



THE  
*Christmas*  
Summons

A WILD HEART RANCH CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

KELLY FOX  
NEW U

# THE CHRISTMAS SUMMONS

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NOVELLA

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Also by Kelly Fox

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Also by Kelly Fox

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## BEFORE WE BEGIN

I have been dying to write Tolly and Gael's story ever since I sensed the sparks between them in Ant's book. I love their cultural differences and sweet dynamics, and I hope you love them as much as I do.

Quick note: I followed each character's spelling and measurement standards. If you see the British spelling of a word, know that you are in Tolly's head. Similarly, if you see the use of the metric system, that's because Gael was raised in Mexico.

*Content warning: brief family-related homophobia and xenophobia. Brief mention of human trafficking.*

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## TOLLY

**A**s an English lord, I'm expected to spend Christmastime at my rather impressive estate south of Manchester or my private island off the British Virgin Islands, but no. There's nowhere else I'd rather be than at a small family farm in rural Texas, nervously juggling an armful of Christmas presents while building up the courage to knock on the damned door.

I nearly jump out of my skin when the phone buzzes in my pocket but I ignore it. Whatever disparaging thing my father has to say to me can wait until after Christmas.

I'm visiting the Hernandez family, whose homestead is next door to the Wild Heart Ranch. The ranch is run by my friends Charlie and Erik, who help save victims of human trafficking. Erik fell in love with Ant Hernandez, a man he rescued, and I've been more than happy to assist them in their endeavors. When they needed support in one of the places where Ant was most hurt, I readily offered my yacht and willing crew.

Ant has since been reunited with the Hernandez family, including Gael, his cousin, who is more like a brother to him.

And Gael... well. He's the reason I've flown halfway around the world to spend Christmas in a small Texas town where the sun is shining and the temperatures hover near thirty degrees. Celsius, that is.

I don't think there are words in the English language to convey how I feel about this man. I first laid eyes on Gael



when Ant, wanting to support his cousin's shoemaking business, sent me and others a link to Gael's website. I was quickly taken by the craftsmanship and had to know more about the man who'd made such beautiful shoes.

I clicked on the About tab and was immediately and fully smitten. The first photograph on the page was a black-and-white candid of Gael laughing with his head thrown back. The subsequent photos were a series of posed shots, each more gorgeous than the last, but I kept going back to that one picture.

Gael and Ant share a lot of features, though Gael is slightly taller, his nose a bit longer, and his hair less tame. God, he is beautiful.

I have an open invitation to Wild Heart's Friday night dinners, and after visiting Gael's website, I promptly found an excuse to attend. I had no expectations with that first visit, not really. Just a beautiful photograph and this quiet voice in my heart telling me to go to him.

The moment I was let in the bunkhouse, though, my eyes found him, and I don't think I saw anything else for the rest of the evening. While the pictures on his website are lovely, they're the equivalent of a small child's crayon drawing next to the vibrant man in the flesh. He was effervescent, full of joy for his cousin, and witnessing how they reconnected after years of being apart was something I'd carry with me always.

Gael and I had a moment when we first met, I know we did. But, the universe had other plans. I'd done my best, drawing him out, getting him to talk about his craft, hoping he felt the same buzz under his skin that I did.

However, over the course of the evening, I couldn't help but notice a reticence under his natural happiness. I knew there had been an awful incident at his and Ant's abuela's house and asked Erik about it, wondering what I'd missed. He explained that Gael had been mistaken for Ant and had to fight off multiple armed attackers, maiming one of them. He was even briefly taken until Ant chased after him and pushed him out of the kidnapper's truck.

In that short, awful window of time, Gael learned more about Ant's history than he could process. Erik said he'd thrown up recounting what the kidnappers had threatened to do to him. Gael realized they were speaking of revisiting that which Ant had already survived—grotesque horrors he'd scarcely been able to imagine prior.

I was already half gone for the man based off a few photos on a website and was instantly besotted the second I spoke to him. By the time I'd seen his gentle humour and fierce loyalty to his family, and especially Ant, I was willing to sign my life away just to be with him.

The thing I'd learned about helping those who'd survived awful experiences was that you let them heal on their own timeline. Gael—beautiful, perfect Gael—was recovering, and it certainly wasn't the right time to declare my feelings.

Still, I had to do something. I marched myself to the ranch next to the Hernandez land, found the owner, and made him an offer so ridiculous he didn't even hesitate to agree to my terms.

When questioned, I tell people it's an investment property and I'm considering rental cabins or some such, which on its face is not a terrible idea. That's how I pay for my island retreat and partially fund rescue operations with Wild Heart. But my friends know I couldn't care less about profit. I need to be close to Gael, and he needs to be close to his family, and I made sure he'd never have to decide between us.

After razing the old, decrepit buildings, I hired an architect to sketch out a private cabin on the heavily treed property. The builder finished last month, and the decorator is nearly done with the interior. I could have managed all of this remotely or handed it off to any number of competent managers once I'd made my choices, but then I wouldn't have been able to use that project as an excuse to visit the Hernandez family when I was in town.

Erik thinks I'm being a masochist, but that's only partially accurate. The way Gael hugs me is life-giving, but it kills me not to know what he tastes like. Over time, I've built on our

physical interactions. I started out by kissing the top of his head, then moved to kissing his cheek. I nearly caught the corner of his lip on my last visit, and that was enough to leave me spiraling for days.

I crave him the way my lungs crave oxygen, but it doesn't stop there. I love being around his family, too. They are so warm and welcoming, and I don't think it's delusional to imagine that they are rooting for me. I love the thought that maybe everyone wants us to be together... when the time is right.

Every indication from Gael is that maybe that time is now. All of which is to say I've firmly put the cart before the horse, and whatever else I do next with the land will depend on what happens when I walk into the Hernandez home this afternoon.

My sister, Beatrice, definitely thinks I've gone 'round the bend, but in her quietly supportive way she helped me find a few of Gael's Christmas presents. Speaking of which, I may have gone a tiny bit overboard. It's a good thing I flew private because I'd filled the cargo hold of my Learjet with presents for the Hernandez family.

Shifting to avoid a present catastrophe, I eyeball the doorbell. I can do this. I can do this. I can—

The door flies open and the woman I hope to someday call my mother-in-law greets me with an enormous, warm smile.

"*Tolly,*" Yaya cries, her heavenly Mexican accent a balm to my soul. "We were so worried you wouldn't be able to join us!"

"My apologies for not coming sooner. I had a small project to complete on the other side of the planet."

Cambodia, to be exact. Erik and Charlie had freed a large group of domestic traffic survivors, reuniting the vast majority of them with their families. Unfortunately, one little girl could not be reunited with her family and had needed a safe place. I have connections with the British embassy in Cambodia, so I took a quick flight over there, arranged things, and now she's spending her first nights with a Cambodian family in Jersey.

Hopefully it will be a foster to adopt situation, but either way, she's safe.

"Oh, so fancy," Yaya says, stepping back to allow me and my ridiculous pile of presents entrance into her gorgeous living space.

I was raised in a manor house full of cold marble, beige curtains, and refined rugs, which have nothing on the bright yellow walls and gorgeous indigenous artwork here in Yaya's home. Even the high-end leather couches look like the kind you can cuddle up in and take a nap.

"Dios mío, are all of these presents for us?" she asks as she takes a few boxes, leading me to the rustic wood-and-iron coffee table.

"Of course. And—" I grimace as I set everything on the table. "—there are at least two more loads where that came from."

"Two more loads of what?"

I freeze in place, Gael's softly accented voice running over me like fine silk. Yaya captures my eyes with a gentle smile. She sets her boxes on the table and leaves us alone.

Taking a deep breath, I smooth down my button-up and turn to find him standing at the entrance to the hall that leads back to the family's bedrooms. Heavens, he is so lovely. His hair has grown out a bit more, and his hands, so used to working with leather, have some sort of stain on them. He's wearing flowy cream-coloured trousers with a tight tank top, and the combination spins me in circles.

"Hello, Gael. How are you?"

My voice is far steadier than my insides, especially when his smile, already stunning, brightens.

"Better now. I was worried you wouldn't arrive in time for Christmas," he says, making his way into the living room.

"As I told your mother, I would've been here sooner, but I had some business in Cambodia that couldn't wait."

“Saving the world?” he asks, popping his thick, perfect eyebrows.

My mobile goes off again and I grit my teeth. “Sorry. My father started calling twelve time zones ago and I’m still in no mood to hear what he has to say.”

“He still waiting for you to take your place as lord of the manor?” Gael asks, his eyes sparkling with amusement. He and I both know that I am not built for manor life.

“He’ll be waiting for a long time,” I retort, fishing my phone out of my pocket to turn off the vibrate feature.

I return my attention to the beautiful man in front of me. “As for saving the world... not quite. More like atoning for my country’s colonizer ways.”

Honestly, it makes me deeply uncomfortable whenever someone acts as though I’ve *saved* anyone. I’m wealthy, born into it, never having truly worked a day in my life. That I can take some of that power and privilege to help a few kids out of a bad situation... Well, it seems the very least I could do.

Gael laughs at my awkward joke, then gestures to the coffee table full of presents. “You’re far too generous.”

“Then I’m going to feel awfully silly about the presents still outside. It’s a good thing I upgraded my vehicle.”

“You are too much. Here, I’ll help you bring the rest in,” he says, hugging my side.

My heart nearly beats out of my chest from the simple contact. I would buy a hundred overpriced parcels of land for one of his hugs.

“I’m so glad to see you,” he says, smiling up at me, his brown eyes a pair of swirling depths I can happily get lost in.

“I wouldn’t miss Christmas with you for the world,” I say, feeling a little brave.

“I’m glad.” He squeezes tight, then takes my hand to lead me outside.

He opens the front door and lets out a low whistle. “Upgrade? That’s an *F350*.”

“It is rather large, yes?” I ask, feeling uncertain. “I’m not sure how things are actually sized here in Texas, only that they seem to be at least double what we usually see in the UK.”

“It’s pretty much the biggest truck you can buy without needing a special license.” He laughs as he climbs, ever so nimble, up into the truck bed.

“You are a crazy man,” he says, handing present after present over the side of the truck. “There’s got to be a hundred boxes here.”

“Psh. Don’t be dramatic. According to customs there’s a mere fifty-three boxes.”

He shakes his head and then elegantly drops to the ground. “You are far too generous.”

He doesn’t even bumble the parcels in his hands.

“I like being generous with my friends,” I respond, sending up a silent prayer that *friends* isn’t the final destination for us.

He slips past me, hipping open the front door and then setting his boxes next to the delightfully decorated Christmas tree. I freeze again when he bends down to tuck the presents in and around the others. Moving to the presents on the coffee table, then the ones I’ve been holding while frozen like a snowman, he creates a tumble of gifts that artistically spill out onto the floor around the tree like confetti, or an extension of the tree itself.

“Ugh,” he huffs out, rising up on his tiptoes to kiss my jaw, too short to kiss my cheek. “You are too much.”

It’s embarrassing to think about the number of nights I’ve spent dreaming of him tucked up against my body. To be fair, snuggling isn’t the only thing going on in those dreams, especially as I reach into my pajamas night after night, his name on my lips as I bring myself off.

“You look parched, Tolls. Let’s have some of my mother’s limonada.” He drifts off into the generous kitchen with me

trailing after him like a lost puppy.

I smile. “You remembered.”

“Of course I remembered. My mother has been keeping fresh limonada on hand for whenever you showed up.”

“Again, I apologise for the delay—”

He holds out his hand, a surprisingly sophisticated gesture given the stains on his fingertips from the leather dyes. “You’re not in trouble. Especially not for arranging for that kid to be fostered.”

“Erik told you?”

He shakes his head. “Ant and I share everything.”

Of course they do. I wonder if they’ve ever talked about me.

God, I’m such a disaster.

“Mom was going to make her sopa de albondigas. Hopefully you’ll stay for dinner.”

“I’m sure it will be delicious, but I was—” *Courage, Tolly.* “—hoping to invite you to dinner. Just the two of us.”

His eyes sparkle and his lips take on a curious smirk.

“Of course. I’d love to join you for dinner. When did you want to go?”

I look outside at the fading sunlight. “Give me a chance to wash off the airplane and change into something a little more comfortable. Meet you back here in an hour?”

“Perfect. I’ll see what I can do to get the stains out.” He wiggles his fingers self-consciously.

Not thinking on it, I reach out, grabbing his hand. “Everything about you is perfect, including—no, especially—your stained fingers.”

His chest rises and falls rapidly as he takes a step back. Reluctantly, I let go of him and head toward the door.

“See you in an hour, Gael.”

“See you, Tolly.”



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## GAEL

Tolly is nervous, and it's endearing as hell. He's fancied me—as the English would say—for a while now. While I've held back, I must admit he's never been alone in those feelings. Even from the beginning, when I couldn't manage even the thought of a relationship, I could not deny the spark between us.

There's more than just chemistry, though. My heart was his the moment he read my hesitation and unequivocally honored it. He has never once pressured me. Even when he bought the land next door, he made it abundantly clear that he is both interested *and* willing to be as patient as I need.

He's a study in contradictions, really. He has the foppish blond hairstyle that rich guys wear, but he's tanned and freckled from the sun. His accent is so devastatingly posh, but then he wears worn out flip-flops, Hawaiian shirts, and expensive khaki shorts. He can be prim, but he doesn't hesitate to get his hands dirty.

Despite the fact that he's a devastatingly handsome lord with aristocratic cheekbones and bright blue eyes, I've never known Tolly to try to cash in on his nobility or face card.

I also have to admit that I adore the way he towers over me and that his mannerisms are all so damned elegant. My height was average in Mexico, but now that I live in Texas, I sometimes feel like an ugly sprite, especially with my stained fingers and the smell of leather that seems to linger despite the number of times I bathe and wash my hands.

Still, Tolly looks at me like I'm the most beautiful man he's ever met.

I'm not surprised that he asked to take me to dinner tonight, nor that he's refused to label this as a date. I just wish there was a way to calm his nerves. As we pull into the Broken Oak's parking lot, I decide a little teasing might do the trick.

Elbowing him, I gesture to the truck's massive interior. "The only thing bigger than this truck is your name."

"True," he admits with a half-smile as he pulls into a spot out by a tree. "But do you actually know my full name?"

*Of course I do—it's the first thing I memorized about you, right after the color of your eyes.*

"Lord Ptolemy James Filbert Llewellyn Middleton III of West Shropshire," I rattle off, shaking my head. "Your name is Egyptian, German, Welsh, and English. Make it make sense."

He snorts in his proper British way, then turns to me. "The fancy names are always meant to make the peasants feel less than, as though the nobility are somehow more, even in our names," he explains, shaking his head.

He once told me that it took a single conversation with a homeless man to turn his sense of nobility on its head.

"What do your parents think of the fact that your friends call you Tolly?"

"They don't like to think of my life outside of the manor walls at all. Unless I'm bringing an appropriate lady around to court, of course."

"Then they are setting themselves up for disappointment." I shake my head. "Ay, *corazon*."

His slight exhale reminds me that he speaks Spanish pretty well and that he knows I've just called him *heart*.

"You have no idea. They like to act as though I have a few wild oats to sew, and therefore the gender of the person I'm sewing them with doesn't matter."

"To be fair, that sounds rather progressive."

He lets out a tired sound. “Deceptively so.”

I think of the way my mom’s voice rang out when Tolly appeared on our front porch, how she lavishes love and kindness on him whenever she sees him because that’s how she treats everyone who is important to us.

And Tolly is important to us. To me.

Before the silence gets too heavy, I nudge him with my elbow, hoping to steer the conversation back to lighter fare. “Serious question: are the English okay? I looked it up and West Shropshire is a region south of Manchester, which is well north and *east* of Shropshire County. Explain *that*.”

“You looked me up?” he asks, his cheeks flushing.

“Of course I did,” I say, taking his hand. “You’ve been wonderful to us. I wanted to know more about where you come from. Though... I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that the cardinal directions make no sense when your language dictates that *I’ll*, *aisle*, and *isle* are all pronounced exactly the same way.”

His flush deepens. “We English like to keep the rest of the world on their toes. If I explain how our system of directions work, the king will order my immediate removal and you’ll never see me again.”

“Can’t have that now, can we?” I say, sending him a wink.

“Absolutely not,” he says, then squeezes my hand. “Wait here. Let me help you climb down from this monster.”

I let him help me, even though I don’t need it. Once on solid ground, I take his arm as we wind our way over to the Broken Oak.

Oliver, owner of our favorite restaurant-slash-bar, notes the contact as he gestures for us to follow him into the main dining room. Tolly places his hand on my lower back as we follow Oliver to our table, and it’s warm and steady.

We sit and Oliver takes our drink order, but I’m too focused on Tolly to pay attention to the specials.

“...and for dessert, spotted dick.”

That startles a laugh out of me and Tolly shakes his head, looking at me like I'm some kind of miracle. We order our entrees and Tolly gets the spotted dick to share after. We make jokes and I sit on my hands to prevent myself from fixing the silly bit of hair poking up from his normally perfect locks.

"You haven't mentioned my shoes," he says, sliding his foot from under the table.

"Huh?" I ask, slightly lost in him.

He cuts his eyes to the floor. "My shoes. You haven't said anything about them."

I follow his line of vision and find myself laughing again.

"What have you done to my boots?" I ask, slipping out of my chair and going to my knee. I place his foot on my thigh and tsk. Running a finger over the worn black leather, I hold his ankle with my other hand.

"Please don't tell me your friends think I've created these monstrosities."

He inhales sharply, then laughs airily.

"Of course not," he says on a hiccup. "I would never besmirch your brand with my name."

