

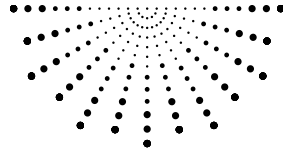
*Working for the*  
**SCROOGE**

MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
CAMERON HART

# WORKING FOR THE SCROOGE

A GRUMPY/SUNSHINE HOLIDAY ROMANCE



CAMERON HART

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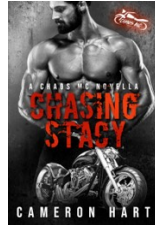
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## WORKING FOR THE SCROOGE

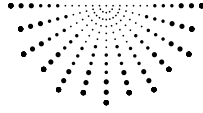
The only thing worse than throwing an all-company holiday party is working with the too-sweet, sugar plum fairy of an event planner. Clementine Clarkson. As the CEO of King's Holdings Real Estate, my time is better spent working on non-frivolous projects.

Despite showing no interest in said holiday party, Ms. Clarkson keeps insisting that she needs my input. I somehow find myself taste-testing hot chocolate for the menu, chopping down pine trees, and running errands all over New York City with the curvy little event planner.

Her holiday spirit is contagious, though I'm trying to stay immune. Every moment in Clementine's presence, however, draws me closer and closer to her warmth and light.

**Can Clementine work her Christmas magic on this Scrooge, or is he cursed to spend his life alone?**

## KINGSLEY



“Now, just listen to me before you get upset,” the president of the board says over the phone.

I let out a sigh and rub the bridge of my nose, waiting for whatever bullshit is about to be dropped on my lap. It’s Monday morning, and as the owner and CEO of King’s Holdings Real Estate, I have more important things to do than coddle my board members.

“No promises,” I mutter under my breath.

Staring out of the floor-to-ceiling window in my corner office, I watch snowflakes make their lazy descent to the slushy city streets. The snow falls on people scurrying around doing last-minute holiday shopping and planning huge holiday parties.

Suckers.

“The Jorgenson’s are spending the holidays here in New York City.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting him to say, but that wasn’t it. “As in Jorgenson Financial?”

“One and the same,” he confirms. “The whole family will be here for a wedding and staying to visit their grandchildren. I think they’ll be agreeable to a few business dinners with us, especially if we can get them on board with our plans to develop overseas.”

“Why would I get upset at the possibility of having a multi-billion-dollar, international financial institution backing



our latest projects across the globe?”

“Well...”

“Out with it,” I grunt.

Dan, the President of the board, clears his throat, which I know from years of working with him means he’s mustering up the courage to tell me something I don’t want to hear. “The other members of the board and I think it would be appropriate to throw a holiday party this year.”

Pulling the phone away from my ear, I stare at the damn thing and blink a few times.

“A holiday party? What does that have to do with anything? And furthermore, what was wrong with the celebration we did last year?”

“We didn’t have a party last year,” Dan says, though his tone is cautious like he doesn’t want to say the wrong thing to set me off.

“Exactly. Big bonuses, no time-wasting soiree where everyone sucks down drinks and stuffs their faces with expensive food they’re too drunk to appreciate in the first place. Seems like the perfect holiday celebration to me.”

“But—”

“*And*,” I continue, on a roll now, “giving a big bonus is technically the most appropriate way to celebrate the festivities this time of year, what with rampant consumerism and FOMO masquerading as Christmas joy.”

I’m met with silence on the other end of the line and then a long, weary sigh. “Look, Jorgenson’s Financial has always boasted its family values and humble beginnings as a family-owned business. Every other Fortune 500 company CEO in New York has a spouse, children, a vacation home, and plans for the holidays. You, on the other hand...”

“Am staring down the barrel of forty while being on the most eligible bachelor list for ten years running,” I finish for him.

Dan doesn't answer, but we both know that's what he was getting at.

I don't mind being single. In fact, I prefer it that way. My old man, God rest his greedy, greedy soul, was never faithful to my mother. She knew about every single mistress and even added some of her favorites to the Christmas card list over the years. She didn't care about anything other than the money and status that came with marrying into the Bowman family.

With that as my only model for love and marriage, I've spent my life steering clear of relationships and commitment. I don't want to be used for my money, and I sure as hell don't want to sleep around and have women hanging all over me. I can barely stand my own company, let alone the constant company of others.

"And throwing a party is going to help my family-man image?" I snap, bringing myself back into the moment.

"It will be an all-inclusive, family-friendly event with carnival games for kids, lots of food, and drinks. There will also be plenty of time to sit down with the Jorgenson family and discuss our very profitable futures together while their grandkids run around, having the time of their lives."

He's right. I know he's right. Hell, *he* knows he's right, but at least he knows me well enough not to boast. Still, I can't go down without a fight. This is still King's Holdings, after all, and I'm the king.

"Dan, I appreciate what you and the board are trying to do, but I don't—"

"Have time to plan a holiday bash that will secure a future deal with the Jorgensons?" he finishes for me.

"Uh, yeah," I mumble.

"I know. Plus, I wouldn't trust anything you planned, anyway." I roll my eyes even though he can't see me over the phone. "You won't need to worry about anything. We've already vetted an event planning company here in the city, and they'll take care of all the details. They just need your input on a few things here and there."

I groan internally at the annoyance, but I'll take working with a company over planning a party myself any day of the week.

"Fine. I'll talk to my assistant and have him move some appointments around. I might have some free time next week—"

"That won't be necessary," Dan says, surprising me.

"And why is that?"

Just then, someone knocks on my door.

"That's probably her now," he answers in a rush.

"You've got to be kidding—"

"Have fun, and remember, spare no expense!"

"Dan, you motherfu—" He hangs up before I can finish my insult.

Another knock on my office door, and then the thing swings wide open, revealing a goddamn sugar plum fairy come to life.

The curvy little woman with blonde hair and sparkling green eyes smiles at me, and God, even her teeth are bright and shiny. The five-foot-nothing woman is wearing knee-high brown leather boots, a red plaid skirt, a cream cable-knit sweater, and a green stocking cap with a giant red ball of fluff on top, like the cherry on top of the most decadent, Christmas-themed dessert.

"Are you lost?" I ask, unsure what to do with this bundle of holiday spirit. Surely this isn't the event planner. She's far too young. Barely out of college, if I had to guess.

"Nope, I'm exactly where I need to be," she says, her voice floating through the air like whispers of jingle bells.

*What the fuck is wrong with me? Why can't I stop staring at her?*

The woman nibbles on her bottom lip, then releases it from her teeth before hitting me with her smile. Something lurches in my chest, pulling and tugging loose until I have to gasp for

air. My heart thuds painfully against my ribcage, and for a moment, I worry I'm having a heart attack.

Then she steps closer and holds out her hand for me to shake. Everything in me stills, from my racing heart to my shallow breaths.

"I'm Clementine Clarkson, and I'm here to plan a company party for you and your employees!" she exclaims, the genuine excitement in her voice as confusing as it is addictive.

*What the hell is wrong with me today?*

When I don't take her hand, Clementine drops it and shoves both hands into her skirt pockets. I shouldn't feel like an ass. I don't do small talk or chit-chat chat or introductions, and I've never apologized for that fact.

Tell that to the brand-new conscience I just grew.

