

Merry
Elf-Mas

SNOW
drop

ESSIE SLOANE



Snowdrop

by Essie Sloane



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RENT. ELECTRIC. CHRISTMAS SHOPPING for my parents, sister, and niece. A better wig for the Christmas show. The pair of red high heels I'd spotted at the mall after orientation for my new gig as one of Santa's elves. Food.

As I looked at the subpar earnings on my delivery app, I repeated this list. I had bills. I had things I needed. I couldn't throw my phone out of my car window and curse the little old ladies who ordered food the week before Thanksgiving and didn't tip. I couldn't delete the app off of my phone and rage quit either. While I did have another job—two other jobs as of the next day—my expenses still outweighed my earnings.

I took a deep breath and rested my head against the steering wheel for a moment. Maybe I just needed a breather. I wasn't even halfway through the four hour block of time I'd scheduled myself for deliveries that night, and I knew the week before Thanksgiving could be hit or miss. I knew that Sunday nights tended to have more miss than hit.

Logically, I knew all of this.

Emotionally, I wanted to scream. I wanted to go back to all of my customers that night and remind them what a good tip actually looked like. No, Karen, it's not one dollar on an order that took three plastic bags and weighed a metric fuck ton.

Another inhale.

Another exhale.

I lifted my head and turned up my music. The night could still get better. It was only half over, and if it didn't get better, at least it would end in two hours. I focused on that silver lining as I pulled out of the neighborhood I'd just delivered to and started back toward what passed as downtown for Frostdale.

A few minutes later, my phone chirped with another order. I skimmed the details and accepted it. At least the guaranteed amount was enough to justify the gas. In fact, it was one of the largest offers I'd seen all night. It seemed that Noel M. had gotten a proper lesson on tipping.

Bless him.

It didn't take long to pull into the parking lot of Felix's Diner.

I waved at the older woman behind the counter as I entered. "Back again?" she asked, smiling so brightly it made the fluorescent lights overhead seem dim in comparison.

"You know it," I answered, offering her a smile just as bright. "For Noel this time."

“It’ll be a few minutes. Kitchen’s a bit backed up.” She leaned forward on the counter. “You want a drink, baby?”

“A drink would be great. Thank you.”

This order was already better than most of the others I’d had that night. The hostess at the last restaurant had looked at me like I was wasting her time when I’d given the name of my customer. But then, I always had a great experience at this diner. They were known for their amazing customer service.

And their amazing hot cocoa, a cup of which was passed across the counter to me. “No whipped cream but extra marshmallows, just the way you like it,” the old lady declared.

I pulled out my wallet and ignored her glare. I knew she wouldn’t allow me to pay for the drink, but I was still leaving a few dollars in the tip jar. I kept eye contact with her while I tossed three singles into the jar. She didn’t say anything. She just smiled brighter once she realized that my intentions were not to pay for the drink she’d given me.

“How much longer do you think you’ll be out tonight?” she asked.

“Another two or three hours, probably,” I told her. If things picked up, it would be closer to three. Maybe even longer. If things stayed as shitty as it’d been, I would be going offline right at the four mark in just under two hours. I didn’t think she needed all of that additional information. “Can’t be out too late tonight. I start my new job tomorrow.”

“And what job is that?”

“I’m going to be an elf at the mall.”

“Well I’ll have to bring my grandbabies by and say hi sometime this season! They will love it.”

I smiled at her over my hot chocolate cup. “I’ll make sure they get a really good experience,” I promised her. Because she always made sure I had one. She always took good care of me when I was picking up food for my orders, or on the rare occasions I was able to come in and actually eat a meal.

A few minutes later, the kitchen bell chimed and the lady passed me a bag containing a single Styrofoam container, napkins, and plastic cutlery. I thanked her before heading out of the door, stepping into the cold November night. My breath was visible as I walked to the car. Luckily, despite my car being old as hell, the heat worked perfectly.

I hit the button to start the navigation to my customer’s house and turned up my music. I sang along to the playlist I’d chosen, not caring that my voice sounded terrible. No one was listening. If anyone had been listening, I probably wouldn’t have been singing. There was no reason to torture anyone else.

It took fifteen minutes to get across town to Noel M.’s address. The house was set in a suburban neighborhood, at the very end of a cul de sac. It was a brick ranch, one story with white shutters that looked worn with age. The grass was a bit long and the bushes were in need of a trim, but then it was November. Who kept their yard up in November?

More importantly, who was I to judge how someone’s yard looked? I lived in a crappy one bedroom apartment with zero

yard.

I stopped my car in front of a black metal mailbox and turned on my blinkers. I grabbed my phone in one hand and the plastic bag of food in the other. I followed the cracked sidewalk to the door and put the plastic bag on a metal chair. I snapped a quick picture for proof that I delivered—just in case—and then rang the doorbell.

There were no instructions on the app to wait for the man to answer, so I didn't. Instead, I started back to my car. I was about to open the door when I heard the familiar sound of a house door. I turned instinctively, just as it opened. I was transfixed.

Standing on the porch was one of the sexiest men I'd ever had the pleasure of seeing.

He had auburn hair with flecks of silver and a short, neatly trimmed beard. He was tall. I could tell that even from the distance. He had a killer body—soft with just a hint of roundness. He looked like he would have chest hair, and I wanted to lift up the black tee-shirt he was wearing to find out.

Our eyes met and I felt my cheeks flush. He tossed me a small smile, probably wondering why I was standing at my car just *looking* at him like he was the meal I'd come to deliver. It was a little humiliating, actually, the way I was staring at him. I smiled weakly before tearing my eyes away from him.

I got into my car and tried to forget about the sexy stranger.



I got home two hours later. Tips had gotten a little better, but I'd still hoped I'd have made more a week before a major holiday. It had been busy enough to justify the hope, but alas, 'tis was not the season for generosity.

I showered off the smell of takeout and plopped onto the secondhand couch in my living room. A spring poked me in the back, and I grabbed a throw pillow I'd found on sale when I'd first moved in to cover the annoyance. It was a little more comfortable, at the very least.

I flipped through the options on my streaming services, but nothing appealed to me. I was bored. I hated being bored. I checked the time. It was too early to go to bed, even if I did want to be well rested for my first day at the mall. I flipped through my contacts, vetoing each one for any number of reasons as I passed before settling on Ozzy.

We exchanged a few texts, and he agreed to come over.

It wasn't pure generosity on his part. It never was with Ozzy. He was one of the most self-serving people I'd ever met, but he was so open about the fact that it was almost admirable. He was coming over because he wanted my opinions on a few pieces for the holiday drag show.

He also wanted to give me a few pointers for walking in the stilettos I'd bought for the show. Ozzy had been on my ass about them since our first rehearsal, and he wasn't alone. The leader of our little troupe of drag queens, Chris, had also been

up my ass over them. He claimed I wobbled like a newborn deer, and unless we had some Bambi loving furies in our midst, no one was going to be impressed.

I grumbled at the memory before climbing off the couch and going to my bedroom to peek into the closet.

While almost everything else in my apartment was sparse or secondhand, my closet was amazing. It was filled with thrift store finds and clearance pieces, some altered and edited and some in the condition I'd found them. The bottom was lined with several rows of shoes. To say I was a clotheshorse would be an understatement.

I grabbed the silver, six-inch stilettos from their spot in the line up and carried them reverently to the living room, resting them on the faded clapboard coffee table. I'd bought them the moment this show was announced. I'd built my character around them.

The problem was they were a good two or three inches higher than any other shoes I'd ever performed in, and Chris hadn't been wrong when he'd talked about my balance in them. I had four weeks until the show to perfect the walk. I'd done more impressive stunts with less times.

For instance, it had only taken me two weeks to master the death drop, once I'd set my mind to it. Two very painful weeks. I looked down at the death traps I'd imprinted on and hoped they'd be less painful.

A few minutes later, Ozzy knocked on my door.

“Come on in,” I called out.

Ozzy entered the apartment. He was short, several inches shorter than my 5’8”. He was slender with an elf-like face, all sharp angles and mischief. His dark eyes were framed with lashes that I would actually kill someone to have, thick and long and dark. He had full lips and a pointed chin and a head full of dark curls that he always kept immaculately styled.

He glided toward me, resting his bag on the table beside my shoes. “If you don’t learn how to walk in these, I’m stealing them before the show,” he informed me, picking the heels up and studying them. “They would be amazing on me, and I would rock them.”

I yanked the shoes back from him. “Easy there, Oz. These are mine.”

“Then get better at walking in them before you do those shoes a massive disservice.”

His words may have sounded catty, but I knew him well enough to know that they came from a place of love. He didn’t bother getting catty with the people he didn’t care about. He just ignored those people.

“I thought you wanted to come over so I could help you with *your* look, not so you could steal my shoes.”

“I did, but your shoes would be a step in the right direction.”

“Not happening.”

His lips curled up into a smirk. “We’ll see. The Fabulous Felicia Oh needs fabulous shoes, and those fit the bill.”

“Too bad the Fabulous Felicia Oh won’t be making an appearance at the same show as these shoes.”

His smirk slipped away. “I hate that Chris is making us use themed names for this show. Felicia is a *brand*. I have a devoted social media following for Felicia. Holly Daze has nothing.”

“Look at Holly as a role for Felicia,” I suggested. It was the same suggestion Chris had made to all of us. Our drag characters for the holiday show were different than our usual personas, and while I looked at it as an opportunity, some of my drag sisters were less than keen. “Or look at it as a challenge. Maybe you can get some new converts this way.”

He quirked an eyebrow at the suggestion. “New converts? I do like new admirers.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you do.”

“I am like Tinkerbell, Billy. I need the applause to live.” If I rolled my eyes any harder, I would strain them. He caught the exaggerated eye roll and clapped his hands together twice, as if calling for my attention. “I’ve pieced together several different costumes. Some of which would work just for Holly Daze, and at least two for potential Felicia shows next month.”

“If only I had the time you did to devote to this,” I muttered dryly.

“You could,” he pointed out. “But instead you insist on working dull day jobs and wasting away in the tedium.”

I held a finger up to silence him before he got into another tirade about how I was wasting my energy on my part-time jobs. He never did go into much detail about how he managed to afford his lifestyle without an actual job, and I never really asked. I knew part of it was social media, and I was fairly certain that some of it came from the wealthy older men he dated.

While I didn't judge him, I also didn't want the sordid details. He was an oversharer when he got started, and we had things to go over and decisions to make. I motioned toward the bag, getting his attention back to his outfits.

He showed off several different outfits before settling on a short sequined dress that would look amazing on his lithe frame. It was a vibrant shade of red that looked amazing against his bronze skin. He was going on about shoes when a thought struck me like lightning.

I jumped off the couch and motioned for him to wait before running to my bedroom. I threw open the closet door and grabbed a pair of gold heels I'd gotten years ago, when I'd first started drag. I'd not worn them in ages, and like Ozzy said, we did wear the same size. I was more than happy to donate them to his collection.

I turned to go back to the living room, only to find Ozzy leaning against my door frame, eyes taking in the details of my bedroom. "You have a lot of stuff," he commented, taking a step into the room.

“It only looks like a lot of stuff,” I assured him. “Really, I just don’t have as much space as I have stuff, but I do have something for you.”

He perked up, eyes bright as he eyed me. “I do love presents.”

I extended the shoes out to him. He let out a small squeal of happiness before taking them, examining them at every angle. “These will look *perfect* with that dress!”

“That’s what I thought too. Now, let’s get out of my messy ass bedroom and have you try them on.”

He turned immediately and practically ran to my couch to try on his new shoes. I sat beside him and put on my own heels.

We spent the next hour practicing our walks. My feet hurt by the time he left, but I did feel a bit more graceful thanks to the advice he kept plying me with. By the time the show came around, I might manage to not fall on my face and make a fool of myself.



“**W**HY THE HELL DID I think this was a good idea?” I asked my ex-wife as I drove toward the Frostdale Mall.

“Because Nick sold you on a dream?” I could hear the laughter in her voice and could easily imagine the way her eyes twinkled in amusement at my predicament. “Because you have always loved kids and you want to give them Christmas magic?” She paused. “Or *maybe* because you’re always bored off your nut in the winter?”

I sighed. She was absolutely correct. I was always driven out of my mind from boredom in the winter. My construction crew got fewer jobs, because who wanted to build in the freezing cold? We had a few home renovations scheduled over the next month, but they were day jobs. A week tops. Nothing substantial enough to keep me from going out of my mind.

So when my friend and neighbor, Nick, said he couldn’t do his annual gig as the mall’s Santa Claus and suggested I apply,

I'd gone for it. I claimed it was to help Nick. His husband, Doug, needed all of his attention after surgery, and that meant Nick couldn't fulfill the role he'd been playing for years.

I still wasn't entirely sure what had made him think that I was the right man for the job, but here I was. Driving to the mall before it opened to dress up as Santa Claus. I'd even spent extensive time researching how to temporarily lighten my beard. Bleaching it may have worked, but it wasn't a real option. I didn't want to have a white beard after the holidays were over.

I wasn't even sure I wanted to have a white beard when I wasn't at the mall. The men on my crew would never let me live it down. I already had two younger men on my crew who referred to me as an old man, despite the fact that I wasn't even forty. At least none of them had children they would be bringing by the mall. I only hoped they didn't have younger siblings or anything either.

"You still there?" Christina's voice sounded over the speakers.

"Still here. Just regretting my life choices," I assured her. I turned into the mall parking lot. "Do you think it's too late to back out?"

"A few hours before you're supposed to make a bunch of kids incredibly happy? Yeah, I'd say it's a bit too late to back out." I laughed. "Sam and I are going to bring Lizzie by this weekend."

"You think she'll recognize me?"

“She knows that every mall Santa works for the big guy at the North Pole. She’s going to shit her pants to learn Uncle Noel is Santa’s minion.”

Santa’s minion? *Christ*. She and her wife would be the death of me. Sam’s six-year-old was going to drive me insane asking me to carry messages to Santa Claus. I could see it now.

“I’m here, Teeny,” I informed her. It was better than pointing out all of the flaws in Lizzie thinking I was Santa’s emissary. “I’ll call you after?”

“Send me pictures,” she requested before hanging up. I pulled into a parking spot and climbed out of my car.



The mall was already crowded with shoppers waiting for stores to open. I navigated through the throngs of people to the employee locker room. Nick was waiting outside with a grin on his face.

“There he is, the man of the hour!” he exclaimed, tossing an arm over my shoulder. Despite the fact that he was at least ten years older than me, he had an energy I’d never be able to match. “Come on inside and meet your elves.”

My elves? “Aren’t they the mall’s elves?”

“While you’re Santa, they are yours. Be good to them. I’ve worked with a few of them before, and you couldn’t ask for a better group of guys.”

“Tell me something about them?” I prodded. I might have also been delaying a little. I wasn’t sure what to expect when I went into that locker room.

“Not sure what to tell you about them,” he admitted, “but if you find yourself struggling, talk to Shae. He goes by Jingle, and he’s pretty much the head elf at this point.”

I nodded. “Okay, so Shae-slash-Jingle if I need help,” I repeated. “You going to introduce me or send me into the hyena den all by my lonesome?”

Nick clapped me on my back and offered me a bright smile, blue eyes twinkling in a way that would’ve had me believing in Santa in a moment if I were just thirty-something years younger. “You’ve got this, Noel. And you can come by after work, tell me and Doug all about it.”

I nodded before squaring my shoulders. He was right. I was a thirty-eight-year-old construction worker. I could manage playing Santa with a bunch of—“Wait,” I stopped my thoughts in their tracks. “How old are these guys?”

“Ages range, bud,” Nick answered. “Don’t stress about it. You’ll probably be the oldest one in costume, but that’s part of the deal when you’re Santa.” He smiled brightly one more time and then pushed me through the door into the locker room.

I stumbled through it before catching myself on a wall. I did not want my first impression to be a face plant in front of the elves. I could hear laughter coming from behind the wall, loud

and raucous and bouncing off the tiled walls. I plastered on a confident mask and walked toward the noise.

As soon as I rounded the corner, I was greeted by elves in various states of dress. A young man with bright pink hair chatted with a curly haired brunette while a blonde man that looked older than either of them straightened his hat in a mirror. Another blonde talked a mile a minute to a short black haired man who was using a mirror in his locker to apply makeup.

Was I supposed to wear makeup?

I cleared my throat and the five men all looked up at me. I lifted my hand to wave. “Anyone know where the Santa uniform is?”

The animated blonde practically leapt over to me, bumping the makeup wearing boy as he did so. “Shae!” the dark haired one scolded. “You’re going to make me poke out my eye.”

The blonde—Shae—waved him off and motioned for me to follow him. “I’m Shae. On the floor, I’m Jingle.”

“Noel,” I introduced myself, those feelings of regret bubbling even higher. I pushed them down and followed the blonde through the locker room. He stopped in front of an unlocked locker that bore the initials S.C.

“Here’s everything you need,” Shae said as he opened the locker.

Inside was the traditional red coat one associated with Santa Claus, hanging open on a plastic hanger. I pulled it out,

rubbing my fingers over the fake velvet fabric. A pair of pants were folded over the hanger and a small bag sat on the bottom of the half locker. I took the bag and excused myself to get changed.

Everything fit perfectly, but I didn't look the part. My auburn hair didn't have enough salt and pepper for the role. I took off the jacket and laid it on the bench behind me. It was time to try the hair whitening. I'd only intended to do it to my beard, but now that I was here, I should probably commit to the entire look.

I pulled the little bottle from the box and flipped it over to read the instructions.

"Need help with that?" a voice asked behind me.

I turned around and saw the dark haired man leaning against the wall of metal lockers. I studied him. He was shorter than me by a good bit and so slender he looked like a strong wind might blow him in half. He had black hair and eyes so pale of gray they looked colorless, but there was an amusement in the way he watched me.

And a familiarity, too. I recognized him from somewhere, but I couldn't place it. Maybe I'd seen him around town, or maybe I'd done a renovation at his house. It was hardly important enough to warrant a distraction from the task at hand: turning my hair white.

"I'm being serious," he spoke again. "I know a drag king that uses the same brand, and I've helped her with it more

times than I can count.” He extended a slender hand toward me, one perfectly shaped eyebrow arched expectantly.

I handed him the bottle. “Sit,” he commanded. I sat. “Are we doing just the beard or the whole head?”

“Whole head. Even with the hat, I don’t look convincing.”

He nodded and got to work. I wished I could watch what he was doing, but he’d positioned me facing away from the mirrors. It didn’t take long before he snapped the bottle shut and stepped back. He motioned for me to turn around.

I’d transformed. Santa Claus was staring back at me.

“Thanks.”

“Oh, running my hands through that luscious hair? Not a burden,” he assured me. He offered a cheeky grin before starting to walk away. Just before he rounded the corner to where the other elves were still talking, he looked back over his shoulders. “I’m Billy, by the way, but you can call me Snowdrop.”

There was a dimple on his left cheek, I noticed, as he went back to his fellow elves.



After my first shift, I made my way back to my house. Neighborhood children played at the end of the cul de sac. I had to wait for them to clear away from my driveway before I could pull into my garage. They all waved at me, cheerful

smiles on their faces. I wondered if any of the younger ones would be coming to Santa's Village that season.

I wondered if any of them would recognize me.

Nick had told me he'd been recognized a few times by the children in the neighborhood. He'd told me that one of them always delivered their Santa letter directly to his house. I hoped Santa changing from one person they knew to another wouldn't ruin the Christmas magic for them. Maybe I should have thought about that before I took the job.

Because seeing that Christmas magic in the eyes of all the kids that had showed up to sit on my lap and tell me their wishes had lifted me in a way I'd not felt in years. My cheeks hurt from smiling by the end of it. I didn't want to be the reason any of that magic got taken away from anyone. If making the magic lifted me that high, I was pretty sure ruining it would send me to an equal low.

I parked in my usual spot in the garage and climbed out of the car. My garage was filled with remnants of the life I'd had with Christina, odds and ends piled up into boxes neatly labeled with her handwriting. My eyes landed on the box of Christmas decorations. I should have put them up already, but I couldn't recall the last time I'd decorated for Christmas.

My house was always dark compared to the neighbor's well lit and perfectly decorated homes. Every year, I thought I should put something up. That I should blend in with the rest of the neighborhood and bring some Christmas joy to my own

place, but every year I had a million other little things to do instead.

It seemed pointless when I always celebrated Christmas with Christina, Sam, and Lizzie at their house across town.

The thought of my ex-wife seemed to summon her, because no sooner than I'd stepped inside my house did my phone ring. Her picture popped up on the screen, and I smiled down at it. "Are you tracking me?" I teased as I answered.

"No, I just knew when you got off and I doubted you went out to celebrate the first day of work with your coworkers," she answered dryly.

"I thought about it," I lied. I'd been invited by the flirtatious elf—Snowdrop, I couldn't remember his real name—to grab a bite to eat, but I'd made up an excuse. He'd been flirting with me all day long, and I didn't want to lead the poor kid on.

Besides, he and the other elves all seemed pretty close. I didn't want to impose, be the old man hanging around a bunch of younger guys. Sure, they weren't all incredibly young, but the average age of the elf crew was barely above the drinking age. I'd have stuck out like a sore thumb.

"You didn't think about it," Christina's voice broke through my inner musings, calling me out on my bullshit. She always could read me too well.

"Fine," I confessed. "I didn't think about it. I was invited, but they're all so *young*."

“How young are we talking here, Noel?” She paused. “Do they have you working with teenagers or something?”

“Early twenties. Think one of them may be older than that, but most of them? Barely above the drinking age. I didn’t want to go hang out with a bunch of kids, Teeny.”

“So, what are you going to be doing tonight? Watch something on TV while you eat a frozen dinner?”

“No,” I said indignantly. “I’ve actually got something homemade to eat.”

“Homemade by you?”

“Yes,” I groaned. “I actually did a few meal preps over the weekend. Figured I’d probably be too tired to cook when I got home from dealing with kids all day.”

“Thought you only did that when you had construction jobs on?”

“After just one day playing Santa, I can tell you it is just as exhausting, if not more, dealing with a bunch of screaming kids all day.” I smiled in spite of myself. “It was worth it though. Seeing the way they all lit up seeing Santa.”

Talking about food made my stomach grumble. I kicked off my shoes and started toward the fridge. Inside, a few neatly stacked plastic containers sat waiting for me. I pulled out the top one and popped open the lid while Christina tried to convince me to come over for dinner.

Sam had made lasagna, after all, and her wife’s lasagna was some of the best I’d ever tasted. I looked down at the grilled

pork chop and roasted carrots and potatoes waiting for me and contemplated it.

“Maybe next time,” I finally decided. “I need to wash this shit out of my hair and beard, and I really was looking forward to lounging on the couch in quiet.”

She laughed. “I won’t tell Lizzie about that,” she promised. “Last thing we want is her thinking Uncle Noel didn’t want to come see her.”

“Oh don’t even try that guilt trip on me,” I laughed. If I’d thought for one moment that their daughter would be devastated by me not showing up for dinner, I’d have already been in the car. Luckily, I knew Christina *and* Sam well enough to know that neither of them would ever put me in that position. “I’m going to get off here and heat up my food now, before you actually try to guilt trip me or bribe me with Sam’s cooking.”

“Smart idea,” she agreed. “I was about to start telling you what we had planned for dessert.”

“Goodbye,” I declared, hanging up the phone with a laugh. She was ridiculous, but I couldn’t imagine life being any other way.

Somehow, we were happier now than we’d been when we were married. And maybe one day, I’d find what she had with Sam with someone new.



THE FIRST WEEK AS Snowdrop the Elf rushed by in a flurry of noise, lights, and stealing any opportunity I could to run my fingers through Santa's hair. He hadn't quite mastered the art of applying the whitener to his beard and hair, and I wasn't going to argue with anything that allowed me to touch him. It was only three days, after all. I was sure he'd master it soon enough and then I'd lose my excuse to touch and to flirt.

What a shame that would be.

When I wasn't working at the mall, I was balancing my other jobs. Every night after I finished at the mall, I rushed straight to rehearsals for the drag show. Chris ran a tight ship under normal circumstances, and he was running an even tighter one for this show. The charity meant a lot to him. It helped queer youth who struggled with any number of things ranging from mental health to school problems to family problems. They wanted to partner with shelters in cities larger than Frostdale to provide queer youth a place to stay if they needed it.

I might not have known Chris's personal story, but I could see the passion he had for this show and this charity every time he spoke about it. It meant something to him, and that meant that I had to kick ass. I also kind of wanted to kick *his* ass, because he overheard me and Ozzy talking about Sexy Santa and decided that it would be an absolute hoot to have Sleigh Belle sing Santa Baby on top of my other two solo numbers that had already been assigned.

On one hand, I was honored to have such an iconic song assigned to me. On the other hand, he did it just to watch me squirm. It was delightfully evil, much like our Drag Mom himself.

As if that weren't enough, after rehearsals, I often found myself driving around Frostdale, delivering food. Just like the Sunday before I started at the mall, tips were not great. People seemed to lack that holiday generosity. I'd actually contemplated taking off the rest of the week, but that just couldn't happen. I had bills to pay and the elf gig and the few catering gigs I'd managed to land just weren't going to cut it.

Besides, I was already planning on working Thanksgiving to avoid having to go to my own family's place for the holiday. My parents wouldn't understand missing it for anything other than work. The fact that I was also going to Chris's for Friendsgiving with the rest of my drag crew? Unthinkable. The fact that I didn't want to go home and have them judge me, my life choices, and the fact that I didn't have my entire life mapped out at the ripe old age of twenty-three was also beyond their grasp.

After an hour of driving around and making a grand total of ten dollars, though, I was starting to have regrets about my decision. I'd mainly been picking up Chinese food, because almost everything else in town was closed, and orders were few and far between. I sighed and looked at the green lights of my dash clock. I would give it another hour and if things didn't pick up, I'd go home and binge watch something on Netflix.

The idea got more tempting after the next order, where a woman scoffed about people having to work on Thanksgiving all the while being one of the reasons that people had to work on Thanksgiving. It was a cognitive disconnect I would never understand. She didn't even tip well for what she viewed as an inconvenience.

I trudged my way back to my car, put my phone back in the mount, and decided that the next order would be my last. I just was not feeling it that night, and I was spending more on gas money than I was bringing in. I started back toward the main part of Frostdale, and a few minutes later, my phone lit up with an offer.

