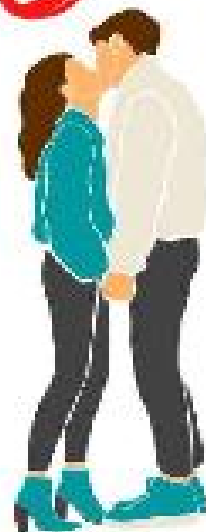


THE ENTIRE WORLD KNOWS HIS NAME.
BUT HE WANTS TO KNOW YOURS.

The Christmas Crush



Lyndsey Gallagher

THE CHRISTMAS CRUSH

*The whole world wants to know his name. But
he wants to know yours.*

LYNDSEY GALLAGHER

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All the characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Ballybowen is a fictional town on the west coast of Ireland.

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*This book is dedicated to my fabulous reader group, Lyndsey's
Book Lushes.*

*I appreciate every single one of you, and value your friendship
and support more than you'll ever know.*

xxx

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

The Christmas Crush is a full length stand alone romance incorporating some of the characters from The Sexton Sisters Series, and introducing other brand new characters from my new Dating In Dublin Series.

You don't have to have read any of the previous books to enjoy Holly & Nate's romance!

A full list of the other titles can be found at the end of this book.

Enjoy!

Love,

Lyndsey x

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Chapter One

HOLLY

November 18th

'Tis the night before Christmas... wait — no, that's not right.

'Tis the month before Christmas and an undercurrent of drunken carnage crackles through the bar. Infectious laughter vibrates through my favourite Dublin wine bar, Heaven on Earth. The place is wedged. Christmas parties congregate around stylish chrome tables flanking the edge of the dancefloor. The dress code varies from reindeer ears and sexy Santa hats to seasonally sequined little black dresses.

My own little black dress, a strapless Reiss number, is pretty dang spectacular, if slightly brave for a woman with double D cups. I might only be five foot three, but the dress somehow makes me feel two feet taller and six inches slimmer. The corset tie at the back makes it impossible to wear a bra underneath, but the second I tried it on in Brown Thomas, I had to have it.

Saturday night is girls' night. Or as my two besties, Ashley and Savannah, call it, 'Sancerre Saturday.' Apparently, getting sloshed on slightly fancier wine somehow makes, well, getting sloshed more socially acceptable.

The alcohol is slowly beginning to weave its magic through my bloodstream.

The age-old social anxiety that has plagued me since childhood starts to slide from my shoulders like a butterfly shedding its cocoon. The importance of behaving appropriately in public has been impressed upon me since I was a little girl, and even all these years later, I'm still not sure I've perfected it. Not to my parents' standards, anyway.

The first few tinkling bars of Mariah Carey's iconic Christmas song resound through the room. Women throughout the warm, lilac-lit bar shriek in excitement, flocking to the dancefloor like bees to a sweet, sticky honeypot.

My kitten heels tap beneath the table in a physical urge to join them, but my head knows my body needs a little more social lubrication before I'm brave enough to join in.

Apart from the social anxiety, I'm quite shy, a trait my friends find hilarious, because when I'm with them, I'm anything but.

But then again, it's impossible to be shy around women who know me better than I know myself. Women who know my every quirk and accept each one of them. Who see my faults and embrace me anyway.

I might be the black sheep of my family but, here with my girls, I'm safely nestled amongst my tribe.

A contented exhale slips from my mouth and directly into the wine glass resting against my crimson-painted lips.

'Isn't it a little early for Christmas songs?' Ashley grumbles, tossing her lustrous auburn hair from her shoulder with a quick flick of her wrist.

‘It’s never too early for Christmas songs,’ Savannah quips from my right. ‘My kids play Shakin’ Stevens all year round. That video where they go to Lapland to see Santa at the toy factory, and those eighties-looking elves,’ she slaps her bare thigh, where her own dress is riding high enough to reveal smooth, toned skin, ‘solid gold entertainment.’

‘No way.’ I shake my head vigorously. My thick, dark hair whips across my face, stinging my cheeks. The movement sends the corseted part of my dress down an inch. I yank it back into place over my bust before the girls burst out completely.

‘You know I love Shakin’ Stevens, but solid gold entertainment is Nate Jackson rescuing crying kids from a burning building, or diffusing a lethal bomb at an orphanage, or single-handedly scaling a skyscraper, topless, I might add, while he saves the world - and the woman he loves.’ A dreamy sigh cascades from my parted mouth.

Nate Jackson is Ireland’s answer to Tom Hardy, apart from the fact that Nate is ten times hotter. With jet black, permanently tousled hair, stubble that promises to burn in all the right places and knowing moss-green eyes that exude a raw, heated promise, he’s my favourite celebrity crush by a clear mile.

And don’t get me started on his perfectly sculpted action hero body.

Nate’s starred in many of my late night fantasies. Even as a teenager, he was my favourite poster pin-up. Now in his mid-thirties, like a fine wine, he’s only improved with age.

Nate might be living in the States, starring in multimillion-dollar action movies, but he’s Dublin born and bred, and the country has elevated him to national treasure status.

‘Oh yes! Nate Jackson is so hot,’ Ashley agrees from my left, her tongue darting out salaciously to lick her lower lip. ‘I wouldn’t kick him out of bed for eating cornflakes.’

‘You’re practically married!’ Savannah slaps the back of Ashley’s hand playfully. ‘You can’t ogle another man like that!’

Savannah is technically the only single one among us, and she prefers it that way. As one of Ireland’s most successful single mothers, she built an entire brand around her “situation,” as she calls it.

Basically, she fled home from her high-flying job in London, single and pregnant with twins. She point-blank refuses to name the father to anyone. Even Ash and I are still in the dark.

The “Single Sav” blog has over three-hundred-thousand subscribers. Savannah is rapidly becoming a household name promoting prams, bottle makers and formulas. She’s currently designing her own infant clothing range. She’s the biggest champion of single mothers, and an amazing advocate for equal rights and opportunities. Against all odds, she flipped her entire situation on its head.

‘If only. Still no sign of a ring,’ Ashley moons wistfully, glancing at her left hand. ‘Don’t get me started on that one.’

Ashley has been with her boyfriend, Matt, for ten years now.

‘Let’s order more drinks.’ Anything to change the subject. Savannah shoots me a knowing glance. Privately, we call Matt, Matt the Twat. He lives in Ashley’s gorgeous Georgian house in Dublin city rent free, having quit his job to concentrate on writing a sci-fi novel.

Seven years later, it's still not finished.

Seven years!

Seriously.

Which might be forgiven if Matt didn't speak to Ashley like she's something unpleasant stuck to his shoe. He's nowhere near good enough for her. Sadly, the only person who doesn't realise that *is* Ashley.

As the principal of the Catholic girls' school where I work as an art teacher, Ashley is officially my boss. Unofficially, she's the woman I phone wailing when I'm watching Hallmark movies, wondering when I'll ever get my own happily ever after.

Mind you, I don't help myself.

'Isn't that Dan over there?' Savannah squints, her slim fingers flailing in the direction of the entrance.

I chance a fleeting glimpse.

I'd recognise that silhouette anywhere. Even through Heaven on Earth's low lighting.

Shit.

I've been casually dating Dan Hargreaves for a couple of months. And I mean casually. We meet up once a week. Sometimes I manage to stretch it out to a fortnight with excuses like lesson planning, parents' evening, and excruciating period pain - something which Dan visibly squirms at the mere mention of.

Truthfully, the pain of listening to him talking about himself all night is the only thing that's excruciating.

We've had sex twice. Neither time was particularly memorable, not for me at least. I keep hoping he'll grow on me, but that niggle in my gut screams that it's never going to happen.

Still, I'm reluctant to call it a day.

Not because I like him.

No.

Because my parents do.

Funny how I've spent twenty-eight years of my life trying to impress my ultra-religious, conservative parents, yet Dan manages to achieve it in less than fifteen minutes flat. Maybe it's the posh boy boarding school accent? Or his family's wealth and status? Either way, they drool over every overly accentuated word he drawls.

The Hargreaves family owns a large chain of hotels in the UK and Ireland, and Dan oversees the social media side of the business. He doesn't drink. Which is his own choice and entirely fine by me, but he hates me drinking.

Or hanging out with my friends.

Or having any type of fun that doesn't include him, come to think of it.

'Head down. He might not see us.' In my dreams.

He knew we were coming here tonight.

It *is* Sancerre Saturday after all.

My regular girls' nights are something we disagreed about only last week.

I turn my back to ensure eye contact is impossible.

The waitress breezes by and Savannah motions for another bottle of Sancerre. Probably not our smartest move, but YOLO, as my students often remind me.

‘I don’t know why you don’t just end it with him,’ Ashley murmurs into her drink.

Hello? Pot. Kettle.

No, that’s not fair of me. At least Ashley loves Matt. She’s hanging on to some thread of hope for the future.

I’m hanging by a thread that’s choking me, purely to please my parents.

I swill the wine around my glass, staring at it like it holds the answer.

‘I will. After Conor’s wedding.’ Conor, my gorgeous, kind, considerate older brother, is getting married to his childhood sweetheart, Clarissa, two days before Christmas.

Two days.

Who does that?

Apparently, Clarissa always wanted a winter wedding. Personally, I think the two of them picked the twenty-third of December so they can swan off somewhere hot on their honeymoon instead of enduring another formal family Christmas.

Though surely when they’re married, our parents won’t insist they sleep in separate rooms anymore when they visit?

Either way, Conor’s the type of guy who would give his wife whatever she wants. Not for a quiet life, but because he wants her to have everything she ever wished for. He’s one of these all-round good guys, thoughtful and kind, in addition to being a successful cardiologist.

No wonder I'm a disappointment to my parents - I'm an unmarried art teacher, harbouring secret flighty dreams of travelling the world and capturing its beauty with my paintbrush, one canvas at a time.

While I don't relish living in Conor's shadow, I *do* relish being his little sister. He's the best brother I could ask for. And Clarissa is an absolute darling.

'You actually want to bring Dan "Do-you-know-how-many-calories-are-in-that-glass-of-wine, Holly?" to Conor's wedding?' Savannah's blue eyes widen in horror.

The waitress returns with another bottle and Savannah thanks her without breaking our stare.

'I'll take "Dry Dan" counting how many glasses of wine I do or don't consume over the endless comments from my mother about how it's time I settle down to get married, find some security with a decent man, blah, blah, blah.' I proffer my glass under Savannah's nose for a refill. 'She's preaching to the converted, believe me, I want to get married, but there's as much chance of finding a suitable man in this city as there is of Nate Jackson waltzing in and sweeping me off my kitten-heeled feet.'

Ashley's tongue clicks against the roof of her mouth in sympathy, while Savannah smooths her dress down over her thighs with a tut.

'Let's drink.' I raise my glass in a toast. 'To Sancerre Saturday.'

'Sancerre Saturday.' The chinking sound of glass is drowned out by Wham's 'Last Christmas,' and I knock back my wine as if it's my own last Christmas. The alcohol

crusades through my bloodstream, chasing away the remaining tension accumulated during the week.

My position as an art teacher isn't stressful per se, but every teacher feels the pressure to provide a first-class education to our private school girls in the stately Victorian building known as St. Jude's.

Add that to the pressure of pleasing my parents, and Dan as well, the load is growing increasingly heavy.

'Uh oh, he's coming our way.' Savannah kicks me beneath the table, running her fingers through her blonde bob.

I don't need to ask who. It's written all over their faces.

Dry Dan might not be a fan of my friends, but the feeling is entirely mutual.

My head turns. Dan approaches, an unmissable glint in his granite eyes. The hackles on my neck rise in a nervous anticipation.

Yep, definitely time to call it a day. Nothing about our relationship sits well with me. Better to be single than with the wrong man. Even if my pearl-clutching mother would disagree with every part of that sentence.

Looks like I'll be flying solo at Conor and Clarissa's wedding, after all.

'Hi Dan.' My smile stretches tightly against my teeth.

'A word.' Dan clicks his fingers at me like I'm his dog.

'Erm, I can't abandon the girls right now, but please, sit down if you like.' Grabbing my gold clutch bag, I make room for him on the seat next to me.

‘Home. Now,’ Dan barks, a thunderous expression on his face.

‘Who are you? Her father?’ Savannah snaps, her bright eyes glittering dangerously.

‘I wouldn’t expect you to understand, “Single Sav.”’ He articulates Savannah’s blog handle like it’s the filthiest word he’s ever heard.

Heat flames my cheeks.

Not here, Dan.

Not now.

‘Holly, this is your last chance.’ Angry pupils burn with torrid flames. ‘If you don’t come home with me now, it’s over between us.’

Every trace of saliva evaporates from my tongue, leaving it suddenly drier than a desert in midsummer.

‘Holly...’ Dan’s voice drops two more octaves in a clear warning.

A rush of adrenaline jolts through me. ‘I’m not going anywhere with you, Dan. Not now. Not ever again.’

‘Cheers to that!’ Ashley and Savannah clink glasses, shameless in their glee.

Then again, Dan was pretty shameless when he marched over here with his demands.

‘Who do you think you are? Messing me around for months, leading me on, then disobeying me.’ Dan straightens his blazer. ‘Nobody treats me this way and gets away with it. I will ruin you, Holly Hazelwood.’ Swivelling on his heels, he

marches back towards the bar, disappearing into the throng of people.

Ashley puffs out a long breath. ‘Wow. That was intense.’

My hammering heart eventually slows, relief inching over each vertebrae of my spine.

‘I can’t believe that jumped-up little prick.’ Savannah was never one to mince her words. When we were six-years-old, one of her two adoptive fathers asked what she thought of the birthday cake he made for her.

Her reply, ‘It tastes like horseshit,’ delivered with her award-winning smile and flick of her golden locks was enough to incite laughter from every adult and child in the room.

She wasn’t lying.

The cake was horrific.

There aren’t many times in her life that Sav has wished for a mother, but that day I know she had romantic notions of a Mary Berry type figure.

‘Good riddance.’ I swat my hand in front of my face, trying to waft away any lingering negativity in the air. ‘Let’s drink this and order another bottle.’

Two hours later, Mariah Carey blasts out again, just in case anyone missed it the first time. With any remaining reservations finally eradicated by alcohol, I grab a Santa hat from a guy sitting at the table next to us. Engrossed in conversation with the pretty brunette next to him, he doesn’t even glance round as I whip it from his head.

‘On your feet, girls!’ My boobs bounce effusively in my dress as we elbow our way to the edge of the dancefloor, stealing a spot where it’s not quite so crowded.

Freedom flows through my veins. Or maybe it's just the Sancerre. Though tonight, they're one and the same. I feel lighter than I have in weeks. Swaying against my friends, a grin of sheer ecstasy rips across my face as my eyelids flutter closed, and I melt into the music.

As Mariah reaches her infamous crescendo, I swing my arms up, shimmying my shoulders to the beat.

It's only when the air hits my nipples that I realise I'm not the only one who's broken free from something controlling tonight.

The corset has burst open and my breasts are bouncing in all their liberated glory, in full view of the entire bar.

Some people point.

Other's cup their mouths with their hands while they elbow their companions.

Someone wolf whistles.

The last thing I see before I run for the door, arms cradling my chest, is Dan clutching his mobile phone, a knowing smirk on his pursed lips.

Chapter Two

.....
NATE
.....

19th November

Leaning against the thick-framed door of the master bedroom of my Beverly Hills mansion, I watch as Celeste, my girlfriend, no sorry, ex-girlfriend as of ten minutes ago, throws her entire collection of designer dresses into an overflowing suitcase.

‘Don’t tell me, “It’s not you, it’s me,”’ I scoff.

I should probably care.

Or feel something, at least.

But I don’t.

And deep down, I know why.

‘Oh no, Nate, this is all on you.’ Celeste tosses her platinum blonde hair back from her shoulder. A bitter, high-pitched laugh rattles through her brilliant white veneers and directly over my spine.

‘*You’re* leaving me for your co-star and it’s *my* fault?’ A disbelieving laugh erupts from my chest.

Narrow accusatory eyes shoot me a condemning glare as she shakes her head. ‘If you weren’t so emotionally stunted, I wouldn’t have looked at Spike twice.’

Emotionally stunted?

Me?

No way.

Admittedly, I've been a little more cautious with my heart since, well, since the Sally-Ann thing, but I wouldn't go as far as saying I'm emotionally stunted.

And what sort of stupid name is Spike? At eight years younger than me, he might be Hollywood's newest up-and-coming heartthrob, but his name makes him sound like a pit bull terrier.

My agent and closest friend, Jayden Cooper, warned me this would happen. Where I have a talent for pretending to be other people, he has a talent for reading them. His unwavering conclusion when I first introduced him to Celeste last year was that she was a social climber.

He warned me she'd use me like a climbing frame to drag herself up the notoriously slippery social ladder before moving on to the next shiny thing.

Or Spikey thing, as it turns out.

This new movie she's starring in with Spike Hancock is her first big break.

But if she's moving on, does that mean I'm no use for social climbing anymore?

Past my sell-by date?

My head shakes of its own accord, dispelling that stupid notion.

I'm in my prime. At thirty-four years of age, I'm in better physical shape than I've ever been in my life, thanks to gruelling workouts with an ex-military personal trainer.

Besides, there are action stars still making movies who are twice my age.

My knuckles skim over the stubble jutting my jaw. I could do with shaving again, but the stubble grows back quicker than I can keep up with. I lift a wry eyebrow. ‘You’ve been cheating on me for months, and you’re telling me it’s my fault?’

‘You’re not exactly Mr Approachable.’ Celeste tuts, raising a manicured index finger and pointing it at my chest. ‘You know, sometimes, I think you actually *are* some sort of closed-up wounded action hero in real life. Every movie you take on, you play the same character, just with a different name and different set of baggage. So, technically, it’s not acting because you’re playing yourself.’

‘You are way off the mark,’ I scoff. ‘I get offered action movies because I have fifteen years’ experience in similar roles.’ Being six-foot-four and swathed in tattoos might have something to do with it, too, I suppose.

‘Well, why didn’t you take that fantasy movie you were offered with Brad Pitt?’ Celeste relentlessly tries to divert the attention from her own misdemeanours. If picking a fight were an Olympic sport, the woman would be a gold medallist.

Why am I only realising this now?

Probably because I deliberately turned a blind eye. Having a new girlfriend who was featured in last May’s edition of *Vogue* and was supposed to distract me from the fact my old girlfriend, Sally-Ann, was pregnant by my best friend.

I’d always hoped it would be my babies she’d carry. Family has always been important to me. Even if I don’t visit my own nearly as often as I should.

‘Because I hate fantasy movies.’ I fold my arms across my chest.

‘Or because anything other than an action movie is too taxing?’ Her thinly arched eyebrow sets a fresh wave of irritation through every nerve ending in my body. ‘There’s nothing wrong with being a one-trick pony. Especially when you’re the show pony of all show ponies.’

My blood boils. I want her gone.

Yesterday, preferably.

It’s a battle to keep my voice on an even keel. ‘You have no idea what you’re talking about. I am nobody’s show pony.’

Hovering in the open doorway, I glance over my shoulder at the woman who shared my bed for the past year. A woman who, in truth, I never really knew at all. Nor had any inclination to get to know. I’ve been using Celeste to plug the cracks in my life. She’s always been slightly cold. But that suited me.

Cold doesn’t stoke the embers of my dying heart.

Cold is safe. You don’t miss ‘cold’ when it leaves.

‘Look, Nate, that came out wrong. I didn’t mean it.’ Celeste pauses, the floor-length shimmering dress she wore to the Oscars with me slung over her arm. ‘Things haven’t been right between us for a while.’

She’s spot on.

In fact, they haven’t been right ever.

Which is why I’m nowhere near as upset about the situation as I should be.

That, or perhaps I am ‘emotionally stunted’ after all?

Truthfully, Sally-Ann might have ruined me forever.

She was my childhood sweetheart. We were together for four years before I made it to the big time. It didn't work out. She couldn't hack life in the States.

Couldn't hack me in the end. Or the person I morphed into. And no amount of money, mansions or movies will ever compensate for that. After Sally-Ann, I decided it was easier to only date other celebs. At least that way, they knew what they were signing up for from the start. Fame wouldn't frighten them away.

'You could have talked to me instead of boning Spike.' My tone is resigned. Not bitter. This scandal is going to generate a fresh round of media-frenzied attention that I don't need right now.

Every time I'm papped at an unflattering angle, some douche will print a bullshit piece questioning my state of mind, wondering if I'll fall off the wagon - again.

'Would it have made any difference?' Celeste continues throwing dress after dress into her suitcase.

'Probably not.' My fingers rake through my hair, scratching my nails over my scalp. 'And for the record, I'm not a one-trick pony.'

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask how many movies she's starred in.

How many Oscars she has to her name?

But that would mean stooping to her level.

'Leave your keys at the front door.' I raise my hand in a sarcastic goodbye. 'Say hi to Spike for me.'

‘Nate, don’t be like that. I’d hoped we could still be friends.’ Full lips pout woefully. No wonder she hasn’t been cast as a leading lady yet. She’s stunning in that waif-like way, but her acting leaves a lot to be desired.

‘We were never friends.’

Fuck buddies, yes.

Cohabitants of my home, yes.

Friends? Never.

‘You know we’ve got that awards ceremony two days before Christmas,’ she reminds me, curling a finger through her professionally blow-dried hair.

Hollywood’s Annual Christmas Awards Night, a celebration of all that’s occurred during the year and the opportunity to raise millions for charity.

Shit.

Not only have I been nominated for America’s Sexiest Actor (utterly cringeworthy), and Superlative Stunt of The Year (in fairness, scaling the side of New York’s tallest building was pretty cool even with all the harnesses), Celeste and I are up for “Celebrity Couple of the Year award.”

Ha. It just goes to show, nobody really knows what goes on behind closed doors. We might complement each other aesthetically, but that’s about the height of it.

‘Obviously we’ll pull out.’ Half of Tinseltown is talking about Spike and her, anyway.

‘We can’t.’ Black pupils widen. ‘You’re nominated in three categories. If you win them all, the entire evening’s proceeds go to the charity of your choice. Remember?’

How could I forget?

There is one charity that's close to my heart. Not that Celeste gives a fuck about the American Addicts Support Society. She simply wants to attend the party. Brush shoulders with Hollywood's most elite. And I'm her ticket in.

'We aren't a couple anymore, Celeste. The whole of Hollywood knows you're sleeping with Spike,' I remind her.

'Nobody knows that for sure. It's not like Spike and I made an official announcement yet.' She pats down the virgin-white dress she's wearing across her flat stomach. 'You know as well as I do, the world speculates about every man and woman cast as lovers on screen.'

'Yeah, and this time their speculations are bang on.'

'Do it for the charity,' she urges, catching her lower lip between her veneers.

It's a low blow.

The woman has a heart of steel.

'We can break up after Christmas officially.' Cat-like eyes methodically stalk over my body.

She's unbelievable. 'You can see yourself out.'

She continues packing one more ridiculous outfit after another. 'See you next month, sweetie.'

A snort bursts from my nose. No, you won't, *sweetie*.

At least our time together has taught me something. No, it's taught me everything. Everything I don't want in a woman. Though it's not like I didn't already know that I've been dating the wrong ones deliberately. Dating the ones who don't possess the potential to hurt me.

I'm not emotionally stunted.

I'm emotionally cautious. It's different.

My feet pad across the thick, plush carpet of the wide, winding staircase to the bright, spacious hallway below. As I stride through to the glass-fronted lounge area overlooking the glistening infinity pool and glinting granite paving, I'm still shaking my head at the one-trick pony comment.

It hit a nerve. Seeped into my skin. Ignited my own secret suspicions that I'm hired for the way I look, and not because I'm particularly talented.

The urge to prove Celeste, and even myself, wrong sparks like a live wire inside my chest.

A crystal decanter calls to me from the glass minibar I had installed when I moved in. I no longer take drugs, but I am partial to the odd Middleton Rare. I pour myself a good measure and take my glass across the enormous sitting room, flopping into a leather recliner that cost more than most people earn in a year.

I'm not most folk, though. I'm a one-trick pony. A walking, talking, breathing, living action man.

Apparently.

Swirling the whisky around the crystal tumbler, I contemplate my next move. The paps will go wild when Celeste and Spike officially announce their romance. I'd rather not be anywhere near it, but if I flee, it'll look like I care.

What I need is a valid reason. Maybe a vacation. Christmas is coming, though it's a holiday I'm not a huge fan of. Not anymore, anyway.

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Jayden Cooper's name lights up the screen.

Is he calling as my agent? Or my friend? Word clearly travels fast. At least he's not one for 'I-told-you-so's'. He's far too classy for that.

For years, he represented his rock star brother and a select few artists. When his brother retired, Jayden branched out to represent actors like me and Tom Hardy instead. Turns out, it's a lot more lucrative and far less complicated. No world tours, groupies or artists going on weeklong benders.

Jayden's one of the few genuine people in Hollywood. When we met at a red carpet event four years ago, we hit it off right away.

We're both Irish. We have the same values, the same culture and the same sarcastic sense of humour.

Swiping right, I accept his call. 'Jayden.'

'How's it going, Nate?' His Dublin drawl is heavily tainted with an American twang, much like my own.

'Grand.' My sarcasm isn't lost on either of us. I take a mouthful of alcohol, breathing through the burning sensation under my sternum.

'I heard about Celeste and Spike.' He tuts. 'I hate to say it but—'

Okay, he's not as classy as I thought.

'Yeah, yeah. Whatever.' I take another sip.

'You don't sound too cut up about it,' Jayden probes tactfully.

'I'm not. I'm more annoyed that this neighbourhood is going to transform into a fucking circus when it's confirmed.'

I'm thinking about taking a vacation.'

'A vacation?' Surprise echoes across the line. 'You haven't taken a vacation in fifteen years.'

'Exactly. Maybe it's about time I did.' My tone isn't convincing either of us.

What do people even do on vacation?

I prefer to keep busy.

Productive.

Relaxing is a concept I've yet to grasp.

'Well, I'm calling with another option. You've been offered a part.' From the doubt weighing on his words, I gather it's not a viable part.

'What is it?' I straighten my spine. Despite Jayden's dubious tone, I'd take almost anything right now just to have a legitimate excuse to escape.

'It's not your usual movie genre...'

He clears his throat.

'Go on.'

Celeste's 'one-trick pony' jibe still stings.

A historical movie?

No. I'm too inked for that.

Some sort of erotica?

Might have worked for Jamie Dornan, but it's not my cup of tea. My junk is staying firmly in my trunks. I don't mind my torso, or even my ass, displayed on the big screen, but my dick is off limits. It's a promise I made to Sally-Ann years ago and despite us splitting up, I always kept it. Some things are meant to be sacred.

‘There’s no way you’ll do it. I hate to say it, but you’re kind of predictable, in the most endearing way.’ Jayden chuckles, utterly unaware his remark is a little too close to Celeste’s.

‘Predictable?’ Is this what everyone thinks of me?

‘Yeah.’ His chuckle echoes into my ear. ‘Gruelling six am gym workout, followed by fifty lengths in the pool and a protein shake. Egg white omelette for lunch. Either steak or chicken with at least three different types of green veg for dinner.’ He sniggers again. ‘Tell me I’m wrong.’

I would if I could, but I can’t.

He has my life down to a T.

‘You only date blondes. Only drive German cars. You’re not exactly known for your spontaneity. There’s nothing wrong with that either,’ Jayden reassures me. ‘You do have a physique to maintain. Though that’s no excuse for limiting yourself to one type of woman.’ Another throaty laugh rumbles over the phone. ‘Look, this movie is probably too far out of your comfort zone. But I promised Ryan I’d ask.’

Ryan? What has this got to do with Jayden’s rock star brother? A slow beat passes while I attempt to process his comments. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s a Christmas romance.’

‘A romance?’ Jayden’s bang on. It’s utterly out of my comfort zone. ‘Do I look like George Clooney to you? Or Matthew McConaughey, for that matter?’

‘The male MC is a rock star. The film is based on my brother, Ryan, and his wife, Sasha.’ Jayden coughs. ‘Look, I know it’s not your thing and I’m probably wasting my breath, but Ryan begged me to ask you. He doesn’t want some golf-

shirt wearing douche playing him. They're offering twenty million and the script is actually really impressive.'

'I'm not getting my junk out. I told you before, Jayden.'

Jayden sniggers. 'Last time I checked, Hallmark was a family-friendly channel, though Ryan and Sasha's romance is probably more suited to Passionflix. You need ear plugs if you're even in the same hotel as them. They still can't leave each other alone.'

God, what I wouldn't do for a love like that. One that's strong enough to survive time and distance and a tonne of mistakes.

Something real. Raw. Honest. But that brings risk as well as reward. I learnt the hard way. 'Hallmark? Seriously?'

'Twenty million. It's seven weeks' work tops. You know they churn these things out like butter.' Jayden's tone is nonchalant. Like he's already kissed his commission goodbye.

It's the perfect excuse to get out of town and to prove I'm not a one-trick pony. To do something unpredictable for once in my life.

And the money is top dollar. I could gift it to the American Addicts Support Society and not have to feel bad about the money they won't be getting from that ridiculous Celebrity Couple of the Year award.

'I'll do it.' I'll show Celeste. And the rest of the goddamn world that Nate Jackson is more than just a walking, talking, tattooed action man.

'What?' Jayden exclaims. 'You didn't even ask where it's set.'

‘I’ll go anywhere right now to escape the shitshow that’s about to blow up in my face.’

‘Great.’ A loud cracking sound echoes over the phone line. I imagine Jayden slapping his desk in triumph. Ten percent of twenty million for asking a question is easy money. ‘In that case, call your mother, tell her you’ll be home for Christmas. Hell, we might even get to catch up for a few beers ourselves. We’re heading to Huxley Castle for the holidays.’

Huxley Castle is the grandest castle in Dublin, home to Jayden’s brother, Ryan, and his family. The same one who wants me to take this role. I like Ryan. I want to help him out. But I haven’t been home in three years, using filming in Japan, Russia and most recently, South America, as my excuse.

The truth is, I’d rather eat kangaroo balls on *I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here* than bump into Sally-Ann and her real-life hero husband, Niall, a fireman who actually runs into burning buildings to save people, instead of pretending to. The news they had a beautiful bouncing baby was another tough pill to swallow. Even for a former addict.

And if I go home, there’s no way in the world to avoid them. Sally-Ann is literally the girl next door. And now her parents have retired to Australia, their house is hers.

Don’t shit on your own doorstep springs to mind. Don’t shag on it might be more appropriate. And definitely don’t fall in love on it.

‘The last couple of weeks will be filmed in Vegas, but the first five weeks are being filmed on the west coast in a tiny seaside town called Ballybowen. There’s a location there called Newbridge Castle that apparently looks similar to Huxley Castle, where Ryan and Sasha’s famous love story began. The only time Newbridge could accommodate Max

Carter's intense filming schedule is next month, even though the movie won't actually premier until next October.'

'Max Carter?' The guy might be one of Hollywood's top producers, but he's the biggest womaniser around.

'Yep. Don't worry, you're not his type,' Jayden sniggers. 'I'll send you over the script. Pack a bag. You leave tomorrow.'

Alarm sneaks into my gut. 'Tomorrow?' That leaves zero time to prepare.

'Yeah, they originally had Tom Hardy signed up but a family emergency put a stop to that,' Jayden relays. 'To be fair, his accent probably would have been crap. His voice screams "London gangster" rather than "Brooding Irishman."'

Am I seriously considering starring in a fucking romance?

A Hallmark one, no less?

What if I *am* a one-trick pony and the whole world sees me for what I am? An emotionally stunted guy, only capable of stepping into other emotionally stunted roles?

No.

That thing sparks in my chest again.

The first flame of a fire that's going to burn bright.

I'm going to pull this off if it's the last thing I do.

Because if I don't, it really will be the last thing I do. My professional reputation will be the same as my relationship status. OVER.

'My PA cancelled the accommodation she booked, but I'll get her to re-book it right now. And Nate, I probably don't need to tell you this, but as your agent, try to keep a low

profile for a few weeks until this Celeste thing blows over. We don't want the press assuming you're spiralling out of control.' Jayden doesn't say 'again' but the word lingers between us, nevertheless.

'Sure. Low profile. I can do that.' I drain the rest of my drink and pray I'm right.

Chapter Three

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HOLLY
.....

21st November

The watery winter sunshine streams into the enormous, overheated classroom. It's either freezing in this old Victorian building or sweltering. There's never any middle ground. But it's great to be back in a routine after spending yesterday consumed with 'The Fear' –drink-related anxiety that no amount of fresh air, meditation, or Hail Mary's will absolve.

Savannah and Ashley spent their Sunday reassuring me that I probably imagined Dan snapping a photo of the most embarrassing night of my life.

Maybe I did.

A lot of wine was consumed. And so what? Even if he did snap a picture of my boobs, he's seen it all before, anyway.

'One for the wank bank,' Savannah had sniggered. 'What's the worst he could do with it?'

Dan's warning leaps to the forefront of my mind. '*I will ruin you, Holly Hazelwood.*'

Shuddering through the ripple of unease tiptoeing across my neck, I turn my attention back to the twenty-two thirteen-year-old girls gazing back at me. Or at least pretending to, while I attempt to educate them on Post-Impressionist art.

My block-heeled ankle boots click across the lino flooring as I pace the front of the bright airy classroom. ‘Van Gogh was often called the father of Expressionism. Almost single-handedly, he brought a greater sense of emotional depth to painting with his bold, dramatic brushstrokes.’

My hand sweeps towards the image projected onto the white board: Vase with Twelve Sunflowers.

A girl called Eloise lets out a bored sigh. Her father is the Dutch ambassador. You’d think she’d show a tad more interest.

My phone vibrates on the oakwood desk.

Probably Savannah sending on some hilarious meme. Ashley’s tied up with headmistress duties until school is out at three-thirty, though we did manage to grab a quick coffee together in the staffroom this morning.

‘What do you think, girls? What do the sunflowers represent?’ My eyes roam the room, silently willing one of them to engage with me.

Emily, a fair-haired, angelic girl, who also happens to be the daughter of the captain of the Irish rugby team, launches her hand high into the air with a suggestion. If only the rest of the class had an ounce of her enthusiasm.

‘Sunshine? Happiness? Positivity?’ Her passion for art shines through her bright eyes. She reminds me of a younger version of myself. The girl who naively envisioned making a living at being an *actual* artist instead of being pressured by her well-meaning parents to get a respectable, reliable job and becoming a teacher.

‘Excellent, Emily.’ My phone vibrates again.

And again.

And again.

A frown flickers across my face. I should have switched the damn thing off. Savannah knows I'm in class. Her twin girls are in the same building, for goodness sake.

The incessant buzzing continues against the oak.

'Sunflowers are symbolic of life and hope. They also symbolise loyalty and adoration, thanks to the myth of Clytie and Apollo.'

The buzzing continues until it's out of control. The students stare pointedly in the direction of the escalating source of distraction. Any second now, my phone's going to blow up the classroom.

'Maybe you should get that?' Mya, a small girl with thick, red-rimmed glasses, suggests from the back of the room.

'I apologise, girls. There must be some sort of family emergency. Please start your painting, keeping the bold, dramatic strokes in mind. It doesn't have to be sunflowers. It can be anything that speaks to you. Whatever symbolises life, hope and gratitude to you.'

Rustling ensues as the students assemble their supplies, ready to start.

Unease rises like a rolling wave in my chest.

Has something happened to my mother? Or my father? Or Conor? This degree of hounding never results in anything positive.

Six-hundred-thousand TikTok notifications blow my phone up.

What the fuck? I barely even use the damn thing.

The influx of notifications explodes once again, so much so the phone is actually hot to touch.

The classroom door opens. Ashley's grim expression churns my stomach. 'Miss Hazelwood, may I borrow you for a few minutes?' Authority rings in her voice, reminding me she might be one of my best friends, but she's also very much my superior. 'Bring your bag.'

Shit. Clearly, I'm not coming back.

Did I share an offensive reel by mistake?

Post a video of us blatantly drunk?

Did a parent complain about me?

Miss Murphy, one of the young resource teachers, steps in to take over my lesson, leaving me free to follow Ashley down the wide, white-washed corridor.

'Ash? What is it?' Fear is audible in my whisper.

'Not here.' Ash's tight smile does nothing to reassure me. Neither does her pale, drawn face. 'In my office.'

The corridor to Ashley's office feels like walking the Green Mile. Only when the dark mahogany wooden door clicks behind us does she drop the cool, calm, collected headteacher act.

'Fucking hell, Holly, have you seen yourself on TikTok?' Pulling out the green leather seat in front of her desk, she motions for me to sit while she paces the thin carpet.

The landline on her desk rings shrilly. She picks it up and bangs it down again before pulling it off the hook completely.

'What? No! My phone was going crazy, but I didn't get the chance to look yet.' Acid churns in my gut, yesterday's fear

back in full force.

‘You’ve gone viral.’ The soft skin beside her eyes creases into a wince. ‘Saturday night. The dress.’ Her hand flicks in the direction of my chest.

A sucker punch knocks the breath from my chest. ‘Oh, fuck.’

‘Fuck is right.’ Ashely bangs her fist on her enormous desk and I jump.

‘I need to see it.’ My shaking fingers struggle to punch in the security code. Eventually the TikTok app opens.

I watch myself bouncing freely at the edge of the dancefloor at Heaven on Earth, bopping along in the stolen Santa hat. My boobs fully exposed, bar the nipples, which someone has obscured with two Christmas pudding emojis, and that ridiculous corset dress only pushing them up further like a fucking porn star. My eyes are squeezed tightly shut in an unflattering expression of sheer ecstasy as I wail the words, ‘All I want for Christmas is...’

The frame changes, and an image of a rusty nail fills the screen. A familiar male voice cuts in, finishing my sentence with two career damning words, ‘A screw’.

Dan’s evil cackle echoes through the room as the blood drains from my face.

It’s a good job I’m sitting because there’s no way I could stand right now.

There’s a reason Dan oversees the Hargreaves Hotels’ social media accounts. He’s ridiculously clued up on the ever-changing algorithm and even more talented with graphic design.

An eight-second clip humiliates me for all eternity.

Ashley shakes her head in disgust. Shame seeps over every inch of my skin, crawling beneath it, tainting me from the inside out. Words refuse to form, because let's face it, there aren't enough to sum up this shitshow.

'The board of governors called demanding answers.' Ashley sucks in the right side of her cheek. 'The secretary has been inundated with parent complaints already.'

My fingers pull the ends of my hair to the point of pain. Although, no physical injury could come close to the hurt slicing my insides right now.

'I can't believe it.' But I can.

Dan warned me he'd ruin me. With his arrogance, family money and connections, he was never going to be the type to take being dumped lying down.

'It's not your fault, Holly. But that doesn't change things.' Ashley's solemn tone is drowned out by more vibrating.

One word lights up my screen. 'Mother.'

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

When I don't answer, she rings again. And again.

'Switch it off,' Ashley suggests.

My hands are shaking so badly, Ash reaches across the desk and switches the damn thing off for me.

'I know this feels like the worst thing in the world right now, but it will blow over.' My friend's sea-green eyes bore into mine. 'I'm going to be honest with you, though, Holly. I'm coming under serious pressure to fire you. This is a Catholic girls' school. What happened on Saturday night was

not your fault, but it's not the kind of example we're supposed to set for our students.'

'What am I going to do? Who will ever take me seriously again when the whole world has seen my boobs? He's made me a laughingstock.'

'You mean, what are *we* going to do?' My friend rubs her palm across my shoulder as I faceplant her desk. 'You're not in this alone.'

'I'm going to demand a full inquiry, which will mean suspension rather than an immediate dismissal. I'm not sure if it's an offence to film you like that without your permission because it's a public place, but I will make damn sure the world knows you did not consent to it. By next week, someone else will be filmed doing something humiliating, which will go viral, and this will be yesterday's news. Until then, you need to lie low. This too shall pass, I promise.'

Ashley's desk is cool against my flaming cheeks. Her words are kind, but they do nothing to ease the burning humiliation pricking me from the inside out.

A bell shrills through the building, signalling the end of the period. One final class to go before the end of the school day.

'Come on.' Ashley gently ushers me to my feet. 'Let's sneak you out the back door before the parents descend on the school gates for collection.'

An image of the wealthy, entitled parents of St. Jude's stringing me up on a cross for a crucifixion is enough to get my jelly-like legs moving.

'Take these.' Ashley hands me an old pair of sunglasses and a black woollen bobble hat from her desk drawer. 'Tuck your hair up under the hat. I'll walk you out.'

I do as she says and grab my bag, following her through the oldest nooks and crannies of the building and out into the car park.

My cute Victorian end-of-terrace house is only a five-minute walk away.

‘I’ll come over as soon as I finish up here.’ Her grim expression suggests she knows she’s in for a gruelling few hours.

Thank God she and Sav aren’t visible in the video. Or we’d all be up shit creek. Well, Sav wouldn’t, I suppose. In fact, it probably would have done wonders for her ‘Single Sav’ image.

Speak of the devil. Savannah arrives like an angel descending from heaven. Her blonde hair blows behind her as she jogs across the school yard in a pair of knee-high boots and slim-fitting jeans.

‘That dirty bastard, Holly. He won’t get away with it.’ When her warm arms embrace me, the tears start. Huge, wracking, heartfelt wrenches rip through my body.

‘I need to go into hiding,’ I hiccup through the tears.

‘And I have just the place for you. You’re going to Ballybowen.’ Savannah squeezes me encouragingly as she leads me away from St. Jude’s. ‘And the phone coverage on that side of the country is crap.’

Chapter Four

HOLLY

‘The villa in Ballybowen is empty.’ Savannah frogmarches me through the door of my own modest, but modern, house.

My parents insisted I get on the property ladder the second I secured the job at St. Jude’s. Being tied to a mortgage ensured any notions of making a go of it as an artist were well and truly over, along with my dreams to travel the world.

‘What? No way!’ The villa is normally booked out years in advance.

Savannah bought five luxury properties scattered across the country as a rental investment when her blog first took off and the advertising, endorsements and ambassador roles began flooding in. With not one, but two accountant fathers to offer financial advice, Sav has made some savvy investments. Pun intended.

Ashley and I have been begging for a weekend in one of them for years, but there’s never any availability.

‘The American company that booked it cancelled at the last minute. They were super suspicious anyway, to be honest. Transferred the cash up front. Wanted to know about the security measures surrounding the property.’ She shoots me a dubious look and shrugs.

Tootsie, my dog, a fluffy white toy poodle, leaps off the couch and frolics through the narrow hallway to greet us with incessant licks from her sandpaper-rough tongue.

I scoop her into my arms, inhaling her comforting furry scent while Savannah continues talking, barely pausing for breath. ‘I mean, hello, it’s the west of Ireland! What security measures? People barely even lock their doors in that part of the world.’

It’s true. As kids, we holidayed in Sligo every summer and it was like travelling back in time. Rural life is worlds away from city life, but that’s part of the appeal right now.

‘Are you sure you don’t mind me using it?’

I’ve seen pictures online. The villa is absolutely stunning. Modern, white, bright, with a huge terrace with an outdoor hot tub and sauna, overlooking the crashing waves of the Atlantic.

Inside, an open fire nestles amongst an exposed brick fireplace. It looks idyllic.

‘Of course, Holly. It’s free until the New Year.’ Savannah strides up the white wooden staircase two at a time. I traipse behind, unable to keep pace with her long legs.

‘The New Year?’ I parrot.

It’s unheard of. Whoever cancelled must have plenty of cash to rent a place like that for the best part of two months.

‘I’ll pay you,’ I offer, following her into my bedroom where she heads straight to my closet, flinging the door open so hard the hinges squeak. ‘I don’t want to put you out of pocket.’ Though we both know, even on a really generous private schooling teaching salary, I can’t afford the usual rental price.

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ Savannah’s fingers swat the air in front of her face. ‘Besides, I told you, the suspicious Americans already paid. It was non-refundable, a fact they never even queried.’

‘And you don’t mind Tootsie coming?’ My fingernails scratch the head of the most loyal creature known to man.

‘Of course not.’ Savannah makes a kissing sound in Tootsie’s direction. ‘She’s my furry godchild. Now, what shall we pack for you?’

‘Baseball caps. Sunglasses. Sweatpants and jogging bottoms. Oversized and comfortable so I can eat my weight in chocolate and drown my sorrows in wine without worrying about my waistline.’ Another hot wave of shame crashes over me. ‘I won’t be able to show my face in public for years.’ I blow out a low, shaky breath. ‘And I thought I had social anxiety before.’

Savannah pulls me into a reassuring hug. ‘It’ll be okay.’ She steps back, her earnest eyes boring into mine. ‘I’ll make sure of it.’

Doubtful. The damage is already done. But I smile and nod, blinking back a fresh set of tears, grateful for her unwavering support and friendship, more than I’ve ever been grateful for anything in my life.

I stand mute as she throws half my wardrobe into my suitcase, including several little black dresses, the sexiest and most uncomfortable lingerie sets I own, and a handful of condoms from my bedside locker.

‘Where on earth do you think I’m going?’

‘Better to be prepared.’ She shoots me a wink. ‘If anyone finds out you’re there, they’ll be beating the door down to get

to you! I mean, did you even see your boobs in that video? Round, full, pert. I'm not hitting on you, by the way, it's just an observation. Women pay thousands for breasts like that every day of the week.'

'Eurgh, Savannah, don't!' My palms cup my cheeks. The situation is way too raw to make jokes about. I place Tootsie on the floor and flop face-first onto the soft cotton of my bed.

'I'm just saying, if you can't stay on at St. Jude's you have other options, you know, like topless modelling or lap dancing.' Her go-to deflection has always been humour.

'Thanks, Sav! That's super helpful right now.' If it wasn't so horrifying, it would be hilarious. She ducks, narrowly avoiding the pillow I throw at her head.

'Just saying.' She flings open the drawers of my bedside locker, rummaging past my passport and every birthday card I've ever received. What can I say? I'm sentimental. Or a hoarder, perhaps. 'Where do you keep your vibrator?'

'What vibrator?'

'Shut the fucking front door!' Savannah's eyes double in size. 'You're kidding me, right?'

I shake my head.

'At least I know what to get you for Christmas now.' Perfectly preened eyebrows wiggle, and despite the situation, I snigger. It might be the only gift I get this year.

Christmas is cancelled, for me at least.

While Savannah the Saint finishes packing for me, I muster enough bravery to switch my phone on long enough to listen to my mother's voicemails, though I wish I hadn't bothered.

My parents are livid. For once, I don't blame them.

I wasn't especially looking forward to another cold Christmas with them, anyway. Especially with Conor and Clarissa on their honeymoon. Mass on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas morning always seemed like overkill to me.

They mean well in their own way, but it's hard to relate to them. Or to please them.

I wince as I listen to the final voicemail. I imagine Mam clutching the ever-present pearl necklace that clings like a choke chain around her neck.

'And what are we going to do about Conor's wedding? I had you sitting with Uncle Richard, but I'm not sure he'll be able to look you in the eye over his celeriac soup now that he's seen your breasts.'

Uncle Richard, Mam's brother, is an inspector with the Guards. As respectable a position as that may be, I'm pretty sure he's seen much worse than a couple of stray boobs dancing to their own rhythm.

'It reflects dreadfully on the family.'

As if I chose to get my boobs out in a busy bar and allowed someone to violate my privacy in the most humiliating way.

'You okay?' Savannah checks her jean-clad butt sitting on my bulging case as she struggles to zip it closed.

'I will be. Thank you for everything, Sav, really. What would I do without you?'

'You'll never have to find out.' My best friend yanks me into a ferocious bearhug before handing me the keys to her

super fancy country retreat. ‘I’ll call you ten times a day, we can buddy watch *I’m A Celebrity* every night, and if I can convince my dads to take the twins for the weekend, I’ll be over in a heartbeat. I have a food order being delivered to the villa as we speak. With wine.’

‘If you were a man, I’d marry you in the morning.’ I clutch my chest, touched by my friend’s generosity.

‘Well, with those boobs, I wouldn’t turn you down. I’ll clean out your fridge and lock up here.’ Savannah fishes my spare key from her back pocket.

‘You really are a lifesaver. Ash was going to come over after work. Will you tell her I’ll call her tomorrow?’ I raise my hand in a goodbye. ‘Love you.’

‘Love you more. Chin up. It’s all going to be okay.’ Savannah rubs my shoulder before helping me lug the suitcase to my Mini Cooper parked on the small driveway. It takes up the entire back seat, while Tootsie and her tartan bed occupy the passenger seat. No room for any art supplies. I’ll buy some when I get there. Because let’s face it, how else am I going to pass the time it takes for this entire humiliating situation to blow over?

I set the satnav to Savannah’s luxury villa in Ballybowen, driving hard on the gas until the Dublin architecture is a distant memory.

The first few familiar bars of ‘Driving Home for Christmas’ hum through the speaker of the radio. I change the station swiftly, find the Killers and turn the sound up full blast, drowning out any unhelpful thoughts that keep popping up.

I have no choice but to ride this out now.

At least thanks to Savannah, I get to do it in luxury.

Ballybowen is a tiny seaside village where, according to Savannah, nothing ever happens. Because of its beachside location, it's a hotspot in summer but during winter, it's a ghost town. And that's exactly what I'm counting on right now. One pub, one tiny a la carte restaurant, a small hotel, and mile upon mile of sandy beach.

It's exactly what the doctor ordered.

It takes almost three hours, but eventually, I swing into the asphalt driveway of Savannah's luxurious villa.

The name on the bronze illuminated plaque on the white walls outside doesn't lie. 'Ard Na Mara,' Gaelic for 'high above the sea.' And this place towers right on the water's edge. The photos don't do it justice.

The rhythmic soothing of crashing waves and their immediate proximity are a form of therapy alone. The salty scent of seaweed lingers in the air, seeping into my nostrils, cleansing me from the inside out.

I inhale a deep breath, blowing it out slowly.

It was one video.

It will blow over.

A bright sensor light illuminates the driveway as I park to the right of the duck-egg blue panelled door. Huge plant pots punctuate the space on either side of three shallow steps. They're overflowing with decorative green foliage. A thick sandy-coloured mat sits on the top step, emblazoned with the word 'welcome' in italic scrawl. Huge wrap-around windows flank each corner of the house.

It's just gorgeous. I can barely wait for daylight to see this place in all its magnificent glory.

I fish out the keys from the glove compartment, feeling more optimistic than I have in hours. Tootsie hops across the centre console, straight into my arms.

'Welcome home, Toots.' I balance my dog on my left arm and use my right hand to slot the key into the lock, twisting until the door swings open.

The inside of the house is just as enticing as the outside. I flick on chrome light switches and drink in the wide spacious hallway, the huge sweeping glass and chrome stairway to my left.

Sauntering in, I find a huge open-plan kitchen/ living area with a double-height ceiling. At the far side of the room, triple sliding doors look out onto a sheltered terrace. The hot tub comes into sight. It's positioned slightly to the left so as not to block the view. From the photos in the brochure, I already know the sauna is tucked against the wall behind it.

I slide open the door and take a lungful of sea air. With the wind whipping against this side of the villa, it's blustery, but life-affirming.

Everything will be okay.

It has to be.

I slide the door closed again and send up my millionth silent thank you to Savannah for offering me such a beautiful place to bury my head in the sand. If things get any worse, I might actually have to bury it on Ballybowen's four-mile beach.

Swivelling on my heels, I pad across the mahogany varnished original wooden flooring back to the living area. A

huge, inviting couch, and two opposing arm chairs flank the open fireplace. Thick velvet cushions look comfortable enough to rest my weary head on, but even though I'm wrecked, I wouldn't dare close my eyes yet for fear of the flashbacks I know my brain is going to torment me with the second I do.