I stand, rolling my eyes at him. "Nothing associated with your name could ever be besmirched. Though, to be fair, I don't know what besmirch means. I've touched your shoes, so let me wash my hands, and when I come back, you'll explain it to me."

He opens his mouth, then snaps it shut, giving me a short, nervous nod.

My English is decent and I'm a genius with context clues, so I already gather mostly what it means. But I like giving him an assignment.

On my way back from the washroom, Sandy the bartender gestures for me to come over.

"Here, I have the drinks you ordered," she says, smirking.

She's even shorter than me, barely clearing the bar as she wipes it down. There's only one reason she'd call me over instead of having them delivered to our table.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, not even bothering to hold back my grin.

"Have you two finally stopped circling each other?"

I lift a shoulder, hoping to appear unconcerned. "As far as I know, this is simply dinner with a friend."

"But you do want more, right?"

Even though Ant and I share nearly everything, I don't always share my struggles. Sandy, having a bartender's nose for such things, has been a surprising source of calm. Not only is she an excellent sounding board, but her advice has also always been spot on, and the Broken Oak has become the place I can go when I'm overwhelmed.

"Of course. It's hard getting started though. I think we had an immediate connection, but he knew I needed time. So, now I feel awkward about saying 'Hey, you can fall in love with me now.'"

"Love?" She raises her brow playfully. "How fancy. I thought you were just trying to get yourself a slice of British pound cake."

"You are terrible."

Sliding the drinks across the bar, she tosses back, "Considering I was a little heavy with the tequila, I think I'm fantastic."

I chuckle as I grab them. "That you are."

Before I walk off, she gestures for me to come closer. "By the way, he's been fidgeting since you went into the bathroom. I think he wants this as much as you do, but he might need some encouragement. Don't be afraid to be forward with him."

"He won't think I'm pushy?"

"You're a Hernandez, right? I thought pushy was the brand."

“You might be right about that,” I retort, grinning.

She winks, pushing me toward the tables. “Good luck, sweetie. You deserve him.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath, and hope blooms in my chest at her bracing words. “Thanks.”

I wind my way through the other tables and set his beer in front of him, just as he puts away his phone. I’m guessing he’s still avoiding his father.

“So, now I’m worried,” he starts.

“About what?” I’m unable to help my smile as I settle into place.

“I brought you my favourite beer from Cambodia, and now I’m not sure if you like beer at all.”

“I love beer, but when Sandy’s bartending I order liquor because she tends to accidentally pour me a double.”

He laughs. “Is there any Topo Chico in that at all?”

I take a tentative sip and blow out fire. “*Just* enough. But don’t light any matches around me.”

“Good to know,” he says, taking a sip of his Dos Equis. Setting down the beer, he drums his fingers on the tabletop. “So, how’s your business going?”

“Business is booming, mostly due to the unusually high number of orders with Caribbean and UK addresses.” I can’t help my smile—his support has made all the difference in the world.

Tolly’s blush tops his tanned cheeks. “Oh, really? I suppose my fellow beach bums and countrymen love a high-quality leather shoe.”

“They must, because they’re paying exorbitant shipping rates for a pair of flip-flops or boots, depending.”

He rolls his eyes. “Maybe don’t concern yourself with the plight of millionaires who order your shoes, right?”

“Fair enough. Thank you, though. Your faith in my brand means a lot.”

“I’m not being nice, you understand. If I were being nice, all of your orders would come from one place in the Caribbean. Your shoes are genuinely so beautiful and so durable that I get asked about them all the time. It’s no struggle for me to give people your information.”

“It’s still appreciated.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Running his hand along the table, he veers off just shy of my fingertips to start drumming a familiar song. Sandy was right. He’s fidgeting and it’s adorable.

As she so helpfully reminded me, he might need more of a push.

“Tolly?”

The drumming stops as his wide blue eyes meet mine. “Yes?”

Deciding to go with the direct route, I ask, “Is this a date?”

He gulps, and his Adam’s apple yo-yos dramatically. His fingers tremble as they trace the wood grain on the table.

“Tolly?” I repeat.

He takes a deep breath, flicks his eyes to mine, then looks back at the table.

“I would like it to be, yes,” he says, barely audible. He clears his throat. “If that’s okay with you.”

His fingers resume their fussy drumming pattern, so I bridge the divide, slipping my hand in his.

“I would *love* for this to be a date. Though... I’m curious,” I say, leaning forward. “Why are you so nervous?”

---

## TOLLY

**W**hy am I so nervous?

My brain unhelpfully provides the answer: *Because when you're on the first date with the guy you plan to marry, it's bound to set off a few nerves.*

I certainly won't say *that* aloud, so I go with a slightly less bold truth.

"You're too beautiful for me to remain unaffected."

His eyelashes, black and lustrous, fan out along his prominent cheekbones as he looks down.

"I'm just a scrawny little Mexican."

"Please do not use the word *just* when describing yourself. I happen to think scrawny Mexicans are quite beautiful."

"Oh, do you now, *Lord* Middleton?"

Raising an imperious brow, I straighten my posture to look as snobbish as possible. "Why do you say my title as though it's a joke?"

"Because *you* say your title as though it's a joke."

His hand feels small in mine, and the way he's stroking my palm with his thumb makes me wish I'd been born somewhere between Guanajuato and San Miguel de Allende. More importantly, his answer makes me break. I can't possibly hold on to the snobbish affect while his expressive eyebrows jump up and down and his mesmerizing eyes sparkle with humour.



His thick, shiny hair has a bit of a wave to it. His hands, while small, are square and industrious looking, his arms veiny in a way that speaks of the intense leather work he does. I know from my snooping he's had to hire two apprentices, but there are some things only he can do.

I'm impressed with everyone in the Hernandez family, but no one more so than him. I'll admit, the tiny dark mole under his left eye may be the reason for my bias.

Bringing his knuckles to my lips, I respond, "Touché. I do make fun of my title quite a bit, though that's only if I'll own up to it. You had an advantage—you knew my title before I knew you."

"Oh? Did you want to be my secret prince? Never telling me until our wedding night?"

Did the words "our wedding night" really leave his lips? I may need a moment because my heart just shifted into hummingbird mode.

"Wow. *Someone* likes their historical romances." I say, far more smoothly than I feel.

"Yeah, so?" he challenges, bringing my hand to his lips, mirroring my gesture.

"I feel duty bound to warn you they take a lot of liberties with those stories," I say, less cool this time around as his grip on my hand shoots electricity up my arm. I'm aware that there are other people in this restaurant, I just can't see or hear anything except Gael.

"Duly noted." Maintaining his grip on my hand, Gael asks, "Do you resent your title?"

"Of course."

"Do you think the British monarchy is a relic of the past and should be mothballed along with the trebuchet?"

I know what he's doing. He's helping me get out of my head, but what he doesn't know is that he's just making my heart beat faster.

“You don’t know besmirched but you know what a trebuchet is?” I practically croak out. He’s kind and ignores my obvious distress.

“I was wondering when you were going to circle back around to that word.”

“It means to make dirty, or unlikable. So I meant I’d never let anything dirty your reputation.”

“I figured that out for myself.” He shakes his phone at me. “But back to my questions. You resent your title, you think the monarchy and peerage system is antiquated, and it can sometimes limit what you want to do with your life, right?”

I take a deep breath. “All true.”

“Every historical romance is about those three things exactly. Only, instead of the maiden girl, you’ve got yourself a stable boy.”

“No,” I tut, weaving our fingers together. “I’ve got the accomplished leather smith, whose bedroom slippers are so buttery soft that the king himself has praised them.”

Gael pulls his hand away from mine.

“Did I do something wrong?” I ask, immediately terrified.

“No,” he says as he presses his fingers to his temples. “Were you joking, though? About the king?”

I grin. “Oh, I never joke about the king. Or leather footwear, for that matter.”

“Are you saying that the actual king—*of England*—has a pair of my slippers?”

His lush mouth hangs open in surprise and it takes every bit of self-control not to hurl myself across this table and suck his tempting lower lip into my mouth.

“That is exactly what I’m saying, Gael. His Majesty’s birthday was a few months ago, and he rather enjoyed them. Said they were his favourite gift.”

“He probably received gifts from heads of state all over the planet. Why would you give him my simple slippers?”

“Because, with your brushed fleece lining they’re like a warm hug.”

He wrinkles his nose and I know I’m sunk.

“I don’t know how I feel about the monarchy being made comfortable by my handiwork,” he says, holding out his hand.

I laugh, taking it in mine as Oliver approaches with dinner.

“Dammit,” Oliver says, eyeballing our entwined fingers as he aggressively sets the plates on the table.

“Is there an issue here?” I ask, concerned.

“Yes, there’s an issue,” he tosses back, gesturing between me and Gael. “I had a five-dollar bet on the line with our cook that you wouldn’t come around until after the new year.”

I try to approximate an expression of sorrow but fear I may have failed. “I’m sorry?”

“Well, you better be.”

He stalks off with a smile on his face and I turn to Gael, his eyes wide with shock.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says, bringing his hands to his cheeks. “We were the subject of a five-dollar bet. That’s pretty big. That means they think we’re a good match.”

We share the goofiest pair of smiles across the table, then dig into dinner. It’s some kind of thick pork chop with a side of green beans. It smells divine, though...

“Has someone put bacon in the green beans?” I ask, using my fork to lift out the offending piece.

“They do that here,” Gael says, snatching the bacon from the tines of my fork with the same fingertips that come to me in my dreams. He pops the bacon into his mouth and closes his eyes, chewing through a satisfied sigh.

“You stole the food off my fork,” I say, though the accusation is light.

“You were complaining about your bacon, which is illegal in Texas.”

“I fear you’re making that up.”

“Probably,” he says, right before stealing another shard of bacon from the pile of green beans on my plate.

I reach across and grab a sliver of bacon from his green beans, popping it into my mouth before he has a chance to snatch it back.

Oh my.

“Well, now. That’s not so bad.”

“Try the green beans,” he orders, gesturing with his fork.

I do as he requests, and... “Oh. This is rather tasty. I’ll have to let the chef back home know.”

“Oh, *the chef back home.*” He snorts, completely unserious.

“Yes, at the manor house. Where I am a lord.”

“If I rolled my eyes as hard as I wanted to right now, they would get stuck back there,” he retorts, using a napkin to delicately wipe away a spot of green bean. “And you don’t live in the manor. You live on an island in the Caribbean.”

“True. But I also have a chef on my island.”

“*Show off.*”

Grinning at each other, we get into the business of eating, both of us going quiet as we enjoy the lovely meal. When Oliver brings out the spotted dick, Gael claps his hands.

“Oh, this is like a fancied up *capirotada.*”

“What’s a *capirotada*?”

“It’s a Mexican bread pudding.”

We share the dessert, and while he insists that it’s mid, we both agree it tastes better than the name would imply. After I pay the cheque, we walk back to the truck, hand in hand, stopping at the bumper to look into each other’s eyes.

“I enjoyed our date,” Gael says, looking up at me, expectant.

Despite the fact that it’s Christmas, and there’s pretty lights everywhere, it’s not even cool enough for a sweater. Ozone and truck exhaust mix with the smell of the sweet grass that grows everywhere. Another look into Gael’s eyes and I wonder if the unseasonably warm weather is global warming or just the man in front of me.

Drawn in like a magnet, I bend down for a kiss, and my hands find his narrow hips. It should be awkward with our height difference, but all I feel is... *finally*. At first, it’s just a nervous brush of lips, but then he goes up on his tiptoes and places his skilled hands on my shoulders. His passion is there where our lips meet. He’s vibrating with it—the grip of his hands, the insistent draw of his body.

Oh, I am in so much trouble.

We linger, kissing again, then once again for good measure. He moans, and his hands drift to my hips, then to my ass. I need to get him on a bed so I can draw more of those happy moans from him.

Not wanting to cause a scene, I pull away and immediately miss the soft, insistent caress of his lips.

“We should get back,” I say, quietly, hoping he can’t see how aroused I am.

I’m thrilled to know that we have chemistry, of course, but I need to move slowly with him. Respect his boundaries.

He hums his acquiescence, pulling me down for a final kiss before climbing into the truck. Scrunching his nose, he gestures at the console between us.

“Why is this thing so massive?”

“This truck is trying to keep us apart,” I answer, pouting. “That’s it, I’m taking it back and getting one with a bench seat.”

He rolls his eyes. “Silly man. Keep the truck. It’ll keep us chaste for a while longer.”

Message received. *Keep it in your pants, Tolly.*

I nod, then reach out my hand, grateful when he weaves his fingers in mine. I manage to wind our way out of the car park in this beast of a vehicle without causing an incident, and our drive to the ranch is peaceful. Once we're off the highway, the road narrows, and the dark sky with its many stars takes over the scenery.

Right before the road curves toward the entrance of my ranch, Gael squeezes my hand, pulling it up to his lips. "Invite me in for a nightcap, Tolly," he says as he kisses my knuckles.

I slow the truck and set the blinker. "Are you sure? My place isn't one hundred percent ready for guests."

"I'm positive. And I don't care."

Swallowing, I turn into my drive.

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## GAEL

**T**olly's driveway isn't yet completed, so we bump along the rough caliche road until we round the bend into a stand of trees. The sounds of the two-lane disappear entirely, and it's as though I've been transported to a magical forest.

After a few meters, his log cabin—a completely incomplete description of the place, by the way—comes into view, and I let out a contented sigh.

The cabin, a combination of cedar and pristine limestone, is somehow both simple and posh. The design is unique, the architect clearly a fan of both country living and Frank Lloyd Wright, but the building is more modest in size than I would have imagined. My favorite part is the steeply angled roof and paned windows which reveal a cozy living area.

“Wait here,” he says as he parks.

Watching such a refined man drive a big ranch truck amuses me to no end. Seconds later, he opens my door, helping me down.

“Just so you know, it would be my pleasure to help you out of this monstrosity whenever we are driving together. I won't insist on it, but only because I know you wouldn't enjoy me insisting on anything.”

I laugh. “It's nice to know my reputation precedes me.”

“Yes, well...” He ducks his head. “Maybe your reputation overwhelms me.”

“Ay, corazon. Look at that blush,” I say, reaching up to cup his jaw. “You’re like my very own English rose.”

“Shut up,” he says before pulling me in for a hug and a quick kiss. “May I show you my home?”

“Yes, please.”

If I liked the sharp roofline on the outside, I especially love the way it creates high, angled ceilings on the inside.

“You didn’t drywall the interior. I love the exposed limestone and cedar.”

“Wouldn’t be a proper cabin with drywall. Besides, I enjoy natural materials, both inside and out.”

“I thought you said the cabin wasn’t finished?”

Looking around, I can’t see a thing I would change. The home has an entirely open layout with three specific areas. The kitchen off to the side is, again, modest. High-end, but perfectly efficient. The refrigerator, sink, and stove line the wall, with a lovely island with barstools for seating.

The limestone fireplace is flanked by soft, low-slung lounge chairs and a modern wooden coffee table, the perfect space to read and hold conversations. Dark hardwood flooring pulls together the warm, cozy vibe.

Finally, tucked under the multipaned floor-to-ceiling windows is a king-size bed on a simple wooden platform, piled with luxurious bedding and surrounded by lush greenery. It’s a neat visual trick—from the drive you can only see the seating area and kitchen, but the bed is where he has his best view.

“Doesn’t the sun wake you up in the morning?”

“Yes, and that’s the point,” he admits, stubbing his toe along the expensive hardwood. “I love being woken by the sun.”

I gesture outside. “Doesn’t give you much privacy, though.”



“Depends on what you mean by privacy,” he says, shortening the *i*. “We’re behind a stand of trees and the gate is always locked.”

He walks over to the enormous fancy refrigerator and pulls out two bottles.

“It’s Angkor beer, and it’s everywhere in Cambodia. You can get it here in the States, but it’s not the same,” he says.

He opens the bottles before handing one over, and we each take a sip.

“Is it okay?” he asks, charmingly worried.

I examine the bottle, nodding. “Not going to lie, I wasn’t sure I would like it. But this is tasty.”

“Isn’t it?” he asks, looking pleased with himself.

We stand there drinking beer as he points out the various architectural features of the cabin.

“I was considering creating three to four smaller versions of this cabin on the property as vacation rental income, but I didn’t want to get ahead of myself. The rental economy seems to be imploding a bit.”

“Charlie told me that vacation rentals have always done well out here, way before the vacation rental explosion. No one comes to the Texas Hill Country to stay in a basic roadside motel. Give people something pretty to look at, make it easy to access, and you’re golden.”

“That’s good to hear.”

We reach the end of our beers, and he stands there, picking at the label. He’s liked me for a while, and as restrained as he is, I think this is far more important to him than he’s ever been able to let on.

We’ve kissed, but maybe he doesn’t know why I invited myself into his cabin, or maybe he doesn’t want to assume. Sandy’s words come back to me. I need to show him how I feel.

Taking his empty bottle, I place it along with mine in his recycling bin, then come back to slip my hand into his. Wordlessly, I lead him over to the comfortable lounge chairs in front of the fireplace and give him a small push. He sits heavily, his eyes glued to mine, his chest rising and falling as though he's just run a 10k. Kissing his knuckles, I kick off my shoes and straddle him.

“Hey.”

He gulps. “Hello.”

There are a million words I could say to him, but between his nerves and my impatience, I think words are not the solution. Cupping his jaw, I catalog every detail of his beautiful face. The way his blue eyes have a slightly greenish ring around the pupil—the left having a brown dot in the blue—the small scar that runs through his right eyebrow, the fact that his freckles multiply up close. The way his upper lip has the most perfect Cupid's bow in contrast with his lower lip, which is plump and poutier than you'd expect from a proper English gentleman, and his cheekbones are high as skyscrapers.

