



Let's Get
NAUGHTY *2*

A LIMITED
EDITION

ROMANCE
ANTHOLOGY

Let's Get Naughty 2

A Limited Edition Romance Anthology

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9 Reasons Nick Stafford is the Perfect Christmas Gift

Vivian Mae

1

Elena

#1. He Carries a Large Package

When Nick Stafford brought the number two, best-selling dildo in the world to my door, I nearly died.

“Oh, Jesus!” I screamed—well sorta—it was more of a croak; a noise that shot out as I inhaled a screech that turned into a cough.

I tightened my fuzzy, pink robe, keeping it from flying open, eager to see Nick, but also berating myself for how ridiculous I looked: my hair dripping wet, falling into loose Puerto Rican curls that grazed my green, cucumber-melon face mask.

“Not Jesus, but Marty.” Nick smiled, an apologetic grin that was as sincere as it was breathtaking. He nodded down to his German Shepard—Marty—who sat squinting at me with old gray whiskers. “He probably thought it was his Chewy subscription... they just keep giving me your mail on accident. Sorry about that.”

“Well, you do live above me.”

“622 does look a lot like 522,” he winced, passing me the gnawed parcel with drool. Quickly, I took it away, stuffing it underneath my pit, ignoring the hot-pink, silicon balls that poked out.

“It happens so often, we might as well just move in together,” I smiled.

Then blinked.

Time suddenly stopped.

God, what the fuck did I just say?

Somewhere, far from the old Prince Street apartment in Manhattan where I stood, Chrissy Teigen felt a cold December wind down her neck and cringed in my honor.

“And save me the pleasure of coming to your door? I don’t think so, Elena.” Nick said my name under his breath, his confidence as alarming as Marty’s neon-green collar which rattled as he yawned.

That was Nick though.

Hot, but cool. Tempting, but intimidating, six feet and three inches of pure sun-kissed skin and striking olive eyes. He slung his tool belt over his bicep, diverting his stare to the tips of his boots.

“I’m sure it’s an inconvenience...” I fidgeted with my robe, double knotting it. He made me so nervous.

“Inconvenience is that sink of yours. Is it still on the fritz?”

“Leaking occasionally... but I put a bucket just below the ___”

“Ah. No, no, no,” he grinned again. “I’m the super... this is my job. And I can’t have you leak, now can I?”

Too late, I thought.

I stared again, this time ignoring the blatant awkwardness that followed his question. The masculine scent of his labor swirled with the juniper warmth of his faded cologne, comforting me with the most insatiable sense of tingles. I shivered, and my muscles relaxed. Only a second passed as I dropped my shoulders, my partially eaten package slipping from my arms.

Marty barked, as all nine inches of pornstar August Falls’ molded penis tumbled to the floor, its base sticking to the glossy concrete with its vacuum-tight suction grip.

My skin melted below my face cream, burning red with a sudden sweat that took over my entire body.

Nick was always supremely cool, but me on the other hand, I was just as busted as the name smeared along the ruined postage on my package: Elena Maria Ortiz, the walking magnet of embarrassment to Nick Stafford. It had only been a year since I moved here from San Juan, but he'd already caught me with lipstick on my teeth, my dress stuck on my panties, and now a dildo at my feet.

"I am *NOT* a sex freak!" I shouted, bending over, yanking the toy from the floor with a *pop*. "This isn't what you think. It's for work."

"It's fine."

"It's a lot to explain."

"Honestly you don't need to," he assured, chuckling.

I stuffed the dildo back into the box, on the verge of tears. I was always so painfully awkward, so self-conscious of every misstep as if the universe was hellbent on making every interaction a certain boobytrap.

"I'm sorry," I sighed.

"Sorry about what?"

"This... I'm so—"

"You're so kind... that's what you are," he interrupted. "You have been patient with me... Hell, you've been patient with that god-awful sink in your kitchen. I know it's a hassle, especially in the midst of holiday chaos, and the last thing you need is me coming to your door and getting in your business..." His quick words suddenly slowed down, his voice mellow and deep, whispering as he craned his neck down to meet my eyes. "I have time now, if you'd like me to come in?"

Nick.

My Christmas wish.

He was the saving grace to this old building; the man every single, and married, woman here pined for, and he was much

sweeter than he ever needed to be. Yes, I felt like a fool around him, but I'd feel even more like a fool if I didn't let him stay longer, hopelessly fantasizing about what we could never be.

“Of course, come in,” I smiled, my dimples piercing my cheek. “Can I get you a drink?”

Elena

#2 *HE KNOWS How to Work a Pipe*

“Cream, no sugar. Right?” I asked, remembering his coffee preference from the previous times he’d visited.

“If it’s not a bother.” He cleared his throat, taking his time to once again appreciate the color on my walls. He always seemed to nod around, admiring my bright teal living room, my fake banana palms, and bohemian throws. “Love that you always keep those up.” He pointed to the white string lights draped above my yellow couch.

“They’re not just for Christmas. They really brighten up the place, right?”

“I’m not sure it could get any brighter. It’s very cozy.”

“Well, it’s home... sorta.” I shrugged, quickly wiping my face clean of the facial cream. I walked into the kitchen, hiding my ruined package in the pink cabinet next to a box of fruity pebbles. I hoped Nick wouldn’t ask about it, considering our interaction was already so inappropriate.

How could I explain that I was assigned my first paying gig with one of the biggest magazines in the world—*New York Prestige*—running a countdown list of the hottest sex toys of the season? *Twelve days of Sex-Mas* had been as exhausting as it was thrilling, spending the last week getting off with various vibrators, Ben Wa balls, and butt plugs. I was surprised I was

even walking straight at this point, let alone calmly pouring Nick's cup of coffee.

"Honestly, I like the whole tropical vibe in here." Nick removed his denim jacket before lying down under the sink, chomping on a flashlight. His dark brown waves fell carelessly to his brows, his nose dimpled at the tip, mirroring the groove of his strong, peppered chin. "Marty won't even go outside to piss anymore... not without mittens. I'm ready to pack up and leave."

"Just don't go too far, who knows what else will break in this place? I *need* you."

"Well, who's to say I wouldn't take you with me, considering I'm sure you know where the best places for warm weather are?"

"The best beaches, too..." I inadvertently sipped his coffee, watching as his shirt lifted from his waist. I tried not to stare, fighting, resisting, struggling with the temptation to gawk as he revealed a trail of trimmed hair on his firm torso. He cranked something underneath the sink, his arms tensing as he grunted again.

"Name one for me."

"Name what?"

"A beach. Which one is your favorite?"

"Ah, *Playa Flamenco*. It's off the main island where I lived, but totally worth the trip if you can get a boat out there."

Nick hummed to himself.

"Playa Flamenco," he repeated my words. I couldn't see his face, but I could hear him smile. "Blue waters?"

"Turquoise-clear... white sand, and warm sunlight."

Nick grew quiet, clanking a metal pipe.

"Sounds nice. But sounds even better coming from you." He noted my accent, my slight Caribbean-Spanish hitch. I combed a curl behind my ear, blushing. "Shit..."

"You ok?"

“Yes... it’s just... the damn part I brought doesn’t work.”

“Again?”

“I’m so sorry, Elena.” Nick sat up, lifting himself from the sink, stretching his neck. “These pre-war buildings have some strange characteristics, and the plumbing is old as hell.” He took the mug from my hand, taking a long sip of his coffee. I didn’t mention I already drank from it and felt a little guilty, but the way his broad shoulders dropped in relaxation was so rewarding. “I think I know what I need, but it will be about a week until it gets in. I was able to fix the leak, but it’s only temporary.”

He smiled.

I smiled back.

Everything grew quiet as I brushed my hair off to the side, twisting its ends with my red-painted nails. Nick tapped his mug before taking the last sip of coffee.

“Did you enjoy it?” I arched my brows, desiring his praise.

“It hit the spot. Always does.”

“If you liked that, then you’d love coquito... It’s more of a holiday drink, though.”

“Chocolate?”

“Noooo,” I waved away, taking his mug to rinse in the sink. I could feel him behind me, watching as I rambled away. “It’s sorta like eggnog, but with condensed milk, cream of coconut, cinnamon...” I tried not to list everything, but then got excited, “Oh! And rum. Lots and lots of rum.”

“Never heard of it.”

I turned and huffed a curl out of my face, unable to hide my grin. “Well, it’s more of a Puerto Rican thing. Something my family and I make for Christmas every year.”

Nick looked over at Marty, who sniffed under my completely empty Christmas tree. Not a single gift was placed beneath it, but the smell of pine wafted in our direction, not the least bit subdued by the smothering of lights and silver

tinsel. Photos of my family decorated the branches, along with little ornate ornaments that I'd brought with me when I left home.

"Christmas in San Juan, right?" he asked quietly.

I wrung my hands together, missing home as I replied, "Yup."

"And are you visiting them for the holidays?"

Ugh. Please don't ask.

I was about to escape the purgatory of being an intern at *New York Prestige*, and with this sex toy countdown I was working on meant my chances of being promoted to an associate editor were riding on this one silly assignment. I had no money to travel, let alone the desire to bring vibrators along to my *very* Catholic family gathering. Still, the fact that I couldn't go, that I couldn't make coquito with them, was completely heartbreaking.

"I, uh, decided to stay in New York this year." I kept it short. "You?"

"My sister out in Jersey invited me over this year."

"Fun!"

"Yeah... kind of, but with the nephews and the cousins involved... it gets a little overwhelming. Then there's her ex-husband."

"He shows up too?"

"Eh, yeah. They're cordial for the kids, but the tension is suffocating." Nick mocked, wrapping his hand around his neck, his large, light eyes bright and hilariously worried. I laughed. "If it's anything I learned from those two, it's don't mix business with pleasure. She got involved with someone she saw every day at work, and now they hate each other."

I winced. "Sounds like fun."

"Fun is doing your taxes. I'm looking for any excuse not to go." Nick's eyes wandered around again, following his brief silence. He focused down at a stack of *New York Prestige*

magazines, their pages noted with colorful sticky tabs. “Fan of the magazine?”

“For work,” I shrugged, organizing the various pamphlets from my favorite Chinese restaurant. He picked up the menu, reading its red logo—*Sichuan Garden*.

“You work for New York Prestige?”

“Currently. Just something small for now but trying to move up.”

Nick placed the menu back down on the counter, nodding his classic little approval that I adored. “Lots of pretty girls there,” he said, staring into my eyes, but I diverted away to the gorgeous model on the cover.

Yes, lots of pretty girls—girls who didn’t look like me, because honestly, since working there not many people did. I wasn’t the tall, five-foot-eleven blonde, with large breasts and designer handbags. Instead, I was petite, built with a small waist, large hips, and an ass like a peach; some compact woman with long, black, curly hair and small breasts. According to the magazines I wasn’t the pretty girl, and since coming here, I started to believe it.

“*Yeah... lots,*” I parroted.

“Well, I’m particular.” Nick flipped the magazine over, placing its cover face down. “I hope I didn’t take too long. I’m sure you have plans tonight. You look like you’re getting ready for something.”

God! I was getting ready, and suddenly I felt so shy about why. Going to my holiday office party wasn’t a big deal, though the fact that I had a plus-one ticket to give away was. Here Nick was, essentially begging for an excuse to leave his family gathering, and here I had the answer.

I watched Marty, who undoubtedly sniffed around for the dildo, waiting patiently below the cabinet I stored it in.

I tried not to clench my teeth and scream.

The truth was I was nowhere near Nick’s league. He was a ten, a solid—muscle-wrapped, Calvin Klein model—ten. And

I... I was the epitome of an unpolished shrew. Despite working for New York Prestige, I wasn't your typical New York Prestige girl, and I certainly lacked the confidence of one. Regardless, there was still one absolute truth that I held close to my heart; that I could survive the constant awkward moments I shared with Nick, but in turn, would never be able to survive his rejection. *It would kill me.*

I froze.

“No plans tonight... just pulling an all-nighter for a deadline I have. Work, work, work,” I smiled, trying not to flail my arms, stewing in the awful lie I told to an otherwise disappointed Nick Stafford.

Elena

#3 HE'S EASILY Likable

“You’re telling me that Henry Cavill could have been here tonight, and you didn’t invite him?” Camilla Martinez, my boss and staff writer at New York Prestige gasped as she stared at my phone. I tried to steal it back, but her manicured, cranberry nails swiped feverishly across Nick’s Instagram feed.

“He’s hotter than Henry,” I defended, the almost sacrilegious statement for who he was compared too. It was true though, Nick was hotter; a little older than me—probably mid-thirties—a tad larger in the forearms with a deeper voice. “Sure, he’s not superman, but he might as well be.” I sipped on my third Mistletoe Martini, trying to dance as little as possible as a jazz pianist played *Santa Baby* in the corner. The music, the chatter, the massive fifteen-foot Christmas tree that sat center of lobby was all enriched by the soft, Manhattan snow that sauntered across our skyscraper view of Madison Avenue and 42nd Street.

“Well, he’s definitely a hero, or better yet, the man of my dreams.” Camilla oohed and awed, flipping the phone over, showing me the screen occasionally. On it, Nick was carrying a case of new tennis balls to an animal shelter, Marty barking by his side. “Did you see his vinyl collection? Oh, and he makes his own pizzas?”

“He fixes everything in the building, too. He’s good with his hands.”

“*Oh*, I’m sure he is.” Camilla peered over the table-top candle, her large black eyes caught in the flame. “And wait... he saw your dildo?”

“God, don’t remind me.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, my cheeks hot from embarrassment and strong vodka.

“Relax, amiga. He’s obviously cool about it.”

“Well yeah, he’s not some prude, but he’s always catching me in the worst situations.”

“But he still comes over, doesn’t he?”

“He has to, he’s my super.”

“But nobody is making him drink your coffee. Coffee’s a date.”

“Coffee’s a courtesy. It’s hospitality.”

“This day and age, coffee is the precursor to dinner, which is also the precursor to moving in and splitting the rent. You’re practically twelve months away from getting married.” Camilla reached up, fixing my antler headband with the flick of its little jingle bells. I tried not to roll my eyes, the thought of ever marrying Nick, let alone being on a date with him felt so unreal.

I tugged on my black turtleneck, feeling antsy as I adjusted the length of my plaid skirt. Nick was clearly into models, which meant at least half the staff here was his type, but not me. Even Camilla, the only other Latina in the building, was different than me. She was taller, her hair flat and sleek, her breasts fuller, and her hips more trimmed. She was devastatingly gorgeous in her luscious black, floor-length gown, shimmering gold earrings, and thin see-through stilettos. She didn’t have to even resemble Christmas, because she lit up the entire room with her radiant smile. If only I could have an ounce of that confidence.

“He said he has *particular* taste.” I took another long sip of my martini, catching Camilla’s attention.

“Yeah... *particularly* for a twenty-five-year-old Puerto Rican,” she laughed as if I were being stubborn and foolish.

“No.”

“Uh, *yes*.”

“He likes magazine hotties.”

“You *are* a magazine hottie.”

“Yeah, maybe for *Highlights Magazine*. I feel like a girl amongst women out here.”

“I see what you mean.” Camilla gave me some playful side-eye.

“So, you agree?”

“I do. But not for the reason you think. You’re gorgeous, trust me. You don’t need to be some amazonian blonde to be desired. You need confidence! That’s what’s sexy, that’s what’s attractive.” Camilla tucked a strand of my hair back into my ponytail. “Honestly, I’d kill for these curls; I know Nick would, too.”

“You’ve had too much Jingle Juice,” I scoffed.

“It’s true! Your hair is to die for! Your lips are real, your smile is white, your skin is glowing like Rockefeller Center.”

“Ok, now I know you’re drunk.”

“Maybe, but so are you. And what you need is a Christmas angel to give you a little push.” Camilla swiped at my phone once more, double tapping not one, but three of Nick’s photos. The little red hearts popped on the screen, showing that I *liked* his photos. I wasn’t even following his account.

“Camilla!” I screeched, snatching the phone out of her hands.

She cackled. “Don’t unlike them either. It’ll be more awkward if you do.”

“I can’t believe you.” I tossed back the last of my drink, stuffing my phone back into my purse.

“Believe it. And that’s not the only gift I’m giving you.” She reached into her bag, pulling out a carefully wrapped box with a large red bow.

“A real gift?”

“Yes. Well, it’s actually the last item for your countdown. I’ve been keeping my eye on your posts, and they’re a massive hit on instagram.”

“They’ve been a big hit for my personal life, too. As long as this one doesn’t get chewed up by Marty.”

“Well, this one is meant to be shared... but no dogs for christ sake. Maybe Nick can help you open it.”

“Ugh... I need another drink.” I slid my arms into my matching plaid blazer, fixing the gold hoops in my ear.

“Remember... it’s all about confidence. Trust me. My ugliest moments are when I’m most insecure... It’s not me, it’s my fear.” Camilla gave me a quick hug as I turned away, package in hand, and a pep talk that felt more like a cheer up, than an actual plan I could ever pull off.

4

Elena

#4 HE COMES With the Best Type of Baggage

I couldn't believe Camilla, my personal romantic assassin, liking the most random posts on Nick's Instagram feed. Like it were a car wreck, I couldn't help but stare, recoiling at the illuminated heart that sat below a photo of Nick holding a Donny Hathaway album from years ago.

"Aww Jesus," I whispered to myself, shivering in the dim lobby of my apartment complex, smashing the elevator button once again. I had one goal, and one goal alone; get upstairs, avoid Nick at all costs, and enjoy the martini induced deep sleep that I earned.

I leaned against a row of mailboxes, tucked in the corner as the front lobby door swung open.

I fought from groaning, peeking up from my phone whose low battery logo flashed on my screen.

Dear god, don't do this...

Nick-fucking-Stafford walked through the large, windowed door, his face stern from the cold wind outside, but it softened as he made eyes at me.

"Nick!" I smiled, laughed—maybe a little too hard—crossing one leg over the other. I tried not to stumble, my holiday drinks already making their way down to my wobbly posture.

“Elena?” He said surprised, scanning me up and down, assessing me, my outfit, my face. “I, uh... thought you...” he shook his head, stopping his thought. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” I said, shutting my eyes. “Good. I mean, I’m good.”

Silence followed as Nick shifted his weight. He muscled over large plastic bags he carried from one hand to the other, balancing a paper grocery sack between his bicep and chest. I watched as he carefully bit down on the tip of his black leather gloves, snatching them free, letting them loose into the bag before licking his lips.

“Still have that deadline tonight?”

“Yes.” I peered over Camilla’s carefully wrapped package that rested on the floor. “Actually I have more to do than I thought. It’s going to be a busy night.”

“It’s already pretty late, isn’t it?”

I nodded, checking how his black chinos and boots matched perfectly with his long topcoat and heather-gray sweater. I appreciated how long his hair started to become, his duck tails swooped back into perfect waves. He was dressed nice, neat even, a sobering contrast to his equally sexy, rugged, morning look from earlier.

The elevator door opened up as Nick gestured for me to go first. I grinned, lifting Camilla’s present into my arms, entering. Somehow inside felt even quieter, as we both reached for the same button. What a gentlemen, pressing my level before his. We each pulled back and laughed.

God. More silence.

Was he thinking about me liking his posts? Had he seen it already? I wondered, suddenly feeling too warm as I unbuttoned my coat.

“No family party tonight?” I finally asked, the elevator creaking in the background.

Nick smiled to himself. “I kind of bailed on that.”

“Not in the mood?”

“Not exactly. I love my sister, love my nephews... just wanted to try something different tonight.”

“Like compete in an eating contest?” I joked, noticing the familiar *Sichuan Garden* logo on his plastic bags. He looked to be carrying nearly ten pounds of my favorite Chinese food.

“Thought I would give it a try... besides, Marty loves the leftovers.”

“He seems like a chow-mien kinda dog.”

“Think more broccoli and beef.” Nick tilted his head, his eyes shifting. He suddenly seemed so self-conscious of the bags, staring at them, his face washed with indifference.

He reached for the pocket in his jacket, for what I assumed was his phone.

I panicked, my stomach instantly twisting into a knot.

This was it, he was going to see the notifications now, if he hadn't already.

“I didn't mean to like your posts!” I blurted out, leaning against the railing of the elevator wall.

Nick pulled out a stick of gum from his pocket, sticking it into his mouth. He chewed, just letting my random statement float around with no response.

“What post?” he asked curiously, almost confused.

“Oh...”

“You liked one of my posts? Like on Instagram?”

“Well, a friend did... I mean I like them, too, but...”

“So, you were with a friend?” Nick scanned me once more, but this time his gaze lingered much longer on my lips. I wasn't sure if he was relieved or concerned.

“Well, she's my boss... it's complicated.”

“Hmmm,” Nick sighed. “I thought for some reason you were on a date.”

“Date?” I snorted, smoothing over my hair, its taut texture blooming into curls on the other end of my ponytail. “No. No

date. Never a date.”

“Never?”

“Not for a few months now.”

“I don’t believe that,” he said, rather confidently, sternly. “Especially tonight, I can’t imagine you going out like that... and not being hit on.”

“Like what?” I stared down at my outfit, playing with its gold buttons.

“Like that, Elena...” he rolled his eyes, amused. “It’s just that you look nice...like, *really, really*, nice.”

Nick stared for a hard second, which turned into two, then three. My head swirled with blood and booze, my lips numb to a buzz that surely made me blush.

Me? Nice looking?

His determination to not look away was met with the most alluring challenge, as Camilla’s daunting cackle morphed into an encouraging chant in my head.

Do it, do it, do it!

I squeezed onto the gift, the elevator beeping loudly, stilling time as my mouth opened and my breath fell short into the most confident response I could muster.

I wasn’t sure how I did it, or why it suddenly felt so easy, but my words spilled out in perfect harmony to the unapologetic sincerity of my eyes.

“You look good too, Nick.” I twisted my hands, trying to, but unable to resist the most radiant smile. “Actually, I think you’re really cute. Always have.”

The elevator jolted to a stop, reaching my level as I turned to face the reflective door. Never had I felt so completely empowered, so totally in control as my one hidden truth finally came out in the most spectacular way. It was perfect, met effortlessly with how I turned away, how I planned to walk out and turn back with a seductive wink.

I smiled at my reflection for a second, then waited a little longer.

Nothing.

Nick reached for the button and pressed it.

I continued to stare.

Nothing again.

The elevator door wasn't opening.

It.

Wasn't.

Opening.

Elena

#5 HE MAKES Me Feel Safe, Even While Pushing My Buttons

“Oh, that’s not good,” Nick mumbled to himself as the elevator buzzed with an annoying alarm.

I pushed him aside, my tiny frame knocking him away as I frantically pressed the buttons.

“What did you do?” I asked loudly, partially to Nick, partially to me. I admitted he was cute—*actually cute*—my last declaration like some magical incantation that locked us in this metal shoebox. How? Why? Was I really stuck in here after confessing that?

“I didn’t do anything,” Nick assured calmly. “These old elevators sometimes need a little help.”

“Well, you’re the help, right?”

“I’m the super.”

“Doesn’t that involve this?”

“This is a little outside my wheelhouse.” Nick laid his bags on the floor, hovering over my shoulder. “This requires an engineer sometimes... though I doubt it’s serious.”

I pulled out my phone and sighed, the screen completely black, entirely dead. “You have to call someone!”

“I don’t have my phone... but it’s ok, there’s a button here for service.”

“Are they fast? Could we fall?” I turned toward him, worried, slightly contemplative. Maybe death by elevator wouldn’t be so bad, a swifter and more merciful sentence than this, being stuck with Nick after telling him how I felt. My antlers jingled back and forth as I switched between facing Nick and the buttons. I was humiliated.

“Yes, they’re fast. And no one is falling.”

“It’s New York, it’s happened before.”

“I won’t let it happen to you,” Nick’s hand reached toward my waist, pressing the emergency call button. “If we fall, I’ll lift you up.”

“Lift me?” I squeaked.

“Yes... I’ll make sure you’re secure before we hit the bottom. I’ll hold you in my arms and lie on my back.”

“Does that work?” I froze, quickly swiping my headband off.

“Of course. But we’re not falling,” Nick laughed. I stared up at him, horrified at how stupid I looked again. He seemed focused on the buttons as I stood frigid, concerned that I had somehow creeped him out with my comment.

Was it too much?

Would he still come fix my leak eventually?

I hated to think that my quick admission would soon become an awkward tombstone to our relationship. Before I blurted out to Nick, I imagined leaving this elevator, allowing my confidence to do the convincing on how sexy I could be. This was the opposite of what Camilla told me to do, none of which involved me turning into a mess.

Nick, though?

He seemed unbothered.

In fact, he fought a smile as he locked his eyes onto mine, almost laughing at how shocked I must have appeared.

“Is this funny to you, Nicholas Stafford!” I shouted.

Nicholas?

Did I just use his full name?

He inched closer, nearly sandwiching me against the wall and intercom.

“It’s a little funny,” he whispered sweetly, sending me into an almost hypnotic calmness.

“MAP communications, this is Linda, how may I help you?” An older woman’s voice came through the other end as Nick cleared his throat.

“Hi, yes. We seem to be stuck in our elevator.”

“Residential or commercial?” she asked. I couldn’t help but pipe in.

“Residential! There’s an alarm going off, and I’m trying to exit the sixth floor.”

“Do you see the button with the two arrows facing the opposite directions?”

“You mean the one I keep smashing.” Nick and I took turns pecking at it.

“Yes. Stop clicking it.”

Nick rubbed his chin as he spoke patiently. “I’m thinking one of the emergency switches was accidentally triggered.”

“Most likely... do you see the ‘Push Run’ button?”

“Yes.”

“Is it engaged?”

“How can you tell?”

“Before you press anything, let me get your address in case we get disconnected. I can dispatch the fire department over there in seconds.”

Yes, god, send anyone! A firefighter, a construction worker, a deli owner, anyone at all who could free us from this thing. I was thrilled, already leaning onto Nick so the lady could hear me. “Thank you! We’re on the lower east side, 143 ___”

I could barely get the numbers out, as Nick twisted a knob.

Immediately the alarm went off.

Along with the lights.

“Oh, shit.” Nick whispered.

“Nicholas!”

Full name? Two times in a row?

A red emergency light slowly came on from above, barely illuminating our faces in the dimly lit confines. Nick twisted the knob again, but the lady on the other end was gone, left only with the first three numbers of our address.

I tried not to panic as I turned to Nick with the widest eyes ever.

He grinned apologetically, lifting up the

large *Sichuan Garden* bag as an offering, “Hungry?”

Elena

#6 HE'S Generous With His Egg Roll

"I'm not too sure if I want to admit this..." Nick laughed to himself, the both of us sitting on the dark elevator floor, slurping down noodles and sesame chicken. He passed me another crab wonton, his hand and features visible in the cast of the mellow red light above.

"Oh, come on! It can't be that bad. All Christmas movies are a little silly, anyways. So which one is your favorite?"

"It's a divisive answer, I swear."

"What? *Christmas with the Kranks*?"

Nick held out his hand as if stopping me, "Woah... don't diss the Kranks." He stabbed his chopsticks into his takeout container, dividing the assorted vegetables from the picked over meat. "Ok. Here it is. I know it's not pretty, but try not to judge... promise?"

"Promise."

It was dark, but I could tell Nick squinted in my direction. He paused, then spoke into his napkin. "It's *Home Alone... Two*."

I coughed up sweet and sour sauce, my response a telling judgment from the promise I clearly couldn't keep. "Two!"

"Hey! Don't you dare."

“I’m sorry, but that’s blasphemy. One is the original, it’s untouchable. Two?”

“I’m a New Yorker, what can I say? It’s the same movie as the first, but in our city. It’s way better.”

“He’s not even *home* alone in that one!”

“He is at one point... alone in a home. It gets by on technicality.” Nick fought back a smile, reaching into his endless bag of Chinese food to hand me napkins and an egg roll. I took both from his hand, still laughing at how appalled he was by my response.

“Is this to shut me up?” I asked, taking a quick bite, wiping sauce off my chin.

“Trying to make amends for offending you with my movie taste... wait till you hear my thoughts on *Jingle All the Way*.” Nick turned his attention back to his food, but I didn’t dare look away.

It had been over thirty minutes since the power went out, but I didn’t seem to mind any more. Sure, I was a little drunk, still semi-mortified, but Nick was being totally cool. The emergency panel was still open, the speaker still silent, but I wasn’t that bothered. Here in the dark, munching on food, laughing, it almost felt romantic, *almost* like a date.

I ignored the fantasy, the ridiculous notion that us being stuck in an elevator could ever be considered something as exciting as going out to dinner with Nick Stafford. Yet, wasn’t that what we were doing?

“Thank you,” I said quickly.

Nick perked up.

“Pardon?”

“Thank you for making me feel better. I know I was freaking out earlier, but you... fixed that. Guess that’s what you do though. You fix things, and not just the plumbing... I don’t know what I’d do if I were alone right now.”

Nick took a few more bites, then shrugged.

“I’d find you.” He inhaled, “Just like someone will find us. It’s late and people are either out celebrating tonight, or already in bed.”

“Maybe Marty will come to our rescue,” I joked, but Nick was quick to reply.

“His bowl is full of food, and he’s watching *Seinfeld* right now. He won’t even know I’m missing.”

“So, he isn’t expecting this giant sack of Chinese food?”

Nick furrowed. “It was more of a Christmas surprise... the old boy will still get a treat once I’m back.”

We both chewed a little longer, taking turns crossing our legs, making due with the space we had. It was spacious, but Nick’s long legs would spread out from time to time, his large boot resting near my thigh. I kept my legs tight together, our walls made of mirrors, giving me all the opportunity to accidentally flash Nick if I weren’t careful. It was dark though, maybe I could get away with it, my panties still hidden enough that I carefully relaxed more in my posture.

“So... why were you all dressed up tonight? I know you were with your boss, but...” he didn’t finish his sentence, he only arched a perfectly intrigued brow.

“There was sorta a Christmas party tonight.”

“Sorta?”

“Well... a big one. But it ended up having to do with my deadline, so I was on the clock, but with cocktails, of course.”

“Oh! A work party.” He seemed sensitive to the subject, pausing after the word *work*. Oh, god, of course, he was thinking of this morning, of the package I so pathetically declared was for my job.

“I’m actually doing a small assignment: *Twelve Days of Sex-Mas*.”

“Never heard that version of the song before,” he grinned.

“It’s better than the song. This one will actually make you hit the *high* notes.” I shamelessly plugged in one of my

Instagram captions.

“Explains the package today.”

“Yeah... The August Falls toy.”

“And which day was that one?”

“Second to last.” I swallowed my spit, chewing more Chinese food than maybe I wanted. My mouth felt entirely too dry, and Nick seemed to notice.

“Thirsty?”

“A little.”

Nick reached into the paper grocery bag, moving items aside as he revealed an amber bottle of Havana Club Rum. He twisted it with a pop. “Looked good at the store, thought it could bring a little holly to my jolly.” He sniffed it, then took a long sip, letting it sit in his mouth. He made me laugh, but the way his cheeks contoured to the bottle, his Adam’s apple bobbing with a swallow, felt oddly masculine and entirely hot. He exhaled, absolutely pleased. “Interested?”

“Always.” I leaned over to take the bottle. “Now this is Christmas.” I took a swig, the liquor still chilled from the Manhattan wind. I shivered as the punch of alcohol hit my chest.

“You know, technically, it’s not Christmas till you get a gift.” Nick motioned to Camilla’s package.

“Oh, no, no... that’s for later.”

“How so?”

“Well, it’s my next assignment.”

Nick smiled. “Don’t tell me, twelve drummers drumming?”

“That would be hard to rate, I’m used to only one drummer drumming, if you know what I mean.” I passed the bottle back to Nick as he took another sip.

“And how does one rate the toys of *Sex-Mas*? Price? Practicality?”

“Pleasure,” I burped. *Fuck*. I wiped my face, fixing my hair as I straightened my posture.

“So, customer reviews?”

“Not exactly...” I rolled my eyes, wondering if this was a good topic to discuss. Would it be so bad considering he admitted to liking *Home Alone Two*? I tried to convince myself that this was some sort of vulnerable flaw he trusted me with, that this silly preference made him not only human, but approachable. Maybe it was the fresh hit of rum, but my ridiculous reasoning made sense. “Actually, I review them... personally.”

“Including August Falls?” he asked, intrigued.

“It’s for *work*.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Well, yes... including him. He’s very popular, you know. There’s a reason he’s number two on the list. Do you know who he is?”

“I’m aware of him...”

“How aware?” I jabbed inquisitively, truly curious.

“I’ve seen him perform... he’s done some scenes with some of my favorites.”

“You have favorites?”

“Yes. Do you?”

I set my takeout down on the floor reaching for the bottle of rum. “Maybe. August Falls is probably my top pick... yours?”

Nick twisted his lips, silently staring into my eyes before biting the inside of his cheek. “I don’t watch too much... but I certainly have a type.”

“What’s her name?” I dared him with a whisper.

“Savannah Sixx.”

I instantly knew who she was, and yes, I’d seen her with August Falls before. I could’ve sworn she was Latina, but

couldn't tell for sure. My heart raced at his admission. "She's petite," I said, acting nonchalant.

"She has dark eyes, and dark hair... That's what I like... amongst other things... but there is no one on film that fully captures what I'm really wanting... or who." Nick folded his hands together, probably feeling unsure if he had made the right move in telling me. "So, you like August, huh?"

"Of course, what girl doesn't?"

"How about his toy?"

I took another drink, then passed it back.

"Let's just say... he passed my test."

"Five stars?"

"Mmmhmm..." I tried not to fidget, but the way Nick stared at me, the crimson light on his sharp features and chiseled chin burned down my arms, creating a subtle ache between my legs. "I watched him today... for my assignment."

"Tell me about it," he instructed, not sternly, but confidently, as if it were natural and expected.

"I, uh... watched him with a girl... a video of them in an alley, having sex behind a nightclub in the dark. Felt homemade... spontaneous even."

"And the toy?" he asked, his gravelly tone reaching from across the elevator.

Was I really going to reveal my dirty side? Normally I was reserved, but my current state of mind was as loose as my lips, helping me pretend that our conversation was as casual as discussing the weather. I knew that it wasn't.

"I stuck it on my shower wall... and used it before getting clean... my laptop was on the counter, my shower curtain pulled all the way open." I wanted to laugh from my candidness, but Nick seemed so pleased with my answer as his pristine smile creased the crown of his shadowed cheeks. He swooped his hair back with his hand, running it down his face.

"How soon after I left did you do this?"

“I was on a time crunch...”

“How... soon?” he asked calmly.

“I... did it as soon as you left. I had to.”

Could this be the confidence Camilla talked about? Because it sure was getting Nick’s attention as he tried his hardest to keep cool, steepling his hands before cracking his knuckles.

“Hmmm. I love the way you worded that, *‘I had to’*,” he repeated, sitting with it, mulling over the phrase. “And, is there anything else you *have* to do right now?” He motioned to my gift. “Since we’re stuck here, don’t you want to see what your next assignment is?”

I picked at my nails, unsure of what to do or say, or how exposed the next toy would make me feel. Did I really want to open this in front of him?

“What else do you have in your paper bag?” I asked curiously, acknowledging the unmentioned items still left inside from where he pulled out the rum.

“Oh, no you don’t. I already showed you my booze... Now don’t you want to show me your gift?”

This felt like a challenge, an opportunity to play it cool like Nick.

“Knowing my boss, it could be pretty salacious.” I lifted the package, untying its bow, pretending indifference. “But I suppose we’re past that.” Carefully, I ripped the paper apart, opening the box it contained. I stared inside for a second, slightly underwhelmed by what I saw.

“Well?” Nick asked. “What is it?”

“*Secrets or Steam*... a lovers card game?” I scrunched my nose. “This beat out August Falls?”

I read the back out loud, wrapping my mind around what could possibly be better than having a pornstar inside me.

“*Secrets or Steam: the hottest new sex card game where couples complete a series of truths or dares while avoiding*

physical contact. The key is to not touch your opponent, no matter how tempting it may get. If a player refuses to answer a truth or enact a dare, they must remove an article of clothing that their opponent selects. Whoever touches their opponent first loses.”

“Interesting.” Nick narrowed his eyes onto the gift. “I’m not sure if this is the right game...” I said, garnering his attention.

“Let’s decide for ourselves. I’m ready to play.”

7

Elena

#7 HIS REINDEER Games are X-Rated

Nick carefully split the cards, steepled them, then shuffled them downwards. The pile in his hand fluttered into a perfectly stacked tower, which he divided into three distinct rows.

“You nervous at all?” I thumbed the open bottle of rum. “All things considered... this is a game meant more for couples.”

“It’s meant for two adults. And to answer your question, no, I’m not nervous... per se. There’s a fine line between nervousness and excitement. The latter is just positive, which I think more encompasses this moment.” Nick swiped at his forehead with the back of his hand. It was warm in here, and the glow of his face was soft and dewy. “I might be somewhere in between, actually.”

“Between nervous and excited?” I leaned against the mirrored wall. “What would you call it?”

“Uncertainty?” Nick pondered for a moment, settling on an answer. “Or maybe it’s not that I’m uncertain, but rather intrigued by the mystery of what it could show me—as in, I don’t know if this is good or bad, it’s just... a tad mysterious. And who doesn’t like that?”

If mystery was what Nick liked, then I was a little short of being anything but. Nearly an hour ago I admitted I thought he was cute. Now? We sat on the floor, sorting cards to a sex

game I was in charge of rating. It was surreal, something between a dream and a nightmare, the horror of being stuck in a dark elevator, with the fantasy of being close to Nick. Maybe like him, I was both nervous and excited, unsure of how far it would go, or if I could ruin the good time we were having. How long could this last until I embarrassed myself again?

“Well, there’s no pressure with this. It’s just a game,” I shrugged.

Nick lowered his voice, his presence immediately calming. “It’ll be fun. Games are supposed to be fun.”

“Fun is good. I like fun,” I rambled, stealing his sentiment.

“*Fun...* were those antlers from earlier,” he teased, “and like you said, no pressure. At any point you want to stop, you tell me... I have plenty of fortune cookies that we can crack open and read out loud for kicks.”

I smiled, our back and forth a subtle excuse to defuse the tension the cards provoked. Each pile was a different intensity, color, and steam level for the dares and questions to come. “First base, second base, third?” I read the cards out loud. “Where’s the home run?”

“Guessing that comes after one of the opponents loses.” Nick motioned his palm in my direction, revealing the stacks that were ready to be played, “Ladies first.”

I sat up straight, hesitant on what to choose or what would occur. Obviously, I wanted to start simple, reaching for a *first base* card, my hand on the verge of shaking. Nick grinned from across the elevator as I flipped over a *secret* card and began to laugh.

“Oh, god.”

“Is it ridiculous?”

“No. Just a little silly. Ok, Nick... pick one, *Whipped Cream or Candle Wax?*” I playfully fanned the card towards my cheek, pursing my candy-apple red lips.

Nick brushed his jaw with the tips of his knuckles. “Whipped cream.”

“Why?”

“Do I need to explain?” he laughed.

“Yeah, why not?” I passed back the bottle.

“Cream... because it’s sweet... it’s lickable. You can place it on someone, or on each other, but removing it is the best part.”

“And where would you put it?” I asked boldly, consciously avoiding biting my lip.

“I’d put some above your navel... I’d lick it all the way up.” He stared right into my eyes. Did he say *your* navel, as in, mine? I swallowed, trying not to laugh again.

“You’d do that to me?”

“Isn’t that how we’re supposed to answer?”

“Oh, I don’t know... that makes sense.”

“Should I apologize?” Nick asked, not panicked, not worried, but inquisitive, almost daring me to say yes, as if doing so would have consequences. I crossed my legs again.

“No need.”

“Then I’ll go next.” Nick reached for a *first base* card, which he seemed to immediately appreciate.

“I’m already dreading it.”

“No, no. It’s a good one. You can tell a lot about a person by how they answer this, and you only have two choices, no context... ‘*Top or Bottom*’?”

Seriously?

“Mmmm. If I were with you... I’d ride on top.” I reached for a card to move on, but Nick’s hand hovered over the stack. I stopped short of touching him.

“Why top?”

I slowly removed my hand, then rolled my eyes to the ceiling. “Just... better control.”

“Over me?”

“Over... how I’m entered.” I avoided his face, scanning his shoulders down to his massive hands. “You’re a big guy. I’m not sure if I could take all of you. On top I can slip down easier.” Did I really just say that out loud?

Nick furrowed his brow. “You a tight girl, Elena?”

God, his deep voice was enough to cause my bad decisions to play out. “Maybe.” I maintained a poker face. “I mean... with the right person I can get wet easily, but it takes a while to adjust.”

“And by adjust you mean, stretch?”

The way he enunciated the word *stretch* was as sharp as it was precise, his inflection settling into my stomach. I had bit my tongue to keep from laughing, not that it was funny, but completely surreal.

“Yes. That way I can move my hips. Bounce. Rub.” I paused, then spoke quickly. “If I can fit you completely inside, then I can grind myself on your body. And that’s something I like.” I said matter of fact. The alcohol was clearly bringing out my honesty, “Or, on *anyone’s* body for that matter.”

Nick’s nonresponse was just as much of a response than anything. His cheekbones chiseled and creased with a spontaneous dimple. I wanted him on the receiving end of embarrassment, taking my chance and immediately reaching for a second base card. I expected the look of fear on his face, but his narrow focus seemed to hone on the potential challenge to come.

“Nick,” I began confidently, “*Fuck me, marry me, or date me?*”

“Seriously?”

“Blame it on the cards.” I flicked it in his direction.

“And if I don’t answer that?”

“Then... you remove a piece of your clothing... one of *my* choosing.” I pointed in his direction, hoping he’d answer, but also secretly hoping he wouldn’t.

He dragged his hands down his face, contemplative, his large index finger tapping the dip below his nose.

“I’ll skip that one.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I won’t answer that.”

“Bit of a prude?”

“Not in the least,” he chuckled. “I’m just more curious as to what piece of clothing you’d choose to remove...”

Conservatively speaking, I had a lot to choose from. Jacket or boots were an obvious and kind choice, possibly turning me into the very same *prude* I accused him of. A part of me wanted him to regret his choice, and a part of me wanted to enjoy something new I haven’t seen of him before.

“Your sweater.” I demanded, “Take it off.”

Nick didn’t react; in fact, he followed my eyes, studying my reaction as he first removed his jacket, peeling it off his shoulders, tossing it towards the corner behind me. “You sure you want my sweater?”

“Off, big guy,” I instructed once more.

Nick reached down to the hem of his soft cotton sweater, his knuckles molded and tight, effortlessly lifting it up. First were the lean cuts of his abs, a sight I’d seen before while he lied under my sink: firm and ripped with trimmed black hair that rose towards his navel, a navel framed with hard, olive abs that stretched to his side. His hair was wavy and brown, lighter than the patch that lied over his well-worked chest.

“That wasn’t so hard... now was it?” I choked, his masculine and woody scent wafted from my lap as he tossed his sweater towards me. I fisted it in my hands.

Nick reached for another card. “I don’t think you’re ready for a second base card, so I’ll go for first.”

“Oh, stop. I’m ready. These aren’t even that bad.”

“No?” He questioned, lifting a first base card, “Ok, then ‘Describe your Panties to Me’.”

I scrunched my nose, almost bored by the laughable question asked by a shirtless Nick. I could be edgy; I could be like him. “No,” I answered. “Pick a clothing item for me to remove. I’ll do that instead.”

Without hesitation, Nick ordered me immediately. “I want you to remove your panties for me.”

I froze.

Describing them was so boring, but now, I was supposed to take them off? Quickly, I ran through my mind, trying to recall what I wore and if they were any good. Were they my comfortable, loose, cotton panties or something Camilla would approve of? I tried not to hesitate, overwhelmed by how small the elevator suddenly felt.

“Turn around.”

“Did you turn around when I took off my shirt? I recall you looking quite intently... so much so I think you enjoyed it, Miss Elena Ortiz.” He sounded so authoritative saying my full name, like a boss. Whatever the cadence was, it made my knees weak as I stood up.

“Then try not to drool,” I sneered, watching the amusement on his face as I carefully reached beneath my skirt, momentarily lifting it, pinching my thighs as if that alone would stop my skin from showing. Nick’s attention shifted between my legs and waist, stitching his focus to the hint of my panties that appeared for a moment. I almost sighed with relief, feeling the frilly, red lace of my thong as I slid my finger beneath its covering. The graze of my own touch made me so aware of my body, realizing now as I stood how my clit thrummed with a pulse. I tried not to react, but I was turned on, my panties pathetically damp with a wetness I hadn’t even realized had been seeping out. Was it the game? Was it Nick? Everything felt piled on, the mood-stricken elevator casting the most provocative red glow as I shimmed my hips. My panties fell to my heels, their elastic band loose around my ankles as I lifted them free. I felt totally exposed, a sense of coolness now grazing the slick dampness between my legs.

“Toss them to me,” Nick grinned.

“Absolutely not!” I squeaked but was challenged further with Nick’s tempting, deep voice.

“You a prude?”

“As if!” I defended, unknowingly morphing into Cher Horowitz.

“You sure about that?”

“Yes. I’m on the naughty list. Trust me.” I shrugged, feeling a little silly, but not caring, my drunkenness mellowing out into a calming buzz. Although I was sobering up, I was confidently crazy enough to toss them over.

Nick snatched them in the air, its band laced on his thumb, the entirety of its fabric swallowed by his hand. He had the strength to rip them off my body had I still had them on, his forearms firm and corded. God, Camilla was right, he did look like Henry Cavill.

“Red. My favorite color,” he mused.

I wondered if he felt my wetness, his attention diverted to where his finger traced the fabric’s inner layer before shoving them in his pocket. He groaned delightedly, his testy grin like a vice to keep from speaking.

“And your underwear?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Describe them to me. Boxers or briefs?” I sat back down, carefully crossing my legs.

“You want me to answer a steamy question for free?”

“Sure! Naughty girls can’t just get coal. Tell me.”

Nick pondered for a second, then settled his eyes to the ground. He laughed, “Honestly. None. I don’t wear them often, and I certainly don’t wear them to bed.”

Nick nude and tangled in the cool sheets of a large bed flashed in my head, his back puckered, his ass peeking and toned from the loose covering of Egyptian cotton. He wore nothing? Really? I supposed it was believable, having seen his pants in the past dipping below his pelvis, his natural V-shape

too visible without the confinement of the Calvin Klein underwear I imagined he'd wear. I eyed him suspiciously, reaching for a second base card.

“*Would you ever want to watch me have sex with someone else?*”

“Someone else?” He seemed simultaneously intrigued and conflicted. “Another man?”

“Could be a woman.”

“That'd be better. But I wouldn't care to see it at all.”

“Because of me?”

“Yes. Because of you. Not that I wouldn't want to see what's under that skirt... or that top... to see you bare, without another person's hands or body on it, man or woman. In fact, I can't imagine how I'd react if I ever saw that... Upset? Jealous?”

I almost missed his words as my heart pounded in my ears. I wanted to say something but couldn't, still stuck on the idea that Nick Stafford could ever be jealous of anyone else touching me. “What?” I asked, as he shuffled all the cards together; bases one, two and three into one unanimous pile.

“Pick another card. Ask me. Dare me. Do it again,” he asserted.

Hesitantly, I lifted another mild first base question. My voice swayed, unaware of how adrenaline took hold of my tone. “*What's the biggest lie you've told to get close to someone?*” I folded the card to my chest.

“I've told a lot. They're all innocent, but they're all certainly lies.”

“And the biggest of them all?”

“One that I'm not ready to share yet. It may be more embarrassing than you think.”

“I know all too well about being embarrassed.” I admitted, our eyes locked in a gaze.

“You think you've embarrassed yourself in front of me?”

“All the time. It seems to be what I do best. Haven’t you noticed?”

Nick clenched his teeth, disappointed. “Whatever you think is embarrassing, is actually endearing...”

“By whom?”

“Guess.” He dared me.

I grew silent, unable to say what I thought he was implying, so I avoided answering him. “You didn’t answer my question. Now you have to remove a piece of your clothing.”

“And what would you want?”

“Your belt,” I settled.

Nick reached for his buckle, threading his thumb between the brass, slowly, meticulously undoing it. It clinked in his hand, the leather snapping loose as he yanked it through the loops of his fitted chinos. His abs expanded, his pants less constricting, comfortably snug with the tiniest gap of skin that hinted towards his crotch.

“Let’s both pull cards. One last time, that is... if you’re up for the challenge...” He tapped his finger on the third base card sitting at the top of the deck. Its red, glossy finish taunted me with the risk of being asked the craziest question, or the dirtiest dare.

“You take the top. And I’ll take the next one.” I instructed, allowing Nick to remove the third base card, and for me to take a first base card below. “You go first.” I whispered.

Nick read his card, then asked, “You sure you’re a naughty-list girl?”

“Mmhmm,” I nodded.

“How naughty?”

“Naughty enough to tell you how I fucked myself in the shower. Isn’t that naughty enough?”

“Close. But this card wants more. Can you give it to me?”

I twisted a loose curl that fell to the side of my face, curious as to what the card said. I wanted to be committed, I wanted to take a risk, just like Camilla said. Confidence was sexy, and I was done feeling like I was second to anyone else. "I'll do it for you," I assured.

"Elena... *Show me how you masturbate.*" Nick demanded, his voice carrying up from his chest with the bob of his Adam's apple, growling.

My heart pounded so fast it tingled the tips of my fingers. "Show me, too?" I asked nervously, not giving it a second thought, not wanting to back out.

"Ok. Start slow." Nick cocked his head as we both slowly stood up. I felt sheepish and small next to him, his height towering across from mine. "I can shut my eyes if you'd like."

"Could you," I replied. "Just at first? Until I'm ready?"

"That's fine." Nick cooed, running his hand across his torso, grazing his abs as he dropped them down past his navel. "I'll meet you wherever you want to go with this, as long as your eyes are on me." He shut his eyes, his face like a furrowing god. "Just place your hand where you like it, and I'll do the same."

I lifted my skirt as Nick unbuttoned his pants, his zipper unraveling with its enticing metallic lure. He reached further down, the impression of his cock molded against his thigh as he fisted the base of his erection. I nearly lost my breath at how big he was, how aroused he became, swollen just like my clit that I pressed down on with my palm.

"You there, yet?" Nick asked, eyes still closed.

"Yes." I breathed, reacting to how he squeezed his cock. He stroked himself once, his pants too tight for anything but a slow, smooth jerk.

"Elena, are you touching yourself?"

"Yes. I'm just... so sensitive right now." I circled my clit, my knees buckling in and out with the bundled nerves that needled through my thighs.

Nick's pants dropped further towards his pelvis, revealing a tan line that met the neat patch of dark pubic hair and flat muscle. "Are you watching me stroke myself?"

"I see it. Looks tight against your thigh... I think it's sexy." I shuddered, dipping my finger inside my slit, thrusting like he did, freeing my wetness. "Can you hear how wet I am?"

Nick stroked harder, his head leaning against the elevator wall, eyes squeezed shut. "You still embarrassed? Does it make you shy that I can hear your wet little cunt?"

"I want you to hear." A moan escaped me, as I unzipped the side of my skirt. "You can look now." I said hesitantly, feeling scared, but so ready for his needy eyes to be on me, convincing myself that it was ok since he knew I fucked myself for work, that I watched porn and played with my holes.

Nick's mouth parted with a breath, his eyes clear and vivid as he opened them, seemingly aching by the sight of me, by the fact that he wasn't able to touch me.

"Jesus, Elena. You're so fucking beautiful." The mounds of his shoulders tightened as his pants fell past his ass, his cock springing loose.

"Fuck," I ran my fingers past my clit, bobbing in and out of my pussy. At first all I could see was Nick, his erection stiff in his hands, far larger than the grip he used to wrap around the entirety of his dick. He licked up his palm, stroking the tip of his cock into his fist.

"Is that how you do it? You finger yourself?"

I pumped faster, shutting my eyes, then opening them again, controlling my breath. I showed off my stomach, taking hold of my shirt, lifting it up for Nick, for his insatiable expression, for him to see the soft, flat spot below my breast as I leaned against the wall. "I always finger myself. Always. I love the way it feels, to be filled completely."

"Tell me," he instructed.

I tried not to lean forward, fighting the beginning tingles of an orgasm as Nick's tempting cock glistened with spit, his

balls waiting to be drained. Fuck, why did that turn me on so damn much? Was this really happening? It felt like a dream, and the longer we played, the more real it became.

“I like the pressure of being entered. Of feeling open, and if I had it with me, I’d fuck myself with my toy.”

“You’d do that... for me?”

“Just for you,” I swallowed. “But fuck, Nick, don’t go too fast, it makes me want to go fast too, and I’m not ready for this to be over.”

“Then do it with me,” he squeezed tighter, rocking his hips into his hands. I bit into the bottom of my shirt, unintentionally lifting it past my bra, its black lace taut on my tits, my nipples escaping as I arched my back and heaved my chest.

“Just... if you fucking come. Could you come on me?” I whimpered.

“You’d want that, naughty-list girl?” he growled.

“All over my stomach.” My first base card fell out of my hand, my head wild and spinning as it caught Nick’s attention.

I froze as he pulled his pants up, making his way toward me. I almost screamed with how fast he approached, pinning me against the wall.

“Nick!” I yelped as he moved dangerously close, far closer than he’d ever been before. The heat of his cock sat bent in his hand, almost grazing my stomach as I palmed my pussy. I didn’t move an inch, not wanting to lose the game.

He looked down at my card on the floor.

“Read it for me,” he breathed me in. “Ask me what the card says, because I’m fucking dying to tell you.”

I peeked over at it, the innocent question so simple and sweet compared to how hot we just got.

I trembled.

“*“What outfit do I look the sexiest in?”*” I muttered near his lips.

“Would you believe me if I said it? If I told you this: a pink robe, a towel in your hair, green cream on your face... you. You from this morning. You from last week with the red sweater and gold hoop earrings. You from the summer, with your white tank top and your small—oh so fucking tight—denim shorts. It’s you, it’s your curly hair, your red lips, and brown eyes... eyes that are more caramel than cinnamon, a color that I have carefully and constantly contemplated about.”

“Nick?” I wanted to fall back, but was already against the elevator wall: blushing, hot with a sticky sweat that took over my entire body. “Me?”

“Do you really think I’m cute?” he asked.

My eyes watered. Sad? Excited? Overwhelmed?

“Yes. I do,” I said timidly.

“And what if I told you I felt the same? What if I told you that the biggest lie I ever said to get to someone was with you? That I could’ve fixed your sink by now, but have delayed it, just so that I could see you more, or that all this food I got tonight wasn’t just for me, but for us. What if I told you that in that paper bag behind us were all the ingredients for coquito, that I wanted to make you feel like you were home again? Everything I do is secretly for you because I want you, and even though I know it’s dangerous to get involved, I’ll do it, because I’d rather lose you now, than live another second not telling you how I feel.” He gravitated closer, his breath sweet like rum and mint.

“You mean that Nick? You did all this for me?” I tried not to cry, resisting the urge to leap up and kiss him.

“Just for you, Elena. I want to do everything for you... I wanted to spend tonight with you... which is a much better holiday than anything I could’ve imagine... and that’s why we’re still stuck here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, more curious than concerned.

“It means... if I told you I could’ve really fixed this elevator by now, would you be mad me?”

His confession settled into my chest, a bombshell truth that caused my eyes to water. It was crazy, it was wild, but most of all, it was something that felt so endearing, only because it was Nick—my Nick—a man who never once judged me like I judged myself.

“I could never be mad at you.” Nick leaned in, his forehead settling onto mine. His breath, his touch, his heat, turned me on and made me throb. “You lost the game.” I grinned, noting that he was the first to make contact.

“Did I?” he smiled. “Maybe I actually just won?”

“Maybe...”

“And do you want me to open the elevator?” He leaned in further, his lips settling into mine, pressing deep into a passionate moan as his cock slipped free and onto my stomach. I rubbed myself, kissing him back, tasting what I always imagined but could never prepare for. He was a god, he was an angel, mischievous yet sweet. He was Nick—fucking—Stafford.

“Don’t you dare,” I warned. “Not until we’re done.”

Nick

#8 HE KNOWS ME INSIDE AND OUT

Of all the wrong things to do, of all the warning signs I learned from my sister and her divorce—how not to be involved with those who you work around, live around—this was the test I knew I'd fail. It was wrong to lie to Elena, and it was wrong to touch her, but fuck if I couldn't resist the urge to graze my finger—hell, my pinky—across the smooth, tanned spot right above her bellybutton.

“I should be patient. I should be gentle, but it's so goddamn hard not to devour you.” I growled into her curls, her arms wrapped around my shoulders. “I feel like I've waited for so long, and the longer it's been, the hungrier I've gotten.” Slowly my pants fell loose as I kicked off my boots, standing tall against Elena's soft skin, her chin raised to my chest as I brushed my nose down from her head and onto her cheek.

“Just kiss me. Lift me and let me taste your lips. I've wanted to kiss you for so long,” she whined sweetly. “Savor it. Savor me.”

“Every inch.” I claimed her, her ass mantled onto my palms as I pushed my weight against her and the elevator wall, wedging her near the railing for support. “You're so fucking hot, Elena... so, so hot. I can feel it between your legs.” I kissed those pouty red lips that had always belonged to me, stifling my need to fuck her hard, from thrusting the entirety of my erection right into her little slit. Savoring wasn't just what

she wanted, it's what she *needed*—my complete appreciation of the only moment I ever dreamed of.

“You can really feel me?” she shuddered, surprised.

“Of course.” I tried not to answer weakly, her needy clit puffy and wet, grinding with the sway of her hips over the head of my cock, covering me with her sweet feminine scent that drove me feral. I kissed her again, licking her lips, sucking them, memorizing her scent for later, her neck and hair sweet like jasmine and strawberries. She was so rich smelling, clean and delicious, enough for me to take a taste, to nip at the corner of her jaw.

“I like that,” she moaned. “Your scruff on me, it's rough, but nice.”

“Do you like it here?” I carefully kissed her, removing her shirt, the width of my hand cupping her bra to the top of her breasts, the same breasts whose cleavage I saw tucked into her robe this morning, the cotton, pink covering that I wanted to shred apart. But now I had her, her little, black bra transparent in the cup of my hands, frilled and laced with just enough covering to mask what I wanted beneath.

“Yes... there.” She swallowed as I shoved her bra down, her nipples hard and sweet, tanned like butterscotches to my tongue that flicked and sucked them.

“And here?” My jaw clenched with restraint, brushed against her sides, her breathing shallow as I made my way down, hoisting her legs over my shoulders while bowing to my knees. “Just a taste, baby girl.” I muttered, a name I never called her before, but came out so naturally and easily that I didn't even skip a beat. I forced Elena up against the wall, standing, gripping her hips to lick the taste out from her cunt.

“God,” she begged, gripping my hair, burning my scalp with a tight squeeze that I craved. I moaned against her slit, the soft spot that my cock twitched for, stretching her open with my tongue as I fucked her with my mouth.

“I've thought of this, I've thought of you, in every position, in every scenario.” My stubble bristled against her

thigh as she rode herself from my tongue to the tip of my nose. I sucked her clit into my mouth, letting it loose with the loud wet pop. “And for as much as I’ve thought of it, I never know where to begin... but between your legs feel so right. Holding you—your hips, your waist.” I squeezed her sides, festering in something so biological, so mechanical and ancient. She felt built to be bred, and my body craved to be unleashed in her, to flood her full. “You just make me ache.”

“You just need a release. We both do,” she said.

“Fuck,” I groaned. “I don’t have protection... I brought nothing.”

“No, no... it’s ok. I’m tested and clear, plus I’m on the pill.” She looked down at me, hope in her eyes, “Are you—”

“I’m tested too. I’m good.” I assured, more relaxed as I kissed her torso, sliding her back down toward my hips. “Just tell me if it’s too much,” I whispered, Elena’s eyes wincing, before growing large. Her mouth parted, opening the same moment her folds wrapped around the tip of my cock, her heat meeting the most sensitive part of my body as I rested my head against hers.

“Slowly,” she bated, “I like when it’s slow.”

“Then, I’ll go as slow as I can.” I pulled her off the wall, holding myself inside Elena as I lowered to my knees again. My calves tightened in the reflection, brawny and firm, our bodies like a jigsaw of muscle and softness pressed against me. She was so small compared to my hands, her perfect breasts rubbing down my chest as she sat further onto my cock, swallowing it.

“Fuck, Nick.” She hugged me, shutting her eyes as she wedged further down, her ass meeting my thighs, the base of my erection submerged entirely into her body.

“That’s it, baby, you’re doing so good.” I bit into her shoulder, praising how tight she clenched herself around me, how the beat of her heart hugged my arousal.

“Let me just rock myself against you—ride you. Can I?” she asked innocently, her hands framing my cheeks, kissing

me. She smiled, the same smile that creased her otherwise large dark eyes, causing my heart to thrum, and my muscles to melt into her giving body.

“I’ll have you any way you want me. *Any* way. Just stay with me, just let me be in you and feel you... the deepest part of you.” Elena slipped up and down my cock, slowly adjusting, giving me the freedom to join, to pump my hips in between, to fuck her like a machine made for her pleasure.

She reached for the rum and laughed, taking a sip, letting some of it spill out of her mouth and onto her chest before kissing me. “Shit, you’re so fucking big for me.”

I stole the bottle from her hand, pushing myself further inside her as she screamed with joy.

“Am I? Fuck me like you would your toy.” I took a swig for myself, using my hand to caress her cheeks, to position her head. She grinned, her mouth open as I spit rum right onto her tongue, her tits wet with liquor, reflecting the subtle sweat that already dampened our bodies.

“My best fucking toy yet.” She kissed me as I swung her around, lying her back on the soft wool of my large topcoat. Her curls sprawled out into a perfect halo of hair as she laughed. “No way, you’re in that deep,” she gasped, her thighs clamped onto my waist as she grunted, “Oh, god. Oh... god! Fuck yes.”

“Give me everything,” I begged, thrusting faster, her slippery cunt leaking onto my pelvis. She took me well, my perfect neighbor with the perfect pussy, massaging me to climax. “I won’t fucking come until you do, not until I feel that orgasm dripping on my balls.” I fucked her harder, feeling even more sensitive, ready to pop.

“You want all of me? You can have it,” she warned, giving me the most sinful of ideas. “I won’t tell you no, Nick, not with any part of my body.”

Elena

#9 HE TAKES My Breath Away

“I hope you don’t regret saying that.” Nick pulled out, every inch of his erection more telling than the last, leaving me feeling so open and empty as he left my body. I was so fucking wet for his size, my blush burning against his palm as he thumbed my lips, smearing its red color onto my cheek. “I want to fill every piece of you, to have every one of your little holes shaped for me. Would you like that, Elena? To be fucked everywhere all at once?” He sat up on his knees, raking my hair until fisting it tight.

“You reading my mind, Nick Stafford?” I got on all fours, propping my ass up, facing him like an obedient dog ready to bow. “You fuck me like that, and I’ll put you on the list as the best sex toy of the season.” I kissed his thigh, running my tongue up to the cut of his pelvis to his shaft. He throbbed for me, his cock hiccuping with a pulse as my lips brushed over him.

“I’m not reading your mind, gorgeous, I just think we’ve always been in sync, but too afraid to admit it. Hell, I like you, and I want to be yours just as much as I want you to be mine.”

I couldn’t believe where I was and what I was doing, admiring the exhausted muscles of my own neighbor, of my building’s super—my dream guy. He was so wet and sweaty, his scent more man than clean cologne, musky and woody, filling my chest with an unfamiliar warmth that somehow

found its way into my stomach. Butterflies erupted from every inch of my body as my head leaned into his torso, hearing his heart pound magnificently through his body. That pound, that erratic beat was for me—all me—and my command was just as powerful over his body as his was for mine.

“Let me suck you, babe,” I said, testing the nickname for myself, enamored by the smile on his face, and the surprise in his eyes.

“Mmmm, babe.” He gripped my hair tighter. I grunted. “Babe, babe, babe. I like how that sounds. Say it again, but louder.”

I kissed the tip of his cock, licking the surprisingly sweet cum that had already begun to bead out of him. Did he get any of it inside of me while we were fucking? A piece of him, his orgasm or the hint of it ever being in my body made me come apart. Maybe I wanted him spilled inside of me entirely, maybe I was greedy for it. Suddenly I wanted him to come so badly. “Stick that big dick in my mouth, *babe*, and I swear I’ll suck it fucking dry.”

“You tease,” he shuddered, exhaling loudly as I took him into my mouth. He was too big, quickly reaching the back of my throat as I clenched onto his topcoat beneath me, fighting the urge not to gag, but being unable to regardless. I didn’t mind, and in fact I preferred it; hot tears formed at the corner of my eyes, as spit bubbled over his balls. The way his thighs tightened as I drooled over him and onto the floor was so exciting, his ass puckered in the reflection behind him, firm and dimpled like an athlete. “Wait! Shit, not yet. I’m too close, Elena.” Nick pulled out, luring a wild string of spit from my mouth as he pinched the tip of his erection, fighting his orgasm. His balls tightened and dropped, resisting the spasm I provoked.

“Almost had you,” I gasped, wiping my mouth.

“Like I said, I don’t come till you do, and that’s what it’ll take to get on the little list of yours. I’ll make sure you know what number one really feels like, and it won’t be from some vibrator.”

I couldn't believe how fast I got to my feet as Nick yanked me into the air, my tits pressed against the cool elevator wall. He handled my hips roughly, effortlessly, positioning me against his groin as I held onto the railing for support.

"I'm learning something new about you Miss Elena Ortiz. I always knew you were a giver, but you're far too giving to not be taken care of first. Can't you see I want to spoil you? That I want to make you feel consumed in the best sense?" He smacked my ass, his question reaching the peach fuzz around my ear, sending chilled shivers all over my body. My nipples hardened from how his cock slipped between me, taking advantage of how unabashedly wet I was. "You trust me?" The clink of his belt lifted from the floor. He snapped it.

I practically drooled my arousal onto the crown of his apple-hard cock, grinding back against his tip. "I do."

"And if you want me to stop, you tell me. This is for you, this is for your mind and pussy." Nick carefully wrapped the belt around my neck, taking special precaution to move slowly and carefully. He laced the black leather through the brass buckle, looping it loosely around my neck. "Say tighter, baby," he instructed, notching the belt further towards my throat.

"Tighter, baby..." I echoed. He wrapped the belt around his fist, turning it into a leash. "Tighter... tighter... tighter," I repeated, relishing in the surprising pressure it produced. "Ti—" I stopped, as he loosened it a little.

"Right there," he growled, finding the perfect spot for me to still breathe and speak, but also, for my head to feel fuzzy and light. "Has anyone taken you from behind before? This fucking peach of yours?" he asked. "God knows I fucking want it, how I've worshiped it as you've walked away... how I've stroked myself to the thought of it."

"You've fucked yourself to me?" My breath fogged the mirror in front of my face, "Did I really make you come, just because of my ass?"

"Every time I'm around you I get so turned on... I always need a cold shower afterwards, but it almost never helps, it only delays the inevitable... me beating off in the water,

sputtering my mess onto the wall, wishing it was you that I'd spill inside of instead."

My mouth opened wide as I felt something warm, something round and hard pushed between me, brushing my asshole. It was such a sensitive spot, such a unique button of pleasure that he merely pressed into, causing me to expand and accept him, to pop his perfect fucking head right into my hole.

"Nick..." I gasped with what little air I could, "Christ, that's it. Right there!" I encouraged, backing up slowly, his cock so soaked with my own spit, that no friction or pain was hardly felt. "I can take it all. I ca—" I paused, my pussy brushing against his balls.

"Every hole, baby girl." He kissed my neck, tightening the belt harder as his reached around, lifting me to my toes as he went knuckles deep into my cunt, his two fingers curling, finding the delicate mound of nerves, pressing it.

"Shit, I feel so tight," I whimpered, weak by how his hips rocked into my ass, his fingers milking my pussy wet. Nick furrowed in the reflection of the elevator wall, the leather strap of the belt clutched into the chomp of pearly white teeth.

"You like it in the ass? Fucking you from behind while fingering you like my little puppet?" he gritted.

My ass bounced into him, his thrusts clapping against me with a raw, hard fuck that made me want to scream.

"Harder, Nick. Fuck me harder." I rubbed my clit, forcing his fingers further as I began to quiver. Here I was, bent over, my lipstick smeared, and my tits pressed painfully hard against the wall, chasing an orgasm that felt too big to ever be expressed. I needed to scream, but Nick tightened the belt, stretching my ass with his fat dick as he fucked me harder than any man or toy ever had before.

"Is anyone in there?"

Fuck.

A woman's voice echoed from the floor above as she knocked on the large steel elevator doors.

We were caught, but not quite, the sound of our sex undeniable, but still not yet seen.

“Shhh... I’m your bull, baby, and I’ll fuck you as such.” Nick covered my mouth, squeezing it shut, his forearms wrapped in corded veins that muffled my groans. “But you gotta be quiet for me... I can’t have my sweet Elena getting caught, taking it so roughly.”

I was so close, biting into his arm, my knees shaking as he entered my ass again, pulling out just enough to remind me how big he felt at my entrance.

“I can’t hold on,” I whined, finally losing control.

“Bite my fucking arm, baby, scream into it.” Nick protected us from being caught, allowing me to cry into his arm as he railed me against the wall. My air grew tighter and tighter, causing stars to build in my head, and my vision to go bright. I was exploding and fading all at once, disappearing into the warmest puddle of nerves that turned my face numb. And as I thought I was about to lose sight of everything, Nick stripped the belt from my neck, releasing all the blood up to my cheeks and head, then back to my clit.

“Fuck!” I thought I was peeing for a second, ignoring the woman that knocked above us, asking a question I couldn’t even pay attention to. I didn’t care if she heard, or if she knew who was in here, because I was coming harder than I ever knew possible.

“Baby, I’m going to... oh, shit—” Nick exhaled loudly, his toes curling beneath me as I heard hot wet drops of cum fall out of my ass, the beginning shots of his orgasm filling me up.

“Come in me, come in me,” I begged as Nick leaned onto my back, squeezing my breasts, draining everything he had into my ass, hot semen seeping over the entirety of my insides. He hugged me tighter than the belt, tighter than how his fingers felt inside me.

“Let me keep you... let me have you.” Nick panted, kissing my upper back and neck, his sweat dripping onto my shoulders. His erection fell out of me, his orgasm spilling over

my thigh and onto my heels. So much of him poured out from how hard he gave it to me. “God, Elena... I’ve waited for you for so long. For this... for what comes next.”

“And I’ve waited for you... ever since I first saw you. It’s been the longest year, but the best one too... at least... now it is.” I leaned the back of my head against his hard chest, savoring each kiss he gave, each needy touch he delivered, his hand clawing at my stomach for an embrace. I didn’t think he’d ever let me go, and honestly, it made me want to cry with joy.

“Whoever is in there, don’t worry! I’m getting help!” The lady called from above, her feet shuffling away. I tried not to laugh, unsure of how much she heard, or what would even happen if the door were to suddenly open. Nick and I were completely nude, and in no desire to hurry. I wasn’t sure if either of us cared to be caught, taking our time to kiss, to face each other, to snuggle.

“I give us about twenty minutes until the fire department shows up... but I’ll have us out in no time.”

“I’m not sure I want to leave.”

Nick smiled. “I’m sure we can make due... and if you think for a second I’m letting you go home alone tonight, you’re crazy.”

“And where are you stealing me away to, Superintendent Stafford?” I joked, tracing a patch of his chest hair with the tip of my finger.

Nick thought for a second, grinning with the most handsome dimple on his cheek. “Hmm... well, if I’m stealing you, then I’m keeping you at my place.”

“You stealing me or selling me on a new apartment?”

“Convincing you...” He kissed me again, affirming my answer that was already written on my face. “One bed, one home... no leaky faucets, no more lost mail.”

About the Author

Vivian Mae is a Latina indie author, who is dressed for New York, but living out of Phoenix, Arizona. When she's not bored at her day job, she's writing steamy, contemporary romance with relatable and angsty characters. All novels intertwine in the same story-telling world that Vivian has created, and feature a variety of hot book boyfriends in complex, emotionally driven situations.

Always steamy, always a happily ever after!

Want more Nick and Elena?

Find their free epilogue in the link below!

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You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

Cuffed for Christmas

Anne Lange

1

Kris

November

I walk into the executive conference room—already packed with employees—and straighten my tie, then brush a hand over my hair to smooth it down. I used to hide at this time. Getting teased for my name throughout school put the Grinch in Christmas for me. But, once I entered the working world, I ignored any ribbing, hoping adults could behave like adults.

Kismet Publishing may not be as large as the big-five publishing houses, but it's getting there. On the top floor of our office building in San Diego, with a wall of windows facing the Pacific, several of my colleagues are standing, some clustered in little groups, some taking chairs at the conference table. It's always nerve-wracking when your CEO calls an impromptu meeting and provides no context.

I've worked at Kismet for almost five years, the last two as an acquisitions editor. I interned here during college as an editorial assistant. I was pleasantly surprised when they offered me full-time employment upon graduation. However, while I love San Diego, I hope to one day move to the main office in New York, home of all the major publishing companies. Although I enjoy editing, my passion lies in production or marketing.

I've dabbled at writing but discovered I'm full of clichés and have limited creativity for world-building. I'm well acquainted with my weaknesses and learned to leverage my

strengths long ago. I'm here in the California office until the perfect opportunity comes along.

While I sweep the room, looking for my colleague Henry, I brush some crumbs from lunch off my jacket. He wasn't at his desk, so I assumed he might be elsewhere. But I don't see him yet. I use the time to scan the room for one of the newest Kismet employees—Joy Calvin. But I don't see her yet either.

“Hey, Kris. Got your naughty list put together yet?”

I sigh. Henry is the one adult who finds the time to tease me. He steps up beside me with a fresh coffee. “If I'd known you were grabbing one of those, I would've joined you. I could've used the fresh air.” And some breakfast. I missed my morning coffee and cinnamon roll because of a deadline.

“Sorry. Last-minute decision.” He sips from the cardboard cup, wincing when it burns his tongue.

“Forget it. What's this meeting about?”

“Not a clue. The boss summoned me, hence my presence.”

I scan the room again; this time, my attention catches and stops on a particular woman who just entered the room. My eyes follow her as she joins some women on the other side of the table. She's got shoulder-length red hair, brushed straight and parted off to the side. Her hazel eyes, more green than brown, sparkle. And she has curves a man can hold on to while he's—

“You're drooling.”

Every time I see Joy, I swear my heart skips a beat, and my dick perks up in excitement. Joy Calvin, my office crush. The woman of my dreams. The boss's daughter. If only she knew how much I desire her.

I snap out of it and avert my gaze. “No I'm not.” I resist the urge to wipe my mouth.

Henry snorts. “Yeah, right. You've had a hard on for that chick since the day she joined the company.” He glances down at my crotch, one brow cocked high. “Make sure you don't embarrass yourself.”

Technically, he's not wrong. I'm half-hard every time I'm around her. "Don't be an ass, Henry."

Her manager had been giving her a tour of Kismet Publishing when I first ran into her. And I mean that quite literally. I'd been rounding a corner and ran smack into her, losing hold of my precious cargo, a stack of fresh-off-the-press new releases from one of our top authors.

While her boss looked on with disapproval, Joy waved him away and bent down to help pick them up. I got an excellent glimpse down her blouse—lacy pink bra, creamy smooth flesh—and I still remember the light floral fragrance of her shampoo.

I also recall how horribly embarrassed I was, and since that day, anytime I get near her, my palms sweat, and my stutter makes an appearance. A stutter I worked hard to fucking beat as a kid. It's almost non-existent now. But occasionally, especially during extreme stress, I know it's trying to rear its ugly head when words get stuck on my tongue. I can't pass them over my lips, no matter how hard I try.

I quickly avert my eyes, hoping she missed me staring. But when I chance another peek, to my surprise she's looking straight at me and doesn't she wink. She even adjusts her stance, a move that thrusts her breasts higher.

My head's on a swivel while I try to determine if anybody spotted that.

Nobody's wasting their time looking in my direction other than Joy, so I think we're safe. This time my heart definitely begins to race, and I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks. God, geek out much? I thought I'd put the awkward kid days behind me years ago.

Henry nudges me with his elbow, dragging my attention away from Joy. "Any idea what this is all about?"

I clear my throat. "Not a clue."

There's a shuffle at the doorway, and the senior leaders enter the room. Martin Calvin, Senior Executive Officer of the California office of Kismet Publishing, is in the lead, and

makes his way to the front, taking a position behind the large black leather chair at the head of the table. From what I understand, he's the youngest of three. He and his two brothers own the company, inherited from their father and grandfather before him. Todd runs things in New York, and Wes handles things in Texas.

Mr. Calvin rests his hands on the back of the chair and addresses everyone gathered. "Thank you for joining us this afternoon. I'll be brief. I know you're all busy. First, I want to say congratulations on a record-breaking third quarter. We more than surpassed our projections. Great job, everyone. I'm also happy to announce that we're in the process of finalizing plans for our annual holiday event. As a thank-you for all of your hard work, this year's Christmas party will be fully funded by Kismet."

"But you do that every year, sir."

I'm not sure who yelled that out, but several people chuckle.

"Yes, yes we do. And I'm happy we can do that for you. This year will be slightly different. Instead of holding it here in our office, we plan to book a downtown hotel, have a sit-down dinner, followed by a dance. We're even securing a block of rooms for staff to use, so nobody has to drink and drive. Cost will be fully covered by Kismet."

A round of cheers and applause follow that announcement.

"As part of this year's event, we also plan to host a Secret Santa gift exchange. Nothing extravagant. There's a cap of forty dollars. Before you leave the room today, I'm having my assistant go around with a hat that contains everybody's name. Choose a name, but don't reveal who you've got. If you happen to choose your own name, then, of course, take another."

There are a few groans but mostly excited chatter.

"Unfortunately, with the season closing in fast, the hotels are being booked quickly. Next weekend is the only available date. I know that doesn't give you much time, but I'm sure

you'll find suitable gifts for your peers. Remember, the idea is to have fun."

The conversations start as soon as Mr. Calvin closes the meeting.

While waiting for Mr. Calvin's assistant, I search for Joy in the room but can't spot her. Did I miss her leaving?

"Hey, man. Want to hit the mall after work and get this over with?" Henry appears less impressed with the assignment than I feel. I don't enjoy these events. I despise networking in any form, but being more outgoing will help me make a good impression.

"Okay, gentlemen, select your name."

Henry and I each draw a folded piece of paper from the hat. I unfold mine, and then I think I stop breathing as I stare at the letters typed in bold black.

"Did you get your own name?"

I shake my head, and the woman moves on.

"Who'd you get?" he asks.

"We're not supposed to say." Fuck, I'm not even sure I can get the name to form on my tongue.

"Oh, fuck that. Tell me who you got."

"J-Joy."

"Seriously?" He smacks me on the back.

"Yeah." I hold out the small slip of paper so Henry can verify that my mind isn't playing tricks on me.

"Cool. You should buy her something sexy."

I glance at him. "Are you sixteen?"

He snorts.

"We're adults, Henry. And this is an office thing. I'll get her something nice."

"You need to make the first move to get into her pants."

“Some days, I question your level on the maturity scale. For a guy who graduated with honors from an Ivy League school, you have the personality of a horny teenager.”

Henry raises his eyebrows and throws up his hands. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I’m about to say more, but my cell phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and see it’s my father. “I’m sorry, I have to take this. It’s probably about my mother.”

Henry sobers, knowing that my mother has been ill. He nods sympathetically. “You go ahead. I’ll pick up the gift for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Not a problem.”

“Just make sure it’s tasteful.” I give him some cash and thank him as I hurry out of the room to find a quiet space to take the call.

An hour later, I’m sitting at Mom’s bedside in the hospital, holding her hand as the doctor updates me and Dad on her condition. She had a stroke two months ago that left her totally bedridden. I’d hoped for weeks that she’d improve, but we’re being told now that the likelihood of that happening is slim.

I glance over at Dad. His eyes are blurry with unshed tears. “I’ll help, Dad. We can move her to a home where she’ll be more comfortable. We can arrange for physical therapy.”

“It’s not that, son. I just hate seeing her like this.” His voice cracks.

Watching Dad crumble after Mom’s stroke has been one of the hardest things I’ve faced. He’s always been a strong source of comfort for Mom and me. I wish I had the power to improve the situation.

Joy

I TAKE one last look at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, making a few adjustments to my hair and touching up my lipstick.

“You look gorgeous, Joy.”

I swing my gaze to my colleague standing next to me. “Thanks, Suzie. You do, too. I love that color on you.” She looks stunning in a dark emerald-green mid-thigh dress sculpted to her body. She’s also wearing high black peep-toe heels and a pair of sparkly wreathes in her ears. That’s Suzie—put together and classy, but still with a splash of sass.

Meanwhile, I’ve chosen a red number, a shade that clashes with my hair. My older sisters always tease me about my lack of fashion sense. Still, I don’t dress to impress the fashionistas of the world. I dress for me, sometimes for my date, but primarily for me. And I like what I like. I look for comfort, meaning clothes that flow over my curves rather than hug them. I’ve never been super comfortable in my body. No matter how much I diet or not, exercise or not, I seem to have inherited my mother’s genes. Cuddly, she and my father used to say.

“Are your parents here tonight?” Suzie asks. Everybody knows I’m the owner’s daughter. At first, I worried it would cause problems, but nobody has teased me about it or tried to take advantage of it.

My parents are part owners of Kismet Publishing. There’s this story that goes with the name. It has something to do with

my great-grandfather meeting his wife at work; it was love at first sight—yada yada.

My father and his two brothers now co-own the company, and there's this unwritten rule that all the kids, cousins, etc., have to spend at least one solid year working for the company. When I turned twenty-five a couple of months ago, I was told it was time to put in my stint at the office. I like to read, so it's no hardship. Though, I much prefer my books to come with a whole lot of sexy.

“My parents never miss a company party.” I turn and lean my hip against the counter. “When I was a kid, I spent one Christmas with chicken pox. My parents still went to the party.”

“Seriously? How old were you?”

“Ten. Mom made sure I was settled, dotted with lotion to keep the itching to a minimum, and then left me in the care of my older sisters. Who, by the way, couldn't care less that I was sick.”

“I'm sorry.”

I spin back to finish with my makeup. “Don't be. My parents got me a couple of extra presents that year to make up for the fact I was sick.”

“Have you seen Kris yet?”

“Not yet.” Kris Nichols is the adorable guy that I ran into on my first day. Well, he ran into me in the hallway. When I stooped to help him pick up the pile of books he'd dropped, I could smell cinnamon rolls on him. I thought it was strange, until I heard he has breakfast at the corner coffee shop with a mid-morning coffee. I can't fault a guy for enjoying sugar and cinnamon.

We work in the same department, so I've seen Kris many times, and I feel more drawn to him each time. He's friendly and dresses professionally, on the shy side, though. What I like most about him is how he gets all flustered around me. Others find it silly, but I find it cute. Not puppy cute, the man is handsome as sin. He gives me all kinds of feelings. He has this

mop of curly dark brown hair that he tries to control with some pomade. And his eye color matches his hair. I could melt into a puddle each time our eyes connect.

I'm just surprised somebody would like *me* enough to get all discombobulated. His neck and the tips of his ears turn red, and he struggles to talk to me. I think he might stutter. That's what I heard, and I wonder if he thinks I'd laugh, but I'd never. I understand the feeling of being scorned for something beyond your control. And I try not to be cruel.

Now, naughty? Flirtatious? A ho? Yes, I can absolutely pull that off, and Kris brings it out in me. I caught him staring at me two weeks ago at the staff meeting. He looked sexy in his suit and tie, all professional. I couldn't stop myself from giving him a playful wink as I fantasized about strolling over and mussing up his hair.

When Human Resources got tagged to organize the Christmas party, Suzie suggested a Secret Santa exchange, and I was thrilled. I love Secret Santa. When I was a kid and we lived closer to my cousins, we used to do a gift exchange every year. But then my parents moved us here to California, and my one uncle moved his family to Texas. The family get-togethers unfortunately dried up.

This time, though, I fought tooth and nail and managed to rig the game just a bit to get Kris's name. But unbeknownst to me, the morning of that meeting, Suzie admitted that she took it one step further and somehow arranged for Kris to get my name. I don't know what she did or who she bribed, but I remember the look on his face when he read my name on the slip of paper. It made every moment of the subterfuge worth it.

"So"—Suzie's eyes are dancing with delight—"are you ready for Secret Santa?"

"I am."

"What did you get him?"

"I'm not telling. You'll have to wait like everyone else."

I got him a sexy version of Truth or Dare. I'm hoping we can use it as an ice-breaker to get to know each another much

better after the staff party.

“They’re going to start the exchange soon. Let’s go.” Suzie tucks her lipstick into her small purse and props her boobs in her dress.

We leave the ladies’ room and walk down the hall to the ballroom where the party is being held. Popular Christmas music is playing, spilling beyond the open doors. Hotel staff is scurrying about with emptied appetizer trays, while Kismet staff are wondering about the room, talking to colleagues, or finding their assigned seats.

Inside, a photo booth is set up in the corner with props like reindeer antlers and Santa hats. Against the far wall near Santa’s throne is a huge majestic tree, its branches cascading out with a mix of shimmering silver, white, and red ornaments. Smaller trees stand regally in the corners in different color schemes. Elegant draperies entwined with delicate white fairy lights flow from a center point in the ceiling out to the edges of the room. The unmistakable scent of fresh pine fills the room.

The tables are covered in crisp, white linens, each with exquisite centerpieces of lush, fragrant winter flowers—deep red poinsettias, ivory roses, and evergreen sprigs.

“Ho, Ho, Ho!”

I spin around in time to see Santa enter the ballroom, a heavy-looking sack over his shoulder. A couple of helper elves tag along behind, each lugging their own red bag of gifts.

I glance at Suzie. “This should be fun.”

“Do you want to sit at our table or stand on the sidelines?”

“Our table is near the front, so let’s sit.” I need to give my toes a break from my shoes. As I sit to rub my feet, I look around the room to try to find Kris because I haven’t seen him yet. What if he’s not here?

Watching people get called up to receive and open their gifts is more fun than I expected. Some gifts are obvious jokes, while others are very tasteful and thoughtful. A few are on the

edge of racy, but only a few. I wonder what Kris will think of his gift. Mostly, I wonder what he got for me.

“Kris Nichols.” Santa calls out his name, and I perk up, trying to spot him. Finally, staff members are shifting near the tables at the back, and he appears.

Oh, my. I swallow hard. He’s usually polished in his business suits. Tonight he’s in all black, with a red tie, and he’s left his hair casual. Holy smoke, he’s gorgeous. He glances around the room almost shyly as he approaches the front to meet Santa.

“Merry Christmas, Kris.” Santa’s deep voice resonates through the room.

I wait with bated breath as Kris slowly unreels the shiny red paper covered in snowmen and separates the edges in front of the entire room. I can see the pink on his cheeks from here. He glances up, his eyes searching the room until they land on mine. To keep the secret until the last second, we all included our names inside the wrapped gift.

“Show us, Kris,” somebody calls from the side of the room. “What did’ya get?”

His smile is immense as he holds up the box, despite shaking his head and growing redder. “Truth or Dare, the Sexy Version.”

The room breaks out in laughter along with a few requests for who gave him the gift. A couple of women offer to play with him. He doesn’t respond, though. Instead, he nods in my direction, and instead of walking back to where he’d been, he heads to one of the empty tables and sits.

As I wait for my name to be called, I wonder what he got me. Did he go the tasteful route? Or did he take a chance and get me something fun? I’m betting he went safe.

“Joy Calvin.”

Suzie pats me on the back and grins as I rise and make my way to Santa.

“Merry Christmas, Joy.”

“Thank you, Santa.” I take the gift and spin it around. It’s about the same size as the one I gave Kris. It’s wrapped in red-and-white striped paper. I slip my fingernail under the tape and slowly slide it along the seam until it’s lifted. I edge the paper away to peek at what’s hidden beneath.

I see the tag first. “*Merry Christmas, Joy. From Kris.*” It’s stuck to a plain black box. I let the paper fall from my grasp to land on my toes. I lift the box to my ear and give it a shake. Something slides from one end to the other. It doesn’t rattle, more like a soft thud.

“What is it, Joy? Open it.”

I raise my head and look straight at Kris. Oddly, he seems just as curious as everyone else. I open the tab at one end, and with a hard jerk, something soft and pink lands in the palm of my hand.

What the...?

Are those what I think they are?

I hook my finger into one of the circles and lift it out of my hand.

I giggle.

Handcuffs. He got me fluffy pink handcuffs.

I raise my head. His eyes have gone big and round, and his jaw has dropped. He looks surprised and not necessarily happy. Though, I’m not sure why. I love them. I return to my seat amid whoops and laughter from around the room.

“Oh my God.” Suzie is doubled over. “I can’t believe he got you handcuffs. It’s like he knows you.”

I wait until the rest of the gifts are dispensed before I search for Kris to thank him. And to ask him for a dance.

But I can’t find him anywhere.

When he still hasn’t appeared an hour later, and the crowd is beginning to thin, I can finally admit that he left without saying a word. Clearly, he doesn’t feel anything for me. He meant the handcuffs as a joke.

I tuck my gift into my purse, say good night to Suzie, and call an Uber to take me home. I had hoped to begin the New Year with a new romance, but I guess that's not in the cards.

Kris

6 MONTHS LATER...

During the holidays, we found an affordable home for Mom in Redding, hours away from Kismet's office in San Diego, and moved fast to secure the spot and save money on the hospital stay. It didn't feel right to send Dad to a new place and leave Mom without nearby family support, so arranged to work remotely for a while. Thankfully, my manager was highly supportive of the alternate work arrangements.

Unfortunately, it meant I had to turn down a job that would have been a great stepping stone to my goal of getting to the New York office.

It also meant I had to leave Joy. Crushing my dreams of building something with her. Kismet is a nine hour drive away. In my limited experience, long-distance relationships only work if there's a solid foundation to build upon. The situation, while not insurmountable, seems unlikely. But a guy could dream. Often late at night, waking up with my cock in my hand and visions of Joy's red-painted lips surrounding it.

I'm trying to look at the positive side. I get to spend more time with my father, and my mother is improving a little with help from her physical therapist.

My laptop chirps, and I read the pop-up reminder on my screen: fifteen minutes until my work call with Henry, *my new boss*, since he took the position I declined. Still pisses me off. I

grumble as I adjust my webcam and open the meeting invite to ensure I have the proper link.

I'm still angry with him about the Christmas gift, too. After I explicitly instructed him to purchase a tasteful gift for Joy, the asshole got her a set of fluffy pink handcuffs. God, it mortified me when she lifted her finger with the cuffs dangling for everyone to see and laugh at. How could I face her after that? Encouraged by Henry, I left the holiday party early to avoid embarrassment.

My computer chirps again with that mechanical trill, and the screen flickers to life as I log into the conference call. Voices crackle from the speakers, Henry's deep baritone mingling with the high-pitched chatter of other Kismet employees attending the meeting.

I can't help but think of Joy. I feel bad about how I left without speaking to her. Between finding a place for Mom, having her moved, and scoping out apartments for Dad and me, I just ran out of hours in the day. Even with hours of physical miles between us, I wish I could talk to her.

After the New Year, she'd sent me an image of a stuffed hedgehog wearing her handcuffs. I couldn't talk to her then, too embarrassed. But now, thinking back on it, I'm regretting my decision not to reach out and apologize for the gift and my hasty departure.

I try to push away thoughts of Joy as Henry's face takes the priority spot on the screen alongside the others. After a quick round of introductions, it's time to get down to business.

"Welcome, everyone," Henry begins once everyone has identified who they are and what part of the company they represent. "File updates first, then I'll introduce a new project to Kris." He updates as we jot notes, leaving me curious about the new task. I try to keep my mind from wandering back toward Joy again while I wait for him to get to me.

We've each had our turn and now we're back to Henry. "We have a new project, which I'm assigning to you, Kris."

I dislike Henry being my boss, but I can respect his position. I straighten in my chair. “Not a problem. Who will I be working with?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute.” He finishes with the others but asks me to stick around. When it’s just the two of us, he clears his throat. “We need a marketing plan for one of the new authors.

Marketing? This is perfect. It’s precisely the type of project that can help me get noticed.

“I’d like you and Joy Calvin to work together on this one.”

My brain and my tongue stutter for a moment. “J-J-Joy?”

“Is that a problem?” He’s staring at me through the camera.

Is this a game for him? Does he enjoy making things awkward for me? I lick my lips and focus on my words, pushing them out through my lips slowly. “Not at all.”

“Good. Joy has all the details. You have a meeting with her in”—he glances at his watch—“fifteen minutes. I’ll flip you the invite.”

“But...”

He leaves the meeting. The jerk. He knows what he’s doing. He’s setting me up. Since I moved away and he got the job I had turned down, we only speak when necessary. Unfortunately, because of our roles, that’s more often than I like. Sometimes I wonder if he deliberately tried to embarrass me in front of Joy and then encouraged me to leave the party early so he could make a play for her himself. Although, no office gossip has reached me in Redding to confirm that. I can’t believe he’d be so conniving or manipulative. Some people will do anything to get ahead.

My thoughts return to Joy as I disconnect from the video call. I’ve got fifteen minutes. I want to make things right between us. I want us to move past the awkwardness. Sniff checks on the pits, and I decide to brush my teeth. I add a touch of pomade to my hair to settle it down and confirm there’s no coffee stains on my shirt.

The computer rings, and, there she is.

Because I've been working remotely, I haven't seen Joy's face in about six months. She's just beautiful as the last time saw her back in San Diego. She's got her red hair up in a messy bun and wearing glasses that amplify her gorgeous eyes. Today, they look a little more brown than green.

"Kris? Are you there?"

I turn on my mic and my camera. "Sorry, yes, I'm here. Hi, Joy."

"Wow, it's been a while. You look great, Kris."

"I didn't know you wore glasses."

She laughs and tilts her head, the sound a little hollow through the computer speakers. She touches the tip of one finger to the rim of her glasses. "Normally I wear contacts."

"Makes you look important."

"Well, I feel important. Hey, I'm glad we're working on this together. I miss seeing you around the office."

"I miss you, too."

Is she being sincere? It feels sincere. I sense no hard feelings or attitude. Does she remember the gift? Has she moved on?

"How's your mother?"

"She's doing okay. We're seeing some improvement, I think. Her therapist seems confident, anyway."

"That's great. I'm happy to hear that."

"So, about this project?" I could talk to her all day about nothing at all.

"Right." She reaches to her left and brings a book into the camera's range, holding it up so I can see the cover. "This book launches in November. They want us to prepare a launch strategy, including promo and a book tour for the author. All to happen before the holidays, of course."

"That's great. Have you done this type of work before?"

“I’ve worked on a couple of events, but mostly in the background. This will be my first to co-lead without somebody else looking over my shoulder.” She laughs lightly and bats her lashes.

We spend the next forty minutes drafting a rough plan of what to do. I discover during the call that Joy is also working from home, so I don’t have to worry about Henry or anybody else overhearing us. I figure it’s time I apologize for that gift.

“Listen, Joy, I want to—”

“Hey, do you want to meet my new roommate? He’s very handsome. He’s got this cute little mustache.”

My heart drops, and I have to double-check that my chin didn’t hit the table. “Yo-your roommate?”

“And he likes it when I stroke him.”

What? The? Fuck?

She nods, her grin sly. “Yeah, he moved in just after Christmas. He’s amazing.”

Anger bubbles up inside me. Why did she have to mention him? I don’t want to meet her attractive roommate. And I don’t want to hear about her stroking him.

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Joy.” Clearly, she’s moved on. Jealousy spears through me, gutting me, leaving me in tiny slivers.

“We’ve been spending a lot of time together, getting to know each another. He likes to cuddle.”

I hate him.

“He’s the perfect gentleman, too—washes after himself. And, oh my God, he gives the best licks. I mean, he loves to lick me, especially after I’ve been stroking him for a while.”

I’m choking. I’m probably turning purple.

Joy must notice the look on my face because she laughs. Straight up, no-holds-barred laughing.

I feel my face heat. I don't blame her for moving on, but I don't think I can sit here and listen to her tell me all about him any longer. "Listen, Joy, I need to go."

"Relax, Kris. It's not what you think."

Not what I think? She's panting about him in front of me.

Joy stands up and walks out of the range of the screen.

Maybe I should just end this call now before she returns.

Before I can push my mouse to the left button, she reappears, holding a black and white cat, who is nuzzling his head under her chin. I can hear his purrs from here.

"This is Jinx. He's my new roommate."

Wait? What? "He's... You've got a cat?"

"Yup. Isn't he handsome?" She lifts the cat and rubs him against her cheek.

He doesn't look impressed. But he does have a streak of black under his nose. And if you cock your head to the right and squint, it resembles a mustache. "Yes, he's a good-looking cat." My heartbeat slows, and I uncurl my fists.

The poor thing twists in her grasp, so she puts him down. "My elderly neighbor moved into a home and couldn't take Jinx with her, so I offered to keep him for her. Turns out I like his company."

My relief is profound considering Joy and I have never even gone on a single date.

"Listen, I should probably go. I'll type up these notes and send you a copy. How's that?"

I nod. "Um... Sure. That sounds good."

"When do you want to meet again?"

"How about the day after tomorrow? We can get the ball rolling on a few items." And it will give me time to cool down and prepare for our next call.

"Sounds good." Joy drops her gaze, lifts her head, and looks straight at me. She leans forward a bit and lowers her

voice as though she's whispering to me, and me alone, even though nobody else can overhear us talking. "I'm thrilled to be working with you on this, Kris. I've missed you."

"Me, too."

Before I say more, she waves and leaves the meeting.

Is that hope I'm feeling in the pit of my stomach? Maybe it's not too late for us after all.

4

Joy

AUGUST

I'm staring intently at my computer screen, but I'm focusing on Kris's face as we discuss the project we're working on. I can't help it. I want him so much. We can't be in the same room together, so I'm hungry for whatever I can get.

All of my other projects pale in comparison to this one. We've been meeting at least twice a week for a while now, and things are moving along nicely, but each time we talk, I get distracted. He looks thinner from this angle. I know he's been worried about his mother. I sure hope he's taking care of himself. His hair is a little longer than when I saw him last, the tips grazing his shoulders—it has a tousled, sexy look. Like he just crawled out of bed.

Jealousy unfurls in the pit of my stomach. What if he has a girlfriend? Our conversations have progressed beyond straight-up work talk to some light-hearted teasing, even edging along flirtation. Still, we have discussed nothing too personal.

I'm desperate to believe he's still as single as I am. As each day and week passes, I fall for him even more, knowing he's the one for me. I'm thinking the stories my father and grandfather told me might be true. I've only experienced it with the men in the family—that feeling of when you encounter 'the one', you just sense it with every aspect of your

being, with all of your heart—and you recognize there’s no other individual for you.

His brown eyes appear warmer; I could just melt under his watch. And the way he talks with such interest in the project... He just makes my stomach flutter. He cares about the author’s experience during this launch—it’s not just a job to him. He mentioned once that he wanted to be in marketing, but I think he’d make a fantastic agent.

I just wish he’d reciprocate my feelings. But considering how quickly he escaped the night of the company Christmas party and then moved to Redding before the holidays were even over, I believe he’s not interested or doesn’t have the time for a relationship.

I had thought I’d maybe broken the ice when I told him about Jinx. I let him think my roommate was another man, and I got the reaction I’d I hoped for. His face gives him away every time. But he has said nothing since. My hopes of starting something with him are dashed.

“Let’s take a break,” Kris suggests, returning my attention to what he’s saying. “I feel like I’ve lost you.”

I nod, relieved and in agreement because I haven’t heard the last few minutes of what he is saying.

“So what have you been up to? Anything interesting?” he asks, his voice soft, personal.

A tingle runs down my spine. Perhaps this is the moment I’ve been waiting for when Kris would reveal his true feelings for me. My heart beats faster, and my palms grow clammy. “Nothing too exciting. Just taking care of Jinx.”

Kris’s face brightens at the mention of my cat. “You know, you terrified me.”

“I did? When? How?”

“When you said you had a new, handsome roommate.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tease you.” Here’s my opening. Now’s the time to fess up. “I was hoping for a reaction, to be honest.”

On the screen, his face scrunches in confusion. “What kind of reaction?”

I shrug and glance down at my keyboard. “I wanted to make you jealous.” My confession tumbles from my lips.

“Well, it worked.”

I raise my eyes. “It did.”

“Damn right. I wanted to punch the asshole that was licking you and allowing you to stroke him.”

A bubble of laughter bursts free. “I forgot I said that. You must have thought I was a ho.”

“No, I was picturing you on your back with your legs spread wide, and”—he pauses as I watch his mouth moving as though he’s working hard to finish where he was going with that statement—“and *me* licking you.”

Blink. Blink. Did Kristopher Nichols just tell me he wanted to eat my pussy? “Um...”

“Joy, I’m sorry about that gift last Christmas?”

“The handcuffs? Why would you apologize for those?”

“I had to go see my mother at the hospital, so Henry offered to get the gift for me. I told him to choose something tasteful.”

“Oh. Well, I like the cuffs.”

Now it’s his turn to blink like an owl. “You do?”

“I do. And if I can be honest with you—”

“You can.” His whole body jerks forward with those words.

“I would love to have you put them on me.” I’m unsure if he’s ready to take the conversation there, but I’m on a mission now. And I won’t be stopped.

He squirms in his chair, a flush appearing high on his cheekbones. “And wh-wh-what would I do once you were cuffed?”

“Whatever you want.”

I watch as his Adam's apple bobs up and down. His eyes are blinking furiously. He licks his lips. God, how I wish we were in the same room.

“Joy?”

“Yes, Kris?”

“I like you.”

“I like you, too.”

“Will you to do something for me?”

“Okay.”

“Do you have a headset?” he asks.

“Of course.”

“Get it.”

“Okay. Give me a sec.” I use my headset when watching a movie on my phone, so I head into my bedroom where I left it last night and grab it off my nightstand. Then I head back to my computer, and I put it on. I see Kris is also wearing a pair now.

“Now what?” I ask.

“Are you alone?”

I glance down to where Jinx is asleep on the floor next to a pillow I laid there for him. “Just me and my new cat.”

“Good. Now, I want you to take off your pants.”

“What?” Not that I won't, but he sure hopped on the bus quickly.

“I'm sorry. Am I going too fast?”

“Not at all.” I eagerly tuck my hands into the waist of my leggings and push them down over my hips and legs. I step free and kick them aside. I add my underwear, since I hope that will be his next request. When I sit again and glance back at the computer screen, I see he's smiling and looking much more confident. “Now what?”

“I would like you to tip your camera down. Oh crap, I didn’t ask if you have a separate camera or if you’re using the one built into your computer.” A look of disappointment crosses his handsome face.

“Don’t worry, I’m using my personal monitor and I have a separate camera.” I reach up to tip it toward my dining room table I’m using as my office.

“More. I want it angled so I can see your crotch.”

Okay then. I play around until I find the correct angle, and then, for good measure, and to make sure he sees everything he wants, I adjust my chair and scoot my butt forward to the edge. I lift my legs to rest my feet on the table. Thank God I live alone. Not the most comfortable position, but I’m about to give Kris a show.

“Perfect. And beautiful.” His voice is low and husky, sexy in my ears.

I close my eyes.

“Take two fingers and touch yourself, Joy. Run your fingers along those lips.”

I do as he asks, and I realize before he even instructs me further that I’m already wet.

“Slip one between your folds.”

It slips inside easily. I run it up and down the length. I even add a second finger.

“Find your hole, Joy. Find it and dip those fingers inside.”

I’m so wet.

“Fuck yourself, slowly.”

I do. I pull my fingers out and then plunge them back in.

“I can hear how wet you are. Oh fuck. I wish I were there.”

I know he can’t see my face, but he can hear me. “What would you do, Kris? If you were in my kitchen while I finger myself?”

He groans. “I’d suck on that sweet pussy. I’d lick that hard clit.”

I shiver.

“Faster, Joy.”

I increase the pace.

“Stop. Show me. Spread those lips and show me.”

With two hands, I pull my labia wide so he can see every bit of pink flesh.

“Fuck.”

I brush the pad of my finger over my clit.

“Yes, keep doing that. I want to see you come. Rub that little button until you’re ready to explode.”

I use two fingers to circle the hard nub to the music of Kris’s heavy breathing in my ears, rotating them faster and faster. Tossing my head back, I pant.

“Plunge them back inside. Deep. Hard. Pretend it’s me fucking you.”

I do as he asks. A violent shudder racks my body. My breathing is short and urgent, and a climax draws close.

“Don’t stop, Joy. Don’t you stop until you’re coming hard around your fingers.”

Alternating between my clit and vagina, I work until I’m clenching around the two digits, pulsing with my release. I’m breathing heavily.

Kris is groaning, and I raise my head in time to see him reach his orgasm. I can’t see his hand or anything below his mid-section, but his upper body jerks in time with his movements. With a gut-wrenching grunt, he stills. His eyes are squeezed shut. His lips are a thin, tight line.

Neither of us says a word until our breathing returns to normal.

I sit in my chair, my feet planted back on the floor.

Kris finally raises his eyes and looks at me. There's a teasing glint there. "I think this was a good meeting."

I laugh. I can't help it. "Yes, it was a great meeting."

"I think we should have more of these."

"I would like that."

We say our goodbyes and leave the meeting.

I flop back in my chair. Well, I guess there's hope for something between us after all.

Kris

I WAS STILL REELING FOLLOWING yesterday's 'meeting' with Joy. Work didn't come up at all.

I wondered if I'd gone too far or crossed some unspoken line that would now mean the end of my job, the end of our friendship. We've been like two horny teenagers, exploring each other's bodies virtually in ways I've only dreamed of. Joy has been so open and playful, and I've been able to let go of all my inhibitions like never before. She masturbated again for me. I did it for her. We masturbated together, the intensity of the pleasure overwhelming to the point I saw stars. I've never felt that kind of connection with anyone before.

We are making great progress with our project, and the book is launching next week. Today is our final meeting to confirm the details before we finish the author's itinerary and check with the various blogs and news stations.

My computer chirps, letting me know I'll see Joy in just a few minutes. I do a breath and pit check, laughing that I'm taking that extra step when we aren't even in the same space.

The video screen pops up, and there's my beautiful Joy. Only she doesn't look alright today. She doesn't even glance up at the screen.

"I've got my notes here, just a second." She flips through her notebook. "I, ah, I just need to check with the bloggers scheduled for next week. And that promo tour company got back to me. I think we can use them for the latter half of the event. Or maybe we can have them focus on something new."

“Joy, stop.”

She glances up. “What?”

I lean closer, peering at my screen. “What’s wrong? You’ve been crying.” Her eyes are red and puffy. She looks like she hasn’t slept.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s something. Tell me.”

Joy drops her notebook, and her shoulders sag under the weight of whatever is bothering her.

“Jinx is missing.”

“Your cat? What do you mean, he’s missing?”

“He got out of my apartment last night and I can’t find him.”

“I’m sure he’s in the building somewhere.”

She throws up her hands, and tears fall from her eyes and roll down her cheeks.

“I’ve looked, Kris. I thought maybe he went back to his old apartment, so I tried there first. But the new tenants haven’t seen him. I’ve checked with everyone in the building.”

“He’s probably scared and hiding.”

“What if he got outside when somebody opened the door?”

“I’m sure he’ll come back.” Damn it, I wish I could be there for her. But even if I left right now, it would be at least nine hours until I reached her. By then, he could have returned on his own.

“I’ve been all over the neighborhood and nothing.” She cries, and my gut clenches because I can’t cuddle her and comfort her.

“Look, honey, why don’t you take the rest of the day and look? I’ll finish up the tour details and you go look for Jinx. I’m sure he’s waiting somewhere close, hoping you’ll find him. He probably just went searching for his original owner

and when he couldn't find her, he went into hiding. He might not even know you're looking for him."

"Are you sure?" Her devastation guts me.

I want to help her. "Yes. And if you don't find him by tomorrow, I'll drive down and help you look."

Joy rolls her eyes. "I can't ask you to do that. Your parents need you there."

"They'll be fine for a few days." Mom's been responding well to her treatments. And Dad is okay on his own. He's not so worried anymore and spends as much time with her as he can, anyway.

"Thanks for the offer, Kris. I will take the rest of today, though, to go look."

"Call me if you find him."

Joy's smile wobbles, but it's still a smile. "I will. Thanks, Kris."

I spend the rest of the afternoon completing the details and worrying about Joy and Jinx.

My phone beeps with a message before I'm ready to call it a night. Joy. My heart swells with love for her, hoping it's good news.

