

WATER | AIR | EARTH | FIRE  
The Holiday Novellas

# Merry and Bright

RILEY NASH



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The Water, Air, Earth, Fire  
Holiday Novellas

By Riley Nash

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*To everyone who has found a place for themselves in this  
found family of perfectly imperfect men*

*Thank you for all your love and encouragement*

# Author's Note

To fully enjoy these novellas, I highly recommend finishing all the books in the Water, Air, Earth, Fire series, or at least most of them. This book contains the perspectives of all nine main characters, and may include spoilers regarding their HEAs.

Please see my reading guide below if you need help figuring out what book tells the story of which couple.

[Hold Me Under](#) - Ethan and Victor

[Make Me Fall](#) + [And All Their Stars \(novella\)](#) - Jonah and Gray

[Show Me Wonders](#) - Jackson and Oliver

[Teach Me To Sin](#) - Colson, Alek, and Benji

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## Afterword

*All is Bright*



*This Christmas takes place between the events of Show Me  
Wonders and Teach Me To Sin*

*This version of All Is Bright is identical to the one that  
originally appeared on Smashwords*





I love driving after everyone else in the car falls asleep. There's something special in the stillness, nothing but the hum of the engine and the warm feeling that your passengers are trusting you to carry them safely to the end of your journey. Pulling my eyes from the wide expanse of snowy plains and low December clouds, I sneak a glance at my daughter Megan and her best friend Eli in the back. They're both knocked out, her blonde head resting against his dark, curly one. Ollie snores softly in the passenger seat with his cheek mashed against the headrest and one hand thrown over my thigh.

When I check the rearview mirror, I can see the grill of Gray and Jonah's tall pickup behind us, their younger daughter Kenzie and baby Davey in the back. Our little caravan has crossed two states in eight hours to make it from Iowa to Wyoming, where Gray's friends from Seattle rented us all a place for Christmas.

I'm so fucking nervous about this whole shitshow that I've been smoking up a storm and chewing the inside of my cheek until it feels raw. It took me months to warm up to Jonah and Gray, and now I'm trapped in the middle of nowhere with even more people I don't know, celebrating a holiday that makes me antsy and depressed. We're only here because I'm pretty sure Oliver surgically removed whatever part of me could say no to his hopeful blue puppy eyes.

When I spot a majestic lodge with towering windows perched on a hillside dotted with evergreens, I reach over and poke Oliver's ribs until he stretches and yawns. It feels wrong for someone like me to pull up to such a fancy fucking house alone, especially when I don't even know the guys who booked it. At least Ollie has met them for dinner once or twice.

Our minivan barely manages to struggle up the slushy dirt road without getting stuck. At the top, we're greeted by a huge five-car garage with all the doors up, waiting to welcome us. The red Ford Bronco with Washington plates must belong to our hosts, Ethan and Victor. I park in the furthest away spot, so I can't accidentally damage anyone else's cars.

Oliver leans over the back of his seat and starts trying to coax the two teenagers awake. Stretching my legs for the first time since we stopped for lunch four hours ago, I unfold from the driver's side door and drag in a lungful of frigid air, my breath making clouds of vapor. They should sell candles of this scent—clean snow mixed with a hint of pine and amber.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I wander to the edge of the driveway and study the view. The sun has melted away the clouds to reveal a pale blue sky, almost too sharp and clear to look at. This brown grassland feels more desolate than Iowa, and it reminds me of the barren, lonely winters where I grew up in Colorado. I shift my weight and gently bounce my fist against my thigh, trying to keep from getting too far into my head to where only Ollie can pull me out.

A hysterical, high-pitched yapping shatters the silence, growing louder and louder until I can hear tiny paws scrabbling in the frozen gravel. Seconds later, a ball of scruffy white fur tears around the corner and launches itself at me, taking a flying leap against my hip. The mutt bounces off and falls on its butt, then jumps up and starts bouncing on its hind legs, paws up like it's begging.

Someone squeals "*Doggy!*" in a high-pitched voice behind me, and I genuinely can't tell if it's my daughter or my almost-forty-year-old boyfriend. Ollie answers my question when he runs over and drops to his knees, holding out his arms in

invitation. He instantly becomes the dog's new best friend as it scrambles up his chest and starts licking his face all over, while he giggles and gasps out protests.

Its owner jogs halfheartedly around the side of the house, trying to look like he's chasing his pet more than actually doing it. Slowing to a walk, he wanders our direction with a cigarette trailing smoke out of his mouth. He's blinding in a bright green puffer jacket and one of those neon orange hats they sell game hunters, his big sunglasses reflecting the winter sun overhead.

"Down, Rio," he mumbles carelessly, paying no attention to whether the dog obeys. It ignores him and goes back to savaging Ollie with love.

The newcomer drags off his sunglasses, revealing keen, pale eyes, and sticks out his hand in my direction. I'm wearing short sleeves after hours in the warm car, but he doesn't even glance at my tattoos or the thick scar up my inner arm. "So which one are you?" he asks, wrinkling his nose in a half-smile, half-grimace. "I'm losing track of everyone."

Before I can answer, Gray walks over from the garage where they just parked the truck, completing the mis-matched row of vehicles dripping muddy water off their undercarriages. All the kids—and the adult kids, Ollie and Jonah—are busy gushing over Rio, who is having the time of his little life.

"This is Jackson. And Jackson, this is Victor," the lawyer rumbles, putting his arm around his friend. I watch curiously as Victor hugs Gray back and buries his face in the bigger man's jacket for a second, Gray's hand finding his hair. Ollie explained to me once the pain they went through together, but now I can see it for myself, something tender and complicated.

I clear my throat, snapping out of the anxious haze of feeling like I'm an intruder on this vacation. "You can call me Jax. And this is Ollie."

Oliver pops up at my side and grabs my hand, grinning shyly with the breeze tousling his hair. "Nice to see you again, Victor." Victor's deadpan expression eases into a small, involuntary smile, like not even he can resist Ollie's face.

“Damn, there’s a lot of you,” he muses, scanning the crowd of kids still playing with his dog and the baby fussing in Jonah’s arm. “Every time I turn around, you’ve multiplied. I don’t know where you’re all going to sleep.”

He doesn’t sound particularly serious, and the house looks big enough to hold five times this many people, but it still makes me wonder if I’m being a nuisance. Blinking like he just remembered something, Victor sighs. “Oh yeah. I was supposed to be inviting you all in for coffee. It’s the dog’s fault I forgot. This just fell into my hand out of nowhere.” He waves the cigarette vaguely. “So go on.”

Gray just chuckles, shaking his head, and joins the exodus toward the front door of the lodge. Instead of following Oliver, I hesitate, still trying to figure out if Victor meant what he said. If we have too many people, I should be the one who offers to go get a hotel, since the hosts don’t even know me.

“Hey.”

Startled, I glance up. Victor’s holding out his box of cigarettes, his blond eyebrows raised. When I accept, he taps one into my palm, then pulls out a lighter. I shield the flame with my hand, his beanie brushing my forehead as he lights it for me. “Aren’t you fucking freezing?” He eyes my t-shirt.

I shrug. “Not yet.”

“God.” He takes another drag. “I’m not used to this shit. I had on three coats earlier but Ethan told me I was being ridiculous, so now I’m cold. I hope he’s happy.”

I stare blankly at him for a moment, then start laughing in spite of myself. That wry half-smile crosses his face again. We smoke in easy silence for a while as all the people we love filter inside, their laughter carrying toward us on the breeze.

“I’ve heard a little about you from Gray.” He studies the horizon, the reflection of the sky coloring his eyes a hazy purple. “Strays are welcome here. Believe me, I’d know.”

Something about the way he clearly doesn’t give a shit breaks down my filter and I admit things I never would

otherwise. “I’ve never gone on a family trip like this. I’ve never had a real Christmas. I don’t even know how.”

He blows smoke slowly out through his nostrils, not looking at me. “I used to spend Christmas in a—” Pressing his lips together, he squints into the distance, then shrugs. “Now Ethan’s obsessed with making every holiday our best one ever. It’s like his fucking fetish.” He sounds irritated, but he can’t hide the softness in his eyes. “So welcome to the fucking annoying family, I guess.”

It’s one thing for Ollie to tell me I have a family now. That’s his job. But to make a new friend and hear him say it... The words crawl deep inside me and curl up in my chest, warm and heavy. “Thanks.”

As our cigarettes die, we meander toward the lodge. “I heard you were a motorcycle guy,” Victor changes the topic abruptly.

“Sure.” I get restless in the winters, when it’s almost never safe to ride and the bike Megan and I are building stays locked in the garage.

“How do you get your partner to let you have one?”

I can feel a smirk pulling at my lips as I glance at him. “I tell him he looks really badass riding behind me.”

He snorts hard enough to start coughing on his own smoke, and I don’t know if it’s from the idea of Ollie looking badass or imagining his own man perched on a bike.

“That’s not going to fly coming from me; he doesn’t believe a damn word I say. You’ll have to do it. There’s your assignment—in the next three days, convince Ethan he’d look hot on a motorcycle, but only if I’m the one driving.”

With that, he bounds ahead of me up the steps to the heavy cedar front door, decked with an evergreen wreath.

*Is it really this easy?* I’ve been shunned my entire life for looking different, for my scars and the tattoos covering my body. But no one in this house looks the same as each other, from the dapper, six-foot-six lawyer to the one-armed goofball to a softhearted dad in a sweater he knitted himself to...

whatever Victor is. It doesn't bother any of them. They're all accepted and, somehow, whole. Like they gathered up their broken pieces and glued them together into something ragged and beautiful.

Can it really be this easy? Maybe it can.



Jonah and I like to go full-on, over-the-top, storybook Christmas for our kids, even if it's obnoxious and cheesy. We adopted unwanted children so we could give them everything they wouldn't otherwise experience, everything I never had. And that includes perfect holiday memories. Ethan's my ally in our quest for the Hallmark Christmas—Victor just rolls his eyes when I lug in two plastic tubs from the truck with garlands, lights, stockings, cookie cutters, the whole nine yards.

He dozes on the hearth next to the fire and watches through intent, half-closed eyes as the rest of the adults and kids start some after-dinner decorating of the lodge's great room and the tree Ethan and he bought yesterday. Jackson seems uncertain as well, but he slowly becomes more animated, holding the ladder we found in the garage and fussing at Ollie as he balances recklessly at the top to hang garlands.

Pale, snow-bleached sunlight pours through the two-story windows, my favorite vintage jazz Christmas playlist tinkling softly in the background. Baby Davey sleeps on my shoulder, his small body a grounding weight against my chest. He's our first infant, and I'm obsessed. I'd hold him 24/7 if I could. Jonah had to fight me to set up alternating baby duties at night, or I would have never slept again and died happy.

Eli and Megan send up an outcry when they discover Kenzie stole all the mint-chocolate candy canes out of the mixed bag. They chase her across the room, dodging between adults and trying not to trip. Giggling frantically, she scrambles behind me and throws her arms around my waist, hiding her face in the small of my back. “Help meee.”

I reach around with my free hand and tug on her ponytail. “You’re asking the wrong parent, Monster.” Everyone knows Jonah’s the fun one.

She tightens her grip. “Not true. You say *yes* to me ‘n Eli way more than Daddy does.”

Twisting around, I furrow my brows at her. “That’s not— Is that true?”

“*Is that true?*” Oliver asks Jonah gleefully as they drape lights on the tree. Lips pressed together to try and keep a straight face, Jonah nods emphatically.

Every day I think that I’ll never feel happier than this. It can’t be possible. My once-empty heart can’t hold any more. And yet somehow it happens, again and again, my whole life built of small, perfect moments I never thought I’d get to have.

Catching the look on my face, Jonah hops up from his knees and trots over, wrapping his arm around my back and resting his chin on my shoulder, searching my eyes. “Good Christmas, baby?” He makes a soft, happy sound when I kiss him.

“You wait. We’ve barely gotten started.”



JUST LIKE EVERY CHRISTMAS MORNING, Jonah wakes up even earlier than our children. He tries to be quiet and good until a human hour, but he sighs and thrashes around and vibrates with excitement until it keeps me awake, too. I’m pretty sure it’s intentional, because we usually end up having sex until it’s time to let our kids at the tree.



This year I'm awake first, staring at the unfamiliar log ceiling, humming with wound-up nerves I don't feel very often. Jonah stretches, yawns, and rolls over, startling when he sees me up. "You okay, baby?"

I'm supposed to wait until everyone gathers to exchange gifts, but I just can't. I scramble to my feet, pulling on a pair of sweatpants. "Sit in the middle of the bed and close your eyes. Don't open them until I say you can."

"I...uh...sure?" Staring at me like I've lost my mind, he clambers out of the sheets in his boxers and scoots to the center of the mattress. "We said we were gonna do a trip to Europe later this year instead of presents for each other... didn't we? Did I remember that right? Or was that a dream? Fuck, I'm sorry."

"Jonah..."

"I know, I know. Calm down." He closes his eyes and sucks in a giant breath, huffing it out again.

"Now stay."

Sliding the bedroom door open, I pad quickly down the hall. I can hear his faint voice behind me: "Wait, did you seriously just leave?" But he's my good boy; he'll do exactly what I asked.

Weaving through the kitchen, I stick my head in the mudroom, making Rio jump up from his blanket and whine. He and Victor are both pissed at me. The mutt usually sleeps curled in his master's legs, but we agreed Rio should keep his new friend company—a one-year-old border collie who spins in circles when it sees me, wagging its tail furiously. Ethan helped me find this puppy through his vet clinic, and they drove all the way from Washington instead of flying so they could bring it to me. I had two criteria when we discussed the idea: it must be a rescue, to add to our family of strays, and it must have at least a fraction of my husband's boundless energy, so they can tire each other out.

"Alright, little one." I bend over and grunt at the strain on my back, scooping the dog to my chest as it squirms eagerly.

“Be quiet for me.” With my hip, I bump the door open far enough for Rio to sprint out and make straight for his master’s room. I crack Ethan and Victor’s door on my way past to let him in, then shut it again, taking care not to wake them. I don’t want to share this moment with anyone else.

Jonah’s eyes are still closed, but he’s rocking back and forth, nose wrinkled in boredom, playing an imaginary keyboard with his hand on the covers. He stills when he hears my feet. “Gray?”

“Hold out your arms.”

“I’m scared.”

“Ready?”

“No.”

He makes an unspeakable sound as soon as the wiggly ball of fur touches his skin. “Open your eyes.”