My gaze rises to a sixty-five-inch television hanging on the exposed sandy-coloured brick wall above. Perfect. A movie and a glass of wine are exactly what I need tonight.

I take the stairs with Tootsie still tucked beneath my arms. There are seven bedrooms. And they're all painted the same shade, a matte ivory. The villa's thick, intricate skirting circling the room is a brilliant white. It's neutral tones are crisp and bright, if a little bare.

Sav could definitely do with some art for her walls. Painting something for her is the least I can do as a thank you for letting me stay.

Besides, how else am I going to spend my run-up to Christmas? Apart from crying, overeating and bingeing Hallmark movies, of course.

Throwing off my jacket, I head back downstairs to collect my luggage and Tootsie's bed. On my way back in, I spot a welcome basket on the white marble kitchen countertop, overflowing with handmade chocolates, expensive wine, luxury cheese, breads and jams. My ravenous stomach rumbles.

'Everything's going to be okay, Toots.' I press a kiss against the top of her head, fully aware it's me I'm trying to reassure, not her.

I place my furry friend on the floor and open a bottle of Sancerre from the basket.

Locating a fishbowl-sized glass in one of the cupboards, I fill it to the brim. After the day I've had, it's medicinal.

Tootsie makes herself at home on one of the crushed velvet cushions as I light the fire.

This entire situation is a nightmare. I don't even care about missing Christmas, but it will kill me if I can't make Conor and Clarissa's wedding.

Maybe if I keep my head down and let this entire thing blow over, I could sneak in unnoticed?

Doubtful. My chest seizes, the icy hands of my anxiety threatening to squeeze the last drop of breath from my lungs. I count to ten slowly, concentrating on every inhalation.

This too shall pass. It's been a motto Savannah, Ashley and I have lived by for as long as I can remember.

Half an hour and two huge glasses of wine later, I change into one of the ridiculous sexy red nighties Sav packed for me and flop on the couch next to Tootsie, wishing I could crawl out of my own head.

I switch on the enormous television, channel hopping until I find a re-run of a topless Nate Jackson scaling a skyscraper to save the woman he loves.

What I wouldn't give to have him charge in here and save me.

Though truthfully, I doubt even he could salvage the shitshow that my life has become.

Chapter Five

NATE

I spend the entire flight from LAX to Shannon regretting accepting a lead role in a romance movie. If Celeste's right, and I am an emotionally stunted one-trick pony, I'm about to spectacularly embarrass myself with the entire world as my witness.

Like that time Pierce Brosnan transitioned from James Bond to a badly singing father in *Mamma Mia*.

A cold shudder rips across my spine even thinking about it. Pierce went from international sex symbol to cringe-central overnight.

I can actually sing, but no amount of money in the world would convince me to do it in public, let alone in a musical.

Jayden sent me the script for 'Falling For The Rock Star At Christmas.' It's actually pretty good. Most importantly, there's no singing in it.

My co-star, Olivia Hansen-Lovett, has a reputation for being an absolute diva, but I'll work with it. It's not like I actually have to fall in love with her. I just have to pretend.

I indicate left, taking the exit that's signposted Ballybowen. The car Jayden hired for me is an Audi Q7. It's spacious and luxurious without being too flashy to attract

attention. His ‘predictable’ comment springs to mind, and I scoff. Germans make exceptional cars. And athletes need protein.

One day I’ll do something wild and surprise him. Though accepting this role probably ticked that off my to-do list pretty damn quick, but that wasn’t why I did it.

Apart from escaping the Tinseltown tittle-tattle, one of the major advantages of accepting a role filmed in the arse end of nowhere, here in the west of Ireland, I won’t need to be surrounded by an army of security.

That freedom alone is worth the risk of making a fool of myself in a romance movie.

My phone rings through the car’s hands-free system. The word ‘Mam’ lights up my dashboard. I might not have been home in years, but she and Dad come to the States quarterly, and we speak on the phone most days.

I hit the button on the steering wheel to accept.

‘Hello?’

‘So, has the wanderer finally returned?’ Mam’s familiar shriek pierces the darkness with a warmth that seeps straight into my soul.

‘I’m on Irish soil,’ I confirm. ‘Though I have no idea where the fuck about.’

‘Language, Nathan Gerard Jackson! Your mama didn’t raise you to have such a foul mouth!’ she scolds teasingly.

‘No, but she did raise me to have the confidence to say and do whatever I pleased, thankfully.’ It’s true. We’re an extremely liberated family. Always have been. Always will be. Mam was a midwife until she retired last year. There’s no

topic that's off-limit over the dinner table, which can be a blessing and a curse. I really do not need to know that when my parents couldn't sleep the night before, 'they did what they were put on this planet to do.'

Too. Much. Information.

Would I change them?

Not for anything in the world.

'Your dad and I can't wait to see you. We're gonna head over to Ballybowen the second he finishes the job he's doing for Mrs Farrow. He doesn't want to leave her kitchen half-finished and, you know, with Christmas coming and all that goes with it...'

My parents don't need to work. I paid off their mortgage with the paycheque I got from my first movie, *Blazing Fire*. Mam always says the day Dad gives up work is the day he'll die, because the man thrives on it.

I ensure they have enough money in their account to live like a couple of rock stars, but they barely touch it, preferring to live a normal life. God forbid the neighbours might assume they'd grown 'notions' of themselves or something.

'And you will come to us for Christmas, I hope? After you wrap up the filming?' Mam's hopeful tone stokes the guilt in my gut.

I should have made more of an effort. It's been years. At first, the thought of Sally-Ann and Niall used to slice me in bits.

Awkward.

Maybe enough time has passed.

Maybe.

I don't feel the same gut-wrenching sense of loss over the two of them that initially struck me.

The thought of Christmas with my sisters and parents pulls at the heartstrings most people don't realise I own. I've gained a reputation for being hard, closed off, but truth be told, I'm anything but.

The stone wall erected itself the day Sally-Ann broke up with me, and I've never been brave enough to take it down.

'Is Celeste with you?'

'We broke up.' I blow out a long, heavy breath, squinting at the winding signs. According to the sat nav, I'm three minutes away from my destination. I haven't met another car in almost an hour. I suppose it is almost one in the morning.

'You did?' Excitement tinged with relief lingers in my mother's tone.

'Yeah. It was for the best.'

'I hate to say it, son, but I couldn't agree more with you. There was something clipped about her.' Mam sighs. 'Your dad and I always felt like she looked down on us.'

'That's just her face, Mam. Don't take it personally.' And she said *I* was emotionally stunted.

'Are you alright though? You're not upset?' Code for, '*You're not going to start snorting again?*'

'I'm fine, I promise.' It's not a lie. I've barely given Celeste a thought. Her parting comments, though, that's another story.

Like my father, I don't need to work. Not any more. Also, like my father, the day I stop will probably be the day I die.

Because I don't have anything else in my life. That's why I take one job after another after another. Plugging the void.

'Oh Nate, it would be so good to have you all under my roof again! Your sisters will all be home, too. I'll make sure of it.'

I fall smack bang in the middle of five siblings. I'm the only boy. It'll be chaos. My two single sisters will be begging me to set them up with Channing Tatum, or Bradley Cooper. I can practically hear the squeals already. 'Just do me a favour, Mam.'

'Sure. Anything.' And I know she means it.

'Don't tell a soul I'm in Ireland. Not yet. This movie is top secret. We're contractually bound not to discuss it. And I do not want to get mobbed in the street every time I leave the house.' What I don't add, but I hope I infer, is, '*Don't tell Sally-Ann I'm home.*'

We said we'd always be friends but when she married Niall, that went straight out the window, along with my friendship with Niall. I ignored his calls until they simply stopped coming. Even though technically they'd done nothing wrong, their relationship still felt like a betrayal.

'Of course.' Message delivered. It's audible in her tone. For all the openness around the dinner table, my mother is like a closed book when it comes to the important stuff.

'I've got to go. I'm almost at the house Jayden rented. It's so dark, I don't want to miss it.' My hand palms the back of my achy neck. It's been a long day. All I want to do is crash somewhere comfortable and escape every niggles of doubt that's haunted me since I agreed to this damn role.

‘Go,’ Mam says. I picture her shooing her hands in front of her face. ‘Besides, it’s way past my bedtime. I couldn’t sleep until I knew you were safe.’

‘I’m thirty-four, Mam.’ My eyes roll into my head even as my heart warms at her words.

To the world, I’m an action hero. To my mother, I’m still her child. Perception is a unique thing. And it doesn’t take much to alter it. Like one bad movie...

No. Don’t go there.

‘I know, son. I just care about you, that’s all.’ She clears her throat.

‘I’ll call you in a couple of days,’ I promise.

‘Love you.’ Her sing-song voice is a bright beacon through the darkness as I pull into the driveway of Ard Na Mara.

‘Love you too.’ She’s the only woman I ever felt comfortable saying that to. Well, apart from Sally-Ann.

The sound of the ocean roars to my right. Wave after wave crashes and cascades against the shore, close enough to spit at. The winter wind whips the scent of salt and seaweed straight into my face. I’ve only been here five seconds, but already I love it.

Santa Monica is amazing in so many ways. The buzz. The restaurants. The nightlife. The movie stars. Sometimes I forget I’m one of them. The time I saw Sandra Bullock in my local Starbucks, my feet stuck to the spot, my mouth flooded like a tsunami and I turned into a stuttering idiot, equally starstruck as any other fan.

But this?

Here right now?

It feels like solitude.

Sanctuary.

It feels like I can drop the tough guy act and just be me for the first time in years.

A Mini Cooper is parked to the side of the villa. Weird. Maybe they rent the car with the house? It's a woman's car, if ever I saw one. Most men wouldn't fit in it for a start.

Thank God for the Audi. Imagine pulling up on set in a fucking Mini. I snort. Though, at least it's German. Fuck it, Jayden's right. I need to shed my predictable ways. Starting with banging a brunette, one who looks nothing like the last one I was with, and buying a Ferrari from the next shipment from Italy.

The sensor light illuminating the driveway is blinding, but the real warmth stems from the inviting glow beckoning from the huge glass panels only half visible behind the pot plants punctuating either side of the solid, duck-egg coloured front door.

Hauling my case out of the boot, I carry it up the front steps and drag my biker boots over the welcome mat. My hand yanks the door handle. Typical Ireland, it's unlocked. Coming here is like going back in time twenty years. That's probably half the appeal for some people. It just didn't occur to me that I might be one of them.

A niggle of unease slides over my skin as I step into the hallway. The faint sound of music travels from further inside the house.

Mariah Carey's iconic Christmas song.

But it's not Mariah's honeyed voice I hear belting out those familiar lyrics.

Well, crucifying them.

Striding through the hallway, I barely take in my surroundings as I gravitate towards the sound.

In a modest sized open-plan living and kitchen area, a five-foot brunette twirls in circles, barefoot on a royal blue crushed velvet couch, clutching an empty wine bottle which she's doubled up as a microphone. She doesn't so much as flinch, blissfully oblivious to my arrival.

A tiny nightdress dips low on her chest, barely covering full, round breasts. The same crimson material skims her thighs, revealing inch upon inch of satiny, smooth skin.

A cute button nose tilts upwards, but not in a snobby demeanour. No, her stance is more like an expression of liberation. Like she's just burnt her last bra in protest or something.

Perfect, pouty cherry-red lips brush the neck of the bottle as she wails into it. Her eyes are squeezed tightly shut. She's utterly lost in the moment.

Oddly enough, so am I.

Transfixed might be a more accurate description.

Dark, loose, glossy curls brush her bare creamy shoulders.

Why have I been avoiding brunettes again?

Something about the way her limbs sway with sheer inhibition is utterly captivating.

My eyes refuse to budge from this bewitching sight before me.

If only she sounded as good as she looked.

Am I so jetlagged I'm seeing things?

It's been a long couple of days.

No. Not even my warped imagination could conjure up this karaoke queen before my eyes.

As she hits the crescendo, shockingly, I might add, startlingly bright blue eyes fly open.

Her body freezes in sheer horror. I can practically feel her adrenaline spike. The moment is so surreal, it's almost comical. An uncontrollable urge to laugh pushes against my sternum from the inside out.

I can't hold it.

Deep rumbling guffaws burst from my chest as she stands catatonic from surprise.

'Sorry, I...' It's no good. Words won't form. The deep belly-aching laughter continues. Like the last few days of tension have finally spotted their escape route and are flocking to it.

The woman hops off the couch unsteadily, one arm folding across her chest as if to hide her cleavage. She's about sixty seconds too late. I already got two glorious eyefuls. What I wouldn't do to get two glorious handfuls. How's that for predictable?

White-knuckled fingers grip the wine bottle, wielding it like a weapon. She's resourceful, I'll give her that.

'I must be really drunk right now because you are the fucking image of Nate Jackson.' Her slurred words are a swift reminder that I am, in fact, Nate Jackson and I have a reputation to uphold. I cough back the laughter and straighten my face into its usual frown.

‘I *am* Nate Jackson.’ I raise my hands like a white flag. The last thing I want to do is terrify the girl. Woman.

She might be short, but those curves are definitely all woman.

‘Yep. And I’m Mariah Carey.’ Her legs tremble as she backs away from the couch towards the burnt orange embers of a dying fire.

‘No, sweetheart. You’re definitely not.’ My lips lift into a smirk again. I should leave because this woman is destroying the grouchy reputation that’s plagued me since the last time I spent Christmas in Ireland.

‘What are you doing in my house?’ Steely eyes roam over me before glancing at the coffee table where a mobile phone sits.

‘This is Ard Na Mara?’ I double-check, even though I distinctly remember seeing the fancy plaque mounted outside.

‘Yes...’ Her voice falters.

‘My agent booked this house for me. Well, technically he booked it for Tom Hardy, but when he pulled out at the last minute...’ I flick my hands in front of my torso, ‘yours truly got offered the role instead.’

Her pretty white throat bobs as she swallows hard. For a fleeting second, I wonder what it would feel like to run my tongue over that creamy white skin.

What would she smell like?

Taste like?

It’s been so fucking long since I got laid. Probably because Celeste was too busy laying with someone else. A fling could

be just what the doctor ordered. Especially given I just decided to bang a brunette.

Would she let me?

The way her eyes are roving over me, like Christmas has come early, I wouldn't rule it out.

'Savannah did say there was someone meant to be here, but they cancelled.' Those huge oceanic eyes continue to sweep over me. 'You're not a figment of my traumatised, drunk imagination, are you?' She lowers the bottle to her waist. Her stance softens along with her widening pupils, which dart over every hard plane of my body.

'You're drunk? I hadn't noticed,' I tease.

Okay, who am I? And why does this woman bring out my playful side? The side I thought had left, along with Sally-Ann.

She tuts. 'And I thought you were an action hero, not a comedian.'

'I'm a man of many talents.' At least I hope I am. We'll soon find out.

Mesmerised eyes drink me in. She swallows hard again. 'I'm not seeing things? You really are here...?'

'I'm here.' I take a tentative a step towards her.

She's bewitchingly beautiful, in a girl next door sort of way. Girls next door are my kryptonite. I'd do well to remember it.

'So, now we've established who I am, and that I'm meant to be here, who the hell are you?'

Chapter Six

HOLLY

The whole world knows his name.

Now he's standing in front of me, demanding to know mine.

Saliva pools in my mouth. My tongue feels thick and furry, and it has nothing to do with the wine and everything to do with the fact my Hollywood crush of fifteen years is standing in front of me.

On top of all the other adrenaline-inducing drama, it's more than my cortisone levels can cope with. My knees buckle, sending me flopping onto the couch with the grace of a seventeen-stone rugby player.

Tootsie's snoring on the floor in front of the fire, curled up in her tartan bed, completely oblivious to our handsome intruder.

'Woah, are you okay?' Nate edges closer, those huge palms reaching out in a silent reassurance.

My clammy, trembling hand clamps over my lips. 'I don't know.'

It's true.

Life as I know it has been turned upside down, and that was before the world's sexiest action hero rocked up looking

like, well, the world's sexiest action hero.

Striking emerald eyes glint with something that looks like concern as he inches towards me, the same way I've watched him tentatively approach terrified orphans on screen.

His full, plump lips are no longer laughing.

Instead, he offers me a tentative smile. 'Can I get you a glass of water?'

I nod, unable to articulate anything coherent as his muscular, gravity-defying backside sashays over to the sink. He's tall. Really tall. Well over six feet. Broad shoulders taper down to a narrow waist. My eyes return to that bum again. Holy crap, the man looks like God carved him straight from heaven.

He checks every cupboard, searching for a glass. My beady eyes check every millimetre of his bulky frame searching for a sign this is not real.

But it is real.

I've watched enough of his movies to be familiar with every fine line of his face. Every slight indentation of his body. As an artist, it's my job to notice these things if I'm going to capture them on canvas. Portraits are my speciality.

Or were, before I was persuaded to get a 'real job'.

I painted a three-foot canvas of Savannah years ago and I still maintain it's my best work yet. That's probably the only reason I was allowed to hang it on my childhood bedroom wall.

The sound of water cascading against the sink jolts me back into the moment. Nate approaches cautiously, handing over the glass.

I down it, before handing it back to him like he's here to wait on me hand and foot.

'You're in shock.' His face is deadpan, but his pupils flicker with what looks like amusement.

'You would be too if you were in my position. I bet everyone you meet tells you the same thing, but I'm a huge fan.' And I've never been more aware of the fact I'm sitting in the poorest excuse of a nightdress, thanks to Savannah.

Though, would the paint-stained joggers have been worse than this desperate housewife-style, sexy scarlet number?

The jury's out.

The couch dips as Nate folds himself into the seat next to me. He shoots a fleeting glance at my thigh before focussing on my lips. 'You don't look like an action movie fan.'

I'm not an action fan, per se.

Just a Nate Jackson fan.

But I'm not about to ruin the most surreal moment of my life by sending him running out the front door. 'Looks can be deceiving.'

'Don't I know it?' He shakes his head ruefully and my eyes are drawn to his perfect bone structure. Sculpted, prominent cheekbones that would make any woman envious. The sharp jut of his roman nose. Those thick lustrous eyelashes that should be illegal on any man.

'You're not what I thought you'd be.' Even though the adrenaline is doing a sterling job of burning through the alcohol I consumed, it hasn't yet restricted my unruly tongue. 'Not that I've thought about you a lot. Much. Ever...'

Fuck's sake, Holly, could you be any less cool? If Savannah and Ashley could see me now, they'd cringe. Hell, I'm cringing!

'Yeah?' The corners of Nate's eyes crinkle with amusement. 'What did you expect?'

'I don't know.' I shrug. 'I suppose in my fantasies, I never imagined you'd be so...nice. So normal. No offence, but you come across as pretty grumpy in your interviews.'

'You'd be grumpy too if everyone wanted a piece of you.' A smile lifts his lips, revealing his perfect Hollywood smile. 'Fantasies, you say?' Devilment dances in his darkening eyes.

I press my palms against my eyelids. 'Oh. My. God. I'm so sorry. I have no filter. Or manners apparently.' Heat flames my cheeks.

A low, gravelly chuckle penetrates the air.

'Want to hear something funny?' He readjusts himself in the seat, not waiting for my answer. 'Nobody ever called me nice before.'

I peek from behind my palms. 'Not even Celeste?' The media paint them as the perfect couple.

Visually, it's a statement I'd have to agree with. They look flawless together. Where he's the stereotypical tall, dark and handsome, she's the conventional tall, blonde and beautiful. Their contrast in colour alone is striking.

A resigned sigh slips from his lips. 'Celeste has called me many things. Not one of them was 'nice', I can assure you.' He glances towards the kitchen. 'In fact, she's the reason I took the job here. To prove I'm not a "one-trick pony".'

‘She said that?’ The cheek of her. How many Oscars has she won?

‘It was part of her justification for boning Spike Hancock.’ He raises a chunky metal wristwatch to his eyeline and squints at the screen. ‘We broke up about thirty-nine hours ago.’

‘Spike Hancock?’ My palm covers my mouth. ‘Holy shit. The man permanently looks like he stepped out of a hair salon. I’m not sure which of them is more beautiful, Celeste or him.’ It’s not a compliment. It’s the opposite, in fact. ‘Men should be men, you know...’

Instinctively, I slide closer across the couch to comfort him, my bare thigh falling against his coarse dark jeans. ‘Celeste is a fool.’

He shrugs, like he doesn’t care that the relationship half of Hollywood was obsessed with is over. Pensive eyes land on mine again. ‘Is there any more of that wine?’

I leap up, needing to put some distance between us before I do something really fucking stupid, like throw myself at the movie star next to me.

A man like him would have no interest in a woman like me.

‘There’s a whole basket of it. Cheese too. Are you hungry?’ Finally! The manners my mother impressed on me are kicking in.

This has to be the craziest night of my life.

‘Ravenous.’ His gaze roves over my nightdress and he arches one thick, inky eyebrow.

Is he fucking with me? Because for a split second there he looked like a lion assessing its prey.

But if he's a lion, I'm the black widow. Because, given half the chance, I would devour this man.

This visceral reaction is like nothing I've ever experienced before. Then again, I've never come face to face with a drop dead gorgeous, overtly sexual movie star before.

Who even am I?

Where is my social anxiety now?

Though one-to-ones are my forte. It's bigger numbers I struggle with.

'Are you...staying?' I can barely breathe while I wait for his answer.

'Do you mind? I don't have a whole heap of other options. I'll find somewhere else tomorrow.'

'No, I'll find somewhere else. I took this place as a....' The word "escape" flutters on the tip of my tongue before I catch myself. There's no way I'm going to admit my horrifying social status to the finest man on the planet. 'A last-minute thing.'

The heat of his eyes on mine burns my back as I strut towards the kitchen. I glimpse over my shoulder to check if I'm imagining the heated stare searing my skin. I'm not, but he drags his eyes away when he sees me looking.

I can't quite believe it. Nate Jackson is looking at me. Really looking at me. He could have any woman in the world.

Though, technically, I am the only woman in the world here right now.

'White or red?' Definitely the most surreal night of my life.

‘I’ll have whatever you’re having.’ He slips off his leather jacket and tosses it on the back of the couch. A tight white t-shirt clings to prominent pecs, fastening around his huge biceps. Both arms are fully covered sleeve tattoos. I’ve seen his markings before on my screen. It’s just so fucking weird seeing them in person. Knowing him, but not really knowing him at all. It’s a battle not to run over to him and run my tongue over each and every weaving millimetre of ink.

‘I probably shouldn’t have any more.’ Given the events of the last weekend, and because every nerve ending in my body is alight with a painful new awareness that can only be attributed to the man with the blisteringly potent sex-appeal across the room.

I’ve embarrassed myself enough for one month.

Year.

Lifetime probably.

The only saving grace is Nate Jackson practically lives on another planet. There’s no way he’s seen that awful video of me, even if it did go viral. He’s so far removed from my little world he may as well be from a parallel universe.

‘And I probably shouldn’t be drinking with a strange woman who refuses to tell me her name, crucifies Mariah Carey’s Christmas cracker, and apparently fantasises about me.’ He fires a wink in my direction, a grin lighting his entire face. ‘But hey, I’m an action hero. I like to live on the edge.’

‘Does my name even matter? You’ll forget me in a heartbeat.’ I give in to the inevitable and uncork another bottle of Sancerre with a gentle pop. ‘And as for Mariah, what I lack in talent, I make up for in enthusiasm.’

‘You look pretty unforgettable from where I’m sitting.’ Teasing pupils probe, penetrating my skin and seeping right into my soul. ‘Now that we’ve cleared that up, perhaps you’ll elaborate on those fantasies...’

‘I’m only human,’ I shrug, taking two fresh glasses out.

My comment is rewarded with another rich, throaty chuckle. ‘So am I.’

Twin pebbles harden beneath the flimsy material and my cheeks burn once again.

In some mad twist of unfathomable fate, Nate Jackson shows up when I can’t possibly feel any smaller or stupider, and I’m pretty tipsy, but I’d swear the man is actually flirting with me.

I pour the wine, watching as tiny inviting drops of condensation form tantalizingly on the glasses. It’s a miracle my shaky hands don’t pour the liquid all over the floor. ‘So, you’re shooting in Ballybowen?’

‘You’re not some sexily dressed paparazzi, are you? A conniving undercover reporter, determined to go that extra mile to nab a front-page-worthy story?’ He readjusts his back against the couch, mansplaying across the velvet.

‘Ha. Do I look like the paparazzi to you? Believe me, if I thought I was getting company, I would have dressed a little more appropriately.’ I cross the room and hand over the glass.

‘You look pretty perfect to me.’ He takes it and pats the sofa next to him.

‘I’ll cut some cheese.’ Oh fuck. That was almost as uncouth as ‘I carried a watermelon’.

He swirls the Sancerre in the glass and sniffs. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

From behind the safety of the kitchen island, I pull myself together. ‘Of course.’ Taking a selection from the basket, I begin slicing French squishy brie, smoked applewood cheddar, and creamy looking Camembert.

‘You would say that though, wouldn’t you?’ That billboard-worthy smile appears again. It would be enough to ruin my panties. If I had any on.

My eyes lock with his across the room. ‘You don’t know me. You’re never going to see me again after tonight. Tell me, or don’t tell me.’

‘Oddly, there’s something trustworthy about you, even though you *still* haven’t told me your name.’ Those full lips press against the glass, and he takes a long sip. His Adam apple bobs with a raw masculinity as he swallows. ‘Nice wine.’

‘It’s too nice. It’s got me into more trouble than you could ever imagine.’ My chest constricts with a fresh wave of anxiety.

Nate’s deep, gravelly voice is enough to drag me back into the moment. ‘Oh, believe me, ’ his eyes flick over my outfit again, ‘I can imagine.’

I find a plate and load it with cheese, some oat crackers, and a sprinkling of grapes. Balancing it on my right palm, I carry my own wine glass over to the couch with my left. Tootsie’s still out for the count. The poor little bitch has no idea what she’s missing.

Placing everything on the coffee table, I perch tentatively on the couch next to Nate.

‘So, this secret?’ I take a small sip from my own glass, conscious of pacing myself now. It would be dreadful to embarrass myself further. Or worse, pass out and miss the opportunity to spend one crazy night interrogating my celebrity crush.

He beckons me over with his index finger. ‘Come closer. We don’t want anyone else to overhear.’

My eyebrow darts up of its own accord. ‘Seriously, you’re in the wrong line of work. Comedy is definitely where you should be.’

‘You’re getting warmer.’ Those huge, enticing eyes twinkle as he pats the couch.

Shimmying my bum over the soft velvet, I can only pray I’m not ruining Sav’s fancy couch with my lack of underwear. In fairness, it is Nate Jackson. No woman in this position could be remotely dry in his proximity.

He’s so close I can smell him. Leather. Cedarwood soap and the slightest whiff of Sancerre on his lips. ‘You’re here to film something really crazy?’

‘Yep.’ Darkening eyes bore into mine with an intensity that smoulders. Every single cell in my body is vibrating with a carnality that I’ve never experienced in my life.

Is it any fucking wonder? The man is a Hollywood actor. He oozes star quality. His sheer presence radiates a vibe that makes you just want to capture him on camera and freeze this moment forever. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask for a selfie, but I just can’t do it.

His face drops in line with mine. Enormous pupils hone in on my lower lip. I catch it between my teeth, utterly aware of myself. And of him.

On the big screen, Nate Jackson is a fucking ride.

In reality, he's a fucking ruin.

Because I will never be right again after tonight.

He's probably used to picking up women whenever he wants. Wherever he wants.

I'm nothing special.

But the way those bright eyes blaze over my body makes me feel like I am.

Chapter Seven

.....
NATE
.....

She has no idea how sexy she is.

And that fact alone only makes her even sexier.

An irrational urge to kiss her swirls in my stomach.

Which is utterly inappropriate. Worse than inappropriate, it would be taking advantage. She's in awe of my fame, I get it. It weirds people out to see people they watch on the TV in the flesh.

Will that stop me? The way my dick is throbbing in my pants, possibly not.

She's clearly been drinking, though my arrival definitely sobered her up. Mariah has long since left the building. I just have no idea who I'm left with.

It's like I conjured up this beautiful brunette in front of me or something. If Jayden could see me now, he'd have a heart attack. Next, I'll be ordering that Ferrari.

'Tell me your name and I'll tell you about the new movie.'
I sit back, giving the illusion I'm respecting her space, but the truth is, apart from battling the urge to kiss her, I have a better view of the entire package from slightly further away. The lack of a bra definitely doesn't do anything to diminish the desire coursing to my cock.

She's the polar opposite of Celeste. Of most women I've dated since Sally. That's probably what's so alluring about her.

'You overestimate my interest in action movies.' She bites her lower lip again.

Why won't she just tell me her goddamn name?

'It's not an action movie.'

Those blue eyes lighten. 'Oh, so it really is top secret, then?'

'Almost as classified as your name.' My index finger taps the glass impatiently. I'm not used to being kept waiting.

Huge, doe-like eyes raise to meet mine. 'It's Holly.'

Finally.

'Nuclear codes have been handed over quicker. Holly is a beautiful name. And very fitting, given how you so enthusiastically belt out Christmas songs. Pleased to meet you, Holly.'

'Funny.' She rolls her eyes and I feel oddly comfortable with her. Like we've been exchanging this playful banter forever. 'Now, the movie?'

I take a sip of my wine, mentally preparing myself for the laughter I'm certain will follow. The whole world will guffaw when they see what I'm trying to pull off. For the millionth time, I wonder what the fuck I'm doing here. 'It's a Hallmark Christmas romance.'

'Wow.' Genuine enthusiasm affects her tone. 'That's amazing.'

'Really?'

‘Yes! I bet they wanted a brooding bad-boy for a male lead, right?’ She crosses her legs beneath her bum and I do the polite thing and avert my gaze, even if my delinquent brain begs me not to.

‘Do I look like a brooding bad boy to you?’ My head dips closer into her personal space.

‘Oh, come on!’ She swats my arm in a playful gesture, but there’s nothing playful about the crackling electricity shooting up my arm at her touch. ‘With that ink, you’re the *ultimate* brooding bad boy. And it’s set here in Ireland?’

‘Right here in Ballybowen. Most of it, anyway.’

‘Typical.’ She exhales a heavy sigh. ‘My friend, Sav, assured me this is the quietest place in the country. That nothing ever happens here. And now it’s going to be crawling with paps tearing the place down in search of you and your co-stars. I’m going to have to emigrate. There’s no other option.’

‘Wow. That’s a bit dramatic, isn’t it? No one knows we’re here, and even if they do find out, we’ll be gone before Christmas.’

‘So will I. Or shortly after, anyway. If I have anything left to go back to, that is.’ Her forehead creases.

Enlightenment creeps in.

The wine consumption.

The reluctance to reveal her name.

Her ‘last-minute trip.’

‘Who are you hiding from?’ My palm finds its way to her knee. It’s meant to be reassuring, but the chemistry that crackles between us is anything but.

‘Ha! The entire universe. That’s who.’ She shakes her head as a sad laugh leaves her lips.

Who is this woman?

So open and refreshing in some ways and so goddamn mysterious in others. I haven’t been this intrigued by a woman in years.

Or as primally attracted to one.

Perhaps because I’ve never let myself. Not after the first time. The reason I don’t usually date brunettes isn’t because I don’t like them.

It’s because I do.

‘I know the feeling. Believe me.’ I place my wine glass on the coffee table next to the untouched plate of cheese.

Fragility lurks beneath her tipsy humour. This woman is broken somehow. But she’s far from defeated.

Holly shifts in her seat, swivelling towards me. ‘Did you ever do something so fucking stupid, so careless, that the repercussions may actually haunt you forever?’

‘Not yet.’ I don’t voice that I might be about to.

And I’m not referring to the Hallmark movie.

I’m referring to this. Whatever ‘this’ is between us. I don’t sleep around. Especially not with ordinary women who could potentially sell their sordid story to the media.

Though there is nothing ordinary about Holly.

The chemistry is palpable. It sizzles through the air in an invisible circuit. She feels it; I know she does. Desire plumes between us.

Tonight, for one night only, I'm going to do something unpredictable. Something reckless. Something physical to burn off this energy thrumming between us. If she'll let me, that is.

My hand tingles to touch her. Before I can stop myself, my palms are cupping her face, tilting it upward, forcing her to look at me.

To see me.

To see the want in my eyes.

The need.

The hunger.

To show her that she's not the only one with fantasies.

The urge to unleash myself on her, right here, right now, overwhelms me.

I should leave.

She could kiss and tell to every single newspaper or gossip blog in the world. Yet somehow, I know she won't. She'll keep my secrets. Tuck them away with her own.

Without moving a millimetre, she drinks me in like I'm some sort of god.

If only she knew the truth.

I'm more like the devil with these sinful thoughts spiralling through my brain.

'I know this is pretty presumptuous of me, given that I know nothing about you, Holly, but can I kiss you?' My dick is straining so ardently against my jeans they're in danger of splitting.

‘You want me to be your revenge fuck?’ The breath rushes from her chest straight into my mouth and I savour every molecule. ‘Are you hoping I’m going to sell my story to the papers? That Celeste will see you’re not sitting around moping?’ Those heaven-sent lips lift into a challenging smirk.

‘Sweetheart, I already know you’re not going to sell anything to the papers. You told me you’re in hiding.’

‘True.’ She shrugs.

I inch forwards, closing the distance between us. ‘I’m going to ask you one more time, Holly. Can I kiss you?’

The briefest nod of her head provides the permission I’ve been seeking.

Tilting her chin upwards, I cup her face and bring my mouth to meet hers. A tingling sensation soars from her soft, sweet lips and goes straight under my skin. She tastes of Sancerre and sin. And tonight, that’s exactly what I need.

My hand falls to her shoulder, trailing across her clavicle, chasing goosebumps. This force between us is animalistic.

I might be an actor, but I’ve never acted like this in my life. It’s irrational. It’s instinctive. I want her.

And I always get what I want.

Chapter Eight

HOLLY

There really must be such a thing as the yin and the yang.

Karma.

Balance.

Like every bad deed is somehow matched by a good. Because the worst day of my entire life has somehow morphed into the best night of my entire life.

Unless I'm dreaming.

In which case, I never want to wake up.

Ever.

Nate Jackson's hand is skimming over my skin in a way that has me squirting. Too much info? Sorry, not sorry. My poker hard nipples are shamelessly begging him to touch them.

Firm lips part mine wider, that rough stubble scratching so deliciously against my jawline. I can only imagine what it would feel like between my thighs.

Nate's hands slide downwards, but not to where I need them. Hot palms skirt either side of my breasts before sliding downwards and settling on my waist. Disappointment sears through me for a split second, right until he tightens his grip

and tugs me onto his lap as if I weigh two stone instead of almost ten.

I am straddling Nate Fucking Jackson.

Nate Jackson's rock-hard action man cock is beneath me and I have no underwear on.

How is this my life?

Actually, it's not my life, it's just *one night* in my life, and I'd do well to remember it. Nate's probably done this a million times before.

I'm under no illusion I'm special.

His mouth moves back from mine enough for him to ask, 'Is this okay?'

It's more than fucking okay. And it's nowhere near okay. Because it's not enough.

I've never had a one-night stand in my entire life.

Never.

My super-religious mother firmly instilled in me at a very impressionable age that girls who put out on the first date don't get asked out again.

But this is not a date.

It's some mad twist of fate.

One crazy random night, which will never be repeated. A gift from the universe. I'd be a fool to let it pass by. It's like winning the trip of a lifetime, but instead of riding a plane to some exotic beach destination, I'm riding Nate Jackson's cock all the way to heaven.

If he wants me, there's no way I'm going to turn him down. But I'm not going to throw myself at him either. I do

have some self-respect, despite what that fucking video portrays.

Every muscle in my body tenses at the memory.

My boobs have gone viral.

The shame.

Nate mistakes my tension for apprehension and pulls back another inch. ‘Sorry, I got carried away. I shouldn’t have yanked you on top of me like that...’

‘It’s fine. It’s not that.’

Earnest eyes bore into mine. Genuine concern etches into the lines of his face. ‘What then?’

‘I just had a flashback, and I was horrified.’ I smile my reassurance and place my hands over his on my waist.

‘For a second I thought maybe I horrified you.’ Nate nudges his rock-solid cock a fraction beneath me and my head rolls backwards in pure pleasure.

‘Careful your romance movie doesn’t get mistaken for a thriller.’ I grind back against him, revelling in the friction. ‘If the camera adds inches as well as pounds, this thing could be mistaken for a weapon of mass destruction.’

I’m rewarded with a low, guttural laugh and a slow, deep hip thrust.

‘There will be no dick shots in the romance movie.’ His lips trail across my neck as his hands slide beneath my nightie to rest at the tops of my thighs. Twin thumbs stroke the soft inner skin in a torturously teasing fashion. ‘Apart from the fact it’s a Hallmark, and cleaner than my mother’s squeaky kitchen floor, I’m very particular about who gets to see my cock.’

My nipples stiffen further against the crimson silk. ‘Is that right?’

‘Yep. Some things are sacred, you know? I usually have a girlfriends-only policy.’ He pins me a stare that dares me to challenge him.

‘Oh.’ My face falls.

I’m not his girlfriend. Nor am I ever likely to be. But on the plus side, he clearly doesn’t sleep around.

His lips quirk. ‘But I might make an exception for the brunette straddling me, given that she’s so stunning and mysterious.’

I recover surprisingly quickly for a woman who’s practically quivering with lust. ‘You’re very forward, you know. Who says I want to see your cock? Anyone would think you were a movie star or something.’

‘Sweetheart, I can feel the hot pulsing of your pussy through these jeans. You don’t just want to see it, you want to feel it. I’d bet my life, if I were to lift you off me now, the denim would be soaked.’

That filthy mouth is my undoing. If I were in any doubt if I was going to have sex with Nate Jackson, it’s over. I am going to ride him like it’s my last night on this earth.

‘Well, seeing as the stakes are sky high,’ I shrug the strappy material from my shoulder and let it drop down my arm, ‘and it’s your life we’re talking about here. Maybe you should check.’

‘For a woman I’ve only just met, you’re awfully concerned about my welfare.’ His face hovers millimetres in front of mine and I inhale his hot breath. Heated eyes lock with mine

and smoulder as his tongue darts out and traces the outline of my lips.

Holy fucking hell. Even if this man wasn't a movie star, even if I hadn't had a crush on him for my entire adult life, I still wouldn't hesitate to jump him, because Nate Jackson in the flesh is the hottest man I've ever met. He oozes more sex hormones than a strip club. Not that I'd know. Hopefully, I won't have to get a job in one like Savannah suggested.

Those thumbs inch higher. Any second now he's about to find out first hand exactly how wet his jeans are. 'I'm guessing you have life insurance and you don't want to pop it before you take Celeste off the policy.'

'She was never on the policy. She was also never spread out across me like this, with a dripping pussy and a smart mouth.' His teeth nip my neck territorially.

What? If Nate Jackson were my boyfriend, I'd straddle him like this all day, every day. 'As I said, I'm only human.'

His right thumb edges further upwards and it's a battle to breathe. 'And as I said, so am I.'

The rough pad of his thumb swipes through my centre and I gasp so loudly I swear my pearl-clutching parents hear me in Dublin.

His smug smirk extends all the way to his eyes. 'No underwear? You really are asking for trouble.'

I can't even think of a one-liner, let alone a witty one. I can't think of anything at all. Other than Nate's thumb sliding through my slickness at a pace slow and sensual enough to send me over the edge, sooner rather than later.

The man is talented. Sex exudes from those dark, lust-filled pupils all the way down to his bulging cock.

‘So. Fucking. Wet.’ He removes his thumb and I physically cry out in desperation. Placing it between his wide smooth lips, he licks as his eyelids half close. ‘I’m going to need more of that.’

In one swift motion, he tears off the crimson silk like the action hero he’s meant to be. The perusal of his eyes over my body is like a caress.

I’m bare for him. Burning for him. This man makes me want to do things I’ve never done before. Makes me wonder how the hell I ever thought I was shy, because right here, right now, I’m not wearing a single stitch of clothing. I’m dripping on to an (almost) stranger’s lap and watching him taste me from his thick fingers, and I’m not even a teeny bit bashful.

‘So fucking sexy, Holly.’ His mouth captures my breast, sucking hard enough to make me cry out again. Expert fingers return to my core, devastating my vagina forever.

‘Nate, I’m going to...’

His thumb circles my swollen clit as his fingers dip inside of me. That magic mouth moves to my other nipple. I want to come, but I don’t want this to end. I want to do this forever, or all night at least.

Hot white jolts of electricity surge through every cell in my body. I shudder and shake through a climax so powerful it’s debilitating. Every time I think it’s subsiding, another hot wave detonates until I’m utterly spent, trembling on top of the man who just ruined me.

Because I am ruined.

How can anyone else compare to that?

‘Did I mention how fucking hot you are? How watching you come undone on my fingers was the most fun I’ve had all

year?’ Nate tilts his head to the side, a satisfied smirk lifting his lips.

‘Is that some sort of joke?’ The man is a poster pin-up. Hell, his posters were pinned all over my bedroom (well, the inside of my wardrobe door. I wouldn’t have dared to pin anything to the jacquard wallpaper in my parents’ house).

‘Do I look like I’m laughing?’

He doesn’t. He looks extraordinarily serious. Emphasis on the extraordinary. And his fingers are still inside me.

Inching backwards over his huge thick thighs, I reach for the buckle of his trousers, silently seeking permission with my eyes.

‘I don’t do this. Ever.’ Those perfect white Hollywood teeth bite into his lower lip. ‘Fuck, Holly, look what you’ve done to me.’

And I do look, right as his enormous cock springs from that zip.

‘So fucking hot.’ I use his own words. They’re only the truth. I swipe across his glistening tip with my thumb, then place it in my mouth. ‘So. Fucking. Wet.’

His head lolls back against the couch as he watches me lick his slickness. ‘You should have been an actress; you learnt all my lines without even trying.’

‘So they were just lines, were they?’ I suck my thumb harder and take his impressive length in my other hand and pump.

‘No, sweetheart. They weren’t “just lines.” Funnily enough, they came straight from my emotionally stunted soul.’

I have no idea what he's talking about, but it doesn't matter.

Thank fuck Savannah packed condoms. I'm going to need them. Now.

Nate takes his cock from my hands and rubs the tip of it against my slippery entrance.

'Let me get something.' I scoot backwards over his rigid quads and stand like a baby fawn taking its first steps, legs trembling clumsily beneath me. 'I'll be right back.'

I wobble up the stairs and fumble in my suitcase for the one thing I was certain I wasn't going to need.

'Hurry, Holly. I need you.' Nate's gritty voice demands from below.

I grab two shiny squares for good measures and catapult back down the stairs. He's waiting in the same position on the couch. Jeans undone, cock standing to attention like a general ready for action.

My legs slide over his as I open the condom with my teeth and roll it over his thick length.

Grabbing my hips, he lifts me up like I'm weightless and positions his tip at my slick entrance. I don't wait for him to push himself in. Parting myself wider, I take him in, inch by life-affirming inch.

This afternoon, I wanted to die of shame.

Perhaps I did?

Because this feels like fucking heaven.

'Holly, you're killing me.' He drives into me, thrusting upwards as I roll my hips over and over and over again. Firm

fingers grip my ass, pumping me harder on top of him.

It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. Nor am I ever likely to again. Which is why I'm giving him everything I've got.

My thighs tighten and tremble as blinding white light builds behind my eyelids for the second time in minutes. My vision tunnels. The world melts away.

I am having sex with Nate Jackson.

The man I've fantasised about for years.

But no fantasy could ever trump the real thing. Because he isn't a movie star. He's a fucking god.

Rough hands palm my breasts as he devours my mouth with an insatiable hunger. When his thumb circles my clit again, my orgasm engulfs me, and I come even harder than the first time.

Hard enough to send him catapulting over the edge and into oblivion with me.

Chapter Nine

.....
NATE
.....

22nd November

Early morning light casts shadows across the varnished wooden floor of an unfamiliar bedroom. A thick ivory rug punctuates the centre of the room, mirrored wardrobes line the far wall, capturing an image of myself the media would pay a mountain of money for.

Next to me, Holly's glossy chestnut hair fans out across the pillow, one arm slung over her head, the other snaked around my middle. Her lower half is tucked beneath the luxury Italian bedsheets, while the other half is on display for my own personal pleasure.

What a night.

It's better than any movie script. From the crazy meet-cute, to the insane and instantaneous chemistry, and the forced proximity of sharing this house for the night.

I'd forgotten what it was like to be with a real woman. One who isn't terrified to be herself. A woman who isn't so concerned with their own outer packaging that she can't just let go and enjoy what we were put on this planet to do.

Celeste and I hadn't been intimate in months, even before she was boning Spike Hancock. We blamed our crazy schedules, but the truth is, if I'd have felt a fraction of the

attraction for Celeste as I felt for Holly last night, I couldn't have let it go days, let alone months, without being inside her.

When Celeste and I did get round to having sex, it had to be with the lights off, because God forbid I might spot a millimetre of cellulite that couldn't be concealed with an airbrush. And she'd hop out the bed the second it was over to take a shower and bandage her body in some sort of seaweed wrap.

Hello, I have four sisters. I'm aware women have to do more than wash and spray on deodorant, but it would have been nice if every now and again that could have been thrown to the wayside in favour of a bit of actual intimacy.

Like the strangely addictive postcoital snuggling that occurred here last night.

Fuck, if the world got even a whiff of the shit flooding through my mind right now, perhaps my upcoming romance role wouldn't be quite so shocking.

Holly wriggles closer in her sleep, pressing her chest into my side. She's so small next to me. I inhale her hair. It smells like freshly squeezed limes, and they're my new favourite scent.

Will she be weird with me when she wakes up?

The movie star thing can be a little overwhelming.

If the press get a sniff that I'm in the country, I'll be hunted like the last fox of the season. If they get any idea that mere hours after breaking up with Celeste, I'm holed up playing house with some...

Shit, I don't even know what Holly does for a living.

Or her last name.

Or where she's from.

Or what she's running from.

Why do I feel like I know her, when in reality, I know nothing about her?

Well, apart from the swell of her breasts and the feel of her clenched...

I digress.

If the press got wind I was holed up with... a stunning brunette hours after Celeste and I split up, Holly's tranquil hideout would be transformed into a circus filled shit show and it would be all my fault. The thought causes an ache deep in my temple.

I should be tired, between the travelling, the jet lag and the four-hour workout Holly gave me between the couch and this bed, but instead I'm wired. A weird, unfamiliar excitement thrums through my veins. Like I'm on the verge of something big.

Is it the movie?

The fact I'm on Irish soil for the first time in years and I've barely thought about Sally-Ann since I stepped into this house?

I'm restless, as ever. Utterly unable to relax for even ten minutes.

The need to do something eats at me.

Read my script.

Learn my lines.

Familiarise myself with the small town of Ballybowen. Locate the set maybe, even though I'm not due there until this

afternoon.

Find alternative accommodation, because even though I wouldn't be averse to a repeat of last night, for all I know, Holly could have been ticking 'bang someone famous' off a mental list I didn't even know she'd composed.

The chemistry between us was like nothing else. The need to do it again claws at me. Because right now, this mysterious stranger is my favourite source of nutrition, and I am beyond famished.

Maybe an illicit fling is just what the doctor ordered.

Would Holly be up for it?

Looks like we're both stuck in this tiny, quiet town for a few weeks, anyway. To me, it seems imprudent not to make the most of it.

I certainly wouldn't turn down the opportunity for another round or twelve of that uninhibited, animalistic, life-affirming sex.

It was supposed to be a one-night stand, but it was more like one night on a pedestal, because no sexual experience before came even close to it.

A niggle of unease slivers into my stomach.

Dating a normal girl didn't work out so well before.

Then again, I'm not talking about dating Holly. I'm talking about revelling in her body. Drowning in the chemistry between us for a week or two.

My idle mind is dangerous. I need to get up.

After creeping out of bed, I pull on last night's clothes without even bothering to shower. I need some fresh air before

the walls, and my own brain, close in on me.

Shooting one last look at sleeping beauty, I pad through to the living area. Holly's fluffy white dog is still curled up in its tartan bed, paws up in the air in a blissful state of slumber. One eye opens as she checks me out before lazily flopping over again. Some guard dog she is.

My stomach growls noisily. Grabbing the keys to the Audi, I slide on my leather jacket. I'm not a kiss-and-run type of guy, which is why I'll return with breakfast once I've checked out this tiny town in the daylight.

A pair of over-sized sunglasses rest on the kitchen worktop. They could pass for unisex. Well, from a distance at least. Can't be too careful. The freedom of being able to walk around without an entourage of security is something I'm not ready to jeopardise.

I peep into the bedroom again. Holly's still unconscious.

With a bit of luck, I'll be back before she even realises I've left.

In the hallway, I pass the suitcase I'd abandoned there.

Was it really only ten hours ago I stumbled in on that Mariah impression? I shake my head, barely suppressing my snigger.

Wheeling the case out to the car, I lift it into the boot. There has to be a hotel round here somewhere. It's such a shame this place was double-booked because it's glorious. Though if it wasn't double-booked, I wouldn't have experienced the best sex of my life last night, several times over.

Can't win them all, I guess.

Seagulls screech overhead and a chilly wind blows in directly from the Atlantic. The tide is high. Waves crash thunderously against thousands of round, smooth stones, dragging them back out with a soothing, rhythmic, rolling sound that no relaxation app could adequately reproduce.

I feel lighter than I've felt in months. Maybe even years. And not just my balls. My soul feels happier or something. It's surprisingly good to be home. In Ireland, I mean. The rugged coastline is hard to beat.

I just hope to fuck I don't ruin it all by embarrassing myself in this new project.

Cruising past the pier, I pass a woman setting up what looks like a coffee caravan decked out in tinsel and flashing red and gold Christmas lights, complete with a sign that says, 'Even Santa needs coffee. Fuel up here.'

At least I know which way to come home.

Home? For fuck's sake. Back I mean. I know which way I'll drive back to bring breakfast to Holly. I've already broken all my other habits, may as well forgo the egg white omelette too. Fresh coffee and buttery croissants might lubricate Holly's perfect pouty mouth.

I have so many questions. Starting with her last name. Occupation. Who she's hiding from. If she wants a repeat...

Around the next bend, my eyes are drawn to a sign for a hotel called The Ocean Palace. If the weathered sign is anything to go by, I doubt there's anything palatial about it, but it'll have to do. Indicating left, I climb the winding dirt track all the way to a large white building.

It's definitely not fancy, but the view of the beach is outstanding. Only six cars occupy the car park. If I was hoping

there would be no room at the inn, and I'd have to go beg to sleep in Holly's stable, I'm right out of luck.

I abandon the Audi across two spaces and jog up the steps and in through the automatic sliding doors. A hit of heat bursts against my face. I probably look like a total dick in these sunglasses, but it's a risk I'll have to take.

A grey-haired woman in her mid-fifties raises her head from a granite topped reception desk. Other than her, there isn't another sinner around. The soles of my boots squeak against the polished floor tiles as I approach.

'Hi, I'm wondering if you have a room available?'

If she recognises me, it doesn't show. I rub my hand over my two-day-old stubble. Hell, I probably wouldn't even recognise myself under this level of growth.

Holly's bound to have a stubble rash today. Everywhere. For some reason I like that I've marked her as mine. I bite back a smirk at the thought.

'Mister, I have a whole floor for you, if you want it.' Her chirpy words ring with heart and humour.

'I'll take it.' I nod and pull out my wallet from my jacket.

Her silvery head cocks to the side. 'You are joking, I presume?'

'No.' I slide my Amex card over.

'When I said I have an entire floor, I meant the bridal suite.' Her fingers skim over my credit card.

'That's perfect.' I nod and motion for her to swipe the card.

