



Christmas might be coming, but that doesn't
mean everything is merry and bright.

UNWRAPPED

CUNNINGHAM SECURITY



BOOK TEN

A.K. EVANS

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UNWRAPPED
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Cunningham Security: Book 10

A.K. Evans



UNWRAPPED

A.K. EVANS

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ONE
.....

Lexi

“Everyone is going to love this.”

With my arms wrapped firmly around her, Elle replied, “I hope so. I’m really excited about it. I can’t even remember the last time I did this; it’s been so long.”

Loosening my hold on her, I pulled back and said, “It’s been a few years, but you have the three best reasons for taking your time off.”

Elle smiled brightly at me. “Speaking of which, I’ve got to get home, so I can take care of a few things the boys need for school tomorrow. I’ll see you later this week for Thanksgiving, right?”

I nodded. “Yes, we’ll all be there. As excited as I am, this week is going to be madness.”

“It is, but I’m also kind of looking forward to it. Are you heading out now, too?” she asked.

Shaking my head, I answered, “Not yet. I’m going to grab Cruz a cup of coffee before I go.”

“Okay. I’ll catch you later, then.”

With that, Elle turned and made her way to the exit. Leaving everything but my wallet at the table where Elle and I had been seated, I went in the opposite direction and up toward the counter, where I ordered Cruz a coffee from the place that had been pivotal in bringing us together. After all

these years, Cruz and I still frequented Colvert's whenever possible.

While I waited for Cruz's coffee, I made my way back to my table, so I could pack up my things. I did it with a smile on my face, feeling great about the conversation I'd just had with Elle.

It was Sunday morning, just a few days before the Thanksgiving holiday. Elle and I had met to go over some last-minute details for her upcoming performance. She hadn't just randomly decided to go on a tour, though. She was going to be performing once in about three weeks at Big Lou's Restaurant and Saloon for a holiday fundraiser.

The holiday season was upon us, and I could already feel the excitement in the air. Of course, a good chunk of that came from my own home, but it also extended beyond that.

Elle had been approached by Big Lou, and he had all but begged her to be part of a holiday fundraiser, knowing just how much she was loved by the locals. Elle hadn't performed in years, so this was bound to be a big event. It was also the reason she'd agreed to perform. She wanted to do her part to help those less fortunate this year.

I got my things packed up, sat down in my seat, and allowed my thoughts to drift even further. So much had changed since Elle and I had met roughly ten years ago. She'd gone from being an acquaintance to a trusted friend, and now she was my sister-in-law.

We'd both gotten married, and our lives had taken turns neither of us had anticipated all those years ago. At least, I knew I hadn't expected any of it.

"Lexi!"

I glanced up at the counter, saw Cruz's coffee being held up, and made my way there to grab it.

Once I had it in my hand, I felt myself grow excited. As much as I had enjoyed the break this morning, I was looking forward to getting home. It hadn't even been a full two hours since I'd been away, but I missed my family.

So, I quickly returned to my table, pulled out my phone, and send a text off to Cruz, letting him know I was leaving and would be home shortly.

That's when it happened.

I hadn't intended to eavesdrop, but the words that were spoken had forced my ears to perk up and listen to what was being said.

"I'm not sure how we'll recover." My eyes glanced toward the table and saw the man who had his back to me was sitting across from another man, who was wearing a stoic expression. "We were preparing for a big weekend after Thanksgiving. It's always our best weekend of the year, Tom, and the entire place has been ransacked."

"I'm so sorry, Bryan," Tom said as I sat back down. "Christine told me she spoke with Meredith, who said you guys have so much to clean up and repair. You know we'll do whatever we can to help you."

There was a moment of silence before Bryan returned, "We appreciate that. But it's the holiday this week, and no matter how much help we have, we'll never get everything fixed up and ready to go before next weekend. Even if we could manage to pull off repairing the broken glass and everything that was damaged inside the store, we'd never be able to get enough back in inventory to sell. Meredith works on her stuff all year long. It's months and months of hand-crafted items we were preparing to sell."

"I wish there was something more we could do. What have the police said?" Tom asked.

"There's not much to say at this point," Bryan answered. "They're doing what they can to locate the person responsible, but our place was the third one hit last week. We aren't the only ones who are going to feel the sting this year. I'm just glad our two oldest kids know the truth about Santa. At least they'll understand why they won't be getting much for Christmas this year. Of course, our youngest doesn't understand, and it breaks my heart to think we're going to have to crush her spirit this year. Times were already tough

this year for us. This break-in and robbery have set us back even further.”

My heart broke.

As much as I wanted to say something or find a way to fix what had happened to this poor man and his family, I didn't trust myself to speak. I quickly grabbed my bag, Cruz's coffee, and walked out.

On my way to my car, I couldn't stop myself from recalling the conversation I'd just overheard. Maybe I didn't know all of the details, but I knew enough. And as awful as it was that someone's business had been robbed, that wasn't what bothered me the most.

It was the kids.

It was about the defeat I heard in Bryan's voice when he revealed he was going to have to share the truth about Santa with his youngest child. It was about his older children already knowing the truth and them needing to accept the family had fallen on unexpected and unfortunate times.

That magic would be gone for those kids. All of them. The things that made Christmas special for children would cease to exist for them, and that hurt my heart, especially when I was on my way back to mine.

Images of four gorgeous faces flashed in my mind, immediately bringing me a sense of peace.

My babies.

My girls.

Olivia, Natalie, Piper, and Maci.

Christmas was their favorite, and it was safe to say, next to each of their birthdays, Christmas had become the next best thing for both Cruz and me. Our joy came from seeing the happiness and excitement on our daughters' faces. I dreaded the day they wouldn't feel that any longer. I never wanted it to change.

As I pulled into my driveway, I felt sorry for Bryan and his family. I didn't know them from the next family, but I couldn't

say I didn't understand the pain and anguish in his voice. The idea of having to disappoint your children was devastating.

Though it would have been easy for me to allow this news to put a damper on my mood, I had to turn it around, because my family was waiting inside. And my girls were just as observant as their father. If I wasn't happy and smiling, they'd know something was wrong, and their little minds didn't need to be concerned about any of this.

So, I took in a deep breath, turned off my car, and closed the garage door behind me. Just like I did every other time, I smiled inwardly at closing that garage door. To this day, I still hadn't forgotten how much grief Cruz gave me about pulling my car into the garage at his place so many years ago, grumbling that he always had to go out and do it.

In that moment, I was grateful for that memory, because it instantly turned my mood around.

I walked into the house through the garage and wasn't surprised to see my guy moving in my direction. His face lit up the second his eyes connected with mine, and when he was just inches away from me, he slipped an arm around my waist, pulled me close, and pressed a kiss to my lips. "Hi, princess."

"Hey, captain."

"How was your meeting?" he asked.

"Good. We got the details figured out, and I've got a couple of things to take care of, but there's nothing pressing. At this point, it all comes down to Elle just needing to be ready to perform in a few weeks," I shared, holding the coffee cup up for him.

Cruz's smile grew as he took the cup from me. "Thanks. Elle will knock it out of the park. Everybody is going to love it."

"Yeah, I think so, too. Where are the girls?"

A strange look washed over Cruz's face as he loosened his hold on me and took half a step back. I immediately knew he was up to something.

“They sent you out here, didn’t they?” I asked him.

His lips parted, indicating he was going to say something, but he quickly reconsidered and pressed them together again. After giving himself a moment to rethink his response, he said, “You know how persuasive they can be.”

I didn’t have to think twice about it. I already knew where this was heading. I closed my eyes, shook my head, and let out a sigh. “They aren’t masters of persuasion, Cruz. You’re just incapable of saying no to them.”

He shrugged. “They’re my girls.”

Just like that. As though it explained it all, he said those three words. I’d heard them at least a hundred times over the course of the years. And while it might not have been enough of an explanation for anyone else, it was more than enough for me.

Cruz was, by far, the best father to our girls. He was sweet, gentle, and wildly overprotective of them.

There had been a time, particularly after our youngest, Maci, was born, when I wondered if he was upset about not having a boy. That thought lasted all of five minutes, though.

Cruz didn’t care. He loved his daughters like nothing I could have ever imagined, and he wasn’t afraid to admit they had him wrapped around their fingers from the moment they were born.

Now, he lived in a house that had more pink, purple, sparkle, and glitter than any one man like him could have ever dreamed of, and he loved it. He adored them, and they felt the same about him. No matter what was happening, they knew they could count on him to fix anything. Not just repairing a toy or unraveling a knotted-up necklace, but everything else in their lives.

If they were worried or scared about something, they went to him.

If they were excited or happy about anything, they went to him.

They came to me for all the same things, too, but it was different. What they got from me in those instances was completely different than what they got from him, and I loved that for them and Cruz.

Of course, there was the one thing our girls sought him out for when they'd never come to me. If there was something they believed they'd ask me for that they'd get an unfavorable answer, then they went straight to him. He was the softie, and they did their best to take advantage of it.

I couldn't really be mad about it, though. Because every time I witnessed the bond they had, it melted my heart. Sure, I'd pretend to be offended, but deep down, they all knew I was joking.

And the truth of the matter was that the things they asked for were harmless. If it was something he knew he couldn't give them for one reason or another, he'd find a way to explain things and compromise with them. He always let them down gently, in a way they never even realized it was happening.

This situation wasn't one of those situations. This situation was one where they wanted what they wanted, and Cruz wanted to give it to them just as much.

I dropped my head back and muttered, "I really can't ever leave you alone with them, can I?"

"You should have seen their faces," he told me.

I cocked an eyebrow. "You know, I wonder if you're going to have that same reaction to giving them whatever their hearts desire when they're ready for their first car and have opinions about which one they want. Better yet, how will you react when they bring home a boyfriend?"

His eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to ruin the whole Christmas season?"

I let out a laugh, pressed a soft kiss to his lips, and apologized. "I'm sorry, captain. No talk of boyfriends yet. But I will note, we haven't even gotten through Thanksgiving, which is why I can't understand what you agreed to with them while I was out."

Cruz's mood instantly improved. With his cup of coffee in one hand, he took my bag from me and set it down before he linked the fingers of his other hand with mine. Then he led me into the family room.

I took one look at the sight in front of me and sighed. Four beautiful faces were littered with anticipation. "So, I heard we're decorating for Christmas early this year," I declared.

In an instant, they charged forward, screaming with delight.

"We knew you could do it, Daddy," Natalie bubbled. "Olivia reminded us that you always keep your promises."

I shifted my gaze to my husband's handsome face. "Making promises to our girls again. What if you couldn't keep that promise?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes as he reached down and lifted Piper in his arms. After pressing a kiss to her cheek, he held her face in one of his hands and said, "Like you could have ever turned this face down."

Maci was tugging on my leg, so I picked her up and kissed her cheek, much like Cruz had done with Piper. I look down at my oldest daughters and asked, "Are you planning to help until everything is finished?"

Olivia and Natalie nodded at me.

"That means cleaning everything up when we're done," I noted.

Their eyes slid to their father's, hoping for him to inject the fun back in that I'd just sucked out of it for them. I had not a doubt in my mind he was going to cave. "Well, we'll have to see what time it is when we get this all finished. I mean, we've got a lot of decorations, so it might be late by the time we finish. And we've got school tomorrow, don't we? We have to make sure we get baths and are in bed on time."

The girls returned their attention to me. "Yeah, Mom. We have so many decorations. It might be late," Olivia pointed out.

Just like that.

He gave them what they wanted without even blinking.

On the bright side, he had set the stage for a seamless night with bath time and bedtime.

“Alright, so what are we starting with first?”

“The tree!” Maci squealed.

At that, I set my daughter down on her feet and gave kisses to Olivia and Natalie before standing and doing the same with Piper, who was still in her daddy’s arms.

“Are you ready to get started?” I asked her.

Piper was my sweet, shy girl. Where her sisters did everything in their power to keep us on our toes, she was the opposite. Even at three years old, she wasn’t the terror I would have expected her to be.

“Yes, Mama.”

Cruz gave her another kiss on the cheek before he set her down on her feet. Then he wrapped his arm around my back, allowing his hand to settle on my opposite shoulder. He curled me in toward his chest, pressed a kiss to my temple, and whispered, “You love them just as much as I do, even if you try to be tough.”

I wouldn’t try to deny it, because it was the truth. So, I nodded. “I do.”

The next thing I knew, our house was a mess of Christmas decorations. Garland, tinsel, ornaments, and stockings were everywhere. It was partly the reason I’d insisted on the girls helping to clean up before we’d even started the whole project. But aside from the mess, our home was filled with a day of laughter, excitement, and love.

Nothing could have convinced me to trade it for the world.

Especially not once I recalled the conversation I’d heard earlier that morning and remembered it wouldn’t always be this way.

There would come a time when Cruz and I would be standing by ourselves in our home, wondering where the time had gone and wishing we could go right back to these very moments in time.

TWO

Levi

“I can take them.”

Squeezing my arms a little bit tighter around Elle’s waist, I shook my head. “It’s okay, sunshine. I’ll take them on my way into the office, so you can spend some time this morning working on your set list.”

My wife’s eyes danced with excitement. “I can’t believe I’m going to be doing this again for the first time in so long.”

“I can’t wait, either. I’m looking forward to seeing you perform, and it’ll be nice to have a night out together without our rowdy bunch.”

“Dad! We’re ready!”

Elle giggled at the sound of our oldest son’s voice ringing through the air with his declaration. “Looks like you better go, or you’ll have a mutiny on your hands. You know what happens if we give them any amount of time together unsupervised.”

I didn’t need the warning. We’d already experienced enough shenanigans with our kids that had left a lasting impression.

Our three boys—Kash, Ryder, and Milo—forced me to feel just a hint of sympathy for my parents. When I was Kash’s age, I hadn’t realized what my two younger brothers and I had put our parents through. There was no question they’d had

their work cut out for them, and I was now just a bit concerned I'd set Elle up for a lifetime of this.

Though, if I had to guess, as tough as it had been for my parents when we were younger, I couldn't say either of them were upset about where my brothers and I had wound up. And when it came to the grandchildren they now had, my parents were even happier.

So, I had a feeling this was just the way it was meant to be. And the way I saw it, I could have wound up like my brothers. While Zane had a mix of both, Cruz had four girls. I didn't know what I would have done with myself if I'd had even one little girl who looked like her mother.

Counting my blessings, grateful for the way my life had turned out, I called out, "I'll be right there, Kash." Returning my attention to Elle, I said, "I've got to go."

"I'll get the boys after school, and we'll see you when you get home from work tonight," she replied.

"I'm looking forward to that more than I could ever tell you." I gave her a kiss and squeezed her one last time. "I love you, sunshine."

"I love you, too."

With that, I took off and loaded my boys up into the car.

Just as I was about to pull out of the driveway, Milo declared, "Hey, that's not fair. I want one!"

I stopped driving, turned around, and asked, "What's the problem?"

Milo pointed at Ryder, forcing my eyes in that direction. I shouldn't have been surprised to see what I saw, but for some strange reason, I was. Ryder had decided not to put his lunchbox in his backpack, and he'd already opened it to see what his mom had packed for him.

Technically, that wasn't all.

Ryder had also decided there was no need to wait until it was time for lunch at school to eat what was inside said lunchbox.

When it came to our boys, I wholeheartedly believed all three of them were the perfect blend of Elle and me. But there was one thing they'd inherited from their mother that I wished they wouldn't have—her affinity for junk food. If it wasn't for the fact I was in the house, I was convinced my boys would never put a vegetable in their mouths. And if there was one thing I could say, as much as Elle didn't hesitate to introduce them to her sweet tooth, she did insist on making sure they ate well-balanced diets.

It seemed that with today being Tuesday and the last day of school before the Thanksgiving holiday break, Elle wanted our sons to have a treat with their lunches. Today, it happened to be pretzel rods dipped in chocolate with edible treats used to make a turkey face and candy corn used to make the fan of feathers behind the turkey's face.

Ryder was in the midst of plucking the candy corn off his turkey, and Milo was feeling left out.

“Ryder?” I called.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Why are you eating that now? Your mom made you breakfast this morning. Didn't you eat it?”

He nodded. “Yes. But Mom told me there was a surprise waiting in my lunchbox, so I wanted to see what it was.”

“Right. So, seeing it and eating it are two different things. Care to explain why you're eating that now and not at lunchtime?” I questioned him.

“It's so good, Dad,” Ryder explained, clearly believing that was enough of a valid reason.

My brows shot up, and I sent a stern look his way. “Put it back in the lunchbox now. You can have it only after you've eaten the real food in your lunch later at school. Do you understand?”

The disappointment was written all over his face in an instant. “Yes,” he mumbled as he returned the pretzel to his lunchbox.

“Are we ready to go?” I asked them.

“I want a snack now,” Milo insisted.

“You had four pancakes and a pile of eggs for breakfast not even thirty minutes ago,” I pointed out.

“We’re going to be late, Dad,” Kash warned me.

I turned around, noted the time, and sighed. We couldn’t waste another minute, or we really were going to be late. How could I be this exhausted when it was so early in the morning?

Twenty-five minutes later, feeling a little less sane, I’d arrived at work. And just over an hour after that, I was standing in the conference room at Cunningham Security with my entire team after having just called a meeting.

As I looked around the table, I found myself feeling nothing but grateful.

It was Tuesday, just two days before the Thanksgiving holiday, and they were all here. Nothing had stopped any of them from doing the job we’d all been doing from the start. Though we were all married with families now, we were just as committed to the work we did. It was important, maybe even more so, now that we had children who’d be growing up in the town where we’d helped the local police department to investigate certain crimes.

Windsor, Wyoming, wasn’t a town riddled with excessive crime, and it was a great place to live, have a family, and raise children. Bad people were everywhere, though, and Windsor was no exception. That’s why my team and I did what we could to make Windsor just a bit safer for our families and the folks in town.

Unfortunately, as much as I would have liked the reason for me calling the meeting to be related to some upcoming holiday party or other good news, it wasn’t going to be the case today. On the last day of work scheduled for the week, I was going to have to deliver the news I’d just received to my team.

Worst of all, I had a feeling they knew there was something bad coming. I could feel the tension in the air.

“What’s going on, Levi?” Cruz asked, eager to know what was going on and simply cutting to the chase.

The room was silent as they all waited for my response. I sighed and revealed, “It looks like we’ve got a Scrooge on our hands.”

I received a couple of odd looks, and it was Dom who spoke. “A Scrooge? What are you talking about?”

Shaking my head, I apologized, “Sorry if it feels like I’m not making any sense. I don’t know why I said that. Elle has already gotten the Christmas movies started at our house, and the boys seem to only be interested in the villains at this point. If they try to act out the attempted robbery scene from *Home Alone* one more time, I might lose my mind.”

“Probably your house in the process, too,” Pierce noted.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t remind me. I’m convinced my kids are going to make sure Tyson’s family’s construction business never ceases to have work.”

The guys laughed, which helped to ease a bit of the tension in the room.

Following a beat of silence, I shared, “I got a call from Detective Jackson Baines this morning.”

“Fuck,” Lorenzo clipped at the same time Trent hissed, “Damn it.”

The looks on everyone else’s faces mirrored those sentiments. They all knew what a call from Detective Jackson Baines of the WPD meant.

“They need our help,” I started. “As it turns out, there have been several robberies over the last week or so.”

“What kind?” Gunner asked.

“None have been residential yet, which makes me feel marginally better,” I replied. “At this point, it’s only been businesses. Sadly, it’s been the small businesses. Ones that can’t afford the losses.”

“Shit. Lexi told me about this,” Cruz bit out.

“What? How does she know?” Dom asked.

With a shake of his head, he explained, “She was at Colvert’s on Sunday with Elle, and she overheard a conversation at a table behind her when she was waiting for a coffee for me after Elle left. It bothered her so much, because one of the two men had gone on to state how he and his wife worked all year long to prepare for the shoppers they knew they’d have coming into their store this weekend. It would be enough to allow them to give their kids a good Christmas. Lexi said the man hated he was going to have to disappoint his children this year.”

And there it was.

This situation had just gone from bad to worse. Because although it was already awful just knowing it was happening, hearing how personal it was for one individual involved easily sent it over the top. We all had kids—young kids—and we’d never want them to have to learn at such tender ages just how cruel life could be.

As upsetting as it was, I knew it also fueled a bit of resolve and determination in the men sitting around the table. If there was a way for us to help, we’d do it.

“So, it’s not a Scrooge then,” Dom noted. “We’ve got a Grinch on our hands. Come on, Levi. You’ve got to know the difference.”

Now that he’d pointed it out, I realized my mistake. Truthfully, I just liked that he’d done something to ease the tension. “Right. My mistake. But it’s neither here nor there. Right now, you all know the WPD is understaffed and overworked on a good day. Their hands are already full as it is, and it’s only going to get worse as the weeks go by, and we get closer to Christmas.”

“You’ve got all of us here, Levi. I get we should all know what’s going on, but this meeting feels a bit different. What are we missing?” Holden questioned me.

If there was one guy who wasn’t going to miss a beat, it was Holden. The man was brilliant.

“The timing of this is the problem.”

“In what way?” Tyson pressed, genuine curiosity laced through his tone.

I sucked in a deep breath and let it out. Then I explained, “If we were at any other point in the year, I would have selected two or three of you to work on this case and moved on. Unfortunately, I can’t do that this time around, because it would just be unfair. I know how tough it’s going to be for everyone involved. Fortunately, we’re not swamped with work beyond routine private investigation cases. This is going to require a bit more time and effort, and I can only assume that’s not going to be easy for most of us to come by over the upcoming weeks. We all try to balance work with family life as it is, but now we’ll be contending with the holiday season, winter activities, and school plays.”

“I know my nephews aren’t into it, but you couldn’t possibly forget the winter dance recitals, Levi,” Cruz noted.

“Or the baking,” Gunner added.

“Or the family parties and gatherings,” Tyson chimed in.

“Or the shopping,” Lorenzo muttered.

“Or the overwhelming desire to just spend some time alone with my wife,” Pierce declared.

“Yes,” Trent agreed. “I’m with Pierce on this one. Am I going to get time alone with Delaney ever again?”

There was a collective round of nods and agreement.

I wanted to laugh. What had started off as a tense meeting was quickly turning into something else. While I didn’t necessarily disagree that more time alone with my own wife was a welcomed notion, I couldn’t exactly say we were suffering, either. I knew that was the case with all of the men in the room, too. Among the nine of us, there was nearly thirty children. None of us were starved for affection.

But it was safe to say we’d always be happy with more.

And despite all the grievances we could have listed, there wasn’t a doubt in my mind, in the grand scheme of things, we

loved every little thing that happened in our homes with our wives and children that took our time and attention.

Laughing, I said, “I think we’ve gotten a bit off track here. The bottom line is that it’s obviously bound to be a very tough time for all of us to focus on something like this. At the end of the day, we’re all fortunate, and we want to make sure there aren’t more and more families with young kids being added to the list of those who will be affected by what’s happening here. My hope is that if we’re all working together on this case, we might be able to bring it to a close sooner rather than later. And hopefully, when one of us is in the midst of something chaotic at home, another one of us will pick up the slack.”

“I think that’s a smart idea, and I don’t see any reason it won’t work, as long as we’re all good about keeping one another informed about any developments,” Holden reasoned.

With a nod, I replied, “My thoughts exactly. That’s another reason why I wanted you all here for this meeting. I want to give you all everything I’d got on this case, so we can review it together and come up with a game plan. I don’t expect we’ll have this solved by the time Thanksgiving rolls around in two days, but I’m hoping we can dig in, uncover each layer of this case, and have it unwrapped before Christmas.”

“So, what businesses have been targeted so far?” Lorenzo asked.

I allowed my eyes to slide through the men in the room and noticed they were all just as eager for more information. Once again, I had no choice but to feel grateful for them. I knew there were a lot of people who couldn’t say the same, but I had the best of both at home and at work.

Feeling indebted to these men, I leaned forward, opened the file on the table in front of me, and filled them in on the specifics of the case I’d received from Detective Jackson Baines. Then we discussed our initial thoughts, came up with a plan of action, and got to it.

And by the time I made it home that night, I realized my thoughts from earlier in the day were true. I was extremely

lucky.

Because though my boys had plenty of energy to burn off when they got home, they hadn't destroyed the house. And when they were finally in bed a few hours after I'd gotten home, I got the time I needed to be alone with my wife.

THREE

Sage

I heard the garage door opening just as I put the ingredients for lunch in the refrigerator. I did it all with a smile on my face.

Because he was home.

Like he'd been doing for years now, Gunner came home at lunchtime. I often tried to think back to when it changed, and I couldn't seem to recall. It just happened out of the blue one day, and from that point forward, unless he was in the midst of some high-stakes life-or-death investigation, Gunner came home for lunch.

Fridays were always the best days, because he usually didn't head back into the office unless he had something pressing to take care of.

So, despite there being a case he and his team had been working on for about a week and a half now, it was safe to say, Gunner was home for the rest of the weekend.

I closed the refrigerator door, turned around, and saw him stalking toward me with that look in his eyes I'd grown to love. He had his mind on one thing and one thing alone.

It was lunchtime, and there was only one thing that was going to satisfy his cravings. Never wanting him to have to wait for what he wanted, I hopped up on the counter before he even made it to the kitchen.

His lips twitched.

I licked my lips, placed my hands behind me, and leaned into my palms.

Gunner made it to me, kissed my mouth, and whispered, “Hey, baby.”

“Hi, handsome,” I returned just as quietly.

He kissed me again, his fingers threading through the strands of my hair. When he pulled back, he groaned. “I’m starved.”

“Well, the weekend starts now, so pull up a chair, and feel free to indulge,” I urged him.

He grinned against my lips. “Don’t mind if I do.”

The next thing I knew, my top was gone, and his hands were on my hips. I lifted them, and Gunner dragged my bottoms down my legs. He’d tossed them on the counter beside me, and they’d just barely landed when he was spreading my legs and burying his face between my thighs.

What he didn’t do was pull up a chair. Then again, I hadn’t expected he would.

The moment I felt his tongue flick over my clit, my head dropped back, and a moan escaped. I dropped down to my forearms, allowed my chin to fall forward, and looked down the length of my body to watch Gunner.

I loved watching him like this.

I loved watching him all the time.

But when he was like this, it was such a turn-on. His hands had been holding on to my hips firmly, until they began drifting up my body toward my breasts. As he began to knead the flesh in his hands, occasionally tweaking and gently pinching my nipples between his fingers, I leaned my weight into one arm and reached down to drive my fingers through Gunner’s hair.

His mouth was doing incredible things to me, making it nearly impossible to catch my breath.

“Baby,” I panted. “Oh, God.”

He was working me up, building it so quickly and effortlessly. No matter how many times we'd done this, it was always this good. This *great*.

And every time, no matter how hard I tried to prepare myself and brace for it, I could never anticipate just how powerful it was going to be.

"Gunner," I called out a warning.

He didn't hold back. He didn't ease up.

Gunner kept at me, going harder and wanting more. Wanting it all.

So, I let him have what he was seeking. The next thing I knew, my body was overcome by one pulsing wave of pleasure after another. It felt like it went on forever, and Gunner rode that wave with me, seeing me through to the end.

"You're going to come again," he ordered when he finally pulled back and had kissed his way up my naked body.

A shiver ran through my body. Just like that, even though he'd just made me experience what he had, my body was ready for more.

It always amazed me just how determined Gunner was when it came to pleasing me. There was no question in my mind that he'd made up for all the years we'd lost when we were younger and kept our attraction to one another a secret.

But from the moment we'd reconnected years ago, he hadn't held himself back from making us both feel good. He'd easily surpassed any goals I might have had for where I wanted our sex lives to go, and Gunner hadn't hidden how much he enjoyed delivering pleasure to me.

Of course, he also hadn't missed how much I enjoyed everything he gave me, even his words with the promise of more. Because it was at that moment when a shiver ran down my spine, and his lips twitched.

Like I weighed no more than a feather, Gunner lifted me off the counter, set me on my feet, placed his hands on my

hips, and spun me around. My hands flew to the countertop as Gunner stepped closer to me.

His fingers on one hand drifted from my hip around my front to rest on my abdomen. Then they crawled down my body and slipped between my legs as his mouth came to my ear, where he whispered, “You’re so beautiful, Sage. Fuck, I love you so much.”

Using the counter for leverage, I arched my back and sent my ass in his direction. Gunner’s fingers were rubbing gently between my legs, using the wetness there to lubricate them as they teased me.

Moaning, I begged, “Please.”

His mouth had drifted down along the side of my neck to kiss me there, but when he heard my plea, I felt his lips form a smile.

A moment later, he slid inside.

All thoughts ceased to exist from that point forward. It was all about feeling it, experiencing what was happening between our bodies.

It was about being lost in the way I felt being filled by him and the way he thrust in and out of my body.

It was about feeling his lips on my neck and shoulder.

It was about the way my belly would clench when he would grip my hip firmly in one of his hands, while the other trailed up my side with a featherlight touch.

The only thing I could do was take what he was giving, hope he was getting what he needed, and allow it to build.

And build it did.

Maybe it was the years of experience Gunner and I had with one another, or maybe it was simply the love and connection we had with each other that made it possible, but I soon found myself on the verge of a second orgasm.

“Are you going to come with me?” Gunner asked, slowing the pace of his thrusts.

“Don’t stop.”

At my command, recognizing I was right there with him, Gunner drove in harder. Faster.

“Gunner,” I breathed.

“Fuck, Sage. You feel so good.”

A moment later, it happened.

My husband’s fingers pressed in deeper on my body, holding on as the two of us came apart together. He worked us both through our orgasms until we made it to the other side, where he eventually slowed his strokes to a stop.

Panting and out of breath, he declared, “Afternoons are my favorite time of day.”

Twisting my neck in an attempt to look back at him, I smiled and said, “Any time you’re around me is my favorite time of day.”

He smiled at me, leaned forward, and pressed a kiss to my bare shoulder.

After we’d gotten ourselves cleaned up, Gunner and I were seated at the table, having lunch together.

“How was your day?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It was okay. We’re all feeling just a bit frustrated right now, because we’ve got this guy on the loose.”

“There hasn’t been anything new since the robbery on Wednesday, has there?”

Shaking his head, Gunner replied, “No. And the only silver lining with this is that he’s keeping his efforts contained to businesses. While we’d prefer to not have anyone affected by this, at least he’s not going into people’s homes and terrorizing them.”

I couldn’t say I didn’t understand why Gunner and his team were feeling frustrated. They took a lot of pride in the work they did, and this case was proving to be a bit difficult to solve. “I’m sorry. He hasn’t left any trace?”

“Not exactly. But we are narrowing some things down, because while we’re not exactly close to identifying him just yet, we are learning a bit about him,” Gunner shared.

“What do you mean?”

After Gunner had taken a bite of his sandwich and swallowed it, he revealed, “The guy is either one of two things, or both. First, he’s smart. We’ll give him that much. He doesn’t approach any person or place yet where we’d have the ability to easily identify him. The businesses he has targeted did not have cameras installed. As I already noted, he hasn’t gone into any homes, which we’re grateful for, but he also hasn’t entered any businesses during the day when the owners and other people might be around. He’s smart enough not to risk exposing himself to people, which is good for him, since he’s likely trying to keep himself concealed.”

My brows pulled together. “Okay, so you think he’s smart. What’s the other thing you think you might have learned about him?”

“It goes along with the silver lining of him not burglarizing anyone’s homes,” Gunner started. “This guy’s reasons for only entering businesses at night might simply be a means of self-preservation, but it could also be something else. He’s doing whatever he’s doing, for whatever reason he’s doing it, and it’s horrible how badly he’s affecting some of the owners of these small businesses. But the way in which he’s carrying this all out leads us to believe he’s not interested in physically harming anyone. I think the town, in general, is feeling a bit on edge, which makes us that much more determined to find this guy as quickly as possible, but at least people aren’t being hurt in the physical sense.”

I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Gunner didn’t often talk to me about specifics related to any of his cases, but there had been occasions where he would. Whenever it was something like this, something affecting the town at large and news media outlets were reporting on it, I noticed he’d be a bit more open.

