



THE
Wish
LIST

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
M M MORELAND

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for selecting THE WISH LIST to read. There are many choices available, and I am honored you choose mine to read today.

THE WISH LIST was originally released as a gift to my newsletter subscribers. Readers loved it, and let me know they wanted to know more. Here we are.

If you are interested in receiving up to date information on new releases, exclusive content and sales, please sign up for my newsletter here at <https://bit.ly/MMorelandNewsletter>.

Always fun book stuff - never spam!

xoxo,

Melanie

THE WISH LIST by Melanie Moreland

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DEDICATION

For those who asked – here you go!

I hope you enjoy.

And to my Matthew –

My own secret wish.

Always, M xx

CHAPTER ONE

ASHER

All around me were the sights and sounds of Christmas. Lights were strung everywhere. Trees, their branches so heavily decorated I was surprised they were standing, were placed in the most inconvenient places. Statues of Santa, reindeer, and elves peered at me from the shelves. Gift wrap, bows, ribbon, and tags were bright piles of glitter. A huge display of frolicking snowmen and the North Pole was set up in the middle of the department, and around it snaked a lineup of children and their parents, waiting to see Santa Claus.

They all looked miserable for different reasons.

The store was overly hot, overly bright, and overly crowded. The children wanted to see Santa—*now*—and the parents wanted to be anywhere but here. I had to agree with them.

Why the hell I did this to myself every year was a mystery.

But a few days before Christmas every year, I came to this store, walked to this department, found the one gift I required, and fled, grateful to be leaving the noise and confusion behind. Then I headed back to my quiet condo, where a good scotch and some soft classical music waited for me.

And silence.

I sat down, staring at the massive tree in the middle of the North Pole display, the fake mounds of snow and large bright-colored Christmas ornaments making my head ache. Despite my promise, I was seriously considering using my power and having the gift picked up by someone else and delivered to me. My sister, Suzy, wouldn't really know. I bought my

niece's gifts that way, and she never complained. I picked the gifts; someone else had the hassle of picking them up. No complaints. Then again, Bonnie was five.

Except, I would know, and I hated lying to my sister. It was only for her that I would make this pilgrimage to this store and get her a gift she loved. One she expected each year from me.

"It wouldn't feel the same if someone else gave it to me," Suzy said once. "It's our thing."

And dammit, I loved my sister too much to let her down.

I glanced at the small bag in my hand. My job was done, and I could leave. Yet, I stayed sitting, staring at the chaos around me like a man unable to look away from a gruesome accident.

Suddenly, I heard my name being called. The voice was panicked, and for a moment, I was certain I was hearing things, until it rang out again.

"Asher!"

I rose to my feet as a woman rushed around the corner. Our eyes locked, and she hurried toward me. "Asher?"

I blinked at the stranger. Her bright-red hair glinted under the lights. It streamed down her back in a mass of waves. As she hurried closer, I stared at her creamy complexion that was covered in freckles. Thousands of them dotted the ivory skin, a large abundance of them on her cheeks and over the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were green—bright and clear like emeralds. She was small, dressed in a coat that looked too big for her, the hem almost to the floor. She carried a bag and another coat, this one smaller. And she looked upset. The need to help her hit me, and I moved toward her.

"Asher!" she called out again.

Did I know her? My name was unusual, so hearing her call it out confused me.

I stepped in front of her, halting her progress, our eyes once again meeting.

"I'm Asher. Can I help you?" I asked, laying my hand on her arm.

She blinked, her voice fraught with trepidation. She shook her head. “No. My son. I’m looking for my son. He-he disappeared.”

I glanced over her shoulder, meeting the mischievous grin of a small boy I hadn’t seen a moment ago. He was among the frolicking snowmen, hiding behind a mound of fake snow. I had no doubt it had to be the other Asher—her son. The red hair and freckles he obviously inherited from his mother gave him away instantly.

“Um, is he wearing a blue sweater with cars on it? And he has your freckles?”

“Yes,” she gulped, gripping my arm. “Have you seen him?”

I tried not to notice how my body reacted to her touch. I could feel it—even through the layers of material separating us. I tilted my chin in the direction over her shoulder. “I think he’s over there.”

She spun, her entire body shuddering in gratitude as she found her son. “Asher, come here,” she gasped, relief evident in her voice. “Now!”

The little boy I judged to be about five or six raced over, stopping beside his mother. “I was saying hi to the snowman, Momma.”

She dropped to her knees, engulfing him in her arms. “You can’t leave my side,” she said, her voice thick with tears. “AJ, you scared me. I couldn’t find you.”

He patted her back, his small hand tapping on her coat in reassurance. He looked up at me, his eyes the same green as hers. They were sad-looking at the moment, the color dull. “I’m sorry, Momma. I could see *you*, so I thought it was okay. I won’t do it again.” He flung his little arms around her neck. “I’m sorry!”

She immediately began to comfort him, making soft sounds meant to soothe.

I sat back down, feeling guilty for witnessing the tender moment between them.

She stood, wiping at her cheeks. She turned to me, her beautiful green eyes watery. “Thank you.”

I smiled. “Not every day I hear my name being called. Happy to have helped.” I looked at her son. “Listen to your momma.”

He grinned, his happy mood restored, and nodded. “I will. I’m a good boy.”

Something about his grin was infectious, and I returned it. “I’m sure you are.”

“Sit here while you wait for your husband,” I offered, standing. The woman looked frazzled and exhausted.

“Oh no, we’re good. No, ah, no husband to wait for,” she rambled. “We’re going to head home now.”

She began to hand Asher his coat when she stumbled. Without thought, I was beside her in a second, wrapping my arm around her waist and supporting her.

“Are you all right?”

She blinked up at me, her face pale, her eyes unfocused for a moment. Then she shook her head. “Oh, I’m fine.” She looked embarrassed. “It’s hot in here.”

“You’re probably hungry, Momma. You didn’t eat breakfast this morning.”

A feeling passed over me as I looked down at her. A small unfurling in my chest. I held her close, liking how she felt against me. It was as if she belonged there for some odd reason. Concern hit me as her son’s words sank in.

“No breakfast?” I asked. “You came into this store, this crowd, with no breakfast to sustain you?”

She shook her head, staring at me.

I tightened my arm. “Well, that won’t do. Let’s go.”

“Go where?” she asked.

“Breakfast.” I looked at her son. “You like pancakes, Asher?”

“Yes.”

“Good man.”

Ten minutes later, we were seated in one of the cafés in the expansive department store. I liked this one, and it was surprisingly empty, considering how busy the store was. I ordered coffee, eggs, toast, pancakes, and bacon, and chocolate milk for my little namesake. Then I turned to the pretty redhead who was still reeling in shock from her scare and my high-handedness. She regarded me cautiously.

“You know my name is Asher,” I teased. “But I don’t know yours.”

“Rosie,” she replied. “Rosie Duncan.”

“Pretty name.”

She lifted a lock of hair. “I came out with a full head of red hair. My dad thought it was appropriate.”

“I like it.”

“Your name is Asher?” her son asked. “Mine too! Did you know that, Momma?”

“Yes,” she replied patiently.

He smiled. “Momma calls me AJ most of the time. So we won’t get mixed up.” He leaned forward, dropping his voice. “If she calls you by your whole name, look out. She is mad.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Any advice?”

“Run,” he said seriously.

I began to laugh, and he grinned. Rosie’s lips twitched at the corner, but she still looked anxious.

I slid a full coffee cup her way after adding cream and sugar. “Drink up, Rosie.”

Her brow furrowed. “How did you know how I like my coffee?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t. But you need the sugar. You just had a scare.”

“Momma, can I go look at the display?”

In the corner, not far from the table, was yet another Christmas wonderland. Asher seemed fascinated by it.

“Make sure your momma can see you,” I admonished him gently as she nodded in permission.

“I will!”

He hurried away, standing and watching the animated scene in rapture.

“So, Asher,” she said. “Do you have a last name?”

“Yes.” I waited a beat.

She shook her head. “Care to share?”

I stuck out my hand. “Asher Hart. Asher William Hart, in case you need the whole name for when I’m in trouble.”

She slipped her hand in mine. It was small and felt cool to my skin. The skin was pale, her fingers delicate. Her nails were short and natural, and she wore no jewelry. It was hard to release her from my grip. She blushed at my words, the pretty color suffusing her skin.

“I doubt I’ll need it.”

I winked. “I have it on good authority from my sister that I’m trouble.”

She smiled and took a sip of her coffee. I found myself mesmerized by her actions. It was the oddest thing.

“Christmas shopping?” I asked, clearing my throat.

“Sort of. He loves coming here to Zoles,” she murmured. “I did as a child too. I bring him every year.”

“AJ?” I asked. “Short for...?”

“Asher Joseph.”

“Ah. And how old is AJ?” I asked.

“He’ll be five in January.”

“You called out Asher when you were looking for him. Not AJ. Not his full name either.”

“I panicked, and I wasn’t thinking. It is rare I say his full name. He’s a good boy.”

“I can see that.” I sipped my coffee. “So, you’re *sort of* Christmas shopping?”

“Browsing, really. I have his gifts already.” She smiled tightly. “I’m his only parent.”

“His father is not in the picture?” I had assumed that somehow, but I needed to be sure.

She frowned. “No. He walked away when he found out I was pregnant. It’s Asher and me.”

“No family?”

She shook her head, color staining her cheeks again, this time darker. “No. They disowned me when they found out I was pregnant and not marrying the father.”

I felt her hurt in the simple words and saw the flash of pain in her eyes. The high color in her cheeks was anger.

“My mother died last year. My father didn’t even tell me. I heard he already remarried.”

“So, you’re alone.”

She tilted her head, studying me. “And you?”

“I have a sister, as I mentioned. And a niece I adore. I tolerate her husband,” I added with a wink. I actually liked him a great deal, and we got along well. “My business is my life, to be honest.”

“Ah.”

That was all she said. No inquiries about my job, my life, my financial status, nothing. She watched Asher carefully, tensing if he disappeared for a moment. I laid my hand on hers, squeezing her fingers. “He is perfectly safe in here, Rosie. I’m watching him as well.”

“I was waiting to pay for his picture with Santa. I blinked, and he was gone.” She shook her head. “He’s never done that before. Disappeared on me. It-it was scary.”

Flipping my palm, I slipped my hand under hers, unable to stop touching her. Our skin slid together, and I entwined our fingers. She stared at our hands, then lifted her eyes to mine. I wondered if she felt that odd connection I did. I hated seeing the worry in her expression. The exhaustion that showed under her eyes. Something inside me wanted, needed, to ease both negative inputs in her life. Anything that bothered her needed to be gone.

I was so shocked by my thoughts, I had to lower my head and clear my throat before I spoke.

“I’m sure it was frightening. It must be a difficult thing to be a single parent. But he’s fine and safe. So try to relax.”

She took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“We come here every year,” she said, sliding her hand away and wrapping it around her mug. I was surprised at the sensation of loss I experienced when we were no longer touching. I picked up my own mug and sipped as she kept talking. I liked the sound of her voice. Low, quiet, sweet.

“I did as a child as well,” she continued. “My grandmother brought me until I was fifteen. She died then.” She paused, swallowing. “Zoles always had the best Santa. They still do. And the displays are wonderful. I loved them.”

“Well, obviously, AJ shares your feelings.”

She smiled.

“So, you have his picture taken every year?”

She nodded, a small frown on her face. “The price skyrocketed this year. I wasn’t sure I could swing it, but it’s a tradition, so I scrimped and saved on some other things so we could do it. I knew AJ would be disappointed. And I couldn’t bring him here to look at the displays and not see Santa,” she explained. “You can’t discuss finances with a small child.”

I studied her. “Is that why you didn’t eat breakfast this morning?” I asked.

She shook her head, looking embarrassed. “Oh, no. I was trying to get him ready, and we ran out of time.”

She was a horrible liar. In my business life, I knew how to spot one, and she was one of the worst I had ever seen. But I let it go, understanding it was a point of pride for her.

But I didn't like it.

"Besides, it was on his wish list. I can't deny his wish list. He really asks for so little."

"I see." I crossed my legs. "Does his momma have a wish list?"

She laughed lightly, shaking her head. "No. Not one I would share anyway. I keep it pretty close to my chest."

I sipped my coffee, having a sinking feeling that her wish list contained far more sensible things than her son's did.

That bothered me as well, and I couldn't explain why.

Our breakfast arrived, and I filled a plate, sliding it in front of Rosie. I had ordered family style, so I knew there would be plenty. "Eat." I paused, using a word that rarely passed my lips. "Please."

AJ ran over, sliding onto a chair. He gazed at the table, his eyes wide. "Oh, Momma. This is a feast!"

I laughed and slid a pancake onto his plate and added some bacon and scrambled eggs. Rosie cut up the pancake after adding some butter and syrup to it, and AJ dug in, chatting in excitement. He pointed out his favorite parts of the display, telling me about his school, his best friend, Charlie, and his second favorite friend, Ashley.

"Sometimes she says she's my girlfriend, and I just let her," he explained. "Momma says I'm too little to have a girlfriend, but I don't like to hurt her feelings." He grinned, showing me a mouthful of pancakes. "She's nice, though, and gives me her cookies at lunch sometimes, so it's okay if she wants to hold my hand in line."

I nodded sagely, finding him highly entertaining. He had good table manners, said please and thank you, and was intelligent. Rosie was obviously a good mother.

I watched her eat, noticing her seeming love of toast. She buttered each piece liberally, adding jam and enjoying the small triangles. Color returned to her cheeks as she ate some bacon and eggs, and I filled her coffee cup again, adding cream and sugar as if I had been doing it for years. It pleased me to know I was doing something to help her—even if it was in the smallest of ways.

It struck me how comfortable I was with the two of them. None of my usual impatience or terseness was present. I laughed and teased AJ, as well as his mother. I smiled in amusement at his ramblings. Watched his momma with concern and interest.

She fascinated me. From the way she ate her toast to her quiet observations. I thought she was lovely, her red hair and freckles enchanting. On AJ, they were adorable; on Rosie, they were sexy and playful. Yet, she seemed unaware of her prettiness. Our eyes met often, locking for brief moments and speaking volumes before she would drop her gaze to her plate or refocus on AJ. I wondered if she was feeling the same draw to me as I was to her.

We finished breakfast, and I paid the bill, silencing her protests with a dark look. When we were done, she was surprised but didn't object as I took her hand and led her and AJ out of the restaurant.

"I'll drive you home." She had mentioned the bus at one point, but I didn't want to say goodbye yet. Or have them wait in the cold for public transportation.

"Oh no—" she began, but I held up my hand, silencing her.

"I'll drive you home," I repeated.

She didn't reply or make a comment as we stepped outside and my vehicle was waiting by the door. She looked nervous, and it occurred to me I was a stranger and basically demanding she let me drive her home. I called the store doorman over.

"Mr. Hart?" he asked.

"This is Rosie Duncan. I am driving her and her son home."

He tipped his hat. “Yes, sir.” He smiled at Rosie. “You’re in good hands, miss. Mr. Hart will look after you.”

She glanced at me with a smile. “Thank you.”

“I want you to feel safe.”

“I do.”

“Good, then let’s get you home.”

I was grateful I had a car seat for my niece already and I knew how to use it. When she saw it, Rosie looked startled, but I explained. “My niece and I have a standing pizza night once a month. I drive.” I winked. “She’s a terror behind the wheel.”

Her laughter made me grin. It was light and buoyant, the sound filling the air. I liked it. I wanted to hear more of it.

I buckled AJ into the back, made sure Rosie was safe in the front, and slid into the driver’s seat.

“What?” I asked as I turned to look at her, seeing the look of confusion and wonder on her face.

“Where did you come from, Asher?” she asked.

I smiled as I touched her cheek. “Your secret wish list.”

Her blush said it all.

CHAPTER TWO

ASHER

I didn't ask if I could come in when we reached her apartment. I simply got out of the vehicle and followed them inside. They lived in a small apartment block, the neighborhood decent for the area. Inside, her home was compact but spotless. A tiny living room and kitchen, a place for a table and chairs to one side. AJ took my hand and showed me his room, the boy theme making me smile. Cars and trucks were big for him, his toy chest overflowing with all sorts of little vehicles.

I left him in his room, returning to the kitchen. I spied a small artificial tree in the corner with a few gifts under it. I went closer, inspecting it. Handmade ornaments and some bright-colored lights decorated the well-used tree. It was very festive. On examination, I noticed all the gifts were to Asher and signed "Love, Momma."

I saw none for her. I wondered if that changed come Christmas morning.

Some other lights were strung up and decorations scattered around. The furniture was worn but comfortable-looking. Throw blankets and pillows made it a welcoming place.

I entered the kitchen, seeing Rosie sitting at the table, looking nervous. I sat beside her, reaching for her hand. "AJ obviously loves his room."

"He plays in there a lot."

I looked around, realizing, aside from the bathroom, the apartment had no other doors.

“Where is your room?” I asked.

“I sleep on the sofa.”

“On the sofa?” I asked, shocked. She had no room? No privacy?

She nodded. “I haven’t found a two-bedroom place I can afford. I like this neighborhood. It’s close to AJ’s school and easy transit. The sofa pulls out to a bed. I don’t mind it. It’s comfortable enough.” She shrugged. “It will do until I can afford something better.”

I had a feeling “until I can afford something better” was a mantra for her. I thought of her too-big coat, going without breakfast. Sleeping on the sofa. She went without so AJ didn’t have to. I wondered how many other sacrifices she made without even thinking.

“What do you do for a living?” I asked.

“I’m an accountant. I put myself through school.”

“While pregnant?”

“Partially.” She smiled ruefully. “It wasn’t as if I had a choice. I had to finish school to get a decent job. I had to work in order to go to school. Luckily, I qualified for some small scholarships, which helped.”

“And his father never helped?”

She laughed and got up, pouring us the coffee she had made. “He ran as far away as possible. Last I heard, he was in the Northwest Territories as a guide or something. He always liked nature and hiking.”

“Selfish bastard.”

“It never would have worked out. We were too different. He was taking business courses so he could run his own company offering outdoor nature adventures. We met at a course we were taking together. He seemed nice. Sadly, nice and wanting the same things from life didn’t mesh. He wanted adventures. To never settle down. I hated the sun and outside. I wanted to get my degree, settle down, and have a family. When I got pregnant, he walked fast.”

“And you became a mother.”

She smiled, her love for her son evident. “*Asher’s* mother. Yes. He is worth everything.”

“So, an accountant?”

“Yes. I finally got on with a good place. I’m still at the bottom, but it’s steady and I plan to work my way up.” She took a sip of coffee. “And you? What do you do when not finding lost boys or feeding strange women?”

I chuckled. “I only do that once a year. Otherwise, I’m a philanthropist.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “What is that exactly?”

“I own several companies, which are profitable. We turn the profits into investments. Those funds are there to help people. We do grants, support charities, fund causes. Scholarships. Foundations. We even give money to individuals.”

“Wow. So you give away money for a living.”

“I tried the usual route. I came from money and made more easily. But I was tired of corporate greed. The first time I gave away a large chunk of money was the first time I felt good about myself. I realized I could do both. Make it and give it away. Help others. So I restructured my life.”

“That is amazing.”

I opened my mouth to reply but my phone buzzed, and I frowned as I read the message. “I have to go,” I said regretfully.

I was pleased to see she looked as disappointed as I felt. She stood, and I followed her to the door. “Thank you for your help today,” she said. “And breakfast. It was delicious, and I enjoyed spending some time with you.”

I stepped closer. “So did I.” I paused. “I don’t want to leave,” I confessed.

“Oh,” she breathed out.

“I want to see you again.” I cupped her cheek, the skin beneath my fingers soft and smooth. I stroked it with my thumb,

feeling the heat gather under my touch.

“Are you sure?” she whispered.

“Do you feel it?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “This... draw?”

She nodded, not speaking.

I dropped my head, brushing along her cheek with my lips. “I want to explore it. If you feel the same way,” I added.

She gripped my jacket with her hand, fisting the material tightly. “I’m not alone.”

“I know. I think you’re a wonderful mother. I like your son. I like you.” I took her hand in mine, lifting it to my lips. “Please,” I asked again, the word coming easily when it came to her.

“I, ah, don’t think I’m the kind of woman you’re used to, Asher.”

I liked the way she said my name. It was different from when she said it to her son. This was breathier, needier.

“I’m not used to any kind of woman, Rosie. I’m a bit of a loner. But I want to get to know you better—if you let me.”

“I’m not in your league.”

“I wasn’t aware I had one. And if I do, I want you there with me. Let me see you again.”

“Maybe you should think about it, and if you decide you want to, you know where I am.”

I pressed my mouth to her cheek, my lips lingering. Her hair tickled my cheek, the scent of her, soft and feminine, swirling around me.

I didn’t need to think.

I already knew.

I knocked on her door at nine o'clock that night. I heard light footsteps, and she opened the door, surprised. Her hair was up, and she was dressed in fuzzy pants and a long sweatshirt. Warm socks were on her feet. She looked adorable.

"Asher?" she asked, confused.

"I've been thinking," I said.

"I see." She chewed on her lip. "Did you want to come in and tell me your thoughts, or did you come to say goodbye?"

I stepped into the apartment. "I came to share."

"Okay."

She had the tree lights on, quiet music playing, and a book was open on the sofa. A mug of something warm steamed on the coffee table.

"AJ asleep?"

"He conked out about twenty minutes ago."

"Am I interrupting your quiet time?" I had a feeling she didn't get much of that.

"I don't mind," she replied. "I was going to read a bit and take some calls. I can put it off."

"Take some calls?"

"I work for a customer call center. I usually try to do a couple of hours in the evenings and the morning before AJ gets up."

"And you work all day?"

"Yeah." She shrugged as if it was nothing. "The more calls I log, the more I make. It helps me give AJ a few treats in the year and a nice Christmas."

I stared at her in wonder. Then suddenly, she was in my arms and my mouth covered hers. I pulled her tight to my chest. She flung her arms around my neck, returning my passion with her own. She tasted of the tea she had been sipping and something I couldn't identify. Something uniquely her. Despite the difference in our heights, she fit against me well, her curves molding to my hardness. She made a low noise in her throat as

I deepened the kiss, exploring her, discovering all the sweetness of her sexy mouth. She gripped my hair, played with the ends, and ran her tongue along mine, making me shiver. I ended up on the sofa, her on my lap, as our kisses became frantic. She straddled me, impatiently pushing off my coat so I felt the heat of her skin through the thin layers that separated us. I lost myself to her. To everything about her. The weight of her on my lap, the press of her mouth on mine, the feel of her nipples grazing my chest. How my cock felt trapped between us. I knew we had to stop soon or we would cross a line neither of us was ready for. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't break away from the wonder of her mouth. The warmth of her embrace.

Until the plaintive sound of her son's voice cut through the fog that had surrounded us.

“Momma!”

She pushed off me, scrambling from my lap. I hated the cold feeling that flooded me without her warmth. Her eyes were wide and startled, her hair messy from my hands, and she was adorably rumpled.

Her gaze strayed to me then snapped back as a second summons was called. She hurried away, and I let my head fall to my chest with a low groan.

I hadn't planned on walking in here and mauling her like a college frat boy. I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her all day. The whole time I dealt with a client, I thought about her. Her smile. Her beautiful eyes. That wild hair. How it felt under my fingers. How soft her skin was. What a wonderful mother she was to her son. How awesome I thought AJ was. The fact that we shared the same name.

I thought about her until I had no choice but to come see her and ask her out again.

Until my body took over my mind and all that mattered was getting her close. I pushed off the sofa, rolling my shoulders and willing my body back under control.

I had only met her that morning, for Christ's sake. Why was I feeling so strongly about her? Why was she filling my every thought?

I blew out a long breath. I needed to get myself under control.

Now.

ROSIE

I smoothed the blanket over AJ's shoulder, stroking the hair back from his forehead. He often called out to me not long after falling asleep. It had been that way since he was able to say "Momma." As if he needed to feel me close before drifting into his deep sleep.

I was normally prepared for it.

But not tonight.

Tonight, I had been locked in Asher's arms. Drowning in his taste. Reveling in his touch.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror that hung on the wall across from AJ's bed. My lips were swollen and red. My hair was messy. My eyes were wide, and I looked as if I had been thoroughly kissed.

And I had.

My God, that man's mouth.

I had noticed him before AJ disappeared. He was sitting alone, staring at the crowds. There was something about his expression. A sorrow I felt deep in my bones as if it were my own. He was incredibly good-looking, even as serious and stern as he appeared to be. Everything about him was dark. He was dressed in jeans, a navy shirt, and a black leather jacket. He had black Doc Martens on his large feet. His rich brown hair was brushed off his forehead, and his eyes were so dark they were almost black. When he rose to his feet, reacting to my calling out what he thought was his name, I noticed how tall he was. When he stepped in to help, I couldn't help staring at his wide shoulders, slim waist, and long legs. I expected to see coldness when our eyes met, but instead, I saw only compassion and worry.

When he held my hand, I noticed how large it was compared to my own. When he closed his palm around mine, he engulfed me.

Much like when he held me close and kissed me.

Earlier, he'd been unexpectedly kind. He was obviously used to taking charge, the way he had taken us to breakfast, then driven us home. I had tried to tamp down my attraction to him, knowing it was a lost cause. When he confessed to feeling the same pull toward me, I was shocked. But after he left, I really didn't think I would see him again. I assumed he would come to his senses and realize he was simply reacting to helping a woman and had gotten carried away. I had googled him, and I knew he was wealthy. That he had been named Philanthropist of the Year three times in a row. I read a lot of articles about the good he did in the community. The pictures I found showed him at various functions. Always alone. He was dressed in a suit in every picture, looking polished and distant, always slightly to the side as if he didn't want to be there. I zoomed in, wondering if anyone ever noticed the sadness in his eyes. It was the same sadness I had glimpsed earlier. I was certain of it.

Then I shook my head, knowing he existed in a different world than I did, and I had no idea if he was sad or simply bored at one of the seemingly frequent events he attended.

I googled a little more, looking at the wealthy people he associated with. Faces I recognized from society columns. Newspaper articles. There were even a few pictures of him taken with the BAM group. They were huge in real estate, and their buildings were highly sought after. And although he was smiling in the pictures, I still saw the same distance in his expression. A man alone in a crowd.

I hadn't expected him to show up at my door tonight.

And I hadn't expected to feel this passion. Or long for his mouth on mine again.

I shut my eyes and scrubbed my face.

I needed to get a grip. Fast.

ASHER

She entered the room quietly, her posture saying it all. I stepped closer. “I apologize.”

“You’re sorry you kissed me?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I should say yes. Assure you I got carried away and it won’t happen again, but I’d be lying. I want to kiss you more, Rosie. Talk to you. Ask you a thousand questions and listen to your answers. Tell you anything you want to know about me.”

She blinked, once again caught off guard.

“I don’t understand.”

I moved in front of her, capturing her hands in mine and lifting them to my mouth, kissing the knuckles. “You’re so shocked someone would be interested in you.”

“Well, that, and it’s so...so—”

I cut her off. “Fast?”

She nodded.

“I know. But it feels right, doesn’t it?”

“We’re so different.”

I frowned, not liking that statement. I knew what she meant. Our lives were polar opposites. Financially, we were yin and yang. Our worlds were two different places. Yet that didn’t matter at all to me. I didn’t want her thinking that way about us. I wanted her seeing the positives.

I wanted to make her laugh and smile, not look sad and pensive.

“You mean the penis thing? That I have one and you don’t? The difference works well in this application, Rosie. Trust me on this.”

Her eyes widened, and then it happened. She began to laugh—the same light, girly sound as earlier. Her frown faded, her

tension disappeared, and she was gorgeous. She slapped my chest in pretend outrage.

“You’re awful.”

“Awful good,” I assured her, lifting her hand to my mouth again and kissing it.

We shared some more amusement, and I pulled her into my arms, unable to resist touching her any longer.

“Opposites attract, Rosie. God knows I’m attracted to you.”

“I, ah, looked you up on the internet.”

I chuckled, not surprised. “The world I live in is different, but I’m just me, Rosie. I like that you see that. I get tired of being the center of attention because of my money. Of being sought after for what I could do for someone.”

“I like the man I see, but I’m still worried...” She trailed off.

I shook my head and kissed her sweet mouth. “Baby, earlier you said you were out of my league. I have a feeling *you* are the one out of *my* league. But I want to explore this. Give me a chance. Please.”