An offer from Noel M.

I hit accept so fast that I was surprised the phone didn't clatter to my floorboard. I followed the instructions to a small Chinese place that very few people ever ordered from. In the two years I'd been delivering food, I'd only had a hand full of pick ups from there, and they always seemed dead. Thanksgiving was no different, and I was in and out in

minutes with a can of soda for myself—a gift from the very kind woman behind the counter.

I drove the still unfamiliar route to Noel's place, following the turn by turn instructions the GPS gave me. By the time I reached his place, my mouth was watering from the smell of the Chinese food in my front seat. It smelled better by the moment, and it smelled a lot better than the more popular place in town. I was going to have to go back for myself at some point.

My mouth was also watering at the idea of seeing Noel out of the Santa uniform. I had spent too much time imagining what he looked like out of costume and I was more than happy to discover it for myself. I pulled the visor mirror down and took a quick look at myself. My hair was decent, but I had bags under my eyes. Noticeable ones. That simply would not do.

I pulled out my makeup bag and quickly dabbed on a bit of concealer. Once those bags looked less like they were about to board a plane, I turned off the car, grabbed the food, and started towards Noel's door. This time, I waited after I knocked. I mean, I had already decided this was going to be my last run of the night, and fate had made it him.

Who was I to argue with fate when it put me at a sexy man's house on a holiday evening?

It didn't take long to hear the heavy footsteps coming to the door, and I was rewarded for my patience when Noel opened the door. He looked like a whole damn meal, tastier than the

Chinese food I was carrying. My eyes slid down his body without a thought, taking in the way his black tee-shirt clung to his torso, the jeans that left way too much to the imagination, and his bare feet. I wasn't a foot person, but any glimpse of bare skin on that man was a treat so I'd take it.

“Billy?”

“You ordered Chinese?” I held up the plastic bag as explanation for why I was standing on his doorstep. “I promise, I'm not stalking you or anything.”

He laughed. It was a gruff sound that made me wonder about other sounds he might make. *Stop*, I scolded myself. Because I could not be standing there and thinking about sexy noises he might make right in front of him. That was a private time thought, and one I planned on entertaining many times later.

“I didn't think you were stalking me,” he assured me. “I was just surprised to see you here. Don't you do the holidays with your family?”

“I would, but I have bills to pay and mall elf? Doesn't exactly pay the best.” There was no way in hell I was unloading my family drama on him.

He opened the screen door and took the food. Our fingers brushed, and I felt a jolt of electricity ride up my arm. Was that static shock, or was the man just so hot he gave off his own electrical current? I liked to think it was the latter.

I started to take a step backward when he stopped me with just a word. My name: “Billy.”

“Noel.”

“Do you—” He rubbed the back of his neck with his empty hand and then took a deep breath, exhaling. “Do you want to come in?”

Did I want to come in? Yes. Very much yes. “Sure. It’s a slow delivery night anyway. I was just about to call it quits.”

He smiled and held the door open for me. As I walked in, I turned myself offline on the delivery app.

He led me through his home, and my eyes took in the little details as I passed. It was sparsely decorated, but everything that was up looked amazing. The walls were a neutral cream color that held little imagination, and the hallway had no decor on the walls. His living room had nice furniture, dark brown and inviting. He motioned me to the couch, and I took a seat.

“Are you hungry?” he asked as he walked out of the living room into what I assumed was a kitchen.

“I ate a few hours ago,” I answered.

“That’s not what I asked.”

I grinned in spite of myself. “I could probably eat, but you don’t have to share your food with me, Noel. I’ve got leftovers at home.”

It wasn’t a lie. Chris had loaded me down in Friendsgiving leftovers, because he had made way more than the troupe of drag queens could ever eat in one sitting. No one had left his house without at least two meals worth of food. He wouldn’t allow it.

Noel ignored me. He came back with two paper plates and two forks. I tried to protest as he passed one to me, but he shot me a look that made me realize that fighting this man was going to be futile. If he wanted to feed me, then I could at least eat a little something. It would make him happy, if nothing else.

And after he unloaded the food, I realized that I wasn't taking food from his mouth. He'd ordered way too much. He caught the amused expression on my face and flushed slightly. "I went to my ex's for Thanksgiving, and it was a disaster," he admitted. "Meaning I've not eaten nearly enough today. Plus, I couldn't choose what I wanted, so I ordered everything that sounded good. I'll probably be living off Chinese leftovers for the next week."

There was a lot to unpack there. First, and most important: "Your ex?" If he was still hung up on an ex, this would have to stay in the land of fantasy. I did not play second fiddle to anyone.

"Yeah. Christina and I may not have worked out romantically, but she's one of my best friends. She's just not the world's greatest cook."

I laughed in spite of myself. "Then why did you agree to go over there for Thanksgiving?"

"Her wife was supposed to be home and cooking, and her wife?" He grinned. "Sam is an amazing cook. If she'd been home, not only would I be stuffed for a week after dinner, I'd have a fridge full of leftovers."

“Why wasn’t she home?” If she was such a good cook, why wouldn’t she have done Thanksgiving?

“She’s a nurse at the hospital,” he explained. “She was supposed to have it off, but she got called in.”

That kind of sucked. For him, for her, for his ex-wife... His ex-wife. Meaning that there was no promise that this crush was even on a man that was capable of reciprocating. Not that it had ever stopped me from crushing on someone, but it was always a lot more fun to crush on someone that I actually stood a chance with. I really wished there was some subtle way to ask him, but I couldn’t find one.

Not one that wouldn’t get me called into HR at least.

Oh well, some things were better kept to fantasy. Sexy Santa might be one of them.

He passed me another container of food and together, we loaded our plates. He leaned forward to grab his remote, and I watched the way his muscles strained the tight tee-shirt. Seriously, it had to be illegal to test a shirt’s construction that way. I wanted to fan myself, but I thought that might be a little obvious.

Not that I hadn’t been completely obvious when I checked him out when he opened the door. He’d still invited me in, so maybe the ex-wife didn’t fully rule him out... I forcefully derailed that train of thought.

“Do you mind if I put something on?” he asked suddenly.

“It’s your house,” I reminded him.

“Yes, but you’re my guest.”

I chuckled. “Choose a show.”

“Any requests?”

“I’m not that picky.”

He nodded and turned on the television. A few button presses later and he had on one of those cheesy holiday rom-coms that saturated the world come Christmas time. It looked vaguely familiar, but I didn’t pay it too much attention. He turned it down a little, letting it serve as a hum of background noise before he picked back up his plate and took a bite.

“So you deliver food and you work at the mall,” he stated between bites. “What else do you do?”

“Like for work or—?” I needed clarification before I answered that one.

“You do more for work?”

“Food delivery alone does not pay the bills,” I informed him. “I also serve at events for this local catering company. Most of the year, I do dog walking and pet sitting through another app. Lots of gig jobs, honestly.”

He nodded. “Why gig jobs?”

He didn’t sound judgmental the way my parents always did when they asked about my various jobs. I liked it. “I like the ability to set my own schedule. I can work more or less depending on what I need that week. If I need time off for

rehearsals or a show, I don't have to schedule it with someone and hope they approve it. I like being my own boss."

"Rehearsals? Shows?"

Right. He didn't know that I did drag. I stalled for time by taking a bite of orange chicken. I hoped he'd get distracted while I took too long to chew and swallow, but he didn't. Instead, he just watched me. My skin warmed under his gaze.

Finally, I couldn't put off answering any longer. "I do drag," I told him with a shrug. Inside, my stomach was in knots. What if he was one of those straight guys who got put off by the idea of drag. I mean, sure, he was nice to me at work and he knew I wore makeup, but that was a different ball game than dressing up and putting on a show.

My insides untangled the moment he smiled. "That's pretty awesome. I love a good drag show."

"You do?"

"I do. I've gone to more than my fair share. In fact, before Teeny married Sam, after we got divorced, we used to do Sunday drag brunch every week. We still try to do it once a month, when we can."

That was actually really sweet. "One of my friends, Ozzy, does drag brunch a lot. I've only done one or two, but it was fun." It just wasn't the kind of show that I preferred. I liked the after hour ones, where I could really let loose and not worry about traumatizing children.

"What's his drag name? I wonder if I've seen him before."

“Felicia Oh,” I answered automatically.

I saw the look of recognition on his face, but that was nothing new. Felicia Oh was practically a celebrity at this point. Ozzy had turned her into a brand, gaining fame on social media and a local following. I was more than a little impressed with my friend.

“That’s one of Teeny’s favorites. Just wait until I tell her that I know someone who knows Felicia personally.”

I laughed. “I will not be telling Ozzy that he’s someone’s favorite. His ego is big enough.”

His laughter joined mine. “Tell me about your drag act?”

I thought for a moment before shaking my head. “How about you come see it for yourself,” I suggested. “I’m doing this charity thing next month. It’s my next show. I can—I can get you a ticket?”

His eyes met mine, and he nodded. “I’d love that.”

We ate in silence for a few more minutes. During that time, I noticed something about the rom-com he’d chosen for us to watch.

It was one of the queer ones that had come out in the past few years. The two men on screen were flirting with one another. I doubted he’d put it on just because I was there.

Maybe I wasn’t barking up the wrong tree after all.



I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT had possessed me when I'd invited Billy in on Thanksgiving night. It was probably the same thing that had me choosing a gay rom-com for us to watch instead of the cooking show I watched while I ate most nights.

I refused to examine it too deeply, or to think too much about the handsome young man after he left that night. Instead, I stashed it all away in a mental box in the back of my head. For the next few days, every time I saw him at the mall, that little box rattled.

It served as motivation to learn how to apply the temporary color to my hair and beard, because it meant I didn't have to have him touching me. His touches were starting to become a distraction. The way he smiled at me when he'd see me in the locker room was beginning to take up too much space in my mind. His easy flirtations were growing harder to ignore.

At least I didn't have to wonder if his flirtations were all in my head. I'd heard more than one whispered conversation among the elves, teasing him for the way he spoke to me or looked at me. It kept me from wondering how much of this was all in my head.

What it didn't do was keep me from watching him when I didn't think he was watching me. It should have. I kept it buried deep inside, because there was no way in hell I was going to be telling anyone that I was enamored with a handsome boy that was way too young for me.

Maybe I just needed to find a distraction. Maybe this was the manifestation of going too long with no intimate contact other than my own hand.

For the next week, I found myself getting distracted by Billy. I'd catch glimpses of him talking to children, and I'd forget what I was supposed to be doing. The only thing that managed to get my train of thought back on the right track was a child coming up to me. When the village was empty, which was mercifully rare, he was all I could pay attention to.

It was becoming a problem.



It became a bigger problem on the second Saturday of playing Santa. Our shift ended, and everyone said their goodbyes. I stuck behind in the locker room after the elves

left, using the color in my beard and hair as an excuse. It was one no one could question, because after the first week, I'd stopped wearing it home.

I'd gotten too many strange looks when I walked out of the mall wearing it, and I didn't like having that many eyes on me.

My stomach grumbled as I walked out of the locker room. I thought about ignoring it. I had food at home, and I didn't need to be spending the money at the food court. I'd managed to avoid it so far, despite the fact that the mall's food court had one of my favorite slices of pizza in all of Frostdale.

The thought of pizza made my stomach growl louder. I gave into temptation and turned away from the doors that would take me to my car in the parking lot. The mall was still crowded, though the crowd tended to be older later in the day. Less families bringing in small children when visiting Santa was no longer an option to entertain their little ones.

The closer I got to the food court, the more I knew I'd made the right decision. I could smell the food several store fronts down. I made a beeline to the pizza place, not paying attention to a thing around me. I ordered two slices of meat lovers and a soda.

I found a seat at a table meant for two and started eating.

I was halfway through my first slice when a loud, familiar laugh made me look up. Billy was leaning against a pillar across the food court, talking to a curly haired man. *Flirting with a curly haired man.*

My stomach clenched in a way that had nothing to do with the food I was eating.

I watched as the other man rested a hand on Billy's forearm. I watched the way Billy seemed to hang on the other man's every word. My appetite began to slip away. The pizza suddenly tasted like cardboard.

Jealousy.

It was an ugly emotion, one that I'd fallen victim to too many times in the past. Not that I had a reason to be jealous of Billy flirting with someone else. He flirted with everyone. I'd watched him flirt with Shae just that morning, but it hadn't affected me this way. I'd seen him flirt with two dads and a mom in line, nothing. But watching him now?

I was seeing green.

I took a deep breath and forced my eyes away from the display in front of me. I needed to eat, and then I needed to get out of there. The box of Billy thoughts in my mind rattled violently, threatening to spill those thoughts I'd hidden away from myself, not wanting to examine them.

I focused too hard on my cardboard pizza.

I could still hear the loud trill of Billy's laughter, but I refused to look up.

Not until I heard my name, closer than his voice had been earlier. I looked up. He'd brought the boy he'd been flirting with over to my table. *Why* had he brought his flirtation to my table? It was doing nothing for the green monster in my head.

“Noel,” Billy greeted. He slid into the empty seat across from me. The boy he was flirting with—fine, *man*, whatever—stayed standing a few inches away from where he sat. He rested his hand on Billy’s shoulder, and I wanted to pry those perfectly manicured fingers off of him. “I remembered you mentioned last week that your ex-wife really liked a certain performer?”

I raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

“This,” he said dramatically, “is Ozzy. Or as you may know him, Felicia Oh.”

“The Fabulous Felicia Oh,” the other man corrected immediately. His eyes moved over me before smiling in a way that could almost be described as predatory. “Oh, you were right, Billy. He is a treat.”

The way he said it sent chills down my spine, and not in a good way. He was looking at me like he wanted to consume me in a terrifying way. I ignored the fact that I knew I’d have no qualms if it had been Billy looking at me the same way.

“Ozzy.” Billy said his name in a firm voice I’d never heard from him before.

Ozzy looked completely unrepentant. “You’re coming to the charity show, right?”

“Billy invited me,” I hedged cautiously.

“You’re *coming* to the charity show, right?” he repeated, narrowing his dark eyes at me.

“We will see.”

“Oz, seriously,” Billy scolded. “If he wants to come, he’ll come. You don’t get to threaten my coworkers to come tip you out.” Billy’s voice came out lighter, but there was still that warning underneath.

Ozzy sighed. “Fine, ruin my fun.”

“I am really sorry about him,” Billy laughed. His voice was back to the one I was used to hearing around the locker room and Santa’s village. “I don’t think his parents taught him how to behave in public.”

“My mother taught me how to behave,” Ozzy countered immediately. “I just choose to ignore those lessons when it benefits me.” Ozzy’s hand tightened on Billy’s shoulder. “I thought you liked that about me.”

“I wouldn’t change a single thing about you, babe,” Billy assured him, reaching up to squeeze his hand.

The little green monster in my head growled in anger. It did not like seeing Billy squeeze Ozzy’s hand that way. I took the last bite of pizza and tried to ignore the swirling feelings inside. It wasn’t the kind of thing that would help anyone or anything. They weren’t the kind of feelings I should be having for someone so much younger than myself.

Not that I was having any kind of feelings other than jealousy.

I ignored the rattling box in the back of my mind.

I put my pizza crust back on my plate. “Are you two on your way out?”

“We have some shopping to do,” Billy answered with a grin. “Ozzy has decided he needs *more* shoes for the Christmas show, and has decided that there’s no rest for the wicked until he’s found the right ones.”

“I may not be performing as Felicia for the show, but I have standards. And I’m not relaxing them just because I’m playing a different character.”

“Is that—” I paused, unsure how to ask the question. I thought for a moment before deciding that my first wording was probably the most polite. “Is that normal? Playing a different... character?”

“No,” Ozzy replied immediately. “But Chris wants this to be fully immersive. Including holiday themed names for all of us, even those of us who have an established cult following.”

“He likes to think he’s bigger than he is,” Billy informed me, offering a cheeky grin up to the man standing over him.

Ozzy’s jaw dropped and his hand fell away from Billy’s shoulder. “I will have you know that I am not exaggerating the love people have for the Fabulous Felicia Oh! *You* are just being a jealous, catty queen.” Billy caught my eye before we both exploded in laughter. Ozzy glared at both of us. “And now I’m being attacked?”

“Calm down, Drama Queen,” Billy teased. “But like he said, Chris wants everything to be unique for this show. A one time only showing of these queens, unless it’s successful enough to do next year.”

“What’s your name? As a queen, I mean,” I asked Billy.

“Sleigh Belle.” He paused before catching another look from Ozzy. “And Ozzy will be Holly Daze.”

“Those are cute. Kind of remind me of some of the names you guys use at the village.”

“I wish I could be Sleigh Belle at the village, but I have a feeling that some of the powers that be might object to such a gender bent name.”

“Not to mention, the heels would not go with that outfit you have to wear,” Ozzy reminded him.

“Not to mention, I still can’t *walk* in those heels properly.”

I cocked my head in interest. My mind was trying to summon an image of Billy in heels, and with the glimpse of his toned legs I’d caught while he’d changed the other day? It was a very pleasant mental image. It was also an inappropriate image, one that I needed to exorcise from my brain immediately.

I stuffed it in the box and asked a more fitting question. “Do you usually have trouble walking in heels?”

“No, but these are killer.”

“And I still think you should just give them to me. You have other shoes that you could wear.”

“You’re not getting my shoes, Oz.”

It sounded like a well-tread argument. “I have full faith that you’ll manage to walk in them.”

Billy's answering smile was worth everything. It lit up his entire face. His gray eyes twinkled, and the entire room suddenly felt warmer and brighter. It was like looking directly at the sun. I couldn't help smiling myself.

"Okay, can we go shop now or are you planning on flirting some more?" Ozzy demanded, crossing his arms over his chest. He looked annoyed. I wondered, not for the first time, if there was something going on between Ozzy and Billy before reminding myself that it didn't matter.

Billy was too young for me.

"I better go," Billy muttered apologetically. "Otherwise this one will pout nonstop and I don't want to deal with that."

"And I just don't want to deal with Mama Christmas flipping her wig if we're late to rehearsal. Tick tock, Billy boy, we are on a schedule."

Billy laughed. "Fine." He turned the full force of his attention on me, turning back on that brilliant smile that turned my stomach in a very different way than seeing him flirt with Ozzy had. "I'll see you at work tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

Billy stood up, walking away with Ozzy and leaving me to my thoughts.

My very inappropriate thoughts, because the entire time he was walking away, I was watching how his tight jeans showcased his ass perfectly.

It was just lust. Lust for my entirely too young coworker.

I was going to hell.



“O KAY, BUT HE COULD *not* take his eyes off you,” Ozzy squealed as we stepped into rehearsal, both clutching bags from the mall.

He'd not stopped talking about Noel since I'd introduced them, which wouldn't normally be a problem, but he was feeding into my delusions. Because maybe I'd been imagining it, but Noel had seemed none too pleased to see the way Ozzy and I interacted. It wasn't like he hadn't seen me flirt with other people.

I could barely breathe without flirting with someone, especially at Santa's Village.

I was talking cheeky grins and subtle flirtations with all the parents and openly flirting with Alec, the sexy as hell photographer. Maybe it was because he knew that the clients were nothing more than fleeting visitors and Alec? He was hot as sin, but he was hardly the sexiest man in the Village. Flirting with him was nothing more than entertainment.

Flirting with Ozzy was the same way, but Noel had never seen me with Ozzy. Noel had never seen me with any of my friends.

“Oh my god, you’re thinking about him right now, aren’t you?” Ozzy demanded.

“Thinking about who?” Chris’s voice chimed in.

“Does little Billy have a crush?” another one of my drag sisters, Charlie, questioned.

“Oh, he so does,” Ozzy answered, tossing that impish grin of his that earned him so many fans, both in and out of drag. Charlie and Chris summoned our other drag queens to come over for tea time. The other four men sauntered over in various states of dress. “Billy is head over feet for Sexy Santa.”

“Tell us something we don’t already know,” Charlie retorted. “He makes moon eyes every time Chris plays Santa Baby.”

“That’s part of my character,” I defended.

It was a losing battle, because not a single person around me looked like they bought it.

“The bigger news is it looks like Sexy Santa wants to make our Billy do naughty things to get on the nice list,” Ozzy announced.

Chris grinned. “Wait, did you meet Santa?”

“Not in costume, sadly.”

“Maybe not sadly for Billy. We all know how you love a silver fox,” Charlie teased, “and then Billy would have to fight

you for his man.”

“He’s not my man,” I insisted.

I might as well have been talking to a wall, because they ignored me. “Okay so tell us everything,” another one of my drag sisters, Michael, demanded as he continued to adjust the wig he was putting in. He’d been the only one to bring something over with him to continue getting into character.

“The man could not keep his eyes off of Billy, and he was practically Wicked Witch Green every time I so much as smiled at our lovely,” Ozzy reported. “If looks could kill, you would be down a queen, Mama.”

“In that case, I’m going to need you to keep your flirty paws off of Billy when Santa is around. I don’t care if he gives you coal, but I am not reworking any of our group numbers to replace your ass if you get yourself murdered by Father Christmas.”

I snorted. Of course that would be Chris’s primary concern. There was a way he was our fearless leader. He never lost sight of the goal. He clapped his hands together, and reminded us all we had fifteen minutes until rehearsal started.

I wished I could say the reminder kept us from discussing Noel further, but it would take something more powerful than the start of rehearsals for that. It only served to get our asses in gear *while* we talked. And okay, *maybe*, I ended up gushing about Noel.

Could anyone really blame me for replaying the entire thing?

Because maybe Ozzy was right. Maybe he had been acting jealous and he was interested in me. Wouldn't that be a Christmas miracle?



The next day, I was a little more aware of Noel than I normally would have been. I watched him more than I should have, paying more attention to Santa than the little kids in my care. More than once, my fellow elves had to redirect my attention to a child in need or a parent waiting for elfly aid.

I blamed Ozzy. He'd planted the seed, and now I was determined to see if it was delusion or something else. More than once, when we were slower, I caught Noel's eyes wandering over to me. Or maybe they were checking out any of the other elves, because I was rarely standing alone during those moments.

I really wished I could read minds and find out what he was thinking when he looked in my direction. I wanted to know if he was as affected by me as I was by him. I had to know if I was suffering from an overactive imagination. I actually contemplated asking my fellow elves, but I could see how messy that would get. Better not to cause drama at my workplace when bills had to be paid.

That thought worked all the way until the end of the day.

What changed at the end of the day? An actual god appeared in line. He had to be at least 6'4". He had several visible tattoos, bronze skin, and he practically glittered with accessories. I will admit that I was drooling a little bit while he was in line.

“Katniss, check out the hottie,” I whispered to Juniper, because he was the elf closest and I had to point him out to someone just to make sure he actually existed, and it wasn't just the fact that I hadn't been laid in weeks causing me to hallucinate sexy men.

Juniper's reaction made it clear that I was not hallucinating. He didn't even react to the ridiculous nickname I'd given him when he'd first told me his elf name.

One by one, the other elves noticed the man. I could almost see the moment everyone saw him. Because he was the kind of man that drew eyes. If I weren't slightly obsessed with Santa Claus already, I might have entertained fantasies of tracing the lines of his tattoos with my tongue. Instead, I found myself wondering if Noel had tattoos.

Still, I couldn't keep my eyes off of the man.

Which was why I noticed the way he flirted with Noel when he finally got up to the throne. He didn't have a kid with him. Instead, he sat on Noel's lap and stroked his beard and whispered something in his ear. I could only imagine the kind of things he was whispering.

And Noel smiled at it.

He *smiled*, and he *laughed* like whatever the man had said was funny.

My blood boiled. How dare that overly sexy man come up to my workplace and flirt with my office crush? Rude. Inconsiderate. And the fact that Noel was flirting back was a punch to my not-so-delicate ego.

“You okay?” Juniper whispered. His eyes moved down to my clenched hand, where the candy cane I was waiting to pass to the man as he exited was nothing more than minty flakes in a plastic wrapper from my grasp.

Oops.

“I’m fine,” I answered. My voice was a little higher than it should have been, and I could feel the expression on my face. Nothing about how I sounded said I was fine, and Juniper looked like he didn’t buy it for a second.

I took in a deep breath and reminded myself that Mr. Too Tall would be away from my man in minutes. Not my man. The man. The man who I worked with. Because Noel wasn’t my man, even if he had practically shot eye daggers at Ozzy just the day before.

I exhaled and tried to release some of the anger. It’d be better if Alec would take the damn picture already. It wasn’t like it was a professional photo shoot. It was one picture at a mall Santa. He’d never taken that long before. Was he trying to torture me?

Was the whole universe trying to torture me?

Finally, the flash of light went off. The distracting man walked by, and Juniper handed him a not crushed candy cane.

Everything returned to normal except me.

I couldn't stop replaying it in my head. Watching Noel flirt with someone else had changed me on a core level.

I had to know if it was one sided. Otherwise, I was going to drive myself insane over the next few weeks.



The next few hours dragged by. I couldn't stop thinking about that man flirting with Noel. More importantly, I couldn't stop thinking about Noel flirting back with him. Finally, the last picture had been taken and the sign stating that Santa Was In was flipped. The village was closed.

We all filed back into Santa's Workshop. I went to one of the mirrors and began taking off some of the makeup I'd put on earlier that day when I made the transformation from Billy to Snowdrop. All around me, my coworkers grabbed their stuff. A few left immediately, back to the locker rooms to change completely. On a normal day, I would've gone with them and did the makeup removal in the locker room, but honestly, I was still seething over the hottie and didn't fully trust myself next to Noel.

"You coming?" Shae asked, as he was about to leave.

“Need a few minutes,” I told him with an easy grin that didn’t match my insides.

“Do you want us to wait?”

“Go ahead. I’ll call you later, okay?”

My friends began to leave the workshop, and I turned my focus back to makeup removal. I would have to go back to the locker room eventually. For one, I did not want to go all the way home dressed like an elf. For another, I needed my moisturizer. The makeup removal wipes may get rid of the makeup, but a full skin care routine it was not, and one didn’t get the kind of flawless skin I had by skipping proper skin care.

It was peaceful. There were strands of the holiday music from the rest of the mall slipping into the small structure, but it was nowhere as loud as it was when I was out there elfing it up. It was a low hum, background noise. I sang along quietly.