I had a feeling he simply wanted to be sure he could ease any worries or fears I might have had about what was going on. The truth was, I always felt better whenever I knew he and his team were doing something to help locate and apprehend a fugitive, but it didn't hurt to get some details from him—details the media wouldn't have—that would give me just a bit more reassurance. There were no guarantees of anything staying the way it was now, but I appreciated Gunner's willingness to put my mind at ease, especially now that we had not only ourselves to think about, but our children as well.

“Well, I'm grateful for that. I really hope you and the guys can get this case solved, so you can all rest a bit easier at night, but if it's any consolation, I can say it helps to put my mind at ease to know that, at least for now, it seems as though this guy isn't interested in hurting anyone.”

Gunner reached his hand out, gave my thigh a squeeze, and pointed out, “Yeah, I was hoping for that. But also, you've got me here for the remainder of the weekend, so that should help you to worry less.”

In an instant, any of the lingering negative emotions I had about this whole situation Gunner and the rest of the Cunningham Security team were dealing with had vanished. Because he was going to be home for the next two and a half days, and I had so much planned for us. Of course, I didn't hesitate to do what I could to improve Gunner's mood by letting him in on all of it.

“I'm so excited for this weekend,” I bubbled.

Gunner cocked an eyebrow. “Do I even want to know what you've got planned?”

“I hope so, since we're going to be having the best weekend ever,” I revealed.

Confusion washed over him. “Is there something I forgot? What are we doing this weekend?”

Grinning at him, I countered, “The better question is, what are we not doing this weekend? I swear, I don't understand

how you seem to have forgotten what we planned all those years ago.”

Understanding dawned on his features. “I didn’t forget anything, but I never want to assume what your plans will be. You still surprise me to this day, stranger.”

After swallowing a bite of my sandwich, I smiled brightly at him. “We agreed on big holidays when I was first pregnant with Ivy. It’s Friday, the first day of December, and that means once the kids get home, we’re going to start. I’m just surprised I managed to wait this long after the Thanksgiving holiday. If I’m honest, I was ready the day after.”

Gunner laughed at me. “Why am I not surprised? So, what exactly are we starting today?”

“Decorating the entire house,” I informed him, a smile plastered on my face. “I figure we can get a good chunk of it done tonight, finish it up tomorrow morning, and spend the rest of the weekend baking some cookies and watching Christmas movies.”

Even though I’d been this way from the beginning, Gunner still looked at me like I had three heads. “We’re doing all of that this weekend? Does that include outdoor decorations?”

“Don’t you think we can manage them, too?” I asked, wondering if my expectations were too high.

He stared at me in silence for all of a few seconds before he assured me, “I’ll get whatever you need done completed before the weekend is over.”

Whatever he thought, even if it was that he believed I was crazy, Gunner never made me feel bad about it. While he might have pressed me on specifics at the start of each holiday, he always came through for me and did whatever I needed him to help with. And our children loved him for it, too.

Finished with my lunch, I pushed my plate back, took a sip of my water, and leaned toward Gunner. I gave him a kiss that got slightly heated rather quickly. Knowing we didn’t have much time left before our children would be home from school, I pulled back and said, “I think we need to get

everything pulled out before the kids get home. I want them to be able to walk into the house, see the containers and boxes, and feel excited about what's ahead for them this weekend."

Gunner reached his arm out, snaked it around my waist, and pulled me into his lap. He brushed his lips against mine and said, "It's the weekend. Ivy and Hunter don't have to get up for school for the next two days. I think that's already more than enough to have them feeling excited about the weekend."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I want it to be even better than just them being off from school."

His hand drifted up my side and along my ribs until he slid it around my front and placed his palm over my breast. Squeezing me there, he declared seductively, "I think we can get another round in before we pull out the boxes."

"You're getting sidetracked."

"No, I'm not. I'm being smart."

"You're being insatiable," I retorted.

He smiled against my lips. "Can you blame me? I mean, have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately, Sage. You're so beautiful. I'm not sure how you expect me to resist you."

I melted into him.

Maybe he'd learned precisely what to say to me over the years to get that to happen, but I didn't necessarily care. It always felt good to hear that he still had an appreciation for the way I looked. And the fact that I could feel he'd grown hard beneath my ass only thirty minutes after he'd just had me only boosted my confidence. I hadn't necessarily been unhappy with the way I looked, but my body certainly had some flaws now that I'd birthed two babies. I was convinced Gunner loved me even more because of it.

When he made me feel like that, I didn't know how I could deny him what he wanted. I squirmed in his lap, my ass grinding against him.

He groaned, lifted me in his arms, and carried me over to the couch. "I was considering doing what you wanted first, but

then you went ahead and wiggled your ass on my cock. Sorry, babe, but I'm going to need you to do that while you're naked on top of me on the couch. Afterward, I'll get everything you want out for the weekend."

"Will it be out before the kids are home?" I asked.

"I guess that depends on how hard you work right now."

"I've never been one to slouch, Gunner."

He let out a laugh as he settled himself on the couch with me in his arms. "I know, Sage. That's why I'm not worried."

I stared at him for only a few more seconds before I shifted my body out of his arms and got to work. Just as I promised, I didn't slouch, and with five minutes to spare before the kids got home from school, Gunner had all of the boxes and containers we had stored all of our Christmas decorations pulled out for them to see.

Suffice it to say, the four of us had the best weekend ever.

FOUR

Tyson

Some people might have found routines to be boring.

I was not one of them.

Years ago, when I was on my own, I didn't necessarily stick to any schedule. And while I couldn't say it bothered me, I certainly wasn't living a fulfilled life.

When I first got together with Quinn, there was no question that being a bit spontaneous had its perks. In fact, I really began to enjoy waking up and wondering where our day would lead us.

But as time went on and we added kids to the mix, my perspective had shifted substantially.

I loved routine.

Craved it.

Thrived on it.

Because my routine now meant that even though I had an alarm set to wake me up every morning, I was always awake before it went off.

Though it might have been easy to close my eyes and drift off to sleep again, I always decided against it.

My reason for that was her.

It was always her.

Quinn was beside me, and I couldn't have her that close to me with nobody else around and not allow my mind to wander to thoughts about what I wanted to do to her. But it didn't just stop with me thinking about what I wanted to do to her.

I followed through.

I made it my mission to wake her up every morning in a way she'd find unforgettable. I wanted to know that when I walked out the door to go to work, Quinn would be home thinking about what I gave to her that morning.

Today was no different.

So, when my eyes shot open, I looked to my right and saw her sleeping. She was beyond gorgeous; something I'd found had become even more prominent as the years went on. From the first day I met her, when she pulled that scarf down past her mouth to speak to me, a day I often remembered, I thought she was breathtaking. But as time went on, the attraction to her continued to grow. Maybe that was related to me seeing her in so many different roles, knowing the kind of wife, mother, sister, daughter, and friend she was that made it so.

Regardless of the reason, the sight of her looking so beautiful first thing in the morning made it impossible for me to hold myself back.

Over time, I learned how Quinn liked to be woken up. She enjoyed having me pepper kisses over the exposed skin on her body. I was more than willing to accommodate that for her, and there wasn't often a place my lips didn't touch. Her cheek, her lips, her neck, and her shoulders were the spots I usually started.

Quinn would start to stir at that point, and I'd toss the blanket off of her body. No matter how much time had passed or how many kids she'd had, Quinn still blessed me with the sight of her sleeping in her satin nighties.

I loved it.

My eyes would roam over her body as my hands did the same. I'd kiss down one of her bare arms before moving back

up and kissing the skin across her chest on my way to the other arm.

She'd fall to her back and allow me to continue my journey unhindered.

Then, because it was impossible not to allow it to happen, my lips would kiss over her breasts and down her abdomen with the fabric of her nightie separating us.

I'd make it to her bare legs, squeeze her feet in my hands, and touch my lips gently to her ankles.

My mouth would linger on her legs for a long time while my hands worked the muscles on them. She'd moan throughout, and the sound always served to make me draw it out, to prolong it.

I loved nothing more than hearing that sound coming from her first thing in the morning, so I would do whatever I could to make sure I got my fill of it.

Everything I did to Quinn from the moment I opened my eyes might have seemed like it was about me getting my fix. I would have been lying if I said that it wasn't.

But there was so much more behind it. More than it was about me, it was about her. I wanted what I wanted, but I got off on making sure she got what she wanted.

That was the reason why I'd made sure to start this morning just like I'd started nearly every other morning before this one.

I loved everything about it, and based on the way she sounded by the time I held her foot in my hand and how willingly she'd parted her legs to give me a taste, Quinn did, too.

The moment she separated her thighs, I knew she was ready for more.

So, I gave her what she wanted while I took what I needed.

With my mouth on her, I'd occasionally lift my gaze to look up her body toward her face. She had her eyes closed, a

lazy smile on her face, and her hands were drifting down her body toward me.

The next thing I knew, her fingers were gripping my hair, holding me close to her. Every morning, it felt like another little victory. She wanted me where I was just as much as I wanted to be there.

And because she gave me that, I refused to not deliver. This woman got everything I had to give to her.

As I continued to feast on her, the tighter her grip grew. When I flicked my tongue over her clit, relentlessly teasing her, Quinn's moans came quicker.

Knowing I'd get even more if I gave her more, I kept one hand planted on her hip while the other drifted up her body and captured her breast. Lapping at her, feeling like I'd never get enough, I squeezed her tit and brushed my fingers over her sensitive nipple.

"Baby," she breathed.

There was another sound I'd never get tired of hearing. The moment that single word left her lips, I knew she was getting close. So, I didn't relent.

I kept at her, giving her more of what she wanted, and when the moans became whimpers, and her hips moved uncontrollably, seeking that friction, I sent her over the edge and just allowed myself to enjoy the experience.

There wasn't any part of it I didn't enjoy. I loved the way she tasted, the sounds of her labored breathing, and the feel of her thighs trembling on either side of my head.

I saw Quinn through to the other side, crawled my way up her sated body, and kissed her mouth. She whimpered at the taste of herself on my tongue.

With her legs wrapped around my waist, I reached down between us, positioned myself, and slid inside.

She moaned.

Of all the things I knew I'd never tire of when it came to Quinn, her warm, wet pussy wrapped around my cock first

thing in the morning was at the top of my list. Granted, I wasn't picky, and I'd take it any time of the day, but I wholeheartedly believed it was the best way to start my day.

"You feel so good," she panted as I thrust inside.

Though there was routine in our days, and it was almost always a guarantee we'd wake up like this, the manner in which things got done after I ate her always changed. Sometimes, she'd be interested in returning the favor and would all but tackle me to the bed to get her mouth on me. Then she'd crawl on top and ride me for a while. Other times, I'd flip her over and take her roughly from behind.

Sometimes, it was slow and sweet and gentle.

Others, it was fast and hard and rough.

There were also days like today when I wanted to simply feel her, warm and soft beneath me. My pace was somewhere in the middle, the rhythm building us both up steadily, and I could relish in the feel of the things I loved most about being with her like this.

The tender touch of her fingertips mixed with her soft moans. The feel of her lips on my skin and the way her thighs pressed tight to my sides. And the words we often shared when we were together like this. There wasn't anything I didn't love about it, about her.

"Tyson, I'm so close," she whispered, her eyes boring into mine.

I dropped my head down, captured her mouth in a bruising kiss, and drove my cock in harder, faster.

Several thrusts later, her mouth still connected to mine, Quinn came apart. Swallowing her moans and feeling her pussy clenching me, I stood no chance. She was at the tail end of her orgasm when I found my own release, groaning through it.

When it left me, I tore my mouth from hers, kissed her cheek, and buried my face in her neck while we both fought to regain control of our breathing.

After I'd accomplished that, I did the next thing I'd normally do. I pulled out, rolled to my back, and opened my arm out to allow Quinn to curl her body into mine.

Following several beats of silence, Quinn said, "I have a question."

I knew that was coming. Not necessarily that she'd have a question, but I knew a conversation would be coming. It was one of the things I looked forward to in the morning with her.

Quinn liked to talk, and since our days were generally filled with madness, this was one of the few opportunities we had to talk to each other, uninterrupted.

"Okay. What's going on?"

"Do you think you'll ever go back to making love to me at night?"

My fingers, which had been tracing random patterns over her skin, stopped and pressed in. "Um, gorgeous, I never stopped making love to you at night," I noted, feeling confused by her question. "I made love to you two nights ago."

Lifting her cheek from my chest, she brought her eyes to mine. "I know. But that was the first time in days. Unless someone is sick or there's some other extenuating circumstance, you make love to me *every* morning."

I hadn't believed it was possible to feel even the tiniest bit of concern about our sex life, because I wholeheartedly believed we did better than most. Hell, just listening to the guys talking at the office right before Thanksgiving about wanting more time with their wives, I had to assume Quinn and I were some of the luckier ones. Now, she had me second-guessing myself.

"Are you telling me I'm not doing enough to take care of you?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Absolutely not. You know I think you're the most generous lover on the planet. I'm very satisfied with everything you give me. It's enough. I promise. It's just that I've noticed I always get you in the morning, and

I don't always get you at night or other random times throughout the day."

"One of the reasons you get me in the morning is because we've got four kids who are still asleep at this time of the day," I explained.

"I know."

I could hear a touch of despondency in her tone, and I didn't like the sound of it one bit. "Gorgeous, I don't even know what to say right now. I thought you liked what we had in the morning. I love this time with you."

Panic washed over her. "I do. I love it. Don't you dare take it away from me."

Feeling slightly relieved, I laughed and insisted, "The thought never crossed my mind. As for the evening, if I don't initiate, it's not because I don't want you. I can't think of a time when I haven't wanted to be with you. But we've got long days with work and the kids, and sometimes, I can see just how tired you are. That's all it is."

"I understand," she assured me. There was something lingering in her gaze, and I couldn't let this go.

"Quinn, baby, if there's something you want that I'm not giving you, I need you to tell me," I urged her.

"You give me everything, Tyson. I promise."

Suddenly, it hit me. I'd grown to love what Quinn and I had together. I liked our routine, because I appreciated knowing there were certain times I'd always have her all to myself. And while I believed she was being honest with me now about not feeling unsatisfied, it was dawning on me that perhaps Quinn wasn't as excited about our routine as I was.

"You want spontaneity."

"What?"

"Sex, gorgeous," I clarified. "You want sex with me when it's least expected. You like what we have here as much as I do, but you want a little more excitement. You don't want to know when it's coming."

Her eyes darkened, and without her saying a word, I had my answer.

Grinning at her, not giving her a chance to respond, I promised, “You just wait. You don’t know what you just signed yourself up for.”

“Tyson, I wasn’t suggesting—”

I lifted my head from the pillow, sat up, taking Quinn with me, kissed her mouth, and silenced her. When I pulled back, I said, “It’s too late. It’s already done.”

“The holiday is upon us, and we’ve got so much going on right now between the parties with your family, the work I need to get done, the kids, and the case you’re working on,” she noted. “You don’t need to add anything else to your plate.”

I gave her another kiss and moved to get out of the bed. Once I was standing up beside it, I looked down at her and advised, “You better prepare yourself, Quinn, because Santa’s coming, and he doesn’t care if you’ve been naughty or nice.” With that, I gave her a wink, pulled on some clothes, and walked to the bedroom door. “I’ll get breakfast started.”

If there was one thing I’d learned how to do over the years, it was cooking. Quinn still handled most of it, but once we started having children, I realized I couldn’t continue to put all of that on her. Breakfast was easy enough, and neither Quinn nor the kids complained about what I made, so I stuck to what I could confidently do and did my best to make up for my lack of skills with cooking in other areas of our lives.

As I worked on the eggs and French toast, I couldn’t help but laugh. Sometimes, it still caught me by surprise when it settled in just how much my life had changed since I met Quinn. Lucky for me, all the changes had been for the better.

I was a better man. For her and for our kids.

All four of them.

Cam, Dylan, Vanessa, and Peyton.

Cam was our oldest; he was nine. Dylan was seven, and Vanessa was three. Our youngest, Peyton, was a year old now.

I'd believed we were going to stop after Vanessa, but Quinn wanted one more. I was immediately on board, and now, I wouldn't hesitate to work myself to the bone to take care of my family.

And when it came to my job, I was only that much more motivated to help solve cases like the one we were currently dealing with, because it meant people like the ones most important to me were safer.

Quinn finally met me downstairs, and she was just in time, because breakfast was ready. For the first few minutes, we ate in silence, both of us needing to consume some calories before anyone else in the house happened to wake up and ruin our shot at eating a meal without any interruptions.

Once we were about halfway through, I asked Quinn, "So, what's your plan today?"

"I'm meeting up with my sister later this morning to let the kids play and to tackle a few loose ends with the business. Cassie and I are hoping that Vanessa and Taylor will entertain each other long enough for us to get done what we need to. I know Peyton will nap after lunch, making it possible. But Owen is going to be the wild card."

Taylor and Owen were our niece and nephew. Cassie had gotten married to my brother, Kyle. Quinn and her sister were pregnant at the same time, so Vanessa and Taylor were practically like sisters.

Owen was about six months older than Peyton, and he had those days when he'd nap, and others when he wouldn't.

"Good luck," I replied.

"Yeah. We'll get it done one way or another," Quinn insisted, popping the last bite of her breakfast into her mouth.

Minutes later, it happened.

Quinn had carried the monitor, which we kept in Peyton's room, down with her. It didn't always happen, but she was usually the first of the kids to wake up. Today was no different.

As soon as my baby girl started to whimper, I looked at Quinn and said, “Your daughter is awake.”

“At least she let me have breakfast this morning,” Quinn returned.

“And she made sure I got two of them,” I joked.

Quinn rolled her eyes at me and stood up. After she gave me a kiss, she said, “I’ll go get her.”

“I’ll clean up the kitchen, and then I’ll get the boys up, so they can start getting ready for school.”

Her eyes shifted behind me, a smile formed on her face, and her features softened. She returned her attention to me and said, “You better figure out how you’re going to do that with your hands full, because your daughter is awake.”

I turned around and saw Vanessa had entered the kitchen. Her hair was a mess, and she looked sleepy.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” I said.

Vanessa didn’t speak. She merely moved toward me and opened her arms up, so I could lift her up.

“Good morning, baby,” Quinn said, pressing a kiss to the top of Vanessa’s head.

My daughter dropped her cheek to my shoulder and cuddled close.

Quinn took off to get Peyton.

“Did you sleep okay?” I asked Vanessa.

“Yeah,” she replied quietly.

“Are you hungry for breakfast?”

With her forehead pressed against my neck, she nodded.

“Okay. How about we go get your brothers up, so they can start getting ready for school, then I’ll come down and make breakfast.”

Vanessa didn’t answer with words. She merely snuggled closer to me, and I took that as her agreement.

So, with one-fifth of my whole world in my arms, I stood, climbed the stairs, and roused my boys before I made my babies their breakfast.

.....
FIVE
.....

Ekko

“Is there anything else I can help you find?”

“No, I think this is going to do it. I’m just going to look through these for a few minutes and decide which ones I want. Thank you for your help.”

Smiling, I offered a nod and returned, “You’re welcome. If you have any other questions, please don’t hesitate to come and find me.”

“I will.”

At that, I turned and walked away from the young girl I’d just been helping. She had been doing a research project for a college class, and she’d needed help with finding some research materials. As the librarian of the Windsor Public Library, it was one of my job responsibilities to help patrons locate the materials they were looking for, whether for educational or entertainment purposes. While that wasn’t the only task required of me, it was probably one of the ones I loved the most.

Then again, if I was being completely honest with myself, there wasn’t much about my job which I didn’t like.

It had been my dream to become a librarian, and there was no question it had taken some time to get here. But I finally did it.

I felt extraordinarily lucky, especially when I thought back to where I started so many years ago.

I made it back to the front circulation desk and found one of our assistants, Amanda, there. “Everything going okay here?” I asked her.

“It’s great,” she bubbled.

Amanda was new to the position, having only started just two weeks ago, so I liked to check in often with her to make sure she wasn’t feeling overwhelmed or confused about anything.

She’d been a fast learner and picked up on everything rather quickly. Best of all, every time she walked through the doors, she always did it with a smile on her face, like she’d just won the lottery. Amanda reminded me a lot of myself when I was going through the most trying time of my life, and for that reason alone, I wanted to keep her around. While she hadn’t indicated she was going through anything difficult, it didn’t matter. I wanted anyone who loved being here that much to stay here.

“Perfect. I’m going to run back and take my lunch break now,” I told her.

With a nod and a smile, she returned, “Okay.” Just as I was about to walk away, her eyes widened, and she said, “Oh, wait. I almost forgot.”

Turning around, she pulled a box off the counter and held it out to me. “Someone came in when you were tied up earlier and wanted to drop this off for the drive.”

I stepped forward, took the box from her, and looked inside. “This is fantastic. We’re only a few days into the month, and we’re doing so well already.”

“I know. It’s so wonderful that folks are being so generous. You’re really going to make a lot of kids happy this Christmas.”

I smiled brightly at Amanda. “That’s the plan.”

Walking off, I carried the box with me to the back office. I was going to have lunch first, then I’d deal with the donation.

Two years ago, I came up with the idea to do something to help the community. Public libraries existed for a reason, and while it wasn't always the case, I knew that many people who visited the library weren't in a position to spend tons of money on books. I had been one of them. It got me thinking, and now that I had children of my own, I couldn't help but feel my heart break over the kids who wouldn't get to experience the kind of Christmas that my children did.

So, I decided to do something about it and set up a book and toy drive at the library. Last year had been the first year, and I started planning a bit too late for it, so while it hadn't been a total bust, it certainly didn't do as well as I had hoped.

This year, I started planning early. I brought Lexi in on my plan, and she donated her time to spreading the word about the cause. But that wasn't all. She walked into the library last week with her two youngest girls and dropped off her family's donation. It warmed my heart.

Plus, I got to give her girls squeezes while directing them to the section of the library with children's books. Piper was thrilled and couldn't have been more interested. Maci was just excited to be somewhere new to explore.

We still had about two weeks left for the drive, and it was already a bigger success than last year's drive had been.

The minute I walked into the break room, my smile grew.

"I can only assume there's something good in that box, if the look on your face is any indication."

That came from Kate, my best friend and the archivist at the library.

I set the box down on the table and shared, "It's another donation. Amanda just gave it to me out front. Apparently, someone dropped it off while I was busy helping another patron."

Kate looked inside the box as I moved to grab my lunch out of the refrigerator. "This drive is going really well this year. I think your diligence has paid off."

When I moved back to the table and sat down across from her, I replied, “I know. I’m so excited. It feels good to know we’re going to help so many families this year.”

“That’s for sure. And they’ll be so appreciative, too. That’s what always breaks my heart. So many families struggle so much, and their children have become accustomed to not getting anything. They’ll get a book or a toy from this fundraiser you’re doing, and it’ll mean everything to them.

“Yeah,” I agreed, understanding what those moments in a kid’s life were like. Not wanting to pull my mood down, I asked, “So, are you all set for Christmas, or do you still have a list a mile long like I do?”

“I’m not done yet, but I don’t feel overwhelmed by what I have left to do. I’ve gotten mostly everything I need except for Brett’s mom and my dad. Of course, I keep saying I’m done shopping for the kids, but I know I’ll probably pick up things all the way up to the last minute for them,” she answered.

I let out a laugh. I couldn’t say I didn’t understand her predicament. I was the exact same way with Hank and Gracie. They were the lights of my life, and I could admit I spoiled them.

“What about you? Exactly how much do you have left?” she questioned me.

Shaking my head, I offered a look of despair. “Everything. After I leave work during the week, I’m so focused on making dinner and spending time with the kids, talking to them about their days at school. Before I know it, they’re getting showers and heading to bed, so we can wake up to do it all over again. Honestly, I’m tempted to ask my sister-in-law for tips.”

“What?”

“Jolie can shop like it’s nobody’s business, and I know she’d be able to help me. Hell, she’d probably tell me to just send her the lists and take care of it all for me,” I noted.

“How would Dom feel about that?” Kate pressed, a knowing smile on her face.

My lips twitched, thinking about how my husband would react to me handing our credit cards over to his shopaholic of a sister. “He’d probably lose his mind,” I admitted. Then I shrugged and reasoned, “Though, I’m not sure. He wouldn’t want me to be stressed about anything, and he’s working on a case right now that’s occupying a good chunk of his time.”

Kate shot me a look that indicated she thought it might not be a bad idea to consider attempting to convince Dom. “You’ll never know unless you talk to him about it.”

“I know. But if I’m being honest, as overwhelming as life feels right now, I want to make the time to take care of the shopping on my own. Considering there was a time when doing it seemed impossible, I find I enjoy being able to give gifts now. It’s just the time factor that’s making it difficult right now. I’m hoping to put a dent in it this weekend. Speaking of which, what are my niece and two nephews asking Santa for this year?”

Kate’s three children weren’t technically my niece and nephew, but she was my best friend, and I loved her children the same as if they were my blood relatives. It was the same for her with Hank and Grace. Both of us were lucky, and our children were arguably luckier.

For the remainder of lunch, we discussed all of the things our kids were hoping the big guy in the red suit would bring them. We probably could have sat there all day long talking about it. But we needed to get back to work, so that’s what we did. And between the donations I needed to take care of that came in throughout the day, along with my normal job duties, the rest of the day passed in a flash.

Before I knew it, I’d pulled into the driveway at my house. Though I really didn’t have the time to waste, there were moments like today when I felt compelled to just take a few seconds to sit and appreciate the sight in front of me.

I loved my house.

It wasn’t about the size or the physical appearance of it.

It wasn’t even about the fact I’d gone from nothing to this.

Though I'd done what I could to make it comfortable, homey, and a place we could enjoy being, it was more about what it represented.

I had finally found my place and purpose in the world. I'd struggled for so many years, and now I was able to wake up here every morning. I got to walk through the front door after a full day at work and see the three most important people in my life waiting there for me with smiles on their faces.

My husband and our two beautiful babies. They weren't exactly babies anymore, considering they'd just turned eleven, but in my heart and mind, I'd always remember hearing their hearts beat for the first time. I'd remember those adorable little faces that, at one point in my life, I never thought I'd ever get to see.

Coming home to Dom, Hank, and Grace was all I'd ever need in my life. And it was usually on that thought when I exited my vehicle and walked into the house.

What was crazy for me was that I never seemed to know what I'd find when I walked in. Some days, everything was peachy. Others, it felt like I'd stepped into a war zone.

Hank and Grace might have been twins who, deep down, loved each other dearly, but they were so very much the opposite of one another. Whenever it came to making decisions in the house, it was rare they ever agreed on anything, and Dom and I would usually need to find a way to come up with a compromise.

Today, it seemed they weren't interested in getting along. I'd barely gotten through the door, when I heard, "Mom, Hank's being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. Grace is so boring."

"Hey!" Dom called out, his eyes focused on our kids. Their eyes shot to his, and once he had their attention, he spoke. "Your mom just walked in the door, and the two of you can't be bothered to say hello to her or ask her how her day was?"

And then there was that.

No matter how much we loved and adored our kids and were especially grateful to have them, considering there had been a point in time when I believed I'd never have any children, Dom refused to let that cloud his judgment. He didn't mind the kids having fun, and as one of five kids, he understood they'd have disagreements. What he refused to tolerate was disrespect or a lack of common courtesy.

I loved the way he parented them with me.

He might have seemed tough on the surface, but he'd do anything for our kids. And they knew it.

But he had expectations about what was acceptable, and not saying hello to me when I walked through the door was something he wasn't prepared to tolerate.

That didn't mean he didn't love them.

Hank and Grace looked back at me and mumbled in unison, "Sorry, Mom."

I offered a smile I hoped indicated I accepted their apology, and I moved toward them. After setting my bag down on the counter, Dom's fingers curled around the back of my neck, so he could kiss me.

Once he did, he asked, "How was your day, sugar?"

"It was great. Everything is going really well at work, and the toy and book drive has really taken off," I told him.

"That's great news. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Dom. How was your day?" I asked.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Right now, I'm trying to figure out if I'm more stressed about work or the argument these two are having."

Focusing my attention on the kids, I asked, "So, what exactly is going on right now?"

Both Hank and Grace opened their mouths and started speaking at the same time, and I couldn't make out anything they were saying beyond it being something about Christmas.

I held my hand up in front of me and said, “Stop.” When they were both silent, I smiled at them. “I can’t hear anything if you’re both talking at the same time. So, Grace, tell me what your problem is right now.”

“Dad asked us what we wanted to do this year for our Christmas Eve family fun night, and Hank is being crazy about it,” she explained.

My brows pulled together. “What do you want to do on Christmas Eve, Hank?”

“Something fun. Grace just wants to either bake cookies or sit around watching Christmas movies, which I know we’re going to be watching all month long. I want to do something exciting.”

“Did you have something specific in mind?” I pressed him for more.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I was thinking we could have a party and have friends over or something like that.”

I looked at Dom; his lips were twitching.

“Hank, honey, there are a couple of problems with that,” I started. “First of all, the likelihood is that all of our friends already have plans for Christmas Eve. That includes your friends from school. Second, and more importantly, this is the Moore Family Christmas Eve family fun night. That means, it needs to be something for just the four of us to do together as a family.”

“Great, so Grace gets her way then,” he scoffed.

Shaking my head, I corrected him. “No, she doesn’t. Me explaining to you how this works has nothing to do with Grace getting her way. I haven’t even asked her yet what she would like to do. A family tradition is a family tradition, Hank. It’s something meant to be done together as a family, and we’re not going to negotiate. Did you have any other ideas as to what you’d like to do?”

“No,” he mumbled.

My eyes slid to my daughter. “Was Hank telling the truth? You want to bake cookies or watch movies?”

She shrugged, too. “I’m not saying it has to be that, but Hank was talking about inviting all these people from school over. If I have to choose between that or the four of us baking cookies, I’d choose the cookies.”

“So, you don’t really have an idea then, either?”

“No.”

Looking at Dom once more, my grin grew. “Then, it’s settled.”

He smiled back at me, even if he had no idea what I was thinking. The truth was that he knew me well enough to know I had something up my sleeve, and we’d put this whole thing to rest.

“What?” Grace and Hank questioned me.

Smiling brightly at them, I shared, “I’ve got it all figured out already. In fact, you two weren’t the only ones thinking about what we should do this year on Christmas Eve. I had it on my mind today at work, and I have the best idea.”

“Oh, no. We can do what Grace wants. You’re going to make us read books,” Hank grumbled.

Dom burst out laughing as he wrapped his arms around me.

“I am not. And I’ll make this promise to the both of you. We’ll find time between now and Christmas Eve to make plenty of cookies and watch some movies. If we can’t make it happen before Christmas, we’ll find some time between Christmas Day and New Year’s Eve to have friends over, too. I’ll be in charge of planning this year’s Christmas Eve activity, and I can assure you that you’ll both love it. Does that work?”

Grace was immediately amenable. “Yeah, Mom. That sounds great.”

“Perfect. What about you, Hank?”

He started nodding his head. “I think it’ll be more fun to have friends over after Christmas anyway.”

“Good. Now, do either of you have any homework that needs to be done?”

“Yes, but it’s only going to take like fifteen minutes to do it.”

I lifted a brow. “Awesome. Let’s get that done while I get dinner made.”

“But Dad already did it,” Hank noted.

Until my son said those words, I hadn’t taken a moment to inhale the scent surrounding me. My eyes went to my husband’s, and I asked, “What did you make for dinner?”

“It’s not finished yet, but I’ve done all the prep work and gotten the first bit of it started,” he answered. “The kids will have just enough time to finish their schoolwork while I make burgers to go with the fries that are already baking in the oven.”

I turned my body fully toward Dom’s and threw my arms over his shoulders. “Kiss me,” I begged him.

“Ugh, I’m out of here,” Grace declared.

“I’m coming with you,” Hank said.

Dom grinned at me, then leaned forward and touched his mouth to mine. Things got a bit hot and heavy for a moment, but eventually, he tore his mouth from mine. “Thank you for cooking tonight.”