I don't even bother with hello. "*Did you find him?*"

I watch the bubbles dance for a second. "*I did. Can I call you?*"

"*Of course.*"

"*It's not too late?*"

"*For you? Never.*"

I wait for my phone to ring, answering it before the music stops. "Where was he?"

She sighs heavily, and I can hear the relief in the sound. "I was walking past an alley a couple of streets over when I hear a meow. There he was, behind a dumpster. Dirty. Lethargic.

And I think he was in a fight. There was blood on one of his ears and he was limping.”

“The poor thing. Did you take him to a vet?”

“Yes. I freaked out, Kris. I found other spots of blood on him, and he whimpered when I picked him up. He’s never going to trust me again.” Her voice hitches.

I lower mine, trying to calm her, worried she’s working herself up. “Honey, of course he will. He’s just as shaken as you are. What did the vet say?”

“That he’d been in a fight, but other than a few cuts and some bruises, he’ll be okay.” She pauses for a minute, and I can hear her murmuring, “I’ve cleaned him up. He’s here with me, lying on the couch. He’s not budging from my arms. He’s being affectionate, but not purring.”

“He needs to feel safe again.”

“The vet assured me that other than a round of antibiotics, he won’t need much looking after. I also had them implant a chip in case he gets out again.”

“That’s a good idea.”

I listen to Joy take a long, deep, shuddering breath. “How is your mother?”

I can change topics if that’s what she wants. “She’s making great progress. She’s talking now and getting some movement back. Dad spends every day with her. We’re hoping she can leave the home by Christmas and move in with my father.”

“She’s very lucky to have you, Kris. You’re a good son.”

“You never talk about your family, Joy. Tell me about them.”

“Not much to tell. My parents are great. And I have lots of cousins, though we don’t see each other as often as when we were kids.”

“I know Kismet is a family business. Do they all work for the company?”

“Some do. My father and my uncles still run everything. I’m sure they’re hoping to retire someday, but none of us are ready yet to step up and take over. Each of us has to put in a stint though.”

“Don’t you like it?”

“I do. But not like you do, Kris. This is your dream job. Not mine.”

“What do you want to do, then?” She’s surprised me. I’m not sure I’d want to go to work every day if I knew Joy wouldn’t be there.

“Well, I admire you. I think you’d make an outstanding agent. Have I told you that?”

I laugh. “I’ve never seen myself as an agent. I’ve always wanted to be in marketing.”

“Nope.” I picture her shaking her head as she scratches behind Jinx’s ears. “You care too much about the author to be an editor. You can certainly do it, but I think you’d make a much better agent.”

I’m not sure what to say to that.

“You know that Kismet employs a group of agents, right? They’re in a subsidiary part of the company. Kismet gets first right of refusal on any projects they pick up for their authors, but they aren’t committed to only working with Kismet.”

“I do.” There are currently more options available in New York—that’s why it’s always been part of my plan.

“Do you still have the game I gave you?”

She’s changing subjects on me again, so catching up takes me a minute. “I do. Why?”

“Let’s play.” Her voice switches to flirty, and just like that, the tone of our conversation changes.

“Now?”

“Yup. Truth or Dare?”

“Um... truth.”

“Oh, I like that.” She laughs. “Mr. Hedgehog doesn’t mind binding.”

“Mr. Hedgehog?” I’m confused.

“Remember the cuffs?”

How could I forget?

“My hedgehog likes the cuffs. And being bound. And maybe I don’t mind it either. At least, I wouldn’t if you were the one binding me.”

Well, this evening has gone in a different direction than I was expecting.

Joy

November

I can't believe how nervous I am. I'm sweating in my ugly Christmas sweater—this year's holiday party theme. I'm not in the mood to party today, but I couldn't resist the temptation of the sweater.

It's been months since Kris and I started our online relationship. There's been plenty of show and tell, but I'm eager to see him in flesh and bone.

Kris didn't specify when he'll be back in San Diego this week. All I know is that his mother is doing well, and he's decided he's ready to return home. Although, he doesn't know where that will be since his father sold his childhood home to move to Redding, and Kris gave up his apartment.

I plan to ask him to move in with me. Is it too soon? I mean, we've been dating, sort of. Since the night I first masturbated for him, neither of us has dated anyone else.

Thinking about it still gets me horny.

He's been busy, so we haven't had time to talk about anything else. I miss our video calls. I miss our video sex.

"Hey." Suzie rolls her chair over to my desk. "You look like you could use a break."

I glance at my watch. "Shouldn't you head home and get ready for the party?"

“Not yet. I thought I’d try one more time to convince you to come with me.”

“I’m really not in the mood this year.”

“Oh, come on. Since you and Kris got together, I’ve been without a wingwoman. I need company for this. Please come with me.”

Without Kris in town for the event, I didn’t bother to submit my name for the exchange or select somebody else’s. “Don’t you think it would be awkward? I’m not taking part.”

“Nobody will care, trust me. You’ll feel better if you go out. It will help pass the time until Kris makes it back to San Diego. When’s he supposed to arrive, anyway?”

Suzie has been listening to me lament about a guy I haven’t even kissed. But on more than one occasion, I’ve stuck my finger, or two, into my vagina and fucked myself. I’ve tweaked my nipples. I’ve even put a cucumber between my breasts and pretended it was him while he jerked off. Okay, that was a little weird. But it worked.

“I don’t know. Seriously, Suzie, I’m not up for celebrating this year. Not yet.”

“Just come for the photo op then. They’re doing it upstairs in the big conference room.” Her face lights up, her eyes full of excitement. “You can sit on Santa’s knee and tell him what you want for Christmas.”

I shake my head.

“Come on. You can leave right after.”

Suzie keeps pestering me until I give in.

“Good. I heard they hired somebody special this year. Who knows? Maybe you’ll get a special candy cane from him.” She takes my hand and drags me out to the hall.

We take the elevator to the executive floor and head toward the conference room. When we turn the corner, I see a slew of women waiting in line to sit on Santa’s lap.

Suzie glances my way and wiggles her brows.

I can't help but laugh.

We join the end of the line and chat with a few other women waiting near us while we make our way toward the big double doors.

When we arrive, I tune out the conversation to take in the room. Wow, my parents went all out for this photo op. They've decorated the room Dickens-style, making it cozy and inviting with the scents of pine and cinnamon.

The conference table is against one wall and covered with a white linen cloth decorated with candy canes and snowflakes. A giant punch bowl and holiday treats of all sorts are ready for staff to indulge.

At the far end of the room a red carpet leads to a platform holding Santa's throne, a fake fireplace, and a decorated Christmas tree. Jingle Bell Rock is playing on somebody's phone. The women ahead of me are giggling about the Christmas wishes they plan to whisper into Santa's ear. And boy, does that Santa look legit. He's wearing a red leather outfit with fur trim on the collar and cuffs.

As we make our way toward the big man himself, I can't help but think about Kris. While he may not be here for the party, I'll at least spend Christmas with him.

Finally, it's Suzie's turn to visit with Santa, but she suddenly spins around, jumps to the side, and pushes me in front of her. "You go first."

"Wait, what?" I squirm out of her hold and step back in line. "No. It's your turn. This was your idea. You go."

"No. I mean, yes, it was my idea, but I insist you go first." She crosses her legs. "I need to pee. And I don't want to pee on Santa. You go first. I'll run to the bathroom and get back in line."

I just stare at her. "Seriously? You need to go that bad?"

She rocks back and forth on her heels and widens her eyes. "Yup. I do."

I roll my own eyes. I'm not sure what she's up to, but I want to get this over with so I can head home and try to reach Kris. "Fine."

I walk up to the platform and step up next to the big guy.

He glances up, smiles, and pats his thigh.

I'm going to do this, I guess. I sit on his right leg, trying not to put too much weight on it. He makes a noise, and I twist to look at him. I'm irresistibly drawn to his scent. Why does that scent seem so familiar? Cinnamon. A wave of dizziness hits, and I lift my eyes, peering at the warm brown ones behind the tiny silver-rimmed spectacles.

Oh my God. Those are Kris's eyes, and they are sparkling with humor. I tug lightly at the fake white beard and slap at his arm, almost hissing my words. "Why didn't you tell me you were already in the city?"

He shifts his leg, causing me to tumble closer to him, and slips his arm around my waist, holding me close.

My whole body is on fire from my pent-up desire for this man. This is my chance to confess my feelings for him, but I'm afraid of ruining the moment, so instead, I stay in character.

"Ho. Ho. Ho. What's your wish this year, young lady?"

I also lower my voice so the other women nearby don't hear. I give him a wide grin and pretend to ponder his question. "Well, Santa, my wish this year is just to spend Christmas with someone special."

"Is that so? Who?"

"My boyfriend. We've never actually been on a date or in the same room together during our relationship."

"Well, that doesn't seem right."

"I agree. Plus, we never got to play with the handcuffs he got me last year."

Kris shifts causing me to tumble into his side. My knee nudges his crotch where there's a very hard budge.

“And I bought him a special gift this year. You might say it’s a matching set. I’m eager to see how naughty Santa can get.”

The electricity between us is palpable. Santa has lost his ability to speak. He’s nodding, his head bobbing up and down. His fingers are digging into my waist.

I hear him swallow. “H-H-Ho-Ho-Ho. I think that’s something I can make happen.” He brushes a stray strand of hair away from my face before leaning in and capturing my lips in a delicious kiss that says more than words ever could.

7

Kris

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm kissing Joy Calvin, finally, after all this time. It took another Christmas event to bring us together. Thanks to Suzie's help, I surprised Joy by arriving in town early. I've been avoiding her calls, using excuses for work, and making arrangements to return to San Diego.

A throat clears. Loudly. "Um, excuse me, but there are a few ladies who still want to give their wish to Santa."

Glancing over Joy's shoulder, I see Suzie at the head of a line of amused women. The line appears as long as it was thirty minutes ago.

My arms itch to move around Joy's waist and hold her close, but I know we have to take a break from the moment or risk losing control in front of our colleagues. "Wait," I say, meeting her eyes.

Joy blinks up at me, her deep brown gaze brimming with surprise and excitement. "What's wrong?" she asks.

I need to compose myself before the next woman sits on my knee. Having Joy in my lap, her voice in my ear, her breath hot on my neck, I wish the world would evaporate so I could strip away her clothes, lay her under that tree over there, and spend the next few hours getting to know her body with my lips, my fingers, and my cock. I want to wrap my arms around her and devour her. "We have an audience."

She turns her head and sees Suzie grinning broadly. "Oh, we do. They can get their own Santa."

I give her a look.

“Fine.” Her pout is laughable. She gets off my lap and stands aside while I finish with the rest of the employees. After the last person leaves the stage, I head to where she and Suzie are at the food table.

“Hey, Kris, welcome back.”

“Thanks, Suzie. Thanks for your assistance in bringing Joy here.”

She casts a side-eye at Joy. “I have to admit, she was being difficult. I practically had to drag her here.”

I reach for a sugar cookie cut and decorated like a Christmas tree. I bite into it, and a sugary softness melts over my tongue, tinged with the sweetness of the buttery icing. Makes me remember my mom’s cookies.

“How’s your mother doing?” Joy asks.

I finish chewing and swallow. “She’s actually doing well. She can’t walk yet and her speech is impaired, but she’s sitting up in bed, and she’s finally able to eat on her own.”

“Your father must be so relieved.”

I nod as I take another bite and reach for a second cookie before I answer. “He is. The progress she’s making is very promising. If it continues, there’s the potential she could leave the home.” I’ve got my fingers crossed for that. My dad is lost without his wife around every day.

Suzie looks at both of us. “Any chance you guys want to join me at the party?”

I glance at Joy but toss in my thoughts before she can speak. “Honestly, I came straight here when I hit town. I made it in time to change into this suit, and I’m kind of tired from the drive.” And I just want to be alone with Joy.

“Where are you staying?” she asks.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Well then, I’m going to head out now. Got me a party to go to”. Suzie grabs a couple of treats from the table and heads for the door.

Joy bats her pretty green eyes at me.

“Ugly sweater day?”

She glances down. “Yup. This was the best I could do.”

She’s chosen a pale green knit with a snowscape on the front. Snowmen, reindeer, and gifts are haphazardly splashed across the front of it. It makes no sense but obviously fits the theme. “I hope you won.”

She laughs. “Want to head to my place? We can grab dinner on the way?”

An hour later, we’re making out in her apartment. Cartons of Chinese takeout are cooling on her kitchen table. I’m sitting on her couch in Santa’s pants, and she’s still wearing her ugly sweater and panties. Still, the rest of our clothes are scattered around my feet. Joy straddles my lap, her fingers dancing across my chest as she grinds her crotch against my cock. I’ll find a wet spot if I look. And if I look, I’ll lose it.

This woman is everything I’ve dreamed of and more. She was the only woman for me since that day in the hall. It’s taken a year, but I finally have her, and I’m not letting her get away.

“Leave the beard on.” She tugs on the end.

“You like the beard?”

“It’s kinda sexy. I think it will complement your gift well.”

“Oh, really? Now, I’m intrigued.”

Joy leans in and whispers in my ear, “It’s a surprise.” Her breath sends shivers down my spine. I can feel her lips curl into a smile against my neck. My hands instinctively go to her waist, pulling her closer to me. Her warmth is inviting, and how she moves against me makes me want her even more.

She leans in and smashes her mouth over mine, shoving her tongue between my lips and kissing me deeply.

I feel myself losing control; I let my hands roam over her body, down her thighs, up beneath her sweater to palm her breasts, exploring every inch of her.

She whimpers against my mouth. Her body arches against mine.

I can feel my body responding to her words, and I wrap my arms around her waist. “I can’t wait to see it.”

She breaks our connection and stands, extending one hand to me, rolling her fingers in a come-hither fashion. “Come with me. Let’s go to the bedroom.”

I take her hand and follow her to the bedroom, anticipation building. When I cross the threshold, I’m hit with a scent of vanilla. I stop while she continues across the room to her dresser.

The walls have been painted a rich deep red, almost burgundy, like a bowl of dark cherries. The bed has satin sheets and velvety throw pillows in various pinks, reds, and purples. A hodgepodge of ruffles, tulle, lace, scarves, fishnets, and other feminine items are strewn about the room.

She is a slob. A slob that can’t match or contrast colors very well.

I can’t stop the smile. She looks so put together at work, even if her outfits sometimes clash with her red hair and fair skin.

Opening the top dresser drawer, she pulls out a red velvet Santa hat with white fur trim. “I got this for you,” she says, handing it to me. “Though I didn’t anticipate you coming with your own.” She grins back at me. “Put it on, Santa.”

I place it on my head, and the top droops down with the pompom on the end, lightly tapping my cheek. “Ho ho ho,” I say with a chuckle.

Joy giggles and spins around, searching for something else in the drawer. “I have one more surprise for you,” she says as she turns and hands me a box.

“You didn’t need to get me a gift.”

“Well, technically, I didn’t. And, technically, the gift isn’t really for you.”

Confused, I open it up and find a small velvet pouch inside. Curious, I open the bag, slip my hand inside and pull out... a pair of handcuffs. A pair of fluffy pink handcuffs. I look up in surprise.

She gives me a wicked grin. "I want you to be in charge tonight, Santa," she says.

My heart races at her words. My cock twitches and hardens in response. "Are you sure about this?"

"Oh, yes."

I lean in to kiss her, but she meets me halfway, our lips locking in a passionate embrace.

Her hands wander down my chest, and I let out a low groan of pleasure. She pulls back, a wicked glint in her eyes. "You're going to have to wait until Christmas for your actual gift," she teases.

I yank her against me, her breasts smashing against my chest. I can feel the hard tips of her nipples through the sweater's weave. "I can be patient, especially if there's more where that came from."

"Oh, Santa. There's lots more where that came from."

Joy

God, he's beautiful. Nobody suspected a hairless chest with a six-pack lurked beneath those button-down dress shirts. Who knew he had the sweetest-tasting nipples, the same shade as his eyes?

My heart is pounding as blood rushes through my veins because I've been dreaming of this moment for so long. I knew he was the one when we collided in the hall at work a year ago. I've always been skeptical of my family's uncanny ability to know when true love stood before them. Or, in my case, kneeled at my feet. I get it now.

His eyes are smoldering with desire. They meet mine, and my knees tremble. My fingers itch with the need to reach out and touch him, to feel the warmth of his skin, but I'm frozen with anticipation.

His eyes search mine, and I see the same desire and longing mirrored in them.

Kris Nichols is the one.

He steps closer and cups my face in his hands. Every nerve ending feels electrified at his touch. We're standing so close his breath warms my skin. I can smell the sugar cookies he ate at the office, just like I tasted earlier. The fluff of his fake beard tickles my chin. I raise my lids and realize I might drown in his eyes.

"Joy," he whispers, his voice soft, yet there's apparent urgency. It's as if he's saying my name for the first time.

A surge of emotion sweeps through me, a mixture of overwhelming fear and longing. I don't want to risk losing him. I want nothing more than to be in his arms. But I probably should tell him how I feel first.

I put a hand on his chest. "Maybe we should talk first?"

He shakes his head and growls as he leans in and brushes his lips against mine. His touch tilts my world on its axis. He runs the tip of his tongue along the fold of my lips, slipping between them and deepening the kiss. He explores my mouth with gentle strokes.

I melt into him. Every nerve tingles. When I pull back, I'm gasping for breath.

He rips off the beard, and I finally see his entire face. I've seen it countless times on my computer screen. I've seen his expressions change from serious to eager as we talked about work. I've watched his eyes darken and his nostrils flare as we pleasure ourselves in front of each other, always remotely.

Now, I can gaze deeply into his eyes. I don't have to search too far to see a fire of reciprocating love burning within. Oh, wow. I want nothing more than to be with him, loved and desired by him.

"Kris, I need to tell you something. It might be too soon, but I can't help it. I just know you're the one." My voice trembles. "I love you," I whisper.

He brushes a strand of hair back from my face. "I love you too," he replies, his voice husky, full of emotion.

"I knew that first day I met you. I knew without a doubt that I would love you."

"I think I did too." With his thumb, he traces a line from my lips to my neck, sending shivers of delight up and down my spine. His hands move lower, caressing me, sending ripples of pleasure throughout my body. "I want you, Joy. I've waited forever to have you."

"Well, it has been almost a year since we've been in the same room together."

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner,” he says. “I should have.”

“Kris, it’s a long drive. Your mother was sick and your father needed you. I understand.”

“But still—”

I press my finger to his lips.

Desperate now to be skin to skin, I step back, bring my hands to the bottom of my sweater, and pull it over my head.

He stares at me. Standing there, shirtless, in bagging red pants, white socks, and his red hat.

I lift my hands behind me and unclasp my bra, letting it fall to the floor. My underwear joins the pile. “Sorry for the mess. If I’d known you’d be here, I might have cleaned up. Though I’ll admit I’m not a neat freak by any stretch of the imagination.”

He shakes his head as he shoves his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and pushes them down, together with his boxers, and steps clear. “I’m not sure that counts as being naughty, but I might have to punish you just the same.” He’s got the cuffs dangling from one finger.

I take a step towards him, my heart racing with excitement.

He meets me halfway, wraps his arms around my waist, and pulls me close until my chest rubs his.

“Are you up for messing up my bed?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Our lips meet in a fiery kiss, tongues tangling as though fighting for control. He breaks away first and trails kisses down my neck and collarbone.

I let out a soft moan, arching my back and pressing my breasts tighter to his chest.

His hands wander down my bare back, fingers tracing the curves of my spine and the swell of my hips. He pulls back away, looking into my eyes with a primal hunger that sends shivers down my spine. “I want you. I need you, Joy.”

I nod, unable to find my voice.

Our touches become frantic, our hands colliding as we work to discover each other's bodies. Mine aches for more.

His hands move lower, cupping my hips and pulling into his.

I gasp when his arousal presses against me.

His lips leave mine to explore, tracing a line of fire down my neck and between my breasts. Then he lifts me into his arms with ease and carries me the few steps to my bed, where he lays me down on the red satin. "Scoot up and put your hands over your head."

I do as he asks, excitement building in my blood because I know what's coming.

"I didn't intend to give you handcuffs for Christmas last year." He takes one of my hands, snaps one cuff around my wrist, and stretches my arm toward the headboard, slipping the other cuff around the back of one spindle. "Give me your other hand."

I lift it up for him to snap the other cuff around that wrist. He's left them loose enough I can easily twist my wrists back and forth.

"But I have to admit, I'm kind of glad I did now." He settles on his knees between my spread legs. "You are so beautiful." He smooths his hands down my legs.

Then, he reaches to cup my breasts in his hands, molding them gently before he playfully tweaks my nipples, rolling them between his thumbs and fingers.

I tug on the cuffs. I can't suppress a moan as I feel heat building between my legs, aching for attention, knowing I've lost a certain amount of control.

He leans forward and latches onto one of my nipples, sucking it into a long, hard point before releasing it and attacking the other. Then he slides one hand lower, down over my stomach, to tease the sensitive skin of my inner thigh.

I spread my legs wider, giving him easier access, and whimper when he brushes his fingers softly against my clit. I'm sure I'm already slick with desire.

His lust-filled eyes darken.

I quiver with anticipation as he shifts and moves down the bed until he's lying between my legs, my thighs tight to his ears, his gaze hungry on my pussy. His eyes never leave mine as he leans in, his breath hot on my skin and zeros in on my clit.

Oh, sweet lord. I arch my back as I go from zero to sixty in no time. When he adds his fingers, I gasp, his exploration sending waves of rapture through my body.

Kris takes his time, expertly working my body like he's done this a hundred times before.

I'm teetering on the edge, ready to fall over into ecstasy. And just as I'm about to come, he slows down.

I grow more aroused, my body responding to every touch. I grip my hands together. I tighten my thighs against the sides of his head. I'm shaking as he pushes me toward a climax.

Then he backs off. Again.

I whimper in frustration. But he's not done with me yet. He flips me onto my stomach, pulling my hips up so my ass is high in the air.

"Do I need to uncuff you?"

"I'm okay."

"Good."

I hear him rip open a condom pack he had waiting somewhere, and while I'm sucking air into my lungs, he covers himself. Then he puts a hand on each of my hips and pulls me back to where his hard cock is waiting.

He pushes it against me, entering me slowly. I can feel the broad head of his penis slip past my entrance. I moan as he fills me up, inch by inch, until his entire length is inside me.

He moves, thrusting into me hard and fast, quickly driving me back to that edge of climax.

I'm panting now, pushing back against him as he drives deep into me, his hips slapping against my ass in an intoxicating rhythm.

My breathing grows faster.

His fingers dig into my skin as he pounds into me, taking me higher and higher until I'm ready to break.

I scream his name as I come apart, my body shaking with my orgasm. I'm convulsing around him as he pumps his hips in and out without compassion and follows me, then collapses onto my back with a satisfied grunt. We topple onto our stomachs, sweaty, satisfied, and exhausted.

After a few minutes, Kris shifts, undoes the cuffs, freeing my hands, and then settles on his side, wrapping an arm around my middle and tucking my back to his stomach. We lay there for a few moments, both of us breathless and still trembling from the intensity of our lovemaking.

"That was amazing." He whispers the words into my ear.

I smile, knowing he can't see my face, but nod my agreement, unable to form words quite yet.

Kris

THE MORNING of our last workday before the holidays, I wake up feeling happy and content. I slept little, anticipating the long-awaited together time. Christmas is fast approaching, and Joy and I plan to make up for lost time in bed. Aside from family obligations, I'm looking forward to spending lazy days with her.

Joy asked me to stay with her, saving me from having to find an apartment during the holidays. At first, I hesitated to accept the offer, worried once I moved a few of my things in, she'd have second thoughts. But we've clicked insanely fast.

The last couple of weeks have been a blur of wrapping up work projects, buying and decorating a tree for her apartment, and baking. Playing with the flour and candied cherries was much more entertaining than using them for cookies. We've also talked about our future dreams, and I know I never want to leave her side.

We enter the office building hand in hand. Joy's laughing as we walk to the elevator. She'd been trying to guess what I got her for Christmas. I'm not giving away my secret.

At the elevator, we meet up with Henry, and he sticks out his hand. "Kris. Glad to have you back." He looks a little grim.

I give it a firm shake. "It's great to be here. Everything okay?"

"Sure. Just a problem with one of my projects. Nothing I can't deal with." His attention drops to our connected hands.

“I see it worked out between you two.”

Joy squeezes my fingers. “Yes, it did. I don’t think I ever thanked you for going against Kris’s wishes when you shopped for my gift last year.”

Henry has the grace to look away, his cheeks red. “Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologize. I loved them. They’ve come in very handy.”

He blushes, and I want to laugh at his discomfort, but he’s earned it. Instead, he gives me his full attention. “Are we still on for nine?”

Henry’s scheduled a meeting with me but wouldn’t disclose what it’s about.

“I hope you’re giving him a raise.” Joy tilts her head and bats those long lashes of hers.

“Um...”

“Joy.”

She elbows me in the ribs. “You deserve one. He ended up with the job that was supposed to be yours.”

Henry’s face turns ashen.

“I turned it down because I needed to be with my parents.”

“Yes, but it was yours first.”

My boss looks decidedly uncomfortable, as do a few others loitering nearby.

“Whatever it is, I know you’d be fantastic at it,” she continues.

I glance over her head at Henry. “I’ll just drop my stuff off, and then I’ll be right over.”

The elevator arrives, and we all step in. Joy and I trade glances as the others gush excitedly about their upcoming holiday break plans. I can’t complain because it’s all I’ve been thinking about, too.

As we ascend to our floor, a tinge of dread settles in my stomach over my impending meeting with Henry.

When we arrive at our floor, Henry hurries off to his office. Joy and I agree to meet later for lunch before heading to our respective workstations. I drop my things at my desk, flip on my computer, and then walk over to Henry's office.

He's sitting at his desk, staring at a file folder in front of him. I knock on the door, and he raises his head.

"Come in, Kris."

I enter, closing the door behind me, and sit opposite him.

I watch as he works to find whatever words he's searching for.

"I'm sorry."

I'm confused. "For what?"

"For being a dick."

"When?" There have been a few times over the past year, so I need him to be more specific.

"Last Christmas, when I took that job, the way I treated you at our meetings, when I assigned you and Joy to work on that project together — take your pick. Although, since things worked out with Joy, maybe you'll give me a pass."

"Well, when it comes to the cuffs, I guess you knew her better than I did." And that sits like a stone in my gut.

"I did it to embarrass you."

"I know."

"I wanted her for myself. I thought I might have a chance if you weren't here."

I would have felt extreme jealousy a year ago. But now, I have the girl. I had the girl all along. I have no reason to be jealous.

"And then when you turned down this job and left town, I figured I'd finally be able to make my move."

I take a deep breath before responding. “It was wrong of you to try something like that, Henry. And it was especially unfair to Joy.”

Henry nods in agreement, still not meeting my gaze. He knows he made a mistake and is trying to make amends with me. “I took a risk putting you on that project together. But I thought the distance kept things in my favor.”

“You thought wrong.”

“I never had a chance. I know that now. And I feel like crap for ruining our friendship over it.”

He’s not wrong.

He hands me the folder he’s been staring at. “Maybe this will make up for my behavior. I am sorry, Kris. And I really hope you and Joy stay together for a long time.”

We’re going to stay together forever.

I open the folder and glance at the sheet of paper inside. I scan the words. My heart pounds as I read through the lines. I raise my head and lock eyes with his. “This is a job offer.”

“It is.”

“As a marketing manager.”

“That’s correct.”

“In New York.”

“Yes.”

“But...” I can’t leave Joy after I just got her. After I just got back to her.

Henry raises one hand to interrupt where my head was already heading. “Joy is being offered a position in the New York office, as well. And I have it on good authority that she’s a shoo-in for it.”

I don’t know what to say. What will Joy say? “I need to talk to Joy first.”

Henry nods. “Of course. Think about it over the holidays and let me know. You can start at the beginning of February.”

That should give you time to wrap things up here and find a place to live there.

“Thank you, Henry.”

“Don’t thank me, Kris. Joy was right. You deserve this.”

I walk out of Henry’s office in stunned silence. My dream job is mine if I want it. Of course I do, but what if Joy isn’t ready to leave California? Her family?

“Kris?” I glance up to see her strolling toward me, and we meet halfway. “I got a new job offer.”

“I know. I did too.”

“What do you think?”

Joy is uncharacteristically quiet for a moment before finally answering. “I think we should take them. This is your dream.”

“What about your family?”

“My family is in New York, too.”

I smile at her, relieved that she’s so understanding and supportive. Though we’ve only been together for a few months, being apart from Joy hurts me more than I care to admit.

“It’ll be okay,” she says softly, reading the worry in my eyes. “As long as we’re together, everything else will work out.”

“Okay then.” I guess we’re moving to New York.

Joy

ONE YEAR LATER...

I drum my fresh manicure against the arm of the chair as I wait for Kris to arrive home, scrutinizing the room to make sure everything is perfect.

The Christmas tree is lit and looks stunning. Check.

The gifts beneath the tree are wrapped and artfully displayed. Check.

Candles are lit, and I poured the wine. Check. Check.

Christmas music plays softly in the background. Check.

It's been two years since Kris gave me those fluffy pink handcuffs. A year since we moved to New York. I'm not sure about winter weather yet, but I love the big city lights and ambiance, especially at this time of year.

Snowflakes are dancing outside one of our enormous windows—one of the many reasons I love this apartment. It's cozy and romantic with the best view. Kris loves it, too. We lucked out finding this two-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. Right place, right time, and it became ours just a few days after we started looking.

We've made much progress over the past year in our new jobs. Kris is creating a name for himself with several very successful launches, and I love my editorial job. Plus, I've gotten close to my cousins Todd, Thea, and Tomas again. Todd's wife, Felicity, is lovely. I hadn't seen her or Todd since

their wedding. While I might not see my parents as often as I'd like, my aunt and uncle have taken me under their wing as if I were one of their own.

Kris's parents are doing well. We spent three weeks in California with them over the summer. His mother has made impressive leaps in her rehabilitation. She's now using a walker to go short distances around her and her husband's home. I still remember the tears in Kris's eyes when he saw her that first day, and she walked to greet him.

It's almost six, and still no sign of him. He had a late meeting with an author with a new book releasing on the first of the New Year. I'm so proud of Kris. I still think he should be an agent, but he loves marketing.

I can't help but feel a sense of giddy satisfaction as I think about the surprise I have for him this year. I remember last year when he surprised me by showing up early in San Diego as Santa. The memory of it still makes my heart beat faster.

I wanted to recreate that moment somewhat, so I've been planning all week, even down to the Chinese food I'm sure will grow cold before we can sample it.

I glance down at the beautiful red velvet dress I bought and brush my hand over the white fur trim. I've even got a new set of fluffy cuffs. We've burned out the ones he gave me two years ago.

My mind drifts to our many heartfelt conversations, the laughter, the moments of pure joy. I think about our passionate lovemaking and how he always makes me feel desired and cherished.

There's a click, and I hear the front door open. My heart races fast. I'm sure my cheeks are flushed with excitement.

"I'm home." His briefcase hits the floor with a thud and his keys clank hard on the glass tabletop where they land. Then I hear his footsteps as he walks down the short hallway into the kitchen.

"Something smells good," he calls. "Did you get Chinese? Oh, here it is. Want me to grab some plates? I'm starving. I

skipped lunch today.”

I can't help but smile as he comes into view, his eyes lighting up when he sees me. “Merry Christmas!” His warm and humorous voice fills the air.

I can't help but laugh. “Oh my, God. You're... You're dressed as Santa!”

He nods, a wide grin spreading across his face. “I thought I'd surprise you.” He crosses the hardwood floor to where I'm standing next to the tree.

“I didn't expect this surprise, though.” He takes my one hand and twirls me around before yanking me hard to his chest. “Sexy.” He lowers his head and smashes his lips against mine.

After a thorough kiss, I pull back and gaze up at him. “Merry Christmas.” I wrap my arms around him. “You look amazing,” I murmur, tipping my head back to receive another kiss from him.

Our hearts are beating in sync while we devour each other's mouths, our hands roaming over each other's backs.

Kris finally withdraws, drawing in the air. His gaze roams over me. “You look beautiful.”

My cheeks grow warm. I take his hand and pull him to the floor with me. “I want you to open your present.”

Kris looks surprised as I hand him the box wrapped in bright red paper with a big white bow on top of it. I hold my breath as he removes the paper and opens the lid.

He laughs. Inside is a pair of fluffy white handcuffs. “I love them. I think maybe you should open my gift, too.” He reaches under the tree and retrieves a beautifully wrapped box, and hands it to me.

I rip off the white bow and tear into the blue paper, tossing both over my shoulder, but pause for a second before I lift the lid and peek inside. I throw back my head and laugh hard. Inside the box is a pair of fluffy white handcuffs.

“Honey, Christmas for us wouldn’t be complete without handcuffs.”

As I look up into his eyes, my heart swells with love for this man. So much so that I’m afraid it might burst. I want to stay like this forever.

Kris leans down, cups my chin in one palm, and brushes the pad of his thumb over my lips. “I have another gift for you.”

“I thought we’d wait until tomorrow.”

“I want you to have this one tonight.” He reaches into his jacket pocket, retrieves a small box, and puts it into my hand.

It’s wrapped like the cuffs, but this box is smaller and square, and the bow is too large for the package.

My heart is pounding. My palms are sweating.

“Open it, please.”

This time, I gingerly remove the bow and then the paper, placing both on the floor next to my knee. I glance up at him.

He nods his encouragement to me to keep going.

I lift the lid. Inside is a smaller, black velvet box.

My throat thickens with emotion, a solid knot, making it difficult to swallow.

My hand trembles as I tip the box so the velvet one lands in my grasp. I suck in a long breath before cautiously lifting the lid to reveal the diamond ring nestled within. Four gold prongs hold a large diamond that catches the lights from the tree and sparkles with such brilliance it threatens to consume me.

Kris removes the box from my hand, lifts the ring from its perch, and holds it up. He can’t get down on one knee since we’re sitting on the floor, but I wouldn’t have this moment be any other way.

“J-J-” He stops, licks his lips and swallows. I watch him gather his thoughts. “Joy Calvin, you fulfill me. You are my

other half. I can't imagine my life without you at my side. Will you please do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Kris Nichols, I knew you were the man for me the day we met. I know lots of people don't believe in love at first sight, but I do. My whole family does. The proof exists. It happens. And it happened to me, that day, in the hallway. Yes, Kris. It would honor me to be your wife."

He slips the ring on my finger, and the next thing I know, I'm flat on my back on the floor, and his mouth is melted to mine. He's touching me everywhere: my arms, my legs, under my dress, exploring my body and leaving his scorching mark. His heart is pounding in time with mine. Our breaths are mingled. Our desire for one another in sync.

And then he stills. When he raises his head, the depth of his emotions is reflective in his gaze. "I love you, Joy." He reaches one hand out and twirls a strand of my hair around his finger. "Let's make this the best Christmas ever."

I nod, my eyes misting with tears. This is going to be the most perfect Christmas ever.

About the Author

Anne Lange grew up with a love for reading. She reads many genres of romance, but prefers to write sexy stories, sometimes with a dash of humor, usually with a side of those sinful pleasures your mom never told you about.

Oh, and always a happily ever after.

Anne juggles a day job and a family while she looks forward to retirement someday soon, and finally writing full time. She lives in Ontario, Canada with her wonderfully supportive husband, has three awesome kids, and two fur babies.

Follow Anne on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Anne.Lange.Author>

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Maybe even sign up for her newsletter and get a bonus epilogue featuring more of Joy and Kris's story: <https://geni.us/Cuffed4XmasEpilogue>

Happy Reading!

You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

The Brightest Christmas Star

**USA Today Bestselling Author
Sharon Wray**

I

ON A SNOWY DECEMBER NIGHT, Sophie Sinclair decided she loved town hall meetings. She loved the bickering about church bells playing Christmas carols, repainting the benches on Main Street, and issues with snow plows. She loved being with people who'd known each other their entire lives.

The only issue with tonight's meeting was that she wished she belonged. As a newcomer, it was going to take time for the town to get to know her. Time for them to think of her as herself and not just as the new girlfriend of the Kingsmill's sheriff.

If she had one Christmas wish, it would be to belong to the town of Kingsmill.

Gage Mosby, Kingsmill's mayor, hit the podium with his gavel. "The last item on tonight's agenda is Santa's Christmas Eve parade."

She leaned back in her chair and sighed. She and Santa didn't have the best relationship considering the one thing they had in common was the first letter of their first names. She wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the room's chill. She, along with others, wore winter coats because they sat in a barn-like building on Main Street that had once been a stable during the Revolutionary War. A stable haunted by Generals George Washington and Anthony Wayne. While she wasn't sure about the story, it could explain why the room could never be heated and the bulbs hanging from the high rafters flickered.

Yet, she didn't mind the intimacy of the low light or the cold air. This was her first town meeting, and she'd been invited by the mayor himself. She'd even printed out the email and slipped it into her coat pocket, just in case someone wondered why she was there. She was excited because this meeting, a few days before Christmas, was considered the most important one of the year.

She shivered and clasped her gloved hands in her lap. Her boyfriend Ben Mosby—who was also the mayor's nephew—had teased her about carrying the invite. But she didn't care. She'd snuck into town a few months ago, alone and homeless, and now she had friends, a job she loved, and a man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. As far as she was concerned, the town of Kingsmill, nestled deep in Virginia's Shenandoah Mountains, was perfect. The only thing that raised the hairs on the back of her neck was this mention of Santa.

Ben, who sat next to her, covered her fingers with his ungloved hand. Concern etched lines around his dark brown eyes, and she wished they were alone so she could kiss them away. As the town's sheriff, he was always preoccupied. Although her recent issues with the FBI had exacerbated his problems.

“You okay?” he mouthed.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“Shush, you two.” Nana Ruthie, an older woman who sat behind them, tapped Sophie's shoulder. “Do you need a cough drop, dear? I always carry cherry.”

She shook her head and shared a humorous look with Ben. While they'd been whispering, Nana Ruthie had scolded them with her outside voice.

“Anything else you care to share with us, Nana Ruthie?” Gage Mosby asked from the front of the room. A retired Army Ranger, he wore jeans, black boots, and a short-sleeved black T-shirt despite the frost on his breath.

Nana Ruthie stood, smoothed down the hand-knitted red wool sweater over her black cargo pants, and said, “No.” She nodded at Gage, her silver hair glinting in the room’s dim light. “You may continue.” Then she sat again.

Ben winked at Sophie, adjusted his much larger body in the too-small chair, and turned his attention back to his uncle.

Sophie held in her laugh and focused on Gage, a six-four-foot man who looked huge behind his too-low podium. This was the kind of small town life she’d always wanted. It was also ironic since she’d come from Salem, Massachusetts which was a small village when millions of tourists weren’t visiting. But, as a foster kid, she’d never belonged there either.

“So,” Gage said. “Let’s discuss the Santa parade.” He cleared his throat and glanced at his wife, Lily, who sat in the front row. She was hard to miss since she wore her long black hair twisted into a French knot and wore a black leather coat straight from a Parisian runway.

Lily nodded in encouragement.

Gage continued. “As you know—”

“Why are we talking about this?” Mr. Elmer, an older man in overalls and wool cardigan, stood. “It’s been years since Santa drove his sleigh down Main Street.” Mr. Elmer’s gaze rested on a couple sitting in the row ahead of Sophie: Jacob Mosby and his wife, Clara, who held an infant in her arms. “I wanted to do this event last year, but we had a Christmas Eve wedding instead.”

Jacob, who was one of Ben’s five brothers, stood. “We also had a blizzard. So it would’ve been canceled anyway.”

Everyone in the room chuckled. While Sophie hadn’t been around last Christmas, she’d heard about Jacob and Clara’s Christmas Eve wedding during a snowstorm that shut down the state for weeks.

Mr. Elmer turned back to Gage. “We haven’t done this parade in a decade. Whoever is handling it now will do it wrong.”

Now Lily stood. “If no one remembers how to run the parade, no one will care.”

Mr. Elmer sat with a grunt.

“Didn’t we hire someone to run the parade?” Nana Ruthie, who was also Lily’s aunt, pointed at Clara who was patting her newborn son’s back. “Because our town’s event planner is on maternity leave?”

“I’m done planning Christmas events.” Clara spoke without a hint of apology in her voice. “I’m happy to run the haunted house tour—in my home—and the Valentine’s Day basket auction.”

“Bachelor Auction!” Mr. Elmer yelled out.

The room laughed, but Clara continued with a firm voice. “I’m not doing the Christmas events. Not the gingerbread house contest. Not the tree lighting ceremony. Not Santa’s parade on Christmas Eve. Although everyone is invited to the top of the ridge behind Mosby House to watch Caleb’s star turn on after Santa’s parade.”

Sophie doubted anyone in the room blamed Clara for her stance. The haunted house tour, which took place in the Mosby mansion where Clara and Jacob lived, was a huge event attracting thousands of visitors.

She touched Ben’s arm and whispered, “Those Christmas events sound like fun.” She didn’t have a lot of experience with Christmas since Salem was a Halloween town and she’d never had a real family, but it all sounded wonderful.

Gage cleared his throat. “Nana Ruthie, we didn’t hire someone to run the parade or play Santa—”

“I ain’t playing Santa.” Mr. Elmer crossed his arms over his chest.

She shared a smile with Ben. Mr. Elmer had neither the beard nor the girth to play Santa. And while a costume could fix those things, it couldn’t change the fact he was shorter than many of the town’s teenagers.

Nana Ruthie threw up her arms. “No one’s asking you, Elmer.”

Snickers echoed, and Gage banged his gavel to regain control.

“I’ll play Santa.” Harry Wakefield, who was also Clara’s uncle, stood. While he was tall and had white hair, he’d need extra padding beneath the coat. “Do we have a Santa costume?”

Lily shifted in her seat to look at Harry. “The high school drama club is making it.”

“Great.” Harry sat down and nodded at Mr. Elmer. “You can be one of my elves.”

Now the room erupted in laughter.

Mr. Elmer frowned. “Good luck finding that sleigh, Harry.”

Gage used his gavel, harder this time, to bring the room to order again, except no one was listening.

“The sleigh is stored in the Fawkes’ barn.” Jacob stood and nodded toward Damian Fawkes who sat in the front row, near Lily. “Damian’s daddy has it.”

Damian’s face turned red. As president of the Devil’s Renegades, the town’s outlaw motorcycle club, he had a difficult relationship with everyone.

Damian stood and motioned toward Jacob. “That sleigh isn’t in my daddy’s barn.”

“How do you know?” Jacob shot back. “When was the last time you saw your daddy?”

“A few weeks ago.” Damian ran a hand over his short, black hair and nodded at Gage. “When his barn burned down after Thanksgiving.”

“*What?*” Jacob’s voice filled the rafters.

Gage banged his gavel. “Order.”

Ben shot to his feet. “What are you talking about, Damian? There was no fire—”

“There was.” Damian scoffed. “And there’s nothing left. If the sleigh was in there, it’s now ashes.”

Ben took out his phone and began texting. “Don’t leave after this meeting, Damian. We need to talk.”

Gage’s gavel hit the podium again. Once everyone was seated again, he said, “Having no sleigh is the least of our worries.”

Jacob raised his hand but spoke before being recognized. “My construction company will get us a new sleigh.”

“Fine.” Gage’s shoulders slumped as if tired. “Kingsmill used to offer thirty annual events to its visitors, until ten years ago when they stopped coming.”

“Because of the Devil’s Renegades.” Mr. Elmer’s voice dripped with disgust. “They ruined this town.”

Damian stood until Gage slammed his gavel down again. This time, the gavel broke in half and the handle flew off the podium. It bounced on the wood floor, stopping near Damian’s seat.

The room went silent, and everyone focused their attention on Gage.

He placed the gavel’s remaining piece on the podium and said, “Last year, when we decided to resurrect some events, we agreed to hold the Epiphany Christmas tree burning, the Valentine’s Day basket auction, and the Fourth of July picnic just for the town. Then we chose three we hoped would win back the tourists.”

“This is ridiculous,” Nana Ruthie said. “We voted to do the haunted house tour, the Santa parade, and the sunflower festival for the tourists.”

Ben squeezed her hand because that festival, which had occurred in October, was the reason they’d reunited after being apart for ten years.

Uncle Harry raised his hand. “What is your point, Gage?”

“We agreed the money in the event fund would be spent on the sunflower festival. Then the profit from the sunflower festival would pay for the Santa parade, including a coordinator to run it.”

Ben used his demanding sheriff’s voice to say, “We made ten grand from the sunflower festival.”

“Yes, we did.” Gage’s voice trembled. “Except the sunflower money is gone. And the Santa parade is canceled.”

2

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Sophie followed Lily through the front door of the Devil's Renegades Cupcake and Coffee Café. It was a short walk from the town's meeting barn at the lower end of Main Street to the café, but she was happy to slip inside since the snow and wind had picked up.

When Lily turned on the lights, nothing happened. "Power is out again."

"I'll check the circuit panel." Sophie shook the snow off her hat, turned on her phone's flashlight, and headed into the kitchen. "It might be a flipped breaker."

"I hope so."

She made her way through the dark kitchen, toward the breaker box near the walk-in freezer. The front of the café had picture windows overlooking Main Street and its street lamps, but the kitchen had one window in the pantry so it was much darker.

Lily had purchased the café from Harry Wakefield, after she'd returned from Paris where she'd been a renowned pastry chef. And a few months ago, when Sophie had arrived in town with no money or friends, she'd applied for a job in the café's kitchen. Although Lily could make beautiful cookies, cakes, and pastries, Sophie had mastered the art of baked savorys while working at a roadside diner outside of Salem.

Now, Sophie worked as Lily's sous chef and lived in the apartment above the café. The one downside was that the building's renovations weren't finished so the utilities in the

historic building were wonky. At least the refrigerators, freezer, and pastry cabinets were on their own electrical circuit attached to an automatic generator.

She held up the light, found the flipped switches on the panel, and shifted them back into position. The refrigerators hadn't turned off which meant the café hadn't lost any food. A moment later, light filtered in from the café. She turned off her phone, hung up her coat and hat, and met Lily near the espresso machines in the main room. Christmas music came from hidden speakers, and the heat kicked on with a low hum. "I fixed it."

"Thanks." Lily had taken off her coat and was turning on the coffee machines. "When we closed up earlier, I thought we were done for the night. But considering Gage's announcement, I suspect we're in for an after-meeting crowd."

Sophie moved into the space between the counter, which was behind her, and the pastry cabinets that faced the dining area. The cabinets held holiday cupcakes, sugar cookies, and the leftover cranberry pork turnovers she'd made earlier that day. "Lily, did you know about the missing money or the canceled parade?"

After Gage's announcement, everyone had looked toward Damian. But his pale face and intense denial had rung true, even to Sophie who prided herself on being able to spot liars and thieves. That was a skill she'd honed after spending years as the girlfriend of a member of an outlaw motorcycle club—the Black Jacks—in Salem.

"No." Lily said. "I knew Gage was stressed about something, but he didn't tell me ahead of time." She poured coffee beans into the top of an espresso machine, and the room filled with a wonderful aroma. "He probably wanted to watch everyone's reaction. Even Damian seemed surprised."

"I know Damian runs the local MC, but would he steal the town's money?"

"I don't think so." Lily took out milk from the fridge beneath the counter. "Despite the club's reputation, Damian grew up in this town and I believe, in his own way, he loves

it.” She poured milk into a pitcher and steamed it with the wand attached to the espresso machine. “Damian acts like a scary, outlaw biker, but he comes to every town hall meeting. He even voted to resurrect the sunflower festival.”

Sophie began rearranging cupcakes in the pastry cabinets. “I’m sorry the Santa parade is canceled.”

“Me too.” Lily put on a black apron printed with the café’s logo and handed Sophie an apron as well. “I’m surprised I didn’t realize there was no coordinator for the parade. Since I wasn’t running the event, I wasn’t thinking about it.”

“Why do we have to cancel the parade?” Sophie put on her apron, took out the tray of sugar cookies, and placed them on top of the cabinet. “The haunted house tour brings in tons of people and that’s managed by volunteers. Can’t we do it on our own?”

The front door opened and a group of people, led by Nana Ruthie, hurried inside, followed by a rush of wind and snow.

“Clara runs the haunted house,” Lily said. “As a professional event planner, she brings in vendors who trade their services for free advertising.” Lily finished two lattes and handed them to Nana Ruthie who now stood near the coffee machines. “Here you are.”

“Thank you.” Nana Ruthie nodded at her friends who were taking off their coats and moving chairs around. “We’ll need four more lattes. Cookies. And Mr. Elmer wants black coffee, freshly made, of course.”

“Of course.” Lily returned to the coffee machines, giving Sophie a wink along the way. Although Nana Ruthie and Mr. Elmer argued incessantly, they were great friends.

Another thing Sophie loved about small towns.

More people came into the café, and she rang up customers, heated savory tarts, and handed out cookies and cupcakes. Once everyone was settled with their drinks and food, she ran into the kitchen to grab leftover petite beef turnovers from the refrigerator. When she returned, she found Nana Ruthie in front of a cabinet, staring at her.

“Nana Ruthie?” She began putting turnovers into the cabinets. “Do you need anything?”

Nana Ruthie smiled, and Sophie’s heart spun in her chest.

“Tell me.” Nana Ruthie’s smile turned into a thin line. “Do you have any idea what could have happened to that money?”

“Of course not!” Heat rose up her neck, leaving her face hot and itchy. “Why would you ask that?”

“You do have some unsavory friends.”

“*Had* unsavory friends.” She held onto Nana Ruthie’s gaze until the older woman turned away. “I can’t believe you’re accusing me of—”

“I’m sorry..” Nana Ruthie placed her empty mug on top of the pastry cabinet and sighed. “I’m just disappointed. I remember when my father–Lily’s grandfather– played Santa. Tons of people came to see that huge tree in front of Mosby House covered in Christmas lights. At least until Caleb Mosby–that old grouch–pulled the plug. We’d have gingerbread house contests, wassailing wagons, snowball fights.” She blinked a few times. “I’m just a woman reminiscing about the past.”

“It’s okay.” Sophie took Nana Ruthie’s mug and went over to the hot chocolate maker Lily had bought in Paris. It was a lovely-yet-complicated stainless steel machine that used melted chocolates.

Usually Lily worked the machine, but she was carrying a tray of hot coffees to Mr. Elmer and his friends from the VFW hall who sat at a table between the soda fridge and a Christmas tree. “I wish I could’ve seen this town when it was filled with tourists for all those events.”

“It was a wonderful time we thought would never end.” She turned toward the windows overlooking Main Street where most of the store fronts were shuttered. Street lamps broke up the night’s darkness, and snow drifted, as if it’d given up its main purpose. “I’d hoped to end this year with a Santa parade.”

Before Sophie could answer, Ben and Gage entered the café, along with a gust of wind. Once she handed Nana Ruthie the hot chocolate, she ran around the pastry cabinets and flung herself into Ben's arms. He held her against his hard body and kissed her until her toes curled inside her wool socks. This time of year, he smelled of pine and cinnamon, and she rested her head against his chest despite the snow on his jacket. She held his waist while his arms settled around her shoulders.

"Would you like a hot chocolate?" Her words sounded muffled against his jacket.

"I'd love one. But it's after nine and I'm afraid it will keep me awake."

She lifted her head to meet his brown gaze and ran her fingers through the hair that hung across his forehead. The shadows in his eyes told her how hard he fought to hide his exhaustion. There'd been an incident on Halloween night when she'd been arrested and released by the FBI. Ever since, he'd been working overtime with federal officers to find members of Salem's outlaw motorcycle club—Black Jacks—she'd once been involved with.

She hated how her old life was causing him stress now, but he'd promised once the investigation was over, things would settle down for them. He'd also promised that, after weeks of waiting, they'd be together. *Romantically together*. Since Halloween night, the time hadn't been right and neither of them wanted to rush things. "You look tired."

She'd been both disappointed and relieved by their lack of intimacy. While she wanted him, *desperately*, they'd been apart for ten years and still were getting to know each other again. It all made sense and reeked of logic, but she also worried about his feelings for her. They'd both lived difficult lives during their decade apart. And while their reunion proved wishes could come true, there was a low level tension between them she didn't understand.

She just hoped she hadn't used up her lifetime's allotment of wishes.

“I’m not tired.” He dropped a kiss on her nose. “Do you have any beef pies?”

“I do.” She drew out of his arms and pretended to believe he wasn’t exhausted. “I’ll heat some up for you and Gage.” She glanced at Lily and saw her in Gage’s arms. “I’m sure you’re both hungry.”

Ten minutes later, she carried a tray of petite hot beef turnovers and sugar cookies to the table where Gage, Ben, Nana Ruthie, and Mr. Elmer sat. She handed plates to Gage and Ben and realized most of the customers had left. Lily appeared with a tray of six hot chocolates for everyone. After handing them out, she took the chair next to Gage.

“I made decaf hot chocolates.” Lily wrinkled her nose. “But no one can ever know. They’re expensive because of the special chocolate I have to use.”

Ben took Sophie’s hand and tugged it until she sat next to him. The lights flickered, the wind howled outside the window, the heat hummed, and instrumental Christmas music filled the chocolate-tinged air.

Sophie held her mug and settled in her chair. Her thigh touched Ben’s, and she appreciated the warmth he exuded. Surrounded by these people who’d taken her in—physically and emotionally—a sense of peace and calm overwhelmed her. “Ben, what happened after we left?”

“Nothing.” Ben shared a look with Gage. “We talked to Damian but didn’t get much out of him. Tomorrow, I’ll call the county fire inspector and visit the Fawkes’ farm. While it’s unfortunate the sleigh is lost, I’m more concerned there might have been a fire we didn’t know about.”

“Ben?” Nana Ruth used a softer voice than usual. “Who do you think took that money?”

“I don’t know.” Ben sent Sophie an apologetic smile. “I knew about the theft a while ago, when Gage told me, but we wanted to spring it on the town to watch their reactions.”

She nodded and exhaled the breath she’d been holding. Maybe that theft was the cause of his distance these past few

weeks.

“Not all the townsfolk were there tonight,” Lily said.

“True,” Gage said. “And we still don’t have a suspect.”

“Are you ruling out Damian?” Mr. Elmer asked.

“For now.” Gage took a beef turnover, ate a huge bite, and continued. “The money was stolen from the online account, and the bank is claiming it’s not their fault a sophisticated hacker got through their online security system. I hate to sound mean, but Damian isn’t that smart.”

“Lotto *is* that smart.” Lily handed her husband a napkin. “I remember in high school how he never studied for the SATs yet he ended up with a perfect math score.”

Sophie took Ben’s hand on the table and squeezed. Lotto had once been a member of the Devil’s Renegades, along with Ben and another Mosby brother named Kane. Somehow, Lotto, Kane, and Ben had gotten free of the MC—yet no one was ever truly free from their past. Weeks of working with federal agents had taught her that. “Lotto has been nothing but kind to me since I came to town.”

Lotto also worked next door, in the kitchen of The Ren, the down-and-dirty biker bar that had once been owned by the motorcycle club until Gage purchased the building.

“I’ve known Lotto for years,” Ben said. “I can’t see him doing something like this.”

“What about your brother Kane?” Mr. Elmer asked. “Isn’t he a computer genius who works for the government? What does he think about this mess?”

“Kane doesn’t know about this yet,” Ben said. “He and Eve are on a Thanksgiving cruise with her parents, and I didn’t want to ruin his vacation. Once he’s home, though, I’m sure he’ll help.”

Sophie took another sip of her hot chocolate and told herself this mess wasn’t her fault. Her arrest on Halloween, and her subsequent work as an anonymous FBI witness with enough evidence to put away the Black Jacks, had been a huge

hassle for everyone close to her. While Ben had taken the brunt of the stress as he worked with federal agents in multiple states, Kane had stepped up as well.

She wasn't sure who Kane worked for—and he'd never tell her—but he was helping with her case. That meant two of the six Mosby brothers had put their lives on hold to help her regain her own. “What did the Santa parade involve? Besides Santa sitting in a sleigh?”

“It was an entire day of events,” Mr. Elmer said. “We began with the historic homes tour and the gingerbread house contest at the Generals Tavern—”

“Which is uninhabitable.” Nana Ruthie glanced at Sophie, and she sunk into her chair.

When she'd first arrived in town, she'd hidden in the old, haunted inn that predated the American Revolution until Ben and Kane moved her to the apartment above the café. But Nana Ruthie was correct. The Generals Tavern had no power or water.

From what she'd seen the past few weeks, most of the historic homes in town—many from the mid-seventeenth century—were uninhabited. When people couldn't sell their properties, they abandoned them. Now big banks owned more than half of the town's residences.

Ben took her hand and kissed her palm. “We also held the snowman-making contest in the field behind Mosby House.”

She nodded. Main Street ran through the center of town, from the church at the lower end of the street to Mosby House which sat on a high hill at the other end. “Then what?”

Lily laughed as she stared into her mug. “After drinking spiced cider at the tavern, the carolers would walk up and down Main Street, singing to people lined up to see the parade. Meanwhile, the parade floats would organize behind the church. Food stands offered roasted chestnuts and cinnamon rolls. Once the carolers reached the top of the hill, they'd turn on the lights of the tree in front of Mosby House.”

“That’s when the parade started,” Nana Ruthie said. “The Ladies Guild and VFW members led the way. Followed by the high school marching band, scouts and other groups. Santa, in a real horse-drawn sleigh, came up Main Street last.”

Ben leaned in close enough for Sophie to breathe in his aftershave. “Once Santa reached the Christmas Tree, he’d hand out presents to all the kids who showed up.”

She scrunched her nose. “What if he ran out of presents?”

“That never happened.” Gage rubbed his chin with his fist. “Although since I was a teenager during the last parade, I never paid attention to how it worked.”

No one responded. When the silence felt heavy, Sophie asked, “What about the star Clara mentioned?”

“*The star.*” Mr. Elmer stared out the window that faced Main Street. “We’d all hike up the ridge behind Mosby House and wait for the star to appear.”

Sophie squeezed Ben’s hand again. “Is that the star you told me your grandfather put up on the highest point of Mosby’s Gap, on top of the mountain next to this one?”

“Yes.” Ben’s smile softened the rough lines around his eyes. “We’d hike up to the ridge and turn off our flashlights. The moment the church bells rang at midnight, the star would light up in the distance. It’s so tall, it can be seen from miles away.”

Nana Ruthie touched Mr. Elmer’s shoulder. “Do you remember, Elmer? Once that star appeared we’d all make our Christmas wishes.”

Mr. Elmer covered her hand with his. “I remember.”

Nana Ruthie released a deep breath and used a paper napkin to dab her eyes.

Sophie watched as everyone seemed lost in their own thoughts and memories. How she wished she’d grown up in this town with its traditions and memories. “Nana Ruthie? Does anyone in town remember how to run the parade?”

“No.” Nana Ruthie looked at Ben with hooded eyes. “They’ve moved away or died. Including Caleb Mosby.”

Gage’s father and Ben’s grandfather. From what Sophie had heard, Caleb had been a hard man to deal with, before and after his death.

She began picking up the dishes and placed them on a tray on a nearby table. “What if I ran Santa’s parade?”

Nana Ruthie snorted. “Do you know anything about running a large event?”

She bristled at the implied criticism. “No. But, like Lily said at the meeting tonight, if no one remembers how to run it, then no one will know if I’m running it wrong.”

Mr. Elmer frowned. “Christmas Eve is in forty-eight hours.”

“I know,” she said. “It won’t be the grand event it used to be, but it will be a start of a new tradition.”

“Why?” Gage’s brown gaze, so similar to Ben’s, held hers.

“Because this town has been good to me.” She placed the hot chocolate mugs on the tray and wiped her hands on her apron. “It’s my way of saying thank you.”

My way of being included.

Everyone stood and watched her until Nana Ruthie said, “If the girl wants to do it, let her do it. We have nothing to lose.”

“We don’t have any money,” Gage said. “Everything will have to be begged for or donated or fought for, including your volunteers.”

“I know.” She touched Ben’s arm. Even though he wore a flannel shirt, his muscles bunched beneath her fingers. “I can do this.”

Ben brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. “Are you sure? This will be a huge amount of work in a short period of time.”

She nodded. “I’m sure.”

Mr. Elmer shoved his chair under the table and rewrapped the scarf around his neck. “At least give her a chance. It’s not like we’ve advertised the parade.”

“Sophie,” Gage said. “You have my blessing. Just don’t come to me for money.”

“I won’t. I promise.” She smiled and intertwined her fingers with Ben’s. “Thank you.”

An hour later, after everyone had left and she and Ben were cleaning up the kitchen, he put down his dish towel and pulled her into his arms. He held her so close, her cheek pressed against his chest and his chin rested on her head. Then he swayed to the low Christmas waltz playing over the café’s speakers.

“Are you sure about this?” he whispered as they moved. “You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

She pulled back to cup his face between her palms. He was always so much warmer than she was, and she loved the rough texture of his skin beneath her fingers. “I’m not doing this to prove anything. I just *need* to do this. I want to belong.”

He kissed her forehead, but she heard the frustration in his short breaths. “You do belong. To me. Even though we haven’t—”

“Shh.” She stood on her toes until her lips rested against his. “It’s okay. I’m not worried about that. We’ll be together when the time is right. We have the rest of our lives to do all the things we’ve ever dreamed of doing.” She used her tongue to trace his lips. “Including *those* things.”

In that moment, in the dark kitchen surrounded by Christmas carols, she believed that.

Ben drew her into his arms again. “But ask for help if you need it.”

“I promise.” Fifteen minutes later, as Ben locked up the kitchen, she remembered something. While she was organized and smart, she and Santa didn’t have a great relationship. Not because she didn’t believe, but because he’d never left her a Christmas present. The greater truth was she’d never

celebrated Christmas before. She'd only ever watched it from afar.

Ben took her hand and led her up the back staircase to her apartment, but her legs felt soft and mushy. She knew nothing about Santa or parades or Christmas. And she had no idea where to begin.

3

WHEN THE CHURCH bells struck eleven times, Ben hurried down the stairs from Sophie's apartment and entered the café's kitchen. Once he zipped up his winter coat, he went through the back EXIT door that led to an alley tucked between colonial-era buildings and a steep ravine leading to a river on the other side. The same river on which Kingsmill had built its first mill in 1681.

The roar of the river's rapids competed with the howling wind, and he shoved his bare hands in his pockets. Trees protected him from the river's mist, but not from the wind stinging his cheeks.

He'd left Sophie asleep in her apartment, but he hadn't wanted to. He'd wanted to crawl into bed, take her in his arms, and make love to her all night. He'd wanted to wrap himself in her long blond hair and lose himself in her dark green eyes. The fact they hadn't made love yet, even though they'd found their way back to each other weeks ago, made the blood burn in his veins and left him with a constant erection.

A few weeks ago, after she'd handed over evidence to take down the Black Jacks MC, he'd made a decision. It hadn't been an easy decision, and he hadn't talked it out with Sophie first. But since he was still involved with the Black Jacks investigation –and the murder they were accused of committing—he didn't want to put Sophie in a compromising situation.

Sophie's anonymous testimony could send members of the Black Jacks to jail for years, but a good defense lawyer could

use their relationship as a way to get the case thrown out of court. Or expose her real identity. Although he was now a sheriff, he'd once been an outlaw. And no defense attorney would hesitate to use his past against him. That was why he used the back entrance of Sophie's apartment instead of the front. He had no idea if the Black Jacks had discovered Sophie's identity or hired someone to watch him. Since no one came down the alley anymore, he felt safe coming and going from her apartment this way.

"Hey, Ben." A man stood in the opening of the back door of The Ren, the bar and restaurant next to the café, and tossed down a cigarette. He crushed it beneath his boot and crossed his arms over his wide chest.

"Hey, Lotto." Gage stopped and nodded. "Why is your kitchen open so late?"

"Damian was at the town meeting. So the rest of the MC was here."

Ben laughed. Gage had recently bought the building from the motorcycle club and hired Lotto as a part-time cook against the official wishes of Damian Fawkes. That meant the other members of the Devil's Renegades were supposed to ignore Lotto because he'd defied Damian. Unofficially, most of the MC members loved Lotto and his homemade meals. So when Damian wasn't paying attention, the MC members appeared whenever Lotto was in the kitchen. But they always came to the back door, not the front entrance.

Maybe, as a former member of an outlaw motorcycle club, he was destined to use back doors as well. And wasn't that a depressing thought.

"Did you hear what happened at the meeting?" Ben wasn't sure why he asked the question. Of course everyone had heard by now.

"Yep." Lotto smoothed down his white apron and looked up at the dark sky. He was six-foot-seven with a long black beard and a bald head covered in tattoos. His starched apron was always pressed and clean. "Any ideas who took the money?"

“No.” Ben flexed his hands in his pockets. He didn’t have his gloves and now that he wasn’t walking, he felt the chill in his bones. “I don’t think it was Damian either.”

“I agree.” Lotto spit on the dirt near the brick path. “As much as I hate Damian, he wouldn’t do that. If you’d had guns stolen from the police station, he’s the first one I’d suspect. But stealing money from the Santa parade... Nah.” Lotto shook his head. “I remember how Damian, when he was a kid, counted down the days until the parade. I think those gifts from Santa were the only ones he ever got. His dad was an ass, after all.”

“True.” Ben exhaled and watched his frosty breath evaporate in the shadows. “Did you know the Fawkes’ barn burned down a few weeks ago?”

“No. But last week I went hunting with Ed in Mosby’s Gap. Ed told me there’s been random fires on the mountain. And a problem with your granddaddy’s star. It may not work this year.”

Ed lived in Mosby’s Gap, near Caleb’s mountain retreat cabin that Ben and his brothers had inherited. Ed took care of the property and maintained the Christmas star that lived on top of a hundred-foot tall steel pole. But since Ed had hermit tendencies and lived off-grid, communicating with him was difficult. “Did Ed tell you what was wrong with Caleb’s star?”

“Nope. Just that it wasn’t working. Oh, and that he was dealing with poachers. You should probably call him.” Lotto checked his watch. “I gotta go. But I want you to tell your woman something for me.”

Ben wasn’t used to thinking about Sophie as his woman, yet the idea filled him with the kind of warmth a man couldn’t get from a physical workout or a hot cup of coffee. “What?”

“If she needs help with the parade, I’m in.”

Ben laughed, not surprised Lotto already knew about Sophie’s decision. “I’ll tell her.”

“And Ben?” Lotto had one hand on the door frame and he was backlit by the light coming from the kitchen. “Don’t

screw this thing up with Sophie. She loves you, brother. Accept it. Appreciate it. Embrace it. And whatever you do, don't let her go. No matter what else you believe about yourself, believe you are good enough for her.”

Ben's mouth went dry and all he could do was nod in silent agreement.

Lotto returned to the kitchen, and Ben headed toward his apartment over the old drug store next to the police station. He was so preoccupied by Lotto's words, he slipped on the snowy path and had to grab a tree branch to stay upright.

Ben had been keeping a distance between himself and Sophie, and he wasn't sure why—until Lotto had laid it out with a simple clarity. Ben still believed he wasn't good enough—for his job, for his family, for Sophie. He'd made mistakes when he'd been younger, including running with the MC. But maybe Lotto was right. Maybe he was good enough for her.

When he got closer to his apartment, the path curved, following the river's bank. The river flowed around the end of the street, almost at a right angle, and continued behind the church. That meant although he could see the church's lit-up steeple ahead of him, he could no longer see Sophie's apartment behind him. She seemed far, far away. Or maybe it was his own self-imposed distance that brought up those feelings.

As he unlocked his building's back door, his cell phone buzzed. It wasn't unusual for him to get calls in the middle of the night, but they were never about happy things.

He pulled it out of his back pocket and checked the ID. FBI agent Charlie Wallace. “Sheriff Mosby.”

“We have a problem.” Charlie barked out the words.

He locked the door behind him and hurried up the stairs to his apartment. “What kind of problem?”

“So far, thanks to Sophie's evidence, we've arrested five Black Jacks members without exposing her identity.”

“That’s good.” Ben didn’t turn on the lights. Instead, he tossed his keys onto the kitchen table and stood by the window overlooking Main Street. The street lamps and random Christmas decorations gave off some light, but he also had a perfect view of the church’s illuminated bell tower. He smiled at the realization his apartment was on Santa’s parade route. A route that led back to Sophie’s apartment. “And?”

“Remember how you wondered if there was still a Black Jacks prospect running around who we can’t find? Someone who attacked a Devil’s Renegade MC member and might have done the dirty work that left Sophie a suspect a few weeks ago?”

A burning sensation crawled up his spine. The Black Jacks MC had gone to great lengths to take down the Devil’s Renegades MC and frame Sophie for the murder of her foster father. If it hadn’t been for her own intelligence and courage, she’d be in a jail cell instead of tucked in her own bed down the street. “Of course I remember.”

“My contacts in Virginia believe this Black Jacks prospect—a man named Pepper—may be near Kingsmill. It’s also possible he set fire to a barn owned by Damian Fawkes’ father. Pepper has been spotted in Mosby’s Gap, probably living in a tent somewhere.”

Ben muttered a curse and leaned his back against the cold window. “Charlie, are you sure about this intel?”

“Two of my CIs confirmed this information independently. While I can’t be a hundred percent sure, there’s a strong possibility it’s true.”

“Do you think this prospect, Pepper, knows about Sophie? Or is he blaming Damian for turning over the evidence that has taken down the Black Jacks?”

“We’ve done our best to keep Sophie’s name out of the case. And no one else on my team knows who she is. I don’t believe the Black Jack know Sophie is involved. At least not yet. But I do believe Pepper is going after Damian and other members of the Devil’s Renegades.”

Ben closed his eyes and rubbed his chin with his fist. His face felt scratchy since he'd been growing out his beard. Sophie said she loved the feel of his beard against her cheek when he kissed her. "Okay. Thanks for letting me know. I'll keep a lookout—"

A loud popping sound made him turn. From his second-story window he saw flames shoot out of the church's bell tower. "Gotta go, Charlie. There's a fire."

At four o'clock in the morning, Ben returned to his apartment. He was exhausted, filthy, and worried about Sophie. The firefighters had put out the flames, and the fire inspector was on his way. But on the church's back door, Ben found graffiti—a spray painted image portraying the Black Jacks MC logo of a skeleton riding a motorcycle.

Below the logo, someone had spray painted the word *Sophie*.

He texted Charlie as he threw winter clothes into a duffel bag and grabbed the keys to his truck. Then he sent messages to his deputies, all five of his brothers, and his uncle, Gage.

His last call was to Lotto who picked upon the first ring. "Brother." Ben hurried down the stairs and locked the door behind him. "I need a favor."

After laying out his plan, Lotto said, "Yes."

Relieved, Ben got into his truck and headed for the mountains. It was time to take care of this threat to Sophie so they could get on with their lives.

The next morning, the day before Christmas Eve, Sophie rearranged the notebooks on her table in the corner of the café with one hand while she held her phone to her ear with the other. "I promise, Ben, I'll be okay."

“I’m worried about you.” His voice sounded tired and strained and far away. “I hate that I had to leave town so early. But I needed to meet with Charlie in the Boston office—”

“I understand.” She used her softest voice and was grateful she was alone. Because of the fire, Lily had closed the café in order to help hand out refreshments to the tired firefighters and other first responders. “Are you sure you weren’t hurt from the fire?”

“I promise I’m not hurt. The firefighters were putting out the fire, and I was in their way. Until I get a report from the fire inspector, there’s not much I can do. Thank goodness the fire didn’t spread from the bell tower. The firefighters saved the main church building.”

The entire town was relieved about that.

“And you’re sure this fire had nothing to do with the Black Jacks seeking revenge?”

“I’m sure.”

She frowned because his quick answer told her he wasn’t sure. But she didn’t want to argue with him. “When will you be back?”

“Soon.” He paused for a moment. “No one would blame you if you changed your mind about the parade. Not after this fire. And tomorrow is Christmas Eve.”

She stared out the window at Main Street, surprised to see the town so empty at ten in the morning. Late last night, before the fire, she’d sent out a note on the town’s email system announcing her plan to run the parade and that sign-ups would begin this morning in the café. She’d hoped to have a line of volunteers waiting to sign up by now. But considering the fire was the only thing the town was talking about—for good reason—she wasn’t going to worry or be disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm. “The parade is still on. I just need you to come back to me safely.”

“I promise. And don’t forget Lotto offered to help. Call him. He’s not just a pretty face.”

She laughed. “I will.” After hanging up, she put on her black coat and blue hat, picked up her notebook and pen, and grabbed her coffee mug. Then she went outside to sit on the iron bench in front of the café. The snow had stopped and melted away, except for some dusting on the nearby rooftops and bushes.

Earlier, when she’d learned about the fire, she and Lily had made a ton of breakfast sandwiches. Then Lily and Nana Ruthie had packed them up and taken them to the town hall where the first responders were gathering. She’d offered to help them, but Lily had asked Sophie to watch the café and reminded her about the volunteers who might drop by.

That was two hours ago.

She sipped her hot coffee and told herself she wasn’t being left out of things. She was doing her part by waiting for volunteers to sign up for her Christmas parade.

“Hey.” Lotto came out of The Ren’s front door with a metal coffee tumbler and sat down next to her. “I saw your email. How are the sign-ups going?”

She waved toward the empty street. The only activity was from the flashing lights at the bottom of the hill, near the church. “I’m beating people away with a stick.”

Lotto laughed, leaned back, and crossed his ankles. “Don’t worry. They’ll come. This town always shows up when things are important.”

“Maybe for people like Lily and Nana Ruthie.”

His frown, along with his worn jeans, black jacket, and swirling tattoos on his bald head made him appear fiercer than normal. “What does that mean?”

“It means my timing is terrible.” Not liking the self-pity in her voice, she covered it by sending him a self-deprecating smile. “I put out an email on the town’s email loop asking for help with the Santa parade right before the fire started. Now I’m wondering if Ben is right. Maybe we should cancel—”

“Hi, there.” A young man, about eleven years old, appeared in front of her. He wore an oversized army jacket and

his smile showed off braces with red and green rubber bands. “Is it true you’re taking sign-ups for the Santa parade?”

“We are.” Sophie put her mug on the ground, found her pen, and opened up her notebook. “Do you want to be in the parade or help us organize it?”

“You’re Dave Tolliver’s son, aren’t you.” Lotto asked.

“Yes, sir. My friends call me Davy.” He chewed his bottom lip and his glance danced between her and Lotto. “We—I mean the middle school marching band—want to lead the parade. But only if you don’t allow the high school marching band to play.”

Lotto’s laugh sounded like a bark.

She tilted her head and stared at Davy. “You want me to exclude another band from the parade? Or you won’t play?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Davy took out his phone and swiped the screen. “Do you want to hear what we sound like? We’re better than the high schoolers. They stink!” Then he held up the phone and she heard the tinny sound of an off-key middle school version of a famous Rolling Stones song.

Once Davy put his phone into his coat pocket, Lotto asked, “Can you play any Christmas carols?”

“Does that song about grandma getting kicked in the head by a reindeer count?”

“No,” she said in a dejected voice.

“Beggars.” Lotto nudged her shoulder with his own. “Choosers.”

She held in her sigh of despair. So far, this was the only act she had for the parade, besides Harry Wakefield playing Santa with no costume or sleigh. “Okay.” She wrote the boy’s name down in her empty notebook. “The middle school marching band will lead this year’s Santa parade.”

Davy took out his phone again and ran down the street, toward the flashing police and fire truck lights.

As she watched the boy run, she asked Lotto, “How many groups used to walk in the parade?”

“Thirty. Maybe forty.”

She closed her eyes and slumped over sideways until her head hit the metal arm rest. “I’m doomed.”

“Don’t give up.” He stood and held out a hand. “You go back inside and wait for the volunteers. In the meantime, I’ll make some gingersnaps.”

She took his hand so he could pull her up. Then she picked up her coffee mug and notebook. “You can bake?”

His grin almost lightened the darkness in his brown eyes. “Only gingersnaps.” He opened the café’s door so she could enter first. “But trust me on this, once I let the town know about my cookies you’ll have a line from here all the way down Main Street, past the church’s graveyard.”

“If you say so.” She didn’t believe him, but she was happy to enter the café’s warmth. At the very least, she could make a list—she was good at making lists—and figure out how to make this parade happen with Davy’s band and Harry’s Santa Claus. “Hopefully, by the end of the day we’ll have more sign-ups and Ben will be home in time for dinner.”

Lotto stood in the café’s doorway and nodded, but his eyes appeared more hooded than usual. “I’ll be back in ninety minutes with cookies and a crowd.” He stood aside as a group of girls entered the café and winked at Sophie. “I told you so.”

4

BEN STOOD in the center of the large group of people he'd assembled at the top of Mosby's Gap and pointed to the woods behind him. He'd called in favors from the State Police and other localities, and Charlie Wallace had notified the FBI and requested more agents. Because of the terrain, and his relationship with Charlie, the feds were allowing Ben to handle the day's activities.

"Ed?" Ben nodded to the caretaker who took care of the mountain Ben and his brothers had inherited from Caleb. "Tell everyone what you've been dealing with."

Ed shoved his hands into his hunting jacket. His rifle hung over his shoulder, and he'd pulled his hat low over his eyes. Ben had already introduced the officers to Ed who'd confirmed that the man he'd been tracking fit Pepper's description.

"Someone's been living in these woods for at least six weeks," Ed said. "I've picked up tracks, found carcasses of dead animals, and there's been suspicious activity all over."

"What kind of suspicious activity?" Charlie asked.

"Sabotage." Ed cleared his throat and spat on the ground. "A shed burned. Food stolen from nearby campers. Caleb's star..." Ed shook his head. "This person ruined the electrical system that powered the star. I haven't been able to fix it, and I doubt it will work by tomorrow night."

As more agents and officers asked Ed questions, Ben moved aside. He'd already given everyone a photo of Pepper,

the Black Jacks prospect, along with other pertinent information. They were also all dressed for hunting a man through the winter woods with heavy coats, gloves, sturdy boots, and weapons.

When Ed was finished, Ben said, “Charlie Wallace’s intel matches Ed’s. I believe our suspect is hiding on this ridge. Once you enter those woods, stay with your teams. We don’t have enough SAT phones for everyone and cell phones don’t always work in these mountains.” He held up his copy of the paper maps he’d handed out to everyone. “You all have had basic orienteering, but I’ve broken you into groups, each with a compass and at least one local volunteer who’s familiar with these woods.”

He nodded at Gage, Jacob, Damian, Mr. Elmer, and a few of Mr. Elmer’s buddies. Unfortunately, Kane couldn’t make it back on time. And Ben’s other three brothers lived too far away to help this quickly. “Pepper is armed and dangerous. He’s also a suspected arsonist who tried to burn down our church last night.” Ben waved in Damian’s direction. “The FBI also believes Pepper burned the barn on the Fawkes’ property. We don’t know what else he’s planned, but he’s a threat. The sooner we find Pepper, the sooner we can get home to celebrate the holidays with our families.”

Mr. Elmer looked up at the sky and sniffed. “Weather’s coming. A blizzard. I can smell it.”

Ed nodded. “Probably starting around four p.m. Let’s hope we find this guy before we get snowed in.”

It didn’t take long to get each of the search parties on their way—except for the last party that consisted of Ben and Damian.

Ben handed Damian a copy of the map. “Can I assume you’re armed?”

Damian scoffed. “What do you think?”

Ben released a deep breath and handed Damian a SAT phone. He was both relieved and stressed to know Damian was carrying a weapon. On the other hand, Pepper would be armed

as well. “You know I don’t trust you. That’s why I want you with me.”

Ben had spent years as a member of the Devil’s Renegade with his brother Kane and his childhood buddy Damian. They’d all been prospects together, but Damian was the only one who’d gone all in and become president before his thirtieth birthday.

“I don’t trust you either.” Damian clipped the phone to his belt loop and zipped his coat. “But right now, does it matter? Pepper wants to kill me, hurt your woman, and take down our town. If it wasn’t for the MC members living in these woods—”

“Making meth.”

“Living off-grid,” Damian corrected. “Without us, you’d have no leads on Pepper. We found him, and I gave him to you and Ed. That means you owe me.”

“I don’t owe you anything. Ed and I are staying silent—for now—on your activities in the woods.” Ben checked his watch. It was almost noon and they had about five hours of daylight left. “But just for this one time.”

Damian scoffed and led the way into the woods. “Whatever you say, J-Reb.”

Ben hated hearing his old MC name, but he wouldn’t allow Damian to disrupt his focus. Instead he passed Damian and pulled out his compass. “Shut up, Damian, and follow me.”

His boots crunched in the snow, which was much deeper here in the mountains, and his breath froze every time he exhaled. But each step brought him closer to saving Sophie. Each step brought him closer to going home. And hopefully he’d make it before Christmas.

5

AT FOUR O’CLOCK in the afternoon, Sophie clutched her piece of paper, left the town hall, and hurried down the marble stairs. Because the town hall was next to the church, she had to dodge construction debris, firefighting equipment, and groups of first responders who were talking in groups.

Except for the burned-out bell tower, there’d been no other damage to the church. The fire hadn’t even touched the Christmas decorations on the church’s extensive grounds. While she was happy about that, she was also annoyed. So annoyed she was considering canceling the Santa parade.

Clara Mosby, who wore a red wool coat and had her hand on a stroller, sat on a bench outside the abandoned ice cream shop down the street. She stood when she saw Sophie coming toward her.

“How did it go?” Clara began pushing and pulling the stroller, as if rocking the baby inside to sleep.

“I got it.” She buttoned her black wool coat and held up the paper. “If you hadn’t come into the café a few hours ago, and mentioned I needed a permit, I never would have known.”

Clara shrugged. “Why do you think I pulled out of all the Christmas events?”

Sophie snorted and they began walking up the hill, along Main Street, toward the café. “My boyfriend is the town’s sheriff. I work for the mayor’s wife. And the town clerk comes into the café every morning for her chocolate croissant. But because I don’t have a Virginia driver’s license, I had to show

her my lease, an electric bill, and a letter from Lily proving she employs me. I swear, Clara, when the clerk asked me if I'd had Lily's letter notarized, I almost canceled the parade and walked out."

Clara laughed just as a gust of wind blew off Sophie's hat. She caught it, but shoved it into her pocket and let the wind take control of her long hair which was in a messy bun. Yes, it'd been that kind of day.

"I'm so sorry," Clara said. "Leslie, the town clerk, can be difficult. I should've suggested you bring her Lotto's gingersnap cookies. She loves them and they make a great bribe."

Sophie glanced at Clara. She pushed her stroller with her blond hair tucked beneath a black beret and her cheeks reddened by the wind. Her smile brightened her hazel eyes, and she exuded an inner peace she craved. "Gingersnaps could've avoided two hours wasted at town hall."

"Yes, but only Lotto's gingersnaps." Clara's smile widened. "They dated once in high school, and I don't think she ever got over him."

"Oh." She tightened her blue scarf around her neck. "If I'd known that, I would've sent Lotto down to get the permit." She shook her head and chuckled at the ridiculousness of it all. "I still can't believe I need a permit."

"How much did it cost?"

"Ten dollars. Thank goodness I had the cash. Apparently, the clerk doesn't accept credit cards after three p.m." She paused near the door to the café. Now that she had the permit, she could laugh at the silly bureaucracies even small towns suffered under. "Are you coming in?"

"No." Clara adjusted her gloves and gripped the stroller's handle again. "But you took notes on everything we talked about?"

"Yes." Thanks to Clara, who was a sought-after event planner, Sophie had a notebook full of suggestions and ideas of how to put this parade together in twenty-four hours.

“Remember.” Clara paused as a fire truck roared down the street. “You’re in charge. You tell people what to do. The people of this town can smell uncertainty from three valleys away. So whatever you do, don’t doubt yourself in their presence. Or they’ll run over you until you’re crying in the gutter. They only respect power and authority. Got it?”

She nodded and tried not to laugh. “Got it.”

“Good.” Clara pointed inside the café where Lotto was dealing with a line of people, taking notes, and Lily was making lattes faster than Santa’s elves. “Looks like you’re getting some parade sign-ups.”

“I am. Thanks to Lotto’s cookies.” Sophie paused, hating to ask for more help. “And the sleigh?”

“Jacob said he’ll bring it to the church before the parade begins.” Clara grimaced. “Although I’m not exactly sure what this sleigh will look like. I haven’t seen him all day.”

“I don’t care if Santa sits on the back of the trash truck.” Sophie pushed open the café door and went inside. “As long as it gets him up Main Street, I’ll be happy.”

Five hours later, Sophie left the café’s kitchen with a plate of brownies, surprised to see a teenage boy standing in front of the table where Lotto sat, writing in the notebook. Ever since returning from her permit excursion, she and Lotto had been signing up clubs and groups to walk in the parade.

When the last group left—the local quilting club—they’d both taken a short break to use the restroom and grab some water. She’d had way too much coffee today and her hands felt jittery. Since the only way to fix that was with chocolate, she’d defrosted brownies Lily had stored in the freezer.

She placed the brownies on top of the pastry cabinet and sat next to Lotto. The boy in front of them, in jeans and a black ski coat, wore an icy look “What’s going on?”

“This is Paul.” Lotto glanced at her, his dark eyes not as bright as they’d been earlier. They were both tired, and she was ready for Christmas Eve to come and go. She hated

feeling that way, but it'd been a long day of working organizing parade participants.

They'd had so many people ask to be in the parade, she wondered if there'd be anyone left to actually watch it.

Since Paul just stared at her, she said, "Do you want to be in the parade?"

"Yes," Paul said with an edge to his voice. "But my friends and I can't walk in the parade."

She stole another look at Lotto. "Why is that?"

"Because Paul is the leader of the high school marching band."

"Oh." And that was going to be a problem.

"My girlfriend, Rosie, is making the Santa costume." Paul's eyes narrowed. "But she'll only finish the costume if the high school band can lead the parade."

6

BEN CROUCHED behind an enormous oak tree and motioned to Damian who was kneeling near a boulder. The wind and snow swirled around them, lowering their visibility. And the dropping temps threatened to lower their ability to react quickly. They'd been stalking Pepper for over an hour and now he was inside his black tent, with a huge amount of weapons, not far from the ridge that held up Caleb's star.

It was great that they'd found Pepper, but the location also meant a few not-so-great things. First, they were so high up on the mountain, they couldn't call for backup. Second, he had to trust that when he went in for the arrest, Damian would have his back. Third, the snow and wind were hitting critical mass. If they didn't get Pepper in the next few minutes, they could all end up dead from the blizzard.

Ben held up his three fingers, and Damian nodded. Although he and Damian were on opposite sides of the law, that hadn't always been the case. For years they'd worked as a team and understood how each other thought and moved. As long as he could trust Damian now, they could make this arrest happen and get home before the storm hit Kingsmill and all the roads shut down.

When Ben dropped the third finger, he moved toward the tent, with Damian as his back—until Pepper came out and headed for the opposite tree line, near Damian. Ben dropped to the ground, praying Pepper hadn't seen him. He glanced at Damian who made an obscene gesture that meant Pepper was going to the bathroom.

Ben nodded and started moving again. It would be much easier to arrest Pepper with his pants down. Damian now led the way, and Ben followed. Suddenly a gust of wind knocked him onto his back, blinding him. Now disoriented, he maneuvered into a low, stalking position and headed for the tree line. Except now he couldn't see Pepper or Damian.

Ben moved forward slowly, his face burning from the bitter wind, until he was surrounded by pine trees. Here, within the relative quiet offered by the massive trees, he stopped. Two sets of tracks led west, toward the highest ridge that held Caleb's star.

He couldn't believe he'd lost both men so quickly. It took another thirty minutes of following the tracks before he heard voices. It was easier to follow the tracks within the woods because the snow didn't cover them as quickly, but it was also darker since the tree cover obscured the moon.

He moved toward the voices, keeping his weapon ready. The tracks led out of the forest and up to the ridge holding the star's hundred-foot pole. That didn't bode well since the ridge upon which the star stood was nothing more than a four-foot landing on the side of the mountain. And once up there, there was no place else to go but down the same path. Or over the cliff into a four-hundred foot ravine.

The voices grew louder and harsher, and he ran toward them until a gunshot ripped through the night's silence. Then a scream echoed, followed by... more silence. Ben's heart beat loudly in his chest, and he clawed his way up the rocky path covered with snow. Once at the apex, he found Damian slumped on the ground, leaning against the enormous pole. Ben saw footsteps near the edge and moved closer until he could look down into the ravine that dropped onto jagged rocks.

"He jumped," Damian said in a harsh voice. "Pepper said he'd never return to jail. So he shot me, and then he jumped. I swear I didn't push him."

Ben ran back to Damian and knelt in the snow. Up here, the snow and wind twisted around each other making it hard to

breathe in the cold air and difficult to see anything. “Where are you hit?”

“Thigh. I don’t think he got an artery, though.”

Ben found his SAT phone and crawled toward the ridge’s edge. Then he prayed for a signal. After a few minutes, a call went through to Charlie’s team. There was no way to get a rescue helicopter up here, and the mountain roads were now closed. So it was up to the rest of the men who’d been searching for Pepper to help him get Damian to safety.

Once all coordinates were given, and Ben knew help was coming, he hurried back to Damian and did his best to stop the bleeding. Normally, he could carry Damian down to the forest where they’d have some protection from the elements. But with the poor visibility and the deep snow covering the path, he couldn’t risk falling off the path’s edge.

Instead, with his hands keeping pressure on Damian’s wound, he glanced up at the dark sky, only then remembering the star at the top of the pole wasn’t working.

A beeping sound startled him, and he looked at Damian. “What’s that?”

“My alarm.” Damian touched his watch and the beeping stopped. “It’s to remind me.”

“Remind you of what?”

Damian shifted and groaned. “It’s midnight. It’s now Christmas Eve.”

Sophie reheated her coffee in the microwave and checked her phone again. It was midnight, she was in her apartment reviewing the millions of details for the parade. She’d come up with a solution to the war between the high school band and the middle school band that ensured Harry’s costume would be finished on time. Then she and Lotto had figured out the parade’s marching order. She’d even convinced the high

school basketball team to decorate the tree outside Mosby House.

She was happy with her progress, but she was worried about Ben.

Lotto, Nana Ruthie, Lily, and even Clara had told her not to worry, but she hadn't heard from him and it was now Christmas Eve. She'd tried calling him, but he'd not picked up. She'd tried calling Charlie Wallace, her FBI contact, but he'd gone silent as well.

She crawled into bed and turned off the lights, except for the tiny Christmas lights Ben had hung around her window. The apartment was small and basic, but it was in the back of the building and her bedroom had an enormous window overlooking the river rapids below and the forest beyond. With the snow falling, wind howling, and the rapids racing over rocks and fallen trees, the window offered a private, million-dollar view.

For weeks she'd dreamed of lying in this bed with Ben, curled around his naked body while staring out into the forest. But now that he wasn't answering his phone, she felt cold and alone. She pulled up the covers, kept her phone near her heart and reminded herself that most people believed miracles happened on Christmas Eve. If that was the case, the only miracle she wanted was for Ben to come home safely.

SOPHIE MISSED THE CHURCH BELLS. She'd not realized how much she counted on them to keep the time, but now that the parade was about to start she wished the bells would ring. Maybe they could take her mind off the fact she'd not heard from Ben. Her only consolation was that no one else in the town seemed worried.

It was almost nine o'clock at night, and she stood next to the huge tree at the end of Main Street, in front of Mosby House. The snow had stopped this morning, leaving a blanket of white over everything. But the snow had made driving difficult.

A lone trumpet began playing *Silent Night*, and the middle school band appeared from behind the church. The parade had begun, and she was alone. Except for the high school's marching band which stood behind her, waiting for their turn to play.

She'd worked out a compromise between the two bands in exchange for Harry's Santa costume. The deal was for the middle school band to lead the parade down Main Street, to the town's Christmas tree. Then the high school band would have a short concert after Santa handed out his gifts.

"Sorry I'm late." Clara appeared with her stroller. Tonight she wore a green wool coat with a green hat. As usual, she looked stylish and completely at peace. "The baby didn't nap well."

She straightened her black wool coat and peeked into the stroller to see a little blue bundle covered in blankets. “Does Georgie help you with the baby?” Georgie, Clara’s daughter from a previous marriage, was a lovely teenage girl with a mind of her own.

Clara chuckled. “Georgie spent most of the day helping the drama department make the Santa costume. Apparently there was some issue with the high school band. And then Gage got involved.” Clara waved a dismissive hand. “But Georgie told me it was fixed.”

Sophie frowned. She’d not heard about Gage’s involvement with anything. In fact, she hadn’t seen Gage since the night of the town meeting.

“Sophie, what did you decide to do about the Santa gifts?”

She shrugged. “There wasn’t time and the roads were closed most of the day. And of course there’s no money. So I worked with Tricia—”

“At the church thrift shop?”

“Yes. She helped me find gifts for younger kids and donated them. She and her shop’s volunteers even wrapped them for me.” Sophie grimaced. “It’s the teenagers I’m worried about. They’re all getting gift cards to the café for free lunches this winter. Looks like I’ll be making beef turnovers and cranberry pot roast tarts until Easter.”

Clara took Sophie’s arm and squeezed. “That was a wonderful idea.”

As they stood together, at the very top of Main Street in front of the lit Christmas Tree, the trumpet solo ended and a sudden blast of music sounded. The sounds of *Joy to the World* filled the dark night, and the parade marched toward them. Now that the middle school band had rounded the corner, the rest of the parade followed.

Clara pointed to the sidewalks along Main Street filled with people wearing colorful coats and hats and holding up their phones as flashlights. “I thought everyone was going to be *in* the parade so there’d be no spectators.”

“I had the same worries.”

The parade lasted for forty-five minutes. As each group reached the tree, they nodded to her and then moved behind the high school band. There were clubs like 4-H, chess, and French. Then there were the scouts and rangers followed by the high school cheer team.

As the groups and clubs marched along the street, the bands played and spectators cheered. The sounds of happy voices and off-tune Christmas music surrounded her, and for the first time since she'd offered to run the parade, she smiled. A genuine smile drawn from the happiness in her heart.

She'd helped facilitate this joy, and the town had responded in kind. The only thing that would make tonight perfect was if Ben were there to share it with her.

Suddenly, behind the VFW banner headed by Mr. Elmer, she saw a red pickup truck with Santa standing in the truck's bed, waving to everyone who cheered as they slowly drove by. It wasn't a sleigh, but it would do.

“Where did they get that shiny red truck?” She squinted to see the driver. “And who's driving?”

“Kane is driving,” a female voice said from behind.

Sophie turned to find Eve, Kane's wife, in a white coat and red hat. Eve had been one of the very first people Sophie had met after sneaking into town, and they'd become good friends.

After many hugs between the three women, and more peeks at the baby, Clara said, “Where did Kane get that truck?”

Eve shrugged and waved at Kane as he drove closer. “I have no idea.”

They all laughed. But a few minutes later, as Santa was giving out gifts, Sophie realized something. “Eve, how did you know about the parade? Aren't you supposed to be on a cruise with your parents?”

Eve shared a long look with Clara. “Jacob called Kane yesterday and told us what was happening.”

“You mean with the parade?”

Eve tilted her head, took Sophie’s hand, and squeezed. “No. With Ben.”

Sophie clenched and unclenched her hands while she paced from the galley kitchen to her couch in her apartment. Clara and Eve sat at her tiny kitchen table, as if knowing to stay out of her way.

Santa was still handing gifts out by the Christmas tree, and she heard the band entertaining everyone else through her windows. Those diversions had given Sophie a chance to stomp away so she could deal with her overflowing emotions. Except she had no idea where to begin.

“Are you both telling me that Ben went after a dangerous Black Jack, in a snowstorm, and didn’t tell me? And”—she held up her hand so Eve wouldn’t interrupt—“he asked everyone in town, including Lotto, to participate in the parade to keep me distracted?”

“You volunteered for the parade,” Clara said softly.

Sophie threw up her hands. “Before I knew Ben was going to turn into a rogue sheriff.”

“I know you’re upset,” Eve said gently. “But Ben didn’t want you to worry. Besides, once he identified the man who’d set the church on fire, he called in the State Police, the FBI, and a few of the men in town to help him. He wasn’t alone.”

Sophie leaned her hip against the counter and closed her eyes. “Do you know what happened? Why have they been gone for so long?”

Clara sighed, and Sophie opened her eyes.

“The storm hit,” Eve said. “The Black Jack jumped off a ridge up on Mosby’s Gap and died, and Damian was shot but

he'll be okay. It just took a long time to get everyone off the mountain and checked out by the EMTs in Milltown. But I promise you, Ben is fine."

She shook her head. Milltown was on the other side of the mountain because Kingsmill didn't even have a first aid clinic. "I hear what you're saying, but I feel ..." she swallowed hard and blinked away tears. "I don't know what I feel."

Clara came over and touched her arm. "Take a few minutes. Grab a glass of water. You've had no sleep for the last two days. When you're ready, meet us up on the hill behind Mosby House. No later than midnight. And together we'll make Christmas wishes on Caleb's star."

She tried to snort delicately, but she sounded like a bullhorn. "I don't know how to make Christmas wishes because I've never actually had a Christmas."

"You had one tonight," Eve said as she buttoned her coat. "Don't let your anger take that away from you."

Before she could respond, both women left and she found herself alone. Not sure what to do with her excess energy, she took off her coat and boots. Then she unbraided her hair and brushed out the curls. After stripping off her itchy wool socks, she headed into her bedroom. Except she stopped in the doorway and dropped her socks onto the floor. Someone had decorated her room with tons of Christmas lights, and a small Christmas tree decorated with lights stood in the corner. A champagne stand near the bed held a chilled bottle, and two flutes were on the bedside table. Low Christmas music came from somewhere, and the wind outside the window blew snow around. Her bedroom looked like a Christmas dream.

She pressed a hand against her stomach and tears pricked her eyes. "Who did this?"

"Eve and Clara helped me," a deep male voice said from behind.

She spun around to see Ben taking off the Santa hat and tossing it onto the floor. He wore the entire costume, and when

he undid the belt, a pillow fell onto the ground. He threw his jacket and white T-shirt on top.

She couldn't look away from his perfect upper body. Cut abs. Huge arm muscles. And a light dusting of hair from his chest down to waistline and below. "Wait. I thought Harry was Santa?"

She backed away, confused and disoriented. Was anything as she thought it was?

"I was a last-minute fill-in for Santa." His voice was filled with laughter, and he came closer. Now he only wore the pants, but because they were too big they rode low on his hips. She ached to trace the muscles of his lower stomach, but she fisted her hands instead.

"I wanted to surprise you. My plan was to give you your Santa gift in front of the Christmas tree in town..." he waved a hand toward the room decorated like a Christmas catalog. "And then bring you up here to celebrate."

She licked her lips and took another step back. And another. Until the back of her legs hit the edge of the bed. "Celebrate what?" She wrinkled her nose. "We're not celebrating anything. I'm mad at you. You lied to me about where you were and then you made the town participate in my parade to keep me distracted. That means I don't really belong." She ended with a huge huff that blew stray bangs off her forehead. "I'm mad about that."

He took her arms and forced her to meet his gaze. "Sweetheart, you do belong. The town helped you because they love you. Not because I asked them to."

She pressed her fists against his chest only to feel his warm muscles clench beneath her hands. "But you did ask them."

"I did." He kissed her forehead. Then her nose. "Except they'd already planned on participating. My phone calls didn't change that. I left to go after Pepper because I already knew the people of this town would protect you and stand by you. If I didn't believe you belonged to this town, and this town belonged to you, I never would've left you alone here."

She sat on the bed, and Ben knelt in front of her. “Sophie, I don’t want to wait anymore to be together. And I promise, no more secrets about anything. Not the FBI investigation. Not Santa-related things. Not my intentions.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “What kind of intentions?”

He stood and dropped his pants. Apparently, Santa went commando.

8

BEN HELD his erection and moved closer to Sophie. Her long blond hair hung in curls around her shoulders, and her tight black turtleneck showed off every curve. They'd been spending so much time in winter coats, he'd almost forgotten how spectacular a body she had.

Her gaze dropped to his erection. When she bit her lower lip, his cock jumped in his hand. "Sweetheart, are you ready? Do you want this?"

She lifted her chin, and he smiled. Her green eyes darkened with desire, and her breaths sounded shallow. Without warning, she pulled her sweater over her head and threw it onto the floor. Her black lace bra followed quickly, and slowly, without getting up, she pulled off her black leggings. Then she lay back against the pillows wearing only a pair of black lace panties.

When she met his gaze, the breath rushed out of his chest. "You are so beautiful."

She smiled and held out her hand. "Come to bed, Ben."

He lay down next to her and traced the soft curve of her breast. "It's been so long, Sophie. I don't know where to begin."

"I do." She pulled his hand away and took his cock in her fist. When she began an up-and-down motion, he closed his eyes and threw back his head. His balls tightened and sweat dripped down his back. When he groaned, she shifted until she was on her knees before him.

The incredible sensation only got more intense when she took him into her mouth and her tongue swirled around the crown. Slowly, she licked his shaft until she took in his entire length. He gripped her hair and moved her head up and down until she matched his rhythm. She licked and sucked and squeezed until the pressure became too much. His lower abdomen cramped, fire burned through his veins, and he knew he had to slow this down.

Gently, he disengaged her mouth, picked her up, and moved her onto her back. He couldn't get over the sheer beauty of her full breasts and her blond hair spread on his pillow. She smiled at him and cupped her breasts until the nipples pushed up, as if begging for his attention.

He drew down his black panties and tossed them aside. Then he spread her legs with his thighs and placed his hands on either side of her head. He kissed her hard. As his tongue tangled with hers, all of the memories from the last time he'd been with her like this flooded his mind. Being inside her, holding her, and then having to leave her.

Something that would never, ever happen again.

She grabbed his ass, as if demanding more action. So he moved his erection to her entrance, and he had every intention of doing this slowly. But when his tip found her softest spot, a wild heat took control of his body and he drove into her with an intensity that left him breathless. His mouth fastened on hers as he pounded into her with a ruthlessness he could neither control nor condemn.

But she didn't seem to mind as she gripped his shoulders, arched her back, and cried out, "*Ben.*"

He wanted to slow down and savor this moment. He was much larger than she was, and he knew he should give her time to adjust to his size. But when she wrapped her legs around his waist and her fingernails cut into his arm muscles, he drove into her with so much force, her head hit the headboard. He wanted to be sorry, but he wasn't. He'd waited far too long for this, for her, and he wasn't about to let her go.

Sophie held onto Ben's arms and gave herself over to the power of his body. It was as if a fire was flowing through her veins, and she knew she'd never have enough of his. She shifted lower on the bed so he could go deeper, if that was even possible.

She loved how his thighs forced her legs apart to fit his muscular body. And as he drove into her, over and over again, she embraced the sensation of being filled up. Filled up by his erection. By his kindness. By his love.

"Oh, Sophie." Ben reared his head as he thrust into her three more times. But it was on the fourth when her world fell apart and all the stars fell from Heaven.

He collapsed on top of her, and she wrapped her around his sweaty shoulders. She loved how his beard left a soft burn on her neck, breasts, and—hopefully soon—her inner thighs. Her body ached, and she felt weightless as he rolled onto his back, taking her with him. A few moments later, her head was on his chest and he was kissing her hair while she rubbed the light hairs on his lower stomach. He smelled of sweat and pine and straight-up masculinity. He smelled like Christmas.

"We can't fall asleep," he said in a dreamy voice. "We have to see Caleb's star."

She stroked his chest and watched the snow blow outside the window. "Lotto said the star was broken."

"I fixed it." He yawned and held her closer. "And please don't say Lotto's name while you're in bed with me."

She chuckled and kissed his chest. "How did you fix it while in a snowstorm with a suicidal Black Jack and a wounded man?"

"Christmas magic." His arm tightened around her shoulder, and he shifted to look at the Christmas tree in the corner. "That reminds me. I have a present for you."

She snuggled closer. "I can open it tomorrow."

“I’d rather you open it now. I’ll be right back.”

He padded in bare feet to the tree, and she enjoyed the view coming and going. When he returned, he handed her a small black box wrapped in a red ribbon he’d taken from the tree’s branches. “I bought this a long time ago. For you.”

She slipped off the ribbon and opened the box. Nestled inside the black velvet was the most beautiful diamond and emerald ring she’d ever seen. Her throat closed up and she was sure tears were going to fall before she could hide them. “Oh, Ben.”

“Please say yes, Sophie.” He sat on the bed and pulled her into my arms. “Please say you’ll stay with me forever, for all the Christmases we could ever have.”

She swallowed, tasting the salty tears in the back of her throat, and nodded.

Laughter filled the room. “You have to stay the words, sweetheart.”

She met his gaze and stroked his cheek. “Yes, Ben. I’ll marry you.”

Hours later, dressed in warm clothes, Sophie took Ben’s hand so he could drag her up the high hill way beyond Mosby House. Considering the house had an orchard and a pond and many acres of farmland, this hill had to be at least a mile away from town. But once she reached the top, she realized the entire town was already there. And everyone was facing west, toward Mosby’s Gap.

They all sat on blankets and passed around tins of cookies. She and Ben found Kane, Eve, Clara, and Jacob sitting on a flannel blanket at the highest point of the hill. Despite the late hour, and the darkness, her face felt hot and red. Since Eve and Clara had helped decorate the bedroom, they all had to know what she and Ben had been doing.

The entire town probably knew because she'd left her own parade without a word to anyone before it was over.

"So," she sat next to Clara and took a mug filled with hot chocolate. "How did the parade end?"

Everyone laughed, and Ben's brothers clapped him on the back. And once she showed them her engagement ring, congratulations could be heard in Milltown.

"Where's Georgie?" Ben asked around a mouthful of cookies.

"Watching the baby," Clara said. "She's too cool to wish on Caleb's Christmas star."

"For now." Jacob laid on the blanket to stare up at the stars. "Give her a few years and she'll start believing in Christmas wishes again."

Buzzers started going off, and she realized it was everyone's phone alarms warning them midnight was approaching. A moment later, everyone extinguished their candles and flashlights and phones, and watched the dark, western horizon..

Ben moved next to her and held her in his arms. "We didn't do this last year. That's why I wanted to make sure the star worked this year."

"Is it really that big of a deal?"

"Wait and see."

A moment passed, and her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"Make your wishes," Ben said softly. "Here it comes."

Just as she counted her wishes, a bright light in the mountain beyond Kingsmill lit up the night. It stood so tall, and so alone on that lonely ridge, it appeared to have been placed there by angels.

She shivered and held her breath until everyone around her began to clap and cheer.

"Merry Christmas, Sophie. I love you." His voice sounded husky, and she turned to find him watching her. "Every year

since we've been apart, I've wished on Caleb's Christmas star to find you again. That's how I knew to buy your ring when I wasn't even sure you remembered me."

"I love you too, Ben." She touched his cheek, leaned closer, and whispered in a voice tinged with tears, "My memories of you are what led me back here. As far as I'm concerned, you are my brightest Christmas star. And I promise I will never, ever let you go."

The End... for now.

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Two Hearts, One Prince, & A
Partridge In A Pear

Emorie Cole

1

Jeff

THE AIR IS COLD, but not too bitter on my face as snowflakes softly fall all around me while I stroll through the neighborhood in Bessemer. Christmas lights adorn most of the houses that I pass, with their reflections dancing and glittering against the snow and ice. I pull my jacket and scarf tighter around myself as I continue to walk down the snowy street, thinking about how lucky I am to have found this quaint little town in Upper Michigan—completely by chance—while searching for remote vacation destinations that offer both skiing and holiday festivities.

I smile as I pass a couple of jolly looking snowmen standing tall in one of the yards. They're decorated with fuzzy scarves and hats that match the mittens attached to their oddly long, stick arms. "What a beautiful night, Nigel. Just take a moment and listen—you can hear the church bells playing *Silent Night* softly off in the distance. Isn't this place charming?" I ask my bodyguard who's trailing behind me.

"Yes, Your Highness, quite charming—but don't you think that we ought to be heading back to the chalet? You need to get some rest if you want to go skiing first thing in the morning."

I let out a long sigh. "Very well. But try to remember, Nigel—on this vacation I'm not Prince Jeffrey or 'Your Highness'—I'm just plain old Jeff."

"Right—and I'm not your bodyguard, I'm your good friend that you've known since childhood."

“You’ve *always* been my best friend, Nigel. We’ve grown up together since we were babies; even though you protect me, there isn’t a single person that I consider a better friend than you.”

“Thank you, Sir—I mean—Jeff.”