"So, what's your favorite part of the holiday season?" she asks, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "It's good to get a feel for what the client likes and work my magic to bring it to life." Her smile is fixed in place as she waits for my response.

I don't know what it is about this woman, but she's... too much. Too cheerful. Too colorful. Too damn young for me to be having the kinds of thoughts I'm having about her full, pouty lips and generous curves.

"Everything from October to March is highly overrated. Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Valentine's... Just excuses to spend money and numb the feeling of being alive for a few months."

I'm unsure why I said that out loud, but the curvy little planner never loses her smile. In fact, she tilts her head and scrutinizes me, her smile never fading, as if she's truly happy to be here in this moment with me.

I don't like it. I can't get away from it. What is she doing to me? Am I finally losing it? Is the stress of running this company catching up to me?

"You can go now," I clip out, dismissing her.

She doesn't break eye contact or drop her curious little smile as she continues to examine me piece by piece.

"Next time, make an appointment with my assistant. I'm a busy man," I inform her.

Why is she still here? Why is she still looking at me with that soft, sweet expression?

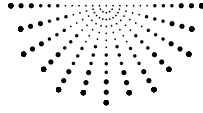
"Okay, Mr. Bowman," the woman finally says, her voice like honey.

"Good," I grunt. I didn't mean to say that out loud, but this woman is throwing me off. "Now that we have that settled, you can go," I repeat.

Clementine nods, turns on her heel, and steps out of my office. She looks at me over her shoulder one last time, a spark of curiosity and mischief swimming in those bright green depths.

*Who the hell was that, and how long do I have to work with her?*

## CLEMENTINE



I close the heavy oak door behind me and lean against the cool wood, my head still spinning from my first interaction with Kingsley Bowman.

My boss told me the wealthy real estate mogul was rude, cold, and had a bit of a temper. I was prepared for his clipped responses and dismissive attitude. I was even prepared for his intense, dark gaze, sexy stubble, and muscled, drool-worthy chest and arms. Yeah, I've seen the Forbes articles and GQ photo spreads with Mr. Bowman. Who hasn't? A girl has to be aware of all the eye candy in the city, however unattainable they may be.

What I wasn't prepared for is that among the hot CEO vibes and cold, detached personality, Kingsley is kind of... adorably grumpy. What was it he said when I asked what was his favorite part of the holidays?

*Everything from October to March is highly overrated.*

I can't wait to prove him wrong.

"Did that go as well as it sounded?" someone asks me from off to the right.

I peel myself off the door and take a few steps in that direction. A well-dressed, middle-aged man sits behind a desk, giving me a friendly smirk. His thick orange glasses pop against his dark brown skin and match his pink and orange silk pocket square. He smiles at me, instantly putting me at ease.

I release a sigh and roll my eyes. "Even better," I joke.

The man laughs, the genuine, hearty sound shaking his shoulders. It's contagious. I join him, laughing along with the ridiculousness of Kingsley Bowman and this jolly man's sense of humor.

"I'm Ben," he says, holding out his hand. "I'm Mr. Bowman's executive assistant and the only one who can sympathize with you trying to get him into the holiday spirit."

I laugh again and shake his hand. "I'm Clem—"

The office door swings open and bangs against the wall, causing me to drop my hand and gasp in surprise. I whip my head around and see Mr. Bowman standing in the doorway, his shoulders nearly taking up the entire frame.

Kingsley stares at Ben and growls, actually *growls*, the sound rumbling up from deep in his chest. He looks... possessed yet confused. I'm certainly confused.

Darting my eyes to the nice man behind the desk, I see he's completely unfazed. In fact, he has a twinkle in his eye.

Looking back at Kingsley, he now has his gaze trained directly on me. Confusion still clouds his dark brown irises, and he opens his mouth a few times as if trying to find the right words.

"Didn't I tell you to leave?" he finally spits out.

I blink a few times, then watch the insane CEO storm back into his office and slam the door behind him.

"Uh, does he do that often?" I ask Ben.

"Mark his territory?"

"What?"

"Nothing!" he sing-songs. I raise an eyebrow at him, but Ben simply smiles charmingly. "I'm just saying, if I didn't know any better, I'd think Kingsley was jealous of someone else making you laugh."

I jerk my head back in shock, my eyes wide at the idea of *Kingsley-freaking-Bowman* jealous of any part of me or my life.

“Ha. Yeah. That’s... that’s definitely not what just happened,” I stutter out. Clearing my throat, I try again. This is my first big project with Emery Event Planning Co., and I’ll need someone on my side if I want it to be a success. “You’re probably in a romantic mood because of the season,” I add with a smile, hoping to flip the script.

“Guilty as charged,” Ben answers with another deep chuckle. He clicks around on his desktop a few times, then turns his screen so I can see. It’s a beautiful cruise ship decked out with Christmas lights and decor, images of a holiday feast mixed in with what looks like classic holiday musicals redone as drag shows.

“That looks so fun!”

“Oh, girl, it will be. My husband and I got married five years ago on New Year’s Day, and we’re celebrating with a tropical Christmas cruise.” Ben scrolls through more photos, his sweet and excited smile melting my heart. “How about you? A pretty little Christmas elf like yourself must have lots of festivities planned.”

My smile drops slightly, but I recover before Ben can see. My heart sinks to my stomach thinking about spending this holiday season without my grandma for the first time. I can’t think about that right now, though. No crying in front of clients or their assistants. That’s a basic rule of professionalism, right?

“Of course!” I say in my cheeriest voice. “Starting with the King’s Holdings Holiday Extravaganza.”

Ben smiles, but there’s something else behind those perceptive. “It’s going to be amazing. I can already tell.”

“Thanks,” I say as I hike my purse further up my shoulder. “I should probably get going. I have a feeling we’ll be getting to know each other a bit over the next few weeks. It’ll be nice to see a familiar face, and even nicer if that face isn’t frowning or growling.”

Ben chuckles again and waves me off. I don’t want to risk another incident with the bear-like Mr. Bowman, so I take the



hint and hop on the next elevator down to the lobby.

A crowded subway ride and three blocks of walking in the snow later, and I'm finally home. Well, I'm at my apartment. Even after four months in this little studio apartment, it doesn't feel very much like home. Will I ever feel at home again, or did my grandma take that comfort with her to the grave?

Once I step inside, I kick off my boots and wiggle my toes, hoping to get some blood flow and sensation back into my cold little nubbins. Looking around the cramped space, I try to see the good things and not the chipped paint, cracked drywall, and the bars on the sole window.

Christmas lights frame the window, and a small wreath covers most of the wrought iron bars welded across the window. I'm not allowed to have a real tree—not that I have the space for one—so I have a little two-foot fake tree with ornaments I picked up at a local thrift store instead.

My couch doubles as my bed, the red, green, and white pillows piled high and accented with gold thread around the edges. The snow globes my grandma and I collected over the years are displayed on my bookshelf, the window sill, the coffee table, and the kitchen counters. I don't have enough space for all of them, but I picked out my favorites.

Collapsing on the couch, I snuggle into my mountain of pillows and peer around the room at the various pieces my grandma and I have treasured for so long. My favorite is of a little girl and an older woman decorating a pine tree outside. They have lights and tinsel, and the woman is helping the little girl reach for a branch that's a little too high for her to reach.