“Ekko, I’ve been listening to them argue about Christmas Eve since they got out of school. I’ll cook dinner every night if it means you can do what you just did.”

“Deal.”

He chuckled and loosened his hold on me, so he could tend to the burgers. While he did that, he asked, “So, what is the plan for Christmas Eve?”

I had come up with the best idea today while I was at work, and the more I thought about it, the more I wanted it to

be a surprise.

“You’re just going to have to trust me,” I told him, leaning against the counter.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“I’ll get it out of you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I have my ways, sugar. I’ll convince you.”

“You can try, but you won’t be successful.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I decided it was best not to argue. Dom would try to get it out of me tonight, and in the process, he’d wind up delivering a couple of orgasms. He might withhold them initially in an attempt to get the information he wanted, but I had my own ways, and I knew I’d be able to keep the secret I wanted to keep while making sure we both ended up feeling satisfied before the night was over.

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SIX
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Pierce

Stepping out of my truck and into the cold weather in the parking lot of Cunningham Security, where I worked, I did it while feeling only a smidgen of relief.

That relief was only related to the fact I could now focus my energy on doing something to alleviate the stress I'd been feeling.

It had been a long time since I'd felt this way. It was almost as though I was being sent back years in time, back to when I'd first met my wife, Zara.

At that time, I'd been investigating a string of arson cases in town, and my work on that case led me to Zara. Back then, I'd been worried about how the case could impact her and her business.

I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't worried about her safety, considering businesses were being targeted, and in Zara's case, she not only had a business, but she also lived in the loft above it. I spent far too many nights worried about whether I'd get a call that something bad had happened to her.

Fortunately, before anything awful could happen to her or Petals—her flower shop—the case was solved.

And our lives had changed tremendously since then.

Zara and I now lived in a house with our two children, Jackson and Brooklyn, our dog, Blaze, and our cat, Callie.

Life had been great ever since I met her, and it seemed to get better with each day that passed. Truly, I couldn't have asked for anything more than I had in my life, and I was grateful for Zara and our family.

As I made my way through the parking lot and to the front door, I tried to remind myself how it had all worked out last time, and it was bound to be the same this time, but it wasn't exactly easy or effective.

Because I was, sadly, back in the same place I'd been in all those years ago.

The Cunningham Security team had been tasked by the local police department with helping to locate the individual or individuals responsible for a string of robberies in town.

Those robberies had been happening at small businesses, which meant Petals was at risk once again, considering the businesses that were being targeted were ones that were exceptionally busy at the holiday time.

Since news of the robberies was no secret to folks in town, it was no surprise Zara was aware of what was happening. I hated the stress I knew it was putting her under, especially when she already had so much on her plate with simply trying to keep up with the holiday rush.

When she'd first learned about it and brought it to my attention, I did what I could to reassure her and make sure she knew we were working on the case with every intention of resolving it.

It seemed to help her, but as time went on without a suspect, I knew her mindset could change. I didn't want that for her.

The only thing I'd managed to find comfort in—something I'd relayed to my wife as well—was that nobody had been physically harmed. With all of the robberies taking place at night when the businesses were closed, the impact those folks felt came in a different way. They were hurt financially.

For the sake of those people, my wife, the rest of the business owners in Windsor, and my own peace of mind, I

wanted this case resolved quickly.

That was the very reason I was glad to have just arrived at work. It was a new day to come at this with a fresh perspective, and it was my hope there would be something that would stand out.

I punched in the numbers on the keypad outside to unlock the door and walked in. I'd barely made it halfway to my office when it seemed I was going to get my wish.

Or part of it, anyway.

"Hey, Pierce, I'm glad you're here," Levi said, stopping me in my tracks.

I turned around to face him. "Hey, Levi. What's going on?"

He let out a frustrated sigh. "I just got off the phone with Detective Baines. He said they just got a call about another robbery."

My body tensed. "Fuck. Where?"

"Toys and Dolls. It's the store in the Windsor Shopping Plaza that sells children's apparel and toys," he shared.

There it was.

Another small business that would have been undoubtedly busy at this time of year.

"How bad?" I questioned him.

Shaking his head, his frustration leaking out of him, he clipped, "The place was ransacked. From what I could gather through my conversation with Detective Baines, it's probably going to be close to being a total loss for the owners."

"Damn it," I hissed.

"I could use a second set of eyes on this while I go to check it out. Care to join me?" he asked.

This case had been at the forefront of my mind, weighing heavily on me ever since I found out about it. There wasn't a chance I was going to sit this one out. The corners of my

mouth tipped up in a smile. “I had planned to come in today and find something new to work with on this case, so I’m guessing heading out with you is going to be the best place to start and make that happen.”

Levi and I walked right back out the door and hopped into his truck.

Before I knew it, we had arrived at Toys and Dolls. The devastation could be felt at every turn. The entire store had been trashed. Racks had been knocked over and very little clothing and toys had been strewn about. For the most part, despite the number of people in the store—the owners, the police, and us—the store felt empty. It matched the hollow feeling I could clearly see written all over the faces of the owners, a pair of best friends who’d opened the shop up just two years ago.

A bad situation had been made even worse, because it wasn’t just a single family that was impacted by the robbery. This one hit two separate families. The women were distraught.

“What do we know so far?” Levi asked Detective Baines.

With a slight shake of his head, he answered, “We got the call this morning, and I called you immediately after. I only got here about five minutes before you, so I’m getting myself brought up to speed right along with you. Just walking through the front door, you can see there’s a lot to digest here.”

Levi and I offered nods of agreement, but I was the one who spoke. “Speaking of walking through the front door, is that how the perp entered?”

Detective Baines shrugged. “Again, I just got here, so I know about as much as you do. There’s no broken glass on the windows, so there’s no obvious sign of forced entry.”

Jerking his chin toward the door, Levi noted, “There’s a security system here. That should have tipped somebody off long before the owners arrived this morning.”

“Let’s go have a chat with them and see what they have to say,” Detective Baines suggested.

Not even ten minutes later, the three of us found ourselves at the back of the store, where there happened to be another door.

At first glance, nothing seemed abnormal. Once again, there was no sign of forced entry. But what was so peculiar was that the rear entrance doors to the stores in the shopping complex automatically locked. They'd easily open for someone on the inside looking to get out without that person needing to physically unlock the door. On the exterior, the doors would be locked, and without a key, nobody could just walk right in.

But there was something Levi immediately noticed. "Well, I think we can confidently say this is how the perp got in without the alarm ever being tripped."

"What makes you say that?"

Levi pointed to the top corner of the door and said, "Open the door again."

Detective Baines pushed the door open, and we saw it. The contact that should have been affixed to the door was somehow still making contact with the other half affixed to the frame of the door. "Is that glued there?" I asked.

"Looks like it."

"So, whoever did this had to be in here at some point prior to last night," I surmised. "It looks like whoever did this isn't a complete fool. Most of the other businesses didn't have the proper security in place to prevent the robberies or even deter someone from making an attempt at one. This tells me we've got someone on our hands who knows what he's doing."

Detective Baines and Levi both took in my words and considered them.

"I think we need to confirm whether there are other employees here or just the two owners," Levi suggested. "Of course, if this was the only robbery to have occurred in the last couple of weeks, the idea that a disgruntled employee was behind this might make more sense. I don't know. Even though I know we need to investigate every possible suspect

and go down every avenue to find our culprit, part of me feels like it'd be a waste of time to go after the individuals who work here. Not only would they not really have any connection to the other businesses that have been robbed, but this whole thing would also put their livelihoods at risk."

Nodding his agreement, Detective Baines added, "And right before the holiday, when things are already tough for so many, that seems counterproductive."

"Exactly."

"In addition to the employees, we should also take a look at anyone else who's had access to this back room," I added, moving closer to the door. As I pushed it open, wanting to confirm the door was actually locked from the opposite side, I said, "I don't know if there are deliveries made or anything like that, but maybe we're dealing with someone who has justifiable reason to be back here, and perhaps at some point he might have been left alone just long enough to mess with the contact for the alarm."

Levi was quick to respond while I played with the handle on the back of the door. "That's not a bad idea. I mean, if there's someone who comes here regularly to make a delivery, the owners might not have thought twice about allowing him to come in and leave whatever was being dropped off without supervising, especially if they were busy out front."

"They've got some cameras mounted on the outside of the building, but is there anything inside here?" I asked.

Detective Baines answered, "I know I saw two at the front of the store, but I don't see anything back here. Why don't we go out there and talk to them? Maybe we can gain a little more insight and possibly take a look at the footage."

I stepped forward again, heading back inside, when something caught my eye. "What's this?" I asked.

I didn't have to look up to know Levi and Detective Baines had stopped moving and turned around to face me again. Propping the door open behind my back, I crouched down slightly and inspected the striker plate for the door.

“Is that... what is that?” Levi wondered.

Narrowing my eyes slightly at the bright red object, I answered, “It looks like it’s a small section of a fine-tooth comb.”

“Don’t touch that yet,” Detective Baines ordered. “If we’re lucky, we might be able to lift some fingerprints off of it. Let me get one of my guys to collect that.”

As he walked off to grab one of his men, Levi moved closer and leaned in to get a better look. “So, this person clearly thought ahead. This is why there’s been no sign of forced entry in any of these cases.”

I shook my head and looked at him. “This doesn’t give me a good feeling at all.”

“Nope. What are you thinking for our next plan of action?” he asked me.

My mind took a moment to consider the options. We had come into this later than I would have liked, which meant we were doing our best to link the newest cases with ones that had happened before we’d been brought on board. “With any luck, we’ll have something to work with on the security footage. Beyond that, we need to try to see what we can do to possibly link all of the businesses involved.”

“You’re thinking it’s possible we have a situation like what you suggested earlier? Maybe someone is delivering to all of these businesses and taking stock of which ones are the most vulnerable.”

I nodded. “It seems the most plausible at this point, and it’s what I’d be willing to run with unless we get something that tells us there is something else we should be looking at.”

Levi narrowed his eyes at the comb, likely digesting all that had just happened. Following a beat of silence, he said, “I agree. After they get this comb out, let’s see what’s on the video footage. We’ll go from there.”

As though on cue, two of Detective Jackson Baines’s officers returned. We showed them what we needed them to remove, and once they got it out, we returned to the front of

the store to get more details. Unfortunately, the camera footage wasn't immediately available, since the cameras had been installed by the landlord, and he was the only one with access to the feed. He had been notified about the robbery and was going to be providing the footage to the WPD by the afternoon.

Levi and I spent the remainder of our morning gathering as much information and evidence as possible before we both returned to the office. For the rest of the afternoon, right up until it was time for me to head out for the day, I worked on this case.

While I didn't manage to solve anything, I'd certainly gotten far more done than I had anticipated when I'd strolled into the office this morning.

And I'd tried to keep that in mind as I made my way back home to my family. The last thing I wanted to do was bring any of the stress and frustration I felt over the case home with me.

Of course, I didn't know why I thought that was going to be a problem for me. The minute I walked through the door, everything but what was right in front of me vanished.

I was immediately greeted by Blaze. He was always the first to make it to me. I bent down and gave him a couple of scratches on the head until my attention was pulled away.

"Daddy, look!" my five-year-old daughter declared as she ran toward me.

Coming to a stop just a few feet in front of me, Brooklyn spun around, showing me what had to be her costume for her dance recital. "Is that for your recital?" I asked.

Her head bobbed up and down. "Isn't it pretty?"

"It's beautiful," I assured her as I bent down to lift her in my arms.

I walked deeper into the house as I kissed her cheek. "Where's Mommy and your brother?"

"In the kitchen."

“And what about Callie?” I pressed, referring to the cat.

“Mommy said Callie was being bossy and demanding dinner, so I think she’s eating now.”

Continuing to carry my girl, who was the spitting image of her mother with her long, dark, curly hair, I made my way to the kitchen.

The minute I stepped into the room, my son greeted me. “Hey, Dad.”

I walked over to where he was sitting on the stool on the opposite side of the island, talking to his mom, and kissed his head. “Hey, kid. What are you up to?”

“Mom and I are trying to figure out what day we’re going to go snowtubing before Christmas,” he answered.

My eyes went to my wife. Zara was working on dinner, and though I could tell she was exhausted, she still had a smile on her face. I set Brooklyn down on the stool beside her brother and rounded the counter.

Zara turned to face me, and her smile grew. I wrapped both arms around her and gave her a kiss. “Hey, beautiful. How was your day?”

“It was good. Long and busy, but good.”

I gave her a nod and jerked my head toward our kids. “We’re going snowtubing?”

She shrugged. “Brooklyn’s so excited about her dance recital coming up, and our son wanted to have something to look forward to as well, so he said he’d like to go snowtubing.”

Continuing to hold on to my wife, I looked at my kids and cocked a brow. “Are you telling me Santa coming later this month isn’t enough to be excited about?”

“I can’t wait for Santa,” Brooklyn announced.

“I’m excited, too,” Jackson assured me. “But I thought it would be fun to plan something for when we’re on winter break.”

And there it was.

Just one more reason I was so determined to see the case we were working on come to a close. I wanted to see it resolved quickly, partly because I didn't want another business being robbed, but mostly because I wanted to enjoy some time off with my kids and my wife without having to worry about being called away from them.

I smiled at my son and promised, "We'll take a look at the schedule and pick a day to go."

"Really?"

"Of course."

Before he had the chance to respond, Zara interjected, "Dinner's just about ready, so the both of you need to go get your hands washed. And Brooklyn, you need to change your clothes, because we don't want it getting dirty."

"I can't reach the hooks and snaps in the back," Brooklyn said.

"Go take care of washing your hands, and Daddy will be right there to help you with the hooks and snaps."

The kids took off to do as their mom told them. Then her eyes met mine. "How was your day?"

"Productive."

Surprise washed over her. "That's good, isn't it?"

Now it was my turn to shrug. "Yes and no. There was another robbery last night. That part of it sucks, but we wound up getting some new information we hope will help us narrow things down."

"Was it bad?"

"Yeah. It was awful. I just hope we can get this case solved quickly now. I don't want it looming over us as we head into the winter break for the kids."

"I'm sorry, Pierce. I wish there was something I could do to help you," Zara lamented.

I tightened my arms around her and touched my lips to hers. “You already do. I stepped into this house, knew I’d see all of you here, and all my worries subsided.”

Her features softened. “Well, even still, I wish there was more we could do.”

“I just don’t want the distraction, because it does pop into my head every now and then. I want us to enjoy our time off together. It’s been so busy lately, and I’m looking forward to relaxing a bit with you and the kids.”

“I’m ready!”

At the sound of Brooklyn’s voice floating down into the kitchen, I couldn’t stop myself from letting out a laugh.

Zara did the same and said, “Relaxing doesn’t start today, unfortunately.”

I gave her another kiss, loosened my hold on her, and moved to walk away. “Doing anything with you or the kids is relaxing, gorgeous, even if I’m just helping with costumes for recitals. I love it all.”

“That’s why Santa’s going to be extra nice to you this year,” she called back.

I laughed again. “I’m not sure what he could possibly bring me when I already have everything I need.”

There was a moment of silence before Zara replied, “We love you.”

“And I love all of you.”

There was nothing left to say. I climbed the stairs and sought out my daughter, so I could help her with her hooks and snaps.

And five minutes later, the four of us were sitting around the table together, eating dinner while Blaze sat at our feet and Callie slept.

SEVEN

Elle

“Only a few minutes left.”

Considering I was standing off the side of the stage, I knew it was coming. But hearing my husband say those words made it feel that much more real.

I only had a few minutes left until Lou was going to announce me to the crowd. The very large crowd.

I peeked around the wall and looked out at everyone filling the room. Being lost in their own conversations, nobody noticed me. I couldn't find a single open space; there were so many people. And while there were plenty of familiar faces—both family and friends—there were far more I didn't recognize at all.

Either everyone had tons of holiday spirit and was feeling particularly festive and charitable—which I hoped was the case, given that was the whole reason I was doing this—or it had been entirely too long since I'd performed.

It was likely a combination of the two.

Returning my attention to Levi, I said, “I can't believe how many people are here.”

He stepped forward, wrapped his arms around my waist, and asked, “Are you nervous?”

I tipped my head from one side to the other. “I don't know. Maybe a little bit. I mean, I've been rehearsing my set all week long, but it's not the same as singing to a live crowd.”

A smile formed on his face. “You’re going to be phenomenal.”

“Your opinion is the only one that really matters to me. Well, you and the boys, but since they aren’t here right now, you’re the only one who’s important.”

Levi’s features softened. “I know you think that, and I get it. But your fans and your music are important to you, too. I just think you’ve been away from it for so long that you might have forgotten what it feels like.”

He probably wasn’t wrong.

I’d been caught up in doing life with him. I’d been busy raising our boys with Levi, and until I became a mom, I hadn’t realized just how much fulfillment I’d feel.

But just because Levi and I had started a family and my priorities had shifted didn’t mean I gave up singing entirely. I sang to my boys all the time, especially when they were infants.

I still loved music, and perhaps Levi had a point. I’d been away from performing for so long, I’d forgotten just how much of a thrill it had given me.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. It has been a long time, and if I’m honest, I guess I am excited to get back out there, so I can do something that brought me so much happiness. I mean, in a way, it led me to you.”

Before Levi had the chance to respond, Lou walked up and asked, “Are you ready, darling?”

I offered a big, bright smile. “I am.”

He returned the smile. “I can’t thank you enough for doing this, Elle. I don’t think we’ve ever had a crowd like this, and I think we’re going to help a lot of people this Christmas because of it.”

That was what this had been all about.

In a way, it was about me returning to doing something I loved, but deep down, the biggest reason I was here was

because Lou had wanted to do something for those less fortunate this holiday season. I couldn't turn him down.

"I'm so glad there's such a big crowd tonight," I told him. "I hope the donations are pouring in."

"I haven't counted anything, but I know folks are being generous. Anyway, hang tight while I go out and introduce you to the crowd," he urged.

As he walked away and out onto the stage, I returned my attention to Levi. He was looking at me like he thought I was spectacular. "Are you going to be here the whole time?" I asked him, already knowing what his answer would be.

"There's nowhere else in this world I'll ever be other than standing right here whenever you're performing."

His words warmed my heart, and just as I heard Lou announcing me, I pressed up on my toes and touched my lips to Levi's in a sweet kiss. Or, I had intended for it to be one. He wasted no time taking things a bit deeper.

I separated my mouth from his on a moan, and he asked, "Is that gingerbread I taste?"

Offering a seductive grin, I countered, "Did you think I was going to walk out on this stage without teasing you with a new flavor of my lip balm first? It's one of the things I was most excited for when it came to performing tonight."

Levi's eyes darkened, but I didn't give him a chance to respond. Instead, I turned and walked out onto the stage, the energy and applause from the crowd overwhelming me with such happiness.

I took it all in, basking in the feel of being in a place that had brought so much joy into my life. Following a warm welcome from the crowd, I thanked them and dove into my set.

And it was magical.

I wasn't even halfway through when I realized just how much I had missed performing. Even if this was a festive set

and a departure from my typical set list, I was still having the best time.

Levi knew it, too.

Because when I glanced over at him at one point with a huge smile on my face, his expression matched my own.

Well before I was ready for it to be over, I'd reached the end of my final song. It didn't matter that I'd been on stage for just over an hour, singing my heart out. I found myself eager to continue. So, I belted out one last unplanned and unexpected holiday tune.

And when I was finished, I got a standing ovation.

I loved this town and these people—family, friends, and strangers alike.

The next thing I knew, I'd walked off the stage and right into Levi's arms. "You were incredible, sunshine. How do you feel?"

"Great," I bubbled. "I didn't realize how much I missed performing until I was back out there and doing it."

Without thinking twice about it, Levi asked, "Do you think you want to start performing again? Maybe put on a small tour?"

"Yes and no."

His brows pulled together. "What?"

"Our boys are still so young, and they deserve to have our attention," I started. "I don't think it'd be a bad idea to do the occasional performance here at Lou's, maybe once a month. But I don't want to plan something that takes me away from our kids for an extended period of time."

Something warm and sweet stole over his expression. "You're such a selfless woman, and I hope Kash, Ryder, and Milo all know just how lucky they are to have you."

"Don't make me cry," I ordered.

Levi lifted his hand to the side of his face, the tips of his fingers in my hair, his thumb stroking gently over my cheek.

“Okay, I’ll stop. But I need you to make me a promise.”

“What’s that?”

“If things change at any point in time for you, and you decide you need or want more of what you just got being out there on that stage, I want you to promise me you’ll tell me,” he replied. “I don’t know what you’ll want, but whatever it is, we’ll figure it out and make it happen for you.”

I couldn’t stop myself from falling a bit deeper in love with Levi. Even now, after all these years, he seemed to know just what to say or do to make that happen. I hadn’t even realized it was possible, but I knew I loved the way Levi loved me.

As much as I adored it, there were times I wondered if he knew just how much I loved my life exactly as it was right now.

“Do you even know me, Levi?” I asked, my voice light and teasing.

Seemingly confused but also amused, he jerked his head back slightly and laughed. “We’ve been together for more than ten years now, Elle. I’d like to think I know a thing or two about you.”

“So, then I’m unsure why it seems like you’ve forgotten how much I enjoy the journey,” I noted.

His arm around my waist tightened. “That’s not the case at all. Between the drives we took from one stop to the next on that first tour I went on with you at the beginning, to all of the places we’ve visited over the years with the boys, how could I forget?”

Pressing up on my toes, I touched my lips to the skin on the side of his neck. My lips drifted toward his ear, where I whispered, “The journey isn’t always about going places, Levi.” I bit down gently on the lobe of his ear, his fingers gripping my hair tighter at the back of my skull. After releasing his ear, I added, “I’ve had such wild and memorable experiences with you without ever needing to leave our house.”

There was a brief moment of silence before Levi gave my hair a gentle tug, tilted my head back, and gazed at me with an unmistakable look in his eyes. “If you’ve found being at home to be so enjoyable, then perhaps we should head back there. You know, especially considering I had thoughts about the things I wanted to do to you from the second you decided to torture me with those lips of yours before you walked out on stage.”

I pushed my bottom lip out, indicating I was slightly disappointed.

He chuckled and asked, “What’s that look for?”

“Well, I was just thinking that since we don’t get the chance to ever really have everyone together in one place like this unless it’s a birthday party for someone’s kid, maybe we could stay here a little longer and enjoy the festivities with our friends and families. I was kind of hoping I’d be able to dance with the girls for a bit.”

“You’re going to make me wait longer to be inside you?” Levi questioned me.

I lifted my hand to his face and ran my thumb along his bottom lip. “I promise I’ll make it worth your while when we get home. Plus, Lou’s serving up some holiday cocktails, which are bound to make me even a bit more playful tonight.”

Levi stared at me, his eyes roaming over my face, assessing me.

Since I couldn’t quite read which way he was leaning with this, I begged, “Please. I think it’ll be fun to have some time here together with everyone. It’ll be the perfect way to get into the holiday spirit. Plus, the boys are at home, and you know they are probably having the time of their lives with your parents.”

“They better be in bed already,” Levi declared.

I bit my lip.

Levi didn’t miss it. “What? What’s that about?”

Lifting my shoulders to my ears and feigning innocence, I squeaked, “I might have told them they could stay up a little later tonight. They’re building gingerbread houses with their grandparents tonight.”

Levi cocked an eyebrow. “So, what you’re actually saying is that we’ll go home, no houses will be built, and all of the candy and icing needed for assembly will be in their stomachs, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, it’s not going to be that bad. Besides, just think about it. If they go to bed a little later, they’ll sleep in, and that means you can have your way with me tonight *and* tomorrow morning.”

Shaking his head in mock disappointment, he ignored the situation at home with the boys and muttered, “Why can’t I ever say no to you?”

My face lit up, and I was practically bouncing for joy in his hold. “It’s because you love me so much, and I think, deep down, you really want to join in with the crowd here tonight.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on the last half of that statement,” he noted. “Give me one more kiss before we head out there. The sooner we get this started, the sooner I can get you home.”

I kissed Levi before he led me out to where we found our friends. And while he spent the better part of the evening merely standing off to the side with a bunch of the guys, talking with them and occasionally shooting an undeniable look my way, I thoroughly enjoyed myself with so many of the women who’d become such an important part of my life.

It was wonderful, and I was grateful to have each and every one of them. So many years ago, I’d learned a tough lesson about friendship and loyalty, so I refused to take the ones I had for granted.

We laughed, we danced, and we drank.

And it was safe to say we were all in the Christmas spirit, almost as excited about the upcoming holiday as our kids were for Santa’s impending arrival.

Somewhere in the midst of all the fun I'd been having, Levi walked up to me, brought his mouth to my ear, and demanded, "It's time to go."

It was time.

He'd gone above and beyond to give me a good night with our friends tonight, so I couldn't complain.

I gave out a round of hugs, said goodbye, and allowed Levi to take me home.



"That's it, sunshine. Show me those eyes and give us what we both want."

As much as I loved hearing his voice, I didn't need the instructions from Levi. I was already beyond determined to give us both what we wanted.

After all, he'd taken care of us both last night, so it was only fair I came through this morning.

Of course, Levi was the one who'd gotten things started for us. I'd been sleeping peacefully when he decided to wake me up with a whole lot of teasing, touching, and tasting.

Once he got things going, it didn't take long for me to take charge. And it seemed he didn't mind handing the reins over to me. I was on top of him, riding him hard, and he hadn't missed the fact I was on the verge of something incredible.

His words, thankfully, indicated he wasn't far behind. Though, it was rather obvious he was right there with me, judging by the sounds that had been coming from him from the minute I climbed on top and slid down over him.

I worked my hips over him, moving faster and seeking that release. Levi's hands roamed over my body, squeezing my breasts, gripping my thighs, or rubbing my clit.

“Levi,” I whimpered.

“Come here, sweetness,” he ordered, reaching his hand up and curling it behind my neck.

My hands, which had been planted firmly on his chest, shifted out to the side, and I bent forward. Our faces were inches apart, everything was building, and at the moment my orgasm started to tear through me, Levi took over.

Powering his hips up, he thrust his cock into me as each wave of pleasure crashed into me. And with my eyes still on his, just the way he liked, I felt it leave me when Levi found his own release.

Collapsing on top of him, I fought to regain control of my breathing. “See? Wasn’t it worth it to stay and have fun last night?” I asked him with my cheek pressed to his chest.

His fingertips were gently stroking along the skin on my lower back as he replied, “There’s the possibility we would have had even more fun if we came home earlier.”

I lifted my head up and looked at him. “Did you really not enjoy yourself last night?”

He let out a laugh. “It was fine. I’m really just giving you a hard time. I know you had a great time, and that’s all that matters to me.”

I smiled at him.

Before I could say anything in response, we heard the unmistakable sound of something heavy falling on the ground somewhere outside of our bedroom.

My body tensed slightly, then I heard the grunts and shouting coming from the boys. “Your children sound like they’ve broken something,” I noted.

Levi rolled his eyes. “I love how they’re my children when they’re roughhousing.”

“I’ve talked to your mom,” I reminded him. “She told me all about you and your brothers when you were younger. I think this is your payback.”

“It’s a good thing you decided to find a Christmas tree today. These kids need to be out of the house, so they can burn off this energy,” he muttered.

“Maybe you should go wrangle them, so we don’t have to get a construction crew in here again,” I suggested.

“Good idea.”

At that, I climbed off of Levi and the two of us got ourselves cleaned up. He was done and out of our bedroom well before I was. And when I finally got myself dressed and was ready to head downstairs to make breakfast for my family, I realized everyone was still upstairs.

I crept down the hall and found them all in Ryder’s room. All I could do was stand in the doorway, because as much as Levi claimed the boys made him crazy, he didn’t do much to stop what was happening. He’d joined in their little wrestling match, and my heart exploded in my chest at the sight.

It always did.

And that’s when I knew what I’d told Levi last night was the absolute truth.

I didn’t want to go out on tour, because I got everything I needed at home. I loved the messy house and our rowdy boys. I loved watching my husband wrestle around with his kids. Every day felt like a new adventure to me, and there wasn’t anything I’d want to do that’d take me out of this house and away from them.

I walked right into the room, hopped on Ryder’s bed, and asked, “Is anyone planning to go get a Christmas tree today?”

Everyone froze and looked at me. “Yeah, I can’t wait.”

“Me, too. When are we leaving?”

My eyes moved through the room. “Well, we need to have breakfast, and all of you need to get dressed and brush your teeth.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

“I could make gingerbread pancakes,” I told them.

“Elle—” Levi got out before he was cut off by his sons.

“Yeah!”

“You better get downstairs,” I told them.

Without another moment of delay, the boys took off. Levi got up off the ground and moved toward me. “They’re having eggs with breakfast today, and we’re limiting the pancakes. Those boys are still wired from gingerbread houses last night.”

“It’s Christmas,” I reasoned.

He shook his head and helped me off the bed. “It might be Christmas, but you like to sneak them treats all the time.”

“Because they’re delicious, and we have you to ensure we consume enough of the healthy stuff.”

Levi laughed, wrapped his arm around me, and led me out of the room.

Then, the five of us had a big breakfast together as I allowed the sounds of my beautiful family to seep into me before we took off for a day out searching for the perfect Christmas tree.

It remained to be seen whether it’d make it through the rest of the season, or if our kids would somehow find a way to knock it over.

.....
EIGHT
.....

Lorenzo

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

It was Monday evening, and I’d just gotten home from work. I’d pulled into the driveway, opened the garage door, and couldn’t even pull into the garage.

It was blocked.

There had been more days of the space in front of my garage door being blocked, preventing me from pulling into the garage, than there had been with it not being blocked.

Because I had a wife.

And my wife and I had two daughters.

We also had another baby on the way.

And Christmas was coming.

All of those things meant that I came home from work on a regular basis to find stacks of boxes obstructing the entrance into the garage.

I glanced over at the passenger’s seat and pinned my eyes on Ollie, our French bulldog. Ollie had become the unofficial mascot of the Cunningham Security team, so he typically joined me when I went to work. He didn’t come every day, depending on what I was working on, but when I could make things easier for Jolie at home, especially now, I took him with me.

“This is ridiculous, isn’t it?” I asked him.

Ollie tipped his head to one side and studied me.

“I bet not even one of those boxes has a single thing for either one of us,” I told him. “How does that make you feel?”

Ollie barked, a clear display of his frustration.

Laughing, I shook my head. “My thoughts exactly.”

I put my truck in park, got out, and moved the eight packages out of the way. Then I hopped back into the truck, pulled it in, and closed the door behind me.

The moment I walked into the house, Ollie took off running, and I heard Jolie’s voice carry from another room in the house. “Daddy’s home!”

The next thing I knew, the unmistakable sound of my daughters’ footsteps filled the air. I heard them before I saw them, and the anticipation of seeing their beautiful faces was always one of my favorite things when I got home from work, or anywhere, really.

As was unsurprising, Daniela was the first to round the corner. At six years old, she was my oldest, and all the things I’d heard about how fast time flies were true. It felt like it was yesterday when she was born, and now, she was six. She was the spitting image of her mother, had opinions, and was such a girly girl.

“Daddy!” she squealed as she ran toward me.

I bent slightly, held my arms out, and replied, “Hey, sweet pea.”

Her little body collided with mine, and I hauled her up to my arms, pressing several kisses to her cheek.

No sooner had I done that, my youngest daughter turned the corner. “Dad.”

I shifted Dani into one arm, crouched down, and held my other arm out to get Harlow. She was a year old, and she didn’t move nearly as fast as her older sister, even if she had the same, if not more, determination.

Once she was close enough, I kissed her cheek, lifted her in my arm, and stood. “Hi, peanut.”

With both of my girls in my arms, I looked between them and saw my gorgeous wife making her way to me with the biggest smile on her face.

“Hi, boss,” she said, when she came to a stop in front of me.

I gave her a kiss and replied, “Hey, baby. How was your day?”

“When Mommy brought me home from school, we painted our nails,” Dani declared. “Look.”

She held her hands up in front of her face and wiggled them.

Harlow mimicked her older sister’s movements.