“Gray,” he wails softly, his sweet brown eyes the size of saucers as he stares in awe at the confused border collie in his lap. “Oh my God. You’re kidding, right? You rented it for the day or something, and then I have to give it back.” He tightens his arms around the dog as it tries to lick its chin, offering me a pleading expression. “Did you really get me a puppy? After all this time?”

I sit on the edge of the bed and brush my fingers through his messy hair. The puppy squirms, trying to nip at my arm. We’ve talked about a dog for years, but it’s still the most spontaneous thing I’ve ever done and I’m feeling a bit self-conscious. “I mean, you know. It’s for the whole family.”

His lower lip juts out and he snuggles the dog closer to its chest. “Not now it isn’t. You all can get your own dog.” His dimple pops out, joy melting across his face like a sunrise. “Can I name her Daisy?”

“It’s a boy.”

He scratches behind its lopsided ears. “Can I name him Daisy? After my rabbit Daisy growing up. She moved away to live in a special retirement garden for old rabbits which...” he

tips his head, thinking "...okay, in retrospect I guess she got eaten by a coyote and my parents didn't want to tell me."

I chuckle quietly, squeezing his knee. "You can name him whatever you want."

The puppy finally squirms free and bounces off the bed to explore the room, snuffling our suitcases. Jonah bounds after it, grabbing a balled-up sock and starting a game of tug-of-war. I just lean back against the headboard with my arms propped behind my neck and watch them frolic and roll around on the floor.

When Daisy finally tires and flops down on his side, panting, Jonah props his chin on the edge of the bed and studies me. "Seriously, though. Why didn't you gift him to the kids downstairs? That would have been your perfect Christmas moment."

I stretch out on the mattress and rest my chin in my hand, my face inches from his. "Because you've wanted one for as long as I've known you," I murmur. "And you've worked so hard, and you deserve this. Not everything in our lives has to be about the kids."

"I love you so much." He leans up and kisses me gently. "Almost as much as I love Daisy. Damn..." He screws up his face. "Now I have to come up with an equally awesome present for you before midnight."

I cock an eyebrow at him. "I trust you'll get creative."



“I can hear you fretting.”

I frown at my phone, even though Mom can't see my expression. “I'm not. What part of talking about how to cook a turkey makes it sound like I'm fretting?”

Victor squeezes me a little and grunts into my neck from where he's sitting behind me on the kitchen counter with all his limbs wrapped around me, drawing gentle circles along my collarbone with his finger. I had a minor meltdown when we got here, before everyone else showed up, about spending my first Christmas day away from Mom. But I know she's happy and well cared for at her facility, and we had an amazing early Christmas together. She's not entirely clear on where we are or why, but she insisted that we stay connected to our friends and get away for a while.

“I just miss you,” I admit finally.

Victor reaches around me and snags the phone, rubbing his nose against my neck as he interrupts. “I got you a puzzle, June. It has like fifteen buffalo on it and they're all the same damn color, so I think it's gonna take us a while.”

At the sound of Mom's bright laugh, my body relaxes. We chat a little longer, then hang up with a promise to call again tomorrow. Victor still doesn't let go of me, holding me captive with his legs around my hips while he texts his business

partner Alek to check on how their swimming center holiday outreach event went yesterday.

As he finishes, Gray straightens up from the floor where he was busy assembling the toys Kenzie and the baby opened this morning. He's wearing the navy blue turtleneck sweater Oliver knitted him. "Jonah, Eli, and Megan are in the backyard with the dogs. Since they're not coming back any time soon," he points out wryly, "I guess we three are in charge of Christmas dinner." We all glance over at Oliver and Jackson, and Victor snickers. Jax is sound asleep on the couch with Oliver on top of him, both of them completely engulfed in the blanket their daughter gifted them like a giant, fuzzy brown amoeba.

Victor kisses the back of my neck and mumbles, "No cooking. Dogs." He slithers off the counter and disappears into the mudroom. I can hear the insanely loud rustling of his gaudy puffer jacket as he drags it on.

My eyes meet Gray's hazel ones, and he shakes his head. "We're down to two. Are you with me in this quest?" He holds up a turkey baster with a crooked smile. This man has changed so fucking much from the arrogant, ice-cold lawyer who used to keep Victor and me in line. So have I, I suppose, though the transformation has been a lot quieter and slower than everyone else's.

"I am." Grabbing a receipt from our Christmas Eve pizza takeout last night, I flip it over and pull a pen from my pocket. "Let's list all the dishes so we can make a cooking schedule and oven rotation."

"Wonderful," he hums in approval. "You know how to talk dirty to me."

I blink at him for a second, then we both grin. I'm pretty sure we used to dislike each other because we were too similar, rather than too different. Now we feel like allies amidst the chaos wreaked by everyone else.

As I wash and stuff the thawed turkey Victor and I bought a few days ago, I stare out the window into the backyard. Rio and the new pup, named Daisy for some inexplicable reason, sprint back and forth in streaks of white and black as Jonah

throws a ball, the baby strapped to his chest. Megan and Eli are climbing through the landscaping with a phone, arguing and playing something called Pokémon Go, while Kenzie chases the dogs. Warm, yellow light pours over the yard and through the glass onto my messy hands.

“Thank you again for helping me find the dog,” Gray comments, looking over my shoulder as he grabs a cutting board for chopping potatoes. “I think he’s the perfect fit for this family. Jonah will run him for miles and I’ll have a sleepy, well-behaved dog and husband at the end of it.”

“I’m glad to see him get a home. He’s been in the shelter for a few months because no one wants to take on a dog with that much energy.” Driving three days while juggling Victor and two hyper animals was a herculean feat, but some part of me loved every second.

“How is your practice shaping up?” Gray inquires, checking the oven temperature. To my surprise, he sounds genuinely interested.

After years of vet school and a few more working for an existing practice, Victor and I pulled from our savings so I could start my own, dealing almost exclusively with rescues, shelters, and fosters, just like I wanted.

“It’s everything I always hoped it would be. I have a wall in my office dedicated to photos of every single animal we’ve helped, and it’s already growing out of control.”

“And Victor’s swimming center?”

Grunting, I plop the turkey in the foil baking dish and start seasoning the skin. “His old swimming teammate Alek is basically running the place now. Actually...” I turn around, wiping off my hands. “I’m not sure I’m supposed to be telling you, but they’ve been having some legal issues. They’re looking for a lawyer they can work with long term.”

He frowns. “Even if I were taking clients, that’s not my specialty. You’d want someone...” He stops to think, a shadow crossing his face. “I might have a referral for you. Someone I

just recently heard is looking to start over.” But he sounds very hesitant. “Let me consider it.”

Dropping the subject, we work in companionable silence. It’s not as gourmet as Jonah’s cooking, but we do a damn solid job of crafting the most traditional Christmas meal you can imagine.

As all nine of us plus a high chair crowd around the giant log dining table, it hits me that I’m more relaxed than I can ever remember being. Just for a minute, there’s nothing to worry about, nothing to fix. Impulsively, I reach out and grab Victor’s hand. He offers me a slightly puzzled smile. When he sees the look in my eyes, he brushes his thumb along the back of my knuckles. Instead of letting go, he starts eating with his left hand, leaving me to use my right, our fingers locked together on the table between us.

Later that evening, after we make Jackson and Oliver do dishes in revenge for sleeping all day, we dig some dusty board games out of the closet and spend a few hours playing in front of the fire with mugs of hot cocoa and coffee. Finally, with one last *Merry Christmas*, we get all the kids and dogs settled and retire to our rooms. I close the door to our little bear-themed bedroom—with bear lamps and bear wall hangings—to find the dogs asleep in the corner and Victor standing in his underwear in the middle of the bed. I know exactly what he wants, but I pretend not to notice him, bustling around to brush my teeth, pee, and undress while the waves of annoyance rolling off him keep getting stronger.

“You’re such an asshole,” he explodes after I string him on for almost fifteen minutes. “And not even a pretty one like mine. An ugly, wrinkly one.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did you need something?”

“There are a lot of hot men in this house, Ethan Lowe. You’d better treat me right, or I’ll have to go solicit one of them.”

I purse my lips, struggling to keep a straight face. “They’re all too besotted with each other to even entertain the notion.”

“Ugh, right?” He rolls his head back and pouts at the ceiling. “Like they’re obsessively, utterly in love or something. What’s that about?”

“I wouldn’t know. Sounds disgusting.”

Now he’s gnawing on his lip to hide a smile, his eyes bright. I cave at last, because I need it too badly, and go to him, holding my arms out in invitation. And just like every day for the past near-decade, he comes to the edge of the bed and wraps his legs around my waist and his arms around my neck. I pick him up as he tangles his fingers in my hair and sinks his mouth deep into mine. It’s never gotten less passionate or less maddening, and he has never stopped tasting like the wild sea.

He groans softly into my mouth as one of my hands caresses his bare back and the other slides up the leg of his boxers to grip his ass. “Jesus Christ,” he mumbles, his nose pressed into my cheek. “How do I stop loving you so much? Because I’m gonna die if I don’t.”

It’s already too late. We’ve woven ourselves together over the years until we’d both unravel to nothing if we ever got pulled apart. Neither of us could continue to exist. I’m never sure if that’s a good or a bad thing, but I don’t care. I eat and drink him, sleep him, breathe him, and I’ll never want anything else.

Turning him over, I drop him on his face on the bed and grab the lube from our suitcase while he touches himself lazily. “Come on.” I cross my arms and study his flawless tan skin. “Convince me you’re a better Christmas present than a puppy.”

He snickers into the blankets, then gives a small hum that sounds like a purr, lazily arching his back and spreading his knees to put his ass on display. One of his hands comes down to cup his balls and highlight the way his hard cock hangs, while the other reaches back to spread his cheeks.

Instead of touching him, I keep watching because we’re about to get to my favorite part. In trying to turn me on, he always ends up turning himself on for real. “Ethan.” He gives



a small moan, writhing when his cock gets even harder in his palm and leaks precum into the bed. “I need you, babe. Make me come.”

“You think I should?” I smooth a hand over his ass, pushing his fingers out of the way, and reach my other hand between his legs. He silently rests both his palms flat on the quilt on either side of his head, because he knows I like to be the only one touching him when we put me in charge. I remember how fucking terrified I felt when he first demanded I own him in bed, how much we’ve experimented since.

I stroke and squeeze his balls, opening him with my lubed-up fingers as he sucks in a deep breath and rubs against my hand. He takes me so easily I barely need to prep him, but I still enjoy doing it because I can toy with his prostate and unravel him.

Something’s gotten into me tonight, the giddiness of Christmas, because I can’t stop teasing him. I keep neglecting his P-spot and tugging his cock with enough friction to keep him hard without satisfying him. It’s like my brain’s fixated on this realization that all of this, him and us and our friends, all of this is forever and I can take it as slow as I want because it’s not going anywhere.

But Victor’s not interested in my epiphanies. Growling in frustration, he twists and hooks a leg behind mine, knocking me over and pouncing on me. We wrestle like big cats, limbs everywhere, and pretty soon he’s laughing too hard to breathe. He doesn’t let other people see him like this, but I pin him down and drink in his wide, goofy grin because it belongs to me. He tips his head back and closes his eyes, panting and flushed. “You know what, Ethan?”

“What?”

“We’ve been together longer than any other couple here. We’re like their grandparents or something.” He opens his pale eyes again and smirks. “Do you like being Gray’s grandpa? Can he sit on your knee and tell you what he wants from Santa?”

“That’s the most disturbing thing I’ve imagined in a long time.”

A half-smile lingering on his lips, he reaches up and drags his fingers through my hair. Then he sticks out his tongue, his lazy eyes daring and begging at the same time. Resting my heavier body on top of his, I pillage every corner of his mouth and rub our cocks together until he jerks and fights and arches under me, coming hard against my belly.



“I’m literally the best husband who ever lived. Forget dying for you; that’s child’s play. I’ve walked five hundred miles and five hundred more. I’ve given up everything I ever loved for just a moment of your happiness.”

Gray shuts the door of our bedroom and leans against it, crossing his arms and studying me where I’ve flopped dramatically across the bed. “I see. What did you do this time?”

“I let Daisy go sleep with Rio and Victor so that we could be alone,” I announce mournfully, throwing an arm over my eyes. “And I already regret it. My puppy will forget who I am and imprint on Victor.”

The mattress shifts as he sits down next to me. “It’s okay. Puppies don’t imprint on you until you sleep in their doghouse with them and eat their kibble for three days.”

I move my arm and peer at him. “Really?”

He just studies my face with a small, tender smirk, then shakes his head.

“You know what?” I roll away. “Quality time canceled. I even filled up the hot tub, but I’m gonna go hang out with Daisy instead.”

One of his powerful hands catches my hip before I can escape, his thumb brushing up under my sweater. “There’s a

hot tub?”

I nod, tugging against his grip so he'll hold on just tight enough to hurt. “We got lucky; the only hot tub happens to be right outside our sliding door. It has plenty of privacy.”

He yanks me back so I'm facing him, sparks igniting as our eyes burn into each other. “I don't give a fuck if there's privacy or not; I'm still going to collect my Christmas gift.”

A grin stretches my cheeks, and I kick his hand away. “If you can catch me.” Then I'm off over the top of the bed and out the porch door, shedding clothes and yelping as the freezing air hits my skin. By the time Gray catches up, we're both stripped naked except for my t-shirt, which got tangled up like it always does if I try to pull it off too fast with one arm. He drops a kiss on my hair, chuckling, then helps me get it untangled.

Slinging a leg over the side of the tub, I groan orgasmically as my body slides into the warm water, the jets bubbling right against my back. On top of sending Daisy into exile, I also entrusted Oliver with Davey's baby monitor for the night. I can't remember the last time we weren't on call for our kids—Davey crying or Kenzie needing math homework help or, god help us, Eli learning to drive. We'd never want it any other way, but I can't get over how peaceful this feels, like the literal silent, holy night my parents used to sing about on Christmas Eve.

*The night isn't the only holy thing around here*, I think, watching Gray's majestic dick sway as he steps into the hot tub.

A flutter of white catches my eye, and I tilt my head back to see snowflakes floating down through the beams of the dim exterior lights. I can feel them melting on my cheeks and lips as I stare up into the endless, dark sky. “Remember when we drank Pabst on your apartment fire escape and you wouldn't stop complaining?”