“You have a good voice.”

I almost fell out of the fold up chair I was using to take off my makeup. The little mirror I was using clattered to the floor and a yelp escaped my mouth. I’d honestly thought that the other elves were the last to leave.

Clearly, I was wrong.

“You okay, Billy?” Noel questioned.

My cheeks turned red. Bright red. If they’d been that color all day, I wouldn’t have needed the blush to play an elf. “Uh-huh,” I squeaked. I drew in a few deep breaths and tried again.

“I just—I thought I was alone back here.” Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been singing. Noel must have been tone deaf to say I sounded good.

“I’ve been here the whole time,” he pointed out.

I looked around. It was just the two of us. This was exactly what I was trying to avoid by not going to the locker room. “Were you—uh—were you waiting for me?” I asked him as I leaned over to grab the mirror from the floor.

He nodded. “I didn’t like the idea of you being in here alone.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “And why is that? It’s not like Santa’s Workshop is a hot spot of criminal activity.”

Noel let out a bark of laughter. “Because you looked...” He paused for a moment, like he was searching for the right adjective for how I’d looked when he’d made the decision to wait for me. “Distant, I guess. You’ve looked distant today.”

“No, I haven’t,” I argued.

“You have,” he countered immediately. “Did something happen with you and your boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?” He thought I had a boyfriend? Well that wouldn’t do at all.

“Ozzy?”

“Not my boyfriend. I don’t think that boy has the boyfriend gene. He is way too in love with himself.” And I didn’t want to play second fiddle to someone’s ego in a relationship. Not

to mention, I had never seen Ozzy that way. He was cute, sure, but he was *way* too much. And that was coming from me. “Why did you think we were dating?”

“He was all over you at the food court.”

“Kind of like that guy earlier was all over you?”

Now it was his turn to look confused. “What guy was all over me? I’ve been around kids all day.”

“Yeah, kids and one tattooed and pierced god in human form.” Did I sound jealous? I totally sounded jealous. “Surely he made some kind of impression. He was stroking all over your beard and whispering in your ear and...”

“Billy.” Noel’s voice put a stop to my rant.

“What?” I demanded, snapping my little mirror shut and tucking it in my bag. “You cannot say that he wasn’t.” I stood up. “And I mean, I don’t blame you or him. He’s hot. You’re hot. Did he say that all he wanted for Christmas was you?”

Because cliché. Mariah Carey may have been a staple, but it was a cliché staple. I would know. At least three of my drag sisters had fought for that song in the line up, only for Chris to smack them all down because he had a full group number planned for it.

“He said he wanted a pony,” Noel answered dryly.

I stood up. I needed to put distance between me and him while that jealous monster inside of me was growling. Otherwise, I was going to cross a line and things would get weird.

“Wait, did you just say I’m hot?” He looked shocked that I would think that, let alone say it. Okay, I could understand the shock in me saying it. I tried to keep my tongue under control at work, at least a little bit.

I shot him a look that would make weaker men wither. “Seriously? Like you don’t know.” He stared at me blankly. “That you’re hot. Like you don’t know that you’re hot. Or that I think it, for that matter. I’m not exactly *shy* in flirting with you.”

“Pretty sure I saw you flirting with one of the plastic candy canes a few days ago, so I’m not sure if that’s a solid judgment on your thoughts.”

I glowered. “Okay, I’m going to go change now before I make an even bigger idiot of myself.”

I didn’t make it more than two steps before Noel spoke again. “You... You really think I’m hot?”

I was too close to him for that question. We were less than a foot apart. If he would’ve asked that when I was closer to the door, I could have answered and escaped. Instead, I got trapped in his eyes. Were they blue or gray? A combination of the two? I wasn’t sure. Just that they had a sparkle in them that intrigued me, even now when they also housed a lot of confusion.

“I don’t see what’s confusing about that. I have perfect vision, meaning I can see a hot guy in perfect clarity. And you, Noel, are sexy as hell. Even with the white beard.”

The white beard that my hand reached out to touch. I'd touched it before, but it didn't feel like this. Charged.

I closed the distance between us and the next thing I knew, I was falling into a pit of bad decisions. He looked down at me. Time froze for a moment. Or maybe my brain stopped working, which was much more likely.

Because that was the only explanation for my next action: I kissed him.

His lips were soft and his beard tickled my face, but he didn't move. Not at first. Time stayed frozen as our lips pressed together. I was about to pull away, run away, when he responded. His lips moved against mine and his tongue pressed at the seam of my lips. I opened for him immediately.

He tasted like peppermint.



KISSING BILLY WAS A mistake. Kissing him at work was an even bigger mistake, but I couldn't fight the undeniable draw I felt to the younger man.

Instead of pulling away when he kissed me, I froze, and then I deepened the kiss. My arms wrapped around his slender body and pulled him closer to me. He followed immediately. His arms wrapped around my waist and I could feel the beginnings of his arousal pressed against me.

It was better than any fantasy I'd had starring this young man, and I'd had more than my fair share of them recently. The box where I'd carefully stored every rogue thought I had about him burst open in the back of my head, spilling out all of my wants and desires.

There would be no putting them back. Not now that I'd tasted him.

I wanted more. I wanted to drink every ounce of him down. A reckless urge burned inside of me, spurred on by the feeling

of his hands slipping underneath my Santa coat. His nails dug into the meaty flesh of my back and he ground into me, letting me feel exactly how I was affecting him.

My own cock was beginning to strain the fake velvet of my red pants.

If he could pull this level of *want* from me with just a kiss, I could only imagine what else he could do to me. With me. For me.

When Billy pulled away from the kiss to catch his breath, I studied his face. His lips were swollen from kissing, and he was breathing heavy. I should have pulled away. Instead, I leaned back down to capture his lips again.

It was like an explosion.

His hands moved from my back and pushed the jacket off of my body, letting it fall to the ground. I responded in kind, ridding him of his bright green elf jacket and pushed his tee-shirt up over his head. He took advantage of the time to rid me of my shirt as well.

We stood there, drinking in one another's bare chests.

"This..." I started.

"Don't," he cut me off. Before I could say anything else, his lips were back on mine.

His hands wrapped around my waist again and he tugged me forward. I would have followed him anywhere in that moment. I would have done anything he wanted in order to keep kissing him, to keep feeling his warm skin against mine.

It was only a few steps until he was against the table he'd been sitting at earlier. I hoisted him onto the folding table, and his legs wrapped around me. Our cocks lined up and he thrust up, rubbing against me through the fabric of our uniforms.

I moaned into his mouth. He pulled away, an impish grin on his face as he studied me. "Shh," he warned. "We don't want anyone knowing what we're doing back here, do we?"

That warning should have served as a bucket of ice water over the whole experience, but it didn't. Not when he was grinding against me. He captured my lips again, and I was taken aback by how in control he was. I liked it. Fuck, I liked it so much, the easy way he took charge and led me through exactly what he wanted.

"More," he groaned into the kiss, so quietly I could barely make out the word.

I pulled away and rested my forehead against his. "What do you want?" I whispered.

His lips curled up into an impish smile. "Mouth," he answered. "Suck me."

Desire surged through my body. I had wanted to taste him, and now I was going to get the chance. My mouth watered at the idea. I nodded and his legs unwrapped, letting me straighten up. I was about to drop to my knees when he shook his head. "Lock the door," he whispered.

Good idea. Very good idea.

I walked over to the door to Santa's Workshop and flipped the lock. It wasn't perfect, not by a long shot. A lot of people had keys to this little building. They could walk in and find what we were doing, but I couldn't find it in myself to care.

Not when Billy was perched up on that table, bare above his knees. His legs were spread and his cock stood at attention, a beacon drawing me back to him.

I fell to my knees in front of him and lifted his legs. I ducked between them and let them fall over my shoulders. My eyes were at the perfect level to take in his trimmed hair and the dick that stood proud above them.

He was bigger than I'd have thought, looking at him. Thicker and longer with a mushroom head begging to be licked. A bead of precum taunted me, and my tongue darted out to lick it away.

It was the best thing I'd ever tasted.

I licked up his shaft and was rewarded with another bead of salty liquid. "More," he whispered.

I nodded before taking his head into my mouth. I circled it with my tongue, and almost died at the strained noise above me. I looked up at him. He was watching me, eyes glued to the sight of his dick in my mouth. He was biting his lower lip and watching me with an intoxicated expression in his eyes.

I began to take him deeper and his expression grew cloudier. He let out a sharp breath. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. His face was so expressive, and I found myself wondering

how expressive he was when he didn't have to be quiet. Something in his expression made me think he was a loud lover, that he was struggling now.

I wanted to find out, but that wasn't in the cards.

When I took him all the way down, relaxing my throat and swallowing around him, he couldn't hold in some of those muted noises. I reached up to cover his mouth, to muffle the sounds I so desperately wanted to hear. He moved his head and took the tip of my middle finger into his mouth.

It was my turn to moan around his cock as he sucked on my finger. I changed the position of my hand, letting him have better access. My index and middle finger hooked into his mouth and he bit down lightly, tongue dancing over them.

My cock was throbbing in my Santa suit.

I wanted to let it out, to provide myself with release, but I couldn't figure out that positioning right then. I was too focused on his dick in my mouth, and my fingers in his. My other hand played with his balls.

“Cl—close,” he panted around my fingers.

His dick throbbed in my mouth. I wanted to taste him.

I doubled down my efforts, hollowing my cheeks and sucking him hard. His thighs trembled before tightening around my head. He pulsed in my mouth, and I was rewarded with his release. I swallowed around him, drinking down every last drop.

It was better than any warm drink could ever hope to be.

When he finished, I ducked out from between his legs and stood slowly. My knees ached from the hard floor, but it was worth every bit of discomfort. He reached out and grabbed my arm to pull me back to him. Our lips met, and he deepened the kiss immediately, tasting himself on my tongue.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “Want to taste you too.”

I pulled away from him and nodded. He hopped down from the table and pulled his pants back over his ass before advancing on me. He pushed me back to the nearest wall and dropped to his knees in front of me.

“Not gonna last long,” I warned.

“That’s okay,” he assured me. “So long as I get to—” He trailed off as he pulled down my pants and freed me. His eyes widened. “Okay, *this* is the kind of cock that make porn stars jealous. I’m going to write poems about this dick.”

It was such a *Billy* thing to say that I couldn’t stop myself from laughing.

“Poems?”

“Odes. Epics. I’m going to create a shrine.” He looked up at me, his pale eyes sparkling. “I have to know if it tastes as good as it looks.”

He didn’t give me time to respond before swallowing me down to the root. I was impressed. I was hardly the largest guy in the world, but my dick wasn’t small. I didn’t think. He swallowed around me, and my knees buckled. All thoughts flew from my head as he worked me over with his tongue.

He sucked dick like he did it for a living. If he thought my dick was a work of art, then I thought his mouth was one. His hands moved around to my bare ass. His fingers dug into my cheeks and he pushed me forward, taking me impossibly deeper.

I came harder than I had in years. I saw stars and snowflakes and dancing Sugar Plum fairies. And he swallowed down every drop before pulling off of me with an exaggerated pop.

“New favorite flavor,” he announced, standing up with the ease of a young man. “Just wanna—” He kissed me again. Our flavors mixed together into a heady taste that, were I ten or fifteen years younger, might have gotten me ready for a second round. He pulled away, nodding. “We taste great together.”

I nodded, because I didn’t know what else to say to that.

“But we should probably actually go get changed before someone sends a search party after us.”

Right. Because we were at work.

The spell was broken, and the weight of what we’d just done settled over me.



I’d spent the entire night replaying what had happened in Santa’s Workshop with Billy. I played through every single moment. I wanted to memorize the way he’d felt against my body and the way he’d made me feel. I fell asleep with a smile

on my face, but I woke up with the heavy weight of regret in my gut.

What had I been thinking? I was more than ten years older than Billy. I should have known better. For one thing, we'd been at work. Someone could have walked in on us. Some kid could've walked too close to Santa's Workshop and heard what we were doing. Luckily, the windows into the room were only paint, nothing that anyone could've seen through.

And it wasn't just that risk.

There was a heavier issue weighing me down. I was ten years older than Billy, so what the hell could I possibly offer him? We were in two different stages of our lives. I was divorced. I spent my nights at home watching television or hanging out with my ex-wife and her new family. He spent his nights delivering food or performing drag shows or who knew what else?

Maybe it hadn't meant anything to him.

The thought curdled in my stomach. I contemplated taking the coward's way out, calling the other Santa the mall hired and asking him to cover for me. In the end, I knew I couldn't do that. It would be immature and irresponsible. I was an adult.

Yes, I was an adult living with major regret, but that was often a part of adulthood.

Luckily, the village was busy. I barely had a moment to even look at Billy, let alone acknowledge the flirtations he threw my

way in the rare moments we weren't swarmed with children. After the shift ended, I didn't hang around the workshop. I just gathered my stuff and left.

We passed briefly in the locker room.

I saw the hurt register in his eyes when he saw me leaving as he came in, white still in my hair and beard for the first time since that first day. He knew that I was taking the coward's way out. Seeing that look in his eyes made me want to stop and comfort him, assure him that what we'd done hadn't been a mistake and hadn't changed everything.

But that would have been a damn lie.



“Okay, what’s crawled up your ass and died?” Christina asked a few hours later.

I hadn't even heard her come into my house.

“When did you get here?”

“Five minutes ago,” she answered with a shake of her head. “I was worried. You sounded,” she paused as if searching for the right word before plowing on with her signature lack of tact, “*off* when we talked earlier. So as soon as Sam got home, I left Lizzie with her to come help you figure out whatever has got you all tangled up.”

I both loved and hated that she knew me so well. “It’s nothing,” I lied.

She plopped down on the couch beside me and shot me a skeptical look. When I didn't say anything else, that skeptical look transformed to annoyance before my very eyes. "Bullshit," she finally said.

"It's not a big deal," I lied again.

"Lie to me a third time and I'm going to beat you with this ugly ass pillow," she threatened, picking up one of my throw pillows. It had been one of the things I'd bought after the divorce, and I tried not to be offended at her description of it. I liked it, and it looked nice against the couch. "Tell me what's wrong, Nosy."

"I think that nickname fits you better right now, Teeny," I muttered. She held up the pillow in warning, and I sighed. "Fine. I hooked up with an elf."

Whatever she was expecting, it wasn't that. Her green eyes widened before the first laugh escaped her lips. It was followed by a gale of laughter, leaving her doubled over and her eyes wet. "You fucked one of your elves?" she squealed. "Oh my god, Noel!"

"We didn't—It wasn't—" I sputtered. I could feel my cheeks burning. I had never been more grateful for my decision to grow out my beard than in that very moment.

"You just said—"

"Blowjobs. Just blowjobs."

"Just blowjobs? Who even *are* you right now?"

She made the whole thing sound so ridiculous. Maybe it was. Or maybe it would've been if Billy had been older, closer to Juniper's age or something. In fact, if I had to be attracted to one of the elves, why couldn't it have been Juniper? He would've been age appropriate at least.

"He's a lot younger than me," I admitted. After she'd finally stopped laughing so hard that any words would've been lost to the noise.

That caught her attention. She raised an eyebrow. "Legal?" When her eyes widened this time, it wasn't in amusement. "Fuck, Noel, please tell me you didn't fuck a minor." She glared. "Excuse me, sorry, didn't *blow* a minor."

"What? No, he's—he's in his twenties."

"That's not too bad."

"Young twenties."

"How young of twenties?"

"I don't know the actual age, but if he's more than twenty-four, I'll eat my Santa hat."

She sat with that information for a few minutes. The silence was deafening. I braced myself for her judgment, the same judgment I'd been throwing at myself since I'd woken up that morning.

It didn't come.

"That's not too bad," she finally said. "I mean, it may not be ideal, but I've heard of worse age gaps, and I love you Noel,

but you're not always the most mature man on the planet." I flipped her off. "You're proving my point. I blame your coworkers, really."

"Teeny!" I exclaimed.

"I'm only telling you the truth," she teased. "But that's not the important part. If you like him, you like him." She studied me for a moment. "Do you like him?"

I wished I could answer that. I liked parts of Billy. I knew that. If he were older, I probably would've asked him out after that explosive kiss or when I learned that he wasn't dating Ozzy, but he wasn't older. "I don't know," I told her truthfully.

She hit me with the pillow.

"What the hell was that for?" I demanded, bringing my hands up to protect myself from another hit.

"I told you if you lied to me again, I was hitting you with the ugly pillow," she retorted. "I can see it on your face. You like him." She held the pillow up again and shot me a look that made me want to hide behind my couch. "Now, I'm going to ask you again, and this time, do not lie to me." She wiggled the pillow. "Do you like him?"

I groaned. "It's more complicated than that." She hefted the pillow up a little higher. "I work with him. He's at least fifteen years younger than me. We're in completely different stages of our life. We probably have nothing in common."

"Ignore all of that."

“I can’t ignore all of that,” I admitted truthfully. “Because those are all deciding factors on if I actually let myself like him or not.”

Christina lowered the pillow and wrapped her arms around me. “It’s okay, Nosy. It’s okay to like him, even if you don’t think you can overcome all those things.” She squeezed me tighter and stroked the back of my head in that comforting way of hers. “I think you’ll come to see that too, because babe, I’ve not seen your face light up the way it does when you talk about him in so long.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to accept the truth, not when I knew it couldn’t go anywhere.

But when Teeny left an hour later, after catching up on non-Billy related things, I ordered Chinese food instead of cooking the hamburger I’d started defrosting when I got home.

When Billy wasn’t my delivery driver, I couldn’t hide the disappointment from myself.



I 'D GOTTEN NOEL'S MESSAGE loud and clear.

I spent the next two days wallowing in the message. I hated it. I understood it, but I hated it. He regretted what had happened between us, and it had changed things between us. The easy-going camaraderie we'd built up, the flirtations and the lingering stares, they'd meant nothing in the end. Not if he regretted what we'd done in Santa's Workshop.

Let me tell you, performing *Santa Baby* during drag rehearsals the two days following my last elf shift *sucked*. Mama Christmas even pulled me aside to tell me I was making Eartha Kitt weep in her grave with my flat performance. I had to literally bite my tongue to keep from retorting. Chris might have cared about me as a person, but a week and a half before the show was not the time to have a professional breakdown.

It was something I was going to just have to deal with.

I spent all of Wednesday night hyping myself up to deal with it. I played through conversations in my head as I delivered

food to the hungry Frostdale residents. Some of the conversations might have turned a little X-rated, but I nipped those in the bud. I was going to have to figure out a way to interact with Noel that didn't have hints of sexual tension lurking beneath the surface.

I couldn't sleep Wednesday night. I tossed and turned, and the few times that I managed to doze off, my sleep was haunted by Noel's too perfect face. And okay, sometimes that too perfect face was doing things that made parts of my sleeping body wake up. It was miserable. Even jacking off to the memory led to a miserable, guilt-ridden orgasm, because I knew Noel regretted our hook up.

Needless to say, I was not at my best when I drove to the mall the next day for my shift.

I barely spoke in the locker room, offering short monosyllabic answers to all of my friends and ignoring Noel entirely. I caught the other elves exchanging looks, but I refused to acknowledge them. There was nothing weird going on. I would die on that hill, even if I wasn't exactly being convincing about it.

For the first time since the season started, I was the first person out of the locker room. I didn't wait for anyone. I just made my way from the locker room to Santa's village. In the workshop, I couldn't sit down at the table. Not without remembering the way it felt to have Noel's larger body supporting me on the table as he gave me a white hot orgasm.

Fuck.

Today was going to suck.

I had never been happier to hear the giggles of children through the clapboard house. It meant that even when Noel got there, he wouldn't have time to try to draw me into stilted conversation. There would be people waiting, reasons why we couldn't interact. Maybe no one would notice the weirdness and we could just move on with our lives, pretend that it never happened.

What did it matter if I couldn't forget?

"Everything okay?" Shae's voice pulled me out of my failed attempts at not remembering the other night. I hadn't even heard anyone else come into the workshop.

I was obviously doing *great* at pretending everything was normal. I gave him a smile that probably looked as fake as it felt. "Yeah," I lied. "I just had a really long night last night. Chris is kicking our asses in rehearsals, then I did a delivery shift. Plus I slept for shit."

He didn't need to know why I slept for shit.

Neither did Noel, who I noticed listening just a few feet away. I injected a little extra pep into my voice. I would be cheery and unaffected if it killed me. "But c'est la vie. I downed an iced coffee with extra espresso on the way here so once that kicks in, bid adieu to the tired husk of a man you see here."

My voice did sound more convincing. Fake it until you make it. Wasn't that the strategy of every single person suffering

from an aching heart? I squared my shoulders. “Anyway, I hear children.”

“Okay, Sarah Sanderson, you realize this is *Christmas* right?” Alec teased, grinning ear to ear.

I flipped him the bird. “I know what holiday it is. I was just pointing out that we should *probably* get out there before tantrums begin, and some kid blows snot on Santa’s jacket.”

I didn’t wait for a response before pushing through the small front door.

The line was pretty insane already. It seemed to get busier every single day. I hadn’t even realized there were that many children in Frostdale. I put on my Snowdrop smile as my fellow elves joined me and Noel ascended his throne.

It was time to get to work.



Faking it was more exhausting than I could have ever imagined. It was not my default setting. My default setting was open. I wore my heart on my sleeve; I always had. We still had hours left, and I was lagging.

Not enough to give the secret signal and disappear into the workshop for a breather, but enough that I knew I was going to be dead on my feet between work and drag rehearsal. I’d planned on doing a shift after rehearsal, but I could already seeing that potential fading away into nothingness.

I was so tired that I didn't notice my sister in line until she and my niece were directly in front of me. Maggie and Mia exchanged a look and I could see the laughter behind both of their eyes. I shot them both a warning glance. Maggie, ever the big sister, clapped me on the shoulder. "I think we should try to convince this elf to take a picture with you and Santa. What do you think sweetheart?"

Mia grinned a devilish grin up at her mother. "I don't know. He's kind of scrawny." Her eyes wandered the area before landing on Alec behind the camera. Her dark eyes, exact replicas of her father's eyes, widened. I knew that face. It was the same face she got when she saw a cute server at a restaurant. "Can we get *him* to pose with me and Santa?"

"That's the photographer," I informed in my most chipper voice. "Unfortunately, he'll be taking the picture. But let's get you up to Santa!"

Maggie laughed, and I motioned for Mia to head on up. I couldn't make eye contact with Maggie, because I would break character. We could talk about Mia's comments about Alec later that night, on my way to rehearsal or after.

Since I wasn't able to look at my sister, that only left a few places for my eyes to go, and they went to the worst possible option. They went to Santa's throne, where Noel was talking to Mia. I watched the way she lit up, even though she hadn't believed in Santa Claus in years, and the weekend before, had protested the very idea of getting her picture taken with him at

all. I watched the way Noel hung on her every word, leaning in to hear her Christmas wishes over the thrum of the crowd.

I'd seen him like that with every single child he'd interacted with over the past few weeks. I'd even seen him like that with one person who was decidedly not a child. It hadn't melted me the way it did watching him with my niece. Maybe it was because I knew Mia better than I knew any of the other kids I'd watched him with.

I knew that she didn't let her guard down easily, especially with adults she didn't know. I knew the smile she gave him, one that was usually hard earned by strangers. It was one of her genuine ones, lighting up her entire face and making her dark eyes sparkle. I saw the ease in which she spoke to him and the way he brought down every single one of her guards.

And for a single moment, I forgot that I was mad at him. I forgot that he'd hurt me by acting so coldly after we'd shared something that I thought was amazing. I forgot that I was trying to distance my heart from him.

In that single moment, I could see myself falling for him. It hit me like a freight train, and the hit kept coming. Because I realized, watching him with Mia, that it wasn't just lust.

I had actual feelings for Noel.

My shift couldn't end soon enough.



I made it through the rest of my shift without getting too distracted by Noel. I'd figured out the trick. The trick was to position myself near the end of the line, where children were just entering the village area. It kept spirits up, and most importantly, it kept Noel out of my line of sight.

Sure, it was lonely out there without my fellow elves, but a man had to make sacrifices to not go completely insane.

I thought I'd manage a smooth escape at the end of my shift. I left the workshop with my other elves and stuck to them like glue. They were my elf-y little shields. If I was talking to them, I couldn't be talking to Noel. I couldn't be staring at Noel. If I left with them, then I wasn't lingering waiting for Noel.

Besides, several of them were having pretty big holiday seasons and I needed to catch up on the latest tea. It was essential, and I was sad to say, I'd been so busy that I hadn't properly caught up with them in *ages*. Was it probably bad form to use that catch up now as an excuse to dodge Santa? Sure, but it was the action that counted, right? I remembered there being an old saying about actions and words.

Yeah, I was justifying it way too much even to myself.

But it was working. I left the locker room with them, and stayed with them all the way to the mall doors. Then I pushed through and was on my own. I tunnel visioned onto my car. I had rehearsal to get to, and then I could go home.

I made it to my car, climbed in, and then the damn thing wouldn't start.

“Are you *fucking* kidding me?” I asked the steering wheel. Then I hit it once for good measure before trying again. It sputtered uselessly. I tried sweet talking it, but nothing.

I could *not* afford this. My car was my paycheck. I couldn't deliver food if my car was broken. I could feel the panic rising in my chest, and the tears burning behind my eyes, threatening to fall. I was *not* going to lose my shit in the mall parking lot. That was one thing that wasn't going to happen.

I was a strong, independent man. I could figure this out. I mean, I knew less than nothing about cars, but Google was free, and you could learn anything on the Internet. Right?

I typed in car sputtering, won't start, but too many answers immediately populated. I clicked on the first one and started to read.

“Everything okay?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the familiar voice. I looked up. Noel was leaning against the side of my car, looking down at me. The sun hit him at an angle that made him look like some kind of delicious god. I wanted to lie, but how could I? I couldn't exactly drive off.

“My car won't start,” I admitted reluctantly. “I have rehearsal in twenty minutes, and my car won't start.”

I didn't go into all of the other ways that my car not starting was going to ruin my life. He hadn't asked for my life story. He'd only asked if I was okay, which meant the immediate.

“Need a ride?”