“Wow. Those are certainly festive. You look like you’re all ready for Christmas,” I said.

“That’s not all, Daddy. We bought Christmas dresses today, too,” Dani shared.

I cocked an eyebrow and looked at my wife.

“They need dresses for Christmas pictures,” Jolie declared, immediately rushing to defend herself.

“Let me guess, you and I need something new to wear as well, don’t we?” I asked.

Jolie shrugged her shoulders. “I want us to match.”

“Baby, these girls are the spitting image of you, dimples and all. I’m not sure how much more you could match.”

“Daddy, I want to show you what I made at school today,” Dani interrupted.

Understanding what she wanted, I put her down on her feet, and she took off into the other room.

Jolie moved closer, allowing me to wrap my arm around her back, so my hand could settle on her opposite shoulder. As

I curled her into my body, she asked, “You aren’t upset, are you?”

“When am I ever upset with you?” I retorted.

“I’m just making sure.”

“Now, the delivery driver is another story. I swear, it’s like he lives for making it impossible for me to just come home from work and pull into my garage.”

Jolie’s brows pulled together. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve got packages outside,” I revealed.

Her eyes widened, excitement littering her expression. “Those are probably the ornaments I ordered.”

“Eight boxes worth?” I questioned her.

Jolie didn’t immediately respond.

She narrowed her eyes, but it wasn’t because she was studying me and preparing to launch into a tirade. I could see her mind working, attempting to recall whatever it was that she’d ordered, because she obviously didn’t think there should be eight boxes filled with ornaments.

“I’ll have to go through them later after the girls are in bed, because they could be gifts,” she said. “You aren’t upset, are you?”

“Upset about what?” I asked.

“The shopping.”

Now, it was my turn to remain silent. My eyes roamed over my wife’s beautiful face, taking in the worry in her expression. It was no secret Jolie loved to shop. It was also no secret that I couldn’t begin to understand the affinity she had for it. But I knew not long after we started dating one another about her spending habits. They hadn’t scared me away from her then.

“I’m not upset,” I assured her.

“You’re saying that, but then you seemed a little distraught about there being new dresses purchased for the girls,” she noted.

“Dani’s going to twirl around in her dress.”

“What?”

Giving her shoulder a squeeze, I explained, “The minute that dress is on her, Dani is going to start twirling around. Then she’ll run over to me and make me watch as she does it again and again. Harlow will see it, and she’ll do the same thing. And my girls will be happy. I don’t care what it is, Jolie. I’m going to give my girls, *all my girls*, which means I’m also talking about you, whatever makes them happy.”

Jolie beamed a beautiful smile at me. “We love you so much for it. You really are the best daddy these girls could have ever asked for. And of course, you know I think you’re the best husband in the world.”

I let out a laugh.

Even though I knew she was being silly, there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that my wife meant every word she said. And that was what it had always been about for me. Nothing had been more important to me than knowing I was a man worthy of their love.

Jolie loved to shop, but she didn’t do it to the point we wound up in debt because of it. Plus, as much as I pretended to be ticked off about it, I wasn’t mad. It made my day to see my wife and daughters laughing and smiling.

After living years of my life in solitude, never believing I’d have any of what I had now, there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do to nurture this family. I knew it wasn’t about material things, and if it ever became a financial issue, Jolie would find a way to pull back. She loved this family as much as I did, wanted to give our girls the world, but she’d never do it at the expense of our family’s security.

Truth be told, she’d already cut back substantially on her spending. At least, for herself, she had. Jolie had been working as a massage therapist up until Dani was born. She took some

time off afterward to be with our girl, and after more than a year of being home with her, she started going back on a part-time basis. Between my mom and her parents, we had enough people willing to look after Dani.

Jolie continued to work throughout her pregnancy with Harlow, but just before she reached the end, she stopped.

I didn't mind.

In fact, I preferred seeing her at home, where she was always happiest anyway. We eventually discussed it, and she confirmed as much. As it turned out, she'd gone back to work, because she believed she needed to provide an income as well. Once I assured her it wasn't necessary, she accepted it and stayed home to raise our babies.

Jolie was certain to never let me forget how much she appreciated me and the way I would work myself to the bone if I had to just to provide her and our children with the life they deserved. It was nice to hear her say the words.

But because I liked to tease her about it, I gave her a kiss on the lips and said, "I'm glad you feel that way. I'm just grateful that baby in your belly is a boy. I know you'll need to make him the most stylish baby boy in the world, but as he grows, you'll learn just how different he is from our daughters."

Jolie's hand went to her belly, and she stroked it over her bump. "I feel so bad for Levi and Elle. I've heard horror stories about what their boys have done to their house. Though I can't say I don't understand, because I had three brothers of my own who didn't exactly shy away from shenanigans."

"Daddy, look!" Dani declared as she came bounding back toward us with her hands filled with art projects.

I released my hold on Jolie as she said, "I'm going to get Ollie's food set out for him, then I'll finish up dinner. The lasagna should be just about ready."

At that, carrying Harlow in one of my arms still, I moved toward my oldest girl. "Let's go sit down, so you can show me what you made in school," I told her.

For the next few minutes, I sat with my daughters while Dani showed me the art projects she'd made in school. Never in a million years did I ever think I'd be so content or even excited to hear all about how a six-year-old made a snowman who looked like he had accordion arms and legs. It didn't even matter to me that the snowman actually had legs instead of a massive round circle at the bottom of his body. Dani rambled on and on about him forever, and it was one of the most riveting and entertaining conversations of my life.

Then again, that was how every conversation with her felt.

It was the exact same feeling I had when she shifted her focus from the snowman to the Christmas tree she'd made out of folded paper plates. I was captivated by her storytelling, hanging on to every word she had to say about how the tree was constructed, then how she decided to decorate it.

When she finished, I said, "These have got to be the best Christmas projects I've ever seen, sweet pea. You are a true artist."

"We're making ornaments tomorrow," she shared.

Smiling at her, I replied, "They'll go perfect on our tree."

Dani looked across the room at our tree. There was some garland on it, along with the ornaments Dani had made last year, but that was it. "Our tree looks very sad right now."

I laughed. "Yeah, but we'll get it decorated over the next few days. Won't we, Harlow?"

My youngest, who had her thumb in her mouth as she sat in my lap, dropped her head against my torso. It was a good thing dinner was just about ready, because I didn't think Harlow had much left in her tank.

As though on cue, Jolie announced, "Dinner's ready."

Dani needed no additional incentive. She scrambled off the couch and dashed out to the table. I lifted Harlow in my arms again and carried her out to her seat. We had a highchair for her that allowed her to sit with us at the table.

And she ate what we ate. Of course, everything was cut up small enough for her to eat, and in this case, the lasagna noodles that had been cooked just a bit longer. She'd get a little bit of everything that Jolie made for Dani at every meal, with modifications made to accommodate her.

Following dinner, Jolie and I spent some time just enjoying our girls and our dog. We knew it wasn't going to be long before there was a new baby added to the mix, and while the girls were excited about his arrival, we still wanted to give them as much time with us as we could.

Eventually, after I let Ollie out one last time, we took the girls upstairs, and I handled bath duties. Dani and Harlow loved bath time, and I enjoyed being able to have that extra time with them. Dani would help me give Harlow her bath, the two of us outside of the tub, and Harlow splashing in the water inside. After we finished her bath, Dani took her shower, and she'd talk to me the entire time she was in there. She reminded me so much of her mom.

Not only did I adore having this time with my girls, but I also liked being able to make things a bit easier on Jolie when I could, especially now that she was taking care of our daughters by herself all day long while being pregnant. It gave her the opportunity to grab her own shower without having to worry about them.

By the time the girls were in their pajamas and ready for bed, Jolie joined us again. We read to them and got them down for the night.

"I'm going to grab a quick shower," I told her as we made our way to our bedroom.

"Okay, boss. I'm going to get off my feet," she replied.

I gave her a kiss and promised, "I'll rub them for you when I'm out."

She smiled at me. "You're the best."

Fifteen minutes later, I'd joined my wife in our bed, my hands immediately seeking out her feet. Jolie might have been

a massage therapist, but she certainly didn't make any complaints about my skills whenever I did this for her.

I listened to the sweet sound of her moans as I worked my hands over her tired and achy feet and felt myself grow even more relaxed.

“So, how was your day, boss?” Jolie asked after she'd allowed herself to have a few moments of relief.

“It was okay,” I answered.

She rolled her head against the pillow and in my direction. With her eyes fixated on mine, I could already see the questions lingering. “Just okay? Any luck with the case?”

The last thing I'd wanted to do was give my wife any reason to feel stressed or worried. But Jolie was a shopper, and while there were plenty of things she ordered online, she also liked to patronize the local businesses. She kept on top of what was happening in this town, so I'd never hide anything like this from her.

Of course, I was sure there was a part of her easily reassured by the knowledge the Cunningham Security team was working with the Windsor Police Department to solve this case. So, while I never gave her any of the specifics about the case—something she never expected me to give her—I did try to let her know the broad scope of where things stood.

“There hasn't been anything new since the most recent robbery,” I shared. “On the bright side, that was the first robbery we were on, and we managed to gain a lot more insight into how this guy is operating. We have a few ideas about who could be behind this, but at this point, it's all just speculation.”

I released Jolie's first foot and reached for the second. Once again, she gave herself some time to enjoy the new sensation and the relief it offered before she spoke.

“Well, you should feel mildly relieved that there's something new to work with, even if you haven't gotten the case solved,” she reasoned.

“Yeah, we’re trying to see any silver lining there is, the biggest of which is probably Levi’s decision to have us all involved on this case.”

“I think it’s a great idea you’re all sharing the workload on this one. Not only will you have a different perspective, but it makes it so there’s not just two or even three of you putting in all the time on such a big case right around the holiday.”

“Agreed. It’s been a relief to know we’re all sharing the responsibility.” I finished massaging her second foot, set it down, and asked, “Feet feel better?”

“Much. Thank you.”

At that, I shifted myself in bed and curled myself close to Jolie’s body. With nearly all of my time and attention focused on our daughters when I got home from work, I didn’t get to be affectionate with my wife the way I always wanted.

Slipping beneath the covers and cuddling close to her at the end of a long, stressful day was usually all I needed. I enjoyed being able to talk to her about my day, and I liked that she cared to ask about it, but it would have sufficed to simply have this. Her body beside mine in our bed.

“How’s our baby doing?” I asked her when my hand slipped around her body and settled on her rounded belly.

“He’s good. He’s been moving around all day long,” she answered.

I pressed several kisses to the soft skin where Jolie’s neck met her shoulder. She hummed with delight, forcing a laugh to escape from me.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m better than okay. I was just hoping you weren’t too exhausted from your day at work and all the help you gave me when you got home.”

“Oh, yeah? Why is that?”

Keeping her body where it was on her side, Jolie twisted her neck to look back at me. “If you had it in you, I’d love to feel you inside me.”

“Baby, you know that’s never a problem for me.”

“I know, but I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of you. My efforts will be limited,” she pointed out.

I smiled, pressed a kiss to her cheek, and insisted, “You can stay exactly like you are, and I’ll take care of the both of us.”

“I’m so lucky to have you,” she sighed. “Santa’s going to have to bring you something really special this year.”

My lips twitched as my hand drifted toward her hip, where I gripped the material of her underwear before urging them down her legs. Once they were off, I replied, “I already have everything I need with you, the girls, and our boy on the way.”

After removing my own underwear, I brought my hand between her legs and began playing there. I shoved my opposite arm between the mattress and her body, and my hand found her breasts.

“Yeah, I know you do, but I still think you deserve something a little extra special,” she returned, parting her thighs a bit to give me easier access to her pussy.

I continued using my hands to tease her. “I’m going to get something a little extra special right now.”

“It doesn’t feel like it’ll ever be enough,” she argued.

Laughing, I promised, “It’s more than enough, Jolie. Always.”

At that, she let out a moan, and I knew she wasn’t going to have it in her to argue the point beyond that. So, I did exactly as I promised and went about taking care of the both of us.

It was only after I finished when Jolie had to get the last word in. “I’m going to make sure this is your best Christmas yet.”

I decided to let her have that, because what she was saying wasn’t untrue. It would be my best Christmas yet.

But that had nothing to do with any present she might stick underneath the tree.

.....
NINE
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Leni

“Can you carry these over to the island, please?”

My nine-year-old daughter, Audrina, took the container of flour from my hands and did as I asked.

“Okay, Garrett, what’s next?” I asked.

“S... su... I’m not sure how to say this word,” he replied.

Garrett was six years old, and we had been practicing his reading, which was the reason why he had the job he had now. Garrett hated reading, so I had to try my best to find ways to make it fun for him.

“The “s” and “u” in that word makes the *sh* sound,” I told him.

“Sh... g... sugar!”

I smiled brightly at him. “That’s right. Great job, kiddo. Audrina, this is another one for you to carry.”

My daughter came back to the pantry and took the sugar container from my hands.

As she walked away, I called out expectantly, “Garrett?”

“Chocolate chips,” he announced proudly.

Of course, he had no trouble pronouncing that one.

I pulled two bags of chocolate chips out of the pantry. “Alright, Everly, you’re up.”

Without hesitating, my four-year-old daughter walked up and took both packages from me before doing what her sister had done with the other ingredients.

“Anything else?” I asked.

Garrett shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

Feeling proud of how hard he’d worked to read off the entire list of ingredients, I smiled at him. “Okay, just to be safe, I need the three of you to do one final task while I pull out the electric stand mixer and the cookie sheets. I need Everly counting how many different types of ingredients are on the counter while Garrett counts how many are on the recipe card. Audrina needs to make sure those numbers match. Got it?”

Audrina stood a little taller and proudly declared, “We’ve got it, Mom.”

I listened to the conversation that ensued while my oldest took charge of the situation. Though she could have easily been bossy and annoyed about the whole thing, it wasn’t the way my daughter was.

Audrina was a helper. She was always doing what she could to lend a hand, and it was one of the things I loved about her. She just cared about people, especially her brother and sister.

While they worked together on making sure the list of ingredients matched on both the recipe card and the island countertop, I did as I told them I would and pulled out the mixer.

By the time I got it over to the counter, Everly said, “We have the same number.”

“Good. I have one more job for you.”

“Can I do it?” Everly asked.

“This is a job that’s going to require all three of you,” I returned. “I need you to go into the family room and tell your grandma that we’re ready to start baking.”

My kids climbed down from the stools where they were sitting and took off to rally their grandma. The thought instantly brought a smile to my face. Sometimes, I still couldn't believe it, but my grandma was still alive and living with us.

I knew it was wrong to be shocked by it, and there was no question I was grateful we still had her in our lives. She was going to be a hundred next year. It was such a milestone. I often wondered if she would have made it this far if she'd still been in the assisted living facility, but those thoughts were quickly squashed when I really took a second to think. It was just in Audrey's nature to be stubborn. She'd be the woman who'd refuse to die out of spite, and somehow, she'd pull it off.

She had been.

My grandma was ninety-nine years old now. And though I occasionally joked about her spitfire nature being the reason she was still with us, I knew it was something much more than that. While I wanted to say it was because my husband insisted on having her move in with us, providing her with a much richer and more fulfilled life, it wasn't the reason.

There was something far more important to her.

Her great grandchildren.

My grandmother had adored me. We were as close as ever when I was single, and my parents had decided to cut me out of their lives. She was all I had, and she loved me enough to make up for what I didn't get with my parents.

But the minute Audrina was born, everything changed. My daughter became her great grandmother's favorite person in the world. And the same thing happened when Garrett and Everly had arrived.

There was no doubt I'd been pushed to the back burner.

Deep down, I didn't mind. There wasn't anything I wanted more in the world than for my children to know the woman who'd been my biggest supporter all my life. They adored her just as much as she loved them.

Since I knew she wouldn't immediately spring up off the couch when they went in to rally her, I had some time to pull out the cookie sheets and separate the wet ingredients from the dry. Then I pulled out a glass mixing bowl for the dry ingredients, along with a whisk, spatula, and the stacks of measuring cups and spoons.

The moment I set them down on the counter, Garrett reappeared, and he was wearing a strange look on his face. I didn't even have to ask, because I already knew what was happening.

"She started early today, didn't she?" I asked.

"Those shows don't make any sense," he returned, evidently frustrated by Audrey's need to watch scandalous talk shows. The kids never sat and watched them with her, but that didn't mean they weren't aware she watched something I'd deemed inappropriate at their ages.

Even if he had been allowed to watch, Garrett would have refused. Everly, too. The only one who might have considered it was Audrina, and that was mostly because she'd just want her grandma to be happy, not because she was actually interested.

"Is she coming?"

"Everly is dragging her out here."

I let out a laugh. The kids had learned. They needed to put on a united front, but it was Everly who'd always do the heavy lifting. Literally. She had the ability to bring anyone to their knees. And while her daddy was the weakest when it came to standing up to her, it was a safe bet to say her grandma was a close second.

A moment later, Audrina and Everly waltzed into the kitchen, with their grandma following closely behind them.

"You didn't forget about our plan for today, did you, Grandma?" I asked her.

"Of course, I didn't. Why do you think I was watching my show early today?" she countered.

“Well, I hope you finished it, because I expect this is going to be an all-day affair,” I warned her.

“I have five minutes left to watch, and let me tell you, I intend to watch them. On today’s show, there was a—”

“How about you tell me all about that later?” I suggested, knowing the kids didn’t need to hear the story. “In fact, you know who will enjoy hearing about it the most?”

She smiled. “Holden might even be tempted to watch it after I tell him about it.”

God, I loved that my husband did that for her.

Whenever it was possible, he’d sit and watch her shows with her. Those days were some of her favorites.

“I’m sure he will.”

“So, what kind of cookies are we starting with today?” she asked.

“Chocolate chip!” Everly bubbled.

“Oh, my favorite. And we’ll just need to make sure we keep our eye on the time, because your mom tends to forget about the stuff she puts in the oven.”

I rolled my eyes.

That hadn’t happened in years, definitely not since before the kids were born.

My children had been begging to bake Christmas cookies, and since we were just about a week and a half away from the big day, I finally caved.

“That’s not going to happen this time. Now, let’s get our hands washed and aprons on before we dive in and have these countertops covered in delicious treats.”

For the next few minutes, we got ourselves prepared to spend the day baking, and once everyone was ready to go, I reminded them, “Don’t forget we’re planning to double the recipe on all of our cookies today, so we can share with family and friends. Audrina, you’re going to be responsible for doubling the fractions, and Garrett is going to be responsible

for doubling the whole numbers. You'll each be able to add your specific ingredients to the bowl, and I have a few Everly will be helping me with after she gets the cookies sheets prepared with Grandma."

"Ugh, but I already did reading today, Mom," Garrett complained.

Smiling at him, I replied, "And now you're going to do some math and home economics."

"Home what?"

"You know all of the normal subjects we learn about for school, like math, reading, language arts, and social studies?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, there's something else called home economics, and it's just about teaching kids how to take care of a home," I explained. "That includes things like cooking, sewing, cleaning, learning how to manage money, taking care of a child, and some general maintenance and repair on your home. You might not be doing all of those things immediately, but you're not too young to start on some of the basics. Cooking is necessary to survive, so you need to learn how to do it."

"Why didn't we need to read or measure ingredients when we made pizza that one time?" Audrina asked.

She wasn't complaining the same way Garrett was. As was unsurprising, she was merely looking for an explanation.

"Cooking is different than baking," I started. "When we cook things for lunch or dinner, we can usually adjust the amount of certain ingredients based on our individual tastes. With baking, it's more like a science experiment. If we don't put in the correct ingredients in the proper amounts, the cookies or cake or whatever we're baking won't turn out right."

"You mean, we're doing science, too?" Garrett gasped.

"Not in the traditional sense, but yes, I guess so."

The expression that washed over my son's face was not one that indicated he was happy. He legitimately believed he woke up this morning and would have a great day of baking cookies. All fun and excitement without needing to learn or put in any hard work.

I'd grown accustomed to that with him. In fact, I'd learned how all of my kids felt when it came to school.

Then again, it would have been impossible not to know that, considering Holden and I had decided years ago we wanted to homeschool our children. Holden was a brilliant man, and I wasn't an idiot. We'd had several discussions regarding school, during which Holden shared what it had been like for him.

While he could go in and ace every test without even trying, he was bored to tears. The teachers had their set curriculum to follow, and he was simply on another level. Plus, he could recall needing to sit for all those hours throughout the day when all he wanted to do was get up and move.

Not wanting our kids to experience that, knowing we could make it work in our lives, it took us almost no time to decide what was best for our kids and our family.

I loved it.

I loved being home with my kids and being responsible for teaching them all they needed to know.

When it came to my work and my yoga practice, I still had time to do that, but I was doing it in a much more limited capacity than I had been. I brought new yoga content to my subscribers on a semi-regular basis, but I'd worked so hard building it up for years that I had the freedom to be with my children now.

And though I knew it was a big deal to a lot of people, I wasn't even remotely concerned about their ability to become socialized with other children. Not only did they have each other and their cousins, who were their Uncle Reese's children, but they were involved in activities. Everly and

Audrina both took dance classes with Pierce and Zara's daughter, as well as Lexi and Cruz's daughters.

Birthday parties amongst the Cunningham Security team's children were aplenty. We were almost always going somewhere, and my children never had any issues with joining in the conversations and fun with the other kids.

Our kids were thriving, and that was all that mattered to Holden and me.

Even if we still got the same resistance from our kids—namely Garrett—about school and learning, we still pushed forward and did what we had to do. Sometimes, that meant I needed to offer a bit of an incentive to make the project we were working on fun.

Since my son wasn't exactly thrilled about the idea of cookie baking being ruined by learning, I noted, "Do you know what the best part of any science experiment is, Garrett?"

He shook his head. "Not really."

"Well, I can tell you it's not getting out the ingredients needed or measuring it," I replied.

"Eating it!" Everly declared as she and her grandma joined us again with the cookie sheets.

I let out a laugh. "Well, I was going to say testing it, but in this case, eating it works."

"What?" Garrett asked, sitting up a little straighter, his eyes dancing.

Grinning at him, I confirmed, "The only way to be sure you did the experiment correctly is to test it. In the case of baking, the way we test it is to taste it. I mean, if you'd rather not do any science work today, maybe I can make an exception for you."

He shook his head. "No. No, I think science is my new favorite subject. What do I have to do first?"

I managed to keep my emotions in check and not react when all I wanted to do was jump for joy that I'd found

another way to entice him. He was excited to learn, even if his reason wasn't conventional.

With that, we divvied up the ingredient list among the kids. They each had specific ingredients they needed to measure and add according to the directions, Grandma and I supervising and assisting the entire time.

We made our chocolate chip cookies first, and while they were in the oven, we started working on our sugar cookies. Once those were done, which took a fair bit of time, since we rolled them out and cut them into all sorts of festive shapes, we moved onto snickerdoodles. The smell in the kitchen and throughout the house was divine.

Finally, we ended our cookie-baking extravaganza with red velvet shortbread cookies we wound up dipping into melted white chocolate before decorating with Christmas sprinkles.

Hours after we had started, we were all covered in flour and cookie dough and melted chocolate. And we'd eaten more cookies than I'd have allowed in any other case. But we'd had the very best time.

And when Holden walked through the door that evening and saw the five of us working on our red velvet cookies and having such a great time, there was no mistaking the look of peace and happiness that settled over him.

"Daddy, you have to try the cookies we made," Audrina declared.

He moved toward his daughter, pressed a kiss to the top of her head, and said, "It sounds like a wonderful dinner to me. What do I get to try first?"

"You can try my snickerdoodle cookie," she said, lifting one out of her individual container.

Holden took the cookie, sunk his teeth in, and made sure Audrina knew just how much he liked it. "This is excellent. You made this?"

She nodded as a smile lit up her whole face.

“You have to try one of mine, too,” Garrett said. “I need to make sure this science experiment turned out okay.”

A worried look washed over Holden’s face, but that didn’t stop him from moving toward his son and kissing him on his head, too. “Alright. What have you got for me?”

Garrett reached inside his container and pulled out a cookie. “A sugar cookie in the shape of a stocking. I decorated it myself.”

Holden’s eyes ran over the cookie, inspecting what his son had deemed a science experiment before he took a bite. After he swallowed, he shared, “I have to admit I was a little concerned, but this is phenomenal, Garrett. You did a great job.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Me next! I have chocolate chip,” Everly announced.

“A classic,” Holden noted. “I can’t wait.”

His baby held the chocolate chip cookie out to him, but Holden didn’t take it from her hand. He leaned forward and took a bite of it while she held it.

“Mmm, that one’s excellent. Are you going to become a baker when you grow up?” he asked her.

She was delighted by his response, excited even. “I could be a baker when I’m bigger.”

“Yes, you can,” he returned before he leaned closer and kissed her cheek. When he stood, he brought his eyes to mine and asked, “What about Mommy? Does she have any cookies for me to try?”

I held up a red velvet one and said, “I just decorated this one.”

Holden moved toward me, slid his arms around my waist, and took a bite of the cookie while I held on to it for him. He chewed, swallowed, and took another bite.

“What do you think?” I asked.

His lips twitched before he took the last bite of it out of my hand. “I love it.”

After he chewed and swallowed, Holden kissed my mouth.

“It looks like you all had a great time today,” he noted. “What about you, Audrey? Was this a blast today?”

My grandma looked at my husband and admitted, “I’m exhausted, but we had fun. It was even more thrilling than my show I watched this morning. I have to tell you about that one.”

Holden chuckled as he reached his arm out to her, hugged her, and said, “I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“Not now, though,” I chimed in. “We need to make sure everyone finishes decorating their red velvet cookies, so we can start cleaning up, and I can make an actual meal today that has a vegetable or two in it.”

The kids groaned.

The adults laughed.

And as my eyes moved through the people standing around the kitchen, I felt warmth move through me.

I was convinced Santa was going to be stuck this year. Because I already had everything I wanted, and I loved my family.

.....
TEN
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Trent

My phone buzzed on my desk, and the name on the display was enough to have me forgetting about all that was consuming my mind.

I smiled and answered the call.

“Hey, sweet cheeks. Are you heading out to pick up Adrienne?” I asked my wife.

“I just got in the car, and I’m already making my way down the driveway,” Delaney answered.

“Be careful,” I ordered.

“I will. I just wanted to call and tell you about the good news I got this morning,” she started. “And I wanted to see how your day was going.”

Curiosity got the best of me. “You have good news?”

“I do,” Delaney bubbled. “I have some new clients.”

“Oh?”

There was no hesitation on her part as she revealed, “They sent over the signed contract, along with their deposit, just ten minutes ago. They’re newlyweds who just found out they’re expecting, and as a Christmas gift to his wife, the husband is paying for me to redesign their entire space. It’s going to be a huge project for me. I’m really excited about it.”

The smile on my face grew. Delaney was finally living her dream of being an interior designer. It felt good to hear her so

happy. “You’re so good at what you do, babe. I’m not surprised they chose you to take on such an important project. When do you start?”

“That’s the best part. They don’t want to start any actual work until after the holidays, so while we might talk a couple of times over the next few weeks while we work out some details, I don’t really have to do a whole lot until after Christmas break.”

That was even better.

Because although being an interior designer had been Delaney’s dream job, being a mother was her top priority. And with four kids in the mix, it was safe to say she already had a full plate.

Sometimes I couldn’t believe I was at this place in my life—married to my high school sweetheart with four kids. Tate was twelve now, and our oldest daughter, London, was ten. Two years later, our son, Van, was added to the mix, and Adrienne, our four-year-old, was the baby.

“That’s excellent news. At least we’ll have some time off together with the kids without having to worry about work,” I said.

“That sounds promising. Should I take that to mean you’re having a good day? Are you confident you guys will get this case solved before Christmas?”

I wanted nothing more than to make her that promise, but I just couldn’t give it to her. Unfortunately, no matter how convenient it would have been to already have this case completed, things didn’t work that way. But I knew the rest of the Cunningham Security team and I were all on the same page.

That was the reason why we were taking parts of it in turn. A fresh set of eyes every couple of days helped in a situation like this. Not only that, but it was nice to know we were collectively sharing the burden.

“I’d like to make you that promise, but I can’t say for sure,” I confessed. “On the bright side, I’m uncovering some

new details, so they might steer us in the right direction.”

“Well, you know that I think you’re brilliant, and you’ve got a great team working with you. I have faith it’ll be resolved in no time.”

“Here’s hoping,” I muttered.

“Alright, well, I’ll let you get back to it for now. I’m going to get our baby girl, bring her home, have lunch, then work with her on our Christmas card display. I pulled a bunch of branches off the evergreens at the house and grabbed some pinecones.”

I had no idea what she was making, but I knew she’d be happy doing it, especially because she’d have Adrienne helping her. Nearly every day I’d gone home from work, I found something new decorating our space for the holiday season. I never thought it was the kind of thing I would have cared about, and to an extent, I didn’t. But I loved the way Delaney had turned our house into a home.

“I can’t wait to see it when I get home tonight.”

“Okay. We’ll see you later, then.”

“Love you, sweet cheeks.”

“Love you, too, Trent.”

I disconnected the call with my wife, set the phone down, and allowed myself to just sit with the good vibes a simple phone call with Delaney could give me. That woman had the power to turn my entire day around.

And with the way things had been going lately on this case, there was no question I needed all the positivity I could get.

As though they knew I needed the extra push to get myself back to work, Dom and Gunner entered my office.

“You busy?” Dom asked as the two of them sat down in the chairs on the opposite side of my desk.

“I’m always busy,” I huffed.

“We’ve got more footage for you to review,” Gunner declared, tossing a USB drive down on my desk.

Reaching for it, I retorted, “More footage? From where?”

“From the used bookstore that was robbed last night,” Dom answered.

“Are you serious? There was another one?”

At this point, I couldn’t work out if I was in disbelief or if frustration had taken over. It was probably a safe bet to assume it was a bit of both.

“Yep.”

“How did it happen? Was it the same as the Toys and Dolls robbery?” I questioned them.

“Fine-tooth comb and all,” Gunner confirmed.

Sometimes, I thought it was incredible how I could feel both frustrated and relieved at the same time. Obviously, I hated this was something we had to deal with at all, but at least we knew we were looking for the same guy.

“Obviously, it was a different business, but is there anything new to report when it comes to evidence? Or do we only have whatever is on this drive and that comb?” I wondered.

Shaking his head, Dom replied, “There’s nothing new to report. The only difference between this one and the last one is that we were able to gain access to that footage sooner.”

Understanding and a bit of frustration washed over me. “Let’s hope we get something on this one.”

I plugged the USB drive into my computer, noted there were several files on it with each labeled as to the location of the camera at the business, and clicked on the first one. It was from inside the store, pointed at the front entrance. As much as I wanted to believe it would be useful, we knew the perpetrator was entering these businesses through the back door.

I'd reviewed the footage from the Toys and Dolls location, and on the surface, it didn't give me a whole lot to work with. Unfortunately, whoever was behind the robberies knew what they were doing. The camera feed stopped working somewhere in the middle of the day, hours before the robbery took place.

I hadn't written it off completely, because I knew it could prove to be useful if there were subsequent robberies where connections could be made. Unfortunately, with the initial thought being that the person might have been a delivery driver who always entered through the back, it could also mean the footage at the front of the store was useless. Even still, it wasn't going to be smart to overlook anything. And despite the doubt I felt about there being anything useful on the new footage Dom and Gunner had just given me, I fully intended to be thorough with my review of it.

It took me almost no time to offer my initial reaction. "It's the same thing."

"What?" Gunner asked.

"Assuming the time stamp on this footage is accurate, it cuts off right in the middle of the day yesterday, likely hours before whoever is responsible even attempted to carry out the robbery," I explained.

The silence stretched between us, the guys evidently feeling just as frustrated as I did.

Eventually, it was Gunner who broke the silence. "Is there anyone there who looks familiar?" Someone who might have also been on the footage from the Toys and Dolls location, maybe?"

Shaking my head slowly as I continued to scroll through the footage, I returned, "Not that I'm seeing yet."

