



Stalked
by
Santa

PORTIA LUX

STALKED BY SANTA

AN INSTALOVE OBSESSED ROMANCE

MAGICAL MAFIAS

PORTIA LUX

STAR SEA

Copyright © 2023 Portia Lux

Individuals pictured on the cover are models and are used for illustrative purposes only.

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All characters depicted in sexual scenarios are over the age of eighteen.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without prior written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a a trashy escapist romance with supernatural elements. A shorter version of this novella was published in December 2021. The book you're about to read is longer and filthier, but the basic story remains the same. Suffice to say, this is *not* the Santa you grew up with.

Kinks + Triggers: age gap, light breath play, spanking, stalking, (mild) kidnapping

[Click here to receive a bonus short story.](#)

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneak Peek](#)

PROLOGUE

NICK

Three years prior...

IF THERE'S one thing being the Man in Red has taught me, it's that we live in a sick, sad world. A world filled with cages. Even a posh corner office can be a cage.

Mine sure as hell feels like one tonight.

Surveillance squares projected onto the windows blot out a breathtaking view of the Manhattan skyline. The images of thousands of innocents dance before my eyes. I stare at them, numb.

When I took this gig, I didn't grasp how much it would demand of me. But the syndicate isn't just an organization, it's a way of life. Hell, it's the Christmas miracle that changed my life.

Permanently.

Like most recruits, I came from nothing. And without the syndicate, I'd still be nothing. When Blitzen found me, I'd just aged out of the foster system, graduating to the streets. Young and hungry, I had zero compunctions about getting my fists bloody. But what set me apart was that despite my crap childhood, cynicism hadn't sunk its claws into me.

I still believed.

Blitz brags that he spotted me a mile away. He probably did. Reindeer have a way of sniffing out believers, and he's one of the best.

His sales pitch emphasized the perks. The climate-controlled polar compound. The twelve-cylinder sleighs. The Amex Black Card, stock options, and bank vaults stuffed with cash. And that's just the material shit. Power was the real carrot he dangled.

"Imagine," he said, "having the magic of Christmas at your fingertips... plus every pussy between the north and south poles."

He wasn't lying. Even ordinary elves end up swimming in enough luxuries and vices for several lifetimes, which makes sense. Immortality is part of the benefits package.

Not that it's all reindeer orgies and snowy mountains of blow. While magic may make Christmas possible, a lot of dirty work happens behind the scenes. A willingness to commit felonies is a non-negotiable part of the Christmas Contract.

No, no one hid the ugly parts. The syndicate is selective, only recruiting those with nerves of steel, physical prowess, a flexible moral compass, and the ability to believe. They don't even approach you unless they think you'll be up to snuff.

But the part they didn't disclose was the paperwork.

Paperwork I'm stuck doing on a Friday night. It's just like the song, except there's nothing merry about making a list and checking it twice. Well, technically, *two* lists. But the Naughty List can be delegated to any ambitious elf. The carols and storybooks gloss over this, but Christmas elves are sadistic fucks.

The Nice List is trickier. The Christmas Contract stipulates that it can only be prepared by the big guy, the Man in Red. In other words, the current Santa Claus.

My first inkling that reaching the top of the syndicate's food chain might not have been my brightest idea came too late—the first time I had to make that list. Because the problem with the Nice List is that it's fundamentally unfair.

It has to be.

Even the syndicate doesn't have unlimited resources. There simply aren't enough elves and reindeer to bring Christmas miracles to *every* good boy and girl, so selecting the correct children is crucial. Reward the right child, and the returns are exponential.

The pressure is intense. It's why I've been poring over the list all day, getting more and more pissed off. So much fucking sadness, so many deserving kids I'll have to deny.

After spending hours narrowing down my top picks, the temptation to call it a night is strong. Yet the more lead time the workshop has, the more impressive Christmas will be. And these kids deserve an impressive Christmas, even if they won't all get one.

Frowning, I scrutinize the feed of little Penelope one last time, then close her square. Her cancer diagnosis means this is likely her last Christmas. I'd hoped to include her anyway, but there are simply too many worthy children this year.

Take Kaden. A new puppy will help restore his faith in Santa. But the cherry on top will be what, or rather *who*, we remove from his holiday this year. I make a note to have Merryn cross-check the Naughty List and add his mom's boyfriend if he's not on there already.

But I feel like more of a bastard with every child I deny. It's all so fucking unfair. There are simply too many good boys and girls.

And, yeah, believers are mostly children. Those who hang on through adolescence, the syndicate recruits, usually. And the ones who aren't ruthless enough, well... either their belief fades soon enough, or they're dismissed as crazy.

Hell, many of them *are* insane—but their belief in me isn't what makes them crazy. Like I said, it's a sick, sad world. It's no wonder some people snap.

Yet as I stare at the nearly empty surveillance grid, I come across a square that makes me question whether *I'm* the one who's crazy. Fuck, maybe I've finally snapped from the sleep deprivation. Rubbing my burning eyes, I enlarge the square.

An absolute goddess fills the south-facing window. A total fucking smoke show. Too old for the Nice List, too young for me to be watching her sleep.

Golden brown hair spills across her pillow. Dark lashes flutter as she murmurs something unintelligible in her sleep.

Needing to see more, I pull up her full file on the other window, selecting the folder of images from the past year. A

collage of near-indescribable beauty fills the glass, more breathtaking than any sunrise.

And God help me, but she *does* take my breath away.

Transfixed, I swipe through photo after photo. All stunning. All somehow so essentially *her*.

My cock strains against my zipper as I stare at a photo taken over the summer. Her bikini reveals more than it conceals. My finger traces the outline of her curves as visions of what I'd like to do to her dance through my head.

Such a tiny triangle of fabric covering the treasure between her legs. It would take so little to push it aside and taste her sweetness...

Fuck. I *never* lose control, but then I've never been tempted like this, never encountered such blinding perfection. Just a few teasing photographs and my balls are damn near ready to burst.

Unfastening my belt, I free my raging hard-on and load a video from the same trip. As I watch her applying sunscreen, I roughly stroke my cock with a desperation I haven't felt since I was a horny teenager.

Every movement, every gesture is perfection. But it's the way she bites her lip, frowning at a question someone off-camera asks, that destroys me. Imagining how those full, innocent lips would feel wrapped around me pushes me over the edge after only a few strokes.

Fuck. Who the hell is she—and why is this the first time I'm seeing her?

Closing out of the photo album, I switch to the barebones biography the elves prepared. Madeline Marsden. Nineteen. Just starting her second year of college.

So I was right, not a child. Which begs the question...

Why the fuck did the surveillance elves include her in the feed of good boys and girls?

But the answer is honestly obvious: they fucked up.

The filters are blunt instruments that target syndicate members and potential recruits. The innocent lunatics who make it into adulthood still believing are removed manually before the pool of believers is sent to me.

Not the most efficient system, but given how few adults believe in the impossible, it's always worked. Sure, a few sneak through, but I've never had any trouble just deleting them.

Until now.

Somehow, I can't delete her from the believers' pool despite that being *exactly* what I should do. The Christmas Contract is clear. Make a list, check it twice. A list of children. And Madelyn Marsden is anything but a child.

The continuing stiffness of my cock as I watch her sleep is proof enough of that fact. But I ignore it, digging deeper into her dossier, needing to solve the mystery of her.

At first, I think the recruitment team screwed up. Nothing in Madelyn's file suggests mental instability. She's top of her class, well-socialized, appears relatively down to earth. But as I read on, it's clear why she wasn't selected.

She's simply too good.

The surveillance elves have noted every good deed since childhood. She may be the least violent and duplicitous person on the planet. In short, not syndicate material.

Don't get me wrong. Syndicate members have the biggest hearts. And not *all* assignments require violence. There are elves in administration, manufacturing, logistics, etc. who've never even committed a felony—but they *would* if asked, without hesitation.

Because membership requires a certain worldview, both an understanding of how fucked up the world is and the determination to make it right. Members possess a rare mix of darkness and unwavering belief. And Madelyn Marsden is unequivocally good, boringly so.

Or at least that's what I think until I discover the letters...

Page after page of letters. Letters that start out innocently enough. But when I get to the one she sent on her eighteenth birthday, I'm hard enough to cut glass for the second time that night.

Dear Santa,

You may not know this, but I turned eighteen today. And now that I'm not a little girl anymore, I have a confession to make...

ONE

HEART RACING, I scan the ballroom for *him*. Santa Claus.

No, not the real Santa. He's too busy to attend something as minor as a charity gala. Even if this one *is* for a really good cause.

Feeling giddy, I accept a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. As the bubbles tickle my throat, it hits me how truly special this Christmas will be, the first one that Barry and I spend together as a couple.

How did I get so lucky? A boyfriend who not only shares my values but fully accepts me—all of me, even the weirder parts that I only share with my closest friends. Because, really, how many boyfriends would be cool with the fact that I still believe in Santa at nearly twenty-two?

Oh, I know it's strange. I learned to keep it mostly to myself back in fourth grade when my classmates teased me mercilessly. I'm not ashamed, not exactly, but the ridicule isn't worth it.

I'm not even sure how I worked up the nerve to confess my belief to Barry, but I'm so glad that I did. Sure, he laughed at first, but when he saw that I was serious, his attitude shifted. I still get butterflies when I remember how he kissed me and said that it was just another quirky thing about me to love.

I came close to confessing the *whole* truth that night, but I'm not ready to tell him *that* particular secret yet, a secret I've shared with only one man. Santa. I've confessed *all* of my

darkest secrets to him ever since I was a little girl, but I doubt he even reads my letters.

And honestly, that's as it should be. It's really the only excuse I have for still sharing such personal details with a stranger despite having a boyfriend. Knowing that my letters are sitting unread in a massive pile alongside the billions of *other* letters he receives has soothed my conscience—and made me more daring. There's a strange freedom in the anonymity of confessing *everything* to Santa.

Still, it's lonely writing to a man who never writes back, feeling like he's the only person I can truly be myself with, without judgment. Feeling like he's the only person who accepts *all* of me—unconditionally.

I want that for real. I want it with a man who sees *me* and loves me for who I am—and not just because he's unequivocally good like Santa. I want it with a man who I'll fall asleep beside every night. Barry and I aren't quite at that level of intimacy and trust yet, but soon...

Handing my empty glass to another waiter, I continue to search for my boyfriend. He shouldn't be hard to spot, not tonight when he's giving me the absolute best Christmas present.

I'm still floored that my always-so-serious lawyer boyfriend actually agreed to play Santa at his law firm's Christmas charity gala. It's honestly pretty out of character for him—not that I'm complaining.

In truth, the thought of Barry donning the red suit and black boots excites me to a shameful degree. It's actually what convinced me to give him a very special Christmas gift this year...

God, I hope this isn't a mistake. Prior to Barry volunteering to play Santa, I'd actually been having doubts about our relationship. Sure, he didn't mock me for my belief in the real Santa, but he also didn't say that he believed in Santa, too.

But that's not what gave me pause. More that it felt like there'd been some other piece of compatibility missing from our relationship. A disconnect I could never quite articulate despite everything seeming perfect on the surface.

Barry would say it's because we haven't gone all the way yet. He doesn't put *too much* pressure on me, but I can tell he's frustrated. And maybe he's right that deeper physical intimacy will take our relationship to the next level.

Prudishness isn't why I've waited. Really, it's the opposite. I sometimes worry about how much I think about sex. But I know that I only ever want to be with one man. It isn't a moral or religious thing. It's more shameful than that—and one of my secrets that only Santa knows.

I want to be *claimed*. Want to be possessed and owned utterly by one man and *only* one man.

And so I've waited to have sex, putting off both Barry and the boyfriends before him. Because my virginity is a gift that I can only give once, which means that the man I give it to needs to be worthy.

Yes, that sounds conceited, and maybe it is. But I can't stand the thought of being intimate, of being *vulnerable*, with someone who doesn't share my beliefs and values.

Or the philosophy behind my beliefs, at least. Waiting to find another adult who believes in Santa would be unreasonable. But finding one who can embody the spirit of Christmas despite not technically "believing"? Who is willing to devote his life to doing good, to helping the less fortunate?

I think I've found that in Barry.

I never thought I'd fall for a lawyer, but here I am. Of course, Barry isn't like other lawyers. He's one of the good ones. The law firm he works for does so much good in the world.

Their focus is immigration law. Sure, they have a lot of corporate clients looking for help with employment visas. They *are* a business, after all. But they also do a ton of pro bono work with refugees.

That's how we met. I volunteer with a refugee resettlement organization, teaching English. One of my students was nervous about meeting with the legal counsel who'd offered to take on her asylum case. I went along as moral support. And well, the result has been a whirlwind romance...

It's funny to think that was only six months ago. And now, just a few days before Christmas, I'm finally ready to go all the way. It's a big step, but I can't think of a better time of the year to take it. Christmas means so much to me. Having my first time happen *now* just feels right.

I actually went on birth control last month. But I've waited to tell Barry, wanting to get the timing just right. Now if only I could find him...

My eyes pass over a group of men chatting at the bar. But they're all wearing tuxedos, not the signature Santa suit. And none of them are Barry, anyway. Determined to share my news, I continue my search.

This is my fault for being late. I'm regretting arriving at the gala separately, but I didn't want to cancel my class tonight, not when we were having our end-of-term Christmas party. And of course since Barry is playing Santa, *he* couldn't be late.

Frustrated, I finally approach a small stage in a corner of the ballroom decorated to look like the North Pole. The charity gala is adults only, but someone had the clever idea of charging drunk socialites an eye-watering sum to sit on Santa's lap and have their photos taken.

Other women might be jealous. But I trust Barry. Besides, Santa's throne is currently empty. But there *is* a pretty, dark-haired "elf" in a scandalously sexy costume sitting on the edge of the stage.

"Excuse me, but do you know when Santa will be back?" I ask, struggling to hide my impatience.

"Who can say?" She taps a pointed red nail on a cell phone sitting on the stage beside her, glances at the time, then rolls her eyes. "He went on his fifteen-minute break half an hour

ago. Selfish, if you ask me. It will take *ages* to photograph all of you desperate housewives. But we're not allowed to leave the stage unsupervised, and his other 'helper' is on break, too. So you'll just have to suffer with the rest of us," she says, pointing to the line of women queued in front of the stage.

