

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, about to kiss. The man is on the left, looking up at the woman on the right. They are both wearing cozy, textured sweaters. The background is softly blurred, showing the warm lights of a Christmas tree. The overall mood is intimate and festive.

A *Swanson
Ridge* NOVEL

The
*Right
One*

JACOB PARKER

THE RIGHT ONE

A SWANSON RIDGE NOVEL #3

JACOB PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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FIND JACOB PARKER

Jacob Parker

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DESCRIPTION



It's him.

Always has been.

But the timing has never been right.

And why would a guy like him— rich, drop-dead gorgeous, and kind—ever be interested in little old me?

He owns a massive hotel chain.

I'm living in my brother's rinky-dink basement suite.

I have bigger things to worry about than my teenage crush coming back to haunt me.

But what if that crush also hands me the big break I need?

How could I say no when the guy of my dreams also offers me my dream job?

Heck yes I want to work for him this Christmas season.

Cue holiday music, mistletoe, and nostalgia.

If I hadn't already been falling for him, I am now.

And I'm pretty sure he feels the same way about me.

At least I am until his crazy ex decides she's not done with him.

She's making me think I should be.

Love shouldn't be this hard, should it?

Or is the right one worth fighting for?

Introduction



Hey! I'm missing you over here in my Insiders Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot and let's connect.

Also, you get a FREE novel for joining. Trust me, you DON'T want to miss it!

See you on the inside...

[Join my insiders HERE!](#)

The second hand made yet another full lap around the face of my newest Rolex. I narrowed my eyes and polished the face with the cuff of my sleeve. We were going to be late.

“Jacob!” I bellowed.

“I’ll be down in a minute!” My brother yelled back from down the hall.

This was the time of the year when I was most nostalgic, wanting to be around my relatives and enjoy all the traditional events that heralded the coming holidays. When I was surrounded by all the family members and friends who’d been there every holiday season, I felt like I belonged, like I’d always have my place here. I seldom left my comfort zone, and the familiarity of the same faces in the same place was something I’d always treasure.

Lately, though, with the rate my family’s resort chain was blowing up and taking off with record bookings, I’d been on the go and busier than usual. This was a banner year, and it looked like it wouldn’t let up in the next one either.

If I wasn’t in meetings, I was flying out to check on our properties. And then there were the reviews, the marketing sessions, the planning marathons encompassing input from all the departments at the head office. As CEO, I took it to heart and gave it my all. I wanted to make sure I did my father proud. Heck, I wanted to do my grandfather proud, too, since the family business began with him.

Being a workaholic dragged on me, though, and that was why I'd planned to hang out at home around Thanksgiving for a few weeks to relax and be present. With the many events scheduled for December, I'd be worn ragged. It wasn't just hosting the parties, but also the obligation to attend and show my face as the leader at them.

It never ends.

That was why I wouldn't hold a grudge against my brother for taking his sweet-ass time getting ready to leave. Most times, he was here not as a mere roommate but as the sole inhabitant at my house. I was gone so often for work, I wondered if he considered this place *his*. He was clearly comfortable bringing women home, like he had last night. Someday, I was sure he'd tire of his Casanova habits, but that didn't seem likely soon.

I needed to chill and soak up these last few days at home. Leaning back on the couch, I recalled the good times we'd had so far.

Thanksgiving dinner. All the leftovers. Football games, both watched and played. Helping with the canned-food drive the Garcias arranged. Edward, the oldest of the Garcias, and I hadn't needed to go to the gym that week. Lugging around cans and boxes of nonperishables was a workout with the amount our community donated.

And tonight, once Jacob got a move on, we would attend the annual s'mores and hot-chocolate party. The neighbors who lived on Swanson Ridge went all out on these gatherings, and it was just one of the ways that made this place *home*. As a kid, I looked forward to this night to try out all the possible ways to melt chocolate. Joshua and I used to compare who could char their marshmallow the darkest and then Landon would dare us to eat them. Once we became teens, it turned into more of seeing our crushes and trying to look cool.

Now as an adult, I still looked forward to seeing everybody and catching up. It didn't matter if I'd seen them for Thanksgiving or just watched the games with them.

But most of all, I was excited for another chance to see Hanna.

Hanna Smith. I'd always noticed her. It was impossible not to, but I never let myself get too close. Everyone who grew up on Swanson Ridge generally ran in the same circles, but she was younger than me. She was twenty-three to my almost twenty-nine. It didn't seem like much now, but when we were younger, I repeatedly reminded myself why she was off-limits.

Jacob had mentioned last night that he'd heard Hanna would be at the autumn party, and since he shared that nugget of information, I got my hopes up high. I was either away too often to chat with her, or she was busy with her friends. Five years shouldn't seem like a huge barrier, but that wasn't all that kept me from approaching her.

The last time I'd put myself out there for a woman hadn't ended well. Maybe it was pointless to linger with skepticism about ever opening up again, but I couldn't change the way I felt. Being hurt once was bad enough. Risking my heart again would just be stupid.

"Ready!" Jacob jogged to the last step, hurrying. He grinned, exhaling hard.

"You didn't have to rush." I shrugged, still sitting.

"Yeah, I did. I didn't plan on sleeping in all afternoon."

I stood, chuckling at his gestures for me to get up. "Well, if you hadn't stayed at the bar so late, you probably wouldn't have."

He shrugged. "And I struck out anyway."

I raised my brows as we headed to the front door. The hot chocolate and s'mores would be set up on the backyard of the Nguyen's house. We lived in a close-knit community, so it would be easy just walking there.

"Which is all the more reason not to miss out on a minute of this party." He got into step beside me as we headed in the direction of the party.

“Wouldn’t it just be some of the same women who were at the bar last night?” I teased.

He shrugged as I reversed. “Maybe. But I don’t care. By the way, I saw Poppy and Arlo at the bar. Arlo said Hanna told him that she’d be coming tonight.”

I hid a cringe. Arlo Briar was more her age, and the idea of someone more “appropriate” or more her peer chatting with her about her plans made me uneasy.

He’d be an ideal guy for her, not too much older. Whereas I was not on the market anyway. Still, I had to wonder if age really was just a number.

“But I don’t get why you’d want to ask her out or anything now,” Jacob replied, checking his hair in the mirror. “You’re just going to be busy as hell at the office and traveling to the resorts for the rest of the year. Doesn’t sound like a smart time to start a relationship.”

“Like I’d take relationship advice from you,” I shot back wryly.

He chuckled good-naturedly. “I’m just saying. You’re too busy.”

I was, and I intended to keep it that way. Staying busy with work was a hell of an effective way to guard my heart. It didn’t do a damn thing for keeping Hanna out of my mind, though, and that was why I kept my eyes open for her once we arrived at the party.

I might not have a good reason to talk to her. Hell, I probably lacked a good line to begin chatting. I doubted we could have much in common. Still, she wasn’t harming me by always hovering in the back of my mind, the untouchable fantasy that kept me intrigued.

After arriving at the party and being directed to the backyard, Jacob and I fit right into the crowd on Swanson Ridge. Tables set up with s’mores ingredients that were fully stocked despite the many kids running around snatching them off plates. Our sister, Clare, was already near the fire helping kids roast the white sugar squares. We saw our parents talking

to some of the other neighbors more than likely talking about their children.

It was one big happy crowd of families and friends, snacking on s'mores at the huge bonfire or sipping hot cocoas, just like it used to be when I was growing up. Nostalgia hit me right in the face along with the smell of the roasting marshmallows and burning wood. Everyone was here, it seemed. All but Hanna.

I gave up on hoping to see her, chatting with Joshua and Landon. I'd never understand how they could call themselves anything but Titans fans, but I supposed they did need to broaden their player preferences a bit when they were doing so lousy with their fantasy football selections.

Jacob tapped on my shoulder, pulling me from laughing about the guys debating quarterbacks.

“Mark my words, I just saw the most beautiful girl ever.”

I lifted my brows at his attempt to sound like a Lothario. Following the direction of his focus, I drew in a deep breath of the chilly, campfire-scented air.

There she is.

Like every time I sought her out, my heart beat faster at the first glance of her beauty. In high furry boots, tight jeans, and a flannel and denim coat, she looked like she'd walked out of an ad for fall fashion. A white knit hat covered her head, leaving her long brown locks to fall over her shoulders. I couldn't help but smile at the look of amusement on her delicate face. Those deep-brown eyes sparkled with mischief and mirth as she giggled at something her best friend said. Gabriela Garcia strolled up toward the tables. Their arms were linked together as they walked, and I was immediately eager to know what could have entertained them so much in walking past the bar.

I chuckled, knowing *exactly* how my brother felt. As much as he liked to give me crap about my interest in Hanna, I could give him the same for how obsessed he was with Gabriela.

“I think I saw her too,” I told him without taking my eyes off her.

He patted the back of his hand against my chest. “Watch how it’s done, bro.”

I shook my head, sipping my spiked cocoa as he sauntered toward them. They were too far for me to hear a word, but I knew my brother. Whatever cheesy pickup line he thought was gold fell flat. Gabriela furrowed her brow and shook her head at him while Hanna laughed and looked away.

Rejected. Again. I hid my smile behind my cup as Jacob returned to my side. He didn’t look destroyed, but I wondered if that smirk was the tip of the iceberg for how he felt.

“How’d it—”

“Shut up.” His ego was burned, and I could only laugh harder. When I looked up, I caught Hanna smiling at me, likely just as amused as I was at my brother striking out again. I winked at her, excited with her attention on me.

Damn. Having her gorgeous smile directed at me was like being blasted with too much heat. She was radiant, but before I could try to go up to her, Liberty greeted her and they all started talking again.

While Jacob nursed his ego, soothed with other girls’ attention throughout the night, I made sure to always be aware of where Hanna was. I didn’t want to stare and stalk. But I didn’t feel patient enough to admire her from afar anymore. Glancing around, I made sure to spot her in case I could find an opening to approach her. Something about seeing her tonight gnawed at me. After such a long time of lurking and watching her from a distance, I felt like it was now or never. Why not? Maybe it was all this downtime from being at home. It wasn’t boredom, but more like a restlessness to *do* something for once.

I still didn’t know what I’d say. I wasn’t easy to intimidate, but later, when I saw her alone at the fire, rotating her marshmallow over the flames, I headed out there. It was private, and I didn’t want to miss an opportunity.

“Hey, Hanna.” I exhaled in relief, glad I sounded normal and casual. “How’s it going?”

“Hey! Hi, Luke. It’s going, it’s going—Oh, shoot!” She giggled when her marshmallow melted too much and plopped into the flames.

“Here you go.” I chuckled and handed her another one. She smiled her thanks. “What have you been up to lately?” *Too nosy*. I inhaled a deep breath of campfire air. “I’ve been home for a few weeks lately and haven’t seen you out and about.”

Too stalkery!

She scrunched her face. “Don’t be silly. You sat two seats over from me at the football game at Joshua’s. You’ve seen me.”

I raised my brows. *Huh*. That was a precise memory of knowing how close we were. I didn’t bother assuming she was watching me as much as I had done to her.

“But, yeah. I *have* been busy.” Her sly grin led into an even brighter smile. “I started up my own event-planning business back before Halloween. And I’m *loving* it! It’s been a blast.” She shrugged. “Starting small, you know. But I’m hoping to score some big jobs for December.”

I bit my lip and smiled. *Perfect*.

“I, uh, I might just know somebody who could use your help.”

“Seriously?” She widened her eyes at me in glee. “I would love that, Luke.”

I nodded, liking this idea even more. December was only days away, and she’d dropped the opportunity of a lifetime in my lap. I wanted to figure out a way to spend more time with her in any other way than just noticing her in the background. And I also needed significant help with my schedule for the resorts.

Talk about a win-win.

“Who?” she asked, already giddy and hopeful.

Me.

She didn't know it, but I had just scored a whole month with her.

Luke Robertson.

Dreamy. Tall. And just a little mysterious in the right way.

I'd had a crush on him for forever. For just as long, he was forbidden to me. He was my older brother's best friend.

Because Joshua knew him "first" and was such good friends with Luke, he'd fallen under the category of guys I shouldn't talk to or flirt with. Sure, we were all one big gang here. All of us on Swanson Ridge knew each other. Once I became a teenager, I understood that this tingling sensation that crept along my skin was attraction, and that the thrill of excitement that came when I was near Luke meant I *liked* liked him, which meant I couldn't figure out how to act around him.

It was far easier and safer to fantasize and daydream about him until I could figure out how to make him see me as something other than Josh's little sister. I was a planner at heart. My confidence grew when I was prepared and knowledgeable about what faced me. Where Luke was concerned, though, I didn't know how to prepare myself for the day that I hoped would come—the day he would see *me* and talk to *me*.

Today was that day.

Gulp.

His Rolex glinted in the firelight, but its manufactured beauty couldn't compete with the way his eyes burned into me.

Double gulp. "Who?" I bit my lip to tamp down the excitement filling me.

He rubbed along his jaw, stroking it as though he was deep in thought. Perhaps he was debating if he should tell me or if he should even be out here talking to me. With a direct stare that warmed me more than any lick of flames in the fire near us, he slowly smiled and simply said, "Me."

Luke? Luke needed a planner? I blinked a few times, wondering if the smoke from the fire was addling my brain. "You?"

He nodded, and the movement caused a few dark blond strands to fall over his forehead. With the shadows cast from the fire and the nighttime darkness cloaking us, he looked mysterious, almost like a puzzle I could never seem to solve. The glow from the fire highlighted his handsome features, and I couldn't help but try to memorize how he looked so attractive.

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. I had to be hearing things.

Shock didn't even begin to describe it. I stood there, parting my lips as I struggled to think of something to say.

Luke wanted *me*? I chased away the instant, dirtier thought of him seeking me out.

"You?" I repeated that simple question with even more incredulity.

"Yeah, me. I've been really busy with the resorts lately."

And no wonder. He'd taken over Robertson Resorts for his dad, and I knew Luke was a hardworking man. It hardly mattered that the oddly named resorts stayed in the family. I would forever think their silliness of omitting the *s* was so cutesy. Many businesses around Franklin were generational successes. My mom and Joshua were recently talking about

how much Luke had expanded the Robertson resort chain, so I was aware of where Luke had to be spending so much time.

“I was just thinking earlier how hectic and busy December will be. Several of the resorts have events before the end of the year, and three of them are bigger, classier events that need more attention than what I can provide.”

Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. I wasn't hearing things. This was really happening. Luke wanting to bring me on board at Robertson Resorts was a godsend for my budding business. I wasn't lying when I told him I was starting out small. Everyone had to start somewhere, after all, and I was building my reputation.

For the last couple of months, I'd been doing things locally. Baby showers, a bar mitzvah, a retirement party. A few Halloween gatherings, too. Word was spreading fast among businesses, too. Offices had reached out to me to handle holiday office parties. Several families were inquiring about things in the upcoming year. I'd gotten an email yesterday from a mother thinking ahead to high school graduation time already.

All of those seemed like small-time gigs. Helping Luke at his resorts was a huge leap forward. Even now, I was giddy about the prospect. I would gain experience outside of our hometown. My name would get out there. I would learn about bigger events, and I could probably network like crazy.

“I have something coming up very soon, in Franklin. But then I also have a couple of out-of-state opportunities. I'll be honest, Hanna, I can't handle it all.”

I clung to his every word. He wasn't begging or desperate. He wasn't complaining either. I heard the sincerity in his tone, and it made me want to help him even more. If I could make him smile, if I could improve his day, it would make me feel good too. Luke was a standup guy. He deserved to have a break.

While I fell under the spell of excitement from our conversation, I tried my hardest to actually listen and not just watch his lips move. Struggling to stay focused, I blinked

again and stepped closer to him and away from the fire. I felt like I was getting toasted, but being closer to him warmed me just the same.

“Multiple teams collaborate at my offices, but it’s starting to feel a lot like herding cats without someone leading them all.”

Uh huh. I nodded, barely hearing him. Concentrating on his offer was a damned difficult thing to pull off. I was tempted to simply stand here and stare at him. A secret smile tugged at my lips. For once, I could appreciate the fact he was talking to me like someone his age, someone equal, and not my brother’s sibling. He was so incredibly handsome, with those classic all-American, boy-next-door looks. His sweet personality didn’t hurt either.

Luke seemed withdrawn sometimes. I recalled him dating someone in college, but otherwise, Luke kept to himself. Joshua explained years ago that the death of a friend changed Luke. Right now though, as we stood in our private bubble near the fire, with no one else interrupting, I only saw how charming and open he was. Being under his direct gaze did things to me, waking up all those fantasies about him noticing me.

He was attentive but not staring at me like he was checking me out lewdly. He was smiling, daring me to smile along with him because his good mood was infectious.

I memorized all that I could, free to look at him and not worry about glancing away. That dimple in his cheek. The dark blue of his eyes. The perfect lift of his lips in his smile. The way his brows arched up in question.

Wait. What?

“Huh?” Dammit. I’d zoned out, nodding here and there.

I didn’t want him to think I was a ditz, a stupid, younger idiot. Not paying attention to what he said was a fast track for him to assume I was immature.

“I said I’d love help with arranging the catering services, too. Our Memorial Day BBQ was a disaster, but I realize it

can't be easy with vendors dropping out.”

I perked up. “Well, I can definitely help there. Gabriela is branching out from their restaurant, making her own catering business. We're tying our services together. Party planning,” I pointed at myself, “and catering.” I pointed at where Gabriela picked out s'mores options with Liberty and her sister.

“That would be great,” Luke said. “If she could come along to help with the catering portion of the events, that would be a tremendous weight off my shoulders. Locally and out of state. She could travel and bunk with you, all expenses paid and, of course, great compensation for both of your services.”

I choked on a breath, overwhelmed and nearly bursting with excitement. My snafu of ogling him hadn't ruined it all. But going forward, I had to watch it. “Yes, Luke. Thank you. We are all in!”

He furrowed his brow. “You don't want to check with her first?”

I shook my head quickly. *Hell no!* “Trust me. I can speak for her. We are so in!”

With another slow smile, he said, “Great. Can you come to my office Monday afternoon? We can sort out all the details.”

“Yes. Absolutely.” We shook hands, and I fought not to squeal in excitement. Even though my hand was gloved, a spark of awareness filled me with his touch.

For the rest of the evening, I remained aware of where Luke was. He returned to Jacob and Joshua and some of the other guys. I giggled when I saw him teasing Edward about something. I tried my best to stay in the mood of the night.

After I told Gabriela about Luke's offer, we joined the other girls. Liberty and Poppy coaxed us into trying a s'more with peppermint patties, and Clare made a mess of trying to use a caramel candy and got so sticky that napkins glued to her. It was easy to just be with my friends and enjoy the night. That was what life was all about growing up on Swanson Ridge, getting together and enjoying ourselves no matter what,

but in the back of my mind, I still struggled to believe that Luke had really approached me with that offer.

After all the hot cocoas, s'mores, and chitchat about Christmas plans, I walked back home to Josh's house, where I was living until I found my own place. He'd generously let me move into his basement suite after staying in a bedroom upstairs for a couple of months and living on top of each other. It brought back too many memories of living down the hall from each other when we were kids. Having my own space in the suite was better. Not ideal, because I was a creature who craved windows and daylight, but beggars can't be choosers, and I was grateful. Hopefully sooner rather than later, I'd find my own place nearby in Franklin. Sure, I dreamed about staying on Swanson Ridge, but I wasn't sure how that would be possible anytime soon, if ever. Josh had been clever to take over mom and dad's old place here on the street. I knew he and Liberty were in the midst of discussing where they would live together. Last I'd heard, they were talking about her moving in here.

In which case I really had to move my butt and get out. I had no interest in living under a newly engaged couple. I did *not* need to hear what they got up to in the late night hours.

I walked slowly and leisurely with Gabriela gushing at my side. She clung to my arm, so excited she couldn't stop talking.

My heart was full after a wonderful night. I loved my old stomping grounds, and I never left a Swanson Ridge block party event without feeling grateful and blessed. After Luke's offer, though, I felt more excited than ever before. While I was a homebody, I sorely wished to travel. With him, I had a chance to, and best of all, I could do what I loved most while I was at it—plan.

And that was exactly what I was going to do the second I got home. Plan, prepare, and scheme. Now that Luke had reached out to me, I refused to mess it up—with him or this job.

LUKE

On the first Monday back to the old rise-and-grind routine of work, I headed into the office looking forward to seeing Hanna later. Before I left the s'mores and hot cocoa night, I gave her my phone so she could put her number in it.

Having a direct way to contact her was exciting. It felt like carrying a secret in my pocket. The ability to reach out to her was a dangerous lure, but I couldn't. I'd limited myself in asking her to work for me. I could text her to confirm her coming to my office. But it didn't give me a right to ask her out or anything like that.

As I entered my office building, I realized I wouldn't have much idle time to just be thinking about her and anticipating her arrival. In the foyer, I already witnessed the beginning signs of Christmas coming. The receptionist had been chomping at the bit to change the lobby music channel to the holiday streaming station.

Gene Autry welcomed me with the first lyric about Rudolph and I rolled my eyes.

Great. Here we go. As soon as Thanksgiving was over, it was Christmas songs on full blast until *everyone* had to be sick of it.

I wasn't crazy about this season.

Did I like being with my family and friends? Of course.

Did I appreciate the boon of business the resorts got with travelers around the holidays? Hell yes.

But the constant commercialized junk of the season shoved down my throat? Hard no thanks there. I wouldn't go so far as saying I was a grinch, but I wasn't careful to hide my annoyance about it all.

Still, I recognized that Robertson Resorts would be hustling and bustling. Business wouldn't let up until late January, and I was here for the busy season, regardless of my personal opinion about it.

"Morning, Luke," the receptionist called out from the front desk on the ground floor.

"Hey, Cheryl." The company was huge, but I made a point of knowing all the critical employees' names early on. At the sight of the red and green ornament earrings dangling from her ears, I mentally groaned. She even looked elfish, short and always so perky. Any day now, she'd be asking me about the holiday office party.

I carried on, aiming for my office. The sooner I got there and made headway on my tedious to-do list of calls, emails, and checking reports, the sooner I could be free to prepare for Hanna's arrival.

Hanna and Gabriela. I didn't have an issue with Hanna's best friend. If I had, I wouldn't have hired her for catering help. Even though Jacob had been obsessed with her for a long while and was very interested in her despite no mutual feelings shown his way, I didn't know much about her. Still, I needed to remember it wasn't only Hanna coming in today. This wouldn't be a date. We wouldn't be alone together, but my mind just went there, wishing it would be just me and her talking again.

I nodded in greeting and replied with hellos to the staff I passed. Many employees had come in earlier than me, and the office was already busy and active. Each person I spotted and waved to showed more signs of the holiday spirit. Red and green could be seen everywhere, in clothing, pens, and

jewelry. A poinsettia sat at the reception area for my floor, and I sighed again.

Hiding how peeved I was, I smiled the whole way to my office.

I shut the door and leaned against it, rolling my eyes and groaning at the yuletide efforts that would soon take over the damn building.

Whatever. To each their own.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pushed off the door. I walked to my desk and pulled my phone out to check the screen.

A real smile crossed my face.

Hanna: I'm looking forward to seeing you at 2!

I typed in a reply, then deleted it. Again, I tried to word something that sounded flirty yet not predatory, and backspaced it as well. Absentmindedly I slumped into my chair and frowned. How could I word it? I was excited to see her, but it wasn't only because she'd be saving me big time by handling the planning.

Luke: Me too. I debated a smiling emoji. She'd sent one. In the end, I figured not using one would keep it more professional.

"All right," I mumbled to myself. "Let's get going."

The first day back at the office was never easy. I seldom took off long stretches of time, but I'd needed it. Those weeks off would help me get through the rush of December, or that was my hope.

I started with the most dreadful task first, clearing out my inbox. It was loaded with crap that didn't matter. A good part of it was erased with fine-tuning my spam criteria. Many emails needed further reading and consideration, so over two cups of coffee, I spent all morning tending to weeks of emails. Calls were easier. I hadn't received many in the first place. Everyone I worked with knew emails and texts were my preference.

Before I got to the end of the ones that stood out or were slightly urgent, I paused on one specific name.

Jennifer. I narrowed my eyes and my heart raced faster. It wasn't a good thing. Adrenaline filled me, and even though she was only there on the screen via an email, I felt the immediate signs of readying for a confrontation.

Another email. I didn't look forward to ever seeing my ex-fiancée's name, and I could have sworn I'd deleted one from her before I took those weeks off. I maintained an open door policy here at work, and I doubted it would be hard to reach me publicly. But I didn't want to hear from *her*.

I'd called off our engagement after I found out she was only in it for the money. Jacob had been the first to warn me that she seemed like nothing but a gold-digger. The final nail in that coffin was learning that she'd had a thing going on with one of my college buddies. Her affair with him hadn't lasted long, and the last I'd heard years ago, she was *still* looking for easy money with a man. I had Jennifer to thank for my trust issues with women, and seeing her name again bothered me on so many levels.

She was crazy, still trying to win me back with weirdly immature emails.

She was zealous, too, not giving up.

But mostly, she was an annoying distraction. Now that I'd found the courage to talk to Hanna and hire her as a way to keep her in my life, I didn't need a former lover showing up.

"Once again," I whispered aloud as I moved my mouse, "good riddance." I clicked the delete option and wished it could be more permanent.

Gentle taps on my door pulled my attention from the screen. Eddie, this floor's office manager, stood there. I forgot his official title but I knew it was executive something. He was a taciturn older man, a retiree from the army. Hiring a gruff veteran to handle my office probably seemed odd, but the man was a rock star at keeping things mostly in order.

"Another coffee, sir?"

I groaned. “For the millionth time. Stop calling me *sir*.”

He only cracked a slight smile. “Yes, sir.”

“I’m like forty years younger than you!”

“Respect doesn’t have an age limit.”

I chuckled. “And you’re not a coffee gopher anyway.”

“I do have my hearing aids turned up though. Hearing you groan and grumble all day has led me to suspect you might need more caffeine on your first day back.”

I shrugged. Coffee wouldn’t resolve Jennifer poking her way back into my life. “Nah. Thank you, but I’m good.”

He nodded and carried on, toting a hefty pile of files in his arms. Even though we were mostly digital, he still found paper copies to deal with.

Later, just before two, I reached a good spot in my work to pause and get ready for Hanna to arrive.

Hanna and Gabriela. Dammit. I had to stop thinking of it as just me and her.

Eddie alerted me with a heads-up on the intercom that they were here, and I smoothed down my shirt. The need to check my appearance almost had me panicking, but I resisted going to the bathroom and looking in the mirror. A quick tidying effort of my desk didn’t help much, but I doubted I would look too sloppy in here. Messy but in a productive way.

And why do I care? I’m the one hiring her, not the other way around.

I stood and drew a steadying breath. This wasn’t a date. She wasn’t here to see *me*, but to work. It couldn’t be a date when I didn’t feel fully ready to date yet with how Jennifer broke me.

“It’s not a date,” I mumbled under my breath, waiting for the mantra to stick.

I heard Eddie leading them down the hall, doubling as a receptionist for some reason. As soon as she entered my

office, I realized any damn man in the building would stick with her for as long as possible.

She was gorgeous.

At the fire, she was dressed down, laidback yet sexy as a poster girl of the season. Here, in a long black skirt and sweater top, she looked just as good, but in a professional, almost academic way. I was caught off guard, stunned and locked in place as I took in her beauty. The sweet smile she gave me warmed me inside out, and I wanted to stay right there and appreciate her radiance. *Damn, she looks good enough to eat.*

Work was the furthest thing on my mind, but when Eddie cleared his throat as he left, I snapped out of it and exhaled the breath I was holding.

“Hanna, Gabriela. Thanks for coming in.” I gestured for them to take a seat.

“Thanks for asking us to come in,” Hanna said.

“Yeah, Luke. This is a huge opportunity. I’m excited to start.” Gabriela grinned at me as she helped herself to one of the chairs in front of my desk.

“I can’t wait to hear more.” Hanna sat next to Gabriela and pulled a notebook out of her slim bag.

I almost smiled, amused with the pen-and-paper approach. Maybe she didn’t trust taking notes on her phone or a tablet, but I was impressed that she wanted to jot things down. She liked to be prepared, and that was always a good trait for an event planner. She opened the small book and flipped past what looked like other pages with lists and bulleted points.

“And I can’t wait for you to help with this planning. The pace has really been picking up around here, what with three big events on the horizon.” I reclaimed my seat behind my desk and gave them a summary of what we were looking at. First, the party in town, further out in Colorado and Branson, then up north.

“Ooooh. New York City, here we come,” Gabriela gushed.

I smiled and shared some more of what I needed them to oversee. It mostly came down to coordinating efforts and sticking with a theme.

“I’ve already got lots of ideas,” Hanna said. “I looked up previous events at Robertson Resorts and comparable resorts to get a feel for it.”

Smart. A go-getter. She’s not going to need much direction at all, is she?

Gabriela jumped in. “I’ve been thinking about the catering ideas as well. I always try to find the latest culinary trends and follow what’s hot.”

“Great. The first event will be a rush job. It’s only two weeks out, near the Opry.” Having a local event would be a good start for them. “But you’ll have an office in each city at our resorts. We’ll designate your workspace. In fact, I believe Eddie already prepared a temporary office for you here, and I can show you to it now.”

Eddie came with us on the walk to the temporary office, and he filled them in about the in-house details he’d see to, like their logins, securing access to the company software for invoices and ordering, and then the basics like getting them phones, keys, and laptops.

We spent a good while in the office, and even though I wanted to linger and be near Hanna, I knew Eddie was on top of this sudden new hire.

I turned to leave, wishing I could think of an excuse to stay without getting in the way, and Hanna followed me out.

“Hey.”

I turned to her. “Yeah?”

“Thank you again for this opportunity, Luke.” She reached out to squeeze my hand, and I felt a repeat of that zing of awareness. This time, she didn’t have a thick glove as a barrier, and I knew I wanted to feel her touch again—and soon.

I smiled. “The honor is all mine, Hanna. Welcome.”

HANNA

I stepped back into the office just as Eddie took his leave.

He closed the door behind himself, and I strolled around the wide-open room. I'd been feeling cooped up working from home in Joshua's suite, but this was far beyond what I could have expected. An office? With huge windows and all this space? And a view? It was amazing.

"He looks *exactly* like Forrest Gump."

I turned to squint at Gabriela as she spun side to side in what seemed to be her claimed chair. "Like Tom Hanks?"

"No. Not the actor. The guy. All military and formal and whatever."

Assuming we'd be seeing Eddie often, I didn't care who he resembled. He was polite and thorough and I bet he'd be helpful as we adjusted to our new roles.

The office fell quiet, and we stared each other down. I doubted I'd stopped smiling since we got here, and she was no better at hiding her enthusiasm. As we looked at each other in a silent dare of who'd speak first, we grinned wider.

Together, we broke and let out a squeal. I bent over at the waist, and she drummed her feet on the carpet. As she stood, I sauntered over to her, waving my arms in celebration. We couldn't be loud, so we cheered and hooted as quietly as possible, doing a little shimmying dance then hugging.

"Girl, just look at this place. I didn't know we were getting an office!"

“And one in each city,” I reminded her. This was above and beyond anything I could have hoped for.

“Pinch me.” She gripped my skin and did so, making me pout and laugh.

“Ow!” I playfully elbowed her aside as I strolled through the huge space.

“I can’t believe this is real,” she said. “I mean, this is happening, right?”

“I told ya.” I winked at her, pausing at what would be my desk.

“I know, but seeing is believing. I’m so excited, Hanna. This is better than anything I could’ve wished for. Having an enormous, actual office. Getting to travel.”

“Making good money,” I reminded her, thinking back to what Eddie showed us on the tablets he’d left for us to begin reading and signing our contracts.

“And the cherry on the top? I get to do it all with my bestie.” She pulled me in for another tight hug.

“Best. Day. Ever.”

She stepped back, watching me with a secret smile. “I’ll say. You get all that *plus* the chance to be around your man.”

I rolled my eyes. “Luke’s not my *man*. He’s our boss now!”

“But you’ve always had a thing for him. And I can see why. He’s so charming. And he’s totally got an eye for you.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Knock it off.”

“Seriously!” She giggled, raising her brows. “I’ll be asking Santa for one of those this year.”

“A boss?” I teased.

“A handsome hunk of a man who’s interested in me.” Still smiling, she spun in her chair again, hugging herself with glee.

“We need to start planning this first event.”

She huffed. “No kidding. It’s in *two* weeks? You better get that notebook of yours ready to go.”

I lifted it. “And we *so* need to spruce this place up.” It was large but empty. How could we be creative in such a dull and lacking room? It was bland and uninspiring.

“Good idea.”

Since we could take the tablets with us to peruse later, we headed out. During our lunch break, which turned into a working lunch, we strolled the aisles of the home goods store and picked out holiday goodies to bring back and liven up our brand-new workspace. Eddie had explained that our phones, laptops, and gadgets would take him about an hour, so when we came back, he’d probably have it all ready.

Armed with bags, we returned to the Robertson offices and stopped at the café on the ground level to grab coffees before going back to our office.

“Okay, so Winter Wonderland Ball Room,” I said as we set the purchases aside. Now that we were here and we’d chatted all while we shopped, I wanted to get moving on making decisions. Gabriela agreed.

We both were aware of the layout for the Robertson Resort near the Opry. I’d gone there several times, and so had she. It was a gorgeous building. Eddie was one step ahead, already uploading the blueprints of the venue space on the tablets he’d loaned us, just in case we needed exact specifications.

“I think that’s the best theme to try for on short notice.” Gabriela tucked her leg up on the chair and leaned over to scroll on her screen. I stuck with my notebook. Having it on hand was a difficult habit to break.

“It’ll be classy and fancy, but also all things holiday.”

I pointed at her. “Right, but let’s not be so selective that finding things will be a challenge with it so soon.”

“More the colors and the vibe,” she replied before sipping her coffee.

I jotted it down to my list. “Deep blues, silver, snowflakes, and frost.”

Gabriela nodded. “You already suggested the gourmet hot cocoa bar, and dinner should be a harvest salad, followed by apple roasted chicken, wild rice, and green beans.”

I checked them on my list with a tap of my pen. “You’re making me hungry again.”

“And dessert will include a peppermint crème brulee.” She rubbed her hands together with a giddy smile on her lips. “Oooh, I can’t wait. This is going to be perfect.”

“Can you pull that off?”

El Vaquero was her family’s restaurant. They specialized in Mexican dishes but Gabriela knew how to make just about anything. These dishes would be made at the resort, and that would require her commandeering their kitchens and staff.

“Oh, yeah. Don’t you worry about the food. I’ll handle it.”

I followed up with listing the vendors and wholesalers I would reach out to for décor and entertainment. Afterward, we both sat back and sipped the last of our coffees. A deep sense of optimism filled me. The biggest part of event planning was this behind-the-scenes time, and while it seemed like busywork, I loved it. All these were floating ideas that we could pull together into a complete occasion sure to please our client.

Luke.

I couldn’t wait to wow him with what I could pull together. I hoped that I could impress him in a business sense so he wouldn’t regret taking a chance on hiring me. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to impress him in another way. Maybe with one successful event down, he would see me as a woman, an equal, and his peer in the workplace, not his friend’s younger sister in the background.

“We got a lot done for just one day.”

I huffed a laugh. “Well, with only thirteen more days to go, we have to start fast on it.”

Eddie stopped in to hand over our things, and with a quick demonstration of our logins, he dismissed us with a wave. “What am I saying? You know technology more than me.”

Afterward, we left the building. I’d hoped to run into Luke again, but we were so busy and worked so late, he’d probably gone home hours ago.

I wasn’t done. Too much energy filled me, and the only place I could think to go was the gym. I took my health and wellness seriously, and I knew when to listen to my body. A hot yoga class helped me lose the tension that had pulled me so tight all day.

I had been nervous, both about the new job and the chance to see Luke again. Both were stressors, but not necessarily bad ones. My time here in the hot room should’ve been a decompression, my downtime to unravel and let go, but it wasn’t easy. As I sat and sweated, I couldn’t stop thinking.

Luke was on a constant loop in my mind, and I couldn’t banish him from my thoughts. I wasn’t sure I wanted to try. The more I was around him, I picked up on things I’d missed before. He had a depth to him that I’d noticed from afar, but I never had a chance to experience or explore it fully.

He seemed cold at times, almost sad, but he always had a smile ready. I also picked up on the way he didn’t seem very interested in Christmas. When a worker passed us, humming a Christmas tune, I could have sworn he’d rolled his eyes. It wasn’t my place to critique, but his office looked like the Grinch’s cave overlooking Whoville. His desk was cluttered and messy, like he was in the middle of a thousand things at once, but not a speck of red or a dash of green showed anywhere. Yet, in the main lobby space, I heard holiday songs, spotted a couple of small poinsettias, and several air fresheners that smelled a lot like the spruce ones that were so abundant in stores now.

I considered the contrasts all the way through the class and on the way home. Luke had layers, and even though I should’ve been focusing on figuring out logistics for the upcoming event, I knew I wouldn’t settle until I had answers.

The idea of someone hurting him to make him act so down bothered me.

Some kind of an incident had to have happened to make him hide behind a wall, and I grew determined to figure out what it was. There was just something about that man that urged me to make him happy. It would be my holiday miracle to see a *real* smile on his sexy face.

LUKE

After the long day of work, I looked forward to catching up with my friends. Joshua arranged it all, reserving a court for Landon, William, and me to join him in a game of Pickleball. It wasn't my best sport, but I enjoyed it more for the socialization with my buddies.

After Max passed away in an accident all those years ago, I became more reserved. My mom and dad had worried for a while that I'd gotten too quiet, but with time, they came to understand it was just who I was. A loss of a friend was traumatic, and it simply had taken me longer to adjust and move on. It wasn't a bad thing to be quieter than usual, and it wasn't worrisome if I wanted to be more introverted than others.

I never shied away from social situations. Franklin offered many, and I attended everything. At work, I was surrounded by people. Still, when I was in the position to be in a crowd, I tended to stick with one or two others. I'd never been the life of the party, and that was how I preferred it.

Meeting up with a clear activity to participate in, like this game of Pickleball, was easy. I didn't have to stand around and talk. It wasn't up to me to think of something to say or ask. We played, and around the exercise, we chatted about our lives.

Joshua was of course the one to reserve our slot in this oddly popular court.

"Why don't you add on courts at your place?" Landon asked him after he served.

“I might,” he replied as he returned the volley. As the owner of a sports complex, Joshua *could* make that happen. “But the city council is already talking about expanding courts here.” He shrugged as William hit the ball. “And there’s grants involved, community surveys. It’s complicated.”

“Seems like we hardly ever get a slot here,” I said as I hit the ball back over the net.

“Well, because we always want the times everyone else does. After work and the weekends,” Joshua said. “Those times are in high demand.”

“So?” Landon returned the ball. “Build more courts and meet the demand.”

“Adding on is the last thing on my mind today,” Joshua grumbled. “The hot water heaters need to be replaced. The swim instructors are already bitching about the maintenance closures. And then I found out the quote I got to resurface the basketball courts had a typo in it.”

“In your favor?” William asked.

Joshua missed the ball and rolled his eyes. “No. *Not* in my favor.”

“Damn, that blows,” I replied.

We all took our turns talking about work. Even though we all had jobs in different sectors, it seemed this was just a stressful time of the year. My friends were all busy, and with work an ever-present challenge to keep up with, we all expressed the fact we were looking forward to having time off for the holidays at the end of the year.

Except me. “I’m glad I had a chance to get time off *before* it gets too crazy.”

“But it shouldn’t be unmanageable, right?” Joshua grinned at me. “Since you’re hiring help.”

I nodded. Hanna and Gabriela would be a huge help, but with how often I was sidetracked in wanting to just be near Joshua’s sister, I wondered if offering her the job might backfire on my concentration.

“How’d Hanna’s first day go?” Joshua asked. “She was checking notes and making lists all last night.”

William chuckled. “Always with those lists.”

“Hey, we could all benefit from more organization in our lives,” Landon said. “My office manager just changed up how we stored things in the office and it’s making a huge difference already.”

“Yeah,” William agreed. “But Hanna’s so old school about it, pen and paper.”

“Whatever works,” I replied, wanting to come to her defense. I appreciated how on top of things she wanted to be. If it was with a notebook, so be it. Calling Hanna *old school* seemed silly anyway. She was younger than all of us here. Maybe it was her quirk, a hint she might have an old soul no matter her age.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen her use her phone or tablet to keep notes or lists,” Joshua said. “But I agree, whatever works. So, the first day went well? She was already doing research, looking up stuff to be prepared.”

“I know. She’s impressed me with how prepared she was. Her first day will officially be tomorrow, but it went well today, talking about what’s coming up.” *And I can’t wait for the morning.* Just knowing she would be at the office excited me more than usual. I never got like this about any other new hire coming on board. But Hanna was far from just any other worker or woman.

I felt the other guys watching me, and I realized it was my turn to serve. Lost in thoughts about Hanna, I’d spaced out there. Clearing my throat, I furrowed my brow and served. “She’s got a great personality. I can already tell that she’ll be a perfect fit for the job.”

As the ball bounced back and forth over the net, I couldn’t dismiss the route my mind wandered to. *Maybe Hanna would be a perfect fit for more.* It wasn’t hard to see her at my side. To hear her sweet giggle and treat myself to the sight of her sexy smiles. She seemed just as drawn to me, and it didn’t take

much for me to consider the chance she might fit with me in other, less clothed, and way more private occasions than talking at the office.

The ball landed beyond my reach. Joshua and William cheered at their point and I groaned, snapping out of my thoughts.

Yeah, right.

I shoved down the fantasies of seeking something more with Hanna. It was too soon. It was too risky. I recalled what happened the last time I'd opened my heart to a woman. Jennifer's cruelty and manipulative ways had wounded me deeply.

I knew not every girl was the same, but the possibility was out there. How could I know if Hanna would end up treating me like Jennifer had? Hanna still lived with Joshua. She was young and just starting her career, her eyes wide open and clearly hungry to make a living. It seemed ridiculous to compare the women, but what did I know? Maybe Hanna could play with my heart and only want my money just like Jennifer had. *Or does.* According to the email I deleted this morning, Jennifer was *still* trying to get back into my life and help herself to my wealth.

What am I thinking?

It didn't matter who the woman was, it was too big of a leap to trust my heart with them.

Never again.

The reminder to stay guarded helped me to dismiss Hanna from my mind. By putting my focus on our game, it became easier to avoid the distraction of obsessing about the way she looked today or the warmth that filled me when she touched my hand.

After two hours of hitting the ball back and forth and joking with my friends, I was in a good mental space. Exercise always helped me clear my mind. Spending time with my closest friends kept me sane. So on the way home, I was in a damned good mood. Hopefully I'd be tired enough to get a

solid night of sleep and be prepared for another long day at the office tomorrow.

Once I reached my house, I saw the empty spot in my drive. I'd forgotten that Jacob was out of town for the night. It was probably something Dad had asked him to do, and it had slipped my mind that my brother wouldn't be here. He wasn't shy about making *my* house look like his. Even though he could be messier than I liked, I enjoyed having him around.

I walked inside and felt instantly overwhelmed with how empty and quiet the house was. Jacob wasn't here to catch up. I had no one to share a late dinner with. After the high of being around my friends at the courts, I fell to a quick low of being alone at home.

Loneliness was a tricky beast. It was hard to feel isolated with so many friends and family members within reach, but tonight, it bothered me. I'd felt so good at the office, busy and needed, then rewarded with a chance to be near Hanna. Then afterward, I'd enjoyed my friends' company. Here, I felt too alone and idle.

Fortunately, I was tired, and I passed out for a fitful and choppy night of rest. Dreams of Jennifer chasing me down peeved me. And the thoughts about Hanna kept me too alert. I woke the next morning earlier than usual, but I didn't consider taking my time to hang out at home.

Caffeine would help. It always did. I drove to a local coffee shop to pick up a coffee on the way to the office. The moment I walked in, I saw Hanna in line ordering a drink. Dressed in another tight, long skirt that hugged her slender curves and toned legs, she looked professional and sexy. She swept her purse back, revealing the blouse that showed beneath her opened coat, and I held back a groan. The black skirt could work any time of the year, but the green and red striped shirt?

Like I need another reminder that Christmas is coming.

I was pleased to see her, no matter the spirited shirt she'd chosen. Several people stood between us, and I didn't have an opportunity to approach her without losing my spot in line. I

was lucky she turned as she waited for her drink. Her brows lifted in surprise when she spotted me, and her lips curled in a sweet smile of recognition.

I brought my hand up in a wave, trying not to smile too wide and show her how thrilled I was to bump into her. I'd guaranteed the fact that we'd see each other at my office, but it was an extra bonus to see her outside of the workplace.