"Maybe you can find something on the exterior footage," Dom suggested.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm going to look at that next. We might need to see if we can get anything off of the surrounding

businesses, too. It might not give us anything, but it's worth a shot."

Before either of the guys could say anything, we were all distracted by noise just outside my office. We turned our attention there and saw Tyson and Holden had made their approach.

"You guys working on the Grinch case?" Tyson asked, referring to it by the name we'd all started throwing around in the office.

"Yep."

Moving out of the doorway and into the office completely, Tyson shared, "Holden and I were, too. And the newest robbery last night gave us a bit more to work with."

"More than the video footage from the security cameras?" Gunner questioned him, his surprise evident.

Holden, who was still leaning against the doorjamb, held up a plastic bag and said, "This is the ticket."

"A piece of a comb? Tell me there was a hair in it that you somehow managed to send out for a DNA sample in the last couple of hours," Dom goaded him, clearly not believing that was a remote possibility.

"We're good, but we're not that good," Tyson noted.

Holden didn't miss a beat and added, "We can't fabricate evidence where it doesn't exist, but we can certainly use what we do have."

"What exactly do you have?" I asked, wanting to cut to the chase and get some answers.

Handing the comb to Dom, since he was the closest, Holden revealed, "Check that out."

Dom inspected the broken comb through the bag and narrowed his eyes. "Does that say—"

"Yep," Tyson confirmed.

"What is it?" Gunner pressed, asking the question on the tip of my tongue.

“The letters *e*, *l*, *t*, *e*, and *r* are inscribed on it,” Dom revealed, handing the bag over to Gunner.

I put those letters together in my head and asked, “Is the word cut off?”

Tyson nodded.

“Shelter,” Dom declared. “This comb is one distributed at a shelter.”

The five of us exchanged looks that indicated we didn’t like where this was heading, and it seemed nobody wanted to say what all of us were thinking—someone who’d been at that homeless shelter, someone less fortunate, was likely doing what they were doing to either make this Christmas a better one for themselves or simply to ruin everyone else’s.

Even worse, if this individual was someone who stayed at the local shelter, trying to figure out who it was would prove to be challenging. Though I couldn’t say there was a huge homeless problem in Windsor when compared to other cities, it still existed here and in the neighboring towns.

“I know we’re going to do what we’ve got to do to resolve this case, but something tells me I’m not going to like the outcome,” Gunner noted.

“Agreed,” Tyson said.

A round of nods followed from Holden, Dom, and me. The likelihood was that someone who was already struggling was going to be in an even worse situation after we solved this case. As much as we wouldn’t want to make life more difficult for anyone, we also had to think about the people who’d been affected on the other side of this. Small business owners were having their Christmas season ruined after their shops had been robbed.

And when it all boiled down, right was right, and wrong was wrong. Even if we could all be sympathetic to an individual in the position of needing to rely on the shelter, it still didn’t give that person the right to break the law and destroy another individual’s business.

I took in a deep breath and sighed. “What’s the plan now?”

Holden stepped forward, reached for the comb, and answered, “Tyson and I are going to confirm this comb is from the Windsor shelter. Then it might be worthwhile to head over there and see if there’s anything that can help us. This person isn’t a fool, though, so I don’t expect we’re going to see anything obvious. It’s worth a shot, though.”

Believing that was a good place to start, I decided to fill them in on my plan. “Okay. I’m going to review the rest of this footage from last night’s robbery. Then I’ll probably go back and compare it with the footage from the Toys and Dolls robbery. Maybe something will stand out.”

Dom and Gunner stood from the chairs they’d been sitting in, and Dom replied, “We’ll let you get to that. Gunner and I will bring Levi, Cruz, Lorenzo, and Pierce up to speed on all of this. Maybe they’ll have some ideas.”

“Sounds good.”

The men filed out of my office, and I dove right back in with my work. As much as it sucked that another business had been robbed, at least I now had something else to work with.

Fresh eyes were always a good thing in a case like this, but fresh evidence was as well. It would give me the opportunity to compare things, and I knew if this person had done the same thing during the actual robbery with entering through the back door and leaving the comb, there’d have to be something else that he or she did that was the same. It was all just a matter of whether those methods were caught on camera.

I was desperately hoping they were.

Because there was one thing I wanted more than to solve this case.

I wanted to spend what was left of the holiday season with my wife and kids. The last thing I wanted was to have this case hanging over my head.

ELEVEN

Zara

“Come on, Blaze.”

Blaze easily and happily hopped down from the snowbank he was on to catch up with Pierce and me. It was early in the morning, the kids were at school, and we were on our daily morning hike with our Siberian husky.

Considering the snow on the ground, we had no choice but to wear snowshoes, because not walking Blaze wasn't an option.

With it being just a few short weeks before Christmas was here, I was exceptionally busy at the flower shop and couldn't stay home to make sure Blaze didn't get too rowdy and tear it apart, likely knocking over our Christmas tree in the process.

And since Pierce was in the middle of working on a rather pressing case at work, he couldn't do it, either.

But even if staying home had been an option for either one of us, Blaze still needed his walk.

Beyond that, our morning walks with our dog were one of the few instances throughout the day when Pierce and I could actually talk to one another without any interruptions. We adored our children, loved them to pieces, but they demanded a lot of time and attention. So, it was no surprise Pierce and I looked forward to our morning walks.

Quite frankly, I think it had reached a point where we craved them more than Blaze did. And I guess the biggest

evidence of that was simply the fact that when we'd moved into the home we were in now, Pierce and I had been sure to get a place with quite a bit of land. Not only did we know we'd have kids who'd eventually want to run around and play in it, but it would be the perfect place for Blaze to get out some energy.

But for Pierce and me, there was something else that factored into it all.

Hiking together every morning had become our thing since we first started seeing one another. While there had been a few instances when we needed to scale back on how long we'd hike for—namely the later months of both of my pregnancies—the truth was that we couldn't seem to give up the one thing we'd done with each other for so long. It offered us both a great way to connect with each other every day, and it made our bodies feel good.

So, we didn't simply sit out on our deck every morning while Blaze ran around for a while. We got out and continued to move our bodies every single day.

As we walked along, making our way back toward the car, we soaked up the last few minutes we had together before we'd both head home, get ready, and set out to work for the day.

While the conversation for the first three quarters of our walk had focused on our children, the things they had going on, and the fast-approaching Christmas holiday, there was an overwhelming urge for me to talk to Pierce about something I could no longer ignore.

“Is everything okay?”

“Of course. What do you mean?”

“You've been my husband for how many years now, Pierce? I know when you've got something on your mind,” I replied.

Holding my hand firmly in his, something he did every morning when we brought Blaze out for his walk, Pierce said,

“I’m sorry I haven’t been able to keep my mind from wandering to this case frequently.”

“It’s really weighing heavily on you,” I noted.

He glanced over at me, and the concern was written all over his face. “They’re targeting small businesses, beautiful.”

Suddenly, it made sense.

Pierce had been particularly distracted for roughly two weeks now. To some degree, I knew he was dealing with a bit of stress over the case they’d been working on at Cunningham Security. It happened occasionally, which was something I’d expected, given his line of work.

But this was different.

There was something more behind his mood lately, and now I understood why.

“You’re worried about me,” I surmised.

He nodded. “I’m comforted slightly by the fact that this guy seems to only be making his move at night, which means you likely wouldn’t be physically harmed if he targeted Petals. But there’s no doubt how heartbreaking it would be if your shop was hit. And not only that, but we also can’t just assume that because he’s done it at night up to this point doesn’t mean he can’t switch things up. So, yeah, I’m worried, because I love you, and I don’t want to see you hurt in any way.”

I knew there was little I was going to be able to say that would make him worry about me any less than he was, but I was still going to try. “Pierce, I can’t tell you how good it makes me feel to know you are worried about my safety and my livelihood. If something happened at Petals, I’d be upset, but we’d be okay. We’d still give our kids a great Christmas, and that’s really the most important thing to me. Of course, I don’t want to see anything happen to my flower shop, but I want you to know we’ll be okay if it does. I’ll be okay, because you’ll see me through.”

The silence stretched between us, Pierce needing to take some time to wrap his head around it all. “I don’t want you to have to go through that at all, though.”

“I know. And I hope I don’t have to, because it’ll only make things harder for us and for you, but if it were to happen, we’ll be alright,” I assured him. “Is there anything I can do to help with how you’re feeling about this?”

He shook his head as we approached the last several yards of the trail, Blaze just a few steps ahead of us. “I’ll be alright. We’re getting closer and closer to having this case solved every day. It’s only a matter of time before we figure out the one thing that’s going to crack this case open.”

“I have no doubt you and the rest of the guys are going to get it figured out.”

We made it to the end of the trail and wound up in the parking lot. After removing our snowshoes, we walked the remaining distance to our truck. And on our way there, Pierce apologized. “I’m sorry if I’ve been moody lately. I just worry about you. But I’ll try to rein in the way I’m feeling.”

Coming to a stop at the back of the truck, I said, “No, Pierce. I don’t want you to do that.”

“What?”

“I’m not looking for you to hide how you’re feeling from me,” I clarified. “I didn’t bring this up because I wanted you to do that. I brought it up, because I care about you the way you care about me. And when something is on your mind, I want to help you through it in whatever way I can.”

Pierce didn’t respond. He held my gaze, his eyes roaming over my face. It looked like it pained him to think he was causing me to worry or stress, and I had to help ease that fear.

So, I stepped closer, threw my arms over his shoulders, and brought my mouth close. “Promise me you won’t hide the way you’re feeling from me,” I begged, brushing my lips gently against his. “I want to know about all the things, whether they’re making you happy or sad.”

I knew I wasn’t exactly fighting fair, but it was the only way I could ensure Pierce wouldn’t keep his emotions bottled up. I love how he always sought to protect me, but I didn’t need protection from his feelings.

“Okay, gorgeous. I promise I’ll tell you everything on my mind,” he acquiesced.

I grinned at him before giving him a kiss. Then we got Blaze in the truck and made our way home.

As soon as we walked through the door and into the house, I sought out Callie. I figured my cat would be off sleeping in one of her three favorite spots, and I was delighted when I found her in the second one.

She peeked open her eyes as soon as I started talking to her, but she didn’t move when I began to give her a couple of scratches and a rubdown. In fact, she merely purred in response.

“Okay, Callie girl, Mommy’s going to grab a shower, because I’ve got to get some floral arrangements made today.”

She nodded off before my hand was even off her body, clearly not caring what my plans were for the day. The only time she’d be interested would be if I happened to be late in feeding her dinner. She wouldn’t want to hear about any excuses I had. She’d just have a lot to say to me until her food was ready for her.

I took off up the stairs and made a beeline for the master bathroom. Once there, I didn’t hesitate to turn on the shower and strip out of my clothes. Being focused on the task at hand, knowing I needed to hurry, so I could make it to work on time, I wasn’t paying attention to what was happening behind me until it was too late.

I felt Pierce’s hands settle on my hips briefly before he slid them up my ribs and around to my breasts. While he cupped them in his hands, he pressed the front of his naked body into the back of mine and began kissing the skin along my neck.

“What are you doing?” I asked him, trying to sound bothered.

“Touching your boobs and kissing you,” he answered honestly.

I rolled my eyes at his response. “Okay, I’ll rephrase that. Why are you touching my boobs and kissing me?”

“Because I like doing both of those things.”

“Right. I understand, and if I’m honest, I like when you do it, too. But I’ve got to get to work. It’s so busy at the shop right now,” I reminded him.

I felt his lips form a smile against my skin as one of his hands released my breast and began drifting down my body. That hand slid down past my bellybutton and was headed right for the prize. “That’s why we’re going to save time and shower together,” Pierce reasoned.

As one of his fingers slipped between my legs and pushed inside me, it took all of my resolve to argue, “That’s not saving me time at all. That’s going to make me late, like usual.”

“Mmm. And when has that ever stopped me from having my way with you, and you loving every single second of it?”

My body shuddered as he slowly worked his finger in and out of my body. I guess I wasn’t the only one who didn’t fight fair.

“That’s what I thought,” Pierce said, his voice husky. He pulled his finger from my body, squeezed my ass, and urged me forward. “Get in, gorgeous.”

I could have said no and refused, but it would have only delayed me getting to work that much more. Plus, he hadn’t been wrong about what he said. Pierce might have made me late to work regularly, but there was no doubt I loved every second of our post-hike showers together.

So, I did exactly what Pierce expected I would do and stepped into the shower. For a while, Pierce didn’t attempt to continue doing what he had been doing to me before we got in. He merely gave me the opportunity to get done what I needed to get done in the shower, the things I would have done if he hadn’t interrupted my plans.

It started off innocently enough, both of us doing what Pierce had initially said we’d do. We were saving time for the both of us by showering together.

But once I started lathering my body up with the soap and he'd done the same, all bets were off. The notion of saving time was a far-fetched idea, and we would have been fools to assume more wouldn't be happening between us.

With his eyes focused on the soap covering my body, Pierce lathered up his hands and reached for me. He gently brushed his palms over my nipples, forcing me to squeeze my thighs together.

My husband noticed the effect he was having on me, and he decided not to delay in giving me what I clearly needed. He slipped one of his hands between my legs and began applying pressure against my clit, circling gently.

“Pierce,” I rasped.

“You like that, Zara?”

“I love it,” I told him.

Half of his mouth tipped up in a smile, and he shot me a look that told me he knew it was going to take a matter of seconds for me to reach this point. “Did you want more? Or maybe something else?”

Nodding my head, I reached out for him, curled my fingers around his erection, stroked it, and answered, “Something else.”

He groaned, stepped closer, and lifted me in his arms.

I loved when he did that.

I could remember a time when I would have been mortified if Pierce tried to pick me up, but now, it was one of my favorite things. He'd made me feel so good about myself, and the truth was that he was incredibly strong. So, I allowed myself to relish in being swept off my feet, literally.

My legs went around his waist, my arms going over his shoulders, and Pierce positioned himself and slid inside.

The back of my head hit the wall of the shower, and with each thrust of his cock into me, Pierce delivered pleasure like I'd grown accustomed to receiving from him. Though I knew

he'd get what he wanted out of this, it always felt like I was who was most important in this scenario.

At least from his perspective.

And I didn't mind that at all.

Because I knew it brought Pierce pleasure to see me come undone.

With the way he was going at me now, his cock filling me and his mouth at the base of my neck, while the water rained down on our bodies, it was safe to say I was coming undone.

With the kids off at school, I didn't need to worry about being quiet, so I took full advantage. My desperate and ragged moans filled the air, and they seemed to only fuel Pierce's movements.

He went harder.

Faster.

Deeper.

"Pierce!" I finally called out a warning when he'd built me up to the point of no return.

"Are you going to come for me, Zara?"

"Yes," I breathed.

And then it happened. I came apart, the heels of my feet pressing into his ass as my hips moved against him.

Pierce kept going, working me through my orgasm until I made it to the other side. And right at the tail end of it, he groaned through his own release, burying his face in my neck.

He stayed like that for a few seconds after it left him, but eventually pulled out and set me on my feet. Then he kissed my mouth, long and hard, his tongue sweeping in and taking the rest of what he wanted from me.

I happily gave.

And when he finally tore his mouth from mine, he said, "See? You like being late for work."

I smiled at him, because I couldn't dispute his words.

While being late for work wasn't exactly ideal, I certainly didn't mind it when the reason was because I got what he just gave me.

"I love the holiday season," I finally declared. "Everyone is so giving."

He cocked an eyebrow. "I'm the only one giving you what you just got, though."

"Of course. And you know what the best part is?" I countered.

"What?"

I pressed up on my toes, brought my mouth to his ear, and whispered, "When the gift giver gets something unexpected in return."

"Oh? What's that?"

I shrugged, a smile playing at my lips. "I guess you'll have to wait and see."

Pierce laughed.

With that, we got ourselves rinsed off and out of the shower. And in the end, I was only fifteen minutes late.

TWELVE

Cruz

It was a good thing Lorenzo was ahead of me.

I couldn't say he didn't feel at least as much frustration as I did, but it was quickly becoming clear to me that he had a better handle on his emotions. If I'd been the one to walk up to the door at the Cunningham Security office first, I'm not sure the door would have remained on the hinges when I opened it.

The two of us had just gotten back to the office following a morning spent with the WPD and the devastated owner of another business in Windsor.

This was getting out of control.

It was ridiculous.

Though I knew we were doing everything we could to try to solve this case, it still felt like we weren't doing enough. Too many people had been affected, and that went well beyond just the business owners.

It wasn't difficult to see the surrounding business owners fearing the worst may happen to them next. The all-too-common feeling that it could never happen to them suddenly no longer the case.

It could happen to them, because it had just happened to the neighboring business.

With the holidays approaching, it just made this feel even worse. This was supposed to be the season of merriment and joy, and everyone was feeling the opposite.

Folks in town, the police department, and us. Nobody was immune to what was happening.

So, it was safe to say I'd allowed my emotions to get the best of me, because I'd had enough. We all had.

As Lorenzo and I made our way through the office, we stormed past Trent's office and heard, "Yo, Cruz! Lorenzo!"

We stopped in our tracks, took a few steps backward, and poked our heads into his office. "What's up?" I asked.

"You guys were just out on the newest robbery, right?"

I dipped my chin and stepped forward, Lorenzo walking in behind me.

"Was there anything particularly different about this robbery when compared to the last couple?" Trent pressed.

Lorenzo and I looked at one another and shook our heads before Lorenzo shared, "On the surface, everything seems the same. The contact on the door had been tampered with, so the alarm wouldn't get tripped, and the comb was stuck in the door."

"The same red comb?"

"Yeah. And Lorenzo and I both went to the shelter to get the lay of the land there," I revealed. "This isn't going to be easy to narrow down, because it's sad to say there're a lot of folks there."

"What's worse is that we don't even know if the person doing this is still living there, so it seems foolish to hang around there, hoping for something, when we don't even know what this guy looks like," Lorenzo added.

Trent nodded his understanding. "Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I'm pretty sure there's more than one guy involved."

"What? How do you know?"

He sighed. "It's a hunch I'm going on after reviewing the camera footage for the last couple of days."

A hunch wasn't something I'd ever give much stock to in regular life. But after working at Cunningham Security for so many years with these men, I didn't hesitate to trust a hunch.

If Trent believed he found something worthwhile, I was convinced I'd feel the same as soon as he shared it.

"What did you find?" I asked.

Trent turned the monitor of his computer, so Lorenzo and I could see the display. After clicking on a few things, the indoor camera footage from the Toys and Dolls store was on the screen.

"A couple of things to note here," he started. "First, if the person responsible is who I believe it is on this one, he's not an idiot. He picked a busy store, and he entered at a time when the owners would be hard-pressed to help every person in the store."

"Okay. So, who are we looking at?"

Trent pointed to the screen as the footage started to play. "The guy wearing the hat and the hoodie. You'll notice he comes in and looks just like any other shopper. He walked up to several displays, pretending to be interested, and he even asks questions about a couple of items, holding a few in his hands and making it appear as though he's considering buying them. If you watch closely, you'll notice he's looking around the space the entire time, and he's paying particular attention to what the owners are doing. Obviously, with the number of people in the store, they are looking a bit understaffed at this point, and he knows it."

The silence stretched between us as Lorenzo and I watched the footage, confirming what Trent had shared to be the truth. Of course, that still didn't give us a whole lot to work with, especially considering there was nothing to indicate this guy had done anything shady.

A moment later, Trent started speaking again. "And here's where it happens. You'll see him walk up to one of the owners, who's already a bit frazzled, and speak to her. Now, while I can't confirm what he said, I'm willing to bet he asked to use

the restroom, because she gives him a nod, points behind where they are standing, and directs him where to go. The first time I watched, I didn't notice this. The second time, I noticed and didn't think twice about it. But by the third viewing, I realized just how long he'd been back there before he returned to the front of the store, looked awkwardly at one rack of clothing, and finally walked out without purchasing anything."

After Trent stopped the video, I sat back and considered what we'd just watched. Admittedly, the guy had appeared to be a bit shady, but I wasn't confident we'd seen anything that indicated he was our guy.

"I can only assume you've got something else to show us, since that didn't give us a whole lot. At this point, it's all speculation," Lorenzo noted.

Trent let out a laugh. "This isn't my first rodeo."

The next thing I knew, we saw the interior footage for the used bookstore pop up on the screen.

As it played, I asked, "Since you said there's more than one guy, who are we looking for this time?"

"The guy with the longer hair and the full beard. Watch him, and you'll see he does almost the same exact thing as the guy in the last video."

We watched the footage, and I found it uncanny just how similar it was. The biggest difference was in the stores themselves. "I wonder if these guys are related," I said.

"What makes you say that?" Trent asked.

Tossing my hand out in front of me, palm facing up, I reasoned, "Well, think about your kids. They might look different, but sometimes, they have a lot of the same mannerisms. I know it's that way with my brothers and me. And I see it with my girls all the time. If it weren't for the differences in their physical appearance, I'd think it was the same guy."

Lorenzo and Trent allowed that to penetrate, and it was Lorenzo who asked, "Have you been able to pull any footage

from the exterior cameras that's useful? What cars do these guys drive?"

Trent sighed in response, an indication we weren't going to like what he had to say. While he clicked around on the computer, he shared, "Both of these guys seem to appear out of nowhere. The traffic patterns in the shopping centers seem to be routine. It's normal patrons parking their cars and heading off toward whatever store they need to go to, delivery vehicles, maintenance workers, or even the employees."

"Well, that comb indicates these guys could be from the shelter. It's not likely they have a vehicle," I pointed out.

"See, I had the same thought, but there's only one problem with that," Trent returned.

"What?"

Before Trent could respond, Lorenzo interjected, "The robberies." When Trent and I turned our attention to him, he was staring at the screen, which was still playing the exterior footage. Though he was entirely focused on what he was watching, he didn't hesitate to speak. "What was taken during these robberies was too much for one person, or even two people, to carry by hand. There has to be a vehicle, and I'm willing to bet that's the one being used."

I shot my attention to the computer screen, aware Trent's focus had turned there, too.

And that's when I saw it.

"What am I missing?" Trent asked.

"That van," I answered.

"What?"

I lifted my hand and pointed to the screen. "The white van."

Trent tipped his head to the side. "That was a maintenance guy. His van was in the other parking lot, too. I don't think it dawned on me, because it was more than an hour after the guy was inside when the van showed up."

“How do you know he was a maintenance worker?” I questioned him.

It was a plain white panel van, so there was nothing to indicate he was hired to work there.

“He parked, grabbed his ladder, and made his way to the far end of the lot, where he ultimately wound up out of view of the camera. I had assumed he was doing work in one of the other shops. What makes you two think this guy is involved?”

Lorenzo didn't hesitate to fill him in. “We scoped out the shelter, and that van was parked outside.”

Silence settled over the room, all of us digesting this new discovery. As relieved as I'm sure we all were starting to feel we were making some progress, there was still an overwhelming sense of unease, and I knew precisely the reason why.

“So, we've got a minimum of three people working on this,” I declared.

“Looks like it.”

My mind was racing with a million thoughts, trying to formulate a plan. Not wanting to waste another minute, I stood. “Lorenzo, can you fill everyone else in on what we know now? I'm going to head to the shelter again, and pull a plate number off of it, since it's not visible in that video. I'm going to send that information over to you, Trent, and hopefully we can start making some connections once we know who owns that van.”

“What's the plan after that?” Lorenzo asked after he stood and moved toward the door.

I narrowed my eyes. “Check it out with Levi, but I'm thinking our best course of action might be to do a couple of stakeouts. If we follow that van, we might be able to see where the next planned robbery attempt will be, and hopefully we can catch all three of these guys in the act.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Lorenzo and I walked out of Trent's office. I split off to head to the front door, and on the bright side, I no longer felt like I wanted to rip the door off its hinges.



It was hours later than I had hoped to be home.

On the bright side, my girls hadn't gone to bed just yet. But it was close. Because when I walked inside, I heard all of them upstairs, and I knew Lexi had needed to handle the bedtime routine on her own. That routine included baths for the girls, and it was challenging when Lexi and I were tackling that together.

As quickly as I could, I raced up the stairs.

The moment I landed at the top, I saw Lexi walking out of Piper's room with Maci in her arms and Piper on her heels. Both of my daughters were already in their pajamas, an indication they'd already gotten their baths.

"Hi, Princess. I'm sorry I'm so late," I apologized.

"It's okay, Captain. At least you called to let me know you were going to be a little later than expected," she returned as I pressed a kiss to the side of her head at her temple before kissing Maci's cheek.

"Daddy's home," Maci declared.

"A lot later than I expected," I noted, bending down to lift Piper in my arms, so I could give her a kiss. "Have Olivia and Natalie gotten their baths or showers?"

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"Do you want me to do that, or should I handle stories with Piper and Maci?"

"You do the reading, so you can spend some time with these two before they fall asleep."

I held out my free arm, and Lexi handed Maci over to me. Then I took my two youngest babies into Maci's room, where the three of us cuddled together while I read a book to them.

About halfway through, Maci's eyes were shut, and three pages before I made it to the end, Piper was asleep.

I closed the book, set it off to the side, and just stared down at my beautiful girls. I had mere minutes with them today. I saw them briefly this morning before I got the call about the robbery and these few precious minutes I had just now.

That was it.

I'd missed nearly an entire day of their lives.

It wasn't that I didn't like going to work. I enjoyed my job tremendously, and it was the reason I could provide my girls with the lives they had. But I'd have been lying if I said it didn't sting on the rare occasions work forced me to stay so late.

All I knew was that I was grateful to my wife for being able to care for them the way she did. And fortunately, she'd started doing her job from home several years ago, so our daughters were home with her until they were ready to go to school.

After taking a few more minutes to just enjoy holding them close, I got Maci situated in her bed before lifting Piper in my arms and carrying her to her bedroom. As soon as I stepped out of the room, Natalie walked right up to me in her pajamas.

"Hi, baby girl," I said softly, lifting her in my arms.

"Hi, Daddy."

That word.

Any time I heard it, I'd quickly forget the reasons I had to be upset about anything.

"Did you have a good day today?" I asked her as we walked down the hallway toward her bedroom.

“We had so much fun today.”

I smiled at her. “I’m glad. I want to hear all about it.”

Just before we made it to Natalie’s bedroom, the hairdryer turned off in the bathroom, and Olivia came running out followed by her mom.

I stopped moving, and Olivia collided with me, throwing her arms around my legs. “Mommy said she wasn’t sure if you were going to make it home before bedtime tonight, but you made it.”

“I made it, honey. Do you want to come into Natalie’s room with me, so you can both tell me about your day before you go to sleep?” I asked her.

Olivia didn’t need any additional encouragement. She released her hold on me and took off into Natalie’s room.

I set Natalie down on her feet. “Go in and join your sister. I’ll be right there.”

Once she walked away, I turned and wrapped my arms around Lexi. “Are you okay?”

She hugged me back. “Yeah. We missed you today.”

“The feeling is mutual. On the bright side, we had a breakthrough, so things are heading in the right direction. It’s only a matter of time at this point.”

“That’s really good news.”

Keeping my arms around her, I pulled back slightly and allowed my eyes to roam over her beautiful face. “Long day for you?” I asked.

“A little. I really just want to hop in the shower now.”

I jerked my head toward our bedroom. “Go. I’m going to sit with the girls for a little bit, so take all the time you need.”

She gave me a nod before she pressed up on her toes and kissed me.

The next thing I knew, I was regaled with tales of how my daughters had spent their days. They hadn’t left out a single

detail, which I was grateful for. If I had to miss the day, at least they could fill me in on everything.

Roughly thirty minutes later, they started to wind down, and I tucked them in for the night.

By the time I made it to my bedroom, Lexi was out of the shower and getting herself ready for bed. “I’m going to hop in and take a quick shower, okay?”

“Yeah. I’ve got food from dinner set aside for you when you’re finished.”

“Thanks, Lexi.”

Ten minutes later, I’d showered and gone back downstairs to eat. Lexi sat with me while I ate, and she told me about the day she’d had.

And twenty minutes after that, the two of us were wrapped up in each other’s arms in our bed.

“How are you really feeling?” she asked.

“About what?”

“Work.”

“I’m good. I wasn’t earlier today, but now that we’ve got quite a bit more to work with, I’m feeling much better.”

Lexi’s fingers were tracing random patterns on my chest, and I relished in the feel of having moments like this with her, where the rest of the house was calm and quiet. “Do you think you guys will catch whoever is responsible before Christmas?”

“I can’t make any promises, but if we don’t, I’d seriously doubt if we’re in the right business,” I replied.

“That makes me happy. I don’t want you to have this on your mind during the holiday. In fact, I don’t even want it on your mind for the rest of the night tonight.”

With my arm wrapped around her back, I gave her a squeeze and promised, “I’m not holding on to it. If we stop talking about it, I can assure you, it’s not going to be on my mind.”

Lifting her cheek from my chest, Lexi shifted her body slightly and brought her lips to brush up against mine. “I know of one way I can be absolutely certain of that.”

“Are you going to make me lose control tonight?”

I could feel her smiling against my lips. “Maybe.”

Seconds later, unable to handle the anticipation that was building, I captured her mouth with mine and kissed her possessively. She hadn't done anything but offered the promise of a good night with her, and I was already wild for her.

Lexi didn't hesitate to swing her leg over my body and climb on top of me. And for a long time, we simply kissed and allowed our hands to roam. Mine were in her hair, on her thighs, squeezing her ass, or drifting up her sides.

Our clothing came off, layer by layer, until we were both wearing nothing, feeling each other's heated skin, and unable to resist the temptation.

Lexi made the first move, positioning me between her legs, and sliding down on top of me. For a while, she led us. But as was not uncommon, there came a point when she wanted me to take charge and give us both what we needed.

So, that's what I did.

I rolled her onto her back, drove my cock in deep, and gave us both what we needed.

Lexi's soft moans and whimpers filled the air around us, her hands roaming over every surface of my body they could reach.

“Cruz,” she panted, her voice begging me for more.

One of my hands, which had been gripping her hip firmly, drifted up her abdomen until it landed between her breasts. I shifted it to one side, squeezed the rounded flesh in my hand, and listened to her moan as I continued to power my hips forward.

It built and built.

One touch, one kiss, one thrust at a time.

Until eventually, we had both worked ourselves up to the point of no return and were seeking that reward.

Only after Lexi let go and had taken it did I allow myself to get my own.

And when I was holding her close before we both drifted off to sleep that night, I felt another wave of peace wash over me. This woman had given me some of the best days of my life, and I knew I was going to have to pull out all the stops this Christmas to make sure she knew just how much I loved her for all that she'd given me.

THIRTEEN

Quinn

“Everyone is going to have a great time tonight. It’s going to be a blast.”

I’d been repeating similar sentiments throughout the day, because I desperately wanted Tyson to believe them.

Or, at least, that’s what I’d been telling myself.

He’d been distracted lately, something I knew was the result of the Grinch case he and the rest of the guys at Cunningham Security were working on.

It was rare that Tyson ever allowed his work to affect him, but this case seemed to be taking its toll on him.

I wanted to do anything I could to alleviate some of the stress he’d been feeling and give him a night to just enjoy being with his family, happily celebrating the upcoming holiday.

And I knew he was stressed.

At first, I thought I might have been overreacting or imagining something that wasn’t there, but then this morning happened, and I couldn’t deny what was staring me right in the face.

For the first time in longer than I could remember, when there wasn’t a reason to justify it not happening, Tyson didn’t make love to me. He didn’t wake me up the way he always did, so the two of us could have that time to connect with one another before the kids were awake.

That's when I knew.

Because it wasn't as though he was exhausted and couldn't wake up. By the time I opened my eyes, he was already awake.

I took one look at him and felt a painful ache settle in my chest. But it wasn't because he hadn't made love to me. Of course, I hated not having him wake me up like that. My biggest concern was seeing him so distressed about this case that it took something I knew he enjoyed tremendously away from him.

As his wife and the woman who loved him more than anything in the world, it was my job to put a smile on his face and bring him back to being the laidback and fun-loving guy I knew he was. And I'd do it by any means necessary.