‘How many nights would you like to stay for, sir?’ Laser eyes peer inquisitively at my sunglasses.

‘Four, maybe five weeks?’

‘It’s four hundred euro per night.’ She swallows hard, like she’s delivering a blow. What she’s actually delivering is a bargain.

‘That’s fine.’ I motion for her to charge my card.

‘I’ll just take some details Mr...?’

An hour and a half later, I swing back into the driveway of Ard Na Mara. The smell of fresh, warm croissants wafts deliciously through the Audi as I pull up on the asphalt.

The Mini that was parked outside last night is gone.

I leap from the car and rattle the front door handle, instinctively knowing already that it’s locked.

Holly’s gone.

My heart sinks.

So does my semi-hard dick.

But given my track record with women, it’s probably for the best.

Chapter Ten

.....
HOLLY
.....

A woody, masculine scent stirs me from the most decadent dream that Nate Jackson was on top of me, resting the weight of that gorgeous, ripped body on his elbows. His huge, thick length sliding in and out, hard enough to render me sore in the most gratifying manner.

The burn down there is real.

A hard hit of adrenaline ejects into my bloodstream. My eyelids fly open. I jolt upright clutching the soft silky bedsheets to my chest.

I *did* have sex with Nate Jackson.

Last night comes crashing back like a swirling, erratic tornado bombarding my brain.

Crucifying Mariah Carey.

Nate's laughter. His surprising warmth.

The way he eye-fucked me in that ridiculously indecent nightie before actually fucking me in forty different ways.

My palm sweeps over the empty bed beside me. Looks like my mother was right. If you put out, they run out.

His clothes are gone from the floor.

I don't need to get up to know he isn't here. Silence rings through the air. But his scent lingers. It's just a crying shame he didn't linger along with it.

Though, seriously, what did I expect?

The world's hottest movie star stumbles into my hideout (well, technically it's his, but whatever), sees me in all my hot-mess glory, and by some mad, crazy plot twist, finds me attractive enough to have mind-blowing, leg-shaking, earth-shattering sex with.

Four times.

Did I seriously expect him to still be here in the morning?

In an expectation that's even madder than Nate finding me attractive in the first place, yes, for some ludicrous reason, I *did* expect him to still be here.

Because the way those mesmerising emerald eyes bored into mine, and the way his huge hands tenderly cupped my face and caressed my body, I could have sworn he was almost as into it as I was.

They weren't "just lines". They were straight from my emotionally stunted soul.

But then again, the man does get paid millions to pretend.

I fling back the covers, my feet sinking into the thick, luscious rug, along with my heart.

How does a woman even process this kind of thing, let alone get over it?

On the plus side, it's doing a stellar job of distracting me from that viral video. A shudder rips over my spine and it has nothing to do with the November morning and everything to do with my mother, my uncle Richard, and the entire world

witnessing my boobs do their own Christmas smut-tactular version of the Charleston.

Is twenty-four hours too soon to hope the entire thing has blown over?

I hit the remote control to open the electric blinds (I'm totally getting Kate Winslet in *The Holiday* vibes; I just wish I could muster some of her enthusiasm). The wild Atlantic Ocean crashes viciously onto the rocks below. I could watch it all day, except I have to call Savannah. She will never believe it. Fuck, I wouldn't even believe it either if my vagina wasn't red raw.

And I should probably pack because this place is Nate's. His agent paid for it fair and square, and I am basically no better than a common squatter.

I throw on another indecent nightie and saunter through Sav's gorgeous villa to the kitchen. If I owned this place, I'd never leave it. But then Sav does have the twins to think of. And her business, I guess.

Tootsie rolls over in her bed, opens one eye, and then rolls up to a standing position. They do say dogs are often like their owners. Tootsie and I could both sleep for Ireland.

Scratching her head affectionately, I sweep her up into my arms. 'Oh Toots, you have no idea what you missed last night. It's probably a good job you sleep like the dead because I'm not sure you're old enough to sit through the kind of show that we put on.'

My phone taunts me from the coffee table. Unable to hack the incessant notifications from everyone I know, and the likes and shares from everyone I don't, I turned it off, but it's probably time to face the music.

As it powers up, I switch on Sav's fancy coffee maker in a dream-like state.

Nate Fucking Jackson was here.

In this very kitchen.

In me.

It's so surreal.

The phone rings in my hand just as I'm about to take my first badly needed mouthful of rich black caffeine. It's Savannah.

'Hello?'

'Thank God, you're alive!' Savannah screeches across the phone line.

'Of course I'm alive.'

'Jesus, when I didn't hear from you three thousand times last night, I was worried you'd flung yourself off my gorgeous terrace and directly into the ocean. Conor is worried sick about you. He called me ten times. I assured him you're safe.'

'Dramatic, much?' I take a huge mouthful, knowing that once I start to tell her about Nate, I won't be able to stop.

'Excuse me if your brother and I are worried about your mental health after the worst day of your life.'

'You're not going to believe this, Sav.' Last night's memories flash through my brain like a digital slideshow. 'It actually turned out to be the best day of my life, as well as the worst.'

'What happened?' Savannah demands.

'Nate Fucking Jackson turned up here last night.'

‘WHAT?’ Her screams are probably audible in Antarctica.
‘Nate Jackson? The movie star? Fuck. Off.’

There’s no controlling my mouth now. ‘Seriously.’ I take another sip of coffee while she processes.

‘SHUT THE FUCKING FRONT DOOR!’

I hold the phone as far away from my ear as possible while a river of mesmerised profanities stream from my beautiful friend. She’s only expressing my own exact emotions.

‘How? When? Why?’

I tell her everything. And I mean everything. We’ve been friends for twenty-five years. There are no secrets.

‘Was he as good as he looks?’ Her dreamy tone floats over the phone.

‘Better.’

‘Did you come?’

‘Four, no wait, five times.’ My vagina clenches at the superlative memories.

‘Oh. My. God,’ Savannah sighs. ‘I’ve had celebrities rent before, but no one of his status. No wonder the company dealing with the rental was so cagey and secretive.’

‘About that, I should go.’ I drain the rest of my coffee, needing at least three more before I can think straight.

‘Go where?’

‘Anywhere. I can’t stay here. Nate paid for it fair and square, or someone did.’

‘You’re not going anywhere. I haven’t heard anything from the company that booked it and even if I do, they cancelled. I’m allowed to re-let.’

‘I don’t know, Sav. It doesn’t feel right. I feel like I’m stealing or something. Taking something that isn’t mine.’

‘Oh honey, by the sound of it, Nate had no problem taking what wasn’t his too!’ She snorts at her own joke. ‘I can’t actually believe it. Isn’t he dating Celeste Occhialini?’

Tootsie licks my hand and I gather she’s hungry. I fill her bowl, place it on the kitchen floor, and she eats like she’s been starved for days. ‘They broke up.’

‘Good. He comes across as a grumpy, tough type, but at least he’s not the cheating type.’ Savannah can’t bear infidelity, which makes me think the twins’ dad was unfaithful. Not that she’ll ever elaborate.

‘What if he comes back?’ Savannah pushes the one button I can’t.

‘If he does, it’s for your stunning villa, not me.’ A sigh slips from my lips. ‘Do you know the really mad thing?’

‘Go on.’ Savannah sounds as dazed as I feel.

‘It’s going to sound completely crazy. Even crazier than him turning up in the first place.’

‘What?’ Impatience weighs on her tone.

‘I got the impression that he actually saw me.’ My stomach somersaults at the memories. At the tenderness of his touch and the juxtaposition of the roughness of his stubble. ‘And that he liked what he saw.’

‘Honey, from what you said, I think he saw every inch of you.’ Savannah snorts again.

‘Seriously, it was like he just got me or something. He was caring, tender, considerate. Not the moody man mountain the media portrays him to be.’ A whoosh of breath rushes from

my mouth. ‘But then again, the man is a professional actor. He was probably putting on the performance of his life. Pretending even to himself that I was the sexiest woman he’s ever seen to make it as good for him as it was for me.’

‘Holly Marie Hazelwood, you are probably the sexiest woman he’s ever seen. You are stunning. The only person who doesn’t know it is you.’ My friend’s loyalty knows no bounds.

To change the subject, I broach the other topic. The one I wish we could bury under the sand, instead of my head. ‘Dare I ask how that life-destroying video is going?’

Savannah pauses, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. ‘It’s going.’

Shit. I don’t even want to know how many hits that thing’s had.

‘Don’t think about it. Delete all social media apps from your phone and go and walk Tootsie on the beach. Take a spin to the pier. There’s a gorgeous coffee cart down there. Get some fresh air. Go to the art supply shop in the next town over and buy some paint. Rest. Heal. You’ve been through a lot. Lie low and trust that I am dealing with this.’

‘Thanks, Sav. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without you.’

‘As I said, you’ll never have to find out.’

We agree to catch up later. I throw on some clothes and get into the Mini.

Sav wasn’t lying about the coffee cart. It’s even decked out with festive, twinkling fairy lights. I order a gingerbread latte and pretend the woman serving me isn’t staring at me like she knows me.

Ten minutes later, Tootsie and I are strolling on the sandy beach, with the wind whipping through my matted-seriously-fucked-hair. I couldn't bring myself to shower Nate's sublime scent from my skin quite yet.

What a night.

Maybe I accidentally manifested it or something. Because I spent years visualising doing that with Nate Jackson.

Just a shame I didn't visualise doing it forever.

Because who the hell is ever going to match up to that?

Chapter Eleven

.....
NATE
.....

25th November

Things are crazy on set. I thought Hallmark movies were supposed to contain minimal drama and maximum happiness. Clearly, my co-star, Olivia Hansen-Lovett, didn't get the memo. She's playing Sasha, the long-lost love of my life.

The woman is a diva, if ever I met one. A ridiculous diamond-encrusted beret balances on top of her perfectly coiffed long dark hair. She's buttoned up to the neck in an ivory fur coat that she's done nothing but complain about for the last three hours we've been filming.

It's not like I'm super fond of the cashmere jumper they put me in, but let's get the fuck on with it. I swear, at one point, Olivia actually stamped her heeled foot on the faux snow scene, set against the background of Ballybowen's historic Newbridge Castle.

The stage production team have erected an elaborate water feature, a sixteen-foot Christmas tree, and thirty white silhouette reindeer fuelled by enough electricity to actually power a real-life magic flying sleigh.

The area is cordoned off to the public with nothing more than a little flimsy plastic tape around the three-acre perimeter, but there's not a soul to be seen anywhere, anyway. This place

is open in the summer like a National Trust park, but this time of year, the entire village is desolate.

The press will eventually get wind of this flurry of activity. Paps will be crawling around before we know it. Most of the actors and actresses have been assigned private rental properties to avoid being hounded. If the cat gets out the bag, so to speak, it'll probably be my fault for checking into the only hotel in the vicinity.

But what choice did I have?

Stay in bed with Holly that morning?

If she wanted to see me, I'm not exactly difficult to find. Instagram. Facebook. Contact my agent. Hell, I even set up a TikTok lately, not that I ever use it. I got six million follows in the first twelve hours and I don't even know how to work the damned thing.

The point is, it's not like I disappeared off the face of the earth.

Olivia's pacing through the fake snow, her hands flailing in front of her face. 'This stupid snow is ruining my hair. I can't work like this, people.' She screeches the word 'people' like they're her minions.

I can't work like this either.

But it has nothing to do with the fake snow, and everything to do with trying to mimic fake feelings for the diamond-encrusted monster in front of me.

It's looking increasingly like Celeste might be right.

I *am* a one-trick pony.

The producers have had us retake the same scene for what feels like five thousand times already. Yesterday wasn't much

better.

We have four, maybe five intense weeks of filming left before Christmas. Everybody wants to get in and out and get back to civilisation ASAP. No pressure or anything.

I need to get my head in the game, but it's nearly impossible when my head is still very much mentally buried between Holly, the mystery woman's, legs.

I've cruised by Ard Na Mara every day since the first night I arrived, and the Mini Cooper is never there.

Where did she go?

And why do I care so much?

I can't stop thinking about her.

I haven't had a crush like this since school. They're more debilitating than I remember.

'Nate. Hello? Earth to Nate?' Max, the director, is on set today with the face of a man who is beginning to realise he may have backed the wrong horse. He's a distinguished-looking type, with peppered grey hair, bucket loads of confidence and the physique of a retired athlete.

We've crossed paths several times over the years. Award ceremonies. Oscars. Parties. I don't know him as such. Max might have a serious reputation with the ladies, but from what I can gather, he has zero interest in Olivia, which is probably why she's being such a diva.

'You're supposed to be in love with her.' Max jerks his thick thumb towards Olivia roughly. 'You're supposed to have spent the last ten years pining after her. Ten years, man! Could you try to put some sort of emotion into this reunion?'

All eyes are on me. Despite the cold, the heat from the overbearing lighting is scalding my skin. I swallow back my irritation and nod at the camera crew, signalling I'm ready to go again.

The lines aren't a problem. I have a photographic memory. What I'm struggling with is the delivery of them. I need to picture someone else in front of me.

Get in the zone.

Feel something.

Fuck, maybe I am emotionally stunted.

'Where are the extras? This is supposed to be a castle hotel. The staff are supposed to be bustling around in the background,' Max booms, and three teenage girls scurry closer.

I clear my throat and on the camera crew's signal, deliver my lines again. 'Sasha,' I pause for dramatic effect, 'it's been a while.'

'Cut!' Max's deep voice yells again. His frustration cuts directly through the crisp air. 'More breathy. More gravelly. You're meant to be playing a rock star, Nate. Own it. And stare at her for three, no wait, four good long beats for effect. Gaze at her as if she's a magical gold-dusted fucking unicorn that you can't physically tear your eyes from.'

I inhale and exhale hard, trying to blow off this cloud hanging over me.

Why can't I just do it?

I'm an actor. It shouldn't matter if I can't stand the sight of Olivia Hansen-Lovett. Pretending comes with the job description.

I nod at the camera crew, signalling I'm ready to go again. 'Sasha,' I hold the pause for twice as long, emphasising the name like it's Holly's, 'it's been a while.'

Max lurches forwards again. 'Cut! Better, but still nowhere near good enough. I need emotion. I need passion. I need this to be sen-fucking-sational.'

I can't do it.

I should quit now before I embarrass myself any further.

They could replace me within a few days. It would set the schedule back, but better late than never. And the way I'm performing, never is looking increasingly likely.

'Go again,' Max barks through clenched teeth.

I readjust myself, straighten my shoulders. 'Sasha.'

A flurry of activity catches my eye behind Olivia's left shoulder. Dark curly hair blows behind a petite, doll-like frame. A familiar-looking figure chases a tiny white fluffy dog. I stare past Olivia like I'm looking at a fucking magical gold-dusted unicorn. Because I am.

The mysterious Holly is here, on set. Blowing in like fucking tumbleweed.

'It's been a while.' The words I've struggled with flow freely, overflowing with passion and emotion.

'Boom.' Max fist punches the air. 'Now, that is what I'm talking about!'

My lips part in a grin. Not at his praise, but at the woman high topping it towards us in a red puffa jacket and a black woollen bobble hat.

The production team finally notice her arrival.

‘You can’t be here,’ three security staff say in unison as Holly approaches, flaming-faced and flustered. ‘This is private property.’

‘Tell that to my dog.’ Holly points at the fluffy white ball who’s bounded straight onto the set and is currently dry humping Olivia’s calf.

‘Ahhh, get this little rat off me.’ Olivia’s leg swings back and forth, but the dog clings to it, thrusting against her like her life depends on it.

Perhaps the dog wasn’t asleep the other night after all, because those moves are pretty dang familiar to me.

‘Holly.’ Excitement courses through my chest along with something stupid, like hope.

‘Nate.’ She nods and stalks towards her dog, entangling its paws from Olivia’s skin-tight jeans.

‘Sorry about this, guys. I’m so sorry.’ Holly scoops the dog up into her arms and fastens a lead to her red leather collar before setting her down again. Huge blue eyes dart around, focusing on anyone but me.

‘Hey, you look really familiar.’ Max’s thumb roams thoughtfully over his designer stubble. ‘Did we work together before?’

Holly’s blushed cheeks deepens to a shade of violet. ‘I, err, no. I’m just here on holiday. Visiting. I mean, er - walking my dog. Sorry for the interruption. I assure you it won’t happen again.’

‘No way. I feel like we’ve met before. I know you, I’m sure of it,’ Max muses, raking his fingers over his temple. ‘I never forget a pretty face.’

‘Yuck! It jizzed on my leg!’ Olivia wails, frantically gesturing to her calf.

Holly’s head whips round. “‘It’ didn’t jizz on your leg! ‘It’ is a girl. And girls don’t do that kind of thing.’

My eyebrows rocket skywards. *Liar*. Girls *do* do that kind of thing.

And she is living proof of it.

Those startling azure eyes finally land on mine, and a flash of something flicks through them. I don’t doubt she’s conjuring up the exact same memories as me.

Her scarlet cheeks turn practically indigo. ‘Sorry for the intrusion, I swear we won’t bother you again.’

My face falls. Max doesn’t miss it, glancing between Holly’s retreating back and me.

‘Wait!’ he yells after her, his grey head darting between the two of us.

There’s a reason he’s in charge around here. In less than three seconds, he’s discovered my secret. That it was Holly’s arrival that enabled me to show the appropriate passion and enthusiasm to deliver my lines.

Holly’s head cranes over her shoulder. Her pace slows, but she doesn’t stop walking.

‘Wait, Miss... er...’ Max jogs after her.

‘Can we get back to it? My complexion is suffering in this dreadful climate,’ Olivia complains again.

My feet follow Max before I can think to stop them.

‘Holly, wait.’ My voice is rough with a need I don’t even pretend to hide.

Max glances between us again.

Holly's feet slow to a standstill, and she turns slowly, a look of reluctance carved on her pretty features. 'I swear, I didn't know you were here. I'm not some crazy stalker. I was simply taking Tootsie for a walk, somewhere I thought would be quiet. Somewhere I thought nobody would see us. I had no idea you were up here.'

'Believe me, I know you're not a crazy stalker.' It's me who's been driving past her house each day, not the other way round - worse luck.

What is it about this woman that draws me to her like a fucking magnet?

'You guys know each other?' Max struggles to catch up.

I say, 'Yes,' at the same time Holly says, 'No.'

'You have amazing chemistry.' Max lets out a low whistle. 'The second he spotted you, his entire demeanour transformed.'

'Thanks for that.' I shake my head and exhale a slow breath. So much for playing it cool.

'Holly, is it? Great to meet you.' Max takes her hand. When he pulls it to his lips to kiss the back of it, a tendon in my neck pulses erratically.

'How do you feel about being an extra in a Hallmark movie?'

Chapter Twelve

.....
HOLLY
.....

You'd think given the week I've had, I'd be all shocked out by now.

And all blushed out.

Apparently not.

My face flames as I stare back at Nate Jackson and some hot old guy offering me a position in a movie.

Could this week get any crazier?

If I wasn't currently hiding from the world, the answer would still be no. I might have lost my dress, then later my panties, but I haven't lost the anxiety that plagues me when I'm under the spotlight or forced to socialise with strangers.

About forty or fifty actors, producers and cameramen stare at our bizarre exchange. I imagine being coerced in amongst them. Absolutely no way.

'Er, thank you, but no.' I tug Tootsie away from the two men, but the little hussy doesn't want to go. Instead of following me, she nuzzles her furry cheek against Nate's black leather boots. His biceps flex beneath his cashmere jumper as he lifts her up into his arms. She licks his face and a deep rumbling laugh tumbles from his throat.

Swoon.

Bad enough he's Hollywood's hottest actor, and the best ride I've ever had, or am ever likely to have again, but it seems he's an animal lover too.

Panties ruined.

Again.

'I'm Max Carter, the director. I'd love to have your pretty face as an extra in this movie,' Mr Hot Old Guy says. His gaze drifts over my puffa jacket, like he's imagining what might be beneath it.

Or remembering. Cringe. It's no coincidence I look familiar. At the last count, my smut-tastic video has had over twenty million views.

'Seriously, we need you on set, Holly.' Max is still clutching my hand.

Nate watches on. A growl gurgles in his throat. It's enough to set Tootsie leaping from his arms and directly back into mine. If looks could kill, Nate's glower would leave Max bleeding out slowly in front of my eyes.

I've seen that glare before. It's the one Nate uses in his action movies, when he finally catches the bad guy he's been chasing for the past hour and forty minutes on the big screen, and he's about to blow him to smithereens before carrying his woman off into the sunset.

If only.

Max finally drops my hand. 'I know you. I know I do,' he repeats with a puzzled shake of his head. 'I just can't place you.'

Ground swallow me fucking whole. Please do not say it in front of Nate. Oh, the shame.

‘I have one of those faces.’ I edge backwards towards the flimsy tape cordoning off the set.

‘So, will you do it?’ Max is persistent, I’ll give him that. ‘You can be a waitress, or one of the hotel’s guests. We really need you around.’ He eyes Nate meaningfully, but I have no idea what that meaning is. ‘Three grand a week, cash.’

Three grand? Is he for real?

I’m acutely aware I may be out of a job and my mortgage isn’t going to pay itself.

‘Three grand a week?’ I squeak. It’s a hell of a lot more than what I earn at St. Jude’s. If I even have a job to go back to.

‘I, err... I’m not sure it’s my thing.’ I glance between Nate, Max, and the direction of my car, a kilometre away.

Isn’t Nate freaked out that the girl he shagged and bolted from is currently being offered a position in his movie?

It’s probably not what he imagined.

The prospect of seeing Nate every day, of getting the chance to admire him in action, is really fucking tempting, even without the three grand. If I could just get over my nerves.

Nate steps forwards and catches my wrist. ‘What is your thing, then?’

Heat sears between us. ‘Action movies,’ I quip.

‘Funny.’ He leans closer until his face is a breath away from mine. His voice drops to a barely audible whisper. ‘Yeah, I recall you enjoying a bit of action the other night.’ His tone is teasing, playful.

So why does shame rise in my chest like a spring tide?

It's three degrees out, but the urge to remove my jacket is overwhelming. Sweat trickles down my spine. Every ounce of blood in my body is either furiously pumping to my face or my vagina. 'Just so you know, I've never done anything like that before in my life.'

Nate's clear green eyes widen in mock surprise. 'You were a virgin?' That velvety voice continues to taunt me.

My palm lightly slaps the hand gripping my wrist and a fresh wave of electricity sparks between us. 'No, clearly I wasn't a virgin. But I was a one-night-stand virgin.'

Max hides his guffaw with a well-timed cough, watching our exchange like all he's missing is a bucket of popcorn. 'I guessed you two knew each other.' Grey eyes twinkle with open curiosity.

'I suppose it's not every day you're forced to share your house with a movie star.' A flicker of insecurity flashes across Nate's face.

Does he think I slept with him purely because he's famous?

'It's not every day I'm forced to share a house with the man whose posters I've been ogling since I was fifteen.'

A low guttural sound slips from his luscious lips. 'That's right. Those fantasies. Take the job, and who knows, we might be able to tick off a few more.'

I clench my thighs and press them together to stop myself from wriggling on the spot. *He wants me to take the job?*

Why did he sneak out of my house then?

Nate drops my wrist, his sculpted arms crossing over the cashmere jumper to rest on those perfectly pronounced pecs.

Max steps between us. ‘Three grand a week, Holly. That’s fifteen grand for five weeks of work. I don’t know what you normally do for a living, but unless it’s something you love, I’d seriously consider resigning.’

Accepting would help fund my art career if I really don’t have a job to go back to. But I’m supposed to be keeping a low profile. The last thing I need is to add fuel to the fire that’s already flaming my embarrassment.

Though I’m technically already on set and no one is pointing or laughing at me.

This lot are real celebrities. The chances are, none of them know or care about my fifteen minutes of shaming fame. Olivia Hansen-Lovett, Tootsie’s new friend, got her boobs out for a high school reunion movie a few years ago. That wasn’t a big deal.

I’m teetering on the edge, so tempted not just by the cash but by the opportunity to spend all day, every day, with Nate.

Could I do it? Get over my nerves for him?

For some mad reason, when he’s around, my anxiety feels minimal anyway. Like he’s got me. Perhaps it’s down to all the movies I’ve watched him in, where he always plays the hero. Maybe that’s the reason I feel safe with him.

Nate eyes me like he’s silently pleading with me to take it.

Why? What am I missing?

‘When will the movie air?’ Maybe if it’s next year, the whole viral video thing will be a distant memory.

‘Next October.’ Max confirms what I hoped. ‘I’d prefer to have waited to shoot in the summer, but this castle is apparently going to be occupied full time from March, so here we are.’

My eyes slide between the two men for a beat as I consider it. ‘The thing is, I’m really shy,’ I confess.

Nate’s lips lift at the corners. ‘Could have fooled me.’

‘No, seriously, I’m okay one-to-one, but big groups of people scare the shit out of me.’

‘There goes my plan for a hot tub orgy.’ Max slaps his thigh with a tsk.

Nate’s eyes narrow to slits. ‘Helpful, Max. Really fucking helpful.’

Max raises his hands in an unspoken apology. ‘Look, Holly, no offence, but you’re overthinking this. No one is going to be paying any of the extras any attention. Most of the actresses over there,’ he thumbs in Olivia’s direction, ‘are too stuck up their own backsides to talk to me. They’re certainly not going to bother you. You don’t have to say a word. All you have to do is stand around and look pretty.’

‘It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.’ Nate’s attention is like a physical force surrounding my body. Drawing me to him. Despite my apprehension, I don’t think I could say no if I tried.

‘Okay, I’ll do it.’

Max claps a palm on my back. ‘Head over to costume.’ He points at a marquee next to the grey brick castle that wouldn’t look out of place at a circus. ‘Macy will sort you out. You’ll need to sign a contract, including a non-disclosure agreement. Welcome to the cast. You start tomorrow.’

I swallow hard, processing for a beat. With a baffled shrug, I take a step towards the marquee, with Tootsie squirming in my arms.

For the millionth time this week, I wonder if I've been transported to a parallel universe.

'Wait a second,' Nate calls, shuffling from one foot to the other with an unreadable expression furrowing his features. 'Can I call over later?'

My ears are playing tricks on me. They have to be.

Nate's oceanic irises bore so deeply into mine, I could drown in them.

I can't breathe.

Can't even think straight when he's in front of me like this.

Why does he want me here? Why is he asking if he can call over? None of it makes sense.

The man is a goddamn movie star and the only thing I've starred in is an accidental Christmas viral video where I flashed my boobs.

He's like the brightest star glittering on top of the Christmas tree, and I'm the discarded cracker joke that people toss into the trash after an eye roll and a short-lived chuckle. If he had any idea what a laughingstock I am, would he want anything to do with me at all?

I distinctly remember him saying he keeps his junk in his trunks. *Some things are sacred.* Meanwhile, the whole world is currently looking, and laughing, at my 'sacred areas' which pretty much render them not especially sacred anymore.

I wet my lips. 'I...er...'

‘Please, Holly.’ Nate’s smooth voice drops. The scent of leather and cedarwood carries on the cool breeze and it’s a battle not to reach out and sniff his neck.

Every nerve ending revs to life inside me. My muscle memory remembers precisely what he’s capable of, no matter how many glasses of wine I had.

How can I say no?

Especially when I’ve forgotten any reason why I shouldn’t agree to it.

‘Sure.’ I shrug, feigning nonchalance.

I’m kidding no one, least of all myself.

His arms drop to his side and his shoulders sag in visible relief. ‘Does seven suit?’

I nod, because I’m at a loss for words.

‘You’ll be there?’

Why would he ask that? Did he come by? Because I wasn’t there the last couple of nights?

These past few days alone have been, well... lonely. I took Savannah’s advice and went to the art supply shop, Art Essence, reacquainting myself with the first friend I ever had, my paintbrush. While I was in there, I saw a sign for a local art exhibition and couldn’t resist. Even if it meant attending in my stylish bobble hat and a pair of cheap glasses I picked up in the Euro Shop because I have no idea what happened to my sunglasses.

I nod. ‘I’ll be there.’

I had planned on spending the afternoon and evening painting something for Savannah to hang on her walls. But I

have a feeling I'll be painting my face and nails instead.

Max steps forwards and pulls a small rectangular card from his back pocket. 'We'll see you on set tomorrow at eight am sharp. If you have any questions about the contract, here's my number.'

Nate snatches the card and screws it into a pea-sized ball before handing it back to him. 'She won't be needing that.'

Chapter Thirteen

.....
NATE
.....

I don't know what it is about this woman.

I don't know anything about her.

But I'd like to. And it's not just because of the painfully hot attraction tethering us together with an invisible thread.

She possesses an easy nature and she's effortless to be around. Her smart mouth is on par with her sublime ass, and one night was not enough to explore properly either.

That perfect cupid's bow is perpetually poised, ready to be kissed, or deliver a surprisingly witty one-liner.

Her blue eyes seem frequently startled. Is it my fame? Or because she's as shocked at the fizzing, bubbling chemistry ready to spontaneously ignite as I am?

I've fancied women before. Plenty of women. But nothing like this. Since the first time I laid eyes on her, all cute and crooning in that crimson negligée, she's all I can think about. And quite frankly, it's exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure.

'It's one thing taking a sly one on the side, but entirely another to stare at a woman like you're mentally devouring her.' Max interrupts my thoughts as we watch Holly's sashaying backside stride towards costume.

‘If Celeste saw the way you looked at that woman, she’d have your balls on a plate,’ Max chuckles. ‘Aren’t you guys up for a couple of the year award or something?’

‘We broke up.’ A ripple of guilt snakes into my stomach. Not because of Celeste. She made her bed in Spike’s house. But because I had to pull out of the Hollywood Annual Awards Night, which means American Addicts Support Society won’t get the exposure I’d hoped to give them.

Even if I hadn’t had a blazing hot one-night stand with a mysterious brunette, going on stage with Celeste now and pretending is so hypocritical.

Especially when it’s for a charity that’s all about coming clean.

I can’t do it. But I hate letting them down.

AASS is the sole reason I’m no longer an addict. Sally-Ann wasn’t the only one who found it hard to adjust to being in the limelight. The cocaine took the edge off. Provided a buffer. Enabled me to create a different persona. Then the weed mellowed me out as I came down.

It wasn’t sustainable. I ended up hating myself for looking so strong on the outside but being so damn weak on the inside.

Drugs almost took my life. The rush, the buzz, the elation of being high compared to nothing I’d experienced before.

When I finally kicked the habit, with the support of AASS, the cravings nearly killed me.

But in all the time I’ve been clean, I haven’t craved anything as much as I’m craving a repeat of the other night.

The question is, will Holly give it to me?

She's not like the usual fangirls who fawn after any famous guy they meet.

I suspect she's in some sort of predicament that she accepted the job. She must need the cash, because from what I remember, she's supposed to be keeping a low profile.

She's the polar opposite to the usual Hollywood wannabe looking for her fifteen minutes of fame. That's half the appeal, along with those beautiful breasts and that perfect pussy. Blood courses below even thinking about it.

'You're better off. I heard Celeste's boning Spike Hancock. I thought maybe that was what got into you earlier, but given the way your cock is bulging through your trousers, that ship has well and truly sailed. This is a Hallmark movie, in case you need to be reminded,' Max chuckles. 'Just channel whatever attraction it is you feel for the Little Red Riding Hood in the puffed coat, straight into your performance, okay? I know this role is different for you.'

Code for *'I can clearly see you're struggling.'*

My tongue clicks against the roof of my mouth as I wonder if I can trust Max's discretion. Clearly, he witnessed the immediate change in me when Holly arrived. Will he judge me for using my attraction to her like a crutch to get me through this nightmare?

'I shouldn't have accepted this role.' I shrug. I'm only voicing what he's already witnessed. 'Celeste made a comment about my limited acting skills, and I hopped on the first plane over as a knee jerk reaction. It was probably a mistake for all of us.'

Max turns to face me, his weathered hand resting on my shoulder. 'This is a high-pressure job. So many big, bolshy

personalities on set are just dying to burst out. Tensions can run high. We all need a little extra help sometimes. And if that girl right there gives you big, dreamy eyes and a poster-worthy pining look, then she's worth every penny.' He cocks his head to the side. 'I want this leg of the movie wrapped up well before Christmas, and my pert little butt straight back on the first flight to somewhere sunny, where the women are as hot as the climate.

'Have some festive fun. God knows you could do with it after the whole Celeste thing. Do what you've got to do - bang Holly six ways into Sunday. Just don't quit on me now. It's too late to find a replacement.' He stalks back towards the others, who are busy pandering to Olivia and her snowy hair.

The rest of the day's shooting goes surprisingly better.

Which leads me to believe Max hiring Holly was the best decision he's made since we got here. And he knows it.

I breeze into The Ocean Palace where the same grey-haired receptionist sits behind the desk with the phone cradled between her ear and her shoulder. I offer up a wave and stride towards the small, rope-lit lift. I ride to the top floor and step out into a quiet oak-panelled hallway.

My suite is a far cry from Beverly Hills, but the apricot-painted walls are clean and bright. The windows are huge, if a little draughty, offering an amazing view of Ballybowen's four-mile beach.

With a master bedroom, ensuite, and separate lounge, it's plenty big enough for me. Especially given what little time I've actually spent in it, between being on set and cruising past Ard Na Mara stalking the mysterious Holly.

That little miniature poodle deserves a bone for running onto set like that today. A grin touches my lips at the memory.

My phone vibrates in my pocket as I'm shaking off my leather jacket. It's Jayden.

'Hello?'

'How is Hollywood's newest Romeo faring?' he teases.

Fuck. Has the man put an actual tracker on my phone? Or did Max call him and tell him I was utterly useless until the woman I boned turned up and put the previously elusive mandatory Hallmark cheesy grin on my face?

Or worse again, has Holly sold her story to the papers already?

No, she's not the type. I don't know a lot about her, but I do know that.

But how else would Jayden have known about Holly?

'I er...' My throat thickens.

Why do I feel so fucking guilty? I'm a consenting adult. Holly's a consenting adult. It was one night of mutual fun.

Because it's unheard from you, dumbass, that's why.

A groan rushes from my mouth. 'She was so just fucking hot. The chemistry was off the scale. She was just there for the taking and, oh my God, did I take.'

'What?' Jayden's voice ratchets up three notches. 'Nate, I was calling to ask how the romance movie was going, not an actual romance! You've been gone, what, four days? Who the fuck could you have fallen into bed with in that time frame?'

'If I knew, believe me, I'd tell you. The woman is more mysterious than a Sherlock Holmes novel.' Flopping onto the

queen-sized bed, I kick my shoes off.

‘Not Olivia Hansen-Lovett?’ he scoffs.

‘Oh, God. You were right about her. High maintenance.’ A shudder runs down my spine as I recall her spoilt foot stamping this morning.

‘So, who is this mystery woman you’ve been banging?’ Jayden doesn’t wait for an answer before spewing out his own speculations. ‘I have it! It’s the blonde, five-foot-ten Swedish air stewardess who served you in first class on the flight over. She’s twig skinny, with legs up to her armpits, which compensates for the fact she had no idea who you are, because she prefers romcoms to action movies. She introduced you to the mile high club for a rebellious romp before you landed, then dragged you to the airport hotel for another round when she saw your tattoos. Am I right?’

I bite my cheek to suppress my laughter. ‘Way off the mark. Want to try again?’

He harrumphs and clears his throat, pausing for a second as he thinks about it. ‘Okay, this time I really do have it!’ The click of his fingers snaps through the phone. ‘It’s the blonde, five-foot-ten costume manager who saw a different side of you the second you slipped on one of those god-awful Hallmark Christmas jumpers. She squeezed the red flashing reindeer nose in the centre of it, felt your rock-hard abs beneath it, then dragged you behind the costume rails and kissed you until you were both swinging from them. Am I right?’

No amount of cheek biting could stop my guffaws this time. And what is his obsession with five-foot-ten blondes?

Oh fuck. Realisation washes over me.

It's not his obsession. It's mine. Supposedly. Jayden is under the same illusion as the rest of the world that I prefer blondes. I think the first blonde after Sally-Ann was my subtle fuck you to her when I heard only months after we split that she was engaged to my best friend. And then they became a strategic habit.

It's a full thirty seconds before my laughter finally subsides and I can form actual words. 'You have one hell of an imagination. You should be a scriptwriter. You're wasted as an agent.'

'Stop stalling, man. Tell me who's got your junk all fired up in your trunks.' Jayden's tone is indignant. 'And for the record, my imagination is not wasted. My wife is the beneficiary of it most nights.'

I quite believe it. Any time I've been in Jayden and Chloe's company, they spend the entire evening eye-fucking each other. Both Jayden and his brother, Ryan, got lucky in love.

My palm instinctively brushes over my sternum as a pang of envy shoots through me.

'Okay, okay.' I tuck my free hand into my jeans pocket. 'I rocked up at the villa you rented, Ard Na Mara, and there was someone already in it.' My cock stirs just thinking about it.

'No!' Jayden booms.

'Yep. And by someone, I mean a total firecracker. Stunning, as well as smart-mouthed. You know I never normally fuck around, but there was just something about her I couldn't resist. A realness about her you just don't get in Hollywood.' I pause for a second, trying to find the right words. 'It was late, I had nowhere else to go.' Blood rushes to

my cock at the X-rated slideshow of memories forcing themselves to the forefront of my brain. ‘We ended up sharing a bottle of wine, and then later a bed.’

‘Fuck off!’ Jayden’s astonished shout reverberates through my eardrum. ‘Where’s Mr Predictable gone? Next, you’ll be telling me you had a bacon sandwich for breakfast and you ordered a fucking Mustang.’ He lets out a low whistle.

I snort. ‘I bought croissants for breakfast. No egg white omelette in sight.’

‘Fuck, man. What’s happened to you? What did she look like? What does she do? Is she still there?’

‘She’s in the villa. Your PA obviously didn’t deliver the message we’d be needing it after all. Holly took it as a last-minute let, and I checked into the only hotel in the village.’

‘You know you’re in breach of contract?’ Jayden’s tone is suddenly serious. ‘If anyone sees you, recognises you, the whole place will be swamped with paparazzi and crazed fans looking for autographs. Filming will be impossible.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m being careful.’ My eyes stray to the dodgy sunglasses I borrowed from Holly as I send up a silent prayer that they’re up to the job of protecting my anonymity.

‘So, this Holly...’ His voice is loaded with questions.

‘She’s five-foot-three, with shoulder-length dark hair and boobs to die for. She’s also one of the funniest women I’ve ever met. Not to mention one of the most intriguing. I can’t get her out of my damn mind.’ I shove my fingers through my hair and sigh.

‘Fucking hell, Nate.’ Jayden blows out a long breath. ‘I think you might have met your future wife.’

My stomach somersaults. ‘Don’t be stupid. I barely know the woman.’

A low chuckle echoes across the phone. ‘And a brunette, too. Are you seeing her again? I’m all for it, but remember you have a movie to make.’

‘Yeah, about that...’ May as well relay the full story, even if my own inadequacies make me wince. ‘Max offered Holly a role on set as an extra. He reckons my performance is better when she’s around.’

Jayden’s silent for a second while he processes. I don’t need to spell it out for him. ‘Whatever works,’ he concedes.

‘That’s what Max said.’

‘Still think you’re going to marry her,’ he quips.

‘Jayden, you of all people know that I don’t date women outside the Hollywood bubble, but I’m not averse to hanging out with one for a few weeks when she’s as intriguing as Holly.’

‘I’m telling you, man, this is how it starts. Chloe and I only agreed to a fling and now look at me. I couldn’t get that woman down the aisle quick enough.’ There’s a wistfulness to his words.

‘You’ve got soft in your old age. Marriage is affecting you,’ I retort.

‘Marriage is affecting me. But I can assure you it’s not making me soft.’ A dirty snigger follows.

‘I’ve got to go.’ I glance at my watch. ‘I’m seeing Holly in an hour.’

‘A date? I knew it!’ he exclaims.

‘It’s not a date, it’s...’ I hesitate because I have no idea what it is.

The only thing I do know is that the need to see her again consumes me.

‘I’ll be your best man, seeing as you’ve got no brothers,’ Jayden teases.

‘Bye Jayden.’ I hang up before he can torment me further.

Chapter Fourteen

HOLLY

I let myself back into Savannah's luxury villa, with a too-short waitress outfit tucked under one arm and Tootsie under the other, wondering if I've lost my mind completely, or if it's just being ruled by my nether regions and their devastating attraction to Nate Jackson.

I've barely left the villa for fear of being seen and ridiculed, and now, somehow, I've signed up to be in a movie. At least I'm getting paid to be in this one.

And I get to keep my boobs safely stowed beneath a blouse.

With all my social media apps deleted from my phone, I have no clue what's going on in the real world, and it's oddly refreshing.

Except for the regular sympathetic voice notes from my brother and Clarissa, I haven't heard from a single soul other than Savannah and Ashley.

My mother has gone oddly quiet. I know I've disappointed her, even though it wasn't my fault. Until I can somehow make it up to her, I'm going to give her a wide berth. I can only imagine my dad's mortification is equal to my own.

These few days alone have forced me to just be me. Not the version of me I'm expected to be. Clearly, I fucked that up for evermore. If I felt like the black sheep before, now I'm a purple iguana. But surprisingly, this time and space may be the best thing that's ever happened. Because without the pressure of all the things I should be doing, like holding down a respectable job and finding a suitable husband, I actually have time to think about what *I* want to do.

Which is paint.

Not teach others how to do it.

The urge to express myself claws to the surface of my soul, demanding me to bleed out onto a blank canvas.

I bought enough supplies at that charmingly well-stocked warehouse to last until the New Year. I snagged every colour of richly tinted acrylic paint I could get my greedy hands on, as well as easels, paint linens, and various sized canvases. Thankfully, they deliver. The Mini is cute and fun to drive but not exactly practical.

I peel off my clothes, throw on the linen overalls and take my brush in hand. It feels so right. Like the bristles are an extension of me. The rest of the world, and all its crazy weirdness, fades away.

The gentle hiss of the tide dragging over the rocks provides the perfect soundtrack to my own personal therapy session. The bright, airy space overlooking the ocean makes the perfect studio space.

When the sun sets, my brain commands my fingers to start washing brushes, but they don't get the memo, refusing to halt their sweeping strokes over the image forming in front of me. I

won't have nearly as much free time from tomorrow, given my new job, something I'm determined not to think about.

In the past, I favoured watercolours. The time to be watery has passed. Painting vibrant, rich strokes is helping me to work through all the things I need to make sense of in my life. Whatever else is happening in the world, art is my oyster. The four-foot-wide canvas I'm working on proof to myself that I'm enjoying re-exploring it.

The beach scene I'm capturing is striking, layered with glistening graphite grey rocks and burnt orange sand. White-tipped sapphire waves crash against the jagged surfaces and explode in every direction.

The painting might be for Savannah. But it's all me.

I am the wave cut and torn on the jagged edge of life, fizzing back out to where I came from, ready to start again.

I have enough savings to keep me going for a few months, even without my unlikely new job, but most artists take years to build up a portfolio big enough to exhibit, let alone sell for anything significant.

I inhale a deep breath and blow it out slowly, silently repeating my new favourite mantra. *One day at a time*. Just keep swimming.

My phone rings with an incoming video call.

It's Savannah. Who else?

Wiping my paint-streaked hand over my overalls, I swipe to answer. The sight of my two best friends sitting in Savannah's humongous rustic kitchen fills the screen.

'Well? Any sign of a certain hot movie star today?' Ashley called me the second Savannah mentioned I had a famous

visitor help transform the worst day of my life into the best night of my life.

I trust these girls with my life, and my dirty little (or big, as the case may be) secrets.

A small smile teases my lips. ‘Actually, you won’t believe it, but yes.’

I relay this afternoon’s events, pausing to let them squeal intermittently. Ashley’s auburn hair bounces as she hops from foot to foot with excitement behind Savannah, whose cobalt eyes are glued to the screen.

‘I always wanted to be in a movie,’ Savannah croons, clutching her chest.

Why doesn’t that surprise me? The woman was born for the limelight.

‘Careful what you wish for. Look what happened to me.’ I shudder, gathering the courage to ask how things are on that front.

‘I can’t believe Nate Jackson is on his way over. That is totally crazy,’ Savannah shrieks, buzzing with excitement.

‘Holly, you do realise it’s a quarter to seven, right?’ Ashley flicks her wristwatch up to the screen.

‘What? No way!’ The hours have flown by. ‘Shit. I need to have a shower.’

‘You most certainly do!’ Savannah wiggles her eyebrows.

‘And a shave,’ Ashley adds unhelpfully.

‘Laser all the way,’ Savannah and I say in unison.

‘Dare I ask how things are going across there?’ I probably shouldn’t, but like watching a car crash unfold, I can’t help it.

Balancing the phone on another easel, I strip the overalls off where I stand. Walking paint through Savannah's show home-worthy villa is simply not an option.

I seriously need to find a lingerie shop around here. The tiny lace and silk scraps Savannah packed are not exactly practical for painting in. Or walking in. Or doing anything in except... well...

The two beaming smiles on the screen in front of me drop.

'What is it?' Panic swells in my chest. I look down to see if my boobs are out again. This ebony lace two-piece also does a poor job of supporting the troublesome double DD's. Still, at least it's only my friends watching and not the entire world and its wife today.

I glance down. Boobs are still safely tucked away, even if the material is utterly transparent. The girls have seen it all before.

And so has the rest of the world now.

Maybe I should move to a nudist colony? But then I'd have to let my vagina out too, and that's something I'm not entirely comfortable with. Well, in public anyway.

'It's no worse than the first, I suppose...' The way Ashley's anxiously chewing her lip does nothing to reassure me.

'Tell me.' I roll the overalls into a ball and clutch them to my chest.

'He released another video.' Savannah's tone is apologetic, the corners of her eyes creasing into a wince. 'And a matching photo meme.'

No need to ask who.

It appears Dan wasn't joking when he said he was going to ruin me.

Morbid curiosity outweighs the urge to bury my head. Marginally, at least. 'Shit, what now?'

'Shall I send it to you on WhatsApp?' Ashley asks.

'Yes.' It's the last thing I want, but there's zero point hoping this will blow over when Dan is breathing life into the dying embers of what little dignity I have left.

The message pings through and I open it with bated breath.

The same video pops up. My eyelids half close, struggling to watch the horror show on my screen. The Mariah Carey song has been replaced with a choir like version of 'Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la la la la.' but the words have been changed to 'Tits the season to get trolleyed, fa la la la la la la la la la.'

Fuck. Now the world is going to assume I have a drink problem as well as a predilection for exposing my boobs.

Nausea rises in my chest. 'Do I even want to know how many views this thing has had?'

Savannah tuts. 'Twenty-two million and counting.'

'For goodness sake! Is there nothing we can do to stop him? There has to be a way to shut Dan down.' Bile hovers at the back of my throat.

'I spoke to the Guards. It's a grey area because it was filmed in a public place. Also, given his family's wealth and influence, I got the impression the Guards would rather chew off their own hands than get involved. I've reported Dan's TikTok account and I've put out a call on my blog page for

other women to do the same, but I guess TikTok is reluctant to remove it when people are eating it up like candy.'

Fuck. My. Life.

'If it's any consolation, they're watching it because you have an amazing rack. I'm surprised you haven't been offered a topless modelling shoot yet.' Savannah's unwavering loyalty does nothing to ease the anxiety building in my chest. 'It will blow over, sweetie, I promise.'

'Well, right now, it's blowing over like a severe storm. I'm here hiding, helpless as it tears my house down and strips me of every shred of comfort I ever had.'

'Oh, Holly, I'm so sorry.' Savannah's honeyed voice fills the air before her face comes into view again as I pull up the video stream of the girls once more.

My eyes home in on Ashley, who's looking anywhere but at me. 'How are things at work?'

She takes a second to reply. 'Erm... the older girls think you're sick.'

'Unwell, you mean?' I will be if I stand around in nothing but this flimsy lingerie for much longer.

'No. Slay. Sick. Cool. Do you know how hard it is to get a viral video on TikTok since they changed the algorithm?' Ashley's tongue pokes the inside of her cheek.

'And the parents?' I don't need to ask. I already know.

'I'm sorry, Holly. The longer this scandal goes on, the harder it's going to be to get you reinstated.' Ashley shakes her head.

It's not even about the job anymore. Not now that I'm back doing what I love. It's the injustice of it. 'It's just so unfair.'

My hands rake through my hair in despair. ‘I mean, okay, I was drunk, but still, I didn’t willingly expose myself to the world.’

‘I know, I know. Just hang in there. There will be a new scandal next week and someone else will be the talk of the town,’ Savannah promises.

‘Country.’ Ashley corrects her.

Again, not helpful.

‘What’s that song again? “Lonely This Christmas”? That’ll be me. And the way things are going, it’ll be a lonely New Year too.’

‘It won’t. If things still haven’t died down by then, we’ll come to you. You will not be on your own for Christmas. I’ll make sure of it,’ Ashley promises. Savannah nods vigorously in agreement.

‘You might wish you were though... because If I’m coming, I’ll have to bring the twins and my two dads. It’ll be carnage. They’ll be fighting over toys and the remotes. And I’m not talking about the kids. Being alone might not be the worst thing in the world.’ She pulls a face to show she’s joking.

‘Thanks girls. Really.’

A bang comes from along the corridor and I whip my head around at the sound of the thud of boots on Savannah’s dark wooden hall flooring. My heart pitter-patters in my chest.

‘Shit! I think he’s here!’ I glance down to confirm what I already know. Nate Jackson has let himself in and is about to walk in on me, barely dressed, for the second time in a week.

Squeals ensue from over the phone. ‘Don’t you dare hang up. Let us see.’

‘Bye, girls. Love you.’ I end the call and switch the phone off.

The thudding sound gets closer. Tootsie lets out a yelp that catches in her throat before turning into a whimper of delight. Floozy. Says me, who’s standing here in nothing but my underwear.

I clutch the overalls in front of my chest, move them down to cover my see-through panties, before moving them up to my chest again.

‘It’s not like I haven’t seen it all before,’ a low voice murmurs from the doorway.

My head whips up. Even though I knew he was coming, nothing could prepare me for the sight of him.

He’s replaced the cashmere jumper with a leather jacket and a tight-fitting black v-neck t-shirt which dips low enough to reveal the tiniest hint of tanned, firm man-cleavage.

‘Sorry, I was....’ My hands fly to my face in embarrassment, and I drop the overalls completely. Fuck.

Amusement twinkles in those heated, blackening eyes as they caress my body in a thoroughly approving perusal.

‘I had intended to put a dress on.’ I bend to pick up the overalls but don’t even bother trying to hide myself again. It’s all a bit late for that. ‘But then I lost track of time.’ My hand motions to the canvas between us.

‘You’re an artist.’ Surprise rings in his tone as he steps forwards. ‘May I take a closer look?’

At me or the painting?

Did I say that out loud?

‘At the painting.’ A dimple indents his left cheek, peeking out through his stubble. Swoon.

‘Sure.’ I step out of the way. At the same time, he takes another step forwards and his hand grazes the side of my waist. Goosebumps open fire across my skin.

‘I’ll leave you to look for a minute while I get changed.’ Those twinkling eyes roam over my flesh again. ‘Showered. Dressed, I mean.’

‘Need a hand?’ His gaze lingers on my breasts for a beat before returning to connect with my hand again.

‘No. Thank you.’ My nipples stiffen in a painfully visceral reaction. And it’s not because he’s a movie star. It’s because he’s the god-like creature who provided more orgasms in one night than I’ve had all year. And his mere presence is sending me over the edge.

I swallow thickly. ‘It’s wet, so probably better if you don’t touch it.’

Thick, dark eyebrows raise as his black pupils dance with wicked delight.

‘The painting I mean!’ Oh. My. God.