“That’s more like it,” I say as I pat him on the back. “Alright, come on, let’s head back.” We walk back down the street to the chalet that we’ve rented for the duration of our stay. It’s not a glamorous chalet by any means, but it’s still charming in its own way, and it’s exactly what I was looking for. When we arrive, I say goodnight to Nigel and head upstairs to get a good night’s sleep.

After brushing my teeth and putting on a pair of pajama pants, I climb into bed before turning off the lamp on the nightstand. I lie awake for quite a while, excited about skiing and exploring this lovely little town tomorrow. Smiling to myself, I realize that for the first time in my life, I don’t have to worry about responsibilities. I’m not sure exactly how long I spend thinking about everything that I want to do while I’m here, but eventually I drift off into a deep sleep.

Morning comes quickly, and I’m awakened by noises coming from downstairs—unlike the palace, the walls here are not soundproofed. As I sit up and stretch, a strong whiff of bacon hits my nose, and I realize that Nigel must be making breakfast. I quickly roll out of bed and shiver as my bare feet hit the cold wooden floor. Reaching into the dresser near the bed, I grab a pair of warm socks and slip them on just as I hear three swift knocks on the door. “One second, I’m coming,” I say loudly as I get up and saunter over to the door.

I open it to find Nigel standing on the other side. “Good morning, Your—Jeff,” he says after a moment’s hesitation. “Glad to see that you’re awake. Breakfast is ready.”

“It smells wonderful!”

“I’ve made bacon, eggs, and toast for you this morning. If there’s nothing else you need, I’ll let you eat while I go gather our things for skiing.”

“Don’t worry about it, Nigel. I’m perfectly capable of gathering my own skis.”

“As you wish—Jeff. In that case, I’ll go get myself ready,” he says with a smile as he heads out of the room. I take a seat at the table to eat my breakfast alone, realizing that Nigel has already eaten, as usual. I guess convincing him to forget about his duties for a little while might be more difficult than I expected. I sigh as I take a bite of my food.

Once I’m finished eating and Nigel and I have grabbed our gear, we head out in our rented SUV. The small highway is snow-covered, but it’s well-sanded so it’s not slippery, making the short drive an easy one. Ten minutes later, we pull into the parking lot at the ski hill—Indianhead Mountain. We climb out of the car and gather our skis, poles, and boots from the back before heading inside the small chalet to purchase our lift passes. Unlike other ski resorts that I’ve been to, Indianhead Mountain is very cozy. The word mountain may be in the name, but from the trail maps that I’ve looked at, and the pictures on the wall, it’s more of a small hill with runs that can’t possibly take more than a few minutes to ski down. When I walk into the chalet, I see that the small two story building contains a ticket office and a cafeteria on the top floor, and an area for ski rentals on the bottom.

As Nigel and I make our way to the counter, the sound of a woman’s cheerful laughter fills my ears. I quickly look around to see where the sound is coming from, only for my eyes to catch on the most beautiful woman that I’ve ever seen. This petite, dark-haired woman has features that remind me of the greek goddesses that I read about when I was younger. Her bright, sparkling hazel eyes seem to dance as she laughs with a group of women that’s making their way towards the exit opposite of me—her short, black wavy hair standing out against the neon green of her ski jacket.

“Jeff,” Nigel says as he nudges me with his elbow, “it’s our turn.”

I slowly tear my eyes away from the woman, and move towards the counter. “Yes—yes, of course. Sorry about that. Two lift passes, please.” The man behind the counter smiles

and nods as he prints the passes and hands them over the counter. “Here you are, Nigel,” I say as I hand him one of the passes.

“Thank you. A bit distracted, Jeff?” he asks with a big grin on his face as we attach our passes to our jackets and sit down to put on our ski boots.

“Me? Distracted? Of course not—I just thought that I caught a glimpse of some paparazzi that were going to ruin this vacation.” I keep my eyes down towards my boots, hoping that he’ll completely forget about this. “All set?” I ask as I stand up and hand him his ski poles.

“Absolutely,” Nigel says with a knowing grin on his face as he walks over to hold the door open.

As we get outside, I gaze out over the hill. “I don’t think that I’ve ever been to a hill where the chalet is on the top, have you Nigel?”

“No, I can’t say that I have—but then again, we’ve never skied anywhere quite so small before.”

“That’s true.” I adjust my goggles over my eyes and put my wrists through the straps of my poles before shouting to Nigel over my shoulder. “See you at the bottom!” I glide easily through the powdery snow, quickly reaching the bottom of the hill a few minutes later.

When I come to a stop and turn to look around for Nigel, I hear a loud shriek before someone hits me hard, and we both fall to the ground in a heap of tangled skis and poles. As I try to remove my skis, I notice who it is that ran into me—the beautiful woman in the neon green ski jacket. “I’m so sorry!” she gasps. “I’m not sure what happened. One minute I was fine, and the next I was losing control and barreling into you.”

“It’s okay—I’m fine. Are *you* alright?” I ask as I help to untangle our skis.

She nods her head and blushes. “I think so. Just embarrassed, that’s all.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. Accidents happen.”

“I know. I’m so clumsy that they happen to me often,” she says with a small laugh.

I smile as I help her to her feet. “We all have those days.”

“Thanks. I’m Sarah Duncan, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Sarah. I’m Jeff Hastings.” We both reattach our skis before skiing over towards the chairlift where Nigel is anxiously waiting. I give him a subtle nod to reassure him that everything is okay before introducing the two of them to each other. Once introductions are finished, I turn to Sarah and ask, “If you don’t mind me asking—where are your friends? I thought I saw you inside earlier with a larger group.”

“Yeah, I was. My friends wanted to ski down one of the more difficult runs, but I need more practice before those. We’re going to meet up again later.”

“Ah, I see. Well, since you’re on your own, you’re welcome to join Nigel and I until you need to meet up with them.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“Don’t worry—you wouldn’t be imposing. You don’t mind if she joins us, do you Nigel?”

“Not at all,” he says with a smile.

“Okay, then. Thank you—I’d really like that.”

“Ride with me?” I ask as I motion towards the chairlift.

“Okay.”

“You go on ahead, Nigel. I’ll ride up with Sarah.”

Nigel obliges and takes the next available chair. Sarah blushes as she catches the next chair beside me. “You didn’t have to ditch your friend to ride with me, you know. I would have been fine on my own. At least I think I could have managed to get on and off the chair without falling again,” she adds with a grin.

“Yes, I believe you *would* be fine on your own, but I enjoy talking with you.”

“Me too.”

We’re both quiet for a minute before Sarah asks, “Where are you from? I haven’t heard your accent before.”

“I’m from a small country in Europe that nobody has ever heard of. It’s called Rohemia.”

“You’re right, I haven’t heard of Rohemia before,” she says with a laugh. “So, what brings you all the way to the Upper Peninsula?”

“Honestly, I just needed to take a break from my duties for a while. I wanted to get away from everything and go somewhere that would allow me to truly experience the Christmas holiday for a change, instead of being burdened with obligations throughout the holiday.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place for experiencing Christmas. Everyone here decorates their homes for the big holiday lighting contest so there are a lot of awesome displays to look at, plus there are horse-drawn sleigh rides with caroling and hot chocolate.”

“That sounds wonderful! I think I saw something about a parade as well?”

“Yeah, Ironwood—the next town over—has a Jack Frost parade every year. It’s a lot of fun to watch as long as you don’t mind freezing to death,” she says with a grin.

“You mean it gets colder than it is right now?”

“Much colder. This is warm compared to the coldest we’ve ever gotten, and since the parade is at night, it’s definitely always freezing.”

“Well, then, I guess I’ll have to be sure to wear warmer clothing.” Our chair reaches the top of the hill, and we both easily glide off. Once we’ve skied out of the way of others exiting the chair lift, we join Nigel and take a moment to figure out what we’re doing next. “What do you guys think? Should we check out a few other runs or stay here?”

Sarah chews on her bottom lip for a moment. “I think given how clumsy I am, I should probably stick to this run a

little bit longer. I don't want you two to be stuck here, though."

"It's really not a big deal. As long as I can get some skiing in, I don't care if it's the same run or different ones."

"It doesn't make a difference to me either," Nigel says.

"Really?" Sarah asks hopefully.

I nod my head yes. "Come on—let's ski." Sarah smiles happily and nods.

The three of us spend the next few hours skiing together, and while we ride the chairlift, Sarah and I spend time getting to know each other—though I'm careful to leave out a few certain details about myself, particularly about me being a prince. I really like Sarah, and I want her to like me for the person that I am, not my title.

"I've really enjoyed spending time with you today, Sarah, and I'd like to see you again. What do you think—could we hang out again sometime?" I ask as we take off our skis and walk towards the lodge after our last run.

She hesitates for a moment before answering, "Sure, why not? I had a great time today, too, and I could probably show you all of the best locations to find the holiday experience that you're looking for. Why don't I give you my number and you can call me?" I take my cell phone out of my pocket and hand it to her so that she can enter her phone number. "There you go," she says as she hands it back to me a few seconds later.

"Thanks. I'll call you later." I watch as she disappears inside the main lodge. Once she's out of sight, I turn my attention to Nigel. "What do you think, Nigel?"

"I think Miss Duncan is lovely, Your—Jeff," he says, catching himself before finishing the phrase. "But I do hope that you're honest about your background with her. If you're serious about her, she deserves to know who you *really* are sooner rather than later."

"We just met a few hours ago. I'm not sure how I feel about her yet, other than that she's nice and I like her."

“Just be careful.”

“I will.” I pat Nigel on the shoulder reassuringly. “Thanks for always watching out for me.”

“Of course.”

We decide to call it a day and head back to our chalet to eat a late lunch. I plan to call Sarah later this evening to see if she'll have dinner with me, but first I need to take some time to consider what Nigel said about being honest with her. Even though we just met this morning, I can't deny that I can see a future for Sarah and I together.

Sarah

AFTER LEAVING Jeff and heading into the chalet, I quickly find my friends Charlotte, Kara, and Carly, all huddled in front of the fire chatting. “Hey ladies, who’s hungry? Because I’m starving!” I say loudly as I approach them with a big smile on my face.

“All of us!” they say in unison as if they planned it on cue.

“Well, that settles it then, let’s head to 906 Cafe for lunch.” We all laugh as we grab our things and head out the door. Once we get to the cafe, the hostess seats us, and our food arrives quickly after we order it. As we start to dig in, I still can’t wipe the smile off of my face.

“What’s up, Sarah?” Charlotte asks. “You’ve had a smile on your face ever since we met back up with you at the lodge after the rest of us finished our double black diamond runs.”

Thoughts of Jeff Hastings, the hunky skier that I spent most of the morning with, keep running through my head. “Have I?” I say naively as if I have no clue what she’s talking about.

“Yes, you have,” responds Kara.

I take a second while I bite into a French fry to debate whether or not I should tell the girls about Jeff before realizing that there’s no point in hiding it. “Well—I met someone this morning.”

“What do you mean you met someone?” asks Carly quizzically.

“I mean—I spent all morning skiing with and talking to this amazing guy named Jeff.” I laugh at the memory of our first meeting. “I met him when I literally ran into him at the bottom of the hill.”

Charlotte nearly spits out her sip of milkshake. “What?!”

“I sort of lost control on one of my first runs, and I couldn’t stop in time. We were a tangled mess of skis and poles. After that, he rode the chair with me and invited me to ski with him and his friend since I was alone.”

“That was nice of him.”

“Yeah, too bad you’ll probably never see him again—unless he’s a local,” Kara says.

“Well—actually I will. We exchanged phone numbers since he wants to see me again. I kind of offered to show him around town.”

“You gave him your number?” asks Carly. “Do you really think that was a good idea?”

“Relax, Carly,” Charlotte says. “Not everyone is a psycho stalker. You watch too many crime shows.”

“I know,” she says a little sheepishly. “But seriously, Sarah. How much do you really know about this guy?”

“I know enough to feel comfortable giving him my phone number. Besides, as much as I like him, I doubt anything serious will happen. He’s visiting from Europe, and he has to go home after the holidays.”

“He’s from Europe?” Kara asks excitedly.

“Mmm-hmm,” I say with a grin. “But don’t worry, I’m not into long-distance relationships.”

I spend the rest of lunch gushing about how dreamy his European accent is and how gorgeous he looks with his green eyes and dark blond hair. By the time we head home, all of the girls—including Carly—are happy for me, even if Jeff and I end up being just friends. It’s been a long time since I’ve put myself out there with a guy. I may as well enjoy the time that

we have together since he's the first guy in a long time to make me feel this happy.

When the girls drop me off at home a little while later, I take a quick shower before changing into my favorite pair of leggings and a comfy sweater. I'm in the middle of trying to tame my wavy, wet hair when my cell phone rings. Picking it up, I see Jeff's name flashing on the screen and let out a happy little squeal before composing myself enough to answer. "Hello?"

"Hi, Sarah. It's Jeff. How are you?"

"I'm great, thanks. What's up?"

"Well, I know that it's short notice, but I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner tonight? Around seven, perhaps?"

I pause for a moment so as not to seem too anxious, but of course I'm going to say yes. "Sure, I'd love to. Maybe afterwards I can show you where some of my favorite Christmas light displays are."

"That sounds wonderful. Should I pick you up?"

"Sure." I give Jeff my address, and we end our call. I finish drying and styling my hair before rushing to my closet to find the perfect outfit to wear tonight. Something not too flashy, but not too modest either. A soft red sweater dress catches my eye in the closet, with black leggings underneath and a pair of dressier winter boots—the kind that look nice, but will still keep my feet warm.

Once I've decided on my clothes, I spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing, trying to keep my mind off of my upcoming date. When six o'clock rolls around, I change out of my comfy clothes and into the cute outfit that I chose earlier for the night. I check in the mirror to make sure that my hair is still cooperating before putting on my makeup.

A few minutes before seven, the doorbell rings, and I rush to the door to answer it. When I open it, Jeff is standing on the other side holding a bouquet of red roses. "Hello. I'm sorry if

I'm a bit early," he says as he hands me the flowers. "These are for you."

"Thank you. They're beautiful," I say with a smile. "Come inside for a second while I put these into some water and grab my coat."

He steps inside, looking around as I close the door behind him. "You have a lovely home, Sarah."

"Thanks. I moved in a few years ago when I got tired of living in an apartment." I make my way into the kitchen to grab a vase and fill it with water. Once I've got the flowers arranged on the counter, I walk over to the hall closet to grab my coat.

"Please, allow me to help you with that." Jeff takes my coat and holds it for me to slip into.

I giggle with amusement. "Wow, are all guys from Rohemia such gentlemen?"

Jeff shakes his head. "Not all. I was just raised very proper."

"Well, *I* think it's charming."

We make our way outside to the waiting car, and Jeff opens the passenger door for me. When he climbs into the driver's seat, he grins at me. "It's a bit chilly, so I took the liberty of turning on your heated seat and left the car running when I came in to get you."

I smile. "No complaints from me—it feels cozy in here."

"Perfect. Do you have any suggestions for dinner? I did a little research on places to eat around here, but since you're a local, I thought that you might know the best spots."

"Hmm—I guess it depends on what type of food you're in the mood for. Elk and Hound or Iron Nugget pretty much both have a bit of everything, Jagger's Ore House has great pizza, and if you're in the mood for Mexican food, there's a great little place in Hurley."

"Where's Hurley?" he asks.

“About fifteen minutes from here.”

“In that case, I’d love to try Mexican food.”

“You’ve never had Mexican food before?” I ask in disbelief.

“I’m afraid not. I’ve eaten a large variety of different cuisines in my life, but Mexican has not been one of them.”

“I’ll fix that,” I say with a smile as I type the restaurant’s name, El Tarasco, into the car’s GPS. “I could just give you directions, but this might be easier for you.”

We talk about all of the different types of food that we’ve both tried as Jeff drives us to the restaurant. Once we arrive, I look at the menu before recommending a few of my favorite items for him to try. “We could try the Molcajete Stone Bowl Special together. I’ve had it before with my friends, and it’s fantastic. It has Ribeye, al pastor meat, grilled chorizo, and even cactus.”

“Cactus?! Isn’t that a little—prickly?” Jeff asks with a raised eyebrow.

“It has great flavor, you’ll love it.”

“If you say so, I’m up to try anything.”

The waiter comes to take our order, and once we’ve made our selections, Jeff and I resume our conversation. “So, do you travel a lot, Sarah?”

I let out a short laugh. “I wish! I have a whole list of places that I’d like to visit someday, but most of them I’ll probably only ever dream of. What about you?”

“I’ve traveled quite a bit actually. Some for pleasure, some for business.”

“What type of business?”

He hesitates for a moment. “Let’s just say that I’m following in my father’s footsteps in the family business. One day I’ll take over for him, and I need to be prepared. A lot of the business travel that I do is to attend—meetings and to learn how he handles certain situations.”

“I see. That’s great that you want to follow in his footsteps though, right? I mean, it’s not some shady business is it?”

Jeff laughs. “No, it’s not shady, I promise. But—”

“But,” I prompt.

“But sometimes I wish that I didn’t have to take on *all* of the responsibilities that he has. There are incredibly high expectations, and sometimes it’s a lot to handle. Like I said this morning, that’s part of the reason that I came on this vacation—to get away from it all for a while.”

“Well, even so, I’m sure that you’ll be great when you take over. You seem like an intelligent, reliable man who’s capable of handling responsibilities.”

Jeff chuckles again. “You got all of that from knowing me for less than a day?”

I grin. “I’ve been told that I’m an excellent judge of character.”

“Well, not to sound arrogant, but I’d like to think that you’re right.”

We pause our conversation when our food arrives so that we can dig into the delicious Molcajete. I watch Jeff’s face as he takes his first bite of cactus. He closes his eyes as he chews. “This is *so* good,” he says as he scoops up another bite along with some ribeye.

I smile. “Good. I’m glad that you like it.”

“I think Mexican is my new favorite cuisine. But it sure is spicier than I expected,” he says with a sniff.

“Uh-oh. I might have created a monster,” I tease. “Since this is the first time that you’ve eaten it, I’m guessing there aren’t any Mexican restaurants where you live. What will you do?”

“I guess I’ll just have to have my chef find some recipes.”

My eyes widen. “You have a chef?”

“Oh—um—yeah. Comes with the family business,” he says with a shrug.

“That must be nice. I wish I had a personal chef. There are plenty of nights that I just don’t feel like cooking, so I end up eating junk food.”

Jeff laughs. “Junk food is okay sometimes, though, right?”

I grin. “Occasionally.”

We finish our meal and head outside to the car. “Where to next?” he asks.

“I want to show you my favorite thing to do around Christmastime—driving around to look at all of the houses’ Christmas lights.”

“Sounds good to me. Just tell me where to go.”

I direct him to all of the neighborhoods that have the best light displays. We drive all throughout Ironwood, Bessemer, and Wakefield. When we finally pull up in front of my house, it’s pretty late. Jeff puts the car into park, and we both just sit quietly for a minute, neither of us moving. “Thanks for such a wonderful night,” I finally say.

“I should be the one thanking you. You introduced me to my new favorite food, and provided me with an incredible holiday experience.”

“You’re welcome.”

We both reluctantly climb out of the car, and Jeff walks me to my door. “I really enjoyed tonight, Sarah. Can I see you again tomorrow?” he asks hopefully.

“I have to work during the day, but I’d be up for going on a sleigh ride and caroling if you’re interested.”

“That sounds fantastic. Text me the details.”

“Okay, I will.”

I reach into my purse for my keys, but Jeff’s gentle touch on my arm stops me. “Goodnight, Sarah.” He leans down and kisses me softly on the lips.

“Goodnight,” I whisper, a little breathlessly, before unlocking my front door and stepping inside.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Jeff says with what sounds like a soft chuckle.

“See you then.” I close the door behind me and lean against it with a silly grin on my face. If someone had asked me this morning what I’d be doing tonight, I never would have guessed that the answer would be falling head over heels for the handsome man that I met on the ski hill, after only one day of getting to know him, and just one sweet kiss later. It sounds absolutely crazy, but that’s exactly what I’m doing tonight.

Jeff

AS I WALK through the door of my chalet, I can still taste the sweetness of Sarah's lips on mine. I hadn't planned on kissing her tonight, especially since we've only known each other for less than twenty-four hours, but I couldn't help it. Desire is still coursing through my body as I think about what else I'd like to do with her, and I know that sleep isn't an option until I do something to—unwind.

I quickly let Nigel know that I've returned before heading into my bathroom to turn on the shower. As I stand under the spray of water a few minutes later, I finally give in to my desires for Sarah and grip my hard cock in my soapy hand. After the thoughts that I've had tonight, paired with the taste of her lips, I'm already at a point where I'm so turned on that I won't be able to last very long. My touch alone has awakened every last nerve ending in my body, making my legs shake. Thoughts of caressing Sarah's body run through my mind as I stroke myself. With each pump of my hand driving me closer, I allow myself to imagine what it would be like to suck her hard nipples into my mouth and tease her before spreading her legs and sinking myself deep inside of her. My hand quickly pumps the head of my cock a few times before sliding down the shaft, and I gasp as I imagine her scratching her nails along the muscles of my back as she trembles from the sensations. A few more pumps, and my body shakes with pleasure as I call out her name with my release. Breathing heavily, I lean my head against the wall, and let the water run down my body, rinsing myself clean.

I stand in the shower long enough to let my breathing return to normal before stepping out and toweling off. Once I've wrapped the towel around my waist, I return to my bedroom to throw on a pair of boxers and crawl into bed.

When I wake up in the morning, I take a few extra minutes to shave the short stubble off of my face in preparation for my date with Sarah tonight. Once I'm finished shaving and getting dressed, I make my way into the kitchen to find Nigel. "Good morning, Nigel!" I say cheerfully.

"Good morning. You're awfully—happy this morning, Your Highness. I take it you had a good night?"

"It was a great night."

"And I'm guessing that you have plans to see Miss Duncan again?" he asks knowingly.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. We're going to attend the Christmas sleigh rides and go caroling."

Nigel smiles. "Well, I'm not thrilled about you gallivanting all over without me, but I *am* glad that you're having a good time—and that you're in good company."

I narrow my eyes at him suspiciously. "You ran a background check on her, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. I can't have the Prince of Rohemia running all over a strange town with some unknown woman. The King and Queen would have my head if something happened to you."

I consider this for a moment before answering. "Very well, I forgive you. But keep the details to yourself—I don't want to know. I want to learn everything about Sarah the old-fashioned way."

"As you wish—Your Highness."

Nigel and I both eat breakfast—I've finally convinced him to eat *with* me instead of *before* me—before heading back to

the ski hill for a few hours. When I've had enough skiing for the day, we head back to the chalet so that I can shower and change for tonight. After I'm cleaned up, I double check the text message that Sarah sent earlier to confirm that I have the details correct. I'm to meet up with her at her place at five-thirty so that we can walk to Main Street to go on the sleigh ride.

I pull up in front of her house at exactly five-thirty and knock on the door. When she answers, she's dressed in a pair of jeans, her neon green ski jacket, and a fuzzy green hat with matching mittens. "Hey!" she says. "I hope you dressed warm."

"Don't worry—I made sure to put on extra layers," I assure her.

"Perfect. Let's go—we don't want to be late."

She locks her door, and we begin walking down the street. "So, how far is it exactly to where we're going?" I ask.

"Not far. Only a couple of blocks."

"Okay." We walk in silence for a few minutes, taking in the snowy scene around us. Finally, after much debate about whether or not I should bring it up, I'm the first to speak. "About that kiss last night—I'm sorry if I was out of line," I say.

She smiles up at me. "You weren't. I wasn't expecting it on our first date, but I liked it."

"I liked it, too." I smile as I consider my words. I'm not quite sure that 'like' is even the right word to describe how that kiss made me feel, and I want to discuss it with her more, but before I can continue the conversation, we arrive at Main Street. I guess it's going to have to wait until later.

"Here we are," Sarah says as she leads me towards a crowd of people gathered around a large horse-drawn sleigh filled with blankets.

Sarah introduces me to several people that she knows, and we're both given a small booklet of Christmas carols. We climb up onto the sleigh with the rest of the carolers and find a

place to sit. Once we're both seated, I grab a blanket and drape it over our laps. "Thanks," she says with a smile.

When everyone has found a seat, the driver lightly taps the reins, and the horses start moving. As we glide through the neighborhoods around town, we merrily sing the carols that are included in our booklets—some of the favorites such as *Jingle Bells* and *Silent Night* being sung multiple times. Snow is lightly falling as our voices echo through the streets, and families step outside of their homes with smiles on their faces to listen to us sing. The bells that the horses are wearing on their harnesses jingle with each step they take, adding a magical feel to the night.

Once we've visited all of the designated neighborhoods along the route, the sleigh returns to Main Street, and we all climb down to grab a cup of hot chocolate provided by the volunteers. "Thank you," I say to them as I take two steaming cups from the table and hand one to Sarah.

She smiles and takes it gratefully. "Thanks. I love hot chocolate on a cold night."

"Me too."

We drink the hot liquid, letting it warm us, as we visit with the other carolers who have stuck around. Once we've finished our drinks and said our goodbyes, we start the walk back to Sarah's house. "Thank you for inviting me to join you. That was a lot of fun," I say.

"You're welcome, Jeff. I had a great time, too."

"Do you do that every year?"

"I try to, if I'm around. My friends and I have gone out of town for the holidays a couple of times."

"Well, I'm glad that you didn't go out of town *this* year."

"Me too. If I had, I would never have met you."

My heart beats faster at her comment, hopeful that it means that she has feelings for me like I do for her.

When we reach her house, I walk her to the door. She pauses for a moment, as if debating something with herself,

before asking, “Would you like to come inside?”

I really shouldn’t since I’m not sure that I can keep my hands to myself, but before I can talk myself out of it, I hear myself saying, “Sure.”

We step inside, removing our outdoor gear in the entryway before walking into her cozy living room. “Make yourself at home,” she says, motioning to the couch. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” she says as she joins me on the couch, fidgeting nervously.

I gently put my hand on her shoulder to still her. “Are you sure you’re okay, Sarah?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just a little bit nervous, I guess. It’s been a while since I’ve invited a guy inside after a date. Actually—until our date last night, it’s been a while since I’ve had one of those, too.”

“There’s no reason to be nervous. We can move at whatever speed you feel comfortable with.”

She smiles. “That’s also why I’m nervous—I know that we just met, and we should probably move slow, but I don’t want to. This feels right.”

My eyes flick back and forth, searching her face, and I can tell that she’s being sincere. Knowing that she wants this as much as I do turns me on. Before I can overthink it, I lean in and crush my lips against hers. This time she’s ready for it, and she parts her lips to allow my tongue to slide in and tangle with hers. I wrap my fingers in her wavy hair, gently tugging to position her head to allow me to deepen the kiss. She moans softly into my mouth, while her hand slides up my chest, gripping my shirt, pulling me closer.

Breaking my lips away from hers, I trail kisses down her neck to her shoulder, and she shivers. “Tell me if you want me to stop,” I mumble as I slide the fabric of her shirt out of the way to continue peppering her with kisses.

“Don’t stop,” Sarah says breathlessly. “I don’t want you to stop.”

I let my hands trail down to her waist, and slide my fingers into her pants. She hisses out a breath as my fingers brush against her sensitive spot on their way lower. I gently rub my fingers against her entrance. “Oh, fuck—you’re so wet.”

“I want you, Jeff.”

“Where’s your bedroom?” I ask impatiently.

“Down the hall on the left.”

I scoop her up into my arms and carry her into the bedroom, gently placing her on the bed when we get there. She wiggles out of her jeans and panties, tossing them to the floor, making me chuckle. “A little impatient?”

She grins. “Just saving you some work.”

“Ditch the shirt, too.” I remove my own clothes, and she quickly obliges. “That’s better,” I say as I let my gaze travel to her bare breasts. I watch as her eyes linger just below my waist. “Like what you see?”

“Mmm-hmm. Now, come here.”

I do as she says and slowly climb on top of her. I know that she’s already ready for me, so I waste no time. I line my cock up with her entrance and push in with one quick thrust. We both let out a small moan of pleasure at the new sensation. Once she’s had a moment to adjust to my intrusion, I begin to rock my hips against hers. Sarah hooks her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper inside. I let out a curse as she tightens around me. “You like that?” she asks.

“You have no idea how good that feels,” I groan as I crash my lips against hers for a passionate kiss.

I thrust into her again and again, trying to keep my rhythm steady, until she’s trembling beneath me. Her nails rake over my back—the feeling in reality even better than what I imagined—sending shivers up my spine. We shift position, the new angle allowing me to slide in deeper, making the sensations even better for both of us. “Jeff,” she gasps. When

she cries out my name with her release, I lose all of my control that I've been holding onto, and my thrusts become quicker and more erratic until I'm calling out her name with my own release.

After a moment to regain our composure, I roll off of Sarah and collapse onto the bed next to her. "Wow," she says happily beside me. "That was—incredible."

I roll onto my side to face her and push a strand of hair off of her face. "I think *you're* incredible, Sarah."

"I think you are, too," she whispers softly.

I hold her gaze for a moment before I decide that I need to tell her who I really am. I really should have told her before things ever got this far, but I selfishly didn't want to risk losing her—although this has the potential to make me lose her anyway. Taking a deep breath, I take her hand in mine and hold it between us. "Sarah, there's something that I need to tell you. I probably should have told you sooner, and for that, I'm sorry."

A look of panic crosses her face. "Oh, no. Please don't tell me that you're married or something. That would be just my luck—the first time that I decide to do something crazy and sleep with someone that I've practically just met, and he turns out to be married."

I squeeze her hand gently to reassure her. "Calm down—no, I'm not married. It's nothing like that. It's nothing bad either."

"Okay, what is it then?"

"I haven't been completely honest about who I really am."

"You're not Jeff Hastings?"

"I am—but my full name is Jeffrey Edward Samuel Hastings—the third—Prince of Rohemia."

She stares at me for a minute, a look of amusement on her face. "You're joking, right?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm afraid not. You can look me up on the internet if you want. Or ask Nigel—he's my best friend

—but also my bodyguard. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you when we first met.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because usually when people know that I’m a prince they treat me differently. I just wanted you to like me for me, not because I’m royalty.”

“I *do* like you for you, Jeff.”

“Really?”

She nods her head yes. “Nothing will ever change that. I never would have treated you differently, either.”

“I know that now,” I say sheepishly. “I truly am sorry for not trusting you with my identity sooner.”

“It’s okay. Just promise me that from now on you’ll be honest with me. No more secrets.”

I give her a quick kiss. “Deal.”

Sarah cuddles against me, and I breathe a sigh of relief that she’s not mad at me—and that my title didn’t scare her off. Now that she knows the truth, I can finally discuss the future with her.

4

Sarah

IT'S warm and cozy waking up in Jeff's arms, and as I slowly open my eyes, I see him sleeping peacefully next to me. I can't help but smile when I think about last night. The way that he makes me feel is indescribable—like nothing I've ever felt before—and I don't want to lose this feeling. I admit that his confession about being a prince was shocking to say the least, but I'm not going to hold the fact that he kept his identity a secret from me against him. I understand why he did it, and I can't say that I wouldn't do the same if our roles were reversed. Snuggling in closer to him, I rest my head against his shoulder, and sigh happily.

He begins to stir beside me, which gives me an idea. Deciding to go for it, I lean over to kiss him. When my hands begin trailing down his bare chest, slowly moving lower and lower, he moans against my lips, and when I lightly brush against his cock, he lets out a curse before opening his eyes.

"This is a nice way to wake up," he says sleepily.

"Mmm—you like that?" I ask as I wrap my hand around him and begin gently stroking.

"Very much." His breathing quickens with each stroke of my hand. His eyes stay locked on mine as I begin trailing kisses down his bare chest. "Don't stop," he begs as my hand stills.

"Don't worry—I won't," I say as my tongue darts out to lick the tip of his cock.

He hisses out a breath. “Oh, fuck!” I smile against him as I wrap my mouth around him. His fingers tangle in my hair as I lick and suck, teasing him with my tongue. As I drive him closer to the edge, he gently stops me before pulling me on top of him. “I want you, Sarah.”

I nod my head yes, and he wastes no time lining himself up with my entrance and driving his cock inside of me. We both let out a moan of pleasure. As I rock back and forth, he places his hands on my hips to guide them before sucking my nipple into his mouth. My movements become more erratic as I get closer, and he flips us so that he’s on top. Taking over, he thrusts into me, again and again. We’re both breathing hard as he thrusts into me one last time, sending us both over the edge.

As we lie next to each other afterwards, Jeff says, “You’re amazing—you know that?”

I smile. “So are you.”

He takes my hand in his and pushes a strand of hair behind my ear with his other hand before meeting my eyes. “I think I’m falling in love with you, Sarah.”

I search his face, seeing nothing but sincerity in his eyes. “I think I’m falling in love with you, too, Jeff.”

“Then come back to Rohemia with me.”

“What?”

He smiles. “I want to spend more time getting to know you, Sarah. I want to show you where I grew up, show you all of the beauty that Rohemia has to offer.”

“I don’t know,” I say hesitantly. “What about my family, my friends, my job?”

“I know that I’m asking a lot of you, but just think about it, okay? You told me that you’ve dreamt about traveling—this could be your chance. I could take you to places that you’ve never been to.”

I nod. “I’ll think about it.”

He gives me another passionate kiss, and pulls me closer—both of us enjoying the feel of being in each other’s arms after

admitting our feelings for one another. When we finally pull apart, he says, “As much as I don’t want to go, Nigel is probably wondering where I am.”

I sigh. “I don’t want you to leave either, but my family is probably waiting for me, too. We have plans today.”

“Alright. I’ll see you later for the parade?”

“Of course.”

We crawl out of bed and get dressed before leaving my house and going our separate ways. As I head over to my parents’ house, I wonder how I’ll break the news to them about Jeff. I pull into the driveway just in time to see my friends heading in the door, with my mom standing there waving at me excitedly.

“Hey, Mom,” I yell as I open my car door.

“Hi, sweetie, come on in! I already have some cookies ready to be frosted so wash your hands and let’s get to decorating!”

I quickly head inside to get ready and put on an apron.

“You’re all smiles, Sarah. You must have had a good time over the last couple of days,” my mom says.

I nod my head yes. “So—I have some news,” I say as I reach for a cookie and the jar of frosting.

“What is it honey?” my mom asks while the rest of them look at me expectantly.

“Well, as you know, I’ve been spending time with Jeff since I met him on the ski hill.”

“We know,” says Kara.

I take a deep breath as I prepare to tell them the rest of the news. “He and I spent the night together last night, and—it turns out that Jeff is actually a prince.”

“A what?!” exclaim Charlotte and Kara together as they both look at me with their mouths hanging open.

“Yeah—right,” says Carly in disbelief.

“No, really. He’s the prince of Rohemia, a small country in Europe.”

“Oh my,” says my mom.

“I know. I didn’t believe it at first either.” I take a moment to gather my courage before continuing. “We were talking, and he would like me to go back with him when he leaves so we can continue to get to know each other some more.”

“And?” prompts my mom.

“And I’ve decided to go with him.”

Mom stares intently into my eyes, as if trying to uncover a truth. “You really care about this man don’t you, Sarah?” she finally says without breaking eye contact.

“I do mom, I really do.”

“Then we’re happy for you. Just keep in touch and visit every now and then, ok?”

“I will. I promise.”

“We’re so excited for you, Sarah! You’re dating a prince!” Charlotte and Kara shriek with excitement.

“I may think that you’re completely insane for moving across the world with this man, but you have to do what you believe is right in your heart. Just be careful—you’ve only known him for a few days,” Carly finally says.

The rest of the day goes by quickly as each of them want to know more about Rohemia and Jeff. Evening rolls around, and I head home to get ready for the parade before he arrives to pick me up. I slip on a pair of my warmest wool socks along with my thermals beneath a pair of jeans and a thick sweatshirt with my ski jacket on top. Jeff arrives, looking as if he’s dressed equally as warm. “You were right, it’s freezing out here tonight,” he says as we walk to the car.

“I know. Sorry I don’t look cute tonight—I chose comfort and warmth over looks.”

He smiles. “You look great. I’m sure you’d look beautiful in anything.”

I can't help my blush. "Thanks."

We arrive in Ironwood a short while later and find a place to stand along the parade route. Once the parade starts, we watch as winter themed floats make their way down the street along with bands and dance troupes. I smile as all of the children watching the parade cheer with glee as Santa Claus makes his appearance at the end.

When the parade is over, we make our way inside Ben's Place, the small restaurant nearby, and sit down for some appetizers. "What was it like growing up as a prince?" I ask Jeff as we wait for our food.

"It had its advantages—and disadvantages. I had a loving family and all of the best schooling, I was never in need of anything, and the palace was like a huge playground for me. But growing up royal also means that I had to meet certain—expectations, and people always treated me differently."

"That has to be rough."

"It is, but at least I've always had Nigel. He's always been there for me as a friend when I've needed him."

"How did you two meet?"

"His parents worked for my parents, so we kind of grew up together. Then, when we were older, he became my bodyguard as well as my friend."

Jeff patiently answers all of my questions, and tells me about his life in Rohemia while we share cheese curds and deep fried pickles—two foods that he had never eaten before tonight, but has now added to his list of favorites. After we're finished eating, he drives us back to my house and joins me inside. Once we're both settled on the couch, I turn to look him in the eyes. "Jeff, when you go back to Rohemia, I'll come with you."

"Are you sure?" he asks hopefully, searching my face. "If you need more time—"

"I don't. I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

He leans in to kiss me. It's a long, sweet kiss filled with passion. "Hearing you say that makes me the happiest man in the world."

We spend the rest of the night cuddling and making passionate love to one another. It makes me even more certain that my decision to go with Jeff is the right one.

Jeff

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Sarah and I spend time packing her belongings and making the necessary arrangements for her to join me in Rohemia. The plan is for her to stay with me for six months so that we have adequate time to learn more about each other, but if all goes well, I hope that she'll make the move permanent.

“My parents have agreed to have a room prepared for you at the palace.”

“The palace—I don't know if I'll ever get used to that. But I look forward to meeting the King and Queen. I hope that they find me—acceptable,” Sarah says a little sheepishly. “Are you sure that they're okay with me staying there? I don't want to impose on royalty.”

“Don't worry—you're the woman that I love, so you'll never be an imposition. Besides, my parents will love you, and it'll be great for you to experience what life in the palace is like,” I say, comforting her.

“I hope you're right. The fact that I'm the woman that you love, and I'm *not* royal, is what worries me. I've watched all of the royal romance movies—the King and Queen are never happy about the idea of their heir being with a commoner.”

I can't help but laugh. “Relax, Sarah. My parents are nothing like the royals that you see in the movies. They don't believe in the whole arranged marriage, keeping the bloodline pure thing. They've always taught me that I'm free to follow my heart as long as I don't neglect my royal responsibilities—

and the woman who will one day reign at my side can be whoever I choose her to be.”

“That makes me feel a little bit better at least. I really am looking forward to meeting them and staying at the palace with you.” She folds a sweater before placing it into her suitcase. “Well, that’s the last shirt that I needed to pack,” she states as she zips up her bag.

“Good. Are you all ready, then?”

“I think so. All that’s left now is to enjoy the holidays with my family and friends, and say our goodbyes. Speaking of which, Christmas Eve is in a few days, and my parents have invited you to spend it with us at their home.”

“That sounds wonderful—I’m looking forward to spending time with them as well.” I smile and wrap my arms around her waist. “Until it’s time to leave for Rohemia, I want nothing more than to be wherever you are.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Sarah says as she leans up to kiss me. “There’s still a few more days for me to show you the rest of the holiday festivities that Bessemer has to offer—along with a few special, festive, activities of my own to show you,” she adds with a gleam in her eye.

I’m not sure what she has in store for me, but I like the sound of *that*.

“Thank you for inviting me this evening,” I say when Sarah and I arrive at her parents’ home on Christmas Eve.

“Of course! We couldn’t let you spend Christmas alone—especially if you’re dating our daughter,” her mother says cheerfully as she takes the gifts that we brought and heads into the living room to put them under the tree.

“It feels like you’re already part of our family, son,” her father adds as he pats me on the back.

“Well, thank you for trusting me enough to take your daughter halfway around the world with me.”

“We trust *you* because Sarah trusts you—but if you break her heart or hurt her in any way, I *will* hunt you down,” he warns. “I don’t care if you *are* a prince.”

“Dad!” Sarah scolds.

I let out a long belly laugh. “It’s okay, Sarah. I like that your father speaks his mind—and don’t worry, Sir, I promise that I’ll take good care of her.”

“Good man,” he says.

“Okay, now that we have that out of the way, let’s sit down to eat before the food gets cold,” her mother says as she returns from the living room.

We all follow her into the dining room where the table is filled with large plates and bowls of food. A giant ham sits in the center of the table, topped with a brown sugar glaze and pineapple slices. It’s surrounded by bowls of mashed potatoes, baked beans, salad, rolls, and so much more. “It smells delicious!” Sarah says excitedly.

“This dinner looks lovely, Mrs. Duncan,” I add.

“Thank you, Jeff.”

We all sit down around the table to enjoy the Christmas feast. Afterwards, once the table has been cleared and the leftovers are put away, we move into the living room to sit in front of a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. Sarah’s father turns on some music, and we listen as familiar holiday tunes flow softly from the speakers. “We wanted to get you both something before you leave,” he says as he pulls two presents out from underneath the Christmas tree. He hands one package to me and the other to Sarah.

“Oh my gosh! I love it!” Sarah exclaims as she rips through the wrapping paper and pulls a fancy floor-length gown from the package. “Thank you!” She throws her arms around each of her parents to give them both a hug.

“We thought that you could use a new dress in case there are any fancy balls at the palace,” her mother says.

I smile at Sarah as I look at the excitement on her face. “We’ll have a special ball just for us if there aren’t any planned.”

“Promise?” she asks.

“Promise.”

“Good—now open yours.”

I turn the package around in my hands to find the end of the wrapping paper. “You didn’t have to get me anything,” I say as I begin to unwrap the present.

“We wanted to,” her father says. “It’s not much, but we wanted you to have a souvenir from the U.P.”

I pull the paper away to reveal a sweatshirt emblazoned with the outline of the Upper Peninsula. I smile as I slip it on over my head. “What do you think?” I ask.

“It looks great on you,” Sarah says.

I turn to her parents. “Thank you. I’ll wear it often.”

“You’re welcome,” they both reply.

After Sarah has handed out the gifts that she brought for everyone, I find the gift that I brought and hand it to her parents. “It’s just a little something that I’d like for you both to have,” I say as her mother opens it.

“It’s beautiful!” she exclaims, carefully taking the handcrafted partridge in a pear tree ornament out of the box. I smile as she and Sarah’s dad examine the intricately carved partridge, with remarkably painted details on it, sitting in an equally intricate pear tree.

“I hope that you like it. It’s a family heirloom—I brought it with me so that I could have a little piece of home on my tree while I’m here, but it’s yours now.”

“Oh, we couldn’t! It’s a family heirloom—a *royal* family heirloom.”

“Please, I want you to have it.”

“Thank you,” she says as she gives me a hug.

“You’re welcome.”

Once the rest of the gifts are exchanged and opened, we all spend the rest of the night watching Christmas movies together—it’s a family tradition according to Sarah. I smile to myself as I look around the living room at the people surrounding me. There’s no doubt about it, this has been the best holiday that I’ve had in a long time.

Sarah

ON CHRISTMAS DAY, I drive over to Jeff's chalet with my parents and the girls to have one last gathering with everyone before Jeff and I leave for Rohemia—he was kind enough to invite everyone over so that we could all spend the holiday together. When we arrive, Jeff opens the door with a smile. “Merry Christmas, everyone! Come on in.”

“Thank you for having all of us,” my mom says.

“You're welcome. After the wonderful celebration that we had last night, I wanted to return the favor. Besides, I want Sarah to spend as much time with all of you as she can before we leave.”

We follow him into the living room and make ourselves comfortable. Nigel enters from the kitchen carrying a tray of hors d'oeuvres. “Hi, Nigel. It's good to see you again,” I say.

“It's good to see you again, too, Miss Duncan.”

“No need to be so formal—please, call me Sarah.”

He gives me a small smile. “I'll try my best—but being so formal is a hard habit for me to break.”

“Are you preparing all of the food, Nigel?” I ask curiously.

“No, actually. Jeff has prepared most of it. I just made the hors d'oeuvres.”

I look over at Jeff and raise my eyebrows. “So, the prince knows how to cook, huh?”

He chuckles. “I do. And I didn’t think that it was fair to make Nigel do all of the work on Christmas—especially when I was the one who invited the extra guests.”

I smile to myself at his admission. His ability to be so down to Earth instead of being a haughty royal jerk makes me love him even more.

Spending the day at Jeff’s turns out to be one of the best Christmases for all of us. We all chatter happily as we eat the meal that he’s prepared—a traditional Rohemian casserole, which tastes amazing, as well as a couple of American side dishes—and afterwards we alternate playing board games and telling stories about our best Christmas memories. Even Nigel participates. More gifts are exchanged, and at the end of the night some tears are shed, knowing that I leave first thing tomorrow morning. I say goodbye to Jeff and head out with everyone else to spend one final night with my parents.

“I’ll pick you up bright and early tomorrow, okay?” Jeff says as I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him goodnight.

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.” I wave goodbye as we all walk out to my car.

I toss and turn all night, too excited and nervous to sleep. By the time Jeff arrives at my parents’ house to pick me up, I’m already waiting to go.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” With one final goodbye to my parents, I let Jeff whisk me away to a new life and whatever adventures await.

About the Author

Emorie Cole is a small-town girl who loves to show her creative side through her writing. She loves creating romance stories that are sweet, but filled with passion and steam so that her readers can be swept into a world where they feel emotional bonds being formed and can find happily ever afters. Her steamy stories will captivate your heart.

When she's not writing you can find her curled up with a good book, spending time with her family, playing with her Shiba Inu, and enjoying the seasons in the beautiful Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Be sure to sign up for her newsletter on her website and follow her on social media for updates about upcoming books, including the continuation of Jeff and Sarah's story!

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You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com
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Holiday Secrets

A Cannon Ranch Short Story

Barb Shuler

A Cowboy is only half a man, the other half is his horse.

~ Unknown

1

Daniel

I TRIPLE CHECKED my saddle since this beast of a horse was known for bucking a rider off since he wasn't fully broken yet. The agreement I had with Mr. McCall was, if I stayed on, he would be mine.

I loved a good challenge. What's the worst that could happen?

Never mind, let's not bring that up.

"Are you sure about this?"

I looked over at my brother and grinned. "Yep. This one will be mine today. Cody's already said he would help me with him."

"You know I'm going to get blamed if you get your fool neck broken."

"Jon, chill, man. I know what I'm doing. I just have to show him he can trust me. Just like with any other horse." As I tried to convince him that I had this, the horse jerked his head up and down. The foot stomping came next, and I eyed my brother. "Your negative thoughts are unhinging him. Go wait outside."

"Yeah, it's me that has him unhinged. Sure." He gave up and went back out of the barn. I gave myself a moment to calm my breathing and patted the horse's neck. I let my hands roam over his shoulder, getting a good feel for him. I could always read a horse. Pops used to say it was something I got from my grandpa. My fingers ran down each leg; he let me lift them with zero apprehension.

That was a good sign. I gave him one good scratch behind his ear before giving the lead a gentle tug. “Come on, big guy, let’s go show these fools a thing or two, shall we?” I clicked my tongue, and he followed alongside me.

This horse, Inferno, was reported to have a great disposition until you got your butt in the saddle, then he turned into a raging monster. Bucking, kicking his back legs. A lot of times that was the rider’s fault. If you let your apprehensions, fear, whatever you’re feeling radiate into your horse, then they would react. Their cockiness too.

A Stetson and Skoal can in your back pocket does not a cowboy make.

And let’s just say a thoroughbred that stands seventeen hands high wasn’t anything to sneeze at. If you’re not used to a boy this size, you’re going to be apprehensive.

Good energy means you and the horse could stay calm. I hoped this would be the case today. A horse wasn’t good if no one could ride them.

I walked silently to the big training ring that was surrounded with ranch hands. Some from the McCall ranch, some from ours. Pops stood by the gate; his gaze went from me to the horse, and he nodded. I knew he was worried; I saw that wrinkle between his eyes. But I had this.

Tater, Jon, and Abe stood behind him along with Cody, who was the ranch’s number one when it came to breaking horses. I sure hoped all the training time we had, me watching him for years...let’s just say, if I failed at this today, I’d never live it down.

Grinning, I stepped into the ring and walked him around, letting the horse get a good look at the naysayers that watched us.

“You’ve got this, Daniel. Remember to breathe, become one with him,” Cody called out.

I took my time, letting the horse get used to the people and noise around us. I reached up, taking his mane in one hand and the saddle horn in the other as I pushed off the ground. Before

I settled my ass in the saddle, I let him adjust to the weight on his back. The second I settled my full weight into the saddle, he was bucking and kicking. I kept a tight grip on the reins and used my other hand to hold onto the back of the saddle. This kept me in the saddle and showed him I wasn't going anywhere. Just like Cody taught me.

Some of the guys around the ring started to cheer and whistle. It's like they'd never seen someone on a wild horse before. It took a good minute for him to stop bucking forward, like he was diving in a pool, and stomping to get pissed enough to start running around the ring. I didn't let go of that saddle though. Oh no, I'd seen Cody do this enough, so I knew better. They'd wait for you to get confident then sling you off like a rock in a slingshot.

"Atta boy, Danny!" I heard Cody over everyone else.

Chuckling, I slowed Inferno, letting him calm down. We trotted, his gait was smooth until he came to a stop, head shaking as he flicked his tail back and forth. He was probably a little mad that I had stayed on.

"See, boy, that wasn't so bad. You want to run a bit?" I scratched at his ear. He shook himself and once I felt him release the air he was holding, I nodded to the gate. "Let me take him for a real run."

"Boy, don't get too cocky there. He's gonna toss you the first chance he gets," one of the McCall boys hollered.

"Just 'cause you can't stay on, doesn't mean I can't," I called back, scowling.

I really hated the fact that grown ass people couldn't take being shown up by a 'kid.' Though I'd passed being a kid years ago. I may be twenty, but I paid attention, learned from watching the men around me. The way it should be.

"Open it, let's see what the boy can do," Mr. McCall shouted.

If Ma was here, I'd be getting a lecture and pulled down by my ear. Maybe. She forgot I was growing up and that I needed to find my place on the ranch. I had to have a useful skill or

they'd not need me. Letting that thought leave me, I let out the growing frustration with a long breath before walking Inferno out of the gate.

The McCall ranch was wide open, similar to ours. There were open pastures, grazing grounds, and off in the distance, more land. It was beautiful this time of year. The crisp air, a slight breeze that sent a chill through you. Wyoming winters were amazing, and I couldn't wait for the first snow. This landscape would be a snowy oasis. Freezing too, but we were all used to that.

I pushed Inferno a bit faster and stopped on the ridge. Looking out over the property, I let the horse under me take in the air and adjust to me being on his back.

I could see a rider coming our way. It wasn't until they got closer that I realized something was wrong. I put my heels into Inferno's sides. "Yah!"

The others noticed what I had, and all hell seemed to break loose. I could hear shouting in the distance, worry running through us all.

I rode hard, trying to catch up with the horse that was running full out across the pasture. I recognized the rider as I got closer. Keisha McCall was a leggy brunette who had stolen my heart in the second grade. I'd harbored a crush on her ever since. To see the look of panic on her face tore at my insides.

There was one thing I could say for Inferno; he may be big and stubborn as all get out, but he was fast. I pushed up, my legs straight, back arched slightly as he got me within touching distance.

"Hold on, I've got you." I reached for the reins, gripping them in my free hand. The horse shied, bucking, ready to race off again, but I held on for her sake. "Easy, easy now. Whoa." The horse started to calm, slowing then coming to a full stop.

"Th-thank you," she stuttered, looking around before cursing. "Dammit." She slid off the horse, her hands going to its sides and legs. "Easy girl, it's okay."

"What happened? Are you okay?"

Her head popped up; I could only see her because I sat taller than her horse. “Yeah, thank you. Nice riding. Didn’t know the Cannons could keep up with the McCalls,” she teased.

“Ah, darlin’, I can keep up with anyone.”

“Sure ya can, cowboy.”

“Keisha, sweetheart, are you okay? What happened?”

“Dad, I’m okay.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “I don’t know what happened. We were having a lazy run in the back pasture, I came through the back gate, and she went off like a rocket. Bucking, kicking. I didn’t see anything around, but I was trying to not get bucked off.”

Mr. McCall hugged her to his side and looked at the horse. I did the same, spotting red on her back flank.

“Hey, she’s got a bloody spot on her back left flank.”

“What the hell?” Keisha ran her hands over the horse. “What did that to you, sweet girl? Huh?”

“Looks like she was shot with something.”

“With what?” Mr. McCall asked.

“Pellets maybe.” I shrugged slightly, my anger growing. If someone shot at her horse...if she wasn’t the rider she was, she could have been killed if the horse tossed her. She could have been trampled. Any number of things could have gone wrong.

Another rider came up the hillside, barreling toward us. His brows were tugged together when he saw us all surrounding Keisha.

“What are you doing over here? I saw you running over there. I was coming to check on you.”

She ignored him, turning toward her father.

“We need to call Dr. Cannon.”

“No need, Keisha, I’m here. Get her back to the barn. Danny can walk her back.”

“I’m not leaving her.”

“Of course, you won’t. Come on, you can ride back with me,” I offered, my free hand going out to help her up.

“That horse isn’t ready for another rider.”

“You aren’t taking her back, I will.”

I gave the man a hard look. “I’ve got her.” My tone was sharp.

Keisha looked at her father and at his nod, she moved to take my hand. I pulled my foot from the stirrup, giving her a place to get a hold, then with a push, she was up. Her arms went around me. I may have had to bite back a groan as her warmth pressed into me.

Inferno shuffled where he stood, his head shaking as the other man got closer. Okay, so it wasn’t just me that didn’t like the way he was creeping toward us. The horse shied; his front hoof stomped into the ground.

“Back up, he doesn’t like the feel of you,” I snarled.

“Easton, back off,” someone called out. The man gave me a look that would have cowed anyone else. Not me. All it did was piss me off more.

“Take it slow, yeah?” Tater took the reins, drawing my attention to him.

I nodded. “Yep, slow.”

He made sure I was in control of my temper before stepping back and nodding. I clicked my tongue and squeezed my knees. Inferno took the silent command and started walking back the way we’d come. His gait was smooth just as it had been before.

“You’re good with him. He’s tossed everyone else to the ground. What’s your secret?” Her soft voice in my ear had funny things happening to me. My heart skipped a beat, my breath sucked in, and my dick—if she did that again this ride was going to be very uncomfortable.

“No secrets, I’m just good with horses. Learned from the best, ya know.”

“Hmm...if you say so, cowboy.”

I smiled at her playfulness. If she only knew what she was doing to me right now. Shaking my thoughts back to her horse trouble, I looked over my shoulder, catching her watching me.

“What were you doing before your horse took off? Out there I mean?”

“Trying to find myself.”

“What do you mean by that?” My brows tugged together when she refused to answer. “If you need to talk, I’m still a good listener.”

“I know, Danny boy.” She was quiet as we walked up to the barn. She slid off the horse then looked up before I got down. “Thank you.”

“I smiled. “Nothin’ to thank me for, darlin’, just being your faithful friend. As always.”

Her smile grew at my words. That bright, beautiful smile lit up her face. I was halfway down when she gasped. The fella called Easton had a hold of her bicep and tugged her a few paces into the shadow of the barn. Now, see that right there just pissed me the fuck off. No one deserved to be manhandled like that. It was unfair for someone his size to yank her around like a ragdoll. I hurried to her side, shoving the big bastard away from her.

“Don’t touch her!”

“Fuck off, kid, this has nothing to do with you!”

“Danny...”

My mistake was turning to her as she called my name. His punch landed hard against my jaw. Good for me that I was already turning. Too bad for him that I had older brothers who were a lot meaner than him. I’d learned to fight long ago. I charged him, ducking, putting my shoulder into his gut. I bodily slammed him back into a tree. The leaves shook and rained down on us as he grunted.

“Don’t touch her again,” I called out as I returned his jaw punch with one that had him stumbling back.

I was pulled away from him, my brother’s arm over my chest, as Cody moved to stand before me. “I’d rethink that pig sticker, Easton, or that horse won’t be the only one needing a doctor today.” His voice was low, menacing. No one liked a cheater in a fight. If you couldn’t win it with your fists, then you shouldn’t start a fight.

“What’s going on out here?”

I pushed away from my brother and walked over to where Keisha stood and pulled her into a tight embrace. She was shaking, and if it wasn’t for not wanting to leave her, I’d go beat the shit out of him for real.

Keisha

WHY WAS *this* happening right now—here—in front of God and everyone?

Danny had not only raced out to help me when my horse spooked, but now he was defending me from the likes of this douche. He had no idea what was going on and didn't seem to care. He was red-faced, his muscles tight as he jerked free of his brother's hold. The anger in his eyes—it could have set the world on fire.

Easton, his face too was red, but his anger was misplaced. He had the audacity to try and manhandle me. Here. With my father twenty feet away from where we stood. What a tool! He best be glad Dad didn't see him pull that. He'd be missing a hand.

Maybe this was the bad karma I'd been fearing. I'd done nothing wrong—I didn't ask for what happened to me to happen—but I had left nonetheless. I'd run from my problems like a freaking coward. Too scared to say—do—anything to anyone. Hurting my family in the process. Fucking Easton! This was all *his* fault.

Now that I was back, I still wasn't sure how I'd handle any of this. I couldn't just sweep it under the rug and pretend it hadn't happened. Right? I had a child to think about.

Easton had yet to lay eyes on him, and I didn't think anyone other than my parents even realized he was here. I'd made damn sure of that. Easton would never have anything to do with him.

I'd been dodging him since I came back home. I wanted nothing to do with him. I really wished I could open up and tell my dad, 'Hey, you know he's a psycho and is the reason I left, right? He took advantage of me.' But I can't gather the courage to admit what happened.

I hadn't been completely innocent that night. I'd let myself get stumbling drunk at the Normans' party. I'd kissed him when he helped me into his truck to take me home before my dad found me. I don't remember a lot of what happened—thank you, alcohol. I do remember telling him to take me home. He'd not done that in a way. We'd ended up out at the old barn in the back pasture.

There had been a struggle...I don't know what else happened though. Other than that he'd taken advantage of me. He'd had sex with a drunk girl after she said 'No, take me home.'

Maybe I'd asked for it by getting in a truck after kissing him. I'd flirted...he had been a handsome man before that. My gut twisted at the mere thought of that night. No, I couldn't blame myself for him taking advantage of me.

Easton had gotten what he'd wanted and then left me in the barn. In the elements of a Wyoming winter. I'd had to walk home, hungover, in pain and regretting all of my life choices so far. I'd gone off to school as soon as Thanksgiving was over and hadn't come home for Christmas, upsetting the family, but I couldn't face them. I was so ashamed of myself. Then I got sick in January only to find out I was pregnant.

I had been a mess...still was.

The last year has been hard. I was back home with a child and my life up in the air. I was going to school for veterinary medicine—finally had to give it up for now and focus on my son. It was too hard to balance school, work, and being pregnant. Once he came along, I had to throw in the towel.

My parents wanted answers that I couldn't give them. Not yet. This hasn't been an easy road. In the beginning, I wanted to give up. To let someone else, who could give him

everything, raise him. I knew I'd give him life...I just wasn't sure I could raise him.

It was my Nanny who made me realize that I was only wanting to run from the bad memories. The reason I had to grow up and be a provider. She sat me down and just laid it out like a rug.

“You might be hurting inside, you won't say why, but I'm here when you're ready. You've got a good head on your shoulders, and like me, your heart is big enough to love without bounds. Give this little baby your heart. If it takes a little time, that's okay.”

“How can I not—Nanny, I don't know what to do.”

“Honey, no one can tell you to do anything. This is your body. Your baby. Your choice. But know this, my sweet cookie. I will love you no matter what you choose to do.”

“I'm scared.”

“You'd be a fool not to be, and you, my girl, are nothing of the sort. Babies are hard. Lord knows your father was a right pain in my ass. He still is. They may grow up and move on with their lives, but they will always be yours. You have to take them with the good, the bad, and the ugly. They have to do the same. Being a kid isn't always easy, is it?”

“No. I guess it's not.”

“Everything in life that's good is worth fighting for. That means your own happiness too.”

“If I do this—”

“We will be right here to help you. You're here at school, away from us all, but, sweet girl, we are only ever a phone call away. You call your Nanny, and I will be here faster than a blink.”

“I love you so much.” Tears fell from my eyes as I hugged her.

“I love you too. Now, enough of that. Come on, let’s not be sad. No matter the past, we are going to look forward to the future. You’ll take this journey one day at a time, and when the day comes and this baby is brought into this world, you will understand why even though he’s a pain in the ass, I’d burn down the world to keep your daddy safe and happy.”

I sat in my apartment that night and thought about everything. How I became pregnant. What I needed to do to move on. Making a plan was something I could control, after all. I laid out everything in the pages of a notebook and over the next seven and a half months, I worked on goals.

Leaving Montana and coming home was even harder. Being here, with my family, was just another way for me to be able to provide the care my son needed.

Atticus turned one last week. The cold was just starting and by the time the holidays were here...I couldn’t wait. This would be his first Wyoming Thanksgiving and then Christmas. The first Christmas at home with his family. He was going to be into everything. It would be amazing.

I wouldn’t let Easton ruin it.

“What’s going on out here?” My dad’s powerful voice rolled out across the yard just before Danny moved to pull me into his embrace.

We’ve been friends for so long, growing up a few pastures apart. Having classes together at school, hanging with friends. He’s always been just a horse or ATV ride away. We’ve shared so many memories of us here on the ranch and over at his; it’s surreal to be able to look to him as a savior when he has no idea of what was really happening here.

I’d let him save me from anything as long as he wanted to do it. His warmth wrapped around me like a cocoon. Letting go of the growing emotions, I started to cry against his chest.

Today has just been one weird moment after another. After I’d gotten Atticus to sleep for his morning nap, I’d gone for a ride. It had been what I’d needed to clear my head. I proved to

myself that I could look at that barn and not cave into myself. I was strong and could overcome this. I needed that clarity, but damn, I'd had no idea that the ride would end this way. With a fight between a past mistake and the boy who had a tight grip on my heart.

Why hadn't I seen *that* hold before?

"Nothing, sir. Just a little misunderstanding." Easton sounded pissed, but he'd not dare tell the truth. The slimy bastard knew he'd never make it to the bunk house if he did. Why couldn't he just ride off of a cliff or something already? Was that too much to ask?

"The fuck it was!" Danny said, turning. I jerked back to myself, curling my fingers into a tight fist, not letting go of his shirt. Maybe with me clinging to him like a scared raccoon, he'd not try to beat the crap out of Easton. Though, if I were being honest, I'd not mind seeing that.

"Son..." Dad stepped closer, his eyes roaming the growing crowd of men. *Dammit*. He met Danny's gaze head on. "Is there a reason my daughter's hanging onto you like that?"

I was holding onto him so tight that my fingers were starting to hurt.

"Yes, sir. So I don't walk over there and punch that lying sack of horse shit in the face again." He said the words with such conviction, the anger showing itself again.

Someone in the crowd coughed out a loud laugh. This was no laughing matter. No—whatever Easton said or did next could open up a box of misery I wasn't ready for. Not now or ever for that matter.

"I see. Why don't you enlighten me as to what the rest of us missed?" My dad met my gaze. "Princess?"

I looked away. My heart was pounding so hard in my chest, I was sure they could all hear it.

"Princess?" Easton scoffed. The anger in that one word had me jerking around to glare at him.

"Care to share your thoughts on my daughter?"

Oh damn. Dad asked, but he wasn't expecting Easton to man up and actually be stupid enough to say anything. He was a coward, after all. But then he did, and everything changed in the blink of an eye.

"She's been nothing but a tease since she got home, sir. That's why I followed her out to the pasture. We were, ya know. Seems Cannon here thought he had a chance too."

"You—" I stuttered. He'd followed me? Had he been the one to shoot my horse? It wasn't a big or bad wound, but... My stomach clenched. "You shot my horse!" I accused, knowing I was right.

He had some nerve.

His gaze hardened, but he ignored my question completely.

"She's been throwing herself at me. Last time was a mistake, but I'm just a—" Danny let go of me so fast, I stumbled as he charged Easton.

"You bastard!" Their fists flew and to my surprise, his brothers and Cody stood there, holding everyone else back.

Fear gripped me tight. Easton was bigger and probably a lot meaner than Danny. He could be hurt trying to defend *my* honor. He had no idea of what happened... He wouldn't understand.

"Danny! Stop," my voice broke, tears rolling down my face as I drew nearer. They had to stop this.

"Tate, Cody, stop them!"

"Sorry, darlin', I can't do that. He's defending you from that asshole." Tate wrapped an arm around me when I made to get closer. "Hold on, let him show Easton that kind of talk is not allowed about *our* girls."

Our girls? Did he think Danny and I were... "We aren't together," I whispered the words more for him than me. My heart hurt saying them.

"Ah, sugar, I can promise you that he thinks differently. Look at the fury on his face," Cody chuckled, "He's staking his claim for all to see."

“His...” My heart grew like the Grinch’s had, but if he knew the truth would he... Fucking hell. I’d have to tell him—them—what happened that night.

“Danny, please stop!” Blood was on both of their faces, and Danny had a busted hand. With one last thump of his fist against Easton’s jaw, the bigger man hit the ground in a pile. I pushed free of Tate’s hold and ran for Danny. I was scared I’d hurt him, but I couldn’t stop my arms from going around him.

“I’m okay...maybe.” He pulled in a ragged breath. His body jerked as if in pain. If not for my arms around him, he too would have hit the ground. Instead, he and I stumbled into the corral fence.

“Danny. Dammit! Why did you do that, you big jerk?” Tears once again fell from my eyes as I reached up to cup his face. His brow would need stitches, his lip was busted, and I was pretty sure his nose was broken. His poor face was a mess.

“Get him inside and clean him up,” my dad called out. “No, not that sack of shit. That can be put in his truck and driven off my property. Now.”

“Hey, slugger, let’s go get you cleaned up.” Tate wrapped an arm around Danny and as one, we moved toward the house. My dad gave me a look that said we would be talking about this soon. I let out a long, frustrated breath. Guess it was now or never. I turned to my dad, stopping Tate and Danny in the process.

“Daddy, don’t let Easton go. Call the Sheriff...there was an incident...”

“An incident?” His brows drew into a tight line.

I looked away, my mind and heart racing. How did I tell him?

“Hey...” Danny tugged free of our grip and moved to face me. His eyes scanned my face. “What did he do to you?”

“Keisha?” My dad’s voice was a hard-edged knife.

I couldn't look away from Danny as I spoke. "He...last year he rap—" I couldn't get the word out before Danny was turning from me. His bellow of anger was the only warning Easton got. He'd just gotten to his feet when Danny slammed into him. My scream had everyone moving. Danny would kill him and then he'd be the one getting into trouble.

Why now? What did any of this have to come out? I was pulled into my dad's tight embrace as I cried, letting out every bit of pain and anger I'd held onto since that night. It was time to push past it and truly move on as best as I could.

Daniel

THE LAST COUPLE of hours have been mind-blowing. I'd never been so ready to rip someone's head off as I was right now.

Easton McKnight was only alive because the Sheriff's department came and took him off to jail. I winced as I shifted in my spot on the couch. I had a busted up rib or three, a broken nose, and enough bruises and scrapes to resemble an MMA fighter after a championship battle.

It was worth it. To defend her, to fight off her demons, I'd do it again over and over.

The quiet of the room, however, was getting to me. My brothers, Cody, and I were joined by Mr. McCall, Pops, and the Sheriff. He was looking at me with his serious face on. It made me nervous. The stare-off was interrupted by Mrs. McCall and Keisha coming in. She held a baby close, a bottle to its mouth. I shifted slightly, making room for her. She came and sat by me without a word.

Shock rolled through the room. She had been holding onto one hell of a secret. I leaned over, pressing a kiss to her temple. I hated that she couldn't trust herself enough to open up to me before. I took in her scent and that of the baby: powder, milk, and just baby.

I closed my eyes, relaxing for the first time in as many hours.

"He has your eyes," I said, softly.

"He does. The McCall trademark."

I chuckled, stopping when my ribs protested.

“That’s what you get for being a dumbass.”

“Keisha!” Mrs. McCall looked in our direction, aghast at her daughter’s words.

Me? Oh hell, I thought it was adorable. I leaned in closer, my breath fanning her face as I spoke. “For you, I’d tear down the world. Have you learned nothing from this friendship, woman?”

“Woman? Daniel Can—”

I didn’t let her finish. I claimed her mouth right there. Before family, friends, the Sheriff—they would all know how I felt about her. She needed to know that I was more than words. I would always be here, do what needed to be done for her and for her baby. Package deals were always the best part of life. You may not get what you bargained for, but it could be more. A way to grow together. To be something new. I pulled back, my busted lip protesting, and my heart, it was trying to beat out of my chest.

“Don’t pull that trigger unless you want more,” I teased, my words barely a whisper.

It was then that she cracked up. The bottle fell from the baby’s mouth, and the protests started. I scooped up the bottle and put it back into his waiting mouth.

“Sorry, little man.” She looked sheepish. It was adorable. “Everyone, this is Atticus McCall. He’s a year old and a handful. Nanny said he is just like Dad as a baby.”

“Oh lord.” Mrs. McCall looked at her husband and grinned.

“He’s precious,” Pops said, smiling over at her.

“Well, he will have plenty of littles to play with.” Tate chuckled. “Katie, Henry, the bigger kids. You will always have playdates, just say the word. We all know how much a little one can take out of you.”

“Thank you. I really do appreciate that. He’s why I came back home. I had to admit defeat. School, work, daycare...I

was drowning.”

“It’s not defeat, sweetheart,” Mrs. McCall said, her eyes locked on her daughter and grandson.

“Defeat isn’t always bad, Mama. I came home where I knew we would be safe. A fresh start. Vet school won’t be going anywhere.”

“I’m glad you came back. I missed you.” She turned to face me. “You left me with Paul and Jamison. Do you know how much of a pain in the butt they are?”

“You forget I know you all, and it’s an equal dose of pain...” She laughed when I poked her side. I wasn’t thinking, and it disturbed the baby. I took him from her, loving that he curled in against my chest, quieting down with the slight rocking.

“Whoa, are you magic?” She turned in the spot, staring at me.

My lips tipped up, and I shrugged my shoulder. The one that wasn’t currently screaming at me. What had I done to it? I looked from her to the baby in my arms, the bottle back to his mouth.

“He’s the baby whisperer in this family. He could always do the same with Abbie. Used to tick me off that as soon as he got her, she would settle down,” Tate said, a fond smile on his face. “All of the babies are like that now. Even Jon’s little one, Henry, who only ever wants his mama.”

I closed my eyes and relaxed back on the couch. Everyone was talking babies, and I just wanted to push them out of here so I could have Keisha all to myself. When my eyes opened again, they locked on her beautiful face.

“He’s asleep; I can take him to his crib.”

“No, he’s fine, really.” I took her hand in mine, ignoring the fact that my knuckles were on fire. Damn Easton and his brick-hard face.

“We’re going back out to finish our business. Daniel, good riding and fighting out there. You, young man, are all right.”

I chuckled. “Thank you, sir.”

“We’ll get the horses loaded up. Give us about twenty, then we’ll head back to the ranch, son.” Pops stood, cracking his back.

“Sure thing, Pops.”

When the room was cleared, I tugged her to my side, loving the warmth she brought to me. I’d apparently closed my eyes again because the next thing I knew, Tate was shaking my leg.

“Hey, Danny, wake up, bud. You gotta give the little one back to his mama so we can head home. Ma has supper waiting.”

“I’m up. Dang.” I looked from him to a smiling Keisha. “You and Atticus should come over for supper.” I winced, trying to shift myself off the couch. I’d gotten stiff as a board.

“No, I couldn’t—”

“You should. It would be good for him and the rest of us. Babies make everything much easier. Trust me, Ma will take one look at his face and lose her mind. Having you and the baby there may help us all from getting skinned because her precious baby boy got into a fight.” Tate let out a booming laugh.

“Ass. It’s not that bad. Jesus. I’m not a baby.”

“Bud, you will always be her baby. No matter how old you get. Just like the rest of us.”

“Let me check with my parents. Make sure they don’t have plans tonight.”

“Sure thing.” She took Atticus from me, and I felt a loss of his warmth.

“You sure you want to go inside and join in the Cannon chaos?”

“Yeah, it’s not like this is my first time meeting them or something. I’ve literally known you guys my entire life.” Her

smile grew as she reached up to cup my cheek. “I won’t let them eat you alive. Promise.”

“They’ll know by now what happened.” My anger started to boil again. I just needed five more minutes with Easton. Fucking prick.

Her hand dropped as did her eyes. I watched as she took in a breath and let it out, shifting Atticus in her arms. “I know, it’s okay. I can’t run from the past. I won’t anymore. It’s made me who I am right now. It gave me my son who I love so much.”

I leaned down, capturing her lips in a soft kiss. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

Her cheeks flushed and before either of us talked ourselves out of this, I tugged her behind me to the door. The house was warm, the scents of roasting meats had my mouth watering by the time the door shut. I helped Keisha by taking Atticus so she could take off her boots. I got him out of his coat, and once my boots were off, I tugged my coat off, hanging each of them on a hook by the shoe bench.

I called out as I came out of the mud room. “Ma, that smells good.” I hoped like hell there were mashed potatoes and gravy. They went with everything, right?

Everyone turned when we came into the kitchen; I felt Keisha’s grip on my hand tighten. “It looks worse than it is. Can we just not talk about it and eat? I’m starving, and I’m sure this little one could use some good food too.”

“Daniel, don’t come in sassing me before I scold you.” Ma came over, looked at my face, scowled, muttered to herself, then hugged me. I sucked in a breath at the pain shooting through my ribs but said nothing. “Keisha, sweetheart, always a pleasure. Who is this little one?” Ma took him from me without even batting an eye.

“Atticus.” She smiled.

“Hey, I was holding him, ma’am,” I chuckled.

“Yeah, and now I am. Go wash your hands and get ready for supper.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I tugged Keisha with me to the hall bathroom. Once I had her in there out of the sight and ears of everyone, I cupped her face and kissed her soundly. Now that I could, it was all I wanted to do. She pressed against me, a small moan escaping her lips. “I’ve wanted to do that for years,” I admitted.

“You could have, any time you wanted.” She gave me a look that said, ‘Duh, dumbass.’

“Hmm...” I claimed her mouth again, breathing in the scent of her perfume, shampoo, whatever it was. She smelled like peaches and baby powder. “I plan to do this a lot. In front of people, behind closed doors, anytime, anywhere.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” she teased.

A growl of emotion escaped me as I brought my mouth down on hers yet again. When I pulled back, we were breathless. “Both.” That one word held all of the emotion running through me right now.

“Good.” She pulled back and moved to the sink to wash her hands. Me, I needed a moment to get myself back to rights. Damn. After a minute, I pushed behind her, grabbed the towel so she could dry her hands, and started washing mine. A few of the cracks in my knuckles broke open, blood coloring the water pink. I hissed, trying to shake the sting of the soap away.

“Do you have a first aid kit?”

“Under the sink. Just need a little ointment and a Band-Aid. It’s not that bad, really.”

“Yeah, yeah. You men always say it’s not bad. Your hand could be falling off and you’d say that.” She came up with the first aid kit, plopped it on the counter, and started digging for the ointment.

“I’m not *that* bad.”

“You forget, I know you. You are *that* bad.”

I just nodded. She could have a point. She was drying my hand when someone knocked on the door. “Yeah?”

It opened slowly, like they didn't know what they'd walk in on. Phoebe came in and scowled. "You look like hell ya know?"

"Yeah, yeah, I love you too."

"Jerk." She scowled but looked at Keisha. "Need help?"

"Yes, I don't see any ointment in this thing."

"Ah, it's probably still in the kitchen. Ma had it earlier. Toby took a tumble on the stairs and got a boo-boo."

"Whoa, is he okay?" I asked, jerking my hand from Keisha's ready to go see about my nephew.

"Hold up, Rocky, he's fine. He skinned his knee is all. After a cookie, he had no cares and ran back off to chase the dogs." She laughed softly.

"All right. Just put the Band-Aid on them. I washed with antibacterial soap; that's good for now."

When we reentered the kitchen, I scooped up Toby, wishing my ribs would stop hurting.

"Hey, kiddo, I hear you got a boo-boo?"

"I falled on the stawers. Hurts my yeg."

I chuckled. Yeg. I loved kid vocabulary. It was adorable. "You have to be careful, okay? You'll give your poor uncle a heart condition."

"Uncle, hell, what about his mama who had her arms full of baby and was helpless to stop it?" Georgia had her arms full of baby now. Katie lay against her sound asleep.

"Yeah, let's not give any of us a heart condition, okay?"

"I twy. What's makes you face broked?"

The chuckles around the room had me rolling my eyes. "It's not broken, much. I had to help someone learn a lesson. It's the cowboy way of handling things."

"No, it's not." Georgia scowled at me.

It was, but whatever. I sat him in his chair, gave Abbie a kiss on her cheek, and moved to steal baby Henry from Bree.

“You baby thief. If you wake him, I’ll skin you.”

“If I wake him, I will put him back to sleep.” I cuddled him for a minute then gave him back. I tried to steal Katie, but there was no need. Georgia handed her over so she could go fix Toby and Abbie’s plates. “Where’s Tanner?”

“With his daddy getting changed. He had a potty training mishap.”

I nodded and walked over to where Keisha stood, once again holding Atticus.

“Do you need your bag from the truck?”

“No, we’re good.” I kissed her cheek and smiled. “Go have a seat, I’ll fix your plate and bring it to you.”

“You don’t—”

“I want to. You can go sit by Abbie. Tater can find another seat.” Chuckling, she moved to the table and sat. Once Georgia was done and had her own plate fixed, I handed over Katie and moved to fix our plates. Even with the pain in my body, my heart was so full right now. This was going to be the start of something I’d wanted for the longest time.

Happiness and my girl by my side.

4

Keisha

OVER THE LAST TWO MONTHS, I have learned a lot about myself and the others around me.

Easton was in jail—his confession of what happened that night, his attack on my horse, and the sheer knowledge that he could have done so much more...hopefully they kept him for a long while.

I've been all but inseparable from Danny since the fight. Danny—man, I'd missed the signs on that one. But I was glad he was here with me now. Atticus too seemed to love him. I'd be jealous, but I got just as much time as the baby. He was never the one to say, 'Hey, let's leave him with your parents' or 'Does he have to go?' Oh no, quite the opposite. Danny was the best kind of man like that. He'd come in, speak to everyone, then go find my kid. I got a hug and a kiss first, but still.

Be still my heart. The man has helped heal so much I didn't even know was broken inside of me.

It's the time of year that's all about thankfulness. Family. Togetherness. I've had all those things my entire life with my parents, but getting it from Danny and his family too...it's a lot to soak in. I'm literally full of happiness. It's almost sickening. Just makes me love it all the more.

As we strolled through the tree lot, I was overwhelmed to say the least. Atticus was off with the other kids, in a wagon so they could enjoy this exploration. This place—there were trees literally everywhere, and yeah, I knew the word tree lot said it

all, but still. Good lord. We were following Mrs. Abigail, Georgie, and Bree as they hunted for this year's tree. It has to be just right in order for it to take center stage in the Cannon home. Georgie's words, not mine.

Their annual Christmas party was the talk of the town—even more than the town's Thanksgiving dinner at the center—so I got it. Their home was always decorated inside and out with garlands, lights, and a collection of Christmas decor fit for a fancy store in New York.

This year, I got to be a small part of the magic that transformed their farmhouse into a winter wonderland. To say I was excited would be putting it lightly.

“How long does this usually take?” I asked, leaning into his side. I'd seen so many gorgeous trees already, but they'd just waltzed on by them.

We've already been out here for a half hour already.

He chuckled. “When it was just Ma not too long; adding Georgie and Bree to the hunting party—well, it can take a long while. It gets aggressive too.”

“Yeah, between the tree for the big house, the trees for our houses, and one for Bree's shop...” Jon chuckled. “It's going to be a bit much here soon.” He sped by us to catch up to where Bree was stopped by a huge tree.

“They're just trying to outdo each other. This is why I never volunteer to go shopping with any of them. They'll walk your feet off.”

“Don't let your mother hear you say that, son, or next time she won't ask for volunteers,” Pops chortled.

“Yeah, don't plan on it, Pops.”

We walked around, separating from the others after a while. I needed to find that hot cocoa stand and warm myself up.

I wanted to enjoy the smell of so many trees, but as I took in the coolness in the air, my nose protested. It was all but frozen at this point.

I enjoyed walking around, holding Danny's hand though. I made my way toward the side of the tree lot where the homemade, fresh garland and wreaths were. That's when it happened. I saw the most perfect little tree I'd ever seen. It would look great in Atticus' nursery. I must have made some kind of noise when I saw it because Danny spun, looking for danger. I tugged his hand and pointed.

"Look at those little trees. Atti's room needs one."

"Dang, woman, you had me ready to fight someone." He chuckled, pulling me to him, and walked me over to the long tables of small potted trees, wreaths the size of my car, and then the yards and yards of garland. It was a gorgeous sight.

"Mrs. Angie, what kind of tree is this?" he asked the small, white-haired woman. She was one of the sweetest ladies in town. And her family has been running this tree farm for the last sixty odd years. The woman knew her trees.

"Douglas Fir, it's just a sapling yet. It can be used as decoration then planted in the yard. Just make sure you give it a space with plenty of room to grow. They can get quite tall."

I ran a fingertip over the needles on the branches. Atticus would love having his own tree; the twinkling lights would be a nice way to drift off to sleep.

"We'll take it," Danny offered, pulling out his wallet.

I tried to shove it back into his pocket. "I've got it. My kid, my tree."

He chuckled and looked down at me, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "Aw, you're cute." He pulled out some money and handed it to her. "I've got this. No arguing with me."

I opened my mouth to protest but was interrupted.

"Oh, that's rich. That Cannon charm will get you almost anything, huh?" someone said from behind us.

I turned to see Felicity Chapman coming our way, her hand latched onto Jeff Morrison's arm. He looked less than pleased to be dragged around like a dog on a leash, but hey, he deserved her. They were both total assholes. The worst kind of

people. I'm surprised they could walk in church on Sunday without being set on fire.

"Ignore her, I do," Danny said, taking his change from Mrs. Angie.

There was something in his tone that had me looking back at him. He never looked back, never gave any of that group a second thought. I sighed and turned to pick up the potted tree. Danny then took it from me with a smirk before slipping his hand into mine. We walked away, leaving them where they stood without a second glance.

That, however, did us no favors—oh no, the stupid heifer had to follow after us. Finally, I'd had enough. I let go of Danny's hand and turned.

"Stalking is illegal in all fifty states."

"I heard you came back to town with a baby." She pretended to look thoughtful. "Poor little thing."

"You know nothing of me or my son, so button your mouth or I'll do it for you."

"Babe, come on, ignore her. It's not worth the headache."

"Shame, really," Felicity continued like we hadn't spoken. "Word is you don't know the father. Probably some dupe you thought you could snag. Guess he got all he wanted from you."

Those words hit a nerve. My anger was all-consuming. She had no idea what she was talking about. I'd been assaulted, hurt, and she was making something out of it? I moved a step closer, Danny's tug on my arm the only thing stopping me from slapping some sense into her.

"Stop. She's just mad because you are with me. I turned her down, and she can't handle it."

His words had my head whipping back. He looked utterly disgusted by the thought of her. I didn't know what came over me, but I cracked up. A loud guffaw left me in a rush. I had to put my hand over my mouth.

"Oh. My. God." I laughed again. Danny looked amused; Felicity looked disgusted. I loved it. "Well, sorry, you tiny

brained she-demon. You don't deserve the likes of Danny. You're with what you deserve."

"You bitch!" She stalked closer. "I didn't want him."

"Right. Says the girl who has slept with everyone in her class and probably the whole school by now."

"Like you have room to talk with your bastard child!"

My face flamed with heat at her words. I really was going to kick her ass now.

"Whoa, down girl." Danny wrapped his arm around me, holding me where I stood when she stepped back. "Felicity, I'd advise you to back off."

"She's delusional," I said, looking back at Danny. "I mean," I turned back to face her as I spoke, "if it has penis, you want it. You usually get it too because most men aren't going to turn down sex. Well, guess what, you two-faced Barbie wannabe? Danny isn't like that. And better yet, he's mine. Has been for a long time. So take your little band of ass sniffers and fuck off before I let my temper free and break your face."

"You—" She lunged for me with one of those enraged screams people thought would be intimidating.

Pfft.

I pushed Danny back as I brought my fist around. She wanted to take me on? Okay, we could dance. My fist hit her jaw so hard, my knuckles cracked.

"Dammit. Stop this!" Danny wrapped an arm around me and bodily pulled me back.

"That's for being you, and if you ever talk about Danny or my son again, as God is my witness, I will beat the blonde off of you!"

"What's going on over here?" I jerked against Danny when the entirety of the Cannon family pushed into the small area where we were.

“Well, alrighty then.” Tate moved to where we stood, took the tree that Danny was fighting to keep a hold of, and turned to the others.

“I asked a question; what is going on here?” Mrs. Abigail looked between us, and I sighed.

“She was being a pain, so I punched her in the face.” I grimaced.

“It wasn’t Keisha’s fault, Ma.”

“Well, it seems to be handled,” she said, turning away.

“She hit me! I’ll press charges.”

“You do that. I’ll make sure your grandmother knows you started this so when the Sheriff comes to take your statement, she will be well informed.”

The look on Felicity’s face made me smile. She looked around, made a frustrated noise, then turned to stalk back the way she came.

“God, I wanna punch her again,” I said softly.

Danny chuckled. “Easy there, slugger, I think she got the point.”

“Come on, we have trees to buy; let’s not worry about other people.”

We followed after the others. Danny took the tree back from Tate and set it in the wagon Mr. Joe pulled. Atti was in his car seat, knocked out. Poor little guy was missing all the fun. Though, that may not have been a bad thing after all.

“My feet are planning my death.” I flopped down on the Cannons’ couch and watched as the guys fought to bring in the big behind tree.

“Girl, you have no idea.” This was something Phoebe said, sitting with a sleeping Katie lying against her. I looked down at Atti; he was half asleep still.

I was laughing at the guys' antics as they brought in the tree. It stood nine feet tall, was about five feet wide...it was gorgeous. The dark green needles covered the branches in thick waves.

"That tree is simply magical," Georgie said, taking a seat beside me.

"I'd have to agree. Though the one you got for your house is a beauty too."

"The one Bree got for the shop window, now that will be fun to decorate."

"It's only four feet tall though," Georgie said, her nose wrinkling up.

"It's going in the window; the window box will make it look a lot taller. I can't wait to pull out the cookie ornaments we made."

"What?" I asked, sounding like a doofus. "Cookie ornaments? As in ornaments that look like cookies or cookies that will be ornaments?"

Bree smiled. "Ornaments made to look like cookies. Gingerbread men and women to be exact. I have a friend that has a small business. She casts different objects out of clay, paints them, cures them, and then sells them online. So we," she motioned to the other women, "had a create and paint party a few weeks ago. Kaylyn put everything in the kiln after we were done and, voila, we now have ornaments."

"That is cool. I wouldn't mind trying that."

"Next time we go, you are coming. A girls' night out. No kids, no men, just us, a bottle of wine, juice for you, and some laughs."

"Juice?" I laughed. "I'll take a sprite, thank you."

That sent everyone into a fit of laughter. This was nice.

Danny slipped over the back of the couch, gave me a scorching kiss, then headed out the door to help the guys bring in the wreaths and garland.

My heart hammered as I watched him go.

It was exciting being able to be a part of the little things that would transpire over the next week or so to get the farmhouse and the outlying buildings looking Christmas ready. My family had their own traditions, so adding to what I already loved about this season was making my heart fill with so much love and joy.

I'd made the right choice coming home. I was seeing that more and more every day. It paid to listen to your instincts. Mine had not only led me home, but it led me back to the man I'd had my heart set on since we were kids.

My prince of horses and tomfoolery.

Daniel

WHY DID I let her go home last night? I missed her like crazy, and it's only been a few hours.

Since Keisha came back into my life, I've tried my best to keep my head in the right place. The feelings that have blossomed for her were overwhelming. I've always known she was mine, just never thought I actually had a chance. Knowing I did—it made life so much more.

Falling in love with your friend could end wrong on so many levels. I'd seen it happen, and I didn't want that for us. I'd have been happy to have her in my life as a friend if there was nothing more to it.

Thankfully, she and I were ready for more.

We'd spent the last week decorating the ranch and then moved to her farmhouse and helped her mom set up all of their decorations. I was so very thankful that they didn't go as crazy as Ma and Georgia. I swear, it was like living with Clark Griswold this time of year. Except I was the one climbing on the roof and risking my neck.

Looking around the McCall home as I slid out of my truck, I couldn't help but smile. The lights around the porch were still on, twinkling on this gloomy, cold morning. Hurrying up the front steps, I rubbed my hands together to warm them before raising a hand to knock on the front door. It suddenly opened; Mrs. McCall jumped back as her dog started to bark.

“Daniel, sweet heavens. I didn't hear you pull up.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you or Winston.” I squatted down and scooped up the little ball of fur. His yips settled as his tongue found my cheek. “Yuck, enough of that.” I chuckled, putting him down so he could run out into the yard.

“It’s all right. Keisha is in the kitchen. Come on in.”

“Actually, if I could talk to Mr. McCall for a moment, then I will find her.”

She watched me, her curiosity showing in her eyes.

I grinned, having a good idea where her mind went just now. I’d overheard her and Ma talking—making plans, just in case—the other night. I was pretty sure they already had china patterns picked out, the wedding planned, and the blueprints for a house out on the property line.

“It’s ranch related. Pops sent me to get something from him,” I said, trying to dissuade her from thinking it was more. For now at least.

Her face fell slightly before she nodded. “Very well, he should be out in the big barn—supervising everything—with the boys. They’re getting ready to go out to the back pastures. So, go on, hurry.”

I chuckled again. “Yes, Ma, Pops does the same. Thank you.” I made my way off the porch and around the house. The bitter cold of the morning slapped me in the face as the big barn came into view. Ducking my head, I pushed through it and pulled open the door, slipping in before too much of the cold followed.

“Daniel, my boy, how are you?”

“Hey, Mr. Conrad. Didn’t know you were here.”

“It wasn’t on the books until Shiloh here decided to throw a shoe.”

“Gotcha. Are you headed to the ranch when you leave here?”

“Sure am. Abe said there was a new rescue with overgrown hooves.”

“Yes, sir, Abe cut them back some, but he wants you to have a look at them. I doubt the poor thing has ever had a good trim.”

“I’ll get him all fixed up, no worries.”

“Thanks. Do you know where Mr. McCall is?”

“Right here, Daniel.”

I turned to see the man in question coming from the tack room, a saddle over his arm. “Morning, sir. Pops sent me over for the paperwork on the cattle exchange.”

“Morning. It’s up at the house on my desk.” He dropped the saddle on the railing to a stall and wiped his hands on his jeans before pulling out his phone. “Hey, sweetheart, I’m sending Daniel back up to the house. There is a brown envelope on my desk; could you grab it for him?” His smile grew as he listened to her response. “Sure, sure. I will. Absolutely, I’m sure he will, it’s never too early or late for pound cake. Very well. Love you. I’ll be headed out in a few minutes. Yes, dear.” He chuckled and hung up, sliding his phone into his pocket.

“Randy, your boy here is all done. He shouldn’t lose this one.”

“Thank you, Ernie. Much appreciated. Ginny says to step up to the house; she’s made you a little thank you basket.”

“Aww shucks. That’s not necessary, but she really does make the best pound cake I’ve ever had.”

“I agree, but don’t tell Ma I said that.” I smiled.

“Never. Abigail makes the best pies in the state.” We all nodded at that. It was true.

“This is why we gain ten pounds walking into the church potlucks every month. It’s all desserts that no one in their right mind passes up,” Mr. McCall said.

Mr. Conrad chortled. “Amen to that.”

“Okay, you’re all making me hungry.” Mr. McCall picked up his saddle again. “Go on up to the house, Daniel, Ginny

will get the papers for you.”

“Before I go, can I talk to you?”

“Sure, grab a blanket. You can help me saddle up Gus; the boys and I are going to check the fences after last night’s winds.”

I did as instructed and followed him to the back stall. Gus was a big red giant of a horse. He was a gentle giant though. He stood tall at sixteen hands, loved to run, and had an ‘I can’t be bothered’ disposition about anything but work and treats. Seems every ranch has at least one of them.

“What’s on your mind, son?”

“Well, I know we already talked about me courting Keisha.”

“Courting, boy, I’m not that old, just call it dating.”

“But it’s more than that. I want to do this right; she deserves it.”

“That she does. If I thought you meant my daughter harm or ill will, you’d not be allowed to even look at her.”

“Yes, sir, I got you. I want, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to give her a ring.” I held up a hand at the sudden jerk of his head. “Not an engagement ring, nothing like that. Not yet.”

“Then what kind of a ring?”

“A promise ring.” I smiled. “I’d like to give it to her on Christmas Eve, at the party. I want to be more present and not rush things. Last thing I want to do is rush or—”

“Hey, there’s no need to explain your intentions to me. I just need to know that you’re going to treat my daughter with the respect she deserves. She’s not your average young woman. She has a child, a job, and demands on her shoulders that won’t always allow her to put you first.”

“No disrespect, sir, I don’t need to be first in her life, I just need to be in her heart.”

“Your mama has raised a good man.” He slapped me on the shoulder and nodded. “You give her that ring and keep the

promise that it holds.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“Now go on up to the house before she comes looking for you.”

Chuckling, I patted Gus on the neck. “Have a safe ride, sir, that wind was a beast this morning.”

“Always, I have a pretty wife to come home to after all.”

Walking back into my family home with Keisha at my side and with Atticus laying against my chest felt right. We were greeted by cold noses, wagging tails, and a herd of little people.

“Uncy Danny!” Abbie plowed into me.

“Hey, princess.”

“Abbie Grace, get your bottom back here.” Georgie came in, a scowl on her face.

“I nots do it!”

“Um...” I looked between them. I let Atticus go when Keisha reached for him. She made quick work of getting his snow gear off. She was doing her level best to not laugh at my being stuck between Georgie and Abbie. Again.

“Little girl, I saw you steal the cookie. Where is it?”

Chuckling to myself, I scooped Abbie up and met her gaze. “Did you take a cookie?” She looked between us and nodded, her bottom lip poking out. “Where is it?”

“Tango ates it.”

Georgia stopped and looked down at the big dog. His tongue lolled to the side as he looked between his two favorite people.

“You gave it to him?”

She nodded. “Mommy tolds him no. Him looked sads.”

I hugged her to me and looked at Georgie.

“Abbie, did you really give it to Tango? It has doggy medicine in it. That’s why he couldn’t have it yet. It’s not for him.” Georgie rubbed her face and pulled her cell out. “Now I have to call Uncle Abe and tell him what happened.”

“What is it? Is Tango okay?”

“Some kind of joint supplement for Lady and Daisy.”

She walked off when Abe answered; I watched as she paced.

“Abbie, you know what you did was wrong?” I moved to the couch and sat her on my lap so she looked at me. “When Mommy says no, that means no. You gave Tango something that could make him sick.” And if he got sick, Georgie was going to lose her mind. That dog was her heart. Don’t get me wrong, she loved Tate and the kids, but Tango was the last piece of her grandfather. He was getting older, too. She was always worried something was going to happen to him.

“Abe says it’s okay. It’s just something to help keep their joints healthy. He said it was a good idea to start him on it too. Crisis averted.”

I nodded. “Abbie, you need to apologize for upsetting your mommy by not listening to her.”

The little munchkin crawled off my lap and ran to Georgie.

“You’re really good with them.”

I pulled Keisha down into my lap and held her there. “Maybe. But they’re really good kids. Just spirited as Ma would say.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” she teased.

“I’m an angel,” I shot back.

Georgia laughed loud and hard. “Angel my backside. Come help in the kitchen, will ya? I need to bag up the last of the dog treats. Your mom went out to the barn to snag a few more eggs, then we will get lunch started.”

Keisha got up, tugged my hand, and together we went into the kitchen with Atticus laid against her shoulder, fighting

sleep.

“Someone looks tired.”

“He should be. He was up until three this morning.”

“Oh yeah, I’d tell you that it ends sometime soon, but really, each kid is different. Abbie would sleep through the night from the beginning. Well, from the time I got here. Tanner was awake all night then slept all day for a while. Katie, she’s willing to sleep anytime her daddy is asleep. So when he’s out working, naps are hard.”

“He’s usually great at sleeping through the night. Not sure what it was. I finally put him in bed with me and turned on the cartoons. Once he got comfy, he was out. My eyes much appreciated that.”

“The twins have nights like that every once in a while. Tanner, that boy could sleep through an atomic bomb. He’s a solid sleeper, always has been.” Georgia slid her fingers along the Ziploc bag while pushing the air out of it. “Toss these in the big freezer for me, please.”

I nodded and did as asked.

When I came back in, I greeted Ma with a kiss to her cheek. “My boy, glad you’re back. Could you do your old mama a favor?”

“Sure thing. What do you need?”

“I just got off the phone with Angie and Gene. They have a basket of vegetables from the greenhouse. Could you go grab it for me? I want to make us some chicken pot pies tonight for dinner.”

“You had his attention at dinner,” Keisha called out.

I turned to raise a brow. “Don’t mock my love of food, woman.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure, lover boy, anything you say.” She stood from the table. “Mrs. Cannon, can I go lay Atti on your bed; he’s out.”

“Of course you can. Just pull the two big pillows from behind the smaller ones and box him in. I will keep an eye on him if you want to go with Danny. Make sure he doesn’t eat all of the carrots on the way back.”

“I can do that, thank you.”

“I’m so glad I can give you all hours of entertainment.”

“I love you, my boy.”

I smiled, hugging her tight. “I love you, too, Ma.”

Ten minutes later, I was helping Keisha into the cab of my truck before running around to get in myself. It was colder than a witch’s tit out here. I started my truck, put the heater on, and headed for the Wilder farm. My stomach was already growling at the thought of tonight’s dinner.

I admit it, I was a man who could always eat. Food was just as good for your soul as love was. I had a full load of love already; food was all I was lacking now.

Epilogue

Keisha

I'VE BEEN in this house ten million times since I was a little kid...why was I so dang nervous to go in now?

That was easy; most of the town would be here, and I was walking in with a baby in my arms. They'd judge me—maybe not all of them, but I knew some would. I let my mom and dad go ahead of us. I really didn't want to go inside.

I jerked when the front door opened. My nervousness seemed to vanish when a pair of smoldering hazel eyes met mine.

“Hey, beautiful, come on in. It's freezing out here.”

I kicked off my boots, making sure there was nothing on them, before I came in the door. Atticus was plucked from my arms and as I took my coat off, I watched Danny with him. My smile grew at the little laugh Atti made. Danny had him over his arm and was blowing a raspberry on his belly. I couldn't help but laugh at the two of them.

“No. No. No.” Atti's shriek of laughter drew a lot of attention. My mom, Mrs. Abigail, Georgie, and a few older women all looked our way. Their smiles had my butterflies easing off.

“What do you mean no? I want those cheeks.” Danny was laughing as he blew raspberries on Atti's cheeks. The child was saying no, but he freaking loved when you did that.

When Danny came up for air, I leaned up on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. I tried to pull back, but he wasn't having it. Right there in front of God and everyone, he

kissed me. His mouth claimed mine and let me just say, I was spinning out of orbit.

“Well...that’s one way to say hello,” I teased, a little breathless.

He grinned. “Look up.”

I did and busted out laughing. The cheeky man had been under the bundle of mistletoe this whole time.

“Merry Christmas, beautiful.”

“Merry Christmas.”

I melted into him, allowing him to take possession of my mouth again. When he pulled back, he winked. “Come on, let’s get you both something to drink.”

“I’m only allowed juice,” I said a little louder than I normally would as we passed the group of women still watching us. Georgie let out a bark of laughter. I grinned.

“You two are gonna be trouble...”

“Hey, I resemble that remark.”

I trailed after him and into the kitchen. There were a couple of large punch bowls on the counter. I knew where I was going; Mrs. Abigail made a mean green punch.

Laughter suffused the room around me. People were talking, poking fun at each other, all while watching others dance on the makeshift dance floor.

How no one seemed to be ready to keel over and pass out, I just didn’t understand. It was almost eleven, and I was fighting to keep my eyes open. Atticus lay across my chest sleeping. The kid could sleep through anything. I guess that’s a good thing though. I hoped it stayed that way. I was one of those people that the quieter I tried to be, the louder I seemed to get.

I leaned my cheek against his head and closed my eyes, wrapping my arms around him; snuggling into him. *Snowman* by Sia started to play on the sound system. The words ‘you are

my home' hit hard. Atti wasn't the only man in my life that was my home. Danny has become that and more.

"Hey, come on, let's get you home."

I blinked up at Danny and smiled. "We're okay. I was just listening to the music."

"I had to shake your leg to get those peepers open, so come on. Don't fight it."

"My parents—"

"They're right there, come on, you're making me work too hard here." He chuckled.

My mom was coming our way, her gaze going from me to Danny then to Atticus. "Sweetheart, we'll be a bit longer. Let Daniel drive you back to the house."

"Or you can stay the night. The guest room has a bassinet in it." Mrs. Abigail stopped before us and smiled down at Atticus. "You're always welcome here."

I didn't care which way...well, that was a lie. I'd love to stay, curled up against him, but it wasn't just up to me.

"Yeah, the spare room is across from mine and Phoebe's rooms. We can help with him if he gets up during the night."

"You shouldn't volunteer your sister—"

"He's not," she cut her mom off. "I'm down for some baby snuggling." Phoebe stopped beside me and leaned down to kiss Atti's head. "He's such a sweet little man."

"Thank you, but I don't have clothes or anything here. Plus," I looked around, "I don't want to interfere with your Christmas morning traditions."

"You wouldn't be, but I understand. You want to be with your parents and Atticus in the morning. That's not a bad thing. Let Danny take you home."

"Thank you for understanding my reluctance." I gave Mrs. Abigail a tight hug.

“You come on over tomorrow for lunch, all of you. We eat around one. There will be more than enough.”

I left them, my parents gushing at the invite. I smiled all the way to the truck and with Danny’s help, Atti and I were strapped in. The drive to our ranch was quick.

We got out with little effort and made it inside the house. I quickly got Atti changed and into his PJs, all without waking him. I watched him as I turned in the baby monitor and went downstairs to find Danny standing before our Christmas tree.

Wrapping my arms around him from behind, I closed my eyes and breathed him in. He turned and when I lifted my head, he claimed my mouth. As we stood there, held in each other’s embrace, the clock on the wall ticked away. The house was quiet, my full attention on him.

“I want to tell you something.” He pulled me to the couch and sat me on it. He got on his knees before me, smiling. I watched as he pulled a small red box from his pocket.

My heart was thundering so hard, I almost missed his next words.

“There’s a time in a man’s life where he just knows what he needs to make it the best it can be. You’re the missing piece in mine. When you left for school, I didn’t know how to adjust. Having you back, spending so much time with you, I found that spark again. I want you to have this ring. It’s a symbol from me to you to always be here. You’re one of my best friends in this world. I never want you to wonder if there’s more to that. There is.”

He pulled open the box, and I gasped. The wide silver band had two sunflowers adorning the top, each having a citrine stone in them.

“Oh, Danny...it’s beautiful.”

“I saw it and just knew it was the right one. You love sunflowers, and it’s got your birthstone.” He leaned in as I did and kissed me softly. “This is my promise to make you both happy, show you what you mean to me, and one day, I’ll replace this one with a different ring.”

“I love you.” The words left my lips as the clock struck midnight. We shared a kiss that had my toes curling in my boots.

“I love you too. Merry Christmas, beautiful.”

“Merry Christmas.”

“To a start of something new and forever.”

He pulled me closer and kissed me again. This was turning out to be the best Christmas I’d had in a long time. All thanks to the man before me. I knew this was just the start of forever, and I couldn’t wait to see where this went.

About the Author

Barb is a Carolina girl by right and a Texan by birth. By day, she's a desk jockey for a rural transportation company and a book lover, reading through as many books as she can. At night, though, she turns into her alter ego: a writer—cape optional, depending on her mood.

Her stories are a mix of real-life events, personal experiences, and the craziness of her own imagination and those of her best friends. And when their imaginations blend together, it can be crazy. Barb writes in multiple genres, encounters new adventures, creates new worlds, and has a fantastic time breathing life into new stories, creating something she hopes inspires anyone who reads to fall in love with them as she has.

Barb lives by one little rule: tomorrow is never guaranteed, so make sure you live each day to its fullest.

Visit <https://www.authorbarbshuler.com/> for more about Barb and her books.

You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

Holly's Hope

Elizabeth Kozloff

Holly's Hope

What happens when the man you want is also your brother's best friend? Holly hopes for a Christmas wish that James will see her as more than his friend's sister. Will this Christmas be the time when James sees her as more, or will the holiday pass them by?

Holly

“YOU HAVE GOT to be kidding me?” I mumble to myself as I stare down at the text on my phone. “Of all things, she has taken it too far.”

“Who’s taken it too far?” Dani asks, startling me from behind.

Turning to face her, it takes a second for me to catch my breath. Dropping my hand from my chest, I glare at her. “Jeez Louise, why do you do that?”

“Do what?” she inquires, trying to look innocent. It may work form some, especially the men around town, but I’ve been given that look for years and it stopped working after the first dozen times.

“That sneaky shit. Can’t you make your presence known?”

She laughs at my answer. “It’s my special power.” She replies in her villain voice. “Muh-ha-ha-ha-ha,” she starts the ridiculous laugh, but we both end up in fits of laughter.

“No seriously,” Dani starts, “what were you talking about when I walked in?”

I roll my eyes at her and take a seat at the kitchen table with my coffee. “My mom, she did it again. Signed me up for some Christmas charity for the town. Something about me being an elf for Santa at the Christmas festival downtown.”

I get she is over a lot of the activities for the town since she works directly with the Mayor. But just because they expect her to be at these events does not mean that I want to be

dragged to them. Usually she checks to see if I'm available, but this time she signed me up and took me off the schedule for one of the days I was supposed to be working at the family farm. It's one thing to mess with my spare time, but to mess with my ability to make extra money pisses me off.

"When is the festival?" Dani questions, looking over my head at the wall—something she does when she is deep in thought. "Wait, that's this weekend. Aren't you working at the farm?"

"Ding, ding, ding. And the prize goes to the lady in red," I tell her, pointing my finger at her obnoxious, ugly Christmas sweater. "Apparently, I have to meet everyone Friday afternoon to go over our jobs and clothes." I raise my eyebrows at her as I take in her outfit from head to toe. "Hopefully, I look better than you do," I tell her with a smirk.

She stands with her hand on her hip and poses like she is the next Miss America. With one foot in a green converse and the other in a red converse, her outfit already gives me a headache. The black dress pants are the only thing normal in her outfit. The red ugly sweater has silver tinsel thread through every opening of the cable knit. Her brown hair is pulled back in a ponytail with an antler headband keeping her loose hairs intact.

"When I come home with that fifty-dollar gift card, you'll change your tune." She tells me as she fills up her travel mug and grabs her lunch from the fridge. "Later, chick. Gotta run, see you tonight."

She's out the door before I can reply. While Dani heads into her job at the local credit union, I clean up the kitchen and prepare myself to confront my mom. I know she means well, but she doesn't understand that I don't want to be involved. It's just not for me. Let me be on the outside, looking in. I don't want to be involved in all the town's outings and functions. I get enough of that from my day job as an elementary teacher. On my time off, I'd rather be out at the family farm, working in the barn and out in the fields.

With everything put away, I head outside, lock up the first-floor apartment I share with Dani, and climb into my car. The wind whips my blonde ponytail here and there as I make the trek across town to my family farm.

The fifteen minute drive gives me plenty of time to have imaginary conversations between me and mom. Stuck in my head, I make the drive on autopilot as I contemplate the different ways the impending discussion can go.

I pull into the driveway and pass the white farmhouse where I grew up and continue down the side driveway. Taking a left at the fork in the path and parking next to the first barn. I see dust settling down the other drive and know that mom has headed that way to clean out the cabin that was rented for the last few days.