Fortunately, today was going to give me the perfect opportunity to make it happen, because we had all just gotten ready to head out for the first of several family parties that were set to be happening in the coming weeks leading up to Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

If there was one thing Tyson loved, it was his family. Not just our four children and me, but everyone else who was related to us. As one of five children, all of whom were married with their own kids, it was safe to say Tyson had a lot of people around him to love.

He'd never allow his work to seep into his mindset so much that he allowed it to affect any of the time he had with our kids, so if it hadn't been for what didn't happen between us that morning, I might not have known just how much he had on his mind.

I wanted to talk to him about it, to give him the opportunity to get it off his chest, but between the demands of having four young kids around us all day and us needing to get them and ourselves ready for the party tonight, it was impossible.

After a morning spent lost in my thoughts about how to help Tyson as the two of us went about our usual Saturday

morning routine with our children, I had convinced myself a positive mindset would be the way to go. If I was happy and the kids were happy, Tyson would have no choice but to join in.

Of course, I couldn't ignore that even if he managed to get in a few laughs this evening, it was entirely possible he'd still have this weighing on his mind when the party was over. At that point, I'd have no choice but to wait until our kids were in bed and asleep, then I'd talk to him about it.

But I was really hoping I could do something about it before then. And now that we were all ready to leave to head to Kyle and Cassie's place for their holiday party tonight, I'd felt it was necessary to make one final declaration about how great the evening was going to be.

Tyson had been downstairs with the kids, waiting for me to finish getting ready. After I'd done that, joined them in the family room, and made my announcement, I looked at Tyson for a response.

He had a strange look on his face, something I couldn't read. In fact, now that I'd thought about it, I'd seen the look before now. All throughout the day today, Tyson had been sending that look my way.

Unsure what it meant and knowing I couldn't talk about it in front of the kids, I asked, "Is everyone ready to go to Uncle Kyle and Aunt Cassie's house?"

The kids shouted with delight, bolting up and running toward the door that would lead them out into the garage. Tyson was much slower to move, and his lack of enthusiasm kept me rooted to the spot, fearing the worst.

He came to a stop in front of me, allowed his eyes to roam over me from top to toe, and finally said, "You look beautiful, Quinn."

A smile formed on my face. "Thanks. I was hoping you'd like my dress."

Tyson returned the smile, leaned forward, and pressed a soft kiss against my cheek before he whispered in my ear. "It

looks great on you.”

My lips parted, and a shiver ran down my spine, a reminder of what I hadn’t gotten from him this morning.

Before I had the chance to ask him about it, he touched his hand to the small of my back and urged me out of the room.

The next thing I knew, we were piled into the car and on our way.

A ride anywhere with our kids in tow was never a quiet one. So, as much as I might have wanted to be caught up in my thoughts about the way Tyson’s eyes had roamed over my body or the way his lips just barely grazed my cheek with that soft kiss, I couldn’t.

“I’m so excited for the Christmas party,” Dylan declared.

“Me, too,” Cam added. “I just wish there was going to be presents.”

“Wait, what? There aren’t going to be any presents?” Dylan gasped.

“Presents!” Vanessa bubbled.

I looked at Tyson and laughed before turning slightly in my seat to focus my attention on my kids. “Christmas isn’t just about presents, Dylan.”

“But the presents make it more fun,” he argued.

Smiling at him, I corrected him. “No, the people you’re with make it fun. Presents are great. We all love them, but if you went to Uncle Kyle and Aunt Cassie’s house tonight and got a hundred presents and had nobody to share them with or play with, you’d understand what I’m talking about. Think about it for a few minutes. How much fun would you have if you didn’t have all of your cousins, aunts, uncles, brother, sisters, grandparents, mom, and dad with you?”

Cam immediately shared his opinion. “That would be boring.”

“Exactly. What about you Dylan?”

My youngest son pondered for just a bit longer. “I guess you’re right. I’d be pretty lonely.”

I offered a sweet smile in return. “Nobody wants to be lonely, especially on the holiday. People, especially your family, are far more important than presents.”

He nodded his understanding, and I could see the question lingering in his gaze.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, I mean, it’s still okay to love getting presents, right?” he asked.

Letting out a laugh, I assured him, “Yes. It’s okay to love getting presents. Just try to remember how special they are when you do get them, because it’s the people who love you who made it possible.”

“And Santa,” Cam added.

“Right. Santa, too.”

I turned around and faced the front again, my eyes connecting briefly with Tyson’s. It hadn’t been part of my plan, but it seemed the conversation I’d just had with our boys helped in alleviating the burden he was carrying on his shoulders. His features had softened a touch, making him impossibly handsome. Seeing that, it only strengthened my resolve to give him more of what he’d just gotten.

The next thing I knew, we were in the thick of it. We’d arrived at Kyle and Cassie’s house and nearly all of our family had already arrived. Cam and Dylan took off to play with their cousins. Vanessa followed closely behind them, and I knew she’d run into at least one of her younger cousins. Peyton had been in my arms one minute, and the next minute, she was gone. Someone had come along and scooped her up, leaving me without someone to tend to.

I figured it was the perfect opportunity to take care of Tyson. So, I stuck close to him as we visited with our family. I touched him frequently or leaned my body in to his regularly. He seemed to be taking it all in stride, but I couldn’t say I noticed any sort of change in him that made me feel like he

had his mind on anything other than whatever conversation we were involved in with others at that particular moment in time.

Eventually, we had to wrangle the kids to get them to sit long enough to have some dinner, but they were all so excited to get back to what they were doing, they didn't put up much of a fight. They ate and ran. Once all of the kids were fed, the adults filled their plates and did the same.

Following dinner, I leaned over to Tyson and whispered, "I'll be right back."

"What's going on?" he asked, curling his fingers around my wrist.

"I'm just running to use the bathroom."

He gave me a nod and released me.

I made it to the bathroom, found it was already locked, and decided to head upstairs to use one of the ones up there. It was my sister's house, and I knew she wouldn't mind.

I quickly used the bathroom in the hallway, but I didn't immediately exit it.

Admittedly, I was beginning to feel a bit disheartened.

Though I was certain nobody knew how I was feeling since I appeared to be completely caught up in what was happening around me, my heart hurt.

Tyson was not completely himself, and I hated that. Of course, I understood he had a lot on his mind. I didn't expect he'd never feel stress from the work he did. It was just that this was impacting him on a completely different level than I had expected it would.

Realizing there was little else I could do in this situation beyond what I'd been doing unless I wanted to cause a scene, I decided to push my worries to the back of my mind and just focus on having a good time with our family.

Later tonight, after we got home and our kids were in their beds asleep, I'd talk to him about it. I'd let him know I was there for him, if he wanted to share what was bothering him.

On that thought, I took in a deep breath, let it out, and turned to walk out. But the second I opened the door, I was halted in my tracks. I nearly ran into Tyson.

“Hey,” I said.

He stepped forward, urging me back into the bathroom, and closed the door behind him after he entered. Once he flipped the lock, my eyes widened.

Tyson grinned.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

He took the two steps forward, closing the distance between us, slid his arm around my waist, and pinched my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I told you Santa was coming.”

“I... you... what?”

Tyson brought his mouth close and brushed his lips back and forth against mine. Both of his hands came to my hips, squeezed me there, and began gliding up and down my sides. “God, all day,” he hissed. “Do you know what it’s been like to let this build since yesterday morning?”

I was still so caught off guard, I didn’t exactly give him the answer he was looking for. “You’re not upset?”

Tyson’s body froze, and he pulled his face back to look me in the eye. “Upset? About what?”

“Work,” I answered. “I, well, I mean, everything seemed okay yesterday morning, but then you didn’t try to make love to me last night. When you didn’t wake me up this morning like you usually do, I started to make assumptions.”

He tipped his head to the side and allowed his eyes to roam over my face. “Is that what this was about all day today?”

“What?”

“The way you’ve been acting all day, especially since we got here.”

“I wanted to take your mind off work.”

A lazy smile formed on his face, and with just that one look, I knew I had my guy back. “Gorgeous, I haven’t been thinking about work since I walked out of the office yesterday. In fact, I’ve spent every second since you walked down the stairs at home wearing this dress, trying to control the overwhelming urge I have to lift it over your ass and hips, so I can slide inside you.”

My body shuddered. “Well, you have me here now. Are you going to keep denying me, or are you going to do something about it?”

“Jesus, Quinn, it hasn’t even been a full two days. Did you miss my dick that much?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’m accustomed to you being generous.”

He laughed as he brought his hands to the hem of my dress, sliding it up over my ass and hips. Once it was bunched up around my waist, he lifted me onto the counter, captured my mouth with his, and touched me between my legs, my underwear the only thing separating us.

Tyson’s tongue plunged into my mouth, his grip firm in my hair, while his fingers continued to circle, apply pressure, and tease me.

Feeling like it had been days since I’d had him, I was worked up and ready to go in no time at all.

“Tyson,” I whimpered, my hands clawing at his shirt and urging it up his body.

He took his hands and mouth off of me only long enough to remove his shirt. Then his hands were right back between my legs. Only, this time, he’d pushed my panties out of the way and drove one finger inside me.

I moaned at the feel and reached for the fly of his jeans, desperate to free him. Tyson continued to pump his finger inside me.

The moment I had him free, I begged, “Baby, please.”

My husband did not deny me. He pulled his finger out, positioned his cock, and drove inside. My head dropped back,

my hands resting on the counter behind me, and my legs circled Tyson's hips.

He drove in hard, one punishing thrust after another. I loved every second of it. Being here with him like this, in the middle of a party, was so unexpected. I loved the spontaneity almost as much as I loved how wild and frantic we both seemed to be for one another.

I was so caught up in everything, it took almost no time for me to start coming apart around him. Tyson worked me through it, never relenting in his thrusts, and once I made it through, he pulled out.

Like I weighed no more than a feather, he lifted me off the counter, spun me around, and drove in from behind.

Our eyes were focused on each other in the mirror, and that's when Tyson spoke. "Look at you, Quinn. Look at us."

My body was still mostly covered by my dress, but it hugged my form and revealed my curves.

"Do you honestly think it's possible I could be thinking about anything else when I look at you? Fuck, baby, there's no better present in this world than you. Nothing compares."

Between the words he was saying and all he was doing to my body, I didn't stand a chance. And once he allowed one of his hands to drift away from my hip, so his fingers could touch and tease my clit, it became impossible to resist what he was doing.

Tyson was determined, and he had every intention of building me up a second time. Of course, I didn't doubt him. That's just who he was every time we were together.

And my husband had perfected the art of it, knowing exactly what it would take to bring me there.

"Tyson," I called out my warning.

A sly grin formed on his face, his hips still thrusting hard as he increased his pace.

He was close.

In fact, I knew he wanted us to go together, so I held on just a bit longer, and the next thing I knew, he demanded, “Come with me, gorgeous.”

So, I did. And his hands gripped me tighter as his orgasm tore through him.

When we both made it to the other side, I smiled at him in the mirror. “This was fun. Unexpected and fun.”

“You liked it?”

“Loved it.” Following a beat of silence, I added, “But can you not take the morning sex away from me if you’re planning something like this? I was so stressed today.”

Tyson burst out laughing, pressing his forehead against my shoulder while his body shook. When he settled himself down, he replied, “Noted. And for the record, I loved this, too, so you better expect more of it in the future.”

At that, he pulled out of me, spun me around, and kissed me.

Then the two of us got ourselves cleaned up before we rejoined the party, nobody knowing where we’d been or what we’d been doing.

And for the rest of the night, I found it was much easier for me to believe the words I’d been saying all day. Because we had a great time, and everyone had a blast.

Christmas was nearly here, but for me, Santa had certainly come a little bit earlier this year.

FOURTEEN

Gunner

There was an overwhelming sense of foreboding that came along with fucking up. Or believing that was what happened, anyway.

In our line of work, it was safe to say the guys at Cunningham Security and I didn't ever want to experience that feeling when we were working on a case.

Sadly, it happened from time to time.

And while there were certainly moments throughout our careers we knew we'd never forget, because of either our connection to the case or the lesson it might have taught us, there was no question this case was sitting somewhere at the top of the pack.

Because I was standing in a store in the middle of the night with more than half the men on our team, and it was obvious we all believed we'd just fucked up.

There was an upside to what we'd done. We had stopped an attempted robbery.

Anyone who knew what we'd done might have felt relief or gratitude for our diligence and commitment to the cause.

But there was one big problem.

We only caught one guy.

The reason for catching one guy had nothing to do with the others getting away.

Nope.

We only caught one guy, because only one guy had shown up at this store tonight.

Earlier in the day, Lorenzo, Dom, Holden, and Tyson had done their due diligence when they followed the white van from the shelter to this location—an electronics store.

They were discreet, knowing how to not be spotted, and they'd watched as everything we had confirmed happened before the last three robberies happened again. A man got out of the truck, took his ladder off, and acted like he'd been hired to do work on the property. Since all of the spaces were leased there, it wasn't as though anyone would have suspected something, and it was likely they just assumed the leasing company had hired someone to come around and do some maintenance.

Once that guy finished his work, he got back in his van and took off. Obviously, we hadn't been able to witness one of the other men going into the store, because they generally arrived before the guy in the white van.

Based on the evidence the guys collected, we'd decided to set up a stakeout at the location. We were relatively confident they'd attempt to make their move tonight.

We weren't wrong, because that was precisely what happened.

Unfortunately, we only had one suspect.

One of the guys had already contacted the authorities, having done so just before we entered the premises to stop what was happening.

And now, we wondered if we'd jumped the gun.

Had we gone in too soon and screwed the pooch on this case? Were the other guys on the way?

Because, again, there were five of us and only one suspect.

One.

“What’s your name?” Pierce asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Who are you?” the guy fired back.

Trent didn’t hesitate to reveal. “We’re the guys who have the ability to let the police, who are currently on their way here, know that you’ve been extraordinarily cooperative.”

Cruz didn’t let it go there. “Or, you know, we could tell them you’ve been the opposite. So, what’s it going to be, Dwayne?”

Dwayne blinked his eyes in surprise and jerked back. “How do you know who I am?”

“We’ve been doing some research,” I explained. “It’s a nice van you’ve got there. Where are your buddies?”

“What buddies?” he scoffed.

Levi moved toward Dwayne, dropped his voice to a lethal level, and answered, “The ones you’ve been working with on each of these robberies.”

He looked around the room at all of us, disgust written all over his face. “I work alone, unlike you. Five men to capture one. Boy, I must have really been causing you some trouble.”

“Really?” Levi pressed. “So, do you want to tell me about the guys who go into the stores and set things up for you on the inside before you come by with your van and cut power to the cameras?”

The man cocked an eyebrow and shot Levi a look that indicated there was nobody else. Judging by that look, I was confident he was telling the truth.

And that’s when it hit me. “Disguises. You disguised yourself, didn’t you?”

“Figured that out all on your own?” he fired back.

It was at that moment when we heard the familiar sounds of sirens in the distance.

“You work as the director at a homeless shelter,” Pierce said, bringing us back on track. “I can’t imagine why you’d do

something like this and hurt the owners of the small businesses the way you have, if everything we read about you is the truth.”

For the first time since we’d started speaking with him, Dwayne snapped his mouth shut. It seemed he was no longer interested in talking to us, and that was beyond frustrating.

Because Pierce was right.

From what we’d been able to gather, Dwayne had been a model citizen. He seemed like the kind of guy everyone would have wanted in their corner. He didn’t become the director of the homeless shelter for no reason, and he certainly hadn’t wound up in a position like that because he didn’t care about those less fortunate. It made absolutely no sense why he’d do what he’d done, why he’d steal from so many innocent people.

I would have loved nothing more than to say that once the police arrived, I felt relieved about the work we’d done. In a way, I guess I was, since we didn’t need to be worried about another business being burglarized.

But everything still felt so unfinished.

And without any explanation as to why Dwayne had done what he did, it just didn’t feel as good as it could have.

Unfortunately, that was the way it was. Sometimes, there was only so much we could do. We’d done our job, and at this point, it was out of our hands. The only thing left for us to do was hope there was some form of justice for the people who’d been impacted by Dwayne’s actions.

If nothing else, that would go a long way in helping me to feel better about this whole situation.

Well, that and the fact I’d now be able to focus my time and attention on my wife and children.



“You two go. I’ll give you a head start.”

Without an ounce of hesitation, Ivy and Hunter took off, racing down the trail. I glanced over at Sage. “Are you good to go?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

“Go ahead,” I urged her.

Shaking her head, she insisted, “No. You go and catch up to the kids. I don’t want them to get too far away from us.”

“Sage, babe, the kids are good, but I’ll catch them in less than a minute or two,” I assured her.

“Please. I promise I’ll be fine. I’m worried about them.”

I rolled my eyes. “Alright. Be careful. We’ll meet you at the lift.”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

I shifted my snowboard and raced to find my kids. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind I’d catch up to and pass them in no more than a minute or two.

They’d see me, and they’d use my speed to motivate them to get down the trail even faster. They’d progressed tremendously over the years, and while they preferred doing things like the halfpipe, today was all about spending some time together as a family.

It had been a few days since we’d caught our Grinch, and the kids were officially out of school until after New Year’s. I had every intention of soaking up every minute I could with them and Sage.

Today, that meant snowboarding.

Tonight, it’d likely mean Christmas movies.

Tomorrow, we were taking the kids out shopping, so they could purchase gifts for their grandparents, each other, and us. I’d take one kid, and Sage would take the other. We’d get done with the shopping we needed to do with that child, then we’d switch so they could buy something for the other parent.

Initially, the feeling I'd had when we closed the Grinch case hadn't been a welcome one. But now that I was here, snowboarding with my wife and kids, and I had days of fun planned with them, I wasn't so upset about it any longer.

Plus, we'd managed to get a bit more information about Dwayne's motive.

Apparently, it was confirmed that he'd been working alone. When the police inspected the van, they found the disguises. As for the things he'd stolen, everything had been recovered at the shelter.

Dwayne eventually broke down and shared why he'd done what he'd done.

As a kid, Dwayne and his mom had been in an unfortunate situation where they relied heavily on the local shelter. It hadn't been easy to get excited about much while he was living in a situation like that, but the holidays were different.

When he was so young, Dwayne learned Santa visited the shelter. Of course, he grew up, and he eventually learned that toy, clothing, and book donation drives were being held at the time of year, and folks had been generous. It was the only way he'd managed to get something special at Christmas.

As an adult, and the director of the shelter, Dwayne had felt compelled to do something similar for those in need. He'd done it for years, and it had always been a success.

But times had changed, evidently.

Dwayne had shared with the officers how people just weren't donating like they used to, and there were far too many people in need for him to not take charge of the situation. Part of him felt bad about what he was doing, but he believed the small business owners he stole from could simply collect their insurance money, and they'd be fine.

The situation was horrible all the way around.

Because the truth was that Dwayne's intentions were noble; it was the manner in which he carried it all out that sucked.

On the bright side, even if he wasn't going to be there to witness it, when word got out about the need for donations at the shelter, Windsor residents stepped up to the plate in a big way.

From what I'd heard, it was likely that every child who'd be spending their holiday at the shelter would have something special with their name on it when they woke up on Christmas morning.

So, as awful as it was for Dwayne, it seemed there would be a happy ending.

For me and the rest of the guys I worked with, we were all taking time off. After the amount of effort we'd all put into the Grinch case, along with our standard private investigation cases, Levi had decided we all needed some time off to just be with our families to enjoy the rest of the holiday season.

And that was precisely what I was doing as I spotted my kids and zipped past them. I heard their cries of delight and laughter as I zoomed by, and I was sure they were both picking up their pace in an attempt to catch me. I'd get to the lift before them, but they were both excellent snowboarders, so they wouldn't be far behind.

Sure enough, I made it down near the lift, moved slightly off to the side, unstrapped one of my feet from my board, and waited. Ivy, being a little older and having more experience, was a bit ahead of her brother. That said, Hunter was giving it everything he had, and he wasn't taking it easy on Ivy. If she wanted to stay out in front, she was going to have to work for it.

The next thing I knew, both of my kids made it to the bottom. "You're so fast," Ivy declared. "How do you go so fast?"

"Well, for starters, I've been snowboarding a lot longer than you. But I'm also a lot bigger. It helps with my speed. Just give it some time, and you'll be right there with me before you know it."

“What about me? Do you think I’ll be able to catch you soon?” Hunter asked.

“If you stick with it, I wouldn’t be surprised if you wind up passing me at some point.”

“Really?”

I shrugged. “Someone’s got to stick with your mom and help her out.”

Hunter laughed. “Mom is *soooo* slow.”

“She learned how to snowboard as an adult, so you have to cut her some slack. It’s easy to learn stuff like this when you’re a kid. It’s not as easy when you get older,” I explained.

For the next few minutes, Hunter started gathering snow up in his hands, rolling it into snowballs, and tossing it at his sister. Ivy ran and hid behind me, and I effortlessly blocked Hunter’s snowballs.

The game went on for a little while when Ivy shouted, “There’s Mom!”

“Finally,” Hunter groaned.

I didn’t respond. I merely watched as she made her way down the last bit of the trail, and I did it with a smile on my face. Sage hadn’t ever been particularly interested in snowboarding, but she asked me to teach her years ago, because she wanted to join us when we brought our kids.

She worked so hard to develop the skills she had, but it was just like I’d told the kids. Learning to ride at her age wasn’t exactly the easiest. She had years of wisdom on her side, so where our kids were fearless, Sage was a bit more cautious. Plus, when we fell at our age, it hurt just a bit more than it would when our kids went down.

When she finally made it to where we were standing off to the side of the lift, Hunter groaned, “It took you so long. You’re always the last one down.”

With a smile on her face, Sage didn’t miss a beat. “I purposely stay behind the three of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just because we’re here, having fun together, it doesn’t mean I stop being a mom. My only concern is your safety. What if I went zooming down the trail and something happened to you?”

I bit my lip to stifle the laughter threatening to escape.

“Zooming down the trail, Mom?” Ivy questioned her.

Sage nodded. “Yes. I’d get down here so fast, and then you or your brother would be stuck all the way up there.”

“I don’t think you could zoom down the trail,” Hunter declared.

“Of course, I can’t. Because I’m hanging back to make sure nothing happens to you or your sister,” my wife reasoned.

“Okay, so what if you and Dad came here together without us on like a romantic date or something like that,” Ivy began. “Would you be able to keep up with him?”

Feeling bad for her, I was about to chime in when Sage reasoned, “I’m not sure there are many people who can keep up with your dad. He was basically a professional.”

“No offense, Mom, but I don’t think this is about you staying back in case something happens to us. If you were worried about us, you’d stay closer and make it down here right around the same time as us.”

I couldn’t allow this to continue. “Guys?” I called. When my kids brought their attention to me, I said, “Let’s take it easy on your mom. We’re here to have a good time together as a family, and she only recently learned how to snowboard. It’s okay for her to be cautious. Besides, there are things your mom has done that are so incredibly difficult, you wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

“Like what?”

“Do you know she used to travel to locations where hurricanes were going to hit? When everyone else was being evacuated, your mom was heading toward the trouble.”

Their heads snapped toward Sage. “Did you really do that?”

She smiled and nodded. “Yep.”

“Wow,” Ivy marveled.

“And that’s just one little example of the things she’s capable of that would blow your mind,” I shared. I could have waxed on about how Sage basically died giving birth to Ivy, but I didn’t want to scare my daughter or ruin our day out. One day, far in the future, we could share that news with her. “Now, if you’re done giving your mom a hard time, I think we can get on this lift and get a lot more riding in.”

At that, the kids started making their way to the end of the lift line.

Sage moved toward me.

As soon as I wrapped my arm around her back, she said, “Thank you for saying those sweet things about me.”

“I meant every word. If they only knew everything you were capable of, they’d never say a word about this,” I told her.

She shrugged. “They’re kids who want to have fun, and I’m slowing them down.”

“It’s okay. They can stand to learn a bit of patience and understanding,” I noted.

“You’re such a great dad, Gunner. I mean that with my whole heart. There’s nobody who could ever do for your children what you do, but I think I’d be lying if I said you weren’t an even better husband. I love the way you love me.”

Grinning at her, I replied, “I feel the same about you as a wife and mother.”

“We should catch up to our kids before they lose their minds,” Sage noted. “We can go down the trails a few more times, then take them to the terrain park, where they’ll have the most fun.”

“You don’t mind?” I asked.

Sage shook her head. “Nope. I want them to enjoy themselves, and I know that’ll make them happy.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Is that really the reason, or are you thinking you’ll be feeling it after a few more runs down the mountain?”

She bit her lip. “Okay, so maybe that has something to do with it, too.”

I let out a laugh, kissed her mouth, and loosened my hold on her. “Let’s go get you worn out, babe.”

“I won’t be able to do anything fun tonight if I get too exhausted,” she noted.

Looking back, I winked and said, “That’s okay. I don’t mind doing all the work.”

Sage rolled her eyes at me, and the two of us rode over to meet up with our kids. We spent the next few hours on the mountain, having a blast, giving our children exactly what they wanted for their holiday break.

And later that night, Sage and I found a different way to celebrate the holiday season.

FIFTEEN

Delaney

“Do you all still have your gloves on?”

“I have mine on,” Tate answered.

“What about you, London?”

“Yes, Mom. We all have them on,” my oldest daughter fired back, a bit of annoyance in her tone. “Can we go now?”

I cocked an eyebrow at her, watched as she humbled herself, and asked, “Do you remember where to go?”

My youngest son, Van, proudly declared, “I do. I’ll show them where to go.”

“I remember where to go, Mom.”

That came from Tate. He was my softie—a mama’s boy. I smiled at him and said, “Okay. You can go, but stick together, and be careful. We’re coming right behind you.”

My four kids took off running. Or, well, they ran as fast as they could with the snow that was on the ground.

I stood and watched them for a few seconds before I turned slightly and looked at the man standing beside me. My husband reached out and gave my hand a squeeze before he wrapped his arm around my back and allowed his hand to settle on my opposite shoulder.

“Are you ready?”

I smiled up at him and nodded. “Yeah.”

Trent didn't hesitate to start guiding us from where we were parked along the same path our four kids had just taken. I wasn't surprised to see London and Van at the front of the pack. London was my tough girl, likely the one leading the charge, and Van was fearless, clearly not concerned about slipping and falling on the snow or ice.

Even though London and Tate were thick-as-thieves, my oldest kiddo had slowed his pace, so he could help his youngest sister, Adrienne. My four-year-old girl was a girly-girl, and she was probably panicking the whole time that she'd fall and mess up her clothes. I loved that Tate stayed back and was holding her hand to make sure she didn't fall.

"I hope they always keep this same level of excitement about doing this," I declared.

"I get the feeling it's going to change at some point," Trent replied.

Twisting my neck to look up at him as we continued to walk forward, I asked, "Do you really believe that? You think they'll want to stop coming here?"

My husband glanced down at me and shook his head. "No. I think they'll always come here, because it's important to do, but I think the way they react to it will be different. London's ten now. I'm guessing by the time she's fifteen or sixteen, she won't be running along the path to get there."

Trent's words seeped into my mind and simmered there for a few seconds. While I was sure the last thing he wanted to do was think about his daughter being fifteen years old, he couldn't deny what was coming. But his declaration forced me to see something else. I could remember the day I found out I was pregnant with London. It was the day of Tate's first birthday party.

I sighed. "They're growing so fast. I wish I could stop the clock and keep them this age forever."

"I know, sweet cheeks. It's not easy. I worry about it all the time," Trent returned. "On the bright side, I think we're doing

a great job with them. We're so lucky, because we have some incredible kids."

I couldn't stop the smile from forming on my face, because he was right. "Yeah, we do. Kids who are excited to be at the cemetery on Christmas Eve, visiting their grandparents."

Trent's hand gave my shoulder a squeeze as we closed the distance between ourselves and our kids, who'd finally made it to their grandparents' headstones.

This had become a tradition for our family. There were several occasions throughout the year when we'd all pile into our SUV and make the trip here. It was important to me that our children understood just how special their grandparents were. I wanted them to recognize the fact that just because their grandparents weren't here in the physical sense, it didn't mean we wouldn't keep their memory alive and talk to them whenever we wanted.

Of course, since she'd died when I was still in high school, my children never met my mother. But they knew about her. I always talked to them about her, so I believed they had a good understanding of the kind of woman she was.

When it came to my father, he'd been around for Tate and London for a couple of years. I knew they had memories with him, because while they didn't often share things about him, there had been moments when they'd suddenly say something they remembered doing with him or talking to him about. London had been only three when he passed, so it surprised me she could remember anything about him.

Van didn't remember him, because he was only a year old when my dad passed. But he knew how much his grandfather loved him, considering I had about a million pictures from Van's first year of life, and my dad was present in at least half of those photos.

The only one who never met him was my baby girl, Adrienne. It made me sad for my father and for my daughter, but I had no doubt my parents were watching down on my family, loving it all. And Adrienne heard plenty of discussions about her grandparents. Maybe it wasn't all sinking in right

now, given her age, but I knew she'd start remembering the stories as she got older. If nothing else, I knew she enjoyed the trip we made to the cemetery throughout the year.

Trent and I finally made it to where our kids were standing, huddled close together in front of their grandparents' headstones. After we came to a stop, my husband released his hold on me, stepped around the kids, and placed the handmade wreaths against each headstone.

When he turned around, he took all of us in, and asked, "Who's going first this time?"

"Me!" Adrienne declared.

None of her siblings fought her for it, so she stepped forward and said, "Merry Christmas, Grandma and Grandpa." She hesitated for a moment, and I wondered if it was because she was doing what I liked to do. I always waited after I shared some bit of news with my parents, like I was hoping they'd respond. Eventually, Adrienne continued, "Santa is coming tonight. I'm so excited. I hope he brings me some of the things on my list."

My eyes met Trent's, and the both of us smiled at each other. These trips here meant everything to me. I loved listening to my children talking to my parents as though they were alive and standing right there in front of them.

The kids took their turns talking to their grandparents, sharing whatever they felt was in their hearts they wanted to share. But since it was Christmas tomorrow and Adrienne had started things off by sharing what she had hoped Santa would bring her, the rest of the kids followed suit, adding in bits and pieces of other things that had happened in their lives since our last visit here.

Trent and I always enjoyed listening, because there were many instances in which we learned about something the kids hadn't shared with us before. In a way, it was as though our kids were having a genuine relationship with their grandparents, sharing things with them they'd never share with us.

And in an effort to respect that relationship, Trent and I made sure not to speak to our children about those things unless they brought them up to us first. Granted, it's not like they were sharing anything harmful or upsetting, and generally, they'd share about something that happened at school or with each other that we hadn't been privy to.

The longer we stood outside, each kid taking their turn, the colder it got. Adrienne made her way closer to her dad, and he immediately lifted her into his arms. Van did the same with me when I stepped forward to speak to my parents.

I was sure if anyone asked him, he would say he was standing close to offer me the support I needed, but I knew he was getting cold. So, I crouched down beside him, hugged him close to me, and made my visit with my parents a quick one, telling them about a few of the things we'd been doing to prepare for the upcoming holiday with the kids. Of course, as always, I let them know how much I wished they were there with us to celebrate.

Finally, I said, "We're going to get going now, Mom and Dad. The kids are getting cold, and it's getting late. They need to get home and have dinner before we build our gingerbread houses and leave out milk and cookies for Santa. We'll see you both next year. Merry Christmas."

My whole family chimed in with a round of Christmas wishes.

Feeling the warmth move through me despite the cold temperatures, I stood, took Van's hand in mine, and turned to start moving back toward our vehicle. Trent carried Adrienne there, and Tate and London remained a few steps ahead of us.

We made our way home, and for the next couple of hours, Trent and I completely immersed ourselves in the final Christmas Eve activities with our kids. While I made dinner, Trent made sure all the kids had gotten showers and baths. Tate and London managed on their own, but Van required some supervision while Adrienne needed some help. No sooner had we cleaned up from dinner when the kids were breaking out the gingerbread houses.

“Mom?” Van called.

“Yes, baby?”