She bit her lip, staring at me. I pulled her teeth from the plump flesh.

“I won’t hurt you. Or your son. Please.”

“Yes.”

That was all I needed to hear.

CHAPTER THREE

ASHER

She was shocked yet again when I appeared at her door the next morning, my hands filled with bags. We had talked, kissed more, and I had left, regretting the fact that I had to, but I knew she was tired. I had hoped once I was gone, she would go to bed, but I had a feeling she would log some hours on her second job. I had to push down my instinct to tell her to stop. I didn't have that right.

Yet.

During our talk last night, I was shocked when she admitted she had only been on two dates since Asher was born. When I expressed my disbelief, she only shrugged at my statement.

"Single mothers are a lot for most men to take on, Asher. We're too much work."

"I disagree. The best things in life are worth the effort."

"I think you're a different breed altogether."

I planned on showing her how different I was—in the best ways. She fascinated me, and I thought AJ was an incredible kid. I looked forward to getting to know both of them more.

I admitted to her I didn't date much. "My business has always come first," I explained. I met her worried gaze, running my knuckles over her soft cheek. "I think that might have changed."

I liked the fact that my words made her smile.

She opened the door looking so sexy and sweet, it took all I could not to drop the bag and pull her into my arms and kiss her until she was breathless. Her hair was everywhere. Lines from her pillowcase were etched into her cheek. Her beautiful green eyes were wide and blinking, hardly awake enough to comprehend my presence.

“Asher?” she asked. “How do you keep getting into the building?”

I grinned. “Magic.” I lifted the bags in my hands. “I brought breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” she repeated. “Or a whole grocery store?”

I breezed past her, stopping to drop a fast kiss to her mouth. “I didn’t know what you had, so I brought everything to make my specialty.”

AJ came running out of the bedroom, clutching a well-worn teddy. “Asher! Hi!”

“Hey, bud. I came to have breakfast with you and your mom. I’m going to make it.”

“Can I help? Momma says I’m a great helper!”

“Great. I need an assistant.”

“I’ll go get ready!” he announced before running to his room.

I set down the bags, shrugged off my coat, and toed off my boots. Rosie stared dumbfounded at me.

“You’re very, ah, goal-oriented, aren’t you?” she asked.

I laughed and cupped her face, her skin warm under my cold hands. “If you mean making you smile is the goal, then yes.” I kissed her again. “We’ll make breakfast. You go have a nice leisurely shower. I don’t imagine you get many of those.”

“No,” she admitted ruefully.

“Go,” I encouraged.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered.

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her deeply. Until she was whimpering and shaking in my arms. Then I pulled back,

resting my forehead against hers.

“That’s why.”

“Okay, then. Just checking,” she replied.

I turned her and swatted her ass. “Go before your son comes back and catches us.”

I tried not to laugh as she walked into the sofa, then stumbled down the hall to the bathroom.

I picked up the bags, feeling somewhat light-headed myself.

Rosie shook her head as she finished the omelet and toast I had made. Once again, I noticed her love of the warm bread. I had bought extra butter, putting it in her refrigerator, assuming it was a treat she didn’t get very often. I had, in fact, added a lot of things I had picked up “by accident” while getting the items I needed for breakfast.

“You like toast.”

She blushed slightly, biting into another piece. “I love it. I always have. Just toast and butter. Nothing else. It’s comfort food to me.”

“You’re in need of comforting right now?” I asked with a frown.

AJ laughed from the spot on the floor where he sat, cross-legged and enjoying cartoons. Rosie had told me she only allowed him an hour of screen time every day except the weekends. *“He loves cartoons, and my neighbor is kind enough to let me use her Disney+ sign-in. I let him watch some shows, and we often watch a movie together,” she explained.*

“Comforting?” she replied. “No, but I’m wondering why a wealthy philanthropist is sitting at my old kitchen table after making me breakfast. It’s a little disconcerting.” She met my gaze. “I don’t really understand this thing between us.”

“I don’t either,” I confessed. “This isn’t my usual MO.”

She sat back, picking up her coffee cup. “What is?” she asked, her voice teasing. But I saw the flash of worry in her gaze and felt her tension. “Five-star restaurants, ballroom dancing, and quick trips to the islands with leggy blondes after a long week of making millions?”

I dropped my head in laughter at her words.

“First off, no to the ballroom dancing. Not a fan. Second, my days and evenings usually consist of me and my laptop, working, listening to my assistant call me a tyrant and a bore because I rarely leave the office.” I shook my head. “My meals are normally what my housekeeper leaves me or takeout. As for the leggy blondes, those were around on occasion before, but lately, I much prefer the company of clever, sexy redheads who let me cook them breakfast.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because I think she is fascinating. Strong. Beautiful. Inspiring.”

She blinked.

“I assume you’re not used to being thought of that way.”

“Well, AJ thinks I’m awesome—most of the time. But other than that, no.”

“Get used to it.”

She worried at the plump flesh of her mouth with her teeth. I leaned forward, pulling her lip away from the self-inflicted torture. “I want to kiss that lip later,” I murmured. “Stop hurting it.”

Her eyes widened, and I tried not to groan as she kissed the end of my finger that rested lightly on her bottom lip.

“Why me?” she whispered.

“Why not you?”

“There is nothing special about me.”

“I totally disagree on that. I think you’re very special.”

“I’m ordinary. There are lots of single mothers working as hard as I am to give their kids a good life.”

I nodded. “I try to help them with my business and my money. I try to do good for a lot of people. That is important to me. As for being ordinary, I don’t think you ever have or ever will be that.”

“Why?” she asked again.

I didn’t know how to explain this feeling. How intensely I felt this connection with her. Or even why I felt it. But it was there, a living, breathing thing between us. And I refused to push it away. I needed to find out how strong it was.

“Because I think it was meant to be.”

She looked shocked at my words, unsure what to say. Right then, AJ chose to run over. “Momma, can we still go sledding?”

“Sure, baby.”

“Can I watch one more cartoon?”

She sighed and stroked his wild curls away from his face. “Only one.”

“Thank you!”

He turned to me. “You can come sledding if you want. We go to the hill by the park. It’s fun.”

“I think Asher has other—”

I cut her off. “I would love to, bud.”

He raced off, happy, and she looked at me. “You don’t have to do that.”

“But I want to.”

“You’re not really dressed for sledding.”

“I have some other clothes in the car. I often take Bonnie to the park, so I’m always prepared.”

“Your niece?”

“Yes.”

“I assume you’ll be spending Christmas with them?”

“No, they go to his parents’ place in Alberta. They’ve already gone, in fact. We’ll spend the day together when they get back and have our own little Christmas.”

“You don’t go with them?”

“I went once. It was just...too much.”

“Too much?”

“I felt like the odd man out, to be honest. All couples and families. And I don’t like my sister worrying about me. So I stay here and do what I do best. Be alone. Find places to give money.”

She frowned. “You can’t be alone on Christmas.” She looked around. “I mean, it’s not much, but you’re welcome here.”

“Not much?” I repeated. “It’s your home.”

“I’m sure compared to where you live, it’s, ah, lacking.”

“You don’t have other people joining you?”

“No. It’s only AJ and me.”

The thought of spending the day with them made me feel something I hadn’t felt in years. An elusive fluttering of happiness filled my chest.

“I would be honored to come here for Christmas.”

She beamed at me, her smile wide.

“Then consider yourself invited.”

The snow began as we went sledding, the fluffy white flakes falling rapidly. The walk to the park was short, AJ chatting incessantly. There were two places to sled, one a small slope, the other much higher. Both were fairly busy with families and kids, the noise and excitement level high.

“There’s a skating pond farther down the path,” Rosie explained.

“I don’t know how to skate,” AJ said with a frown.

“I can teach you,” I offered.

“I don’t have any skates. Neither does Momma.”

“I bet I have an older pair kicking around that would fit you,” I said. “My sister left her skates last time. I bet they’d fit your momma.”

“I’d like that!”

Rosie didn’t look as enthused as her son did, which made me chuckle.

At the bottom of the hill was a food truck, and the scent of coffee, hot cocoa, and something sweet filled the air.

“That’s where Momma sits while I sled sometimes.” AJ pointed to the picnic tables set up. “She only goes a few times.” He bent his finger for me to come closer. “She gets tired ’cause she is old.”

I bit back my laughter. “I don’t think your momma is old.”

“She says so.”

“Trust me, trudging up the hill, I feel old,” Rosie said, sounding amused.

“Okay, well today, AJ and I will trudge.” I pressed a bill into her hand. “You sit and enjoy the coffee. We’ll have some cocoa when we’ve made a few trips.”

She began to protest, and I leaned down and kissed her. “Please. I want to do this.”

She smiled, and it felt as if the sun came out. “Okay.”

“Let’s go, bud.”

We headed to the hill, and I paused. “Which one?”

He hesitated. “That one.” He pointed to the smaller of the two.

“I don’t mind walking up the bigger one,” I offered. “It’ll be fun.”

He kicked the snow. “The little one is fine.”

I got down on one knee. “What is it, Asher?”

He looked up, hearing his full name. “I went down the big one once, and I fell off the sled. I’m scared to try again.”

I pursed my lips and nodded in understanding. “That would be scary. But this time, I’ll be with you. We can go down together. I won’t let you fall.”

He looked over my shoulder at the higher hill. “You won’t?”

“Nope. I’ll sit behind you and make sure you’re good.” I winked. “If I hold you, I won’t fall either.”

He grinned. “Let’s go!”

We headed up, pulling the wooden sled behind me. I noticed AJ’s envious looks at some of the newer sleds on the hill, but he didn’t say a word.

“You know,” I confided. “I had a sled just like this when I was your age. Best kind around. The wood goes faster and straighter than some of the slippery ones.”

“It’s all right.”

At the top, I put the sled into position and motioned for AJ to get on. He looked nervous, so I sat at the back, patting the space between my legs. “Sit here.”

He did, and I grabbed the rope. “Hold tight to this. We’re gonna go fast.”

“We won’t fall?”

“Nope.”

I pushed off, guiding the sled down the slope. It was fast and fun, the wind in our faces, my arm around AJ, holding him tight. He whooped and laughed, raising one hand in the air as we hit the bottom, gliding to a stop. He jumped up, no longer afraid, his eyes gleaming with happiness.

“Can we go again?”

“Absolutely.”

A few runs later, I joined Rosie on the picnic bench as AJ went to the smaller hill, confident on his own there.

I sat down heavily, accepting the cup of coffee she handed me. I took an appreciative sip.

“He was having such a good time,” she observed.

“We both were. He wants to play with his friends for a bit, which is good.” I leaned back with a grimace. “Apparently, I’m old too. My butt is killing me.”

She laughed. “Nothing like an almost five-year-old to make you feel your age.”

I chuckled.

“You’re so good with him.”

“I like kids.”

“I can see that.”

“Am I allowed to buy him a gift, Rosie?”

She frowned. “Allowed?”

“A Christmas gift. I don’t want to overstep. Nothing extravagant.”

“Like?”

“A new sled.”

She smiled sadly. “The one he has is a used one. I’m sure he’d love a new one.”

“I know the perfect one. It’s not over the top or unsafe.”

“If you want to, then yes.”

“I want to.”

“Okay, then.”

I squeezed her hand. “Thanks.”

“Uh-oh, he’s headed back. Hope your butt is recovered.”

I grinned. “If not, you can kiss it better for me later.”

I left her laughing.

AJ's laughter rang out loudly as we went to the bigger hill again and again. We had a snowball fight, him and me against his momma. She was far better at it, building up an arsenal and pelting us with them mercilessly. I loved seeing her happy and giggling. Her cheeks were flushed with the cold, her eyes dancing. She was beautiful, and I kissed her after tackling her in the snow. AJ jumped on top of us, and we rolled around, throwing handfuls of snow, chuckling and teasing.

We were all wet and cold when we got back to her little apartment. She made us hot chocolate and threw our wet clothes in the dryer at her neighbor's.

"She lets me use her machines," she explained. "She's away for Christmas right now."

We spent the rest of the afternoon watching a Christmas movie. Eating popcorn. I insisted on ordering in dinner, and we ate a feast of Chinese food, AJ exclaiming over every new dish he tried. It was simple, fun, and I couldn't recall ever feeling so content in my life.

After he went to bed, we ended up on the sofa, locked in each other's embrace, our mouths moving together with a hunger that couldn't be satisfied. She was beautiful in her desire. Achingly sweet in her pleas for more.

"I don't want to rush," I murmured, wondering who the hell was talking. I wanted her. I wanted her more than I could recall wanting another woman in my entire life.

"Please give me this," she whispered. "A memory I can think of and hold close."

I drew back, shocked. "No, baby," I whispered back. "No, that is not what this is. I'm not going to disappear. I won't fuck you and vanish. I'm not walking out of your life."

"I have nothing to hold you."

I rested my forehead on hers. "You have given me more happiness in a day than I have felt in years. You and AJ. That

is priceless. What you give me is inestimable. Your heart is far more valuable than the millions I touch every day.”

She clutched my wrists. “I want to believe that.”

“Then do. I told you—I’m your wish list.”

I hated to leave her. I had to force myself to walk out the door. I kissed her long and hard before leaving, promising to return the next day by lunchtime. It would be Christmas Eve, and I wanted as much time with them as possible.

In the condo, I prowled the vast space, noticing the emptiness of the rooms and the coldness of the décor. I had never given much thought to it before.

For all its shabbiness and cramped space, Rosie’s place was a home. This was simply a place to live.

I thought of how, with one phone call, I could have the place decorated, a huge tree brought in. Presents delivered and enough food to feed an army by tomorrow. I could bring her and AJ here and give them a Christmas beyond their expectations.

Except, I knew she wouldn’t like it. She would be overwhelmed and uncomfortable. Unlike women in my past, she wasn’t interested in me for my money. I barked out a laugh in the silence of the room. She had no idea who I really was. What I did. How rich I actually was. She had admitted to googling me, but she hadn’t dug very deep. It didn’t matter to her.

But she mattered to me. How it happened so quickly, I had no idea, but it did. I cared about her. About her son. And I knew she felt it too.

And I wanted to make Christmas good for her—for both of them.

Without overwhelming her or scaring her off.

I picked up my phone and made a call. A shocked voice on the other end answered.

“Asher?”

“I need your help.”

“With?”

“Pulling off a small miracle.”

“Hit me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ASHER

I arrived just before lunch, knocking on Rosie's door. She opened it, and I grinned at the jaunty Santa hat perched on her head. I set down my bag and stepped forward, cupping her face and kissing her. "Santa has never looked so sexy," I murmured.

"It arrived this morning, along with a few other things," she said, shaking her head. "Asher—"

"My contribution to the day," I finished for her. "A few groceries and such."

"Your *such* is extravagant. Lewis refused to take any of it back."

"And she was pretty damn insistent." My assistant strode in from the kitchen, covered in glitter and tinsel. "AJ and I were making some ornaments while your woman was cussing me out and telling me off," he informed me with a twinkle in his eye. "You never said she was lippy. Just pretty."

I shook his hand, still amazed at how lucky I was. When he'd listened to my requests last night, he hadn't wasted time with questions or unwanted advice. He'd simply gotten to work and arranged some of the items I needed. The rest, I took care of myself this morning.

Some things a man needed to handle on his own. And as much as I appreciated Lewis's extra efforts, I wanted to do the more personal ones.

I walked into the kitchen, laughing at AJ. He wore even more glitter, but the smile on his face was even brighter.

“Asher!” he crowed. “We made things!” He held up a brightly colored ball, the glitter literally dripping from it. “I like Lewis!”

“Me too, bud. You had fun?”

“Yeah! And Momma said she’d never seen so much food in our kitchen.”

I had made sure to add lots of extras to the list. I never wanted her to be without butter again for her toast. Or real cream.

I peered at her. “I assumed you wouldn’t normally make a turkey for just the two of you. I got us one. I thought we could cook it together.”

“And the rest of the stuff?” she asked quietly.

I shrugged. “Things I thought we might need. I had no idea what you had or didn’t have.”

She rose up on her toes and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “And you went overboard. But thank you.”

I turned and captured her mouth, kissing her hard and fast. I was grateful and surprised at her acceptance.

I saw Lewis smirk as he reached for his coat. I walked him to the door. “I’ll transfer everything to your trunk,” he said quietly. “I got it all.”

I shook his hand. “Thank you.”

“I don’t know what happened or how you met her, but she is amazing,” he said. “I’ve never heard or seen you look like this.”

“This, how?” I asked.

“Happy. Excited.” He paused. “In love.”

I blinked at his words.

Love?

I wasn’t *in love*. I had only just met Rosie. That was impossible—

Or was it?

I grinned.

“Another Christmas miracle,” I replied. “Your bonus is in your bank account.”

“Boss man, what I did this morning was my gift to you. But I appreciate it, and I’ll make sure Evan knows where the MacBook came from. He’ll be thrilled. He’s been wanting one of those in green for ages. Luckily, the Apple Store still had one in stock. I’m picking it up now.”

I clapped him on the shoulder. “Merry Christmas.”

He grinned. “Back at you.”

He left, and I picked up the bouquet I had left in the hall. I walked into the kitchen, where Rosie was still unpacking bags and AJ was tidying up. I had a feeling I’d be sneezing glitter for the next few months, but somehow, the thought made me happy.

I helped her finish unloading the groceries. The flowers I gave her made her smile. They also got me a long kiss that only ended when AJ ran into the kitchen to tell us it was snowing again. He was excited.

“Momma, a white Christmas! We never get those!”

“I know, baby.”

He stared up at me, his eyes round in his face. “Maybe we can go sledding again?”

I ruffled his hair. “I’d love to.”

He paused. “Are you gonna keep kissing my momma?”

“Probably.”

He crossed his arms. “She doesn’t usually kiss anyone but me.”

I matched his stance. “I see. Do we need to have a talk? Man-to-man?”

He pursed his lips. “Later. I don’t wanna miss my show.”

“Good choice. Later, when your momma is having a nap.”

“A nap?” he questioned. “Momma never naps.”

“It’s Christmas. Naps are special.”

“Doesn’t sound like much fun, but okay.”

He padded back to the living room. Rosie smiled at me.

“You’re very good with him.”

“He’s the same age as my niece. I talk to her like an adult too—at least, most of the time. We’re silly at times too. But kids are smarter than people give them credit for.”

She was quiet for a moment, then stepped closer.

“I noticed your, ah, overnight bag you put in the closet.”

“I was hoping you’d let me stay. Wake up with you two on Christmas morning.” I swallowed nervously, surprised at how desperately I needed her to say yes. As someone used to getting anything he wanted whenever he wanted it, asking her came surprisingly easy. She controlled the situation—not me. It was an odd sensation, but not unwelcome. “If you’d let me.”

“I sleep on the sofa. The mattress is sort of lumpy.”

“I can handle it.”

She tilted her head, and a smile tugged on her lips. “Not sure I can handle you, but I would like it if you stayed.” She held up a finger before I could speak. “But if you decide a few hours from now it’s all too much, I won’t be upset if you head home to your own bed and some peace and quiet. You’re still welcome for dinner.”

I wasn’t going to change my mind. I was tired of peace and quiet. Tired of being alone. I was right where I wanted to be—lumpy mattress, crowded apartment, overly excited child, and all.

Because everything was connected to her.

“I am so full,” she murmured, setting down her utensils. She sat back, picking up her wineglass. “Since when do wealthy single men cook for themselves?”

I laughed. “I can do breakfast, and I make this casserole. That is it. My housekeeper taught me this recipe in case she was gone for a while so I wouldn’t starve.” I winked at her. “You are totally in charge of dinner tomorrow.”

“Speaking of that, a fifteen-pound turkey for three people?” she scoffed. “Plus all those vegetables for side dishes? And the desserts? We’ll be eating like kings for weeks.”

That had been my plan. Although, the more time I spent with her and AJ, the more I was convinced they would be in my life for a very long time. I would make sure the kitchen was well stocked. Preferably the one in my condo. I could already see Rosie in there making dinner, AJ playing on the floor in the living room, and me watching them both. Making sure they were warm, safe, and happy.

I kept my mouth shut, though. Rosie already thought I was too impulsive.

What she didn’t realize was that it was only when it came to her. Everywhere else in my life, I was circumspect. Cautious. One encounter with her and that all went out the window.

“I like leftovers,” I said simply.

She smiled, looking shy.

“What?” I asked, leaning over and stroking her soft cheek.

“I like knowing you want to be around for them.”

“I do. More than you know.”

Her brow furrowed, and I moved closer again. “I’m not going anywhere. I can’t explain why or how I know, but I do know it. I trust my gut all the time. It has never let me down.”

She became teasing. “And your gut likes me?”

I winked, leering at her. “Everything below my belt likes you, Rosie.” When she began to laugh with me, I smiled. “Everything above the belt too.”

“Okay, then.”

“Finish your wine. I believe an excited little boy wants to go for a walk and watch a movie before he puts out his stocking. We have a busy night ahead of us.”

She grinned. “Yes, we do.”

AJ was out for the count. Between the walk, the movie, and the wrestling match we had, he was exhausted enough to fall asleep by nine. I helped her put out the few gifts for AJ from Santa and fill his stocking. “What about you?”

She smiled and added a couple of boxes under the tree. “I wrap up a few things from around the house so I have something to open.”

I refrained from telling her this would be the last year that happened. In fact, it wouldn't be happening at all. Instead, I nodded. “Good thinking, Momma.”

She went for a shower, and I called and left my sister a voice mail. I told her I wasn't alone and I would explain when she got back. We didn't make a big deal about Christmas apart. We celebrated when she returned, but I knew she would be pleased to know I was with someone.

Rosie returned, dressed in pajamas with Santas on them. They were fuzzy and warm-looking and made me smile. I grabbed a fast shower in her small space, missing my far more luxurious shower. I hoped one day soon to show it to her.

Back in the living room, she looked nervous. The pull-out bed was ready, and she was perched on the end. “Ah, do you have a favorite side?”

I bent and kissed her. “Whatever one you like is fine.” I cupped her face. “Relax, my girl. I'll be a perfect gentleman.”

She chewed her lips. “I hope I can return the favor.”

I winked. “Just nudge me. I'll be ready.”

We climbed into the bed, and I discovered quickly she was correct. The mattress was lumpy. But that ceased to matter when I pulled her close and she nestled into my chest as if she was meant to be there. I had to stifle a groan as she wiggled against me to get comfortable. My cock was fully ready for her. I tried to shift my hips back, but she obviously felt me against her.

“Oh, ah, sorry,” she mumbled.

“Ignore it. It’ll settle.”

Maybe.

With a sigh, she relaxed and fell asleep quickly. I knew she was tired. She worked, looked after her son, and had the added stress of the holidays. And she did it all on her own.

I waited until I knew she was deeply asleep. I had never moved as carefully as I did for the next while. I slipped down to my car and pulled out the bags Lewis had left. I snuck back upstairs and added gifts to the ones currently under the tree, putting the reused gifts for her into the bag, which I tucked into the closet. I added a full stocking for Rosie. The sled I had purchased was too big to wrap, but I propped it against the wall, adding a festive bow. It was sleek and fast. AJ would love it. Then I crept back into bed, smiling as she snuggled against me again.

A while later, I woke alone, sitting up to see Rosie kneeling by the tree, staring at it and the pile of gifts. She was touching the ribbon on a package, shaking her head. I flung back the blanket, padded across the room, and sat behind her. “What are you doing, Rosie?”

“How did these get here?”

“Santa.”

She turned, the soft glow of the tree casting her face in light. “I didn’t expect...” She trailed off.

“I know. I wanted you to have a surprise too.”

“You’re incredible.”

I touched her nose with mine, rubbing it affectionately.

“I think the same of you.”

“Asher,” she whispered. “What if there *was* something I wanted? Something only you could give me?”

“Ask me,” I replied without hesitation. “Whatever you want, I’ll get it for you.”

She drew in a deep breath. “You. I want you.”

I froze. “If we do this, Rosie, then you’re mine. I don’t play the field. I take sex seriously. I’ll be all in. You understand that?”

She pulled her pajama top over her head, her breasts full and taut in the glow of the tree. “I’m all in too.”

There was nothing else to say.

I yanked her into my arms.

CHAPTER FIVE

ASHER

She was liquid fire around me. Warm, soft, fluid. Her breasts were perfect in my hands, her nipples hard points under my tongue. She smelled like flowers and tasted like sugar. We kissed endlessly, never moving away from the tree. I laid her out on the floor, worshipping every inch of her body. She was ticklish on the right side. The sexy freckles I liked so much were scattered all over her body, and I enjoyed tracing them with my tongue. She whimpered when I sucked her nipples and moaned softly when I nibbled on the sensitive spot behind her ear. She was responsive and eager. As desperate for me as I was for her.

“Condom,” I hissed.

“On the pill. I haven’t had sex since AJ,” she assured me.

“It’s been a long time for me.”

“Take me like this,” she whispered. “I want you.”

Her sharp gasp when I entered her was music to my ears.

“Oh, you feel so good,” she groaned. “*So good, Asher.*”

I reveled in the feel of her. Came alive under her touch. I shivered as she trailed her fingers down my spine, gripped my shoulders, and clutched at my back as I drove into her. With everything in my life, even lovers, I always held myself back, never giving everything. But there was no holding back with Rosie. I lost myself in her. Gave her everything I had. Took everything she offered and then some. I had never experienced such passion, such need, as I did with her.

And knowing this was only the first time?

It blew my mind.

She stiffened, her muscles fluttering around me. She whispered my name, tightening her arms around my neck and holding me close.

I buried my fingers into her hair, gripping it as my orgasm washed over me. It peaked and ebbed like a tidal wave, carrying me along its path and crashing me to the sand. Leaving me adrift and spent.

We lay wrapped around each other until I felt her shiver. I sat up, and we helped each other dress, sharing smiles, kisses, and whispered words of adoration. I wrapped myself around her in the bed, kissing her neck.

“Best Christmas gift ever,” I murmured. “Thank you.”

She giggled. “No returns.”

“I don’t want a return. I want to repurchase. Again and again.”

“That was incredible.”

“Yeah, it was.”

I kissed her, pulling her tight to my chest. “Sleep, my Rosie. AJ will be up early, and he’s going to have a banner day.”

She peered up at me. “I just had a banner night.”

I laughed and rubbed her nose. “Good.”

I had never experienced a Christmas like it. It wasn’t the gifts. It was the love that filled the room. AJ’s excitement. Rosie’s smile. The little surprises, like the stocking Rosie had filled for me with silly, fun things. How she had managed it, I had no idea. AJ adored the new sled I got him as well as the snowsuit so he could stay out longer and not be cold. Rosie exclaimed in delight over every gift, even the gloves and scarf I’d selected for her, the green reminding me of her eyes. I kept the

gifts simple, not wanting to overwhelm her or the ones she had already purchased for her son.

There was a handsome muffler for me. A box of cookies she had baked. A coupon book filled with IOUs for dinner or a back rub. Thoughtful ideas I planned on cashing in. I made breakfast, we watched a movie, and then we went sledding, just AJ and me, leaving Rosie puttering in the apartment and cooking dinner. I knew she didn't get much time on her own, and I hoped she'd take advantage of it and curl up on the sofa and read or nap while we were gone.

The area wasn't as busy, but there were still a fair number of people around. One young boy ran up to AJ, looking excited.

"Cool sled!"

AJ grinned. "My friend Asher gave it to me."

"Maybe we can race later!"

"Sure."

At the top of the smaller hill, AJ looked up at me. "I was right before, wasn't I?"

I hunched down to his level. "About?"

"That you're my friend."

"Absolutely."

"Are you Momma's friend?"

I rubbed my chin. "That's a bit more complicated, AJ. Technically, yes. I'm your momma's friend. I like her a lot."

"I know." He wrinkled his nose. "You kiss her all the time."

I chuckled. "Noticed that, did you?"

"Yes. And you hold hands. Momma told me once that grown-ups do that when they like each other. She holds my hand because she loves me and doesn't want me to get lost."

"I don't want your momma to get lost either."

He suddenly looked older than his years. "She smiles more when you're here, Asher. She doesn't seem so sad."

“Your momma gets sad?”

He scuffed his boot in the snow. “She tries to hide it, but I see sometimes. She cries.”

My heart hurt for them both. “Sometimes grown-ups cry,” I agreed with him. “There’s a lot of responsibility when you’re big.”

“Do you?”

“On occasion.”

“I try to be good for her when she cries.”