I'm crying before I realize it, my tears cooling as they drip down my cheeks.

God, it aches. I knew this Christmas was going to suck. It's the first holiday season since my grandma passed away this summer. She succumbed to breast cancer after three long, hard-fought years. Knowing her battle was coming to an end did little to ease the pain of losing her.

My grandma and I adored all things Christmas, and yes, we were the people who could hardly wait for Halloween to be over so we could start decorating. Some years, we didn't make it to Halloween before the Christmas items found their way into the decor.

I thought moving to a new city with a new fancy job would distract me from the grief, but now I'm alone in a strange place with nothing and no one familiar. One thing no one tells you about the stages of grief is that they come and go in no particular order. I didn't start with denial and end with acceptance. I started with depression, which morphed into anger, back to depression, then on to bargaining. Denial popped up during brief moments when my grandma had good days, but then shock and anger reared their ugly heads.

I still vacillate between overwhelming sadness and intense anger at the universe and cancer. However, on rare occasions, I get glimpses of acceptance.

Sniffing into my Peace on Earth pillow, I try shoving those sad, miserable thoughts to the back of my mind. It doesn't work, but I can't keep crying myself to sleep every night. My tears will run out eventually, right? Even then, I'm not sure this hole in my heart will ever be filled.

I wipe off my face and sit up, digging through my bag to find my laptop. Opening it up, I create a new mood board on Pinterest for the King's Holdings Holiday Extravaganza and begin adding photos and notes for inspiration.

I keep replaying the conversation Kingsley and I had earlier. He doesn't think he likes the holidays, but that's because he's never celebrated the right way.

One thing he said is stuck in my brain, and it makes my heart twist painfully every time I think about it.

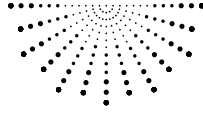
*... just excuses to spend money and numb the feeling of being alive for a few months.*

Does he really believe that? How tragic.

The more I search and plan for the party, the more determined I am to make it incredible. Not only for the sake of

the season, but for Mr. Bowman. I may not have the warm, fuzzy, magical Christmas I'm used to, but I can give that to Kingsley.

## KINGSLEY



I swipe my key card to open the executive elevator that goes directly to the top floor, stepping inside and brushing the snow off my coat. I only live a few blocks from the King's Holdings building in Manhattan, but it was a rather brisk walk this early in the morning.

The alarm on my watch beeps as the elevator doors open, letting me know I'm right on time. My life runs on a strict schedule. One that I've perfected over the years.

Wake up at five, hit the home gym, shower, breakfast at six-fifteen, and out the door by six-forty-five, which leaves me enough time to get into the office by seven o'clock sharp. The only other souls here at this early hour are the security guards and my long-time executive assistant, Ben Sherman.

I give him a nod as I walk past his desk, my eye catching on the large to-go cup of coffee in his hand. I don't usually notice details like that, but a few months ago, Ben made an entire PowerPoint presentation on why I should invest in locally-sourced coffee from his favorite roastery.

So much for listening to my employees and their "great" ideas.

Ben avoids my gaze, pretending to be glued to his computer screen, working ever so diligently. As soon as I open my office door, I know why.

"Good morning, Mr. Bowman," Clementine greets me. She lounges in my chair, her feet propped up on my desk next to two large coffees in the same to-go cup Ben had. The traitor.

My eyes linger on her emerald tights dotted with Santa hats, the thin material stretching over her shapely calves and thighs. She's wearing a different skirt today, this one black and velvety, and her sweater is a deep red that matches the Santa hats on her tights. The soft wool hugs her generous breasts, making my dick twitch.

*Fuck, get it together!*

"Ms. Clarkson," I clip out as I set my briefcase down and shoulder off my winter jacket. I take my time hanging up my coat and digging through my briefcase, hoping she takes the hint that I'm busy and don't want to talk to her. "I wasn't expecting to see you this morning," I say over my shoulder.

"Life is full of little surprises, which makes every day exciting, don't you think?"

My eyes roll so far back into my head I give myself a headache. Seriously? Who is this beacon of holiday cheer and sunshine? She must have gotten lost on her way to an audition as a Disney Princess.

"Not really, no," I answer matter-of-factly.

Clementine laughs, the sound as light and airy as the sparkling snow. It does something funny to my chest, but I ignore it. No need to dwell on ridiculous thoughts like replaying that sound over and over in my head every night as I drift off to sleep.

I still can't face the bright and bubbly event planner, so I pretend to look for something in my coat pocket while I come up with an excuse to leave. I don't know what it is about this woman. She just... pulls some kind of feeling out of me. It's raw and unfiltered and honestly scares the shit out of me.

I nearly ripped my assistant's head off—my happily married, flamboyantly-gay-and-proud-of-it assistant—for making her laugh and shaking her hand. It wasn't jealousy. That couldn't be it. And yet...

"I think we got off on the wrong foot yesterday," Clementine says, her voice cutting through my confusing

thoughts. She sounds closer now, like she left my desk and is walking toward me.

“We didn’t. That’s just how I am,” I grunt, trying to suppress the strange urge to run my fingers through her golden hair and fuse my lips to hers.

When she doesn’t respond for a few beats, I turn. Was I finally rude enough to send her running? Oddly, I don’t think I want her to go.

I’m surprised to see the Christmas angel herself standing right behind me, coffee in hand. She stumbles back as I reach toward her, my hand finding her hip and holding her steady.

God, she feels good. Soft and sweet and perfect against the palm of my hand.

“Uh, s-sorry,” she stutters.

Her green eyes latch onto mine, and I can’t look away. Clementine nibbles on her bottom lip, drawing my attention there. Jesus, those lips... They’d look perfect wrapped around my cock.

“What?” I grit more harshly than I intended. *What the fuck was that?* She’d slap me if she knew the filthy thoughts I’m having about her.

“Coffee!” she says, stepping away from me. “Caffeine fixes everything. I wasn’t sure how you liked your coffee, so I have a plain black one and one with three sugars and three creams.”

I blink at the curvy little Christmas treat, hating the apprehension in her eyes. I did that to her. I made her uncomfortable. Dammit, I’ve never cared about shit like that, but now... How do I be... *nice?*

“I have a feeling you’re more into sugar and cream than I am,” I finally say, keeping my tone as flat as possible. Truthfully, the green-eyed goddess intrigues me. And that’s a problem.

“Guilty as charged,” she agrees, her lips stretching into an easy smile.

Clementine holds out one of the coffee cups, presumably the one without all the add-ins. I wrap my hand around the cup, and my fingers brush hers in the lightest of touches.

“Oh,” she gasps, her entire body jolting when I make contact with her hand.

I felt it, too. That spark.

She pulls her hand away, and I find that I want her touch. It takes considerable effort not to growl at the loss of contact, but I try to reel it in. This woman has me all mixed up, and she’s not even trying.

“I know you’re a busy man,” Clementine starts, backing away a few steps to give me a clear path to my desk. “But your first appointment today isn’t until ten. That gives us three whole hours to discuss the party.”

“Uh, no,” I grunt, running a hand down my face. “Just because I don’t have a meeting scheduled doesn’t mean I don’t have work to do.”

