



mistletoe
hearts

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MISTLETOE HEARTS

THE MISTLETOE SERIES

BOOK TWO

NANA MALONE



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CHAPTER I

ALEX



“ALEX, YOU HAVE TO LET THIS GO.” MY ROOMMATE, SASHA, trailed behind me as I marched toward The Hornet’s Hole bar just off campus.

“I can’t let it go. I think he’s lying to me. He’s been cagey, weirdly unavailable. I am getting paranoid.”

“So of course, you come to the bar where he works, just to see if he’s... what? Flirting with someone on shift? Come on.”

I hated rational Sasha. I really did. I needed someone who was going to be just as crazy as I was and back me up. “You didn’t have to come.”

“Yes, I did. I’m your roommate. I can’t let you do anything insane.”

It wasn’t like I was going to cause a scene.

Who are you kidding? Of course you’re going to cause a scene.

“It’s not insane. I know something is off. I wish I could explain it, but I can’t.”

“Correction, you *think* that maybe because he’s been busy with class or homework, something is off. You don’t *know* anything. I’m a good, supportive friend. And look, if you’re right, I’ll ply you with liquor until you feel better, then we’ll go home, okay?”

That hardly seemed like a satisfying outcome. “I don’t know. If I’m right, I want his head on a pike.”

“Look, you knew it was going to happen when you went out with someone like Mark. Honey, he’s gorgeous. And he’s an athlete. You know what I mean. He’s got a certain appeal. You are going to have to fend off lots of bitches.”

“Why would I fight someone over a guy?”

“Well, maybe that’s it. Maybe Mark just doesn’t feel like you’re in this. Maybe he wants someone who would fight for him.”

“Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? Who’s going to fight over a man?”

Sasha pursed her lips. I had a startling realization that she would possibly fight over a man.

Thank God, we didn’t even have the same type.

The blast of Imagine Dragons playing on the sound system met us before we even stepped into The Hornet’s Hole. The bar, aptly named for our school mascot, boasted a giant hornet’s head above the door, dark crowded booths along the wall, a packed bar, and a movement-stifling, postage-stamp-size dance floor. As well as the ever present smell of stale beer, cheap cologne, and bad decisions.

Needless to say, this close to finals week, the place was packed. I raked my gaze over the bar and could see there were two bartenders working, but I didn’t see Mark. I recognized the emo girl with the inky black hair and a tattooed sleeve. The other guy I didn’t recognize. He was lanky, moderately good-looking, with a kind of charming smile that immediately elevated him from a seven and a half to a solid nine. He probably cleaned up in tips.

I knew for a fact that when there were two bartenders working, they didn’t have another backup. So, had I gotten it wrong? Was Mark not working today?

Then I saw him in the corner, tucked away with his arm around some girl.

She was pretty, with her deeply tanned skin and raven-dark hair.

What the hell?

She said something to make him laugh, and jealousy tried to claw its way out of my chest. Then he tucked her long straight hair behind her ear and leaned in to kiss her. Not like a peck, but like something passionate. And I was frozen as I watched them, unable to do anything about it. Unable to even breathe.

Oh, God.

I was right.

The last couple of weeks, I hadn't been crazy thinking something was off with him. Even though I tried to talk myself out of it. All it would have taken was for him to break up with me. That would have sucked, yes. But this? This was infinitely worse.

But there was also an odd satisfaction in knowing that I had been right. That I hadn't imagined what I'd been feeling all along.

I was right. That cheating, lying asshole.

But still, I couldn't force my body to move, to take action. Then someone next to me did move.

Sasha.

For all her insistence that I was overreacting, for all her reminders that perhaps I was insane, she was the one who went straight up to him, shouting, "You lying asshole. Fuck you."

Mark's eyes went wide. He stared at Sasha then held up his hands. "Sasha, babe, I'm sorry. It's not what it looks like."

My head cocked, and my mind tried to parse the words that he was saying.

Sasha, baby?

And why was he apologizing to *her*? Why was *she* so angry?

And then it happened. The bile rushed up in my throat. I clamped a hand over my mouth and squeezed my eyes shut as

if I could block it out and pretend it hadn't happened. Pretend I didn't know what my roommate and my boyfriend had been doing. And my boyfriend's additional girlfriend, or whoever she was.

When Sasha whipped around and turned back toward me, our gazes met and her mouth hung open as if she had momentarily forgotten that I could see and hear her as she berated my boyfriend for cheating on *her* with someone else.

I don't know what came over me. Honestly, if I was questioned later about what was going on, I would have said that I was possessed. I reached my hand back and then let loose, but instead of the satisfying stinging of my palm, my arm didn't move. I tried again, but it still didn't move. So I turned to glower at it, only to find that my wrist was encased in a strong, tanned hand. I followed the arm up and gasped at the most beautiful man I had ever seen on campus. Dark curly hair. Whiskey colored eyes. A jaw sculpted by the gods. And the kind of lips that belonged on Angelina Jolie. Why the hell were they so full? Not to mention he had lashes thicker than mine, and my lashes were long as hell.

"What the hell are you doing?" I muttered when my brain cells came back online and my mouth could work again.

"I think a little payback is probably better revenge."

I frowned. Sasha had stopped her ranting, and Mark froze when he saw what was happening. All he said was, "Fuck, Alex."

And then the gorgeous stranger who was still holding my wrist turned me around. "Now, when I do this, don't slap me, okay?" And then he leaned in, pulling me toward him. My body was suddenly encased in nothing but heat as he wrapped his arms around me.

He turned so he blocked their view. "I'm not actually going to kiss you, I'm just going to kiss your neck so it will look like we're kissing. That way they'll both think that you were here to break up with him."

I gasped. "What?"

“You know, because *we’re* not assholes. You came to break up with Mark before carrying on a torrid affair with me. Because you and I are in love. Don’t you see?”

The mischief in his eyes and the twitch of his mouth told me what he was doing. A perfect goddamn stranger thawed the ice that had threatened to encase me and turn me into a statue that was unable to think, or breathe, or ever love and care about anyone again.

“I don’t know if that’s going to work.”

He lifted his brow. “Oh, right. We should probably do the whole thing. Make sure everybody knows.”

All I could manage was a nod because... holy hell. What was he doing? What was I saying?

Somewhere deep down, I knew I was tangled in pain and betrayal, but I didn’t care. And that was when the tall, gorgeous stranger turned me back around in full view of Mark and Sasha then slid his lips over mine.

Jensen

OH, shit.

The moment my lips touched hers, I felt like I’d been hooked up to a live wire. Holy cow. How was I ever going to stop?

When I saw what was happening from across the bar, my intention was just to fuck with Mark. He was an asshole, and I had a bit of a personal gripe with him. He’d wormed his way into an internship I’d been working for. So sticking it to him... Well, that was part of it. But also, what he’d done to this girl was a dickish move.

I didn’t know the girl. I knew her friend though, Sasha. She was an okay enough girl, but she was the kind who was always chasing after some dude. I didn’t know the girl in the

booth with Mark, but hell, this was just a soup of epic shittiness.

I figured maybe I'd play the Good Samaritan gig for the day. But fuck me, kissing her was... Not that I believed in kismet, but the way this girl kissed... geeze.

She nearly made me a believer.

I could see why some people would risk it all for this. Which made her dangerous.

I thought it would be simple. I'd give her a kiss and step back, easy. Just enough for Mark to see and get jealous. But when she sighed and her body molded against mine, I fucking forgot what I was supposed to be doing.

Instead, I slipped my hands around her body, cupping the back of her neck and pinning her in place, angling her head just right so I could deepen the kiss.

Molten lava started to course through my veins, and everything around us started to melt away, piece by piece. The music faded first, then the talking, then the people. And it was just me, and this girl, and this kiss.

When she wrapped her arms around my neck, bringing herself even closer while using her teeth to scrape my bottom lip just a little... No lie, the way the sharp bolt of electricity snapped along my spine, I thought I might come. No fucking joke.

But in that second, I wanted more. I wanted to keep her.

Except you are a fuckboy and don't fucking do relationships.

Ever. I knew how they ended. Bitterly. So it was better to have fun. And this girl... God, this girl was the kind of girl you kept.

I tried to pull back. I swear to God, I did. I just needed a little more. Just one more taste.

In the end, it wasn't me who pulled back. Or even her. Instead, someone was dragging me away.

I was still groggy and lust-drunk when Mark yanked me. “Jensen, what the fuck? I thought we were friends.”

Had I been more aware, I could have blocked the punch. But all my blood had run south. My brain cells were in dire need of a reboot, and the hit across my jaw did the trick. My head snapped to the side, but I didn’t move much. The pain woke everything up, and I glowered at him. “Oh, really? You’re the one who’s cheating on what looks like two or three people, and I’m the asshole?” I didn’t know the girl, so I couldn’t use her name. Instead, I tucked her under my arms. “You see, she didn’t want us to be together until she told you that she wanted to break up. I waited impatiently to kiss her because she’s amazing.”

I hoped she’d play along. And when she wound her arms around my waist and tucked into me, God, there was a sliver of me that wished it was real.

Mark’s gaze drifted to her. “Alex, is this fucking true?”

“Unlike you, I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t cheat on you with two people, one of whom was my fucking friend.”

Sasha had the grace to look chagrined at that.

“I just started to have feelings for someone else,” she continued, “so I came to find you and talk to you so we didn’t need to go home on fucking holiday in this weird spot. Only I found out there was no need for me to have been the good one. I could have been having fun all this time. And p.s.,” she turned to look at me. “Babe, that kiss was well worth waiting for.”

I grinned at her, nodded my head at Mark, and turned her fully around before whispering, “By the way, my name is Jensen.”

“I’m Alex.”

“Nice to meet you. Now let’s get out of here before I do something to Mark’s face that I’ll probably be arrested for.”

“By the way, thank you.”

“What’s a Good Samaritan for?”

As we left, I turned my gaze over my shoulder and grinned at Mark, who was still scowling at me while Sasha tugged on his arm and the other girl stared at him as if asking, 'What the fuck?'

Yeah, asshole. You're getting everything you deserve.

CHAPTER 2

ALEX



WHAT IN THE WORLD HAD JUST HAPPENED?

I glanced over at the gorgeous guy who had walked me out of the bar like he had every intention of taking me home. My body purred at that idea, but I didn't know him.

He led me toward a bright yellow Camaro in the parking lot, tugging me against him.

“Um, oh, while uh, that was... interesting, um, I just—”

“Mark is outside. He's watching us. So just be aware.”

“Oh, that asshole. Okay, what's he doing?”

“So far, he's just staring at us.”

“Um, should we kiss again?” Not that I was begging. Hell, who was I kidding? I was totally begging.

He smirked. He leaned down and nuzzled my nose with his. “I'm afraid if I do that, I really won't be able to stop this time. Hell, I almost didn't stop last time.”

“Right. Who wants a kiss? That would be crazy.” Oh yeah. Just play it off like he didn't kiss me so good I needed him to give Mark lessons.

“I didn't say I didn't want to. I just mean that it's probably better for the both of us if I don't.”

“Right. Absolutely better. You're a stranger. I don't even know you.”

“Exactly. Also, I’m kind of what my last girlfriend called a fuckboy.”

I laughed nervously.

He wrapped his arms tighter around me. “Fair warning, I’m going to do something that is really inappropriate. But Mark is headed this way, so we need to make it look real, okay?”

I blinked in surprise. “But you’re not going to kiss me. Are you going to—” Oh, *that’s* what he was going to do. He slid his hands over my ass, cupping me before tucking me against him. I swear to God, I lost all ability to think. I was holding my breath. I was probably going blue under my brown skin. But I didn’t care because, oh my God, his hands were on my ass. And he had enormous hands. Fucking huge. He cupped me easily. He leaned down and tucked his face into my neck. “This has been the most interesting first-time meeting I’ve had with anyone. Ever.”

I just continued holding my breath as I nodded.

Lazily, I looped my arms around his neck, and he said, “Oh, that’s good. This screams, ‘You’re taking me home.’”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Let’s just say Mark is an asshole. He cheated me out of an internship at Fisk Industries. I had it lined up, then something happened and he got it. We were both in the hospitality program.”

“Oh, that was you?”

“You know about that?” He pulled back slightly, frowning down at me.

“Just that his uncle called a friend at Fisk about his nephew who was fighting for some internship, and then he said, ‘Oh, it was easy getting it.’ He didn’t even have to interview when it came down to it.”

Jensen cursed under his breath. “Fuck me.”

My body really thought he meant it, especially as his hands tightened on my ass. “Excuse me?”

He cleared his throat and slid his hands back up my back. “Sorry. That’s not what I meant. And Mark is gone.” He pulled away slightly, setting me about a foot away from him.

I told myself I wasn’t going to look down his body because that was a recipe for disaster. I was not going to look down his body. I was not— Oh my God, that chest. Broad shoulders that tapered down to a lean waist, and oh my, that bulge in his jeans. I skittered my eyes away immediately. “Um, thank you for the rescue. I’m sorry that Mark was a dick. At least—this sounds terrible—but I’m glad it’s not just me.”

“No, he’s a grade-A asshole. I’m sorry you had to deal with that.”

“Whatever, I guess. The problem is, Sasha is my roommate, so I’ll be stuck with her all next semester.”

“Oh, fuck. You could get housing to change you.”

I shrugged. “That’s unlikely. It’s too far in the year already. We’ve all already signed on. I could go off campus, but I can’t afford to live on my own. This is just bullshit.”

“It’s a tough ride.”

“Thank you for what you did in there. You didn’t have to. I’m a perfect stranger.”

He shrugged. “Like I said, he’s a dick. He had it coming. And you are too beautiful to be made sad just before Christmas.”

I shrugged. “That’s nice of you to say.”

“Oh, I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“Right. You kissed me like maybe you do say lots of things you don’t mean.”

He lifted a brow and crossed his arms. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Like, maybe your ex is right, and you are a fuckboy?”

He flashed a grin then. “We can say that I’ve made mistakes in the past. I never lied though. I don’t believe in it. I had parents who hated each other, and my whole family lies all

the time. It's terrible, actually, so I tell the truth. It's just that people don't like it when you do that."

I smiled up at him, and I could see the sincerity in his eyes. He really was helping me out. It wasn't his fault I gleaned some other meaning just because he'd kissed me.

I squared my shoulders. "Well, Jensen, is there a last name that goes with your first?"

"You know, I've never heard of a one-named Jensen before. Maybe that should be a thing."

"No, it's not a thing."

"It's Morrison."

"Well, thank you very much, Jensen Morrison. You saved my ass. And my ego, what little I have left of it."

"You should have lots of ego, beautiful girl. Your sixth sense told you there was something wrong. You're smart. You just need better roommates. And boyfriends."

"Yes, I do, don't I? I'll get right on that just as soon as I get home."

"So, what do you say, maybe we should go and get some food? Different bar though. Since I'm an unrepentant fuckboy, you deserve better than me as a partner. But I think I have a slot on the friend roster if you're interested."

"So what, you're a Good Samaritan who just happens to be looking for a friend?"

"Yeah, something tells me you're a little bit of a Christmas miracle, and I think my grandmother would love you."

"Your grandmother?"

"Yeah, long story but worth pointing out. She always tells me to find people who are unfailingly honest and really intuitive. You strike me as both. So what do you say, Alex? Let's go get some fries and you can tell me all about you and how you ended up with asshole Mark and how we're going to pay him back."

"I thought we already got him back."

“Oh no, this was just our opening gambit. We’re going to ruin him forever. He should pay for hurting you. That’s the way I believe friends roll. Ride or die.”

I laughed up at him. “See, about that ride or die thing, like where are we going? And why do I have to die when we get there?”

“You know, it’s a good question. Let’s figure it out over some French fries. Where’s your car? I’ll follow you there.”

“You know what, Jensen Morrison, I just might like you.”

CHAPTER 3

ALEX



ONE YEAR LATER...

The best part about being friends with Jensen Morrison was he was fun. Playful. Always had a smile. And while he was prone to general fuckboyishness, he was loyal. Hell, sometimes he'd even stay home from a date if I looked sad or preoccupied with something, and he would do anything to make me smile and bring me out of my funk.

The bad news about being best friends with Jensen was that sometimes it was easy to confuse the signals of someone actually caring for me just because they loved me as a person. At times I'd have to talk myself out of that chain of thought.

I liked him. Sure, he was cute, but it wasn't just that. He was a genuinely good guy, and he cared about me. And once he'd proclaimed us best friends, that was it. Instant loyalty. In so many ways, Jensen and I were alike, and he just got me. Which was why I forcibly shut down any pesky little feelings beyond friendship.

I'd gotten so good at it that it might as well have been my job.

Except sometimes he didn't make it that easy.

The sun streaked into my bedroom the week before the Christmas holiday. I groaned, knowing that I needed to get up and finish the last bits of my final submission project, pack, and wrap up some presents because he was a snooper. I also needed to make sure that I shipped the present I had gotten for his grandma. Even though I hadn't met her yet, the woman

sent me a present last year. A fresh set of oil paints and a color swatch I'd been dying to get myself but couldn't because it was far too expensive. All because Jensen had told her about his best friend, Alex, who was an artist.

So I'd gotten her address and written her a thank you note. And this year, because I knew she and Jensen loved to travel, I'd gotten her one of those anti-pickpocket purses. And for Jensen, well, I'd gotten him a painting. I *always* painted him something. And I'd go for weeks freaking out about what to get him, then inspiration would hit. Birthdays, best friend's day, Christmas.

I still smiled when thinking about this gift. He'd been on and on about this Cuban spot in Havana he'd gone to with his grandmother, back when going to Cuba was still a legalish option. I'd painted this woman he'd talked about dancing in the middle of the restaurant. She didn't work there or anything, but a song had come on and she'd been so joyful and sexy according to his description. So I'd painted the scene as he'd described.

Suddenly, the alarm went off and I groaned again, realizing we'd over imbibed the night before. It was only as I was smashing the off button that I noticed the note under a full glass of water and an Advil that was also next to the glass, and I chugged them both down. The note read:

Good morning, sleepyhead. Drink the water, take the Advil. Text Carl Patrick's Cafe downstairs, and they'll have your coffee order ready in five minutes. Meet me at the skating rink. I'll have your outfit waiting for you there.

XOXO, Jensen.

My heart gave a little flutter.

What in the world?

Shut it down. You're just friends. You. Are. Just. Friends. You know better.

But an outfit, already calling in my coffee order, and the water and Advil, that was caretaking. That was someone who loved you.

Nope. Shut. It. Down.

It didn't matter how much I told myself that this was not what I thought it was. Hope was a dangerous thing. Hope made you wish. Hope made you think that you could be the exception. Even though he'd clearly told me, 'I am a fuckboy. I think I like you too much to ever do that to you.'

And look, I dated. I did. Here and there. Guys asked me out. I just wasn't always interested. Great guys too. Good-looking, smart, kind. Some artists. All the things that I should want. But when measured up against Jensen, there wasn't really any comparison. Which was problematic because Jensen dated all the time. *All. The. Time.* He and his current girlfriend, or flavor of the month, rather, Macy, were currently having a row. She hadn't listened when Jensen had told her that he was looking for somebody casual. So when she pressed about locking him down and trying to get him to come home with her for Christmas, he bolted. As Jensen was known for doing. The moment you tried to get him locked into anything, he would dance out of that commitment so fast.

You fall into that category too.

Yes, but we were friends, and it was different, and I wasn't trying to hold him too close to me.

I got up and showered, texted the cafe downstairs, and sure enough, Jensen had my order ready to go. He knew I didn't actually like coffee, so he ordered me a hot chocolate, a plain croissant, *and a pain au chocolate.* Also a smoothie so that I would actually get some fruits and vegetables in me.

I took a sip of my hot chocolate and then a sip of my smoothie and sighed. The barista behind the counter smiled at me. "Your boyfriend is very thoughtful."

"Oh, he's not my boyfriend."

She laughed. "Are you sure? Because he basically told me how to do my job. He was very particular about your smoothie. There is wheatgrass in there. Hope you don't mind."

"Yeah, he knows me. He's just my best friend."

“Jesus, does he have a brother? Because maybe you could date his brother.”

“No thanks. One Jensen is enough.”

I took my drink carrier and my snacks, then headed for my car. When I found where I parked it, I grinned to myself. Jensen had also washed my car, a white Ford Focus. He called her Digital Abby. She wasn't much to look at, but she worked, and she was mine, and I'd bought her with my own money. To me, she symbolized freedom. Living on my own. She was my first purchase with my first sold painting. I loved that damn car. And he'd washed it. He'd cleaned the inside of it too. Oh my God. What was I going to owe him for that?

When I arrived at the skating rink on the other side of campus and parked, there was a man in a Santa suit waving at me. I looked over my shoulder to make sure he wasn't waving at someone behind me, and he laughed. “Nope, it's you. Jensen texted me a picture of you. I'm supposed to give you this.”

“Do you know what's going on?”

He shook his head. “No, I have no idea. He just paid me fifty bucks, told me to put this on and to hand this to you then tell you to go change and meet me back here.”