He said it so easily, like things weren't incredibly weird between us, and he hadn't given me the big Arctic Chill on Monday. I wanted to brush him off too, serve him back the same energy he'd given me, but honestly? I did need a ride. I was tired, and I was going to be late. Chris *hated* when we were late.

I nodded.

“C'mon. Get your stuff.”

“You're going to regret that last one,” I warned him as I climbed out of the driver's seat. I walked around to the trunk of the car and lifted the popped hood. Inside, my drag bag sat. It was big and heavy, but it was full of all the little things I needed to transform from Billy Wilde into Sleigh Belle.

I hoisted it onto my shoulder, only to find myself relieved of the weight moments later as Noel grabbed it and lifted it like it weighed nothing. I guess with his burly body and bulging biceps, it didn't weigh much at all. *Do not think about burly bodies or bulging biceps*, I warned myself. Not when I was about to get into the car with him.

He motioned for me to follow him, so I slammed my trunk closed, locked my doors, and did as I was told. He took me to a simple black sedan. Then he opened the door for me.

Swoon.

How was I supposed to fight the fact that I had feelings for him when he carried my bag and opened the door for me? Couldn't he go back to being Mr. Freeze? It might have been

painful, but it was easier to accept that nothing was going to happen between us when he wasn't acting like Mr. Perfect.

I was too busy bitching to myself that I hadn't noticed him getting into the car until his door slammed, slamming me right back into reality with it. "So I guess I should tell you where we're going?"

"I know where the show is," he assured me. "I looked it up after you talked about it."

He looked it up? I was *so* royally screwed.

He pulled out of the parking lot and onto the main road before he spoke again. "I need to apologize to you," he began. He had my full attention. "Monday? It wasn't my finest moment."

"It's okay," I told him, despite the fact that it wasn't okay.

"No, it's not." He sighed. "I'm almost forty. I shouldn't be acting like a teenager. I was confused about what happened between us, and I didn't act my age."

"Are you—" I drew in a deep breath. I was so stupid for asking this question. "Are you still confused about what happened between us?"

He thought for a moment. His eyes stayed on the road ahead of him. While he thought, I filled the silence with every terrible possibility of what he was going to say. Each one hurt worse than the last.

"No."

“No?”

“No. I’m not confused about what happened.” He stole a quick look at me. I wished he hadn’t, because I was sitting so ramrod straight and my shoulders were so tense that he could probably see every anxiety and bad thought in my mind. “I don’t regret it either.”

I exhaled. I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath until it rushed out of me. “You don’t?”

“Do you?” He turned onto the road where the club was. I almost wished he’d started this conversation at a time where we could really get into it, because his question was a loaded one.

A loaded one with a quick summary answer. “No, I don’t.” Because I didn’t. “I kind of thought you did, and I don’t like the way that made me feel.”

He took a hand off of the steering wheel to reach over the console and squeeze mine. The simple gesture sent warmth rushing through me, relaxing every muscle that was still tensed. “I’m really sorry for that, Billy.”

“The next time you’re confused, can you just talk to me?”

“I will.”

I had no choice but to take him at his word. He pulled into the parking lot and found a parking spot. He started to get out of the car and I shook my head. “Chris is pretty strict about people coming in with us. His partner isn’t even allowed

inside during rehearsals, and they've been together since before I was born."

Noel let out a laugh. "Okay, I got it. No sneak peeks."

"I'm pretty sure if I showed you my routine out of the club, he'd appear to freak out at me." I was only slightly exaggerating. "The group we're doing this for means a lot to him, and he doesn't want anything going wrong."

I didn't dive any deeper into that. My hand drifted to the door handle. I didn't want to get out of the car. I didn't want to break this moment, but time was ticking down until rehearsal was set to start, and I didn't want to give Chris any reason to flip his wig.

"I've got to—"

"Can I kiss you?" Noel's words rushed over mine, covering them, and suddenly my own words felt unimportant.

I nodded. "Yeah, you can kiss me." My voice sounded breathy to my ears.

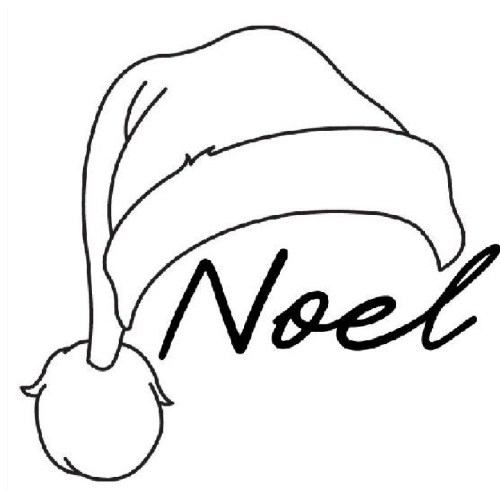
He leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. It was different than the kiss in Santa Village, sweeter and gentler. It wasn't hungry. It didn't burn with passion and boil my blood. It wasn't scalding. It wasn't even a simmer of a kiss.

It was cotton candy and milk chocolate, sweet and melting.

When the kiss broke, the smile on my face was so vast that my cheeks hurt.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Billy," he assured me.

I was speechless. I just nodded, got my bag from his trunk, and walked into the club on wobbly knees.



ALL I COULD THINK about after dropping Billy off was that kiss. I could still feel the gentle pressure of his lips pressed against mine, the warmth spreading through my body, hours later. Normally, I would've called Teeny and talked to her about it, but I wasn't confused by the kiss.

If anything, it settled all my confusion.

I liked him.

It didn't matter that Billy and I worked together or that he was so much younger than me. I liked him in a way I hadn't liked anyone since my divorce. Teeny had, of course, been right. When it came to me, she was always right.

I wanted more kisses like the one outside of the club. I wanted more of his smiles, the ones that showed off that adorable dimple. I wanted more of his easy laugh and the way he always lit up every room he was in. I wanted all of that beautiful energy pointed at me, so that I could bask in it.

I wanted him.

My eyes darted to the clock across my bedroom. It was late, but I assumed he was a night owl. How else would he be able to fit in all the things he did? I knew he delivered food, did drag, worked at the mall, and had to have at least some semblance of a social life. I'd even heard him talking about picking up shifts with a catering company.

I doubted he'd be asleep.

Even though I knew it was a bad idea, I grabbed my phone off my nightstand and navigated to his number. I made a few false starts, trying to figure out what I wanted to say to him this late at night, before I settled on my words.

Noel: Do you have rehearsal tomorrow?

The message was marked read almost immediately. The bouncing dots showed up, indicating that he was typing back a response. My heart raced. I felt ten years younger than I was. No, twenty years younger, like I was back in high school texting my crush.

Billy: nope. chris has plans so no rehearsal.

Billy: why?

Noel: Would you like to do something after work?

Just us?

I hit send before I could think too hard about the words. I didn't want to second guess my bravery. I didn't want to dial back the message or the suggestion of going on a date. Because that was what I wanted it to be. If I wanted those moments with him, those kisses and smiles and laughs, then I had to put myself out there.

His answer seemed to take forever.

Billy: i would love that.

Noel: It's a date.

Billy: is it?

Noel: Yes. I'm asking you on a date, Billy.

Billy: can i call you?

Instead of answering his question, I hit the call button. My hands were sweating as I listened to the phone ring against my ear. Had I misread everything? I didn't think so. He'd said that he liked me that afternoon. He'd let me kiss him. There had to be something else going on, something he wanted to talk to me about.

"So how is this going to work?" Billy answered the phone and dove right in, not even bothering with a hello.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean us. If we're going on dates, and we work together..." He stopped and I tried to pick up his train of thoughts. I couldn't follow the trail. "Do we tell everyone that we're going on dates?"

Oh. That was a good question. Even though I was Santa and he was an elf, I could hardly be considered his boss. I didn't think HR would frown upon a little inner North Pole dating, but I wasn't sure. What if we went on this date, and it turned out we had nothing in common?

"Maybe we should play it by ear," I suggested.

He was quiet for a moment before letting out a small hum. "That sounds smart."

What did that mean? Had I made the wrong call? "Unless..."

"No, playing it by ear is smart. No need to make a big deal out of it if it's just a few dates." Billy sounded confident in the decision.

"Then tomorrow, it's a date?"

"It's a date." I could hear the smile in Billy's voice as he confirmed. I wished I could see it. I wished I could see what he looked like now, laying in his bed. "Are you in bed?"

Billy's voice echoed my own thoughts.

"I am," I answered.

"What do you sleep in?"

"Why?"

"I'm trying to picture it." There was a dreamy tone in his voice. I could picture him, eyes closed, in a bed across town trying to imagine me.

"Gray sweats, no shirt."

“That sounds hot,” Billy whispered. “What color’s your comforter? Your sheets?”

“How detailed are you trying to get in your imagining?”

“Well, I’m building a mental image so I can jack off to it later,” Billy chirped.

My eyes widened at his bluntness. I was pretty sure I choked on air. Had he really just said that? More importantly, why was I surprised?

“Are you now?” I tried to keep my voice calm, but even I could hear that I was failing.

“I mean, I could jack off with you on the phone with me,” he offered. I could feel my cheeks burning so hot that I worried my bed would burn to ash. “I mean, I know what your cock looks like. I know what it feels like in my mouth *and* what your mouth feels like around me. I can imagine the rest of it.”

My dick twitched in my sweats, and I fought the urge to palm at it.

“I can imagine the way your dick looks behind the sweats. I’m picturing an impressive dick print, by the way. I can practically taste the sweat on your skin as I kiss down your body.” His voice is quiet, thick with lust.

I should stop this.

“But then I hit a dead end. Because I don’t know what color the sheets are or the blanket or anything,” he chirps. His voice is back to normal, and it makes my dick throb harder.

“I guess some things will have to be left to mystery,” I teased. “But just so you know, I don’t need to know what any part of your room looks like to picture you right now.”

My hand moved down my chest, to press down on my growing erection. I was too old for phone sex, and every word he was saying made me want to go find him, bring him to my house, and taste him again. Those thoughts were not doing anything to help my inflating cock.

“And what do you think I look like right now?”

“Like someone who needs to go to bed,” I teased. “Because the next time we get off together, I want it to be *together*.”

He groaned. “Spoilsport.”

“Good night, Billy.”

“Good night, Noel.”

We disconnected. The moment he was no longer in my ear, I took care of the little problem. I imagined him kissing me, prepping and fucking me, bringing me pleasure with his lithe body.

When I came, it was with his name on my lips.



I got to work early the next day. It was partially eagerness to see Billy. I wanted to check in, make sure he hadn’t changed his mind about our date that night. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if he had. Deal with it, obviously, but I would be hurt.

Christina had called me ridiculous when I'd voiced my concerns to her on the drive to work. She didn't understand. Billy was the kind of guy that could have anyone. Why would he want me? She'd had more than a few words about that particular line of thought, words that I probably needed to hear and internalize, but had instead argued until she'd hung up on me.

Billy was already in the locker room when I got there, standing alone in the room. "Where's everyone else?" I asked him, my eyes sliding down his slender body. He looked so damn good in his elf leggings and nothing else.

I wanted to put my mouth over the very prominent bulge, but decided to be on my best behavior. We were at work, after all, and someone could walk into the locker room at any time.

"No idea. I..." He looked at the floor sheepishly. I watched him take a deep breath before he brought his eyes back up to mine. "I was kind of excited to get to work today. To see you..."

My heart pounded against my rib cage. I tried to play it cool by going to my locker. My hand shook with nerves as I fiddled with the combination lock. "Everything okay?"

He was going to cancel. I just knew it.

"I'm excited. For tonight, I mean." There was an uncharacteristic quality to his voice. It almost sounded like he was as nervous as I was about this whole thing. It set me at ease, as terrible as that probably sounded.

My hand stopped shaking, and I was able to open my locker. I pulled out my costume and the white coloring for my hair and beard. His eyes met mine as I started to undress, and there was no disguising the *want* in them. It looked a lot like how I imagined I'd looked at him when I first saw him in the locker room.

Heat coursed through me, warmer in every place his eyes landed. I could feel the fire in his stare, and my mind played back to the fantasy I'd had the night before. It was too bad that would probably never be reality. Men took one look at me, and they expected a certain kind of lover.

The thought was effective as a bucket of ice cold water being thrown on top of me. If we got to that point of the night, he'd probably be disappointed.

"You okay?" he asked, his eyes narrowed as he studied me.

"It's nothing," I assured him. "At least nothing that can be discussed here."

He nodded. I didn't know what he thought I was talking about, but somehow I doubted he'd have picked up the right train of thought.

We both dressed, and he helped me put the color in my hair and beard. We were leaving the locker room as the other elves came in. I couldn't read the expressions on their faces as Billy and I walked by.

I didn't think about it. Not when Billy was beside me, walking through the mall towards Santa's Village. We stepped

into the Workshop together. His gray eyes swept the area before he took a step forward. His arms wrapped around me and he stood on tiptoe. I knew I should stop him, but I couldn't.

I didn't care how reckless it was. I wanted nothing else but to kiss him right then.

So I did.

It felt like a combination of the kiss outside of the club the night before and the heated make out session we'd shared in this very room. It had the sweetness of the former and the promise of the latter.

Unfortunately, it didn't last nearly as long as the last time we'd kissed in the workshop. It was probably for the better. Who knew when the other elves would show up, and we had decided to stay discreet at work until we figured out what this was.

When Billy pulled away, he had an impish grin on his face. It made me nervous.

"What?" I asked cautiously.

"I'm just imagining the things I'm going to do to you tonight." He had that same gravelly tone to his voice that he'd had on the phone the night before. My dick twitched in my Santa pants. In an abundance of caution, I sat down on one of the folding chairs.

I regretted this choice immediately, because Billy sat down on my lap, one leg on either side. The weight of him on my lap

made fighting my cock a losing battle. Especially when he ground down just enough to provide a tease of friction.

“I had a whole fantasy played out last night. Of course, I had to pretend with the sheets. I decided you’d probably have something simple, based on your living room, so I went with heather gray.” He leaned forward and placed a teasing kiss on my lips, pulling away before I could deepen it and leaning back enough that I couldn’t chase him to get it back. “First, I imagined that I was in the bed with you. I kissed all over this amazing body of yours.”

He trailed a finger down the white fur of my Santa jacket. “I paid special attention to any place that made you squirm. Then I started sucking your dick, and while I worked you over with my mouth?” He rested his forehead against mine, grinding down against my now rock solid cock. I fought the urge to moan at the teasing pressure.

“Yeah?” I exhaled.

“Well while I sucked you, I started working you open and then...” He grinned a wicked grin that would haunt my dirty dreams for the rest of my life. “Then I fucked you until we both exploded, and then I kept fucking you until neither one of us could take it anymore.”

I swallowed hard, my eyes growing wide.

He must have misread the situation, because he shrugged. “It was just a fantasy. If you prefer to fuck me, that can be arranged.”

“N-no, I—I really like the idea of you...” I trailed off, and that wicked smile appeared on his lips, big enough to put his dimple on display.

He ground his body against me one more time before sliding off of lap. “Just gotta get through today,” he chirped. He leaned over and gave me another quick kiss before walking over to the mirror to readjust his lip gloss.

I was still trying to force my cock to go down when the door opened and the other elves came in, completely unaware of what had just gone down.



I COULD FEEL NOEL’S eyes on me the rest of the shift. Did I maybe add a little extra pep to my step because of it? Maybe. But if a sexy man is going to be looking at me, I might as well give him something to look at.

“You’re in a good mood,” Holli whispered at one point.

“I have a good night planned,” I answered. He raised an eyebrow and I shook my head. There was no way I was going to a) jinx it with Noel ahead of the date or b) tell anyone about our plans when we’d already decided to keep this thing between us quiet until we figured out *what* exactly it was. But Holli was still looking at me curiously, and I knew I had to give him *something*. He’d kept me informed about everything with Jack. I kind of owed him.

Besides, he was my best friend in the entire world, and I’d always told him everything. “I don’t know if it’s going to be anything yet, so can I tell you all the nitty gritty details later?”

I just wouldn’t specify how *later* it would be.

And to keep him from trying to get some clarity on what later meant, I turned my attention to the kids in line. I kept busy for the rest of the shift, and before I knew it, the village was closing for the day. I filed back into Santa's Workshop with the other elves and started immediately to the locker room. I hadn't brought anything date worthy, and I smelled like sweat and children. I pulled out my phone and sent a very fast text to Noel, requesting that he meet me by my car in the parking lot.

I rushed in getting back into my people clothes and made my way to the car, goodbyes to my friends still hanging in air.

Noel took another five minutes to get out to my car. His blue eyes were twinkling when he saw me, and for once, there was still some lingering white in his auburn beard. It looked good. He was going to look incredibly sexy when that was real and not just hair coloring for a role. I kind of hoped I'd be around to see it.

Which was getting ahead of myself in a major way. I had to dial it back a little before he thought I was insane.

"You ready?" he asked as soon as he was in front of me.

"I was actually going to ask if you'd mind if I went home and changed first?" I admitted, looking down at my black sneakers.

He nodded. "How about I pick you up in an hour?"

Pick me up? Oh my god, he was so adorable. When was the last time a man had actually picked me up for a date? Never.

That was when. I mainly met guys on the Swyper or Poundr apps and none of them had the courtesy to actually pick me up before we hooked up. Which was probably a good thing, because there had been more than one time I wanted to make a quick escape after we'd finished.

I didn't foresee myself needing an easy out with Noel, so I nodded. "I'll text you my address."

"I'll see you in an hour."

We hovered there for a moment, eyes locked. "God I really want to kiss you," I admitted.

His smile grew bigger and brighter. I watched his eyes dart around the parking lot before he swooped in and planted his lips against mine. It lasted only a moment, but I felt it all the way down to my toes. I couldn't stop smiling as I climbed into my car and drove away.



Two and a half hours later, Noel and I walked out of Felix's Diner with full stomachs and smiles on our face.

I'd learned a lot about him during that date. He had two siblings, one older sister and one younger brother. He'd met his ex-wife in college and dated her for two years before they got married. He'd told me a bit about the death of their relationship and the divorce and how much it had hurt him at first.

I'd told him about my family, about how I never lived up to their expectations and they'd never really understood me. I told him about the only serious relationship I'd ever been in, back in high school, and how that had ended in a whimper, not a bang.

I felt like I could've kept talking to him at that table all night, but we had other plans.

He wanted to drive around town and look at Christmas lights.

"It's one of my favorite things about Christmas," he admitted, as we got back into his car.

I buckled my seat belt. "The lights are really pretty," I agreed, "but I don't think I've ever really gone out driving around just to look at them."

"I used to do it with my parents when I was a kid," he told me. "They'd load us kids in the car on Christmas Eve with hot chocolate and drive around town for hours. By the time we got home, we were all exhausted. Which I'm pretty sure was the whole point." He pulled out of the parking lot. "I used to dream of doing it with my own kids."

"Why didn't you and Christina have kids?" I'd seen him with the kids at the mall. He was amazing with children and would have made an amazing dad.

"Teeny can't have kids," he said with a shrug. "We'd talked about adopting when we found out, but it never happened."

I nodded. While I had other questions, I didn't think it was my place to ask. That was his ex-wife's personal business, and I hadn't even met the woman. "Why didn't you adopt after you two got divorced?"

"It's hard for a single man to adopt."

"Do you still want children?" Was this conversation too deep for a first date? Probably. Should I have changed the subject? Oh god, was he going to be miserable on the rest of the date because I kept asking these intrusive questions?

Fuck.

I was going to blow this entire thing.

I don't think he even noticed that I was starting to go into a full spiral down Panic Boulevard. Instead, he made a thoughtful noise. His voice pulled me back from the twirly slide of doomed thoughts. "I think I would. One day. With the right partner." He turned onto a residential street. "Do you want kids?"

"Yes," I answered immediately. I'd always dreamed of having kids one day, and when Maggie had Mia, that desire only grew. It grew bigger the older Mia got, because she was just such a fun kid. I wanted that. "One day. With the right partner."

It seemed to be the right answer, because he was smiling again. He reached over the center console of his car and took my hand, lacing our fingers together.

“Look at that house,” he said suddenly, lifting our hands to point out my window.

I looked, and my jaw dropped. I didn't know what I'd expected to see. Maybe some pretty lights twinkling along roofs and windows. The house he pointed out had that, but they also had a giant Santa peeking out from behind a chimney, lit up from behind. On the roof sat eight lit up reindeer and a sleigh that looked overburdened with packages. The two big trees in the yard were fully decorated with lights and baubles and giant stars atop each of them. I could see a tree inside too, lit up like a beacon into a warm looking living room.

Every house in the neighborhood seemed to be decorated, and several seemed to be competing for the most wild decorations. A lot of them were themed, and one of them had lights that changed in time to a Christmas carol that played from speakers hidden somewhere.

“How much money do you think these people pay for their decorations?” I asked him as we pulled out of the neighborhood.

“I don't think either of us want to think about the answer to that question,” he laughed.

“Have you finally put up any decorations at your place?” Given the way he seemed to love all the lights we'd passed, I'd assumed he had. I hadn't delivered to him since Thanksgiving, and that had been weeks ago.

“No,” he groaned. “I keep meaning to, and Teeny has been up my ass about it.”

“Kinky,” I interrupted before clapping my hand over my mouth. Had I *really* just said that? Foot. Meet mouth.

He let out a bark of laughter and shook his head. “Sam would murder me if that were literal.” It was my turn to laugh. “*Anyway*, Teeny has been nagging me about putting up lights, but I haven’t really seen a point to it. I spend Christmas over at her place.”

“Not with your family?”

“They live on the other side of the state. It’s too much of a drive just for presents and dinner. I usually go to see them a few weeks into January for my mom’s birthday.” I nodded. That made a lot of sense, and I guess some people did think birthdays were more important than Christmas. “My siblings come up for it too. We just do Christmas that same weekend.”

We talked until he pulled into another neighborhood, and then we focused on the lights again. We made it through two more neighborhoods, talking and laughing and enjoying one another’s company before I squeezed his hand. “What do you think about heading back to my place?”

I didn’t usually have guys over, but Noel wasn’t just some guy. The more I talked to him, the more I liked him. Like *really* liked him. I wanted to show him my world—and then I wanted to do some other things to him, but that was a whole other conversation. He seemed to pick up on the whole other conversation bits, because he swallowed hard and nodded.

“I think I’d like that very much,” he agreed.

“Good.” I stopped for a moment, looking over at him. “And you realize, I’m inviting you up, right? That wasn’t a slick way of saying I was ready for this date to be over.”

He nodded.

“Perfect. Because I have a lot of things I want to do to you. In case you forgot.”

Maybe it was just me, but he seemed to drive a little faster after that, and before I knew it, he was parking in front of my apartment.



I was a bundle of nerves as we ascended the stairs to my minuscule apartment. What was I thinking bringing him here instead of suggesting we go back to his place? I’d seen his house. It was a suburban dream. My apartment? Not so much. It was small and cramped and never clean enough for an actual visitor.

It wasn’t like my apartment was a complete pig sty, but between all of my clothing, makeup, and drag accoutrements, there was always something laying around. Had I remembered to put up the outfits I’d tried on before deciding on my ensemble for tonight? I couldn’t remember. My heart was pounding against my chest, and I could feel the panic beginning to rise.

Then Noel squeezed my hand, and all the wild thoughts faded away. Noel wasn't going to judge me if my apartment wasn't perfect, and if he did, then I'd seriously misread him. And did I really want to be with someone who would judge me because my apartment wasn't perfect or was small or was whatever else I was driving myself crazy about? No. Absolutely not. Not that it mattered, because that wasn't Noel. Not at all.

“Are you okay?” Noel's voice was quiet behind me, and it was the perfect reassurance of everything I was thinking.

“Yeah,” I told him before diving straight in. “Actually, I'm nervous.”

“We don't—We don't have to do anything you don't want to do. No matter what you said earlier.”

God, the perfect words from the perfect man. Except he'd completely misread my nerves. I wasn't nervous about the idea of finally getting him naked. “It's not that,” I explained. “It's my apartment. It's not as nice as your place.”

“Billy, babe,” Noel began. I had to force myself to pay attention to any other words that came out after he called me *babe*, because I was screaming inside. Screaming. “I like you. I wouldn't care if your apartment came with five overbearing roommates and seven cats.”

“Eight,” I said with a straight face.

He blinked. “What?”

“I have eight cats.” The look on his face was so comical that any residual nerves disappeared immediately. “I’m kidding! I don’t have have any cats. Sadly. I don’t have the time to devote to a pet.”

He exhaled. “Okay. I mean, I like cats, but eight in a small apartment?”

“I’m extra, but I’m not *that* extra.”

He laughed and I finished leading him up the stairs to my apartment. I felt more confident as I stuck the key into the doorknob and pushed the door open, letting him into my inner sanctum. “Would you like the grand tour?” I offered. Not that there was much to tour.

“I would,” he agreed.

I nodded and motioned around the room we came in through. “This is the living room. As you can see, I do a lot of living in here.” The death heels sat by the door. I kicked off my shoes and bent down to pick them up. “Normally, when I come home, I’d put these on immediately. They’re for the Christmas show.”

“And you’re not going to put them on now?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

The idea of walking around in heels and sexy underwear filled my mind. That would be hot, but honestly, I didn’t want all of that extra stuff for our first time. I wanted it to be just us, no bells and whistles. “Maybe another time,” I told him. “And probably later. Chris wants me wearing them any time I can.”

Even though I had finally mastered walking in them, Chris was just being Chris.

I waited for him to take off his shoes and put them next to mine. My inner hopeless romantic squeed over the image of his shoes next to mine. I wanted to see it more, our stuff coexisting. Maybe this would be the start of that. Once he was in his socked feet, I led him further into the apartment. “The kitchen is through there. It’s nothing special. There’s not even a table in there.”

“Where do you eat then?”

“Couch,” I admitted. “There’s not exactly room for a breakfast nook in here.”

He laughed. “I eat a lot of my meals on the couch too, and I have a full dining room.”

An entire dining room. Wasn’t that the dream?

I dragged him toward the door at the other end of the living room. “And my bedroom is through here.”

I pushed open the door and led him inside. He closed the door behind us, and suddenly, the entire vibe of the room had changed. It felt warmer, more intense. I looked up at him, and he looked back down at me.