“Exactly,” Clementine agrees, nodding. “Like talking with your event planner and helping her get a vibe on what a King’s Holdings party should be like.”

I stare at her blankly, though it’s increasingly difficult not to match her smile. Not that anyone could truly match her genuine, bright, and brilliant smile, but dammit if she doesn’t make me want to try.

*Again, what the fuck is wrong with me?*

“Serious vibes. Money-making vibes. No-time-for-frivolous-parties vibes. Need I go on?”

Her demeanor never wavers. In fact, her eyes twinkle at my response. Why can’t she take the hint and leave me alone?

*No, something in me shouts. Don’t go.*

“I didn’t ask for Kingsley Bowman vibes. I asked for King’s Holdings vibes,” she counters, an adorably mischievous grin curling up one corner of her lips.

“Same thing,” I reply as I shuffle through the stack of envelopes and proposals on my desk.

Clementine giggles again, and I have to look away from her. The tugging ache in my chest seems to grow tighter each moment she’s here and not in my arms. Jesus, I need to get a grip.

“Okay, then. What’s the opposite of those vibes? Maybe that’s a better place to start.”

“I’m sure by now you’re well aware that I’m not a huge fan of the holidays or people, so having a party with my employees on the most celebrated holiday in the country is already at the bottom of my list of things I never want to do. You think having me list off the opposite of everything I love will make me want to attend?”

“No, but that’s where negotiations will start,” she quips. I roll my eyes, which of course, only makes her grin. “Fine, how about you take a look at a few themes I’ve picked out? Once we pin that down, I’ll have plenty to do before contacting you again.”

I cross my arms over my chest and stare down at the golden-haired goddess adorned with enough holiday cheer and kindness to put Tiny Tim and Charles Dickens to shame. Clementine mirrors my stance, but when she crosses her arms over her chest, her breasts are pushed up and together, and I can’t stop staring. This woman has zero clue what a temptation she is, which only makes her that much more intriguing.

“It won’t hurt you to glance at a few color palettes and give me your approval.”

“It might,” I mumble, forcing my gaze to meet hers. That was a mistake. Eyes as green as pine trees stare back, and I’m helpless to do anything but nod and agree to whatever she says.

“Yes!” she exclaims, pumping one fist in the air in victory.

How is everything she does adorable? I’ve never used that word before, but nothing else fits. Clementine Clarkson is



changing me already, and I'm unsure how much more I can take.

And this is only my second day working with her.

My office door swings open, revealing the last person in the world I want to see. "Kingsley, dear, why haven't you returned any of my calls?"

"Ben, you're fired!" I shout to my assistant.

He laughs. "Sure. I'll pack my desk up right now." Ben laughs again.

The bastard. He knows all too well I won't fire him. That man is the only person who can put up with my attitude. Plus, he knows all my passwords. It'd be a hassle to hire and train someone else.

"Don't blame him. I'm your mother. I have the right to talk to my only child, especially when he's been ignoring me for the last two weeks."

I scrunch my nose when I get a whiff of my mother's overwhelming perfume. Chanel No. 5, of course. She tosses her Marc Jacobs fur purse on the couch in my office and flings off her matching designer fur coat, indicating she'll be staying for a while. Or so she thinks.

The woman who gave birth to me strides up to me and kisses one cheek, then the other, as if we're sorority sisters catching up at a reunion. Everything about her is fake and shallow, but that's nothing new.

For all of her faults, Eloise Bowman has never pretended to be something she's not. She married for money and has been content to let my father run around with his mistresses their entire marriage. If that's what having a relationship is like for the rich, I want nothing to do with it.

"We need to discuss the party," my mother says.

"Same!" Clementine chimes in.

My mother whips her head around so fast I think she might have dislocated a disk in her neck. "Who are you?"

I don't like her tone. I never like her tone, but I like it even less when she uses it with Clementine.

"Clementine Clarkson," she chirps, holding out her hand for my mother to shake.

My mom looks at her hand, then at Clementine, her eyes scanning her outfit and noting everything she hates. I know that look, and I don't want Clementine to experience it.

Before I can step in, my mother returns her attention to me without acknowledging Clementine's outstretched hand. "The party. Who's your date?"

"How do you know about the party? I only found out yesterday," I groan, plopping into my chair. If I'm going to fight with my mother, I can at least be cushioned by expensive Italian leather.

"I have my ways," she says mysteriously.

Something tells me those ways include getting rather close with my board members. My stomach churns at the thought. I make a mental note to find out who and have them removed from any position of power.

"I don't have a date, and I'm not looking for one," I tell her as I turn on my computer and start replying to emails. Maybe if I ignore her, she'll go away. It's never worked before, but hey, 'tis the season for Christmas miracles, right?

As my mother launches into a monologue about the family legacy, I look around the room for Clementine. She hasn't said anything for a few minutes, which isn't like her. She's not here, and for some reason, my stomach drops. It makes no sense. Wasn't I trying to get rid of her?

"Are you listening, Kingsley?"

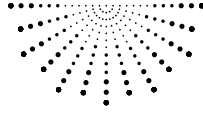
"I try not to," I mumble.

She doesn't hear me and continues her rant.

As my mom scolds me for still being single and not attempting to look for a partner, my thoughts turn to Clementine. Where is she? Will she get in trouble for not having my input on something?

More importantly, *why the hell do I care?*

## CLEMENTINE



“Can you hold the door for me, please—”

The giant glass door of the King’s Holdings building slams shut in my face, and I stop short, narrowly avoiding a disaster. The two drink caddies I’m holding shift slightly, but I manage to hold onto them. Thank Sweet Baby Jesus for that. The morning has already been rough enough without spilling a hundred ounces of hot chocolate on myself.

I didn’t sleep at all last night or the night before. My upstairs neighbors are out of school for the semester and have decided to use every second they aren’t in class to party. I knocked on their door and politely asked them to turn down the music last night, but everyone laughed and booed me. When a red Solo cup half-filled with stale beer hit me in the side of the head, I gave up and went back down to my couch to cry until the sun came up.

I’m exhausted and cranky, but I don’t let any of that show.

“I swear, some people need to learn some manners,” comes the now-familiar voice of Chester, one of the security guards I’ve gotten to know over the past two weeks since working with Kingsley.

“Maybe they didn’t hear me,” I say as the older man jogs up to the door and opens it for me. I manage a smile, though it feels a little forced today. “Thank you.”

The ache in my chest from missing my grandma is particularly painful this morning. I guess without enough sleep, it’s harder to separate my grief from my professional

life. But I need to shove all that down and do my job. It's not Chester's fault my grandma is dead and my neighbors are jerks.

"Always trying to see the good in people," Chester replies with a kind smile. "Don't let this city take that away from you."

"I won't," I promise.

"You know what? I believe you, Clementine. You haven't let Mr. Bowman break your holiday spirit yet."

"And I never will. In fact, I think I may be the one to break him out of his grumpy attitude," I tell him once we're both inside.

Chester follows me to the elevator bank and scans his key card for the executive elevator straight to Kingsley's office. Technically, I'm not allowed to use it, but whenever Chester is around, he ensures I have a primo ride up to the top.

"That Scrooge?" the security guard questions with a disbelieving smirk.

"Even Scrooge came to his senses in the end," I remind him. "It just took a little bit to get him there."