I ruffled his hair. “It’s not you, bud. She loves you, and I think you’re a good boy all the time. She just needs to cry. Mommas are like that sometimes.”

“Will you make her cry?”

“I hope not.”

“Will you go away and not come back like my dad?”

“No. I plan on staying.” I drew in a deep breath. “Sometimes being a grown-up is a lot of work. I like your momma, and she likes me. We want to keep seeing each other. We’ll need some time alone—and other times with you. Lots of it, really. If that’s okay with you.”

“I’d like that.” He flung his arms around my neck. “I like you, Asher.”

I hugged him back tightly. “I like you. Now, let’s try out this new sled, okay?”

“Okay!”

We spent a couple of hours at the park, arriving back at the apartment cold and hungry. The scent of the turkey filled the small space, and the feeling of peace and belonging filled my soul as I stepped inside and saw Rosie’s wide smile greeting us.

Midafternoon, I fell asleep on the sofa with AJ snuggled beside me, and when I woke up, Rosie was nestled into my other side.

And I was complete.

Dinner contained more laughter. More bonding. Afterward, cleaning up, I wrapped my arms around Rosie's waist, dropping my head to her shoulder.

"Did you have a good day?" she asked.

"The best. You?" I tightened my arms as I waited for her reply.

"Yes. You made all my dreams on my wish list come true."

I held back my smile. If only she knew I was just starting. I planned to give her every dream and wish she could think of.

"Can I stay?" I asked quietly. The thought of going back to my cold, empty condo felt wrong. I wanted to be right here. What happened after the next few days, we would deal with. But for now, this was where I wanted to be. For as long as she would let me stay.

"Yes."

I spun her in my arms and kissed her. "Thank you."

Our eyes met and held. "This is only the beginning. You know that, right?"

She nodded. "I do." She cupped my face. "Merry Christmas, Asher."

I kissed her again. "Merry Christmas, Rosie."

AJ bounded into the kitchen, wearing the new pj's Rosie had bought him. The Batman logo blazed on his chest, the little hoodie complete with the bat ears. He loved them, having vowed to never take them off. I had laughed, and Rosie had shaken her head. "He's serious."

"I know," I replied. "I gave Bonnie some *Frozen* pj's she was dying for, and she wore them constantly. Suzy had to strip her at night, wash them, and put them right back on, or the tantrums started."

Rosie chuckled, laying her head on my shoulder. "Sounds about right."

AJ was full of excitement over his day. “Momma, Christmas movies are on all night! Can I watch them?”

“May I,” she corrected.

He grinned. “Yes, you may. So that means I can too!”

Laughing, he raced out of the kitchen. I had to join his amusement. “He’s clever.”

“Too clever for me some days.” She smiled, but it was a sad one. “He’s growing up so fast. Next fall, he’ll be in school full time. I don’t know where the time has gone.”

I slipped an arm around her. “It goes fast,” I agreed. “Where is his school?”

“Oh, the public elementary down the road. Bradshaw.”

“Is he excited?”

“He’s used to a schedule. He goes to day care and kindergarten. He is very advanced.”

“What do you do in the summers?”

“Any free camps I can enroll him in, I do. I pay for a couple. Things he finds fun. Some day care. I take my holidays in August, so we have time together. My boss has always been very accommodating. I work extra in the winter and over tax time. And I work four days in the summer, so, financially, that helps. I take extra calls when I can.” She paused. “But I have a new boss starting after the holidays, so I’m hoping she’ll be as understanding.” She lifted a shoulder in resignation. “I’ll figure it all out.”

I marveled at her. She wasn’t complaining or whining. Simply stating the facts. Everything she did was for Asher. To make sure he was safe and happy. I pressed a kiss to her head, knowing that she had no idea how incredible she was.

From the living room, Asher shouted. “Momma! Asher! Grinch is on!”

“We mustn’t keep him waiting,” I chuckled. “Grinch is on.”

I lay beside Rosie, her head on my chest, the room dark except the lights of the Christmas tree. We'd made love again, this time on the lumpy mattress. I needed to source a new one for her—it really was uncomfortable. I knew exactly where to get one. I would have to arrange it to be switched out while she wasn't at home so she couldn't say no.

I stroked my hand through her thick hair, the tresses soft against my fingers.

“I love your hair.”

She hummed. “Really? It's annoying. The color, the curls.”

“Those are two of the things I love most about it.”

I felt her smile against my chest. “You're so sweet.”

I laughed. “I'm hardly sweet. I made you blush not long ago.”

I lowered my voice. “And come a couple of times.”

“Three,” she responded.

“Oh.” I grinned, feeling the male pride of making my woman orgasm. “I missed one. I'll have to pay better attention.”

“You were kind of busy moaning yourself.”

I hauled her up my chest, fisting her hair and kissing her. “When your mouth was around my cock, you mean? Baby, that was the hottest thing I've ever seen or felt.”

I felt the warmth of her skin as she flushed. It amazed me that such a sweet woman could turn into a passionate lover one moment, then blush the next. It was intoxicating.

“Jesus, you turn me on,” I groaned into her mouth. “I've never felt like this, Rosie. Ever.”

“I want you,” she breathed. “Again.”

It was music to my ears. I kissed her until she was shaking with desire, then pulled her onto my thighs. “Ride me.”

“I've never...”

If anything, those two words turned me on more. I loved knowing she was inexperienced. That I was the first man showing her all these things. She was a fast study.

I grasped my cock, sliding into her inch by inch until I was fully enveloped by her. Our bodies were so tightly connected it was incredible. I was deeper in her than I had ever been. I gripped her hips, encouraging her to move. She was slow at first, finding her rhythm, then she began to whimper, undulating her hips, moving easily, taking all of me.

“Grab the back of the sofa,” I instructed, my voice rough. “Lean forward.”

She did, and I sucked at her breasts, the new angle stimulating and different. I slipped a hand between us, stroking her hard clit, making her tremble. I thrust up, needing to be closer, wanting more. She rode me faster, her breathing picking up and the sounds she made becoming needier and louder.

I covered her mouth, and she licked at my palm before biting down, her teeth rubbing my flesh. She stiffened and came hard, strangling my cock, setting off my own orgasm. I shut my eyes, lost to the sensations. Her body, her sounds, the feel of her around me. The scent of her, me, us swirling in the air.

And then she collapsed on top of me. We were a mass of arms and legs, sweaty bodies, and stickiness. I held her close, chuckling when she lifted her head. “I need a shower.”

“Go,” I encouraged. “I’ll follow.”

“Okay.” She pressed a kiss to my mouth, and I held her close, keeping her there until I was satisfied. At least as satisfied as I could feel right now.

I watched with a grin as she lifted off me and headed to the small bathroom.

I had a feeling I might never be satisfied when it came to Rosie.

CHAPTER SIX

ROSIE

The next two days were filled with a contentment and rhythm I had never experienced. The three of us were like a little family. The days were spent wandering around, eating in restaurants—not fancy places, but ones AJ and I enjoyed. The kinds of places I could afford once in a while as a treat if I put in extra calls or was given a gift card at work for a bonus. Asher never once pulled a face, made a disrespectful remark, or informed me he wanted to go elsewhere. We played in the snow, went to the park, watched movies on my little TV, snuggled while AJ played with his new toys, and took naps. Glorious, wonderful naps, wrapped in Asher's arms, his warm body close, his even breathing on my skin. Invariably, AJ would wake first, but he seemed happy to play or watch a cartoon while Asher and I looked over at him from the sofa.

The mornings were lazy, Asher cooking breakfast and the coffee ready when I woke. The nights were incredible. Once AJ was out, Asher had me in bed, doing all the things he whispered to me during the day he had planned that night. He was an incredible lover, giving and patient. Never angry if we heard AJ and I had to check on him. He was inventive and gentle. Passionate and intense. I never knew which Asher would greet me after I tucked AJ in, but I liked all of them.

I had no idea what was happening between us. What would happen once the holidays were over. But my entire life, I had done what was expected of me, played by the rules, and it got me nowhere. I was worried about AJ and how fond he was

already of Asher, but there was little I could do about it. Asher asked me to trust him, and I did. I hoped, somehow, we would fit into Asher's life once reality set in.

If we didn't, I would care for my son and move on.

I tried to ignore the little voice in my head that asked who would look after me. Asher would be incredibly difficult to move past.

So even though the odds were against us, I refused to think about that.

I woke up in the morning, hearing Asher's low voice in the kitchen.

"I just didn't expect you back so soon, Suzy."

I sat up, pulling my legs to my chest. My heart sank. His sister was home, with his niece. He had told me he would be going to see them for a few days but didn't expect them back until the new year. We had plans for a fun evening on New Year's, but listening, I knew it wouldn't be happening now.

"Of course I'll come. I promised Bonnie I would, and I don't break my promises. But why the place in Quebec?"

There was silence, and I heard his sigh. "I see. Makes sense. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Again, there was silence as he listened. "No," he said firmly. "I'll drive myself, and I'll see you tomorrow. I have something I have to take care of first."

I heard his phone hit the table, and I shut my eyes at the pain that swelled. He had to take care of us first. Would he be saying "see you soon," or would it be a "this was a fun break, take care of yourself," sort of farewell?

I pushed back the blanket, grabbing my robe. I shivered a little. The apartment was cold, and my robe had seen better days. I headed to the kitchen. Asher was at the table, his head in his hands, pulling on his hair. I walked up to him, tugging on his hands. "I like your hair where it is."

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close, his head resting on my stomach. "I didn't mean to wake you. Go back

to bed, and I'll bring coffee."

I didn't think I could face this conversation on the sofa. Too many intimate moments had been shared on it. "I'm fine. I'll get us coffee."

I bent and kissed the top of his head, and he looked up, unhappy and worried. I pulled away and got the mugs, pouring the coffee and bringing it to the table.

"Your sister must have been up early."

He nodded. "They flew home ahead of schedule."

I injected a false note of cheer into my voice. "You must be excited to see Bonnie and have your Christmas with her. I'm sure she is thrilled, knowing she'll see you soon."

"They're headed up to their cabin in Quebec. They want me to come tomorrow. Well, today, actually. But I said tomorrow."

I stood and went to the counter, refusing to let him see how sad his words made me. I'd known this was coming. He wasn't going to stay in this ratty little apartment with us forever. He had another life—one filled with other people, very rich people, like him who had cabins and flew to and from places whenever they wanted. I cleared my voice before I spoke. "You must have a lot to do before you go. Do you have time for breakfast with us first? I know AJ would like to say goodbye."

He was behind me in an instant, spinning me in his arms. "I am not saying goodbye to either of you."

"Asher," I began. "I know you have another life—"

He cut me off, lifting my chin. "My other life was empty until I found you and AJ. Lonely. This is not goodbye, Rosie. I have to go see my sister and niece because I promised. I don't want to leave you."

"Oh."

He shook his head. "How could you think that after the past few days?"

“I-I don’t know what to think. We never talked past the holidays...” I trailed off at his intense frown.

He pressed his forehead to mine. “I am not walking away. I thought they’d be at home and I’d drive up in the morning, spend the day, maybe one night like usual, and be back with you fast. But the cabin is a day’s drive, and she wants me to spend a couple days with them, and I hate saying no...”

“I understand,” I replied because I really did. That was his family.

“Come with me.”

“What?”

He stood back. “You and AJ come with me.”

I shook my head. “No, Asher. It’s too soon. I-I wouldn’t be comfortable. I wasn’t invited.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “You’d be welcome,” he insisted. “I want you there.”

I shook my head. “It’s not a good idea.”

“It is to me.”

I pressed a hand to his cheek. “You go see your family. Spend some time with your niece. Asher and I will be here when you get back, if you still want to see us.”

He held my hand to his skin, his voice incredulous. “What kind of statement is that?” he asked. “*If I want?* Of course I want to see you. I don’t even want to go, Rosie.”

His words eased my anxiety a little. “You have to go.”

“We’d planned New Year’s.”

I had to laugh. “And we’ll do that when you get back. AJ won’t care if he eats Chinese food on the second or the thirty-first. All he’ll care about is he eats it with you. So, we’ll hold off until you get back.”

He cupped my face, looking into my eyes. “I am coming back, Rosie. This is not over. Please come with me, though.”

“Another time, Asher. I don’t want the first time I meet your family to be, ah, now. And I am not intruding on your time with your niece. You need to go, and I need to stay here. We’ll be waiting.”

“You promise?” he asked.

“I promise.” His plea made me feel better.

“Fine. You shower. I’ll make breakfast.”

“Okay.”

He kissed me. Softly. “I will miss this. You. Me. AJ.”

“It had to end sometime,” I reminded him. “We couldn’t stay here forever. Life has to go back to normal.” I slipped from his arms, pausing at the doorway when he said my name.

“You have a new normal now. We both do. Do you understand me?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

AJ hugged Asher. “See you soon!” he exclaimed.

Asher ruffled his hair. “Only a few days, bud. Then I’ll be back, and we’ll have supper, okay? We’ll start your skating lessons.”

AJ nodded. “Charlie’s dad goes on business trips all the time. He always brings him something fun!” Then he covered his mouth. “Sorry. That was rude.”

Asher laughed. “Nope. I agree. I’ll bring something fun for you.”

AJ clapped his hands in delight and sped off to his room. Asher had explained over breakfast he had to go away for a few days, and AJ had immediately assumed it meant the same as when Charlie’s dad was gone. It was easier than trying to explain everything else, so I had simply agreed with his

thoughts. We watched a movie and had one last play in the snow before Asher left. I knew he had to get ready and that he planned on leaving early the next morning.

Asher turned to me. "Come here."

I slipped into his arms, and he held me close. "A few days," he said. "It's only a few days."

"Drive safely," I replied. "Let me know when you get there, please. I checked the weather report, and tomorrow looks okay for driving."

He smiled down at me. "Will you worry?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll call. And text."

"Use Bluetooth," I insisted.

He smiled. "I like having you worry about me. Few people do."

"I will. So, check in. And enjoy your visit."

"Are you sure you won't come?"

I leaned up and pressed a kiss to his jaw. "Yes."

He yanked me tight to his chest and covered my mouth with his, kissing me hard. Deep. Until I was shaking in his arms. "Asher," I whispered as he dragged his lips to my ear. "It's only a few days," I repeated.

"I'm going to miss your mouth."

"Is that all?" I teased.

"No. I'm going to miss everything, but especially this mouth. Your smile. Your voice."

"My mouth and my voice will be waiting for you when you get back."

"And you'll pick up the phone?"

"Yes."

"Not work every second I'm gone?"

“No.”

“I’ll call you later.”

“Okay.”

He kissed me again and opened the door, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “I left you something in the bathroom.” He paused. “I’ll see you soon, Rosie.”

And he was gone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ROSIE

It was confusing how I could miss Asher so much that quickly. He hadn't even left the building, and I wished he was back. I shook my head. I was being ridiculous. He'd only been in our life for a few days. He couldn't possibly have made that much of an impact on us.

Could he?

In the bathroom, he'd left a sweatshirt, which made me grin. I had told him I would miss his scent, so he'd left me this to borrow while he was gone. I slipped it over my head, inhaling deeply. It smelled like him. Rich, decadent, and intoxicating. I kept it on all day.

Around eleven, I closed my laptop and got ready for bed. AJ had fallen asleep around eight, so I signed on and logged some calls. It was a busy night, so I was pleased. I pulled out the sofa bed and sat on the mattress, running my hand over the blankets. I missed Asher waiting for me. His strong body, his warmth. He had called and texted, and I knew he was no doubt asleep since he planned to be on the road no later than six the next morning. I sighed as I picked up my book, deciding to read a little. My phone buzzed with a text from Asher.

You awake?

I smiled as I replied.

Yes. You shouldn't be since you have to get up early.

His reply was swift.

Couldn't sleep. You weren't beside me, all sexy and sweet, drooling on my chest as you slept.

I laughed as I typed my response.

I do not drool.

I loved his teasing.

You do. It's totally adorable.

I shook my head.

Go to bed.

Baby, it's cold outside.

I laughed.

It is winter.

It's lonely too. Your hallway is sort of dark.

I stared at the screen and flung the blanket off, rushing to the door. I opened it, meeting Asher's gaze.

"What...?" I asked, but before I could say anything else, he stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. He kissed me, hard, wet, and deep. His skin was cold, his mouth warm, and his embrace tight. He pulled back, leaning his forehead on mine. "Hi."

"You are supposed to be at home."

He tightened his arms. "I am now."

"Asher—"

He cut me off with his lips on mine again. "I was lying in my bed, wondering why I wasn't here. Even for a few hours. I've been pacing my empty condo all night, missing you and AJ."

So, I came over. If you don't want me to stay, I'll start driving."

I slid my hands under his open coat, tugging on his T-shirt. "Get in bed with me."

He grinned against my mouth. "Your wish, my command."

I settled against his chest, his arms around me. "I didn't come here for a booty call," he murmured. "But, wow, lady. You missed me." He chuckled. "I think I might fear for my manhood when I get back. You'll drain me."

I laughed at his teasing. "I think you can keep up."

He slipped his finger under my chin, lifting my head. "I'll do everything I can to make sure you're satisfied."

I bent and kissed his finger. "You are the ultimate Snickers." At his low laughter, I smiled. "I had no idea..." I trailed off.

"No idea?" he prompted, tapping my chin.

"Um, sex before was okay. Not like with you."

"Obviously, aside from sperm donation, your ex wasn't much good at anything except running like a coward."

"I always thought it was me."

He kissed me soundly. "Trust me. It wasn't."

He pulled me back to his chest. "Sleep for a while, Rosie."

"What about you?"

"I can sleep now too."

He was gone when I woke up. For a moment, I thought I had imagined his late-night visit until I saw his note and another shirt.

In case my smell fades from the first one. I liked seeing you in my clothes. Back before you know it-
Asher xx

He had loved the fact that I'd worn his shirt all day. He left me another one.

I planned on wearing it.

ASHER

“If you look at your phone one more time, I am going to pitch it in the snow. No business deal can be that important,” my sister Suzy informed me dryly. “You’ve checked it a dozen times since you got here.”

I slipped it into my pocket. “Just waiting on a reply.”

I had texted Rosie three hours ago. She hadn’t responded. My call went to voice mail.

Was she okay?

Was AJ sick?

Was she sick?

Had she already forgotten about me?

Internally, I shook my head. She was no doubt busy. Laundry. Playing with AJ. Out. Something.

But she hadn’t answered, and I was worried. I almost started to laugh. I didn’t worry about anyone. Aside from my sister and niece, and even they didn’t get much of that worry. I knew James loved them fiercely and protected them both.

“A new project,” she asked. “Or—” she grinned widely and took a sip of wine “—does this have something to do with your ‘I’m not alone’ comment over Christmas?”

I was surprised it had taken her so long to bring that up. Granted, since I’d arrived, I had been busy with Bonnie. Opening gifts, having tea, reading to her before she went with her dad to pick up pizza, leaving Suzy and me alone for the first time since I’d gotten here.

I was quiet for a moment. “I met someone. I was letting her know I arrived, and she hasn’t responded. I’m a little surprised.”

“And concerned,” Suzy added, tilting her head. “She must be special to have your attention, big brother.”

“She is.”

“When did you meet her? How long have you been seeing her?”

“Just before the holidays.”

“So, November?”

“More like a couple of days before Christmas.”

Suzy’s eyebrows flew up in shock. Before she could speak, my phone rang and I answered quickly, my voice filled with relief. “Rosie. Is everything okay? “

“I’m sorry!” she exclaimed. “It was so cold AJ couldn’t play outside, and he was restless. The neighborhood theater had a cheap matinee and we went, and I guess I forgot my phone. We stopped for a burger, and we were gone longer than I expected and I missed your calls—”

“It’s all right, baby. I’m glad you and AJ had a nice afternoon and you’re both okay.”

“I didn’t mean to worry you. In your message, you sounded upset.”

“I was concerned. But it’s all good.”

“Your drive was okay?”

“Boring and fast.”

“Did you speed?” she tsked.

“A little.”

“Asher,” she scolded.

I glanced at my sister, who was watching me with narrowed eyes.

“We’re about to have dinner. I’ll call you later once the holy terror is in bed, all right?” I said, dropping my voice.

Rosie’s lovely laughter drifted over the phone. “You adore that holy terror. I can see it every time you talk about her.”

“I do. I adore you as well. I’ll call you later. Give AJ a kiss for me.”

“And me?”

“A hundred of them.”

I hung up and caught sight of Suzy’s shocked face. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, and met my eyes.

“Asher, you had better start talking. Really talking. And I mean now before Bonnie walks through that door and monopolizes you again. Spill it.”

I told her everything. Mostly everything. Okay, the basics. Meeting Rosie and AJ. The connection. Spending Christmas with them. But I was honest about the draw I felt toward them. Especially Rosie.

She stared at me. “Who are you, and what have you done with my brother?”

I shrugged.

She narrowed her eyes. “Did you sleep with this woman, Asher?”

The front door opened, and Bonnie called my name, excited. “Uncle Ash, we got pizza!”

I stood. “I’ve been summoned.”

Suzy said my name, and I paused at the doorway.

“We’re not done.”

I nodded. Knowing my sister, we were far from finished with this conversation.

I avoided her until almost nine. I read Bonnie a story, sitting with her until she fell asleep. She loved her gifts, told me all about Christmas Day with her Gram and Gramps and her cousins.

“Uncle Vince and Auntie Laura were there, but you weren’t,” she observed. “I missed you.”

I chucked her under the chin. “We always have our own little Christmas, munchkin. You know that.”

“Why?”

It was too difficult to explain to a child. “Uncle Ash likes having you to himself,” I said instead. “I look forward to our time without everyone else.”

She thought about it for a moment, her adorable little brow furrowed in thought. Then she smiled. “Me too. And Mommy says if you miss someone, it means you love them.”

I thought about how much I was missing two people right now. All day and evening, they hadn’t been far from my thoughts.

I bent and kissed her. “Your mommy is very smart. Now go to sleep.”

I read a little more, and she drifted fast. I thought I was in the clear, but just as I headed to my room, Suzy appeared. “Not so fast, buster.”

“Must it be tonight?”

“Yes. I have scotch.”

“Well, at least that helps,” I muttered. “A little.”

In the living room, my brother-in-law handed me a generous glass of the amber liquid. “For the inquisition,” he said with a droll wink. “Suzy filled me in, and I have to admit, I have questions.”

I took the glass from his hand. “Thanks. I think I’m going to need it.”

Suzy came in, carrying a glass of wine. She sat across from me, James beside her, his hand on her knee. “Did you sleep with her?” she asked again.

I met her gaze. “Yes.”

“Asher,” she said, aghast. “There is a child.”

“I am aware, Suzy. I was there.”

“And you stayed there all this time?”

I laughed. “You make it sound as if I was there for a year. It was a few days.”

“There is a child,” she repeated. “An impressionable child.”

I sat forward in understanding. “I am not playing around.”

“What do you call it?”

I took a sip of scotch. “The start of something important and real in my life.”

It was rare I saw my sister speechless. She gaped at me, looked at James, then took a sip of wine.

“You met her at Zoles?”

“Yes, I was getting your gift.”

Suzy glanced over at the tree, her handmade crystal collector’s ornament catching the light, along with the thirty-plus others she had. One for every Christmas she’d been alive. I had taken over the tradition of giving them to her when our mother died. Every year, there was talk of discontinuing the tradition, and every year, I vetoed the idea. Suzy loved the pieces—loved what they represented. It was different for me, but I carried on the tradition for her. They were a limited item, and each one had to be picked up in person and signed for.

“Is she pretty?” Suzy asked.

“Tiny, fierce, strong, and a great mother,” I replied. “Her voice is soft, her heart is big, and she’s simply the loveliest woman I have ever met.”

Suzy blinked and looked at James again, taking another sip of wine.

“She has red hair, green eyes, and freckles that drive her crazy.”

Me too, I added silently, but my kind of crazy was different. The kind I wouldn’t discuss with my sister.

“Do you have a picture?”

I scrolled through my phone, picking one I had taken of her reading to AJ. With her head bent over his, it was hard to tell

where her red hair ended and his began. He was staring up at her, and she was smiling at him, patiently explaining something he didn't understand in the story. It was one of my favorites. Suzy studied it, then scanned a few more. She stopped at one, lifting her eyebrow. I knew which one it was. Rosie staring at the camera, sexy, and freshly fucked. Her hair was a mess, her lips swollen and a shy smile pulling her lips.

"She is beautiful," was all she said, handing my phone back.

"Inside and out." I paused. "The moment I touched her, something flared between us. I couldn't deny it. I didn't want to. Then she almost fainted, and I took her to breakfast. That was all I meant to do, but..." I shrugged. "I couldn't stay away."

"Does she know who you are?"

"She knows I'm a philanthropist. That I'm single and I have a sister and a niece."

James cleared his throat.

"And a brother-in-law I get on well with," I added with a grin.

James inclined his head in thanks.

"Does she know *who* you are?" she asked again.

"No. I didn't share that information with her. It wasn't relevant at the time."

"You mean before you—"

I held up my hand. "Do not finish that sentence. I'll say something and we'll start fighting, and James will punch me in the mouth and I'll have to punch him back and this scotch will be everywhere but where it should be."

James grunted. "We could set the scotch in a safe place first."

"But it would take away the spontaneity," I pointed out.

"True."

"Can we get back to the subject at hand?" Suzy said crossly.

I sighed. "I don't know what you want from me. I met someone. Someone wonderful. We had this instant connection.

She has a son from a previous relationship. His father has nothing to do with him—in fact, he has never seen him or even cared that he exists. She’s a single mother—a wonderful one, I’ll say again—and I’m interested in spending more time with her. Seeing where this goes. She likes me too. Just me. Asher. She has no idea of my past, how wealthy I am, or who my family is. That’s all I can tell you.” I drained my scotch. “The rest, frankly, is private.” I set down my glass. “Except you should know, I wanted her to come with me. She felt it was too soon and said no. I wish she had come. You would love her.”

“And if I don’t?” Suzy challenged.

“I think you will. She’s smart, strong, and witty. She cares for those around her. Very much like you. And if you don’t, then I will see her without your approval. I’ll see you and Bonnie other times.”

“And me,” James interjected. “I keep getting left out.”

I laughed at his humor. “I add you silently, James. Always.”

He tipped his glass. “Thank you very much.”

Suzy gazed at me. “You have totally fallen for this girl.”

I shifted in my seat. “I care about her a great deal, considering how short a time I have known her. I care about her son too. I think she is amazing.”

“And you’re sure she isn’t, ah—”

I was already shaking my head. “She had no clue who I was. She was looking for her son. Not me.”

“But she found you.”

I sat back with a grin. “Well, I found her, actually. I went to her. I’m not even sure she had noticed me. She was too busy looking for AJ.”

“Fate,” she breathed out.

“Fate, kismet, or coincidence. I don’t care. I met her.”

“When can I meet her?”

“Soon.”

“How soon?” she pressed.

“When I decide you won’t frighten her away.”

“Me?”

I laughed. “You, my sister. I am aware of your interrogation tactics.”

“As we all are,” James said dryly, pouring us each another finger of scotch. “Legendary.”

Suzy laughed at him, and I joined in, then became serious. “Give me a little time. I’m not ready to share.”

Suzy shook her head. “I can’t believe it,” she muttered. “You and a single mother.”

I grinned.

Me and Rosie.

I liked the sound of it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ROSIE

“**M**omma, that was so much fun!” AJ exclaimed. “Can we do it again tomorrow?”

I rubbed my shoulder. Sledding with AJ was fun, but we’d gone over a large bump and I’d fallen off the sled, hitting my shoulder hard on a patch of frozen snow.

“Sure, baby. If my arm hurts, I can watch.”

He looked sorrowful. “Do you need an aspirin?”

I ruffled his hair. “I took a couple of Tylenol. I’ll feel fine soon.”

I opened the fridge, peering inside. It was still full of food. I had made soup with the turkey bones and frozen it, but Asher had bought so many other items, we were spoiled for choice.

“Want grilled cheese and tomato soup?” I asked, already knowing the answer. That was his favorite.

“Yeah!” he said, throwing up his arms.

I laughed and made our simple dinner. We ate it on the sofa, watching a movie. I relaxed my usual rules over the holidays and let him watch what he wanted. He still enjoyed playing and coloring, so it wasn’t as if he was glued to the screen all day.

After we ate, he curled into me and fell asleep. I rubbed my shoulder at the dull ache. Maybe I was too old for sledding anymore.