“What’s going to happen when he gets too old?” he asked.

“Who?”

“Santa.”

London, who was expertly adding frosting to her house, didn’t even look up when she pointed out, “He’s already old, Van. Haven’t you seen the white hair and the beard?”

“I know.”

Unprepared for the conversation, my eyes shot to Trent’s. He saw the panic on my face and turned his attention to his son. “Why are you asking that?”

Van’s eyes narrowed, his mind clearly concerned. It seemed he was struggling to formulate a response, and that’s when Tate chimed in. “He’s worried Santa might start forgetting things.”

Evidently, there’d already been a discussion amongst the kids about this. “How do you know that?” I asked Tate.

“Van was asking me about it the other day. He was worried Santa could forget about some kids on the nice list and wanted to know what would happen if he missed coming down our chimney.”

“What did you tell him?” Trent questioned Tate.

Tate shrugged. “I just told him Santa wouldn’t forget. I’ve never heard about him forgetting anyone.”

My heart melted as I looked at my big boy. He was at an age where I think he started to question the reality of Santa’s existence. Despite the doubts he might have had, he wouldn’t take away the magic from his younger brother and sisters. It made me love him even more, which seemed impossible.

“You’re right about that, Tate,” Trent declared. “Plus, even if Santa is having a rough year, he’s got all those helpers.”

“The elves!” Adrienne exclaimed.

“Exactly.”

I grinned at Trent before I added, “And do you know how smart the elves are?”

“They’re smart?” London asked, a bit of doubt lingering in her tone.

“Of course, they are. I mean, do you know what Santa’s helpers learn when they’re in school?” I asked her.

“They don’t go to school,” London scoffed.

“They do.”

Trent’s voice filled the room next, and he shot me a curious look. “I’m curious about this. I knew Santa’s helpers were smart, kept him on his toes, and went to school, but I never heard about what specific classes they took. Are you saying you know?”

“Of course, I do.”

“So, what is it? What do the elves learn when they’re in school?” Tate questioned me.

My lips twitched as my gaze landed on each member of my family. Seeing their curious faces, loving the way it felt to be surrounded by all of them, I revealed, “The elf-abet.”

Trent chuckled, Van burst out laughing, Tate smiled, and London rolled her eyes at me. Adrienne squealed, “I know the alphabet. Do you think I can be one of Santa’s helpers?”

I looked down at my girl beside me and said, “I know you do. I’m not sure if Santa is looking for helpers, but you can certainly ask him when you send him your list next year. But if you moved to the North Pole, I’d miss you so much all year long, and especially on Christmas morning.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, I didn’t think about that. Maybe I’ll stay here instead.”

Wrapping my arm around her, I squeezed her tight to my body and kissed the top of her head. “That sounds like a good idea. I’d totally cry if you left.”

“Me, too,” Trent added.

“You wouldn’t cry,” London told her dad.

“Yes, I would. I’d cry if you left, too.”

“I’ve never seen you cry,” Van said.

“I have cried plenty of times. Like on the day you were born and the day I married your mom.”

I was grinning from ear to ear as I took in the look of shock on Van’s face.

“You were so happy, you cried?” London questioned him.

He nodded. “Yep.”

Something strange washed over our daughter’s face, and I had a feeling she’d just realized she didn’t need to be so tough all the time, especially when she leaned her body into her dad’s and cuddled close to him.

Trent wrapped his arm around his girl and began blinking his eyes rapidly. Though she loved her family fiercely, London wasn’t very physically affectionate, so I wasn’t surprised to see Trent struggling not to break down at her reaction to learning he had moments of vulnerability, too.

When we finished building the houses, the kids helped prepare Santa’s cookies and milk, along with a plate of carrots for the reindeer.

And in what was a rare occurrence in our house, the kids didn’t hesitate to climb into their beds without a fuss.

Once we had them down for the night, Trent and I fell into our yearly Christmas Eve duties. I worked on wrapping those last few gifts I hadn’t managed to wrap in the weeks leading up to this point, and Trent arranged everything I’d already wrapped under the tree.

Before I knew it, I was walking up to stand beside Trent in front of the tree with a cookie in each of my hands. “Santa’s reward,” I told him.

Trent took the cookie from me and sunk his teeth in. I did the same. And for the next few minutes, we stood there, staring at the tree and eating our cookies. Then Trent took a

big gulp of the milk and broke apart the carrots, placing parts of them back in the refrigerator, where the kids wouldn't ever suspect a thing.

In one of my favorite Christmas Eve traditions, my husband and I hopped in the shower together and allowed the tension to build between us. No touching, no kissing. Only seductive looks that indicated what was to come.

Of course, by the time we got out, we were completely worked up. We barely made it to the bed before we were touching and tasting everywhere we could.

Trent took us to the bed, and we became a mess of tangled limbs, soft touches, and sweet kisses.

We had a healthy sex life. Things never got stale between us. Trent and I always found ways to be creative, whether it meant a quickie in the morning before the kids were up or a long, rough session after a hard day of work.

But one of my favorite ways to be with him was like this—soft, slow, and sensual. I liked the way it allowed the emotional connection between us to build the physical sensations up.

We rolled several times, each of us taking turns to lead, and the kissing was out of this world.

It built slowly, but it always built to something extraordinary.

And that was precisely what happened. It took us time to get there—something I loved—but Trent and I brought each other to an earth-shattering orgasm, the waves of pleasure crashing into us over and over.

The extended pleasure only deepened the connection I had with Trent, something that had been there from the very beginning. Something I'd always hold close to my heart.

After we'd cleaned up and were back in bed, Trent spooning me, I said, "I know I say this every year, but it bears repeating. I still can't believe we're here."

“It’s been just shy of twelve years, Delaney. How long do you think it’ll take you?”

I ran my fingers along his forearm until they found his hand, which was possessively cupping my breast.

“A lifetime. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it. When I think back on all we’ve experienced over the years, going back all the way to when we were in high school together, I can’t help but feel grateful we’re here.”

Trent pressed a kiss on my shoulder. “It took a long time for us to get here, but it’s been worth it. I can’t imagine what Christmases would be like if I didn’t have you and our kids here with me.”

The idea of not being with Trent and not having our kids was horrifying. “I certainly wouldn’t feel this fulfilled. And though I know you did something special for me for Christmas, I just want you to know that there’s never going to be a gift that can be unwrapped that’ll ever be as precious to me as the love you’ve given me and the life we’ve built together.”

Trent’s fingers tightened on my breast as he pressed another kiss to my shoulder. “I feel the same about you, Delaney. It seems impossible, but just having another day with you and our kids is all the gift I’ll ever need.”

At that, Trent and I settled into the silence for a bit. But because I couldn’t go to sleep without saying it to him, I eventually broke the silence and said, “I love you, Trent.”

“I love you, too.”

Minutes later, we both drifted, knowing morning would soon come and our joy would come from seeing our children’s faces light up when they realized Santa hadn’t forgotten them at all.

SIXTEEN

Dom

“Can you tell us now?”

“We can’t wait any longer, Mom.”

I couldn’t say I didn’t understand my children’s impatience and anticipation. It was Christmas Eve, which brought enough excitement as it was. But since we had an annual tradition of doing something new and fun with each other just hours before the big guy in the red suit arrived, the kids were bursting at the seams to know what their mom had planned for this year.

Normally, we all would have known what was happening, but when Hank and Grace couldn’t manage to agree on something on their own, Ekko took matters into her own hands.

And I just knew it was going to be good, not only because she never did anything without the effort, but also because the look on her face right now told me everything I needed to know.

Weeks ago, when the kids had first been arguing about what to do, Ekko had shared she had an idea and would take charge of the planning. I’d attempted to get it out of her that night, but she refused to share.

I was surprised by her determination to keep it a secret.

But now that we were here, and she was wearing that look on her face with the wrapped boxes in front of her, it hit me.

I knew precisely what she had planned, and I couldn't have loved her more for it if I tried.

Then again, loving Ekko any more than I already did would have been quite the feat. She came into my life all those years ago and changed it in a way I hadn't been expecting or prepared for. Every day since then had been quite the adventure with her and our twins.

I loved it all.

And if I tried now, I wasn't sure I'd be able to communicate with words just how much it meant to me that she decided on this as our activity for the night. I could already feel the nostalgia setting in.

Without even seeing what was inside those boxes, I already knew. Ekko was going to be recreating one of my favorite memories with her from our first Christmas together. Obviously, the end result today with our kids in the mix would be different than it had been all those years ago, but I didn't care.

This was going to be such a blast, and I knew the kids were going to love it.

Ekko held one box out to me before she set a box in front of each of our kids. "Before you open those gifts, here's what you need to know. What we're about to do is something your dad and I did during our first Christmas together, so if you think you might want to complain about it, keep in mind it's something special to us."

"Did the two of you actually do fun things?" Hank asked.

Ekko grinned at him before she shifted her eyes to the side to look at me. "Every time we were together, your dad and I had fun."

I smiled back at her, feeling something swell in my chest. Nostalgia had certainly taken hold as I recalled Christmas Day all those years ago. Ekko hadn't been in the best financial position, and yet, she managed to give us both a memorable day, something far better than any expensive gift could have.

“Can we open the present now?” Grace asked, pulling us both out of the fog.

Ekko turned her attention to our daughter. “Yes, Gracie, you can.”

Already knowing what was inside, I took my time with the paper. The twins couldn’t rip theirs off fast enough.

“Dart guns?” Grace scoffed.

“What? Cool!” Hank declared.

My wife’s face lit up, nodding as Grace stared on in horror.

“What are we doing with these?” our daughter asked.

I figured it was my turn to offer an explanation. “You’re going to open those boxes as quickly as you can. I’ll cut off any zip ties holding it in place, but then it’s up to you. You’ve got to get the darts loaded and ready to go.”

“Ready to go for what?” Hank asked.

“You’ve got the whole house to either run, hide, and hope nobody finds you, or you can seek out your opponents and fire,” I replied.

“For the record, it’s the most fun when you’re going after your opponent,” Ekko added.

I let out a laugh, remembering just how many shots she’d fired off when she gave me the dart gun years ago. Not only that, but I’d been completely naked at the time, and I’d needed to load the darts. She’d gotten hers ready sometime beforehand. Even though she’d had the unfair advantage, it was still one of the best memories I had with her.

The kids and I started unboxing the dart guns, then I demonstrated how they needed to be loaded and assembled. Hank and Grace listened intently, following instructions and being utterly determined not to make a mistake. While I did that, Ekko brought out hers, which was already ready for battle.

Knowing what she likely intended to do, I came up with a bit of my own plan. After giving our kids the final bit of

instruction they needed to have their dart guns ready to go, I said, “Once you’ve done that, you’ll just need to do this.”

Without giving her a chance to react, I aimed and fired a dart off at Ekko. It hit her in the shoulder. As she gasped, I aimed and fired at Hank before moving to Grace. Three shots had been fired, and I didn’t miss a single one.

Then it was absolute, total chaos.

I continued firing off shots, knowing I was going to hit my target nearly every time. Darts flew in my direction, but for every ten that came my way, it might have only been one or two that hit me.

“Why does it feel like I’m the only target here?” I asked. “You’re allowed to shoot at each other.”

Ekko didn’t miss a beat. “It’s going to take the three of us working together against you to even stand a chance at winning.”

As soon as she said it, the thought popped into my mind. I wasn’t quite sure how anyone actually won in this game. I mean, if we were going based on how many accurate shots were fired, they already knew I was going to win.

Not caring about winning or losing, I just reveled in all that I was hearing. My wife and my children were happy, laughing, and enjoying themselves tremendously. That was all that mattered to me, especially when I recalled what had happened between Ekko and me not long after we’d done this for the first time on Christmas Day so many years ago.

God, that thought popped into my head on occasion, and it was never good. I always had to remind myself it all worked out in the end, because Ekko and I were together now, and we had our miracle babies.

So, to hear the utter joy coming from them, I didn’t care that they were all ganging up on me. I loved it.

Despite the fact Ekko had purchased high-capacity dart guns, it didn’t take long for her and the kids to shoot all of them. By the time they were all empty, I still had plenty of darts left.

“Oh, no,” Ekko murmured.

“What?” Grace asked.

“This feels all too familiar. Your dad always wins the game.”

“Dad won when you two played?” Hank pressed.

Ekko nodded. “Unfortunately.”

I grinned at the three of them and insisted, “Your mom and I tend to agree to disagree on that one. She might have been out of darts before I was all those years ago, but she fails to remember she managed to get my gun away from me. If that isn’t the mark of a winner, I don’t know what is.”

Hank’s and Grace’s eyes widened. “How did you do that, Mom?” Grace questioned her.

“Yeah, how did you do it? If you did it by yourself, I’m sure the three of us can definitely do it now.”

Ekko laughed and shook her head. “Oh, I don’t know. I can’t quite remember.”

My lips twitched as I watched Ekko squirm, hoping our kids accepted her explanation. Of course, there wasn’t a chance either one of us was going to tell our children how it happened, since Ekko had essentially walked out from behind a wall she’d been hiding and stripped down into nothing right in front of me.

“Tell you what,” I said, wanting to get her off the hook. When everyone was looking at me, I swung my hand out in front of my body toward the mess of darts all over the floor and spoke. “We’ll have a rematch. I’ll give the three of you the time you need to reload your guns, and I’ll only fill half of mine. That should level the playing field a bit.”

Excitement washed over Hank’s face. “You’re totally going down, Dad.”

I lifted a brow and sent a dubious look his way. “If you say so.”

With that, everyone got to work on loading the guns again. And I relished in the conversation that took place as it happened. For kids who had wanted to do either the traditional Christmas activities like Grace did, or who didn't even want to spend time together as a family of four like Hank did, it became immediately clear this had been their favorite Christmas Eve family fun night.

Just as Ekko's intention had been years ago when she did it, it seemed she'd done it again. With little cost, no fighting between the kids, and a lot of love in our house, we created memories I knew would last a lifetime. Not just for us, but for our kids, too.

Hours later, long after we'd played several rounds with the dart guns, watched the kids' favorite Christmas movie, got them to bed, and the presents were placed under the tree, Ekko and I were finally alone in our bedroom.

"You did really good tonight, sugar," I said when we were pulling the blanket back to climb into bed.

"What do you mean? You won every single round, even with limited ammo."

As we both collapsed in bed, I laughed. "I wasn't talking about that. You and I both knew that was a given. I meant that you came up with a really great idea of something for us to do together tonight. The kids had such a good time."

She smiled at me. "Yeah. I'm so happy they enjoyed themselves. I think they had a blast."

"I did, too. And it really means a lot to me that you chose to do that. I don't know, I'm starting to feel the need to show you what having you choose that activity for tonight meant to me."

"You liked it that much?"

With my head propped up in my hand, I nodded. "I did. Though, I will be honest and say that the first time was my favorite."

"Really? Why is that?"

The corners of Ekko's mouth tipped up, but I could tell she was trying to suppress the smile. She knew the answer to her own question, but that didn't stop me from responding. "I think you know exactly the reason why. I liked the way you won that game all those years ago."

Ekko shifted her tiny body closer to mine. "I did have a good strategy then, didn't I?"

"Mmm. Now that I think about it, I wonder if this had been your plan the whole time this year."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

My arm, which had been draped over her waist, began to move. My hand drifted down toward her ass and grabbed a fistful. "I'm just saying that I think you might have wanted me to recall what happened that day in hopes of getting one... two... maybe three early Christmas presents tonight."

"Are you suggesting I'd ever try to deceive you?" she asked playfully.

I leaned forward and brushed my lips against hers. "It wouldn't matter either way, because I already planned to start celebrating the holiday early with you. I'm feeling particularly generous this year."

Ekko's hands slid up the front of my chest and over my shoulders toward my head as she whispered, "Is that so?"

"Absolutely, sugar. And we're done talking for now. I've got some other uses for my mouth and yours tonight, and they won't involve uttering any words. Unless, of course, you're begging for me to give you more."

Understanding what I wanted, Ekko didn't speak. Instead, she curled her fingers around the back of my head and kissed me while I brought my body over hers. For a long time, we continued to kiss.

Ekko's hands began to roam as she rolled her hips against me, seeking that friction. Wanting her to have what she needed, but wanting to be the one to give it to her, I tore my mouth from hers and began kissing my way down her body, urging the top she was wearing up over her head.

As she tossed it aside, I focused my attention back on her. My hands went to her breasts, my thumbs swiping across her nipples. A moan escaped from her, and her hips jerked up.

I smiled against her skin, my mouth moving toward one side until it eventually closed over one of her tits. I sucked it in deep, my tongue flicking over her nipple to tease her.

Ekko's fingernails scraped along my shoulder, eventually digging in hard. Even if she didn't use words to say what she liked, my wife always made it clear what she enjoyed.

After teasing her on one side, I moved to the other and did the same, the reaction from Ekko nearly identical.

As much as I knew she was enjoying what I was doing and would have likely been content for me to stay where I was for a while, I got to the point where I needed more of her.

So, I released her breast and continued my descent down her body. My hands made it to her hips, curled around the fabric of her underwear, and began pulling them down her legs.

Once they were gone, Ekko did exactly what I knew she would. She planted the bottoms of her feet in the bed, separated her thighs, and offered her pussy up to me. It was all mine for the taking.

And that's exactly what I did.

I could have taken my time and kissed up her legs to tease her—something I'd done on many occasions before—but I wasn't interested in doing that tonight. Ekko wasn't going to mind either way.

So, I buried my face between her legs, my tongue coming out to swipe through the wetness.

Fuck, I'd never get tired of the way she tasted. In fact, I'd found the more I had of her, the more I craved her. It could have been because I was addicted to the taste of her, but it could have also been that I was addicted to making her feel so good.

It was immediately clear I was making that happen, too.

Ekko's hands could no longer reach my shoulder, but they could reach down between her legs to my head. She didn't hesitate to hold me tight to her.

As I ate her pussy, Ekko continued to moan and squirm.

The more I flicked my tongue over her clit, the more she moved.

And when I reached one of my hands up, found her breast, and began teasing her nipple, her moans turned to whimpers.

Her breathing grew shallow, her hands held on tighter, and she began begging. "Dom, baby, please don't stop."

It was a rare occasion that I'd ever stop what I was doing when I was eating her. I never wouldn't satisfy her, and I'd always make sure she came before I did, but there had been an occasion or two when I didn't make it happen as quickly as she might have liked, because I wanted to play for a bit longer and keep her teetering on that edge.

But it was Christmas Eve, I was in a generous mood, and I still had plenty of time to play with her and build her up again another way.

So, I didn't stop.

In fact, I worked her harder. Faster.

She started panting, her hips struggling to move against me and, eventually, it happened.

Ekko cried out through her pleasure as her thighs tensed and trembled on either side of my head.

I worked her through her orgasm before I pulled away and came up on my knees. For a while, I stayed there, simply looking at her gorgeous body on display while she took the time she needed to regain control of her breathing.

One of my hands was resting on her leg, my fingertips gently stroking over her thigh. Right about the time I knew I couldn't wait any longer and was about to position myself to enter her, Ekko sat up in the bed.

She curled her fingers around my cock, her other hand resting on my hip. Then she looked up at me through hooded eyes as the tip of my cock was pressed against her lips.

Damn.

“That’s a sight I’ll have engrained in my mind until the day I die, sugar,” I revealed. “You, face flushed and looking gorgeous, with my cock about to enter that beautiful mouth. There’s nothing better in this world.”

Ekko cocked an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

I nodded, my hands clenching into fists at my sides.

She brushed her lips back and forth against the head. “So, you’re telling me if I part my lips and take you inside my mouth, that won’t be a better sight?”

My wife had me there.

“That’s not a bad thought. Maybe you could make that happen, so I can make a comparison.”

She didn’t hesitate. Her lips parted, and her tongue came out to swirl around the tip twice before she took as much of me in her mouth as she could. Then she lifted her gaze to mine once again.

Yep.

I’d been wrong.

This was much better.

“You win, Ekko. I prefer the sight and the feel of this.”

She pulled back, hollowing her cheeks as she went, and freed me from her mouth. My muscles were tense with anticipation, needing desperately to be back in her mouth.

“See, Dom? As your wife, I think I know exactly what you like even more than you do.”

Wanting to tease her while hopefully getting what I wanted, I cocked an eyebrow. “Is that so?” I asked, using the same words on her that she’d just used on me.

She tightened her grip on me and nodded.

“Then maybe you want to put me back in your mouth before we skip this altogether, and I wind up inside your pussy before you have a chance to play.”

A bit of panic washed over her expression, but it lasted mere seconds, because she got busy and took me in her mouth.

Fuck, she was good.

Ekko hadn't been wrong. As my wife, she'd made it her job to know exactly what I liked, and she didn't hesitate to deliver it.

Licking, sucking, and taking me in deep, she gave me everything I wanted and more. And the best part about all of it was hearing the excitement she had for doing what she was doing.

Eventually, it got to the point when I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I dragged my hips back, pulling myself from her mouth.

Ekko knew precisely what that meant, and she immediately asked, “How do you want me?”

“On your belly,” I urged her.

She shifted her body and settled herself on her belly. I straddled her with my thighs, my palms coming to rest lightly on her ass as I leaned forward and kissed the skin on her upper back and shoulders.

Bringing my mouth to her ear, I whispered, “Put your hand between your legs and touch yourself, sugar.”

Ekko instantly complied with my request, lifting her hips slightly and slipping her hand beneath her body.

Once she'd done that, I lifted my torso and allowed my eyes to rake down the entire backside of her body.

I squeezed her ass once more, causing her to lift her hips just a touch higher. I brought a couple fingers between her legs, confirmed she was ready, and positioned myself. Then I slid inside.

For three or four strokes, I moved slowly, wanting to relish in the feel of how warm, wet, and tight she was. But I was a man who could only show so much restraint when it came to her, especially when I was watching my cock disappear into her over and over again. It wasn't long before I lost control.

“Fuck, Ekko, you feel unbelievable.”

“Baby, give me more,” she begged, her hand still working between her legs.

I grinned.

Then I got to work.

As I began to increase my pace, my hands gripped her ass cheeks firmly. But when she pleaded with me to give it to her harder, I pressed my palms to the mattress on either side of her ribs and drove in harder.

The sound of our bodies slapping together might have been enough on its own to take me where I intended to go. But because this was Ekko, it wasn't all I got.

Not only did I get to listen to her moaning with pleasure after each thrust, but I also got what she was giving at a deeper angle when she managed to arch her back slightly and lift her hips higher.

The feel of her, the sounds surrounding us, and ultimately, the love I felt for her made it impossible to hold myself back. Fortunately, it was the same for Ekko.

“I'm going to come again.”

That was all I needed. I drove in harder and didn't relent. Within seconds, she was coming, forcing me to do the same. Keeping one hand pressed firmly into the mattress, I brought the other back to grip her hip as I worked us both through it.

When it left us, and I rested my weight on my forearms on either side of her body, she sighed. “I don't think I can move.”

I pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder, laughed, and replied, “I'll get something and clean you up.”

“It's okay. I can do it.”

“Are you sure?”

“You gave me all that, Dom. I can at least do this.”

“I’m not done giving to you, Ekko. Don’t forget it’s Christmas tomorrow.”

Her cheek was pressed into the mattress, but I saw the smile form on her face as a shiver ran down her spine. “Merry Christmas to me.”

I laughed again, kissed her once more, and finally pulled out of her.

Then she got up to get herself cleaned up.

She barely made it back to the bed before we started working ourselves up to another round.

What could I say?

It was Christmas.

And if ever there was a time to be generous, this was it.

SEVENTEEN

Jolie

It was building.

Slowly but surely, it was happening.

Then again, considering I was the one in charge now, it came as no surprise this was a slow process. If Lorenzo had taken the lead, he'd have already delivered multiple orgasms, and he'd probably have done it without even breaking a sweat.

I wasn't so lucky or talented.

But I was enthusiastic and determined.

It was very early in the morning on Christmas Day, and after I'd gotten up to use the bathroom and came back to bed, I couldn't fall asleep again. So, I decided to give Lorenzo an early Christmas present. I had at least a dozen downstairs under the tree for him, but I knew this was the one he'd like the most.

So, with my pregnant belly, I climbed on top of my husband and started peppering kisses across his chest and up toward his mouth. He quickly stirred, realized what was happening, and didn't hesitate to use his mouth and hands on my body.

Lorenzo was so good at what he was doing that before I even realized what was happening, I was reaching down between my legs to position him.

But the moment he was inside me, there was no mistaking what was happening. I got to work.

Of course, Lorenzo wasn't the kind of man who could just sit back and do nothing while I did everything. He had to be involved; he had to put forth some effort.

As much as I wanted to give this to him, I couldn't say I didn't appreciate what he did for me.

Because there was nothing better. I loved the feeling of having his hands on me, touching my thighs, my breasts, or my ass. I also loved the feeling of having his mouth on me, kissing my mouth, my neck, or my breasts.

This morning, Lorenzo had done all of that while I rode him, eager to deliver something he'd be thinking about throughout the day, something he'd desperately want to have again by the time we wound up back in this bed tonight.

“Jesus, baby, you're unbelievable.”

I smiled, feeling proud of myself for being able to make him feel so good. I still had some time left before this baby was going to be here, but there was no question I wasn't as mobile now as I was three or four months ago. Knowing my slower pace wasn't preventing him from getting the enjoyment he deserved to get out of it was a relief.

That was mostly because, as I'd already noted, it was building.

For me.

And it was becoming harder and harder to stave it off.

“Boss,” I moaned, the pace of my hips starting to increase as I edged closer and closer to that point of no return. “You feel so good.”

Lorenzo groaned, lifted his head from the pillow to my breasts, and captured a nipple in his mouth. He sucked it in deep before flicking his tongue over it.

I pressed my palms firmly into his chest, my nails beginning to dig into the skin. “Oh, God.”

Lorenzo continued to lavish my breasts with attention while something else took hold of me. He immediately recognized what was happening, and he didn't hesitate to take

over. Since there were only so many positions that worked for me at this stage in the pregnancy now, Lorenzo didn't attempt to move me or change position.

He merely brought his hands to my hips and helped me to continue the movement. It was just what I needed, what we both needed.

Given that it was so early in the morning, there was no light filtering into the room. While my eyes had adjusted a bit in the darkness, I had mostly been relying on my other senses. And when it came to being with Lorenzo like this, I had learned a long time ago that I didn't need to see to enjoy what was happening.

The man made me feel everything. With his hands, his mouth, and his heart.

I continued to climb higher, my breathing grew shallow, and the next thing I knew, I was coming apart on top of him. Tremors shot through my body, every muscle tensing and trembling. Wave after wave of pleasure pulsed through me, and when I felt Lorenzo's fingers grip my hips tighter, I knew he was experiencing the same.

Once it left me, I stayed where I was, my head dropping back as I attempted to regain control of my breathing. Lorenzo's hands stroked over my body—one on my thigh and the other coming up between my breasts.

"Merry Christmas, baby," Lorenzo said softly.

My head dropped forward, and I gave my eyes a second to adjust enough to make out his features. I smiled and returned quietly, "Merry Christmas, boss."

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked.

"Yes. I woke up to pee, but then I couldn't fall back asleep. I figured I'd give you an early present."

I felt his body vibrate beneath mine with his laughter. "It's already turning out to be the best day."

Mission accomplished. That was exactly what I'd wanted.

“I think I’d like to doze off again for just a bit longer, if you’re up for it. At least until the girls are up.”

“I’ll give you anything you want or need, Jolie.”

“That’s good, because right now, I kind of need you to help me get up off of you,” I retorted. “My hips feel like they are stuck.”

Lorenzo returned his hands to my hips as he sat up in the bed, and he gave them several gentle squeezes to get the blood flowing. While he did that, he didn’t hesitate to kiss me.

Once he’d had his fill, he helped me to shift my body up and over his.

The two of us got ourselves cleaned up before we climbed back into bed, curled up with one another, and dozed off again.

It felt like I’d only been sleeping for five minutes when I woke up again. Peeling my eyes open, I realized it had been much longer than five minutes, considering the amount of light filtering into the room.

But feeling tired lasted all of a few seconds, and I was grateful for the light. Because my girls had just entered my bedroom, Dani leading the charge, and Ollie bounding along behind them.

Apparently, Dani had woken her sister up and helped Harlow out of bed, so they could do the same with Lorenzo and me.

“Mommy! Daddy! It’s Christmas,” Dani declared, racing toward the bed.

She climbed up, and I gave her a hug and a kiss. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.”

As Harlow made her way to my side of the bed, Dani climbed over to get to her dad. He was her absolute favorite, and their relationship simply melted my heart. “Merry Christmas, sweet pea,” he said, engulfing her in his arms and giving her a kiss.

“Merry Christmas, Daddy.”

Harlow finally made it to the bed, reaching out for me. I lifted my baby into my arms and pulled her close, showering her with love and kisses. With Dani still in his arms, Lorenzo sat up slightly, leaned my way, and planted a kiss on Harlow’s chubby cheek. “Merry Christmas, peanut.”

More heart melting ensued.

There was something about hearing the man I loved calling his daughters by the nicknames he’d given them.

Ollie had been a true gentleman, not daring to hop up into the bed until Dani and Harlow had gotten their Christmas morning hugs and kisses. But once they’d gotten that, all bets were off, and he was demanding a bunch of love, too.

“Do you think Santa came?” Dani asked us after we’re showered Ollie with cuddles and scratches.

“I’m sure he did,” I answered. “I mean, you were a good girl all year, right?”

She sat up straight and returned proudly, “Yep. Harlow was, too.”

“Then Santa definitely came last night,” Lorenzo assured her.

If Dani had any doubt lingering after I’d answered her question about whether Santa had visited, it was gone once she had her dad’s reassurance. She trusted him implicitly, believing anything he told her. And Lorenzo was smart to never let her down, either. If he told her something, he made sure it had either happened or would happen.

“It’s snowing.”

Harlow’s sweet voice pulled my attention away from Dani. “Snowing? Did you see snow outside?”

My baby nodded her head with a smile on her face as her sister explained, “We looked out the window in Harlow’s room. There’s a lot of snow.”

I turned my attention to Lorenzo. “Looks like we’re having a white Christmas.”

He smiled back at me. “It looks that way.”

“Can we go see what Santa brought us?” Dani asked, her excitement palpable.

“You mean you don’t want to just cuddle in bed all day long?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “No. We have to open presents.”

“Presents!”

At Harlow’s single word declaration, I sighed. “Who would have thought both my daughters would be bossy like their daddy? I guess it’s time to open presents. But first, Harlow needs her diaper changed, and you need to use the potty.”

Dani scrambled off the bed and ran into our bathroom as Lorenzo lifted Harlow out of my arms and started moving toward the door with Ollie on his heels. “I’ll take care of getting her changed.”

“Thanks.”

By the time I maneuvered myself out of the bed, Dani came running out of the bathroom. “I’m ready.”

“Okay, baby girl. Mommy just needs some pants,” I said as I crossed the room to snatch up my favorite pair of sweats.

Once I pulled them up my legs, Dani and I walked out of the bedroom and found Lorenzo walking out with Harlow in his arms.

His eyes connected with mine, and he smiled at me before he shifted his attention to Dani and asked, “Ready?”

“Yes. I can’t wait!”

“Let’s go,” he urged her, reaching his hand out for hers.

Dani immediately moved toward him and took his hand. Then Lorenzo returned his focus to me and jerked his head toward the stairs. “You go ahead of us.”

I appreciated Lorenzo's forethought to have me descend the stairs ahead of them. I could still move okay, but there wasn't a doubt that Dani would take off running the minute she got off the last step. He didn't want me to miss her reaction.

Wanting to keep up appearances and build the excitement for them, as soon as I stepped into the family room, I marveled, "Wow. Oh my goodness, wait until you see this."

My oldest daughter's excited giggles filled the air, forcing a permanent smile on my face. When they entered the room, Dani came to an abrupt halt, and her eyes widened. Harlow started wiggling in her dad's arms, so he placed her down on her feet.

"Harlow, look at all of the presents," Dani said, disbelief laced through her tone.