Years ago, Mom had the idea of turning the far side of the property into a side job. She had five cabins built and started to rent them out to tourist. You wouldn't think that many people would be interested in visiting our small Georgia town, but with our proximity to the Blue Ridge Mountains, there is hardly a time that we don't have a rented unit.

The rumble of four-wheelers approaching has me turning around and watching to see who is approaching. With my hand on my forehead shading my eyes from the blazing sun, I watch as three blurry dust clouds speed forward. The dust settles slowly, revealing two of my brothers, Jake and Damien, and James, Jake's long-time friend and ranch hand.

They slow as they get closer, and I walk forward to meet them. For them to be coming in this early tells me one of two things: they either didn't have much to check today, or something has gone wrong.

Dirt flies as Jake comes to a halt in front of me and dismounts. "You got a minute?" He hollers over the other engines while he turns his off.

"Sure, what's up?" I answer on instinct. Something in his tone tells me that this is not a time to play around.

“Follow me,” he instructs as he turns and walks into the barn. When Damien and James turn off their engines, the only sound left is the thud of boots on the concrete floor.

I rush to follow him to the back of the barn, while Damien and James head to the side of the barn and begin the gathering fencing and posts. In the back stockroom, I find Jake loading up the additional things he needs. He throws me a pair of gloves and a flannel shirt from the hook by the door. “Fence down?”

“Yeah, and a fourth of the herd is through the fence. Ben and Dad are trying to wrangle them back.”

“Where?” There are only a few spots that would cause much concern if the herd got through the fence. Most of the time, a fence down is not this time sensitive since the area where the herd escapes to is just another pasture that we use for them.

“Back corner,” Jake replies.

“Shit,” that’s one place we don’t want a downed fence. The back corner he refers to is where our property ends and the Phillips property begins. “Ben and Dad should have them back in the fence by the time we get back there,” I mutter to myself as I follow behind Jake and help strap things down on the four wheelers.

Ben is my oldest brother and the one that will take over the farm once Daddy is ready to hand it down. It’s always been him, and he wants it. Something that my other brothers and I aren’t as committed to. Jake and Damien love the farm just as much, but they have their own jobs and we all have interests that occupy our time.

Jake and Damien take off as James starts his engine. He looks over at me and gives me his grin. The grin that brings me to my knees and I think he knows that fact, but plays it off. “You coming?” he yells.

“Yeah,” I answer just as loud.

“Hop on, Holls. We got cattle to save.”

James

I WATCH as Holly runs towards me and feel her mount the four wheeler behind me. A pro mount, one that she has been doing for years. Her hands grip my shoulder as she settles behind me, her tap on my shoulder giving me her signal that she's ready to ride.

“Hold on,” I holler and her arms wrap around my middle. A feeling that's comforting and exciting every time we ride. She holds on tighter as I take off and accelerate down the path.

I see her brothers up ahead in the distance, but keep my fast pace a tad slower. It's moments like these that I wish wouldn't end. Holly's body pressed against mine, thoughts of what it could be like if things were different.

When we approach the gate to the pasture, Holly taps twice on my stomach, her signal for me to slow. She hops off, opens the gate and I ride through. Once the gate is closed, she hops on and gives me a shoulder tap, telling me she's ready to go.

We exchanged no words as we bump along the fields. Her grip gets stronger and releases a little here and there as we roll along.

With her arms around me, her chest pressed to my back, and her scent surrounding me, I bask in the feel and sensations of having her this close. If things were easier, this would be permeant, her at my back or by my side. She would be mine. But you can't always have what you want.

If I was a better man, one without the troubles and baggage that I carry, I would have grabbed the opportunity to be her man years ago. But what do I have to offer her? A ranch hand on her family's farm and deputy sheriff, a tired man who works sun up to sun down most days and the overnights when I'm on call. A man who works two jobs to take care of himself and others. Some that are grateful and some that despises the hand that helps them.

I push those thoughts out of my head as we pull up to Jake and Damien working on the fence, with Ben and Mr. Frost, better known as Henry, sitting atop their horses, watching on. Or more like supervising from their perch.

Henry's eyes look to where Holly has her hands around my waist, but quickly averts them when she speaks. "Did you get them all?" She hops down before he can answer and is next to him in an instant, rubbing Demon's muzzle. The black quarter horse is the most stubborn animal I have ever met. But when he sees Holly, he melts under her touch.

I know, man. I do the same.

"Yeah. All are accounted for," Henry answers, his voice stoic and to the point. He's never a man to mix words.

I give him a nod and drop my eyes back to Holly. Demon lowers his head, and she gives him a quick kiss on the bridge of his nose and steps back. "What can I help with?" she questions as I dismount and pull my work gloves from my back pocket and grab the spare pair that are in the cargo bag up front.

Holly takes the spare pair from my hands and slips them on. We work in silence as we help Jake and Damien fix the fence line that is down. Holly works on removing the wire that is down while I pull the bent post out of the ground.

"You have any idea on what happened here?" I ask aloud to no one.

"My guess, someone or something, weakened the line. This is more than what our herd can get up to," Jake answers. He reasoning the same I was thinking as well.

“Has to be,” Ben adds. “I rode the fence line yesterday and everything looked good. If there was a problem, I wouldn’t have moved them over to this pasture yesterday evening.”

“Well, whatever it is, let’s get it fixed,” Henry orders. “While y’all work on that, Ben, let’s move them to the next pasture in rotation.” Ben nods and turns his horse toward the cattle. Henry follows and they push the herd down the line to the next pasture. It doesn’t take much effort since the cattle are used to the rotation and have an idea of where they are moving too. Or at least I like to think that is the case.

We work in comfortable silence, the occasional order from Jake. This is nothing new for all of us. While Holly doesn’t work out on the farm that often anymore, she’s done this her whole life. She knows the rhythm of what needs to be done. She doesn’t balk at the hard work, just gets it done.

Even with her hair falling out of her ponytail, the dirt smudge on her cheek, and her sweatshirt tied around her waist, she is the most attractive woman I have ever met. Her quick wit, hard work, and smarts are all added attraction points to her looks. The woman is the whole package.

“All set,” Jake calls out as he checks over the repairs. “Let’s head back,” he orders as he mounts his machine. We all do the same, and I savor in the feeling of Holly at my back as we follow her brothers across the pastures.

Back at the barn, Holly dismounts, giving me her smile as she stands at my side. “Thanks for the ride, Cowboy.”

“Any time, Darlin’,” I reply, tipping my baseball cap like a Stetson.

Her snicker and eye roll at the banter we always have after a ride is something that I hold close. It may be silly to most, but it’s just something between us. *Ours*. And I wouldn’t change it.

“Okay, I’m headed to the house. I’m supposed to help mom with the website,” Holly announces. “Holler if something comes up. I’d rather be out here.”

“Will do,” Jake replies while Damien and I call out, “later.”

As Holly walks towards the house, I watch her leave, my eyes focused on her ass in her tight as sin jeans. She removed the sweatshirt and carries it in her hands, giving me a sight to watch. She looks over her shoulder and catches me looking. I can hear a faint chuckle from her as she shakes her head and focuses ahead.

“What’s your thoughts?” Damien asks, and the silence that follows has me turning to him. Both he and Jake smirk when I meet their eyes. “Did we lose you?”

I look at them both, wondering what their thoughts are. I know they caught me watching Holly walk away. This is the first time I’ve slipped up and let my mask down. But neither looks upset. “Just tired, had a long day yesterday,” I answer to deflect from where my mind really was.

Reflecting back, it was a long ass day. I woke a few hours into the morning and headed into my shift at the station. Once my shift was up, I headed to the grocery store and picked Ellie, my sister, up from her part-time job. Dropped her off at a friend’s house and came back to the ranch to handle the evening chores with Ben. After a few hours of work, I headed back into town to bring her back to my place. All the while dodging calls from my mother and her problems.

“While I’m sure that’s part of it,” Jake replies with his eyebrow up and head tilted. I just stare at him, and he chuckles. “It’s all in your head, man. We’ve told you before. We’ve seen the looks take a chance. You know where we stand.” He pauses and looks over at Damien.

“Hurt her, and—“ Damien starts.

“And you’ll make sure I hurt,” I answer.

They may be okay with it, but what about the rest of her family? There are other relationships in the works that could be damaged if things go bad. My friendship with Jake, Damien, and Ben. My job with the farm. Ellie’s relationship with Holly and her mother, Kathy. The family atmosphere that

I longed for while I was growing up, the same one that is being offered to Ellie.

The pounding of hooves behind me ceases the conversation. Turning, we watch as Ben and Henry approach. Their timing is perfect. The interruption allows me to bury my thoughts of Holly and get back to work.

Holly

THROWING a change of clothes in my backpack, I zip it up and sling it over my shoulder and leave my bedroom. I have about five minutes before I need to leave and make my way downtown and participate in the dog and pony show my mother has signed me up for.

Dropping my bag by the door, I head into the kitchen area to make a quick drink to go. I grab my favorite tumbler and fill it halfway with ice before grabbing the cold brew and creamer from the refrigerator. Placing everything on the counter, I get to work mixing my drink.

The front door opens and I lean back from the counter and watch Dani walk in. She drops her purse and bag on the living room chair and sashays, *no joke*, to the kitchen with a white paper bag. The woman can make any person, man or female, take notice when she walks into a room. “Hot damn,” she exclaims as she stops right next to me.

“You’re so annoying,” I retort, and roll my eyes at her.

“You love me,” she says as she sets the bag down in front of me.

I know what it is. Anyone within a fifty-mile radius knows what the white bag with a bee sticker on the front stands for. *Honey’s Sweet Treats*. The best damn bakery there is, and also her and Dani’s other best friend. “Whatcha got here?” I question as I pull the bag closer.

“Honey sent some lemon bars.” I lick my lips while Dani continues. “But I don’t think you should have any. You know

how messy they can be. And girl,” she pauses for dramatics, “you do not want to mess up your look. Damn! Who knew being an elf could be sexy? You’re showing a lot of curves in this outfit. Is it appropriate for young eyes?”

“Shut it,” I tell her as I grab a dish towel out of the drawer and tuck it into the top of my dress. I am not missing the opportunity for one of Honey’s treats. She has been so busy the last few months with the holidays that we haven’t had as much time with her.

Placing a lemon bar on a small plate, I bring it to my mouth and sink my teeth in. The flavors explode and my mouth and I can’t hold in my moan. “So good,” I mumble before taking another bite.

“Ditto,” Dani says before she takes another bite, her other hand under her bar to catch the crumbs.

She has powder sugar specks on her shirt, but she couldn’t care less as she stuffs the last bite in her mouth. “Best sugar orgasm ever,” she announces as she grabs a bottled water from the fridge and takes a swig.

“Ditto,” I parrot her previous answer and throw away my temporary bib. Smoothing down the dress, I make sure it’s still presentable.

“So,” she deadpans and looks up at me as she wipes the sugar from her shirt. “You know you are looking mighty hot there, girl. You ready to be on Santa’s naughty list?”

“Eww. No thanks, Sheriff West is Santa. No, thank you!” I fake puke in my mouth, and Dani bust out laughing, which causes me to follow. Sheriff West is a nice man, but he’s older than my dad and there is nothing attractive about the man.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll end up on somebody’s naughty list before the night is over.”

“I gotta go.” Grabbing my drink, I walk out of the kitchen and sling my backpack over my shoulder. I stop at the door. “See you later?”

“Sure will hot stuff,” she hollers.

I shake my head. She's right about the outfit. It's a lot more provocative than I expected, but I have a green sleeveless, knee-length duster that completes the outfit. Sliding into the driver's seat, I wiggle the red fabric up a little so that I can move my legs. It's not bad when I'm standing, but the dress hugs my curves and is restricting when I sit. The high collar dress keeps the girls covered, so there is no worry that I might give someone an eyeful when I bend down to talk to the kids.

The dress makes my ass look amazing, and I wonder if I can find a dress similar for myself. A little black dress that I can keep in my closet and pull out here and there when I need to let my hair down. Thoughts of seducing James come to mind, and I try to stop them as I drive to town.

I shouldn't have these thoughts about him, but I can't stop them. There are times that I think he has them too, the long looks and small touches. However, I tell myself that I'm reading too much into those moments. My mind wonders to the other day when I helped him and my brothers with the fence.

Anytime I have the opportunity to ride behind James, I snatch it up. Being pressed up against him is heaven and hell. I'm in heaven being in his bubble, his touch lighting a fire inside of me. But on the other hand it's hell knowing that I only they don't mean as much to him.

I'm his best friend's little sister. It's against the bro code or something like that. Plus, I've seen the women that hang around him and my brothers. Tall and trim women, cantaloupe sized breast and perfectly put together.

I shouldn't be jealous, but my five and a half foot curvy frame is way different. My make-up regime consists of light foundation, neutral eyeshadow, a layer of mascara and lip gloss. I do not know how to contour and at this point in my life, I don't plan to figure it out. Every now and then I let Dani do all that work on me, but to be honest, it's too much for me. I don't have the patience.

I pass the Sheriff's office and my mind goes right back to James. When we returned from fixing the fence, I left the guys and headed up to the house. I may or may not have put a little sway in my step, and when I turned back, I couldn't help but smirk when I caught him looking at my ass. One that Dani says is to kill for, but I have to disagree.

I pull into a parking spot behind the courthouse and grab my things to walk in. Once inside the building, I head up to my mother's office. We had a brief discussion when I stopped by the house the other day and have come to an agreement that she will no longer sign me up for things. I let it go on to long and never really stood my ground, but when I laid it out, Mom understood.

I step out of the elevator and make my way down the hall. Her door is open, so I walk in as she is ending her call. I take a seat in front of her and she gives me a weary smile. "What's wrong?"

She sighs, "Not much, just a Santa situation."

"What?" Confusion clear on my face. We can't have the Christmas festival without a Santa. I hope she has a backup plan that does not include me. Ugh! I honestly wish that I wasn't having to deal with this, but I see the frustration on Mom's face, and I want to help her. Before I can try to help her salvage the problem, her desk phone rings.

"Sheriff," she greets the caller. I grab my cell from my purse and adjust in the chair, figuring I have a few minutes to kill while she talks with the Sheriff about the Santa problem. "I see," she pauses and looks over at me. "I think he would make a great Santa. Tell him to suit up and meet us at Town Square."

She stands up, ending the call, and grabs her cell. She's at the door before I even have time to grab my things. "Everything work out?" I ask as we step out of her office and head for the elevators.

"Sure is. The new Santa will be at the square by the time we get there."

Wow, that's fast. I wonder who it will be. I was prepared to deal with Sheriff West, but before I can question about who the new Santa is, her cell rings and she takes another call.

4

James

I WALK across the square to the tent that is set up behind the North Pole scenery, cursing myself for letting the Sheriff talk me into helping out. He played the guilt trip of helping Kathy out, knowing that I would help her since she was like a mother to me.

I mean, it's not his fault he has the flu. And any good citizen would know that if you're sick, you need to stay away from crowds. Especially a shit ton of kids.

I pull the tent flap back and stop in my tracks when I see Holly in the corner on her phone. My eyes travel her body that is encased in a red dress, showing off curves I want to trail with my fingers, my mouth. *What is she doing here?*

She doesn't notice me, so I take my fill and bite my tongue when she turns around and I see the way her ass fills the dress as she bends to drop her phone in her purse. I take a quick look around and see other men looking at her. Probably fantasizing about her, just like I am. *Hell no.* Not on my watch.

I walk further into the tent and her head pops up. She eyes me wearily, and I just stare back. I must look like a fool in this outfit, white beard and Santa hat. When she tilts her head, I know she's about to figure it out, so I raise my eyebrow and give her a smirk. Not that she can see it, but recognition dawns on her face.

"James? You're the new Santa?" Her hand slides from my tricep to my elbow, the touch innocent in her eyes; not in

mine. “This is so soft, much better than this,” she points to her dress. I toss my bag next to hers, taking a step closer.

“I see nothing wrong with it, Holls,” I reply, silently adding, *but it would look better on my floor*. I hold that in, trying to be a gentleman. Her cheeks blush, and I tell myself to stop making her uncomfortable.

I take another step closer and lean in, eye level with her. “James,” she whispers, her teeth scrapping across her lower lip. I want to bad to take a taste, but then I remember where we are. In a crowded tent, towns people all around. Hell, her mother is somewhere in here, and I’m in a goddamn Santa suit.

I take a step back and watch her eyes dim for a second, barely noticeable. “I need to go check in with Kathy,” I tell her. She nods and I spin on my heel; leaving her temptation at my back.

I can’t give in. There’s too much at stake and I’m not the right man for her.

Once checked in, I follow the directions and get the evening started. It’s uncomfortable at first. There’s tension between Holly and I. Something that I have never felt before, but we can’t show it because kids are around.

The kids take up our time and I find myself laughing more and more. A lot of the kids know her from the school, so I get to see her interact with current and past students. And some things that the kids ask for Christmas are funny as hell, while others get me choked up.

I know that some of the kids don’t have that great of home lives; probably similar to mine. But it’s heartbreaking when a child asks for more blankets since the house is cold, or diapers for their younger sibling.

We didn’t have much, and I know what that’s like; so I try to remember those kids and when we take quick breaks, I ask Holly about them. She tells me what she can, and I absorb it like a sponge. It may not be much, but I want to make their

Christmas mornings when they see something they needed on their doorstep.

As the festival dies down, the parents shuffle the kids away and the older crowd wanders around. I know that Jake and Damien are headed to the bar downtown, and I have plans to meet them for a drink afterwards.

When Kathy gives us the okay to leave, I hustle into the tent behind Holly. My eyes were once again on her ass.

“I don’t know about you, but I need a drink after all that.” She laughs as I pick up our bags and her purse and hand it to her. “Want to grab a drink?” It’s not out of left field, at least I think it isn’t. We’ve been to the bar before, but it’s always been in a group setting.

“Yeah, why not? I’m starved too. Road House?” she asks and I nod. “But I need to change out of this.” She waves her hands up and down, indicating her dress and my eyes follow. Her phone beeps and her fingers fly over the screen, while I look my fill.

“Same. Think the courthouse is open?”

“No, it’s closed, but I just texted Honey and she said to meet her at the store and we can change while she brings everything in from her table.” She throws her phone in her purse and slings it over her shoulder.

She holds her hand out for her backpack. “I got it. Lead the way.”

As we make our way down the street, she comments on the festival. Going down memory lane on some of the past years that we have been here towards the end.

It’s a town tradition and no matter your age, everyone stops by the festival in some capacity. Those that are younger come earlier in the evening, while the older crowd comes later to take part in different activities. There’s vendor tables all over, so some shop for gifts or treats, and other’s just walk around to see everything and everyone. Mostly couples and groups of women, whereas the men are usually at Road House or The Pub.

We make it to the bakery and take turns changing as Honey puts away her things. I tried to help her, but she declines since she has all the heavy items already put up and was just boxing cookies. I shoot a quick text to Jake and Damien to let them know other plans came up. I leave out the information that the other plans is their sister. While they may be okay with us together, I'm not sure if that's where her mind is at completely.

Holly invites her to Road House, but she again declines since she had an early day today and will have one tomorrow. Holly looks upset, but it quickly vanishes when Honey tells her she'll see her next week for Christmas Eve.

We head out and walk past a few more buildings before we hit one corner of the square. With my hand on Holly's back, I lead her to cross the street towards the station. "Let's drop these bags off in my truck and then get something to eat."

"Sounds good," she answers, and we make our way there in comfortable silence.

Opening the passenger door of the truck, I stow our bags on the seat.

"Here, take this too," Holly's voice calls out, muffled by her head stuck in her sweatshirt. She wiggles her body as her arms try to remove the bulky material. Her t-shirt rises with her attempts, showing off her creamy skin.

"Let me help." I place a hand on her hip, my thumb and forefinger grazing her soft skin. Just one simple touch and I have to bite down on my lip to hold myself in check as I use my other hand and try to free her.

We're a tangle of arms and fabric as I pull her sweatshirt off while she tries to keep her t-shirt attached to her body. Once free, she stumbles closer as she gets her bearings and her scent pulls me in.

I need to back away, but she holds me captive when she looks up at me. The streetlight behind me illuminates her face and I watch different emotions pass.

Surprise. Desire. Confusion. Sadness.

She takes a step back, grabbing the sweatshirt from my hands and throwing it in the truck. She watches it land on the seat and turns back to me. “Thanks for the help. Let’s go get a burger.” She bends down to grab her purse and turns to face the street, dismissing me as she waits.

Holly

DAMMIT, I should have leaned in. *No, it's not what you think.* Yes, there was something there. I should have leaned in, pressed my lips to his. *No, he wasn't thinking like that; he was just helping a friend.*

Shaking my head slightly, I struggle with my inner monologue as we make our way across the street to Road House. I'm in the friend zone, and I need to make peace with it.

It doesn't matter that his touched burned me; it doesn't matter that I want more. I'm his best friend's little sister and I need to stay in my box. *But you want to break out of that box.*

"Doesn't matter," I mumble.

"What was that?" James asks as he stays in step next to me.

"Nothing, just deciding which burger I want." God, what a lame excuse, but it's better than telling him I'm talking to myself about him.

"Try again, Darlin'. You never waiver from the Heart Attack." I stop on the sidewalk and stare at him.

Well, hell, he just called me out. He's right, I never change my order at Road House. The Heart Attack is my favorite burger. The burger is piled high with cheese, bacon, a fried egg, avocado slices, and a mustard-mayo sauce concoction that pulls everything together. That he remembers that makes my heart beat a little faster. "Who says I can't change it up?"

“No one, but you never do. You gonna tell me what you were really thinking?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry.” I counter, taking the last few steps to the entrance. With the door open, I turn back to James. “You coming?”

He shakes his head with his signature smirk and walks my way. Taking the door from my grip, he leans down and grumbles in my ear. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten that you didn’t answer my question.” His breath coast across my ear and I try to hold the shiver back, but he sees it. “I’ll get the answer, Holly.” He stands back to full height and looks down at me. “Let’s eat.”

I nod and make my way to the stand at the front of the restaurant. The hostess completely ignores me, her eyes target on James as she gives him a shy smile. He’s quick to give her our information, and she leads us to a small booth in the back corner. James waits for me to take a seat across from the wall and he slides into the side with his back to the wall.

The hostess leaves, and our waiter appears within seconds. Malcom is a local, someone I babysat years ago, so he doesn’t give us the special speech or small talk. “James, Holly, y’all know what you want?”

“Yep,” I reply. “I’ll have the Heart Attack, medium well, sweet potato fries, and a chocolate shake.” James chuckles at my order, and I roll my eyes at him. Yeah, he was right. My order was not going to be different. I cock my head to the side and wait for him to order. I know his order just as well as he knows mine. We’re creatures of habit. Maybe that’s why I’m so in tune with him.

“I’ll have the Shroom on a Broom, medium well, extra crispy fries, and a Coke.” His eyes find mine after he orders and I just smirk.

“Got it. I’ll put it in now and bring your drinks.” James nods at Malcom and he walks away to put in our order. James looks back at me and I can’t stop the smile that forms.

“You’re just as predictable as me, ya know?”

“Maybe I am. But it’s the best burger there is.”

I shake my head. “I disagree.” He starts to plead his case about how you can’t beat swiss cheese, mushrooms, and crispy fried onions on a burger, but Malcom shows up with our drinks, ending his rant.

We both thank him for our drinks and he leaves, leaving us in our bubble. But James burst the bubble with his next question.

“Now’s the time, Holly.” His eyes hold mine, his words echoing in my head. *What is he talking about?* Now’s the time, the time for what? He must sense the confusion on my face. He leans in across the table. “What was on your mind on the walk over?”

My eyes drop to the table and I shift in my seat while I try to think of a quick lie, but my mind stalls. Literally stalls. Nothing comes to mind other than him. I pull my drink closer and fiddle with the straw. I keep him in my peripheral vision as he leans back against the back corner of the booth. He’s so calm and my nerves are bouncing all over the place.

With a big breath, I straighten my shoulder and look at him head on. I try to be confident in everything I do, so why not in this situation as well? Hell, I’m probably going to look stupid, but maybe he won’t see it that way. I can give him just a sliver of information and let him run with it, see where he takes it. “You,” I answer. One word, multiple ways for this to go. I’ll leave it in his hands.

He leans in, his actions pulling me in with an invisible rope. “What about me?”

I pause and hold his gaze. It’s hard to tell in the dim light, but it looks like excitement and want. His stare is intense, but I don’t back down. “Just you,” I reply.

“I wonder if you have the same thoughts that I have. Thoughts about you.” His words give me hope, but Malcom breaks the moment when he returns with our food.

With our burgers in front of us and Malcom gone, I look at James. “What thoughts?”

His eyes scan the restaurant and then land back at me. “Now’s not the place or the time.” He glances at my plate and back at me. “Let’s eat and then we’ll head out.”

“James,” I plead, I want to know what he means.

“Eat,” he answers before taking a bite of his burger.

I follow suit, but watch him the whole time. My nerves are a mess, and I’m only able to finish half of my plate. Which is unusual when it comes to my favorite burger. We don’t talk, both of us in our heads. My mind is all over the place, wondering what he meant. I thought I had the lead in this, but he played an Uno Reverse on my answer and now I’m stuck with different scenarios in my head.

After settling the tab, which James would not let me go dutch on, we head outside. The cool December air blows my hair around and I try to tame it, but it’s no use.

“Let me drive you to your car,” James offers.

I give him a nod, my voice lost as my brain continues to read into everything. Did he pay for my dinner because he wanted to treat me? Or was it because he felt obligated to because I’m his best friend’s sister? And now I’m back to square one, completely confused.

We make it to his truck and he holds the door as I climb in. I watch him round the hood and give him a small smile as he climbs in. The man is too handsome. I lean against the door and watch him as he drives the few blocks over to the courthouse.

He parks next to my car, and I start to gather my things. He opens my door and takes my bag and sweatshirt from my hands. After stowing them in the back seat of my car, he closes the door and leans against his truck.

I try to think of something witty to say, but my brain and mouth don’t work together. “Thanks for dinner.”

“You’re welcome,” he replies. There’s a storm in his eyes, or at least that’s what it looks like with the streetlight above us.

“I should go,” I tell him, not making any movement to open the driver’s door and get in. Something in my gut tells me we are on the edge of something new. Something life changing.

“Yeah, it’s late.” James continues to lean against his truck, watching me.

Since we’re at a standstill, I open my car door and throw my purse on the passenger seat.

“Fuck it,” James mumbles behind me. I turn to face him and he is right there. He slowly lowers his head, pressing his lips against mine as he kisses me tenderly. At first, his touch is soft and tender, but it quickly changes to something more. A deep growl vibrates through his chest while his fingers tangle in the back of my hair, pulling me closer as he takes complete control of the kiss.

His tongue brushes against mine and the world around us melts away as we get lost in each other’s arms. I feel something big building between us, erasing the doubt I had earlier.

James

I PULL AWAY, confused and frustrated in myself for taking that leap. She stands there, looking like every one of my fantasies, with her loose blonde hair and blue eyes full of desire. They tell me it was the right move. Without warning, without thinking about the consequences, I lower my mouth to hers again, kissing her with need, and want, and a promise of what could be.

Her moan is the answer I need, the permission to continue, and I do. I claim her the only way I can at the moment. Our lips and tongue battle with each other as we give way to feelings that we both have kept bottled inside. I reluctantly pull back and look at her. Her smile confirming that we are on the same page. “Something starting here. You good with this?”

She nods, and that one movement, that one acknowledgement, releases all the frustration I feel. Holly is not a one and done woman, and I don't want that with her. I want it all. I want to see where this will lead to and how we will get there.

“Good. It's getting late and I have to be up at the ass crack of dawn to get to the ranch. Let's call it a night, but text me when you get home.” I hate to end the night after that kiss, but I don't want to rush with her.

“James, I don't know what to think.” Her vulnerability shows in her voice, and I don't want her to feel that way.

“I don't regret anything. Do you?” She shakes her head no. “Then all is good now and going forward.”

“Okay,” she answers before getting in to her car and cranking over the key. The engine doesn’t crank over, just a clicking sound as she tries again. She pops the hood at my request, and I pull the jumper cables from the toolbox in my truck bed.

After a few failed attempts, I gather the cables and put them back in my truck. It’s too late to get a wrecker or take it to the mechanic shop. “Grab your stuff, Holls. I’ll drop you off at your place. It’s too late to do anything tonight.”

The drive to her apartment is quiet, both of us lost in our thoughts. I don’t want her to overthink what just happened between us. I want to give her assurance that we are on the right path. Reaching my hand over the console, I place my hand over hers that rest on her thigh, and thread my fingers with hers.

I park in front of her apartment, in her normal spot, and turn off the truck. Turning in the seat to face her, she does the same, our hands never separating. I’ve never been the hand holding type, but this with her feels right. “No doubts,” I state, letting her know where I stand.

“No doubts,” she repeats.

I give her hand a quick squeeze. “Let me walk you up.” She nods and I hop out of the truck and walk to her side. Opening her door, I hold out my hand and gather her things again. She steps down, closes the truck door, and I follow her to the front door. Dani’s car is not in her parking space, so I know Holly has the apartment to herself.

She unlocks the door and turns to face me. “Thanks for tonight.” The smile on her face is one of pure joy, one that I hope to put on her face many times to come.

“You’re welcome. It’s a night I won’t forget.” My words are true, not some lame pickup line. I never thought I would take the leap, but I don’t regret it one bit.

Before I leave, I need one more taste. I take a step forward and she leans against the doorjamb. I take her lips in another kiss. Her body responds to mine, and it makes it damn near

impossible not to want to take her to her room, spread her on her bed and finish what we started.

We both pull away, taking a moment to fill our lungs. “I should go. I don’t want to go. But I need to back away before we go too far too soon.”

She nods and slips inside her apartment. I wait to hear her door lock and then make my way back to the truck. The entire drive home, I can’t stop the smile that pulls at my lips.

“James,” Ellie calls out from behind my bedroom door.

“Yeah,” I grumble as I wipe the sleep from my eyes. It surprised me to see her at my place last night when I got home. I thought she was staying at a friend’s house for the night, and when I asked her about it, she said she changed her mind and didn’t want to go home.

I understood her not wanting to go home, hence why I gave her a key to my place. The minute I had the opportunity to move out, I took it. I just wish I could have taken Ellie with me as well. But she was too young.

“I made eggs if you want some. I know you have to leave soon, so I can wrap them in a burrito, if you want.”

I grab my cell phone from the nightstand and see that it’s a few minutes before five, the time that I set my alarm for. “Thanks, E. A burrito sounds good with some cheese.”

“Got it,” she calls out and I listen to her walk down the hallway.

I never asked her to get up when I do and make me breakfast, or to have dinner on the table on the nights she stays over. Every time I talk to her about it, she breaks my heart with her reasoning. She always says that she does these things to thank me for helping her out, that she wants to give back to me for what I have given her. She doesn’t want to make me mad for not be appreciative.

All her reasoning's stem from our mother and her parenting style. Growing up, we were told that we should be grateful that she put food on the table, that we had clothes on our back, and that there was a roof over our head. It didn't matter that the food was a case of ramen, that the clothes were washed out hand-me-downs from the second-hand stores, or that the leaky roof over our head never had heat or AC. We were taught to show her our gratitude, or what we needed to survive was taken away.

We lived like kings for the first few days after her disability check came. But the monthly money that they gave her dried up real quick when she had to support her habits. It didn't matter that she had two mouths to feed, clothe, or take care of.

I climb out of bed and head to the shower with hopes to wash away the memories of my mother.

Once dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, I grab my flannel and head out to the kitchen. Ellie has two breakfast burritos wrapped in foil on the counter for me. "You didn't have to do this, sis," I tell her as I grab them and the travel coffee she made from the counter.

"I know, but I did. I'm trying, James, but some habits are hard to break. And I was hungry, so there is that too." I start to reply, but she cuts me off. "And I took an early shift, so I have to be at the store at six. So I was getting up already."

"Okay. You got a ride to the store?"

"Yeah, Claire is picking me up on her way in. She starts at six too."

"Sounds good. Later." I head out and hop in my truck.

I eat my breakfast on the drive to the ranch, my thoughts drifting back to Holly. Once parked, I send her a quick good morning text and hop out to start the day.

After a few hours running the pasture lines on the four-wheeler, I pull it into the barn and unload the supplies I brought with me. Once finished in the back, I head up to the front and find Jake, Damien, and Ben waiting for me.

They all wear different looks as they stare at me. “What?”

“Something’s different with you today,” Damien states as he walks closer, inspecting me.

“Does it have anything to do with you bailing on us last night?” Jake adds with a smirk.

Well shit, guess I need to let them know. Not sure if Holly wants me to or not, but if I want her the way I do, I need to make sure they stay true to their word of being okay with this. “Had dinner last night with Holly.”

Both Jake and Damien smile, but Ben watches me. The big brother act in full mode with him.

I take a step closer to him, man to man. Last night I got a taste of her and I won’t back away. I wait for him to say something, and then it happens. His lips curl up and he lets out a chuckle. “It’s about damn time.”

I’m caught off guard by his reaction. It wasn’t what I was expecting. Before I can question him, Henry calls out from behind me. “It’s about damn time for what?”

Holly

THE PAST WEEK has been a blur of nerves and excitement.

When I came out to the farm the Saturday after the festival, James knew I was nervous. We had shared multiple text messages that morning. James told me I had nothing to worry about, but I wasn't so sure.

Unbeknownst to me, he had already talked to my brothers, and apparently my dad had walked in on the conversation. He knew that Jake and Damien would be okay. But he was worried about Ben and dad. But to his surprise, and actually my surprise, both Ben and dad were cool with James and I. However, they gave him the typical you hurt her; we hurt you speech.

When I pulled up to the house, James walked out of the barn straight to me, pulled me close, and gave me one of his kisses. There are hoots and hollers from all of my family members, and it was then that I noticed my brothers and dad had followed him and my mother was on the front porch. I could feel my face turning beet red, but I didn't care. Everyone I loved was okay with the situation, and I wasn't going to upset the apple cart.

Despite our small public display of affection, and that I wanted to be next to him all day, we went our separate ways and did what we had to do at the farm. We spent the evenings that he wasn't at the station or doing late chores together. Simple evenings of making dinner, watching movies, and talking. Every evening ending in kisses and heavy petting.

I was ready for more, and it felt like James was too, but he never acted on it and since I had little experience, I was following his lead.

But tonight I was hoping for a different ending and I had a few tricks up my sleeve.

It was Christmas Eve, the night that mom held her annual get together with family and friends. It's a night of gathering for amazing finger foods, fun games, and good times.

So, here I stand in the kitchen helping mom put together a couple more charcuterie boards before the guests arrive.

"You look happy, really happy," mom says when she bumps me with her hip at the kitchen counter.

I look at her and I take a moment to think and I know the smile on my face answers her question, but I still give her the words. "I am. I'm really happy, Mom."

"That's good. It suits you and him."

Before I can reply, Dani and Honey come in from outside through the kitchen door. Both of their arms are full of boxes from Honey's Sweet Treats.

"Where do you want these, Mrs. Kay?" Dani asks as she walks toward us.

"I have some serving platters over there on the breakfast table. Let's go ahead and put those on some of them and place them on the dining room table."

Honey and Dani get to work on unloading the delicious pastries. And before long, we have everything set up on the kitchen counters, island, breakfast table and the dining room table for people to grab their food.

I hear the kitchen door open but my back is to it, but the second I hear boots against the tile I know it's him. His hands grip my hips as he leans down to my ear so only I can hear him. "Looking good there, darlin'."

I was never one for public displays of affection, but his small touches are exactly what I want and need. The added bonus is that it doesn't make anyone upset to see the little

touches. I thought for sure my brothers or my dad would give him a glare, but they just look away with a smirk. However, my mom just watches and smiles every time, her heart happy at what she sees.

I turn to the side and he loosens his hold, giving me access as I lean up and give him a quick kiss on his cheek. He looks good in his new jeans and button up. It's the only rule for Mom's get together. Everyone dresses nicely. It doesn't have to be extravagant, just nice.

Hearing more people come in from the front of the house, I know it's time for me to go change out of what I'm wearing and into the dress that I picked solely for tonight. I was so in love with the elf dress I wore last week that I found a similar one online in a deep green, and thanks to Amazon's two day shipping it arrived yesterday.

"I'll be back. Let me go change. I'll see you in a minute," I tell him as I step away. "Dani, you gonna help me?" She nods and follows me up the stairs to my childhood bedroom. With a few twists and turns, I'm in the dress as she zips me up. I go to the bathroom to fix my hair and apply a light dusting of makeup. Nothing major since I can barely do anything, but just a little highlight here and there.

I head down the stairs into the living room and see that more people have arrived, and the gathering is just getting started. Ellie and Honey are in the corner talking, so I make my way over to them.

Ellie is such a sweet girl and I feel for her, with the mother that she has. I know she's had a rough time. But I know James is trying to take care of as much as he can now that he is able. And when it comes to the things he can't do, there's always mom or me. I know it's hard on both of them, but they stick together. She's fortunate that James has a place for her and a huge surprise coming her way.

Ellie wants her independence, but at seventeen she still has a year to go. I know she wishes she could do some things that others her age are doing, but she just doesn't have the means to do so. She's working on that with her part-time job, saving

money for a car. But what she doesn't know is that James has been working hard to get that for her. He was able to buy her a used car and fix up some things on it so that it's safe and drivable for her. It'll be his Christmas gift to her this year and I cannot wait to see her receive it.

"Hey, sweet girl. How you doing?" I ask her as I come up to her side. She looks over and beams at me. Just seeing the smile on her lips and the excitement in her eyes makes my heart full. I'm so proud of how much she's grown in the last few years that James has been there for her. I know he beats himself up that he left her there with their mom, but he had to get out and make something of himself so that he could make a better life for her.

"Hey, Holls. I'm good. You look real pretty in that dress."

"Yes, she does," James replies walking up behind me. He wraps his arm around my back, with his hand resting on my hip, and pulls me close to him.

I melt into him and look up. He gives me his smile and a quick kiss on my forehead. "Did you get some food yet?" I ask him. I nibbled here and there while we prepared the food, but I ready to dig in.

"Was watin' on you," he tells me before looking at Ellie and Honey. "What about y'all?"

"We were headed that way," Honey replies as she turns and walks off, the three of us following her.

The night progresses with laughter, good food, and gifts. Mom always has a gift handpicked for every guest. They're small things, but each one matches the person who receives it. James and Mom worked together on her gift to Ellie. We usually go around the room, each person taking a turn, so Mom made sure that she started the gift opening so that Ellie was the last to open her gift.

James stands behind her while she unwraps the gift from Mom. When she pulls out a self-defense wristlet, her brows bunch in confusion, but the set of car fresheners has them

bunching more. Before she can say thank you, James is holding a set of keys in front of her.

Her screech of excitement has everyone laughing, some of us with tears in our eyes.

“Is this for real?” She asks James as she looks up at him.

“It is. You wanna take a look?”

“Yes...yes...let’s go,” she replies while constantly nodding her head up and down.

We all follow Ellie and James out of the house. The weather has gotten a lot colder as the sun set for the day, but the excitement of watching Ellie takes precedence. She’s ecstatic as she hops in and cranks over the engine. James hops in the passenger seat and after talking to her for a moment, she rolls down the window. “We’re gonna drive down by the rentals,” she calls out.

We all give her a wave and watch her drive down to the fork in the drive. When she makes the turn to the rental drive, I turn back and head into the house, noticing that there are only a few people still outside. Mom waits for me on the porch and we head in.

It’s getting late and the guest gather their things and say their goodbyes. By the time that James and Ellie return about ten minutes later, the house is clearing out.

Dani comes over and wraps me in a hug. “Merry Christmas, Holly. I put your bag in your car.” James doesn’t know it, but I’m staying with him tonight. Nothing has to happen, but I want to wake up on Christmas morning and his face is the first thing I see.

“Thanks, girl. Merry Christmas, I’ll see you in a day or two,” I tell her as she walks down the porch stairs.

“Or three or four,” she replies with a chuckle.

I just shake my head at her as James and Ellie come outside. She gives me a hug, her smile huge. “Best Christmas ever,” she exclaims as she hops down the stairs. “I’ll see you at the house,” she calls out to James.

He gives her a wave and then pulls me close. “Have I told you that you look amazin’ in this dress?”

“A time or two.” I tell him. “So Ellie is staying over tonight?”

“Yeah, I think it’s going to be permanent until she is eighteen and gets her own place or goes off to college.” He looks worried when he says it, but he shouldn’t be. “That gonna be a problem?”

I gasp at his question. “Absolutely not. You know I love her like a little sister, and what you are doing for her is amazing. Why would I ever fault you for that?”

He shakes his head, clearing his thoughts. “I was worried it would bother you. It sounded like you were upset she’s headed to my house tonight.”

“That wasn’t my intention when I asked that question. I asked, because I was hoping you had the house to yourself tonight. I was going to surprise you with a sleepover.” It sounds lame to my ears, but it was the reason I asked. I wanted a night of just James and me.

“You know my room is at the other end of the house.” He smiles down at me, desire in his eyes. “I figured you would stay here. Isn’t that the tradition?”

He’s right. Ever since we all moved out of the big house, we always come and stay the night on Christmas Eve. “I think we need to make our own traditions,” I tell him as I lean up and steal a kiss.

“Let’s go say goodbye and I’ll follow you home.”

I give him a nod, and we do just that. No one bats an eye when I tell them I’ll see them in the morning.

As I pull out of the driveway, the taillights from James behind me flash in my rearview. This is the beginning of us, and I can’t wait.

James

I'M NOT USUALLY a nervous man, but tonight is different. Following Holly to my house, my doubts start to kick in. She may have called it a sleepover, but from the look in her eyes, sleep was the last thing on her mind. Don't get me wrong, I want everything with her, but I don't want to rush her. She parks next to Ellie's car in the driveway, and I pull next to the other side of Ellie's car on the grass. I press the garage door opened, shut off my truck and hop out of my truck.

Holly emerges from her car as I make my way to her. I take the bag from her hands and pull her close.

"I hope I wasn't too forward," she asks as she bites down on her lip.

"Nope. I like the idea of you here, in my bed." She smirks and shakes her head as she pulls away and enters the house. The house is dark, except for the light over the stove. "Take this back to my room. Let me lock up and I'll be back." I hand over her bag and step away. She heads to my room and I lock up the house, stopping to check on Ellie before I head back to Holly. Her bedroom door is closed, but I see light shining from underneath the door. With a quick tap on the door, I hear Ellie, "come in."

"Night," I tell her and she says the same. I close her door and head back to my room. Opening the door, I see Holly sitting on the edge of my bed, still in her killer dress. Good, I wanted to take that off her all night, and now I will have the opportunity to do so.

“Come here, Holly.”

She doesn't hesitate as she makes her way to me. Once she is within reaching distance, I pull her close and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her against my chest. I don't want to rush her, and having her this close my body aches for her.

Unable to wait a moment longer, I crash my lips to hers. Her hands grip at my waist, pulling me closer as a moan vibrates through her as I lean in and press my hard dick against her center. Her hands drift from my hip and meet at the button of my jeans, her fingers gripping the denim, making me instantly hard.

I reluctantly pull back from her lips and stare down at her. Her cheeks and neck are flush pink with desire and she looks at me and whispers, “I love you.” Her eyes bug out at her confession and I want to tell her the same, but is this what love feels like? Do I know what real love is?

My hesitation at her declaration has her trying to pull away, but I hold her close. She lowers her head and stares at my shoulder, lost in thought. “Look at me, Holly.” She lifts her head and stares back at me, vulnerability shining in her eyes.

“Hearing those words from your mouth, they mean something. And to be honest, I think I've loved you for a long time, Holly. I don't know. Didn't know what love was for a long time. Some may say it's too soon, but I've known you for years. And what I felt for you years ago when you were Jake's little sister has morphed into more. And when I started to think of how I wanted to be with you, I knew I want to do this for the long run. This isn't a quick fling. I want to take care of you, to see you happy, to be there for everything good, bad, and sad. Does that make me a sap? I don't fucking care. Because with you by my side, I can handle anything. So if that's love, then that's what I have for you.”

There, I've laid it all out. She leans up and presses her lips to mine, but before I can further the kiss, she pulls back. “That's what I want from you. And that's what I want with you. The good, bad, sad, and everything in between.” Her hands cup my face, “I want you James I want you like I've

never wanted anyone before.” Her hands trail down my neck, resting at the collar of my shirt, before her fingers slowly unbutton the first few buttons from the top of my shirt. “ Make me yours.”

Her words fuel my need and my hands wrap around her back, my fingers finding the zipper on the back of her dress. Slowly, I pull the tab down while she works at unbuttoning the rest of my shirt. Her hands push away my shirt from my shoulders and pulling it from where it’s tucked into my jeans.

With the offending garment off, she throws my shirt and I stand bare chested before her. I mirror her movement once I have her dress unzipped. She raises her arms and I gather the material at her hips and pull it up.

She stands before me in a coordinating pair of black sheer undergarments. Her nipples are outlined in the fabric and I can’t wait to get a taste.

“You’re fucking beautiful, Holly.” She’s perfection. All the curves. Everyplace I want to explore with my hands and mouth.

“You’re not so bad yourself there, cowboy.”

“Darlin’, you have no idea what you do to me.”

She looks down and can and stares at the bulge in my pants. Her lips curving up as she licks her lips. “I think I might have an idea.” She gets closer and reaches for my button on my jeans again.

Her fingers tremble, and I cover her hands with mine. “Are you sure?” I asked her, not wanting to rush her, and wanting everything to be perfect. I’m not one who worries about making sex perfect for females. But this woman is like none other. She’s mine and I want to show her what that means.

“So ready.” She unhooks the button and unzips my pants. She tugs on the denim and they fall to the floor.

I step out of the jeans and kick them away, standing in a pair of black boxer briefs. She takes her time looking me over, while I do the same again to her. She doesn’t look disappointed. It’s not like she doesn’t know what I look like

without a shirt. She's seen me bare chested a couple hundred times. Between swimming at the lake, working on the farm, or any other time the Georgia heat was beating down.

Once we have both had our share of checking out the other, she takes a deep breath as the palms of her hands roll over my bare chest. Her praising look sets me off and I can't take it anymore. I need to taste her again. I pull her close, our lips crash. Both of us taking what we want and need from each other.

I reach down and grab her ass, squeezing her perfect peach. Running my hand lower, I grip where her ass meets her thighs and lift her up. She instantly wraps her legs around my waist, her fiery core pressed against my cock. Her little whimper fueling me on.

I walk the short distance to my bed and gently lay her down. I grudgingly pull my lips from hers and breakaway from her hold. I stare down at her and burn the image in my brain. Seeing her laid out before me is a memory I never want to forget it.

My fingers itch to touch her, and they trail lightly down her cheek, her neck, her collarbone, her shoulders, stopping at her breast. My lips follow that trail, kissing, licking and nibbling until I'm at her full mounds, wanting more. I move my hands to her back and she lifts up as I release the clasp of her bra and lowering it down her shoulders. She moves her arms and I pull the fabric back, revealing her perfectly round breast. Her nipples harden under my gaze and my mouth waters as I drop my mouth to one of her nipples, sucking and nipping at her sensitive flesh.

Her heart, her body, everything about her calls to me, like she was made for me. It took me forever to get to this point. But I'm glad I didn't turn the other direction, didn't let my doubts cloud my mind.

With her head thrown back, her body arches toward my mouth. I switch to her other breast, giving the twin peak the same attention. Her moans surround me while my cock throbs against my boxer briefs, waiting to be released. But I have to

hold it in, because right now is all about her. I want to taste all of her as much as I want to be inside her. My dick is going to have to wait his turn.

Releasing her nipple, I kiss my way down to her panty line. Hooking a finger on each side, I pull the fabric down her toned and tan legs. I look up to make sure that she's doing okay, and she looks back through hooded eyes. I kiss and nibble her inner thighs and she opens wider for me, showing me her desire. Her wet center glistens as I lean down and swipe my tongue through her folds. Her taste explodes on my tongue, and I want more.

“Oh, God ... please don't stop,” she pleads.

“I'm just getting started here, Holly. We're in for a long night,” I answer, my voice just as needy as hers.

Seeing her here in my bed, bare and beautiful, takes my breath away. Her look of trust and desire is my undoing. I curve my hands under her ass, pulling her closer as I lower my mouth between her thighs.

I start slow and steady, teasing her clit with my tongue and lips. Her hips buck against me and I relish the effect I'm having on her. Her little moans and whimpers fill the room, urging me on. I love how her body responds to my every touch. I want to watch her as her walls come crashing down. I want to see her body twist and jolt as she comes, to see her cheeks and chest blush red with desire. I want it all. After a few more flicks of my tongue, her orgasm takes hold, her entire body begins to quiver and shake uncontrollably.

Holly

HE HAS ME ON EDGE, right at the point where I know I'm about to fall over. When he adds his fingers into the mix, my orgasm takes off. Warm sensations float throughout my body. My fingertips and toes curl, and my walls clamp around his thick digits. My eyes squeeze shut as aftershocks, causing my muscles to twitch. I've never had an orgasm of this magnitude and I slowly wait for the haze I'm in to clear.

When I open my eyes, I see James leaning over me, his lips leaving small kisses on my shoulder. "You okay?" His eyes light up as he cocks his head to the side and smirks.

"More than good," I reply with a lazy smile. My body is limp from my orgasm, but I want more. He nods and leans over me to reach the nightstand. When he opens the drawer, I know what he's reaching for, but I don't want it.

"I'm on the pill," I tell him as I place my hand on his forearm. He stares back at me, processing my words. "I don't want anything between us." Yeah, I know it's a risk, but I want James skin to skin. I want to feel all of him.

"You sure? I've never gone bare before. I'm clean. I just had a physical for the department two months ago, and it's been longer than that since I've been with someone intimately." He lays his truths out, and I know I made the right decision.

This is us, James and Holly, and there will be nothing to separate us as we move to the next level. It may be too soon for someone to tell them they love them, or to have sex

without a condom, but not for us. We have been building our friendship for years and now we are where we're meant to be.

James positions himself between my thighs, his eyes on me, waiting for permission. I give him a nod and he slowly brushes the head of his cock against my wet entrance. His touch brings my body back to life, the lazy feeling from my orgasm gone as he continues to bring us closer.

I wrap my legs around his body and dig my heels into his lower back, pulling him closer. An animalistic growl vibrates through his chest as he pushes his cock in further. He takes his time easing in and out until he's full seated inside.

"So full," I moan as James gives me a few seconds to accommodate his size. He's bigger than I've ever had, bigger than any toy I've used. The stretch is a little painful, but then it turns to intense sexual need when he drags himself out and slams back in.

My eyes lock with his as he drives harder and I see that he's there, but holding off his release. I want him to lose himself, to experience his orgasm with the intensity of what I felt earlier. I rock against him, matching him stroke for stroke, but he still holds back.

His hands grip my hips and he lifts my ass off the bed, pulling me closer to him. Half of my body is suspended up as he holds me and continues to pump in and out, hitting me deeper and at a new angle.

My body begins to tremble and I know I'm in for another mind blowing orgasm. His thumb finds my clit, and it takes seconds before I'm lost in my release. Through the haze, I feel him release inside me and my orgasm continues.

He slowly pulls back and we both moan at the loss. "Let me get you cleaned up," he tells me as he slips from the bed and walks to his master bath. After he cleans me up, I still lay on the bed in a comatose position, my body wrung out from our activities.

It should embarrass me that I am laying like a starfish on his bed completely naked, but I don't have the energy to care.

He pulls the covers back on one side and I roll over on my stomach, gripping the pillow as my eyes get heavy. When James gets into bed on the other side, my eyes snap open as I watch him, watch me.

“That was ... amazing ... wonderful ... “ I tell him as I look for the right word. How do you describe what just happened?

“It was everything,” he answers. His answer sums it up perfectly.

“Everything,” I mumble as he pulls me close to his side. My leg tangles with his as I lean against his side, my arm stretches over his stomach, and my head rest against his chest. “Everything,” I mumble again as the warmth of his body and the floating endorphins in my body take hold and pull me into slumber.

Hours later, James wakes me up with sweet kisses on my shoulder and neck. When I finally break free from my sleep, he surprises me with the words I have longed to hear from his lips.

“Good morning, darlin’. Merry Christmas, love.”

I can’t stop the smile that spreads across my face, or the butterflies that swarm inside my stomach.

“Merry Christmas, James.”

About Author

Elizabeth is a wife to Mr. Fix-It, mother to two girls and 2 dogs. Elizabeth lives in Georgia and when she is not writing, crafting, or working, you can find her with her family camping in their home away from home or out on the soccer fields.

Elizabeth Kozloff loves escaping to her fictional worlds and seeing couples overcome obstacles to be with the ones they love. Most times you can find Elizabeth with her phone or kindle in her hand, devouring a new book or re-reading a favorite.

For updates on new releases stalk me on

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Santa's Sack

Layla Delaney

Prologue

Pearl

“I GOT THE JOB!” I scream.

“What?” Annie breathes. “The one at Pure Bliss?”

“Yes!”

Her jaw almost drops off her face. But as realization sets in, she smiles. Then she grabs the closest pillow and lobs it at me.

“You lucky bitch!”

“I know!”

“Let’s go on the website and check out the guys again,” she squeals. “I wonder which one you’ll be paired up with?”

Just the thought of engaging in sexual play with *any* of the men who currently model for Pure Bliss is getting me wet. Sure, there is no expectation that we will actually have sex, but they didn’t say that it was prohibited, either. So, the fact that I am newly single is probably a good thing. My last boyfriend bit the dust after I showed him a book cover I had modeled for. The sight of me underneath another man in nothing but my underwear sent him into a fit. In all honesty, despite the look on our faces, there was nothing romantic or sexual about the entire thing. Especially since he was gay.

That didn’t matter to Alec.

So, good riddance. And hello to possibly enjoying my new job far more than I should.

“I wonder what their names are?” Annie ponders as she pulls up the couple’s toys page.

“Who cares,” I laugh. “When you’re hot as fuck, your name doesn’t matter.”

She laughs at this, too. Then we openly salivate over the very provocative pictures in front of us. Pure Bliss is a sex toy company. One that was built from the ground up by a local businesswoman three years ago. And while I’ve managed quite well as a model in this city for the last five years, I’ll admit that I was starting to get a little bored with things. I think this gig at Pure Bliss is exactly what I need to spice things up. Especially since it’s for a special holiday collection they’ll be releasing for a limited time just one week before Christmas.

“I wonder if they give you toys to play with at home,” Annie wonders.

“You don’t have enough?” I tease her.

“You can *never* have too many sex toys,” she grins.

For the next twenty minutes, we get lost down the virtual rabbit hole of couple’s toys and the hot men modeling them. Truth be told, I’d let any of them have their way with me. But for some reason, the one with jet black hair and light blue eyes piques my interest the most.

“Him,” I tell Annie as I point.

“Mmm, yeah,” she sighs. “He looks like a naughty boy.”

“Whose name is Clarence,” I giggle.

“If that sexy thing was staring down at me while owning my pleasure, I’d scream his name all night long.”

“Same,” I laugh.

“Okay,” she groans. “We need to stop or I’m going to have to self-medicate, like, *now*.”

We laugh harder at this and go about the rest of our evening. When I finally crawl into bed to sleep, my mind is spinning with visions of the men of Pure Bliss and what it’s

going to be like working with them. I'm smiling as I get to work with their number one selling female masturbator. This will put me in a good mood when I meet with them tomorrow. And since I'm going to be well-acquainted with their products, I might as well start now.

1

Griffin

“HER NAME IS PEARL,” Zane says with a smirk.

“And?”

“And she’s gorgeous and *very* excited about this gig.”

“Good to know,” I nod. “That should make things easier.”

“Anything is better than Karen,” he grumbles.

“Agreed,” I chuckle. “I don’t understand how a woman so physically attractive has such an aversion to intimate contact. Why she ever wanted this gig to begin with, I’ll never know.”

“She was trying to make her boyfriend jealous,” he shrugs.

“Did it work?”

“It could be why he left her.”

“Is that why she quit?”

“Probably,” he grins.

I laugh at this and settle on the couch in his studio. Zane and I are waiting for the new model to arrive for introductions and a rundown of our job for the next few weeks. Not to mention a little test to see how she’ll react to the openness of all things sexual in this company. This was Elana’s idea. She’s the CEO of Pure Bliss. And since Zane isn’t just her photographer but her husband, they’re more than willing to get physical in front of anyone. It’s part of the reason everyone is so comfortable working here.

After all, if you work for a company that sells sex, it shouldn't make you blush. You should be open about it. Not to mention your preferences and your own opinions about the products sold. Only when that happens can a company like this keep flourishing. And flourish it has. Especially in the last year since Zane was brought on to take the catalogue pictures to the next level.

I'm drawn out of my thoughts when his studio door opens and Elana walks in. Zane and I rise to greet them. Of course, Zane is on Elana in seconds, devouring her mouth in a deep kiss and effectively blocking my view of our new model. And my new couple's partner for pictures. When he finally breaks contact, they're both smiling. Then Zane pulls her further into his studio.

And I get my first look at Pearl.

I smile at the physical manifestation of my perfect woman. Tall, curvy, big tits, and flaming red hair. I haven't seen her ass yet, but I'm sure it will be perfect, too. When she's introduced to Zane, she gives him a smile that speaks to my cock. She's wild and adventurous. Not to mention gorgeous. Thank fuck. I can't wait to see what kind of heat we can bring together. I'm already smiling when Elana gestures in my direction. When Pearl's eyes lock with mine, they widen for an instant. Then her smile morphs into something even more devilish.

"This is Griffin Marks," Elana says. "He'll be your partner for the couple's toys. Griffin, this is Pearl White."

I almost chuckle at her full name, but I'd rather not start off on the wrong foot. Instead, I step forward and offer my hand. She slides her fingertips over my palm until I can slowly raise them to my mouth.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Pearl."

"Likewise," she breathes as I kiss her knuckles.

"Please, have a seat. Let's talk."

I lead her over to the couch. Zane settles on the adjacent love seat and pulls Elana onto his lap. But Pearl's eyes are on

me. Which is fine. I keep her hand in mine and sit. She sits close so her knee is touching mine.

“So, this is the photo studio?” she asks.

“Yes,” I nod. “It’s set up for just about everything.”

“What exactly do you mean by everything?” she smiles.

“Elana has a very specific vision for the pictures taken to showcase her products,” I explain. “In order to capture that vision, we’re expected to use those products for their intended purpose.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“I’m a stranger to you,” I point out.

“I’ve been in intimate positions with other models before that were strangers to me,” she laughs.

“This is different, Pearl,” I explain. “We’ll be as close to naked as possible.”

“I’m okay with that.”

“Have you ever posed in the nude?”

“No.”

“If you’re going to come, I’m going to see your pussy. And so will Zane.”

Her breath catches at this. But her pupils seem to dilate. She’s turned on. Something also given away by the slight tense in her hand.

“All of this was explained to me at my interview,” she breathes.

“Saying you’re okay with it is one thing,” I say in a low voice. “Being okay with it when it happens is another.”

As if on cue, Elana moans. Pearl’s head snaps to the side. But she doesn’t have a full view. To my absolute delight, she turns her body to watch. I keep her hand in mine and slide close behind her.

“What are they doing?” she pants.

I take in the sight of Zane pleasuring his wife as she straddles his lap. His face is cradled in her hands as he kisses the swell of her breasts. She rocks her hips back and forth as he mostly likely pumps her pussy with a vibrator.

“He’s making her come,” I growl.

“I can see that,” she breathes. “I just...didn’t realize she was so...*close* with her employees.”

I smile at this. Then I put my mouth against her ear to clue her in.

“He’s not just her employee, he’s her husband.”

“Holy fuck,” she pants. “And...do they do this often?”

“Whenever the urge strikes them.”

I glance down and enjoy the sight of her heaving breasts as she watches. Her hand is still in mine, so I slide my free hand around her waist and pull her against me. She shudders and I smile.

“How does it make you feel to watch them?”

“It makes me want to come.”

“I can make you come,” I growl.

She snaps her head toward me. Her eyes are dark with desire and need. The sight of it makes my cock harden.

“Yes,” she breathes. “Make me come.”

I grip her hand tighter and rise, pulling her up with me. She flashes me a gorgeous smile as I lead her over to the dresser. When I open the top drawer, she gasps. Then I gesture toward the array of toys.

“Pick your poison, Pearl.”

For this, she releases my hand, setting both of hers on the drawer as she looks things over. In less than thirty seconds, she grabs a clit stimulator. She smiles as she hands it to me.

“Where do you want me?” she asks.

“On the bed. And this works through panties,” I say as I lift the toy. “Whatever’s comfortable for you.”

With a wicked smirk, she lifts the hem of her dress up to reveal her uncovered pussy. Then she sits on the edge of the bed and parts her legs. I make a show of adjusting myself before I kneel and push her legs further apart. She moans, bites her lip, and leans back on her elbows.

“Is this comfortable for you?” she asks.

“Absolutely.”

With that, I turn on the stimulator and slap it on her clit. She gasps, her body jumping for a moment. Then a long, low moan leaves her. And fuck me if she doesn't immediately start to rock her hips. My focus alternates between her face and her pussy. I can't decide which sight is more erotic. When Elana cries out, so does Pearl. Then Zane groans in response.

I smile and take a chance with my next move. Very gently, I bend my head and lick the inside of her thigh. She gasps and opens even wider for me.

“Jesus, you're fucking perfect,” I growl.

I increase the intensity of the stimulator just as Elana and Zane walk over to watch. I smile up at them for only a moment before bending my head to lick the inside of her other thigh. And that's when her orgasm claims her.

And she fucking marks me.

Pearl

MY RELEASE LEAVES me in great spurts. For a moment, I worry about Griffin's face being in the line of fire. But when he moans and leans in closer, I relax and let go. I cry out as my back arches. Griffin keeps the stimulator on me, prolonging one of the most delightful orgasms I've ever experienced. I'm so lost in it; I never hear the click of Zane's camera.

When the sensations start to fade, I slowly let myself collapse onto the mattress. My eyes are closed as I try to catch my breath. Then my head falls to the side as a gentle hand caresses my cheek. I force my eyes open only to find the deliciously sexy Griffin hovering over me. A smile of satisfaction on his face.

"Fuck," I breathe. "I need one of those."

Griffin chuckles. So do Elana and Zane, who are both standing at the end of the bed. Reluctantly, I look away from Griffin and smile at them.

"If that was a test, I hope I passed," I giggle.

"With flying colors," Elana winks. "I think you're exactly what we need."

When she says this, her eyes flit up to Griffin for a moment. And I wonder if there's more to her words. Not that I took this job hoping to find a man, but I'm certainly not complaining about the connection between us.

"Thank you," I breathe as I sit up.

Griffin slides his large hand across my back to help me. When I move to stand, he does as well. Then I notice his very obvious arousal. I turn and smile up at him.

“Let me return the favor.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Oh, I want to,” I smile. “Pick your poison, Griffin.”

Even though his face is damp with my desire, he turns to the dresser and pulls out a male masturbator. Then he settles on the chaise lounge, parting his legs on either side of it as he undoes his pants and frees his very magnificent cock. Without hesitation, I settle between his legs and watch while he draws it down his length. Not wanting to do anything wrong, I make another simple request.

“Show me what to do.”

He smiles, turns it on, and starts to stroke himself. His entire body jerks for a moment before he settles. I watch for a few more seconds before I take over. A low growl leaves him when I do. I glance up and watch as his head falls back on his shoulders. Then I settle in to truly return the favor. Several minutes pass as I focus on my task. Finally, the head of his cock starts to swell. And he lifts his head to breathe his encouragement.

“That’s it,” he pants. “Come on, Pearl. Get me off.”

I smile and work him a little harder. When I look up, his eyes are locked on me. And the look in them is damn near hot enough to make me come again. But it’s his turn, now. So, I give what encouragement I can.

“Come for me, Griffin,” I whisper. “Come all over me.”

A great roar leaves him as he sits up and threads his hand into my hair. My lips part on a gasp. And then I feel his cum on my chin. My eyes close for a moment and I moan. When I look at him again, he’s smiling. But I don’t stop moving until he’s completely spent, and he collapses back onto the chaise. I settle back on my heels and release him.

We stare at each other for a long time. Quietly taking each other in. His face is still glistening with my release and Lord knows his is all over my dress as well as my chin. I'm about to say something when Elana appears beside us with two towels. I laugh as I take mine. Then I look back to Griffin.

"Don't worry, I'm no Monica Lewinski," I tease.

He chuckles at this. Elana laughs and invites us over to Zane's computer to check out the pictures he took. Griffin quickly wipes off his face before leaning forward to help me. This entire situation should feel awkward. But nothing about this man is unsettling. Except for maybe his good looks and the bad boy gleam in his eyes.

When he's satisfied, he tucks his cock away while I stand. I take both our towels and lay them on the dresser. Before I can say more, he settles his hand on my back and leads me over to a large worktable where Elana sits close to Zane as he does something on his computer. When we sit at the two empty chairs, Elana is beaming.

"You two have amazing chemistry," she smiles.

"Especially for knowing each other less than an hour," Zane chuckles. "I can't wait to see how much better things get after you really get to know each other."

I smile at this. Then I chance a look at Griffin. His eyes are already on me. And I can't help but to question their excitement.

"Have you had a problem getting models for your company?" I ask Elana.

"Given what we pay, there's no problem getting models," she smiles. "The problem is finding models who are, how should I put this nicely? Uninhibited?"

"Well," I laugh. "I've always been more than open when it comes to my sex life. And besides, if you can't have fun at your job, what's the point?"

Elana and Zane smile and share a look when I say this. Once again, I look back at Griffin. He's still smiling when he

leans forward, his eyes dropping to my lips for a brief moment before he speaks.

“I think we’re going to have a great deal of fun working together, Pearl,” he says in a low voice. “Maybe too much fun.”

“Is there such a thing?” I challenge.

His eyes twinkle for a moment before he answers.

“I hope not.”

I smile wider before turning my attention back to Zane’s computer. For the next ten minutes, he shows me what he’s already captured between us. And while I knew what to expect after checking out the Pure Bliss website, I’m a little giddy to have provided something equally drool-worthy. When he finishes, Elana rises and invites us into the testing room with the other models who will be posing for the holiday edition toys.

She details the purpose of each new toy before passing them around. The mood is light, but the undercurrent of sexual tension is there. Before she releases us, she hands us each a box with our own set of toys. And instructions to test them all this weekend so we’re ready to start shooting next week.

I’m as delighted about this as everyone else. When we leave the room, Griffin introduces me to the rest of the models. There is another couple who photograph together like Griffin and I will, and the others model only the solo female and male toys. We chat for a bit before slowly making our way toward the exit. Griffin stays close to me and even walks me to my car.

“So, Pearl, are you in a relationship with anyone?”

“Not anymore,” I laugh.

“Why is that funny?”

“Because my last boyfriend left me after I posed for a romance book cover.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Although his reaction to it was what they wanted, it wasn’t what he really thought.”

“I get that.”

“Are *you* in a relationship?” I ask lightly.

“Not yet,” he smiles.

“Not yet?” I laugh. “What’s that supposed to-”

He cuts off my question with a kiss. My gasp of shock allows him to deepen the contact. And God help me, I allow it. For a long time. When he finally pulls back, he gives me a wicked smile.

“Think about me when you come tonight,” he rasps.

“As long as you think about me, too.”

“Believe me, I will.”

Then he winks and turns away. Leaving me wet and wanting.

Damn him.

Griffin

THE PURE BLISS holiday collection of toys is more than satisfying. But nothing quite beats imagining Pearl at my mercy while I'm tending to my own pleasure. That woman is more than I ever expected. And everything that I want.

Modeling for a sex toy company makes it very difficult to keep a girlfriend. Especially when I'm contracted to model with other women. But right now, I'm elated that I'm not committed to anyone else. If I were, I'd probably break things off to pursue Pearl. Of course, I left her wanting on Friday. I just hope that doesn't land her in someone else's bed. My hope was that it would make her desperate for me. As desperate as I am for her by the end of a weekend of countless solo orgasms.

When I walk into the building, I'm smiling at the thought of getting up close and personal with Pearl again. So much so, my cock is already starting to rise to the occasion. Something that it rarely did with Karen. More than once I had to imagine someone else to give Zane the pictures he wanted. But Pearl? God, we made quite the vision on Friday. And I can't wait to see how far she'll let things go.

No, Elana doesn't expect us to really have sex, but she never said that we couldn't either. If I'm being honest, I very much want to have sex with Pearl. In a variety of ways. And knowing that we'll do so in front of Zane will only make it hotter.

"Jesus," I mutter.

I'm getting ahead of myself and I'm getting hard. Not an uncommon thing in this place, but I'd rather Pearl see first-hand what she does to me. Somehow, I manage to will away my arousal before I get to Zane's studio. Thankfully, I'm here before Pearl. Actually, for the first time ever, I'm early.

"Eager to get things started?" Zane chuckles.

"Absolutely," I smile.

"Elana's excited, too," he laughs. "She's probably going to come watch you guys together."

Laughing, I head over to the table where he has the holiday products laid out. I smile when I see a cock ring with a clit stimulator. When I flick it on, Pearl steps beside me.

"Looks fun."

I smile down at her only to find her smiling up at me.

"I'm sure it will be," I tell her.

"Are you assuming I'm going to let you use it properly?"

"I'll make sure you do."

She laughs at this. Then she walks over to the dresser where our outfits are laid out. The first order of business is posing in matching Santa-esque lingerie. These pictures will be used for promotional advertisements. So, we're not starting out with the naughty stuff. Which is fine with me because I want to tease her.

A lot.

To my absolute delight, she doesn't bother with the changing room. Oh no. This woman strips right there in front of the dresser to change. I turn and lean against the table to take her in. Delighting in the fact that she's covered in a light smattering of freckles. I lick my lips as I imagine counting them. With my tongue.

She slips the red velvet bra with white faux fur trim over her breasts. I move with purpose so I can help her secure the clasp on the back. And I make sure she can feel my arousal.

"Such a gentleman," she breathes.

“When necessary,” I chuckle.

I stay where I am, close behind her, and gently grip her hips when she bends over to pull up her boy shorts. When she straightens, I assist her once again. Then she turns around and pins me with a hard look.

“Shall I assist you getting dressed?”

“If you like,” I smirk.

She smiles and leans back on the dresser. As I start to strip, she takes the Santa hat and pulls it onto her head. When I’m completely naked, she grabs the men’s shorts and kneels. Her mouth is just inches from the tip of my cock. She eyes it for a moment before locking eyes with me and licking her lips. I brace my hands on the dresser behind her and step into the shorts.

When she rises to pull them up, she stays close enough for my cock to trail over her body. And then, as if I wasn’t ready to blow my load, she palms it and tucks it away for me. My entire body clenches at the contact. She smiles and strokes me for a minute before removing her hand.

“Did you think about me this weekend?” she asks.

“I did.”

“I thought about you, too.”

“Good.”

We stay quiet and smile at each other for a moment. Until Zane’s voice snaps us back to the moment.

“Okay, guys, I’m ready for you.”

As I did yesterday, I place my hand on the small of her back and guide her over to the area Zane has set up for us. There’s a large chair there and I’m asked to sit in it. From there, Zane directs us through a myriad of positions. Most of which require me holding her close and brushing my face against various places on her body. The valley between her breasts. The side of her neck. And putting my lips a breath away from hers.

All the while, she looks down at me with a great amount of desire. Desire that I hope is real because I know it's real on my side. When she shifts on my lap and nestles my cock against her warm pussy, I growl. Her head falls back on her shoulders and my restraint snaps. I grip her ass to hold her in place. Then I lean forward and lick her sweet skin. She gasps and slides her fingers into my hair.

At this point, everything else fades away. I don't even know if Zane is still taking pictures and I don't care. While she grinds herself on my cock, I growl and suckle the swell of her breasts. Then the hollow of her throat. When I lift one hand and lock it behind her neck, she lifts her head and crushes her lips against mine.

Our kiss is deep and slow. Her motion against my cock increases. Her hands grip my shoulders as her nails dig into my skin. I slip my free hand under the hem of her shorts and thumb her clit. She screams into my mouth as her release claims her. Somehow, she's able to reach into my shorts and stroke me, too. In seconds, I'm coming. All over us.

When we're both spent, and her body shudders one last time, I lean back and pull her against me. She rests her head on my shoulder and curls her hands in front of her. I lightly caress her back while our breathing slows. Finally, I break the comfortable silence.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she nods. “I'm wonderful.”

“Good.”

I smile. And sigh.

“Griffin?”

“Yeah?”

“Was it like this with your last partner?”

“No,” I say in a low voice. “Not even close.”

4

Pearl

I CAN'T HELP the smile that lights my face at his words. I can't believe my luck in general. Of all the male models on the Pure Bliss website, he's the one I was most attracted to. And now I find out that this chemistry between us is real.

Very slowly, I sit up. His eyes immediately lock with mine. We smile. Then we hear Zane.

"Jesus, you two are going to melt my lens at this rate."

This makes us all laugh. Then I turn to him and shrug.

"Sorry?"

"Don't be," he grins. "Elana's going to love it."

"Well, what's next?" I ask.

"Clean yourself up and we'll get some shots of you standing."

I nod and Griffin gently grips my waist to help me stand. Not knowing the layout of the room, I let him take my hand and lead me to the bathroom. We're quiet while we clean up. But before I can walk out, he's in front of me and takes my face in his hands.

"Whatever this is, I want to explore it."

"Okay," I nod. "I'd like that."

He hits me with his panty-melting smile for a moment. Then he bends his head to kiss me again. I open for him immediately and take the opportunity to let my hands wander all over his nicely defined chest. His fingers flex against my

face, and I revel in the feel of it. It's been a long time since I've affected a man this way. I've missed it.

When he pulls back, he threads his fingers with mine and leads me back out to the studio. Zane is at his worktable. The pictures he just took of us are on his computer screen. Griffin leads us in that direction. I stand next to Zane and lean in to look. Griffin grips my waist and leans in behind me.

“Wow,” I breathe.

“Yeah,” Zane nods. “You two are the hottest couple I've ever had the pleasure of photographing.”

Griffin squeezes my hips at this, and I giggle. After we finish checking out our steamy make out session, we walk back over to give him something a little more playful. I basically stay in his arms the entire time as we smile and laugh our way through Zane's instructions. The attraction is still there, but we're able to keep it to a reasonable simmer this time.

When we're finished, it's lunchtime. And we don't have another session here until tomorrow. Griffin suggests going somewhere together to eat and I agree. I follow him to an Italian bistro, and we settle at a small table in the corner. Once we've ordered, he gets down to it.

“So, tell me about yourself.”

I smile and give him the rundown. Third child of seven from an Irish family in the suburbs. Average grades, community college, and a chance meeting with the CEO of a modeling agency to start my career. Then I ask about him.

“Only child raised by a single mother,” he sighs. “I worked my ass off to get a full-ride to the university to play football only to suffer a career-derailing ACL tear my junior year.”

“What was your degree in? And how'd you get into modeling?”

“Sports medicine,” he shrugs. “The modeling gig came about because of football. Some local author wanted a shirtless football player on a cover and since I was only a benchwarmer

by then, I took the gig. When the book hit the bestseller list, I became the go to guy.”

“Wow,” I smile. “That’s amazing.”

“It pays the bills.”

“Have you ever thought about using your degree?”

“Occasionally.”

He says no more so I don’t press him. Instead, talk turns to other things. We sit for an hour after we’ve finished eating just so we can keep talking. Finally, he looks at his watch and sighs.

“I have to go. I have another photo shoot across town in an hour.”

“Okay,” I smile. “This was nice. Thank you.”

He smiles at this and flags down the waitress for the check. He insists on paying and I allow it. Then my hand is in his as he leads me out to my car. When I’m at my door and turn to face him, he has his phone out and asks for my number. As soon as he saves it, he sends me a text. Then he pulls me into his arms for a kiss.

It doesn’t last as long as I’d like, but he does have a job to get to, so I don’t mind. When he pulls back, he sighs.

“I’m having dinner with my mother tonight, otherwise I’d want to see you again later.”

“We’ll be seeing a lot of each other over the next two weeks,” I remind him.

“I know,” he grins. “But I want to have you outside of work, too.”

“You haven’t even had all of me,” I fire back.

“Not yet,” he growls.

“Such confidence.”

“You like it.”

“Yeah,” I nod. “I do.”

With that, it's another kiss and then I'm in my car watching him walk away. I sigh because he's just that good looking. When he's out of sight, I head to my apartment. I'm going through a list of modeling jobs when Annie gets home. And she's immediately next to me on the couch.

"Okay, woman, *spill!*" she shrieks. "Did you trade orgasms again?"

"We did," I giggle.

"Oh, you lucky bitch," she sighs. "What else?"

"He wants to explore our connection. Outside of work."

She gasps and covers her mouth. Then she closes her eyes and shakes her head.

"I both love and hate you right now," she growls.

"Oh, stop," I laugh. "Give it some time. He probably has some weird fetish that will send me running."

"For a man as hot as he is who is also capable of giving orgasms, I'd deal with most anything."

Funny. I kind of feel the same way.

Griffin

I'M ONCE AGAIN SMILING like an idiot as I walk into Zane's studio. Early. Again. He makes no comment this time. He just smiles and nods as I head over to see what's lined up for us. It looks like we'll be trading pleasure again today. Which is fine because I'm not sure when I want to take her for the first time.

Part of me would like to do it here while we're working. Just to elevate the experience. But another part of me wants to do it in my own bed so I don't have to worry about how we look. Sure, that's the purpose of these photos, to reflect the true pleasure that can be provided by the products, but letting loose and being completely uninhibited isn't really an option. I was close yesterday, though. And Zane loved it.

I'm running through the settings on a dildo when Elana and Pearl walk in together. When I look up, Pearl is smiling at me. Elana is greeting her husband with a deep kiss. I do the same with Pearl.

"Are you ready for more orgasms?" I ask.

"Always."

"Did you make yourself come last night?"

"No," she smiles.

"Why not?"

"I want this shoot to be hot."

"It will be."

She smiles wide at this. Then Zane gives us the rundown of what he wants. Our goal is three toys for Pearl, and two for me. And since I'll need some time to recover, she's going to get me off first.

"Where do you want us?" I ask Zane.

"Wherever you like."

"The chaise," Pearl says.

I smile and nod. While I undress, she changes into the lingerie provided. When I get comfortable, I notice that Elana has settled in a chair close by. Her eyes are locked on Zane, who is holding a remote. I guess he plans on making her come now, too.

I take a deep breath and start to stroke my cock. But as soon as Pearl approaches, I let go. I want to see exactly what she's capable of. And how far she's willing to go. She has the male masturbator in her hand that she used on Friday. So, I know it won't take long...*if* she doesn't want it to. With a wicked smile, she settles between my legs and grips me with both hands.

My breath hisses through my teeth at the contact. For a moment, I fear that her touch will end things before we've begun. But after a deep breath, I manage to control my reaction to her. She strokes me until she's able to slide the masturbator down my length. Then she sets it to vibrate, making my cock jump in response.

I expect her to use it right away, but she has other plans. She rises onto her knees and plants her hands on either side of my hips. Then she locks eyes with me as she licks her way up the center of my chest. My hands clench into fists as I give myself over to her. Her ministrations are everything. Especially when she's leaning over enough for my cock to brush against her stomach.

Unable to help myself, I thread my right hand in her hair, gently tugging every now and then while delighting in each soft moan of response. When she starts to suck on my nipples, my hips buck up against her. Then Elana moans. With a loud

pop, Pearl sits up and settles back on her heels. Smiling, she grips the masturbator and gets to work.

In seconds, I'm panting as my orgasm bears down on me. All the while, Pearl's eyes stay locked on mine, a small smile of satisfaction on her face. Especially when I start to work with her. Just before I explode, her smile widens, and she speaks.

"Come for me, Griffin."

And my God, do I ever.

A pained groan rips from my throat as my seed leaves me. Pearl moans, too. Her eyes are now locked on the action. She's pumping my cock even faster as my cum covers my chest. When I'm dry, she slowly slows her motion. After the last shockwave of pleasure courses through me, I let my head fall back and my eyes close.

"Fucking hell," I pant.

This woman just owned me. And I haven't even had her pussy, yet. My God, the things she can do to me. I stay where I am while she gently removes the toy from my softening cock and goes about cleaning me up. When I'm finally able, I lift my head only to find her smiling at me.

"How was that?" she asks.

"Un-fucking-believable," I rasp.

Her smile widens. Elana cries out as her orgasm claims her. But I sit up and pull Pearl toward me for a deep kiss. When her hands start to wander, I pull back and smile.

"Get comfortable, Pearl," I growl. "I need to return the favor."

"Yes," she whispers.

"*Twice.*"

"God, yes."

As soon as she stands, I'm on my feet heading toward the dresser of toys. I grab the clit stimulator first. Then I grab a small vibrator. I think I'll save the dildo for last. By the time I

get back to Pearl, she's discarded her panties, but her legs are closed.

"Open for me," I demand. "Let me see if you're ready."

She slowly parts her legs for me. When I look, I can see that she's drenched. I smile at the sight.

"Zane, are you ready for this?"

"Get to it," he says in a thick voice.

I settle between her parted thighs and pull her legs over mine. Then I flick the stimulator on and smile at her.

"How many times can you come?" I ask.

"No man has ever made me come more than once," she whispers.

"Very well," I nod. "That ends today. Right now."

Pearl

AS SOON AS the words leave him, he slaps the stimulator onto my clit. And I come. Hard.

My hands fist and my head thrashes against the chaise. I knew there was something special between us, but I never expected it to affect me this way. A long moan leaves me when I'm finally spent. I am lifeless. Boneless. I literally can't move. As I pant, I feel myself being moved. Then I feel his lips on my forehead.

"Come on, baby," Griffin whispers. "Come back to me. We've got so much more to share. Come on, Pearl. Wake up."

"Griffin," I breathe. "Oh, God."

"That's it," he sighs. "I'm here. I've got you."

I hum and nestle into him as he cradles me in his arms. He continues to kiss me. My forehead, my cheek, my eyelids. Finally, I breathe deep and open my eyes. And Griffin is right there, smiling down at me.

"Hey," I smile.

"You okay?"

"I think I'm dead," I giggle. "I...I wasn't expecting that to happen."

He nods. Then his expression grows serious.

"Did you feel good?"

"That was beyond good."

He nods his head. Then he presses a soft kiss to my lips. I hum at the contact, and he pulls back far too soon for my liking. Then he kisses my forehead again and tells me to rest a bit before we continue. I nod and close my eyes after I bury my face against his neck.

At first, I enjoy the moment. But the longer he strokes my skin with gentle hands, the more my body starts to come back to life. I open my eyes and trail my fingernails up and down his chest. A few moments pass like this before his hands begin to wander. Over my hip. My ass. Down between my thighs. The first brush of his fingers over my pussy makes me gasp. In another minute, he lifts me up and settles me on the chaise again. But instead of kneeling between my legs, he drapes them across his lap.

Then he smiles and picks up a vibrator.

My answering smile is all the acknowledgement he needs to move forward. At first, he teases me with it. Running it up and down my slit. Just barely grazing my clit. When I start to grow restless, he pushes it inside me. And leaves it there. Then he holds up the remote.

“Griffin,” I breathe. “Oh, God.”

“I’ll go slow this time,” he smiles.

I nod. Then he moves so he’s stretched out beside me, his leg wedged between mine so he can also feel the vibrations. His cock, for now, is resting on my hip.

“Kiss me,” I plead.

He smiles and does what I ask. Slow and deep while his free hand wanders across my breasts and my stomach. When I start to grow restless, my hips rocking and shifting as I seek more, he pulls back.

“Do you want to come again?”

“Yes,” I nod. “Please.”

“You like begging?” he smirks.

“If it gets me what I want.”

He turns up the speed on the vibrator and I gasp. Then he holds his large palm over my mound.

“And what do you want, Pearl?”

“You.”

He smiles wide. Then he bumps up the vibrator speed and thumbs my clit. And I come once again. This time, though, I keep my eyes on him as I ride out the sensations. When I’m gasping for breath, he pulls out the vibrator and tosses it aside. Then he pulls me against his chest. I allow myself another reprieve before I lift my head and kiss him.

“It’s your turn again,” I smile.

“That it is,” he growls.

“Get on the bed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I leave the chaise and go to the dresser to grab a male stimulator. This one is a little more complicated. Griffin is already stroking his cock as he waits for me to join him. Zane is there, too, but I barely even give him a second glance.

Funny how I’ve not cared about him during all this. No, all I care about is me and Griffin and the pleasure we can give one another. Something that I’m more than ready to do for him now after my last two orgasms.

With a wicked smile, I kneel between his legs and get started. This one has controls as well. And I plan on putting them to good use. For the first few minutes, I set the speed at low. And I let my hands wander. Because this one does all the work. When his breathing increases, I up the tempo again and lean down to kiss his lower stomach. The feel of his cock against my throat is amazing. As are his small grunts of desire. Each time I increase the speed, I tease him with my mouth even more. When I see his cock thicken, I sit back and let my words send him over the edge.

“Come for me, Griffin.”

His body all but jackknives off the bed as his release claims him. He reaches out and catches my arm as his seed spills all

over his stomach. When his eyes lock with mine, something passes between us. I don't know what it is, or how he feels about it, but I know we're going to find out.

“Pearl,” he grunts. “Jesus Christ.”

With that, he collapses back onto the bed. And I repay his actions from earlier. I shut off the toy and set it aside. Then I climb up the bed and curl my body around his, not giving a damn that I'm now covered in his cum as well. At first, he does nothing. But when he starts to recover, he lifts his arms and pulls me close.

“If this is how things are going to be between us, I may not last much longer at this job.”

I giggle at this. And so does Elana.

“I'll make it worth your while, Griffin,” she promises. “Because I don't want to let either of you go.”

Griffin

PEARL GIGGLES AGAIN at Elana's words. Then I add some more of my own.

“As far as I'm concerned, we're a package deal,” I pant. “If you want me, you get Pearl, and vice versa.”

I catch Elana's eye and find her smiling at us. Pearl stills beside me before slowly rising up to look down at me. Her expression is unreadable. Then she tilts her head and brushes her hand over my cheek.

“Are you claiming me?” she asks softly.

“Yes,” I nod. “You're my Christmas present this year. I'm just unwrapping you early.”

“You haven't even unwrapped all of me,” she smirks.

“I will,” I smile. “Tonight.”

With that, we come together in another deep kiss. Then, since we still have to work with the dildo, I roll off the bed and go about cleaning myself up. I smile when I see Pearl getting settled to wait.

My God, this is crazy. And scary. Can our mutual sexual attraction really turn into something more? Something *real*? I've never had real with a woman before. But it's all I want now.

After a deep breath, I grab the dildo and go back to her. She's smiling. And she's restless. When I move to the foot of the bed, she parts her legs for me. Then I notice the small

smears of my cum on her torso. I set the dildo aside and hold myself over her so I can lick it off.

“Griffin,” she mewls.

“Jesus, that’s hot as fuck,” Elana adds.

“Indeed,” Zane agrees.

I taste her skin well after the evidence of my release is gone. Then I lick my way up to her mouth. She opens for me immediately. I kiss her as deeply as I can, blindly reaching for the dildo as I do. Once I turn it on, she breaks contact. Her eyes are unfocused for a moment, and I like that. With a smile, I slide the dildo into her. Her breath leaves her in a gasp, and her mouth opens. I just smile.

“Tonight, this is going to be my cock.”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I want that, too. I want all of you.”

“You’ve got me.”

My smile widens and I sit back on my heels to give her pleasure once again. Her hands drop to her sides, and she bends her legs just slightly. This particular dildo has a clit tickler. For now, I tease her with it. I fuck her with long, slow strokes, just barely touching her clit as I push in deep before pulling back out immediately. Her breath catches every time. The sight of it is hot as fuck.

When her hips begin to lift, searching for more contact, I give her what she wants. With each deep thrust, I twist the dildo just slightly, caressing her swollen bud a little longer. A small moan leaves her each time. All the while, her eyes are locked on mine. The attraction between us growing hotter by the second.

After a few minutes, she’s on the edge, so I do what’s necessary to finish this. Because as much as I love this job and the toys, I want nothing more in this moment than to abandon it all so we can exist together on our own. I need to know if our connection goes beyond all this.

And I’m going to find out tonight.

“Griffin,” she mewls.

“Do you want to come, Pearl?”

“Yes,” she nods. “Please. Finish me.”

After a few more hard thrusts, I bury the dildo as deep as I can and gently rock it into her, so the clit tickler is doing its best job. Almost immediately, she gasps. Then she works with me, rocking her hips in a small circle. I smile and watch as the small nub touches her over and over. Without warning, her body tenses. Then she moans my name as her orgasm consumes her. I keep my motion constant as her desire pulses around the dildo and covers my hand. I’m vaguely aware of the sound of Zane’s camera as he captures Pearl lost in this moment.

She’s fucking gorgeous right now.

Eyes closed, lips parted, and her fair, freckled skin flushed with desire.

But tonight, that desire will come from me and only me as I see to her pleasure.

Just the thought of it has my cock swelling up again. But I close my eyes to will it away. I don’t want her to return the favor again. At least not here, anyway. When she releases a long, slow groan, I open my eyes and find her settling back into the mattress. She’s spent. So, I turn off the dildo and set it aside before lying beside her and pulling her into my arms.

I’m starting to crave the feel of her there. Especially when she nestles her head further into me. Zane and Elana have a quiet conversation while I caress her back and press soft kisses to her head. After a few minutes, she takes a deep breath and sighs.

“You okay?” I ask.

“I’m more than okay. I feel amazing.”

“That’s good,” I smile. “But I intend to make you feel just as amazing tonight. When it’s just the two of us.”

“I can’t wait.”

She lifts her head and I kiss her gently. When she sits up, I do as well. Then Zane tells us to get dressed and come over to

his computer. Smiling, we do as he wishes. In a few more minutes, I pull Pearl onto my lap so we can check things out. Elana is sitting on the arm of Zane's chair, her hand caressing the back of his neck as he navigates through our photo shoot. I can't help it when I constantly let myself look at her for her reaction. While I know Zane is amazing at what he does, I can't help feeling that what Pearl and I have together just makes his job a little easier. When he's finished, he leans back and shakes his head before confirming my thoughts.

"You two make my job too easy," he laughs.

"Is that a bad thing?" Pearl giggles.

"Only if the boss decides I'm not working hard enough," he says with a glance up to his wife.

"Don't worry," she smiles down at him. "I have my ways to make sure you'll always deliver your best."

"Thank God for that," he smiles back at her.

Since our work for the day is done, I take Pearl's hand and lead her out to her car. After finding out where she lives, I tell her that I want to take her dinner before taking her back to my place. For the night. She agrees and we part ways with a soft kiss. After I watch her drive away, I smile and go about a few errands before seeing her again.

And I can't fucking wait.

Pearl

I'M PACING our small apartment while Annie silently laughs at me. I don't know why I'm so nervous about tonight, but I am. It's not that I'm afraid to have sex with Griffin. That I'm very much looking forward to. What's freaking me out is whether this is going to be everything I ever wanted or if it's going to ruin me completely.

Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted the fairytale. The handsome knight in shining armor who would sweep me off my feet and we'd live a perfect happily ever after. Yet all I've known in my relationships with men so far is that no one wants to commit to a woman like me. A woman whose physical appearance pays the bills and sometimes puts her in a position where things look like more than what they are. And I'm in that same position with Griffin right now. Yes, our sexual attraction is strong and mutual, but what if there's nothing more beyond that? Will I be able to move forward with someone else? And will someone else want me once they see the pictures of us together? Pictures that capture our connection?

I doubt it.

Of course, if I'm being honest with myself, what I really want is for Griffin and me to connect beyond the sexual. I'm tired of being the trophy girlfriend. I want something real, and I want it with Griffin.

There's a knock on the door that makes me scream. Annie just laughs and rises to pull me into a hug. I relax and hug her back.

“Let me answer the door,” she whispers. “Take a few deep breaths and calm down. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

I nod my head and she kisses my cheek before walking to the door. When it opens, Griffin’s rich voice makes me smile as he greets her.

“You must be Annie.”

“That’s me,” she laughs. “Come on in, Griffin.”

I turn around and watch as he greets her with a kiss on the cheek that makes her blush. Then he turns his attention to me. He walks over and pulls his hand from behind his back to present me with a small bouquet of red roses. I smile as I take them.

“You look beautiful,” he says.

“Thank you,” I breathe. “You look very handsome.”

“I’ll look even better with you on my arm.”

I giggle and then he presses his lips to mine. After putting my flowers in a vase, I grab my coat. He helps me into it and grabs my overnight bag. Then he looks at Annie with his sexy smirk.

“I promise to take good care of her,” he says.

“You better,” she adds. “And if she doesn’t get hot and bothered giving me a rundown of the night, you don’t deserve her.”

He lets out a loud laugh at this. Then he leans in and whispers something in her ear that makes her mouth drop in shock. He pulls back and she blushes as he kisses her cheek once again before turning his attention back to me. I can’t even inquire about that exchange before he takes my hand and leads me out. When I’m in his car, I finally ask.

“What did you say to Annie?”

“I told her she had nothing to worry about,” he shrugs.

“Uh huh,” I smirk. “You said more than that.”

“Maybe,” he grins.

He says no more so I let it go. He drives us to an upscale restaurant in the center of the city and since he made reservations, we're led to a table right away. As always, our conversation flows easy and natural. After he pays the check, he smiles and leads me out. Another twenty minutes finds us at a very nice apartment complex at the outskirts of the city. After grabbing my bag, he opens my door and offers me his hand. Thankfully, my hand is steady when I take it.

We're quiet as he leads us inside and to the elevator. We take it to the top floor and walk to the apartment at the end of the hall. He releases me to open the door and gives me his gorgeous smile as he gestures for me to walk inside. I do as he wishes. But as soon as I take in the space, I gasp and stop short.

“Griffin.”

His name leaves me on a breathless whisper. I hear the door shut and then his arms are around my waist, pulling me close against him as he presses his cheek against mine.

“Do you like it?” he asks.

“What...what is all this?”

He chuckles and presses a kiss to my cheek before answering.

“The things you've made me feel in the short time I've known you are beyond anything I've ever experienced before,” he says softly. “I want things with you that I never thought I could have.”

His words bring tears to my eyes. The sight of his living room full of flowers and candles lit in hurricane vases blurs. When I sniff, he turns me in his arms and waits for me to look up into his handsome smiling face.

“Griffin,” I breathe again, apparently only capable of saying his name at this point.

“I'm a romantic, Pearl,” he says. “I'm *that* guy. And you're the first woman who has moved me to show that side of myself. I want tonight to be your fantasy come to life. Or even

your fairytale. And I want to be the man to make your dreams come true.”

In that moment, all my fear and anxiety leaves me. I slide my hand up his chest and into the hair at the nape of his neck. His body shudders and he pulls me closer.

“I’m ready, Griffin,” I smile. “Give me all you’ve got. And I swear you won’t regret it.”

“I know I won’t,” he growls.

Then he bends his head to kiss me.

9

THEIR KISS IS soft at first, but quickly grows deep and passionate. But Griffin has other plans before taking Pearl to his bedroom. He slows things down and finally breaks contact, loving the sight of her wet lips and her heaving breasts. He smiles and leads her further into the room where he turns on a stereo. In seconds, Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" begins to play. Griffin immediately pulls Pearl into his arms to dance.

Not knowing if this song is some kind of message, Pearl simply smiles up at him and follows his lead. For the duration, they sway in time to the music and stare into each other's eyes. When it's over, Bonnie Raitt starts singing "I Can't Make You Love Me." Pearl's heart rate kicks up a beat, then stutters in her chest when he quickly scoops her into his arms and carries her toward his bedroom.

To Pearl's surprise but ultimate delight, his bedroom is also lit with candles in hurricane vases. And there are red rose petals scattered about. Gently, Griffin climbs onto his bed and settles Pearl in the middle of it. Then he proceeds to strip her. As soon as she's naked and bared to him, he discards his own clothing. She smiles as he climbs onto the bed and settles his body on hers.

"Griffin," she breathes.

"Do you want this?" he asks. "Do you want *me*? Like this?"

"Yes," she nods. "I do."

He releases a breath of relief. With a smile, he lifts his hips and slides his cock into her. Her sigh of pleasure is music to his ears. Then, he does something he's never done before: he makes love to her. Seconds turn into minutes. Minutes turn into an hour. Finally, they come. Both of their bodies trembling in pleasure. Desire. Need. And possibly love.

“Griffin,” Pearl breathes. “Oh, my God. That was...”

“Yeah,” he nods. “And I’m not done yet.”

Before she can question him, he pulls out of her and slides down her body until his face is buried in her pussy. She screams. She jolts away from him. But he holds her in place as he begins his quest to provide her more pleasure than she's ever experienced before. His name leaves her multiple times. Sometimes on a scream, other times a whisper, most times a plea for more. When she finally falls over the edge, he moans his delight as her desire covers his face. He stays with her until her body settles lifeless into his mattress.

“Pearl,” he pants. “Jesus Christ, Pearl.”

“Griffin,” she breathes.

“More,” he growls. “I want more. Give me more.”

Before she can protest, he flips her onto her stomach and pulls her ass into the air. Then he buries his face in her swollen folds once again. But from this position, he's able to tease her ass as well. She tries to jolt away from him at first, but when he stays on her, she finally settles and lets him do what he wants.

Which happens to be everything she needs to have a third orgasm. The most intense one of the night so far. As she did before, she melts into the mattress after the sensations fade. But Griffin still isn't done. After licking her clean, he rises up and slides his hardened cock into her. She mewls his name as he settles his body onto hers.

“You're perfect, Pearl,” he pants. “Absolutely perfect for me.”

She's so delirious with pleasure she can't even form any words to respond. So, she just nods her head and parts her legs

a little further to allow him to push even deeper inside her. At first, his motion is slow and steady. But as she starts to work with him, his desire spikes. When he starts to move with more force, she welcomes it.

“Yes, Griffin,” she pants. “Fuck me hard. Let go. Give me all of you.”

Her words snap his restraint once again. With a growl, he pulls his knees forward and grips her hips to hold her in place. Then he lets go. Pounding his cock into her with more force than necessary. But when she continues to encourage him, he’s of no mind to hold back. His bedroom quickly fills with the sound of skin slapping skin and a very wet pussy.

Pearl encourages his efforts, but he doesn’t want to finish her like this. Just when he thinks she’s about to come once again, he pulls out of her.

“No!” she screams.

He smiles and flips her over to her back. She squeals out in shock, then cries out his name in surprise when he shoves his cock into her again.

“You’re going to come again, Pearl,” he growls. “One more time. Maybe twice.”

“Griffin,” she mewls. “Oh, God. I can’t.”

“You can,” he grunts. “You will.”

She shakes her head in protest. But Griffin won’t be deterred. As he fights back his own release, he makes her come two more times before they come together in a mind-blowing orgasm that damn near makes him black out. But he doesn’t let it happen because he needs to take care of Pearl.

Six orgasms are enough to shut her down. Something that makes Griffin smile with pride. With his cock still throbbing inside of her, he brushes his fingers over her cheeks and places soft kisses on her forehead. When he’s certain she’s out for the night, he reluctantly pulls free of her and goes about cleaning her up. Then he cleans himself up and rushes around his apartment to put out all the candles before crawling back into bed with the woman who now owns his heart.

Should that be possible after just a few days?

No.

Does he care?

No.

All he knows as he pulls her into him for the night is that he's never felt so content with a woman before. And he doesn't want to find this contentment with any other woman, either. As far as he's concerned, Pearl is it for him.

Now.

And forever.

Pearl

WHEN I OPEN my eyes on Wednesday morning, I'm still firmly encased in Griffin's arms. I smile and snuggle closer into him. His hold on me tightens just before his sexy voice rasps in my ear.

"Good morning, gorgeous."

"Morning," I sigh.

"How do you feel?"

"Amazing," I say truthfully. "Last night was...amazing. No man has ever made me feel so good."

"That's good," he says.

He says no more, and we stay quiet and close in this moment for a few more minutes. A moment that I'm more than content in. Finally, he shifts his position so he can look down at me. His hair is a sexy, tousled mess. His eyes are locked on mine and there's a small smile on his face.

"Will you stay with me again? Tonight?"

"Is that what you want?" I ask softly.

"Yes," he nods. "I want you, Pearl. As often as I can have you."

Tears prick my eyes at his words. But I nod my head. Because I want the same. And in the next second, I have it as he rolls me onto my back and slides his cock into me. I moan at his fullness and the feel of him moving inside me.

Everything about him is perfection. When I'm with him like this, I'm at his mercy. Happily and willingly.

His arms band tight around me, holding me in place as proceeds to fuck me long and slow. I can do nothing more than take what he gives. When my breath hitches at the first flicker of an orgasm, he just smiles and moves with more purpose until we come together. I shudder as the last sensation leaves me.

“Griffin,” I breathe.

He smiles before he presses a soft kiss to my lips. Then he climbs off the bed and helps me into the bathroom to clean up. At his insistence, we shower together before sharing a cup of coffee and looking at our schedules for the day. We don't have another session at Pure Bliss until tomorrow. But we both have other jobs later today. We spend the morning continuing to learn more about each other and grab some lunch together before he drops me off at my apartment to part ways until later.

Annie isn't home right now, which is good. Because I'm not ready to share the play by play just yet. Or the fact that I definitely have real feelings for Griffin. I ponder those feelings for the rest of the day. Until I get to his apartment door that night only to find that he's cooked dinner for us to eat by candlelight. After that, we take a bubble bath that leads to some very delightful orgasms.

Once I'm back in his bed, he owns my pleasure again. But tonight, it's not through his dominance over me. No, tonight he owns me tenderly and lovingly. It's beyond anything I've ever experienced before. And as always, he makes sure I come several times before he joins me. When we're settled in for the night, he kisses my temple and pulls me close. I slip away with a smile on my face.

Griffin is holding my hand as we walk into Pure Bliss on Thursday morning. We're both smiling. Even more so when

we step into Zane's studio to find him and Elana waiting for us. Elana looks at our joined hands and arches an eyebrow at us.

"Are you two an official couple now?" she asks.

"Yes," Griffin says quickly. "We are."

"Very good," she nods. "But I still don't want you to do any more than you're comfortable with here. Your connection is amazing, and it's already given us exactly what we need for this new line. Don't ruin what you have by thinking we need more, okay?"

"Thank you," I say shyly. "But honestly, we may not be able to help ourselves."

She nods at this and gestures for us to get ready. As always, there's a lingerie set for me and a pair of briefs for Griffin. When we've changed, we take in the toys that are available. There are only two, and they're both cock rings. One is powered and the other isn't. I'm not surprised that Griffin wants to use the vibrating one last.

Smiling, he takes my hand and leads me to the oversized chair. When he settles on it, he pulls me into his lap. Then he pulls me to him for a deep kiss. I grind myself on him until his cock is hard. When I pull back, I rise up so he can free himself. Then I help him slide the cock ring on. With a wicked smirk, he sits back and rests his arms on the chair. I smile as I stroke him a few times.

"What are you going to do, Pearl?" he asks. "Are you getting me off? Or are you coming with me?"

Instead of answering with words, I answer with action. I slide my panties to the side and slowly take him into me. To my delight, his hands immediately fly to my hips as he lets loose a curse. When I start to move, he helps me. It takes me only a few strokes to figure out how to put the cock ring to work on me. Then I grind myself on him.

"Jesus Christ, Pearl," he breathes.

"How does it feel?" I ask.

“I feel *you*,” he pants. “I always feel you.”

“Yes,” I breathe. “Come with me. I’m ready.”

My words do their job and his hips lock as he spills himself inside me. The feel of him, compounded with the cock ring, takes me with him. I hold his gaze until we’re spent. Then I collapse into his waiting arms.

Griffin

I CLOSE my eyes as I hold her against me. Even here, with Zane and Elana looking on, I only felt her. Sure, the cock ring assisted, but it was the feel of Pearl wrapped around my cock that truly sent me over the edge. When she sighs, I smile and kiss her temple.

“Wow,” she breathes.

With a chuckle, I lift up my hips and hold her tight against me so she can feel that I’m still hard for her. The gasp that leaves her is perfect. Then she rolls her hips and sits up to look down at me.

“You ready for more?” I ask her.

“I’m always ready for you, Griffin,” she smiles.

“I’m glad.”

I pump myself into her a few more times just to watch her reaction. Then I rise and carry her over to the bed. After a quick, hard kiss, I pull out of her and head back to the dresser so I can clean up a bit and grab the second cock ring. By the time I walk back to her, she’s discarded her panties. When she sees me, she parts her legs and smiles.

I smile back as I toss the new toy between her legs. Then I shed my briefs. She moans her appreciation at the sight of my fully naked body. When I crawl between her legs, I quickly pull the cock ring over me. Then I turn it on, my body jolting at the intense feeling.

“Hurry,” she pleads. “I need you.”

A low growl leaves me as I crawl over her and sink my aching cock into her swollen pussy. She gasps and quickly pulls me down for a kiss. I plunder her sweet mouth as I start to move with long, slow strokes. Each time I'm balls deep, I make sure the nub on the cock ring teases her clit. In mere minutes, we're both on the edge.

"God, Pearl," I pant.

She moans and nods. Then I sit back on my heels and pull her up with me, my cock pumping even deeper inside her. She gasps and her head falls back, her hands barely gripping my shoulders. It's no matter though. I won't let her go. I wrap both my hands around her back and let go, bucking myself into her slow and deep. Unable to help myself, I bend my head and taste the swell of her breasts.

When I'm close, I slide my right hand up to cup the back of her head. Her lust-filled eyes focus on me, and she manages a smile.

"So fucking good, Griffin," she pants.

"Yeah," I nod. "You are."

"Fuck me hard," she begs. "Please."

Her words slay me. With another growl of need, I lay her back on the bed. Her hair splays around her head in a beautiful, tangled mess. Her lips are parted as she pants. And her eyes are solely focused on me.

Perfect.

I rest my weight on my right forearm and grip her hip with my left. Then I give her what she wants. I fuck her. Hard. Hard enough for her breasts to bounce violently in her bra. Hard enough to make the cock ring dig almost painfully into my skin. And hard enough to make us both come in an explosive climax that soaks us where we're joined.

But I fuck through it until she comes a second time. Only when my name leaves her on a painful whisper do I stop. Instead of collapsing onto her, I pull out to discard the cock ring. Then I cover her body with mine and pull her close. When we recover, we check out the results.

As they have been before, they're phenomenal. And as the week proceeds, I find myself not wanting to part ways with Pearl for the weekend. Thankfully, she feels the same. She stays with me the whole weekend and we continue to explore our physical connection while still learning a little more about one another.

When Sunday night rolls around, we're talking about our plans for Christmas. And as much as I hate to tell her the truth, I do. Only because I feel closer to her than I have any other woman save my mother.

"My mother stopped celebrating Christmas after I graduated from college," I say softly.

"Why?"

"I told you before it was just the two of us growing up," I shrug. "She went without every Christmas for a long time. When I was finally able to make it on my own, she insisted that I do what I wanted on Christmas."

She's quiet for a long time. Then she asks the obvious.

"What do you want to do on Christmas?"

"Spend time with my family," I choke out.

Almost immediately, she crawls on top of me and smiles. It's a gorgeous sight. Because *she's* gorgeous. And I am more than delighted that she wants to be mine. Especially after her next words.

"My family is getting together for Christmas this Saturday," she says. "You and your mom can come celebrate with us."

I shake my head and pull her toward me for a soft kiss. Then I give her the bad news.

"While I'd love to meet your family and celebrate with them, I'm certain my mother will refuse," I sigh. "After all, she's not even met you yet."

"Then let's make a date so I can meet her," she insists. "And I can invite her myself."

I take her in for a few moments. Then I just laugh.

“You can try,” I smile. “I’m sure she’ll be delighted to meet you, of course. But if you can convince her to celebrate Christmas with us and your family, well...”

“Well, what?”

“It would be the second-best Christmas present ever.”

“The second best?” she giggles.

“Yes,” I tell her. “Because you’re the best Christmas present ever.”

“Then you better plan on having the best Christmas ever, Griffin.”

Pearl

ON MONDAY AND TUESDAY, Griffin and I finish our sessions for the Pure Bliss holiday collection that will drop on Wednesday. Strategically timed to capture last-minute Christmas shoppers looking to spice up their sex life. Thursday night finds us at Griffin's apartment where he and I cook a meal for us and his mother.

She's a stunning woman. I'm surprised she's never dated anyone since Griffin was able to take care of himself. For the first half an hour, she's a bit reserved. And I notice her watching Griffin and me as we go about cooking. Once we've got things in the oven, she walks over and takes my hands in hers.