When Asher had been here, the two of them had done most of the sledding, while I cheered on with a cup of coffee in my hand. I much preferred that.

I woke up AJ and ran him a bath. I washed his hair, and he talked nonstop the whole time about his day. He loved it when I wasn't working and we could spend time together. I had to admit, I loved it as well, but it only happened over the holidays and my once-a-year vacation, unless he got sick and I stayed home with him.

My phone rang, and I answered, happy to see Asher's number.

"Hey, you," I said, trying not to laugh at the soap monsters AJ was making in the tub.

"How are you, Rosie?"

"A little wet. AJ is having his bath."

"Hi, Asher!" AJ called out, excited.

"Put him on," Asher said good-naturedly.

I did as he asked and handed AJ the phone on speaker. "Don't drop it."

I headed to the kitchen and took a couple of Tylenol. My shoulder still hurt. I could hear AJ telling Asher how fast the hill was with his new sled and how many kids there were.

"My face got really cold," he said.

"You need an extra scarf. Tie it over your forehead and nose. You won't get so cold again."

"I'll tell Momma!"

"Good man. You taking care of your momma?"

"She fell off the sled and hurt her arm."

"What?" Asher said, his voice now worried. "She's hurt?"

I took the phone. "As we discussed before, I'm old, is what I am. And the frozen ground was hard. I'm a little sore. Nothing to worry about."

"Did you hit your head?"

“Barely. Just my arm and shoulder. I’ll be fine.”

“Barely?” he repeated. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“I can send my doctor to see you.”

Those words stopped me. *He had a private doctor? That was a thing?*

I left AJ playing for a few moments and sat on a chair in the hall where I could keep an eye on him. “Asher, I smacked my arm on some hard ice. It’ll be fine. No need to call a doctor.”

He huffed. “All right.”

“How is everything there?” I asked to change the subject.

“Great. Lonely without you.”

I laughed. “I am sure your sister and niece are keeping you busy.”

“Bonnie is. We had another tea party this afternoon. All the stuffed animals were invited, so I had a lot of voices to do. James and I split them up and drank a lot of pretend tea. Luckily, the cookies were real. Suzy went and had a manicure.”

“Nice.”

“I am sending them out for New Year’s, and Bonnie and I will do our own thing. They’re going with friends for dinner at the club. I thought they’d enjoy a night out.”

“I thought you were at a cabin.”

He laughed. “I am. In a private resort surrounded by many other cabins and a huge clubhouse with lots of amenities. This is my sister’s idea of roughing it.”

I chuckled, not even able to imagine it.

“I have a cabin in the Niagara region,” he murmured. “I bought it from a business tycoon. It’s private and woodsy. No one else around. That’s my idea of getting away.” He paused. “It’s a great spot. I’ll take you there.”

“Oh. That would be nice.”

“What are you two doing tomorrow?”

“We’re going to make homemade pizza and watch TV. He’ll be out by nine, and I might work a little. Surprisingly, New Year’s Eve is very busy on the customer service line. So, nothing exciting.”

“I’d make it exciting for you if I were there.”

Before I could respond, AJ called out.

“Momma!”

Asher chuckled. “Go see your boy. I’ll call you later, Rosie.” There was a moment of silence. “I miss you,” he added before he disconnected the call.

I got AJ ready for bed and read to him for a while. He was chatty and happy, but he soon drifted off.

I settled on the sofa, putting an ice bag on my sore shoulder. My head was aching, and I was tired. It had been a long day. I chuckled thinking ice had caused the problem and was now the thing I needed to use for relief. My phone buzzed with a video call, and I answered with a smile at Asher’s handsome face. “Hi.”

“AJ asleep?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not working, are you?” Asher asked with a frown.

“No. Taking the night off.”

“Good. You work too hard.”

“I work because I have to, Asher. And I’m fine. You worry far too much.” I winced a little as I moved.

“You need someone to worry about you.”

His words made me warm, but he frowned. “You keep grimacing.”

“My shoulder is sore. I’m icing it.”

“Let me see.”

“There is nothing to see.”

“Rosie. Let me see.”

With a sigh, I turned to the light, pulling my sweater off my shoulder, holding up the phone.

“Nice sofa,” Asher said dryly. “Go to the mirror.”

“My God, you are bossy,” I muttered. Tamping down my impatience, I went to the bathroom and showed him my shoulder in the mirror. I was surprised how bruised it was, the dark stain coming out already on my skin.

“*Nothing* to see,” he snorted.

I shook my head and headed back to the sofa. “Nothing I can’t handle, anyway.”

“And you’re sure you didn’t hit your head?”

I didn’t understand his fascination with my head, but I assured him I had not hit it hard. “It sort of glanced off the snow, but my shoulder took the hit. I’ll rub some Voltaren cream in before I go to bed, and I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“I’d do that and kiss it better if I were there,” he said, sounding frustrated. “And I wouldn’t stop at your shoulder.”

“When are you coming home?” I asked, ignoring the rush of desire I felt at his words.

“I’m leaving at lunch on New Year’s Day. They’re staying another week, but I’m done. Suzy and James enjoy the whole resort and the social aspect. Bonnie has friends she can play with. I’ve had a good visit, but I have something I need to get back to.”

“Your business?” I teased.

“Yes. You and AJ are my business, and I miss you like crazy.” He shook his head with a grin. “How, I don’t understand, but I do.”

“We miss you too.”

“Soon, you won’t have to.”

“Okay.”

“May I take you out when I get home?”

“Out, like a date?”

“Yes. A proper date. Dinner. Maybe dancing. Or my place. Just the two of us. Do you have someone who can watch AJ?”

“Yes.”

“Arrange it.”

I lifted an eyebrow, and he chuckled.

“Sorry. Please arrange it. Whatever night suits you best.”

“I’ll do that.”

We talked a bit longer, about nothing important, just sharing bits of our time apart. He was reluctant to hang up. “This bed is empty and cold.”

“So is mine.”

“I’ll be home soon.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Call me in the morning and let me know how you are.”

“Okay.”

He disconnected the call after staring at me for a moment and touching his lips in a silent kiss.

I stared at the ceiling, wondering how this was going to work. We’d lived in a bubble for a few magical, wonderful days. But real life was about to happen. I’d go back to work and the daily grind of getting AJ out of the house and to day care, then coming home and making dinner, doing housework, dishes, and chores. Getting him to bed. Working some extra hours, catching sleep when I could. I wouldn’t have long days of walks, snowball fights, stolen kisses, and afternoon naps. I had no doubt whatever he did kept Asher very busy. He’d mentioned dinners and events, lots of meetings and long hours.

Would we find time for us, or would we drift apart? I couldn’t help but wonder if he had been reacting to the loneliness of the season and, now that it had passed and he went back to his real life, if what we shared would fade away. The idea of that

happening made my chest ache with a sadness I couldn't comprehend.

I stood and got ready for bed, slipping on Asher's T-shirt. It still smelled like him, and I buried my nose in the neckline of it and drifted into an uneasy sleep, one thought on repeat.

That soon, his scent would only be a memory.

Like him.

Like us.

CHAPTER NINE

ROSIE

I was a little stiff in the morning and slow to get going. I'd fallen asleep after talking to Asher and my cell phone had died overnight, so I plugged it in. AJ and I went to breakfast as a treat. It was nice to have the meal out, and I could relax and enjoy my coffee as AJ colored the menu they'd given him. He loved the pancakes at the small diner, and he dug in as soon as they were in front of him, dousing them with syrup. I laughed and took away the bottle, enjoying my western sandwich. Food always tasted better when you didn't have to make it.

After, we walked to the store to pick up a few things for New Year's. I let him pick his favorite chips and one bag of candy. I bought the makings for homemade pizza. AJ was excited, and we headed home, walking slowly. I shifted the bags from arm to arm, my shoulder aching constantly. When we arrived at the apartment building, I was surprised to discover a man waiting for me by my door. He was middle-aged, with kind brown eyes, and he carried a black bag.

"Ms. Duncan?"

"Yes," I replied with a frown. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Dr. Sherman Hayes." He offered me a card.

I shifted the bags, taking the card. "Um, hello?"

"I was sent by Mr. Hart."

At my blank look, he smiled. "Asher. Asher sent me."

I was confused. "Why?"

“He was worried. He said you hit your head, and he hadn’t heard from you as promised. He thought you might be in medical distress.”

I gaped at him. “What? So he called you to come check on me?”

“Yes,” he said calmly, as if that was normal.

I had no words. Asher had sent his doctor to check on me. I blinked, unsure how to handle the situation.

“Perhaps we could go inside,” Dr. Hayes said quietly. “Have a cup of tea. Call Asher after I check you over and reassure him?”

I planned on reassuring him, all right. That he’d gone too far and was overreacting. But I wasn’t going to take it out on the nice doctor in front of me.

“Yes, come in and have a cup of tea,” I offered.

“That would be lovely,” he replied.

“Not once I’m through,” I muttered under my breath.

We entered the apartment, and AJ shrugged off his coat and headed to his room. I put down the bags and plugged in the kettle, looking at my phone. I had five missed calls from Asher and many more texts, each growing more frantic. I tamped down my frustration and typed a fast reply to them all.

I am fine. I will call you later.

I turned to the doctor, who was watching me with a calm expression.

“I’m afraid Mr. Hart has wasted your time.”

He shook his head. “If it calms his fears, then my time is not wasted.”

“I’m fine. It is a huge misunderstanding.”

“You wince when you move. Asher said that you hit your head?”

“I hit my shoulder, and yes, my head fell back. But the headache is from the neck and shoulder stiffness. Not because of something else.”

“May I look?”

I had a feeling this was not going to stop unless I agreed. I tugged off the sweatshirt I was wearing, leaving on the tank top underneath it. The doctor tsked as he saw the bruises and indicated for me to sit down. With a sigh, I did so, and he checked out my shoulder and arm, examining my head. He checked my eyes, had me do some reflex tests, and nodded. “You are badly bruised, but I agree, your head is fine.”

The kettle whistled, and I stood, pouring the hot water over the tea bags in the pot. I carried the pot to the small table and poured us each a cup of the steaming, fragrant liquid.

“Asher overreacted. I’m sorry to have troubled you.”

He wrote something on a pad of paper and handed it to me with a smile. “No trouble. Get this prescription filled and rub this cream into your neck and shoulder. It will help ease the ache. I am glad you didn’t do more damage.”

“Who knew sledding could be so dangerous?” I asked, trying to be light.

“You would be shocked at the number of serious injuries from sledding. Broken bones, head injuries, hidden sharp objects under the snow that cause stitches.” He shook his head. “Asher was being cautious. I don’t fault him for that.” He took a sip of his tea. “I will let him know you are fine.”

Before I could respond, I heard heavy, rushed footsteps coming down the hall. My door opened fast, so fast it almost slammed into the wall. Asher rushed in, meeting my eyes across the room. He visibly relaxed when he saw me standing. I stared at him, shocked.

“What are you doing here?”

He crossed the room, his eyes wild, tiredness etched beneath them. “You’re okay?” His gaze swung to the doctor. “Is she okay?”

“*She* is fine,” I said firmly.

Dr. Hayes stood. “She is bruised and sore, but otherwise fine.” He turned to me. “You have my card should you feel unwell. Fill the prescription. It will help ease the aches.” He leaned close. “Don’t be too hard on him.”

He shook Asher’s hand and left. We stared at each other.

“You didn’t call. You didn’t answer my calls. Or my texts. I was so worried, I—”

I lifted my hand, cutting him off. “You overreacted. I told you I didn’t hit my head directly. I hit my shoulder.”

“You had a headache.”

“From being jarred with the fall.” I shook my head. “You overstepped, Asher.”

AJ ran into the kitchen, a huge smile on his face. “Asher! You’re back!” He flung himself at him, wrapping his arms around Asher’s legs and hugging him. “We missed you!”

Asher kneeled in front of AJ. His smile was forced, but I doubted AJ realized it. “Missed you too, bud.”

“Are you gonna have pizza and watch movies with us tonight?”

I interrupted before Asher could reply. “No. Asher has plans, baby. He just dropped by to say hello. Go to your room and play for a little, okay? Momma has to put away the groceries and start the pizza for later. I’ll make you a snack.”

AJ frowned but hugged Asher. “See you soon, right?”

Asher ruffled his hair, his eyes on me. “Hope so.”

AJ padded down the hall to his room.

“I can stay.”

“No. You are supposed to be at your sister’s, looking after your niece.”

“Suzy understood.”

I frowned. “I don’t. I told you I was fine. I am perfectly capable of looking after myself, Asher. If I thought there was a problem, I would have gone to the hospital. I don’t need you to second-guess me. I certainly don’t need you screwing up everyone’s plans to rush here or send a doctor to check me over.”

He began to argue. “You didn’t answer your phone—”

“I fell asleep and forgot to charge it. I slept in a little and had to get to the store before they closed at noon. I wanted to take AJ for breakfast as a treat. My son and our plans were a priority. I had no idea you’d go off the deep end and jump in the car and rush here. Or send some strange man to my home.”

“He is my personal, private physician. And I didn’t drive. I chartered a helicopter. A service will pick up my car.”

I could only blink before I shook my head at his words. A helicopter. A private physician who made house calls. Until he had told me that last night, I didn’t know such a thing existed. It certainly didn’t in my world.

Which was so different from his.

“Suzy is taking Bonnie to the care center, where lots of other kids will be tonight. So, their plans haven’t changed. Bonnie will have a great time. I’ll make it up to her and go visit in a couple of weeks. I was out of my mind with worry when I couldn’t get a hold of you.”

I rubbed my temple. “You overreacted.”

“I beg to differ.”

I shut my eyes, not wanting to go round and round on this. “You need to go home, Asher. Or better yet, go back to your sister’s and keep your word. I’m fine.”

“Are you?”

His insistence that I was not telling him the truth irked me. “I have an achy shoulder. I’m not going to drop dead of a head injury or whatever you’re thinking. I’m a grown woman, perfectly capable of making decisions when it comes to my

health and how it affects me and the welfare of my child. I have been doing it since I learned I was pregnant. You have no right to step in and make those decisions. Now I want you to leave.”

There was a beat of silence. Our gazes locked, mine angry, his oddly vulnerable. Then a hood came down over his expression. He straightened his shoulders. “Are you sure?”

“Go.”

He spun on his heel and walked out the door, closing it quietly behind him. I stared at it, hearing his footsteps fading away. I sat down, suddenly shaky. I had just ended it. I knew it. Asher Hart wasn't a man who begged. He was a man who took control, used to handling everything quickly in his life. He didn't ask for second chances.

Our bubble had burst quickly.

I rubbed my head, another headache coming on. This one wasn't from bumping it while sledding. It was from emotion. I had a feeling I was going to miss him more than I could express.

More than I anticipated.

And the thought of it made me sadder than I could fathom.

AJ picked at his snack. “Momma, why did Asher go?”

“He had plans tonight, baby. I told you that.”

“Is he coming tomorrow?”

I forced a smile to my face. “No, he has to go away for a while on business again.”

“When is he coming back?”

“I don't know.”

“He's too busy for us now? I liked it when he was here.”

“He is a businessman, and he has lots of demands on his time now that the holidays are over.”

“You should call him and tell him I miss him. He’ll come back,” he said with the confidence of a child.

“I’ll tell him that next time I talk to him.”

“Good.” He perked up and ate his cheese and crackers. Mine tasted like ash and I was hardly able to swallow any of it, but I forced myself to so that AJ didn’t question me.

We watched a Disney movie after we finished our late lunch. It kept him entertained, while I sat beside him, laughing when he did, pretending to eat the popcorn. All I could think of was Asher. The look on his face when he left. The genuine worry in his expression when he showed up. His over-the-top reaction and sending his personal physician to see me.

I wasn’t sure anyone had ever cared enough to go to such lengths over me.

I remembered Dr. Hayes’s whispered plea not to be too hard on him.

Had I been too hasty?

I sighed as I rubbed my eyes. It was too late now. Asher was gone, and my phone was silent. I had a feeling it would remain so.

Outside, the snow fell softly, and AJ looked out. “Momma, can we go for a walk? Maybe sled again?”

It would do both of us good to go out and get some fresh air before darkness fell. “Sure. I’ll just watch this time.”

“Okay!”

We went out in the cold, heading to the park. He went down the hill a few times with some friends he met up with. I stood with some other moms, laughing at the antics of our kids. One of the dads took turns going down with his daughter and AJ, so he was happy. It felt normal, although I had to admit it wasn’t as fun as when Asher was with us. I had no warm kisses to look forward to, and I couldn’t be bothered to get a coffee from the food truck. Asher had insisted on it the other

day. And he had stolen sips from my cup when he would come to check on me while AJ took a turn down the hill on his own since he was feeling braver. I had no interest in drinking it alone.

Today, I tried not to notice how that happened to other families at the hill. Watching them pulled at something in my chest. Something that hurt.

But I kept a smile firmly in place. I was determined to make this a nice evening for AJ the way I had planned.

Back at home, I made hot chocolate, and AJ had a bath to warm up. He watched a cartoon while I showered fast and got into a pair of fuzzy pants and a warm sweatshirt. Together, we made homemade pizza, laughing at our oddly shaped pies and putting on our favorite toppings. I turned on the tree lights, and he chose a movie and helped me carry our plates and drinks to the sofa. We snuggled under the blankets and watched his chosen show while we ate the pizza and sipped ginger ale from the two champagne flutes I'd bought at a garage sale years before. I rarely let him have pop, but tonight was a treat, and he loved the fancy glasses.

He made it through to the end, and I brought out a plate of cookies left from the bounty Asher had brought on Christmas. AJ ate a cookie, snuggled into my side. He talked about going back to school, seeing his friends, only mentioning Asher once. I turned on a New Year's Eve show, but he was bored with it, so I told him to pick another movie and we'd watch it after I tidied up the kitchen. But when I got back, he was sound asleep on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket, little cookie crumbs on his chin. I lifted and carried him to his room, placing him on the bed. It was only seven, and I knew he'd be up early the next day, but he was tired so I decided to let him sleep.

Back in the living room, I logged on and clocked a couple of hours, finding the time went by fast as the customer service line was steady. I stopped around ten and poured myself a glass of wine, putting the TV back on but not paying much attention to it, the background noise helping dispel the quiet of the apartment.

I wondered where Asher was now. Had he driven back to his sister's? Was he at home? I swallowed down the lump in my throat as I wondered if he'd decided to go out with someone else for the night. If he would be kissing another woman at midnight.

I was shocked at the tears that welled in my eyes at the thought of it.

I wiped at my eyes and took a sip of wine, reaching for my book and opening it, determined to put all other thoughts out of my head.

A short while later, there was a soft knock on my door. I assumed it was a neighbor coming to wish me a Happy New Year or the super's wife had come to check on us. She did that on occasion, which was kind.

I was shocked when I opened the door to find Asher there. He filled the doorway, his broad shoulders straight. His overcoat had a dusting of snow on it, and a few flakes glistened on his head.

"Asher."

He nodded, looking determined. "Rosie."

"I assumed you went back to Suzy's."

"No. I stayed here. I know you told me to leave, but I was hoping you would allow me to come in."

"Why?" I asked.

"To talk."

I paused, his next words surprising me.

"Please, Rosie. Let me in. Give me a chance and hear me out."

I couldn't ignore the plea in his voice.

I stepped back. "Come in."

CHAPTER TEN

ROSIE

He stepped in and shed his coat, hanging it in the closet. He toed off his boots and stopped, looking uncertain.

“Do you want some coffee? Or a drink?”

He glanced at the sofa, seeing the champagne glasses. He looked at me, puzzled.

“Ginger ale New Year’s celebration with AJ. He had too much sledding again today and passed out a couple of hours ago.”

His eyebrows drew down, and worry crossed his face. “You didn’t—”

I stopped his question. “I watched today.”

He nodded, looking relieved. “A drink would be welcome.”

I waved at the kitchen. “You know where your scotch is.”

He had brought a bottle with him, plus an expensive liqueur for me to drink, before Christmas. Some of each was left in the bottles.

“I’m going to check on AJ.”

In his room, I looked down at my son. He was sleeping, having kicked off the blanket he’d been wrapped in, and was now on the bottom of his bed. I carefully moved him and tucked him back in, knowing I’d do this again later. I brushed back the hair on his forehead, smiling as it flopped back into place. He needed a haircut. I’d give him a trim tomorrow. I bent and kissed his forehead, inhaling. He smelled of bubble bath and shampoo. I straightened, thinking how fast he was

growing. Soon, he wouldn't fit in this single bed. Or this room. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. Hopefully by then I would be in a better place financially. I would have a better-paying job and find a larger place for us to live. One step at a time, I reminded myself, the way I had since finding out I was pregnant.

In the living room, Asher waited, a scotch in his hand. He had poured me a liqueur, and I sat beside him. For a moment, there was silence, then he spoke.

"I owe you an apology and an explanation." He took another sip. "I had no intention of making you feel as if I questioned your ability to make sound decisions for yourself or your son. I think you're an amazing mother, and I'm sorry if I made you doubt my feelings on that subject."

"Why did you call the doctor, Asher? Why did you race here? And hire a helicopter, of all things?" I questioned.

He turned and met my eyes. "I was frantic."

"Explain why to me. Please."

He hesitated, then reached for my hand. I let him clasp our fingers together, and he stared down at them, lifting our joined hands and kissing my knuckles.

"I was seven, Suzy was five and a half. My father was away on one of his constant business trips. It was Suzy, Mom, and me as usual. She hadn't been feeling well all day—Mom, that is. Tired. Out of sorts, she would call it. I had heard her ask my father not to go away that morning—to stay home and help look after us because she wasn't feeling herself. He told her that was what nannies were for and to hire one, and he left. Mom was quiet all day, and she didn't eat much supper. She kept rubbing her temples, but she would smile and say she was fine when I asked. After dinner, she said she was tired and going to have a nap and asked me to watch over Suzy. We played for a while, but Mom was still asleep." He paused, his voice getting thicker. I could hear his barely contained emotions, and I braced myself for what he was going to say. I already knew how this ended, and I was horrified.

“I helped Suzy get ready for bed, and I brushed my teeth and got in my pajamas. I thought Mom would be so proud of me. I went to tell her and let her know I was going to bed, but—” he swallowed convulsively then took a sip of his scotch “—I couldn’t wake her.”

“Asher,” I breathed.

“She had an aneurysm. She’d fallen a couple of days before and knocked her head on the edge of the counter. She’d gotten up and laughed, saying how clumsy she was, and did nothing about it. It caused a blood clot. If my father hadn’t been so wrapped up in business, he could have stayed home. Made the connection between her fall and how she was acting. Taken her to the hospital and maybe saved her life.”

I moved closer, and he tightened his grip on my hand. He hadn’t looked at me once as he spoke, as if too wary to make eye contact. “I was seven. Alone with my baby sister and my dead mother. We lived in a large house, and the staff wasn’t there. We had a housekeeper, but she only came three times a week. Mom refused to have anyone help her ‘raise her babies,’ as she used to say, so no one was around. Not even a close neighbor, as we lived on a large estate.”

“What did you do?” I whispered.

“I was panicked. Scared. Emotional. But I remembered what Mom taught me. Called 9-1-1. The police and ambulance came. They took her away. Put Suzy and me in a foster home for the night. Tracked down my father.” He wiped a hand over his face. “My entire life changed that night, Rosie.”

“I’m sorry.”

He nodded and turned his head, finally looking at me. “When you said you had a headache, it all came rushing back. Finding my mom. Being alone with her. Scared and not knowing what to do. When you didn’t answer your phone, I became irrational. All I could think about was getting to you. To little Asher. Suzy told me I was overreacting. She warned me. But I had to come. I had to call Sherman and get him to come see you. I prayed so hard that I would find you okay. That there

was a simple explanation for your not returning my calls.” He swallowed before speaking.

“That you weren’t lying dead on the sofa and AJ finding you. That through some sick twist of fate, I’d lost another woman the same way I’d lost my mom.”

His voice cracked, and I couldn’t stop myself. I climbed into his lap, wrapping my arms around him and holding him tight.

“I’m here, Asher. Right here.”

He gripped me tightly. “Thank God.”

ASHER

I had taken a chance, coming back to Rosie's place. One I knew could blow up in my face. I had crossed a line that morning. Suzy had tried to warn me, begged me to be patient, but I hadn't listened. I couldn't listen. The images from my childhood hit me hard, wrapping around my brain until that was all I could see. Feel. Think about. I had to make sure Rosie was okay. And on the off chance she wasn't—I wanted AJ to have someone there to care for him. I never wanted a child to feel the swamping panic and grief I'd felt at a situation they couldn't control.

But she had let me in and listened. Now I had her in my arms again, a warm, soft weight on my lap. I inhaled her feminine scent, feeling the calm she brought with her. It settled into my chest and thawed me. Eased away the tension I had been carrying around all day. First the fear of something happening to her, then her anger when I stuck my foot in my mouth.

I had wandered my condo all day, unsure what to do with myself. How to put aside the feeling I had somehow lost something intrinsically precious to me with no idea how to get it back.

She eased back, cupping my face. Her lovely eyes were damp.

"I'm sorry," I said, sliding my hand around to the nape of her neck, the skin silky under my touch. "Please tell me you forgive me and we can go forward."

"Is that what you want?" she asked quietly. "To go forward?"

"Yes," I insisted. "Aside from this morning, has anything indicated I don't?"

"Our lives are so different. You need to get somewhere fast, you take a helicopter. I take the bus. You can buy anything you want. I save for the smallest of treats. I don't think I can compete, and I wonder how long it will be until those differences become too much."

I shook my head, the panic returning. “I don’t want you to compete. Yes, I can buy anything I want. For me. You. AJ. Anyone. Those are material things. I can’t buy the feeling I get when I’m close to you. When AJ makes me laugh. How much of a man I feel like when I do something and you smile at me. Kiss me. Those things are far more precious and rarer.”

She frowned, and I pulled her close, kissing her again. “The time I spent with you and AJ made me feel alive. Happy. I have missed you so much and was so anxious to get back here. The only other person I have ever missed is my mother.”

“What about your dad?”

I sighed, hating this subject. “My dad wasn’t a bad person. He didn’t beat us or hurt us in any way, except to avoid us. Mom was the main parent. He was driven to succeed. Work was his top priority all the time. The only disagreements they ever had were about his being gone so much. I remember her telling him that his presence was more valuable than more money in the bank. But he was obsessed with wealth. He’d grown up dirt poor and made himself into the business tycoon he became. He always said he’d stop when he had enough money to relax.” I barked out a low chuckle. “He was never satisfied. After Mom died, we had housekeepers, babysitters, tutors. He buried his feelings and his mind in accumulating more wealth. Power. Status.”

“He never remarried?”

“No.”

“He must have loved your mother very much.”

“She was easy to love.” I ran a finger down her cheek. “She would have liked you.”

Rosie smiled, a gentle expression on her face. I loved her softness, the way emotions played out on her face.

“Suzy and I were close. Dad was just a figure who passed through the house at times. He wasn’t mean or nasty—simply withdrawn. There was no lack of money. Anything we wanted, we got. We could have ended up spoiled and entitled, but somehow, I inherited my father’s work ethic and my mom’s

love of family. Suzy got my mom's heart—she loves as fiercely as my mom did. I made sure to keep my feet on the ground. When Dad died, all the money was split. I inherited most of the businesses. Dad was old-fashioned and always thought men should run things. I sold some of the companies and gave Suzy half, but I kept many of them. They're profitable and let me keep giving money away. I have the right people in place running them. I oversee most of the time."

"You must be a busy man," she murmured. "No time for anything but work."

"I thought so."

Our eyes met and locked. "I can find the time for something better, Rosie. For you and AJ. I want that. I don't want to be my father."

"Your world is—"

I cut her off. "Lonely. Empty. It'll be lonelier if you don't forgive me."

"I do forgive you."

The weight pressing on my chest vanished. "You do?"

"We need to talk about boundaries. You have to understand something, Asher. AJ comes first. You might call or text, but if I am busy with him, he is my priority. If he were sick, I would cancel plans with you. If he needed me, I would stay with him."

I nodded in agreement. "I do understand, and it's one of the things I adore about you. You put your child first. Your love for him is fierce. I get that and respect it. I wish my father had been the same way."

"How did he react when your mother died? Did he comfort you? Stay with you?"