The elevator doors open, and Chester holds his arm out so the doors don't close on me while I juggle the drink caddies and my bag.

As the door closes, Chester smiles and winks. "You're right. You may be the angel he needs this holiday season."

The doors slide shut, saving me from having to come up with a response.

Sighing, I rest my head against the back wall of the elevator and psych myself up for today's mission—hot chocolate tasting. Kingsley doesn't know I'm coming, which is how all our interactions have gone thus far. I find the sneak attack to be the most effective way to get his opinion on something, and even then, it's like pulling teeth.

The doors to the elevator ding as they open, and I make my way down the hall toward Kingsley's office. Ben smiles when

he sees me, the warmth in his dark eyes almost bringing tears to mine. It's been a terrible morning so far, but people like Chester and Ben remind me there is still good in this world.

"Everything okay?" Ben asks, his brow furrowing with concern.

"Yeah," I say in the least convincing voice ever. Clearing my throat, I try again. "I'm fine. Just feeling a little off today."

"Do you need anything? Water? Aspirin? A hug?"

"I'm okay," I assure him. "Is this a good time for me to bug Mr. Bowman?" I ask, hoping to change the subject.

Ben narrows his eyes at me but decides to let it go. Thankfully. If he presses any further, I may break down in tears.

"He's in his office," Ben confirms. "No meetings or calls, he's just avoiding people." The way he says it makes me think this is a regular occurrence.

"Does he do that often? Hide from people?" How lonely.

Ben tilts his head and gives me a look. "You've met him, right? That man would never leave his penthouse if he didn't have to, but someone needs to brood in the corner office."

I grin at his joke, though my heart squeezes painfully at the thought of Kingsley shutting everyone out. Then again, if everyone in his life treats him like his mother, I understand why he's hesitant to let people in.

God, she was awful. Cold and calculating. Kingsley might be standoffish and a bit rude, but he's not shallow or cruel.

"Here, let me get the door for you," Ben says, breaking me out of my thoughts. He walks around his desk, opens the door to Kingsley's office, and steps aside to let me in.

"Very brave, considering you've already been fired once this month," I tease.

"Clementine?" Mr. Bowman's voice is slightly less annoyed than usual when he realizes it's me entering his office.

“Good luck,” Ben whispers before shutting the door behind me.

“Kingsley,” I respond, giving him my best smile. “I have hot chocolate.” I lift the eight beverages packed into two drink caddies.

The CEO stares at me, his brown eyes intense as he studies everything about my face. I feel... examined, vulnerable, and on display, but I can't quite say why. I'm fully clothed and wrapped in a coat and scarf, yet I feel bare before him.

“What's wrong?” he asks. More like demands.

“Uh, nothing?” I'm unsure what he's getting at. “We're having a hot chocolate bar at the party, so I wanted us to taste-test a few options.”

He doesn't say anything, his scrutinizing gaze never leaving mine.

“We have traditional milk chocolate, of course, but also white chocolate raspberry, caramel and dark chocolate, peppermint and—”

“Something's missing,” Kingsley interrupts as he stands from his desk.

I furrow my brow and look around his office. Everything looks as pristine as it always does, if not a bit sparse and impersonal. “Uh, should I go ask Ben if...”

I trail off as Kingsley stalks forward, the tall, intense man focused solely on me. He stops a few inches away, surprising me by taking the drinks from my hands and setting them down on a side table next to the couch.

“Um...” I breathe out as I tilt my head up.

Kingsley stares down at me, then slowly, so slowly, he raises his hand and brushes a few strands of my hair out of my face, tucking them behind my ear. The tips of his fingers tickle my skin, and I hold my breath, my heart racing with each second he's close.

“Your eyes aren't as bright as today,” he murmurs, though it seems he's talking more to himself than me.

“Just tired,” I reply, matching his soft tone.

Kingsley furrows his brow as a fierce look overtakes his features. It’s like he’s already livid over whatever made me lose sleep. Crazy, I know. Why would he care?

“Something else. Something deeper,” he says, those dark brown eyes peering straight into my soul. “You’re... sad.”

I blink a few times, unsure what to say in response. How does he know? What does he mean, my eyes aren’t as bright today? I didn’t think Kingsley cared about details like that or about me at all.

It’s too much. He’s getting too close to the grief sitting heavy in my soul today. I’m already on the verge of tears, and I’d never forgive myself for crying in front of my first big client and ruining the holiday party I’ve worked so hard to plan.

“Nothing to worry about,” I assure him, smiling at Kingsley while taking a few steps back. I can think more clearly now I’m not surrounded by his warmth and his leather and spice scent. “Just one of those days.”

“It’s only eight. How much could have happened to make it *one of those days*?” He moves closer, those intense eyes never leaving mine.

“Why does it matter?” I ask, taking another step back.

We continue our dance of retreating and advancing until my back is pressed against the wall.

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“Do you always answer a question with a question?”

He’s leaning over me now, one hand spread on the wall next to my head. I’m not scared or intimidated. I’m... safe. It’s like Kingsley is creating a smaller space, a safe haven for me to share my secrets. The world doesn’t seem so big and scary when it’s only us here at this moment.

“Do you?” Kingsley whispers, his breath tickling my cheeks and lips.



“Only when I want to avoid the answer,” I tell him truthfully, a tiny smile curling up one corner of my lips.

Kingsley doesn't smile. Not that I expect him to, but this look is different. More serious, if that's possible. Like I'm a puzzle he doesn't know how to even begin solving.

“I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong.”

Theory confirmed. But more importantly... why does he want to fix it? Fix *me*?

“There's nothing to fix.” I sigh, looking away from him. “I miss my grandma,” I murmur. “She passed away over the summer. Christmas was our favorite time of year, and...” I trail off, mortified when my voice cracks.

The first tear falls, and in the next second, I'm wrapped up in Kingsley's arms.

Having all his strength and power this close is overwhelming at first. I rest my head on the hard planes of his chest while he cradles the back of my neck, massaging me there in light, calming touches.

“I-I'm sorry,” I choke out. “So un-un-unprofessional.”

“I've got you,” he whispers, nuzzling into the top of my head. I have no idea where the sweet gesture came from, but it makes me cry even harder. Kingsley holds me through it all, his expensive shirt and tie soaking up my tears.

He somehow senses when I'm all cried out and takes a step back to give me some breathing room. I sniffle and wipe my face, awkward and unsure how to proceed.

“So, um, the hot chocolate is probably lukewarm chocolate at best,” I say, looking at the forgotten drink caddies on the side table.

“Get them all,” Kingsley says easily.

“All eight kinds of hot chocolate? I was planning on three, maybe four.”

The usually dismissive and apathetic Kingsley shrugs, and I think he's grinning. It's a little out of practice, but it makes

my heart flip all the same. He's trying.

"So rent a bigger table and feature all eight. 'Tis the season, right?"

"Um, yes?" I tilt my head to the side, scanning Kingsley up and down to ensure it's him and not a body double.

"So let's go all out. In memory of your grandma," he adds softly.

I blink back tears and nod, surprised at yet another sweet gesture from him. This man is full of surprises and much more capable of empathy than anyone gives him credit for. I'd like to think I had a little something to do with that.