"Oh, I'm not actually here to get my picture taken. I'm his girlfriend," I reply, feeling a small stab of concern. It's unlike Barry not to be punctual. "If you tell me where the break room is, I'll go check on him."

"Oh, I know who you are," she says, giving me a strange look, like I'm some sort of fascinating science experiment. "He was bitching about how hot the suit was, so I'm guessing he went back to the dressing room."

"And that would be *where*?" I press, unnerved by the way she's still staring at me.

For a long moment, she doesn't answer, then shrugs and stands. "Come on, I'll show you. But don't shoot the messenger."

"I thought you couldn't leave the stage?"

"That was the order Barrykins gave, but I only take orders from the *real* Man in Red." Grabbing her phone off the stage, she rolls her eyes. "Besides, this should be too good to miss."

Not waiting for a reply, she strides toward the exit, her skimpy elf costume barely covering her pert bottom. Feeling queasy, I follow her out of the ballroom and down a long hall.

But my excitement over telling Barry about his Christmas gift returns when the elf stops outside of a room and produces a keycard. The elf was surely exaggerating his reluctance to play Santa and projecting her own bad mood.

"Should I do the honors, or will you?" she asks, offering me the keycard.

"Umm, I think I can handle it from here," I say, taking the keycard from her. "You really don't have to stick around."

Silently, I beg her to take the hint. This is *not* a conversation that I planned to have in front of an audience.

But to my dismay, the elf just winks.

“And miss the fireworks? Hardly.” She places a hand on her hip, then adds, “Well, hurry up. Better to pull the Band-Aid off quickly, dear.”

With a sigh, I slide the keycard in the door, deciding that I’ll just join the line waiting in front of the North Pole instead, and whisper my secret when I sit on Santa’s lap.

When I enter the room, however, all thoughts of *my* naughty surprise flee. I shake my head, sure that I’ve stumbled into some bizarre Christmas hell. A hell in which the pieces of Barry’s Santa suit form a trail from the entryway to the bed.

Black boots by the door. Red jacket draped over a chair. A scraggly white mess that must be the beard lying on the floor next to a pair of red pants, a white undershirt, and Barry’s boxers.

And a Santa hat perched on the head of a blonde-haired woman dressed like a slutty elf. A slutty elf who’s lithe where I’m curvy, not to mention prettier, older, and clearly more sophisticated.

Barry hasn’t realized that they have an audience yet, but the woman spots me right away. Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t stop what she’s doing. And what she’s doing...

It takes me a few stunned seconds to process what I’m seeing, and once I do, I’m speechless. If I’d just walked in on Barry cheating, I want to believe I’d know what to say. But *this*? I’m at a total loss.

Because, yeah, that’s my boyfriend on his hands and knees.

And, yep, that’s definitely an enormous candy cane.

A candy cane that the elf is shoving into one of Barry’s orifices—and *not* the one where candy canes are supposed to go. But judging by the look of pure bliss on his face, he’s enjoying it.

Enjoying it so much that when he finally notices me, the first words out of his mouth aren’t *I’m sorry* or even *I can*

explain. They aren't even directed at me.

He glares over his shoulder at the blonde. "Don't you dare stop."

Behind me, the other elf clears her throat. "Enough, Chrissy. Time to go."

"Finally." With a look of relief, the blonde tosses the candy cane in the trash. "Took you long enough," she says, then grabs her purse from the nightstand and sashays past me before disappearing into the hall.

"What the hell?" I ask, hating how lame I sound. "*This* is why you wanted to be Santa?"

The question was directed at Barry, but it's the first elf who answers. "Oh, he's no Santa, darling. But don't worry, you're still in the running with the Man in Red—and *he* doesn't screw his elves."

With *that* bizarre comment, she follows the blonde into the hall, the door slamming closed behind her. I'm on the verge of running after her and demanding an explanation when Barry brings me back to Earth—reminding me that I have bigger problems than crazy sluts in elf costumes.

"Jesus, Mads, couldn't you have waited five more minutes before pulling your usual needy shit?"

I turn back to Barry, relieved to find that he's put his boxers back on. "Umm, excuse me? I catch you cheating and *I'm* the bad guy?"

Shaking his head, he grabs his pants. "Oh, please, don't tell me you're really going to try to take the moral high ground. You're the last person who should kink shame."

It's clear by his smug expression that he expects this to end the conversation, but it's more confusing than anything. He has no way of knowing what my kinks are. The only conversations we've had about sex were always about me wanting to wait...

I frown. "What on Earth are you talking about?"

“Drop the innocent good girl act, Mads,” he says, sneering as he pulls on the baggy red pants. “I’ve seen the depraved shit you write to *Santa*.”

TWO

MERRYNN TAPS A LACQUERED nail against the video feed. “See? I knew we shouldn’t interfere. Not that it’s a huge loss. She wasn’t syndicate material, anyway.”

Ignoring the elf’s thinly veiled “I told you so,” I stare at the static-filled screen, willing it to come into sharper focus. But the flickering surveillance square refuses to remain stable—proving how badly I’ve fucked this up. This isn’t a run-of-the-mill glitch. The squares only become this unstable when we’re about to lose a believer.

“Bloody hell.” I slam my fist down onto the open tray table. The tablet displaying the surveillance feeds jumps.

Misinterpreting my anger, my assistant continues. “Stop torturing yourself. What’s done is done. In any event, she was unlikely to hang on much longer. We’re still well within our quota of believers.”

“I don’t give a fuck about our goddamn believer quota!”

“Respectfully, *sir*, that’s the entire fucking problem,” MerryNN retorts, voice acerbic. “You’ve had extra surveillance on this girl for the better part of three years. It’s a misuse of resources.”

I wince at the elf’s criticism, but I don’t contradict her. In truth, “surveillance” is too mild of a word for my behavior. My observations of Madelyn Marsden crossed the line into stalking a long time ago.

It’s sick, but I can’t help it. I’m obsessed with her. And I have been for three long years—ever since I read those

goddamn letters...

Well, she's consumed me. I've tracked her every move. I know when she's sleeping, and I know when she's awake. I don't have to check when she's been bad or good because my Maddie is *always* good.

Well, almost always. Because my little girl has a secret: her fantasies are utterly filthy. And not just filthy, but kinky as fuck, going by her letters. Such a strange mixture of naughty and nice. How could I resist discovering every last thing about her?

The sick truth is that I haven't. When it comes to Madelyn Marsden, I've exhibited an appalling lack of restraint. Her surveillance feed is always open on at least one of my devices. I can't help it. She's my addiction.

It's rare that I allow more than a few hours to pass where I'm not watching over her. So of course I knew when she was about to make a huge fucking mistake and give her innocence to a man who isn't worthy to lick her shoes.

Well, I simply couldn't let that happen. Allowing them to get any closer would have ruined her life—hence Operation Honeytrap. Everything in his file suggested that my plan would succeed at splitting them up. And technically, it did.

But the cost—Maddie's very belief in fucking Christmas—is unacceptable. And not just because her losing her belief is a goddamn crime. If she falls off the grid of believers, my access to her will be cut off.

That can't happen. So far, I've kept my distance, only watching my sexy girl from afar, honoring the letter of the Christmas Contract if not the spirit. But the thought of losing access entirely, of not knowing if she's in danger...

Sure, I could stalk her by more conventional means. But those don't go far enough, don't allow enough access. Already, I've saved her more times than she can ever know. And now my ability to continue to do so, to watch over her, to protect her, to keep her fucking *safe*, is in jeopardy.

I turn on the elf. "This is all your fault."

Merryn raises an eyebrow. “*My* fault? I was following *your* orders.”

“I told you to have Chrissy split them up, to lure him away, not to peg him in the ass in front of her!”

“Unlike you, I don’t micromanage my subordinates. Not that I can fault Chrissy for her efficiency.” She shrugs. “The operation was demanding too many man hours during our most critical quarter, and like me, she has other tasks on her plate. More important tasks, mind you, than catering to that little creep’s fetishes.”

Tuning out my assistant’s excuses, I rewind the feed, replaying the footage of Maddie fleeing the hotel. Even with the sound muted, her distress is undeniable. Tears streak her gorgeous face. She stumbles, then yanks off her heels and tosses them in a trashcan.

My heart sinks at the undeniable proof of how badly my plan backfired. The only thing I care about is Maddie. And I just fucking hurt her. Badly.

Yet what choice did I have?

The thought of allowing that slime ball to corrupt her innocence was intolerable. That’s why I intervened, not jealousy. Not because I was terrified that she wouldn’t just ask him to fuck her but might allow him to indulge the *other* fantasies she’s confessed...

I switch from the video back to the live feed. But it’s still all static. Fuck.

Panic clawing at my chest, I open the location tracker, which mercifully is still online. Maddie’s dot is moving rapidly out of the city. Zooming out, I examine the map.

“What’s the sleigh’s current coordinates?” I snap.

“Do I look like a reindeer?” Merryn asks, then sighs. “But we just left Manchester, so Dublin’s next.”

“Who are we flying with tonight?” I ask as I do the mental math.

Judging by the route, my angel is heading to her parents' house in Scarsdale. That should be a safe enough location.

Should being the operative word. I've never seen Maddie this upset. And her parents already left town, which she very well *knows*. It worries me that she's apparently planning to spend Christmas alone in an empty house.

But even if that weren't alarming enough, the fact that her live feed is suddenly pure static means that the location tracker will likely be the next to go offline.

I'm losing her.

"Don't do this, Nick," my assistant says, voice weary. "The contract—"

"Who is fucking flying the sleigh right now, Merryn?"

She sighs. "Comet, but I don't see why—"

Cutting her off, I activate the radio link between the flight cabin and the cockpit and give the order to divert.

THREE

MADELYN

COMING HOME for Christmas was a mistake. The silent front hall is as dark and empty as I feel. But it only took one miserable night alone in my apartment to know that I couldn't stay in the city. The thought of spending Christmas alone, surrounded by takeout boxes, was unbearable. Unfortunately, this might be worse.

My family is in the Caribbean on their annual Christmas cruise. I should be with them. But because Barry volunteered to play Santa at the charity gala on the 23rd, I stupidly stayed behind.

Mom and Dad were disappointed but understanding. Mom said she knew this day would come, that soon I'd be starting my own family and that of course that would come first.

I thought that too. I thought Barry wanted to be Santa because he knew how much Christmas meant to me. Turns out all he wanted was to spend time with the legal secretary he'd been having an affair with for weeks. I'm such a fool.

I wish I could bleach my brain. The image of him with those stupid red pants around his ankles is burned into my mind. If only that had been the worst thing I saw...

Shoving that horrid memory aside, I deposit my bags in my bedroom and change into my pajamas. Wide awake still, I head back downstairs and drift into the living room, not bothering to turn on any lights. The soft glow of the Christmas tree illuminates the space.

It's so like Mom to decorate a tree even though she wasn't planning on anyone being here. And of course she left the tree lights on a timer. Mom loves Christmas as much as I do. Or as much as I *did*.

Christmas is ruined now.

No, not ruined. Cancelled.

Yeah, coming home was definitely a mistake. Fleeing the city was supposed to make me feel better, but being here is just a reminder that the life I'd dreamed of having since I was a little girl was never anything more than a stupid fantasy.

While I'm the last person on the planet who should judge someone else's kinks, seeing Barry being dominated by a sexual partner shattered literally everything I thought I knew about both him and our relationship. The fact that he was desecrating both my favorite holiday and my favorite Christmas candy was just the cherry on top of the crap sundae.

It's bad enough that I didn't realize sooner that he's a two-faced liar with no respect for me. But how in the world did I miss how wildly sexually incompatible we are?

Feeling properly sorry for myself, I turn on the gas fireplace, then sink down onto the floor in front of the flickering flames. Leaning back against the sofa, I draw my knees up against my chest. Barry's cruel words echo in my mind, and I struggle not to cry.

Because he's right—some part of me *must* have wanted him to read the letter he found, or I'd have sealed and sent it the second I finished writing it.

God, Mads, knock it off with the tears. I'm the one who lived like a monk for months, waiting for you to loosen up and start putting out. Imagine my shock when I discovered you weren't a prude but a sexual deviant. The second I read that letter, I knew you weren't end game.

No one will see if I *do* cry, but I've already shed too many tears over him. He's not worth crying over. But that doesn't mean that words didn't still sting. Because maybe he's right,

maybe I *am* a deviant. Ugh, Santa probably burned those letters, then put me straight on the naughty list.

But that wasn't even the worst part. No, it's what he said next. Things that made me realize I never even knew him at all.

Do you have any idea how exhausting it is to argue the cases of sub-literate morons from shit-hole countries? Of course not. You're a spoiled, selfish baby, supported by Mommy and Daddy and living in a fantasy land. Hell, you're old enough to drink yet still believe in Santa. Grow up.

His words hurt. They hurt because they were true. Well, at least partially.

He's wrong about my students. English is a nightmare to learn as an adult. Yet every semester, my students manage it. I'm proud of them, proud of how hard they work to build better lives.

But the rest? Well, maybe he has a point.

I graduated over a year ago. Mom and Dad encouraged me to take some time off to try to decide whether I wanted to go to grad school and pursue a more advanced degree. Yes, I volunteer so many hours that it's basically a full-time job. But I don't pay my own bills. I've never supported myself.

I've been living in a fantasyland. I thought Barry was a good person, and that turned out to be a lie. Maybe *no one* is really good.

And if that's the case, all the crap I believed about Christmas and Santa was likely a lie, too. What does it say about me that it took me twenty-one years and walking in on my boyfriend getting pegged by a slutty elf to see the truth?

God, I'm such a stupid child. Even now, I'm tempted to go into the kitchen out of habit and see if there are any cookies that I can leave out for Santa. But what would be the point? When I was nine, I caught Dad eating the cookies himself. Except, stupid me had actually *bought* his explanation.