"No. He sent people to pick us up from the foster home. He greeted us when we arrived home but was reserved. I went to their room the next day and barely recognized it. The furniture was different, all traces of her gone. I asked him, and he ignored me. I never saw him shed a tear or break down. He

was never warm and loving like Mom, but he was Dad, you know? After she died, he became a polite stranger.”

“What kind of business did he run?”

“He was into real estate, shopping stores, hotel chains, so many things. He loved getting in on the ground floor and making money. He was brilliant. He could spot a solid investment, and he was never wrong.” I took a deep breath. “His very first venture, one only he owned, is still one of the most profitable and privately owned stores here. Zoles.”

She blinked. “Zoles.”

“Yes.”

“Where I met you?”

“Yes.”

“You own Zoles.”

“Yes.”

“Why were you there? You said you hated it.”

“I did. I do. It took so much of my father’s time. I used to hate what it represented. It robbed me of him. If he had to choose between it and me, it won every time. I still resent it, but I own it.” I tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I can’t sell it because my mother loved it. Everything about it. He named it after them. Zoe and Les. *Zoles*. Selling it feels wrong because of the love my mother had for it. When I grew up, I realized maybe my father spent so much of his energy on it because of what it meant to her. That maybe he was as lost as we were, but unable to admit it. That helped me forgive him. So, I keep it. In her memory.”

“Asher,” she whispered.

“I was there because every year, Zoles comes out with a limited crystal Christmas ornament. It was my mother’s idea, and it was and is huge. She gave Suzy one every year until she died. I carried on the tradition. The first Christmas after she was gone, I figured out my father wouldn’t think to buy her one, and I made my way to his office, which was on the top

floor of the store in those days. I spoke to his secretary, and she took me downstairs and helped me buy the ornament.”

“At seven years old,” she said. “You went all by yourself?”

“Yes. I had the driver take me to the store, and I used the money my father gave us every week as an allowance. Mrs. Fairmount made sure my name was on the list so I could buy one every year for Suzy. I have never missed one. She insists I buy it for her.”

“And your driver still takes you to pick it up?” she teased gently.

I laughed, grateful she was trying to lighten the atmosphere. “I usually drive myself.”

She nodded. “Your story would have been more dramatic if you’d had to take the bus instead of being chauffeured. Sort of takes away from the whole image. The big allowance thing was sort of a letdown too. Most seven-year-olds can’t afford crystal. You should have had to save for months by collecting bottles and stuff. You should rethink it the next time you tell it.”

I pulled her into my arms, chuckling. “I have only ever told you, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

She held me tight. “I’m sorry for what you went through, Asher. I hate thinking of you alone, even if it was in a limo.”

I pressed a kiss to her head. “I’m not alone now.”

She looked up, cupping my face. She pressed her mouth to mine.

“No, you’re not.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ROSIE

I held Asher close, his embrace tight. We sat for a while, not speaking, not moving, simply locked together.

He was a proud, strong man, and he had just allowed me to see his vulnerable side—one I was certain few ever saw. Instinctually, I knew he needed my embrace. To be held and comforted by my touch. I felt safe in his arms, and it made me feel incredible to know he felt the same way about my hold.

As a mother, I was horrified that he had found her dead at his young age. Left alone to figure out what to do. The thought of that happening to AJ was overwhelming. I understood Asher's panic now and could allow for his feelings. He still had gone overboard, but given his history, I wasn't angry anymore.

Asher shifted, and I eased back, cupping his face. His eyes were still dark with emotion, but some of the tension had fallen away.

"Thank you," he said simply.

I leaned forward and kissed him affectionately. "Thank you for telling me."

"Am I forgiven?" He sighed, his hands gripping my hips. "I'll try to do better, Rosie. Sometimes it hits me, and I react—"

I pressed a finger to his mouth. "Forgiven. I understand."

"I do, as well. AJ comes first. I'll try to hold back on my impulsive panic."

“I’ll try to remember to look at my phone more often. I’m not used to anyone calling or checking in on me. If AJ is with me, I tend to forget.”

He smiled, tracing a finger down my cheek. “We both have things to learn. Me, some patience, and you, that you have someone who deeply cares.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the knuckles. “I like the sound of that.”

“Me too.”

His stomach grumbled, and I frowned. “Are you hungry?”

“I didn’t eat. I was upset.”

“I’ll make you something.”

“I don’t want you to work. I’ll order something.”

I laughed. “Asher, it’s late on New Year’s Eve. Do you know how busy every place is? You won’t get delivery for hours.”

He looked mischievous, reaching for his phone. I rolled my eyes.

“Not even you,” I challenged.

He grinned. “Oh baby, now I have something to prove.”

Forty-five minutes later, I was nibbling on an egg roll as Asher dug into a container of noodles. He fed me a mouthful and opened some orange chicken, muttering about how delicious it was. He offered me a piece with his chopsticks, and I took it, agreeing how tasty the morsel was.

“How?” I asked.

He smiled. “I went to school with the owner. We’re still close. I bankrolled the restaurant. He always comes through.”

“Even on New Year’s Eve,” I hummed, impressed.

Asher chuckled, licking at some sauce on his mouth. “I actually rarely ask. He knew it had to be important.” He dug in the bag and handed me a set of chopsticks. “Eat with me. I saw the leftover pizza in the fridge, so I know you didn’t eat much either.”

“I was upset,” I admitted.

He paused, leaned forward, and stroked my cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. I’m better now.”

“Me too.”

We ate, the TV on low in the background, music playing, mostly by groups I had never heard of, but it was white noise. Asher appeared famished, polishing off every dish he had ordered. I picked at the food, nowhere near as hungry as he was.

“Did you not eat today at all?” I asked.

“No.” He peered into the bag, handing me a fortune cookie. “No leftovers. I should have ordered more. I’ll get more in for dinner tomorrow. AJ loves Chinese.” He stopped, meeting my gaze. “If that’s all right with you.”

“You’ll spoil us.”

He placed the bag on the coffee table and opened his fortune cookie, breaking it in half. He placed a piece on my bottom lip, and I let him feed me the sweet-tasting cookie. He popped the rest into his mouth and chewed slowly. “I need to make this clear, Rosie. I want to spoil you. Both of you. I have money. Lots of money. What seems extravagant to you probably doesn’t to me.” He held up his hand before I could say anything. “I’m aware of how that sounds. I’ll try to watch myself and not go overboard. But you should know part of my ‘love language,’ if you want to call it that, is buying gifts. I do for my sister and my niece. I’m generous with employees. It’s part of my nature.”

“Love language?” I repeated, a smile pulling on my lips.

He chuckled. “That’s what Suzy calls it.”

“I know you’re generous. More than most people,” I replied.
“Christmas is a good example.”

“I held myself back,” he argued.

I sighed. “I can’t reciprocate, Asher.”

“Yes, you can,” he said, sounding eager. “You can cook me the food I bring. Let me enjoy a meal with you and AJ instead of eating alone. Wear the scarf, which will make me happy knowing you love it. Relax in the tub using the bath bombs I picked out because they smelled great and I wanted to inhale that fragrance on your skin. Being here with you makes me happy. That is far more valuable than the cash I spend. Happiness is much rarer.”

“Says someone who has lots of it.”

He shifted closer. “I can make you happy too, Rosie. Give me a chance. Let me into your life and trust me. Let me spoil you the way I can. You spoil me the way you can. It all equals out.”

“Hardly,” I said with a grimace.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “I’ll never be equal to what you give me.”

“Asher,” I protested.

“You are priceless to me.” He took my hands and cupped them with his, kissing my palms. “You mean so much already, and we’ve only started. I cannot fathom what you’ll mean over the next while.”

My breath caught at his words. “You mean a lot as well.”

“Then we’ll start the next year off together, yes?”

Behind him, the TV show began the countdown. His gaze slid to mine, waiting, hopeful, and filled with adoration. “Say yes, please, Rosie.”

I smiled because there was no way I could refuse this man.
“Yes.”

He slipped his hand to the nape of my neck, pulling me close.

“Happy New Year, Rosie,” he whispered against my lips.

“Happy New Year, Asher.”

With his mouth on mine and his promise ringing in my ears, I looked forward to what the year held in store.

I woke up to low voices coming from the kitchen. Asher had stayed, but we hadn't done anything other than hold each other. He needed the closeness, and I loved his warmth. He had held me tightly, and we had slept after the midnight celebration.

I sat up, running a hand through my hair. I was bundled up, but the air in the apartment felt cool. I shivered a little and wrapped the blanket around me. I checked the thermostat, wondering if the heating was on the fritz again. It occurred a lot here. I turned it up but nothing happened, and I groaned low in my throat in frustration. It always got fixed, but it often took a few days. AJ and I would have to bundle up to stay warm. I had one small heater I would set up in the living room then move to AJ's room at night to keep the apartment from getting too cold. I could only hope they would fix it soon.

I washed my face and brushed my teeth, then I headed to the kitchen, leaning on the doorframe, observing AJ and Asher in silence. They were eating breakfast and playing checkers—a game Asher had bought AJ for Christmas. They were concentrating, leaning on their elbows, studying the board. AJ had a piece of toast with peanut butter in his hand, Asher was holding a half-eaten granola bar. Their serious expressions made me smile.

“I feel the tension in here,” I drawled.

They looked up, grinning when they saw me.

“Momma—I beat Asher once, and he beat me. This is the tie breaker!”

I stepped closer, ruffling his hair and kissing his cheek. “I see.”

Asher smiled at me, his eyes dancing. “Do I get a kiss too?”

I bent to brush my lips over his cheek, but he pulled me close, capturing my mouth. “Morning,” he breathed.

“Morning.”

“I made coffee.”

“Okay.”

I poured a cup and topped his up, then sat down and watched them finish the game. AJ won, and he lifted his arms in celebration. Asher fist-bumped him. “You’ve caught on well, bud. We’ll move on to chess next.”

AJ laughed in delight at the thought of spending more time with Asher. I smiled at him. “Go get dressed, baby. Wear something warm. It’s cold in here.”

He ran off, and Asher studied me. “I noticed the temperature drop. Why is it cold?”

“We often lose heat in the winter. They fix it as fast as they can.”

“What if they can’t?”

“So far, they have.”

“I don’t like the idea of you two being cold.”

“We’ll survive.”

“Come to my place.”

I shook my head. “AJ goes back to school the day after tomorrow. I return to work. We’ll add layers, and if it gets really bad, they’ll do something. The system is old, but they do the repairs when needed.” I shrugged. “A little chill is better than when we lost electricity for four days. No heat, lights, hot water, any way to cook anything. AJ was only two. It was awful.”

“I hate thinking of you in any discomfort.”

“I’m tougher than I look.”

He smiled. “I know you are. You’re exceedingly strong.”

“Not always.”

“I think you’re incredible.”

I waved off his compliment. “You’re biased.” I stood, stopping to drop a kiss to his mouth. “It’s the sex. It’s clouded your mind.”

He tugged me to his lap, wrapping his arm around me, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “It’s you, Rosie. I’m in constant awe of you.”

I snuggled close, loving his scent, his warmth, and the way he saw me. “Thank you.”

He tipped up my chin and kissed me again. “You’re welcome.” Then he grinned. “But if you want to remind me about the sex thing, I’m all for it.”

I laughed. “With AJ awake? Good luck.”

He returned my amusement. “We’ll have to wait until he’s asleep, then.”

“Good plan.”

The apartment was chilly by the time the heat was fixed. Asher was anxious and upset as we waited. AJ and I were used to it and added blankets. I had to admit, as the temperature dropped, the invitation to go to Asher’s condo looked better than ever. When the pipes clanked and hissed, indicating the heat had returned, I blew out a relieved breath. We were snuggled on the sofa watching a movie when it happened, and Asher frowned.

“Took them long enough.”

“Sometimes it gets cold out here,” AJ informed him. “But Momma puts a heater in my room so I’m okay.” He bounded away to get a drink, and Asher studied me.

“So, you make sure he’s warm, and you suffer?”

“I sleep on the floor of his room. In the daytime, I bring the heater out here so we are warmer. It’s rare when it’s off longer.” I lifted one shoulder. “I can’t afford to go to a hotel, so we do the best we can.”

He shook his head but didn’t respond. I knew he couldn’t imagine living the way we did, but AJ and I were fine. We did the best we could with what we had, and we were happy. One day, we’d have more. I was working toward it. I headed to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee to brew. Asher followed, sitting at the table.

AJ came into the kitchen, and I smiled at him. “Time to cut your hair.”

He rolled his eyes, always hating to have his unruly locks trimmed, but I had an ace up my sleeve. “I’ll cut Asher’s first if you want.”

They both stared at me. “Um,” Asher said, for the first time sounding hesitant. “Cut my hair?”

“It’s beginning to hang in your eyes.”

“I can see my barber in a couple of days.”

I held up my scissors. “But I have time now.” I pulled a chair in front of me and patted the seat. “It’ll only take a minute.”

He sat down, and I unfurled the cape, draping it around his shoulders. I spritzed the water on his hair and combed it. Standing in front of him, I pursed my lips. He looked decidedly nervous, which I found amusing. Asher was never nervous.

“Have you cut any hair aside from AJ’s?” he asked.

I tilted my head. “I watched lots of YouTube.”

He swallowed, and I had to laugh. “I took a course. You’ll be fine.”

I was done in five minutes, tidying up the ends and trimming the front. As a joke, I pretended to make a mistake, widening my eyes and looking at my closed hand. “Well, thank goodness it grows back,” I muttered, my voice horrified.

“Oh God, how bad?” Asher groaned.

I began to laugh as I uncurled my fingers and showed him there was nothing there. “Gotcha.”

AJ began to chuckle, and Asher narrowed his eyes. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Promises, promises.”

I handed him the mirror. “See for yourself.”

He glanced at his reflection, brushing at his temples. “Once again, I’m impressed, Rosie.”

I could only smirk.

AJ sat down once Asher stood, and his took a little longer. But it looked much better, and it didn’t take me too long. Afterward, they insisted popcorn had to be their reward. We ate it as we played a game of Trouble, AJ winning the game soundly.

Asher and AJ picked the dinner menu, and more Chinese food arrived. Way more than we could eat, but I knew Asher did that deliberately, wanting my fridge full. We ate in the living room, the food spread out on the coffee table. Watching Asher try to teach AJ how to use chopsticks was funny.

He leaned over AJ, showing him with his fingers how to hold them. “Like this, bud. Put your fingers like this. Yes. Now, the other chopstick here. Great. You got it. Pick up a piece of chicken,” he encouraged.

The chicken got away, and Asher laughed. “Again.”

They practiced as I ate, happy just to see them together. Asher was endlessly patient with AJ, and in the end, he was able to pick up a piece of the teriyaki chicken and eat it. Rice was a grain at a time, and the noodles ended up being wound around the chopsticks like spaghetti, but they had fun. AJ’s face and fingers were a mess, so when he finished his meal, I sent him to wash up.

Asher filled his plate again, relaxing against the sofa. “Thank you,” I said quietly.

“For?” he asked, popping a piece of chicken into his mouth and chewing.

“For your patience with him.”

Asher shook his head. “He’s easy to be patient with. He makes me smile.” He paused, chewing a mouthful of noodles. “I think he and Bonnie would get along well. I’m sure Suzy will be demanding an intro soon enough.”

I smiled, knowing he was probably correct. If she was like her brother, patience wouldn’t be a strong suit.

We ate in silence for a few moments, and he set down his plate. “I don’t want to leave you tomorrow.”

“We have to go back to normal life,” I replied. “The holidays are over. AJ goes back to school, I go back to work, you go back to giving away money.”

He nodded. “But I can see you, right? Besides a date?”

“If you want to,” I said cautiously. “I know the holidays are lonely and people do odd things, so if you go back—”

He cut me off with one word. “No.” He shook his head, his gaze fierce, his voice firm. “This was not just me being lonely. We are not ending, Rosie. This is simply the start. We’ll adjust and figure things out. But you and AJ are part of me now. Don’t think for one moment you were nothing but a temporary panacea. You are so much more. Tell me you know that.”

“I’m trying.”

“You are.”

“Okay,” I whispered, wanting with everything in me to believe him. To know this wonderful man would be around once the holiday decorations were gone and real life stepped in.

“I’ll prove it to you.”

“I look forward to it.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

ASHER

My condo felt empty when I returned to it. Vast, filled with furniture, the air warm, and completely lacking any life. I wandered around, looking at the rooms. Four bedrooms, plus my large primary suite. The others rarely used unless Bonnie spent the night or Suzy and she stayed a few days. The kitchen was great for heating up takeout and the furniture rarely sat on. My office was the most lived-in. I spent a lot of time there, even sleeping on the sofa on occasion, watching a movie on the big screen. The rest of the rooms were just...space.

Rosie's tiny apartment was crammed. The furniture didn't match, the heat was iffy at times, yet I sensed the love that saturated the rooms. Felt the lives they lived in that tiny space.

I longed to be back on that lumpy sofa with her wrapped in blankets to ward off the chill rather than here in my perfectly temperature-controlled condo with nothing out of place. It was devoid of warmth. Rather like me before Rosie and AJ came into my life.

I loved my sister and my niece. But even with them, I tempered my feelings. I got on well with my brother-in-law. I had a few friends I cared about. But with all of them, I drew an invisible line in the sand. I cared only so much.

That line was erased when it came to Rosie and AJ. I had no control over my emotions. My actions. Normally, I was rock solid. I made rational decisions, and I stuck to them. There was nothing rational about how I acted with Rosie. It was as if

she had woken up something inside me that had been locked away.

Last night after AJ had fallen asleep on the sofa, I'd carried him to his bed and stood back as Rosie tucked him in. Seeing the sweetness of her mothering him, pressing kisses to his forehead, brushing his unruly hair off his face, made my chest ache with the tenderness of the moment. Something she was used to, no doubt, but being denied that so much of my life brought out a sensation I wasn't used to feeling. I wanted to be part of that nighttime routine. To give and get sloppy goodnight kisses. To know the satisfaction of having my children warm and safe, tucked up for the night.

She had impressed me with the haircuts she gave the two of us. Mine looked neater, and AJ's was far shorter and he had stopped pushing it off his face every few moments. She was a woman of many talents, even though I realized some of them, like cutting her son's hair, were more of a necessity than a pleasure.

Rosie had bent and bestowed one last kiss to AJ's nose and tucked the blanket around him. She snapped off the light, leaving the small one in the corner lit. She had told me he didn't like total darkness, so it was on for him every night.

We had walked to the living room, coming together without words. Our clothing was discarded, and I sank onto the sofa, pulling her to my lap. We kissed endlessly, whispered words of desire, emotion, and shared quiet secrets. I slid inside her, the feeling of rightness at being surrounded by her settling over me. We moved and rocked on that old sofa, our pleasure blanketed by lips and tongues, our bodies releasing the tension we'd been carrying since being apart. Afterward, we dressed, and I held her close, wishing this was how I could end every day. Wondering, hoping, that one day it would be the normal.

I stared around my condo, thinking of that wish. I could see Rosie in the kitchen here. AJ and possible siblings playing on the floor. Studying and doing their homework. Having dinner as a family. Tucking them in and finding Rosie in our bed, waiting for me. Losing myself in her for a while and drifting off to sleep with her beside me.

At the moment, I loathed the fact that I was here in a warm, empty condo and she was across town, prepared to face the cold if need be. Alone. She handled everything alone.

I couldn't allow that. I couldn't stomach the idea of it happening.

I shook my head and strode into my office.

I had arrangements to make.

I didn't sleep well and was up early, heading into the office. I knew it would be busy after the holiday break, and I wasn't wrong. The building buzzed around me all day. I had investment people who made sure the money source would never end. Another group that scouted for opportunities. Staff who went through applications, sorting out the bad from the good. Lawyers and accountants.

My office was at the end of the hall, the windows overlooking the small park behind us, a rare treat in downtown Toronto. I owned the building, refusing to pay rent to someone else. I used the top two floors, and the bottom two were rented from me. That money got reinvested and used to help make others' lives easier. My world was a constant circle of money in and money out. The bottom line was that no matter how much I gave away, it would always be replenished. My father, although lacking in emotional support, had built a strong portfolio of investments, real estate, businesses, and land. Once I was no longer an angry man, I focused on the good the money could do and stopped selling off businesses and giving away money like an idiot, and I made a career of it. I had quadrupled his portfolio, making it mine.

The sunlight bounced off the snow, reflecting on the window behind me as I studied the picture on my phone. I had snapped it yesterday while Rosie was busy. It was the January calendar for her and AJ. Her work, his school and activities, the online second job hours she had penciled in as much as she could. She was a single mother who struggled every day to be both

parents to her son, while working two jobs and still making sure AJ was looked after, had outside activities, and was happy.

As I told her, she amazed me.

The one thing this schedule confirmed was that Rosie had zero time for herself. If she wasn't working, she was shuttling AJ around, taking care of him, and once he was in bed, taking care of the apartment and her second job. She had mentioned wanting to continue her accounting education as well.

"When I can afford it," she had added. "Maybe a couple of years away, but I'll get it done."

Everything she did focused on AJ. He had good, warm boots. Hers had seen better days. His winter coat was newer. Hers was well-worn and ragged along the hem. They took the bus or walked everywhere. Yet she never complained.

And now, I wanted some of her time. Which she had precious little of to spare. I wanted to figure out a way to help her, which, in turn, helped me. It was selfish, but I didn't care.

I made a call to a friend who owned a nanny service. After describing what I wanted, Maureen was quiet for a moment. "I don't really offer babysitting services, Asher."

"I'll pay double. Surely some of your nannies want extra money."

"This is highly unusual."

"I just need a couple of nights a week. Please."

"I'll see what I can do."

I hung up, hopeful that she would figure something out. She always did. Her business had a stellar reputation. If I could prove to Rosie that AJ would be well looked after, maybe she would go out with me. I knew she didn't want to take advantage of her neighbor all the time. And I wanted to see her more than occasionally.

I had an email with some photos attached, and I grinned as I chose the options I liked best from the selection my designer had provided. Part two of my plan was moving ahead swiftly.

It helped when you owned the business you wanted a quick turnaround from.

Then, satisfied there was nothing more I could do at the moment, I turned my attention back to business. I had back-to-back meetings the rest of the day. It was always busy after returning from the holidays, and this year was no different.

Except I was different.

In ways I had never expected.

And I rather liked it.

Six o'clock appeared in the blink of an eye. I had been busy all day, yet Rosie invaded my thoughts often. I wondered how her day was going. If AJ had enjoyed being back at day care. If she had eaten lunch. I knew she had a new boss starting today, and I hoped the transition had gone well.

Selfishly, I hoped she'd had time to ask her neighbor if she would watch over AJ one night so I could take her out.

I picked up my phone, dialing her, suddenly wanting to hear her voice.

She answered, her tone cautious. "Hello."

"Hey, sweetheart. How was your day?"

"Asher?" she questioned.

I laughed, even as a ripple of possessiveness ran through my chest. "Do you have a lot of men calling you up and addressing you as sweetheart?"

She hummed in amusement. "I didn't recognize your number."

"Oh. I called you from my other cell phone. I only use it for business, and I was on it most of the day," I explained. "I picked it up out of habit."

"I'm in your business contacts?"

“You’re in both business and personal. Now you have this number, and you can reach me anytime. But use the personal one first. I always answer that, no matter what.”

“More than business?”

“Yes,” I replied firmly. “Family first.”

“Ah.”

“How was your day?”

“Chaotic.” There was a noise behind her. “Still is. AJ is starving.”

I felt a flash of disappointment I tamped down. She had priorities that were far more important than chatting with me.

“Go feed him, and call me when you can.”

“How was your day?” she asked.

“I missed you.”

There was a beat of silence. “Oh.”

“You were on my mind a lot, Rosie.”

“I asked Mrs. Watson if she could look after AJ one night. She said Wednesday worked for her. She has bingo tomorrow.”

“Wednesday seems so far away.”

She laughed. “The way my week is shaping up, it’ll be here fast.”

There was a note to her voice. Was it tension? Worry? I couldn’t tell. She sounded tired, but it was the first day back from the holidays, so no doubt it would take her a bit to settle back into her routine. One that I hoped included me now.

“I will look forward to it. What time can I pick you up?”

“I can be ready for six thirty.”

“Perfect.”

“Momma!” AJ’s voice called.

“I have to go.”

“Call me later.”

“I will.” She paused. “Asher?”

“Yes, Rosie?”

“I missed you too.”

She hung up, but her admission made me smile.

I sent her flowers the next day. I had casually confirmed the name of the company she worked for when we spoke later that night. I wanted to send her something that reminded her of me and let her know I was thinking of her. She texted me in the afternoon, thanking me and telling me she was looking forward to seeing me the next day.

It does seem forever away.

Your flowers are beautiful.

I replied swiftly, ignoring the people sitting in front of me.

Not possibly as beautiful as you.

The little heart emoji she sent back made me grin. The proposal we were going over was granted more money than I had planned to give. It seemed right somehow, given they were working on helping single mothers.

My staff left the room wondering if I had taken leave of my senses. It was rare I doubled the suggested contribution.

But my respect for single mothers had changed drastically. I'd admired them before Rosie. Now I thought they should be revered.

I had a feeling she would be pleased with my decision.

And even though I was going to see her the next day, I showed up at her door at nine that night, knocking quietly in case AJ was in bed.

She opened the door, looking surprised and, to my delight, happy to see me. She was in a long nightgown sort of thing. Shapeless, huge on her, and, no doubt, fuzzy and warm. She looked sexy and sweet all at once.

“Asher? What are you doing here?”

“I missed you,” I replied.

She pulled me in, throwing her arms around my neck. I held her tight, enjoying the feeling of having her close, then slipped my fingers under her chin and kissed her. Our mouths moved together, lips and tongues touching, tasting, exploring. She was sweet tea and mint. Warm hellos and soft whimpers. I drew back, gazing down at her. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she replied.

“Can I come in just for a few moments?”

“Yes.”

I toed off my shoes and laid my coat over the sofa arm. “AJ out?”

“Yes. You missed him by about fifteen minutes. I was just having supper.”

“You didn’t eat with him?”

“I had a really late lunch. I sat with him while he ate his dinner so I could hear all about his day.”

She tugged me into the kitchen, and I shook my head. “Toast and tea? That’s your dinner?”

“I love toast.”

“I know, Rosie, but you have to eat more than that.”

“It’s all I wanted. Do you want some?”

I wasn’t going to argue with her. “Yes.”

She put some bread into the toaster and poured me a cup of tea. She handed me the peanut butter with my toast, but hers only had butter. I made a mental note to check her butter supply. I would make sure she had bread as well. If all she was

going to eat was toast, I needed to know she had the supplies for it. We carried our “dinner” to the sofa and sat down.

“Why such a late lunch?”

She sighed quietly, and I noticed she looked tired.

“My new boss is rather, ah, demanding.”

“Oh?”

“She has different ways of doing things. She’s very brusque. To the point. And likes things her way. She’s almost rude, if I’m being honest. I get the feeling she wants to make an impression.”

“Sounds like she has. A negative one.”

“I was lucky with Albert. He was a family man. He understood that with my being a single parent, sometimes I had to leave early, or if AJ was sick, I would work from home. He knew I always got the job done. Ms. Wells, as she prefers to be addressed, informed me she won’t *cut me any slack* for my situation.”

“What ‘situation’ exactly?”

“Being a single mother.”

Anger flashed through me. “How is she possibly judging you on her first couple of days?”

“She wasn’t happy that I left on time yesterday. Or that I was fifteen minutes late this morning after dropping AJ off. The sidewalks were slippery, and I slipped on the ice. I missed the bus.”

“Are you hurt?” I asked, getting to my feet.

She shook her head. “Relax. Sit down. Other than my pride and a sore butt, I’m fine. I didn’t hit my head or any other vital part.”

I sat down, shaking my head. “Your ass is pretty vital. At least to me.”

She began to laugh, and I had to join her. “Thank you,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I needed that.”

“Did you explain?”

Rosie nodded, stood, and placed her hand on her hip. She pretended to stare down at me. “Life is filled with mishaps, Ms. Duncan. How we overcome them shows our inner strength,” she intoned in a nasal, holier-than-thou voice.

I blinked, amusement making my lips curl. “Your new boss, I presume?”

She flopped on the sofa next to me with a sigh. “She wasn’t pleased when I informed her my inner strength needed some ice and a Tylenol. She told me to settle myself and get to work.”

“Sounds lovely.”