He wades toward me, the foamy water barely covering his junk and the lean curve of his hips. Straddling my knees with his long, muscular legs, he stares down at me with hazy green-

gold eyes. “I wouldn’t have complained so much if there had been a hot tub on my fire escape.”

I groan quietly at the thought, rubbing my hand down my face. “God. I was already so fucking horny for you that night; I almost came in my pants every time you looked at me. My heart would have exploded at the sight of you wet in trunks.”

“What about without trunks?” he croons, running a finger along my jaw.

“You’re so proud of yourself, aren’t you?” I wrinkle my nose at him, smirking. “You think you’re some kind of panty-melting sex god.”

Kneeling over me, he leans in, brushing his full lips across mine in deliberate, unbearably light kisses. His fingers splay in my hair while his other hand trails down my body. I hiss when he palms my erection, hooking a fingertip through my reverse Prince Albert ring. “Well, I don’t see your panties anywhere.”

And that’s the magic of Gray, because no one in this world can turn me on as desperately as him, all while making me laugh harder than I ever have before and somehow bringing a pace that makes my wild brain slow down and relax for a minute. The man is made of absolute witchcraft.

I mumble something incoherent and stretch up to coax him into a real kiss, the frantic, animal kind. Our tongue-fucking gets violent enough that he slips and half falls onto the plastic bench. Seizing my chance, I climb on top of him, keeping our faces glued together as our cocks slide and rut. Chilly air touches my wet shoulders and snow catches in his dark blond hair as I do my best to consume him whole.

When we’re gasping for breath, I press my face under his jaw and run my tongue along his warm, salty skin, whining as he laces his fingers between my Jacob’s Ladder and drags his grip up and down the piercings.

He grabs my chin in slippery fingers and brings our foreheads together. “Is it time for my present?”

“Uh-huh,” I murmur, my voice all throaty. Then a tiny part of me starts to worry that maybe he doesn’t get that this is just

a joke. Maybe he thinks I'm the lamest gift giver of all time. "To be clear, we're still gonna go to Europe this summer, and in the meantime I can totally buy you a watch or a pen or whatever you—"

His thumb finds my lower lip and presses in to trap my tongue. "Sweetheart?"

"Uh?"

"Shut up and suck me." Pulling out his thumb slowly, he kisses the tip of my nose, then pushes me off into the water, where I bounce in anticipation, sinking down all the way to my chin. My whole body throbs blissfully as I watch him slide up to sit on the edge of the hot tub. He got in soft, but it's rock hard and glistening now.

"I feel like I'm cheating. This is more of a present for me than it is for you. But it is a present for you, right?"

He laces his long fingers in my hair and grips firmly. "If you want to keep talking, little animal, you can do it around my cockhead."

I groan, feeling every word in my straining dick, engulfed in bubbly warmth. "You think I could?" It's a genuinely interesting question. "I haven't tried. Wouldn't it tickle? Jesus —" I claw at his thigh as he drags me into place and pushes his cock as far in as I can take it—which is all the way now, because I've practiced a fucking lot.

But this is *my* present to *him*, damn it, so I shake off his hand and wrap my arm around his waist, sliding my damp fingers along his crack as I set my own deep rhythm, lost in the feeling of his blunt head pushing open my throat. And just for him, because I know it drives him completely insane, I whimper and moan all needy and desperate, like I don't know exactly what I'm doing.

I feel his ass clench first, then his thighs, then his hand engulfs the back of my neck, hard and gentle at the same time. He gives me in return the sounds that drive me insane, gasping like he can't hold himself together, and comes right down my throat.

Gulping in air, I rest my forehead against his hip. He doesn't allow me a moment of rest before he grabs my head and tilts it up toward him, narrowing his eyes at me. "Did you just come in the hot tub while you were blowing me?"

"Uhhh." I go for diversion and gesture to his own spent cock. "I mean, you did too."

"No, I came in your mouth, because it's rude to come in someone else's hot tub. What if Ethan and Victor want to use it tomorrow?"

"Jesus, Gray, how do you fit his dick in there next to the stick up your ass?" comes a laconic voice from the balcony above our heads, followed by a trail of cigarette smoke. Gray's head jerks up, and I collapse back into the hot water in a fit of silent giggles.

"I don't—" my husband huffs. "I'm not—"

Victor raises his voice a little louder. "Keep telling yourself we don't all know you're a switch, baby."

I'm crying from laughter now, my forehead resting on the plastic edge of the tub.

"You'll sorely regret this," Gray snaps back, standing up and stepping over my prostrate form to march inside with his dignity only kind of intact.

I hear a soft chuckle from overhead.

"Merry Christmas, Victor," I call, switching off the jets and mentally thanking him for the absolute railing I'm going to get when I go inside.



When I open my eyes, I'm alone in the dark guest bedroom. The last thing I remember was lounging on the couch in front of the fire, watching Megan thrash everyone at Scrabble, even Gray. Jackson must have carried me upstairs after I dozed off, but his side of the bed feels cold. Touching the plastic speaker clipped to my waistband, I recall Jonah asking me to listen out for Davey tonight. When I sit up and check the clock, rubbing my eyes, it only shows a few minutes after midnight. I half expected people to still be up partying, but the house seems dim and quiet as I stick my head into the hall.

Padding along the thick carpet on bare feet, I look in on the baby to make sure I didn't miss anything. When I lean over the banister, I catch a glow of yellow light coming from the kitchen. I hug Jackson's flannel more tightly and sneak into the dining room, peering around the corner to see a familiar shock of wiry brown hair bobbing above the door of the open fridge.

When Jax straightens up with a plate of Christmas cookies balanced on his arm, he jumps at the sight of me. He's easy to startle, after the life he came from, and I always feel bad when I scare him. "Sorry, love. I just wanted to know where you went."



He raises an eyebrow and hefts the plate of cookies as an explanation. Setting it on the counter, he strips off the foil covering and studies his options.

“Are you hungry? We can heat up some turkey.”

He shakes his head *no*. Breaking off a large brick of Jonah’s double dark chocolate fudge, he inserts the entire thing in his mouth at once and starts sucking on it. “Wha?” he grouses around the mouthful when he realizes I’m gawking.

“Do you actually understand what fudge is?”

“It lasts longer this way,” he enunciates carefully, before going back to sucking. He holds out one arm with its elaborate sleeve of tattoos, and I hurry over to lean against him. Wrapping me in a crushing hug, he sighs quietly into my hair and starts trailing his fingers up and down my shoulder. I can tell he’s happy, but completely drained.

When I finally hear him swallow the fudge, I look up and study the stubble on his strong jaw. “What do you want to bet that—”

“—they’re all fucking right now? No bet. One-hundred percent guaranteed they are.”

Snorting, I press my face into his solid chest. He huffs a laugh, but I can feel a hint of tension in his body as he waits to see what I’ll say. I have to be careful sometimes; this man will do anything in the world for me, even if it’s to his detriment. And right now, I know he’s too exhausted and overstimulated to be recharged by sex. I don’t mind in the least. We spent so many years apart that my soul lights up at the chance to spend our first Christmas just existing together.

“Can I show you my favorite Christmas movie?” I trace my fingers soothingly up his spine, under his white t-shirt, as all his muscles relax. He hasn’t seen any of the classics, so we have a lot of catching up to do. “It’s called *It’s A Wonderful Life*.”

He pulls back and makes a face at me. “You’re kidding.”

“You wait. It’s the greatest fucking movie ever made.”

Rummaging through the kitchen, we unearth rum, coke, popcorn, and the rest of the Christmas cookies. I stack everything on a tray and lug it to the den, where I turn on the giant TV and hunt through streaming services until I find one that has the movie. Jax sprawls onto the leather couch, then hooks an arm around my waist and drags me closer, trapping me against his warm body as he rests his jaw against the top of my head. Using his foot, he snags the blanket folded under the coffee table and pulls it over us.

“Are you sure it’s okay that we’re not fucking?” he murmurs as the black-and-white opening credits finish playing.

I press my nose into his neck. “How could I enjoy your asshole running commentary about how stupid everyone in the movie is if we were fucking?”

He smiles against my hair, then kisses my temple. Between his body, the blanket, and the rum and coke, I’m drifting blissfully in a cozy half-sleep. I expected Jax to snark and then doze off, but he gets quieter and more attentive, eating fewer and fewer snacks until he’s engrossed in the story. He keeps making me pause it to explain things like how loan companies work and what a run on the bank means, so he can understand exactly what’s going on.

At the end, when everyone piles the money on George’s table and sings *Auld Lang Syne*, he makes a weird snuffling sound and rubs his face on the top of my head. “Are you *crying*?” I ask incredulously through my own tears, because this movie always gets me no matter how many times I watch it.

“No.” He swipes a hand across his eyes and glares at the windows on the far wall. Through the crack in the curtains, I can see fat flakes of snow illuminated in one of the exterior lights. “It’s just...like, he didn’t think he mattered. He never did anything right, and people told him he was a lost cause. But he really did matter.”

“Yeah, he really did.” Pulling out from under his arm, I turn around and straddle his lap, taking his face in my hands.

There aren't any tears on his cheeks, but his eyes look wetter than usual. I hold on firmly until he meets my gaze. "And you matter, too. Not just as an extension of me; everyone here likes you for yourself. Even Victor, and he's scary."

Jax chuckles at that, shaking off the moment of fragility. "He's not."

"He *is*."

"You're scared of that guy, but you were never scared of me?"

"Because I can always tell what you're thinking."

His lips quirk into a grin as he ruffles my hair back from my forehead. "Your sense of self-preservation is all backwards, you dork."

"It worked out for me." As I press my mouth softly to his, Jax's warm hands wrap around my waist.

"You taste like fudge," I hum sleepily when he pulls away. "Don't stop."

I hear a soft rumble in his chest. He eases his tongue piercing into my mouth and chases my tongue with it, catching my chin in his grip when I try to retreat. When he lets me go, I pull off my t-shirt as he does the same. Skin to skin, we press our bodies together as we make out sleepily, no pressure for more, just drowning in each taste and movement and breath, finding every inch of each other with our hands. We whisper *I love you* again and again, so many times that the words start to sound like nonsense as the snow piles up silently outside. When the sun set, the world outside was brown and gray. When we wake up in the morning, it will be pure, beautiful white.



“Who on earth thought this was a good idea?” Ethan gripes as he parks the Bronco in the parking lot next to Bison Lake, about half an hour from our lodge.

“Who on earth thought it wasn’t?” I pop my gum at him, then jump out of the car. My whole body tingles at the sight of water, even if 99% of it is frozen. A giant blue banner by the lake reads *44th Annual Polar Bear Plunge*. I owe Ollie for stumbling across the event this morning online while he was searching the town website for yarn shops.

Jonah runs over from his truck, Daisy bounding along next to him. I can’t tell which of them is more excited. “Ready? Ready? Ready?” This goof is ridiculous, but I like him. He’s the only person who thinks my bad ideas sound amazing.

Gray, Oliver, and Jackson take the kids and dogs to the spectator area, but Ethan trails Jonah and I toward the participant sign-up table, fretting the whole way. I tried to convince Jackson to jump with us. I almost had him. But then Ollie had to go and remind him he wasn’t a strong swimmer. For some reason he didn’t believe me when I promised I wouldn’t let him drown for too long.

“Victor...” Ethan groans when we enter the heated tent and I strip to my tiny speedo. “Why are you wearing that?”

“What, are we doing it naked?” I look around hopefully, but everyone else has on swimming trunks.

He grabs my shoulders and bonks his forehead against the top of my skull. “I dread to think why you decided to bring a speedo to Wyoming in the first place.”

I wriggle free and hop up and down, warming up my body as I watch the first group of participants head for the giant hole cut in the ice. They’ve got event organizers, a camera guy, and an EMT out there, but of course that’s not enough for Ethan. He snags my hand and squeezes it firmly. “Victor, after you jump in the water, you need to get back out of the water right away, because it’s dangerously cold. I’m serious.”

I nod vaguely, eyes fixed on the way the dark lake churns and nips at the edge of the ice as the people before us climb out.

“Babe.”

“Hm?”

“Babe.” His voice gets stern.

Finally, I pry my attention from the lake and turn it back to him. “What?”

“How many words in that sentence did you actually hear?”

I hold up two fingers.

“Which ones?”

“Water.” I fold one down, then the other. “And water.” Then I pull off my sunglasses with a grin and lean up to kiss him, throwing my arms around his neck. I don’t care if we get weird looks. I’m going to be in the water in a minute, which makes my body feel like liquid fire, and my liquid-fire-body likes Ethan’s body a lot. I’d make him fuck me standing here if it wouldn’t get us thrown out.

Ethan thinks he’s so sneaky, making his way over to Jonah after I let go of him. I can’t read lips, but I know what he’s saying. *Get Victor out of the water, please.* I’ve always loved and hated his attention, all the fussing. More and more over

the years it feels like a home where I can live, safe and quiet. Sometimes, like now, I play dumb just to get more of it.

Suddenly it's my turn—*fuck yes*—and I bound ahead of everyone else. I can't dive head first, even though I want to, so I just jump. This water *bites*; it wants to shut my body off. I love the fight, the powerful way it grips me. Years ago, I would gladly have let go and dropped into the peaceful dark. Today, when I look toward shore, there are a bunch of idiots that call themselves my friends standing on the shore in dorky sweaters and beanies. And one of them is my idiot, holding my idiot dog, so in the end I lift myself onto the ice of my own free will, before Jonah can get to me. An event organizer slings a blanket over me and steers me toward the heated tent as water trickles down my legs.

My skin looks blue-tinged and covered with goosebumps as I shiver in a camp chair, wiping my nose on the towel they gave me and shaking droplets out of my hair. I'm buzzing and wound up as Ethan comes in with Rio on a leash. My puppy claws his way right into my lap and starts lapping water off my chest and chin. "Did you have fun?" Ethan's patient amber eyes crinkle around the edges.

I fidget in my seat, urgent, willing him to understand. "I want to go back in. Please?"

He crouches next to my chair, a hand on my thigh. "I checked my phone and there's a YMCA pool about ten minutes away. We'll go right there after this, I promise."

"God, yes." I let out a huff of relief. "Let's hurry up."

Ethan pecks me quick and warm on the lips as he stands.

"Mmm," I hum plaintively, catching his arm. "Come back." This time I give him one of those pure romantic movie kisses, the kind of kiss you sometimes forget to do after you've been together as long as us. His hand cups my neck, his thumb along my jaw—my stability.