"Thank you for making him happy," she chokes out. "It's all I ever wanted for him."

A tear slips down her cheek as she pulls me into her arms. I hold her close, tears streaming down my own face, as I tell her another truth.

"He makes me happy, too," I whisper. "Thank you for raising such a wonderful man. You should be proud of him."

"Words can't describe how proud I am of him," she says as she pulls back and gives me a watery smile.

In the next moment, Griffin is there to pull both of us against him for a hug. We laugh and enjoy the moment. While our dinner cooks in the oven, we settle on the couch, and I answer all her questions. It's no surprise that I end up talking about my family.

“Seven children?” she gasps.

“Yes, ma’am,” I laugh. “My house was like a zoo growing up. And with three of my siblings still at home, it still is at times. Especially during the holidays.”

“Oh, my,” she laughs. “I can’t even imagine.”

When Griffin squeezes my hip, I know this is my opening. So, I’m quick to take it.

“With my two older brothers living several hours away, we’re gathering for Christmas this Saturday,” I say with a bright smile. “We’d love for you and Griffin to join us.”

“Oh, no,” she says quickly. “I couldn’t impose.”

“It would be no imposition whatsoever,” I laugh. “And besides, you might enjoy watching my father and brothers give Griffin the third-degree.”

“You haven’t met her family yet?” she asks him.

“I haven’t,” he says with a grin. “And it might be nice to have some backup.”

She agrees to think about it. But by the end of the night, I’ve got her convinced, much to Griffin’s delight. After she leaves, Griffin carries me to the bedroom and owns my pleasure for the next hour. When I fall asleep in his arms, I’m certain that I’ve also fallen for him.

We both have photo sessions on Friday for some other contracts, but we’re done by midday. After explaining that a covered dish is expected instead of a gift at my parent’s house, Griffin and I go to his mother’s apartment that night to prep our contributions. We’re back late Saturday morning to finish cooking.

When we arrive at my parents’ house, I can sense that both Griffin and his mother are a little nervous. But when I open the door to the chaos that is the White family during the holidays, they relax and enjoy blending into the melee.

“Mom, dad, this is my boyfriend, Griffin Marks and his mother Anna,” I say as we enter the kitchen.

As I expected, my mother is quick to hug them both, thanking them for their dish. My father greets Anna with a kiss on the cheek before shaking Griffin's hand and quickly leading him into the family room. I smile and give him a wink knowing that my four brothers are probably in there as well. When he's out of sight, Anna grabs my arm and pulls me close.

"I've never seen him so nervous," she whispers. "He must *really* like you."

"I really like him, too."

In no time at all, we dive in to help my mother. Anna is introduced to my two sisters first, then my four brothers and two of their wives and my niece and nephew. As it goes, one of my sisters-in-law brought along her father, Dylan, who has been widowed for the past five years. When he's introduced to Anna, I recognize the smile he gives her. He's interested. And Anna may be as well.

When Griffin notices, he's torn over how he feels about it. Having watched her live her life alone, I'm not surprised. But when Dylan offers to drive her home, he can stand it no more. He discreetly pulls him aside and asks what his intentions are with his mother. His answer must satisfy Griffin because he allows his mother to leave with him. When it's time for us to go, we're hugged warmly and asked not to be strangers.

On our drive back to his apartment, which I've spent more time in than my own over the last week, he smiles as he holds my hand. When he lets us inside, I gasp at the sight of a small Christmas tree in his living room. It wasn't there this morning.

"When did you do this?" I ask.

"Remember when mom asked me to run out for some wine this morning?"

I nod. Then he pulls me into his arms. After he kisses my neck, he lifts his hand in front of me. I gasp when I see a ring box in it.

"Griffin, what's this?" I whisper.

"Just open it."

With a trembling hand, I do. And I gasp again at the sight of a white gold Irish Claddagh ring with a pearl in the center.

“I’m in love with you,” he breathes. “And I know we haven’t been together long, but I wanted you to have some kind of promise from me that I want to see this through for as long as you’ll allow it.”

“Oh, Griffin,” I choke out. “I can’t believe it.”

He chuckles at this and takes the ring from the box. I offer him my left hand and watch with a small smile as he slides it onto my ring finger with the heart pointing out. As soon as I look up, his lips find mine. I hum against him and wait for him to break contact before I tell him how I feel, too.

“Do you want to know something?” I ask him.

“Of course,” he smiles.

“I love you, too.”

Epilogue

One Year Later

“AND AT THE top of Madam Santa’s Naughty List...Griffin and Pearl!” Elana shouts.

Pearl whoops in delight as Griffin picks her up and spins her around. Then he carries her onto the small stage to accept their award, a bag full of new Pure Bliss products. They both thank Elana with a hug. Pearl happily accepts Santa’s sack and starts to head back toward their table. But Griffin stops her and approaches the microphone.

“Before we enjoy the rest of the night, there’s something else I’d like to take care of,” he grins. “Pearl, why don’t you take a look inside Santa’s sack for an extra special surprise.”

She frowns but does what he wishes. After digging around for a moment, she gasps. Then she carefully pulls a red ring box out of the sack. Elana steps forward to take the sack while Griffin kneels. The entire room goes silent before he speaks.

“Pearl, last year you were the best Christmas present I could have asked for,” he says in a voice full of emotion. “And I want you to be my Christmas present again this year and every year we have ahead of us. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she chokes out. “Absolutely, yes!”

With that, he takes the ring box from her and quickly slips the diamond ring from it. While he does, Pearl moves the Claddagh ring he gave her last year to her right hand and offers him her left once again. After he settles the ring on her finger, he rises and pulls her into his arms for a kiss. The applause from the other employees in the room is deafening.

But when Pearl pulls back, she smiles and gifts him with her own surprise.

“I’ve got a present for you, too.”

“Really?” he smiles. “What is it?”

“Well, next year you’ll have to buy presents for more than just me.”

“What do you...wait...are you...are you pregnant?”

“I am,” she breathes.

He crushes his lips against hers again before pulling back and shouting out to the room.

“I’m going to be a daddy!”

The celebratory atmosphere in the room triples at that point. Congratulations come from all around, but they don’t soak it up for long. They make a quick exit and head to their new apartment with Santa’s sack, eager to consummate this next step in their future together long into the night.

About Layla

Layla is a full-time educator whose love of reading turned into a delightful side gig back in 2014.

Since then, she's managed to crank out over 40 novels and 6 novellas that run the gamut from sweet to swoony to sexy to blazing hot.

She considers herself a small fish, but she certainly enjoys the swim, and hopes you enjoy the plunge into her writing!

Follow her at: www.layladelaney.com

You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

Hot Toddy

C.L. Collier

Heidi

“I JUST LOVE YOUR SHOP! I’m so glad I stumbled across it today!”

The jovial woman about my mom’s age gushes as I hand her the bag of items she purchased. “Thank you so much for coming in.”

“I’ll be sure to tell all my friends to stop in,” she says, taking her bag with a kind

smile before turning to leave.

“Please do!” I say as she walks toward the exit.

This past year has been a crazy whirlwind for me. After years of planning, I finally opened my own shop, Cheerfully Yours. Crafting and home decor are my passions, so opening a shop where I can sell those things is a dream come true. Plus, I get to help local crafters sell their handmade goods, as well as sell some of my own. I’m glad I finally took a leap of faith, quit my job, and started this business because it has been more successful than I imagined.

I owe some of the success to its location. My cousin knew what I wanted to do

and let me know when this shop space was available for lease. He and his wife run Connors Music next door. Our little strip mall is becoming a hub for the arts. A bookstore went in on the other side of Conner’s Music, then my store, and now a bar will open on the other side of me, which will feature live music acts on the weekends.

The buzz of a power saw interrupts my thoughts. Speaking of the new bar, they started doing construction in that space this week, and I'll be glad when they finish. All of the power tools and loud hammering noises are beginning to get on my nerves a bit.

Suddenly, there's a loud, persistent banging noise against the wall. I look at the shelf hanging on that wall, full of delicate glasses I've handcrafted with etched designs. With every bang against the wall, they shake, moving closer to the edge of the shelf. I rush to the wall in a fit of panic and quickly take the glasses down, carefully setting them on the table below where they'll be safe. The banging is persistent, though, and before I can reach for the last one, it falls, crashing to the floor.

"Fuck!" I say, stamping my foot like a toddler. But, really, I'm pissed. I spent time

and money to etch the design onto that glass, and now it's just a broken pile of shards on the floor.

Thankfully, no customers are in the store at the moment, so no one heard me drop the f-bomb. However, with all the noise coming from the construction, they may not have heard me very well anyway.

The banging continues, and before I have a chance to start sweeping up the broken glass, a picture falls off the wall. Then another. My blood pressure is through the roof now. Will I have to take everything down from this wall?

Luckily, the two pictures that fell were just painted on wood, so nothing broke. However, I do have other pieces that will break if they fall victim to the construction, so I set to work, quickly removing everything breakable first. Luckily, the banging on the wall has stopped, but I have no idea if and when it will start again. I have to act fast.

It takes me well over twenty minutes to remove everything that could potentially fall, and once I'm done, I'm left with a very bare-looking wall and an all-around mess. Not only is the glass still on the floor, but everything I took off the wall now sits on other surfaces, making my store look cluttered.

The bell on the entrance dings, and I turn to see a customer walking in. Despite the stress I'm feeling, I force a smile. "Welcome to Cheerfully Yours. Sorry for the mess." I feel the need to explain. "There's construction next door, and I had to move some things so they wouldn't fall to the floor."

Just as I say that, the woman eyes the broken glass on the ground. "Oh, no! It looks like you already had some damage."

"Yeah... luckily just one broke," I reply, still feeling frustrated that I lost a piece of inventory. "Is there anything I can help you find?"

"I'm just looking," she says with a smile, then starts browsing on the other side of the store.

"Let me know if you need anything," I say before going to fetch the broom.

After I clean the broken glass off the floor, the customer walks up to the counter, ready to check out. She's buying scrapbooking supplies. As I ring her items up, she says, "It's a shame that you had a glass break and had to rearrange your entire wall. Have you talked to the owner next door about it?"

"Not yet, but I plan to," I reply.

"You need to," she says, taking me by surprise by how serious she is about the situation. "My husband's a lawyer, and he's helped clients in your situation before. You shouldn't have to put up with this."

I look at her as she rummages through her purse. I'm unsure of what to say. I wasn't expecting a customer to give me any sort of legal advice on the matter.

"Here's his card," she says, pulling it from her wallet and placing it on the counter in front of me. "If you need to take legal action, he's the man you want in your corner. And I'm not just saying that because he's my husband."

I pick up the business card and read his name. Matt Smith, Attorney. "Thank you," I say, slipping the card into my pocket. "I'll keep him in mind."

As I finish her transaction, the thought of having to take legal action on this matter is at the forefront of my mind. I've never had to deal with anything like this before, and I can't imagine this situation blowing up to the point that I need a lawyer... but who knows? I've never been a business owner before either, so I don't know exactly how these things work.

After the customer leaves, I try to reorganize all of the items I took off the wall so the store doesn't look so cluttered. By the time I finish, it looks a little better, but I hate the look of the bare wall. There hasn't been any construction noise or banging for several minutes now, and I wonder if they're done for the day. Maybe they just had a few things to do, and now they're finished. Did I take everything down for no reason?

I'm overwhelmed with frustration. They broke one of my glasses, and could have broken more items if I didn't move it all. And it's not fair that I had to move it all! I understand that they're doing construction, but why should my business have to suffer because of it? I need to do something about this... although I'm not sure taking legal action is necessary right now.

Instead of taking the lawyer's business card out of my pocket, I grab my shop keys and head for the door. I turn the sign around, saying I'll be back shortly, then walk outside and lock the door behind me. I march next door and peer in the window. I see a few men standing near the bar, talking. Taking a deep breath, I knock on the door, making sure to rap loud enough for them to hear me.

All three of their heads turn and look at me, and one of them walks toward the door. I straighten my posture, preparing to stand my ground and let them know what an inconvenience their construction has caused me and my business. Hopefully he'll understand and I don't come across as a bitch... I don't want to cause issues with my soon-to-be neighbor.

The door swings open, and my mouth goes dry. I wasn't prepared for this situation.

"Can I help you?" one of the most attractive men I've ever laid eyes on asks.

“Oh—hi,” I manage to say. All of the words I had rehearsed in my head as I walked over have vanished. I look at this brown-eyed, brown-haired, tanned, muscular man in front of me. His sexiness has caught me off guard.

“What can I do for you?” he asks, and I realize I must look stupid right now, speechless, just standing in front of him.

“I-I’m the owner of the shop next door,” I manage to say, pointing in the direction of my store. I steady myself and find my voice again. “The construction you’re doing rattled the wall we share, and it knocked some of my things down.”

He just stares at me, emotionless, as if he doesn’t understand what I just said to him.

“One of my glasses shattered on the floor,” I add, hoping he’ll realize the severity of the situation.

His expression doesn’t change, and I wonder if he doesn’t speak English. But that wouldn’t make sense since he already spoke to me in English.

“Are you sure it was our fault?” he finally says.

That was not the response I was expecting to hear.

“Um, yeah. It was definitely your fault. All of the banging against the wall caused it to fall off the shelf.”

He rubs his chin, then puts his hand out for me to shake. “I’m Jacob. I’m the owner of this soon-to-be bar and grill.”

I’m confused about the way this conversation is going, but I shake his hand to be cordial. “I’m Heidi. I’m the owner of Cheerfully Yours.”

Jacob smiles, but it doesn’t meet his eyes. “So a glass broke? How much do I owe you for that?”

Okay, maybe we’re getting somewhere.

“Twenty-five,” I reply.

“For a *glass*?”

Defensively, I cross my arms over my chest. “Yes, for one etched-by-hand glass. It was one of my original designs.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Wow. You must make a killing over there.”

What. The. Fuck?

Who does this guy think he is?

“How long will this construction be going on for?” I ask, hoping he says they’re almost done. From where I’m standing, it’s hard to tell how much progress they’ve made inside.

“Probably at least a couple more weeks, if not more,” he says with an exasperated sigh. He doesn’t seem to care about the problem he’s causing me at all. “So I would suggest moving your fragile glasses away from the wall until we’re done.”

I’m taken aback. Why is this guy being such a dick? “I’m sorry... but you don’t see the problem here?”

He crosses his arms over his chest, and his T-shirt tightly hugs his bulging biceps. “I can’t exactly stop the construction. I need to finish my bar. So I guess you’ll need to move your things until we’re done.”

My blood is boiling. He doesn’t seem to care about anyone but himself. “Are you being serious right now?”

He scoffs. “Yeah, I am. Are you suggesting I stop construction? Because if that’s the case, I’ll never be able to open my business.”

“Well, maybe that would be a good thing,” I say to this selfish prick.

“Wow,” he says, seemingly surprised by what I said. “You know the world doesn’t revolve around you, right?”

I gasp, and my hand flies to my throat. I can’t believe he just said that to me! “Are you kidding right now? I could say the same thing to you!”

He laughs, and I have the urge to slap his smug, sexy face.

Damn him for being so hot!

He pulls his wallet out of his back pocket. “Twenty-five?” he asks as he looks through the billfold.

I nod but don't say anything. He holds out a couple of bills toward me, and I take the twenty and the five from his hand. "Thanks," I mutter.

"No problem," he says, his voice sticky sweet. "It was nice meeting you, Heather."

"It's Heidi," I say, rolling my eyes.

"Sorry," he replies, opening the door to go back in. "Heidi." He gives a little nod as he heads back inside, leaving me out here all alone.

"Unbelievable," I say to myself before turning on my heel and walking back to my store.

What an ass! I can't believe he was so aloof to my situation and how *his* construction is affecting my shop. I can't believe *that's* the guy I have to share a wall with for the foreseeable future.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Jacob

OPENING my bar is turning out to be more work than I originally thought it would be. So far, everything has been a headache, from getting all the permits, to hiring a reliable construction crew, to starting the hiring process for all my employees. I can't wait for everything to be done.

And then, in the middle of the contractor telling me that they found mold behind the bar underneath some of the floorboards, my new neighbor stops by to complain about the construction. Thinking back on it now, I probably came across as a complete dickhead. I was overwhelmed at the time, and sometimes I struggle to handle my frustrations well. Her complaining about a glass breaking and having to move some of her stuff was just the icing on the cake for me. She has no idea the amount of roadblocks I've had to deal with since I signed the lease paperwork.

But I was a dick, and she didn't deserve it. I'll have to apologize to Heidi whenever I see her again.

And I hope to see her again soon. Damn, she's beautiful. Blond hair, blue eyes, and although she wasn't happy with me, I couldn't avoid being attracted to her.

I kick my shoes off, then crash on the couch. I'm exhausted. I turn on the TV and search for something to watch. My phone dings with a text notification, so I take it out of my pocket to read what it says.

Markus: *Just checking to see if you're coming to our holiday party on Saturday. Let me know!*

Damn. I almost forgot. Markus invited me to this shindig about a month ago. We've known each other since high school, and we reconnected a couple of years ago when he came into the bar I was—and still am, for the time being—bartending at. He and his wife, Amber, run the one and only music store in town, Connors Music. Her parents owned and operated the store for years until they retired, and now Markus and Amber run it together.

After I shared my dream of wanting to open my own bar someday, Markus encouraged me to do so. When the restaurant a couple of doors down from his music store closed, Markus let me know right away, and I contacted the building owner about leasing the space. It's the perfect spot for what I envision my bar to be, including enough space to add a small stage big enough for bands to perform on the weekends.

Markus and Amber have been nothing but supportive throughout this process. Having never been a business owner before, I had—and still have—a lot of questions they've been able to help answer. I just wish I knew how many roadblocks I'd come across on this journey. According to my original plans, the bar was supposed to open a week ago. Now, the estimated date is two weeks from now—at the earliest. But with the mold discovery, I have a feeling the opening date will have to be pushed back even further.

I reply to Markus's text, letting him know I'm planning on going to the party. Then I try to relax while I watch a mindless reality show.

“Are you sure you can have it done that fast?” I look at my contractor, Hector, hoping he's not bullshitting me right now.

He nods. “Yes, I'm sure. Schedule all the inspections you need to have. I'm guessing you'll be able to open by New Year's Eve.”

“That's only three weeks from now. That seems pretty fast, considering you found mold yesterday.”

Hector smiles. “Yes, but the mold wasn’t as extensive as we first thought. We’ll replace the boards that are affected, and that’ll be it. You have my word. Get your inspections lined up. I’m betting you can open by December 31, if not sooner.”

I study his face, looking for any sign of him lying to me, but he appears to be truthful. I put my hand out for him to shake. “Okay, then. Let’s get this place finished.”

Hector shakes my hand and pats my shoulder with his other one. “It’s gonna look amazing when we’re done!”

“I’m holding you to that,” I say with a chuckle.

The thing is, I know he’s telling the truth about that. I’ve seen the work his crew has done in other restaurants and bars. Everything they’ve constructed looks amazing, so I know this place will look just the way I want it to look once it’s done. Having the soft opening on New Year’s Eve would be incredible, too. What an amazing opportunity to throw a party and celebrate. I know I won’t be able to get a musical act to perform on such short notice, but that’s okay. My original plan was to start the live music acts at our grand opening, anyway, which will be a month or two later after we get all of the kinks of opening a new bar worked out.

If Hector is right, and we’ll be able to open three weeks from now, I have a lot of planning to do.

But right now, I need to go to the job that’s still paying all my bills. I wish I had time to stop inside Cheerfully Yours to apologize to Heidi, but that’ll have to wait for another day.

I’ve worked at Grays for almost five years now, and I’ve been the head bartender for the past three. Before that, I worked at another bar in town, which I started out as the bouncer before eventually working my way behind the bar to mix drinks. I love my job. I’m a social guy and love talking with people, so bartending is the perfect job for me. I love connecting with my customers and being a sounding board for them when they need it. It’s amazing how open people are with their bartender... I’ve learned a lot of interesting things over the years, and I’d like to think I’ve helped people with their problems, too.

Hopefully, if all goes to plan like Hector says, I'll finally be able to give my official two weeks' notice at Grays next week. My boss isn't happy with me at the moment, although she's still supportive of me pursuing my dream. However, I'm stealing a couple of her employees to come work for me once Hot Toddy's opens. That's the name of my bar—Hot Toddy's. I thought it was clever since it's not only the name of a drink, but Todd is also my last name.

Halfway through my shift, I'm surprised to see Markus and Amber walk in. They sit at the bar, like they always do when they come in. It's been a while since they've been in here, so it's good to see my friends.

I walk over to where they're sitting. "Hey, guys. What's up?"

"Hey, man," Markus says, shaking my hand. "Long time no see. How're things going?"

"It's good," I say, although that's not entirely true, considering all the stress the new bar is causing me.

"How's construction going at the new place?" Amber asks. "When do you think you'll get to open?"

I sigh and wipe the bar down with a rag. "Well, let me tell you all about it," I say before going on to explain what's been going on with that.

After sharing the exciting news that I'll likely be able to open by New Year's Eve, Markus and Amber congratulate me. "We'll keep our fingers crossed for everything to go smoothly from here on out," Markus says.

"Thanks, man. So what can I get you guys tonight?" I ask.

They place their orders, and I get to work mixing their drinks after putting their food orders into the computer for the kitchen. I deliver their drinks, then help a couple of other customers before returning to chat with them some more.

“So the holiday party is this weekend,” I say to them. “I’m looking forward to going.”

“Yeah, it should be a good time.” Amber leans in and quietly says, “Nick is in town, so Riser’s going to play.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “What? That’s amazing!” Amber’s brother is the lead singer of the Grammy-award-winning rock band Riser. Getting to see them perform for free will definitely be a treat.

“Yeah, but keep that on the down-low,” Markus says. “We don’t want random people getting word of it and trying to track down where the party is.”

I chuckle. “The secret’s safe with me.”

“Not that it would be easy to *find* the party,” Amber adds with a laugh.

Their holiday party is being held at Amber’s parents’ house, who live on acreage outside the city limits. Even after their retirement, her parents continued to host the holiday parties since they have the perfect location to do so. Although I don’t work for Connors Music, I always get an invitation. They don’t just invite their employees to the shindig, they extend invitations to everyone they know, and it’s always a good time.

“Are you going to bring a date with you?” Markus asks.

I shake my head. “No, not this year,” I reply.

Last year, I brought the girl I was dating at the time, but that relationship was short-lived.

“Are you dating anyone right now?” Amber asks.

I shake my head again. “Nope. Not right now.”

My beautiful blond shop owner neighbor pops in my head. Heidi’s the type of woman I’d date. After I have the chance to apologize to her, maybe she’ll agree to go out with me someday.

I wonder if Markus and Amber know Heidi very well. After all, they’re her shop neighbors on the other side, so they

must know each other. Maybe she'll even be at their holiday party. That might be a good opportunity for me to apologize and get to know her better.

“Hey, do you guys know the owner of the craft store between us?” I ask, curious what they'll have to say about her.

Amber cocks an eyebrow. “Heidi? Yeah—”

“She's my cousin,” Markus butts in, taking me by surprise.

Great. Hopefully she hasn't told Markus what an ass I was to her yesterday.

“She is?” I ask, wondering how I didn't know this. I've known Markus for years, not to mention he never told me that his cousin owns the shop located between us in the strip mall.

“Yeah. Her mom is my dad's sister. Why? What about her?”

Wanting to downplay the situation now, I shrug a shoulder. “I met her yesterday. Apparently our construction work caused the wall to rattle too much and she had to move a bunch of her stuff. One of her glasses broke, too.”

“Oh no,” Amber says. “That's too bad. I bet Heidi was upset.”

You could say that.

“Yeah, she was. I paid her for the broken glass.”

“That was nice of you,” Markus says.

“She's coming to the holiday party, too,” Amber adds, then leans in closer. “She's single, you know.”

“Is that right?” I'm not going to let on that I have any sort of interest in Heidi. I'm not sure how Markus would take it, considering they're related.

Amber gasps. “Oh, you two might get along really well, actually.”

Is that right?

Markus puts his hand over his wife's. “Babe. Don't try to play matchmaker between Heidi and Jacob. They have to work

next door to each other. If things don't work out between them, that could be really awkward."

He has a point.

Amber looks at Markus, then me, then back to Markus. "Okay, fine," she concedes. But then she looks back at me with a serious look on her face and adds, "Just so you know, though, Heidi is the kindest, strongest, most selfless woman I know. She's been through a lot in her life, and she's not one to put up with anyone's crap. She's a fighter, a warrior, and she deserves the best in life."

Her words take me by surprise, especially with the seriousness of her tone.

"Okay... I understand," I reply, although I really don't. What has Heidi been through?

I can only hope that I'll get the chance to talk with her at the party. Not only do I feel the need to apologize to her, but I'm also more intrigued by and want to get to know my new, beautiful work neighbor for the amazing person Amber makes her out to be. Saturday can't get here fast enough.

Heidi

“MOM! ARE YOU HOME?” I hear Brooklyn’s voice call from the front of the house.

“In my room!” I call to her before looking in the mirror to apply my eyeliner.

I hear footsteps in the hallway, then in my room before the reflection of her in the bathroom doorway appears in the mirror. “Hey! Whatcha doin’?”

I click the lid back onto my eyeliner pencil, then turn around to give her a hug. “Hi, hon. I’m getting ready to go to a holiday party.”

“Oh, fun! Who’s throwing it?”

I turn back toward the mirror to finish my makeup, and Brooklyn lowers the toilet lid to sit down. “Markus and Amber. Supposedly Riser is performing at the party tonight, too.”

Brooklyn’s eyes widen. “No way! That’s awesome!”

“Wanna be my date?” I ask, although I know she’ll say no.

“I can’t. I have plans,” she pouts. “Although your plans sound better.”

“What? Do you mean you’d actually rather hang out with your mom than go out with your boyfriend?” I laugh, knowing full well her answer is no.

She rolls her eyes. “You know I love hanging out with you... but I’m not so sure I want to go to an *old* person’s

party.”

I gasp, pretending to act shocked. I know she’s kidding, but I still have to react. “How dare you call me old! I am *not* old!”

She purses her lips. “Okay... keep telling yourself that. You *do* have a twenty-one-year-old daughter...”

I scoff. “I brought you into this world, and I can take you out.”

“Hey! Now that’s just mean.” She laughs.

“Oh, and calling me old isn’t?” I shake my head, then turn back to the mirror to fix my hair.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Brooklyn says with a sigh. “I guess you were young when you had me, so that doesn’t make you *too* old.”

“You’ve got that right. So what are your plans tonight, anyway?”

“Mike’s picking me up soon. We’re meeting some friends at Brickhouse for drinks and pool. I think a band is playing there, too.”

“Sounds fun,” I reply. “Will you be coming home tonight, or staying at Mike’s?” Although she’s an adult now, I always feel strange asking my daughter if she’s coming home at night or staying with her boyfriend. She may be twenty-one, but she’s still my little girl.

“I’ll probably stay at Mike’s,” she replies before looking down at her phone in her hands. “Oh, he’s here.” She stands and gives me another hug. “Have fun tonight. I’ll text you to let you know for sure if I’m staying at Mike’s. Love you!”

“Okay, have fun. I love you, too!”

Brooklyn bounds out of the room, and I turn to give myself a final once-over in the mirror. It’s just about time for me to leave as well. Hopefully the party is as much fun as I’m anticipating it to be. I’m sure it will. Amber and Markus always throw amazing parties, and the fact that Riser will be performing tonight makes it even more exciting.

“Heidi! I’m so glad you’re here!” Amber greets me with a hug as soon as she sees me.

“Thanks again for inviting me,” I say.

“Of course! Make yourself at home. There are food and drinks over there,” she says, pointing at the other side of the large workshop that’s been transformed into the ultimate party space. The setup includes a stage for bands to perform on, two small bathrooms, about a half-dozen tables to sit and eat at, and lots of open space for guests to mingle and watch the band later.

I make my way over to the food area, where several others help themselves to the impressive buffet. I say hi to a few people I know, although Markus said his parents couldn’t come because they’re not feeling well, so my aunt and uncle aren’t here.

After making small talk with a few acquaintances and filling my plate with food, I look for a table with an empty seat. Luckily, I spot one in the corner, so I grab a hard cider to drink and carry my plate in that direction.

Just as I sit down and get comfortable, I hear a deep voice say my name. “Heidi. It *is* you.”

I look up to see who the voice belongs to, and I’m shocked at who I see.

Jacob. My new shop neighbor.

I was not expecting to see his face.

His sexy, stubbly, smiling, dimple-popping face. He’s more attractive than I remember from our last encounter. However, maybe that’s because I was so perturbed with him at the time.

“Hi,” I manage to say.

“Can I sit with you?” he asks, and I notice he has a plate full of food in his hands. I was so fixated on his attractive face before that I didn’t notice.

I nod, not wanting to be rude. However, despite the fact that he's one of the most attractive men I've ever met, I have to remember what a selfish prick he was to me at the shop the other day.

"Thanks," he says as he sits down. "Does this mean you forgive me?"

His question catches me off guard, and I freeze. I don't know how to respond.

He smirks, looking cocky and too handsome for his own good.

"Forgive you for what?" Although I know what he did, I want to hear him say it.

He leans forward, his elbows resting on the table. "For being an ass the other day. I'm sorry that you had to take so many things off your walls, and that your glass broke."

His sincerity takes me by surprise. This is the last thing I expected to hear tonight, and I truly feel as though Jacob means what he's saying.

"Oh. Well, I appreciate that," I say, then take a sip of my hard cider.

"The last thing I want to do is upset my new neighbor," he says before taking a bite of mashed potatoes on his plate.

"When is your bar supposed to open, anyway?" I ask, cutting into the slice of turkey on my plate.

Jacob swallows, then says, "I'm having a soft opening on New Year's Eve. You should come."

That sexy smirk of his makes my belly muscles clench. *Damn him!* Why do I have to be attracted to a guy who was such a dick to me?

Story of my life, I guess.

"Y-yeah... I'd like to go," I reply. I don't know if I'll actually go to his soft opening, but how can I say no? That would be rude, and I want to be the bigger person here. Besides, he *did* apologize...

Jacob and I continue talking throughout dinner. He tells me more about his bar, and I'm surprised to learn that he works at Grays. I've been there a few times, but I never noticed him behind the bar. Not that I would've known him before, but I probably would've noticed such a hot bartender. Maybe I happened to go when he wasn't working.

Surprisingly, I enjoy Jacob's company. He's funny, kind, and easy to talk to. He's nothing like my original impression of him, and I'm relieved about that. I wasn't looking forward to working next door to an asshole, but now I don't think I need to worry.

Although we get to know each other, it's all surface level stuff. I learn that he not only named his bar after the famous drink but also his last name, Todd. Jacob Todd. Hot Toddy. The name is appropriate in my opinion. Jacob is a hot one.

I also discover he went to high school with Markus, which makes him a few years younger than me. Okay, maybe *ten* years younger than me, but at our ages, does it really matter? I'm forty-five, and he's thirty-five. It doesn't seem like *that* big of a difference. It's not as if he's Brooklyn's age... now *that* would be weird.

We joke about the fact that our high schools were rivals, and despite our age difference, we reminisce about some of the things we used to do growing up. I learn that he's an only child, and I tell him about my older brother and the things we used to do as kids. He also shares memories he has of him and Markus growing up, and it's interesting to hear about my cousin's life from someone outside our family. Since I was much older than Markus, I was totally unaware of the things Jacob tells me.

Although I share a lot about myself with him, too, the one thing I don't mention is the fact that I've been divorced—*twice*—and that I have a daughter. I also don't mention all of the health issues I've had over the years. Jacob and I are just getting to know each other, and it seems too soon to get into all that personal stuff. Not that Brooklyn is considered too personal, but bringing up the fact that I have a daughter just hasn't made its way into our conversation yet.

“So, tell me, Heidi... what made you decide to open Cheerfully Yours?” he asks.

Jacob doesn't know it, but asking that one simple question just opened a whole can of worms about my life.

“I'm not sure if you're ready to hear the answer to that,” I say with a laugh.

Jacob's face scrunches up in confusion, then he laughs along with me. “I guess you don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I hope you do.”

I smile at Jacob, then look away and clear my throat. Time to get more personal, I guess. “I opened Cheerfully Yours after beating cancer for the second time.”

Jacob's smile fades, and his jaw hits the floor. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “Serious as cancer,” I say with a laugh. Joking about my health conditions is my coping mechanism.

Jacob lets out a short, nervous laugh, as if he's not sure if he should be laughing. It's the same reaction most people have, so I'm used to it. “I'm so sorry, Heidi. What kind of cancer did you have?” he asks.

“Breast cancer. I was young when I was diagnosed the first time—only thirty—and although it was aggressive, I had phenomenal doctors and beat it. However, it came back a second time about three years ago.”

“I'm so sorry,” he says, which also fits most people's reaction.

“It's okay. I'm fine now,” I reply, not wanting his sympathy. Those days are far behind me, and hopefully I'll never have to face them again.

“Wow. Of all the things I thought I'd learn about you tonight, I wasn't expecting you to say that,” he says, shaking his head. “You're so young.”

“It shocks most people, so you're not alone. But to answer your original question, I used to work as a nurse with Amber. After beating cancer the second time, it was becoming harder

and harder for me to work. All of the chemo and radiation messed with me a bit, physically. Not to mention the emotional trauma of it all... And then to have to face illness and death at work every day... it was hard, to say the least.”

“I-I can’t imagine,” he says.

“Then my daughter graduated with her associate’s degree—” Jacob’s eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn’t say anything, so I continue, “And seeing her starting her adult life, with so many dreams and aspirations she could chase, I decided to chase after my own dream. I did my research, got a business loan, and opened my shop. Amber actually helped by telling me about the empty space for lease next to their store.”

Jacob picks his jaw off the floor, then says, “Wow. I-I don’t know what to say, except that’s awesome. Good for you! I admire the fact that you chose to chase after your dreams after going through hard times.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

“And you have a daughter? That’s amazing.”

“I do. She’s my everything. I had her when I was only twenty-four. She’s an incredible human being, so supportive and caring for others. She’s a nurse now, too.”

“That’s great,” Jacob says with a smile. Our conversation is interrupted by the sound of a guitar.

We turn our attention toward the stage and see that everyone is crowding around to see Riser, who is ready to start performing. “Hello, everyone!” Nick, the lead singer and Amber’s brother, speaks into the microphone before the band breaks into one of their hit songs.

Jacob stands, putting his elbow out toward me. “Shall we?”

I smile at his surprising chivalry, then stand and link my arm through his. “We shall!”

Jacob and I join everyone else near the stage. Riser sounds amazing, and the crowd cheers them on. It’s an intimate rock concert, and I realize how lucky I am to be one of the few to

attend this unique event. No more than a hundred people are here, and as I look around, everyone is enjoying themselves. I mean, how could they not? Amber and Markus always host amazing parties, but to have Riser play is an absolute treat.

We dance and sing along to the band's greatest hits for the rest of the night. I'm shocked that Jacob and I have such a great time together. After our first encounter left a bad taste in my mouth, my impression of him has drastically changed. He's been nothing but kind to me tonight, and I've enjoyed hanging out with him.

When Riser plays their slower ballad "Meant to Be," the crowd quiets down. Before we know it, Jacob and I find ourselves surrounded by couples slow dancing to the romantic tune. Suddenly, I feel nervous. Maybe this is a good time to get another drink.

I turn to go get another cider, but I practically walk into Jacob's broad chest.

I look up at his handsome face, and as he smiles, that dimple of his appears below sparkling brown eyes.

"Wanna dance?" he asks, instantly causing butterflies in my stomach.

I want to dance with him. I'm attracted to Jacob, and I like the thought of his arms holding me as we sway to the music. Although I'm nervous to do so, unsure of what this could lead to, I nod.

Jacob pulls me close, putting one arm around my waist and holding my hand with the other. He's a gentleman, and it feels better than I imagined it would to have him touch me. The smell of his musky cologne attracts me to him even more. *God, he smells good!* I can feel his muscular back through his shirt, and his strong hand feels warm and secure in mine. I know I thought this man was a dick not that long ago, but now I feel like a schoolgirl with a crush on the popular quarterback. I'm not sure how he feels, but I hope he likes me just as much as I'm starting to like him.

I look across the room and see Amber and Markus dancing together as well. They look happy, content, and absolutely head over heels in love with each other. I want something like that someday. I've already had two failed relationships, and I want my happily ever after. My first husband, Paul, and I were only together a few months before I got pregnant. We got married for the sake of Brooklyn, but our relationship wasn't strong enough for us to stay together, and we were divorced two years later. Luckily, he's been a good father, and although he remarried and has a couple of other children with his new wife, he has never treated Brooklyn any differently.

My second marriage was a complete disaster. Lance and I met through mutual friends, and he seemed like a great guy. He treated me like a queen, and Brooklyn was his princess. We got married, and things continued to be great for a couple of years, but then things quickly went downhill. He started working longer hours at night and sometimes on the weekends. We didn't have as much time together anymore, and we argued more and more. Then I was diagnosed with cancer. He was supportive throughout my treatments, and I actually thought things might be better between us. But shortly after I was cleared of cancer, things became rocky again. I didn't want to give up on us, though, and I didn't want to be divorced a second time when some friends my age weren't even on their first marriage yet.

Our relationship held on by a thread for way too long before it finally came apart a couple of years later. I found out Lance had been cheating on me, and I wasn't going to stand for that. I was thirty-five. Divorced twice. A single mom. Lance cut himself out of Brooklyn's life as well, which hurt her immensely. She couldn't understand how someone who treated her like his own daughter could suddenly walk away and never speak to her again. Frankly, neither could I, and I felt awful for her. I'm thankful that her real dad continued to be so involved in her life.

As the song comes to an end, everyone begins to cheer, including Jacob and me. The moment we break apart, I miss his touch. I want to feel his hands holding me again, and the realization that I don't know if I'll ever get that chance makes

me yearn for it even more. Riser plays another, more up-beat song, and I decide now is a good time to get that drink I was going to get earlier.

I turn and practically run into Jacob again. He smiles. “Leaving so soon?”

“No, just getting a drink,” I say.

“I’ll get one, too,” he says, taking me by surprise.

We walk together toward the coolers where all the drinks are stored, and I can’t help being filled with hope. Jacob wants to spend more time with me. Maybe he does like me as much as I like him.

He opens a cooler, and we peer inside to see what’s available. I grab another cider, and he takes one of the same. “These are good,” he says. “You have good taste.”

“Yeah, I do,” I say with a wink. I can’t stop myself from flirting.

He smirks. “Do you want to go sit down for a bit?”

I nod, then follow Jacob back to the table we sat at before. Being back in the corner away from the crowd, the music is still loud, but not as bad, making it easier to talk to one another. Also, no one is paying attention to us back here, so it’s as if we’re alone.

“Tonight’s been fun,” Jacob says. “I’m glad I decided to come.”

“I agree. I’m glad we got the chance to talk tonight, too,” I say, then decide to be truthful with him. “I thought you were kind of an ass when we first met.” I laugh, and Jacob’s eyes widen.

He laughs, shaking his head. “I knew it. I *was* kind of a prick to you that day. That’s why I apologized.” His laugh fades and his eyes soften. He doesn’t say anything right away, but he looks sexy as hell, and I can’t help but wonder what he’s thinking behind those piercing brown eyes of his.

My heart pounds, and I wipe my damp palms on my jeans. I feel like a hormone-fueled teenager, anticipating what Jacob

will say next.

“Heidi, I really like you,” he says, and I swear my heart stops. “You’re smart, funny, and I’ve enjoyed getting to know you.” He moves closer, then strokes the back of his hand down my cheek. “You’re also beautiful,” he adds before leaning closer.

The earth seems to flip on its axis as Jacob’s lips make contact with mine. He kisses me tenderly, his hand cradling the back of my head. His tongue traces my lips, and the moment I allow him access to my mouth, this tender kiss quickly intensifies.

I surrender to him as we take this kiss to the next level, devouring one another. I wrap my arms around him, and he pulls me onto his lap. Sitting on his knee, we get wrapped up in each other, our tongues gliding together, not caring who may be watching from the dance floor. My whole body responds to Jacob, wanting more. My hands grip his hair as his hands tangle through mine. Our lips break apart just long enough to tilt our heads in the opposite direction before crashing together again. I haven’t been kissed like this in years and don’t want it to stop.

Suddenly, the crowd erupts in louder cheers than before, stealing our attention. Instantly, I miss the feel of his lips on mine. Riser has finished playing, and the show is over. All at once, I realize Jacob and I will be discovered back here in the corner. I stand to avoid people seeing me sitting on his lap.

Jacob stands, too. “Do you wanna get out of here?”

I nod. “Let’s.”

But before we can exit, I hear my name.

“Heidi!” Amber calls out.

I turn around and see her walking toward me. Me *and* Jacob. I feel like a kid getting caught with their hand in the cookie jar. Maybe she saw us kissing. Even if she didn’t, she sees us together now.

Not that it should matter.

“Hey, Amber,” I say, trying to act natural. “What a great party!”

“Thanks,” she says, then looks at Jacob. “Hey, Jacob. I hope you both enjoyed yourselves.”

Did she see us?

“I did, for sure,” Jacob replies.

“So did I. You always throw the best parties, Amber,” I say, hoping she didn’t see anything. I don’t want rumors starting to fly about Jacob and me.

However, would they be rumors if they were true?

“I’m glad you had fun. Are you leaving already?” Amber asks. “I know Riser is finished, but we still have dessert coming out in a minute.”

“Oh, umm... I’m kind of full, actually,” I reply.

I’m not hungry for dessert at all.

I’m hungry for Jacob...

“Oh, you have to try a little of it. It’s a delicious tiramisu, and I know how much you love tiramisu.”

I don’t want to let Amber down. She’s right; I *do* love tiramisu.

Before I can respond, though, Jacob says, “That sounds delicious. I love tiramisu myself. I’d love to try some.”

I look at him, surprised by his response for more than one reason.

“Great! You two come sit with Markus and me after you get a piece. We haven’t had a chance to talk with either of you tonight!”

Jacob and I agree before Amber rushes off to talk to another guest.

“Sorry, I can’t turn down tiramisu,” he says. “And I can’t turn down Amber and Markus. They’ve been so helpful in getting my bar opened.”

I smile. As much as I was looking forward to the myriad of possible scenarios that could've played out between Jacob and me if Amber hadn't stopped us from leaving, I find myself a little relieved that she did. Who knows what would've happened, or if it would've turned into a mistake with my new work neighbor that I'd end up regretting.

Not only that, it's been a few years since I've had sex, and no matter how hot and ready I think I am for Jacob at this moment, I'm not sure I want to rush things with him. Something tells me I should take things slow with Mr. Hot Toddy.

4

Jacob

I CAN'T SLEEP.

I should be sound asleep by now, considering I didn't get home until one o'clock, and here it is, almost three already. But I'm still wide awake, unable to get my evening with Heidi off my mind. My attraction to her has multiplied since getting to know her. She's not only beautiful on the outside but she also has a beautiful soul. I enjoyed getting to know her. She's not like any other girl I've met before. She's strong, brave, independent, and smart, not to mention kind and fun to be around. Maybe she's not like other girls because she's in a whole other category—she's not a girl, she's a woman.

Heidi's a woman I'd like to get to know more. Knowing what she's been through makes me want to spoil her—take her out on fancy dates, treat her the way she deserves to be treated—but maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

Kissing her felt amazing. We were close to leaving together before Amber innocently stopped us, and while I know we could've left together later, I'm glad we didn't. I don't want Heidi to be another notch on my bedpost. I want to take things slower with her, get to know her better first before sleeping with her. *If* I'm lucky enough to get the chance to sleep with her. We'll be working next door to each other, after all. Our businesses share a wall, not to mention Markus is her cousin. If things don't work out with Heidi, things could get awkward *really* fast, and I definitely don't want that to happen.

I need to take things one step at a time with Heidi. Take her out on a real date to begin with. Get to know each other

better. Then if things continue to go well between us, maybe we'll take things to the next level.

God, I hope so.

New Year's Eve

“Jacob! This is amazing! Congrats, man!” Markus shakes my hand, then pulls me in for a man-hug.

I pat his back twice, then we let go. “Thanks, man. I'm still in awe that I pulled all this off. Thanks again for all your help.”

“All I did was tell you about this space for lease. That's nothing compared to all the hard work you put into it.”

“True, but I wouldn't have a location without your help, and that's pretty important!”

“I guess you're right,” Markus says with a laugh before Amber walks up to join her husband.

“Jacob, I love the place! Good job!” Amber hugs me, then steps back and puts her arm around her husband.

“Thanks. I was just thanking Markus for finding this place for me. I couldn't have opened today without your help.”

She smiles, then something behind my back catches her eye. “I guess this location has become a good place for you for more than one reason,” she says, and before I have a chance to turn around to see what she's looking at, Heidi appears at my side.

“Hi, guys,” she says, looking beautiful as ever.

I wrap my arm around her waist and kiss her briefly on the lips. “Hey, babe.”

She smiles at me. “Everything looks great! I'm impressed.”

“We were just saying the same thing,” Amber agrees. “When you officially open to the public, this place will be one of the most popular in town. I just know it!”

Their words are encouraging, and I do feel proud of Hot Toddy’s. “Thank you. I hope you’re right!”

Heidi gives me a slight squeeze. The past few weeks have been stressful regarding work, but Heidi has helped improve it. Ever since Markus and Amber’s holiday party, the two of us have talked every day, either in person, on the phone, or through text messages. We’ve also gone out on several dates together... and we’ve had sex. Everything with Heidi has been incredible—better than I ever expected it to be—and I’m a happy man.

“Brooklyn and her friends should be here soon,” Heidi says. “She texted me right after I got here.”

“Cool. The more, the merrier.” I recently met Brooklyn for the first time a couple of days ago. After Heidi broke the news that she was dating someone, Brooklyn wanted to meet me, especially when she found out I was the owner of the new bar going in next door to her mom’s store. When I told her about our New Year’s Eve private soft opening, she was eager to come and check it out, especially when I mentioned who our first musical guests were.

To my surprise, they introduced me to Amber’s brother, Nick, before I left their holiday party. I was starstruck, to say the least, but I was floored when he offered to have Riser play at Hot Toddy’s opening night. That’s when I decided to make it a private party rather than open to the public. I’ve kept quiet about Riser’s performance and swore the few people I told to secrecy so the word didn’t get out. I didn’t want random Riser fans showing up, trying to crash the party. Luckily, no one seems to have let the cat out of the bag because there haven’t been any crazy fans trying to get in.

I look around my new bar and feel proud. Dozens of people are here, people from all aspects of my life. Relatives, friends, coworkers, former coworkers, and classmates... it’s surreal seeing them all in one place, helping me celebrate the

opening of my own bar. I feel fortunate and privileged to have them all here.

“What time does the band start?” Heidi asks.

I look at my watch. “In about ten minutes,” I reply.

“I’m so excited! This is going to be great. I can’t wait to see everyone’s reaction

when they see Riser is going to play.”

“I know. I can’t wait.” I lean down and kiss her again.

Tonight’s the night. Not only the start of my dream career as a bar owner, but it’s the night I’m going to tell Heidi I love her.

I know some people may think it’s too soon, but I know how I feel. My relationship with Heidi is unlike any I’ve had before, and I know in my heart that I’m in love with this woman. Not only that but if I had to guess, I’d say she’s in love with me, too. It’s in the way she shows she cares, how she talks, how she kisses me, and how she makes love.

Sex with Heidi has been the best I’ve had, and she says it’s the best she’s ever had, too. Each time we’re together, it only gets better.

“Jacob! I have a question over here,” one of my waitresses walks up to me and says.

“Okay, I’ll be right there,” I reply, then kiss Heidi on the cheek. “I’ll be back.”

“No worries. I’ll just go introduce myself to your mom.” She winks, letting me know she’s joking.

She’s been asking if I’m going to introduce her to my parents tonight, and I told her I would. I’m actually excited to introduce her to my mom and dad, which is unusual. Whenever I’ve introduced a woman to my parents before, I panicked, wondering if my parents would like her and if she was right for me. This time, however, it just feels like the right thing to do.

When I first told my parents I was seeing someone new, of course they asked me questions. Once I said that Heidi owns the store next door to my bar, Mom got excited. To my surprise, Mom has shopped at Cheerfully Yours several times before, so technically, they met long before Heidi and I ever did. I should have known; Mom loves doing crafts and buying the kinds of things Heidi sells in her shop. Of course she's shopped there. I don't know why the possibility hadn't occurred to me before.

After I help my server, it's time for me to take the stage to welcome and thank everyone for coming. Then, I'll introduce our special guests, Riser. As I look out at the sea of familiar faces in the bar I've spent months—no, *years*—planning, I'm overcome with emotion. I manage to hold back the tears as I give a little speech, and as soon as I announce Riser and they walk out onto the stage, everyone erupts in cheers.

I walk back onto the floor to find Heidi. She's with Brooklyn and a couple of Brooklyn's friends, who thoroughly enjoy Riser performing just feet away from them.

"Come on," I say in Heidi's ear. "I want to introduce you to my mom and dad."



"Three, two, one, Happy New Year!"

Everyone cheers, Riser plays "Auld Lang Syne," and my lips land on Heidi's. Her arms wrap around my neck, holding me close. Tonight has been amazing, not only because my dream bar is now open but because I've had an incredible time celebrating the new year with Heidi and my closest friends and family.

My parents adore her. Mom and Heidi hit it off as soon as they met, which has never happened with any of my girlfriends before. They even recognized each other from being in Cheerfully Yours. They're already planning a crafting day together, which is another first. No one I've dated has ever

hung out with my parents without me. This is new territory for me... and I like it.

“I want you.” Heidi’s breath tickles my neck. Her words have a direct line to my libido, and my cock twitches.

I kiss her neck, then reply in her ear, “I want you, too.”

Realization hits that we won’t be able to leave for at least a couple more hours. I admire Heidi, looking sexy as sin in the short red dress she wore tonight. I don’t want to wait to be alone with her.

Riser starts playing another song, and an idea pops into my head.

“Come with me,” I say, taking Heidi’s hand in mine and leading her through the crowd.

We can be alone in my back office.

“Where are we going?” Heidi asks as I lead her to the area designated for “employees only.”

“You’ll see,” I say as we approach my office door. I take my key out of my pocket and unlock the door, swing it open, and flip the light switch on.

“Is this your office?” Heidi asks.

We walk into the small room with a desk, chair, and filing cabinet. I close the door behind us and lock it. “Yeah, it is. I couldn’t wait to be alone with you. I want you now.”

She smiles wickedly at me, then tosses her small purse on my desk. She licks her lips, her hand lightly caressing her collarbone as she looks at me seductively. “Do you want to bend me over your desk?”

Fuck. All the blood rushes straight to my dick. My erection strains against my jeans, and my fingers itch to touch her beautiful body.

I step closer and grip her hips, lowering my lips to hers. As my tongue darts in her mouth, my hands slide up her dress, and I’m pleasantly surprised to discover she’s not wearing

underwear. I moan in appreciation as I grip her ass, pulling her body flush against mine.

Knowing we don't have much time, I pull my lips away, then spin Heidi around so her back is to my front. She lets out a little screech of excitement as I guide her toward my desk and quickly move my chair out of the way. I shove the few papers on my desktop aside so she has space to bend over the top of it.

Gently, I pull her hair to the side, giving me access to her neck. She squirms as I kiss behind her ear before whispering, "Put your face down on my desk and stick your ass out for me."

"Yes, sir," she says meekly. It's a turn-on for me because Heidi's the opposite of meek. However, I've learned she enjoys being submissive in bed, which is perfect for me since I like being more dominant.

Her dress barely covers her butt cheeks as she bends over my desk, and I nearly combust at the sexy sight. I glide my hands up the back of her legs and flip the skirt of her dress up to expose her ass. I don't waste any time. "Spread your legs," I say, and she complies.

I slide my hand between her legs and discover her pussy's already wet for me. Sliding my fingers between the folds, I concentrate on her clit and rub it in circles. Heidi's breathing becomes more labored, and I know she's enjoying my touch.

"Yes, right there," she says. I lightly increase the pressure on her clit as I continue rubbing, and it doesn't take long before she calls out in ecstasy. I insert two fingers and pump in and out vigorously, making her come even more. Heidi covers her mouth to avoid screaming too loudly, but she can't stop moaning in pleasure.

Quickly, I undo the fly of my jeans and slide them down far enough to pull my dick out. We've already established Heidi's taking birth control, and neither of us has any diseases, so we stopped using condoms about a week ago. I line up my cock with her pussy and slide in. Her back arches, and she sticks her ass out more, allowing me to slide in deeper.

“Mmmm, you feel so good.” I lean over, speaking in her ear. “Your pussy’s so wet and tight. I’m gonna come so fucking fast.”

She wiggles her backside and presses against me. “Your cock feels amazing,” she says. “Make me come again.”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice. I stand back up and begin fucking her at a steady pace, gripping her hips to keep her in place. She moans and every once in a while lets out a “Yes!” or curses in pleasure. I look down between us and watch my cock slide in and out, and the sight turns me on even more, getting me closer to release. I increase my pace a fraction, hoping I can make her come again before I do.

“Harder!” she directs me, so I do what she says. “Ohmygod.” It comes out as one garbled word right before her muscles clench around my dick, and she calls out my name.

“Yes, come for me,” I say, and she moans.

Her muscles continue to contract, milking my cock, and suddenly, I’m on the precipice of my own orgasm. The thought of nearly a hundred people on the other side of this wall or that one of my employees could hear us as they walk by my office door excites me even more, sending me over the edge.

“Heidi, fuck!” I call out as I come inside her.

As we both recover, I look down at this beautiful woman. I feel so fortunate to have met her. Although I was going to wait until we got back to my place to tell her I love her, I have the urge to do it now. I don’t want to wait anymore to tell her how I feel and how much she means to me.

But I’m nervous. What if it’s too soon, and she doesn’t feel the same?

I let the moment pass, and we quickly clean up and get dressed. I suppose we should return to the party before everyone wonders where we’ve disappeared to.

Maybe I’ll say those three little words to Heidi later.

Heidi

“BYE, MOM,” Brooklyn says, giving me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, honey. Drive safe,” I say, knowing she chose to be the designated driver tonight for her friends and that she’s staying with them at their apartment tonight.

After the last of the guests have left Hot Toddy’s, it’s just me, Jacob, and his

employees finishing up for the night. It’s after two o’clock, and I’m tired but not sleepy. I’ve been craving more of Jacob since our tryst in his office. Tonight has been the best New Year’s Eve I’ve had in a long time—maybe ever—and I know it’s due to the past few weeks with Jacob. They’ve been the best I’ve had in a long time. My relationship with Jacob has evolved and grown quickly... and my feelings for him are intense. He makes me feel beautiful, secure, and cared for. He makes me feel loved.

There’s no denying it—I’m in love with Jacob.

But I’m not going to be the first one to say it. I’m not going to jinx the best relationship I’ve ever had by saying those words too soon. I don’t want to lose Jacob because I scared him away.

I met his parents tonight, and his mom and I made plans to hang out and do crafts together. I’ve never hung out with any of my ex’s moms before without them being there, too. Even my former mothers-in-law and I never made plans for just the two of us. This is new territory for me, and while it may seem

premature to be hanging out with the mom of a guy I've only been seeing for a few weeks, it doesn't feel weird at all. I'd actually met his mom before when she shopped at Cheerfully Yours, and I remembered her immediately, which isn't easy for me to do. I meet a lot of customers who come into my store, and I don't remember them all. After all my cancer treatments, my memory's not what it used to be. However, his mom was familiar to me right away.

Brooklyn approves of Jacob, too. She thinks he's nice, and that he's perfect for me. I'll introduce him to my parents and the rest of my family soon... if things continue to go well for us... which I hope they do.

I sit at a booth and watch as Jacob and his employees finish what they need to do. His employees begin leaving, and before I know it, we're left alone. He saunters over to me and sits in the seat across from me. Stretching his arms out on the table, I take his hands in mine. He looks exhausted.

"You did it, babe," I say. "Your soft opening was a success!"

He smiles. "Thank you. Hopefully, it'll be a success when we open to the public tomorrow afternoon."

"It will be. I just know it," I reply, and I'm not just saying that to be nice. I really do think Hot Toddy's will be the hot new bar in town.

"I'm exhausted, babe. Are you ready to go?" he asks.

I nod. "Yes. Let's get outta here."

I rode here with Amber and Markus so I could go home with Jacob. Cheerfully Yours will be closed tomorrow—or, rather, today—for New Year's, and the plan is that Jacob will drive me back to my place before he has to return to open Hot Toddy's later in the afternoon.

We pile into his car, and he starts the engine. He doesn't put it in gear, though. He looks thoughtful for a moment before taking my hand and turning to face me.

I turn to look at him, too.

“Heidi, I have something to tell you,” he says, and his words fill me with dread. He’s so serious; I wonder what he’s going to say. Is he seeing someone else? Does he want to see someone else? Anytime I’ve heard a man say the words *I have something to tell you*, it’s never been good.

“O-okay,” I stammer, my heartbeat pounding in my ears. I’m afraid of what he’s going to say. Please don’t let this be the end of Jacob and me! Our relationship has just begun, and I thought everything was going well.

He rubs his forehead with his other hand, then looks me in the eyes. “I... I’ve wanted to say this for a while now, but I was afraid of how you’d react.”

My mind races with the possible scenarios that could play out right now. Is there another woman? Is he not happy with me? Does he think we’re moving too fast? Does he not want to be in a relationship? Is there something else entirely that I haven’t even considered?

“Heidi, I—” He looks down at our hands for a moment, and I swear my heart stops.

Just say it and get it over with! If he’s going to end things with me, I want it to happen quickly.

He rubs his thumb back and forth over the back of my hand before looking back up at me and continuing. “I know this may be too soon, but I have to tell you how I feel.” As he pauses, his words give me a sense of hope. Maybe he’s not going to say something bad after all...

But what *is* he going to say?

He quickly licks his lips, then says, “I love you, Heidi.”

I suck in a breath, and my hand flies to my chest. Did I hear him correctly? He *loves* me?

“You... you love me?” I ask, hoping I didn’t black out and imagine him saying that when, in reality, he said he doesn’t want to see me anymore.

He nods, his lips lifting a fraction, and I exhale. I didn’t black out. He really did say the words I wanted to say to him

but was afraid to.

“You don’t have to say it back to me,” he says. “I know it’s early in our relationship, and I haven’t even asked you to officially be my girlfriend, but we’ve been spending all of our time together, and I—”

I move my hand from my chest to his mouth. I don’t want him to say another word, giving me excuses for not saying it in return because I *want* to say it to him, too.

“I love you, Jacob.” His brown eyes widen, and I feel his smile under my hand. I drop my hand and replace it with my mouth, kissing him senselessly.

His hands tangle in my hair, and I hold the sides of his face as our tongues glide together, sealing those three little words we just said. I love this man, and I’m overflowing with joy knowing he feels the same way about me.

Jacob pulls back and looks at me. “You love me, too? You don’t think I said it too soon?”

Shaking my head, I reply, “No, I don’t think it’s too soon. I wanted to say it to you, but I was afraid *you’d* think I was moving too fast.”

He smiles. “You did?”

I nod. “I did.”

“I love you,” he says before kissing me again.

As I kiss the man I’m in love with and I now know loves me, too, I’m overwhelmed with happiness. Jacob is everything I’ve wanted in a man for as long as I can remember. After all the struggles I’ve been through in my life—both mentally and physically—I suddenly feel a sense of calm.

Jacob’s and my relationship may still be new, but I have a feeling it will be different than all the rest. It has already been different, and I’m looking forward to all the possibilities for us as a couple. Sometimes life throws curveballs, and sometimes first impressions of people aren’t always accurate. I’m relieved I gave Jacob a second chance after our initial disastrous

meeting. Who knew that things would turn out so amazing with this man? I certainly didn't, but I'm grateful it did.

Happy New Year and new love to me!

The End

Find out how Markus and Amber's relationship started in

Finding Our Rhythm:

<https://clcolliercom.wordpress.com/finding-our-rhythm/>

About C.L. Collier

C.L. Collier is a USA Today Bestselling Author who lives in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. She was raised in the Seattle area, and although she lives closer to Portland, Oregon now, she frequently visits the hometown she loves. When she's not writing, you can find her reading, watching her favorite sports teams, spending time with her family, or going to concerts. She likes her music loud, wine and coffee sweet, and her books steamy.

Find all of C.L. Collier's book links here: <https://clcolliercom.wordpress.com/books/>

You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

CHRISTMAS

Darby Fox

1

Hiro

“I NEED A FAVOR.”

“Well hello to you, too,” I say to my best friend Henry Black. “You missed poker last month.”

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

“Okay shoot.”

“Have you already gone up to your cabin?”

“No, but that’s only because I’m finishing a few things up here for a project. I’m heading up tomorrow.”

“Great.” He breathes a heavy sigh. “I need you to take Katie with you.”

I sit up straight in my office chair. Maybe I didn’t hear him correctly. “Excuse me?” Katie is Henry’s little sister. She’s almost ten years younger than us, and last I heard, she’s a handful. At least for Henry who has been looking after her and the rest of his siblings, since his father died five years ago.

“Katie needs a place to stay for a few days until we can fly home for Christmas.”

“Why me? Katie hates me.” Or at least she certainly didn’t love me. If I had to guess, she sees me as an overly stuffy, grumpy, stick-up-his-ass obstacle to her having a good time.

What she doesn’t know is that if I had less honor, I’d love to show her a good time.

“Katie doesn’t hate you.”

“Mm-kay.” I triple click my pen. “Why do I need to be her babysitter. She’s what? Twenty now?” I pretend like I don’t know that Katie Black just turned twenty-one on Halloween. Not that I’ve been counting down the months to when it wouldn’t be wildly inappropriate to fantasize about kissing her back, should I ever get the chance again.

While technically she’s an adult now, I can’t change the fact that she’ll always be Henry’s baby sister.

“She’s twenty-one, but she may as well still be sixteen for all that she can handle herself. I’ve had some problems, which I thought were limited to some of our business assets, but then someone emailed me photos of Katie, insinuating she was vulnerable if I didn’t kill this deal I’m working on.”

Dread trickles down my spine. “What kind of problems? What’s going on?” Henry Black is the head of a vast entertainment conglomerate that includes everything from movie studios to nightclubs. After his father died, Henry had to step into some pretty big shoes, but he’d been training for it his whole life. We’d met while at boarding school and after he’d punched me in the face for calling him a pampered prince with the most fuckable mother I’d ever laid eyes on we somehow became best friends. Henry Black is a golden boy.

I am not. He’s silver-tongued, persuasive, and charming when he wants something. I’m a sarcastic asshole with little patience and while my techniques might be persuasive, they’re hardly charming.

“It’s not something I want to get into over the phone,” Henry says. “But I’ll tell you as soon as I’m back stateside.”

“Are you safe? Do you need me to call in a team?” The Black empire might be famous and powerful, but mine is vast and often operates in the shadows.

“I’m good, I promise. But Katie might not be. I need you to get to her and get her out. Please keep her safe until I can fly back from Singapore.”

“I know Greyson and Adelaide are with you, but where are Baxter and Oliver?”

“Baxter is in London, and I can’t get ahold of him right now. Oliver is god-knows-where doing god-knows-what. I can’t count on him to get to Katie in time.”

I nod. Oliver is definitely a wild card, but something Henry says sticks with me. “What do you mean in time?”

“I think she’s in danger. I didn’t want to scare her because she was finishing up exams, but I need eyes on her immediately.”

“She doesn’t have security?”

“Not on campus because it’s never been an issue before. Katie enrolled under Mom’s maiden name so she could live like a normal girl.” I hear the air quotes in his voice. Plus, I want to deal with this discreetly. If Katie is suddenly surrounded by muscle, they’ll know they got to me.”

“Yeah, but if you don’t, whoever ‘they’ are might try to get your attention.”

A pause. “That’s why I need you to go get her.”

“Have you spoken to her?” I ask.

“I have. I wanted her to fly to Singapore, but she refused.”

“What makes you think she’ll agree to come with me?”

“Then do whatever it takes to persuade her. Please, Hiro. You’re the only one I can trust.”

The bar is hot, noisy, and full of horny college students. I tip my red cup to my lips and grimace. This is what passes for bourbon in this place? I wouldn’t be drinking at all, but the asshole at the door said no one stays without a drink. I glance around, hoping Katie will miraculously appear, but no such luck. Instead, a young woman in a red velvet bra, trimmed in fluffy white faux fur sidles up to me, opens her full red lips and sticks a candy cane in her mouth. She swirls it around, before sliding it out of her mouth with a pop.

“Are you naughty or nice?” she asks, eyeing me up and down like I’m her next candy treat.

Jesus. As if all this wasn’t bad enough, the theme for the night is Home for the Holidays to celebrate the upcoming break. It’s a nightmare sea of red and green, with elf hats and those stupid little necklaces that looks like Christmas lights. Christmas music shakes the walls and I shudder. I just want to collect Katie and escape to my quiet cabin to wait out all the hoopla. How am I ever supposed to find Katie in here? Two women in tiny elf suits brush past me, pushing me closing to Naughty Mrs. Claus. I lean in, raising my voice to be heard over the piercing sounds of Run, Run, Reindeer.

“Do you know Katie Black?”

“Who?”

Shit. That’s not her name here. “Katie Williams. Do you know Katie Williams?”

Naughty Mrs. Claus sucks her candy cane again, her eyes brightening. “Oh, you’re looking for Kate?” She sweeps her gaze over me again, tongue swirling in blatant invitation. I wait it out until she rolls her eyes and gestures over her shoulder. “Yeah, she’s probably in the back where the pool tables are.”

I push my way through the crowd, past what I assume is a dance floor full of writhing bodies. Near the entrance to what I assume is the pool room, a bunch of dude bros look like they’re demonstrating a football play and one idiot bumps into me, spilling beer on my dark grey suit. I clench my jaw, reminding myself that Henry sounded scared when he called me, which makes my spine straighten in anger. My best friend shouldn’t ever have to worry about the safety of his family.

And to extend that threat to Katie? Someone has a death wish.

I step inside, expecting a more laidback vibe, but whatever I’m expecting, this isn’t it.

A huge wheel is set-up in the corner, spinning as I watch. A shirtless guy in a red sequined top hat and green bow-tie is

riling the crowd up. Next to him is a tiny girl in a Santa hat, her hands over her eyes, as she waits out the spin.

“Striptease!” The guy screams as the arrow slowly ticks to a stop. The girl throws her head back in laughter, accepting a shot glass from a tray being held by another shirtless dude, this one in red pants and black boots. A half-dressed Santa, maybe? Someone pumps up the music, and I roll my eyes as Santa Baby comes on, the girl getting a boost up onto a nearby pool table amid cheers from the crowd. Her back is to me, as she circles her hips, before dropping into a squat, her red, cheerleader skirt flaring out over a perfectly round ass.

I start walking through the room, looking for Katie’s auburn hair when a low wolf whistle draws my attention back to the impromptu show. The girl kicks a leg up in a dancer’s pose, running her hand over her candy cane striped thigh-highs, before gracefully lifting her arms and pulling her Santa hat off, tossing it out to the crowd. My jaw goes slack as auburn ringlets spill down the girl’s back.

I’ve seen those curls in my dreams too often not to recognize them.

No freaking way. Fuck me. If Henry Black knew his baby sister was gyrating on a pool table, while she slowly unbuttoned her white, schoolgirl blouse in front of these slack-jawed yokels...

Fuck. A growl escapes me, causing a few heads to turn my way. I push my way to the pool table, reaching in and placing my hand over Katie’s shoe, one that looks alarmingly like those I’ve seen on actual strippers. “Katie.”

Startled blue eyes meet mine. “Hiro?” She glances around wildly. “Is Henry here?”

“This guy bothering you, Kate?” A guy with more muscles than brains leans in, shoving my hand away from her. I’m grateful she has someone in her corner if she’s pulling stupid stunts like this striptease in a room full of drunken frat guys, but right now he’s one more obstacle between me and my cabin. The music changes and not for the better. I wince as something that sounds remarkably like Alvin and the

Chipmunks' Christmas Song blares out from the speakers. My silent cabin.

I give the guy a look that's been known to make bigger men piss their pants, but he doesn't get it. I raise my hand, offering it to Katie. "Come here, Katie."

She places her small hand in mine, and I help her down off the table, trying not to notice her soft weight sliding against me in that ridiculous getup. "Where's Henry?" she asks again. "Is everything okay?"

Shit. I never thought to ask Henry what she knows about what's going on. If she hasn't received any threats, I'm scaring her unnecessarily. If she has, seeing me show up at her college party isn't helping.

"Henry's fine. Everyone's fine," I assure her. "I just need you to come with me."

"You're not taking her anywhere, buddy." Muscles steps in front of us. "Who is this old dude, Kate?"

I bristle with annoyance, but Katie places a hand on the guy's chest. "It's okay, Owen. He's my brother's friend." She sways and gives a little hiccup. "I just need to see what he wants."

I grip her arm and steer her out of the back room. "Hey, where are we going?" Katie tries to dig in her heels, but those shoes are ridiculous, and I resist the urge to just pick her up and carry her out of the bar, but I'm afraid that's going to attract too much attention.

"Are you seriously here to ruin my fun, again? How did you even find me?"

"Henry asked me to come." I can almost see the door when Ms. Naughty or Nice from earlier steps directly in our path.

"Kate!" She turns to me. "You found her." The woman throws her arms around Katie. "You finally get to meet Tom." She drags Katie away from me and I clasp her hand to keep from losing her again in this crowd. At the sudden tug, the girl stops, looking down at our hands.

“What’s this?” She searches Katie’s face. “Who is this guy?”

Katie tries to pull her hand free, grimacing at me when I don’t let her go. “My brother’s friend.”

Naughty-or-nice arches an eyebrow. “Where’s Owen?” She leans past Katie. “I’m her best friend, Karli, with an ‘i’, by the way. You’re a little overdressed for the party.” She flicks my vest.

“Owen’s back there.” She cranes her neck. “I assume. I just need to see what my brother wants.” Katie wobbles a little on her heels as she looks back at me. “I assume he wants something.”

Karli slides me another measuring look. “Well, I want you to meet Tom because I know you think I made him up.” She pulls Katie towards her, frowning at me when I don’t let go, but she’s all smiles a second later.

“Tom, this is my best friend, Kate. I know you’ve been dying to meet her.”

I sigh. How long do I have to endure this? I look past the girls expecting another muscle-head like Owen and stop short. Tom is tall and built like a brick house, with a buzz cut and tattoos that blanket his neck. My back prickles when he assesses me, and I’d swear I’ve seen those black-as-night eyes before. Then he lifts his hand to shake Katie’s and I see it. An elaborate scroll tattooed on his hand, between his thumb and forefinger. A scroll bearing a stylized number. The prickles down my back turn to ice. I don’t even need to see the number, the symbol itself tells me this guy is a solidier, but not in any government institution. This man belongs to the Blood Knights.

They might be well-connected and well-organized but they’re still criminals.

How did Tom happen to show up here tonight, with Katie’s so-called best friend?

I don’t believe in coincidences.

My breath squeezes inside my lungs as Tom's hand engulfs Katie's and Karli finally manages to break my grip, pulling Katie into a hug with the man my entire body is warning me about.

Tom has blood on his hands.

And I'm afraid he came here tonight for Katie's.

Katie

“COME DANCE WITH US!” Karli squeals, pulling me in for a hug where I’m suddenly sandwiched between her and her new boyfriend. Tom’s hand is still attached to mine and somehow ends up squashed against my boobs as I stumble into them. My shoes are wobbly and hurt my feet and I never should have put them on, but Karli told me tonight was the perfect time to wear them.

“Sorry,” Tom’s deep voice growls in my ear but he doesn’t move his hand, managing to cop a feel, his thumb grazing my nipple. A shiver runs through me at his rough touch, but it isn’t one of pleasure. What a weird night this is turning out to be. I try to squirm away, but Tom latches his other arm around my waist, guiding both me and Karli to the dance floor.

“Catch you later, mate,” he calls over his shoulder.

Seconds later, Tom’s arm is forcibly removed from my body. Hiro takes my hand, standing by my side. “I don’t think so, *mate*,” he sneers.

Tom bristles, his dark eyes flashing dangerously. “Both ladies are staying with me.”

Karli tugs on his arm. “Don’t worry about it, Tom. He’s a friend of Kate’s brother. I’m sure he’s just delivering gifts or something.” She wiggles her fingers at Katie. “See what he wants, then come find us to dance.”

Tom’s shoulders straighten when Karli mentions Hiro is a friend of my brother’s. Is it possible Karli has told Tom who my brother is? I keep my family name a secret for a reason.

People treat me differently when they find out Henry Black is my brother. As one of the world's richest men, there's a lot of scrutiny on him, and consequently on the rest of us, especially since Dad died. My throat closes and I swallow hard, sniffing. The drinks, the Christmas music, and the stifling crowd all of a sudden making me melancholy. I wouldn't have told Karli anything about my family, except that I lost it this year on the anniversary of Dad's death, the full force of grief catching up with me when I thought about the fact that he wouldn't be here to watch me walk across the stage next spring. In my lowest moment, I confessed what my real name was and who my family was.

She told me she'd wondered why I never seemed to worry about money the way our friends did and assumed I was a secret sex-worker. She swore she'd never tell anyone.

I take a couple of steps back, bumping into Hiro's hard, warm body. He huffs out a sigh of impatience and I roll my eyes. Hiro has always been stiff, controlling and about as much fun as a corpse at Christmas. He's only thirty but he acts like he's fifty. He's always been so over-protective and over-bearing. I still remember the time he broke up a little party I was having in Henry's Manhattan apartment. And yes, I was only sixteen, and yes, Henry was in London at the time, but it's not really stealing a plane if it's your family's private jet, right?

I mean forty people isn't that big. And it was totally not my fault that Mrs. Albrecht got an eyeful of my friend Jonas', um, appendage which is now famous thanks to his raw performance in last year's Oscar-winning movie.

It's such a shame because Hiro is drop-dead gorgeous, with his dark hair, dark eyes and lean, muscular body. He doesn't even seem to notice the way he turns heads, that or he doesn't care. He's so straightlaced, sex is probably too messy for him.

That might just be sour grapes on my part. He's turned down every flirtatious smile I ever threw him, and I've never caught his eyes lingering on me, even when I wore a bikini

that nearly gave my brother a heart attack. Hiro treats me like an annoyance.

And I've never gotten the message because when he put his hand over my shoe and I met his gaze, I would swear I saw desire in his eyes. It must be the tequila playing tricks on me.

Hiro's hands slide up my bare arms, leaving little trails of heat in their wake. I shake my head to clear it. Karli is tugging on Tom, who doesn't look like her type at all, and doesn't seem interested in dancing or even being here at all. I blink as Tom takes a step towards me, earning me a glare from Karli. I nearly groan. We're just getting past the Owen thing. I can't deal with her suspecting this new guy is interested in me too, just because he looked at me more than once. I'm certain Tom checked out everything with boobs in here tonight. Maybe he's chivalrous and is worried about the way Hiro is manhandling me towards the door.

Hiro deftly guides me through the club and soon an icy blast of winter wind is hitting my bare skin. I shiver and Hiro whips off his jacket, covering my shoulders. "Did you bring a jacket?" he asks jiggling a set of keys in his hand, an SUV flashing its lights in the parking lot when he presses a button.

"No, but you could have asked before you dragged me out of the party. What are you doing here anyway?"

A sudden jolt from behind knocks me to my knees and I cry out at the sharp bite of pain. I turn to look over my shoulder to see Tom grappling with Hiro. What the actual fuck is happening? I squint into the semi-darkness, just in time to see Tom slash at Hiro with a wicked looking blade, and Hiro responding with a kick that looks like something out of an action movie. Tom stumbles, but isn't down, a roar erupting from his throat as he launches at Hiro again. Hiro catches him, just as I see campus security running across the parking lot and presses his wrist against Tom's neck, the tendons bulging before he slides to his knees. Hiro ignores the shouts from the guards as he lifts me into his arms and strides to the SUV, buckling me in like a child, before rounding to the driver's side and pulling away smoothly as if he hadn't just left a pile of chaos behind him.

He presses a button on the steering wheel. “Mr. Abbott.” The woman’s voice startles me.

“Madeleine. I need you to take care of something for me.” He rattles off the address for the campus bar where the Christmas party is. “Please have the security feeds pulled as well. I’m going to want to see who was at that party.”

“Consider it done, Mr. Abbott.”

The call disconnects. I blink rapidly, my brain trying to make sense of what just happened back there. “Why did Tom follow us outside? Why wasn’t he dancing with Karli?”

Hiro keeps his eyes straight ahead, and I realize he’s got the lights turned off as we snake through the campus streets. “I don’t think Tom was there to dance.”

I sit back, breathing heavily. “Why were you there?”

“Henry asked me to come.”

“Who is Madeleine?”

“She works for me.”

I think back to what I know about Hiro. I know he owns some kind of tech company, and he developed an app that he sold for millions. He doesn’t dress like a tech guy though, and the way he put down Tom isn’t exactly something I would think a tech guy capable of. “What kind of app development teaches you those moves?”

“You’d be surprised.”

I bet. This is answering none of my questions. I lean forward, peering into the darkness. “My building is just off the next right here.”

Hiro keeps driving.

“Hey, where are we going?” Alarm straightens my spine. I look out the back window, but no one is behind us. “Shouldn’t we go back and speak with security? Or maybe the police?” I pull out my phone.

“What are you doing?” Hiro asks.

“Texting Karli.”

“Don’t. Don’t use your phone.” He holds out his hand.
“Give it to me.”

I hug it to my chest. “I’m not going to give you my phone.”

Hiro blows through the stone gate marking the entrance into campus. He makes several left turns heading down residential streets before he pulls into an empty driveway and touches the screen on his watch.

“What are we doing here?” I ask, looking up at the dark windows of the house.”

“Waiting.”

“I don’t think anyone is home. Do you know who lives here?”

“I don’t. And I don’t care if they’re home.” Hiro shifts, turning to me, his dark eyes flashing. “We’re going up to my cabin for a few days.”

“We’re going, like me and you?” I point my finger back and forth between us. “Is Henry there?”

He shakes his head. “No, he’s still in Singapore. It’s just temporary, until he can fly back and get you.”

“Why send you? I could just stay in my apartment until he gets here.”

“He asked me to take you.”

“Well, I don’t want to go. Besides, I’m not packed for a trip, and I’m certainly not dressed for anything other than a Christmas party.”

“I wouldn’t say you’re dressed at all,” he mutters.

I glance down at my pleated red cheerleader skirt, white blouse and my white, red and green striped over-the-knee socks. I even took a green scarf and wrapped it around my waist as a belt. I look like a cute elf. My knee twinges and I lift it to see the tear in my socks and the angry, red welt underneath. In my shock, I didn’t even register the pain, but

I'm definitely feeling the burn now. I sniffle back the tears that are threatening.

Hiro stops scanning the street behind us and focuses on me. I brace myself for whatever sarcastic comment I'm certain is on the tip of my tongue.

Warm hands cover mine, brushing them out of the way. "How bad does it hurt?" He leans over my lap, gently rolling my stocking down, lifting the torn fabric away so it doesn't pull at my raw knee.

My mouth goes dry as his fingers skim my leg and my heart thuds in my ears. For years I would have given my left arm to have this kind of gentle attention from Hiro, instead of his usual scowl, sarcasm, or worse, complete obliviousness to the fact that I'm in the room. I shift in my seat as he delicately presses around my abraded knee, my skirt riding up my thighs. I tense, desperately wishing he'd slide his hand higher to where my panties are suddenly soaking wet. He stills, lifting his head and meets my eyes. The car is silent and my heart pounds, the ambient neighborhood light casting his face into beautiful relief. His caress is clinical, checking me for injuries and almost as light as a brush of air over my knee, but it lights up my nerve endings like the Fourth of July and for a minute I panic that I moaned out loud.

A muscle jumps in his jaw when I wince. "I'm sorry it hurts."

"It's not your fault," I whisper, squeezing my legs together to stem the ache.

Hiro sits back, thumping his head against the leather head rest. "You shouldn't have so much as broken a nail with me."

"Is that what my brother said?"

He closes his eyes for a second and doesn't acknowledge my question. There's a low buzzing and he pulls out his phone.

"Hey, how come you can use your phone?" I ask.

Holding up a hand he shoots me a dark look of annoyance. Now we're back on familiar ground at least.

“Abbott, here.”

I can't hear the person on the other end, but Hiro curses. “How is that even possible?” he asks, his tone frosty.

He issues a few directions that make no sense to me and then slides the phone into a slot built into the dash. He puts his arm up on the seat, twisting to look out the back and reverses out the driveway. I'm tense, responding to his body cues as he scans the road in front of him, steadily gaining speed as we approach the highway.

Wait. The highway?

“Hiro, I can't go to your cabin, I don't have any clothes, or any of my stuff. Let me call Henry.”

“Keep your phone off, Katie.” He spares me a glance as he smoothly maneuvers around traffic.

“But it's almost Christmas. Is your whole family going to be there for the holiday?” Considering the amount of time Henry and Hiro spend together, I don't actually know much about Hiro's family. I know his mom is Japanese because I asked about his name once, but I don't know if he has any brothers or sisters or if he had a goldfish growing up. I don't even know his relationship status.

“My family is going to Whistler for the holiday.”

“Oh. Is your girlfriend staying with you for Christmas?”

A muscle jumps in his jaw. “I'm currently single, Katie.” He sighs. “I go to my cabin to decompress and be alone for a bit. That's it. Your brother asked me to take care of you until he could get home so that's what I'm doing.”

I hold up my hand, ticking off my fingers one by one. “I have no clothes, no essentials, no winter jacket or boots, I can't use my phone and there's just over a week left before Christmas.” I fold my arms. “This feels like a kidnapping.”

“Still so dramatic, Katie?”

What is it about Hiro that always makes me feel like a stupid little girl? “I'm just highlighting the realities.”

“Well, the reality is that your brother asked me to take care of you. Otherwise, I’d already be at my cabin with nothing but silence and a good book.”

“Just drop me at the side of the road, then. I don’t want to invade your private, quiet time.”

Hiro sighs and I hold up my hands before he can speak. “I know, I know. My brother, blah, blah, blah.” When Henry says jump, everyone does it. “I don’t know why he thinks I’m still a little girl who can’t take care of herself for a few days.”

“Has he interfered while you’ve been away at college?” Hiro asks.

I think about it. There have been a few overprotective moments, but generally, he tried to give me the independence I crave. I wrinkle my brow. “Why now? What’s happening?”

“You met that guy Tom for the first time tonight, right?”

“Yes. Karli met him a couple of months ago.”

“Isn’t she your best friend? How come you only met him tonight?”

“He doesn’t go to school with us, and I’ve been really busy trying to get things tied up with my courses.” Plus, I thought Karli was super mad at me about Owen, so when she started seeing someone, I didn’t press her about it. Owen and I are just friends, even though he might be interested in something more. I know Karli liked him and they hooked up a few times, so I thought for sure they’d end up together. He thought they were *very* unattached, and when he asked her if she’d talk to me about giving him a chance, she was pretty angry. Rightfully so, in my opinion, but then she said she didn’t care. I’m not really interested in being more than friends with him, and I thought I made that clear, but he’s still hanging around.

I tilt my head against the headrest, watching the lights skim over Hiro’s profile. “How far away is your cabin?”

“We’ll drive through the night,” he says, flicking a glance at me. He leans over, pulling his jacket over my lap. “Warm enough?”

I nod. It feels surreal to be driving through the dark, the warm air from the vents blowing around me, Hiro's big hands wrapped around the steering wheel. Something stirs in my belly, and I wonder if he remembers that night in Henry's Manhattan apartment when I kissed him. He'd opened the door we were using for Seven Minutes in Heaven, and I registered his presence immediately. I didn't question why he was there, but pulled him in, sliding my hands into his silky hair and took advantage of the element of surprise to do exactly what I'd been fantasizing about for months at that point. I'd still swear he kissed me back before he firmly set me away from him, called me irresponsible, and shut the whole party down.

CHRISTMAS

MY FINGERS CURL into my palms as I watch Katie sleep. She's always been a beautiful girl, but it was easy to ignore it when she was sixteen and wild. Now she's all grown up and I can't deny the fear that slid down my spine when I think about what might have happened to her last night if I hadn't shown up. Her auburn hair is tangled, her makeup is smudged and she's wearing some ridiculous mash-up of an outfit that's somewhere between a sexy schoolgirl uniform and a cheerleader elf. I didn't notice last night until I heard the faint jingle of bells, but even her earrings are Christmas-themed. Little dangling bells with red and green plaid bows. I'm not a Christmas-lover but something about the way the bells tangle in her long hair tugs at my heart.

It's just for a few days. I can manage a few days. I definitely can't manage a few days with her in that outfit however, which is why I'm sitting in the parking lot of a big box store about two hours from my cabin waiting for Katie to wake up. I lean across the console and gently shake her arm. Her lips part and a tiny snore, almost a snuffle, escapes. I reluctantly smile. She's so damn cute it makes my chest hurt. I've always been in awe of her. She's always been the coddled baby of the Black family, and all that adoration resulted in confident, smart, funny person who could talk to anyone and charm everyone around her. As a shy, quiet introvert, being around Katie was like a day at the beach. Sometimes loud, sometimes too bright, but you couldn't make yourself leave, because the sunshine felt so good, and then by nightfall you were exhausted.

Her lashes flutter and she opens her eyes, smiling at me sleepily. My heart stutters. I try to think about the last time I woke up with a woman and I can't. Sex is necessary, transactional, but it doesn't have to be all-night affair. Of course, Katie and I didn't have sex, but that sleepy smile does something to me anyway.

Recognition sets in and the smile fades from her face. "Hiro?" She roughly massages her temples. "Are we at your cabin?"

I shake my head. "No." I point out the window. "We're going shopping."

She turns. "In there?" She glances down at herself, still covered by my jacket. "In this?"

I shrug. There's no help for it. I couldn't stop by her apartment, and she needs some stuff. "I'd prefer not to be too long, but you need some essentials."

We get out of the car, and she stretches. At least there aren't too many people here this early, but her outfit is going to raise some eyebrows, especially here where the customers look to be seniors and people getting an early start to the day. I shake out my jacket and drape it around her.

Inside, I'm accosted by more Christmas music and large inflatable decorations. I should be at my cabin already, surrounded by snow and silence. Instead, I'm following a tiny red-headed elf into the seventh circle of hell as she walks right past the snowsuits and into an aisle filled with stuffed toys gyrating to "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree". I wince and plunge after her, trying to block out the noise. I distract myself by trying to catch a glimpse of her peach-perfect butt, but alas, it's covered by my jacket. I shouldn't even think about her in that way. Henry wants me to protect her, not lust after her.

"What kind of Christmas décor do you have at your cabin?" She turns her big, baby blues up at me, those long, dark eyelashes fluttering. She puts a finger to her cheek, tapping as she considers. "Is it après ski? Lots of Nordic influence? Or maybe country Christmas, with lots of rustic wood pieces?"

“I don’t have any.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

I shrug. “It’s just another day and I’ll head to see my family just before New Year’s, so I don’t bother.”

“Just another day?” Disbelief colors her words. “Christmas isn’t just another day, and it’s not just a day either. It’s the anticipation of all the days leading up to it. Decorating, listening to Christmas music, watching all of those cheesy Christmas movies, eating all the holiday baking.”

I reach out taking her arm. “Alright, I get it. You love Christmas. But it’s just not my thing. Now can we please get you a few things so we can be on our way?”

Katie looks down to where I’m holding her arm. I’m not squeezing her, hell I’m not even touching bare skin, but there’s something there. Something palpable. Her gaze drifts back to mine and I should let go of her, but I don’t. I’ve always been drawn to Katie. I’ve always felt protective of her in a way that was easy to gloss over when she was younger – too young for me – because she was Henry’s little sister and he’s my best friend. Of course, I was going to watch out for his family. But as she’s gotten older, that protective instinct grew to something more. An attraction I shouldn’t feel. I covered it up by being distant and aloof whenever she was around, and I know she sees me as nothing more than a giant wet blanket on her sparkly flame.

I drop her arm, telling myself that I’m imagining the disappointment in her eyes. “Snowsuit,” I practically bark.

She purses her lips. “What am I supposed to do at your cabin for however long I’m there?”

“You could have gone to Singapore.”

Her shoulders sag. “I’m like a puppy that someone has to take care of. Why doesn’t anyone see that I can take care of myself?”

I feel a momentary pang. If Katie hadn’t been born a Black, she’d be able to forge her own path and twenty-one is certainly old enough to make her own decisions. The Black

name might come with a lot of opportunity, but it also comes with its own unique restrictions. For several years, the Black kids lived in a gilded cage.

Katie rubs her eyes. “Look. I know you promised my brother you’d swoop in and save me from whatever it is I’m too young to know about this time, but I know you don’t like me, Hiro and I really can take care of myself.” She wraps my jacket tighter over her chest. “Why don’t you just take me to a hotel where I can have room service and watch Christmas movies until Henry can come and collect me.”

Something shifts in my chest. As much as I felt this was a duty I owed my best friend, the shadow of truth in my heart is that I would walk into a burning building to get to Katie.

I sigh, giving into the inevitable. Unless I lock myself in a closet while we’re at the cabin, I won’t be able to avoid her. Katie doesn’t deserve to be trapped with me while I try to ignore her, pretending I don’t feel things I shouldn’t. “The problem isn’t that I don’t like you, Katie.”

She picks up a little owl, a merry red scarf around its neck, and hugs it to her chest. “Well, that’s news to me. You always act like you hate me. I know you think I’m annoying.”

“I don’t think you’re annoying.”

“You’re just saying that to get me to come with you.”

“I do want to get out of here, but you need some things.” I can’t bring myself to pluck the owl out of her arms. I feel like I’ve kicked a fairy, knocking the sparkle off her wings.

“I bet you have a running list in your head about what I need. Everyone always knows better than me about what I need.”

I tilt my head, studying her. “We don’t have a lot of time, Katie and you do need a snowsuit, but I’m not trying to torture you either.” Nope, it’s just me out here on the side of the mountain, in agony, only instead of my liver being plucked from my body, it’s an assault of Christmas music and guilt. I check my watch. Madeleine called with the disturbing news that ‘Tom’ was gone by the time campus security and the

police got their heads out of their asses, but no one has been able to track him. I'm confident he wasn't able to follow us, but that doesn't mean he didn't get a good look at the vehicle I'm driving. I thought this would be a simple enough favor: pick-up Katie, keep her occupied for a few days until Henry is back in town, and then have a come-to-Jesus conversation with my best friend for keeping me in the dark about what is going on. Henry Black might have one of the best security agencies at his beck and call but only if they're aware of all the threats that are out there. And someone should have flagged any issues directly with me before now.

The sooner I get to my cabin, the sooner I can take stock of the situation and figure out what is needed. Tom's disappearance solidifies my hunch that he wasn't just some random thug and that makes my blood freeze in my veins.

“Okay, you can get whatever you want, but you have exactly one hour before we're going to be back in that car, driving. And you stay with me, got it?”

Her lips flatten into a tight line, but she nods. “You can push the cart.”

I grab a cart and Katie immediately deposits a dancing penguin. “Hey, we just need the essentials.”

She stops me from taking it out. “You said I can get whatever I want.”

“I meant...”

“If you want me to go along with this kidnapping...” I raise my eyebrows as the elderly woman in the bright pink ski jacket turns and gives me a sharp once over.

Katie flips open my jacket and gestures to her outfit. “We're into role-play, right Daddy?” She smiles and winks at the woman who quickly pushes her cart out of the aisle.

Heat creeps up my neck. The easiest way to get out of here, without calling attention to us, is just to let her have her way. But I don't want her to know she has the upper hand. I step in front of her, pulling my jacket closed and tug her towards me. She tips her head up, a startled expression on her

face. “If I’m your ‘Daddy’, then I’m pretty sure you have to do what I say, right, baby?”

A blush stains her cheeks, but she doesn’t pull away from me. “Maybe I’m more of a brat,” she replies.

I’ve no doubt if this were real, she’d be brattiest little princess out there, but I’m not about to let her win this round. I slide my arms around her and tangle my fingers in the ends of her silky hair, gently forcing her chin higher. “A brat who disobeys risks getting spanked.” Her beautiful lips fall open in disbelief. “Don’t push me, Katie.”

“I’ve been trying to push you my whole life,” she whispers.

Heat floods me. “You’re too young to even know what that means.” I release her, reluctantly. She reaches for a silver tinsel garland, throwing it in the cart and adds a pillow with a picture of one of those bearded garden elves that says ‘Gnome for the Holidays’. I shudder, thinking of my clean, streamlined cabin.

Katie tosses her hair over her shoulder and makes her way through the Christmas stuff, finally picking out some clothing and necessities. At the checkout, I shake my head as the cashier scans our alarmingly large cart. Imagine if I’d given Katie even more time. There’s a pink and black snowsuit, flannel pajamas, little scraps of lace and satin that I shouldn’t be interested in and a few books. There are red and green colored cookies, marshmallows, more Christmas chocolate than anyone could possibly eat and those red and white swirled peppermints. Hot chocolate, chocolate-covered pretzels, popcorn and red licorice sticks. My stomach is turning just looking at all that sugar.

“I have food at the cabin,” I mutter.

Katie rolls her eyes and pokes me in the stomach. “All super healthy, I’m sure.” She snags the licorice before it disappears into a bag, opens it and bites the end off one of the twisted sticks with relish. “I bet you’ve never given in to temptation, even once.”

As I watch her beautiful lips move around her candy treat, I bite my tongue to stop myself from telling her that she's the biggest temptation I've ever faced and I'm seriously thinking about breaking all the rules with her.

Katie

I'M PRACTICALLY VIBRATING by the time we get to Hiro's cabin, and I can't blame it all on the sugar. Watching his strong hands capably maneuver the steep, winding road through the falling snow was doing something to my insides.

I'd always imagined Hiro as a fairytale prince. His dark hair, golden skin and sharp cheekbones, like something out of a manga. He looks like the type of guy in a rom-com that the girl dances with at a masquerade ball, and he lifts his mask and you realize he's actually the king or something like that. He's intense, gorgeous and always seemed about as distant as a guy on a movie screen, until now.

He's not doing anything either. Little glances that let me know he's watching out for me. He caught me shivering once and he turned up the heat. He pulled over and dug through our shopping bags, handing me a snack when he saw me trying to reach for something in the back. He's attuned to me in a way that makes my skin tingle. Every brush of his hand, every one of those half smiles, even his sigh of resignation when I won the war of the car stereo, turning it to a station playing all Christmas music, made my belly flutter.

But now we're at the cabin. In the middle of nowhere. It's a log cabin that could pull double-duty in a Hallmark Christmas special – all it needs is a golden retriever with a red bow frolicking in the fresh, fallen snow, and a pair of skis leaning against the front porch. It's big enough, I suppose, but nothing close to the chalet Baxter bought last year for his ski obsession. It's not big enough for me to pretend that my old

crush on Hiro hasn't roared back to life in a very non-childish way. My fairytale fantasy has changed over the last few hours from having Hiro walk into one of the boring formal events we always have to attend and asking me to dance to having Hiro walk in, whisk me away in a big, black vehicle and spank me until I'm promising to be a good girl.

I swallow hard, clenching my thighs together.

"Does it hurt?" Hiro finishes bringing in the last of the bags and closes the door against the swirl of snow.

My mouth goes dry at the question, heat rising in my cheeks.

Hiro points at my knees. "Are they worse?"

Oh, he's not talking about the ache low in my belly at the thought of being alone with him for the next however many days. I nod to cover my flustered reaction. "Right." I clear my throat, awkwardly. "They're sore, yes." I give an exaggerated wince, heading into what looks like a living room, complete with comfortable looking dark wood furniture and over-stuffed couches. I'm suddenly, terribly self-consciously aware that I'm standing in Hiro's cabin in ripped tights and a too-short skirt, my hair a tangled mess and I probably reek of beer. More than one partygoer bumped into me last night. The combination of my sugary breakfast, too much alcohol from last night and the weirdness of Karli's new boyfriend and Hiro's arrival is making my temples throb. I rub my forehead, not really knowing what to do. I turn to see Hiro unpacking our stuff.

"Can I help?"

"You won't know where anything goes." He doesn't glance up. "Why don't you have a seat?"

I watch as he opens a cupboard, noting the cereal boxes lined up meticulously, like soldiers in a line. The box I chose doesn't fit.

Of course.

"How come there's food already here? Did you drive down to get me?"

He shakes his head, trying to move some of the stuff around, but it's apparent to me that it's not going to fit. He's going to have to leave it out on the counter. I eye the perfectly bare charcoal granite. That's going to drive him nuts.

"No, someone stocked the cabin for me." He sets the cereal box down before picking it up again, frowning down at the colorful cartoon drawing on the front. "You were the only thing unplanned."

"Oh."

His head snaps up. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm happy to help Henry."

I bite my lip. Of course, this is just a favor to my brother, like holding onto a package. I shake it off, poking around in one of the bags for something to wear. "Is there somewhere I can shower?"

He straightens. "Yes, of course." He points at the open staircase. "Up the stairs to the left. Take your pick."

I climb the stairs, my eyes widening at the bookcases that line the open area at the top. There's a cozy reading nook I wouldn't mind settling into later. I go left, noting the two guest bedrooms on either side of the hallway. Maybe this place isn't as small as I initially thought. I step into one, the cream-colored walls and old-fashioned quilt on the bed drawing me in. It's simply decorated but feels inviting and I'm drawn to the window where I can see snow softly falling outside on green trees and there's even a lake, its unfrozen surface a dark gray in the distance. I put the few things I carried upstairs on the bench at the end of the bed. My phone lights up and I see several messages from Karli. I hesitate, looking at the door. My friend must be worried. I think about the knife I saw flashing in the dark. I'm worried. I flip my phone over so I can't see the notifications. Everything is so quiet here. It's a far cry from my apartment on campus, where I might technically live alone, but Karli and my other friends are always around. Plus, in an apartment building you can always hear other stuff going on, not just from residents, but from outside. A dog barking. A siren wailing. Here it's like

everything is muted by the snow. Even when I'm home, with so many siblings, cousins, friends, and the house staff, it's never quiet, no matter which property I happen to find myself.

I press my forehead against the glass, the cold easing the ache there and just watch the snow steadily falling for a minute. Is Henry just being paranoid? I don't pretend to know everything he does to keep our vast holdings and business interests organized and profitable. I imagine it's a lot like running several countries at once, at least that's how our father used to describe it. I squeeze my eyes shut. No matter where he was in the world, we were always together for Christmas.

A shuddery breath escapes me, and I head for the bathroom, stripping off my clothes. Goosebumps race across my skin when my feet touch the cold tile floor and I switch the shower on, letting the hot steam rise around me. The shower matches the rustic feel of the cabin, an alcove of natural stone and a large skylight so it feels like I'm standing outside when I step in and gaze up. I rake my hands through my hair, tugging at the tangles before I soap up with a bar that smells like I'm walking in the woods. The hot water stings the raw skin at my knees, and I wish I could call Karli and ask what is going on. Is that Tom guy her new boyfriend? Why did he follow us out to the parking lot? What happened after we left?

The water beats down on my shoulders, easing the tension from the long drive and I sigh, arching my back and turning to let the heat wash down my front, my breasts heavy and sensitive. A sudden wave of dizziness hits me, and I reach for the ledge holding the soap and bottles. I breathe shallowly, slowly rinsing the soap out of my hair and switch the water off. I step out onto the soft towel and sink to my knees. I should have had more than candy for breakfast. Nausea washes through me. Definitely not, considering the drinks I had last night. I shiver in the cool air, water trickling around me from the ends of my hair as I suck in streams of air between my teeth.

“Katie?”

I flinch as the door swings open. How fucking embarrassing. Naked on the floor with some combination of

low blood sugar and a hangover. “Get out,” I mumble.

A warm towel wraps around my back. “Did you fall?”

“No, I’m just sick and stupid. Leave me alone.”

Gentle fingers comb my wet hair back from face, and a soft towel covers my head, those deft hands working some kind of fancy towel origami that wouldn’t be out of place at my usual salon. “I’m going to pick you up, Katie. If you feel like you need to throw up, just tell me.”

Hiro lifts me like I weigh next to nothing and cuddles me against his chest, striding into the bedroom. I’m caught somewhere between mortification and relief as he lowers me to the soft bed and the shivery feeling passes.

“What happened?” he asks.

I bite my lip. “Maybe one too many drinks and not enough food,” I mumble.

“Did you eat and get enough sleep through your finals?” he inquires, his voice quiet.

I think back over the hectic last couple of weeks. I had three back-to-back exams in a twenty-four-hour period and had to turn in a paper within that same time. My fifth exam gave me some breathing room, but the exam counted for the majority of the final mark, so I couldn’t slack off, not that I would have. Then there were the late-night calls with Karli and getting ready for the end of the year parties... I’m not certain when I last ate a full meal, to be honest.

Hiro smooths the lines across my brow. “You’re probably the one sibling who is the most like your brother. He’ll go until he drops too.”

The mattress shifts as Hiro stands. “Are you going to be okay if I leave you for a few minutes?”

“I’m fine.” The room is silent and the soft quilt smells faintly of lavender. My forehead tingles where Hiro brushed his fingers over my skin, and I drift off thinking about the way he carried me in here and his comment about me being too young. Am I imagining the gentleness in his hands when he

touches me? Is it wishful thinking or did he actually press his lips to my hair before he put me down?

“Katie?” His low tone vibrates through me. “You need to eat something.”

My eyes pop open and when I lean up and can drag my eyes past the site of Hiro in soft, gray sweatpants and a rugby shirt I see he’s set up a little side table with a tray. “You get Uber eats up here?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes but there’s a grin tugging at the side of his lips. “I can cook. Did you not see all the groceries downstairs?”

I reach for a small plate filled with crackers, cheese, almonds, and strawberries. “I mostly saw cereal. Don’t you have someone who comes in and cooks for you?”

Hiro shifts to give me access to the table, propping some pillows behind my back for comfort. “I don’t. When I’m here, I like my privacy.”

I pause in the middle of chewing. “Mumph,” I mumble. These strawberries are delicious. I swallow and then glance at Hiro’s muscular thigh, so close to mine. I swallow again. “Sorry I crashed your party for one.”

He shrugs. “I’m happy to help Henry.”

I huff a sigh. “Right. It’s like dog-sitting for your bestie.”

Hiro pauses as he lifts the dome from a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. My tummy growls, surprising me. He laughs. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. I was worried when I saw you on the floor.”

“Don’t remind me.” I eagerly tuck into my plate, moaning as I bite into the thick-cut bacon.

Hiro’s jaw tightens and it intrigues me enough to do it again, practically purring as I lick the tiniest bit of salty grease from my lips. “Mmm. You even have bacon treats for your temporary pet.”

Hiro tilts his head, meeting my eyes. “You’re hardly a dog, Katie.” His gaze drops to my lips. “And if you keep licking

your lips like that, I'm going to forget that your brother is my best friend."

My throat goes tight. "Is that what stopped you before?"

He shakes his head. "No. What stopped me before was your age. What kind of man takes advantage of a sixteen-year-old girl?"

"You're not that much older than me."

"Almost a decade. When I walked into that New York party and saw that stupid boy with his hands all over you I wanted to smash something." Hiro takes a deep breath. "But you were sixteen and he was sixteen and that is perfectly normal. What wasn't normal was my reaction."

A tremor shivers through my stomach and it has nothing to do with being sick. "I tried to kiss you that night."

His lips twist. "Tried? You did kiss me that night."

Heat floods my cheek and I bite my lip, remembered embarrassment leaving a heavy feeling in my chest. I straighten my shoulders. "You didn't kiss me back. You pushed me away. It's not like I was some innocent girl at sixteen anyway." I was pretty wild, in fact. I look away, suddenly wishing I hadn't tried to be so much older than I was back then.

Hiro moves closer, lifting his hand and taking my chin, forcing me to look at him. "It doesn't matter what you did or didn't do back then. You were sixteen with all the privileges of being a Black and all of the limitations too. Of course you tried to rebel. But it doesn't matter how old you looked, or acted, or even what you asked for. I was the adult and I had to protect you."

"Just like now."

His eyes search mine. "It's a little different. You're an adult now."

"What would happen if I tried to kiss you now?" I whisper.

"Do you still want to?"

I nod, afraid to take my eyes off his, afraid that if I move, I'll break this spell. His fingers slide along my jaw, under my ear and tilted my face up to his. "Would you mind if I kissed you instead?"

Before I can even draw in a breath, his mouth is on mine, his lips coaxing mine to open. The kiss is like fireworks, lighting me up everywhere all at once. I tentatively press my tongue against his, my nipples tightening instantly as he groans, deepening the kiss between us.

My towel slips and I arch into his embrace, rubbing myself all over the soft knit of his shirt.

He breaks the kiss, panting as he looks down at me. "Shit. You're sick and I should be taking care of you."

I straighten, letting the towel fall away completely. Cool air sweeps across my nipples and the hunger in his gaze makes me bold. "I do need you to take care of me."

His eyes darken. "Where does it hurt, baby?"

The endearment, uttered in low tones, feels like a caress. I don't know what's happening here but if this is the only shot I have with Hiro, I'm going to grab it tight and wring every drop out of the experience. I glide my hands up my ribcage and lift my breasts, deliberately skating my fingers over the sensitive peaks. "Here," I rasp.

Hiro covers my hands with his, the warmth sinking into skin. He molds my fingers around my nipples, using my nails to rasp the tips before bending over me and sliding his tongue up my cleavage. My head falls back, and he drags his teeth lightly over my collarbone, eliciting a shiver that feels like sliding into a hot bath after coming in out of the rain. I open my eyes to see Hiro grinning and my belly clenches just as a flood of warmth rushes lower. He leans in, doing it again before kissing and nuzzling higher, making me squirm.

"So sensitive aren't you baby?"

My pulse kicks up another notch at the dark promise in his voice. I'm not a virgin but somehow this feels different from anything I've ever done before.

He lowers me completely to the bed, sweeping his hand under my hair and fanning it out across the pillow. “If you only knew how often I imagined your hair like this, spread out like ribbons of embers for my pleasure.” He dips his head, inhaling. “And scented with my soap.”

“Y-, you fantasized about me?” I can barely form a coherent thought as he finds my breast with his hand, kneading and plumping until the ache between my legs becomes an inferno.

Smoothing the hair away from my forehead, he drops a tender kiss there. My eyes flutter open.

“I’m not a good man, Katie. I shouldn’t have thought about you like that.”

My eyes go wide at the admission. “I thought I annoyed you.”

The corners of his eyes crinkle. “Oh, you did. Every little flick of your hair, the curve of your lips, the sway of your hips. Your intelligence and your determination to do exactly what pleases you, damn the consequences.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “I was especially annoyed by the fact that you are my best friend’s little sister, and I shouldn’t have noticed any of those things about you at all.”

Wonder washes through me as his hand strokes the side of my face, down my neck and over the curve of my shoulder before brushing against my breast again, gentle, feather-like touches that leave sparks rushing along my skin. I can feel him everywhere at once, the heavy, hot weight of him between my thighs.

“You have too many clothes on,” I whisper, raising my hips against the ridge of his cock.

Hiro presses my hips back down with his. His eyes are dark with desire. “Once I take them off, there’s no going back, Katie.”

“God, I hope not,” I grind out, the length of him rubbing me in almost the exact right spot, but my hips are pinned, and I can’t move.

“Are you certain? I’m almost ten years older than you and over-bearing, over-protective and crazy about you.”

I pause, but only for a second. It sounds like he’s asking for a whole lot more than whether I’m certain about our current position. Hiro is the one thing I can’t imagine ever getting bored of and if he doesn’t put his hands on me soon, I’m going to die. “Are you certain, Hiro?”

“I’ve never wanted anything more than this.” He drops down, nuzzling my shoulder.

“I want you. I want this.”

His cuddle turns to kisses and the feather soft touches begin again, his fingers trailing over my hip before dipping between our bodies. He groans. “You’re so wet.” Swiping up the center of me, he swirls his thumb over my aching clit, and I shudder. “So wet and needy.”

“Please, Hiro.” I’m panting, every single cell in my body attuned to his.

“I dreamed about how you’d feel, but this surpasses even my most intense fantasies.” He looks down at me. “You’re so soft and warm. Like the best dessert, ever.”

While I watch, he dips inside me and brings his fingers to his mouth, licking them. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen and when he grins at me, mouthing the word ‘delicious’ I nearly melt into the bed. He rolls beside me, spreading my legs wider, and teases my pussy, his fingers moving fast, then slow as he catalogues every twitch and moan I deliver under his ministrations.

