



THE
Christmas
EXTRA

LAUREL HOLIDAYS #5

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

V.L. LOCEY

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The Christmas Extra

Laurel Holidays #5

V.L. Locey

'Tis the season for a second chance at love.

Stillman King likes his life in the small rural farming community of Rockmount, Pennsylvania. It's a different pace of life than Philly, but Philadelphia was where his heart was broken, and he was happy to leave. He might be lonely, but he's settled and has even managed to win over his snooping neighbors. Overall, his days as a small-town sheriff are peaceful with only the occasional traffic accident, drunk and disorderly conduct, or a random meandering cow to deal with. That was until the day the mayor announced that Rockmount was going to be the filming location for a Christmas romance movie starring the popular soap opera star, Tony Gugliotti. The same Tony who'd left him right after college graduation and headed west to the bright lights of Los Angeles without even a goodbye.

Hearing his former lover's name shatters all the merry bucolic vibes that usually fill Rockmount, at least for Stillman. He'd not seen or spoken to Tony for over twenty years and had no wish to ever again. But, suddenly, here Tony was, looking just as good as he did way back when with his killer smile and movie star jawline. Hollywood descended on Rockmount and Stillman did his best to balance keeping the peace while maintaining a polite distance from his ex. Pity it's such a small town packed with incredibly meddlesome people. All it takes is one stake out, a night stuck in the courthouse's basement, and one kiss wound in a lighted pine tree to reignite the passion both men thought they'd left far behind.

The Christmas Extra is a standalone small town, forced proximity, gay second chance Christmas romance with all

the glitter of Hollywood, two mature men who never really got over each other, a village packed with holiday cheer as well as inquisitive neighbors, a well-meaning cast and crew, and a tinselly happy-ever-after.

A V.L. Locey MM Holiday Romance

The Christmas Extra (Laurel Holidays #5)

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Even the plastic banana in my holster.

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incredibly hard to help me make my books the shiniest we can
make them.

If you want to keep up with all the latest news about my upcoming M/M releases, sign up for my newsletter by visiting my website:

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Chapter One

“No, hey, Edgar, you can’t park there,” I called to Edgar Murphy, an old dairy farmer who’s been retired from farming for well over twenty years now, as he pulled up in front of the Rockmount High School in his rattletrap Ford pickup. “This is a no parking zone and look down here!” I pointed at the fire hydrant I stood next to.

“What?” Edgar shouted, parked, and slowly extricated himself from his truck. “I come for the town meeting Mayor Milquetoast announced in the paper.” I snickered under my breath. Everyone called our mayor that even though they knew full well his name was Bradley Milkhouse. “When did that fire hydrant get put there?”

“Oh, about 1940 I’d guess,” I replied, reaching up to push my hat back on my head, glad for the gentle fall breeze. This year, November in the hills of Pennsylvania had arrived on a warm rustle of falling leaves. I feared it would go out on the back of a wintry gust, as it so often did. Edgar shuffled up to me, his “Eat Corn” ball cap frayed along the brim. “Edgar, you can’t park here. Also, while we’re talking real nicely, I think I explained to you that you cannot drive your farm truck around.”

“Why not? She’s a good runner. I bought her when Doris had our last boy, Timmy. Nope, that’s not right. Timmy sold that to me after his first boy was born. Yep, that’s right. Angus, his name is, married that Stottlemeyer gal from over in the holler.”

I nodded along as he relayed the history of his grandchild’s marriage. The parking lot was filling up rapidly. It seemed most folks were eager to hear what this big and exciting news was that our mayor had crowed about in the weekly Rockmount Gazette. A rather large part of being in law enforcement in an incredibly small town was being patient. “...then she had a baby girl. Named that poor child some damned foolish name from some dragon show. No one can pronounce that baby’s name. Well, guess she ain’t exactly a baby no more.”

“Edgar, as much as I’d love to stand here and chat, you need to move your truck in case of a fire. Also, when you drive home, make this the last trip you take that truck off the farm. It hasn’t been inspected since Clinton was in office.” I pointed at the sun-bleached PA inspection sticker clinging, miraculously, to the interior lower left of the windshield.

“That’s a dumb rule. I bet the current president come up with that law. Nothing wrong with that truck, Stillman.”

“I’m sure she’s a good truck but she’s not safe.” I shifted from one foot to the other, my sight touching on the families circling up the drive to enter the high school. My deputy was at the front door talking to the sister of a girl he was dating. “I don’t want to have to ticket you.”

“Fine, I’ll leave her home next time but it’s too far for me to walk what with my gout,” he informed me.

“Okay, you give Teddy your keys at the door and tell him Sheriff King wants him to move your truck around the back. Watch that curb.” I took his thin arm to aid him up to the sidewalk.

“You’re a good man, Stillman, even if you are light in the loafers.”

Off he toddled. I ran a hand over my beard, wondering, not for the first time, if the old folks in this county sat around making up terms for gays. I’d heard them all during my twenty years here, more frequently during my last ten or so, after I had come out. There had been some upset when the voters heard I was gay, but after the initial shock, they’d come to realize that even though I dated men, I was one hell of a law enforcement officer.

A few people had rebelled strongly, but over the years—and my winning every election overwhelmingly—the haters had stopped being so vocal. They were still around, but they’d shut their mouths. For the most part. Most were not willing to go toe-to-toe with me over my sexuality. Some people said that I was intimidating. Good. My chunky frame and height had served me well over the years with those who wanted to push the pansy sheriff. Trust me, most didn’t push too hard or

too far. The only thing that pushed me steadily was Paul Whittle's damn bull. That bastard and I had a long history, one that usually ended up with me hauling my beefy ass over a fence at breakneck speed while Milford visited all his neighbors up and down Whittle Fork Road. It had been a month. The son-of-a-bitch was due to break out and wreak havoc on people's yards any day now.

I kept an eye on Edgar until he reached the front doors. Teddy spoke with him and then glanced at me. I nodded. My deputy smiled at the old gent and then jogged away from the sprawling stone-and-mortar building that housed grades seven through twelve toward me.

"Hey, so now we're valet parking?" he asked, waving at the Armstrongs, who were creeping by with their four kids in the back of their burgundy minivan. Town meetings were big occurrences in Rockmount, especially when the city council was being so secretive.

"You'll learn that being a small-town cop means doing all kinds of things they didn't teach you at the police academy. I've had to help a cow give birth on more than one occasion," I tossed out, enjoying seeing his bright blue eyes widen. "Valet parking is a breeze compared to being shoulder deep in a Hereford."

"Yeah, that's a hard no from me," he countered and jogged around the old truck, taking a moment to point at the expired inspection sticker.

"I'm aware. Just pull it around back." I could give old Jasper a citation, but why would I do that? He was an old, old man who thought he was getting something over on the sheriff. Maybe it made him recall his youth. Rumor was that the Murphy boys were quite the firecrackers way back when. He was the only one left out of the five wild Murphys, so as long as the truck wasn't too much of a hazard, I could turn a blind eye. There were more important hills to die on, at least for me. My deputy, fresh out of my alma mater, had yet to learn to chill the hell out. Not every infraction required the hammer of the law to fall down on a person. He'd learn. Life and policing ran at a slower pace in a rural community.

I waved a few cars past the front of the high school, then when it was closer to time for the town hall, I moseyed inside, stopping to chat with Camryn Daniels, who owned the sporting goods store in town. He and I had hit it right off when I'd first arrived. He had been a wrestler in college, just as I had been through high school and also for Drexel when I was there studying criminal justice. Go Dragons!

"Any clue what this big news is?" Camryn asked as we made our way to the auditorium.

"Nope, but knowing Bradley, it's something that's going to be a major pain in my ass," I replied, which got a knowing nod from Camryn.

The last time Bradley had summoned the town to an unscheduled meeting, it had been to announce that he'd invited a traveling circus to perform at the fairgrounds. A circus. With elephants. Of course, this was about fifteen years ago when people weren't as attuned to the plight of captive elephants. All was well until someone forgot to tether the elephant and it went for a stroll down Main Street, blithely knocking down streetlamps and crushing our cute little redwood planters. Yep, that was a hoot. Then there was the time when he thought having a wild animal park would be a major boon to tourism. Which, sure, probably, but if he thought trying to corral a placid, old elephant was bad, just wait until the mountain lion they wanted as part of the park's attractions broke loose. Or the buffalo. Or the baboons. I'd fought that one hard, and finally, clarity had won the day. Fucking baboons. I could just imagine the bedlam of a herd of fucking baboons in the movie theater.

"Bradley is a moron," Camryn whispered before taking a seat next to his wife, Peggy. Couldn't argue with that. How he was voted in time and again was one of those unsolved mysteries. He did have charm. I would give him that. Perhaps that was why the good people of Rockmount liked having him in charge.

I smiled at Peggy and made my way to the stage. I wasn't on the council as it would be a conflict of interest, obviously, but I did like to hang out in case things got heated. And

sometimes the voters got pretty hot under the collar at these things. Especially since raising taxes was on the docket and seeing how the mayor had been catty about the news he was sharing...it was just better to hang out and be seen looking growly. Taking a spot at the corner of the stage, I sat down with a sigh of relief. It had been a long day and my feet were tired of carrying around my two hundred twenty pounds. I shrugged out of my winter coat, draped it over the back of my folding chair, and then crossed my arms over my tan uniform shirt. My badge glinted in the bright lights shining down on us. Bradley liked the spotlight. I could do without it personally.

Several members of the council were already seated, our mayor waiting backstage to make an entrance. He did that. All the time. Politicians. Go figure.

When the auditorium was full, Bradley made his entrance. He was a tall man, pleasant enough to look at with his blond hair and blue eyes. I preferred my men darker, but I wasn't dating the mayor. He was too ambitious for me and far too straight. I'd fallen in love with a man who had grandiose dreams once. I was content being a small-town sheriff and had no desire to see my name in lights or hear the applause of the masses. Helping out where I could while keeping the streets safe was good enough for me.

"Okay, everyone, if you could simmer down," Bradley said, grinning out at the townsfolk who, to my sight, were sitting on their hands. "I know we're all excited to get to the big news, but we have to do things by the book."

And so we sat through all the blah-blah-blah of opening up a town hall. My deputy had returned, sneaking down the aisle to plant himself in a chair beside Melinda Pinkham, his new steady gal. Did kids do that anymore? Go steady? Probably not. Man, I age myself more and more every day. Wriggling down a few inches to get my weight off my tailbone, I stifled a yawn as my sight flickered over the stage. We had a small council compared to some larger towns. Just four members plus the mayor. Kevin Decamp was the president, Jane Arnold the secretary/treasurer, Joe Fahey the solicitor, and Owen Dyer was the fourth member newly elected just this past year. Owen

ran the feed mill and was quite the catch. He'd never been married and after I came out, the rumors swirled that we were a thing. Nope, we were not.

Owen liked women just fine, and he was just a confirmed bachelor. Couldn't hold that against him. I was too, it seemed. Not really by choice exactly. The dating pool in this neck of the woods was kind of limited. Actually, it was non-existent for a man of my age and life station. Not that I was unhappy. But the long, cold winter nights would be a lot less cold if my bed had someone else in it. As that was unlikely to happen despite what all the love gurus on daytime talk shows claimed—I was not at all sure romance could strike at any age—I was content. That was enough, surely. Many people wished to be as satisfied with their existence as I was. Who needed all the drama that came with a relationship? I'd pass even though I yearned for a warm body to curl up next to when the snow blew around my little home.

“...now that we've gotten through all the minutes from last time, thank you, Jane, we can get to new business.” Bradley beamed at his constituents. The man looked about ready to burst. I'd not seen him so torqued since the governor had visited two years ago on a reelection campaign stop. We'd made the poor man pet a cow. Nothing against Bertha, she's a lovely Holstein and winner of a blue ribbon, but the governor had not worn cow-friendly shoes. “I know that I've spoken about trying to find ways to increase the city coffers. Several of my ideas have been true blockbusters!”

“Name one!” someone who sounded a good deal like Edgar shouted from the back. I smiled inside but remained stoic on the outside. Bradley, the consummate politician that he is, never missed a beat.

“This time Rockmount is about to become famous!” Bradley shouted into his mic, feedback flowing out of the speakers. “Sorry, sorry,” he quickly said as he moved his mic back from his face. “I'm just so darn excited!”

“I got calves to feed. Get to it!” a deeper male voice called from the right side of the room.

“Okay, simmer down, everyone.” Bradley patted the air in front of him. “We’ve just finalized a deal with Life Loves Studios to film a holiday romance movie right here in Rockmount! Yep, that’s right! Next week people will be arriving to begin filming! I’ve been told that six to eight weeks should be enough for them to do all the scenes they want here in Rockmount, so our local businesses will be thriving at a time when sales are needed most. We all know that most of our income rides with hunters coming into camps, but once they leave after the end of deer season, it’s a rough go. Not this year! This year our tills shall runneth over!”

We all blinked at the announcement. Wow, that was... wow. That was big news indeed. I nodded in appreciation of such a big score for the town. We’d have a ton of income flowing in, as well as hundreds of people. I stretched my legs out in front of me, crossing my right ankle over my left to try to alleviate the ache in my ass. Damn hard chairs. That influx of cash was great for Rockmount, but it might be a bit of a nightmare for Teddy and me. Maybe I should reach out to the state police to see if they could give us a hand while filming was taking place.

“And that’s not all,” Bradley announced. “The stars of *Tinsel Kisses for Santa* are two of the biggest soap opera stars on the planet, and they’ll be right here in town!”

“Who is it?” a woman a few rows from the front asked.

Bradley stood up. Huh, must be big names if he was going to his feet. I didn’t do daytime TV as a rule, so I’d not have a clue. I was at the courthouse most days, either in court or in our tiny little broom closet that they dared to call an office, or out policing the county. If I were home due to sickness, I might watch a game show, but if I was not working, I was either out fishing or hiking, anything outdoors as opposed to sitting inside. I spent enough time at a desk or staring out the windows of our lone courtroom on the second floor wishing I was outside. Besides, I did my best to avoid soap operas and those who starred in them.

I reached into a back pocket to pull out my phone and start making notes. A big rush of movie people was going to

require some major planning ahead of time. Something that I was sure Bradley hadn't bothered with. He'd shove that off to others as he normally did while basking in the limelight of his coup. First off, I'd have to make sure they had all the required permits and then I'd have to try to figure out where the hell these people were going to park because along Main Street was not going to happen as we—

“The stars of *Willow Dale*. Sasha Faye and Tony Gugliotti!” Bradley crowed. More than half the crowd seated on the bleachers squealed. I gaped at our mayor, my phone sliding from my now numb fingers to the floor as several men in farming caps asked who the hell Tony Gugliotti was. If only I could ask that question. I knew far too well who the man was...

My house was a tiny little fifties bungalow that used to be a hunting camp tucked back at the end of a winding dirt road.

There was something magical about my long driveway and it wasn't just the fact that wildflowers lined it or that wildlife was frequently seen darting across it. That stretch of smooth gravel signified the end of the workday. Most of those workdays were pleasant enough, even if some did tend to run long. Today's had been a real kick in the balls. Pity too because it had started off nicely enough with Teddy bringing in doughnuts with my favorite jelly-filled variety that the local bakery generally ran out of first. You would imagine a day that began with jelly-filled would end up on a good note. Nope, not this one. Perhaps jelly-filled had lost their magic? Whatever the cause, this day had not only taken a wrong turn, it had veered off the road and right over a cliff, flew downward to crash into jagged rocks, and then burst into flames in a garish Hollywood style.

I parked my black SUV with the big golden star on the door in my drive, turned off the engine, and simply sat there staring at my humble abode. It had been well over an hour since the bomb had dropped. Tony was coming here. To Rockmount. To act. In a fucking movie. About romance.

Fuck. Me.

He did. Many times. Remember?

“Nope, not going to take that stroll down memory lane,” I growled at myself. I’d worn that fucking path down to the Earth’s core over the years, and what had I gotten out of it? Blisters and an everlasting heartache. Staring at my front door as if I could mentally command it to open, I barely noticed the tuxedo cat waiting on the porch. Ellery stretched, meowed, and then sprinted to the car. I opened the driver’s side door for him. Up he leaped into my lap, making muddy cat tracks on my trousers. “Hey, buddy,” I whispered, running my hand down his back. His purrs were deafening. “Let’s go have a beer.”

He gave my chin a bonk with his head and then he jumped down to the cold ground. October had a firm chilly grip on things, frosting the grass as well as the pumpkins for the past few nights. The leaves were now mostly fallen. If you drew in a deep breath in the morning, you could taste the bitter touch of winter. It was coming. We’d been known to have snow by mid-November, a real boon to deer hunters.

And holiday movie sets. Real snow. How romantic!

“Nope, once again, we are not thinking about romance.” I stalked to my front door, opened it, and followed Ellery inside. He darted to the kitchen as I untied my black tactical boots and left them on the boot tray. Working where I did one needed good boots. I locked the front door and removed my duty rig from around my waist and then flipped on the light.

“Alexa, play the *After the Gold Rush* album,” I called, and she rewarded me with Neil Young’s amazing voice. The fire in the woodstove needed some wood, so I did that before padding around my rustic home, my head a million miles away given the fact that when I went to reach for the dry cat food, I still had my gun belt in my hand. “For fuck’s sake.”

Ellery was too hungry to put off, so I placed my rig on the counter, fed him, and threw a frozen meal in the microwave. Then I carried my belt into my bedroom, placed it on the dresser, and stood there staring at myself in the round mirror

over the bureau. I looked pretty much the same as I always did but nothing like I had when Tony and I were together.

I'd been younger, leaner, still burly but not quite as husky, and with far less laugh lines and gray hairs. And Tony had been...well, Tony had been incredible. A fun-loving extrovert theater major who tended to offset my less-than-bubbly personality. Tony was beautiful. Tall, rangy, with dark hair and eyes so brown they appeared to be onyx. Olive skin from his Italian parents and a laugh that lifted a soul. Tony had wanted me just as much as I'd wanted him for some weird reason. To this day, I could not reason why. He was so stunning, so vital, so personable. He could have had any man on the Drexel campus, but he chose me. The big, lumbering wanna-be cop who wrestled to pay for his tuition. The poor kid from the rough side of Philly who somehow managed to get a sports scholarship to get him out of the grimy city streets. Tony was from Society Hill, a whole different world compared to the badlands where I'd grown up. Rich boy, poor boy. One dreams of acting, while the other dreams of walking a beat. We shouldn't have worked, but we did. Until we didn't.

I got my degree, and he got his. He left me for California. Not another man or because we didn't jibe. He left me for the glamour of Tinsel Town, something that I could not compete with even if I had wanted to. Once he had left, I found my dreams had shifted slightly. I no longer wanted to work the streets that had claimed my older brother and, in a way, had also killed my parents for when David had been gunned down, they'd died as well. Day by day, until they were gone within a year of my younger brother. Tony had been the only reason I would have stayed in Philly, but when he climbed onto that jet bound for LA, my heart and soul withered, just like my folks had.

I left the city behind, applied for jobs in small towns throughout the commonwealth, and finally settled here. And I was happy here.

"You *are* happy here, Stillman," I told myself. The man gazing back didn't look particularly joyous. To be honest, he looked like he had swallowed a porcupine. Ellery arrived with

a soft little squeak as he landed on my dresser. He paraded back and forth, his tail tickling the underside of my chin. “We’re as happy as clams, aren’t we, Ellery?”

He purred a bit more loudly, then jumped to the bed, eager to curl up on the duvet to warm his little pink beans. I had a moment where I too thought crawling into bed with the covers drawn over our heads would be the cat’s meow. But then that stubborn side of Stillman pushed aside the woe-is-me with a hearty shove.

“We are not going to do this again,” Stubborn Stillman announced. Ellery glanced up from cleaning himself, rear leg in the air, to stare at me as I pointed a finger at myself in the mirror. “We are *not* doing this again. The past is just that, the past. He’s a big TV star now. You’re a small-town sheriff. We’re going to do our job, be professional as hell, and not give two fiddy fucks about the man. Remember, he left *you*, not the other way around. You have nothing to be ashamed of and no reason to be fidgety. It’s only six to eight weeks, then he’ll be gone, headed for sunny California just like before, without a thought for you or what we had.”

I nodded at my reflection with authority. There. I told me.

It would be fine from here on out. I was one hell of a peptalker.

Surely it was time for that beer now.

Chapter Two

I had severely overrated my pep-talking abilities.

A week after the big announcement, movie types had inundated our quiet little town.

Rockmount was buzzing like a beehive in May. Sadly, all that hustle and bustle meant that friction was bound to erupt, even if all the store owners were giddy over the influx of customers.

Every diner—we had two—was packed for every meal and had had to hire extra help. Every hotel—we had two—was booked full and people in town were now renting out rooms to stranded makeup artists and key grips, whatever the hell a key grip was.

I'd already had to ask several trucks with equipment—tons of equipment—to find other places to park then had a long talk with the production manager, a nice guy named Kevin, about where his permits gave him permission to shoot and where they did not. Since most of the townsfolk were hepped up about being in a movie, they all seemed willing to bend over backward. Seemed everyone was happy to have filming take place inside stores and homes. Hell, even Mabel Larkin let them see her bathroom and the cast iron bathtub she'd inherited and now they had scribbled out a scene for Tony to be in that clawfoot tub. A mental vision that I did not ever need. Tony dry was hard enough to purge from my mind. Tony wet would be damn near impossible.

I heard our mayor calling my name and thought, albeit briefly, about trying to duck behind a huge fir tree that the movie set hands were setting up in the middle of our town green. It was utter madness.

“...you are! I was looking for you in the library. Hello! Bradley Milkhouse, mayor of Rockmount and a huge fan of this movie!” He jammed himself between me and Kevin, grabbing the man's hand and pumping it frantically. Bradley had been running on sixteen cylinders since the film crews had besieged our town. “There's been a small snafu over at The

Pine Arms Motel. Seems they mistakenly overbooked.” I folded my arms over my coat as a feeling of dread settled over me.

“And this impacts me how?” I asked while Kevin, sensing something on the crisp fall winds, eased away and hid behind the massive fir tree. Lucky bastard.

“Well, you have that charming little place, and it’s just you, so—” Bradley said, his coat collar turned up against the chill.

“No.”

He made that face. The one that said he was just a beleaguered public servant like me and why was I being such a turnip?

“Stillman, be reasonable. Everyone in town is pitching in.” He took me by the arm and led me behind a trailer filled with lights and rolls of cables. I followed only because the trailer served as a windbreak. “How would it look if everyone but you acted hospitable?”

“It would look like I value my privacy.”

His thin lips flattened. “So do Lilith and I, but we’ve opened up our home to the director. Everyone on the council has offered up spare rooms. Even Teddy said one of the wardrobe assistants could stay with him.”

“Is she blonde with big boobs?” I asked and got a scorching look. “Just asking.”

“She might be but the point stands. If Gertie over at the library is willing to clear off the bed in her doll room, I’m sure you and your cat can bend just a little.”

I rolled my eyes skyward. He knew I was not a man who liked people in his space. I valued my privacy and downtime. How the hell would I unwind with some key grip—what *did* they do anyway?!—slopping around my house? No, it was just not doable. “Stillman, think of how poorly it would look if the only LGBTQ person in the county refused to be hospitable.”

I glared down at him. “Do not go there, Bradley. My being gay has nothing to do with me not wanting some stranger sitting at my breakfast table eating my fucking crispy rice cereal.”

“You’re being more stubborn than usual.” He huffed and then glanced down Main Street. “Imagine what our country would be if every American turned their backs on those in need.”

Christ on a bike. He was speechifying. Damn politicians.

“Bradley...”

“What would this country be if we didn’t help the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, and the weak? We’d be a shell of ourselves, a watered-down version of this great land that we have grown to love!”

“God bless America!” some guy hauling lights from inside the trailer shouted. Bradley placed his hand over his heart and gazed with reverence at the US flag snapping over the post office across the street.

“For fuck’s sake. Fine, I’ll take in one person. One. Can’t have the good folks of Rockmount calling me rude or unpatriotic.”

“Excellent! That’s wonderful! I knew Rockmount could count on you, Stillman. I always say to Lilith that I’m always proud to stand beside you in pictures during Pride week and let the world know that you’re my gay friend.”

“Uh-huh. One person, non-smoker, must love cats, and they are not to touch any of my shit.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’m sure a big star like Mr. Gugliotti won’t need anything of yours. He’s traveling with everything he needs as well as a personal assistant who can dash to CVS if—”

My brain seized up. “Wait, what now? Who is...”

“I know! You’re so lucky. Several of the single women in town—and four of the married ones which give me a bit of concern given their marital status—leapt at the chance to have

Dr. Rock Watson, that's the role he plays in *Willow Dale*, stay with them but I suspected he would be happier with you." He peeked around the trailer and then leaned in close. "He's gay too, so, you know, you two can talk about gay things in the comfort of your little rustic bungalow."

"No, I...I didn't...no, I just cannot—"

"Paul! Oh, Paul, hold up, I need to speak to you about the day in the apple orchard planned for next week! Thanks for being a team player, Stillman, even if you do play for the other team. Paul! Mr. Gershman! Ugh, assistant directors are so uppity! Paul Gershman! A moment!"

Bradley dashed off. I stared at his back and wondered just how much trouble I would get into if I threw a movie light at his fat head. I could shoot him, but that would be a very lengthy prison sentence.

"Oh, Stillman!" Bradley paused by the fountain in the center of the green. "Tony is arriving this afternoon. He likes chocolate coffee!"

"Yeah, I know," I muttered to myself before kicking the tire on the trailer so hard my big toe cracked. Ouch. Fuck.

"Oh, one more thing!" Bradley bellowed across the green. "Would you please run to the airport and meet his flight at five-fifteen? A police escort would show how much we value his being here! Paul! Mr. Gershman! Please wait, I have ideas!"

"But the airport is over an hour away and..." And he was out of earshot. "I'm going to put that on the clock!"

Fucking hell. Did I look like a damn limo service?

Christ on a pogo stick. Would anyone miss me if I just got in my cruiser and drove to Canada? I could be a Mountie. I looked good in red, and I liked snow and maple syrup.

Glancing at the chaos claiming my tiny town, I felt the urge to upchuck on my shiny black boots. Yep, the call of the RCMP was growing louder with each passing second...

Muttering all the way—it wasn't even November yet and I was in no mood even though Rockmount now looked like the North Pole on steroids—I refused to jingle all the way, as I drove to Williamsport to meet my ex's plane.

I was too damn mad to be festive. Mad and jittery. I'd had nightmares just like this. Me looking old, frumpy, and a little wider around the waist meeting Tony—who looked just as good now as he had in college—in some shadowy dream place. In every dream, he had taken one look at me, laughed, and strolled off to kiss a palm tree. I imagined he did that a lot. Kissing palm trees. Hell, maybe he was into rubbing off against coconut trees. Were those two different kinds of trees? Coconut trees had palm fronds. I'd seen them in movies. Didn't Eddie Murphy drive down a palm-lined road in *Beverly Hills Cop*? Was it the first movie or the second? Were those coconut trees? I'd never spent much time away from the cold AF northeastern swatch of the States. What did I know about tropical trees?

Didn't matter. The point was Tony obviously was more into palm/coconut trees than he had been into me. And now here I was hauling my sorrowful ass away from home and the ton of things that I had to tend to back there to pick up the palm lover.

Parking in the short-term lot, I lumbered along, shoulders up, glower on my face, into the small but tidy airport. Generally, there were just a few flights in and out, all going to the major hubs, and so it was easy to find where to wait. I got a few worried glances since I was still in uniform. Maybe the couple waiting for a flight to Kennedy thought I was here to pick up a fugitive. In a way I was. Tony had fled our relationship. Pity that wasn't a crime I could arrest him for even though the statute of limitations had surely run out by now. Still, the idea had merit.

The arrival of a small jet grabbed my attention. Walking past a vending machine, I stopped to buy a roll of antacids and a soda and then made my way to a wall of thick glass. It took minutes for the ground crew to get the stairs pushed to the door of the shiny white jet, so I took that time to rip open the

antacids and popped three into my mouth. Chewing like a goat, my sight stayed locked on the door as it slowly opened. My stomach began to churn. I chewed faster. A flight attendant appeared in the doorway and then... Tony.

He was chatting with the young woman animatedly. My heart flipped over—the feeling uncomfortable, to say the least. I swallowed the chalky mess in my mouth. He looked too damn good as he jogged down the stairs, a leather carry-on bag over his shoulder, his clothes casual but fashionable. No one else departed the plane. Tony stopped about fifty feet from me, his expressive dark eyes finding me through the terminal's tinted glass window. He squinted at me, his mouth battling to figure out if he should smile or frown. Tony, being Tony, went with the smile. My tablets hit my gut a few seconds too late to save me from the churn of seeing that grin directed at me.

With the grace of a runner, he dashed inside the terminal, giving fans a quick nod as he passed, his long legs carrying him to me faster than I wished. I was not ready for this moment. I'd hoped to never see him in person again.

He stopped about a foot from me, his ebony hair—now shot through with strands of silver so kudos to him for not dying it—windblown, his cheeks rough with afternoon whiskers. He'd always had a heavy beard and liked to tease about it being the Italian in him. Be it his Sicilian blood or just his amazing genetics, the scruff worked for him.

“I know we didn't part on the best of terms, but are you planning on shooting me, Sheriff King?” he asked jokingly.

I glanced down to my side to see that I had a firm grip on the handle of my revolver. I instantly released it and stood there empty-handed with nothing to do with my hands. So I shoved them under my armpits.

“Nice to see you, Anthony,” I replied with my best lawman tone.

“Now you sound like my mother,” he teased. The man had always been a big pester ass. The soul of a trickster god housed in the body of a god of seduction. A lethal combination.

“Doubtful.” I looked around him, ignoring his playful smile. “Where’s your PA?” There had been just a handful of airport staff milling around.

“Sadly, he had to have his wisdom teeth extracted, so I flew here all alone.”

I glimpsed his way. He seemed sincere. “Sorry to hear that he’s under the weather, but I’m sure the movie people will find someone to fetch and carry for you.”