While Dani remained rooted to the spot, Harlow pushed forward, interested in inspecting the mountain of gifts.

"Girls, look at your stockings," Lorenzo advised.

Both of our daughters turned their attention to the fireplace, where their stockings were hung and filled with presents.

Dani turned around to face us and asked, "Can we open everything?"

I tipped my head to the side and said, "You can only open the ones with your name on them. Daddy will get your stocking down for you, and the two of you can start with those. I'm just going to grab a quick snack, because your brother isn't interested in presents right now. He's hungry."

"Okay."

I snuck off and popped a piece of bread in the toaster. When it popped up, I slathered some cream cheese on it and quickly returned to the family room.

"She's back, Daddy. Can we open them now?"

Lorenzo gave her a nod. "You sure can, sweet pea. Harlow, can you do it, or do you need help?"

Harlow didn't answer with words. She made note of what her sister was doing and worked to do the same. In the time it took her to open one gift, Dani had unwrapped three.

Seated on the floor, Lorenzo and I watched as our girls opened all of their gifts. It felt like it was hours later by the time they'd gotten through all of them. We could no longer see our floor with the amount of wrapping paper strewn everywhere.

The mess didn't bother me at all.

The girls were ecstatic, delighted with everything they got. And they didn't hesitate to show their appreciation, either. I could admit we spoiled our daughters, but that didn't mean they weren't taught to appreciate everything they were given.

For a little while after the gifts had been opened, the girls went through their new things and inspected them all more closely. In several instances, they brought a box over to their dad and asked him to open something up for them. When he wasn't doing that, he had his arm wrapped around my shoulders, the two of us leaning our backs against the couch, and he was either kissing my temple or laughing at something one of the girls said or did.

Ollie had several new squeaky toys to play with, and he'd kept himself entertained for a while, but eventually, the excitement became too much, and he went to take a nap, carrying one of his favorite new toys with him.

A little while after that, I said, "I'm going to get up and make breakfast."

"Do you want me to help?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. You stay here with them, because I'm sure they're going to want or need more help with something. I'll bring in a garbage bag for you to work on the wrapping paper mess here, though."

He let out a laugh. "Sounds good."

I stood and made my way to the kitchen to start breakfast. I made my family some eggs and breakfast potatoes, and for a

special treat, I pulled out the glazed blueberry doughnut muffins I'd made during the day yesterday.

About forty minutes after I'd left them in the midst of Christmas morning chaos, I called my family out to eat. We enjoyed breakfast together, the girls—namely Dani—talking about their favorite gifts.

Lorenzo cleaned up from breakfast, giving me a chance to relax, and after enjoying having a slow morning with the girls, we went upstairs to get ourselves ready for our day. I came from a big family, so we had a lot of people to visit with today. Plus, we had to visit with Lorenzo's family, too. Fortunately, we'd worked it out that we'd do lunch with my family, and dinner with his.

While Lorenzo got himself dressed and loaded up the car with all of the gifts we had for our nieces, nephews, parents, and siblings, I got myself and the girls dressed.

By the time we got ourselves back downstairs, Lorenzo had just walked in from the garage.

“Daddy, look at my dress!” Dani squealed excitedly.

Just like he'd told me she'd do, Dani twirled around in her dress to show it off to her dad. He crouched down, kissed her on the cheek, and said, “You look beautiful, sweet pea.”

“Look, Daddy,” Harlow said.

She started twirling just like her sister had done, but she wasn't as steady doing it.

“Come here, peanut,” Lorenzo urged her, reaching his hands out to pull her in for a hug. “You're beautiful, too.”

“What about Mommy?” Dani asked.

Lorenzo lifted his gaze to me, and I spun around in my dress for him. He stood, moved toward me, and slid his arms around me. “You look beautiful.”

I grinned at him. “Thanks, boss.”

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

I nodded. “I just need to grab the bag I packed for the girls. I brought some extra clothes and snow stuff, in case they wind up outside at one of these houses today.”

“I’ll get on it. How about the three of you get in the car?”

“Come on, Ollie,” Dani said, not needing any additional instruction from me.

At that, the girls and I, along with our dog, made our way out to the car. Lorenzo joined us not more than a minute later, and he took over getting Harlow strapped into her seat.

Two minutes later, we’d pulled out of the garage and were on our way for a fun-filled day with our families.

Lorenzo reached across the center console, took hold of my hand, and gave me a squeeze. “It’s been a great Christmas already, Jolie.”

Nodding, I confirmed, “It has.”

“Next year is going to be even better when he’s here.”

I brought my free hand to rest on my belly. “Yeah, it is. I can’t wait to meet our little guy. I wonder who he’s going to take after.”

“I think he’ll be the perfect combination of the both of us,” Lorenzo replied. “The girls are.”

They were.

Our girls were perfect, and it was because they had the best parts of the both of us in them.

And on a day like today, when I’d noted just a few hours earlier how appreciative our girls were for everything they’d gotten for Christmas, I thought it was only fitting for me to do the same.

“Thank you for giving me this life, Lorenzo.”

His fingers tightened around mine. “Baby, you made it impossible for me to not want to give you the world. That’s the way it is, because you give me everything just by being you.”

“After all these years, it still feels perfect. Every day with you and our girls is everything I ever wanted, but it’s so far beyond anything I could have ever imagined. I know that probably doesn’t make any sense, but in my head, it does.”

Lorenzo lifted our clasped hands to his mouth, kissed my knuckles, and replied quietly, “It makes perfect sense.”

“Mommy?” Dani interrupted.

“Yes, baby girl?”

“Can you put Christmas music on the radio?” she asked.

The corners of my mouth tipped up in a smile. “Of course.”

Less than thirty seconds later, music filled the cabin of the vehicle. And with it came another question from our daughter. “You wouldn’t ever kiss Santa like in the song, would you, Mom?”

I looked over at Lorenzo, who’d momentarily taken his eyes off the road to glance at me. My husband’s lips twitched.

Oh, I’d absolutely kiss Santa. The problem was, I couldn’t tell my daughter that.

“Only Daddy, Dani. I’m only going to kiss Daddy.”

Relief swept through her. “That’s good.”

For the rest of the car ride to my parents’ house, we listened to Christmas music as we took in the sight of the freshly fallen snow. Lorenzo took it slow, getting us there safely.

From the moment we stepped through the front door, our day together was one filled with so much love and laughter. Sure, there were gifts, but it was the people we were with that made it all so special.

It really was the best Christmas ever.

And by the time we got home and were all in our beds, exhausted from the day’s excitement, I could admit I was already looking forward to what next Christmas would bring.

EIGHTEEN

Holden

It had been the best day.

There was so much that made it that way, too. Waking up with my wife in my arms, and our kids running into our room beyond excited about the day ahead not long after, was just the beginning.

What followed was more than I could ever put into words. The squeals of delight, the laughter, the smiles, the conversations, the family, the food, the desserts, the music. Even the weather. It had started snowing late last night, and we woke up to several inches blanketing the landscape.

Christmas was everything this year. Everything and more.

Then again, I could recall thinking the same thing last year, too, so perhaps it was just the way of it. Maybe I was sitting here trying to come up with a list of all the things that made it special when how I felt was merely an indication every moment I had with my family would always get better and better, that I'd never have any reason to feel disappointed, as long as I was with them.

Sometimes, I still couldn't believe it.

I never imagined my life would ever become what it did. For so long, I'd resolved myself to the fact that I didn't want this. God, I didn't know who I'd been trying to fool.

It would have been the biggest mistake of my life to not work things out with Leni all those years ago.

Because she'd given me everything I wanted and all that I didn't even know I needed when she handed her heart over to me. But I not only got her, because I also got our kids. I got a family. Even Audrey was part of it.

I loved all of them.

And they were just a part of what I had. They were obviously the biggest and best part of it all for me, but I was blessed with even more.

Sitting here in our home, watching what was happening in front of me, after a day of celebrating with Leni, our kids, Audrey, my parents, my brother, his wife, and their kids, I truly believed I had it all.

I'd unwrapped several gifts from my family today, and while everything I'd been given was appreciated, the truth was that it all just felt like a bonus. There was nothing that would compare to having Leni and our babies.

Nothing.

And despite how busy the day had been, my wife still hadn't stopped. It was late, just past the kids' usual bedtime, and she wasn't ready for the day to end.

I didn't care.

It wasn't as though the kids had to get up early for school tomorrow. And nobody was heading into work.

So, as long as I could sit here and watch them do what they were doing, being as happy as they were while doing it, I'd stay awake all night long.

We'd hosted Christmas this year, and my parents, my brother, my sister-in-law, and my niece and nephews had left not that long ago. Audrey had stayed up later than she usually did, so it was no surprise she'd called it a night about thirty minutes ago.

Though the kids had woken up early—their excitement over getting the day started and seeing what Santa had brought them too much to tame—they were just as eager as their mom was to continue with the holiday festivities. Of course, that

could have also been the result of having one too many Christmas cookies.

“Oh, this is a great one,” Leni bubbled, finally finding what she’d been looking for.

The next thing I knew, the sound of another upbeat Christmas song filled the air around us. Leni started dancing in the middle of the room, and the kids didn’t hesitate to join in.

Even Garrett.

My girls took dance classes, so I expected they’d have no issues jumping in to dance whenever there was music playing. They were so much like their mom when it came to craving movement.

They all were.

But seeing Garrett move close to his mom and reach out for her hand to dance with her affected me in a way I hadn’t been prepared for, no matter how many times I’d witnessed it. The sight always caught me off guard and forced something to tighten in my chest.

Because the way Garrett was with Leni reminded me so much of the relationship I’d had with Eva, the woman my father married long after my biological mother left us. Eva became my mom—better than any mom I could have dreamt up—and she always used to dance with me when I was younger.

Hell, if there was a special occasion now where there was music playing, Eva still expected at least one dance with me. Fortunately, my wife didn’t mind at all. In fact, it was one of those things she just enjoyed watching. In the beginning, I think it simply warmed her heart to see the relationship I had with my mom. Now, I think it served to mirror the relationship she had with Garrett, and she’d never want anyone to take that away from her, no matter how old he got.

At first, I wasn’t quite sure I’d ever understand why Leni liked watching me dance with Eva, but then I did.

Because when I saw Leni dancing with our kids for the first time, years ago, I finally understood.

For a long while, I sat there, watching, with a smile on my face. Everyone was happy. My wife, my kids. Me.

“Daddy!” Everly squeaked. “Can you dance with me, too?”

I’d never turn her down. I’d never turn any of them down.

A long time ago, I’d learned what happened when I denied myself and didn’t give in to doing the things that felt good. It was one of the biggest lessons of my life, one I’d never forget, and I’d never put myself in that position again.

Plus, in this case, there wasn’t anything that would ever stop me from dancing with my kids, especially my daughters. Where Leni could have that special bond with Garrett in a situation like this, I had it with my girls.

So, I stood and lifted Everly in my arms, pulling her close to my chest, before I started spinning around the room with her. Her little arms came around my neck, and she laughed in my ear, the sound making something in my chest swell.

I wasn’t sure there was anything better than the sound of my children laughing and being happy.

Audrina had been content dancing close to me, but as soon as I held my hand out to her, she took it and started spinning. It took a good time for her and turned it into a great time.

I watched her for a bit, loving the sight of the smile on my oldest girl’s face, but I eventually lifted my gaze across the room. My eyes locked on Leni’s, and hers were positively radiant. She was having a blast, and there was no question she loved the fact we were all dancing with each other right before bed on Christmas Day.

It was easily the best way to end what had been an incredible day. If I had my way, we’d do this with each other day in and day out. It would always be like this.

Unfortunately, I still had to work. And while it was something I was honored to do, loving that I could take care of my family and provide for them, there were moments like this when I never wanted to walk out the door and miss a single second with them.

For now, I'd count my blessings when it came to work. I'd be grateful I had such a wonderful team at work and that they were all excellent at what they did. And I'd be thankful we'd worked together to solve a case that was poised to impact our time with our families on a day like today. Work, especially when it was on a case like the one the Cunningham Security team had recently solved, served to make me appreciate the uninterrupted time I had with Leni, Audrina, Garrett, and Everly.

One Christmas song rolled into another, and the five of us didn't stop. We must have danced through five or six songs together before Leni declared, "Okay, this is the last one. Then it's time for bed."

The kids groaned their displeasure.

"We're not tired yet," Garrett said.

"Yeah, we're not tired," Everly insisted.

"Do you remember everything Santa brought you today?" I asked them.

All three kids gave me a nod.

"Tomorrow is the perfect day for being able to enjoy all of those things. If you want to do that, you've got to get to bed tonight," I explained.

"Okay," Audrina replied.

I expected as much from her. She never attempted to make things difficult for us, and Leni and I knew just how lucky we were. Of course, we also wondered if that would change as she got older. Would she wind up giving us a run for our money once she was a teenager? I shuddered at the thought and was simply glad for her being exactly who she was right now.

As Leni promised, we gave the kids one more song, one more dance. Then we were ushering them up the stairs and handling their bedtime routine.

Audrina and Garrett each had their own bathroom, so they hopped in their respective showers. Everly's room didn't have its own bathroom, but there was one in the hallway just

outside her room, so Leni took her in there for her bath. While Leni did that, I took care of pulling out pajamas for Everly and cleaning up the kids' rooms. Having their cousins over today, I wasn't surprised to find they'd left some things strewn all over their rooms. Generally, the kids were good about keeping their rooms picked up, but a day like today required a bit of grace.

Eventually, Leni and I were moving between the three bedrooms to say goodnight to each of our kids. It was one of my favorite parts of any day for two reasons. Not only did it mean that there was some time alone with Leni ahead for me, but I also enjoyed being able to have those few quiet moments with my children to ask them about how their day had been. Even on Christmas, I always thought it was important to be sure they had that time alone with me to talk about anything on their minds.

As I walked out of Audrina's room, having already talked with Everly and Garrett, and Leni came out of Garrett's room, having already talked to Audrina and Everly, the two of us smiled at one another.

Then I moved to her, took her by the hand, and said, "Come with me."

Leni's brows pulled together at my request, but she didn't hesitate to allow me to lead her back down the stairs.

Once we were there, I put on a slow Christmas song, turned the volume down to not disturb the kids, and brought my attention to my wife. Smiling, I walked toward her, closing the distance between us, and ultimately slipped my arm around her waist to pull her close.

For the first few minutes, the two of us moved together to the music without saying a word. The looks on our faces already said everything we felt in our hearts.

But after a while, I realized I didn't want there to be any question about it. I wanted Leni to know exactly how I was feeling.

"It was a great day today," I told her.

Smiling back at me, she replied, "Yeah. It was the best."

“The kids are so lucky to have you.”

Leni tipped her head to the side and assessed me. “They’re just as lucky to have you.”

Nodding, I replied, “I know. But it’s different with you. Everything that happened today was all because of you. The food, the decorations, the presents, and the holiday spirit in general. None of it would have happened if it hadn’t been for you.”

“I can only do what I do because you do what you do, Holden,” she reasoned. “We’re a team.”

I pressed a kiss to her cheek before I said, “I understand, but I still think you deserve a medal or two for everything you do to make a day like today everything that it was for our kids, our family, and us.”

She let out a soft laugh. “I don’t need any medals. I’ve got everything I need sleeping upstairs in their beds and holding me in his arms right now.”

“It’s crazy, isn’t it?” I asked.

“What?”

I shrugged. “Everyone goes crazy leading up to today. We’re all busy working and buying presents and doing all of these things to make sure it’s perfect for the people we love, and the truth of the matter is that when it all boils down, it’s what we had tonight that was the greatest gift of all.”

Leni’s expression warmed as her features softened. “Dancing together.”

I offered a slight nod. “Even the kids get it. They could have been ripping open every box and playing with the new things they got, but they weren’t. In fact, I believe they were far happier dancing with us than they would have been doing anything else.”

Leni’s body relaxed and melted even deeper into mine. I happily took her weight and continued to sway with her to the music. After a while, she said, “I think we’re doing good, Holden.”

“What do you mean?”

“With our kids. They’re really great kids, and I don’t think I would have ever wanted to raise a family with anyone else.”

My arms tightened around her. “Sweetheart, I realize the day hasn’t ended yet, but you don’t have to keep giving me gifts.”

She tipped her chin up, smiled, and replied, “I wasn’t trying to give you a gift.”

“That’s just it. You’re so good at it, I constantly feel like I’m being rewarded without you even intending to do it. And the truth is, you’re the one who deserves the rewards.”

“I think we should agree to disagree on that one.”

I offered her a nod and a smile. It wasn’t worth it to upset her by arguing about something like this, especially not after a day like we’d had today.

When the song ended and rolled into another holiday tune with a slower pace, Leni and I continued to dance.

But after that one ended, I turned off the music and asked, “How about you let me take you upstairs, so I can give you one last gift?”

“You want to give me one more gift?” she countered.

“If I’m honest, it’s going to be more than one.”

The look in her eyes gave me all the confirmation I needed that Leni was more than willing to receive any gifts I had for her. So, after we turned out the lights and locked up the house, Leni and I climbed the stairs and moved to our bedroom.

I gave my wife her first gift when we stepped into the shower together, and I gave her two more after we’d gotten out.

But because she was who she was, Leni made sure she wasn’t the only one who was on the receiving end.

And by the time I had her in my arms again before we drifted off to sleep, I allowed the events from the day to replay in my mind once more.

Feeling good, looking forward to what the next week off with her and our kids would bring, I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

It didn't take long for the two of us to start to drift off, both of us feeling blessed for all that we had and everything that was to come.

We'd been through some horrific things in our lives together, but there was nothing quite like the holidays, especially Christmas, to offer us perspective and a moment to be grateful for what we had that would never fit into a box.

Love.

With one final squeeze, I whispered, “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

Leni's voice was so soft and sweet when she replied, “Merry Christmas.”

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading Unwrapped. I hope you enjoyed catching up with the Cunningham Security team for the holiday season.

If you're looking for more holiday fun, turn the page for a preview of Naughty Heart, the prequel novel to my upcoming family series, The Westwoods, releasing January 1, 2024.

PREVIEW OF NAUGHTY HEART

Chapter 1

Malcolm

Holly? Jolly?

This was not the time to be struggling with names.

At the feel of the whisper-soft touch of kisses being peppered across my chest, I did my best to recall any bit of the conversation I'd had last night. I couldn't remember her name.

Did it even matter, though?

Christmas was coming. It was the season of giving, and Eve seemed interested in being generous.

Eve wasn't her name, either.

Damn it. Why was it that the only thing I could remember about this woman was that she had a name which reminded me of Christmas?

Her hands joined in the mix, and I decided it was time to focus on other things, more important things than just her name.

Like, for example, the fact that her hands had drifted down my torso and abdomen, the ultimate destination unmistakable.

Mary? It had to be *Mary*.

Or was it *Carol*?

Just as she started to take a journey with her mouth farther south, a forceful knock came at the door.

I could ignore it.

Candy was.

Candy. Like candy cane. That had to be it.

“We’ll come back later.”

“I’m not coming back later, Larry. We’re doing this now.”

At the sound of my parents’ voices outside the door of my studio loft, all the work the girl with the Christmas-themed name had done, which hadn’t been a whole lot, was shot to hell.

If there had been a chance of her working me up enough for us to go a round or two this morning, that opportunity had vanished now.

“Maybe he spent the night out, Wendy,” my dad suggested.

“Oh, I have no doubt he was out last night, but I’m certain he came home. Where would he stay?” my mother countered, clearly not thinking it was possible for me to be anywhere but where I was.

My dad hesitated for just a moment before he advised, “Don’t make me answer that question, dear. You won’t like my response.”

Mom gasped. “Ugh, that’s horrible, Larry. I can’t even believe you’d suggest that.”

I had to fight back the laughter threatening to spill out of me. My dad was typically the disciplinary parent in the house growing up, but it seemed ever since I’d graduated from college a couple of years ago, those roles had been reversed.

Dad realized I was an adult and that I could make my own decisions. Of course, he had his opinion on things, but there seemed to be a line he wouldn’t cross. No doubt he knew precisely what was happening here.

Mom, on the other hand, was either willfully oblivious and just didn’t care what she was setting herself up for, or she still believed she could whip me into shape.

“I don’t know why that surprises you. You know how he is. It’s the whole reason we’re here this morning.”

“Yeah. I know it’s how he is, but hopefully that’s going to stop today.”

So, it was definitely the latter for my mom. She thought she could whip me into shape, even if there was a bit of fear lingering there that she might not like what she’d see when I opened that door.

Unwilling to allow this to continue, since there wasn’t a chance of anything fun happening now, I gave Joy a tap on her shoulder and said, “Okay, it’s time to go.”

She lifted her head up, brought her stunned eyes to mine, and whined, “But we didn’t even have breakfast yet.”

I shot her a sympathetic look. “Sorry. It’s not going to happen this morning.”

Without waiting for a response, I did an ab curl to sit up and curled my fingers around her shoulders to move her off to the side.

“You’re serious?” She sounded wounded.

There were three loud raps on the door.

Jerking my head in that direction, I explained, “My parents are here for a family meeting, so we’re going to have to postpone the breakfast date to another time.”

“He’s not here, Wendy.”

“He is, Larry.” My mother refused to be denied, and she proved that when her voice carried loudly into the space. “Malcolm Westwood, if you don’t open this door right now, I’m calling a locksmith, and I don’t care if you think you’ll want to have me arrested for trespassing. I’ll happily go in handcuffs, but I won’t be leaving here without talking to you first.”

I rolled my eyes. I could just imagine her making a megaphone with her hands and holding them up to the door, as though she believed I hadn’t heard the knocking or their conversation.

Even more amusing was that it would be Wendy Westwood who would have no problem being arrested just

days after the Thanksgiving holiday, all because she wanted to have a talk with her son.

The Christmas-themed cutie, who was naked beneath the blanket, finally seemed to grasp the seriousness of the situation and sprang out of the bed to gather up her clothes and throw them on her body haphazardly.

I grinned.

Maybe Mom and Dad's unexpected visit this morning was a good thing. At least I wouldn't have to have a conversation with a woman whose name I couldn't remember.

I wasn't proud of myself, but it wasn't like she didn't know the stakes going into things last night.

Deciding it was best to put them out of their misery, I pulled on a pair of sweats and yelled out, "I'll be right there. Give me a minute."

"I told you he was in there," my mom hissed.

"And you're not going to like what you see once he opens the door," my dad warned her.

It was all I could do not to burst out laughing.

After snagging up a shirt, I began descending the stairs of the loft and moved toward the door. The entire space was open, so once anyone stepped inside, they could see the kitchen, the living room, or anyone who happened to be standing up near my bed.

The moment I yanked open the door, my mom took in the sight of me and narrowed her eyes. "For crying out loud, Malcolm, it's freezing outside. Put on a shirt."

She stepped inside and moved past me. I foolishly thought it was wise to correct her. "I believe it's thirty-six degrees out, so technically, it's not freezing. Plus, as you'll note, I'm inside, where I don't necessarily need to be concerned with the temperature outdoors."

"This is not the time to be smart with me."

"You're right. I'm sorry, Mom. Good morning."

I walked over, giving her a kiss on the cheek in an attempt to use my charm and warm her up. Then I pulled on my shirt.

A moment later, there was the distinct sound of footsteps on the stairs. Both of my parents looked in that direction.

“Oh my God,” my mom mumbled under her breath. Displeased wasn’t even the right word for how she felt.

“I tried to warn you,” my dad felt compelled to point out.

Her eyes cut to his, forcing him to take a step back. My dad was as tough as they came, but there was one person on this earth who terrified him.

His wife.

“Mr. and Mrs. Westwood, I’m so sorry to interrupt your plans. I didn’t know you had a family gathering this morning. I’m Noelle.”

Noelle.

I knew I wasn’t crazy. She had a Christmas name.

Noelle closed the distance between herself and my parents, extending her hand to them. My dad was pleasant and happily shook it. Even though she did the same, my mom looked like she was being poisoned.

After introducing herself to my parents, Noelle turned her attention to me.

I offered a half-hearted smile and said, “I’ll give you a call.”

She beamed at me. “I left my number next to the bed.”

Right.

I was going to need that if I planned to contact her. Of course, I wasn’t convinced I intended to do that.

I walked Noelle to the door, and the second I closed it behind her, my mom sighed, “Larry, you better start, because I’m not sure I can do it without losing my mind.”

My brows pulled together. “Start? Start what?”

My dad sighed. “We need to have a talk, Malcolm.”

“Well, my plans for this morning just walked out the door, so I’ve got the rest of the day. What do you want to talk about?”

“Your ridiculous behavior,” my mom exclaimed.

So much for not losing her mind.

“What your mother is trying to say is that we’ve had a discussion about you and the way you’ve been acting for the last few years, and we need to see an improvement,” my dad explained.

I shot them a questioning look and threw my hands up as I shrugged. “An improvement in my behavior?” I headed toward the kitchen to grab a glass of water. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I’m an adult.”

“And you’re acting like a spoiled child. What are you even doing with yourself?”

“I’m just having a good time, Mom,” I reasoned. “I go to work and do my job. It’s the week after Thanksgiving, and I’m enjoying a few days off. I don’t think there’s any harm in that.” Grabbing a glass out of the cabinet for myself, I asked, “Do you want anything to drink?”

My parents shook their heads, and it was my dad who spoke. “We’re not here to socialize with you, son. This is serious.”

“What do you mean? I’m technically on vacation right now.”

“And if you don’t shape up soon, it’s going to turn into a permanent one,” my mother warned me.

I narrowed my eyes, quickly realizing this wasn’t just some friendly visit. Of course, I suspected my parents had something they wanted to discuss with me, but it wasn’t until this very moment that I recognized how serious this was. “I don’t want to jump to conclusions here, but are you telling me that I’m in trouble for taking a few days off? I worked right up until the Thanksgiving holiday. Am I not entitled to a few days off?”

“Oh, please, Malcolm. You do just enough at work to appear busy. That’s not going to cut it any longer.”

I downed half the glass of water I’d poured myself, set the cup down, and crossed my arms over my chest. “What’s going on?”

“We are trying to run a successful business. We want to have a legacy to leave behind,” my dad declared.

I already knew this. “What makes you think that you aren’t?”

He shook his head. “We are. We know we are. The problem is that we thought you were the one who was going to take the reins, eventually.”

I didn’t like the turn this was taking. “Was?”

The silenced stretched between us. This was far more serious than I had anticipated.

“You graduated from college four years ago, and it’s like you think you’re living in a frat house,” my mom sighed, throwing her hand out toward the stairs that led to the loft. “I mean, what’s with the random women?”

“I didn’t know my sex life was a concern when it came to the company.”

Shaking her head, disappointment was written all over her.

My father walked over, clapped me on the shoulder, and urged, “Malcolm, let’s go have a seat. We have some things we want to talk to you about.”

I wanted to say I was too fired up to talk, but I decided against it. The priority at this point was to hear what they had to say, because I was certain I hadn’t yet heard the worst of it.

Snatching my glass up off the counter, I walked out of the kitchen and to one of the chairs in the living area. My parents took the couch.

“You have an incredible opportunity in front of you, son,” my dad began. “I can’t even imagine what so many of the kids you graduated with would have done with what you got upon

graduation. You're just one notch shy of being the man who takes over this company, and you're risking it for nothing."

"I don't think I'm risking anything. I took a few days off after the holiday. I didn't think it was wrong to have a good time. Money isn't everything, you know? I'm Malcolm Westwood, not Ebenezer Scrooge."

Continuing to shake her head, my mom chimed in. "This isn't about a few days off. This is about a lifestyle that's reckless."

My eyes nearly fell out of my head. "Because you came here before Holly happened to leave?"

"Who's Holly?"

I pointed to the door. "The girl you just met."

"Her name was Noelle, Malcolm. My goodness, are you are serious right now?" my mom scoffed.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Maybe I just wasn't great with names.

Dad scooted to the edge of the couch and rested his forearms on his thighs. "You're playing with fire. This isn't about Noelle specifically. But you put this company at risk when you're out partying every weekend and living the life you do."

"So, it's about money, then? That's all that matters. What about my quality of life? Isn't there more to it than just work? I mean, the holiday season is here. Shouldn't we be able to enjoy ourselves just a little bit?"

"You know it's more than that for you. And don't tell me about your quality of life, because you've had it made in the shade your entire life. You're not struggling, by any means. If you want to talk about quality, why don't you start thinking about the life you intend to have five years from now?"

"I'm still young. What happens five years from now isn't important."

My parents turned their heads to look at one another, frustration and regret marring their features. After my mom

gave my dad a gentle nod, he turned his attention back to me. “You are young, so we can understand your carelessness. But you’re not so young that you can’t hear the truth.”

“What truth?”

“If you don’t straighten up, prove you are serious about this company’s future, and do it soon, Mina is going to get it,” my dad revealed.

“Mina?” I repeated. “She doesn’t even want it.”

Mina was my younger sister, and she’d made it clear that our family’s company, The Westwood Company, wasn’t something she wanted to be wholly responsible for.

Simply put, The Westwood Company manufactured confectionery. It would have been easy to say we were a chocolate factory, but the truth was that we offered a lot beyond that. The chocolate was our bread and butter, though, and the whole operation wasn’t something that should ever be given to someone who wasn’t interested in doing all that needed to be done to keep it going.

I loved my sister dearly, but Mina didn’t want to be the president or CEO of a company like this.

“You aren’t wrong, Malcolm. She doesn’t want to run the company, but she’d rather have it than see you destroy it.”

I sat back and stared at my parents, feeling dumbfounded. I was in disbelief at what I was hearing.

I could admit I wasn’t exactly proud of the way I’d been acting, but wasn’t that what your twenties were for? I didn’t see the harm in having a little fun.

“So, what do you want from me?” I asked.

“Nothing you aren’t willing to give to get what you claim to want.”

“Oh? And so, what now? I have to take the next three years to prove I’m worthy of running the company?” I questioned them.

My dad shook his head. “No, Malcolm, you don’t have to take the next three years to prove it. You’ve got just over three weeks. If we don’t see the change in you by the time Westwood’s holiday party rolls around, there will be nothing left to discuss. If we see the change we’re hoping for, you and I will start next year with transitioning you into my position.”

“Are you kidding me?”

They stood from the couch and offered solemn looks. “You have all the potential in the world, Malcolm,” my mom started. “Don’t waste it on nonsense.”

“And don’t give up your future and a life better than you could have ever imagined for a few wild nights. I know it doesn’t seem that way today, but when you make it to the other side of this, and I pray that you do, you’ll see that we’re right.”

Without waiting for a response, my parents moved to the door.

I was in such shock; I couldn’t even get myself up off the couch to see them out.

My dad rested one of his hands on the door, placed the other on my mom’s lower back, and turned to give me one final look. “Your mom and I have a conference to attend early next week. I hope by the time we get back later in the week, we’ll see you there, ready to prove the legacy we’ve fought so hard to build is worth being a part of. Your future depends on it.”

A moment later, the door closed behind them.

I sat in that chair for the next hour, and all I could do was allow the bitterness to settle.

Three weeks.

My parents were giving me a whopping three weeks to prove I wanted what was meant to be mine all along.

How would they even be able to tell if I was serious in that amount of time?

That’s when it hit me.

Maybe they already knew the answer and simply needed to find a way to break the news to me.

This company was all that I'd ever imagined I wanted. I'd have been lying if I said I'd been taking things seriously this whole time, but I didn't think it'd ever come to this.

I had to find a way to prove I could do this, no matter how impossible it seemed.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.K. Evans is a contemporary romance author of over forty published novels. While she enjoys writing a good romantic suspense novel, Andrea's favorite books to write have been her extreme sports romances. That might have something to do with the fact that she, along with her husband and two sons, can't get enough of extreme sports.

Before becoming a writer, Andrea did a brief stint in the insurance and financial services industry and managed her husband's performance automotive business. That love of extreme sports? She used to drive race cars!

When Andrea isn't writing, she can be found homeschooling her two sons, doing yoga, snowboarding, reading, or traveling with her family. She and her husband are currently taking road trips throughout the country to visit all 50 states with their boys.

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