"Hi!" She waved from up ahead.

Just then, the line moved up and the customers in front of me stepped up to the open registers to order. It left me nowhere to go but to approach the next available employee, and that spot just happened to be closest to where customers waited for their drinks to come out. I gave the barista my order.

"Morning, Luke." Hanna grabbed her drink as it came up, and I stepped over to wait for mine. Lingered there, she smiled warmly at me. "Funny running into you here."

I nodded. "It is." *But in a good way.*

"I got up too early."

"Nervous about the new job?"

She scoffed. "Nervous? Nah. I've got this."

"I know. Just teasing."

"I figured since I had a few minutes that I'd come sit here and let this wake me up the rest of the way." Her lips touched the rim of her cup as she sipped.

"Me too."

"Would you like to sit with me?" She kept a casual yet hopeful smile on her face as she tipped her head toward the tables along the walls.

I appreciated that she took the initiative to invite me. I'd approached her at the bonfire. I'd gone out on a limb to hire her. Even though this was just an unexpected coffee meeting, I liked that it wasn't just me pursuing her.

It's not a date. “Sure. I’ll meet you over there once my drink’s up.”

She smiled brighter before she walked off, and I fought not to stare after her. I couldn’t help but feel drawn to her, and I wasn’t sure if that would be my downfall. Hanna brought out the charmer in me. She lit me up when she was near.

But I couldn’t be sure if those were just the first signs I was already loosening up too much where my heart was concerned. *I should stay guarded, right?*

Perhaps it would be wise to be safe rather than sorry. This wasn’t a date. She was my new employee and my friend’s little sister. It was probably smart to step back and remember that she was still off limits.

Regardless of how long I’d noticed her and how quickly I was becoming attached to her presence, I had to protect my heart and not get hurt again.

HANNA

I sipped my coffee and waited for Luke to come to my table. The coffee shop was bustling. It usually was. In any other circumstances, this would've been a perfect place for a date. Seeing him here was just a happy coincidence, but I felt unprepared for how to pull it off.

We weren't friends exactly. He was my brother's friend but not directly *mine*. We hung out when he took all of the Swanson Ridge neighborhood to Bali right before Poppy and Landon's wedding.

We weren't colleagues, either. He was my boss, or he would be officially come nine o'clock.

And we definitely weren't dating or lovers or anything romantically inclined. He would always be my crush, it seemed, and with that familiar frustration of knowing I'd never have him, I sighed and hoped I wouldn't blurt out anything inappropriate.

As he strode toward me, I couldn't help but wish this *was* a date. He looked too damn good, tall, and so sexy in that suit. I'd always liked my men clean-cut and dapper, and Luke sure as hell fit that to a T. It didn't hurt that I could remember what he looked like on the beach, too, when we were in Bali with all the others. Luke was gorgeous no matter what.

"Come here often?" he asked as he took a seat across from me.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, come on, Luke. You can try a better pick-up line than that."

He paused, his cup halfway to his mouth.

Crap! What happened to not blurting out anything stupid?

“I mean, if I was here for a date. Or a girl you wanted to hit on.” I nodded and sipped my coffee, unable to maintain eye contact. “I’ll shut up now.”

He chuckled, and if it weren’t for the smirk on his face before he drank his coffee, I would’ve sunk down in my seat, humiliated.

“I’m not sure what this is, anyway.” He shrugged, calm and smooth about my gaffe. “In twenty minutes, you’ll technically be my event planner. But until then? I’m not sure who you are other than Josh’s little sister.”

My cheeks already felt seared. Could I dig myself in a deeper hole? He didn’t need to come out and remind me that I was a younger sibling, already not on his radar. I hated to think that Gabriela was wrong, that all those looks he’d given me yesterday weren’t hints of his interest.

I opened and closed my mouth, cautious to speak again.

“What I meant,” he said as he seemed to pick up on my awkwardness, “is if you came here often since their renovation.”

I smiled, taking this lifeline. “They really screwed it all up, didn’t they?”

He scoffed. “It’s like they *wanted* to make it a maze.”

“The tables made so much more sense on the other wall. Over here, the sunlight gets right in your eyes.”

He nodded. “And it’s made even worse with Daylight Savings Time. You can’t escape the glare through those windows. What I don’t understand is the line design. I can see the allure of making customers wait by the baked goods to tempt them to buy more than a coffee.”

I sat up straighter, feeling my confidence return. Talking to Luke wasn’t so bad after all. I still felt unprepared, but this was easy. “Yes! It makes you loop around those columns and

then it's super weird standing in the middle of the line while you wait for drinks."

He chuckled, nodding. "If you ask me, I think it was fine before they renovated."

"Me too."

Before that awkwardness could come back, and before I could hurry to think of something work-related to say, he opened his mouth again. "It's like they're trying to change too much downtown. It's not the same area that I remember when I was a kid growing up here."

"Remember that old clock at the corner? I can't believe they tore it down when they redid the sidewalks."

"I loved that thing. I liked checking the time on it when we came down the street. It was a cool antique."

"Steam-punkish," I agreed. "And so pretty when they decorated it for Christmas with the garland and tinsel."

He shrugged, reinforcing my intrigue about his dislike of the holiday. "And that weird scale at the pharmacy, that was another thing of the past."

I giggled. "I remember all of us trying to stand on it at once when we came as a family. Joshua would hold me. William would hold Max piggyback, and then Elijah would stand on his tiptoes to show Mom how much all her kids weighed at once."

On and on, we went, reminiscing about things from our childhood. Even though five years stood between us, we had shared a history together indirectly. Minutes turned to hours, and I didn't even care that I lost track of time.

I'd always known Luke. I'd been aware of him forever and crushed on him, but I never had a chance like this to actually get to know him. Just me and him. No Joshua here as his friend or as my brother. No one could interrupt. It was a rough start of me trying to label *who* Luke was to me, but over these coffees, we forged a new understanding. After we chatted about growing up here and how things were different downtown, we caught each other up on what we'd been doing.

He told me about taking over the resorts, but even that didn't feel like a true "work" topic. More like a personal matter.

"Dad had been ready to retire, but I wanted to make sure I spent plenty of time learning it all."

"And with so many resorts, that couldn't have been a quick task."

He smiled. "Nope. When I felt I was ready, I took over. It's been hectic, but staying busy helps."

Helps with what? Joshua sometimes complained that Luke wasn't available to hang out as often anymore, and I wondered if Luke was using his work commitments as a way to stay guarded.

"You get it," he said, surprising me. "Starting up your own business has to suck all your time too, just like me taking over an already established business."

I laughed lightly. My small event planning company was like apples to oranges with the billion-dollar Robertson Resort chain. "Yes. It's been a whirlwind of activity, but I love it. It's been daunting too." I shrugged. "It was a challenge *not* to follow in my parents' footsteps. No one in my family has worked with event planning, but it's my passion."

"How come?" He leaned back in his seat, done with his coffee. His stance was relaxed and his easygoing expression made his question not feel like a dig. He was curious, and that excited me. "How come you chose event planning?"

"I love seeing people happy." That really was the simple truth. "I enjoy watching others having a good time, and if orchestrating the occasion makes it more of a reality for them, I'm glad to do it."

"I admire that."

Careful, Luke. If he kept up that praise, I'd melt in a puddle. "My favorite events are weddings and receptions. I only have done one so far and have another planned far in the future. I love planning all kinds of things but I especially enjoy the weddings."

He exaggerated a grimace. “Weddings?”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “Why? What’s wrong with weddings?”

Sitting closer to lean his elbow on the table, he set his face in his hand and waved with the other, dismissing the topic with a wave, as though he’d rather shoo it away. “Weddings are nothing but a cash cow.” He pumped his eyebrows. “You’d know firsthand now since you’re in the business. Don’t try to tell me that you haven’t noticed the obscene markups of costs when it comes to a wedding cake versus a birthday cake, for example.”

I rolled my eyes, taking his criticism good-naturedly. “Just because it’s more money and there is a lucrative business around weddings doesn’t mean they aren’t special.”

“Special for one day. An expensive wedding doesn’t mean anything for a marriage’s quality.”

I took that with a grain of salt. His perspective sounded like he valued connections over pomp. “Well, I would like to look forward to one day marrying my forever person.”

He tipped his chin up and grinned. “You can have this wedding at one of my venues then. I’ll only mark it up a little.”

“Ha. Ha.” I stuck my tongue out at him. “How generous.”

He frowned, turning his watch to read a notification. “Whoops. Eddie again.”

I gasped, looking at my phone. We had been talking for almost two and a half hours. Panic kicked in, and I hurried to tidy the table and leave. “We have to go! We’re late!”

He chuckled, and I almost cringed at how much I loved that throaty, husky sound. Now was *not* the time for my attraction to control my thoughts.

“I don’t have a boss.” He set his hand over mine as I hurried to shove my phone in my purse and stand. “And I’m pretty sure yours will be okay with you being late.”

I laughed, too addicted to him joking like this. I turned my hand to take his and pulled on it. “But we gotta go!”

I tossed out a hasty goodbye and we went in the opposite direction to our cars outside. While I never liked to speed, I put my foot to the floor and hurried to the office. Sure, he said he wouldn’t mind but he wasn’t the only one whose opinion mattered right now.

Sure enough, when I got to the office and hurried upstairs, I found Gabriela stunned and confused. I hadn’t looked at my phone at all, wanting to give Luke all my attention when we talked.

“What in the heck happened? Where have you been?” She grabbed my wrists and gaped at me. “I was worried you’d quit on the first day!”

I hated that I’d made her worry. And there was no reason for it, like Luke said. I laughed, pulling her in for a hug. “It’s okay.” I let her step back and sighed. “I ran into Luke.”

Her brows spiked high. “You were with him?”

“We were talking. I went to get a coffee and he did too, so we sat down and chatted.”

Those details weren’t enough. My bestie was aware how badly I’d crushed on him for years, and she didn’t relax until I told her all of it. How I almost made a fool of myself and how smoothly he’d changed the topic. Catching up. Getting to know him. All of it. As I spoke, I almost couldn’t believe it had happened.

When I finished, she grinned. “I *knew* it! He’s totally into you, Hanna!”

I wish. I shook my head, too cautious to get my hopes that high. “It was very casual.”

Gabriela giggled. “You’re two hours late to work. That ain’t casual!”

Casual or not, my one-on-one time with Luke was certainly over. I wasn’t sure if or when I could look forward to

having him all to myself like that again, but now it was time to get busy.

I worked well into the afternoon on all things event-related. Elijah teased me that I was a Luddite, preferring my notebook and pen to stay organized with details and my agenda, but the tablet and smartphone Eddie provided for me and Gabriela were damned handy too. I focused on drafting documents with all the pertinent information for the vendors I'd contact as well as who I'd need to speak with at the Robertson Resort.

Gabriela came and went, preferring to talk with vendors on the phone. She was considerate enough to have her conversations outside our shared office so I could concentrate on my computer. Still, I took every opportunity I could to step out too.

I was hoping to run into Luke without making it obvious I was seeking him out. Unlike this morning at the coffee shop, I didn't happen to cross paths with him at all.

Still, the memories of our hours talking together lingered. Fresh in my mind's eye, I revisited how handsome and dashing he'd looked. So attentive and gorgeous with no one to interfere with us spending time together.

And I hope it can happen again.

With the Nashville resort's event happening so soon, it made sense to schedule a staff meeting for it pronto. I couldn't ignore the feeling that I was rushing Hanna and Gabriela into their new jobs, but I wouldn't have pushed this on them if they hadn't seemed competent and eager to start working on it so fast. They were both go-getters.

Even though I knew Hanna and Gabriela were here at the office, I didn't see them. Being aware of the fact that Hanna was here somewhere taunted me. All day long, I struggled to stay focused and not think up an excuse to go check on them in their office. I didn't want to hover and give them the impression I intended to micromanage. But I couldn't sit still, knowing she was within reach.

A staff meeting made sense, and it would be a good way to be near her again.

Everyone gathered in the conference room. I sat while the manager for the Nashville resort spoke first. He was an impatient man, and I couldn't wait to see how impressed he would be after Hanna presented. I had no clue what she'd prepared to show us on the screen, but I had no doubt she'd wow us all. The sexy woman came in early and stayed late. She was more than a go-getter. She was a workaholic.

“As we all know, this event is one of the classier ones the Robertson chain puts on for hotel guests. We have several well-known celebrities booked for this specific weekend, and the governor will also be staying in a suite. We're aiming for

something formal and elegant while also ensuring we stay on brand and centering the occasion on the holidays.”

That last part was unnecessary to say aloud. All the events this month would have holiday themes. They would all stand apart from each other, but the main focus was this super commercialized and, according to me, annoying time of the year.

“Hanna Smith, our new executive event planner, will take the lead here.” He nodded at her and glanced at me.

“Thanks, George.” Hanna stood and took the place at the front of the room. George could be gruff and perhaps *too* impatient to keep things moving, but Hanna wasn’t a docile amateur at being introduced to strangers and other professionals. She didn’t stutter or hesitate. She stood, ready to go. Her confidence couldn’t be more appealing.

Bold and unafraid. I like it.

Damn, she was a sight to behold. Today she’d chosen a power suit. Her skirt was a muted blue, and over her white blouse, she wore a cardigan that made her almost look scholarly. Not like a student but a figure of authority that turned me on.

Today, of all days, is not a good time to realize I have a secret naughty librarian kink.

I sighed, stifling those thoughts and shoving them back to the gutter where they belonged. I focused as she clicked to turn the screen on behind her. With poise and patience, she summarized the main points of her plans, then walked us through the finer details without bogging us down. Unlike a teacher lecturing, she kept everything brief and to the point.

“The theme of this Nashville event will be Winter Wonderland,” she repeated.

No one in this room could miss it. The color scheme showed in her presentation font, background hues, and the images she included.

“Which will help us to keep some things vague as need be. For example, should we fail to secure the vendor’s

confirmation about the trees and forestry stands for the entrance, we can easily resort to the alternative décor of snow and glitter, as well as the lights.” She switched between the two mockups she’d created. With the real image of the venue’s rooms, she overlaid the items for either of the directions we could go in.

George’s assistant raised her hand. “And for the menu?”

Hanna smiled and gestured for Gabriela to rise. “I’ll let Ms. Garcia share those details next.”

As Gabriela spoke, clicking the presentation forward to both the menu and images of the dishes, Hanna stepped aside. I should’ve paid attention to what Gabriela said, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Hanna. It wasn’t very obvious, and had I not been watching her so closely, I would have missed it. A slight sigh left her, and I noticed the drop of her shoulders as she released her breath. Maybe she’d been more nervous than she let on.

At moments like this, I had to consciously remind myself how much younger she was. She hadn’t been a Robertson employee for many years like the seasoned managers and executives in this room. She was younger, newer, and with less experience, but it didn’t show. Without pause or doubt, she plowed forward and gave it her all. Hanna had the confidence and gumption someone her senior might still be searching for, and it only made me admire her more.

I hadn’t given her this job to prove anything, but the truth was clear to see. Hanna wasn’t inferior in any way, too green or young for any challenge. And it made me curious if that age gap between us shouldn’t be such an issue either, in a personal way.

“And now,” Hanna said after Gabriela was finished with her part, “all that remains are any questions. Lisa, do you have anything you’d like to add?” She looked at the head of marketing.

The redhead stood up and grinned. “Thanks, Hanna.” She rubbed her hands together. “I can’t wait for dinner. I’m so hungry after hearing that scrumptious menu.”

She presented a list of marketing tools they would use, and she asked for several minor details to be sent to her to better make the entire promotion cohesive with the theme Hanna and Gabriela concocted.

At the end, they all looked at me. Hanna seemed to hold her breath, gazing at me intently. I got the impression that she was nervous, waiting on the edge of her seat for my approval. Hell, even a comment. I'd deliberately stayed quiet throughout the whole meeting. I hadn't wanted to step on toes and simply listened. If it had just been me and her in here, I wouldn't have tried to be as blank and tight-lipped as I was.

It was the first indication that something was veering off track between us. She wasn't just a new hire, she was a friend I wanted to reassure and support. She wasn't merely my friend's younger sister. Hanna was a strong, determined *woman*, and I wasn't sure how to handle this growing fascination that took root in me.

"Very well." I looked at everyone in the room, not just Hanna. Even though this meeting showcased all of her work and demonstrated her planning, I didn't want to single her out. If anyone picked up on the fact I was more interested in her than I had a right to be, it wouldn't be good.

"I think this is an excellent plan, and I'm pleased with the direction everyone is aiming for." I stood, smoothing down my jacket. It killed me not to make eye contact with Hanna or directly address her by name. But I couldn't trust myself if I gave in to the temptation to acknowledge her like that.

"I approve all that was presented, and you can all proceed with my permission to start booking the vendors and secure the resources we need to make this another success." Several prominent vendors were typically on standby for us, and even though the turnaround time was short, I had faith Hanna would wrangle them all together in time for a perfect event.

Everyone filed out. George left first, already on his phone, and I stood by my chair as I watched them leave. Gabriela exited with Lisa, chattering about that brulee. Within a few moments, I was left alone with Hanna. She didn't glance up,

continuing to sort her papers and collect her things. Free to simply watch her, I enjoyed the tingle of awareness that spread through me. Should we stay in here, private and without anyone else, things could steer into the inappropriate category very quickly.

Still, I couldn't break the spell of simply being in her presence. She drew me to her with her beauty and her timid nature. Maybe it was nothing more than her decompressing after the high of presenting to strangers. She breathed deeply, like catching her breath and calming down. Her presentation had been genuine. She didn't put on an act for anyone, it seemed, so her need to regain her composure surprised me.

Only when she walked around the table to leave, her gaze still low, did she realize I was there. She bumped into me, nearly losing her papers. I reached out to steady her, and as she straightened the mess in her arms, she frowned up at me.

"You did a great job, Hanna." I kept my voice low, but I made sure to let her see the honesty on my face. "You've put a lot of work into planning this and seeing to all the details on such short notice. I'm impressed by your creativity and professionalism."

Her throat tightened with a swallow, and her smile was almost bashful. "Thank you. I'm happy you like it."

I smiled wider, wishing I could cross the boundaries even more. She'd told me that she enjoyed making people happy, and I hoped my admission that I was glad gave her satisfaction.

I drew in a deep breath, tormenting myself with the scent of her faint perfume. She gazed up at me with so much trust that I couldn't break this spell between us. When I stared in her gorgeous brown eyes, I got sucked in even more.

"Oh. Sorry." Eddie's voice cut through the quiet of the room, breaking the bubble of privacy.

Hanna flinched at the interruption, clearly as transfixed on me as I was on her.

I fought back a cringe. If Eddie poked his head in here and thought he was intruding, I wasn't doing such a great job of keeping things strictly professional in here.

"I'll see you later," I told Hanna, perhaps too curt in my tone as I tried to cover my error.

I had no right lingering in that room with her like that. I couldn't let my attraction to her spoil her success here. Just as I'd feared it would happen, she was becoming a distraction.

As I walked back to my office, I wondered how stupid I could have been to offer her the job in the first place. I'd wanted to make sure I would have a reason to be near her. But not as my employee. I wanted to be with her as a friend.

Bullshit.

I closed my door and dropped into my chair, eager for the distraction of work. Because I wasn't interested in Hanna for friendship. I was getting addicted to the idea of something much, much more.

I did my best to focus on work for the rest of the day. I was almost successful, making it to the lobby without caving and detouring past her office on the off chance I would see her.

Before I exited the building, one of the HR assistants flagged me down. She'd always been a handsy sort of girl, trespassing personal space, and it didn't help that I'd seen her at a bar with the guys before, when she was tending bar and offering body shots. We'd made eye contact that night, and it forever made me uncomfortable since. She was professional at work though, so I never mentioned it.

"Can we start working on the holiday party?" she asked.

I groaned and kept walking.

She followed me. "Cheryl's been talking about buying things for it," she singsonged, knowing that I disliked the season.

"I know. I know." I couldn't be a complete grouch about it. I wasn't a fan of the holidays, but I did value the end of the

year awards I handed out to employees. I liked to be generous, just without all the candy canes and reindeer.

“So, do we have the green light to start working on it?”

I sighed. “Yeah, but no one touches my—”

“Office.” She giggled after finishing it. “Of course, not. We know better.”

Too bad I didn’t know better where Hanna was concerned. As I walked past her car, I wished I had a reason to talk to her again like we had at the coffee shop.

I would have to think of something.

Just before we called it a day, I turned to Gabriela in our office. “Hey, I’m going to hunt down Eddie and get those forms from him.”

She nodded, waving at me since she was still on hold with the chef at the resort while he checked something.

I hurried down the hall, bypassing Luke’s office since it was becoming a habit. Yes, I wanted to sneak a glimpse of him and hopefully catch his eye. It was also a good place to find Eddie, too. Neither of them were there, so I hustled to the elevator to hopefully catch Eddie before he left.

I looked at my phone, seeing the late hour that suggested he might have already left. “Oh, shoot.”

His granddaughter needed to be picked up from band practice after school every day. While I had the device in hand, I swiped over the screen and saw that my mom had texted earlier in a group chat.

Mom: How about dinner and Pilates, ladies?

My aunt, who was a Pilates fanatic, had already agreed. Gabriela was like the sister I’d never had, and I bet she’d say yes. We had planned to grab dinner together to talk about work some more, but spending time with my mom and aunt seemed like a better idea. I doubted my text would send until I was out of the elevator, but I sent my RSVP of *yes* before the doors slid open.

Eddie was nowhere to be seen, but Luke was just ahead.

He wasn't alone. As he strode across the lobby, so bright with all the windows up to the high ceiling, a slim woman ran up to him and practically jumped into his arms. I staggered to a stop, clamping my lips shut from calling out goodbye to him.

Her giggles carried to me all the way to the elevator area, and she linked her arm with his and leaned her cheek on his bicep. My shoulders slumped.

Whoa.

He muttered something and she giggled again as they left.

Are they together?

Joshua hadn't mentioned Luke seeing anyone, but the way this woman was so familiar and confident enough to sidle up to him like that, I had to wonder. It made sense. He was a super good-looking man and plenty of attractive and smart women worked in the building. While I wanted to think he was simply guarded and withdrawn sometimes, I worried that I'd misread him all this time. Maybe he wasn't being quiet but standoffish with me. I hadn't gotten that impression when we'd chatted over coffee, but maybe he was just being polite, humoring me.

He sure didn't hesitate to hedge his way out of calling our chat a date.

I rubbed my brow as I got back onto the elevator.

I'm such an idiot.

I frowned at the panel of buttons, almost in a daze, and hit the button for my floor.

He's not being quiet and introverted. He's just not interested. It stung to accept that idea, but I refused to be carried away with assumptions that I had a chance. It was best to squash those hopes that he was interested or attracted to me. Those thoughts needed to be put to rest.

I didn't have a chance to wallow in my low mood. My spirits sank with every step I took, but Gabriela prevented it from making me bitter.

“You know how we were talking earlier about this place needing a little more inspo for the holidays?”

I shrugged.

“I’ve got a great way for us to get on the nice list with our new boss.” She held up a length of tinsel and did a little shimmy as she waggled her brows.

I giggled, unable to stay in a lousy funk with her antics. “Oh, I’m in.”

I might not have a chance with Luke, but it’s ridiculous to feel down at this time of the year. A little holiday magic never hurt anyone, right?

After Gabriela and I were done at the office, we met up with my mom and aunt at Sweetgreen. Having my best friend with me helped stave off constant thoughts about Luke, and seeing my mom and aunt shoved him even further from my mind. Mom and Aunt Sydney were so funny together, both of them so sarcastic and silly that it was impossible not to laugh and lighten up in their company.

We all ordered salads and caught up. Mom was eager to get William to move out of their house, but she wasn’t whiny about it. Aunt Sydney told us about a new stand-up comedian she started following on social media, and with her trying to tell us the jokes, she cracked up so hard herself that her laughing made us laugh. It was so uncanny how just seeing someone so amused caused a chain reaction of more laughter without knowing what was so funny in the first place.

I enjoyed myself, as I always did with them, but toward the end, it became harder to keep Luke off my mind.

“How is the new job going?” Mom asked. “Enough goofing around. I can’t wait to hear about it.”

“Where are you working?” Aunt Sydney asked.

“I told you, at Robertson Resorts,” Mom said.

“Hanna, do you like it so far?” Mom set her chin in both hands, elbows on the table.

I had her full attention. “It’s been great.”

“Is it fun working with Luke?” she pressed.

I had to deliberately strain to keep a smile on my face. “Yeah.”

“Uh oh.” Aunt Sydney tossed her napkin to the table. “Did you see that, Lauren?”

“Oh, yeah. Fake smile. Hanna, what’s wrong?” Mom frowned, then brightened and snapped her fingers. “Wait! Luke. You’ve always had a crush on him.”

I mentally groaned. “No, Mom. That was a long time ago. Just a girlhood thing,” I lied. My crush on Luke had started a long time ago, but I’d learned to hide my interest in him as I got older.

Aunt Sydney leaned closer to dramatically stage whisper, “Could there be a love match happening here? Hmm?”

Gabriela nodded and giggled. I shot her a stern look even though I laughed too. “No, nothing.”

“Come on. Don’t be shy,” Mom chided. “I think there’s something more here.”

I shook my head. “Oh, stop. I won’t lie. I think Luke’s very handsome, but he’s quite standoffish.”

Gabriela huffed. “Oh, he’s not.”

“He can be.”

Mom furrowed her brow. “Hot and cold?”

I nodded. *Just to me, I think.*

“He doesn’t seem to be a fan of Christmas,” Gabriela said. “Maybe it’s just his mood for the moment.”

Aunt Sydney hummed. “Hot and cold, then a grinch too? Both red flags if you ask me.”

I nodded, but Mom shook her head, laughing. “No, don’t make assumptions. I’m not surprised Luke isn’t a fan of the season. I’m pretty sure this is when he went through his breakup with that girl from college. Jenna or something.”

I knew I could take her word for it. Mom was good friends with Olivia Robertson, and surely Luke's mother would know the details about his relationships. I only vaguely recalled him having a serious girlfriend back then.

"It really caused him to have some trust issues," Mom added as she smiled warmly at me. "You just keep on being yourself. And try to have an open mind."

Aunt Sydney finished her water and set her glass down. "That's true. After all, the holidays have a way of bringing people together, you know. Uncle Harry and I married on Christmas, much to Grandma's dismay."

I smiled, loving that story. Luke and I were just talking, or *not* talking, about weddings, and I'd always thought a winter romance would be so sweet with a wedding on an infamous date like December twenty-fifth.

Finished with our salads and with arguing about how to split the check, we went to the studio and prepared for our Pilates class. The walk through town gave us ample time for our dinners to settle, and as I worked out, I waited for that euphoria that I always felt.

My mind raced too much for any calm to sink in. So many things ran through my head. Worries about the event coming up. The presentation had gone so well, but it had been my first time meeting those people, my first time hurrying to make a professional presentation, and my first time spearheading an event with actual celebrity guests. It was only natural to be nervous.

After I replayed the memory of the meeting, I fell into recollections of that woman walking out with Luke at the end of the day. I winced at the jealousy that filled me at her staking a claim on him, and I hated the sadness and disappointment that swiftly followed. He wasn't mine to have, but dammit, I'd pined for him for so long, this would be a hard loss to accept.

My mind was stubbornly stuck on Luke.

Thoughts of my new boss plagued me no matter what I did.

And I wasn't sure when I would know how to behave around him—hot or cold.

While his standoffish and slightly cool behavior toward me should have been enough to warn me to give up, I couldn't lose the hope that I could make him happy somehow. I believed him when he told me he was impressed with my planning so far. But I wanted to please him so much more than just doing my job at the office.

LUKE

Jacob would be returning to town soon, and I was glad that I'd gotten off work at a decent hour to get home before him. We weren't just brothers but good friends. After that funky loneliness that crept up on me in the empty house, I looked forward to having him back.

He'd left on a short overnight thing that turned into two. I'd received a text that he'd be staying away slightly longer, and I wondered if something had come up or if he'd found a lady he wanted to pursue for longer than his typical one-night-stand routine. Either was possible with him.

We took turns making food, and for tonight, I went ahead and grilled chicken. It wasn't the season for grilling. I knew that. Snowflakes fluttered from the sky as dusk took over, but on the deck, with the heater nearby and dressed well enough, it didn't seem so weird. Standing at the grill and drinking a beer, I was toasty and warm. Grilling the marinated meat guaranteed a quick and easy meal. With perfect timing, I got the potatoes out of the oven just as he came in.

"Damn, that smells good," he said in lieu of a greeting.

"Hungry?"

"Hell yeah." He headed up the stairs though. "I'll put this away and be down in a second."

His so-called second turned into six minutes, but it didn't bother me. He came back into the kitchen, hurrying, but I saw the exhaustion on his face.

“Bad trip?”

“Meh.” He shrugged and grabbed a beer from the fridge before he sat across from me at the kitchen counter. “How’s it going?”

We dug into the food, but I knew what he was doing. He clearly didn’t want to talk about himself, overly curious about me. Sure, he cared about me, but we both went out of town here and there. I was often gone more, for longer trips, but this wasn’t one of those occasions. While I wondered what was going on with him that he’d act like this, I didn’t push the issue. He’d open up and talk to me when he was ready and wanted to.

“I’ve been busy planning the Nashville event. Hanna’s been heading that up.”

“Oh, yeah.” He grinned before he took a long pull on his beer. “And how is *that* going?”

I ignored the teasing tone of his question. He was aware of how I always noticed her. Over the years, he’d evolved to outright taunting me about my interest in her, but I’d never come out and said I planned to do anything about it.

“It’s going.” I didn’t have a clue how to be honest and still keep the details to myself.

“I’m still surprised you asked her to work for you.” He shook his head.

“What do you mean? She’s smart and professional.”

He raised his brows. “You know that already? Didn’t she *just* start up her planning business?”

I nodded. “And a few days is all I need to know that. She really is a good fit for the company.”

“You’re not just saying that because you’ve always had the hots for her?”

I rolled my eyes. He made it sound like I was a creepy stalker. “She’s great at her job.”

“I can’t see how she’d have much experience and know-how to bring to the table yet.”

His dig about her age irked me. Yeah, she was young. But so what? “She more than makes up for it with determination. She accomplished a lot in a short time.”

“Uh huh.” He kept eating, but that smug smile didn’t disappear.

“She has.” I filled him in on the details of the event she’d masterminded a theme for. “It’s been nice working with her.”

Again, he shook his head. “You’re just setting yourself up for misery, man.”

“How so?” I set my fork down and furrowed my brow. Like he’d know what would set me down the path of misery again. The last time a woman made me miserable, I learned my lesson. Jennifer broke my heart and I swore off putting myself out there like that. I wasn’t sure where Hanna would fit in my future as anything other than an employee when I refused to consider dating anyone.

“You made yourself her boss, so that means no funny business on the clock, right?”

He knew me well. I wouldn’t cross those lines. But already, I was developing too many feelings for her. Respect and admiration because of her productive work, yeah, those were there. When we talked over coffee though, and when I stayed in the conference room to tell her how impressed I was? Those moments felt different.

“You’ve had your eyes on her forever. How’s it going to work if you’re constantly tempted when you boxed yourself in as her boss?”

I shook my head. “It’s not like that.”

“Bullshit,” he said, laughing. “Are you trying to tell me you’re not interested in her anymore?”

I didn’t look at him, too annoyed that he had me there. Just recently, at the s’mores and hot cocoa gathering, I’d told him that I thought she was the most beautiful woman there.

I cleared my throat, uneasy about talking with him about my feelings. They were all over the place now. “She’s beautiful. And kind. But I’m not interested in anything serious and I likely won’t ever be again.”

He cracked up. “You’ve always been the dramatic one.”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t dramatic. Just wise. I was burned once, and I knew better now.

“You really can’t see anything happening with her?”

I thought back to the scholarly, proper look she had that started to turn me on at the meeting. Then the cute panic when she’d gotten flustered for being late. There was that spark of heat I felt when our hands touched, too.

On top of all those things that made me want to smile was the dreamy expression she had when she talked about weddings and wanting to find her forever person. When she mentioned those words, I couldn’t picture her promising to love another man for the rest of her days. I’d noticed her for so long, it was ridiculous to picture her with someone else.

“Luke?” Jacob waited, watching me.

I shrugged and vowed not to think about her or mention her again. Fortunately, he didn’t push for more, asking about how Gabriela was faring with her new job. I didn’t pester him about his interest in her. Unlike me, he was very clear and outspoken about his interest in Hanna’s best friend. And it was just as clear at the s’mores night how little Gabriela cared about how attracted he was to her.

Later, when I tried in vain to fall asleep, wondering about Hanna was *all* I could do. She was sneaking under my guard, filling my head with thoughts and memories about her. In the end, I caved, and it was her smile that I envisioned before I finally drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I didn’t have a chance to look forward to Hanna coming in or how I would interact with her. From the moment my alarm went off, I was glued to my phone, replying to texts and urgent emails. Putting out fires wasn’t something

specific to my position as CEO. No matter the industry, this was simply part of being the leader.

A booking glitch at the LA resort had caused significant issues and I needed to intervene. Then on the other side of the world, the resort in Venice faced a cyber attack on its network. Hell was breaking loose, it seemed, so when I entered the building, I was too harried to say hello to Cheryl or even glance at the damn decorations. The front reception probably resembled a vomit of red ribbons and green garland. Gold trim and twinkly jingle bells competed with the colors, but I ignored the blur of it in the corner of my eyes. I remained focused on my phone until I reached my office.

And then I stopped.

Outside my personal workspace was one thing. *To each their own* and all that. In here, in *my* office, those Christmas decorations had no place. I growled, pulling my lower lip between my teeth to bite. I needed to do something to refrain from shouting.

Tinsel and garland spiraled around the columns. Red, green, and black striped covers adorned the chairs. A freaking Christmas tree replica stood next to my computer, but at the other end of my desk sat a stuffed plush statue of a Santa wearing sunglasses and holding a trombone. It must have been equipped with a motion sensor because as I stared around the room, it began to wiggle and bounce, playing “Jingle Bells.”

Furious, I lowered my phone and walked back into the hallway.

“Whoever decorated my office is—”

Somone cleared their throat, and I turned to face Hanna. She’d been walking by, probably on her way to her office, but she’d stopped in her tracks. Her cheeks turned pink and her brow furrowed as she winced with embarrassment. As she lifted her hand, she swallowed. “I thought you’d like it.”

I narrowed my eyes, hating that I’d made her feel so intimidated. At the same time, I was angry that she’d come into my office and messed it all up.

“Come to my office. Now, please.”

I turned, giving her my back to let her follow me inside. She didn't dally, and once she entered my space, I closed the door and walked in further. “What were you thinking?”

She folded her hands together and glanced at all the festive crap. “It was just an innocent gesture to get you in the holiday spirit.”

“I don't need to get in anything.”

She frowned at my harsh words.

I'd never enjoyed being told what to do, and the implication that she'd want to change me pissed me off. “The holiday spirit isn't for everyone.”

She broke eye contact, deliberately looking away. Her jaw moved as though she gritted her teeth, but with another deep breath, she nodded. I was deprived of her caramel eyes glaring at me when she spoke again, and it felt like I'd been cheated somehow, unable to face her fully.

“I will keep it strictly professional from here on out until the season is over.”

“See that you do.”

Now she glanced at me, letting me see the simmering hurt in her eyes. “And you can go back to your dull, grumpy life without any interference from me.”

She turned swiftly, robbing me of a chance to have the last word. I gaped at her as she strode to the door and closed it firmly after her exit. She was clearly upset, and damn it if that didn't make me feel even worse.

Seeing all this stupid décor had me on edge. They were nothing but symbols of the last time I'd worried about a woman in my life. As Santa kicked into another fucking round of “Jingle Bells,” I glowered his way.

“Shit.”

I felt terrible. It probably seemed ridiculous to be so pissed about Christmas decorations. It was all plastic and glitter junk.

I'd hurt Hanna's feelings over this crap that apparently had been her attempt of showing me goodwill.

"I enjoy watching others having a good time, and if orchestrating the occasion makes it more of a reality for them, I'm glad to do it."

Was this her attempt of caring about me, her new boss, and wanting to ensure my happiness? If it was, I'd stomped all over it like an ass. Calling me out for being grumpy in general stung. Her words hit me hard because they forced me to consider that my attitude was that lousy.

I knew I needed to get over myself. I'd never enjoyed this time of the year, and for good reason, but maybe it was past time to really move on.

It was just tinsel and string lights, for crying out loud.

I hung my head as I sighed and walked toward my desk. My movement activated that damn toy again. A growl built in my chest as the plush body wiggled. And as the first jazzy beats filled the air and the plastic trombone slid, I slitted my eyes at him. "Oh, shut up."

HANNA

Unlike the excitement I felt my first time going into the Robertson Resort headquarters, I dreaded showing up. Each day since Luke's reaction to the decorations felt like a test. I was torn, still upset as the end of the week neared.

I felt awful for upsetting him. I hated to ever think I'd made anyone mad. Elijah used to tease me that I was a people pleaser to a fault, but that wasn't true. I was competitive at the gym and with sports. Everyone who knew me was aware I showed no mercy with beer pong. That wasn't the same thing here.

Luke made me feel like I was horrible. I didn't know why he had reacted the way he had. It wasn't high on my list to ask any of the other office workers about why he would have blown up. Eddie probably knew his boss well enough to be able to explain, but I didn't reach out to him, either.

It didn't matter. Whatever pissed off Luke about Christmas was his deal. It was his opinion. If he hated Christmas and all hints of it, then fine. So be it. The bottom line was that it was none of my business to understand why. So I didn't bring it up to anyone but Gabriela.

"Maybe he just gets sick of it all?" she'd guessed when she snuck into his office when he was out for a meeting in the conference rooms. It'd taken us an hour to put it all together, but we'd hurried to remove every trace of the holidays in a quick ten minutes. The remnants of what I'd thought was a nice gesture stayed tied up in a bag in the closet of our office.

It still stung enough that I'd lost all desire to be happy and peppy. I didn't try to walk past his office and catch a glimpse of him. I didn't go out of my way to hope for an excuse to text him. I gave him the cold shoulder for the whole week, nursing my pride and licking my wounds. I never went down quietly though. All through my avoidance of him, I simmered and stewed, annoyed and mad that he'd lashed out like that.

I hadn't done it to hurt him. I didn't deserve that outburst. No one did.

Instead of being enthusiastic to be on board, I did my job and left with as little communication with him as possible. If it wasn't work-related or directly linked to my planning contribution, I excused myself and maintained my distance.

It wasn't too hard to pull it off, either. All week, I hustled like crazy to get the Nashville event finished up for this weekend. If I wasn't on the phone with a vendor, I was talking to Gabriela. If I wasn't busy on my laptop in my office, I was at the resort and coordinating with George and his supervisors. The rush to the deadline helped to distract me, and by the time the event was to begin, it was second nature to focus first and dismiss thoughts of Luke.

The Winter Wonderland Ball had finally come. I was both excited and nervous about how it would go, but I was determined to give it my all until the last minute. Running around at both the office and the resort, I made sure everything would be perfect.

Hiccups were to be expected, and they'd popped up at the last minute. Some resort staff members had called off or were out sick for their shifts. Certain supplies hadn't been delivered on time. And a mess in the kitchen had everyone worried for a hot minute. Out in the venue space, bickering waitstaff almost toppled over an ice sculpture. Even worse, one of the band members couldn't find his instrument.

I supervised it all, though, helping everyone to streamline and work together. As everything started coming together, I didn't feel like an amateur or an outsider anymore, and it was with my usual confidence that I kept a level head and

remained calm. Getting flustered or panicking wouldn't help anyone. Even Gabriela. She'd counted on merely overseeing the menu and the dishes because the sous chef was a hothead, but she'd had to jump in and work with her hands on the line. Instead of patrolling through the party, I'd stepped up to assist with the caterers, too, because they were short-staffed.

It was a frenzy of activity, and like I'd anticipated, it *was* a learning experience. The party wound down toward the end of the night, and as I swept up a spill in the caterer area, I realized two things.

One, we did it. Gabriela and I pulled it off. As far as I could tell, we'd kicked ass and proved we could plan one heck of an event on short notice.

And two, I had to pick more sensible shoes for next time. My heels ached as I dumped the last dustpan load of debris. I heaved out a long sigh and snuck toward the side of the bar area to lean against the counter. Only then did I let myself relax. Dinner had been served. Dancing was still underway. And guests were happy.

I watched them out there, dancing, some still eating, and just enjoying the evening. I hadn't heard any complaints, and with all the smiles I saw and the laughter I'd heard, I convinced myself that I'd made the night a festive evening for all.

I lingered there, watching from afar until a voice made me flinch.

"I'm sorry." A long pause followed Luke's words.

It was the first he'd spoken directly to me since he'd scolded me in his office. I drew in a slow, deep breath, summoning the courage to face him. All at once, the hurt and confusion flooded back in. I couldn't avoid him but I also didn't want to make a scene.

I turned, not moving from my spot. He stood there with his hands in his pockets. Even though the light was dim by the bar, I didn't miss a detail. Wearing a bespoke tuxedo, his hair slightly styled back, he looked good enough to *eat*. I couldn't

help but check him out. It was a habit, one I vowed to break if he was going to always have such a grumpy mood.

Gabriela agreed with me there. Luke *was* a grouch. We hadn't had much time to talk all week, but she knew me too well and saw that something was off with me. Before we'd entered the office that fateful morning, she'd teasingly poked fun at me, saying we should've put the mistletoe in his office too. I shook my head, telling her about the other woman clinging to him, and she frowned and gave it a rest.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, stepping closer. "I didn't mean to pop off the way I did at the office."

I arched a brow. *Trying to weasel out of admitting your fault now?*

"It was wrong of me." He stood close enough that I could smell the intoxicating woody scent of his cologne. "And I'm genuinely sorry for the way I acted."

I nodded, hoping that was an adequate acknowledgment.

"You've pulled off an incredible event, Hanna."

Now I shook my head. "Whoa. Hold up. An apology and then straight to praise? Flattery won't work on me, not like that."

He frowned, stepping closer yet. "I'm—"

I held up my hand. "You have got to get over yourself. It was just some decorations."

"I know. I'm aware of that. You've made it much more obvious earlier this week."

Huh. That was something. I'd almost counted on him to be stubborn and argue. That wouldn't have made sense either, though. While I'd given him a cold shoulder and avoided him, he hadn't approached me to scold me any further. He'd kept his distance too, and perhaps he'd faced some hard truths then.

"Are we okay?"

I sighed, glancing at him and wishing he didn't have the ability to mess with my mind so easily. That he wasn't so

damn handsome and drew me to want him close. “I forgive you.”

We stared at each other for a long minute. He almost seemed void of emotion, not showing a sign that he’d heard me or that he was glad to have my forgiveness.

And why would he? He doesn’t care. He probably just wants to make sure being at the office won’t be awkward anymore, that’s all.

But then a slow start of a smile showed on his lips. “Would you like to dance?” He held his hand out toward the dance floor as a slower song began.

He’d caught me off guard. A familiar burn of a blush crept over my cheeks, but he couldn’t see it in this light. “Me?”

He nodded.

“Now?” I glanced down at myself. I wasn’t dressed for it. I’d come in a simple black gown, all the better to blend in the background and not stand out. When I had to jump in and help serve, I’d changed into a spare uniform of all black and a collared shirt. Plus these heels, I hated with a passion now. They were Gabriela’s. She, too, had dressed up but then changed to help in the kitchen, and my sensible lower heels were a safer bet for her back there. My blush burned hotter as I realized how frumpy I looked compared to him.

“I had to change earlier and help out. I’ll stick out like a sore thumb out there.”

He smiled. It was one those amused smirks that made my heart pitter-patter faster.

“That would be the case no matter what you wore.”

I shot him a deadpan expression. “Are you saying I *always* look bad?”

He chuckled that deep, husky sound. “No! The opposite, Hanna.” Tipping his head toward the floor, he held his hand out to me.

You think I always look good?

I furrowed my brow, trying to make sense of him. Was this another whiplashing moment of him being hot and cold? What was I supposed to think? Until this moment, I'd been crossing him off my good list, and now?

"Come on," he coaxed again.

I lifted my hand toward his, wanting to give in. He gripped my fingers, gently pulling me toward the dance floor.

"People will see," I whispered as he wrapped his arm around me.

"Shh." He shook his head as he lifted our joined hands. "No one will see."

And that makes it okay to dance with me? You wouldn't want to be seen with me?

He squeezed my fingers, pulling me out of my jumbled thoughts. I could barely think straight. I'd dreamed of dancing with him. I'd fantasized about being his partner in any sense, but especially a romantic one like dancing.