“Oh my God, what is happening?”

I was changed in seconds. I came back to find Santa waiting for me, leaning against the tree. “What now?” he asked.

I stared down at the elf outfit. “I have no idea. Sometimes, that's just Jensen. I don't know what to do with him.”

“He didn't tell you anything?”

“No, nothing at all. I'm a little scared actually.”

“He's not paying you?” Santa asked.

“He got me breakfast. I ate it in the car.”

“Ah, you're a cheap date.”

“This is not a date.”

“Are you sure? He’s very specific about you.”

“No. I’m sure.”

Despite what my mouth said, despite what my brain knew better than to buy into, I was excited. I was hopeful. Jensen had gone to all this trouble. The little niggling voice of doubt tried to warn me. *He already told you.*

Yeah, yeah, he had. But why go through all of this if this wasn’t something for me?

Santa and I headed up to the rink, which was empty of skaters. It wasn’t supposed to open until 2:00 p.m., but there were a few people milling about, the workers and the Zamboni driver, who had already done his thing. Then I saw Jensen skate out into the center, and he waved us forward.

I laughed when I saw him. He was dressed up. Nice slacks, heavy sweater. “What are you doing, Jensen?”

I had to be careful because I was in regular shoes. Well, elf shoes actually, but whatever. He gave me a tight squeeze. “You ate something?”

“Yes, I did. What are we doing, Jensen?”

“Well, I need you and Santa here for something very important.”

Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone enter the skating rink. My stomach immediately twisted and knotted. When I turned properly, I saw it was Macy. Then suddenly, it all came together. This pomp and circumstance was not for me. It was for her. She was not dressed up like an elf. She looked beautiful in a sweater with a scarf around her neck. Her blond-highlighted hair was piled high on top of her head, and she had earmuffs on. I looked dumpy and ridiculous in my elf costume, standing there next to Santa Claus, looking at the boy that I couldn’t help but love as he looked at her like she was important to him. Macy squealed when she saw him. “What is this?” Then she tossed me a knowing smile. “What’s up, Alex?”

I gave her a nod. Macy and I had a cordial relationship. She genuinely seemed to like him, so I had no real issues with

her. And I kept my jealousy shoved down, hidden in a box, guarded by a dragon like it should be. He was not mine. She didn't love that we lived together, but when she saw me out on a date one night, she relaxed a little bit. Jensen gave her a tight squeeze, and then Santa handed over a box to her.

She sucked in a short breath. "Oh my God, what is this?"

"Just open it," Jensen said.

She tore the wrapping off, not giving a shit where the paper landed. *Litterbug*.

It was a dazzling pair of earrings, slim little flutters with diamonds on the end. The bottom fell out of my stomach. I had helped Jensen pick those out.

"I've requested to have this skating rink to ourselves for now. And I know you wanted to take me home with you for the holidays, but I've got to go home to my grandmother. I know you are disappointed, and I wanted to make it up to you. I just want to make our time together special."

Suddenly, Macy was squealing and wrapping herself around him, forgetting all about the fact that she wanted him home with her for Christmas. Unsure what to do, I cocked my head. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Well, if you wouldn't mind being our photographer, I know this is going to be a lot of content for Macy's social media."

And that's when it hit me. I was there to be the photographer. "For fuck's sake, Jensen." In that moment, my feelings for him shriveled up into a little lump of coal. I knew better, but God, how could he not see how my hope soared? How could he not see that I was standing right in front of him? I didn't want to be there anymore, and I realized that maybe it was best if I spent a lot less time with Jensen Morrison.

CHAPTER 4

JENSEN



FOUR YEARS LATER

Please, let her be okay. Please, God.

I ran through the hallways of the hospital, nearly tipping over a gurney at the nursing station, narrowly missing an orderly, and then actually tripping over a wheelchair someone had left in the hallway.

I scrambled to get back on my feet, my heart beating a frantic tattoo against my ribs. I had to get to her. I couldn't lose her.

My cousin's words on the phone still rattled around my brain. 'She's in the hospital. You need to come quickly.' I took the stairs two at a time to the fourth floor, where they'd directed me to the main reception desk.

Oh, God, please let her be okay. Please, please, please, let her be okay.

My Grandma Lucy was the only person on the planet who understood me. Well, besides my best friend, Alexandra, who I affectionately called Alex. But Grandma Lucy, she was my heart. She was the sole reason I was where I was today, even when no one else believed in me.

Growing up, she'd been my rock. She'd scolded me when she needed to, hugged me when I needed it, and always told it to me straight. She was outrageous and always said the most inappropriate things. But man, she was fantastic.

Grandma Lucy had been the one to tell me to stop trying to seek my father's approval and follow my own path. She was the sole reason that any banks would even talk to me when I wanted to build a boutique hotel.

My family was known for their hotels the world over. But investors didn't want to get in bed on the first solo venture from the prodigal son. But my grandmother had made sure that several banks knew that, while a separate venture, I was backed by the matriarch of the family.

As family went, the only one I ever counted on was my grandmother. The rest of my relatives I could take or leave. My mother hadn't come from money and had left me with my father when I was eight because the old man could provide a more stable environment for me. Most of my family never approved of her. As an adult, I could see how being around the Morrisons was very difficult for her. But as a child, I'd just missed her. She died in a car accident just six months after she left. A part of me had never recovered. As for my father, well, Jack Morrison wasn't exactly warm. But up until the reading of the will, I would have said we got along well. *Boy was I wrong.*

My cousin Martin and I had both interned at the flagship property on Catalina Island. My father had always made it clear that I should be the one eventually running Morrison Hotels, but somehow Martin had shoved me out of what should have been my birthright.

The knowledge that my own father wouldn't trust the Morrison legacy to me still burned like a fire in my gut. It was what spurred me on. *Prove the old man wrong.* I'd always thought my father loved me. *Then why cut me out?* The fact that he could do that to me, shut me out without a word so that I had to hear about it in the reading of the will, was a special kind of hell.

I tugged open the door to room 406. I found Martin, my Uncle Jake, my Aunt Mary, and a few of the household staff that had been with my grandmother for years gathered all around my grandmother's room.

Grandma Lucy tried to push herself to sit straighter, but when she winced, I ran for her side. “I don’t think you’re supposed to move.” I turned my attention to Martin. “What happened? What did you do?” I yelled.

Martin rolled his eyes. “I didn’t do anything. I’m the one who found her collapsed in her office. I called an ambulance to get her to the hospital. Then I called you, her precious grandson.” The note of jealousy rang clear as a bell.

From behind me, a voice said, “If I were you two, I’d keep it down. Your grandmother needs rest. If you can’t give her that, I will have security escort you out.”

I turned to find a petite woman in a white lab coat. Her dark hair was pulled back off her face into a bun, her expression stern. Her name tag read Dr. Jesslyn Wells.

“Are you my grandmother’s doctor?”

She gave a brusque nod. “Yes, I am. Now can you and the rest of your family please give me some space so I can check my patient?” Her voice was stern, clipped. It told me that she was well-versed in dealing with difficult people.

“I’m sorry.” The group backed away, but I moved to the foot of the bed. “I just don’t know what happened.”

Grandma Lucy waved her hand. “What happened is your cousin overreacted. My blood pressure’s just low, that’s all. I’m fine. I do not need to be in this hospital. Matter of fact, if you can get these IVs out of me, I’ll be on my way. I feel like a damn pin cushion.”

Dr. Wells clucked as she checked my grandmother’s vitals then wrote something on her clipboard. “Now, Lucy, we’ve had this conversation already. I am not unhooking the machines. You need to stay for observation for at least a couple of days. You’re slightly dehydrated, and I’d like you to start eating a little bit more. Your blood pressure is low, and you’re fatigued. You really need to rest.”

My grandmother was having none of that. “Listen up, young lady, I’ve had three times more years on this planet than you have, and I know how I’m feeling. I was a nurse when I

was young, so I know that I'll be fine. You don't need to keep me in here. You just want to bill my insurance."

Dr. Wells's lips twitched. "Lucy, we've already had this conversation. This is my area of expertise. I want to make sure you stick around to see any future great-grandchildren you may have, so I'm going to need you to listen to me right now."

I had never seen anyone handle my grandmother so effectively, and Grandma Lucy did not offer an argument. She frowned, closed her mouth, and sat back. Dr. Wells had used the magic word. *Babies*.

My grandmother had been after me, Martin, and our other cousins to procreate as quickly as possible. I was in no hurry. Hell, I was only twenty-five. Martin was older by a couple of years. She needed to direct her energy on him.

The rest of our cousins were scattered in age, but there were some who were over thirty, and Grandma Lucy really should have been focused on them doing the marriage and kids rodeo. Not me, *never* me. I wasn't going to mess up some poor kid like my father had screwed me up. No way, no how. Plus, children involved settling down, and that was certainly not going to happen. I liked my women available, flexible, and *transient*.

Except Alex. Alex was different. She'd been my best friend since college, and possibly, besides my grandmother, the most influential female in my life. And I *liked* her. There had never been anything romantic between us, that one kiss notwithstanding. Which was our saving grace. Not that she wasn't hot. She was. Alex was gorgeous. With those big brown eyes and her dusting of freckles on her nose. In the beginning, I'd flirted mercilessly with her, but I'd been honest and told her I was a fuckboy.

One day years later, she'd told me she was glad we were just friends because she couldn't take me seriously. It was the best thing we could've ever done for the two of us. We were closer now than we would have been if I hadn't pushed her away and she *had* taken me seriously. I'd have messed that right up. Slept with her then run... very far away.

“Dr. Wells, can you tell us what happened or what’s going on?”

She sighed as she clicked her pen and tucked it back in her pocket. “Your grandmother is suffering from exhaustion. She’s been doing too much and taking on too much stress. Her blood pressure is all over the place. It was low and that’s why she collapsed, but since she’s been here it’s spiked up then shot down. I need to take a look at her medication. She will be fine, but she has to cut back on her daily activities and relax. That’s very important.”

The steel bar constricting my chest since Martin’s call loosened, but only a bit. “Okay, so what do we need to do for her?”

“Keep her relaxed and keep her mind off the hotel business.” She put a hand up to stop my grandmother from talking and continued. “We don’t need her experiencing anxiety.”

I nodded. “Yeah, we can do that.” The relief washed over me like a tidal wave. All we had to do was keep her calm. That was my new number-one mission. I was living in San Diego, but with my hotel up and running now, and profitable after only a year, I could take more time away to see her. Catalina wasn’t far. I’d make the drive to LA and take the ferry over to the island. Put in some quality time with her.

Except for one little fact... I never went home. Hadn’t gone home in a long time. The time I spent with her was usually during some vacation away that we’d planned together. But for Grandma Lucy, I could do it. I could put up with Martin and the rest of my family. For her, I’d do anything.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to continue making my rounds. Visiting hours are over in ten minutes, so now might be a good time to say your goodbyes.”

As soon as Dr. Wells was gone, my grandmother started tugging at her IVs, and I put a hand over hers to halt her. “You heard the doctor. *And* you agreed. So stop that.” She grumbled but sat back, crossing her arms. “Now Grandma, tell me what you need.” Whatever she wanted, I would make it work.

“I want everyone out.” Martin looked like he was going to argue, but she set her lips, and he knew better than to fuss. When I made to go as well, she reached out an arm and held me back. “Not you.”

With everyone else gone, I turned my attention to her. “What’s up, Grandma?”

“I didn’t want to embarrass you in front of the rest of the family. I know how difficult it is for you to be around them. Especially Martin.”

And that was why I loved her. She would always go out of her way to protect me. “It’s okay, Grandma. Whatever you need.”

“Well, the doctor’s right. I do want to be around to see my future great grandbabies. And given what’s happened, we can’t keep procrastinating. I want my family around me. You haven’t been home in a long time. I want you to come for the holidays.”

Shit. That was the last thing I wanted to do. Checking on her from time to time was one thing, but a big family dinner and holiday gathering? Not my bag. But it was for my grandmother, and she never asked me for much. “Okay, I’ll make that work.”

She nodded with satisfaction. “Good. Given what’s happened, I may not be able to travel for a while. Our trip to Hawaii and my surfing lessons will have to wait.”

I laughed. “Okay, I’ll take a rain check for now, but I think you’re gonna love it, Grandma.”

“I don’t doubt it. Oh, and Jensen, make sure you bring that girlfriend of yours. I can’t believe I still haven’t met her. After all this time, I’d like to see the woman who’s going to be getting my ring one day.”

Oh shit. I shifted on my feet. So what was the harm of one little white lie? And honestly, all I’d been trying to do was protect my grandmother.

Liar. You did it to protect yourself and to keep her from meddling in your love life.

The woman was relentless. She kept insisting that I needed to be dating someone. Every time I'd seen her on one of our trips, she tried to set me up, so I made up a girlfriend. I never thought I'd have to produce her. But now she wanted to meet her. I was screwed.

"Oh, I don't know Grandma. She usually spends the holidays with her family."

And then my grandmother pulled her trump card. Not only did she give me the big sad eyes, but she sniffed. "You heard the doctor, Jensen. I'm an old lady. I don't need the stress. I want to meet her. I want to make sure she's good enough for you."

Damn it. "Okay, I'll bring her with me over the holidays." Now all I had to do was find someone who fit the bill. Because Grandma was too important to me, so I had to make this happen.

Alex

I WAS PRETTY SURE this was not how Osso Buco was supposed to look. This wasn't my fault. I didn't cook. I did excellent takeout. *Copious* amounts of takeout. Cooking wasn't my thing.

You have your first gallery opening to prepare for. You don't need to be creating a dish for this man. Or rather, if I cared about him at all, I *wouldn't* be attempting to make a meal.

His grandmother was in the hospital. And since Jensen was the closest thing to family that I had, I needed to at least try to look out for him. And cooking was what you did, right? I'd learned about this ritual from movies. Not from my parents.

My mother was always gallivanting around the world for her photographs, leaving me in the care of nannies. And my father preferred his string of girlfriends to parenting, so I rarely saw him. I stared into the pot. Damn it. I'd screwed this

up. But hey, it was the thought that counted, right? Besides, it wasn't like Jensen didn't know that I couldn't cook. We had no secrets. Except for the one I'd been holding on to for years.

From the moment we'd met in that bar when he'd kissed me to help me save face, to the time when he and his stupid frat brothers were trying to steal the Fine Arts department founder's statue out of the Fine Arts hall, he'd known me through and through. *And he's been dragging you into his antics ever sense.*

Jensen was good for me. I might be an artist, but most people told me I was far too serious. I never let go except in my art. Never had any fun. Yeah, fun was reserved for people who knew what the hell was going to happen the next day. Since I never knew growing up, I liked to have control over my destiny. Jensen was the risk taker. He could go into any scenario without a plan and still come out smelling like roses.

The door to Jensen's condo swung open, and he immediately started to cough. "Oh my God, did someone break in here and try to smoke me out of my own home?" He dropped his bag by the door and came running into the kitchen. "Alex, what the hell are you doing?"

I stopped stirring and turned to him. "I'm cooking."

"Is that what we're calling it?"

I wiped my hands on the apron that had an attractive nearly naked guy on the front. "I was trying to make dinner so you wouldn't feel too much pressure with everything that's happening."

Jensen stared at the stove for a long moment, then his eyes darted to me, then back to the stove again. And finally, he just came over and wrapped his arms around me.

I automatically hugged him back. I didn't normally do emotional displays. I wasn't much of a hugger. The one exception was Jensen. If he was giving out hugs, I was first in line to get one.

Because you're pathetic.

No, I wasn't pathetic. We were friends. *Best* friends.

Which is why you'll never, ever be with him.

I shook off the thought. I didn't want to be with Jensen.

Liar.

Okay, so there was a part of me that at one point thought I could be with Jensen. That part had died a long, slow, lonely death. It was never going to happen. Jensen was not mine. He was my best friend, and I'd seen what happened to women who got too close to the flame.

I was never getting burned like that again. And the more honest I was with myself about that, the less getting embraces from Jensen hurt.

"I'm so sorry about your grandmother."

He shook his head, moving his chin back and forth over my hair. My wild mane of curls was already a mess. I was dreading wash day, but I didn't complain that his actions were inducing more tangles. "What do you need me to do?" I asked.

"You're already doing it. Just being here. And even though your culinary skills need major help, the thought is really what counts. How do you feel about takeout?"

"Now *that* I can do. Sorry I tried to poison you."

He chuckled. "It's not the first time. I don't know why you insist on trying to cook me anything *ever*." Then he added, "Not to worry, the bag is by the door. I had a feeling you'd be here."

And just like that, Jensen had reversed the roles. The man was all things to all people. "You weren't supposed to do that. *I* was supposed to be looking after *you*. Not the other way around."

He shrugged. "I had a feeling you'd be here trying to take care of me. And for the record, we're best friends. So *we* take care of each other. When I moved out here after grad school, who actually had a place to stay and let me crash on their couch for six months?"

Yeah, the early days. I'd been an apprenticing painter for Peter Maine at his gallery in San Diego. I'd sold a piece early,

and I saved all my money and was able to afford a decent place to stay in. It had been like summer camp.

“Well, the way I figure it, I was paying you back for letting me move in with you sophomore year. So tell me, how is she?”

Jensen let me go then leaned back against the fridge, one leg propped back against it. “She’s actually not terrible. She’ll stay there a few more days for observation. But the doctor thinks there might be a problem with her medication, so they’re trying to figure out the right dosages. Until they do that, they said no stress, no running around. She’s to take it easy.”

I snorted. I might not know Grandma Lucy personally, but from everything Jensen had told me, the old lady was never slowing down. “How’d she take that?”

Jensen shook his head. “About as well as can be expected for her. She was in no kind of mood for that noise.”

I cocked my head and studied his face intently before hopping up onto the counter. “Okay, spill, Jensen. You always have that look when you aren’t sure how to get out of a problem.”

He rubbed the end of his nose, and I wondered just what kind of trouble he’d gotten himself into.

“So, you know how Grandma has been trying to get me to settle down?”

I nodded. And every time Jensen brought home some blonde with big boobs and an attitude, I often had to bite my own tongue. But that was neither here nor there. “Yeah, what’s that have to do with anything?”

“Well, I might have told her I had a girlfriend to get her off my back.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you did. Why would you do that? You should have known that at some point she was going to request to see this girl.” The look on his face told me that something just like that had happened. “Jensen. Spill it.”

“I know it probably wasn’t a good idea, but I was desperate. She was constantly trying to set me up with girls. They would show up at the hotel. At my gym. I had to get her off my back. So I made up the perfect girl that would never have to be seen. One that was so busy with her career. Problem is, now Grandma Lucy wants me home for the holidays. And she wants me to bring that girl.”

I stared at him for a long moment, blinked several times, and tried to open my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Finally, I managed, “Jensen. She’s sick. What are you going to do now? You clearly can’t tell her that you made up a girlfriend. That will stress her out.”

“I know. I know. I should never have lied. But I can’t just confess the truth because now she’s sick. She’d supposed to stay calm. I’m caught between a rock and a hard place.”

I tried to force my brain to work. “You need to figure this out. Is there someone in your roster? I’m assuming by the holidays you mean Christmas?”

“Christmas.” He nodded.

“Well, I’ll think of something before then.”

“*You* don’t have to think of something. I already have a solution.” Jensen grinned.

“Yeah? What’s that? If it involves hiring a hooker, you’re crazy. Maybe it’s better to tell her the truth and not dig a bigger hole for yourself.”

Jensen’s brows snapped down. “No. I’m not telling her the truth. She needs me to have a girlfriend, so I’m going to have a girlfriend. I’ll do anything to make sure she gets better and on the road to recovery.”

And that was part of Jensen’s problem, he was always wanting to be all things to all people. But he never spent too much time worrying about what would actually make *him* happy.

“So what can I do? Am I supposed to help you audition girls?” I asked. “Because that’s approaching awkward territory.”

“Well, since you’re dying to make me feel better, *and* you are my best friend in the entire world, I was sort of hoping *you’d* pretend to be my girlfriend.”

My heart leapt in an attempt to escape from my chest, beating so hard and so fast that I was sure there would be splinters and shards of my rib cage floating around.

Calm down, silly. Listen to his words. Pretend. Girlfriend.

And suddenly my heart stuttered and skipped to a stop. The pain so immediate and so hot, I had to fight to not show any expression. He was asking me to help him because he needed a way out of this mess. Under normal circumstances, I would do anything for him.

Except this.

Because if I did this, then he would know.

He’d know that I’d been lying and carrying a torch for him this whole time. And I wasn’t going to expose myself like that. “Jensen, I love you, and you know that. But I’m not going to pretend to be your girlfriend.”

CHAPTER 5

JENSEN



HELL.

She said no.

I really hadn't considered that possibility. "Alex look, I know you hate to lie, and you're not very good at it. But I am up the creek with no paddle. I need my wing girl. Wing woman. Whatever, you know what I need. It's just for a couple of days, and it's not like we weren't going to spend the holidays together anyway."