I can’t remember the last time something felt this good. I turn, capturing his mouth with mine and kiss him with all the desperation building in my body as his fingers pump slowly in and out of me, pleasure snaking through me.

“Come for me, baby.” His fingers stop their slow exploration, as he settles against my clit, rubbing the pads in a light circle, which makes my legs shake. “I want to feel you come on my fingers, want to feel this greedy little pussy

squeeze me before I bury myself deep inside and make you come again on my cock.”

There’s an edge to his voice, like he’s losing control and oh, doesn’t that do amazing things to my body. My body is tightening, spiraling higher, while he whispers filthy things in my ear until my whole body contracts, like a flash reaction I saw once on some science show. His fingers work me through my orgasm, wringing out every little drop of sensation, like he knows my body better than I do. His fingers slow, gentling, so the pressure isn’t overwhelming, his lips softly brushing against my shoulder.

I’m dazed, sated and a little sleepy as my heartbeat slows and the warmth of Hiro’s body snuggles into mine. When I looked down at his beautiful, stern face last night in the bar, the last thing I imagined is that I’d end up here, in his arms, my body still tingling from his amazingly talented hands.

I don’t know if this is a Christmas miracle, or some kind of dream I don’t want to wake up from, but whatever it is, I don’t want it to end.

Hiro

ABOUT FIVE OR SIX years ago, I had the opportunity to train with some specialized monks who believed everything was in the mind. Pain, hunger, and fear caused physical responses, but if you could control your mind, you could focus beyond those responses, effectively controlling them and their effect on the human body. It was an incredible experience and I witnessed amazing things, even learning some of the early stages of control, but the insertion of Katie in my life has wiped that training clean. I might be able to go days without feeling hunger and I might be able to ignore pain, but right now, in my kitchen, my cock is as hard as it was twenty minutes ago, when Katie was pumping her hips against my hand and crying her pleasure into my mouth while those generous tits shook with the force of her orgasm.

That's all the magic I need in my life.

I've never understood the concept of blue balls, but the ache in my pants right now is a huge middle finger to all the control I was so proud of seemingly possessing.

I'd be buried deep in that sweet pussy now if I hadn't seen her eyes droop with exhaustion. When she tucked her knees up and I caught sight of the red burns on her skin from hitting the pavement, anger burned through my chest.

So here I am in the kitchen, keeping an eye on Katie, who is tucked up on the couch, in one of my plaid shirts because I wanted something of mine to be touching her, even if I wasn't. The little owl in the Christmas scarf is cuddled in her arms and there's a Christmas movie playing, complete with cute

puppies, a horse ranch and not a single explosion to be found at least that I've seen so far.

I lean against the counter, waiting for the kettle to boil. To boot, I'm making hot chocolate with whipped cream and sprinkles – red, green and white – to mark my transition from commercial-Christmas hater to love-struck sap.

Love. Fuck. Really?

Really. It was inevitable when I look at it. It's always been Katie.

A low beeping reaches my ears, and my body instantly tenses. That's the perimeter notification. I reach for my phone, wondering if I've missed a call from Madeleine or if somehow Henry made it back from Singapore and he didn't let me know when he landed.

I swipe my screen. Nothing. The initial perimeter response gives me about twenty minutes. I send an alert to Madeleine, requesting a status update and round the island.

"Katie." I don't want to alarm her, but a perimeter notification means someone is near the cabin and didn't clear their approach with my office or with me personally, which is pretty much one and the same thing.

While mistakes can happen, I'm not expecting a delivery and my shoulder blades prickle.

She glances over her shoulder and sends me a heart-melting smile. *Jesus*. Any second now I'd be offering up my balls to hang on a Christmas tree. From my phone, I set the full alarm system, bringing the security cameras online. The hair stands up on the back of my neck and I'm not one to ignore my instincts. Although the cabin is well-protected, I don't like the idea of Katie sitting down here with these windows, no matter that they can function like one-way glass and are bulletproof.

I hold out my hand. "We're going upstairs now."

Her mouth drops open at my tone. "But the movie—"

“Later,” I say, and her eyes glaze with desire. Fuck what I wouldn’t give to play with her right now, that my urgency is because I can’t wait to strip her down and bury my face in that sweet pussy.

I can’t get distracted. I pull her up from the couch and head for the stairs.

“What’s wrong?”

I debate lying for a second, but that won’t do either of us any good. “Someone is coming.”

She twists her head at the top, peering down at the door. “Is it my brother?”

“Maybe.” I hope so. I hope it’s Henry and he’s so jetlagged, he forgot all the protocols for approaching the cabin. I tug her in for a kiss, not able to resist how adorable she looks in my shirt with her hair tousled from earlier. She melts against me, and I tuck it away for later. If it is Henry, I’ll have some serious explaining to do in about ten minutes.

When we get to my bedroom, I press my thumb to what looks like a knot in the wood of my floor-length mirror. The biometric sensor engages, and I hear a soft click before swinging the mirror away from the wall. Next to me, Katie gasps and a little burst of pride straightens my shoulders. I’ve never shown anyone my office here before and the tech I’ve employed is all based on stuff my partners and I have created and tested over the years. Katie peers around the frame and steps inside.

“I never would have guessed this was in here.”

“That’s the point.” I move in behind her and pull the door closed, reactivating the seal. It’s unlikely anyone could get this far, but if the cabin was breached, all they would succeed in doing would be pulling the wood paneling away from the ‘built-in’ mirror.

Katie does a slow spin in my office, taking in the monitors and equipment, my desk, and a small kitchenette. “What is this place?” she breathes. “Is it like a safe room?”

“It is. I designed the one in your family’s home too.”

“Really? I thought you were a tech guy. Like video game apps.”

I move to my desk, swiping up so I can see the perimeter cameras. “I am a tech guy. Tech security and design. Although this space was designed by one of my partners. I’ll show you how the bed comes down from the ceiling later.”

She glances up. “There’s a bed?”

“Min Jee is incredible with industrial design. Small spaces aren’t new in a lot of residential units in many Asian countries, and she’s incorporated a lot of that knowledge for our customers.” A movement on the edge of west side of the property draws my eye and I zoom in, waiting to see if it gets picked up on another camera. Sure enough, a hooded figure is tramping through the woods. Katie comes up behind me.

“A lost hiker?” she asks.

“Not in those clothes.” I do make allowances for people who may have broken down, or gotten lost, but the way this person is moving through the woods, instead of following the road up to the cabin makes me think this isn’t an innocent approach.

We watch for several more minutes, until finally the guy looks up, clearly scanning for surveillance, by the way he holds his hood up to shield one side of his face from where he suspects a camera would be. Not an amateur then, but clearly not someone who has done enough research on this place.

Katie sucks in a breath, leaning close to the monitor. “Isn’t that—”

“It is,” I say, flatly. Shit. Definitely not an amateur, just someone who decided to take advantage of time as opposed to strategy. “Katie. Didn’t I tell you not to use your phone?”

“I didn’t!” She paces around the small room. “I swear, I didn’t text Karli, or call her or check any social sites, nothing.”

I stop, thinking for a minute. “Did you turn your phone off?”

She shakes her head. “No, I saw notifications come in, but I never responded, I promise.”

“Where’s your phone?”

“In my room. On that bench at the foot of the bed.” She bites her lip. “Why is that guy here? Do you know him?”

I don’t know him personally, but I’m very familiar with the Blood Knights. Fucking hell. Is he alone, or did he have time to call in reinforcements? As we watch, he pauses in the shadow of a tree, and we see a small flare, as he cups his hands around his mouth. A fucking cigarette? The Blood Knights aren’t stupid, so he’s either over-confident or he doesn’t give a shit about being discovered.

Neither scenario gives me the warm and fuzzies. This place is effectively a fortress, so I’m not too worried, but I’m not interested in dealing with anything that puts a target on Henry’s back.

“Stay here,” I say, unlocking the door. “I’m going to get your phone.”

“But—” Katie’s face is pale.

“We’re fine, Katie. He can’t get in the cabin.”

I slip out and secure the mirror, jogging to get her phone. When I’m back in the safe room, I hand it to Katie and ask her to unlock it.

“There are a bunch of texts here from Karli, but none of them say anything about Tom, which is kind of weird.”

“What do they say?”

“Mostly, where are you, where did you go, let’s meet for lunch, type of thing.”

I take her phone and open up her settings. I turn the phone to her. “Did you realize you were sharing your location with Karli?”

She shakes her head, taking the phone from me with trembling hands. “I mean we’ve shared locations before, when

we're trying to meet somewhere, but I didn't think it was permanently on."

"She have access to your phone?"

"Of course. She's my best friend. She's always at my place and she knows my password so we can check photos before posting them."

I roll my eyes. "Text her."

"What?"

"I have a suspicion. Please text her that you're checking in and you're fine." I watch as she does, nodding when she hits send. I turn her towards the monitor.

Our sinister smoker straightens, pulling something out of his pocket. Katie's hand covers her mouth. "That's Karli's phone."

"How do you know?"

"See the butterfly sticker on the case?"

I squint, and sure enough there's something with wings on the back. Such a simple thing for this guy to track her. Jesus.

"She's texting me back!" Katie holds out her phone. "Or he is, or something."

I watch the three dots appear and wait. Sure enough, a message pops up asking if Katie is with her brother. An uneasy feeling grows in my stomach. What has put Henry on the Blood Knights' radar?

"Should I text him back?"

I shake my head. "No. Let's see what he does."

As we watch he texts a few more times and the messages come in, a variation of the same ones as before. When Katie doesn't respond, he stuffs the phone back in his pocket and keeps trudging. I take some pleasure in the fact that it looks like Tom has been following us since last night. He's not dressed for a stakeout, wearing sneakers and what looks to be a few layers of dark clothing. That means he hasn't taken the

time to plan this properly. I check my watch. I have a unit on their way here, but they're still thirty minutes out.

Tom finally makes it to the edge of the woods where he can spot the cabin. I curse when I realize I was too distracted by Katie when we arrived earlier to park in the garage. Stupid, rookie move. I bet I didn't even lock it. Tom approaches the vehicle, looking in the windows and placing his hand on the hood to check the temperature. He tries the doors and, sure enough, I didn't fucking lock them. I could sound the alarm from my phone now, but I'm interested to see what he's going to do.

He circles the vehicle, pulls out a phone, one I note is absent the butterfly sticker, and takes some photos, including of the license. Fuck.

He pulls out a blade and sets in, slashing at the leather seats. Goddamn it, I'm itching to get out there and teach this fucker a lesson, but not if it means leaving Katie in here. I'm confident she'd be fine until the unit arrived, but I'm not taking chances with her.

I can't quite see what he's doing until a few seconds later, the front seats erupt into flames. Jesus Fucking Christ.

Katie turns wide blue eyes to mine. "Is he going to burn us out?"

"He can't. The cabin might look like wood, but it's actually fireproof siding. It would take a while to breach the house."

"But it's possible?"

I shake my head, pulling her to me and dropping a kiss on the top of her head. "Not this guy and not today. I've called a unit in, and they'll be here shortly. I would take care of this asshole myself, but it's more important that I take care of you."

"A unit?" Katie shakes her head. "Who are you?"

"I'm the man your brother trusts to protect you."

On the screens below us, Tom folds his arms, clearly waiting for someone to rush out of the house. When that doesn't happen, he stalks up to the door, his tattoos clearly visible from our vantage point as he forgets about concealing himself and examines the door.

Katie cuddles in close to me. "I trust you too, but I'm scared."

I check my phone. "The unit will arrive any second now."

And that's when I see Tom turn. He only hesitates a minute before he sprints into the woods, three large, black SUVs pulling in front of the cabin. I know there's a group already located at strategic points in the woods, and we watch a cat-and-mouse game for a few minutes before Tom is apprehended by the team.

A call comes in and I issue directions for holding and questioning Tom. As much as I want to deal with him myself, and I will in a few days, I'm not leaving Katie for anything. Although I use careful language, I see the fear in Katie's eyes, and I hate it.

"Are you the police?" she whispers, watching as a hood is thrown over Tom's head and he's dragged out of the woods and into one of the waiting vehicles.

"I'm not." I hold out my hands. "I don't even know that I'm one of the good guys."

She wraps her arms over her waist, rocking back on her heels.

A buzz causes me to glance down at my phone and I see that the unit is cleaning up and resetting the perimeter. I let them know that I'll meet with them in a couple of days.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Katie nods. "What would have happened to me if you hadn't been there last night?"

"We never have to worry about that, baby. From this day forward, I'm here for you."

She bites her lip. "Because my brother asked you to?"

“No, because I want to be wherever you are.” A panicked thought crosses my mind. “And if you don’t want that, I’ll still be here for you.”

She walks to up me and pokes me in the chest. “No turning back now, Hiro. I’m not letting you wiggle out of this one. As you said, I’m an adult now, and I am going to make my own decisions.” She tips her beautiful face to mine. “And one decision I’ll happily make is having you. I’m yours.”

I switch off the screens, not wanting the reminder of what I’ll need to focus on to keep her and her family safe in the future, and hit another switch, causing the bed in the ceiling to lower and the equipment to slide away. Katie stares in amazement at the perfect alignment of the bed over the desk.

“This is so cool.” She heads over and tests it with her hands. “Is it safe?”

“I assume so, although I’ve never actually slept in here.”

She shoots me a look from under her lashes that goes straight to my cock. “I wasn’t talking about sleeping.”

I trust Min Jee, but when she designed this, I don’t know if she thought about how hard I want to fuck this woman in this exact instant. I slide open the doorway. “We can test the design standards later,” I say, drawing on all my control to not bend her over the bed and drive myself into her from behind. “Right now, I want a big, luxurious bed where I can comfortably drive you wild for hours.”

“Hours?” She straightens, looking over her shoulder.

“Hours. First, I’m going to use my tongue on those incredible tits of yours. I want to worship them, feel those perfect nipples hard against my tongue and see if I can make you come just from that alone.”

She gets off the bed, looking a bit dazed. “And then?”

I take her hand, pulling her into my bedroom. “And then I’m going to bury my face in the wetness between your legs, because you will be soaked from all the top-shelf action.”

“Top-shelf action?” She laughs but I don’t care. I’m too caught up in stripping my shirt from her and lashing my tongue against those little cherries as she squirms in my arms.

“Yeah, top-shelf action. And then I’m going to lick that sweet pussy until you’re moaning begging me to pound you into the mattress.” I push her down onto my bed.

“I’m about to beg you now,” she says, breathlessly, rising up on her elbows as I quickly shed my clothing.

“Oh, really?” I climb over her, kissing her hipbones and finding her wetness with my fingers. “You’re already so wet and warm,” I murmur.

“I thought you were starting with the top-shelf action,” she stutters as I push two fingers into her softness.

“Mmmm, I’m too hungry for a taste of this,” I say leaning forward to drag my nose up her center. Katie moans and I pull back to get a view of her glistening skin before diving back in and sliding my tongue over her slick flesh. Slowly, slowly, building her pleasure the way I learned earlier. I pull her hips up, grinding my face into her as I flick her sweet clit with my tongue, letting her body show me what she likes.

Her thighs are shaking around my head, and I pump my fingers in and out of her, loving the curse words falling from her beautiful lips, the way her hands alternate between clenching my duvet and clutching at my hair.

“So fucking sweet,” I rasp before working her clit again, keeping my pace steady while her orgasm builds inside her. Finally, she comes against my mouth, and I lap up every perfect shudder of her body, gentling my tongue to a soothing rhythm.

“Come here,” she crooks her finger and I climb up her body, dropping kisses everywhere. She grabs my shoulders and kisses me deeply, our tongues tangling and fuck, if that isn’t the hottest thing she could do in the moment.

She breaks the kiss and looks me in the eye. “Do I need to beg now?”

Katie

HIRO'S dark eyes are bright with desire and god, oh god, his body. He's like a machine or something you'd see in a movie. Chiseled. Not overly muscular, his pale, golden skin highlighting every dip and sculpted plane. My mouth goes dry, which is a miracle, considering how wet I am down below.

Hiro shakes his head. "You never have to beg, baby. I'll take care of you." His fingers brush against me and my hips shift, the warm buzz of pleasure between my legs starting to ache at the emptiness there. My breathing changes as Hiro gently strokes my breasts and thighs, drawing long, lazy circles down my back. He's hard as steel next to me but when I reach out to caress him, he moves away.

"If you touch me, it's all over, baby."

"I want you to lose control with me. Please," I moan as he dips his head, touching his tongue lightly over each of my nipples.

His teasing drives away the last of my satisfaction and my hips move, needing to feel the weight of him against me. He moves over me, notching himself against the entrance to my pussy and my breathing hitches. Slowly, slowly he drives into me, pumping his hips and gliding his thumb over my clit setting off little sparkles of heat where our bodies join.

"You feel so good, Katie," Hiro's voice catches as he eases inside of me. Even now, when it must be killing him to take his time, he's more worried about my pleasure than his own.

I reach up, drawing his face down to mine, capturing his lips. “Harder, please,” I whisper.

“Anything for you.” His hips start to thrust against me and pleasure crests within my body, my nails digging into his bunched muscles. It’s like my words caused him to let go and he rocks into me over and over again, his hands sliding down to grip my ass, the better to take his pounding.

The angle of his hips hits me exactly where I need it and I scream out his name as I tip over into another orgasm, this one shattering every cell in my body, leaving me in tatters as he drives into me, shouting out my name as he finishes.

I’m limp as Hiro gathers me close to him, my eyes closing as exhaustion overcomes me.

“You’re perfect,” he says.

“I think we were pretty perfect together,” I mumble sleepily.

“Did you mean what you said, before? That you’re mine?” Hiro’s voice is quiet, but I hear the small hesitation in his words.

“You’re never going to get rid of me now that I know what you do.” I open my eyes.

His brow crinkles. “You mean the security tech stuff?”

I smile. “Maybe I should have phrased that better. Now that I know what you can do. All of it. Keep me safe, make me happy, give me amazing orgasms.”

“Is that it?” His lips quirk.

“Well, don’t forget about cooking. That bacon was divine.”

He brushes a soft kiss over my lips. “I’ll make sure we have plenty of bacon.” His gaze goes serious. “It’s too soon to tell you this, but I love you, Katie.”

I kiss him back. “I know, and I love you too. Sometimes we can’t control everything, Hiro. I’ve loved you the day Henry introduced you to our family.”

He flops back on the bed. “Your brother is going to kill me.”

I rise up on my elbow. “No, he won’t. Not when he sees how happy you make me.”

Hiro opens one eye. “I can’t tell him you’re happy because of orgasms and bacon.”

I tilt my head. “Okay, fair. But you can tell him that you make me happy in other ways.”

He pulls me down, cuddling me into his side. “Like what?”

“Like when you took me outside to cut a Christmas tree after our nap.” I prop myself up on his chest. “Or that you made me fancy hot chocolate and watched Christmas movies with me all day.”

“All day?” He grimaces, but then a slow smile crosses his face. “Anything for you.”

THE END

Darby Fox writes deliciously naughty contemporary romance that she hopes tempts her readers to stay in bed all day with a good book. Her stories feature rockstars, billionaires and other swoon-worthy heroes who usually fall first and fall hard making for an extremely satisfying happily-ever-after. She is living her own happily-ever-after with her own real-life hero, a tween princess determined to steal her shoes and a prince charming-in-training.

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About the Author

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Kissing You

Part of the Lockland Distilling &
Welcome to Kissing Springs
Worlds

Tracy Broemmer

1

Marlowe

HE WASN'T GOOD-LOOKING. He was *striking*. Marlowe had been eye-stalking him all night, sneaking peeks at him as she poured wine, pulled mugs of beer, and mixed drinks. Dressed for the blustery cold, it was hard to tell what his body looked like—he appeared slim and trim, but who knew what sort of muscular build he was hiding under the flat front gray pants and the navy sweater? More to the point, who cared?

Marlowe couldn't remember seeing a man with such a pretty face. And that was the weird thing—pretty, yes, but angular and masculine, too. His cheekbones would cut glass; she had no doubt. Thick, dark eyebrows and long, thick lashes framed his deep, ebony eyes. And she'd already lost a minute or two wondering if his honey-blond locks were as silky as they looked.

He had come in with a rowdy bunch of guys, a bachelor party, Marlowe had guessed correctly. He was drinking with them, but he was much more reserved than the rest of them. Which wasn't to say he didn't talk or smile often; he just wasn't boisterous. The rest of the guys were dressed in denim and t-shirts or flannels. By comparison, this guy looked like a model.

Mysterious.

Little bit dreamy.

Marlowe gave herself a mental shake and swung her gaze back to the bottle of cabernet in her hand. If her friends could see her now, mooning over some guy at her bar, she would

never hear the end of it. Especially a guy who looked like that. There was no way he would be attracted to what he saw behind the bar.

“What about a bowling league?”

“What?” She snapped her gaze to her friends sitting across the bar from her.

“Would you do that? Like a Sunday night league?”

Marlowe eyed Summer Lockland with a smirk.

“First? We can’t, because you look like you swallowed the bowling ball.”

Bristol Miller snorted softly as she tried to sip her beer. Summer only laughed and smoothed her hand over her growing belly. “Nuh-uh. I’m not that big yet.”

She wasn’t, but they all loved to tease her.

“Second. No.” Marlowe shook her head as she poured the cab into the wine glass she had set out on the bar.

“No? What? That’s not a second. That’s—what?” Summer shook her head.

“Where I come from, winter Sunday bowling leagues were for couples. I’m not a couple.”

“You could hook up with Pierce,” Summer suggested.

“Pierce Rooney?” Marlowe turned her nose up. She liked the guy fine, but no, she had no intention of hooking up with him. Then again, she had no real intention of hooking up with anyone in the foreseeable future. Marlowe had her fun years ago when she was younger, and now, she had other responsibilities.

And she wouldn’t change a thing. She pulled her phone from her back pocket and peeked at the screen. Just before ten. Way was supposed to be ready for bed, but if she knew her son, he was asking his grandpa to let him watch one more TV show or play one more video game. And if Marlowe knew her dad, Waylen would get his way.

“Not hook up, hook up.” Summer rolled her eyes when Marlowe tucked her phone away and looked at her again. “Just for the sake of bowling.”

“No.” Marlowe shook her head again. “Do I look like a bowler, Summer?”

“Well, no, but you don’t look like a first baseman, either.”

Marlowe narrowed her eyes at her as Teri, one of two waitresses at the Iron Stag, came up to the bar to get the wine she’d just poured.

“I’m tall and left-handed.” Marlowe tipped her head. “Perfect for first base.”

“Mm-hmm.” Summer nodded. “And tattoo sleeves on your arms and a nose piercing. Doesn’t scream first baseman to me.”

Marlowe laughed and shrugged. “And still no.”

“Hmm.”

“Why do we have to have a thing?” Marlowe grabbed a rag to wipe down the bar. “I mean, we play softball because we’re good. And we win. But why do we have to have a winter thing?”

“Because it keeps us all active and together,” Bristol answered.

“You and Rhett already bored?” Marlowe quirked an eyebrow at Bristol. Over the summer, Bristol and their friend Rhett Bailey had finally hooked up and started seeing each other. Marlowe often wondered which of them would get to the altar first—Bristol and Rhett or Summer and Rhett’s brother, Taj.

“No.” Bristol grinned and ducked her chin a bit when she blushed. “But it’s fun to hang out with everyone.”

“It’s December,” Marlowe reminded them. “Everyone’s busy.”

“Yeah? What’re you doing these days?”

“Working.”

“Do you work tomorrow night?”

“No. I’m hanging out with Way tomorrow night.”

Summer winced. “Yeah, that’s a good thing to do.”

“I know!” Bristol yelled and threw her hand in the air as if trying to get someone’s attention. Marlowe glanced at the bachelor party guys again. Was she just checking on them, or was she wondering if Bristol’s outburst had gotten their attention? Or *his* attention? If she were being honest—Nope. No sense in going there. She’d never see the guy again after tonight.

“What?” Summer drew Marlowe’s attention back to them.

“Let’s have a Christmas party.”

Marlowe looked at the Christmas tree in the front of the bar now. She and James had decorated it. Sometimes James Murray was a cantankerous old man, but most of the time, they got along well. James would never tell her, but Marlowe knew his wife, and Elaine had told her recently that James was dealing with high blood pressure and the medicine merry-go-round while his doctor tried to find the right fit for him. She knew from experience with her mom that that wasn’t a fun process.

“Yes!”

From the corner of her eye, Marlowe saw Summer nod.

“Marlowe?”

She didn’t hate Christmas, but she wasn’t one of those nutjobs that wished every day was Christmas, either. But it was the middle of December, and it was colder than a snowman’s fart outside. And speaking of snow, it was in the forecast for the next three days.

“I don’t hate the idea,” she answered with a shrug.

“Let’s do it!” Bristol and Summer looked at each other with a nod. “kay. Mark your calendar, Mar. Next Saturday.”

“Like a week from tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Can I have more water?” Summer pushed her empty glass at Marlowe as she slid off her barstool. “Be right back. Gotta pee again.”

Marlowe laughed softly as she snagged Summer’s glass to refill it.

“You need a date.”

“For what?” Marlowe asked Bristol.

“The party.”

“I don’t need a date for the party,” Marlowe corrected her. “Notice Marlowe has been very dateless for several years, and she’s almost always smiling.”

“Rhett would suggest it might be gas.”

Marlowe snorted.

“What’s wrong with Pierce?”

“Eww. No. For one thing, he’s four inches shorter than me.”

“He’s nice.”

“He is. He’s cute, too. But no.”

Bristol narrowed her eyes at Marlowe and nodded. “I’ll find someone for you.”

Marlowe rolled her eyes and made her way back down the bar to check on the bachelor party guys.

Cass

CASS HAD NEVER BEEN a whiskey connoisseur like the other guys. He'd never been to Bardstown or Kissing Springs or Rodey, Kentucky, either. His friends talked about the Bourbon Trail like it was some holy grail, which Cass found amusing. Still, he wouldn't have missed Cy's bachelor party.

At least they had progressed from their college drinking days. No one was throwing this whiskey back the way they used to shoot tequila back in the day. Even Cass had some of those stories tucked away. Cy's glass was empty, and technically, that wasn't supposed to happen. They had started this party last night with dinner at a brewery in Bardstown. While they had all had their fair share of beers, none of them had tied one on that made this morning rough.

Before Cass could flag the bartender down, Zayne got her attention and nodded at Cy's empty rocks glass. It didn't matter who bought Cy's drinks; the three of them had been taking turns all night. But Cass' next swallow of Lockland Five Year tasted a little like disappointment. He wouldn't mind catching the bartender's eye. Tall, but thin, she still somehow cut an imposing figure. Her bare, muscular arms were covered shoulder to wrist in tattoo-sleeves; Cass had been sneaking looks at her all night, trying to make out what the tattoos were.

If he wasn't mistaken, at least some of them appeared to be bookish.

The fact that this bartender might be into books was a little side bonus. With her violet eyes and raven black pixie cut, she'd bewitched Cass the second he laid eyes on her. He

watched her now while she was busy mixing the Old-Fashioned for Cy. Hopefully she wouldn't notice the way he admired her moves.

Her fingers were long and slender, her nails short and bare. She wore a silver band on the middle finger of her right hand, but no other jewelry on her hands or wrists. The tiny diamond stud nestled in her nose caught his eye each time she moved, and the light caught it. In contrast to her hands—mostly free of jewelry—there were multiple piercings in her ears. And in those piercings, she wore an intriguing mix of silver and diamond studs and silver hoops.

“Here ya go.” She aimed a smile at Cy, but Cass felt it sharp and lethal, as it slipped between his ribs like a sharpened knife and pierced his heart.

“Thanks.” Cy nodded and turned his attention back to Braden. Engaged for six months and involved with Kaeli for two years, Cy wouldn't flirt with a lap dancer if the guys had hired one for him. Braden would, depending on whether or not he was involved with someone, and even then, *who* he might be dating. Zayne flirted with wallpaper, so yes, he had already tried his hand with the bartender. While she had been game to join in their fun, she'd done so from a distance and not played right into Zayne's hands.

Cass wasn't much of a flirt. Not unless he was interested. An intellectual, he had his nose in a book a lot more often than he had his ass on a bar stool. He supposed he had charm when he wanted to, but there hadn't been a woman who intrigued him enough to make him want to in quite a while.

That drought was over.

Cass sipped his two-finger, neat pour again and lowered his glass to the bar. He hadn't really thought enough about his lack of dating, of romance, as a drought for it to be considered a *drought*. But now that he was watching this woman behind the bar, her long fingers twisting a slice of orange over a glass now, although it felt like she had Cass' belly in her fingers instead, he was deliriously dry and thirsty.

The Iron Stag was a small one room shack off a gravel road in a little one-horse town called Rodey. Actually, though the address might say Rodey, Braden had driven the rental van a long way down that gravel road. The Iron Stag was more of a hole-in-the-wall country tavern than anything. What it lacked in big city posh, it had in charm in spades. The place was slightly trendy, which made it a sore thumb rather than an eyesore. The exterior needed some updating; some of the siding was bent and peeling. Cass had noticed it when they'd come in. The interior was a mix of old and worn and shiny new. The bar itself was an impressive slab of polished wood with a back bar stocked with things his buddies worshipped. The floor was worn hard wood.

Cass had noticed a mechanical bull tucked away in the far corner. He wondered if anyone ever rode it. In their college days, every damned one of them would have climbed on that thing and given it a shot. Might have all walked out of here bruised or broken, but they would have had fun. Now, he wouldn't put it past Braden or Zayne to try it if they noticed it.

The bartender handed the drink she'd just made—she had garnished it with that same slice of orange peel—to a waitress and turned back to two women at the other end of the bar. Cass assumed she knew them; she had been chatting with them since he and the guys had come in. Country music played in the bar; Cass had noticed some of the songs were Christmas songs, but not all of them. It was okay with him; after all, it was mid-December. Time for the holiday festivities.

Which reminded him, he needed to call home and check in.

“You ready?” Braden elbowed him, drawing him out of his thoughts.

“Where're we going?” He picked up his glass and eyed the amber whiskey in it. Eyed the bartender through the glass. He wasn't finished with either of them, but he had no intention of announcing that to the guys.

“Zayne's got that whole bottle from Barron Distillery. We're gonna go to the VRBO and open it.”

The bartender chose that moment to drop her head back and laugh. The throaty, buttery sound wound through Cass like a swallow of the high proof stuff in his glass—a little sweet, a little spicy, and enough heat to make him sweat.

“You guys go on,” Cass told his friend. They’d all gone their own ways after college, but they stayed in touch. Cass didn’t see them as much as the rest of them saw each other; he’d spent some time traveling abroad and tended to spend even his weekends working or traveling. Other people might think it was odd that he would tell his buddies to go on without him, but his friends wouldn’t blink.

Cass spent a lot of time alone, and he did a lot of physical activities—rock climbing, biking, hiking. He would walk to the VRBO when he was ready; it wasn’t a terrible walk. In fact, he might need the sub-freezing temperature out there to cool him off when he left.

“You sure?” Cy leaned around Braden with a frown.

“Yeah, man. I’m good.” Cass nodded. “Gonna poke around and see what I can find out about Rodey and Kissing Springs.”

They didn’t actually roll them, but Cass could see that glaze of uninterest cloud their eyes. He loved history; he often dug into the places he visited to learn more about them. He also frequented museums; the rest of the guys even got a little bored at the *whiskey* museum.

“Call if you want me to come back and get you,” Braden told him as he slid off his stool.

“I can walk it.”

“You’re not really dressed for a hike in the snow,” Zayne reminded him.

“Last time I looked there were six snowflakes on the ground.”

The loud burst of laughter from all of them drowned out the Clint Black song playing. Cass picked his glass up and noticed the bartender looking their way. He sipped his whiskey and offered his buddies one last smile as they zipped their coats to leave.

Another bottle of whiskey with his college friends or a chance to chat up the sexy bartender? No contest. Cass took a drink and waved the guys off, his eyes meeting hers as the song changed to something old and classic by Trace Adkins.

Marlowe

SHE WAVED AGAIN as Summer and Bristol headed to the door and reached with her other hand for Bob Crimm's glass to get him a refill. The man would warm his barstool until last call and then stumble outside where his wife would be waiting for him in their ancient Chevy. Not exactly Marlowe's idea of what marriage should look like, but then again, she wasn't married, so what did she know?

The bachelor party bunch had paid their tab and headed out. Minus the guy with the cheekbones. Marlowe wasn't sure cheekbones had ever turned her on before, but she kind of wanted to nibble on them. Maybe slide her tongue over them and see if they cut her. While she was close to his face, she'd try his lips, too. They were thin, but firm as if chiseled from stone.

He looked a bit like a god from Greek or Roman mythology. Not just the handsome face, but his whole demeanor. While Marlowe had seen him laughing and talking to the other guys, he seemed separate from them, too. The word aloof came to mind, but she wasn't sure it was the correct one. Refined, maybe.

Marlowe pushed Bob's pint glass back over the bar and returned the old man's smile. The door opened, letting in a rush of cold air. Maverick Pressey and some of the cowboys from his dad's ranch filed in. Mav hollered at her as they all saddled up to the bar.

"Hey." She clapped his hand in the buddy shake they'd all perfected years ago. Marlowe had gone to school with Mav

and his friend Rye Gallaher. She and Rye had tried to date once, but it was a disaster. They had decided after an awkward make out session to be friends. That was years ago, and Marlowe still considered Rye a good friend. Mav, on the other hand, would date and sleep with anything that moved. Except Marlowe. She would never consider herself *that* desperate for a guy.

“Can we get a pitcher?” Mav asked her.

“A pitcher?”

That surprised her. Usually, if Mav was in the Iron Stag, he was bellied up to the bar. Secretly relieved—she wanted Mav and his friends out of her way so she could talk to the pretty stranger a few stools down—Marlowe filled a pitcher with Mav’s usual choice and handed him a stack of plastic cups.

“Rye says hi,” he told her as he took the pitcher and cups.

“Yeah? How’s he doing?”

“Good.” Mav nodded. “He and Chantele are leaving tomorrow to visit some of her family in Indiana. So they wanted an early night.”

Marlowe smiled and nodded her approval. Rye and Chantele had met last summer right here in the Iron Stag. It had taken a bit, but they had eventually clicked, and it hadn’t been long before Chantele moved down here to Rodey to live with him.

The holidays were a good time to visit family. Marlowe loved that her friends could do that, but that old ache she’d shoved down inside years ago always tended to be worse this time of year. She and Way spent the holidays with her dad, and they had fun. But she missed her mom. She assumed her dad did, too, but they seldom talked about her.

Shaking off the grief that lingered even now, Marlowe finally made her way down the bar to the stranger.

“You’re not from around here.”

His smile revealed perfect teeth. The warmth in his eyes told her *aloof* was definitely the wrong word to describe him.

“No, I’m not.” He pushed his glass toward her. Marlowe tried to remember how much she had poured for him. She didn’t think it was much at all compared to the other members of his party. “Illinois, born and bred.”

“Chicago?”

“No.” He laughed and shook his head. “Mid-state. We don’t often claim Chicago as part of Illinois.”

“Politics.” She grinned.

“Politics. Taxes.” He shrugged. “I’m Cass.”

“Marlowe,” she answered and shook his hand. “What’ll you have?”

“Maybe one more pour of something.”

She eyed him with amusement. “Vague.”

“Dealer’s choice.”

“Oh.” She nodded and spun around to eye the bottles on the back bar. “You just had Lockland, right?”

“I did.”

“Wilderness Trail,” she decided as she selected the bottle. “This is a wheated bourbon.”

She felt his eyes on her as she splashed a finger in his glass.

“Is this your favorite?” He picked the glass up and nosed the whiskey. Marlowe put the bottle back, flicked her gaze over the room, and then satisfied that all was well, she looked back at him.

“Mmm.” She pursed her lips. “If I had to claim a favorite, I’d probably say Lockland. But I do love Wilderness Trail. As well as pretty much all the others.”

He smiled again—Marlowe read it as pure amusement, pure emotion, rather than flirting.

“Okay.” He nodded. “And why Lockland if you had to claim a favorite?”

“Because I’m good friends with the Lockland family.”

“Fair.” He took a sip.

“The women who left just a few minutes ago? They were down the bar there?” She nodded toward the stools Summer and Bristol had occupied. When he nodded, she continued, “Summer Lockland, daughter of the owner. Well, actually, she’s part owner now. And Bristol Miller, manager of the Skeleton Bar.”

“We’re supposed to go to the Skeleton Bar tomorrow. After a tour of Lockland.”

“Nice. They have a nice facility there.” Marlowe grabbed a bar towel and wiped down the area around him. “Which one of you is the groom?”

“The red head.”

“Makes sense.” The red head had been the only one who didn’t pay for any drinks. “Are they coming back?”

“Nah.” Cass shook his head. “They have a bottle they’re going to open at the VRBO. I’m not as into bourbon as they are.”

Marlowe wondered if he had a car here, but before she could ask, Cass spoke again.

“So, tell me about Rodey.”

She tipped her head with a frown. “If you blink, you miss it.”

“Noticed that already.” He nodded. “What else? Give me some town history.”

“There’s not much to tell. I think we’re an off shoot of the Bardstown area. Bardstown was originally settled by Europeans. In the early 1780s, I think? But the town wasn’t formally established until later in the decade. Rodey was established in 1792, I think. Population is 521.”

“And how long has the Iron Stag been here?”

Marlowe swallowed hard when he turned his head to give the place a thorough look. His longish hair curled slightly at his neck. His fingers were still curled around his glass, though

his grip was loose and casual. She could see a worn leather bomber jacket hanging on the stool behind him. Would it smell like leather, she wondered? Or him? A mix of his cologne and soap? Something woodsy or maybe tonka bean? Marlowe's mouth went dry at the thought. She'd smelled a Tom Ford cologne when Christmas shopping in Lexington a few years ago that had given her all kinds of ideas. She had wished then she had a man to buy it for as a gift. Her dad was happy with English Leather, and Way was too young to care about cologne.

Amused by the thought that the only time she'd wished for a man in recent years was after finding the perfect male scent, Marlowe gave herself a mental shake. Cass turned back and fixed those intense dark eyes on her, reminding her he had asked a question.

"The building has been here since 1981. But it was many things, including empty, before becoming the Iron Stag. James Murray bought it in 2009 and did some remodeling and cleaning up. Opened the Iron Stag that October."

"What's the significance of the name?"

"I really don't know."

"Interesting." Cass nodded, sipped again, and looked at the Christmas tree this time.

"The tradition of the Christmas tree comes from Germany."

He laughed as he flicked his gaze to her. "Yes."

"Are you a trivia buff or a history nerd?" she asked him.

"Both?" Laughing as he swallowed, he choked down another sip.

But what a handsome man to be a nerd. Marlowe wondered if he was married. Not that it mattered. It wasn't like she would ever see him again. But she was curious if he was married, if he had children. If so, he was probably one of those dads who had a trivia tidbit about everything.

"What do you do?" she asked him.

“I’m a professor,” he answered. “Private college.”

“History?”

“Mm.” He frowned. “I’ve taught history, but mostly I teach philosophy. I even taught a literature class a few years ago.”

“Wow.” She folded her arms over her chest, oddly attracted to him even more with each of his confessions. “Do you wear contacts?”

“No. Why?”

“Just envisioning you as a student. Wearing glasses. Piece of tape right here.” She plopped the tip of her index finger between her eyes.

“Nice,” he said, but his laugh sounded genuine. “I’m guessing you’re a reader.”

“That’s not hard to figure out.” She shrugged and held her arms out in front of her. “Harry Potter was my boyfriend when I was in school.”

She pointed at the lightning bolt near her elbow.

“I didn’t even notice that one.” He leaned a bit into the bar and touched the tattoo. “I mean, maybe if you’d put it on your forehead.”

Marlowe laughed and rolled her eyes. She was caught in a whirlwind of butterfly wings—he touched her. Cass has stroked his finger very lightly over her tattoo. And, he had noticed she was a reader, but not by her Harry Potter tattoo. Interesting. Which fandom had given her away? And what did that mean?

4

Cass

“*ACOTAR*.” He dragged the tip of his finger lightly over the spray of stars on her other arm and then rubbed his thumb over the quote every *ACOTAR* fan swooned over.

“What do you know about *ACOTAR*?”

“Only everything.” He drew his hand away and watched her with a smirk.

“Your students read them?”

“They do,” he answered with a nod, “but, I’ve read them all, too.”

“Seriously?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’re a guy.”

“Guys read.”

“But they’re romance.”

He shrugged. “I read everything. And I think you do, too.” He nodded at her arms as she folded them over her chest again.

“Interesting,” she said quietly.

“What’s your favorite book?”

“Well, that’s like asking me who my favorite kid is.” She rolled her eyes.

“And who is that?”

Marlowe took his glass, but he shook his head. “Can I just get some water?”

“Of course.”

She leaned over to set his whiskey glass in the sink and grabbed a Collins glass and filled it with ice. She moved with ease, as if she had been doing the job long enough to do it in her sleep. Cass could watch her all night.

“My favorite kid is Waylen,” she answered, “and my favorite book is *Peter Pan*.”

“And would I find either of those names in your tattoos?”

She grinned and ducked her chin, but she nodded.

“*Peter Pan*,” he repeated. “That’s cool.”

“And you’ve read it?”

“Are you going to insist on challenging me on everything?”

“Sorry.” She held her hands up in surrender, both snickering a bit.

“Who’s Waylen?”

“My son.” She announced it unapologetically, because there was no one more important in her life than her son.

“How old?”

“Eleven. Very soon to be twelve.”

“Nice.” Cass nodded. “My favorite kid is Lettie Coulter.”

“Who’s that?”

“My niece. She’s my little brother’s kid.”

Cass slipped his phone from his pocket and pulled up a picture of the three-month-old baby. He smiled proudly as he turned the phone to show it to Marlowe.

“Adorable.” She nodded. “Do you not have kids, or do you have kids but just like her better?”

The laugh that rumbled out of him surprised him. “I don’t have kids.”

“Don’t want kids?”

“I do. Just haven’t found the one.”

“My son wants the latest video game console for Christmas.”

“And?”

“I got it, but I wish he would get outside more.”

Cass grinned and took a big drink of his water. “My brother and I would leave the house in the morning around nine. And not go home until it got dark. We rode our bikes everywhere.”

“Right?” She nodded. “I rode my bike everywhere, and if I wasn’t on my bike, I was at practice.”

He eyed her with interest. “Basketball.”

“Softball.”

“First base.”

“Yes.”

She glanced away from him as the guy from earlier approached the bar.

“Excuse me.”

He nodded and watched her talk to the guy. Even though the guy might be a real cowboy, the cowboy hat he wore annoyed Cass. Maybe it was more the head it set atop that annoyed him. The guy looked like he thought women should drop at his feet to worship. Cass found it interesting and pleasing, if he were being honest, that Marlowe seemed immune to his supposed charm.

A Christmas song played now. If he wasn’t mistaken, and he wasn’t—his parents had a huge holiday music collection—Alan Jackson was singing. Rather than feast his eyes on Marlowe—as much as he wanted to, he didn’t want to be creepy—he swiveled his head around to look at the Christmas tree again.

He hadn't put one up at his house. Hadn't for the last few years. When he lived with Lisa, they did, but when that all went to hell, so had the holiday joy. While he was over Lisa and the holiday joy was definitely back, he just hadn't taken up the decorating thing again. Didn't realize how much he missed it. Not until he started talking to Marlowe.

The night went by fast. Cass was finished with whiskey, but Marlowe didn't seem to mind refreshing his water glass every now and then. They talked about her son and the video games. Cass and his brother had played video games, but they had been more outdoorsy. Marlowe's son did enjoy hiking, so Cass asked her for recommendations on trails to hike in the area. Not that he had time this weekend, but he would file the information away for any future trips.

He had just come back from Spain. Spent a week in Barcelona. He'd been there before, done the touristy things—the hop on and off bus tour. This time he had done a deep dive into the churches there, studying the history, the architecture, and even the religion. Who knew? Maybe he would come back to Rodey or Kissing Springs, Kentucky, next spring for a hike.

If he did, he might look Marlowe up.

He glanced at his watch when she took a set of keys out from under the bar.

“Do you need me to get out of here?”

He looked around, realizing suddenly that he was the only patron left in the bar.

“No.” She shrugged. “Unless you need to get out of here.”

“I would love to just sit here and talk to you, Marlowe,” he told her.

She grinned and nodded. “Me, too. Let me lock up.”

He watched her when she stepped out from behind the bar. Her long legs were clothed in dark wash, wide legged jeans. Cass wondered if she had big heels on, or if she was this tall without them.

“Do you have heels on?” he called across the room.

Marlowe flipped the key in the lock and turned back to him with a frown. “Are you kidding me? I’m six feet tall without heels. That’s hard on a girl. Let me tell ya. Especially in rural Kentucky.”

“But you don’t play basketball.”

“And if I had a dollar for every time a man has said that to me, I could buy everyone in Kentucky a drink.”

“Aren’t there a lot of Baptists here? So, that’s a whole lotta drinks you wouldn’t have to buy. Just saying.”

Marlowe dropped her head back and laughed big and loud.

“Don’t judge. I could be Baptist.”

“No judgement, whatsoever,” he promised. “Just calling you on your hyperbole.”

He watched her flip the switch on the signage out front. The lighted signs blinked off, and darkness draped the parking lot.

“Can you leave those on?” he asked when she headed toward the Christmas tree.

Marlowe

“FEELING FESTIVE?” She quirked an eyebrow at him but walked away from the tree and left the lights on.

Cass shrugged. “Nostalgic, maybe.”

“Yeah? Good Christmas memories?”

She crossed the room, stepped behind the bar, and grabbed a beer. Rather than stay on her side of the bar, she returned to him and sat next to him.

“Good memories,” he answered with a nod. “Small town memories, though not quite small like Rodey.”

Marlowe snorted.

“Safe place. My parents are great. Their friends were great.”

“Takes a village?”

Cass laughed softly. “I suppose. You?”

She sighed and looked away. “Good memories, but sometimes, even the good ones hurt.”

“Spoken like you have some that hurt.”

“Lost my mom when I was fifteen.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” She nodded. “Dad and I have done okay, but losing a parent is hard.” She swallowed a small drink of her beer. “Being a fifteen-year-old girl and losing your mom is really hard.”

“I can only imagine.”

“So.” She cleared her throat. “I saw Sting in concert once.”

She tilted her head and waited for him to catch up. Sting’s voice singing “I Saw Three Ships” surrounded them.

“So, you like live music.”

“I like music,” she said simply. “Most people look at my tattoos and assume I like heavy stuff.”

“And do you?”

“Yeah.” She laughed softly.

“Hmm.”

Marlowe looked at him to find his gaze on her arms, a severe frown on his face.

“What?”

“If people look at you and assume that, then I have to assume they’re not really looking.”

“A lot of people are pretty judgmental about tattoos.”

“That’s true, and I agree, but that’s not even what I meant.”

“Explain.”

Cass leaned back and scooted around on his barstool. Marlowe chuckled and nodded at the table nearest them.

“We could sit at a table.”

Ignoring her suggestion, he narrowed his eyes and started speaking. “First of all, the first thing I noticed about you is your eyes.”

“Really?” She said it as a challenge.

“Really. You have very pretty eyes.” He nodded. “And I’m not knowledgeable about makeup, but you wear it well.”

His compliment was a sharp little arrow in her heart. Marlowe grinned and mumbled thanks.

“Then again, maybe I noticed your hair first.”

“You know what most people assume when they see my spiky haircut?”

“People who assume things make asses of themselves.”

Marlowe laughed, nodding as she took a drink. “You’re right. Continue.”

Cass tapped her bottle with his glass. “It made me think of a fairy. A pixie. And yet, you’re tall.”

Marlowe rolled her eyes. “And should play—”

“Like a goddess.”

She might have laughed, uncomfortable with his word choice, except for the fact that she’d had the same thought about him earlier. He had the face of some mythic god.

“And.” He smiled and drew out the word and his pause.

“What?”

“Your hair accentuates your cheekbones. And your eyes.”

“You’re pretty good at this.” She arched her eyebrows. “Are you always this flirty?”

“Actually, no. I’m not.” He shrugged. “And I’m not flirting now. I’m just telling you what I saw first when I looked at you. And, when I did look at your tattoos, my first thought was wow, she’s into books.”

Marlowe held her breath for a second and finally let it out in a rush. “You know you’re the only person who’s ever noticed that without me pointing it out.”

“Really?”

“Other than my son, as he got old enough to see them and understand them.”

“I think that these quotes,” he skimmed his fingers over her bare arm again, but damned if Marlowe didn’t feel his touch everywhere at once. “Meant something to you, and you inked them on your skin to keep them with you. Make them part of you.”

She stared at him silently for a moment.

“Am I right?” he asked. “Half right?”

She laughed softly and took her time to answer him. “Yes and no.”

“Explain.”

“I got my first tattoo when I was seventeen.”

“How’d you do that? Don’t you have to be eighteen?”

“Crazy, right?” she asked him. “Gotta be eighteen to vote and get a tattoo, but I can do other things when I’m fifteen. Anyway, I lied about my age. Had a fake ID.”

“Okay.” He nodded for her to continue.

“It was book related, yes, but I think that first one was more about my rage. How lost I felt.”

“What was it?”

“A raven.”

“Edgar Allan Poe.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I don’t need to point out that the raven represents his grief over Lenore.”

“You’re likening that to my grief over my mom.”

“I am.” He watched her with a frown. “You don’t think so?”

“I dunno. Maybe subconsciously? I just...I was a handful before she died. She was sick for a long time. And I got worse when she died. My poor dad.”

“He stuck around?”

“Yeah. In fact, he’s watching my son right now.”

Cass straightened on his chair. “Do you need to go?”

“No. Dad lives with us.” She waved off his concern. “They’re probably both in bed.”

“Okay, so, you got your first tattoo out of rebellion. But it was still something from literature, and I’m betting that deep

inside, you related to it because of your grief.”

“Our parish priest said I was a wild child and that my dad should ground me until I was twenty-one.”

“Not Baptist,” he said with a wink, “and just because you got a tattoo?”

“No.” She laughed and widened her eyes. “Oh, no. I did a lot of things I shouldn’t have done.”

“And now?”

“Well, I don’t do drugs. Don’t even smoke pot anymore. I drink occasionally. I work full time here, and most of that full time, obviously, is nights. And I take care of my dad and my son.”

“So, you turned out okay.”

“Yeah. I guess I did.” She nodded.

“And still, you sound sad.”

“Not sad.” She shook her head. “I just wish Way had more in his life.”

Cass

“IS HIS FATHER IN THE PICTURE?”

Cass wasn't sure he should ask that question, but on the other hand, hadn't she just bared her soul to him in her explanation about her tattoos? Sure, she'd played it off with a joke about her rebellious behavior, but Cass had seen the sorrow in her eyes.

Besides, his was genuinely interested. Both for her sake and her son's.

“No.”

He nodded, ready to leave it alone. It was one thing to ask if the guy was in the picture, something else entirely to pry into reasons why he wasn't.

“He wasn't in the picture the day after we hooked up on his living room couch,” she answered. “One of those floral, velour things? Brown with blue flowers and little birds on it.”

Again, she was using sarcasm to keep her feelings out of the way.

“Did he know?”

“That I was pregnant?” she asked and continued when Cass nodded, “Well, yeah. He lived here then. We weren't dating, but it's a small town. So, we ran into each other almost anytime I left the house. He saw me pregnant. He never asked. I never told him.”

“And now? Does he live here?”

“No.” She finished her beer and set the bottle on the bar.
“No idea where he is, but he’s not here.”

“Does your son know any of that?”

“No.” She flinched. “I know. I need to tell him. He doesn’t ask about his father much. In fact, he asks more questions about my mom.”

“I saw Barry Manilow in concert.”

Marlowe jerked her chin up so quickly to look him in the eye, he worried she might have whiplash.

“Are you kidding?”

“Nope. Took my mom and grandma to see him once.”

“Wow.” Her laugh was already familiar to him, and it warmed him and still managed to make him shiver every time he heard it.

“But I also saw Kiss.”

“Me too.”

“Tell me about Kissing Springs.”

“When you watch TV, do you fly through the channels at the speed of light?”

“Nope.” He flashed a sheepish grin. “Actually, I don’t. I watch a lot of documentaries. And once I get sucked into one, I don’t change the channel.”

“Sucked into a documentary,” she mumbled and shook her head. “What is that? I don’t get it.”

“Do you like to dance?”

“Not much, no.”

“You know you have to teach your son to dance, right? So that when he’s a freshman at his first school dance, even though he’ll be standing with the rest of the boys on one side of the gym, and the girls will be on other side, at least he’ll know *how* to dance.”

“Your mom taught you to dance?”

“No.” He shook his head. “My friend did.”

“What was her name?” She wagged her eyebrows at him.

“Mike.”

They shared a hearty laugh. Cass slid off the barstool and reached for her hand.

“Dance with me.”

“I’ve never danced to Christmas music.”

“They do it all the time in the Hallmark movies.”

“Of course you watch Hallmark Christmas movies.” She let him take her hands and ease her closer, into his arms, against his body.

“When I’m not watching documentaries,” he reminded her.

“Right.”

“Did you change the playlist?” he asked her as they settled into a slow rhythm. He hadn’t noticed it before now, but it was all Christmas music playing rather than a mix.

“I did.”

“I like it.”

They danced for a while without talking, their bodies very close, but not quite touching. Cass wasn’t the wham-bam-thank you type, not like Zayne tended to be. He wasn’t particularly shy, either. Just choosier, he guessed.

And yet, he was attracted to Marlowe.

“I don’t suppose you have any mistletoe?”

Cass felt her laughter in her belly and her chest before he heard it tumble from her lips. She tipped her head back to look up at him.

“It’s just not a mistletoe vibe kinda place, is it?”

“The Iron Stag?” He looked around, squeezing her hips just a bit tighter. Marlowe nodded. “I guess not. But I want to kiss you, and I’m not really the crazy, hookup kind of guy.”

“A kiss doesn’t necessarily mean a hookup.”

“No,” he agreed, “but I’m also pretty sure one kiss isn’t going to do it.”

She laughed and frowned at the same time. “We could always see.”

“We could.”

They had stopped moving, eyes locked. Cass wondered for a moment if everyone driving by could see them inside the tavern, with the lights on in here and the darkness outside. Then again, the Iron Stag was on a gravel road in the middle of nothing and nowhere, and it was after one in the morning. Besides, did he care if someone saw him kiss her?

She watched him, her eyes wide and hungry. Never one to rush anything, Cass lifted his hand and cupped her chin.

“I have a question first.”

“What?”

“Are you married?”

“Not married. Not involved with anyone. Haven’t been in about three years.”

“Then I definitely think you should kiss me.”

Cass raised his eyebrows, but even with her watching, waiting, he wouldn’t rush the kiss. Never a first kiss. Rarely any kiss. Some women had liked that about him; it drove others crazy. And not in a good way.

This close, he could see the sparkle on her lips. He liked it, the bit of sparkle over what appeared to be her natural color. The shadow on her eyes was dark and sexy, the naked need in the look she gave him made his heart beat a little harder. Her eyes fluttered as he dipped his head, but she moaned softly in protest when he only nuzzled her nose, her cheek, with his.

He moved his free hand slowly, dragged his fingers up her side. Hungry to touch all of her, but enjoying the slow anticipation, he was careful to keep his hand in appropriate places. Knowing his thumb hovered so close to the curve of her breast made his cock stir with longing. Knowing he wouldn’t touch her, not yet, made his balls ache.

Wondering about what it might be like—romancing her, lying her down on her bed, and pressing kisses all over her skin, kissing her tattoos and drinking her soul in—made his heart pound. This was all the good stuff. Why did so many people these days want to hit a drive through when making love should be a feast?

“Cass.” Her whisper brushed his parted lips as he combed his fingers up into her short black hair. As if she had kissed him, as if his name was a kiss from her lips, Cass took a breath, moved his lips as if to kiss her.

Eyes locked again, Marlowe lifted her hands to frame his face.

“Is this how you make love?” She pressed into him, her breasts resting on his chest. Eyebrows arched in a challenge now, she let her eyes slide over his face. He wondered what she saw there, if she could see how badly he wanted her.

7

Marlowe

HE ANSWERED HER, his voice low and gruff.

Yes.

Marlowe felt a ribbon of lust unfurl low in her belly. She wanted him to kiss her, but that voice, the movement of his lips—he could talk to her all night and make her come.

She hadn't. Not for a long time. And as much as she craved his touch, she liked this pace, the anticipation. She wanted all of him, and her skin was on fire, waiting to see where he would touch her next.

“This is how I make love.” He leaned closer and rubbed his lips lightly over her forehead. “Why rush something that should be beautiful and passionate?”

Weak at the knees, Marlowe dug her fingers into his shoulders to hold on. They swayed as one to the music, but she was so focused on his lips, so hungry for him to kiss her, she barely noticed their middles pressed together.

No one had ever said anything like that to her. Not words like that. Marlowe knew on some intellectual level that sex was supposed to be beautiful and passionate, but she hadn't experienced that in her life. For her, it had been yet another way to act out against the rage, the pain, of losing her mother so young. And her act of rebellion had evolved into something fun, something pleasurable, but she still couldn't put her finger on a time when a man she was with actually made love to her.

Eyes locked with Cass', she licked her lips, noticing when his gaze dipped to watch her. She wasn't trying to be coy; she

was bone dry and hot, and desperate for a drink.

Or a kiss.

Unnerved when Cass' gaze lingered on her lips, Marlowe dragged her teeth over her bottom lip, and finally, she dragged her own gaze down over his face to look at his lips again. Would they be warm? Or cool? The perfect lines of his face made him look like a work of art, like stone or clay. And yet, pressed to him as she was, his body heat sinking into her, Marlowe imagined his lips, his mouth would be like hot silk.

Behind her, anyone in Rodey could approach the windows and peek in and watch her dancing with this stranger. And even though she knew the entire population of Rodey was probably tucked away in bed for the night, she didn't care if any or all of them were standing right outside.

Right now, nothing existed but the music. The tree across the room and the glow of the lights. And Cass' hands on her—one hand holding her chin, touching her lip in what felt like an explicit caress and the other hand in her hair. Cass looked her in the eye again and tipped his head just enough to almost touch her lips with his.

She felt the warmth of his breath on her skin just as he moved away. Shifting her a bit as they danced, Cass smoothed his hand down over her back and spread his fingers over her waist. Her belly quivered with his nearness, with the graze of his lips—this time touching the corner of her mouth soft, like a feather.

As much as she wanted to take his head in her hands and yank him in to devour him, Marlowe was learning his game. He might drive her crazy with kisses like this all night. If she were naked under him right now, he might edge her, make her beg. And somehow, she understood even without being in that position, it would feel that much more incredible if and when he did touch her.

Her panties wet now with her mind in bed with Cass, she wondered if he could feel the way her heart was pounding. Aware now of their bodies touching, of his erection pressing

into her, Marlowe's nipples tightened and chafed in her lace bra. Electric anticipation tingled in her fingertips and her belly.

His kiss was like a whisper, the press of his dry lips to hers so gentle. And yet, she felt it everywhere—low in the pit of her stomach, in her nipples, her fingers. He hovered there, his chin tucked, his lips so close to hers, almost touching.

When he moved, pressed her mouth again, she eased back and tipped her head up to look at him. Her low moan might have been approval. Maybe frustration. She felt both things. And so much more.

Another almost kiss, like children playing house—afraid, nervous, about that intimacy. But for Marlowe, it was anticipation that roared like flames in her belly and then exploded out of her and flared through her limbs.

When he finally settled his lips firmly over hers, she sighed—relief, pleasure, her thirst quenched. And still, he didn't hurry. Her skin sparked as he brushed his mouth over hers, the kisses simple, sweet, but certainly not chaste. Not with the heat, with the way her body vibrated with need and hope.

Marlowe played along, wondering, hoping, the cat and mouse kisses turned him on the same way. Was he aware of the dark windows behind her? Was he worrying about his buddies and the bachelor party he ducked out on? Or, like her, was he on a different plane of existence? She wouldn't say cloud nine, because there was nothing heavenly or celestial about how she was feeling right now.

Kissing him, this sober, intense stranger in her bar, was like robbing a bank. Marlowe had never done it, never considered it, and tomorrow, maybe she would think it was all a dream. But for now, she was ready to grab the gold and run.

Clearly in charge of the pace, of their dance moves—only their hips swayed a slight bit now—Cass kissed her harder, nudged her lips with his. Still sweet, curious kisses—as if he needed to press the center of her upper lip and then slide his own to the corner of her mouth and even graze his lips over her cheek.

The music around them was slow, romantic, as if Cass had ordered up a playlist of sexy holiday tunes. The Carpenters were more her parents', even her grandparents' speed, and yet kissing Cass to "Merry Christmas Darling" couldn't have been more fitting.

She drew in a deep breath, her nostrils flaring, when he dragged his teeth over her bottom lip. The scent of bergamot reminded her of the leather bomber jacket she had seen on his barstool. She imagined wearing it now with nothing. Just her skin and the cool leather and Cass' skin.

His breath smelled like whiskey, a scent Marlowe was familiar with and yet it was so new here tonight, on this beautiful stranger. She craved his kiss now to taste him, to sample Lockland and Wilderness Trail from his lips, his tongue.

She parted her lips, and finally, finally, Cass swept his tongue over her mouth. Marlowe dug her fingers deeper into his shoulders, that spark of anticipation burning in her knees now. Making her weak.

Swoon.

This beautiful man was making her swoon.

She smiled but quickly lost herself again, her lips parted under his. He stroked her tongue with his, first with depth and drama and then playfully. When he retreated, Marlowe nipped at him and then rubbed her tongue over the spots her teeth had captured.

He pulled away, tipped his head back to study her face. She fought the frantic need to throw herself at him, to wrap her legs around his waist and hold on. One kiss. Three songs. How many minutes had she lost to that one kiss?

How long would she ache for the next one?

What would she do tomorrow when she woke up without him? And if it wasn't tomorrow, it would be the next day. Cass—she didn't even know his last name—was only visiting. A Bourbon Trail tourist hanging out with his buddies. And yet,

for the last several moments, Marlowe had believed she was kissing the love of her life, her soulmate.

“I have never been so mesmerized by anyone.” His voice was still small and gruff, like it pained him to speak.

Marlowe quirked an eyebrow at him. “I thought the same thing earlier tonight when you were with your friends.”

Cass

“I DON’T DO THIS,” he said apologetically. Marlowe sighed softly and rested her cheek against his.

“You’re leaving.”

“Sunday.” He slid his arms around her and held her close. “I wish I could stay.”

“Me too.”

“Can I tell you something?”

Marlowe drew back to look him in the eye and nodded.

“I don’t do one-night stands.” He dragged his hands up over her sides, the curves of her breasts so tempting again. “I think they’re cheap. I think human connection should be worth more. You deserve more than that. And I do, too.”

A smile played at her lips. Cass wanted to kiss her again.

“No one has ever said anything like that to me in my life.”

“That’s just wrong,” he said quietly.

“It’s okay.” She shrugged, that smile finally taking control of her lips. “I do okay here in this little life.”

“You do.” He nodded. “I see that. It’s part of what attracted me to you.”

“Do you think you’ll ever come back to the Bourbon Trail?”

“Yes.”

“You said you’re not that into bourbon,” she reminded him.

Cass shook his head. “Still not. But I would like to come back for you.”

“Like you would come back, what? Every six months? And kiss me until I see stars? And then leave again?”

“You’re seeing stars?” he asked with a grin.

“I am.”

“I’m kind of seeing little birds with hearts for eyes.”

Marlowe laughed and rolled her eyes.

“I mean, I guess I could do that, but I was thinking...” He hesitated.

“What?” She scraped her short little nails up the back of his neck and into his hair. Cass shivered and closed his eyes.

“Would you do that again?”

“If you kiss me again.”

“I think we can do that,” he said with a smile.

“What, though?” she whispered. “What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know. Exactly.” He shrugged and grinned, worried now, that she would decide he was awkward, weird. “I just know that I’d like to see you again.”

“Yeah?”

“A lot more often than every six months.”

She stared at him silently for a moment. Cass held his breath until her lips perked up again in a little smile.

“Me, too.”

“I don’t know how you feel about...long distance...things. Friendship...dating...”

“I don’t, either, because I’ve never done it.”

“No?” He moved his hands again and rested them on her hips.

“I’d be willing to try it, though.”

“Let’s try it.” His words were almost a whisper. “I’m Cass Coulter, by the way.”

“Marlowe Dailey.”

“I wanna do all the things with you, Marlowe Dailey.”

“Like what?”

“Watch a sunset,” he suggested. “Pick a Christmas tree out and cut it down. Debate the best *Jack Reacher* actor. Buddy read *Alexander Hamilton*.”

Was it his imagination, or was Marlowe’s next breath shaky? Was she excited about the things they could do together or wishing he would get out of the bar so she could go home?

“I love that,” she said softly.

“Make love in front of a fireplace.” He lifted a hand and brushed his fingers over her face. “Sit with you in a bubble bath and drink wine while we listen to Zeppelin.”

“Zeppelin?”

Her grin did something to his heart, his gut. He took a deep breath to steady himself.

“Sinatra. Willie Nelson.” He shrugged. “Whatever you like.”

“I like you, Cass Coulter,” she said with a deep, hearty laugh. “I really like you. Where have you been all my life?”

“Maybe we were both becoming the best versions of ourselves to be who we were tonight when we met.”

“Maybe.” She nodded.

“I have one favor to ask of you.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Name it.”

“Please do not hang mistletoe anywhere in this bar.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “I’d like to be the only one kissing you.”

“Got it.” She nodded. “If my boss suggests, it, I’ll shoot ‘im down.”

“No need for violence.”

“You don’t have to leave right now, though, do you?”

“No.” Cass settled his hands on her hips again. “What about your son? Should you get home?”

“He’ll sleep until nine.”

“So, we can spend a few more hours dancing?”

“Yes.”

“And kissing.”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He nodded and tipped his head. Marlowe moved first, leaned in to kiss him but drew back with only her breath touching his lips.

“Merry Christmas.”

Her words were almost more of a thrill to him than her lips, still so close to his.

“Merry Christmas,” he said and kissed her firmly, giving her no chance to play any games. “I have the feeling it’s gonna be a great new year.”

THE END

About the Author

Tracy Broemmer is the author of several contemporary romance novels including *Shameless Santa (Welcome to Kissing Springs Book 7)*, *Plus One*, and the *Mississippi Queen Trilogy*. Tracy also writes women's fiction and is the author of the Williams Legacy series as well as several stand-alone titles.

Tracy's books have been called gripping, emotional, and timely, and readers describe her characters as real and relatable.

Tracy lives in Midwestern Illinois with her husband of 30 years. Visit her on the web and sign up for her newsletter at www.broemmerbooks.com

You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

Passionate Notes: A Holiday Affair

**USA Today Bestselling Author
Leanora Cowan**

Blurb

Briella Hayes is a nightclub singer who has always dreamed of getting a record deal. With her parents and older brother being the biggest supporters, they encouraged her to send her demo to different labels. While waiting for a reply, Briella continues to sing for her fans at Club Diamond and as the holidays approach, feelings of loneliness start to set in as she prepares for the club's anniversary party on Christmas Eve.

Grayson Mills has lived a glorious life as the owner of Club Diamond and six other clubs. From making artists famous to rubbing elbows with the rich and famous in the music industry, Grayson has become tired of the fast pace and wants to slow down and focus more on his family and friends.

Will Briella get the contract of her dreams, and will Grayson find the fulfillment he is searching for?

I

“GIRL, YOU DID YOUR THING TONIGHT!” Briella Hayes heard as she sat at the vanity in her dressing room at Club Diamond. Turning around, she found her best friends, Noelle Ward, and Samara Hart walking into the room.

“Thank you, ladies! What did you think of my new songs?” Briella asked as she stood up and hugged each of them.

“You know that you sing beautifully, and your fans love everything you release, ” Noelle said as she sat Briella’s glass of white wine on her vanity.

“She’s right! You could sing old Macdonald, and they would still love it,” Samara joked, causing the group of ladies to laugh.

“You are something else, but I appreciate the compliment. Are you ladies doing pretty good tonight in tips,” Briella asked as she looked at them in their black silk shirt and silver skirt uniform. All three ladies met when Briella came to an audition the club was having for their new singer. They had been best friends for over six years and had an unbreakable bond. Sharing the bond of being plus-size women and being around the same age with Briella and Noelle being thirty years old and Samara being thirty-one, sealed their friendship because with Briella being a size twenty and the other two ladies being a size twenty-two, they often went on shopping trips and bonded on the challenges of life together.

“It’s Friday night! Our best night to make tips plus the place is packed and everyone is ordering bottle service, ” Samara replied as she and Noelle took a seat on the gray suede sofa in the corner of the room.

Looking down at her emerald, green satin turndown collar plunging neck draped mini dress, “You’re right about that! I saw our regulars but also a lot of new customers too. Also, I’m glad I let you two talk me into buying this dress. It fits the occasion,” Briella said before taking a sip of her wine.

“You look beautiful, and your performance was magnificent. That color brings out the green in your eyes perfectly,” Noelle replied before finishing her wine.

“Thank you! I appreciate you saying that! Speaking of shopping, we must finish Christmas shopping this weekend,” Briella suggested as she refilled everyone’s glasses.

“You know I’m always ready to shop, plus I do have a few more gifts to buy,” Samara added before taking a sip of her wine.

“Would one of those gifts be for Gage Mills?” Noelle asked, causing Samara to choke on her drink, and causing the other ladies to laugh.

“For your information, I’m buying Gage, Grayson, Gabriel, and their mother, Gracelyn, a gift this year,” Samara replied with a smirk.

Smiling, “So you having a crush on Gage, has nothing to do with it?” Briella asked as she leaned back in her seat.

Shaking her head, “Would your crush on Grayson have anything to do with you buying them all a gift?” Samara asked with a smirk.

“She does have a point! You have had a crush on Grayson since the first day we started here. Why haven’t you said anything to him?” Noelle asked, causing Briella to sigh.

“We’ve talked about this! He is a handsome and successful businessman who owns an entertainment firm with seven nightclubs under it. He can have any woman he wants. Why

would he care that I have feelings for him?” Briella asked as her heart sank from the words she spoke.

“I understand where you are coming from because I feel the same way about Gage. He is the vice president of this company and is surrounded by beautiful women every day,” Samara added before downing the rest of her wine.

“Ladies, we are beautiful women too, and these guys would be lucky to date any of us,” Noelle stated as she refilled their glasses with the last of the wine in the bottle.

“So, that means you will finally talk to Gabriel?” Briella asked with a smirk.

“Since you asked, yes, I will be talking with Gabriel since we have a meeting coming up this week,” Noelle replied, causing the other ladies to smile.

“Let’s make an agreement! We all will use this holiday season to get over our fears and seize love and happiness with both hands,” Briella stated as she raised her glass in the air.

“Agreed!” The other ladies added before they all finished their drinks.

“I agree too!” A male voice added, causing the ladies to look toward the door to see Grayson Mills standing there dressed in a black tailored suit with a royal blue silk tie.

Clearing her throat, “Grayson, how long have you been standing there?” Briella asked as she placed her empty glass on the vanity table.

Shutting the door behind him and walking further into the room, “Not long actually, but now that I see you ladies response to my presence, I wish I had come a little earlier,” he replied smiling.

Seeing his smile and smelling his intoxicating cologne, had Briella’s heart racing.

“You didn’t miss much, just some girl talk!” Noelle replied as she and Samara stood up to leave.

“She’s right! We were discussing Christmas shopping and setting up a day to go,” Samara added as she collected the

empty glasses and bottle.

“Don’t even bring up Christmas shopping! I haven’t even started,” Grayson stated while shaking his head.

Walking toward the door, “Maybe Briella can help you with your shopping, she is a pro,” Noelle suggested, causing Briella to look at her wide-eyed.

“She’s right! Briella helps us every year with our shopping,” Samara added just before they walked out the door.

Once the door was closed, “Will you help me?” Grayson asked, causing Briella’s breath to hitch.

Clearing her throat, “Of course, I’ll help you! What are friends for?”

“Let’s say we meet at the mall tomorrow around two p.m.?” He asked, smiling, causing butterflies to flutter in her stomach.

Clearing her throat, “Sure, I’m free tomorrow,” she replied, causing his smile to brighten.

“Now that we’ve settled that! The real reason I came to see you was to congratulate you on a great performance and to also invite you to my private cabana to have dinner with me and my family. My mom is here, and she is excited to finally meet you,” Grayson suggested.

Smiling, “I would be honored to meet your mother. She is one of my favorite clothing designers,” Briella replied as she looked at her reflection in the mirror.

“You look beautiful as usual, so come on,” he stated as he grabbed her hand and started to lead her toward the door.

The moment his hand touched hers, she felt a surge of electricity that was indescribable. It was as if her body came alive with need, and he was the key to the satisfaction she needed.

Taking a deep breath as he ushered her out the door, she prayed she could compose herself in front of his family. The feelings he had ignited in her were overpowering and new to her.

2

WALKING side by side with Grayson as they carried their shopping bags full of gifts, Briella looked over at Grayson to find him watching her, “Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked with a frown.

“I’m just trying to figure out why it took so long for us to spend time together, outside of the club. We have been friends for years, but never spent time together to get to know each other,” he replied as he took the shopping bags from her.

“You have always been a great friend to me and I cherish our friendship. Plus, you are a busy man who is always traveling and in business meetings all day,” she replied as she looked over at him as they approached an empty bench.

Setting their bags on the ground and taking a seat beside Briella, “Friends! It’s interesting you use that word when you have feelings for me,” he replied with a smirk while causing her to gasp.

Wide-eyed, “You heard our conversation last night, didn’t you?” She asked as she stood up to put some distance between them.

“I didn’t hear the whole conversation but, when I was about to knock on the door, I heard my brothers’ names, then mine, I wanted to hear the rest. To my surprise, I heard you have feelings for me and I don’t know why you never told me,” he replied as he also stood up.

Shaking her head as she tried to get her racing thoughts under control, “I didn’t tell you because it wouldn’t make a

difference. You have your busy world full of glitz and glamor and I have mine as a singer in a nightclub trying to make it in the music industry,” she replied causing him to frown as he stood toe to toe with her.

“Briella, you are an amazing woman and an amazing singer. Any music label would be nuts not to sign you, and it will happen sooner than you think. As for me being busy and the glitz and glamor, that’s not me. You know I would rather spend time with my family and friends than be at some big party,” he replied as she sighed and returned to her seat.

“You’re right! I do know that but I also know it comes with your business and I wasn’t sure if even bringing up my feelings would matter, because I don’t fit in that world,” she stated as she looked at him as he sat beside her.

“How about we start building our friendship on a personal level and see what happens? We get to see each other outside the club and that whole environment and get to know each other,” he asked as he put his hand over hers in her lap.

Taking a deep breath, and looking into his hypnotizing hazel eyes, “I’m open to that as long as you make me some of that chicken alfredo, I’ve heard so much about,” she joked causing him to laugh.

“Deal! How about we have dinner at my place this Friday, and I’ll cook your chicken alfredo?” He asked, causing butterflies to flutter in her stomach.

“It’s a date!” She replied, instantly regretting her words until his smile brightened and he squeezed her hand.

“It’s a date! Now, let’s finish shopping so we can grab something to eat. I’m starving,” he joked causing her to laugh as he stood up and pulled her up from her seat.

“I’m hungry myself! Let’s go!” She replied as they stood toe to toe.

“There’s something we have to do first,” he stated as he looked into her eyes with such intensity that her breath hitched.

“What’s that?” She asked with a frown.

“This!” He replied, seconds before pulling her into his arms and pressing his lips against hers.

The moment their lips touched; Briella’s body ignited into flames. All the pent-up desire from years of wanting to kiss him was released the moment they kissed. Feeling his arms wrapped around her as their kiss deepened, she never wanted the moment to end. Then all too soon, he pulled back and looked into her eyes, “That was well worth the wait,” he gasped as he put his forehead against hers.

“What are you talking about?” She asked as she wiped her plum lipstick from his lips.

“I have a confession to make!” He replied before he kissed her hand.

Frowning, “What’s that?” She asked.

“I have to admit that I’ve had feelings for you since the first day we met at your audition. Your voice and mere presence drew me to you, then when I really got to know you and found out how down to earth you are, I was hooked,” he confessed bringing a smile to her lips.

“Since we are being honest, the first day I met you, I was hooked too. The way you walk in a room and command everyone’s attention and the kind way you treat others drew me to you. Let’s not forget that you are sexy and very handsome,” she stated causing him to smile.

“Let’s go before I kiss you again because I’m not sure if I’ll be able to stop,” he whispered as he pulled her back into his arms.

“I think everyone got an eye full earlier. Let’s save some for later,” she joked, causing him to chuckle as she stepped back from him.

“As much as I want to kiss you again, I can be patient,” he replied as he stepped back too and started to pick up their bags, giving her a great view of his bottom that looked great in his blue jeans.

When he turned around, he smirked, “Enjoy the view?” He asked, causing her to shake her head as a blush rose to her

cheeks.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” she replied as she started walking away causing him to laugh as he walked behind her.

“Sure you don’t!” He stated as he caught up with her and bumped shoulders with her.

Shaking her head as she smiled at him, Briella tried to process everything that had happened and she still couldn’t believe she had just kissed her boss and long-time friend.

3

“GAGE, CAN’T BE THAT BAD!” Briella exclaimed from her seat on the black leather sofa in Grayson’s living room, which was decorated with shades of brown accessories and black furniture.

“Trust me! Gage comes across as all about business, but he loves to play pranks on his family and friends. He has a great sense of humor and being the middle child, he goes overboard sometimes,” Grayson replied as he refilled their wine glasses with red wine from his seat next to her.

“From what Samara tells me, he does have a great sense of humor, I just didn’t know about the pranks,” Briella stated before taking a sip of her wine.

“Gage is the prankster of the family but is very dedicated to his family, friends, and our business. Speaking of Samara and Gage, is she going to tell him how she feels?” He asked causing Briella to smile.

“To be honest, I’m not sure! She cares about him,” she replied.

Smiling, “Well, I did a little digging and after talking with my brothers about your friends just to see if there is any interest, I found out they are interested in your friends too,” he said as he laced his fingers with hers.

“Well, hopefully, they will work everything out like we did,” she suggested as she enjoyed his skin against hers.

“They seem very interested and hopefully they make a move to get to know each other,” he added as he looked into

her eyes with such intensity.

“I hope so too! Noelle has always wanted to tell Gabriel about her feelings but the timing was never right,” she said as her heart started to race and wicked thoughts started to invade her mind.

“Gabriel is the free spirit of the bunch. He loves protecting everyone’s rights and he loves doing everything he can to help our environment, which is why he became a lawyer. He is our lead attorney at the firm but also does free work for local businesses and the local community programs. He is more like our mom when it comes to staying connected to the community,” Grayson revealed before taking a sip of his wine.

“Speaking of your mom, she is amazing! She has the warmest presence and she is so talented. My mom is trying to order one of her gowns for the club’s anniversary party on Christmas Eve but the one she wanted is sold out everywhere,” Briella said as she found it hard to look away from his hypnotic gaze.

“I’m so proud of my mom! When my dad was killed in a car accident with a drunk driver, she made it her mission to make sure we were taken care of. Then as her career as a fashion designer took off, we were able to see parts of the world we never knew about. She is our hero and we couldn’t ask for a better mom,” he replied his eyes softened as he spoke.

Squeezing his hand, “I’m sorry to hear about your father! How long ago was the accident?” She asked as she placed her glass on the glass coffee table.

“It was a long time ago! I was nine years old when he was killed and I’m thirty-one now. My mom was left with three little boys to raise, but luckily the settlement from the accident was enough to take care of us for a long time. It turned out to be the governor’s son that killed my dad and they wanted to keep it out of the media as much as possible. Mom, took the money and made some very lucrative investments and she started her design house,” he replied as he started to caress the back of her hand with his thumb.

“Sounds like a smart woman, who has been through a lot and still came out on top,” she stated as she turned in her seat to face him.

“She is! She taught us everything we know about running a business and she even started trust funds for each of us, and when we each became 21, we could use the money as we saw fit. I opened my first club with some of mine and just built an empire from there. I still have money in the trust fund that hasn’t been touched,” Grayson confessed causing her eyes to widen.

“That’s amazing! You guys are a true testament that hard work does pay off,” she exclaimed causing him to smile.

“We are doing all right! Your family is just as successful. Both your parents are successful entertainment lawyers and your brother owns one of the top fitness center chains in Los Angeles. Let’s not forget that you have the most beautiful voices I’ve ever heard and I can’t wait for everyone to hear it,” he stated as he looked into her eyes.

“You’re right about my family and I’m so proud of them. As for my voice, I enjoy singing at your club and meeting fans who love my music. With my family’s encouragement, I’ve submitted my demos to a few labels, but I haven’t heard anything back,” she confessed as her heart ached from the disappointment of being ignored for so long by record labels. Needing some space, Briella stood up and walked over to the window to get her thoughts together as she tried to hide the tears flooding her eyes.

Coming to stand beside her and lifting her chin with his hand, “Your time is coming sooner than you think! You have an amazing voice and you have a great stage presence. Let’s not forget the great music that you write. You will make it big in the music industry,” he suggested as he wiped the tear from her cheek.

Trying to smile through her tears, “Thank you for saying that it means a lot. Deep down, I know that I must be patient and everything will work out,” she said as she looked into his eyes and she couldn’t look away if she tried.

It was as if he was looking into her soul and seeing all her innermost secrets. The pull he had over her was overwhelming and she wasn't sure if she should give in to her erotic urges or fight them. Just being that close to him and smelling his cologne was wreaking havoc on her senses.

Lost in her thoughts, Briella didn't realize Grayson was going to kiss her until his lips touched hers. The mere touch of his lips against hers was erotic and her desire flamed out of control.

His taste was addictive, and Briella felt she couldn't get enough of him as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. The feel of his velvet tongue caressing hers was almost her undoing. Being in his arms at that moment was better than all the dreams she had experienced over the years she had known him. As he started to caress her back, Briella released a moan as shockwaves went straight to her womanhood.

Deepening their kiss, Briella gasped when she felt him lift her onto the edge of the bar before he moved between her legs. Pressing her body closer to him, her hands caressed his back earning her a groan from him as he nibbled at her bottom lip. She could feel his desire radiating from his body, causing her to moan as his rigid member which was concealed by his jeans pressed against her center.

Slowly, she eased her hands down his chest, loving the hardness of his muscles as they flexed under her touch. When she reached the hem of his shirt, she quickly lifted it over his head, revealing the mouthwatering view of his perfectly sculpted abs that had her panting. Pulling him back to her, Briella felt him slowly pull down the spaghetti straps of her top, revealing her red lace bra. He groaned at the sight before him before he began placing love bites on her shoulder as he pulled her bra straps down and skillfully unfastened her bra.

When he tossed her bra onto the floor, Brielle let her head fall back, as she pushed her aching breasts into his hands. With the electric current flowing through her body, Briella felt delirious with need, and it intensified when his hot mouth latched onto her hard and sensitive nipple. She arched her back

as she put her hands into his silky dreads and pulled his head closer to her breasts.

Continuing to nibble on her nipples, Briella realized his hands were slowly easing her long hobo skirt up her legs when the cool air in the room hit her hot skin causing her to sigh.

“Please Grayson!” she moaned as his hand glided closer to her aching womanhood and earned a groan from him before he kissed her with so much passion, she became breathless. Briella had to fight the urge to squeeze her legs together as the aching intensified and he seemed to be going at his own pace.

Pulling back from his juicy lips and looking into his passion-filled eyes as she gasped for air, Briella slowly ran her hands down his chest and abs before she came to the edge of his jeans. Deciding to have a little fun, as she continued to look into his eyes, she slowly let her hand glide down over his hard member that was perfectly outlined in his jeans.

She earned a groan from him as he gripped her thighs, and he stepped closer to her, opening her legs wider. Still looking into Grayson’s eyes that seemed to narrow at her, she slowly ran her hand back up over his member causing his member to twitch. She enjoyed the feel of his rigid member and the material of the jeans against her skin.

Licking her lips, she slowly unfastened his jeans as she saw the fire in his eyes blaze out of control like a wildfire as his hands caressed her thighs causing her to moan. While pulling the zipper down, and hearing that sound, it sent an electric current through her body, causing her to squeeze her legs around him. Needing to touch him, Briella slowly pushed his jeans and boxers down his legs, causing his member to be released from its confine. Wrapping her hand around his hard and long member, Briella couldn’t resist licking her lips as she thought about all the pleasure they were about to experience.

Grayson must have read her mind, as his hand slid between her legs and his lips descended on hers causing her to moan. The force of his lips pressed against hers as his tongue opened her lips and met hers, Briella was almost at her breaking point as her pleasure and need for more intensified. she wrapped

Excitement overcame Briella, as her legs around his hips as his hand moved her red lace panties aside and started to manipulate her sensitive folds causing her to gasp.

As their kiss became wild and exotic, her need to have him inside of her was driving her insane. Getting the message, Grayson pulled her closer to the edge of the table with her legs over his arms. Slowly rubbing his member against her center, earned him a moan from her as a quiver rocked her entire body. When he slowly entered her opening, they both groaned, as Briella closed her eyes. Her womanhood started pulsating uncontrollably, causing her to throw her head back and scream out his name over and over.

Between the mesmerizing feel of his hard member going in and out of her and the magical feel of his fingers as they massaged her extremely sensitive clit, Briella thought her body was going to short-circuit. When Grayson's pace started to pick up, Briella held onto his strong shoulders as she started to match his thrust with her own causing them both to cry out. With the pulsing of her womanhood and the pressure building in her core, Briella needed more. She deepened their kiss as her hands threaded through his dreads.

"Grayson!" she screamed as she free-fell over her orgasmic cliff, causing her gasp to tighten on his shoulders as he continued to pound into her.

Shockwaves racing through her body, Grayson continued his assault on her senses as he applied more pressure to her clit, causing her to scream as she threw her head back again.

"That's it, baby! Let go and enjoy every minute" he whispered as he grabbed both of her butt cheeks and pulled her to him as his pace increased.

As the pressure started to build again, Briella didn't know how much more pleasure she could take. Meeting his thrusts and losing all her restraints, Briella let her body enjoy all the sensations flowing through her just as she heard him release a loud groan and his body stiffened. Still thrusting down on his member, Briella felt her release crashing down on her, causing her to scream. Feeling him slowly moving inside of her,

Briella realized that her dreams couldn't compare to the real thing.

Gasping for air, "Damn!" she whispered as he gently pulled out of her and pulled his boxers and jeans up.

Looking into her eyes, "My thoughts exactly," he whispered before he kissed her slowly causing her to moan.

Pulling back and looking up into his intense hazel eyes, Briella knew the wait was worth it and she was determined to experience more. Then she pulled him to her with her legs wrapped around his waist and her hands running through his dreads.

"Do you think you are up to exploring where the night could take us?" she asked as she started to kiss his chest.

"I'm definitely up to the challenge," Grayson replied as he grabbed both hands full of her rear end and picked her up, causing her to gasp.

4

YOU DID A GREAT JOB TONIGHT!” Grayson exclaimed as he walked into her dressing room.

Turning around from her vanity mirror after refreshing her makeup, “Thank you! I hoped everyone loved my new songs,” Briella stated before she stood up.

Pulling her into his arms, “Everyone loved your songs and they can’t wait to hear more,” he replied before kissing her.

The feeling of his lips against hers made her weak at the knees and she was glad he was holding her. Being in his strong and muscular arms made her feel safe and cared for. Before the kiss could get out of hand, they heard a knock at the door.

Smiling up at him when he groaned and looked at the door, “Come in,” she stated as she wiped her plum lipstick off his lips.

When the door opened, they saw her parents and her brother, followed by Grayson’s mother and two brothers.

“Hey guys!” She greeted them as she went to hug everyone.

“Hey, sweetie! We just wanted to come to congratulate you on a great performance,” her mom, Camila Hayes said as she hugged Briella.

“Your mom is right! You were amazing Briella,” Grayson’s mom, Gracelyn Mills added as she also hugged Briella.

“Thank you both! I appreciate you all for coming tonight,” Briella stated as she stepped back into Grayson’s arms causing the group to raise an eyebrow as they looked at the couple.

“Is there something you two want to tell us,” Gage asked as he looked over at Gabriel and Briella’s brother, Brian.

“If you must know, we have talked and decided to be an exclusive couple,” Briella replied before looking up at Grayson, who smiled at her and then kissed her forehead before looking at their family.

“We hope that you all can be happy for us,” Grayson added.

“What took you so long?” Briella’s dad, Hamilton Hays asked, causing Briella to smile at her dad.

“We all been wondering how long it was going to take for you two to wake up and admit your feelings for each other,” Brian added smiling, which caused everyone to nod their heads.

“They do have a point! Your brothers and I had a bet going on how much longer it would go on before you two woke up,” Gracelyn joked causing the group to laugh.

“Mom has a point bro! Anyone could see you two had feelings for each other,” Gage stated causing Grayson and Briella to smirk at him.

“Is that so? Since you could see our attraction for each other, but you can’t see that Samara is attracted to you. And Gabriel can’t see that Noelle is attracted to him,” Grayson asked as his mom looked at Gage and Gabriel with smirks.

“You need to open your eyes too! Those ladies are beautiful and smart. You better act now before another guy comes along,” she warned causing them to frown.

“I’ve been saying the same thing to my son, about that pretty assistant he has. I think her name is Nicole. She’s single and has had the hots for Brian for years. She’s smart and has her own projects she is trying to get off the ground,” Camila stated.

“Since nobody is going to make introductions, I’m Gracelyn Mills and of course, you already know my sons, Grayson, Gage, and Gabriel,” Gracelyn stated as she stepped forward and hugged Camila before shaking Hamilton’s hand.

“I think our kids forgot their manners, but we are well aware of who you are. I have a closet full of your clothes,” Camila replied.

“I can attest to that! Our credit cards are still crying from her last shopping trip,” Hamilton joked causing the group to laugh.

“Thank you for your support! Since you love my designs, I would love for us to get together before I head back to New York City, so you can see my summer collection,” Gracelyn suggested causing Camila’s smile to brighten and Hamilton groaned, earning an elbow to the ribs by his wife. The group laughed at his reaction.

“My credit cards are hurting already,” Hamilton mumbled causing the group to laugh.

“Let’s go grab dinner and drinks in our private cabana,” Grayson suggested as he looked down at Briella and then over at their families.

“That’s a perfect idea! I’m starving,” Gage replied.

As they followed Gage to the door, “Dude, you are always hungry,” Gabriel joked causing the group to chuckle.

Walking down the hallway, “I can’t help I’m a growing boy,” Gage replied smiling.

As the two brothers continued to tease each other Briella couldn’t help the smile that lit up her face. She was happy to see that their families were so much alike and they seemed to get along together.



Later that night, laying in each other’s arms, “Tonight was amazing,” Briella whispered as she basked in the aftermath of

their lovemaking.

“Tonight is just getting started,” Grayson joked causing her to hit his stomach as her head rested on her chest.

“I’m talking about the great time we had with our families tonight,” she replied.

“It was a great night, and it was just the beginning for us all,” he stated before he lifted her chin so they were eye to eye. “Tonight, also helped me realize how much you mean to me and I don’t want to waste any more time. I love you Briella Hays with everything in me,” he confessed causing tears to flood her eyes.

Wiping her cheek and smiling up at him, “I love you too Grayson Mills,” Briella exclaimed before she slowly closed the distance between them and pressed her lips onto his. The moment their lips touched, something inside her was released and she felt free to explore the love and passion she had held inside for so long.

Deepening the kiss, and as their tongues caressed, Briella felt that all her fantasies were about to come true. As her anticipation rose, she climbed onto his lap, while placing her hands on the bed on each side of his head as she leaned to look down at him smiling before she started kissing his lips and moving down to his neck and chest. Hearing his moan and feeling his grip on her hips tighten sent shockwaves to her core.

Then sitting back on Grayson’s lap, Briella slowly raised her silk nightgown over her head, and feeling the silk run over her hot skin sent a shiver down her spine.

Then tossed the gown on the floor and looked into his eyes, “Do you want to have some fun?” she asked as she placed her hands on his chest and started to caress and pinch his nipples. As the room filled with his moans, Briella could feel his rigid member rubbing against her womanhood as her juices started to flow and her womanhood started to throb while looking into his hypnotic hazel eyes. Briella slowly started to grind her mound against his member, causing him to groan deep in his throat as he closed his eyes.

“I want you more than you will ever know,” he growled as he opened his eyes. Grayson reached up with one hand around her neck, and pulled her head down, before smashing his lips into hers causing Briella to moan.

Feeling the yearning that he was holding in, Briella pledged to unleash his and her wildest desires. As their lips caressed, Grayson grabbed her butt in both hands and pulled her closer to his member as he started to grind harder against her. That contact ignited flames inside of her that she had never experienced before, and she was going to enjoy every second of it.

She loved the feel of his strong and muscular body, but she needed more, so she reached between them and released his hard manhood from his boxer briefs, earning her another groan. As her hands ran up and down his rigid manhood, she tried to memorize its texture and warmth to her memory. As his member became harder and longer right before her eyes, Briella became nervous because of his large size and hardness.

Her womanhood started demanding its much-needed attention as it throbbed and her juices continued to flow, so lifting on her knees, Briella aimed the tip of Grayson’s large, rock-hard member at her eager opening as his hands tightened their hold on her hips.

Grayson must have become impatient, because he thrust upward as she came downward, making them both cry out. Briella cried out as she felt an electric current flow through her from her head to her toes. Her womanhood felt so full, and he seemed to be touching sensitive spots inside of her that she didn’t even know existed. It was as if she had finally released all the doubt and stress of everyday life and had finally experienced true bliss. Then looking into Grayson’s eyes, Briella started a slow rhythm of going up and down as he caressed both of her sensitive breasts in his large strong hands.

To her surprise, Grayson pulled her nipples into his hot mouth, as he started to guide her movement by moving her hips up and down with his hands. The heat from his mouth sent a shiver down her spine to her sensitive clit causing her to throw her head back and release a string of moans. The more

she ground her rear end down on his pelvis and the harder he sucked on her nipples, the stronger the pressure built in her core until it was almost paralyzing.

“Damn, you feel so damn good,” Grayson moaned as she felt her womanhood clamp down on him, and the pressure exploded within her.

Briella released a toe-curling scream, as she saw flickers of lights before her eyes. Riding the wave of ecstasy, Grayson grabbed her hips again and started to hammer into her as his release exploded, and his body became rigid as a board. When his body relaxed back on the bed, Briella sat back on his lap as they both tried to catch their breath. They continued to look into each other’s eyes as if they were in a trance. When they were able to breathe comfortably, he pulled her into his arms and he started to rub his hands up and down her back causing her to moan.

“You are so beautiful and I love you so much,” Grayson confessed as he kissed her forehead.

“Thank you for the compliment! You are the sexiest man I’ve ever seen and I love you too,” she replied as she started to run her fingernail over his nipple, making it harden.

“If you don’t stop, we will never get any sleep tonight,” Grayson warned as she felt his manhood twitch inside of her.

“Is that a promise?” Briella moaned as she started to rotate her hips causing his manhood to become hard as a diamond again.

“There’s only one way to find out,” he replied as he flipped her over onto her back and thrust his member inside her so deep that she felt she was free falling into a sea of ecstasy.

5

“So, are we still on for dinner tonight?” Briella asked as she walked into Grayson’s office, and the scene before her caused her to pause.

Standing in front of his desk was Grayson and his ex, Tianna Harris, who happened to be a world-known fashion model, kissing. They quickly pulled apart when they heard her voice.

Seeing the scene before her caused her heart to ache. It felt like she couldn’t breathe, and all she wanted to do was run. Not able to stand there any longer, Briella turned to leave, when she felt his hand touch her arm.

Jerking her arm from his grasp and taking a step back from him “I see you already have plans,” she exclaimed as her heart pounded in her chest and her breath became labored.

Grayson started to walk toward her again but she stepped back causing him to pause, “Briella, it’s not what it looks like! Please let me explain,” Grayson pleaded as he tried to step closer to her, but Briella stepped back again.

“Grayson, why are you pleading with this woman? She is beneath us,” Tianna stated causing Grayson to turn and look at her with a hard gaze that would frighten anyone.

“Don’t you ever talk about her like that ever again,” Grayson yelled causing both ladies to jump.

Shaking her head, “Neither of you have to worry about me! Have a nice life together,” Briella stated before she turned

to leave, but just as she reached the door, she felt him grab her arm again.

Jerking her arm out of his grasp again, “Do not touch me ever again, Mr. Mills,” Briella yelled and then walked out of his office.

She could hear him calling her name, but at that moment, she didn't have the patience to hear his excuses.

Walking into her dressing room with tears flooding her vision, she quickly grabbed her coat off the coat tree by the door and then grabbed her purse out of the drawer of her vanity table. While wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand, Briella raced out of the club, being careful not to be seen in such a state and got into her car and drove away. As she drove, Briella's thoughts were going all over the place. She couldn't understand why Grayson would hurt her that way. As her thoughts continued to race, she heard her cell phone ring, and her first impulse was to ignore the call until she saw that it was Noelle calling, “Hello!” she greeted.

“Hey girl, are you up for some drinks and gossip?” Noelle asked.

“The way I'm feeling right now, I need a lot of drinks,” Briella grumbled.

“Are you ok?” Noelle asked, causing her tears to fall more.

“I'll be better after a few drinks,” Briella replied as she wiped her cheek with her hand.

“Let's meet at my place in an hour and then we can talk about everything?” Noelle suggested as Briella took a deep breath.

“Sounds great! See you in an hour,” Briella replied before ending the call.

Driving through the busy streets of Los Angeles, all Briella kept thinking about was the kiss she walked in on between Grayson and his ex-girlfriend. She thought about the pain she felt seeing them together. It felt as if her heart was being ripped into two pieces. Briella never imagined Grayson would've betrayed her in such a manner. Then thinking about

all the time they had known each other and how close they had become in the past few months, Briella realized that maybe they had rushed things too fast. Maybe she didn't know him as well as she thought. Pulling into the parking lot of her favorite winery, "I guess we are going to need a lot of wine tonight," she mumbled as she parked her SUV and grabbed her purse.

Walking into the winery, Briella's thoughts were so scattered that she was starting to get a headache. Taking a deep breath, "Tonight is all about girls' night," she thought, but she couldn't fight the nausea that hit her causing her to rush to the restroom.

Ringling Noelle's doorbell, Briella was shocked when her mother opened the door, "Hey mom!" Briella greeted her as they shared a hug.

"Hey sweetie," Camila replied as they pulled apart and entered the foyer before closing the door behind them.

"I didn't know you were going to be here," Briella stated as she hung up her coat on the gold coat tree standing next to the door.

"Gracelyn, Noelle, Samara, and I had lunch together today and we didn't want to end the day, so we decided to have a girls' night. Plus, you've been so busy with your music and rehearsals, we thought you could use a break," Camila replied as they headed into the living room to join the rest of the group.

"Hey, ladies!" Briella greeted, as the other three ladies stood up to hug her.

"Hey sweetie, you look beautiful as usual," Gracelyn stated as she hugged Briella.

"Thank you for the compliment! You look beautiful as usual too," Briella replied as they pulled apart.

After hugging her best friends, everyone sat down on the navy-blue suede sofa and Noelle passed her a glass of white

wine. As soon as Briella took a sip, her nausea returned tenfold causing her to rush to the restroom.

Minutes later after getting herself together, and returning to her seat, “Baby, are you ok?” Camila asked as she passed Briella a bottle of water.

“I’ve been getting nauseated a lot the past few days. It’s probably a stomach bug or something,” Briella said before taking a sip of her water as she watched her mother and Gracelyn share a look.

“Ok, you two! What’s with the looks and smirks?” Briella asked before drinking more of her water.

“They are probably thinking the same thing we are thinking,” Noelle replied smiling before taking a sip of her wine.

“And what would that be?” Briella asked as she started to feel butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

“Let me ask this first! Is your period late this month? Has your breast become sensitive and you’ve been feeling tired a lot?” Camila asked before she took a sip of her wine.

Frowning as she thought about the last few days, her eyes widened as the pieces started to fall into place, “I can’t be pregnant,” she replied as tears flooded her eyes.

“There’s only one sure way to find out. I’ll run down to the local pharmacy and grab a few tests,” Samara suggested as she started to stand up.

“That won’t be necessary, I have a few here,” Noelle replied causing the ladies to look at her wide-eyed. “What can I say, I want to be prepared,” Noelle continued causing the group to shake their heads.

“There’s no way I’m pregnant! Plus, after what happened today, Grayson and I are over,” Briella revealed as her tears took over and she fell into her mother’s arms.

As Camila hugged her, Gracelyn rubbed her back and handed her some tissue from the coffee table.

Taking a deep breath and wiping Briella's cheeks, "Why don't we handle one thing at a time? Let's take the test, and then we can discuss what happened between you and Grayson?" Samara suggested.

"That sounds like a great idea. Noelle, show Briella where the tests are, while we wait here," Camila suggested as she and Gracelyn helped Briella stand up.

"Come on, you can use my master bathroom," Noelle suggested, as she laced her arm around Briella's and they headed down the hall.

As they walked down the hallway, Briella couldn't come to grips with the way her life was spinning out of control. First, she was dating the man of her dreams, then she caught that same man kissing his ex-girlfriend, and then she had to deal with the possibility that she was pregnant.

Shaking her head, she realized that they had entered the master bedroom that Noelle had decorated in neutral colors with splashes of turquoise and red here and there.

"Here are the three tests I have, take them and then wait a few minutes. We will wait with you," Noelle suggested before she hugged Briella, who hugged her back before wiping her cheek.

"Thank you both for always having my back," Briella replied as she wiped her cheek again.

"We're more than friends, we are sisters," Samara stated as she hugged Briella.

Pulling apart, "Here goes nothing," Briella said before going into the bathroom and shutting the door behind her.

6

SITTING at her vanity table after being away from the club for a few weeks to give her some space away from Grayson, Briella tried to focus on getting ready for her performance and not on the fact that her life was falling apart right before her eyes. It was Christmas Eve, and the club was hosting a big party to celebrate the holidays and their tenth anniversary.

She had been ignoring Grayson's calls and deleting his voicemails without even listening to the message. She knew there was a chance she would see him that night, but she would avoid him if she could. She couldn't forget the pain she felt when she saw him kissing another woman. Granted she wasn't insecure about being plus size, because she loved her curves, but when she compared herself to a tall and slim supermodel, Briella couldn't help but feel some doubts.

Looking at herself in the mirror, as she added a little blush to her cheeks, Briella realized that she didn't know what tomorrow had in store for her, but that night was meant to be a celebration and she was going to do just that.

Taking one last look at herself, Briella stood up and as soon as she did, the room started to spin. As the room started to go black, she saw Grayson's face looking down at her as he kept calling her name.

Opening her eyes, Briella felt disoriented and didn't understand why she was lying down. Looking around the

room, she realized she was still in her dressing room, and Grayson was pacing back and forth while her family and his were talking.

“Grayson!” she whispered, causing everyone in the room to look at her.

“Thank God you are awake,” Grayson exclaimed as he sat down in the chair placed next to her and grabbed her hand.

Frowning, “What happened?” Briella asked as she tried to sit up, and Grayson was quick to assist her.

“When you didn’t come out on stage on time, we became worried, so Noelle and I came to check on you,” Samara replied as she wiped a tear from her cheek, while Gage put an arm around her and offered her his handkerchief.

“When we opened the door, you were lying on the floor, passed out. So, I rushed to find Grayson, who was in his office and we came back here. He placed you on the sofa and made sure you didn’t have any injuries, and then he called Heather to come check you out. Then I found your family in the audience and told them what was happening while Heather was checking you out,” Noelle added as a tear glided down her cheek. Gabriel hugged her to his side and wiped her other cheek with his hand.

Heather Jenkins was the physician that Grayson kept on standby at the club for emergencies.

“I’m sorry I put you all through that!” Briella replied as she took the bottle of water that her mother had offered her.

“Heather said you were dehydrated and need to rest,” Camila stated as she frowned at her daughter.

“Briella, you must take care of yourself and our grandbaby,” Hamilton said causing everyone in the room to pause.

Grayson looked at her frowning as her heart rate started to accelerate.

“Why don’t we let these two talk? Then we can celebrate the new addition to the family,” Camila suggested as she

started to lead Hamilton and Brian out of the room.

“I agree, Camila! Let the love birds talk first and when Briella feels up to it, they will find us in the cabana,” Gracely added as she led Gage, Gabriel, Noelle, and Samara out of the room.

Taking a deep breath when the door closed behind their family, leaned her head back on the sofa as she tried to get her thoughts together.

“Is it true that you are pregnant?” Grayson asked as he sat on the sofa next to her and gently grabbed her hand.

Pulling her hand back and looking at him, “Yes, I am, but you don’t have to worry about us. You can move on with Tianna and have a nice life,” Briella replied before she went to stand up and the room started to spin again.

Quickly rushing to her aid, Grayson helped her back down to the sofa, “There is no Tianna and me! There never was, and if you would just listen to me, then you would know that too,” He replied as he returned to his seat beside her on the sofa.

Looking at him, “Would you listen to me if you walked in here and found me kissing my ex-boyfriend?” Briella asked as her heart ached. Just looking at him and being so close to him reminded her of the great times they spent together.

Taking a deep breath, “I know seeing that hurt you a lot, but you must believe me when I say that she kissed me and we are not together. Tianna wanted to see if we could give it another chance and I turned it down. When she went to leave, I hugged her and she kissed me and before I could react, you walked in. It was nothing more than that. I would never hurt you like that ever,” he pleaded as he reached for her hand again.

As he pleaded his case, she replayed the scene in his office in her mind. If she hadn’t jumped to conclusions, she would have noticed his hands were at his side and he wasn’t kissing her back.

Taking a deep breath, “Grayson, seeing you with your ex hurt me, but I’m sorry I didn’t give you a chance to explain,”

She stated as looked down at their hands.

“You have nothing to apologize for! I need you to understand that I love you with everything in me and I will never hurt. I’m sorry you had to go through all this,” Grayson exclaimed before kissing the back of her hand.

Slowly sitting up in her seat, “I accept your apology and I love you too.” She confessed as a tear rolled down her cheek.

Wiping her cheek with his thumb, “Thank you for being such an amazing woman. Now, tell me about the baby,” Grayson suggested as a smile lit up his face.

Thinking about their baby, brought a smile to her face.

“There isn’t much to tell! I took a few tests at Noelle’s the day I walked into your office after being nauseated and they all came back positive. Our mothers were there with us for girls’ night and they convinced me to call my doctor and schedule a few tests. Dr. West confirmed that I’m 2 months pregnant,” Brielle stated as she reached for the bottle of water that her mother had handed her earlier.

“I’m sorry you had to go through all that alone! I will make it up to you and I promise not to miss any more appointments,” he said as he put his arm around her and pulled her into his arms.

Being wrapped in his strong arms made all her worries disappear and she felt safe. Briella never wanted that moment to end.

Out of the blue, she heard him chuckle, causing her to lean back and look at him with a frown, “What’s so funny?” she asked.

“My mom has been snapping at me for days now and telling me to get my stuff together and that she didn’t raise me to treat women that way. Then she told me that I was going to miss out on a true blessing,” Grayson said as he pulled her back into his arms.

“That’s a whole lot better than what she had planned! She was going to hit you upside your head like she used to do

when you were kids,” Briella joked causing Grayson to rub his head.

“I still have a knot on my head from the time I pulled a prank on Gage and he got hurt. My mom wore my butt and head out and I couldn’t sit down for a week. What hurt me most was that my little brother got hurt,” Grayson confessed.

“That is why I know that you will be a great dad to our child,” Briella stated as she looked up at him smiling.

“That means a lot coming from you,” He replied before kissing her softly on her lips.

The moment his lips touched her, Briella knew Grayson was the man for her. The fact that he was also the father of her unborn child eased some of the nervousness she was feeling uneasy about because she knew that he would be with her throughout the whole process.

All too soon, he pulled back and smiled at her, “I think we better go celebrate with our families before they come barging through that door,” Grayson joked.

Chuckling, “I think you are right! Can you help me up?” she asked as she smiled at him.

“Your wish is my command,” he exclaimed before he stood up and extended his hand out to her.

Standing toe to toe, Briella looked up and smiled, “I think you owe me a kiss,” then she pointed up at the mistletoe.