My mouth felt dry as I gazed into his eyes. Between the thrill of excitement that filled me and the fast beat of my heart that I was *dancing* with him, I was overwhelmed.

"Just stop. Whatever is making you look so panicked, let it go."

"But we shouldn't be doing this."

He frowned. "Are you trying to tell me what to do again?"

"No. I mean, I'm just working here and you're..."

"Also working here." He slid his arm around my back, pulling me closer, and I nearly whimpered at the hard wall of his body intimately near mine. "You deserve a moment to relax and enjoy yourself too."

I stared up into the dark blue of his eyes, drowning in the sincerity. He'd apologized. He'd sought me out and had been thinking of me.

"You said you liked to plan these sorts of things because you liked to make others happy," he said.

I nodded, mute with the pressure of tension pulling us together. He couldn't look away either, and I wondered if he noticed it, this awareness clawing at us to be even closer.

“And it's only fair,” he said softly as he lowered his mouth to my ear, “that someone ensures *your* happiness after all your hard work.”

I swallowed, closing my eyes at the sensation of his cheek nearly brushing against mine. Being this close but not touching was torture. With the darkness of the room, the sweet music as our bodies swayed together, I felt like I was drifting on a cloud in a dream.

I had to be dreaming because his words barely made sense in my mind.

Luke cared about me and he wanted to see to my happiness.

For the rest of my life, I would never forget how full my heart swelled when he said it.

LUKE

I left the resort and headed home that night with a strong feeling that I'd fixed things with Hanna. She'd been hesitant to dance with me, and rightly so. All week long, I felt the iciness and distance between us. I didn't blame her for avoiding me. Every time I thought about my behavior, I felt worse and worse, intimidated by the fact that I had to make amends.

Jacob was already in his room by the time I arrived home, and I was glad not to have to talk to him. He'd been convinced my grouchier-than-usual mood all week had to be a sign of trouble with Hanna. I didn't want to tell him that he had been right. I figured he would've been eager to ask me about her and the event, and I was grateful to be spared that conversation. I wanted to savor the fresh memory of having her in my arms as we'd danced.

He would've peppered me with questions about Gabriela, too, and I didn't have answers. I hadn't seen her, and per George's comment, I'd learned after the fact that she'd stepped in to help in the kitchen. I didn't see Hanna all evening either, too busy and swamped with mingling and speaking to the guests. I'd made sure I found her before the music was done, though, and I would treasure the feeling of her sweet body pressed against mine for a long time.

I fell into bed with her on my mind, and with her phantom touch, I dreamed about her. Dancing in the ball was only the beginning of my visions. She didn't wear an all-black outfit to blend in with the waitstaff. In my dream, it was just the two of

us, me in my tuxedo and her in a sexy gown. Music prompted her closer to me, not just holding my hand and resting the other on my shoulder. With a seductive smile, she'd cling closer, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me tenderly. Her lips never touched my mouth, teasing me, and I fisted my hands in the material of her gown.

But then it was gone. Music still played in the distance, but we were on a bed. Her panted breaths drowned out the instruments from the ball, and as I kissed down her throat, aiming for the low cut of her sparkly dress, she moaned and clutched at my head to keep my mouth on her succulent skin.

“Please, Luke. I want you,” she whispered throatily, her words filled with thick desire.

I peeled the fine gown off her body. At the first sight of her bare breasts, my dick hardened to the point of intense pain. I grunted, and she helped to loosen my pants. Her hands slipped under my jacket and she forced it away. Then her fingers dropped back to my zipper. Between the layers of her dress and the articles of clothing that slowed me from reaching her fully, I growled and hurried.

I'd fantasized about having her in my hands. Dancing in the ballroom was one thing. Getting her bare and under me so needy like this was another sort of dance of two becoming one.

As soon as we'd lost our clothes, the music picked up the beat. It had been so slow, building up in speed as we fought to get naked. Now that she lay beneath me and hugged me closer, it was a rush. The music increased in tempo, adding suspense to the first deep slide into her. Then it went faster, urging me to thrust hard and fast with her sweet cries of pleasure. It felt like she'd disappear. I worried this moment would be gone. That *she* would vanish despite being all welcoming and lusty for me.

For too long, I'd never dared to go for her like this. Even though I was lucid enough to know this was a dream, I strained to make her come.

“Come on, Hanna. Come for me.”

She shook her head. Her brow furrowed as she resisted it. “I shouldn’t.”

“Please, Hanna. Now!”

She tightened around me, and with a final arch up against me, she did. Her walls sucked me in and she cried out a sweet, sexy groan I never wanted to forget.

So close to my own release, I woke. It was a twisted stroke of unfairness, still hard and aching to come. I growled, fighting to go back to the dream, but with a few grinding pushes against my mattress, my hand around my dick, I came and fell back to sleep.

I woke in the morning, stickier than what was right, but I didn’t rush to get up. That dream still lingered in my mind, and I swore I could still hear her crying out for me. I hadn’t gotten off from a damn dream since I was a teenager, but I wasn’t shocked she’d made this happen.

I was obsessed. But she couldn’t know. Despite the intensity of that dream and the way she’d gazed up at me with such desire when we danced, I couldn’t let things get awkward between us.

I sat up, grimacing at the mess I’d made, then got up to shower.

I had to find a way to make it seem like nothing was going on. If she had any idea how much I wanted her, how deeply she’d gotten under my skin and in my head, I’d risk scaring her off. Like Jacob warned, I had the work thing between us too. I was her boss, and that alone required delicacy with this situation.

What situation? Hanna didn’t need to know how attracted I was. I’d spent years noticing her in the background without approaching her. What was a little longer?

Being her boss complicated things in an obvious way, but I still couldn’t convince myself I was ready to try to be with a woman again. Desire was only a physical thing, right?

At the office with her, I debated the stupidity of thinking this pull to her was just a physical itch. I was drawn to her on

so many levels and stuck in a web of wanting to be near her.

In my office, I sat with her, Gabriela, and Eddie. George was on a video call, confirming how successful the event had been. One of his supervisors at the Nashville resort nodded along with the praise.

“You know, I was skeptical. You’re just so…”

I glanced at Hanna. I hadn’t said much, and I watched her tilt her head to the side, prompting the woman on the video call to speak up.

“So young.” The woman shrugged. “There’s no other way to say it. You look like you could be in my daughter’s cheer squad, a teenager.”

I sighed, sitting upright.

Hanna smirked, though. “If that’s a way of complimenting how well I’m aging, thank you.” She sat forward, raising her brows and getting tough. “Otherwise, if you’re trying to suggest I’m unqualified for this position and lack experience—”

“No, no, no.” George shook his head, glancing at his employee. “You’ve proven last night with that event that you’re more than qualified. No worries there, Hanna.”

She nodded, pleased, but I wondered if the tight press of her lips was a hint her feathers had been ruffled.

“Is there anything else?” I asked, speaking up to move past that uncalled-for comment. Sure, Hanna looked young. But her maturity and professionalism should’ve prevented anyone for mistaking her for a teenager.

We hung up the call, and with his usual aplomb, Eddie asked Hanna what she needed from him for the next event. It would’ve been nice to bask in the success of the first event, but we didn’t have much time before the resort in Denver would need our full attention.

“First, the blueprints, vendor list, and contact information for the staff on site.” Hanna didn’t seem bothered about the

woman's remark about her age. With that trusty notebook in hand, pen tapping bulleted items, she was in business mode.

"Consider it done." Eddie stood to leave us. I almost smiled at his formal bow before he closed the door on his way out.

"All right." Gabriela clapped her hands. "Before we dive into this next one, maybe we need to figure out a plan of attack if those hiccups happen again. We need a better chain of command."

"Are you talking about the kitchen?" Hanna dove into her opinions on how to better avoid them personally stepping in. Human resources would be a good place to talk about this, but as they discussed implementing floaters on call for future events, I zoned out, watching Hanna speak.

I almost laughed again, amused about how she'd misinterpreted what I said last night about how she looked. As if she could ever look *bad*. Hanna was beautiful, inside and out. It didn't matter what she wore, she was stunning. Last night in the all-black attire, in the dress from my dream, hell, even in much less, like the bikini she wore on the beach in Bali. I thought more about that trip to the beach we all took together right before Poppy and Landon got married. More than once, I'd worried I would get caught checking Hanna out. She was the sexiest woman there, a walking wet dream in that skimpy bathing suit under the sun. Here, too, she was drop-dead gorgeous in twice as many layers. In a pale green dress, she tempted me. She could wear a burlap sack and still entice me.

"Luke?"

I blinked, jerking my gaze to her. Swallowing quickly and sitting up straight, I prayed she hadn't noticed that I'd stared at her like that.

"What's going on?" She bit her lip, hiding a smile.

"Huh? What?"

Gabriela giggled, but I couldn't look away from the playful expression on Hanna's face.

“What’s going on with the Denver resort? Any themes we should stay away from?”

I furrowed my brow. *Is that a dig at me? Suggesting I can’t stand the holiday spirit as a theme?* I didn’t have to conform and pretend to enjoy this season when crappy memories were embedded in it, but I understood that the events had to ooze with yuletide festivity. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“I need more information about the location in Colorado. I know Eddie will send me all the files, but I want to get a head start on decoration plans. If I have a rough idea of the space, I can be more confident about what I can work with.”

“Right.” I was supposed to be answering questions, not getting distracted. “Sorry.” Tuning back into the topic, I explained how the ballroom was shaped. I pulled up photos on my computer, giving her a quick visual.

“What about a gingerbread theme?” She glanced at Gabriela.

“Oooh! I like it.”

I nodded. “That would be a good theme.”

Hanna huffed, shocked as she faced me again. “Wow. *You* have a positive opinion about Christmas décor?”

My phone rang. I couldn’t have asked for a better save. I doubted it was anything important, but I needed some space from the constant pull of her and how easily I was distracted. Hanna and Gabriela left the office giving me privacy to take the call.

The screen showed that it was an old college buddy. I’d graduated with him several years ago. It wasn’t that far back, but still, I seldom caught up with that crowd anymore. “Hey, Frankie,” I greeted.

He was calling about a PR thing, but once I directed him to the right person to look for with Robertson Resorts, he steered the conversation into small talk and catching up. Having a breather from the temptation of Hanna helped, so I didn’t see the harm in entertaining him.

“By the way, while I have you on the phone, mister *don't call, text instead*. Did you know that Anthony and Jennifer broke up?”

I furrowed my brow. “Yeah. They split a couple of years ago.” I'd been good friends with Anthony until he became my enemy.

“Yeah, well, I just heard. I thought it was weird because Jennifer's been asking around about you. Trying to get your personal number by the look of it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lord, give me strength.”

He chuckled. “I mean, she can try, right? But you never fucking answer your calls.”

“I wouldn't answer her texts either, man. I'd prefer to never speak to her again, if I'm being honest.” I shook my head, annoyed with the reminder of my past. While I appreciated him giving me a heads-up, I was peeved to even have Jennifer on my mind.

Turning back toward my office, I paused at the sight of Hanna dancing with a boa of garland over her shoulders. With earbuds in, she seemed oblivious to the fact that no one else was listening to whatever had her shimmying and rocking in place. When she spotted me, she smiled wide and laughed, removing one bud. “Is everything okay?”

I nodded, letting the remaining traces of my annoyance fade. “It is now.”

“Then come on.” She beckoned me to follow her down the hall. “Gabriela and I could use an independent vote on a couple of things we can't agree on.”

I walked with her toward her office. “Eddie couldn't help?”

She laughed. “Please. He's too polite to pick one of our ideas over the other.”

I grinned, glad he'd failed in assisting them. Because whether it was a smart idea or not, I'd be a sucker every time this woman invited me to be near.

HANNA

I was grateful that Luke got over himself to apologize. His offer to dance with me confused me though. Being in his arms felt good, and if I hadn't been mistaken, he seemed to feel just as aware of our bodies so close together. He hadn't appeared so immune, staring down into my eyes, then whispering into my ears about wanting me to be happy too.

If he hadn't taken that step to smooth things over between us, it would have made this next event much more awkward. We were already forced to be near each other at the office building in Franklin. On his family's private jet, there would be no way to evade him.

Like with the Nashville event, I was busy the whole week leading up to the Robertson Resort event. From morning to night, Gabriela and I hustled and called and coordinated so many details. This time, it seemed more difficult for her because it was remote and she couldn't *see* the kitchen or the food. Her first video meeting hadn't pleased her, so with Luke's advice, she flew out to Denver yesterday to get in touch with the kitchen managers who would need to follow her planning for the dinner and the extensive desserts. With a gingerbread theme, we were relying on the culinary delights for a wow factor.

The day before the event, I met Luke at the plane and boarded. Just seeing him excited me on an elemental level, and I looked forward to spending time with him not at home, but somewhere new.

“Ever been?” Eddie asked me.

I shook my head. “Nope. This is my first time to Denver.” He wasn’t coming with us, merely helping Luke get on the plane and situating the people who needed to fly there. The last time I was on the Robertson’s jet, it was packed and crowded with so many members of our families and our friends in the neighborhood. This time, it was just a few employees, but it was packed regardless. We’d brought tons of supplies with us. Many seats were available, and I could spread out if I wanted to, but that was the opposite of my goal.

I didn’t want space. I wanted to sit with Luke. After that dance and his words about wanting me to be happy, my crush thickened and grew even more. I couldn’t stop looking his way and he filled my thoughts nonstop.

He still carried that air of aloofness though, making him slightly unapproachable, so I hurried to think of which excuse I could use to justify sitting with him. I’d rehearsed several, anticipating a chance to sit with him, and I relied on bringing up work.

“Hey, Luke,” I said as I sat next to him, conveniently right when we’d need to buckle in for takeoff. “I was thinking about something.”

He turned toward me. “All right.”

“Could we possibly do some shopping once we get to Denver? We may need a few more items.”

He chuckled and pulled out a tablet from his bag. “Even though the plane is practically full already?”

“Just a few things.”

He shrugged. “Sure. That will be fine.” As he turned on his tablet, he arched a brow at me. “Want to watch something with me?”

My heart leaped. I was instantly giddy with the offer. “Sure!”

We settled on classic Chevy Chase. I knew better than to suggest anything *more* Christmasy, and who didn’t love

National Lampoon's? As we flew over the country, we snuggled close enough to watch the movie together. I fell just a little more for him each time he laughed, and even though I was slightly embarrassed by how amused he was that I could recite lines verbatim, it was fun.

Once the credits rolled, Luke shook his head and chuckled. "I haven't laughed like that for a long time."

I peered at him, hating that he hadn't enjoyed the remedy of laughter lately. "How come?"

He immediately went stoic, blanking his face and likely regretting that he'd said anything. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Dammit. The rosy feeling of good companionship faded. I wasn't easily swayed though. I meant it when I wanted to make people happy, and Luke was quickly becoming my favorite project. "Does it have to do with Max?"

Joshua missed him too. I felt sorry for him. Max was a close friend who'd passed away when they were all younger.

Luke sighed, but it didn't sound like he was exasperated with not letting it go. "That was a hard time in my life. Loss always is. Max's death *did* prevent me from getting close to people, but I'm trying to do better."

My heart broke for him. I didn't like the idea of him ever feeling like he had to hide from anyone. The thought of Luke feeling alone and isolated saddened me.

"Is that the reason for your grinchiness too?"

He arched one brow. "Grinchiness?"

I nodded. "You heard me."

"That's not a word."

I shrugged. "It is now."

"No. My grinchiness only began a few years ago."

"Why?"

Now, he clammed up completely, shaking his head. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

That was twice he’d mentioned wanting to pass on a topic. I didn’t want to risk striking out a third time. It was difficult for me to let it go, but I knew better than to push too far. Instead, I fell back to another ice breaker I’d rehearsed last night when I was anxious about this flight with him.

“The last time I was on this plane, we were all going to Bali, remember? What a trip that turned out to be.”

He smiled, joining my walk down memory lane. “It was a blast. I travel often, but it’s the trips with family and friends that stand out. That and going to beaches.”

“I still laugh sometimes that Landon never knew that Liberty and Joshua were sneaking around behind his back.”

“Oh, yeah. They had some guts. Joshua had to have been so nervous about going after his best friend’s little sister.”

I fought back an instinctive wince. Little *sister*? Liberty was Landon’s *younger* sister, in terms of sequence with the siblings, but she wasn’t *little*. It hurt to realize Luke thought of it that way, such that I was merely Joshua’s *little* sister.

“What’s that look for?” Luke asked.

I shrugged. “I’d hardly call Liberty *little*. She’s an adult.”

He laughed. “You know what I mean.”

I didn’t. Or maybe I did and wanted to reject that factor. One of my biggest concerns with Luke was that he would never see me as an equal he could match with and belong with. Hearing him comment on Landon and Liberty being his younger sibling hit a nerve.

“It was fun, though,” he said wistfully.

“And so warm.” I mocked a shiver. “Although this winter has been mild so far.”

He laughed. “Hold on to that thought. We *are* headed to Colorado, you know.”

I smiled and laughed along with him, slipping back into an easier, more lighthearted conversation. We had our ups and downs. I pushed for information and he was holding back. Still, we seemed to always manage to find a way back to this seamless and laidback familiarity. Deep down, nothing could change the fact we were friends at some level.

And I wished I could be content with that.

Being his employee was a blessing.

Calling him a friend, sort of, was great.

But what about something more?

LUKE

Once we landed, I breathed easier. Well, not really. The elevation in the mountains messed with me, but I got used to it soon enough. I'd needed a breather, a little bit of a break. Having Hanna pressed against my side during that movie felt too damn good. If those other employees hadn't been in their seats, it would've been more intimate. Riskier.

When she asked about my past and why I acted so edgy sometimes, I struggled with the desire to tell her.

Could I trust her?

Would she believe me? Pity me?

It felt like too complicated of a topic to cover, so I shoved it off for later. Or never. Hell, I didn't know. She confused me, making me want her so badly.

Once we arranged things to be taken to the resort, she roped me into going to a huge Christmas outlet.

"Just a few things, huh?" I asked when she paused at a large display.

She grinned, nodding. "Yeah." Then she peered back up at the enormous statues. Inflatables, wooden, and even plaster. They came in all materials, personifying the usual. Santa, elves, abominable snowmen, Rudolph, and then others like the Peanuts characters and Disney princesses.

The one that snagged her attention was a monstrous nutcracker. Although it seemed dumb to arrange for transportation of an eight-foot-tall statue of *anything*, even I

could admit it was an impressive piece. Lots of details had been seen to, with the paint job, ornamentation, and hair. I was no expert, but it seemed that in the line of *you get what you pay for*, this guy was a quality item of décor.

“A few things might be too large to fit on the plane,” she explained flippantly.

I chuckled.

“Just imagine it. They could flank the entryway like guards.” She stepped back, bumping into me as she crossed her arms. “Finding nutcrackers that big is one thing, but these are gingerbread nutcrackers. It’s kismet. They’d be perfect.”

I shrugged and approached the huge things, wondering if they worked. Looking at its back, I saw that it had an actual lever to lift. “What the hell would these crack? Coconuts?”

She giggled, and while I remained behind the statue, I grinned. I loved that sweet sound.

“When I was little, I used to call them cracknutters,” she said.

I joined her and shoved my hands into my pockets. “Is that just a Christmasy way of saying ball buster?”

She giggled, and we moved on through the over-the-top store. Talking and joking with her helped me ignore the blasting songs overhead. The more I focused on the lively and fun woman at my side, the less I thought back to the last time I hadn’t minded having some holiday spirit.

When Jennifer and I were engaged, I’d gone all out. I was getting ready to suggest she move in with me before we married, and I invested a lot of time and effort to spruce up my place to make it look more magical for her. I wanted her to see what our future winters would look like with decorated trees and all the homey effects. Jacob had still been living at home with our parents then, so no one was there to ridicule me about my showy display.

“What about those?” Hanna pointed at some awfully interesting cookie cutters, and I burst out laughing at the

shapes. I glanced around, still chuckling. “Since when did we stumble onto the adult section of this Christmas hell?”

She giggled. “Well, that proves I was right?”

I picked up the X-rated cookie cutter. “Proves what?”

She rolled her eyes and put them back down. “That you’ve been zoning out for the last fifteen minutes.”

Guilty. “Sorry.” I couldn’t make eye contact, annoyed I’d zoned out. As I fiddled with some small charms on wineglass tags, I wondered if she’d like one of those tiny shapes of a gingerbread for the event. They were so small they could even work on jewelry, I bet. It probably wouldn’t make sense at the event. The caterers would pick up glasses through the night.

When she didn’t speak up, I looked at her and repeated myself. “Sorry to zone out.”

She shrugged.

Dammit, now I really felt bad. It wasn’t her fault that I couldn’t get over my past and enjoy this season again. Yet, I knew that it mattered to her. She wanted to see me happy, and for the first time in a long while, I dared myself to consider, what would it really hurt to try to go along with this?

I picked up a Santa hat that doubled as a beer holder and put it on my head. “I’m guessing this is to entice frat boys to shop here?”

She laughed, humoring me, and it lifted my spirits. That was my reward for daring to step out of my comfort zone. As we continued through the store, I got stuck on making her laugh and smile. Soon enough, we were near the check-out area and I felt that I’d done a decent joke of making sure I wasn’t too much of a downer for her. I realized it wasn’t so hard. Being with her wasn’t a challenge, and I’d actually had fun. I’d loosened up enough to try on a normal Santa hat and I didn’t roll my eyes when she took a picture. Proof, she claimed, for Gabriela, that I wasn’t one hundred percent a grinch.

Arranging for the enormous nutcrackers to be delivered to the hotel, she finished purchasing the rest of the things she’d

spotted. Even though our shopping was done and I no longer had a direct reason to be with her here, I found myself reluctant to see her go.

“Want to grab a bite to eat?” I asked.

First, offering her a job. Then asking her to dance. Now that movie on the plane and going out to eat. I wondered if she’d realize I was interested in her without coming out to label anything. If she put me on the spot and asked if this was a date, I wasn’t sure what I’d say. I wanted it to be a casual date, but I was also afraid to make that step.

“Sure, I need a minute to sit down and check off things in my notes.”

Well, that sounded like a work thing, so maybe this wasn’t a date at all.

Stop overthinking it.

We found a place to eat, and just as she’d said, she got her trusty book out and marked an X through some items on her list.

She slapped the book shut and sighed, smiling at me.

“Satisfied?” I asked as I paid for the bill.

“Very. There’s nothing better than the accomplishment of crossing something off a list.”

“Nothing better?” I teased. Instantly, I thought of my dream about her. “Not even sex?”

She bit her lip and lowered her gaze, but I didn’t miss the naughty smile she tried to hide. I sure had crossed a line there. I’d blurted it out, but I was excited that she wasn’t acting prudish about it.

“Well, there’s that,” she agreed bashfully.

Now that it was on mind, I rolled with it. “Have you had a serious relationship before?”

She furrowed her brow. “Are you implying I’m too young to have had one yet?”

I scoffed. “No.”

She shrugged. “Sex doesn’t have to be synonymous with a serious relationship, you know.”

I laughed. “Okay.”

“I dated a guy in college. It wasn’t anything I’d consider serious though.” She raised her brows, not looking away for a second. “What about you?”

Fuck. I sure walked right into that one. “I was engaged once.”

She blinked rapidly and her jaw dropped. “How could I not have known about this?”

I sighed. “Well, Joshua never knew either, if that makes you feel better.”

“You hid it?”

“It didn’t last long enough to tell anyone.”

“Damn. How long did it last?”

“Not long.” *Not even a whole holiday season.*

“Wow.”

“So, it’s sufficient to say things didn’t work out there.”

She leaned forward over the table, curious. “What happened?”

With her gaze so intent on mine, I realized I’d killed the mood by even bringing up Jennifer. “Forget it.”

Her pout of concern suggested she wouldn’t.

“It’s not something I enjoy thinking about.” *Especially this time of the year when so many reminders of that time are shoved down my throat.* “Maybe we should leave.” I stood, tugging my coat on. “It’s probably past time for us to get back to the resort. Don’t you need to meet up with Gabriela and finish up some last-minute details?”

She reached over to grab my hand, stopping me from rambling. As she tugged me back toward the table, she let out

a long exhale. “If you ever want to talk to someone, I’m here to listen. I want you to know that, okay?”

I stared down at her, getting lost in the sincerity in her eyes. Hanna was a compassionate woman. I’d known that for a long time. But I was also aware that she would bend over backward to make someone happy.

It was a generous offer. I could benefit from having someone listen and care enough to hear me out. She shouldn’t have to be the one, though. Hanna didn’t have to be my sounding board. Like she’d told me the other day, I had to get over myself. *I had to fix myself.* I couldn’t depend on her.

“I hate the thought of you thinking you’re alone.” She stood, still gripping my hand. Her touch electrified me, and I held on tight as she stood and found her balance.

I never feel alone with you. Not often enough, at least. With Hanna, I wanted privacy. I enjoyed being treated to all her attention and knowing I had hers. When I was with her, I felt lighter, more hopeful. She tempted me to consider opening up again, at least when I wasn’t pissing her off and earning myself a cold shoulder.

I stepped closer, letting myself fall further under the magic of her compassionate nature. I wanted to lean on her, to rely on her warmth. She already fired me up to have filthy thoughts and steamy dreams, but it went deeper than that.

I licked my lips, fighting the sudden urge to kiss her and claim her sweet offer fully.

Leaning in, I held her hand and memorized the perfection of her gorgeous face so close to mine.

Her phone rang. The chords of “Jingle Bell Rock” trilled and I sighed. Stepping back, I hated that the moment had been interrupted.

So close, yet not.

She answered, putting it on speaker.

“Hanna? Where *are* you?” Gabriela asked as a greeting. “We’ve got a huge problem at the hotel. These guys dropped

off giant nutcrackers, but the order form says we're supposed to have half of the guys with the green hats and half the girls with the red aprons. We've got seven guys and three gals, and it's not symmetrical at all!"

"We're on our way," Hanna replied before she hung up.

We rushed out together, impatient to fix this snafu, and just like that, I had to bite back a groan that work was taking over my chances with her again.

Guess that's what I deserve, though, like Jacob said.

Because when she implored me to talk to her, I knew she hadn't been suggesting that as my newest, hottest, and most qualified employee.

I had a hunch she meant to say it as a worried and concerned friend.

But when she'd lowered her lids and parted her lips, leaning toward me too, I knew damn well that our first kiss was all that was on her mind. Knowing Hanna wanted my mouth locked against hers was a hell of a dangerous idea, and I wondered how long our attraction could continue at this low simmer before one of us got burned.

Back at the Robertson Resort, we found Gabriela panicking and pacing in the reception area for deliveries. As soon as she saw me and Luke, she sighed and shook her head, stalking over to us. “Okay. So it’s not what I thought. I had some guys back here help me open the boxes and check what exactly we got. It’s six nutcracker dudes and four nutcracker girls. Still won’t match up once we’ve got them in the entryway.”

The space she referenced was such a grand entrance area. A long hallway with deep brown wood panels made it seem like a castle, and with ornate glass windows, it was too pretty of a space not to tend to the décor there. These mega nutcrackers weren’t only perfect because they were gingerbread folks, but also because they were so narrow and tall that they’d fit precisely at each of the arches along the walls. It might have seemed like a petty detail, but if we didn’t match, it would stand out so much.

“I was thinking maybe only have four pairs, and then the extra inside somewhere?” Gabriela suggested with a shrug.

“No.” I got my phone out to call the store. This wasn’t what we’d paid for, and that was that. I’d checked the form twice before I signed it, ensuring the receipt showed five of each. I’d even asked the person checking me out to confirm the purchase, too. Their delivery department was responsible here. Mistakes happened, but they could be corrected too. “They need to fix it. It would stand out.” With five archway points dipping down, one not “covered” would stand out.

“It’s the principle of it anyway,” I muttered. I loved decorating for Christmas, but there was no way I’d be able to afford those gigantic nutcrackers myself. They weren’t cheap. Luke was a billionaire and his company could afford them. I imagined this was a teeny thing in terms of the big picture of the chain’s spending, just a drop in the bucket. Still, I didn’t want anyone or anything to screw Luke over. If I ordered something, it should be fixed. End of story.

The customer service rep answered. Gabriela and Luke listened in to the speakerphone call as we walked through the hotel toward the ballroom. The head manager was still there, overseeing the teardown of a wedding reception that had been scheduled before being blocked out for the ball setup. I listened to the rude man not helping and bit my lip. He was condescending, impolite, and dismissive. It took all my effort not to snap at him. This wasn’t a personal thing, but for work. I worried it might kill me, but I kept my composure, determined to stay professional.

“Listen, lady—”

Gabriela gawked at his tone and lunged to get the phone. Her brows slanted down in a furious scowl but I evaded her.

“Do not talk down to me, sir. If you can’t help me, please refer me to your superior who might be able to ensure a correction.” *And maybe someone who’s not a dick and won’t treat me like crap?*

“Oh. I see. I get it. You want to be a Karen now? All ‘let me talk to the manager?’ Well, guess what, girly? I’m the top here. You won’t go higher than me. I saw you walking through my store. I saw you giggling and goofing off with your boyfriend. Maybe you should have paid attention to what you were doing when you checked out. You’ve got no right calling me up during the busiest time of the year acting like some entitled, spoiled brat wanting your way just because you think I can do anything about swapping your order and—”

Luke took my phone and I winced. With that thunderous expression, the store manager was about to get some firm words.

“You’re going to drop that attitude right now and get something straight.” Luke didn’t yell, but the commanding, don’t-mess-with-me tone brokered no argument. The man who’d tried to belittle me remained quiet. Anyone would at that firm tone from my boss. “Once you and I are finished speaking, you will apologize to Ms. Smith. Under no circumstances are you to use that tone with her. I don’t have time to deal with fools. You either understand the importance of correcting the recent purchase made for the Robertson Resorts or you provide a full refund and I can go elsewhere. I’m certain your competitors would be glad to have the sales you’ll lose due to your ignorance of customer service.”

The man cleared his throat. “And just who do you think you are?”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Luke Robertson, CEO of Robertson Resorts. Have I made myself clear?”

Gabriela and I shared a wide-eyed look. She smiled brightly, while I gaped in shock. Luke sure didn’t pull any punches.

As he paced, setting the man straight, I conferred with the hotel’s manager about which tables should be switched for the event. I couldn’t help but keep my eyes on Luke as he concluded the call. He was sexy as hell, coming to my defense like that. I wanted to hero worship him for saving me from the crappy attitude. He was already hot, but this made me even more aware of how badly I’d wanted him.

Finished with the call, he strode toward me and held my phone out. “They’ll be here within an hour to pick up the wrong one and drop the right one off.”

I smiled and slipped my phone into my pocket. “Thanks, Luke.”

He nodded, almost curtly, and an instant worry that I’d inconvenienced him flitted through my mind. I hadn’t *asked* him to take over that call. He’d just done it himself. Was he irked that he’d needed to intervene? Was he annoyed that I hadn’t managed to control the situation?

“Does that work for you?”

He asked it neutrally, but with the negative thoughts in my mind, I picked at what it seemed like he wanted to say. I heard an implication there, that I needed help and couldn't do this without a helping hand.

No. Stop. Was I looking too far into this? After our conversation about dating and sex, then his explanation about a failed engagement, and then the moment when I could have sworn he wanted to kiss me, I didn't know what to think of how to interpret what he said or did. He was luring me to want him even more, but true to that hot-and-cold pattern, he'd suggest the opposite just as quickly.

His phone rang, sparing me from having to reply. He lifted his hand and nodded toward the door. “I should get this.”

I watched, slightly stunned, as he turned and left. Gabriela called out for me to help her sort through boxes that had been dropped off, and I tried my best to shove Luke from my mind. My bestie noticed. Of course, she did.

“Did Luke get that guy to fix the nutcracker order?” she asked, likely assuming I was feeling down about how that guy acted.

“Yeah. All figured out.”

Funny, I feel like I've figured nothing out about him though.

Gabriela and I both cursed the lousy labeling system the people at the Nashville resort had used. We almost had to open all the boxes to know if the contents needed to be used in the ballroom or near the kitchens. Not everything could be reused, but some staple décor items and signage were kept the same to maintain brand consistency.

All throughout unpacking and moving boxes to where they'd make sense, I struggled to move past what Luke had told me. That stood clearest in my mind. He'd been so bland, almost gruff when telling me about his broken engagement. Now, his opinions about weddings made more sense. He'd

made it sound like weddings were nothing but a money grab and not worth it.

He really must have loved this girl he proposed to. I almost wished I could ask Joshua about it, desperate for more details about how it happened and what she was like. Whoever she was, she had to have made a big enough impact to ruin the idea of weddings for him entirely. I couldn't pinpoint why, but I wished this pit of jealousy didn't make my stomach knot with tension the way it did. With an overall antsy and irritable sensation, I tried to dismiss my deep discomfort about Luke's past.

I hated to think of him being hurt, but that was ridiculous. He wasn't *mine* to feel so protective of. Having a crush on him for years didn't grant me any exclusive right to be concerned for him. Worst of all, I couldn't make sense of why I felt so threatened and intimidated by his failed relationship that didn't even exist anymore.

Snap out of it. Stop being so silly.

He wasn't with her anymore, so it couldn't matter in the present. Yet, it seemed like she still held that power over him, preventing him from anything new.

Like me.

Just stop, and focus on the now. I sighed, determined not to let this ruin my holiday spirit or break down my productivity at work.

Once we sorted out which boxes went where, Gabriela and I moved on to the real set-up process. Now that the wedding teardown was done, the manager helped direct some of the Nashville people and his in-house Denver employees to start setting up for the gingerbread event. Luke finished his call and joined us, but he was on the move, never staying in one place for long in the enormous hall. It was nice to see him participate. He wasn't just a hands-off office guy. He didn't hesitate to pitch in and get his hands dirty. It charmed me, but he seemed distracted and upset, reinforcing his close yet distant personality.

“What’s wrong?” Gabriela asked me quietly with a nod toward Luke across the room.

I sighed, glancing at him frowning as he tried to figure out how to extend a pole for a backdrop. “I think I may have messed things up with him. For him.”

“What’d you do?”

I shrugged, pulling out more linens from the containers holding table covers. “We got a bite to eat,” I said unnecessarily since I’d texted her where I was, “and we brought up past relationships. He was engaged before, and whatever happened to make her an *ex* seems to weigh on his mind still.”

“Huh.” She raised her brows, continuing to work next to me. “I didn’t know he was engaged.”

“I guess it wasn’t for long.”

“That’s so sad,” she replied, shaking her head.

It was, and it complicated how I could approach him. I didn’t want to rush him to anything, but I hoped he took it to heart when he remembered I would always be there for him to talk to.

Decorating the hall took hours, and once all the team members reached a point of feeling like they were done, we collectively cheered. Talk about a rush. It wasn’t an easy feat to hustle like this. Transforming this big of a place into a gingerbread-themed party was a magical switch. Now, all that remained for us was to get ready ourselves.

As people headed off to change and prepare for the ball’s start, I made one last walkthrough with Gabriela, ensuring things were running smoothly. No last-minute snafus. No missing staff members. I personally checked with everyone in charge and felt confident nothing would surprise us here.

No need for me and Gabriela to jump in like last time, I hope. We’d both decided to wear “sensible” heels though, just in case.

I looked around for Luke, hoping to touch base with him before I got ready. He'd been in and out of the room, helping to set up, but I'd lost track of him during my last all-clear check.

I found him standing outside, and I did a double-take of him on a balcony, alone. *Maybe he needed a breath of fresh air.* I debated interfering and bothering him, but when his shoulders lifted and fell in a deep sigh, I worried that he was still feeling down. I'd never know unless I asked, and I'd regret it if I left it alone.

Stepping out to the balcony, I smiled at the light snowfall that fluttered to the ground. Without the chaos of the ballroom setup and the noise inside, it was peacefully still and quiet out here.

I remained silent, seeing no need to speak. He turned toward me and lifted a brow, but I still didn't open my mouth as I approached. Sometimes, actions were better than all the possible words I could think of. I took his hand and squeezed it, simply letting him know I was there.

He adjusted his fingers, shifting his big hand over mine to better hold it.

As we stood there side by side, gazing at the serene setting of the distant mountains, he sighed again, but this time, in this moment of solitude and calm amidst the snow, his deep breath didn't seem like a release of misery but a more optimistic relaxation.

And I felt vastly better to know I was helping. In any little way I could.

LUKE

I didn't often come to the Denver resort, but when I did, I made sure that it was a wintertime trip. Colorado was beautiful with this grand and majestic scenery. It just didn't snow quite like this at home. Stepping out here was a good reminder that this season wasn't *all* bad. All the glistening snow, the utter quiet of nature, even though the resort was humming and hectic behind me. This simpler winter scene of the great outdoors would never fail to amaze me, but having Hanna at my side to experience it made it matter more.

Her hand was warm in mine, delicate, soft, and so much smaller than mine. She was shorter, making her seem almost dainty compared to my height. It wasn't another way of noticing our difference in age, but in size. All it did was make me want to protect and treasure her more. Like that asshole on the phone.

Reminded again of how he'd talked down to her, I felt a flicker of anger resurface. She hadn't deserved that crap. Hanna hadn't made a mistake at all in the store, and she had every right to calmly and politely ask for a correction. I wasn't surprised when she took it in stride, not rising to anger or shouting back with just as much sass or frustration. This woman was a class act, and I was proud to call her my event planner.

And friend? She was one. She'd always been one in the distance at home, but here, she was showing me how much she did care. I hadn't missed her glances in the ballroom as we set

up. It seemed like she always wanted to check on me and hope to find me happy.

She did make me happy. And as I turned toward her with half a mind to claim that kiss I'd wanted earlier, I knew that would be blurring the lines of friendship for good.

I slanted toward her, tugging on her hand so she would face me. As I did, she turned her face up to mine and smiled.

Damn, she's gorgeous. I got lost in the sweetness of her soft expression, and in her caramel gaze, I saw the awareness and attraction that zinged between us. I was an idiot to think she wasn't interested. It was right there, clear in her eyes and the tenderness of her grip on my hand.

I lowered more, drawing in a deep breath of the sweet floral scents of her long chestnut locks. On a delicate sigh, she closed her eyes and reached up to me, bringing her face closer at an agonizingly slow speed.

Snowflakes fell, caught in her dark lashes lying like crescents over her smooth, creamy cheeks. I hesitated to press my mouth to hers. I didn't stall because I was indecisive or nervous about taking this step, but because I wanted to capture this sight in my memory.

I'd always noticed Hanna, but I knew without a doubt she'd never been more beautiful and radiant than she was now, in my hands and begging to be kissed.

I bit back a growl of desire, knowing it was far, *far* too soon to express anything as carnal as how badly I wanted her so open and vulnerable to me. Instead, I closed my eyes for a second so I could focus on every electric spark that flew wild when I brushed my lips over hers.

A soft exhale left her lips as I kissed her lightly. My pulse rocketed, and my chest felt too full of pleasure. I felt the smile of her mouth curving and her cheeks rising against mine.

Her fingers clenched around mine, and with a subtle lift up higher on her toes, she urged me to do it again. Our mouths were already a breath apart. Her exhales mixed with mine. And as I leaned down more to kiss her for a longer moment of

bliss and perfection, the rest of the world faded away. For years, I'd fantasized about the soft sweetness of her lips, but the gentle plumpness was far more tantalizing than anything I'd conjured up in my mind's eye. Finally acting on my attraction felt like a whirlwind rush of an adventure, and as we rested our foreheads together and simply soaked in each other's presence, I fought to remain patient and let her seek *me* out next time.

Going from boss-to-employee toward something more was hard enough.

Going from friend of her brother to wanting her with an unforgiving need was something far trickier.

"Hey! Whoa. Oh. My bad."

Hanna stepped back as the voice of the manager's assistant cut through the quiet magic we'd shared on this snowy balcony. I gazed at her, memorizing her pink cheeks, tinted from the cold and maybe a blush of being caught in an embrace with me.

I grinned, loving this sheepish expression. At the same time, I faced the employee who'd interrupted. He'd reacted with immediate regret for intruding on my moment with Hanna, much like Eddie had at home.

Maybe I'm wrong there.

Knowing I was attracted to my friend's younger sister might not be the hardest hurdle to overcome.

Our connection in the workplace might be more difficult to manage.

I cleared my throat. "What's going on?"

"We need you inside." He looked from me to Hanna. "Uh, both of you. An emergency popped up."

We followed him inside. I was equally eager to spring into action and resolve a crisis as I was to grab an easy way out of having to talk about that kiss with Hanna. She seemed just as happy for a distraction, but as we headed inside, she grumbled under her breath.

“I knew it was too good to be true.”

I furrowed my brow, glancing at her as we followed the messenger. “What was?” *Me kissing you? Shit.*

She smiled and gestured at the balcony we’d left. “Not that. I thought that checking on everyone before the ball would eliminate the chance for emergencies. I wanted to avoid something like what happened in Nashville, when Gabriela and I had to step in for the short staff.”

I chuckled. “Eh. In the resort business, that can *always* happen.”

She nodded. “Well, life happens, right?”

Gabriela wasn’t anywhere to be found, and I guessed she was off getting changed and ready in her room. Guests would be arriving soon, and as Hanna and I approached the hotel manager, I hoped it wasn’t anything serious. This really was last minute.

“Hanna, bad news,” Tim, the manager, said.

“So I heard. What is it?” she asked.

“The live band set for the late-night entertainment won’t be showing now.” Tim shook his head, glancing at Gabriela rushing up close.

“Did you hear?” she asked.

Hanna groaned. “Just now.”

“Their limo hit some black ice,” Tim continued. “Everyone is fine. A couple of trees will need to be replanted come spring, but their instruments are gone.”

Hanna frowned. “Missing? Like they flew out in the accident?”

That would be déjà vu of the Nashville event, a missing instrument.

“No. Damaged. That van was totaled.” Tim winced.

“Okay.” Hanna drew in a deep breath. “We’ve still got something lined up. Maybe we can reach someone.”

“I’ll try to find someone too.” I loved that she didn’t freak out. Maybe she was on the inside, but she was quicker to try to find an answer, pronto.

I had quite a few connections. Being a prominent person in the hotel and luxury resort business, I had contact information for quite a few members in the entertainment industry. Hoping against hope that someone would not only answer but also be available, I went through them all, offering to pay all expenses for an expedited trip here.

I should’ve known better than to hope. Nobody was available this close to Christmas. And no one was open with such a rushed notice for a late-night show.

“Dammit.” I cursed some more under my breath as I paced and ran my hand through my hair.

“No luck?” Gabriela asked.

“None.” I glanced at Hanna, impressed she was still in crisis-solution mode, not panicking and emotional with complaints or worries. She was the consummate professional, keeping her cool better than Tim, a veteran manager of twenty years, as he whimpered and groaned, exhausting his calls to local musicians.

“I’ll have to schmooze the earlier entertainment.” This event was a long one, well into the night. They would have to stay for hours. “I’ll try to convince them to stay till the end.”

“Or.” Gabriela glanced at her best friend, then me. “Hanna could sing.”

I stopped pacing and stared at her. Hanna immediately turned bright pink, locking a wide-eyed glare on her friend.

“Be quiet,” she hissed.

I raised my eyebrows and faced her fully. “You can sing?”

“No,” Hanna said quickly at the same moment Gabriela nodded and said, “Yup.”

“I do not,” Hanna told her. “Not professionally.”

“Oh, yes you do. You can.” Gabriela threw Hanna under the bus, smiling wide.

“Can you?” I asked again. I didn’t want her to be forced to do something she wasn’t comfortable with, but I couldn’t tell if she was denying what Gabriela said because she really couldn’t sing or if she simply *thought* she couldn’t. I wracked my brain, trying to remember Hanna in choir or anything, and I couldn’t. I blinked, surprised that there were still some details I *didn’t* know about the sexy woman.

“I mean, I can sing, but never in front of an audience.”

Tim nodded. “Please! You’ll be compensated.”

“It’s not about the money,” she said, rolling her eyes.

I thought back to how she’d just said she wished she wouldn’t have to step into any role last minute again, to strictly plan an event, not to put it on physically.

“Can you, please?” I asked.

“Hanna, come on. You’d rock it.” Gabriela grabbed her hand. “You’re a perfect replacement.”

With an exaggerated whining sound, Hanna groaned and gave in. “All right. All right. It’s not in the plans, but whatever.” Then she glanced at her phone. “Shoot. I *definitely* need to spend time getting ready if I’ll be on stage.” She grabbed Gabriela’s hand and hustled away.

“She’d look fine on stage even if she spent no time getting ready,” Tim commented.

I slid him a dour look, advising he never talk about her like that again.

Later, when the last set cue prompted Hanna to take the stage, though, I knew Tim wouldn’t be the only man to want to comment on her beauty. More to the point, I had no right to be so grouchy about other men noticing her. One kiss on the balcony didn’t grant me anything. She wasn’t *my* girl.