“I’m going to miss Mignon terribly. He’s the best fetcher since I owned that little black terrier.”

I shot him a dry look. “I didn’t mean to say that your personal assistant was a dog.”

“I know, you just meant to say that I was a jerk who expected people to jump when I say how high.”

Fucker. That was exactly what I had thought. “Do you have more luggage?”

He snickered softly, his brown eyes alight with mirth. I was going to thump him before we made it all the way home. This was a dreadful idea. I vowed to never vote for Bradley again. Not that I had ever voted for him, but if I had...

“I do yes, they’re sorting it now. Might be a few minutes. Would you like to go to the coffee shop over there to wait? I’d kill for a tart with a mocha coffee on the side.” I bobbed my head, spun on my heel, and stalked off, muttering about the amount of tarts he had enjoyed over the years. “You know that despite what the tabloids say, I was happily married and so my tart intake was lower than you might have expected.”

Damn man had ears like a bat. I remained silent as we got Tony his coffee and tart. Actually, it was a rather dried-out-looking apple turnover, but that would have to do. The girl behind the counter gushed, batted her lashes, and got a selfie. He plunked his tight ass on a stool, smiled sweetly at me, and then blew over his coffee.

“You can sit down. I promise I will not bite you,” he said as he tore off a chunk of his turnover and dunked it into the

coffee. “They could put out some fresh pastries for passengers.”

“This is a small airport not LAX.” I stood at his side, like a prison matron, eyes glued on the guys on the tarmac talking instead of loading luggage. I heard Tony sigh. “Their work ethic is pretty shoddy.”

“They’re probably talking to each other just to spite you,” he flung at me like a ninja star. My gaze flew to him. “Thank you for looking at me. Stillman, I am sorry for—”

I held up a hand. “Nope, don’t need to hear it nor do I want to hear it. You made your choice, Anthony, and it turned out to be a good one for you. You’re a big star now, making tons of money, marrying starlets and leading men—”

“Only one starlet and that was before I could be out and not jeopardize my career. The leading man was a mistake. We both knew it a month after the vows had been spoken. My therapist says that I’m trying to fill a void in my heart.”

That one got me. Like a trout on a sharp new hook. He sat there on the bank, verbal pole in hand, and reeled me to the shore. I thought to unload on him, but that was not a conversation to have in public. So, I did the next best thing. I flipped him off and then stormed outside to bark at the men who were loading suitcases onto a trolley. They both surged into high speed after I spoke to them. Within ten minutes, we had Tony’s two cases in hand and were in my cruiser, heading home.

“For a law enforcement officer, you drive rather recklessly,” Tony said when I took a turn with a bit too much gusto. His coffee sloshed over the side of his cup.

“If you would have left the lid on, that wouldn’t have happened,” I explained because a chimp should be able to figure that out. Lid on, no spillage.

“It was too hot so I had to blow it.”

“No, do not even start.”

“What did I do? We’re talking about hot coffee. Honestly, Sheriff King, you’ve got the dirtiest mind. Always did, though.

Do you remember that night when—”

“No. *No.*” I jerked the wheel to the right so hard he had to lunge around to keep his damn mocha latte whatever foamy shit in the cup. What was wrong with plain old coffee? I turned as much as I could, given I was buckled in, and shoved my finger into his face. “We are *not* taking walks down memory lane, Tony. I did not volunteer to have you in my home. I knew nothing about your movie being filmed in my town until it was too late to speak against it. You left me. I begged you to stay. Pledged. But you had stars in your eyes and zero love for me in your heart.”

“That is not even partially true,” he weakly argued, coffee dripping off his fingers to the floor mat under his expensive hiking boots. As if he would be hiking anywhere. Hollywood types were all the same, fakers and liars and heartbreakers.

“I’m not interested in hearing your bullshit. Until a room somewhere else opens up I’m stuck with you. I will do my civic duty to the town because this movie is important to our fiscal health. That is the *only* reason, Tony. If not for the citizens needing the influx of all that dirty money, I’d have seen you bedding down with Barry Shetland’s prize sow. Now, sit there, be quiet, and let me drive.”

He pressed his lips together, nodded, and wiped his fingers on his pant leg. I exhaled sharply, hit the turn signal, and melded back into the light traffic, leaving Williamsport to head for home. The silence lasted an entire five minutes.

“Still listening to Neil Young, I hear,” he commented, not the least bit wary or even a touch ashamed. I pretended not to hear him. Wished I could block off my nose so that spicy cologne of his wasn’t tickling my senses. Holding my breath wasn’t a sound option as I was driving. “It’s good to know some things don’t change. I have a ton of playlists from our halcyon days.”

“Mostly packed with Hall & Oates,” I said before I could stop myself. Now he knew that I remembered his adoration for the famed musical duo. Damn it.

“Guilty as charged.” I heard the humor in his voice. “I did get to see them perform live. It was May ’83 at the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco. They’d played in LA before they moved to San Diego and San Fran, but I’d been working those nights at a comedy club so I had to miss the closer gigs.”

“Comedy club?”

“Yes, Stillman, a comedy club. You didn’t think that I arrived in LA fresh from the Drexel University theater program and fell right into a starring role on television, did you?”

Yeah, I kind of did. “Of course not.”

“Good, because there were several really lean years. I couch surfed forever it seemed. Worked at diners and clubs, pumped gas, and cleaned toilets. Several times I was halfway to the bus terminal ready to head back east.”

That I also did not know. I chanced a glance at him. He was so damn good-looking, even if his nose looked a bit larger than Hollywood probably liked. It said something about him that he had not given in to the pressure to have it “fixed” with a scalpel. The fact that he let his gray hairs show as well as his laugh lines also made him a little more appealing in my book.

I thought we weren’t saying he was hot or commendable. Did that change?

“Why didn’t you come home?” I asked with as much nonchalance as I could muster. If he had returned, how different my life would have been...

“Quitters never win,” he flung out as if by rote. “Someone once told me that when I was ready to quit the senior production of *Hamlet* because I couldn’t nail the lines.”

Fuck. That someone had been me. Why was I so fucking wise?

“You were trying too hard to be Laurence Olivier instead of being Tony Gugliotti.”

He chuckled. I stared at the bumper ahead of me. “True, very true. And I have since learned that I am not a

Shakespearean actor. I'm more suited to roles that showcase my wit, looks, and rakish swagger.”

I nearly laughed. The fucker was far too charming. I'd have to build thicker walls to keep him from whittling through to my tender heart.

Chapter Three

We pulled up in front of my place around eight at night.

We'd have been home sooner, but a certain spoiled actor just *had* to have a milkshake from Sheetz. I wanted to go in and order it for him to expedite things. My ass was dragging and my mental walls had been under attack from his charisma forces for an hour. I was beginning to worry that my defenses might weaken from the steady onslaught of allure boulders he kept hurtling at them. I should have never binged the *Lord of the Rings* movies last night. Sleep would have been much better, but since I'd not been able to rest, it had been talking trees and wizards.

But of course, he had to go into the bustling convenience store. It took us forty minutes to leave. Fans. Holy hell, were soap operas really that popular? I knew that my mother had watched her stories for years before she had passed, but that seemed like something old women did. Tony had fans of all ages coming up to him to gush, take pictures, and get things signed. One guy had him sign the wrapper from his sandwich. No one spoke to me, but I got the impression that they thought I was with Tony as some sort of personal security. By the time he extricated himself from his adoring fans, I was beyond grumpy.

"You should have gotten a milkshake. They're so good and ice cream always makes a person happy inside." He offered me the dredges of his melted shake.

"No thank you." I slammed the cruiser into drive, turned CSNY 1974 up loud, and dared him to speak over any of the songs being sung.

"The man definitely needs some ice cream." He sighed and then thankfully fell asleep.

Every now and then I darted glances at him, re-memorizing his profile. The full swell of his lower lip, the long neck and prominent Adam's apple, and the proud nose. He had aged well. Much better than me, to be honest. Shoving

my admiration for his face aside, I focused on work. That was much safer.

The sun had sunk behind the mountains long ago when we finally pulled up to my house. I'd left a light on inside, as I normally did when I knew I'd be late. Ellery was sitting in the front window, probably put out with me leaving him inside all day but tough. It was cold and he wasn't as young as he thought he was. Kind of like his master. Did cats have masters? No, not really. Like the human who catered to his every whim. There. That's better.

When the engine died, Tony groggily sat up, looked around in confusion, and then smiled at me.

"You always were the prettiest thing to wake up to," he said, his voice sleepy.

"All that time in the sun out in LA has baked your brain. Either that or it's all the weed you hippie movie sorts toke."

"Hippie movie sorts?" He snickered and rolled his head, his neck cracking like a starter's gun. "Ouch. You, dear Stillman, have been living in the hills for far too long. I personally have not met one hippie in all my years in LA, although there were a few who qualified in San Francisco when I lived there for a year or two. I loved it there. Very *Tales of the City* vibes, but that job fizzled, and I went back to LA after a bit." I nodded along as if I knew what a *Tales of the City* vibe was. Books maybe? Probably, he had always been a big reader. I read when I had time. Lots of Tom Clancy and John Grisham. "Oh, okay, yeah, this place looks just like you."

I looked from him to my home. "Thanks."

"It's charming in its laidback brusqueness."

"Uh-huh." I tugged the keys from the ignition, unbuckled, and slowly eased my ass out of the car. My back twinged as it always did if I sat too long, old wrestling injury, and so I did a roundabout hip roll to work out the kinks.

"That wasn't a slam," Tony called as he exited the SUV. "In case you took it as such. It's a charming place, really. Nestled back into the woods, the exterior all craggily wood

shingles, with an irritable cat in the window. If I drove up here myself, I would know it was yours instantly. It's handsome and inviting, yet not so welcoming that you dare walk right in and put your feet up without an invitation."

"I do not suggest walking into anyone's home uninvited." I walked up to my front door, unlocked it, and swung it open. Ellery dashed out without even a leg rub. Tony nearly tripped over him as he climbed the three short stairs to my porch. "Watch the cat."

"He should watch me," he countered as I reached in to flip on the nearest light. I tossed my keys to the side table, my sight on Tony as he slowly entered my home. A smile pulled his lips up at the corners as he spun around to take things in. "Stillman, this is really quite nice. I love the sunken living area and the fireplace. Oh, and a woodstove. Do you heat with wood?"

"I do," I replied as I knelt down to untie my boots. My feet were hot and achy. It had been a long, long day. Truly, it felt like weeks since I had picked Tony up. "Your room is the door on the left, mine is on the right. Bathroom is between them." I turned to face him. "I get up early and am not going to pussyfoot around so as not to wake you. And I also like to have some downtime at the end of the day, so if you're planning on having wild parties or inviting the cast and crew out here for an orgy—"

His eyes flared. Then he laughed aloud. "Stillman, really. An orgy. Do you honestly think that every actor is a hedonistic beast?" He dropped his bags to the floor. "Or is it just me that you think is a bastard?"

"I try not to think about you at all." And with that, I strode into my bedroom and closed the door in his pained face. Damn it. Now I felt bad for being such a dick.

No, don't feel bad. He's an actor. That hurt look is probably one that he has used a thousand times.

True.

Or he could really be trying to mend some fences.

Also true.

Stillman, my man, if he wanted to mend fences so badly, why did he not contact you once in the past couple of decades?

Maybe he was too immature to face what he had done and now that he has the chance he's trying to reach out. Also, Stillman could have reached out to Tony. Just sayin'.

There was nothing like standing in your bedroom in your socks and listening to your inner demon/angel argue over your ex-lover's intent. Shaking free from both of the voices inside my head, I stripped down to my boxers, placed my gun on the nightstand, and padded around nervously. My routine was out of sync.

Tony was muttering and thumping as he dragged his bags into his room. His door closed with a firmness just short of a slam. Cool. I pulled on some joggers, a tee, and some thick socks, and slunk back into the living room. I spent several minutes rebuilding the fire in the wood stove. By the time I had a nice roaring blaze, Ellery was back at the door. He didn't spend too much time outside now that it was growing colder. His wandering days were behind him now. He, like me, was content to sit in front of the stove, warm our belly, and watch some *Justified*.

Once the fire was going, I made my way into the kitchen to feed the cat as well as myself. Ellery paraded around the room, tail in the air, meowing loudly.

"I know...give me a second." After a pot of coffee was brewing, I opened a can of tuna and cheese cat food and dumped it into his bowl. He leaped onto the counter to eat.

"I remember when we went to Dewey's frat house for that party and their cat was on the counters. You had a shitfit about it. Said it was dirty and crude to allow animals in the same place that you prepare food." I shot Tony a look. He too had changed into lounge clothes, his soft fleece pants of dark gray, a hoodie, and thick slippers. The rumpled look suited him well.

“Maybe I’ve mellowed over the years,” I replied and turned from him to get a mug from the cupboard. It wasn’t like I was going to relay that I’d unlearned a lot of bullshit my god-awful father had pounded into Mom’s and my heads. “Do you drink coffee?”

“Is it decaf?”

“Not hardly,” I answered, my back to him, gritting my teeth to not be too mean but just mean enough.

“Ah, then no thanks. Caffeine keeps me up and I need some sleep. I have to be on set at eight a.m. tomorrow morning. Do you know if Sasha has arrived yet?”

“Not a clue.” I glanced back over my shoulder. He heaved a sigh as he reached out to pet Ellery. The cat arched his back into Tony’s hand. A vivid, five-alarm memory flared to life. Me, Tony, in a bed, my spine bowing up into his palm just as Ellery’s had as he moved inside me. I nearly dropped my mug to the floor. Bobbling the cup, I hurried to fill it and then spun. “I do have Wi-Fi so you can contact the producer or director to fill you in.”

“Cool, thanks. Will you be heading into town early tomorrow?”

I stared down into my mug of coffee as if I could pull up a reply or maybe some common manners from the imaginary grinds at the bottom of the ceramic cup.

“I’ll be leaving here at seven sharp,” I offered, and that was the best I could do right now. The smell of him was tangling up with the aroma of dark brew. It was more than my poor head could deal with. “If you’re fixing your pretty face and you’re not ready, I’ll roll without you.”

He grinned widely, like a damn jack-o’-lantern. “Stillman, you think I’m pretty.”

I nearly choked on the swig of coffee I’d just taken. Unable to reply in a manner that would suit my inner angel, I defaulted to demonic comebacks.

“Fuck. You.”

I took my coffee to my room. To hell with TV tonight. U.S. Marshal Givens would have to uphold justice without me.

When I hip-checked my door shut, I heard Tony whispering to my cat. What he was saying wasn't clear, but Ellery and he were having a good giggle over it. Yes, cats do giggle. Just let one trip you in the dark as you make your way to the bathroom to pee. You'll hear them sniggering if you listen closely enough.

After a long night of tossing, turning, and pummeling my pillow, I rolled out of bed with a slight attitude.

An attitude that did not get better when I stalked into the bathroom and felt the residual steam in the air as well as the rich aroma of Tony's body wash. Something with mango and orange, its bright yellow bottle sat next to my bar of blue soap in the shower caddy.

"Making himself right at home," I mumbled before heading to the john to piss. I washed my hands after, splashed water on my face, and then shuffled out to find Tony standing in the middle of my kitchen, a cup of coffee for me in his hands, smiling at me like June Cleaver used to beam at Ward every morning. Just give him some pearls and an apron.

"Morning," he said as he passed the coffee over to me. "Two spoons of sugar and a splash of cream, right?" I grunted. "My ass may be sagging, but my memory is top-notch."

Knowing he was fishing for a comment about his ass being fine, I stared down into my coffee and then took a sip. Damn, it was good.

"I hope you don't mind that I showered, but I was fast so that you'd have enough hot water."

"It's fine." I padded off with my cup to stare outside and felt him slide in beside me, the smell of his soap more than a little appealing. "I don't shower here. I go to the gym in town to work out every morning. So I shower there."

"Oh, of course. I should have realized that you still worked out. You look amazing." That pulled my gaze from the frosty

leaves clinging to the trees in my backyard. Backyard being a bit of a stretch. I did mow it, but nothing else. The property line edged state game lands which was one of the big selling points for me. Walk out the back door and you're in the forest. Not that I'd had much luck killing a buck the past several years, but nothing beat sitting in a tree stand away from the world for a few hours. "What? You do. You've not aged a day."

"Have you been adding something to your coffee?"

"Not a thing other than a dribble of milk. Which is bordering on being funky. You have nothing in this place other than stale bread, a case of cat food, and a can of tuna. The fridge is just as bare. How does a man of your appetite survive on iffy milk and a six-pack of beer?"

"There's mustard in there too," I pointed out, his elbow dangerously close to mine. "I don't have a PA or a housekeeper to fawn over me. Eating in town is just easier, not that I have to explain my way of life to you. If you were so damn worried about my dietary choices, perhaps you should have—"

I bit the rest of that back.

"I am sorry for leaving, Stillman," he quietly offered.

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter." With that, I left him standing at the back door alone with his fucking delicious coffee and pitiful excuses. "Be ready to roll in ten minutes," I called over my shoulder, stepping over Ellery, who had plonked himself down in front of the fire.

The cat gave me a dark look when I asked him to move so I could feed the stove. With his tail in the air, he walked off and disappeared into my room. Tony had the good sense to stay in the kitchen. Today was not going to be a good day to poke this bear.

Chapter Four

The ride to town was deadly quiet aside from an old live album by Neil Young.

Tony was subdued, his nose in a thick script, the whole way into Rockmount. He now wore reading glasses. Small round ones with dark frames that looked wickedly attractive on him. Our gazes touched once or twice on the ride, his darting back to his script while mine would fly to the road—where they belonged.

“This is the town green,” I said, pulling up behind a yellow sawhorse that Teddy had placed in the middle of Main Street to divert the traffic away from the shoot. “You’re shooting here for a week, then it’s off to a local wedding barn and then out to the tree farm. Not sure what comes after that, but this is where you need to be today.”

He closed his script, his glasses riding low on his lovely nose, and smiled at the madness outside in the cold.

“It looks like something from a painting,” he commented, and yeah, he was right, it did look like a Thomas Kincaide oil. A huge blinking tree stood off to the side of our little World War II memorial fountain. Stalls had been erected to mimic a Christmas celebration with strolling carolers and a rolling hot peanut vender. “Guess I had better get to makeup and wardrobe. I’ll get a ride home tonight. Oh, and I’ll cook something. I’m pretty good at cooking now.”

I arched a brow. That was news to me, but then again, he could have taken a master chef class and I wouldn’t have known. Hell, he could have a degree in quantum mechanics for all I knew. I had avoided all news about him like the plague. A little puff of warmth, like someone blowing on a fire about to go out, flared up in my chest at his use of the word home for my place. It was...well, it was making me think of domestic things that could have been but now were never going to be.

“I’m not sure—”

“Don’t be stubborn,” he said while tucking his glasses into the interior front pocket of his puffy coat. “I enjoy cooking and you enjoy eating. I’ll run through the grocery store after we wrap. Now go pump up those beefy biceps.”

“Mfph,” I replied as someone with bright blue hair and a lanyard tugged open the passenger door and whisked Tony off to the makeup trailer. I watched him go, jogging along with the young miss who had fetched him, his ass not looking saggy at all in his well-fitted jeans. My cock decided to plump up a bit. “Enough of that. His ass is off-limits. I told you that forty times last night.”

Dicks do not listen well, though. And much like cats, dicks have minds of their own.

I worked out hard.

They say if you feel the burn hard enough, it drives out lust.

Not true.

My shoulders ached still at lunchtime when I came back from a call out at Lockheed farm that had come in this morning. Seemed some kids with nothing to do—a problem in rural towns all over America—had stolen the cash from Mabel Lockheed’s egg stand at the end of her long driveway. I’d warned her numerous times to not leave her egg money out there overnight, but she was elderly and had forgotten. I slipped her a tenner to replace her loss, and she gifted me a dozen fresh brown eggs for my kindness.

So now I was looking for Tony solely to tell him I had eggs and not to buy any. There was no other reason. After I relayed the egg news, I went to the elementary school to talk to the kids about stranger dangers. Town was bustling. The diners were packed tight, but I managed to find Tony seated at a round table in the corner talking to a tall man with a thick mustache and no hair. When the bells over the door jingled, everyone glanced up. Seeing it was me, most nodded and then went back to their food and lunch chat. When Tony saw it was

me, he waved like a lunatic. The smell of deep fryer grease made my gut rumble. I motioned to Annie, the waitress for the back section, to take my coffee to Tony's table. She nodded in reply before placing a plate of gravy fries in front of Marcus Langford, a clerk at the courthouse.

"Hey, imagine running into you here," Tony said as I neared the table. "Stillman, this is Roquefort Malls, the casting director. Roquefort, this is Stillman King, the sheriff in these here parts." Tony's western accent was damn good, silly in this instance as we were east as east could be, but still damn good. "Roquefort was just saying that he would love to cast some of the locals as extras in the movie. I suggested you for a walk-on role as a local lawman." My eyes flared. "It's just a bit part with me. You'd pull me over, get out of your car, walk toward me all sexy coppish, and then warn me to watch for crossing pigs...or was it cows? Well, it was livestock. Then I say I will and drive off. What do you think?"

"Uhm, well, I'm not sure—"

"Here you are!" The mayor in all his mayorly glory arrived bright as a new penny. "Oh, hello, Stillman! Did Tony get you to agree to be an extra? It's so exciting! Everyone in town is doing it. I have a role where I get to deliver a ten-line speech in the background as Tony and Sasha have a meet cute. I'm so thrilled you're in on this! What civic pride you have! Annie, can you please place my BLT next to the director as he and I have important business to discuss? Hello, Dylan. Nice to see you! How are the kids?" Bradley blew in and then out like a handshaking hurricane.

"Welcome to the cinema," Roquefort said with a tiny smile. "We'll get contracts written up. Enjoy your lunch."

Off he went, leaving me with Tony, who looked like the cat who just ate the ostrich.

"I think I was just hornswoggled," I complained as my coffee arrived, delivered by a rather harried-looking Annie. "I might have changed my mind about sitting with this man."

"Good luck finding somewhere else to sit and eat," she flung back, giving me a pointed look.

“Fine, I’ll eat here. Bring me a burger and fries. Make sure the burger is—”

Annie ran off before I could even finish. I guess she knew my order well enough by now. I eyed my coffee and then Mr. Smug before lowering my ass to the still warm seat Roquefort had been sitting on.

“Don’t look so angry. It’s a nice little part with a nice little payment,” Tony stated while poking at his bowl of chili with his spoon.

“I’m not fond of being in pictures, moving or still.”

“Yes, I remember, but you’re too damn good-looking to not get a chance to make all the men in America wish they were getting pulled over and frisked by you.”

I dumped a bit of cream into my coffee. “I rarely frisk people I pull over.”

“Poor people are missing out. If I recall, you’re a fantastic frisker.” I shot him a gimlet eye. That made him snicker softly. “You’ll be fine.”

“So says you. What the hell is a meet cute, anyway?” I stirred my coffee as my sight roamed over the diner. Everyone was cheery and talkative and their energy levels were high, which was a nice change for this town after the gray days of winter arrived.

“It’s a scene from a show or movie or a passage in a book where two people who are going to become romantically involved meet in a funny or cutesy way.” He sprinkled some salt on his steaming chili before spooning some up to blow on. Those puckered lips were distracting, so I fixed my sight on the bald spot on the back of Byron Culpepper’s head. “Mm, this is good.”

“Minnie in the kitchen is a great cook. So this meet cute thing. That’s with Sasha?”

My eyes darted to him of their own accord. He nodded as he chewed his beans and beef.

“Yes, thankfully I get another day before we have to film together. I worked with her for four years on *Santa Barbara Sun* before I left for *Willow Dale*. She is a raging bitch, but she’s the queen of daytime television. She’s been on *Santa Barbara Sun* for over twenty years and will let you know that as soon as you meet as well as every ten minutes thereafter.”

I stared at him for a long moment. “But you were married to her.”

He tossed some oyster crackers into his chili with a sigh. “Yes, I was. Worst six years of my life. Trust me, many was the time I seriously contemplated renting a dirigible to fly over LA with ‘Tony Gugliotti loves dick!’ flashing on its side just so I could be free of her. Never working on TV again would have been preferable to sharing a home with the Wicked Witch of the West.”

“She was your beard,” I said and got a curt nod.

“She was. Pity that so many of us had to lie just to survive, but that was how things were back in the day. Thank Christ things are better for us now. Hell, it’s all the rage to be queer now.”

“Well, maybe in the big cities. Out here in the red counties being gay can get you a good ass-kicking,” I reminded him.

He stopped chewing. “Yes, I’m sorry for being such a metropolitan queer. You’re right. It must have been hard for you when you first got here.”

“There were moments,” I answered, leaning back to allow Annie to place my food in front of me. “Thank you,” I said to her as she topped off my coffee and then hustled back to the kitchen to silence the ringing bell. “There are still some folks here that would rather me be somewhere else, but over the years they’ve mostly come around.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Ugh, Stillman, the blood is soaking through to your bun. I see you’ve not learned the lesson about cooking your food thoroughly.”

I smiled down at my rare burger as Tony went on about rare ground beef being so terribly bad while I woofed down

my burger. I also threw in yummy noises.

“When you’re in the ER with severe gastric distress, don’t come running to me,” he said and took a moment to take a selfie with a gal I had never seen before. Probably people from the neighboring counties were here to watch the filming and rub elbows with the stars.

“If I’m laid out with a sour gut, I doubt I’d call you to help me,” I flung out wittily. Or I’d hoped it was witty. Given the pained look that flitted over his face, my wit had missed the mark.

“Right, yes, well, I suppose I should get back to it. I have Gaston bringing me home until someone can secure a car for me. It’s amazing that there are no car rentals anywhere nearby.”

“Welcome to rural life,” I replied as he rose slowly from his seat. “Oh, I got some eggs, so don’t buy any.”

“Noted.”

“Who’s Gaston?”

“Oh just a friend. I’ll see you tonight.”

He gathered up his glasses, his script, and his coat, then headed out into the cold, stopping time and again to engage with fans. Gaston. What the hell kind of name was Gaston? There was no one in Rockmount with that name. I polished off the last bite of my burger, stuffed the four remaining fries into my mouth, and then tossed a twenty on the table to cover my food as well as gratuity. I had time before my talk to the kindergarteners.

I could hurry back to the sheriff’s office and run a fast check on anyone named Gaston in the area. Just as a precautionary nod to the big star calling our little hamlet home for the next six weeks. It would look bad if Gaston—which is an evil name if ever I heard it—hurt Tony. I didn’t want my brass star tarnished so checking on Gaston was a service to the community and the movie production team. Yep. That was my story, and I was sticking to it like glue.

The afternoon hadn't gone well.

One of the kids threw up during my presentation.

After that, I had a call from Kyle Landford about some missing sheep he wanted an APB issued on. It took me forever to get his mind off an all-points bulletin and into making a call to the game commission. I feared he might have lost some of his flock to coyotes, and even mentioned that, but he swore up and down that the Pierson boys down the road had lifted his sheep. I told him I would check. I did. There were no sheep on the Pierson farm, only contented cows and one irate Frank Pierson. Frank didn't cotton to being called a sheep wrangler. I didn't say as I blamed him.

It was an old feud between the two men. I suspected a woman had been involved somewhere along the way, but since both were now in their sixties...well, they had to squabble about sheep.

There was also the fact that my search for a Gaston produced nothing.

By the time I pulled into my driveway, I was tired, edgy, and not at all pleased with the amount of cow and sheep shit glued into the tread of my work boots. I'd offered Teddy a promotion if he would dig it out. He declined. Then I asked Wanda—the 911 day dispatcher who worked out of our little office—if she would do it. What she said in reply was not fit for delicate ears. Wanda Mueller was a wonderfully kind dispatcher but off the air, she had a mouth like a drunken sailor. So all the way home the heater in my SUV blew the stink of two barns into my face.

The only upside to the whole afternoon/evening was the funny feeling of coming home to see lights on and smoke rolling from the chimney. Knowing that it was Tony in there making things all cozy and fuzzy was disconcerting, to say the least. As I sat in the drive sniffing cow poop, I did my best to steel myself against his appeal. And the appeal of not coming home to a dark, cold, empty house. Sure, I had my cat, but he was not the best conversationalist nor did he spoon well. Ellery wasn't a cuddle cat. He would snooze by your feet

when it was cold but generally liked his own space, which was a lot like me so I couldn't fault him.

The porch light came on. I stared as the front door opened, my cat raced in, and Tony stepped out to wave at me. Busted. I gathered myself up, threw on my cop face, and exited the vehicle.

"I thought I saw headlights," Tony called, his words little puffs of steam that quickly dissipated. There would be frost tonight for sure. A heavy one by the feels. "Come on in. I have dinner ready!"

I slugged my way inside, stopped just inside the door, knelt down to untie my boots, and then opened the door to place them on the porch. After dinner, I'd pick the poo out of the tread with a screwdriver. Whatever Tony was cooking smelled amazing.

"I thought I recalled you enjoyed heavy meals with lots of gravy, so I stirred up some Swedish meatballs over rice," he said as I slowly shucked my coat and removed my holster. His gaze followed the belt with my gun as I laid it on the side table. "Shouldn't you lock that up?"

"You planning on shooting someone?" I stepped around him, eager to eat and then hide myself away in my room.

"Obviously not, but should it be lying around like that?" He followed me into the kitchen where the rich smell of beef, onions, and garlic was heavy. My stomach rumbled loudly.

"There are no kids here. I'll take care of it when I eat," I said, turned to look at him, and heaved a mighty sigh. Tony had this look—one that he obviously had perfected over the past twenty years—that was cutting censorship to the nth. "Fine. I'll take care of it now."

"Thank you. Guns make me nervous," he confessed as I stalked back to get my weapon and tote it to my room. I'd actually known that about him but had forgotten. A cousin of his had been shot in a fatal accident when he was younger. I stowed the belt and weapon in the drawer of my nightstand and locked it, something I rarely did anymore, as it was only

me and the cat here. Ever. And Ellery wasn't interested in the Glock 22 in the least.