I couldn’t say who moved first, but one moment, we were looking in each other’s eyes and the next, our lips and tongues were battling it out. He walked me backward until my knees hit the bed. I pulled him down with me, loving the way his body covered mine almost immediately. I could still taste the

hot cocoa from dinner on his tongue, a ghost of sweetness added to the kiss.

My hands began to explore, tugging his button up shirt from his pants. He was too tucked in for what I wanted. He broke the kiss long enough to sit up, one leg on either side of me, and lift his shirt over his head. I feasted on the sight of his fuzzy chest and dark pink nipples. I wanted to follow the bed of hair down to the amazing cock I knew was tucked beneath his pants, and then I wanted to explore everything else.

I also wanted to take my dear sweet time, but uh, he was very hot and I was not one to say no to temptation when that temptation looked like Noel Miller.

“Your turn.” He looked down at my shirt and I nodded. I sat up, and he helped me take my shirt off. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

My cheeks flushed. “You’re not too bad looking yourself,” I assured him. “In fact, you are fucking sexy as hell.” It was his turn to blush, and it was fucking adorable. “I want to kiss every inch of your body.” I punctuated my statement by kissing along the column of his neck.

He leaned his head back, giving me better access. I kissed down to his collar bone and nipped ever so slightly. I could feel him growing hard, pressed against my abs. I knew he could feel my reaction too. I was hard as a rock. I kissed the same spot on his collar that I’d just nipped and his hips moved. The friction made me moan against his chest.

He moved again, a smirk on his face that told me he knew *exactly* what he was doing. “Tease,” I exhaled before moving down his chest and flicking my tongue over one of his nipples.

It was his turn to moan. I drew the taut nipple into my mouth, sucking. His hands tangled into my hair, holding me in place as I worked over them. His hips moved, riding my clothed cock and making me see stars. It was the perfect amount of a tease, and I wanted more.

“Lay down,” I instructed, nudging him.

He nodded and laid down on his back. I nudged his legs open and slotted myself between them, hovering over him. He looked like a feast, spread out on my sheets.

“Kiss me,” he requested, and I was powerless to deny him. It didn’t matter that I wanted to continue my trip down his body. If he wanted to be kissed, then I had no choice. I hovered over him as I brought my lips down to his.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me down on top of him. Feeling his sturdy body under mine made me feel safe in a way I couldn’t define. He made me feel safe in a way I could never put words to.

Hands began to wander again. His first, grabbing at my ass and pulling me down, grinding me into him. It drew long and low moans from his lips and breathier sounds from mine. He felt so good, just like that, and I knew for a fact that the rest of this was going to be mind blowing.

When I was finally able to pull away from his kiss, I made quick work of his belt. I pulled his pants off, drinking in the expanse of long furry legs and the plaid boxer briefs underneath, barely containing his cock. I licked my lips as I looked down at it.

“Not yet,” he practically purred. “I want to see you first.”

I nodded and stood up. If he wanted to see me, then I was going to give him a show.



THE MOMENT BILLY CLIMBED off of me, I leaned up onto my elbows. I wanted to watch him undress. I wanted to drink in every inch of his lithe frame, before he took over my senses again. I knew that would happen the moment he was back in touching range. I would lose all coherent thought the moment we were able to kiss again, because all I would want in that moment would be to touch him.

He made eye contact with me as he slowly undid his belt. My heart pounded in my chest, and I bit my lower lip. I had never seen anything more sensual than the slow way he pulled his belt through the loops. Not until he pulled down the nearly painted on jeans he'd been wearing. Then, I knew I'd never see anything sexier than what he had underneath.

A pair of pale blue lace briefs cupped his dick. The head peeked out of the waistband. I couldn't look away. Not even to admire the rest of the body he revealed to me. I was practically drooling. I don't know why, but I'd not expected him to be

wearing lace. I hadn't even known I was into men in lace until that moment.

It fit him perfectly. Sensual and sexy with some delicate undertones.

“Fuck,” I groaned out. “Have you been wearing that all night?” He smiled and ran his fingers over the waistband of his underwear. I shook my head and scooted down the bed. “Leave them on for a few minutes.”

“You like them?”

“Let's just say that this moment will be starring in all of my dirty dreams for the rest of my life.”

He laughed. “Well, you know, you can just see the real deal any time you want.”

My mouth went dry. I liked the idea of that, of getting to see him like this whenever I wanted. I liked the idea of being the *only* person to see the sexy underwear on the even sexier man in front of me. I nodded and motioned him over to the bed.

When he got in front of me, I stopped him with a simple hand to his chest. He gave me a puzzled look, but I didn't bother with an explanation. I repositioned myself on the bed, laying on my stomach with my head close to him. I kissed the tip of his cock where it peeked over the waistband of his panties, tasting the bead of precum that had been resting there before mouthing over his generous bulge.

“Baby,” he exhaled.

I smiled as I continued to work him over with my mouth, savoring the salt of his skin through the fabric. His hands tangled in my hair, and I moaned against him. I teased him a few moments longer before taking him out and swallowing him down. His reaction was immediate. A long groan followed by a thrust of his hips. I hollowed out my cheeks and sucked him hard, remembering the things he'd liked the only other time we'd done this.

It wasn't enough when he pulled away, shaking his head. "You keep that up and I'm not going to get to do what I really want," he reminded me, stepping out of his underwear.

My eyes drank in the sight before me hungrily. He was a work of art, and I didn't understand why he'd be interested in me. But the way he was looking over my body told me that even if I didn't understand it, it was true. He found me as attractive as I found him. "And what is it that you *really* want?" I asked him.

Because yeah, I kind of wanted to hear it.

"I want to fuck that perfect ass of yours until we are both spent, and then I want to spend the night in your arms."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

The words fell from my lips, and his eyes sparkled with the challenge. He reached into his nightstand and pulled out a condom and a bottle of lube. He climbed back onto the bed. I was about to roll over so I could face him, but a single imperious hand to my shoulder blade kept me on my stomach.

Clearly, he wanted to be in control and I was a-okay with it. I trusted him to know what he wanted to do with me, to know how to make it good for both of us. He moved with the kind of confidence that left no doubt in my mind that he would accomplish whatever he set his mind to. I watched over my shoulder as he crawled over me, settling with straddling over my thighs. He tugged down my briefs, and palmed at my ass. “You have got to tell me your ass work out, by the way,” he commented. “Because no amount of squats can make *this*.”

“Manual labor.”

“Gross, not for me.” I laughed, but my laugh fell short with the sound of the lube bottle clicking open. I watched as he lubed up one single finger and began to tease my crease, brushing over my hole tenderly. “I think I need better access,” he muttered before climbing over to one side. He tugged down my briefs further. I helped him by kicking them off the side of the bed. “Perfect.”

He nudged at my legs, and I opened them automatically for him. He hummed a sound of approval, and began to work me open. His first slender finger gave just enough burn, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. So did he, and soon he had two and then three fingers pumping in and out of me, brushing over my prostate and making me cry out for more.

A part of me thought the was going to tease and torment me forever. It felt like forever before he reached over me to grab the condom that was still sitting on the table. “Turn over,” he instructed. “I want to look at you.”

I wanted that too. I rolled over and watched as he rolled the condom onto his length. He slathered lube on and moments later, he was at my entrance. He pushed in slowly before pulling almost all the way back out. When he pushed back in, it was deeper.

He continued this slow torture until he was finally fully seated. Our eyes met, and I nodded. "I'm good," I assured him.

It was the only reassurance he needed before he began moving. When I tugged him down, he came willingly, kissing me as he moved inside me. I could feel every inch of him, and it felt like nothing I'd ever felt before. It was different than every other hookup I'd had, whether I was topping or bottoming.

And I knew the reason for that.

This wasn't just a hookup.

As Billy and I moved together, I knew that this was the first thing that felt like it could be *something* since my divorce. I didn't know if he felt the same way, but I knew I wanted this to be real. I didn't just want this to be a few dates, a few fucks, and then a memory. The feelings made it all the more intense as my orgasm built inside of me. "I need—" I panted out, my lips brushing against his.

I didn't have to finish my sentence. His hand wrapped around my dick, and he began to stroke in time to his thrusts. It only took a few strokes before he had sent me barreling over the edge. He cursed and moaned and moments later, he

collapsed on top of me, spent. We kissed again, uncaring that he was getting sticky from the jizz on my chest. Uncaring that he was still inside of me.

I felt closer to him in that moment than I had anyone in years.

When he finally pulled away, I felt like something was missing. The something missing returned with his lips against mine. We kissed until our lips were sore. “We should clean up,” he finally said, being the only one of us with any sense.

I whined, and he brought a finger down to shush me. “You’re going to regret not getting cleaned up later. Cum plus chest hair?”

He had a point. I laughed. “Shower?”

“Not really big enough for two,” he admitted before shrugging. “But I’ve had tighter fits.”

He led me to the bathroom, where we barely fit in his tiny shower, and then back to his bed where we fell asleep with him in my arms.

When I woke up, I was still smiling.



The next day at work, I wanted to kiss Billy. Every time I passed him, I wanted to sneak touches and kiss him, whisper sweet nothings in his ear, anything to show him how happy I was about the night before. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option. We had discussed what we wanted. We had agreed on

it. We were going to keep things quiet at work while we figured it all out.

So instead of greeting him with kisses, we shared secret glances across the village. Every time I started looking at him, he'd turn around and smile, like he could feel the weight of my gaze on him. It was pretty heady to think that someone like Billy was so in tune to me that he could feel my eyes on him, to know that I had any affect on him at all.

I wanted more than just stolen glances though. On our breaks, I wanted more than just fingers lightly grazing against each other or his thigh pressed against mine under the table, hidden from everyone else. I wanted to publicly declare him *mine*, but that went against our agreement.

If I couldn't do it publicly, I wanted every single minute alone with him that I could have.

Unfortunately, that was harder to do than I'd thought.

The first night after we slept together, he had to rush out after work to get his car to a mechanic friend's of his to finally figure out why it had decided to stop working the other day, only to start working when he tried later that night. Then he had drag rehearsal and, assuming his car was up to the task, he was planning on delivering food that night. He said that he needed the extra money, with the holidays so close. I had a hard time believing he hadn't already finished up all of his Christmas shopping, but maybe I was wrong.

It wasn't like I knew much about his finances.

So that night, I ordered food on the app and was disappointed to find a young woman delivering it. The next night, it was an older man.

The third night, I knew Billy wasn't going to be delivering. He had to cater some fancy gala for the Winters family, both because he'd already been hired for it and as some kind of favor for Holli.

Instead of ordering food in hopes of seeing the man, I took Teeny and Sam up on their offer to have dinner with them. Teeny spent far too long prying for details about what was going on with me and Billy, only to let out a shrill squeal of delight when I announced that I'd told him how I felt and that we'd gone on a date.

I could see wedding bells in her eyes.

Sam took a more practical standpoint, asking about Billy and our shared interests and the things that mattered in a relationship. I was all too happy to tell her every single thing I knew, including how hard of a worker he was between drag show rehearsals, the mall, his catering gig, and the delivery driving.

“So when does he have time to hang out with you?” Sam asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Whenever he can find a few hours, but the delivery gig? He's his own boss, so he schedules that.”

“Is that why you turned us down for dinner the past few nights?” Teeny asked, always too astute for my own good. I

began to twirl spaghetti around my fork to dodge the question. I didn't need to look up to see the smug expression on her face. "Maybe instead of trying to trick fate into letting you have a few stolen moments with him, you could just invite him over one night?"

"I've thought about it," I admitted with a shrug. "But then I remember how hard he's working, and I don't want to be the reason he's not able to get everything he wants."

Sam nodded. "Makes sense, but remember, if he wants you? He needs to make time for you too. Not just the money making things."

It was my turn to nod.

"And also, the moment he gets a free night, let him know that he's expected to come over here for dinner. I need to meet this young man."

"Teeny..." I warned.

"Don't Teeny me. I've never seen you so smitten."

That was a lie. She'd seen me just as smitten with her, but that had been years ago. Maybe the memories had faded. Either way, I didn't point it out, because we were both happy with how our lives had turned out. She had Sam and Lizzie, and even when we'd been married, I'd never seen her so happy. I had my career and this new thing with Billy, and maybe one day I'd have everything else that I wanted too. For the first time since our divorce, I had hope for the kind of happiness I always dreamed of.

So, maybe Teeny was right. Like always. *Damn her.*

“Oh I know that look,” Sam butted in. “That’s the look you always get when you realize our Christina is too smart and knows you better than yourself.”

I laughed. I hated that I had a look that said it, and I hated that Sam and Teeny both knew exactly what that look looked like.

“So...” Teeny started, leaning in. “When do we get to meet him?”

“I’ll let you know, but it’s too new to scare him off with you.”

Sam and Teeny both laughed before thankfully changing the subject.



The fourth night without Billy seemed too long. I’d been able to steal a kiss from him in the parking lot before we left, but I wanted so much more than that. I was determined. That night, after he finished his deliveries, I was going to invite him to come over and spend the night with me again. Going four nights without him in my arms was too long. I’d gotten too used to him sleeping there in just one night, and I didn’t want to go back to sleeping alone.

When I ordered food that night, I wasn’t watching the app in hopes that Billy would be the one to pick it up. Instead, I was thinking of how I would invite him. Would a text be too

informal? Would it be too formal? Would it feel like a booty call?

How the hell did people do this all the damn time? I was so lost on how it actually worked, starting a new relationship.

In the end, it didn't matter, because when my food came, Billy was standing at my door. He was holding his cell phone in his hand, snapping the picture. "I put myself offline," he told me as he pocketed the phone.

"Oh?" I questioned.

"Yeah. I mean, I missed you anyway, and I was kind of planning on just stopping over after I finished my deliveries anyway. Just to see you if you were still awake, and well, the universe said 'have a sexy man' and who am I to argue with the universe?"

I laughed and stepped aside to let him in.

The moment he stepped over the threshold, his lips were on mine. He kissed me with a fiery passion that made me forget the hunger I had for food, replacing it with something else.

Once that hunger was sated, we sat on my couch, his bare feet propped up on my lap as I ate my dinner and tried to convince him to share it with me. We had another cheesy Christmas movie playing as background noise, and when the couple on screen sat down to define their relationship, I took it as a sign from the universe—the same way I knew Billy would have.

“I think it’s time,” I told him, setting my plate down on the table in front of me.

He looked alarmed. “Time for what?”

“Time for us to make this official,” I declared. “It’s been a few days since our date, and you’re all I’ve thought about. I’ve ordered food almost every night, just hoping to catch a glimpse of you. I talked Teeny and Sam’s ears off about you last night. I think it’s time, Billy.”

The smile he gave me was bright enough to power the entire block. I’d never seen his dimple deeper. “And what do you want us to be?” he prodded.

“I want us to be an *us*.”

“What does that mean?”

I sighed. He was really going to make me do this the old fashioned way. Was I too old to ask someone to be my boyfriend? I mean, I was thirty-eight, and the term boyfriend brought to mind flirtatious high schoolers sneaking into R-rated movies to make out in the back row. (Though, now that I thought about it, making out with Billy at a movie theater did sound pretty hot...) He raised an imperious eyebrow at me, demanding that I go on.

“Exclusive,” I started. “I don’t want either of us to be with anyone else.”

“Already done,” he told me, waving a hand through the air. “I haven’t been with anyone since right before I met you. The

moment I laid eyes on you, you were all I wanted, and well? I like to think I always get what I want.”

“Do you?”

“No,” he laughed. “But maybe this time?”

I leaned across the couch to kiss him firmly on the lips. “This time, I think you can get exactly what you want.”

“Good,” he chirped. “Because all I want for Christmas is you.” He crooned the last lines in a terrible Mariah Carey impression.

I groaned. I couldn’t help it. It was so damn cheesy, but I was smiling. He made me smile in a way no one else ever had.

I took his hand in one of mine and lifted his chin with the other. “Billy Wilde, I am absolutely—”

“If you say wild about me, I’m calling this whole thing off,” he interrupted. “I’ve heard it too many times before and it’s a hard no.”

“Can you let me finish?” I demanded. He mimed zipping his lips. “Billy Wilde, I am absolutely *crazy* about you.” He lifted an eyebrow, like he didn’t believe that was what I’d originally planned to say. “Will you be my boyfriend?”

Instead of answering, he dived across the couch and kissed me until neither of us could breathe.



I HAD A BOYFRIEND.

I woke up in Noel's arms with a smile on my face, because this was going to be a regular thing. Just casually waking up in the arms of the amazing man that I got to call *mine*. How did I get so damn lucky? I didn't understand it, because this kind of thing happened to other people. It didn't happen to me. I'd always had the worst luck when it came to actually finding men who wanted to date me.

I thought the hardest part was going to be leaving him the next morning, because while I would have loved to ride into work with him, we had decided to keep this close to our chests. Not to mention, I was not dressed for work. Not even for the locker room before I put on my elf costume. I was dressed for a date night, and my clothes were wrinkled. No thank you. I had standards to maintain.

Noel and I struggled to say goodbye at the door to his house. Mainly, we seemed to struggle with stopping kissing long enough to actually say the words. When we finally managed

and I got back to my apartment, I may have done a full blown happy dance. My cheeks hurt from smiling. I couldn't believe my luck in landing a guy like Noel, but here I was. With the man of my dreams as my own.

I wished I could tell Holli. He was living his best Hallmark holiday life, and I wanted to let him know that he wasn't alone. Actually, now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure that everyone at work was living that life. I wished I could tell all my other elves that I'd joined their ranks, but it would have to wait. Maybe when the season wrapped up, I'd be able to tell them all about Noel, about the fact that I was falling hard and fast for the jolly man himself.

I could tell Ozzy though. He wasn't a coworker and I was pretty sure if I didn't tell someone, I was going to explode.

"You better have a damn good reason for interrupting my beauty sleep," was the way Ozzy chose to answer the phone when I called him.

"It's not *that* early," I pointed out. He groaned in response. "Would it make it better if I told you that I had news?"

"Sexy news?" he asked, his voice perking up ever so slightly.

"Very sexy news."

"Did you finally sleep with Santa?"

"Yeah like last week. That's not the news."

"That is the *only* news I care about. How the hell did you not tell me this?"

“Because Chris has been working our asses off during rehearsal and I haven’t had time?”

I knew his answer before he even said it. “You could have called! Since clearly you don’t give a shit about calling during unholy hours.”

“Can I just tell you my news?”

He heaved a dramatic sigh. “Fine.”

“Noel and I are officially dating.” Silence. Actual silence. I thought maybe the call dropped. “Oz?”

“Why would you take such a fine piece of ass off the market?”

“What?”

“You, babe. God, why would you commit that fine ass to someone? Or let him do it?”

“Because I like him?” This was not the reaction I expected. It was kind of a let down. Maybe I should have chosen someone else to tell. I knew Ozzy’s views on monogamy and tying yourself down to just one partner. I had just kind of hoped that he’d put it aside to be happy for me. “He’s really great, and I don’t want anyone else. I haven’t. Not since I saw him.”

He gagged.

“Okay, that’s just rude,” I scolded him.

“Don’t get me wrong, Bills, I’m happy for you. I don’t understand it, but if you’re happy, then more power to you.”

He sighed again. “But that does mean that now I can’t end up on Santa’s Naughty List, and that’s a damn shame.”

“I’m hanging up on you now,” I warned him.

“Good. Then I can finish my beauty sleep.”

“Asshole.”

He didn’t answer. He just beat me to hanging up. I rolled my eyes at the call ended screen and finished getting ready for work.



It turned out that saying goodbye to Noel was not the hardest part of my day. That came the moment I saw him in the locker room, surrounded with the other elves. The hardest part was seeing him and not immediately dive bombing him for kisses. Why had we decided to keep this secret? I couldn’t remember a single good argument for it when he was standing there in his Santa pants, no shirt, and looking at me like he wanted to eat me alive.

If I took longer getting dressed just so I could have a moment alone with him, no I didn’t.

The moment the other elves were gone and it was just us, I launched myself at him lips first. He caught me and all but devoured my face. It wasn’t until we heard the squeak of the door that we ricocheted apart, smiles on our freshly kissed lips. Our hands brushed one another’s as we walked through

the mall, stolen touches that would have to get me through the day.

For the rest of the week, it was like that. We would wait until the other elves left and steal kisses in the locker room. If we were both in the workshop alone, we'd steal little moments.

One of the days, we had a particularly heated make out session behind the mall before we went in. It didn't matter that it was below freezing when his body was pressed against mine, blocking the cold and warming me from the inside. Sometimes, I thought I saw my friends exchanging looks, but I just assumed it was about something else. Probably about their perfect love lives.

I really wished I could share mine.

Instead, I found more stolen moments with Noel. Which, okay, I'll admit: the sneaking around thing was hot. There was something sexy about the danger of getting caught in the moment, especially since I was fairly certain there wouldn't be too big of consequences if we were caught. If they tried to fire me for making out with Santa Claus, I'd just have Holli talk to Jack. Benefit of my bestie having a rich Daddy who owned the mall, right?

When we were actually in the village, it was easier to focus. I mean, yeah, I still stole glances at Noel and watched him with the kids, imagining a future where he played Santa to our children, but I also focused on the kids I was responsible for. I focused on leading them to where Noel was and helping them

get on his lap. I helped them check out or whatever else my job required in the moment.

Outside of work, we found other times to be together. Some nights, it was a quick burger at the fast food place down the road from the club before rehearsals. One night, he rode along with me on my deliveries. We spent that entire night talking about anything and everything, and by the end of it, I knew for sure that I was falling for this man. It didn't matter that it was too soon.

Every single thing he said made me care about him more, made the slippery slope to forever that much shorter. I was falling head over feet.

Every night, we found our way to either his house or my apartment. He never made me feel bad about having a small place in a not-so-great part of town. When he was at my apartment, it felt more like a home. I wondered if I had the same affect on him and his house.

“I think Holli knows I'm hiding something from him,” I whispered to Noel, one night while we were laying in his bed. We were freshly showered, and I was nestled in his arms. I was supposed to be falling asleep, but my mind was going a thousand miles a minute.

“You want to tell him, don't you?” he asked softly.

I flipped over to face him. “He's my best friend. I've told him pretty much everything since the day we met.”

“You can, you know,” he assured me, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “I’m not going to be mad at you for telling your best friend. I’ve told mine.”

“You have?”

“Teeny? Yeah. She and Sam know everything about you. In fact, they’re riding my ass about inviting you over.”

I scowled teasingly. “They know that riding your ass is *my* job, right?”

He laughed and kissed me again. “I haven’t exactly told them the specifics of our sex life. Though I’m pretty sure Teeny knows I prefer bottoming.” He paused for a moment before shrugging. “At least I hope she knows, considering the number of times she pegged me when we were married.”

I groaned. “Too much information!” The words were almost lost to my laughter.

His laughter joined mine and that feeling of falling in love returned full force. When the laughter finally died down, he took my hand in his and held it between us. “If you want to tell Holli or any of the other elves, you have my blessing. I don’t want to hide you from the world.”

I brought his knuckles to my mouth and kissed them. “I don’t want to hide you either, but I kind of also like the sneaking around.”

“It is kind of hot.”

“It really is.” I sighed. “I just don’t like lying to Holli. Even if it is a lie of omission.”

“How about this?” He met my eyes in the dark. “You decide what you want to do and when you want to tell them. Until then, I’ll just follow your lead on everything.”

“Could you be more perfect?”

He thought for a moment. “I could be rich.”

My nose scrunched. “Nah. You’re perfect exactly the way you are.” I gave him another kiss, one that quickly grew heated.

We may have had to have a second shower before bed.



“I WANT TO SEE you after work,” I whispered between kisses. Billy’s body was pressed between mine and a wall in the back of the locker room. Our other coworkers had all headed to the village already, and we were taking advantage of the rare moment alone.

“Rehearsal,” he reminded me before attacking my lips again.

“Between rehearsal and work. After rehearsal. I don’t care,” I countered, kissing between each word.

He pulled away to look at me and smiled. “I suppose I could skip a night of delivering to spend time with my very sexy boyfriend,” he decided.

“Let’s go out.”

“And do what?”

I thought for a moment before deciding. “I think it is time for me to put up my Christmas tree.”

He grinned that wicked grin of his. “Isn’t that usually done at home, babe?”

“I need to *buy* one first.” I could already see it in my mind. The two of us walking through the rows of Christmas trees, bickering over which tree to get. In my mind, Billy was incredibly stubborn about tree selection, insisting only on the most aesthetically pleasing. We also had steaming cups of cocoa to fight off the bitter cold. “And I would love to have your opinion on it.”

“Only if you let me decorate it with you,” he bargained.

As if I would have it any other way. I wanted to decorate the tree with him, to hear his opinion on ornaments and to kiss him under the artificial mistletoe I knew was collecting dust in a box in my garage. I wanted the full domestic scene, and I wanted it with him. It was slightly terrifying, the way I wanted all of those domestic moments with Billy. I’d never been someone who fell this hard, this fast. It had taken me six months of dating Teeny to get to the same place that I was, mentally, with Billy.

Maybe it was just my advancing years.

He pressed his lips to mine, and I knew that wasn’t it. It had nothing to do with age, and everything to do with the irresistible younger man who was capturing my heart.

The locker room door creaked open, and we shot apart. “Billy? Noel?” Juniper’s voice echoed in the empty locker room. “Are you guys still in here?”

“Yeah,” Billy called out. “I was just helping put the finishing touches on his hair.”

Which he had been doing. Before we started making out. It was a really convenient excuse to hang back in the locker room. Despite talking about it two nights before, he still hadn’t told anyone, and I was just following his lead. We straightened our uniforms and made our way to Santa’s village and another day of collecting Christmas wishes from small children who believed I was the real deal.



I was waiting outside of Billy’s apartment when he finished rehearsal. “Babe, if I knew you were going to be waiting on me, I would have given you a key,” he teased the moment he saw me, sitting outside of his door.

“I was fine with waiting,” I assured him.

“Yeah, but the neighbors are going to talk, and the last thing I want is for one of them to call the cops, thinking I’ve got myself a very sexy stalker.”

“Can stalkers be sexy?”

“I mean, sure, some of them. There are entire books written about sexy stalkers.”

“And true crime documentaries about real ones,” I pointed out.