As she took the microphone with a shaking hand, I hated that she was nervous. I wanted to reassure her to be confident, as though she was my girl to comfort. Then when she began to

sing “O Holy Night” like she’d been onstage all her life, sharing a melodic mastery of all the notes, I dropped my mouth and stared.

Hanna didn’t just sing—she sang like she was a pro. She missed not a single beat and knew every word. The crowd was in rapture, listening to her gorgeous voice, but no one could have been as enamored as I was.

I couldn’t look away, mesmerized and bewitched with her talent. She was stunning no matter what she did or what she wore, but belting out the hardest high notes with a deep red gown accentuating her lovely curves, she was magnificent.

Gabriela elbowed me in the ribs, giggling. “Close your mouth. You look like a baby bird.”

I did, slapping my lips together before swallowing hard. “She’s incredible.”

She grinned, her hands on her hips, proud of her best friend. “Yeah. She really is.”

HANNA

I felt the burn of Luke's gaze on me all while I sang that night in Denver. It took everything in me not to look right at him, knowing he was staring at me like I'd stunned him. It was just a few songs. I hadn't practiced, and I missed more than one note, never having sung with that pianist before. I gave it my all, and per the applause and happy dancers on the floor, I figured I'd passed.

Still, it was Luke's gaze on me that had me feeling warm on that stage. The flame of his attention hadn't been extinguished yet. Even though we'd flown home a few days ago, I still felt the lingering traces of warmth. It made me so giddy, so excited to have impressed him. My goal was to see to his happiness, one way or another, but having his full attention when I put myself out there and sang lent me a boost in confidence.

Thinking of his hot stare on me, I wished I had a chance to be alone with him again.

"Hanna!" Liberty giggled, snapping her fingers in front of my face as we dove into the Chinese takeout we'd ordered.

"Hmm?" I flinched, jarred from my thoughts. Luke intruded my mind no matter the hour of the day or night. Even now, at Liberty's place. She was hosting the girls' night we'd planned back at the s'mores block party. I instantly felt bad that I wasn't paying attention to them, and I knew my sheepish smile at being caught zoning out wouldn't go unmissed.

“What?” I asked when Liberty and Poppy raised their brows at me. Autumn and Maya were supposed to come too, but they were busy. Gabriela rode with me, though, and it helped. I was close to Liberty because she was going to be my sister-in-law soon, and Poppy often hung out with her. They were older than me, but Gabriela evened it out, age-wise.

Gabriela leaned toward Poppy. “Thinking about him again.”

“Him?” Poppy grinned. “Ohhh. *Him*.”

“No, no, no. This is a *girls’* night,” Liberty scolded. “But pass me that soy sauce and then tell me about *him*.” She wagged her brows.

Gabriela laughed. “You already know him!”

“Stop.” I rolled my eyes and handed the bottle to Liberty, but she was snagged, intrigued to know more.

“Him who?” She narrowed her eyes then gasped. “Luke?” She didn’t give me a chance to reply or confirm who Gabriela was teasing me about. Liberty clapped and squeed. “I *knew* it.”

Poppy giggled. “Uh, everyone knew it. Sorry, Hanna, but you’ve never made your crush much of a secret.”

But does Luke know? I’d never approached him before, and I doubted Joshua ever wanted to say anything. I assumed others might have suspected over the years, but I never announced it or carved our initials into a tree as a hint for the guy.

“*We* could notice,” Liberty said. “But that’s a girl thing.”

I shrugged.

“And I meant I knew it like I knew something would have to happen when he hired you. He’s always so grumpy around this time of the year and I was hoping you’d brighten him up.”

Poppy nodded. “Luke’s a bit withdrawn. You’d inspire him to smile.” She grinned, projecting her enthusiasm.

“Inspire him to do more than smile,” Gabriela teased knowingly.

I shot her a look. I never kissed and told, but on the flight back, Gabriela and I sat in the back of the plane. Luke remained in Denver for an extra day to deal with a couple of meetings for that specific resort and I had full privacy to catch Gabriela up on the way back. I mentioned that we'd had a moment and kissed, but that was confidential!

I stuffed my mouth full, using the takeout as an excuse not to reply. If they got caught up on the girl talk, especially about something as juicy as me and Luke getting together, we'd never get to the movies we had planned. This night was a tradition full of takeout and Christmas romcoms.

"Do tell," Liberty told her.

Gabriela winked at me. "I feel like I've had a front-row seat to Luke falling in love with my bestie here."

"Love?" Poppy asked.

"Stop," I protested before I sipped my wine.

"Okay. I won't jinx anything or get too far ahead of myself." She shrugged. "Your mom and aunt are right, though. There's just something about the holidays that gets people to fall in love."

But the man I've wanted for so long is the only guy not interested in the holiday spirit, remember?

"I'm confident to report Hanna and Luke are definitely hitting it off."

I smirked at Gabriela. *What happened to not jinxing it?* "He's just my boss."

"You kiss all your bosses?" she challenged.

Liberty and Poppy gasped with equal amounts of interest and amusement.

"No. But we're not there." I didn't know what Luke and I were doing. Sure, he was my boss, but I'd told him that I would always be there to listen to him as a friend. And when I kissed him back, that was something even more.

"Well, where are you, then?" Poppy asked.

“Other than kissing?” Liberty added.

“It was one time. One kiss.” I lifted a finger to emphasize it. “It’s not a pattern.” *Unfortunately.*

“Is he hesitant?” Liberty guessed.

“Are you trying to pace it? With the rush of the holidays and all the events?” Poppy asked.

I shook my head and shushed them both. For one thing, it wasn’t any of their business. But more than that, I didn’t know how to reply. “It’s not that big of a deal.” The words tasted like a lie. “Yes, I like him.” *Perhaps more than I want to say.* “But I don’t think he’s as eligible as you think he is. Just because he’s single doesn’t mean he’s datable.”

In the back of my mind, I couldn’t lose the thought that he wasn’t over his ex. If their engagement came apart a long while ago and he was still upset about it or hurt by it, then she was still on his mind in some capacity.

Liberty nodded. “Actually, I know what you mean. Joshua told me that Luke had a very serious relationship in college, I think with a woman named Jennifer.”

I perked up. “Oh?”

She nodded. “Yeah. From what he said, it sounds like the woman broke his heart when she cheated on him with one of Luke’s close friends.”

Damn. She cheated on him? I realized there was much more to this story than what Luke was willing to tell me. No matter how many times I told him I was there to listen when he was ready, it seemed he wouldn’t be inclined to open his mouth and tell me about this girl.

My heart broke a little more for him. It was already lousy to witness him being so down and sullen about whatever he’d endured with that breakup. Knowing the woman he’d proposed to had been disloyal renewed my hope to cheer him up and make him smile.

What was worse, though, was that this news validated my suspicions. I was probably right about him not being ready to

date. Sure, he'd kissed me, but that didn't imply a lasting relationship. I'd felt the tension crackling between us, but maybe I'd misread it all. Maybe he'd only wanted to thank me with a sweet kiss, like a friend might.

Girl, that's crazy! Friends don't kiss like that.

I had dreamed of Luke kissing me for years, but still, when he was starting to only now view me as an equal and not Joshua's little sister, he was still out of reach and as untouchable as ever.

Eventually, Poppy turned the tables and put Gabriela on the spot. She pestered her next. "Well, if this is the season for falling in love, what's going on with you? Who are you eyeing for a holiday romance?"

Gabriela scoffed and shook her head. "Um, no one you need to know about."

"What?" Liberty jumped on the bandwagon, giggling and excited for more gossip. "Is someone on your mind?"

Gabriela mimed zipping her lips and shook her head. "Not getting it outta me."

Eventually, we left the holiday romance topic alone. Maybe they'd tired of it, or maybe they were being considerate. I bet they could pick up on my uneasiness after talking about Luke. Just thinking that nothing would or could happen between us saddened me. I wouldn't say I had a one-track mind where he was concerned, but with the mixed signals and hot-and-cold treatment, it was only natural that I'd be confused.

Eventually, we moved out of the kitchen and headed toward the living room. We'd already picked the movies, and while they were reruns of classics, I doubted I could get into any of them. I found myself struggling to focus, only absently interested in sipping my wine as the first movie played.

I wasn't the only one indulging on the wine. Once the movie was over, Liberty stood. She was tipsy, giggling and stumbling away from the couch. "What if we don't watch another?"

“What would we do instead?” Poppy asked.

“Yeah, I’m not in the mood to watch something else.” Gabriela stood and stretched. “I wanna *do* something.”

Liberty led us toward the kitchen again. “Let’s bake cookies! We can make them all cute for the boys.” She removed her engagement ring and placed it safely in a zippered pocket in her pants for safekeeping.

I giggled, thinking back to the X-rated cookie cutters at that Christmas outlet store in Denver.

We were all buzzed and tipsy, talking about Liberty and Josh’s wedding planning and if they’d decided where they wanted to live. I was *mostly* confident we measured the ingredients correctly, but I wouldn’t have bet money on it. We laughed at the wonky shapes we made with the cutters, and no matter which one of us helped Poppy, she just could not roll the dough out properly.

It was fun, but if anyone were to ask me when we sampled the frosting then decorated the cookies, I was thinking about Luke the whole damn time.

LUKE

I returned from Denver after everyone else had. While I enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing to the meetings on my agenda out there and I knew the resort was doing well with solid plans to expand next year, I'd missed the team at my office.

Or, rather, I'd missed Hanna. I'd fallen asleep to the memory of her singing, and I wondered if or when I'd ever get a chance to hear her again.

Fortunately, I didn't have to wait long for an excuse to see her. I hated that it was simply easier and more convenient to count on seeing her at the office. After that kiss and what we'd talked about, I should have felt more prepared to ask her if she'd like to spend time with me outside the working capacity.

After this event, before it's even closer to Christmas. I had to find time somewhere in there. This event-per-week rush would be over then. Nothing big was planned on Christmas, and we'd have a little free time until the New Year's Eve bash in New York.

Hanna and Gabriela filed into my office, both ready and eager to talk about this last December event in Branson. Since it wasn't too far away, the resort manager's assistant came to sit in for the meeting as well. Gina, the manager, had another commitment, but I knew Hanna and Gabriela didn't *need* any help.

"I'm excited about this event," Hanna said. Since Branson was known for its country music, the girls quickly came up

with a general country Christmas theme. They went over the basics, but once lunchtime came, Gina's assistant expressed the need to return to Branson.

"I can't wait for you to send over more details. This is going to be a blast."

Gabriela replied first. "I'll email the menu first and foremost."

"Thanks. Gina will be so happy to have such a streamlined plan for this. Events tend to stress her out." She glanced at me. "I mean, not stressed but, well, you know. This time of the year is just so hectic."

"Uh huh." Eddie saw the assistant out, leaving me with Hanna and Gabriela. We ordered lunch in, and I sat in the meeting room with them as they carried on. I had no reason to supervise them. They were competent and had proven their creativity at the first two parties. Still, after our lunches were tossed away, there wasn't really anything for me to do.

I was lucky to have an open schedule for the day because I found it hard to leave the room. Hanna had taken the reins and ran with it, already so advanced with her plans scribbled into her ever-present notebook. It was amazing to watch her work. She had a brilliant, quick mind, and I marveled at her energy and enthusiasm, wondering if she was just as dedicated of a lover.

No. Don't go there.

More and more, intrusive thoughts about her popped up.

Does she still think about our kiss?

Did she want more?

I thought back to how we'd joked at that store. Then her pretty blush when we'd lunched.

I smiled, trying to hide it with my chin in my hand as I sat there. If anyone were to ask me what I was doing there, I wasn't sure what I would say. I was reluctant to step away from her, and for the first time in so long, I knew I was *really* smiling.

“I mean, I love all animals,” Hanna said as she sat in her chair and chatted with Gabriela.

“I’m still shocked you didn’t become a vet,” Gabriela teased.

“But I especially love horses. They’ve always been my favorite. Maybe we could incorporate horses into this. Like a stand, a selfie spot near the entrance.” Her pen tip moved over the paper.

Gabriela nodded. “Yeah. That’ll fit in the country theme. Horseshoes too, maybe even for the main logo.”

I sat there, listening in, and felt proud that I was aware of Hanna’s love of animals. She’d always been like that. When we were younger, she was always the first one to suggest to Joshua that they should ask their parents for more pets.

Hmmm. I swiveled in my chair a bit, thinking this could be a good way to show my thanks for her hard work. I pulled out my phone and scrolled through some links for Branson. Going out of my way to find a special thank-you wasn’t something I did for all of my employees. Robertson Resort wages and salaries were already lucrative, but I couldn’t help it.

Admit it. This isn’t only a thank you. It’s a way to spend time with her outside of the event, too.

I clicked on the link for the Dixie Stampede and checked out the ticket options. Hanna would have her horse-loving fun watching the amazing animals at that show. And it wasn’t a weird thing to suggest. An attraction, not an overly romantic date. I still wanted to play it carefully with her, and I wondered when I would tire of this cautious behavior.

There. Done. While Hanna and Gabriela continued to plan, I finalized the purchase for two tickets for us while we’d be in Branson.

“Luke?” Eddie leaned through the doorway, spotting me. “Need to borrow you for a minute, if you’re free.”

I held back a snort of laughter. It wasn’t like I was doing anything in here. Honestly, I was surprised Hanna hadn’t mentioned anything. I wanted to believe she merely liked my

company and having me close. Gabriela hadn't called me out on it either, but she always was laidback like that.

I followed Eddie to my office, where he needed my signature on a few things. For an hour or so, we caught up on the most urgent things that couldn't wait until after the Branson event was over.

I finished up with the work day and returned to Hanna and Gabriela's office, curious if they were still planning. Hanna needed to sign a couple of things for me too, namely the reimbursement for those massive nutcrackers in Denver. A snafu with the software had us using paper instead of electronic forms, but it would be cleared in no time. I had faith in my financial department. And I'd never turn down a chance to see her.

"So we can—" Hanna paused in whatever she was telling Gabriela. She smiled at me as I entered the room, amused that I'd returned.

I waved at her to continue. "Don't mind me. I can wait." I set the papers on the tabletop and sat back.

I think I've been waiting for you for a lifetime already anyway.

Hanna wasn't flustered by my return, but she seemed to pick up on my presence. It also seemed she might be learning how to read minds because she glanced at me repeatedly, often with raised brows with a silent question.

While it was nice to know I could get under her skin, I put her out of her misery. "I'm just here to get a couple of signatures," I explained.

"Oh." She relaxed with a sigh. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

I shrugged. "I didn't want to interrupt."

And I love hearing you talk. She had a sweet, sexy voice, but the passion she showed when she got excited about planning something, maybe seeing how it can all come together in her mind, that was something else.

“Shoot. Would you look at the time?” Gabriela groaned. “I’ve got to go. We’ll figure it out tomorrow.” Without giving Hanna a chance to reply, she left, putting her coat on as she hustled out.

“Yoga class.” Hanna smiled. “She forgot, just like I knew she would.” She tapped her pen to her trusty notebook. “Everyone can tease me all they want about using a paper notebook, but it keeps me on track.”

“As I have seen.” I stood as she gathered her things into a large tote bag. “What would you need to figure out tomorrow, though? From what I’ve heard today, you’ve got it all planned.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Nah. The big-idea planning is done, but we’ve got lots of finer details to smooth out. Lots of vendors to call.”

I nodded. “Tomorrow then. Let me walk you out to your car. I’m done for the day.”

Her smile was shy and cute. “Okay.”

“I’ll just get my coat.”

She followed me out to the hallway but lingered at the doorway as I headed into my office again.

I frowned at once. Someone had been in here, decorating, so to speak. No one had vomited red and green holiday cheer all over, but a single addition had been placed on my desk.

Frowning at once, I approached the flowers. A bouquet of red and white blooms stood among leaves, a Christmasy arrangement, no doubt. “What the hell?”

Hanna walked in. I felt her presence behind me as she noticed the flowers. “Wow. So pretty!”

So fucking weird. Who the hell would send me flowers?

I picked up the card that had come with them.

“You must have one heck of a happy client somewhere to thank you with such beautiful flowers.”

I snorted a single laugh. “I’ve never received flowers before.” As I turned the cover over, I read a damning line of words.

I hope you’re having a Merry Little Christmas – J

I ground my teeth as realization set in. Her handwriting was still the same, but just how low was Jennifer willing to go? That message, that comment, was a total mockery of when we’d broken up.

So, you’ve tracked me down, huh? I seethed at the fact she’d gotten to me. I was a private man with a public position. I could be reached, sort of. I always maintained layers of distance between my work contacts and my personal life. Except for Hanna.

This was too damn far.

I picked up the bouquet and bypassed Hanna, dropping the whole fucking thing in the trash next to my desk. The slim vase barely fit, but I didn’t care how much of a mess it might make.

Hanna yelped, rushing forward to rescue the blooms. “Luke! Those are too pretty to throw away!”

I didn’t give a damn. I would’ve chucked them out the window if I could have. They could wilt and be buried under the snow.

“I have to go.” I didn’t wait for her to acknowledge me. The presence of Jennifer’s message peeved me. I felt too confined, too attacked. Her words had to have been carefully chosen to inflict maximum pain. Was she trying to piss me off even to see her? Was she hoping to pull on when we’d last been together to encourage me to speak with her?

This was only the latest attempt she’d made, and I didn’t care to consider how far she’d go in the future.

Without risking a look back at Hanna, I turned to go. I couldn’t face her now. She’d want an explanation of what was going on. She’d ask why I was so upset about the delivery and what it meant to me. I couldn’t answer her. In the absence of

any reply that would make sense but also warn her to drop the topic, I abruptly left.

When I reached the end of the hallway, I realized I'd pulled a one eighty on her. She'd come with me to my office because I'd offered to walk her to her car, but now, I only wanted to escape.

"You can keep the flowers if you want," I called over my shoulder as I went.

For so long, I wanted to escape the memories of Jennifer cheating on me. I wanted to move on from that time and seek happiness again. Hanna was the only bright spot in my life, and I sorely wanted to escape *to* her. I'd offered to walk with her in case I found a way to ask her to spend more time with me outside of work.

Now that Jennifer had intruded into my life again with those stupid flowers and her mocking note, I felt like I had just one more obstacle that held me back from moving forward with Hanna.

Some days, I just can't fucking win.

HANNA

The flight to Branson was shorter than the one to Denver. It was also awkward. Luke didn't sit near me, busy talking on his phone, and even if a spot was open next to him, I wasn't sure if I wanted his attention.

Instead, at the back of the plane, I stewed in my personal awkwardness while Gabriela checked the menu on her laptop. I was itching to bring her up to speed about what happened the day before. I hated to gossip about Luke, but I wanted her advice, at least.

I didn't have the guts to bring it up on the plane, though. Luke was way at the front and we were in the back, but still, I didn't want anyone else to overhear. Several employees from his main office were traveling to Branson to make this event happen on time.

Once we arrived, it was a rush to get moving and transform the large space into a ballroom with a sweet country theme. We had even less time to make it work here, but since it was closer, we had the extra staff on hand to move quicker.

As Gabriela and I helped move decorations into the place, I checked that no one was close enough that I could talk to her at last. It was going to drive me nuts to keep it all to myself.

“He didn't walk you out to your car?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No. He went to his office to get his coat, and once he got there, he found flowers that had been delivered.”

Her brows spiked high. “Weird.”

“I thought they were from a client or something. Since everyone seems to know he hates Christmas décor. He went stiff and threw them away. I’m telling you, Gabby, it was like a switch was flipped. Happy one second and then furious the next.”

“Damn.”

I sighed. “He just walked away. Shouted back at me to keep the flowers if I wanted them.”

“Like regifting?” She cringed.

I shrugged. “He didn’t care what happened to the flowers. I told him they were too nice to waste, and when I got them out of the trash, I read the card that came with it.” I told her what was written. Based on Luke’s reaction, I could only assume one thing.

Gabriela’s eyes went wide. “No way.”

I nodded. “The ex.”

That clawing thread of jealousy spread through me again, and I hated that his former lover, a woman from his past, could have power to usurp my hopes with him.

“Is she trying to get back with him?”

I shot her a *duh* look. “What else would it be?”

“I don’t know. It seems weird.”

I nodded. “And intrusive.”

“I’m just saying.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I’ve never sent a guy flowers. I’m not sure why I would.”

I arched one brow. “Isn’t that sexist?”

“I don’t know what it is. I’ve never thought to have a bouquet delivered to a guy. But it’s weird she sent them to him and wrote that. Like, wouldn’t she know he hates Christmas?”

I shook my head, seeing Luke in the background. He had yet to speak with me since the funky way he’d left me at the

office, and I didn't want him to hear me talking about him or his former relationships.

Gabriela was called into the kitchens anyway. And seeing the installation going underway for the country Christmas-themed decorations, I hurried over to intervene.

"Nope. We need it set up over there." I directed the men who lugged in large pieces of the carousel. It was a big expense, but I knew it would deliver on the wow factor. I'd located a local company that had a refurbished antique merry-go-round with country horses on the stakes. It would be a showstopper, and I was glad we had enough staff working that someone could oversee it. However, it would make much more sense with a shift of placing it in the corner, not close to the stage.

"What the hell is this?" Gina, the hotel's manager, strode over. She was a hard one to tolerate. It seemed that she was my first real-life experience of learning how to work with a control freak. "I didn't see anything about a carny ride being put up inside."

"It was a last-minute effort," I explained.

"Approved by whom?" she haughtily challenged as Luke walked toward us.

"Him." I pointed at him and she crossed her arms.

"A merry-go-round." She smirked at him once he reached us. "Isn't that something for kids?" The derisive look she gave me said enough. She wanted to imply *I* was being childish to order this to be here.

"This is a formal event for adults, Hanna," she added.

"Yes, it is." I tilted my head to the side. "Anything else you need clarification on?"

She huffed and turned away, mumbling under her breath.

I didn't face Luke and, instead, watched the men assemble it all.

"She has a point."

Oh, great. Not only do things need to be awkward between us, now you have to side with her.

“Do you think grownups will like riding a merry-go-round in their ballroom attire?”

I shrugged. “It’s the Ozarks. Chances are that they will.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets, and I fought not to look at him, just keeping him in my peripheral vision.

“It will get people talking and taking pictures of it. And if they don’t, it’s pretty to look at.” I faced him then. “Pretty to look at, like fresh-cut flowers, you know?” I added that last bit almost snidely, hoping he would fess up about who sent them to his office.

He remained closed-lipped, not saying anything about them.

Damn. I’d been sure he would say something, since I’d been there when he saw them and pitched them. If I brought it up again, it would be weird now, almost nagging.

He cleared his throat and lifted his face. “Would you like to go to dinner with me?”

I went still, shocked. Dinner? *Like a date?* It couldn’t be a working dinner because my work was here, at the venue for the event that was going to happen tomorrow night.

“I’m not sure I have time to go out to dinner.” I gestured at the ballroom that was so quickly being put together. “Maybe another time would be better for a work meeting.”

I wanted him to clarify his intentions. After that kiss in Denver, I felt like he had to have something more on his mind. That was the problem. He could be so warm one minute and then cool the next.

“No work.” He slowly smiled as he pulled his phone out and unlocked it. “Not a meeting.” He turned the phone around so I could see the screen. “A date, I guess. You and me, at the Dixie Stampede.”

My jaw dropped. I gripped his wrist to bring his phone closer to see. “The Dixie Stampede!” I’d always wanted to go.

“Tonight?” I asked, not caring if I was making myself look immature or too excited with the thrill I couldn’t cover up. Him actually calling it a date was a monumental occasion, but to the Dixie Stampede? I was over-the-moon thrilled.

“Tonight.”

“Oh, my gosh. Yeah, I would love to go.” I held up my hand, already backpedaling toward the kitchen. “Just let me check with Gabriela.”

He nodded, smiling softly, and I turned to jog into the kitchen to find her. She stood in the back, discussing a slight adjustment to the dessert menu.

“Gabby!”

She caught my arm as I rushed up to her so quickly that I almost knocked her over. “What? What happened?” She lowered her face and growled. “Dammit. Something else is going wrong at the last minute again?”

I shook my head, smiling wide. “No! Luke bought tickets for us to go to the Dixie Stampede.”

She laughed lightly. “You’ve always wanted to see that!”

“I know!”

“Well, it’s not like he doesn’t know you. That’s sweet of him.” She frowned though. “Wait. He was all grumpy and edgy, and from there, he goes to taking you out?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. We need to sit down and talk.” Some attempt to improve communications was necessary.

“Huh. Well, it’s still a hell of a nice gesture!” She hugged me. “When is it? After the ball tomorrow?”

“No.” I bit my lip. “Tonight. Would it be okay if I went?”

She rolled her eyes. “As if I’d tell you to pass this opportunity. Go, girl, go. We’ve got so many people on hand that you can take off.”

“Thanks, Gabby.” This time, I pulled her in for a tight hug.

As I left, she called after me. “Just make sure you do that whole sitting-down-and-talking thing too!”

I waved my hand over my shoulder, dismissing her. “Yeah, yeah.” I wasn’t sure how much talking Luke and I could do, but I was determined to make the most of it while I could.

I hurried to my room and got ready. I hadn’t brought much with me because this event’s planning phase happened so quickly. What I did have on hand would probably work, though. The brown and green dress I’d brought wouldn’t do. Too classy. I had it with me for wearing it to the event. Most of my clothes were casual since moving things around and decorating wasn’t a tidy business.

Jeans and a nice green sweater were my best bet. They’d be fine since we were going to a place that could be dirty and dusty, an arena to watch horses do tricks and all that. Luke had asked me to “dinner,” but I imagined we’d be dining on easily held concession-stand sort of food.

After one last check of my hair and makeup, I walked over to Luke’s. He was either just as impatient as I was or he didn’t take long to change out of a suit and put on more everyday, ordinary clothes.

I met him in the hall, and as he strode toward me, his long legs easily ate up the distance. In jeans and a blue crewneck sweater, he looked laidback yet not. It didn’t matter what he wore, the man always looked damned fine. I bit back an instinctive sound of appreciation and licked my lips.

I couldn’t look away, locked in his smoldering gaze. He focused on me and gave in to a smug smile, almost cocky about knowing I was here for him, that he was coming to me and would have me all night. Just me and him.

All night? I felt immediately hotter at that racy thought. Already, I was jumping to conclusions, wishing for not just the privacy of going to the show with him but also what might follow afterward.

Calm down, Hanna. Calm down.

It was pointless to try to. I staggered in my step, stopping so he could reach me. I was too dumbfounded with this sexy man coming my way. All I could do was force myself to keep my face up and looking at his face. If I detoured again in another onceover, I doubted I'd be able to tear my eyes off him. Some men could pull off the rugged look in jeans, but I didn't think any of them could fill them as fine as Luke did. No matter what, I couldn't risk another glance lower at the bulge in the tighter fit of his pants.

Oh, man. I'm in so much trouble tonight. I swallowed and damned the warmth on my cheeks. It would be very hard to keep my hands off him tonight, and I prayed he wouldn't be able to tell how naughty he made me feel.

Going out with my boss felt taboo.

Agreeing to be at Luke's side when he looked good enough to climb?

"Ready?" he asked and held out his hand to mine.

"Oh, yeah," I said, breathier than I intended to as I placed my hand in his.

He'd surprised me, asking me out when I'd least expected it. I'd been deprived of a chance to rehearse or meticulously plan how to *be* ready for this. But with a long time of dreaming about being with this sweet, sexy guy, I hoped reality would just follow along the lines of my dreams.

Even the dirty ones.

LUKE

Hanna drew in a deep breath and smiled up at me. I felt like a king, like a rockstar, having her gaze at me with such desire and adoration. I wasn't sure what I'd ever done to deserve her in my life, but I knew I would *not* mess it up.

I regretted walking away from her in my office a thousand times since that afternoon. It hung on my conscience, and I loathed that I'd sunken to such a point of letting Jennifer rule me. I refused to let her interfere with my present or my future. Looking down into Hanna's caramel gaze, I knew she had tickets to more than just the Dolly Parton show. Hanna had a direct path to my heart.

Unless I try to guard it more.

"You look amazing," I told her, eager to get the truth out before the night would be too busy.

"You, too, Luke." She smiled wider, pleased with my praise, but it didn't last long. Her expression didn't fall, but I noticed the slight twinge that suggested she was trying hard not to furrow her brow.

"What's wrong?" I tightened my hold on her hand, concerned that she might have second thoughts about spending time with me outside of work. I'd called it. I actually came out and said it was a date tonight. When I changed out of my suit, I was elated that she'd agreed, but now?

She pursed her lips and started walking down the hall, leading me to follow along. "Didn't those tickets say seven

o'clock?"

"Yeah."

"Then we're gonna be late!" She glanced at me, worried. "I looked it up on my phone while I got ready, and Luke, we'll never make it on time!"

I chuckled as she broke into a jog. Hanna had always been athletic, so I wasn't surprised when she ran down the hall with ease. She was also a diehard planner, and surprising her with a date tonight, she was thrown into living on the fly.

"We'll make it. I promise." And even if we didn't reach the arena before it started, we'd catch some of the show to make it worth it. Hell, every minute in her company was worth it.

I'd already seen to reserving a rental car, and it was waiting out front for us near the valet. The geographical distance between the resort and the Stampede's arena wasn't far, but we faced tons of traffic.

Each time Hanna wrung her hands together, I smiled and slipped my hand between them. Stroking my fingertip over her knuckles seemed to calm her, and I felt lucky that she gave me this chance to learn more about her. About what she liked and how to soothe her anxiety about being late. I supposed if she'd known about this in advance, she would have had ample opportunities to arrange her outfit, map out the best path, and probably prepay for parking while also knowing the full menu of food ahead of time.

"We'll make it," I reassured her.

"But look at all these people!"

Her finger aimed out the window, and yeah, it was crowded. Lots of people flocked to Branson during the holiday season. The Robertson Resort was always busy at the end of the year, and I knew I could always count on it. People came for the lights and whatnot, but it wasn't so logjammed that I couldn't reach the arena's parking garage.

"We're going to be late," she said quietly.

“It’ll be fine.” I squeezed her fingers. “Even if we have to run.” I winked at her and she shrugged.

We arrived and parked just in time. After a hasty jog toward our seats, we got there as the lights darkened.

“See? We made it.”

“Just barely!” She gripped my hand and held it as the show began. Leaning together in the seats, we were as cozy as could be. Well into the evening, we watched the amazing show. Horses did tricks like turns, jumps through fiery rings, and intricate, dancelike footwork. The riders and dancers didn’t disappoint, with acrobatics and graceful postures on the horses. Since this was their Winter Extravaganza show, we were treated to even more tricks and treats. I caught myself watching Hanna more than once. She stole the show for me. Having her pressed close against my side thrilled me, and she had yet to move aside and claim any space for propriety. It seemed that telling her this was a date, she decided to act like it.

I was in heaven, so close, and seeing her eyes light up and her lips curve in a smile, I fell further under the spell of her beauty. She intoxicated me, both in her beauty on the outside as well as her sharp mind and big heart on the inside. I couldn’t help but wonder how her analytical yet creative brain worked with the clever use of props, stage pieces, costumes, and decorations.

When the intermission came, I ordered the food ahead on an app, and before the show commenced again, our meals were delivered to our row. We hadn’t lacked for conversation. Talking about what we’d liked most so far filled up the break. Then as we tuned back in to the show as it resumed, we kept eating our chicken, corn on the cob, and cowboyish fare.

“That was incredible!” Hanna said as we left after the show. She clung to my side and pulled in a gusty deep breath, theatrical and enthralled about it all.

“I’m glad you liked it,” I told her as we returned to the rental car.

“Did you?” she asked, reminding me that she loved to see others happy.

“Very much.” We got in the car, and I asked, “I know this won’t top it, but would you like to go see some lights?”

Her reply was to lean over the center console of the car and take my hand. “Yes! I’m not sure I want this night to ever end.”

Me neither; Hanna. Me neither. We’d drifted into something new yet old. We were far from strangers, but being like this not as her boss and not as mere friends, it was like a journey in uncharted territory.

We got in line for the Shepherd of the Hills and opted to do the drive-thru lights. It was pretty chilly, and since neither of us brought decent outerwear, we chose the warmth and privacy of checking out the lights in the car.

She *oohed* and *ahhed* more than I did, but I wasn’t my usual grinch-like self. Not *all* the lights were themed about the holidays. A fair amount of the illuminated displays were more generic, simply depicting ice and snow, but everything was well done and caught my eye.

I’d never considered hosting a proper light show at a resort, but seeing how much of an attraction this was, I wondered if I was missing out.

“What about the tower?” she asked once we got through the light trail. “When I looked up the Dixie Stampede, a suggestion came up for the Tower of Inspiration too.”

“Oh, yeah.” I nodded, recalling that tall structure nearby. “The lights would be pretty up there, too.”

“Listen to you,” she teased, “thinking that lights were pretty.”

I shrugged and smiled as she mussed my hair as I drove.

“I’m not saying I’m trying to convert you from your grinchiness, but I am glad you’re having fun.”

“I am.”

“You’re not just saying that, are you? You’re not faking it?”

I laughed, shaking my head. My first thought went to how else someone could fake something on a date, and I mentally groaned at my mind going to the gutter.

We parked and paid for admission. A fairly decent breeze cut through the air, so I draped my arm around her shoulders to keep us close and share body heat on the way into the tower. It wasn’t too crowded, likely because of the bitter weather, and I was glad we didn’t have to wait long to reach the top.

Once we got up there, I was blown away with the scene lying down below for us. The view was unreal. The darkness of the night shrouded the land, giving it an infinite look, but dotted like stars on a live map, so many lights shone in a dreamy mosaic. Colored lights pulled the eye, but the overall brightness of gold and white lights were remarkable from this high up.

Still, I was pulled away from gazing through the windows. Just like at the Dixie Stampede, I was distracted by my girl. I kept sneaking more glances her way as she grinned at the scene. Then I lingered, risking longer looks because she stole my breath.

Wait. My girl? I wasn’t sure when I’d started thinking of her like that. Jacob used to tease me that she was *my* Hanna when he mentioned her, as if there was another girl with her name on Swanson Ridge. I didn’t have a right to be possessive, but the more I spent time near her, it became natural to think of her as someone who belonged in my life—as more than the intelligent event planner I’d hired.

She turned from the windows, catching me staring, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t look away. So many things filtered through my head. I wanted to be open with her and talk, but I couldn’t figure out how to start. Once I did, I was sure that would be doing the opposite of being careful.

I hadn’t set out to make Hanna the woman who would rectify the trust issues Jennifer left in her wake, but it seemed she was taking on the role regardless.

I *wanted* to trust her and believe that my heart could be safe with her.

Her expression suggested that she was feeling uncertain, though. I took her head and stepped closer. It couldn't be a concern about being late. This was the last place we'd decided to go tonight. *Except back to the hotel*. I hated the thought that she could be nervous about that.

"Is something wrong?"

She licked her lips before shyly admitting what was on her mind. "I've been thinking about that flower delivery."

Dammit.

"I know it's silly but I'm really curious about who they're from."

Fuck! Does she think there's someone else in my life? Jennifer was, but she wouldn't be ever again.

"I keep wondering why they made you so upset."

I sighed, realizing she needed to know the truth. I didn't want my girl to feel like she wasn't just that, mine. "They were from my ex. Someone told me that she broke up with the guy she left me for. She cheated on me with him, and she's been trying to weasel her way back into my life."

"Oh." She opened her eyes wide, alarmed.

"No doubt because she has her eye on a new car or Burken bag she wants to use my money to buy."

She cringed. "Oh."

"Yeah. *Oh*, is right. Hanna, there is nothing between me and Jennifer anymore. No matter how much she tries to wiggle back into my life, she's no longer a part of it. I dodged a bullet when the engagement fell through. And I'm grateful it did." I stepped closer and brought my hand up to cup her chin. As I lifted her face to mine, I smiled. "Because I'm here with you now."

She covered my hand with hers, leaning up to meet me in the middle. "Oh, Luke."

We touched our lips together in a tender but passionate kiss. And there, on the top of the tower with all the lights glittering so far down below, I wanted to reassure her that I hoped I would be with her, like this, for every day forward.

HANNA

Luke's soft lips touched mine and a spark of excitement filled me. I leaned into him, pressing my cheek into his big hand as I brought my arms up. Looping them over his shoulders, I kept him right where I needed him.

If he dared to break this kiss, if he thought about stepping back from starting this, I'd go insane. The feel of his lips against mine pulled me to life. It was already exciting and thrilling to be here with him. To *finally* be on a real, honest-to-goodness date. All evening I'd been greedy. I held his hand. I angled against his side. It was an hours' long slow buildup of getting used to his proximity like this, but still, I felt scorched under his kiss.

He sighed, parting his lips, and I smiled at the hidden growl of needing more.

Oh, yeah. Me too, baby.

I widened my fingers to grip the back of his neck and pull him down lower. He didn't hesitate, crushing his lips to mine with an insistent push, demanding more. My nipples hardened at once, teased between the layers of our sweaters and coats that kept me locked to the hard wall of muscles in his chest. My heart raced faster, eager for more, and more, and just *more*. I'd dreamed about such a wet and hot kiss with him for so long, I couldn't stop smiling.

"Yeah, girl." Another spectator in the tower commented. I refused to open my eyes and see where the woman was, but

her voice was clear and close. “You go, girl. You get your man.”

“Somebody’s getting some tonight!” another teased.

My man? Luke never was exclusively mine. More than anything, I wished he could be mine. All to myself. Not connected to me through work, as my boss. Not just being there because he was my brother’s friend. Just me.

Now that he was in my hands, or I was in his, we were smashed together in this torrid, sloppy moment of making out like we’d wither and crumble without our lips together and our tongues sliding together. Right now, Luke gave me the impression he wanted to be mine.

And it was up to me to make that happen. How, though? Up here in this tower with other guests, we had no privacy. I didn’t want to share him at all, not even with others observing our lust for each other. I wanted him to cup my ass and push me against him somewhere else. I wanted to mewl and groan with need somewhere he could hear me, not the catcalls of others coming up here to check out the view down below.

I was the planner. I never just dove into anything. But kissing him back and reveling in his firm embrace, I couldn’t plan. I couldn’t even think, just feel. All I could “plan” for was to get him back to the hotel and have my way with him, alone. There was no more time to mentally get ready or prepare for anything. I felt like my whole life had been a long journey to be this happy and in his arms. Deep down in my soul, I was ready for Luke to be mine.

I’d settled for him noticing me. But now I felt so damn powerful and content to realize he *wanted* me. He had to, unless that bulge in his jeans was a flashlight or something.

He couldn’t keep his mouth off me long enough to speak.

“Let’s, um, get out of here.” He pressed his mouth back to mine, almost peppering my face. I grabbed him, framing his face and kissing him so hard he almost picked me up into his arms and carried me to the wall.

“Uh huh,” I replied breathily. “Let’s go.”

“The car.”

I sucked on his tongue, silencing him with a longer, more frantic kiss.

“Hotel.”

I might have nodded, but he kept his hand on the back of my neck, keeping me in place to devour me, and I couldn't complete that motion.

“Yeah,” I said on a deep exhale. “Yeah.” Now I nodded.

He grinned down at me, licking his lips that were wet from our kisses. Gazing at me with such heat, he seemed to memorize me, searching my face. I couldn't stomach the chance he might be stalling. I didn't want to prolong this aching need to have him.

I was sure. This *was* happening. We both seemed to know it. That kiss unleashed the desire neither of us could ignore. I was confident and reassured to take what I wanted, and I was fully, irrevocably on board to see where things were going.

I grabbed his hand and grinned, almost rushing him to go down the tower.

We didn't speak, suspended in this haze of desire. No one else mattered, and as soon as we slid into his car, I lunged over the console to pull him in for another kiss.

“Fuck, Hanna.” He growled against my lips as he started the car. “Not here.”

I giggled, buckling in but keeping my hand on his hard thigh. “No, not here.” Car sex could be hot, but it was *not* what I'd dreamed of for our first time having sex together.

At each light, each stop, I couldn't help it. I leaned over to kiss him. I cupped him in his pants and slipped my hand up under his sweater. It was impossible to keep my hands to myself, and he was just as desperate, kissing me back and squeezing my leg.

This pull to him was an unstoppable force. There was no way I could put the brakes on my desire, and it thrilled me and turned me on more when he was equally needy for me.

We're doing this. We so are. Luke was my man tonight, and I was all for it.

Once we reached the hotel, he delayed me, pressing me up against the car with a hard and hot kiss. I leaned back against the cool vehicle, relishing the contrast of the chill and the overheated intensity of his body close to mine. It was just another moment of teasing, of dragging out the burning connection we rushed toward. If I had the time to be poetic about it, not so needy and rushed, I would have realized hurrying to get to bed made sense. We'd been dancing around each other for so long. Now that the dam on our attraction had burst, we had to hurry before we drowned.

"You have no idea how long I've thought about this," he said against my lips as he caught his breath.

I rubbed my hand up his back beneath his coat. "Oh, I think I do." I took his hand and jogged for the door. I couldn't speak for him, but *I* had thought about this for a very long time, crushing on him, then wanting him badly.

"My room," I said once we got in the elevator. We were on the same floor, but I felt like I'd be more comfortable in mine. Gabriela hadn't bunked with me this time, and while her room was near mine, Luke and I would be blissfully alone at last. If we went to his room, I feared someone would need him to tend to something.

This time, my boss was coming to my room.

The second we got the door closed behind me, worry kicked in again. I wasn't a virgin, but I lacked a lot of experience. I knew what I liked and didn't, but dammit, I didn't know any tricks. I didn't have many moves. I was younger than him, and as he kissed me and backed me toward the bed as he reached for the button to my jeans, I became frantic with anxiety.

This was why I needed plans. This was why being prepared and practiced mattered. What if he found me lacking? What if I was too inexperienced and amateurish?

He'd unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans along with his. But he'd stopped, cupping my face and staring at me intently. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "What if I disappoint you? I'm not as experienced and I—" At the sweet, patient smile he gave me, I shut up and sighed. How could he know to comfort me with just a look?

"You can't." He kissed me deeply. "You can't disappoint me. In any way, Hanna." Stepping back, he pulled off his sweater and T-shirt, revealing his chiseled chest.

The sight of his ripped body quieted the worries, and with his smoldering stare on me, I knew he was right. He wouldn't disappoint me, so why should I stress the opposite? I slowly grinned, lifting my arms up for him to take off my sweater too.

He groaned, dragging his hands over my sides beneath my sweater. After he held me there, his hands so hot and possessive, he pulled my sweater up over my head. In my bra and panties, I felt so vulnerable, but he didn't let me fall back into that worry of being inadequate. He removed his boxers, letting me see how hard his thick dick was. Fully erect and with the tip glistening, it was long with veins I wanted to trace.

"You keep looking at me like that, babe, and this will be over way too quick."

I giggled turning as he kept an arm around me as he got on the bed. He pulled me into his arms, twisting so I landed on the mattress beneath him. Wiggling without breaking another urgent kiss, I lost my panties. He stroked his tongue along mine as he brought his hand to my bra, and with a quick struggle on the clasp, he removed that too.

Kissing him had already made me so wet and achy for him. He slid his hand over my stomach to feel me, and he cursed, dipping his finger into me.

"So wet."

"So ready," I corrected him, "for you. Please, baby."

I almost felt silly to use that endearment, but I couldn't help it. He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a

condom he had taken out of his wallet earlier. Once he slipped it on, he nudged his wide head at my entrance.

“Please, Luke.” I wasn’t experienced, but I could make up for it with eagerness. I widened my legs, wrapping them around his waist. He didn’t need to be told twice.

Gritting his teeth, he showed how he strained not to rush it. The muscles and tendons in his neck flexed. His arms tightened as he hovered his sexy, hulking body over mine. Then with a low growl, he slid all the way in to the hilt.

He stilled, stretching me so fully with a delicious burn. Pleasure zinged through me, and I mewled, dropping my head back on the pillow. Lowering to kiss me along the bottom of my jawline, he pulled out, then drove right back in, just as hard and steadily.

Over and over, he gave me those long, deep thrusts, and he was right. It was over too soon. We’d both been so riled up and ready that we hadn’t lasted long. Each minute of this man filling me and pleasuring me would remain in my mind forever.

I reached the peak and came crashing down too soon. A sweet, shattering orgasm claimed me. He grunted, kissing me hard as I cried out my pleasure. With another jerk, then shaking groan, he followed me to ecstasy, coming just as hard.

Limbless and sated, I didn’t think or worry. He didn’t seem ready to move either, slumped against me and catching his breath. This was, in short, utter perfection. I never wanted to leave this blissful moment, but I knew he’d leave sooner or later. All I could do was smile wide, wondering how long I would have until he’d get up and go.