"I don't love you," I breathe against his mouth, and he smiles.

"I don't hate you."

I wrap my fingers around the nape of his neck and kiss him again. “I’m gonna swim a hundred miles and then I’m gonna come right back here to you. Every time, baby.”

His lips move against my ear. “I know.”

Then he helps me up and lets me hold Rio while he pulls warm, dry sweats over my legs. “Let’s go.”

Everyone’s waiting as we come out of the tent. Jonah has about four sweaters and a Gray wrapped around him. The kids are arguing about whether, if you froze solid, you could be shattered into tiny pieces like an ice statue. Ollie’s playing with Daisy while Jax watches over everyone silently. Who the fuck are all these people, and where the fuck did we come from? How did we all end up here? Who the fuck decided we finally get to be happy? Maybe it was us all along. Maybe there isn’t such a thing as love or happiness or anything else except what we choose and chase after and become. Maybe we figured it out.

“Good Christmas this year?” Ethan’s watching my face, smiling, his arm around my shoulders. The man can read my mind.

“It might be half decent once I get my ass in that pool.”

May You  
Be Merry





*This Christmas takes place after the events of Teach Me To Sin, when all the guys have their HEA.*



“**W**hat the hell are you doing?”

I spread my thighs so I can look between them and see Ethan glaring at me from the doorway with a million shopping bags balanced in his arms. I’m lying on my back in the middle of the living room with my hips hiked up off the ground and my legs sticking straight up in the air.

“Perfect timing. Take off your pants.”

The paper bags rustle as he shifts his weight, his chocolate-colored eyes narrowing. “I told you we needed to go Christmas shopping, and you told me you had a fever and couldn’t get out of bed.”

“Well.” I hoist my hips experimentally, trying to get them higher, and swing my legs over my head, presenting my ass to the world through my gym shorts. “I lied. But I’m working on my secret Santa gift.”

He dumps the bags on the couch. “I spent *hours* carrying this shit.”

“That sounds like a you problem. You could have just, y’know, chosen not to.” I slap my feet together commandingly. “Now take off your pants.”

Ignoring me, he flops down on the couch with an exhausted sigh. His unkempt brown hair sticks out in every

direction when he runs a sweaty hand through it. “So are you gonna tell me what you’re doing, or do I have to guess?”

“I read about this sex position,” I grunt as I try to wiggle my hips even higher and splay my legs out in the air. “But, like, I’m trying to figure out if it’s even physically possible. It doesn’t seem like it. Take off your pants and stick your dick in my ass, from the front, and then sit on—”

“If I sit on you, you will break in half like a mouthy, lying little twig.”

My screaming spine celebrates when I give up and collapse flat on the floor, grinning and sweaty. “Then try this other one for me.”

He wrinkles his nose, but I can see that little glint of interest in his eyes. I bounce to my feet and take up a stance in the doorway to the kitchen, underneath the tangy-smelling evergreen garlands Ethan nailed all over the house. I wolf whistle when he hauls himself to his feet, unbuckles his belt, and drags his jeans down his thick, hair-dusted thighs. “I’m playing right into your trap, but what do sex positions have to do with your secret Santa?”

We’ve added three more men to our annual Christmas gathering this year, for a total of nine, so we agreed on a giant secret Santa name draw. As Ethan has reminded me seven hundred times, telling him the name I drew ruins the game. Well, he can help me practice without figuring out that I have Benji, the swimming champ who trains at my pool and dates my business partner. He’s a chaotic little stinker and I really like him, so I’m going all out on my gift. Anyone else would have gotten a Toblerone.

“It just does, okay?” I wave him over impatiently. “God, it’s like you don’t even want to have sex with me.” As soon as I shimmy my shorts off to reveal my half-hard dick, the big guy wakes right up and hurries over with his ears pricked like our dog Rio when he hears the treat bag. He reaches out to grab my hips and press our cocks together, but I dance backward out of his hands. “Nuh-uh. This is for science. Lube up.”

We have at least three lubes hidden in every room. There is not a square foot in this house where we haven't banged. Ethan grabs the nearest one from behind a plant and smears it hastily on his cock, which gets even harder as he slicks it up.

Pressing my back against one side of the door frame, I spread my thighs. "Stand between my feet." He obliges, but I can tell he's already getting annoyed. So I lean up and kiss him, let him get his fingers in my curls for a second. "This is supposed to feel extra, super fucking good," I breathe against his lips. "No work, no reward."

"If only you applied that motto to literally anything in your life," he muses with a crooked grin. "We'd have world peace by now, no hunger, flying cars..."

"Shut up." I spread my thighs and awkwardly angle myself so we're each leaning on the opposite side of the door frame with our pelvises close together. Both of us are hard now, and I can see precum beading on his slit. Eager boy. "Now you're going to put your right leg over my shoulder."

He blinks. "You're fucking kidding me. Do I look like Simone Biles to you?"

"Maybe we'd have flying cars if you took that stick out of your ass for one day— Jesus!" I duck just in time to avoid being decapitated by his flailing leg. No matter how hard he tries or how loud he grunts, he can't stretch even close to high enough. By the fifth try, he's furious and I'm crouched on the floor sobbing with laughter into my knees. "Never mind," I wheeze. "I don't think Colson's any more flexible than you."

"What are you talking about?" he fumes, rubbing his lower back like he just sprained something.

"Thanks for the research." I hop up and grab for my shorts without answering his question. "That was informative. Now I need to finish my gift."

"What about—" His shoulders sag, like a kid who just got told his trip to Disneyland is cancelled. "Aren't we...?"

"Sorry, babe. You couldn't get it up." I dissolve into another fit of laughter and flop into the armchair where I

originally started working on my gift this morning.

Goosebumps prickle along my skin as his feet thump across the floor toward me. He always likes to finish what he started. He's responsible like that. What I *don't* expect is when his powerful hands grab my ankles and yank them up, folding me in half in the chair with my hole exposed and open for him. "What about this position?" he growls. "Is it not good enough for you?"

I growl back and wiggle my perfect ass at him, but he doesn't take it. He just stands there, holding me up like some salmon he caught on a deep sea trawler. "What?" I struggle a little, and he just hoists my ankles up even higher. Now my cock really aches, bouncing hard against my belly and leaving precum stains on my t-shirt. "You want me to beg?"

He raises his eyebrows. "I bought a lot of nice things today that we're going to wrap and put both our names on, as if you helped instead of practicing the *Kama Sutra* solo. So yeah, a little begging would be nice."

My ass is desperate for it, opening up even without his fingers for that perfectly shaped cock it knows so well. I meet his dark eyes and hold them. "Show me who's boss. Hard. So I don't fucking forget next time. Make it hurt—ughhhh." I close my eyes and trail off into blissful moans as he shoves himself all the way in with a jolt of his hips. My whole body is sobbing at the pretzel position he's forced me into, and that just makes it feel even better.

Gripping my ankles so I can't move, he lets out all his frustration on my ass with a vicious rhythm. I want to stroke my cock and milk it out, because he keeps tagging my prostate and I feel like I'm melting into lava, but I know I'm not allowed to touch it. I dig my fingers into the arms of the chair so hard my knuckles turn white. His eyes flick approvingly from them to my jerking cock.

"You're gonna come just like that," he demands, his voice unsteady in time with his thrusts. "That's how bad you want me. You have no self control at all."

I couldn't prove him wrong if I tried, because thirty seconds later all the muscles in my legs tighten and spasm and I writhe with a throaty whine as I come helplessly all over myself. He doesn't let up, even as I start to go limp, until he spills inside me with a groan.

My whole body is shivering in protest as he lets me unfold, and I slither down onto the floor and lie there in a panting heap.

"Give *that* to your damn secret Santa," he snarks triumphantly as he sits down next to me and strokes his fingers gently along my back. "Or, I mean...that came out wrong. Don't do that. I don't understand what's going on at all."

I chuckle into my elbow. "You're gonna have to wait until the Christmas party. What about yours?"

"I bought him a lovely gift while I was out today that I'm going to wrap in beautiful gold paper and a ribbon, because I'm a classy man and you're a monster."

Prying myself off the floor, I eye his soft cock. If I do my job right, I can keep him here all afternoon. He sucks in a breath when I crawl closer and bend down to lap my tongue along the tip of his shaft. "Monsters have the most fun."



One bright red apple after another plops from my hand into my shopping bag as I count to myself. “Two for Eli, two for Kenzie, one for Davey, one for me, and four for Jonah.”

I’ve never attempted to roast apples in a fireplace before, but I have no doubt my husband will set quite a few on fire before the night’s through. He asked me earlier why I picked some weird holiday tradition that no one has done since Victorian times, but I couldn’t get past the mental picture of all the kids huddled around with their faces lit up by the cozy orange glow, then presenting their steaming treats for me to add brown sugar and cinnamon. I’m irredeemably sappy, and I make no apology for it.

Tomorrow is Christmas, the one day a year when our friends all gather from Iowa and Washington. Last year, we met at a lodge in Wyoming; this time my family and Jackson and Oliver’s family flew up to Seattle for the weekend. We’re giving all the kids their Christmas tonight, so I just have a few more preparations to—

Someone backs into my arm and jolts me forward, knocking a jumble of apples off the grocery store display. “I’m so sorry,” a low, sleek, and remarkably familiar voice says behind me as fruit bounces off my shoes and rolls across the aisle. I spin around to find my ex husband bent over, trying to

chase down and snatch up all the apples before they trip anyone. When he straightens up, huffing, his pitch-dark eyes meet mine and widen slightly. “Oh. Hello there. I didn’t know you were in town yet.”

I stare at him, fascinated. He looks like the Colson I knew once, with his perfect hair and devastatingly expensive gray wool coat. But he’s gained a little weight, and his cheeks have more color. There’s a light in his eyes that’s very different from the predatory gleam of a lawyer about to pounce on a piece of evidence. He’s fucking happy, and it’s not until this moment that I realize how unhappy he’s always been. I don’t think he realized either. “We flew in late last night.”

“Still shopping for your secret Santa?” he teases, dumping the apples back onto the display. “I’m surprised you didn’t have it purchased and wrapped six months before we drew names.” His voice drops into a mockery of mine. “This zucchini noodle spiralizer will be appropriate for any possible distribution of gifts. I love to be prepared. It makes me erect —” He chokes on a laugh when I try to trip him with my shopping bags. But both of us are grinning.

“What about you?” I ask. “Do you already have yours?”

A flicker of mischief crosses his face. “Mine is very much taken care of.”

“Then what are you—” I narrow my eyes at the four shopping bags dangling from his hand. “Hold on. The rule was secret Santa only, and we donate the money we’d usually use on our significant others to that children’s cancer charity. Are you cheating and shopping for your men?”

He purses his lips, eyeing me. When two lawyers get into an argument, blood can be spilled. “It’s not my fault that I have extra money. Besides, what’s all that?”

I try to hide the extra bags that aren’t full of apple-roasting supplies behind my legs. “Nothing. Stuff for the kids.”

“Sure, they’re really into—” he angles his head and squints, “—books of vintage tractor diagrams. Interesting.”



“Okay.” I hold up one hand placatingly. “I propose a settlement.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. This feels so good, to see the best possible version of a man I loved once and build a friendship based on all the parts of ourselves that work well together. “I’m listening.”

“Both of us double our donation to the charity, and no one speaks a word of this.”

He tosses back his head with a laugh. “Deal. I have a bit of time before I need to be home. Can I help you find your secret Santa gift so you *don’t* buy whoever-it-is a kitchen appliance?”

“I know what I’m after,” I explain as he falls into step next to me. “It’s on the second floor of the mall.”

After I purchase my apples, we cross the waterlogged street to the mall. In Iowa we left behind four-foot-deep banks of snow; in Seattle it’s just soggy and a bland fifty degrees. “I can’t remember the last time I went into a mall,” I muse as we push open the doors.

Colson wrinkles his nose at the overwhelming waft of scented candles and popcorn that rolls over us. “I don’t see the appeal. Where is your family anyway?”

“Jonah took them up the Space Needle,” I explain as we ride the escalator to the second floor. “Since I’m terrified of heights, I thought I’d spare everyone a repeat of that mountain gondola in Austria.”

“Oh god,” Colson groans. “I forgot how it felt to have your husband faint in the middle of twenty people halfway up a mountain.”

“Exactly. Ah, here we are!” I gesture to the store in front of us.

Colson looks from the fake bricks, to the ugly graffiti sign, to the dingy interior.

“If you’re shopping here, I think you just narrowed down your secret Santa options to two, maybe three people?”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Maybe I got your name. You’ll just have to wait and find out.”

While I head toward the back of the store, Colson browses near the front. He makes himself look about seventy years old, the way he squints incomprehendingly at t-shirts covered in video game logos and anime characters like they’re from another planet.

It’s easy to find what I’m looking for in abundance—tacky things for the tackiest person I know. As I’m carrying my purchases to the register, I spot the most appalling item I’ve ever seen in my life, balanced proudly on a shelf. Why anyone invented it and what drugs they were on, I have no idea.

I can’t do it. I can’t walk up to the cashier with that abomination in my hands. I’m not even supposed to be buying gifts for my husband. At the same time, I can’t leave it here when it’s practically made for him. When I can imagine exactly what I’d do with it, how his hysterical laughter would turn into moans. Making sure that Colson isn’t watching, I snatch it up and stuff it under my other purchases.

The cashier is a young woman with a lot of piercings who looks my suit up and down. When she gets to the last item, she just giggles to herself, gives me a nod of respect, and packs it away.

Cole is lurking directly behind me with a bright pink and blue tie dye t-shirt shoved in my face. “What is this?” he demands, avoiding my eyes sheepishly. “Benji likes colorful things and cute animals but I have no idea what the hell it means.”

Smugness floods me. He picked the one thing in the store I can identify, thanks to my son Eli. “That, my friend, is Pokémon.”

“Pokémon? Like that yellow rodent thing I got out of a Happy Meal when I was ten?”

I nod sagely, but he’s not satisfied. He gestures to the three creatures on the front of the shirt. “What are they called? Will he recognize them?”

Shit, it's been years since Eli would cuddle with me in his bed and tell me the names of all the Pokemon on his comforter. "Squirtle," I venture, pointing to the turtle, then the baby dragon. "Something about Char, and..." The last one taunts me as my mind goes blank. "And Succulent Dinosaur."

"It's not fucking called Succulent Dinosaur." Irritated, he plops the t-shirt down in front of the cashier. "Benji's going to make fun of me if I don't know."