The world is a big place, filled with children who need Santa's help, children less fortunate than you. Since Santa

can't possibly visit every house, the moms and dads of some children act as his special helpers. I know it must be disappointing to realize that Santa doesn't stop here, but you should be grateful that we don't need Santa's help.

His explanation made sense. I never questioned Santa's existence again. If anything, it solidified my belief, gave me a deeper appreciation for how important Santa is. Even now, it's hard to totally shake the habits formed by years of believing. Like I could almost swear that I hear sleigh bells...

Another sound, almost too subtle to hear, disturbs the stillness of the silent night. But even if Santa *were* real, he never came when I was a child. Why would he start *now*?

I tell myself it's just the wind. Maybe a branch scraping the roof. But I can't stop my heart from racing as I try to recall if I remembered to set the alarm.

Crap, what if I *did* forget? I sit frozen, staring at the flickering flames as I mentally retrace my steps earlier. But I was too busy throwing myself a pity party to pay attention to anything else.

All of my senses are heightened now, though. Heightened to the point that I'm hallucinating. Like I can almost swear that the flames shifting and shimmering. A soft thud.

Oh my God, are those really a pair of black boots behind the fireplace's glass front?

Except it's a *gas* fireplace. The chimney isn't a real one, doesn't connect with the roof...

But I forget about the fireplace as a massive figure blots out everything else. My gaze travels upward, cataloging details.

Crimson leather pants hug thick, muscular thighs. My face heats when I realize that's not all they hug... the bulge in the front of the man's pants is enormous. Tearing my gaze away, I take in a matching biker jacket that strains across broad shoulders and a muscular chest.

Mouth dry, I stare at the strange man standing in my childhood home. A neatly trimmed black beard with just a hint

of silver covers a strong jaw. Short black hair is mostly hidden by a... Santa hat. Piercing blue eyes meet mine, then rake over my body, leaving me feeling utterly exposed.

As if in a dream, I stand, drawn toward the man. Feeling small and insignificant, I stare up at him, struggling to catch my breath. He's just so *large*, so much broader and taller than me. He's also dangerously attractive.

It's not just all the muscles—or his distractingly large package. Not even the way those eyes seem to be undressing me. No, he radiates power, confidence, mastery...

Moisture forms between my legs. The sort of slick wetness Barry never inspired. I've only ever felt this tingling between my legs alone at night in my room when describing my fantasies in my letters to Santa...

Oh my God, am I seriously turned on right now? Have I lost my freaking mind? A stranger just broke into my house. An intruder, one who's twice my size and almost certainly stronger than me.

I take a step back, my bare legs hitting the sofa. "You shouldn't be here."

"You know that isn't true, Maddie. I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be, where I'm needed."

The room is too hot. He's too close. His scent surrounds me, and it's indescribable. Snow and cedar and something else, something I can't name but that feels like coming home and every happy moment I've ever known.

This man broke into my house. I should run, but my legs won't move.

I shake my head, trying to break whatever spell has fallen over me. "Who *are* you?"

FOUR

NICK

I DON'T ANSWER RIGHT AWAY. I can't, not when she has me spellbound.

Never have I dared to come so close to her, and proximity makes her even more irresistible. Intoxicating, really, and I don't trust myself not to do something I won't be able to take back. Because however bold her letters were, the gulf between her innocence and my experience isn't lost on me.

Her skimpy tank top and shorts reveal more than she likely realizes. The thin material hugs her curves, doing nothing to hide the soft swell of her curves, the hard points of her nipples.

Tonight, she's pulled her hair into a messy bun that I long to free it from. An urge so intense that fighting it would take all of my self-control. And so I don't fight it, don't even try.

Barely breathing, I step closer, invading her space. And as the brown and gold strands fall around her face, I bend down and murmur the answer to her question in her ear.

"I have many names, angel. What I'm called shifts in every land. But you can call me Nick."

Her body tenses, but her arousal permeates the room, telling me exactly what I'd find were I to push those tiny shorts down over her luscious hips. But she doesn't answer, and it won't do for my girl to be scared, so I add, "Or you can call me Santa if you'd prefer."

For the second time tonight, she shakes her head. "No, you can't be..."

While I swore I'd stay away from her, I've nonetheless envisioned our first meeting countless times. And right now, it's going all wrong. Her doubts fill the room, marring the perfect trust her letters always displayed. So though it kills me, I step away from her, putting some needed distance between us so that I can fucking think straight.

I gesture toward the sofa. "Sit."

She complies immediately. Of course she does. My Maddie isn't wired to disobey me.

Yet she doesn't believe. She doesn't believe I'm who I say I am. Worse, she's in danger of losing her belief in Christmas, in goodness itself, entirely. That can't happen. I won't allow it.

"Oh, my little Maddie, I assure you that I very much am. I've watched you for years, watched you in moments when you thought you were alone. I know things about you that no one else does, and that no one ever will if I have anything to say about it."

"Like what?" she asks, the question breathless.

My God, can she truly be this innocent? She knows damn well all the dirty fantasies she confessed to me. But if this is how she wants to play the game, then so be it.

Holding her gaze, I decide to start from the beginning. "One year, you received one of that season's trendiest gifts for girls your age in your stocking. A multicolored pen that vibrated. You found a creatively naughty use for those vibrations, didn't you?"

Her cheeks flush a deeper shade of pink, and she nods.

"Do you know how fucking hard I got reading the thank you note you sent me for that pen? A note you sent *years* after the fact despite knowing damn well by that point that your mother had purchased it, not me. Yet still, you described your first orgasm in provocative detail and *begged* me to kidnap you from your bed in the middle of the night."

My own words push my desire up a notch—and my frustration, too. Frustration that only grows as she stares down at her hands, not answering me.

And yet it's clear from her expression that she remembers that damn letter as well as I do—how could she not? That was the letter where everything changed. The one she sent the day she turned eighteen...

“Well, Maddie? Do you still believe that I'm not real?” I demand, voice rough.

Looking up, she frowns. “I never said that you weren't real, just that you weren't...”

“The man you've fantasized about for years? The person you've confided all of your doubts, dreams, and darkest desires to in letter after letter?”

“Oh God, those letters...” She turns her face away from me, staring out the window into the darkness of night. Nearly too softly for me to hear, she adds, “The hard copy proof that I'm a needy, screwed-up mess. That's why you're finally here—isn't it? You want to scold me, too.”

Suddenly, it all falls into place. Mentally, I replay the surveillance footage from the night before. How did I miss it? Her loss of belief was never about her boyfriend cheating—it was what he said afterward. Fuck.

And yet, I *know* my girl—and exactly how to handle this.

“Yes, Madelyn. We're *long* overdue for a discussion about those letters, and they are *exactly* why I'm here.”

FIVE

OF COURSE THIS is about the letters. Those stupid, stupid letters. But how could this man have read them? All those letters that I addressed to Santa Claus at the North Pole.

Except hasn't he just proven that he has? I told no one about the screwed-up things that I did with that vibrating pen. No one except...

This man looks nothing like how I envisioned Santa, yet he's everything I want. Everything I've ever wanted. Confronted with the sheer physicality of him, my doubts war with my desire to believe and my shame over the realization that whoever this stranger is, he clearly read every damning word that I wrote.

"The letters were a mistake," I whisper, doubting that my face can get any hotter. "A stupid, fleeting impulse that I regret now."

"A fleeting impulse that you gave in to over three hundred times in the past four years? I call bullshit," he says, voice hard. "So cut the crap and answer the question that's been tormenting me: Why would a good girl like you write such filthy things, but more to the point—why would you write them to *me*? And don't try to lie to me, little one. You don't want to be on Santa's naughty list."

God, Barry said the same thing, called the letter he found "filthy" and not the sort of thing a good girl would write. There was no explanation I could offer Barry and none that I can offer this man, either. This man who has read things so

much worse than the single letter Barry stumbled across in my apartment.

How do I explain that I don't always *want* to be the good girl that everyone thinks I am? That I want to experience *everything*—right and wrong—but that I'm not brave enough to explore that darkness on my own? That I need someone bigger and stronger to take control?

Except I have. I'm sure of it. And in my stupid, childish fantasies, the man that I confessed those sick, twisted needs to understood. Somehow, I convinced myself that if my fantasies were really so wrong, he'd have written back and told me to stop.

Instead, he's here demanding I explain—just like Barry did. It just proves how deluded my fantasies really were. Sure, he claims they turned him on, but he hasn't so much as kissed me. No, instead he's standing there patiently waiting for me to explain to him why I'm so screwed up.

Forcing myself to meet his gaze, I shake my head, willing myself not to make this worse by crying. "There's nothing to talk about. I know how wrong they were. Know that I'm not supposed to..."

"Want the things that you do?" he asks, voice low. "You don't know the first thing about impossible desires, little girl. Each December, the North Pole is flooded with requests I can't possibly grant and half the ones that I do are problematic, to put it mildly. And yet all you've asked for, Maddie, is for me to do exactly what I want to you."

His words make me feel like I'm falling. And yet part of me still believes that they can't be true—that none of this can be real. That *he* can't be real—or at least not who he claims. And yet he knew about the pen...

"Only Santa was supposed to read those letters," I protest, hating how childish and unsteady my voice sounds in the empty house.

"And I did, love. So why are you so upset?"

“Santa isn’t real,” I whisper, hating the words but needing to say them, needing to admit the truth before this goes any further. “That kind of goodness can’t be real.”

At this, his eyes darken. “Oh, I’m not a good man, Maddie. Make no mistake about that. Would a good man have watched you in secret for years, even in moments where you had every expectation of privacy? Would a good man have tracked your every move, stolen belongings he knew you wouldn’t miss just to hold something that had touched your creamy skin? Would a fucking *good* man have stalked you?” He shakes his head. “No, I’m not good. I’m too obsessed with you to be good.”

His words unlock something inside me—a dark, needy something that I’m afraid to examine too closely but know that I must. My head spins as I try to make sense of my body’s reaction to everything he’s just confessed.

Because his confession should frighten me. *He* should frighten me. He’s just broken into my house and confessed to stalking me. I shouldn’t find that freaking *hot*...

But somehow, I do. Him caring enough to engage in that degree of obsessive surveillance makes me feel wanted, cherished, *safe*—and oh so very wet.

“I’m... I’m obsessed with you, too,” I admit, eyes downcast.

“Look at me, Maddie,” he orders, all traces of warmth disappearing from his voice.

Time stops as his gaze searches mine. Standing in front of the fireplace, his muscular frame silhouetted by the flickering flames, there’s nothing jolly or merry about the leather-clad older man observing me.

He crooks a finger. “Come here.”

At the ice in his voice, I shiver, wishing I were wearing something warmer. Some screwed-up part of me wants to obey him, the same part that wrote those embarrassing letters, but I’m frozen beneath the scrutiny of those cold blue eyes. Trapped.

Shaking his head, he sinks into the chair nearest the fire. My father's chair.

“That wasn't a request. Good girls sit on Santa's lap when they're told. I won't ask again.”

This time, I do obey. Reluctantly rising from the sofa, I approach him, my bare feet sinking into the soft carpeting.

“Strip.”

I'm unsure what I expected him to say, but it wasn't *that*. Face hot, I freeze. But then I do as he asks—how could I do anything else? This is *Santa* commanding me, and I can't say no.

Feeling as if I'm dreaming, I pull my camisole over my head and toss it onto the sofa behind me. Then with shaking hands, I push my pajama shorts down, letting them fall to the floor. I'm not wearing underwear, and an emotion I can't read flashes in his eyes when he discovers that.

Heart pounding, I force myself to move toward him again. As I close the distance between us, goosebumps form on my limbs even as I feel my blush spread from my face to my chest.

Hot and cold. Fire and ice. Just like this man.

His gaze raking over my naked body could immolate me. Yet those icy eyes are colder than the darkest winter night as he pulls me sideways onto his lap.

And then the cold disappears—and not just because of the proximity of the fire. Hot shame flares inside me at my own helpless desire when my bare sex meets his muscular, leather-covered thighs. Sitting on Santa's lap, I feel like a naughty child about to be scolded by the only hero I've ever had.

He wraps an arm around me, holding me in place. Despite knowing that I'm trapped, I can't help but try to get away. But his embrace is like being restrained by steel bands. And something equally hard presses up against my bare sex...

Suddenly, it's all too real. Too intense. Too impossible.

But even as I'm thinking that, the arm around me tightens, pulling me even closer. He strokes the side of my face, then cruel fingers grasp my chin, turning my face toward him.

His lips claim mine in a bruising kiss, coaxing my lips open. And then I'm kissing him back, our tongues warring as I feel myself falling into him, deeper, darker... wrapping my arms around his neck, I moan into his mouth, needing more, needing *him*.

But I've needed him for years and he's never so much as written back, despite my desperate pleas for him to do just that...

Gasping, I pull away from him, ending the kiss. And as my lungs fill with air, the unreality of all of this washes over me again. I'm sitting on the lap of a strange man who just broke into my parents' house, naked, wet, and desperate for him to kiss me again.

The mixture of shame and arousal coursing through me is confusing. And maybe that confusion is what makes me say what I do next. "You may be my stalker. But you aren't Santa. Santa isn't real. He *can't* be real."

"This isn't the Maddie I know," he says, voice stern. "My Maddie is a good girl. My Maddie believes. And yet, you've been nothing but naughty tonight. Forcing me to divert my sleigh on the most important night of the year. Wearing that skimpy little outfit to tease me, to test the limits of my control by tempting me with those delicious curves."

The displeasure in his voice should frighten me. As should the clear obsession his statements betray. But instead of being frightened, I'm shamefully thrilled.

Not seeming to expect a reply, he continues. "And to make matters worse, you neglected to leave out the milk and cookies this year. Is that because you were hoping I'd taste that sweet pussy instead? I will, many times. But first, you need to be punished, then maybe you'll understand how real I am."

Then as if I weigh nothing, he stands and carries me across the room to the sofa. The next thing I know, I'm lying face

down across his lap, my cheek pressed into the upholstery.

I should struggle. I should try to escape. But then I suddenly understand that I'm incapable of disobeying this man, incapable of doing anything other than exactly what he wants. I hold my breath, uncertain what he'll do next but praying that he'll finally give me what I so desperately *need*.