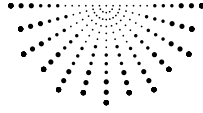
"I'll make some calls," I finally reply, swallowing past the lump in my throat. "Um, th-thank you," I stutter.

"No, thank *you*," he says, confusing me even further.

I gather my bag, not bothering to clean up the hot chocolates. I'll tell Ben to warm them up and hand them out to people in the office after selecting his favorite, of course.

Slipping through the office door, I take a deep breath and lean against the cool wood, much like my first meeting with Kingsley two weeks ago. Only this time, I'm breathless for an entirely different reason.

## KINGSLEY



“*W*here the hell is this place?” I mutter as the GPS directs me down another gravel road, this one even less maintained than the last. The back wheels of my Tesla spin slightly as I take the turn, and I wince, knowing I’ll need to replace them after today.

I received a cryptic email from Clementine this afternoon with an address and instructions to dress warmly. I should have ignored it. A previous version of myself would have. But now? Now, I seem to hang on her every word. Now, I want to know everything about her. Now, I long to be in her presence. If throwing on a coat and gloves and driving thirty minutes outside of the city is what it takes to see Clementine, it’s a small price to pay, tires included.

Something happened yesterday. The usually bright, sunshiny event planner walked into my office with a fake smile plastered on her face and exhaustion clouding her emerald eyes. Everything about her was subdued, which isn’t like the Clementine I’ve come to know over the last fifteen days.

Her light was gone. She was putting on a good show, but I could see the heaviness in her heart. I could fucking feel the weight of the world on her shoulders, and when she confessed she was missing her grandma... I couldn’t hold back. I had to touch her in some way and comfort her.

I don’t know the first thing about caring for someone as precious as Clementine, but after having her in my arms, I don’t think I can let her go.

“The destination is on your right,” the GPS informs me.

Turning to the right, I see a wooden archway several dozen feet down the snow-covered lane with the words “Carlisle’s Christmas Tree Farm.”

Surely Clementine doesn’t think we’re going to chop down a tree today? Even as the question crosses my mind, I know it’s exactly the kind of thing Clementine would do. Instead of finding it annoying, her over-eagerness and cheery spirit make me want to kiss her nose and bundle her up in my arms again.

As soon as I pull into a parking spot, I see Clementine waving and jogging toward my car. She has on a teal winter coat and a fluffy white hat with matching gloves. Her cheeks and nose are slightly red from the chill in the air, and I know. I just know. She’s so fucking it for me.

*What do I do now?*

Opening my car door, I stand and wave at Clementine like the biggest dork with a crush. It’s so much more than a crush, though. When she smiles at me, my chest tightens to the point of pain. It aches. I *ache* for her.

“Hi, Kingsley!” she calls out. “Surprise!”

Clementine is a few feet from me, her arms outstretched as if showcasing the entire tree farm. I don’t have it in me to even pretend to be grumpy. The truth is, I haven’t stopped thinking about her since she left my office yesterday morning.

“Clementine,” I reply, shoving my hands in my coat pockets.

I’m unsure what the protocol is here. I want to hug her again, lean down, kiss her, and greet her like lovers, but we’re not there yet. I’d never forgive myself for taking things too far or making her uncomfortable. My girl is nearly fifteen years younger than me, and I get the sense she hasn’t had a relationship before, physical or otherwise.

“I wasn’t sure you’d show up,” she says, swaying closer.

Clementine squeezes her hands into fists at her sides, then relaxes them as if she’s nervous. Do I make her nervous?

“I’ll always show up for you,” I tell her, my words shocking me as much as her. “Uh,” I say, clearing my throat. “So, tree shopping? How many are we getting? One for every nook and cranny of the venue? Two? Or perhaps we’re decorating the office building today?”

Clementine giggles, and I close my eyes, letting her tinkling laughter fill me up. “No, we’ll have fake trees for the party, and I’m sure the floors in your building already have some holiday decor. This tree is for you.”

“Me?” I blink at her a few times.

She beams up at me and nods. “Yeah. Your office is the only place in the entire building without decorations, holiday, personal, or otherwise. You spend how many hours a day cooped up in there? I think you deserve a legit, real tree for your office.”

“A real tree that sheds pine needles and leaks sap?” I ask, looking at her skeptically. Of course, I’m going to do whatever she asks, but I have to give her a hard time first. I like seeing her rise to the challenge.

“Yup,” she confirms. “It’s all part of the experience. Come on. Let’s check out this lot over here.”

Clementine holds out her hand to me, and I stare at it, surprised that she offered it so freely. She takes my hesitation for rejection and quickly drops her hand. I lunge forward and wrap my fingers around her hand, securing it in mine as I match her steps.

Clementine looks down at our entwined hands, then up at me, her cheeks an even brighter shade of pink than before. I like it. Maybe a little too much. What else will make her blush?

“Tell me about the experience of having a real tree,” I say after we’ve walked a few moments in silence.

“You’ve never had a real Christmas tree before?!” Clementine stops short, making me come to a halt.

“You met my mother, right?” I deadpan. “She would never have gone for that. We had one of those huge silver trees in the

entryway of our house, adorned with over-the-top golden and silver ornaments. We never set it up, of course. My mother hired people for that. She wanted the appearance of a happy family without doing any of the actual work.”

I’m unsure why I told her all of that. I could’ve simply told her I’d never had a real tree. But somehow, Clementine makes me comfortable enough to share. Never thought I wanted that, but being able to talk to Clementine is freeing in a way I’ve never experienced.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she says as we continue our slow, casual walk through the tree farm. “I can’t picture your mother roughing it out in the woods to find the perfect tree.”

I chuckle dryly and nod. “Honestly? I hated Christmas growing up.”

It’s colder than I initially thought, but anywhere outside New York City is colder without the hustle and bustle of city life. A few snow flurries float in the air, getting caught on Clementine’s eyelashes.

She squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back. “It was the one day out of the year my parents pretended to like me and tolerate each other. I was miserable, knowing they would go back to ignoring me and cheating on each other the next day. I... I’m sorry. I can’t seem to stop talking around you,” I finish lamely.

“You don’t have to apologize for telling me about your childhood,” Clementine says softly. “It sounds like an uncaring home. I’m sorry you grew up like that.”

I shake my head, unable to accept her kindness. It’s ridiculous. I have nothing to complain about. “Poor rich kid, right?” I joke, but it comes off stilted and awkward, two things I’ve never struggled with before.

“You don’t have to dismiss your pain because you think someone else’s is worse. Sure, you’ve always had financial security and then some, but there’s a quote from a great philosopher who says mo’ money, mo’ problems.”

A laugh bursts out of me, shocking both of us. “Ah, yes, the great philosopher, The Notorious B.I.G.” I chuckle. “Aren’t you a little young to know that song?”

“Hey, a classic is a classic,” she counters, giving me another of her warm smiles.

“Classic? Ouch.” I put my hand over my chest as if in pain. Clementine knocks into me with her shoulder and rolls her eyes. “Whatever. You’re not *that* old.”

“Just old enough then,” I say, pausing to look down at her.

Clementine nods. “Just old enough.”

She sways closer to me, her lips parting slightly as her eyes lock onto mine. This is it. I’m going to taste her sweet lips for the first time, and when I do, I know I’ll be a goner.