“God, you're so handsome,” I say on an out breath.

“I was just about to say the same thing.”

In this position, our height difference is neutralized, so I lean forward and place a kiss on his lips. His pained moan spurs me on; I lick the seam of his lips, then deepen the kiss as he lets me in, moving my hands to the back of his head and neck.

“You may well be the best kisser I've ever known,” he says, coming up for air.

I chuckle. “Thank you.”

“No, no. Thank *you*.”

He glances off to the side before pulling me in for an even deeper kiss, and his body against mine is everything. He's more solid than he initially looks and I roll my hips, happy—relieved—to discover he's as hard as I am.

His whimpering sounds are adorable, but I need skin on skin. Sliding off him, I unbutton my shirt, letting it slip down my arms to the floor, where it lands with a soft whisper.

“Gael...”

“Take off your shirt,” I command, hand on my hip.

He flushes and immediately begins working on his buttons, wriggling out of the finely tailored cloth, bunching it up and then tossing it to the side.

It’s my turn to figure out how to regulate my breathing. One would assume with all of his elegance that he’d be smooth, practically hairless. Underneath the Hawaiian shirts, however, is a beautiful light dusting of fur. It follows the curves and planes of his muscles, and my fingers itch to run through it.

Unable to wait for another kiss, I crawl onto his lap again. Our bare chests slide together, and we rub against each other like horny schoolboys, setting me on fire.

“Gael, Gael, Gael,” he chants. “Let me take you to my bed. Please.”

“Yes.” With one hand cupping my ass and the other pushing off the arm of the chair, he stands, dragging me with him. I tighten my thighs around his waist as he walks over to the bed.

The evening glow of the cabin and the rumpled sheets on his bed feel like sex, and I need it so bad. Kneeling, he lowers me carefully, like I’m something precious, his stare intense.

“This isn’t some fling for me,” he warns as he removes the rest of his clothing.

I follow his lead, stripping myself bare under his all-seeing eyes. “I don’t do one-night stands. Or casual.”

The relief on his face and in his body is adorable and tells me he must be very serious about me indeed.

“But you can fuck me like this is a one-night stand, though... right?” I ask, needing to know he won’t treat me too preciously.

He scrunches his nose at me and lowers his forehead to mine. “Yes, my... Gael. But not tonight. My heart can’t take it.”

His honesty is the thing that cracks me wide open.

“Not tonight,” I promise, smoothing my hand over his cheek.

The way his chest expands tells me how much he wants this to go well. I’ve only been with two men before, and those experiences were... *fine*. Not earth-shattering like you read in romance books, and I often felt like an afterthought, as if they were already on the hunt for somebody cooler, taller, slicker.

Tonight, though, I could walk into a room full of tall, sleek men and Tolly wouldn’t see anyone except for me. I am so in awe of being one person’s sole focus.

We kiss, and I don’t know how, but each subsequent kiss is so much better than the one before it. I sink into the bed as Tolly lies on top of me, supporting his weight on his forearm as his expression reveals the depth of his feelings.

I know with absolute certainty that Tolly loves me. Not like a friend... no. He’s *in* love with me. Has been for a while now. The nerves, the awkwardness... it all makes so much sense.

I wrap my legs around him, encouraging him to rub up against me, to feel everything.

Exploration finally turns into writhing and moaning and deep, searching looks between kisses I could drown in.

“Gael, I—”

“Me too.”

Within moments his posh sex sounds pitch up and he grinds his hips down on mine. Warmth floods the space between us and everything goes white with pleasure, the earthy smell of him making my brain fuzz and rattle.

“Tolly—”

I come, and keep coming. I've had orgasms that felt like electricity, fast and brutal. But my body takes its time with these sensations—the cresting wave of pleasure, the warmth of our mingled release, the way it feels when his eyes take in every detail of me.

It feels amazing to rub off against him, of course, but the thing I've been desperate for, even more than our intense physical connection, is the sense of home. I think of the bed at my mother and father's home, and suddenly it doesn't feel like mine anymore.

Tilting my head back, I'm dazzled by the starry night sky through the multipaned window over the bed as I lie surrounded, dreamlike, by gorgeous linens and beautiful plants.

*This*, says the soft voice inside my head. *This is home.*

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## TOLLY

I've been awake for an hour, watching as the sun's light and shadows move across Gael's beautiful face. I was so nervous last night. I wasn't expecting him to want to come to my place, and then, when I got him here, I was... My brain glitched. But then he led me to the chair over there, which I will be buried in, and showed me he feels the same.

He saw that I was nervous and he helped me.

One would think kissing, touching, and coming with him would make me less nervous, but that is not the case. I'm even more of a wreck this morning because now I know how much I have to lose if he decides I'm not it for him.

All last night did was confirm he is the one and only for me—and will only ever be such. He's not just the most gorgeous, sexiest man I've ever met. He's smart, he's warm and funny, and he's come out on the other side of something horrific stronger and more determined to do right in the world. He's so perfect for me that if he decides last night was a mistake, life will be meaningless.

Which is how I find myself stuck between his beauty and my fear.

I love the way his eyelashes fan out across his cheeks. How his nearly black hair shines in the morning light and his thick brows wing out to the sides. His features are so different from mine. I feel pale and bedraggled next to him. Even yesterday, with leather stains on his fingertips and sweat across his brow, he looked so regal.

And I know regal.

He could walk into court and outshine every single one of those inbred assholes.

“You’re staring,” Gael says. His voice is rough with sleep, his eyes closed, even as a sneaky smile turns up the corners of his full, perfect mouth.

“It’s not my fault you’re this beautiful first thing in the morning.”

He opens his eyes, and the sun highlights their russet coloring.

“You keep talking like that and you will never get rid of me.”

*Thank God.*

“Note to self: tell Gael he’s beautiful every day for the rest of his life.”

I swallow quickly, immediately regretting being so forward with my words, but then his smile brightens, and... maybe I haven’t ruined it.

“Note to self,” he replies, “learn how to take a compliment from British aristocrats. They do it better than anyone else.”

I laugh, relieved, as I tighten my hold on him. His hand lands on my chest and he runs his fingers through my chest hair. He’s obsessed with it for some reason, and it strokes my ego like nothing else.

“I don’t know why, but I’d thought you’d have less body hair.”

“We don’t like to talk about it,” I say, leaning into that posh accent that Americans so badly imitate, “but my family lineage can be traced back to Scotland. The Scots are a hairy people.”

“I love the Scottish. They have the best insults.”

“That’s because they sharpen them on the British.”

“A more worthy whetstone I cannot imagine,” he jokes, brushing his fingertips over one of my nipples.

I inhale sharply and he smiles into my pec. “Someone liked that.”

“Your hands are on me. I’m going to like anything you do,” I admit, kissing the top of his head.

“Mm. Might have to test out that theory.” He briefly plucks at one nipple while tonguing the other, then turns southward. He trails kisses down my chest and belly.

“I...” I forget what I was going to say when he licks along the darker happy trail.

“Yes?” he asks, nuzzling into my pubic hair.

“I haven’t been with anyone since we met,” I say, gulping as he inhales my scent. “And my annual came back negative.”

He flicks his eyes up to mine. “Thank you. And same.”

My cock, extremely interested in his progress, starts to plump. It’s rather pale, save for the head, which flushes pink when I get excited. I suck in a breath as he takes it into his hot mouth, his suction perfect. Not too light, not too aggressive. Just perfect.

“Gael...” I choke out.

“I’ve been wanting to do this for a long time,” he says into the slit, teasing it with the tip of his tongue.

“Me, too.”

He looks up at me, and his smile is everything. Without warning, he pivots, hiking a leg over my belly, showing me his perfect brown ass. I’m instantly in love with the sparse fan of hair at his back waist.

I can’t tell what he’s doing with his back to me, save for a delicate spitting sound. I shiver when he touches the tip of his cock to mine, then runs his hand over, bridging us together with...

“Is that your foreskin?” I cough out.



“It is. I’ve always wanted to try it with someone who is cut.” I can hear the smile in his response.

Rough, uncoordinated sounds fall from my lips as he spits again, then continues to slick his skin over my glans, back and forth, back and forth.

“I’m gonna—”

The orgasm barrels through the deepest parts of me, a violent, nasty thing.

“*Gael!*” I cry.

He’s made a circle of his thumb and forefinger, holding his foreskin in place over me as I come.

Spanish curses tumble out of his lips as his cock kicks against mine, then floods the same tight space with his own spend. The pressure, the heat, the wetness... I’ve never experienced anything like it, and when he releases the tight ring of his fingers, I’m drenched in our combined seed, my life forever altered.

Laughing, he sets his ass on my lower belly and melts against me, his back to my chest. We’re a mess. An entire mess, and I don’t care.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” I say, sliding an arm around his chest, pulling him to me as I kiss the top of his head.

“There’s something about you that makes me want to play. To explore,” he says, wonder in his voice. “This last year has been amazing and horrible and revelatory, and so, so good. But so goddamn hard.”

His voice cracks, so I tighten my hold on him.

“But this here with you... it feels like you’ve been slowly stitching me back together. If you had told me that some British man with a title could feel so warm and wonderful, I would have called you a liar.”

My heart thuds heavily at his words, and the world spins a little more slowly.

“I’m glad I can surprise you,” I say, running my hands up and down his chest. “I knew you were warm and wonderful from the second I met you.”

He twists to look up at me, followed by his body. Our cum is everywhere, but I can only focus on the serious expression in his eyes.

“You gave me time to heal. You’re the reason I didn’t let myself get pulled down into the dark reality of my cousin’s history. You helped Ant, and for that you will have my eternal gratitude. But you brought *me* back to life, and I hope to pay you back for that favor for as long as you’ll let me.”

I can’t quite unhook the fear in my heart that he doesn’t yet understand how much I adore him already, so I kiss him until we’re both desperate for oxygen.

“What do you have planned for today?” I ask, then kiss him again before he can answer.

We writhe against each other, lubricated by our cum, not quite hard. It feels amazing.

Finally, he pulls away, his mouth slick and red with abuse. “Our big Christmas tradition is a tamale breakfast with all the fixings and sides. So, today’s the day we make an assembly line and build the tamales. We put on my grandmother’s favorite Mexican standards and sing along as she judges our masa to meat ratios and the tightness of our tamales,” he explains between pillowy kisses all over my face.

“I can see how the right ratios and rolling technique could make a difference,” I say as his lips find mine again.

“Have you actually had tamales before?” He grunts as I grab one of his tiny, round ass cheeks.

“Oh, yes,” I say, sucking lightly on his neck. I’d love to leave a mark, but I don’t want to horrify his mother. “I love all different kinds of tamales. A friend of mine from Veracruz uses skinless, bone-in chicken thighs. Instead of corn husks, he uses banana leaves wrapped with twine.”

Gael nods, sucking on my earlobe. “I love those, too. But the tiny tamales are my favorite.”

“Have you had the rough corn masa ones from New Mexico?” I ask, wrapping my legs around his.

He shakes his head.

“We’ll have to go to Santa Fe together one of these days,” I say, brushing his hair away from his face.

“Okay,” he answers softly, dipping down to nurse at my nipple.

My cock twitches and I let out a low groan, wishing I could go again so quickly. He switches to the other nipple, and even though the cum starts to get sticky, I don’t want to be doing anything else.

Just as I’m imagining what his perfect little ass will taste like on my tongue, my phone goes off, the ringtone all too familiar.

He pulls away from my nipple with a pop. “Who’s that?” he asks, pressing on the line between my eyebrows.

“My sister.” The answer throws a bucket of cold water on my libido. Beatrice is one of a handful of people set to bypass my do not disturb setting. “She wouldn’t call unless...” I unlock my phone to find that since turning off my phone last night I’ve missed dozens of messages from my father.

I hit the Accept button.

“Bea?”

“Tolly,” she says, relief in her voice.

“I’m just now waking up. I’m in Texas. What have I missed?”

“Texas? Why are you in Texas? I thought you were coming home for Christmas.”

“No. I said that I might be there for New Year’s.”

“Tolly. I don’t think this can wait till New Year’s.”

“What is it?”

“Remember, all of the ideas I had for the family estate?”

“Yes. They were brilliant. Do you need help with them?”

“No. Father ignored me, and the HMRC has threatened to seize Sandringham.”

Sandringham is my family’s estate in West Shropshire, the one kept in trust for me until after my father passes. At least I’m pretty sure how that works. Either way, I’ll be handing the estate over to my sister at the earliest possible moment.

I should probably tell her that at some point.

“What are you saying? They would do that? Seize our ancestral home on the eve of Christmas?”

Her silence ratchets up my anxiety.

“I... The letter I discovered has a July date.” She snuffles, and my heart breaks for my sister. “He hasn’t paid taxes in ten years, Tolly.”

“Ten years?” I practically shout.

Gael’s eyes widen and I mouth a quick *sorry* to him.

“Ten years?” I repeat, softer this time. “But he’s always said that the accounts are fine. I saw them myself—there’s plenty of money in there.”

“I suppose they would look good since he wasn’t paying for anything. His accounts have already been seized. It appears that some of the money came from a bank in Saudi Arabia, and ever since the crackdown a few years ago...”

“Oh, dear Lord. Is our father involved in some sort of scheme?”

“I... I don’t think so. I think he thought he’d be given consideration because of his title.”

“Yeah, but not for ten years. God, this must be all over the news back home.”

“Not yet, but if the estate goes, it absolutely will be.”

“Jesus, Bea. He should have listened to you.”

“Maybe he will now.”

We both go quiet because that’s about as likely as someone setting up a snow cone stand in hell.

My phone goes off again; this time it's my father on the line. "Beatrice, it's him."

"Take the call," she says gravely.

I switch to his line, entirely too aware of the sticky state of my sheets and pubic hair. "Father?"

"Ptolemy. You need to come home. We've much to discuss."

"Father, I'm in Texas."

"You have the plane, don't you?"

"I do."

"Good. I expect you by tonight," he says, ending the call before I can utter a response.

"What's wrong?" Gael asks, touching my face.

"My family has called me back to the estate. It's not something I can ignore."

"You're going to miss Christmas with us?"

The sadness in his voice breaks my heart. "I don't want to, but this is a duty I cannot push off."

He takes my face in his hands. "I would never want you to ignore your duty. It's one of my favorite things about you."

God, I can't bear the thought of leaving him now. *I just got him.*

"Come with me," I say, the words spilling out of my mouth before I can pull them back.

He looks off in the direction of his family's ranch, obviously conflicted.

"I'm sorry, Gael. Of course I can't ask you to miss Christmas with your family. I just hate that we won't be able to spend it together."

He leans in and kisses me dizzy. "Maybe we can. I'll explain it to my mom. She'll understand."

If I were a better man I'd decline his offer, but I can't.

I touch my forehead to his. “Thank you. Now that I have you, I can’t imagine doing this without you.”

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## GAEL

**T**olly and I shower together, and of course, his bathroom is magnificent. I borrow his truck while he packs. The moment I pull into my family's driveway the front door opens and my mom stands there, grinning at me.

"Does he love you?" she asks in Spanish as I make my way up the front steps.

I kiss her cheek. "He does. He hasn't said the words, but no one looks at somebody like that without their heart being involved."

She squeals and hugs me, then presses a kiss to each cheek.

"You deserve the world with him. He's such a good man."

"He is. And unfortunately he has duties back in England."

"Of course," she says with a shrug. "He's a man with lot on his shoulders."

"Yes, but I'm talking about right now. His family called him this morning. He's getting on a plane in the next hour."

"Wait—he can't have Christmas with us?"

I shake my head, following her into the living room. "He's asked me to join him, and I want to say yes, but I don't want to break your heart and miss out on Christmas."

"Why are you breaking your mother's heart?" my dad asks as he walks into the living room.

“He’s not breaking my heart, Emil.” She pauses for a kiss and a tight hug from my father. “Tolly’s been called back to England, and Gael doesn’t want to be apart from him.”

My father’s hands land on my mother’s hips. “I understand entirely. But what about the tamales?”

“My mother won’t be thrilled, but we can push the tamale assembly and breakfast until he comes back.”

I’m overwhelmed as my father nods.

“I like that.” Turning to me, he asks, “Will you bring Tolly back with you? This is an important tradition with our family.”

“I will do everything I can to make that happen,” I promise, filled with gratitude for their understanding and support.

Opening my phone, I send Tolly a quick message. “I’ll pack and take his truck back to him.”

“That truck is enormous,” my mother says, fanning herself. “How does he get around it?”

“Pretty good for a guy who owns a yacht.”

“A yacht. I forgot. If he’s in love with you, he needs to impress me, so let him know that a trip around the Caribbean on his yacht would be very impressive, indeed.”

“Mama!” I say, slapping my palm to my forehead. “We are not going to ask him to do those kinds of things. We do not take advantage.”

“Ay Dios mío, I know. I just wanted to tease you.”

“Teasing Gael is the most fun,” my father says, bringing me into a hug. “Go to England. Support him. And then come back and we’ll show him our family traditions.”

“I will.”





“WHY ARE there a dozen parcels wrapped with Christmas paper in my hold?” Tolly asks as our flight heads out over the Atlantic. “Are you a magical Christmas elf?”

“I have stock on hand for overnight requests and my father is a world-class gift wrapper. Also, I can’t arrive at Christmas empty-handed. Mi abuelita would never forgive me,” I answer, standing in front of him. “Make room for me.”

This fancy plane has no shortage of large, comfy captain’s chairs, but I’ve decided his lap is the best seat in the house. Without a word I sit, and he seems nonplussed, his arms limp on the armrests. I arrange myself, nudging my hip against his business while snuggling against his chest.

I’m almost exquisitely comfortable, but... not quite.