I stalk out of the room before I can embarrass myself any further.

Chapter Fifteen

HOLLY

I shower, then dress in an ivory, off-the-shoulder jumper and dark fitted jeans. When I return to the open plan living area, Nate is still examining my work.

‘You’re good,’ he says, without taking his gaze from the painting. It’s not the most original compliment I’ve received, but from his mouth, it feels like winning an Oscar. Or so I imagine, anyway.

‘Thanks. I never had the time before.’

‘Why is that again? Remind me.’ His thumb roams over the stubble dotting his jaw and my thighs clench together, barely recovered from the rash said stubble inflicted there only a few short days ago.

‘If you really don’t know, you must be the only person in the world who doesn’t.’ I cross the room to stand at his side and examine the painting.

The rocks could do with a more metallic finish. Something sparkly to make them pop. ‘It still needs a lot of work,’ I say, more to myself than to Nate.

‘Don’t we all.’ His broad frame towers above me. I should have put on a pair of heels instead of flat boots. I feel positively pint-sized next to him.

‘You look amazing, by the way. Though I’d be lying if I said I didn’t prefer your earlier outfit.’ He wets his lower lip and my stomach flips.

‘I thought this was more appropriate.’ I smooth my palm over my jumper.

‘Appropriate for what exactly?’ His elbow playfully nudges my ribs.

‘You tell me. I can’t for the life of me work out what a man like you is doing visiting a woman like me.’ Thankfully, my words don’t sound as insecure as I feel.

‘A woman like you...?’ He makes a show of musing. ‘You mean a woman who is drop-dead gorgeous, mysterious as hell, and dynamite in bed?’

My scoff catches in my throat.

‘I haven’t been able to get you out of my head since the other night. I thought I’d never see you again. When you turned up on set earlier, it was like Christmas came early.’ That low, deep voice is so convincing, I almost believe him.

‘Is that why you crept out of bed at the crack of dawn the other morning before disappearing with the wind?’ My right eyebrow arches of its own accord.

‘I got cabin fever. I went to get coffee. You were in a deeper slumber than Sleeping Beauty herself. Then when I came back, your car was gone, the house was locked, and I had no idea of your last name, address or anything about you.’

I swallow, the saliva thickening my throat.

He didn’t sneak out to avoid me.

He was coming back.

God, I am such an idiot.

But am I though? Because if he's telling the truth, it's far harder to believe than the lie I'd told myself - that he snuck out of bed the other morning rather than waste another minute with a laughingstock like me.

'Do you want a drink? Because I think I kind of need one.' I pad across the wide varnished floorboards and into the kitchen, pausing briefly to throw another log onto the crackling fire.

My brain aches. I can't think straight with these pheromones fizzing in the air between us.

'Sure. I brought a bottle to replace the last one we drank.' He motions to the counter where a bottle of Sancerre sits. Condensation drips from the chilled glass directly onto the worktop.

'You hoping to see Mariah again? Because that's who you're going to get.' I'm not lying. In fact, even though I haven't been particularly honest with Nate, I haven't lied to him. I've only ever been my authentic self. He didn't get the polished version my mother groomed me into, because I never dreamt I'd see him again.

'I kind of liked Mariah, but I preferred the girl I met afterwards.' Nate reaches for the wine. I hand him a bottle-opener before grabbing two crystal glasses.

We move around each other in perfect symmetry, like we've done this routine a hundred times before.

Nate Jackson might be a movie star, but he's so effortless to hang out with. It's ridiculous.

'Shall we sit?' He motions to the couch. Anyone would think it was his house. I suppose, technically, it is.

‘Did you find somewhere to stay?’ It’s a stupid question, because clearly he did, but it’s all I’ve got right now.

I sit at the far end of the velvet cushions, purely because I can’t trust myself not to jump on him the next time I catch a whiff of his now familiar, intoxicating, leathery scent.

He drops into the middle, not right next to me, but not far enough away to keep him safe from my tingling ovaries.

‘I checked into the only hotel in the village. Technically, it’s a breach of contract, but I did go in disguise.’ He reaches into the top pocket of his leather jacket and produces my missing sunglasses. ‘Here, I borrowed these. Sorry.’

A laugh tumbles from my mouth. ‘I wondered where they went.’

‘I intended to return them with your coffee but, like I said, it didn’t work out that way.’ Torrid flecks of gold dance in his irises as he surveys my every minute movement.

‘So, congratulations on your new career,’ his smoky voice wisps into my ear.

‘I haven’t fully committed to it yet.’ If St. Jude’s reinstated me, would I go back?

Doubtful. Which basically means I *have* committed to it. I’m going to be a full-time artist. It’s what I’ve always wanted, so why does it seem so daunting?

A frown deepens on the crease of his brow. ‘Have you done any acting before?’

Oh. He’s referring to the side gig that I’ve done my best not to think about since my rushed acceptance.

‘Did Max change his mind? Send you over to check if I had any experience?’

‘No. Max needs you more than you’ll ever know.’ Nate pinches the bridge of his nose and exhales a breath that makes me think Max needing me is somehow his fault.

‘So, you came here to chat about my career plans?’ I don’t mean to be intrusive, but curiosity is killing me.

The air vibrates between us. A fire seems to be sucking every molecule of oxygen from the room. Not the log fire. The one that’s burning so hot between us that I want to rip off all his clothes and straddle him like I did the other night. The sex was transcendent. That’s why he’s here. It has to be.

‘I needed to see you.’ He accentuates the word *needed*.

‘You’re looking for a repeat of the other night?’ I’m not averse to it, I just need to get it straight in my head before I do something daft like fall in love with him. I’ve never had a fling before, but then again, I’ve never had a one-night stand until three days ago, either.

‘Yes.’ The twin flames of his eyes burn through my clothes.

I feel naked. Vulnerable. Like he’s got all the power.

‘But I had to see you again regardless of whether we have sex or not.’ A low hum sounds from the back of his throat. ‘Oddly, you intrigue me.’

‘That is odd,’ I agree, nipping at the inside of my cheek.

‘It’s not odd because it’s you, Holly. It’s odd because you’re an easy woman to be around. And that’s something I haven’t encountered in a long time.’

‘Hmm. Easy is one word for the other night.’ Now he’s this close, I’m owning the shame that earlier consumed me.

Nate's thick thighs skirt closer to mine. 'You know loads about me. I know nothing about you. Give me something.' His deep sensual eyes pin me in a haze of sexuality.

'That's not strictly true now, is it?' We both know he's intimately acquainted with every inch of my body.

I tear my eyes back to my glass and take a sip before I combust with lust. 'I'm an art teacher at an all-girls' convent in Dublin.' If I haven't been sacked, that is...

'A teacher?' He pauses for a beat like he's processing. 'You're wasted as a teacher. You should have your own gallery. Showcase your amazing work. I actually wondered if you painted a portrait of the head of the Mafia and he didn't like it, so you had to come here to lie low.'

'Ha! I wish. I succumbed to the pressures of getting a "real job" very early on.'

His pensive gaze crawls across my face.

'And if you're not hiding from the Irish Mafia, what did bring you to Ballybowen?' It's his turn to take a sip from his drink.

'If I told you that, you'd go running for the hills.' My fingers rake through the ends of my hair nervously.

'I doubt it. But I do have a house in the Hills.' Those full lips quirk. 'It's nice, but it gets kind of lonely sometimes.'

'Really? I never imagined a man of your calibre would be lonely.'

'Because we already established you "imagined" me a lot in your fantasies.' That velvety voice slides straight over my spine and directly to my sweet spot.

'I was tipsy, sorry,' I cringe.

‘Don’t apologise. It was sexy as hell. They don’t make girls like you where I live.’ Nate slides his glass on the coffee table, before prising mine from my clammy fingers and setting it next to his.

He tugs me towards him, lifting and arranging me like a doll until my thighs are on either side of him. Déjà vu. I’m not complaining. I like being on his lap as much as it appears he likes having me there.

‘You know this potent attraction between us could keep us both warm on these winter nights while we’re hiding out in this tiny, quiet village.’ His face dips towards mine and he inhales the scent of my hair. ‘I don’t suppose I could talk you into hanging out with me for December?’

A short-term arrangement with the man of my absolute dreams while I sort my life out? The same man who’s already proven is more than capable of providing endless orgasms?

Sign. Me. Up.

‘Fuck buddies?’ I didn’t think it was possible to make my mother more ashamed of me after last weekend, but I’m pretty sure this would drive her over the edge.

‘Do you have to be so crude?’ he teases, digging his fingers into my waist. ‘I was thinking more like friends...’ Dark pupils dance with a decadent delight, ‘with benefits.’

‘So that would entail you sneaking here for regular sex?’

‘Amongst other things.’ His index finger trails languidly across my collarbone, hovering just above my breast. I can barely breathe. ‘Did I mention I preferred your earlier outfit?’

‘You can’t make an accurate judgement until you’ve seen the entire outfit, you know?’ I shrug, letting my jumper slide

off my shoulder, revealing even more flesh and an ivory silk bra strap.

So much for being shy. Something about Nate Jackson removes every shy bone in my body. His hips buck beneath mine and his lips inch close enough that his hot breath seeps into my parted mouth.

Firm hands cup my ass cheeks and squeeze. ‘Bedroom.’ It’s an order.

It looks like Nate’s taking charge tonight.

Ha, who am I kidding? I might have been on top the first time, but I’m not stupid enough to think for a second I was in control.

I wriggle backwards, my body humming with a lust so intense my veins are sizzling. ‘Bring the wine.’ Getting completely naked in front of Nate granite-glute Jackson goes against every good girl instinct I own, which is as thrilling as it is terrifying.

‘Get your sexy ass up those stairs,’ Nate demands from right behind me as I hesitate in the hallway.

With trembling legs, I climb the stairs, clinging to the banister for dear life. I flick on the white rococo lamp and thank God I left the bedroom tidy. Nate follows me through the doorway, kicking it shut with his heel.

‘I’ve been thinking about getting back into this bed with you since the second I left it.’ He puts the glasses down on the chest of drawers pinned against the wall and turns to me like a tiger ready to pounce.

‘In that case, maybe don’t rush out of it so quickly next time.’ I flop back on the silky sheets and pat the space next to me with a confidence that I don’t necessarily feel.

‘Oh, believe me, sweetheart, I have no intention of rushing any part of this.’ With two long strides, he’s on top of me, slanting his mouth over mine. His teasing tongue dips in and out. He tastes of mint and mischief. When my pelvis arches beneath him, searching for the friction I so desperately long for, his chuckle surges straight into my mouth.

Quick fingers slide between us, unbuttoning my jeans, wiggling them lower until they’re sliding over my ankles and straight to the floor. One hot hand splays across the scrap of ivory lace between my legs. He tears his mouth from mine to examine the tiny triangle between his fingers and what he came here for.

‘So fucking beautiful,’ he murmurs, dropping to his knees on the diamond shaped rug on the floor beside the bed. ‘Lose the jumper. I need to see the rest of you.’

I arch upwards and tug my top over my head. The straps of the bra are silk, but the cups are a transparent lace. They do absolutely nothing to mask my nipples, silently begging to be sucked.

He assesses every bit of exposed flesh with a voracious expression that will reside rent-free in my brain for the rest of eternity.

Nate Jackson wants *me*.

The impressive bulge in the front of his jeans verifies it.

‘Here’s what’s going to happen, sweetheart.’ He tugs the bra down until my breasts spill over the top of the flimsy material. There’s something so decadent about being naked while he’s fully clothed. ‘I’m going to make you come so hard they’ll hear you all the way in hell.’ Two fingers slip inside my panties, and I gasp.

A crooked smile twists Nate's full lips. 'Then, I'm going to slide inside you and ride you into a blissful oblivion until we both forget our own names.'

'The way your fingers are working me, you won't have to wait long,' I confess breathily.

'I know, baby. I love how wet you are for me.' He slips the ivory lace down over my legs with his free hand and brings them to his face. 'So. Fucking. Sexy. I need to taste you.'

His face dips as he parts my thighs and swipes his tongue across my centre. His appreciative moans are drowned out by my own. My fingers rake a chaotic path through his hair as his mouth works me into a frenzy of white-hot light. He holds my trembling thighs as my orgasm hits like a bolt of thunder, reverberating through every single cell in my body.

The crinkle of foil ripping registers while I'm still riding out the last few waves. Nate whips off his shirt, revealing rigid muscles rippled under soft, inked skin. Those tattoos. That body. Looking at them alone would almost be enough to set me off again. His thick tip probes my entrance as he balances above me.

'This okay?' He studies my face in earnest.

'It's more than okay. It's essential.' My legs hook around his waist as he slides deeper into my core until he's all the way home. Slow, skilful thrusts obliterate the rest of the world. It's just me and Nate snared in this timeless rhythm. His improbably soft mouth caresses mine. Our eyes are locked, beholding the other's pleasure, like we're frightened of missing any part of this experience, both committing every second to memory.

Fingers dig into my cheeks, readjusting the angle a fraction. My vision tunnels. Every nerve in my body tingles as a full body tremor rips from the roots of my hair all the way down to my toes. 'Nate.' Our moans mingle as he pulls the pin on the grenade between us. When it finally detonates, it's devastating in the most decadent sense.

We unravel as we join. Grinding out every last drop of pleasure.

His mossy-coloured eyes penetrate mine as he plants a kiss on my forehead.

Looks like this friends with benefits will prove to be very 'beneficial.'

Chapter Sixteen

.....
HOLLY
.....

26th November

My hand grazes over the silky sheets, but the bed is empty once again. This time the material is still warm beneath my palm. My body jolts upright as I squint through the darkness. Disappointment blooms inside me like a wilting flower.

We agreed to be friends with benefits, not get married, for goodness' sake.

I sink back into the plump duck-feather pillows with a sleepy sigh. The bedroom door opens with a quiet creak.

'Holly?' A voice whispers through the bleakness like a ray of sunshine. 'I made you coffee.'

Nate's silhouette becomes clearer through the darkness as my eyes adjust, but it's his topless torso that has me really squinting. Low hanging jeans drape from his hips, showcasing that enticing happy trail. Oh, how happy it made me last night.

'Thank you.'

No one has ever brought me coffee in bed before. 'How did you know how I like it?'

Those pearly whites almost blind me through the darkness as he flashes another devilish megawatt grin. 'Sweetheart, I know exactly how you like it.'

My lips meet the mug and I blow gently before taking a sip of smooth, rich, strong coffee. It slides down my throat like velvet. It's perfect. Dark and strong, just like him.

'You're not wrong.' I take another sip because I don't know what else to do. I'm not au fait with fuck buddy next morning etiquette.

Why is he lingering against the bed frame like he's about to sit down?

He got what he came for. Another mind-blowing night of intense sex. I kind of assumed he'd be on his way, until tonight at least.

He strides to his side of the bed, flips the duvet back, and slips under the covers next to me.

What is he doing? This was supposed to be sex only, yet here he is getting back into bed for a chat like it's the most natural thing in the world. 'Don't you have a job to go to?'

'Don't you?' he quips, as his hot palm splays over my stomach with an affection I didn't dare expect.

I wriggle sideways an inch, snuggling in closer to Nate's perfectly carved abs. There's no way I'm going to turn down the opportunity to huddle into this god-like, coffee-making creature. 'I still have no idea why Max offered me this job.'

'Trust me. We need you.' A frown flickers across his face for a split second. 'Do you have any plans for later?'

My mind rolls over to my painting, but that will be there long after this man has disappeared. 'No.'

'Can I come over? Maybe we could get a takeout and watch a movie?'

‘You want to watch a movie with me?’ Surprise slides across my skin and snakes into my voice.

‘You have heard of Netflix and chill?’ He exhales an amused snigger and his hand on my stomach slides an inch lower.

My core clenches. Every cell remembers exactly what this man is capable of. ‘There was me thinking we’d passed the Netflix part already, given our agreement.’

‘I’m not just a piece of beef, you know,’ he teases. ‘Action heroes are partial to a little tenderness too.’

‘Excuse me for not knowing that. You’re the first one I’ve encountered.’ With Nate pressed against me through the early morning light, it’s surprisingly easy to forget he’s who he is. ‘Come over tonight, you’ll get your tenderness, but I get to pick the movie.’

‘If you’re anything like my sisters, it’ll be *Love Actually*.’ He rolls his eyes.

‘It is almost December.’ I shrug. ‘Watching *Love Actually* is a tradition.’

‘Not for me, it isn’t.’ His eyes drift to the ceiling, seeing something that isn’t there. ‘Traditions are watching the Christmas lights get turned on in town. Opening an Advent calendar and counting down the days until Santa comes.’

A wistful sigh slips from my lips. ‘Nope. Not for me. We never did Advent calendars. Not even as kids. In our house, sugar is the devil. And my parents were usually too busy with their business to bring us to town to see the lights. Funny, they were never too busy to miss mass, though.’

‘What?’ Nate jerks up in mock outrage. ‘You can’t be serious?’

‘Deadly serious.’ I nod, taking another sip of my coffee.

‘We’ll have to rectify that.’ He presses a kiss to the side of my temple in yet another surprisingly affectionate gesture. ‘But right now, I’m about to start another tradition for the festive season. Put the mug down. I’d hate for you to spill coffee on the sheets.’

My greedy core coils with a fresh bout of need and I slam the cup on the dresser so fast it almost spills, anyway.

Nate flips onto his front and nudges himself between my legs.

I might have missed out on some of the usual traditions, but this new one he’s starting blows everything else out of the water.

An hour later, I arrive outside Newbridge Castle dressed in the ridiculously short waitress outfit, hovering at the edge of the film set. Nate left ten minutes ahead of me to disguise the fact we spent all night, and morning, joined at the hips.

The snow machine is in full force and the scene before me looks like the front of a Christmas card. There are people everywhere. Cameras. Lighting. Actors. Extras. The place is buzzing with activity.

Nerves twist my stomach. The urge to vomit presses up my throat. My anxiety is back in full force.

What am I doing here?

I’m supposed to be in hiding.

I don’t belong here.

I don’t belong anywhere at the moment.

Turn. Run. It's not too late to back out.

Nate is back in his cashmere ensemble, glaring at his stunning co-star, Olivia Hansen-Lovett. I've seen a few of her movies, but she doesn't invoke the same star-struck awe in me that Nate stirs up. And she was mean to Tootsie.

As if he senses my arrival, Nate's thick neck snaps in my direction. When his eyes land on mine, his entire expression transforms. His face lights up brighter than all the bulbs on the castle's sixteen-foot Christmas tree. He strides across the white frost-dusted ground, but someone else reaches me first.

'Holly.' Max sounds almost relieved to see me.

Nate eyes Max warily, then drops a quick but territorial kiss on my cheek. 'Thank you for doing this. I owe you big time.'

'You all set?' Max's palm lands on the small of my back and Nate's eyes narrow to slits.

I sidestep out of Max's reach, towards Nate. 'Guys, I'm really not sure about this. I've never done anything like this before and I...' My protest dies on my tongue as Nate's huge eyes almost drown me.

'Please, Holly.'

Fuck my life. 'What do I have to do?'

'The production crew will fill you in. You won't have any lines. Just carry out plates of food and drinks. There's one scene where a waitress walks in on the two MCs kissing.'

Shit. I forgot I'd have to watch Nate kissing somebody else. My stomach churns. Like he can read my mind, he offers a small vigorous head shake as if to say, 'Tell me about it'.

Thank God it's a Hallmark movie and not something X-rated.

'Nate, over here,' one of the camera crew calls. Nate grabs my hand and offers it a grateful squeeze before jogging towards the camera.

Swivelling on my feet, I turn to Max. 'Do I have to show my face?'

'Trust that I'm saying this in the nicest possible way. No one will be looking at your face.' Max arches his eyebrows knowingly.

Fuck.

He's seen the video. He knows. He's seen my boobs. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

'I er...'

'Three grand a week,' Max reminds me.

'Fine.'

And just like that, I've transitioned from teacher, to laughingstock, to actress (though I'm under no illusion that I'm still a laughingstock).

Seven hours later, I have blisters forming on the bridge of both feet after a whole day standing around the castle atrium pretending to dish out canapes whilst sporting the most ridiculous pair of high heels.

'What waitress works in heels?' I whisper-shout to Nate as everyone winds up for the day. I quickly gathered from the polite, but formal tone he'd used all day that he doesn't want

the rest of the crew to suspect there's anything going on between us, which is fine with me.

The last thing I need is any more attention right now. But tell that to the hummingbirds soaring through my stomach every time he casts a secret, sultry glance my way.

His hard body leans on the maple wood staircase. 'Poor baby. I'll give you a foot massage later, if you play your cards right.'

'And there was me thinking I was supposed to be showing you some tenderness tonight,' I murmur as everyone bustles around us, seemingly desperate to escape for the day.

He shrugs, casually raking his fingers through his inky dishevelled hair. 'It works both ways.'

Wow. And I thought Nate Jackson was perfect before.

A pink-haired woman in her early twenties strides towards us carrying a big cardboard box. I recognise her as one of the production crew. She glances between Nate and me twice before her stare settles on Nate.

'Delivery for you.' She extends the box with long slim fingers painted the same shade of cerise as her hair.

'Actually, it's for her.' Nate's head flicks in my direction in a casual nod.

'Me? I didn't order anything.' The words rush out like a stammer.

Pink Hair shrugs and swivels, dumping the box into my clammy hands before rushing back in the direction she came from.

His lips lift into a lazy smile. 'Go on. Open it.'

‘Is it a first aid box? Because my feet would really thank you for that right now.’ I sit on the bottom step of the staircase, rest the box on my lap and tear at the seal.

‘It’s better.’ His eyes twinkle with a promise.

He’s not lying. Behind the outer packaging, a rich royal blue foil appears, with a Dior label plastered across the top. ‘What is it?’ I squeak with excitement.

‘It’s an Advent calendar. One without a grain of sugar.’ His fingers thrum over his quirked lips.

He isn’t joking. The images of iconic miniature Dior products displayed on the outside of the box hint at an array of luxurious treasures hiding behind each door; a mini J’adore perfume, mini Diorshow Overcurl Mascara. A full-size Addict Lip Glow.

My heart inflates in my chest. Not at the gift, which is divine. But that Nate went to the trouble of doing something for me. ‘It’s too generous. Too much.’

‘It had to be something special to make up for all the ones you missed. Don’t open it until the first of December.’ His head dips to mine. Warm lips ghost from my cheeks to my temple, in a quick fleeting gesture. ‘I’ll call over after seven.’

‘See you then.’ My heart flutters in my chest.

Tenderness loading.

Chapter Seventeen

.....
NATE
.....

1st December

Having Holly on set for the past week has saved me. It's thanks to her that we're on schedule. Every time I'm supposed to feel a longing for Olivia, all I have to do is sneak a glance at the unpretentious beauty in that waitress costume and that longing bursts into life.

It feels like I'm cheating.

Like I don't deserve this part.

But there's no way I'm going to admit defeat now.

If I can just get through this movie, I will *never* ever take on another type of role, other than action, again. I know my limitations, and floundering around in a cashmere ensemble pretending to be doe-eyed over another Hollywood princess is a hard limit for me.

We wrap up the scene we're filming inside the castle. Max fist pumps the air, happy with the day's shooting.

I'm thinking about a different kind of shooting.

Having Holly on set is great for my performance, but not so great for my impatient dick.

'Good work today, Nate.' Max proffers a knowing wink. He doesn't give a fuck what I need to get my lines right, as

long as they sound authentic. And he's been thoroughly discreet about the entire thing.

Olivia fluffs her hair. 'Nice work, tiger.' She strides towards me, her high heels clicking across the castle's hard flooring. 'Took a while, but you warmed up nicely.' She pats my bicep, her hand lingering longer than necessary.

Oh God, don't tell me she's noticed my change in demeanour and thinks I'm genuinely interested in her. She's the epitome of everything I dislike about Hollywood women.

Holly glances over from the castle's reception area but looks away again immediately. Is she jealous? She has no reason to be.

If only she knew the reason Max hired her. The Advent gift I gave her is nothing compared to the gift she gives me every day.

I'm using her. And not just at night.

Guilt gnaws at me because I haven't been entirely honest, but admitting my inability to act in love with Olivia reveals a weakness I'm not prepared to expose.

Especially not to Holly.

'So, a few of us are going to take the limo and find a wine bar later tonight, if you want to join us.' Olivia licks her lips in an overtly flirtatious display.

Again, my gaze strays to Holly. Her eyes are firmly focused on one of the gilded paintings mounted on the castle walls, but she's close enough to hear every word Olivia's saying.

Olivia tosses her hair from her shoulders in a gesture which I think is supposed to be sexy. 'There's a place with a

private lounge just over an hour away. I mean, it's nothing like home, but we've got to get our kicks somewhere in this tiny excuse for a town, right?'

I'm getting plenty of kicks. Just not the way she might imagine.

It's not just the sex which, by the way, is sublime. It's the ease of being with Holly. The effortless banter. The way we crash on the couch, limbs entwined. We can both be ourselves without trying to impress the other, because we're just friends who happen to have a lot of sex.

'It might help our on-screen chemistry if we bond a bit, you know?' Olivia is like another Celeste. The polar opposite of Holly.

'I have plans tonight.' The same plans as every other night since I got here. I've barely seen the inside of my hotel suite.

'Maybe another night?' Olivia pouts.

I don't deign to give her an answer.

It's after seven when I let myself into Holly's house. The enticing scent of rich tomato sauce seeps through the air.

'Something smells good.' She's stirring a huge steel pot on the cooker. I stride over and wrap my arms around her waist.

It's a relief to be able to touch her after watching her strut around all day at the castle, while I pretend to everyone but Max that my acting is genuine, instead of heavily inspired by this sex kitten in front of me.

It's amazing how different I am on set when she's around.

Amazing and terrifying in equal measures.

The quicker I get back to what I'm good at, the better.

'I made meatballs. You want some?' She dips her index finger into the sauce and licks it with a smirk.

'Sure, thanks.' I skipped a proper dinner in lieu of reading tomorrow's lines.

Fuck buddies eat together, right? I've never had one before, so I'm not entirely sure of the etiquette. The only thing I do know is that I can't keep my hands off this woman. My mouth nuzzles her neck, and she turns her back to the cooker, tilting her face up to meet mine. Turns out fuck buddies don't just fuck either, they make out whenever they can.

Who knew?

She parts those sweet, sultry lips. Her tongue probes mine in a way that makes me want to carry her through to the bedroom and never leave. It takes every ounce of willpower to tear my mouth from hers, but I do it, even as every single cell of my body cries out in protest.

My thumb roams over her perfect cupid's bow, tracing the spot my lips just left. I know little more about her than I did a week ago. 'Do you have a last name?'

'I do.' Her shoulders stiffen and the mood changes instantly.

'But you're not going to tell me?' She trusts me with her body, but not with her identity. Someone must have really done a number on her.

Until she's ready to open up, I won't push her. I could check her contract, of course, but it seems like a breach of trust when she's not ready to tell me herself.

And she's not the only one with secrets.

I attempt to lighten the mood. ‘Wait - is it Rumpelstiltskin? Because you are weaving some seriously solid gold magic in my trousers right now.’

‘Last time I checked, surnames aren’t mandatory details for “friends with benefits” slash “fuck buddies”. I’d hate for you to google me and discover every embarrassing image of me online,’ she jokes, but her insecurities radiate from her like a beacon.

‘Hello? Google me and you’ll see a tonne of embarrassing images. Every dodgy outfit I’ve ever worn. Every questionable date I’ve ever been on.’

Ignoring me, she turns her attention to setting the table, pulling cutlery from drawers. I lift down two wine glasses and open a bottle of Malbec, pouring two generous glasses while she plates up the dinner.

‘I lost track of time painting again. I meant to do an hour, then all of a sudden two pass and my stomach is rumbling like my throat’s been cut.’ Holly offers the subtlest shake of her head, flicking her glossy hair from her shoulders. It’s one of her many mannerisms I’ve come to love.

‘What inspires you so much that you get so engrossed?’

‘That would be telling.’ So secretive all the time. This woman might be the death of me. She places two white square plates with spaghetti drowning in rich sauce on the table.

I pull out a chair opposite her. This is the first time she’s cooked for me. The first time we’ll be sitting at a table together. Surprisingly, I like it.

I bring my fork to my mouth, savouring every delicious mouthful. ‘Want to go out tonight?’

Holly's eyes widen. 'But you don't want to be seen in public, and I definitely don't want to be seen with you...'

'Wow. Way to break a man's heart.' My palms fly to my sternum in mock horror. 'Film stars have feelings too, you know.' Well, the ones who aren't emotionally stunted do.

'I didn't mean it like that! Nate, I'm sorry.' Her fingers reach across the table and brush over mine. 'It didn't occur to me you might want to go out. We didn't agree to date.'

'I wasn't asking you on a date as such, though I suppose that's what it is, because I will kiss you, Holly.' I study her thoughtfully. 'But don't freak out. I'm only here for a few more weeks. You said the same. I thought, given what you said about not getting to see any Christmas lights being lit, that you might like to go to the square to see Ballybowen's official switching on.'

Something flickers across her features. A spark of longing. Her eyes light up like a child's in a sweet shop. I might not know a lot about her, but she definitely has a Christmas kink.

'It'll be pretty. We might even find some mulled wine.' Why am I trying to encourage her to go out with me? I should just take her to bed and be done with it, but for some inexplicable reason, I *want* to see the lights with her. Want to see her face light up like it did when I gave her that damned Advent calendar.

Why has no one ever spoilt her before? And why is she hiding? The questions roll round my mind on a never-ending conveyor belt.

'But won't people recognise us?' She bites her lower lip. 'You, I mean. Won't it blow your cover?'

‘It’s dark outside. No one is looking for either of us here. Are they?’

Who is she running from?

An abusive ex?

Her overbearing family?

Three charming but illegitimate children?

A trace of uncertainty lingers on her face. ‘I assumed Christmas was cancelled this year, for me at least,’ she confesses in a tone that seeps right into my skin and into my veins. ‘But I’d love to see the lights.’

‘Christmas isn’t cancelled, sweetheart. But we need to leave in ten if we’re going to make it in time.’

‘Well, you’d better eat up then.’ The grin that touches her lips also touches something deep inside my chest.

Something I never thought I’d let anyone touch again.

Chapter Eighteen

NATE

Twenty minutes later, we're nestled among the villagers of Ballybowen in the tiny town square, a couple of hundred yards from the pier. The night is clear and cold. Frost bejewels the ferns and our breath fogs before our faces.

We loiter at the back, out of the way.

'Can you see from down there?' Holly's tiny frame next to mine stirs up protective urges I no longer thought I was capable of.

'Very funny. If only an action hero would sweep me up onto his shoulders. Ha.'

'I would, but I'd hate to attract any unwanted attention. Here, how about this instead?' I guide her towards a small embankment. It's a little further away than I'd like, but its height definitely offers a better view.

Holly snuggles closer to me, and I wrap my arms around her, pulling her in front of me until her back rests flat against my chest. 'Is that better?'

She shimmies her backside against my crotch. 'It certainly is.'

I have to agree.

There can't be more than two hundred people here, but the excitement is palpable. Especially from the woman squeezing my arm like she's never seen a Christmas tree before.

It is an impressive tree for a small town. At fifteen-feet-high, punctuating the centre of the square, its thick branches are bushy and luscious. We listen as one of the locals tells the crowd how the annual switching on of the Christmas lights has been a pleasure bestowed on his family for three generations.

It makes me think of my own family. Despite lavishing cash on my parents and sisters, I haven't been the best son in the world.

They never wanted my money. They wanted my time. And that was something I couldn't give them. Not with Sally-Ann and Niall playing happy families next door.

It was easier to allow everyone to think I was too busy leading the high life to come home, than to admit I haven't felt at home, even in myself, until now.

I swore I'd never date a 'normal girl' again, yet here I am, getting over myself. Maybe there's hope for me yet.

It's different with Holly, though. There's a time limit on this.

I'm not going to fall in love.

No way. Never going to happen. We're worlds apart.

So why does it feel like we're the only two people in the universe when I'm with her?

A gaggle of small children gather at the front and begin to sing *Away In A Manger*. They're enthusiastic, if not pitch perfect. Tiny fine hairs prick on the back of my neck. The atmosphere's charged with positivity, normality, a sense of

community that I've never experienced outside of this country. I soak up every second of it.

Parading around with the rich and famous has its perks, but it also has its drawbacks. It's a relief to be anonymous. To not have to watch every word that comes out of my mouth in case someone has an iPhone pointed at me. To spend time with someone who seems to see me, rather than wants to be seen with me.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket and snap a quick selfie of the two of us. Holly glances up at me. 'You're not going to share that with the world, are you?'

'No. We've already established you're ashamed to be seen with me,' I tease.

'No, just ashamed to be seen.'

Curiosity flares inside me, but the countdown begins.

'... three, two, one.' The tiny square bursts alive with multicoloured twinkling lights. We clap and cheer along with the rest of the crowd.

The tree erupts into an impressive display complete with a gigantic gold, glowing star. Row after row of glimmering white fairy lights dangle overhead, providing a glistening pathway all the way to the pier.

'Wow. It's so pretty.' Holly stares up in awe.

'There's something so magical about it, right?' A million childhood memories flood back. 'Seeing the lights turn on in Grafton Street is one of my favourite childhood memories.'

Holly nods. 'We used to watch it on television. Mam and Dad were busy building their empire.'

‘Empire?’ I keep my voice neutral, even though I’m dying to know more about this woman. She’s so open with her body, but not with her heart. I don’t understand it.

‘They developed an interest in alternative remedies after Dad finished his cancer treatment. They opened a small health food shop selling supplements on the outskirts of Dublin, stocking products that were hard to source back then.’ She shrugs.

‘But things really took off when the Irish rugby team asked if they could supply them with natural supplements, homemade protein balls and other healthy snacks. Suddenly, the business skyrocketed with online orders. The Irish Independent wrote a huge piece on them, and Mam was asked to write a dietary column in the healthy living section. They went from having one tiny shop to sixteen across the country in a matter of months. Now, their ‘clean-living’ online business is worth a fortune. I guess you could say the importance of becoming successful was drummed into my brother Conor and me our entire lives...’

It’s the most she’s ever revealed about herself. I stand quietly, willing her to tell me more.

Her eyes remain focused on the twinkling lights. ‘Christmas is always super formal in our house. Time is money, you know? The day is planned like a military operation. Smoked salmon and a thimble-sized glass of champagne for breakfast at nine am sharp. Mass at ten. Lunch is served at one o’clock sharp. Presents aren’t opened until the afternoon. We’re not even allowed to laugh unless it’s in the allocated time slot. Mind you, there’s often not much to laugh about. Conor is the only saving grace. We start on the egnog

good and early in the kitchen under the pretence of making cranberry sauce.'

'Wow.' Our families couldn't be any more different. 'When you said Christmas was cancelled earlier, I felt sorry for you. In reality, I think you had a lucky escape!'

A girlish giggle from Holly's lips warms my heart.

'Yeah, I never got taken to sit on Santa's knee, toast marshmallows on an open fire, or eat gingerbread cookies, because sugar is poison, apparently. Homemade Christmas pudding is just about permitted, but I can't enjoy it with my mother staring at me like I'm going to turn into every single calorie I consume,' she sighs.

'Somewhere along the line, my parents became obsessed with how everything looks to others from the outside and forgot about what it feels like on the inside. Even the tree has to ooze success, decorated in a way that made it look like it's been directly transported from a fancy department store.'

Despite her festive name, it seems Holly's never had the full festive experience. Hell, it's been a while since I have. Getting dumped on the twenty-ninth of December put a downer on every Christmas that followed.

'Let's do it.'

'Do what?' Her porcelain skin shines through the moonlight as she gazes up at me.

'Christmas, the proper way. Let's go and see Santa. Let's toast those marshmallows. Eat every gingerbread cookie we can get our hands on. Let's make a dog's dinner of decorating the tree.'

'Do fuck buddies do that kind of thing?' She cranes her head round further.

‘Festive fuck buddies do.’ I nudge my hips against her backside, and she squeals.

‘In that case, you’re on.’

Chapter Nineteen

.....
HOLLY
.....

6th December

I spent half the night with my legs wrapped around Nate's waist, and the other half staring at the ceiling.

There are many mysteries in this life.

Where do we go when we die?

What happens to the socks that disappear inside the washing machine?

What is a man like Nate doing hanging out with me?

And what the hell am I going to do when this is over? Because I don't know how to get over a man like Nate. And it's not because he's rich or famous. It's because under his tattooed bad boy exterior, he's sweet and kind and so fucking in tune with me, it's not even funny.

Nate brings me a coffee in the bed, pressing a kiss to my temple. It's become another December tradition, along with tearing luxurious cosmetics from my Dior Advent calendar. I'm already dreading January. I mentally swat the thought away before it takes hold of me.

'I'll see you this afternoon, yeah?' A worry line crinkles his forehead.

This morning, they're filming a family dinner scene and no extras are required until the afternoon, which leaves my

morning free to paint. If I can keep my eyelids open, that is.

When the front door bangs closed, I give up overthinking and go in search of my paintbrush, surrendering everything else over to the universe.

I let Tootsie out for a wee, fill her bowl with dry food, devour a croissant in two bites and take a coffee through to my makeshift studio in Savannah's spacious living area.

My fingers skim over yesterday's brush strokes. The image that stares back at me is the same image I see every single time I close my eyes.

But this one's not a place, it's a person.

That strong, hard jawline, dotted with masculine ebony stubble. Those huge swirling green pools loaded with the promise of something utterly delicious.

It needs a lot more work. I don't bother putting my overalls on in my rush to pick up my brush. I paint and paint and paint. Only when my phone vibrates with a text do I notice I've been at it for three hours straight.

Standing back, I survey my handiwork.

That roman nose is slightly off, but it can be fixed. The bone structure is unmistakable. Nate Jackson is getting his third portrait this week. And it's the best work I've done in years, even if I do say so myself.

Hard not to be inspired when a film star come-god sweeps you off your feet and claims you. Even if it is only for a few weeks.

I open the message.

Hey beautiful.

How is this my life? It seems too good to be true. Well, as long as I don't factor in the life I left behind. The one I'm hiding from. And the fact that Nate will be gone in a matter of weeks at best, assuming he doesn't find out what a laughingstock I am before then and dump my sorry ass.

All the more reason to enjoy December while it lasts.

Aren't you getting paid to romance someone else today? Even if it is an act.

The phone vibrates again before I have the chance to put it down.

Yeah. About that. It's not going so well.

It'll be okay. Don't panic. I know a movie star who'll come rushing in and save the day at the last minute.

My phone rings in my hand.

Movie stars clearly don't have to adhere to the same rules of dating that us mere minions follow, because if I text and then immediately call a guy I'd been on a date with the night before, I'd risk looking too keen. Though we're not technically dating.

No, realistically, even though neither of us are willing to admit it, we're already beyond that, given how much time we've been spending together, joined at the hips. Friends with benefits is rapidly turning into something that looks like a real, co-habiting relationship, because Nate's barely been back to his hotel at all since we started hooking up.

I swipe to accept the call. 'Hello?'

'Hey, how's it going?' That American tinged Dublin drawl has me swooning and smiling simultaneously.

'Surprisingly well, thank you.' Would he think it odd if he knew I've been painting him all week? That he's my muse? 'How's filming going?'

'Not good.' He exhales a long, heavy breath. 'Can you come to the castle?'

I glance down at my paint-splashed fingers. 'Now? Max said he didn't need me until later.'

'Yeah. Do you mind?' There's an edge to his tone. A desperation.

'Is everything okay?'

'No.' He sighs heavily again. 'I'm fucking up every line. Turns out I can't act. Not romance anyway. Celeste was right.'

'Nate, you can do it. I know you can.' I'm already on my way up to the bedroom to change.

From the moment we met, he's given me everything. That luxurious Advent calendar isn't just an Advent calendar - it's proof things don't have to stay the same. Nate's comforted me when I've been at my lowest. Soothed my shattered soul and reinstated my confidence just by being him. Which is exactly why, if he needs me, I won't hesitate.

He exhales wearily. 'I need to tell you something. Something that might change the way you see me.' His serious tone churns my stomach.

'Go on.' My heart jack-knifes in my ribcage.

He clears his throat. 'There's a reason Max offered you the extra role. We weren't really short, per se.'

Oh God. Maybe Max wasn't the only one who saw the video of my bouncing boobs.

Maybe they all thought it would be hilarious to have a busty waitress in his movie. Clichéd, but hilarious. Finally, something for the poor unfortunate men. The ones whose wives insist they sit through Hallmark movies year after year.

My throat is too dry to speak.

'Max offered you a role as an extra because my whole demeanour changed when you ploughed across the set chasing your teeny tiny dog,' Nate confesses.

'Changed?' I squeak. Where is he going with this?

'Yes. Max said my face lit up like a fucking comet when you arrived.' He pauses for a second, allowing this snippet of information to sink in.

Is this what this is about? I help his mood?

Am I his crutch in the fallout of Celeste cheating on him, or what?

Resting the phone between my shoulder and ear, I pull open a drawer, looking for something to put on. 'I don't get it.'

His sighs. 'This is going to sound really weird, given we don't know each other very well, but I'm different around you. I don't have to pretend to feel Hallmark-y when you're on set.'

I don't have to pretend a thousand hummingbirds are whirring round my stomach. I don't have to force a super cheesy smile. It's just a kind of by-product of seeing your stunning face.'

I pull out a pair of skinny navy jeans and a white blouse while I try to formulate a reply that isn't so gushing and girly that he changes his mind. 'Er, thank you. I guess...'

'This thing between us, this friends with benefits, well, it seems to be good for my performance as well as my penis.' He keeps his voice low as a familiar teasing edge creeps back in.

'Glad to be of service.' And relieved he hasn't discovered my shameful secret. Yet.

'Look, Holly, it boils down to this. I need you.' His voice cracks with a raw honesty and my own hummingbirds flutter and soar in my stomach. 'Technically, it's cheating. I'm supposed to be an actor. I shouldn't need my girl around to put the feels on me. But I do. Turns out I am a one-trick pony.'

My girl?

Holy fuck, my knees are weak.

My mind wanders back to this morning's work, painting the face of the man on the other end of the phone. Bizarrely, it seems we inspire each other. 'You're not cheating. You just need a little inspiration. I'll be there in fifteen minutes.'

'You will?'

'I'm on my way.'

'Holly?' That deep gravelly voice pauses.

'Yes?'

'Thank you.'

Chapter Twenty

.....
NATE
.....

When Holly arrives at the castle with her glossy hair windswept, peeping from beneath her bobble hat, my shoulders slacken with relief.

I stride across the mosaic floor, bursting with gratitude that she came, and how well she took the news that I've basically been using her as some sort of fucked-up muse.

Her skin deepens with a crimson blush as her eyes connect with mine.

If I didn't know better, I'd almost swear she looked flattered.

'Thank you for coming in early.' I drop a kiss on her cheek, feeling the heat of a hundred eyes on my back.

I don't care.

If Holly is gracious enough to understand my situation, I'm not going to hide this 'thing' between us any longer. The 'thing' that's growing in speed and emotion every day.

For me, at least.

We're beginning to feel like something so much more than friends, fuck buddies or anything else I've experienced. My brain warns me to cool it, but my heart wills me to turn up the heat. I just hope I don't get burnt.

Holly tugs off her hat, slips out of her red puffed jacket, and discards them behind the reception desk. She's wearing a white blouse that hugs her breasts, buttons just begging to be popped off with one swift yank. Is it any wonder this woman inspires me?

Heels clicking across the tiles alert me to the arrival of my prima donna co-star before she utters a single word.

Olivia's hawk-like stares flits from Holly, to me, and back to Holly again and it's like reading an open book.

Why would I want Holly when I could have her?

The subtlest hiss slips from her lips along with a, 'Are you for-fucking-real?'

I don't dignify her with an answer, instead I plant a kiss on Holly's mouth in a deliberate show of affection.

The entire cast and crew are contractually bound by a non-disclosure agreement, so what difference does it make, really? So what if they see Holly and me have a bit of festive fun? As long as they don't find out how heavily I've come to rely on that fun to help me survive this Hallmark hell.

Holly's cherry lips part to allow my probing tongue access. A small moan of 'please' seeps from her mouth into mine.

No, I'm definitely not 'emotionally stunted'.

I've been shacking up with the wrong women because it was safer. Because there was no chance of getting hurt.

But somehow Holly breached my carefully constructed wall.

Reluctantly, I tear my lips from hers, every cell of my being silently screaming in protest. If I'm this bad at dragging

myself away from her kiss, what will I be like when it's time to leave for real?

It doesn't bear thinking about.

'Where do you want me?' Holly exhales a wispy breath.

'Stay where I can see you. In my eyeline if possible.' Tucking a flyaway strand of chestnut hair from her eyes, I motion for her to stand next to Max, who's spent the morning pacing the castle like he's waiting for an ambush.

We struggled through the family dinner scene and now we're filming a scene set beneath the sixteen-foot Christmas tree. Twinkling white lights adorn its thick branches. Tiny silver baubles are spaced evenly five inches apart in every direction. There's not a pine needle out of place.

The way Holly's eyes glaze over, and given what she said the other night about her disappointing childhood Christmases, I can only assume it reminds her of her own family's tree.

She's clearly hiding from them.

What could she have done that was so bad?

Holly hovers behind Max in my direct line of sight, like she's determined to do exactly what I need, even though I'm basically using her like my very own porn prompt.

This woman is too good to be true. She has a heart the size of Lapland. She's the type of person who simply gives and gives and gives. She's stunning, but it's not just that that draws me to her. Her beauty burns from the inside out. There's something inexplicable about her. Something more.

Yet she considers herself less for some reason. Someone hurt her, I'm sure of it. And I want to shake their hand for

sending her in my direction, before crushing them for wounding her in the first place.

I lean towards Olivia, passing her the neatly wrapped Christmas gift my character has bought for hers. With Holly in my periphery, smiling in encouragement, the grin that parts my own lips is genuine.

The cameras roll. I articulate my lines with smooth perfection. Olivia does the same, thankfully. An hour later, Max is finally happy, the soles of his shoes now safe to see another day.

‘Cut!’ Max yells. ‘Fan-fucking-tastic! Great work. Let’s wrap it up for today, people!’

The cast and crew begin to disperse, and I head in Holly’s direction. The urge to kiss her again consumes me. ‘Follow me.’ My head jerks towards one of the castle’s lavish drawing rooms.

Holly’s pretty crimson lips lift as she follows me without question.

Rich navy drapes swing from huge sash windows. Holly yelps as I yank her hand, dragging her behind the thick velvet material like I’m a naughty schoolboy.

‘You look sensational.’ My teeth tug at her earlobe as I inhale the heady scent of her skin.

‘You should see what I’ve got on underneath.’ Mischievous blue eyes twinkle up at me. ‘I didn’t know how much inspiration you might need, so I came prepared. Want to see?’

‘Don’t fucking tempt me.’ My lips capture hers again, parting them with my tongue.

‘Get a room,’ Max yells and Holly jumps abruptly. Max seems to intimidate her.

‘Sure.’ I swat him away with a flick of the hand and he tuts a sound of playful disapproval.

‘Can I take you out tonight?’ I blurt.

Holly’s blue eyes brighten two shades, piercing my soul. ‘Out where?’

‘That little a la carte restaurant at the pier.’

Holly swallows hard. ‘What if someone sees us?’

‘They won’t. No one’s looking for us. Let’s live a little.’ My index finger traces her cupid’s bow as I drink in every line and curve of her face. ‘I want to thank you for coming in early. For helping me. And to apologise for not being fully honest with you earlier.’

She blinks hard, staring at me like she can see my soul. ‘I don’t think it’s an apology you should issue when you admit you genuinely like someone.’

‘Yeah,’ I sigh, as thunder strikes my chest, rattling the ground beneath my feet and the entire world as I know it. ‘I *really* like you, Holly. And it wasn’t part of my plan.’

Her pulse quickens on her neck, but for once, she’s out of witty one-liners.

‘So, dinner?’

Her teeth gnaw at her lower lip again. ‘Okay.’

‘I’ll pick you up at seven.’

At six-forty-five, I let myself into Holly’s house and follow the sound of a hairdryer drifting from the bedroom.

She stands in front of a silver-framed, floor-to-ceiling mirror wearing another set of stunning lingerie. If I didn't already know she wasn't an artist, I'd assume she owned a lingerie shop. This one is red lace with tiny pearls lining the edges.

Leaning against the door frame, I watch as she curls a brush through her hair, scrutinising her reflection in the glass.

She has no idea of her allure, and that's half the appeal.

Those full, bouncing breasts.

The womanly curve of her hips.

Her legs aren't long by any means, but they are so perfectly shaped I could stare all fucking day.

I really like you, Holly. And it wasn't part of my plan.

She didn't say it back. She didn't say anything. And it's eating me alive. Is there a way to extend this thing between us?

How can I be falling for someone who doesn't even trust me enough to share her last name with me?

Falling?

What the fuck?

I pause, catching my breath, my heart thumping erratically in my ribcage.

The permanent grin on my face anytime she's near. The stolen glances. The surge of protective adrenaline anytime Max, or any other man, looks at her. The morning snuggles. The trillions of butterflies that have taken up permanent residence in my stomach since I first laid eyes on her.

Shit. It's less than ideal. But it's undeniable.

‘Nate.’ Her hand clutches her chest. ‘You scared the shit out of me. Again.’ She glances at the tiny silver watch on her wrist.

She’s scaring the shit out of me too, just for very different reasons.

‘Sorry. Is it weird that I love watching you?’ I step forward and brush my lips against her cheek.

I can’t kiss her mouth. If I do, we’ll never leave this bedroom and, for some reason, I have this mad urge to take her out on a proper date. A woman like Holly shouldn’t be cooped up here every night, even if it’s a fabulous prison.

‘I love watching you too, but most of the time you’re on my TV.’ She motions over her undressed state. ‘Sorry, this is becoming a regular occurrence.’

‘Sweetheart, don’t apologise to me for being half naked. I fucking love it.’ My dick stands to attention in agreement.

Her gaze lingers over my chest before dropping lower. Longing lights up her eyes. ‘I’m not that hungry, you know.’

‘I am. But don’t worry, princess, I always have room for dessert.’

‘Well, I suppose we should get the appetiser over with, then.’ She smirks and sashays across the room to the bed, her ass swinging so seductively I could sink my teeth into it.

Picking out a black dress from an assortment of clothes strewn across the sheets, she pulls it over her head.

I cross the room to help her zip up the back. ‘We’re doing things all wrong. I should be undoing this, not helping you put it on.’

‘Dessert, remember?’ Those hips shimmy in a playful promise.

Fifteen minutes later, we reach the only restaurant in Ballybowen, nestled right at the far end of the pier. The humble wooden décor is modest, but utterly charming. Fairy lights hang from the ceiling and around huge windows which I can only imagine offer stunning views of the ocean in the daylight. Michael Bubl  sounds through the thoughtfully positioned speakers.

There are only fifteen tables in total and none of them are taken. Hospitality is a tough industry to be in, but tonight it suits me down to the ground.

The wide-eyed waiter’s chartreuse-coloured eyes flit from Holly, to me, and back to Holly again. On her breasts in particular.

Irritation burns through me. My tongue clicks against the roof of my mouth in disgust. She might not technically be my girlfriend, but he doesn’t know that. ‘We’ll take the booth behind the Christmas tree, away from prying eyes.’

His cheeks flame red as my dig registers. ‘Sure.’ He leads the way. I follow, with my palm pressed firmly against the small of Holly’s back, marking her like a dog, even though theoretically I have no right.

The scent of fresh herbs and zesty lemon assaults my nostrils. I wasn’t lying when I said I was hungry.

Or that I always have room for dessert.

But she’s going to have a real dessert first. Christmas pudding, to be precise.