He made a *psh* noise and waved his hand in my face, like he was shooing my words out from the space between us. “Give

me ten minutes to get ready, and we can head to the tree farm or lot or wherever you buy Christmas trees.”

I followed him into his bedroom, only to have him put a hand on my chest to stop me at the door. He shook his head. “Oh no, if you come in here, we’re not leaving it. Because I will start getting undressed and then you’ll make that sexy look of yours and then I’ll have to fuck you into the mattress and then the Christmas tree place will be closed and you’ll be sad.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That could be—”

“Nope! You want a Christmas tree, we’re getting a Christmas tree.” He laughed as he pushed me over of the threshold and closed the door in my face.

I could still hear him laughing as I made my way to his living room and plopped on the couch. I didn’t have to sit long. Less than ten minutes later, he walked into the living room dressed for Christmas tree shopping. He made me look frumpy in his silvery sweater and dark skinny jeans tucked into black boots with the slightest heel on them. He had somehow managed to replace his drag makeup with a more subtle look. I could tell he was wearing eyeliner, lip gloss, and a little eye shadow, but I couldn’t tell if he’d done anything else.

Knowing Billy, he’d managed a full face of makeup in those ten minutes. He was a magician.

“Should I pack an overnight bag?” he asked with a teasing grin.

I nodded, and he left again. He returned a few minutes later with a duffel bag. “I figure with how many nights I spend at your place, I should just leave a few things there. Save us both some time the next time we decide to have a quick morning fuck.”

I rolled my eyes. He didn’t need to remind me that we’d both almost been late to work the day before because of his voracious sexual appetite. (Not that I’d been completely innocent or complaining.) He grabbed the pair of sky high stilettos from beside the door and followed me to my car, locking the door behind us.



Christmas tree shopping with Billy was exactly like what I’d imagined it to be. The first thing we did when we arrived was buy two Styrofoam cups of cocoa to combat the cold. Then we walked the aisles. There were a lot fewer trees than I remembered there being the last time I’d gone to a tree lot. I assumed it was because we were so close to Christmas. Most people had probably grabbed all the good ones by now.

“What about this one?” I asked, pointing at a tree that looked good to me.

Billy eyed it critically, walking all around it, before shaking his head. “No way.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” I questioned. I didn’t see any obvious flaws.

“Inconsistent coloring on one side. You are going to end up with a sad and shedding tree before we even get to presents and your vacuum will not thank you.”

He tugged me away from that tree and to another one. “This one though...”

“Good taste.” I looked at the source of the voice. A dark haired man closer to Billy’s age than mine eyed the tree and then eyed Billy with an appreciative look I was all too familiar with.

“I only have good taste,” Billy informed him.

There was a flirtatious undertone to his voice that made my stomach turn. It didn’t happen when he flirted with people we knew, with the other elves or with Alec or even when he turned his charm on Holli’s boyfriend, Jack. But this man was a stranger, and he was looking at Billy like he wanted to consume him.

I stepped in closer to my boyfriend and put an arm around his shoulder, pulling him into me. He gave me a weird look as he nuzzled into me. His attention returned to the man in front of us. “Meaning if you’re wanting this tree, you’re going to have to fight me for it. And I should warn you, I fight dirty. I pull hair.”

The stranger laughed and tossed his hands up in mock surrender. “No need to fight. I’m actually here with some cousins helping them find a tree. No vested interest.”

“Good,” Billy preened. He looked up at me and then back at the tree. “This is the tree, by the way. Look at it. Full, even coloring, and the branchy things look perfect.”

“I think they’re called needles,” I informed him, giving him a kiss on the top of his head.

“Whatever they’re called, they’re perfect, and this is the tree we’re getting.”

I couldn’t argue with him when he put it like that. “I’ll go find the tree guy.”

“I think he’s called the owner,” Billy sassed. I glowered playfully at him before walking away, looking over my shoulder at the other man for a moment. I hated leaving Billy there with the tree, but I knew it’d be way too hard to find again if we both left, and he had his heart set on that one.

It took less than five minutes to find the owner and bring him over to grab the tree. By the time I got back, Billy was laughing at something the other man said. That ball of anger and jealousy returned, ten times heavier than it had been earlier.

“I think someone else may have taken your tree,” the older gentleman who ran the lot commented, looking at Billy and the stranger.

The knot in my stomach grew tighter, because I could see what he saw. The man Billy was talking to looked closer to Billy’s age than I did. They were laughing and talking like they were a couple, not just strangers. Billy’s naturally

flirtatious energy could be felt, even from a few yards away, and the man? It wasn't like he *knew* Billy.

Was this the way the rest of the world would see us? Unevenly matched. Would everyone see me and Billy and question what the hell Billy was even doing with me?

I sauntered back over to my man and gave him a quick kiss. He yelped in surprise before wrapping his arms around my waist.

“Hello to you too,” he teased. “Did you find the guy?”

“I did.” I motioned for the lot owner to come over to get the tree ready and looked at the man Billy had been talking to. “I don't think I got your name?”

“Liam Lancaster,” he introduced. Another man came over and slid his hand into Liam's. “And this is my fiancée, Reed.”

Fiancée. So he wasn't flirting? Somehow, it didn't make the knot in my stomach go away. It didn't stop the voices in my head from pointing out the way that Liam and Billy looked more like a couple than Billy and I did.

“It was great meeting you. And you should definitely come check out the show Saturday. Just go to that website, and you can buy the tickets.”

Liam smiled a broad smile. “We'll check it out.”

“Check what out?” Reed asked.

“Drag show for charity. Billy's a drag queen.”

“We’ll have to check it out,” he agreed. “C’mon babe, your aunt was looking for you.”

Liam waved goodbye. I could hear him and Reed talking about the show as they walked away.

I was quiet as we paid for the tree and made our way back to the car. I didn’t say much as the man roped the tree on top of my car.

When he walked away, Billy leaned against the driver’s side door, blocking me from getting in. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he looked up at me with a stubborn set to his jaw. “What’s wrong? And don’t try any of that *nothing* bullshit, because I’m calling that out right now.”

“Can we not talk about it here?” I requested. It was a coward’s request. A part of me hoped that he’d forget the question if we didn’t have this conversation now, that we wouldn’t have to have this conversation and I wouldn’t have to lay my insecurities out to him. I had always struggled with that kind of vulnerability, and it was harder with Billy. Because Billy was the epitome of confidence. I’d watched him stare down bratty pubescents at the mall who tried to make hateful comments or start shit with his friends. I didn’t think anything ever made him insecure or worried.

He always acted so untouchable.

“No,” he declared, jutting out his jaw. “We can talk about it in the car if you don’t want anyone else to overhear, but whatever crawled up your butt and died? We’re extracting it

because there is only enough room up there for me and I don't like to share."

I snorted in spite of myself. "It's stupid."

"I'll be the judge of that."

I sighed. I knew a losing battle when I saw one. "You and Liam."

"Me and the very engaged guy back there? What about me and the very engaged guy back there?"

"The lot owner thought you two were a couple."

"And this made you grumpy why?"

He was really going to make me spell it out for him. "Because I saw the way you two look together. You're both young and objectively attractive. You looked like a couple. We look like—"

"*We* look like a couple. *We* look like two men who are very happy together. Fuck what some old guy who saw a glimpse of me with another man thought."

"It's not that easy, Billy," I groaned.

"Then make it that easy. Explain it to me like I'm dumb." I could hear the annoyance seeping into his voice. I hated it. I hated that I was ruining our magical night of picking out a tree and decorating it in my living room and kissing under plastic mistletoe. "I'm waiting."

I also kind of hated his impatience. Didn't he understand that this was hard for me?

“People are always going to look at us weird. People are always going to look at you, and then look at me, and wonder what the hell you see in me.”

“Who cares?” he demanded. “Who cares if they look at us and wonder? If they want to give free real estate in their brain to two strangers because they don’t think we look right together, who cares?”

“I do!” I exploded. “I care. I care that I’m never going to look good enough next to you. I care that everyone’s going to think I’m your dad or your Daddy or that you’re my midlife crisis or some kind of gold digger.”

“Why?”

“Because I do.”

I couldn’t explain it more than that. I couldn’t explain why I cared about these things that seemingly didn’t matter. I knew that they didn’t matter, especially not to Billy. I knew that my insecurities were just that: insecurities.

Billy stood there for a moment before reaching out and taking my hands. He massaged the knuckles, forcing me to relax my fists. I hadn’t even realized I’d balled them up in my frustration. He laced his fingers together with mine and brought them to his lips, kissing my knuckles gently. I started to relax.

“Do you think I’m too young for you?”

“I think people will think you’re too young for me,” I answered.

Billy shook his head. “Do *you* think I’m too young for you? Not what everyone else might think.”

I thought for a moment. I’d thought he was too young for me when I met him, but as I’d gotten to know him, I’d come to the painful realization that he might actually be more mature than I was about a lot of things. This just seemed to be another one of those things. “No.”

He nodded and kissed my knuckles again. “Do you think that we look bad next to each other?” He dropped my hands to turn around, resting his back against my front.

I looked at our reflection in the mirror. He looked like a model and I looked like a man having the beginnings of a midlife crisis. I had gray starting to show in my beard and a few silver hairs on my head. I didn’t have his perfect body. “I think you look too good for me.”

“And I think I look like the luckiest man alive.” He turned back around. “I think you’re the sexiest man I’ve ever seen, and I thought that before I knew you.” That made no sense. I guess my confusion showed on my face, because he smiled that dimpled smile of his. “I delivered to your house the night before we started at the mall, and I went home and thought about you basically nonstop. I got off to the brief glimpse of you, and that was before I got to know you. After I’ve gotten to know you?” His smile grew. “Now I don’t just *think* you’re the sexiest man to ever exist. I know it.” He stood on tiptoe to place a kiss to my lips. “Now I think you need to take us back

to your house so we can decorate this tree, and then I can show you *exactly* how much I love your body.”

I swallowed hard and nodded.

It was hard to argue with that.



THE CHRISTMAS TREE WAS decorated. Noel's living room looked much more festive with the tree in front of the window. At his insistence, we went out to his front yard and viewed how it looked from the window. If I'd driven by the house, I would've thought the tree looked like something out of a movie.

"This is the first year I've decorated since Teeny and I got divorced," Noel admitted. "I never really saw the point since I spend Christmas with Teeny, Sam, and Lizzie anyway."

"What changed?" I asked him as I hugged my body for warmth. It was way too cold to be outside having this discussion. There was snow falling, for crying out loud.

He noticed how I was standing and wrapped his arms around me. It was slightly warmer in his embrace, but nowhere near warm enough. "I met you," he admitted. "And now, I want to have a tree so we can open presents under it Christmas morning before I go to Teeny's."

“Can we do Christmas Eve?” I asked, looking down at my boots. “I kind of promised my parents I’d make up for missing Thanksgiving by coming to Christmas. I’m supposed to be at Maggie’s by five in the morning.” I groaned. “I don’t even think that’s a *real* time.”

“I promise you, it’s a real time. And yes, we can do Christmas Eve, but I want you until you have to leave, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Now can we go inside? I’m freezing my dick off, and I have plans for it.” I had promised to show him how much I loved his body. I couldn’t do that if I was a human icicle.

We went inside. The moment we got inside, I instructed Noel to go take a shower. While he showered, I dug out the candles I’d found in one of his kitchen cabinets while looking for bowls earlier that week. I took them to his bedroom and set them on his nightstands and dresser. I lit them with a lighter I’d found in his junk drawer. By the time the water turned off, I’d pulled out a condom and a bottle of lube and set them beside the candles.

I knew I only had a few minutes before he came into the bedroom. I quickly stripped out of my Christmas tree shopping outfit. I tucked the abandoned clothes back into my overnight bag.

“That is quite the sight to walk in on,” Noel’s voice came from behind me. I could practically feel his eyes on my lace covered ass.

I turned around and my mouth went dry. He was still wet from his shower, wearing nothing but a towel.

“Lose the towel,” I demanded, getting control over myself again. “And then lay on the bed. On your back.”

Noel dropped the towel automatically. My mouth was practically watering at the sight of his thick cock against his hairy thighs. I couldn't wait to get my mouth on it. I watched him as he went to the bed and laid down exactly as I instructed. As much as I wanted to join him, I didn't. I turned off the lights, letting the candles cast a romantic glow on the entire room. I could feel him tracking me as I walked back toward the bed.

When I got to the foot of the bed, it took everything I had not to dive on top of him and start kissing him. I didn't understand how he didn't see how irresistible he was. Yeah, I flirted with everyone, but it was different with him. The moment I saw him, it was different.

“Do you know how sexy you look right now?” I asked him, looking down at his exposed body.

I finally joined him on the bed, crawling up the side of him, not touching yet. “I want to kiss every inch of your body.” I punctuated the statement by kissing his shoulder.

He shivered at the contact.

I kissed across his collar bone. “You're body is so damn sexy, Noel. You look like my wet dreams come to life. Like if

I had to imagine my perfect man? He wouldn't hold a candle to you.”

Noel looked skeptical. I bit down on his collar bone, harder than my usual love bites. He let out a whimper. “And you're not allowed to have *that* look while I tell you how perfect I find your body. I told you, I'm going to show you how much I love your body and that's what we're going to do. Understand, baby?”

“Mhm.” I took that as a sound of affirmation. Noel was going to see himself accurately if it killed me. And I was going to have a lot of fun doing it. I had a feeling it would take multiple sessions of this, but fawning over his sexy body? So not a hardship.

I kissed the spot I bit before moving my lips up the column of his neck. “I love the way your beard feels on my skin,” I told him. “I love the way it feels against my lips and the smell of the beard shampoo you use.”

I punctuated the statement with a kiss to his lips. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me down deeper into the kiss. I licked past the seam of his lips and he opened immediately. Our tongues danced, and my cock grew hard in the Christmas tree green lace panties I wore for the occasion. The combination of the sexy man underneath me and the way he kissed me? There was no way I wasn't going to have a reaction.

I pulled away from the kiss and took his hand as I sat back up. I put his hand on my cock, right over the lace I knew he

loved so much. “Do you feel what you do to me?” I asked him. “I’ve been half hard since you walked into the room. Just seeing you naked, water dripping down your chest? Fucking wet dream.”

He gripped my shaft, and I thrust into his hand automatically, moaning at the friction. I allowed him to stroke me a few more times before taking his hand and putting it back on the bed. “As great as that feels, I am on a mission.”

“A mission?” Noel questioned.

“I told you at the tree lot. I’m going to show you exactly how much I love your body, and while your hand is an *amazing* part of that body, it’s going to stay right there on the bed for now.” I gave him one more quick kiss on his lips, pulling away before he had a chance to deepen it again. I could lose myself to his lips, and then he’d never get the full experience of how much I loved his body.

He tried to chase my lips when I pulled away, but I stopped him with a simple hand on his chest and narrowed eyes. “As much as I would love to just kiss you all night, I do believe I said I wanted to kiss every inch of your body.”

My eyes moved over his body before landing back on his face. Even in the candlelight, I could see that his pupils were dilated, erasing almost all of the beautiful blue-gray color I loved losing myself in. His dick was hard, tempting me. I wanted to taste him, but it wasn’t time yet.

“Now, where was I?” I mused to myself. I met his eyes again and then kissed his cheeks. “That’s right. I was talking about

how much I love your beard.” I ran my fingers through the soft facial hair. “You take such good care of it, but I think I love it the most when it’s messy in the mornings when we first wake up. I love that I’m the only one that gets to see it that way.”

I kissed his eyebrows. “And your eyes? I love the way they look at me. Like I’m both something precious you want to keep and something you want to consume. They get this look and I can practically feel my panties drop.” He let out a snort of laughter. “Yeah, that look, right there.”

I kissed along the shell of his ear before whispering into it. “And I love the way you listen to me, even when I’m talking about shit you could care less about. Do you know how many men would actually listen to me talk about how annoying Chris was at rehearsal or about some new makeup tutorial I found online I wanted to try?” I didn’t give him a moment to answer before nipping his earlobe. He let out one of those sexy sounds that sent heat lightning through my veins. “Very few. *And* you never look bored listening to me talk about it.”

“Because I’m not,” Noel replied. “I love hearing you talk about stuff like that. It brings out your dimple and makes your eyes light up.”

How the fuck was I supposed to focus on how much I loved his body when he went and said things like that? Things that made me want to swallow him whole and kiss him senseless all at once? I was only one man, and I was only so strong. I abandoned my quest. Not for good, because I was still

determined, but I had to take a detour. Besides, this position crawling up his side? That was only going to work for so long.

I straddled his waist before bending down to kiss him, my hands tangling up in his hair. His incredibly soft hair that I took any excuse to touch at work, usually under the guise of helping him get into costume. His tongue met mine and fucked into my mouth as his hips thrust upwards, seeking friction he was unable to get. I was positioned just far enough away from his dick, just enough to torture him and let him thrust into the air.

After I'd kissed my fill, I pulled away a few inches. My hands stayed in his hair. "And don't get me started on your hair. I have been *obsessed* with your hair since day one. It's so soft and I was seriously wanting any excuse to touch it. Why do you think I kept volunteering to help you with the coloring?" It was not out of the kindness of my heart. It was purely out of the want in my veins, want that was directed solely at him and boiling at this point.

I crawled down his body, trailing kisses along the side of his face, his neck, his collarbone, and then his chest. I drew one nipple into my mouth and flicked it with my tongue as I rolled the other between my fingers. The change in position was just enough that this time, when he sought friction, he found it. His cock rubbed against mine and I groaned at the sensation, rolling my hips to grind against his shaft. His breathing was heavy as our bodies moved together. I traded nipples, sucking and tonguing the other and fighting the urge to grab both of our cocks in my hand and give into temptation.

Because Noel Miller was temptation personified.

Especially when he made the noises he was making now, lustful, needy sounds that filled the room around us. I couldn't wait to pull more of them out of him.

I continued my journey down his torso, kissing his sides and his stomach, kissing down his treasure trail to his hipbones. "Your body is so fucking hot," I muttered. "How do you not see that? I am always fighting the urge to just fuck you wherever we stand."

"You could just fuck me now," he pointed out, his voice thick with lust.

"Oh, I will. Trust me on that one." I grinned up at him as I breathed over his rock hard dick. My tongue lapped up the precum beading at his slit. "And you taste so fucking good."

He leaned up on his elbows, looking down at me as I ran my tongue up the bottom of his shaft and then back down. He was radiating need, and I wanted to give it all to him, but not yet. I had things to do still. I ignored his balls and began kissing down his right thigh and back up the left. I was careful this time not to touch his dick. I didn't think I could avoid the temptation of sucking him dry if I did that right now, and besides, hearing him whine when nothing more than my breath ghosted his balls? So worth it.

I continued kissing down his legs, talking about how sexy I found them. When I reached his feet, I was half off the bed again, but I didn't care.

“Roll over,” I instructed. He whined. “I said *every* inch of your body, Noel. That means the back too.”

Besides, I had been eyeing his cake for far too long, and it was about damn time that I got a taste.

I gave him enough room to flip over and took in the sight. His ass bubbled up, and my eyes went there immediately. Then they traveled the rest of his body: the muscles of his strong calves, the back of his thick thighs, and his back. His arms were up over his head, giving his back more definition and causing the muscles in his arm to be visible and defined. I wanted to lick every corded muscle. “So hot,” I declared before I licked my lips. “I want to eat you up.”

Noel chuckled. “Again, I say you could just do that.”

I reached up and swatted his ass playfully, watching it jiggle from the impact. That did not make it look any less appetizing. I had to remind myself that I had a goal—kiss every inch of his body—I had to do that before I finally got my dessert.

I started my journey back up his body, kissing along those strong calves as I told him how much I loved the muscle. He laughed as I kissed the back of his knees. “I love how ticklish you are here,” I teased, peppering the back of his knees with light kisses that made him squirm and drew out laughter. It was adorable.

“Stop,” he pleaded after not nearly enough time of playing with that particular toy.

But I couldn't exactly *not* stop when he begged so nicely. I got back to work, kissing up the back of his thighs. When I got to his ass, I spread his cheeks and breathed over his hole. He let out a sound of anticipation that was almost the end of me. But if I went for a taste now, I was having a whole damn meal, so instead, I just bit one of his cheeks. He whined again.

“Have I ever mentioned how much I love your ass?” I asked him, kissing one cheek and then the other. “Not only does it basically fit me like a glove, it's just so great to look at. I have lost time staring at your ass.”

“It's nothing special,” he countered.

I bit his cheek harder, a reminder of my earlier demand. He was *not* putting himself down right now. This whole thing was about getting him to love his body as much as I did, and I wasn't going to let him get away with negative self-talk. “If I say your ass is amazing,” I bit the other cheek harder, “then it is fucking amazing. Do not argue with me.”

“Yes, sir,” he groaned.

I didn't have a whole dom kink fantasy or anything, but in that moment, the whole *sir* thing was really doing it for me. I didn't care if there was an undertone of sarcasm. He deserved a reward for that. I spread his cheeks again and ran my tongue over his hole. His reaction was immediate, a long drawn out moan that grew louder as I repeated the action a few times. Fuck, he tasted so good that it was distracting. I was overwhelmed by his scent—musk and body wash and something that I was pretty sure were pheromones but just

smelled like sex to me. Hot damn, I did not want to stop after just a taste, but I had to be stronger than that.

I pulled away again, kissing each cheek one more time and forcing myself to stop focusing on that amazing ass.

I began kissing up his spine, savoring the way his skin got goosebumps when I'd run my tongue over his flesh. I kissed over the muscles of his shoulders. My arms slid up his, covering his hands with mine. He laced his fingers through mine immediately. My dick nestled in between his cheeks, and he lifted his hips slightly, giving me a better position. The friction felt so damn good. I rolled my hips as I kissed the back of his neck.

“Fuck, I want you so bad,” I groaned against his skin. “Please, never doubt that again. Never doubt that I am absolutely obsessed with your sexy.” I thrust again, the head of my dick catching his rim. He let out the sweetest and sexiest mewling sound I'd ever heard. “As.” Another thrust, another sound from him as my dick slid between his cheeks. “Fuck.” The last word was practically a moan, because damn did the whole thing feel good.

“Please,” he whimpered. “Stop teasing me, Billy. Please?”

I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed one of the pillows by his headboard and slid down his body. “Raise your hips,” I instructed. The moment he complied, I stuck the pillow underneath his hips for a better angle. “Now I'm going to do one of the things I've been dying to do all night, but especially since you flipped over.”

“Fuck me?” he suggested.

“Close,” I answered before spreading his cheeks and finally getting the feast I’d been dying for.

My tongue worked over his rim, softening him up, before spearing into him. He squirmed and tightened around my tongue, letting out sounds that encouraged me further. I could feel precum leaking through the lace of my underwear and onto the blanket underneath me as my dick wept over the full sensory experience that was eating Noel out.

Eventually, I added a finger, using the slick from my tongue as lubricant as I fucked my finger and tongue into him. A second finger joined the fray, helping to relax the muscle and open him up. He was begging a stream of incoherent nonsense by the time I finally pulled away, my chin dripping with saliva. His hole glistened with spit, and fuck I wanted to dive back in. I was going to be dining on that all you could eat buffet way more often.

I wiped my mouth before grabbing the lube and condom I had laying out. The candles were burning lower, making the room dimmer than it had been. Noel watched me over his shoulder as I finally freed myself from the way too restrictive underwear I was wearing. I slid the condom onto my throbbing dick and slicked up. I positioned my head at his hole and slid inside with one slick thrust. The warm heat surrounding me almost made me lose control immediately, but I was not going to lose it the moment I was inside because I’d teased both of us way too much.

“I don’t think I’m going to last long,” I warned him. “Your ass is just too perfect. *You’re* just too perfect.”

I continued to tell him everything I loved about his body as I fucked into him. I told him the things I loved about his personality, the way he listened to me and made me feel seen and heard and never inconsequential or like some kind of mistake. Three words hung on the tip of my tongue as my words became more and more incoherent, turning into moans that joined his. I refused to say them in the heat of the moment.

It didn’t matter how close they felt to true. Unless I was one hundred percent sure, I wasn’t saying them. Even when I was, I wasn’t going to say them while my dick was inside of him. The last thing I wanted was him thinking that I only said it because of the sex.

We weren’t smooth or coordinated as we chased our release. When he begged for his, I yanked his hips up to get better access and stroked him, desperate to get him there before I came. It didn’t take long. His walls constricted and the warmth of his cum spilled over my hand. The sensations tipped me over the edge. His ass milked me through my orgasm as I spilled into the condom and collapsed on top of him, spent but smiling.

“Thank you,” he said, when we both regained the ability to speak and started cleaning up.

I gave him a quick kiss before snuggling into his chest, not caring that we were both still sticky or that there was a wet

spot. “I can promise you that was not a hardship. In fact, I am more than happy to repeat as needed.” I brought his hand to my lips and kissed his knuckles. “You taste delicious by the way. Like a five star meal. If we’re ever too broke to eat out, just serve me your ass on a silver platter, and I will be happy.”

He laughed as he burrowed his head into my hair. We were still cuddled up like that when the sun rose and woke us up to start a new day.



WHEN I SIGNED UP for the Christmas village, I made it clear that the day before the drag show, I wouldn't be able to work. Chris had booked us all day for dress rehearsals and making sure that everything was polished perfectly. I hadn't minded in the middle of November when I'd accepted the elf job. Now that I was there? I hated missing a day of work. It meant missing hours with Noel, not seeing my friends, and not seeing the way the kids' faces all lit up when they saw Santa.

But it was worth it in the end, because by the time we left on Friday night—much later than we'd typically leave rehearsal—we were a well-oiled machine. All our routines were flawless. Our lighting and music queues were timed perfectly. The backdrop looked magical on the video tests Chris had done while we worked, so that we could all upload parts of our performances to our social media or YouTube.

I actually made it to the village on Saturday, but I was there in body more than spirit. I played the part, but my mind was a

few hours in the future, running through my choreography and worried that somehow, I'd forget how to walk in the massive heels I'd chosen for Sleigh Belle. Why had I decided to wear those monstrosities? On our break, Noel took me out of the village to a secluded hallway and gave me a pep talk that happened to come with multiple kisses. It soothed me, a little, but the nerves came back almost immediately.

Too bad I couldn't bottle him up and put him in my pocket.