When I returned to the kitchen after changing out of my uniform and into fleece joggers and a long-sleeve Rockmount PD tee, I found Tony dishing up our dinner. A box of cupcakes from Becky's Bakery set on the table. The man was trying to seduce me with food. Damn his soul. It might be working.

"Sit, eat. I found some wine for us to enjoy with the meal," he said, spooning hearty meatballs coated with a thick, creamy sauce over a mound of fluffy white rice. "Or if you'd prefer, I picked up a six-pack of something more suitable to the meal than your usual light ale."

"I'm watching my weight. What kind of beer did you buy?" I took the plate and placed it in front of me. He'd dug out the only cloth table covering that I owned, a lacy thing that my mother had just loved, and my wine glasses.

"A nice Flemish red." He placed his dish on the table and then went to the fridge. When he bent over to grab a bottle of beer, I had to stare at his ass. It was right there in my face—almost. It was not saggy in the least. "I had to stop at a few bars to find one that carried something a little more—"

"Snooty?" I offered and got an eye roll. He handed me the beer.

"Less common. I think you'll like the way the tartness of the beer plays with the creaminess of the gravy."

He sat across from me, smiled, and poured himself a nice tot of Dolcetto wine. "I should have remembered this state doesn't allow beer sales in grocery stores. Which makes finding a unique name even harder, but I got Gaston to drive me out to the beer distributor where we found that lovely red."

I twisted the cap off the bottle of Flanders and took a swig. Damn, yeah, that was a nice beer. I nodded at him. He lifted his glass of wine in a salute.

"So, this Gaston guy," I opened with as I put down my beer and speared a fat meatball. I stabbed it soundly and then looked at my dinner partner.

“Yes, what about him?” He cut his meatball in half. Such a refined man. Guess eating out with flashbulbs popping in your face drilled good manners into you. His dark eyes lifted from his meal to me. Lord they were pretty eyes. “Dreamy” is what Wanda had called them earlier.

“He’s not from around here.” I put the whole meatball into my trap and chewed.

He sat back a bit, one eyebrow cocked. “And you would know this how?” I chewed and remained silent. I knew my rights. “Oh.” The accusatory expression faded to be replaced with a softer yet gleeful one. “You pulled a cop and did a background check on him, didn’t you?”

“No, I just know the area and the people who live here.” The flavors of the rich cream and perfectly seasoned beef hit my tongue fully as I talked around the food in my mouth. It was fucking divine. “Jesus,” I said after swallowing. “This is delicious. Curl your toes like a good orgasm delicious. When did you learn to cook like this? That last meal you made us was ramen noodles and you overcooked them.”

“I remember that night,” he said, sighing wistfully into his wine. After taking a sip to allow me to linger in the memories of those last days together, he jumped from the distant past to the near past. “I learned how to cook during the lockdown. The pandemic had closed down all the studios and networks, so all of us ‘Hollywood types’ were left at loose ends. I took an online course with a chef who I knew rather well and that led to another course and another. I came out of the pandemic with a new love of cooking and ten extra pounds.”

“Only ten? I packed on fifteen.” I forked up some of the rice and then another meatball. God this was good. The only home-cooking that I got was at the diner. I sorely missed my mother.

“I’m sure you took it off quickly, what with being so active and snoopy.”

I stared at him, swallowed, and took a sip of beer. “Fine, I checked out Gaston. There is no trace of anyone in this county

or the others that border it with that name. What kind of name is that, anyway?"

"French, I think," he replied glibly.

"Sure, well, I think this guy is working under an alias. Either that or he flew in from California with the rest of the funny name folks."

Tony snorted. "Funny name folks."

"Well, prove me wrong. That guy you were having lunch with is named after a hunk of blue cheese." I stabbed a meatball with attitude, waving it at him. "I don't trust him."

"Who? Roquefort?" He looked innocent, but he was anything but. I knew him far too well.

"No, this mysterious Gaston. Did he come from California with the movie production crew?" I shoved the meatball between my lips, chewing with decisiveness as I tried to pin Tony down with my best lawman dead-eye stare.

"He's a friend."

Okay, yeah, he was playing now. "Well, your friend is not to be trusted."

"Well, to be honest, he's quite the specimen. You should see him expectorate."

That drew me up short. "You like this guy because he can spit?"

He broke up. As in lost his shit, laughing so hard he cried and gasped, holding your sides laugh fit. I pretended not to care as I shoveled food into me.

"Oh shit, you are so incredibly adorable. Nothing has changed about you, Stillman. I love it." He dabbed at his eyes with a napkin that matched the table covering. I was done with my meal now, my plate was licked clean. Not really. I'd not lick it. Though I wanted to, I did have some manners even if I was a redneck cop. I angrily downed my beer. "Phew. Okay, so no I do not like Gaston because he can spit. I was making a reference to the movie."

I shook my head. “What movie?”

“*Beauty and the Beast*. The animated Disney movie?” I continued to shake my head. “It’s been turned into a play and a live-action film. No? Wow, okay, well, no wonder that went right over your head. Gaston is a friend of mine who works with the production crew. He’s a best boy and has—”

“He’s your best boy?”

“No, *a* best boy. Well, now they’re termed ‘best person,’ but he’s the gaffer’s second-in-command. He’s a lovely young man who volunteered to run me home tonight since my PA is back west, resting after his dental procedure. And no, his mother did not name him Gaston. He chose that name when he came to work in the movie industry, just like thousands of other people in the arts choose stage names.”

Ah. Well, okay. “Not all actors change their names. You didn’t. And he’s not an actor, he’s a good boy.”

“Best boy.”

“Whatever. Also, why name himself after a cartoon that spits? None of it adds up. I’m not sure he’s trustworthy. You should let Teddy run you where you need to go.”

“Or I could simply let *you* be my chauffeur...”

He left that hanging. Nope, nope, nope. No way. Sitting here staring at him all comfortable and sexy in my home was torture enough. If I had to be at his side all day long, I’d do something stupid.

Like run a background check on an electrician’s assistant?

That falls under the category of doing his job to keep the town of Rockmount safe.

My angel had my back big time. Take that, Satan.

“I have a job to do. Criminals to lock up. Streets to keep safe. I don’t have time to haul your tight ass all over the place looking for fancy beers and imported bags of rice.”

“You’re so cute when you’re jealous,” he had the balls to say to my face.

Shooting to my feet, I knocked back the rest of my beer and swiped one of the cupcakes from the box.

“I’m not jealous, Anthony. I got over you years ago.”

With that pronouncement, I stormed to my room with a pilfered cupcake to enjoy. No TV again tonight, it seemed, but that was fine. I had a book. A good one by John Grisham.

Jealous. What utter horseshit. I’d have to have feelings for him to be jealous.

Right now, the only thing I loved was this cupcake.

Buttercream over ex-boyfriend’s FTW.

Chapter Five

Twenty longest days ever.

Honestly, if I'd have known Tony being in my space would be this unsettling, I would have gone to the wedding barn and slept in the hay mound. To be honest, I kind of knew having him around would be irritating. I mean...he *is* my ex. Not saying that all exes are annoying, but most seem to rub the wrong way. The burrs under my saddle were more than simple old lover annoyances, though, and that was what had me tangled up. Even now, standing in the center of the Love Bird Barn on the outskirts of town supervising the setup of a holiday dance shoot in a few days, I was edgy. Tony was here, and so was his ex-wife, Sasha Faye.

Their tension plus my tension plus the usual tension associated with a movie set—something that I was becoming familiar with just by being exposed to the chaos on the daily—had the entire cast and crew wound tighter than banjo strings.

Oh, and my big silver screen moment was tomorrow. Talk about anxiety-inducing. I had all of three lines:

License, insurance, and registration, please.

You were going a little fast for the conditions.

I'm letting you off with a warning this time, but slow down and save a life.

Do you think I could recall them when I tried to rehearse in front of my bedroom mirror? No damn way. Three lines. This was why I was a cop and not a thespian.

So yeah, the air in this renovated barn was thick with stress. I'd clung to the outer periphery as much as possible at the request of most of the crew. Seemed I took up a lot of room and made people jittery when I stared at them.

Today they were shooting a scene that takes place after the dance because Sasha had, according to the whispered gossip I'd overheard while hiding in the shadows, thrown a fucking fit about not having the proper boots for the dance scene itself. Also, today was the first day that she had been on the set. I'd

caught a glimpse of her as she and several attendants had paraded past. Beautiful woman who had aged gracefully. She was roughly our age, according to Tony, just a year younger, but with a soul possessed by an ageless harpy. His words, not mine. I'd picked up his unease last night over a delicious pot of beef stew he'd made for dinner. I feared I might have to move to the next notch on my belt if he stayed for the projected six weeks.

Six weeks. Christ. We barely had four done, and I was unable to think rationally. I glanced upward. The hay loft looked better and better.

"Please, do not try to insinuate to me that I do not know how to deliver a comedic line!" I heard Sasha saying as she sailed onto the set, sending the hands flurrying about like chickens after a fox ran into the pen. Paul Gershman, the assistant producer, was being raked over the coals by the starlet. Was a woman in her fifties still considered a starlet? I had no clue but man did I feel for poor Paul. I'd spoken to him several times and he seemed an affable sort of guy. "I've been starring in films since before you were a spurt from your daddy's saggy ball sack."

Paul glanced around, seeking out Miles Whitehead, the director, and the only person who seemed to be able to curtail Sasha's histrionics. Tony must have needed a beard badly to marry this woman.

"Sasha, I'm well aware of how talented you are and how long you've been in the business," Paul quickly said as a group of makeup and hair people fluttered around her, trying to finish their work while she ranted. I felt bad for them too.

"Was that an age crack?" Sasha snapped, and then her sight flew to me. Shit. "You there!" She stalked over and tapped my chest with a long, merry fingernail. "You're the law around here, correct? I want that man arrested!"

I shot Paul a look. He was whispering a silent prayer to the sky, or the hayloft, perhaps both.

"On what grounds?" I asked as politely as possible.

“Defamation of character! I want him thrown into your jail and held there until he retracts his statement about me being too old to star in a romantic comedy!”

Wow. It was amazing how such a pretty woman could morph into something so horrible to look at in such a short amount of time.

“Defamation is not a crime. You can certainly contact your attorney if you wish, but since multiple witnesses can testify that Mr. Gershman said nothing like what you are accusing him of, you’d lose the case.”

She glowered up at me, called me a hick that slept with pigs, and then stormed off with makeup, hair, and several members of her “team,” whatever the hell that constituted. Paul whispered a thanks to me and raced off after Sasha to placate their leading lady.

“Nicely done,” Tony said, stepping up beside me out of nowhere, looking amazingly handsome in his winter gear. “She will stew about your set down for at least an hour. Want to go to the food trailer and get something hot to drink?” The inside of the barn was chilly for sure. All the doors were open, which allowed the winds to whip through. With the temps now hovering around twenty degrees, it didn’t take long to get cold. “It’s on me.”

Deep down, I knew I should move on. I had paperwork out the ass to do back at the office. I’d been trying my level best to keep as much space between me and Tony as humanly possible, but there was something about his aura today that had me nodding silently.

We made our way out of the big red barn, which was all duded up with holiday cheerfulness. I made a point to give the ball of mistletoe hanging over the open doors a wide berth. Not that Tony and I would ever kiss again. No way.

“You certainly do have a way with people,” Tony said as we meandered outside, the November sun weak today as thick gray clouds were moving in. Forecasters were saying we might get a dusting of snow overnight.

“I try,” I replied, shoving my hands into the front pockets of my thick black bomber jacket with the RPD patch on one arm, my name stitched over the placket for my badge, and my shoulder mic fastened to my left shoulder.

“Sometimes that gruff bear persona works. I’ve never seen the queen bitch or her ladies-in-waiting, as I call them, move so fast.”

That made me chuckle. “I wasn’t trying to scare them, just relay some information.”

“I should have had you around when I was married to her,” he glibly tossed out and then paused beside a sturdy pine festooned with little Christmas lights and decorations. Every tree lining the walkways and driveway had been decorated. Even with my usual Scrooge attitude about the holidays, in general, it was hard not to feel a tiny bit of ho-ho-ho creeping in. “But if you were around, then I would never have married her.”

That took me aback. “Why not? Even if we had been together, we wouldn’t have been able to be together. I’m assuming she was a handy way to prove how straight you were.”

“Mm, yes, she was handy. And willing to be my wife. We’d both stumbled into a bit of a PR muddle at roughly the same time. She had been caught with a married man getting cozy at a club, and I’d been seen with a single man getting cozy at a club. There were no pictures and no internet, thank God, or that would have been it, but there were rumors. So, to save her reputation as well as mine we rushed to Vegas to get married. It was a perfect ruse. We played husband and wife on TV, so fans fell for the lies our agents fed the world. How we had fallen so deeply in love while working...” he made a yucky face, “as if I could ever fall for a human being like her. Still, it did get the heat off each of us for a long time, even after our divorce.”

“I’m sorry you had to live that lie. I know how tiring it is.”

He glanced at me, a softness now settling over his face. “Thank you. That was the kindest thing you’ve said to me

since I arrived.”

A young man raced past with a goat on a lead. Then Santa strolled past with a vape pen and a cell phone plastered to his ear.

“I’m not trying to be mean, Tony, I’m just trying to keep a professional distance because once this movie is over, you’ll leave. I cannot allow myself to get close to you again and then have you fly west.” He stared at me openly, dark eyes now filled with agony. That look there I could not handle. “On second thought, I should get back to the courthouse. I have paperwork to file.”

I walked away before I said something else that bared more of my soul.

“See you for supper?” Tony yelled.

I gave him a nod without looking back. If I dared to glance back, he’d see the vulnerability I seemed unable to control around him. I had learned at a young age to never let weakness show.

Dinner that night was carryout from the diner.

Tony had been stuck late on the set since Sasha had thrown a fit and delayed filming for several hours. He’d stopped on the way home with Gaston, who I had found among the many workers on the set just yesterday and questioned casually. Nothing severe, just some well-thought-out questions that put my mind at ease. Like what was his real name and did he have a girlfriend, you know, casual chit-chat. He was happy to reply to all my inquiries. So now that I knew that Gaston Lampley was, in fact, Mitch Dulong from Schenectady, who was incredibly straight, my worry over a major star under my protection was lessened.

Things were tight as we ate. Quiet for the most part. I’d exposed a part of myself earlier that I hadn’t wanted to, and that was a tender wound. As we polished off our Reubens and fries, Tony began edging into conversation as he flipped through the chunky script. Mostly about the set, his ex-wife,

and how his PA Mignon was arriving tomorrow morning. Another person with a funny Hollywood name.

“...once he gets here because I usually read off of him and tomorrow’s shoot has to go off without a hitch or we’ll fall behind and the studio does not like it when we do that.” He dipped his last fry into a mound of ketchup with a sigh. When he glanced at me over the top of his reading glasses, I knew he was about to ask for a favor. It was in the way his lips twitched upward into a tiny smile and his gaze mellowed. “Would you be willing to read lines with me?”

My initial response was to say no and go hide in my bedroom. But then I recalled I was having trouble with my lines and, not wishing to be an ass in front of the whole crew and town, nodded quietly. His smile turned brilliant. It made all the sauerkraut in my belly turn gassy. I burped softly into my hand. We cleaned up quickly and went into the living room. The fire was roaring, the temps falling rapidly outside as they tend to do in November. Ellery was snoozing on the back of the sofa, his eyes opening just briefly when we entered.

“Okay, so we’re going to be shooting the big dance scene tomorrow, where my character asks Hildegard the Bog Witch, aka Sasha, for a dance. It’s a big moment for their relationship, so I have to nail the feels which, given my past with Sasha, is proving tough.”

I bobbed my head as I paged through my copy of the script. Seemed they could have saved a tree and simply jotted my lines down on a napkin, but what did I know about movie stuff?

“Okay, so I’m Sasha, right?” I scanned the page that he had marked. When he didn’t reply, I glanced up to discover him admiring me with a slight little tilt of his head. “What?”

He smiled. “I’m trying to picture you in her slinky satin robe.” I rolled my eyes. What a silly man. As if they made slinky satin robes in my size. “Nope, cannot conjure that mental image. I rather like you in your butch daddy bear flannel and fleece when you’re not in uniform.”

Huh. Well, okay. “Sure, well, uhm...”

“We won’t even touch on how hot you are in uniform,” he said then, as he liked to do because the shitter knew it knocked me off-balance, he went back to movie talk. “So, let’s pick up where I ask her to dance. Do you have any music we could play as background to help set the mood?”

Not being a big fan of Christmas, it was doubtful, but I waved at the TV stand where a small stereo system set on a shelf under my flat screen. Poor dusty television. It was probably sad and confused over how little it had been used since my house guest had arrived.

“Mom had a lot of holiday music, I think,” I said and then returned to reading over the pages of lines Tony had. Hundreds of lines of dialog were outlined with yellow highlighter. Holy hell. How the shit could he possibly remember all of them? “Movies too. You’ll have to look through them. When she died, I just stuffed them all in there.”

“I’m sorry to hear about Gayle. She was a lovely woman,” he softly said and padded over to the TV to hunker down on one knee. I glanced over at him, feeling that familiar gut punch whenever someone mentioned my mother.

“Thank you,” I croaked and quickly went back to reading.

A moment or two passed before Tony yelped in glee. Assuming he’d found some sort of jolly music CD, I flipped a page. A movie case was shoved under my nose, startling me. I blinked at the change of vision, then felt my face flame. Fucking hell. Of course he found it. Just fucking of course.

“Pray tell, what is this?” he asked, his deep brown eyes full of mirth. I stared at the well-worn case holding *Mamma Mia* and then started to try to think up some feasible excuse. There was none. Yes, I owned a copy of a musical based on Abba songs. “Be honest, Stillman. Is this yours or was this your mother’s?”

I could have lied. I probably should have. But for some inexplicable reason, I felt compelled to tell the truth.

“It’s mine,” I confessed with my chin held high. He gaped at me. Then he smiled and kissed my cheek. Lightly, just a brush of his lips over my rough face, but it was enough to have me backpedaling. “There is nothing wrong with a man liking a musical. I happen to think Meryl Streep is—”

“Hey, please, no.” He held up his free hand. “You do not have to explain yourself to me. I personally love the shit out of these films. Did you see the second one with Cher? Talk about iconic. Let’s watch it.”

Now it was my turn to go slack-jawed. “But your lines?” I shook the script.

“Meh, we’ll do them after the movie. It’s only a little after eight.”

He hurried over to the DVD player, blew the dust off the top, and slid the disc in. With a twinkle in his eye, he rushed back and flopped down on the sofa. I was still standing with my backside to the stove, holding a script while he settled down. “Stillman, come on. Have a seat. I promise I won’t bite.”

A little nip wouldn’t go amiss.

Stop it. We’re not nipping with Tony. We’re over him.

Yeah, are we really though?

Sensing defeat, I snapped the script shut, sighed as if watching Meryl and Pierce was the worst fate in the world, and then gingerly made my way to the couch. Tony patted the spot next to him. I sat on the far end and placed the script on the cushion between us as if it possessed some sort of magic that would keep us apart. My cheek was still tingly from that tiny peck.

As “Honey, Honey” filled the living room, I had to think this was probably a very bad idea but damn if I could tear myself away even if I’d seen the film over a hundred times.

The next two hours flew by, my shoulders sinking back into thick cushions as Tony showed me what a geek he really was by singing along to every song and reciting a few lines as well. Truth be told, I knew he was a theater nerd already. After

all, he had left Philly, and me, to seek fame and fortune on the West Coast. And find it he had. But at what cost, I had to wonder. He'd surely lived a rich life out there in Tinsel Town. Perhaps he didn't consider what he had given up a loss given how successful he now was.

"What is it about this movie that appeals to you?" he asked out of the blue, jerking me from a rousing rendition of "Dancing Queen" with Meryl leaping about on a bed. "I mean, it's not your usual film choice, is it?"

He had me there. "I always dreamed about taking Mom far away from her nightmares. She spoke of going to Greece all the time. I don't know." I shrugged, wishing he would stop staring at me with so much sympathy. "Someday I'd like to retire to a small Greek isle and run a hotel like Donna does in the movie. I'd call it Gayle's Getaway. She would have liked that."

"Yes, she would have," he gently replied, slipping his hand over the script to touch my forearm. When I didn't fling his touch away, he took my hand, timidly to be sure, and then meshed his fingers with mine. Sparks skipped up my arm to settle in my chest for the remainder of the movie. We never did get to studying our lines. Tony and I were both having trouble keeping our eyes open by the time we reached the movie scene. Still, we pushed through to the end. How could we not? Then, with a soft squeeze, he released my fingers to stand.

I looked up at him, Ellery mewling from the kitchen looking for a goodnight treat. "Are we calling it a night?" I asked, loathe to do so. I did have the second movie. If he would sit back down and hold my hand, I'd watch it with him. Over and over until dawn broke.

"I think so." He stretched his arms over his head, his sweater hiking up to expose a strip of skin with a thin line of dark hair sneaking into the top of his pants.

"But our lines..."

"We'll nail them over breakfast. I'm making waffles." He picked up his glasses off the coffee table and then folded them

neatly. A log cracked in the stove.

“But I don’t have a waffle iron.”

“You do now. Thank you for sharing your movie with me.”

He reached out to touch my face, then, for some reason, drew back his hand and went to his room. I sat there for the longest time, my fingers now chilled, wishing like hell that he had caressed my cheek, and then cursed myself out for wishing that at all.

Chapter Six

“...always wanted to find a man like you to dance with.”

I glanced up from the script as I forked a bite of fluffy waffle, then sped it to my mouth, rich butter and maple syrup dribbling from my fork. After I had the bite in my mouth, I stared at Tony, his reading glasses on, his face freshly shaved. It was a treat to have him here when I woke up, I had to admit. That worried me a lot. Somehow, my anger was fleeing, and I really needed it to stay so I could cling to it. “This is really kind of sappy,” I added after swallowing.

“Mm, a little yes. But it’s a made-for-TV holiday movie. It’s not supposed to be *Sophie’s Choice* or anything.”

“Obviously. And these Christmas romance movies are popular?”

“Extremely,” he answered and cut into his own golden waffle. “They pay well also. Which is why I was happy to sign up. I didn’t know they were going to cast Sasha as my romantic partner, but as Mignon said when we found out, ‘just bring some bitch spray and you’ll be fine,’ so I didn’t balk as much as I wanted to. Besides, this will be airing on the same network that carries *Willow Dale*, so the head honchos are happy about that.”

“I guess. Still, I’m having real trouble with her name being Candy and yours being Nick.”

He snickered softly before lifting his fork to his mouth. A droplet of syrup lingered on his lower lip for a moment before he licked it up. My dick was quite into his tongue peeking out. Why it was so into some things I had no clue, especially since I’d just jerked off in the shower before coming out for breakfast. No, I was not doing the gym this morning. I was taking Tony to the wedding barn and then getting ready to do my big scene. Probably I should have worked off the stress and horniness riding me like a jockey today, but...waffles. Waffles and Tony’s glowing smile. I was a weak, weak man.

“At least her last name isn’t cane.”

I nodded. There was that small blessing.

We ran his lines and then mine on the way to the set. When we arrived, we were greeted by about twenty people, one a lean Black man in a puffy silver coat who hugged Tony as if they'd been long-lost family or something.

“Mignon, thank all the gods you made it,” I heard Tony saying as a tiny girl named Woe led me to the makeup trailer. Oh Mignon. Tony's personal assistant. Okay, that was safe hugs then. The next hour was one of the most unusual of my life. I was seated in a beautician's chair—or something similar—and had Woe shave me. Seemed Woe worked in hair and wigs. Never in all my shaving days—and there had been a lot since I had started whacking whiskers at sixteen—had another human being shaved me. It was an electric razor, and she was quite careful around the edges of my beard, but it was strangely intimate. Mostly it was a tidy-up of my facial hair before she brought out the clippers to buzz my already short hair down to the wood. She rubbed some sort of scalp conditioner into my skin, talking away to Happi—with an I, the pudgy Asian makeup artist informed me—as I was shuttled from one seat to another. Tony appeared behind me, Mignon talking into his cell at his side, and plopped down into the chair I'd just vacated.

“Your beard looks razor sharp,” Tony said while Mignon took a seat on a folding chair in the corner. How he found room for his lanky self amid all the wigs and makeup cases was a testament to how badly he wanted to sit down. The trailer was brightly lit with four chairs placed in front of glowing mirrors. Stuff was scattered everywhere. I sat back to allow Happi to tuck some paper into the collar of my uniform shirt. “Mignon, this is my old dear friend Stillman King. He's the lawman around these parts.”

“Hello,” Mignon replied without glancing up from his tablet. “So, I see that you have totally screwed our social media interaction over the past ten days.”

Tony gave me a wink as Woe began working some sort of pomade into his thick hair. “Internet is terrible out here in the boonies. I’m sure you posted all kinds of good stuff.”

“Not the point, Anthony. Also, I am staying in a home that has a child. Am I expected to engage with the child? Honestly...children. It’s like my own personal *Silent Hill*.”

Tony chuckled as did Woe. “I’m sure all you have to do is be nice when you see the child.”

“Hmm, well, as long as it doesn’t try to touch me. I really dislike children’s sticky fingers on me.” Mignon crossed one long leg over the other and then looked at me in the mirror. “You’re not at all like I envisioned when Tony told me—”

“Hey, why don’t we run over those lines of yours one more time, Stillman? You were still kind of flat on the way in.” I shot both men suspicious glances. “Unless you’re happy being a wooden cop.”

“Not really,” I slowly said, my sight lingering on Mignon, who had rolled his lips over his teeth. “Okay.” I cleared my throat. “License, insurance, and registration, please.” Woe and Happi grimaced. “Shit. Was it really that bad?”

“Very stiff. Try putting some swagger into it,” Tony said as his PA slithered down in his chair, his tablet coming up to shield his long face. “You’re a big burly he-man cop. Say it like you would if this were real.”

“I did.” I had no fucking clue how to put swagger into a line asking to see an insurance card. Then an idea popped into my head. “Should I try to sound more like a Southern sheriff? I can do a pretty good Buford T. Justice.”

Everyone under forty in the trailer said “Who?” simultaneously. Tony gave them all a good tsk as I stewed. Come on now. Was I really that old?

“Honestly, you kids,” Tony chimed in as Woe patted his nose with powder. “Sheriff Justice was a huge comedic role in the Smokey and the Bandit movies, played to perfection by Jackie Gleason,” Tony explained and got more blank looks.

“Who’s Jackie Gleason?” Happi enquired.

“Oh! Wasn’t she married to that president who Marilyn Monroe sang happy birthday too?” Woe asked, frowning when Tony and I sighed and shook our heads.

“Oh, hold on,” Mignon called out, tapping away at his phone. “Jackie Gleason was an actor who was famous in the fifties for a show about honeymooners,” he read from his cell and then lifted bright brown eyes lined in kohl to us. “Says here he was called ‘The Great One’ but doesn’t say why he was called that.”

I shrugged and looked at Tony. He gave me a wink. “I got this,” he whispered to me and then proceeded to give the young ones—and me—a quick bit of trivia knowledge. “Rumor has it that he was given that name by Orson Welles after a night spent partying and Gleason embraced it.”

“Who’s Orson Welles?” Woe asked. Tony threw his hands up. The kids looked a little flummoxed, but Google quickly came to their rescue. I had never felt older than I did sitting in that chair as a twenty-something smeared something gooey on my face to hide the wrinkles at the corners of my eyes.

When we were freed to go to wardrobe, I rose, thanked the artists who had made me look ten years younger, and followed Tony and Mignon outside. It was a quiet morning, cold and crisp, with little chatter coming over my shoulder mic.

Tony kept glancing back at me. Finally, we stopped outside a massive trailer that was parked behind the courthouse so it didn’t interfere too badly with the flow of traffic on Main Street. Things were clogged at times as it were.

“Okay, so I know I’m not a wardrobe maven, but I think you should wear your own uniform,” Tony said, glancing from me to his PA who had pulled a muesli bar from his shoulder bag and was tearing it open. He took a bite, tipped his head left and then right, and nodded. “See, he agrees.”

“It does have a patch with the town name on it, though,” Mignon pointed out, tapping my bicep with his crunchy breakfast bar. It had big fat raisins and nuts in it that tumbled to the frosty grass. “Oops. Well, the pigeons can have that bite.” He smiled and took a huge bite. “Mm, but...” He held

up his hand in front of his face to shield us from seeing him chew and talk. “Gracelyn will not favor you expressing your thoughts on her wardrobe choices.”

Something nibbled at the back of my brain. Then, without warning, the door to the trailer flew open to reveal a woman of about four feet nothing with kinky black hair, thick glasses, and a tape measure hanging around her neck.

“You’re both tardy!” she barked down at us, glowering through her smudged lenses.

“So sorry, Gracelyn.” Tony bowed gallantly to the older woman.

“Pah, try to charm me, you queer bastard,” she grumbled, spun, and stalked off as a young man raced past us carrying a gray goose with a bow tie.

“She’s a charmer,” Tony whispered as I gawked in shock. “But we overlook her gruffness. She dressed Audrey Hepburn.”

“Oh,” I replied, staring into the trailer as if it were the bowels of Hell freshly opened.

“It’s fine. Let’s go talk to her. I’m sure I can charm her,” Tony glibly stated.

Tony did not charm her.

A half hour later I was in some stiff dark green sheriff uniform and a bulky black coat with a badge proclaiming I am the sheriff of Mistletoe Corners. Everything aside from my boxers felt like someone had doubled the starch.

My nerves were jangling. The whole town seemed to be here for the big holiday barn scene. I did my best to meld into the background, tapping my fingers on my holster.

“Hey,” I heard to my left. Teddy had shown up too, it seemed. “The lone case today has been heard, and the jury has been dismissed by Judge Sorkin so he can film his bit.”

“That’s fine. Wanda will keep us informed if anything pops up. She did her filming yesterday while you and your houseguest were up in Corning watching glass being blown.”

“Her name is Fiona,” my deputy informed me, rising up to his toes and rocking back on his heels. “And glass wasn’t the only thing being blown yesterday.”