We did have a plan for Christmas. Christmas Eve would be at her place, and there would be takeout and alcohol and holiday movies. Then Christmas Day we would start at my place. I was pretty good at breakfast. My grandmother had taught me. That was the best day, opening presents.

Most of the artwork I had in my place were her pieces. And though each of them were given as gifts, I knew full well how much they were worth. To me, they were priceless, but to the rest of the world they were *expensive*.

In the evening, we would go to the big Christmas spread at my hotel. It was a tradition I'd started the first Thanksgiving we were open. It was so successful, I did it again for Christmas, with employees and guests alike.

I hadn't been dating anyone over the last few holidays. Which was fine by me. But if I ever was, she'd just have to get used to the fact that Alex was in my life.

Yeah, how well do you think that's going to go when your new girlfriend realizes that sometimes you have inappropriate

thoughts about your bestie?

I shoved that thought aside. And to be fair, I hadn't had inappropriate thoughts in oh, days now. That was something, right? It wasn't my fault. She was stunning, with all that beautiful café au lait skin that always seemed to glow it looked so healthy. And her hair that always managed to somehow smell like lemon meringue pie. I almost loved hugging her just for that. *Almost*. There were other reasons I liked having her in my arms. Reasons I wasn't going to explore right now. I needed to get her on board.

“Look, I know this is a huge imposition.”

“Jensen, you know I would do anything for you. But this is ridiculous. I'm a *bad* liar. And Grandma Lucy will be able to tell. And I'm pretty sure they'll notice when you bring me home and I'm like 'Hey, my name is Alex.' They'll put two and two together that the person that you've been calling Alex all this time is somehow standing in as your girlfriend.”

Okay, I hadn't really thought of that. But that could work. We could just pull the *yes, we're best friends, but we also started dating* ruse. No biggie. That would totally work. “Relax. I doubt anyone will find it hard to believe that we started dating after being friends for so long.”

Her tiny frown only deepened, and she opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Please don't say no. Please don't say no. Please do not say no.

She chewed her bottom lip. “Jensen, this is such a bad idea on so many fronts.”

She didn't want to do it. Not that I blamed her. She understood the issues with my family.

“Look, it's fine.” I pushed off from the refrigerator and went to her, laying my head on her shoulder. When in doubt, use charm. *Lots* of charm. I'd gotten used to generally talking my way into or out of any situation. All I had to do was find the precise button to push. Figure out the right person to be. I

was brilliant at figuring out what people needed and being able to be that person for them.

What does that mean for you? Who do you want to be?

Well, the person I wanted to be and the person I was were two different types of people. The man that I really was, no one loved back. No one except Grandma Lucy. And right now, I would do anything to make her happy and keep her healthy. And if that meant begging, then I would gladly get on my knees.

I lifted my head. Alex was scant inches away from me.

My first thought was, *God, I wonder if she tastes the same.*

The next thought was also not helpful. *Her lips look as soft as I remember.*

And then the next one was far less helpful and way naughtier. And that one wasn't so much of a thought as it was a visual of what we might get up to between her lips and mine. I shook my head. Damn it. I'd been doing so well, managing to go whole days without a sexual thought about Alex. Because as much as I loved her, if I ever acted on even one of those notions, that would end everything. "Tell me what you need, Alex, and I'll make it happen. Right now I'm pleading with you. As my best friend, I need your help."

Alex

THE MAN WAS GOOD, but I *couldn't* do what he wanted. I couldn't just give in. Because then he'd know. For the most part, I hid it well. That ridiculous sliver of hope I carried around that one day, the sexy Jensen Morrison would look at me like he did the string of women he brought around. He *never* looked at me like that. He looked at me like I was family. Which was nice. And important. But that deep, dark, hidden part of me wanted so much more. If I pretended to do this, then I was going to expose myself. He was going to see.

“Look, I think this is a bad idea, and I’ve got the gallery opening on New Year’s Eve. I can’t drop everything and just go to Catalina for a few days.”

“I know, and I will do everything possible to help you prepare. You tell me what you need, and I’ll give you hotel resources. I will make it happen so you can do this. I will clear any schedules, get a helicopter to fly you back to San Diego for meetings, whatever you need.”

I shook my head. The man was exasperating. And sexy. And sweet. His dark brown eyes, the color of melted chocolate, implored me. And I wanted to give him anything. I wanted to give him *everything*.

No. I am not giving him everything. This is a way to get my heart broken.

Yes, yes it was. And I was not going to be one of the many who had their heart broken by Jensen Morrison. Of all the women in his life, I stuck around because we hadn’t gone there with each other. We were friends. *Just* friends. “Okay look, I know you need help. What about Sheila, your PR person? She’s smart, fun, and she’d totally get it. She is all about the image. Me, I constantly have paint under my fingernails, and generally somewhere else on my body that I don’t even notice until you tell me.”

“Sheila? Have you forgotten that she is a lesbian?”

Good point. But she might still be willing to help out her boss. Although, that wasn’t ideal. Because then Sheila would really be lying. Plus, the two of them would have no chemistry and it would show.

“Okay, so no Sheila. What about Madison? Madison likes you a lot.”

Jensen scoffed. “Madison? Are you insane? It took me months to get her to stop calling me three times a day every day. Bunny boilers need not apply.”

Despite myself, I laughed. “You are so wrong. Just because she made it known that she was totally into you did not make her a bunny boiler.”

“It makes her clingy. And I don’t need to confuse matters. You’re the perfect choice. No waters to muddy. You know me better than anyone. You could help me navigate the waters of the family. I need you. Not Sheila, or Madison, or some other hired hand. I need my best friend.”

“Jensen, this is a bad idea.”

“It’s only for a few days. Just for the holidays. I’ll make sure you get to LA to do everything that you need to do for the gallery opening. And I’ll give you all the support you need. I just need three or four days in Catalina. And technically you’ll be no farther away from LA than you are now, so it’ll be fine. Please Alex, I need you.”

And because I was a fool who cared too much about him, I sighed. “Okay, fine, I’ll do it.”

One rule. Don’t get caught up. Remember the last time you let yourself get caught up in Jensen?

CHAPTER 6

ALEX



“YOU AGREED TO DO WHAT?”

I shifted under the scrutiny of my assistant, Cassie. “I said that I would pretend to be his girlfriend for a couple of days. It’s no big deal.” I busied myself with getting the gallery show ready, fiddling with bubble wrap on the corner of a canvas.

Cassie put her hands on her hips. “Look, I know I’m just the assistant here, but I’d like to think we’re friends too. After all, we survived working for Peter together. He was a miserable old goat, but he put us together. Now I’m about to way overstep my boundaries here.”

I shifted on my bare feet. If Jensen saw me, he’d roll his eyes. But I preferred to work without the restriction of shoes. It was more comfortable, and something about it made me feel free. “Okay, let’s have it.”

“How long have you been in love with him?”

The heat hit me first. Then embarrassment that my deep, dark secret I’d been holding back from everyone for years was plain for someone to see. Cassie and I had known each other since I moved to San Diego. At the time, Cassie worked for the artist that I apprenticed for. When he moved to Europe, Cassie had stayed on to work with me.

“I — What — I don’t know what you mean.”

Cassie wrapped the next canvas like a pro. The medium sized painting featuring streaks of reds, blues, purples, and golds, titled simply *Closet*, was one of my favorites. The closet was the metaphor for my life and the jumbled mess that it was.

And now you're putting it on display to be judged by everybody.

“Okay look, I’m totally overstepping here, but I like you. And I know you’re not one for oversharing or getting really close and whatnot, but I’m worried about you. If you think you can go to Catalina and be a stand-in girlfriend, you’re nuts. I see the way you look at him. I’ve looked at one too many guys like that. Like they walk on water.”

I winced. “Is it really that obvious?” I whispered.

Cassie shook her head. “No, no, don’t worry about that. It’s just I spend a lot of time with you. And Jensen is always here, so I spend a lot of time with the *two* of you together. I just see these things. What I know is that with proximity stuff is harder to hide. So what is your plan? Because I’m not letting my boss lady go to Catalina with a piece of toilet paper stuck to her shoe.”

The metaphor gave me a great idea for a painting.

Focus on what the girl is asking you.

“Look, I get what you’re saying, but what was I supposed to do? He is my best friend. And he is as close to family as I’ve got.”

“So you can just pretend to be his girlfriend and hope he doesn’t notice that hey, you’re in love with him?”

“I’m not in love with him. I just—”

“Sometimes you hold on just a second too long when he gives you a hug. When you think he’s not watching, you inhale deeply just to get a contact high from his cologne. Every time he holds your hand and pulls you close, you imagine being with him and what it would be like if he finally one day turned to you and said ‘Let’s do this. Let’s give it a go.’ Because I’ve been that girl. A lot. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

My heart thundered against my chest. If Cassie had seen it, I had no hope being locked in on the island with Jensen and all his relatives.

He’ll find out. And then our friendship will be over.

I flushed. “Oh no, this is a disaster. What was I thinking?”

Cassie busied herself. She set another canvas aside then marked it off her checklist before placing it in its location in the cart. She had a system. When it came to the creative side, that was all me, but the organization, getting pieces to where they needed to be, the customer service, that was all Cassie. She ran everything behind the scenes, and I would be lost without her.

“I am not in love with him. We are best friends. And he is like my family. And I wanted to help him out.” Damn, that sounded lame even to my own ears. I was so totally screwed. “Oh my God. What have I done? How do I get out of it?”

“Well, honey, I’m not sure you can get out of it. He said his grandma’s really sick, right? You must’ve had a plan when you said yes.”

“I don’t know. I was sort of gonna do what I’ve always done. You know, pretend it’s not there, bury the feelings deep under years of dirty laundry where no one should ever go. That was my whole plan. That’s it.”

Cassie shook her head. “I swear, for someone so bright and intuitive, I’m surprised you really don’t want to do anything about your feelings.”

“You don’t understand. I’ve only ever had Jensen.” And now, I could see the problem with that. I never really had many close girlfriends. I never let anyone get close. But Cassie was trying to be a friend right now.

Maybe it was the desperation. Maybe it was my spiking blood pressure, the blood roaring to my head that made me think twice. But all I knew was that Cassie was offering some kind of life preserver. And it was nice.

If you get too close, she could hurt you too.

But before I could latch onto that thought, Cassie smiled at me. “Look, I’m here if you want to talk about it. I think you and I could be friends. And one of these days, you might need someone besides Jensen for advice and stuff.”

Cassie had a point. And for the first time, I liked the idea of having another friend. Because right about now, I needed all the support I could get.

CHAPTER 7

JENSEN



“I DON’T GET IT. EXPLAIN TO ME WHY I NEED TO BUY clothes?”

I tapped Alex on the nose. She really was adorable. “I think you look awesome. No matter how you’re dressed.” Even now, with her hair up in a sloppy bun, long-sleeved tee that at first glance was clean, and baggy boyfriend jeans, she was cute. Stunning really, bare of any makeup, and this was how I liked her. But on closer inspection, there was some paint in her hair. *And* on her jeans. *And* also on the hem of the camisole that was sticking out from under the long-sleeved tee. And of course there was paint on her nails. But well, I was used to that by now.

“Honey, you’ve got paint all over you.”

Her eyes went wide. “I do not. I cleaned up well this time.” I subtly pointed out the jeans and the camisole. And she cursed. “Dammit. I swear, I put on clean clothes. I don’t know what happens. Between being naked to getting dressed in the confines of my bedroom to out the door, something goes very wrong. Every time.”

Oh shit, the moment the word made it past her lips, my brain offered all kinds of visuals about how she would look naked. My favorite was Alex in bed, her dark hair fanning out over the pillow, paint in all sorts of strategic places that I wanted to kiss. What the hell was that? I shook my head. This was *Alex*. Why did I want to kiss her? I knew better.

She was the best part of my life. We were friends. Except for that one kiss, I'd never gone there with her. Ever. And I never would. I was not looking to screw that up. Except... Naked Alex wouldn't go away. And this time the paint was replaced by chocolate. *Damn.*

"Okay, fine, I guess I need to get some new clothes."

"Honestly, Alex, you always look great to me. Paint and all. But you don't know my family. Martin, his parents. All except Grandma Lucy. They're a bunch of vipers."

She shrugged. "It's okay. Between you and Cassie, I'm getting some truth that I wasn't ready for over the last couple of days."

"What did Cassie have to say?"

Alex's brows furrowed, and she took a moment too long to answer the question. "Just that I'm by myself a lot and it wouldn't hurt to have *more* than just one friend."

"You have more than one friend. You have lots of friends. We were hanging out with a group of them at my house the other night."

She shook her head. "They were *your* friends. I go along for the ride because I get to kick it with you, so I tolerate other people."

"You're crazy. Everyone likes you."

I laughed even as I shook my head. She might think she was a loner type, but people naturally gravitated toward her. She could be serious, or silly, or just thought provoking. She was so layered. And not just about art. As long as I'd known her, she'd been obsessed with music of all kinds, except country, she liked to say. And books. They were an escape, she said. But the painting... the painting was life.

She shrugged again. "Yeah, but you know that saying; just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you."

I laughed. "So you're okay with doing this?"

“I can be easy, just as long as you’re not trying to replace my entire wardrobe. If it’s just a couple of things, then no big deal.”

“That’s the spirit.” I took her hand, and the zing of electricity coursed up my arm as I flexed my hand around hers.

Dude, get it together. This is Alex.

More and more lately whenever I was around her, the current was too much to contain. It was also getting hard to ignore. I seriously considered cutting down on our hanging out sessions. Problem was I liked being around her too much. “Let’s go shopping.”

“Fine. Alex Winters reporting for torture.”

After an hour and a half, my feet hurt, and the more dresses that Alex tried on and came out to show me, the more irritable I got. Not because she looked bad in any of them. Quite the contrary. That was the problem. She modeled dresses that showed a little more skin than I was used to seeing from her. Because she was painting all the time, she kept her wardrobe simple, usually leggings, tank tops, T-shirts. Occasionally she’d toss on a sundress, but nothing like what she’d been trying on at the upscale boutique I’d taken her to. Everything was short and form fitting, or cleavage showing, or had a slit up to there that nearly showed all the lady parts. Damn, those were my favorite parts. I didn’t want the world to see them. She came out in another red number, the vermilion red complimenting her café au lait skin and dark eyes. My mouth watered.

With cutouts at the sides, it showed just the right amount of skin too. And it was cocktail length. Her legs were a mile long.

I cleared my throat. “That one. That one definitely has to come to Catalina.”

Alex tortured me some more by twirling in the outfit. “Are you sure? It doesn’t exactly say Christmas.”

“It’s red. Red equals Christmas.” I tried to convince her.

“But you don’t think it’s too...”

“Sexy?”

She nodded.

My dick agreed.

“It’s perfect. You’re getting the dress, so deal with it.”

Alex wrinkled her nose. “When did you get this bossy? I have my own dresses.”

“Oh, please. When we get back to your place, show me one dress that does not have paint on it.”

She opened her mouth to argue but then quickly snapped it shut again. She narrowed her gaze at me, and her lips were twitching.

I paid for the red dress, but she insisted on paying half for the simple green one. I didn’t want to let her do it, but I knew how important it was to her to pull her weight.

On the sidewalk, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. She turned her face up at me, her gaze warm and light and happy. And holy hell, I really wanted to— What in the world was wrong with me?

“Well, if it isn’t the Siamese twins. I see you didn’t trade up after I left you, Alex.”

I held back a groan as Alex and I turned. Her ex stood on the sidewalk glaring at us. “Brian, still a prick, I see.” I had to fight the overwhelming urge to hit the guy. He’d hurt Alex bad and didn’t deserve to walk the earth.

Alex was unusually taciturn. She was usually quick with the comebacks. When it came to this guy, it’s like she had nothing. I still had no idea how Alex had ever dated him. He was just like her long-ago ex, Mark. Matter of fact, so many of them were like Mark.

But Brian was a special brand of turd who only ever thought about himself, and to make matters worse, he didn’t pull his weight with the bills. And Brian was one of those artists who’d thought his talent was on the same level as hers.

He eventually gave up and became an art dealer. He didn't deserve her.

And you do?

Brian's smirk morphed into a sneer. "Alex, if you finally dump this loser, you could have a real chance. I might still consider taking you back. You have to get rid of him first though."

That did it. "Listen, you little prick."

She put a hand on my chest and nuzzled close. "Jensen, sweetheart, calling him a prick is an insult to all pricks."

I bit back my chuckle.

Brian didn't seem amused. "You know I was the best thing that ever happened to you, Alex. If you'd just paid a little more attention to me and hadn't been so selfish—"

And that was the fundamental problem with Brian. He believed everything he needed had to come first.

I tightened my arm around Alex's shoulders and pulled her close before kissing her forehead. "Brian, I just want to say that you guys breaking up was the best thing to ever happen to Alex. Me too. Because she realized what a loser you are, and she's mine now."

Brian's brows shot up as Alex snuggled into my side. And when she tipped her megawatt smile at me, I couldn't help myself. I told myself it was practice for what we would have to do in a few days. The truth was that the membrane between us that was a separation between friendship and something more was getting thinner and thinner these days. I dipped my head and slid my lips over hers.

With a surprised gasp, Alex parted her lips, and all thought ceased on my end.

All thought. All breath. All basic bodily functions ceased. All that mattered to me in that moment was the feel of Alex's soft lips and the slide of her tongue over mine. A deep shudder racked my body in that instant.

Alex wrapped her arms around my waist, and every nerve cell in my body shouted, *yes*. I knew we had an audience, so I had to make it good, right?

Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.

I slid my tongue over hers, sliding and retreating, coaxing her tongue into a dance.

She made this sexy whimpering noise at the back of her throat, and it was all I could do to not slide my hands over her perfect ass and press her flush against me into my erection.

And then the warning bells clanged in my head. *This is Alex*. But it felt so damn good. Especially when I could feel her nails digging into my back. I pulled away but still held onto her for the benefit of Brian.

Apparently, her ex was not pleased about our new relationship.

His words were seething as he spat out, “You *swore* to me. You *swore* to me there was nothing between you two.”

Alex shrugged, giving me that sweet smile again, and I couldn’t help myself, I squeezed her into my side. I needed more of her. I wanted to hold her closer.

“What I do with my love life is no longer any of your concern. Now if you’ll excuse me, Jensen and I have somewhere to be.”

As we walked away, I felt her muscles relax marginally. Brian was such a jerk. He’d always treated her like he should be the primary in the relationship. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. He’s just a blowhard. Besides, that was totally worth the look on his face.”

Her grin was friendly and bright, and I wanted to kiss her again. But that was not going to happen. A simple kiss from her had felt better than anything I’d had with anybody in months, maybe years.

Didn’t matter. I was not going there... All I had to do for the week we’d be away was not kiss her again. It couldn’t be

that hard to do, could it? I hoped not. “Yeah, that was totally worth the look on his face.”

CHAPTER 8

ALEX



“ARE YOU OKAY WITH THIS?”

As the wind blew my hair around my face, I tucked the errant strands behind my ears. I’d opted for a straight look today, figuring I didn’t want to scare the Morrisons with my wild curls just yet. Come Christmas Day, I’d introduce the full Afro. “Yeah, fine. Just trying to settle in as Jensen Morrison’s girlfriend.”

Jensen laughed. “You realize you’re closer to me than any other girlfriend I’ve ever had in my life, right?”

I chewed my lip. That was not exactly what I wanted to hear. But whatever. It was too late to back out now. I could do this. Besides, if push came to shove, I could always call Cassie for an SOS. An emergency that required me to come home. “You realize that’s not promising to me, right?”

Jensen laughed. “Well, it’s the truth. We Morrison men can be hell on women.”

“Why do I have a feeling that’s more about *you* than being a Morrison?”

He grinned. “Because you know me.”

That stupid grin got me every time. The butterflies flapped their wings low in my belly, and I knew I’d do anything to see that expression again. Yeah, I needed help.

We pulled up to the ferry terminal, and I couldn’t help but be struck by the sheer beauty of it. Granted, we lived in San

Diego, so a picturesque sunset over a marina was nothing new, but Catalina certainly was beautiful.

Jensen helped me with our bags, and I had no choice but to follow him outside. I expected to see someone. Family, even Grandma Lucy. From what I'd heard about the old lady, she'd have fought tooth and nail to meet Jensen at the ferry stop. But there was no one there save a single chauffeur, holding up a sign that said *Morrison*. Seriously? Not one person in his family could be bothered to drive over and pick us up? Okay, then. I needed to do a quick mental recalculation on his family and what it meant. Norman Rockwell would not have painted this family.

As if Jensen could read my thoughts, which, *hello, scary*, he said, "Don't bother being surprised that no one came here to meet us. I'm not."

That single line told me everything I needed to know. No one besides his grandmother was looking forward to Jensen coming home. And no one in the family except her was deserving of his love and affection. I would just have to take over the caring duties then.