SIX

NICK

I'D BE a liar if I claimed I never fantasized about this exact moment. Yet the reality of her bare bottom exposed before me is beyond anything I ever imagined.

Sliding a finger along her little slit, I discover exactly how wet for me she already is and groan. It's all I can do not to spread that tight little pussy and take her virginity here and now. But there will be time enough for that later.

Right now, she needs to be punished.

Not because she's bad. Oh no, my little girl is nothing but good. But she needs to be shown how real this is, needs to be grounded in the present moment. And she needs to understand that this delicious ass is mine, that *she's* mine.

Lovingly, I caress each cheek, and she whimpers, squirming on my lap. The small movement causes her clit to rub against my erection, and she gasps.

"Stay still, gorgeous, or it will be so much worse for you," I say, then deliver the first swat, not giving her a chance to reply.

To her credit, she goes absolutely still, not making a sound.

I smack the other cheek, then the first again, my cock throbbing in the tight confines of my pants. But it's the third smack that undoes her, making her moan and rub that tempting little pussy against me.

"More, please," she begs.

Unable to deny her, I do, spanking her harder this time.

She cries out.

It's too much. The need to be inside her, to taste that sweet cunt, to devour *all* of her intensifies. My balls are like boulders. All I can think about is spreading those sumptuous thighs and thrusting deep inside her.

Her ass cheeks are pleasingly red now. Her moans fill my ears. She's perfect. She's everything.

Jesus Christ, what the fuck did I do to deserve this?

I massage her enflamed ass cheeks, then reach beneath me to play with her clit. She trembles.

"Say, 'Spank me, Santa,'" I order, voice strained. "Show me that you believe."

Almost too low for me to hear, she whispers the three words I've fantasized about hearing for years.

I continue to play with her clit, marveling at how wet she is, how responsive. When her desperate cries and moans tell me that she's close, I finally oblige her request spanking her one last time.

And that's enough to push her over the edge. She arches against my hand, crying out as she comes. Not giving her a chance to recover, I flip her over and settle her on the sofa.

Maddie winces when her abused skin makes contact with the fabric but then settles back against the cushions. As she watches with curious eyes, I kneel before her and gently spread her legs.

She shudders as my fingers explore her sensitized skin. But she doesn't tell me to stop. No, not my good girl. Spreading her legs wider, she bites her lip.

I bring my face closer to the puffy lips of her glistening pussy. My dick is so hard it feels like it could snap off, but the desire to taste her wins out. Because now that I've claimed one orgasm from her, I'm consumed by the greedy urge to taste her as she comes against my mouth.

"That's my Maddie. Such a good girl. So wet, so responsive," I murmur before allowing myself to finally

fucking taste her.

With my tongue, I trace a path from her tight hole right up to her sensitive little bud. God, she tastes better than she has any right to. I lick her again, feeling the addiction to the taste and feel of her taking root.

Throwing her legs over my shoulders, I pull her toward the edge of the sofa and bury my face between her legs, losing myself in her. Her cries fill the room as I devour her, swirling my tongue over her clit even as I slide a finger inside her.

God, she's so tight, so wet, so perfect. Everything about this moment is perfect, or nearly so. Her release will complete it, and I'm determined to have it from her.

Her fingers push my hat off, tangling in my hair when I find that secret spot inside her. Her thighs clench around my head even as her pussy walls squeeze my finger, making her even tighter. And then I suck on her clit, satisfaction filling me as she comes, grinding that perfect little pussy against my face.

When I've swallowed every last trace of her orgasm, I stand and look down at her. She's so flushed, so beautiful.

"That's a good girl, coming for Santa. Every time you've touched that delicious little cunt, I've dreamed about doing that. You taste amazing."

"You saw... that?" she asks, voice unsteady.

"I told you. I've been watching you." I pull my zipper down, unable to wait any longer, praying that I can maintain some semblance of control and not be too brutal for her first time. "Always, I'm watching you, Maddie. And now I'm—"

An impatient cough cuts me off, just as Maddie jumps, her eyes going wide at the sight of something—or rather *someone*—behind me. Cursing, I pull up my zipper before turning to face the reindeer.

"What the fuck, Comet?"

The reindeer stares down at the hearthrug, not making eye contact. "We're running low on—"

“Face the fireplace before I smash your face in for daring to look at her.” The words burst out before he can finish speaking.

Face blanching, Comet immediately does as directed. I feel a stab of remorse for speaking to one of my best pilots and oldest friends that way, but the thought of another man laying eyes on what’s *mine* has me seeing red.

“Comet? Like the reindeer?” Maddie asks, incredulous.

Turning back to my angel, I shrug off my jacket and wrap it around her before answering. She’s so tiny that the jacket swallows her, but she’s still showing too much skin for my liking, particularly around a reindeer. While they’re excellent pilots, they’re also total sluts.

Still, there’s no help for it at the moment, so forcing some semblance of calm into my voice, I answer her. “Yes, Comet is a member of the Reindeer Corps.”

She frowns. “Wait, so they aren’t, like, actual reindeer?”

“No, we haven’t used those in nearly a century. Not since the sleigh drivers got their pilot’s licenses.”

While Maddie seems to be considering this, Comet clears his throat. “Uh, boss? Is it safe to turn around yet?”

“That depends on what you have to tell me,” I say, forcing myself to turn my back on Maddie once more. “Your orders were to wait in the sleigh.”

The reindeer faces me. “I know. And I’m sorry to interrupt, buddy. Believe me. But we’re low on fuel from diverting so far off course. It would be a mistake to keep the sleigh idling much longer.”

At my stony glance, he adds, “I could go refuel, then come back for you. But if you want to reach the pole before dawn...”

Sighing, I shake my head, the full weight of my responsibilities returning. I may be perilously close to breaking the Christmas Contract, if I haven’t already, but I

can't disregard my duties entirely. The elf teams will need to debrief, be checked against the list.

And yet the thought of leaving Maddie's side is unbearable. So I do the only thing I can.

I kidnap her.

SEVEN

HE DOESN'T ASK PERMISSION. He doesn't even warn me. One minute, I'm standing in my parents' living room. The next, I'm hanging upside down, draped like a doll over Santa's shoulder.

Santa...

Is it possible that this man actually is Santa Claus? When Nick was spanking me, believing felt as natural as breathing. And yet it seems impossible that the only man I've ever truly wanted is not only real but has been stalking me for years.

Belatedly, I realize I should protest, put up a fight. There's no escaping the muscular arm wrapped around my legs. Struggling won't help. But I could scream...

Suddenly I'm staring down at black roof tiles flecked with softly falling snow. Santa sets me down, still keeping one possessive arm wrapped around my waist.

And, yes, this man is Santa. The sleigh is proof.

Or at least, I assume the sleek black vehicle parked on the roof is a sleigh. Much like my stalker, it isn't at all what I envisioned in any of my Christmas fantasies.

The sleigh looks like a cross between a sports car and a small aircraft. Its windows are tinted such a deep black that they're nearly indistinguishable from whatever material covers the sleigh's body and wings.

A faint beep, the sound you hear when a car unlocks, pierces the silence of the sleeping neighborhood. Two doors

swing upward, revealing two compartments. One appears to be a cockpit, judging by the lighted instrument panel. But it's the rear compartment that Nick gestures toward.

“After you.”

The roof tiles are cool and rough against my bare feet as I hesitantly approach the sleigh. My mind too blown to do anything else, I get in.

The interior of the sleigh is shockingly warm after the cold December night. Nick slides in beside me and pushes a button that causes a privacy screen to rise, closing us off from the cockpit.

I can almost pretend that I'm sitting in the back of any luxury sedan. The illusion is shattered, however, when the sleigh begins to move. My stomach drops as we gain altitude, lifting off the roof into the starry night.

Because while on the outside the windows may be opaque, from the inside of the sleigh there's a spectacular view. I stare down in wonder as we fly over my childhood neighborhood. Houses and shops spread out below us, like a fairytale gingerbread village.

Only when the objects on the ground become too small to see do I remember where I am, who I'm with. All the impossible events of the past hour rush through my mind as I turn away from the window and examine the man sitting beside me. A man who is staring at me with such intensity that it should frighten me.

He should frighten me.

Because he looks more like a biker than a merry old man. He doesn't look old at all, although he's clearly much older than me. Older and dangerous.

I pull his jacket tighter around me, inhaling his scent as I take in his sheer size, which the leather pants and black T-shirt only emphasize. The T-shirt also reveals that his massive arms are covered in black ink.

But I can't bring myself to be frightened. Not of this man whose presence beside me feels both exciting and strangely

reassuring. Or maybe it's not that strange. He is Santa after all...

He's also my stalker. A stalker I didn't even know I had. A stalker who just abducted me from my parents' living room but not before spanking me and...

With a rush of embarrassment, I realize I'm wet again.

Is this what it takes to turn me on? A man admitting to having an obsession with me that any court would deem criminal?

Criminal or not, I can't help but slide closer to him. Still silent, he takes my hand, making me once more aware of the difference in our sizes.

Unable to stand the tension, I break the silence. "Where are you taking me?"

"The North Pole."

"Why?"

His laugh is a deep chuckle, not a jolly ho ho ho. It does something strange to my stomach. God, is there anything about this man that doesn't turn me on? Everything about this night is so wrong, but I don't want it to end.

"You heard Comet. We wouldn't have made the North Pole by dawn if we didn't leave then, and I'm afraid that I still have work to do," he says, an emotion I can't name passing over his face. "The elves still have reports to make, love. Being in the syndicate doesn't lend itself to the best work-life balance."

I raise an eyebrow. "The syndicate?"

"The Santa Syndicate," he clarifies. "It's kind of like the mafia... except its objective is Christmas, not financial gain."

At that, my glance can't help but travel around the interior of the sleigh. As if reading my mind, Nick laughs once more and my core clenches at the deep, resonant sound.

"Not that the syndicate doesn't do quite well for itself," he adds. "But accumulating wealth isn't its objective, just a side-effect of some of our more lucrative business dealings."

“So you make and sell toys?” I ask, trying to connect the dots.

“Among other things,” he replies, expression guarded.

“What ‘other things’?”

“Whatever is necessary to ensure that the good are rewarded, the naughty punished, and that the spirit of Christmas is preserved,” he says, voice weary.

Guilt washes over me at the edge of fatigue that’s crept into his voice. And suddenly it hits me. It’s Christmas Eve. Out of all the nights in the year for Santa to finally make himself known to me...

“Why are you really here?” I whisper. “Why me? Why now? Why tonight?”

“Oh my sweet, innocent girl, haven’t you guessed that by now? I told you already—I’ve been watching you. Until now, you didn’t need me. Not really. But tonight, you do.”

A warm glow spreads through me at his words, but still, the guilt gnaws at me.

“I would have been fine,” I protest. “Christmas is more important than I am. You should have left me back there. I’ll just be in the way.”

He shakes his head. “You really think I could have left without you?” He squeezes my hand. “After tasting how sweet you are?”

At the unmistakable meaning infusing his words, I blush. “You... You didn’t have to do that, you know. Not that I’m complaining, but it’s not like there was anything in that for you...”

With his free hand, Nick grabs my other wrist, guiding my hand to his crotch. “Does this *feel* like I didn’t enjoy myself, little girl?”

Instinctively, I squeeze the hard bulge. Even through the buttery leather, that part of him feels like granite. Breaths coming faster, I move my hand experimentally, curious.

Groaning, he crushes me against his chest. Snow and cedar and the scent of Christmas itself surround me as he captures my mouth in another bruising kiss.

And then the seats are somehow reclining and I'm on my back, pinned beneath him. As he deepens the kiss, I part my lips, granting him access. Access he fully exploits, his tongue exploring my mouth in ruthless strokes even as his hands roughly push open the jacket and explore my body.

"I will *never* get enough of tasting you, Madelyn Marsden," he says, ending the kiss and pulling back slightly. "My God, the things I want from you. You have no fucking clue."

"Then show me, Santa."

"You aren't ready, angel," he growls, teeth nipping my lower lip.

"You don't know that," I protest, hating how young I sound.

He closes his eyes, expression pained. "Trust me on this, Maddie. Please."

"But I want to please you, Santa. Tell me how." To emphasize my point, I reach between us, stroking his erection through his pants. "Or show me."

Threading his fingers through my hair, he presses our foreheads together.

"You'll destroy me," he murmurs, lips inches from mine. "If I don't destroy you first. The things I want to do to you are wrong."

"You couldn't do anything wrong, Santa," I whisper. "I've enjoyed everything we've done together."

"That's the entire fucking problem, angel. You're so innocent, so pure, you have no idea. Hell, just the things I've done to make sure Christmas happens..." He laughs, but there's no joy in it. "Good men don't become the Santa. It's a job only a devil can do. A cruel man. A man who won't hesitate to commit violence to save a child's Christmas."

At his words, my gaze returns to the rack of guns, and understanding dawns. I'm horrified but not by Nick's confession. No, it's the pain that laced his words, and the sudden suspicion of what this job has likely cost him.

"Would bad things happen to children if you didn't intervene?"

"Yes, but that—"

I silence him with a soft kiss, then say, "So it doesn't matter. Not to me."

"Maddie, if you truly understood, you wouldn't forgive me. You'd run."

This time, I kiss his rough stubbled jaw. "Doing bad things to prevent innocents from being hurt doesn't make you a devil. It's Santa's job to keep children safe."

"Such a goddamn innocent," he says, stroking my cheek. "Taking you with me was a mistake—one I'll surely regret but that I couldn't not make. If I were a good man, I'd order Comet to turn this sleigh around before this gets truly fucked up."

"No, Santa, please," I beg, hot tears pricking my eyes. "I want to stay. I'm yours."

"I said *if* I were a good man, angel—but I'm not. I enjoy my job." Propping himself up on his elbow, he stares down at me, eyes glinting dangerously. "And I enjoy hurting innocents, too—or one innocent, at least. I enjoyed hurting you. Enjoyed spanking you. Your pain made me just as hard as your pleasure."