After work, I rushed out of the locker room like Frosty running from the sun. I yelled my goodbyes over my shoulder and rushed to my car. Luckily, it hadn't had any trouble since the mechanic looked it over and fixed up whatever had pissed it off.

I made it to the venue, and found that all of the other performers were already there. Most of them were already putting on their makeup and wigs. Costumes were strewn all over the backstage area. The only place untouched was my corner, because I hadn't been there. It was a calm spot in a storm. For now.

"Oh my god, you're finally here!" Ozzy shouted, running toward me in a pair of heels I hadn't seen.

"Those are different. Did Chris approve the costume change?"

He shrugged. "I needed a different pair of shoes for each number, I decided. And these are for the first set up. Aren't they great?"

“I really like them, Oz.”

“Is Sexy Santa coming tonight?” I sighed and shrugged. I knew Noel was going to be there, but it was worth acting like I didn’t to see the way Ozzy reacted. His shoulders tensed, and he looked like he was about to go into battle. “If that boyfriend of yours doesn’t show up, I’m hunting him down and introducing him to those stilettos you gave me.”

“Not the ones you’re wearing?”

“No. The ones I’m wearing cost *me* money. Like hell I’m ruining them.”

“Ozzy, leave Billy alone. He’s got to get ready, and I know you aren’t going out like *that*,” Chris’s voice boomed from across the room. I looked up and watched as he came bustling over in his full Mama Christmas glory. He had on a big blonde wig woven with silvery tinsel and a red and green garland halo, a long shimmering red dress, and a pair of green fuck me pumps. His makeup was sparkly, dramatic, and perfectly applied.

Ozzy opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but caught the look Chris was giving him, thought better of it, and scampered off back to his mirror to finish getting ready.

“Thanks.” I smiled at Chris before dropping my duffel bag. “He was giving me hell about Noel. Again.”

“Do we finally get to meet your mystery man tonight, darling?” Chris settled into an empty seat next to my station like we were about to have a full blown chat.

“I hope so, but I’m not sure. We—we still haven’t told people about us.”

“No one?” Chris raised a perfectly drawn on eyebrow. “Is he ashamed of you or something?”

“Oh god no!” There was no way I was allowing anyone to walk around with that impression. “In fact, he said he’d follow my lead on it, but... I don’t know what’s holding me back from telling people. I mean besides the obvious sexy secrets thing.”

Chris stayed silent for a few moments. I took advantage of the time to start unloading my bag. My costumes were already hanging up, but my makeup needed to be properly organized. I didn’t have any makeup changes for the night, but sweat and makeup did not always play nicely. I wanted to make sure everything was placed just so, just in case I needed to do a quick touch up between songs. I didn’t want to look like a melted Christmas candy on stage. No thank you.

“You know what I think?” Chris asked, breaking the silence. I stopped lining up my makeup and looked at him, silently urging him to go on. “I think that you’re scared. I’ve known you for a few years now, Billy. I’ve never seen you as happy as you are when you talk about your Santa Baby, and I think it terrifies you.” He wasn’t *wrong*. “I think you’re afraid that if you tell everyone in your world and you get hurt, then people will look at you different.”

I nodded. “A little.”

“How do you think they’re gonna look at you?” I thought for a moment. I didn’t know how to word it. I didn’t know how to verbalize my fear, because it wasn’t something that made sense to me. When I didn’t answer, Chris had the answer for me. “Are you afraid they’re going to realize that things do, in fact, get under that thick as hell skin as yours? Realize you’re human and breakable?”

Ding, ding, ding. Someone get Chris a prize, because that was *exactly* what I was afraid of. How the hell could Chris not only see that, but word it so effortlessly?

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“Well, baby, let me impart some wisdom on you, as someone who has been around the block so many times the tread on my tires is bare.” I motioned for him to go on. “Being afraid that people are going to see that you’re human isn’t gonna stop a single person from seeing it. And letting people see you in pain? That’s not gonna stop them from thinking you’re strong. Strong isn’t never getting hurt. Strong is getting up and going on when you’re hurt and living a life that *can* get you hurt. That is strength, Billy. That is bravery.”

“I just—”

“Nope,” Chris put out a single finger and pressed it to my lips, literally shushing me. “No explanations needed. You just gotta figure out if he’s worth being brave over, because you’re happier than I have ever seen you and I know it’s because of that man. And that kind of happiness?” He grinned a wicked grin. “I’d almost put money that if you went out there tonight

and told all your friends that you've been fucking Santa, ain't a single one of them going to be surprised."

Was he right? A thousand little moments and looks over the past few weeks clicked in my memory. I was pretty sure I'd heard one of my friends singing a song about kissing Santa in the locker room while looking at me. Did they already know? And if they already knew, why hadn't they had the courtesy to just call us on it? Unless someone had been singing about kissing Santa Claus in an attempt to call us on it and I was too busy looking at Noel's ass to pick up on it.

That was entirely likely.

Chris took my silence as acceptance of his words and leaned in to give me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Now get your ass ready. I want to run through *All I Want for Christmas* one more time before doors." He stood up and clapped to get everyone's attention. "I have a few numbers I want to do a final run through on, so I need all of you bitches ready in fifteen. Let's go!"

The energy changed immediately, and before long, everyone was in their outfits for their first performances and the final runthroughs were over.



The club was packed. I could hear the applause the moment Mama Christmas stepped on stage and started her spiel, welcoming the audience to the show and giving a very brief overview of the charity we were supporting. After that, time

sped up. One minute, I was standing on the wings, waiting for my first queue, and the next, I was on stage doing a killer performance of *Christmas Wrapping*. I walked off stage a few minutes later with hand fulls of cash, half of which immediately went in the charity bucket. The other half of the tips were for us to keep, a split that had been made clear by Mama Christmas and multiple posters.

By the time I changed into my second outfit, Ozzy was on stage as Holly Daze, doing *Jingle Bell Rocks* from *Mean Girls*. I peeked through the curtain to watch. It had been one of my favorite portions to watch during rehearsals, and I wanted to see the crowd's reaction. They were loving it. I spotted Chris in the audience, standing next to the table of elves, just in time to see him start to mirror the dance the way Jennifer Coolidge had in the movie.

Needless to say, that routine was a massive hit. I almost felt bad for Cookies N. Mylk, the queen who went on after that. At least until I watched her performance of *Blue Christmas*. She had them eating out of the palm of her hand.

Two songs later, it was time for me to go out again. Mama Christmas introduced me and I came out, hitting my first mark. The opening chords of *Santa Baby* played over the speakers, and I began my performance. The first verse was done on the stage before I began working the audience. I picked a few marks immediately. The first was the man, Liam, from the Christmas tree lot. His fiance was laughing hard as I danced around him before moving onto my next mark, a woman sitting at a table with friends. By the time I left their

table, she was grinning ear to ear. I went through two other targets, walking closer and closer to my final target, the table next to my friends.

The entire time I danced, I could feel his eyes on me. He had to know that I was going to visit him at some point, because why wouldn't I? He was sitting with two women, both of whom I recognized from pictures at his apartment, and his neighbor and last year's Santa, Nick, and his husband. His seat was practically pushed between the table the elves sat at and his, which made it even more perfect. I sauntered over to him just as Eartha Kitt began her last verse. I reached him just before she began singing about believing in him.

I sat on his lap, careful not to let the short red number ride up. I lip synced the first line of verse directly to him, turning my head to look in his eyes as I conveyed that I believed in him. Or, well, Santa. I stayed on his lap as I mentioned a ring, and stood, looking over my shoulder to tell him to hurry down my chimney tonight. I didn't look at the other elves, though I could hear their shouts of delight at the performance as I walked back onto the stage.

The song ended, and I collected the cash that had been tossed up onto the stage for me before walking backstage to get ready for my final solo number.

My final outfit involved *the* heels. It also involved my most in depth choreography.

"Need help getting zipped?" Ozzy asked, sauntering over in the heels I'd given him back in November. "I have three

minutes before I have my last number.”

“Thank you,” I accepted, turning around and lifting the back of my pinned wig to let him zip me up.

“So, I see he came,” Ozzy commented as he finished zipping me up.

“Hm?” I questioned.

“Sexy Santa. Noel. Whatever we’re calling him right now.” I couldn’t help smiling. “Just so you know, I overheard some of your conversation with Mama before the show, and yeah. No one in their right mind would see you two together and *not* know you’re fucking.”

“Because of the lap dance?”

“No, because of the way he was looking at you.” Ozzy sounded almost wistful. “No one has ever looked at me like that.”

“I could think of a few reasons for that.”

Ozzy flipped me the bird and walked over to the wings so he wouldn’t miss his queue.

My final song went off without a hitch. I stayed on the stage, and my choreography was tight. I didn’t wobble in my heels, which was a good thing because I’m fairly certain Mama Christmas would have killed me if I had. Even the death drop at the end was flawless. I brought the house down with applause.

No one changed after their final numbers. Chris had it all planned out, all of us in outfits that would work for the final group number. Three acts later, I was back on stage with my drag family performing Mariah's biggest Christmas hit. It lasted a few minutes, and then it was over.

Over a month of rehearsal. Literal blood, sweat, and tears. All the anxiety and the hype and the drama that always happened when our group got together for a big performance like this. It was all over. I could barely hear Mama Christmas as she gave her final remarks. I could barely hear the applause, even as I stepped forward for my own curtain call. It all faded away.

The only thing that didn't fade away was Noel, still sitting between the two tables where he could talk to Teeny and Sam and Nick and his husband or to any of our coworkers and their boyfriends. It hit me then.

I was an idiot.

Every single man at that table was happy, including Noel. The only difference was that we all knew that the other elves and their lovers were happy. According to Ozzy and Chris, they all knew that we were happy too, but I didn't *know* that for sure.

The moment the applause died down and my fellow drag sisters started to leave the stage, I made my decision. I started toward Noel with such single minded determination that I didn't notice him starting toward me. We met somewhere in the middle. He wrapped his arms around me and lifted me,

spinning me around, before our lips collided. The swell of music that happened then could have been coincidental, or it could have been that our DJ had an incredible sense of humor, but it felt like a scene straight out of a cheesy holiday movie.

I loved it.

I was pretty sure I loved *him*. Just like the other night after the tree lot, the words were on the tip of my tongue, but I refused to let adrenaline be the reason I said them for the first time. Besides, my tongue was otherwise occupied, engaged in a fierce battle of passion with his, and I had no intention of stopping right then.

He clearly did though, because he broke the kiss and put me down. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and led me back to the table where all of our friends were waiting.

“So, I have a confession to make...” I started when I got to the table.

“Could it be that you and Noel have been hooking up for weeks?” Holli asked, leaning forward.

“Oh, maybe it’s that they’ve been making out all over the mall,” Shae suggested.

“No, I think it’s the fact that they’ve been secretly dating,” Nate added.

“You knew?” Ozzy and Chris had been right? I was never going to hear the end of it.

“I walked in on you two in the locker room the other day, remember?” Juniper pointed out. “Helping him with his hair.

Because we hadn't seen you helping him with his hair *before* we all left."

Right. That had happened. I'd completely forgotten that I'd been doing his hair when the other elves had left that day when I used it as an excuse. Was it my fault that I couldn't think clearly after making out with Noel? No. It absolutely was not, and no one should be able to blame me.

"We're happy for you," Holli piped up.

My cheeks hurt from smiling. Everyone knew about me and Noel now. We talked to the elves for a few more minutes before Noel ushered me over to the other table to meet Teeny and Sam, who immediately invited me to dinner as soon as we could find a time. After small talk with them, I dragged Noel backstage with me.

I needed to get changed back into my normal clothes, and I wanted to introduce him to the rest of the people in my world. Because they were important to me, and they were going to be in it for a long time. And because I wanted *him* to be in it for a long time too.



AFTER WORK THE DAY after the drag show, we went to Shae's piano recital. I had no idea the elf leader was so talented. I knew he played a mean keytar, but his piano was something else. Watching him play piano wasn't the best part of that event though. It was sitting next to Billy, holding his hand, feeling his head resting on my shoulder. I loved being able to be out with him, to be able to touch him and give him kisses whenever I wanted. I loved that everyone knew that I somehow, beyond all reason, managed to get a man like Billy.

When we went back to work the next Monday, we had to struggle to stay professional. Now that I could kiss him whenever I wanted, it was all I wanted to do. But it wasn't worth Santa's reputation. After all, my character was happily married, and it wasn't to a gorgeous young elf named Snowdrop. The last thing I wanted to do was be responsible for a bunch of kids losing their faith in Santa and Mrs. Claus.

I'm pretty sure it'd be bad for the village and the mall.

After hours and on breaks, all bets were off. It was a good thing we typically got dressed on opposite sides of the locker room, or else the other elves might have murdered us. Especially since I knew what Billy wore under his uniform, the brightly colored pretty underwear, lace more often than not after he discovered how much I loved it. It was hot, and I would not have been able to be held responsible for my actions.

Okay, that was a lie. Even if he were getting dressed right next to me, I would have had some restraint.

At least until we were alone.

I had plans to get Billy alone after work that Monday. We didn't have to be in for two days, and he no longer had drag rehearsal. It was the first day where we didn't have plans, where we weren't busy, and I planned on taking full advantage of it. Billy, on the other hand, had other ideas. When I suggested we head out, he got a sheepish look. "I kind of need to find presents for my family," he admitted.

"Oh." Well, there went my plans.

"I'm sorry, Noel."

I brushed off his apologies. "Do you want help? I may not know them, but I can keep you company."

Billy brightened immediately. He looped his arm through mine and pulled me out of the locker room. I could hear the laughter of the other elves, probably thinking we were off to do something more scandalous than Christmas shopping.

It turned out that shopping with Billy was a marathon. He had a very short list of people to shop for, but very particular ideas of what he wanted to get them, as well as very particular ideas about how much money he was willing to spend on them. I understood the last part. Despite working three jobs and making a good amount of tips at the drag show, even after his charity split, he wasn't exactly rolling in the cash. If I thought he'd take me up on it, I'd have offered to help him so he could buy the nicer things that caught his eye.

But I knew my boyfriend well enough to know that it would earn nothing more than a glower and a reminder that he had his own money, thank you. He didn't mind letting me pay for our dates, sometimes, but beyond that? He was independent. I wouldn't lie and say I hated it, especially since I wasn't exactly rolling in the dough during the winter months myself. Construction slowed a lot when it got cold in Maine.

It took almost two hours before Billy declared us done with our shopping. He had a few small bags, each filled with presents for various members of his family. I'd paid attention to the other things he'd looked at, things he'd expressed interest in for himself, because it dawned on me while we were shopping that I should probably have a Christmas present for him. I couldn't exactly ask him what he'd want, because I knew him well enough to know he'd tell me I didn't have to get him anything, which wouldn't do.

This was going to be our first Christmas together—our first of many I hoped.

We'd almost made it to the front doors of the mall when Billy stopped dead in his tracks. He started patting down his pockets. "Fuck," he groaned after he finished patting himself down.

"What?"

"I forgot my keys in the workshop."

"I could—"

"Nope. I have something to do tomorrow, so I'm going to need my car." I raised a questioning eyebrow at him. This was the first I was hearing of plans for the next day. He grinned. "You don't have plans tomorrow, babe. I told Ozzy I'd help him with something."

That was cryptic. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. He needs to film some Christmas content for his socials. He has a lot from Holly Daze, but he wants some stuff where he's in his Felicia Oh persona, since it's all posting on her profiles." He sighed. "It should only take a few hours, but I don't want to tie up your car for it."

"Then let's go find your keys," I agreed.

We turned around and started back toward the village. The partitions were already up around the throne, blocking it from the rest of the mall and keeping anyone from messing with the props. Noel typed in the passcode to the workshop, and we crept into the little wooden building.

"Remember the last time we were in here alone?" he questioned as he looked around.

“Like it was yesterday.” He’d basically sucked my soul out of my dick. It was kind of hard to forget that, no matter how many repeat performances we’d had. I noticed the glint of mischief in his eyes and shook my head. “No. Billy, we are not fucking on a folding table.”

“I wasn’t thinking the table.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “Think about it. The walls are up out there. No one can see the throne, and I’m going to admit. I have had some serious fantasies about sucking Santa’s dick while he’s on his throne.”

My eyes widened. “Billy, children sit on my lap on that throne.”

“And you know I swallow. Won’t waste a single drop.”

“Did you really forget your keys, or was this some elaborate plan to fulfill a Santa fantasy?”

He laughed. “I did forget my keys, but now that we’re back here...” he trailed off, giving me a look of pure lust.

Damnit. I already knew I was going to give in. “We could get fired,” I reminded him.

“We have less than a week left of the season. They’re not going to fire us,” he cajoled as he took my hand and started tugging me towards the door into the village.

I was powerless. I followed him, because I’ll be honest, the whole thing did sound really hot. I’d imagined Billy knelt between my legs on that throne more than once. I’d even searched for a similar one to put in my basement to fulfill the fantasy in the privacy of my own house.

But he was right. It was very private with the walls up.

He led me to the throne and motioned for me to sit. “Just remember, you have to be *very* quiet.”

I sat down. I was never good at fighting this man, especially when he got that look in his eyes that promised to blow my mind. He knelt down between my legs and began quickly undoing the button of my pants, keeping eye contact the entire time. I could feel my dick reacting just from the anticipation of what was to come. I lifted my hips to help him pull my pants and boxers down in one fell swoop. He got them down to my ankles before breaking eye contact.

His hands moved up my thighs, and I remembered the things he'd said that night in my bed, the way he admired how thick and hairy my thighs were and how strong my legs were. I smiled at the memory, a smile that grew brighter when he began to kiss his way along my thighs. I tugged at his hair, stopping him from getting too far into his teasing. “Remember, we're not supposed to be in here,” I reminded him. “Maybe save the sensuous teasing for when we aren't risking our jobs?”

He smirked. “As you wish.”

I didn't have a chance to ask what he meant by that before he was swallowing me down to my root. I wasn't fully hard yet, but he made quick work at fixing that little problem with his skilled tongue. He swirled it around my cock before hollowing his cheeks and sucking me down hard. His head bobbed up and down, and I became a sea of sensations.

My hands tangled into his dark hair and my hips rose, fucking into his face. He let out the quietest moan as I started taking control. He usually loved being in control, but I also knew that he loved to have his face fucked, to have his mouth used for a partner's pleasure. For *my* pleasure.

And it wasn't like he was letting me have full control over the situation. I may have been driving my dick down his throat, but he was working his tongue along the shaft, teasing and taunting and tempting me to explode. I let out a sound that was apparently too loud, because one of his hands flew from my thigh to cover my mouth. I sucked his fingers into my mouth, and used them to distract me from the sounds that wanted to spill from my lips.

His other hand began to play with my balls, and before I knew it, I was shooting down his throat.

As he promised, he swallowed every drop and sucked me completely dry. When he pulled off, there wasn't a single trace of what we'd done left.

He stood up, adjusting himself, before he leaned over me and kissed me hard. I could taste myself on his lips. I moved my hand to the very prominent bulge in his tight jeans, only to have him bat it away. "That will leave a mess. You can take care of me when we get home."

Home. I didn't know if he meant his place or mine, but I loved the idea of one of them being *home* for both of us. I loved the idea of being his home. I didn't even know if he realized he'd said it. I wasn't going to point it out, in case he

didn't. Instead, I was going to savor the warmth that came with those four letters, and hold tight onto the hope that one day, it would be more than just a word.

"Now get dressed," he commanded. "We don't want to get fired after all."

He laughed and sauntered off, leaving me on my throne with my pants around my ankles.



The next morning, Billy left my house around noon to meet up with Ozzy. The moment he was gone, I called Teeny. "I need your help."

"What's going on?"

"I have a few ideas for Billy's Christmas present, but I need a second opinion." I mean I saw what he'd looked at the day before, but I wanted to make sure that the stuff I was picking out was decent quality.

"Why not ask one of your coworkers?" she suggested. "They know him a lot better than I do."

"Because you know *me* better, and you know how to speak my language," I pointed out. "Meaning you can get me to stop obsessing over the perfect thing, and you also won't be afraid to tell me that what I'm picking out is dumb." I couldn't say the same about the other elves. "Plus, I know that you won't tell him what I got for him. Or drop hints."

Teeny laughed and promised to meet me at the mall thirty minutes later.

She arrived at the mall at exactly the time she promised. “I was almost late. Lizzie didn’t want to go see her grandma.”

“You could have brought her,” I pointed out.

“And then we’d be searching toy stores for your boy toy’s present, and something tells me his idea of fun toys differs from Lizzie’s.”

I snorted. “I don’t know, I could see him playing Barbies.”

“Do not tell Lizzie that. She will be begging you to bring him over to play with her.” She cocked her head to the side. “On second thought, maybe I *will* tell her so you have no choice but to bring him over for dinner.”

“We went over this Saturday, Teeny. I’m bringing him after New Years.”

Teeny huffed. “I guess I’ll be patient.”

I threw my arm around her shoulder and we started shopping. She vetoed a few options, things I’d seen him looking at. “Babe, those are things he could just buy himself,” she pointed out about a pair of shoes. “Think about what the jewelry is saying. It may be a pretty ring, but you guys have been together for what? Two, three weeks?” she pointed out at the jewelry counter.

It was exactly what I needed her there for, because while I might one day want to put a ring on one of his slender fingers, it would probably be better to wait until we’d been dating at

least a few months. I didn't need him running away terrified because of a shiny object. When I finally found what I wanted to get him, she beamed and declared it perfect.

We did a little more shopping, finding a few more toys to add to the giant stack of presents for Lizzie hiding in my closet to keep the curious girl from finding them. "You're still bringing everything over Christmas Eve, right?"

Fuck. "Can I bring them over really early on Christmas morning?" I asked, rubbing the back of my neck. I'd forgotten that I made plans with Billy. "Billy has to meet his sister at five on Christmas morning. I can leave when he does, let myself in, and put the presents under the tree?"

"Only if you dress like Santa. Just in case Lizzie gets a case of the early birds."

I laughed and promised that I would dress like Santa in case the kid woke up. We grabbed a quick lunch, talked about her New Years Eve party, and just enjoyed the rest of our afternoon until Sam and Billy texted us, separating us to head back to our better halves.



MY TIME AS SANTA had come to an end. The moment the last child left my lap, I felt it. I had been so unsure about doing this when I started, but now, I knew that I was going to miss playing the part of Santa Claus. I knew that the past six weeks had changed my life.

I'd met friends I never would've found otherwise. I had the potential for something great with my construction company, expanding to include some landscaping services thanks to Juniper. I'd met the man of my dreams, someone who looked at me and saw someone desirable, irresistible, and made sure that I knew it with every single one of his words and actions. Somehow, by playing Santa, I'd gotten all of the Christmas wishes I'd never actually made.

After we closed, we all left the locker room together. There was an air of sadness, because we all knew it would be the last time we were in there. Some of us might come back next year. I already planned on it, and I knew that Billy wanted to bring

back Snowdrop the next year. Shae would probably be back, but Holli was graduating soon. Nate had bigger dreams of culinary school.

It felt like an ending.

Even Billy was solemn as we left the mall and walked to my car. I opened the door for him, and went around to my side. The moment we were both inside, he took my hand. “I’m so glad I took this job,” he confessed, echoing my thoughts. “It was exactly what I needed, and not just because I made good money.”

I laughed. “You read my mind.”

He grinned over at me and squeezed my hand. “Okay, enough of this sappy shit. It’s not like we’re never going to see them again.”

“So what should we do instead?”

He waggled his eyebrows at me. “Well I can think of a few things.” I smirked and he shook his head. “Not that! It’s Christmas Eve. I’m pretty sure we’re supposed to celebrate.”

“*That* could be celebrating,” I pointed out.

“Oh, and it will be, but I’m starving and you promised to feed me.”

I had made that promise. I couldn’t give him a full Christmas feast, but I didn’t think he’d want that anyway. Not when he was going to have all of that with his parents the next day. Instead, I had a different dinner planned. He’d told me once that his favorite food was Cajun Chicken Alfredo, so I’d found

a recipe for it. I didn't know how it would turn out, but I was excited to try it. I was more excited to see his reaction to it. I hadn't told him what I was making him, just that I hoped he'd like it.

We drove back to my house. His car was sitting in my driveway, covered in a fresh coat of snow from the night before. "I like seeing your car here," I admitted.

"I like seeing it here, too," he agreed. "Mainly, because it means I'm going to be here, and I'm going to spend time with you."

"Cheesy."

"Like Velveeta."

I pulled my car into the garage, and we went inside. I made a mental note to clean the garage as soon as it was warm enough, so he could park inside instead of out in the snow. It couldn't be good for his car's paint, and while I knew that didn't matter to Billy, it mattered to me.

I sent Billy out of the kitchen the moment we got inside. He didn't argue, and instead took the time to shower off the smells of the mall. Dinner wasn't done when he got out, so I shooed him back out of the kitchen again. I heard the television playing in the other room and smiled. He made the house seem so much fuller just by being there. I loved hearing him move around, just living and coexisting. It was domestic as hell, and it was exactly what I wanted.

When dinner was done, I brought our plates to the living room. He turned on another holiday movie and we ate. I watched him as he took his first bite, satisfaction coursing through me at the heavenly expression on his face and the moan he made when he tasted it. We didn't talk much as we ate, and when we finished, we put our plates on the coffee table and snuggled up while we finished the movie.

"I think it's present time," I announced as the end credits rolled.

Billy perked up immediately, wiggling like an excited puppy. I almost fell off the couch laughing, but managed to stay seated. Once he calmed down, we both went to the tree. There were a few presents under the tree that hadn't been there earlier. I raised an eyebrow and he grinned. "What? You think that because you're Santa, you're the only one that can sneak presents under here?"

"I've been with you. Nonstop for the past three days. When did you have time to put secret presents under my tree?"

"Remember when Teeny came over the other day and needed your help bringing one of Lizzie's presents into the basement?" His smile was full of mischief. "Let's just say that the present wasn't originally going to be in the basement, but she likes me so she got you looking one way while I snuck them in."

"Great. Now I have you and Teeny conspiring against me."

"And Sam," he chirped. "Or at least I'll have Sam to conspire with after we do the whole dinner thing."

I was doomed, and I loved it.