After seeing the sad look in her eyes when she saw that Christmas tree earlier, it’s time to start ticking off Holly’s

Christmas bucket list.

Chapter Twenty-One

HOLLY

The waiter brings us menus, and Nate orders a bottle of Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

The special today is roast turkey. Could it be any more Christmasy? It's almost as if Nate has planned it.

'It has to be done, right?' Nate raises those luscious lash-framed eyes from the menu.

I don't need to ask what he means. I simply nod.

'We'll both have the roast turkey, please.' Nate's voice rings with confidence and authority.

He's a man who likes to be in control, but that's not a bad thing because he seems to know exactly what I want. What I like. And not just in the restaurant.

Dan always used to make decisions for me during the short time we were dating. I hated it. But then again, he had no idea what I liked, or any inclination to find out.

'And you thought Christmas was cancelled. Instead, here it's come early.' He fills my glass before filling his own.

'It certainly has.' I raise my drink in a toast. 'Most people don't ever get to meet their heroes. By some mad twist of fate, I get to spend December with mine. That has to be the best Christmas gift ever.'

‘Somehow, I think the gift is all mine.’ He smiles with a lascivious twinkle in his eyes.

‘That’s because you know what a great Mariah Carey impression I can do.’ I raise the glass to my mouth and take a sip. The wine is divine, not that I’m much of a connoisseur, but even I’m getting hints of blackberry and pepper.

Nate leans across the table and lowers his voice, even though we’re the only ones here. ‘It’s because you are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met and easily one of the most intriguing. And, apart from all that, you’re saving my sorry one-trick pony ass by working the extra role, because I can’t muster any chemistry, even the fake type, with Olivia.’

‘Glad to be of service.’ I nip my lower lip, thinking of exactly how I’d like to be of service. He was adamant we come out tonight. Like on a date. I’m trying hard not to read into it, not to get ahead of myself.

Nate’s mouth opens, then closes again as if he wants to say something else but stops himself. He fiddles with his cutlery. ‘I owe you big time.’

He doesn’t. Not even a bit. Because while I seem strangely able to inspire him, he’s also inspired me. He just doesn’t know it yet. Would he think it weird if he knew my best work was his face?

I put the final touches on his latest portrait before he collected me, which is why I wasn’t dressed when he arrived. And I started another one, a side profile with a bare, ripped chest and pecs that look so lifelike, I want to squeeze them.

If I manage to keep this pace, by the time Christmas actually comes, I’ll have enough to showcase a small collection somewhere. And with the extra role, I’ll have a few

extra grand to help fund it. As long as I manage to find a gallery that doesn't mind painting after painting of a striking, ebony-haired actor.

'You owe me nothing,' I assure him. 'The pleasure is mine.'

A low, guttural growl rumbles in his throat. 'It will be. That, I can promise you.'

My thighs press together in anticipation.

How am I going to give this man up in a few short weeks? I can't bear thinking about it, which is why I bury that knowledge in the same locked and bolted compartment of my brain that stores the memory of my tits going viral, and that I'm a laughingstock.

The waiter brings our food, keeping his eyes firmly on our plates. The roast potatoes are so fluffy it's as if they floated straight down from heaven. But they have nothing on the company.

It's like Nate and I have known each other forever.

I suppose it's no surprise when we've spent the last couple of weeks either talking or tangoing - horizontally.

Nate's not showy or flashy or arrogant, like some celebrities might be. He's easy to talk to, more quick-witted than the finest stand-up comedian, and hotter than hell.

'Were you ever married?' Nate glances at my left hand.

Until now, we've been tiptoeing around hard facts, sticking to lighter topics like favourite TV shows, all-time celebrity crushes. He was mine, obviously. Sandra Bullock was his, less obviously. Sure, she's unquestionably beautiful, but I thought

he'd go for someone more obvious. Or younger. Or blonder like the women he's been photographed with.

So this question, now, is a new development.

I suppose it was inevitable. Though it doesn't make it any less embarrassing.

'No. But you're not the only one who just broke up with someone.' I place down my knife and fork and push my plate away.

'Did he hurt you?' Nate's jaw ticks.

'No! Not physically, anyway.' I take another sip of wine. 'He is trying to ruin me though.'

'In what way?' Nate's fists clench on top of the starched white tablecloth.

'I'd prefer not to elaborate, but he did something that cost me my family, probably my job and my self-respect.' It's the closest I can get to revealing the truth without embarrassing myself.

'Well, from what you've told me, you already lost your family to their business when you were a kid. And your job, well, maybe it's a sign that it's time to follow your own passion and exhibit your work.' His hot, firm hand reaches across the table to take mine. 'And as for your self-respect, no one on this planet should be able to take that from you.'

'My brother's getting married on the twenty-third of December. I was so looking forward to seeing him and Clarissa tie the knot. They're such a gorgeous couple, but after what happened...'

'Did your brother un-invite you?' Nate cocks his head.

‘No, Conor would never do that. He’s as upset about the situation as I am. I was told in no uncertain terms that my Uncle Richard would no longer be able to look me in the eye over his celeriac soup.’

‘Well, fuck Uncle Richard and his celeriac soup. Walk in and pour the damn thing all over his lap. Nothing, or no one, should have that level of control over you.’

‘I’m so ashamed.’ The wine is in danger of loosening my tongue.

Nate’s fingers trace over the back of my palm. ‘If you tell me, maybe I can help?’

‘No. I’ve said enough. What’s done is done. I just have to lie low and ride it out.’

A darkness haunts his eyes, but he forces his lips into a tight smile. ‘Well, that I can definitely help with.’

The waiter hovers, ready to take our plates away.

‘Do you have any Christmas pudding?’ we ask simultaneously. Nate’s tone is several degrees cooler than mine.

‘Sure do.’ The waiter scurries off in the direction of the kitchen with our dirty dishes.

‘So, what about you and Celeste?’ If my love life is up for discussion, so is his.

‘The papers made us out to be better matched than we were, and, at the time, it suited both of us. Celeste is ambitious. Every move she makes is considered, like a well-orchestrated game of chess. I was never in love with her.’

‘Have you ever been in love?’ A blush creeps up my cheeks. ‘Sorry, maybe that’s too personal.’

Nate shrugs. 'It's okay. I was in love once. Not since. It's hard to find something real when everyone I know gets paid a hefty wage to act for a living. So many people have another agenda, like using my fame to propel their own career. It's hard to distinguish the birds from the trees sometimes.' His eyebrow, dark as ink, arches upwards. 'Especially birds of prey. But truthfully, I haven't been looking for love.'

'Did you ever date non-celebs? Ones who don't want to use you as a social climbing frame?' I work hard to ensure my voice remains casual enough to come across as curious, instead of expectant.

Of course, I'm not stupid enough to think he's going to date me properly. This is different. It's just for December.

'Only once. My first girlfriend. And it didn't exactly end well. After that, I vowed never again.'

I read something about it in the papers a long time ago. 'Oh.'

He turns my palm in his, tracing the lines in a thoughtful fashion. His mouth opens and closes again. Something's definitely hovering on the tip of his tongue.

'It must be tough not knowing who's going to sell their story to the press for a quick buck. Knowing whose interest is genuine.' I squeeze his hand back, revelling in the electricity surging through my fingertips.

'Yeah, First World problems. Believe me, I know.' He shakes his head. 'That's what's great about this though. About us. Well, apart from the fact you're amazing, I know you're not going to do any embarrassing kiss-and-tells. And you're not exploiting my connections. You're not using me.'

‘Well, I wouldn’t say that exactly.’ I slip my foot from my stiletto and run it along the inside of his thigh to his crotch. He’s definitely sporting a semi.

‘That’s different.’ His mouth curls upwards.

The server returns with two steaming bowls of Christmas pudding, drowning in creamy, thick brandy custard.

‘Just to clarify,’ Nate’s tongue darts out to wet his lips, ‘if I’m staring at you eating your pudding, it’s not because I’m wondering how many calories you’re consuming. It’s because I’m wondering how many I’m going to get to work off.’

My stomach flips.

By the time we get back to Ard Na Mara, my tummy is full and so is my heart. Being out on a date with a Hollywood movie star felt oddly normal. Well, apart from the trillions of butterflies zipping round my stomach. I guess even the right non-movie stars have the potential to invoke them.

I linger in the doorway, pretending to bid him goodbye. ‘So, thanks for dinner.’

Nate’s face falls for a split second before he realises I’m joking. Two enormous, tattooed arms launch around the backs of my legs and sweep me off my feet.

‘Nice try, sweetheart, but I believe you promised me a different type of dessert.’

Tootsie barely raises her head as we thunder through the hall and up to the bedroom.

Nate lays me out on the bed. His whole demeanour is different tonight. Like something’s shifted, but what, I don’t know.

‘On your front.’ It’s an order I’m only too happy to obey.

Nate undoes my zip with a sound almost as satisfying as the growl of appreciation from his lips.

‘Do you have shares in a lingerie store by any chance?’ Thick, callused fingers trace over my back as he wiggles the dress down over my hips.

‘No. I have a friend who was convinced I was going to need every sexy item I owned. She owns this place, actually.’

‘Well, remind me to thank her, if I ever meet her.’ We both know that’s unlikely. Meeting friends was never part of this arrangement.

I rise from my stomach to my knees and shimmy my hips to help him along. He blows out a low whistle and tosses the dress to the floor. ‘Holy fuck, Holly, you’re going to be the death of me.’

My head twists over my shoulder to eye him, but he’s too busy eye-fucking my ass to notice. Slipping a finger beneath the scarlet waistband of my panties, he swipes a finger through my wet heat.

‘Did you see the way that waiter was looking at your tits?’ His voice is deep and gravelly.

I swallow hard, wondering if I should confess, but apparently it’s a rhetorical question, because Nate continues before I can answer. ‘I can’t blame the guy, but seriously, this is mine.’

I whimper a response. It’s a battle to form anything coherent when he’s touching me like that.

‘I don’t share, do you understand?’

As if I’d dream of thinking about another man while we’re knee deep in this thing. Even if it does have an expiry date.

He slips a finger deep into my core and I gasp.

‘Say it, Holly. Say you’re mine. No one else looks at, or touches, this body while we’re together, okay?’

‘Nobody but you,’ I pant, bucking like a wild horse.

‘Good girl.’ He removes his finger and tugs my lingerie to the side, crawling onto the bed behind me. Hot hands grip my ankles and hold them wide. His face dips and his tongue flicks my clit. The fact he’s behind me only makes it so much hotter.

‘Fuck, Nate. That’s so good.’

‘Damn right it is.’ His tongue swirls, darts and slides over every sensitive spot and I’m almost blind with white, fiery lust and need. My thighs tighten and tremble, but I can’t move. And I revel in every single second of it.

No one has ever owned my body like this. The way he takes control over my pleasure is as big a turn on as the act itself. Add that I’ve been fantasising about this man since the day I realised what my vagina was for, and I’m spiralling over the edge, free falling into an orgasm worthy of its own movie. A thousand stars burn and crash behind my eyelids as the world shatters around me.

‘So fucking delicious.’ Nate flips me onto my back like a pancake. However hot the first night was, the temperature elevates with each one that passes. By the time Christmas comes, I may be nothing more than a pile of hot, sticky lava.

I reach for the buckle of his trousers with frantic fingers.

‘Greedy little thing, aren’t you?’ His trousers drop to the floor.

‘Shirt off.’ He’s not the only one with a list of demands.

He arches a thick black eyebrow and smirks before indulging me.

‘I need to feel you in me. Now.’ My fingers reach for his backside, my nails nearly piercing the skin of his ass as I yank him on top of me.

‘Easy,’ he sniggers as I hear foil ripping. ‘Unless you want me to put a baby in there.’

Is it crazy that I wouldn’t be entirely averse to it?

His thick cock nudging at my entrance saves me from answering. My legs part further for him, accepting inch after glorious inch.

‘Holy fuck, Nate.’

We’re chest to chest as he slams in and out of me. His hands fumbling, undoing my bra. When his mouth captures a nipple, it’s utter ecstasy.

‘So fucking perfect,’ he murmurs. The twin flames of his eyes burn through mine, searing my soul with something so much more than lust.

He sees me.

And I see him.

The world melts away. Nothing else matters.

‘Nate, I’m so fucking close.’ His thumb drops, circling as he thrusts into me.

‘I’m right behind you, sweetheart.’

I don’t want him behind me. I want him with me, every step of the way. And I’m not talking about this insanely addictive physical act that leaves our tangled limbs languid. I’m talking about life.

But what I want, and what I can have, are two very different things.

Chapter Twenty-Two

.....
NATE
.....

8th December

I'm counting down the days until this damn movie is over and simultaneously dreading it.

Today we're filming inside the castle in one of the elaborate drawing rooms. Thick majestic drapes adorn single-glazed sash windows. A mountain of logs crackle and roar on an open fire as burnt orange flames lick the smoky wood. A six-foot department-store-worthy Christmas tree punctuates the corner, flanked by two huge burgundy leather wingback chairs.

In this scene, Sasha, AKA Olivia, finally agrees to go out with me. Obviously there's a surprise visit from Santa, the promise of a Christmas miracle, and three hundred ounces of warm, gooey mature cheddar cheese, because it is a Hallmark movie.

Huge, hot lights have been positioned around us. It seems as though every spotlight in the world is honing in on me. Give me bungee jumping off a burning building any day. It's way less intimidating than faking heart-shaped eyes at Hollywood princesses.

'I need dreamy eyes, Nate. I need solid universal fantasy butter. I don't care what you need to conjure up in your mind to deliver it - just do it,' Max yells, slanting his eyes sideways

towards Holly in a silent reminder of my living, breathing personal muse, before counting us down, ‘Five, four, three, two one.’

I launch into my lines, picturing Holly’s perfect porcelain face instead of Olivia’s St. Tropez spray tanned one.

Hallmark movies are supposed to be quick and easy.

This one is dragging like a donkey laden with a heavily pregnant Mary, Joseph, and all their worldly belongings.

I’m beginning to realise there’s nothing wrong with being a one-trick pony. Not a damn thing. At least everyone knows where they stand. Especially me. Because right now, I’m standing in yet another oat-coloured cashmere cardigan, and a fucking Santa hat, trying to muster a look that’s supposed to be heated and pleading.

I feel like pleading alright.

Pleading to get out of this damn outfit, and this entire stupid role.

Could I look any more ridiculous if I tried?

I’ll be lucky if it doesn’t put Holly off me for life.

I’ve been in her bed almost every night since I got to Ballybowen and, worryingly, it’s done nothing to satiate my powerful, law-defying attraction to her. In fact, if anything, it’s done the total opposite. And yet, I’m still no closer to knowing any more about her.

Unless you count the gentle, appreciative moans she makes when she comes.

Or the utterly rewarding, tinkling laughter that bursts out of her full chest.

Or the steady, rhythmic sound of her breathing when she's in a deep sleep.

When we're joined together, something hidden inside her soul cries out to mine. It's like I'm an addict all over again, just not to a substance, to a person. But Holly is a habit I'm going to have to kick in a couple of weeks. And already, I can't stomach the thought of it.

Is there a way we could continue this thing between us?

I said I'd never date a normal girl again. But there is nothing normal about Holly. When I'm with her, a weird sense of security envelops me, which is ridiculous, given she's a five-foot-three doll-like creature, and I'm a six-foot-four brute who's more than capable of protecting himself. But the security stems from the knowledge I'm safe being myself around her.

She's exquisite. Mysterious, creative, and sexy as hell. Those sultry blue eyes exude a kindness, a vulnerability, and a never-ending desire to please, which probably stems from her fucked-up upbringing. Because it was fucked up, clearly.

Who's too busy to take their kid to visit Santa? Or go see the Christmas lights?

It's early days but already I find myself wanting to give Holly everything she never had. We've known each other for a matter of weeks, and I'm already wondering if there's even a remote chance she'd try a few weeks in the States with me after we wrap up.

Am I getting ahead of myself?

Probably.

'Cut!' Max yells again. 'You're losing that dreamy-eyed look, Nate. Focus, for fuck's sake.'

Holly flutters her long, luscious eyelashes from where she stands beside Max. She's dressed in yet another waitress outfit. Her black skirt stops four inches above her knee, and that damned crisp white shirt hugs her breasts decadently.

Dreamy-eyed is suddenly no longer an effort. The second I summon last night's memories, my pupils dilate and cloud over, and I have to force the image away before my unapologetically growing cock transforms this movie from a Hallmark movie to a Pornhub-worthy Passionflix.

Eventually, Max gets the scene the way he wants it, and we call it a wrap for the day. The actors depart in dribs and drabs, making plans for the evening, while the camera crew pack up their equipment.

Macy, the busty blonde from costume, is collecting everyone's outfits. It's a relief to hand over the cashmere cardigan and Santa hat. Just as I'm about to turn my back, the rest of the Santa suit catches my eye, and an idea pops to the forefront of my mind.

'Macy, do you mind if I borrow that?' I take back the hat and nod towards the rest of the costume.

She arches an eyebrow quizzically. 'The Santa suit?'

'Yeah.' My palm roams over my stubble as my eyes drift towards Holly, where she's deep in conversation with Max. Her face heats with a blush at whatever he's saying. A small smile tugs on her lips. She shakes her head, her palm clutching her chest.

Is Max hitting on her? Or is paranoia wreaking havoc with my senses because Celeste was cheating on me for months and I was dumb enough not to notice?

Macy offers me the Santa suit. I take it, ignoring the quizzical expression on her face. Bundling it behind my back, I march over to Holly and Max, a flicker of envy flames inside my gut.

The conversation falls to a complete standstill.

‘Everything okay?’ My question is aimed at Holly, but my attention is on Max.

‘Everything is fine. I was trying to persuade Holly to work with me again in the New Year.’ Max rubs his fingers through his salt and pepper hair.

My jaw locks so hard my molars might crumble. Max has been discreet with my situation, but I can’t overlook the fact he’s a notorious womaniser, and no doubt has his own agenda for offering Holly a job.

Though, if Holly were to accept a job offer from Max, wouldn’t she likely be in Hollywood, just like I was dreaming of minutes earlier? ‘In what capacity?’

‘I’m filming a movie loosely based around Hugh Hefner and the Playboy Bunnies. Holly would make a great Playboy Bunny, don’t you agree, Nate?’ His voice is goading. The slick bastard.

‘Some things are meant to be sacred,’ I mutter.

‘Indeed.’ Max raises his eyebrows and Holly’s cheeks redden further.

‘Obviously, I said no...’ Holly reassures me.

It would gut me like a knife to see the woman I care about take on a role like that, but it’s none of my business. It’s not like we’re in a relationship.

‘Just think about it.’ Max wrings his hands, twisting the chunky gold rings on his fingers as he turns to leave. ‘It’s an opportunity to turn your life around.’

His intonation gives the impression he’s talking about something so much more than making money, or becoming famous, but right this second, I don’t have time to ponder.

One by one, the crew depart the castle, leaving Holly and me alone, finally. Placing a hand on her spine, I steer her towards the drawing-room door. ‘Wait outside this door for two minutes, and don’t come in until I call you, okay?’

She glances up at me, craning her neck to meet my eyes. ‘What? I thought we were going home? Tootsie will pee all over the floor if I don’t get back soon.’

‘Tootsie can wait a few more minutes. I have a surprise for you.’ I bite back a smile.

‘You already gave me too much. That Advent calendar, bringing me for dinner, you’re overly generous. Nate, I...’

‘Two minutes.’ I hold my fingers up to reinforce my point.

The second I’m in the drawing room, I discard my clothes and pull on the Santa suit. The trousers fit surprisingly well, but the top stops halfway up my midriff. And Santa is supposed to have a belly? Not in this outfit, he doesn’t.

Fuck it. I throw the shirt on the ground. This will have to be a sexy Santa outfit.

Placing the stupid hat on my head, I stuff my clothes behind one of the leather armchairs before folding myself into it, spreading my red velvet-clad thighs into a position which will accommodate Holly’s fine ass on my lap.

‘Can I come in yet?’ Holly calls from outside the door. Her voice is jittery with curiosity and impatience.

‘Yeah.’ It’s a battle to keep my lips straight at the absurdness of this entire scenario as she struts in, hips swaying before stopping at an abrupt standstill. Her pretty red mouth pops open to form the perfect little O.

‘So Holly, have you been a good girl this year?’ I pat my lap invitingly.

She hesitates for a split second, takes one quick glance over her shoulder to make sure we really are alone, before diving across the room onto my lap. The way she shimmies herself against my cock reminds me she’s a very naughty girl.

But I have a feeling she’s still going to get a big present this year.

‘I’ve been mostly good.’ She wriggles those hips again. ‘But I’d like to do something really bad.’ She bites her lower lip and straddles me.

‘Tell Santa everything.’

If Jayden Cooper could see me now, he’d laugh his fucking ass off.

The things we do for the people we love... Yep, it’s official.

I’m rapidly falling for the woman who won’t even tell me her last name.

Chapter Twenty-Three

.....
HOLLY
.....

10th December

I'm in the makeshift studio, admiring my latest piece, and I'm actually showered and dressed for once.

A certain hot actor in a Santa hat stares back from the creation in front of me. It's unbelievably good, even if I do say so myself. Practice really does make perfect. I have Nate's poster-worthy bone structure down to a fine art, pun intended.

'Does Nate know you're making a shrine to him?' Savannah asks. I'm showing her and Ashley my work over FaceTime.

'No. But in fairness, he hasn't asked what I'm painting either.' Is it a bit weird that his is the only portrait I've captured, over and over again, since I got here?

Given the amount of time we spend together, and my growing feelings for him, probably not. 'He's a great muse.'

'Those paintings would sell like hotcakes if the world got wind his girlfriend painted them,' Savannah sing-songs over the phone.

'What? I'm not his girlfriend. We're just hanging out for the holiday season. Besides, I could never use my connection to Nate like that. What we have, it's...special. I'm not painting him to make money, I'm painting him because I can't get him

out of my mind. I'm just hoping one day they're going to make money off my own back.'

'Well, let's hope they do, because your return to St. Jude's is looking increasingly less likely,' Ashley calls from the background, her voice ringing with sympathy.

My heart sinks. Not because I especially want to go back to St. Jude's, but because I want this whole embarrassing video to die a death and be a dreadful but distant memory. 'Oh God, what now?'

'Dan's released another video,' Savannah says solemnly. 'And another matching photo meme.'

I scrape my fingers through my hair and blink back the tears threatening behind my eyelids. I still haven't heard from my parents. It's not uncommon for us to go weeks without talking, but I have to presume they're still horrified with me.

There's no way I'll be able to show my face at Conor's wedding with this thing still circulating. 'For fuck's sake. Has Dan got nothing better to do?'

'It would appear not,' Ashley tuts in disgust.

'Dare I even ask what this one says?'

'Do you want to see it?' Savannah asks with a wince.

'Not really. Is it the same as the last one?'

'Yes, but he's replaced the song again. This time, it's 'Have Yourself a Merry Little'...' Ashley cringes visibly on the screen in front of me, 'stiffness.'

'Oh my God. Every time I dare to dream this whole embarrassing debacle might be blowing over, he fucking does it again. How many views this time?'

‘Twenty-eight million at last count,’ Ashley sighs.

‘Oh my God.’ My forehead falls to my palms.

‘If only there was a way to turn this around,’ Savannah muses thoughtfully, flicking her professionally blow-dried hair from her shoulder.

Max’s offer springs to mind. ‘I did get offered a minor role in a movie being made about Hugh Hefner and the Playboy Bunnies. I’m under no illusion it’s for anything other than my boobs because I’m not qualified for anything remotely challenging.’

‘SHUT THE FUCKING FRONT DOOR!’ Savannah screeches, leaping to her feet with excitement. ‘You’re not seriously thinking of doing it?’

‘Of course not! Bad enough playing an extra in the background of a Hallmark movie. The last thing I want to do is play a pivotal role in a glorified porno.’

‘Yep, definitely not a good idea,’ Ashley agrees using her head teacher voice. ‘Even if you do have an amazing pair of tits.’

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ a deep voice chuckles from behind me.

Nate.

Shit. It goes without saying that he’ll arrive around seven o’clock.

How much of that did he hear?

As he crosses the floor, I fling a dust sheet over my paintings to hide all the portraits I’ve painted. Don’t want him thinking I’m a weird stalker.

He presses a kiss to my temple in direct line of the camera on my phone.

‘Swoon central!’ Savannah squeals deafeningly.

Nate’s head swings in the direction of the screen. ‘Hello, ladies.’

‘I can’t believe it’s actually you,’ Savannah gushes.

‘Oh, it’s him alright.’ Funny, the novelty hasn’t worn off, but when it’s just the two of us, it’s easy to forget the man is a movie star.

To me, he’s simply Nate now.

‘You do realise you’ve been Holly’s celebrity crush since we were like fifteen?’ Savannah informs him with glee.

‘Thanks, Sav.’ My eyes roll skywards.

‘She did sort of mention it along the way.’ He flashes that Hollywood grin.

‘So how long are you planning on hanging around?’ Ashley, the ever-sensible one of the three of us is already trying to ascertain Nate’s intentions.

Intentions we’ve already discussed. We’re both aware, however much fun we have in December, we lead very different lives outside of Ballybowen.

Nate clears his throat and glances between me and the phone. ‘I, er, I’m not sure. We have just under two weeks of filming left in Ballybowen. I wriggled out of my commitments in the States so I can spend Christmas in Dublin with my family...’

Christmas in Ireland? This is a new development. I bite back the ridiculous ball of hope growing in my chest. He said

Christmas with *his family*, not Christmas here in Ballybowen with a Mariah Carey wannabe.

‘Well, girls, it’s been lovely chatting.’ My pointed stare is enough to wrap up the conversation.

‘Of course, don’t let us keep you from whoever you’re doing.’ Savannah nudges Ashley. Both of them have their noses pressed against the screen. ‘I mean, *whatever* you’re doing.’

‘We’re about to erect something big and hard and it’s going to be messy,’ Nate sniggers, pulling me into a one-armed embrace.

‘That sounds promising.’ My hand falls to the curve of his ass, grabbing a handful of denim-clad iron buttock. I could squeeze all day long and never tire of it.

‘I bought you a Christmas tree.’ Pride hangs on his every word.

‘A real one?’ I gasp.

‘A real one,’ he confirms.

‘Bye, girls.’ I blow a kiss to my friends.

‘You guys are so cute together!’ Savannah squeals.

I blow them one more kiss before hanging up.

I’ve never had a real tree in my life. No one had time to go and pick one out. It was easier and more efficient to use a fake one.

This really is shaping up to be the best December ever. If only I could pause it and stay in this moment forever because Christmas is coming, and a life without Nate in it already seems duller than a year of January days.

Chapter Twenty-Four

HOLLY

‘They seem nice,’ Nate comments, while dragging a six-foot Christmas tree through Savannah’s living room, leaving a path of fresh pine needles in his wake.

‘Nice doesn’t cut it. They’re my best friends. My ride or die, you know.’

‘Yeah. Hard to find friends like that. Hang on to them,’ Nate huffs, positioning the base of the trunk into the huge ceramic pot, resting the tree against the wall as he begins to fill the pot with gravel.

‘Do you have a friend like that?’ It occurs to me that I’ve seen endless amounts of pictures of him with a string of women, but never with any men.

Frown lines bracket the corner of his eyes, and he flinches. ‘My closest friend these days is my agent, Jayden. I had a best friend from school but...’ he trails off.

Curiosity piques, but I don’t pry. ‘So a man of your calibre really does get lonely?’

‘Sometimes. Which is probably why I stayed with Celeste for longer than I should have, even though I knew it wasn’t right. I like having someone ask about my day, and actually understand the pressure of the film set and the industry.’

‘The benefits of dating other celebs, right?’ He already made it crystal clear he doesn’t date ordinary girls like me, so why am I bringing it up again?

His strong arms continue securing the base of the tree. I grab the middle of it, balancing it upright while he shovels gravel all around it.

‘It has its advantages.’ He cranes his neck as he glances up at me, tiny delicious beads of sweat dotting his brow. ‘And its drawbacks.’

I look away and swallow hard. God forbid he might think I’m getting clingy or needy. ‘I’ll shut up. It’s really none of my business.’

Though I’m not the one blurting things like ‘*this is all mine*’ in the bedroom. A statement which turned me on and terrified me in equal measure, because if Nate found out what he’s calling as ‘*all his*’ is plastered all over the internet, I doubt he’d be too impressed. He told me the first night he rocked up here that he’d never get his junk out on camera.

‘Well, it kind of is your business,’ he grunts, shovelling the last of the gravel into the pot. I chance taking my hands from the trunk, holding my breath. Not because I’m worried it might move, but because I’m waiting to see where Nate’s going with this.

‘If you want it to be.’ He stands, dusts off his hands and takes a step towards me so we’re facing each other.

Those deep green eyes bore into mine. A flicker of something like vulnerability crosses his face. ‘I was wondering if you’d like to come over to the States early in the New Year, for a visit or vacation... No pressure.’

Is he for fucking real?

My movie star crush is inviting me to stay with him in Beverly Hills.

How is this my life?

‘Yes. I’d love to.’

‘You would?’ His tone lifts with surprise.

‘Of course! Apart from the fact I’ve never been to the States before, the chance to spend any extra time with my date for December is enough of an incentive to get me on a plane.’

‘Great.’ His huge chest heaves a sigh of what sounds like relief. ‘It’s just, you know, my lifestyle isn’t for everyone.’

‘Ha,’ I scoff. ‘Yeah, I’m sure there are women who would hate to stay in your Beverly Hills mansion while you spend every night serving up smoking hot sex and bringing them coffee. Let me know when you find one that turns you down.’

‘You’d be surprised.’ He shakes his head, pulling me against him so our bodies are pressed together. ‘It’s not for everyone. My life can get crazy. The media can be cruel. That’s why I don’t date “normal girls”. Don’t get me wrong, I prefer ordinary, real, relatable and genuine over a socialite any day of the week.’ He exhales deeply and rakes his hand through his messy hair.

‘Sorry.’ Those huge green pools that are his eyes drift back to me. ‘That came out wrong. I didn’t mean to call you ordinary. You’re anything but, sweetheart. You’re extraordinary. What I meant to say is there’s a reason I usually stick to dating other celebs.’

‘I guess “normal women” are just so easy...’ A hot hit of shame flashes up my neck as I remember how quickly I fell into bed with him. I’d never have done that if he wasn’t a movie star I’d been crushing on for years, would I?

Scratch that. Given the chemistry between us, I probably would.

‘Oh God, no! Believe me, it’s not that.’ His hands circle my hips, splaying over each of them. ‘Truthfully, I’ve been an idiot. Or a coward might be a more accurate description. The reason I normally date people within my own industry is because they’re not scared off by the limelight. They’re used to having cameras thrust in their faces from every direction and reading bullshit rumours about their partners, which are made up to sell papers.’ He pauses for a split second, a pained expression pinches his face.

My hands dip around his waist, drawing small circles on his back.

‘Sally-Ann, she couldn’t hack the pressure of being hounded, followed, photographed. Eventually, that’s what tore us apart,’ he admits, angling his face towards mine.

‘I’m sorry.’ And I am, genuinely, because even as he says the words, the lingering hurt is visible in those deep swirling eyes.

‘It’s fine. I mean, it was a long time ago. She married... someone else. They have a baby now. She’s happy.’ His pupils flit over my head, seeing something that isn’t here.

‘But are you?’ I place a palm on his right bicep, demanding his attention again.

‘I am now there’s no immediate end date looming on this thing between us.’ His lips press against my forehead in a kiss that’s so tender my heart balloons in my chest. ‘I already told you, I like you. A lot, Holly. More than I thought possible to like anyone. Like is such a shitty word. It doesn’t do justice

for what I feel for you. I'm sort of obsessed with you. Am I freaking you out yet?'

Fizzing warmth floods through my veins. 'No. Would you be freaked out if I told you I painted your portrait?'

'You did?' He eyes me dubiously. 'You know, it's kind of crazy that I still don't know your last name. And if I'm going to be booking a flight for you to come Stateside, I'm going to need that kind of information.'

My teeth nibble my lower lip. How can our relationship - if that's what this even is - progress, if I don't open up to him?

'It's Hazelwood,' I blurt out quickly before I lose my nerve. 'But please, don't google me.'

His jaw drops open. 'Well, fuck me. That was quick. I was sure I was going to have to torture you for it. You must really want that trip to the States.'

'What I really want is to be with you. Because the thought of you leaving, and not seeing you again, is one that I can't bear.'

'The feeling is mutual, believe me.'

To lighten the mood, I pinch the curve of his perfect ass. 'Now, do we have anything to decorate this thing with?'

'We certainly do. You should know by now, I don't do things by halves.'

'I have sort of noticed that, now you mention it.' My gaze lingers on his crotch.

'Behave. At least until we get to tick off another item from your Christmas wish list.'

My mind wanders. ‘Oh, believe me, Nate, you’re doing a stellar job of that.’

He goes out to his car to fetch the trimmings for the tree while I pull up a Christmas soundtrack on Spotify. Bing Crosby’s smooth voice echoes around the room while I heat some mulled wine. I’m not a huge fan of it, but the smell of it simmering in the kitchen adds to the evening’s atmosphere.

Nate returns, arms laden with boxes of fairy lights and multicoloured baubles. My mother would have a heart attack if she could see all the tacky clashing colours.

‘Is that mulled wine?’ Nate’s nose wrinkles as he sniffs the air.

‘Yes, do you want one?’

‘I suppose it is the season.’ He dumps the decorations on the sofa. ‘So, Hazelwood?’ A grin rips across his face. ‘Next you’ll be telling me your birthday, your home address, and your social security number.’

‘Now you’re starting to freak me out.’ I hand him a crystal goblet filled with wine. ‘I’m not joking when I said don’t ever google me.’

‘It can’t be that bad,’ he says teasingly, pulling his phone from his back pocket.

I snatch it out of his hands and stuff it down the front of my dress between my cleavage. ‘Oh, it is, believe me.’

‘If you’re hoping to distract me, it’s working.’ He palms my boobs through my dress.

‘Good.’ I’m increasingly aware that I’ll have to tell him soon. Have to confess that I am the laughingstock of the world right now and only for the dreadful intermittent network

coverage in Ballybowen, I would have been laughed out of here too.

But the thought makes me want to shrivel up and die. Nate is so mature, sophisticated, and utterly composed. And for some crazy reason, he thinks I'm cool, smart, and funny. And I don't want to ruin that.

But at some point very soon, I'm going to have to.

Is it better to rip the plaster off and see if the wound is one that we can plug?

His hands drop from my front, and he nods towards the tree. 'Come on, let's get this thing decorated. Crank up the tunes.'

We decorate the tree together, singing along to *Now That's What I Call Christmas*. I hang a luscious, thick holly garland over Savannah's stone mantelpiece. The open fire is roaring, but what really heats me from the inside out is a warm glow that comes from the man next to me. The man who's not ready to call this a day after December, either.

Later, we lie together on the couch, limbs entwined as we admire our handiwork. Multicoloured lights twinkle, generating their own special brand of festive magic. Shiny metallic baubles glitter brightly back at us. A silver, diamante-embellished star crowns the very top of the tree.

'I can't believe you got me a real tree! It's the most thoughtful thing any man has ever done for me.' I swallow the stupid lump of emotion forming in my throat. 'Well, that and the Advent calendar.'

'That's not all I got you.' Nate nods towards his overnight bag, which he abandoned on the floor in the doorway.

‘Have a look in the front pocket.’ Curiosity is the only thing strong enough to lift my face from where it rests on the hard planes of Nate’s perfect pecs.

I dart across the room, eager to get back to my man. Ha. My man? He’s mine for now, at least. I’m under no illusion I’ll get to keep him forever.

Hooking my fingers inside, I find a small box. I open the lid as I zip back across to the couch.

‘Open it.’ Nate nods in encouragement.

I lift the lid and tear away the tissue paper impatiently. Another bauble gleams back at me. This one is a gorgeous pale rose-gold embellished with Swarovski crystals. But that’s not the best thing about it. The selfie Nate took of us the night we went to see the lights being turned on stares back at me from the centre.

Tears prick the back of my eyelids. ‘Wow, Nate. It’s absolutely beautiful. It’s the most thoughtful gift ever.’

It’s not the beauty of it. It’s the sentimental value. Because one day, all of this will be a distant memory, but now I’ll always have a part of Nate and this surreal, special time that I can hold in my hands.

‘I’m glad you like it. Who knows, maybe it’ll become our new tradition.’

Something dangerous like hope blooms in my chest, unfurling like a flower in spring.

Before I can come up with a coherent reply, his warm lips dust over mine with a fervour that conveys so much more than ‘like.’

Chapter Twenty-Five

.....
NATE
.....

14th December

‘Yoo-hoo! Nate! Over here.’ The screeching of my mam’s voice is unmissable as she charges through the castle’s wrought iron doors and barges straight onto set.

Penny Jackson is not known for her subtlety. In a red knee-length trench coat, she looks every bit as festive as the rest of us who are actually in costume.

‘Cut,’ Max yells, his head whipping round in frustration at the interruption. A collective sigh ensues from the cast.

The scene we were filming was really intense. My character has to break some horrific news to his love. The atmosphere is tense enough without the arrival of my theatrical mother.

‘Oh, sorry, am I interrupting?’ Mam ploughs on past Max, not really giving a fuck what she’s interrupting.

‘Ten-minute recess,’ Max sighs, resignedly.

Olivia tuts and stalks off, presumably in search of caffeine because I’ve yet to see her actually eat anything the entire time we’ve been here.

Holly, on the other hand, continuously munches on the endless supply of sandwich platters. She’s not fussy. It’s one of the things I love about her.

Not that I've told her that yet. Because once I do, there will be no going back, and I'm not sure either of us is prepared for that. She's only just beginning to trust me enough to open up, and I refuse to do anything to jeopardise that.

'Oh, Nate, it's so good to have you home.' Mam's arms wrap around my shoulders as she pulls me down to her level for a hug. Dad hovers behind, slapping my arm with a solid, manly greeting.

'I didn't expect you until tomorrow.' It doesn't matter how big you get. How old you get. How wealthy. Or how successful. Even international movie stars have to suck it up when their parents turn up and embarrass them at work.

'Your dad finally finished Mrs Farrow's kitchen.' Mam shakes her silver bob in mock despair. 'If we left it another day, he'd have taken on something else and then we'd have never got here. He's on about ripping out our kitchen next, and putting a new one in. I mean, this close to Christmas? Bloody madness if you ask me.'

'Right.' I disentangle myself from my parents and scan the room for Holly. She's hovering next to Macy and her array of festive costumes. Not sure the Santa one will ever be the same after the other day, but hey ho.

'Though, I suppose it would be nice having a brand-new shiny kitchen to cook the Christmas dinner in. A new double oven. You are staying for Christmas, Nate, right?' She barely pauses for breath, taking in my appearance from head to toe. 'You look tired. This movie's definitely taking it out of you.'

I don't tell her it's the five-foot-three brunette across the room who's taking it out of me. Every. Single. Night.

Though Mam would only love those kind of details.

Oh, God, I'm not sure Holly's ready for this. I'd have liked a bit more time to prepare her for Penny and Frank 'zero boundaries' Jackson.

My parents are going to love her. Double points because she's Irish. They'll be hoping our new romance will mean I'm home more.

Maybe it will, because given our conversation round the Christmas tree, it looks as though neither of us are willing to put an end date on our relationship.

Last night, I emailed Jayden an official statement to send out, announcing my split with Celeste. It will air tomorrow. Celeste can go to Hollywood's Annual Christmas Awards night with Spike if he gets invited. And the donation I just made to American Addicts Support Society was substantial enough to fund them for the following year without any other aid.

The reason I've decided to stay in Ireland for Christmas isn't just to spend time with my family. I'm hoping to spend the holidays with Holly too, if my parents don't deter her for life before then.

Even the thought of seeing Sally-Ann or Niall doesn't seem nearly as daunting.

Mam rambles on, her excitement palpable as her gaze roves upwards over the intricate detailed coving and the castle's majestic, gilded interior. 'This place is absolutely beautiful. The scenery on the west coast is stunning, but my goodness, is it remote? The coverage is terrible! And such a trek to get here. Do they even have running water in Ballybowen?'

When Holly's gaze cautiously rises to meet mine, I motion for her to join us. She declines with a rapid shake of her head. I arch an unwavering eyebrow in question.

She mentioned she was shy, but I never believed her. Considering the events of the night we met, and every night in between, how could I?

'Mam, there's someone I'd like you to meet.' I drop an arm over Mam's shoulder and guide her towards Holly, whose porcelain skin is flushing redder than a radish. She slinks behind Macy's voluptuous frame.

'Holly, come on, don't be shy now. Come and meet my parents.'

'Oh.' Mam practically squeals with glee, peering round Macy to catch a glimpse. 'Is Holly your co-star?'

'No, she's my...' Holly's head peeps past the blonde ponytail sweeping over Macy's shoulder, her startling blue eyes wide with horror. Before I can finish my sentence, Mam practically leaps over to her.

'Oh my goodness. Holly Hazelwood?' Her tone's tinged with surprise, and strangely enough, sympathy.

I glance between them quizzically. 'You know each other?'

Mam's ogling Holly's bust so unashamedly that I'm positive Holly must feel violated. My mother has always been ridiculously forward, but so obviously checking out my girlfriend's assets is extreme, even for her.

Dad, on the other hand, is looking everywhere but at Holly, suddenly fascinated with his left foot. Specifically, on dragging it over the castle's mosaic flooring.

‘Everyone knows Holly,’ Mam clucks, running a hand over Holly’s forearm in a gesture that’s way too intimate for comfort if Holly’s flinch is anything to go by.

‘They do?’ This is getting weirder by the second.

And I thought I was the celeb.

‘How have you been holding up, pet? Such an awful, unfortunate incident. I kept saying to Frank here.’ She kicks the foot that Dad is staring at, jolting him to look up. ‘I kept saying, imagine that could have been one of our girls. So awful for you. That boyfriend of yours should be strung up for violating your privacy like that.’

‘He’s not my boyfriend,’ Holly squeaks, as the tips of her ears burn brightly.

My heart hammers in my sternum and a jolt of adrenaline spurts through my insides. ‘No, I am.’

Okay, technically we haven’t put a label on us, but the end date has been removed so I guess that makes her my girlfriend by default.

My scalp prickles. ‘Now, will someone tell me what the fuck is actually going on?’

Macy scuttles away, readjusting her ponytail, leaving us huddled in a small circle.

‘Oh, you two are in a relationship.’ An ecstatic grin lifts Mam’s lined lips as she peers at Holly with newfound awe. ‘Is he satisfying your needs?’

Holly’s stunned eyes meet mine. A long beat passes before she offers a confused nod.

I close my eyes and count to five, draping an arm over her shoulder like one of those weighted comfort blankets. ‘I told

you our families were very different.’

‘Good man.’ Dad slaps my back in a *go on, my son* kind of gesture, before catching himself and brushing an imaginary piece of something from his shoulder.

‘Will somebody please tell me what’s going on?’ I turn my focus on Holly. ‘Who violated your privacy? Tell me what happened.’

‘You mean you haven’t seen it?’ Mam’s fingers fly to her lips.

‘Here, I’ll show you.’ Dad pulls his phone out from his pocket but before he can hand it over, Holly wails, ‘No, please, don’t show him.’

My chest is so tight it feels like it might explode.

‘Frank, I told you to delete that!’ Mam uses the tone she reserved for scolding us as kids.

Dad eyes Holly apologetically. ‘I did, but Benny next door sent it to me on WhatsApp. I didn’t know what it was until I opened it. This time the song was different.’

‘What the actual fuck?’ Removing my arm from Holly’s shoulder, I prise the phone from Dad’s fingers, ignoring my new girlfriend’s beseeching protests.

Opening the WhatsApp icon, I tap Benny’s name. No mean feat while Holly is jumping up and down in front of me, trying to wrestle the phone from my hands. ‘Nate, please don’t look at that. It’s so embarrassing. You will *never* look at me the same way again.’

I’m torn, not wanting to go against Holly’s wishes, but needing to know what it is that’s so terrible that the woman I’m so enamoured with ran here to hide.

The need to know overrules.

Hating myself, I tap the video to play it. An image of Holly, gyrating on a crowded dance floor, bursts across the screen. Her beautiful bouncing breasts on full display for the world to see.

The first few bars of 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' ring through the room, but the words have been altered to sound cruder. Holly's eyes are squeezed shut. She's utterly lost in her own world. It reminds me of the first night we met, and I thought she didn't have a lot of clothes on then.

I can't take my eyes off her tits in the video. They're fucking spectacular. She is every man's fantasy.

But she's my reality.

And the fact this has been shared is an abomination.

My molars clunk together tight enough to crack as I thrust the phone back at my father. Thunder courses through my veins. Someone is going to pay for this. Heavily.

Holly's features crumble a split second before she turns on her heels and runs across the tiled flooring and out of the castle's double doors.

I snap out my own phone and dial Jayden. He's not only my agent and closest friend, he's the one man I know who has the means to make this go away.

Chapter Twenty-Six

.....
HOLLY
.....

How many times can one girl cry over the same damn thing?

Millions, apparently.

Tears streak my cheeks, blind my eyes, and my throat burns like an inferno.

Nate's face when he saw that video will be forever imprinted on my mind. Livid is the only word to describe it.

No one else looks at, or touches, this body while we're together, okay?

A fresh wave of shame washes over me. I'm a laughingstock and, by default, I've made him one.

I tumble through the front door of the villa and throw myself onto the couch in a heap. Tootsie cocks her head from her tartan bed in front of the Christmas tree Nate bought for me. It twinkles back at me, the rose-gold Swarovski bauble only further serving to remind me of all I've lost.

Though I never had him, anyway.

Not really.

This thing between us was supposed to be a fling. Okay, he wanted me to go to the States, but then what? We could have had another few weeks of intense mind-blowing sex. A few

dates. But it's not like it was ever going to go anywhere. He's a movie star and the only thing I'm the star of is a very embarrassing viral video. We're worlds apart.

But when we're together, why does it feel like we aren't? Why does it feel like we're two peas in the same secure, sexy little pod?

A tiny sob hiccups from my mouth. Tootsie hops from her bed and ambles over to me. 'Oh, Toots, I'm sorry you haven't been getting much attention lately.' I scoop her up into my chest where she snuggles into my bosom, resting her head in the crook of my shoulder. Whoever said diamonds are a girl's best friend never had a dog.

Though I do have two amazing best friends too. Reaching for my phone, I dial Savannah.

'Why are you calling instead of FaceTiming me? I need to see you!' Savannah's affectionate tone sets off another sob. 'Holly, what is it? I'm switching to video right now.'

'It's not pretty,' I warn her.

'Not possible.' Savannah hangs up. Two seconds later, her sunny face lights up my screen.

'What happened?' Concern radiates from her pale blue eyes.

I fill her in on the entire sorry debacle, and another wave of shame crashes over me.

'Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry.' She curls her ash blonde hair round her index finger. 'I wish I was there to give you a hug.'

'Me too. I could do with one right now. Tootsie's good company, but her arms aren't big enough to wrap around me. Plus, she doesn't drink Sancerre.'

‘There she is! I knew you were in there somewhere. Maybe you should pour yourself a glass.’ She takes a long sip from a mug in front of her.

‘Is that what you’re slugging in there?’

A less than ladylike snort erupts from her mouth. ‘No way, you should know me better than that.’ She fires a comical wink. ‘It’s mulled wine! It is almost Christmas, after all.’

A low groan rumbles from my mouth. ‘Don’t remind me. I told you I’d be lonely this Christmas.’

‘And I promised you that you wouldn’t be.’

I readjust my legs, folding them beneath me on the couch, shifting the sleeping dog a fraction on my lap from where her tiny paws are digging into my ribcage. ‘How’s the other thing going?’ It sickens me to mention IT or HIM by name.

‘I’m working on it.’ Her tone is grim. ‘I started a social media campaign #amanscorned and you have a lot of support from women across the country, but the videos haven’t been taken down yet.’ She blows out a long breath. ‘I won’t stop until they are, Holly, I promise.’

‘Thanks, Sav. You really are the best.’ My heart balloons in my chest. My parents’ success might have had its drawbacks for our family life, but thank God they moved me to St. Jude’s because otherwise I may never have met Savannah and Ashley, and a life without them is inconceivable.

‘Get a drink. Relax. There’s nothing you can do about any of it. Leave the rest to me. I’m sure lover boy will come around.’

‘I doubt it.’ *This is all mine. No one else looks or touches it.* ‘Talk later.’

I place a snoring Tootsie back into her bed and faceplant onto the couch.

Three hours later, the front door bangs open. Familiar heavy boots pad along the corridor. My ears prick to attention. My stomach is a ball of nerves.

If Nate's here to berate me for not telling him the extent of my situation, he need not bother. No one is more disgusted with me than me.

'Holly?' his demanding voice calls.

'Here.' I barely lift my head from the couch.

Nate strides round to me and drops to his knees. Tootsie licks his face before hopping to the floor and back to her own bed.

'Sweetheart, I am so, so sorry.' Nate takes both my hands in his. I can only imagine what a horror show I look like lying here. Smudged make up. Swollen eyes. Puffy cheeks. It can't be any worse than that video, though. Different, perhaps, but no worse.

'What are you sorry for?' I sniff. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I'm sorry you're probably about to become a laughingstock by association. I'm sorry the whole damn thing happened that night. And I'm sorry I ever went out with Dan Hargreaves in the first place.'

His thumb roams the back of my hand in soft, soothing strokes. 'Sweetheart, it's not your fault. You were violated, maybe not physically, but emotionally. And that can be just as traumatising. I know what it's like, believe me. It's horrific looking over your shoulder the whole time to see if someone recognises you. Or if they have a phone in their hand ready to

snap a picture to make a few quid. What that dickhead did to you was beyond damaging. It was downright cruel. But he won't do it again.'

'What do you mean?' Hope sparks in my chest.

'He's been served papers already. I have the best law firm in the country all over this. That's the only reason I didn't run out of the castle doors straight after you. It was imperative we shut this thing down first.'

A fresh round of tears falls from my eyes, but these feel more like relief. Like this nightmare might finally be coming to an end. 'You were so mad.'

'Not with you, sweetheart. I was mad *for* you.' His lips press against my temple with a reassuring firmness.

'Do you think less of me now you know what a joke I am?' I extract one hand from his and wipe the back of it across my damp face.

'No. If anything, I think more of you. You've been through so much on your own.' His head shakes from side to side and he exhales a deep breath.

'I wasn't on my own, though. I had you. This thing between us saved me from spiralling. It gave me something so much bigger to occupy my thoughts.' And inspired me to try portraits again.

'I wish you had told me. I would have shut this thing down a lot sooner.' His lips pepper tiny, gentle kisses across my cheekbones.

'I'm sorry.'

'Stop apologising.'

‘Do you understand my shame now? Why I didn’t want to tell you my name? My entire family is horrified by me. I doubt I’ll ever get my job back at St. Jude’s. It’s an all-girl Catholic school, for fuck’s sake. I’m not exactly a glowing role model.’

A low growl rumbles in Nate’s throat. ‘Your family should have been offering support, not shunning you. And if you want your job back, I’ll make damn sure it happens.’ His palm brushes over my cheek as he tilts my face up to meet his. ‘But I don’t think that’s what you want, Holly. Do you think I don’t notice you slipping out of bed at night? Do you think I haven’t peeped over your shoulder while you’re so engrossed in the early hours of the morning and seen your amazing artwork? You are incredibly talented.’

‘You saw the portraits?’ My cheeks flush.

‘Yes. And I want to buy every single one of them. Especially the Santa hat one. That invokes special memories for me.’