The car wound around the island, driving along the coast before finally pulling up to the Morrison estate, which sat behind the Morrison Hotel and had a 1930s F. Scott Fitzgerald glamour to it. Jensen opened the door for me, "The palace awaits m'lady."

The front door opened, and I plastered what I hoped was a winning smile on my face.

Out walked a man who could've easily been Jensen's brother. Their frames were similar, and while their eyes were the same shade of brown, Jensen's always looked warm like melting chocolate, but this guy's eyes were flinty, dark, and cold.

"Well, I would say the prodigal son has returned, but no one wanted you home."

I scowled at the guy. I was trying to be on my best behavior and waited for Jensen to say something. Even better,

to knock the guy on his ass. But my best friend did nothing but clench his jaw and ignore the comment.

Well, I couldn't stand for that. "Jensen, sweetheart, who's this asshole?"

The other man cocked his head. "Well, this one is feisty. I do like feisty. Pretty too. Sweetheart, are you sure you're supposed to be with this guy? I've got more money, and I'm better looking too. I'm Martin."

I twitched with the desire to slap him. God, if only Jensen would let me slap him. Jensen grabbed the last of the bags from the chauffeur and tipped him. Before I could open my mouth, he leaned down and whispered, "Remember, we're here for Grandma Lucy. Ignore him. Otherwise, you're only succeeding in giving him what he wants."

The problem was that ignoring idiots was not my strong suit, except for Brian. Damn. My big mouth was why Jensen liked me. It was also why a lot of other people didn't.

Remember, you came for him.

I sighed. I *had* come for him. So I'd have to play his way. "I'm Alex, Jensen's girlfriend."

I would just totally ignore that happy buzzing feeling those words gave me.

Martin grinned at me. It was really more leer than grin. "I'm Martin, and I'm CEO of Morrison Hotels." He said it like he was announcing at some grand ball. I didn't have the heart to tell him he should wait for someone else to announce him first.

"Well, you must be very proud of yourself." It was the nicest thing I could think of to say. Because what I really wanted to say was high on the inappropriate list.

Behind Martin, someone put a hand on his arm and tapped him out of the way. When he stumbled to the side, a diminutive woman with a shock of white hair, aviator sunglasses, and a wide grin said, "I've been waiting for you two to show up." Considering she'd been in the hospital,

Grandma Lucy was spry enough to stride over to her grandson and wrap her thin arms around him, squeezing tight.

Now that was what I wanted from his family. The love and devotion was clear and glowing on Lucy's face. The old woman stepped back and took a proper look at her grandson. "You look like you haven't been sleeping. I certainly hope it's not because you're worried about me," she said to him.

Jensen shifted on his feet and avoided her gaze. "It's good to see you Grandma. This is Alex."

Grandma Lucy turned and scrutinized me. "I do like it when my grandson exceeds expectations." She reached out and gave me a tight hug.

Damn. Wasn't this woman supposed to be sick?

Grandma Lucy stepped back and nodded her approval. "Oh yes, you'll do just fine." Then she turned to her grandson. "Alex? Haven't you been telling me for years about your best friend, Alex?"

Jensen scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah, well, Alex is my best friend. She's just *also* my girlfriend."

Grandma Lucy nodded. "I approve. Now let's get on inside. There's cooking to be done and rooms to be assigned. Martin, stop standing around and come get their bags. Take them up to their rooms."

Martin sputtered. "But we have valets for that."

Grandma Lucy leveled a look on her other grandson that made him jump. Martin hopped to and took the bags from Jensen. She gave Martin a satisfied nod as he lugged them inside. She leaned in and whispered to me, "Sometimes you just need to know how to handle men."

I fought a grin. I liked Grandma Lucy. Maybe this Christmas wasn't going to be so terrible after all.

"Now Jensen, I put you and Alex in the blue room. It's south facing, so you'll get plenty of light. And you'll be able to see the shore from there."

I frowned. The blue room? As in *one* room? “Uhm, Miss Lucy. I know how traditional you must be, and I wouldn’t dream of spending the night in the same room as Jensen.” I sent Jensen a beseeching glance, silently pleading with him to do something. *Jensen, come on. Come through for me.*

Jensen shook his head. “Grandma Lucy. Since when have you been down for cohabitation? With Martin’s girlfriend, you railed and railed about how that was so inappropriate under your roof. Now you’re sticking me and Alex in the same room?”

Grandma Lucy just waved him off. “I was saying that because I didn’t like the girl. She was a gold-digging wh—”

“Grandma Lucy,” he said with the faintest hint of warning in his voice.

His grandmother shrugged then took my hand. “Well, I call a spade a spade. And that’s what she was. And that’s why I didn’t want her digging her claws into my grandson. But of course Martin doesn’t listen to me. And that, one day, will bite him in the ass.” She led me to the doorway and then went ahead of me. When Jensen followed, his grandmother turned around and smiled at both of us. “Go on now, Jensen, kiss your girlfriend.”

I froze. What the hell? There was no way I could endure another kiss from Jensen. The other day when we were shopping, it was one thing to endure it to make Brian jealous. But I couldn’t possibly kiss him just because. My heart couldn’t take it. Neither could my libido. Incinerating on the doorstep was not a way to impress for sure.

Jensen shifted from foot to foot. Then leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Grandma, is there mistletoe all over this house?”

Grandma Lucy giggled. “Just because your grandfather is long gone, it doesn’t mean I can’t feel the romantic spirit of Christmas.”

“I never thought of Christmas as particularly romantic,” I said.

Grandma Lucy patted my hand. “That’s because you never had someone special to spend it with. Now you have my grandson. And Jensen, if you hope to keep a woman, you have to kiss her better than that. Do it again and this time put your back into it.”

I couldn’t help it. I sputtered and the laugh broke free, echoing around the expanse of foyer.

Yeah, you keep laughing, he’s about to kiss you in a minute, and you two need to make it look real.

Damn. I turned to face Jensen and licked my lips. His gaze pinned to my tongue as if his entire focus was on how I might taste. When Jensen leaned over, he gently mouthed, “*Make it look real.*” And I swallowed hard.

When his lips brushed over mine and his hands moved around my waist to pull me close, my mind reeled. As the blood rushed in my skull, my knees felt too weak to support my weight. Right there in the front entrance to the Morrison estate, I was melting into a pool of hormones and need, but before I could even settle in and enjoy myself, it was over too soon. He pulled back and then brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. All I could do was blink in confusion and wonder. Oh, right. Grandma Lucy was saying something to me.

“Now see, that was a kiss. Jensen, honey, you better learn to do that all the time if you’re to keep this beauty.”

“Grandma, no antics, Alex is shy. She doesn’t like flaunting our relationship in front of everyone.”

Yes. That’s exactly what we discussed. Me wanting to keep my private life private was a way to keep from showing too much affection to each other. But screw that plan. I was now all about demonstrating passion. I might slip Grandma Lucy a five under the table to suggest that I kiss Jensen again.

Grandma Lucy just shook her head. “Nonsense. When you love your man, don’t you worry about who’s watching you. Love with your whole heart, honey. Now you two get upstairs, freshen up and come to the kitchen.”

Jensen groaned. “Grandma, I thought the whole point was you were supposed to be relaxing.”

“Oh good Lord, boy, you talk too much, and you worry even more. I have help in the kitchen. I’m just there to supervise and eat chocolate chip cookies.”

Jensen’s stomach rumbled, and I shook my head. The man could literally be controlled by his food. “Chocolate chip cookies?”

Grandma Lucy grinned as she went down the hall. “You two just get settled then come on down, and you can have as many as you can eat.”

Jensen took my hand and squeezed gently. “I’m sorry. My family can be—”

“It’s not your fault. But you know what? I like your grandma. She’s fun.”

“Yeah, but you have a lot of other things to handle. My crazy relatives are not what you should be dealing with right now.”

“It’s fine. So what are we doing about our shared-room situation?”

“Don’t worry about it. From what I remember, that room has a decent-size pullout couch. It was originally designed as a suite. We’ve got plenty of room for me to sleep on the couch.” We reached our door and found our bags neatly stacked outside. Perfect.

I turned the knob and pushed open the door then froze in the doorway. Behind me, Jensen groaned. “Alex, what are you doing?”

“Jensen, you need to see this.”

Jensen leaned around me and peered into the room. There was an enormous king-size bed against the far wall, and a sitting area for reading. The bright bold colors spoke to me. I loved everything in it. Except for one little problem. That couch that Jensen had been talking about was gone. And the floors were not carpeted, they were hardwood. It looked like

Jensen and I would probably be sharing a bed while we were there.

CHAPTER 9

JENSEN



I STEWED ALL THE WAY THROUGH DINNER. AS MY grandmother chatted excitedly with Alex, and the rest of my family asked her about her paintings, her career, and her upcoming gallery show, I was too busy trying to think of a way out of this predicament.

Martin leaned over. “What’s got your panties in a twist?”

“For once in your life, Martin, shut the hell up,” I muttered.

Grandma Lucy looked up. “Jensen, honey, are you okay? You barely touched your roast.”

Alex was quick on the defense. We’d been covering each other’s asses for so long she knew exactly when I needed her. “Um, Grandma Lucy, we did have a really big lunch. And you know Jensen. When he sees something he wants, he has to have more than one helping.”

I bit back a groan. For once, Alex was *not* helping the situation.

Martin chuckled next to me. “I’m the same way,” he said to Alex with a smirk. Then when no one was listening, he leaned over to me. “I think now that I’ve gotten to know Alex, I might go back for seconds on that.”

I knew Martin was deliberately attempting to get under my skin. I would not bite. I *could* not bite. But damned if I didn’t want to knock that smug expression off my cousin’s face.

Across the table, Martin's parents chatted amicably with Alex. And interestingly enough, not one of them commented on the fact that she wasn't the usual socialite blonde that they would've expected. Thank God for small favors. Although, my aunt and uncle did occasionally toss out some privileged comment about who would dare send their child to public school and how boarding school was really best for children. Alex just ignored their pretentiousness.

My other cousins, Jason and Mack, wouldn't be in town until tomorrow, so at least tonight's dinner was a small group. I didn't have to pretend for too many people.

I was so good at putting on the show, depending on what was needed for the time. In particular with my family, I deliberately put on that air that indicated I wasn't fazed. I was good at that one. I'd been practicing it for years. And I was exactly who they needed me to be. The loser underdog.

Which was fine by me because my boutique hotel was already in the black. I was already proving them wrong. Just by existing. Just by having tried and not crumbling under the pressure.

After the dinner plates were cleared, Scotch was passed around along with the bread pudding, Alex yawned next to me and covered what she could, but my grandmother was quick to notice. "Alex, honey, you look exhausted. Given that you and Jensen were traveling from San Diego, then had to contend with the traffic and the ferry, why don't you two get up to bed. I'm headed in that direction myself. Doctor's orders and all that. Can you imagine she told me I need to be in bed by nine every night?" Grandma Lucy shook her head.

Alex laughed. "Yeah, with this gallery opening, I've been burning the candle at both ends. I need to do some hard-core relaxing."

Martin was there with a comeback. "I can help you relax." And just when I was about to stand and knock him flat on his ass, he added, "There's a lot of sightseeing to do on the island, all very chill. I can make sure you have the best tour of the city." He flashed me a grin. The jerk was doing it on purpose.

With our good nights said, I had no option but to follow Alex up the stairs. The staircase wound from the south around to the east in a gentle curve until we reached the top. With every step Alex took, her heels clacked against the granite. It was funny; I'd never imagined myself coming home, and never with Alex. But somehow we both looked like we belonged. Usually Alex was in something casual, but in her classic A-line dress and her stilettos, she looked the part.

More than you do.

I shoved that errant thought to the back of my head. I didn't have time for that right now. Right now, I needed to figure out how I was going to sleep in the same room as Alex for several days *and* keep my hands to myself.

This should all have been easy. But instead, we were facing the dilemma of, *hey where can we sleep?* If I didn't know better, I would've sworn my grandmother did this on purpose.

When we reached the threshold, Alex put her hand on my arm. "Look, before you start saying crazy things and offering to sleep sitting up on the chair or on the hard floor, we'll just share the bed, okay?"

My dick twitched as if to say, *Hell yes, I'm so down with that plan.* I cleared my throat. "I'm not sure that's the best idea."

Alex's brows furrowed. "Why not? We've passed out on the couch together a hundred times. This is no different. It's totally fine. Unless of course you sleep naked?"

Yes, that was one problem. I usually did sleep naked. But I could toss on pajama bottoms. Although, what if I couldn't resist giving into that crackle between us? "Why? Do you want me to sleep naked?"

Even under the soft brown of her skin, I saw her cheeks flush pink. "I— You can sleep how you like, but I'm sure me sleeping naked would only make *you* uncomfortable. So I'll ask you not to do the same."

She was right. The idea of her sleeping naked made me all kinds of uncomfortable... in my jeans. "Relax, I'm teasing. You're right. We've done this dozens of times. This is no big deal. Get ready for bed and hit the sack. I swear, I am capable of being a perfect gentleman."

There was something in her eyes that told me she wanted to ask me something or tell me something maybe. But as quickly as it appeared it was gone again. As she was headed to the bathroom to brush her teeth, my stomach fisted then loosened and then fisted again. And heaven help me, my hands twitched a little.

I changed quickly for bed, shucking my clothes and tossing on some pajama bottoms. I was always too hot and liked to sleep with the window open, but I knew that Alex was almost always too cold. So the best I could compromise was to sleep with my shirt off, at least regulate my body temperature a little bit. When she came out of the bathroom she was humming, but she stopped short when she took one look at me. "Where's your T-shirt?"

"I get too hot, remember?"

Alex opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again. Then she tried one more time, but I got the same guppy routine.

"Something you want to say, Alex?" Even as the question rolled off my tongue, my dick stirred, and I ground my teeth to keep from groaning. I needed to get to the bathroom quickly before she noticed what was happening south of my waistband. "I'm just going to go brush my teeth."

"Yeah, you do that."

As I locked myself in the bathroom, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. How in the world was I going to make it through the night sleeping next to her? I was terrified my own inappropriate thoughts were going to soon turn into questionable actions. And Alex was too important to me for that.

CHAPTER 10

ALEX



I SANK DEEPER INTO THE WARMTH. WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME I'd slept like this? I was usually on the go so much that it wasn't uncommon for me to get about five maybe six hours of sleep a night. Especially when I was prepping for something like a gallery opening or showing.

I nuzzled further into the warmth then froze as one of my hands encountered something hard and hot. Oh no. *Jensen*. My first instinct was to jump back and pretend the breach hadn't happened. The thing was I knew my hand had encountered abs. Rock-hard abs. And yes, I'd seen him shirtless dozens of times. It never lost its impact though. He was beautiful. And he knew it.

Last night when we'd gone to bed, I picked a spot on the ceiling and focused on that, willing sleep to come. Because if I hadn't done that, I would've stared.

Jensen breathed deep and rolled over, slinging an arm across my waist. *Oh, God*. I could smell the faint hint of his shower gel from the night before.

Okay, no more torturing myself, out of bed. I was going to be productive today. At the very least, I could hop the ferry to Los Angeles and check on the gallery opening and the delivery of my pieces. Yes, I'd be nice and focused. That was so much better than ogling Jensen.

I hated leaving him alone with his family, but a little space would do me some good. The last thing I wanted was for this little adventure to put a stressor on the relationship.

I slid out from under his arm and was in the bathroom in seconds. I snatched up my shower cap out of my toiletry bag and carefully tucked my straight hair underneath it. In and out of the shower in five minutes, and I was dressed even faster. And when I tiptoed out of the bedroom, Jensen was still sleeping.

Skipping down the stairs, I figured I'd grab something quick in the kitchen and hit the first ferry at 9:00. But I skidded to a stop when I found Grandma Lucy in the kitchen puttering around.

“Good morning. Do you need help getting anything? I can help you.”

Grandma Lucy turned around and put her hand on her hip, cocking it slightly. “Honey, this is my kitchen. Nothing you could help me find that I didn't put there myself.”

“Oh, I know, ma'am, I just thought I'd get something for you so that you don't overexert yourself.”

The old lady grinned at me. “Ma'am? A long time since anyone called me that. Just call me Grandma Lucy.”

I nodded. “Okay. Can I help you get anything before I head out?”

Lucy frowned at me. “Where are you going?”

“Oh, I was going to head into LA today and check on the gallery pieces. They were supposed to be delivered today, and I'd like to be there to check things out. Make sure everything's okay.”

Grandma Lucy suddenly held onto the counter and wobbled slightly. I was on her in a flash, scooting a stool underneath her. “You have to sit down. I'll get Jensen then call your doctor.”

“Oh stop it. I don't need a doctor. I was hoping you could help me in the kitchen this morning.”

I wavered. “Oh, Grandma Lucy, you should probably be warned, I've ruined more of your recipes than I should

confess. Even with precise directions, I managed to screw them up.”

Grandma Lucy laughed. “Yes, I know, Jensen does tell me all the stories about you. The time you tried to make him a stew.”

I flushed. “It was not my fault. I swear the oven hates me.”

“Well, we’ll just fix that today.” Her smile was filled with warmth. I knew in that moment there was no way that anyone couldn’t love this woman.

I opened my mouth to tell her that I had to get to the city. But Grandma Lucy just clucked around the kitchen handing me things, asking me to open things, telling me that she was going to show me how to make bread from scratch.

I needed to get out of there.

But do you really? Cassie’s got it.

And I was here for Jensen. He wanted his grandmother relaxing. And until he could take care of her himself, it was Alex to the rescue. Besides, I could help out for an hour.

But as Grandma Lucy told me stories about Jensen growing up and asked me questions about myself and my childhood and what my dreams were, I realized that there was no way I was going to LA today. And part of me didn’t even mind.

Jensen

I WOKE up alone and cold. I was never cold. But when I reached for Alex in the morning, her side of the bed was cool, like she’d been out of bed for a while. *Probably running from me.*

I flopped back on the pillows and groaned. I expected to be up all night, staring at the wall, kind of like she’d stared at the ceiling. But the moment the light was out and I heard her sigh deeply and exhale, I did the same and was out like a light. My

brain offered up glimpses of memory and snippets of the bliss of soft, warm skin pressed into my side within fifteen minutes.

Just like every other time we'd crashed together, Alex was like coming home. And even though I'd slept later than I would've liked, I felt so refreshed and revived. It was 8:30. Wow, when was the last time I'd slept in that late? I was showered and out the door within minutes, and I could hear Alex in the kitchen laughing with Grandma Lucy. Just the sound of the two of them giggling like schoolgirls in the kitchen made the warmth in my chest spread out like a ball of fire, simultaneously filling me with joy and calm. Like this was the way it should be.

Easy there, boy. Don't go getting all excited. This is just pretend.

The smell of baking bread made my stomach react, and I walked into the kitchen with a smile. "I see you two are happy."

Grandma Lucy gave me a broad grin. "That's because your girl here is regaling me with stories of your misadventures. Did you two really meet because you and your fraternity brothers were attempting to steal a mascot?"

I darted a glance to Alex. "You told her that story?"

Alex shrugged. "You know I don't lie well." Her expression said it all.

Don't go there. I'm trying to talk about anything but the one thing I can't talk about.

I cursed my luck. "Yeah, Alex busted me, but then I asked her if she wanted to join us. And she helped to cart it all the way back to our fraternity house."

"Well, the establishment in the Fine Arts department was a bit snooty. They certainly needed a shakeup. Besides, I liked the idea of being stealthy and undercover."

I grabbed a slice of the fresh-baked bread and slapped a big pat of butter on it. When I took a bite, I all but moaned around it, and my grandmother looked on with delight.

“Cinnamon bread. Your favorite.”

I couldn't help but talk with my mouth full. “Grandma, seriously, I don't know how you do it, but this is amazing.”

My grandmother shook her head. “Wasn't me. Alex made that.”

I coughed. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to swallow the piece now or spit it back out. Thing was, it tasted fine. It wasn't rock hard. It was soft and warm and moist. Just how I liked it. And it tasted freaking delicious. I opted for swallowing.

“Alex made this?”

Alex nodded. “I don't know how it happened, but with your grandmother standing right here, there was no way I wasn't getting it right. Turns out when she says a pinch, it's not an exact science. It's more like an art. When she explained it like that, it was pretty easy.”

I nodded warily, not sure it was a good idea to take another bite, but my stomach rumbled, begging for more. It was really good.

My grandmother patted me on the back. “And why are you standing up like I didn't teach you properly? Grab a plate and coffee and juice. Eggs and pancakes will be out in a moment.”

“Another Alex creation?”

Grandma Lucy shook her head. “Now that I have Marta from the hotel coming over to cook for everybody, Alex and I got to know each other.” Her smile intensified when she glanced at Alex. “So listen, Jensen. I want you to go golfing with Martin today. I think you two can heal your tension. Then when you're done with that, will you go to LA and check on Alex's artwork for her so she doesn't have to do it herself? You know her nerves.”

I looked back and forth between my grandmother and my best friend. And my gaze locked on Alex's. The crackle of a spark was there, just like it had been last night, but today it was worse. I needed to get away from it.