Smiling, “As I said before, your wish is my command,” Grayson replied before he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

About the Author

As a little girl, Leanora always had a notebook, where she could write her dreams and fantasies down. Growing into adulthood, she would read other authors' work and say to herself that she wanted to do the same thing and become a published author.

At the age of thirty-one, she decided to write her first novel entitled, *The Caress of a Younger Man*. Since then, she has followed it with *A Touch Of Heaven* and started *The Voluptuously Curvy and Loving It* series, which focuses on plus-sized women and the men they love. Leanora started the series because she wanted to create a movement for plus-sized women in the world so that they would know that they are beautiful and intelligent and that they also deserve a happy ending.

In the *Voluptuously Curvy and Loving It* series, the books are titled *Smooth As Silk*, *Finding Love Within*, *His Forgotten Lover*, *Drafted For Love*, and last but not least *Planning For Forever*. Recently, Leanora released a new series titled *The Musical Curves Series* which starts with *Rhymes from the Heart* and then *Producing Love Together*.

Throughout the entire process of becoming a published author, Leanora has learned that to write a great novel, she had to be willing to learn and apply the information from all the authors who offered her advice and knowledge. By being willing to learn from others and applying what she had learned, Leanora became a USA Today Bestselling Author in 2023.

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You can also pick up *Let's Get Naughty 3* here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

Motions of the Heart

A Small Town Holiday Romance

Pandora Snow

Penelope

“YOU’RE LATE, MISS PARKS.”

“Sorry. The train was delayed. The police were walking through the cars, looking for a thief dressed as Santa Claus.”

“We don’t give second chances at Barton’s Law Offices. Consider me the grinch.”

My new boss furrows her eyebrows. She’s a frumpy woman in her fifties, with gray hair pulled into a tight bun. I bite back a laugh as she stares down her nose and removes reading glasses.

Being fired within five minutes of employment would set a record. The last four temp jobs with supposedly world-class lawyers all ended the same way. Their fingers fondled my double-D breasts or curvy ass, and my right hand slapped their perverted face. Why I continue attracting sleaze bags in their sixties, I don’t understand.

Without a paralegal degree, I’m forced to work through staffing agencies. Rent is insane in downtown Atlanta. My hourly wage barely covers a tiny apartment and food. I’d love to further my education if I could catch a break with a reliable job and save some cash. Being able to live in a less crime-infested neighborhood would be nice, too.

I stare at the floor, sinking into my chair. Her oak desk is covered in papers and books. The bookshelves lining the walls are filled with thick law books and ancient tomes. She’s obviously an expert in her field. Yikes.

“I’m here to work.”

“You will. Barton’s Law Offices take pride in its legal team. Our reputation is impeccable. Is that why you were late? Were you having too much fun on the train?”

She scowls. Is it the heat or my response that pisses her off?

“Let me rephrase, were you ‘having sex’ on the train?”

“No.”

“You’re too ugly for that.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

The woman was obviously serious, not insulting me, but her words stung. My figure is full and curvy, considered average according to Ted. I have long, wavy red hair and my light green eyes are my best feature, which has helped me land jobs before. Her response is a slap in the face. A lie, and not the first I’ve heard.

“Hmm. Well. I’m Mrs. Rogers. We’re a small firm, and I hate to waste time. After the holidays, I’ll be too busy to train you.”

“I learn quick.”

“Our clients are high profile, and I expect them to be treated with the utmost respect.”

The grouchy woman’s tone is like a knife scratching at the back of my neck. She’s obviously a perfectionist.

“What kind of law does the firm practice?”

“Personal injury.”

Mrs. Rogers answers her ringing phone. The conversation’s brief. She reminds me of a strict school principal. I release a sarcastic giggle at the thought her ruler might smack my fingers.

“Your resume states you’re proficient in Lawcus legal management software. Is that true?”

“Yes. Three years.”

“Mr. Barton’s secretary called out because of a car accident. You’ll have to do.”

The insult’s meant to intimidate me. A heavy sigh exhales from her frowning mouth, and her eyes sweep over my outfit. This dress is my most conservative, a green sleeveless shift garment. But there’s no hiding my abundant assets. Maybe the boss man likes skinny blondes and he’ll keep his dirty hands to himself.

Hostility from other women’s a daily occurrence. People assume my brain is small because of my generous chest. I’ve discovered that remaining quiet diffuses most situations. I’d love to ask the green-eyed ladies if their back aches at night and they’re afraid to go anywhere alone. Some gifts are a curse.

“Report to Mr. Barton’s office. I’ll lock your purse in my cabinet; he doesn’t allow cell phones on his floor.”

The idea of meeting the owner within minutes of starting the job spikes my heart rate. I can’t afford to quit again. My knock-off Gucci bag locks in her cabinet and she gives me a keycard, explaining the procedure. Thank God I’m not bluffing about knowing the software.

“This activates the secured twentieth floor. He demands perfection and efficiency. Professional mannerisms are required at all times. Understand?”

Her undertone indicates I’m the type of girl who jumps at rich jerks in positions of power. I have an excellent comeback for miss grumpy, and am used to other women feeling threatened by the assets God gave me. But I need the money. Desperately.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Oh, and address him as Sir, not Mr. Barton. Go. He’s waiting.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and I stand. I twitch my fingers and straighten my hem as Mrs. Rogers waves me to the door. Dad needs surgery to correct a knee bone misalignment.

I'm saving extra dollars for his medical bills, and will fill his Christmas stocking with two thousand in cash.

I walk to the elevator, dreading the inevitable. Maybe, for once, the CEO will choose self-respect instead of a cheap thrill. Four-inch black heels click across the tile floor, and I adjust my bra to further conceal my generous cleavage. His barbaric *Sir* rule is ridiculous. Probably another old geezer who gets off bullying younger women.

A deep breath inhaled as I insert the card and the transport whisks me to my destination. The pinging sound from the opening doors rings across the expansive empty floor. I'm greeted by a sea of white marble tile as far as I can see. A glass conference room is ahead, with two hallways on either side. Decision time.

I choose the right path, finding a small kitchenette and restrooms, but no office. The air's cool, and my fingers brush my arms for warmth.

Why didn't I wear my heavy coat? Oh yeah, it needs washing after a drunk man spewed vomit on the wool fabric at the pharmacy.

Admitting that I enjoy the male attention a bit is tough. I'm an expert at highlighting these swaying hips. However, respect and boundaries are non-negotiable. Men assume this girl's easy lay when their lustful eyes sweep over my body. I've turned down sex for ten grand. This dignified assistant is not for sale.

There's a small fridge filled with water. Since I'm already cold and the stale air is dry, I help myself, and gulp half the twelve ounce bottle. Knots twist in my stomach as I anticipate the meeting of yet another wealthy womanizer.

My feet turn to exit, and hard muscle stops my progress. I gasp. The remaining liquid squirts down my chest as I squeeze the plastic, and I throw the bottle in the air to find my balance. My hands land on flexing biceps, and a full body shiver rushes through my core. Long fingers clutch my hip to save me from toppling to the ground.

“Who are you?”

His deep voice booms, and a small, trembling squeak escapes my lips.

Please let him be under fifty, I mentally plead. I’m overdue for a Christmas miracle.

Bentley

HER BECKONING ENERGY drew me from my office and into the hallway. This is an unusual behavior. Call me a dick, but employees come to me. My time's invaluable.

She stutters a response as heat engulfs my cells.

“Penelope Parks, a new temp, reporting to Mr. Barton.”

“Address me as Sir.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I've gained her submission in less than sixty seconds. She's a bombshell, with an abundant chest and full, sexy hips. My thumb and forefinger rub together, wanting to tug her silky red hair. The deep shade of green in her emerald eyes is mesmerizing. My pecker picker is on point with this girl.

“Tell me your experience.”

I brush my jaw stubble as her body remains tense, and she fidgets. Wearing four-inch heels in the frigid weather isn't smart, but damn, her shapely legs look enticing. My hand falls from her silk green dress before I stray to her full behind.

“Ask permission next time.”

“Yes, Sir.”

My eyebrow rises as we gaze into each other's eyes with curiosity. The scent of orange and clove softens my tight mouth as my right arm reaches across her shoulder for paper towels. She reminds me of the spiced eggnog Dad makes. I

could sprinkle this beauty with cinnamon and drink from her luscious lips.

“I’ve worked for three premier law firms in the past year and am proficient in Lawcus software.”

“Why haven’t you kept a steady job?”

Her mouth tightens, and she turns away to dab the damp fabric. Behaving with arrogance and authority is my sole persona since losing Syd. Avoiding emotional connections with women by remaining distant keeps my grief buried.

A drunk driver killed Sydney on New Year’s Eve. It’s my fault. CFO Federman and I were filing last-minute donations to lower our tax burden. We planned to meet for a private meal at Atlanta’s finest steakhouse. I was going to propose.

Fate had other plans.

“I’m waiting for your answer.”

She lowers the paper towels to the counter and stares at the tile floor.

“My father’s been ill, and the previous working environments were inflexible. He needs a partial knee replacement.”

Pity is not an emotion I allow.

My finger’s pads are about to text Mrs. Rogers to escort her out, when a second desire grips me. I want to care for this girl. It’s been over a year since I touched a woman for sex.

My hand reaches out and places itself on her shoulder. Her eyes dart up and she swallows hard. The urge to move my fingers across her collarbone to feel her breath rise and fall is overwhelming. I need more.

“Define inflexible, Miss Parks.”

“The offices I worked for didn’t meet my ethical standards.”

“Why not?”

My body's temperature skyrockets as she huffs and steps towards the elevator. This girl's resurrecting my dormant desire for more than sex. Justice is what I live for, and she needs protection from sleazy lawyers. I beat those bastards in court most days.

Maybe I can find another great love. But cracking open my reticent heart could reopen the pain and grief of losing Syd.

The devastating news about her involvement in a drunk driving accident came from a sheriff's deputy. A single tear dripped from my eye before I internally shut down. I hate myself knowing that had I chosen Syd over work, we'd be married right now.

Never again will I share my life with a precious woman. That's my belief. *I'm a stronger man without her* is the bullshit my therapist spews during my grief counseling appointments. The only reason I feel compassionate towards this knockout is my mother's early influence. She taught me to be empathetic and to comfort those less fortunate.

"No reason."

Her whisper is firm, and I suspect the truth may not be forthcoming.

"Tell me everything. We have nothing but time."

Her chest heaves, and the pouty lips open to explain. My eyes flick to the exposed skin beaming up at me from underneath her arms. I watch in awe as her red fingernail clicks across the hard surface, drawing an invisible pattern.

"Like I said, Sir, I'm saving money for my father's surgery. Either give me an assignment or find another temp willing to work on Christmas Eve. My morals are none of your business, Mr. Barton."

"Address me as Sir."

Twinges of lust awaken my groin as her pupils soften, and a light flush crosses her face. Screw work. I'm long overdue to play.

"This way, Miss Parks."

Clicking heels follow me towards my second home. Many nights spend on the sleeper sofa instead of in my penthouse. The empty bed Syd and I shared feels cavernous, and loneliness prevents me from relaxing my nervous system.

My feet turn, and I smile when we reach the room's threshold. The grin is one part angel and one part danger. Her hands rest on her hips and plump pink lips are frowning. Desire surges through my blood as we stand in a faceoff. Anger and passion look seductive on my new assistant's face.

I'm wearing down her defenses as I step close, and her breathy sigh escapes. Miss Parks is testing my resolve to remain professional, and she's unafraid to question me.

For a split second, I hesitate and consider sending her home. My heart's off-limits to women. The protection mechanism spares me further pain. Then I notice. Her legs are trembling as her fingers splay along her hips. The atmosphere is explosive.

“Please stay. I respect your skills, Miss Parks, and I'm enjoying your company.”

Penelope

I FEEL sincerity bleed from his tempting brown eyes and nod my head yes. I wonder why he's working on Christmas Eve and not sipping champagne with a supermodel.

Bentley's six-feet-something-inches of ripped muscles in an Armani custom black suit. Dark chestnut hair frames his chiseled jaw, and his Calvin Klein cologne smells intoxicating. I inhale.

My eyes glance around the impersonal space, noting there's not a single holiday decoration. Traveling home to Minneapolis wasn't in my budget, and my parents live a frugal lifestyle. Mom and Dad struggle with high blood pressure and their weight thanks to a diet heavy in dairy and meat. Being unable to care for them daily feeds my internal guilt.

"The paperwork shouldn't take longer than a few hours. I'm sure you have a partner waiting at home."

Bentley's observant, noticing my lowered eyes as he leads me towards a conference table. I brush my bare arms as goosebumps race across my skin. Last year I was being kissed under the mistletoe by a man I thought was forever.

"My family lives in Minneapolis. I'm saving for plane fare."

"Doesn't anyone look after you? Traveling without a winter coat is a health risk, and those heels aren't suitable for snow."

"Not your concern, Sir. But no. No boyfriend."

He frowns as he removes the Armani jacket. Six-pack abs are clear underneath the form-fitting white Oxford. How odd for a boss on a one-day gig to take this level of interest in a temp. A warm coat places over my shoulders and he waits for me to place my arms in the sleeves.

“Thanks.”

“You’re most welcome.”

“Black is an odd color for a Christmas tie, Sir.”

My thighs squish together as he squints his eyes and stares with intensity. I may faint from the wave of testosterone blanketing my body.

“Not your concern.”

Behind his intimidating identity, I see sorrow flash across his stoic face. There’s a reason he’s alone, and that he’s banishing all signs of hope and cheer.

“Two documents need completing for a ten a.m. emergency hearing.”

He pulls out a chair in front of an iMac computer and waits for me to sit. My ass squirms to settle in the seat as his arms surround me and he enters the password. The Lawcus program opens, and he notes several unfinished docs. His heated breath issues instructions near my ear.

“The data’s in this manilla folder. Drop the completed forms on my device before printing so I can verify the details.”

“Yes, Sir.”

My fingers shake as I double click the first document. He’s standing too close for me to concentrate, and I’m basking in the sexual attraction. I scan the online details and my stomach twists. The father of two young children is asking for an emergency addendum for full custody. He found the mother unconscious at her home and suspects a drug overdose. The man called 911 and drove the toddlers to his parent’s house.

I’m surprised Bentley took this case. Given the addresses listed, the family lives in a low-income housing community. They can’t afford his thousand-dollar per hour rate. My boss

may have a generous heart hiding underneath his sorrow and pain.

An incoming call sends Bentley striding behind a large mahogany desk. His authoritative voice challenges the caller and states the billable hours are to be categorized as Pro Bono. Compassion blooms through my chest at my boss's generosity.

“Questions?”

His words snap me from my fantasy of being spanked, and my cheeks flush pink. I'm desperate to find out why he's masking the gratuitous service behind an external brick wall.

“Are you Santa Claus, Sir?”

4

Bentley

DAMNIT, but I can't hide a smile as bright emerald eyes gaze at me with appreciation. Penelope's rekindling my hope that I'll be gifted a second chance at love. With her.

“Finish the task.”

I avoid a direct answer, feeling a year of damned emotional pressure loosening my cold persona. My CFO, Bishop, is finalizing our annual business statements. He's paid six figures to minimize the company tax load and maximize profit. Money's irrelevant compared to the sense of obligation I feel to honor Syd's memory.

Helping those who couldn't afford legal representation was Syd's calling. We met in court; the case involving sexual harassment. My male client committed the crime, admitting he touched Syd's female accuser without consent. But thanks to my persuasion powers, the judge dismissed the accuser's claims due to lack of evidence.

The next morning, Syd stormed into my office, determined to tell me off for defending a guilty man. Her finger waved in my face, and I wrapped her free arm behind her back. We exploded into a fiery kiss, agreeing to keep our personal and business lives separate.

During our three-year love affair, I learned humility from the stories of struggling families she shared. Each legal case I defend lessens the painful wound of loss and eases my self-inflicted guilt.

An incoming police report diverts my thoughts, and an hour passes. A notification pings on my desktop, and my eyes soften as I glimpse Penelope double-checking data. Seeing her wearing my jacket surges a primal need for protection.

“Nice work. You added the missing retribution clause and caught Helen’s terminology mistake.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Her pupils darken and I stand, maintaining eye contact as I reach the glass table. My arms enclose hers and I hit the print button, inhaling her holiday fragrance of cranberry and mint.

“You smell like Christmas.”

My hands glide up her smooth biceps, unable to maintain a professional distance.

“Will that be all, Sir?”

I squeeze her shoulders and help myself to another inhale, resting my chin against the silky hair. She’s tensing every muscle, as though she’s fighting the desire we both feel. My left hand moves to adjust my growing erection, and she pushes back the chair.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Barton.”

Her energy shifts to animosity, leaving me confused.

“Did I say something wrong?”

When she doesn’t answer, I wrap my arm around her waist and receive a hard slap on the cheek. She teeters on her heels and clicks towards the elevator. What the hell?

“Talk to me!”

“Good luck with the case.”

My composure disintegrates, and I press her against the cold marble wall.

“What did I say? At least explain why we went from attraction to loathing in a heartbeat.”

Her eyelids close and her shoulders slump. She’s hiding pain, and I’m determined to ease the sudden flair of agony.

“You’re all the same. You lured me into your office with the promise of a huge payday. But all you really want is sex. You know why I haven’t held down a steady job? Because assholes like you think you’re above the law. My vagina’s not for sale, Mr. Barton. At any price.”

My hands clench in anger at the thought past employers have abused her. The only chance to regain her trust is with blunt honesty.

“Forgive me. I had no idea who you were. The black tie reminds me I lost Syd last New Year’s Eve. A drunk driver killed her on the way to meet me for dinner. I put work before love.”

A tear forms in Penelope’s eye, and I release her body. I wouldn’t be reacting with passionate emotion if she were just a sexy temp.

Her mouth remains silent, and I offer a sincere apology.

“There’s zero excuse for my sexual advances. I apologize for losing my mind and misbehaving. You’re the first woman to spark my hope that I’ll find love again.”

She wipes the droplets from her cheek, and I await my fate.

“Apology accepted, Sir. It was nice meeting you.”

Penelope

MY FEET WIN the internal battle raging in my heart, and I walk to the elevator. Memories of my prior boss, Peterman, remind me men can't be trusted.

Shivers roll down my spine as that day's events recall. Peterman stormed onto the tenth floor and demanded I follow him into his office. His jaw was clenched, and he avoided eye contact.

"You screwed up the deposition dates on the files and the case was dismissed."

My mind raced and reviewed the paperwork. I was certain that I input accurate data. The information in the report must've been wrong, not me. He locked his door and stood too close.

"Sorry, Mr. Peterman. I triple checked the data with the handwritten client forms and police documents. I don't understand how this could've happened."

"Well, it did, and we lost thousands. I should fire you. Do you want to keep your job?"

I should've seen his behavior coming, but he caught me off guard with the shameful threat. His wrinkled hands clutched my ass, and he pulled me against his crotch. He purred an evil threat.

"Let me fuck you, and I'll overlook your mistake. I know you need the money, Penny. Have you forgotten I lent you my services to get your infraction dismissed in court? We can negotiate a long-term deal to ensure your bills are paid."

My hand slapped his left cheek hard enough to send him stumbling a few feet. I shouted a veiled threat about filing a sexual harassment claim with HR and never looked back. They rarely hold men in powerful positions accountable for their heinous actions. Lawyers are experts at covering immoral behavior, especially their own.

A gentle voice snaps me into the present.

“I’m due in court. Please stay, and we’ll have lunch when I return. My assumptions were wrong, but my intentions were honorable. I’d like to know you better, Penelope.”

“Do you have additional work that needs completing?”

I smother a wide grin, and relief relaxes my tense frame.

“Yes, Miss Parks.”

My hand motions for her to walk in front of me. A slight weight lifts from my heart thanks to her words of integrity and understanding. She allows me to hold her chair when we reach the conference table and folds her hands in her lap.

I stride to my desk drawer and remove a folder. My fingers are nervous as I fumble through similar named folders. Doubts swirl in my mind, and I hand her the documents. This case is black and white. I’m curious why my gut’s constricting.

“Miss Rodriguez is seeking child support from her ex boyfriend. She needs help to complete Form FL-340 and has the DNA test to prove he’s the father. She doesn’t speak English.”

“Yes, Sir. I’m fluent in Spanish, thanks to high school courses and my immigrant neighbors.”

Bentley’s face morphs into a mixture of respect and concern. My apartment’s in a low-rent suburb in Atlanta. Maybe he’s assuming my neighborhood is unsafe, which is true. The thought endears him further under my skin, but I hide the chemistry behind my professional façade. If this lawyer’s real, I could fall hard.

“I’m grateful you were available last minute, Miss Parks. Any restaurant preferences for lunch?”

“I trust your judgment.”

His eyes smile, but his mouth remains closed. My peripheral vision watches him gather the paperwork into a leather messenger bag and pat his pocket. I'd love to sneak a look at his driver's license and verify his age.

“Wallet, keys. Back soon. Help yourself to the kitchenette.”

“How generous of you, Sir.”

His lips part, and he keeps whatever's darkening, his expression quiet. I wait a few minutes and take the stairs down eight floors to Mrs. Roger's office. I'd like to call my parents and wish them a Merry Christmas.

“Finished, Miss Parks?”

“Taking a brief break. May I have my purse?”

“Are you leaving the premises?”

“Just want to wish Mom and Dad happy holidays.”

She unlocks a filing cabinet and hands me the faux Gucci bag. I sense her judging me for a second time as she issues instruction.

“Use the conference room down the hall. Ten minutes, Miss Parks.”

“Yes, Mrs. Rogers.”

I mean, Mrs. Grinch.

When I reach the space and power on my phone, I notice three missed calls from Mom. I press her speed dial button.

“Hi, Mom. Everything alright?”

“Thank goodness, Penny. Your father's not feeling well, so we're heading to urgent care. His blood pressure is one-fifty-two over ninety-one, and his fingers are tingling.”

“Give him my love and keep me posted. Do you need me to fly home?”

“I'll let you know what the doctor says. Hopefully, this is just a flare-up of diabetes and nothing serious. He ate two

slices of apple pie this morning.”

My nose inhales as I recall the delicious smell of her desserts. With the thousand-dollars I’m earning, I could take a red-eye flight. I don’t want to imagine the pain Bentley’s in from losing a loved one this time of year. He’s filled with regret, a feeling I know well since relocating.

“Tell him Merry Christmas. Call me as soon as you see the doctor.”

“Merry Christmas, Penny. I’m sure it’s nothing serious.”

There’s nowhere to hide my cell in this clingy dress. The device powers off and returns to my purse. I can check on Dad again when Bentley and I leave for lunch.

“Thank you, Mrs. Rogers. Do you have holiday plans?”

“No. Back to work.”

Her steely eyes indicate I should drop the subject. Like attracts like, as they say, and it seems we’re three bitter people wronged by fate on this most holy of nights.

There’s good in everyone’s life if they look hard enough. Ted’s decision to dump me days before Christmas last year encouraged my independent nature. Running home to my family would’ve shown that moving to Atlanta with Ted was impulsive and stupid. I hate when someone says *I told you so*.

I remind myself that the monetary contributions I send my parents each month make a difference in the quality of medical care dad receives. This small-town girl’s isolation in a big city is tolerable. Most days.

Christmas Eve, not so much.

Bentley

“GOOD MORNING, Judge Siever. Thank you for granting me this emergency court session. My client, Mr. Martinez, is at the hospital with his ex-wife.”

“I’ve read over the preliminary paperwork you emailed. Are the children safe?”

“They’re with his parents. Mrs. Martinez isn’t expected to survive. He’s requesting full and immediate custody in either case.”

“Granted.”

He signs several documents and records the decision both on a physical log and on the computer. Sadness fills my eyes at the thought of another unnecessary death, and the ones they love who’ll be left behind.

“Good work, Barton. If ever there’s a time to treat others with compassion and understanding, it’s Christmas. How are your parents?”

“Basking in eighty-degree sunshine on a Caribbean cruise.”

I sense Judge Siever wanting to offer additional condolences for Sydney. He presided over the wrongful death lawsuit her mom and dad filed and sentenced the drunk driver to life in prison. Two prior infractions insured the careless man received the maximum punishment.

We stand and he walks with me into the courthouse hallway.

“You’re welcome to dinner with me and Abigail.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ll pass.”

We shake hands and I check my watch; plenty of time to make our eleven-thirty reservation. When I reach the car, a text message from Mrs. Rogers freezes my chest.

Miss Parks went home. She did not complete the second assignment, and I paid her five hundred for two hours’ work.

Why did she leave?

Family obligations, though I don’t believe her excuse. She kept cursing someone named Peterman under her breath.

Shit! I must’ve handed Penelope the wrong file folder. She’ll hate me for all eternity because I mistakenly asked her to review a sexual harassment case.

What’s her home address?

Are you sure that’s appropriate?

Not your concern.

I don’t want Penelope thinking I’m a callous monster. The information arrives, and I plug the data into my car’s navigation system. The phone drops onto the passenger seat, and I take several centering breaths to calm my rising fear. I won’t lose the single spark of joy in my hollow life to a misunderstanding.

As I shift into reverse and an incoming call halts my progress.

“Rosalie’s gone, Mr. Barton. How am I supposed to tell our kids their mom died on Christmas Eve? Why did she do it? Did she hate me that much?”

He’s sobbing as the words stutter out. Before I find Penelope, my client needs an understanding ear.

“Are you still at the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes. I’m so sorry for your loss, Mr. Martinez.”

The situation jolts me back to the emergency room last December thirty-first. The trauma surgeon offered a similar sentiment upon announcing Syd's death. I know how it feels to be inconsolable, and I'm compelled to offer my client comfort.

The sudden bleeding of my heart is because of an unexpected, and gorgeous, miracle worker named Penelope. I can't help but wonder if she's a sign from above that it's time I move on and allow love to resurface. Maybe she's nudging me from heaven to accept God's will and let go of regret. Neither Mr. Martinez nor I could've prevented these tragic circumstances.

Traffic's light, and I arrive at the hospital within fifteen minutes. I pick up Mr. Martinez's copy of the legal documents and stride through the ER's double doors. Not as his lawyer, but as his friend.

The desk attendant informs me he's in the cafeteria. When I reach the restaurant's entrance, I see him slumped over his arms at a small table.

"Accept my heartfelt condolences, Mr. Martinez. You have full custody."

I pat his shoulder and his head lifts.

"It's my fault. She begged me to spend more time with her and the kids, but I was too stubborn. I drank beer with friends instead of taking care of them until she kicked me out. I'll never forgive myself."

He sits back in the chair and brushes his hands across reddened cheeks. I wholeheartedly understand his first instinct is to blame himself. Twenty pounds dropped from my muscular frame in the months following Syd's funeral.

"Had I been home, I could've called 911 or run to my neighbor's house for help. Instead, I spent another hour with the construction crew. One more beer, my macho ego said."

"I can state from experience that the days will pass, and the emptiness will dissipate. My girlfriend died last New Year's Eve. Sometimes we aren't meant to understand why

God takes them away. All we can do is honor loved ones by helping others.”

“Is that why you don’t charge for your services?”

“Yes. The pain feels unbearable. I know. Remember that given time, you’ll find a reason to continue living. The children need a father who can comfort them and express vulnerability. It’s never too late to change, Mr. Martinez.”

He wipes tears on his dirty shirt sleeve and looks into my eyes.

“You’re a good man, Mr. Barton. I thought all lawyers were apathetic assholes.”

Not this one. At least not anymore.

“The community center offers grief counseling. I’ve known the director, Mrs. Conner, for several years. She can provide additional resources for the kids. Accept help instead of closing down, like I did. Life is too precious to waste.”

He reaches to shake my hand and we stand. My heart’s wide open to embrace a second chance at love. If Penelope will speak to me.

Penelope

THE APARTMENT DOOR slams shut as I arrive home. My hands rub together to warm my fingers; the temperature's a cool forty-five degrees. Mrs. Rogers offered one last Grinch-worthy demand as I walked out the office.

"Leave Mr. Barton's coat. And don't bother asking for a referral."

I pick up a cotton throw pillow and scream. He had me fooled, with his heart-wrenching story of losing his girlfriend and his Pro Bono service. But he proved himself to be a spineless bastard, just like the rest of them.

He was already in the elevator when I opened the manilla file folder. Instead of the Martinez client he mentioned, the name Peterman was typed onto the tab. That Peterman.

It's true lawyers have each other's back. Bentley was forming a case against one of my ex-boss's secretaries who accused her former employer of nonconsensual sex. I could believe Bentley handed me the wrong folder, but I can't condone his willingness to overlook potential rape.

My heels unbuckle and remove. I felt confident and beautiful when he left for court. Now I'm just another miscellaneous expense on Barton's balance sheet.

After changing into red flannel pajamas, I dial Mom and boil water for chamomile tea.

"How's Dad?"

“We’re waiting for EKG results, but the doctor suspects his overload of sugar caused the symptoms. He suffered an insulin reaction. He wants to say hi.”

“Sorry to worry you, Penny. I’m fine. Your Mom’s overprotective.”

“Two slices? I suppose you had ice cream, too.”

“We’re supposed to celebrate and overindulge this time of year. I hate that you’re spending the holidays alone.”

I’ve already scoured the internet for cheap flights to no avail. Five hundred bucks only covers a one-way ticket.

“I’ll visit in March once Minneapolis thaws. Get used to sugar free, Dad, and low-fat everything.”

“I hear anger in your voice. I didn’t mean to scare you or your mother.”

“They cut my temp job short. I hoped to earn enough for a surprise visit.”

“What happened this time?”

Explaining my lack of job stability is a touchy subject. If I even hint at the fact, my employers have made unwanted sexual advances, he’ll demand I return home.

“I completed the work. No drama.”

“If you lie at Christmas, Santa won’t bring you gifts.”

“I’m twenty-four, dad. Santa shops at Walmart.”

He chuckles.

My childhood was typical of a blue collar family. Mom was a kindergarten schoolteacher, retiring last year to care for both her and dad’s health. My father works for the state highway bureau as a road maintenance supervisor. He’s on duty during the holidays and inclement weather to ensure the streets remain safe.

I met Ted at the recreation store, where I worked as a cashier. He was a rookie field trainer for the Vikings, flexing tone muscles and a warm grin. Our conversation was natural

as I escorted him around the store, helping him fill a shopping cart with sports equipment.

With bold confidence and a sensual smile, Ted asked me on a date. My feelings deepened as the months passed though dad's excitement eclipsed mine. He and Ted talked football nonstop, and Ted invited dad to several home games as a VIP guest.

I'd be lying to say that I wasn't having relationship doubts, even then. We couldn't go to dinner without a stacked blonde or fiery red head hitting on him. The Viking's cheerleaders were celebrities in their own right; beautiful, coordinated, and the envy of every plain girl like me.

Ted often reminded me that public image and networking were crucial to his career. His fraternizing with coworkers left me home alone many nights. Maybe I was star struck by the important role he played in the team's success. Maybe I was convinced pleasing dad was more important than my internal warning signals.

Ted received an offer from the Atlanta Falcons after the season ended last February. They agreed to pay moving expenses and give Ted a twenty-thousand-dollar increase in salary. He signed the paperwork before even asking me, which should've been my sign to let him go.

We'd been dating a year at that point, and dad encouraged me to follow him to Georgia. Just three months into the life-changing move, I felt Ted growing more distant. We had the inevitable, *it's not you it's me* talk.

Our breakup was drama free until I looked through his email as I was transferring my files to a thumb drive. He had dozens of nudes stashed in an un-named file. When I enlarged the picture named three, my gaskets blew. Ted had been scoring field goals with multiple cheerleaders. At the same time.

I hear a male voice in the background and Mom comes on the line.

“Doctor's here. Call you back with an update.”

Hot water pours over two tea bags, and I stare into my empty family room. I thought Bentley was different, and I can't deny our combustible chemistry. Maybe I should give up my goal of becoming a certified paralegal and return to the frosty Midwest. Men are scum no matter where you live.

A knock on the front door startles me, and I spill the liquid on my leg as the cup shatters on the ground.

“Penelope? Are you alright?”

Barton's getting an earful of vengeance as I limp to the door's handle. Between my father's health crisis and being unable to fly home, I'm at the breaking point.

“What!?”

The door cracks and chilly air swirls across the burn area.

“Ouch!”

“Let me in. You need care.”

The barrier shuts, and I unlatch the security chain. He sweeps his eyes along my body and lands on the wet pant leg. I'm pressed to his chest, and he steps inside before re-fastening the deadbolt.

“First, are you hurt?”

“I spilled hot tea on my leg when an asshole lawyer knocked on my door.”

He cringes, and I hobble to the sofa. Barton's hold is warm and his concern is noble, but he breeched my rules of integrity by agreeing to defend a blackmailing jackass named Peterman.

“I deserved that. I made a horrible mistake, Penelope, and handed you the wrong folder.”

“Doesn't erase the fact you'd twist the legal system to get my ex-boss off on rape charges.”

“You worked for Peterman?”

He's surprised. Good for him.

“I'm dropping his case. I've reconsidered.”

“Not my concern.”

“I won’t leave until you listen. I never thought I’d find happiness again until a green-dressed goddess spilled water on her generous cleavage. But this is more than lust, Penelope.”

“Tell it to the judge.”

I shove his shoulder and reopen the front door. My leg’s throbbing from the minor burn as he remains in place.

“I feel compelled to protect you. Call it a Christmas miracle that my heart has come online after a year of solitude. I could fall in love with you.”

Bentley

HER FINGERS TREMBLE. She must give me permission before I touch those seductive curves and kiss her sweet lips. Once I taste heaven, she's for keeps.

“Close the door.”

My girl obeys, and I clasp our hands together.

“Let's start over. My name's Bentley Barton. I'm a lawyer, but not an asshole. A position has become available at my firm, and you're the perfect fit.”

“What are the job requirements?”

“Integrity, compassion, and a willingness to fight for your beliefs.”

Her eyes cringe, and I sweep her into my arms.

“Where's the bathroom?”

“On the left.”

I carry her into the small space and set her on the laminate counter.

“Show me the injury.”

It's killing me not to ravage her mouth.

“Um.”

“No need to be embarrassed.”

A slow smile lifts her lips, striking me straight in the groin. Pink flushes light her cheeks, and I grip the sink's edge.

“May I lift the pants hem above your knee?”

She nods yes. My imagination runs wild at the thought she’s hesitant to drop her pajamas because she’s panty-free.

“Ow!”

The fabric pushes up and reveals a minor burn above her knee. She reaches into a drawer and hands me Neosporin. Her eyes shut tight and I apply the antibiotic. I find a bandaid in the open compartment and cover the wound.

“Better?”

“I need an explanation, Mr. Barton.”

“Bentley.”

My lips stop short of saying Ben. Only Syd used the nickname. Since her passing, I’ve avoided any place we frequented, including the Starbucks in my building’s lobby.

A low grumble clears my throat.

“I messed up with the Peterman case. Forgive me. And I’m sorry for how I came on to you just now. I feel a strong connection to you, Penelope, and it’s not about the job offer. It’s about you.”

She looks longingly at me.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’ve been alone for a year now. No dates and no sex. The worry of disrespecting Syd’s memory left me paralyzed. I never thought I’d feel anything for anyone else. But then I saw you, and something stirred inside me. I know it’s sudden, but I need to tell you this.”

Penelope looks at me, her eyes softening.

“I don’t know what to say. I’ve been hurt before too, and I don’t know if I’m ready to open myself up again.”

“Can we at least give this a chance?”

Penelope’s bottom lifts into my arms and we return to the blue micro-suede couch. Broken glass catches my eye.

“Let me sweep up the shards first.”

“Not your concern. Talk.”

A wisp of vanilla and chocolate wafts from a soy candle on the coffee table, making the room smell like a candy shop. There’s an even sweeter scent that rises from Penelope’s skin, intoxicating notes similar to the best kind of whiskey. Something ancient and undeniable.

“I lost sight of why I practiced law over the past year. The sorrow of losing Syd channeled into working eighty hours per week. I took on easy and profitable cases, although they weren’t aligned with my values.”

“Why did you become a lawyer?”

“My parents’ housekeeper, Lucinda, suffered abuse by her husband. She shrugged off the inexcusable injuries, stating this male behavior was part of the culture. The more bruises I saw on her arms, the angrier I became.”

Penelope clasps my fingers, and I sigh with joy.

“Were you able to help her?”

“I hadn’t passed the bar exam at that point. She eventually left the abusive man and counsels women in similar positions at the local community center. Offering free legal services to others in her neighborhood is my way of paying her back for years of kindness and care.”

“That’s beautiful.”

She presses our hands against my thighs and leans in for a tender cheek kiss. Time stills, and I allow her affection to flow through my veins. I may cry from her show of empathy.

“I meant it when I said I dropped Peterman as a client, and I’m sorry for triggering your pain.”

Her phone rings and the magical spell breaks. She picks up her cell from the kitchen counter and strides into the hall.

“Thank goodness. You’re going to throw away all the junk food, right?”

“Yes, even the Fritos, Dad.”

Her back stiffens, and I listen to her side of the conversation.

“No, I’m not moving home.”

“You’re the one who wanted me to be independent.”

“Fine. Be mad. I’ll call you on Christmas Eve.”

Penelope’s posture slumps and her head rests against the blue painted drywall.

“Follow the doctor’s orders.”

I enter the hall, and she hangs up.

Her back turns, and I hear soft sniffles. She had the strength to call out my bullshit despite a family health emergency. My girl’s strong, but at this moment, she needs a shoulder.

I walk behind her and brush flannel-covered arms in a soothing rhythm.

“Hey. Everything okay?”

She pivots, and teary eyes pin mine with a mix of sadness and desire. Holy hell. She’s speaking directly to my soul.

“Kiss me.”

Penelope

THE ROOM DISAPPEARS as our soft lips brush together. He's a paradox of a formidable lawyer and sensitive lover. My cells melt against him, and my arms shift to circle his neck. His fingers splay across my back and he holds me close. This man is cherishing me, tasting my skin as I hum with pleasure.

His restraint is admirable as I glide my tongue around his lips until I gain access. I feel his chest thumping against mine, and he joins the dance. An involuntary moan rushes from my mouth and he deepens the kiss. I forgot what it feels like to be adored.

“Can I take you to dinner?”

The concoction of emotions built up from the day's events burst in an unrestrained plea for deeper connection.

“I'm not hungry for food.”

“Lord,” he whispers, and parts our mouths.

My fingernails scrape his neck, and I raise my right leg against his hip. I'm unashamed to ask for what I want.

“Sometimes we don't get a tomorrow. Make love to me, Bentley. My intimacy needs are most definitely your concern. I want this. I want us.”

“Me too.”

I balance my hands on his shoulders and shift my feet to the ground. There's no hesitation on his part. My legs wrap around his waist as he stands, and I ravage his mouth until we're out of breath.

He offers me one last chance to slow our march towards a night of wild and unapologetic intimacy.

“You’re more than sex to me, Penelope. Let me by you dinner. It’s important.”

The cracking tone of his voice causes me to pause and return my legs to the ground. He’s still processing the guilt of choosing work over his girlfriend. My heart gushes with elation that he wants to take this step with me.

“Sustained, Mr. Barton. I need to change.”

“Can I help?”

My lips press to his for a steamy kiss, and I point to the sofa.

“Objection!”

“Overruled. Be right back, Sir.”

Every cell in my body buzzes with anticipation as I shimmy into the green dress. Thoughts whirl through my mind as I freshen my makeup in the bathroom mirror. Is he ready to love again? Do I trust he’s not manipulating my emotions to recreate the relationship he lost?

A light coat of hairspray applies to my smooth locks, and I pause at the bedroom threshold. He’s on the phone with a woman.

“Merry Christmas, Lucinda. Mr. Martinez and the children are with his parents. He’d love to hear from you. You’re most welcome.”

My shoulder bumps the doorjamb and I walk forward, feeling as though I’ve overheard a deeply personal conversation.

“Can I talk business for one minute?”

“Sure.”

“Mr. Martinez’s ex-wife passed away. I stopped by the hospital to offer my condolences and deliver the signed custody papers. You bring out the best in me, Penelope. I promise not to waste a single moment with you.”

We embrace, and he holds me tight, stroking my sticky hair. My chin tips for a breathtaking smooch, and he groans as my tongue deepens the exchange. Time to go before I strip him naked.

“I hope you eat fast.”

“The food, or your delectable body, Miss Parks?”

He smirks as my cheeks turn red, and I rest my head against his chest.

“Nothing could make me happier tonight than your company.”

“Where are our reservations?”

“Chef’s Table at Peach Grove. A friend recommended the five-star eatery.”

“I feel underdressed for a fancy restaurant.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

My purse retrieves from the kitchen counter, and he pecks my hand after I lock the apartment door. A light snow is falling, creating a magical winter scene. Maybe I’ll wake up as Barton’s princess.

Bentley

MY BALLS TIGHTEN as I help her into the Mercedes leather seat and fondle her curvy behind. She understood why I insisted on dinner first without me needing to explain. Penelope deserves to date a respectful man who can control his sexual urges after being mistreated by past employers. The fresh flakes and spark of love in my heart ensure our inaugural date will be memorable.

“The seats are buttery soft and the interior smells amazing. Is it new?”

I steer through side streets, clutching her left hand when I hit red lights. The snow’s likely to turn into ice once we finish dinner. My penthouse is close to the restaurant. Maybe she’ll spend the night.

“Six months ago. What do you drive?”

“I don’t own a car.”

“You took the train in that thin dress and teetering heels?”

“Spank me later. Do your parents live in Atlanta?”

I pause, allowing my mind a few seconds to picture her naked behind across my lap.

“They live in upstate New York. I sent them on a luxury cruise for the holidays.”

“Why didn’t you join them?”

“My caseload is heavy, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to visit. Your family must be used to frigid temperatures, living

in Minnesota. Is that why you aren't wearing a coat or my jacket?"

"Mrs. Grinch ordered me to leave the wool garment in her office."

I laugh, glancing at Penelope as she realizes what she said. I forgot how much I miss these simple moments, and I look forward to discovering additional secrets behind her seductive smile.

"Sorry. Mrs. Rogers."

"Your description's accurate. She asked to work during the holidays. Her husband's a police officer, and she wants to busy her mind. What motivated you to move to Atlanta?"

"Stupidity. I followed my then boyfriend. He's a sports trainer and took a position with the Falcons."

"His loss is my win. We're here."

The Mercedes stops curbside in front of Chef's Table, and a valet opens her door with a cheery greeting.

"Merry Christmas, Ma'am."

"Merry Christmas."

I place the keys in his hand when I reach the sidewalk. Flakes fall into Penelope's hair and my stomach flips. She could be mine.

We enter and escort to a reserved private booth. Garland, ornaments, and white twinkling lights bring a festive atmosphere to the space. Penelope looks around and smiles. Funny that her apartment's undecorated, given her affinity for the season.

She slides into the booth and I follow, resting our knees close. Fragments of sorrow float across my mind, and I remind myself to be present. I'm nestled next to the most beautiful woman in the room, a gift for which I give many thanks.

"Good evening. May I recommend a wine or cocktail?"

His innocent question stirs anger at the drunk driver who stole Syd's life. My hands form fists, and Penelope responds

when she sees my mouth tighten.

“San Pellegrino’s, please.”

“Of course, Miss.”

“Sorry,” I stutter when the server leaves.

“You’re safe to share your feelings with me.”

The angel to my right places a kiss on my cheek, and I refocus on her gorgeous green eyes.

“I get spikes of anger and regret.”

“That’s normal after losing someone close, Bentley. I still cry when I see a dog on tv. Ginger, my golden lab, passed two years ago. Healing takes time.”

“Pinch me, because you can’t be real.”

My lips kiss with sweetness and the server returns with our beverages.

“May I order for us?”

“Sure.”

“The lady will have herb chicken with sauteed asparagus, and I’ll have the brown butter salmon with orzo.”

“Excellent selections. I recommend our fresh micro-greens salad with feta cheese and glazed balsamic dressing.”

“Yes,” my date interjects.

I raise my glass.

“A toast to our blossoming relationship.”

We clink the fine crystal, and I whisper a naughty promise.

“I can’t wait to devour your bud.”

I’ll never tire of her authentic expressions. Capturing her pink glow will remind me she’s real.

“May I take a photo?”

She nods yes, and open my phone’s camera. During difficult moments, I’ll have her gorgeous smile to ground me.

Penelope's an undeserved holiday present, pressing her lips next to my mouth until I click.

After the selfie snaps, her dirty words flow into my ear.

“Asparagus is my favorite. I lick the tip before swallowing whole.”

Check, please.

Penelope

BENTLEY'S PASSED a crucial relationship test. He's willing to show vulnerability and share his emotional pain. My hearts swoons when his thumb brushes my temples and his lips tease mine. Remembering past moments with his girlfriend is normal, and I'd never fault him for expressing how he feels.

"Did you grow up in New York?"

"Syracuse. I was accepted into Atlanta's John Marshall Law School after graduating from Syracuse University."

"I've never been, but I'd like to visit someday."

"You'll love it. My friend Tucker's a chef."

"Is he single too?"

Bentley scolds me, and his eyes narrow.

"You're too good for him."

"Just teasing. I'm not interested in anyone other than you."

His lips curl into a smile, and I resist the urge to jump across the table and kiss him.

"You're a beautiful woman, but I don't want to rush into anything. I'm anti-cheating and expect you to be mine exclusively. I've handled enough bitter divorces to know infidelity only leads to heartache."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"A younger sister, Candice. Am I on trial, Miss Parks?"

"Sorry, I..."

“I’m kidding. You’d make an excellent paralegal. Why haven’t you pursued additional education?”

“Do you want the list?”

My parents’ income is low enough to qualify me for a student loan, but piling up thousands in debt is risky. I’m considering moving back home to the comfort and safety of family. A small piece of my heart hopes Ted will show up on my doorstep and beg for a second chance.

Delicious looking salads place on the table, and I fold my napkin several times. Bentley places his hands on top of mine, interrupting my mind’s negative pattern.

“You miss home?”

“Yeah. I underestimated how lonely I’d feel being single in the city. My track record of attracting unethical bosses and inability to afford paralegal school are signs I can’t ignore.”

“It would be a shame to waste your talent. Several large firms in Atlanta offer scholarship opportunities.”

“Maybe.”

I stab the salad with my fork and shove greens into my mouth. I feel ridiculous on a Christmas Eve date with a wealthy lawyer who I just met. This girl’s from a small town where family comes first. Mom and Dad need me. Atlanta doesn’t.

Bentley asks me if I like the dressing when applause ring through the air. We turn to our left, and my jaw drops. Ted proposed to a knockout blonde, and she said yes. He bows her back and places a steamy kiss on her bright red lips. I’m a fool to think that could someday be me. Cutting my losses and returning to the safety of the upper Midwest is growing more appealing by the second.

“Excuse me,” I mumble.

My hand clasps, but I rebuff Bentley’s gesture. I’m guilty of not reciprocating my date’s honesty and sharing my feelings. Chills shiver my spine as I reach the restroom and my arms display goosebumps. I stare into the large mirror that’s

reflecting a defeated girl. Seems Mrs. Rogers has convinced me to embrace my inner grinch.

A patron exits the stall and washes her hands. She looks at me with pity, sensing my low vibration as I gaze into the sink.

“Boyfriend trouble?”

“I’m out of my league in Atlanta.”

“Why do you say that?”

“My ex just proposed to a stunning woman.”

“Why does that make you feel insignificant?”

If she’s a therapist, I need to book an appointment.

“The holidays are overwhelming, being away from family. I’m tired of not having roots and moving from job to job as a temp.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a legal assistant.”

“Here’s my card. My company’s hiring, and we offer tuition reimbursement if you choose to pursue a degree. It’s Christmas. We can’t control circumstances, but we can choose how we react. Enjoy your evening.”

I reach for my phone to call Mom when a man enters the ladies’ room and locks the door.

“Please don’t hide from me, Penelope. You’re too precious to let slip away.”

Bentley

MY STOMACH LEAPS into my throat at the sight of my girl's sad eyes. I assume the guy who proposed is her ex-boyfriend. He's wearing a jacket with a Falcons monogram. She's fragile, and I proceed with caution.

"Was that Ted?"

"Yeah."

"Can we finish dinner and talk at my place?"

An expression of uncertainty subdues her beautiful face, and I brace for the worst.

"You're amazing, Bentley, and I appreciate everything you've done for me. Could you please just drive me home?"

"Anything you wish. Why do I feel you're saying goodbye?"

"Returning to Minnesota is the smart decision. I can save money by living with my parents and earn a paralegal degree in Minneapolis."

The floor drops from underneath my feet. There've been enough synchronicities and coincidences over the past twelve hours to confirm she's my next great love. I need to fight for her.

"Please, Penelope. I know how it feels to be lonely, especially when everyone around you is bursting with holiday cheer. I won't leave you in this sorrowful state."

"Just go, okay. I don't deserve you."

“Why the hell not?”

My frustration is clear as we stand, and my hands flank my hips. I must understand what’s changed in her psyche, and why she’s denying herself happiness.

“I’m sorry.”

She moves to step past me, and I block her progress.

“Let me go.”

“Not until I know why you’re bleeding self-doubt. I refuse to abandon you in this state. Whether you realize it, I’m falling in love with you. I’ll swear on the bible. I don’t care what secret you’re hiding, we can—”

“Damn it, Bentley! Stop! Stop caring about me. Stop promising me a happy ending. You won’t forgive me.”

Oh God. The next words from her mouth will shatter my world. My bones are already cold.

“Ted dumped me because I was cited for drunk driving, and he didn’t want his reputation tarnished. He was ashamed of my behavior, and rightfully so. My dreams don’t matter anymore. I’m renting a car and driving home. For good.”

My knees buckle as tears stream down her cheeks. She unlocks the door and rushes out of the restaurant, taking my heart with her. I swore I’d never forgive the man who killed Sydney. Unless I reconcile my demons and make peace with the events, I’ll also lose Penelope.

Several women glare as I exit the bathroom. I drop three hundred-dollar bills on the hostess stand and rush to the street. Penelope’s gone.

My fist pounds the brick building. I never thought God could be this cruel, stealing a second woman for whom I breathe. When I reach the Mercedes, my head slumps against the steering wheel and I cry for the first time since the funeral. I cry for failing to recognize how fleeting life can be, and for harboring deep resentment over the past year.

Forgive me, Syd, for putting you in harm’s way. Forgive me for not fully appreciating the gift of your love. I need a

miracle to save my battered soul. Her name's Penelope. She's strong, smart, and embodies your compassionate spirit. Please, I'm begging you. Help me find her before it's too late.

Penelope's house lights are off, and she doesn't answer after five minutes of knocking. A woman in the next-door apartment shouts profanities in Spanish, and I laugh to ease my nerves. I search the dark complex until I locate the landlord's unit.

"Coming!"

I halt my pounding, and a beer-bellied man answers. He's dressed in a white tank and holiday boxers. He may not be Santa Claus, but he'll do.

"My girlfriend's not answering her apartment, unit 3b. She left work with a one-hundred-two-degree fever, and I'm scared she's come down with the virus."

I'm already on the naughty list. What's a little lie.

"What's her name?"

"Penelope Parks."

"Where's she from?"

"Minneapolis."

"Alright. My service isn't free."

I slide him five Benjamins, and he leads me back to her door. The lock unfastens, and he turns on the light.

"Miss Parks, are you here?"

Nothing.

My feet push forward into the bedroom. The covers are neat and the bathroom's empty. Relief calms down my rapid heartbeat to see her toiletries on the countertop. She hasn't left town, a minor miracle.

“When I saw her yesterday, she was flushed and mentioned an upset stomach. Maybe she’s at the urgent care down the street.”

“I’ll call. Do you mind if I wait here? It’s late, and I’m worried sick.”

His shoulders shrug, and he closes the door behind him. My calls and texts to Penelope go unanswered, further nauseating my stomach. I’m not used to begging, but God owes me one.

Please bring her home safe. I forgive her for making a mistake. You know I’ve made plenty. I swear I’ll work to release my anger and guilt towards Hughes. Penelope’s who and what I need. I’m in love with her.

I step into the kitchen and retrieve cold water from the fridge. Memories of last New Year’s Eve flood my system. A chaotic mash of emotions, from rage to grief to hope, keeps my body anxious.

Where the hell is she?

Penelope

“YOU’RE a savvy shopper waiting to buy seasonal décor. With the fifty percent discount, your total’s fourteen twenty-three.”

I pull cash from my wallet and the CVS clerk smiles, humming along to Frosty the Snowman.

“Merry Christmas. You should wear a coat in this weather.”

He drops a handful of candy cane flavored Hershey’s kisses in my bag.

“Thanks.”

I don’t want to be alone because I’m feeling sorry for myself. I seek refuge at a nearby Starbucks, and watch last-minute shoppers rush in to buy gift cards. A dozen missed calls and texts from my date add to the weight constricting my chest.

“Miss? I made an extra peppermint mocha. It’s yours, free.”

“Thanks.”

“You look cold. Rough night?”

“Yeah.”

I retrieve the hot beverage from the countertop, wondering how I became so lost. After calling my parents one last time to wish them a good evening, I order a ride home. The barista waves goodbye, and I step into the chilly air.

My body jumps as two vehicles collide at the intersection. The damage is minor, thank goodness. Black ice is forming and I'm guessing neither of them could stop on the limit line.

Damned tears unleash, and I cry as the drivers evaluate the dents. They hug, and I hear the older gentleman express gratitude that everyone's okay.

Walking out on Bentley was shameful. He's moving forward after suffering a tragic loss, and I'm licking my stupid wounds. I have loving parents, a safe home, and a potential new job opportunity.

To salvage what's left of the night, I stopped into CVS after leaving the restaurant. I purchased a small fake tree with plastic ornaments and lights for ten bucks. Seeing the Rudolph tie for \$3 made me emotional because I imagined Bentley wearing it..

My driver arrives dressed in a Santa hat and jumps out to open my door. Taking the train of night isn't smart. At least I made one good decision.

"Merry Christmas, miss."

"You too."

He notices my tear-stained face but doesn't comment. I relay my address and he whisks me home. When I reach for cash as the vehicle stops in front of my building, he shakes his head.

"This sleigh ride's on me. There's still time for a Christmas miracle. If you need one."

"Sure."

My key inserts into the lock, and I freeze. Someone's in my apartment. The kitchen light is on. My heels stumble back and the door swings open.

"Thank God."

Bentley catches me as I slip on the snow.

"Jesus, Penelope. You scared the Scrooge out of me. Are you alright?"

He lifts me against his chest and steps us across the threshold. I break into sobs when my feet hit the ground, and he wraps me in his warm arms.

“What are you doing here? You have every right to hate me.”

“Hush. Let me hold you.”

The plastic bag drops on the floor, and I cling to his waist. He soothes me with tender strokes of my hair and brushes along my back.

“Just a second.”

He loosens his grip, and I retreat to the bathroom. I blow my nose and laugh in the mirror at my red skin. Someone was looking out for me tonight. I can't ignore the series of minor miracles, from free candy to an Uber ride. Maybe we're meant to be together after all.

I slip into fluffy pink slippers and stand in the bedroom doorway, admiring the humble gift who's waiting with patience. This is our night. Thanks, Santa.

“Can we try again? You've brought me back to life, Penelope, with your compassion and beauty. I won't hold your past against you. We all screw up, especially me.”

“I was ashamed to tell you the truth. I caught Ted kissing the blonde when I drove to his office to surprise him with lunch. He let me use his car that day to run errands. I haven't had alcohol since that night.”

He paces towards me until we're breaths apart.

“I'm sorry, Penelope. I had no right to judge you. It's not your fault that Ted is a sleazy cheating bastard. And I'm not perfect either. I have my own demons to battle.”

He takes my hand and leads me over to the miniature Christmas tree. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small box.

“I got you a present. Open it.”

I tear the wrapping paper to reveal a Hallmark ornament. The design shows the scales of justice sitting on a legal pad with a gavel to the side.

“Where did you find this? Mom and I buy a new keepsake treasure each year, but we’ve both been too exhausted to bother. The lawyer that saved Christmas. Who knew?”

Bentley leans in to kiss me. It starts off slow and tender, but soon his passion ignites. His arms wrap around my waist and I cling to him, lost in the moment.

We break apart, panting and grinning at each other. It’s been a rollercoaster ride, but maybe this is where we both belong.

“Merry Christmas, Bentley.”

“Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“You’ll trust me with your emotions, good and bad. My heart’s awakening, Penelope, with appreciation for the past and gratitude for the present.”

He clasps my fingers, and his eyes tear with love.

“Will you be my girlfriend, Miss Parks? The perks include a generous salary and a full-paid scholarship to law school. You don’t mind working underneath me, do you?”

Bentley

FIREWORKS EXPLODE through the dense air as plump lips glide across my skin. I'll want for nothing if she'll be mine.

Her hands press against my chest, and she traces my muscles with her thumbs. I hum with desire as her fingernails shift north and scrape the back of my neck. The kiss deepens.

“Did you go to Starbucks? I taste peppermint mocha.”

“The counsel will keep quiet while I examine the evidence and reach a decision.”

She removes my tie and unbuttons the shirt. The feel of her soft hands causes me to growl. I need her so badly.

“Exhibit A checks out.”

“Penelope!”

She squeezes my growing erection and my pelvis thrusts forward. I puff my chest as she removes the cufflinks and tosses the Oxford shirt on the sofa. This is backwards. I want to make love to her until she overflows with pleasure and screams my name.

My hands turn on her curvy hips and her head rests against my shoulder.

“As I recall, you were hired to follow my orders.”

She trembles as fervent kisses nip her neck, and I unzip the silk dress.

“Touch me, Sir.”

“Where, Miss Parks?”

“Breasts.”

My lungs halt as the garment falls onto the ground. A white lace bra and matching thong adorn her magnificent figure. She’s regaining confidence as her left hand digs into my hair and she unfastens the front clasp.

“Do I need to bind your hands so I can complete my cross examination?”

My muscles thunder with excitement as she slides off the straps and throws the sexy bra over her shoulder.

“Be my guest.”

I mutter curse words under my breath and tie her wrists. My fingers glide along her sides and draw down the matching panties. Desperation and lust course through my blood as I pull her pelvis against my erection. These pants need to come off.

“On your knees, Penelope.”

“My pleasure, Sir.”

She licks her lips as she turns, her eyes blazing. My arm supports her while she kneels.

“Good God. You’re sinful, sexy girl.”

I cup her head’s sides, and I stare in wonder at this goddess before me. I never thought I’d find this depth of connection with another woman. She slaps my hands when I unfasten the belt and lower the trousers’ zipper.

“Allow me.”

I clench my ass cheeks as she fondles me through the pants and then lowers my clothing. There’s an inexplicable ecstasy I feel watching her kneeling before me in submission. My heart-rate doubles.

“Slow, beautiful.”

“Like this?”

Her tongue flicks my thick tip, and I shudder.

“Hmm. May I proceed, counsel?”

I groan as she sucks my head and floods my cock with a tingling sensation. Her seductive eyes shoot up to mine, and she flashes a dangerous smile.

“Hard muscle. Velvety skin. Drops of creamy goodness. You present a solid case for becoming my boyfriend.”

My peepers clench shut as her hot mouth engulfs me and I spurt liquid. This is happening too fast. She’s got me by the balls.

“Oh, baby. It’s been so long. I want to come inside you.”

“Pen!”

Her pace doubles and I tug brown curls as my climax surges. I attempt to pull out, but she clamps her lips, sucking me into an inebriated state of bliss. The sight of her swallowing me as tears form in her eyes’ corners burns into my brain.

She slows, letting me fall from her swollen skin. We’re both breathing heavy, and her breasts are bouncing as she gasps for air. I drop to my knees and rip off the thong by inserting my thumb into the thin lace.

“God, Penelope. The relief’s indescribable. I feel whole and free.”

“The rapture on your face interwove our heartstrings. I’m falling for you, too, Bentley. Take me to bed. Santa needs to deliver his package up my chimney.”

“Have you been a good girl?”

Penelope

OUR MOUTHS MELT TOGETHER as he grips my behind and lifts us into a standing position. I can give Bentley what no other woman can, my endless love and devotion. His triumphant smile flutters in my belly. He is a Kringle.

His shoes kick off and he steps out of his boxers and trousers.

“You look sexy in socks.”

“Thank you, Miss Parks.”

“I’m sorry for running away.”

“All is forgiven.”

A light bulb pops into my head as we reach the full-sized mattress.

“I have a gift for you.”

“Another one?”

I swat his hands as he squeezes my butt and struts to the sofa. Saint Nick needs proper attire. The tie removes from the plastic sack and hides behind my back. He’s grinning stupidly when I return.

“Damn, woman. You have a fine set of peaches.”

“Close your eyes.”

He follows instruction, and the fabric slides over his head. I take a moment to appreciate the Adonis before me. Best. Gift. Ever.

“Open.”

“What’s this?”

“A new tradition.”

“You’ve no idea how grateful I am to be with you, Penelope. My lust at first sight turned to the beginnings of unbridled love as you challenged my beliefs. I never thought this depth of devotion was possible after losing Syd. You make me a better man.”

My tender kiss morphs into a passionate need to claim her before midnight. This is our holiday, and I want to create lasting memories.

I sit on the bed’s edge and pat my thighs. The idea of pinking her beautiful skin enlivens my cock, and she shimmies across my lap.

“It’s later. Are you ready, gorgeous?”

“Uh-huh.”

My right fingers slide onto her flawless behind, and she purrs. Every teenage fantasy is playing out as I continue massaging the supple cheeks. My blood’s pumping with excitement.

“Please.”

“In due time.”

I wish she could see the school-boy grin breaking on my face. This is heaven. She rocks her stomach across my erection, and my index and forefinger slide into her moist folds.

“Ooh,” she murmurs.

“May I continue?”

Her head nods, and I pierce her swollen opening. *Hold on boy, it’s almost time*, I chide to my throbbing cock. My thumb finds her plump bud, and she breathes out a sexy moan.

“Am I doing it right, Miss Parks?”

“Jesus, Bentley. Yes.”

Her hips swivel in rhythm with my sensual touch, and she clenches her ass. My hand removes and slaps the cheek with the perfect amount of pressure. Three spanks on each side leave her panting for air and garbling to make her come.

The condom I threw on the comforter retrieves, and I roll the latex tight. She's repositioned into a straddle on my lap.

"I want to watch your face burst into orgasm, beautiful. Ready?"

"Please!"

Her shout times perfectly with my penetration, and I feel her nails dig into my shoulders as I thrust hard. I smell her arousal, holiday spice, and peppermint. She's delicious enough to eat, but I'm greedy, and it's almost time. The clock on her dresser shows eleven fifty-five.

She meets my every stroke, wrapping her right fingers around the tie and tugging with each impale. Seeing her breasts and ass rise and fall blurs my vision, and my teeth clench. One minute.

"I'm close," she gasps.

"Me too. I love you, Miss Penelope Parks, and I don't want to waste another second of this precious life. Will you move in with me?"

"Bentley!"

We meld together and convulse into a mind-bending climax. Her fluid floods me with euphoria, and I come so forcefully that my eyeballs roll. Her sex clenches tight. I'll never let her go.

"Oh God," she chokes. "I'm high."

"Me too, baby. It's Christmas Day."

"Santa came. Hard."

"Indeed, Miss Parks. You don't have to answer now."

"What?"

"You didn't hear me ask you to move in?"

I push damp locks of hair behind her ears as our eyes sparkle, and she gives me a wicked grin.

“I heard.”

“Well?”

“Not your concern, Sir.”

“Your damn right it’s my concern!”

“I could beat you in court, you know. My poker face is unbreakable. Maybe I’ll pursue a full law degree.”

She kisses me deep and we bask in the holiday glow.

“Be mine, Penelope,” I breathe as our lips part.

“It would be my honor, Mr. Bentley Barton, Sir.”

We fall together under the covers and the moonlight dances in her silky hair.

Thanks, Sydney. Thanks, Santa. Miracle complete.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m counting the number of ways I could take you across my desk.”

“How about you?”

“I can’t wait to tell my parents and meet your family. Mom and Dad will cry more than me.”

“I love your tears. What if I told you Kringle has access to a magical sleigh that will transport us to the frozen tundra of Minnesota?”

“Yeah, right. I suppose he has a sack of gifts, too.”

My muscles roll her onto her back and she giggles. The sweet sound is pure magic.

“My sack is full, Miss Claus. I’ll alert my pilot and we can leave mid-morning.”

“You’re serious?”

“Swear under oath.”

“I love you, Bentley. This feels like forever.”

“Call me Ben. For the rest of our lives.”

The End

About the Author

I'm so glad you're here – welcome!

I help overworked stressed women by giving them the freedom to discover themselves and fulfill their innermost passions through my enthralling stories.

I'm a successful bestselling author by day, and a devoted Pugmom by night.

Your shelter from the storms of life is only a page away!

Pandora

P.S. Visit my website to get two of my bestselling books for FREE!

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You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

A Home Run to Forever

**USA Today Bestselling Author
Kristin Lee**

1

Kenni

“I’M TIRED OF USING TOYS,” I say to no one. I’m usually incredible at multitasking, but I can’t enjoy it when I’m having to do the work and the dirty talk to myself.

The garage door hums with a rhythmic clatter as it opens, followed by a distinct, metallic click. He’s returning home after touring Japan for the iconic brands that he represents, like Louisville Slugger, Rolex, and Wilson. Even during the off-season, there aren’t many days to relax.

Bolting through the house, I find my soon-to-be husband in the mudroom with his luggage in tow. “You’re home! You’re home!” I leap into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist, and the faint smell of cinnamon drifts through my nose. When our lips part, the taste electrifies my senses as he moves the Big Red gum to the inside pocket of his cheek, letting our tongues tango.

Wilson Shepherd has loved cinnamon gum since we were just kids playing two-hand touch in the field, between our houses.

“You’re late. We only have an hour,” I say, eager to be with him.

Wils holds me with one arm, grinning from ear to ear as he turns his hat backward. “I’m early, remember. I took a different flight so we would have time to”—he sweeps his lips over mine—“be together one more time.”

One more time seems so final.

A thud sounds against the hardwood floor as he drops his duffel bag, and he sits me on the counter. I pull his quarter zip over his head, but there's another layer beneath—a button-down. "Why are you wearing so many clothes?" I ask, frustrated that I can't get to his body quicker.

I struggle with the little shell buttons as he assists me by working on my jeans. "Why wear jeans so snug? They're like a snake's skin. I thought you wanted this to move faster," he teases as I squirm to slip out of them. He removes my jeans and the teeny strip of lace underneath them, and then swiftly discards them over the kitchen chair.

"I was reviewing the seating chart when I heard the garage door open." I sneak a peek at my smartwatch and realize we're down to fifty-seven minutes. "Remind me why we agreed to forgo sex for three weeks before the wedding."

"This is why." A sexy rasp escapes his throat. His lips graze along the column of my neck. "I missed you so damn much."

The next button reveals an undershirt. He has to be kidding me. "A T-shirt, too? What're you doing to me?"

"Because it's December in Chicago, but I love it when you're eager." He glides his thumb and forefinger through my folds. "The anticipation has you so wet and glistening like snow. Are you ready for me, babe?"

Wilson's body is exquisite. It's not only the washboard abs; his obliques and back muscles make me weak in the knees, too. I intend to worship at his throne tonight.

My navy blue cashmere sweater sticks to my skin as he peels it over my shoulders and dips his head into the sensitive area of my neck, nipping and sucking. Skipping down to the shiny gold fastener of my bra, he playfully nuzzles around before using his teeth to release the clasp.

I almost push him toward my legs as he continues to fondle and bite my breasts. His large palms keep my legs spread as he drops to his knees.

"So ready," I pant.

“I noticed,” he whispers, plants a soft kiss on my inner thigh, then repeats the same gesture on the other side.

My body aches for him in ways I can't explain. Maybe it's his attention to detail. He flattens his tongue and moves it to my center, causing my stomach to heave toward him. “Oh, God.”

“That's quite a compliment,” he murmurs in a low, guttural tone, and I can't help but thrust my center into his face. “Now that's my good girl.”

He sucks my cream-colored nub, creating the perfect amount of suction against my delicate skin. He buries his head so far between my legs, all I can see is his hat and the brown hair curling up under the edge.

The sides of the cap scrapes over my thighs, casting goosebumps on top of my skin, providing me more friction. “I love your hat between my thighs. Please ... please bring this hat on the honeymoon.”

His tongue swirls but stops when my hands press on his hat, driving him deeper. He makes me crazy.

With the precision of a drone strike, he bombards his target over and over. Unable to think, my core tightens. He adds a finger inside me, and it's more than I can handle. I try to stave it off, but my inner walls seize, and I have an undying orgasm.

Wils stands up from the floor, using the back of his baseball hat to wipe away my juices. A fresh set of tingles courses through my body when he declares, “This hat is never to be washed. You know how superstitious us baseball players can be.” He winks, flashing me dimples that saturate my soul every time.

“I do. Will it be your good luck charm, Mr. Shepherd?” I ask seductively, letting my fingers travel over my breast.

He swallows hard as he drops his pants, and I'm mesmerized by his length and width as if it's our first time. But he's a prime example of God's rule of proportions. If there were a diagram in biblical texts, it would be of Wils. He's

gorgeous, not bulky, and every muscle is cut like a flawless diamond.

He slides me off the counter, and his erection presses into my stomach as we sway back and forth, kissing tenderly. I'm three weeks away from marrying the boy I've crushed on since I was nine years old—my brother's best friend.

During those younger years, I never imagined the intimate activities in the kitchen, but now it has become one of my favorite places. Wils positions his hands on the counter, using his imposing frame to surround me.

Gently, he gathers my hair, draping it over my shoulder, allowing it to cascade over my breast. His hand roams across my back, planting tender kisses along the way. "I need to be inside you, soaking in your heat. You're driving me out of my mind."

With one hand on the small of my back, he guides himself into my entrance and my muscles welcome him home. His dick swells inside me and my ache is so strong, I blurt out, "Then drive."

"Where do you want to go?" he asks with a low chuckle. His hips begin to piston while the delicious sound of our skin meeting unravels my need for more.

"I don't care, just drive fast."

Wils lives his life with intention and always has. Every moment builds on something else. He nurtures his friendships to become family. He eats well to fuel his body during a four-hour daily workout so his body can withstand the rigorous grind of being a professional baseball player.

Wils doesn't do things halfway. I'm going to be sexed up when our hour is up.

We're bent against the dark gray slate countertop when he throws a change up; instead of pumping me faster, he swirls, shifting his hips and pressing down on my back. He hits a spot so deep that I fall into the recesses of my desires. No matter what he wants to do at this minute, I wouldn't be able to stop him.

A beautiful vision plays in my head of me in my wedding dress. It's hiked up around my waist, and Wils is behind me in only his tuxedo shirt, giving me everything he has. That's when it happens—my muscles stiffen. I reach behind me for his arm, removing it from my skin and pulling him in close. I need him close. With his chest on my back and his chin tucked in my neck pocket, he whispers, "I love you," over the shell of my ear.

I can't breathe. Every muscle pulls taut, even my eyelashes, from squeezing. A million syllables sputter from my mouth as the oxytocin releases and my bare skin adheres to the cold stone beneath me.

He's always in control, so when his movements become erratic and he plunges into me harder and faster, I know he's ready to explode. His hot cum warms me from the inside out. He slips his arm around my waist, thrusting deep, stuffing me with his body and filling me with love. I go overboard once again, but this time it's with him.

My chest heaves as I struggle to breathe. He peels his body from mine, turning me to face him.

My heart's racing and my lungs burn. In broken syllables, I say, "Breathing shouldn't require so much air." I lift my arm to check my watch. "It's 12:23. We went over."

"Breaking the rules never felt so satisfying," he says as laughter erupts from his chest. "But we're not done."

His phone buzzes and our wedding coordinator's name appears on the screen, but Wils turns the phone face down on the table.

He always answers his phone.

Wils

“ARE YOU BEING SERIOUS? When will you have a definite answer?” I ask, pressing the wedding planner for more information.

All I want is to marry the woman I’ve loved since I was a teenager. The tips of my fingers scrape over my forehead before I shove the phone back into the zippered pocket of my athletic pants. A single surprise can have a ripple effect, and I’m not fond of that.

The back door of my home gym glides open as my three best friends—Patrick, Archer and Tackett—waltz in, chatting about the Bears football game later today. They’re making meaningless bets like, *I’ll wash your car if they win by three points or more.*

When I don’t chime in, Patrick slaps me on the back. “Didn’t you sleep well? The kids woke me up three times last night. I had to read *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* three times to Ella. Upon hearing giggling, Avery and I thought Jackson had a girl in his room. Turns out they were on a video call.” He shakes his head before sitting down on the weight bench. “He’s eleven and I’m dreading his teenage years.”

Of course, Jackson has this little girl laughing in stitches. He captured all our hearts the moment we met him as he joked and played pranks.

Archer, the owner and General Manager of the Chicago Kodiaks, the baseball team the rest of us play for, says, “I

don't want to hear it. Megan and I are adjusting to having six-month-old twins."

A half-smile lifts my cheeks. When Patrick and I bought land outside of Chicago and built houses for us and our families, I never expected for all of my best friends to be living here. Patrick, Archer, and Tackett have homes in the private subdivision we aptly named Kodiak Kove, since we play for the Chicago Kodiaks.

"Good problems to have. Kenni and I've been engaged the longest, and we're the last ones to be married. In fact, it's looking less likely that she'll have her dream wedding." I grab the cloth and the cleaner, wiping down the machine I was using before Zena, the wedding coordinator, called and put me in a bad mood.

Tackett, the youngest player on our professional baseball team, asks, "Why?" He married his wife, Talynn, when baseball season ended.

"The castle in England was in foreclosure, and the new owner takes possession tomorrow. They may not honor the contract. Hopefully, I'll know later today." It's a good thing I handle pressure well. You can't be the major league MVP and have two World Series rings without learning to compartmentalize. "Alright, let's start our workout."

The ball feels heavy, but I think it's the wedding weighing on my mind as Patrick and I partner up, throwing the medicine ball back and forth and doing sit-ups. Grunts escape from my chest until I sit up, resting my elbows on my knees.

Patrick's stare lingers on me. "Let's go to the batting cage. Ripping some balls will help." An intuitive person, Patrick can clearly sense that I'm nervous about wrecking my fiancée's dream wedding.

We make our way to Kodiak Stadium and request the equipment manager to set up the batting cage and ball machine. A hush falls over everyone as we slip into our cleats and choose our favorite bats. Strolling through the tunnel toward the field, the resounding clicks of our cleats against the

concrete floor echo in my mind alongside the daunting task of reorganizing an entire wedding.

Archer suggests some minor changes in Tackett's swing. He's not just a figurehead, he knows baseball inside and out.

After a couple of hours rotating through sliders, curves breaking, and curve ball pitches, my phone rings again. It's Zena, the wedding planner.

"Hello."

There's a heavy sigh before she speaks. "I'm sorry, Wilson. The new owners want to renovate the castle starting this week. You'll receive a full refund, but we need to find a new castle for the wedding."

Inwardly, I chuckle at the use of the words *new* and *castle* in her sentence. Finding another castle quickly seems impossible. Part of the reason we pushed our wedding date into the future was so we could get married at Belvoir Castle.

"I'll pay whatever price for the new owners want if they can just wait," I say, attempting to stay calm and solve the problem. "Triple. I'll pay triple."

"I've already let them know that you're willing to increase your price, but the new owners have declined to negotiate. I contacted three castles in England, but two have prior events. The third one hasn't called me back."

The only word I say is, "Okay."

In a momentary lapse of self-control, I sling my bat well past the infield. "Fuck."

This cannot be happening. Kenni and I have endured and overcome many obstacles, but this is one hurdle I can't jump.

My friends hang their heads.

Tackett, ever the optimist, grabs my elbow and says, "You once told me not to stress, to stay calm, and my swing would return. Just stay calm and we'll figure it out."

I breathe out, close my eyes, and respond, "You're right. But how am I going to break Kenni's heart when it's finally

mended?"

.

Kenni

WHAT COULD GO WRONG? Lake Michigan is stunning, even now in the winter. The soothing water ripples, and the December sun, although not strong, is bright. When Wils inquired about my dream wedding, a castle came to mind because *The Princess Bride* is my favorite movie. *Wesley, oh, Wesley*. Wils is my Wesley, willing to fight for me to the end.

When we were teens in love, tragedy struck. I cut him out of my life, and the shared pain that should have brought us closer drove us apart. Nevertheless, he didn't surrender. Being baseball's rising star and league MVP, he arranged a trade to join my team, ensuring we would have to talk and face our past heartbreak. I attempted to resist the charm of those captivating dimples, yet the more I resisted, the more resolute he became.

My friends gather around me. "Are you excited?" Megan asks, and I can't believe how freaking gorgeous she is after just having twin boys.

Overwhelmed by remembering my painful past and the difficulties that Wils and I experienced as kids, my lids fill with tears. My hand shakes before tenting my nose and my lips fold inward, attempting to ward off the threatening tears.

I've known Avery since I was young, and she knows all too well what I'm feeling right now. She married Wils's best friend, Patrick, a couple of years ago. Megan and Archer followed only weeks later.

While holding a stem of golden bubbles, she rubs my back for a long moment and stares out the large penthouse window. “Baseball brought us all together. I can’t imagine not living in Kodiak Kove with you, Megan, and Talynn. Today is a day of celebration where we celebrate the best friend any of us could have. I know it’s hard, but let’s stay in the present.”

Megan hands me a glass of champagne.

“Is it okay to make a pre-bridal shower toast?” I ask.

Talynn claims, “You can do anything you want. This is your day.”

The fleeting moment of sadness disappears, and laughter fills me because I’m the shyest of my friends. I’m the one listening to them about sex. “To being celibate for three weeks.”

“What?” they say in unison as their jaws drop. Then, Avery, always the therapist without a filter, says, “May I ask why? Because that’s just crazy.” She pauses and squirms one side of her mouth up. “It’s proven that sex is the best stress reliever on the planet, and these last few weeks of weddings are stressful.”

Talynn chimes in, “Can I get an Amen?” She began making plans for her wedding about one year out.

“Don’t look at me. Archer and I were married three weeks after he proposed,” Megan states while wiggling her eyebrows. “I had to lock that shit down.”

Naturally, my friends know how to soothe me—they’re angels on earth but come complete with potty mouths.

“Because Wils wants it to be epic. It’s always epic. The man doesn’t half-ass anything. So last night, he came home from a ten-day road trip. Well, let’s just say, I don’t think honeymoon sex can beat it. How did I get so lucky? How did we find these perfect men?”

Megan smiles. “Somehow, we found men that healed our pain.” She hugs her sister, Talynn. They had it rough, we all did—just in vastly different ways.

The doorbell to the suite rings with a sing-song sound. Megan opens the door to a line of friends and family. My mom and Wils's mom pull me into a tight embrace. They're followed by my wives of the Kodiak players and my colleagues in the Kodiaks front office.

My mom says, "This hotel is unbelievable. I love the blending of old and new styles. Anything I can do for you, baby?"

A-listers have hosted their weddings and receptions at the historic Drake Hotel. It's an old Hollywood style of glamour.

"Not really. I told Wils what I wanted, and he ran with it. As you know, wedding dress is a secret, and I approved all details. Are you ready for your first international flight?"

Mom sucks in a mouthful of air. "Not especially. But I'll do anything for my baby girl."

"I'm your only girl." Sadness flashes through her eyes. "You know what I mean."

I squeeze her hard, understanding its impossible not to think of the past. "Love you, Mom."

They scan the room, taking in the beauty of the elaborate penthouse now decorated in gold and cream. An enormous three foot vase with gold-tipped flowers adorn the gift table.

Megan asks everyone to sit as she passes out iced cookies packaged in clear cellophane with gold ribbons tied to keep them fresh. They're decorated with questions to answer. *Answer the question that's written on your cookie*, it says. I've played something similar. If you can't answer the question, then the person next to you gets a chance, and the cookie passes until someone answers correctly.

Megan asks Mrs. Shepherd to go first. "As Wilson's mom, I've known Kenni ever since we moved next door. I've witnessed her fearlessly going toe to toe with the boys while playing baseball in the yard. I've also seen her gracefully working in ball gowns and dedicatedly building sports trauma centers. So, I can confidently answer the question." She turns it over face up and giggles. "When did you notice Wilson and

Kenni had a spark?” Her eyes water. “That’s easy. The first time I heard her call him *Wils*. When he was twelve, she always looked at him like he hung the moon, and he was protective of her.”

Talynn says, “Kenni, you held out on us. We thought you all got together when he was almost seventeen.”

A warm feeling skates through me, thinking about teenage *Wils*. “The question was when did she notice a spark, not when we admitted our feelings?”

“Is she right?”

My smile widens as I think back to my earliest memory. “Close enough. While I began calling him *Wils* early on, I was as certain of my love by age ten. But year after year, it never waned. It’s hard to believe someone as handsome and charming as *Wils* loves me.”

Mrs. Shepherd stands up and takes both my hands. “Honey, he’s never loved anyone else. Never.”

Simultaneously, the guests say, “Aww.”

“Me either.”

My heart is full from how well my friends and co-workers know *Wils* and me. Almost everyone keeps their cookie. Talynn missed her question but took it back from Megan, challenging that *Wils* and I were already in Chicago, and she missed the part about our first kiss.

Avery says, “Sit here. It’s gift time.” I take my place by the gift table with presents stacked two high and three deep. The first gift is from Avery, Patrick’s wife. I shred the gift wrapping away and find silk lingerie for me and silk boxers for *Wilson*. Avery snickers. “*Wilson* may want to be careful with the boxers because they’re from Jackson.”

Everyone laughs because they know Avery’s son, Jackson, can’t help but play a good prank. Patrick and *Wils* always try to one up each other, and Jackson loves it. It’s a poor combination since we live next door.

“This is gorgeous,” I say, admiring the claw clip encrusted with rhinestones.

Mrs. Chatham, who is Archer’s mom, and the owner of the Kodiaks along with her husband, claps her hands and explains, “I thought it would be perfect for the morning after. You’re not going to feel like doing your hair.” She grins.

Chuckles come from the peanut gallery.

“Thank you, it’s beautiful.”

They shower me with jewelry, totes, and things engraved with *Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd*. My favorite is the blanket with our wedding date on the corner. There’s one more enormous gift, packaged in shimmery copper paper with a light gold bow. I rip the paper after pulling the ribbon. A gasp escapes my chest. “It’s...gorgeous.” I take the black iron infinity sign out of the box, holding it first to me and then rotating it for my guests to see. “No card to give me a hint? Who gave me this stunning piece of art?”

“Oh sorry. It’s from me. It’s the coordinates of the castle where your wedding was supposed to take place.” All eyes are on Talynn when she ends the call. “Now I need to have another one made.

My brows pinch and my brain tries to make sense of the word *was*.

The room is quieter than when a Baptist preacher says, *Let’s pray*.

4

Wils

“GIVE HER SOME TIME. Kenni’s upset but she’ll come around,” my mom suggests before she hangs up.

I called her three times, but she didn’t answer. Messaged her. Again, no answer, and I feel seventeen all over again. Kenni withdraws when she processes, but I can’t give her space this time.

It’s been three hours since I spoke with my mom when Kenni finally comes through the front door, which she never uses, fumbling with her keys. Then I recall her riding with Avery, Megan, and Talynn.

She stumbles and hits the wall in the hallway, and I rush over. “Did you have fun?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. She’s tipsy, possibly drunk.

“I did until I found out I’m not getting married in a castle and my fiancé kept that little tidbit from me,” she slurs as she attempts to square her shoulders.

I touch her arms, trying to hold her steadily, but she pulls away abruptly. “Babe, I didn’t want to ruin your special day with friends and family. I didn’t expect Tackett to tell Talynn since she was already at the bridal shower. I promise, I intended to tell you as soon as you got home.”

As she walks away from me, her ankle twists and she falls to the floor. Why she chooses to wear these high heels, I’ll never understand. I scoop her into my arms and carry her to our bedroom.

“I’m mad at you. Let me down.”

“I know, babe, but I’m going to put you in bed and make you a sandwich. One of those greasy ones you like so much.”

Kenni hums as she rolls onto her side, bending her knees and placing her hands under head. “The ones Avery calls a cheesecake panini?”

I laugh, recalling Avery using the term when she and Patrick were fake dating. “Yeah, I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me,” I assure her, and place her phone on our nightstand.

Kenni rarely kicks back. She’s the type of person that always has to be busy, so when she imbibes a little too much because I failed to secure the castle of her dreams, I’ll give her a pass.

After gathering all the ingredients, I spread the butter on the hoagie and toast it in the oven. Then I sauté the thinly sliced steak, onions, and mushrooms. I pile it high and even add mayonnaise. Although, she usually eats healthy with me, this time she deserves whatever she wants. Because I need to get out of the doghouse.

“Dinner is served,” I say in my best English accent. Kenni is curled up with harsh, uneven breaths coming from her lungs. “Sit up and take these.” I hand her two ibuprofen and a glass of water, placing the plate on the bed.

Her wavy, blonde hair is mussed, and unless we can find a castle in England, our wedding plans are much the same.

She swallows the pills and reaches for the sandwich. She sinks her teeth into the bread and perks up. “Holy smokes, this is good. We should have it every night.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you immediately. I wanted everything to be perfect for you. I was hoping I could figure it out and offer you some choices, but nothing is available in England.”

“I know. The girls researched while I drank peach Bellinis. You’ll make it up to me by eating this fattening cheesesteak. A soft laugh filters out of her mouth.

Picking up the massive sandwich, I rip it in half, causing the butter to drip down my hands and onto the bed. As a self-

proclaimed neat freak, I believe everything should have its place and food doesn't belong on the bed. However, Kenni finds it amusing, and if ever we needed some comic relief, it's now.

“Kiss me.”

She leans over on all fours, stretching her neck, pressing her lips to mine before collapsing into my lap. “What are we going to do? Why is the universe against us?” she asks, whimpering. Her hand slides around my waist.

“Honestly, I don't know. Do you want to postpone?”

“No, I'm tired of waiting to be your wife. Let's just get married here. I'm sure with all of your—and Archer's influence—someone will have a church available.”

“But you always dreamt of getting married in a castle, and I can afford it, so I want to be your prince.”

“You've always been my prince.” She pushes off my chest. “What about everyone's flights? The caterer? The flowers. Everything has to be redone.” Worry lines crease across her forehead and her eye search mine for answers. All I can do is hold her close.

“The guys are on it, and I'm sure their wives are as well. The wedding planner is searching for alternatives. She's seven hours ahead of us, so let's go to sleep and hopefully we'll have some places to check out tomorrow.”

I take the food downstairs, and when I come back up, she's wearing nothing but my practice jersey. A deep growl travels through my body.

“Come get me,” she practically purrs, gesturing with her pointer finger.

I pull the comforter from underneath her, and she laughs hysterically as her back bounces on the mattress. “Not on a greasy mattress. Aren't we supposed to be waiting?”

Kenni sticks out her bottom lip, all pouty and perfect, and I suck on it like candy, teasing her. She giggles as she squirms away. There's not a more important sound I'll ever hear than

her laughing. From the time we were kids, it always struck me. When I heard it, my heart immediately skipped a beat.

My breath ghosts her skin with phantom-like kisses. “You’re making it hard to resist you, wearing my old Sarasota Sharks jersey.” My dick strains against my pants, wanting nothing more than to fill her sadness.

She rises to her knees. “It’s where we restarted our life. After pain meds and food, I realized that it’s not about where we get married—it’s that we get married. Can we forget the pact?” She kisses one cheek then switches sides, finding the corner of my lips.

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Lying her down on the bed, I lift her shirt, showering her with wet kisses from her belly to her lips. With my arm enveloping her waist, I flip us over so she’s on top, wanting her hair to brush against my skin while we make love.

Those brilliant green eyes peer down at me as her smile fades, replaced by a serious expression. “I’ll be happy no matter what because I’ll be Kennison Marie Shepherd.”

“Umm. I love the way my last name sounds at the end of yours.” My fingers trace the outline of her face before my thumb grazes her lower lip. Tugging it down, I suck it slowly, beginning a long exchange of kisses.

After removing our shirts, she rests against my chest. My calloused fingers skate over her back, and she lets out a small sigh as her body relaxes into me. I whisper over her hair, “I love you.” Before I can break our *no sex before the wedding* pact, her breathing slows, and faint, muffled snores emanate across my chest.

Lying awake for hours thinking about the wedding re-plan that needs to take place this week, my spirit is calm knowing she’s happy, even if she can’t get married in a countryside English castle.

It’s after sunrise when my phone lights up with a message from Tackett.

Tackett: I found a castle. I should be elevated to the Best Man.

Kenni

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, our lives took an unexpected turn, propelling Wils and me in opposite directions. This time, it's a happy change. Almost a week later, we're gazing upon a castle sitting back off the road, high on a hill, surrounded by the soft, rolling hills of Kentucky.

"Tackett, we can't thank you enough. It's gorgeous," I say, admiring the stone structure where Wils and I will get married.

Tackett stuffs his hands into his pockets, blushing. He's the youngest of our friend group and is cocky as hell on the field but off he's a cinnamon roll. "I can't take all the credit." Tackett points to Hagan and Harper, Archer's younger twin siblings. "I felt terrible for spoiling your shower. I recalled Hagan mentioning a castle outside of Lexington when he first transferred to the university. So, I reached out to see how I could make it up to you and Wilson. After that, a chain reaction began. Logan, their roommate, overheard and shared that his sister knew the owner. His sister made a late-night call and set up the meeting for you."

"And here we are," I say, shivering. "A castle in Kentucky. Who knew?"

Wils draws me under his wing. Wils says, "Thanks to all of you for helping me make her dreams come true, even if it's different."

"It not just different, it's better. Getting married on the rooftop of a castle, Oh Wesley," I laugh. "I mean Wils."

“I’m going to *Wesley* you. So, my princess bride, will you marry me here at Castle Post?” he asks, wrapping his arms around my jean jacket.

I thread my hands around his neck, playing with the curls under his black beanie. “Yes, it’s perfect. Better than the castle in England.” He peppers me with PG kisses, and everyone claps.

“Alright, let’s go inside, have lunch, and decide how to divide and conquer,” Wils says, clapping his hands.

“Did you bring your colored pens?” I ask Megan, which amuses everyone. She’s a color coder, like so many successful people.

“I did. The tasks are divided into categories. During lunch, we’ll assign a category to a group of people. The guys will take travel arrangements because that doesn’t take creativity,” she smirks.

Her husband, Archer, replies, “I’m creative. Remember what I did with your toy—”

She interrupts him abruptly, covering his mouth and with a firm expression, and retorts, “Not in front of your siblings.”

Following our lunch, we head to the farmhouse, close to the castle, which will serve as the accommodations for the entire wedding party until the big day.

When Wils informed Archer about the new venue in Versailles, Kentucky, Archer wasted no time and dialed friends who live in the same quaint town. His friends possess a breathtaking colonial mansion that’s unoccupied while the owners are away in Southern California.

Miles of white fencing adorns the brown fields while a few white barns dot the landscape.

“Who wants to go horseback riding?” my future husband asks.

“Me!” I exclaim.

Avery chimes in, “Yeah, you need to get those inner thighs in shape.”

Wils rolls his eyes, then they soften around the edges as he pretends to scratch his non-existent beard, ignoring her. “I’ll call the farm manager and arrange it. Let’s meet in the kitchen in an hour. We’ll start checking off items from our list tomorrow,” Wils says, sporting a relieved smile.

After meeting the group and getting the horses saddled, Wils and I wander off by ourselves, having both ridden horses in our youth. We find a place that winds down to a creek. Sitting side by side next to the creek, our fingers interlace as the gentle water mumbles its soothing melody. The setting sun casts a warm glow over the chilly night.

“Are you happy? Tell me the truth.”

I lift my chin and look into his ocean blue eyes. “The happiest I’ve ever been.”

His eyes water as he asks, “Is it?”

I can see the joy in his eyes; they’re reflecting the same happiness in my soul. Everything else blurs away as we gaze into each other’s eyes, and the world seems to stop turning. In this serene moment, our destiny is right here. Right now.

“Yes, every detail of the castle and this mansion are perfect.”

The evening breeze brushes through our hair, and I can’t resist taking off his beanie and running my fingers through his tousled locks. The warm presence of his hands skate across my cheeks. We exchange a daring smile, and after a minute of hesitation, Wils claims my mouth.

I’m his. He’s mine. And we don’t need a marriage certificate to understand the depth of our connection and the love we’ve shared since we were teens.

The creek’s gentle song creates a peaceful backdrop, intensifying the intimacy between us. He takes off his Barbour jacket and lays it on the cold ground. He pushes down the leggings underneath my dress as his fingers sneak under my panties.

“Wils, not here. Someone could find us.”

He produces a light chuckle. “You’re always talking about our lives being too planned. How you want to be spontaneous. This is me being spontaneous.” His tone is two octaves deeper than normal, and I feel a rush through my core and the dampness on my panties.

“You, Wilson Shepherd, are being a very ... bad ... boy,” I say in my sultriest voice.

“That’s the point. Be bad with me.”

My eyes widen as I nod in agreement.

Our life revolves around schedules and sticking to them, but tonight we throw the calendars into the rushing water. He removes my boots and leggings, then takes off his own. Warming my body like it’s summer, he plays with my folds.

He enters me and it feels like a steel freaking rod; he’s so hard. His slow, measured movements involve pulling all the way out and pushing all the way back in. My fingernails dig into his ass. God, I love his ass, especially naked or in his baseball uniform. My fingers skate up to his puckered hole, and I tenderly scrape my nails over the tight skin.

“You’re such a bad girl,” he roars in between ragged breaths.

He plunges into me harder, and time seems to slow down, giving us time to cherish this blissfully intimate moment where love seems to have cast an enchanting spell.

“I’m going to come,” I pant while drawing him closer to me than feels humanly possible. One large palm encases my ass as he pumps a few more times, with his body spewing into me like rushing rapids.

His body blankets mine, and with the creek as our witness, I’m certain that no matter where we are, we’re home if we’re together.

By the time we return, everyone is sitting around the firepit. Patrick offers, “There’s pizza, wine, and beer in the kitchen.”

“Thanks.”

Megan goes over the list of what needs to be done while Wils calls both our parents to give them good news and their tasks of the seating charts and signage.

Guys: cancel flights and make new arrangements.

Girls: shop for flowers for the rehearsal and bouquets.

Wils: handle the flowers for the wedding day, figure out catering, and find a new wedding coordinator.

I survey the circle of friends that are taking ten days from their busy lives to make our dreams come true, and my eyes water. Wils notices and puts his arm around the back of my chair, fiddling with my hair as he whispers into my ear, “We’re lucky.”

“We are.” I nod my head while wiping away an errant tear.

After everything we went through as teenagers, I never considered myself lucky. In the back of my mind, I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Wils

THE WIND HOWLS outside the grand castle walls. I stand on the brink of our wedding day, with my heart filled with a blend of excitement and desperation. The snowstorm rages on, threatening to ruin our nuptials.

My phone rings with Kenni's assigned ringtone. I take a deep breath, hoping to calm her fears.

"Hey babe. Are you ready to get married?"

I can practically hear her heartbeat pounding in her heavy sigh. "Wils, have you looked out the window? It's a blizzard."

"We've weathered worse. Nothing, I repeat, *nothing* is stopping me from becoming your husband today."

"I want that too, but my dress consists of fine, intricate lace. A few flakes will soak it, let alone a snowstorm."

I'll make it happen. "Just have fun getting your hair done. Are you wearing that sheer robe with the white feathers on the edges?"

"Yeah, why?" she asks.

"Because when you tried it on at home, I couldn't take my eyes off you—it's the perfect incentive. Don't worry—I'll take care of everything. At three o'clock, I'll be at the end of the aisle. Okay?"

In an almost bashful tone, she says, "I'll be the one in white," and hangs up.

The majestic castle, decorated with flickering lights and white flowers interlaced with purple dwarf crested irises cascading down the walls, now seems eerie amidst the roaring blizzard. I pictured her walking down the aisle in a beautiful vintage gown, but the reality of the storm threatens to shatter her dreams. And her dreams are my own. I'm the man that's supposed to make them all come true.

Kenni and the bridesmaids are in the Bridal Tower and separated from the groomsmen. Archer hands me a bourbon, then sits in the tufted chair beside Patrick and Tackett.

Tackett says, "I'd like to say a few words since Patrick has the honor of the Best Man toast." He clears his throat. "Wilson, you taught me valuable lessons about baseball, life, and love. You're the man that gave me a place to live and trusted me with it. A generous friend and mentor. Today, when you marry Kenni, the world will be in harmony." He raises his glass, and we follow his lead, slamming the new and exclusive Barron's 12 Special Reserve.

Grabbing his shoulder, I look into his eyes. "Thanks, Tackett. Now I need to find Kenni something to wear over her gown. She says it's too fragile for this type of weather."

Patrick suggests, "Instead of getting married on the roof, why don't you get married inside the castle? That would solve all the problems." He holds his hands out, palms up.

"It would, but Kenni has always dreamed of having it outdoors. Besides, the only space large enough is where the reception is being held. And moving everything would be a logistical nightmare. We'll delay the wedding if necessary."

An idea strikes me and I look at Archer. "Your friend's wife that found us the mansion is a fashion designer, right?"

Archer answers, "She is."

We call his friend and put him on speakerphone. He passes the phone to his wife, while I explain my urgent need for something warm for Kenni to wear over her wedding dress on this white, wintery day. Though his wife doesn't have the material available, she offers to help if I can find something

within the next two hours. Soon after, Kaylee sends me a text informing me she's already contacting her suppliers and suggests several types of materials that could work.

I look over and Archer is on the phone, pacing around the room. Occasionally, I hear words like *okay*, *perfect*, or *thanks*. He strolls over, squeezes my shoulder, and says, "I called my mom. She's having a white wool hooded cloak flown here using the team plane. Last week, Mom and Megan were shopping on the Magnificent Mile and saw it in the window."

A breath I didn't realize I was holding in escapes. "Perfect. Can you get Hagan to pick it up at the airport and deliver it? He's been to Nic and Kaylee's house before, right?"

"Sure, if someone plows the streets."

"Just when I thought I had one problem sorted out, another unexpected issue arises," I mutter in frustration. Luckily, Archer has met the university's athletic director, so I decide to call him and ask if he can help me get in touch with the mayor.

Another problem solved. I'm marrying my childhood sweetheart today.

Hopefully.

At three o'clock, I stand on the roof of the grandiose castle, with stacks of snow shoveled to the sides and inches standing on the ledges. My heart pounds against my ribcage with nervousness—an unfamiliar feeling for me. After going through years of counseling, I thought I had mastered keeping calm.

The wintry landscape is a breathtaking sight, but all I can think about is Kenni, my soon-to-be bride. Each passing second feels like an eternity, and I eagerly await the moment she steps through the double arched doors as she makes her grand entrance.

My best friends stand beside me, mesmerized by their stunning wives walking down the aisle. And as I look out over two-hundred people undeterred by the weather that came to see Kenni and I pledge our undying love, my heart may burst. Teammates from my youth until now, doctors and nurses from

the trauma centers, and our families and friends are here to witness that love can endure all things. They are here because in one way or another their lives were touched by the tragedy that drove Kenni and I apart as teens.

Tears leak out of the corners of my eyes. Through everything—we made it.

The trumpets sound as the doors creak open. When Kenni emerges with her arm laced through her father's, I'm left breathless. She's the pure definition of elegance and beauty. Her gait is slow as snowflakes gracefully fall around her. When she gets closer to me, I get lost in her radiant smile that's framed by her rosy red lips and smoky eyes.

"Who brings this woman to be married to this man?" the officiant asks.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis respond, "We do." Her dad lowers the hood on the white cloak, kisses her on the cheek, then puts it back in place.

My bride, that used to wear her hair in French braids, now has the most intricate updo with tiny braids trailing over the loose bun in the back. My voice sounds like sandpaper. I'm so taken with her. "You are beautiful every day, but today, you are a vision. You look like a princess."

Her face reddens. "This cloak is gorgeous. I never imagined the wedding would be this enchanting, but you made it happen. I love you."

Our eyes swell with tears as the officiant starts the ceremony. We cut several minutes from the ceremony because the snow is supposed to get heavier soon.

It comes to the part where the reverend asks, "Who has the rings?"

I catch a mischievous glint in Jackson's eyes, and his sly grin piques my curiosity. My bride-to-be and I exchange worried glances, sensing something unexpected is about to happen. Unaware of Jackson's playful scheme, I reach into my pocket to retrieve the rings. Little did I know I would pull out a fake spider. My heart races for a half second and amusement

dances across my face. Laughter echoes through the guests as I discover the little trickster's clever prank.

Patrick fist bumps Jackson for a job well done.

Kenni says, "That's my nephew."

The tension that comes with such an important day, and the obstacles we've had to overcome, fade away. It's all replaced by a shared moment of joy, courtesy of Avery and Patrick's prank playing son who made our wedding day even more unforgettable.

"You may kiss the bride."

In this magical moment, it's as if time has stopped. I am hers. And she is mine.

After we're announced as *Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Shepherd*, we make our way inside the castle to the dance floor. She reveals her wedding gown. The plunging neckline is made of fine, soft white lace and fits snug to her thighs, then flares out gently.

"How did I get so lucky to have you as my wife?" I whisper in her ear before twirling her back into my chest. We sway a few times, just like we practiced, before I raise my arm and she rotates into my chest.

"Where on earth did you find the cloak?" she asks with a broad smile. "It must have cost a fortune. It made me feel so beautiful, like Grace Kelly, the movie star turned princess."

"It's a gift to you, babe. Mrs. Chatham flew it here on the team plane and I had the rhinestones and pearls added."

"Thank you, but I would have gotten married at the courthouse." She laughs, throwing her head back.

I pull her in close, whispering over her ear, "I know better. I listened while you played with Barbie dolls for two years. You always, always had them getting married in the winter—at a castle."

She playfully bats her eyes. "You loved me then?"

“Maybe not then, but I knew you were someone special in my life.”

After the toasts from Patrick and Megan, I touch my spoon against my champagne glass, clearing my throat.

“Excuse me, I’d like to say a few words.” The room falls silent. “Getting married is stressful, and our wedding wouldn’t have been possible without the help of friends and family. Life continues to erect obstacles to place in our way, but we keep hurdling each one. Our hearts have belonged to each other since we were teenagers. But life threw us a curve ball, and the distance proved to me that Kenni was still the only girl for me. Years later, I took a chance. I thought maybe together we could heal our pain, honor the past, and build a future together.” I say this very sentence every time we open a new trauma center.

“Today, the weather tried to throw us another curve, but we prevailed. Our hearts are bound by tragedy, but also by love, and that love will endure and get stronger through every passing season.”

“Thank you to our parents, who moved to Kodiak Kove to be with us daily and support us in life. Our friends... Kenni and I wouldn’t be standing here today without you. We love all of you. And to Kenni...Babe, you need to change the name of your club.”

The small line emerges above her nose and her eyes narrow. “Club?” Then her eyebrows shoot up and with rounded eyes, she asks, “The Kenni Davis Exclusive Boyfriend Club?”

Chatter amongst the guests causes Jackson to shout, “Kenni had a boyfriend club? Did you kiss her?”

I shoot my wife an ear-splitting smile. “It was exclusive, only me, and yes, I kissed her.”

“Welcome to the Kenni Shepherd Exclusive Husband Club. Now, are you going to kiss me or not?” Kenni presses on her toes, planting a tender wet kiss to my lips that I return two-fold.

The diamond earrings I gifted her as a wedding present sparkle under twinkling lights. I lovingly fiddle with a loose hair that was framing her face and tuck it behind her ear. The band hits their first notes of our song.

Our eyes lock during this magical moment. We're lost in each other's happiness.

"Yes, I'm going to kiss my wife all night long," I declare, my voice strangled by emotion.

In the castle's honeymoon suite, we're surrounded by gray stone walls, sheer fabrics strung over the bed and candles on every surface. The world around us fades to black, celebrating being husband and wife. Our lips meet in sweet embraces, sealing our love with sweaty bodies and tender moments.

Afterword

If you want to read Wils & Kenni's raw and emotional love story,

read Stealing a Second Chance, [click here](#).

All the characters in this short story have full books as well in the Sarasota Sharks Series.

About the Author

Kristin Lee is a USA Today Bestselling Author and writes heart shattering, heart melting romances with a shot of humor and a twist of suspense.

She writes, small town, sports, billionaire, rock star and is looking forward to writing her first MC romance next year.

If she isn't writing or reading, you'll find her streaming her favorite shows, or attending sporting events. Did I mention she loves having a Bourbon cocktail while at the horse races?

If you haven't found your match, don't worry, you will. But for now, take a romantic journey in one of her romance novels, where you are sure to meet a swoon worthy book boyfriend.

[Join my Newsletter](#) for Sales-Freebies-Recipes and inside tidbits on my inspiration and my works in progress.

You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

Melissa's Homecoming

Gillian Zane

Blurb

Step into a world where small-town reputations clash with big-city dreams in 'Melissa's Homecoming.' In this sizzling romance, Melissa, a headstrong woman with a sordid past, escapes the confines of her judgmental hometown and finds refuge in the bustling streets of New York. Leaving behind her tarnished reputation, she embraces the anonymity of the city, hoping never to look back.

But fate has a way of rewriting our plans, and her father's untimely death calls her back from where she fled. Returning to a town that never truly understood her, she grapples with old wounds and unresolved desires.

Amidst the whispers of gossip and sidelong glances, one person has always seen past the rumors to the real Melissa. Grant, her sexy younger next-door neighbor, harbors a not-so-secret fascination for the woman who fearlessly challenged conventions. As their paths cross again, the tables turn, and it's Grant's opportunity to seduce the girl who, to this day, ignites his fantasies.

'Melissa's Homecoming' is a tale of forbidden attraction and daring encounters where boundaries blur and fetishes ignite. Will Melissa succumb to the allure of her past, or will Grant's charm rewrite the future they both crave? Dive into this tantalizing story of love, self-discovery, and the thrill of coming home.

1

Melissa

MELISSA WAS GOING HOME. It had been six years. Six long, independent years away from the God-forsaken swamps she had grown up in, besides quick visits where she barely had enough time to unpack. Six years hadn't been enough. Her stomach roiled with nerves as she thought about what going home meant.

She hadn't dreaded her homecoming, but she had fought tooth and nail to leave her small town. Coming back seemed like admitting defeat. It was all she had ever wanted growing up; it was all she had dreamed of as a teenager. To leave. To define herself, not by the house she grew up in or the boy she dated in freshman year, but by her accomplishments. She could only do that if she left. So, at eighteen, she had packed up and got the Hell out. But, now she was back. Soon she would be walking around town to hear the whispers. *Slut. Whore.* People had long memories of her hometown.

All the mean-spirited names her classmates had blessed her with trailed behind her as she descended the escalator of the airport. She made no attempt to go faster and walk with the movement of the machine. She only held on as the motorized conveyance forced her to the airport's first floor and the familiar feel of sub-tropical humidity filtering through the sliding glass doors. Welcome to the Gulf South.

Her mother was waiting by baggage claim, like the dutiful parent she was pretending to be. There was no mistaking that posture or that perfectly styled hair. How it stayed styled and

teased in this humidity was one of those mysteries of life. Her mother's face lit up the moment she laid eyes on Melissa. The older woman was pristine, in a yellow pantsuit, her hair styled in the same textured bob it had been arranged for the last twenty years. For as long as Melissa could remember, she kept her Friday 8am appointment at the local hairdresser with no deviations. As she approached her mother, she noticed a few more wrinkles around her eyes, but her neck looked firmer than ever. A little work done? She would never ask her mother. You didn't ask things like that.

Melissa barely made it within arm's length before she was yanked forward and enveloped in a hug, her mom's wet cheek pressed against her shirt since she was so much smaller than Melissa. The smell of her perfume filtered up to Melissa. It was both comforting and unsettling. Like her hair, her scent hadn't changed in decades. Chanel No. 5.

"I can't believe you came back," she sniffled into Melissa's crisp white shirt.

"You asked, Mother. How could I refuse?"

"You could have refused. Just like you refuse to take my phone calls."

"Only while I'm working, Mother."

"I didn't expect any of this. I didn't want to call you. I thought your father would be around forever." There was a break in her voice as if she was about to tear up. Melissa couldn't take a breakdown from her mother, especially not in public. The woman liked to make a scene.

"He was so young; he had another good twenty years in him," her mother said.

Melissa knew otherwise. Her father had been a consummate drunk, smoked like a chimney, and lived off fatty foods. There was no forever in his resume. He had died after consuming his favorite fried shrimp po-boy from the local deli. He made sure he ate every bite and then dropped dead of a heart attack next to the dinette set in the kitchen.