“She loves to bark orders all day. Not only at me, but she does love to stick her head in my door and tell me what she wants done. Frequently. My old boss sent out texts and emails, the occasional call. He was polite and knew the word please. And he knew exactly what was happening in the department at any given moment. He never barked. She wants daily update reports sent before we leave for the day. And God help me if it is a minute before four. She informed me she wasn’t happy with my special hours.”

“Track it all,” I encouraged her. “You might need it for HR. It sounds rather bullying to me. And you can’t discriminate against a single mother.” I shook my head. “Better yet, quit and come work for me.”

She blinked at me and laughed. “Yeah, so not a good idea. I am not coming to work for you. I will not be that woman sleeping with the boss.”

I already knew she’d reject that idea. I pulled her to my lap and slid my hand up her leg. “There’d be perks, Rosie.” I covered the nape of her neck, drawing her close and skimming my mouth along her skin. “So. Many. Perks.”

My mouth hovered over hers, grinning as she whimpered. I kissed her. Deeply. Passionately. Without intent, but wishing there were. Except she surprised me, tugging off my tie and

unbuttoning my shirt, slipping her hand inside and trailing it over my chest in light touches.

“Rosie, I didn’t come here for this,” I groaned, dropping my hands and palming her ass. God, I loved her ass. It fit perfectly in my hands.

She pressed wet, openmouthed kisses up my neck, pulling my lobe between her lips and sucking. I shuddered as the heat rolled through me. “Did you want to, though?” she whispered. “Come, I mean?”

“God, yes. I suppose I should do a thorough inspection of your injured butt. For purely medical reasons.”

“Are you playing doctor now?” she purred in my ear, dropping her hand and cupping my erection through my pants.

“Yes. You have a fever, Ms. Duncan. There’s only one cure. A special injection just for you.”

“Give it to me,” she whispered against my mouth. “Please.”

I was only too happy to do exactly as she requested.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ASHER

The next day felt endless, which was unusual for me. I had left Rosie sleeping on her sofa, hating to depart, but not wanting to risk being found by AJ. I didn't want him thinking I snuck in at night after he went to bed. After our frantic coupling on the sofa, we had held each other, talking about everything and nothing. It was something I enjoyed about Rosie. She found the world around her interesting. At times frightening, but still intriguing. She talked about people at work, those she saw on the bus. She told me about the homeless man she saw every day. She often brought him a sandwich and made sure he had blankets. *"He tries so hard to be dignified," she said quietly. "I worry every time there's a storm and I hope he's found shelter."*

I adored her tender heart and her way of looking at things.

She was on my mind all day. It was odd for me to think of anything but business. Even after hours, I was usually handling emails and messages. Once I sat at my desk, the rest of the world faded away, and I concentrated on the task at hand. But since the holidays, Rosie and AJ slipped into my thoughts all the time. Especially today. I swore I could still taste her, smell her skin. When I tugged on my overcoat to head to a meeting, I realized her fragrance clung to the material. I had wrapped it around her last night, after noticing her shiver. The apartment was chilly, given its age and the poor insulation and drafty windows. *"Even with the heat working, it never is very warm," Rosie admitted.*

Except, I couldn't help but notice when I went in to peek at AJ, his room was toasty, with the little heater pumping away in the corner. I hated and loved the fact that she made sure he was fine, while she did without. She was a selfless mother, but she needed someone to look out for her as well.

I wanted that someone to be me.

Six o'clock couldn't come fast enough, and I was out of the office before the chimes on the large wall clock I had in the waiting room had finished their song. I made record time getting to Rosie's and was knocking at her door at six fifteen. She opened the door, smiling.

"This is becoming a habit."

I grinned, stepping inside and handing her the small bouquet I had picked up earlier. I cupped her face, her skin soft under my cool palms, and kissed her. "One you can't break, I hope," I murmured against her lips before kissing her. "You look beautiful."

AJ rushed over, so I kept my caress PG. I hunched down, exchanging fist bumps. Rosie went to the kitchen to put the flowers in water, and I listened to AJ tell me all his news. Like his mother, he was observant and loved to watch people. His world contained more crayons, nap times, and cookies, but I still enjoyed hearing him talk.

"You and Momma going for supper?" he asked.

"Yes."

He twisted his lips. "Not me."

I ruffled his hair. "Not tonight. This weekend, we all will. Okay?"

His sunshine smile broke out. "Okay!"

I grinned. He was easy to please.

Rosie returned, her pretty green dress swirling around her legs. She had her hair up, showing off her neck, tendrils dancing around her face. The dress had long sleeves and a bow on the hip. The color set off her eyes and ivory skin. I found myself wondering if the bow was for show or actually worked.

I hoped to find out later.

I met Rosie's neighbor when she came over. Mrs. Watson set down a large bag containing wool and knitting needles. She looked me up and down, pushing her glasses higher on her nose as she did so. Rosie introduced us, and I shook her hand. She grinned at me. "You're a fine specimen, aren't you?"

I had to laugh. "I clean up well."

She stepped closer. "She's a good girl. A good mother. You gonna treat her right?"

"Absolutely."

She nodded, watching as I helped Rosie on with her coat. It was different from the coat I'd seen her wear the first day. Shorter. Newer and fancier, but thinner. I frowned at the feel of it, but I didn't say anything, not wanting to embarrass her. Mrs. Watson beamed at her. "That looks lovely, dear."

"Thank you for the loan," Rosie replied.

"You have a good time. Don't rush to come back. I have my knitting, and I can sleep on the sofa. You enjoy yourselves." She winked at me.

"Thank you."

AJ got lots of hugs and kisses from his momma. He held up his arms, and I picked him up, getting a hard hug and a kiss on the cheek. His show of affection warmed my heart, and I felt that tug toward him, the same way I felt toward Rosie.

I turned up the heater in the car and put on the seat warmers. Rosie thanked me. "She insisted I borrow her coat. Mine is old, and I didn't want..." She trailed off. "This one looked nicer." She glanced down. "My dress isn't new either, but—"

I leaned across the console and cupped her face, kissing her until I felt her relax. "You look beautiful. I don't care if the dress is new, if the coat is borrowed. I want to spend the evening with you. That's all that matters."

"I don't want to embarrass you."

“You could never embarrass me,” I replied firmly. “Ever. I’m proud to have you on my arm. Please forget about the dress, the coat, everything—just for a little while. Please?”

“Okay.”

I winked at her. “Good. Because if you don’t, I’ll open up Zoles only for you and make you pick out a new coat and dress. Boots too.”

“You wouldn’t,” she gasped. “You can’t do that!”

I laughed as I guided the car into traffic. “I can, Rosie. The store belongs to me. I can do whatever I want, so…” I trailed off, glancing her way.

“I wouldn’t allow it,” she said primly.

I chuckled and took her hand. Little did she know I had plans to shower her with gifts, both the useful and frivolous varieties. And I was going to enjoy it. I had no doubt she was going to fight me on it, but I was looking forward to the scuffles as well.

I was looking forward to anything that had to do with her.

The restaurant was small, quaint, and homey. We walked in, and the owner stepped forward. “Asher!” he said, shaking my hand. “And who is this lovely lady?”

“Rosie, meet Franco. Best Italian food in the city.”

He beamed, lifting her hand and kissing it. She smiled, and he looked at me. “What a beauty. Come. I have the best table, and I will cook for you myself.”

We slipped into a circular booth, and without asking, a bottle of my favorite red appeared with two glasses. A plate of warm focaccia and a bowl of the most beautiful olive oil was added for dipping. The bread was studded with sun-dried tomatoes, rosemary, and pink salt. A bowl of mixed olives and thinly shaved slices of parmesan accompanied it.

Rosie looked around in curiosity. The wood walls and beams gave the place an exceptional ambiance. Candles and low lighting made it feel warm. The seats were comfortable and the place not overly crowded. Our spot in the corner was intimate, the small booth set back, giving us privacy.

“I love this place,” Rosie said quietly.

“It was my mother’s favorite spot. We came often. It’s been family-run since the day it opened.”

“And it’s still here,” she marveled.

“Great food. An amazing wine cellar.” I picked up a piece of focaccia and dipped it in the olive oil, the subtle flavor of the oil bursting on my tongue. I pressed another piece to Rosie’s lips. “You have to try this.”

She took a bite and chewed, closing her eyes and humming at the taste. “That’s incredible.”

“I know.”

She picked up her own piece, dipping it as I had, then added a sliver of the cheese. “Oh my God,” she hummed.

She was sexy as she shut her eyes, chewing slowly, savoring the flavor. She smiled as she swallowed. “I’m going to move in to the kitchen.”

I chuckled. “Franco would probably let you.”

“So your mom brought you here?”

“We used to come as a family. After she died, we stopped, but I would beg the nanny of the month to bring me here. Suzy and I loved the place. When they fell on hard times, I bought it, gifted it back to them, and I make sure they will never have to sell. My mother loved it. I refuse to let it go.”

“Like Zoles.”

“Yes, but this place is personal. It has nothing but positive memories. I won’t let that fade away.”

She leaned over and kissed me, her lips soft and warm on mine. “I love your sentimental heart, Asher.”

“My father felt it was a weakness.”

“No, it’s your greatest strength.”

I kissed her back, needing her touch. “Thank you.”

She beamed. “Anytime.”

Rosie oohed and aahed over every dish. Protested she was full, yet her eyes lit up when the next round would appear. I had told Franco to go all out and I wanted leftovers. It would ensure Rosie and AJ ate well for the next couple of days. I noted the stuffed shells and chicken piccata were her favorites. The risotto was a huge hit, but we ate all of it, Rosie cleaning her plate with more focaccia. Finally, she sat back. “No more. I will burst out of this dress.”

“No objections here.” I waggled my eyebrows at her, and she laughed.

“One-track mind.”

“When it comes to you, yes.”

Franco presented some Italian cookies and espresso, along with small glasses of amaretto. We relaxed and enjoyed the ambiance and the quiet. I liked that I didn’t have to fill in the silence with chatter. The quiet between us was comfortable.

“Do you have plans this weekend?” I asked.

She shook her head, swallowing her mouthful of cookie. “Working a little on the help desk. Probably sledding. Some errands.”

I took in a deep breath. “Would you consider taking the weekend off and you and AJ come to the condo for the weekend? There’s a great park not far from me. We can sled there. Skating too.” I paused. “The three of us spending some time. I’ll take you back on Sunday.”

She placed her cup in the saucer carefully. “Where will AJ sleep?”

“In the guest room.”

“And me?”

“With me in my room. His room would be right down the hall.”

“That’s a big step, Asher.”

I tilted my head, studying her. “Every step we take is big, Rosie. We don’t seem to have a small one in our roster.”

“Does that worry you?”

“Not a bit.”

“Okay.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up Friday after work.”

“I thought you said the weekend. As in Saturday and Sunday.”

“The weekend includes Friday night, Rosie. I’m sure most of the world would agree with me.”

“So, two nights, then?”

“Yes.”

“I assume you expect to get lucky?”

I chuckled. “I am lucky if you agree to this.”

“You know what I mean.”

I slid closer to her in the round booth. Glided my hand up her arm, over her shoulder, and wrapped my fingers around the nape of her neck. She shivered at my touch. I pulled her close and kissed her. “You, me, in my bed, so when you leave, the sheets smell like you? Like us? Yes, I want to get lucky. I want to hold you all night and wake up with you beside me. I want to make love to you in a big, comfortable bed. I want you to like it so much that you come back. A lot.”

Her eyes were wide and shocked in her face. “I see.”

“So, is that a yes?”

Her breath was warm on my skin as I pressed closer.

“Yes.”

I kissed her. “Good answer.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ROSIE

I checked on AJ when I got home, still high on my evening with Asher. It had been so long since I had been on a real date. I had been nervous about my dress, my borrowed coat, but Asher made me feel beautiful. He refused to let me worry, smoothing all my rough edges with his sweet words and gestures.

I was touched that he'd taken me to a place that meant so much to him, that held such personal memories. I loved the restaurant. The casual way he told me of saving it and giving it back to the family showed me his real heart. I had seen so many glimpses of it since we met, but that showed me his honor.

We'd had dinner, sitting for hours simply talking. I loved hearing his stories. He was an excellent listener, asking questions and showing me that he was actually paying attention to me when I spoke. So many men tended to check out, barely paying attention. Asher truly listened.

I had been equal parts sad and happy when he'd brought me home, walking me to my door, kissing me goodnight, and leaving me.

"You're not coming in?" I asked.

He drifted his knuckles down my cheek. "No, Rosie. Tonight was to spend time with you. You're not just a booty call. You're so much more than that."

"Coffee?" I asked.

He bent and kissed me again. “We both know I won’t be able to resist, and coffee will become more,” he murmured. “I want tonight to be the first of many wonderful nights.”

“All right,” I agreed.

That didn’t stop him from kissing me until I was a shaking mass of want in his arms. He felt the same way, judging from the erection pressed between us as he held me tight. But he left, trailing his finger over my lips, shaking his head, and muttering about “red-headed sirens.”

I curled up on the sofa, my makeup scrubbed off, dressed in my warm pajamas. I pulled a blanket over me, once again feeling the coolness of the apartment after being warm and cozy beside Asher all evening. I hoped the heating wasn’t failing again. The building was so old, it seemed to happen more and more often.

I was looking forward to the weekend with him at his place. I could only imagine what his condo was like. I asked him if I could cook for him, and he had been enthusiastic, telling me to send him a list of what I needed and he would ensure it was there for me. AJ would love it. He adored Asher, and part of me worried about that, while another part of me knew Asher didn’t take that lightly. He assured me he had no plans on going anywhere.

I sighed as I rubbed my temples. I was falling for him. Fast. Hard.

I let out a small laugh.

Who was I kidding? I had already fallen. I’d fallen for him before Christmas was over. Maybe even the first day. I tried to recall how I lived before him, but everything seemed so black and white. I existed. Since he’d come into our lives, everything felt full of color. Of hope.

I curled up, pulling my blanket around my shoulders. My phone pinged, and I looked at my screen.

You were so beautiful tonight. It hurt to leave you.
Looking forward to the weekend.

Good night, Rosie, my love. Asher

Rosie, my love.

He'd never called me that before.

I smiled as I replied.

Looking forward to it.

PS – I hated seeing you walk away, but the weekend is soon!

Sleep well. Yours, Rosie XX

His reply was fast.

Mine. Yes. I like that.

Asher xx

I fell asleep dreaming of Asher, AJ, and a bright future.

Ms. Wells was on a tear the next couple of days, killing the high I had been feeling since my date with Asher. She loved to control everything and everyone around her. It wasn't only me, but I had the feeling she watched me extra closely. I kept track of all our emails and interactions, as per Asher's suggestion. She did like to refer to my "single mother status" far too often. It had rarely ever come up with my old boss or any of my coworkers, but she seemed to focus on that fact. I was on time every day, ate lunch at my desk as usual, and didn't leave before four p.m. Still, I had a feeling she found me lacking. I wasn't sure why she disliked me, but that feeling lingered.

Friday afternoon, I left work with an extra bounce in my step. I picked up AJ, and when we got home, I helped him pack his knapsack for the weekend.

"What toys should I bring, Momma?"

“Oh, ah...” I grimaced, unsure. Would Asher want toys strewn around his place?

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. I glanced at the watch on my wrist. It was barely five. Asher wouldn't be here for another hour, but when I opened the door, there he was. Tall, handsome, and sexy in his suit and overcoat. He held a large laundry basket in his hands, and he was smiling, looking sheepish.

“Rosie.” He bent and kissed me. “I'm early. I couldn't wait.”

I stepped back, unable to stop returning his smile. “I don't mind.”

He came in, shutting the door, and placing the basket on the floor.

“Is that invisible laundry?” I asked. “Does your fancy apartment not have a washing machine?”

He chuckled as he took off his overcoat. AJ came running out.

“Asher!”

Asher bent, lifting AJ over his head. “Hey, bud.”

I had to turn my head at the sight of the joy on my son's face. He flung his little arms around Asher's neck. “I missed you, and I'm so excited!”

“Me too.” Asher stared at me, his gaze heated. “What about Momma? Is she excited too?”

“Yes,” I managed to get out, my breathing suddenly picking up.

“Good. Then we're all excited.”

“Asher, what toys should I bring?”

Before I could speak, Asher set AJ down and lifted the basket. “Bring whatever ones you want that can fit in here.”

“You have to be tidy at Asher's home,” I reminded AJ. “Just like in your room.”

“I know, Momma. I'll clean up my toys before bed.” He picked up the basket, the size almost dwarfing him. “I gotta

pick the best ones.” He glanced at Asher, a furrow between his brows. “I don’t know if I have this many.”

Asher laughed. “Just pick your favorites. There are a few waiting for you at my place as well. I’ll carry the basket when you’re done.”

AJ hurried away, the idea of other toys exciting him.

“You’re spoiling him,” I admonished gently. He stepped forward, wrapping one arm around my waist and drawing me close, while he cupped my face with his other hand. “I want to spoil him. And you. AJ is easy. You are far more challenging, Ms. Duncan. I have a feeling you’ll fight me at every turn.”

“Not every turn. I accept coffee.”

He pressed his mouth to mine, our lips moving in perfect synchronicity. “How about the best coffee you ever tasted?” he murmured, dragging his mouth along my cheek. “A big sofa in front of a warm fire, curled up under the softest blanket I could find in this city?”

“And you beside me?”

“Oh, baby. You know it,” he whispered, his voice husky. “I plan on staying close all weekend.”

“Then go ahead and spoil me.”

He grinned, dropping a kiss to my nose.

“I plan to.”

I was nervous on the drive to Asher’s place. He pulled into a private parking lot, using a pass that got him through an extra garage door. The level was bright and quiet, not very full, with six cars and a large, square truck-like vehicle parked in a row. All were gleaming under the lights. He parked beside the large vehicle and got out.

AJ stared at the truck. “That’s a Hummer. It’s so cool.”

Asher grinned, handing me AJ's knapsack and my small bag. "It is."

"Does it belong to a neighbor?" I asked, trying not to laugh. AJ was staring at it like it was the holy grail. He stepped closer as if to touch it, but I patted his arm. "No, AJ. It isn't yours."

"He can touch it," Asher objected. "I don't mind."

"Is it yours?" AJ asked, sounding awed.

"Yes." He glanced around. "All of these are. This is my private parking area."

I tried not to gape. All of these cars were his? I didn't know much about cars, but I knew all of them were expensive.

Asher ruffled AJ's hair. "If your mom is okay with it, I'll take you for a drive in the Hummer this weekend."

AJ's eyes lit up, and I tried not to groan. "You have to behave," I said.

"I will!"

We stopped at an elevator, and Asher pressed his thumb to a panel. The doors opened, and we stepped in. "Yours, too?" I asked.

"Yes. I have a private entrance."

Of course he did.

Nothing prepared me for the condo we walked into. Soaring ceilings, an open floor plan, a massive fireplace, and a view to die for. I wasn't sure where to look first. The kitchen was gorgeous, with rich wood cabinets and stainless-steel appliances. The fridge would hold enough food to feed AJ and me for a month. The freezer beside it would keep us stocked for a year. Corridors led to the left and right of the great room we were in.

"Guest bedrooms and gym that way," Asher said with a tilt of his head. "My office and my room that way." He indicated the other hall.

I could only stare, trying to take it all in. My entire apartment would fit in his kitchen with room to spare. The thought of

him even being at my shabby little place made me blush. Never mind all the time he spent there with us. The awful little sofa he slept on with me.

I was embarrassed. Horribly so.

But I forced a smile to my face. "Asher, it's incredible."

He gave me a strange look but took my hand. "Come on, I'll show you the rest."

My head swiveled constantly as we toured the condo. Asher showed me the room he had for AJ. It was the first one off the hallway, with a spectacular view of the city. It was painted a cheerful blue, and it held a double bed and dresser. Some Lego and a couple of other toys waited for AJ, who was far more interested in those than the room, the en suite, or the rest of the place. He sat down, eagerly reaching for the Lego, waving us off when Asher asked him if he wanted to come with us.

The other two rooms were more neutral than the room AJ was going to sleep in, and I had a strange suspicion that it had been painted recently. Asher assured me that we would be able to hear AJ if he needed us in the night. "I bought a monitor," he said proudly.

After showing me the gym, he tugged me through the living room and past his office, leading me to his bedroom. Once again, I was speechless. I was certain I had never seen a bed so big. It dwarfed the room, the beautiful black-and-white comforter setting off the iron bedframe. Aside from the nightstands and a chair in the corner, it was the only piece of furniture. The dark colors with splashes of blue and gray were masculine and suited him.

He had a large walk-in closet and an amazing bathroom. I counted seven shower heads and an overhead rainfall shower in the glassed-in enclosure. A large slipper tub was in the corner, a set of long narrow windows at the perfect height to see the view as you relaxed in the tub. The entire condo bespoke wealth. It was rather overwhelming. I was at a loss for words.

Asher wrapped his arms around me, drawing me back to his chest. “Breathe, Rosie. Just breathe,” he soothed, as if sensing my inner turmoil.

“It’s so...incredible.”

“It’s where I live. That’s all.”

“I’m embarrassed about you being at mine,” I admitted.

He spun me around. “What?”

ASHER

I was horrified by her words. “What?” I asked, meeting her eyes, aghast to see how pale she’d become. The moment we’d stepped into the condo, I’d felt her withdrawal. She became tense. Her smile brittle.

If I’d had any idea seeing this place would do that to her, I never would have brought her here.

“My place—” she began.

I cut her off. “Is your home. You welcomed me there. I loved every single second I spent with you there.” I looked around. “Bigger isn’t better, Rosie. A fancy tub doesn’t make it a home. *You* make it a home. I felt that every moment I spent in your place.” I stepped back, running a hand through my hair. “I wanted to bring you here so you could get comfortable in my space too. So we could go to either spot and feel relaxed. I didn’t do it to upset you or make you feel embarrassed. *God*, that is the last thing I wanted.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just so...vast.”

“And empty.” I cupped her face. “Every moment since I came back to this condo, I felt its emptiness. I couldn’t wait to get you and AJ here to bring some life to it. To make it feel like home, not just a place I sleep.”

Her entire body relaxed. “Really?”

I kissed her. “Yes. I want to see you everywhere. Curled up on the sofa. Sitting by the fire. I want to watch you cook in the kitchen. I’m looking forward to building Lego with AJ and being able to see you as you move around. I’m going to fill that tub and watch you lie in it and relax. I want to be in there with you. Then I’m going to take you to bed and make love to you all night. I want to be able to see you everywhere, so when you’re not here, I have something to hold on to until you are back again.”

“Asher,” she whispered, her eyes bright.

I leaned my forehead on hers. “You mean so much, Rosie. So much. I would never do anything to hurt or embarrass you. I’m sorry. I didn’t think how this place would make you feel.”

“I’m overreacting,” she admitted. “It’s so incredible. Really incredible. It just...”

“What?” I asked tenderly. “Finish it. Tell me.”

“You have a private parking lot. I have a bus pass. You have a condo that I think my entire apartment block would fit into. I have a space that is hardly warm enough to live in at times. You buy restaurants to help people. If I can scrape enough together for takeout, it’s a bonus. We live such different lives. How can I satisfy you?”

“By being you. My wealth doesn’t talk to me and make me laugh or feel good about myself. My huge condo doesn’t welcome me with a brilliant smile and warm green eyes. My cars are only good if they take me to you. My money only means something if it is making your life better. You, Rosie, have become the pinnacle I set everything else up against.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

I swept her into my embrace and kissed her. She held me tight, letting me command her mouth, hold her close and ravish her. I wanted to carry her to my bed and bury myself in her for hours. Until she believed the words I was speaking.

But the sound of running feet broke us apart. Rosie was breathing fast, her cheeks flushed.

“Do you understand what you mean to me?” I asked. I knew my wealth overwhelmed her. That the life I led was different from hers. Different, but not better. I had to be patient and let her figure it out. I wasn’t worried that it was insurmountable. She needed some time to get used to all of it.

“I’m beginning to.”

I held out my hand. “Then come with me. I need dinner, and you promised me shepherd’s pie. After AJ goes to bed, I’ll

finish showing you.” I paused. “If it takes all night, you’ll understand, Rosie. I promise you that.”

She relaxed as she pattered around the kitchen, exactly the way I knew she would. She grew more comfortable, the glass of wine I poured her helping, as much as the fact that she was in her element. She loved to cook, and I had been told the kitchen was a chef’s dream.

I used it to heat up leftovers and make the occasional easy meal.

But Rosie was cooking. I heard her humming as she chopped and stirred. I surreptitiously watched her as she opened cupboards, investigating and finding what she needed. I’d had the kitchen department at Zoles fill it with everything. Pots, pans, baking implements. All sorts of gadgets and things I would never use, but I knew Rosie would. I heard her soft exclamations of delight as she discovered something she was looking for. Her pleasure at the self-lifting mixer in one of the bottom cupboards made me chuckle. It also inspired her to “whip up a batch of cookies” while the shepherd’s pie cooked. My condo had never smelled so appetizing.

She watched us as well. Commented on the Lego creation we were making. Chuckled at some of AJ’s random thoughts. I heard all about the kids at school. The new girl missing her two front teeth that made her lisp when she spoke.

“The other kids laughed, but I got mad,” AJ told me. “She fell off a swing in the summer, and they came out.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I told them to stop being mean. I held her hand and told her she was pretty and I liked her even if she talked a little funny. I thought it was cute. I think she could be my friend. Now that Ashley moved, it would be nice.”

I nodded in understanding. He had told me about Ashley moving on the phone, and he was sad. From what Rosie had

said, I gathered it was sudden, and he didn't get to say goodbye. I was pleased he had a new friend to play with. And I was proud of his actions.

“Good man. You should always stick up for people.”

He nodded. “I sat with her at lunch, and she gave me a cookie. I wanted to give her a bite of my apple, but she said it was too hard since her teeth were gone. I am gonna ask Momma to give me a knife so I can cut it up next week and share.”

“Maybe take a banana,” I advised. “Or some grapes. I don't think your momma will give you a knife.”

His eyes lit up. “Good idea, Asher! They would be easy for her to eat.”

I ruffled his hair. This kid slayed me with his good heart.

We ate dinner, AJ not overly impressed with the shepherd's pie, but I was. I ate two large helpings, plus salad and bread. Then I ate four cookies, still warm from the oven, and drank a large cup of coffee.

“You won't be able to sleep tonight,” Rosie admonished me.

I grinned and winked. “That was my plan.”

I loved her blush. And the way she rolled her eyes as she picked up the plates. Pretending to be affronted but smiling at the same time.

We watched a movie, AJ marveling at the size of the screen. He was crazy for the big chair he sat in that had a cupholder and a wide arm to put the bowl of popcorn I'd made in the microwave. I was certain I had impressed Rosie with my skills when I made it for us, adding the butter with a flourish as I informed her I was a microwave genius. Her laughter was music to my ears.

I sat beside her on the sofa, a blanket over our knees. I turned on the fireplace, the flames dancing in the low light, the heat making the room cozy. She sighed in contentment, nestled against me, a bowl of popcorn on my lap, her head on my shoulder. At one point, I glanced down at her. She was asleep, her eyelashes resting on her cheeks as she slumbered. I looked

over at AJ, amused to see he, too, had fallen asleep, one hand still in the popcorn bowl. I felt a rush of tenderness for them, plus the internal pride that they were comfortable and safe because they were here with me. The condo was warm, they were content, and somehow that was all that mattered. I let the movie end, then shut it off, easing from Rosie. I picked her up and carried her down the hall, frowning as she stirred when I laid her on the bed. “Go back to sleep,” I whispered.

“AJ,” she protested sleepily.

“I’ll put him to bed.”

She mumbled something incoherent, falling back asleep. I stood over her, brushing her pretty hair off her forehead, pleased that she trusted me enough to let me handle the task.

Then I returned to the living room and repeated the same thing with AJ, wiping his buttery fingers with a damp cloth, grateful Rosie had put on his pajamas before we started watching the movie. I turned on a night-light and switched on the monitor in case he woke up. I left another light on in the living room and headed to my room, stopping at the little voice I heard call my name.

“Ash-er.”

I hurried back to AJ’s bed. He was asleep, burrowed deep in his covers already. I brushed his hair back and bent to kiss his head. He muttered in his sleep, and I remembered his teddy bear, tucking it close to him. He let out a long sigh and made a contented sound in the back of his throat. I gazed down on him fondly. He had called me tonight, not Rosie.

I wanted to be there for him every night. To make sure he was safe and warm. That they both were.