He grabbed the first present from under the tree and handed it to me to unwrap. It was a copy of one of my favorite childhood books. I couldn't believe he remembered me mentioning losing my copy when I moved into the house years ago. I'd always meant to buy another copy, but I'd just never really taken the time to do it. The fact that he had meant everything to me. It was one of the best Christmas presents anyone could have ever given me.

He'd also gotten me a shirt that I never would've picked out for myself, a DVD copy of the movie we'd watched together on Thanksgiving, a small tool set for my car that I'd mentioned wanting when he'd asked what I wanted for Christmas, and my favorite present: a picture of the two of us kissing at his drag show. I hadn't even realized someone had captured the moment. "Chris's husband took it. He's a professional photographer," he explained. "He sent me a copy before Shae's show, and I knew we needed a printed copy."

"We?"

"Well, yeah, I have a copy of it for my apartment, and now you have a copy here, so no matter where we are, we can see how happy we looked in that moment."

"I love it."

He beamed at the praise. I knew how much he struggled to find the right presents for people, but he'd found the perfect ones for me. They were all sentimental, things that I either

wanted or things that reminded him of me or us. I felt like my own presents for him were lacking.

He didn't seem to agree. I'd gotten him a makeup set he'd looked at while we were shopping, a pair of simple blue stud earrings, and a warm sweater that Teeny had helped me pick out. It wasn't anywhere near as sentimental as the presents he'd picked out for me, but he seemed overjoyed.

"One last present," I announced.

I pulled a small velvet box out from underneath the tree skirt. His eyes widened, and he opened and closed his mouth like a fish. It took me a moment before I realized the source of his shock. I didn't say anything as I handed him the box.

His hands shook as he opened it, revealing a simple silver key on a Santa Claus keychain. "Oh, thank god," he exhaled.

"What?" I asked with a grin that matched the shit eating one that was always on his face. "Did you think I was proposing after a few weeks?"

"I was a little scared there," he admitted. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I could see myself marrying you one day, but after we've dated for longer than a few weeks."

It was almost verbatim what Teeny had said when I was looking at a ring as a potential present. Not even an engagement ring. Once again, she was right. "Don't worry babe, I'm not at the engagement part yet either," I assured him. "But I do want you to have a key here. I'm going to clean out part of the garage, so your car can fit in there too."

“Are you—” He took a deep breath before he continued.
“Are you asking me to move in with you?”

“No, not yet.” He breathed a sigh of relief. “I just want you to be able to come and go whenever you want. I want you to have a drawer to leave some stuff here.”

“I want you to have the same stuff at my place then,” he decided. “I’ll get you a key after Christmas.”

He pulled out his key ring and put the key next to his own apartment key. The little Santa dangled down next to the only decoration on his keys: a small silvery high heel Chris had bought him after his first drag show. “This is perfect.”

He sealed the words with a kiss, one that grew deeper and more heated until I was crying his name out under the Christmas tree and the plastic mistletoe.



Teeny and Sam’s New Years Eve party was the same as it had always been. Friends from their respective jobs, old friends from when Teeny and I were married, and new friends that Sam and Teeny had made as a couple mingled together, listening to music, dancing, and drinking champagne out of crystal flutes. Lizzie was at her grandparents’ house, and it was a child free zone, even with all the toys littered around the room.

The only thing missing was Billy. I’d invited him, but he had a party with his drag friends. He’d invited me to come with

him, but this was my New Years Eve tradition.

“Are you thinking about your boy?” Teeny asked as she sidled up to where I was standing alone, watching everyone around me instead of joining in the conversations.

I nodded. “Yeah, I was just imagining him here.”

“And?”

“He’d stand out, wouldn’t he?” There was no mistaking the fondness in my voice.

“He would,” she agreed. “But he’d also be striking up conversations with every single person in this room and probably have everyone eating out of the palm of his hand by the end of it. He’s quite charismatic.”

“Yeah.” I turned to face her. “For instance, he can use that charisma to get my oldest and dearest friend, my beloved former wife, to distract me at my own house so he can smuggle presents in.”

“He told you about that?” she asked, rubbing the back of her neck nervously.

“He seemed very proud of himself.”

“He should be. He sweet talked me right into it.” We both laughed. When the laughter died down, she linked her arm through mine and angled her head up to look into my eyes. “So, why aren’t you with him tonight?”

“Because I always go to your New Years party.”

“Okay, but why aren’t you with him tonight?”

“Tradition? Keeping my promise?”

I should have seen the thwack to the back of my head coming. I really should have, but I didn't. Not until the playful hit landed. “You're an idiot.”

“What?”

“Noel, babe, you have a boyfriend now. You're supposed to put him first sometimes. Did he invite you to his party with his friends?” I nodded. “And you told him you had to come to this with me and Sam instead?” I nodded again. “You are such an idiot. He wanted you to be with him tonight, do that whole New Years Eve kiss thing.”

I wanted that too. I really did want to kiss him at New Years.

“You know, they say the way you spend your New Years Eve is the way you're going to spend the rest of the year,” she pointed out. “So how do you want to spend your year?”

I knew the answer immediately. “With him.”

“Then I ask you again, why aren't you with him tonight?” I didn't have a good answer. She took my silence as an invitation for further intervention. “Go to him. You still have,” she pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and looked at the screen, “twenty minutes until midnight.”

I nodded and downed my champagne. It burned going down, but I didn't care. I was just glad it was only my second glass of the night. Something had kept me from drinking too heavily, and now I wondered if it was this: the knowledge that I needed to be with Billy.

I started to leave, but Teeny caught my arm. “Oh, and Noel?” I gave her an impatient look. If I only had twenty minutes, I didn’t exactly have time for whatever she was going to say. “You should tell him.”

I blinked. “Tell him what?”

“You know what you want to tell him.”

“I don’t have time for your cryptic ass right now Teeny. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

She laughed and gave me the world’s quickest hug before pushing me toward the door. I shouted goodbyes as I left, not stopping to talk to anyone.

I drove across town to the address Billy had given me when he’d told me about the party. He’d said it was because he liked the idea of me knowing where he was, but once I was on the way, I realized that he’d given it to me in hopes that I’d go to him. At least, that’s what I was hoping it meant, because I was on my way to him now.

I found the address easily, but parking was another story. The driveway to the nice two story house was completely full of cars. There were other cars spilling over into the yard and on the street. I finally found a spot a block away. It wasn’t my best parking job, but I was running out of time. I took off running toward the house.

No one was on the porch, but I could hear the party going on inside. I heard someone begin the countdown at thirty seconds. I didn’t bother knocking. I just pushed into the house.

I spotted him immediately, standing with Ozzy on the other side of the crowded living room, shouting the countdown with his friends.

I pushed my way through the crowd and got to him just as the countdown hit five.

I stepped between him and Ozzy, because there was no way in hell Ozzy was getting my New Years kiss. Billy noticed me at three. His pale gray eyes lit up and that dimple came out in full force. In that moment, I knew exactly what Teeny was telling me to tell him.

The moment the party yelled one, I pulled him into a kiss, lifting him from the ground and holding him close. The kiss drowned out the noises of the party, drowned out everything but me and him.

When we finally broke the kiss and I put him down, I was ready.

“You came,” he said.

“I love you,” I said at the exact same time. The words left my tongue like they were something I’d said to him a thousand times, natural and right and honest. I loved him. I didn’t expect to love him when I met him, but now, I couldn’t imagine not loving Billy Wilde.

“I was supposed to say it first,” he grumbled petulantly, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ve been trying to find the perfect moment to say it, and you sweep in here and steal my moment?”

“Guess you shouldn’t have waited for the perfect moment,” I teased. “Otherwise, someone’s gonna sneak in and steal it.”

He tried to keep that scowl on his face, but it dissolved when I said it again.

“I love you too,” Billy finally said.

If I thought saying the words were amazing, it was nothing compared to hearing that this man somehow loved me back.

And if how I spent New Years Eve was how I was going to spend the rest of my year, then it was going to be the happiest year of my life.

All because I took the role of Mall Santa.



ONE YEAR LATER

“WE’RE GOING TO BE late,” Noel called into our bedroom.

“I’m almost ready,” I called back. “But remember, if you come in here right now, we will definitely be late.”

Even after a year together, he still wasn’t allowed in the bedroom when I was getting dressed if we were in a hurry. He still got that look in his eyes that went straight to my dick, and then we ended up distracted. You’d think after a year, we’d have grown immune to it, but there was something about that man I didn’t think would ever happen. He was still the sexiest man in the world, even with a few more gray strands in his hair and beard.

A few minutes later, I left the bedroom and found him sitting impatiently on the couch, tapping his foot. “Can you calm down?” I asked him, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’ve been high strung all day.”

“I’m excited to get back.”

I couldn't help smiling at that. I mean, could you blame me? He was just as excited as I was to re-enter the magical world of Mall Santa. We were both reprising the roles that brought us together, only this year, there would be no sneaking around. Okay, there might be *some* sneaking around, because it was still hot to sneak away for a quick make out session. Besides, anyone who thought I'd be able to keep my hands off of my sexy as hell boyfriend for an entire work shift was completely delusional. There was no way. I could barely go an hour in his company without touching or kissing him.

According to Holli, we couldn't even *look* at each other without eye fucking. I just hoped the kids wouldn't pick up on it. To my knowledge, none of them did last year, but we were actively trying (and failing, according to everyone who knew us) to hide it last year. We had no reason to do the same this year.

It would be an interesting season.

"Okay, are you ready?" Noel asked, hopping off the couch.

"You realize it's just set up today, right?" I questioned.
"We're not even seeing kids."

"I don't care. I want to get there on time. It'll look bad for Santa to be late."

I rolled my eyes, but started for the door to the garage. Noel fidgeted the entire drive to the mall, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel. I'd never seen him like this before. I was getting a little nervous. Maybe he was just nervous about

starting at the village again, at befriending new elves and seeing a new set of kids.

That had to be it.

After he parked, we sat in the car for a few moments. The nervous energy surrounding my boyfriend seemed to ramp up higher, which I hadn't even known was possible. Finally, he took a deep breath and opened his car door. "You coming?" he asked, like we both hadn't just sat there for a whole minute, basking in whatever ants were in his pants.

I climbed out of the car and followed him through the crowded parking lot.

The Frostdale Mall was once again decorated to the nines. Now that I knew Jack better, I could see his hand in this. When it came to Christmas, he was extra to a level that put me to shame.

I started toward the village, but Noel caught my wrist as we walked past the hallway that the employee locker rooms were in. "For old times sake?" he asked, motioning down the hallway with his hand.

"Thought you were worried about being late?"

"Because of traffic, not because we snuck off to steal a few kisses."

I laughed and followed him into the locker room.

It looked exactly the same as the year before: the same rusted lockers and the same smell of stale body spray. The benches still had sharpie scribbles and graffiti on them,

contributions from various mall employees over the years. Noel took my hand and guided me around the corner to the same spot where his locker had been the year before, the spot of so many stolen kisses.

The moment we rounded the corner, I noticed the decorations.

There were shiny foil snowflakes on lockers. I figured they were marking elf lockers, which sucked because I really liked my locker the year before. But okay, I could handle a different locker, especially if it came with a cute snowflake to mark it as mine. I turned to examine one of the snowflakes, because they looked really cute. I was trying to figure out if they were Shae's handiwork or if they were store bought.

I couldn't figure it out, and I was getting distracted by shiny snowflakes.

"So are you going to—" I started asking as I turned around. The words stopped before I could finish, because all of my thoughts had grinded to a halt.

Noel was on bended knee next to the bench where I'd first done his hair. He had a dark green velvet box in his hand. My hand flew over my mouth. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening, right? I was dreaming. If I was dreaming, I didn't want to wake up.

"Billy, I met you right here last year. I didn't know it then, but you were going to change my life, and you have. You've taught me how to love again, not just you but myself. You've never once let me believe anything bad about myself, and

every time one of those thoughts came through, you were quick to tell it to fuck off. You've made me happier than I ever imagined I could be. You've made me happier than I've ever been in my life."

I could feel the tears burning behind my eyes. I was going to start ugly crying. This was straight out of one of those cheesy holiday movies we loved.

"The only thing that could make me happier is if you would do me the incredible honor of being my husband."

Yeah, I was crying. I was absolutely crying. They were happy tears, but my makeup was going to be ruined. I hadn't had the foresight to use waterproof mascara when I was getting ready that morning, and now I was going to spend the day looking like a raccoon. "Yes!" I exclaimed. "I love you. I love you so much."

He slipped a simple rose gold band on my finger before pressing a kiss to the same finger.

I pulled him up and kissed him, hard. His body hit the metal lockers behind him. His arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer to his body and holding me tightly in place as our mouths ravaged one another. When we finally pulled away, our breathing was ragged. "I love you," he gasped out. "I love you so much."

I wiped the tears from my eyes and looked at the ring on my finger. Upon closer inspection, I noticed something etched into it, an abstract design that reminded me of snowflakes going all

around it. It was the most beautiful ring I'd ever seen, and I knew I would never take it off.

“Do you like it?” Noel asked nervously.

“I love it.”

“Good.” He grinned. “Can you tell Teeny that later? Because she told me I was doing too much with the snowflakes, and tried to get me to get one that had little diamonds instead.”

I laughed. “I promise I'll tell her when we go over for dinner.” I gave him another kiss. “Now let's go help set up. I want to show off my ring and my fiancé to everyone.”

Fiancé. I had a fiancé. I was going to be a husband.

Great. I was crying again.

Noel wiped a tear away with his thumb. “You want to clean up first?” he asked.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the full length mirror and nodded. My makeup was smudged, and that was not the way I was meeting the new group of elves joining us for this year's season. Noel pulled a tube of my mascara out of his pocket and handed it to me. “I figured you'd need this.”

“God, I love you,” I exhaled as I grabbed the mascara from him and went to the sink to clean up.

Five minutes later, I looked less like a raccoon in crisis and more like my fabulous self.

I took Noel's hand and we walked hand in hand back to Santa's village for another season at the place that had

changed both of our lives for the better.

THE END

WANT TO LEARN MORE about Liam and Reed, the boys from the Christmas tree lot? Turn the page to read the first chapter of *Introducing Mr. Right (Now)*.

CHAPTER ONE: LIAM

“ARE YOU COMING OUT tonight?”

I looked up, blinking slowly, as my best friend Shaun’s voice broke through the haze in my head. I’d been focused. I’d been so focused on the spreadsheets in front of me, trying to figure out the formula that would aid me in writing the literal thousands of SQL queries the client was demanding done by the end of the day.

I knew that it could be done. I’d done it before. I was just not having the best brain day.

“Are you coming out tonight? Hello, earth to Liam...”

“I heard you the first time,” I commented, rolling my eyes up at the impish man in front of me. “I just — “

I heaved a heavy sigh.

“Nope,” Shaun chirped, shaking his head. “We are *not* doing the heavy sigh and excuses routine tonight. You always do the heavy sigh and excuses routine.”

He wasn't exactly wrong. I'd been in a funk since my ex-boyfriend left — six months ago. Some days were easier than others. Some days, my brain was on point and I thought about getting back out there. Getting back on that proverbial horse and finding someone to ride off into the sunset with.

Or maybe just finding someone to ride.

But then there were days like today when memories crowded my head, pushing away anything that could be potentially useful - like the Excel function to transform the columns of client data into usable SQL functions for their database team. There were days like today when my brain was overwhelmed with the mere thought of him, with the memory of how he could walk me through these kinds of problems without even thinking. Without even really knowing what I was doing.

He was like a whetstone, keeping me sharp.

No, I scolded myself. I was not going to do this. I was not going to wallow over a man who had left me six months ago, someone who had determined that I wasn't the kind of man that he wanted to spend a life with. It only took him three years to figure that out...

I could feel the bitterness pulsing through my veins.

"You're doing it again," Shaun muttered, waving his hand between me and the laptop screen, pulling me back to the present.

"You're being annoying."

"And you're wallowing over Jackson."

“I hate you.”

“Then show me that you hate me by going out tonight, getting incredibly drunk, and then making me deal with your grumpy, hungover ass tomorrow.”

I did not see how that was at all logical, but then Shaun wasn't exactly known for his logic. If you asked him, there were always a thousand strands of logic in every one of his arguments. Maybe to him. To the rest of us mere mortals, it was nonsense. No logic to be found.

“What's the plan?”

“Then that's a yes?”

I groaned. He was absolutely relentless. “No, that's not a yes. That's a simple inquiry required to make my decision.”

“Well...” I didn't like the way he trailed that word out. Every time he'd ever done that, it had ended up with us in trouble. I was tempted to cut him off then and there and tell him no, absolutely not, whatever mischief and mayhem he had up his sleeve was going to be a hard no. But I didn't get a chance before he barreled on. “This guy I'm talking to on Swyper, BigBen, invited me to a party at his place.”

“You want us to go out. To a party. At some guy you met on Swyper's house.”

“Yes.”

“Some guy named BigBen, which I'm assuming is his screen name and not his actual name.”

“No, his actual name is Ben.”

“And I’m assuming he’s going to murder us? Or we’re the party and he’s hoping for a wild and reckless threesome but he’s telling you it’s a party so he can lure two unsuspecting best friends to their demise.”

“No,” Shaun scoffed. “It is a legitimate party. And he’s not a murderer. We’ve been talking for a bit *and* we met for coffee a few days ago.”

His light brown eyes were practically pleading with me. I couldn’t say no. I couldn’t let him go to some Swyper guy’s party solo, because I couldn’t live with myself if this turned into some Lifetime movie of the week because I left him alone.

And the worst part? He knew that he had me. I could see it in the way those whiskey-colored eyes lit up immediately.

“I have to finish this first,” I warned him. “And I’m going home and getting changed because nothing about this —” I motioned up and down at my professional outfit of a dark blue button down and khaki slacks “ — screams party. Unless it’s an office Christmas party for accountants.”

“Budge over. Show me what you’re working on.”

And wouldn’t you know it, he knew exactly the formula I was looking for. Within fifteen minutes, he’d walked me through it in a way that I knew I wouldn’t forget. It took less than twenty minutes for me to get all the formulas in place and

copy them down the spreadsheet to write the thousands of queries. I sent it off to the client by the deadline.

Maybe things were looking up.

After work, I went back to my small apartment to get ready for the party. Shaun told me that he'd come and pick me up at eight, we'd grab a quick bite to eat, and then we'd head to the party. That left me with just under an hour to get ready, to transform myself from my professional persona to someone that might blend into a party.

I'd made Shaun show me pictures of Ben before we left the office. Not because I was curious about who had him so smitten, but because I wanted to get a read on what I should be wearing to this party. Should I dress like I was heading to a club, hoping to find a hookup, or should I dress in a way that didn't stand out quite so much, hoping to avoid potentially evil stares?

Based solely on Ben's Swyper profile pictures, it was the former.

I showered quickly and pulled on a pair of tight dark wash jeans. I examined myself in the mirror, mainly making sure that they showed off my *assets* in a flattering way. If I was going to hook up tonight, then I was going to have to draw attention to my best feature.

Even Jackson agreed that my ass was my best feature. Sometimes, it drove him crazy.

No, I scolded myself again. I was not going to sit around and think about his opinions while I got ready either.

Choosing a shirt took a little longer. Nothing I owned fit the mood I wanted to portray. Nothing I owned said *here I am, come fuck me* the way I needed it to. Maybe I shouldn't have thrown out all of the mesh from my twink days. In the end, I settled on a silvery-blue button down, leaving three buttons undone, enough to tease.

My hair didn't take long to style, a little gel and my fingers gave it the artfully disheveled look that Shaun claimed made me look like I'd just been fucked. But I still felt like I looked too plain. My eyes darted down to the drawer of my cabinet.

Should I?

I opened it, pulling out a small black Maybelline eyeliner pencil. I looked at it, uncapped it, capped it again. I used to wear eyeliner all the time. Every night out to the club, I'd outline my eyes, letting the black draw more attention to them. Sometimes, I'd accentuate my naturally long lashes with mascara.

Then Jackson started getting annoyed with the eyeliner and mascara. He claimed I was too old for it. That it made me look like I was trying too hard. That started happening around my twenty-fifth birthday, a little over two years before.

I'd bought this pencil shortly after Jackson left, a way to reclaim a part of who I used to be. And then, I'd promptly put it away, because I hated hearing him call me immature every

time I pulled it out. Hated hearing him tell me that I was trying too hard.

His voice echoed even now.

Everyone can see through the pathetic attempts to reclaim your youth, Liam.

Fuck you, ghost of Jackson, I thought bitterly. His voice solidified the decision. I was going to wear the eyeliner and I was going to look hot as hell in it.

I drew on the eyeliner, swiped mascara on my lashes, and studied myself in the mirror. Something was still missing.

I replaced the simple silver studs in my ears with small silver hoops.

That was better.

For the first time in six months, the man in the mirror looked familiar.

Shaun was, predictably, late in picking me up.

He apologized profusely, talking about how he couldn't figure out anything to wear and had to try on almost everything he owned. I could see his bedroom clearly in my mind, clothing strewn over every surface. It was one of the reasons I was glad to move in with Jackson after we'd been together six months. Shaun as a best friend was everything I could dream of. However, Shaun as a roommate left a lot to be desired if I didn't want to feel like I was living in a frat house.

We stopped at our favorite pizza place, a few blocks from my apartment, and ordered a few slices each. Then we were on our way to party with BigBen — or possibly to be murdered by BigBen. I hadn't ruled that possibility out.

BigBen — I should probably call him Ben — lived on the outskirts of King's Bay. Which only furthered my belief that we were about to be murdered. The more distance we put between us and the city proper, the more the feeling grew.

What would happen if Shaun and I both got wasted? Would we have to crash at Ben's? Did Uber even come out this far? This was the kind of stupid thing we did when we were in our young twenties, not pushing our thirties.

Maybe Jackson was right and we were immature and just too old for this.

I sighed.

"Stop it," Shaun muttered, reaching over to nudge me as he was driving.

"I wasn't doing anything."

"You were thinking about *him* again."

Shaun said him with the kind of disdain most people saved for truly evil people, but then he'd never been a fan of Jackson. The feeling had been mutual as my ex had thought that Shaun did nothing but prevent me from growing up.

“Just focus on the road and stop pretending you can read my mind.”

The problem was, he kind of could. We’d been best friends for so long that he knew what I was thinking at all times. Most of the time, I felt like he knew me better than I knew myself. It could be really annoying.

Shaun focused on the road and less than five minutes later, we were pulling off the main road and onto a long driveway. There were already cars parked alongside it and in the grass. I could hear music through the car windows and see people on the porch of an almost obscenely large house. Shaun parked and we climbed out.

I felt like I’d been transported back in time.

This didn’t feel like the kind of party that adults had. This felt like the kind of party we would’ve found in our college days. “How old is Ben?”

“Twenty-four.”

So not a college kid. There was that at least.

“And he’s having this party, why?”

“Some friend’s birthday.”

I was tempted to back out. We were going to the overly loud and crowded birthday party of a stranger. I had the feeling that this wasn’t the kind of birthday party where there would be cake. Before I could say anything, Shaun’s hand wrapped around my wrist and he tugged me forward.

I guess we were doing this.

The party was in full swing when we stepped inside. Bodies were pulsing on a makeshift dance floor and nearly everyone had a drink in hand. Shaun led me through the front room to a dining room where a group of six played beer pong, fully cementing my belief that this had some serious college party vibes.

Seriously, who played beer pong after university?

Shaun and I kept walking through the crowd, his head swiveling back and forth, looking around for someone. I was assuming he was looking for BigBen, our illustrious host. We made a full loop with no luck. Back in the living room with the pulsing bodies and thumping music and makeshift dance floor, Shaun pulled out his phone and sent a quick message — I was assuming it was to BigBen.

A few moments later, he was leading me back through the throng of people and into the backyard. It was less crowded there, people sitting around an in-ground pool. A few people were in the water, splashing and shouting and making me wonder how long this would last before someone called in a noise complaint. Of course, I couldn't even see the closest neighbor's house, so maybe there wouldn't be anything like that happening.

Maybe that was why BigBen could host a party like this.

Shaun led me straight through to two men sitting on lounge chairs, bodies angled towards one another. One of them looked familiar. I'd seen his pictures on Shaun's phone: BigBen. (I really should stop referring to him as that.) He had short dark hair, buzzed close enough to his head that it looked like it'd be soft to run hands over. He had a slender build, full lips, and a nose with a little ski jump bump in it. He was attractive, but nothing about him made me think *let's drive into the middle of nowhere for a chance at that dick*.

The other guy though?

God, the other guy looked like a walking wet dream. He had a mess of dark spiral curls and one rogue curl that fell in the middle of his forehead between thick eyebrows. He had broad shoulders and muscular arms, visible due to the black tank top he wore. A tank top that hugged his body in the most delectable ways. His bottom lip looked fuller than his top, adding something interesting to his face.

But the most interesting part of him wasn't visible until we were right next to him, until he looked up at me as Ben and Shaun greeted each other.

His eyes.

They were icy blue, the kind of eyes that looked as if they could pierce every bit of armor someone had surrounding them and see straight into their soul. And they were looking at me, moving up and down my body in a way that felt tangible. Everywhere he looked left a flush of warmth and I wanted desperately to be worthy of his appraisal.

“Do you want a drink?”

I nodded, catching Shaun’s eye, silently asking if it was okay with him if I went off with this guy for a drink. Shaun gave a small nod and tapped his pocket.

It was our sign that he’d text if he needed me so we could make a quick escape. I could do the same. My lips twitched into a quick half grin at my best friend and followed the stranger back towards the party.

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Writing a book is not a solo effort, as anyone who has ever written a book knows. It takes a village to get the book from my brain into your hands.

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And finally, to you, the person reading this book. Thank you so much for picking up my book and reading it. Thank you for supporting my dream of being a writer. If you feel so inclined, go ahead and leave a review.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Essie Sloane (She/They) currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky with her daughter and ancient black lab. She's a life long reader and has dreamed of being a writer since she was a child. When they're not reading, she enjoys doing small craft projects - crocheting and diamond painting, mainly. She also enjoys listening to music, studying queer history, and playing on their computer. You can reach out to them on Facebook or Instagram. She loves to chat!

You can also join their Facebook group, [Essie Sloane's Elite](#), for teasers, sneak peeks, updates, announcements, and general revelry.

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