"You could know the names of all three thousand of the things and he'd still make fun of you for buying that. But he'll love it."

"He'll look damn adorable wearing it to bed with no pants," Colson muses, his eyes glazing over a little. "Alek will thank me for this."

"Are they decorating?" I ask as we leave the store. Colson's rural-modern dream house was finished just a few months ago. He, Alek, and Benji are hosting the party tomorrow.

He grins. "That's part of the reason I left today. Alek bought the most delicate icicle lights and reindeer sculptures made out of artisan driftwood and Benji brought home a load of garish inflatables and snowflake projector lights. I've made bets with myself about who won, and I'm about to go home and find out."

My phone vibrates, and I tug it out of my pocket. One message from Jonah:

*we're done hurry up i want to climb your space needle if u know what i mean. i can try spinning at the top and everything.*

When I look up, Colson is watching me with a small smile. He shakes his head and chuckles. "I've never seen a man so besotted in my whole life."

"Right." I gesture to the ridiculous t-shirt clutched in his hands. "Try looking in a mirror sometimes."

It starts to rain again, as we exchange an awkward back-patting hug under the overhang of the mall entrance. "I'll see

you tomorrow,” he calls, ducking his head and jogging away down the sidewalk. As I watch him go, I realize that I might love him again, the man I spent so many years hating. Not in the same way as before, not romantically, but as two good friends who both had their worlds turned upside-down, backwards, and inside out, and finally found what they had been missing all along.



**B**ang. I jump, flinching at the slam of a door even after all these years. But I'm sprawled safely in front of a roaring fire in the way-too-fancy vacation rental we're sharing with Gray and Jonah's family. We're spending tomorrow at Colson's house, but Jonah found lights and garlands in the garage and threw them everywhere, like Christmas vomited in here. He also left a holiday playlist tinkling in the background that I've been too lazy to turn off. It's kept me from losing my temper over the last hour.

"Sorry," my daughter Megan hisses theatrically from the entryway as she and Eli noisily throw off their coats and shoes.

"You'll be sorrier when you wake up Charlie and I send you to get her back to sleep," I offer, frowning at the tangle of yarn and plastic needles in my clumsy hands. Ollie and I only adopted baby Charlotte four months ago, and that little screaming thing with her plump face and wisps of red hair rules our household. The evenings where I fall asleep on the couch with my head in Oliver's lap and Charlie splayed out on my chest are the best moments of my entire life.

Eli sprints past me toward the room he, Megan, and Kenzie are sharing at the end of the hall. He's not fast enough for me to miss the bag of candy rustling under each arm. Megan wanders in, her spoils dangling shamelessly from one

hand. She and Eli are in their mid-teens now, plenty old enough to explore the neighborhood by themselves and find a store. I guess they're not old enough to think buying four massive bags of Reese's Christmas trees might be a bad idea. I'm gonna let Ollie deal with that later.

"What on earth are you doing?" She plops on the couch next to me and blinks at the fucking woolen disaster in my lap.

"I'm finishing your dad's secret Santa gift," I grumble, wishing I could throw it in the fire and watch it incinerate. "I need your help."

"You're knitting him socks?" she asks incredulously.

I blink at her. "You're kidding, right?"

"What?"

"Goddamn it." Throwing my head back against the cool leather couch, I close my eyes. "It's a hat, not a sock."

She snorts loudly and dissolves into giggles.

"Show me how to fix it then, twerp." Sitting up, I flick the middle of her forehead.

Holding up her hands, she scoots away and tosses back her blonde braid full of flyaways. "How the heck should I know?"

I narrow my eyes at her, and she narrows hers right back. "You've lived around the man your entire life and you have no idea how to knit at all?"

"Let me get this straight." She crosses her arms with a sassy flounce she'll never grow out of. "Daddy's the most epic knitter you know, so why did you think knitting him something shitty was a good gift idea?"

"Don't cuss," I growl like a reflex. "So are you gonna help or are you gonna be a dick?"

One of her dimples pops out as she grins, then flops over with her head on my shoulder. "What if you pretend you're playing a guitar?"

"That doesn't make any sense."

“I think you’ve created too much of a shitshow to turn down anyone’s advice, Dad.”

Angling my head, I prop my nose against her hair and take a calming hit of her bright, citrusy shampoo. “At least give me a Reese’s.”

“Because I feel sorry for you.” She rips open a candy bag and tosses three chocolate trees into my lap. “I’m kidding. He’ll love his sock, because you made it for him.”

“It’s *not* a *sock*,” I holler after her as she tears out of the room, laughing.

When the front door opens again, I stuff the knitting under my cushion a second before Ollie comes in. His cheeks are all pink from the outdoors, and his soft reddish-gold curls spring free as he tugs off his hat. Why the hell am I knitting him a hat when he already has a perfect one he made himself? I don’t know what’s wrong with me. “Hey, love.” His soft, breathless smile turns my body to nothing but heat and light. “What have you been up to?”

“Just napping,” I mumble, fixing my eyes on the fire. I suck at lying to him. “Did you have fun with Jonah and Kenzie and Davey?” Megan and Eli are in that phase where they think it’s more cool to “hang out” doing nothing with each other than to do something actually fun with their little siblings.

“Yeah.” He trots over and catches my hand. “The Space Needle is tall.”

“What a shocker.” We grin at each other, then he tugs on my arm.

“They’re all right behind me. Let’s get somewhere quieter.”

Not sure what he wants, I let him pull me up and drag me through the house, past our room where the monitor clipped to my jeans tells me Charlie’s still sleeping. To my surprise, he leads me downstairs, through the rec room with its pool table where Jonah has been destroying me one handed, into the huge closet that holds all the board games and pool cues. He pushes the door shut and stands there, staring at me expectantly.

A stampede of footsteps crosses the floor above our heads as I glance around the room. “Can I help you, Ollie?”

I grunt in surprise when he catches my neck in both hands and goes up on his toes to kiss me. It’s one of his needy kisses, where he presses his whole body against mine and his tongue swipes in to play with my piercing. He whines, and when he bumps our hips together I feel his massive hard-on. “What’s got into you?” I gasp when he pulls back for breath, but my voice sounds ragged and hungry too.

“I love Jonah, but he hasn’t shut up about Gray all day. Gray this, Gray that, what a great dad Gray is, how handsome he is. I swear to god he made thirty-seven different innuendos about the Space Needle and Gray’s dick. I counted.”

“So?” I shiver a little and let my eyes drift half closed as Ollie rubs his erection against my quickly growing one.

“So I desperately wanted to tell my man how handsome he is, what a great dad he is. And how hot his damn Space Needle is.”

I crack up in his hair. “If I’m the Space Needle does that make you the tower in Dubai that’s the tallest in the world?”

“Shut *up*,” he gasps, flushing even pinker. He gives a moaning little whimper when I drop down on my knees and start unzipping his pants.

The sound of people walking and talking upstairs seems to turn him on even more, so I glance up and meet his eyes as I slip my fingers into his briefs and tug them out of the way. “You’d better keep it down.”

His huge, flushed cock sits heavy in my fingers as I lick the tip and cradle his balls in my palm, enjoying the sight of his toes curling into the carpet. “Jackson,” he breathes shakily as he presses his back against the wall and runs fingers through my hair. “What about you. Do you want to come?”

I shake my head and brush the tip of my tongue along his wet slit. “I want you to put your hands above your head and be good for me.”



He moans, squeezing his eyes shut for a second like he needs to pull himself together, then raises his arms and tilts his hips forward obediently. His little ass is tensed, and his breathing goes all fast as I wrap my lips around his cockhead and suck gently. “This feels so wrong,” he pants when the sound of running kids passes over our heads again, followed by laughter.

I pull off for a second, spit trailing from my lips to his shaft, and flick my eyes up to his wide blue ones. “This is what you asked for, Ollie. You like it.”

Shivering, he drops his head back against the wall. I can’t take his whole shaft in my mouth—I don’t think anyone could. But I’ve practiced a lot, more than I’ve practiced just about anything in my life. I love sinking into his ass, but even more I love lying between his legs while we’re watching TV in bed and just sucking him until he comes, maybe two or three times. It’s even more fun on nights when my body has no interest in sex itself and I can just play with him like a science project.

I’ve pretty much perfected this. My throat has learned to love the feeling of his fat head lodged deep, where I can’t breathe. My mouth knows how to stretch for him, the slow, deep sucking he likes best. And I’ve perfected how to use my hands for the rest—tugging his balls, stroking the base of the shaft faster and faster as he gets closer, smearing spit and precum down its length. I know the way his thighs tense and twitch when he gets close, the exact moment he thrusts his hips forward helplessly.

“Oh shit, *fuck*,” he whimpers, clapping one of his hands over his mouth as all his muscles jerk and he spills right down my throat, hot and needy. It took me a long time to train myself to swallow as much cum as he makes, but now I know how to do it so that the contraction of my throat milks him out even more.

When I pull off, he melts like Jell-O and slides down the wall until we’re eye to eye. The corner of his mouth curls up in that half-shy, half-playful grin. “Hi.”

“I need you to promise me something.” I reach over and brush his messy hair off his forehead.

His eyebrows furrow in concern. “What is it, love?”

“When it’s time for gifts tomorrow, just remember how good I am at this, and how much you appreciate it.”

Cocking his head, he raises an eyebrow. “Huh?”

I grimace, then pat the top of his head and scramble to my feet, helping him up. “You’ll understand what I mean when the time comes.”



“D un dun dah dah dun dun...”

I turn around so fast Benji almost crashes face-first into me. “I’m legitimately going to kill you right now. I hope you gave Colson a goodbye kiss this morning.”

Benji just jumps back and claps his hands together, pointing his index fingers at me like a pistol. “*Pew, pew*. Not if I kill you first.” Then he skips past me across Ethan and Victor’s back yard and goes back to humming the *Mission Impossible* theme song.

I watch his back as he bounces toward the house, then tries to do a forward ninja roll, fails, and lies on his face in the damp grass, giggling. Reluctantly, I realize how wide I’m smiling, even though I’ve wanted to punch his cute face all morning.

“The spare key is under a plastic rock by those roses.”

While Benji goes digging enthusiastically through the flower bed, I sneak up to the glass French doors and peek into Ethan and Victor’s dining room. They’re downtown watching some kind of Christmas performance this afternoon, so the house is quiet.

Still humming under his breath, Benji sidles up with a dirty key in his palm. “Want to breach the perimeter for me?” I ask

in spite of myself. He has that effect on people.

Flashing a brilliant grin, he unlocks the door and throws it open, then plants one sneaker dramatically on the hardwood floor. “Step one complete. Now it’s time to disable the alarms.”

“That’s your specialty. I’m going to start searching for the target.”

Benji brandishes his finger gun, then stuffs it into the back of his jeans. “No force necessary, only biscuits.” Fishing in his pocket, he produces a fistful of Triss and Hamlet’s dog treats and whistles. With the skittering of claws on wood, a scruffy white ball comes zooming down the stairs and around the corner. Rio barks two or three times, like he feels obligated, then catches a hint of the biscuit smell and hones in on Benji with his tiny tail wagging.

My heist partner will happily spend the next ten minutes cross-legged on the floor with a dog in his lap, so I carry on alone. I’m not entirely sure where my target is hidden, but I have some guesses. Bringing Benji with me to help steal my secret Santa gift is technically against the rules, since it gives away who I have, but I couldn’t resist the chance to watch my boy have this much fun.

I weave through the house to their office, which fortunately for me is not locked. I’ve never had a reason to come in here when I’m visiting Victor, but it only takes me ten seconds to tell which part of the room belongs to him. Ethan has a big desk, a shelf full of coordinated hardcover books, and neat stacks of paperwork. I can only assume Victor lives in the cramped corner that looks like it’s home to a family of paper-eating rats.

I have no doubt that Ethan has never seen the thing I’m looking for. Victor swore it would never see the light of day again. The only reason I know about it is because I was there when it came into existence. Everyone else would assume that he threw it away a long time ago, but I know better. Underneath his careless attitude, he clings to any memories and sentimental things that aren’t associated with the hell he’s

been through. Like he's trying to prove to himself that he existed outside of it.

At first I poke through the drawers of his overstuffed filing cabinet, but that's too obvious. Ethan might decide to clean them out some day in a fit of frustration, and Victor would never risk such a discovery. After searching for ten minutes, I start to worry that I'm in over my head. If I can't find this, I'm going to be one of those losers out at nine PM on Christmas Eve, buying socks and Ferrero Rocher for some weird uncle they forgot about.

A particular board in the rich mahogany-colored flooring creaks loudly when I put my weight on it. Incredulously, I kneel down and dig my fingers into the join like someone from an adventure movie finding the treasure map. "Jesus Christ," I gasp when the board comes up and reveals a cavity underneath with what looks like a Ziploc baggie inside.

Instead of grabbing the bag, I put the board back and go to the doorway, hollering Benji's name. After a pause, he and Rio come trotting down the hall. "Did you find it?"

"Come here." Grabbing his arm, I pull him across the office and point to Victor's corner. "I need backup to check the flooring in that area. I heard something suspicious."

He narrows his eyes at me suspiciously. "It's okay, baby. You don't have to pretend there's something under the floor. I'm not that clueless."

"Are you talking back to your superior in the middle of a dangerous operation?"

Flushing a little, he raises his eyebrows. "Okay, we're roleplaying spies in bed later and you're in charge." But he humors me and wanders around, prodding boards with his toes. When he hears the creak, he hesitates and glances at me, startled. "I...no way. It can't..."

He literally screeches when the board comes up in his hands and he discovers the secret compartment. "Oh my goood! This is the coolest fucking thing I've ever seen in my life. Look, look." Yanking the bag out of the hole, he waves it

at me with no concern for being gentle with the contents. “I’m dead. I’m in heaven. Can I video call Cole and show him, please?”

“No!” I grab the bag away. “This is a secret, remember? No one is supposed to know that I cheated and told you my name. You can film it and show him after Christmas.”

Huffing irritably, he films the hole from all angles with a running commentary, then puts the board back. In the meantime I empty the baggie of photographs out on Ethan’s desk and push them around with one finger. There are so many good options I don’t know where to start, so I decide to take them all.

A lean body crashes into my back as I finish sealing up the bag. “One more thing,” Benji purrs in my ear, slinging his arms around my neck. “The main character spies, the ones with sexual tension, always make out in the middle of the operation. Right as the security cameras are panning towards them, or the laser beams are about to go on.”