"But I enjoyed it, too, Santa. I want you to be my—" I gasp as he cruelly twists my nipple, both from the pain and the answering pulse between my legs.

"Your first? You've made that abundantly clear, little one. But you should think carefully before you offer me something you won't be able to take back."

"I have, Santa," I protest. "I've thought of nothing else for years. I've been saving myself for you."

“Don’t you ever lie to me, little girl,” he says, wrapping a hand around my throat. “Remember, I know everything about you. Which means that I know what you intended to offer your boyfriend last night.”

“My ex-boyfriend,” I say, my humiliation returning full force. “But...”

“But?” Nick questions. “You don’t deny that you intended to have sex with him?”

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to shove my hurt feelings aside. Because they aren’t important. Barry isn’t important. The only thing that matters is what’s happening in this sleigh.

So I shake my head. “I thought that was what I wanted. But only because... Only because I thought I couldn’t have you. You’re the only man I’ve ever actually wanted. It’s always been you.”

“Stop tempting me with what I have no right to claim.” The hand around my throat squeezes gently. “Don’t you fucking get it? I won’t stop at lightly swatting your bottom—or even at fucking you until you’re sore. Oh, I could promise to stop there, but in the end, I *will* hurt you. I’ll push your limits. I’ll make you experience the pleasure that can come from pain before twisting your pleasure into pain.”

Heart pounding, I stare up into eyes that are now more black than blue, wondering whether my own pupils are that dilated, too. Because, yes, his words scare me, just as he intended. But they’ve also left me restless, achy, wanting, no *needing*, something I don’t know how to express...

“How will you hurt me, Santa?”

“However you’ll let me.” Yanking my wrists up, he pins them above my head, easily restraining them both with just one hand. “I want to hit you with my belt before binding you with it. And once I have you trapped with no way to escape, I’ll devour that pretty little pussy until you’re in tears, begging me not to force you to come yet again.” His other hand returns to my throat, and he squeezes it once more, harder this time.

“But I wouldn’t stop, Madelyn, because I own your pleasure, own your pain, own *you*. Don’t I, little girl?”

His words are harsh, but as I meet his gaze, my breath catches at the vulnerability I encounter. Because despite his commanding tone, there’s a silent plea in his eyes, as if the next words I speak hold the power to destroy him. But that can’t be true—can it?

EIGHT

NICK

THIS ENTIRE NIGHT is spinning wildly out of control. Every second in Maddie's company chips at my self-control, intensifying my obsession. Not for the first time, I'm glad that I paused long enough to drop Merryn off at our New York offices. Because even with my assistant present in the sleigh, I wouldn't have been able to keep my hands off this girl.

She's too beautiful, too perfect, too innocent. But the next words out of her mouth wreck me totally, dissolving whatever remained of my crumbling restraint, somehow accomplishing what her unpracticed stroking of my cock did not.

"Yes, Santa," she whispers. "You own me totally, and you always have."

But while her words are brave, I don't miss the tremor of fear that runs through them. And why wouldn't she be afraid after the things I promised—no, *threatened*—to do to her?

The fucked part is that I will—but not tonight. I'm too desperate to be inside her to maintain the level of control I'd need to keep her safe. And more to the point, I don't want her first time to be marked by violence. Even if I do have zero doubts by now that violence *does* turn her on.

So with a fucking superhuman level of self-control, I release her. Rolling off of her, I return the seats to their upright position.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asks, biting her bottom lip in that way that drives me fucking crazy.

I'm so desperate to be inside her that I'm struggling to think straight. But this is important. Reassuring her is important. Maybe the most important thing I'll ever do.

"Hardly, angel. But if we're going to do this, we're going to do it right. And as tempted as I am by the thought of having you trapped beneath me and choking the shit out of you while I pop your cherry, that's not how I want the first time to be with the woman I love."

"You... you love me?" she asks, voice breathless, her innocent surprise making her look impossibly young.

Fuck. I was so worried about reassuring her that I didn't stop to consider whether talk of *love* would frighten her more than threats of violence. Because of course it's too soon to make such declarations.

Maddie may have been my obsession for years, but she's only just coming to terms with the fact that I actually exist. But while I may be many things, I'm not a liar, and I can't bring myself to backtrack and try to take the words back. So instead, I double down.

Running a finger along her jaw, I stare into her eyes. "Madelyn Marsden, I've been hopelessly, obsessively in love with you from the first moment I saw you. I'm yours and only yours. Body and soul."

She smiles shyly. "I love *you*, Santa. Always."

And then I'm completely fucking lost.

"Ditch the jacket," I command, voice so hoarse that I practically growl the command.

As Maddie hurries to obey, I unzip my pants, lifting my hips to slide them down. Then more roughly than I intend, I grasp her by the hips, lifting her so that she's straddling me.

This is so wrong. She deserves better than this. I'm not a small man. I should prepare her with my fingers, at the very least.

This is unconscionable. I should do better by her. I want to do better by her. But she's completely wrecked my self-

control.

Positioning the head at her entrance, I grit my teeth as I guide her down onto my cock, forcing myself to at least exhibit that degree of restraint. Even if everything in me wants to grab her hips and slam her down.

Fuck, she's tight. There's no way I'm going to last.

With excruciating slowness, I sheath myself in her, stopping when I meet resistance. Pressing our foreheads together, I hold her gaze.

“You're so small, Maddie. This is going to hurt. I'm afraid there's no way around that.”

“If it will let me be closer to you, I want the pain. I need it. I need you.”

Crushing our lips together, I thrust up, claiming her virginity. Claiming her.

She goes still for a moment, then kisses me back, all need as her pussy clenches around me.

Self-control obliterated, I become an animal. Fingers digging into her hips, I slide her up and then slam her back down onto my cock. Balls feeling as if they'll burst, I pound into her tight, young pussy.

I wanted this moment to last—the moment where Maddie Marsden finally and truly became mine—but we're both too impatient, too frantic to not rush this.

She cries out against my mouth as her orgasm overtakes her. And that's all it takes to send me tumbling after her, filling her with my seed.

When we're both totally spent, she collapses against me, resting her head on my chest. For several long moments, we stay like that with her wrapped in my arms and me, still hard, inside her.

Only Comet's voice over the intercom manages to rouse me, breaking the spell. “Uh, boss, just wanted to let you know that we're currently fifteen minutes out from the workshop.”

Sighing, I slide out of her, watching with regret as she slips my jacket back on. I pull my pants up, then eye her critically.

The jacket really doesn't cover as much of her as I'd like. And those goddamn elves are horny little fucks.

Opening a compartment, I take out a spare blanket. After wrapping Maddie head to toe in it, I pull her onto my lap. Leaning back in my seat, I hold her as she snuggles against me, burying her face against my neck.

As the sleigh begins its final descent, I whisper into her ear, "Welcome to the North Pole, baby."

But Maddie doesn't answer, and glancing down, I realize that she's fallen asleep. It's just as well. Because while Comet was too discreet to say anything about me and Maddie, elves are rarely so circumspect. It's honestly a relief to not have to worry about my angel being exposed to their salacious comments. It will save me from having to punch an elf.

Sighing, I hold Maddie more tightly. Because it's not just the elves' crude jokes and lascivious gazes that I'm worried about. No, the real issue is that I am now definitely in breach of the Christmas Contract.

The only real question is how long it will take the syndicate to find out.

NINE

THE SCENTS and sounds of Christmas tease at my senses, pulling me toward consciousness, urging me to open my eyes to avoid missing a single second of my favorite day of the year. And yet it's difficult to feel any urgency with downy pillows cradling my head and the softest silk sliding against my bare skin.

I've never awoken feeling so pampered and relaxed—so warm, so *safe*. Never spent the night in a bed this luxurious, magical even...

The details of the previous night come rushing back. The spanking. The sleigh. Bouncing up and down on Santa's cock.

It all feels like some surreal dream. And yet here I am, lying in a strange bed with an unfamiliar ache between my legs. If none of that was real, then I'm still dreaming—the most vivid, detailed, and utterly filthy dream of my life. The things Nick said to me... is my subconscious really *that* naughty?

Bright sunlight streams through a window somewhere overhead. Head still fuzzy from sleep, I struggle to make sense of my surroundings. This is definitely the poshest bedroom I've ever seen.

The massive bed dominates the room, but other details hint at decadence, too. The silk sheets. The jacuzzi. The fire roaring in a fireplace that takes up an entire wall. The two leather wing-backed chairs situated in front of it. The Persian

rugs. Still, none of that means that I'm actually at the North Pole...

"Was all of that actually real? Was *he* real?" I wonder aloud.

"Oh, I'm real all right," a deep voice murmurs from behind me.

I cry out, but before I can turn around, strong tattooed arms wrap themselves around me as Nick pulls me against his hard chest. And his chest isn't the only thing that's hard...

Reflexively, I push back against him, seeking more contact, seeking *him*.

He groans. "Careful, angel. If you start that now, we'll never make it to breakfast. And I still need to give you your Christmas present."

Feeling naughty, I keep my voice deliberately innocent as I say, "I thought Santa's cock was my present."

He slips a hand between my legs. "Fuck. How can you be this wet already? Is that what that greedy little cunt wants, baby? Santa's big cock filling it? What about that filthy mouth of yours? Does it want my cock too?"

"Yes, please..." I say, the last word ending on a moan as he teases my clit.

"Oh, you'll get it, angel—in all of your hungry little holes."

But then to my frustration, he stops his tease and pulls away. I roll over to face him, but he's already left the bed. Back to me, he takes a pair of black leather pants out of a dresser. He slides them up over narrow hips.

Stung by the unexpected rejection, I blurt out the question without thinking. "Are you already tired of me?"

At this, Nick laughs. "Quite the opposite, angel. I love that you're insatiable. But if I succumb to your charms now, it will be hours before I let you leave this bed. Besides, it was a long night. And I don't know about you, but I need coffee."

His words are reasonable. But it's still a struggle to hide my disappointment as I reluctantly leave the warmth of the bed.

TEN

NICK

MY ANGEL IS POUTING. Pouting, trying to hide it, and failing miserably.

I feel a stab of guilt over my white lie. But if I told her the real reason for my reluctance to spend the morning in bed with her, it would ruin the surprise. Besides, what would I say?

I'd love nothing more than to fuck you senseless, darling. But I won't be able to relax until I have my ring on your finger?

But that's the honest-to-God truth. Because now that I've tasted my Maddie's sweetness, I won't be able to relax until she's mine in *every* sense of the word.

We dress in silence. But when I see her in the dress I chose for her, I let out a low whistle. "Stunning."

She blushes at the compliment, but it's true, she is—stunning. The red silk clings to her curves in all the right places before flaring out just above her knees. Yet I suspect that Madelyn Marsden would look breathtaking in absolutely anything.

I can't wait to find out. Can't wait to choose dozens more dresses for her. But even more than that, I'm looking forward to watching her body ripen and mature. The thought of seeing her soft stomach swell with my child...

That is, assuming the syndicate doesn't balk at my plans. But I'll burn that bridge when I get to it.

Fuck. Who am I kidding? I'll blow it up with dynamite if necessary. Nothing, not even the syndicate, can come between me and my future wife.

Because one thing I know with absolute certainty is that all possible futures contain her. How could they not? She's so fucking good, so absolutely perfect and smart and caring and sweet—and yet somehow, she loves *me*, an orphan thug from the wrong side of the tracks with a body count higher than his IQ.

In no reality do I deserve a woman like Maddie. But now that she's here with me, there's no way I'm not locking her down.

“Breakfast is in the orangery,” I say, taking her hand, deliberately keeping my voice light.

As we make our way across the compound, I give her a mini tour, keeping up a running commentary to mask my nerves. It's a struggle, though. Never in my life have I been this on edge. But then, I've never had this much on the line. No battle in the war on Christmas ever had stakes this high.

If she rejects my proposal, it will fucking gut me. Hell, I'm not sure that *I'll* continue to believe in Christmas if she does. But her saying no isn't really what has me so worked up.

No. It's that there are consequences to her saying yes, too. And while losing the Santa suit doesn't bother me, I do wonder...

What if she only loves me *because* I'm Santa?

Because once she says yes, the syndicate's response is a foregone conclusion. Sure, I'll make my case, but the reality is that the Christmas Contract is ironclad. No wiggle room. No forgiveness.

But not proposing isn't an option. Even if I could somehow restrain myself—which I can't—the contract is already broken. Whether or not I marry Madelyn Marsden, it's only a matter of time before I'm called before the board.

Too many people know what happened last night. Comet. Merryn. I trust *them*. But countless other elves and reindeer

watched me carry her off the sleigh. And because the North Pole is a small, gossipy, incestuous community, even more syndicate members likely know by now where she slept last night. While my subordinates obey me, and in many cases *fear* me, that doesn't mean that there aren't also plenty of ambitious elves and reindeer just waiting to stab me in the back and claim my spot at the top.

But what was I supposed to do? Allow her to wake alone in some impersonal guest room simply because of a technicality in my goddamn contract?

Fuck that shit. Besides, *sex* doesn't violate the contract terms...

No, but the words we said in private sure as hell did. Words that I *need* us to declare publicly before the entire fucking world. Screw breakfast. The moment we reach the orangery, I'm giving her the ring. I can't wait.

Unfortunately, Maddie seems determined to make me do just that.

My mistake is taking the shortcut through Candy Land. With her at my side, it becomes a meandering stroll, taking twice as long. I forgot how some features of the North Pole would seem to someone not accustomed to them. But as we're crossing the licorice bridge over the chocolate river, I start to see my home through Maddie's eyes.

It's magical. Pure and simple. A magic that my jaded eyes have taken for granted for years.

Christ. What the hell is wrong with me? This entire tour is a casual cruelty that my angel doesn't deserve. Why the hell am I showing her things that will soon be taken away?

Because I'm a goddamn coward—that's why. A coward who is hopelessly, stupidly in love with a girl who adores Christmas and has worshiped *Santa* her entire life.

If I were a better man, an *ethical* man, I'd come clean now. I'd tell her about the Christmas Contract and the complications it presents. I'd let her make a fully informed decision...