My heart feels lighter with every passing second. The worst has come to pass. Nate hasn’t run for the hills. ‘Hmm, I’m not sure they’re for sale. I’m kind of fond of them. That one in particular.’

‘Maybe we can share them.’ Nate’s thick black eyebrows arch in question. ‘You know, people who live in Beverly Hills would pay a huge amount of cash to get a portrait like that done.’

Butterflies swirl in my stomach. ‘But I don’t live in Beverly Hills.’

‘But you could, if you wanted to...’ Nate swallows thickly. ‘Look, I know it’s early days between us, Holly, but I’m crazy about you. I have been from the second I laid eyes on you

crucifying Mariah Carey in that indecent excuse for a nightie. This thing was supposed to be casual, but it turned into something so much more.’ A flash of vulnerability flickers in his pupils. ‘For me, at least.’

‘Oh Nate, it was always going to be more than a fling for me. It was inevitable. Did you forget the part where, while you were swanning around Hollywood, I was ogling your photos and pinning your poster to my bedroom furniture?’ My arms wrap around his neck, tugging his mouth closer to mine.

‘I wasn’t joking when I said I want you to come to the States. I’ll set you up in an art studio in the sunniest room in my house. You can paint until your heart’s content.’

‘Are you asking me to move in with you?’ My head is spinning.

A sheepish grin lights his lips. ‘I think I am, yeah.’

‘We’ve barely known each other a month,’ I remind him.

‘Yeah, but in case you didn’t notice, we’ve barely spent a night apart since we met. So, we’re kind of living together, anyway.’

‘What if you get bored with me? What if the novelty wears off? What if some super-hot actress steals you away from me and I’m made a bigger fool of than I already am?’

‘Not going to happen, sweetheart. My only concern is that you won’t be able to hack the press attention, and there will be a huge amount of it. Sally-Ann couldn’t hack it and I thought what we had was rock solid. She ended up marrying my best friend, Niall. He actually runs into burning buildings to save people, instead of pretending. And Sally never has to worry about the media printing shit about their relationship.’ The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkle into a wince.

‘The media can be so cruel. And I’d hate for it to destroy us, because when Sally-Anne ended things, it nearly ended me. If you were to do that, I don’t think I’d survive it. Even though those videos have been removed from TikTok, they’re on people’s devices. I wish I could delete every single one of them, but I can’t. And the chances are, if you come out as my girlfriend, that video will be resurrected.’

I pinch the corners of my eyes between my fingers.

‘But I can promise you something. I will handle it. Every comment. Every statement. Every damn thing. You won’t have to worry about any of it. And on the plus side, your artwork will sell like hot cakes, trust me. Apart from the fact it’s incredible, you’ll be in the spotlight and believe me when I say there is no such thing as bad publicity.’

This cannot be happening.

What about my house?

My friends?

Oh my God, Savannah will lose her shit completely.

My life as I know it will be transformed.

Admittedly, I’m at a crossroads, but this is like reaching the crossroads and hopping into a hot-air balloon instead of choosing a path.

Could I hack the media attention? All that negative press? If I’ve survived it once, maybe I could survive it again. After all, look at the prize I’d have at the end of it.

‘I’ll need to think about it.’ For all of about three seconds. No matter how terrified and utterly unprepared I am of the media shitstorm, letting Nate walk out of my life is even more terrifying. ‘Joking, I’m in.’

Chapter Twenty-Seven

.....
HOLLY
.....

15th December

‘What if your parents hate me?’ Panic weaves itself around my windpipe as I set the table at Savannah’s villa. Mr and Mrs Jackson are on their way over here as we speak.

Nate turns to me from where he’s seasoning two giant, juicy Tomahawk steaks in the kitchen and fires me an *are you for real?* look. ‘Sweetheart, they already love you.’

‘What are you talking about? They don’t even know me. Bar the fact they’ve clearly both seen my boobs.’ Heat flares up my neck even thinking about it.

Nate abandons the seasoning and strides across the room to hover behind me. Huge, strong hands snake around my waist as he pulls my back to his chest.

‘I’ve already told you, my parents are the polar opposite of yours. You are everything they would pick for me. Trust me.’ He nuzzles the top of my head. ‘Think of this objectively, as if this was a movie, and you’re the heroine. What Dan did to you already makes the audience feel for you. Throw in your immense likeability and the fact you live in the same country as the hero’s parents, and you have yourself a great setup.’

‘Huh. What if I flunk in act two?’ My head rolls back onto Nate’s right pec. It’s better than any fancy duck feather pillow.

‘Not possible with my parents, I’m afraid.’ He tsks. ‘But I’m not sure you’re fully prepared for the force of Frank and Penny Jackson.’

At that second, three heavy raps sound on the front door before it flies open with a crash. ‘Coooooeeee! Hope you’ve got some clothes on in there,’ a woman calls. Her jovial tone indicates the exact opposite.

‘It’s not like we haven’t seen it all before,’ a deeper voice calls, then chuckles.

I suck in a lungful of air. Nate places a kiss on the top of my head and struts towards the hallway.

‘Let yourselves in. Sure, make yourselves at home.’ His velvet voice is weighted with sarcasm.

Mr and Mrs Jackson tornado into the open-plan living area like two natural forces of destruction. His arms are laden with wine and chocolates; her arms reach out to her son, squeezing his cheeks before throwing herself at him.

‘It’s so good to see you, son,’ Mrs Jackson squeals like a fangirl.

Nate pats his mother’s back before relieving his father of his generous gifts. All eyes turn to me.

Nate struts across the floor. ‘Mam, Dad, this is Holly. I know you met briefly yesterday.’

Nate’s mother races across the room to envelop both of us in a warm, mama bear embrace that has my eyes welling with tears of gratitude and surprise. I only wish my own parents could be so sympathetic and understanding.

‘Holly, it’s so lovely to meet you properly. I’m sorry if we scared you off yesterday.’ Her arms fall as she scrutinises my

face in a kind, searching manner.

‘I was just so mortified,’ I confess to Nate’s chest, as Mrs Jackson crushes us together.

‘Never be embarrassed around us, pet.’ Her thumb brushes a stray tear that escapes from my right eye. ‘We’re the embarrassing ones around here. Isn’t that right, Nate?’

‘Abso-fucking-lutely.’ He nods and takes a step back, allowing his mother to draw me into another hug. I barely know these people and already I feel like I’m one of them.

‘Drinks?’ Nate claps his hands together and nods at his father, motioning him to help.

Mrs Jackson’s arms slide over my back, and she clucks soothingly into my ear. ‘It’ll be alright, pet. Nate will make sure of it. He takes care of everyone. He can’t help himself. That video is gone from the interweb, as far as I can see, anyway. If you want me to take the heat off you, bring me to the nearest nightclub and video me in the same situation. That’ll give the bastards something to really laugh about.’ Her eyes crinkle as she grins.

For the first time since that damn video went viral, I’m able to laugh about it. Really laugh. A high-pitched, borderline hysterical giggle catches in my throat, threatening to choke me if I don’t let it free. Tears streak my cheeks again, but this time they’re not sad tears, they’re happy ones.

Nate’s here.

His family is amazing.

They haven’t told me what I should do, discussed damage limitation or how my misdemeanours will reflect on them. They simply accept me as I am. The one thing I’ve craved my entire life.

‘Thank you, Mrs Jackson. That’s the best laugh I’ve had in a long time.’

‘Call me Penny, please.’ She steers me towards the kitchen like a mother hen.

By the time we’re sitting around the opulent oval table, we’re on our second glass of Malbec and I feel as if I’ve known Frank and Penny for years. They’re such easy company. Unafraid to laugh at themselves. And there is no such thing as too much information.

‘So, when we finally got checked into the hotel yesterday, I ran us a bath.’ Penny wiggles her eyebrows at Frank. Nate grips my thigh beneath the table. ‘When Frank unpacked his wash bag, he realised he’d forgotten to pack the Viagra,’ Penny sniggers. ‘I mean, what man in his late sixties brings his wife for a dirty weekend away and forgets the very ingredient that makes it dirty?’

Nate takes a huge glug of wine and looks everywhere but at his parents.

Penny pokes Nate in the torso across the table. ‘Don’t worry though, son. I worked it in the end.’

A satisfied smirk tears across Frank’s lips and he pauses mid-chew. ‘She certainly did.’

Nate tuts and mouths a silent ‘sorry’ across the table. I giggle.

‘Don’t you dare apologise for me, son,’ Penny mock scolds. ‘Especially not when it comes to my sex life. I was a midwife for twenty years. Sex is what makes the world go round.’

Penny turns her attention to me, her fork suspended in mid-air, a huge slice of medium rare steak hanging from it. ‘It’s what we were put on this earth to do, Holly. Ask me what the secret is to a long and happy marriage. Go on.’

They are hilarious.

So open.

So unabashed.

So freaking normal. More like friends than parents. ‘Go on, Penny. Tell me, what is the secret to a long and happy marriage?’ I raise my wine glass to my lips and take a sip.

‘Do not encourage them,’ Nate mutters under his breath.

Penny is positively beaming. Is it the wine, or is she always like this? I suspect the latter.

‘The secret, my dear, is copious amounts of sex. The more adventurous, the better.’ She raises her glass in a toast, and I clink mine against hers.

‘To copious amounts of sex,’ Penny, Frank, and I chant in unison.

‘Come on, Nate. Don’t pretend you’re shy,’ Frank teases. ‘Not now we know you’ve been holed up here with Holly hammering out your own happy ever afters for weeks. Isn’t that right, Penny?’

‘I knew you had a girl on the go. I just knew it. A mother knows these things.’ Penny arches an eyebrow at Nate and finally he surrenders a snigger.

‘So, Holly, you’re an art teacher, is that right?’ Penny asks before popping another piece of meat into her mouth.

‘She’s an artist,’ Nate answers for me, squeezing my thigh again.

‘Oh, lovely. What do you paint?’ Frank’s grey head tilts to the side.

‘Anything and everything, but portraits are my favourites.’ I place my glass down on the table and pick up my fork. Nate did an amazing job with the steaks. They melt in the mouth.

‘Oooh, ever do nudes?’ Frank wiggles his eyebrows humorously. ‘I could pose for you, if you’d like.’

‘Ha!’ Penny slaps her thigh. ‘Yeah, bet you wouldn’t forget the Viagra that weekend, would you, love?’

Laughter explodes around the table. A deep sense of belonging swells in my sternum. By some mad Christmas miracle, everything is going to be okay. I don’t know how exactly. For the first time in years, I don’t have a plan, but it’s okay.

The opening bars of the song recorded for Nate’s debut movie *Blazing Fire* pierce the air. My head whips round to his in question.

‘Oh, don’t mind me, pet.’ The legs of Penny’s chair scrape against the floor as she pushes it back and stands. ‘Proud mam, you know how it is.’

I don’t, but I’m beginning to understand.

‘I set up a google alert for Nate. When there’s anything new published about him, I get a notification.’ She searches the pockets of her crimson coat hanging off the back of one of the kitchen stools for a second, before producing her phone with an, ‘Aha!’

Nate shakes his head again, but I can tell he loves it.

So this is what it's like to have parents who adore you. 'Adopt me, please!' It's out of my mouth before I've even thought about it.

Penny returns to the table with her phone. A tinkling laugh leaves her lips. 'Oh, honey, we won't need to! He's going to marry you! You know that, right?'

My cheeks flush with colour, and Nate clears his throat noisily before taking another huge mouthful of wine.

'Sure, we haven't seen him this way since...' Frank starts, but Penny cuts him off with a swift dig to the ribs.

'Since forever,' Penny finishes for her husband before squinting at her phone.

'What are they saying about me now, Ma?' Nate drawls lazily, like he's bored of these never-ending notifications.

'Oooh.' Penny pouts dramatically. 'It's an official statement from your agent, Jayden Cooper. How is he, by the way? I've always had a soft spot for him.'

'A wet spot, you mean.' It's Frank's turn to nudge his wife in the ribs and the two of them share a look. 'He's your mother's free pass,' Frank explains, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

'Thank fuck he's happily married.' Nate exhales heavily. 'Because I could not hack a lifetime of "your mama jokes" from my best friend.'

Frank snorts and nods at Penny's phone. 'Well, what does it say about our boy?' There's no mistaking the pride in his voice, either.

'It says Nate Jackson has split with his long-term girlfriend, Celeste Occhialini. The split was amicable, and he

will no longer be attending the annual Hollywood Christmas Awards Ceremony, instead opting to spend Christmas with his family.’

Penny’s on her feet like lightning. ‘Is it true?’ Hope hangs on her every word. ‘Are you coming home for Christmas, Nate?’

Nate’s oceanic eyes land on mine. ‘What do you say, baby? Will we go home for Christmas?’

My heart balloons, along with my ovaries. This man. He’s my world.

‘Please say you will, Holly! We’d love to have you, wouldn’t we, Frank?’ Penny nudges Frank again.

‘Absolutely. Sure, she’s family now too.’ Frank’s words cause my eyes to well again.

An influx of warm and fuzzy emotion renders me speechless, but I manage to offer a quick nod.

‘Wahooo!’ Penny fist punches the air.

Nate leans into my ear. ‘Christmas with the Fockers has nothing on this. You’re going to love every second.’

And I know he’s right.

Later that night, we lie on the couch, Nate’s huge frame wrapped around mine in the spoon position. Tootsie lies at our feet, curled up in her tartan bed, snoring softly.

His hand rests possessively across my stomach. ‘You know my parents love you, right?’

My insides inflate at the compliment as he tugs me round to face him and we’re locked in a look so intense it smoulders.

‘You know I do too, right?’ His breath seeps inside my lips while his words sear my heart.

Emotion swells so tight in my chest. It’s everything I ever dreamed of and more. I don’t hesitate. The words fly from my mouth of their own accord. ‘I love you too, Nate. The difference is, I have done for years.’

Earnest eyes bore into mine like he’s searching my soul. ‘You really think you can handle the pressure of being with me?’

‘Whatever it takes to be with you, I’ll handle it.’

‘Ditto.’

What a few weeks. It’s been a whirlwind of emotion. Heartache, embarrassment, and pain, but so much pleasure. Nothing beats this. Just being here with Nate. He’s transitioned from the movie star I had pinned on my wall, to well, my person. My everything. I don’t know why I didn’t just open up to him in the beginning.

Shame, I suppose. Insecurity that he’d see what I’ve always felt my parents see - someone lacking.

But instead, he stepped up. I’m under no illusion this viral video is going to disappear completely, but with him by my side, it’s a lot easier to swallow.

His commitment is unexpected in so many ways, yet unsurprising in others. From the very first moment we met - well, from the moment I stopped crucifying Mariah and actually spoke to the man - something clicked between us.

And every day we’ve spent together that has magnified.

His gentle thumb strokes across my skin express more than a million verbal I love yous.

The Ten O'clock News rolls across the screen in the background, but I'm paying more attention to the soothing heartbeat pressed against my chest.

The presenter's smooth, clipped voice tears my attention away from Nate by name dropping a bomb I never thought I'd hear on TV. 'Hotelier Dan Hargreaves from the prestigious Hargreaves Hotel chain is facing a lawsuit following allegations of professional misconduct.'

I jolt into a sitting position and grab the remote from the coffee table, my thumb frantically turning up the volume until the newsreader's voice resonates throughout the entire spacious living area. Dan's face appears in a grainy photo on the screen.

'An investigation is underway following a social media protest campaign started by Savannah Kingsley, known as Single Sav to many of our viewers. The campaign #amanscorned, highlights a cruel prank played by Mr Hargreaves on his former girlfriend, Holly Hazelwood, and the injustice of the laws surrounding filming in public places.

'Somehow, Dublin-born action movie hero, Nate Jackson, got wind of this horrific personal attack on Holly Hazelwood and stepped up to support Miss Kingsley's campaign. The matter is finally receiving the attention it deserves. Looks like our Nate isn't just a hero on screen. Now for the weather.'

I mute the TV and turn to Nate, who's languidly draped across the couch sporting the biggest grin. 'No one messes with my girl.'

Yep, I'm officially ruined.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

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NATE
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19th December

‘Okay, guys, that’s a wrap for this leg of filming, anyway.’ Max’s deep voice resounds across the set, and a tidal wave of relief sweeps from my head to my toes. The spotlights fade. The camera crew exchange a few easy pleasantries as they pack away their equipment.

I can officially say I’ll never accept another romance role in my life. And truth be told, when this cheesy shit airs, I’ll probably never get offered one.

It’s taken thirty-four years, and one tough Hallmark hellish lesson which I’ve scraped through by the skin of my teeth, and an exceptional muse, but finally, I realise I have nothing to prove to anyone.

I’m proud to be a one-trick pony. We all have our own lane. There’s nothing wrong with staying in it and excelling in it.

We still have a couple of weeks of filming to do after Christmas, but they aren’t love scenes. They follow my character, Ryan, as he goes on tour to Vegas. That I can live with.

Macy tuts, rounding up the discarded costumes which have been dropped at her feet. ‘Do I look like the fucking cleaning

lady?’ She watches the cast swarm like flies towards the twinkling Christmas tree in the castle’s hallway.

Max hired some real waitresses for once, and they’re currently handing out champagne and canapés to celebrate the last day of filming before Christmas. Our very own Hallmark Christmas party.

My eyes lock with Holly’s across the room in an unspoken agreement. One drink to be sociable. Then we’re out of here. There’s far more fun to be had at home, especially now my parents have gone back to Dublin and aren’t liable to let themselves in while we’re getting down to business.

There’s no bigger cockblocker than your mother walking in on you on the job, even if it is *what we were put on this planet to do*.

And as well as the sexy-time fun, we need to pack Holly’s belongings. Tomorrow, we leave for Dublin, and I can’t wait to tick off a few more of Holly’s festive fantasies, starting with the lights on Grafton Street. Ice skating. A trip to Brown Thomas. The urge to spoil her eats at me.

Holly takes a step towards me, but Max grabs her by the elbow, halting her where she stands. It’s impossible to hear what he’s saying over the buzz of chatter. I hesitate for a beat, then cross the floor to join them.

‘Ah, the hero of the hour.’ Max’s cocky grin translates to, *I knew Holly’s secret all along and I’ve seen your girlfriend’s tits*.

It would be really unprofessional to punch him in the teeth, but I haven’t ruled it out.

‘I still think you’d make an amazing Playboy Bunny.’ Max’s beady eyes linger on Holly’s waitress outfit.

I'm going to miss that outfit.

But I won't miss Max and his leery comments.

Holly squirms, clearly uncomfortable under Max's scrutiny.

'Yeah, that's not going to happen, Max.' I muscle in next to her, flanking her back protectively.

'Would you like to go to the States, Holly?' Max is like a dog with a fucking bone.

Holly bristles beside me. 'Oh, I am going to the States.' Her huge clear eyes gaze up at mine so trustingly, I want to pick her up, put her in my pocket and protect her forever. However crude Max is, the media can be so much harsher, as she, unfortunately, already knows. Is it unfair of me to drag her even further into the spotlight with me? Maybe, but my need for her overrules logic.

Max takes a step back. His eyes widen as they dart between the two of us.

'I thought she was just a bit of skirt helping you out on set.' The man is liable to receive his own lawsuit soon. How is it possible to get away with being such a sexist asshole at work in this day and age?

Holly winces visibly, and my fist tingles with the urge to shut Max up one way or another. He takes a step back, seeming to realise he's overstepped the mark.

I tower over him. 'Holly's so much more than that, Max, and you know it. You'll treat my girlfriend with the respect she deserves, or it'll be the last thing you do.'

'Sorry, I didn't mean it like that, you know. I didn't realise...' He raises his right hand in a peace sign as a frown

flickers across his forehead. He turns his attention to Holly. 'Good luck, kid. You're going to need it in Hollywood.'

What if she can't take the pressure? The cameras being shoved in her face every time she leaves my house. The paps who circle like sharks sniffing out the tiniest drop of blood. The incessant media speculation every time either of us is captured with a hint of a frown.

No. Holly isn't Sally-Ann. If she says she can handle it, then she can handle it.

We head towards the Christmas tree in search of a drink. God knows we could both do with it.

Seventy members of the cast and crew congregate in the dome-shaped atrium next to the tree. A buzz of excitement stemming from the upcoming holiday fizzes through the air like the last day of school before spring break.

'Take no notice of him,' Macy says, brushing past us with an armful of crimson and cashmere. 'He's fifty-five years old and the most meaningful relationship he's ever had is with his right hand.'

'I heard that!' Max yells, glancing up from his phone.

We all laugh, and the tension evaporates, but it doesn't alleviate the niggles of doubt that has snaked into my stomach.

Two hours later, we have most of Holly's belongings packed up and her paintings bubble wrapped and ready for a courier to collect and take to my Beverly Hills house. Her makeshift studio looks bare with the canvases all packed away.

Technically, I still have to check out of The Ocean Palace, but given I only spent about three nights there in total, most of

my stuff ended up here, anyway.

‘I can’t believe I’m moving to the States.’ Holly sucks in a huge breath before blowing it out slowly. ‘You know, I always wanted to travel. To experience new places.’

‘If you want to, you can travel with me whenever I go on location, too. It could be anywhere, though. Sometimes they’re not the nicest of places.’

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, I’d pretty much go anywhere with you.’ Holly glances round her holiday home wistfully. ‘You know we barely made use of this place?’

I take in the kitchen counter, the sofa, the rug in front of the fire and a million memories roll through my brain. ‘I wouldn’t exactly say that now...’

She slaps my arm playfully. ‘I meant the outdoor hot tub and the sauna.’ Her head tilts towards the huge sliding doors that open onto the terrace.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her that in Beverly Hills, I have an outdoor hot tub and an infinity pool that makes this one look like a child’s inflatable paddling pool, but I don’t want to sound like a dick. ‘Well, we’re not late yet.’ I yank my t-shirt over my head and stride across the floor.

Holly pauses, glancing at the kitchen, then back towards the terrace.

‘Well? What are you waiting for?’ I open the door and step out into the crisp, cold night. The stars gleam in the sky and my breath fogs in front of my face. It feels almost cold enough to snow.

Holly sashays towards the kitchen as I turn to pull back the hood on the tub and set it in motion.

The ocean roars to my right, but it's nothing compared to the roaring in my heart when my woman (yes mine - I don't care who's seen her topless) returns, utterly naked, clutching a bottle of Sancerre in one hand, and two wine glasses in the other.

'Are you just going to stand there all day or are you actually going to get in?' Holly's voice interrupts my thoughts.

'Ladies first.' I sweep her in front of me and drop my trousers, along with all those stupid niggling thoughts.

She hands me a glass and sinks down into the infinite bubbles with a tiny, satisfied sigh. 'Heaven.'

It really is. Her skin is luminous under the starlight. Every creamy inch begs to be touched. 'You're so fucking beautiful, Holly.'

I sink into the bubbles beside her, and she fills up both of our glasses.

'Any chance of Mariah appearing tonight?' My lips lift in a smirk.

'For you, I'll be whoever you want me to be.' Her pink tongue darts out over her lips.

Is it any wonder I'm smitten? I've got a serious case of the warm and fuzzies flooding through my arteries and not just to my dick. Holly is everything I ever wanted, but was too afraid to pursue. Loving her is as natural as breathing.

'What are you thinking?' Holly asks, her hand settling on my thigh beneath the water.

'I was thinking it's been a crazy month.'

'What a meet-cute, right?' she giggles.

‘One to tell the grandkids.’ I press a kiss to her button nose as the tiniest drop of snow touches mine. I’m drowning in emotion.

An expression of sheer uninhibited wonder lights Holly’s face as tiny delicate snow droplets descend from above. Our hands rise simultaneously to catch the first snowfall of the season. ‘Pure magic,’ she exhales with wonder, closing her eyes like she’s committing this moment to memory.

‘You’re pure magic.’ I swallow hard.

Our fingers interlock, and those thick black lashes flutter open. Our faces are millimetres apart. The words I thought I’d never say to another woman tumble out freely for the second time this week. ‘I love you, Holly Hazelwood.’

She slides closer, wrapping her legs around my waist beneath the water, her pupils pleasure-drunk, overflowing with emotion. ‘I love you, Nate Jackson. I thought I loved you since I was a teenager, but the man in the posters I pinned to the inside of my wardrobe has nothing on the real you.’ Her lips brush teasingly over mine. ‘You’re so much more than my celebrity crush. You’re my everything.’

‘The feeling is mutual, princess.’ My voice is low and gruff with need.

No matter how many times I have this woman, it’ll never be enough. I abandon my drink by the side of the tub, my hands landing on Holly’s bare hips.

When our lips meet, it’s with a tenderness that no Hallmark movie could capture.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

HOLLY

My skin is shrivelled like a prune. We finished the bottle of wine ages ago, but neither of us seem in a rush to get out of the tub.

‘Tell me about Beverly Hills. What’s it like?’ Will I be enough for him under the glittering city lights? When he can have his choice of so many other women?

Am I right for a man like Nate?

If I’m not, then why does it feel so natural being with him?

Nate’s eyes blaze with enthusiasm as he reaches for me beneath the water, and my insecurities burst like the jacuzzi bubbles.

‘It’s full of amazing architecture. Honestly, some of the houses look like they’re plucked straight from a fairy tale. There are loads of parks and gardens. I’ll bring you to the Virginia Robinson Gardens. It’s insane. Like the botanic garden of all botanic gardens.’ Nate takes my hand. ‘And the food is unreal. So much choice. There are hundreds of gourmet food shops. There’s even a store with over five hundred varieties of cheese.’

My mind wanders back to my parents and their healthy living food chain. I still haven’t heard from either of them and

it's freaking me out. We aren't the closest family, but I expected to hear something. I thought after Dan appeared on the news, they might have called. I've deliberated ringing them a couple of times, but the coward inside me couldn't bear their disappointment.

'What's your house like?'

Nate's chin tilts up as he sucks on his lower lip. 'It's.... nice...'

'What is that supposed to mean?' I slant him a sideways glance.

'It's a little bigger than this.' He gestures towards the villa, which is easily the most luxurious house I've ever had the pleasure of staying in.

'My house is fifteen-thousand square feet. I have a tennis court. A gym. A one-hundred-foot infinity pool. And I just ordered a construction company to add on an extension at the back,' he admits.

My jaw drops. 'You have a fifteen-thousand square foot house and you're putting on an extension? What the hell for?'

When he grins, devastating dimples dent his chiselled cheekbones. 'For you, of course. For an art studio.'

His words, and his gesture, steal the breath straight from my chest. My mouth opens and closes and opens again. There are no words.

'I asked the architect to use as much glass as possible to give you the best light and the most amazing views for inspiration.' Nate presses another kiss to my swollen lips.

'I can't believe you did that for me.' It's insane.

‘Sweetheart, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you. I want you to be happy in Beverly Hills.’

My heart is so full it could burst. ‘As long as I’m with you, I’m happy.’

A sound from inside the house sets us jumping apart.

‘Yooohooooo!’ a voice shrieks from inside.

We exchange a quizzical glance.

‘I thought your mam and dad went back to Dublin yesterday?’ Why I’m whispering, I have no idea.

‘They did.’

‘Holly?’ The voice comes close enough to recognise.

My best friend barrels out onto the terrace, wide-eyed with glee. Barely stifling a laugh, her pupils dart between us before shamelessly settling on Nate’s impressive pecs bobbing just above the bubbles.

Sav might be committed to being single, but she’s only human.

‘My, oh, my, you are one lucky bitch!’ she squeals, with a hand over her mouth. ‘Have you two filthy animals been having sex in my hot tub?’ Her tongue clicks against the roof of her mouth, but her eyes exude pure excitement. ‘Of course you have.’ She’s wearing tight navy jeans and a crimson cashmere turtleneck jumper. A bottle of champagne is tucked tightly beneath her right arm.

‘Savannah? I can’t believe you’re actually here!’ In my sheer uninhibited excitement, I go to stand up, before realising I’m actually completely naked once again.

Seriously, the nudist colony is the only place for me.

‘I told you I’d come, didn’t I?’ Another bout of noise follows from behind her and it’s enough to drag her eyes from my hot boyfriend and back in the direction from which she arrived. ‘Oh shit! Get dressed guys, quick!’

‘A towel would be helpful!’ It’s impossible to hide the excitement in my voice.

My best friend is here. My boyfriend just said he loved me. And I’m moving to the States to do what I’ve always wanted to do, paint and travel. Somebody pinch me. I feel like I’m in a Hallmark movie of my very own.

Nate raises his arm languidly in Savannah’s direction. ‘Please to meet you. If you’d have called ahead, we might have even got dressed.’ Mildly amused sarcasm rolls from his tongue.

‘Shit.’ Alarm replaces her glee as she scrambles round the decking, presumably looking for towels. ‘Your brother is here! And Clarissa. And my dads. The twins are asleep in the car, and Ashley is on her way down too. We decided to celebrate Dan’s demise by surprising you! But it looks like it’s you who’s surprising us.’ She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. ‘Again.’

‘My brother?’

Shit. Shit. Shit. Conor is cool, but even he won’t relish seeing his little sister naked in a hot tub with a movie star.

‘I’ll stall them in the hall. As amazing as your rack is, Holls, I think we’ve all seen enough of it for one Christmas.’ A grin flashes across Savannah’s face.

‘Speak for yourself.’ Nate pinches my ass beneath the water.

‘You two are so cute, it’s disgusting.’ Savannah darts back in through the sliding doors.

Nate hops out of the tub first, yelping as the soles of his feet hit the fresh layer of snow covering the decking. He yanks on his damp, snow dusted trousers and heads to the doors.

‘And you thought your family had no boundaries?’ My eyebrows shoot upwards of their own accord. ‘Sorry for the intrusion.’

‘Don’t be. I can’t wait to meet everyone. Once I get some proper clothes on, that is. I’ll grab you a towel.’

‘My hero.’ I flick him with the foam from the top of the tub.

‘You know it.’ Laughter crests his perfect lips.

I sink back under the heat, letting it roll over my shoulders while I wait. Nate returns thirty seconds later with a huge, fluffy white bath towel and my runners, saving my feet from the same freezing fate as his. By the time my brother makes it through to the living area, I’ve haphazardly thrown on the clothes I discarded earlier.

Conor’s charcoal-coloured suit is slightly crumpled from the journey, his crisp white shirt contrasting sparkling blue eyes the same shade as mine. He probably came here straight from a long hospital shift.

Clarissa enters the room right behind him, her ash blonde hair professionally blow-dried. She’s wearing an ecru woollen coat that nips in at the waist before kicking out into a flattering flare over her hips.

Conor exhales a low whistle as his eyes roam over Savannah’s villa: the open fire, the huge ornate kitchen. A deep rumbling laugh tumbles from his throat when they land

on my ridiculously bright Christmas tree. ‘And you thought Mam was mad at you about the video? If she saw this multicoloured monstrosity, you’d be in real trouble.’ He strides across the room, his broad smile showcasing years of orthodontics.

‘How are you, sis?’ He plants a kiss on both my cheeks.

‘Never been better.’ I turn to Nate, who is lingering a foot behind me. ‘Conor, this is Nate. Nate, this is my brother, Conor.’

When Nate steps forward, Conor freezes like a rabbit in the headlights. ‘Wow.’

I wasn’t the only one with a Nate Jackson crush. The only difference is my brother’s man crush stemmed from Nate’s impressive stunts, instead of his impressive pecs.

‘Obviously, I’d heard you were here, but it’s so surreal seeing you in person. I’ve been watching your movies for years. You’re like a national hero.’

Nate extends a hand to Conor, who fumbles for a second before taking it. ‘You’re a cardiologist?’

‘Yes.’ Conor’s awe-struck face stares down at the hand shaking his. It’s too funny. I can only imagine my own expression when I met Nate that first night.

‘Well, then we all know who the real hero is.’ Nate shrugs good naturedly.

‘Hello?’ a man’s voice calls from the hallway.

‘Oh shit! I almost forgot about my dads! And the kids!’ Savannah’s hand flies to her temple.

Nate turns to me with a quizzical look. ‘Dads?’

‘Savannah’s adopted,’ I explain.

‘In here, Dad,’ Savannah calls, beckoning them in.

An hour later, I’m sitting on the rug in front of the fire, between Nate’s huge thighs, with my back resting on his chest. Savannah’s fathers managed to carry the twins in from the car without waking them, and they’re now fast asleep in one of the seven guest bedrooms. Ashley arrived half an hour ago, without Matt, who is apparently still preoccupied writing his novel. She’s kicked off her shoes and sprawled out on one of the crushed velvet armchairs.

I’ve lost track of the days while I’ve been cosy up to Nate each night, but school is officially closed until next year. Not that it matters to me now. I’ve decided not to go back.

Conor and Clarissa snuggle up on one end of the couch, while Savannah and her fathers are huddled at the opposite end.

Tootsie’s asleep, as ever, in her tartan bed beside Nate and me. His right hand strokes her fluffy fur every now and again as she snores softly.

‘I can’t believe the wedding is next week!’ Savannah gushes to Clarissa, who’s starry eyes turn to Conor, like he’s the movie star in the room. Even after being together for years, they’re so enamoured with each other, it’s outrageous.

‘Speaking of weddings, when are you going to settle down, young lady?’ Savannah’s dad, Steve, pipes up in a mocking tone.

Her other dad, Stuart, swipes his hand in front of the air. ‘Oh, cut her some slack. She’s an independent woman, isn’t that right, Sav?’

Savannah rolls her eyes playfully. ‘If I have to listen to how you two have dreamed of giving me away in a church full of people, with an extravagant carnation arrangement pinned to the end of each pew, I swear I’m going to bed. From the day you guys adopted me, you’ve done nothing but pray to get rid of me!’

‘We just want to see you happy, darling.’ Steve smooths his smart trousers over his thighs.

I bite back my snigger. Savannah’s dads are always on her to date. I’ve witnessed this exact conversation at least fifty times before and it always plays out the same way.

Savannah takes a sip of champagne from the glass she’s clutching like a lifeline. ‘It would kind of ruin my brand, don’t you think? “Married Sav” just doesn’t quite have the same ring to it. How can I be a champion for single mothers if I’m no longer one?’ She dismisses their words with a quick flick of her wrist.

‘Maybe you’ve done enough championing? Maybe it’s time to let someone else take over?’ Steve’s hand waves the air dramatically in front of his face and Nate squeezes my waist, watching the show.

‘It’s not even about what I want. It’s my entire business we’re talking about.’ Savannah shakes her head despairingly.

‘What about the kids’ swimming instructor?’ Steve persists. ‘Oh my God, he’s absolutely gorgeous.’ Steve’s head barrels round to Stuart, who’s wearing an indignant expression on his pursed lips. ‘Not as gorgeous as you, Stu, of course, but he’d be perfect for Sav.’

Stuart perks up at Steve’s compliment. His back straightens as he preens himself. ‘Isn’t he like an Olympic

medallist or something? What's his name again?'

'Ronan Rivers?' Savannah practically spits.

'That's the one.' Steve clicks his fingers. 'Sexy and successful. He could be the one.'

Savannah's eyes narrow. 'You've got to be kidding me? Ronan Rivers is the most arrogant asshole I have ever had the misfortune of coming across in my entire twenty-eight years. Well, apart from...' She trails off, glancing at the floor. It doesn't take a genius to work out she's referring to the twins' mysterious father.

'If Ronan wasn't the best swimming instructor in the country, and we didn't live dangerously close to the sea, there's no way I'd suffer bringing the twins to his overbearing lessons every week.'

'Me thinks the lady doth protest too much.' Steve is either very brave or very stupid. From the way Savannah's lips are pursed into a grim line, and the blood vessel furiously pumping on her temple, she's about three seconds away from snapping.

'Back to Conor and Clarissa's wedding,' Ashley interjects from across the room. Sav mouths a silent thank you across the room.

'Are you all set?' Savannah latches onto the rope Ashley cast her and clings to it for dear life.

Clarissa and Conor's heads angle towards each other again. God, even their mannerisms are in perfect sync.

'I guess so,' Clarissa answers for both of them. 'Conor's mam has done a lot of the planning. I'm not overly fussed with things like flower arrangements, table decorations and seating plans.'

‘Way to get on your future mother-in-law’s good side,’ Savannah says. ‘Especially Mrs Hazelwood.’

‘Letting her plan our civil ceremony was the only way to compensate for the fact we aren’t having a religious one,’ Conor admits.

Nate squeezes my thigh at the mention of my mother.

‘Those types of things are important to her. Once the groom turns up, and says yes, that’s all that matters to me.’ Clarissa’s hand drops to Conor’s thigh and he presses a kiss to her temple. If it wasn’t so adorably sweet, it would be sickening.

I’m on my second glass of champagne, but it’s not that making my insides warm and fuzzy.

‘You are coming to the wedding, right?’ Conor’s gaze lands on Nate and me on the floor.

‘We’d be delighted to,’ Nate answers for both of us before I can ask if that’s a good idea.

Chapter Thirty

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HOLLY
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20th December

‘I can’t believe you’re leaving. We only just got here,’ Savannah complains, pouring star-shaped cereal into two ceramic bowls for the twins. Isla and Eden are draped across the couch watching a rerun of *Home Alone*.

‘I know, I’m so sorry. I would have planned it better if I’d have known you were coming.’

‘Can’t you stay until tomorrow? Or the next day?’ She plonks the bowls at the large table and calls the kids.

Cradling a strong black coffee between my palms, I blow on it before taking a sip. Nate’s in a deep sleep for once. A break from ‘Hallmark hell’, as he calls it, seems to be agreeing with him. ‘Nate’s family is expecting us. He hasn’t been home in a while.’

‘So, you’re spending Christmas Day with his family?’ Savannah arches her perfectly plucked eyebrows.

‘Yeah. His parents are lovely. So warm. So openly affectionate. And they’re absolutely hilarious.’ I shrug, like it’s not the biggest deal in the world. ‘I still haven’t heard from mine since...’

I need to call my mother. I have to. But I keep putting it off. The shame is too fresh. I can’t carry the weight of hers

too.

‘And then what?’ she probes, packing away the cereal boxes into an overhead cupboard.

‘Then... I’m going to America.’ I place my cup on the counter and wait for the onslaught.

‘You’re what?’ Ashley shrieks, choosing this moment to drag her tousled auburn hair into the kitchen.

‘To live with Nate.’ I roll my lips, anticipating the deluge.

Savannah fist pumps the air. ‘Wow! You go, girl!’

Her excitement is precisely what I need right now, because if I were to pause long enough to think about how quick things are moving and the consequences of being in a relationship with an A-list celebrity, my anxiety might just ruin me.

‘You know, I’ve always tried to do the right thing. The sensible thing. Like becoming a teacher because it’s a respectable profession, because it offers more security than selling paintings. Tying myself to a mortgage that’s probably too much for one person alone but struggling along anyway because getting on the property ladder young was something that was drummed into us since we were kids. These are great achievements, but they were my parents’ dreams, not mine.’

Savannah and Ashley nod in complete agreement.

‘This month here has really given me the chance to find myself. There were a few long days where the only company I had were my thoughts and my paintings. I know it sounds so cliché but away from the rat race of work and conforming to every little thing that’s expected of me, I had no choice but to face the truth – it’s a relief to be out of it.’

Savannah takes my hands and squeezes them. ‘I am going to miss you so much! But on the plus side,’ she side eyes Ashley, ‘visiting our bestie is a fantastic excuse to hop on a plane!’

‘God help America,’ a deep voice teases from behind us. Nate strides across the room wearing only a pair of tight boxer briefs.

No matter how many times I see his body, it never fails to take my breath away. The smooth planes of his stomach. The six symmetrical muscles above it. The perfect V that dips below his waistband and the fine wispy black trail following it. The ink sprawled across his rippling muscles.

‘Oh. My. God,’ Savannah whispers in my ear. ‘If he asks you to move to fucking Antarctica, go with him.’

My entire face flushes with heat, love, and longing all in one burst.

The girls step back, allowing Nate to step in. ‘Good morning, gorgeous.’ Strong hands grip my waist as his lips land on mine. He snatches them away again all too soon. ‘I’d dehydrate in that bed before it occurred to you to bring *me* a coffee.’ His sparkling green eyes twinkle at me mischievously.

I peep round his bicep to see Savannah and Ashley clinging to each other behind Nate’s back. A grin opens up on my face as my hands reach for Nate’s iron ass and squeeze.

‘And you pretend you’re shy!’ Savannah shrieks, cupping her mouth with her hand.

A giggle slips out of my mouth as I turn my attention back to Nate. ‘Go back to bed. I’ll bring you that coffee now.’ Chemistry sparks between us in an invisible short circuit.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Nate offers a mock salute and presses another kiss on my lips before turning on his heels and exiting the kitchen just as swiftly as he arrived.

My cheeks ache from grinning like an idiot as I load a capsule into the coffee machine. I’ve got a feeling Nate could be drinking this one cold.

‘Oh my God!’ Savannah repeats like a broken record. ‘Your boyfriend is insanely hot, but the hottest thing about him is how much he adores you. Go live in America. Paint all day long and ride that celestial creature all night long.’ She makes a show of fanning herself and pretending to buckle at the knees. ‘It’s a good job my dads are still in bed because I think Nate in his underpants would be enough to make them both faint.’

By midday, all my things are packed in Nate’s rented Audi. Savannah kindly offered to drive my Mini back to Dublin to see what price the dealership will offer me for it.

Tootsie is in her element in the backseat, sitting up and sniffing the window. I hope she doesn’t pee on the leather interior.

My hand reaches into the handbag dangling from my left shoulder, searching for the only ornament I took from the Christmas tree, the bauble Nate gifted me. My fingers trace over the cool crystals and heat fires through my veins.

Outside Ard Na Mara, my friends and family linger at the doorway.

Tiny white snow drops flutter through the crisp air, a thin layer coating the ground beneath my feet. The ocean roars to my right, hissing and fizzing as it rolls back over the rocks.

‘I’ll miss this place.’ I murmur into Nate’s shoulder.

He tilts his head to the side, scanning the villa like he’s committing it to memory. ‘We’ll come back for a holiday one day.’

‘I’m going to miss you so much!’ Savannah shouts from the doorway.

I blow her a kiss. ‘You’ll see me in a couple of days, you loon!’

Clarissa invited everyone to the wedding. Even Savannah’s fathers. This is going to rightly fuck with my mother’s table plan, but who am I to argue with the bride?

The thought of facing my parents and extended family members after everything still sets a fresh wave of panic through me, but with Nate by my side, I know I can do it.

It’s taken most of the month, and repeated reassurance from pretty much everyone here, to realise that I did nothing wrong. I just hope my parents can see it that way.

‘Ready?’ Nate’s head dips to mine.

‘Yep.’ I smile as he opens the car door for me.

I hop in and let down the window, waving to my friends and family as we shout our goodbyes.

‘Text me when you get there safely.’ Savannah calls.

‘Yes mom.’ I exhale a happy sigh.

‘Be safe,’ Conor calls, raising his hand in a wave. His focus is on Nate, who nods back silently like Conor just asked him to take care of his little sister.

The car slopes down the driveway. ‘You okay?’ Nate’s eyes dart sideways.

‘I’m good.’ And I mean it. I’m putting my blind trust in him, but it feels good.

We cruise through the tiny roads in search of the motorway. ‘Are you looking forward to going home?’ I fiddle with the radio, trying to find some Christmas music.

He readjusts himself in his seat. ‘I don’t know, to be honest.’

‘Why haven’t you been home in years? Your parents are amazing. I can’t wait to meet your sisters.’ John Lennon’s timeless Christmas classic begins, but I turn the radio down to hear Nate better.

He indicates and switches lanes. A heavy sigh whooshes from his chest. ‘The neighbours.’

‘What about them?’ Curiosity kindles in my chest

His Adam’s apple bobs. ‘Sally-Ann and Niall live next door.’

‘Oh.’

‘And you’ve avoided them because you were still hurt?’ I try to keep the worry from snaking into my voice. If he still cares, does that mean he still has feelings for her?

He blows out another big breath. ‘It was awkward, that’s all. Niall was my best friend. I didn’t just lose Sally when she called it a day. I lost him too.’

Sympathy floods through my veins. ‘And now? Will you be okay?’

He lifts my hand and presses the back of it to his lips. ‘More than okay. Mam’s doing dinner for the four of us tonight. Then tomorrow, the madness begins.’

‘Madness?’ I raise my eyebrows.

‘My sisters will start arriving. It’ll be bedlam. There’ll be hair straighteners strewn all over the place. Make-up all over the bathroom. The place will stink like a perfume parlour. Natalie will beg me to set her up with Tom Cruise over the eggnog, even though he’s probably old enough to be her grandad, and I’ve never met the man in my life. Stella’s kids will be so excited they’ll use the couch like a climbing frame whilst devouring every ounce of chocolate they can lay their grubby hands on, even the liqueurs. Ava will pop the Prosecco at eight am, and continue to drink it all day, every day, claiming ‘it’s the season to be jolly,’ while trying to convince me to invest in her latest business venture, of which there have been many. And Faith will probably try to convince me to buy her another house because the three-thousand-square-foot one in Skerries that I already bought doesn’t have a big enough garden. It’s going to be noisy.’

My eyes widen. ‘It sounds like bedlam.’ The polar opposite to any Christmas I’ve ever experienced.

‘It will be. But hopefully the best kind.’ The corners of his eyes crinkle with a smile.

Chapter Thirty-One

NATE

I told Holly I'm okay with things, but that doesn't stop the stupid flutter of nerves darting around my stomach as we pull into the small cul-de-sac where my parents' red brick Victorian detached house is located.

A million memories flood back. Playing on the central communal lawn on a balmy summer day. Constructing makeshift goals with our t-shirts, and kicking a football until the sun went down, or we got hungry. Building snowmen in the winter, stealing whatever items of clothing from the coat hooks we could find.

I blink them away and refocus on the house with a gleaming gold number seven plaque on the open front gate. Mam's Volkswagen Golf is parked on the grey paved driveway to the left of the house, with Dad's Transit van beside it, both facing forwards. Dad has always enforced a strict reverse-in, drive-out policy since they became grandparents, and toddlers were liable to be running loose.

With six bedrooms and a generous-sized garden, it more than meets their needs, but that doesn't stop me wishing they'd let me spoil them. Let me buy them something four times the size. But that's not what they want.

Mam's words from all those years ago roll through my mind. *'This is our home. It's always been our home, and always will be our home.'*

Of course, that's not the only reason I wish they'd move.

I will my eyes not to look at the terracotta tiled house next door as I park on the road outside instead of blocking my parents in.

'This is where you grew up?' Holly's eyes roam over the neatly manicured gardens, the symmetrical hedging that dad spent years preening to perfection, and the hip-height potted plants flanking the black front door.

An intricately woven Christmas wreath comprising crimson holly berries and lush green ivy hanging on the front door welcomes us.

Images of the last Christmas I spent here infiltrate my brain like a swarm of fireflies. It's a battle to swat them away.

It was the most amazing Christmas.

Too good, as it turned out.

Sally-Ann's parents had emigrated to Australia, and their Christmas present to her was their house to do with as she wished. As an only child, it was always going to be hers one day, but I assumed she'd rent it out or sell it. We'd been living in Santa Monica for almost a year. I'd just been cast as the lead in my third movie that year. Things were going great.

Or so I thought.

I was due to start filming the first week in January, so we'd booked flights to the States on the twenty-ninth of December. My suitcase was packed, waiting by the front door, ready to go, when I heard muffled sobs coming from up the stairs.

With a tear-streaked face, Sally-Ann confessed she wasn't coming with me. That she couldn't hack the pressure of being relentlessly pursued by paps, the lack of privacy and the continuous speculation about whether I was sleeping with my co-stars.

It was my dream to make it big in America. And she respected that. But it was never hers.

The worst thing about it?

I didn't see it coming. Didn't get any inclination that my world was about to blow up spectacularly in my face like an action stunt in one of my movies.

It would almost have been easier if she'd broken up with me because she didn't love me, but it wasn't even that.

It was life that broke us apart.

As my career progressed upwards, my personal life spiralled downwards. The drugs took the edge off, for a while at least.

I didn't expect Sally to marry my best friend less than a year later.

In my mind, we had unfinished business. I thought she'd come back to me at some point. After all, we split because of the outside pressures, not because we didn't love each other.

The day Mam informed me Sally was getting married, I dragged my sorry stoner ass to American Addicts Support Society and vowed to turn my life around.

She'd moved on.

It was time for me to do the same.

Hopping out of the Audi, I round to the passenger side to open the door for Holly. Her chestnut hair is not entirely dissimilar to Sally-Ann's, a fact which hasn't really registered until this moment. But other than that, they're nothing alike. Sally also has blue eyes, but Holly's are ten shades brighter, and twenty times more playful.

Where Sally was always quiet, serious and studious, Holly's a Mariah-Carey-impersonating pool of endless fun. She's like an explosion of her brightly coloured paintings at the end of a long and lonely tunnel.

I reach out and take Holly's hand, helping her out of the Jeep. Before her little tan ankle boot has even hit the ground, the front door flies open.

'Ahh!' Mam's excited squeal pierces the air. 'You made it!' She skips down the driveway in a red roll neck jumper and the same plaid trousers she's worn for years.

Dad appears in the open doorway, resting a broad shoulder against the frame. His tool belt is loosely strapped to his waist, and a pencil is tucked behind his ear as if we've caught him in the middle of another one of his endless odd jobs. His weathered lips quirk into a smile as he watches Mam rush to greet us. 'Careful you don't slip, Penny!'

And there it is, right there. The love between them is obvious.

That's what I want.

That's what I've been missing all these years.

I never thought I'd find it again. Hell, I never dared to let myself even try. And when it came down to it, it wasn't even a conscious decision. Holly just happened, in the best possible way.

My chest constricts with love for the woman whose small hand is clasped in mine as my mother squishes us into an excited embrace.

‘I can’t believe you’re home! I was beginning to think I’d never see the day.’ Mam dabs her eyes with her fingers and shoos us up the driveway.

A thud sounds from my right, and instinctively my head whips round before I think to stop myself.

This is the moment I’ve spent the last few years wishing for and dreading in equal measure.

The one where I wondered if my heart would shatter into a million pieces. Well, what remained of it, anyway.

Sally-Ann’s familiar frame pauses in her doorway, her face frozen in an expression of surprise. Denim-coloured eyes widen as they soak me in. Her glossy dark hair is longer than I remember, hanging loosely over her shoulders in subtle waves. Her sallow skin bears the fine lines of a woman now, not the girl I used to know.

Her jaw slackens, her mouth drops into a tiny O. Our eyes lock in an intense exchange. The world pauses for a split second, like I’m watching in slow motion from above.

Mam and Dad hover awkwardly in my periphery, matching strained smiles stretch across their faces, watching as I face the very reason I’ve avoided coming home. The same reason I shut myself off from everyone. The same reason that ensured I spent the last number of years dating women I knew I’d never fall in love with.

But every fear of seeing Sally-Ann again dissipates like a deflating balloon. Even the baby strapped to her chest doesn’t tear up my heart like I thought it would.

Sally looks well. But the attraction that once motivated me has evaporated. Any feelings I had for my first love are well and truly gone.

It's a relief. Or maybe a Christmas miracle.

No. The real miracle is the gorgeous brunette beside me. The one who inadvertently managed to unravel my jaded heart enough for it to contemplate loving someone again.

The woman who makes me laugh without even trying.

The one whose body fits with mine like it was carved out by a god I'm not sure I believe in, just for me. The one whose very touch makes my soul sing.

It's taken me years to realise, but finally I can see the light through the trees. It wasn't specifically Sally-Ann I've been pining for all these years. It was a love like it. A love as intense and long-lasting as the love my parents share.

One that *can* and *will* stand every and any test of time.

What hurt was her marriage to my best friend, but now I'm finally back, I can see my pride was more wounded than my heart.