“Are either of those things about to happen?” I ask, turning around so our faces are an inch apart.

His eyebrows go up, his soft eyes bright. “Who knows?” He nips at my lower lip, then again, harder, trying to goad me. I catch the back of his neck firmly and study every inch of him. He’s gotten stronger the last year, as he trains for his swimming, and his complexion looks healthier.

As slowly as I want, to drive him crazy, I lean in until our lips are less than a centimeter from touching. “Let’s be clear. I’m only kissing you to fill your mouth so you can’t sing that damn song anymore.”

He gives a little growl-whine, then groans when I finally kiss him. True to my word, I push deep into his mouth and don’t let up. Of course he starts rubbing against my leg, because he’s insatiable, but I pinch him until he goes still. None of the three of us have issues with the other two having sex without him, but even Colson would be offended if we left him out of secret spy sex in someone else’s house.

That doesn't mean I can't turn around and drop Benji on his back against Ethan's desk and make out with him for a dangerously long time before we flee with our prize into the damp December afternoon.



Gray can't keep a surprise for shit. The whole time we're having dinner with Jackson, Oliver, and the kids, the whole time we're roasting apples and singing carols, the whole time we're washing up and getting all the children in bed, he's watching me with that strange, slightly hungry glint in his eyes that means he's hiding something and it probably has to do with sex.

The older kids are all sharing a room, and we've been trading off with Jax and Ollie for who watches the babies, so Gray and I are alone as we head out the front door and make the ten steps to the door of the next attached unit. It's nowhere near the chill of December in Iowa, but the temperatures have dropped enough to make the puddles slushy and slippery. As we move carefully, gripping each other's hands, I tip my face up to the night sky and sniff.

Gray smiles. "Do you smell a white Christmas, Iowa boy?"

Pulling my hand out of his so I can hold up my finger, I scent the air more carefully. "Unlikely but not impossible."

"That's cheating," he complains, unlocking the front door. "You'll be right no matter what happens."

I shoot him an angelic smile and duck past him into the warm living room identical to the one next door. We used up most of the Christmas decorations over there, but I dangled one string of rainbow twinkle lights over the fireplace. "I



didn't think we'd get any kind of romantic getaway on this trip," I muse, drawing the curtains and getting to work starting a fire.

"Right." His voice goes kind of funny, and he hurries away to get a drink of water. When he comes back, I'm lounging across most of the couch as the fire starts to crackle and send up swaying orange flames.

He gestures to the occupied sofa. "Are you going to let me sit down?"

"Are you going to tell me what you've got your dick in a twist about?"

I'm rewarded with him propping his hands on his hips in exasperation, one of his hottest moves. "I found something while I was out shopping, and I'm entirely unsure whether I should bring it out or throw it away."

I can feel my lips curling into a grin as my body starts to wake up and take notice. "Oh, anything that has you this flustered needs to come out."

He studies me for a moment with his brooding hazel stare. "Then close your eyes."

Electricity prickles along my skin as I listen to him digging through the pile of shopping bags by the front door. His socked feet pad toward me across the floor. "Open your mouth." It's his sex voice, now, and I twitch when his fingertips soothe the side of my neck. I flex my jaw obediently in the pine-scented darkness, offering my tongue.

The mystery item is made of slick silicone and it's big, big enough to make me struggle. My mouth gets forced wider as the shape of the toy swells a little. It's weirdly bumpy, the texture teasing my tongue. He keeps going, steady with a hand on the back of my head, until I fight back a gag. My eyes start watering as I suck on the unfamiliar shape.

"Any guesses?" His thumb strokes the nape of my neck, but he doesn't pull back. "Don't open your eyes yet."

I shake my head a little, completely unable to talk. I've never been more confused in my life.

“All the way back,” he murmurs, and I groan, struggling to relax my throat and open my jaw wider than physically possible. I don’t need to see him to know that he’s hard now. When I try to suck in a breath through my nose, I can’t. Just for a moment, he’s holding my life in his calm, firm hands. It’s the biggest high, and my body dumps all its adrenaline straight into my dick.

As he pulls it out I gasp and cough, wiping my messy lips. “Good,” Gray murmurs. “I know how much your heritage means to you, as a proud Iowa farm boy. You might even say it’s buried deep in every part of you. I wanted to respect that. So you can open your eyes.”

Blinking in the orange fire light, I shoot him a bewildered look. Then my jaw drops open. “Oh my god.” Before I can say anything else, I break down into laughter.

He’s standing there with a half-sheepish, half-aroused smile, holding a whopping yellow corn-on-the-cob dildo. My spit glistens along every lovingly-crafted kernel, down to the thick stem gripped in my husband’s fingers. “If I make you take this whole thing,” he asks mildly, fighting his widening grin, “will the citizens of Hollow Creek finally embrace me as a true native?”

“Give me that,” I gasp, trying to get myself under control. I pluck it out of his hand and hug it to my chest. “Go away. Corny is mine, and I don’t need your dick anymore. Corny and I understand each other.”

I can tell how pleased he is with his joke, even though he acts casual. As he leans over to kiss me, I hook my stump around his neck and tug him down to kneel by the couch, where I can taste his mouth for as long as I want.

Thirty sweaty, naked minutes later, I’m on my face on the rug in front of the fire with a massive corncob most of the way inside my ass and my straining cock dangling between my legs. Gray alternates stroking it just slowly enough to drive me crazy and rubbing my back as he works the dildo deeper. I know I won’t be allowed to come until he pulls it out and

replaces it with his cock and fucks me so hard into the carpet that we both have rug burns tomorrow.

Right as I'm moaning at the deepest intrusion yet, Gray pauses. "Oh, it's midnight."

"Uh." I grunt.

He pats my ass gently. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart. I love you. Do you want to make a toast?"

My ass clenches around the corn and I moan desperately. "Ughhhh, Christmas, love, yay, don't stop you prick."

And so I ring in Christmas with one of my favorite sounds, his low, dangerous chuckle as he plays with and pushes my body beyond its limits until I come apart.



COLSON, Alek, and Benji's house looks amazing when we pull up in the late afternoon, as the sun is just starting to go down. One-year-old Davey babbles and points excitedly at the massive Santa, reindeer, Grinch, and dog inflatables looming in the front yard. In the afternoon light we can only barely see the projected snowflakes spinning wildly all over the front of the gorgeous stone and timber facade. I spot some wooden reindeer sculptures and classy lights tucked in around the edges, but no one gives a shit about those.

As we unload two cars worth of adults, teens, kids, and infants, as well as bags of food and piles of wrapped gifts, Ethan and Victor pull up behind us in their Bronco. Victor looks pained as Kenzie runs over, hugs his waist, and dashes away again. She's always had a weird fondness for him since he played fetch with her at our wedding. "Every time they get big enough to stop being annoying, you all keep adding more," he observes as he squeezes Gray in a tight hug.

The front door opens, and a younger man who must be Benji bounds out in lounge pants and Birkenstocks that probably belong to Colson. "Welcome." He spreads his arms

expansively. “Everyone needs to go tell Alek how much you like the decorations.”

“Hey, squirt.” Victor tousles his hair, then makes a break for the house without another word. I glance at Ethan in confusion, but he just shrugs.

“I’m Benji.” The boy flashes me a stunning smile, tossing back his tousled auburn hair. “You must be Jonah.” He doesn’t even glance at my knotted jacket sleeve that gives away my stump.

Colson appears in the doorway and leans against the frame as Jackson and Oliver herd children toward the porch. “Victor’s eating something,” he calls to Benji. “Is he supposed to be doing that?”

Benji straightens up with an armful of gifts from the back of our car, then goes pale as he meets my eyes. “Fuck, I left your present in the hall. *Damnit.*” Throwing the packages down, he goes tearing back into the house.

Oliver stops next to me, cradling baby Charlie, who tries to grab a fistful of my coat. “Does he realize he just gave away his secret Santa?”

Gray sighs. “I dread to think how hard Cole and Alek worked to make sure he wouldn’t do that.”

“I promise I won’t tell them,” I offer.

As we carry everything into the huge, cozy foyer, two of the most amazing dogs ever come racing to greet us. Gray’s told me about them and showed me pictures, because he knew how much I’d adore them. They’re like a mix between a muppet, an anteater, and a giraffe. I was gutted to leave Daisy at home, so I drop my things and grab a plush bear off the floor to throw for them.

Chasing them toward the back yard, I pass a short hallway with the sound of splashing echoing down it. Curious, I wander through and stick my head into a beautiful indoor pool surrounded by big windows and a jungle of well-tended plants. There’s a pile of clothes on the blue-tiled edge of the pool that I’m pretty sure Victor and Benji were wearing a minute ago.

The two of them are in the pool in their underwear, splashing and wrestling viciously over what looks like a bag of salt and vinegar kettle chips.

“Give them back,” I hear Benji snarl between gasps as his head breaks the surface. “They’re not yours.”

“It’s too late; they’re already open.” Victor easily swims out of reach, holding the bag above the water in one hand while Benji chases him in circles.

I start to back out of the room silently, when Benji spins around and points at me, with water dripping from his hair down into his eyes. “They’re his present, Victor. Apologize to him.”

Victor pauses a moment, eyeing me with his pale stare, then swims silently over to the lip of the pool near my feet and holds the bag up. When I reach for it, he pulls it back. “Just one.”

“You *dick*,” Benji cries, paddling closer. “I don’t even know him, and now he’s gonna hate me.” He catches the edge of the pool and shoots me wide, sweet puppy eyes. “I’m sorry, Jonah.”

When I grin, he relaxes. “Can I come in?” Swimming with one arm was another thing that took a lot of extra practice to learn, but I used to love it. I haven’t gotten the chance in a long time. As I strip off my t-shirt, I tilt my head back just in time to catch the first Christmas snowflake landing on the glass skylight above me.



Ethan

There hasn't been a white Christmas in Seattle for nine years. Even now, the snowflakes creep down timidly at first, and melt away before they even hit the ground. But as more and more of them fill the air, the tips of the grass start to turn white.

I turn around right as Victor enters the open kitchen-living room area where we've all gathered. Since the beginning, when we hated each other, my body has always been hyper-attuned to his every movement—anxious when I can't see him and relieved when he comes back. That's probably not healthy, but after so many years we have a pass to be as toxically codependent as we want. His damp curls cling to his face, and his t-shirt is sticking to his wet skin. His pale eyes find mine immediately, the corner of his mouth twitching up.

"Good for you," Alek murmurs next to me, fishing out his wallet and handing me a five dollar bill. Colson, looking classy and cozy at the same time in his thick gray wool sweater, crosses the room and passes me an identical note. We placed bets on how fast Victor would find the pool—Colson went for four minutes, Alek for two. They both thought I was getting carried away when I guessed twenty seconds, but I never had any doubts. If anything, it was more like ten.

Oliver comes down the hall from putting the two babies down for a nap. I can see him trying to say something, but the

volume in the room is too much for his soft, hesitant voice. Everyone shuts up instantly when Jackson barks “Hey, be quiet.” He’s not the friendliest or most socially adept, but no one minds. We’re all a little odd around here.

“Uh, thanks,” Ollie murmurs, flushing a little. “I was just going to say that the babies are sleeping and the kids are playing outside, so if we want to exchange gifts without a lot of screaming and drama, we might want to do it now.”

“Too late,” Benji mumbles from his spot on the couch on top of Alek. “Victor’s here.” The story of chipageddon has already spread through the group, and I think the boy’s going to be sore about it all day.

Entirely unbothered, Victor flops down on the other end of the couch, leaving room for Colson next to his men, and curls a finger at me. I want to watch the snow, but I’ll never be able to say no to him. Stepping over Jonah’s shoulder and Jackson’s legs, I sit on the carpet in front of Victor’s knees. He immediately wraps his legs around me and starts teasing his fingers through my hair. Colson plops down next to us, kissing Benji, then Alek. Everyone’s finally here—and even in a room this big, nine men barely fit. We’re all bumping elbows, shoulders pressed together, the room smelling like a mix of fresh scents and colognes. It reminds me of when I was little, before my life fell apart, when my whole extended family would pack the house with cookies, music, laughter, and fighting over board games. I never thought I’d have that again.

“Let’s just start by the tree,” Gray suggests, pathologically unable to avoid trying to organize the chaos. “And go around in a circle.” No one else gives a shit, so he points at Jonah. “You first.”

His husband glances up at the huge Douglas fir behind him, decorated in blue and white lights, silver garlands, and baubles in every possible color. “Oh, uh, here. It’s nothing crazy, but I hope you like them.” He grabs a heavy, square package, struggling to balance it with one hand, and passes it to Jackson. Discomfort radiates from the tattooed man as everyone watches him carefully pick open the ends of the

package and peel off the gold snowflake paper, like he's trying to save it.

Finally, he reveals a stack of vinyl records. From what I can see, they look like singer-songwriter and folk artists. "Yesterday I went to a shop here and had them give me a bunch of local artists. I thought you might find some new songs to learn," Jonah explains bashfully.

Jackson keeps his head ducked, like he wants to sink through the floor, but he flashes Jonah a genuine smile. "Thanks. Show me your favorite track and I'll figure it out for you." They fist-bump solemnly, and Oliver shoots Gray a smile.

Between Victor massaging the back of my neck and the warm peppermint tea Colson brewed spreading through my body, I could drift off right here and have the best nap of my life. But Victor abruptly lets go of me and bounces forward with a "fuck yeah", kneeing me in the ribs as Gray gets up and passes him a gift. Gray seems like the kind to choose something boring and pragmatic, but he and Victor have known each other longer than any two people in this room. I have faith in him.

Sure enough, Victor crows happily as he shreds the paper to reveal a stack of t-shirts. He holds up one covered in cats with lasers coming out of their eyes, a vintage Hannah Montana tee featuring six huge depictions of her face, and pink crop top that says *Look out, I'm a cougar*. Victor points at Gray with a wide grin not even he can hide. "You never let me down, baby." Alek rolls his eyes, Benji watches enviously, and Jonah and Gray exchange a high five without even looking at each other. All the people who are less familiar with Victor's fashion choices just exchange confused glances.

"Did you see, Ethan?" Victor drops all the shirts on top of me and waits impatiently until I admire each of them. "Pick one for me to wear."

"I mean, Hannah's a classic, but I'm never going to turn down a chance to see you in a crop top."