I shifted my attention from the arrival of Sasha Faye on the set, which was always a moment that seemed just shy of some sort of royalty making an entrance. One kind of expected trumpets to flare. When the queen of daytime had passed us with her ladies-in-waiting as Tony called them, I looked back at my deputy.

“I thought you were dating—”

“Yeah, no, that didn’t work out,” he hurried to say. “Listen, since I’m here now that the docket was cleared, do you think it would be okay if I rode along with you in the police car during your scene?” I threw him a curious look. “I won’t say a word. I’ll just sit there and look authoritative.”

“If it’s okay with the movie people, it’s okay with me. You’ll have to sign a contract with Roquefort.”

“Thanks, Stillman!” He beamed, clapped my shoulder, and ran off with his hand on his hat to find the man named after cheese. I scanned the set but didn’t see Tony anywhere. Perhaps he was off with the producer or director talking about the day’s filming. I hoped we would start shooting soon. The longer I had to wait, the more I fretted over fudging my lines.

Four hours later, we were finally ready for my one scene. Lunch had been served, sandwiches and chips from the diner by the library, and I was now burping the spicy mustard that had been smeared liberally on my ham and cheese sandwich. Teddy was at my side, in a uniform much like mine, smiling widely. You’d think he had won the lottery. Of course he didn’t have lines to fuck up. Maybe I should give him the bigger badge for the scene.

“Okay! People, please, can we focus here? Thank you!” Paul Gershman shouted to be heard over the hundred or so

people here. “We’re running a little behind due to an unfortunate eyebrow incident in Sasha’s trailer, so we’re going to switch things up. Where are the cops?”

Teddy thumped me on the arm with the side of his fist and then stepped out from beside a heater blowing warm air on the frozen production crew.

“Here!” Teddy yelled as he jogged out into the meager sunlight. “We’re here.”

“Good, okay, so let’s get you into the cruiser. Tony is already at the end of Main Street waiting in his car. You two are to pull up behind him and then the big man here gets out and you go through your lines. If it’s at all possible, can we please nail this in one take? Sasha is now having an emergency eyebrow procedure in makeup and is emotionally unable to perform today, so we’re in a bit of a bind timewise already.”

“Is she okay?” I asked as Paul herded us to a golf cart parked around the back of the barn, out of sight of the cameras situated inside the decorated barn. Strains of Christmas carols floated on the cold afternoon wind.

“She’s fine. Little accident while smudging the trailer. Her psychic advisor warned her that there was a malevolent presence in her brand new trailer and so she wanted to smudge it. Guess she waved the smoking smudge too close to her face. Anyway, she’s out again today so we’re going to try to get something fucking done today.” He shoved us gently at the golf cart before hustling off to tend to something else.

“Wow, movie people are energetic,” Teddy muttered. I nodded. That was one word for them. The cart raced down the driveway, skidding on the pea-sized gravel. We climbed out and I caught a peek at Tony sitting in a pale green SUV, the motor running, parked in the pine-lined road leading to the barn. “My mother is so freaking excited!”

Teddy darted to the police cruiser we’d be using. I wiped my hands on my trousers. Cameras were in place, one on a rail-system that ran along the road to capture us driving, I assumed. I walked to the cruiser, my sight locked on my feet,

my gut churning. Happi appeared to powder my nose one final time.

“You’ll be great!” she said and hurried off to fix someone else’s face.

I peeked at Tony. He blew me a kiss. My dick decided that now was a good time to perk up. It was not at all a good time, and I mentally told it that. How the hell could I get hard just seeing the man pucker up when I was so damned stressed out? Penises are stupid. I’d smack mine if I weren’t surrounded by lights and cameras.

Someone nudged me to the car—a woman with a lanyard and very little patience left by the tone of her tight voice—and instructed me to get inside. I did. Teddy crawled in on my right. He looked ready to explode with excitement. I wanted to vomit on my too-tight shoes. Shiny and black, with smooth soles that would be totally unsuited to the real duties of a cop, but hey, what did I know? I certainly wasn’t going to tell Gracelyn, who had dressed Audrey Hepburn, to give me different shoes. She kind of scared me.

Once the car was running, someone with a clapboard stood in front of Tony’s car, yelled something, and snapped his black and white board soundly. Tony pulled out slowly. I gave him a few seconds to get ahead and then I eased the old Buick into drive, hit the lights, and pulled in behind him. It was completely surreal. I felt like a gorilla as I hefted myself out of the car, reds and blues flashing, cameras trained on me as I swaggered to Tony’s car.

“Cut!” Miles shouted from his fancy seat. Everything stopped instantly. “Sheriff Stillman, did you shit your pants?”

I wanted to die. “No, I was told to put swagger into my performance.”

“Oh, well, stop swaggering,” Miles yelled, then burrowed down into his thick coat, his mouth going a mile a minute to some other woman with a lanyard who looked just as tired as the other woman with the lanyard. So many lanyards...

Right. I was going to throttle Tony. I went back to the cruiser, folded myself into the car, and waited for the guy with the clapboard to do his thing.

“I thought you looked like a sheriff from a western. All you needed was spurs.” Teddy gave me a thumbs up. “Not at all like you shit your pants.”

“Thanks.” That helped not at all.

I nailed walking on the second try. When I got to Tony’s window, I rapped on it as was written in the script. A few tiny flakes fluttered down from the slate sky as Tony lowered his window, smiled up at me, and said his lines.

“What seems to be the problem, sheriff?”

I gawked at him as my brain went totally blank. Like... nothing. He blinked several times.

“*Cut!*”

Fourteen takes later, it was over. Thank freaking God. If I never stood in front of a camera again, I’d be a happy man. I’d never felt so stupid or out of place in my life. We went back to makeup just as night was falling. Teddy was on the prowl for his new squeeze and left me sitting in a chair as some guy with a skinny mustache handed me buttery-scented wipes to scrub my face with. He never said a word to me, just stared and huffed, until I was pushed out the door so he could help the endless stream of Rockmount people filing in and out. Then it was back to wardrobe to change. Gracelyn was gone, so there was that small blessing.

I didn’t linger. There was no sense to it.

“Stillman, hey, hold up!” Tony called, stalling me as I stalked from the barn to where I’d been directed to park my official vehicle. “Wow, you must have your afterburners on. I rode in with you today, remember?”

I sorely wanted to forget. Had it only been this morning that we’d eaten waffles together? It felt as if a thousand years had dragged past.

“I’m tired,” I confessed as we walked, our shoes crunching on the walkway leading around the back. I stopped striding along to turn to him. “You told me to swagger.”

He skidded to a halt, a tiny snowflake landing on his nose and quickly melting. The tall pines were swaying in the wind, all the tiny lights blinking as the boughs danced. The final shoot of the day was taking place in the barn, a modern remake of “O Holy Night” by Mariah Carey being carried around the back on the wintry winds.

“I personally thought your swagger was very sexy. Shades of John Wayne’s iconic gait.”

“He said it looked like I shit my pants. In front of everyone.” I was more than angry right now. I was exhausted, embarrassed, hungry, and tangled up in all of my emotions. “How am I supposed to face down the people that live here after having that thrown at me?”

“He says that kind of thing to everyone. Did you not hear him tell me I needed to get the dick out of my mouth and enunciate?”

“What?!” I must have missed that. What a jerk.

He waved off my shock. “It’s fine. He’s just a little stressed. Sasha is being Sasha, setting everything on fire like the dragon that she is, and he’s taking it out on the rest of the cast. Jillian, the animal wrangler, will get him sorted tonight. They’re having a fling while on the shoot. All very hush-hush since his wife is taking a small spa retreat in Spain with her sister.”

“Wow,” I whispered, all the steam that I’d built up fizzling out like stale soda pop. I had nothing else to say right then. “Just...wow.”

I walked off and he jogged up to catch me, shuffling his script to his other arm so he could take my hand. I studied it and then his face.

“You did a wonderful job. Truly. And I’m not just saying that because...”

He let that fall off, but I was not willing to let that dangle.

“Because why?” I demanded with little real fire.

“Because you’re special to me, still, always, forever.”

God. *Damn*. I should have flipped him off. I should have told him to find somewhere else to stay for the duration, Bradley’s wishes be damned. Well, I should have done a thousand things. The one thing that I shouldn’t have done was take his cold face in my hands and kiss him.

But I did...

Chapter Seven

So yeah. I'd just done that thing.

It was jarring, to say the least.

Sure, I was the one leading the charge into that space where sane you just sits back crisscross applesauce, arms folded, staring blankly at the chaos monkey you just unleashed onto your nice, quiet, uncomplicated life. Later, when that wild monkey was back in its cage—if that day ever came—I could blame myself for the havoc.

That was later, though.

Right now, my lips were pressed to Tony's as the Carpenters were singing "Merry Christmas, Darling" while delicate lacy flakes drifted down around us. It was everything that I had yearned for all these years plus more. He never once wavered in his reaction. With a grunt of pleasure, he grabbed hold of my sides, tongue gliding into my mouth, and yanked with such vigor that we stumbled off the raked gravel path and into a pine tree. A bough slapped me in the head knocking my police cap off. That probably should have been taken as a wake-up call from the winter gods, but nope. My dick was leading the show. Well, my dick and the anarchy primate now in charge of higher reasoning. Talk about a massive clusterfuck inside my skull. Between my cock and that frenetic rhesus monkey nothing that resembled sanity was getting through any time soon. I licked into his willing mouth, the taste of something salty mixed with coffee spurring me to delve deeper. Tony was fully on board, his hands now moving down to cup my ass through my uniform slacks. He spun us around, the string of twinkling lights catching on my holster as we moved. He hoisted me back, away from prying eyes, our tongues tangling madly.

"Christ you feel good," I growled and jerked us around, trying to get more grind into the kiss. He swatted at some thick pine boughs that raked across the top of his head, sticky sap from where it had been recently pruned for movie perfection, now glistening in his hair. I shoved my hands up under his coat

and shirt, found his bare chest, and gave his pecs a squeeze. His hips rolled. His hands clawed at my ass, tugging me closer, until our cocks were lined up.

“There, there,” he huffed, his grip on my cheeks a little painful. Not enough to keep me from slanting my mouth over his, and then grinding hard into him. He hitched a leg up, linking his heel behind my thigh, and humped away like a mad rabbit. Or tried. Balancing on one foot threw him off balance, but we recovered enough, with a small twist and flail, that we didn’t go down into the fake snow. He did manage to get my shoulders pinned to the tree, his teeth raking down my throat, and resumed pumping. I drove my fingers into his hair, and he bit down on my lower lip. My balls contracted so powerfully that I nearly blacked out. Tony, hearing my growl of completion, jerked and spasmed into me, his breathing ragged as he, too, made a mess in his underwear.

“Oh shit,” he heaved out, sagging into me, his lips warm and welcomed on my neck. I moved us yet again, needing desperately to pin him down in some manner. I kissed him hard, stepping in even closer, jamming my leg between his thighs as my dick pulsed. “Christ...oh shit, Stillman.”

“Be quiet,” I grunted, speech still a bit tricky. The soft purr of a golf cart approached, the gravel rolling softly under the four tires, as the driver muttered to himself about frozen toes and minimum wage. When he passed, I kept my weight on Tony, holding him to the tree, as I went to lower my arm, only to find that we were well and truly bound in a string of red and green lights. “Shit,” I mumbled, tugging hard to free my hand, the lights pulling free of the boughs near us to cascade to our shoulders.

I stared at him, the glow from the scarlet and evergreen lights illuminating his face. His dark eyes were soft with spent passion, his lips puffy, his cheeks red from my beard. He was stunningly beautiful with the radiance of those tiny lights. I kissed him softly, keeping him where he was. I wished it could be forever. But as sanity returned to kick that frenzied simian to the curb, I knew deep down there would be no forever for us. This was a movie set. It wasn’t a real Christmas miracle.

Nor was life like a dumb holiday rom-com. Local sheriff would *not* win the heart of the charming Hollywood star. He'd had his chance, that lawman, and he'd lost to the siren call of fame.

"You look freaked out," Tony whispered, reaching up to loop the lights up and off us the best he could. "Are you mad?"

"No," I confessed. "Not mad. Sad."

"Stillman..."

"Nope, don't make promises you can't keep," I softly said, easing from him, the lights wound around us impeding my departure. I pulled on the thin green cord hard, popping several tiny bulbs from their sockets in my frenzy to get some distance between us. Tony wiggled free first, stepping out of the tangled mass of lights and then easing them down my legs to free me. He stared at me as I righted myself, the cold dampness in my boxers a shameful reminder of just how weak I was concerning this man. "I don't want that from you."

"What do you want from me, Stillman?" His query was as delicate as the tiny flakes falling from the sky. I could lie and say nothing. No, I should lie and say nothing. "I see you wavering. Be honest, I promise I will move heaven and earth to give you what you want. I owe you that much."

I studied his face in the subtle colors of Christmas, the wind rustling the pines, moving the tangled mess we'd made of the neatly strung lights.

I cupped his cheek, obviously already giving it up to my baser side. That little devil on my shoulder should be pleased.

Oh, I am, trust me. Tell him what you really want and to hell with the consequences.

The angelic half was far too quiet.

"I want to have you under me for the duration of your stay here. Every night." His nostrils flared. That made me shudder, not from the cold but from the want that still coursed through my veins. "I want to make you shatter, then I want you to do the same for me. I want..."

He moved closer, filling the cold gap he had just created a moment ago. His hands went up my back, under my jacket, his fingers still warm as toast. He wet his lips.

“What more do you want, Stillman?” he asked as he rubbed my lower back, easing his frame tight to mine, making rational thought impossible.

No, no! Do not say anything else lest you give him the power to hurt us again. Keep things carnal if you must...

Oh he must! Now go back to watching something with Michael Landon in it. We got this!

And the devil booted the angel off my shoulder. Angel Stillman landed in a mound of artificial snow with a soft “oof” and his robes over his head.

The words rested on the tip of my tongue, then sat there, growing sour as fear slipped in.

“All I want from you is what we do in bed,” I replied and kissed him hard, ensuring that no other words came falling out of my face. Words expressing how I wanted his love, his commitment. How I wanted to be one half of a whole instead of one half of an empty shell. But those words had been spoken before and I still carried the heartache, pathetic as that was.

When the kiss broke, he chased it, but I stepped away from him because that same golf cart was coming back with several people in it. If he wanted to say more, the time wasn't now. Not that I imagined there was much he could say. When the movie was wrapped, he would go back to LA and I'd be here, so why pledge troths when we both knew this had a very short shelf life. If I was in charge, things wouldn't hurt so deeply when he climbed on the big silver bird and flew home.

“If you're sure?”

I nodded, unsure as fuck, and took another step away, the lights around my ankles nearly sending me to my ass alongside my voice of reason.

“I'm sure,” I stated, pulled the wires from around us, then stepped free.

“Okay then. If that’s all I can have of you, then that’s what I’ll take.” He strode away from me, paused, and then turned back to offer me his hand. “Let’s go to bed.”

I waited, suddenly struck by Medusa’s curse of some sort. What the hell was I doing?! Was I seriously considering falling into bed with the man who had broken me so badly I’d never been able to completely heal emotionally? What the fuck was wrong with me?

“Are you coming?” he asked, extending his long fingers and closing them as my hand grasped his. He took a step. My cement feet held us in place behind the pines, the sounds of laughter and Christmas carols moving past in the dark, cold night. “Come on then, let’s go. I want to feel you inside me.”

Stillman, you simpleton, pick up those monstrous feet of yours! Left, right, left, right. Come on! You’ve been walking since you were ten months old! Get moving. His tight ass is yours for the taking.

“No,” I croaked.

FFS.

Yay! Drifted up from the laundry powder we stood in.

Did they even use laundry soap for fake snow in movies anymore? Didn’t have a fucking clue. Probably not. Christ, I was old and stupid and screwing up something that I had dreamed of for years. Revenge sex with Tony. Fucking him so well and so thoroughly that he would live in regret for leaving me behind.

“No?” he enquired, his hand falling to his side. He turned to face me, his dark hair glowing red, green, red, green, red, green as he studied me intently. “Why no?”

“Because I don’t want that from you. With you. Whatever.” I reached up to find my cap, only to realize it was gone. So I rubbed at my skull so hard sparks were probably flying. “I want more than sex. And I know we can’t have that because your heart belongs to the cinema and mine lives here in Rockmount.”

“What if I said I wanted more with you?”

I pushed in on my temples with the heels of my hands. “But you don’t!” I growled like a wounded animal. “You never wanted more with me. If you did, you wouldn’t have left.”

He drew in a long, shaky breath. His shoulders fell and his eyes closed. “Stillman, I made a mistake.”

My eyes flared. “You made a mistake?”

“Yes, I made a mistake. I should have asked you to come with me,” he said, his gaze roaming over my face as I massaged my cranium in an attempt to try to knead the confusion out. Which didn’t work, but I had no clue what else to do with my hands. If I let go of my head, I would either throttle the man or sweep him off his feet and carry him to the hay mound in the wedding barn. “I should have tried my hand at Broadway if you said no, and you would have said no, I know that.”

“You don’t know that! How could you fucking know that if you never asked me?!” I barked, winced at the pressure on my thick head, and dropped my hands to my sides. They instantly fisted into tight balls. “I would have followed you to the ends of the fucking earth, you idiot. Christ! When I told you I loved you, I meant it. I still love you!”

Oops. Fuck.

His dark eyes rounded. Then, he smiled, just a little one, a mere tickle of a twitch at the corners of his recently kissed mouth.

“I still love you too,” he whispered just as Teddy came barreling around the tree shouting at us to show ourselves. Could I go to prison for swatting my deputy upside the head? I’d have to Google that later.

“Hands up where I can—” Teddy’s gaze flew from Tony to me. It was kind of funny to see the shift from uptight to oh shit. “Sheriff? Uhm, what are you doing back here? One of the key grips said some shifty characters were skulking around out here.”

“We’re the shifty characters,” I told Teddy as I bent down to pick up my hat. I jammed it down onto my head. “I was

checking the lights on the trees to make sure they weren't a fire hazard when Tony came along and offered to help."

"Oh-kay," Teddy murmured as his sight darted from me to Tony. I prayed that the now icy-cold spunk in my shorts hadn't soaked through to my trousers. "Are they?"

"Are they what?" I asked as we stood there in the tree line like three dolts.

"A fire hazard? If they are, we can tell someone to fix them," Teddy earnestly asked.

"Oh no, they're fine. A-1. I got tangled up in that one." I jerked a thumb at the tree of lust behind me. "But otherwise, they're all good. Up to snuff. I'll be sure to send a text to Clyde over at the Rockmount Fire Company to let him know the lights are safe."

"Sure, okay, well, uhm," Teddy began backing up, "I'm just going to head on home. See you at the office tomorrow. Oh, and don't forget to bring a dish to pass."

I blinked stupidly while Tony stood off to the side with his teeth in his mouth. "For the Thanksgiving party?"

"Is that this week?" I asked like a total dullard. I mean, he had just said it was, but how could it be Thanksgiving already?

"Yeah, in two days."

I heard Tony make a choking noise. Teddy and I both looked over at him. "I should buy a turkey," he announced and snuck off like a thief in the night.

Teddy turned his attention back to me. "Wanda is leaving early to fly to North Dakota to be with her family, so we said we would party tomorrow. Did you forget?"

"Must be I did," I replied. "I'll totally bring a dish to pass." If a dish to pass meant a bag of chips. "I need to go home now."

Teddy nodded and moved aside to let me pass him. I felt his befuddled gaze on my back as I thundered to my car to find Tony sitting in the front seat and googling Thanksgiving

recipes. He glanced up from his phone when I threw myself behind the steering wheel.

“Do you like oysters in your stuffing?”

So we were just ignoring the elephant playing with my riot gear in the back seat of my SUV then. Okay, that’s ducky. I could pretend like we’d not just confessed big things to each other after we’d come in our pants. Yep. Just another normal day in Rockmount.

“Sure, oysters are fine,” I replied and got a happy little hum from the man to my right.

I cranked over the engine and then drowned out Tony’s perky little hums with “Cinnamon Girl” cranked all the way up. The pachyderm in the back seat was along for the ride, it seemed.

“...this is my grandson Clinton when he was two months old. And this is him now that he’s three months old.” Wanda proudly passed her phone to Mignon, who had mysteriously arrived at city hall for our party. He was nodding along as he nursed a giant cup of coffee from a Starbucks many miles away while munching on corn chips. I stood in the corner, sullenly chewing on some soggy celery from my dish to pass. Thank God for deli veggie platters. Tony was chatting it up with Larry from the Prothonotary’s office, Midge from the Treasurer’s office, Penny from Elections and Voter Registration, and Bradley, who had left his office to schmooze and eat free food. The mayor never missed free food and/or gossip. “He’ll be four months old the day after Thanksgiving. I crocheted him some bibs.”

Teddy was making doe eyes at Lydia from Veteran’s Affairs. That kid had a libido that never quit. My sight lingered on Tony. He was ridiculously comfortable among small-town folk, something that his costar was not. Sasha had fled our charming village for Manhattan for the four-day holiday, claiming she could not tolerate the stench of cow shit and commonality any longer. As angry as I was at Tony—and myself—I felt bad for him. The poor man had to have been

desperate to save his career to wed such a harridan. Thankfully, he could now be free to express who he was and still have a job. And yes, I was angry at Tony. I was also furious with myself for letting him wear down my resistance. I'd worked out so hard this morning that I'd tweaked a muscle in my shoulder. Pumping iron did purge some of the ire and upheaval from my chest, but only for so long. As soon as I was showered and dressed, the confusion returned.

And it still lingered now. The gathering was in its final stages. Praise all the gods.

"He is a lovely child, Wanda, give him a kiss on the cheek for me," Bradley said, locked eyes with me, and then zoomed over like a bloodhound on the trail of a felon. Backed into the corner as I was, there was nowhere to go unless I leapt over a filing cabinet or hid behind the American flag in the other corner. "Stillman, I'm glad I ran into you. Oh dip!" He grabbed a coated plate and heaped veggies onto it while he talked. "Is this leek dip?"

"I think so," I replied, my sight darting to Tony as he waved goodbye to Teddy and Lydia. He turned to glance my way, giving me that playful smile, and then dove into a conversation with his PA and a few lingerers. "I bought it at the corner mart."

"Oh, well, that's fine if it's not. So, a fast thing I wanted to mention. Since the movie is taking a short break, I'd like you to pay extra attention to the trailers they've brought in. There are a few miscreants that might decide to vandalize or break into them while filming is paused. Maybe you and Theodore can set up a...shit, what do they call it? A stakeout!"

"You want me to sit in my cruiser for hours watching double padlocked trailers?"

"Yes, I do. We'd be happy to pay you overtime for tomorrow since it's a holiday." He spooned up the rest of the dip and then grabbed the rest of the broccoli florets and the last two baby carrots and grinned at me. "Thank you for looking after our town so well. If you need me, the wife and I are heading down to Myrtle Beach for a pickled beet lovers

convention, so only call if it's an emergency. You're a good man, Stillman. Good night, all!"

He rushed out, with a plate filled with veggies, leaving me glowering at his back.

"If looks could kill," Tony whispered as he edged up next to me to pluck a limp celery stalk from the plastic platter on my desk.

"He wants me to work tomorrow."

Tony's eyes flared. "Seriously?" He placed his phone next to mine on the wireless phone charging station beside my desktop monitor.

"Yeah, he wants me and Teddy to stakeout the movie trailers."

"Well damn, that sucks. Can you do it in shifts?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'll text Teddy later tonight and let him know."

"I'm sorry we're making you so much work," he said, then called goodbye to the last partiers to leave our tiny office. "Mignon, go on home now. I'll help Stillman clean up the mess."

Mignon placed a plate of ranch corn chips on my desk, made namaste hands at his boss, and raced out, leaving his empty coffee cup on a folding chair.

"I can do it alone," I grumbled, thoroughly fed up with actors and cinema people. And mayors. And stupid sheriffs who kissed and fondled thespians before confessing his deepest feelings.

"I never said you couldn't but let me help. It's okay to ask for help." He tossed his limp stalk back to the platter and then set about gathering plates, cups, and plastic silverware. I sighed and shrugged. There was no sense in arguing. The man was as stubborn as I was at times. Plus, the sooner things were tidied up, the sooner I could get home and go hide in my bedroom. We'd barely spoken this morning. Mignon came to pick up Tony, and I had snuck out while he'd been showering

so I could pound the living shit out of a weight bag at the ass crack of dawn.

“Whatever,” I muttered like a sullen teenager before picking up and folding the chairs. We worked in stilted silence for a few minutes. “I’m going to start hauling these down to the basement.”

“I’ll help.” He tossed the last handful of plates into the trash and then grabbed two chairs in each hand, tucking them under his armpits just as I had my four. “We’ll have to come back for the rest.”

“Yep,” I replied and made my way to the elevator. He lumbered up beside me, silent as stone, as the lift raised from the basement to the ground floor. We stepped inside, chairs bumping and clattering as we wiggled into the small area. I used my elbow to push the B button. The door closed. Quiet settled over us. It was the longest and most awkward elevator ride in the history of elevator rides.

The basement in our century-old courthouse was musty and generally used for storage at this point. All the offices had been moved up during a flood about twenty years ago so we had all kinds of small rooms for stashing old office furniture, boxes of decorations, and a nativity scene for the front yard that we no longer used because several people—me included—had pointed out that sticky little point about separation of church and state. That had gotten me some dark looks for a few months from the local pastors.

The chairs were stored in an office that used to house the county treasurer. The walls were old cinderblock and cold as sin. There was little heat down here, just enough to keep the water pipes from freezing. Adding the iciness that Tony and I had brought with us made the dark area even more dismal. Wishing to be anywhere but here, I toted my chairs to the rear of the room, my mind racing around in circles like a dog after its tail, when I heard Tony drop his chairs and the door slam. I turned to see if he’d tripped over the brick used to hold the door open, but no, he was fine, just as angry as a wet hen by the looks.

“You dropped your chairs,” I pointed out as I placed mine tidily against the rest.

“Yes, I know, Stillman. I dropped them on purpose so you would turn around and fucking look at me!”

Yep, he was mad. I turned. Oh yeah, he was pissed. I could tell by the tight V between his sleek eyebrows. He had to pluck or wax to keep them that well kempt. Either that or my eyebrows were wild monsters. Probably the latter.

“I know what you look like, Tony.” I spread my legs in a defensive posture and crossed my arms over my chest. This was my tough cop stance. It sent off don’t fuck with me vibes. To most people. Guess my ex was immune to my mean AF aura.

“You’re being a jerk. What are you so damn uptight about? Telling me you still loved me? Is that what has your balls in a vice?” I opened my mouth to reply, but he chugged right over my attempt to speak. Once a Gugliotti got a head of steam, it was hard to interject. This I knew from previous experience. “If that is the case, then hey, I said the same thing to you! So why are you acting like you were the only one to admit that you harbor feelings for me?”

“Can I speak now?” I asked and got a scathing glower.

“I wish you would. Just speak. Don’t keep things bottled up like you do.” He took the same stance that I had. Ready for battle. Only, I didn’t want to fight with him. I just wanted —“Well, are you going to say something or are you going to just zip your lips and let things fester?”

What *did* I want? Him, obviously, that was pretty damn clear. But what else? Did I want to fuck him? Well, duh. My cock was already perking up at the mere thought. There was more to work through than just the physical. It was apparent that we desired each other still. The crusty shorts in my hamper was proof of that. Did I want more than just sex, though? And if so, why? There was no possible future for us. West Coast and East Coast careers would do us in immediately. I was not a long distance romance fan. Not that I knew for sure since he’d taken off without giving me—or us—

a chance to even find out. Could I do LA flights monthly?
Could he work by coming east?

“Stillman, if you do not talk to me, I am going to start talking at you and I know you zone out when that happens.”

I jerked back to the here and now. “I don’t zone out when you talk to me, but I do zone out when you talk at me.”

“Well then, you best start flapping those kissable lips because I’m just about ready to go into full Rosie Gugliotti mode.” His dark eyes were snapping. I’d seen his mother let into him a time or two when we’d been dating. She was a force to be reckoned with even if she were a full foot shorter than her son. Rosie knew how to wield a wooden spoon and a sharp tongue.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I opted to say, shouldering my way around a dumbfounded baby Jesus—yeah, I know I’m pretty stunned that I said that as well, little guy—and gave the doorknob a twist. Nothing happened. I tried again. Nothing. Third time was a firm jerk on the lever. Still nothing. Then I gave the knob a better look while Tony began unloading verbal buckshot into my back. Oh super. A keyless self-locker. Superb. I jiggled the lever, but it was not budging. “Fuck me.”

Now it all came racing back. Three years ago, all the doors in the courthouse had been refurbished with state-of-the-art locks. In case terrorists decided to infiltrate the deep secrets of the Rockmount Courthouse and steal our county secrets. What those secrets were I had no clue—the total cow per home head count maybe—but Bradley had been running for reelection so we’d been promised tighter security if he were reelected. And he had been so new knobs for all doors. Take that, terrorists! Christ.

“...perhaps if you would open up a bit and be honest with me, we could—”

“Hey, so we have a thing here.” I blew out a breath to look at Tony, who was glowering at me. “Seems someone kicked the brick out of the way to throw himself, and now the door is locked.”

His irate expression disappeared. “What?”

“Yeah, the brick is to keep the door from closing, so we don’t have to call Carlton to find the fucking codes to reopen them.”

“Who the hell is Carlton? Why didn’t you tell me not to move the brick?!”

His temper was up, and while I shouldn’t find that sexy as fuck, I did. God he was stunning when he was riled. The urge to bend him over the plastic donkey behind a giant plywood Easter basket was overwhelming.

“I didn’t think you were going to have a temper tantrum, which involved throwing chairs and kicking bricks.” His glare was legendary. My dick began to swell. *Fucking dick*. I was not going to give into lust again. I reached for my phone in my back pocket. It was gone. Fuck. Right, it was charging on my desk next to Tony’s. Oh how fucking fabulous. “We’re stuck here.”