I lean forward to open the window shade, then rearrange myself all over again as though Tolly were some comfortable bit of furniture. I sigh, equally amused and content, as I look out the window.

“I would request that you show decorum in front of my staff, but you feel so damned good I can’t bring myself to do it.”

“What can I say? I like sharing a chair with you.”

I’m reminded of the things we got up to on the chair in front of his fireplace. As he adjusts his collar, I wonder if he’s thinking of the same thing. My eyes dart from the window to him, and I tilt my hips sideways, knocking into his growing hard-on.

“Are you turned on by my sitting in your lap?”

“Possibly.”

I shift again and Tolly stifles a groan as Heathcliff, his long-suffering flight attendant, walks by to offer refreshments. I refuse but Tolly asks for ice water.

“I didn’t know the English knew anything about ice water,” I tease.

“I spend a good deal of my time in warm climates. I have come to appreciate the Americans love of a—*mf*— good iced

water,” he explains, his voice strained as I grind my ass more purposefully. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“No.” I undulate against him with a wicked grin. “Just a bit of light torture.”

“Sounds like Anders to me.”

I toss my head against his shoulder, cackling. “Oh, Anders. I do like that guy.”

“Should I be worried?” he asks, squeezing my hip.

“Don’t hurt me and you’ll be good,” I fire back, and then give him an extended kiss.

We part at the sound of a polite cough.

“Pardon me, sir. Would you like for me to bring you a lunch selection?”

“No, Heathcliff, but thank you,” Tolly says.

I only just met the man, but I think Heathcliff likes his boss, and for some reason he’s taken a shine to me. He hides a grin behind a gloved hand, then sends Tolly a short nod before retiring to the galley, where he pulls the curtain.

It’s not exactly what I call privacy, but I’ll take it.

Tolly tickles my sides. “You are such a troublemaker.”

I laugh and try to escape his fingers while staying firmly planted in his lap, getting him back by vigorously rubbing my ass against his cock.

“Gael, I’m...”

“Hard as a rock?”

“Yes.”

After checking the curtain, I slide to the floor in front of him, kneeling as I push his thighs apart.

“Gael...”

“He can’t see anything. Can you be quiet?”

“I think so.”

He struggles for a moment to get his belt unbuckled and his pants unzipped until I get impatient and bat away his hands, taking care of it for him. Dipping into his underwear, I scoop out his growing shaft and tight balls, and then I bury my nose into the base of his cock and inhale his clean, musky scent.

Tolly throws his head back with his eyes to the ceiling, mouthing out words I can't hear. Might be a prayer, could be a curse. His knuckles are white as he grips the ends of his armrests.

I slide my mouth down his cock, loving the muted, desperate sounds, reveling in how hard he's trying to hold back. I make a meal of his glans, licking and sucking it, using the tip of my tongue to tease out a pearl of precum from his slit.

When I'm certain he can't take it a second longer, I take him to the back of my throat. He punches the armrest with the side of his fist, his hips rising off the chair. Pinning his unruly hips back to his seat, I hold him in place while I take him apart.

Needing more, I grab his hand and put it on the back of my head. He takes a ragged breath as my eyes meet his, my meaning clear. His chest rises and falls as he sends me a short nod. I grin and relax the back of my throat as he sifts his fingers through my hair. I wasn't sure he got the memo until he grips it tight, thrusting up while pulling down.

*Yes.*

I relax my jaw even further, letting him take everything. Proper gentleman that he is, his violent hip thrusts are absolutely silent. It's my turn to stifle sounds of pleasure. I love being his like this; I want him to do it again, and again, and again.

"Gael—" he chokes out. I catch his eye again, nodding slightly, wanting it.

With the softest exhale on the most violent thrust, he comes. Oh God, does he come. I nearly choke on it, loving

that even more. He shivers on the last few thrusts and pulls away, his breathing ragged.

I sit back on my haunches, satisfied as I lick a spot of cum from the corner of my mouth. Before I can catch my breath, Tolly yanks me up from the floor, twisting me so that my back is against his front. With rough movements, he undoes my jeans, pushing them down to mid-thigh.

I lean my head back on his shoulder while he spits on his hand and takes half a second to slick my cock. Pressing his forearm against my chest, his strong fingers circle my shaft.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” he whispers as he shuttles his hand up and down, at first gentle, then with more umph, and finally with such careful force that my eyes roll to the back of my head.

The rapid *schlick-schlick* sound is barely audible above the engine noise. I valiantly try to stay silent but can’t help the nearly silent grunts. It’s not just his hand on my cock, it’s the way this gentle, kind man with his Hawaiian shirts and linen shorts is jacking me so violently with one hand while his other drifts to my neck. Using just the barest pressure, the move sends chills out along my chest and down low into my belly.

“This feels good, yes?” he asks, his accent sophisticated even as he’s wringing pleasure from the very depths of my soul.

“Mmf” is all I can manage because he’s added an evil flick to his wrist right under the head.

So turned on I can hardly think, I fuck against his hand, blowing every circuit in my body. I shoot so hard that my vision goes black for a second, and by the time I’m aware again, cum is everywhere.

Tolly keeps one hand against my throat, breathing slowly with me as he delicately licks his hand that’s now covered in my cum. Scooping up the remnants from my belly and shaft, he pushes his refined fingers into my mouth.

“Suck.”

I do, tasting my own salt as he spreads his fingers, letting me explore them, his other hand heavy against my throat as I swallow. Satisfied that I've licked every drop of cum from his fingers, he wipes them against my bare thigh, leaving a slick trail of our combined fluids.

He carefully tucks me back into my underwear and we work together to pull up my jeans and zip them.

"Do you know? I've never done that in my plane before," he says, playing with the seam that runs over my balls.

I shake my head, all of my muscles on standby.

Heathcliff parts the curtain, and Tolly finally drops his hand from my neck, wrapping his arm around my waist. I can feel his returning hard-on through the fabric of my jeans and its distracting as hell.

"Your ice water, sir," Heathcliff says, his eyes averted.

"Thank you. I think we're fine for the rest of the trip. I'll hit the button if I require anything further."

"Yes, sir," Heathcliff says, setting both the ice water and a small plate with two tightly rolled, steaming washcloths on the small table by Tolly's seat. Heathcliff returns to the galley and closes the curtain again. Tolly's hand goes back to my throat, and the delicate way his fingertips dig into the sensitive skin becomes the center of my universe.

Tolly reaches for the glass of iced water, takes a sip, and holds it in front of me.

"Drink."

I do as he says, grateful for the cool liquid. He reaches, grabs the edge of one of the washcloths, and snaps it open with one efficient move before wiping away any residual cum from our fingers and mouths. Once finished, he holds the washcloth to his nose and inhales deeply.

Setting the used cloth aside, he tenses the fingers at the side of my throat briefly before relaxing his hand. I swallow and my Adam's apple bobs up against the inside of his palm. His other hand drifts down to my chest, his thumb grazing my

nipple over the thin material of my shirt. I inhale sharply and arch my body. He tuts in that arch British tone of his, grinding his impossibly hard erection against my ass.

He thumbs the same nipple over and over, pinching and pulling on it. He lets his hand skim over my belly, and I grind back against him.

“Good. That’s good,” he says, cupping the bulge in my pants, his lips so close to my ear that I shudder.

It’s enough to make me hard all over again.

Dipping his hand into my jeans, he straightens out my cock under my waistband, just enough to expose the head while the rest of me is trapped.

“Spit,” he commands. I tilt my chin and do as I’m told, aiming to spit toward the head of my cock.

With just his thumb and forefinger, he begins to carefully—so carefully—rub my foreskin against the glans, lubricating it with my own spit. I’m tempted to beg for more, but I like the torture. I can only hear the sound of my own breath, ragged in my ears, as he continues to stretch and twist the foreskin over the sensitive tip.

“You fucked me with this last night, Gael.”

I nod.

“You slipped it over my cock and made me come so hard.”

“*Ah...* yeah.”

“I’ve never done that before, either. You seem willing to give me all kinds of new experiences.”

I nod off-kilter, coming out of my skin with the way his fingertips on my throat and his fingertips on my cock are each the perfect counterpoint for the other.

“Mmhmm,” I hum, half out of my mind.

“It’s only fair, then, that I teach you a few things before we land,” he says, rolling his thumb and forefinger.

Not enough. Not nearly enough.

“As you know, my full name is Lord Ptolemy James Filbert Llewellyn Middleton III of West Shropshire. Spit again for me, darling, I don’t want you to chafe,” he says, his matter-of-fact delivery fucking with my head.

I follow his instructions only because I can’t think of another thing to do.

“My parents are—do you like it when I do that?” he asks as he dips his slick thumb between my cock head and foreskin.

“Oh... oh, *fuck*. Yes.”

“Wonderful.” He hums, slipping his fore and middle fingers under the foreskin as well, increasing the pressure and friction and... Jesus. Fuck. Christ.

“As I was saying, my parents are the Duke and Duchess of West Shropshire, whom you will address as Your Grace. After that is my eldest sibling, Robert, though what you call the viscount matters not as he will not be there. My sister, Beatrice, is lovely and she will laugh at you if you call her anything other than Bea.”

His voice never wavers through this entire explanation, even as his thumb and fingers have colluded to separate my soul from reality.

“Oh, dear. You are getting rather noisy,” he says, taking the remaining washcloth and pressing the tightly rolled, pleasantly hot, damp material to my lips. I open my mouth, allowing him to tuck it into place as he ruthlessly twists his slick thumb and fingers under my foreskin.

When his free hand goes back to my throat, I come so hard I’m grateful for the cloth. Water spills down my chin as I bite down to prevent myself from screaming. White cum dribbles down his lightly tanned knuckles, which he licks delicately before removing the cloth from my mouth to finish the cleanup.

“Now, to review—what will you call my father?”

I look up at him, wrung out and barely able to lift my arms. “Your Grace?”

He smiles down at me, his eyes twinkling with mischief.  
“Excellent. You’ll do just fine.”



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## TOLLY

**B**y the time we land, I don't even know who I am anymore. I've never quite taken control like that in an intimate situation, but I loved it. I was filthy with him, telling him all about peerage and entitled lands whilst playing with his nipples or having him suck my cock. I even had him trap his cum in his foreskin again, this time holding it until I could position myself to swallow it while tonguing those delicate parts of him. Whatever I wanted, he followed my every whim, like an instrument in human form, making music only for me.

Oh, dear. Somewhere over the Atlantic I've become a bad poet.

Wellesley is waiting for us on the tarmac next to the Rolls. I wrap my arm around a warm and sleepy Gael.

"Darling, we've landed."

He blinks up at me, stretching like a cat in my lap. "We're here already?"

"We are. Someone slept rather soundly for the last half of the trip."

"That's because someone edged me with all of his dirty little tricks and made me come three times. Then put me into a coma," he snaps back, his beautiful brown eyes twinkling.

"Guilty."

"I like it," he whispers as we make our way to the Rolls. "You turning the tables on me."

“So do I. I wouldn’t say I need to be in control one hundred percent of the time, to be sure, but I’d happily explore more of that once we’re back in the States.”

A flush darkens his cheeks. “Yes, my Lord.”

Oh, damn. That’s quite... *mm*.

We settle into the back of the Rolls and I remove my mobile, shooting off a text to my father.

Me: We’ve landed. Should be at the estate in thirty minutes or so.

Father: Excellent. I’ll see you tomorrow at Christmas lunch.

I snarl at the phone and send off a quick message to my land manager. He texts me back immediately.

“Wellesley, change of plans. Take me to Adrian’s house.”

Having been the estate’s driver for nearly twenty years now, I recognise the sharpening of his jaw. He’s as familiar with my father’s patrician ways as I am.

“Of course, my Lord. Shall I deliver the packages to the manor house?”

“No, Wellesley. Thank you. I’ll store them at Adrian’s.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Something wrong?” Gael asks, now more awake.

I rub my forehead. “After insisting that I immediately get on a plane, my father has informed me that we’ll speak tomorrow.”

“What the—?” Gael’s irritation matches my own, and I appreciate the solidarity.

“I’d love to say that this is a surprising turn of events, but it is not.”

“What about presents? Food? Does your family not have any Christmas Eve traditions?”

I chortle in the back of my throat. “It’s been years since we’ve exchanged gifts.”

Gael’s mouth drops open, and all I can do is shrug in response.

He supportively rests his head on my shoulder, and we ride in comfortable silence on our way to my family’s estate, his hand tucked in mine. Despite the last-minute change of plans, I’m not filled with the usual sense of dread while riding in to meet my family. It makes all the difference in the world, having someone at my side.

My irritation is further cut short as we roll to a stop in front of my land manager’s house. Adrian enjoys going overboard with the Christmas decorations, some of which he’s had since I was a child. It looks like a festive gingerbread house and feels like home. Gael laughs and kisses my cheek.

“At least these people know how to celebrate.”

Adrian makes his way down the steps and opens the door to the Rolls. “Tolly, my boy! It is so good to see you.”

Adrian and his family will not consider it an imposition for me to show up at dinnertime because they always make more than enough. We’ll be up for the next three hours talking, of that I’m certain.

Adrian is average height and blocky, with hands that can crush as well as care, his face pit-marked and aged in the sun, hair fleeing from his head as quickly as it can. These are the traits members of my family judge as middle class if they’re being generous. Lower class if they aren’t. I was raised the same way, but no one ever made me feel accepted and loved the way Adrian and his family did.

He was the first person I came out to because he was the person I was most nervous to have accept me. All he did was wrap me up in a too tight hug and say, “Whatever is the most real about you is the most beautiful thing about you, Tolly. Don’t let anybody convince you otherwise.”

“Tolly!” Adrian’s wife, Dimitra, races down the front porch steps to join us. “You’ve just missed the kids, but they’ll

be in for Christmas breakfast.”

I smile. Her youngest “kid” is halfway through university.

Dimitra’s short, a bit rounder now in her fifties, and her gorgeous black hair is now liberally shot through with white and silver, making the long ponytail hanging over her shoulder that much more eye-catching. Her family hails from Greece, which is evident in her strong features. Her beauty is timeless, and she and Adrian make a dashing couple.

Finished with fussing over me, they turn to Gael. At some point in the drive over, I explained where we would be staying, and he seemed to relax, happy to put off meeting the parents for another day.

“Is this the one you’ve been talking about since the summer?”

Gael looks up at me, his eyes glittering with amazement. “You’ve been talking about me?”

“Whatever. You’ve been talking about me too.”

Rolling my eyes, I stoop to kiss the top of his head. Looking up I find Dimitra with her hand on her heart, and Adrian beaming with pride.

They hustle us and our many parcels into what was tantamount to a small cottage on our estate. It’s a lovely two-story, three bedroom, two bath, extremely homey place that they’d lived in ever since they were hired as newlyweds thirty years ago.

We make our way inside and I’m immediately hit with the warm familiarity of their slightly cluttered living room and it’s overdecorated Christmas tree, bursting with presents at the bottom. Adding to the nostalgia is the enchanting smell of Dimitra’s cooking. Her tomatoey Greek lamb stew smells like a hug. They show us to the guestroom, where we drop off our things, and then we wash up and sit at their small, well-loved table.

Gael and I spend the evening stuffing ourselves on amazing stew and crusty village bread slathered with

homemade butter while Adrian and Dimitra pepper us with questions about life in Texas and in the Caribbean.

We go through two bottles of Adrian's table wine. He makes some noise about it not being the fancy stuff I like to drink, but I assure him that I love it. I'm not lying—it's simple, drinkable, and such a deep red it stains our teeth purple.

We're all tipsy by the time we stumble to bed, and I'm grateful to have this respite before facing tomorrow's cold realities.

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## GAEL

Tolly and I wake up early the next morning because it's impossible to sleep once Adrian is up and going. His work boots are particularly loud and heavy on the wooden floors.

I grouse, scrunching my face against the noise. "It's still dark... Christmas."

"Darling, even on Christmas, Adrian's up before dawn tending to the land and animals as he does every day. He's probably up a little earlier to get things settled before breakfast."

"Oh." Guess I can't complain about that.

Snuggling into Tolly's armpit, I rub his chest as we listen to Adrian tromp outside and start a very loud engine. Everything goes quiet after a few moments and I lower my hand to his belly, loving how warm his skin is.

"How can you sleep nude in this freezing weather?" I mumble, kissing his bare pec.

"It's not winter inside the house," he says, palming the back of my head. "And I like the feeling of bed linens on my skin."

"So you never wear pajamas?"

"Depends on the circumstance, but I wear as little as I can get away with."

"I don't hate it," I admit, dry humping his hip as he cups my ass.

He chuckles and pulls me up for a chaste peck of the lips.

“Mmf. I can’t tell if I want to go back to sleep or brush my teeth so I can make out with you.”

Twisting to rub his morning hard-on against my thigh, he mutters, “I know which one I’d prefer.”

Needing no further encouragement, I slip out of the covers and into the shared hallway for the bathroom. After brushing my teeth, I give myself a lightning-quick bird bath and race back across the hall to the room. Tolly, in no rush, strolls naked to the bathroom and does the same.

We are the only ones upstairs, but I’m still scandalized. And entirely turned on.

When Tolly returns smelling of toothpaste and soap, I tackle him to the bed. He presses me against the pillows with insistent kisses, delving into my mouth with his wicked tongue while ripping off every shred of my clothing.

I let myself be ravaged, boggling at the fact that I’m in the UK on Christmas, getting kissed to within an inch of my life by an English lord. It’s like somebody took *Pride and Prejudice* (the Keira Knightly version) and *Y Tu Mamá Tambi3n* and blended them together on high.

Drawing back, Tolly shoves two fingers in my mouth, thrusting in and out until they’re slick, then he pushes my knees to my chest.