“Horny piece of shit.” He yanks off his black Nirvana tee and pulls on the pink one. “Keep it in your pants, there are kids present.” Kissing my hair, he leans back again and puts his feet in my lap. I wrap one hand around his ankle and brush my thumb along his smooth, hard calf.

“Well...” Alek dumps Benji off his lap and picks up a small envelope. Benji gives a muffled squeak of excitement when he drops it into my hands. “We went through a lot of danger to get this for you. I need you to promise me you’ll guard it well and use it wisely, for maximum damage.”

I turn it over in my hands, bewildered. It weighs almost nothing. “You’re scaring me, but I swear I’ll do the best I can.”

Sliding my thumb under the flap of the very un-Christmas-y manila envelope, I tear it open and peek inside. It looks like ten or so photographs. As soon as I dump them out on my lap, Victor makes a strangled sound and tries to lunge over the top of me to grab them away. An elbow bangs me in the back as Alek tackles him onto the couch and pins him down, so I scoot out of danger into the middle of the floor. Everyone’s watching in fascinated confusion.

“You’re dead,” Victor hisses at Alek. “I’m gonna burn the new swim center down, with you in it this time.”

As I flip through the photos, Benji leans over my shoulder and Gray gets up on his knees to see. Victor makes a muffled sound of despair.

He can’t be more than eight in these pictures. He’s standing with his arm around Alek; they weren’t teammates yet, but they must have met through youth swimming events. Alek looks almost exactly like he does now, solid and serious with a refined face and dark eyes that match his tidy hair. But Victor...he’s chubby and doe-eyed, with curls sticking in every direction. Ugly, wire-rimmed glasses dominate his face, drawing almost as much attention as the huge gap between his buck teeth. All the pictures are from the same event, what looks like a birthday party. I flip between dorky little Victor

hitting a pinata, stuffing his face with cake, and falling over as they play tag.

I hear Benji burst out laughing, along with some of the other guys, but as I grip the photos in my lap I can feel my throat tighten. I've never, ever seen my boyfriend without demons behind his eyes. This carefree grin and the innocent light in his face—I've dreamed about them, tried to imagine them, but they've never been real. I think Alek gave me these as blackmail material, and by the chaos going on behind me I can tell it's effective. But I just want to keep them and hold them and look at them every single day. No one else, including Victor, is ever allowed to touch them again.

I glance up and meet Gray's eyes as he crouches next to me. I can see in their somber hazel depths that he finds the same heartbreaking wonder in them. Quietly, while everyone else is distracted joking around and figuring out the next gift, I hold the photos out to him. "You can pick one."

His jaw flexes a little as he studies me, then he squeezes my shoulder and takes the stack of images. "Thank you."

When I go back to the fuming Victor on the couch, I point firmly for him to stand up. His eyebrows knit together as he realizes I've stopped playing around. Scrambling to his feet and adjusting the crop top, which clings around his pecs and perfectly shows off his lean stomach, he waits for me to sit down before curling up in a ball on top of me, with his head thrown back against my shoulder so he can watch the rest of the festivities. I slip my hand up his shirt and rub his back until he hums contentedly into my neck. "I don't hate you," I murmur.

Stretching up, he kisses the edge of my jaw. "I know."



I can't remember the last time I had a Christmas like this. In Dad's mansion, a pair of professional decorators showed up every December 1 to put up a tree, string garlands over the windows, and hang plain white lights along the eaves outside. It was all uncannily perfect and absolutely empty. No one saw the lights because I never left the house and Dad never came home from the office. No presents were ever exchanged around those trees.

A therapist might say that's why I didn't like Alek's simple, elegant decorations. I probably didn't need to be a brat about it, but I want everything to be as imperfect as possible. Because that means we're real people having a real holiday. Even fighting with him over the yard ornaments made me weirdly happy.

"My turn!" When Ethan puts Victor's photos away, I jump up and hopscotch between legs and over bodies to the tree. Gray frowns at me, because I'm messing up his little sharing circle order. I'm not scared of him, even though he's fucking eight feet tall with a glare that could melt your skin off. I have Colson to protect me. If Colson challenged Gray to a fight over my honor, it would turn out like in the first *Indiana Jones* movie—Gray would get distracted doing pointless tricks with his sword, then Colson would just shoot him and walk off. No offense to Jonah, but I won the brooding lawyer lottery.

I gather up three bulging paper bags in my arms and waddle them across the room to Jonah. They're nothing special—they still have the grocery store logo on the side. It looks like I don't care, but I didn't have time for wrapping yesterday. When Alek realized I wasn't going to back down on my yard inflatables, he went inside to drink coffee and nap in front of the fire while I wrestled with the huge, floppy bastards for hours in the cold. I was still at it after dark, when Cole got home and felt sorry for me. He helped me finish, then carried me inside and made Alek and I apologize to each other by 69ing it on the bed while he fingered us.

Like I said—all the guys in this room are sexy and cool, but I got the best ones.

"I'm sorry about the chips," I ramble, upending a bag of snacks into Jonah's lap. "Good thing I got a lot. You might need another suitcase to get it home." By the time all three bags are empty, he's smiling at me quizzically, half-buried in junk food—chips, jerky, popcorn, nori, candy bars, cookies, energy drinks—while I keep babbling. "Snacks are such a weak gift, but I thought since you're a dad maybe you never get anything fun for yourself anymore." I'm trying not to say something rude about parenting, but he's closer to my age than either of my boyfriends are, and he has three freaking kids. I could never. "These are my favorites; I eat them all the time."

A disapproving throat clears behind me. I know exactly who it is. "You told me you've been on a training diet for the last month," Alek growls in his swim coach voice.

Instead of turning around, I just flash Jonah a sheepish smile. He grins back, a dimple popping out on his cheek. "Thanks, Benji. I promise my kids won't get a single bite of this."

"Not Gray, either."

His smile widens as his husband huffs irritably. "Not so much as a single cookie. And I'll buy as many suitcases as it takes."

"No wonder you've been making zero conditioning progress," Alek chides as I come back to sit beside him.

“Diets are an oppressive social construct.” I slide in between him and Colson and enjoy the sound of Colson chuckling at me as he slides an arm around me. I rest my head on his shoulder and my legs across Alek’s lap and bask in the feeling of all four of their hands idly petting and holding my body.

Victor points for Jackson to toss him a tiny package from under the tree, catches it, and holds it out to me. Curiosity perks me right back up when I realize he must have drawn my name.

He pulls it back a little when I reach for it. “What do you think it is?” A smile plays around his lips as his unreadable eyes study my face.

I squint at the size of the parcel. “A tiny Speedo?”

“Mmm, noted.” He tilts his head thoughtfully.

Ethan rolls his eyes. “This is his lazy trick for getting gift ideas for next year.”

“Come on.” I grab it impatiently and tear it open. A notecard-sized booklet with twelve handwritten pages falls into my lap. The front reads *Christmas Coupons*, with the literal most half-assed illustration of a triangle tree, a lopsided star, and a disaster of random lines that might be a reindeer or a polar bear.

I flip it open eagerly and read the first card aloud. “Redeem this coupon for a week of foot massages and frappuccinos from Alek instead of swim practice. Ooh, I like that.” The boyfriend in question hums disapprovingly.

The second page promises *Redeem this coupon to make Colson do all your chores for three weeks followed by Redeem this to make Colson and Alek buy you a bigger and more expensive gift every night for a week, with a starting value of two grand.*

“Okay now, what is this? No one consulted us.” Colson plucks it out of my fingers as I squawk protestingly. Everyone else in the room is cracking up now. “Redeem this to make Colson and Alek do you in this position...” He trails off and

squints at the stick figure illustration. “I will never walk again if I try to do this.”

Victor arches his back and yawns like a pleased cat, lounging against Ethan’s legs. “If you start daily stretches now, maybe you’ll be ready.”

Alek takes the booklet from Colson and reads the rest. Based on his expression, they’re even worse. “These are absolutely not valid.”

“Too late.” The blond smirks. “Look how happy his cute little face is, are you gonna tell him you don’t want to rub his feet?”

“It’s mine.” I snatch the booklet and cradle it to my chest. “This is gonna last me all year.”

Victor points at me. “I expect video evidence of every single one of those.”

“I’ve got this.”

“You do not *got this*,” Alek protests.

I snuggle deeper between them. Colson laces his fingers through mine without thinking, and Alek kisses my hair instinctively. I shoot Victor a smug grin, which he returns. “I’ve totally got it.”

“Well,” Ethan sighs, getting up. “This is going to be anticlimactic, Colson.”

“I appreciate that.”

I try to swipe Colson’s gift, in revenge for him shitting on mine, but he wraps his free arm around my head and pins me down as he takes a perfectly square, neatly-wrapped gift from Ethan. It’s painful to watch him unwrap it slowly on purpose, just to wind me up.

When he finally gets the box open, he pulls out two large plush bones with rope toys sticking out either end. The red one has *Triss* embroidered on it in fancy letters, and the black one says *Hamlet*. “A friend of mine makes these to help raise funds for the vet clinic,” Ethan explains.

“They’re beautiful.” Colson holds one in front of Triss’s long snout. She gives a lazy, half-asleep sniff, then sits up with her ears pricked.

“She scents them with a touch of vanilla,” Ethan explains, smiling as Triss starts trying to snatch it away.

“Go on!” I think the smell was supposed to get the dogs excited, not me, but I grab the toy and chuck it across the room without thinking. Triss barges through everyone with no consideration for who or what she stomps on. “Scuse me, sorry,” I call as I stumble after her. At the sound of his sister’s nails clattering on the floor, Hamlet comes racing in to see what’s happening. I turn around to go back for his toy, but Jonah snags it and follows me toward the back door.

I’ve never had a storybook Christmas, so I wouldn’t know, but something tells me this is nothing like one of those. In the same way Alek, Colson, and I aren’t a storybook couple, because there are three of us. And just like Alek, Colson, and I, this Christmas puts the storybooks to fucking shame.



I was a waiter at a cafe for two years in college—it’s a good thing I was cute, because I was clumsy as hell. All I have to show for it are some embarrassing stories and the ability to carry a surprising number of mugs at the same time. Everyone seems impressed when I fill seven red stoneware mugs with steaming hot cider from the coffee urn in the kitchen, add cinnamon sticks for decoration, and carry all of them into the living area at the same time without spilling a drop. Jackson looks like it turns him on.

“Should we wait for Benji and Jonah?” I ask once I’ve passed around the drinks. “They’re missing out.”

Colson cranes his neck to check out the window and chuckles ruefully. “I don’t think they’re ever coming back. Let’s carry on.” The sound of happy yelling, kids laughing, and dogs barking drifts through the cracked-open French doors.

“In that case, this is for you Alek.” I pass the dark-haired man a large, squishy bag, feeling a little sheepish. Back when I was dating Megan’s mom, she would roll her eyes and ask why I had to give boring knitwear for every *single* holiday, birthday, and baby shower. My friend Tristan told me she was just mad that her only meaningful skill in life was running to the nearest store and grabbing some mass-produced piece of junk, but I still feel self-conscious sometimes. Especially when



I barely know Alek at all. I had to break the secret Santa rules and ask Colson what colors to use.

Jackson's half asleep in his cider, exhausted from days of traveling and constant social interaction, but he can always sense my mood. He rubs my back encouragingly as Alek tears off the brown paper.

"Holy shit," Alek blurts as he holds up the chunky knit throw blanket, sounding genuinely shocked. The rich browns and oranges glow in the overcast light through the window, dotted with splashes of blue and white. "This is fucking gorgeous."

"He made it," Jax speaks up firmly and proudly, squeezing the back of my neck.

Alek gapes at me. "Really? You're incredible. Cole impulse-bought some ridiculous \$2000 blanket that isn't half this good."

Colson pretends to slap the back of his head with the arm resting around his shoulders. "You aren't supposed to tell anyone about my addiction."

"Which one? Overspending or cozy blankets?" Shaking his head with a grin, Alek spreads the blanket over his lap and runs his hands along the thick strands of yarn. "Thank you, Oliver. You might have to teach me how to do this."

So many people have expressed interest in learning to knit. Almost none of them mean it, but I can't help the rush of excitement every single time. "It's excellent for stress relief, and ideal for busy people because you can take it anywhere." I feel myself flushing awkwardly, because I sound like an absolute nerd, but I can't stop.

Just as I'm about to grab my needles and yarn and derail the whole afternoon, the baby monitor on the table gives a loud, indignant screech. Before Gray, Jackson, or I can even react, Jonah bursts through the back door with seemingly supernatural hearing. "I changed Davey's diaper right before I put him down, so he's probably just lonely," he pants, his cheeks still red from running around. Even though I see Jonah

at least once a week, I'll never get used to the effortless way he switches from a goofy bundle of youthful chaos to one of the most attentive and organized fathers I've ever met.

Waving for Jackson and I to stay put, he and Gray disappear into the back room and come back with one-year-old Davey and a very sleepy, irritated Charlie. Jackson is her favorite when she's fussy, so I gesture for Gray to plop the little girl in his arms. His tired face lights up, and he kisses the top of her head, then pulls faces at her until she smiles.

While Gray settles Davey on his lap and gives him one of his plastic tractors to drive around on his knees, Megan, Eli, Kenzie, and Benji come in and noisily grab mugs of cider and tree-shaped gingerbread cookies we made yesterday.

"Well," Colson muses, standing up. "I guess everyone gets to enjoy your gift, Gray."

"Oh, god." Gray sighs heavily. When I laugh, he shakes his head at me. "You think Victor and Benji are the brats here, but Cole's a hundred times worse. He just hides it well."

"I don't know what you mean," the handsome, dark-haired man muses as he picks his way through the very crowded room and disappears down the hall.

Gray puts his face in his hand, peering through his fingers at Alek. "Why does your boyfriend have to leave the room to get my gift?"

Alek spreads his hands. "If I knew, I would tell you. All I can say is *I'm so sorry* in advance." But he can't hide a lovesick grin as he pulls Benji into his lap and wraps the blanket around both of them. Everyone's waiting in suspense, because deep down we're all trolls and watching Gray get flustered is fun.

Colson comes back lugging a flat, heavy paper-wrapped object at least four foot by two foot, clearly some kind of painting or wall art.

"Thank god." Gray relaxes, keeping one hand on Davey so he doesn't topple over. "Whatever that is, we can't get it on the plane home."