“Okay, I’ll head out to the course. What time?”

My grandmother grinned. “They started an hour ago.”

Shit. That meant I was late. I grabbed another slice of bread and jogged upstairs to change. When I finally made it up to the golf course, my cousins and uncle were on the fourth hole.

Martin was typically snarky. “Look who decided to wake up. It seems the rest of us who aren’t the favorite were up at the crack of dawn.”

“Keep talking, Martin. Grandma’s not here right now, so I will happily break your nose. For the second time.” I grinned. I’d been seven when I broke Martin’s nose the first time. Didn’t matter that my cousin was older or bigger than me.

But now I had the height and weight advantage. While Martin may have looked similar to me, working out for my cousin consisted of a round on the golf course. I wasn’t sure if my cousin had ever run anywhere in his life.

Martin studied me for a moment, unsure if he should take me seriously or not. There was no way I was going to poke at my cousin with my grandmother present, but since Grandma wasn’t there, I was done taking Martin’s insults.

Martin cocked his head and took a step back, conceding it would have been a fight. “It’s okay, cousin. I mean, I know you probably didn’t get enough sleep with that hot piece next to you.”

I tossed down the five iron I’d picked and got in Martin’s face up close and personal. “What did you say?”

Martin held his hands up. “Sorry. Can’t help it if I notice that your woman is hot. She’s got that sassy thing going for her. I mean honestly, I never thought you were into exotic girls, but man am I glad you brought her around. Maybe she’s looking for an upgrade.”

Exotic? What the actual fuck?

If I hit him in the face, Grandma Lucy would notice and be upset. As I assessed all the points that I could hit on my cousin

without my grandmother noticing, my uncle stepped between us. “That’s enough, you two.” Uncle Jake wasn’t a bad guy, he was just complacent and let his son have too much freedom.

“Not another word about my girlfriend.” I punctuated the point with a glare.

Martin grinned. “That’s fine. I’m happy she’s in my imagination.”

As if I would let Martin anywhere near Alex. Luckily for Martin, he narrowly dodged a beat down thanks to an intervention. I pulled out my ringing phone and turned my back to my cousin. “Yeah?”

“Jensen. Thank God you answered. I didn’t want to disturb Alex. You know how she gets, and she’d be freaking out right now.”

“Cassie? Calm down. What’s the matter?”

“The pieces haven’t arrived. No, scratch that. Some of them *have* arrived. But not *all* of them. And I watched the guys load the truck myself. Alex is going to kill me. And just when we’ve started to become friends. Oh my God.”

This was so bad. “Cassie, calm down. Were there any other scheduled deliveries for the truck?”

“I was on the phone with the trucking company this morning, and they’re looking up to see where else the truck stopped. But the problem is, I’m here at the gallery and I’ve only got maybe two-thirds of the pieces we promised. And I don’t know a way to fix this. Alex put everything that she had at the studio on that truck, and I have no contingency plan if they can’t find the pieces.”

My gut curled in on itself, and the bile rose. Alex had worked so hard for this. She was finally getting the recognition she deserved. She was selling her pieces. This gallery was going to open things up for her. She needed this. “Cassie, calm down. I’m coming. We’ll figure this out together.”

“What about Alex? Will she know there’s a problem?”

“You and I are keeping any problems to ourselves for now. Besides, she asked me to look in on the gallery today anyway.”

I hung up with Cassie and turned on my cousin with a grin. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to go save the day for my girlfriend. You should be so lucky.”

CHAPTER II

JENSEN



IT HAD BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE I HAD BEEN THIS ANGRY. “What do you mean you don’t know what happened to the pieces?”

I had the owner of the delivery truck shifting back and forth on the balls of his feet as he tried to explain. “I don’t know what happened. There were two other stops, but things were supposed be loaded there, *not* taken off. I’m trying to figure it out.”

“You need to do more than try. Do you understand how long Alex Winters has been working for this gallery opening?” Instead of shouting, my voice went deadly soft. Cold. “You may already think yourself a success with your business. She is meant to do so much more than any of us could do. With her work she brings joy and light to people’s lives. And you want to tell me that you don’t know where those pieces are? Let me tell you how this is going to go. You’re going to get on the phone, and then you’re going to personally go to those other locations and do a full search for those items. And you will have them here for me tomorrow.”

The guy darted a glance to Cassie, and I got in his face. “Don’t look at her. Look at me. I’m the one you have to deal with if you can’t perform the simple task of delivering what you were contracted to do.”

The guy nodded vigorously, beads of sweat rolling down his temples. Granted, it was unseasonably warm for December in Los Angeles, but I wasn’t screwing around.

After he left on his search for Alex's paintings, Cassie came over and blew a low whistle. "Man, remind me to never get on your bad side."

Looking over, I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you've got your boxing gloves on. You were about to tear that guy a new one."

"Well, he pissed me off. It's his job to deliver. If he can't handle that responsibility, I'll make sure *everyone* knows about it. By the time I'm done with him, he won't have much of a business."

Cassie stared at me for a moment, then the slow smile crept over her lips. "You really care about Alex."

Shit. Could she see? Did she know what lurked deep down in the recesses of my mind? "Of course I do. I should. She's my best friend."

"I wish I had a best friend like you, riding in on the white horse, all angry gladiator. I'm down for that."

I shook my head. "I'm not charging in on a white horse. I'm just trying to get that guy to fulfill his obligations."

"Whatever you want to call it, it's still fighting for her."

I frowned. "Of course I am. As if you'd do anything less."

Cassie shrugged. "Alex has a lot of people who want to see her succeed. So it's cool. In the meantime, when are we going to tell her about the missing pieces? Because as much as you terrified that dude, I'm not so sure he's going to come through."

"I certainly hope I scared him straight, but I have another solution. One I pray works almost as well."

"I'm all ears. Because right now we're up the creek, no paddle, and the canoe is leaking."

I laughed. "Great visual."

"Isn't it accurate?"

I nodded. "That it is."

“Okay, so what’s plan B?” Cassie asked.

I hadn’t gotten much further than light a fire under the delivery guy’s ass, but I needed to do something. This was going to break Alex’s heart. She’d lost sleep over this show. Hell, she’d lost weight over it, not that she had any weight to lose. The stress was showing. All I wanted to do was help her. “Cassie, don’t worry about this. We’ve got all the pieces we need.”

“What do you mean? We’re supposed to be exhibiting twenty pieces, and right now we only have thirteen. There are a couple of sculptural pieces in there too, but she’s a bit nervous about those because she’s known for her paintings.”

“You won’t be short on paintings. You might even have one or two extras.”

“Are you going to go back to Catalina and ask her to paint through the night?”

“Next best thing. We can raid my piggy bank.”

“Huh?” She scrunched her face.

“For every birthday and every celebration, whenever Alex asks what I want, I always tell her a new painting. I’ve got at least eight. They’re currently displayed at my condo, but I can have them replaced with prints. Alex needs this. And of course they are pieces that have never been shown from my private collection. So they should make a mint.”

Cassie’s eyes went wide. “You would do that for her?”

“There’s not much I *wouldn’t* do for Alex.” And that was true. She deserved so much more, but this was what I could give her. I would make sure she had the gallery opening she deserved.

“Looks like she’s lucky to have you.”

As I walked away, I mumbled under my breath, “No, I’m the lucky one.”

CHAPTER 12

ALEX



PATIENCE WAS NOT ONE OF MY VIRTUES. OKAY, PATIENCE AND cooking. Though now, with Grandma Lucy's help, cooking wasn't nearly as bad. I'd made bread this morning. I'd actually even managed the sandwiches for lunch.

I was pacing in the library, waiting for Jensen to come back to the island. When Martin and his father and brothers had come back from golfing, they said Jensen had taken off early. They said the conversation hadn't sounded good, so of course, I'd worried. I'd tried several times to call Cassie, but Cassie didn't answer her phone. And neither did Jensen. Neither one of them were filling me with confidence at the moment.

When Jensen walked through the front door, I pounced on him. "What's the matter? Did you see them? Do they all look bad? Will I get laughed out of the community? What if everyone hates my pieces? What if none of them sell?"

Jensen was somber, but his lips twitched. "If no one purchases a single one, which by the way, is *not* going to happen, I'll buy all of them. Remember, I had to fight Mr. Tamagotchi last summer for one of the pieces that's hanging in the condo."

"Yeah, but you're only saying that because you're my best friend and you have an obligation to. But I wouldn't let you buy them all."

He chuckled low, but I could see something was wrong. "What's the matter? You've got that look on your face like

you're trying to figure out the best way to tell me something. How many times do I have to tell you? You don't need to sugarcoat things with me. Just rip off the damn Band-Aid!"

"Alex, it's not that easy. I want this to be great for you."

"You're making it worse. Just tell me."

He sucked in a deep breath. "Look, there was a problem with the delivery. Some of the pieces didn't quite make it there."

My lungs constricted. Even as my heart hammered that *thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud*, I couldn't get any air, and my head started to spin.

Jensen put his big hands on my shoulders and propped me upright. "Alex, breathe."

His voice was a sharp command. And I inhaled. And this time the air made it into my lungs. Oh no. What was I going to do? "I don't know— What am I supposed to— I don't have time to make new pieces."

He shook his head. "And you don't have to. I took care of it."

"What do you mean you took care of it? Are you an artist now?" My tone was harsher than I meant it to be, thanks to the panic.

"I don't have to be. You've given me art since we became friends. Every birthday, every celebration. I've got multiple pieces of your work. We are going to show some of those."

Those were personal. Those were my past. I opened my mouth to argue with him, but he put his finger over my lips. The buzz of electricity where he touched me pulled at something low in my belly.

"I took care of it. I only gave Cassie six of them. I kept my absolute favorites. This is done, and it's going to be perfect."

When he removed his finger, I struggled to find words. "But those were for you."

“But I’ll give them to you so that you can have the success you want. You worked too hard to not have this go right.”

“You’d do that for me?”

He shook his head. “How long is it going to take for you to realize that we’re family? Whatever it takes to make you happy, I’m down for it. Hell, you came to Catalina to stand in for me as my girlfriend,” he whispered. “I can do you a favor in return.”

And boy, he had done me a favor. At least I wouldn’t be showing with a half-empty gallery, but still, what about those pieces? All that work, the blood, sweat and tears. Where were they? “Jensen, I don’t know what to say.”

“Look, I know that the pieces I can substitute aren’t the ones you wanted to show. I know that it’s not the same as the ones that you specifically selected. But I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that we get every missing piece back. Every last one. I promise.”

My nose stung and my eyes pricked. Oh hell. I was going to cry. “I don’t know what to do. And I don’t know how to thank you.”

After the first tear spilled, I couldn’t hold the rest of them back. Jensen’s face fell. I never cried, let alone in front of people. But as much as he must have been startled, all he did was pull me close and hold me tight.

Jensen

I COULDN’T TAKE my eyes off Alex. We’d all gone for a short cruise out on the water before dinner. I told Alex to stay behind so that she could process and didn’t have to be on, standing in for me, when she was dealing with all this stress, but she refused. And I had to admit that the fresh air and open water had done something for her complexion. Her eyes were still sad, but she looked steadier.

At dinner that night, Martin handed her a gin and tonic he'd made himself. "Here baby, drink this. Feel better. What's got you blue? I'm betting it's my idiot cousin. It can't be that bad, so have a drink."

The last thing Alex needed was alcohol. What she needed was sleep, about a week's worth of it. "Martin, you need to mind your business."

Down at the other end of the table, Grandma Lucy narrowed her eyes at the two of us. And then her gaze softened when she looked at Alex. "You two behave down there."

I was quick to apologize. "Sorry, my cousin's getting on my nerves, Grandma Lucy. I'll try not to hold it against him."

My grandmother grinned. "Jensen you always were troublesome."

Through the rest of the night, Martin kept making sure that Alex's glass was full, and I wanted to smack him. Alex was a lightweight. She usually only ever had one, and even one made her extra loose. Unfortunately, it also made her *extra* honest. And neither one of us could afford for her to go spilling anything. I made a point to keep a close eye on her, and on Martin, as we all adjourned for dessert in the library.

By the time we were ready for bed, it was clear she'd had more than one too many. She leaned on me, barely able to navigate the stairs. Once we were in the room, I was unsure what to do with her. "Hey, Alex, do you think you can manage brushing your teeth?" I sat her on the bed and studied her closely. She fluttered her beautiful long lashes open and the tips of them hit her eyebrows. But her eyes were glassy, and she was clearly out of it. "Okay, we'll skip the brushing for the night."

I should help her to change her clothes, but that was going a step too far. Besides, she was in leggings and some kind of soft cotton top thing, so maybe she'd be comfortable. I hoped so, because neither one of us was going to manage it if I undressed her.

By the time I crawled into bed, Alex had adopted her favorite position, sprawled out. I only got a little section of the bed, but then she shifted and adopted her other favorite position, which was draped across me. I gritted my teeth. So much for getting any rest tonight.

But I couldn't lie. It felt good to have her so close.

CHAPTER 13

ALEX



I WOKE SURROUNDED IN A COCOON OF WARMTH. THIS TIME I knew exactly where I was. I knew exactly whose arms were around me. I knew exactly whose heartbeat was steadily thumping against my cheek. And even though I knew exactly who it was, I couldn't resist laying there for just another second. I didn't want to face what he'd told me yesterday. Everything I'd worked for. What if it didn't happen?

Suddenly I was way too hot. With a groan, I rolled over and scooted out of bed. I just needed to get all these clothes off. Why was I still in my leggings? Had someone turned up the furnace? All I wanted to do was go back to bed, snuggle into Jensen, and stay there.

I stripped off my leggings and my long sleeve sweater. My head still spun a little. Why did I have so many gin and tonics?

Because when you were sipping you weren't thinking about the gallery.

I was certainly more stable now, but I still felt a little off kilter. Wearing just my underwear, I crawled back into bed. If I could sleep a little more, I'd feel better. I'd have a plan of attack.

Jensen already had a strategy, and he'd taken care of it yesterday. There was no way I was going to examine that any further. That wouldn't be in my best interest. All I knew was that the moment I slid back into the bed, Jensen reached for me and pulled me against him tight, wrapping an arm around my waist, and he didn't let go.

I might not even be fully awake. He certainly wasn't. But still, for a few brief moments, I wanted to pretend, to imagine that this was real. Fantasize that a family was possible for me. Dream that Jensen could love me.

Jensen

I HAD no idea what time it was. All I knew was that Alex was grinding her ass onto my dick, and I was hard as stone. I settled a hand on her hip to see if I could get her to stop. But when my hand encountered smooth satin skin, I jerked it back. She was naked. Where were her clothes? I racked my memory. I'd put her to bed. Gotten ready for bed myself. Climbed in. What did I miss? She was dressed when I put her on the mattress.

I tried to scoot back a few inches, so at least I wouldn't have that gorgeous behind tempting me. If she kept rubbing up against me like that, I was going to wake her. And she would likely figure out exactly what I'd been thinking about her. Of course the little devil on my shoulder said, *Oh that could be a totally awesome way to wake in the morning.*

But as I tried to get away from Alex without actually getting off the bed, she finally rolled over and then sleepily blinked her lids. "Hey, where are you going?"

I cleared my throat. "Nowhere. I was just changing positions."

She nodded, her eyes drifting shut, and I released the breath I'd been holding. She was still drowsy. Maybe now was a good time to grab a T-shirt and head for the couch downstairs.

Before I could make my final decision, her lashes fluttered again. This time she blinked dark eyes up at me, and my breath caught. The sliver of moonlight shining in the room made her look like an angel. "Jensen? Can I ask you a question?"

I tried to speak but found that I was too hoarse, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “Of course. You can ask me anything.”

Alex pushed herself up onto her elbows. The blanket slipped, showing me that she was at least in a bra. Thank God for small favors. Or too bad, depending on whether I listened to the little angel or the little devil.

“Why haven’t we ever... You know?”

My dick twitched as if to say, *hey, I have the same question.*

“What do you mean?” I asked to stall for time.

“I mean, why have you never seriously tried to go out with me? Sure, you used to flirt, but you hit on every woman you’ve ever met. What’s wrong with me?”

In the middle of the night, when my body was loose and languid and I didn’t have to pretend at all, the truth came more readily. Which terrified me. “Because you’re too important to me. In the early days, sure, I considered it. But you firmly ensconced me in the friend arena, and that was fine. And honestly, it’s better that way. I know I can be hell on women. And I never want to do that to you. Besides, you don’t really want to be one of those girls to me. I’m not good with relationships. Except this one.”

I couldn’t be sure, but the moonlight gave me enough light to see that her eyes were glittering as if she was ready to cry. “Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve always wondered what was wrong with me. Why you didn’t want me. I mean, you’ll sleep with anyone as long as she’s hot. I guess I was wondering if I would’ve made your list. You know, after guys like Mark and Brian. I think I just want to feel desirable. I find it hard to connect to people. Not you, though. But that’s never happening.”

Was she insane? I wanted her. I’d *always* wanted her. I’d just barely managed to use more of my brains than the little guy downstairs to think things through. “Alex, you’re single-

handedly, next to my grandmother, the most important person in my life. And you are sexy as hell. Shit. You're the sexiest woman I've ever known. You don't even try. Most girls I know, it's all smoke and mirrors. Hair extensions, nails, makeup. Those women look like completely different people when I wake up with them in the morning. You wake up like this. Soft and oozing sexiness."

She turned to face me, rolling onto her side. "You're just saying that because you're my best friend and you don't want to make me feel bad."

"I promise you I'm not just saying that." I turned on my side to face her as well, and she was so close I could have brushed my lips over hers. And ruined everything. "Alex, do you have any idea how tortured I've been the last two days? Not to touch you. I'm drowning here. Every time I kiss you, it's like someone shot a lightning bolt straight to my dick. And that's... *confusing* at the very least."

She ducked her head. I reached out and traced my fingers over her jaw before tilting up her chin so that our gazes met. "I want you so bad it hurts."

Her lips quivered when she asked, "What's stopping you?"

In that moment, I had no idea. If I kissed her, maybe that would be enough, just a taste. One that wasn't orchestrated, one that wasn't to show anything off, one that was private, between us. And I wanted it. Bad.

But that will mess up everything.

For once, I didn't listen to the internal doubt. And then I leaned over and swept my lips over hers.

CHAPTER 14

ALEX



GENTLY, JENSEN SLID HIS HANDS DOWN MY ARMS AND WOUND them around his neck as he mumbled something unintelligible against my lips.

I moaned softly as Jensen’s lips trailed down my neck, leaving a trail of wet kisses that sent shivers down my spine. His hands moved down to my breasts, cupping them firmly as he kneaded them gently. I arched my back, pressing my breasts into his hands, and let out a low groan.

“God, you’re so sexy, Alex,” Jensen whispered, his hot breath against my ear. “I want you so bad.”

Fisting his hands into my hair, he kissed me again, licking into my mouth, and I couldn’t help the shiver that rolled through me. He growled low when I rolled my hips up, and I smiled to myself. At least I wasn’t the only one feeling the heat.

“Mmmmm,” I moaned, sliding my hands down to his shoulders and back up to his neck, my fingers threading in his hair. I gave a tug and pulled his head back, breaking his mouth away from mine.

He kissed down my neck, biting gently then licking the sting away. His hands ran over my back, then down to my backside, squeezing with a gasp.

“I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anyone as much as I want you right now,” he murmured, his breath hot against my neck.

God he was good. “Jensen, you don’t have to—”

Jensen drew back and stroked a thumb over my cheek.

“I don’t have to what?” His gaze searched mine. “I’ve been dying to touch you ever since our first kiss. I go to bed with you on my mind and wake up hoping that you don’t torture me all day with every casual touch. I’ve barely been holding it together all these years. You are so beautiful, some days it hurts to look at you.”

“Jensen,” I whispered. In that moment, I wanted to believe him. Believe that I was somehow special to him. But a tiny voice in my head reminded me to be careful.

This is all pretend. Enjoy him now and get out unscathed.

If I believed him, I would get hurt, and I hadn’t signed on for that.

“My beautiful Alex.”

I moaned, arching my back and pressing my breasts into his hands again.

“I want to watch your face as you come, Alex,” he whispered, his lips against my ear. “I want to see the pleasure as I slide into you and as I bring you to orgasm.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered softly, my eyes drifting closed. His words were making me hotter than I thought possible. Strong hands slid down my back and under my ass, pulling me flush against his thick length.

I rocked against the length of him, and the delicious friction made me shudder.

“Oh God,” I gasped as Jensen’s mouth met mine again, his hot tongue sliding against mine, kissing me as if I was the air he needed. I couldn’t get enough of his mouth, loving the way he moaned as we kissed and how our breathing grew ragged.

I let my hands run down his body, over his defined back and lean hips, then shifted my hand between us to palm him. “Oh fuck me,” he groaned as I ran my hand over the thick length of him, feeling him throb and twitch beneath my fingers.