“Hold,” he demands, his eyes dark and hooded.

I wrap my arms around my knees, bent in half as he kisses his way down my shin. Palming my ass with an intense look on his face, he spreads my cheeks, biting his plump bottom lip as he lowers his face to my hole.

Growling, he dives in, first with an eye-rolling broad lick before swirling the tip of his tongue around my rim. My cock bounces and twitches as he continues to mix it up, and I feel like I’ve gone insane when the pleasure reaches down in between my toes.

Before I can acclimate to his attack, he plunges his middle finger inside me. I have to drag a pillow over my face when he hooks it right up against... Oh, fuck. He spits on my hole and adds the second finger. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end as he twists his wrist.

Just when I think I can't take it for another second, he sucks my cock into his mouth. My orgasm feels like a pressure valve has been released, sudden and powerful. He grunts, surprised, but swallows everything.

Ripping the pillow from my face, I drop my feet to the bed and drag him up to me, kissing him like the world is about to end, tasting what he tasted and reliving it all over again.

"Sit on my face," I beg between breaths. "Please. Need it."

"I—I could hurt you." His voice is ragged, and his eyes look greedy.

"No, you can't. I need your ass. Please."

Awkward, he flips around, looking back at me, his eyes filled with worry.

The morning sun has started to brighten the room, and I'm entranced by his pale hole, covered in a fine brown fur. I swallow my drool as I grab his hips and pull down.

He insists on going to his knees and hovering slightly. I take a tentative lick, then bite back a groan, loving the musky smell of him.

"Down."

He's still not giving me everything, but I don't have the patience to argue with him. I devour him, loving every twitch and groan. His hole is a tight bud, and I lick at it until it softens enough for me to push inside him.

His shout is muffled, like he's biting his hand or something, so I go a little deeper. Unable to hold himself like that any longer, he finally gives me his full weight, allowing me to properly tongue fuck him.

He whimpers and shifts above me, the telltale sound of jacking off music to my ears.



“So close, so close,” he chants, clenching around my tongue as hot cum hits my belly.

I thrust my tongue inside him until he jerks away, shivering and overstimulated. I roll him to his back and straddle him, then wipe the cum from my belly with my palm, licking it as I capture his glazed over eyes.

“Can’t... believe...” he starts, unable to connect the words.

I wink at him. “I love, love, love eating ass. You can sit on my face any time.”

He nods, pulling me up for a dirty, filthy kiss as he finger fucks my used hole. “Soon. Soon we’ll fuck each other till we’re both dripping,” he slurs, his words drifting off as he slow-blinks into oblivion.

Within seconds he’s out, and I follow him just as quickly.

We don’t sleep for long because Adrian is back less than an hour later, stomping around the house. Tolly tightens his grip on me, kisses me, then slides out of bed. Grinning like a masochist, he flings open the heavy drapes and lets in the cold winter light.

I throw myself under the thick homemade duvet, cursing him in English and Spanish.

“Darling, there’s nothing more beautiful than fresh snow on Christmas morning.”

I peek out from my blanket fortress. “There’s fresh snow?”

“Yes, dear,” he says, slipping on a robe as he looks outside, appearing nothing like the man who impaled himself on my tongue an hour ago.

Slowly and with bitter complaint I rise and shuffle next to him by the window.

“It’s like a movie,” I whisper. “Also, is that breakfast I smell?”

He tugs me into a cozy hug, kissing my nose and forehead. “Yes, darling. Also? Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” I murmur in return, protesting when he drapes a robe around my shoulders but then snuggling into its warmth.

We step into our Gael Hernandez original slippers and make our way downstairs as Adrian and Dimitra’s three boys file into the dining room. We’re introduced and I find them as warm and kind as their parents.

Heli, which I discover is short for Helios, their oldest, greets Tolly with an effusive hug.

“How’s Bea?” he asks, tucking his hands into his pockets.

Huh. Interesting.

Before Tolly can answer, he’s swamped on both sides by Heli’s taller and stouter younger brothers, who give Tolly a tight hug.

“Gentlemen, please. My spine,” he says dryly.

They laugh and squeeze harder, and I join in on the merriment, giggling at the scene, and all grumpiness from the early morning vanishes.

Tolly leans down and whispers to me in Spanish, “Growing up, I was always amazed at how many people could fit around their table when you really tried.”

“Just like at my abuela’s house.”

Even though the dining room is crowded, no one complains because they’re too busy talking and joking and trying to one up each other.

Greetings out of the way, we tuck into the fantastic breakfast Heli cooked for us. The bacon is thick, the eggs are fresh, and the coffee is hearty. Apparently, he apprenticed at the manor before becoming a head chef at a local cafe.

“Use the Range Rover if you’re going to take Gael out on the property today,” Adrian says as he dips a hearty slice of village bread into his sunny orange egg yolk.

Tolly nods, fussing with his tea. “That Rover is almost as old as I am,” he tells me, “but Adrian takes meticulous care of

the vehicle, and it has gotten us out of more than one rut.”

After breakfast we pile into the living room, spread out on the couches, chairs, and the floor. They exchange gifts and I’m touched when Dimitra hands one to me.

“This is for both of you,” she says, kissing my forehead, then Tolly’s.

It’s a bottle of Adrian’s table red and I hug it to my chest. “This is more valuable than a bar of gold,” I declare, kissing Tolly’s temple.

He takes the bottle from me and pretends to tuck it into his robe, setting off another round of laughter.

When I pull out boxes from my stash and begin to hand them out, Adrian shakes his head.

“How could you have presents for us? You didn’t know you were staying over.”

I raise my brow. “Mi abuelita would not let me back into the house if I showed up on Christmas without presents.”

I brought several pairs of the buttery soft slippers with me, and luckily I have enough of a variety to fit even the largest feet. Dimitra declares me an honorary son and Tolly’s eyes go misty.

As the family settles into lively conversation around the tree, Heli goes up to Tolly with a gift in hand. “This is for Bea. Would you mind giving it to her?” he asks, his cheeks slightly red.

“Of course,” he says, taking the present with careful fingers.

Definitely going to have to find out more about that. Later, though, because Tolly is about to take me on a tour of the estate before we go to his family’s Christmas lunch.

I have a sneaking suspicion that this breakfast and gift exchange was already the best part of the day.

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## TOLLY

**W**e say goodbye to Heli and his brothers, then go back upstairs to get changed. I go out to warm up the engine of the Range Rover while Gael finishes putting on his boots and coat.

When Gael finally joins me, the engine is ready, the heater is blowing warm air, and the earth's ice caps have melted.

“What’s so funny?” he asks as though he isn’t waddling over to the Rover like a stuffed penguin.

“Have you seen the classic American movie *A Christmas Story*?”

“Maybe?”

“There’s a kid they wrap up in so much clothing he can’t move. You look like that kid,” I say, pulling out my phone to show him the Google image of the character.

Gael narrows his eyes at me, and it’s hard to take him seriously when his thick eyelashes curl in the sharp winter weather. I should point out his eyes are the only thing I can see because Dimitra has wrapped an enormous sheet-sized scarf around his neck and shoulders, topped with a slouching beanie pulled down around his ears.

I stifle a snort as he walks toward the driver side of the Rover and opens the door, at first confused, then cursing under his breath.

“Fucking British on the fucking wrong side of the road.”

The laughter breaks free from my chest as I grab his hand and lead him around to the passenger side. He's too mummified in his winter wear, so I boost him up into the seat, loving the opportunity to cup his cute ass.

"Why are you laughing at me?"

"Because you look like a very colourful, very delicious mummy."

"Dimitra said to dress in layers!"

"Yes. Like, two layers. You're currently wearing at least six."

"I am not! It's only four."

He tries to send me the middle finger as I make my way around the front of the vehicle to the driver side, but he's wearing mittens, which decidedly mutes the effect.

"Shut up." He scowls, ripping off his mittens and unwinding the scarf. "Fuck, I'm sweating."

"Oh my God, I love you so much," I say, reaching across the console to kiss his sweaty temple.

Suddenly, Gael's grumpy attitude vanishes and he goes quiet. He turns to me, his eyes gone all gimlety.

"I know," he murmurs.

"You know what?" I ask, rewinding our conversation.

Oh. *Fuck*.

Too soon, Tolly. Too soon.

I grimace. "Gael—"

He holds up his hand, or as much as he can, given his many layers. When an indelicate snort escapes my nose, he tries—unsuccessfully—to cross his arms in a pout. After some wrangling, he takes off the rather large puffer coat, which seems to solve most of his issues.

"Fine. Just show me your estate, and we'll pretend you didn't tell me that you loved me two seconds after you sat on my face."

“It wasn’t your rimming skills, darling, which are unequalled.”

“Whatever. That’s the story I’m telling myself.”

“You know I’ve been mad for you for six months. This is not a surprise.”

He drops his chin to his chest, his smile so bright it might crack his jaw right off his face. “I know.”

“You have fancied me for exactly the same amount of time. Don’t lie.”

“True.”

“And just because I was respecting your healing process doesn’t mean my feelings weren’t developing. Seriously, name one person who has spent this much time with you and not fallen head over heels in love. I’ll wait,” I say, a smidge defensively.

“I know.”

I look at him, incredulous. “What do you know of other people falling in love with you?”

“Johnson City is a small town, but there are plenty of people who find me attractive. Some who’ll even ask me out.”

“You’ve been dating this whole time?” I ask, my heart cracking in two. “I thought you said...”

I mean, is it fair I’m jealous when I hadn’t even asked him out? No. But here we are.

“No, you idiot.” He emphasizes my idiocy with a mostly ineffective punch to my shoulder. “People have been asking me out, and I have been rejecting them.”

I stare at him. “Why have you been rejecting them?”

“You know why I’ve been rejecting them,” he says snippily, gesturing forward as if to hurry along my review of the estate.

I turn off the vehicle and face him entirely. “We are going nowhere until you tell me why you have been rejecting them.”

Chuckling to himself, he reaches across the console and cups the back of my head, giving me a kiss for the ages. “You asked the question and you are the answer. Please turn the vehicle back on before I freeze to death. It’s negative two degrees outside!”

“That’s in Celsius, you drama queen. Nearly thirty degrees in your Fahrenheit.”

“I also use Celcius, you royal pain in the ass.” His cheeks redden. “It’s still below freezing.”

I roll my eyes as though I’m not also suffering. Having acclimated to the Caribbean and Texas climates, I find my blood rather thinner than it was when I lived here more regularly.

“Whatever. You admitted that you basically love me, too.”

“I said no such thing!” He throws up his hands, but I know it’s an act.

“You said I was the reason you rejected all suitors. Sounds like love to me.”

His mouth drops open and I, in turn, raise my brows in challenge.

“Fine. I’ve probably been in love with you for a while as well.”

“How romantic. I barely had to pull that out of you. Only a tooth extraction would’ve been more painful.”

“Are we going yet?”

I reach out my hand and he laces his fingers with mine. “Yes, dear.”

Every cell in my body is effervescent with joy as I drive us to the horse stables, which he declares are the fanciest stables he’s ever seen before in his life.

It gets a little hilly along the back of the property, and he says it looks like a Christmas postcard. When flurries begin to whirl around us, he insists I stop the vehicle so he can get outside and be in the snow.

“I’ve never seen snow like this!”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I don’t like it, but it is beautiful.”

“I feel the exact same way about it. Why do you think I live in Texas now?”

He turns, blinking up at me with fat white snowflakes landing on the black fringe of his lashes. “So... You’re officially a Texan?”

“I believe I am.” I bring a gloved hand to his face, leaning in for a kiss. He giggles against my lips.

“Great, now you’ve made me self-conscious,” I say, brushing the snow off his fringe.

“No! It’s just that your nose is so cold.”

“So is yours,” I say, honking it.

Gael shakes his head, taking in the scenery. “My parents are never going to believe this place.”

“Wait till I show you the manor.”

“Let’s go!” He pulls away, attempting to run back to the vehicle.

I grab him and drag him back to me. “Say it.”

His innocent eyes fool no one. “Say what?”

“You know. Say it like you mean it.”

He scrunches his nose, then gives in to the smile that makes my heart race.

“I love you, Tolly.”

His sincerity and the warmth of his accent bring a tear to my eye, and I wipe it away with a gloved hand. “Now, was that so hard?” I joke, my voice cracking with emotion.

“Oh, shut up.” He grabs the front of my coat and yanks me closer. “Say it back.”

“I can only do one of those things,” I retort, fixing his beanie.



He turns on a huff back toward the Rover and I drag him to me again.

I look down as he looks up, and I'm temporarily frozen by the depths in his expression.

"I love you, Gael. From literally the second I saw your photograph online, I knew I'd found the love of my life."

He sucks in a breath, then coughs out the sharp cold air. Laughing, I wrap him up as best I can and bury my face in his hair. "I've never loved anyone or anything more," I admit on a soft exhale.

It's his turn to wipe away a few errant tears before he goes to his tiptoes and we kiss until our ears go numb from the cold.

We get back in the Rover, and I take the long way around to the manor, wanting to enjoy this peacefulness with him while also giving him the big wow when we go over the next ridge.

"Hey," he says, squeezing my hand as we bump over the marshy bits of the drive. "Why are you so quiet all of a sudden?"

I take in the landscape—the evergreens and the white snow and the brilliant blue sky.

"Because you reminded me that this place is magical. It's only ever felt like an obligation. They act as though I am critical to the estate, yet they ignore my advice and treat me like I'm a silly man with no direction."

"Don't they know the good that you do?"

"They obviously don't know all of the details. What they do know gets chalked up to simple charity to them, which they view as a social necessity. Not a societal one."

"Oh, wow. I bet they're fun at parties."

"You have no idea," I say, going over the ridge and around the bend to—

"*Madre de Dios*," Gael says, his voice hushed in awe. He follows that with a string of curses before turning to me. "You

call *that* a house?”

I lift a shoulder. “You should see the estate my brother lives on. His wife comes from a massively wealthy family. Made their fortunes on crude oil.”

Gael’s eyes are so round they might fall out of his head. “So, when your parents pass, this is yours?”

“I believe it’s held in trust for me, yes.”

“You don’t know?”

“It’s... something. I can’t be assed to remember what they call it. My father has made no concessions for Beatrice, as he presumes she will marry into wealth.”

“There’s a lot to unpack there.”

“Yes, quite.”

“This is almost as big as the manor they used in *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“Technically Sandringham has more square footage.”

Gael blinks at me, then stares at the house again. “How many people live here?”

“My parents, and my sister. Plus...” I glance up, counting. “Maybe ten staff?”

I fear for his ocular health if his eyes keep bugging out of his head like that.

He ponders my existence as we drive around the pond and park in front of the main entrance. There is exactly one wreath on the door, my family’s one and only nod to Christmas. If there’s a tree inside, a decorator brought it in.

A new butler, one I’ve not met before, approaches the car.

“Lord Middleton, Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas...”

“Julian.”

Someone opens the door on the other side for Gael, and he hops out, looking up at the house like a little kid with his arms

spread wide. “Oh my God, this is the most beautiful house I’ve ever seen before in my life,” he says, loud and overly excited.

I love it.

My mother makes an appearance at the door. “I am so glad you approve.”

Gael smiles at her like a lunatic and grabs one of the packages of slippers before beelining right for her. “Mrs. Middleton!” He pauses, hand to his chest. “I’m sorry, Your Grace. You have such a beautiful home. It is so wonderful to meet you. My name is Gael Hernandez. Merry Christmas,” he says, handing her the thoughtful gift.

My mother hesitates, sending me a look as she takes the box, her expression a combination of amusement and judgment. After handing it off to Julian, she turns her sights back on Gael. “Welcome, and thank you for the gift. I wasn’t aware that my son was bringing a guest. I’ll have the servants set out another plate for lunch.”

There’s a certain coldness to the way she lets him know that he is not an invited guest, but that she would make do with his presence.

Gael looks back at me, his smile all wrong. “Should I have stayed with Adrian and Dimitra?”

I shake my head. “No, this is my home, and you are the love of my life. You are welcome wherever I am welcome,” I say, serenely glaring at my mother.

Two can play that game.

“Of course,” she says smoothly. “Come in out of the cold weather.”

“Thank you,” Gael says on a nervous laugh, stomping his snow boots on the mat before walking in. “My Mexican ass is freezing.”

She stares after him then pivots to me. “*Son.*”

“*Mother,*” I reply, leaning in for a small peck on the cheek.

This should be interesting.



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## GAEL

The difference between Adrian's and Dimitra's welcome versus Duchess Middleton's welcome was more than night and day. It was the difference between human and a cold, strange alien.

Tolly's mother has her hair rolled like an old lady. She can't be older than my mom, but she's wearing an outfit I had once seen the Queen wear, I'm certain of it.

Regal on an elderly woman, but rather dowdy on a woman who is maybe fifty. If I'd aged myself that badly with cosmetic choices, I'd be upset too.

Despite my genuine wonder at the beauty and size of the manor, I've picked up on the fact that any expression other than thin-lipped neutrality is unwelcome.

So, while I walk into the towering marble foyer with art adorning every available space and rugs which are plusher and more beautiful than any I've ever stepped on in my life, I say nothing.

Tolly puts his hand on my shoulder, the placement considered and appropriate.

Leaning in, he whispers, "Now you know why I wasn't thrilled to be here."

"Tolly!" exclaims the female version of the man I am in love with.

Tall and lively with even brighter blonde hair, I know this has to be Beatrice.

Given the greeting I had from the Duchess, I was unsure what I'd get with his sister. Turning to me, she thrusts her hand out.

"Hello. My name is Bea, and you must be Gael. My brother has talked so much about you."

"People keep telling me that. Hopefully he says nice things."