“Don’t be stupid. Just call for Carson—”

“Carlton. He’s the security manager for the courthouse. Also, he runs the locksmithing shop out on the Bird Lighter Road.”

Tony’s look was comical, even though it was supposed to be scary. “What. Ever. Just call him and get the damn code.”

“I would if I had my phone.”

“Oh seriously, this is the problem with country bumpkins. They never have their phones with them when they’re needed most. City people like me always have our—” He began patting himself down. I waited, fighting back a smirk. “Fuck! Where is my fucking phone?! No, do not say a damn word, you irritating asshole. Use your shoulder mic and call Cartright—”

“Carlton.”

“What the fuck ever.” I swiped my hands up and then down to show him I was out of uniform and, therefore, did not have my shoulder mic with me. “What the hell? You live in

the damn uniform and now you decide to not have it on? That's so inconsiderate of you!"

That one got me. I couldn't hold the laughter back anymore. A rolling belly laugh escaped me. Tony's face shifted from irate to confused to something lighter. Then, he too began to chuckle.

"Holy shit, we are a couple of total assholes," he said as another round of sniggers overtook him. "So, how long are we stuck in here?"

"Cleaning crew arrives at ten p.m. so about..." I checked my watch, "about three hours."

"Well, that's just awesome." He blew out a long breath before turning from me to pat a plastic sheep on its dusty head. "What the hell are we supposed to do for three hours?"

There was no hiding the invitation in his question. The sexy bastard.

I was behind him before my head could register what my feet had done. My arms snaked around his middle, cinching him back into my chest. He came easily, with no resistance, and I was done. To be honest, I was done weeks ago. The moment I saw him in the airport was my downfall. I'd been scrambling like a madman to keep adding stone to the walls that he was ripping down. Maybe it was time to stop trying to keep him out and let him in. Was I brave enough to do so a second time, though?

I buried my face into his neck, inhaling the warm manly smell of his cologne and skin, and my cock kicked. He drew in a sharp breath as I nestled my prick against his ass cheek.

"I want to bury myself so deep inside you that neither of us knows where the other ends," I growled into his flesh, taking a taste with a swipe up and over his perfectly groomed stubble. His entire body shuddered. He pressed his ass back into my cock, grabbed my forearms, and melted back into me, his head twisting to the side.

"Kiss me hard. Then tell me how you truly feel. I must hear it, Stillman, and not thrown at me in anger but confessed

to me on the soft exhalation of an ardent lover.”

I covered his mouth with mine, plunging my tongue into his hot mouth. He moaned into the sloppy kiss, his tongue slipping over mine as his fingernails dug into my forearms. Even through the long-sleeved RPD tee I’d yanked on after my shift was done, I could feel the burn. No lie, it turned me on. Everything this man did made me crazy with want. And yes, I did still love him. But was it wise to confess to that again? Why did it matter so much to Tony if I cared? He sucked my lower lip between his teeth, sending all my rational thoughts out the skinny window that Ellery would have trouble wiggling through.

Not that I planned on escaping any time soon...

Chapter Eight

Talking could wait until later.

“Talk to me, Stillman,” Tony huffed as I ground my cock into his ass.

Or maybe not...

“Damn it, Tony, you know how I feel about you,” I growled as I palmed his stiff prick through his slacks.

“Is there a chance for us?” He sighed, rocking his hips up then back, enjoying the touch of my hand on his dick just as much as he loved the feel of my cock jabbing his backside.

“Sure, of course,” I replied, lust drunk and lost in the possibility of what could be. Hell yes there was a chance for us. Wait—“A chance for what?”

He was having none of my questions, it seemed, and he began undulating in my arms. It was like trying to hold onto an eel. It was agony and immense pleasure keeping him close while he moved and wiggled, freeing his dick from his slacks for me. Just for me. I took him in hand, enjoying the satiny skin stretched taut over a rod of pure iron.

“Fuck me,” he huffed.

Yep, I was right. Talking could wait until later. “In my wallet...condom and lube. Hurry, Stillman, I need to feel you inside me.”

I didn't want to sound like a Puritan, but my stupid jealous head wanted to know if he carried stuff for random hookups because he was giving himself to guys left and right. Once I had that monster back in its cage—insecure much—I nearly tore his back pocket off to get his wallet out with one hand. No way was I releasing his prick.

“Here,” I panted as he worked on getting his pants and briefs down around his ankles. His bare ass was now cradling my cock.

“You need it,” he replied, spreading his legs as wide as he could with his ankles bound in cloth while trying to pull a

plastic camel out from behind a row of folding tables. “Why the hell do we always pick the worst places to get off?”

That was a good question. I had a bed at home—two, to be honest—where we could get freaky without lights or tables or an infant messiah staring up at us. Yeah, he had to look elsewhere. I reached down and flipped the babe over before rolling on a condom.

“Turn them around,” I barked while ripping open the lube packet.

“Them who?” Tony asked and then gasped when my slippery fingers found his hole.

“Mary and Joseph, spin them to the wall.” I eased my middle finger into him. My mind went totally blank save for the primal urge to sink into his hot, tight channel.

He looked over his shoulder. “They’re plastic.”

“I know.” I pushed two fingers into him, making him mewl. “I can’t do this with a virgin staring at me.”

“You’re so odd,” he said as he flailed at the two until they were staring at the backend of an ass. “Damn, right there. Shit!”

I rubbed his prostate gently. His ass clenched around my fingers. That was about all that I could take and not bust a nut, so I eased my digits out, wiped them on my shirt, and took my cock in hand. His hole was shiny with lube, his back arched out, his belly resting against the camel’s humps. Licking my lips, I tapped his entrance with my dick a few times and began pressing into him.

“Relax, baby,” I cooed, rubbing circles on his buttocks, pressing them tightly together, and then spreading them so I could see my cock easing in. My balls drew up tight before I even had my cockhead inside him. Easing out, I took a breath or two and rocked back inside. Heat engulfed my cock. Tony grasped a camel hump for dear life, arching his back and leaning back to spear himself on my prick. He whimpered as my dick eased past the ring of resistance. Then he sighed as I moved deeper, pulled out, and went back in again. “God

you're so fucking tight. I love your ass so much, Tony. I missed this."

"Me too. Faster, fuck me harder now, yes, fuck yes!" He was such a vocal bottom. I loved it. He asked for it, so I gave it to him, daring to give his right cheek a small slap with each thrust. His knees buckled at the pleasure of that light crack. He'd always enjoyed a tiny bit of paddling when being boned. Just enough to pinken his ass cheeks. "Stillman, you bastard, yes!"

"Has anyone fucked you just the way you like it since me?" I hadn't meant to ask. It was a stupid question. What if someone had? Did I want to know? "Has anyone given you a ramming like this since me?"

I ramped up the speed. Balls slapping balls so hard it stung, but I kind of liked it myself. Tony locked his knees, but I held him, nonetheless, hoisting him up until he was on his toes. I reached around the best that I could to grab his cock. The wet head slid over my palm. I gave him a tug or two.

"No one...like you," he cried out as he came all over my hand. The clench of his ass around me combined with the knowledge that no one did him like I did was enough. More than enough to be honest. I drove into his heat, hard, and let go. The orgasm was mind-blowing. It stole all the air in the room, leaving me gasping, shaking, and floating. Each contraction of Tony's milked another pulse from my balls. He collapsed between the camel's humps, and I went with him, covering his sweaty back as we sank to our knees.

"Talk about...getting humped," he breathlessly tossed out while we lay like wet rags in the valley of a synthetic Bactrian mammal's fat storage bulges. Foolish me did not want to let go, ever, but as he worked to breathe, I knew I had to. So, with great care, I eased out and off, rocking back to sit on my heels to catch my breath. Also, to admire the glorious sight of Tony, slumped over a camel, ass pink and well-fucked.

I reached out to touch his buttock and then bent down to press a kiss to his cheeks. He made a cooing sound, like a happy dove, and that broke me in ways that I couldn't grasp.

Instead of standing up, tucking my dick away, and forcing myself to get some distance for the sake of my sanity and tender heart, I did the exact opposite. I gathered him up, easing him back into my arms, lifting him off the camel, then shucking us to the side. My back thudded into the camel as he flip-flopped into my lap. And he was a lapful make no mistake. He wasn't a tiny twink of a man. He just wasn't as burly as me.

"My ass is going to get cold," he told me as I gently pressed his head to my shoulder. Knowing we would get chilly soon, icy cold ground against cinderblock wasn't exactly cozy and warm, I pawed around in a box of picnic supplies from last year's fireman's cookout on the courthouse yard. I tugged a big tablecloth free, tucked the flocked backside around us, and cradled him close.

"I need to say something," I stated as he nestled into my chest, his long legs out, his bare bum now covered from the cold cement floor. "There's an elephant we need to discuss."

"I didn't see an elephant. I did see the donkey, the sheep, and, of course, the camel."

"Ass."

"Sorry, is there a difference between ass and donkey?" he asked, his breath warm, moist puffs moving over my neck. God this brought back memories. He'd always loved to cuddle after sex and I adored tending to him, holding him, kissing him, rubbing cream into his skin after we'd come down and bathe.

"No, *you're* the ass," I replied, pressing a kiss to his hair. My pulse was jacking up steadily. I was utterly terrified. I was not only exposing my dick—which still had a condom on it and would need to be tended to shortly—but my soul. He sniggered softly. "I think asses are donkeys, just wild ones."

"Noted." He kissed my thumping jugular. "Are we okay?"

"Define 'we'."

"Well," he lifted his cheek from my shoulder to look right into my eyes, "we, as in the two of us, as a possible

reconciliation thing.”

That was when I mentally bottomed out. “You... reconcile?”

“Maybe, if you’re able to trust me enough.” He studied my face in that way of his that stripped away all of my defenses. I shifted under him, uncomfortable as hell to have all my yearnings suddenly pulled from the dark to see the sun. Hope. No, that was far too much to even dream of, wasn’t it? I’d been ready to tell him I still cared about him and wanted to be friends. But reconciling? A second chance? “Okay, I take that hesitance to be a sign that you’re not ready yet.”

“Tony, I just...” I felt as if someone had downloaded the world wide web into my brain. And since it was an old brain that still ran on technology akin to that of a Walkman, my synapses were overloading. “I...trust is earned.”

“I know, and I’m willing to do that.” He cupped my face in his hands and then touched his lips to mine. Oh gods it was a sweet kiss. “Let me try. I know that’s asking a lot, Stillman, and I am ready to do the work.”

“Prove it,” I countered instantly. A truly asinine reply because how could he prove he was to be trusted to not jet off again unless he didn’t jet off again? But he had to jet off again.

“Okay, I lied when I told you that Mignon had wisdom teeth pulled. He did not.”

I blinked, then grunted. What kind of lawman was I when this kind of obvious thing had not chimed off a bell? I’d seen him eating crunchy stuff several times now. Did anyone do that after having wisdom teeth extracted? No, at least not when I’d gone through it. Christ. I was a moron. Someone should take my badge and give it to a chimp.

“I know you’re angry at me now,” he said as the church bell in the Presbyterian steeple chimed nine times.

“No, not really. I’m mad at me for seeing him eating granola bars and not putting two and two together.” Did I not want to make that connection because it would show me that Tony, yet again, had been unworthy of my trust? “Why did

you—no, wait, I think I got it? You wanted to be with me, alone, in my place to try to win me back?” He nodded. My jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

“Oh yes, seriously.” He went to leave, but I held him in place. I liked him in my arms, his cheek on my shoulder, as the smell of sex wafted off his skin. “I need to get up and cover my ass.”

“Nope, you’re staying put until we hash this out. No leaving,” I firmly said, and he bobbed his head in understanding. With him back where he belonged, he let his brow rest against my collarbone while his hand snaked up the front of my shirt to rest on my chest.

“I shouldn’t have manipulated things as I did, but I knew you would never let me come within shouting range unless I played on your noble side.”

Noble? Hell, I was far from noble. “What the hell are you talking about with that noble shit? I’m not virtuous. I’m just a cop trying to keep his town safe.”

“And that makes you laudable. Stop rolling your eyes. You’re selfless. Most public servants are like that. The opposite of someone like me who knew the young man he was in love with adored him but hared off and left that beautifully strong yet delicate young man behind.”

Strong and delicate. Did those words even belong side-by-side? And was that really me? “You had a dream, something that you loved and studied for,” I mumbled, stunned as the words fell out of my mouth. Was I really forgiving him?

Since when do we defend the mook?

Since forgiveness gives us freedom.

“Yes, but I could have asked you to come. I *should* have asked you to come, but I didn’t, and do you know why?” he asked, his nose lying on my throat, his hand pressed tightly to my breast. I was sure he could feel the thump-thump-thump of my heart in his palm. He had to have. It was thundering so madly that it was close to busting free.

“No,” I squeaked out. I suspected it was because he didn’t love me enough, but no way was I saying that out loud. A man had to cling to some of his pride.

“Because I knew you would come. And I was a stupid jerk who didn’t want to have to face you with rejection after rejection after rejection. My fragile, immature ego couldn’t bear the thought of you seeing me washing dishes while you were putting your degree to work. So, I left you behind like an unwanted sock.” I felt a slight shudder move through his body as his voice thickened. He was crying. “Can you forgive me?”

And there it was, the question that I’d mulled, chewed, and debated over for eons. Could I forgive him? Should I forgive him? Sure, I knew what the angel Stillman would say. Turn the other cheek. Forgive others their transgressions. If you hold anything against anyone, forgive them and so on.

But what would that demon say if asked? He’d point out that this was a trust issue and not just about forgiveness. Since Tony had hurt me so badly, I’d never truly been able to love another man again, not wholly, due to his betrayal. He’d encourage me to enjoy this moment of revenge pain. And trust me, for many years, I dreamed of seeing this man weeping and begging for one more chance. I’d assumed it would feel good, but...it really didn’t. Not like it should have, which only added to the maelstrom of emotions swirling around in my head.

He had said I was delicate. And as much as I should rail and posture about having such an unmasculine term applied to me, it was an apt description. I *was* delicate. We all were. Hearts were finespun things. Crafted out of emotion and tissue paper, easily rented and ruined. And he had destroyed me, my heart, and my ability to trust fully.

“I need time to think about it,” I replied candidly.

“Okay, that’s more than fair. Thank you for at least considering it.” He moved around to face me, his legs bent and cocked off to the left in some sort of funky yoga move that I’d never have the fascia to achieve. His cheeks were wet, his eyes red. No, yeah, I didn’t enjoy the sight at all. Not one fucking bit. So much for being a vengeful bastard.

I took his damp face in my hands, searching his eyes for some tiny bit of deceit. Granted, he was an actor, so this could all be a farce, but I didn't feel that it was. He appeared to be genuine.

"You know that even if we decide to give it another go, it's doomed to failure when this movie moves on to the next locale," I said, rubbing at his cheeks with my thumbs. "As much as I would love to throw caution to the wind, we're going to end up back where we were, Tony. You leaving come the end of the year, taking my heart with you, and me picking up the pieces. That's my stumbling block."

"I know, and I have something to show you." He stole a kiss, then slowly stood up, the tablecloth gliding down his back, showing me his soft prick up close and personal. Unable to stop myself, I linked my arms around his thighs and kissed his cock. He teetered to the left, his hands clasping my head to steady himself. I mouthed my way to the tip of his dick, lapping at the drying spunk, reminding myself just how delicious his spend was. The salty explosion made my mouth water. I sucked his flaccid cock wholly into my mouth. "Christ on a unicycle, Stillman," he gasped as my nose rested in his tidy dark curls.

I let his dick slide from my lips, closed my eyes, and buried my face in his pubes. The rich, musky smell of Tony filled my lungs.

"The memory of your aroma never left me," I confessed, cradling his ass now as he rubbed my scalp with the tips of his fingers.

"Yours never left me either." He bent down to kiss my buzzed head, then, ever so gingerly, stepped back and pulled up his briefs and slacks. Sensing that sexy times were over, I removed my condom, knotted it, and slowly got to my feet to dispose of it...where? I couldn't just leave it in the trash can if there even was one in here. So, I pocketed it, tucked and zipped. "Fuck, I just remembered I don't have my phone."

I said nothing, just went to find two folding chairs. Once they were open, I planted my ass in one as he sat beside me

and tried to begin sorting things mentally.

“Well, what I was going to show you was my *Willow Dale* contract. It ends in June of next year.”

Okay, that did not help with the sorting. I blinked at him as the cogs of thought slipped yet again. He gave me a wobbly smile. “You look doubtful, but it’s true. My agent is after me to re-sign, but I’m holding out.”

“For what?” I chanced to ask, fearful that he might say something that would suck me in even more. Where had all my hatred gone? Where was the resolve to keep my distance emotionally? Fucking A but having one forever love sucked. I mean, for the love of God, even geese found new mates when theirs died. Why the hell couldn’t I have done the same? It’s the fucking pits when a goose has more life skills than you do. “More money?”

“No.” He dashed at his cheeks and then bent down to pick up the tablecloth and drape it around his shoulders. “To see if I should look for work on the East Coast. They do film soaps in New York, you know. I’ve had several offers.”

Words just wouldn’t appear. I was mentally drained, it seemed. A good fuck will do that to a man.

Now, now, don’t make this all about sex, Stillman.

Why not? It’s supposed to be just getting off. We do not trust this man. Am I the only one who—

Good Stillman booted Nasty Stillman to the cold floor.

“I need time,” I reiterated, thankful that I could get those three words out. It was just too much good news, and I was suspect. It’s not like life to suddenly drop blessings on you after it’s shit on you for fifty years.

Perhaps you’re due for a blessing.

Perhaps I was due for another kick in the balls by Cupid too.

“Sure, yes, take your time. Think. I know this is all a lot. I’ve had time to come to grips with my feelings, to move on from them, and try to right this terrible wrong. Take all the

time you need. I just...well, I know it's cheeky of me to ask, but while you're thinking about things, can we date?"

"Date?" He bobbed his head, some of the sparkle now returning to his stunning eyes. "Like...date?"

"Yeah, Stillman, like date. Can I woo you?"

"Woo me?"

Stillman, dear, we do need to try to converse in sentences that are longer than three words.

"I know that's an antiquated term, but it fits. Some days I feel old as Methuselah."

I felt that, but since my words had failed, I just grunted and crossed my arms over my chest. Defensive posturing resuming I took note and then let my hands fall to my thighs. I didn't want Tony to feel put off.

Yes you do! He's a sneaky heartbreaker!

I ignored Devil Stillman shouting from under a life-size plastic goat back in the corner.

"How do we date?" There. I was now up to four words. Go me.

"Like most people do." He appeared to be enjoying this now. The man was nothing if not mercurial, a trait that I liked. Had liked. I wasn't sure I liked much about him now.

Stillman, it's a sin to lie.

Shit. Fine. I enjoyed knowing he was fiery. And I enjoyed knowing he ran hot most of the time while I was more chill.

"Like going to the movies? Shit like that?" Wow, look at all the words. That college education was rebooting. Pretty soon I might complete a whole paragraph.

"Shit just like that." Okay yeah, he was smuggy now. "Or dinners out or dancing or playing board games. Well, maybe we'd do date things like older folks. I'm not sure young people even really date in person anymore. Which is incredibly sad. You really can't get to know a person unless you interact with

them face-to-face, I think. Talking through a screen is fine, but nothing can replace that human touch.”

Board games. Did I even have any board games? Unlikely since playing a board game by yourself was damn depressing and predictable. You always win, right? I used to enjoy the hell out of board games. We’d play them for hours back in our poor student days. Play games, fuck, eat junk food, study in between. Life was so much easier back then, idyllic. Shame life has to shit all over us as soon as we leave campus. Guess that’s life lesson number one.

“Maybe,” I mumbled after a lengthy think. Tony scooted his chair closer and pecked my cheek.

“I’ve never heard a ‘maybe’ sound so good. Do you still like playing *Battleship*?”

“I don’t know. It’s been ages since I played it.”

“Well, we’ll just have to have us a few rounds to see.”

Chapter Nine

“I don’t get it. Why are there little pegs? Aren’t they choking hazards?”

I stared at Mignon over the top of the game board. For some crazy reason, Tony had invited him and Teddy to our Thanksgiving meal. Sure, it was my house and I should have the final say about not having people over—it was a rule of mine that I kind of enjoyed—but Tony had bought all the food and cooked it so...whatever. I could play host for a few hours. Maybe.

“You put the white pegs in the top grid for misses. Red pegs are for hits. As for the other comment, we grew up in the days of jarts so swallowing a tiny plastic peg was a nothing. Now, are you ready to play?” I asked because we’d already dicked away ten minutes as he argued for a different game to play, preferably something online or with an app. The fact that Tony had brought these thrift store finds, one of my fave board games plus *Monopoly*, was reason enough to not look for stupid digital versions. Sometimes you had to shove a red peg into your grid by hand. Gen Z just didn’t have a clue.

I heard Tony chuckling behind me as his PA scowled at the highly used red play set in front of him. Teddy was nursing a glass of beer, moping into his cold brew as he had been all day. The guy was a good lawman but a poor boyfriend. He tended to jump from one lily pad to another like a randy frog and then wonder why, when he needed somewhere dry to sit, all the pads he’d once rested his keister on told him to fuck all the way off.

“So I blow up your ships or you blow up mine. Then what?”

“Then I shout, ‘I win!’ and we go have pie.”

“Why don’t we just have pie and skip obliterating each other? I mean, what kind of lesson are we teaching kids here?” he asked, took a sip of his latte, and picked up a red peg to study it in depth.

“Tony, why don’t you just serve the pie and we’ll skip board games for now,” I called over my shoulder.

“We can do that,” he said, reaching around me to place a slab of pumpkin pie in front of me. Teddy was too busy drowning his broken heart in beer bottle number six of the day to react to dessert. Poor guy. Seems the little wardrobe assistant had gotten under his skin, big time. She’d left for the holiday break with a burr under her saddle after catching him making eyes at one of the fans who had lined up outside the library two days ago when a scene was being filmed on the steps. My mom used to have a saying about sauces, geese, and ganders. With the battleships pushed to the side for later—Tony and I would have a rousing seafaring encounter, I was sure—and pie being enjoyed by all aside from Teddy, I sat back, belly full, and had a flashback. Generally, I did my best to not let the holidays get to me, but the lingering taste of clove, nutmeg, and all those other glorious pie spices yanked me back to my youth.

Me and mom spending our first Thanksgiving away from the nightmare. It was a small little place in Elmwood, a ratty one bedroom above an Italian deli. The walls were paper thin, and the cockroaches were plentiful enough to carry off a small child—of which I was—and the faucets leaked. Every damn one of them. But it was ours. And he was not allowed to come near us. The courts had said so, and Mom had promised that what the judge had said that day was fact.

We’d had frozen turkey and stuffing, instant mashed potatoes, and a reduced for quick sale pumpkin pie for dessert. I was ten years old and fully the man of our rundown house.

“Next year we’ll have a real turkey and two pies,” Mom had promised. I didn’t care if we had frozen dinners or not. I was just happy that Mom wasn’t crying all the time and that neither of us had spent this holiday in the emergency room like last year. Rolling my arm, I felt the twinge of a dislocated shoulder that still gave me problems from time to time. That was what the monster had given me for my birthday the year before. Happy fuckin’ birthday, son.

“Hey, are you okay?” Tony asked as he poured more coffee from a white carafe into a cup that I didn’t know I even owned.

“Yep, fine. Just reminiscing,” I replied. He nodded softly. Tony knew my history. He might be the only person other than my mother that did. A soft snore floated by. We all turned to look at Teddy snoozing in his chair. “Guess he’s sleeping over,” I said with a sigh.

“He can have my room. I’ll bunk with you,” Tony offered. Mignon gave us a curious look but kept his questions to himself. Which seemed prudent as I was still trying to figure out if his mother had named him after a prime slice of beef or if he had chosen that name for himself. Which begs the question why, if he had, did he pick a name that makes people think of steak sauce?

“Sure, okay,” I replied, tossed back the dregs of my coffee, and rose. Mignon did as well. He nearly flew out of his seat, bussed Tony goodbye, and sped out the front door. “Was it something I said?” I asked Tony as I gave Teddy a good shake. My deputy roused enough to stand. Then he listed to the right. What a lightweight. “Here we go. You’re spending the night.”

“I’m okay.” He tripped over my foot, giggled, and then began whimpering about his missing lady whose name he was having trouble recalling. “Why did she leave me alone to eat stuffing? Shit, what was her name?”

He hung over my shoulders like a wet towel. “Fiona. And she left because you were hitting on that redhead outside the library.”

“I was just giving her directions,” he wailed as I led him to the guest room. We took off his shoes and his pants before he fell face first into Tony’s neatly made bed and passed out.

When I returned to the kitchen, Tony was filling the dishwasher. He glanced up when I flopped down to pour myself another cup of coffee to have with my third slice of pie.

“If you stay here until Christmas, I won’t fit into my uniform pants,” I lamented but spooned some whipped topping

onto my pie, anyway.

“There are ways to work off my cooking,” he replied all Mr. Sassy Pants. My dick stirred in my boxers even though I was feeling the effects of the huge meal. A nap would be lovely. Maybe a nap after a blow job...

“Question,” I asked as he fiddled around, wiping up the counters, something that he did not have to do but insisted on doing. He disliked crumbs. Said they drew ants. I’d mentioned that it was winter now, so I didn’t think ants would be out and about. He’d waved me off and sponged the counters. It was quite the domestic moment. “Is sex part of dating? Asking for a friend.”

He chuckled, turned to face me, and gave me that wanton look. The one that made me hard in an instant.

“How would we know if we were compatible if we didn’t have sex?”

“Well, we kind of know that the sex is good. That was never an issue then or now.” A tiny bead of worry popped up. “You do think the sex is good, right?”

“Of course I do. The best that I’ve ever had.” I preened inside. Stupid, yes, I know, but it was nice to hear that I outfucked his ex-husband. “Did you not want to muddy things emotionally by having sex?”

“No!” I hurried to clarify. “No, I’m fine with sex, but I was just wondering if it was part of dating for you now.”

“Yes, it is. I’m not nineteen anymore, but I do still have a sex drive. Granted, it’s not as rambunctious as it was back in college, but it’s not too shabby.” He gave me a wink.

“It’s not shabby at all.” Now all I wanted was to go to bed. Knowing he would be there all night beside me was... something deep that I probably shouldn’t be as excited about as I was. I was supposed to be thinking about a possible reconciliation after all, and that would require a clear head. “So yeah I’m beat.”

“Subtle as a brick to the head,” he said, laughing. Just as he was placing the pink sponge back into its new ceramic

holder—I *know* I did not own that—my cell phone chirruped. The tone indicated that it was a call from the dispatcher on duty.

“I have to take this,” I said as I jumped on the call. There was really never a day off for small-town lawmen. We could be summoned at any time for anything. A call could range from a cat up a tree to a barn fire to a natural catastrophe. Hopefully, this was just a question from Wanda’s replacement, a young girl who had just finished her training.

“Sheriff King, this is Lana. We just had a domestic call asking for assistance out at the Clinton Marley residence.”

Damn it. I was on my feet before Lana was done relaying the news. “I’m on my way. What are we looking at?”

“According to the caller, a minor male who I suspect was Daniel their youngest, his parents were fighting and his father hurt his mother. I couldn’t get any other details as he then hung up and attempts to contact him failed.”

“I’m en route. Can you reach out to the state police barracks over in Presco County and see if they can send someone for backup? My deputy is indisposed.”

Teddy and I will have a long talk tomorrow morning, rest assured.

“Will do, Stillman. I mean ten-four, Sheriff. Sorry to disturb your holiday with your boyfriend.”

“It’s part of the job,” I answered as I always did when I got called out on a day off. I knew going in there would be days like this. I’d miss parties, birthdays, and anniversaries. Not that I had a lot of those things on my calendar being the confirmed curmudgeon that I was, but if I had someone important in my life, I would have. Also, as a side, her calling Tony my boyfriend should have freaked me out more than it did. “Damn Clinton,” I growled as I made my way to my room to pull on my uniform. Tony followed behind me, silent, easing into my room to hand me a clean shirt and then my trousers from the closet, his expression tight. His lips flattened into a paper cut when I pulled on my Kevlar.

“What’s going on?” Tony asked a moment or two later. I looked up from strapping on my holster.

“Possible domestic situation at a farm out on Old Pike Road.”

He handed me my jacket. “Will the stacies come help you?” His concern was evident by the tight lines of stress around his eyes.

“Teddy is not in any shape to be out on a call. Besides, I know how to handle this type of situation. I’ve had training and have taken extra classes on how to respond to domestic, elder, and child abuse cases. I’ll be fine if they can’t, but I wager they’ll send someone out.”

Clinton Marley was a nasty son-of-a-bitch with a vile temper. I’d lost count of how many times I’d been to their rundown dairy farm to smooth things over.

“Yes, of course. With your past, I’m sure you’re the most suited for this kind of call just...” I looked up from checking my revolver. I doubted I would need to use it. The taser on the other hand—“Be careful because I’d like to woo you longer than one day.”

I wasn’t sure how to reply to that, so I reached out to stroke his stubbly cheek. “I’ll be careful.”

With that, I headed out with all haste, keeping the flashers and siren off as I wound my way down dark dirt roads, my head filling with memories from my childhood. I shook them off as I rounded the bend to the modest farmhouse flanked by a barn that had fallen into disrepair. All the lights were on in the house, although it was barely dusk. Clint’s beat-to-shit Dodge truck sat kitty-corner across the drive, and the man himself was sitting on the front porch nursing a cup of coffee, serene as a monk. The innocent act didn’t fool me one bit. He was a belligerent man who loved his whiskey more than he loved his wife, kids, or the once thriving farm that he’d inherited when his father died ten years ago. Knowing he was combative on a good day, I readied myself for some flack. Since my backup was sleeping off a six-pack of some fancy

German beer Tony had purchased, it was just me, myself, and I out here until—or if the state police showed up.

Not that I needed help. I was well versed in how to handle men who abused people weaker than they were. Also, I had a gun, a taser, and a baton.