Giving in to the lust that had a chokehold on us was one thing. Getting my hopes up to think he’d stay was just silly. Before long, though, as I got sleepier with his hot body against mine and his lazy caresses on my arm, I fell asleep in his arms.

When I woke the next morning, I blinked away the sleep with a sudden shock. Luke was still here, pressed alongside my body. He hadn’t left through the night like I’d expected

him to. I vaguely recalled him getting up in the night to remove the condom and wipe me clean, but he hadn't abandoned me. He stayed, keeping me in a tight embrace.

I rolled over to face him as he grumbled in his sleep. Seeing him all sleepy and lazy like this endeared him to me even more.

"Morning." Without opening his eyes, he brought his lips toward mine and I giggled when he missed for a kiss, pressing his mouth to the tip of my chin. Once more, he blindly sought me out, and I stroked his cheek as he kissed me.

"Morning," I replied as he opened his eyes.

"Don't tell me we need to get up yet."

I shrugged, giggling more as he hugged me closer, like I was his favorite pillow to snuggle.

I wasn't sure what was on his agenda, but I knew mine. One thing I hadn't penciled into my schedule was waking up with him. I would gladly sacrifice my workout in the gym for time with him, but I had to ask, "What does this mean for us going forward?"

He sighed. "It drives you crazy not to have a plan, doesn't it?"

"Kinda. It's just that I'm on your payroll and all. It complicates things. Not to mention you're my brother's friend."

He rolled me over so I lay on my back. Hovering over me, he kissed me soundly. "We'll figure it out, babe."

Knowing he wanted to figure something out was music to my ears. It wouldn't be a one-time thing.

"I just need a bit of time for things to slow down."

Slow down? I frowned.

"I promise." He slid over me and off the bed to stand and smile down at me. "We'll revisit this after Christmas, okay?"

I didn't want to be put on hold, but he had a point. It had been a breakneck pace for this month. *It's less than two weeks*

away.

I didn't really like the principle of it, but I respected that he might need to take this slowly and not rush.

I smiled and sighed. "Okay. We can take it at your pace and wait."

I think.

LUKE

After Hanna and I got up, we had to split up. Work called. She was expected to catch up with Gabriela and ensure tonight's ball went off without a hitch and I had a few mostly casual meetings to attend. Several local business owners wanted to discuss some ideas with me, and since the proposals would benefit the resorts, I attended them all and paid as much attention as I could.

It wasn't easy. Every time I zoned out, Hanna filled my mind. Surrendering to my need for her had been better than I could have imagined. She was sweet and sensual. Recalling how trusting she was as she proved she was as hot for me as I was her, I fought back a groan.

I wanted her again.

And again.

Once would never be enough, especially with how quickly we'd enjoyed each other. We hadn't even experimented with foreplay at all. I hadn't taken my time to cherish her and learn every inch of her body. Rushing it was cheating both of us, and had I been able to last longer, I would have taken my time to explore and pleasure her.

Neither of us had that level of patience. She'd come too soon, milking me dry. It was so good that I hadn't stayed awake in her embrace. And when I realized I was sleeping over, not just sleeping with her, I couldn't make myself be rational and leave.

I'd been helpless to give in to my desire, but now that I'd had her, my need for her seemed to have been multiplied, not reduced. On one hand, I thought having sex with her would calm me. I'd figured it would satisfy me to no longer have to wonder about her. Instead, I realized I'd only intensified this pull to her.

Once my meetings were over, I hurried to dress and head to the ball. I was late, fashionably so, and as soon as I got there, I sought her out. I was glad that she and Gabriela had seen to the details and checked everything so thoroughly that they didn't need to step in and help—not in the kitchen or on the stage. All was going according to plan.

I found her easily enough, though, admiring the carousel with Gina. She'd been rude with her comments about the attraction, but she must have had to eat her words tonight. Numerous guests were riding the slow attraction, and many more were posing for pictures near it. Each horse had a Santa hat or reindeer antlers attached to their heads, and with the twinkling lights wrapped through the antique display, the final effect was breathtaking. Hanna was a genius to think outside the box for this. Everyone who took a picture would have the logo for the resorts, and I had no doubt this press would be viral.

As I sidled up to her, wishing I could pull her into my arms right here in front of everyone, I settled for simply complimenting her. "Brilliant, Hanna."

She nodded, turning toward me slightly to check me out in sexy onceover that tempted me to take her back to my room. "Told ya." In bed this morning, she'd asked what would happen next. She was right to be cautious about the work relationship. My answer for her had been honest but vague. Taking things one step at a time was wise, but I didn't know what it meant. To do this right, we had to keep our business and personal lives separate. Right now, though, she taunted me to say the hell with it and just kiss her to show my appreciation rather than tell her.

Her dress was a deep green with coppery brown sewn into it. While it wasn't overly Christmasy, it was formal yet fitting

for the country-themed event she'd planned so well. Her attire didn't matter. She would shine in anything.

Or nothing at all.

Standing close to her was too dangerous of an idea. So with a smile and a nod, I left her before I fell further under the temptation to truly show her what I thought of her brilliant, sexy self.

I worked the room, mingling with guests and checking in with my staff. Still, I was drawn to seek out Hanna. Regardless of what I told her about needing to keep things slow until after Christmas and recognizing that we needed to be careful on the clock, it was impossible to pretend she wasn't here.

If we weren't sharing sneaky glances, we were daring to directly check each other out. I would never forget how she almost walked into a wall, staring at me like she wanted to climb me on the spot. I wasn't much better, distracted with the sight of her laughing with Gabriela and having to ask the congressman guest to repeat himself three times because I wasn't listening.

The mere thought that we shouldn't be doing this gave me a rush. Knowing she was forbidden made this all the more thrilling. By the middle of the night, all I wanted to do was steal her away and have a private moment away from prying eyes.

I tried to appease my need for her by approaching her at the bar. As she checked on the liquor to see if anything needed to be restocked, I leaned against the bar and listened to a guest asking me something trivial. Then I turned to meet her behind the bar. I intentionally bumped into her, feeling like I was playing with fire just being in her space. She had the ability to light me up, and I wasn't sure how well I could tame my desire. She gasped, leaning into me with a sly smile.

I mocked a grunt of disapproval, not stepping back. I was addicted to her touch. "Don't you have other things you should be doing?"

She played along. “Hmm. I could think of a few tasks I’d like to check off my list.” Her hand dropped, brushing ever so lightly against my crotch. My dick instantly jerked, and I flinched at the tug of arousal she elicited through me.

“I think you’re too much of a hardass who needs to relax. It’s Christmastime.”

I leaned closer, wishing I could haul her into my arms and dip her back for a kiss. Instead I muttered darkly into her ear, “You’re going to pay, talking to the boss like that.”

She giggled, biting on her lower lip.

After checking that no one was looking or watching us back here, I smacked her ass and stepped aside. “Go on now,” I said, trying my hardest to sound stern. I wasn’t any good at role playing. I knew she could hear the laughter in my tone.

Damn, is she impossible to resist. I strode away, leaving her at the bar before she teased me any further. Just to avoid being drawn to her with her playful looks, I focused on staying away and mingling in the crowd. I tried to small talk and schmooze, but it was a lost cause to dismiss her completely. Despite my efforts, I could not get her out of my mind.

Fortunately, for the sake of us not doing something stupid and letting anyone know that we were fooling around, she was busy with the cleanup that followed the event. Unfortunately, in the manner of which I wished I could take back my words about approaching this slowly with one step at a time, I refrained from going to her room.

I had to give her space. She deserved a chance to think this through.

On the flight home, it was all I did. I couldn’t help but obsess about what we’d shared and stare at her on the plane. She gave me a flirty glance, so naughty that I almost said the hell with it and asked her to sit with me, but I didn’t. I refused to be completely contradictory like that.

I told her that we should take it slow and hold off on addressing our connection until after Christmas, but I didn’t know why the hell I thought that was feasible.

Just a few weeks ago, I'd sworn myself to being a lifelong bachelor, a forever single man.

Jennifer left wounds that still had yet to close. She'd done a number on me, and because of her infidelity and manipulation, I feared I'd always struggle to get close to women.

Am I even able to trust again? If there was ever a worthy candidate to trust, it would be Hanna. I wanted to believe in her feelings for me and trust on being happy with her, but I knew she wasn't without flaws. Money could corrupt the best of people. When I'd met Jennifer, she hadn't been obvious about wanting me for my money.

But Hanna knows who I am. She's always known my family and that we have money. She'd never acted with interest for money before.

What if she's using me for a job? To get her name out there? What if she has ulterior motives? What if she only wants to be with me out of pity? She's admitted that she's a people pleaser. What if she only wants me as a project to make me happy?

I shook my head, feeling the start of a headache with the jumbling mess of too many questions and worries.

It's just paranoia talking.

I knew Hanna was a good woman. She came from a good family. She was Joshua's sister. I *knew* her, and I had confidence to believe she was better than most women I'd ever meet.

As I stared out the window, waiting to get home, I knew I had to get over this insecurity. Just because Jennifer hurt me didn't mean Hanna would. Realizing I had deeper hangups than I first considered, I felt like maybe I'd made the right call after all.

Maybe it was for the best to hit pause and take this slowly. It might be wise to sit on this until after Christmas. I could use that time to really think about it all and determine if I was ready for Hanna.

Because she was too damn good to ruin. Hanna didn't deserve a doubtful man. She deserved a real man, one who could revel in her love.

And I damn well refused to consider her being with anyone else.

HANNA

The days following the Branson event were hectic yet not. Gabriela and I had a small break from planning events for Robertson Resorts. We didn't have anything happening from now until New Year's Eve, but that didn't mean we were looking for anything to do.

She was busy with small catering orders for friends locally. I was still at my computer, doing research and really getting into all the details for the NYC party. With it in a bigger, busier city, we really needed to up the details put into it. It meant we weren't at the office as often. I did most of my work on the phone and on my laptop at home. But not going into the office was strange. I'd gotten used to going there and seeing Luke. He was busy in his office. I felt silly to look, but I'd glanced at the inner office calendar and saw that he was booked almost nonstop with meetings and reviews. He was the CEO of a billion-dollar company. Of course, he was busy, regardless of the time of the year.

When the day came to head out for some Christmas shopping with the girls, I was eager for something social to keep my mind off Luke. I'd already gotten him a gift, and I really hoped he'd like it. It was harder than I thought it'd be to think of something for him. I'd never gotten him an actual present before. He was never mine to get anything for. I still wasn't sure what he wanted to be in my life, but I would just have to wait and see on that.

I loved Christmas and couldn't wait for it. This year, though, I was almost more eager for it to be over so Luke and I

could take *us* off hold.

All morning, through lunch, and into the afternoon, we shopped. Autumn had to leave early, but Liberty, Poppy, and Gabriela were with me to shop till we dropped.

We gave in at last to get coffee, and I sighed into the steam wafting from my cup. The last time I was out getting coffee, I'd bumped into Luke. It felt like a lifetime ago. Since having him grind against me and fill me so perfectly, it was safe to say a lot had changed.

"There. I'm done. Or I think I'm done." Liberty exhaled her relief and sat back in her seat.

"Hmmm. I need to get something for my dad yet," Gabriela said. "He's so hard to buy a present for."

"I'm done." I nodded, glad I could claim it.

"What'd ya get Luke?" Poppy asked, teasing me with a sly smile.

"Something." I winked. "It's a surprise."

"Oooh. We've moved on to the getting-gifts stage." Liberty sat up.

"Oh, yeah. Getting gifts and getting laid," Gabriela joked.

I playfully smirked at her. "Yeah. Only once."

"Only once?" Poppy asked.

I set my cup down to explain. Maybe they'd have some advice. "We slept together in Branson, the night before the ball. He took me out on a date to see the Dixie Stampede. Then we saw the lights and went to the tower, and when we kissed, it just led from one thing to another."

They all cheered and teased me.

"Good!" Poppy said. "It was a long time coming."

"Like, literally coming?" Gabriela joked.

I shoved her lightly. "Oh, my gosh. You're really in the gutter today."

She giggled. “But she’s right. You’ve been crushing on him forever.”

“But she said only once,” Liberty said. “How come?”

“Well, you know how I like to plan and such. When I woke up the next morning, I felt so unsure. Like what would happen next?”

Gabriela nodded. “Yeah, he is our boss.”

I frowned at her. “For now. He’s technically my client. I’m not a contracted employee like a regular person at Robertson Resorts. I have my business and he’s simply hiring me that way.”

“Isn’t that a technicality?” Liberty asked.

“Is it?” I shrugged. “He told me he wanted to hire me and Gabby for all the things in December. Nothing was said about after.”

Gabriela laughed. “Oh, come on. Like he doesn’t want you to stay.”

“Well, how would I know? I was thinking maybe he said to put us on hold until after Christmas because I wouldn’t be his employee in January and that wouldn’t be an obstacle to being together.”

“Huh.” Gabriela furrowed her brow. “I hadn’t thought about it like that. I mean, I’m assuming he’s gonna stick with you. Not just stick it in you but you know. Keep you for *all* his event planning.”

I ignored her naughty joke. “Yeah, but that would mean quitting *my* business to just work for him.”

“Is that something you want to do?” Poppy asked.

My cheeks warmed up. Gabriela noticed. “I think maybe she’s only thinking about doing *him*.” She giggled, and it was so infectious we all cracked up.

“I’m not sure. If you’re saying do I want to eliminate all reasons I can’t be with him?” I held my hands up in a shrug.

“So, you agreed to wait?” Liberty asked.

“Yeah. Not wait, but like go slow, I think.” I frowned, thinking back to that ball. “But then he was flirty at the party and you could just feel the tension simmering between us.”

“Well, I’m happy for you however it works out,” Poppy said.

If it does work out. “But how do I approach this? Why does he need to wait until after Christmas to sort out how he really feels about me? Shouldn’t he just know? And why the mixed messages? One minute, we’re falling into bed together for the best sex of my life. Then we’re talking about waiting until the holiday season is over. And *then* he’s slapping my ass and being so sexy and needy for me at the ball.” I pouted. “It’s all so confusing.”

“Sounds like it,” Gabriela said. “But now that you’ve mentioned it, maybe it is just that work thing. He’s got us on contract for the events in December. Maybe he just wants to keep things as neat as possible, as professional as possible, until you can talk about it.”

I nodded. “And there’s no time at all to talk to him. He’s busy.”

“Then bring him to the party and get a moment with him there,” Poppy said. “Remember, y’all, Landon and I are determined to throw the best Christmas Party the street has ever seen. Next weekend.” She narrowed her eyes and pointed at us one by one. “Y’all better be there.” When she got to me, she winked. “Bring your grinch, too.”

We chorused agreements that we would come. And now that she’d put the idea in my head, maybe she had a good point. Asking Luke to come hang out with us at that party wouldn’t be a direct invitation to something Christmasy, which he was allergic to. It could be, instead, a way to be surrounded by our friends, and I could try to talk to him there.

After our coffees were empty, we loaded up our arms with our bags and began to exit the mall. On the way out, I frowned and stopped at a cardboard display. As the girls joked about *maybe* stopping in one more store, I meandered toward the

stand. It was a toy drive box, and like the previous ones I'd spotted during the day, this one was almost empty.

"Damn." I shook my head, saddened that it only had a single LEGO box in it.

A woman popped up behind the cutout stand advertising the toy drive. "Oh, hey!" She smiled brightly, and I noticed her name tag that identified her as someone from the charity. "Happy holidays!"

I pointed at the container and frowned. "Sure doesn't seem like much is in there."

She sighed. "Yeah. I know. Maybe it'll be better tomorrow. There are boxes all over town to collect toys and donations for the kids' charity." She shrugged. "Many of them look like this. People just don't have as much to give these days."

I shook my head. "That's too bad." The other girls had gathered up with me. As Gabriela shuffled her bags on her arms and in her hands, she grinned. "Well, I'll get something. Once we dump these bags in the car, I've got time to get something."

"Yeah!" I brightened at my best friend's instant generosity. Mom liked to joke that we were such good friends because we both were so giving and compassionate, and maybe she was right. "I will too."

"Hell, you unload my arms and I'll fill 'em right back up," Poppy said. "Let's go!"

We unloaded our gifts in our cars and set out shopping once more. Instead of consulting my notebook and checking off items on my carefully curated lists, I freestyled and just shopped. For another couple of hours, we browsed the mall and bought as much as we could to fill the boxes in the mall, but it still didn't seem like we were making a dent.

"We've got to do something about this," Liberty said.

I nodded. I was crushed at the possibility a child would wake up with nothing under the tree. I had no clue when it would happen for me. My clock wasn't ticking too loudly yet, but I knew I would enjoy watching my children waking up at

the crack of dawn all excited to rush to the tree and see what gifts waited. Every child should have something to get excited about on Christmas morning.

“We need to get the word out,” Gabriela said. “Sure, they have those signs, but it’s not enough.”

I nodded. “I’m going to talk to Luke about it. Maybe there’s something he can do.”

“Oh, good idea,” Liberty said. “He loves paying it forward and giving back to the community. In fact, I’m going to talk to Joshua too.”

“I’ll see what Landon thinks too,” Poppy said.

“Since we’re not as busy with events until Christmas,” I said, glancing at Gabby, “maybe we could put something together for the toy drive, some kind of volunteer event or something.”

She grinned, pulling me into a hug. “You’re such a sweetheart. That’s a brilliant idea.”

I smiled wide, thinking back to when Luke gave me that same praise, calling me brilliant to think outside the box and have a carousel at the last event.

“Luke’s a lucky man to have a giving girl like you,” Poppy said.

Yeah, so long as he actually does want me to be his girl after all this is over.

I could only hope, and heading up something for this toy drive was an excellent impulsive idea to avoid thinking too much about him and why he couldn’t stick with what he said.

LUKE

At the end of a long day of calls, meetings, and reviews, I returned to my office and stopped short.

“What the fuck?” I mumbled under my breath. “*Again?*”

Sitting on the edge of my desk was another floral arrangement. This one had bright white and pink petals bursting with bright colors and too strong scents that made my office seem like it’d been doused with perfume. I gagged at the cloying smell and marched up to the obnoxious gift.

My blood boiled as I picked up the card and read it. I already knew who it was from, but I narrowed my eyes and scanned it anyway, on the off chance I could be wrong.

I wasn’t.

Just a little something to make you smile. Missing you this Christmas. – J

“You bitch.” I seethed, losing my temper. I snapped, whispering that out loud. I was alone in my office, and all the void space around me felt like a vacuum of anger swirling me into a pit. I couldn’t climb out of the fury that enveloped me.

“Missing me this Christmas?” I spat under my breath as I crumpled the card. My vision blurred as I fisted my hand around the paper.

She’d tried to lie her way out of cheating. Then she confessed to it without shame. I recalled so vividly asking her why. Why I couldn’t have been good enough for her to stay loyal. She’d ruined me with her reply, stating that we never

had to actually be in love or get along. It was just for appearances, wasn't it? The audacity of that woman. She broke my heart and stomped on my efforts to show her what our cozy Christmases could look like in the future.

And now she had the nerve to tell me she was missing me this Christmas? She hadn't wanted to spend a real holiday with me in any year!

I picked up the vase and threw it away.

"I'm going to need a bigger fucking garbage can for this," I muttered. Once the vase settled in the can, already emptied for the afternoon, it rolled to its side. A white teddy bear had been tied to the base, and I plucked it out, smirking at the happy little face of the polar bear figure.

A stuffed animal? I shook my head, not amused. This was something I could see myself picking out for a kid, maybe gifting it to a little toddler to find under the tree. I didn't know what she intended, gifting me a damn toy, but it was a sign that she was scaling up. First emails. Then flowers. Now more crap. When would it stop?

I had to try to prevent her attempts from reaching me at all. I clutched the bear in my hand and headed to the front lobby. Cheryl was there, still working on her Wordle. When she heard me striding toward her front counter space, she smiled.

"Wasn't that staff party great?"

We'd held it last night, and all I could focus on was that Hanna wasn't there. She and Gabriela had turned down invites, explaining they weren't "official" Robertson employees. But that party wasn't on my mind now.

Cheryl stood, frowning with my approach. "What's wrong, Luke?"

I thrust the bear out to her. "Did you authorize this delivery to come to my office?"

She shrugged, then nodded. "Yeah. It was attached to a vase, right?" She beamed. "So pretty."

I shook my head. “Do *not* have them delivered to my office anymore. If I get anything else from them, pitch it.” I showed her how much I meant what I said by throwing the bear into her trashcan behind her counter.

“*Jeez*, Luke. What the hell?” She scowled, turning back to retrieve the bear and brush it off. “I could take this to my nephew. You don’t have to be such a grinch and waste a nice gesture.”

“It was *not* a nice gesture.” Jennifer was only sending that crap to try and weasel her way back into my life again. “No more deliveries like that to my office.”

“Fine. All right.” She continued brushing off the bear, clearly intending to save it. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Good.”

She sneered at me, old enough not to take shit from me even though I was her boss. “It’s not my fault someone cared to send you something like this. These bears are expensive.”

Like I’d know. I didn’t have kids yet. A bear was a bear. And those flowers were not sent out of care. Jennifer was a master manipulator.

“I was only doing my job,” she grouched, fluffing up the bear.

I exhaled, coming down from the adrenaline rush. While I hadn’t raised my voice at her, not really, I felt terrible. Added to the way she wanted to preserve the toy for her nephew, I felt awful. *I’m sending that kid a huge bear now*. It wouldn’t make up for my error, but it would be an honest example of a “good gesture” that she referenced mistakenly.

“I’m sorry.” I rubbed my hand down my face. “I’m sorry for lashing out, Cheryl.”

She shook her head and rounded the counter to pat my arm. “You’re never pleasant this time of the year, but I thought you seemed happier. Until yesterday.”

I huffed. Yeah, I wasn’t Mr. Congeniality at that staff party. She’d clearly noticed how much I’d wanted to leave. It was

because I missed Hanna. I was reverting to my grouchiness because I wanted her at my side. And now this BS with Jennifer?

I gave her a small smile. “Give that bear to your nephew.”
And don't be shocked when I send another.

I left her and stopped at the security office before returning to my office. Jennifer was only upping her methods of contacting me, and I seriously wondered if she would go further to stop by here. Fortunately, I'd been living in a different place when she and I were engaged. If she knew where I lived, I'd need to hire a security dog to bark her off my property.

What if she does show up here?

I spoke with security, firmly explaining that she was not permitted to enter the building under any circumstances. After they understood and wrote down my orders, I headed back up to my floor.

I got off the elevator and detoured on the way to my office. It was almost on autopilot that I took this long way to reach my space. I'd adopted this funky route when I wanted to get a glimpse of Hanna working in the temporary office she shared with Gabriela.

I reached it, slowing down to linger at the doorway. It was empty now. They hadn't been coming in since the Branson event, and I missed having them here. Of course, I wanted Hanna nearby, but I also missed Gabriela being near. She was bubbly and witty, a pleasure to work with. Both of them were great partners in planning, and I mentally made another note to schedule a time to talk to Hanna about long-term plans.

I'd been hesitant to broach the topic. I wanted her to work for me. Of course, I wanted to retain the talent that she brought to the table. But after sleeping with her, how would that work? I'd be sleeping with my employee? Dating someone who worked for me? Because once wasn't enough. While I still struggled with the concept of trusting her with my heart, I knew I was far from done with her. It was part of why I wanted to wait until after Christmas to talk about *us*, because I

had no clue if she wanted to continue planning events for Robertson Resorts.

I tapped my knuckles on the doorframe, staring absently into the space she and Gabriela would have occupied. With the NYC event out a ways, we didn't need to operate at the rushed speed. I knew she'd taken her laptop home to source things, but I suspected she was perhaps intimidated to come to work after we'd slept together.

After all, I was the one to suggest we stall on figuring us out, if there was an us.

Just the same, I wished I could see her smile. That sexy girl lit up every room she was in, but when she was near, gazing at me with that gleeful twinkle in her dark eyes, I felt instantly happier, like her mere presence was a balm on my soul.

I turned, knowing I needed to get back to my office and close up for the day, but I ran right into her. As if my thoughts had summoned her, Hanna was suddenly right there.

In an ugly Christmas sweater and tight jeans, she looked dressed down but still so put together. Her hair lay in long waves over her shoulders, and her cheeks were pink, like perhaps she'd been hurrying to reach me here. The scent of the cool air outside clung to her, and I was confused what warranted her rush to get to me.

"Hey, Hanna!" I raised my brows, so stunned to just see her right when I was thinking about her so much.

"Luke!" She smiled warmly and leaned over to hug me, still catching her breath. She must have really been in a hurry. While she didn't linger, wrapping her arms around me, she didn't skimp on the casual affection. "I was hoping to talk to you."

"Sure, sure." I smiled because, around her, I couldn't fight them back enough. "Something wrong?" I lifted my hand to gesture for her to head to my office, and when she started that way, I fisted my hand at my side. Holding her soft, delicate

hand would've made me feel more grounded, but not here. Not at work.

“I was shopping with the girls earlier and we noticed that many collection containers for the local toy drive were almost empty. The woman from the kids' charity said they hadn't been getting many donations. We got several things, but it still seems like so much.”

We reached my office, and I closed the door behind her. “That's rotten.”

She scrunched her nose. “Ugh. More like something was rotten in here.” She waved her hand under her nose, and I mentally cringed at the lingering scent from those flowers and hoping she didn't look toward the trash can. “Have a visitor who swam in perfume or something?”

I rolled my eyes, and she sobered. “Um. Sorry. That's none of my business.”

Shit. Was she thinking I had a woman in here? I only had eyes for her, but that felt like such a risk to say. She didn't give me a chance to explain anyway, shaking her head and continuing.

“Um, the toys. I was wondering and hoping that maybe we could do something.”

I sat on the edge of my desk, loving the way she'd worded that.

We sounded good. Me and her. I suspected she meant a collective we, as her and Robertson Resorts.

“I'd love to find a way to get more donations. Do you think something could be done?” She winced. “And on a late notice?”

I chuckled. “Oh, sure, like *you* have a problem doing things on a rush.” Crossing my arms, I studied her. She really meant this. She wanted to be that altruistic and do something good just for the sake of making kids happy. I was crazy to ever think of comparing her to gold-digging Jennifer. “It would be great to organize an event for it. We've got the manpower, and we've got plenty who'd love to pitch in.”

“Not to mention the social media reach,” she added, pointed at me. “I think that’s the biggest issue, getting the word out. I’ll help, obviously.”

“Then go for it. You can use Robertson Resorts as a sponsor. Whatever resources we have, you can use. I’ll help as much as I can, but I think it’d be best if I let you run with this, Hanna.”

“Really?” She beamed at me, so damn happy that I felt like a mighty man to be able to please her.

I nodded. “Really.”

Best of all, it’d bring her back to the office, near me so I could torment myself with seeing her day in and out, wondering when I would be ready to go for a true future with her.

HANNA

I wasn't surprised that Luke was willing to do something for the toy drive. He wasn't a fan of Christmas. I'd never forget my lesson that he didn't want any holiday spirit contaminating his grinchiness. But when it came to being generous and giving back to the community, I had no doubts. Luke was wealthy, but he didn't horde it or flaunt it.

More than once, the Robertsons hosted charity events, either locally or at other locations where they had properties. I knew Luke was giving, but seeing him get so involved in my spontaneous request made me smile even more.

"He's just happy to have an excuse to see you here again," Gabriela whispered in the office we'd been working out of. Within a day, Luke had me and Gabriela in the office and getting this prepared.

Luke spoke with Eddie across the conference table, and both men looked up at us whispering together.

"What was that?" Luke asked.

"Nothing." Gabriela gave him a shit-eating grin that would likely only make him think the opposite.

"So, a kids' event," someone from marketing said. "What are the main points you want to post about?"

I turned my laptop around to show her images while I listed them from my notebook. Each line I referenced, I checked a dot next to the bullet point.

“An assortment of games, similar to what could be found at a carnival or fair but themed for Christmas.”

She laughed lightly, nodding. “I ordered that bean bag toss board for my kindergartener’s school party. You sure know where to look for kids’ things. I bet yours have a great Christmas.”

I blushed, not daring enough to glance at Luke. “I, um, don’t have any.” A strong *yet* waited on the tip of my tongue, but I buckled down and kept going.

“Then we have a face-painting station. Services already donated.” I smiled, thinking of Poppy and her art friends.

“Then some crafts, simple, since it’s just an extra activity for the kids to check out. And then of course, the big man himself.”

Gabriela spoke up. “Most, if not all materials have already been pledged as donations.”

“What about the food?” Luke asked.

“Simple fare, a meal, but light since families will be eager to go home for the holiday,” I said. Gabriela shared the menu, which was basic in design but I knew it would be scrumptious on the plate.

“Then the cookie station, that’ll take up a good section too.”

“I’ve spoken to several companies about inflatables. Not necessarily bouncy houses, but other holiday-themed items.”

“So, more like a kids’ carnival?” the marketing woman asked.

I shook my head. “Not entirely. People can buy or donate tables. Plus, the silent auction Robertson Resorts is running online will draw in a significant amount of money for the charity.”

“Which I will personally match,” Luke said.

I sighed, not even caring who saw me gazing at him with dreamy eyes. No matter what anyone said, I knew this man

had a heart of gold. He was already giving so much by auctioning rooms, activities, and different reservations for Robertson properties all over the world.

For another good while, we discussed the main points marketing would need to jump on right away. Coordinating with the staff here was a simple joy. I was glad to work with such a dependable staff here, and I was pleased with how smoothly everything was going.

“Excellent ideas, as always,” the marketing associate said as she stood to leave the office. She smiled at me and Gabriela. “I look forward to working with you well into the future. You make it seem so easy!”

Once she left, Gabriela cleared her throat and faced Luke. “How about that, anyway?”

He lifted his brows. “What do you mean?”

“Are there any plans for Hanna and I to stay in the New Year?”

I tried to kick her under the table but my foot smacked into the table instead. “Ow,” I hissed.

Luke fought a smile, righting his cup before it skidded from the impact of my hard kick. “I’ve had some ideas about that, yes.” He nodded. “We’re still working out compensation packages to offer you both. I understand that would impact the time and energy you would have to dedicate to *your* business, but it is something that is in the works from my end.” He looked at me, locking me in his serious gaze.

Wow. Okay. I hadn’t intended to have this discussion today, but I couldn’t be mad at Gabriela for bringing it up. She wanted to run her own company, but I knew she hoped I would stay with Robertson Resorts and Luke.

But wouldn’t that just make it even harder to be with him in the way I truly want to? As his woman? His partner?

I slid my notebook closer and turned to a new page. It lay there empty, but I didn’t have a clue what to write there. I hadn’t given it enough thought yet, but if and when I was expected to jump into negotiations or being put on the spot to

express my goals for my career, I wanted to have some notes or ideas jotted down.

Luke picked up on my tension. He cleared his throat and scooted his chair back. “But that conversation wasn’t on today’s agenda.” Standing, he smiled at us both and buttoned his jacket. “Eddie, we can take a break now to go over those budget items.”

His right-hand man stood, nodding. “Sure, sure. Gabby, Hanna, would you like some coffee sent up from the café?”

After the jolt from thinking I had to talk about my future, I didn’t need anything else to keep me awake and perky. I’d be jolted from caffeine now.

“No thanks,” I told him. Gabriela declined as well, getting up to close the door.

“Gabby!” I hissed.

“Okay, okay.” She sat and turned her chair to face me. “I totally did that out of the blue. It just seemed like such a good time to bring it up.”

I clutched my notebook to my chest. “No! *Not* a good time. I haven’t even outlined—”

“Anything. Yes, I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to give the equivalent of a heart attack to you, obsessive planner that you are.”

I steadied my breaths, giving her a stink eye.

“But I couldn’t take it!” She lifted her hands and slumped back in her seat, exasperated. “You didn’t see what I did.”

I narrowed my eyes. “See what? We were talking about the toy drive and the event we’re hurrying to put together for it.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. That’s what *you* were focusing on. I was watching him, too. And I’ll tell you what, Hanna. He looks like a man in love.”

I rolled my eyes. “All right. You’re getting way far ahead of yourself now.” Still, her words made me giddy inside. “He’s asked me to wait on any romance. That’s the opposite of love.”

She grinned. “When Margo made that slip in assuming you had kids already, oh, my gosh. You should’ve seen the look on his face.”

I was too busy burning up with embarrassment.

“It was like *he* wanted to talk about kids with you.”

I cracked up. “Are you listening to yourself? You are so far out of touch now, jumping to conclusions and grasping at the most farfetched ideas that can hit your head.” I snapped my fingers left and right, emphasizing how all over the place she was with her comments.

“I think he’s absolutely smitten with you, Hanna.”

I shook my head. “Smitten doesn’t mean ‘let’s wait a couple of weeks to address the fact we slept together.’”

She shrugged. “Maybe he’s shy.”

I borrowed a page from her book, jumping to wild conclusions. “Maybe I’m not the only woman in his life and he can’t make up his mind.”

She blew a raspberry. “What? That’s ridiculous.”

“Yesterday, when I talked to him in his office, it smelled like someone with perfume had been in there.”

“So what if there was? He’s into *you*, Hanna. I can tell. I’m a witness.”

I shook my head. “Then why wouldn’t he just want to commit now? At all?”

Gabriela pulled her laptop closer, readying to dismiss my concerns. “Like I said, shy. Or scared. And I bet that smell was another flower delivery. When I spoke with Cheryl about helping with this event, she mentioned another one came to his office and he was livid about it.”

“See! Another woman in his life.” I didn’t want to compete for him.

“No. A woman in his past, not his future.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but my phone dinged.

Luke: Can you come to my office?

“Aha! Look at you.” Gabriela giggled. “It’s a text from him, isn’t it?”

I stood and pressed send on my affirmative. “How can you tell?”

“You get that secret little smile. Go on. Go on.” She winked before turning to her laptop.

I didn’t know what he wanted to talk to me about, but I would take him up on any excuse to be together. He couldn’t be asking me to come to his office to get frisky. That wouldn’t work with the goal of keeping things strictly professional here.

I knocked and entered his office, finding him deep into multiple things at his desk.

“Hey.” He smiled quickly. “One thing. Well, two. First, I didn’t mean to surprise you with that talk about becoming a permanent employee here. I’m sorry if it made you uncomfortable.”

I shook my head. “No, that’s on Gabby. She asked.”

“And two, we neglected to think of *where* this event will be for the kids’ charity.”

I smiled. “Nope. I already had a place in mind. I neglected to tell you though. Silly me for thinking you could read my mind.”

He went still and gave me a slow onceover. “Trust me, I’d love to know what you’re thinking.”

Oh, man. I licked my lips, feeling too warm under his intense look. *If you only knew.*

I cleared my throat, tamping down the racier thoughts that were always near the surface where he was concerned. “The local resort. Where we already had that first event. The Winter Wonderland Ball.”

He nodded. “Good thinking, but we’d need to adjust the decorations and setup to make it more kid friendly.”

“Oh, definitely. I’ve already got lots of ideas.” I opened my book and went through them, getting more and more excited with each point. We had a good bare bones of décor to work with from the first event I planned for him.

When I looked up near the end of the list, I was taken aback by his smile. He looked like he was under a spell, entranced. “What? What is it?”

“Your face just lights up when you get excited.”

Another blush came, and I almost fanned my cheeks at the warmth. I loved the way he looked at me, but it didn’t add up. How could he gaze at me like that but still not be sure about his feelings for me?

I went out on a limb and took a chance. “Luke.” I closed my book and hugged it, almost like a shield in case this backfired. “I know you said you wanted to wait until after Christmas to see how things could go between us, but what if we went to Poppy and Landon’s party tomorrow night— together?” He didn’t speak, so I added, “As friends?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

I blinked, surprised that he’d agreed. For as busy as he’d been and anti-spirit as I knew him to be, I’d been ready for a hard pass.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He smiled, and when his phones rang, both the one on his desk and his cell phone, I left him to it.

I hustled back to Gabriela and told her how I’d taken a chance to ask him out like that. She squealed, excited for me, but she chided me for wording it as “friends.”

“Girl, I’m telling you. That man does not look at you in a way friends do.” She winked at me before urging me to get my mind back on the charity event’s plans.

LUKE

I tried to get home as quickly as I could to get ready for that party. I'd attended them before, but not since Jennifer and I broke up. She'd marked the start of my seasonal loathing, but before it, I tolerated these get-togethers well enough. Being around my friends was fine. It was when everyone tried to force cheer and goodwill down my throat that I got sick of it.

Max's death changed me. I'd done better over the years, but a part of me would always be slightly withdrawn. So when the Christmas craze began and everyone wanted me to *just be happy*, it felt like such a trial to explain that not everyone was magically capable of pulling that off.

Hanna twisted my mindset in a good way. The idea of hurrying home from the office to get ready to hang out with my friends was a fine idea in and of itself. But knowing Hanna had put herself out there and took the initiative to ask me to come, even as a "friend," excited me even more.

We weren't friends. I knew that without a doubt. At least, I didn't view her the same as I did Poppy, Liberty, or Gabriela. Friends didn't have hot and intense sex like Hanna and I did. If she was trying to steer us toward something like friends with benefits, she would be mistaken. Because once I got my shit together and fully embraced being with her like my heart desired, we would be exclusive and committed.

Until I could tell her how much she mattered to me, though, I could appease her assumption that we could pretend

to be mere friends hanging out at this party.

Jacob was singing and making a ruckus from his room, and I shook my head, wondering how he could create so much noise before going out. I didn't know if he realized that I planned to come along, but once I ran into him in the house, I'd offer to drive with the cold temperature. I could drop him off, then go pick up Hanna. She only lived a little way up on Swanson Ridge, but I could save her the walk on this cold night. And it was an excuse to have more time for her, even if just a minute or two.

Since this wasn't a formal thing, I didn't have to worry about picking a suit. These were laidback nights, and I opted for jeans and another sweater. I wanted to look nice for Hanna. The need to impress her was always there. At the same time, I didn't want to overdress and look too stuffy.

I stared at my reflection, letting that thought sink in. I wanted to impress her. Not just at work but in all aspects of life.

Because she matters. Because this connection between us matters. I smiled, letting those truths roll around in my head. I'd been hiding my feelings for her for too long. From my family, my friends. Hell, I was trying and failing to hide how I felt about Hanna at the office and at the events. Every now and then, I felt that sixth sense of someone watching me. Typically, it was Eddie. He was the eagle eye, aware of everything. Nothing got past that man. I was confident he suspected something might be brewing between Hanna and me, but he hadn't said anything.

All this time, I'd been making too many damn excuses. To myself, clinging to this feeling that I was too scarred after Jennifer and I would never be able to trust a woman again. I was making excuses to her, too, asking her to hold off on talking about us and seeing where we're at until after the holidays.

It was pathetic, hedging and cowering from owning up to my attraction for her. I resolved to let it go, to stop it with the

excuses, but I wasn't sure if tonight, at this party, I would be able to follow through.

I headed into the hall, bumping into Jacob.

“Hey, what are you all dressed up so fancy for?”

Damn it. So much for not overdressing.

“It's too much?” I asked.

“For what?”

“Christmas party at Poppy and Landon's.”

He arched his brows. “You're going?”

I just said I was. I turned that back on him. “Are you going?”

He grinned. “Gabriela's gonna be there. So yeah, I'm going.”

In that second, I wished I could be more like my brother. He wasn't afraid to admit he was interested in her. I wanted to be that open and daring too. I hoped I was getting there, but at my pace.

He turned down my offer to drive, smiling too damn wide at my comment that I was picking up Hanna to bring her with me. That was my first hint that we were up to something more than “friends.”

When I pulled up, one minute earlier than when I told her I'd be ready, I walked up to the front door and waited for her to come out.

Since it wasn't formal, she wasn't all decked out in a fancy outfit either. Still, she looked gorgeous. Flirty and fun, with another ugly sweater, but this time, she paired it with a short black skirt that had so much flare it was a constant tease when she turned. I already knew she'd be driving me wild. I already missed having my hands on her and her hands on me. I'd be itching to feel her up and let her snuggle close all night.

Again, not something between friends.

I didn't want to bring her flowers, but I felt like I needed something to offer her. It wasn't a date, but it felt like one. To her delight, I presented a box of chocolates to her. I'd ordered them a while back, and this seemed like a far safer and better idea than something like handing her a bouquet. I'd had enough of flowers for a long while.

"Ooooh, I can't wait to snack on these!" She leaned in to peck a chaste kiss to my cheek. "Thanks, Luke." After she set them inside and grabbed her coat, she smiled at the sight of my car. "I thought you were joking about literally picking me up." She tipped her head in the direction of the other house. "We can walk."

I exaggerated a long look at her bare, slender legs. Sexy boots covered her feet, but all I could think about at that moment was having her legs wrapped around my waist again.

"You sure?" I teased, hating how husky I sounded. I didn't want to *only* sleep with her, and I hated to think of her assuming I was only after a lay.

"Yeah." She looped her arm with mine and walked close. "You'll keep me warm, right?"

Fuck me. I wanted to burn up with her and give in to this fiery desire all night long.

At the party, *everyone* noticed that we arrived together. No one came right out and said anything, but I knew from everyone's curious glances that we'd captured their attention. Hanna didn't leave my side except to shed her coat. I didn't try to hide or slink away to be my quiet, unattached self, either. If they thought we were together, fine. We were in my mind. We'd come together, and already, even though the night was just starting, I knew we would be leaving together.

It helped that we'd grown such a rapport at work, and after a few chats with our friends, it was a seamless and familiar companionship. Hanna made sense with me, I realized. And I didn't want to relinquish a minute of her presence.

We talked with everyone, mingling over drinks and snacks. When the music started, we danced too. I'd had enough drinks

to not care that they were old-timey Christmas songs, and before long, I realized the time was speeding by too fast. It zoomed by because I was having fun. With her, with everyone else, just kicking back and partying with people who'd always been there to support me.

As we lingered near the kitchen, demolishing the appetizers and snacks, I realized I hadn't thought of Jennifer once. Only when someone pointed out a floral arrangement of blooms that looked similar to the first one she'd sent me did I think of her name. It was a lousy reminder in that, but once I accepted the connection, I was surprised.

I'd been surrounded with holiday spirit. All the ugly sweaters, the Santa hats, the Christmas tunes. In the corner there was a huge tree, twinkling with lights and reflecting the glaze of so many ornaments. I was in the thick of Christmastime here, and with all the visuals of what used to always remind me of the specific day when I'd learned about Jennifer's betrayal and the way she didn't love me, I hadn't been bothered in the least.

It was all due to Hanna. I snacked, watching as she joined another friend at the other side of the piano. Arlo played the piano while Hanna sang a Christmas song, and I lost track of doing anything but stare at her in awe. All other thoughts vanished, and just like I had at the Denver event, I got sucked into the spell of her beautiful voice as she shared the melody.

"Damn, can she sing or what?" Joshua said next to me, hugging Liberty.

I swallowed and closed my mouth, glancing at them. Liberty gave me a knowing smile that seemed too secretive for my liking while Joshua looked at his sister with pride.

"Yeah, she sure can," I replied.

I couldn't look away. Listening to her opened me up and touched my heart. I felt like I might just be looking at the rest of my life, determined to bask in her radiance for as long as I could.

How do you know when you've found "the one" though?

I wasn't sure my radar for dependable, honest women could be relied upon.

Everything with Jennifer soured me. After her manipulation and selfishness, I felt like whatever I'd previously thought about soulmates was just bullshit. I hadn't given true love a single thought since we broke up, and until Hanna, I thought it was a myth. That it didn't exist.

Hanna made me experience the complete opposite. She prompted me to reconsider the idea that someone was out there for everyone. As soon as she was done singing, she smiled and made her way right to me. Only me, as though she'd already come to the conclusion that I was made for her and completed her just the same.

"Hey, look." Liberty and Joshua backed up. She pointed overhead, and I glanced up.

A mistletoe had been clipped to the archway between the rooms. It hung directly above me and Hanna.

"Uh oh," Joshua teased.

"Well, you gotta kiss her now," Jacob said from the other side of the room.

Among the catcalls and joking encouragement, I smiled at Hanna. Her cheeks pinkened with a pretty blush, as if I wasn't already enamored and charmed.

I took her hand and gently pulled her closer. She'd called it. She said we would come as just friends. I thought otherwise, but if she didn't want to kiss me and didn't want to make anything public here, then I would respect that. After all, she had to have had a reason to determine we'd be coming here "as friends."

The second her caramel eyes locked on mine, I knew she was either second-guessing her wording or changing her mind. She clutched the front of my shirt and bit her lower lip as she pulled me toward her with a matching slow speed.