The roar of rushing blood in my skull drowned out all other noise. This was real. At least for now. In this moment, he was mine. Slowly, I tugged the knot of his pajamas loose. When I reached inside past the cotton, my hand closed around the heat of him, and we both hissed.

I ran my thumb over the tip of his cock, spreading the precum around and smiling to myself as he shuddered.

When my thumb found the sensitive skin on the underside of his cock and stroked repeatedly, he froze then swallowed hard.

Wow.

“Alex.” My name on his tongue was both a warning and exaltation. Propped over me on his elbow, I watched in awe as his jaw ticked and he dragged in deep breaths. “Please, Alex. Do it again, baby. You’re such a fucking tease, and I love it.”

I grinned at him wickedly and did it again, watching as his gaze followed my hand. Slowly, I slid my hand up and down his length, over and over, varying my strokes from fast to slow, relishing in how he leaked precum. Eventually all I could hear was the sound of our labored breathing.

Jensen let his head fall back, groaning and closing his eyes, his hands sliding down my thighs and squeezing.

“Alex, I need you. Please.”

When I used my other hand to palm his balls, his eyes snapped open and he grabbed my hand, stopping my strokes. His eyes burned into mine. “I need you so much.”

“Jensen, I want you to make love to me.”

He seemed to hesitate a split second and then muttered a curse. Lifting me, he tugged off my bra. Then he discarded my panties. He never once took his eyes off me, watching me with the keen hunger of a starving man.

When he finally shed his pajamas, my eyes went wide. Wow, he was big. He was also beautiful to look at and cocky enough to know it.

He yanked open the bedside drawer, then fumbled around before cursing under his breath. “Fucking hell.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Alex. No condoms. Obviously I didn’t think we’d be doing this, and I hoped there would be some in the nightstand. But—” He stopped and ran his hands through his hair. “Fuck. It’s okay. Change of plan.”

What? I was finally here in Jensen’s arms, and we had no damn condoms? For fuck’s sake. I hadn’t packed any either because this was bloody Jensen. I never in a million years thought I’d be here.

“I have an IUD and I’ve never had sex without a condom.” The words came out in a rush, tripping over each other to get out.

What?

What the hell did I just say?

My pussy just throbbed in response as if piping out that we’d had a major dry spell and I wanted this, I wanted him. Honestly, it felt like she was threatening me with eternal horniness if I didn’t say the words.

Jensen’s brows knitted. “Alex, neither have I. But we don’t need to. I have a whole host of other skills I want to show off that will have you screaming my name.”

“No, I—” I bit my lip nervously. “I want to. I want... you.” I said the last word so softly I didn’t think he heard me.

He dropped his forehead to mine. “Jesus, woman, you’re killing me. I’ve been tested. I’m clean. And condoms are a rule for me. I’ve never had sex without one. Are you sure, Alex?”

That little kernel of niggling doubt tried to warn me that I would get attached. Tried to warn my already tender heart. Tried to protect me.

But my body knew what it wanted. And I wanted Jensen. For however long I could have him. For once, I was going to live in the moment. “I’m sure.”

He swallowed hard and pulled back, his gaze roving over me like he was trying to decide which part of me to devour first.

“I want to take this slow,” he whispered, his face inches from mine.

I swallowed a lump in my throat and nodded. God, this was really happening.

“Alex...” His voice was low and hoarse. He trailed a finger down my cheek, and I shivered. “I want to take my time and enjoy every inch of you.”

I nodded again, barely able to breathe. He grinned, and I felt the smile against my lips as he kissed me. “I want you to show me everything you like. Everything that will make you come.”

I gasped and felt my face flush. He smiled at me and kissed me again then moved down, kissing and licking down my neck and chest. I moaned out loud and arched into his mouth.

“God, yes. That feels so good.”

He dipped his mouth to my nipples, sucking and rolling them around his tongue. I moaned again as he licked and sucked them, pulling them between his teeth and biting down softly. My clit throbbed as it sent a jolt of pleasure through me.

My hands found his hair, pulling at the soft strands and tugging as he licked and nipped at my nipples, then he used his teeth to scrape across a sensitive peak, and I cried out.

He lifted his head, grinning at me as he shifted his mouth to the other nipple. I couldn't take my eyes off him, my breath sawing in and out of my lungs.

I lifted my hips up to meet him, rubbing my clit against his thigh.

“Oh God, that's amazing,” I moaned.

He moved from my breasts, trailing his tongue down my body, licking and sucking every inch of me as he went. I was

panting and moaning constantly, my head spinning, my heart racing while his mouth and tongue worked magic on my skin.

I held my breath, not sure what he would do next. He moved lower and lower until he was on his knees, nipping at my hip and then sliding down the length of my thigh.

I moaned and moved my hand to the back of his head, pulling him up, wanting to feel his mouth on my most sensitive spots. I hissed when the stubble around his lips rubbed across my clit, and then he breathed hot air on my quivering skin.

He moved to the other thigh, and I felt the tip of his tongue slide across the length of my pussy. I gasped, my hand twisting in his hair as I tried to pull him closer, but he resisted.

“No, Alex keep still. I want to take my time.”

“But—”

“No. I said Keep. Still.” He punctuated each word with an open mouth kiss. My pussy throbbed in response, and I shuddered. “I want to drink in your taste. And I want to make you come before I bury myself inside you.”

Holy Mother of God. I bit my lip and nodded. He kissed me slow and deep.

“I love the way you taste.” His voice was hoarse. “I can’t wait to be inside you. God you’re so fucking wet, baby.”

He slid a finger through the length of me, and I moaned.

“You’re so beautiful, Alex. So wet, so hot. I’ve been dreaming of your pussy since the first night I kissed you.”

I squirmed in his hold, trying to get closer.

My body tightened when he buried his face in my pussy, and I cried out, grabbing his shoulders. He made a humming sound, and it vibrated against my clit, sending a ripple of pleasure through me as he buried his face.

“Shhh, baby. I won’t hurt you. Just let me taste you. I’ve been thinking about this for so long,” he said then he licked

my pussy, and I cried out at the feel of his hot tongue against me. “So. Fucking. Long.”

He licked, sucked, and teased me until I was weak with need and my body felt as if it was on fire.

With his mouth on my clit and a finger stroking the bundle of nerves deep inside my pussy, he traced another finger even lower, and my back arched off the bed. “Oh my God, Jensen!”

When he lifted his gaze to mine, I could have sworn he was smirking. His finger grazed my pucker again, and my mouth fell open. “Jensen!”

He eased off my clit to ask, “You don’t like it?”

Did I? “I—I’m not sure.”

“Okay, do you want me to stop?” He asked and waited patiently for me to stop.

“N-n-no. Don’t stop. I was just surprised.”

He bit back a smile. “Okay. Just tell me if anything doesn’t feel good.”

I swallowed hard, my mouth dry as he went right back to fingering my pussy. “Oh my God, Jensen.”

This time when his finger grazed the tight pucker of my asshole, I tried to relax. The unexpected zing of pleasure hit me again, and I dragged the pillow over my face, groaning into it.

I had never felt anything so good in my life. He hummed again, and it vibrated against my clit, and I shot off like a rocket, my body shivering and shuddering as electricity sparked all over my body.

“Jensen!”

Holy shit. I felt like I was balanced on a precipice. I was so close to falling over and tumbling into the abyss.

He slid a second finger deep into my pussy, and I lost it. I came apart in his arms, my body shaking with the force of it. He continued to finger me through my orgasm, and I was delirious with the pleasure.

“Oh, God. Oh. God,” I moaned. I’d never come that hard in my life.

He kissed me low on my belly and looked up at me, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

When he notched himself between my thighs, I reached for him. “I cannot believe I’ve managed to go all this time without ever watching you come. I need to see it again,” he murmured against my lips before kissing me deep.

I could taste myself on his tongue as he fisted my hair and kissed me thoroughly.

I whimpered and tugged at his hair when the blunt head of his cock brushed over my clit. He thrust his hips, and I cried out, my back bowing off the bed.

When he pulled away, I spread my legs wider and lifted my hips to his.

“Alex,” he swallowed hard. “Put me inside you. I don’t trust myself to go slow.”

When I reached for him, both of us groaned. I loved how he felt, pulsing and hot in my hand.

I drew him to me, circling the stiff length of him at my opening briefly. He cursed, and his arms shook as they steadied him over me. His hips bucked, and I tightened my hold.

When I finally stopped teasing and positioned him, directing him into my softness, I gasped. He was so hot and electric and big. I let my eyes flutter closed, but he stopped me.

“No, Alex. Look at me. Watch me as I take you. Know who’s making love to you right now.”

Oh, God. The combination of his dirty talk and his slow advance and retreat had me hovering somewhere between *I’m going to come* and *I can die happy now*.

When he started to move, I did the one thing I never let myself do; I finally let go of all the stress and the doubt and let myself enjoy it.

“That’s it, Alex. That’s it. Let go for me.”

My release came on quick, stunning me as the heat and bliss rushed from my spine to the center of my body. He’d just sunk to the hilt when the tremors started from inside my thighs. I tried to hold it back, but he wouldn’t let me.

“Don’t you dare rob me of this. I want to see you come, Alex. Let go,” he muttered through gritted teeth.

And I did. The rolling waves of orgasm disoriented me, fogging my brain, making it impossible to command my muscles to do anything other than hold on tight to him.

“Jesus, Alex, so beautiful, so hot.” The words flowed from him, unrestrained. And I felt another orgasm build inside me as he slid into me again. I started to move my hips again, and he chuckled on a retreating stroke.

“God, you’ll be the death of me.”

But he kept making love to me. Taking his time. No rush, as if I wasn’t already coiled tight enough that I’d snap. As if he wasn’t pulsing inside me. But his clenched jaw and furrowed brow told me he was working on holding back, waiting for me.

“Come on, baby, I’m not going without you.”

Jensen slid a hand between our bodies and found my clit. With a series of deft, sure strokes, another wave of bliss bit into me.

The moment my walls clamped around his length, threatening to hold him inside me forever, he started to come. He scooped his hand under my ass, holding me to him so tight I worried I wouldn’t be able to breathe ever again.

Finally, he collapsed, rolling to the side and bringing me with him. Too limp to do anything else, I didn’t fight it. In that moment, I knew I was in trouble.

Maybe it was seconds, but it felt like hours had passed when he finally eased out of me. I was too tired to open my eyes, but there was a shift of weight on the bed, and he took his heat with him.

I curled onto my side to nurse the rejection, but instead, he returned with a warm washcloth, gently turning me to my back and parting my thighs.

After he cleaned me, he climbed back into bed with me, pulling me snug against himself. Neither one of us spoke. Either we were too exhausted, or we were terrified of what the heck we'd just done to our friendship.

CHAPTER 15

JENSEN



HAD I EVER FELT LIKE THIS? THAT DESPERATE, CLOYING, jump-out-of-my-skin feeling? Making love to Alex was like making love to a live wire. How had I never known? How had we never done this before?

But now what? I still couldn't believe that we'd made love last night. More than once. More than twice. The third and the fourth times sort of blended together because we just kept going. Who needed sleep? I certainly didn't, not if it involved losing even a second of the cocoon Alex and I were in.

When I reached for her, her side of the bed was cool, and my eyes popped open. What the hell? "Alex?" I called. I listened but didn't hear running water or any other sound in the bathroom. "Alex?" I said again as I sat up, shoving off the sheets and blankets. *Holy shit*. She'd left me. She'd screwed and dashed?

How many times have you done that to others?

That was different though. Last night with Alex was something else entirely. My brain offered up images of Alex straddling me as I sat up and kissed her while we made love. Sweet and slow, lips touching. Whispered murmurs of, *Yes, right there*, and *Please more. Don't stop*. My name a whisper on her lips. That deeper connection I'd never felt with anyone before. And now she'd left me? That stung, and I didn't know what to do with that feeling.

If I'd been using my logical brain, I would have remembered that Alex was generally not one to examine

emotions. That's why I'd been so freaked last night when she cried. Maybe she had no idea how to handle the morning after. It was awkward enough the other night when we woke up together. The thing that really burned the most was that she hadn't even left a note. What if she'd left the island?

No. As awkward and confused as we both might be, she wouldn't leave. At least I hoped.

Jensen

AFTER A HOT SHOWER put things in perspective, I went down to the kitchen. Again, my grandmother had cinnamon bread baking. I'd hoped to find Alex in there, but it was just Grandma Lucy, and I greeted her. "Morning, Grandma."

"Morning, baby. Want some coffee?"

"I thought you couldn't have coffee? And shouldn't I be getting you something instead of you waiting on me? Do you want me to make you breakfast?"

My grandmother sighed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. I'm going to follow the doctor's rules. For a while anyway. You know how I get when I think things are exaggerated."

"Grandma, please, I want you around for a long time. You can't be scaring us like that again. If the doctor says no coffee, that means no coffee. Do you understand me?"

Grandma Lucy's brows shot up. "Well, this is a nice surprise."

I poured myself a cup even as I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's nice to see you taking the lead. I know how you usually handle things with your charm and being able to adapt to any situation. But I have to say, it sure is nice for you to stand for something. It's good to see. Helps me realize that you're doing just fine."

"Well, yeah. You get more flies with honey and all that."

She grinned. “Yeah, but sometimes a flyswatter’s pretty good too.”

I took a sip of my coffee and grinned into the dark liquid. “So, uh, have you seen Alex this morning?”

“No. You lost your girlfriend?”

I pursed my lips. When she put it like that, all the irritation came rushing back. But I shoved it back like I always did. “I’m sure she’s just headed into Los Angeles to check on the gallery.”

His grandmother nodded. “Mm-hmm. Can I ask you a question, baby?”

“Sure.”

“Why don’t you ever come home anymore?”

Oh. We were jumping right in, then. “You know why, Grandma.”

“Well, I can piece it together. But you know, you’ve never actually told me. You just kept saying no when I asked you to come home and offered to take me somewhere fabulous instead. Now you know how I love to travel, so I’m never going to say no to that. But it would be nice to have you home more often.”

“You and I both know that this isn’t my home anymore. I loved my father. I loved all the hotels. Every time we got to go somewhere, we’d stay at a Morrison property, and I’d get so excited. They all felt like home with different touches and different themes. I could never have seen myself doing anything else. But then Dad was gone, and instead of giving me the opportunity to show him and everyone in the family how much I loved this place, he gave everything to Martin. The dude who made it clear how much he hated me.”

“Jensen, baby, he doesn’t hate you.”

“Well, he sure is a good actor then. He can’t ever resist the chance to twist the knife that Dad overlooked me and didn’t trust me enough with this place.”

Grandma Lucy slapped the granite countertop with her palm. “Now that is enough, Jensen. If you didn’t know your dad well enough to know his intentions, then let me fill you in. Your father loved you. He knew how much you love these hotels. But he also knew that you were the kind of person who would make everyone else happy first. It’s in your soul. Hospitality was born and bred into you. He knew that you would constantly change and adapt yourself to be what other people wanted. And he knew that your uncle Jake, and Martin, and your cousins Jason and Mack would gang up on you and consistently outvote you since they sit on the board. He didn’t want that for you. And the hotels needed a lot of upkeep, some of them were in serious debt, and he didn’t want to saddle you with that. He knew you had vision. He wanted you to build your own legacy. Your dad knew you were no worker bee. He knew that you’d want to come in and change things and do them how you want to. He changed the will so that Martin would inherit. He always meant to talk to you after the paperwork was finalized, but then he had a heart attack and was gone. Your father loved you.”

I leaned against the counter, taking another sip of my coffee, letting the bitter taste ease down my throat along with the bitter pill I was swallowing right now. “I don’t know about that Grandma.”

“I knew my son better than anyone. You were all he cared about. When he and your mom called it quits, he worked hard to keep you in a lifestyle that would make you miss her less. Because he never got to choose, he wanted you to be able to. If you wanted, you could work at Morrison Hotels. He knew, sooner or later, you’d be in charge of everything anyway. Martin and your uncle Jake would all be forced to take a back seat.”

The knot in my belly tightened. Had I been looking at everything all wrong? Had my father wanted me to choose my own legacy? Create one for myself? I’d spent the better part of the last three years angry at him for cutting me out of the only thing that I ever wanted to do. But if I’d stayed, I never would’ve opened my own hotel. I would’ve been too stilted, trying to keep the Morrison name and everything it stood for.

Out on my own, I'd been able to create something I loved, something that was all me but also part Morrison. Was it possible I might have been wrong about my father? About my family? Maybe I was wrong about Alex, too. Shit, Alex. Last night had felt too good to give up. Last night had been something special.

"You have a lot to think about, baby. But remember, he loved you, like I love you. Maybe even more. Because if I had my way, I'd have kept you here. But that's for my own selfish reasons, so I could see you all the time."

"You wouldn't have to keep me here, Grandma. I would be here all on my own."

"I love to hear that. And I'm so glad that you brought Alex, because I adore her. She's great. And funny. And did you know that that child always has to paint on something. Yesterday while you were in Los Angeles, I showed her the watercolors I keep in the back shed. Before I knew it, she was painting me a landscape."

I laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like her. One time, I caught her using strawberries and raspberries as pigmented colors for some painting she was doing."

My grandmother patted my arm. "You did good. She's beautiful and smart. Sweet. And clearly, she's in love with you."

Heat flamed my skin. She was not in love with me. Alex didn't do emotions. "Not so sure about that."

She patted my arm. "You go on and finish your coffee. I need to go get something I put in the den last night."

"What's up, Grandma?"

"Hush up and drink your coffee. At least you can enjoy it for the both of us."

I finished my coffee, and my mind stayed on Alex. And my father. Maybe it was time to reevaluate some things.

My grandmother came back in a couple of minutes, smiling like the Cheshire cat. "Okay, now I'm going to give

you this, but you in no way have to use it. I have met that girl, and she's not exactly an old-fashioned ring kind of girl, but she still might appreciate this."

Heat suffused my skin the moment my grandmother said ring. From behind her back. She pulled out a tiny blue-velvet box. I knew what was in there. Her wedding ring. An emerald cut diamond in rose gold setting, rose gold and platinum wound around each other to form intricate flower patterns. "Oh, Grandma. I couldn't."

My grandmother waved me off. "I'm insisting. If there's anyone who deserves my ring, it's that girl. Certainly no one that your cousin Martin has brought around."

The guilt wove through me like smoke disbursing. I was a liar. And what's more, now I was going to hurt my grandmother. "Grandma, I need to tell you something."

She shushed me. "You hold onto that for as long as you need to. And then, maybe soon, maybe a year from now, you might know someone who would like to wear that ring for a while."

Man, I loved my grandma. She was going to be so disappointed when she found out I was a liar.

CHAPTER 16

ALEX



THIS WAS WHAT I HAD ALWAYS IMAGINED CHRISTMAS TO BE like. Surrounded by family, lots of food, laughter, joy. I spent the better part of the day working with Cassie to integrate the pieces I'd given to Jensen into the rest of the collection. Then I did a little shopping to make sure that I had Christmas gifts for everyone.

No, they weren't my family, but Jensen was. It was the first time I'd bought his present instead of making him one. I just hoped I'd gotten it right. Since I'd met him, he'd been completely obsessed with cars. He'd seen every episode of *Top Gear* ever produced. So I just hoped the present was enough to say thank you for going out on a limb for me.

Given that it was Christmas Eve, we hadn't had a chance to address what happened between us last night. By the time I'd come back from LA, everybody had come in from their day, and the kitchen was in full swing. There hadn't been a single moment to go, *Hey, so about all the good sex last night. Was that just me? Are we still friends? Do you still respect me in the morning?* No, there was no time for that. But there would be. We couldn't walk around pretending it hadn't happened, not that I wanted to anyway. Last night was honestly everything I'd ever imagined. I'd hated to leave that morning, but I knew that if I didn't get to LA, I'd never get everything set with Cassie.

"Did you have a great day, honey?" Grandma Lucy asked.

"Yeah, I actually got a lot of work done. It was really good. I woke energized, so it was great to get a jump on the

day.”

“Yeah, the whole *early bird gets the worm* and all that. Just make sure you don’t work too hard so you can thoroughly enjoy yourself. Experience some of our hospitality.”

Next to me, Jensen grazed my leg with his. My body remembered his brand of hospitality. “Yes, ma’am. I’m so grateful. Thank you so much for having me in your home. Especially over the holidays.”

“If I’d known that you were going to be this fantastic,” Grandma Lucy said, “I would’ve pressed Jensen to bring you home sooner.”

Jensen leaned over. “Hey, you want another drink?”

I shook my head. “I think I’ve had enough for a lifetime.”

He still hadn’t said anything about what happened last night. But he’d been all over me. Pulling out my chair. Making sure to serve me before he served himself. Getting me a drink whenever I needed one. All the attentiveness was freaking me out. What did it mean?

Jensen eventually had thrown his arm around the back of my chair, his fingertips playing with the skin on my shoulder, making me crazy. Making me want him again.

You’re going to get hurt. Stop getting too attached.

Eventually I needed to get up and find some space. Because if he kept touching me like that, I was going to jump him. And that probably wouldn’t end well for either of us.