My love for Sally grew slowly and steadily. We were childhood friends for years before we became an item. That depth of familiarity and connection is hard to beat. Yet, in only a month, I've managed to achieve that and more with Holly.

Holly and her bouncing boobs in that crimson outfit will be forever imprinted in my mind. Her smart mouth and sparkling personality hit me harder than an avalanche of seasonal snow. The warmth she exudes combined with her subtle vulnerability is enough to bring me to my knees.

And being the way she is, with her huge heart permanently displayed on her sleeve for the entire world to see, she's made it abundantly transparent she feels the same about me.

'Are you okay?' Holly murmurs, watching as I stare at Sally-Ann like I've seen a ghost.

Which is precisely what Sally-Ann is.

My very own Ghost of Christmas Past.

Suddenly I need to be alone with my Ghost of Christmas Present and Future. The woman beside me. I need to be inside her with an urgency that catches me by surprise. An urgency I never really experienced with Sally-Ann.

Sally-Ann and I were kids.

Holly is all woman.

And her femininity brings out the caveman in me.

The only thing that does incite a flicker of envy is the baby strapped to Sally's chest. Not because I want to be its father, but because it hits me like a thunderbolt that one day I want to make one of my own with Holly.

My lips lift in a small smile. One that I hope conveys I'm okay. This is okay. We've both moved on. There are no hard feelings.

I raise my hand in a casual greeting. Holly does the same, offering Sally a warm and gracious smile. It has to be awkward for her, too.

As Sally nods, her gaze darts between Holly and me, and a small smile forms on her lips. 'Merry Christmas,' she calls, before sauntering down her own pathway and out onto the sidewalk.

‘Merry Christmas,’ Holly and I call back in unison.

‘Alright, son?’ Dad asks with bated breath.

‘Never been better,’ I reply with utter honesty as Holly squeezes my hand.

Mam’s relieved sigh cuts through the air as I usher Holly into the familiar hallway. The scent of pine needles and sweet cinnamon rolls assault my senses.

Mam nudges us further into the house, where a six-foot-tall real Christmas tree fills the space to the left. A mountain of prettily wrapped parcels already sits beneath it.

I really need to do some Christmas shopping. And bring Holly to Grafton Street to see the lights. But first of all there’s something more pressing I have to deal with.

‘I take it we’re staying in my old bedroom?’ My eyes travel to the red-carpeted staircase on the right.

‘You are.’ Mam beams like the prospect of having her son back where he’s always meant to be thrills her.

‘Well, excuse us while we test out the bed for a few minutes.’ I drag Holly by the hand and tug her up the steps two at a time.

A blush creeps up her neck and flushes across her cheeks as my mam whoops and my dad shouts, ‘Go on, my son! It’s what we were put on this planet to do!’

‘I told you it was going to be bedlam.’ I open my childhood bedroom door and gently shove Holly through it with a firm slap on her fine ass.

Chapter Thirty-Two

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HOLLY
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21st December

Grafton Street, lit up with white glittering Christmas lights, has always been one of my favourite festive sights, but with Nate next to me, the experience is heightened tenfold.

Hanging from his muscular bicep, I inhale the atmosphere straight into my lungs and into my heart. The air is crisp and cold and my exhale fogs in front of my face. Huge snow clouds linger overhead in the twilight sky, though nothing has fallen for hours.

Carol singers lining the street corners, their sweet voices radiating through the air, providing enough warm and fuzzies to melt the coldest of hearts.

Overhead, giant decorative snowflakes dangle from evenly spaced lampposts, forging their own illuminated path through the city. The cobbled streets are wedged with people jostling and bustling on a mission for last-minute gifts.

I need to buy Nate a Christmas present but I'm on a different mission today.

My eyes dart sideways towards my boyfriend. I still can't believe he's mine. Even in that completely un-Nate like baseball hat he's wearing as a disguise, he's still the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on.

‘I need to buy a dress.’ The wedding is two days away and I’m cutting it fine. Possibly because I wasn’t sure if I’d have the balls to show my face after those awful videos, but with Conor and Clarissa insisting, Nate by my side, and Savannah and Ashley there to have my back, I wouldn’t miss it for the world.

‘I’m buying your dress. It can be part of your Christmas present,’ Nate says as we sidestep a particularly assertive shopper, who charges directly into Nate’s shoulder before bouncing off with a less than festive grunt. Christmas really does bring out the best and the worst in people.

‘Part of my Christmas present?’ I crane my neck to look up at him. ‘What’s the other part?’

His lips quirk upwards and there’s devilment in those liquid emerald eyes. ‘It’s a surprise.’

I offer an exaggerated eye roll in his direction. ‘I’m not good with surprises. Secrets and suspense kill me.’

‘I know.’ He flashes that full on, panty-melting megawatt grin. ‘You, gorgeous girl, can’t even hold up the elastic on those sexy sets of lingerie you insist on teasing me in.’

I squeeze his forearm through his leather jacket. ‘Is it any wonder when my hot boyfriend keeps slipping his skilful hands into them? Those stunts you do on the big screen have nothing on what you’re really capable of.’

Having sex in Nate’s parent’s house while they were downstairs felt like being a naughty teenager again, which served to make me come twice as hard on his expert hand.

When we did emerge from his childhood bedroom, we were met with winks, backslaps (for Nate), nudges (for me), and two hot whiskeys.

If I wasn't already head over heels in love with Nate, his family would swing it for him. I barely know them, and they welcome me with open arms. I can't wait to meet his sisters tomorrow.

'Where to? The quicker we get this dress, the quicker I can get my hands back where they need to be.' A heated look flashes across his chiselled cheekbones. The man is insatiable. Which, by the way, is an observation, not a complaint.

'Brown Thomas.' I nod towards Dublin's magnificent department store, where I bought the dress that got me into so much trouble all those weeks ago. I can't bring myself to regret any of it, though, or else I'd never have met Nate. I wouldn't be about to embark on a career as a full-time artist. And I wouldn't be about to travel the world with the man of my dreams.

We nudge our way through the crowds, Nate and I both keeping our heads angled towards the ground. The last thing either of us need is to get spotted and mobbed.

Brown Thomas's huge windows are dressed beautifully with luxury designer stockings dangling beside an enormous white frost-coated fibre optic Christmas tree that my mother would definitely approve of. A lavish display of partially wrapped plush gifts adorn the floor beneath it. Silver glittering bows opened just far enough to reveal the pretty gifts inside, Charlotte Tilbury sparkling gift sets, and a Stella McCartney label peeping out from beneath layer upon layer of crimson silk that just begs to be unwrapped.

'Come on.' I tug Nate's arm impatiently. A blast of hot air hits us full frontal as we pass through the glass double doors and through the perfume section.

Riding the escalator to the second floor, I hold Nate's hand, grinning like a fool in love.

The second my foot hits the women's department, I see it.

A metallic, long-sleeved, ruffle trim, woven maxi dress screams at me from the mannequin it hangs on.

The front dips into a deep V, which I already know will perfectly showcase the assets I'm supposed to be embarrassed about, but its long sleeves and floor-length skirt cover everything else, rendering it unquestionably classy.

My feet gravitate towards it, like a magpie flocking to a shiny object. Fingers itch to roam over the shimmering material. When they do, its sheer silkiness makes me gasp.

It is beyond stunning.

I need it.

Flipping the tag between my fingers, I see it's a Rebecca Vallance. Bracing myself for the price, I suck in a huge breath and flip the tag over.

Two thousand euro.

Fuck.

'You like it?' Nate rolls back on his heels and studies my expression thoughtfully.

'It's too much.' I back away from it like it's an unpredictable animal, not a designer dress.

'I told you, I'm buying it as part of your Christmas present.' Nate's eyes roam around the store floor, presumably searching for a sales assistant.

I yank his arm. 'No, I have the money, it's not that. I'll find something else.'

‘If it’s not the money, then what is it? Your entire face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning when you saw it. What is it?’ A frown creases his forehead.

‘I feel guilty spending that much money on myself when there are people starving in the world.’ My gaze falls to the floor.

‘I know, sweetheart. Believe me, I know.’ He presses a fleeting kiss to my temple. ‘Would it help if I told you I donated over six million dollars to charity this year?’

Thick, dark eyebrows furrow, and he hesitates for a split second like he wants to say something but can’t find the words. Meanwhile, I’m still digesting the six million dollar part. It’s easy to forget Nate’s financial status when he’s so grounded.

‘You know I used to be an addict, right?’ He rolls his lips, eyeing me with a newfound caution, like I’m going to go running for the hills.

I reach for his hand and thread his fingers between mine. ‘It is a matter of public record.’ Is this the point where I admit to obsessively googling him?

‘And it doesn’t bother you?’ Nate’s eyes search mine.

‘What part of “I love you” and “I’ve been obsessed with you for years” did you not pick up on in the weeks we’ve known each other?’ I tease, rocking back on my heels to gaze up at him.

‘The six million went to American Addicts Support Society the charity that helped me. Next year, you can pick. Any charity of your choice.’ His lips hover millimetres from mine. ‘I know you value your independence, but you’re mine, and I will spoil every inch of you because you deserve it. I’m

buying you the dress. I don't want to hear another word about it.'

I didn't think it was possible to love this man any more.

'Can I help you?' A sales assistant approaches from behind, wearing a tailored navy suit and name badge that says, 'Cindy'.

'We'll take this dress, please.' Nate casually flicks his wrist at the Rebecca Vallance dress. 'And we're going to need shoes and lingerie to go with it.'

This man absolutely ruins me.

Let's just hope he's not going to be the ruin *of* me.

As we leave Brown Thomas half an hour later, laden down with elaborately wrapped, boxed, and bagged goods, I scan the store for some sort of inspiration for a Christmas gift for Nate. What can I buy the man who not only has everything, but gives me everything?

Later that night, we're gathered around Nate's parents' rectangular dinner table with two of his sisters, Natalie and Ava, who both landed like a grenade into their parent's house, in an explosion of noise, laughter, discarded handbags and high-heeled shoes. It really will be bedlam when his other two sisters arrive with their children.

Nate is the middle child. Faith and Stella are both older and married with kids. Natalie and Ava are both younger, and from what I can gather, both single.

The Jackson warmth appears to radiate through the entire family, from what I've experienced so far. Each of them greeted me with heartfelt hugs and kisses.

Natalie and Ava are currently arguing over who is hotter, Channing Tatum, or Tom Hardy.

‘Channing has a better body,’ Natalie declares, spearing a piece of steak with her fork before thrusting it into the air to emphasise her point. ‘I mean, did you see *Magic Mike* three?’

Ava shakes her purple-tinged curls aggressively, speaking through a mouthful of buttery potatoes. ‘No. Have to disagree. Tom Hardy is the full package. And that accent? Just dreamy.’ A small hum of appreciation vibrates from her lips.

Nate’s sisters share the same dark glossy hair as him, but where Nate has green eyes like his mother, the girls have their father’s brown eyes.

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full,’ Penny scolds, shooting Ava a look of mocking disapproval.

Ava swallows hard, glances pointedly at her mother and pokes her tongue out.

‘And you wonder why you’re still single?’ Nate teases his sister affectionately.

‘I just haven’t met the right one yet,’ Ava declares, straightening her spine.

‘She met plenty of wrong ones, though.’ Frank reaches for the salt, shaking his head in despair. ‘The last guy she brought home still had a prison tag on his ankle.’

Ava’s nostrils flare. ‘How was I to know? He didn’t mention that on his sign-up form. Besides, it was an open prison. And it wasn’t as if he was a proper criminal. He was a climate activist who’d broken into a Marks and Spencer food court and poured milk all over the floor.’ Ava stabs her meat forcefully.

‘Oh, well, gee, that’s okay then.’ Nate’s sarcastic tone is lost on none of us. ‘You should seriously update your sign-up form.’

‘Sign-up form?’ I have *so* many questions.

Nate jerks his head towards me, slipping his hand on my thigh beneath the table. ‘Ava’s latest business venture is a dating agency, HeartSync.’ Those gorgeous, full lips curl up in a smirk. ‘But how she can take people’s money to set them up, when she can’t even find herself a date, is beyond me.’

‘I can get a date.’ Ava scrunches her button nose. ‘I’m just very particular.’

‘Clearly.’ Natalie voices what we’re probably all thinking, and laughter ripples round the table.

Ava sniffs pointedly. ‘By the time you’ve convinced Holly to marry you and put up with your grumpy ass for the rest of your miserable days, I’ll be approaching my tenth wedding anniversary with the man of my dreams, surrounded by our adorable, immaculately behaved children.’

‘Now there’s a fairy tale if ever I heard one,’ Nate scoffs, but there’s no animosity between them.

He scrapes the final drops of gravy from his plate. ‘*When* Holly and I get married,’ he pauses, shooting me a sideways look that has my insides dissolving into a smouldering pile of lust-filled mush on his parents tiled floor, ‘if you even have a boyfriend, I’ll invest a million euros into your dating business and help you take it to the next level.’

Ava’s fork slips from her fingers, clattering to her plate with a piercing chinking sound. ‘You will?’

Nate nods solemnly, licking the last few drops from his cutlery in a gesture that makes my stomach flip and my tongue

salivate.

‘Shake on it,’ Ava demands, sticking a long slender hand across the table. ‘And don’t leave it too long before you get down on those wobbly knees. You’re not getting any younger.’

Chapter Thirty-Three

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HOLLY
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22nd December

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to come into the city with you today?’ Nate’s eyes rove over my outfit like he’s already thinking about peeling it off.

‘I need to do some Christmas shopping. If you don’t want me to be gone all day, help a girl out and give me a clue what you’d like under the tree on Christmas morning.’ Resting a palm on the mattress for support, I lean across the bed and plant a chaste kiss on Nate’s mouth. Anything more would only lead to me crawling back under the covers with him, and apart from buying his present, I want to get something for my parents, and Penny and Frank too.

‘The only thing I want to unwrap is you.’ He catches my wrist and pulls me back down for another kiss.

‘Nate.’ The warning’s clear in my tone.

‘Spoilsport.’ He releases his grip on me with a reluctant sigh.

‘What are your plans for the day?’ I grab my phone and purse from the nightstand and smooth my jumper back into place.

‘I’m going nowhere. Mam, Dad, Ava and Natalie are going to visit Dad’s brother. I’m going to enjoy the peace while

they're gone. Faith is coming tonight with the kids. Things are about to get crazy. And loud. You should probably abandon your plans and stay here with me.' He pats the bed beside him with an inviting glint in those huge come-to-bed eyes. 'We could shop together online.'

'I'll be as quick as I can. We'll squeeze in some quiet time this afternoon before everyone arrives home.' I blow him a kiss and creep down the stairs. The house is quiet.

Tootsie is snoring in the kitchen. I let her out in Nate's parents' back garden and top her bowl up with two scoops of dry food.

Slipping out the front door as quietly as I can, I walk down the garden path, glancing back at the house over my shoulder. A small smile twitches on my lips. I love this place. I love this family. But most of all, I love Nate Jackson.

As I exit the cul-de-sac and turn onto the main road, a black car slows to a crawl alongside me. The driver and the passenger, two men in their forties, stare at me like they're trying to place me before indicating into the street I've just come from.

That damn video.

It might have been erased from social media, but it obviously hasn't been erased from people's minds yet.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, distracting me from dwelling on it.

It's Savannah.

'Hi.'

'Hi, girl, how's it going with Mr Hollywood? Please tell me you're not impaled on his dick this very second.'

Savannah's voice is giddy for details.

'Unfortunately, I'm not. I'm just heading into town to pick up a few presents. Are you around?'

'Does Santa Claus come on Christmas Eve? Yes, I'm around! My dads have the twins and I need a Christmas drink,' Savannah insists.

'Everything okay?' I check.

'Yeah, but did you happen to go on social media this morning?' She pauses and my stomach sinks. Not more shit from Dan, please.

'No. I still haven't reinstalled the apps. The video might be gone, but I'm pretty sure I'll still have three billion notifications that I can't deal with.'

'The press got wind that Nate's in Dublin. He was papped going into Brown Thomas with a "mystery brunette" yesterday, and the media is going wild with speculation, especially given it's only a few weeks since he announced his split from Celeste.'

'Oh.' It takes a minute to register what Savannah is telling me. 'Do you think they'll put two and two together and realise that it's me in that god-awful video?'

'Oh, honey, it's just a matter of time, but you knew that, right?' Savannah says. 'It was always going to happen at some point. The #amanscorned is still growing every day thanks to Nate sharing, but it's another clue back to you.'

'Thanks for the heads up.' For the millionth time, I thank my lucky stars for my friends.

'So, Sancerre at Heaven on Earth?' Savannah says. 'I'll text Ashley. She might need an excuse to get away from that

dry shite, Matt.'

'Sav, I haven't been there since...' The most mortifying night of my life flashes through my mind in slow motion. I wouldn't mind, but it's not like I can even really remember the details. They're hazy from the wine. No, what I'm reliving is worse. It's the image that millions of people have seen. My spirited breasts boinging up and down like a couple of bouncy balls.

Savannah tuts. 'You haven't been there since you shacked up with Hollywood's hottest movie star.'

Heaven on Earth is wedged. Christmas parties congregate around the stylish, chrome tables and at the edge of the dancefloor. Patrons wear reindeer ears and sexy Santa hats, along with their seasonal sequined little black dresses. It's four pm yet it could be midnight in this dimly lit, stylish bar.

I feel a tad underdressed in the jeans and off-the-shoulder jumper I threw on this morning, but not as underdressed as the time my boobs burst loose. If the waiting staff recognise me, they're too polite to mention it. Thank God for small mercies.

'How did the seasonal shopping go?' Savannah enquires over the rim of her wine glass.

'I ordered Nate's sisters each a bottle of the new Tom Ford fragrance, and our respective parents a fancy hamper from Brown Thomas filled with Chateau Montelena Cabernet Sauvignon and an array of other million calorie delicacies. They're delivering everything gift-wrapped tomorrow, thank God. The baskets themselves are bigger than me.'

'And what did you get the man himself?' Ashley demands, shimmying forwards in her seat.

‘I got Nate a razor. I know it sounds utterly thoughtless, but it’s a bit of an in-joke that his stubble chafes me. Everywhere.’

‘You lucky bitch. Being “Single Sav” isn’t all it’s cracked up to be sometimes,’ Savannah sighs, blowing a strand of hair from her face.

‘Being in a “committed relationship”,’ Ashley uses her fingers to make air quotes, ‘isn’t all it’s cracked up to be sometimes either.’

I swirl my wine in my glass. This is the first time Savannah or Ashley have admitted their lives are lacking romantically. ‘Want me to ask Nate if he’s got any friends?’

‘God no!’ They eye each other with horror. ‘How is Nate, by the way?’ Savannah leans forwards to be heard over the rising chatter.

‘He’s waiting for me...’ My teeth nip my lower lip to halt the grin spreading across my face, ‘in bed.’

‘Well, he’s going to have to wait a bit longer! I need to make the most of you before you jet off to Hollywood.’ Savannah fluffs her hair with a grin.

Ashley motions for the waitress to bring us another bottle of Sancerre. Like we need one, we’ve had two already.

‘Girls, I should probably go.’ I grab my coat, ready to leave, but Ashley snatches it from my arms.

‘One more,’ Ashley pleads merrily. ‘Go on, it’s Christmas.’ She’s definitely not in head teacher mode today.

‘Okay, one more glass. None of us wants to be hungover for the wedding tomorrow.’ The urge to see Nate is consuming me.

I've got it bad.

Savannah's mobile vibrates on the table and she squints at it for a second before sniggering. 'Is it weird that I set up a google alert for your new boyfriend?' She swipes the phone from the table, holding it up in front of her face. 'Figured it would be a good way to keep track of you when you're living the high life in Beverly Hills.'

She punches in the pin to her phone with wobbly fingers. 'You know half the world is looking for Nate right now? Since his split from Celeste, he hasn't been spotted once until yesterday. There were full-on conspiracy theories that he and Spike Hancock had gotten into a fistfight over Celeste before Spike buried his body in the Hollywood Hills. Others were speculating he'd hit the drugs again.'

'Did anyone stop to consider he might have taken on a secret filming project?' I blow a stray strand of hair out of my eyes. This is the exact type of speculation that Nate warned me about.

'Maybe he's been spotted again today. You might not be the only one doing some Christmas shopping!' Ashley cocks her head and arches her eyebrows. 'Wonder what he bought you?'

'No. He bought me enough already. Girls, wait until you see the dress he got me for tomorrow.' A dreamy sigh floats from my lips at the memory of it.

Savannah's gone strangely quiet. Her pupils flick back and forth across the screen of her phone like she's reading something.

'What?' I straighten my spine and shimmy closer. 'What is it, Sav?'

What Dan did has traumatised me. Every time someone stares at their phone, I immediately panic that my life is once again in tatters.

Savannah swallows thickly. ‘They know it’s you, Holly.’ She hands over her phone with a sympathetic look. A brief article lights the screen.

The search for Nate Jackson’s new beau is finally over. The action hero star has barely been spotted out in public since issuing a statement confirming his split from actress Celeste Occhialini, but it looks like Holly Hazelwood, an art teacher, who’s better known for her topless appearance in a recent viral TikTok video, has snagged Ireland’s most eligible bachelor and is Nate’s new squeeze.

If the Twitter hashtag #notrightforNate is anything to go by, Holly’s not the public pick for our national treasure.

Click the link below to see exactly what Nate Jackson’s squeezing this Christmas.

The urge to vomit overwhelms me. The first few twinkling bars of Mariah Carey’s ‘All I Want For Christmas Is You’ sound through a speaker somewhere, mockingly. The public is right. I’m not right for Nate. I’m nowhere near good enough for Nate. They’re only tweeting what I’ve always known. But that doesn’t ease the searing pain shooting through my chest.

I’m mortified. And not for myself, but for him. ‘I need to go, girls.’ I grab my handbag, my coat, and the gift I bought for Nate.

‘Wait, we’ll come with you.’ Savannah leaps to her feet and downs the remaining dregs in her glass.

‘No.’ I raise my hand, motioning for her to stay where she is. ‘It’s fine. I just need some time alone. I’ll call you later.’

I practically run out the front door of Heaven on Earth, bouncing straight into two guys on their way in. ‘Sorry,’ I mutter, hopping into the taxi they arrived in. The driver raises an eyebrow in the rear-view mirror and I give him my address, not Nate’s parents. There’s no way I can face them, or him, right now.

Traffic is heavy and annoyingly slow. I inhale a deep lungful of cool air, then blow it out slowly, attempting to steady my hammering heart.

‘Do I know you?’ the driver asks.

‘I just have one of those faces.’ Why on earth did I think coming back to Dublin was a good idea?

In the secure bubble of Ard Na Mara, neither Nate nor I thought our relationship through.

I underestimated the interest people we don’t even know would take.

Maybe Nate did too.

I pull out my phone, which is on silent as usual. I have fourteen missed calls from Nate and a voicemail. Pressing the phone tight to my ear, I listen to Nate’s concerned message. ‘Holly? Where are you? Call me when you get this.’

‘Where to?’ The taxi driver’s eyes keep flicking up to the mirror. When they fall to my chest, I know he’s just realised why he recognises me.

In the thirty minutes it takes to get to my house, I replay his voicemail over and over again. ‘*Call me when you get this.*’

I can't.

We're worlds apart and it's never been more obvious.

I throw the taxi driver a fifty euro note and hop out of the car without looking back.

The street outside my house is swarming with paparazzi wielding cameras bigger than their heads. My heart pounds in my ribcage. Raging anxiety consumes me. My hands shake so hard my entire body rocks on the seat.

I'm not cut out for this.

I take a deep breath and keep my head down as I power up the pathway to my front door.

'She's there! Look!' a man's voice booms.

'Holly! Holly!' My name's being called from every direction as I hastily haul the house keys from my handbag..

'Hey, Holly! Getting much action with Mr Action Hero?'

'Give us a flash of your boobs!' another yells.

My shaky hands finally slip the key into the lock. Camera flashes illuminate the twilight sky, but I don't look round.

Chapter Thirty-Four

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NATE
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‘Looks like you’ve been busted, son.’ Mam lugs in the mountain of Christmas presents she exchanged with her family, her eyes clouding over wistfully.

It goes without saying I can’t stay here another night. We’d never make it to Christmas Day without fans bursting through the door. Even with extra security on their way.

Mam drops to her knees, arranging the gifts into neat little piles beneath the tree. ‘Where’s Holly?’ Her bobbed head tilts to the side as her silvery eyebrows knit together.

‘I don’t know. She went Christmas shopping. The last time I heard from her, she was going for a few drinks with her girlfriends.’ My eyes dart down to my phone, like it might have miraculously rung without me noticing. ‘That was hours ago.’

Something’s not right.

I’m reluctant to interrupt her girl-time. I know her ex hated her being out with them, but I’m genuinely beginning to worry about her safety. The evening is drawing in. I check my phone for the millionth time, but there’s nothing.

Where the hell is she?

A tiny sliver niggles inside me, tormenting me. Screaming at me that Holly's simply running at the first sign of trouble, like Sally did.

If I could push a button and have us tucked away in my Beverly Hills mansion, with thousands of miles between us and this shitshow, I would do it in a heartbeat.

For now, I'll have to settle for a countryside Airbnb. Jayden's PA is currently trying to find one for us. This close to Christmas, there's not a lot of availability and it's not as if we can just check into a hotel. Within three minutes of arriving, we'd be swamped with press.

Getting mauled and hounded is the one part of my job I hate. It's the colossal drawback to being famous. People think they know me. Own me. That they have some sort of right to me.

And I hate that it's affecting Holly. Hate that they're dragging up everything about her. All because of me. The shame. The humiliation. All the unresolved tension with her family will be heightened the day before her brother's wedding. My insides twist at the thought of her having to go through the same embarrassment we worked so hard to quash. And it's all my fault.

'What do you mean, you don't know?' Mam stands, dusting her hands together.

'I can't get hold of her. I've called her fourteen times with no response.'

'Have you seen the shit the press is spouting about her, son? They're saying she's not right for you. The hashtag trending on Twitter is "Not right for Nate". And a link to that stupid meme.' Mam crosses the room and takes my hand.

‘No, I deliberately avoid social media.’ I know first-hand how damaging it can be. It’s a rabbit hole. Yes, it can be gratifying to receive messages from genuine fans, but the negative comments from the haters far outweigh the warm and fuzzies. If the movie I’m starring in gets fifty thousand five-star ratings and fifty one-star ratings, it’s the fifty that play on my mind when I’m trying to fall asleep at night. Comments like ‘has been’ and ‘time to retire, grandad’ really grab me by the throat and choke me sometimes. Probably because they’re a little too close to my own fears and insecurities.

Shit. Clarity dawns like a fucking rainbow. What’s trending about Holly is a little too close to her own insecurities.

‘Son, you need to find her. The chances are she’s utterly devastated. She probably believes the shit they’re spouting about her.’

Holly’s never been out of contact this long. The shame of her past is probably eating her alive and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it. ‘Fuck.’ My thumbs knead my temples.

‘You know how she felt about those videos,’ Mam reminds me. ‘The poor girl was victimised, and now she’s being attacked again by an army of faceless women on social media who are probably just jealous that she’s nabbed a Hollywood actor. People can be so cruel.’

It makes sense.

Realisation slices through my chest like a dagger.

Holly isn’t too busy with Savannah and Ashley to take my calls. She’s ignoring them.

She’s probably slipped into that what’s-a-man-like-you-doing-with-a-woman-like-me bullshit again.

I pace the hallway, raking my fingers through my hair. I will not allow the media attention on the woman I love ruin another relationship for me.

‘I don’t know how to fix this,’ I admit. ‘No one grows a skin thick enough to deal with what they’re going to say about us overnight. It takes time. I haven’t had enough time to prepare her for what it’s like to be mine.’

‘Well, find her, son, and show her what it’s like to be yours. Show her you’ll stand by her side no matter what anyone says, does, films, or prints...’

‘I wish I could level out the playing field for her. Show her she might have gone viral for something embarrassing, but it doesn’t matter one iota to me.’

Mam clicks her tongue against her palate. ‘Think of a plan fast. Because if I was trending as *hashtag, not right for Nate*, I’d probably feel like complete shit too.’

I pinch the bridge of my nose and wrack my brains for an idea. The hashtag *#NotrightforNate* sets a rage roaring through my veins so powerful I want to break something.

Who are these people who hide behind their devices while cruelly attempting to tear the real world to pieces? Holly is a real person with real feelings.

She’s someone’s daughter.

Someone’s sister.

Someone’s friend.

Someone’s girlfriend.

My girlfriend.

There's no way I'm letting her fall at the first hurdle. Not because of this. No fucking way.

'You're in the eye of the storm, son.' Mam takes my hand and pats it affectionately. 'There's going to be a lot of shit swirling in the air for a long time. And there's always going to be the chance of another storm, or even a tornado. But if you stay centred and don't get dragged into it, it will eventually die down. Holly hasn't learnt that yet. You need to show her.'

'But how? How can I justify dragging back the woman to a position where people can and will hurt her over and over again?'

'Because you love her. And she loves you. And "people" don't matter. "People" come and go. A love like you two have, some "people" never find that once. Grab onto it with two hands, Nate. Show Holly what really matters. Make a grand gesture. Something the entire world can never doubt.'

She's right.

The fire sparking in my gut knows it. The humming, fizzing electricity firing through my blood knows it. Every fibre of my entire being knows it.

"People" are about to get the shock of their lives.

They're about to see Nate Jackson as never before. Pierce Brosnan in *Mamma Mia* has got nothing on what I am about to perform. If the Hallmark movie isn't enough to end my career, this next performance might be.

But if it brings Holly back into my life, it's a risk I'm willing to take.

'I think it's time I patched things up with Niall. I need to borrow a fire engine.'

Chapter Thirty-Five

HOLLY

My heart pounds like a drum in my chest, but my brain can't seem to stop my thumb from scrolling through more articles. The media has dragged up all the tiniest insignificant details of my life. Where I went to school. Where I grew up. My parents' business. And what knickers I wore yesterday.

Parents from St. Jude's have stepped forward, claiming they've always 'expressed concerns' about the example I set for their daughters.

Acquaintances I haven't seen in years have crawled out of the woodwork to offer an opinion and insight into my *situationship with Nate*. Because the world knows a man like him would never be involved in an actual relationship with me. They say the truth hurts. And deep down, I've never believed I'm good enough for him.

I'm not even good enough for my parents. How the hell could I ever be enough for a man like Nate?

Finally, I understand why Sally-Ann broke up with Nate all those years ago.

This level of privacy invasion is not something anyone could prepare for. I won't have Nate's career or reputation suffer because I'm an embarrassment.

I love him too much to allow that to ever happen.

It's time to stop burying my head in this festive fairy tale.

I was a fool to think things could ever last between us.

I'm such an embarrassment, I can't even attend my own brother's wedding.

A pounding sound echoes from the front door, but I ignore it. Ten seconds later, it starts again.

'Holly?' An unfamiliar masculine voice penetrates into the house.

'Holly Hazelwood?' It comes again. A pause follows then, 'Did you see *The Sun* is offering a million euros to whoever delivers the shot?'

'Fucking right I did. Why else would I be freezing my bollocks off outside here mere days before Christmas?' the first voice says.

I tiptoe to my front door, barely daring to breathe as I peep through the keyhole. A guy in a brown bomber jacket paces the front of my house, even daring to peep in the window of my living room.

Have these fuckers no shame?

By nine pm, the front of my house is crawling with activity. There's a full-on news crew outside. Countless paparazzi.

I'm going out of my mind. I need Savannah or Ashley to sneak me out of here, even if it's in a suitcase or a body bag.

I switch my phone on, and a million notifications light up my screen. The only one that catches my eye is a text from Nate.

I open it with shaky fingers.

All I want for Christmas is you.

Being associated with me is going to make Nate a laughingstock. I won't let that happen.

Blue flashing lights catch my eye outside the window. Oh, for fuck's sake. Don't tell me I'm about to be arrested, too.

Racing up the stairs, I peep out of the upstairs window. My jaw drops as my mother steps out of the back of a police car, wearing a tailored suit and an expression that says *don't fuck with me*.

She marches straight into the middle of the chaos. 'Move along, or you'll be arrested for breaching the peace.'

Two uniformed officers exit the vehicle, one of whom is my Uncle Richard, dressed in his full commissioner's uniform, bar the hat which is tucked under his right arm.

Another two police cars swing into the street, pulling to an abrupt stop behind the first one. A further four officers hop out of the vehicle, leaving the blue lights flashing.

My nosy neighbours scurry off like cockroaches. The paps take a little more persuasion.

'You can't stop us from standing on the pavement. We aren't breaking any laws,' the guy in the brown bomber jacket complains, lowering the bulky camera on his arm.

'This isn't a pavement. It's a crime scene, and unless you want me to haul your ass down to the station to make a

statement, I suggest you move along mighty fucking quickly.’ Uncle Richard’s voice rings with authority.

A crime scene?

My insides churn like a washing machine on a spin cycle.

The young officer who exited the second vehicle cordons off the front of my house and the street, forcing the paps out of their way.

‘What did she do?’ bomber jacket guy says to my mother with a sneer.

‘It’s not what she did.’ My mother’s expression could cut glass. ‘It’s what’s being done to her. This is outright harassment. Have you no shame?’

‘I’m just doing my job,’ Bomber Jacket Creep shrugs.

Uncle Richard steps forwards. ‘And I’m just doing mine. Move along or spend Christmas in prison.’

Eventually the news crews and paps clear off. I watch my mother walk up my short footpath, her pristine permed hair sprayed within an inch of its life. ‘Holly? Are you in there? Open up.’

She’s ten times more intimidating than the paparazzi.

‘Coming,’ my throat croaks.

‘She’s there,’ I hear her say to Richard.

‘I’ll give you a few minutes.’

Scraping back the deadbolt, I crank the front door open a few inches. ‘Mam, what are you doing here?’ I swallow back a dam full of pent-up emotion.

Mam hates tears. She’s always said they solve nothing. But seeing her here, watching her tell off those god-awful

paparazzi, I can't help it.

Steel-blue eyes sweep over my face, drinking in every last detail from my tear-stained cheeks to the bags beneath my eyes. 'For goodness' sake, child, look at you.'

'Sorry, Mam.' I take a step back, and she pushes the door the rest of the way open and steps into the house she persuaded me to buy six years ago.

She pats my arm awkwardly. It's the closest to a hug we ever get. Air kisses and pats are a Hazelwood's standard greeting.

'What are you apologising for? It's me who should be apologising.' Her head shakes, but her perm doesn't even twitch. It knows better. 'I came by last week to try to patch things up between us, but you weren't here.' Her eyes slant sideways at me. 'Having seen the news, and the crowd camped outside here, I have a good idea where you've been hiding out.'

'Sorry.' My cheeks burn. Bad enough she's seen those awful videos, but now she knows I've been shacking up with a movie star. If I could teleport myself out of here, I wouldn't hesitate.

Two silver eyebrows dart upwards. 'He's quite the catch. You always did have a thing for that man,' she muses, strutting through to my kitchen, her gaze raking over every nook and cranny. 'Used to see half-naked posters of him pinned to the inside of your closet.' She tsks, but there's a rare smile flirting with the corner of her mouth. 'Mind you, he is pretty easy on the eye.'

My mouth falls open. Who is this woman and where is my ultra-religious pearl-clutching mother?

‘I’m sorry, Mam. For everything.’

‘Stop apologising. I’m the one who’s sorry.’ She takes a seat at the kitchen table and motions for me to do the same. ‘I panicked when I saw that video, I have to admit.’ Her lips purse into a grim line. ‘But I should have been more supportive.’

Am I hearing things?

First the easy-on-the-eye comment, then an admission of being wrong. My mother has definitely been abducted by aliens. I don’t know who this impersonator is.

‘It was probably the worst time of your life, and I’m sure my reaction didn’t help.’ Her head tilts forwards, and she taps the table with a neatly trimmed fingernail.

‘No wonder you were ashamed,’ I shrug. ‘It wasn’t my finest moment.’

‘I wasn’t ashamed. I was livid. Not at you, but that someone could do that to my daughter. I’ve had Richard on the case ever since. As you know, being filmed in public like that is a grey area. I wanted to be sure we could nail that bastard Dan Hargreaves, before we went after him.’

Fresh tears line the whites of my eyes again. ‘I thought you liked Dan.’

The frequency of the tapping increases. ‘I liked the idea of him,’ she admits. ‘On paper, at least. But it turns out he’s a rotten apple. You’re not the first woman he’s abused. In fact, his parents paid a hefty fee for his last girlfriend to drop some very serious charges against him.’

‘What?’ I rock back on the hard wooden chair. ‘Did he assault her?’ His contorted face flashes through my head. He always had anger issues.

‘He filmed her without her consent. In the er —’ She clears her throat uncomfortably and I get the gist. ‘Richard is going to make sure he gets jail time. A man like Dan thinks he’s above the law. It’s imperative that it’s corrected.’

‘Wow.’

‘All I ever wanted for you was security. I worked so hard my whole damn life to try to provide you with it.’ Her cobalt eyes rise to meet mine. ‘Your dad and I were brought up in a different era. We had nothing when we were kids. I never wanted you to experience the same thing. That’s why I pushed you towards a man like Dan. That’s why I’m hard on you. Because I care.’

‘You and Dad are both so successful. Conor is so successful. My whole life, I’ve never felt good enough.’ That awful hashtag lights up in my mind like a lighthouse beacon. ‘I’m the family fairy. My only ambition was to paint.’ I choke back a sob.

‘Oh, Holly.’ Mam puts her arms around me and pulls me into an awkward hug. ‘You *are* good enough. You’ve always been good enough. I pushed you because I saw so much potential in you. Yes, I wanted you to get a “real job”.’ She lifts her fingers to make quotation marks. ‘But I never wanted you to give up on your dreams, either. In fact, I sold one of the paintings in your old bedroom only last week.’ Her lips lift into a small smile. ‘I hope you weren’t too attached to it.’

‘What?’ These unexpected revelations and the lack of sleep are leaving me light-headed.

‘The portrait of Savannah you painted when you were teenagers.’ Mam studies me, waiting for me to remember. ‘It was in your bedroom, but I moved it to the dining room wall last month. I had some friends over for afternoon tea, and Mrs

Bridges took quite the shine to it. She's a big Savannah fan, you know, especially because her own daughter is a single mother. Quite the celebrity Savannah is these days.' Mam's eyebrows quirk.

She never openly disapproved of Savannah's situation, but she never condoned it either.

'Don't you want to know how much I sold it for?' Mam asks.

'The money doesn't matter. What counts is that someone was willing to pay for my work. It's the boost I need right now after everything.'

'It's more than a boost, it's three thousand euro,' Mam states proudly.

'What?' My jaw hangs open.

'Not bad for a woman who considers herself "not good enough" right?' Mam sits straighter in her chair, staring me square in the face like she's waiting for me to challenge her.

'It's unbelievable.' I shake my head in disbelief.

'I would have charged her double if I'd have known you're dating a celebrity,' Mam tuts.

'We were together, but now we're not. I can't be what he needs,' I admit.

'Because of the fame? Is that social anxiety plaguing you again?' Mam's voice is overflowing with sympathy.

'No, it's because a woman like me isn't —' Mam's hand thrusts upwards, halting me before I can utter another word.

'Don't you dare say what I think you're about to say.' She points her index finger at me. 'You're my daughter. A

wonderful, warm, caring woman. And a damn fine artist. I'm sorry if I made you feel like an underachiever. It was never my intention. But that stops today. Do you hear me?' There's a sternness in her tone that dissuades me from arguing with her, even though I can't agree with her.

Nate is in another league. He always has been. Our relationship will never work, but maybe, just maybe, it's transformed the relationship I have with my mother. Because I don't think anything else in this world would have forced us to have the conversation we've just had, and for that, I have to be grateful.

Chapter Thirty-Six

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HOLLY
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Another rap on the front door sets my nerves on edge.

‘That’ll be Richard.’ Mam breezes past me like she owns the place. ‘Or your dad.’

It’s actually both of them. Clarissa and Conor are tight on their tail.

My father loiters in the doorway for a split second, eyeing me with trepidation. He’s not the only one who doesn’t know what to say. I’m not sure what’s worse. That he’s seen my boobs, or that his daughter has been shacked up with a movie star for the past few weeks.

‘Hi Dad.’

He hesitates for a split second before striding over and offering a brief, awkward embrace, before patting my arm.

Uncle Richard helps himself to the bottle of brandy on my top shelf. ‘Those dirty paps. As if Holly hasn’t been through enough.’ He pours himself a good strong measure and necks it.

Looks like he might just be able to look me in the eye over my celeriac soup after all. It’s just a shame about the other two hundred and fifty guests we have to take into consideration.

My brother raises his hand in greeting from the corridor. The kitchen is barely big enough for all of us, but I beckon

him and Clarissa in. ‘What are you guys doing here? You should be getting ready for the wedding.’

Conor wraps his arms around me and ruffles my hair. ‘We saw the news. Don’t let it deter you from coming.’

I step back from Conor, making space for Clarissa to slide in between us and accept the small tumbler of alcohol Mam offers me. ‘Oh, guys, I’m a laughingstock. Again. What will your guests say?’ I bring the glass to my lips and take a large mouthful.

‘Fuck them,’ Richard proclaims, as my mother winces. Yep, we definitely don’t need to worry about his celeriac soup.

‘Yes, fuck them,’ my best friend calls from the front door, as she lets herself in with my spare key. Savannah’s blonde hair appears in the doorway a second before Ashley’s auburn locks. ‘Any of that left for me?’

‘Oh, girls.’ I nudge past Conor to greet the woman, who’s like a sister to me.

‘You shouldn’t have run off on us like that! I’d have been here sooner, but my dads were struggling to get the twins to bed.’ Savannah scans the room. ‘Where’s Nate?’

‘I... er...’ My eyes fall to the floor. ‘The press had his house surrounded. I’m pretty sure he didn’t want my presence embarrassing him further.’

‘What utter nonsense,’ Savannah splutters, accepting the drink my mother hands her. ‘The man is mad about you. Anyone can see it.’

‘Even if he is mad about me, being associated with me will make him a laughingstock. I won’t do that to him. He deserves so much better. Someone he’s proud to have with him at his

red carpet events, not someone who he has to firefight the media over.’

Savannah grabs my arm. ‘Holly, we’re all firefighting every damn day. I’m constantly getting abused online. Do you have any idea how many people think unmarried women with illegitimate children should burn in hell?’ Savannah sniffs and my mother suddenly becomes engrossed in her glass. ‘The fact I’m making a good living out of my situation incenses some people. If the media weren’t slagging Nate off about who he was dating, they’d be slagging off his hair, his body, or his acting skills. It’s the way of the world when you’re in the public eye. You do know his first girlfriend dumped him because she couldn’t handle the media attention? It was all over the news. She ended up marrying his best friend.’

‘Of course I know. And today, I’m beginning to see why she couldn’t handle the attention. In Ballybowen, we were living in our own little bubble. Thriving in it. But it wasn’t real life.’

‘But it *was* real life, Holly. When you go to the States with Nate, you’ll close the front door on his Hollywood mansion and that will be your new bubble. What the media print or say isn’t real. Don’t let them get in here.’ She taps the side of my temple with her index finger.

‘We can’t just stay holed up in the house the entire time.’ Even if it does sound idyllic.

‘But the time you do spend at home is what counts. Wouldn’t it be far worse if the media printed wonderful things about the two of you, portrayed you as the perfect couple, but behind closed doors, you couldn’t stand each other?’

Savannah’s words remind me of what Nate said about his relationship with Celeste.

‘The States?’ my mother interjects, staring at me, but it’s Savannah who answers her.

‘Yes, the States. For the first time in her life, Holly has the chance to do something she’s always wanted to do. Don’t you agree she should grab it with two hands?’

‘But what about her house? My mother fingers the pearls surrounding her neck.

‘She’s going out with a multi-millionaire movie star.’ Savannah arches a defiant eyebrow at my mother. ‘I’m pretty sure she doesn’t need to worry about her house.’

‘I’m not sure if I am going out with a movie star...’ I wince. ‘I think I messed it up when I fled like a scaredy cat.’

‘It’s a wobble. Call him now and apologise,’ Clarissa suggests, snatching my phone from the table and pushing it against my chest.

I glance around at my family. Six sets of eyes stare back at me, all of them seemingly willing me to make this right. Swallowing the emotion forming in my throat, I take the phone, along with a deep breath.

‘A little privacy, perhaps?’ I gaze around hopefully.

‘Not a chance!’ Savannah screeches. ‘We’re all dying to hear how this goes.’

No one disagrees with her. Or moves from the kitchen.

‘Fine.’ It’s not like Nate and I argued. It was just a wobble. I panicked. It’s not a big deal. I’ll call him. He’ll understand. We’ll work through this.

I hold the phone to my ear and listen as it rings and rings with no answer.

I catch my lower lips between my teeth. ‘What if he’s annoyed with me for being flaky?’

‘No daughter of mine is flaky. You were merely in shock.’ My mother comes to my defence haughtily.

‘He’s probably just struggling to deal with the chaos outside of his house,’ Richard suggests. ‘Want me to send some patrol cars?’

‘No, Nate has his own security. I’m sure they’re...’

The familiar bars of Mariah Carey’s iconic Christmas song blare out from the street, growing louder with every passing second.

I rush to the front door to peep out, with seven adults tight on my tail.

‘What the...’ I open the front door. A fire engine decorated in tinsel and fairy lights swings into the street, bulldozing through the flimsy tape cordoning off the perimeter. Two of the uniformed officers step forwards and raise hands, signalling the driver to stop. The engine comes to an abrupt halt just as the song begins, but it’s not Mariah Carey’s voice booming out the first line.

It’s Nate’s deep, gravelly one. Holy fucking shit. The man is only half-dressed. He’s wearing the same Santa outfit as that memorable afternoon at the castle. Red velvet pants hang from his hips as he descends the ladder on the side of the truck, clutching a microphone in one hand. A white-rimmed crimson hat balances on his head and his expression is one of total mischief.

Has he lost his fucking mind?

Frank and Penny hop out from the truck, along with Ava and Natalie and two other women I haven’t met, but who share

the same dark hair and similar features as Nate.

‘Go on, my son!’ Frank cups his hands over his mouth as he shouts over the music.

The neighbours flock from their houses and onto the street. The recently dispersed paparazzi return in full force. Cameras flash from a million different directions, but I can’t take my eyes off the half-naked man powering up my pathway.

‘Oh. My. Word,’ my mother gasps, blessing herself with her right hand.

Nate strides purposefully towards me, his torso rippling like a warrior as he walks. Liquid green eyes zero in on mine, the trace of a smirk evident on those plump delectable lips.

An ache throbs in my chest, a longing so powerful it physically pains me.

What is he doing?

The rapidly growing crowd cheers, bopping along to the music. My feet are glued to the spot in the doorway. When Nate reaches my front step, firm hands on my shoulders shove me out of my own front door to meet him.

At six-foot-four, he towers above me.

‘Nate, what are you doing?’ My cheeks flush at the commotion, but Nate just grins at me and continues singing, grinning through the lines like he’s determined to embarrass himself.

Clarity hits me like a train. He’s evening the playing field. Matching my humiliating video with one of his own.

His deep velvety voice continues booming out Mariah’s famous words and I hide behind my fingers as a grin splits my face in half.

Nate prises my hand from my face, taking it in his without breaking eye contact. The heat from his fingers sets electricity sparking through every single cell in my body. Emotion surges through my veins, heating me from the inside out.

He'd embarrass himself so publicly, just to take the attention from me. His gesture is so grand, it trumps any Hallmark movie I've ever seen.

As he belts out the rest of the song, cameras burst into a flurry of flashes from every angle. My cheeks burn brighter than his Santa hat. Not with embarrassment, but with a love so powerful it transcends the previous shame, public opinion, and any trace of social anxiety.

Savannah and Ashley holler their approval from the back of the room. My mother stands shell-shocked six feet away, clinging on to my father like she's liable to keel over at any second. Clarissa grins next to Conor, the two of them swaying to the music.

As the song reaches its climatic finale, Nate inches his face forwards, his lips brushing over mine in a gesture that's so sensual it sets goosebumps ripping across every inch of my flesh.

I rest my forehead on Nate's perfect pec and plant a kiss over his heart. The rest of the world melts away.

Nate turns to address the crowd that's congregated behind us. A number of people have their mobile phones out and are filming every single second. 'Don't forget to upload your videos to TikTok with the hashtag *all Nate wants for Christmas is Holly.*'

He drops the microphone to the ground and sweeps me up into his arms. 'I can't take away the hurdles we're going to

face, but I *can* ensure we jump them together.’

The crowd burst into another deafening round of applause and suddenly we’re enveloped by my mother, father, brother, Clarissa and Savannah. Even Uncle Richard’s serious face is carved into a smile.

Penny and Frank charge up the pathway with their daughters behind them. Nate and I are bundled by our families, surrounded by a support system I never dreamed I’d ever have.

‘Now we’re even,’ Nate whisper shouts into my ear as we’re squashed in a noisy, jostling family embrace. ‘Don’t ever sneak out on me in the night again. I decide who is good enough for me, not the public.’

‘I won’t.’ I wrap my arm around his bare waist. ‘But I think you should put a top on before you give my mother a heart attack.’

Chapter Thirty-Seven

NATE

My security detail lines Holly's street, ready for any crazy fans who might rock up.

'We can't stay here, sweetheart,' I tell Holly, as she drags me into the hallway. Maybe we could check in to the K Club, Conor's wedding venue, a night early. I'd have preferred a private house, but it seems there is literally no availability.

Holly's house is cute. Bright, abstract artwork lines the walls. Nothing of her own creation, though. That's going to change when I get her to my house. I'm going to display her paintings all over my place.

My family push in the door behind us. We're wedged in like a tin of sardines. My mother and father are introducing themselves to Holly's parents, while my sisters make a beeline for Savannah, of whom they're apparently huge fans.

'You're crazy,' Holly murmurs into my ear.

'Crazy about you.' I nuzzle the top of her head, inhaling her familiar lime shampoo.

Jayden will kill me when he sees the footage. It's possibly career suicide, but it's a chance I'll take. Because that void in my chest when I realised Holly was gone was like a crater had

blown through it. I don't care if I never shoot another film, as long as I have her in my life.

I ball up the Santa hat and throw it onto Holly's kitchen worktop, glancing around the place that she called home for the past six years.

'Will you give me the tour of your house?' I'm desperate to get five minutes alone with her after everything.

Holly beckons me down the small corridor and into the next room, a cosy living area with an L-shaped couch and a rocking chair. A narrow mirror runs the length of the wall above the couch. I barely recognise the man staring back at me. He's actually grinning.

The emotionally stunted ogre has well and truly left the building.

'That was quite the performance.' Holly traces a finger over my bare chest and my nipples stiffen.

I yank her hips towards me and line them up against mine, staring down at the woman of my dreams. 'It wasn't a performance. It was the truth.'

We stand toe-to-toe, her azure eyes swarming with emotion. 'The media will crucify you for this.'

'I don't give a single fuck. As long as I have you.'

'You have me.' Her throat bobs as she swallows.

'Oh, Nate, I can't believe you just did that.' Her fingers thrum over her mouth in disbelief, but not before I see her moist lips lift in a smile. 'Where the hell did you get the fire engine from?'

'Niall, Sally-Ann's husband.'

‘You mean your ex’s new husband?’ Her voice hitches in surprise.

‘Yeah, Niall and I used to be best friends. He and Sally called over when they saw the commotion outside. They know exactly what it’s like. They wanted to help.’

‘No one has ever done anything like that for me before.’ Her voice cracks with emotion.

‘I’d do it every day for the rest of my life if it was the only way to keep you from bailing on me.’ I brush her hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. ‘I didn’t want to hound you when you were out with the girls, but I should have sent security after you. No wonder you panicked.’