As soon as I stepped out of the cruiser, Clinton smiled at me and lifted his cup of coffee in greeting. He and I had danced this dance many times. I closed the car door gently and planted my feet wide in his overgrown driveway.

“Oh hey, looky here. It’s the pansy police officer!”

“How goes it, Clinton?” I called as I slowly walked toward the house. The living room window on the ground floor was filled with worried faces. Scared kids clinging to their mom as a monster played nice on the front porch. This was all so familiar, sadly so.

“Oh fine, fine. Had a nice meal with my lovely wife and children. Now I’m just smoking a fag and enjoying my after dinner apéritif.” I let the cigarette slur slide. Clinton thought he was a clever man, but he was just a crass, abusive bastard, just like my father. “Oops, pardon me, Sheriff. The wife has been watching that regency show and I must have picked up some British slang.”

“As one would,” I replied as I gave him a quick assessment. I could see no weapons, but I knew they were in the house. Clint, like most in this county, was a hunter. And while I had never seen any of his rifles, if he was four sheets to the wind...well, a lawman had to be careful.

“We got a call there was a scuffle out here, Clinton. Would you happen to know anything about that?” I asked, taking one step at a time until I was at the bottom of the four steps leading up to the front porch. Somewhere around back a hound dog brayed.

“Nothing that needed the law. Just me and the wife having a little dispute over the lumps in the gravy. Damn woman can’t make good gravy to save her life.”

Uh-huh. “Think I could go inside and have a few words with Louise?”

“Sure, go right ahead, just don’t eat the gravy. Stuff ain’t fit to slop hogs.”

I gave him a wiry smile and climbed the stairs. The man reeked of booze and cigarettes. A rusty coffee can at his feet held a pile of smoldering cigarette butts.

“Might want to consider getting a warmer coat on. It’s damn cold out here,” I mentioned as I opened the squeaky screen door and pushed through the battered storm.

“I got all I need in this here cup to keep me warm,” he replied, chuckling to himself.

“Make sure you don’t go driving over to hang out with Jeff Cramer in that condition,” I added and got a grunt followed by a smoker’s cough.

Entering the home, I could smell roasted turkey and Marlboros. The front foyer—or the mudroom as folks around here called it—was packed with coats, muddy boots, boxes of toys, several bikes, and a few political yard signs that someone had used for target practice.

“Louise,” I called out, closing the door softly in Clint’s face. “Sheriff King here. Got a call you needed some help out here?”

I glanced up at the staircase on the left, seeing nothing but toys and boys’ shoes tossed about. A lazy calico cat lounged at the top of the stairs, eyeing me with sleepy disregard.

“Sheriff,” a soft feminine voice called. I looked left and saw Louise standing in the doorway, her face puffy from crying but no outward signs of abuse, her three sons behind her, eyes wide and damp. They all had brown hair and expressive brown eyes like their mother. The front door creaked open behind me. I craned my head to glance behind me at Clint glowering around the storm door.

“Why don’t you go sit back down and finish your apéritif while I talk to your wife, Clint?” I asked politely but with firmness.

“It’s cold out there,” he replied.

“Then go tend to your cows. The barn will be nice and warm.”

He said nothing, but a vein in his temple stood out. He left, but it was with a severe attitude and a sound door slam that made Louise and the boys jerk.

“Now,” I said, removing my cap and smiling at the lads, ranging from six to about fourteen, strapping boys all of them, with curious eyes. Shame they’d seen so much dysfunction already. “Why don’t we go to the kitchen and have us a talk?”

“The kitchen is a mess, Sheriff, what with the holiday meal and all. Nothing really to speak of, to be honest. Clint and me was having a talk about gravy.” Louise tucked a strand of mousy brown hair behind her ear, her sight never leaving my big black boots as she spoke. “I made it lumpy, and he yelled. That’s all. Not sure why one of the boys called emergency services. Nothing bad happened. Just a married couple loud talking.”

“He made Mama cry,” Daniel whispered. The eldest, Jeremy, stared at me hard, his jaw working as he looked to be biting back what he wanted to say.

“Now, honey, there’s no law about men making women cry. If there was, every man on the planet would be in jail,” Louise joked, but the pun fell flat.

“He hit her in the stomach,” Jeremy blurted out, his angry gaze flying to the window as his father could be seen staggering to the dairy barn, an old black-and-tan hound dog at his heels.

I looked from the window to Louise. “Did he hit you, Louise?”

She bit down on her lower lip and shook her head. “No, of course not. Clinton never hits me.” That was a lie, at least in my estimation. Either Louise Marley was an abused wife or she was the most clumsy human being on the planet. I personally knew of at least ten trips to the emergency room she’d had in the past twenty years. News travels fast in a small

town and there are zero secrets. Since Louise wasn't a minor, the medical personnel could not report it to me. All they could do was speak to her about what help was available to her in the county and then patch her up. I'd not heard of any physical abuse directed toward the boys, but the Lord above knows they'd suffered tons of mental agony.

"Mom, he did. He hit you. I saw it from the doorway!" Jeremy argued, and the two younger boys were now crying again.

"He didn't hit me. Silly boy, now look what you've done. Take your brothers upstairs while I talk to the sheriff and then we'll have pie." She shooed them off. Jeremy gave me a look that I knew all too well. I nodded at him as he passed, his face a mask of ire and buried pain.

"Louise, if Clint is hurting you, there are options available to get you some help," I said after the boys were upstairs.

She shook her head as she walked to the front door. When she opened it, I inhaled deeply and then released it before turning to look at her. If ever there was a bowed and defeated woman, I was looking at her. Her posture reminded me of my mother's before we'd gotten free of the monster that had terrorized us.

"I don't need help, Sheriff. It was just a loud shout. Now, I'm sure you have pie waiting for you at home with your new movie star boyfriend?" A cold wind whistled in over the tiny chore boots lying in the mudroom.

"If you're sure that you're okay and that no harm was brought to you, then I'll head out. But if he gets loud and shouty again, do not hesitate to reach out. I can personally take you to the Wilda Hinkins Shelter over in the next county. You do not have to be in this situation, Louise."

She finally glanced up at me. I took heart at the flash of understanding in her gaze. I'd not seen that on the previous calls I'd had out here.

"You'd do that?" she meekly asked, and I nodded. "I'll keep that in mind." I had to strain to hear her whispers, and

then quite boldly, she told me to go home and have pie. I met Clinton on the front porch.

“You done here, Sheriff?” he asked as the dog scurried through the open door with his tail tucked between his scrawny legs.

“I am. Night, Louise,” I called as I strolled past him. He mumbled under his breath as I passed, but I did catch deviant in the garbled stew of words. “Clinton,” I tacked on as I went down the stairs, breath fogging in front of my face.

The storm door was shut with such force the rafters on the porch vibrated. Exhaling deeply, I slid behind the wheel of my cruiser and sat there just staring at the house. From the outside, it looked like many farmsteads in our county, worn down by time and the lack of money to sustain it. Small farms were dying out, and that was incredibly evident in rural counties. Not just mine either but across the country. I called back in to let Lana know things were settled here and to notify my brothers in the state police barracks that no assistance was required.

Which was when a state police cruiser pulled up beside me. We had a short talk, me and Officer Clyde Maskin, and when that talk was concluded, he left.

I wished there were more I could do, but there wasn't. Until Louise was ready, there was little help I could offer than I already had. There were no signs of recent physical injury to the alleged victim. And while I could have yanked him in on probable cause as one of the kids had said he'd hit her, Louise wouldn't press charges, and then, knowing the type of man that Clint was, he'd lash out at Jeremy for talking to the cops. I could clearly recall the first time that I'd taken a blow meant for my mother after I'd told the police that my dad had hit my mom. It got me a black eye and a bloody nose. It also lit a fire under my mother. Scared as she had been of my father seeing her baby boy—although I was already a few inches taller than her—getting socked had been the catalyst she had needed to leave. So yeah, totally worth a punch in the face to get her free.

I prayed Jeremy wouldn't get bloodied and bruised in order for Louise to break away from her rotten husband. Hopefully, it will be soon...

Knowing that there was nothing more for me to do here, I drove home with Neil Young's "Old Man" blaring on a steady loop until I was parked in my skinny driveway. No sooner had I cut the engine, than Tony was jogging out to meet me. Not going to lie. His arms around me as we stood outside on the cold November night felt pretty damn good.

"We'll talk over pie and coffee," Tony said as we moved apart. He knew where I was at mentally. Even after all the years that had passed, he knew...

"That sounds good."

He gave me a wobbly smile and led me back inside where it was warm and safe. He'd only been here a short while, but my house felt different now. It felt like a home. Like someone who cared about me lived here. I knew that was foolish because Tony and I were...well, not even dating properly, or improperly, but that was the vibe my heart was feeling. The smell of coffee, the crackle of the fire, the tangy scent of Tony's aftershave, and the little mewl of welcome from my cat lying in front of the heat filled me with something that came frightfully close to the L word. Did I dare chance it? I'd been alone so long, scared so long, hurt and angry so long. Was it worth it to allow my emotions to soften and welcome this man back into my heart?

Neil had just been singing about how we needed people to love us. Maybe he was right. Who was *I* to argue with the genius that was Mr. Neil Young?

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Black Friday, was pretty subdued.

Tony opted to catch a ride to the set, which was out at the Larky century farm for exterior shots, with Mignon so that I could have a moment alone with my deputy. I was sipping coffee while eating a toasted English muffin when Teddy appeared.

I glanced up from my phone where I'd been scanning the editorial page in the weekly newspaper. Guilt hung over his head like a thundercloud.

"I know what you're going to say," he rushed to get out before I could even open my mouth. I cocked an eyebrow. "No, I do. You're going to tell me to stop being such a fool."

"Nope, that was not what I was going to say at all," I replied, laying my phone down beside my mug. "What I had planned to say was threefold," I held up a finger, "one is that you slept in your uniform, so it needs to be changed." His cheeks grew pink. "Two," I held up another digit, "we all have personal issues that drag us down. You need to learn that while you are on call, and that is pretty much all the time in a village this small, you have to limit your alcoholic intake." The man flushed a brighter red. "And three," my ring finger came up to join the other two, "women have feelings. Stop treating them like they're disposable playthings."

"Yeah, you're right." He sat down opposite me, the meager morning sun trying to push its way through some thick, gray clouds. "I mean, I know all of that, I just..." he blew out a breath that billowed his cheeks, "I got kind of lost in the whole 'men in uniform are sexy' thing that so many chicks are into. I mean, I try not to be a jerk, but they're all so pretty and friendly. But yeah, I'm swearing off women for good. I think I might join your camp."

I had to chortle. "Don't think it works that way, but feel free to apply for membership. Also, before you hear it elsewhere, which you will, there was a call out for a domestic at the Marley farm, and since you and he are cousins..."

His bleary eyes rounded. “Fuck. Did you go without backup?”

“I called the state police, and that is not a call I like making, Theodore. It makes us look bad, so in the future refer back to my point two. I’m being gracious this time.”

“Christ, I am so sorry. This is really my screw the pooch era.” He slapped his hands over his scruffy face and then scrubbed hard enough to make sparks. “And for the record, he’s only a cousin through marriage. No one claims that nasty rat prick. Did he hit Louise?”

“She claims no but the older boy, Jeremy, said yes. I’m going to contact Rachel over at CPS just to make sure the school knows to be on the lookout for any signs of harm on the kids, especially now that they’re the ones calling the cops.”

“Yeah, good idea. I’ll make runs out there more frequently, just to touch base, as family and all. Louise is too nice a lady to be married to a fuckwad like Clinton.”

“That she is.” I didn’t wish to gossip more about someone who was facing one of the worst situations a person could find themselves in. “Would you like some coffee?”

“I...yeah, maybe. Thanks.” I rose. “And thanks for being so decent about my fuckup. I’m turning over a new leaf. No women and no drinking.” He crossed his heart with a shaky finger.

I doubted that vow would last long. I remembered being young and randy. Hell, I was still randy, just less frequently. Truth be told, I’d given up on my sex drive for years, thinking I was too old and broken for such things. Then Tony Gugliotti showed up in my little town and *BOING!* My dick staged a revival meeting in my drawers.

After his coffee, I sent my disheveled deputy home to shower and shave. My hour at the gym dragged terribly as everywhere I looked there were holiday decorations. How the store owners had gotten them up so damn fast was a mystery. They were everywhere, though. I suspected Bradley had recruited the local streets department to work overtime to

make sure the tinsel candy canes were attached to the old-fashioned lights that lined Main Street just for the movie ambiance. Hell, knowing the mayor, he might have done it himself. Just him and the Mrs. out at two a.m., her holding the ladder, while he made with the merry.

The office was as quiet as a tomb when I arrived. Most of the offices were open today but with very disgruntled and sullen employees, so the chit-chat was the bare minimum. An older woman, Leighanna, was our dispatcher today. She waved and offered me some cookies that were left over from her big meal yesterday. Given the state of my trousers since Tony moved in, I politely declined the sweets and ambled into our tiny office, proud as hell of myself for not giving into temptation.

“Hey, I see you came into work today,” Logan from the planning commission office said as he stopped at my door. “I wasn’t sure you’d have the stamina after spending all day with that TV star fiancé of yours.”

My ass was barely in my chair and we were doing this already. “Tony and I are not engaged. He’s staying with me because of the lack of rooms for the movie production company.”

“That’s not what Leroy Gilken was saying at the diner. He said that his wife, Tizzy, who owns the hairdresser shop out on Miff Berry Road, was saying her cousin Freda, who works for the cleaning company that won the contract for the courthouse, had to unlock the basement door and let you two out. Freda said that you two looked real cozy and that you two were holding hands. Then Paulina, who’s the clerk at the *What A Bargain!* store, saw Tony through a window and swore he had a hickey on his neck in the shape of a walrus. When she said that Gladys Humphrey had one of her spells and they had to use some vinegar on a sponge to revive her.”

Christ. This town. “Okay, so for starters, as I said, Tony and I are old friends. Yes, we did get trapped in the basement. No, we were not cozy.”

Excuse me? You fucked him over a camel. If that's not cozy, I don't know what is!

Great, Satan Jr. was back and yakking in my ear.

“And as for a hickey, it was probably a shadow,” I clarified as he stood there nodding his balding head while chewing on a jelly donut. I was too damn mature to give hickeys.

“Huh, well, okay then. Anyway, Tonya is working on her guest list for our yearly Christmas party. Two kinds of tiny wieners this year! Look for the invite in your inbox within the week and RSVP early because once we hit fifty people, we're cutting things off.”

“Will do, but I'm not sure if I'll be free. It takes a lot of time to keep those Hollywood folks in line.” I would sooner place my balls in a nutcracker than go to a Logan/Tonya party. The last one was still being talked about in whispered conversation at any town function. I think there was a meme floating around a year or so ago. I'd never seen a man get so thoroughly raked over the coals in my life.

“Yep, so I hear. I personally keep my distance. Tonya's not fond of people who come from outside the county. Other than you, of course. She says you're her token queer party invite.”

“She says that out loud?” I enquired because...wow.

“Well, no. Well, I mean, she said it to me over dinner one night. But it's a compliment.” His phone pinged. The man startled so badly that he dropped his donut. “Shit. I mean, oh hey, that's Tonya. Make sure you look for that email!”

He ran off, leaving his donut on the floor in his haste. Sighing, I got up and plucked the baked good from the floor before Leighanna came in to ask if I wanted to speak to the local yarn crafting group, Knit Happens, and slipped. We did not need a broken hip on Black Friday. Or any other day. After I dropped the donut in the trash, I sat back down, fired up my desktop, and tackled some paperwork. While I loved my job, I loathed the incredible amount of paperwork that came with it. Every incident required a report filed. And while my workload was lighter than say my fellow officers in Philly or Pittsburgh,

it was still mundane and boring. My typing skills were shit—my fingers were too big for the small keys—so I did a lot of hunting and pecking with one finger. I'd just opened the incident report for the domestic call last night when I heard a few clerks passing by my door, discussing the great deals online today.

Knowing that I'd be whisked back into my past as I filed all the details that I could recall, I opted to let that set for a spell and opened up a search for good gifts for...

And there I hit a blank. What exactly was Tony to me now? Not my boyfriend and yet not exactly my ex anymore. So was he now my friend? I mean, we did fuck over a camel as my inner asshole with horns had so tactfully pointed out. Generally speaking, I didn't do that to my friends. So we were more than friends but not boyfriends. Was that a category I could even do a search for? Would the search engine find me a nice present if I typed in "What to get someone you're fucking and considering getting back together with but are scared shitless of actually taking that step because he hurt you so badly a lifetime ago?" or would the poor program just curl up like a pill bug?

I typed in gifts for male friends.

That seemed less likely to fry the server or whatever type of technobabble might ensue. Pages and pages of gift suggestions appeared. I squinted at the screen and began scrolling. So many suggestions. Holy hell. How would I ever decide? And should I even be looking for Christmas gifts? Where did gift giving fall in the working on reconciling list? Was there a list? I went searching for one in a separate tab while a page filled with men's scarves waited on the left of the screen for me to return. Hmm, well, this page was full of healthy tips. Don't use the past as a weapon. Oops. Okay, I did that. Big time. They also said to communicate honestly. Ouch. Yeah, that was a tough thing for me to do. Exposing my vulnerable spots was something that I didn't like to do. Learned that growing up with a man who spoke with his fists. Yikes, this list was filled with tough angles that were not going

to be easy. Did I even want to spend all that energy on a man who had torn my chest open and ripped out my heart before?

Now, Stillman, that's a bit over the top. Yes, he did hurt you, but he was younger then, and as we know, young men tend to do foolish things. I recall a line from Sir Walter Scott about the affectations of young men and—

“Rap, rap! Oh hey, are you shopping on company time?” I looked up to see Bradley, wearing that fake politician smile, peering over the top of my monitor. Thankfully, he had shown up before my angelic shoulder guest could get deeper into Scottish poets and their thoughts on youthful swains. “I’ll have to dock your pay packet!”

“You don’t pay me, the state does.”

He stood straight, sighed as if slighted, and then tucked his too long tie back into his brown suit jacket.

“I was joshing, Stillman. I’d never dock your pay for spending some time looking for the perfect gift for that handsome fiancé of yours.”

It was only nine in the morning. Maybe I should take an ad out in the Rockmount News to inform the good villagers that I was not engaged to Tony.

“We’re only friends,” I wearily replied.

“Oh really? That’s not what I heard at the diner. Well, if you want to keep it under wraps, that’s fine. I know how famous stars are when it comes to personal matters. I’ve tried numerous times to speak to Sasha Faye since her arrival, but her retinue informed me that she does not allow anyone but her team into her trailer, which is a shame because I have an incredible idea about an ad for the county that—”

“Bradley, did you want something in particular?” I asked as I closed out the “how to get back with your ex” page. I minimized the scarf page as Tony did like scarves. Or he used to. Shit, I barely knew this older Tony at all. Did he still enjoy seafood? What was his favorite color now? Was it still blue or had that changed?

“I did, yes. Today they’re shooting the tree lighting ceremony on the green. I’m reminding all the extras to show up and be ready for that scene. The director asked me personally to contact all the locals who signed contracts. I just know people are going to flock here for the winter after seeing our beautiful little park all done up with lights!”

Ugh. Hair and makeup. “Fine, I’ll be there.” I prayed there were no lines I had to remember. “I do have to get this paperwork done. By the way, do you know if there are any openings at the Wilda Hinkens Shelter?”

His always upbeat persona fell away. “I heard about the call out to Clint’s place. I’ll check with Dot. Sadly, it’s generally pretty full. Lots of hard times in our neck of the woods. Low jobs, high cost of living...”

I was aware. Yes, life was hard for rural Americans, but that didn’t give people the right to take out their frustrations on those weaker than them.

“Thanks. I’m just asking in case someone might want to spend a night or two—” I replied and then let it drop. Bradley did the same. His cousin ran the shelter, so he had a direct line to the place. Dot, too, had seen her share of hard times with her ex-husband. I liked her a lot and did all I could for her shelter whenever it was possible. That included donations and fundraising candy bar sales. Families needed that shelter. And yes, that was also my past experience talking.

“Of course. I hope if anyone needs a room, they know they need only to call.” He gave me a nod, threw back his shoulders, and fell into mayor form. “So, I’m off to supervise the placing of the Marty Buckerman star as it’s transported from the Grange to the green. What a glorious day to be mayor!”

Off he went, stopping to talk with Leighanna on the way out. Hoping that going to the tree lighting ceremony would be a lift, I dove into the incident report from last night and then filed it away. There were several others in the files.

When I was perusing socks for friends, a call rolled in, the ping pulling me from some really silly but cute men’s socks

with stars on them. There was no stopping the smile that appeared when I saw it was Tony. I hurried to close the sock website.

“Morning,” I answered in my best sheriff voice as Leighanna was seated less than a few hundred feet away. “Sheriff King speaking.”

“Morning, Sheriff, it’s your wooing partner calling from the diner where I’ve just been given a free plate of eggs and hash browns for my betrothal. Would you happen to know anything about this news and should I change my status on Facebook?”

I probably shouldn’t have chortled, but the man made me happy. Sue me. “Yeah, that’s the rumor going around. Guess you can’t have an old friend bunk with you without someone thinking you’re engaged when you’re not.”

I said that last bit loudly enough for Leighanna to hear.

“Well, as rumors go, I like it. I’d be happy to be your affianced.”

“We’ve not even dated yet,” I hurried to correct. Marriage. What a silly notion. Why would he even say such a thing? I wasn’t even sure I wanted to be wooed by him.

“A man can dream.” I shook my head at his foolishness. “So, I see that we’re shooting the tree lighting scene today and wanted to give you a heads-up. Oh, hello. Thank you, yes, we’re very excited. Stillman is picking out drapes as we speak.”

I heard Lyle Grossman through the phone. The man was deaf as a locust post and spoke so loudly he could be heard outside when he was inside.

“Anthony, for God’s sake, don’t encourage the gossip,” I huffed, leaning up to rest my brow in my hand. “Now people will be asking for our registry.”

His little titter should have infuriated me. It didn’t. Actually, it kind of made me fizzy in the belly. “It’s all good fun. And who knows. You just might like the idea of being my forever guy.”

I had to get this phone call back on track and fast. “You were going to pass along news about the tree lighting shoot?”

“Right. Don’t be in a hurry to run over to the green. Seems the leading lady is throwing a bit of a hissy fit about having to leave New York City before she could spend some cash at Vivienne Westwood’s and is even now refusing to leave her hotel room in Manhattan.”

“Why don’t they just fire her?”

“She has a contract, and she’s the top daytime female lead for ten years running. Don’t you watch the Daytime Emmys?”

“No, sir, I do not.”

“Barbarian. Well, she’s won year after year. She’s adored by the fans. So they’ll coddle her antics until filming is complete. So, while she’s having a tantrum in her room at the Ritz-Carlton, we’re here twiddling our thumbs. Mignon and I are thinking of going up to that mall in New York State and then stopping at a Whole Foods if I can find one, just to kill the morning since we’re not going to be filming until Medusa slithers back over the state line.”

“Okay, I have stuff to do here in town. Thanks for calling and letting me know about the delay. You don’t have to inform me of what you’re doing, Tony. I’m not your boyfriend.”

“Yet. Oh, and free coffee! Thank you, Mabel. Yes, I am talking to Stillman. Oh, of course. Stillman, Mabel said not to forget about the parking situation behind the bank.”

“The busted parking meter isn’t actually part of my job description as I explained to her, but I’ll pass it along to the proper office.” I sat there listening as he relayed the message to the morning shift waitress. “I’m hoping to get some admin work done today.”

No sooner did the words tumble from my mouth than a call came into dispatch. I heard Leighanna take the call, sighed at the name Butterman when it came up and knew my planned morning of paperwork was now over. “Tony, I have to go. There’s some sort of issue out on the Butterman hog farm that needs me.”

“Oh crap. I hope everything is okay. I’ll see you later today and will keep you posted as to when the wicked witch arrives on her broomstick. Be safe.”

“Yeah, you too.” I hung up, then thunked myself on the brow. “Be safe. At Whole Foods. You have such a way with words, Stillman.”

Pushing to my feet, I met Teddy as he arrived, looking better for the shower, shave, and clean uniform.

“What do we have?” I asked Leighanna as I shoved my arm into my winter coat.

“Someone cut the fencing on the western side of the hog farm. There are fifty or so free-roaming pigs wandering up and down the hogback.” She smiled up at us. “I shit you not. Could I make up something like that?”

No, no, she couldn’t. Hopefully, pigs were easy to herd.

As it turns out, pigs are not easy to herd.

Rather like chickens, only bigger and far less congenial.

It took Teddy, me, Bob Buttermann, his wife Chloe, and their five kids almost seven hours to round up all that bacon on the hoof. Teddy got bitten on the thigh. I fell down and skinned my knee, and when Louie Diggle drove up to us and blew his horn, Bob almost got stampeded by his own hogs as we were steering several back over the road. The pigs squealed. Bob was knocked down. Hogs ran every which way. It was utter chaos. How little kids showed pigs at the county fair every year was beyond me. Sure, they had boards to steer them, but still...

When I limped back to my cruiser with my deputy gimping along at my side, I found my cell laying on the seat with several messages. All from the movie set asking us to report to the town green asap as Sasha had finally arrived. It was after five p.m. and nearly dark. I tossed our gifts from the hog farmers in the back seat.

I glanced at Teddy as he rubbed his thigh. “You sure that’s okay?”

“Yeah, I checked it when I took a piss behind a tree. It didn’t break the skin, but man is there a bruise coming up already. Size of my fist it is. Fucking pigs.”

“Yeah, I may never eat bacon again.” That was a total lie. I loved bacon. I’d better because the Buttermans had given us each ten pounds of the stuff as well as an Easter ham for our valiant efforts. “Looks like all the extras are needed by the tree on the green.”

He gaped at me. “Now?”

I nodded and looked down at my filthy clothes. I was coated with mud and pig shit from chasing meat hogs through diversion ditches for several hours. If whoever snipped that fencing did it again, I would taser their asses for the sheer joy of it. Probably bored teenagers. This kind of stupid vandalism happened all the time. There was little for kids to do around here, so they got into trouble like this and from knocking down mailboxes from their cars. The pasture was a mess, as a small feeder for a nearby creek ran through it. Given that we’d arrived a few hours after the pigs were free, there was no chance of finding any evidence.

“I’m going to go home and change,” I said and got a firm nod from Teddy. The stink rolling off us would not endear us to the production crew and anyone else in a hundred-yard radius. Nothing quite as glamorous as being a small-town sheriff.

Teddy climbed into the passenger seat while I flopped behind the steering wheel. The windows were frosty, so we sat and waited, wet muddy clothes sticking to our calves, as the engine slowly warmed.

“Did you notice that Belinda Butterman gave me some extra side pork?” Teddy asked as we sat there shivering in our shitty boots. I rolled my head wearily to the right to give him the driest look that I possessed. He glanced up from his phone. His wind-chapped cheeks flushed a deeper red. “I’m not

thinking of anything bad. She's just nice. Sweet, you know. Cute with them freckles and red hair."

"She's also got four brothers that will beat you like a dime-store rug if you get out of line."

"No, no, I'm not thinking of asking her out for *that*. I meant it when I said I was giving up women and wine."

"Teddy, Belinda is a woman." I felt it prudent to remind him.

"Oh sure, well, I meant fast women."

I could foresee a near future when four massive hog farmers came looking for my deputy with fire in their eyes. I hoped Teddy's bite was healed by then because he was going to have run damn fast.

In all honesty—and aside from the throngs of people everywhere—our tiny town green had never looked more festive. Sure, it was all a bit much. Still, the massive pine that was all set and ready to go as if it were the gargantuan fir at Rockefeller Plaza was breathtaking. Our usual trees were dwarfed in comparison to this behemoth. Where they'd found it I had no clue but it was a stunning blue spruce, perfectly shaped, and festooned with thousands of delicate glass balls, strings of lights yet to be lit, and enough garland to reach from here to the state capitol.

People milled about, all in winter coats and hats, gloves and mittens, snow boots and mukluks. Stands sold hot cocoa and soft pretzels. A few dogs on leashes could be seen sniffing strangers' boots as kids were being told where to stand by harried-looking parents. There was even music playing. An old Bing Crosby tune extolling the beauty of Christmas in Hawaii. With the frosty temps and little flakes falling from the sky, Rockmount looked nothing like Honolulu.

"There you are!" I was torn from my perusal of my town by Mignon. He skittered up to me, frantic by the looks, and waved a mittened hand at the trailers parked on Main Street.

“Tony has been trying to reach you all day. The man is beside himself.”

“There’s no cell service out on the pig farm. Joys of rural living,” I replied and got a sassy look. “I told him where I was going.”

“Well, yes, but when he sent you several texts and didn’t get a reply, he assumed the worst.”

“Just like his mother.” I sighed but was touched that the man fretted so.

“Exactly. He’s sure you were eaten by a pig.” I stared at him openly. “What? It happens. I’ve seen it several times as plot devices on shows. Kill someone you dislike and then feed them to the pigs. Evidence gone! Seems a lawman would know such things.”

“Okay, well, yes, pigs are omnivores and so they would and could eat a human being, but that human would have to be unconscious or dead. I am, the last I checked, neither of those two things, so I’m not overly worried about being on the porcine menu.”

He huffed as he tapped away on his tablet. “There, he knows that you’re alive and well. I told him to meet us by the steamed peanut vendor. So please just stay put so he can find you and calm his emotions.”

Off he went into the mass of humanity. Since I’d been told to stay put, I did just that, taking a peek into the peanut vendor’s steamy glass display atop his cart. The peanuts did not appear to be real, which kind of sucked because I was starving.

“There you are!” I glanced over my shoulder to see a woman in bold black glasses with frizzy black hair charging up to me. “Why aren’t you in wardrobe?! Sasha is ready to film and our town cop is in jeans and an old flannel coat.”

“I was told not to move by my... Tony,” I explained to whoever this was. Her lanyard said she was Ruth Raynard, Social Media Consultant to Sasha Faye. Ah, a lady-in-waiting. “Why does Sasha care if I’m here or not?”