And then we met. Mouth to mouth. I smiled into the kiss, and she giggled with her sweet lips pressed to mine. I slid my hand up her back until I had my arm snaked around her. As

she moved her hand from my shirt to my face, caressing my jaw as she kissed me harder, I tuned out the cheers, catcalls, and whistles, glad she'd talked me into coming.

It was already a night I'd never forget, and the urgent push of her hips against mine, bringing our bodies flush together with a thrilling friction, told me the night was far from over.

HANNA

I stood there kissing Luke, right in front of my brothers and all our friends and family.

Liberty whooped and Poppy hollered the loudest, cheering me on for going after him like this. But it didn't matter if they approved or not. My heart was full. My body was responding to Luke's, and need would soon start to take over. When he first eyed me with mischief and hope, I was elated that he was letting go and loosening up to show me and all the others that he was making a move.

I saw the question in his eyes, though, and I regretted ever taking the easy way out in telling me we'd be coming here as friends. I wanted him. I freaking lusted for him, and I was excited for what else would follow.

I didn't retreat, threading my fingers through his hair and keeping him close for a kiss with tongue. I wasn't shy about making out with him in the middle of a chaotic, lively party, but as the songs changed in the background, Luke hugged me closer so he could walk me more toward the speakers. With Ella Fitzgerald crooning in the background, Luke softened our kisses until we danced more than made out.

He didn't let me go once, segueing from a mistletoe kiss to a slow dance. And I had no intention of stepping away from him. Was I clinging to him? Probably. But I didn't care. We laughed when we stumbled, neither of us great dancers, and when we fell into swoon stare-downs with so many unsaid emotions passing between us, we kissed tenderly.

After a few more songs, I couldn't take it anymore. His looks lit me up. His hands warmed me with an itchy need to take off my clothes and feel his hot skin flush against mine.

I had only one sure thing on my mind. And that was getting him out of here so we could be together, alone. Christmas wasn't for a few more days, but I felt like unwrapping him for a preview to my deepest wish. All I wanted for Christmas was this sexy man who melted me inside out, and as I leaned up to whisper in his ear, I decided to make that happen. Now.

“Ready to go?”

He held my hips and pulled me toward his, treating me to the feel of his hardening dick. He wasn't anywhere near tenting his jeans, but I felt enough and I wanted more.

I wanted it all, and I was determined not to rush it tonight. I did hurry us out of the party, though, casually telling everyone goodbye. No one questioned our early departure, and maybe it made me a chicken, but I couldn't face Joshua. Everybody knew why we were leaving, and facing my brother would just be too much at that moment.

I practically hauled Luke out the door, and as we found the sidewalk, we walked side by side. Holding hands and glancing at each other with smoldering looks, the walk was a blur. He stopped to tie his shoe, laughing when I made him off balance, and as he stood, he dragged his hand up my bare leg and under my skirt.

Then when we reached the intersection to cross, I let him walk up to me and bump into me from behind. I stuck my ass back, and he groaned at where he'd touched me.

I was tipsy, but I wasn't drunk. He'd had less to drink than me. We both knew what we were doing, and that was walking into sex.

The moment I unlocked the door and let us in, I feared my heart would beat so loud he'd hear it. I was excited and so damn horny for him, I felt like I'd combust.

“Babe.” He closed the door behind me, and as I heard the lock automatically click, he pushed me against the panel. “Hanna. Damn. Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

I kissed him back and looped my leg around his. “I’ve got a hunch.” I sucked on his tongue, kissing him with a growl as I slipped my hand to his jeans and cupped him.

He grunted, leaning into my hand as I stroked him. I breathed quicker, mingling my panted inhales with his as he devoured my mouth. His lips brushed urgently along mine. I slid my tongue alongside his and relished his taste. I was on fire. And impatient for more. I didn’t want to rush like the last time, but I could only take so much of his addictive kisses and feeling the tease of the erection hiding behind too many layers.

“I want to savor all of you,” I said against his wet lips, catching my breath as he kept me pinned there. “I want to unwrap you, layer by layer, and enjoy it all.”

He nodded, stepping back and pulling me with him.

“My space of the home is downstairs. Let’s head there before we give Joshua a sight he might never erase from his mind.” I directed him to the door that led to the basement where we hastily made our way. He stopped me at the bottom of the stairs.

Slipping his hands under my coat, he brushed his fingers over my breasts in the same motion that he removed the garment. I leaned in to kiss him as I walked him further into the house. His coat went next.

Then my sweater.

His jeans.

My skirt.

We shed our clothes in a trail, but still, I was too needy and impatient to make it to my room. In front of the Christmas tree in my living room, I pushed him back and dropped to my knees. I’d been eager for a taste of him, but he didn’t seem willing to let me do more than close my lips around him and flick my tongue once.

“Fuck. No, babe. No. I need you too much.”

I giggled as he wrapped his arms around me, lowering me to the plush rug. He rolled us until he trapped me beneath his rock-hard body, and I smiled up at him after another kiss. “I thought that we said we weren’t going to rush. I want to take my time learning you.” I caressed his chest, loving the solid hardness of his muscles that was so different from my softer physique.

“Hmm-mmm.” He caught my hand and kissed each fingertip. “I know. But you don’t understand.” He dragged our hands lower, near my legs. His cock rubbed over my thigh, a steely thick length that tortured me with the wait.

“I’ve dreamed about learning *you*. For years, Hanna, I’ve wanted to know how to please you.” He slipped his finger into my aching core, and I held his face close to kiss. He swallowed my mewls and whimpers as he stroked his fingertips along my wet entrance.

He lowered his mouth to my breast as he continued to finger me. Fire shot through me. Desire was a live, charging force that would soon consume me. As he sucked on my nipple crawling lower, he seemed to want to be the one doing the eating. With his teeth, tongue, and lips, he dragged a path of desire down my body. Breathing hard and hardly believing this was finally happening, I let my legs drop apart. He kept going, down and down.

“Oh, baby,” I groaned when he rubbed his palm over my mound, leaving friction where I needed him. He didn’t stop, smiling when I tightened my fingers in his hair. Then he closed his mouth over me, licking with gusto at my entrance, and I cried out.

I’d never imagined having Luke, my crush from years ago, eating me out under my Christmas tree. And it was far better than any of my naughtiest fantasies. He didn’t slow or stop, fanning the flames of my need higher when he growled and hummed.

“Like that. Yeah. Luke, like that.” I thrust up to his face, and he brought his hands up to cup my ass, holding me in

place as he tormented me. He pushed me to come with a blinding intensity. I closed my eyes tight, only to open them to the dizzying blur of the lights above me. Breathing hard, I cried out as he kept at me, prolonging those sweet waves of orgasms as they streaked through me.

Before I could relax at all, he crawled to his jeans and got a condom. He returned on his hands and knees, and I sat up, eager to please him too.

He lowered to the floor, sitting and leaning against the coffee table before he could reach me, sheathing himself. Instead, still shaking and trembling from my first orgasm, I straddled him and sank down on his hard erection. He growled a filthy sound that hit me so deep. As he slid toward his side, going to the floor with me impaled on him, I lifted up and sank back down, reveling in the intense stretch of him filling me.

“Hanna.” He leaned up to pull me lower, and he silenced himself with a mouthful of my breast. Sucking hard on my nipple and using his teeth, he proved to me that this wouldn’t be a solo orgasm kind of night.

I rode him, arching my back to thrust my tits in his face, and before long, we came together. This second orgasm hit me even harder, so after we found our release and collapsed in a sweaty, shivering mess together, I doubted I would ever look at my Christmas tree the same.

“Shower?” he asked lazily.

“Meh-hmm.” I didn’t know if I was arguing and determined to sleep here or if I was agreeing and wanted to get to bed.

He chuckled, understanding anyway. After he stood and removed the condom, he scooped me into his arms and easily carried me up the stairs. Standing under the water invigorated me, and when he got hard again after cleaning up, I got my wish to taste him and get him off.

We staggered into bed, sleepy, sated, and snuggling up close. I’d never had a man in my bed in my cozy little suite, and I quickly realized how good it felt to be flush with his

naked body spooning mine. Sleep evaded me, despite the slow, featherlight caresses of his fingers over my arm.

Before he could fall asleep, though, I felt restless to speak up.

“Luke?”

He kissed my shoulder.

I turned onto my back to face him as he lay on his side.

“I’m falling for you.”

There. I did it. I put myself out there in a way I never had before. And with him. I wasn’t settling for a weak substitute while hopelessly crushing on him. This was *Luke*. The one I’d always wanted, the man I dreamed of being able to love freely.

He lowered to kiss me tenderly, and my heart swelled with joy.

“I’m falling for you, too, Hanna.”

I kissed him once more. “What do we do next?”

A yawn cracked his mouth open. “Sleep?”

I giggled as he chuckled. “I mean, about us. Is there an us?”

He nodded. “We’ll just take it one day at a time.”

As he nestled his face into my neck and pulled me closer in a hug, I smiled wide, knowing neither of us would try to waste time or lie about this bond building between us. No more waiting until later.

Luke was my man.

And I was determined to hold on to him, one day at a time.

LUKE

After Hanna got out of the shower in the morning, I started my car and waited for her to get ready. I'd already gotten up and brushed my teeth with paste on my finger. It was as good as I'd get here, but I was in no rush to go home.

I had nothing on my schedule today, and I intended to spend it with Hanna. I'd told her the truth last night. I was in. I was falling for her. I had been slowly reaching that point ever since we became adults.

Telling her my feeling should have intimidated me. I'd resisted putting myself out there for so long. After the mind-blowing sex and feeling her so perfect in my arms, I gave in to the urge to simply speak from my heart.

I was falling for her, hard and fast. When I told her we'd take it one day at a time, it was the best strategy I could think of just before falling asleep. And this morning, I was eager to start *this* day and make the most of it.

While she showered and sang, I smiled and sat on her couch. My stomach grumbled, and I couldn't wait to take her out to breakfast. We'd worked up an appetite last night. I didn't want her to feel like she needed to cater to me and make anything, so as soon as she was dressed, I'd suggest I take her to my favorite café.

I gazed at her tree, waiting for that rush of annoyance and bitterness that always crept in. I still remembered the painstaking task of setting up the fake tree for Jennifer. That

should have been my first clue that we wouldn't be compatible. She'd once told me she hated the smell of spruces, and I had loved it growing up. I'd accommodated her though, gone with an elaborate artificial tree that took a surprisingly long time to erect. I didn't have any ornaments, but as I'd hung them up, I thought ahead to when we'd find ours and make a collection.

It never happened.

On Hanna's tree, I spotted an assortment that had to have been carefully curated. She had good taste, though, hanging up both arty and funky baubles as well as classical snowflakes and glass bulbs.

"Ready?" I asked once she came out to the living room. I stood, inspired by her tree if she wanted to spend the day with me.

"For what?" Her stomach growled, and we both laughed.

"That." I pointed to her stomach as she approached. "Breakfast."

"Mmmm. You're a man after my own heart, aren't you?" she teased as she took my hand and led me to the door.

Yeah. I really am.

I drove her to my favorite café and we ordered the same thing.

"So she doesn't have a complicated order," Hanna said with a shrug.

I glanced around, betting our waitress was raking in hefty tips with how packed it was here. Hanna had a good point. We were probably a much easier table to manage than the one with five kids or that area with a dozen men laughing and eating.

"You're sweet."

She batted her lids at me, exaggerating a coy smile. "Why thank you."

"Really, you are. You said you liked planning events because you enjoy making people happy, but you take that to

heart.”

“And you? Do I make you happy?”

I beckoned her closer to lean over the table. I met her in the middle and gave her a slow, tender kiss. “Yeah, you do.”

Her cheeks turned pink and I took her hand to hold it over the table.

“You make me happy too.”

“Really?”

She nodded, laughing lightly. “You doubt it?”

I pretended to be deep in thought, rubbing my chin. “No, but I’m wondering if you’d be happy to come get a tree for me. With me.”

She grinned. “Oh course!” But she sobered, seeming suddenly too suspicious. Her furrowed brow didn’t belong here. It was days from Christmas and everyone in Franklin, including the people in this café, were a happy, lively group with the hecticness before the holiday.

“What?”

“Okay, so, I get that, um, my introduction to my Christmas tree was original.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I’m going to remember you riding me under it for the rest of my life.”

She tried and failed to hide a smile. “Yeah. Me too. But, days ago, you hated Christmas. Now I’m not saying I have some magical powers to change a man, but what gives?”

I sighed, knowing I’d need to explain. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to give Jennifer any more thought. I wanted to move on with Hanna.

“Why’d you hate Christmas so much? Or are you just pretending to want a tree now?”

“The day I found out Jennifer, my former fiancée was cheating, I’d just spent hours making my home all decorated for her. She was moving in, and she’d commented that it didn’t

feel like *her* home. Just mine. Now, in hindsight, I realize her idea of home differed from mine. She was never there because she was cheating. But I thought making it all Christmasy would charm her, like she'd envision future holidays together."

"Oh, Luke." Hanna squeezed my hand. Sympathy shone in her sincere eyes.

"I put all this effort into it, wondering if she'd like this or that. I wanted to make it a home, and hint at the future I was excited for. Instead, I got a text showing me video of her cheating. Then she lied about it. Then confessed. She said some pretty lousy things, like why would she care about having a tree here, she'd rather spend Christmas in the Caymans, that sort of thing."

Our plates came and I tried to wrap it up but still explain. "It was a bad time, losing her. My trust in women was shattered. And I guess I associated all the holiday stuff with that day."

"No wonder it triggered you."

I'd never called it that, but it was true.

"But she's in my past. It doesn't matter how many stupid flowers she sends me, she's nothing. I'm over her, and I am moving on with you." I shrugged. "I'm realizing I don't have to hold a grudge with all things to do about Christmas."

She squeezed my hand again then released it to start on her food. A naughty smile pulled her lips up. "And you can make new memories."

"Hmmm. I think last night will reign as the number one memory forever now."

She blushed again, smiling as she tucked into the food. I waited, stuck on her beauty for a moment, before eating. Telling her the truth felt like having a weight lifted off my shoulders, and I sighed.

I felt alive, light and free to *just be happy*, and it'd been a long time since I could admit that.

All thanks to you, my Christmas girl.

“Eat, eat!” she playfully ordered. “We’ve got things to do today.”

I chuckled and did as I was told.

After breakfast, we went to the tree farm. Doing Christmas stuff with her felt like a new adventure, and none of it really resembled my shopping spree for artificial stuff.

“But *you* haven’t cut down a tree before?” I challenged her when we stood together in the snow and considered the tree we’d agreed upon.

“Well, no.”

“I could have sworn I smelled pine last night.”

“Among the smell of sex in the air?” she joked right back. “My tree is real.”

“Did you buy it in a lot?”

She nodded and held her hand out. “But it’s not like it can be that hard. The trunk is only so thick.”

“Well, *I’ve* never chopped down a tree, regardless of its girth.”

She narrowed her eyes, biting on her lip not to laugh. “All right. All right. Enough about the *girth*.”

“Maybe you have to hold it to make it work?”

She giggled. “What did I just say?”

I laughed with her, pulling her in for a hug and quick kiss. “I’m not trying to talk in tree innuendo. Seriously. Maybe you hold the top while I cut it? Like keep it out of the way while I chop it down?”

She frowned. “What if you cut my legs?”

I bent down, inspecting the trunk. I stalled to caress my hand up her leg, toward her thigh, and she squealed.

“I love your legs. I wouldn’t dare to hurt you or them.”

“How about I cut it and you hold it?”

We switched positions. She lowered to kneel with the loaned saw and I gripped a part of the top of the tree.

After a few jerking motions and her light curses, I leaned down to see what the issue was.

“It’s not going in,” she whined.

I clamped my mouth shut. “I’m not even going to say anything.”

She cracked up. “I mean it. The saw won’t slide through. It’s getting stuck.” She mimed the sawing motion and I jerked back out of the way.

“Sorry.”

“You’re going to cut your arm off with that thing.”

“Nah. I got it.” She tried again.

But she didn’t get it. With a little more laughter and light bickering, I felled the tree. She whooped and lifted her hands like I’d scored a winning shot in a game.

It was impossible not to smile and feel lighthearted with her. On the drive back to my house, we stopped at her aunt’s to grab more ornaments. Hanna explained that this close to the holiday, stores would be lacking a quality selection of lights and ornaments. She had an idea to stop at her aunt’s instead, and once I saw the bounty of “excess” décor, I realized the woman really did have an abundance, most of it still in boxes.

“I’m telling you, kids, take them!” her Aunt Sydney rolled her eyes, handing over boxes and boxes of decorations and lights and all sorts of Christmas paraphernalia.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I can bring them back.”

“No!” Sydney laughed and Hanna giggled.

“They got married on Christmas,” my girl explained. “And suffice it to say *everyone* thought to gift ornaments and holiday décor for anniversaries.”

I laughed, stowing them into my car. “That’s a lot of anniversaries’ worth of gifts then.”

“I think twenty-seven years now? They’re still in love as if they were our age.” Hanna smiled up at me as we went to my place.

Jacob was out of town again, for some sport thing with Landon. I had the whole house to myself to do this with her.

“Getting married at Christmas sounds interesting,” I commented.

“But you hate weddings,” she said as we got everything inside. She went still, holding a couple of boxes, and winced. “Because of Jennifer?”

I shook my head, shifting my boxes to the side to kiss her deeply. I didn’t want to talk about my ex anymore. “Nah. Because weddings *are* just a money grab!”

She giggled at my goofy, incredulous tone. And she got the point. No more exes. No more wedding talk. We had fun putting up my tree, and if anyone were to ask, it was leaning too much to the right, not the left like she claimed.

Well into the evening, we decorated and hung out. After dinner, when we still teased each other about the wonky slant of the tree, we admired our teamwork. Drinking hot cocoa and snuggling on my couch felt domestic, but it also felt right.

I sighed, loving the way she leaned into me.

She feels right.

I was damned glad I’d chosen to open up and to be with Hanna.

I’d turned into a grouch because of my lousy reminders of what else happened before Christmas in the past, but like she so wisely said at breakfast, I could make new memories under the tree. Last night’s escapade was hot. But it wasn’t any less memorable or meaningful to relax on the couch with her after all the trials and errors of getting a tree to stand in my living room.

HANNA

I drew in a big breath as I pulled in to work. Nothing, and I meant nothing, could wipe this smile off my face.

Luke was falling for me. I suspected that I already had. Why else would this giddy excitement still fill me like I'd burst with glee?

Yesterday was perfect. Complete, utter bliss. I wasn't sure if Luke's transformation of liking Christmas was too good to be true. I hated that phrase. Shaking my head as I parked, I dismissed how stupid the term was. Good and bad things could happen to anyone. No one had control over what *happened* in life. And as far as if something was true or not, nobody could guess that ahead of time.

Joshua and Elijah liked to tease me that I was overly optimistic. Maybe I was, but it was just the way I was.

After the peaceful, fun day Luke and I shared, I felt that much more confident that he was true to me. That his heart was true. I believed him when he said he was falling for me. For a flicker of a moment, I worried that it was just sex, that he only wanted me for a good time in bed.

Or under the tree. I grinned as I stepped out of the car, again amazed and excited that we'd done that.

While we enjoyed each other's company yesterday, we refrained from getting into bed again. We'd traded raunchy jokes, but other than that, I sensed that Luke wanted that simple downtime with me. And it was just as good as the minutes of him deep inside me.

Okay. Shelve it, girl. I strode away from my car, both looking forward to seeing Luke here and to get busy on this project. I'd told him that I would volunteer my time to do it, but he'd told me last night that it was the perfect prompt for him to make me official. He showed me a draft of employment to simply work *for* him, not to be my client. It was a big choice to make, so I borrowed his line and said I'd decide after the holidays. The day had been too good to ruin it with work talk.

Walking toward the entrance now, though, I smiled and saw it so easily. We'd come to work together and have the chance to see each other throughout the day. People who were dating could work together, right? Maybe dating the CEO would be slightly different, but I wanted to think I'd proven my ability otherwise.

It wasn't as though he slept with me and *then* offered me an opportunity.

His argument was that I would be paid for planning this event. It was a charitable outreach of Robertson Resorts. With that reminder in mind, I quickened my pace, eager to get a lot done today. Like the previous events, time wasn't on my side. What I did have in my favor was the overwhelming support from the community. So many businesses had donated services and money, and I knew this last-minute effort would go smoothly.

Just as soon as I find Santa! That was first on my to-do list. This close to the holiday, it *would* be damned hard to locate a man who did the Santa gigs everywhere. But there had to be one Santa for hire somewhere.

I slowed my step as I rounded the last car of the row I'd parked in.

What's this? A pretty, slender blonde leaned against the half wall near the entrance. The *Reserved for CEO* plaque was still frosted over, and I tightened my coat around me tighter.

What's she doing by Luke's spot?

At first, I tried to shrug it off, walking ahead. Maybe it was another sales rep. Eddie joked the other day that they were tenacious, hoping to weasel into Luke's schedule by banking on holiday spirit and all that.

As I almost passed her, I struggled to let it go. This blonde just had a vibe that didn't sit right with me. She looked purposeful, too determined for whatever reason. She leaned there smugly smiling like she had every right to wait for something or someone.

Like Luke?

I couldn't leave this alone. I doubled back, approaching her. I didn't wear the wide grin I had when I pulled in here, but I made sure to smile and look friendly. "Do you need help?"

The woman smirked. It wasn't a gregarious expression, but it didn't lessen her beauty. She was beautiful. I saw this now up close. She had that air of a highly maintained woman who knew how to take care of herself and make herself look good. Her good looks were the kind that easily intimidated me.

"Oh, no. I'm just waiting for my man," she replied.

I blinked as my stomach knotted. *Her man?* I glanced at the CEO parking sign, and she nodded, noticing where I looked.

"Your—"

I swallowed and licked my lips, trying again. "Your man?" My insides shrank as I spoke the words I'd only just claimed myself. In Branson, even here at home, I'd finally taken that leap and knew I could have confidence Luke was mine.

She lifted her hand to flip her hair to one side. She nodded, and the motion emphasized the glint of her necklace. It caught in the rising sunlight, and I narrowed my eyes at the pendant of the letter *J*.

Recognition set in as my shoulders drooped. *Jennifer.*

"Luke is taking me back," she told me confidently as my world shattered. "I made the worst mistake of my life when I ended things with him."

“When you *ended* things with him?” Even though my heart was breaking, I wanted to be defensive. He’d ended it with her. She’d cheated and went to his friend, but here she was trying to make it sound like she’d miscalculated something minor.

She shrugged and rolled her eyes. “Yeah. It’s complicated. You’ll see someday.”

I hated her dig, like she was superior and older and wiser. I knew I would never be so dumb to not see what a great guy Luke was.

“I know he’s ready to give us another chance now.” She gave me a dreamy smile. “We’re meant to be. After all, what better time to get back together than Christmastime?”

I thought back to Aunt Sydney and Mom telling me the holidays had a way of bringing people together, but I never ever could have seen it happening this way with Luke.

“I have to go.” I didn’t wait for her reply. I turned and hurried inside.

I panicked, and the stress of this discovery battered my determination to work. I didn’t know how I could be professional and cool and focus. My life was falling apart. As I waited for the elevator, I jabbed the button again, frantic to hide in my office until I could get myself together.

My heart pounded as I let this news sink in. Luke and Jennifer, back together. Sure, they had history, but I thought he’d meant it when he said he wanted to move on and forward with me. He’d been so grouchy for so long, though, maybe it was foolish for me to think he’d change so swiftly.

A car door closed outside, and with how near it sounded, I knew it had to be Luke’s. He parked closest to the building. I looked over my shoulder, seeing the parking lot clearly with all the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the lobby.

He’d arrived, looking so sexy and dashing in his suit.

I crumpled further, spotting the red and green tie I’d suggested he wear when we found it unopened in Aunt Sydney’s stuff.

In slow motion, everything else blurred as I watched. Jennifer had already descended on him. I couldn't look away, like witnessing a car accident. I watched in horror as they kissed. His arms flew back with her reaching up close, and she draped her arm around his neck.

Tears burned my eyes. With blurred vision and a wounded heart, I burst out of the lobby and ran to my car. I dropped my tote bag with my notebook as I rushed out the door, but I couldn't stop and get it. I had to get out of there. My heart was cracking. My soul was withering into a ball of hurt and disappointment.

"Hanna!" Luke called out to me, but I couldn't risk a look back. "Hanna, wait!"

He could shout out whatever he wanted, but I refused to let him see me crumbling like this. I whimpered, so overwhelmed with this hit of heartache, and I fumbled with my door handle. Finally, I got it and I climbed in. Without another look back, I peeled out of the parking lot, leaving the happy couple behind.

How could I have been so blind? Tears fell, streaking hot lines of pain down my cheeks as I drove. Sniffing and wiping my face, I tried to make sense of it. We'd been so happy just yesterday, and now this.

How could I have missed this? Luke clearly wasn't over her. *And why wouldn't he be?* They'd been together long and deep enough to be engaged. *Why would he choose me over that bombshell?*

I loathed how naïve I was. It was pure stupidity to ever think my schoolgirl crush on him was anything meaningful compared to the bond he would've shared with his ex-fiancée.

"I never should've gotten involved with him," I mumbled aloud in my car. The warning signs were there, but I'd ignored them, too hopeful to have him in the way I'd always dreamed. I recognized that he'd had a lot to sort out from his breakup, and I was an idiot to think he was over it or her.

I pulled over to call Gabriela.

"Don't bother going to the office today," I told her.

“Hanna! What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

“I’ll tell you.” I sniffled and wiped my eyes. “I’m coming over.”

“Okay. All right, Hanna. I’ll be waiting for you, okay? I’ll put some tea on. Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out.”

I doubt it. I rolled my eyes.

“Just drive safe and I’ll be here for you.”

Unlike Luke. He would never be there for me again, not like yesterday.

I didn’t care what my aunt said. Christmastime was a crappy season to even think about happily-ever-afters.

LUKE

I scowled at the back of Hanna's car as she burned rubber getting out of the parking lot. Twice, I called out to her, and she hadn't even looked back. Just got into her car and escaped. She hadn't been leaving in any other way. She was fleeing.

And I didn't have to wonder why.

I fisted my hands, feeling a familiar burn of anger coursing through my veins. Turning back to glower at Jennifer, I tried to keep a grip on my temper.

She stood there, looking the same as before. Put together with a severity, like not a single strand of hair could ever be out of place. Smiling smugly, she licked her lips, probably hoping that usually sexy action would tease me to wanting her again.

I wiped my mouth off, damning her for ever trying to force me to kiss her. I damned her for even *being* her. I'd tried to banish her and all reminders of our breakup, and here she was, like a fucking curse.

"What is *wrong* with you?" If I hadn't been here to see it and believe it, I would've refused to accept that she'd just launched herself at me and planted her lips on me like that. Holding my briefcase and my coffee, she'd caught me unawares and unprepared to physically bar her from rushing at me.

"Wrong? Nothing's wrong with me." She giggled, and the sound grated on my nerves. "I've just come to my senses,

ready to get back together with you.”

“Back together.” I bit the words out, shaking my head as I seethed.

“Yeah! It’s the perfect time of the year to get back together.”

I clenched my teeth, straining to breathe as steadily as possible.

“Problem, boss?” Eddie slowed as he walked by, furrowing his brow.

I held my hand out to him, dismissing his kind offer to back me up. “I can handle it.” I didn’t want to. I’d never wanted to see her again, much less speak to her. But this—she—was my problem to handle, not him. Maybe throwing away and rejecting her attempts to reach me weren’t enough. I shouldn’t have deleted her first email and moved on. I should’ve replied with a clear *fuck off*.

“There’s a reason you haven’t heard back from me.” I wanted to growl. “There’s a reason you haven’t been able to get into my office all the times you’ve tried.” Since I spoke with security, they reported multiple attempts of Jennifer trying to sneak in as a visitor.

She tilted her head to the side, expecting a reason.

“I’m not interested in getting back together with you. Period.”

She scoffed. “Oh, come on, Luke. Think about what you’re saying.” She crept close, reaching out to put her hand on my chest and I swatted it away, dodging her touch.

“You need to go. You are not a part of my life.”

“Luke, don’t be so stupid.” Again she reached out to me and I sidestepped.

“I’m filing a restraining order.”

She sneered. “What? Jeez. You’re acting like I’m some psycho stalker.”

Aren't you? “Gee. Wonder why I'd come to that conclusion.”

“I'm not.” She put her hands on her hips. “I just wanted to give us another chance.”

“*Don't.*”

She pouted.

“I've moved on. You need to move on too.”

Shaking her head, she tipped her chin high and stalked away. Her coat pulled tighter as she hugged herself, hustling away with speed.

Good. Fucking. Riddance. I ran my hands through my hair. *Again.*

I stared at the exit of the parking lot, waiting to make sure Jennifer got into her car and left. When the sound of footsteps approached, I turned to see Eddie coming back.

“I found this in the doorway.” He handed me Hanna's black tote bag. She'd gotten it for herself as a graduation gift from college, but her niece spilled a bottle of milk against it. Instead of replacing it, she tried to use leather cleaner on it. A splotch still showed, but she didn't care, claiming it was too good of a bag to waste.

And I'd been so dumb to worry that she was materialistic like Jennifer.

I shook my head, taking the straps. Inside, I saw her notebook.

“Go on.” He tipped his chin toward my car.

“What?”

“Go after her.”

I furrowed my brow, remembering he'd been hired after my breakup. “That was Jennifer. I don't want to go after her.”

He sighed. “*Hanna.* Go get her back.”

I let my shoulders drop. I wasn't sure she'd hear me out anytime soon. I hated that she'd seen Jennifer kissing me. But

then again, why couldn't she have had faith in me and know I didn't want her? I'd told her several times.

Probably because she saw how hung up I was over my ex and worried Jennifer had her claws in too deep. It was ridiculous. Hanna hadn't merely gotten under my skin like Jennifer had long ago. Hanna had pushed her way all the way to my guarded heart.

I nodded at Eddie and thanked him for the bag. Instead of going into my office at all, I got in my car and called her. Just as I predicted, it went unanswered. Besides, I needed to talk to her in person, not explain this over the phone.

I drove to her house and didn't see her car. I couldn't justify stalking her and chasing her down. I'd give her a chance to calm down and try again.

Joshua's place was my next step. Since Hanna lived in the basement suite for now, odds were she wouldn't see me park across the street, or she wasn't home. Fortunately, Liberty wasn't there either. It felt risky enough talking to the brother of the woman I loved. Facing her at the same time would have only made it harder.

"Well, well, well," Joshua said as he greeted me with a smile. "Looks like you've finally decided to take it easy for the holidays. Luke Robertson *not* in the office? It's a miracle," he joked.

Uh, looks like he doesn't know yet.

I entered and noticed him frowning at me holding his sister's tote.

"Isn't that Hanna's?"

I nodded and didn't just sit on a stool at his kitchen counter. Gravity pulled me down to slump over the white granite too.

"Uh oh."

"I can't get Hanna on the phone." I'd only tried calling her once, but I had a feeling deep in my gut she wouldn't be picking up. "She won't talk to me."

“Okay.” He pulled out a stool and sat across from me.

Fuck. Have I ruined everything? I shouldn't have been so passive to delete her emails and throw away the flowers. I should have told her to back off.

“What happened?” Josh’s tone wasn’t demanding or cold. He was one of the only guys I felt close to. Jacob wasn’t back home yet to talk to. Talking to Joshua was tricky though. I gritted my teeth, bracing myself for him giving me shit for even going after his younger sister at all. Sure, he saw us at the Christmas party, but he had yet to comment to me directly.

“For a month or so now, Jennifer’s been trying to reach me.”

His brows shot up. “Jennifer as in the gold-digger who cheated on you with Aaron?”

“Anthony,” I corrected. “Not that it matters.” He had the right woman in mind. “But yeah, that Jennifer. She was emailing my work address.”

He nodded. “She wouldn’t know that you’d moved. Since you were in that other house and then wanted something new after that breakup.”

“Yeah. She didn’t have my personal number. I’d changed it when I thought a clean, cold cut would be smart.”

“I still think it was smart.”

“But it didn’t last. I’m a public guy for work. She emailed me. Then she sent me flowers.”

He arched a brow. “Huh.”

“And she left a card about wanting me to have a nice Christmas.”

“Oh, that’s rich. After the way you guys split and you confronted her after decorating just to please her.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Then she sent more flowers and a damn teddy bear. Stupid little stuff. But they were signs of her trying to get to me. I told Cheryl not to permit any more deliveries. I told security she wasn’t allowed to enter the building.”

“Damn. Sounds like she really wanted to talk to you.”

I shrugged. “Too bad. What’s worse is that she showed up this morning. I pulled in and there she was, waiting at my spot. Security told me that she’d been trying to slip in as a visitor, so she must have counted on seeing me before I went in. As soon as I got out of my car to tell her to get lost, she launched at me and kissed me.”

He shook his head.

“I had my coffee in one hand and my briefcase in another. I didn’t think she’d lunge at me like that. She always hated PDA.”

“You set her straight?”

I nodded. “Of course. After she kissed me. Also after your sister saw her kissing me. I think she’d just gotten there and saw it all. She drove off, not giving me a chance to explain.”

I’d been waiting for him to frown and show anger, but he only smiled softly.

“So that’s why she’s been so smiley lately.”

I snorted a laugh. Didn’t he hear a word I said? “She was *not* smiling this morning.”

He didn’t react with a glower. “No. I mean, I saw you at the party. I thought maybe you were just hooking up and all. But she really likes you. And you care about her. If she was that upset then she must really care about you too.”

I didn’t just care about Hanna. I felt like I was on a fast track to a lot more than *liking* her. I was already falling hard for her.

“But now she’s not going to give me the time of day.” *I fucked it up.*

Joshua shook his head. “I’m sure it’ll all work out.”

“I’m not.” He didn’t get it. Hanna was the kind of woman that I saw in my future forever. I didn’t see her on my couch in my house and predict more adventures of getting trees with her and decorating them at Christmastime. I could so easily

see her there for all the holidays, in every room of my house as she lit up the whole place.

“Well, with that attitude, no.”

I deadpanned at Joshua.

“It won’t work out if you just sit on your ass moping about how Jennifer sabotaged you and didn’t get a hint.”

I didn’t intend to sit around. Being here with him, so lucky to have his support, I felt restless and itching to move and fix this.

“Don’t let your ex ruin anything else for you, man. If you love my sister, prove it.”

I wanted to, but I was scared of the chance she wouldn’t hear me out. She was a people pleaser. She admitted to wanting to see me happy. It was an admirable trait, but I worried that she would assume and mistakenly think *Jennifer* made me happy, not her.

“Go on.” Joshua nodded his head to the door. “Don’t wait.”

I stood, nodding and reaching for her tote bag. *On second thought.* “Maybe you can hand that to her though.”

He raised his brows. “Chickening out?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t need a prop for an excuse to talk to her.” I slid the bag over toward him anyway. “But I am aware she might slam the door in my face. You know how lost she is without that notebook in there. I don’t want her to feel lost without it until she is ready to face me.”

Joshua stood, chuckling as he saw me out. “Yeah. You got a point there. If I could guess, she’ll want to talk with the girls about this fiasco. I’ll bring it down to her when she’s home later.”

HANNA

I spent all day at Gabriela's. She still lived at home, and her older sister, Bella, was a big help, too. She offered her perspective, and since she was a few years older, I valued her take on it all. Mrs. Garcia was just too forgiving, wanting me and Luke to both be happy for Christmas. It was something more like a mom saying she wanted both teams to have fun at a game, not caring who won. As I made cookies with them, I listened to their advice and tried to weigh how I should interpret Jennifer kissing him like that.

"All I'm saying is maybe he didn't have a chance to push her off," Mr. Garcia said when he came into the kitchen to impart his take on it.

"If his hands were full," he said, picking up a can of whipped cream in one hand to mimic Luke's coffee cup, then swiped the box of aluminum foil from the counter to model Luke holding his briefcase. "Here come surprise me quick with a kiss, Maria."

His wife smirked at him. "The cookies will burn."

"Quick, quick!"

She giggled rushing up to him and kissing him suddenly. He couldn't have warded her off without dropping the things in his hands. He didn't either, kissing her again. It wasn't the same. They were both laughing, still so in love and happily married to be goofy like this.

I saw his point though. "Okay. So, his hands were full." Maybe that could have excused him from being less able to

ward her off.

But it doesn't explain this deep, sinking feeling of dread deep in my stomach.

Later, I headed to Poppy's house. It was another one of our traditions, our Festivus. We had no aluminum pole or any other references to the famous *Seinfeld* show where Cosmo Kramer declared Christmas Eve's Eve a new holiday. I did air my grievances though. Liberty and Poppy joined Gabriela as my audience in hearing what happened that morning and why my eyes were so puffy and red from crying.

Seeing my tote bag prompted me to launch into explaining.

"Joshua said to make sure I brought it over for you. We know how you can't stand to be parted from your notebook." She handed it over and I didn't waste a second. I dipped my hand into the bag and retrieved my good old friend. I didn't know why it brought me so much comfort. Planning always did. I figured if I'd planned how to get Luke in my life a little better, I wouldn't be in this predicament right now.

"He kissed her," Liberty said after I told them, "or she kissed him?"

"She kissed him. She approached him. She'd been waiting there for him."

Poppy shook her head at me. "But did he respond in kind?"

Why does it always seem like everyone else is siding with him? I didn't want to think that I was overreacting or just being silly and emotional.

"I didn't look. I couldn't look. It was hard enough just hearing her talk about how confident she was to have him again that I couldn't think straight." I sighed, looking down at my plate of takeout that I barely touched. Tonight was supposed to be a fun evening of eating, drinking, and watching another movie, but I wasn't in the mood. I appreciated them listening to me and offering their opinions. I needed advice and guidance, but I felt like I had to listen to what I felt deep

down. They weren't there to see it. They didn't hear the complete confidence Jennifer had about him.

And why shouldn't she? She'd known him better, for longer. I'd known Luke all my life, but Jennifer had him more as an adult.

"Think about it. He's been a grouch for years around this time of the year," I said, hoping to make them understand why this hurt so damn badly. "And then all of a sudden, we have sex and get a tree and his past is erased?"

"Maybe you have a magic vajayjay."

I pointed at Gabriela to hush. Now was *not* the time for goofy jokes. "It's crazy to think he could change that fast." I felt dumb to even hope for it. "I saw the red flags. He was hung up over her."

Poppy grimaced. "Hmm. Maybe not. I think he might have just been hurt that deeply, sensitive about this time of the year when he experienced such heartache."

Liberty topped off her drink. "I agree. Luke never dated much. He's always been on the quiet, loner side of life. Maybe it's just stuck with him that much because he couldn't get over the pain, not that he couldn't get over her."

I shook my head, still so unsure and wounded about it all. "And it won't impact *us*, whatever I thought we were building up to. It's going to impact work."

Gabriela cringed. "Yeah. It'll be awkward doing this toy drive event. Seeing him and all. I hope he explains before then." She grabbed my phone and showed me the screen to the device I'd silenced. "Maybe that's what he's hoping to do, explain."

I shook my head. I wasn't ready to face him. I knew we needed to talk, but only now with my notebook did I feel like I could jot down my points to plan and prepare for that discussion.

"And weren't you working on a New Year's Eve event, too?" Poppy asked.

I nodded. “In New York.” Traveling with him would be so awkward now. “Maybe Luke was right. Maybe we should’ve left things alone until after the work events were done. To safeguard our working relationship.”

Gabriela rubbed my forearm, sympathetically. “And then the whole thing about just working for Robertson Resorts would be a huge question in the air.” She patted firmly and smiled. “But it won’t come to making a choice to stay or go. It’s going to be worked out by then. I just know it.”

I wanted to call bullshit. “Sorry, but this is going to be the first time I won’t share your optimism.”

No matter what they said, I was convinced it was over. Luke and I were over before we truly began, and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn’t have a magical anything to make Luke want me over his ex. I couldn’t force him to forget about her and actually move on and not wallow in the past.

“They’re going to get back together.” I covered my face and sighed, hating how whiny I sounded. I didn’t mean to be a downer. I was just speaking the truth. “I can tell.”

“No, you can’t,” Liberty argued.

I nodded, still not looking up. “It’s that time of the year.” I sat up and looked at Gabby. “Like my aunt and mom said. The holidays have a way of bringing people together.”

She shook her head. “Yeah, meaning you and Luke.”

“No. Like reuniting and reconnecting with former flames.”

Poppy held up her hand. “Come on, Hanna. You’re not a negative kind of girl. Has he given you any indication that he still misses her? Not that he’s stuck in remembering the past with her, but that he misses the chance to have her in his life now or in the future.” She raised her brows expectantly. “Has he?”

“He threw away the flowers she had delivered,” Gabriela reminded me.

I shrugged. “He did.”

“Did you ask him about her?” Liberty asked. “Joshua told me a little, and it sounds like it was a messy breakup.”

“I did ask. For so long, he didn’t want to talk about it but he finally opened up.” I thought back to his words about wanting to move on and look ahead—with me. But those were just words, weren’t they?

I shook my head then finished my drink. I had no desire to get drunk and forget about him, but I enjoyed taking the edge off with these women who’d have my back no matter what.

“It’ll be hard to see him with her. But I won’t have a reason to go back to his office after the end of the year. I can avoid the awkwardness there.”

“That’s *if* it doesn’t work out,” Gabriela reminded me.

I shrugged. “I think it’s fair to assume that my Christmas love affair with my longtime crush will just be short-lived and pointless.”

It depressed me to admit it, but I refused to get my hopes up high.

Poppy must have sensed that we needed a change in topics. We moved into the living room and watched our movie, but I struggled to get into it. Gabriela took my phone off silent to vibrate, and throughout the evening, he called and texted several times.

Finally, Liberty grabbed the remote and paused the comedy. “Jeez! Just reply to him already!” She laughed at her own outburst. “Either tell him to stop pestering or tell him you’ll talk to him later.” Narrowing her eyes at me, she gentled her tone. “I can tell you can’t stop thinking about it.”

I appreciated her tough love. Nodding, I grabbed my phone and sighed.

Luke: I just want to talk.

Luke: Will you please consider meeting me at the café in the morning?

I bit my lip and typed a reply. Tonight was no good. I needed to sleep on this.

Hanna: Okay. Nine o'clock.

After I sent it, I turned off my phone notifications. The café would be packed for Christmas Eve. It was a public place I wouldn't want to be seen crying at, but I needed the closure. I needed to know rather than guess or assume where I stood with Luke, both for my career and my heart. If nothing else, I would have the first step completed to go forward.

"There." Liberty smiled. "Feel better?"

I smirked and shook my head. "Not really."

"You will," Poppy reassured.

"What did you say?" Gabby asked.

"He said he wanted to talk and asked to meet up tomorrow, so I said I would."

"Thattagirl," Liberty cheered.

"Talking is critical," Poppy advised. "Miscommunication is such a waste of time."

I wasn't certain if that was what happened between me and Luke. He'd communicated his willingness and desire to be with me, but he'd also expressed his difficulty in letting go of his past and moving on to anything else. Yes, he'd taken a big step in getting a tree yesterday. With the fragile state of my head and mind, I was too timid and cautious to take much faith in that.

I left the girls to the rest of the movie, needing the quiet of being in my own space. When I entered, I turned off the Christmas tree lights, not wanting a reminder of what I shared with Luke there. Instead, I curled up in bed and took out my notebook. Then I got set to writing, listing everything I felt as though it was a journal. That turned into bulleted points of all I wanted to say to him, and when I finally dozed off that night, I felt slightly more prepared to fix this gaping hole in my heart that Luke once filled.

LUKE

The next morning, I sat at a table waiting for Hanna. I came early, worried I wouldn't get a table. Even then, I got lucky with a couple just leaving, giggling and cozying together about how they looked forward to their first Christmas as newlyweds. I envied them for their happiness, wondering with a faltering sense of hope if I would ever be able to share that bliss with Hanna.

She was the one for me. I knew it, even if I struggled to express it. I might not be the smoothest at voicing what I felt and I would struggle with opening up on the best of days, but with her, I wanted to. I really did.

Surrounded by all the happy people readying for the holiday, I felt awkward and out of place. Sitting there alone, I stuck out like a sore thumb. On any other day, I doubted I would have cared, but with knowing I'd had a chance to have Hanna and our budding relationship soured my mood. I refused to let her slip from my grasp, but my odds seemed to shrink every minute that passed when she didn't show.

I wouldn't blame her for standing me up. I harbored serious doubts that she would come, and I let my nerves get the better of me.

"Hey, can we use this chair?" Someone reached from the other side of the table and I hurried to hook my foot around the metal leg.

"No, sorry. I'm meeting someone here."

The guy in a hideous turtleneck sweater scoffed. “Well, yeah, that’s what you want to think.”

I glowered at him.

“You’ve been sitting here for like a half hour.”

More like six minutes, asshole.