Who are you kidding? Jumping is great until the sex is over and he realizes he doesn’t want to be with you.

And that was going to hurt. “I’ve got to use the ladies room.” I pushed my chair back, and Jensen and his uncle and cousins all stood. And then they sat when I sashayed out of the room.

After splashing cold water on my face, I found Jensen in the hallway, leaning against the wall.

“I didn’t need an escort.”

He shrugged. “Part of me was afraid you wouldn’t come back just now, or maybe you were making your escape.”

Hell. He was upset. I could see it in his face and in the set of his lips. He was still smiling, but the emotion didn’t quite reach his eyes. I should’ve known better. I ducked my head. “I’m sorry about this morning, Jensen. I needed some time to process. I did send a text so you wouldn’t worry.”

“Yeah, unfortunately I didn’t see your text until after I worried about you for an hour.”

I flushed. “Sorry about that.” And then I saw the sadness in his eyes. He thought I didn’t want to be there. *Damn.* “Jensen, last night was better than anything I could’ve ever imagined.”

His lips lifted into a smirk. “So you imagined us together, then?”

I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips. “I plead the Fifth.”

Jensen laughed. He strolled over to me, took my hand, and tugged me forward about half a foot. Then before I could gather my thoughts or catch my breath from having him so close, he dipped his head and kissed me.

It was a sweet kiss, his lips sliding over mine, giving me a taste of the heat between us. A taste of what we’d had last night. But then, as quickly as he started, he stopped again. “Come on, let’s get back to dinner.”

“A guy who kisses like that has no intention of taking me to dinner.”

He barked a laugh. “Okay, so you might be right about that. We’ll make a pit stop, then go back to the family celebration.”

As he dragged me down the hallway, I pulled back a little. “Jensen, wait. We crossed a line last night. *I* crossed a line. We can’t just pretend it didn’t happen.”

He ran a thumb over my cheek as his fingers played with the ends of my hair.

“You are the most important person in the world to me. And I don’t know what happened last night or what I hope is going to happen in the next couple of minutes, but I know that whatever happens here will not ruin what we have. We are forever going to be friends. I know that because when I thought I’d blown it this morning, all I wanted was to have you back.”

“Friends.” I said it slowly and deliberately to make sure I’d heard it right. He wanted to be friends. After everything that had happened?

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m not using you. I’m not going to hurt you. I would rather die. We were the best of friends before we ever did this. And maybe we weren’t supposed to sleep together, but it happened. And now that I’ve had a taste, it’s pretty impossible not to touch you.” He ran a hand through his hair. “We depend on each other, and I know that I’m horrible at relationships. Last night, for me, was...” He shook his head. “It was incredible. We go back to the real world in a couple of days, and when we do, I promise I won’t touch you. But maybe while we’re here, we should enjoy the time together. Enjoy us.”

Something deep inside of me screamed. I wanted more than this. I wanted *all* of him. But I knew he was right. He was horrible at relationships. And at the core of it, he didn’t think that anyone would love him long enough to stick around, so he dropped women first. And I never wanted to become one of his women. The ones that he never called again. The ones that he never saw again.

“Okay, we’ll go back to being friends when we get home. What happens in Catalina stays in Catalina.” It was going to kill me, but I knew he wasn’t the type to settle down. And I was grown up enough to know I couldn’t change him. We were better off as friends. But I was selfish too. I was going to enjoy this time with him. And even though I never let myself care about anyone, I was going to hold onto this and cherish these few days. Forever.

Jensen

STILL HOLDING my mug of mulled wine, I pulled her into the library. After locking the door behind us, I dragged her to the couch and placed my mug on the coffee table. When she placed a soft kiss on my lips, my whole body tensed. The scent of her perfume intoxicated me. The way her soft fingers brushed against my bare chest made my whole body tingle.

I couldn't wait any longer. My hands moved to her hips, and I pulled her closer to me, feeling the heat of her body against mine. Our mouths collided in a frenzy of lust, and I slid my tongue inside her mouth, exploring every inch of her. She moaned softly, and I knew she was just as turned on as I was.

Years of frustration and need boiled out in the kiss. Last night hadn't been enough. I wanted so much more from her.

I hiked her dress up and demanded that her tongue meet mine. I tasted and teased and sucked on her tongue in a sensual rhythm that spoke of how I was going to ride her. Soft hands caressed my back and clung to my shoulders as her hips rose and descended involuntarily.

Shit. And I'd thought dry humping as a teenager was frustrating. Clamping both hands on her hips, I held her still and continued to devour her. When she came, I would be inside her. When her orgasm hit, it would be with the slick walls of her sex around the length of me.

I broke our kiss and traced a path of open-mouthed kisses along the column of her neck.

I pushed her down onto the couch, and she giggled as I climbed on top of her. I could feel the hardness of my cock pressing against her thigh, and I knew I had to have her. I kissed my way down her neck, nipping at her skin as I went. When I reached her breasts, I took one of her nipples into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it through the fabric of her dress.

“Oh God, yes,” she moaned, her hands tangled in my hair. “Don’t stop.”

I moved my mouth to her other nipple, giving it the same attention.

My hands controlled the movements of her hips now, and I eased her moist heat against my throbbing erection in a pace that I could manage. I tucked her close, then tilted her away, tucked her close again, and away. Over and over I set the new pace, letting her know that I was in charge.

She tasted sweet and spicy. And her hair smelled like heaven and fresh lemons. With a growl, I shifted our position, tossing her beneath me on the couch. With rough hands, I tugged at the fabric of her dress, then her panties, and a small tearing sound echoed in the quiet of the night.

Alex moaned at the sound, and if possible I felt more heat pouring off her already wet center. Her fingernails dug into my back, scoring the skin, and she called out my name. Fire burned where her nails tore flesh.

Taking the cue from her, I reached for the hem of her dress and tugged it over her head, baring her breasts to my view. Her nipples already pebbled hard from my sucking on them.

With a grin, I reached for my mug, took a sip then sucked one pebble into my mouth and grazed it with my teeth. I tugged gently and used my fingers to pinch and pluck the other puckered nipple. When I’d had my fill of one, I moved to her other breast and laved at her like she was ice cream on a hot summer day.

“Jensen, please.” She reached between us, unzipped my trousers, and cupped me through my boxers. Her eyes flared. “God, you’re big.”

With one stroke of her delicate hand, she had me on the brink of orgasm. Lust raged in my veins, and I couldn’t for the life of me remember why I was supposed to go slow. I burned for her.

Impatiently, I tugged and yanked off my shirt, then my pants and boxers. I positioned myself between her thighs

again. With wide eyes, she stared up at me like she was holding her breath.

I stroked her wet slit with the backs of my knuckles, and she rolled her hips into the caress, moaning for me. Her wetness coated my knuckles with her slickness. “God, you’re already so wet.” I stroked again.

Alex tossed her head back. “Jesus, Jensen, please don’t tease.”

I chuckled as I slid a finger inside her, reaching into her slick depths. Slowly, I retreated then added another finger. With my thumb, I teased her clit by making light circles. Her hips rocketed off the couch, and I slid my fingers into her even deeper.

When she widened her thighs, I inhaled. I loved her scent, spicy and decadent. I had to taste her. Once again I reached for my mulled wine and took a sip. When I lowered my head, she mewled. I deliberately let some wine spill off of my tongue over her pussy lips, and she shook beneath me. I licked the length of her cleft and relished in her unique flavor. Devouring her, I avoided her clit deliberately. I meant what I’d said—when she came, it would be because I was inside her.

She attempted to tug me up by yanking on my hair, drawing me closer to her. “Jensen please, I need you. I can’t —”

I kissed a path up her body again, pausing momentarily at her breasts. Then I positioned my cock at her entrance. With one stroke, I slid into her to the hilt. She cried out as I groaned.

“You are so tight.” I withdrew an inch and re-seated myself inside her. “Fuck, you feel good.”

Ecstasy and white-hot bliss exploded in my body. I buried my face in Alex’s neck as I struggled to conquer the blistering need to claim her hard and quick. She felt like heaven. Soft, silken heaven wrapped around my cock. At that moment, a hundred armed men could have come charging through the door, and I would have been powerless to leave her.

“Jensen, I need to come. Please make me come.” She dug her nails into my back again.

Through clenched teeth, I muttered, “Shit, Alex. Stop that. Otherwise, we won’t be here for long.”

She placed an open-mouthed kiss on my shoulder. “I don’t want to stop. I want you hard and fast, Jensen. I’m not some delicate flower. I need this.” Her hands slid to my ass, massaged the bunched muscles, then drew my hips forward and tucked me further inside her.

That was the moment my body snatched control from my brain. I drove into her with enough power to make her gasp. No matter what happened, I was never leaving Alex Winters if I could help it.

Alex

I ARCHED my back under Jensen as his cock stretched me. As he slid into me again, he rubbed against my G-spot, and I moaned. God, he felt so good. His cock sliding in and out of me was what I needed. What I’d been craving since I first met him.

With a growl, he shifted our position so that I sat astride him, and he stared up at me from under hooded eyes. “Ride me, baby, it’s your show.”

And I did. Rising over him again and again, I took what I needed. He clamped his hands on my hips and held on, digging his fingers into my flesh.

As he drove into me with thrust after thrust, he stared up at me, eyes adoring, full of lust and... something else I couldn’t quite place. Unable to take the intimacy, I closed my eyes, wanting to only focus on the feelings, how he touched me, how the desire and need unfurled within me. But Jensen had other plans.

With his thumb and forefinger, he took hold of my chin. “Look at me, Alex.”

I stubbornly refused to open my eyes. And he immediately stopped thrusting. I snapped my eyes open. “Jensen!”

“I asked you to look at me.”

Heat flushed my face. “I... It’s too much.”

He shook his head and started moving inside me again. “No. It’s perfect.” Pulling me close and levering himself up so we were in a more seated position, he kissed me slow and deep, brooking no argument from me. When he pulled back from the kiss, he resumed the deep thrusts into me. Gently now, as if we had all the time in the world. “I want you to be well aware of who’s inside you. Who’s making you feel this.”

Pleasure rode my spine, urging me to go faster, and I rocked against him.

Jensen pumped inside me again. Capturing my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he pinched gently, and my inner walls quickened.

He repeated the motion. Harder this time. I groaned as bliss chased the initial sting of pain.

“You like that?” His dark gaze settled on me.

I nodded. “Y-yes.”

He repeated it, and I tossed my head back. “Jensen, please. I need—”

With his other hand, he reached between us and stroked my clit.

“Oh God!” To allow him better access, I braced my arms behind me on his knees as I enjoyed his deft thumb and his hard strokes.

My orgasm crashed into me so fast I lost my balance on his knees and fell back. Shocks rippled through my body, and I groaned.

With a muffled curse, Jensen grabbed my hips and held tight as he increased his pace. With three more thrusts, he jerked and threw his whole body back. Inside me, his dick twitched, and I knew he was coming.

Unable to move on my own, I allowed him to pull me close. He kissed my temple and my forehead and my cheeks. I started to get up, but he stilled me.

“No. Not yet. I want to hold you for a minute.”

As I settled in, determined to enjoy the moment, I prayed I would never have to leave his arms.

CHAPTER 17

JENSEN



“YOU ALL RIGHT? NOT FEELING SEASICK AT ALL? THE WATER is choppier today,” I said as the boat toured us around the island. Why had I avoided coming home for so long? I loved this place. But it had hurt too much to come home. Except, it didn’t hurt now to be here with Alex. I didn’t feel so alone.

“I’m fine. You worry too much.”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly worried about you. I was trying to find out what my chances were of getting laid.” I winked at her before pulling her in for a quick kiss.

“Jensen Morrison, your family is on this boat. You realize that, right?”

I nuzzled her neck. She tasted so good right there. Okay, maybe she tasted that good all over. I had, after all, kissed every inch of her skin. Knew every button to push. I knew her body almost as well as I knew my own. I knew what would make her arch her back, what would make her sigh, what would make her stick her hands into my hair and tug. I liked the tugging part.

How are you ever going to not touch her again?

As I nuzzled, she sighed and I smiled against her skin, my hand sneaking under her long-sleeved T-shirt as my fingers played with the soft skin at the small of her back. I loved that spot. I wanted to lick it. And kiss it. And bite it.

With a frustrated growl, I drew back. She was right, my family *was* on the boat. The last thing Grandma Lucy needed was to walk in on me making love to Alex against the railing.

Although, sex on the deck of this boat was one of my fantasies.

“Behave yourself,” she said..

I put up three fingers in Scout’s honor. And then as she giggled, I nipped at her neck again. “Okay. I promise. That was the last one.”

She laughed. “Somehow, I don’t think I should believe you.”

I did it again, this time sucking hard on the flesh of her neck and tucking my hands over her ass as I pulled her hips against me so that she could feel every inch of the erection pulsing against my jeans. “You know that I would, right? I’d have you right here if it wasn’t for my family walking around. I want to enjoy every minute with you.” The unspoken words hung between us. *Until this is over.*

“Jensen.” But even as she admonished me, she moaned. She was so damned responsive, and I loved every second of it. The truth was I didn’t want to let her go. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to find a way to keep her. I could figure out a way not to screw it up with her, right?

“Hey you, behave. I have to give you your Christmas present.”

I grinned. “I thought my Christmas present was that thing you did with your tongue this morning. Seriously, I’m going to work really hard at not thinking about where you learned that.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “No. That was not your present.”

I backed off and set her away from me. “Okay, what’s my present? Yours is waiting back at the house, but I’m happy to get mine now. I love presents.”

“I know you love presents.” She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a long envelope then grinned at me before handing it over.

I shook my head as I took the envelope from her and shook it.

“You’re supposed to open it, silly.”

“Yeah, but if you handed me a box, I would certainly shake it and try guessing. This one I can’t guess. It’s too small for a painting.”

“That’s because I broke protocol and decided to get you something different. Something else you’ll love.”

A little niggling voice in the back of my mind offered up, *As much as I love you?* Where had that come from? I did love her of course, but it wasn’t *that* kind of love, was it? Although my conversation with my grandmother the previous day went through my mind.

All these years, I’d thought that my father didn’t love me. That he’d seen how messed up I was and hadn’t believed in me. That I was in some way flawed. And now I realized that might not necessarily have been true. So maybe Alex and I could make a real go of it.

“Come on. Open it. Don’t just stand there.”

I realized I was staring at her. With a flourish, I tore open the top of the envelope and pulled out a stack of papers. My eyes scanned the paper quickly, trying to comprehend what I was seeing, and then I lifted my gaze to hers. “Seriously, you’re sending me race car driving?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m sending *us* race car driving. Formula One, the whole thing. In Vegas. This time I wanted to get you a *present-present*. Normally I give you paintings because, well, it feels like I’m giving you a piece of myself. But this time I figured I’d give us an experience. I mean this whole place is an experience and, uh, everything is different. Anyway, I thought it was time to change things up for your present.”

I laughed and then wrapped my arms around her before picking her up and twirling her around. “It’s awesome. I love it. You better get ready because I’m so going to kick your ass.”

“And of course, neither one of us can resist a competition.” She squeezed me back. “You should probably understand that you’re going to lose. You know how competitive I am.”

“I’m not letting you win this time.”

She pushed back from me, but I held her closer still. “You never *let* me win. I always win fair and square.”

She did, but I wasn’t conceding. “If you say so.”

She smacked me on the arm. “And just when I was going to say thank you for everything you did for me at the gallery. Cassie let me know about you chewing out the delivery guys and threatening businesses and all in my name.”

Someone should’ve done that for her before. Anyone. I shouldn’t have been the first. I shrugged. “You deserve it. And I—” Whoa, had I just almost told her I loved her? “Being here with you reminds me what I’ve always loved about this place. Reminds me of how much I *miss* this place. Because of you, I think maybe I could come back and face my demons here.”

“I love Grandma Lucy. She’s amazing. I can almost make a decent meal now. The woman is magic.” She shifted in my arms. “So how are you going to break everything to her?”

Yeah, it was inevitable. We needed to tell her. Or rather *I* needed to tell her. I wanted to get her healthy again first, though. “I think in a few weeks after she sees the doctor again, I’ll tell her that we split up but we’re still great friends. And that’ll be the truth.”

Except you want more.

And in that moment, I knew that was my truth. I wanted so much more with Alex. But knowing how she was about emotions, understanding that she wasn’t one to bear her soul, I kept that to myself.

“There you two love birds are.”

We both jumped as I glowered at my cousin. How long had he been there? Had he heard anything? “Martin, what do you want?”

“Just came to tell you we’re all heading below deck to eat. Wanted to see if your pretty girlfriend wanted to sit next to me and have a decent conversation for once.”

Alex glowered at Martin. “Okay, Martin, this has been a lovely Christmas so far. Let’s not ruin it by me having to tell

you what an asshole you are, okay?”

Martin’s face flushed, and I barked out a laugh. “What can I say? My girl has a sharp tongue.”

When Martin left, Alex winced. “Sorry about that. He’s getting on my nerves. He’s such an ass, and I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“You don’t ever have to apologize for sticking up for me.” What I kept to myself was that she’d sealed our fate. Because in that moment, I fell in love with her.

CHAPTER 18

ALEX



THIS WAS GOING TO HURT. BUT JUST LIKE THAT WIGGLY TOOTH I had when I was six, I couldn't help but play with it. Play with *him*. That morning, Jensen had been all cuddles and nuzzles and woke me up with the most delicious— Well, never mind. I knew the pain that was coming for me. But I couldn't seem to make myself stop.

When I finally escaped the house, I told myself that I was going to get some fresh air, get in a little bit of work, and give the whole situation some thought. It wasn't like me to get emotional about things. I could find a way to shut off that piece of my heart, couldn't I?

“Hey, you headed to the ferry?”

I groaned. I wanted to get in and out without anyone seeing me. I had to look at a couple of things at the gallery and add a few other last-minute finishing touches. Not that Cassie couldn't do it, but it was always better if I did it myself. I turned with a forced smile. “Hi, Martin. Just catching the ferry to LA for a quick trip.”

“Me, too. Can I walk with you?”

It was clearly a self-invitation. “Okay, I guess.”

Thankfully, Martin was mostly quiet on the walk down the path that led to the main road to the ferry. He offered to carry my bag, but I declined. Maybe it was petty because of the way he'd been treating Jensen all week, but I didn't care. I didn't want his help.

“You have fun this week?”

“Yeah, it’s been great. I can’t believe it’s taken this long for Jensen to come home, and I’m so glad he brought me with him.”

Martin stopped short, his hand on my forearm. “Come on, you can drop the act with me. I know that there’s no way in hell you would actually be with my cousin. A girl like you? You have marriage material written all over you.”

I wasn’t sure what to do. This was why I didn’t lie. But I forced another smile that probably looked more like a gritting of teeth and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Jensen and I have been together for a long time.”

“Look, I heard you out on the boat. There’s no use pretending. You realize Jensen doesn’t have access to any of the Morrison funds, right? So if that’s your plan, pretend to be his girlfriend and he’ll pay you with Morrison funds, that’s bullshit. He doesn’t have any.”

I knew I should stick to the script, but thankfully, I didn’t always do what I was supposed to. “Why do you hate him so much? You got what you wanted. You have the Morrison hotels. Have you ever stopped to think maybe that’s not what Jensen wanted? Not what he *really* wanted anyway.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know he doesn’t need the Morrison Hotels. J Morrison is doing amazing. It’s fully booked through the next six months, and he’s considering building another hotel just to cover overflow. He’s getting noticed. The hotel was mentioned in *Boutique Hotels* magazine two months ago. He’s new and edgy, and if you didn’t hate him so much, you’d be able to see that. Being a jerk to him does nothing for you. He’s still a success. I know you can’t stand it, but that’s your problem, not his.”

“Oh, kitty’s got claws. How do you think Grandma Lucy will take it when I go back and spill the beans? The stress level could really kill the old bird.”

“Martin, you are a horrible person. Would you really put your grandmother’s health in jeopardy just to prove something

to Jensen?”

“I wouldn’t want to, but she deserves to know her favorite grandson is lying to her.”

I shrugged. “She also deserves to know her other grandson is a total ass. Not kind, not gracious. How do you think that will play out for you?”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. All that matters is that Jensen won’t have her undying love and faith anymore.”

“Swear to God, if you do anything that would hurt that lady—”

He started walking again. I had no choice but to follow, because like it or not, I wasn’t going to miss the ferry. Over his shoulder, he said, “Look, I don’t want Grandma back in the hospital any more than Jensen does. You may not think so, but she does have other grandchildren who love her.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

“I’m not the one who lied to her.”

The heat of shame flowed through me. He was right. I was a liar, and so was Jensen. This was supposed to be harmless. Just go for the holidays and help boost her spirits, but that had become something else. And now Grandma Lucy would be the one hurt by the whole thing. “What is it you want?”