"Incredibly nice things."

I try my genuine smile with her, and she returns it, loosening the knot of insecurity I had from the encounter with her mother. Of course, the duchess isn't too far behind, ushering us into an enormous banquet hall with a long, elegant table filled with all sorts of food.

We'd taken our time exploring the estate, but I'm still full from the Christmas breakfast. Regardless, I'm going to put on a brave face and do whatever it takes to look like I fit in. Checking my attire, I realize this isn't going to be possible.

"I feel underdressed," I whisper in Spanish to Tolly, rubbing my hands together as I take in the room.

His mother's silent appraisal of me seems to verify my suspicion.

Tolly, even more underdressed than I, shakes his head. "You're not underdressed. You look wonderful. Also, your boots held up beautifully under the snow." He turns to his mother. "Gael is a shoemaker extraordinaire. He works with the softest, highest quality leathers, and his designs are beautiful. Classic, simple, eternal. The slippers he gave you are the same that I gave to His Majesty."

His mother raises her brows. "Oh. How skilled of you."

She says *skilled*, but it sounds like *beneath my son*.

Tolly swallows, looking over at me, and I realize that he's nervous. Putting on my most charming grin, I respond, "I should hope so. I've been working leather since I was five."

I hold up my stained hands, believing that if she is going to hate me, I'd rather her hate all of me.

“Oh, do we need to direct you to a washroom?”

“Mother!” Tolly cries.

“His hands appear to be dirty.”

“Appearances can be deceiving, Your Grace,” I say sweetly. “Though I would love to avail myself of your washroom, as I always sanitize my hands before I eat. These stains, however, are from years and years of working with dyes and chemicals and will not wash away.”

“Oh,” she says, her hand to her chest. “A man dedicated to his craft.”

Somehow, she makes *craft* sound like low-level employment.

“My grandmother and grandfather always taught me that anything worth doing is worth doing well.”

Tolly clears his throat. “I’ll show you to the washroom.”

We walk for a long time, taking various twists and turns until we arrive at what appears to be a guest’s quarters.

“There’s a closer washroom to the dining hall. Several, in fact. I just needed to get away from her for a second.”

“She doesn’t like me very much, does she?”

“You cannot provide me an heir, so you could be Michelangelo and she would act like you were painting with crayons.”

“Good to know.”

I excuse myself to step into the nicest bathroom I’ve ever been in, so fancy that I’m self-conscious as I use the facilities. Washing my hands, I look into the mirror to hype myself up.

Come to think of it, that’s probably what Tolly was doing on our morning drive. How sad.

I join him back in the guest’s quarters, and we slowly make our way back to the dining hall, his hand in mine. It’s easy to forget Tolly’s noble status because it doesn’t mean anything to him.

He has this big yacht, and instead of using it to impress beautiful models, he uses it to save the day. He sends his friends my way to support my business. My family has an open invitation to his estate in the Caribbean. He bought the ranch next to mine.

But today he is so completely shut down it's as if I am here alone. That's not true, of course, but I don't know this version of him. And I don't like it.

I gather it's necessary, but knowing that doesn't make me feel any better.

"Oh, there you are," says his mother as we walk in. "We thought you'd gotten lost. It's been years since you've stayed here," she says to Tolly.

"You always stay with Adrian and Dimitra? I thought it was just because we'd arrived in the evening?" I whisper out the side of my mouth, switching back to Spanish.

"I avoid this place whenever possible," he whispers back, putting on a sharp smile, like a shark, as he shifts to addressing his mother. "I was just giving Gael a brief tour of things."

"Oh, I was hoping to show him around," Bea says, smiling at me.

She's the only one in the room who doesn't look like an automaton. I wouldn't call her warm, necessarily, rather someone who seems to be trying to stand her ground. Like maybe she's screaming in her head at all times.

Tolly pulls out the chair for me and we sit. Where Heli's breakfast was made with love, this lunch is aggressively plain. The presentation is fine, and while nothing is dry or unpleasant, it's the kind of meal someone would eat if they weren't ever allowed to have bad breath or gas.

With only salt as the seasoning, I decide that this is what sadness tastes like.

I turn to ask Tolly why his father isn't joining us for the family's Christmas lunch but decide against it.



We eat in silence, the tension in the room ratcheting up with each passing second. I'm self-conscious about my utensil handling, the size of my bites, the number of times I chew. When I set down my utensils, the duchess pounces on the opportunity.

"Now that we're finished with lunch, Beatrice, could you give Gael a proper tour of the manor?"

Beatrice takes a deep breath and places her napkin on her plate. "Of course, Mother."

As she leads me out of the dining room, I glance at Tolly. He sends me the smallest head shake, mouthing *I'm sorry* as I follow Beatrice out to the grand hall.

"Looks like they're about to talk about something serious," I venture as she points out the oil painting of her great-great-great-grandfather.

"It would go better if I were in there, but my mother is decidedly not a feminist."

Surprised by her honesty, I hold out my elbow, and she takes it, wrapping her arm in mine as we walk down the cold, well-appointed hall. "If you don't mind me saying so, I doubt she's much of a queer ally either."

"No, she is not."

"So Tolly showing up here with me..."

"He's never done something like this before. I think it means he's finally done."

I glance off to the side. I came here to support him, and I appreciate he's taking a stand, but I do not like this place. It was far more beautiful from the outside, when I didn't understand the rot on the inside.

"Please do not misunderstand me," she says, leaning against me. "You're not some sort of shot across the bow. I mean, you are, but he would not have brought you here unless you were incredibly important to him. This is him telling our mother her hopes for a daughter-in-law will never come to pass."

“I thought he was more sexually diverse. Surely if he needs an heir, he could...”

“Have you seen the way my brother looks at you?”

I drop my chin to my chest. “Yes.”

“He is, technically, pansexual, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a preference. The second you walked in the door, I knew there could be no one else for him. I’ve always known that, when he did finally fall in love, it would be deeply. And he is, without a doubt, sincerely, madly, *deeply* in love with you.” She pauses, her cheeks pinker. “Oh dear. I hope it’s okay for me to say that.”

“It is. Tolly and I have been friends for a while. More, if I think about it. I was introduced to him after a particularly traumatic event, and I was not in the right headspace to...” I trailed off, not sure how much to tell her.

“He gave you all the space you needed, didn’t he? There, supportive, but not pushy,” she commented.

“Exactly. Did he tell you?”

“He’s spoken of you over the last few months, but he didn’t tell me of any traumatic events. He wouldn’t need to, though, because that’s just who he is. This robotic version you’re seeing of him? It only appears when he’s inside this place. It’s not good for him, so he stays away, and my parents will never understand. How could he not want all of this splendor?”

“Have you been to the land manager’s house? To Adrian’s house?”

I’m met with silence in response. I glance over to find her chin wobbling. She fixes her face, but I saw what I saw.

“I’m sorry. Did I accidentally knock into something sensitive?” I ask, remembering at the last moment that there was something about the way Heli asked about her.

Bea tightens her hold on me. “I’m in love with Heli. Have been since I was fifteen. And of course a relationship between

us is impossible because he's a commoner and not from any wealth at all."

Called it. Shit.

"I'm sorry. I don't know the protocol here, so I'm just going to be direct. Er, if that's okay?"

"Of course," she says, gesturing to the view outside of a glorious bank of floor-to-ceiling windows.

"He gave Tolly a gift for you. It's still in the Rover—I think because Tolly knew he shouldn't give it to you in front of your mother."

"Can we—" She stops, rubbing her hands together.

"Do you want the gift now?"

She nods and I let her lead me outside. I grab Heli's present and another one of my gift boxes from the back of the Rover.

Remembering her mother's reaction, I hesitate. "Uh, I brought slippers for everyone, but—"

"The ones Tolly bought for the king?"

I nod.

"I'd love a pair," she says sincerely, killing my doubts from before.

I hand her both boxes and we walk back into the manor.

"Not to assume, but it appears that Heli returns your feelings," I say as we enter what ends up being her apartment.

It's like a house within the manor, complete with its own living room and kitchen. There's even a modest Christmas tree in the corner with handmade ornaments.

She takes a deep breath, setting her gifts on the coffee table as we sit on her pretty couches. "Yes. But Heli's well aware of the situation, and we both know it would never work out."

"So, you're left out of what sounds like an important conversation downstairs, and you're not allowed to pursue the person you love. What's in this for you?"

Her eyes go shiny for a moment, then she blinks and they're dry, like a magic trick. Lifting her chin, she answers, "I'm not allowed to think about what is in it for me. I'm only allowed to think about the country and succession and finding a gentleman of either sufficient class or noble birth to continue the line."

It's quite a thing, the ability to stifle one's emotions so cruelly. I suppose I could keep my comments to myself, but, as they say here, in for a penny in for a pound.

"Wow, I almost didn't see the little pull string in the back of your neck. That's a neat trick."

Her eyes dart to mine, and she barks out a laugh, entirely unladylike. She claps her hand to her mouth, her eyes widening. I wink at her.

"Apologies, Lady Middleton. I am not socialized in the way of British aristocracy or the whole stiff upper lip thing. I'm sure I appear quite crude to you."

Dropping her hand from her mouth, she points her finger at me. "Don't you dare call me Lady Middleton ever again. It's Bea. And you don't appear crude. You appear warm and kind. I can't imagine how Tolly held off all these months."

I rub the back of my neck. "He's a good man."

"That he is. And so are you. I hope we can be friends."

With my free hand, I slip my phone out of my pocket. She takes it from me and adds her information.

"Thank you." Pointing to the boxes on her coffee table, I say, "Let's open your presents. It's important to enjoy the small things."

Flushing, she reaches for my box and laughs when she sees that I brought pink slippers especially for her. She slides her feet into them and lets out a happy sigh.

"These are perfection, Gael. Thank you."

After a pregnant pause, she reaches for her gift from Heli. It's a rectangular box, and she takes her time with the exquisite

wrapping. A small cry escapes her lips as she removes a sleeve of cookies from the box.

“They’re my favourite almond shortbread biscuits,” she says, wiping a tear. “Here, you must try one. They’re delicious.”

I take a cookie and bite a corner. “This is so much better than that sad excuse for a lunch downstairs.”

She laughs and bites into her cookie. “It *so* is,” she says, crumbs on her chin and a real light in her eyes.

The effect is temporary, however, and just as quickly she looks so forlorn it makes my chest ache.

I rest my hand on top of hers. “From what I understand, the estate is struggling financially.”

“That is stating it mildly.”

“I don’t know you very well, but I overheard Tolly say that your parents should have listened to you. Can I assume had they implemented your ideas, not only would you not be in trouble with the tax collectors, but you’d also be flush with cash and the envy of the country?”

“Perhaps not that extreme, but we would certainly not be in any danger of losing the estate.”

“Is it too late to take your good advice?”

“No. But it soon will be.”

I thumb a gesture toward what I think is the direction of the dining hall. “Then let’s be a little disruptive.”

Her eyes widen. “I could never.”

“Yes, but I’m a bad influence, and I’m going to make you.”

She lets out another unguarded laugh. “Then I am influenced.” Her smile is a little sad. “Maybe with Tolly having my back...”

“He’ll definitely have your back. He might be just done enough to make them listen to you.”

“Let’s give it a go, then, shall we?”

She steps into her shoes, grabs my hand, and leads me out of her apartment.

I may have started something.

Oops.



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## TOLLY

**T**he second the last bite of lunch passes Gael's lips, Mother has him shuffled out of the room. Barely a second later, my father joins us through another door.

"How very Agatha Christie of you, Father," I say, rising to greet him. He spares me a nod as people in white gloves and black livery remove the food from the table.

What a farce. Violins on the Titanic, only less heroic.

The difference between this morning's meal and this supposed "Christmas lunch" cannot be overstated. I'm so grateful that me and my siblings have done what we can to wrestle back control of our lives.

"Merely efficient, my son," he says, examining my casual clothing with a critical eye as he sits at the head of the table.

It should be noted that, while I wear casual clothing, none of it is cheap. I'm a brand-name bitch, but he's in his three-piece suit looking at me as though I've shown up in beggars' rags. Having spent time in places where poverty is a constant, I know that beggars on the whole are far more principled than my father and his cohorts.

"The estate is in dire straits," he says, forgoing preamble.

Had he wished me a happy Christmas, I may have fallen over dead.

"I can hold off seizure for another three, maybe four months. I'm sure you've learned many lessons in your travels,



but it is now time to come home, marry well, and take your place in society.”

I’m not surprised by his speech in the slightest. He’s been saying some combination of those words for a while now, which is why I ignored his first several attempts to contact me. He loves to insist on the importance of the Middleton family name, our bloodline, and the land.

“How did our tax accounts get to be so far in arrears?” I ask, sidestepping the annoyance building in my chest.

“The land does not produce as it once did, and corporate farming and agriculture have done the rest.”

I nod, tapping my fingertips on the polished wood. It’s on the tip of my tongue to enquire about his Saudi funds, but I can’t find it in me to care. It is, however, interesting that we are not having this conversation in his office. If I had to guess, his ego cannot take this discussion in the space where he is supposed to be king of his domain. He has so very clearly mismanaged things, perhaps he cannot browbeat me in the place in which he has been most ineffective.

“What about Robert? Where is he in this discussion?” I ask of my older brother.

“Robert has his own issues to deal with. Gwendolyn is pregnant again, and his finances are tied to her estate. I do not wish to engage the Edringtons in our personal affairs. Besides, he’s already holding down the family. It’s your turn to contribute.”

I hold back a smile. It is no accident that Robert’s finances are so closely tied to the Edringtons’ accounts, or that he removed his name from the estate’s trust once he married Gwendolyn. Her family wanted the peerage, our family needed someone with their own money, and the two had been put together since they were teenagers.

Knowing that they were pawns, Robert and Gwendolyn somehow managed to outmaneuver everyone by falling in love. Robert insisted that she keep her inheritance separate,

and he listened to the advice from Beatrice that our father ignored. Their estate is profitable—and separate from ours.

Good on them.

“If Robert’s having a third child, why do I have to produce an heir?” I ask, knowing his answer.

“It is a tradition, steeped in preserving our way of life. This estate.”

“If we are unable to preserve this way of life under our own steam, why should it be preserved?”

“I will not engage in a battle of words with you at this time,” my father says, straightening his back. “You have benefited from being raised in this environment. How can you not give back now that you owe your comfort to our generosity?”

“Father, I am eternally grateful for the opportunities I’ve had as a result of my raising and my family connections, and I’ve taken those lucky circumstances and paid them forward to provide connections and support to others.”

“Yes, at our expense. And now we are asking you to pay the bill.”

“Father, you know that I take nothing from the estate. Nor will I.”

“You’re not actually self-financed if you’re using your trust,” he commented coldly.

“Father, I have never once touched my trust. I knew that to do so would behold me to you, and that was a position I would never find myself in. So, from a very early age, I have been responsible for my own finances. Did I use my connections? Absolutely. But never once have I used a single penny of my family’s wealth.”

This stops my father in his tracks. He blinks slowly. “Your trust is intact?”

“Fully. I’ve moved the finances into smarter investments, and the interest from those investments funds my charitable works. But the trust itself has not been touched.”

“So you’re saying that you have the means by which to save this family, and you’ve been holding it back this whole time?”

“Father, I will not risk my charitable endeavors in the hopes that you won’t mismanage my trust as you have the estate’s finances and, I imagine, Robert’s trust.”

Straightening his tie, Father sneers as though I’m some foolish boy. “I have done what all of my forefathers have done before me.”

“And that is why you’re failing.”

“Elucidate, then, dear son, how I might have done better,” he responds, a dangerous edge to his voice.

“You could have listened to your daughter’s advice.”

“House tours? Weddings? Absolutely not.”

“The estate would be flush with cash, Father, our taxes would be paid, and we could have avoided this entire embarrassing situation.”

“Son, you well know that we cannot break with tradition.”

“Other estates have broken with tradition, Father, and reaped the rewards. The Edringtons’ estate coffers are evergreen.”

“That estate was paid for, not earned through nobility.”

“Father, you *well know* that noble estates do the exact same thing. It enables them to hold to their traditions while allowing the general population to take part in previously exclusive spaces.”

“Those spaces were exclusive for a reason, and those estates dishonor the crown and England with their monetization of our most sacred traditions.”

“Do you even know how you sound right now?”

“It matters not how I sound, Ptolemy. I’ve been far too generous with you and your propensity to galivant about the globe, saving one wretch after another. Now is the time to settle down and marry. We think Lord Shrewsbury’s daughter

would be a suitable mate, and her family's assets will come in handy," he said, ignoring reality entirely.

"I'm in love with Gael, so, no. I will not be marrying Clara. Also, she is a lesbian and is openly living with the woman she's been in a relationship with since year twelve."

"That is precisely why she is a good match. Her parents want her married properly, with an heir, and they have the money to make it happen."

"Two things, Father: She's not a piece of property to be sold off—"

"Ptolemy, you know that—"

"Don't interrupt me, Father. You've drug me across the planet on Christmas to be here for this ridiculous conversation. Clara is a person who's made her choices, and I will not interfere in those. Second—how is it that her family's estate has come into such wealth while we struggle?"

My father's silence is my answer.

"I get it now. It is okay for other people to debase themselves by opening their estates to the public to make the money they need, but we would never do the same. We would only benefit from their shrewdness, because that is in no way hypocritical or completely outdated."

"That is simply being smarter than those who don't know better."

Unbelievable.

"Think of the staff, son," he says before I can respond.

I go cold, and yet am unsurprised in the extreme that he is willing to hold them over my head.

"We've allowed that land manager you're so fond of to live rent free for decades. If you do not come to heel, we will partition the land, sell the house and barn, and have enough to pay off our taxes and run the rest of the estate for at least five more years."