But when we reach the far bank and Maddie pauses to dip a finger into the rushing torrent of liquid chocolate, I'm reminded of exactly how much of a bastard I truly am. Because any urge I had to do the right thing evaporates as she sucks the chocolate off her finger.

I watch, transfixed, as she closes her eyes and lets out a little moan that makes me strain against my zipper. God. This *girl*. This fucking girl. She's a goddamn fantasy come to life.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she says, voice soft. "This is like a dream."

"Not a dream, Maddie. This is the rest of your life," I murmur, hating how easily the lie slips off my tongue.

"What are you saying, Nick?" she asks, looking up at me with eyes so innocent that I immediately feel like the worst kind of asshole.

Because while *I* might be the rest of her life, the North Pole sure as hell isn't. But I'm not ready to find out how she reacts once she learns the full truth—that I'm throwing away the career she admires so much so that I can be with *her*. And I can't wait another goddamn second.

"You're everything, Maddie. My angel, my obsession, the love of my goddamn life. And you have been—for years."

Christ. I'm blowing this. First by beginning with a lie. Then by forgetting the speech I lay awake all night mentally rehearsing. But fucking hell, in for a penny, in for a pound.

Removing the ring box from my pocket, I drop down on one knee. "What I'm saying is that I love you, Maddie. Although in truth, love doesn't even come close to describing how I feel. And the thought of ever spending another night apart—"

"Yes," she says, cutting me off. "The answer is *yes*, Nick. Maybe we're moving too fast, but I'm obsessed with you, too. I *love* you, too. So, yes, I'll marry you. I don't ever want to be separated from you or spend a single night not in your bed."

At her words, something loosens in me. "You'll never have to, angel. You're mine, and I'm yours. Always. Will you be

my wife?"

Laughing, she shakes her head. "I already said yes, but fine, I'll say it again. A thousand times if necessary. Whatever this is between us, it's magnetic. Inescapable. You're like a drug, one I never want to break my addiction to."

"And no one will ever ask you to, baby girl," I say, taking the ring out of the box and sliding it onto her finger.

Maddie gasps. "How did you know that emeralds were my ___"

"I know everything about you, Madelyn Marsden. Remember, I've literally been stalking you for years." Standing, I claim her mouth in a soft, lingering kiss that leaves her lips swollen.

Breathless, she says, "Surely you don't know *everything* about me..."

"I know that your favorite fruit is strawberries and that you adore cranberry scones. And I made certain that both will be served at breakfast. Shall we?"

Smiling, Maddie takes my hand once more, but we never make it to the orangery.

It's the reindeer's fault.

We've only gone a few steps when I spot Rudolph striding toward us. The reindeer's expression is so sour that if I didn't already suspect the reason for his approach, I'd be tempted to ask him if he'd been banned yet again from the reindeer games for cheating.

"Ms. Marsden," he says, inclining his head. "Nick."

"What can I do for you?" I ask, voice stony.

"Not me, Nick. I'm just the messenger." The reindeer shakes his head. "The board of directors has requested your presence in New York. Immediately. I've already prepared the sleigh."

ELEVEN

THE VIEW from Nick's office is impressive. In truth, the entire office is impressive. It's strange, but the full extent of my fiancé's power and influence didn't really register until we entered the headquarters of Polar Enterprises.

Yes, I know that he's Santa Claus. And you'd think that the sleigh, the magical polar compound, or the fact that Nick can seemingly defy at least some of the laws of physics would have clued me in to the fact that my new boyfriend is a powerful man.

Yet all of that felt unreal, like something out of a fairytale. But the kind of power and wealth on display here—well, this is something I understand. I've been surrounded by this kind of power my whole life.

I survey Nick's office, struggling to reconcile that kind of ruthless accumulation of material assets with the idea of Santa Claus. But then Nick himself isn't how I envisioned Santa.

And I just don't mean how hot he is. There's an intensity, a possessiveness, a degree of obsession that's at odds with all my preconceived ideas about Christmas. And who would have thought that some of the elves would turn out to be nearly as big and scary as Nick?

But some of them are. And he posted one such elf in the hall outside his office door, insisting that I couldn't be left unguarded. I'm unsure what he's expecting to happen in an office building, but his concern is actually reassuring.

The whole sleigh ride here, he was so distant and preoccupied. While he insisted that I eat *my* breakfast during the flight, he just had a mug of black coffee. The entire trip, he just stared out the window, brooding.

I have no clue what his meeting is about, but it's a struggle not to take the abrupt shift in his demeanor personally. I'm guessing he's probably just worried about work. But it's hard to silence the nagging doubt that maybe he's already having second thoughts about freaking *proposing* so soon.

And yet the fact that he left an elf to guard me demonstrates that he cares. Right? I try to convince myself of that despite knowing that he must employ hundreds, if not thousands, of elves. What's one elf bodyguard in the grand scheme of things?

And it's just as likely that he placed the guard there to make sure that I stay put. Maybe he's embarrassed that I'm so young and unsophisticated and the elf is there to make sure that I stay out of sight and don't embarrass him.

"I'd say that it's lovely to see you again, but we'd both know I was lying."

I spin around to find the source of the voice and freeze. The dark-haired "elf" from the gala who exposed Barry's infidelity stands next to Nick's desk, one hand on her hip. Except apparently, she actually *is* an elf...

"I'm afraid we don't have time for you to connect the dots, honey. So I'll be blunt." The elf continues. "I'm Nick's executive assistant. On occasion, the position requires duties that fall outside of my official job description. Leading the team tasked with breaking up your relationship was one of the more unpleasant tasks Nick's assigned over the years, although not quite as bad as that incident in Nicaragua."

I stare at the beautiful elf, trying to make sense of her words. "Wait. You're saying that Nick ordered that woman to have an affair with Barry?"

"Basically." The elf shrugs. "He left the details of how to dispose of your boyfriend up to me. And any woman knows

that the easiest way to manipulate a man is through his cock, a lesson you've clearly mastered—finally.”

“My ex-boyfriend,” I say, hating how lame I sound.

“Oh, yes, I'm aware that you've moved on to greener pastures, dear. That's what I came to chat with you about.”

“I'm afraid I don't understand.”

The elf crosses the room and stops in front of the bookshelves that line one of the walls. “It will be quickest to just show you.”

She pulls a book from the wall. A section of the shelves disappears, revealing a doorway. Curiosity piqued, I follow her through the opening. And then I gasp.

“Shrine” is the only word to describe the windowless room we're standing in. A shrine to *me*. Thousands of photos of me, most of them candid shots, paper the walls. Other than an overstuffed armchair and an end table with a stack of papers and an empty tumbler on it, the room is empty of furniture.

Unsure what the elf expects from me, I walk over to the table and examine the papers. My letters. Every single letter I've ever addressed to Santa, including the ones from childhood.

I don't know why I'm surprised. Nick admitted to stalking me. He confessed his obsession. Yet seeing the proof of it makes it real in a way that it somehow wasn't before.

I've never felt so loved, so wanted, so... *cherished*. Turning to the elf, I smile. “As flattering as this is, I'm not sure why you're showing it to me. Would Nick even want us to be in this room?”

The elf rolls her eyes. “I'm showing it to you so you understand how fucking close you are to destroying Christmas.”

“Excuse me?”

“Look. I bear part of the blame for this. If I'd realized how badly it would spiral, I would have nipped Nick's obsession in the bud when it first started. As it is, I'm guilty of not only

keeping his secret for years but of assisting him with his crazed surveillance scheme. Not that I had much choice. If I hadn't covered for him, they'd have caught him even sooner."

"Who? The police?" I ask, frustrated that I seem to be missing something that the elf views as obvious.

"The NYPD is a joke." She rolls her eyes. "No, I'm talking about the board of directors. The Christmas Contract is clear about what lines a Santa must never cross, and it's pretty simple. Sex is fine. Falling in love, though? That's verboten."

I collapse onto the chair, head spinning. "What do you mean *a* Santa? There's more than one?"

She gives me a pitying look. "How well do you actually know Nick?"

When I don't answer, she shakes her head. "Of course there's been more than one Santa. Eventually, they all run afoul of the contract—one way or another. But losing Nick will be a huge blow to the syndicate and, honestly, to Christmas itself. He's one of the best Santas we've had. He never flinches, never hesitates to do whatever it takes to help a kid in need. It makes me sick that he's ready to throw that all away for a selfish nobody like you."

Tears prick my eyes as I struggle to formulate a reply. But before I can, the elf sashays out of the room. A moment later, the office's outer door slams shut.

Suddenly, I see the room I'm in with new eyes. Nick's stalking, his obsession with me... maybe it's not romantic, maybe it *is* a sickness. One that I'm enabling by agreeing to marry him.

Because the elf was right—how well do Nick and I really know each other? And yet everything has moved so fast, faster than I even realized since he's apparently prepared to throw his entire life away just to be with me.

My heart feels frozen, like it's become pure ice, brittle and easy to shatter. Numb, I stare down at my engagement ring, knowing what I have to do.

TWELVE

NICK

I GLARE at the board chair. “So that’s it, then? An ultimatum? I knew you were spineless, but I’d have thought you’d have the guts to fire me.”

The immaculately coifed elf shakes her head sadly. “You aren’t thinking clearly about this, sir. Please, take the week we’re offering to consider our offer. Your record... well, it’s impressive. No mortal girl is worth throwing all that away.”

“I’d only be ‘throwing it away’ because you’re forcing me to,” I retort. “I’m not resigning.”

Dasher clears his throat. “None of us want to do this. But the Christmas Contract is clear, Nick. Surely you can appreciate our position?”

When I don’t respond, he sighs. “Look. The holidays can be stressful. We’ll reconvene in the new year. Be prepared to give us your answer then.”

How do they not fucking get it? I’m so frustrated that I want to scream that I’ve already given them the only answer they’ll receive. But there’s no point. I could argue my case all day, and they’d just keep citing the goddamn contract.

Besides, I’ve already been away from Maddie for too long. Turning and striding out of the boardroom, I hurry back toward my beautiful girl, my mood already improving at the thought of seeing Maddie again.

Sure, they’re going to sack me when they reconvene and discover that I haven’t changed my mind. Because there’s no

decision to make, not even close. There's only Madelyn. She's the answer to every question.

And having finally confessed that fact to the board, I already feel lighter. I hadn't realized how heavy the weight of hiding my obsession had become.

Yes, it fucking sucks that I'm going to lose the title, the power... the sleigh. But I'm not the only syndicate member capable of donning the red suit. The syndicate existed for centuries before me, and it will continue to exist once I'm gone. The institution of Christmas is more than one man.

Besides, I already have an idea of how I'd like to spend my retirement. I walk more quickly, eager to share my plan with Maddie.

But when I reach the C-suite, I pause. The reception area is empty. Neither the receptionist nor the guard I left on duty are anywhere in sight.

While their absence is irritating, I try to tell myself that it's not a reason to panic. Not yet. It *is* Christmas, after all. Elves are often pretty punchy and reckless as they come down from the Christmas Eve adrenaline rush. The assholes are probably fucking in a supply closet.

Whatever. I'll punish them later.

But as I enter my office, it hits me that I have a bigger problem than insubordinate elves. The door of my private study is ajar. Fuck.

Maddie knows. Knows exactly how obsessed I am.

Inwardly, I groan, but she was bound to realize eventually. Maybe it's better to get it *all* out in the open now. Hell, maybe seeing how fucking devoted I am will soften the blow of her finding out that I've lost the Santa gig.

Steeling myself for an uncomfortable conversation, I enter the study—and find it empty, too. For the first time, actual panic starts to set in.

But as I scan the room, searching for traces of foul play, I discover that everything is as I left it. Well, almost everything.

A ring rests on top of the stack of letters. Maddie's ring.

On some level, I'm relieved that there's no indication that anyone harmed my angel. But the fact that there's no sign of a struggle also means that she left of her own free will. She willingly removed the ring. *My* ring.

She couldn't have left a more obvious message if she'd penned a Dear John letter. But sneaking out of my office and leaving behind the ring is a pretty clear sign that she has no intention of writing another fucking letter to Santa.

Feeling as if I've been sliced open by a particularly sadistic elf, I shove the ring into my pocket and return to the main office. As I pour myself a drink to dull the pain, there's a knock on my open office door. Not waiting to be invited, the reindeer walks over to the wet bar and helps himself to my scotch.

"What the fuck do you want, Blitzen?"

My oldest friend frowns. "Well, I came hoping you'd introduce me to the broad everyone is saying ruined Christmas. But going by the scowl on your face..."

Sighing, I toss the ring onto the bar. "Too late."

"Rudolph claimed you only *just* proposed." Letting out a low whistle, he shakes his head. "Do I even want to know how you fucked things up so fast?"

I'm about to tell him to go to hell, but at his question, something clicks.

"I killed her belief in Christmas," I admit, defeated.

Blitzen holds up a hand. "Whoa, back up, buddy. Rumor has it that you fell for a chick who was somehow *still on the believer's list* despite being an adult. The elves aren't lying—are they? This chick *is* legal?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm not a perv, asshole. Madelyn is twenty-two."

"Chill. My point was that this woman, despite being an adult *and* not eligible for the syndicate, still believes. Has wearing the red suit made your ego *that* fucking huge that you

think *your* sorry ass is enough to crush that level of fanaticism?”

Ignoring his insult, I shake my head. “You don’t get it. I *know* Madelyn Marsden. Her belief in Santa is more intense than most people’s belief in God. Christmas is her fucking religion.”

“Hold on. Which is it? Because a minute ago, you were claiming to have killed that belief.”

“I did!” I slam my glass down onto the bar. “If Maddie left me, that means that she stopped believing in Santa. There’s no other explanation.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Did she tell you that?”

“She didn’t tell me shit. She just fucking snuck out of my office while I was meeting with the board and left the ring behind. So it’s pretty obvious if you ask me.”

“Well, there’s an easy enough way to settle this,” Blitzen says, voice mild. “Just check the surveillance squares. If you’re right, she won’t be on them.”

“Fine. If that’s what it takes to get you off my case.”

Sighing, I take out my phone. Pulling up the surveillance app, I type in the code for Maddie’s feed. But instead of the inevitable black square, my angel’s tearstained face fills the screen.