“It’s simple really. When you go to LA, just don’t come back. I’ll send your stuff, or even better, Jensen can bring it back when he comes home. You can tell him whatever you like. That you had to stay, there was an emergency, whatever. But stop with this pretending nonsense. You’re only hurting my grandmother.”

More shame flowed through me. He was right. The only person who’d be hurt would be Grandma Lucy in the end.

Don’t forget about yourself.

“You’re not running me off, Martin.”

“Fine. Don’t look at it as me running you off. See it as me looking out for my grandmother. And you. I know what he’s

like. He's going to dump you."

"You realize I love him, right? Every time you say something bad to me, it makes me want to hurt you."

Martin grinned and hung back as I walked ahead. "Yes, maybe, but it doesn't make it any less true."

My heart twisted. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time to stop play-acting before everyone got really hurt.

Alex

I DIDN'T GIVE a damn what Martin said. I wasn't going to leave Jensen. I was going back.

Because you're a glutton for punishment.

Yes, that, and I loved him. He was still my best friend. I looked at the clouds and wrinkled my nose. Going to rain. I hoped that didn't impact the opening.

"Incoming." Cassie called as she ran up and tried to shove me into a back room.

"Cassie, what are you doing?"

"Brian is here."

My gut twisted, and my heart skipped a beat as my blood pressure raced. What the hell was he doing there? "Why?"

Cassie shook her head. "I don't know. He says he's here to evaluate some of your stuff. He has a potential buyer."

"What? I can't hide back here. I need to get back to Catalina."

"It's your call. What do you want to do?"

I knew I had to face him. I couldn't keep tucking my emotions away and not dealing with them. I had to face him head-on. "I'll deal with him. Coming out."

Cassie's brows lifted. "Okay, boss lady." Cassie shuffled out, and I took several deep breaths to try cooling myself off

before I saw him again.

When I walked out, Brian was touring the gallery, stopping at each piece, taking note of the prices, the dates I painted them, and other pertinent information about them. “Brian, Cassie says that you’re evaluating for a buyer. I’m not sure I believe her.”

My ex turned, and I waited for that slam of shame and disappointment. It was so different from what I felt with Jensen. Jensen was supportive and understood me and wanted me to do well. For once, I didn’t feel like things falling apart with Brian had all been my fault. Like I hadn’t been enough or something. He’d cheated because he was a jerk. Low-down, pond scum on the bottom of my Prada heels. He hadn’t deserved me. And just like that, all the tension and residual emotion I’d been carrying around dissipated.

“Well, I’m not going to lie. I obviously wanted to see you too. I didn’t like how we left things.” He turned back to the artwork. “These are really good. Normally you’d be a nervous wreck by now. Not washed your hair in three days or barely eaten. But you look good.” He winked. “But then, I always think you look fabulous.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just stop it. You would think by now you’d have given up. Especially after what you did.”

His fingers stroked his chin over the closely cropped beard he’d grown. “I’ve been thinking about the day I saw you with what’s-his-name.”

“His name is Jensen. You’ve always known his name. You just keep pretending you don’t because you never liked him.”

“You think I don’t know when you’re faking something, sweetheart?”

I grinned. “Oh, I *know* you don’t know when I’m faking something.”

His face flamed, and I could see the muscle in his jaw tick. “I know you’re not with him. It’s written all over you, the discomfort when he touched you. And you’re a crappy liar. I could tell. I think it’s not too late for you and me. I mean I just

have one caveat. You can't be friends with him anymore. But I'm willing to give it a go again."

I had two options. Close my hand into a fist and slug him, breaking that perfect nose, or laugh. I opted for laughing. The kind of laugh that made my sides hurt. Besides, my gallery opening was too close for me to go to jail. "I see you're still full of yourself."

"Maybe. But at least I see things clearly. Sweetheart, if you had a problem with me cheating on you, you should have tried harder to keep me happy in bed. When I saw you with Jensen, it made me crazy. You know that guy. He can't keep it in his pants to save his life. There are always women in and out of his bed. And if he hasn't seen by now that you've been in love with him for years, he's never going to see it, and he's never going to step up and actually do anything about it. You are really better off with me."

I ground my teeth and lifted my chin, despite the pain slicing through me. I braced myself and tried to stand erect. I knew Jensen well. He wouldn't cheat on me. Not like Brian had done. But he would want to be with someone else eventually. He wasn't the kind of guy who stuck around. This whole thing was my fault. I'd offered to be his stand-in girlfriend when I was already in love with him.

"Brian, I hope you buy every single piece in here because I would love nothing more than to take your client's money. But if you ever talk to me again like you did today, next time instead of laughing, I'll be tempted to break your pretty nose." I turned and stalked back to the office, refusing to lose it while he could still see me.

When I was behind the closed door, I let myself sag against the wall. He was right. Jensen *would* get bored. He didn't really do the love thing. What would happen when he got to that stage? What would happen if he hurt me so irrevocably I couldn't even be friends with him anymore?

Going back to Catalina would be a mistake. It was about time that this charade was over. I was done hurting myself.

Jensen

WHERE THE HELL WAS SHE? I speed dialed Alex again. She hadn't come back last night. The storm had been raging all night, so it made sense that she hadn't come back, but not calling wasn't like her at all. I managed to get through to Cassie and leave a voice mail, but every time I tried Alex, I got the message that her voice mail was full. "You know, pacing around and looking out the window isn't going to make her come back," Grandma Lucy said.

"I can't help it. She's never *not* shown up or checked in. That's not her. She always turns up when I need her."

My grandmother harumphed "That sounds like love to me."

"Of course it is. We're best friends." And then I realized my slip. "I mean she's always been my best friend. And now she's more, and I'm freaked out."

My grandmother gave me a level glance. "You have the look of a man in love, sweetie. Which is amazing. I know you've been bouncing around lost for a bit."

I glared at the sheets of rain. "I have no way to get to her. They said there's a tornado warning for Los Angeles. A *tornado*, Grandma."

Grandma Lucy laid a hand on my arm. "Jensen, I know you love her, but she'll be okay. She'll come back. There's no reason to jump to conclusions. You said you got a message to her assistant, so she'll call you when she can. Remember the newscast said that service is intermittent. So don't worry. Just keep a tight lid on all of your emotions."

My emotions. Yeah, right. I wasn't in control of anything right now. Alex was gone. Maybe she freaked out because I was getting too close. Was that it? There were too many emotions for her? The last several days I'd tried to show her how much I cared about her and how I would take care of her.

Maybe it was too much for her. Maybe she was trying to cut her losses.

But Alex would never walk away without saying goodbye. Our friendship was too important. Wasn't it? "Grandma, I don't know. I just need to get to her."

"Honey, when it's safe, I'll get you on a boat myself. I was gonna suggest that we all go see her gallery opening. After meeting her and spending time with her, I think she's lovely and I want to help her career."

I couldn't help but smile. "You'll love her work. I'm so lucky to know her."

My grandmother smiled. "Said the man in love."

CHAPTER 19

ALEX



I WALKED SLOWLY FROM PIECE TO PIECE, DETERMINED TO remain calm. I could do this. It was fine. I was strapped into a mermaid gown that I couldn't breathe in and shoes so beautiful I was afraid to walk. I looked every part the sophisticate. And I wasn't worried about tonight at all.

Liar.

For two days I'd wanted to call Jensen. But I'd needed the time to get my emotions under control. When the need to call him had finally overwhelmed me, I hadn't been able to get through to the house in Catalina. I'd called the hotel's landline and left no less than five messages. It was okay. This was *my* gallery opening, and I could do this without my support system.

Who the hell was I kidding? I couldn't do this. I missed him. Right about now, I could use a bit of family. He was my family but also so much more than that. I loved him. And it was breaking my heart that I was going to have to do this, the most important step in my career, without him.

"You might as well enjoy the night. It's your big opening, so stop worrying about Jensen if he's not showing. Even I'm willing to admit the storm might have something to do with it."

I groaned and barely looked over at Brian. "Would you shut up, Brian?"

He put his hands up. "Touchy, touchy. I see you're still not over our conversation from the other day. I was just telling you

the truth. I'm the one trying to help you." A waiter passed with several glasses of champagne, and Brian grabbed two. "Here. This is your opening. Sure, it sucks that Tweedledee isn't here to accompany you, but you have me and that assistant of yours, who insists on glaring at me and mumbling under her breath every time I come near you. We're the ones in your life."

I flexed my jaw. "Correction, you *were* a person in my life. You're not anymore."

"But it doesn't have to be that way. I would try harder this time, maybe. And you could try harder as well. We could make it work. Why don't we pretend for the rest of the night I'm your date, and we'll see where it goes?" He handed me the champagne and leaned closer like he was going to try and kiss me. Every instinct in my body had me shrinking from his touch as I leaned away.

"You need to stop trying to kiss my future granddaughter, mister."

I snapped my head back at the sound of the now-familiar voice, and when I saw the diminutive woman with the shock of white hair, I wasn't sure if I wanted to run and hug Grandma Lucy or if mortification was going to take over. The problem was, when I got that nervous, I usually couldn't speak. And of course, Brian thought he'd help the situation.

"Alex was my girlfriend. We maybe have a few things to work out, but we're getting back on track."

I shook my head and stuttered. "N-n-no. We are *not*. He is not my boyfriend. He's my ex."

Brian put his arm around my shoulder. "Now that's not exactly true. We've been talking the last two days, trying to work things out."

And then I saw Jensen coming through the front door, looking every bit the Greek God of the ocean with strands of wet hair sticking to his handsome face. He looked like everything I'd ever wanted. He grinned when he saw me, but then his face instantly fell when he took in Brian's arm around

me, and something inside me snapped. I couldn't take the lies, or any of it, anymore. I knew I had to get the truth off my chest, and it was going to hurt Jensen.

Jensen

RELIEF FLOODED MY VEINS. She looked amazing. The overhead lights were soft and made the diamonds in her ears twinkle as she moved. Had I ever been this happy to see her?

Though after the relief flowed through me, I was far less enthusiastic to see Brian with his arm around her. Matter of fact, I was pissed. I strode toward them, ignoring my grandmother standing there like a fierce warrior because all I could see was Alex. “You want to get your hands off her, Brian.”

“Or what? You'll hit me? This is between me and Alex.”

Alex shrugged out of Brian's hold and put a hand on my chest. An immediate spark flowed through me, staying me for just a moment. She also took her other hand and shoved it against Brian until he backed up by a few inches.

“Stop it. I have had enough. Enough of the lies and the pretending and all of it.” She turned to face me. “Jensen, I'm so sorry. But I can't lie anymore. I should never have agreed to do any of this.” Brian grinned as if he'd somehow won.

I pleaded with her. “Alex, you don't have to—”

“I *do* have to,” she said and turned her attention to my grandmother. “Grandma Lucy, I owe you a huge apology. I'm not Jensen's girlfriend. I'm his best friend. He wanted you to feel better, and that girlfriend he said he had, well, he never had one. He just didn't want you to be stressed out and upset, so I said I would pretend to be his girlfriend. And then I got to know you, and it just felt so terrible to lie to you, and I'm so

sorry. I hope this isn't making your condition worse, but I just can't lie anymore."

I couldn't believe my ears. She was telling every single one of our secrets. But I didn't care because I was in love with her. All I wanted was her.

"And Jensen, I'm sorry to you too. I've been lying to you for too long." She sucked in a deep breath. "I'm in love with you. I know you don't feel the same way, and it's fine. It really is. Because this last week was amazing. It was every fantasy of mine come true. I also know that it can't continue. I was going to come back to Catalina. You have to know that. I just needed some time. My plan was to go back and tell you that I was falling for you. I was afraid that would have affected our friendship and maybe you'd never talk to me again, but at least it would've been the truth and I would've been honest with both you and myself."

"Alex—"

She didn't let me finish. "And Brian, if you ever put your hands on me again, I'll cut them off and feed them to you. We're done. Over. And I never want to see you or talk to you again. You are a liar, and a cheater, and Jensen is twenty times the man you are. *In* the bedroom and out. He would never do to me what you did. But you were right about one thing. I have been lying to myself. I've been in love with him since college, and I was too terrified of my emotions to deal with it."

When she turned back to me, I reached for her, but she avoided my touch. "I'm so sorry, Jensen." And then she ran out.

Holy hell. I should go after her, but I needed to deal with my grandmother first. "Grandma Lucy, Alex was just upset. The weather, and her not coming back, and the opening, and this jerk of an ex-boyfriend—"

"Honey," she interrupted and leveled her gaze on me. "You're a worse liar than she is. I knew you were spinning tales in the hospital. You think I didn't notice you'd use the girlfriend excuse whenever I wanted you to meet someone? I'm in control of all my faculties, thank you very much. I

wanted to see what you would do. Besides, I've known for years you were in love with Alex. Every other word out of your mouth is, 'Alex this and Alex that.' I wanted to get a look at her for myself." She straightened the hem of her blouse. "Can't fault a grandma for trying to set up her grandson, right?"

I blinked at her. "You knew?"

"Yes, I knew. And you didn't make it easy, worrying about me every step of the way. But we can talk about that later. How about right now, you go find your girl?"

Grandma Lucy turned her attention on Brian, and I didn't want to be him. I knew my grandmother was going to set him straight. But I pushed those thoughts aside as I raced out to find Alex.

CHAPTER 20

ALEX



I HAD REALLY MESSED THIS UP. HOW HAD I SCREWED everything up so badly? And on the night of my biggest career victory. Cassie had already called to tell me that all the paintings had sold. Every last one. Even the two sculptures that I wasn't that enthusiastic about. They'd all sold, and I'd made more money in one night than I'd seen in my entire life. But none of that mattered. Not without Jensen.

Now that I had the freedom to do what I wanted with whomever I wanted, I didn't have the one person who mattered the most to me anymore. But at least I had the one thing that always gave me comfort.

I stood behind my easel and gathered my paints, the brightest colors I could find. They would work for both joy and misery. I lifted my brush and started to paint. Never mind my fancy dress or getting splatters everywhere. This sparkly dress wasn't me. Paint under my fingernails, in my hair, and on my skin, *that* was me. This was coming home.

I didn't know how long I'd been at it when I heard a voice behind me. "I knew you'd be right here."

Jensen. "What are you doing here?"

He stepped over to me, hands in his pockets. I knew that stance.

"Jensen, don't. Just don't. You don't need to placate me or pretend with me. Just say it and be done."

He stood in front of me, his lips tipped up in my favorite smile. "Say what?"

“That we’re done. That we’re not friends anymore. Rip off the Band-Aid. I can’t go back to being just your best friend. I can’t watch hot girls parading in and out of your bed. It hurts. I know I don’t say so, but it’s painful to see.”

His eyes went soft. “Every one of them are poor facsimiles of you. I kept picking girls that were the exact opposite of you. Some not so smart, none of them as beautiful. Not a single one of them compared to you. I always figured I didn’t deserve you. But being back home has given me some perspective on my family. Their mistakes are not mine. I can be the right guy for you. I want to be.”

“You can’t say this stuff to me, Jensen. Because I *want* to believe you.” His words twisted in my gut like barbed wire. How could he just say those things and twist my emotions?

“Well, I intend to keep saying those things to you. I’ve been trying to tell you for over a week now. I love you.”

“Yeah, I hear you. I love you too.”

Jensen turned my stool around so that I faced him. His smile was gentle. “No. You’re not hearing me. *I. Am. In. Love. With. You.* I have been since that first kiss when we were just trying to get revenge on Mark. I knew in that second you were extraordinary. And I’m sorry I put you through this last week. It wasn’t fair, but it helped me see that I’ve been completely in love with you since the day I met you. You’re funny and smart and kind, and I know you don’t really do displays of affection, but I want to tell you today and every day for the rest of my life that I love you. I’ve *been* in love with you. It took me a while to figure it out, but now that I have, I’m not letting you go. Ever.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and I blinked rapidly to try and dissipate them. “You love me?”

“Yes. I’ve been trying to tell you all week.”

“But you said that we’d just come back home and go back to being friends.”

He chuckled. “Because I’m an idiot and I thought that’s what you needed to hear from me. I didn’t want to spook you.”

I thought if we could go back to the way things were, you would be more comfortable until you could figure out that you love me too.”

“Well, I didn’t need to figure that out. I’ve known it for years. Which is why this week was so hard.”

He tugged me to standing and pulled me into his arms. “I love you, Alex Winters. And I want you to be mine forever. Can you manage that?”

I laughed as the tears fell down my cheeks. “Yeah, Jensen Morrison, I can manage that.”

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ALSO FROM NANA
MALONE

CHEEKY ROYAL



“You make a really good model. I’m sure dozens of artists have volunteered to paint you before.”

He shook his head. “Not that I can recall. Why? Are you offering?”

I grinned. “I usually do nudes.” Why did I say that? It wasn’t true. Because you’re hoping he’ll volunteer as tribute.

He shrugged then reached behind his back and pulled his shirt up, tugged it free, and tossed it aside. “How is this for nude?”

Fuck. Me. I stared for a moment, mouth open and looking like an idiot. Then, well, I snapped a picture. Okay fine, I snapped several. “Uh, that’s a start.”

He ran a hand through his hair and tussled it, so I snapped several of that. These were romance-cover gold. Getting into it, he started posing for me, making silly faces. I got closer to him, snapping more close-ups of his face. That incredible face.

Then suddenly he went deadly serious again, the intensity in his eyes going harder somehow, sharper. Like a razor. “You look nervous. I thought you said you were used to nudes.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “Yeah, at school whenever we had a model, they were always nude. I got used to it.”

He narrowed his gaze. “Are you sure about that?”

Shit. He could tell. “Yeah, I am. It’s just a human form. Male. Female. No big deal.”

His lopsided grin flashed, and my stomach flipped. Stupid traitorous body...and damn him for being so damn good looking. I tried to keep the lens centered on his face, but I had to get several of his abs, for you know...research.

But when his hand rubbed over his stomach and then slid to the button on his jeans, I gasped, "What are you doing?"

"Well, you said you were used doing nudes. Will that make you more comfortable as a photographer?"

I swallowed again, unable to answer, wanting to know what he was doing, how far he would go. And how far would I go?

The button popped, and I swallowed the sawdust in my mouth. I snapped a picture of his hands.

Well yeah, and his abs. So sue me. He popped another button, giving me a hint of the forbidden thing I couldn't have. I kept snapping away. We were locked in this odd, intimate game of chicken. I swung the lens up to capture his face. His gaze was slightly hooded. His lips parted...turned on. I stepped back a step to capture all of him. His jeans loose, his feet bare. Sitting on the stool, leaning back slightly and giving me the sex face, because that's what it was—God's honest truth—the sex face. And I was a total goner.

"You're not taking pictures, Len." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Oh, sorry." I snapped several in succession. Full body shots, face shots, torso shots. There were several torso shots. I wanted to fully capture what was happening.

He unbuttoned another button, taunting me, tantalizing me. Then he reached into his jeans, and my gaze snapped to meet his. I wanted to say something. Intervene in some way...help maybe...ask him what he was doing. But I couldn't. We were locked in a game that I couldn't break free from. Now I wanted more. I wanted to know just how far he would go.

Would he go nude? Or would he stay in this half-undressed state, teasing me, tempting me to do the thing that I shouldn't do?

I snapped more photos, but this time I was close. I was looking down on him with the camera, angling so I could see his perfectly sculpted abs as they flexed. His hand was inside his jeans. From the bulge, I knew he was touching himself. And then I snapped my gaze up to his face.

Sebastian licked his lip, and I captured the moment that tongue met flesh.

Heat flooded my body, and I pressed my thighs together to abate the ache. At that point, I was just snapping photos, completely in the zone, wanting to see what he might do next.

“Len...”

“Sebastian.” My voice was so breathy I could barely get it past my lips.

“Do you want to come closer?”

“I—I think maybe I’m close enough?”

His teeth grazed his bottom lip. “Are you sure about that? I have another question for you.”

I snapped several more images, ranging from face shots to shoulders, to torso. Yeah, I also went back to the hand-around-his-dick thing because...wow. “Yeah? Go ahead.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about your boyfriend ‘til now?”

Oh shit. “I—I’m not sure. I didn’t think it mattered. It sort of feels like we’re supposed to be friends.” Lies all lies.

He stood, his big body crowding me. “Yeah, friends...”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t bloody think with him so close. His scent assaulted me, sandalwood and something that was pure Sebastian wrapped around me, making me weak. Making me tingle as I inhaled his scent. Heat throbbed between my thighs, even as my knees went weak. “Sebastian, wh—what are you doing?”

“

Proving to you that we’re not friends. Will you let me?”

He was asking my permission. I knew what I wanted to say. I understood what was at stake. But then he raised his hand and traced his knuckles over my cheek, and a whimper escaped.

His voice went softer, so low when he spoke, his words were more like a rumble than anything intelligible. “Is that you telling me to stop?”

Seriously, there were supposed to be words. There were. But somehow I couldn't manage them, so like an idiot I shook my head.

His hand slid into my curls as he gently angled my head. When he leaned down, his lips a whisper from mine, he whispered, “This is all I've been thinking about.”

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Mistletoe Hearts

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