“Can I help you two find anything?” someone calls out from a few yards away.

A growl rumbles up from some primal place inside me. I don’t like being interrupted when my girl is offering herself so sweetly to me.

“No,” I grunt.

Clementine swats me in the chest, giving me a chastising look. “He’s kidding,” she says to the tree farm worker. “We’re looking for a blue spruce tree.” My girl turns to me, a sparkle in her green eyes. “I thought we’d do your office in golds, blues, and greens. The blue spruce will be perfect.”

“Show us the biggest, fullest, bluest spruce you’ve got,” I say to the young man.

“Not everything has to be the biggest and best,” Clementine whispers as we follow the worker to one of the other lots on the property.

“Then what’s the point of having all this money?” I counter.

My girl rolls her eyes again, but there’s nothing she can do to hide her smile.

“Here we are,” the man announces, stopping in front of a massive twelve-foot-tall tree. “Biggest one here.”

One look at the gleam in Clementine’s round, green eyes, and I know I’ll do anything to get her to light up like that.

“We’ll take it,” I announce, pulling out my wallet. Handing the employee a wad of cash, I don’t even bother counting it. Any price is worth the look on Clementine’s face right now.

“Oh, that’s too much,” the man says.

“It’s for delivery, too. I assume you offer that?” He nods. “Good. I’ll need it delivered to my office building in the city. Is this enough?”

“More than enough,” he insists.

“Good. Keep the change.”

“But—”

“Happy holidays,” I say, the words sounding foreign on my lips. Clementine gasps, and I give her a wink. Damn if it doesn’t make her blush.

“Thank you, uh, sir. I’ll ensure it’s delivered by tomorrow.”

I give him a nod, wrap my hand around Clementine’s, and lead her back out to the parking lot.

“Well, that was easier than I expected,” she says. If I knew it’d take less than half an hour, I may have had the Uber driver wait here for me.”

“Uber driver?”

“Yeah, it’s this service where you order a ride from the Uber app on your phone...”

“Ha ha, yes. I know what Uber is,” I say, narrowing my eyes at her. She has the most adorably playful grin on her face, and I have the urge to taste it. “Wait, are you saying you took a ride from a stranger to a secluded spot in the dead of winter?”

“Um, I guess technically that’s what Uber is, but—”



“I’m giving you a ride,” I tell her matter-of-factly. No way in hell am I sending her away with someone else. She’s mine to look after now. Mine to protect and ensure she gets home safely.

“No, it’s fine,” she rushes to say.

“Clementine, it’s cold, it’s snowing, and I have a car with heated seats. This isn’t up for negotiation.”

“If you want to give me a ride back to the office, I’ll catch the next subway or bus to my apartment,” she hedges.

Why is she fighting me on this? I’m trying to be considerate. Trying to take care of her. Why won’t she let me? “How about you get in the car, and we’ll discuss where I’m dropping you off along the way.”

Clementine narrows her eyes but eventually agrees. “Fine. Thanks. I... my place isn’t...” She trails off, not finishing her thought.

I don’t know what she was going to say, but I’m glad she’s letting me give her a ride. I want to know so much more about her, starting with the space she calls home.

Opening the car door, I help Clementine inside and race around to the driver’s side, worried she might change her mind before I get behind the wheel. I start the car, turning on the seat warmers and blasting the heat to thaw a shivering Clementine.

I turn onto the main road, heading back to the city, perfectly content to have my woman beside me. She twists her hands in her lap and fidgets.

I reach over, covering her hand with mine. “What are you so nervous about?” I try to make my voice as calming as possible. I’ve never cared how I sounded to someone else, but with Clementine, I can tell she needs me to be gentle and proceed with caution.

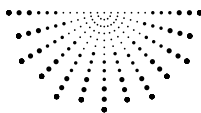
“I, um...” She turns her head and stares out the window in silence.

I'd be worried about coming on too strong by holding her hand, but she's squeezing it as if I'm the only thing keeping her grounded.

"It's okay," I finally say as we pull onto the interstate and head back into the city. "I'm right here."

Clementine nods but doesn't say anything in return. That's fine. I'll discover her secrets and reassure her that nothing can come between us. Now I've found her, no way in hell am I letting her go.

## CLEMENTINE



“Turn here,” I direct Kingsley as we drive through Manhattan.

“That’s where the office is,” he says flatly, giving me some serious side-eye.

“You said we’d discuss where you’re dropping me off on the way, and now we’re discussing it,” I counter, trying to muster up a cheeky smile. It must not work because Kingsley’s eyes narrow further.

“If I drop you off at the office, I’ll only follow you onto the subway and all the way to your front door.”

I glare at him, then let out a defeated sigh. “Fine. But I’m not sure why you’re so dead set on driving me all the way home. Not to brag, but I’ve gotten there by myself every day for the entire four months I’ve been here.”

“Good to know. But now you don’t have to,” is all he says.

I finally give Kingsley my address, noting his slight look of disappointment at the sketchy neighborhood where my apartment is located before he schools his expression. I was hoping to avoid that, but here we are.

He changes course and makes his way out of the jungle of skyscrapers, designer boutiques, and billion-dollar penthouses.

We approach my street, and I direct him to turn right. Kingsley slows, and I’m sure he sees the men huddled around

the entrance of my apartment building, eyeing up his expensive car. The only people who drive anything remotely close to this are drug dealers. Everyone else finds out quickly that their nice cars will be stripped for parts if left alone in this neighborhood.

“You can let me out here,” I insist, not wanting him to pull into the parking lot and cause more of a scene. Of course, the guys hanging around the front door are the same jerks who have been blasting their music all week.

“Which one is yours?” he demands as he drives straight into the lot despite my attempt to keep him away.

I reel a bit at his harsh tone but point to my apartment. “Unit 2,” I say softly. I knew he’d judge me for my shitty living situation, which is precisely why I didn’t want him to drop me off.

“Ground floor?” he grunts.

I nod.

“Jesus,” he mutters.

I hate the judgment, the look of anger and disappointment. Something snaps, and I turn to face Kingsley, righteous indignation rising and burning a hole in my chest. “Look, I get it. I’m poor and disgusting, and you disapprove of where I live. I moved here with what I thought was enough money from my grandma’s life insurance, but that dried up after the second month, and now I’m stuck here, alone in the world, clinging to a job that I hope one day will pay me a livable wage. What I don’t need right now is the most successful real estate developer in the city making me feel like shit for living the only way I can.”

I finish my rant and suck in a huge breath, a bit lightheaded from yelling. My heart is jackhammering in my chest, and stupid tears threaten to spill down my cheeks.

“Clementine,” Kingsley says softly, all the anger from his voice drained and replaced with gentleness. “I’m not judging you or your living situation. I’m worried about you. A young woman with a ground-floor apartment in this part of the city?”

I'm surprised your place hasn't been broken into by now. Plus, a drug deal is happening a dozen feet from us. It's no place for you."

I shrug, unsure what he wants me to do about any of those things.

"I have a guest room," he suddenly says as if it's just occurred to him. "Actually, I have three. I don't think anyone has ever stayed over, but the sheets get washed and changed once a week, regardless. You'll be staying with me."