“Told you so,” Blitzen says, peering over my shoulder, voice way too smug. “Now stop standing there staring like some sad sack and fucking man up and go fight for your girl.”

THIRTEEN

MADELYN

THE GORGEOUS DRESS Nick gave me is no match for the cold December wind. Inside the compound and on the sleigh, the dress had been fine. Even on the short trip from the landing pad to the executive elevator, its impracticality hadn't registered because Nick had draped his suit jacket over my shoulders.

But as I walk dejectedly down the street, the skimpy dress only serves as a reminder of how alone I am. Alone and helpless and *stupid*.

Because my purse? The one that contains my wallet and keys? It's still back at my parents' house in Scarsdale. In other words, an hour's drive from the city.

Barry and my parents are the only people who have spare keys to my apartment. My parents are too far away to help, and the thought of Barry seeing me in this state makes me sick.

Mentally, I run through my list of friends and try to remember who was planning to stay in the city for Christmas. They won't be able to help me get into my apartment, but they'd at least give me a place to stay.

But then I realize that won't work, either. Because my phone? That's still in Scarsdale, too. I have exactly two numbers memorized: Barry and my mom. I don't even know my *dad's* number by heart. Calling either of them isn't an option.

Even if I could somehow find one of the city's increasingly rare pay phones, there's no freaking way that I'm calling *Barry*.

What was I thinking, running away without telling anyone where I was going? The smart thing would have been to find that elf, Nick's assistant, and ask her to help me get back to my parents' house. Or at least to help me find a way to break into my own apartment.

Yet the thought didn't even occur to me. And honestly, if it had, would I have actually had the nerve to ask her—or *anyone* at Polar Enterprises—for help? She'd made it pretty clear how low of an opinion the elves have of me.

The elf Nick had asked to guard me hadn't even stuck around. Absolutely no one tried to stop me from leaving. And why should they have? They were probably relieved to get rid of the girl who was ruining Christmas.

Ugh, Barry was right. I'm a spoiled, selfish child. I nearly ruined Nick's life, and now I'm going to freeze to death because I'm too dumb to live.

But then I walk past a doorman denying a homeless person entry to an apartment building, and it hits me how truly dumb *and* ungrateful I am. It's a scene I've probably witnessed hundreds of times and never really thought twice about.

But now?

Well, one, it puts an end to my pity party. Yes, this situation sucks. But my life could be so much worse. Yet it's the second thing that it makes me realize that has me kicking myself for being so dumb. I may not have the key to my apartment, but I won't have to break in. All the doormen who work in my building know me. Someone will let me in and get a spare key from the building manager.

All I have to do is walk another thirty blocks.

That realization deflates my spirits, but I force myself to keep walking. Of course, now that I have a plan to solve my need for shelter, my thoughts inevitably return to Nick.

Leaving him, returning that ring, was the hardest thing I've ever done. Yet what choice did I have once I knew what marrying me would cost him? What it would cost the *world*?

The elf made it clear how selfish that would be. She said he was the best Santa they've ever had. How could I ask him to turn his back on that just to be with me?

I'm no one. The elf made *that* clear, too. She called me a selfish nobody. And while her words stung, there was truth to them. Because really, what have I done with my life? Nothing, that's what. I'm just a spoiled little girl who's been content to drift along after college and let her parents pay for everything. I've never even held a real job.

No, Nick is better off without me.

FOURTEEN

NICK

MADDIE'S SURVEILLANCE dot on the map calls to me. I still don't know whether she'll even speak to me, but Blitzen is right. The fact that she hasn't disappeared from the system proves that, if nothing else, she still believes.

I have to try. I can't just let her walk away. Even if it means kidnapping her against her will this time.

When I appear on the sidewalk in front of her, I don't give her a second chance to run. Wrapping my arms around her, I transport us to my New York penthouse.

The feel of her in my arms when I thought I'd never hold her again blots out the speech I'd rehearsed. Holding her more tightly, clinging to her as if I were drowning, I crush my mouth to hers.

And God help me, but she melts against me, kissing me back in a way that suggests she might be drowning too.

Not releasing her, not breaking the kiss, I fumble with my pants until my cock is free. We fall to the floor, tongues warring, our kiss growing more desperate. Frantic, I shove up her skirt, tearing off her underwear, needing to be inside her.

Because I need her, need to claim her, need the reassurance that she's mine.

She wraps her legs around my hips as I slide into her, heels digging into my back as she urges me deeper. As I thrust into her, I finally break the kiss and look into her eyes.

“What the fuck were you thinking, angel? Running from me? Leaving your ring? Scaring me like that?” I punctuate each verb with a sharp thrust of my hips.

Tearful, she looks up at me. “Christmas means too much for me to deliberately ruin it. Santa means too much.” Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me into another kiss.

When we’re forced to finally come up for air, she continues, gasping. “There’s so much darkness in the world. How could I selfishly keep one of its few bright lights all to myself? And once the elf explained about the contract—”

She left because she thought she was saving Christmas? Not because she was disgusted by my obsession?

This time, I kiss her—but softer this time, with more finesse now that my panic is beginning to abate. Maddie moans into my mouth as I slip a hand between us and rub her clit.

And then there’s only our mutual pleasure, a slow-building ecstasy that eventually overwhelms us both. Shuddering, I come inside her as she cries out my name.

I collapse onto the carpet next to her. But as the fog of our frenzied coupling dissipates from my mind and I replay what my angel just said, I feel my anger growing.

Not anger at Maddie, but...

“What elf approached you? Who told you about the contract?” I demand, already knowing the answer.

Maddie winces. “Don’t be mad at her. At least not if she was telling the truth.”

“Which elf, Madelyn?”

“She was telling the truth, wasn’t she?” Maddie asks, voice sad.

“Technically, yes.” I sigh. “But if it was the bitch I think it was, she likely twisted it to manipulate you into doing exactly what you did do.”

“Careful who you call a bitch,” Merryn says, stepping off the elevator. “I don’t have to tell you about the Mrs. Clause.”

FIFTEEN

CURSING, Nick tugs my dress down. Pulling up his pants, he jumps to his feet. I stand more slowly, the elf's words mocking me. Barry cheating on me was humiliating, but discovering that there's already a Mrs. Claus shakes the foundations of everything I've ever believed in.

“Mrs. Claus? You're already *married*?”

“No, I'm not fucking—”

“Chill,” the elf says, cutting him off. “I said the Mrs. *Clause* with an ‘e,’ you foolish girl.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Merryn?” Nick snaps.

The elf—*Merryn*—perches on the edge of a chair and gestures for us to sit on the sofa. With Nick still looking mad enough to strangle her, I take his hand and tug him toward the couch.

“Come on. We should at least hear what she has to say,” I tell him, not relinquishing my hold on his hand.

Nick doesn't reply, but he squeezes my hand, giving me hope that he'll at least hear the elf out.

Merryn rolls her eyes. “If Nicky boy had bothered to fully read the Christmas Contract before signing his soul away to the syndicate, he'd already know.”

“Know *what*, pray tell?” Nick asks through clenched teeth.

“The syndicate was testing you, moron. Well, okay, technically we were testing *her*. And she passed with flying colors. Your girl is the real deal.”

I look at Nick. “Do you have any clue what she’s talking about?”

“Not in the slightest. Explain, elf.”

“If I didn’t already know how completely insane you are when it comes to this woman, I’d rip you a new one for talking to me like that.” Merryn shakes her head. “The Christmas Contract doesn’t actually state that Santas can’t fall in love—only that they can’t fall for a woman who fails to meet the requirements outlined in the Mrs. Clause, which was added after several Santas chose highly *unsuitable* wives. It keeps the Christmas magic balanced. Pure.”

A light of understanding flashes in Nick’s eyes, but I’m still totally lost. “What do you mean by that?”

“When Nick became a Santa, he gained access to powerful magic. Old magic that’s intimately intertwined with his emotions. While a certain degree of ambition, brutality, and ruthlessness is required to be an effective Santa, a Mrs. Claus who shared those traits would be an unmitigated disaster. The syndicate can’t risk a Santa succumbing to an obsession with anyone who would twist that to her advantage. Needless to say, very few are born these days with the purity of heart to meet the clause’s requirements.”

“In short, angel, Merryn just confirmed what I already knew. You’re fucking perfect.”

“Wait.” I hold up a hand. “You mean we *can* get married? We can be together without you losing your job?”

“Man, Nick, you really did find an innocent, didn’t you?” The elf looks at me appraisingly, as if I’m some rare animal she’d heard rumors of but didn’t believe existed. “And you clearly haven’t explained to her how the syndicate operates. Bold choice.”

“I haven’t had a chance,” he replies, tone defensive.

“Nothing he could say could make me love him any less,” I protest.

“Well, that’s a relief.” Merryn winks. “Because, yes, you can marry with the syndicate’s full blessing. But if you decide *not* to marry the big oaf, well... let’s just say the syndicate would be forced to silence you. Permanently.”

And with that ominous statement, she disappears. Staring down at our entwined fingers, I mentally replay her words, which sounded an awful lot like a threat...

As if he’s read my mind, Nick pulls me into his lap. Wrapping his arms around me, he buries his face in my hair. Sighing, I allow myself to melt into him, grateful for the comfort.

But her words still nag at me, so after a moment I finally ask, “Do you think she meant that?”

“That you’re the ideal Mrs. Claus?” Holding me tighter, he nibbles on my earlobe. “Of course she fucking meant it. You’re practically perfect in every way.”

The layers of clothing between us do nothing to hide his arousal. Through the soft silk of my dress and the thicker material of his pants, I can feel the hard outline of him pressing up against me.

But determined not to be distracted by the promise of more sex, I shake my head. “No, the part about ‘silencing’ me if I *don’t* marry you.”

“You’re fucking marrying me,” he growls. “That’s no longer up for discussion.”

Twisting around in his arms, I hold his gaze, taken aback by the vulnerability I find there. For the first time, it hits me—how much power I have over this big, strong man. It’s intoxicating, but a little scary, too. Suddenly, the existence of the Mrs. Clause makes perfect sense, especially given what Nick shared last night about what his job demands.

“Of course I’m marrying you, Santa.” I stroke the side of his face, loving the way his beard feels beneath my hand. “But I think it’s time for you to explain exactly what I’m getting

myself into with this syndicate business. Do elves really murder people?”

At this, he chuckles. “Don’t worry, angel. She was just fucking with you. The syndicate only eliminates those on the naughty list.”

Before I can formulate a reply, he adjusts our positions and reaches into his pocket. The next thing I know, he’s sliding the ring back onto my finger with a satisfied smirk.

Glancing down at the ring, I can’t help but smile, too. This all still feels so surreal, but surreal in a *good* way. It’s as if every fantasy I ever had has suddenly come true.

No, I still don’t know everything about how the syndicate operates, but I’m not worried—not when I have Nick by my side. Because ever since I was a little girl, there’s been one fact that I’ve always known and never once doubted: Nothing bad can happen to you when you’re sitting on Santa’s lap.

EPILOGUE

NICK

WHEN THE SLEIGH touches down in Calgary, I reluctantly disentangle myself from my wife's embrace. While Maddie would never complain about my job, I can sense her disappointment. The last several stops took longer than planned, meaning that it's now technically Christmas day. Our wedding anniversary.

Because once Merryn explained the Mrs. Clause, I insisted on making it official that same day. What can I say? Given how much Christmas means to Maddie, it just seemed right.

Unfortunately, I failed to consider that it would mean that our anniversary would always fall on the one day that it's impossible for me to take off work. As she does every year, Maddie's making a valiant attempt at hiding her sadness, but over the last five years, the bond between us has only gotten stronger.

My angel can't conceal anything from me.

"This is the last stop, love," I promise, stealing one more kiss before exiting the sleigh.

And it really is the last stop—ever. I haven't told Maddie yet. I've been saving the announcement for the party tonight. But I warned the board of directors eleven months ago that this would be the final time I donned the red suit.

Once the sleigh door has closed, I rap sharply on the window of the cockpit. A moment later, the glass slides down and Dasher passes me my Glock.

Before Maddie, I kept my gun rack in the rear of the sleigh. But ever since she's started traveling with me—which has been every single Christmas Eve since that first one—I've stowed it in the cockpit.

Oh, my angel isn't dumb. She's not completely naive and is aware of some of the less savory aspects of my job. But I've tried to shield her from the worst of it.

Impatient to return to my wife, I carry out my final hit quickly and efficiently. It still takes longer than I'd like, however, particularly without an elf to assist with the coverup.

But even though Merryn and Maddie have become great friends, I prefer the intimacy of it being just me and my wife in the rear of the sleigh. So I convinced the board that it was more efficient to let Merryn have her own sleigh and manage a second team. But the truth is that it's simply too damn difficult for me to keep my hands off Maddie.

When I return to the roof, I'm eager to resume where we left off. You'd think after so many years, my desire would have abated somewhat. But it's been exactly the opposite.

I can't get enough of my wife.

Normally, she's as insatiable as me. But when I slip back into the sleigh, the burst of cold air as the door opens doesn't disturb her slumber.

I frown. Yes, it's been a long night. But it's not like her to fall asleep when I'm still not done with her—and I fully intended for my wife to have several more orgasms before the sleigh touched down at the North Pole.

Although admittedly, work *has* kept her pretty busy lately. My Maddie always had a weakness for charitable causes, but becoming Mrs. Claus seems to have amplified her selflessness. Gently, I drape a blanket over her, deciding that she's earned her sleep.

The work she's been doing with our foundation is truly inspiring. I wish that I could claim the children's charity as my own idea, but it was all Maddie. She needed something to pour

her energy into other than our relationship. And since we still haven't had children...

The guilt of that weighs on me every day. Because I know how much she *wants* children, and she'll make a damn fine mother. And it's not like I don't want that, too. I want nothing more than to create a family with the most amazing woman on the planet.

But when Maddie saw how much of my time the syndicate demanded, she suggested that we delay starting a family until my workload got less crazy. Reluctantly, I agreed, not having the heart to tell her that my workload was *never* going to get lighter. At least not as long as I was still the Santa.