“Because you’re supposed to stand right behind her and Tony when they kiss. Did you not read the script?! Seriously, this is just...ugh! I hate my job. Oh great, now look. She’s heading our way with that constipated look on her—Sasha! I found the cop! I love that pink beret on you.”

Sasha Faye stalked up to me with Tony right on her heels. She planted herself directly in front of me, tipped her head back, and said...nothing. Just stared up at me. I glanced over at Tony, who stepped around his ex-wife wearing a look of utter exasperation.

“Stillman, they need you over in wardrobe,” he said while Gayle was trying to hide behind the peanut cart. I peeked down at Sasha, who was still glaring at me silently.

“Is my head on backward?” I asked the TV star.

“You are a curd,” Sasha informed me, spun on her pink booted heel, and stormed off with Gayle and at least five other women trailing behind her making apologies for me.

“Did she call me a curd? Like...a curd from a tub of cottage cheese or a member of a Turkish minority group?”

“I’m sure she meant cottage cheese. That woman wouldn’t have the slightest idea where Turkey was, trust me. Where have you been all day? I was ready to go find the pig farm and demand to see what was left of your corpse.”

“I was doing my job. Keeping people from running into pigs and vice versa. There was no cell service out that far, and then I had to shower and change into something that wasn’t smeared with hog feces. Sadly, I have no clean uniforms—I never got to the dry cleaner today—so I had to come in street clothes. You’re incredibly nosy for a man I’ve not even decided I want to woo with.”

That comment brought a twinkle to his brown eyes. “Oh stop. You know you want to woo with me, you’re just playing hard to get. I’m glad you’re okay, but I am not thrilled about the lack of cell service. What can be done about that?”

“Talk to the congressman when he shows up and tell him to push for more infrastructure money for rural communities.”

“I’ll do that. For now, let me send Mignon to the dry cleaners for your sexy uniforms while we whisk you through hair and makeup, and then we’ll get you one of them.”

“But I have to wear one that has Mistletoe Corners on it,” I explained. He rolled his eyes as he led me around cables, tracks, and a huddle of people trying to calm down Sasha.

“We’ll see what we can do about that,” he replied, linking his fingers with mine. It was a bold move, and perhaps I should have stopped it, but it felt good. People both native and not watched us walking hand-in-hand toward the makeup trailer.

As it turned out, Tony didn’t do much about my appearing in a crappy Hollywood sheriff uniform. If it didn’t say Mistletoe Corners on it, I wasn’t wearing it on screen. Which was fine. This was probably the last time I’d have to be in this scratchy outfit, anyway. I hoped. While Teddy and the other Rockmountians were thrilled to be part of this adventure, I could have happily lived my whole life without having someone powder my nose.

Another thing I could have lived without was watching Tony kiss Sasha. Seventeen times. Take after take after take. It seemed endless as well as pointless. Each time they kissed, it looked just the same as the time before. Sure, a hand may have moved or a head tilted, but why the hell did a hand make any difference? Also, because I was cold, tired, and hungry, which made me cranky, did Sasha have to keep staring up at Tony as if she loved him? Surely she didn’t have to exude so much passion in a kissing scene? The way she gazed up at him made me itchy. Or perhaps that was the rental uniform. Whatever the case, by the time the stupid tree was lit and the stupid leading man and lady had stupidly kissed a hundred stupid times, I was done with make believe and makeup. It was all stupid.

I stalked off in a snit, eager to be free of this pancake batter on my face and the too-tight pants digging into my balls. Tony finally found me as I was wiggling free of my costume in the wardrobe trailer. He was freshly scrubbed of his makeup and

in his own clothes. His smile for me and the young man trying to keep track of all the clothing and hats being chucked at him was refreshing and real.

“Gibraltar, why don’t you go get a snack and something to drink at the diner? They’re handing out fresh cranberry and eggnog tarts,” Tony told the young dude with the silver nose ring. I stood there in my boxers and socks, stunned at the speed the kid raced out of that trailer. The door slammed in his wake. Tony turned those dark eyes to me as he locked the door and then leaned his ass against it. “Now, let’s have a look at you.”

“Tony, if you’re planning on doing something naughty, I need to remind you that I’m a public servant in this town and —”

“Hush now.” He pushed from the door, swaggering to me as if he had just gotten down off a horse in a western as opposed to snogging with his far-too-pretty ex-wife in a holiday rom-com. “I’m well aware of your standing in this community. I’m also well aware of how cross you looked during shooting this evening.”

He closed the distance between us. My cock perked up as Tony reached out with one finger to snap the waist of my boxers softly.

“I dislike standing around in the cold,” I answered as he pulled that lone finger up my belly, across a stiff nipple, and then back down to the elastic on my briefs. By this time, my dick was rock hard and leaking. His gaze moved over my face and then downward, a devilish twitch pulling up one corner of that lush mouth as he spied my erection.

“So it was the cold that made you look like you wanted to chuck Sasha into a pigpen?” He drew a circle around my navel, his eyes glowing now with lust, and then he went to his knees on a pile of winter wear that needed to be sorted by size and hung up.

“Yes,” I grunted out as he buried his face into my belly, his hands coming up and around to cradle my ass as he rooted

around like a wee piglet searching for a teat. “Hate the cold... Tony...damn it.”

His lips moved over my prick, rubbing as they went, then gently nipping at the thin cotton of my boxers. His gaze fluttered up to me as he mouthed my cock, brown eyes simmering with desire and a request.

“I never did have any self-control around you,” I admitted, my voice husky. “Take me out quickly.” He did as told, eagerly pulling my dick through the opening and dipping his tongue into the slit to gather up the droplet of precum. My balls tightened at the sight. “Take out your cock now.” Again, he was fast to do as I bid. He’d always like to be led with a strong but gentle hand. “Stroke yourself while you suck me off.”

A shudder ran through him as he worked at his zipper. When his prick was freed, he gave it a long, slow caress before falling on my cock like a starved hound. Knowing him—or having known him—I hoped I was reading the yearning look right. I threaded my fingers into his hair, his purr of pleasure showing me that yes, this was what he wanted. I began to work my dick in and out of his slippery lips, enjoying the sounds that filled the trailer. Slurps and moans, grunts, soft whispers of how good he was at taking me apart. That was no lie. The man had always been able to wreck me physically and emotionally. While it should behoove me to remember how he’d totaled me all those years ago, I couldn’t. Not when he was kneeling before me, taking me to the hilt, his hand on his dick. Perhaps I might not ever be able to distance myself from him again. Perhaps I didn’t want to...

“Coming,” I huffed when my balls drew up. He cooed, the sound vibrating through my spit-slick shaft. My hold on his hair tightened. He moaned long and low as I shot my spend down his throat. I felt the warm splash of his spunk on my calf. I pumped slowly, dragging my dick to rest on his lower lip, then pressing back in, time and again, until the tremors stalled.

“Delicious,” he roughly whispered, licking my cock like an ice cream cone. I rubbed his scalp, easing the sting of the

tugs I'd given him, then smiled as he got to his feet.

"Do it," I said, gathering him close as he slanted his mouth over mine. The cum on his tongue was salty, bitter, and mine. I lapped hungrily, loving the taste of myself in his mouth.

"Was it as good as you remember?" he asked, easing back into my embrace.

"Well, I'm pretty old and my memory ain't what it used to be, so...maybe?"

"Ass," he teased back.

"You've gotten better with age," I confessed as I ran my hands up and down his side. "So is oral sex part of wooing?"

"Of course!"

"And to think I imagined wooing as buggy rides with an escort so no improprieties were engaged in."

He gave my chin a little nip. "I'm all for improper behavior if it wins you over." He stared at me hard, driving his words into my cinderblock head—or trying to. "I will do whatever is needed, Stillman. I've learned a lot of hard life lessons along the way to get where we are now."

"In a chilly wardrobe trailer parked in some two-horse town?"

"Exactly." His smile was stunning just like the movie magazines had always claimed it was. "One of the largest lessons was that I'd given up the only man for me for fame."

I was about to ask him if he would do the same thing again if he had to when a rap on the door scared us both so badly we startled.

"Shit," he hissed, leaping into action. He yanked up his zipper as I scrambled around looking for my clothes on what had to be a hundred hangers on one of ten rolling wardrobe racks. "One minute, we're in our delicates!"

"I can't find my damn clothes!" I spat, shoving hangers aside frantically.

“You’re in A through J. Look on the next rack for K for King,” Tony called while raking his fingers through his mussed hair. “Christ, I think I have cum on my shoes.”

“Could be worse. Could have cum on your shin,” I fired back just as I found my street clothes neatly folded and covered with thin plastic. The hammering got louder. “Tell them to stop knocking or I’ll arrest them for unnecessary impatience.”

That got a giggle from my—I’d search for a word for him later. Right now, I was all about hiking my pants over my ass. Tony bumbled about, tripping over hats that lay on the floor untended, until he got to the door. I gave him a nod at his fast glance back as I shucked my shirt up over my shoulders. He threw the door open and cussed at whoever was on the portable stairs.

“You’re fired,” I heard him saying.

“Better me than poor Gibraltar who, rumor has it, was sent to the diner with his heart set on cranberry and eggnog tarts only to be told there were none because cranberry and eggnog tarts were *yesterday’s* baked goodie,” I heard Mignon taunting. Must be they had an incredibly good working relationship if he could give his boss shit like he did. He peeked around Tony when I ambled out, my belt in my hands. “Mmhmm, I figured. You’re welcome. I did divert Gibraltar when he was on his way back to the trailer, tartless and heartbroken, with the key to the door in his hand.”

“Young Gibraltar would have gotten a first-hand lesson in fellatio,” Tony replied and gave me a dirty wink that made me blush. Not an easy thing to do. I was not a man prone to pink cheeks generally.

“You talk too much,” I said as I shrugged into my coat and stepped around Mignon on the top stair.

“I wasn’t doing much talking for the past fifteen minutes or so,” Tony called as I strode off, face flaming, ignoring the sad-looking wardrobe assistant as he shuffled past in the throes of utter dejection. Poor kid must really like tarts. I could hear Tony chuckling behind me. What the hell was I even doing

anymore? What the hell happened to my nice, quiet, dreary life?

Chapter Eleven

It was funny how fourteen days could race past in the thump of a twitterpated heart.

My life before the crew of *Tinsel Kisses for Santa*—I assumed Tony was to be Santa but had yet seen him in the red suit—had been pleasant enough. I'd certainly not been unhappy by any means, just a little lonely at times. Ellery coming along had been an enormous boon but damn Sam the winter nights were fucking long.

Now I barely had time to think about the short days because they were packed with things. All kinds of things, and not just law enforcing things, but Tony things. The man was not one to sit still for long. Even back in college, he was always tromping from one side of the Drexel campus to the other for plays, fundraisers, chorus practice, and his baking club. Amazingly, he still had that drive. Most of us slowed down with age. Not Anthony Gugliotti. He kept me moving constantly, and not just on outings, but in bed as well. Trust me, I was not complaining about the bed play. I'd been pretty much celibate for years now, so having sex on the daily or close to it was frigging amazing. As I sat staring at Tony across a table with a checkered cloth and a stumpy candle in a festive pine bough decorative base, I confessed to myself that I wasn't really complaining about the hustle of outings and dates. Dates. Like the one we were on right now.

A cozy little inn that straddled the New York/Pennsylvania border which served the best steaks in either state. Tony had somehow found this remote rustic log cabin and booked us a meal. Or perhaps it had been Mignon who had set up this dinner. Whoever it was, kudos.

I was far enough away from Rockmount that no one knew me, which was a blessing all on its own. It's hard to be wooed when everyone and their damn Treeing Walker Coonhound knew you and stopped to visit your table. We'd not had one meal out where someone didn't come up to me to talk local shit or gush over Tony. I found it hard to believe that there was a person alive in the Keystone State that didn't have a selfie

with Anthony. Things here at the Mossy Elk Inn had been so peaceful and mostly free from adoring fans. They'd given us a private dining room. All to ourselves, with only impeccably trained staff to wait on us.

"Did you set up this date or was it your PA?" I asked as I lifted a sesame breadstick from a cloth-lined basket. A roaring fire snapped in a stone hearth under a thick pine slab of a shelf holding festive wood carvings of Old St. Nick and his reindeer.

"Why?" he asked as he began cutting up his salad. Soft holiday tunes played around us. The sounds of other diners could just be heard if one strained. I wasn't straining.

"Because I need to know which of you is getting dicked into my bed tonight."

He snickered as he chased a cherry tomato around his bowl. "Now you realize that I'm going to say me even if it was Mignon. I'm a very jealous lover, Stillman. You know the Gugliotti blood runs hot like lava from Vesuvius." Yes, I did know that. And I really loved it. "It was me. Honestly. Mignon found five, but I made the final call. So perhaps just give my PA a gift card to Hermes and dick me into the bed."

"Fair," I mumbled and doused my salad with thick, pungent blue cheese dressing from a little carafe. His eyes glowed like the votive candles on each empty table around us. How he finagled to get a private room at peak dining season and times I couldn't hazard a guess, but it was working. Big time. I might be a big, bad bear of a cop, but I have a tender underbelly. I made a mental note to get a gift card for Mignon. Tony's thank you required no online action.

We dined on perfectly prepared T-bones—mine rare and his medium well—buttery baked potatoes, and a tender shoot of asparagus. The coffee after the meal was rich and bold and went perfectly with the slices of double chocolate cake we both had. I joked about having to run to the gym tomorrow. Tony said he would ensure we would both wear off the luscious meal when we got into bed.

“As much as it pains me, I have to admit that you’re doing well on the wooing,” I confessed as I forked up my last bite of cake. He beamed as I chewed and moaned in total bliss. “I don’t think you’ve missed much in the past ten days or so. And all so romantic.”

“I pride myself on my romanticism. It’s a gift that all Italian people possess.” Cocky bugger. He was right, but still did he have to know it? “What all have we done for our wooing?”

“Well, we went bowling. Not sure how romantic that is,” I said and got a sour look.

“Bowling is terribly romantic. Also, in my defense, it had snowed, and the roads were dicey, so that left little to choose from locally.”

I nodded. He was right. It had snowed. The town had been simply glorious the following morning with a few inches of white powder. The set designers for the movie were so thrilled I feared one little guy in a beret might have orgasmed right there on Main Street.

“What else did I do to win your heart?” he asked over his cup of coffee, those brown eyes sparkling with secrets and mischief.

“Well, other than bowling, we’ve been to the library for a Jane Austen holiday reading,” I replied as I leaned back to stretch out my legs under the table. Tony did the same, his socked toes finding my calf, then began a slow rub up and down. The tease. “Then we took a class at the candy store and made little chocolate candy canes. One night we went to the glass museum to shop. We spent a few nights at home where you cooked and then we watched holiday movies.”

“Hmm, well, that night we watched *Die Hard* was questionable.”

We’d playfully bickered about if the Bruce Willis classic was, in fact, a holiday movie. I said it was. He didn’t seem convinced. So I sucked his dick after the movie and then he conceded that I had been right all along.

“It’s not really Christmas until you watch a terrorist fall from a high-rise.”

“I’ll stick with the less violent films for my holiday viewing.”

“You know, we’ve done just about everything there is to do in this county and several others close by, but we haven’t been to a movie in a theater yet.”

“I’m glad you brought that up.” He placed his cup on its saucer, then gave the little bell that we’d been given a ring. The doors opened, and the sounds of a packed eatery flowed in as four servers hustled in with a TV on a rolling cart, trays, and smiles.

“What is going on here?” I asked as I sat up, his toes still under my pant leg.

A young lady placed a tray of boxed candies on the table. Another server deposited a huge bucket of buttered popcorn beside the candy tray. Then another server placed two massive cups of iced drinks in front of us. Tony sat there smug as a hoot owl, smirking devilishly as the fourth server quickly parked the TV on the stand along a wall and slipped a DVD into the slot on the bottom of it. The tech server hurried over to hand Tony a remote as I sat there looking as dumb as a pine knot. Then, as fast as they arrived, they left, dousing the lights as the door was closed.

The room was dark now aside from the glow of the fire and the flickering candles burning low on each table.

“If you bribed the owners to let us watch porn in here...”

Tony chuckled as he sat up to eye the selection of candy. He couldn’t possibly be hungry.

“No, although that would have been a randy idea. But no, we’ve watched enough of that in bed since I arrived. You’ll love it, trust me. May I slide my chair around to sit beside you?”

“Keep your hands to yourself, mister.”

“I make no promises.” He moved around the table, sat at my side, and then let his head fall to my shoulder while he pointed the remote at the large screen. “If I get frisky, will you paddle my ass?”

“Yes, I will.”

He shivered and then pushed play. A fictional Greek isle swam into view and I knew exactly what film he’d arranged for us to watch. *Mamma Mia*.

“You damn idiot,” I whispered, my throat thick with far too many emotions.

He said nothing in reply, just reached over to grab my knee and give it a squeeze while Sophie began going on about dots.

I pressed a kiss to his thick hair. Yep, the man knew how to woo.

He also knew how to ride a dick.

Given that he had done such an amazing job with tonight’s date, I made sure to give him the gift he so deserved. My cock buried in his tight, hot ass. His choice of how he got it. Being a fan of westerns, even though he’d yet to star in one, he chose to bust me like a wild bronc.

This bucking stallion had no complaints about the man bouncing up and down on his dick. Tony’s head was back, his prick leaping, and his fingers meshed with mine.

“Fuck...fuck...fuck,” he grunted each time his ass hit my thighs. I was teetering on the brink of losing all control but gritted my teeth. I wanted him to shoot his wad all over me first. That private screening of *Mamma Mia* had earned him the first orgasm of the night. In truth, he deserved that every time we made love just because he was that special to me. Somehow, somehow, Tony Gugliotti had slowly and gracefully reclaimed that desiccated chunk of coal I had called my heart. Why he wanted the withered old bit, I had no clue. But bless him for yearning for it. Watching him lose himself in the pleasure that our bodies brought each other, I couldn’t help but wonder if he really planned to not re-sign with the network.

He'd be forfeiting some huge bucks as well as his standing as a soap opera heartthrob. And for what? To hang around with a crosspatch like me?

"I'm so close," Tony grunted, his fingers squeezing mine to the point of some minor pain.

"Come on my belly," I huffed, arching up from the bed to make sure he got every inch of cock when he came down. He did, and it made his dick jerk and spasm. Hot cum flew from him, coating my hairy stomach with strings of semen. Clutching his hands tightly, I let him ride out his orgasm, his hips rolling, his channel tightening around me. With a growl, I let go of that skinny tether of restraint and pumped a load into the condom. Tony wiggled and clenched as I came, his gaze hot and lazy as he watched me shatter.

When my abdomen was coated with spunk, he lay down on me, easing off my dick, so that he could lift my hands above my head and slant his mouth over mine. Our tongues danced smoothly, gliding with mellow ease, stroking, then pulling back. His hands held mine tightly, his strong arms pinning mine to the bed. I linked my leg around his and then rolled us to his back, his breath leaving him in a huff as I settled between his spread thighs and began licking from his swollen lips down to his tummy. He twitched and sighed as I cleaned up his cum before coming back to his mouth for one last deep taste.

"You're delicious," I whispered while licking a hot stripe up the side of his throat. He was like putty now, his body lax and his eyes drowsy. His hair was a tousled mess. The stuff of wet dreams and a hundred thousand fantasies. Our gazes locked. Something shifted inside me. Not sure what. Maybe my old cold heart grew a few sizes like the Grinch. Hell, maybe the tectonic plates under Rockmount lurched. Whatever it was, it made me feel foolish. Reckless. Unafraid.

"Are you okay?" Tony asked, his voice slow as molasses and sexy as fuck.

"I think...I never...your eyes never left me," I managed to croak out. His mouth pulled up at the sides, his hands sliding

up my forearms until they linked behind my neck. “Not for one day. Every night I saw your eyes before I fell asleep. I never stopped loving you. And now I really want to love you more. Forever if that works for you.”

“It so works for me. I never stopped loving you either, Stillman. Not a day went by that I didn’t think of you while cursing myself out. If only I’d had the courage to reach out years ago...”

I stole a soft kiss, my arms beginning to tremble. “I wouldn’t have accepted your call. Now I’m okay to pick up the receiver and say ‘Hello and welcome back’ or something along those lines.”

“Pick up the call? The kids don’t call anymore. They text. You have aged yourself terribly,” Tony teased.

“Yeah, probably. I’m not good at this.”

“Stillman King, you are *incredibly good* at this.” He pulled me down for one more slow, soft kiss before letting me go. Only long enough to shed the condom, trash it, and pad into the bath for a wet cloth. I took a moment to wash up at the sink and studied my face in the mirror. Did I look a little younger, perhaps? Had releasing the fear and anger ease the lifelines around my eyes? Or was I just being a giddy kid falling back in love? Whatever the reason, I was down with it.

Leaving the smiling guy in the looking glass behind, I carried the warm rag to my lover. He lay there in my bed looking every inch the seductive stud that he was. I wiped him clean, tossed the rag into the hamper, and then burrowed under the covers with him. We snuggled close, listening to the green oak logs in the woodstove pop and hiss while a winter wind blew into the county. Sleepy and sated, my Tony resting at my side, I wondered if we’d have snow in the morning. If so, maybe we’d go look for a tree out in the woods. Tony had asked several times, but I’d shut that down. I’d not decorated for two decades. Now though...

Maybe now it was time to set up a spruce tree for Ellery to knock down.

That was what one did when one was in love again, right?

Chapter Twelve

“It’s still leaning to the left,” Tony said as I lay on the floor holding a sticky-ass evergreen in a waterless stand.

“You said it was leaning right a second ago,” I grunted, shifting the tree for the twentieth time.

“It was, and then you fixed it, but it went too far left.”

I mumbled something very Scrooge-like under my breath. Lying on the hard floor was not doing my back any good. Ellery paraded past, his tail sweeping under my nose, as he tried to scale the tree.

“Hey, no! At least let us get the damn thing up before you climb it,” I snapped. The cat sat down and licked his balls. Right in my face. Typical Ellery. “So is it good?” Tony took a moment to reply. “Let me rephrase that. I know it’s good because we’ve been dicking with this tree for over forty minutes.”

“Yes, it’s perfect. Screw it!” Tony exclaimed.

“That’s what you said last night,” I huffed as I finally tightened the bolts to secure the tree into place. When that was done I rolled to my back with a grunt. Lying on the ground was not my thing. Maybe the Hollywood folks got into yoga with all that rolling around on the floor but not this old grumble pot.

“You weren’t complaining then. Stay there and let me fill up a watering can.”

I rolled my head to the left. There sat a cat butt. Nice. I looked up into the tree, the limbs thick and dark green. Deep in the densest boughs, I spied a small bird’s nest. A little-bitty thing it was, no bigger than the center of my hand.

“Hey, I think there’s a hummingbird nest in our tree,” I called out as my lower lumbar reminded me I was no longer a kid so get up off the motherfucking floor. “Maybe. Maybe it’s a small wren’s nest.”

“That’s wonderful. They say a home will be prosperous if a bird’s nest is found in the holiday tree. Leave it there. Here’s some water.”

He hunkered down and then passed me a bright yellow watering can. “Is this mine?” I asked as I took it and moved to water the tree.

“Hardly. Have you ever owned a thing that needed to be watered?” He sat down crisscross applesauce on the hardwood floor. Yep, he was one of them Hollywood yogis.

“The cat,” I pointed out. Ellery lifted his head from his grooming, gave me a very cat-like deadpan look, and then went back to cleaning his nuts.

“Aside from Ellery. Any plants of any kind?”

“Nope.”

“Then why would you own a watering can?”

“People own a lot of things that they never use.”

“True. No, it’s something that I bought online last week. I thought we could use it to water the potted tomatoes.”

“What potted tomatoes?” I wiggled out from under the tree like a Marine crawling under barbed wire in basic training. Tony shot to his feet to help me get up. I took his offered hands but didn’t really need them. Much.

“The ones we’ll plant in our little garden when we live in Greece.”

He seemed so earnest. I dusted the cat hair from my joggers and then handed the yellow watering can back to him.

“Who said we were living in Greece?” I asked as he futzed with my shirt, pulling it down to cover my belly button like an old mother hen.

“You did.” He paused in his fussing to study me closely. “The hotel on a small Greek island? Your mother’s dream that you want to see become a reality in her name? Any of that sound familiar?”

“Tony, those are pipe dreams. Sure, it would be nice to retire to some small island in the Mediterranean, but who can afford to do something like that? Not a small-town sheriff. There might be just enough in my 401K to live comfortably if I don’t go overboard and buying a hotel in Greece would definitely be going overboard.”

“I have lots of money just sitting in the bank getting dusty.” I opened my mouth to protest. “No, don’t say it. I know you have pride, far too much at times, but this would not be me paying your way. It would be a joint venture. We’d each put up half after you sell this place and then we’d run the inn equally. I’d do the books and such while you did the repairs.”

I stared at him in open dismay. “I’d do the repairs...”

“Yes, I’m not very handy that way, but I’m a whiz with numbers and people. I can be the desk clerk and handle the bookings while you fix things and go fishing with Atticus, the old fisherman who brings us free fish because his wife is our housekeeper.”

“Atticus...”

“Yep.” He bobbed his head, patted my chest, and went off to find the boxes of decorations he’d had delivered to my house the past four days. My feet were rooted to the floor. I stared at his backside and then his front when he returned with arms filled with lights and garland.

“So you’ve given this a lot of thought.” I took the boxes of garland as he deftly removed Ellery from about midway up the tree, placing him onto the floor.

“I’ve done it before quite a few times,” he replied, tucking the end of the lights at the top of our short but fat blue spruce.

“You’ve run a hotel in Greece with a man you love?”

“No, you pickle. Decorated a Christmas tree.”

“Ah.”

He paused in draping lights just so on the boughs to stare at me. “Of course I’ve given it some thought. I’ve thought of nothing *but* heading to Greece with you. Imagine it, Stillman.

You, me, a bedroom overlooking an azure sea. Free to live out the rest of our lives in the sun and surf, growing old together, sipping ouzo on the veranda as the sun drops from the sky, Ellery sprawled out in the waning sun as we exchange loving looks then a sweet kiss.”

Okay, yeah, that sounded really good. But still, it was a fantasy. Surely two men such as us, at our age, couldn’t simply pick up and move across the world. Could they?

“You’re a dreamer. Always have been,” I stated brusquely in hopes it would scuttle the daydreams of white beaches and a sun-drenched Tony spread over a rustic bed grinning up at me.

“And I’ve made those dreams come true. Every dream that I ever dared to dream has come to light. This one will too, you just have to believe.”

He moved around the tree. When he came back to me, I had a comeback ready. Just one, and a weak one, but it was a comeback just the same.

“You dreamed of starring in a western but never did,” I flung at him. He paused, nodded, and then smiled over at me.

“True, but I still have time. Maybe I can revive the spaghetti western!”

“Those were shot in Italy not Greece.”

“Fine, they’ll be moussaka westerns then.”

An amused snort broke free. “You’re an idiot.”

“Ah, but I’m your idiot. Now start with the garland. We need this tree done tonight as tomorrow is Christmas Eve. We won’t have time to finish it with us both working and then going to the town dance and cookie bake-off at the fire hall. Oh, don’t forget to get the Santa suit from Wanda. It was so nice of you to volunteer to sit on the throne.”

“I do that every morning after my high-fiber shake at the gym.”

“Stop it. Everyone knows Santa doesn’t poop.” I shrugged. “Then the day after is Christmas and we’ll be having people over.”

“Yeah, can we talk about that whole people over thing...”

“After you get the garland on the tree.”

Which was Gugliotti for nope not discussing it because I already made the plans and holidays are for food and friends.

As I began placing the silver garland on our tree, I had to wonder when I lost all control of my life and my home. Probably around the same time that I stopped caring if I lost control of my life and home just as long as Tony was sharing both.

Our little fire hall was decked out.

Our pride and joy ambulance as well as the two fire engines were parked outside of the bays, each one done up with garland and those fold-out paper balls that blew in the cold, cold wind. It wasn't a nice night weatherwise for the yearly holiday dance and bake-off—all sales benefiting the Rockmount Fire Company—as sleet was blowing sideways across the parking lot. It felt like little stones hitting your face. Since we had a few inches of snow leftover from a short Canadian blast about a week ago, we'd have a white Christmas for sure. The white might be snow-covered with tiny ice balls, but it all worked.

Tony hustled along beside me, his coat up to his ears, and his dark hair coated with bits of ice. He threw a tortured look my way.

“We could be in Greece next year at this time. Just saying...” He jogged ahead to grab the door for the elderly Winetoast sisters. They were twin sisters who lived together in an old farmhouse up on Winetoast Hill. Last year, the town celebrated their ninety-fifth birthday right here in the fire hall. No one could knit a sweater like Lily and Lila Winetoast. Everyone in town had at least one of their cozy creations. Tony was wearing the one they'd given me four years ago. I'd never been able to get into it, but I smiled and thanked them for the gift every time I saw them out at the old folks home or

at the domestic abuse shelter where they taught yarn crafts every Thursday.

Greece. Yeah, okay, that sounded really nice right about now. Being pummeled by Mother Nature's version of a winter sandblasting sucked. I'd probably be up all night responding to auto accidents. God forbid people slow down for conditions.

I let his comment blow past. There was probably little chance that I'd be moved from this county anytime soon. I liked it here. A lot. It was safe here. Known. Routine. I could not foresee anything that would make me leave this comfy little village in the mountains for some whimsical fantasy to honor my mother. Mom would understand. She would get it. A safe home was important. And I had that here. Who knew what we might find in Greece, if we went, which we weren't so might as well shelve that notion in the same mental filing cabinet where playing in Crazy Horse had been stashed many years ago.

I took the door from Tony so he could enter. Falling in behind him, the warmth enfolded us as did the arms of many friends. The mayor and his wife ran up to Tony to shake his hand. I got a pat on the arm and a raspberry cupcake to munch on while Tony was dragged off to talk to the more important people. Which suited me fine. I wasn't big on socializing. I moved through the crowd, eyeing the big tree in the corner and the throne that sat in front of it. Sighing at the knowledge that in an hour I'd be sitting there with snotty kids on my lap filled me with all kinds of cheer. Not really, but I'd volunteered. What a nice guy I was.