“Face it. They’re not gonna show.”

I dragged the chair closer to the table. “That seat is taken.”

“Whatever, dickhead.”

“Yeah, Merry Christmas to you, too,” I jeered.

Knowing people would be seeing me here and judging me for being alone didn’t stick in my mind though. I didn’t care. I couldn’t. All I could concentrate on was if Hanna would come and how I would break into explaining myself to her.

I don’t want Jennifer. I want you. That was the truth, but it felt like I would be coming on too strong.

I want to kiss you, only you, for the rest of my life. Okay, that was even worse for an opener. Too possessive.

I love you. Also the truth I was finally starting to accept, but it would be too much of a bombshell right after *hello*.

No matter what I blurted out, it would have to fix this. I felt the pressure of the world on me to make this right. It kept me in suspense, waiting for her and being so driven to communicate with her.

She arrived, putting my fears to rest, just a couple of minutes late. As the hostess walked her back to my booth, I overheard her telling the woman that finding parking was an absolute horror out there.

“Hi.” I stood as she approached, but I made sure that my gift for her didn’t slip out of my pocket. Keeping one hand over the small container, I waved at her lamely. I wanted to hug her. I wished I could squeeze her to me and get a deep inhale of her sweet scent, but she was too guarded, eyeing me carefully.

“Hi, Luke.”

She sat across from me, and I reminded myself to go slow, to be honest, and to hear her out too. I told her I wanted to talk. That meant *me* telling her why she didn't need to assume the worst of me. But I wanted to hear her express herself too, if she was willing.

She seemed to have something for me, too, but once she pulled it out from her coat, I saw that it wasn't a gift. I smiled lightly at the sight of her notebook. She was so cute with that thing, so stubborn to never consider using her phone or anything else to keep track of her thoughts and plans.

“Can I start?” she asked.

I swallowed and nodded. That wasn't the way I saw this conversation going, with her having the first words, but it didn't matter. “Sure. Please.”

She flipped over the notebook and drew a deep breath before looking me in the eye. “Over the past month, you've made me feel so many things, Luke. As my boss, you made my confidence grow with all the responsibilities you trusted to me so eagerly. As my friend, you made me realize how appreciated and welcomed I was in your life, even if you had your troubles with this time of the year. And as my lover, you made me understand what really falling in love is all about.”

Oh, Hanna. I clenched my hand to refrain from reaching out to her.

She cleared her throat. “I thought you were giving me signs that you felt the same about me. And I was convinced in the thought that we were hurtling toward something real. Maybe it was fast, too fast, but it felt so real and solid, deep in my heart. I thought we were heading toward something that could really stand the test of time, not just something new and shiny and temporary because of the season. After a lot of thinking and debating though...” She sighed.

My stomach churned the coffee I'd had this morning. My heart raced. It felt like she was about to lay a huge *but* and tell me it was over.

“I came to realize how naïve I was. I realize that I’m younger and less experienced, but that difference doesn’t mean my heart doesn’t know what it wants. I would rather be naïve and maybe too impatient going into something so blindly, but I’d rather be naively eager and honest, and hurt, than guarded and angry, like you. I don’t want to go through this holiday season, or any time, holding a deep grudge.”

“Hanna.” I cleared my throat that felt so thick with emotion at hearing her pour her heart out like this so boldly.

She lifted a finger, indicating she wasn’t done. If she jotted down the points, she would get through each and every one of them. I knew this. Because she was prepared.

“I’m sorry that Jennifer hurt you so badly in the past. I wish she hadn’t shown back up and disrupted what I thought was the start of a relationship between you and me, but if you want to choose her, I will be okay.”

What?

“I just want you to be happy. However, I would regret it if I didn’t say that I think you deserve better than someone who would abuse your trust like that and throw you out like you never meant anything. I think you should be careful with her, Luke. Because I’d hate to see you hurt again.”

I stared at her, my lips parted in shock as she closed her book and folded her hands on top of it. She looked calm and collected, but I didn’t miss the troubled gaze in her caramel eyes.

She was *still* putting me first. Hanna was a people pleaser. She admitted it freely. Everyone who was lucky enough to know her knew that about her. She got pleasure from seeing others happy.

But now? Even after the hurt I’d put her through? Still, she wanted to prioritize my happiness?

I pressed my lips closed and licked the seam, trying to think of the best way to reply. I hadn’t prepared with handwritten notes. I hadn’t spent all night outlining a statement like she had. I’d hoped to simply speak from my

heart and wing it, praying she would believe me and want to stick with what we were building together.

A small part of me was hurt that she wouldn't consider what I'd told her. All those times I'd told her I wasn't interested in Jennifer and that I wanted to move on from her. I never once suggested that I missed being with Jennifer.

And what about when I told her that her happiness mattered too? When we danced and I apologized, I told her in clear terms that someone—meaning me—had to see to her happiness too, because she deserved all the happiness in the world.

She didn't need to put me before herself in the name of love.

I didn't want her to.

“Luke?” She furrowed her brow. “Please say something.”

I let my breath out in a quick rush, smiling. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

Her brow lined even more.

“I’m not trying to gaslight you or discredit your feelings, but really, in the simplest, barest sense, you’ve got this all wrong.”

“How?”

Damn, I loved how she challenged me, pushing me to be clearer. This woman didn't take crap sitting down or standing. She went for what she wanted, in this case, answers, and her drive was sexy as hell.

“First and foremost, I do *not* want Jennifer.”

She swallowed, waiting for more.

“She’s basically been stalking me. The kiss that you saw was one-sided. When she showed up in the parking lot, I was caught off guard. I thought I’d made sure that I wouldn’t have to ever see her again. I told Cheryl, my receptionist, to reject any deliveries from her. I told security that she wasn’t permitted in the building, and since then, I’ve learned that

she's been trying to sneak in as a visitor. The woman was hounding after *me*. I hadn't wanted anything to do with her since we broke up."

"And she couldn't get the hint? Sending flowers? You never told her to stop?"

I hated the implication that I hadn't tried hard enough, but I didn't have an excuse.

"I didn't want to tell her anything. I cut her out of my life. In hindsight, I realize maybe that was an error on my part, not telling her to back off. I didn't want to speak to her at all." I waited in case she followed up with another question, and when she didn't I continued. "She sent me those flowers, then another one with a toy. She was scaling up and I hoped that barring her from visiting or delivering anything, she'd get the hint. She was just trying to worm her way back into my head. Then in the parking lot, yesterday morning, she'd cornered me." It felt like I was grasping for any excuse, claiming that, but it was true. "My hands were full, and short of tossing my coffee on her, I didn't have any way to deflect her."

She lowered her gaze to her hands, and I lost my control then. I reached out to take her hand and hold it. When she glanced up at me, I felt a trickle of hope filling my heart.

"Hanna, hear me when I say that kiss meant *nothing*."

She nodded slightly, pressing her lips together.

"I'll show you the surveillance tapes. I wiped my mouth and promptly told her to get out of there. I'm filing a restraining order against her."

Her brows spiked high.

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm not taking chances on her anymore. I want her gone, out of my life for good because I've moved on. I *am* moving on. With you, I hope."

Still, she seemed hesitant. "It's just that it didn't really look that way."

"I get that. But that's the truth. Her kiss meant nothing. *She* means nothing to me." I smiled, breathing easier. "And it feels

really fucking good to be able to say that.” I’d feel even better if I knew all could be back to normal with Hanna again, but maybe she’d need time.

She rubbed her tongue on her lower lip, almost seeming shy. “And it’s just that I’ve had a crush on you forever. I’ve had a crush on you for so long.”

“You did?”

Her cheeks turned pink. “Oh, gosh. I figured you knew. Yes. For a long time, so long I can’t even remember. And then just when I thought you were actually starting to open up and let me and Christmas into your life, this happened.”

I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face, still stunned. “You had a crush on me?”

She rolled her eyes, fighting a grin. “Yes! I dreamed of the day you’d notice me. I prayed that you’d one day just see me, not as Josh’s little sister but an equal, a partner you’d be attracted to. And then once it seemed like that was coming true, this happened. I can’t help being scared, thinking that I’m more invested in this than you are.”

“I’m scared too, Hanna. Maybe more so. You’re the light I needed in my life, and I can’t believe you’ve had your eye on me without my knowing it. I’ve noticed you for years but never knew how to approach you. But since I have, I’ve treasured every minute of getting close to you.”

I slipped my hand into my pocket and put the box on the table.

Her eyes went wide as I opened the box to the bracelet.

“I’ve been collecting things that remind me of you.” I watched as she picked it up and traced her fingertip along the charms. “You can add more.”

So far, I had a horse, a mistletoe, a toy, and a heart.

She narrowed her eyes, looking closer. “What’s this?”

“A gingerbread.”

“Wait. Wasn’t that the wineglass charm from that store in Denver?” she asked with a laugh.

I nodded. “I went back to order it.” I squeezed her hand, hopeful that she hadn’t pulled away. “If you need time to think about what I’ve said, I understand. But I’d like for you to have it.”

HANNA

I held my breath, feeling like I was on the edge of a precipice. Luke's fingers were warm against my skin as he secured the beautiful and thoughtful charm bracelet to my wrist. Every time his fingers touched me, a jolt of electricity radiated through me.

This awareness between us was nothing new, and I doubted it would ever fizzle out. After the worry and pain of seeing another woman's lips against his, this sizzling connection between me and Luke was as strong as ever. Maybe it burned even hotter now because I wasn't gripped with doubts and wondering about the unknown.

Luke had come clean about it all, and now that I looked back and thought about what I'd assumed, I knew I had grossly misunderstood the situation. Perhaps if I hadn't put him on such a high pedestal and wanted him for so long, I wouldn't have been so quick to jump to conclusions with too little information.

"Oh, Luke," I said on a sigh as I rotated my wrist. The cool metal of the bracelet and charms tickled me, and I tried my best not to break out in too giddy of a smile.

"You know, I love the way you say my name, but when you said it the other night..." He groaned, as though I was killing him with need.

"I forgive you, baby." I wasn't sure if he was even asking for forgiveness. In fact, it wasn't something he had to ask for. He hadn't done anything wrong, but I had. "Actually, no."

He dropped his jaw. “What?”

“You don’t need my forgiveness. I need yours. *I’m* sorry, Luke.”

He smiled, looping his foot on the leg of my chair and scooting it out. He kept his cocky smile on his lips as he dragged me closer.

“I’m sorry for doubting you. I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions. I’m sorry for not letting it fully sink in that you meant it when you told me you wanted to move on from her and your past. And I’m just so sorry.”

He got me close enough, scraping the feet over the tile floor, until he could kiss me quiet. I relished the heat of his strong hand cupping my face, and I sighed against his lips.

“I’m sorry for—”

He kissed me again.

“I’m sor—”

Again. I giggled, holding on to his hand and keeping him in place as I kissed him back harder. “Okay, I get the point.”

“You don’t need to apologize either. It was a misunderstanding, and I’m glad we’ve cleared the air.”

I nodded, resting my forehead against his. I practically oozed happiness, and I didn’t care if I looked ridiculous, gazing at him with a wide smile like he hung the moon.

“What next?” he asked.

I giggled. “Isn’t that supposed to be my line?” I felt like I’d asked him that often, always eager to know what to plan for and to look forward to.

“Maybe. But I don’t know what comes next. I’d love to, uh, check out your Christmas tree again.”

I cracked up, laughing so hard I bet other people were looking.

“But I know you’ve got plans and all. Christmas is tomorrow.”

“Then why don’t you come with me?” I leaned against him, gazing up at him. “Will you spend Christmas Eve with me? Tomorrow night will be busy with the toy drive event.”

He smiled. “I’d love to.”

“It’ll mostly be hanging out with our friends anyway.”

He pecked a quick kiss to my nose. “Even if it wasn’t, and it was just the two of us, I’d love to.”

I think I might like it even more if it was just the two of us.

I couldn’t renege on plans, though, so even though, “cuddling” under my Christmas tree sounded like a great way to spend the night before Christmas, Luke and I met up outside with our friends. I think Gabriela was the one who first thought of it, and I’d jumped on the plan because I loved singing.

Even though it was cold, all of us in this younger generation lined up to go caroling around the neighborhood. We didn’t get fancy with matching clothes or anything. Liberty tried to hold up a candle but the wind kept blowing it out.

We toured the neighborhood, doing our best to convey the holiday spirit to the older generations. We laughed and goofed off too, ragging each other on missing notes or forgetting lyrics. Gabriela claimed that I sounded like an angel, as always, but I had to shoot sterner and sterner looks at my brother for teasing Luke.

“He does *not*,” I protested.

Joshua and Jacob laughed together. “He does.”

William smirked. “Luke sounds like a soaking wet cat screaming to get out of the bathtub.”

As they laughed, Luke smiled and shook his head.

“Be nice!” I demanded as he slung his arm around my shoulders.

“Aw, look at Hanna, defending her man,” Liberty teased.

“Maybe just try to soften your notes,” I coached him.

He was untrainable, but I was glad he still seemed to be having fun, laughing with how bad he got with every attempt of following my advice.

We were having a great time, but he really was hopeless.

“Besides, nothing will ever sound as good as the noises you make when you orgasm,” he whispered into my ear.

“Behave,” I teased back, reaching under his coat to squeeze his ass.

“You don’t make it easy,” he replied, dipping me in a quick hot kiss.

“Annd, I think we’re going to lose our star singer,” Jacob teased. “Get a room, you two.”

Luke and I tuned them out. They were right anyway. Once we agreed that our toes were frozen and hot drinks were necessary, I led Luke back to my suite. I doubted Luke was right about me being loud during sex, but it seemed like a safer bet to have my man come to my place instead of his.

As soon as I closed the door, Luke stalked up to me, already taking his coat off. I held up my hand. “As much as I enjoyed the last time,” I said, trying to keep as straight of a face as possible.

He grinned. “Time to make another new memory and christen somewhere else?”

“Well, you know how some people say sex on the beach isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be?” I hugged him back as he gathered me in his arms. Pushing my breasts against him, I guaranteed a delicious ache of need to build in my core.

He growled, kissing me hard. “Since that trip to Bali and seeing you in your bikini, I’ve had many fond fantasies of having fun with you on the beach.”

I smiled into his kiss, loving the news of him having *fantasies* about me. Maybe one day.

“But they say sand gets in places where it doesn’t belong,” I cautioned. “And per the rash that I found on my lower back,

I'm realizing that maybe the same applies here. I don't want to, um, get pine needles where they don't belong either."

He chuckled, kissing me again. It was so easy to laugh with him and shift right into the less amusing and far hotter moments.

I took his hand and led him down the narrow hall to my bedroom, where we removed our clothes in a fumbling rush of wanting to be naked and also getting warm under the sheets.

He heated me inside out with desire, but we'd been caroling for hours, and I was more than frozen. Shivering against me under the covers, Luke held me close and kissed me without pause. Slowly, as our hands roamed and explored in light foreplay, we got our blood circulating again. His was rushing south. I stroked the hard, long length of his erection while he fingered me, and before long, I felt like we would both come too soon with only our hands.

"Come here, babe," he whispered huskily.

I sat up as he moved, not seeing what he wanted.

He kept the blankets secure to us, not risking a loss of the body heat under the tent of the blankets. I giggled and lay back as he maneuvered over me to reach down to the floor for his pants. He returned with a condom, and once he slid it on, he lay back beside me.

"Okay, now come here," he said between kisses.

I followed his lead, staying on my side as he lifted my leg to drape it over his. As he entered me, I relaxed and lowered my head to face him. It was a twisted fit, but he secured his mouth over mine and kissed me hard as he slowly pumped in and out of me. Every long, steady stroke dragged his steely thickness over my sensitive channel. Once he moved his hand from cupping my breast, where he'd been rolling his thumb over my stiff nipple, he slid his fingers over and around my clit, teasing me even more.

"Oh, Luke," I said, giving in to what he'd joked about earlier. If he liked hearing me say his name, I was more than

happy to oblige. So long as he kept loving on me with this battering strike of pleasure, I'd say anything he wished to hear.

“I love that, Luke. I love the way you fill me.”

He thrust into me harder and faster, fueled by what I said in gasping breaths. With a firmer press on my clit, so sensitive from being this close to my release, he pushed me over the edge. I cried out loudly, tightening my pussy around his dick, and with one, two more drives into me, he came too.

I trembled and clung to kissing him as I rode out the intense waves of this orgasm. I wasn't sure if it felt more special, more potent, because it might have been makeup sex. We hadn't fought. I'd apologized even though he insisted I didn't need to.

As he relaxed against me, cuddling me with his sweet brand of aftercare and showing reluctance to get up out of bed, I nestled up against him, knowing this time, and every time after, would be hot and tender because we understood each other now.

There was no more room for doubts or worries in my heart or mind.

Luke and I were too good of a fit to let anything pull us apart.

“Merry Christmas, Hanna,” he said as he kissed my shoulder.

In the distance, I heard the church bells ringing, marking midnight.

I smiled and leaned back to kiss him too. “Merry Christmas, baby.”

This was by far, my best one yet.

LUKE

I woke up Christmas morning with Hanna warm and soft in my arms. I could fall into a trance gazing at her no matter where she was and what she wore, but I suspected this was my favorite. Nothing beat holding her all sleepy and peaceful, so pliant and cozy. It was hard enough to get out of bed in the winter. I always wanted to linger in a warm bed and avoid stepping out into the chill of the room. I could stay in here forever with her and be content.

I'd grumbled and groaned with this season, but it had taken her patience and lively spirit to make me come around, and I'd forever be grateful to it. Even if I'd gotten over myself and fallen in love with her any other day, or holiday, this connection to her would be the same.

Deep. Soulful. Perfect.

She woke up slowly, blinking away the dregs of sleep in her eyes. Then she gazed at me with such a rich sense of comfort and contentment that I felt like I was the luckiest man alive.

"Morning," I said and kissed her tenderly.

"Morning." She kissed me back longer, ending the press with a proud smile. "More like Merry Christmas, Luke."

I could have sworn we'd shared that saying last night before we fell asleep. With her, I'd repeat it again and again, meaning it every time.

“Just think. Right now, kids are waking up their poor, tired parents eager to unwrap their gifts and see if their Christmas wishes came true.” I hugged her closer and kissed her again. “But I’ve beaten everyone to it.” I stroked my hand down her bare back, grinning when I felt the goosebumps rising on her soft skin. “I was lucky enough to unwrap my gift last night.”

She giggled as I cupped her ass and gave it a squeeze.

“Thanks for making my Christmas wish true.”

“You wished for me?” she asked shyly as she stroked my jaw.

I nodded. “Not just for the holiday, but before it. I love you, Hanna.”

She blinked quickly, leaning up to lie over me. With her warmth draped over me, her arms around my neck, she grinned and kissed me deeply. “I love you, too, Luke.”

Hearing those sweet words thawed my heart even more. Not a trace of guardedness lingered in my soul. Never again would I become a grouch or grinch. I had no room for those negative feelings when she charmed me into feeling so loved and mighty to be her man.

After we snuggled and kissed, cherishing each other and those words of affection, she laughed and looked at her watch. “I think you’re wrong, though. Kids were probably getting up hours ago.”

I peered at the hour and nodded. “Yeah. Jacob and I set a record of jumping on our parents beds when we were six and seven.”

She giggled. “What time was it at?”

“4:58. My dad never ever forgot the precise minute.”

“We weren’t so bad. I think Joshua tried to sneak downstairs every year though, and someone would catch him.”

“I can only imagine how exhausting that all has to be.”

She sighed, resting her chin on my chest. “I think the holidays, while fun and lovely, are *always* exhausting in some

sense.”

I rubbed her back. “You’ve got to go to what, two dinners?”

She shook her head. “Just one, dinner at my parents’ this year.” She grinned slyly. “And I think Mom is going to be sad if you don’t come.”

I smiled back. “I’ll be there. And same for you. You best be coming to mine, too. We’ll have to pace the food.”

It was so easy, so simple to make these arrangements. I was glad there was no obligation to meet each other’s families. No awkwardness and the usual getting-to-know you stuff. We’d grown up together and already knew each other so well, it felt like it was a silly waste of time to have taken this long to get together.

“But it’ll still feel hectic, having the event to handle at night, too.”

I nodded, getting up with her. “I know. It will be fun, though. I’m glad you thought of doing something.”

“Are you just saying that because the resorts get free PR?” she teased.

“No.” I shot her a playful yet stern look. I knew she didn’t actually think that. “But next year, we’ve got to make it bigger.”

After I went into the bathroom, I headed for her kitchen to make her breakfast. I was already aware of the layout of the house from when Joshua lived here, and I made myself at home scrambling eggs and making bacon.

Hanna came from downstairs in a robe, and guessing that she was wearing nothing underneath it had me mentally groaning and wishing for another round of enjoying her luscious body.

She hugged me from behind, sniffing deeply and groaning. “Hmmm.” Between her fingers, she held a slim envelope. She tapped it on my bare chest as she pressed a kiss to my back.

“You’re spoiling me with the gifts, mister. First the bracelet. Now making me breakfast.” She held the paper up to me. “You’re not going to let me catch up.”

I took the envelope, turning and keeping her in my arms as I opened it. She reached around me, just as unwilling to step away, and flipped the bacon.

I found a pair of tickets inside, smiling immediately as I read what they were for. She’d reserved us a private tour of the Empire State Building for when we would be in New York for the last event of the year.

“This is awesome, Hanna. Thanks, babe.” I smiled down at her and kissed her deeply. “I can’t wait to see this with you.”

“I was hoping to surprise you. You surprised me with the dinner at the stampede and trip up to the tower. So, I wanted to do the same for you.”

“I love it.” I kissed her again before we parted to eat. “Have you ever been there?” I asked.

“I’ve been to New York, yes.” She sat at the table with two cups of coffee that I’d brewed. “But not during the holidays. I’m excited to see it all.”

I sat, divvying up the food. “Let me guess. You’ve got a hell of a list going in your notebook.”

“Of course.”

I chuckled, prompting her to laugh too. “Why’s that so funny?”

“You and that notebook.”

She shrugged. “I like to be organized.”

“Yeah. I see that. But why pen and paper? Why not on a phone or something that can sync?”

She furrowed her brow. “Are you implying that I should be all about technology because I’m so young?”

I scoffed. “Hanna, you’re like five years younger than me. Not ten.”

She sobered. “Does the gap bother you?”

I shook my head. “Not at all.”

She smiled. “It only bothered me when I worried it would turn you off from wanting to start something with me. Aunt Sydney and Uncle Jerome are eleven years apart.”

“The aunt who loaned me all the Christmas stuff?”

She laughed. “Um, no. I’m pretty sure she expects you to keep it all. No loaning. But yeah, that’s the aunt.”

I thought again to how she said they’d married on Christmas. “Could you imagine having the stress of a wedding on Christmas? When it can already be exhausting by itself?”

She licked her lips, staring at me carefully with a sly grin. “I think a wedding wouldn’t be stressful at all when you know it’s with the right person.”

I smiled right back, wishing I had the guts to reply in kind to that.

“But the paper and pen stuff.” She shrugged, sensing we weren’t ready for that deep of a commitment. “I just like it. I like the motion of moving my hand as I write and turning pages. It’s satisfying.”

“Hey, we all have our quirks.”

“Like being horrible flirts?” She gave me a teasing smile before getting up to bring her dishes to the sink.

“I can’t get over the fact you didn’t know I had a crush on you for so long.”

I smiled. “I think Joshua might have suspected it when we were younger, but he never came out and said anything.”

“I don’t think he’ll be an annoying big brother and act protective.”

I agreed. “Nah. I think he’s too chill for that. When we were younger, I think it might have bothered him, but not much.”

“He didn’t say anything at the Christmas party,” she said.

After we finished with cleaning up after breakfast, we moved to the living room. Snuggling on the couch and sipping our coffees, we watched the snowfall and the twinkling lights on the tree. Music would have been even nicer, but I suspected we were both too comfortable to get up and reach for our phones.

As I sat there, so happy and calm, I imagined when it might not be. If our kids would be setting records of how early they could jump on our bed to wake us up for opening gifts. If we'd have a sneaky son or daughter who would try to slip downstairs and "catch" Santa in our living room. It would be hectic, and busy, but the thought brought out a smile on my face.

I'd told her we'd take this one day at a time, but here I was looking forward to having kids. Next thing, I'd be making my own list of names.

"Are you sure we won't disappoint our kids?" she asked, breaking the peaceful quiet.

I choked on my coffee, afraid I'd been thinking out loud. Spluttering and coughing, I sat forward. She laughed, shocked, and patted my back.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded, clearing my throat. "What'd you say?"

"Are you sure we won't disappoint our toy drive kids tonight?"

Okay, *that* made much more sense. She hadn't been reading my mind or anything like that.

"I *know* we won't disappoint them." I smiled at her taking possession of the event. She truly was the most giving, big-hearted person I knew.

"But the Santa for hire I found got the flu and no one else was available." She bit her lip, worrying it with her teeth.

"And I told you I'd handle it."

She narrowed her eyes. "Did you really find someone?"

I nodded.

“I realize you’ve got connections everywhere, but I was searching all over, even up into Southern Ohio, for someone who’d be available.”

“It’s taken care of.”

Still, she was curious. “Who is it?”

“A family friend.” I didn’t want to lie to her, but I wanted it to be a surprise.

“Hmm. I guess *I* won’t have a reason to sit on Santa’s lap.” She kissed me. “I already got my gift.” She tapped my nose. “You.”

And I got you too. I pulled her in close for a longer kiss. “Trust me. I can’t wait for tonight.”

HANNA

Luke went home shortly after our relaxing morning. He wanted to change and get ready for the rest of the festivities, and just hearing him be so excited about going to these things made my heart full. He really had done a one eighty, going from the grinch to the gorgeously happy man who liked Christmas again. I wouldn't be sappy and call it a miracle, but as I got dressed and prepared to head to my parents' house to celebrate and exchange gifts, I felt good about this.

I hadn't *forced* anything on him. I'd tried to respect his anti-Christmas ways. But it had happened, and I knew he wouldn't hold it against me at all. He'd wanted to get over his past and the triggers that made him grumble about all things Christmasy. In a way, I was a catalyst there. He'd hated Christmas because of the breakup with Jennifer that happened at that time. Now that he was firmly telling her that he'd moved on, to me specifically, I had severed that tie to his bad memories of the season. Now all he had to do was keep on enjoying the warmth and love the holiday season had to offer.

He came with me to the earlier than usual dinner with my family. Mom made her ham, Dad insisted on grilling steaks too, and no, I wasn't sure how that "tradition" ever happened. She humored him, and Luke seemed really intrigued, apparently also a fan of grilling in the middle of the cold winter.

Men and their toys. Enough said.

Joshua and Liberty were there, as well as the rest of my siblings. With the laidback fanfare that we also had at family gatherings, it was a fun-filled night of delicious food, too many desserts that we all planned to take leftovers home, and the typical exchange of gifts. It was a nice time had by all, and I was glad that Mom thought ahead to get Luke a gift. He didn't need anything, but it was a nice gesture, and I know he appreciated it. Of course, he'd gotten gifts before. Joshua was his good friend, but now, he was treated almost the same way she treated Liberty, her soon-to-be daughter-in-law. If it wasn't telling of the new way she viewed Luke as my man, I wasn't sure what would've been.

Once the gifts were opened and everyone kicked back with drinks and so forth, I headed to the kitchen to prepare the cookie platter I intended to set out. Joshua strolled in not long after me, tossing out his water bottle and grabbing a new one.

"Water?" I teased, knowing full well that he was still slightly hungover. Liberty had roasted him in a group text, saying he'd wanted a hot toddy too many after the cold night of caroling. I much preferred warming myself up with Luke in my bed than drinking heated booze.

"My head is only now starting to not hurt," he joked. "So, yes. Water it is."

"Old man," I joked, elbowing his side.

"Well, there's the sister I know. Mean as ever." He elbowed me right back. "You happy?"

I smiled, knowing what his teasing meant. He always claimed that I was only "normal" if I was bickering with him. If I had to guess, Liberty had told him about my experience with Luke at the office.

I glanced at him, realizing he seemed awfully knowledgeable. Maybe Luke told him too. As a matter of fact, it was a shock I hadn't put it together earlier. She'd had my tote bag, and he had to have given it to her. I'd had it at the office, dropping it in the lobby, so yeah, Luke was the one to get it in Joshua and Liberty's hands. He probably told him all about it.

Which means that cleared up the telling-my-brother bit.

It was nice to know that was out of the way.

“I am.” I smiled at him, meaning both words. “I’ve never been happier.”

He nodded, sipping from a new water bottle. Pointing a finger from the plastic, he said, “If Luke messes up again though, I’ll flush that friendship right down the drain.”

I giggled, shaking my head. As if they’d ever not be friends.

“Seriously, I’ll beat him up for you.”

I laughed harder. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“Good.” He nodded once more, smiling. “So, it’s like real?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah. As real as it can get.”

“Like marriage?”

I tossed a chunk of a broken cookie at him. “We *just* started dating. Like days ago.”

He scoffed, snagging a cookie and making me have to rearrange them again so it looked pretty. “*Just?* There’s nothing *just* happening between you two. You’ve known each other forever.”

“But not dating forever.”

“I mean you’re not getting to know each other, as if you’ve just met.”

That didn’t matter. “Oh, I’m still learning.”

He groaned. “No. I do *not* want to think about my sister’s sex life.”

I laughed. “You said it, not me.”

“But really,” he insisted. “Why wouldn’t you guys take this as fast as possible?”

“Hmm, I don’t know. To savor every moment as it comes?”

“Yeah, yeah. All that.” He dismissed me with a wave. “Still, you guys could’ve eloped for the holiday.”

I snorted. “That wouldn’t be moving fast. That’d be going at the speed of light!”

He slid me a knowing smile, smug about it. “Oh, don’t tell me you didn’t spend years crushing on him and thinking up a dream wedding with him all along.”

I gaped at him. “You knew?”

He rolled his eyes, chuckling. “Of course, I knew. I never told him. But yeah. I saw how you acted around him. And I overheard you and Mom talking once. I always figured it died out over time.” He shrugged. “Or you just got better at hiding it as you got older.”

“Ha.” I deadpanned as I picked up the tray. “I *thought* I got better at hiding it.”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think he ever knew.”

I smiled. “Seemed that way.”

“And I always wondered if *he* had a crush on *you*, too. Or he at least liked to notice you and watch you from afar.”

My heart swelled, both with pride that I’d captured Luke’s eye and that he’d been honest in telling me the same thing. It made it all the more sweeter that we’d found our ways to each other after all. Almost like it was kismet, meant to be.

We joined the others, again, but after a while, we had to leave and hurry to Luke’s family. All of our relatives were understanding of our commitments for later tonight. I was sure my family and his would’ve wanted to be selfish and keep us for themselves in this time of celebrating the holidays, but they all supported the charitable work we wanted to do at the last minute.

Luke’s parents were thrilled to have me over, and his grandma was almost bowing to me in a Wayne and Garth bow when they claimed they weren’t worthy. She’d been most bothered by his grinchiness, and Jacob said I’d transformed Luke to be a happy man again.

Over another serving of delicious food, turkey, this time, they regaled me with more stories about Luke when he was younger. He used to be all about the holidays. While I humored them and listened, laughing along with Luke, I admitted I already knew about many of the stories, having grown up with him.

“Well, it just took you some time to make your way to each other,” his grandpa declared later in the night.

“Maybe this time next year, it’ll be your first newlywed Christmas,” his mother hinted.

“Didn’t someone in your family marry *on* Christmas?” Jacob asked.

I nodded while Luke replied, “Yeah, but if we do that, I have it on good authority all our anniversaries would be taken over by Christmas.”

That doesn’t sound bad. After all, Aunt Sydney and Uncle Jerome were still happy in marriage.

“Oh, stop pressuring them,” his dad said. “We’re all just happy for you two. Happy that you’re together and enjoying it all.”

Thank you! It felt like déjà vu, talking about rushing to marry him. Joshua had been teasing me about it at our family’s gathering, and now, it seemed Luke’s family was thinking the same thing.

I had the same final thoughts on it though. It didn’t matter when a wedding took place, holiday or not. It was the person you chose that made it work.

Before long, it was time to leave his family’s place and get ready for the toy drive. Luke had driven me to his parents’ house, but now, he waited in the car, dropping me off at my place so I could get ready.

“I don’t want to go outside,” I admitted, bundling into my coat. He’d cranked the heat up and it was more than toasty in here. “After the double dinners and all those desserts, I could fall asleep right here.”

He laughed, smiling down at me. “I know what you mean. But it’s not a long walk.” He turned his car off and grinned at my squeak of protest. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

“It’s too late to try to slip inside for any funny business,” I argued. He shut the driver’s door though, letting an icy breeze slip in.

He opened the door and waited for me to take his hand. “All I want to do is slip inside *you*, but that’s got to wait.”

I hugged him, keeping my arm around his waist as we walked up the path together. He was right. The trip from the car to the door was maybe twenty feet, but still, it was chilly. He was also too sweet, walking me when it was so pointless.

“Okay, you need to stop this chivalry. Get back in your warm car, go home, and get ready, then you’ll be back to pick me up in, what, twenty minutes?”

He nodded, pausing at the front door as I unlocked it. “But first.”

Leaning toward him, I waited for his kiss. He made it last, a long one with tongue, and I wondered if the man understood a word I said about being on time. I’d planned this hectic day out to the minute. Going to one dinner, then the next. Rushing to get ready. And then hustling to the event. I hadn’t budgeted for any extra time for fooling around, but he presented an awfully damning case.

“Luke,” I breathed against his lips once we came up for air. Our exhales misted in the air, swirling away from our mouths.

“I just wanted to say thanks for a wonderful Christmas,” he said softly.

“Back at you, baby. Thanks for making mine so great.”

“And sorry if my family was too excited about us being together. After, well, you know who.”

I giggled. “You can say her name. It’s not like she’s Voldemort.”

“After that breakup, they’d been hoping I’d find love again. I just never realized I could actually find it with you,

that you feel the same about me.”

I kissed him again, rubbing my thumb over his chin. “I’m glad we both realized how we felt. Just in time for a Christmas wish coming true.”

After another kiss, he backed up down the steps. “I can’t wait to see what I’m unwrapping tonight.”

“I’ll keep you in suspense. For...” I looked at my phone and squeaked. “Seventeen minutes! Go! And are you sure you’ve got someone to play Santa?”

He nodded and winked. “See you soon, Hanna.”

LUKE

After the longest seventeen minutes of my life, I returned to pick up Hanna. Getting ready didn't require too much concentration on my part. I already knew what I was wearing, both to the event and after. At the end of the night, I looked forward to wearing nothing at all, with Hanna in bed. But I was getting ahead of myself. We had to see this event through, and I was proud when I pulled up with seconds to spare.

She must have been looking out the window for me because by the time I pulled up and set my car in park, she was hurrying out the door. The long, thick coat she wore hid most of her dress, but the little I could see tempted me. She'd gone light on the makeup, glamming it up yet not going overboard. Her hair lay over her shoulders in loose waves, and when she climbed into my car and buckled in, her coat fell open, giving me a teaser of her skin. A long, high slit had been cut into her dress, and the sight of her smooth skin turned me on in a flash.

"Gorgeous, babe." I squeezed her thigh and tipped her chin up for a sound kiss on the lips.

She smiled, moaning against my mouth as she reached up and threaded her fingers into my hair at the back of my head. Cradling my head, she hummed her appreciation. "No product. I like it. Makes it easier for me to muss up."

She could muss me up however she liked. I never wanted her to stop. I knew we didn't have much time right now, but I

couldn't stop kissing her, eager for more of her sweet minty taste and the velvety feel of her smart mouth.

Once I worried I'd reach the point of no return in terms of hiding my erection, I pulled back. Now really wasn't the time to get carried away if we intended to make it to the event. As I looked down at her blinking with lust-hazed eyes, I noticed the steamed windows behind her.

"We'll pick up with this later, huh?"

"Oh, yeah." She adjusted herself in her seat and sighed. "We will, Luke."

We arrived at the ballroom on time, to her pleasure. Seeing all the decorations up exactly as Hanna and Gabriela had intended satisfied me, too.

"It's amazing," she praised as she took in all the formerly white and blue silvery scene that had been morphed into a livelier, kid-friendly version of Christmas delight.

"You're amazing," I corrected, leaning in to kiss her. "This is all you. You thought of this, you put this together."

She shook her head. "I was *not* hands-on with this setup."

I'd scheduled it so that she wouldn't be on the "front lines" so to speak. I'd offered overtime to the employees who'd wanted to stay and get it all ready. I was careful with my selection, ensuring no young parents worked it instead of being with their families. Eddie headed it all up, and he'd even had his grandkids come in to pitch in with getting the place ready.

It looked marvelous, appropriate for kids but also elegant for the diners and contributors who were staying for the food. Items in the silent auction had already been claimed. We'd set it up to happen only remotely, but big-ticket items were still going for bidding. A couple of kiosks toward the one wall near the bar area offered a chance for guests to continue bidding. Many of the items were reservations and bookings at my resorts, so it wasn't as though a tangible thing could have sat on a table for people to browse.

Kids' activities were already underway. Music played. The dance floor was full. And many were seated eating, talking, and laughing. It felt like we were walking into the party already in full swing, but it was all right. Joshua and Liberty had agreed to come earlier since Hanna and I had to go to my parents' house too.

It was packed with happy kids and parents, and it warmed my heart to witness it all in action. Our friends were scattered through the place, pitching in and giving a hand. It already had felt good to be able to ensure these kids had at least one present under their trees this morning, but it was extra great to see them having a ball and enjoying themselves here.

"Luke," Hanna gushed, holding my hand. "Look at all these kids!"

I smiled, scanning the place. They were eating, doing crafts, and playing games, living it up.

"Isn't it great?" I asked, getting her bright smile and nod in return.

We'd made our circles, making sure we talked to all the contributors and bigger names who helped see to making this happen. Everyone was happy and having a great time, and once I saw Hanna chatting with Gabriela, I knew it was time.

I slipped away, nodding at Jacob, who'd helped me fit my outfit. When Hanna said she'd struggled finding a Santa, I bribed Jacob to consider doing it. He'd nearly said yes, probably to impress Gabriela, but instead, I had an idea to handle it myself. My brother helped me find the suit, and it was hanging up in a small room outside the ballroom.

I smiled, wondering how shocked Hanna would be to see me decked in red and white like the jolly old man who slid down chimneys. As quickly as I could, eager to show her my disguise, I shed my suit and put on the velvety soft yet slightly hot outfit. Jacob had left a pillow-like thing too, to better look like a pudgy man from the North Pole, not a fit guy who was almost thirty.

Once I secured the beard and wig-hat combo, I wondered if I'd cook in this getup. It was *hot*, but once I moved around and let air come up under the layers, it wasn't so bad.

I grabbed the sack of smaller presents and returned to the ballroom. Kids squealed and screamed. Some younger ones cried in fright. A few older children eyed me, suspicious and curious, suggesting they were on the border of believing or not. I was having too much fun, walking around and greeting kids.

Many parents joked with me, claiming I should be getting ready to return to the North Pole with my reindeer. A few teased me, saying Mrs. Claus was probably wondering what was taking me so long to come home.

“Oh, I heard there was a party here and I had to come see!” My throat felt raw from faking an overly deep and older tone, but I figured even if anyone knew it was me, they weren't going to ruin the fun and call me out on it.

I handed out the gifts. Jacob came to ask me if I needed water because he'd tried the suit on to make sure it fit and knew firsthand how hot it was.

When Hanna saw me, she gaped, then smiled in that goofy, excited way she had. Too many kids surrounded me for me to have a chance to approach her. I bet I shocked her silly. She'd been looking at me like the town grouch for so long this season, she would've had an easier time seeing me dressed as the green grinch. She couldn't stop smiling at me, thrilled I'd taken on this duty myself.

As I tried to speak with each child, I wanted to both laugh and joke like a smartass.

“But, I really, really hoped you'd get me a puppy,” one boy said sadly.

His mother rolled her eyes behind him.

“Maybe next year,” I said, winking.

Another girl wanted to invite me over to show me how she'd already built her entire LEGO kit. And after her, a younger boy asked me if I liked my job.

I love my job, kid. Now to get my girl to stay there with me.

The New Year's Eve event was a week away, but already, I had a strong feeling how much I would enjoy it with her. And then, all the events we wanted, once she decided if she wanted to be a full-time employee.

I made sure to interact with all who approached me. As I interacted with them individually, listening to what they had to say, I caught sight of Hanna watching from a slight distance, happy tears in her eyes.

Oh, Hanna. I knew she'd love this. And I was so happy I'd pulled it off. To make *her* happy, the people pleaser who deserved a dose of happiness herself.

I told the children the best advice I could as it came to mind. Reminding them that this was what the holiday spirit was all about. Love. Family. Kindness. Giving.

I made sure to look each child in the eyes when I told them to take care of themselves, and before long, it was time to wrap it up. Waving at them as a group, smiling because the news station had a camera up off to the side, I told them I'd see them next year.

I almost thought Jacob would follow me out and make sure I got out of the suit all right. I didn't know how those dudes at the malls pulled this off. I was soaked with sweat, and the right leg of my velvety pants was extra drenched from a toddler who'd peed through her dress.

She insisted that she'd gone potty like a big girl when her mother asked if she had to go. The girl wiggled and wiggled, waiting for her mom to take the picture. I thought she was just happy and excited, dancing in place, but once I smelled her accident, I realized she was just being that honest, going potty right when she was asked, not that she was *on* a potty.

Once I returned to the small room, more like a storage space, I wiped at the dampness with a towel.

The door opened and then closed, and I whipped around, glad I hadn't taken the suit halfway off and ruined the "secret" for a kid snooping around.

It was no child. Just Hanna.

She stalked up to me, smiling that sexy, mischievous grin that I loved.

“You.”

I stood up and smiled, forgetting about the stain.

“I can’t believe you did that.”

I snorted a laugh. “Me neither.” I took off the Santa hat and wig combo, dropping it. Sweat flew into the air in a spray as I ran my hand over my hair. Then I yanked the beard off, breathing that much easier with air on my overheated skin.

“It’s hot in here.”

“I’ll say it is.” She gripped the white fluff of my shirt and tugged me close. Her lips smashed over mine, and I grunted into the feral, impatient kiss. As she walked me back, I knocked into a chair and lowered to it. For a fleeting second, I worried I was overheated and dizzy, but it was just her. It was simply the overwhelming love and desire that took over me whenever my girl gazed at me with such adoration and need.

As she slumped toward me, aiming to straddle me as I sat on the chair, I shifted her to land only on my left leg to spare her getting that kid’s accident on her gorgeous red dress.

“Hmmm.” She pressed kiss after kiss to my lips, showing her thanks for being Santa. “You have no idea how much I love you.”

“Just for sweating my ass off in this for hours?” I joked.

She pulled the velvet shirt open, helping me from overheating. I panted, grateful for her assistance. She tugged the pillow off me too, handing me the bottle she’d entered the room with. “Jacob told me you might need this.” After I sipped it, she kissed me again. “It’s the way you were with them. Talking and listening, not mocking it at all. With the way you were about holiday spirit just weeks ago, this is incredible.”

I gave her a lopsided smile. “It’s all you.”

She laughed. “That’s what you said about this event.”

“No. You. You’re making me want to be the best man I can be. You make me want to do better, in all ways.”

As she gazed at me, showing me all that love in her eyes, I drank the water and felt more like myself.

I bounced her on my knee. “So, Hanna. Did you get everything you wanted this Christmas?” I tried to ask in that fake deep, jolly voice, but my throat was strained.

“Oh, I did, *Santa*.” She ground against my leg slightly. “And I can’t wait for a repeat of my ‘gift’ tonight.”

HANNA

A few days after Christmas, I was deep into work mode. This New Year's Eve event was a larger occasion and in a more challenging place to arrange things. I'd actually started on it from the moment Luke asked me to plan his events. Throughout the whole month, I was picking at little things and thinking ahead for details that couldn't be rushed.

It wasn't easy to order a thousand of an item at the last minute. The Robertson Resort chain held some pomp and clout, but with some vendors, I faced the chance of getting laughed at in the face for expecting delivery so soon. As such, I began ordering things earlier in December, and now that we had mere days until the event, I was glad that I had done that. We were still scrambling and connecting the puzzle pieces of the event, and I felt better to be a step ahead.

Because being in the office with Luke, I was far too easily distracted.

He didn't sit in on every chat Gabriela and I had. He was busy, often on a call, replying to emails, or getting pulled aside to speak with Eddie. When he wasn't preoccupied, he came to the office Gabriela and I had all but claimed for ourselves. I loved that he couldn't stay away.

"What about these?" Luke asked of an option for twinkling fairy lights.