Melissa had been down for the funeral and then quickly returned to her small but chic apartment in New York to live her life. She had assumed her mother was doing fine. Her father had a considerable life insurance policy, and the house was paid off. There shouldn't be any reason to worry. But, according to her mother, she was barely getting by. The taxes were too high, and then there was the flood insurance after the last hurricane and maintenance cost. The house was old, one of the oldest in their small town, and something always needed to be repaired or replaced.

"I can't believe you came back," her mother repeated.

"It's going to be okay, Mom; I can do my job from anywhere; this will help both of us." Melissa patted her mother awkwardly on the arm, trying to get her to stop using her shirt as a handkerchief since the waterworks were now in full effect.

What she said to her mother was true. Melissa made her living as a writer for an online gossip blog. She could do her job from almost anywhere in the country since most of her tips came via email and text. She might lose some street cred when they found out she was reporting out of BFE Mississippi, but it wouldn't do that much damage. Or so she hoped. She could always fly to NYC for essential functions and networking events to keep the juices flowing. The irony of her day job versus her distaste for her own personal small-town drama didn't escape her. But, she brushed it away by justifying that these people chose to live in the public eye, whereas she liked to be far removed from scrutiny.

Melissa managed to disengage herself from her mother in time to see her bright pink suitcase begin to creep down the turnstile. She pulled the first one off the rotating rack and placed it near her carry-on.

"I have the car double-parked, so let's get moving." Melissa's mom went from an emotional wreck to crisp and business-like. She grabbed Melissa's backpack, the lightest of her luggage, and hurried off on her three-inch heels toward the service ramp without glancing backward at her prodigal daughter. The closest airport Melissa could fly into was New

Orleans International, so they had a long drive back to their rural home. It was going to put Melissa's patience to the test.

Melissa

THE DRIVE HOME WAS BORING. Her mother kept up an incessant chatter, filling her in on everything that had happened in the six years she'd been gone. Her twang had deepened in the years Melissa lived in New York, or maybe it was because she wasn't used to everyone speaking this way? Either way, it was annoying, and by the middle of the journey, Melissa was already ready to break her promise and head back to her tiny apartment.

The fact that her mother had a twang was peculiar since she wasn't a native Southerner. They had moved to Mississippi when Melissa was ten- from Chicago, of all places. It had been quite a change, and Melissa had fought it. Still, her father was intent on relocating his business, and the tax incentives were better in the South. Or so he said. Melissa never let the Mississippi drawl take hold of her, which was one of the reasons she was ridiculed in high school and never fit in. How dare she speak like a Yankee.

They thought their precious Southern drawls should be admired and revered. Melissa's Northern, heavy vowels were a disgrace to how proper ladies should speak. She was nothing more than a Yankee slut to her peers. Good Southern girls didn't behave like Melissa, didn't talk like Melissa, didn't dress like Melissa, and definitely didn't fuck like Melissa. Or so she had been told in the locker room, between classes, and on the few occasions her mother had managed to dress her up and drag her to the Club.

The moment she turned eighteen, she left and didn't look back. Back up North where she fit right in. Or tried to in any case. Then her dad died, and here she was, back for good. There wasn't any other solution for this situation.

Melissa and her mother pulled into the drive of the sizeable Acadian home her mother maintained. It was a sprawling restored plantation they had purchased when they moved down here for what her dad had called a steal. The house was huge, over six thousand square feet, and way too large for one person, but her mother refused to sell it. "*Memories.*" She always responded with.

Her mother claimed that the taxes and utilities were killing her and that her father's savings and life insurance paid everything else.

"All I need is a little help to keep our family home," Melissa's mother had begged over the phone.

Melissa's salary was pretty good; if all she had to do was pay the taxes and a few electricity bills, she would be saving a lot of money living at home. Her New York apartment had put a burden on her finances. She barely had extra spending money after paying her bills to do the things she wanted. The house in Mississippi was big enough that she and her mother wouldn't be living on top of each other. While she lived there, she could talk her mother into getting a job to pay for the extras or selling the house at some point, and she could move back to New York. Her mother was only in her late fifties. There was plenty of life ahead of her. Melissa could get her on a dating app, or they could both move back to New York. Nothing was keeping her mother in this tiny little town.

As they neared the house, rounding the last large oak tree that lined the drive, Melissa noticed something was wrong.

"Mother, why are there a ton of cars parked out here?" Melissa asked, taking in all the fancy Fords and Buicks parked around the house.

"Well, darling, I had to throw a welcome home party; I couldn't let you slip in without anyone noticing. I invited all of

your friends from high school, the neighbors, and the girls from the Club.”

The Club. Melissa didn't know that her mother still maintained that expense. *How much did that cost a year?* She knew the fees were costly to be a member of the prestigious Southern Oaks Country Club. You weren't anyone unless you were a member. It wasn't a few hundred dollars, either. Melissa knew their annual fees were in the thousands. Much more than insurance and utilities. The truth was coming out before she even stepped foot into the house.

“Fuck me,” Melissa said under her breath and let out a long sigh.

“Language!” her mother replied with a hiss.

“Sorry.” Melissa opened the passenger vanity mirror and checked her make-up; she still looked fresh, even after a 4-hour flight and a 3-hour drive. Her shirt was another thing, though. She began unbuttoning the formerly starched white blouse, now smeared with lines of mascara and a smudge of red lipstick. She reached into her bag and pulled out a stretchy tee that showed off a little too much cleavage for this group, but she didn't care; it was all she had ready.

“Melissa, why are you undressing? We're in a car. You aren't supposed to do things like that.”

“Relax, Mother, you got snot all over my shirt. I have to look decent. I can't walk into a party with snot on my shirt.”

“Well, you're right about that; I just hope no one sees you. That red bra is awfully sheer; I can see right through it. Your nipples are on display.”

“That's the style.”

“I've never worn red undergarments in my life,” her mother said; she crossed her arms and huffed.

“You should give it a try. You're still young, Mother; I'm sure plenty of eligible Mississippi gentlemen would love to see you in a pair of red undergarments.”

“Melissa, what has gotten into you? Is this how they talk in New York City?”

“No, I’m just tired, Mother. Let’s go party.” She got out of the car and grabbed her rolling luggage before walking up the steps of the sprawling porch like she was facing a firing squad.

Friends from high school. Melissa didn’t have any friends from high school. She had one friend from high school, but Tammy was long gone, or at least she hoped she was long gone. She hadn’t spoken to Tammy since shortly after she left. They had tried a phone call here and there, but it quickly turned to months of radio silence, which lengthened to years. Until finally, Tammy was only someone she had known long ago.

As if she had conjured her up with her thoughts, the first person Melissa laid eyes on as she opened the mahogany doors that led into the entranceway was Tammy. A lot heavier, with a big round belly that she had her hand protectively over and a big smile on her chubby face. Her one and only friend Tammy. *Oh, Tammy. She must not have made it out.*

“Welcome home!” the crowd shouted. And Melissa forced herself to smile and begin greeting her guests. She knew most of them, and the ones she didn’t know, she could guess who they were by who they referenced or stood near.

There was Marge, the wife of the guy who owned the county’s only auto dealership. She was with a younger girl, who Melissa assumed was her oldest daughter. Then there was Mr. Keller, owner of the hardware store, Doc Mallet, and Fannie Turpin, who had a ring on her finger, but Melissa didn’t see a husband hovering. She greeted everyone by name, and they smiled back like this was a great accomplishment. Melissa had learned how to work a crowd in her time in New York.

Tammy trailed in her wake as she greeted everyone, keeping up a steady droning monologue about her life in-between Melissa’s pleasantries with the guests.

“I married Ted, you remember him, right Lis?” Melissa nodded as she accepted an overly friendly hug from Tipper Prat, who was now working at the golf course in the neighboring county.

“Ted, he talked me into coming back. He was right; I didn’t belong out there. Everything moves so fast, and the people just ain’t like the people back home. Meaner. They don’t say hello on the street and if you do wave and say hello they look at you funny. You know. Well, Ted, he proposed, and I realized I missed home, so I came back, and we got married,” Tammy said. She flashed her hand in front of Melissa’s face so she could see the microscopic diamond. The too-fast-paced place she was talking about was New Orleans, one of the most laid-back cities in the country. Melissa could only nod her head in response.

“This is number two,” she patted her protruding belly and smiled an almost silly smile. “Tommy’s gonna be a big brother. I think this one’s gonna be a girl. I can feel it. Ted wants to name her Tina. Because—”

“All the T’s,” Melissa finished for her. It was a toxic trait of hers to finish people’s sentences, but now that she was in her home town all her attention was on survival and not correcting her ingrained toxic behavior like she did in New York.

“Yeah,” Tammy said. Her smile slipped slightly. “Tommy’s almost potty-trained, and Ted wants to have three total, but he needs to get another promotion; kids are expensive.” All Melissa could do was continue to nod as Tammy went on and on about her life, the town, and what hadn’t changed since she left. Not much, from what Melissa was hearing. There was a new boutique owned by Nick Grayson’s wife. He met her at USM. A transplant from Mobile. She was nice, even though she was a city girl. *Tammy’s words, not hers.*

When Melissa neared the kitchen, she patted Tammy on the arm, begged off, and made a dash for the quiet of the back of the house, desperate for anything to get her out of the insanity of this party. The insanity of what it meant to be home.

Home. No, this wasn't home, she thought. It never had been. Or that is what she told herself. It had only been a place she had lived in her mind. She had never felt welcome. She had never felt comfortable. And here she was again and just as uncomfortable as she remembered. She sometimes thought she was exaggerating her memories in the years she had been away. Giving herself an excuse not to return home for a holiday or birthday. It could have been the case. Melissa really didn't know what home meant, she didn't feel it here, and if she was honest with herself, she didn't feel it in New York either. Maybe she still needed to find home.

Melissa pried open the fridge doors and leaned in. A few beers were in the back, so she grabbed one of the dark bottles. She poured it into a red plastic cup to be inconspicuous. No one was drinking. It wasn't a dry county, but certain decorums were expected. The beer was probably left over from her father. It didn't taste old, though. Melissa sighed as she swallowed a big gulp and leaned on the fridge; the cool of the appliance's exterior felt great against her over-heated back.

"That bad out there?" The male voice had her eyes popping open and her back stiffening. Her eyes widened as she took in the most exceptional piece of man flesh she had ever laid eyes on. He was well over six feet tall and very fit, his shirt stretched across broad shoulders that tapered down to a slim waist.

He had dark hair, almost black, and the brightest green eyes she had seen on a human being. They were made brighter by his tan skin and dark hair. They were compelling and unique eyes, a color she hadn't seen before on anything other than a cat...or maybe she had? A brush of familiarity niggled at her brain. She knew those eyes. Or thought she might. She had to know this guy; she knew everyone in the town or knew of them. Those stunning eyes that looked kind of familiar were set in a very handsome face. A face she wouldn't have forgotten. Familiar but not. Maybe someone's older brother or cousin? It was there, some sort of recognition, but she couldn't place him. She would have remembered someone this good-looking.

“No, just thirsty,” she said. She motioned in the air to play off her initial shock. “Who are you?”

“You don’t recognize me, Melissa?” He smiled, and if she wasn’t mistaken, her panties actually dampened. His teeth were perfect and straight, the pink of his tongue catching against his front tooth as he took her in. She tried very hard not to preen at his perusal, stick her chest out a little further, cock her hip. What was it about Mississippi that turned her into a horny teenager?

“Honestly, no, did we go to high school together? I think I would have remembered someone like...” her words cut off. She didn’t want to say what she was about to say.

“Someone like, what?” He asked, and Melissa just shook her head and rolled her eyes. She would not answer that; she motioned for him to go on.

“Yes, we did go to the same high school. But not at the same time. I just graduated.”

“You just graduated?” Melissa gulped. *There was no way this guy was still a teenager.*

“Well, not just graduated. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s been three years. You still don’t know who I am, do you? Think, pain in the ass, neighbor.”

“Grant?” Melissa narrowed her eyes, taking in the man before her. The Grant she remembered was a ten-year-old kid, too skinny and too tall; he always popped up when he wasn’t welcome, following her around like a dog in heat. But those eyes. Yeah, she remembered those eyes.

“That’s me.” His smile got even bigger, and Melissa chewed on her bottom lip, taking him in. He definitely had grown.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

“Yeah, well, that does tend to happen since the last time you saw me, I was a sophomore I think,” he laughed.

“You were like ten when I left,” Melissa frowned.

“Try fifteen.”

“No way, you were so little; you’ve definitely grown,” she said in a whisper.

“Yeah, that tends to happen to the male species. What I didn’t expect was for you to get hotter. I didn’t think that was possible. What has it been ten years? I thought you were the hottest thing to grace the planet, now well—” He looked her up and down, and there was no hiding what he was thinking. Melissa tried not to shiver; if looks could devour, she would be Grant’s next meal. Grant, her kid neighbor.

“Six years. And, thanks, I think,” Melissa said. This conversation was making her feel uncomfortable. She couldn’t correlate the skinny aggravating kid that used to follow her around to this attractive male standing before her without mixing up her guilt complexes. She was good with conversing, especially with men, but Grant had her tongue-tied and out of sorts. She remembered Grant as the aggravating kid who lived next door, but Grant, the man was entirely different. She would have never expected him to turn out this way. He was panty-wetting delicious. As a boy, he had been tiny, scrawny, with a slight acne problem, thick glasses, and had an annoying habit of peeking in her windows like some pint-sized perv. But, this guy, she wouldn’t mind him looking in her windows. Crawling through them as well.

She tried to eighty-six that last thought. She couldn’t think of things like that. She couldn’t be sucked back into her old ways. Her reputation was tenuous in this small town. If she began screwing around with her neighbor when she stepped back into town, Yankee slut Melissa would be resurrected with a vengeance. Not to mention Grant was barely legal. He might look every bit man, but he was younger than her. There was no way she could lust after someone like him. She liked older men. Experienced men. Men with established lives and tastes.

Bad Melissa! She scolded herself for thinking impure thoughts about this man, *no kid*. He was a kid. *What the hell?*

“*That’s all I get? Only a ‘gee thanks’ after all these years?*” He cocked his head to the side and looked her over suggestively again. *Still a perv, it would seem.* Pervy from hotties tended to get brushed off as not so pervy.

“Well, I don’t think anything else, or whatever you’re implying with that look, would be appropriate,” she laughed nervously. “You’re like barely eighteen, right?” She asked as she gulped her drink and choked on the froth, coughing into her hand. Her math could have been better.

“Not quite, I’m twenty-one, Melissa,” he drawled her name. “Never that good at math, were you?”

“Oh,” her eyes widened, and the evil thoughts she had held back filtered through her head with a vengeance. Twenty-one was doable. *Literally*, she was only barely twenty-five herself. She was also a sucker for a hot guy, always had been since she got that first tingly sensation in her body when she watched the guys play a touch football game. But she couldn’t get tingly for Grant. He was too—much younger than her and well too close to home. She couldn’t fall in lust for the first Mississippi boy that smiled at her and laid on the Southern charm.

But, she argued with herself, she wasn’t that much older than him, only four years; it was nothing if you thought about it in the grand scheme of things. And she couldn’t help thinking about it as he stood before her, looking hot and smug.

Thoughts only, *thoughts*, she chided herself. She could lust after him, look at him, but that was it. She might act on it tonight, by herself, with her favorite toy that she had made sure to pack. A girl had to have some sort of outlet. But that was it. No touching. Not Grant.

Grant smiled at her as if he knew what she was thinking. “You get back to quench your thirst. See you around, neighbor.” He winked, *actually winked*, leaving her alone with conflicted thoughts.

Melissa slumped against the kitchen counter and took three deep breaths. If she saw more of Grant, this homecoming wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Grant

AFTER THE PARTY, Grant lingered on his side porch, watching all of the guests depart from his elevated vantage point. His house was a good distance away from the Barrington home, but most of the trees were at the front and back of the house, so he had an unobstructed view of next door. The way he liked it.

Just like he was fifteen again. He cursed under his breath, trying to forget that pathetic boy he had once been. One look today at Melissa and he was that kid again. That awkward teen that popped hard-ons if the wind blew too hard, who had a mad crush on the smoking hot neighbor. The neighbor who had turned him into a Peeping Tom pervert that liked to sneak around and look into windows.

Speaking of neighbors, the object of his many masturbation fantasies from fifteen to eighteen walked onto her back porch. She was still so damn beautiful. Even more so than he remembered. When she left, she was a girl pretending to be a woman. Now she was all woman. Her dark hair was a lot longer, falling almost to her ass, and she had filled out more. Her tits were fuller, her hips a bit wider, and her face had lost that childish roundness of her teen years. She had gone from the hot girl next door to the hot woman of his ultimate fantasies. He could handle her looking this good, but only if he finally tasted her. Something he seemed to need desperately. His dick hardened with merely the sight of her.

“Handle it,” he said the words out loud. He *was* going to handle it. He wouldn’t let Melissa get underneath his skin

again, no matter what. This time he wouldn't be that awkward kid following her around like a dog in heat.

This time he would make her pant after him.

He might be only a high school graduate who hadn't ventured very far from this town, but he was a damn good catch. His life was set up. His parents had purchased a condo in Florida the day after he graduated, and his dad had left him the keys to the grocery store that had been in his family for three generations. They came back one weekend every month, just to check in, and then they were off again. He was the town's most eligible bachelor, or so most of the older women that shopped at his store told him.

Grant already had his life set before him. He lived in the house that he grew up in and loved, in the town he had lived in for his entire life and couldn't imagine leaving. And now the girl of his dreams was back.

Melissa fucking Barrington. He had compared every girl to Melissa. Every girl he dated, he didn't find as appealing as Melissa. Every girl he fucked couldn't have been as good as Melissa would have been. No one was as pretty, no one as funny. It was damn annoying. A girl he had never touched, had never dated, had overshadowed every girl that he let into his life. And now she was back. This time he was going to have her. There wasn't a question in his mind. He would fuck her, find out that she wasn't as perfect as he imagined, and he would finally be free of all the Melissa fantasies. She would be out of his system. He would prove that she wasn't the girl of his fantasies but just another hot fuck that he could walk away from like the rest.

That was it. He'd have her, and then she could return to her fancy big city, thinking she was better than the rest of them, and Grant could finally stop comparing every girl to her. Fuck her and send her on her way. *It was a damn good plan.*

He wasn't looking to keep her. Grant wasn't into keeping girls around for long. He just wanted a taste, maybe a few tastes. He knew that Melissa wasn't all that his impressionable teen mind had cooked up, the goddess of way too many

fantasies. If he got ahold of her and managed to get her in his bed and under him, he would finally be done with that fantasy and could scratch her off the bucket list of unfulfilled teenage dreams. And hopefully stop comparing every woman to her.

“Hey,” her breathy voice knocked him out of his raunchy thoughts. She had crossed the yard and stood at the foot of his porch. He hadn’t noticed, too caught up in his ridiculous plans.

“Hey.” He straightened up and descended the stairs to stand next to her.

“I had forgotten how pretty your mom kept her gardens. The smell is divine.” She smiled and chewed her bottom lip. He imagined that mouth wrapped around his cock and shifted as his pants tightened further. He cursed himself. He hadn’t popped wood like this since he was fifteen.

“She’s hired a landscaper since I can remember, and I’ve kept up the tradition, even though he charges an arm and a leg.” She frowned and took a better look at the meticulous lawn.

“Your parents don’t live here anymore?”

“Only one weekend a month. They bought a condo in Florida, living the retirement life,” he said. It was his turn to smile.

“Wow, so it’s just you in this big house?”

“Yeah, it’s spacious, I get to stretch out.” Grant sat down on the back steps and patted the spot next to him to invite her to sit with him, trying to think pure thoughts to make his cock go down. She obliged, leaning her back on the post and facing him. She didn’t cross her legs, her skirt riding up and exposing long tan legs. Now his cock was never going to go down.

“What made you move back, Melissa? I heard you were living the dream in New York City.”

“My mother. She says she’s broke. I’m here to help her figure things out.”

“Your mother ain’t broke from the gossip at the Club. I heard she got a pretty penny from your daddy’s life insurance

policy. You might be surprised when you delve into those finances. She might be just lonely.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll be relieved. Pissed. But relieved. I gave up a good rent-controlled apartment.”

“I’m glad she talked you into it. I get my eye candy back.” He winked and felt like a perv afterwards. He had been shooting for smooth and he was dishing out perv hick.

“You always did like to watch me. You gonna pick up where you left off, Grant?”

“No, Melissa, because I won’t be watching you with other guys this time. I intend to be the guy you’re with.” Grant watched as her cheeks flushed, and she quickly breathed in a deep breath. He could tell the idea excited her.

She shifted in her seat uncomfortably and her eyes traveled up and down his body. He could tell she liked what she saw and he felt a smug satisfaction. Even though she was still blushing, there was no mistaking that Melissa wouldn’t mind reenacting a few of the darkest fantasies he had cooked up in his head when Melissa lived next door.

Melissa was no virgin. He knew that for a fact. She liked sex, and she liked it a lot from what Grant saw as her neighbor. Grant had watched many of her exploits from where he currently sat, right here on these steps.

In the back of the Barrington house was a landscaped area with a pergola at the center. Her mother had furnished it with an outdoor fire pit and curved outdoor sofa. It was Melissa’s favorite place to take her dates. Grant had a clear view of that spot from his back porch, but it was shielded from view on the Barrington side. He could see everything her parents couldn’t. What he had watched Melissa do on that sofa had haunted his thoughts for years. Her perfect tits, the way they would bounce as she rode the guys that were lucky enough to be taken there. How she loved to suck their cocks before she took them into her body.

She had been so enthusiastic. Sometimes she would let them take her from behind, her hands gripping the back of the

sofa and he would imagine she could see him sitting on the porch watching as she took them inside her. She would moan their names as they made her come and he would fantasize she called out his name.

He had watched as she sucked their cocks and let them come on her face and those perfect tits. Grant had heard her moans in the night and wished with every fiber of his being that it was his name she had called out, it was his come on those perfect tits, it was his dick buried in her sweet pussy.

As he began to become sexually active he expected every girl to act as Melissa had with those guys, but he was always disappointed. Not one acted like Melissa. Not one girl moaned with sweet abandon like Melissa had. Not one sucked his cock with enthusiasm like he had watched Melissa do. She was a fantasy. Like a favorite porn star. He had to talk girls into sucking his dick. Not one of them had fallen to their knees like Melissa did, excited about unwrapping a cock like it was a present. He thought she was the norm, that when he was old enough, he would get to experience a girl like her. But he hadn't. And he had damn sure tried.

“You intend to be the guy I’m with?” She said with a laugh, not breaking eye contact. “You’re still my younger neighbor. Isn’t there a law about things like that? I probably should have been arrested if you saw everything I did out here.” She looked over, and a slight blush traced her cheeks when she saw the view of the pergola from where they sat.

“So, you did know I watched you.” Grant smiled as he confirmed what he had suspected all this time, what he had hoped—that she had gone to the outdoor sofa for him. “And I’m twenty-one, stop trying to make me out to be a kid, so you have an excuse to keep me at arms-length.” He shook his head, knowing she was playing coy.

“Still young,” she whispered.

“Give me a try. All thoughts of my age will fly right out of that pretty head of yours when I have my face buried in your pussy.”

4

Melissa

MELISSA'S CHEEKS were flushed red, and she squirmed in her seat from the intensity of his naughty words. She could feel the wetness pooling in her panties, and her irrational mind wanted him to stop talking and start acting. *This was not the right thing to do. This was not how she wanted to be.* She had only just come home. She couldn't fuck the first guy that had her hot and bothered, especially since he was her neighbor. Things could get really ugly if it didn't go over well. Not to mention she would be falling into her old patterns again.

Her eyes were drawn to how his body moved under his tee and how he looked at her like she was his favorite dessert and he was starving. She almost scooted closer. *Almost.*

Her mind flashed on the skinny kid he used to be. How she would see him on his back porch, his eyes on her. Always watching her. He had been so young, but the intensity of his stare always had excited her, like she was the only thing in his universe, his sun and his moon. She liked the way he looked at her. It had made her feel alive.

The first time she had brought a guy home, they had gone to the outdoor sofa to avoid her parents. Her dad was drunk, but he woke easily. He didn't want her dating, even though she was eighteen, but there was nowhere to go in this tiny town to have sex. She had worked up the nerve and unbuttoned the boy's pants, taking him in her mouth and sucking him off. When she looked up, there was Grant, watching from his back porch.

At first, she had been scared. Would he tell on her? Would she get in trouble?

The fear eventually faded as hormones took over, and she had let that boy take her in every way possible. Grant never told anyone. She should have been disgusted or have felt guilty for corrupting the kid, but she didn't. It was thrilling. He didn't look at her like a kid. It was always those eyes. Those eyes had been so mature in his young face. He had watched her the entire time, and it had been exhilarating.

But, she was done with him watching. Now she wanted Grant to fuck her in that same spot.

"You want me," he said. It wasn't a question, but Melissa nodded anyway.

"I want to fuck you, like a man, not like those little boys you played around with. I want you to ride me on that sofa and scream my name. Ride me like you used to ride those jocks you brought home. Every one of them I used to wish was me. I used to jerk off for hours thinking about how you would suck them off and let them fuck you. You drove me insane."

"Do you want me to make it up to you?" she asked coyly. Her earlier reticence faded away, replaced with warm lust and desire. All guilt and reluctance was gone. This was who she was. This was what she liked to do, small town gossip be damned.

"It's going to take a lot of making up from you. You fucked with my head for a year."

"Melissa!" The cry came from the back of her house. Her mother looking for her. Melissa shot to her feet as if she was caught in the act. Grant chuckled, but it sounded exasperated.

"Melissa!" The call was louder.

"I gotta go," Melissa looked down at her neighbor.

"Come back later, Melissa, so I can give you a proper homecoming," he said with a smile, staying seated even though his Southern manners told him he should have stood when she did.

“Uh, sure.” But Melissa wasn’t at all sure of anything anymore. Maybe it was a good thing that her mother had interrupted.

The next few days were a blur of activity. She spent the days working on her daily social media posts and the nights going through Mother’s financials, cleaning, and setting up her living area. Her mother wasn’t in as dire of straights as she had implied, but it wasn’t good. Melissa was aggravated to see that there were a lot of unnecessary expenses. Her spending would have to be stopped from here on out. It wouldn’t be easy, though. Her mother was a stubborn creature. Melissa was appalled as she confirmed that her mother had a few trips to the plastic surgeon this year, including a boob job and a neck procedure. She also went on three vacations. No wonder she was blowing through the insurance policy so quickly.

The plastic surgery was confusing. She had talked to her mother about getting out there, maybe dating, but she had adamantly opposed the idea. Why was she getting work done if the woman wasn’t interested in dating? Her mother had always liked male approval; maybe she only needed for them to still notice her, not actually spend time with her.

After the second operation, the life insurance policy was almost depleted; it left only the pension and what little income she got from a rental property in the center of town. A place next to the grocery store. Grant’s parents owned the store, which Melissa assumed was now run by the man himself. It was a sizeable amount, but it wouldn’t hold if her mother kept spending the way she was doing.

Her thoughts drifted to Grant often and then were quickly consumed with the man when she wasn’t busy on some task set forth by her mother. After that first night, she went to her bedroom and took out her favorite sex toy. She hadn’t come like that in a long time. She had imagined he watched her as she fucked herself, lying naked on the bed with her legs spread and her huge silicon dildo deep in her pussy. She had invited

him to watch her, leaving her blinds up and drapes pulled open. Did he watch her?

“Melissa,” her mother’s voice shook her out of thoughts of Grant. She looked up from her computer and noticed that her mother was spotless as usual, dressed in a lavender garden dress.

“Yes, Mother.”

“I’m going to Maddie’s. We have a board meeting about the beautification project. You know we’re trying to get the old Kiln House restored to its former glory.”

“Yes, you told me about that.”

“Well, I’ll be a couple of hours. Can you return the serving dish on the counter in the kitchen to Grant? He brought the eggplant for your party, wasn’t it wonderful? That cook he keeps on staff at the grocery does a wonderful job with fried foods.”

“Grant?”

“Yes, the neighbor boy. Suzanne and Greg’s son. Just run it over. And you know it wouldn’t hurt to get to know him. I know he was a little strange when you went to school together, but he’s well-respected in the community; maybe he can show you around. Get you out of this house.”

“Yeah, sure.” Her mother looked at her and frowned. She desperately wanted Melissa to assimilate and had hoped for that when they had moved here. She had put her in every group event she could nab an invite to and had forced her to join dancing, theater, and sports. You name it, Melissa was pushed into it. None of it took.

It looked like her mother was back to her old tricks. This time she was pushing in the right direction, though.

After she left, Melissa made her way to the kitchen and scooped up the plate, intent to run it over and maybe share a bit of conversation with the neighbor boy. That’s it. Conversation only. But then she had second thoughts and ran to the bathroom. She freshened up, changed out of her jeans and tee, and into a matching bra and panty set. She slipped a

sun dress over the sexy set but didn't bother with make-up. Her only addition was to spritz a bit of perfume on her chest.

She knocked on the back door, the butterflies in her stomach an unwelcome guest. Men didn't make her nervous; this was unusual for her. There was one thing about Melissa that she was proud of, and that was her confidence. She was never lacking in that department. Why Grant was different, she couldn't nail down. He just was.

The door opened, and the man was better looking than she remembered. A sly grin slipped over his face, and she couldn't help but smile back.

"I brought your plate," she held up the large glass plate.

"How neighborly," he said and opened the door wider. "Want to come in?"

"Sure," she slipped past him, almost swooning as she brushed against his chest as he held the door for her.

He took the plate from her, and she followed him into the kitchen. She had only been in his house a few times, and usually only for formal dinners. He had updated the place, it was modernized, and the kitchen was all top of the line, with granite countertops and gleaming appliances. She wondered if he could cook. That was sexy.

"Thought you might have come back to pick off where we left off the other night?" He said, and she could hear the grin in his voice even though his back was to her as he pulled something down from a cabinet.

When he turned, she saw he had two wine glasses in his hand. She nodded when he held it up to her questioningly. He pulled a bottle of red from a rack under the island in the middle of the kitchen and uncorked it expertly, pouring her glass with finesse. Twenty-something guys in New York could barely manage that. It was impressive that this Southern Mississippi boy could pull off those swoon-worthy moves.

"Just returning a plate, though. I can't stay long," she took the wine glass from him and smiled when his mouth tilted into a frown.

“Stay a bit,” he said. The look in his eyes gave her no room to wiggle out of it. She couldn’t leave, not the way he was looking at her.

“Ok,” she said over a gulp of the wine.

“Let’s go out to the porch,” he said, and there was no mistaking that he wanted to bring them full circle back to the conversation from the other night. Grant was persistent. She had to give him that. She hadn’t made up her mind if she was going to let this happen. Still, as he tugged at her arm, felt the warmth of his skin on hers, and saw him look her up and down in that all-encompassing way of his, she knew she just might give him exactly what he wanted.

They settled into their assigned spots. Again, Melissa leaned against the railing as they sat down on the steps. She had an unobstructed view of her family’s outdoor living area. She could imagine how many times Grant had sat in this exact spot and watched as she fucked guy after guy.

“You liked that I watched.” He eerily picked up on her thoughts.

“You always looked at me in a certain way.”

“What way?”

“With such an intensity. I did like it.”

“I felt like you were teasing me.”

“I wasn’t. I would have never been with you back then. You were too —” Melissa didn’t want to say anything insulting.

“I was too, what?” He asked.

“You were a year younger and nothing like the guys I dated.”

“Jocks.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh.

“I thought you fucked them where I could see to rub it in that I wasn’t anything like them.”

“It wasn’t that at all. I like to be watched. Especially by you,” she said. It was hard admitting that. She had barely admitted it herself. But, when she began to date in New York, she found that some of the best encounters she had were when she could be seen. The windows wide open in her apartment. A hurried encounter in Central Park. That time at the club in the VIP section. *Fuck*.

“It drove me crazy.”

“I didn’t mean to drive you crazy. I thought...”

“You thought what?” He pried.

“That I was rewarding you.”

“It was torture to watch you with all those times,” he took a sip of his wine and held her eyes, accusing, hurt, dark with want.

“I didn’t mean to,” was all she could respond with.

“I know.” He let a small smile slip through, and she smiled back.

“Let me make it up to you?” She shifted closer.

“That’s going to be hard,” he turned to face her more fully.

“Lemme try,” she said as she reached over and rubbed his cock through his jeans, pulling on it through the material. It was so hard she could see the outline of it through the thick material.

“Is that how you’re going to make it up to me? You gonna let me fuck you, Melissa.”

“Will that help?” She asked.

“It’s a start,” he looked down at her delicate hand as it rubbed his dick through his pants. He made no move to pull her closer or push her away.

Her fingers pulled at the material of his pants, outlining the hardness of his dick. It was hard and big, and Melissa wanted it in her mouth. She had never wanted anything more.

“I want to suck you,” she said in a whisper. He shifted beneath her hand.

“Is that what you want. You want to suck me?” He finally grabbed her by her arms and pulled her toward him.

His mouth came down hard on hers. Hardness yielded to soft kisses as their mouths aligned, and she opened to him. His tongue licked across her lips and then slipped into her mouth. He claimed her, leaning her head to the side as he delved deeper into her mouth. She tried to kiss him back, but he was all-encompassing as he let her know exactly what he would do to her by the movement of his tongue.

The kiss was so intense their teeth clashed together. He reached up and gripped her by the back of her head, pulling her back by her hair, kissing down her cheek to her throat. His other hand fumbled with his fly, she heard the distinctive rip of the zipper as he undid his pants and pulled out his cock. He roughly pulled her closer but then softened when he realized he was being a brute. She made a noise in protest. She didn't want him to be gentle. She didn't deserve gentle. She didn't like gentle.

“Suck me, Melissa,” he ordered.

He took her by the head and brought her down to his lap, his intent obvious. She had to oblige. She wanted it so bad. She bent lower over him, licking the tip of his dick. She wrapped her hand around him. He was so large her hand barely fit around his girth. *Could she swallow him?* She thought. She would need her hand too. She took him deep into her mouth and pumped him with her palm simultaneously. She wouldn't be able to swallow him all, no matter how hard she tried; he was that big, that amazing. He would hurt her pussy when he fucked her. She shivered at the thought. She swirled her tongue down his shaft, sucking on the side of his cock as she explored him. She wanted to see how much of him she could take down her throat, so she pulled back and pushed herself over him, getting on her knees in front of him.

She moaned in appreciation as he tightened his grip on her hair. Holding her in place as he pushed deeper into her mouth.

“Yes,” Grant said with a groan. His breathing had become heavy as she took him into her mouth, swallowing, using her tongue, and pushing herself deep into him. She almost got all of him inside her when she felt herself gag a little bit, so she pulled back and began to suck hard on his tip, fighting her natural gag reflex. Her hand assisted in stimulating what she couldn’t fit in her mouth. Up and down, she stroked as she tried to take him further into her.

Grant’s hands were in her hair, pushing her onto his length, urging her into a pace that was exhilarating but scary at the same time. He knew exactly how far she could take him and wasn’t forcing her out of her comfort zone, but with each pull, she tried to go a little further and deeper.

“Swallow me—*fuck*, I want to hit the back of your throat,” he moaned.

Melissa tried her best, letting him fuck her mouth. He pumped harder and harder into her mouth until she felt his entire body clench and knew he was about to come. He made to pull away, but she sucked harder, holding him in place with her hand and her mouth. The taste of his pre-come fueled her need for more, the need to feel his hot seed pour into her mouth and coat her throat.

“I’m gonna come in your mouth, you gonna swallow me, Melissa? I wanted to come on your tits, but this is so much better...” She couldn’t speak around his length buried deep in her mouth; she could only moan out a muffled, “Mmm hmmm.”

“I’m coming,” he cried, and Melissa felt the hot liquid pouring out of him over her tongue and dripping down her throat. She swallowed, loving the taste of him and the warmth of it as she eagerly slurped him down. She continued to pump him and suck on his length as his size diminished and he softened in her mouth.

“Fuck.” He shivered and pushed on her shoulder, pulling his dick out of her mouth with a pop, gripping it like he was in pain. She pouted up at him prettily like he had just taken away a yummy treat. She wanted to continue sucking him; his dick

was amazing. She wanted to get him hard again, and then maybe this time he could play with her pussy while she sucked him.

“Inside, now,” he barked. “I need to fuck you.”

Melissa couldn't help the grin that spread across her face. This was becoming quite a homecoming.

Grant

HE NEEDED to have his dick buried in her or he was going to explode. Her mouth and dick sucking ability would spoil him from any other woman in the future. She was that talented. Everything he had imagined and more. He had never come that hard and then she had swallowed his come! Most of the girls he'd been with wanted him to pull out, come in a little handkerchief, or if he was lucky he got to come on their tits. He hadn't ever been with one that liked to swallow. He had known that Melissa did, watching her with those jocks. But experiencing it for himself blew him away, literally. She was better than he had imagined. He couldn't wait to have her naked and spread out before him. It was time he got his hands, and mouth on her pussy.

"Come on," he said as he led her to his bedroom, which was once his parents' master suite. He had replaced their conservative double with a California King and planned to make use of it tonight.

"Get undressed," he ordered and he crossed his arms and waited for her to obey.

"You're bossy," she pouted, that fat lip poking out, swollen from the intensity of her cock sucking. He wanted it on his dick again, maybe while she sat on his face.

"You don't know the half of it. Naked, come on. I need you naked."

She smiled and her hands went to the hemline of her dress, pulling it up and over her head, revealing a drool-worthy, red,

sheer bra and matching panties. He could see her nipples and the dark areolas that surrounded them through the transparent material. When she saw his eyes on her nipples, her fingers pinched at them and rubbed over their tips provocatively.

“Like them?” She said with a purr. All he could do was stare. Her tits had been beautiful as a teen, but now with a little extra weight they were heavy and full, the nipples darker than he remembered. As she pulled off her bra to reveal them, their perky nubs standing at attention, he palmed himself through his jeans. He was hard as a rock again.

He pulled his own shirt over his head, exposing the rock hard abs he had worked to perfect this last year. He knew his chest looked good and he could tell by the way she was staring that she agreed.

His hand went down to the fly of his jeans and he motioned for her to finish her job of undressing. He watched as she dropped her bra to the floor and her face flushed red as she stood there in only her panties. He could see her shaved pussy through the material. There was not one bit of hair, it was perfectly exposed and waiting for him to explore.

“Come here.” He motioned for her to join him near the bed. When she got close enough, he grabbed her and pulled her to him. His hands went to her hips and his mouth descended on hers. Their kiss was slower this time, less desperate. He angled his head, deepening the kiss, sucking her swollen lips and nipping them gently. He tasted his come on her lips. It was a heady experience. He ground his hard cock into her center and she moaned against his mouth before reaching a hand between them and pushing his jeans down, pulling out his cock.

It didn't take much for him to kick out of his shoes and then his pants and finally his boxers followed. He stood nude in front of her, while she remained in her hot red undies and high heels. It was so hot, he had to be inside her, now.

He pulled her back to him and kissed her hard, kissing her shoulders and pinching the hard exposed nipple. She moaned and let her head drop back as he cupped her breast, rubbing his

thumb over each peaked nipple. She called out his name, squirming under his touch and placed both hands on his shoulders as he kissed her neck and moved down, taking that beautiful nipple into his mouth. He made her scream as his teeth grazed its length.

He came up with a gasp, "I want you so bad."

"I'm all yours," she said in a breathy voice, making his cock jerk. He turned her around roughly and pushed her down onto the bed, on her hands and knees. Her ass was facing him, round and enticing. If he yanked aside that little scrap of lace, he would see her pussy.

"I'm going to have all of you. I know you like to fuck, Melissa. I've watched you fuck so many times," he growled.

"I do. I love it. I love when a man possesses me," she purred, looking over her shoulder at him. He could have come right there with that look.

"They called you a slut, but I never thought you were a slut, you just knew what you wanted. You want my cock, Melissa?"

"Yes!" She all but screamed.

He swept the red lace of her underwear aside to reveal the pink lips of her cunt. It was seeping with wetness dripping down her thighs. He ran a finger through the folds and she moaned under his touch, pushing back, asking for more attention. He gave her what she wanted and slipped a finger into her warm entrance. She clenched around him and he began pumping his finger into her. Slowly at first and then he picked up speed. He used his index finger to stimulate her clit and slipped a second finger inside of her, pushing it in and out, loving the way she shook with the pleasure and little moans would slip out of her mouth. She was so warm and wet and the sounds coming out of her mouth as she pushed against his hand were mind blowing.

"More, Grant, please."

"What do you want more of?"

"Make me come," she demanded.

“I don’t know about that. Aren’t you supposed to be making up for all the torture you put me through?” He pulled his fingers from inside her and circled her clit with hard and fast movements.

“I’m sorry for that. Now make me come,” she said. Her words were demanding but her tone was whiny.

“Demanding girl, aren’t you?” He pushed his finger back inside of her and then fell to his knees behind her so he could access her with his mouth. He sucked her clit into his mouth with a swift lip roll. His tongue flicked over it while he finger-fucked her. It didn’t take long before she jerked against him, her orgasm a wave that broke over his face.

He had just made Melissa come all over his face. Something he had been fantasizing about for years.

Melissa

MELISSA'S ORGASM WAS INTENSE, but she barely had time to recover before he flipped her over and pulled off her panties. He nonchalantly threw them across the room as he smiled down at her.

“You ready to give me what I've wanted for so long?”

“Yes,” she moaned, spreading her legs wider in invitation. She wanted Grant inside of her. She didn't know if she had ever wanted someone this much.

She frowned as he stood and walked away from her. He went to the side of the bed and dug in the drawer, pulling out a ribbon of condoms and a large purple dildo. He threw them down on the bed with a smirk.

“I know you like toys,” he said.

“You watched me?”

“Always.”

Ripping the little foil pack with his teeth, he slipped the condom on with ease and then came back to stand in front of her.

“How many times did you think I watched you?” He asked. There was no condemnation, just curiosity in his gaze.

“A lot.” She wasn't ashamed of it. She liked to be watched. She liked sex. The thing she didn't like about it was being talked about. Judged. She hadn't had many girlfriends because of that, only Tammy. She also hadn't been very popular with the adults or teachers. But enjoying sex with

jocks had gotten her into a lot of parties and asked to every dance and social event. It was a good trade-off. Now older and a bit more picky, she chose her partners carefully and with a little more thought behind it, more than just hormones. She had learned that sex could backfire sometimes, so she wasn't as reckless with her partners anymore. She still liked to fuck, but she hoped that one day she could have a steady partner, a home, maybe that crazy thing called marriage, or at least a commitment. Not now. But in the future.

Yet, here she was again, back home, fucking the first guy that came on to her. It must be a Mississippi thing that made her hormones all wonky. *Maybe it was the humidity.*

"I never could tell if you knew I watched you. I was never sure if you saw me." He said. "The fact that you knew makes me regret never making a go for you myself."

"I knew. It made me hotter. It made me fuck harder and come harder." Melissa said. He pressed the head of his dick at the entrance of her pussy, rubbing it through her folds and her wet cream. He circled her clit with his thumb, causing her to shudder, and then he slowly pushed into her.

"I would go inside and jerk off for hours, thinking about your tits bouncing as you fucked. About how your mouth looked wrapped around a cock. You were my own personal porn star. I wished it was my cock buried in your pussy. Hours, Melissa. I would come and think I was done, and then I would imagine your tits and your mouth, and I would have to masturbate again."

"It's your cock now. It's your cock in my pussy," she said with a moan.

"It is. This is my cock, fucking your pussy. Do you like it? Do you like my cock?" He slammed into her, pushing into her as deep as he could go.

"Yes!" She screamed. And it was true. This was hotter than any sex she had on that pergola. Grant's dick felt amazing inside of her, so big, so encompassing. No one had turned her on this much. Wanted her this much. She could feel it in every touch, in every thrust. She was going to come quick. *Again.*

He lifted her legs so he could have better access, so he could pound deeper into her. He held her by the ankles, and with each deep movement, she panted in pleasure. It was absolutely shattering what he was doing to her. As he pumped harder and harder, she felt her body tense up, ready for another orgasm. This wasn't possible, she thought. He wasn't doing anything she hadn't experienced before, but how he was doing it. The intensity of each motion had her on the verge of a meltdown.

"I'm going to come," she shouted, and he dropped her legs and spread them wider by pushing her knees down, getting better access to her swollen clit. He rubbed it hard and fast until she screamed, shouting her pleasure for anyone in earshot to hear.

"I like making you come," he said.

"I like when you make me come." She lay back on the bed, her body spent; a thin sheen of sweat glistened her skin. All the lights were on, and the shades flung back. She didn't care. She hadn't been fucked this hard and sound in a long time. Probably ever.

She sat up and realized her panties were still on, they had ripped a bit, but they still clung to her left leg. She ripped them the rest of the way and threw them to the side, catching the hungry way that Grant was looking at her. His dick stood at attention, dripping with her fluids, and it nearly undid her again. *How could she want this man so much?* A man she barely knew.

"You were hot before, now you're fucking off the charts," he bent over and took her mouth in a searing kiss. He tasted of sweat and her. It was intoxicating.

She wasn't quite as comfortable in her body as she had been as a teen. As a teen, she had pranced around nude in the locker room, gone skinny dipping without any qualms. Flaunting her body. Proud of her tight little body. As an adult, she had put on thirty pounds, and it seemed they all went to her tits and ass. Her tits were big and heavy, and the areolas were dark compared to her pale skin. She liked her bigger

breasts, but did he like how she had been before? Slimmer, less busty? From his stare and words, he seemed to like her curvier shape.

She rubbed her fingers across her nipples to bring them to attention. The action sent shivers through her body, leading directly to her pussy. She wasn't done. She wanted more. So much more.

7

Grant

MELISSA LAY on the bed rubbing her nipples, her legs spread, hiding nothing from him. She was temptation. She was beauty. She was everything he had imagined she would be.

Melissa was so beautiful and tempting in front of him. Her tits were magnificent. He wanted to bury his face in them and chew on them like a dog with a new toy.

He laid down next to her on the bed and beckoned for her to straddle him; he wanted her to ride him, to see those beautiful tits bouncing over him. Like the good little girl she was, she did as she was told and moved forward on her hands and knees until she was on top of him, her pussy lined up perfectly with his dick. He sat up, pushing her back so they were both sitting, then pulled on her hips until he pressed against her entrance.

She bent over him until her tits were in his face and he promptly buried his face in them just as she pushed down and impaled herself on his ready cock. She began riding him, pushing herself up and down on his length until she found the perfect pace. She leaned back, bracing herself against his thighs and he leaned forward so he could suck on those erect nipples.

The pace she set was fast, but gentle. He wanted it harder.

“Fuck me harder,” he growled, and she mewled in response. When the pace didn’t pick up to his liking, he grabbed her hips and began to pull her down onto his dick, over and over again. Hard.

Her tits were now slamming against *his* face. He was fucking Melissa. She was moaning his name as she rode his cock. Damn, but that thought was fit to make him come.

With one more hard thrust, he came, it burst out of him without warning, making him clench his jaw and jerk until he emptied entirely inside her.

He pulled out of her and smiled at her little sound of protest. His dick started twitching again.

“Give me a few minutes, baby, then I’ll fuck you again. I promise.”

“You better,” she said in a whiny voice. “I need to come again.”

Grant pulled the condom off and tied it up with dexterous fingers, sliding off the bed and entering the bathroom. He quickly cleaned up and went to join Melissa on the bed again.

She was spread eagle across the bed, and she had that big dildo I had put on the bed only to tease her, buried in her pussy. She gripped its purple length, her nails painted a bright blue, and stroked it in and out of her in slow pumps.

Grant stood there and stared at her. Stared at what she was doing to herself. He needed to fuck her. *Again*. He didn’t think it was possible to recover this fast. Not with anyone but Melissa.

“I wanted to be ready for you,” she whispered. Grant reached down and massaged his cock, which was thick in his hand.

“I’m gonna fuck you doggy-style now, lemme see your ass, but continue to fuck yourself with that toy,” he bit out in clipped tones. Grant knew what he wanted and wasn’t afraid to give orders to get it.

Grant

MELISSA DID AS WAS TOLD, rolling over onto her hands and knees, the thick length of the purple cock still in her pussy. It was a fucking amazing sight. He crawled onto the bed, on his knees behind her.

“Fuck yourself,” he growled.

She moaned as she pushed the dildo into herself. Faster. Faster. He opened the bottle of lube he had grabbed from the bathroom and rubbed the oil on his fingers, rubbing it against that puckered hole that beckoned him to take.

She was shivering as his cock rubbed against the oiled entrance.

“Grant,” she whined.

“Keep fucking yourself,” he growled. He pushed in slowly. Her tight little ass sucked at his cock, wanting him inside of her. Wanting all of him. Slowly. So, slowly he entered her as she fucked herself harder and harder with the dildo.

“Can you take me all?” He hissed as he had his tip seated in her.

“Yes. All of you!” She screamed and he pushed deeper. Waiting for her to protest, but none came. Until he was fully seated. Until all of him was buried inside of her as her pussy took all of the dildo as well. He held still, savoring the moment.

“Grant,” she whined.

“One sec, baby,” he cooed.

“I need.”

“I know,” he thrust forward and she screamed. He drew out, not all the way, but enough and then pushed back into her, causing her to scream. Her own hand was forgotten, the dildo inside of her, but her concentration was only on his cock. He pumped into her repeatedly, his peripheral vision darkening as her tight ass took all of him.

The intense fucking ripped another orgasm from her, but again he didn't let her come down easily. He pulled the dildo from her pussy and replaced it with his cock. He continued to pound into her, his pace merciless, his goal was to make her come so many times she would compare *him* to every other guy in the future.

She didn't disappoint him, and after the next one, she brought him over the edge with her. His orgasm was intense. He saw black as he emptied into her. His world was thoroughly rocked. He fell, panting by her side, breathing heavily, covered in sweat. Melissa was everything he had ever imagined. *And more.*

“You're amazing,” she said on a breathy exhale, her breathing coming in fast pants from the intensity of their union.

“You should have come home a long time ago,” he said, and she laughed.

“I don't think so. If we had done that six months ago, I would have been arrested.”

“Again, your math is horrible,” he laughed. “But, technically, we still could be,” he chuckled, sitting up and looking down at her amazing body. “Sodomy is illegal in Mississippi.”

“I like illegal things,” she grinned, chewing on that sexy bottom lip of hers.

When his dick hardened, ready for more, he reached over for another condom, giving her nipple a quick nip when he moved over her.

“You’re ready for more?” she asked, her voice breathy in wonder.

“I did promise you a proper homecoming,” he said as he pushed into her, spreading her wet pussy with his enormous cock. He buried himself deep in the girl of his fantasies. Buried himself deep in Melissa.

“Oh yes, you did,” she purred.

Grant slipped out of bed just as the sun broke through the windows facing the bed. He looked down at Melissa, now illuminated by the orange light of dawn. She lay curled on her side, her breast and pussy covered demurely by her thigh and arm. There was nothing demure about his Melissa, though.

His Melissa. He scowled and made his way to the bathroom. He knew he had to get to the store this morning. It always ran smoothly when he made an appearance first thing. It kept the employees on their toes and didn’t lead to them slacking off as much. But the only thing he wanted to do was get back in bed with her.

He forced himself into the shower and didn’t turn up the hot water. The shock of cold would knock him back to his senses. The plan had been to have her and then move on with his life. Once he had her, he would know that she wasn’t the end-all of female perfection. The problem was last night had been beyond description. Better than any fantasy he had cooked up about her. She had done anything he wanted, had been intensely responsive, and those noises she made when she came-his dick hardened and he looked down at it in disgust.

“Traitor.”

But facts were facts. And it was a fact that he didn’t want to move on. He wanted to get right back in that bed, spread her legs and make her come again and again.

Melissa

SHE WAS A COWARD, a horrible, despicable coward. She could admit that. Especially as she tiptoed across the wet grass to her home. She didn't want her mother to know she had spent the night with Grant. Or that is what she told herself as she hastily scrawled a note to Grant with a lame excuse and snatched up all the clothes she could find before he got out of the shower.

But she didn't want to see that look in his eyes. The look that said, thanks for a good time, but I gotta go. You're great in bed, Melissa, but boys don't keep girls like you around...at least not in the daylight.

It had happened to her repeatedly, and she was usually good with it. She didn't want to keep any of them around anyway. But, for some reason that she didn't want to admit, she didn't want to see that look from Grant. So, she left before he could give it to her.

She crept back into her house, like a teenager, and went straight to the shower to wash off the most fantastic night of her life.

It didn't take long to lose herself in work, emails, phone calls to her editor, and more emails, but her concentration wasn't what it usually was. Her mind drifted back to last night. To the things Grant had done to her, how he had made her feel. Each time she thought about what they had done, her nipples tightened, and she wanted to run next door and see if he was

home from his store. But she couldn't do that. The house was quiet. She would have heard if he had been home. She could see the driveway from the study window, and his truck was gone.

Her phone was also silent. She had left her number in her note. Her desperate attempt to start something. He hadn't texted.

She would have to accept that her night with Grant would be what it was, *a night*. And she was sure word would spread. He would tell someone at the store that he finally got a piece of Melissa Barrington. The rest of the town would all know shortly. The joy of small-town living. People would all know that Melissa hadn't changed, only that she might like things rougher now.

By the end of the day, she was a mess. Her mother asked her if she wanted to go to the Club with her, but Melissa couldn't take the looks she would get. She had the narrative already set in her mind. The town knew, and when her mom returned from her tea, she would also know. She would probably ask her to go back to New York. Even her mother's ability to look the other way couldn't ignore this. She didn't want to see the disappointment in her eyes.

Melissa could only imagine the conversations being had by all.

"Did you hear? That Barrington girl let the Montreux boy take her in the butt, and he's younger than her. What a whore! That's because she's a Yankee. That poor boy, how would he get a wife now? She must have lured him into her bed."

It wouldn't be Grant's doing, no, not the way this town worked. It would be all Melissa. The corrupter. Like when she was caught with Bill Tralston in the school store room. Bill had been the star wide receiver. Melissa had lured him in there by not wearing a bra to school. She had gotten the detention. The only thing Bill got was a notch in his belt.

Why did she come home?

Her mom came through the door promptly at six o'clock. She stated with no indication of her emotional state that she had a headache and would be going to her bedroom.

Was that because she had found out about Melissa? Was she overcome with the gossip? How much worse had it gotten by the time it made it to her mother's ears? Melissa could only imagine.

She needed a drink. There was nothing in this house. She opened cabinet after cabinet. She had exhausted all the beer in the fridge. She would have to go to the liquor store on the outskirts of the town if she wanted anything to drink. She decided it was worth it. She grabbed the keys to her mom's car, made a mental note that she needed to get her own damn vehicle, and hurried out the back door.

Her hair was in a messy bun. She wore her Tiktok leggings and a crop top to go with the leggings, but she didn't care. Maybe no one would recognize her.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, she noticed the fire pit had a pretty good fire going, and someone was sitting on the outdoor sofa.

"What the—" but her gut knew before her brain caught hold of the idea. And then her feet took over, leading her down the path to the little nook that had aided in her naughty reputation. The reputation that was giving her such mental grief at the moment.

"About time, neighbor." Grant's sexy voice carried with it all sorts of innuendos. The crackle of the fire, the smell of pine, and the subtle hint of his cologne made her insides squeeze up in anticipation.

"Grant, I didn't—"

"What? You thought you could scare me off with that little note?"

"I just, well, I thought you had me, so well..." She couldn't. She wouldn't put what she was feeling into words. Maybe they would catch if she said them out loud. Perhaps he would realize that they were true.

Two wine glasses were on the side table, and a bottle of wine was already opened and waiting. He was dressed impeccably in a pair of slacks and a polo shirt. She was a mess. She wanted to run back inside and change.

“I had you.” He stood up and stepped closer to the spot she stood frozen on. “But, I haven’t had enough.”

“I have to change; I’m a mess.” She turned slightly, but he captured her hand and dragged her forward. She fell against his chest and closed her eyes as the smell of him, soap and cologne, mixed with the smell of the fire, washed over her. He was delicious.

She felt his breath on her neck, and she shivered, wanting this desperately. Wanting him.

“Why change when you’ll be naked soon?” he whispered in her ear.

“Oh God, Grant,” she moaned as his hands began to roam across her body, her ass, and then under her shirt to touch the skin of her back.

“I’ve had this fantasy about you riding me right here, on this sofa. Wanna make my fantasy come true, Melissa?” Her shirt came off and fell to the ground. His hands were tugging at her leggings next, pulling them over her hips.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she repeated as he moved her near the sofa.

“I’ve had a lot of fantasies about you, neighbor, since I first started having naughty fantasies...” he had managed to get her leggings to her ankles and she kicked them off as they both tumbled to the sofa. With a deft movement, he had her on top of him, straddling his lap. She wanted contact with him, but his pants were still on. He needed to get naked too.

“What did we do in them?” She moaned the question as he sucked her nipple through the thin fabric of her bra.

“Everything...” he growled impatiently as she tugged at his pants, trying to free what was inside. She released him, grasping his heavy cock in her hand and pumping its hard length in triumph.

“I want to know what you mean by everything,” she gasped as her panties ripped away impatiently. She tore open the condom that he had left on the sofa near them and hastily slipped it onto his length, smiling as he groaned with pleasure at that slight contact.

“I’m going to show you,” he grasped her hips, pulling her forward until the tip of his dick was positioned at her pussy. “Because, neighbor...” he entered her, his thick length pushing into her, stretching her. She was so wet, so ready for him, there was little resistance. She wanted this, needed this. “I plan on reenacting every one of my fantasies with you.”

“That might take some effort.” Her head fell back as they set a pace that was good for both of them. His hands gripped her hips, hers his shoulders.

“It will take a bit of work. I hope you’re home to stay...”

And at that moment, Melissa felt like maybe coming home was the best thing she had ever done.

About the Author

Gillian Zane is an Amazon bestselling author that specializes in dark genre fiction for adults. Gillian defines herself by the city she was raised in, New Orleans. She's tried moving away a few times but always comes back. At the age of ten, she decided she would be a writer and has been determined ever since. Between that decision and when she actually finished a book that she believed was good enough to publish, she's served in the military, worked as a bartender, became a cog in the corporate marketing wheel as a person "that makes things pretty" and has since been laid off too many times to count. She currently writes full-time, but still, continues to "make things pretty" by designing book covers and websites for her fellow authors and bloggers. Gillian lives in New Orleans with her husband, her daughter, and a fat cat named Sushi. A prepper at heart, she also recently added chickens to the mix in her efforts to progress toward self-sufficiency. www.NOLAZombie.com

You can also pick up Let's Get Naughty 3 here: www.letsgetnaughtybooks.com or <https://books2read.com/u/mqBW89>

Two Nights Before Christmas

Mellanie Szereto

I

LAUREL STREET HOOKED her forearm through the strap of the last cloth tote and stepped back to consider her options. Yes, she'd managed to grab every bag of groceries for a single trip into the house, but closing the hatch of her car posed a dilemma. At least it wasn't the worst of her current problems.

As she reached for the handle with the least-weighted-down hand, a gust of wintry wind whipped her scarf across her face. Her knuckles hit what had to be the lock mechanism, sending red-hot pain shooting through her icy fingers. "Ouch, damn it! I can't wait for summer."

"Let me help you with that." Her neighbor's voice distracted her from the burning and throbbing in her hand and incited a much more pleasurable ache a bit lower in her body. Beauregard Sterling Walters—Bull or Coach to most of the residents of Two Forks Hollow—shut the hatch and slipped all four bags from each of her arms. His muscles flexed and bulged in his snug Ohio State sweatshirt, warming her insides if not her frozen hands.

"Thanks, Beau."

He hefted the load without so much as a grunt. "Lots of groceries today. Are you helping with the food for Robin and Jay's party tonight?"

She nodded as she hurried ahead of him along the sidewalk to her front door. "Morning sickness has been kicking her ass the last few weeks, so I offered to organize the menu and prep."

Of course, her newly pregnant coworker sort of deserved a bit of payback after setting her up on a blind date for the shindig—without asking.

“I can help. I worked for my mom’s catering business when I was in high school.” He stuck out an elbow to hold open the storm door while she shoved her key in the deadbolt lock. “And you already know I like to cook.”

The evergreen wreath hanging above her head wobbled slightly as she pushed inside. “Are you sure? I appreciate the offer, but I can handle it myself if you have other things to do. You’re dressed like you were getting ready to go for a run.”

How the man jogged in only body-hugging sweats and a stocking cap in this Arctic cold was beyond her comprehension, not that she minded the view. He was built like a linebacker—the position he’d played from about six years old all the way through college—with sculpted thighs and biceps, rock-hard abs and pecs, and mouthwatering buns of steel. Watching him wash his prized 1978 Firebird, mow his lawn, and warm up for and cool down from his daily jog since early April had made her an expert on the physical perfection of an adult Beau Walters.

He’d also graduated from high school with her youngest cousin, Rich, six years after her. Lusting after a guy in his mid-thirties when she’d hit the big four-oh two birthdays ago still seemed like robbing the cradle, despite his very grown-up body and the fact that he was financially secure enough to buy a house.

He followed her into the kitchen and set his armloads on the center island. “I’ll put groceries away while you warm up. No run today. We’re supposed to have a winter storm Christmas Day, so I tuned up the snowblower and checked the generator. I’m all yours for the rest of the day if you need me.”

Damn, the offer was too tempting to brush off—not that she could take full advantage of it. Her vibrator sort of remedied that particular need on a regular basis.

After turning on the flame under the teakettle, she tugged off her gloves and hat and grabbed two mugs from the cabinet.

“Well, actually, I have a huge favor to ask. It’s fine if you don’t want to, but I’ll gladly make it worth your while. Whatever flavor lasagna you want to last all of winter break, plus scones and my best tea blends every morning for breakfast for the month of January.”

“That’s a pretty enticing bribe. What kind of favor?” The crinkle and clunk of groceries being unpacked joined the faint hiss of the heating water. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

Anything?

An image of a shirtless Beau stretched out on her rumpled sheets took her breath away.

Get your mind out of the bedroom, Laurel.

“Vanilla mint, snickerdoodle, or cranberry amaretto?” She opened the cupboard where her tea lived and turned to face him, determined to avoid making things awkward. “This isn’t a heavy-lifting kind of thing.”

He shrugged as he added a package of goat cheese to the pile of items that needed to go in the fridge. “Doesn’t matter. Name it, and it’s done. Vanilla mint sounds good today.”

“Even if it means pretending to be my date for the party tonight?” She ducked her head and whirled back around to fill the tea balls. Her cheeks burned—and not from the stove’s heat. “Robin informed me yesterday that she and Jay arranged a blind date for me. I panicked and told her I already asked someone.”

Returning to unpacking the groceries, Bull swallowed the urge to come clean to Laurel about his discussion with their mutual friends. If he accepted her deal, he might finally work up the courage to reveal his true feelings for her. If he didn’t, she might not blow him off when she discovered who her blind date was—but he also ran the risk of her showing up with someone else, even with the short notice. What guy wouldn’t

say yes to an invitation from a brainy and beautiful woman like Laurel Street?

Having emptied the last bag, he reached for the fridge handle. “So, um, did she tell you who she fixed you up with?”

“No, and that’s a big part of the problem.” The kettle let out a shrill whistle as she dropped the second infuser in her SCIENCE NERD mug. Her kissable lips scrunched into a cute grimace as she poured the water into the first cup. “But Jay had this goofy look, like it was an inside joke or something. Anyway, I’d feel more comfortable with you than anyone else. You know, since we’re friends.”

Ugh. Relegated to the friend zone again. Unless...

No way could he let her think he’d twisted Jay’s arm to arrange a fix-up with her. Taking their friendship to a new level had to be as much her idea as his. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you! You’re the best.” She hurried toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “I mean it.”

Her coat did little to camouflage the pressure of her breasts against his chest, waking his dick from its constant semi-erect state any time she was near.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad to help.” He patted her back and eased away to keep from making the situation worse, even though he would’ve preferred a tighter hug and a kiss or two as an appetizer. “We better start cooking. What’s first?”

She blinked up at him with her mesmerizing green-brown eyes, frowned, and put more space between them. Then she pivoted toward the living room. “I have the list on my phone. Back in minute. I need to take off my coat.”

Shit, I bet she noticed the hard-on. Is that good or bad?

With several rounds, blocks, and half-horns of cheese stacked in his left hand, he opened the refrigerator to put away groceries. It was better than watching her walk away from the most embarrassing moment of his adult life. The blast of chilly air had no effect on the cold sweat forming on his upper back and neck or the ever-present lump in his sweatpants.

He might've blown his chance with her in every possible way and put their friendship in tricky territory, all because his dick had a mind of its own.

It's only responding to what's going on in my brain. I have to stop imagining a life where she's my girlfriend—okay, sex-crazed wife—for more than a minute. Yeah, because that's going to happen.

Still wallowing in a mire of lost opportunities, he placed the last of the vegetables in the crisper drawer and moved on to the pantry items. Footsteps and the weight of Laurel's stare from behind challenged him to focus on the job.

"Let's start with the desserts. We're making lemon bars, shortbread cookies, and cheesecake bites." Metal clinked against glass, signaling her standard three-minute steeping time was up. "Robin's sister is handling the rest of the cookies plus the spiced cider. Jay's baking the potatoes for the potato bar, but I need to take care of the toppings. I'm also in charge of the nacho bar and the charcuterie spread."

"We, not you." He snagged the ring binder of her favorite recipes on his return to the kitchen workspace, hoping she'd forget about his erection if he dove right into playing sous chef. "I'll get the pinto beans cooking. Do you want me to work on mixing the filling for the cheesecake bites or slicing and chopping the vegetables after that?"

"Veggies. You're much faster at cutting than I am." She moved her mug to the island and opened the cabinet at her knees. "Did you see the gloves for slicing the jalapeños when you were putting stuff away? The store only had extra larges, but I figured that was better than nothing. They were in the bag with the tortilla chips, I think."

"Yep." Familiar with how she organized her recipes, he flipped to the right page almost immediately and then slid the binder toward her. "We made these for your Labor Day party. Good choice."

"They're always popular. I need the eggs and cream cheese while you're getting out the vegetables." Her take-charge tone added to the discomfort in his pants.

Did she know how sexy she sounded when she told him what to do in the kitchen?

As he gathered her ingredients, prepped the dried beans, and organized his chopping area, his thoughts wandered to his favorite fantasy—making breakfast with the woman of his dreams after a night of pure orgasmic bliss. He would feed her bites of omelet in between nibbling fruit from her belly, and then he'd make love to her again.

The wiggle of her hips as she stirred the cheesecake filling mixture added to the realism of being inside her.

Mm-mm-mm.

“Did you say something?” Before he could avert his gaze from her sweet ass, she looked over her shoulder with a hint of surprise in her expressive eyes.

Heat flooded his face. He'd clearly hummed his appreciation out loud. “I was, um, just thinking about tonight's desserts.”

2

DID he check out my butt?

A ripple winged its way through Laurel's uterus for the umpteenth time in the last hour, catching her off guard. She barely smothered a squeak as she refocused her attention on the bowl in front of her.

Or is it wishful thinking? We're friends. Neighbors. And I know I can always count on him if I need anything.

Beau was also her date for tonight.

She let that thought simmer as she transferred the last of the four dozen cheesecakes to the cooling racks on the counter. Obsessing about what to do if she happened to get caught under the mistletoe with him wasn't helping her concentration. Since they were going as a couple, everyone—especially Robin and Jay—would expect them to kiss and hold hands like normal dating people. It was a necessity if she hoped to convince their hosts she was already taken.

“All the fruit and vegetables are washed, cut, and bagged, including the potato and taco toppings.” The knife clunked against the cutting board behind her, but she didn't dare turn around to look at the man every single woman in town had pursued at one time or another. As a high school science teacher and the winningest football coach in Two Forks Hollow history, he appealed to nerd and jock lovers alike. Too bad that was her favorite combination. “Do you want me to work on the cheese next?”

She nodded and moved the empty tins to the dishwasher. “Sounds good. The lemon bars have to bake for another fifteen minutes, so I’ll mix the shortbread dough. The butter should be soft enough by now. Let me know when you’re ready for a lunch break. There’s white chili and vegetable soup in the fridge.”

“Are you hungry? I can check the beans and make lunch while you’re mixing up the last batch of cookies.” He headed for the fridge as she stepped toward it. His hands closed around her waist and he lifted her in the air, narrowly preventing a collision. He spun her around and set her on her feet, but not before she grabbed for his shoulders and held on for dear life.

The weightlessness spread to her heart for several beats, tempting her to tug him closer for a kiss that inspired the same feeling. Then his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

Kissing him is such a bad idea.

But I want to, damn it!

Then he took a step back, putting too much space between them for her to touch that sexy mouth with hers. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to almost plow you over. Um, lunch? I’m hungry.”

She swallowed a moan. *Me too, Beau. Me too.*

His arms dropped to his sides and his gaze swung past her face to a point somewhere behind her. “What do you want to eat?”

You.

The thought echoed in her head for several seconds before her brain caught up. “I... Whatever you’re having is good.”

A hint of pink colored his cheeks above the dark whiskers of his beard, and his dark eyes cut to hers for a few thumps of her pulse. They held more than his usual friendliness, but then he looked away again. “So...I was thinking maybe we should practice dancing together. And maybe handing hands. And kissing. Not like making out or anything. Just enough that we

don't feel awkward touching each other. You know, so we can convince Jay and Robin we're on an actual date."

Kissing. Touching.

She nodded before the possible consequences could take root in her brain. "Good idea."

He jerked his gaze back to hers again, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. "Really?"

Had he expected her to refuse? No one in their right mind would. He was everything she'd ever wanted in a boyfriend and never dared to hope for.

Nodding again, she closed the space between them and tried to fill her lungs and brain with enough oxygen to be sure she wasn't hallucinating—or still wallowing in wishful thinking.

A smile curved his inviting lips, negating her efforts to breathe. He slid his fingers through hers and gave a gentle squeeze. Despite the callouses from all his physical activities, his hands were warm and soft, familiar and soothing, fantasy-inspiring and tingle-inducing. "This doesn't make you uncomfortable, does it?"

"Nope." She draped her free arm over his shoulder and let the subtle scents of his soap and shampoo mix with the aroma of freshly baked cookies to flood her senses. "Alexa play 'The Christmas Song' by Nat King Cole."

"Great choice." He led her into a tight circle as the music began, guiding her with a hint of pressure from his rock-hard thighs and strong hands. "My mom was right about dancing lessons being good for more than football."

Her eyes drifted closed with the graceful sway of their bodies, and the occasional brush of his not-insubstantial bulge against her leg incited spasms in her long-neglected lady parts. When the whisper-light caress of his breath feathered across her chin and then his warm lips touched hers, her body sang and her heart gave up the hopeless battle.

Wisps of Laurel's coal-black hair escaped her ponytail, tickling Bull's nose as he eased his lips back from the brief but earth-shattering kiss they'd shared and pressed his cheek to hers. His feet had stalled and the world seemed like it had frozen in this perfect moment.

He mentally crossed his fingers for a three-peat or more at the party tonight—because he didn't have to fake any feelings with this woman. She was it for him.

Too weak to resist kissing her again, he nuzzled her temple and dipped his head to find her irresistible lips. A millisecond before he made contact, a loud knuckles-on-glass knock twanged through the kitchen, sending his pulse racing and diverting every drop of blood away from his dick and toward his pounding heart.

Then a chime interrupted the music. "You have one unread text message from Jay Jacoby. Jay Jacoby wrote, 'Here to pick up the food you have ready so far.'"

Laurel stiffened in Bull's arms and jerked toward the patio doors leading to her deck.

Jay stood in the falling snow with a shit-eating grin on his smug mug and raised his hand in a quick wave. Footprints showed his path through the backyard into the abutting property beyond.

The rush of icy air as she let the interloper inside cooled the heat of embarrassment on Bull's face but did nothing for his libido. His friend's timing sucked worse than his ability to play quarterback, which was pretty damn pathetic in spite of the instruction he'd been given at their Sunday morning flag football games.

"Hey, Laurel. Smells great." Jay stomped his boots on the rug and yanked off his gloves, the amusement in his expression still obvious in his smirk. "I figured you'd be knee-deep in cookies and snack foods, not dancing and playing

tonsil hockey with your neighbor. Am I safe to assume Bull's your date for the party?"

"Yes." She hurried to the counter and started packing the cheesecakes into an empty container. How could she focus on normal stuff after the way their bodies had moved together? "I told you I didn't need a fix-up. These have to be refrigerated. The big cooler's in the garage if you don't have room in your refrigerator. You can take all the cut fruit and veggies too. How's Robin? Is she going to be able to stand being in the same room as the food?"

At the mention of his wife's name, Jay finally lost his annoying grin. Hopefully, that meant he would keep his mouth shut about who Laurel's blind date was supposed to have been. "Maybe? She's taking a nap right now, but she managed to eat toast for breakfast this morning without feeling like she was going to puke. That's a big improvement over the last month. Did she tell you we got to hear the baby's heartbeat at her appointment last Friday?"

Her shoulders dropped an inch or two, probably from the easy change of subject. "Mm-hm. She was really excited. I'm glad she's finally getting over the morning sickness. Beau, will you please get the fruit and vegetables out of the fridge while Jay finds the cooler?"

"Sure." Resigned to the temporary loss of the romantic mood from the arrival of his friend, Bull stalked to the fridge and tried to focus on the task at hand.

Footsteps and then the snick of the door to the garage opening and closing came from his left. Less than a minute later, Jay reappeared and set the cooler on the floor. He raised a questioning eyebrow, but Bull ignored the prompt. "So...you two. When did that happen?"

3

SMOOTHING her clammy palms over her sparkly reindeer sweater and down her skinny jeans-clad hips, Laurel slowly blew out an exhale and pivoted away from the mirror in her bathroom on her wedge-heeled ankle booties. Her dangly jingle-bell earrings clinked with the movement.

Unfortunately, the sound didn't distract her. She shouldn't be nervous about a date that really wasn't a date, but those kisses in her kitchen had triggered very real feelings and Beau's intentions hadn't seemed at all pretend. Although they'd stuck to food prep all afternoon, the air around them had been charged with more than static electricity after Jay left. Anticipation had made her antsy and disappointment had settled in when Beau said goodbye and carried the last of the food to the Rockwell-Jacoby house at three thirty.

Her doorbell chimed as she picked up her coat and purse from the bed.

Breathe.

And remember this is fake.

She repeated the reminders over and over on the way to greet her sexy neighbor—the man she absolutely, positively would not include in her wish list when Santa asked everyone at the party what they wanted for the holidays this year.

That thought abandoned her brain when she opened the door.

Beau stood on her porch in thigh-hugging black jeans, a red thermal Henley, and a leather jacket that emphasized his

broad shoulders and muscular build. Snowflakes melted on his dark hair and neatly trimmed beard, leaving shiny droplets of water that sparkled under the porch lights. “Hi. You look great. Festive. Are you ready to go?”

A whimper nearly escaped. “Hi. Um, come on in. You look great too. I just need to put on my coat.”

The smile he aimed at her as he stepped inside lit multiple body parts on fire. “Let me help.”

Clearing her throat to cover a groan, she turned her back to him to hide the warmth spreading to her face. “Thanks.”

He held her wool peacoat, making sure her hands found the sleeve holes, and lifted her hair out of the way when he adjusted the collar at the back of her neck. His fingertips brushed her skin, setting off a shiver through her entire body. “Do you need a scarf? The temperature dropped a few degrees when the sun set and the wind’s picking up. Don’t want to ruin your evening off with frostbite.”

Frostbite wasn’t even a remote possibility with the heat coursing through every one of her erogenous zones, but a scarf might disguise her flushed cheeks. “Good idea. I’ll grab one.”

Burying her head in the coat closet gave her a few moments to catch her breath and chill her lady hard-on—at least somewhat. Thank god, he couldn’t see the way her clit and nipples rose to attention. That would be truly embarrassing.

She covered all but her eyes and forehead before she hooked her purse strap on her shoulder and tackled the low row of buttons down the front of her coat. “Ready.”

With the movement of her jaw, fuzzies from the scarf stuck to her recently applied lip balm.

Bleh.

A slight frown caught her attention, but he opened the door and offered his arm. “Hold on to me. I salted your steps and sidewalk, but it’s still a little slippery.”

She pulled on her gloves and did as he instructed, not about to risk talking again until her face was free of the lint-y scarf.

He waited beside her as she locked the door. “I’m glad we decided to drive. Are you sure you’re warm enough?”

“Mm-hm.” Salt crunched under shoes on the steps, but thanking him for his thoughtfulness would only add more fuzz to her furry mouth.

“Watch out for the slick spot at the bottom of the—”

Her feet slipped out from under her, triggering a preemptive burst of pain through her hips and tailbone. A screech barely passed her lips before he scooped her up and squeezed her against his chest. She flung her arms around his neck, narrowly missing his nose.

A puff of air warmed her forehead as he cuddled her against him. “That was scary. I should probably carry you the rest of the way.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. Her ego couldn’t handle another embarrassing incident today.

“That looks like Jay’s car.” Beau’s gentle voice soothed her wounded pride.

The SUV stopped at the end of her driveway and the window slid downward, revealing her co-worker. He grinned. “I thought you were supposed to carry your bride over the threshold into the bedroom. Next thing you know, you’ll be running to the store for hot pickled cauliflower to satisfy her food cravings.”

Jay’s offhand comment—carrying his bride over the threshold, not driving to the store because of pregnancy cravings—found a permanent place in Bull’s brain, constantly distracting him from the party and the conversation. He hadn’t strayed from Laurel’s side since they’d arrived nearly four hours ago. Even after taking advantage of more than a dozen opportunities for

PDA, their first sort-of date wasn't the right time to suggest they elope or for a traditional marriage proposal.

She squeezed his hand, reminding him of their intertwined fingers—something that felt completely natural—and leaned close enough to whisper in his ear. “I want to check on Robin. Do you feel like coming with me?”

As much for the benefit of their audience as himself, he pressed a light kiss to her lips, doing his best not to let his dick hijack her question. “Of course.”

After a slow blink he chose to interpret as interest, she smiled at the trio of her co-workers from the Biological Interaction Research Center putting on their coats. “It was good to catch up. Email me and we'll meet for coffee or lunch next week. Drive safely.”

When the group headed out the door, Laurel led him to the recliner in the corner of the living room.

Their hostess sat in the chair, with her husband dangling a sprig of mistletoe over her head. Jay waggled his eyebrows at her before Robin tugged him close enough for a kiss. They shared a smile and a look that left no doubt about how much they loved each other.

Envy poked at Bull's heart. He wanted the same kind of happily-ever-after with Laurel. Was it even a possibility?

Looking less pale than when they'd arrived, Robin cast a glance in his date's direction. “Thanks so much for organizing the menu and helping with all the food for the party, Laurel. We couldn't have done this without you. My sister's boxing up the few leftovers for you take home. I also had Jay pick up a little gift for you.”

Her husband picked up a wrapped present with a red bow from the hearth and held it out to Laurel. “Open it on Christmas morning. We really appreciate your help. Feel free to call in the favor any time. Now, you two take off and enjoy some private time. We'll handle the rest of the cleanup.”

Laurel leaned down to give Robin a one-armed hug and then took the offered present. “A gift wasn't necessary, but

thank you.”

“It was, and you’re welcome.” Robin’s gaze shifted to Bull and pinned him in place. “You take good care of my friend.”

He nodded. “For as long as she’ll let me.”

His fake date’s lips brushed his cheek. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Robin. He’s pretty amazing. Get some rest and call me if you need anything.”

After a shorter than usual goodbye, Bull finally escorted Laurel to his pickup, holding tight so she didn’t skid on the slippery driveway in her somewhat impractical but sexy boots. While the truck warmed up, he loaded the cooler of leftovers in the back. With thoughts of what could happen when they got to her house, the biting cold barely chilled him.

He climbed behind the wheel and buckled up, glad for the warm air blowing from the vents. Resting his hand on her seat to look through the back window, he met her gaze. “I think we did a good job of convincing everybody we’re a couple.” *Including me.* “Don’t you?”

She nodded. “Even Robin seemed like she believed us, and her bullshit meter rarely misses a thing.”

“It helps that we know each other pretty well.” The urge to touch her hit hard and strong as he turned toward the front again, but he forced his hand to the gear shift and his brain to focus on driving halfway around the block. Less than a minute later, he parked in front of her garage. His insides weaved and spun, like they were trying to avoid getting tackled, but she’d caught him months ago. “I’ll walk you to the door and then carry in the cooler.”

Her smile sent his pulse skipping and jumping along with his stomach. “Thanks, Beau. You’re such a sweet guy.”

A few minutes later, the thought of saying goodnight to her and going next door to his empty house gave him a kick in the ass as he joined her in the kitchen with the party leftovers.

Her coat, scarf, and gloves now gone, she reached into the cooler and looked up at him. “Do you want some of this?”

A deep inhale barely prepared him to respond to the opening she'd given him. "I'd rather have you."

4

STUNNED INTO SILENCE, Laurel could only replay Beau's words in her head and hope her brain wasn't playing tricks on her. The bag of mixed raw vegetables slipped from her grasp, but she couldn't make her hand pick it up again. "I... Me? You want *me*?"

His expression more serious than she'd ever witnessed it, he stared down at her and gave a curt nod. Then he cleared his throat and huffed out a breath. "You. I can't pretend anymore, not after holding your hand and kissing you and dancing with you today. Tonight. I want to be more than friends."

Friends with benefits?

Instant disappointment struck with that possibility, but he shook his head before she could ask if that's what he meant. "God, I'm seriously screwing this up. I like you, Laurel. A lot. Maybe it's just me, but it feels like there's this amazing chemistry between us when we're together. We fit. At least I think we do, and I hope we can date for real. No more faking, like at the party."

She straightened and grabbed for the countertop as his admission sank in. Was she dreaming? "You're sure?"

"Yes." His eyes suddenly widened. "I know what you're thinking, and it doesn't matter. Why can't I be with a woman who's older than me? Besides, it's less than six years. Guys date younger women all the time—fifteen or twenty years younger—and nobody says a word. In this case, numbers

mean nothing. Unless, of course, you don't feel the same about me as I do you."

Her heart tripped and she finally gave herself permission to take a chance.

She shoved the cooler lid closed and grasped his hand. "Come with me."

The double meaning hit her a moment too late—at the same time his mouth curved into a swoony half smile. Dr. Bravestone of *Jumanji* fame had nothing on Beau Walters' smolder.

Ducking her head to hide what had to be a brilliant shade of Christmas red on her cheeks, she tugged him toward her bedroom. "I mean, follow me."

He scooped her into his arms and marched out of the kitchen. "You had it right the first time."

His husky voice lit up every nerve ending in her body that hadn't already ignited. Getting rid of their multiple layers of clothes became her top priority, but she needed a kiss—a real one.

When he stopped next to her bed, she dove in for the kind of taste she'd been dreaming of for months. His lips parted with the first touch and his tongue tangled with hers, stealing all the air from her lungs. A moan vibrated through her throat, but she had no idea where the sound originated.

He nibbled a path along her jaw to her ear, his rough breathing making goose bumps spread across her skin. "I wish I could kiss you everywhere at once."

"Everywhere?" She nearly choked on the word as tiny tremors rippled through her belly.

"Mm-hm." His lips still pressed to her neck, he lowered her feet to the floor.

"Then maybe you should undress me." The thought escaped before she could censor it, but she wanted to be naked with him. She wanted every part of him making contact with every part of her. "Forget the maybe."

He straightened, giving her a good look at his hopeful expression. “Are you sure about this? I don’t want you to regret it in the morning.”

The prospect of him spending the night obliterated the fear of telling him exactly what she desired. “I won’t have any regrets unless you’re selfish in bed. If that’s the case, I’ll be kicking you out long before morning.”

Humor danced in his eyes and a grin hinted at the pair of dimples that rarely made an appearance. “I plan to be very generous. You can’t kick me out if you’re too satisfied to move.”

Bull rubbed his thumb along Laurel’s kiss-swollen lower lip and worked her sweater upward with his other hand. His fingers found bare skin at her lower back, inciting more than a few tingles in his balls. “Are you going to undress me too?”

She shoved his leather jacket off his shoulders, but it got stuck on his biceps. “It might be faster if we undress ourselves.”

“I don’t mind undressing both of us.” He tugged her festive top over her head and dropped it at their feet. Then he let his eyes roam over her lacy bra and the handfuls it held in place while he shed his coat and shirt. “My dreams didn’t do you justice.”

A rosy blush spread from her chest to her cheeks, but she ran her fingertips over his pecs and across his abs. His jeans barely slowed her descent, and her hand cupped the erection behind his zipper before he could react. “Same.”

Unable to stop a groan from rumbling out of his throat, he rocked his hips forward. Exploding in his pants was a very real possibility if the pressure continued. He backed away to kick off his hiking boots and shed his jeans. “Clothes off now.”

Her shoes landed near his, and she shimmied as she peeled off the second skin covering her legs. A few springy jet-black

curls peeked out from the edge of the small triangle of matching lace above her thighs. She faced him, but he still caught a glimpse of her bare butt cheek.

A thong. Thank you, Santa.

Her arms hung at her sides, her fists clenching and unclenching, like she wasn't sure what to do next. She wet her lips and lifted her chin. "I have a box of condoms in the nightstand drawer."

His dick bobbed toward her, clearly liking the implication that it would soon be inside her.

"Good to know. I only have one in my wallet." He dragged his gaze from her delectable mouth. "I'm naked. You're not. What are we going to do about that?"

She flicked open the catch between her breasts and left the lace clinging to the perfect mounds of flesh as she wiggled out of the scrap of material below her waist. Bit by bit, her bra slipped away, finally revealing the nipples he'd imagined teasing and tasting at least a hundred times. They puckered into tight rosy peaks in the cool air.

He swallowed against his suddenly dry throat and skimmed the straps off her arms. Instead of speaking, he guided her down onto the bed and drowned in the feel of her skin against his. The scent of her hair lured him to her neck, where he breathed in the intoxicating aroma of vanilla and sugar. A careful nip and a lick assured him she tasted every bit as good as she smelled. "Mmm. Delicious. I want to feast on you."

Her pulse quickened beneath his lips and she arched into him. "Then what are you waiting for?"

The husky question launched a whisper of a caress along his shoulder. Her breathy words sent him on a mission to explore and memorize every inch of her magnificent curves—after a tongue-tangling kiss that pushed his heartrate past its usual max during a hard workout.

He nibbled his way along the length of her collarbone and downward to the valley between her gorgeous breasts. Careful

not to scrape her silky skin with his beard scruff, he sucked one beaded nipple into his mouth while he brushed his thumb over its twin.

Her needy groan was accompanied by a tug on his hair. “Yes. That feels so good.”

The slight sting encouraged him to switch to the other side long enough to pull another desperate sound from her. It changed to a whimper when he released the taut tip and moved on to her ribs and the plane of her stomach. “I promise to pay more attention to them after I make good on that no-regrets deal.” He swirled his tongue around her belly button. “Your first orgasm is coming soon. Are you ready, Laurel?”

She froze, sending an icy shiver up his spine. Did he sound too cocky, like he had far more experience with women than he actually did?

Her abs trembled and she pushed up on her elbows. A giggle echoed off the walls, followed by all-out laughter. “You said...my first...orgasm is...*coming* soon!”

He dropped his forehead to her belly, wishing he was half as smooth with the ladies as people seemed to think he was. The heat of a thousand suns crawled up the back of his neck, but he raised his head to laugh with her. He loved making her smile, and she looked much less tense now.

Scooting lower, he settled between her thighs. The sweet scent of her arousal urged him closer still. The laughter died in his throat, and he glided his tongue through her slick folds. A shuddering gasp added to her addictive flavor. Hunger rushed through him, with the need to bury his face in her pussy and discover what gave her the greatest pleasure.

He licked and sucked and savored, more determined than ever to please her when her giggles turned to panting cries. Within seconds, she jerked against his mouth and screamed his name, but he didn't stop until she lay limp on the covers. Only then did he dig for the condom in his wallet, roll it on, and prepare to enter heaven.

Cradling her face in his palms so he could look into her eyes, he slid home. She surrounded him, pulling him deeper with every pulse of her snug muscles. The connection he'd longed for finally became reality. The emotions he'd hidden for months drowned his body and soul. Those three little words tried to escape, but he pressed a gentle kiss to her lips, her nose, her forehead as he slowly glided in and out.

She moved her hips in time with his, reminding him of the dances they'd shared, as she wrapped her arms around him. A soft sigh drew out into a long, low hum. "Oh god, you feel amazing."

Her voice stole the last of his control and he pumped into her, letting every sensation overtake him. Then she cried out again and hugged his dick so tight he could only leap off the ledge with her.

5

CURLED UP IN A COZY COCOON, Laurel ignored her growling stomach and wiggled against the erection nestled against her bottom. The arm around her waist pulled her closer, bringing back memories of a glorious night filled with lovemaking and more orgasms than any and all of the three other men she'd slept with in her life.

Beau moved behind her and pressed his warm lips to her ear. "Any regrets?"

She shook her head and rested her hand on his forearm. "Only that we can't spend all day in bed. I have presents to wrap and drop off at the memory care center by noon."

"But you're not kicking me out, right? Does that mean I can spend the night before Christmas here with you too?" When her insides rumbled again, he chuckled and spread his palm over her belly. She'd evidently burned off the calories from their midnight snack. "Sounds like you need a recharge."

"Definitely not kicking you out." She rolled toward him to steal a quick good-morning kiss, but seeing the way he looked at her made her linger for several more seconds. "What if I want to have a sleepover at your house tonight?"

His relaxed smile widened. "Even better. Then we won't have to walk next door in bad weather if the power goes off. Let's go make breakfast and work out the details."

"Sounds like a plan." She crawled out of the blankets after him, enjoying the view as he bent to pick up his pants.

He was the whole package—smart, kind, and attentive. Having a sexy-as-sin body was a bonus.

Glancing over his shoulder, he bared those mischievous dimples again. “Are you staring at my ass?”

With a shrug, she grinned right back at him. “Yes.”

His eyes dropped toward her breasts when he pulled his khakis to his muscular thighs. “I guess we’re even then, because I’ve stared at yours on numerous occasions. The red bike shorts and sports bra you wore to yoga class in the summer is my favorite outfit.”

Had he really noticed her months ago?

“Mine is the shorts you wear to wash your car. No shirt.” She reached for her robe at the end of the bed, happy to own her truth since he had. “I’ll be out in a minute. Bathroom stop first. Feel free to use the one in the hall if you need to.”

He took one step toward the doorway and immediately backtracked. After a quick brush of his lips on hers, he headed for the hallway again. Before he disappeared, slightly off-key singing carried into the bedroom. “I saw Laurel kissing Beauregard underneath the mistletoe last night.”

Caught between an unladylike snort and a swoon, she swayed into the bathroom. Her reflection in the mirror confirmed what she’d suspected when she woke. She was truly and hopelessly in love with Bull Walters. A few splashes of cool water on her face didn’t wash the obvious emotion from her face, but she hurried to the kitchen anyway.

Sharing breakfast, talking about where and when to meet up later, and lingering over a goodbye suggested he felt the same way about her.

She finally closed the front door and returned to the master bath for a shower. Her overused muscles loosened under the warm spray, a good thing since she planned to use them again tonight.

Dressed in leggings, another holiday-themed sweater, and fuzzy slippers, she spread out her wrapping supplies on the bedroom. As she finished cutting paper for the first gift, her

phone buzzed and hummed on the nightstand. Her pulse stuttered with the instant hope that Beau was calling. She pushed down her disappointment when Robin's name lit up the screen. "Hi. How're you feeling today?"

Her friend snickered. "Not as good as you, obviously, but better. Jay and I saw Bull's truck parked in your driveway bright and early this morning. And no fresh tire tracks in the snow. Although I have to say, we weren't surprised he spent the night, considering how inseparable you were at the party. It seems serious."

Needing to confide at least some of her feelings to Robin, Laurel switched to speaker and continued her task. "I hope so. I like him a lot."

"What I don't get is why he wanted us to set up the two of you if you were already together. I mean, the party clearly wasn't your first date."

With a piece of tape poised to seal the long edge of the package, Laurel frowned. "Beau was supposed to be my blind date for the party? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't *he* tell me? I don't like that he tried to trick me into dating him. I know I'm going to regret asking this, but when did he ask about setting that up?"

"I don't know. Probably sometime right around Thanksgiving. Yes, when they played flag football at the park after dinner. How long have you been seeing each other?"

That was the hundred-thousand-dollar question—the one that required another fib or admitting the truth.

This is why I hate lying. And why didn't Beau tell me about the fix-up? Or ask me to the party himself?

She balled up the tape and tossed it toward the wastebasket next to the nightstand. "I can't answer that question without incriminating myself. Gads, I feel like I'm back in high school, if high school had included guys wanting to date me."

"Incriminating yourself? What does that..." Robin's sigh spoke volumes about what ideas had popped into her head.

“Did you pretend to already have a date to avoid the one we set up for you?”

Her friend’s direct question demanded a direct answer, but Laurel pushed to her feet and paced to the closet and back first. “Yes, and I asked Beau to be my fake date. Yesterday.”

Another stretch of silence filled the room. “Yesterday. Okay, but if you and Bull aren’t actually a couple, why was his truck parked in your driveway this morning? Please tell me you didn’t hook up with him for a one-night stand.”

“Of course not.” She plopped onto the bed and avoided looking at the rumpled covers. “If I was going to have a one-stand stand, I wouldn’t do it with my next-door neighbor.”

“But you did have sex with him. Am I right?”

“Maybe.” The evasion pricked her conscience, especially since she could trust Robin with the truth. Unfortunately, she was no longer sure she could trust Beau to honest with her. “Fine, yes. And I’m pretty sure I’m in love with him.”

“So...you and Laurel Street, huh? When did that happen?”

Half wishing he’d created an excuse to miss what had started as the annual Dawg’s House lunch with his out-of-town friends, Bull took another bite of his burger and rolled his eyes at Dirk Wagner.

Jay chuckled and leaned in, like he was about to reveal a big secret. “He won’t admit it, but I think she asked him out last week. That’s when he stopped begging me to play matchmaker. I had a blind date all lined up for them and everything.”

“Anyway, it’s about damn time.” Dirk squeezed more ketchup onto his plate and dunked a fry. “I still don’t understand why you were too chicken to ask her out. If she turned you down, you could’ve just moved on to the next—”

“Women aren’t interchangeable.” Shaking his head, Bull aimed a glare across the table. “Why are we friends with this guy?”

A hoot of laughter came from Jay. “Because we want to be here to watch when his heart breaks over a woman who won’t give him the time of day.”

Dirk snorted. “Not happening. I’m enjoying the bachelor life too much to give it up for one pretty face and hot body. No wife. No kids. No commitment. Speaking of commitment, when are you going to propose to the brainy Dr. Street?”

Heat crept up Bull’s neck, but he ignored the bait that would undoubtedly force him to admit he’d impulsively bought a ring weeks ago. Only one topic would shut him up. “Are you planning to call Ingrid while you’re in town?”

The low blow hit its target.

Dirk’s jaw tensed, but it was the only hint that the thought of contacting his former girlfriend from most of their middle and high school years bothered him. “Nope.”

The three of them fell back into superficial conversation after several minutes of awkward silence. Wives, girlfriends, and exes hadn’t been come up last year—or the previous several years. When they parted in the parking lot twenty minutes later, the impulse to ask Laurel to marry him hadn’t waned.

Setting the scene for a romantic Christmas Eve, prepping food for being snowed in, and chatting with his mom and dad about how their fortieth anniversary trip to Costa Rica was going helped distract him for a while at home.

Ten minutes before Laurel was supposed to arrive, he retrieved the small blue box from the end table in the living room. Each facet of the diamond sparkled in the light shining in the front window, promising something magical if he braved giving it to her.

The doorbell chimed, sending his gut spinning.

He shoved the ring in his pocket as he walked to the door. “It’s too soon. Be patient.”

A frown greeted him through the glass, but she stepped onto the rug when he gestured her inside, bringing in a chill that had nothing to do with the winter temperature and blowing snow. After a few stomps of her boots, she exhaled and looked up at him. The usual cheerfulness in her eyes was missing. They weren't readable at all.

A surge of protectiveness swept through him. "Is something wrong?"

She twisted her gloved hands together and tilted her head. "I don't know. You didn't tell me about the blind date, even after I told you I lied about already having a date. Am I just a hook-up to you?"

Shame for not coming clean battled with the guilt the hurt in her words triggered, but his feelings didn't matter. "No, you're not a hook-up. I would never disrespect you."

Her eyebrows dipped lower. "Then why didn't you tell me you asked Jay to set us up?"

He bit his lower lip and rubbed the back of his neck. His embarrassment was a small price to pay for earning her trust. "I felt stupid for not being brave enough to ask you myself, especially since I had no idea if you liked me that way, and I didn't want to risk your friendship. Not that it justifies hiding my actions."

Her expression softened, but she deserved the whole truth.

He pulled the jewelry box from his pocket, recognizing his chance to fix his mistakes. His hand shook as he opened it in front of her. "I bought this a few days after the first time you invited me over for a cookout. Not once have you ever treated me like a big dumb jock, and I wanted to prove to you how special you are to me. Words are just words with nothing to back them up. I love you and I want to marry you if you'll have me."

She blinked at him, her eyes shining like she might cry. "I love you too, you big smart romantic, but I'll only marry you after you practice communicating your feelings to me."

Ecstatic to know she felt the same about him, he picked her up and carried her toward the bedroom. “I’m madly in love with you, and I want to show you how much right now.”

About the Author

Mellanie Szereto is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of over forty romcoms and contemporary romances, most with characters who have plenty of life experience like herself. Whether you call them older, seasoned, mature, experienced, or later-in-life protagonists, they deserve love too! Her stories are often set in small towns with quirky main characters, fun secondary casts, and lots of humor. She enjoys gardening, cooking, and baking—as well as hiking to work off the fruits of her labor—and incorporates food into all of her stories. She lives in an old farmhouse in rural Indiana with her husband of thirty-seven years.

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Adore Me's Naughty Christmas

Ashley Zakrzewski

I

JUST A FEW HOURS AGO, Emily was standing at the window, begging for it to snow. She's only a little girl, so she doesn't understand that snow in Texas is rare. It's silent outside, everyone at home with their families. We live on a quiet residential road with not much traffic. It's one of things Damon looked for when surprising us with the house last Christmas. His big grand gesture.

Emily is curled up on the couch watching Animal Planet like normal, and the fire is crackling away. It's our first Christmas in the new house, and I want it to be perfect. Damon smiles and throws his arm around me, and we watch her from the kitchen. *Why is she still awake?* Damon should remember how last Christmas went. Emily ended up getting up at the butt crack of dawn, and we were up until like three in the morning trying to get everything figured out in the living room around the tree.

The time is encroaching on ten in the evening and I want to get some sleep tonight. Tomorrow this place will be filled to the brim with family for the holidays, and right now we have a little of peace and quiet. Is it bad that I want to enjoy it?

"Maybe we need to remind her that Santa is coming?" I poke his stomach. "Or she'll never go to bed."

Emily doesn't believe that Santa comes down the chimney, and mainly because before now, she has never been in a house with one. She thinks he just walks in the front door, puts the presents under the tree, and walks out. No need for a key. I love the way children think about things.

He laughs. “You want me to be the bad guy?”

My hand falls on my hip. “Come on, let me be the good guy.”

“Fine, but you owe me.”

Damon trots over to the couch and sits down on the edge, whispering something in Emily’s ear. She rises up off the couch and throws her hands in the air.

“Santa’s coming!”

I smile and follow her up the stairs to her bedroom and tuck her in. “Just remember, don’t get up too early. Love you, sweetheart.”

There hasn’t been a single year she has slept past six on Christmas morning. I know the drill. Go to bed as early as possible to keep my strength for the craziness that will ensue tomorrow. She always has so much energy first thing in the morning, and I need at least a cup of coffee beforehand.

When the door shuts behind me, I bite my lip.

“You can’t be serious?” I laugh, taking him in.

Damon is standing right outside our bedroom in a pair of velvet red sleep pants and no shirt with a santa hat on. *How did I get so damn lucky?*

My relationship with Damon is healthy, and I can’t say that much about my previous ones. Somehow, I attracted toxic men, but fate pushed us together. He saved Emily and I out of a burning building. Damon is our literal Knight in Shining Armor.

“What? Not a good enough present for you?” he says, walking into the bedroom.

I run after him and find him on the bed, splayed out. “No fair. I don’t have something as sexy as that to wear.”

He winks and throws a red bag at me. “Now you do.”

Damon and I have the same humor. He has opened up since we moved into this new house, and finally believes he deserves love again.

I'm all for dressing up and having a good time. He looks like a marvellous piece of man candy, laying there on the bed, staring at me.

"You want me to wear this?" I ask, holding it up.

He nods.

The lingerie slips between my feet and works its way up around my thighs and then the straps on my shoulders. There isn't much to this one. It's like a red string.

"I like yours better," I say, already getting a wedgie.

"That's your opinion. Spin around and let me see the back."

After honoring his request, he eases off the bed and walks over to me, tracing my shoulder with his finger. "You are fucking magnificent, but from experience I know you taste a thousands time better than you look right now."

His devious smile makes me quiver, and I step back a bit as he grabs my waist and kisses my neck. The things this man does to me. The raw passion he has unleashed inside me.

As he moves in front of me, I reach up behind his neck and pull his head down. He tilts his head the rest of the way down and kisses me deeply. *Fuck!* My whole body tingles in excitement.

"We need to get everything set up for the morning," I say, his hands slowly moving down toward my ass.

I love his hands on me. The way he squeezes hard, but gentle, and then lifts me up like I weigh nothing.

"Seriously?"

Okay, so maybe I'm playing a little hard to get because I want nothing more than him to ravish my body for the next few hours, but I also need to make sure we don't tire ourselves out and forget to play Santa.

I wrap my legs around him and he shoves me into the wall. *Now, this is worth it.* A groan escapes my throat as he buries

himself in my neck. This is the man I am going to spend the rest of my life with - lucky me.

His breathing gets heavy, but he presses his body firmly against mine. *What a tease. Just fuck me already.* I'm not wearing this ridiculously uncomfortable outfit for no reason.

"Fuck me already, damnit!"

He moans at my words and he drops his pants. "I like this look on you. Very dominating."

I scratch at his muscular arms and grab at his perfectly sculpted torso until my hands wander down to his erection. He's ready for me. He's going to feel so damn good inside of me.

"You will want to scream," he whispers. "But don't. Quiet, remember?"

He kneels down and his tongue licks up my thigh and then onto me. Damon does wonders with his tongue and before him, no one has ever gone down on me before. In fact, my sex life before him sucked. No foreplay.

My hips rise, begging for me, and his tongue flicks against me, spreading my thighs wider to explore further. *Perfect ending to Christmas eve.* His tongue is moving in sync with the finger inside me, and I beg him not to stop. *I need this release. NOW!*

Damon is driving me insane, and my side is cramping from this position. I turn around and put my hands on the wall, bending over with all my glory hanging out. "Fuck me now!"

He grabs my hips and thrusts himself inside of me, causing a moan to erupt from my throat. The one thing about him is he knows exactly what I want. We can decipher our moods to know what pace to go. Tonight is quick and dirty. My back arches as he slams into me, over and over, me begging for him to let me come. My toes curl, and my walls tighten around him.

"Oh shit, that is the best feeling."

"Don't stop."

He grabs my breasts and squeezes them, using them as thrusting support. Anytime, baby. Whatever you need.

When his breathing quickens, it signals that he is about to come. He loves dirty talk, and I'm on the brink of another orgasm.

“I'm yours. Punish Me. I've been bad.”

His hands go back to my hips as he thrusts two more times and then we both still.

“How the hell do we expect to get anything done when we could have been having sex like that 24/7? I feel like a fucking teenager again. Can't get enough of you.”

I walk over to plop on the bed to catch my breath. He's right. Why would I ever want to do anything else but this? The amount of good sex I've missed out on until him. What a shame.

He plants a kiss on my lips, and then pulls me up by my hands. “It's time for us to put the stuff out. But first, you need to change. Just in case.”

I laugh as I look down and forget what I'm wearing. “Yeah. I'm not wearing this downstairs. Not with our windows.”

Damon helps me out of the contraption, and then I slip on flannel pants with a reindeer on them. Comfy and seasonal. Perfect.

We get all the items around the tree and we take a good hour at least. By the time we are done, I'm yawning and just wanting to tap out.

“My luck. She'll be up at five in the morning,” I say as I'm crawling into bed.

The sex is always great, but on a night like this, now I'm over exhausted with a big day tomorrow. But that means I'll sleep better now too.

2

LIKE CLOCKWORK, her hands are beating against our door at six in the morning, causing me to fall out of bed.

“Are you okay?” Damon asks, getting up and coming around to help me.

“And so the craziness of today begins.”

I rub my eyes, wishing for just another hour of sleep, but that’s never going to happen.

“I’ll head down and start the coffee,” he says, opening the bedroom door, and high fiving Emily.

“Mom, come down and see. You and Damon even got something this year!”

My forehead scrunches. There is no present underneath the tree for me. I would know. I flick my wrist and throw on a pullover as the chills run down my back. Why is it so damn cold?

Coming down the stairs, Damon and Emily are both at the window.

“What’s going on?” I ask, pushing Damon out of the way.

“It’s a Christmas miracle, mom. Look!”

There is a blanket of snow covering the ground, nothing like Michigan, but enough for Texas. If there is one thing about Texas weather, it is unpredictable.

“Well, I’ll make you some hot chocolate to celebrate and grab my coffee. How about that, sweetie?”

Emily rushes after me while Damon starts the pot of coffee and I warm up some milk for her hot chocolate. She is very picky. No water. It has to be milk. Although, I can't say I blame her since it tastes better with milk.

Damon places a kiss on my cheek and then pours me a cup of coffee.

“Drink this before we die. Seriously, I can't die on Christmas.”

He thinks he's funny. Just because Emily is in the room means nothing. I laugh at myself.

I pour in the packet of mix and mix it around, and then Emily rushes to the living room. Damon is more chipper in the mornings, so I let him hand out gifts. When he comes across a gift with his name on it, he looks over at me and then places it to the side.

We watch Emily unwrap present after present, and each time, a smile is present. She has been wanting some things to decorate her room, and we had enough money to get everything on her wishlist.

“Mommy, this one's for you,” she says, getting the last present under the tree and handing it over.

Damon must have gone out after I fell asleep and put this here. He's sneaky sometimes.

“I thought we weren't getting gifts this year?”

“This one I technically bought, we said that.”

The red and green paper rips off and shows the box underneath. I wiggle it around. What is that? Well, to my surprise, when I open the box, it's a set of keys. At first, I couldn't even bring myself to speak. He bought me a car? To be fair, I don't have one right now, and we have just been sharing the one we have.

“Listen, I know it's a lot, but as Emily gets older, carpooling will not be as beneficial. You'll need to take her practice and what not.”

He searches my eyes for anger.

“You didn’t have to buy me a car. How am I ever supposed to compete with that?” Tears come to my eyes, and I wipe them away instantly.

“Don’t you dare. Technically, it’s our car. You will just drive it, mostly.”

He needs to open my gift now. I need the focus to be off of me. I point to it and he smiles. “See, you didn’t follow the rules, either.”

When he opens it, he’s confused. It looks just like a t-shirt until he unfolds and realizes what it says. “#1 Dad, to two awesome kids.”

His eyes peer into me. “Wait! No freaking way. Are you pregnant? This isn’t a joke, right?”

Some people might joke about stuff like that, but Damon’s dream of having a baby isn’t a joke. He treats Emily like his own, but he wants the entire experience. I have no doubt in my mind he will never treat Emily any differently from this one.

“Honey, we are having a baby.”

About the Author

Ashley Zakrzewski is known for her captivating storytelling, sultry plots, and dynamic protagonists. Hailing from Arkansas, her affinity for the written word began early on, and she has been relentlessly chasing after her dreams ever since. She also writes under the Pen Name Kaci Bell for clean romance.

Her favorite thing is to hear from readers - so if you loved a book, hit the contact button and shoot her an email to make her day!

She has made the switch to being on all major ebook retailers and also giving her readers the option to buy eBooks and paperbacks directly from her website.

If you like to save money and support the author, she offers Buy One Get One Free eBooks on her website and bundles that save you even more \$\$\$\$. No coupon code needed. All discounts will be applied in the cart. Just visit www.ashleyzakrzewski.com

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