The hall was alive with Christmas songs and laughing townspeople as most of the movie folks had blown out of here this morning on whatever planes, trains, and automobiles they could find to haul them home. Sasha was winging her way to France with the ladies-in-waiting. Tony had praised all the gods for her departure. Her scenes were in the can as they say, and no one was happier to see her gone than...well, everyone.

Teddy and Belinda were over in the corner, smooching under some dusty plastic mistletoe. I scanned the fire hall for her brothers. None were here. Yet.

Happy to keep to myself, I whiled away the time tasting baked goods, buying baked goods, and judging baked goods. And I wasn't even an official judge. Someone just led me to a table to settle a tiff between Mary Johnson and Eileen Tittle. Both had brought fruitcake in the same tins. Guess Murray Tittle thought I would be best suited to calm the women down.

After tasting both fruitcakes and admiring the tins, I announced that both were tasty and that it was the season for love and not warring over fruitcake tins. After that, they calmed down a bit and allowed me to go and change into my red suit and fake beard.

Two hours later, the last toddler was off to bed, the fire hall was emptied out, and a few scattered volunteers remained to clean up the mess.

Teddy and Belinda had stayed as had a few of the local firefighters, but all seemed to be antsy to get home. The firemen had kids and wives, and Teddy and Belinda...

I wasn't sure what their rush was, but I waved them both away while telling them to behave. Teddy grinned, took her hand, and out into the bitter cold they ran.

"Young love." Tony sighed as he wiped down the dirty tables with a blue sponge.

"Young love is nothing but trouble," I replied, carting a folding table past him on my way to the storage room in the rear.

"Oh now, stop that. Young love can be rapturous! Surely you didn't forget our halcyon days at Drexel?"

I glanced over my shoulder to see him wink at me. The shitter. "No, I didn't forget. Never could. Now wipe faster so we can get out of here. I think I feel a cold coming on already. I should have never let that snotty Lucas kid get on my lap."

Tony chuckled. I bumped the door open with my hip, angled the long table through, then placed it along the wall with several others. It was chilly in this room. I took a few minutes to neaten up the stacked chairs. Mellow music filtered into the storage room, yanking me out to see what was up. Not

that I didn't know it was Tony fiddling with the sound system in the kitchen area. I walked out just as he was exiting the food prep area.

“I tried to find some Neil Young Christmas music among the CDs back there, but there wasn't any, so I went with this,” he announced with a wave of his hand at the tunes flowing from the speakers in the corners. “It's holiday waltzes.” I cocked an eyebrow. “You know how to waltz. I taught you back in college.”

He strode up to me, eyes glowing with love, and offered me his hand. “This is corny,” I said as I swept him into my arms. Yes, I recalled how to waltz, and that day in our sophomore year that he had taught me. Very little about our past was not crystal clear in my mind.

“No, it's Korsakov's *Waltz of the Snow Maiden*.”

“Idiot,” I said, nuzzling my face into his neck. “I love you,” I whispered as we moved around the fire hall, his body pressed to mine. The smell of him was intoxicating and if not for the blast of cold air billowing in, I'd not have known that someone had entered the hall.

They say that when you're in a life-and-death situation, that time sometimes slows down or stops. Some say it races by. I've been called to a few scenes in my years that made time feel off or wonky. Once I had to help a farmhand who had gotten his arm caught in a hay combine. I'd been closest to the farm. Paramedics arrived after I'd helped the young man as best as I could. I'd been witness to several lethal car accidents and investigated a few missing person cases where we found the body in the thick woodlands of the state, death by their own hands most generally.

When I looked around Tony and saw Clint Marley standing by the kitchen door with a hunting rifle shouldered and pointed at Tony's back, time not only slowed, but it crashed into a fucking tree.

“She moved out, and it's on you!” Clint slurred, the shout echoing off the walls of the fire hall as he pulled the trigger. My reaction was instinctual. I pushed Tony a split-second

before the round hit me in the upper left shoulder. I stumbled back at the impact, my Kevlar at home with my uniform. Tony shouted something. Clint bellowed in a rage for missing the vital shot. Drunken shooters rarely hit the target, which was good for me.

I went to my ass with a huff, my shoulder on fire, my right hand sliding down my right hip to find my service revolver. I'd been told many years ago by an old hand at this law enforcement game that police should always carry, even when off-duty. You never knew when you'd be confronted with a violent attack. Just like now. Cops made all sorts of enemies who knew how to hold onto a grudge. Clint being a case in point.

I popped off three shots, all three hitting our attacker, as Tony scabbled on his hands and knees under the table he'd been wiping off not fifteen minutes ago. Clint crumpled to the cement floor, the rifle falling to the left as he listed to the right. The man was not reaching for the weapon, I was pretty sure of that. Both of his kneecaps were no more, and he had a sizeable wound in his upper thigh. Still, it would behoove me to get to my feet, but that didn't seem to be happening right now. I glanced down at my wound. Oh. That was ugly. The exit was probably worse. Lightheadedness was already setting in. My shirt was soaked with blood, front and back.

Well shit.

At least Tony was okay. Right?

"Tony..." I croaked, but he was already skittering closer to Clint, his eyes wide with horror. "Call...for help..."

I vaguely recalled seeing him kick the rifle from Clint's reach and then close the distance to me lying on the floor bleeding like a stuck pig. Clint was bellowing in pain while sobbing. This was not at *all* the way I wanted to spend Christmas with Tony. I didn't want to go out now, not when we'd just found each other again.

"Stillman! Baby, no! Don't you dare leave—"

There were flashes.

Bright moments of coming back to reality then fogging out. Someone I knew but couldn't place speaking to me about speedy ambulance arrival time. Ha, yeah, it was parked outside. Another person—a human in white scrubs—sometime later telling me that the poke from the IV would sting a little. I recalled two things from the poke moment. Telling the nurse—or so I assumed it to be—that being shot with a Nosler deer rifle at close range hurt more than her needle would so stop worrying about the sting. And asking for Tony.

Every time I swam through the haziness of blood loss and then anesthesia, I asked about Tony, or so the nurses who swam in and out of my consciousness informed me. When I came around in the wee hours of the morning, groggy and unable to get up to piss but trying nonetheless, the lovely lady working the night shift said that she was going to wake up Tony and tattle on me for trying to get up.

“Tony...” I whispered as she eased me back into the bed, my shoulder on fire, and my head packed with batting.

“He’s resting on a cot.”

“He okay?” I asked, wooziness playing havoc with my stomach. Ugh, fucking anesthesia always made me sick.

“Gotta piss.”

“He’s fine now.” Her face appeared in the small round circle that was my line of sight. She was wearing reindeer antlers that flashed red whenever she moved her head. It was kind of psychedelic. I could not look away. “He refused to leave until you were wheeled into your room. Then he refused to leave at all. So we pulled in a cot from the maternity ward and there he was, snoring away. Your fiancé is quite stubborn.”

“You have no idea,” I mumbled as my gut roiled. “Gotta piss.”

“You have a catheter in so go ahead.”

Oh. Okay, that was nice. I wasn't sure I could make it to the toilet right now. Which would have sucked as I then, with very little warning, had a gagging spell. Nurse Rudolph gave

me some sort of something in my IV to combat the nausea. As she lowered the lights, I rolled my head to the left, which hurt like fuck, and saw Tony across the room, lying there facing me, his face resting as he rested. Rested as he rested with the rest of us who were resting.

“Get some rest,” someone said, not sure who, it could have been God. I closed my eyes and slept just in case. He’d spared me and my beloved tonight, so if he said to rest, I was going to rest.

When I clawed my way out of a drug-induced slumber, my gaze roamed the ceiling for a moment as I tried to adjust my sluggish thoughts. The sound of machines beeping, the ache in my shoulder and back, and the intake of breath to my left were all the reminders I needed. Bullet hole. Marley. Lots of blood. Yep. Ho-ho-ho. Merry fuckin’ Christmas, Stillman.

“Stillman, are you awake?” Tony asked, his face slipping into view.

“Mostly,” I croaked, my throat sore from the breathing tube during my surgery. “You okay?”

He looked ragged, a look that one didn’t see on TV and on film star Tony Gigliotti often. Then again, it *had* been a night.

“Me? I’m fine. How are you?” He sat on the edge of the bed and carefully took my hand between his two warm ones.

“Ready to...mango.”

A flimsy smile appeared on his face, beating back the exhaustion for just a second before it reappeared.

“Tango?”

“Sure, let me get...dancing shoes.”

He coughed/laughed, his grip tight. Someone walked past the door, the squeak of rubber-soled shoes on the tile floor soft but noticeable.

“Fool.” He sighed, lifting my hand to his whiskery face, his eyes drifting shut as he rubbed his cheek against my

knuckles like Ellery liked to do. “Beautiful, brave fool.”

“Meh,” I groaned as I tried to sit up just an inch. My ass bone was killing me. Everything hurt. Fuck that asshole Clint. “Clint?”

“Mm, down the hall. Stable. Under state police guard. Teddy is taking over as temporary sheriff until you get back on your feet. The town is safe, and I’m safe, so stop worrying about everyone else and worry about you.”

“Louise and the kids?”

That made him sigh and smile, his dark lashes lifting. “They’re fine. Tucked safely into the shelter. She’s upset that her husband went after you because she left him.”

“Better me than...her or one of...the boys. Christ, this bed sucks.”

He found the remote for the bed and raised it inch by inch, watching me as he did so.

“Thanks.” I sighed, the position a little better. He gave me water to sip, another blessing. Who knew warm, dusty water was so damn good? “Guess we’ll be skipping...that get together today,” I teased as he placed the sippy cup back on the side table. The sun outside shone on him, making the gray strands in his ebony hair glisten like spun silver.

“You’ll do just about anything to get out of having guests, won’t you?” Tony asked, but then broke down and cried. My heart shattered into bits. I reached for him with my good arm, tugged him to my side, and held him as he shuddered and sniffled.

“Shit, oh shit, I’m sorry. Sorry.” He wiggled free, using care to leave the bed and my arms, then jogged into the bathroom. I lay there staring at the ceiling, shoulder throbbing, listening to the man who I loved—always had—sobbing silently in a hospital crapper. It tore me the fuck up.

Sure, I knew in some far-off corner of my brain that the spouses of cops and firemen paid some heavy mental fees. Not knowing if your husband or wife was going to come home, getting the call in the middle of the night saying your loved

one was shot or burnt, or just the daily day-to-day knowledge that every moment could be your last because some asshole with a gun and a grudge had put a target on your partner's back.

Yeah, I'd known all that. Read about it. Watched it on the news. Felt bad but in that kind of distracted way that one does watching an earthquake in another country. Wow, that sucked, but life here in my world chugged on. This right here, though? Tony hiding away in a sterile bathroom with an emergency pull cord was real. And it ripped my insides to shreds.

He emerged, face blotchy and dark eyes red. His hair was lank, his clothes wrinkled, and his face covered in thick black whiskers. He looked like ten miles of *really* rough road.

"I am so sorry. That was..." He paused at the foot of the bed and shoved his hands into his already wild hair. "That was not supposed to come out in front of you. I'm here to cheer you up, not snot all over your cute little hospital gown."

"Idiot," I murmured, unsure of what to say or do. I patted the bed. He returned to me, sitting tenderly on the bright white sheets as my heart monitor beeped along steadily. "You can cry in front of me. If I..." I paused to gather my thoughts as they were starting to get squirrely again. How could I be this tired? I'd just woken up, for fuck's sake. "If you had been shot, I'd cry."

"You sweet man." He bent over to kiss my face. The rub of whiskers on whiskers was nice. A rap on the door saw him stiffen, like a drill sergeant, stalk to and then out the door.

"Huh," I said, wiggled around just a bit, moaned at the incredible pain shooting out from my shoulder holes, and then simply lay there and watched the sunrise. Pretty incredible things those sunrises, even the dull winter ones. Made even more incredible by the fact that if that round had been a few inches to the left, I might not have seen Ole Sol climbing into the crisp, winter sky.

Tony reappeared after a moment or two, looking stern as he began moving around the room tidying things up. Not that there was much to tidy.

“Did you send the Avon lady packing?” I asked, my gaze following him as he opened the vertical blinds an eighth of an inch wider.

“That was Sergeant Viso of the Pennsylvania State Police. He wants to talk to you. He wanted to talk to you last night, but I told him no. I told him no again this morning. Imagine the gall of that man asking to talk to you when you just woke up.” He began arranging each slat as he spoke. “They know what happened. I told them. That asshole who shot you told them. That should be enough. You need to rest and get better. Why is this stupid slat bent?”

A spicy string of Italian curses hit the steamy glass.

“They need my statement,” I said, smiling just a bit despite the throbbing now overtaking my entire upper torso. Getting shot hurts. “Let him in.”

He spun to stare at me as if I had just said to let a hungry tiger into the room. “He will come back tomorrow. And if I judge you to be in shape to speak to him, then he’ll speak to you.”

“Bossy,” I said, wincing. He rushed over, worry etched all over his face. “Fine. Hurts. Might...sleep some.”

“Okay, baby, you sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up. I love you.”

“Love you...mangoes.”

The next week was spent sleeping, eating soft foods like a frigging infant, and accepting visitors when the Doberman in Dior menswear allowed them entrance. Nothing had ever sounded sweeter than when my surgeon gave me clearance to go home.

Tony packed up the dozens of bouquets and cards as I struggled to get dressed. Honestly, it was stupidly hard to just pull up my jogging pants with one functional arm, but I was going to get home today no matter what. I even endured being pushed through the hospital in a wheelchair and helped to my

waiting car where it took me five minutes to get settled, to buckle the belt, and to catch my breath.

“Would you like to stop anywhere for anything?” Tony asked as he maneuvered my SUV out into traffic. “I mean, other than the pharmacy to pick up your pain meds.”

“I’m not taking those. They make my mouth taste like Ellery shit in it and they make me feel stupid. I’ll be good with some acetaminophen.”

“Of course you will,” he muttered, smiling as sweetly as he possibly could.

“Will you still want to live with me in Greece after having to wipe my ass for the next few weeks?”

He looked over at me after pulling up in front of the bakery. “Yes.” With that, he kissed me on the lips and ran in to pick up the order he had called in ahead.

Staring out the windshield down Main Street I watched the snow falling gently as a few folks ran into various stores. Rockmount was pretty quiet in the evenings. The Christmas decorations were still up. I’d missed celebrating that holiday unless you counted being high as a 747 celebrating which, you know, it kind of is in its own way. Still, now that I reflected on it, and the flowers and gifts in the back—including the bag of pork rinds Teddy had brought me—it might have been nice to have some friends over for a meal. It would have *had* to be better. Would next year’s Christmas be anything like this year’s? In some ways, I hoped to hell not. In some ways, I hoped so.

“My gosh you should see the size of the bear claws they put into the box for you,” Tony announced, yanking open the rear passenger door to place several boxes of baked goods into the rear. “I told the young miss when I called that you’d probably be a bear the next few weeks, so we needed a baked treat to match your growly temper. She laughed.”

“Yeah, that’s funny.”

I wiggled around to look into the back, the stitches in my shoulder tugging to remind me—as if I needed a reminder—

that I couldn't spin around like I could before. Fucking Clint. I hoped he enjoyed his time in the prison infirmary where he'd been moved to a few days ago. He'd declined an attorney and was pleading guilty to all charges. And there were many. None of us in Rockmount were sure if he was doing so to try to show Louise he was trying to atone for his sins or if he just hated lawyers. It was hard to say, but whatever the outcome, I'd be paying close attention and would happily testify at his trial.

"Are you in pain?" Tony asked, looking around the headrest at me.

"Thinking about Clint," I confessed.

"Try not to. He'll be in prison for a long, long time. Attempted murder is a serious charge, as is a felony assault on a law enforcement officer. And that's the tip of the iceberg as those are some of the charges on your behalf. Mine will be added. I hope he rots in that cell."

Another burst of Italian took place and then my suave lover spat on the ground as he cussed out Clint.

"Did I ever tell you that you're super sexy when you get riled up?" I asked and got a sheepish sort of look as he fiddled with four boxes of tarts, doughnuts, and, of course, bear claws.

"A few times. If you weren't bandaged and convalescing, I would show you just how riled up I get when someone hurts the man I love." He closed the door soundly and then hustled around the rear of the car to get behind the wheel.

His words warmed me inside. I leaned over the console just to where it hurt, then cleared my throat. He looked over from unwrapping the hand-knitted scarf from Lily and Lila Winetoast and the Knit Happens group.

"I'm so glad you came back into my life," I whispered.

He reached over to touch my cheek and stole a soft, sweet kiss. "I am too. Thank you for taking me back into your heart, you brave man." He stared at me for a long time. I liked looking at him so I just stared back. "We had better get home before you get chilled. I have a pot of minestrone soup ready

to warm up for dinner. Then you're going to stretch out on the sofa and we're going to watch holiday movies.”

“What kind of holiday movie is there for New Years?” I enquired and got a wink.

That night the three of us—Ellery curled up on my lap for the first time in forever—sat in the twinkling glow of our tree, stuffed with Mama Gugliotti's famous minestrone soup and bear claws, watching *Mamma Mia 2*.

I mean, it only made sense. New beginnings, moving on after a loss, and the one you loved at your side. Our love seemed to fit the script perfectly.

One Year Later

“Are you sure that the bishop moves that way?”

I looked up from the rather brazen move our housekeeper, Ioannis, had made. Granted, I was new to this game, and therefore, the man who cleaned the five rooms at Gayle’s Getaway in the morning and cooked the meals for us and our guests at night was probably cheating.

“Yes, yes, of course,” he replied in a thick Greek accent that was slowly becoming second nature to my ears. “You look it up if you wish.”

“No, it’s good.” I leaned back in my chair, the winds off the sea sweeping over the patio, the sun on my shoulder joint easing the ache that lived there since the shooting a year ago.

“No, I insist. You look.” He gathered up the old print copy of *Chess for Dummies* and passed it to me. I sighed and took it. “You see. You lose because you are looking for Tony and Delia to come back from the sea with dinner.”

“Okay, firstly, no.” I eased up, rolling my shoulder as I did so, and forced myself to flip pages as I pretended to read. “I’m not waiting for Tony to come home. I’m wondering where the cat is.”

“Ellery is under the chair my ass rests in.” I flipped faster. “Stillman, it is okay to worry over your love. I do every day. But today is a special day. Today they have decorated the boat. Today we have a feast made by my hands. Then we drink a little, have a taste of St. Basil cake, drink a little more, and then watch the movie that brought you and Tony together in loving bliss.”

I glanced up from the book, and the rules about how bishops could move, which said Ioannis had indeed moved legally, and stared at the big, bearded man seated across from me. He and I were of the same size, same looks, same ages, and same grizzled temperament. Several of our guests here on the tiny island of Thalassa had thought we were brothers. To be honest, I had grown close to our cook/housekeeper as well

as his tiny wife who ran a fishing trawler. They weren't Atticus and his wife as Tony had joked about last year, but that was fine. We were known to be a little different here at Gayle's Getaway, what with being gay American hotel owners who knew nothing about chess, fishing, or how potent fucking Kitro liquor was. How could something that was a liquor drop a man of my size so fast? Ioannis teased me every time we had cocktails after dinner. Still, we loved it here in Greece. So much so that I sometimes had to remind myself of the lives we left behind in the States.

"I'm sure Tony is just fine. He and Delia have been sailing for months now as he scopes out sites for his gay western miniseries," I replied, laid the book on the warm tan tiles under my feet, and slid my knight in a L pattern to intercept his bishop. "Of course they're fine," I reassured myself and then watched as my housekeeper got to checkmate in one slick move. When I glanced up from the carnage on the chessboard, Ioannis was sitting back in his wrought iron chair, smiling like Ellery when he gets into the cream. "Huh."

He tapped his bald head, his smile pulling up the thick black beard that he wore. "You are too distracted today."

"What's my problem every other day?" I asked, my sight leaving my chess teacher to search the tiny port for Delia's boat. Tony and she had been gone for two weeks, sailing along the coasts of various small islands, stopping in to visit the towns and scout for those perfect settings for his nearly completed script.

"You suck at chess?" I peeked over at Ioannis.

"Don't you have rooms to dust?" I asked, and he chortled deeply then rose to his feet, his hips popping like my shoulder did every damn day, before sauntering off humming "Shake It" by Sakis Rouvas.

Tidying up the pieces for tomorrow's slaughter, I sighed as gulls soared overhead. My shoulder had healed, yes, but it was never going to be the same. The physical therapist back in the States had suggested getting out of the cold to ease the steady aches in my shoulder after numerous sessions and visits to

pain specialists had gotten me nowhere. The bullet had done some irreparable damage to the ligaments and muscles. She'd said it jokingly, I was sure, but after several months of dillydallying about, watching Teddy step into the position that I'd held down for years with more grace and competence than I'd have thought possible, I'd made a decision. I'd gone home, found Tony working on his western movie script, and told him I wanted to go to Greece.

We left the next week and had yet to return. That would change in the new year as I had to testify at Clint Marley's trial in January after the court resumed following the Christmas break. In a way, I was looking forward to it. I longed to see that abusive asshole behind bars for daring to aim that fucking gun at Tony's back. Yet, in a way, I was happy here. Incredibly happy and loathed the idea of leaving our little retreat overlooking the Aegean Sea. Our days were calm here, peaceful, idyllic. We rose early. Old habits died hard. We played chess. We made love, and we spent time with our few guests. We ate, we sipped cocktails at night, and we swam in the stunning sapphire waters, and we curled up together at night.

Pattering through our small inn, the smell of salty air blew through the many arches of dark red clay scattered throughout our property. I could hear Lukas playing in the sunny veranda by the pool, the local musician strumming his bouzouki for our guests. It was late afternoon, barely four, and so I meandered to the kitchen. There I stole some dates, a slice of Cretan bread that I loaded up with tomato slices from our rocky but plentiful garden up back, and made myself a pot of green mountain tea. As I munched on my open-faced sandwich, I moved from the kitchen to the back patio, a wide open space with a few wooden tables. From here, the view was steep but spectacular. A peek down at the wharf showed no signs of Tony so with a hearty sigh I wandered Gayle's Getaway, fingers of my left hand coated with tomato juice and hearty oil as I sipped at my tea while balancing the heavy ceramic mug in my right hand.

When I entered the cozy resting area/day room adjacent to our bedroom suite, I paused to enjoy the tree in the corner. Tony had gone whole hog this year on decorating. Christmas

in Greece was a big thing I was learning, despite the oddly warm weather we were having this year. The locals had informed us it was usually much chillier than the temperate seventy-two today. Tomorrow the weather was forecast to change, gray and rainy, with only a few peeks of sun, which seemed to be more on par for the season.

I paused to tap at a small bell of gold amid the baubles and trinkets. It was a simple little item, nothing too grand or expensive, although it was weighty, so I knew that Tony had paid well for it despite saying he'd not. The man liked the finer things. Why he was with me—a man about as fine as a cat's tongue—I'd yet to figure out. Still, with me he was, and pretty happy too if his smiles and coos of contentment when we were fitted together in the dark of night were any indication.

I tapped the tiny bell that read "First Xmas Together" and the jingle was sweet and melodic. Hearing it made me smile. When he'd unwrapped it after bringing it home from a quick trip to Athens to seek out a costume designer he'd met once at a party for his upcoming film project, I'd called him out.

"This isn't our first Christmas together," I'd said, and he just smiled that sweet smile of his as he hung it on a bough and stepped back to admire it.

"It's our first Christmas together in my mind because we're both together freely and openly."

Okay, well, yeah, that made sense, I had to confess. Back in our early days, we'd been hiding our relationship. Being gay wasn't something that you made public. Hell, Tony had married a harpy just to ensure his homosexuality was deeply hidden from the masses. No marching in Pride parades for us back in the dark, dismal days. But now...well, now we were free to be us. And so, sure, it kind of was our first Christmas together.

"See how well trained I am? You ring that bell and I appear."

I spun, slopping my tea over my fingers, to see Tony standing in the doorway looking windblown, tan, and

incredibly handsome. As always, but even more so when he was gone. Thankfully, with us both retired—or him semi-retired, I suppose—our days apart had been few and far between. Funny how attached you grew to someone’s face.

“How did I miss your boat returning?” I asked, placing my tea on a rustic side table and then wiping my hand on my cargo shorts. Yes, I liked cargo shorts. Sue me.

“You were too busy staring at our tree.”

He moved across the room, arms open, and enveloped me in a hug. I found his mouth, soft and pliant as always, and kissed him hungrily.

“Mm, you seem to have missed me,” he whispered when the kiss broke.

“A little,” I teased, snuggling him tightly to me. I breathed him in, the smell of the sea on his skin mixed with his cologne, and I knew that I was home. His arms were where my heart resided. “Did you see beautiful things while you were out scouting?”

“None as beautiful as you,” he replied.

My heart did this sappy little flutter as if it were temporarily thrown off its cadence.

“Want to tell me about it over dinner or in bed?” I asked, holding him as tight as possible.

“In bed, of course. But we’ll have to be quick about it. The premiere of *Tinsel Kisses for Santa* is tonight.”

As if I could forget. That silly rom-com movie changed my life forever. Also, it would be nice to see Rockmount again, even if it were on a screen.

“Maybe we should just wait to get into bed then. I don’t want to rush making love to you.”

“Or we could get frisky now and after the movie is over.”

Oh yeah, we could do that. Might take some effort. Neither of us were young cockerels anymore, but we could do it twice in one night. Probably.

“I love the way your mind works,” I said, stole a kiss, and led him to bed. “I love all the other things about you as well,” I added because I was a romantic bastard deep down.

Well, maybe not *so* deep down as it used to be.

The End

A note from the author...

If you enjoyed *The Christmas Extra (Laurel Holidays #5)*, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review on a major retailer site, BookBub, Goodreads, or on your personal social media platforms.

Reviews are the reason someone else might decide to give this book a try!

Deepest thanks,

squishy hugs

V.L.

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Author V.L. Locey—Penning LGBT hockey romance that skates into sinful pleasures.

V.L. Locey loves worn jeans, yoga, belly laughs, Dr. Who/Torchwood, walking, reading and writing lusty tales, Greek mythology, the New York Rangers, comic books, and coffee. (Not necessarily in that order.) She shares her life with her husband, her daughter, one dog, two cats, a flock of assorted goofy domestic fowl, and one Jersey steer.

When not writing spicy romances, she enjoys spending her day with her menagerie in the rolling hills of Pennsylvania with a cup of fresh java in hand.

If you want to keep up with all the latest news about her upcoming releases, sign up for her newsletter by visiting her website:

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Black Tie—An Overtime Novella

Off the Rack—An Overtime Novella

The Laurel Holidays Series

The Christmas Oaks—Laurel Holidays #1

The Christmas Pundit—Laurel Holidays #2

The Christmas Tenor—Laurel Holidays #3

The Christmas Rescue—Laurel Holidays #4

The Christmas Extra—Laurel Holidays #5

*The Easter Redemption—A Laurel Holidays Spring Romance
Novella*

Tales of Bryant Series

Tales of Bryant

Nine Small Sips—A Tales of Bryant Wedding

Fade In—A Tales of Bryant Novella

Reserved—A Tales of Bryant Novella #2

Safflower—A Tales of Bryant Novella #3

Cayuga Cougars Series

Point Shot Trilogy Boxed Set

Snap Shot—Cayuga Cougars #1

Open Net—Cayuga Cougars #2

Coach's Challenge—Cayuga Cougars #3

Overtime—Cayuga Cougars #4

One-on-One—Cayuga Cougars #5

A Star-Crossed Christmas—A Cayuga Cougars Holiday Short

Chesterford Coyotes YA Trilogy

*Off the Ice—Chesterford Coyotes #1—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

*On Thin Ice—Chesterford Coyotes #2—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

*Dance on Ice—Chesterford Coyotes #3—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

LA Storm

Script—LA Storm #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Arizona Raptors

*Coast to Coast—Arizona Raptors #1—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

*Across the Pond—Arizona Raptors #2—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

*Shadow and Light—Arizona Raptors #3—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

*Sugar and Ice—Arizona Raptors #4—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

*School and Rock—Arizona Raptors #5—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

Harrisburg Railers Series

Changing Lines—Harrisburg Railers #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott

First Season—Harrisburg Railers #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Deep Edge—Harrisburg Railers #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Poke Check—Harrisburg Railers #4—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Last Defense—Harrisburg Railers #5—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Goal Line—Harrisburg Railers #6—Coauthored with RJ Scott

*Neutral Zone—A Harrisburg Railers Holiday Novella—
Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Hat Trick—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored with
RJ Scott*

*Save the Date—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored
with RJ Scott*

*Baby Makes Three—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—
Coauthored with RJ Scott*

*Rivalry—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored with RJ
Scott*

*Perfect Gifts—A Harrisburg Railers Novella—Coauthored
with RJ Scott*

Owatonna U. Hockey Series

Ryker—Owatonna U. Hockey #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Scott—Owatonna U Hockey #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Benoit—Owatonna U. Hockey #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott

*Christmas Lights—An Owatonna U Novella—Coauthored with
RJ Scott*

*Valentine's Hearts—An Owatonna U Novella—Coauthored
with RJ Scott*

*Desert Dreams—An Owatonna U Novella—Coauthored with
RJ Scott*

Boston Rebels Series

Top Shelf—Boston Rebels #1—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Back Check—Boston Rebels #2—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Snowed—Boston Rebels #3—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Royal Lines—Boston Rebels #4—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Blade—Boston Rebels #5—Coauthored with RJ Scott

Rental—Boston Rebels #6—Coauthored with RJ Scott

M/F Rereleases

To Love a Wildcat Series

Pink Pucks & Power Plays (To Love a Wildcat #1)

A Most Unlikely Countess (To Love a Wildcat #2)

O Captain! My Captain! (To Love a Wildcat #3)

Reality Check (To Love a Wildcat #4)

Language of Love (To Love a Wildcat #5)

Final Shifts (To Love a Wildcat #6)