I slid up close to him to see what he was referring to on his laptop screen, but he tugged me closer yet and I dropped onto his lap. Ever since he'd put me on "Santa's" lap, I couldn't get

the idea out of my mind of riding him on a chair. Or anywhere. Luke constantly tempted me to entertain dirty thoughts. He'd jumpstarted my libido into overdrive in telling me he loved me on Christmas morning.

"Hmmm." I deliberately rubbed my butt and back against him, grinding where I knew it would drive him wild.

He grunted and lurched forward. With his arm banded over my waist, he pinned me on his lap. "Naughty girl."

I turned back to kiss his cheek. "Me? No. Never."

"Oh. My. Gosh." Gabriela tossed her pen to the table and groaned. She smiled as she stood, but I heard the annoyance in her tone. "You two need to get a room."

I giggled but got up. That was taking it too far. Luke and I were in love, but that wasn't any reason to be this blunt about how hard it was to keep my hands to myself. I was a professional. I wanted to have a solid reputation for my ethics and what I brought to the table. I didn't want to be known as the girl sleeping with her boss.

Well, not just sleeping with him. But same thing.

"I'm going to get a coffee and take a break." She shot me a *come on, girl* look and left.

I felt guilty and knew I could do better. "She's right."

He caught my waist as the door closed behind my best friend. I went with him, falling back into his lap and smiled into his deep kiss.

"I can't keep my hands off you. I'm sorry."

"Me neither." I couldn't resist pushing into his crotch again, just to tease him. "But at work, we've got to have some limits on the flirting and touching." I stood, putting some distance between us.

"You're right." He sighed and rubbed his face. "And I know that." He smiled at me, that charming, sweet expression that told me he was happy. "It's just like the newlywed phase or something."

Or something. Because we're not newlyweds. I was taken back to Christmas, how my brother and Luke's family hinted at marriage already. Almost as though they'd been counting on us to match up all along.

"And it's not like we'd be the only ones. I don't have archaic no-dating rules for employees. There are many married couples who work for the company, all over the place."

I nodded. "But I bet you expect them to, you know, focus at work."

He stood and smiled. "I do. And it's my fault." He grabbed my ass and gave it a squeeze as he passed. "I'll leave you to it. It's not like you need my help with this. I'll have to save my attention for you at home."

While he lingered at the door, I grinned. "Can you last that long?"

He gave me a slow onceover and groaned lightly. "I have to. Besides, it'll make the wait all the more worth it." He winked and left, leaving me hot and bothered and counting down to the moment I'd see him again.

I texted Gabriela and told her to come back.

Hanna: He's gone. I sort of kicked him out. I'll behave now.

Gabriela: Famous last words, girl. I doubt you'll ever behave around him.

Later that night, Luke and I made good on our promise to save our affectionate attention for at home, my home. Jacob was at his place and we wanted a little more privacy.

We kissed hello and stayed near the front door making out for a bit. I'd left first, and he'd shown up singing, "Honey, I'm home," which was cheesy and kinda sexist, implying I was a housewife without a job, but I giggled and greeted him with all the pent-up love and desire I'd been holding on to since that morning.

We made dinner together, a simple chicken parmesan hack, and it didn't escape my notice how domestic it was to share

my kitchen with him, regardless of how small it was. My suite was cozy in every definition of the word. We had to shimmy past each other, my butt often grazing his crotch, his hands sliding over my lower back, and for once, I didn't mind how cramped it was. I couldn't help but wonder if one day we'd be doing this in our own kitchen.

Since he mentioned that newlywed thing, it remained loud and clear in the back of my mind. I focused on planning with Gabriela, but the moment I had a second of downtime, my thoughts went there.

Newlyweds. Married to Luke.

We were told that it wouldn't seem rushed since we were friends and, before that, kids who played together. Luke and I shared a long history together, even if the intimate adult part of it was shorter in term.

As we sat and ate, he smiled at me and cleared his throat. "Hey, babe?"

I looked up, jarred from my thoughts. At this rate, *newlyweds* would become a refrain in my mind.

"I just wanted to let you know how happy I am."

"Me, too."

"Here, at the office, just in general. You make me happy."

And he knew how much I loved to do that. "I've never been happier."

"But what I said earlier."

I dropped my fork. "About newlyweds." I blurted it, finishing it for him.

He chuckled. "It's been on your mind too, huh?"

I nodded. "Not just because you mentioned it. At Christmas, Joshua was talking to me in the kitchen."

"Then my family, too."

I laughed. "Yeah, you can say it's been on my mind."

“It’s been on my mind a lot too. When I proposed to she who won’t be named.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Back then, I didn’t feel the way that I do now. It’s got me wondering if that saying is really true.”

“What saying?”

“You know when you know.” He got up, done with his plate, and I joined him in taking mine to the sink.

“Like listening to your heart. Or your gut.”

“Yeah,” he said as he rinsed his plate. “And with that theory, I don’t think time really makes a difference. When I proposed to her, I’d only known her for a year or so. Even if I had more time to get to know her, I doubt I ever would have felt this feeling of her being right.”

“That still doesn’t excuse her for cheating.”

He shrugged it off. “Think about it. We’ve known each other all our lives. We’ve secretly been in love for probably just as long.”

“And I plan to love you for even more.”

“But what else?” he asked as he took my plate to rinse it.

I laughed. “Um, I guess all the hot sex?”

He smirked, shaking his head. “I mean the future.”

“Well, I definitely see you as a star in it.”

“Oh.” He raised his brows. “A star, huh? Like, a porn star?”

My cheeks heated in a blush. It was silly I could still feel embarrassed around him. *I never should have told him how much I like it when he goes down on me like that.* It clearly had gone to his head and inflated his ego.

“I see you in my future, Luke.” I hugged him from behind.

“Here?” he asked, wanting the specifics.

“Maybe? For now?” I didn’t want to tell him I would rather not move in with him *and* Jacob. I liked the guy well enough, but I wanted privacy with Luke, to keep him all to myself. We could make the space work temporarily. Right?

“I could see us getting a place somewhere in Franklin and making it *ours*.”

“Me too. Something to grow into. Somewhere close to our families and friends.” I didn’t say our jobs. He traveled a fair amount, and if I decided to be Robertson Resorts’ new full-time, official event planner, I realized I would be too. “Something move-in ready. I don’t see any time for renovations and remodels with the events you’ve got lined up for the new year.”

He nodded, taking my hand to lead me to bed. “Somewhere with space, where we could start a family of our own.”

I held in my excitement that he was on the same page as me. Somewhere on Swanson Ridge, perhaps in Luke’s current home if Jacob moved out. Our own front door, lush green yard, and big living room window to display a Christmas tree in every December. Just like how we grew up.

“And,” he added, smiling like the devil, “somewhere we won’t have to tiptoe around your brother and Liberty being upstairs or Jacob at my house.”

Giggling, I stole a kiss and nudged his nose with mine. “I couldn’t agree more. And you know, I can’t stop thinking about you as a dad ever since you put on that Santa suit.” He was so sweet and genuinely kind to those children, it kickstarted something deep in me. My clock wasn’t ticking loudly, but this carnal yearning to have a child with him had filled me.

He winked.

“Well, I was thinking other things, too.” *Like making him a father.* I laughed at his smug smile. “What? It was the first time I ever thought Santa was sexy, okay?”

Laughing together, we got ready for bed. Once we were changed into our “pajamas” I wondered how long they would stay on tonight. His consisted of just boxers, and I only wore panties and a cami. They never stayed on all night, and we clearly preferred sleeping in the nude with him spooning me.

He kissed my brow as we settled under the covers, and I smiled up at him.

“I can easily see a family with you,” he told me sincerely. “Two, maybe three kids.”

How about four? I grinned.

“Going to rainy soccer days on Saturdays.”

I nodded. “Early mornings packing lunches.”

“Camping trips where nothing goes right.”

I giggled.

“Family movie nights.”

I kissed him tenderly. “A little someone on your shoulders, putting the star on the Christmas tree.”

He sighed, hugging me close. “It sounds magical.”

It sounds like the future I can't wait to see happening. With you.

He looked around. “And like we’re going to need a much bigger place.”

LUKE

The days after Hanna and I agreed to keep things as professional as possible went by in a blur. I didn't have many chances to stroll by her office and get a glimpse of her. She was too busy, calling vendors and FaceTiming the hotel manager in New York. This event was more glamorous and incorporated more people and service providers to make it happen, but I had faith in her to pull it off with the natural expertise that she showed at the other events.

I was a lucky man to be able to rely on her talent and her creativity, but I felt like the most fortunate man in the universe to be able to call her mine after the workday was over.

I hadn't felt nervous talking about the future with her. No anxiety hit me, and with the absence of any nerves, I realized she was really the one. If I had any doubts, I would have felt the pressure of handling them. If I wasn't confident that she and I belonged together for good, I would've delayed talking about it. My words would've come out choppy and unsure.

When she gazed at me so openly, I knew she was on the same page. It felt good to know she wanted the same things I did. It excited me to know she was not only looking forward to the same future but also that she would be my partner in making it come true. With Hanna, I was ready to go for making *both* of our wishes a reality.

And it would start in New York.

And *that* made me nervous.

We met up on the plane for the flight, and I drew in a deep breath to hold back how antsy I felt. She was the busy one, talking to five people at once, it seemed. She didn't stay still, replying to questions and directing others. Like a conductor, she was hopping and on it.

Once the flight took off, I had her more or less to myself. We sat together while Gabriela read a book a few rows back. Even though Hanna's presence comforted me, it also made me anxious in this case.

The ring in my pocket seemed to burn through my pants and sear my skin. Just knowing it was there intimidated me. I wasn't scared about wanting to marry her, but *how* I would ask her.

The last time I'd asked a woman such a huge question, it ended badly. Jennifer had asked me about the carats of the diamond. She's glanced at it closely, like weighing its worth and wondering if it was enough. We'd gone out to eat, and she'd complained the entire time, wanting adjustments or replacements for her food. As far as dates went, it was a mediocre one, littered with hints of her dissatisfaction.

Hanna wasn't Jennifer. I knew that. But asking a woman to marry me was the same procedure. I couldn't help but worry in some elemental way. In hindsight, I wished I hadn't put the ring in my pocket. It was worsening my nerves. I wanted to get this just right, perfect for her. That was why I'd elected to keep the ring on me, not in my suitcase where she might see it in our room or it could get lost.

She played a movie and propped the tablet on the tray in front of us, but I kept losing track of what was going on. It wasn't an easy plot to follow, either. Time travel stories were like that. If you missed one small detail, nothing seemed to make sense.

"Want some?" Hanna offered me a bag of the honey-roasted nuts I liked.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the movie. I needed some kind of distraction, but eating didn't seem smart. My stomach was already so knotted.

“What about these?” She held up a bag of apple slices. Pink lady. She knew me so well, memorizing my favorites.

“No thanks.”

She furrowed her brow. “One of these?” She offered a cough drop, still worried about my recent complaints of a sore throat from faking a Santa voice.

I smiled. “No.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I kissed her and held her hand, hoping *she’d* be distracted by the movie to not pay attention to my nervousness.

Still, she turned to me. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, Hanna. It is.” *Or it will be.*

After we landed in New York, we headed to the hotel. I heard each one of her *oohs* and *ahhs* as we went through the front lobby space. It was grand and modern, but she forgot how to close her mouth once we reached the ballroom. She was stunned, gawking at it all. This ballroom was by far the grandest and most ornate, suiting the clientele who stayed here.

She didn’t get stuck in the awe. As soon as she spotted the managers she’d been speaking with via calls and video for weeks now, she snapped right into business mode. While she wasn’t bossy, she was firm with her instructions. She had every right to be. This was a large space to consider and she was working with a demand to impress.

Even though I wanted to stay by her side, I attempted to not get in her way. She was in her element, consulting her notebook, the printed sheets of the room’s layout, and her phone for quicker access to links and contacts she needed on the fly. When she got deep into the delegation mode like this, she almost reminded me of Inspector Gadget, always prepared with a tool someone needed for installing a decoration or having an answer ready for where something should be located. Multitasking was easy for her.

I trailed after her, not really contributing but unwilling to leave her side. I was charmed, falling further in love with her and her quirks. I enjoyed seeing how excited she would get as her visions for this place started to come together.

Gabriela had texted that she had a headache and wanted to nap for a bit. While I didn't want her to suffer, I took advantage of having Hanna to myself. I stepped up to move something or offer my opinion when she asked for one, but she was too in her element to cater to me.

Still, she paused to show affection as well, hugging me or squeezing my hand. If I had to guess, she was probably still concerned and curious about why I was so nervous on the flight here.

I couldn't tell her. Not yet.

"I am so excited for this party to start," she gushed as the bigger installations of decorations and props began to be moved into place.

"Me too." She kissed me back when I tugged her hand and pulled her close.

"And I'm glad to see you so happy doing what you love."

She arched a brow and gave me a cocky smile. "I love you, and I am happy when I do—"

"Ahem." Gabriela stood behind us, done with her nap. By the looks of it, she was keeping in some infectious laughter. She lost the battle, cracking up loudly and teasing Hanna for having such cheesy lines.

Once they settled down, I figured I'd give them time to finish overseeing the setup faster without my interference.

"I'm going to catch up with some things." I kissed the top of her head. "But once I'm done, would you like to come with me and check out some of the city?"

Gabriela snorted a laugh. "Uh, you realize she's got a list of what she's got to see, right?"

"A list?" I teased.

“Just so ya know,” Gabriela replied. “It’ll be her showing *you* around.”

“Oh, stop, both of you,” Hanna said with a smirk. “Yes, Luke, I’d love to check out the city with you. Only once this setup is fully underway. I’ll text you when I’m ready.”

I expected no less from her. She was a perfectionist with having her plans implemented, and she should be. They always worked out well.

I left her with Gabriela and went to find the staff I wished to speak with. Those meetings didn’t take long, so I had plenty of time to chat with an old friend from college too. He’d moved out here from back home, and while I worried he’d bring up Jennifer or Anthony, I was upfront about being with a wonderful woman. We killed even more time with him showing me pictures of his wife and their new baby boy. Hearing him so proud and happy of the family he was starting got me even more excited for doing the same with Hanna.

She would make a great mother and a perfect wife for me. It felt like a pipe dream finally coming true, and I wished I could lose some of these nerves about getting it just right.

Since Hanna hadn’t texted me yet, I went back to the hotel and burned more time at the gym. A half hour on the treadmill and forty-five minutes of weights aided me in venting some of the pent-up energy I’d been carrying around since I picked out this ring with Joshua and Jacob back home.

I showered afterward, and when my phone rang before I’d fully stepped out of the luxurious shower stall and dried off, I ran for the device.

It wasn’t Hanna contacting me but Jacob.

I answered, seeing that he was videoing me from home. Funny, it hadn’t felt like home for a long while. Hanna had come there, but we preferred her house since Jacob wasn’t traveling as much right now.

“Excited?” he guessed.

“Nervous.”

He laughed. “Why? You know she’ll say yes.”

I nodded. I was fairly confident she’d agree to marry me, but at the same time, I worried.

“It’s just so fast.”

“Nah. Not really. You’ve been doing an epic slow burn to this for a long time.”

“I want it to go perfectly.”

“Why?” He shrugged. “You already know she’s perfect for you. If you don’t have an immaculate proposal, she’ll still tell you yes.”

It reminded me of when Hanna argued that a wedding could happen no matter the time of the year. All that was critical was marrying the right person.

I agreed, and talking a little longer with Jacob helped me lose some of the fear.

Finally, Hanna’s text came, informing me that they were at a good place in decorating and arranging things for the event. I rode the elevator down to her floor and smiled at her hanging up more fairy lights with Gabriela. It was like they couldn’t sit still, needing to get their hands on it all and contribute.

“Ready?” I asked.

She smiled and climbed down the ladder, accidentally letting a string of balloons lift up and lose a number two shape that had been inflated to supersize. “Catch me?” she asked playfully, holding her hands out. She didn’t wait for a reply, dropping down to me. It wasn’t a significant fall, and I easily caught her in my arms.

I held her there, just because I could, and I pecked soft, quick kisses to her cheeks. “I will *always* catch you, Hanna.”
For the rest of our lives.

She beamed at me, dropping to stand. “And I will always run to you.” She pulled her small notebook from her purse. “Now, about this city. I’ve got a color-coordinated map that will show us the best route that will ensure we’re back here for the next stages of decoration later.”

I gestured for her to guide me. “Lead the way.”

I'll follow you wherever you are, wherever you want to go.

HANNA

I'd been to New York before, but that trip was in the summertime, when I was a young teen. It was hot, slightly smelly, and very crowded because we'd done all the usual touristy things. That experience was nothing like what I could have expected being here with Luke.

Everything was more exciting with him. It felt cliché to think that, but it was true. This man filled that little something that had been missing from my life, and I just felt more whole and complete with him at my side.

We headed out from the Robertson hotel and aimed for the usual big sites. We would be saving the Empire State Building tour for later. Gabriela had offered to handle this event in shifts. I would be present and make sure all was going smoothly for the first half, up until the ticket for the tour would start. Then she would take over and see it to the end.

Saving that iconic tower for the end, we had plenty to see and do.

"Isn't it amazing?" Luke asked as we stopped near Rockefeller Center. We'd gotten a pair of skates. I twirled and circled the ice rink, holding his hands. I was athletic and had a good sense of balance, and Luke did too. It was crowded, but not so much that we couldn't get laps in.

"I feel like I'm inside a snow globe, looking out at the confetti." I smiled at him, blinking as the light snowfall landed on my upturned face.

“Or one of the slider toys, where you can make the figures move over the surface.” He eyed it all, taking in the scene just like I was.

Luke had grown up going to all kinds of exotic and faraway places. His family had resorts for three generations in some of the hottest places to visit. He didn’t show it. I knew he’d been here many times before, for work. He’d gone to all kinds of fancy places and seen all the remarkable sights. Yet, he looked around with wonder. I didn’t have to worry about him being bored or not wowed. He was a laidback guy and was easy to please when it came down to it, but I couldn’t help but stop and be so grateful that he was relatable like this.

He valued the same things I did. He wasn’t all about having money just for the sake of being able to say he was wealthy. He wasn’t trying to impress me and show off with extravagance and pomp. The Robertsons were as normal and down to earth as my family was, and I smiled with the knowledge Luke and I wanted to branch off and start our own.

I worried for a while if I would seem too different, too young and inexperienced, and green around him. He was world-wise and well traveled, but he was still the small-town boy next door who looked forward to the simpler life with me.

We’d already talked about wanting kids and doing all those family-oriented things. And I was confident that he wouldn’t get bored with that life—or me.

“What’s that little smile for?” he asked as we made our way toward the skate rental area to return ours.

“I’m just happy. And I’m enjoying myself.”

“Me too.”

“Even though you’ve been here before?”

He smirked. “You have too.”

“Not like this.”

He tugged on my hand, sliding me to him so he could hug me. “Me neither. Not like this.” Lowering his face, he pressed his lips over mine and kissed me sweetly. “Not with you.”

I swooned, sighing as I leaned against him with a wide smile of pure contentment. This man. He knew exactly what to say, exactly how to wow me.

He held my hand and guided me off the ice. Once we turned the skates in and walked away from the crowd there, I waited for my “land” legs to get back to me. Luke seemed to feel that lingering sense of a weird balance, but soon enough, we lost the sensation of still skating.

“It’s not the same old for you?” I asked as we headed toward some shops. I didn’t want to spend money. Or more to the point, I didn’t want to waste time inside stores and have to deal with bags when I could be sightseeing and walking around to take in all the sights.

“You’ve been here before.”

“For business,” he corrected.

“And you’ve seen so much of the world with your business.”

He shrugged, pulling me to a stop so we could stand not in the middle of the sidewalk as we watched a light show that displayed a little program on the outside of a building.

“But I’ve never done it like this.” He hugged me back to his chest and dropped a kiss to the top of my head. “I’ve never seen it with you.”

“And that really makes it different?”

He chuckled. “It makes *all* the difference.”

I felt and heard his sigh as he tightened his embrace around me.

“You make me happy, Hanna. No matter what we’re doing or where we are, you make me happier than I’ve ever been. I’m not just saying that because you’ve helped me to move on from that breakup. And I’m not telling you this because of the residual magic of the holiday spirit and all that. I mean it, from the bottom of my soul. You brighten my life, and spending time with you makes it better.”

I tilted my head to the side and kissed him. The angle shifted my scarf and I shivered at the exposed skin chilled by the cold air, but that might have been him too. When he gazed at me with that smoldering intensity, I felt like I was buzzed from inside out.

“Yeah, I’ve traveled a lot, but I can’t wait to do it with you. You’ve got no idea how much joy it brings me to see you happy and excited.”

He turned me in his arms and lifted me a bit for a deeper kiss. “I’ve seen all the sights around the world, but seeing you at my side is my favorite.”

I draped my arms over his shoulders and was content just to stand there and kiss him. A street performer started up a slow, sexy tune, and it felt like the music drowned out the busy noises of the city. Luke and I were in our own bubble, in love and present in each other’s hearts. I knew it would always be like this. We’d never lose this ability to zero in and connect deeply like this, and I felt like I was blessed to have found him.

We moved on from that spot, seeking something to eat. I admitted that I’d only snacked and missed a real lunch, and we set out to rectify that. Sticking with my map and following the bulleted points on my list of what were must-sees, we walked and walked, capturing the sights.

Another musician stood at a corner, and Luke scoffed, shaking his head.

We were just about to walk up another couple of blocks to where we’d grab a sandwich, but I waited and watched as he walked over and put a few bills in the man’s donation hat. The musician’s eyes went wide, and I knew he’d noticed what had to be large bills. Adding to the music, he stood up and did a little jig with his trombone in his hands.

Luke’s smile still didn’t make sense. We’d passed all sorts of street performers. Dozens had vied for our attention near the ice-skating rink.

“What?” I asked as he took my hand. “What’s so funny?”

The man changed to “When the Saints Come Marching In.”

Luke chuckled more. “Don’t you remember?”

I shook my head. *Does he have a trombone kink?*

“That Santa? The plush one you put on my desk?” He tipped his chin at the guy. “It was a Santa playing a trombone to those songs.”

I remembered now, and I laughed with him as we left the spot.

“Little did we know that incident would end up bringing us together,” he remarked.

I frowned. “Together? I gave you a cold shoulder and avoided you!”

“Which prompted me to start getting my head out of my ass and apologize to you.”

I loved that, how he could still look at what should be a bad thing and turn it into something positive.

“What’d you do with those decorations, anyway?”

I shrugged. “Gabriela took most of them and shoved them in a bag. She’d helped me put it all up and she helped me tear it all down. I kept that Santa though.” I giggled. “But I had to take the batteries out. It kept going off in my living room and I worried it was possessed. And the batteries were dying, so it was a weird, creepy slower song he played.”

After a late lunch that seemed more like an early dinner, we continued walking around. In the back of my mind, I worried a bit about the event. It was a bigger, more important one with more influential guests, but at the same time, I did my best to stay in the moment with Luke. We’d be heading back to the hotel soon enough.

Everything was absolutely gorgeous, from the glistening snow, the mild weather and lack of too much wind, and all the lights and decorations still up from Christmas. Luke didn’t protest how often I wanted to stop and take pictures, and he

was always ready to pose for one, with me or not. I knew I'd have many fond memories to revisit after we got home.

As I thought ahead to how we could print our favorite shots and hang them in our future home that we were both already fantasizing about, we made our way to Central Park. Seeing all the runners and joggers made the athlete in me want to figure out a time to get a run in. I liked all sports, but I'd always felt that running on trips was such a good way to see it all.

Luke took my hand and held it as we strolled along the paths. I'd done my research of wanting to see the highlights of New York City's iconic green space, but he surprised me at the end with the suggestion to ride a horse-drawn carriage. Hearing the rhythmic *clop-clop* of the horse's hooves was hypnotizing, and cuddled under the blanket next to Luke, I almost wished we could stay on this cushioned bench seat for hours and hours. Lights looked different from up here, more like a lazy blur, and I embraced each and every one of his tender kisses as he gazed down at me.

I was in love, so in love, and I would treasure Luke's romantic moments forever.

It was go time, though, as in going back to the hotel to get ready for the event. Gabriela and the managers onsite had texted me throughout the sightseeing. They hadn't pestered. They were all self-sufficient, but like Gabriela often teased, I was the mastermind.

"I'm glad we had a chance to see the city together," Luke said as he stepped out of the second bathroom of our suite while I hogged the main one. He looked dashing in his tuxedo, tall and regal. I stopped messing with my earrings, too dazed and distracted to line the post in the hole in my earlobe.

He smiled that cocky grin that always let me know he was thinking of something filthy and fun, and I felt instantly warm.

I watched as he stalked toward me. His stare was a seriously intense smolder, full of liquid desire pooling in his dark blue eyes. He took me in, admiring how I wore this silver

gown. It felt like he was undressing me with his eyes, caressing me with that onceover.

I shivered once he stood behind me, taking my necklace off the vanity. I swallowed hard, watching his reflection in the mirror as I slipped my earring in.

Teasing me with his hot gaze, he lifted the necklace to me and closed the clasp, but he didn't move his hands away from my neck. Instead, he trailed his fingertips down and along the low cut of my dress, and I shuddered as I leaned back to him. At the same time, he brought his other hand up to press on the underside of my chin, angling me to the side so he could kiss me deeply.

When he parted for air, I licked my lips and debated with saying the hell with it. I wanted him, *now*, and when he chuckled at my pout, he shook his head and took my hand.

“I want to fall in bed with you too, babe.”

He guided me to leave.

“But not yet.”

I groaned, realizing how unfair but amazing it was that we could both make each other so needy and turned on with just a deep kiss.

We had a ball to go to, and we hustled there, hand in hand.

But the moment we were given the green light from Gabriela to go to that tour, this sexy billionaire was all mine to ring in the new year.

LUKE

I wasn't sure if it would ever sink in. I knew what Hanna's plans were for the events. I saw the blueprints and rough sketches. I listened and paid attention when she told me all the things she wanted to have at the parties. But still, seeing the full end result of it all never failed to wow me. I wondered if it would ever really hit me that my girl was capable of working magic.

"What do you think?" she asked as we entered.

I scanned the grand room again, making sure to slow down and notice it all again. The lights, the baubles, the bubbles, the balloons. Ornate installations offered vertical reaches of more glitter and glam, and I smiled at her, truly amazed.

"It's amazing, Hanna." I kissed her, keeping it quick for a few reasons. One, I knew better than to drive us both crazier with desire now. Two, it was work, and I'd tame the PDA the best I could. And three, I wanted to save more kisses for later, when it was just the two of us.

Refraining from going for her kept it all the more exciting, and the wait was always worth it. I didn't have to rush anything with this woman. I would only hopefully have the rest of my life with her.

Because she had the Empire State Building tour tickets, she made extra sure that staffing would not be an issue. Both she and Gabriela would have no need to serve food, collect drinks, or sing. I would have loved to hear her sing, but I also felt greedy and not inclined to share her with these guests. I

doubted she'd be able to overcome any trace of stage fright if she were asked, anyway, with bona fide celebrities and musicians in attendance.

For this event, unlike the others before it, she would remain at my side as I did my thing. I always made sure to show up and make my presence known at these top-tier events. I knew I needed to be the face of the company, so with Hanna at my side, holding my hand at times, she tagged along as I did what I needed to do.

Even though we'd walked all day, we had to get more steps in here. We walked around and mingled. I shook hands in greeting acquaintances, and I introduced Hanna to them all, proud to have her at my side. We chatted and talked. Everyone was pleasant and enjoying themselves, talking about their holidays or complimenting me about the resort. A few tried to weasel in hints about wanting to talk about business, but I kindly and carefully suggested that they contact me another time. Tonight was about celebrating, not striking up deals.

Hanna remained with me the entire time, but I knew she was patrolling in her own way. She kept an eye on it all without looking like she was stressed in the least. She paid attention to it all, and I couldn't have been any prouder of her determination to make sure everything went according to plan in this grand ballroom as guests readied to ring in the new year.

Many guests asked me who did the decorations and planned the event, and I was damned happy to drop her name and introduce her in person. I couldn't stop smiling as she spoke about her work and acted like the sweet, gorgeous host she was with me.

We had more than an hour to go before the ball would drop, and I knew when Gabriela entered the room that it was my cue for Hanna and me to leave.

"Hold on." I held up my phone to take a picture of the best friends all dressed up and glamming it tonight. They smiled and struck a few poses, and I was sure Jacob would be all over seeing how Gabriela looked tonight.

“You’re not going to get stuck in the traffic for Times Square, are you?” she asked.

Hanna shook her head as she got her coat from the coat room.

“We shouldn’t,” I told her.

“Happy New Year, Gabby!” Hanna said with a tight hug and kiss on the cheek for her friend. The next time we saw her, when we returned, it would indeed be the next day, a new year. And something else too.

We left, strolling hand in hand to the car that would drive us to the famous skyscraper.

“I’m glad we’re not going toward Times Square,” she said as we rode.

A bottle of champagne waited for us back here, but not yet. I bit my lip slightly, no longer nervous or anxious about tonight, but excited. I was afraid she’d get suspicious of how much I smiled, and I tried to tamp down on the thrilling impatience that filled me as she gazed out the window and took in the scenery.

“Yeah, I’m glad too,” I told her.

“Have you ever gone to Times Square for the ball drop?” she asked.

Is this another moment of her wondering if I am bored or hard to please? I picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles. As if my life would ever be dull or lacking with her in it. “No. I’ve never been interested. Too packed and loud.”

She gazed at me, sober.

“What?”

She shrugged. “I’m sorry that you’ve always felt withdrawn. After Max’s death. And the breakup with *her*.”

I smiled. “I was never lonely.” I slid my arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer.

“As if anyone *can* ever truly be lonely on Swanson Ridge. Too many curious neighbors.”

I relished her warmth next to me. “It’s not that I was withdrawn,” I argued gently. “Just that being an introvert sometimes took over my ability to want to be an extrovert.” I cupped her face and turned her toward mine. “And now, all I want to do is be alone with you, no matter where we are. So I will never be anywhere near withdrawn again.”

I kissed her, so full with joy and peace that she was so sweet and considerate. Without fail, Hanna would have a big heart and want to see me happy. I appreciated her concern for all things big and small, and I would try every day to do the same for her. It was already automatic to fuss about her and try to make her happy as could be.

Even though she had purchased tickets for a “private” tour of the tower, we weren’t the only visitors showing up. With the way the few others were dressed, in gowns and tuxedos, it seemed that they’d done the same thing we had: gone to a party then came here for the ball drop in a non-crowded and untouristy way.

We were granted privacy with the tour though. Each pair of ticket holders were granted permission to enter separately, and each couple had their own designated tour guide to explain the history of the skyscraper. The tour began at the ground level, and I smiled, watching Hanna’s eyes light up with delight and awe as she took in the 1920’s Art Deco style of the entrance and lobby. From the ground up, the building was impressive. While it might have seemed like a downer to go from a high-end ball at the hotel to something educational and more lecture like, our guide, a spry older man of seventy-seven, was a wiseass who had us both laughing and entertained with his behind-the-scenes knowledge of the building as well as the historical facts I’d never known.

“Have either of you ever been to the top?” he asked as we rode the elevator up. Again, it was just us in here, making it seem like only Hanna and I had come.

“Yes,” Hanna replied, while I shook my head.

“No? Really, man?” The guide beamed at me. “You’re in for a special delight.”

I already have one right here. I squeezed Hanna's hand.

"The lights, especially tonight, are remarkable." He winked and gestured for us to exit at the top.

Hanna gasped in awe as she walked around. Before us, way down below, the cityscape glittered and glimmered with the multitude of lights spread over the buildings. It seemed like *déjà vu*, looking down from a high height, and I smiled as I thought back to the other time we'd viewed the surreal scene. When we went up on the tower in Branson, the flatter land, less densely built-up area looked like a blanket with diamonds spread out over the earth. Here, one thousand-two hundred and fifty feet into the air, that number courtesy of our guide's knowledge, it looked like we were hovering over a jagged crystal of the world, sparkling and twinkling.

"This is like *our* thing," Hanna said quietly but with humor. There was no missing the awe in her voice as she gazed at it all. I'd never forget the sight. Her in that plush black coat lined with faux fur. She was far too big-hearted and sweet to wear real fur. That silvery dress that shone and curved with her slender, sexy body. I stared, committing the vision of her to memory because this wouldn't be a monumental night just for the holiday.

The bright lights of the city reflected in her eyes as she gazed out at the view. She was remarkable, magnificent in her beauty. I was enthralled with her before, but on this night as the clock ticked down, I was so overwhelmingly in love with her. Every day, I fell further and faster, and I knew my love for her would be endless until the end of our lives.

"That tower after the stampede," she said, clarifying. Perhaps she took my silence as being confused, not that I was lost in thought.

"Thirty seconds!" someone called out from the small gathering up here on the viewing deck.

My heart raced. I was on the edge of falling into something new with her, and I couldn't wait for the exact moment.

“And now this one.” She winked at me. “Setting the bar high, aren’t you, baby?” She exaggerated another goofy wink. “Get it. *High?*”

She giggled at her own joke as the countdown ticked away. We leaned closer to view the ball dropping nearby. It was no doubt a party down there, packed and lively.

I preferred this quiet with her up here.

Hanna and me.

Forever.

“I can’t wait to spend all my holidays with you, Luke.” She smiled up at me before facing forward at the view again. “But you’ve got to admit, it’s going to be hard to *top* this.”

You’ve got no idea, sweet girl.

I let her smile and giggle at her sudden fascination with puns.

As the ball sank to the earth, I turned to her, ready to do more than kiss her into the new year.

EPILOGUE

HANNA

L uke's hand wrapped around mine. Even though we were one thousand-two hundred and sixty feet in the clouds—*or was it one thousand-two hundred and fifty feet?*—he grounded me. I squeezed his fingers as the few couples around us chanted.

“Five.”

“Four.”

I grinned, joining in. “Three!”

“Two.”

I gazed up at the man I loved, praying it would always feel this right, this magical with him. I knew it would. Our love wasn't fickle, and we'd cultured it for years, even if it'd taken us so long to reach each other. Past the boundaries of friendship, a difference in age, and even the workplace, we'd found each other.

“One!” I leaned up to Luke as he lowered to me. “Happy New Year, baby!”

“Happy New Year,” he replied in that husky, deep whisper I loved so much, making me wake up and tingle with desire. He pressed his lips to mine, and I sighed into the kiss. Our first of the new year, the next of so many.

I would never tire of the thrill of kissing my man. For too long, I'd only been able to dream about it. I'd fantasized so much about ever being in this position, and here we were, on top of the world celebrating the holiday and our love.

I kept my eyes closed after he broke the kiss, retreating. My lips tingled from the touch of his, and as I licked my lips, I relished the chill of the air on them with the exposed air.

But it didn't feel right. He was pulling on my hand, almost as though he was falling.

Huh?

I'd only closed my eyes for that second, to savor the moment and let the happiness inside me sink in further. When I opened them, I gasped at the sight of Luke on one knee.

I was speechless, staring down at him, stunned and elated.

He was smiling up at me with the sure yet smug smile I loved so much. His focus was all-consuming. He gazed at me like he was looking right into me and at my soul. I felt like I'd never belonged anywhere else.

“Like I said, when you know, you know.”

I smiled, choking on an incredulous intake of air. Already, my pulse rocketed faster, so surprised and excited that this was really happening.

“I don't need months or years to know you're the one, Hanna.”

Oh, baby. I don't either. You've always been the one. I swallowed, struggling not to cry.

“I see now that you have been the one all along. We just had to take different paths to find our way back to each other. Every day, I wake up thankful for the brightness you bring into my life. You make me a better man. You're the only one who could remind me of who I was after I was done wrong by another. I will never stop being grateful for you showing me how to let go and fall in love not only with you, but with my life again. With Christmas. With everything.”

“Oh, Luke.”

He'd told me he loved hearing me say that. I'd repeat his name every day however he wanted. I'd tried so hard to see to his happiness, but in doing so, I found my own purest sense of it too. I wiped tears from my eyes and sniffled.

“I love you, too, Luke.”

He canted his head to the side. “Will you marry me, Hanna Smith?”

I nodded, giggling with a bubbling force of mirth that I couldn't contain. “Yes, Luke. Of course, yes.”

He stood, reaching for my hand to slip the ring on, but I stalled him, sealing my answer with a hard kiss. I laughed and grinned, too damn excited to let him find the right finger. He gave up, chuckling and holding me close as we kissed, and kissed, and kissed our way into the new year. A new life, as his soon-to-be wife.

Congratulations rang out around us. People had come with some party favors, whistles and noise-makers for celebrating the turn into January, and they all cheered again. They hooted and hollered, making noise as they saw us with this proposal.

Finally, Luke set me down and slid the ring on. It fit perfectly, and he looked mighty proud and excited as he lifted my hand and kissed my knuckle, like locking the ring on my digit.

“Congrats!” The guide walked up with champagne. I thought I'd read that it was included in the tour ticket, but not that bottle!

He winked, pouring me a flute. “We keep these bad boys on hand for the special occasions.”

Luke and I clinked our glasses together and sipped, toasting our new reason to celebrate.

The other strangers who'd gotten the same private tour came by to congratulate us. Old couples and new, they bestowed us with well wishes. When the eldest came by, they winked and shared their wisdom.

“Fifty-five years,” the man said proudly.

“Wow!” I smiled at them, congratulating them. That felt like a lifetime yet still not long enough.

“We celebrated just last week,” his wife said, smiling up at her spouse. “Christmas.”

I laughed, glancing at Luke. It looked like my aunt and uncle weren't alone in that date.

"Makes it easier to remember the date for anniversaries," the man joked, elbowing his wife gently.

"Oh, hush. You've never forgotten a single one of them," she chided playfully.

"And you don't," he told Luke. "When every day feels like a new adventure with them, you don't need yearly anniversaries for an excuse to celebrate your love. Every day is a celebration."

I liked that advice. They offered to take some pictures for us. The jovial guide did too. Even though our friends and family weren't around to see it happen, the many pictures would serve them some justice. Shots of my ring, our hands together. Then us with the city behind us. Then kissing.

"I used to be a photographer," the guide confided with a laugh. "I know all them shots to do."

I appreciated it, and I marveled at my sparkly diamond as Luke tipped the man generously again while asking if he'd consider coming to Tennessee to photograph the special day, too. I wasn't sure if he was serious or joking. It was a spontaneous offer, but I knew my man. My fiancé. He liked to say *I* had the big heart, but his was just as big and golden, always generous and thoughtful.

We rode down the elevator without the guide. He must have sensed we wanted privacy. I'd kissed Luke in an elevator before. We'd kissed many times in the elevator at his office building, sneaking in kisses and touches when no one was looking, but as his fiancée, it felt more exciting. Or maybe it was the lack of oxygen as we made out, coupled with descending the hundreds of flights of the skyscraper.

The car was waiting for us, and once we tumbled into the backseat, we were lip locked again. It was a ravenous need that had taken over me. I couldn't keep my hands or mouth to myself, and I reveled in the way he couldn't control himself, either.

The ride back to the hotel was a whirlwind of hot kisses, sweet touches, and bold caresses that were nothing but a prelude to what we'd be doing once we hurried back to our room.

"I hope you're not thinking about work," he whispered into my ear as he dipped me back against the cushions.

I laughed. "Work is the last thing on my mind, baby."

I knew what he meant though. After events, I liked to at least check in with the staff and supervise the cleanup. It wasn't just the planning of getting ready for the balls and setting them up that I saw to. The aftermath was another ordeal, and storing some things required extra time and care.

Not this event. Not tonight.

"All I care about is getting you upstairs," I whispered back as the car pulled up to his hotel.

Thank goodness for that privacy partition. I gasped as Luke slipped his fingers beneath my wet panties, teasing me with his hand up under my dress.

"And making love to my fiancé."

He groaned a filthy, sinful sound and kissed me harder, brutal enough to leave my lips tingling in a delicious burn of friction and heat.

"I can't wait."

That was our thing, though. We *could* wait. We had waited. For years, we'd remained apart and not reaching out to each other. Crossing the line of friendship took us too long, and now, we were free to enjoy every moment as it came.

I didn't even look in the direction of the ballroom. I trusted Gabriela and the staff we had on hand. I wasn't lying when I told Luke that work wasn't on my mind. It wasn't, but I still felt lost and disoriented as I followed after him to the elevators, then up to our room. I was dizzy with lust and desire, my heart full with love.

All I could concentrate on was getting him alone again and showing him how happy he'd made me.

“Don’t rip it,” Luke teased warningly when I hurried to get out of my clothes after we got to our room. He loosened his tie with an agonizing slowness as he stalked toward me. I’d never forget how he looked like this. Sexy and powerful, handsome in that tuxedo that fit him so perfectly.

He gripped the tab for the zipper I was struggling with. As he kissed me, drugging me with another potent hit of desire, he dragged the tab down my back, teasing me with the touch. As every inch of my skin was revealed, I felt chilled and on fire at the same time.

“Let me unwrap my present.” He kissed my shoulder as he stepped closer to continue unzipping so slowly.

I was going to combust with the building need to feel him filling and stretching me.

“My prize.” He kissed my other shoulder.

I trembled, undoing his pants so they could fall to the floor.

“My bride.”

Smiling as my dress pooled to the floor with his pants and boxers, I savored his grunt at seeing the lingerie I wore for him tonight. He brushed the strap off my shoulder, and soon my sexy lace set was on the floor with my dress. With hurried motions of my fingers, I unbuttoned his shirt as fast as I could. “You’re confused, baby. Christmas was last week. What gifts are you expecting now?”

“You.” He picked me up, kissing me deeply, and turned to the bed. He set me down, took a condom out of his pocket and tossed it on the bed beside me, and dropped his pants. He sat down on the edge of the bed and I swung a leg over to straddle him. My thighs rested aside his as he rolled the condom on, and then I ground my wet, throbbing entrance over his hard dick. I’d removed his shirt, but I gave up on that tie. I gripped it now as we kissed. His fingers dug into my hips as he lined me up. I held my breath, reveling the stretch of his cockhead on my sensitive flesh, and I lowered until he was as deep as he could go.

“Maybe we *should* keep that date in mind for a wedding.”

I rode him, slowly and steadily, not wanting to miss a moment of this exquisite fullness as I raced toward an intense orgasm. I was tense and aching, so desperate to come.

He wasn't any better, panting and urging me to go faster and harder as I bounced on his cock.

"Christmas?" he asked, panting as he stared at my breasts as they jiggled. He groaned, pushing his hips up to meet my thrusts. In the same motion, he cupped my tits and rolled his thumbs over my nipples roughly. It was all I needed. It was all I could take. I came in a blinding, blissful rush, relieved when he followed me a second later.

He hugged me to his chest as he fell and rolled back on the bed. Still, he stayed in me, so deep. I felt every jerk and twitch of him filling me, and I sighed at the sweet pleasure of him loving me so thoroughly.

"Yeah," I said once we caught our breath. I'd needed a long moment of cuddling and coming down from the high that was sex with my man. Once I recalled what we'd said during making love, I smiled. "A wedding on Christmas."

He smiled at me.

"Why not?"

Leaning closer to kiss me, he agreed. "Yeah, why not?"

"This is going to be the best year ever," I replied.

"It sure is, Hanna." Then he rolled to pin me to the bed and kiss me again.

Want more of Luke and Hanna? I've got a special Extended Epilogue just for you!! [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



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He's the one that got away.

Now that I'm back in town, the jerk wants to offer me a job.

This isn't good for either of us. He feels like he's got to make up for what happened when we were kids.

And I have to restrain my hormones from doing the tango in front of him.

Never a good working relationship. Or is it?

See, here's the deal. We made a pact when we were kids.

If by some crazy reason we weren't married by the time we were thirty, we'd marry each other.

Well, time's up. And the pact was never broken.

Now what? Do I forgive the guy that ripped my heart out as a lovesick teenage girl?

He wants a second chance, and honestly, no one is rooting harder for him than me.

In our small town, this handsome, rich boy and I couldn't have been more different, but they say opposites attract.

Either way, our Marriage Pact is an interesting thought.

Feels more like forever than a simple agreement, and with this boy?

Forever is exactly what I've wished for.

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Introduction



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After ten years of helping his wife, Ali Parker and brother-in-law, Weston Parker develop love stories of their own, Jacob Parker has decided to take the plunge with a new twist on the romance story.

He's a romantic guy in real life and wanted to bring the world of the Manhattan Men to life with his wife, Ali.

He lives in Texas with his family, loves to golf, also writes as J Stark, and can be found working in his wood shop when he's not writing.

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The Right One

A Swanson Ridge Novel #3

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First Edition.

Editor: Eric Martinez

Cover Designer: [Ryn Katryn Digital Art](#)