Cruel and inefficient. And entirely on brand.

“So, a permanent decision with a temporary solution. What happens in five years when you’ve continued your epic mismanagement? Sell off another piece of land, and another piece of land?”

“If needs be.”

“You should have listened to Beatrice, Father.”

“And you should not have come here, on Christmas, with a little Mexican boy. Really, Ptolemy. I thought you had more taste than that.”

His crude words silence me. Shame me, actually. I brought Gael here to shield me against their cruelty, forgetting how well their cruelty travels. I should have never put him in this position, and as soon as I can, I will be correcting that.

Clara, however, needs to know what her family is up to. Taking a deep breath, I swallow my bile and say, “You are right, bringing him here was a mistake.”

“That is the first sensible thing you’ve said all day.”

I bite back my reply. I hate everything about this, but my family’s dehumanization and slavish loyalty to a standard no one can reach will end with this generation, so help me.

“Can I assume the Shrewsburys have offered a generous dowry?”

“Yes. I negotiated liquid assets over land, of course.”

Cash for an unwilling woman’s hand in marriage.

“So, if I marry Clara, you’ll agree to leave the estate intact?”

My father looks at me patiently, as though I’ve somehow forgotten how things are done around here. I’ve forgotten nothing.

“Her parents are holding her dowry until she marries and produces a natural heir.”

“You yourself just said we have mere months before the HMRC seizes the estate.”

He thins his lips.

“Doesn’t matter what I do, does it? You’re still going to sell off the parcel regardless.”

“Unless you’re willing to give me the equivalent of her dowry now.”

“How generous of you, Father, to leave it up to me to select which life I destroy.”

“Hard choices often have to be made to preserve the lineage. Do you think that Gwendolyn was Robert’s first choice? Hardly.”

Silently, I resolve to warn Clara of her parents’ designs on her life, ensure Beatrice is properly cared for, and put in a request with my barrister—the one I hired outside of my family’s influence—and have him make an offer on Adrian’s property. From there I can put it in a trust for Adrian’s family.

I’m just grateful that my brother has already seen himself clear of this place, and I will do the same. If it weren’t for Bea, I’d let the estate go in a heartbeat.

“With that settled, we need to discuss Beatrice,” my father says, assuming my compliance. “She, too, must come to an understanding of her responsibilities. The Shrewsburys also have an eligible son, which would make things quite convenient for us.”

“Have you approached the Shrewsburys about this secondary deal?”

He steeple his fingers, dipping his head like some wise patriarch. “They are amenable, though we’ll need to negotiate terms, of course.”

“Of course.”

My father adores an audience, so I let him speak, listening as he details the stomach-churning plan to strip my sister, Clara, and Clara’s brother of all autonomy so that he can keep this facade of British aristocracy going. My mind begins to spin, and by the time he’s finished, I know exactly how to outmaneuver him.

Time to find my man and get the hell off this island.





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## GAEL

**B**eatrice presses her finger to her lips as she approaches the door to the dining room. Quietly, she opens the door a sliver.

“...and you should not have come here, on Christmas, with a little Mexican boy. Really, Ptolemy. I thought you had more taste than that.”

Beatrice inhales softly, shaking her head. It’s certainly not the first time I’ve heard someone say my nationality like a racial epithet, but something about hearing those hateful words in that deep, posh cadence makes me feel one centimeter tall, like maybe I do have something to be ashamed of.

Fuck that, obviously. But the thought is still there. Worse, Tolly doesn’t immediately defend me. That hurts just as badly.

“You are right, bringing him here was a mistake,” Tolly says, sounding like a robot again.

Beatrice’s eyes widen.

“That is the first sensible thing you’ve said all day.” His father’s reply is chilling.

I shake my head, not sure what I’ve heard. I grab the door, ready to... I don’t know? Defend myself? I stop cold, though, when I hear mention of a dowry, and then Tolly say, “So, if I marry Clara, you’ll agree to leave the estate intact?”

I step back, numb as they coldly discuss the fate of an unsuspecting queer woman in a stately Mancunian accent. I hear something about marrying off Bea as well.

I am the world's biggest fool, declaring my love for a man I've met in person five, maybe six times. I let our chemistry and the fact that he's helped out a few kids blind me.

*He bought that property next door, I reason with myself.*

My internal sentinel fires back, *I'm sure it was just a matter of securing a location for his side piece.*

*But, but... He said he loved me and he meant it.*

I imagine the sentinel laughing at my naiveté. *Oh, I'm sure he does. This is how men like him love. A million dollars says he doesn't even see the hypocrisy.*

I can't deal with this a second longer. I step back again as Beatrice silently closes the door, staring at me, no doubt shocked to find that she is just as expendable as this tiny Mexican.

"Gael, I'm so sorry," Beatrice says, her chin wavering again. "I didn't know that's what they were going to discuss. Why would he agree to—"

"I need to get out of this house," I say, interrupting her. "Manor. Whatever you call this hellhole."

I spin on my heel, looking for the entrance. Recognizing the rugs, I start off in that direction. Beatrice follows me, silent until we reach the door.

"Gael..." Beatrice says, clasping her hands together.

I shake my head. "I... Thank you for showing me around and for speaking to me like I'm a human."

"Me, too. For reminding me that I, too, am a human."

I clench my jaw, unable to simply leave her to the wolves. "You don't have to stay here. You can come with me."

For the first time since meeting her, something like determination crosses her face. "Thank you for the kind offer. I, however... I needed to hear my father's plans for me, I think. I've been holding myself in check for so long. I think I'm the one who's done."

She blinks rapidly, as though she can barely believe the words that came out of her mouth.

“Do you think Heli would—”

“Yes,” she says breathlessly. “He’s been waiting for me this whole time.”

“Then go to him, and tell me how it turns out,” I say, holding up my phone. “Though I might need directions to Adrian’s house. We did not take the direct route to get here.”

“Once you’re past the drive, it’s a straight shot to the left.”

I kiss her cheek again and make my way to the Range Rover and turn the key that’d been conveniently left in the ignition. Thankfully, Bea’s description was accurate. Tolly had truly taken a back way this morning.

I hit Ant’s number as I take off, driving on the wrong side of the car on the wrong side of the road.

“Gael! How’s it going at the rich man’s castle?”

“It’s not a castle, it’s a manor house.”

“What’s going on?” he asks, switching to Spanish. I never could hide a single emotion from him.

“The family is in financial trouble, and Tolly is working out a deal with his father as we speak to marry some rich girl to save the estate. How that works, I don’t know.”

“I can’t imagine Tolly would do that.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to, either, until I heard it from his mouth. They were discussing this girl he was going to marry like she was a piece of cattle. And they even spoke about Beatrice the same way.”

“Who’s Beatrice?” he asks, his words turning sharp.

“Tolly’s sister. Apparently, the family he’s marrying into has a two for one deal with the brother.”

I share with him everything I learned, and he listens like he always does.

Finally, he asks, “How the fuck could he do that? Doesn’t he get that it’s basically high-end human trafficking?” He curses under his breath, getting more and more heated. “Primo, seriously, get the fuck out of there.”

“Already on it. I just need to find a flight.”

“I’ll find the flight. You get to the airport.”

“Here, I’ll give you my credit card.” I nearly drive off the road as I go for my wallet.

“Absolutely not. I’m rich as fuck. I’m paying for this.”

I pause, considering his offer. My shop has done well, but this would definitely stretch my finances.

“Okay, thank you, primo. I’m grabbing my things.”

“Do you have your identification and cash on you?” Ant asks, and I hear him typing out something on a keyboard.

“Yes,” I say, approaching the driveway to Adrian’s house.

“Then don’t stop. Just go straight to the Manchester airport. I’ll have a ticket waiting for you.”

“Okay,” I say, not the least bit confident I can navigate the roads, even with the app on my phone.

Adrian steps out of the house, his brow quizzical. I wave, not bothering to stop. Minutes later I’m on a highway, terrified. By the time I get to the airport, Ant has forwarded the ticket to me.

“Ant, this is cutting it really close. I don’t even know how to get through the line.”

“You’ve got Global Entry, and I booked you in the meet and greet parking. Go. *Run.*”

I breathe a sigh of relief as I discover he’s booked me in the closest parking available, and I leave the keys in the console. Zipping through Global Entry, I race to my gate, reaching it just as they’re calling my name for final boarding.

As I find my seat, my text notification goes off.

Tolly: Where are you?

Gone. Where I am is gone.



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## TOLLY

**T**here is no way in hell my father is getting an ounce of cooperation from me. I've done my duty, I played the part, but the second I step out to the great hall I fire off a missive to my barrister, telling him my plan for Adrian's parcel of land.

That accomplished, I cock my ear, listening for Bea and Gael. I need to find them, put them on the plane, and get them the hell away from this place.

I first try the usual route we take to show guests the estate, but I can't find them anywhere.

Perhaps Bea didn't give him the usual tour. She can appear to be reserved, but once she trusts you, she's genuinely kind. I wouldn't be surprised if she and Gael are fast friends by now. That in mind, I make my way down to the kitchen.

"Lord Middleton?" asks our head chef. "How lovely to see you in the kitchens. Is there anything I can get you?"

"No, I am looking for my sister. She was showing my partner around. He likes to cook and so does she, so I thought they might end up here."

"I haven't seen her at all today. She hasn't been back here since..." He let his words drift off, but we both know what he's talking about. Since Heli apprenticed here.

I hoof it up to her apartment, but she's not there, so I start out toward the library, texting them both.

Me: Where are you?

After a few moments with no response, I fire off a quick text to Adrian.

Me: Have you seen Bea or Gael? My negotiations with my father went on for longer than I thought, and now I can't find them.

Adrian: I haven't seen Bea, though Gael drove up to the house.

Me: Gael was driving? That must've been a sight. He's terrified of the whole "wrong side of the road" thing.

Instead of seeing the reply dots, a call from Adrian appears on the screen.

"Tell me he didn't get into an accident."

"No, I don't think that he did. I thought I should call you because it was the strangest thing. He drove up to the house, and he was speaking on the phone."

"He was driving *and* talking on his mobile? He won't even do that where he knows how to drive," I say, dread starting to creep in around the edges.

"He was definitely speaking on the phone with someone. He saw me, waved, and kept going."

"Like he was gonna stop by the house and changed his mind?"

"Exactly. It was almost comical."

"Interesting. He hasn't returned my text. Maybe I'll call him directly."

"You do that, sir. We have moussaka on the menu tonight and I would hate for him to miss it."

"Thank you, Adrian."

I check my texts again, and there's no response from either Beatrice or Gael. I pull up the family location app on my phone, and Beatrice's location is strange. She's not on the estate at all, but rather in Manchester proper, seemingly at a small cafe. The name is familiar, but I can't quite place it.



Since she's not yet responded to my text, I phone her.

No response.

I phone again, and she picks up.

"Yes?" she asks, her voice sharp.

"Bea? Are you okay?"

"I am now."

Something in her manner is off.

"Are you there with Gael?"

"No. I am not."

Unable to account for the short way in which she's speaking to me, I ask, "What is going on?"

"Have you been lying to us—to me—this whole time?" she asks, her voice quavering.

"What do you—"

"Have you even rescued a single child, Tolly, or was that all a lie, too? And what was the purpose of parading Gael in front of our parents? I swear, I've never seen such acting in all my life. Well, you had me convinced. All of those simpering looks at the poor man, knowing the entire time—"

"*Bea*," I say, cutting her off. "What are you even saying right now?"

Her laugh is dry and bitter. "Forget it. Since you and Father seem bound and determined to set my course without me, I'm taking back control of my life."

Oh, shit.

"Beatrice, I'm not sure what you overheard—"

"We heard *everything*, Ptolemy."

"We?" I ask, my stomach bottoming out. "Bea, I promise you, I am not cooperating with our father. I think what he wants to do is awful. If you are in love with Heli, then I can think of no other person in the world more suited for you."

I now remember why the cafe sounds so familiar. Adrian had mentioned it last night because that's where his son, Heli, ended up once he was dismissed from our kitchens.

The silence on the line makes my head spin out in about a million directions.

“Bea?”

“Do you mean it? *Don't lie to me.*”

I stare at my mobile before putting it back to my ear. “Of course I mean it. Obviously, you overheard my conversation with Father, but I was just getting him to talk so we would know his plans and could all get out of this. I swear, I just want to grab you and Gael and get the hell out of here. Unless you want to stay.”

“Oh,” she responds, her voice thin. “So, you were acting for Father, not Gael?”

“I'm definitely not acting when it comes to Gael. I'm head over heels for him, Bea, and I need to find him so that I can clear this up with him.”

The silence on the line is killing me. “Beatrice?”

“I don't know, Tolly. But he was there with me. He overheard you say that bringing him was a mistake. He overheard you negotiating a deal with Father about marrying Clara. Honestly, he's probably trying to go home.”

“Oh, God.”

With everything Gael's been through, I can't even imagine what he must think of me. I want to vomit.

“Do you want me to text him?”

“You have his number?” I ask, incredulous.

“Yes. We exchanged numbers.”

“See if he'll tell you where he is. *Please.*”

“Fine. But I promise you, if I discover that this is one of Father's machinations, you and I will never speak again.”

“I wouldn't want to speak to me after that either.”

We hang up and I hit the button for Adrian's phone number. "Tolly?"

"Adrian, I can't find Gael. I don't know what to do."

"I've got a tag on the Range Rover. I can look it up if you'd like."

"Please."

He calls a few minutes later.

"The Range Rover is parked at the airport."

*Christ.* I was a good deal more convincing than I'd realized.

"Call the airport, have them ready my plane."

"Consider it done. Take care of that man, or I'll send Dimitra after you," he says with zero humour.

"I'll deserve her wrath if I can't make this right."

Entering the library, I shut the door and sit down at the reading desk, staring at my phone. I know what I need to do, yet I find the prospect slightly terrifying. With a fortifying breath, I ring the one person, aside from Gael, I'd never want to disappoint.

Ant picks up on the first ring. "What the fuck do you want, pendejo?"

His voice is so full of hurt and anger that it stuns me silent for a moment.

"I *said*, what do you want?"

"Ant, sorry. I'm—I'm at a loss for how to explain this, only that Gael overheard something that he wasn't meant to hear."

"Because you were going to... what? Make him your dirty secret while you married some unsuspecting lesbian from Manchester?"

"No, because I was lying to my father to get him to tell me everything. I'm trying to fix things for my sister, I'm trying fix things for Clara—"

“Who the fuck is Clara and why do I give a shit about her?”

It’s not the right moment, but I adore how vicious Ant is willing to be for Gael. He would sacrifice his life for his cousin, and he would absolutely take mine for harming him.

“She’s the lesbian from Manchester. I’m making sure that she’s not forced into any agreements with my family.”

“Oh.” He pauses. “Then what about Gael?”

“I need him to know that he’s the only person I have ever and will ever want to marry. Please believe me, Ant. I despise deceit, and only ever use it in the service of the ones I love.”

“You love him?” Ant’s voice has lost the edge of rage, but not quite the sense of disbelief.

“I adore him and would sacrifice my entire world for him, Ant.”

“If you’re lying—”

“Then sic Anders and that rather terrifying friend of his on me. The one from New York.”

“Hopper is the friend. And you should know that Hopper’s billionaire boyfriend bought him his own personal crematorium because they were running out of places to hide the bodies.”

I gulp. “If I’m lying, call him first.”



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## GAEL

When I finally land in Austin, I'm more wrung out and heartbroken than I've ever felt before in my life. My connection to LaGuardia was delayed, and then the flight was diverted due to bad weather. After sitting on the tarmac in Dallas for two hours, we finally made the short flight to Austin.

It's wet and miserable outside, hovering above the freezing mark because that's what Texas weather does. I just want to grab an Uber and go home to the warmth of my family.

I walk through the concourse and start my way down the escalator to the luggage and pickup area. I'm about halfway down when I recognize the flop of blond hair.

Tolly, holding a handmade sign that says *I'm Sorry* in shaky block letters.

Glancing up behind me, I calculate if I could somehow make it past the dozens of people streaming onto the escalator with their kids and parcels and suitcases. Stuck, I set my jaw as the escalator inexorably draws me closer to him.

Stopping in front of him, my feet are bolted to the ground as tired travelers stream around us.

"How did you get here before me?"

He takes me by the elbow and moves us to a spot under the escalator. Setting the sign at his feet, he cups my shoulders, holding me until my eyes meet his. In them, I find the sincerity I've always seen, and I don't know how to make it make sense.

“Your flights were delayed, and I have access to a private jet.”

I drop my chin to my chest. “But you don’t have me. Not after you negotiated that woman’s future, Tolly. I don’t know how you could do that, given what you’ve seen. Given what they did to Ant...”

I let my words trail off as the timed airport announcement goes off.

*“Please do not leave your luggage unattended,”* says the pleasantly monotone voice.

Tolly attempts to hug me and I pull away, wincing.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he says, stepping back.

Somehow that feels worse.

“Gael, nothing you heard was the truth. I’d gone there knowing he’d mismanaged the estate’s funds, but he was going to sell Adrian’s land out from under him. Once I realized how horrible he was willing to be, I said whatever I could to keep him talking.”

I shook my head. “But you—”

“It meant nothing,” he insists, cutting me off. “Something you’d know if you’d turn on your damned phone.”

“Well, someone should hand you an Academy Award, then. You convinced me,” I fire back, fishing my phone out of my pocket.

I forgot that I’d turned it off, so I power it up and tap my foot impatiently as it boots up.

Dozens of increasingly worried-sounding texts from Tolly and Bea are waiting for me. I can hear her last message in that posh, warm voice of hers.