‘It’s my fault.’ Holly’s earnest eyes fill with unshed tears. ‘I immediately jumped to the conclusion that I was such an embarrassment that you wouldn’t want me. I didn’t want to ruin you with my mistakes. I’m sorry.’

‘Holly, how many times do I have to tell you? You were a victim. If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to make sure Dan Hargreaves serves time for what he’s done to you. A lawsuit just doesn’t cut it.’

‘My mother and Uncle Richard have saved you a job. Apparently, they’ve spent the last few weeks doing a bit of digging, and it turns out Dan has done a lot worse. He will serve time.’

‘Good. He deserves to rot for what he did to you.’ I rub a hand over the thick stubble lining my jaw. My razor finally died this evening. ‘There are always going to be people like Dan trying to get to us, though. It’s like the world thinks fame and fortune equals a lack of feeling. If you can’t handle it, I need to know, because I can’t bear to lose you.’

‘You won’t lose me. I promise.’ Earnest eyes bore into mine, reflecting a newfound clarity.

Finally, I think she realises what she means to me. ‘Good. I was thinking, if it’s too much to ask you to come to the States, I can come home. We can buy a house here.’ I don’t care where we live once I have her. She might think she can handle the attention from the press, but I’m not sure it’s a risk I’m willing to take.

‘I want to go to the States with you.’ Her fingers smooth across my pecs. ‘Besides, what about your career?’

‘To be honest, I’m not sure there will be much demand for a singing Santa in the New Year, but you never know.’ My lips quirk.

Once upon a time, all I dreamt about was the next movie. The next big hit. Now all I’m dreaming about is playing house with this stunning creature in front of me and lying low for a while.

‘We can try it and if you don’t settle, we’ll come home.’

Home.

That’s wherever Holly is. I’ve known the woman barely more than a month, but already she’s the most important fixture in my life. And I’ll lay my head wherever she wants me to, to keep it that way.

‘We should buy a place here, anyway. For when we visit. As much as I’d prefer a private house, I think we’re going to have to check in to a hotel tonight.’

‘I don’t care where we stay, as long as we’re together.’

‘Sweetheart, we’re going to spend the rest of lives together.’ My lips brush over hers. ‘But for now, you’d better

officially introduce me to your parents. Then we can escape and get back to doing exactly what we were put on this planet to do.' I shoot her a wink and she giggles.

'I can't believe you're here.' She exhales a heavy breath as her hand catches my forearm.

'Well, you'd better get used to it, because I'm not going anywhere. Not without you, anyway.'

Chapter Thirty-Eight

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HOLLY
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23rd December

The K Club is situated amidst the lush Irish countryside, an hour outside of Dublin. Surrounded by open snow-dusted fields and frosted ferns, it's the perfect setting for a winter wedding.

The manager snuck us in through the back entrance last night and straight up to an opulent airy suite with a crackling open fire. We ordered room service and did exactly what we were put on this planet to do until the early hours of the morning.

After his performance outside my house went viral last night, we are trending on all social media platforms this morning as #Nolly #TistheseasontogetHollyed #Natesmate #Haveyourselfamerrylittlenateness.

Predictably, Nate is on the front page of every tabloid this morning and it's all every breakfast television show is talking about today. But instead of becoming a laughingstock, it looks like Nate's commanded the respect of the nation by standing up for what he wants and for going after it with everything he has. His public persona has transformed from being moody and untouchable to completely and utterly relatable. Which is going to make his appearance in next year's Hallmark movie so much more believable.

Now, it's finally time to watch my brother get married.

'You look absolutely stunning.' Nate circles me, his gaze trailing over the front of the Rebecca Vallance dress he had his security detail bring here.

'So do you.' A black tuxedo showcases his broad shoulders. Tight, fitted suit pants hug his granite glutes like they were made especially for him. I still cannot believe this man is mine.

'Are you ready?' Nate offers his arm to me, and I take it, not necessarily needing his support, but wanting it all the same.

Everyone I love is in this building. And I can't wait to join them and watch my brother and Clarissa exchange their vows.

Nate opens the suite door. Four of his security detail man the wide, thickly carpeted hallway outside. He nods at two of them who follow us into the lift.

The ceremony is taking place inside one of the hotel's grand ballrooms. We step into the dome-shaped brilliant white room. Row upon row of white wicker chairs form perfect lines, seating Conor and Clarissa's friends and family.

We strut the length of the makeshift aisle together. It feels like every single eye in the room is on us. The sound of my heartbeat pounds through my ears and the oh-so-familiar anxiety curls around my heart.

'I've got you,' Nate murmurs. His smooth, velvety voice seeps into my soul, and the tightness unfurls in my chest.

As we make our way towards my parents in the front row, my mother turns her head and offers a reassuring smile and a nod of approval as her steely eyes appraise my outfit.

She's wearing a pastel pink pencil dress and matching suit jacket. Daddy looks dapper in a navy suit and pastel pink tie.

I take the seat next to her and air kiss both her cheeks before greeting my father the same way. Nate extends his hand to my father and offers him a hearty handshake before pulling my mother into a Jackson embrace. Her mouth drops open, and she freezes for a second before surrendering to my boyfriend's PDA. When he finally lets her go, she's still open-mouthed and slightly shellshocked. It's hilarious.

My brother stands at the front looking sensational in a traditionally tailored, ebony three-piece suit. He ambles over to greet us, flanked by his best man, Clarissa's brother, who is making no attempt to hide his awe at Nate's presence.

'You look so handsome.' I pat Conor's arm encouragingly. 'I'm so happy for you.'

'It'll be your turn next.' Conor shoots Nate a look that translates to '*it better be, anyway.*'

The first few notes of Pachelbel's Canon radiate around the room and Conor races back to his position at the front to await his blushing bride.

Clarissa comes into view, linking onto her father's arm, grinning at her guests as she passes by. She's a vision of timeless romance, her dress a stunning ivory masterpiece. Wispy ash blonde hair is swept up in a classic chignon, revealing tanned shoulders and her long slender neck.

When Clarissa finally reaches the front, my brother is vibrating with pure joy. The difference between the colour of their outfits is vast, but the expression on their ecstatic faces is very much the same.

Under a white wicker arch adorned with stunning lilies, Clarissa and Conor make their vows. There isn't a dry eye in the place. Even Mam is hurriedly sweeping the dampness from her cheeks. I haven't seen her cry since her own mother passed away fifteen years ago.

I hold Nate's hand as the registrar pronounces them man and wife, wondering if this will ever be Nate and me someday. If the bet he made with his sister Ava is anything to go by, it looks like a distinct possibility.

Conor leans towards Clarissa, and when their lips touch, the guests erupt, clapping and cheering. They break apart, beaming at each other, and Conor takes Clarissa's hand and raises it in triumph.

The song they chose to walk out to begins, Florence's 'You've Got the Love', and as the happy couple stroll by us along the plush red carpet, Conor proffers an affectionate wink.

My heart is overflowing with happiness for the two of them.

I blink back the tears threatening to spoil my carefully applied make-up and turn to my boyfriend. 'That was so beautiful.'

'You're beautiful.' His lips graze my ear as he ushers me out to the drinks reception directly outside the ballroom.

A semi-circle shaped bar has been set up at the far end of the room, while two long tables flank the stone-coloured walls on either side.

Waitresses circulate, offering champagne flutes and tiny delicious looking canapés. A harpist has set up in the corner of the room, strumming out soft classical Christmas songs.

Conor and Clarissa pose for photos in front of an indoor water feature carved in the shape of the Greek goddess, Aphrodite, while Mam and Dad are busy shaking hands with Clarissa's parents.

While the guests regularly sneak glances at Nate and me, most eyes are firmly on the bride and groom. Their love overshadows our recent antics by far.

I scan the crowd for Savannah and Ashley. They're huddled at the mahogany bar, sipping on what looks like Sancerre. It could be one of those nights again. I accept a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and hand it to Nate before taking another for me.

'Would you like a big wedding?' Nate's hand falls to the base of my spine as he sips the champagne from his glass.

A fizzing of its own shoots through my veins. 'I haven't really given it much thought.'

'Well, perhaps it's time you started.' His fingers caress my skin through the dress and goosebumps ripple across my back. 'Now I've found you, I want to make you mine. Really mine.'

'I am yours,' I tell him solemnly.

'I know, but I want to make it official.'

'Even more official than hijacking a fire engine and publicly serenading me?'

'Even more official than that.' The grin on Nate's lips freezes as his focus falls to the main entrance. A striking man with dark hair and grey eyes zeroes in on us with a frown and a quick disapproving flick of his head.

'Uh-oh.' Nate exhales a low whistle.

'What?'

‘That’s my agent, Jayden Cooper. And he doesn’t look too happy with me.’

I crane my neck as Jayden stalks towards us with a glare.

‘I must be in bigger trouble than I thought if he’s come to drag me out of here personally,’ Nate sniggers.

Jayden finally reaches us. ‘For fuck’s sake, Nate, I thought I told you to keep a low profile?’ His voice is weighted with exasperation.

‘A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. It could be worse. At least I’m not back on the coke.’ Nate slaps Jayden on the back as if to say ‘lighten up.’

‘Huh, with that type of crazy fire engine karaoke, people will wonder.’ Jayden offers a more vigorous, exasperated head shake.

‘I’m high on life,’ Nate smirks. His arm rises from my lower back to rest protectively across my shoulders. ‘Jayden, this is my girlfriend, Holly. Holly, this is my pain in the ass agent, Jayden.’

The frown on Jayden’s face unfurls until his eyebrows are wiggling in a suggestive dance. ‘I fucking told you she was “the one” though, didn’t I?’

Nate’s eyes roll in his head and I’m foolishly flattered that he’s been discussing me with his friend.

‘No need to be smug about it.’ Nate signals a passing waiter for another drink.

Jayden dips his head and kisses my cheek.

‘Hate to piss on your bonfire, Nate, but there’s an army of crazed fans swarming the grounds right now. There’s no way

you can stay here tonight. We don't have the security to manage a perimeter this size.'

A heavy sigh whooshes from Nate's chest. 'My parents' house is swarmed. So is Holly's. There's no availability anywhere. It's a disaster.'

Jayden glances at Nate. 'Come and stay at my brother's place.'

'Huxley Castle?'

Huxley Castle is a grand estate on the outskirts of Dublin. I've seen it in pictures in glossy magazines, but I had no idea my boyfriend was acquainted with its owners.

'Chloe's already there with the kids. Her baby sister, Victoria, is home with her family. It'll be a crazy Christmas, in the best possible way.' Jayden raises his eyebrows to Nate, accepting a glass of champagne.

'The offer is tempting. But have you met Penny Jackson? If I'm in the country for Christmas Day and not at her dinner table, she'll string me up, drain the blood from my body and stuff me along with the fucking turkey.' Nate's tone is jovial, but there's a weight to his words.

'I've already cleared it with her.' Jayden licks his lips. 'You think I don't know Penny Jackson has a soft spot for me?'

Nate groans and screws his eyes tightly closed. 'I can't hack anymore "your mama" jokes.'

Jayden fires a wink in my direction. 'Nate's mother has a wet spot for me. Oops, I meant soft spot.'

Laughter presses against my chest at their comfortable banter.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Nate groans.

‘Your sisters are coming too. There are more rooms at Huxley Castle than Caesar’s Palace. It’ll be a blast, trust me.’ Jayden cocks his head to the side. ‘Besides, Ryan and Sasha are dying to know how filming is going. Ryan wants to check out your physique, make sure you’re doing his character justice in their romance movie.’

Nate turns to me. ‘What do you think?’

The temptation is real, but it’s not that simple. ‘I think Penny Jackson isn’t the only mother who will string you up, bleed you and stuff you if you’re not at her table on Christmas Day.’ I nod towards my mother who’s charging through the crowd towards us like a bull freed from its pen.

Jayden steps in front of us, seemingly used to being Nate’s middleman.

‘Mrs Hazelwood.’ Jayden offers my mother the most charming Hollywood smile, and she halts in her tracks, gawping at him like she’s never seen a man before. ‘I’m Jayden Cooper, Nate’s agent and friend. How would you and Mr Hazelwood like to spend Christmas in an Irish Castle?’

‘Well, I never...’ Her palm rests over her pearls as her eyes rake over Jayden’s athletic body. She turns to me with a raised silver eyebrow. ‘Okay, thank you. We’re in.’

Chapter Thirty-Nine

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HOLLY
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Christmas Day

I wake up in a four-poster bed in a rock star's luxurious countryside castle. But that isn't the best Christmas present by far. The best Christmas present is the man propped up on the Egyptian cotton pillow beside me, eyeing me with an expression of pure bliss.

'Merry Christmas, gorgeous.' His lips dip to meet mine.

'Merry Christmas.' I shimmy closer, pressing my body against his. It's no coincidence I'm wearing the flimsy crimson nightie again. The same one I wore the first night we met. Nate insisted. Thankfully, he didn't insist I sing. I think we've all had enough of Mariah for one year.

My parents are somewhere in the castle. They arrived yesterday evening, shortly after Christmas Eve mass. I can only imagine what they think of this place. Of Nate and me. But from now on, what they think is their business. I'm no longer making it my priority to seek their approval. Or anyone else's.

Though one thing my mother would certainly have approved of is the sixteen-foot Christmas tree in the castle lobby. Decorated in ice blue and silver bows and white twinkling lights, it's classier than any department store tree I've ever seen.

We were welcomed with a drinks reception in one of the drawing rooms before being brought to the ballroom for a dinner prepared by Ryan and Sasha's famous chef.

Nate's friends are ridiculously famous, yet they seem so normal. So down to earth. The women are stunning as well as gracious, warm and kind.

The Cooper/Sexton kids are hilarious. As is their youngest sister-in-law, Victoria, who controversially married her bodyguard, Archie.

They're also all absolutely gorgeous, but given their genetics, it's no surprise.

This stone-bricked mansion might be a castle, but it's very much a home. One that welcomes everyone.

'I can't believe this is my life.' My eyelashes flutter against my cheeks as I bite back my overwhelm.

'Well, you'd better start believing it, sweetheart.' Nate's hips nudge deliciously against mine as his fingers stroke my thighs, working their way upwards with a promise that sets my insides smouldering. 'Now I've found you, I'm never letting you go. By this time next year, if I get my way, you'll be Mrs Jackson.' His words render me wetter than his fingers.

'Is that right?' A kaleidoscope of butterflies flutters in my stomach.

'That's exactly right.' His mouth skims the sensitive skin of my neck and he sinks his teeth into my flesh. The finger brushing my inner thigh finally dips inside my entrance, and my pelvis arches in response. 'And with any bit of luck, I'll have put a baby in here.'

My core clenches around his finger.

I want Nate's babies more than anything else in the world.

I'll never get enough of this man.

Forever isn't long enough.

Nate slides on top of me, parting my thighs with his hips. His shoulders sink between my legs, and he watches as his fingers work me into a frenzy.

'Nate, I'm so close.' I'm trembling on the edge of a very steep cliff. One that I want to fall off with him.

'I know.' Hot lips blaze a trail up my leg.

'I need more. I need you,' I moan.

'Why didn't you say so?' He drags himself up the bed on his elbows until his arousal pushes deliciously against my entrance.

His emerald eyes bore into mine, glinting with a promise of not just immediate pleasure, but a lifetime of it.

He inches himself in slowly, careful not to hurt me. 'Fuck, Holly, you're so wet.'

'It's not every day you wake up with your movie-star crush in your bed.' I tear my nails across his glutes, greedy for him to plunge deeper inside me.

'Actually, for you, it is.' His full lips swallow my response as they clamp over mine. Our tongues slide and explore each other's mouths, matching the same languid rhythm as our hips. When his fingers brush over my clit, I'm gone.

All the way to fucking heaven and back.

White hot lust blinds me as trillions of jolts of electricity shoot through my core until I'm shuddering all over Nate's huge cock.

He's right behind me, pumping harder until he spills himself into me with a carnal moan. His head falls forwards until his cheek rests on my clammy chest, rising and falling with my ragged breath.

'Best Christmas ever,' we say in unison. I run my fingers through his dark, tousled hair.

'I love you.' Nate's thick, lustrous lashes close with contentment.

'I love you too.' I close my own, savouring the skin-to-skin contact. There's no better gift in the world.

Reluctantly, I wriggle beneath my boyfriend's clammy body. We were given strict instructions to be at the tree at ten o'clock this morning for the present opening and champagne. Apparently it's a Huxley Castle tradition. 'What time is it?'

'Half-past nine. We've got loads of time.' Nate peels his cheek from my chest and gazes up at me.

'You mean you've got loads of time! I need to have a shower and wash my hair.' I try to buck from beneath him, but he pins me down and runs his scratchy jawline between my breasts.

'I could do with a shave, but my razor broke.'

'Funny you should say that, but I have a present over there for you that might help.' I point to the corner of the room where I pretty much dumped everything yesterday.

'You bought me a present?' Nate's head whips round to where I'm pointing. 'I told you I didn't need anything.'

'Well, apparently, you do. And it's kind of a present for my jaw and inner thighs too.' A smug smirk creeps across my

face. 'You're so hard to buy for. What do you buy the man who can buy himself anything?' I shrug.

Nate finally releases me and pulls back the bed covers. I admire his iron-sculpted ass cheeks as he struts across the room and picks up the box before shaking it. His fingers are already tearing through the paper to reveal the best electric razor Brown Thomas stocked.

'It's perfect,' he announces with a grin. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.' My palm rubs over the sensitive skin of my inner thigh, a decadent reminder of where my boyfriend's head frequents daily at the moment.

'I got you a present too.' Nate grabs a thick white A4 envelope from his suitcase. A single scarlet bow seals it closed.

'You've given me far too much already.' My gaze drifts to the Dior Advent calendar, which I propped up on the bedside locker last night. There's one door left to open.

'Baby, I haven't even started yet.' He crosses the room and perches on the edge of the bed. 'Merry Christmas, sweetheart.' He presses the envelope into my hands.

My fingers skim over it with curiosity.

'Open it,' he insists.

So I do.

A glossy brochure of a huge airy building drops onto the bed sheets in front of me. I pick it up with bated breath. 'A building?'

'Not just any building. That, sweetheart, is your new art gallery.' His smooth voice harbours the smug tone of a man who knows he nailed his girlfriend's Christmas gift.

‘Nate, no way. It’s too much.’ I press the brochure back towards his muscular chest.

‘Well, there wasn’t a lot of point in me having a studio extension put on to *our* house if you don’t have a place to showcase your work.’ His thumb trails across my cheekbone, wiping away the happy tears that streak my face.

‘Thank you, Nate. Thank you.’ I bury my head in his neck and thank my lucky stars for this man and for the way he loves me.

The last door on my Dior Advent calendar houses Rouge Addict lipstick. I apply it over my lips, grinning at the woman who stares back at me in the bathroom mirror.

‘Come on,’ Nate appears behind me wearing a black shirt that matches his inky hair, ‘before I’m tempted to smear that lipstick all over your face.’

‘Merry Christmas, lovers.’ Penny Jackson is already waiting in front of the twinkling Christmas tree at the bottom of the castle’s cherry wood staircase. She pulls Nate and me into a hug that squeezes the air out of my lungs.

From my periphery, I catch sight of my own mother and father wincing from beside the tree. Was it the term “lovers?” Or the PDA? Either way, old habits die hard.

‘Ah, I see you’ve finally joined us,’ Frank says in a teasing tone. ‘I’ve always said sex is the best gift God gave any of us. And from the look of it, you two have already exchanged ‘gifts’ this morning.’

Ground, swallow me whole! I thought the viral video was bad, but Frank asking about my sex life in front of my parents takes the biscuit.

A fleeting glance shows my mother actually clutching her pearls. Running her fingers over them like she's saying the rosary.

She can keep her Hail Mary's. I vowed not to look for her approval. I am in a committed relationship. I'm a young, healthy woman, with a healthy appetite for sex.

I meet her eye and raise a hand in greeting before winking at my future-father-in-law. I repeat his own mantra straight back at him. 'It's what we were put on this planet to do.'

'Atta girl.' He slaps my back and lets out a hearty belly laugh.

My mother's lips twitch like she's battling a smirk, and she reluctantly drops those pearls.

'Happy Christmas, darling.' She closes the distance between us and air kisses both my cheeks.

'Happy Christmas, Mam. I'm so glad you're here.' I do something I haven't done in years and pull my mother into a distinctly unsophisticated hug. She tenses for a split second before her shoulders slacken and she pats my back.

It's progress. A little, at least.

Nate's sisters, Ava, Natalie, Stella and Faith, arrive through the castle's wrought iron front doors with their respective husbands and children. Sasha, the hostess with the mostest, welcomes them with a tray of bubbling champagne.

Jayden is handing out pristinely wrapped presents from beneath the tree while his wife, Chloe, is chasing around after their daughter, who's decided to streak around the Christmas tree wearing nothing but the flashing tiara Santa brought her.

I guess it doesn't matter what walk of life you come from, kids will be kids.

Discarded wrapping paper litters the mosaic floor. The scent of nutmeg and cinnamon assaults my senses. Laughter fills the air, floating to the top of the atrium. Love fills my lungs. I stare at the tree, not even really seeing it. What I'm seeing is far more alluring. It's the future. And it's so bright it brings tears to my eyes.

I have a man who loves me. I'm surrounded by two families who love me. And I get to do what I love for the rest of my days.

'Are you okay?' Nate's comforting arms snake around my waist from behind.

'I'm more than okay.' I tip my head backwards and meet his eye. 'This is the best Christmas ever.'

Nate wiggles his thick, dark eyebrows. 'It's the best Christmas so far,' he corrects me. 'I've got a feeling next Christmas could be even better.' He slides a hand over my stomach and takes my left hand in his other. His silent hopes for the future match mine. And that's the best gift ever.

EPILOGUE

HOLLY

9 Months Later...

‘You’d have done anything to get out of the Hallmark red carpet premiere,’ Nate teases, taking my hand as another excruciating contraction hits. ‘All that champagne and flashing cameras. I thought you’d have gotten over your aversion to the paparazzi by now. Especially when they’re your biggest champions.’

It’s true. The American public has been nothing but entirely supportive of our relationship. And of the opening of my swish new gallery on the boulevard. I sold every painting on my opening night and have been taking private commissions ever since. The press can’t get enough of us after Nate’s Christmas karaoke performance got so many hits it crashed the TikTok app.

Dreams really do come true.

But I’ve got a feeling I’m in for a nightmare tonight.

The birthing pool Nate had installed in the Beverly Hills mansion has done fuck all to ease the agony of birthing his child.

‘Yeah, like I planned to keep your baby in my womb ten days past her due date,’ I puff, tensing as another tight wave grips my womb.

‘*His* due date,’ my fiancé corrects me. Nate barely waited three months to get a ring on my finger. We booked the wedding before we realised I’d fallen pregnant at Huxley Castle, which is why it’s only ten weeks from now, the second Saturday in December.

What were we thinking?

‘You’re a brave man,’ my future mother-in-law interjects from the side of the room where she’s scrubbing her hands in the marble sink. Obviously, Penny-zero-boundaries-Jackson would insist on being the midwife to deliver her grandchild.

Thankfully, Frank is waiting downstairs, entertaining my parents, who flew over five days ago thinking they’d have a new grandchild already.

This baby is either shy like me, or stubborn like her father.

Yes, *her*.

No matter what Nate thinks, I know it’s a girl. Both of us opted for a surprise, but only one of us is going to get it. Tootsie is getting a little sister.

Another contraction rips through me. ‘They’re getting closer.’ I reach out for Nate’s hand and squeeze with all my might.

Penny strides to the edge of the birthing pool, as cool as a cucumber. She drops to her knees beside me. ‘It won’t be long now, pet. You’re doing great.’

‘I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want a natural birth.’

Savannah warned me this would happen. She begged me to go to hospital and get an epidural, but I was harbouring a ridiculous romantic notion about a home birth. It's the fairy in me.

'It's too late for that, Holly.' Penny's usual jovial expression is serious. 'On your front. On your knees. It'll help, I promise.'

The pain is worse than I could ever have imagined.

But so is the reward.

Thirty minutes later, our beautiful baby daughter is placed on my chest. The rush of love that burns through my body is comparable to nothing else in the world.

With a shock of ebony hair and emerald eyes, she's the image of her father. Her tiny fingers curl around mine as we blink back at each other through our mutual tears.

Nate's tattooed arms envelop us. His expression is a picture of pure wonder. One I want to capture on a canvas, but not for a very long time. This little lady is going to get my undivided attention for the first few months. I'm going to smother her in love and affection. My business can wait. She's my world and I want her to know it from her very first breath.

'She's perfect.' Nate's pupils dilate in wonder. 'Just like her mammy.'

'I love you.' I press a kiss to her tiny forehead.

'And I love you both.' Nate's nose nuzzles against my temple, his familiar scent surrounds me.

NATE

10 weeks later...

I glance out of the window as the wintery wind whips the Atlantic Ocean against the rocks below. We hired an entire island off the west coast of Ireland for the wedding. We had no choice if we wanted any modicum of privacy. Which is why I bought the only hotel on it, and have spent the last six months ensuring the best construction companies have been restoring it to its former glory - and then some. Everyone I've ever cared about is on this twelve-mile stretch of land.

Jayden crosses the oak wooden floor of the honeymoon suite and hands me a tumbler of honey-coloured whiskey. 'Who's the best man?' He cocks his ear and I swear to God if he says it one more time, I'm going to punch him.

'You are,' I mutter, clinking my glass against his.

Niall hovers by the window, looking out over the bay. Our friendship will never be the way it was, not because I resent him, but because we've grown into different men from the kids who grew up together. Since he lent me the fire engine, we've been in touch every week. It wouldn't have felt right not having him by my side today.

As much as I hate to admit it, Jayden really is my best man.

'Are you nervous?' Jayden's usual smirk is replaced by a more serious expression as he straightens his tux.

'No.' It's the truth.

Holly is everything I ever wanted, but previously afraid to pursue. And our daughter, Harriet, is the best thing that ever happened to us. I can't wait to give Holly my name. To give her everything I have and am.

Jayden slaps my back heartily. ‘Good man. Marriage is the best thing that happened to me. If you’re even half as happy as Chloe and me, you’ll be ecstatic.’

Niall swivels round and raises his glass. ‘Trust me, you’ve done the hard part. If you can survive the labour ward together, marriage will be a walk in the park.’

The sleepless nights were tough at first. Holly refused to get a night nurse, determined to do everything herself in her quest to put our daughter, Harriet, first. At ten weeks old, she’s just started sleeping six hours through the night and I swear to God I can see the light at the end of a tired but exultant tunnel.

‘Have you got the rings?’ I adjust my crimson cravat in the mirror. The colour reminds me of the negligee Holly had on the first night we met and a grin flares on my face.

‘Yep.’ Jayden pats the pocket of his ebony jacket just as my dad enters the suite without knocking, as usual.

‘There he is. The man of the hour.’ My mam sweeps in right behind him.

‘Oh, Jayden. How lovely to see you.’ She coos and I cringe, downing the remainder of my drink.

‘Let’s go get me married.’ I slam down the crystal tumbler on the drawing board and motion for my groomsmen to do the same.

The ceremony is taking place in a tiny chapel adjacent to the church.

The holly-decked pews are packed already. My two older sisters, Faith and Stella, occupy the front rows with their husbands and kids. Natalia sits next to my nieces, playing with their hair as they hop from foot to foot impatiently.

Ava sits smugly in the second row with her date. The guy next to her isn't her usual type, but he isn't wearing a prison tag either! Looks like I might have to invest in her dating agency after all.

Holly's mother sits in the front row on the opposite side of the chapel, fingering those ever-present pearls, but her face is a picture of pride as she glances down at my daughter, Harriet, where she's sleeping in her pram. Mrs Hazelwood is on babysitting duty tonight. She doesn't drink. Obviously. A fact I've never been happier about, considering it means I'll get an uninterrupted night with my wife for the first time since we were blessed with Harriet.

Conor and Clarissa perch on the pews behind. Clarissa clutches her huge bump while Conor makes a fuss of rubbing the base of her spine.

Jayden's wife, Chloe, sits with her sister, Sasha, and Jayden's brother, Ryan, in the row behind them, with none of their children in sight.

Sally-Ann sits in the row beside them. When she finally tears her eyes away from Niall, they land on me, offering an affectionate nod and a smile. I'm so glad she made it. That the years we spent together weren't wasted because what we're left with is a million memories and a mutual respect.

Sally's made no secret of how impressed she is with Holly's ability to not only adjust to Hollywood, but to thrive there. These last few months have seen us resume an unlikely but undeniable friendship.

My parents take their seats next to my future mother-in-law, and Jayden ushers me to the front of the chapel where the priest waits.

‘Ready?’ Jayden’s steel eyes burn into mine.

‘I was born ready for this.’

The organ chimes and my gaze locks on the doorway. The air grows heavy with anticipation, every set of eyes in the house waiting for the first glimpse of the bride.

Savannah and Ashley enter first in scarlet dresses that match my cravat. It seems to take them forever to reach the top of the chapel. They take their places across from Jayden and Niall and I wait with bated breath for my wife.

A word never sounded so good on my lips.

She appears like a vision in a simple silk dress with a train that extends six feet behind her. Her bright blue eyes sparkle as they land on mine. Her full chest heaves as she sucks in a breath. The smile that touches her lips is all mine because she doesn’t so much as glance at another person in the room.

Her cherry lips move, mouthing my exact thoughts.

‘I love you.’

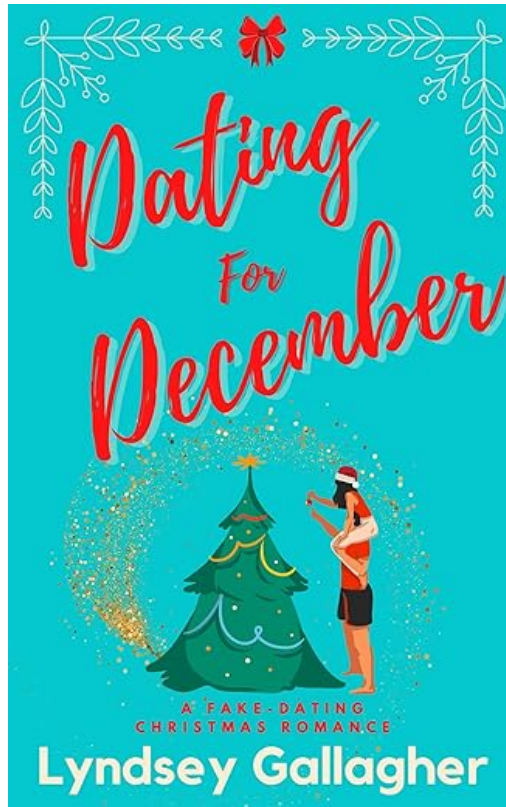
‘I love you,’ I mouth back.

And this emotionally stunted male is finally complete.

THE END

Haven’t quite had your fill of the Jackson family and friends? Check out **Dating For December**, Ava Jackson’s fake dating festive romance.

https://mybook.to/Dating_For_December



ALSO BY LYNDSEY GALLAGHER

DATING FOR DECEMBER

*A STEAMY, FAKE-DATING, SINGLE-DAD ROMANCE WITH ALL THE
FESTIVE FEELS!*

AVA

My perpetually single status hardly serves as a shining advertisement for HeartSync, the dating agency I own. Nor is it likely to convince my incredibly successful movie star brother, Nate, to invest in my business. Which is precisely why I agree to fake-date Cillian “can’t-crack-a-smile” Callaghan for the month of December.

Sure, his role as a stoically single father and a notoriously grumpy divorce lawyer is far from ideal, but his silver eyes, sculptured shoulders and sharp tongue tick all the right boxes.

Even boxes that are supposed to remain, ahem, unticked...

One mistletoe kiss sparks a lust that could melt Lapland, and frosty fake dates blaze into something feverishly real...

CILLIAN

I’m the country’s most successful divorce lawyer. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out why I don’t date. Add in the fact that I’m a full-time single dad, even if I had the inclination, I don’t have the time. But when my cheating ex blows back into town, the only way I can convince her it’s over for good is by fake-dating someone else...

Enter Ava Jackson, with her infectious laugh, long legs, and luscious lips.

Throughout December, her witty one-liners and effortless bond with my daughter thaw my every defense.

She’s everything I never knew I needed.

I’m an expert at breakups... but maybe it’s time to master a love that lasts...

https://mybook.to/Dating_For_December

****99pc SPECIAL PREORDER PRICE ****

FALLING FOR THE ROCKSTAR AT CHRISTMAS

SASHA

Ten years ago, I inherited our family castle and sole care of my youngest sister. More Cinderella, than Sleeping Beauty, at the mere age of twenty-eight I have a teenager to raise and a hotel to run. If the hotel is to survive past Christmas, I need a lottery win, a miracle, or Prince Charming himself to sweep in with a humongous... wad of cash.

When my super successful middle sister announces she's coming home for the holiday season, I'm determined to put my problems aside and make this the most fabulous Christmas ever. Especially as it might just be the last one in our family home.

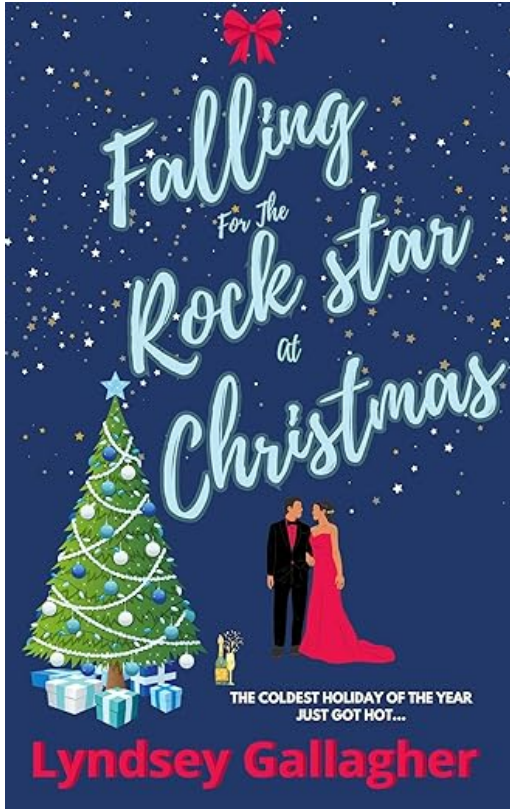
I didn't factor in the return of my first love, **Ryan Cooper**. Back then he was the boy next door. Now, he's a world famous singer/song writer. We were supposed to go the States together. He left without me. Now he's back. Rumour is he has writers block. Apparently this is a last-ditch attempt to find inspiration before his record label pulls the plug permanently.

And guess where he wants to stay? You have it in one- the most inspiring castle hotel in Dublin's fair city.

Every woman in the city wants to pull this Hollywood Christmas cracker. Except me. I'm going to avoid him at all costs.

Easier said than done when he's parading around under my roof, with enough heat exuding from his molten eyes to melt every square inch of snow from the peaks of the Dublin mountains...

[FALLING FOR THE ROCKSTAR AT CHRISTMAS- click to learn more](#)



Falling
For the
Rock star
at
Christmas



THE COLDEST HOLIDAY OF THE YEAR
JUST GOT HOT...

Lyndsey Gallagher

FALLING FOR MY FORBIDDEN FLING

CHLOE

Even the name **Jayden Cooper** sends a hot flush of irritation through my veins. His rockstar brother might be about to marry my darling sister, but that does **NOT** make us family.

Thankfully, there's a continent separating me from his ridiculously attractive but super-smug face. And his arrogant tongue.

I'm rapidly carving my name in the glittering world of celebrity event management... and what better event to manage than the final farewell tour of my sister's fiancé, Ryan Cooper.

It's the biggest gig of my career.

Eight cities.

Eight concerts.

Eight opportunities to propel my business to a global level.

I couldn't turn it down if I wanted to.

The catch?

It involves working closely with Ryan's agent- his brother, Jayden-Super-Smug-Cooper.

Going on tour with Jayden is almost as inconvenient as the hate-fuelled lust that steals the air straight from my lungs every time he's near.

Someone somewhere is testing me, but I've survived worse. And I'll survive him.

As long as I don't melt under the intensity of his smug but admittedly smouldering stare ...or fall foul of the talents of the aforementioned arrogant tongue...

Especially when technically...like it or not, we're about to be related.

JAYDEN

I've been through hell to get to where I am today.

I'm *the* best agent in Hollywood's cut-throat industry because I clawed and dragged myself there inch by excruciating inch.

Which is why I refuse to be bossed around by a pushy, Prada-wearing princess when it comes to organising my Rockstar brother's farewell tour. I've got bigger fish to fry, starting with upholding a promise I made a lifetime ago...

But Chloe is about to find out the hard way, what goes on tour stays on tour.

[FALLING FOR MY FORBIDDEN FLING- click to learn more](#)

Falling *For My* Forbidden Fling

WHAT GOES ON TOUR STAYS ON
TOUR, RIGHT?



Lyndsey Gallagher

FALLING FOR MY BODYGUARD

VICTORIA

As a student doctor, I deal with bullet wounds on a regular basis, but one teeny nightclub shooting is all it takes for my sister and her rock star husband to send me a new bodyguard/ babysitter.

The last person I expect to turn up is Archie “can’t-bear-to-look-you-in-the-eye” Mason.

Now we’re roommates until graduation. I can’t turn around without tripping over him. If only I could trip underneath him. Because he is every bit as alluring as he was five years ago. And equally as unavailable.

But when my night terrors result in us sharing the same bed, our situation sparks a brand new danger.

One that could hurt both of us irreparably...

ARCHIE

I’ve been *obsessed* with Victoria Sexton for years.

If my boss and friend, Ryan Cooper, had any idea how bad I have it for his wife’s little sister, he’d sack me on the spot.

Living with her is testing every inch of willpower I possess.

How can I watch her back when I can’t stop imagining her on it?

[FALLING FOR MY BODYGUARD- click to learn more](#)

HE'S TRYING TO SAVE HER.
SHE'S KILLING HIM.
ONE INDECENT OUTFIT AT A TIME...

Falling For My Bodyguard



Lyndsey Gallagher

LOVE & OTHER MUSHY STUFF

ABBY

I need a man. Not in my bed, but for my radio show. I'm an eternally single agony aunt responsible for dishing out romantic advice to the nation. It would be funny if it weren't so tragic. I desperately need to up my ratings.

What better way than to employ one of the country's hottest rugby players to offer his take on love and other mushy stuff to the frenzied females of the nation?

Callum Connolly is the classic example of male perfection.

He's everything I need for my show and everything I don't need in my life...

CALLUM

I'm not looking for *the one*, merely for *the next one*. That is, until my teammates bet I can't keep the same woman long enough to bring to my best friend's wedding.

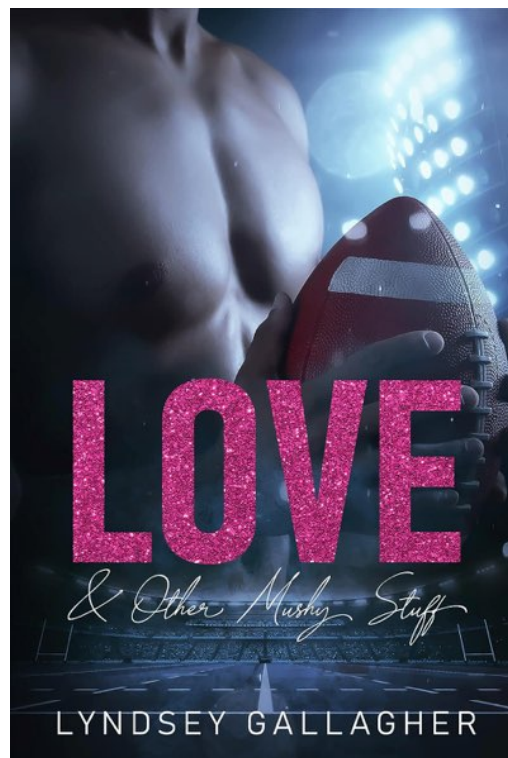
How hard can it be to date the same woman for three months?

When I bump into a beautiful DJ in a hotel spa, we strike an unlikely but alluring deal. I'll feature on her show and help up her ratings, if she fake dates me until after the wedding.

I don't bank on falling for her.

Especially when nailing her proves harder than nailing the most elusive touchdown ever...

https://mybook.to/Love_OtherMushyStuff



LOVE & OTHER GAMES

EMMA

I spent one mind-blowing night with the country's hottest rugby hooker.

It was the best night of my life.

Transcendent, in fact.

And foolishly, I believed **Eddie Harrington** when he swore the feeling was mutual.

But it turns out, the man is a notorious player off the pitch, as well as on it.

They don't call him "Hooker Harrington" for nothing.

One year later, I board a flight to my best friends beach wedding, dreaming of sun, sea and sangria. The last person I expect to find in the seat next to mine is Eddie "love-them-and-leave-them" Harrington.

His best friend is about to marry mine.

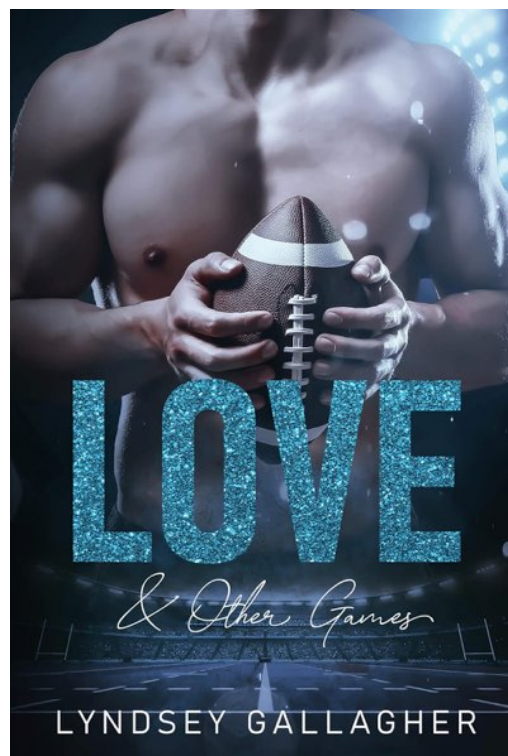
I *hate* the ground he walks on, but to keep the peace, I'll play nicely.

Even when a mad twist of fate forces us to share a romantic, idyllic honeymoon suite, complete with only one ginormous, rose petal-covered bed.

Eddie is certain his practiced tactics will earn him a replay, but this time around, I'm sticking firmly to my game plan.

Even if the chemistry between us is hotter than the Croatian sun...

<https://mybook.to/Love>



LOVE & OTHER LIES

KERRY

Who's unlucky enough to get sacked and evicted in the same week? Me. That's who. But a chance phone call with a witty, velvet-voiced stranger provides a stunning solution to both my problems.

Nathan's looking for a live-in nanny for his sunny five-year-old daughter and as fate has it, I have a degree in childcare, even though I swore I'd never use it.

Taking this job will force me to face demons I've been hiding from for a long time, but I have no choice but to accept.

It's only when I reach the magnificent Georgian house, my new home for the summer, I realise Nathan "the velvet-voiced stranger" is actually Nathan Kennedy, Ireland's most successful rugby player, and the only man I ever kissed when my boyfriend and I were on a break.

I can only pray one tiny (hot as hell) blip in my past doesn't ruin my future.

I need this job more than I've ever needed anything.

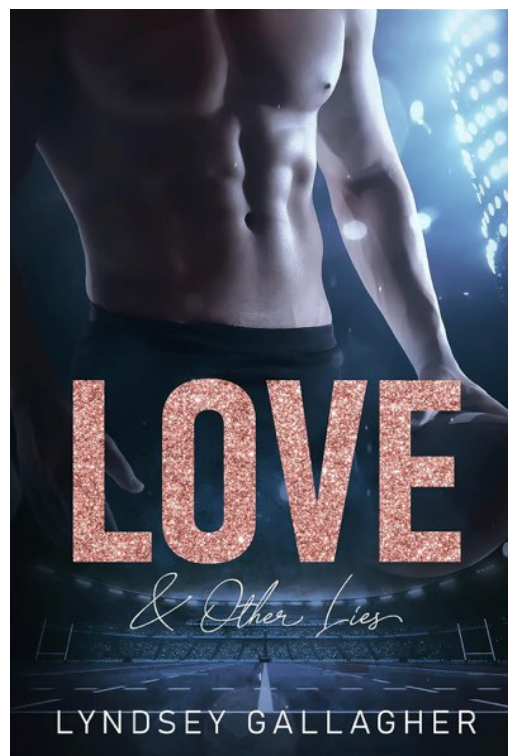
And worryingly, now I'm here, I want it more than I ever wanted anything too.

As the summer heats up, so does the escalating chemistry with my new boss.

Nathan's advances are becoming harder to resist.

And this time round, he swears he's playing for keeps...

https://mybook.to/love_and_other_lies



LOVE & OTHER FORBIDDEN THINGS

AMY

I've always been a good girl, but for the first time in my life, I'm ready to do something bad...

Hot, half-naked men lurk everywhere I turn. But the one whose soul screams to mine wears the number six jersey, along with a look of sheer uninhibited desire.

Six has always been my lucky number, but it's hard to see how this will end auspiciously for either of us.

Ollie Quinn is my brother's teammate. And thanks to my recent appointment as the team's physiotherapist, he's now my patient too. He might be newly single and ready to mingle, but he is utterly off-limits.

Does that stop me?

Of course not.

Chemistry crackles like an invisible circuit between us but when sparks fly, one of us will get burned...

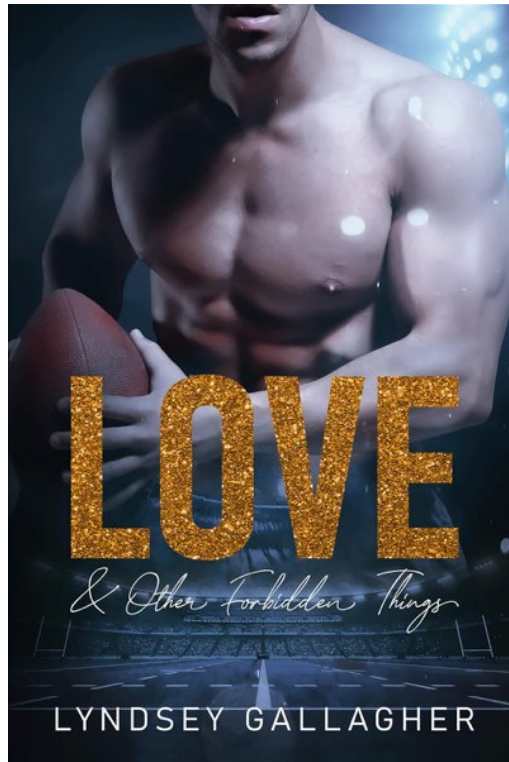
OLLIE

Injuries sustained on the pitch seem minimal compared to what Eddie Harrington might do if he finds out I'm sleeping with his little sister. But Amy is everything I never knew I needed and I couldn't give her up if I tried.

Is it simply the temptation of tasting the forbidden fruit?

Or will forbidden turn into forever?

[Love & Other Forbidden Things](#)



LOVE & OTHER VOWS

MARCUS

Once upon a time, I was the captain of the national rugby team, surrounded by the loyalty and laughter of my teammates, basking in the glory each winning match brought our country.

Now, I'm a stay-at-home-dad to my two beautiful, bubbly, busy girls while my stunning wife, Shelly, slides, shakes and shimmies her pert little ass all over national television as part of the newest, sexiest, celebrity dance show.

I don't resent her.

She's my world.

But if I tell you I'm struggling to adjust, it's an understatement.

SHELLY

After years of flying solo with the kids while my husband travelled the world with his teammates, the light has finally emerged at the end of a long and lonely tunnel. Living in Marcus's shadow has been hard but now, I'm finally getting my chance to shine.

I never dreamed I'd be offered a place on the hottest new dance show around. Nor did I dream I'd be paired up with Marcus's oldest rival either, though. And they weren't just rivals on the pitch.

We have a whole lot of history. And history has an awful habit of repeating itself.

Marcus and I vowed to stay together through sickness and health, but can we survive the pressure brought by fame and wealth?

https://mybook.to/love_and_other_vows



THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH

Twenty-seven-year-old **Lucy O'Connor** has been asked to be her future sister-in-law's bridesmaid despite the fact they don't see eye to eye. The last thing she expected was to fall in love with a complete stranger at the hen weekend. Which wouldn't be a problem, apart from the teeny tiny fact that she's already married to somebody else...

Is it a case of the **Seven-Year-Itch**? Or could it be the real deal?

Lucy needs to decide if she's going to leave the security of her stale marriage in order to find out if the grass is indeed greener on the other side, or whether it's worth having one more go at watering her own garden.

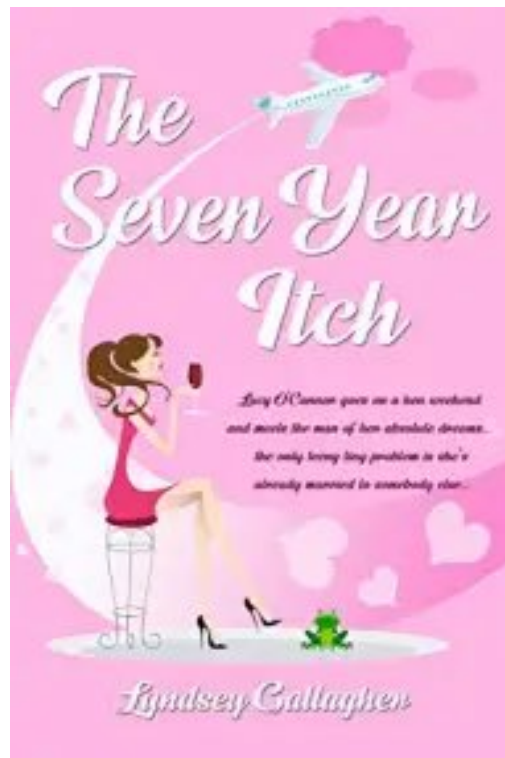
Could this party-loving, city girl really leave the country she loves for a farmer from the west of Ireland?

Is there such a thing as fate?

What about karma?

Is John Kelly all that he seems?

★★★★★ *Love can be insane, gut-wrenching, and dizzying*



https://mybook.to/The_Seven_Year_Itch

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I need to say thank you to my fabulous author pals, Sara Madderson and Margaret Amatt. They're two of my favourite writers and I'm lucky to have them both as friends.

A huge thanks to my reader group, Lyndsey's Book Lushes. The daily chats and check-ins mean the world to me. Writing can be a very lonely job. I appreciate your friendship and support more than you'll ever know.

It wouldn't be right if I didn't mention my amazing husband— my very own book boyfriend! (*If you haven't already read *The Seven Year Itch*- go read it!*) He listens to my ideas, he's my IT expert, and he's a pro at 'research!' ;)

And finally, thanks to **you**, dear reader! Without you, I wouldn't get to do my dream job every day! Thank you for picking *The Christmas Crush* when there are so many amazing books out there.

I hope you enjoyed Holly and Nate's story. If you did, please consider leaving a review on Amazon/Goodreads/Bookbub. They really do make a huge difference to authors.

And if you want to hang out with me in my Facebook reader group, Lyndsey's Book Lushes, we'd love to have you!
X

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/530398645913222>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lyndsey Gallagher lives in the west of Ireland with her endlessly patient husband, two crazy kids, and an even crazier boxer puppy. When she's not dreaming up the next boyfriend, she's circuit training, sea swimming, or eating more chocolate than is healthy.

Hang out with her in her private reader group, Lyndsey's Book Lushes. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/530398645913222>

Or subscribe to her newsletter @ www.lyndseygallagherauthor.com