“Oh don’t worry, my friend.” Colson props it against the wall with a devious smile. “I’ve already arranged to ship this to you.” Clearly reveling in the attention, he points at Gray. “Get over here and open your gift.”

After a long pause and a pleading look at Jonah, who has no interest in bailing him out, Gray carefully sets Davey on the floor and stands up. As soon as he tears off a corner of the paper and gets a look inside, he takes a step back and shakes his head. “I hate you, Cole.”

“Open it, Dad,” Eli chants from his spot at the kitchen island with Megan. “Do it, do it, do it.” Kenzie picks up on the chant, slapping her hands on the marble countertop.

“You don’t hate it,” Cole murmurs with an evil grin at his ex. “I know your ego. This is how you visualize yourself every morning to get yourself out of bed.”

The tall man finally gives up and tears the paper off the front of what looks like an elegant Renaissance painting of a royal family—a noble king on a horse in front of a castle, surrounded by his spouse and children.

Jonah realizes what’s going on first, and collapses onto the floor with the world’s loudest snort, followed by hysterical giggles. His infectious laughter spreads around the room as everyone recognizes the man on the horse as Gray, and the people arrayed around him in stiff, incredibly elaborate outfits as Jonah, Eli, Kenzie, and Davey. Their dog Daisy is even in the background, chasing a goose. The best and worst part is that it’s a really fucking stunning painting. He must have spent a fortune on the custom commission. Colson just stands there, as pleased as a dog with a steak, watching Gray turn red. Victor gets up and scrambles all the way across the room just to formally shake Colson’s hand.

Jax nudges me, his stubble brushing my ear as he leans in. “Ollie?”

“Yeah?”

“What the hell is wrong with these people?”

I start giggling again, and it's hard to stop. My face and stomach hurt from laughing so much today. "What, are you saying when we go reunite with your brother Scout in a few months we shouldn't bring one of these starring him and his boyfriend?"

He eyes the painting. "Based on how I remember him, he might actually think that's the greatest thing he's ever seen."

The painting entertains everyone for a good twenty minutes as we admire the details and Megan ruthlessly makes fun of Eli for the lacy collar and gaudy gold jewelry he's wearing. "Hey," Benji pipes up finally, frowning at the empty space under the tree. "No one gave Oliver a gift."

I feel Jackson tense next to me, but it's too late for him to hide. The lawyers in the room immediately work through the mental math and turn toward Jax—the only person who hasn't yet given a gift.

"I don't, uh... The baby needs...something. A diaper." Before he can escape, Jonah jumps up and steals Charlie, who just snuggles against his thick chest. He sniffs the vicinity of her butt. "She smells fine to me."

Jax grimaces and shoots me a slightly desperate look. "I don't have a gift. I'm really sorry, Ollie."

"That's okay, love." Confused, I brush a thumb along his cheek and try to diffuse all the attention focused on us. "You got me a baby this year, I think that's plenty."

"Hey, Dad." To my surprise, Megan comes running down the hall with Jackson's black Carhartt jacket. She drops to her knees next to him and pushes it into his lap. "Come on. He'll love it."

He shakes his head. "Leave it, Megs. I don't—"

Grabbing his big, rough hand in her slender one, she leans in and whispers something in his ear, then pecks his cheek and sits back with an encouraging smile.

"Fine," he sighs, pulling a small bundle of red paper out of his coat pocket. "She'll never let me rest until I give you this."

Hoping to get his torture over with as quickly as possible, I waste no time ripping open the paper and pulling out... Well, it's a thing, and it's knitted. That's about all I can discern from the tangle of lumpy stitches. But for every single one, I can see this man sitting cross-legged on the couch for hours, glaring at his hands while he struggles along, like he can intimidate it into cooperating.

"I couldn't figure out how to finish it," he mumbles. "I need you to show me. I'm sorr—" Before he can get the apology out, I lean up and kiss him firmly and probably a little more passionately than I should do in the middle of a Christmas party. When I pull back, he sucks in a breath and watches me with surprise. His light brown hair falls forward over his forehead, and I brush it back.

"I love the colors you picked." I touch the stripes of white and green. "They're gorgeous. They'll look great when I... wear it...outside?" I venture, hoping I guessed right that it's meant to be a piece of clothing.

Jackson's face brightens a little. "You like the colors? I thought they'd match your eyes."

In the back of my mind, I will the rest of the room to be considerate and take the pressure off him, but I needn't have worried. Everyone else goes back to admiring their gifts while Alek drops cross-legged on the floor next to us with his blanket to ask Jackson questions about how long it took him to learn this, what yarn and needles he used. He seems entirely impressed with the unidentifiable item, and he's already adding stuff to his shopping cart online. I think I've created a monster. Good thing Colson likes cozy things.

As I sink deeper into helping Alek pick out supplies and beginner patterns, Jax props his head against my shoulder and I can feel him drifting off. When I glance over, Megan's still holding his other hand while she leans against him and reads on her phone. When I catch her eye, I mouth *thank you* and she flashes a dimple at me. The poor man has been anxious for weeks—stressed about flying, stressed about the giant party, and apparently stressed about my gift. But no matter what, he

always throws himself into anything that will make his family happy. I'm glad he can finally rest now.

“Hey,” I whisper into his hair just before he dozes off. “You're really good at blowjobs, too. I didn't forget.”

I just feel him laugh against my neck, and he holds out one hand in the sign for *I love you*.



When I look to my right, Benji’s lanky body is curled in a ball against my side, his fingers laced through mine and his other hand stroking Triss’ silky head. His shoulders shake with laughter as he jokes around with Victor and Jonah.

To the left, I can see Alek stretched out on his side on the floor, propped up on his elbow. He listens intently as Oliver balances a sleeping Jax on his shoulder and explains how he made the blanket and why he chose each color. Alek has been running himself ragged the past few weeks with Christmas parties at the swim center, planning for tonight, and negotiating stacks of financial paperwork for the new year. This is the first time I’ve seen him totally relax in ages, with his hair mussed up and no tension in his body.

I glance down at Benji’s auburn tousle and brush my nose through it. That’s when I realize he’s watching Alek too, with that adoring light in his eyes. “We’ve been making his life harder. What should we do for him tonight, hm?” I murmur in Benji’s ear.

He purses his lips thoughtfully, then his face brightens. “I got it.” Craning his neck, he whispers into my ear for a long moment, explaining what he and Alek were up to in Seattle yesterday. A slow smile spreads across my face as I listen.

“Understood. I can get behind that.”

“Fuck yeah.” He bounces a little. “Can everyone hurry up and go?”

“Take it easy, little fish.” I smooth his hair back from his forehead. “Enjoy your friends for a while longer. We’ll still be here.”

Despite my words, he fidgets impatiently through the rest of the evening as the eggnog and cider disappear, as the babies get cranky, and everyone starts to get up and gather their things.

“Alright, people,” Ethan announces as they stand up. “Give me your attention for a sec.”

“Let me guess,” Jonah bursts out eagerly. “You’re having a baby too!”

Victor explodes into a spluttering, coughing fit, almost spilling his cider everywhere, and Ethan rolls his eyes with a grin. “Never. I just wanted to take a group picture.”

Alek makes a little phone stand out of books on the kitchen island while the rest of us try to arrange ourselves in front of the fireplace without anyone catching on fire. I end up with Benji wrapped in my arms, Gray pushed against my shoulder while his baby glares up at me like I offended it, and Oliver’s reddish curls tickling my hand. “Get the dogs, Alek,” Benji yelps just after Alek hits the timer. I can hear Victor snickering as Alek frantically tries to convince Triss and Hamlet to drop their toys and join the group in the ten seconds before the photo goes off, because Benji won’t let any of us leave until he gets his way. It ends up taking seven tries and half of us whistling and calling to the dogs before we manage a photo with everyone.

“I think I was blinking in that last one,” Jonah complains.

“You definitely weren’t,” Alek insists without even looking at the photo. “Everyone looked great. Perfect picture. We’re done.”

With a lot of bustling and pulling on coats and packing up gifts, all our guests go tramping out into the night. The snow only left a faint dusting of white, but it’s enough to crunch



under the men's feet as they head for the cars, weaving between Benji's menagerie of inflatable creatures.

The three of us cluster in the doorway together and wave as the cars back down the drive with their inside lights on so we can see everyone waving back. The only thing they left behind is the massive painting I'm sending off to be shipped tomorrow. I will only die happy when I know Gray has that thing hanging front and center in his house, annoying him every single day. When he invites friends over and has to explain it to them.

Alek rests his chin on my shoulder as we watch the cars disappear. I kiss his chilly ear, then the top of Benji's tangled hair. "I think our first time hosting was a great success."

"Once Benji cleans the potato chips out of the pool." Alek pokes him, and Benji gives a little huff. Our too-serious man sighs with a tired smile. "I guess I'll do some dishes, then go to bed."

I raise my eyebrows at Benji, who turns around and sprints away into the house and up the stairs.

"What got into him?" Alek asks in confusion as I push the large, timber front door closed. He makes a startled sound when I press him against it and kiss him—gently at first, then deeper until he gives me his mouth with a soft moan. He thinks I'm going to stop, but I just go in again, harder and more demanding, stroking my fingers through his hair as he melts under me.

"Come on," I breathe with my forehead against his. "I need to show you something."

"Is it you washing dishes?" He murmurs as I pull him toward the stairs. "Because that would be really sexy."

I scoff at him and kiss the back of his hand. "When you wake up in the morning, my beloved, all the dishes will be clean. But right now we have a bigger problem."

Worry flashes across his face as we stop outside our bedroom door. "A problem?"

I hold a finger to my lips and pause until he can hear soft banging and clunking noises inside. He just blinks at me, utterly confused. “Open the door, quietly.”

When he does, it swings back to reveal Benji, dressed in all black, pulling out all the dresser drawers and digging through the contents. I almost lose my composure at the sight of him. Any fucking excuse to make a mess, and he finds it.

“Benji,” Alek exclaims. “What are you—”

The boy spins around and aims a dramatic finger gun at Alek’s head. “You won’t take me alive. I mean...that didn’t sound right. I’ll be alive. But you won’t.”

Alek looks between us, then rubs his forehead in a tired, perplexed gesture. “I know neither of you want to wash up, but you could just tell me, instead of...” He waves a hand wordlessly.

“I think we’ve caught a spy,” I prompt patiently, feeling the cloud of horny impatience rolling off of Benji. “Trying to steal our...uh, secrets.”

“Huh?”

Benji huffs and crosses his arms. “I’ve stolen the nuclear codes,” he declares, “but I’ll never tell you. Never. No matter what you do. Nope.”

“Ohhhhhh. Oh my god.” Alek cracks up. When he realizes neither of us are laughing, he slowly goes serious again. “I mean, oh no. Not the codes.”

“I think you need to prep him for interrogation.” I point toward the chair in the corner where we sit to tie our shoes.

“Mmmm,” Alek nods slowly, warming up to the idea as a smile tugs at his lips. “I agree.” He advances on Benji, who backs away as he struggles not to explode with delight at what we’re doing.

“You traitor,” Benji yelps as Alek corners him and yanks down his sweatpants, then tugs his shirt off over his head. “We did the Victor Lang job together. Does loyalty mean nothing to you?”

“It was all part of the plan,” Alek teases, running his nose down Benji’s neck and nipping at his shoulder. “I was learning your weaknesses.” Benji gasps and whines when Alek wraps fingers around his hardening cock and strokes it a couple of times before pushing him into the chair. “Like that. Now stay.”

“What’s the plan?” I ask, crossing the room and unzipping my jeans so I can free my own growing erection. I could come just watching those two play with each other. I have, in fact, many times. Benji makes a needy, protesting sound when I slide down the front of Alek’s sweats and cup his cock and balls in my palm.

Alek groans, rolling his head back. “Enemy spies don’t get to come until they confess everything.”

“I’ll never break,” Benji declares with no conviction whatsoever, watching us touch each other with longing puppy eyes.

I peel off Alek’s sweater and run my palms across his hot, soft skin, kissing him again with plenty of tongue to make Benji feel extra frustrated. “I wonder how many times I can make you come in front of him before he gives up.”

Alek is so tired and needy he’s struggling to remember the game now that our erections are pressed together through our underwear and my hands and mouth are playing with his body any way I want. He just whimpers, but I know that sound is torture to Benji. The boy is rock hard and leaking, his fists white-knuckling the arms of the chair as he pins us with a wretched glare.

So suddenly it startles me, he bolts upright and makes a break for the door. “You let yourself get distracted,” he yells as he disappears. “And I’m leaving tripwires behind me, so you’re trapped.”

Alek meets my eyes and cracks up as we hear him thundering down the stairs. “You two are...” He shakes his head, lost for words. I expect him to say ridiculous, but instead he blurts out, “perfect.”

“Shall we go get our spy before he falls apart?”

He nods, grinning. We sneak downstairs hand in hand, then circle the long way through the downstairs to creep up on Benji from the rear, where he's crouched behind the sofa watching for us in the wrong direction. He screams when Alek pounces on him, picks him up, and drops him over the back of the sofa with his ass in the air and his arms pinned behind his back.

Benji freezes, shivering, his cock pinned between his body and the cushion and his legs spread. He spreads even wider on instinct when Alek brushes a finger along his crack, and his needy little hole tenses. "Do you want him, chief?" Alek asks me. "The threat has been neutralized. He'll say anything you want now."

"No." I brush my fingers along the soft underside of Benji's balls, and he shudders. "You can have him as a reward for assisting in his capture. Consider it a Christmas bonus."

"Or we could take turns," Alek muses, squeezing one perfectly round ass cheek. "He's not going anywhere the rest of the night."

"Jesus Christ," Benji moans into the cushion.

So we pass the holiest of nights taking turns railing our boy in the messy remains of our first Christmas party, only letting him come when we've both had a couple of turns.

It all happened so fast—this morning we were laying out cookies and mixing batches of cider, mopping the floors and rearranging furniture. Now it's already a deep, peaceful midnight, carrying us from Christmas into just another day, from a tumultuous year full of change to something new and unfamiliar. I'm the kind of guy with a house and a family now. A man who has cars full of happy, laughing people to wave goodbye to, friends who will never drift apart because we're tied together by something none of us can express.

It seems like the moments that change our lives forever should be huge and earth-shattering, but it's really just one moment, one gift, one memory at a time, turning over and over into new days until everything is brighter and more beautiful than it's ever been before.

Thank you so much for reading *Merry and Bright*! If you loved revisiting your favorite characters, please consider leaving a review!

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