Bea: He was trying to protect us.

Bea: And may have accidentally started a land war between the Middletons and the Shrewsburys.

I laugh at her dry humor, then notice a text from Ant.

Ant: He told me that if he was lying that I could send Hopper after him.

Ant: Not Anders. Hopper.

“I never had any intention of marrying Clara or being a part of anything that stripped her of her autonomy, I swear it.” Tolly’s voice has an edge of desperation to it, and I know he’s telling the truth.

I’ve been so crushed, spending these last twelve hours unable to reconcile the man I’d come to know and love with that cold, calculating voice. But this voice? Somehow both crisp and warm? This is the voice I recognize.

“Gael, I can only imagine what must’ve been going through your mind. Growing up, I learned how to placate my parents, keep the ruse going, make them think that I would eventually settle down and be a part of their estate life. I’d been happy with my adventures, and I think some small part of me thought I would eventually want to settle down. But then I was there with you, and I realized I would never want a life that didn’t include you in it.”

“I would never be comfortable in the estate life, Tolly. And definitely not as some side piece.”

“God, me neither. I don’t care about some stuffy estate, but I wasn’t going to flounce off and leave the people I care about to the wolves. I had to play the game one last time. And I would never do you the dishonor of a less-than-forthright relationship.”

I shake my head. “How? What did you do?”

“My father had already partitioned the land. So, I had my barrister use one of my shell corporations to make an offer above what he was selling it for. By the time I hit American airspace, he’d accepted it.”

“But he said if you married Clara—”

“He lied.”



“That poor girl.”

“Clara is no poor girl, I can assure you. As it happens, she and her wife—”

“Wife?”

His grin melts off more of the ice around my heart. “*Wife*. They got married in secret, so the deal was always going to be off. She hadn’t known the extent to which her family was willing to sell her and her brother off to my awful family. I offered to help her, but, just like Bea, she told me to fuck off with my white knight syndrome. I suspect she’ll enjoy confronting her family.”

“What about Bea? Did she go to Heli?”

“She did,” he said, smiling. “They’re officially together. The section of land my father partitioned is quite large, and if Adrian and Dimitra willing—which I know they will be—she and Heli can build a house on it alongside them. All of the kids can.”

“But you said bringing me was a mistake.”

He nods. “It was. Not because you were the mistake, but because you should have never been exposed to their bigotry. I ruined your Christmas, and that will never happen again.”

“But your title...”

“It would take an act of parliament to strip away my title, but they can’t force me to care about the estate. All the land, title, money... mere trinkets compared to how I feel about you.”

Hedy, the trauma therapist I’ve been seeing, insists that I can trust myself and my instincts. And everything inside me says to trust Tolly. It always has. I take a step closer, leaning my forehead against his chest.

“The only time I’ve ever felt more awful was in that truck, when the man was telling me what he would do to me. What people like him had been doing to Ant for years and years.”

A sharp breath escapes Tolly’s lungs. “My God, Gael. I’m so sorry you were made to feel that way. You will never have

to be around my parents ever again. Please, please let me make it up to you. Let's go make some tamales together with your family, then let's go to some place warm and safe."

I widen my eyes innocently, blinking up at him. "Are you trying to bribe me with a Caribbean vacation?"

"Darling, it's not a vacation if I own the island."

Rolling my eyes, I lightly punch him in the chest. "Snob."

He wraps his long arms around me, pulling me in tight. "Yes, but I'm your snob."

"Take me home," I say, tilting my face up.

His soft lips hover near mine. "If I'm with you, I'm always home."



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## TOLLY

I hire a car to take us from the airport out to my ranch, and the balmy weather from just a few days ago has been replaced by a sharp chill. As we slip into the back seat, Gael's hand in mine, relief floods my body. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since I'd last seen him, but the thought of losing him in those interim hours aged me ten years at least.

Gael is exhausted from his horrible travel day, and from the stress of thinking that I am anything like my father. We situate ourselves, and he leans against me, asleep before we leave the airport.

I use the time to finalize my plans, send a wedding present to Clara and her wife, and check on Beatrice and Heli. She sends me a selfie of the two of them. Heli is kissing her cheek, and she is looking at the camera, happier than I've ever seen her.

Adrian: What is this envelope I've received?

Me: My father partitioned the land under your house to sell it, so I bought it and put it in a trust for you and your family.

Me: The official paperwork will be filed sometime after New Year's, but my father's acceptance letter is in the envelope.

Adrian: Why would you do this for me?

Me: Because you've always loved me like family.

Me: And, as your new boss, I will be holding an annual meeting at my estate in the Caribbean.

Adrian: I'm not going to refuse that offer.

Ten minutes outside of Johnson City, the misty, miserable weather turns to flurries.

“Gael, snow.”

He blinks awake, a grin spreading across his pretty mouth.

“It hardly ever snows out here.”

“I know.”

Erik says that the snow here is useless. Often, you'll see a few errant flakes, and then nothing sticks to the ground. This snow, however, is serious. The flurries start falling faster, and the landscape is already turning white by the time we pull up to the cabin.

I lead Gael inside, and it's warm and ready.

“I need a shower,” he says, sleepily rubbing his eyes.

I help him out of his coat and boots and clothes, gentle with him as we step under the hot running water. We kiss and bathe one other, then stand under the water for a very, very long time, inhaling and exhaling together.

“I'm sorry that this was so traumatic,” I say, whispering into the top of his head. “I should've known better.”

Instead of answering, he sucks on my nipple, tonguing it until I moan.

“Bea reminded me how convincing I can be. You have to know that I would never, ever, ever do anything to make you feel that way ever again.”

“I know,” he says, patting my chest. “I know you, even if that made me forget.”

After the shower, we dry off and fall into bed, both of us quickly giving in to sleep. I don't know what time it is when we wake up, and the snow is still blanketing the land.

“Fresh snow is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Gael says, wistful as he stretches to look outside.

“Are you sure?” I ask as I take his hand and move it low on my belly. “I’m told my cock is quite beautiful.”

He buries his face in my shoulder, his body shaking with laughter.

“It wasn’t that funny.”

“Yes, it was,” he says, pulling down the duvet to reveal how hard I’ve gotten. He leans over to kiss the tip. “Your cock is very beautiful.”

I moan as he takes the head into his mouth, sucking lightly.

“Perfect.”

I place my hand on the back of his head and his eyes flick up to mine, an invitation. Grinning, I push until he’s swallowed the full length of me, holding him in place as he hollows out his cheeks.

“You’re so good for me, Gael.”

He relaxes his throat, taking me in a bit farther. I roll my hips, hard and fast, loving how his body undulates with each sharp thrust. Snow flurries come down at an angle, whispering against the window as I lose control.

He pulls away from me, breathing deeply as he reaches for the lube. Sneaking his fingers behind himself, he prepares his hole as he plays with my cock. A few moments later, he straddles my hips, sinking down on me. We both groan as he rolls his hips, closing his eyes in ecstasy.

Remembering how much he loves having his foreskin played with, I lube my fingers and dip two in under the stretchy skin, along with my thumb. He lets out a grunt, taking me deeper, thrusting faster.

“I love you so much,” I whisper, again and again. He’s speechless, only able to send me a small nod before concentrating again on the deep pleasure. I reach up toward his neck with my free hand, placing it delicately on the skin there, making sure that I’m applying only the lightest pressure.

A whine escapes his throat, and every part of him tightens intensely as cum rockets from his hard and weeping cock.

“You like that, don’t you?”

“Always.”

Grabbing his hips, I thrust up—violently, needy—grunting as I spill inside the hot clutch of his body. I stay inside him as long as I possibly can, not wanting to be apart from him.

After, we clean up and wrap ourselves around each other until his phone goes off. He puts it on speaker.

“Are you coming to help us put together tamales?” his mom asks, her voice sweet but demanding.

He sits. “Of course, ’ama. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

He hangs up and turns to me, his eyes bright. “You’re in for a treat.”

I drag him down for another kiss, distracting him with a make out session for a few extra seconds.

“Then let’s go. But know that I have everything I need right here.”

# EPILOGUE



**N**ext weekend, on Christmas Day, Tolly and I will be getting married on his island estate. Tonight, however, we're hosting a bachelor party on his yacht. By the way, that entire sentence sounds like a fever dream.

Tolly proposed to me last month, and neither of us wanted to wait to make it official. Aside from the fact that I'm absolutely crazy for the man, the timing has mostly to do with the fact that we've been busy helping the guys at Wild Heart track down and save more people.

Tolly uses whatever resources he has, and Beatrice has even gotten in on the action. She's here tonight with Heli and the rest of his family, everyone relaxed and sunburned and happy. Clara couldn't join us, but she and her wife sent us a wedding present.

Tolly's father called up in a rage weeks after our visit when he realized what Tolly had done to protect and preserve the land for Adrian and his family. I didn't understand why he was upset—after all, he had the money he so desperately wanted.

Turns out, it isn't enough. The Duke said the sale would pay off the tax lien and support the estate for the next five years, but Tolly's contacts in the area say that he is still trying to force Beatrice to marry someone wealthy.

Or was, until he discovered that she and Heli got married last month in a private ceremony on Tolly's island. That phone call was even louder and angrier than the first.

Tonight, though, is about us. Looking around, seeing the friends and family who love us, means a helluva lot more than the fact that we're navigating the yacht around Tolly's island estate.

Ant meanders up to me, tipsy and smiling, with Erik tracking closely behind him.

"Primo! Look at us! By next week we'll both be old married men."

"Shhh, it's a surprise," I remind him as he wraps me up in a hug.

I smile over his shoulder at Erik. It's impossible for that man to hide how much he loves my precious, precious cousin, and I'm relieved, knowing that Ant will always be cared for. When I suggested to Ant that he could either be my best man or get married alongside me, he instantly fell to his knee and proposed to Erik.

It was just us, and the look on Erik's face was pretty amazing, especially when he pulled out a ring from his wallet, one he'd been carrying around for a while. There were a lot of happy tears that day.

Tolly is making his way around the deck with a tray of Jell-O shots, dressed like a pirate. This isn't a costume party, so I'm not totally clear on why he's wearing tight breeches and a flowy white shirt with an eye patch, but I'm digging it.

Speaking of things I never anticipated, my man is a connoisseur all things gelatin and alcohol. He especially loves mixing different flavors of Jell-O to recreate classic cocktails. We've already had margarita, piña colada, lemon drop, and orange dreamcicle Jell-O shots, with blue coconut and strawberry daiquiri shots waiting in the fridge below deck.

In other words, we're all drunk off our asses. Thankfully Tolly's crew knows how to handle a rowdy crowd.

Biting my knuckle, I watch as Tolly picks his way around the people on lounge chairs, each grinning as he hands them his newest concoction. Most want to take a shot with him, and he is, as always, an obliging host.

“God, I love him,” I say as he narrowly avoids falling into the pool.

“He’s a good man, Gael. I wouldn’t accept anything less for you,” Ant says, patting my chest with shiny eyes.

After my adventure in England, I heard all about how Ant ripped Tolly a new one, and it made me laugh.

A shout goes up and our attention is diverted back to Tolly. He’s managed to lose his balance again, this time dramatically windmilling his arms before falling into the pool, splashing water everywhere. The party cracks up, and the captain gives the horn a merry toot.

Tolly catches my eye, pouting. “I tripped on those new flip-flops you made for me.”

“Sure, darling.”

I laugh as he swims over to where we’re standing, hefting himself out of the pool, his eye patch lost somewhere along the way. The flowy white shirt is now see through and spackled to his chest and abs.

I send him a low whistle. “*Thank you, Mr. Darcy.*”

He looks down and shakes his head, then stops because his balance is still hella compromised. “You’re welcome.”

Stumbling toward me, he picks me up off my feet and spins me.

I smack his chest. “Put me down!”

“But I thought you liked the wet puffy shirt look.”

“I do, but you’re getting me wet!”

Another shout of laughter goes up around the deck and a devilish look comes over Tolly’s face. Hoisting me up again, he turns and jumps back into the pool.

It’s a damn good thing I’m wearing a bathing suit. Still, I sputter at him, blinking away the water in my eyes.

“That’s it! I’m calling off the wedding,” I joke, twisting to get away from him.

“Too bad, love. It’s going to be a pretty amazing party,” he says, putting on that posh accent.

“Okay, fine. I’ll marry you, but I’ll be getting you back.”

He grins and pulls me in for a kiss until the partygoers start whistling again.

“Looking forward to it. For the rest of my life.”



## TOLLY

“I don’t know if I ever told you how surprised I was the first time you brought me here,” Gael says, as we’re wrapped up in one another on the double lounge, the beach a stone’s throw away.

“Really?” I ask, kissing his temple as we watch the stars begin to appear in the night sky above us, outshining the palm trees wrapped in Christmas lights.

The wedding ceremony today was simple and beautiful. We’d kept the double wedding with Erik and Ant a surprise, and the guests’ reactions were a combination of shock, laughter, and tears. The cousins were beautiful, of course, and Erik and I had exchanged a look like we both knew that we were the luckiest two men on the entire planet.

We danced for hours, the music a mix of Quelbe, reggaeton, corridos, early 2000s pop, and Christmas carols.

“Yeah. The guys would talk about your Caribbean estate, and I guess I was imagining some bohemian version of the estate outside of Manchester. Big and imposing, taking up half the landmass of your little island.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Oh, darling. That’s never been my style.”

“I know that now, of course. Coming here after that awful trip to England reminded me of the first time you took me to your cabin at the ranch. It’s gorgeous, clearly high-end, but built to be a part of the landscape instead of overwhelming it.”

“That’s a good description of my general style. I don’t think there’s anything more beautiful than nature, and trying to impose my own architecture over that seems perfectly ridiculous.”

“Like this house,” he says, gesturing to my—*our*—home. “It’s beautiful, and I love the massive sliding glass doors that let in the ocean air and sunshine. But it’s not that much bigger than your cabin. Hell, some of your staff’s homes are bigger.”

“We built the homes to suit the size of the family.”

“But people who are as rich as you always build these massive mansions. And yeah, architecture or whatever, but you could build a large home that encompass the natural beauty around you.”

“What am I going to do with a large home? That was the question I’ve always had for my friends with these massive mansions. I know a guy who has a fifty-bedroom mansion. Fifty. He and his wife have a daughter. Singular. What the hell is he doing with the other forty-five rooms?”

“Bragging,” Gael says, kissing my jaw.

I hold him tighter. “I’ve seen too much bragging. To use one’s largess to show other people how rich you are is embarrassing in the extreme. At least I would be humiliated to act like that. Meanwhile, Erik’s and Charlie’s portfolios are similar to mine, and their homes are not grand, either.”

“True. They’re beautifully made, and wonderfully livable, but they’re not a flex.”

“Exactly. When you’ve grabbed a Kind Bar out of your own backpack to feed a child who was on the razor’s edge of starving to death, massive displays of wealth seem so immoral in comparison,” I say, running my hand through his hair.

“And that’s why I love you, Mr. Hernandez,” he says, leaning into the affection with a goofy grin.

I fit his back up against my chest as I wrap my legs around his. “Tolly Hernandez has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“Yes...”

His voice drifts off as my hand finds his neck. He has never wanted to be choked, but he loves the feeling of being controlled, even when he's topping, and a simple hand necklace always does the trick.

Nestling the edge of his ear, I ask, "Do you need any more lubrication, darling? Or are you still good?"

I could feel, rather than see, his smile. "I'm perfect," he answers, arching his back, pushing his ass against my growing cock.

After the reception, once everyone went to their individual cabins, Gael and I tore into each other. First, he docked me and held my cum until he could push his cock into my waiting mouth. Then he fucked me and I fucked him, and now I need him again.

Permission granted, I slip inside him, loving how slick he already is from cum and leftover lube. "I don't know if I have another one in me, I just have to be inside you," I say, gently thrusting into him.

"Same. I love how you feel."

The stars are now a field of diamonds and the crystal-clear ocean dictates our rhythm, the slick sounds of me moving inside his body coordinating with the gentle lapping waves in front of us. Firming my fingers around his neck, I use my free hand to stretch and play with his foreskin until he's fully erect. The salt air is heady with the scent of our sex.

We continue like that for a while, turned on but not desperate, connected but not trying to orgasm, soft and hard all at once. Neither of us wanting this moment to end.

While I hadn't intended to come again, the tight clench of his body around me is too much. I roll us over, fucking him into the plush cushions.

"*Gael*," I moan on a hard, grinding thrust. "I'll never get enough of you."

"Me either," he whispers, pushing against me as I grip his shoulders and angle for that perfect place inside him.

We grunt and cry out through our shared releases, and I collapse on top of him, knowing how much he loves his weighted sex blanket. When we finally separate, we laugh at our mess and I wipe down the cushions with my shirt while he wades into the ocean, naked and dripping with my spend.

Laughing, I join him, and we hold each other, kissing as the waves wash over our hips.

Rinsed clean, Gael takes my hand and leads me back to the shore, where we walk on the private beach, sand between our toes.

“Thank you for being patient with me,” he says, stopping to look out over the moonlit water.

I wrap my arms around his warm body, pulling him close. “You were worth the wait.”



THANK you for reading The Christmas Summons! If you have a chance, please leave a quick review or star rating.

MAKE sure to check out the entire [Wild Heart Ranch](#) series!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi there! I write contemporary gay romance, which is to say I curse way too much, drink exactly the right amount of red wine, and sleep far too little. I'm also lucky enough to live in Central Texas with my wife and our dogs, where the astonishing diversity of humans and landscapes and tattoo shops serve as my muse.

Check out my Facebook reader group, [The Fox Den](#), for giveaways, first-look cover reveals, and more, and follow me on Amazon to be notified of new releases by email.





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