I slipped out of his room and stopped in the doorway of mine, grinning. Rosie was a curled-up bundle under the blankets, reminding me of AJ. She was tiny and perfect on the large mattress. I got ready, slipping in beside her. I reached for her, and she came easily, resting her head on my chest, her arm snaked around me. I held her close, pressing a kiss to her head.

I had longed for her to be here with me in this bed. To feel her pressed against me.

It wasn't how I had planned for the evening to end, yet strangely enough, it was even better. The little family I thought of as mine were with me. Sheltered, content, and happy.

It was all I needed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ROSIE

I woke in the early morning, confused. The last thing I remembered was watching a movie with Asher and AJ. I vaguely recalled being carried and put to bed, Asher's lips on my forehead telling me to sleep and he would look after AJ.

Currently, I was draped across Asher's chest, the steady beat of his heart under my ear. He had one arm around me, holding me tight to him. I lifted my head, studying him in the low light. He had his other arm tucked behind his head, his face turned slightly. A low sound escaped his mouth every few seconds, his breathing deep and even. His hair was tousled, and his face was relaxed, his mouth pursing and releasing with his breaths. I carefully eased away, slipping from him, and I used the bathroom, then checked on AJ, who was sleeping hard, curled up in the middle of the bed, his blankets pulled tight around him and his favorite teddy in the crook of his arm.

Then I headed back to Asher. He had frowned in his sleep when I moved away, but he was flat on his back, still slumbering.

Well, most of him was. The comforter was tented, and I bit my lip, holding in my grin. Someone was up and ready to say good morning.

I carefully climbed in beside him, settling close. This bed was heaven, plush yet firm, and I had slept better than I had in months. That deserved a reward.

I slid my hand under the covers, then the waistband of Asher's lounge pants. He was hard and hot in my hand. Heavy.

He groaned in his sleep, his back arching at my touch, but he didn't wake up. I stroked him a few times, loving the quiet moan from the back of his throat.

Carefully, I pulled back the comforter and slid under the sheet. It was easy to move his pants down since they had loosened in his sleep and were already low on his hips. His cock sprang free, already glistening at the head. I engulfed him in my mouth, taking in as much as I could, slowly sucking. I felt it the moment he came awake, his gasp of air and the way he immediately threaded his fingers through my hair.

"Jesus, Rosie, what..."

The rest of his words were garbled and lost in his groan of pleasure. I flicked my tongue along his shaft, and he shuddered.

"Baby, what if AJ..."

Once again, his words were cut off with another groan. I sucked him deep, humming around him, and he thrust into my mouth, going deeper. I swallowed around him, and he began to pant and mutter, begging for more, pleading for me to stop, threatening me if I did. Whispering dirty words. Praising me. Pulling at my legs to bring me closer. He slid his fingers into my leggings, finding me slick and ready.

"Sucking my dick makes you wet, doesn't it, Rosie? You like my cock down your throat," he hissed. *"Such a good girl, taking my cock."*

I whimpered as he played with my clit. Softly at first, then in tighter circles that made me moan around him. He slipped a finger inside me, then two, using his thumb to keep a steady pressure and rhythm on my clit. I began to shake, the pleasure hitting me in waves.

"Come on my hand, Rosie," he commanded. *"I'm going to come down your throat. Oh God, now, baby, come now. I can't —fuck!"*

He filled my mouth, and I swallowed, my body locking down as a hot, intense orgasm burst through me. I was lost in a sea of sensation. His talented fingers, his hot release, his noises,

my moans, the lewd act itself. Something I had never enjoyed as much as I was right now.

He stopped moving, his breathing harsh. I shuddered as the last of the pleasure dwindled, leaving me feeling listless and relaxed. I released him, laying my head on his stomach. He lifted the sheet, gazing down at me with a grin. "You must need some air, baby. Come up here."

He tugged me up, and I rested my head on his chest, his heartbeat still rapid and his breathing ragged.

"One hell of a wake-up call," he said.

"I agree."

He pressed a kiss to my head. "Morning, my love."

I looked up, feeling shy suddenly. He smiled, running a finger down my cheek. "God, I love that."

"What?"

"That after waking me up with my cock in your mouth and riding my hand, you can still blush. You are such a contradiction, Rosie Duncan." His gaze was tender. "And I wouldn't want you any other way."

We heard the sound of AJ jumping from the bed and rushing down the hall at the same time. Asher grinned. "Good timing." He pressed a kiss to my head. "Thank you."

I grinned back. "Same to you."

The morning passed in waves of happiness. Pancakes and coffee. Secretive looks and smiles being shared between Asher and myself. Stolen kisses as AJ got dressed. Whispered promises, dirty and sweet in my ear as Asher cupped me from behind while AJ worked on his Lego treasure, his voice low in my ear.

"I'm going to ravish you tonight, Rosie. You, me, that big bed. My cock inside you until you scream." He nipped at my lobe.

“I won’t even stop then. I’m going to make you come so often, you’ll lose count.”

AJ called me over, and I sat with him, piecing together a couple of bricks. Asher joined us, sitting behind me. *“You are such a good mother,” he praised. “I love watching you with him.” He rested his chin on my shoulder, observing AJ with me. “Would you want another one?” he asked, his voice soft.*

“With you?” I replied.

He drew in a fast breath. “Yes. With me.”

I could see him with a baby. His care and patience while I was pregnant. The way he would love us.

“Yes.”

“I already see it. You, me, AJ, and a little one. Maybe two.” He kissed my neck. “Maybe three.”

I had no words to reply.

We went for a walk, AJ between us, holding our hands. We swung him a few times, and he was excited when we reached the skating pond. Asher had gifted him a pair of skates, and he was anxious to get on the ice.

I sat on the bench as Asher laced up the skates for both of them, explaining patiently to AJ how he was going to teach him. I watched as they hit the ice, marveling how quickly AJ caught on. Even Asher was impressed. AJ managed to stand more than he fell, and he held on to Asher’s hands, learning to find his balance and move his feet. I loved observing them while I sipped the coffee Asher had gotten for me. He wanted me to try, but I was leery and passed this time. My butt was sore enough from the slip on the ice the other day.

After skating, we went back to the condo and ate grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. I loved how Asher appreciated everything I cooked, even something as simple as an easy lunch. He ate two sandwiches, a huge bowl of soup, and a handful of the cookies I had made last night.

He had wanted to order in lunch, but I said no. I knew he could easily afford to order in every day, but it seemed

extravagant to do so when the fridge and pantry were filled with food.

“I’m in charge of dinner, then,” he said. “No arguments.”

I saw how AJ’s eyes lit up, and I knew Chinese would be on the menu. But I didn’t argue.

After lunch, Asher and I sat on the sofa as AJ built more Lego. He glanced out the window. “Can we go skate more?”

Asher laughed. “Sure, bud.” He turned to me. “You stay here and relax. Read. Nap. Have a bath. Just enjoy a little me time. AJ and I will skate.”

Before I could protest, he lowered his head to my ear, whispering, “It’ll tire him out. Then we get tonight. *I* get tonight. I get *you*.” He pressed a kiss behind my ear.

“O-okay,” I stammered.

He stood with a grin, AJ jumping up in excitement. There was a flurry of activity, and then I was alone. The condo suddenly seemed vast. I filled the bathtub, not surprised to find that Asher had thought of bath products. I sniffed a few bottles, settling on a light citrus scent. Soon, the bathroom was filled with the fragrance, the steam gently wafting upward, beckoning. I slipped into the warm water, groaning as the heat surrounded me. I relaxed against the built-in pillow, sighing in pleasure. I couldn’t recall the last bath I’d had where I could just relax. The one in the apartment was shallow and not comfortable like this, plus, with AJ, it was hard to find time for a leisurely soak. This was a treat.

One I intended to enjoy fully.

An hour later, I was back on the sofa, book in hand. Asher’s office had a lot of books on the shelves, and he had a suspense one I had wanted to read. I made a cup of tea, and it sat beside me, the scent drifting to my nose. I was wearing one of Asher’s sweatshirts and a pair of my leggings. His socks covered my feet. I was content, cozy, and sleepy. More content

than I could recall being in years. The sun was still out, and a few flakes flew around outside. AJ was with Asher and no doubt enjoying himself thoroughly. I looked around, wondering what it would be like to live like this. A warm home, a fully stocked kitchen. A car to drive. A comfortable bed.

No bus. No budgeting every penny to make sure there was enough food. Saying goodbye to piles of thin, well-worn blankets when the temperatures dropped and the heating didn't work so well.

I shook my head to clear it. That sort of thinking was dangerous. I was grateful for what AJ and I had. I couldn't be envious of the things we didn't.

Clearing my thoughts, I rested my head against the soft fabric of the sofa, drifting. The sound of the elevator opening woke me, and I blinked, unsure of what I was seeing. I met a pair of familiar dark-brown eyes across the length of the condo, but it wasn't Asher and AJ. Instead, it was a woman, holding the hand of a little girl. They both looked at me quizzically, then the woman smiled. Widely.

“You *must* be Rosie.”

Ten minutes later, I sat across from Asher's sister, Suzy. She had his eyes and smile, but her features were more delicate. She was tall like him, forward, and blunt. I liked her.

Bonnie, his niece, was sweet. She didn't have a shy bone in her body. She declared the cookies I set out delicious and informed her mother they had to get some. Then she spied the Lego being built and sat down in front of it, studying it closely.

“Does she like Lego?” I asked.

“Not as much as dolls, but she'll give it a go. Do you want me to tell her no?”

I shook my head. “AJ and Asher won't mind.”

Suzy sat back, picking up her tea and taking a sip. She studied me over the rim. “You have my brother tied up in knots. Acting like a crazy man.”

Before I could say anything, she grinned. “I like it. I have never seen him act like this. Out of control. Out of his depth. I can understand why. You’re very pretty.”

“Um, thank you?”

She grinned. “He is besotted.” She tilted her head. “In love, actually, I’d say.”

“Oh, no...ah...” I stumbled over my words.

She shook her head. “I know my brother. And it’s in our nature. I fell for my husband in ten minutes. I knew I was going to marry him. Asher recalls my mom saying she fell in love with my dad from across the room. It only makes sense when Asher finally fell it would be hard and fast.” She paused. “It’s kinda fun to watch from afar.”

I had no idea how to respond. She picked up a cookie. “Want some stories about when he was younger?”

That, I could get on board with. “Yes.”

Twenty minutes later, the elevator doors opened and Asher and AJ walked out. Asher stopped when he saw me and Suzy. Bonnie streaked across the room, her arms outstretched. “Uncle Ash!”

He bent, swinging her into his arms and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Oh, you’re cold!” she squealed. Laughing, he set her down, and AJ smiled at her.

“Hi. I’m AJ.”

“I’m Bonnie. I like your Legos.”

A commotion ensued as coats were discarded, boots kicked off, and the kids ran to the Legos. Asher came over, bending to kiss his sister.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” he said dryly.

“Obviously.”

He stood beside me, placing his hand on my shoulder. He squeezed it gently. “I promised AJ hot cocoa when we got home.”

“I’ll make it.”

“Great.”

I stood, and he stopped me moving, his hand still on my arm. He captured my mouth, kissing me hard. “Want me to throw her out? I will,” he said quietly. Suzy heard him, laughing behind her hand, knowing he was full of it.

“How rude,” I said. “I like her. And Bonnie.”

“We can keep Bonnie,” he insisted. “She and AJ can hang. But this one is gonna be full of questions and not so subtle suggestions.”

I patted his cheek. “We’ll be fine.”

He sighed. “Good thing her husband isn’t around. He encourages her.”

“James will be here in an hour. He wasn’t going to come up, but when I told him your woman was here, he was all for it. Then Rosie invited us to stay for dinner. She said Chinese was on the menu.”

“Dammit,” Asher muttered, hanging his head.

I tried not to grin. “It’ll all be fine, Captain Highliner.”

His eyes went wide, and he spun toward Suzy. “You told her that?”

She wagged her eyebrows.

“I was seven!” he exclaimed. “I thought he was a real fisherman with his own boat, and I wanted to be like him!”

I chuckled. “So sweet.”

He glared at Suzy. “No more stories.”

We laughed, and I headed to the kitchen. “Too late, Asher. She’s been here a while, and I got lots of dirt.”

He sat down, glowering. “Not fair. I need extra marshmallows now.” He sat up straighter. “And I have stuff I can tell about her too.”

They started to squabble, and I laughed as I filled the pot with milk for hot cocoa. I had a feeling I was going to be laughing a lot this afternoon.

Suzy hugged me. “You have my number. Call me, and we’ll get together.” She glanced over my shoulder with a wicked smile. “I have lots more stories about my brother.”

Asher stepped close, pulling me away from her. “She’s busy that day,” he said emphatically.

“We didn’t choose a date.”

“She’s busy every day,” he replied.

Suzy laughed, and James shook his head. “Give it up, Asher. They’ll get together one way or another.”

I hugged Bonnie goodbye. James was holding her, but she reached out and I couldn’t resist. She was a delightful child, and AJ liked her. They played well together and after dinner watched a movie as we sat around talking. It was obvious she adored Asher, and he felt the same about her. He and James had sat on the floor cross-legged with them and worked on the Lego blocks, acting like kids themselves. Asher was a natural with children, and the thought of seeing him with a baby did something to my ovaries. I kept thinking about his words from the morning.

“Maybe three.”

I had to avert my eyes when he glanced up, but his grin told me he knew exactly what I was thinking. He was thinking the same thing.

The elevator doors closed, and I looked down at AJ. “Time to get ready for bed.”

“Okay.” He scampered off, stopping at the edge of the living room. “I like it here, Momma. It’s warm and has lots of room. I like the people. Especially you, Asher.” Then he hurried away.

Asher wound his arm around my waist. “Do you like it here, Rosie?”

“It is lovely.”

“Can you see yourself living here?”

His words made me tremble. He spun me in his arms, looking down at me, his gaze gentle.

“What?” he asked tenderly. “It surprises you that I would ask?”

“It’s a big question.”

“Would you think about it?”

“Asher, we’re so new.”

“We’re *so right*. You fit me perfectly, Rosie. You and AJ. Look how easily you meshed with my sister and her family. How well suited we are. Eventually, we’re going to move forward.” He tilted his head. “My bed won’t fit in your place, so this is far more logical.” He lifted one eyebrow so I knew he was teasing.

“One step at a time,” I whispered. “I have to think of AJ. I can’t cause him upheaval twice.”

He frowned. “Twice?”

I drew in a deep breath. “In case it didn’t work out.”

He frowned. “I have every belief it will.”

“I need...” I swallowed, feeling overwhelmed.

He kissed my nose. “A little time. I understand. I’ll show you how serious I am, Rosie.”

“I know that. I... AJ...”

“I know. I know. But I’ll prove it.”

AJ came running out of his room, grinning. “I brushed my teeth, Momma!”

Asher swung him up in his arms. “What a clever boy. Isn’t he clever, Momma?”

I ruffled AJ’s hair. “He is.”

“Asher is clever too. Right, Momma?”

I smiled looking at them. They both looked at me with so much love in their eyes. As if I was the center of their world. I had to blink away the emotion I felt building.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Both my boys are clever.”

They high-fived each other, and AJ looked at Asher. “Will you and Momma read to me again tonight?”

Asher set him on his feet. “Go pick a book, and we’ll be right in.”

AJ rushed off, and Asher looped his arm around my waist. “One book, then you’re mine the rest of the night, Rosie. All mine.”

I followed him into the bedroom, hoping the book AJ chose was short.

Really short.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ROSIE

The next few weeks, life was different. The office wasn't as great a place to be anymore, at least not for me. Ms. Wells loved to micromanage and everyone in my department felt the effects of her daily reports, but she was especially hard on me. She noted my comings and goings meticulously. I made sure to arrive as early as I could, and I never left a minute before four. I wondered bitterly if she ever accounted for the fact that I rarely took a break and ate my lunch at my desk. I kept my phone on silent and replied to Asher's texts while in the bathroom or when I ate my sandwich at my desk. He checked in on me every day without fail, his sweet words the only thing making me smile.

But as draining as the days were, the evenings made up for it. I never knew when Asher would appear. Sometimes, he was waiting when we got home; other times, he would show up after dinner or while we were eating. A couple of times, he was waiting outside, driving me to pick up AJ and taking us out to supper. The nights he had meetings, he always called to talk. He told me about his day, a new venture, or a large donation that pleased him. I missed him when he wasn't there. His comforting presence, his warmth and laughter—I felt their absence. He rarely stayed the night, but he took AJ and me to his condo on the weekends. It was like a mini vacation from reality.

One I was finding hard to return to.

I hated Sunday nights. So did AJ. Last night after we got home, he threw a tantrum. The first I had ever witnessed.

“I want to go back to Asher’s,” he insisted. “It’s nice and warm. I have a big bed, and you smile when we’re there. Call him and tell him to come get us!”

The temptation to do exactly that was strong.

Asher was careful not to overstep or go too far. But the difference in our worlds was so clear every time I stepped back into my small apartment after leaving his more luxurious space. It surprised me how comfortable I was there. How much it felt like home. *He* felt like home. How tempting it was to ask him to let us stay. Because I knew if I did, he would arrange it in a heartbeat. He had already added to AJ’s room. A race car bed frame now stretched along one wall. New toys and toy box. Racing stripes on the walls, a soft rug on the floor for when AJ was playing. A big chair in the corner all three of us sat in to read a book at night.

Items for me appeared as well. A thick, soft robe and warm slippers. Luxurious bath and beauty products. Another big chair to curl up in and look out the window of the bedroom. Every type of cooking implement and ingredient I could think of to use in the kitchen. Blankets and pillows in the living room. Some new comfortable shirts and leggings appeared in the closet. A pretty, warm jacket I had yet to wear.

All added for our comfort, slowly turning the condo into a haven of warmth for us all.

But I had only known him a short time, and I still worried. It frightened me how much I was beginning to rely on him. How much I needed him.

My phone rang, bringing me out of my musings, and I frowned when I saw the day care number.

“Hello?”

“Rosie, it’s Gwen from Happy Faces Day Care.”

“Is AJ all right?”

“He’s fine. But we’re closing early due to the storm.”

“Storm?” I repeated, standing up and peering out my door. My little office had no windows. I was surprised to see the heavy

snow swirling around outside from the window across the office.

“Wow. They forecast a few flakes,” I said, shocked.

“They updated it an hour ago, and now they’re calling it the storm of the season. We’re asking all the parents to pick up their kids. They’re advising people to head home and get off the roads.”

“I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

I headed to Ms. Wells’s office, knocking on her door. I noticed a lot of desks were empty as I went past the other offices.

She glanced up, the perpetual frown on her face evident. “Yes.”

“I have to leave.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The storm outside. I have to get my son.”

She glanced at the clock. “You have two more hours until you can leave.”

I shook my head. “I have to leave now. I have no choice.”

“I said no.”

Anger grabbed hold of me. “I haven’t taken a lunch in weeks. Or a break. I’m not asking permission. Half the staff has already left. I have to get my son.”

“I’ll dock your pay a full day unless you work it.”

“I’ll report you to HR.”

She shrugged as if she couldn’t care less. “I have lots to share with them about your attitude.”

I was done. “I have no idea why you dislike me so much, but do whatever the hell you want. I’m going to pick up my son now.”

“You’re fired.”

I blinked. “What?”

“You leave, and I’m letting you go. Take your personal things, and don’t come back.”

I pulled off my pass and flung it on the floor. I rushed to my little office, grabbing the few things I had. A picture of AJ. A pencil holder he’d made me for Christmas. A couple of small items. I didn’t have much. Ms. Wells stood in my door, watching me, her gaze cold and unfeeling. I ignored her, adding my shoes to the bag and pulling on my boots and coat. I felt ill and wanted to cry, but I refused to let her see.

I didn’t touch the work on my desk or the computer. I pushed past her, and she followed me to the door. I blinked away the moisture building, grateful not many people were around to see this, and I walked out the front door, the icy cold temperature and the snow hitting me in the face.

I couldn’t think of what had just happened. I had to get my son and make it home. That was my priority. I would call the owner of the company and try to tell my side of the story later. I would let my old boss know what had happened. Maybe he could help find me another job. I knew I could never work for that woman again.

Then I put aside all other thoughts and headed to the day care.

AJ and I stumbled into the apartment, cold and shivering. The temperature had dropped, the buses were crammed full, and we’d had no choice but to walk after two buses passed by us so full, people were jammed against the door. Normally, it was about twenty minutes, but with the snow and wind, plus the ice everywhere, it took longer. The apartment felt warmer than the outside but not by much. I hung our wet coats in the bathroom, and we changed into dry clothes. I found a note under my door from Mrs. Watson saying her son had come and gotten her and she would be staying with him. “Use anything you need,” her note read.

Her dryer would come in handy, but first, we needed to warm up.

AJ huddled on the sofa, his eyes big as the heavy snow hit our window. I made a cup of coffee and sat beside him, needing a moment to gather my thoughts. I turned on the TV, the local news broadcasting the weather warnings and the city asking people to stay off the streets. Buses were no longer running, malls were closing, shelters were already full, and only essential services would be available.

I had tried to call Asher, but the call went straight to voice mail. He was in Kingston at an all-day meeting, and I wasn't sure he would make it back to town, given the weather. AJ and I were on our own.

I heard the sudden loud clunk that indicated the heating had gone out, and I shut my eyes. My head was spinning. I had lost my job, we had no heat, Asher wasn't around, and it was only AJ and me. It couldn't get much worse. I struggled to stay calm, deciding to push aside the job crisis until this one was over.

I plugged in the heater in the living room, deciding AJ would sleep with me out here so we could both stay warm. I heated some soup and made sandwiches, the routine helping to soothe me. We had gone through winter storms before and been fine. We would be again.

After we ate, I handed AJ a cup of cocoa and a plate of cookies I had made last week and sat beside him. The lights in the apartment flickered, the TV died, and suddenly we were thrust into darkness.

"Momma?" AJ asked, sounding scared.

"It's okay, baby. We lost power for a few minutes. It'll be back on soon," I assured him. "I'll light a couple of candles."

Once they were lit, I set them on the coffee table and added another blanket over us. I checked my cell, not surprised to find I had no service. I had a cheap pay-as-you-go, and at times, it was unreliable. This was such an instance. I pulled AJ close and kissed his head.

"We'll just wait for the power to come back on, baby."

"Okay."

As time passed, I longed for Asher. If he were here, I would feel so much better, but I couldn't get hold of him. This storm had caught us all by surprise. I imagined him in a small motel in Kingston, pissed off he couldn't reach me, upset that he wasn't with us. He would know what to do.

I wondered if the whole city was without power, and I stood and peered out the window. I could see lights in the distance, so I knew it was probably the street or maybe only this building.

The power would be back soon, I told myself, cuddling beside AJ again. Using the candlelight, I picked up a book, and read to him, not surprised when he fell asleep, a heavy weight pressed against me.

Alone, the worries filled my head. No heat. No power. Nowhere to go. I had little cash on me, and I had no idea if ATMs were working or how badly the storm was affecting the city. I carefully eased away from AJ and searched the cupboard, finding the small, battery-operated radio I had. The temperature in the apartment was dropping quickly, and I fretted, wondering how long we could stay here, but unsure where to go.

I wondered if I took AJ and went to Asher's building if the doorman would let me in. We always entered with him through his private entrance, although the doorman had seen us leave together to go to the park. I thought of calling Asher's sister to see if she could help me by contacting the manager there, then I recalled my phone wasn't working.

I was stuck.

I rubbed my head, willing myself to stay calm. I had to make it through the night and hope by morning things were better. The news on the radio was bleak, the announcer saying more snow and ice were expected. Temperatures were still dropping. They advised people to stay off the roads, stating traffic lights were down all over town and electrical outages were affecting some areas.

I shut my eyes, my fear taking hold.

Then I heard it. Heavy footsteps coming down the hall. A knock at my door and a voice I was desperate to hear calling my name.

“Rosie! Open the door—it’s Asher.”

I raced to the door, stumbling around furniture, flinging it open.

Asher filled the doorway. “How...?” I gasped.

“Thank God you’re safe,” he said, pulling me into his arms.

I didn’t care that his overcoat was cold. All I felt was the safety of his embrace. His scent surrounded me, calming me.

“How are you even here?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I’ll tell you later. I’m overstepping right now, and you’re going to let me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Then get our boy and your things.” He shook me slightly. “I’m taking you home.”

Asher

I cursed as I stumbled up the stairs to Rosie’s apartment. When I pulled onto the street, I wasn’t shocked to see her building in darkness. A lot of streets were that way, the storm affecting the power. Knowing she and AJ were upstairs sitting in the cold and dark, alone and no doubt worried, was what kept my eyes on the road and my speed even as I drove back from Kingston, ignoring the warnings not to be on the road. The Hummer Suzy had teased me mercilessly for buying was perfect for this weather. The heavy body and the wide tires ate through the snow. My attempts to reach Rosie on the phone failed, and I knew the cell systems were faltering as well as power in many places. I couldn’t get through to Suzy either, so I concentrated on my driving, my only goal getting to Rosie and AJ.

The streets were deserted, abandoned cars littering the roads. I parked in front of her building, leaving the vehicle locked and running. The door lock to her building wasn’t engaged, and I was grateful the stairwells weren’t secured since the elevator wasn’t working. When she opened the door, the look on her

face told me I'd made the right call in getting here. I could feel the cool air of her apartment and felt the tension in her body as I held her.

"Pack what you need for AJ," I said to her. "I'll grab some things for you." I glanced to the sofa. "He can sleep through anything, can't he?"

"Yes."

"Don't wake him up. I'll carry him down in blankets. We'll take his coat."

"Asher," she said, pausing.

I cupped her cheek, feeling the coolness of her skin. "What, my love?"

"Thank you."

I bent and kissed her. "I'll always come for you, Rosie. Now get your stuff so I can get you warm."

Twenty minutes later, I had them in the Hummer. Rosie was in my overcoat, her wet outer garment still hanging in her bathroom. I made her leave it, planning on getting her a new one. Overstepping and I were about to become best friends.

I wasn't going to let her and AJ do without any longer. I had been patient enough.

The car seat I owned was in one of my other vehicles, so I laid AJ on the back seat, managing to get a seat belt around him. He barely stirred. The two small bags Rosie brought were tossed on the floor. I lifted Rosie into the passenger seat, fighting against the wind that threatened to slam the door on me, then hurried to the driver's side and slid in. I cranked up the heat for all of us, grateful the vehicle was already warm. Rosie held her shaking hands over the vents. I peeled off my gloves, doing the same thing. Even outside for only a moment, I was chilled.

"Can we get to your place?" she asked, nervous.

"Without a doubt."

I eased back onto the road, driving slowly. We barely spoke on the trip, and I sighed in relief as we got to my building, the garage door closing behind us and the lights on the parking level still glowing.

“You have power,” she said.

“And heat. How long was yours out?”

“About three hours. Maybe more. The heat before that. My cell didn’t work either.”

I gathered AJ in my arms, and she grabbed the bags. Upstairs, she followed me into AJ’s room, and we tucked him in. He stirred, his eyes opening. “Asher,” he muttered sleepily.

“I’m here. You and your momma are safe. You’re back in your big bed, bud. You sleep well, okay?”

He made a little noise of contentment, already slipping back into sleep. I made sure his teddy bear was tucked close.

I took Rosie’s arm, heading to the primary bedroom. Turning on the shower, I stripped off her clothes, then did the same, pushing her into the warmth. I followed her, wrapping her in my arms and holding her until the shaking stopped and her body warmed. I needed to hold her as much as she needed to be held. I had been so worried I wouldn’t be able to get to her. That she would be on a bus that broke down or unable to get home. I feared the power outage the radio talked about, certain it would affect her older building. All sorts of terrible scenarios had played through my head on the drive.

That she was safe and here helped me relax.

Until I realized she was crying. Rosie never cried.

“It’s okay, my love. I have you. AJ is safe. Everything is fine.”

“I got fired today,” she wept. “Because I left to get AJ.”

Fury tore through me. “Wells?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“We’ll figure it out.” I tilted up her chin, meeting her tear-filled gaze. I hated to see her green eyes clouded over with fear and worry. “You will be fine. You have me, and I won’t

let anything happen to you or AJ. I'll take care of you. I promise."

I could see her struggle. "I know you're independent, Rosie. I love that. But it's okay to accept help from someone who loves you and only wants the best for you," I said, holding her gaze. Letting her see the adoration in my eyes.