Despite my agreement, I make sure to remind her every few months that if she gets tired of waiting, she can change her mind at any time. Because while my job *is* demanding, I'd do anything to make Maddie happy. It's my goal in life to give her literally anything she wants.

But she claims the foundation fulfills her. She says she doesn't need her own children when there are so many others that she can help.

I don't believe her for a second. My wife is a terrible liar. Over the years, she's proven that her naughtiness really *is* confined to the bedroom. Not that I'm complaining...

"Cleared for landing, boss."

Dasher's voice fills the cabin. He is *not* a quiet reindeer. But still, Maddie doesn't stir. Not even when the sleigh touches down and I scoop her into my arms.

Fuck, I hope she's not coming down with something.

But the cheers of the gathered elves when we exit the sleigh finally manage to rouse her. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep," she says, stifling a yawn.

Deciding that checking the list can wait, I transport us directly to our room and place her on the bed before replying. "You never have to apologize, love. But I will confess to being worried. We'll call the doctor in the morning."

To my surprise, Maddie blushes. “That won’t be necessary.”

I frown. “It’s not up for debate. You’ve been awfully tired lately. Too tired. You’ve been working too hard, and it has to stop.”

“Nick, I’m fine...” she says, not meeting my eye.

I stroke her hair. “What aren’t you telling me, love?”

“I wanted to surprise you tonight at our party,” she says, finally meeting my gaze. “But do you remember the day you proposed, when I asked if you knew *everything* about me?”

Unsure where this is going, I nod.

“Well, maybe you did then, but your powers of observation are slipping, dear. I stopped taking my birth control pills three months ago.”

“Are you saying...”

“I’m pregnant, Nick. *We’re* pregnant. I know it will be tough with your hours but—”

I cut her off with a kiss.

When we finally come up for air, I say, “It will be fine, angel. I’m thrilled. Ecstatic. I can only think of one Christmas present that could top this one, and you already gave that to me years ago.”

“I was so worried you’d be upset.”

I shake my head. “Not at all.”

“But your workload...”

“You aren’t the only one who was planning a surprise announcement during our party,” I admit. “I’m retiring. This was my last Christmas Eve run.”

“But Christmas...”

“Will continue just as it always has. The syndicate is bigger than any one man. Surely, you’ve seen that by now? I’ve had a longer run than most. Someone else can be the Man in Red. Christmas will be just fine without me.”

Maddie shakes her head. Then to my surprise, she giggles.

“What’s so funny, minx?”

“You’re going to have to stalk me the old-fashioned way now, without the aid of an entire surveillance team.”

“Nope. Afraid not.”

“But you said—”

“I said that I’m hanging up the Santa hat. Elves emeritus still have full security clearances. If anything, this will give me even *more* time to track your movements. And it’s a damn good thing, I’ve clearly been slipping.”

“That’s what you’re attributing it to? You slipping? Not me being sneaky?”

“You’re a terrible liar, love,” I say, then kiss her before adding, “And I love that about you. If you weren’t so good, you’d never have met the requirements of the Mrs. Clause.”

At this, she pouts. “I’m not *always* good. I mean, I did successfully lie to you *this* time.”

“True,” I say, voice thoughtful. “That was very naughty.”

She nods. “Very, very naughty. You should totally punish me.”

“But the baby—”

“Is currently the size of a jellybean. Please don’t start treating me like I’m made out of spun glass just because I’m pregnant, Nick.”

I shake my head. “If anything happened to you or the baby, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Okay, so I didn’t want to admit this, but I asked my doctor, and she said it would be fine.”

“You told your doctor that we…”

Face red, she nods.

“Now that was *very* naughty, Madelyn.”

“I know.” My wife smiles. “You’ll have to spank me, Santa.”

Craving more Santa smut? Visit www.portialux.com to join the list. And if you totally want to make my day, please rate or review :)

XO,

Portia

SNEAK PEEK

CAUGHT BY CUPID

Sebastien

SPRING BREAK IS any veteran cupid's nightmare. Our turf gets overrun by horny assholes looking for a cheap fix, most unable to pay the cartel's prices.

Take tonight. It's three a.m. but the Mermaid is hopping. Giggling coeds, idiotic frat boys, and opportunistic townies cram the booths and tables. Nearly everyone is hammered, even the staff. Hell, even the rookie cupids who trawl joints like this are sloshed. Amateurs. They won't last a year.

Normally, I wouldn't choose to be stone-cold sober in a sea of drunks, but I'm here for business, not pleasure. Cartel business.

Rule #1 of the Cupid Code: Never refuse a hit. But even if it weren't, I owe the cartel too much to refuse, and Rosa knows it.

When she plucked me from the corner where I was selling ordinary dope, I was a fucking wreck. My life had no meaning. The cartel gave me both—plus a hefty bank account, an impressive pile of rocks right on the water, and all the cartel groupies I could ever want to bang.

Without the cartel, I'd be nothing. It shaped me, pulled me back from the brink, made me what I am. Ruthless, merciless, thorough. Dangerously good at what I do.

Yeah, it's a risky line of work, but worth it if you play your cards right. Once you get your wings, you aren't just set for life but *eternity*. I'm so close to the finish line, I can taste it. But this current assignment could jeopardize everything.

Melanie Crawford. Twenty-year-old virgin. Never been matched.

On paper, she's a soft target. Innocent, inexperienced, sexually curious. Ripe for seduction, an easy hit. Everything about her drags a guy's mind into the gutter. She *should* be any cupid's wet dream.

I watch from a rear booth as she balances an overloaded tray. The sway of her hips as she approaches her table is mesmerizing—and not just because she’s a fucking eleven out of ten.

The Mermaid makes Hooters look like a nunnery. The uniforms are a sexual harassment lawsuit waiting to happen. Seashell bras and skintight sequined skirts. The shimmering green faux fish scales cling to the waitresses like second skins.

I grit my teeth as she winds her way through the dining room, smiling at every dumb fuck she encounters. The men at the counter snap their heads around so fast as she passes, they damn near break their necks.

I’d love to knock their lights out. But I’m here to *match* Melanie, not ride in on a white horse and save her. This ain’t a fairy tale, and I’m sure as hell no Prince Charming. And as long as they simply *look*, well, I can’t really blame them.

She’s just *that* delicious. I did my homework, but the dossier didn’t prepare me for the reality of the goddess waiting tables in a bustling boardwalk cafe. After six months on this assignment, my restraint is close to snapping. Watching her now, my cock is already filling with lead. God, she’s delectable...

Sun-kissed strands of strawberry blonde curls teasingly brush the tops of her tits. *Fuck...* those tits. Mouthwatering, yet so much more than a mouthful. Breasts you want to bury your face in and worship, squeezing and sucking until she’s begging you for more.

But it’s not just her rack. This girl is a goddamn work of art. Pink pouting lips made to suck cock. Dark lashes. Stunning turquoise eyes, so wide and innocent. Everything about her screams that she needs a daddy to protect her, punish her, keep her safe.

She’s the kind of woman to make men desperate. An easy match even for the greenest cupid. But Rosa wouldn’t have tapped me if she wasn’t worried. My cut is too high for bullshit assignments. I’m the best cupid in the field.

My specialty is taking down spoiled brats, even when they don't want to be matched. *Especially* when they don't.

Except Melanie *isn't* a brat. Her character is just as sweet as her appearance. She's forever staying late, picking up shifts no one wants, covering for flaky coworkers.

Her story doesn't add up. She claims she dropped out of college and took a job in this shithole to care for her sick dad. But going into a job blind is how cupid's make mistakes, and I've done my homework, which is how I know she's lying.

Her "sick" dad still frequents the seediest waterfront dives. Nothing is wrong with him other than likely liver damage.

So yeah, she's a liar. What I *don't* know is whether she's just covering up a deadbeat dad out of shame or hiding something bigger. Those jolly fucks in the Santa Syndicate might be omniscient, but the Cupid Cartel is stuck doing reconnaissance the old-fashioned way. Well, field cupid's are, at least, but I wasn't born yesterday. Rosa definitely knows more than she shares.

And so does Melanie, my beautiful little liar.

I wish I understood why she's different. Normally, every job's the same. Swoop in, match some clueless broad with the lowest-value schmuck she'll settle for, collect my cut. Wash, rinse, repeat.

It's easier than selling bath bombs and pumpkin spice lattes to suburban moms. My track record is perfect, and I'll be damned if I'll let her be my first failure.

I've become a regular at the Mermaid. The waitresses all adore me, but then most women do. Near godlike powers of persuasion are a perk of the job, and the cartel only promotes exceptionally attractive recruits to the cupid division. So yeah, I have every female employee here eating out of my hand—with one glaring exception.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I've established a friendship of sorts with Melanie. But it's clear she's in trouble—and doesn't trust me enough to confide... *yet*. But I'm determined to

change that since I suspect whatever she's hiding is the key to her ability to resist the cartel's product.

Drugs are the lifeblood of most cartels, and we're no exception. Except our drug is love—a brand of love more addictive than crack cocaine.

The dopamine rush knocks you on your ass. It can make you screw over friends, quit your job, change religions. Hell, some suckers do all three. It's so addictive it has a body count. It kills faith, ends marriages, starts wars. It engenders the kind of over-the-top, impossible obsession that obliterates all else.

Instalove.

Get hit by a cupid and you won't eat, won't sleep, won't do anything but obsess over your match. You'll forget the difference between love and obsession, between obsession and desire.

Few matches last forever. Yet by the time they wear off, you're already hooked. So hooked you'll seek out the next hit on your own, paying whatever price we demand.

Yet somehow Melanie is still a virgin after four fucking hits—each one delivered by cupids who prematurely “retired.”

Of course, that's a euphemism—no one ever actually *leaves* unless it's in a body bag. Out of all the gangs, we're the least sentimental. Cupids who exit the field early aren't exactly patted on the back and given a gold watch, creating a huge incentive *not to fuck up*.

That said, not everyone can hack it and some targets defeat even seasoned cupids. Usually, our attrition rate isn't this high, though. The number of cupids she's destroyed is staggering.

Not that she's aware of the carnage. Girls like her never are. They float through life, racking up points and breaking hearts, oblivious to the consequences of their chastity—the collateral damage.

If I don't match her soon, I risk joining their number. Yeah, the cartel rewards skill, but it punishes incompetence, too. Brutally. Love is war. Rule #2 says it all: Take no prisoners.

Cupids are mercenaries. We don't give a fuck about your feelings, your happiness, your dreams. We line the cartel's coffers—after taking our cut.

Each target gets scored by the pricks upstairs. Yeah, the ideal is to match two marks for life—or *more* if you're one of the overachieving fucks in the polyamory unit. But in the end, the bottom line is what matters.

So we take our hits where we can, forcing imperfect connections when the math works in our favor. If a target proves too volatile, we neutralize it. No regrets. No second chances. No negotiations. We wipe the slate clean.

If you're a male operative selling to straight women, that translates to a textbook pump and dump. Fuck her and leave her. Break the girl's heart so she's no longer a threat.

After six months in with no match in sight, I know damn well that's what Rosa expects from me. Her hints have gotten less subtle. But I haven't neutralized Melanie yet because that's what hacks do. And while I have my flaws, I'm a professional.

Still, Rosa won't tolerate excuses much longer, and I'm too close to earning my wings to become another number. Still, I've racked my brains, trying to calculate how Melanie has accrued so many points. Her numbers don't make any fucking sense.

Executing a hit without understanding the math is a rookie error. I haven't gotten this far by taking stupid risks, and I'm not gonna start now. So while I'd love to have my fingers coated with Melanie's undoubtedly sweet juices, fucking her would definitely be a stupid risk.

Because, yeah, cupids can get away with one-night stands with lower-level targets, especially if they aren't virgins. Hell, make it good enough for a target like that, and they end up craving our product even more. But a target with a score this high?

You gotta handle that shit delicately or you risk disillusionment. Future hits become impossible. All those

points simply gone. Wasted.

Don't get me wrong. My cock likes the idea just fine. I'd be lying if I claimed I hadn't thought about spreading Melanie's creamy thighs and taking her innocence. But it would be sloppy—and a mistake.

In just six short months, she's gotten under my skin. She's all I can think about, dream about, she's always fucking on my mind. Screwing her would be stupid.

Because if you violate any part of the Cupid Code, you're out. And I suspect that if I fucked Melanie, I'd stand a damn good chance of breaking Rule #4.

No, I just need to match this mark the old-fashioned way, even if she's starting to feel like more than a mark. Watching her move among the tables, I ignore my body's Pavlovian response to her and force myself to focus on what matters: this girl is a liar.

Oh, my sweet Melanie, what are you hiding?

As if we share a mental bond, she turns and catches my eye. A strange feeling twists my guts. A feeling I never experienced before this job and intensely dislike. The first time it happened, I thought I'd pricked myself with one of my arrows. It was *that* unpleasant.

My heart slams in my chest, but there's no way in hell I'm gonna be the first to break eye contact. I grip my keys, using the pain of the metal digging into my palm to distract myself from the fact that every ounce of blood has rushed to my cock. Finally, she blushes and looks away.

Exhaling, I struggle to get my body under control. I have a healthy libido, but no other woman has ever gotten to me like this. If my bow and quiver weren't safely secured and concealed, I'd suspect a self-inflicted arrow wound now.

But no, I haven't pricked myself with one of my own fucking arrows, and I'm even less likely to break Rule #4. I'm immune to our product. Melanie just has that effect on men—and while I may be a cupid, I am still very much a man.

I've spent countless hours analyzing her and concluded that it's not any one thing about her that drives men crazy—it's the whole fucking package. If she weren't so fucking innocent, so fucking *good*, I'd wonder why the fuck Rosa wanted her matched rather than recruited...

My phone vibrates, forcing my attention back to the task at hand—*matching* Melanie, not fantasizing about licking that sweet little pussy. No, a girl like her is too innocent for my brand of seduction. I may be a ruthless bastard, but even I balk at destroying something so beautiful. Unfortunately, as I read Rosa's text, I realize that I may have to do just that.

Timeline has moved up, Lover Boy. Report to HQ at dawn.

[Continue reading...](#)