She blinked. "You love me?"

"Yes."

"You. Love. Me."

"And AJ."

She flung her arms around my neck, sobbing hard again. I held her and let her cry. She needed the release. She'd had to be strong for so long, and today was the proverbial last straw. I rocked her, letting the heat and my closeness soothe her. When her tears stopped, she rubbed at her eyes, staring up at me.

"I love you too," she whispered. "So much, Asher. You're incredible, and I feel so much, I can't even express it."

I bent and kissed her. "Good. Then together, we'll figure everything out. You're not alone anymore, Rosie. Never again."

She nestled into me, and I smiled, finally relaxing.

They were here. They were safe.

And she loved me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ROSIE

I woke up feeling hot. Bundled in so many blankets I felt like a burrito. Asher was gone, his side of the bed cool, so I knew he'd been up for a while. He obviously wanted to make sure I was warm without him. I preferred his hot skin next to mine, but it was still nice to wake up and have my first thought not of being chilled.

I sat up, looking around. A glance at the clock told me it was past ten. I never slept this late.

Then again, I was rarely home on a Tuesday.

The other thought absent was the dread of going in and facing Ms. Wells. Untangling myself from the blankets, I padded over to the window, opening the blinds. It was still snowing, the world outside covered in white, the tree branches laden with snow and ice, bending under the weight they carried.

I got ready, dressing in leggings and a cozy sweatshirt. Asher hadn't packed a lot, but I could make do. It was only for a few days.

The thought of that made me sad, but I tamped down the feelings. I was here now.

I found Asher and AJ stretched out on the rug in front of the fireplace, the flames dancing behind the glass. Between them was the checkerboard, and they looked thoughtful as I crouched between them.

“Good morning.”

I received two enthusiastic responses. AJ was thrilled to be back at the condo and with Asher. He talked and grinned for five minutes. Asher waited his turn, then drew me close and kissed me. “Hello, my love. You look better.”

“I feel better. Lazy.”

“No. Long overdue. I made coffee.”

I stood and stretched. I saw how Asher’s gaze followed the hem of the sweatshirt lifting and exposing my skin. His eyes gleamed, and I shook my head. “Behave.”

I got a cup of coffee as AJ jumped to his feet. “I won! I beat Asher! Momma, I hardly ever beat him!”

Asher stood, laughing, and shook his hand. “Good game.”

AJ nodded. “You too.”

Asher ruffled his hair. “Go get dressed. I’m gonna talk your momma into making pancakes.”

AJ scampered away, and Asher came into the kitchen. I poured him a cup of coffee, and he sat at the counter.

“Pancakes?” I asked with a smile.

“And sausage,” he said with a decisive nod. “I took it out of the freezer for you.”

“How helpful.”

“I know.” He studied me. “You slept well. I’m pleased.”

“You rather wore me out.”

He’d made love to me twice before I fell asleep, once hard and fast in the shower and once in the bed, slowly, sweetly, making me come twice.

He grinned. “My favorite job.”

My smile faded at the word, but he shook his head. “I spoke with my lawyer. Wells had no grounds to fire you. It’s being handled.”

“Handled?”

“Sam is friends with the owner of your company. He called him this morning. You are free to return to work. Ms. Wells will not be there.” He took a sip of coffee. “If you want to go back. If not, there is a nice severance package for you.”

“I have to work.”

He lifted his eyebrows but said nothing.

“I do,” I insisted. “Rent, food, clothes. They all cost.”

He nodded.

“What about her?”

“Yours wasn’t the only complaint. It was by far the most serious. Turns out she is the daughter of a friend who called in a favor. Her résumé looks awesome, but it’s all a pack of lies. She’s great at manipulation. He is ‘moving her along.’”

“Oh. Good. I don’t know why she disliked me so much.”

“Because you were up for her position, and she knew it. She wanted you out of there so you couldn’t show her up.”

I gaped at him. “I had no idea. I’m not qualified...” I trailed off.

“Your old boss thought you were. He thought you were the perfect person to take his place. He recommended you.” He smiled. “She disliked what you represented. A threat.”

Her dislike made sense now. I didn’t like it, but now I understood it.

“The office is closed for the rest of the week. You can work from here if you want, or you can take the rest of the week off—your choice.”

“Wow.”

“I have connections, and I will use them to make your life easier.” He looked fierce. “I will do anything to make your life easier.”

I blinked and set down my coffee. “I think I have pancakes to make.”

He slid off the stool and rounded the counter. “Too much?”

“I’m not used to it, I suppose. Being cared for. That’s my job with AJ.”

“I can help with that, but you are mine to care for.” He kissed me, holding me tight and commanding my mouth until I was lost to everything but him. “Mine,” he repeated. “Got it?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Good.” He dropped another kiss on my nose, rubbing it affectionately with his. “Now, make me pancakes, woman. I’m depleted.”

I grabbed a bowl, smiling.

I was rather depleted as well.

The snow finished falling late that night. The next evening, I watched the plows still hard at work with the long task of clearing the roads from the floor-to-ceiling windows of Asher’s condo. The wind had died, but it remained cold. All day, the sun had glinted off the snow, looking pretty but dangerous. It was treacherous with the hidden ice and the below-normal temperatures. They were still asking people to stay home and off the streets.

I had managed to get through to the super in my building, but he told me that the heat was still out. The electricity had come back about an hour before I called. *“It’s cold, Rosie,” he said. “If you have a warm place, stay there. I’ll let you know when it comes back. And I’m worried the electricians will shut down again. Stay safe.”*

I hung up, knowing I had to move. Joe and his wife did their best, but if the owner of the building wasn’t willing to fix the main issues, what they could do was patchwork. I couldn’t keep living with a small space heater and a prayer.

I sighed as I looked out at the snow-covered city. I feared for those homeless. I was grateful not to be one of them. Yet I worried.

Asher came behind me, his reflection a tall shadow that hovered over me. “You look very serious, Rosie.”

I shook my head. “Just looking at all the snow. Where will they put it all?”

“They have dumping places, plus a couple of the stations use melting machines. Some goes down the sewers, and the rest is piled at corners and on boulevards.”

“I don’t remember ever seeing this much snow before.”

He hummed in agreement, pulling me back to his chest and wrapping his arms around me.

“There is a huge amount.”

“Did you get hold of Suzy?”

“Yes. They’re all fine. Hunkered down and safe. She was relieved to find out you were here with me. She was worried.”

I patted his hand. “I’m relieved too.”

He held me tighter. “Not as much as me. I can’t stand the thought of you cold, scared, and on your own.”

“I’ve done it for a long time.”

“Not anymore.”

I stared out at the white-covered city. But I would have to. I had to go back to the apartment and figure out my life.

“What?” he asked, spinning me around. “What do you mean, go back?”

I sighed, realizing I had muttered my thoughts out loud.

“It’s where we live, Asher. Today was lovely. I’ll stay tomorrow too if that is okay, then we have to go home. I have to figure out what is going on with my job, make sure everything is okay at the apartment, and keep going with life.”

I had been thoroughly spoiled the past couple of days. Napping, eating, watching movies. Reading. Comfortable and safe. It had been wonderful. Amazing. But it was time to get back to reality.

“You can’t.”

“Pardon me?” I asked, confused. Why was he so upset?

He paced in front of me, back and forth, his steps fast, his face like thunder. He stopped mid-pace and met my eyes. He was determined. Serious. I suddenly realized the businessman had appeared.

“Do not ask me to take you back there.”

“All right,” I said quietly. “I’ll take the bus.”

He gripped my arms. “You cannot go back and live there.”

“Asher, I have no choice. It is what I can afford.”

“You do have a choice.”

“Asher, if this is about—”

He cut me off with his mouth on mine. He kissed me senseless. Until I was clutching his shoulders, kissing him back with the same intensity he was devouring me with.

He pulled back. “*That* is what this is about. You aren’t going back there because you and AJ are staying here with me.” He shook me gently. “Don’t you see, Rosie? This is where you belong. With me. Where I can see you. Feel you. Where I know you’re safe. I can’t begin to think of you back there in that cold little apartment, wondering and worrying if your lights will go on. If you have heat.”

“We’ve made do before.”

Again, he shook me. “You don’t have to ‘make do’ anymore. Ever.”

“Asher, it’s so fast. You can’t possibly think this is a good idea.”

He leaned close. “It’s the best idea I have ever had.”

“You’re overstepping.”

“I’m aware. But I’m not stopping.”

“Your sister—”

“Agrees. She can’t believe I haven’t moved you in already.”

“AJ—”

“Can be taken to day care every day and picked up. By me. You. Someone I hire. He loves it here, so you can’t use him as an excuse.”

“I’m not trying to find excuses. I’m trying to point out...” I waved my hand, trailing off. I wasn’t sure what I was trying to point out. Then I remembered my argument.

“We’ve only known each other a short time. What if we’re not compatible?”

He hauled me back to his chest and kissed me again, his tongue doing things to my mouth that should be illegal.

“Stop it.” I slapped his chest. “You’re clouding my head.”

He pressed his forehead to mine. “We are compatible. We were meant for each other. That is why I went to the store. That is why you named your son Asher. He hid that day because that was what was supposed to happen. I was meant to find you. You were meant to be mine.”

I searched his gaze, seeing only truth and longing in it.

“Asher,” I whispered, frightened. Scared he was right, terrified he was wrong.

“Describe your life to me in two words,” he said, his gaze intense.

I frowned at the abrupt shift in conversation. “Hard. Rewarding.”

“Because of AJ?”

“Yes. He is worth all the struggles.”

He nodded. “Ask me.”

“Okay, describe your life in two words.”

“Desolate. Solitary.”

I felt my eyes widen. “What?”

“I’ve always held back from everyone. Even Suzy and Bonnie. I kept a little piece of myself locked away. But I can’t do that anymore. Not with you. And I realized every time you walk out that damn door, I hate it. I loathe it. I had no idea how

lonely I was until you came into my life. How empty my world was. I had everything money could buy and nothing my heart needed to live.” He paused, swallowing. “Don’t leave, Rosie. Stay with me. Make this your home. Our home. When you and AJ are here, that is exactly what this place is. Home.”

“Asher,” I began, my voice thick.

“I love you. I love you both. I don’t want to be without you. I want you here when I come home. I want to know you’re safe. I want to be the one to take AJ to school and pick him up. I want us to be a family. I want to build a family with you. Stay here with me and make it happen, Rosie.”

My head was swimming with his sweet words. He slipped an arm around my waist, tugging me close. He pressed his lips to my forehead. “I want to look after you. Both of you. Nothing would make me happier.”

“I have to work, to pull my weight,” I protested.

“Let me carry it for a while, Rosie. Lean on me, and let me show you how good life can be. Let me spoil you,” he murmured against my skin. “Marry me and make me the happiest man on earth. Stay.” His sigh was a warm breath across my forehead. “Please.”

I tilted up my head. “*Marry you?*”

“I want it all with you. Marriage, babies, love. I want you forever.”

“I love you.”

He smiled. “Is that a yes?”

I stared at him.

He ran a finger down my cheek. “I told you that I was your unspoken Christmas wish, Rosie. But you know what? You are my *life* wish. Everything I wanted, everything I needed but had no idea how to ask for. Please—” he bent, his mouth brushing mine “—make my wish come true.”

I flung my arms around his neck.

“Yes.”

EPILOGUE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

ASHER

I glanced at my watch, seeing it was almost three in the afternoon. I had a meeting with my personal accountant. She was a new hire, extremely efficient, and very tough on my expenditures. She also looked after my company expense reports and seemed to take great delight in questioning my submissions. I enjoyed our biweekly sparring.

As soon as the meeting was over, it would be time to pick up AJ. He was a highlight in my days now. Always happy to see me, full of stories and laughter. Then tonight, I was taking my wife out on a date. I kept Maureen's nannies busy with overtime, using them at least twice a week for date nights. AJ loved it—especially one of them. George was his favorite, the two of them bonding over dinosaurs and Legos.

A knock on my door brought me out of my musings. “Come in,” I called.

She walked in, bringing with her a thick file, a calculator, and a stern expression. She sat across from me, crossing her legs, setting her files on the edge of my desk. “Mr. Hart,” she greeted me.

I couldn't help but stare at her. Dressed in a pale green silk blouse and black pencil skirt, she was extremely sexy. Her hair was up, wispy tendrils around her ears and neck. Emerald earrings glittered in her lobes. Her wedding rings sparkled in the sunlight, the diamonds catching the light.

I should never have hired her—she was far too much of a distraction to me.

But one I loved having around.

“Mrs. Hart,” I replied in a low voice.

She pursed her lips, making me smile.

“May I remind you we are at the office?” she said tartly. “That is not an office voice.”

Rosie insisted on proper behavior during business hours. I liked to throw the rules out the window on a regular basis.

I stood, rounding the desk. I bent over her chair, resting my hands on the arms of it and trapping her there. I stared down at her. "I'm aware," I murmured. "But you are too sexy today, Rosie, my love."

"Behave," she said, but her voice was breathless.

I bent and captured her mouth, kissing her deeply. She whimpered, wrapping a hand around my neck and holding me tight. I enjoyed the closeness, the way her soft scent wrapped around me. The feel of her mouth under mine. The taste of her.

I drew back and dropped a kiss to her nose, then sat in the chair across from her. "How was your day?"

She blinked, patting her hair. "Good. It was good."

"Ready to go get our boy?"

"We're not done yet. We haven't even started."

From the look of the sticky tabs on my expense report, I had a feeling I was in for a good tongue-lashing. I settled in to enjoy it. I did love it when she chewed me out.

"Let's begin, then. I want to finish, go home, get AJ to bed, and finish something else."

I smirked as she opened the file, her cheeks flushing with color. I loved the fact that I could still make her blush.

"Business first. You cannot claim the car you bought me as a business expense."

"Why? It's for you to use for business."

"Because you insist on a driver or driving me yourself, Asher. You can't write both off."

I waved off her concern. "Then strike it."

"It was an unnecessary expense personally as well. You should return it."

"It's not a scarf, Rosie. It was a gift. You're keeping it. You won't drive any of my cars, so I got you one you are

comfortable with.”

She snorted. “I’d be comfortable with a Mazda or Hyundai. I don’t need a Mercedes SUV.”

“I thought you did. Case closed. Next.”

“The business trip last month was anything but business.”

“I met with some people.”

“Accidentally. For drinks.” She eyed me over the file. “Not a scheduled meeting. And you talked zero business. I was there.”

“I meant to,” I protested. “But you looked so fucking sexy in that little sundress. It was hard to discuss business while trying to make sure my dick didn’t explode out of my shorts trying to get to you.”

It had been a fabulous break. Rosie, me, a private villa. Sun, sand, and time together. We hadn’t had a vacation since we got married. Our honeymoon was wonderful but brief. Then Suzy and her family flew down with AJ, and we met them in Florida and did Disney World and a cruise. It was a belated birthday gift for AJ as well as a family trip. It had been one of the happiest times of my life. When we came home, I started the adoption process to make AJ mine officially. He already was in every other sense.

I still loved it when I heard him call me Dad.

But last month, I had needed my wife alone, so I’d chartered a plane and flew us to the Bahamas. I shook hands with a few people. It was sort of business.

She blinked. “You can’t—”

“Take it out, then,” I chuckled. It was all my money, so I didn’t really care. “Next.”

“The chair in my office.”

“Office furnishings.”

“Only because you broke it while having sex with me in it.”

I waved my hand. “No one knows that. It stays.”

She huffed. “I’m unsure on the flowers you send me weekly.”

“I put some in the reception area as well. That is a real expense.”

“Fine.”

“Do whatever you want, Rosie. Leave them, include them. It’s all the same to me.”

She closed one file and opened another. “Now, your personal expenses.”

“Are fine.”

“You’re spending more than you have in the past on a consistent level.”

I began to laugh. “Rosie. Of course I am. I’m finally living. I’m spending it on you. AJ. *My family.*”

“You’re spoiling us.”

“Then my plan is working,” I replied. “Spoiling you makes me happy.”

“You should stay on a budget,” she argued. “Plan for the future. For unexpected expenses.”

“I’m certain I can cover any ‘unexpected expenses.’” I leaned close. “I make more in an hour than I spend in a week, Rosie. You know that.” I ran a finger down her cheek. “I know money still makes you nervous, but baby, we have a lot of it. More than we’ll ever spend, even if I bought you a car every week. If I never brought in another dollar, you will never have to worry about money again.”

“Still, I drew up a budget.” She handed me a file, the look on her face nervous.

I sat back, opening the folder, running my finger down the columns. All well-thought-out, all generous, although I noticed she had put a restriction on takeout meals, which made me grin. I liked to order in dinner and save her the work. She had done this before and I always refused, but I did like to humor her. She had added a “spur of the moment gifts”

column with such a low number I blinked. I wouldn't be paying attention to either of her "suggestions."

I tried not to laugh at her new additions and notes, frowning in confusion at one set of notes.

Reasons for budget planning:

Loss of wages.

Unexpected additional household expenses, such as: baby clothes, diapers, more childcare.

I was about to ask her why she had noted those items, when it hit my befuddled brain.

I froze, my gaze flying to meet hers. She held a small white tube in her hands that she passed to me. Two lines and the word "Pregnant" were in the small window.

Pregnant.

Rosie was pregnant.

Instantly, I was out of my chair and on my knees in front of her. "Really, my love?"

She nodded. "Really."

"Say it, Rosie. Tell me."

"I'm pregnant." She drew in a deep breath. "You're going to be a daddy again."

I wrapped her in my arms, holding her. Dropping hundreds of small kisses on her face. Pressing my mouth to hers, my tears mixing with hers. AJ was my son in every way that mattered, and now we were having a baby together.

"I'm about to overstep," I warned, pulling back, cupping her face. "And you're going to let me."

"Okay."

"No more working. You're staying home with this baby. With all our babies. I'm going to be around more. I can work from the condo. And we need to buy a house. With a yard. James and I can build a swing set. Can it be a girl, Rosie? I'd like a little girl."

She sniffled a little. “I can’t do much about that, but we’ll find out soon enough.” She swallowed. “I don’t want to work after the baby is born,” she confessed. “I had to with AJ because I had no choice, but this time—”

I cut her off. “You never have to work again. I’ll look after all of you. I’m going to be overstepping all the time now.”

“I know you will.”

“And you’ll let me.”

“Yes.”

I wrapped her in my arms. A baby. We were going to have a baby.

This was the best meeting of my life.

CHRISTMAS THE FOLLOWING YEAR

I held my son, cradling him in my arms. Only eight months old, Brandon was remarkably advanced. At least, I thought so. He was crawling, trying to walk. Jabbering nonstop at times. I pretended to understand everything he said. I thought he was pretty much perfect, aside from the crying and the pooping. He did more of the latter, it seemed. Rosie handled it far better than I did. On the nights he fussed, I sat with him nestled on my knee in a huge chair I had bought Rosie that she loved to read in. As I discovered one night, it was extremely comfortable, and I used it whenever I could. We talked for hours, me imparting wisdom, him grunting and gnawing on his fist as he absorbed everything I told him. AJ often joined us, and Rosie would find the three of us asleep, a blanket over us, one boy on each side of me in the large chair.

From the moment we had dragged in the tree, Brandon had been fascinated. The lights mesmerized him, and Rosie had started laying him down for his nap by the tree. He would stare at it, slowly falling asleep with the glow of the lights. Rosie played music all the time, and the sounds soothed him as well.

Rosie came in, carrying his bottle. She handed it to me with a smile. “How is he?” she asked, bending down and brushing a dark curl off his head.

“Good.” I patted the spot beside me, and she snuggled in with a sigh. “Tired?”

She rubbed her stomach, looking thoughtful. “This one is even more active than Brandon. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“You didn’t think it was possible to get pregnant again so quickly either.”

She sniffed. “You and your overactive libido. And determined sperm.”

I chuckled. “Fertile Myrtle, I think the doctor said.”

“Whatever it is, we are a dangerous combination. No sex for a year after this one.”

“Shit,” I muttered. “Don’t even joke about that.”

She laughed, pressing a kiss to my jaw. I captured her mouth and kissed her. “I can’t keep my hands off you for that long, Rosie. Ever.”

She settled her head against my shoulder.

“So, another boy,” I mused. We had decided to find out this time.

Rosie chuckled. “Yep. Your sister has girls. You have boys.”

“Maybe the next one.”

She tilted up her head. “Um...”

I grinned. “I bought us a big house, Rosie. We need to fill it.”

“It might be easier to move.”

I laughed, laying my hand on her stomach. “Whatever you want, baby. If you’re happy, I am.”

“I love you.”

I pressed a kiss to her head. “I love you.”

CHRISTMAS FOUR YEARS DOWN THE ROAD

I woke up, my hand reaching out for my wife, already sensing she wasn't there. I sat up, glancing at my phone. It was four a.m. We had gone to bed past midnight, getting everything ready for Christmas Day. Why was she already up?

I threw off the blankets, pulling on my robe, and went in search of her. I peeked into AJ's room, the boy who was trapped between being a child and growing into a kid, but his room was empty except for him. I stopped to pull up his blanket, unable to stop smiling when I noticed his favorite teddy from years ago tucked by his pillow.

I checked on Brandon, but he was sleeping, curled up under the blankets of the race car bed AJ had let him have once he decided he was "too old" for it. No kicking off the blankets for our son. He liked being warm too much.

Next door, Carter slumbered in his bed, a thumb in his mouth, a stuffie clutched in his other hand. I stopped for a moment, gazing down at him. Brandon had my dark hair and his mother's green eyes. Carter was the opposite. Rosie's hair color was evident in the curls, although it was a darker hue than hers. His eyes were my dark brown, and according to my wife, so was his impatient temperament. Our child liked to overstep on a daily basis. I could only imagine him as a teenager. I had a feeling gray hair was in my future far sooner than I ever expected.

I shut his door, listening. The house was silent, but downstairs, I saw the flicker of the fire reflecting on the walls, and I headed that way, thinking Rosie had come down to add something to the tree or maybe her back was hurting and she was resting on the sofa. She liked to lie there.

I found her in front of the tree, staring up at it. Her long hair hung down her back, the flames highlighting the red curls. She was in a fuzzy robe, a pillow under her butt. How she got

down, I had no idea. She mostly waddled and perched places these days. I wondered if she was stuck.

I crouched behind her, wrapping my arms around her, settling my hands on her tummy.

“Rosie, baby, it’s the middle of the night. Why are you down here?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Are you okay?” I rubbed her swollen belly. “Is our girl keeping you up?”

We were having a girl this time. I tried not to gloat about it, but it made me incredibly happy thinking about it. After Carter was born, we decided three was enough. Pregnancy was hard on Rosie, and I hated seeing her struggle. But as we discovered, one way or another, no matter what we did, we ended up pregnant—although this time, it took a few months longer than with the boys. When I found out it was a girl, I was ecstatic. I loved my boys, but I had always wanted a little girl who looked like Rosie whom I could spoil.

Rosie leaned back into me. “No, she is quiet tonight.”

“Getting ready for her grand entrance in a couple of weeks.”

“I suppose.”

Her voice was different. Thick.

“Rosie, my love, what is it?”

“It’s snowing outside.”

I glanced out the window. “Yes, it is.” I looked over her shoulder, seeing something clutched in her hands. “What is that?”

She held it up. “The scarf you gave me that first Christmas.”

“You still have that?”

“Yes. You gave it to me because you were worried about me being cold.” Her voice caught. “You were the first person who cared about me in so long.”

I held her a little closer. “Feeling sentimental?” I asked, pressing a kiss to her head. I loved her tender heart.

“I guess. Remembering how alone I always was all the time. How frightened that I would do something and not be a good parent to AJ or lose my job and mess us up. Not be able to provide for him. I was always scared.”

“You never showed it. You always were so brave.”

“I felt it. And then you came into our lives, and suddenly I wasn’t scared anymore. I had you. You and your generous heart and incredible love. You were larger-than-life. I kept thinking you’d disappear, but you kept getting better. Your love was—is—so wonderful.”

“Rosie,” I murmured, overcome by her words.

“For the first time that I could recall, I wasn’t afraid. Because of you. This scarf represented so much to me. I could never get rid of it. Every time I see it, I think of meeting you. How my life changed.” She leaned back and looked up into my eyes. “And the life I have now is so wonderful, so full. All because of you. You’re a wonderful husband and a fabulous father. I love you, Asher Hart. With everything in me. You are my world.”

I shook my head in wonder at her words. “You brought such joy to my life, Rosie. You have given me so much I didn’t know I was missing. Your love and goodness. Your sweetness. I fell in love with you because of *how* you loved. Completely. Without reservation. I love you right back.” I bent and kissed her.

She nestled back into me, and we sat looking at the lights on the tree. She stiffened then melted back into me with a small sigh and a low laugh.

“I have a last-minute Christmas gift for you.”

I chuckled. “I don’t need anything.”

“You’re gonna want this.” She looked up. “My water just broke. I think your daughter decided it was time to meet you.” Her eyes went wide as a contraction hit her. “Now.”

“Holy shit.”

Two hours later, I held my daughter. Tiny fuzzy red curls were all over her head. I swore I already saw freckles on her skin. She'd entered the world screaming loudly, demanding attention, and angry at leaving the warm nest she'd been encased in for so long. She didn't stop crying until they placed her in my arms.

I fell as hard and as fast for her as I did her mother. All our children inspired a protectiveness that I never knew I had in me. But what I felt for our daughter was ten times that fierceness. I glanced over at my wife, who was watching us with sleepy eyes. We'd barely made it to the hospital this time. I had hardly gotten a gown and cap on and she was crowning. Moments later, Daphne appeared, and I hadn't stopped smiling.

I stood, sliding her into her mother's waiting arms. “Wait until the boys wake up and find out they have a sister for Christmas.” I tucked a curl behind Rosie's ear. “Are you certain you want to go home later today?”

She smiled. “There is nothing they can do for me here, and I hate hospitals. Besides, I don't want to miss dinner.”

I chuckled. “We could do it tomorrow.”

“No. Today is Christmas. I want to be with my family.”

“Highly unusual, the doc says.”

“I don't care. Even he agreed I'd be fine at home. So, I'm going.”

“I'm going to overstep and spoil you. Make you stay in bed and be catered to.”

“Whatever. Just take me home.”

I bent and kissed her. “Okay, my love. I'll take you home this afternoon. As long as you sleep now. Suzy has the boys, and James will bring the girls over once they wake up.”

I took Daphne from her and sat down. “We’ll be right here.”

“Are you going to let anyone else hold her?”

“Of course,” I scoffed. “In a month or so.”

Rosie smiled. “I love you.”

I stood and kissed her again. “Thank you for my daughter, Rosie Hart. Merry Christmas, baby.”

“Merry Christmas, Asher.”

She fell asleep, and I stared down in fascination at my little girl.

Our daughter.

I had Rosie. A great, full life. Three sons. The girl I’d longed for. My little alphabet, as Rosie called our kids. I now had ABC and D. I was good with that.

“Merry Christmas, little one. Welcome to the world. I’ve been waiting for you, and I can’t wait to show you everything.”

A tear splashed on my hand, and I realized I was crying.

My final wish had come true.

And life was perfect.

Thank you so much for reading THE WISH LIST. If you are so inclined, reviews are always welcome by me at your retailer.

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But today is not that day.

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My reader group, Melanie's Minions—love you all.

Matthew—always and forever. That will never change.

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ABOUT M MORELAND



M Moreland is a pen name for NYT/WSJ/USAT international bestselling author Melanie Moreland. She loves writing contemporary romance and needed to find a home for her *bit of naughty along with the nice*.

Insta-Spark collection from M Moreland are complete standalone reads with one thing in common - lots of sweetness and a guaranteed HEA. Instant attraction, little angst - love and happiness abounds.

Melanie lives a happy and content life in a quiet area of Ontario with her beloved husband of thirty-plus years and their rescue cat, Amber. Nothing means more to her than her friends and family, and she cherishes every moment spent with them.

While seriously addicted to coffee, and highly challenged with all things computer-related and technical, she relishes baking, cooking, and trying new recipes for people to sample. She loves to throw dinner parties, and enjoys traveling, here and abroad, but finds coming home is always the best part of any trip.

Melanie loves stories, especially paired with a good wine, and enjoys skydiving (free falling over a fleck of dust) extreme snowboarding (falling down stairs) and piloting her own helicopter (tripping over her own feet.) She's learned happily ever afters, even bumpy ones, are all in how you tell the story.

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