I blink a few times, my mind spinning with this new proposal. Well, it's not so much a proposal as a declaration. The thing is... I hate my apartment. I hate my neighbors. I hate the bars on my windows. I hate that I only get hot water if I shower at five in the morning. I hate crying myself to sleep on my couch, wondering if I'll ever be as happy or content as when my grandma was alive.

But this offer is too good to be true. My mind has reservations, but my silly heart is already half in love with Kingsley Bowman.

"Are you even going to ask?"

Kingsley grins, and God, it's all I can do not to reach over, brush my fingers over his lips, and kiss him. Crazy, I know. But he makes me feel all sorts of things.

He opens his mouth to respond when someone shouts at us.

"Hey! Yo, blondie!" my stupid neighbor says from his spot by the front door. "Maybe you'll join our party this time instead of trying to crash it?"

The engine revs, and before I realize what's happening, Kingsley hits the gas, and the car surges forward, coming to a screeching halt right in front of the group of drunk jerks.

"Holy shit!"

"What the fuck, man?"

"Goddamnit, what the hell?"

The men continue to hurl insults and swear words as Kingsley reverses and peels out of the parking lot.

“No way in hell am I leaving the most precious woman in the world with those vile pieces of shit. You’ll stay with me where I can keep you safe.”

*Precious? Me?*

“I know I’m acting possessed,” Kingsley continues as he winds through traffic. He grips the steering wheel so tightly his fingers turn white. “I can’t... I wouldn’t sleep thinking about you there. I should’ve figured it out sooner. Should’ve ensured you were safe.”

He’s talking more to himself by the end of his thought, and I’m having a hard time accepting that Kingsley-freaking-Bowman thinks I’m precious and worth protecting.

I’m not surprised when we pull into a private, underground parking lot fifteen minutes later. Kingsley helps me out of the car and guides me to the elevator, which of course, leads straight up to his penthouse.

“I’ll give you the tour later,” he says, stepping out of the elevator. “You probably want a warm shower and a change of clothes.”

“Too bad all my clothes are back at my place,” I deadpan.

Kingsley turns to face me, resting his hands on my shoulders as his dark eyes latch onto mine. “Believe it or not, I have clothes here.” I roll my eyes at him, but the serious look never leaves his face. “Let me take care of you,” he murmurs.

“Why?” I whisper.

Kingsley furrows his brow at my question, then slowly slides one from my shoulder to gently cup my face. “I’ll tell you when you get out of the shower.”

I narrow my eyes at him, and Kingsley rewards me with another grin. I could get used to this.

He leads me to one of the three bathrooms, and shows me where the towels are. Kingsley says he’ll have a change of

clothes for me right outside the door whenever I'm ready, then heads down the hall, leaving me to my thoughts.

And boy, do I have thoughts.

By the time I step out of the shower and dry off with one of the towels on the heated rack, all my feelings and thoughts have boiled down into one: lust.

Standing naked in Kingsley's steam-filled bathroom, I can't deny that everything feels so sensitive, from my warm skin and hardened nipples to my slick, aching pussy. I've gone through such an emotional rollercoaster the last two days, from falling apart in Kingsley's arms to picking out a Christmas tree and having him open up to me about his parents. And now, I can't deny it any longer.

I want Kingsley Bowman. I want him to be my first everything. I hope he'll also be my last.

After slipping on the oversized T-shirt Kingsley left outside the door, I attempt to pull on the sweatpants, but they keep slipping off. The shirt is nearly as long as a dress, so I decide to go for it. If he wants me, too, maybe this will give him a hint.

I look at myself in the mirror, wiping away the condensation so I can see my face. Am I doing this? I have no idea how to flirt or how to get a man to kiss me, let alone a gorgeous, muscled, filthy rich and successful man.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I spin on my heel and open the bathroom door. One foot in front of the other, I make my way down the hall and into the living room, the only other place I've seen in his huge penthouse.

I get distracted by the gold marble side table with a lovely vase featured in the center.

"Clementine," Kingsley rasps, drawing my attention toward his voice.

He's sitting on the couch wearing a black T-shirt stretched across his chest and biceps and a pair of black joggers. His feet are bare, and something about that makes this moment even more intimate.

“Um, hey,” I say softly, more aware than ever that my legs are on display.

His eyes roam up my calves and thighs, pausing on my chest. The strong, powerful man clenches his jaw and flares his nostrils, looking almost angry.

I’m not wearing underwear or a bra, and I feel unbearably vulnerable the longer Kingsley stares at me in silence. “I can go change—”

“Come here, beautiful,” he says, cutting me off.

His voice sounds strained, and the closer I get to him, the more I realize... he likes what he sees. *Beautiful?* God, I hope he wants me the same way I want him.

I stop in front of Kingsley, who is still sitting on the couch. He holds out his hands, and I place mine there, holding his gaze.

“You’re stunning,” he murmurs, urging me to take another step forward. “I don’t deserve to, but...” Kingsley tugs me closer, settling me in between his spread legs. I’m helpless to do anything but follow his lead. “Can I hold you, Clementine? Can I touch you?”

He looks up at me, letting me see his desire. His hunger. His need. I need him, too.

“Yes, please,” I breathe. “I-I think I’d like that.”

“I’ll make sure you do,” he replies, his voice deep and filled with lust.

His large, warm hands slide up my legs until he reaches the hem of the long shirt I’m wearing. Slipping his thumbs underneath the fabric, he caresses my skin, making my legs tremble and my breath catch in my throat.

Kingsley takes advantage of my nearly debilitating arousal and pulls me closer, his hands wrapping around my thighs and urging me to straddle him. I hesitate slightly, but I can’t look away from his intense gaze. It’s more than lust shining in his eyes; there’s tenderness as well. I don’t know how that’s even possible, but it’s true.



I surrender to him completely, letting him settle me on his lap. He grunts in approval, and the sound travels through me, making my pussy clench.

“I knew you’d feel amazing,” he says softly, more to himself than to me. “Jesus, I can feel your heat. You need this, too? Need my touch?”

“Yes. God, yes,” I moan, loving his dirty words. He seems like he’s barely holding something back, like I drive him as crazy as he drives me.

Kingsley grips my hips and helps me rock against his hardening length. My hands glide up his chest and shoulders, and I tangle my fingers in his hair, pulling his head back so he has to look at me. I don’t know what I’m doing. I only know I need more. Every part of me responds to every part of him. When his breaths grow shallow, mine do, too. When he rolls his hips, I do, too. When he groans and closes his eyes, I do, too.

When I open them again, Kingsley is looking right at me. His jaw clenches and his nostrils flare. He slides his hands from my hips down to my ass, cupping me there, squeezing the soft flesh and grinding my body on his.

“Kingsley...” I gasp, tightening my grip on his hair.

I pull on the strands as a surge of pleasure rolls through me, making my muscles tense and my thighs shake. I’m so wet, so sensitive, my thighs twitch every time my clit scrapes against the fabric of his pants.

He curses under his breath, trembling as I jerk in his arms and grind against his thick, hard cock. “Clementine,” he growls right before pressing his lips to mine.

His kiss destroys me. It’s slow, soft, and seductive, shredding me into little ribbons of pliant pleasure. He sinks into me like I’m some decadent dessert, loving my mouth while his hands grip me tightly and crush me into his hard body.

I whimper into his mouth, making him groan. Kingsley slips his hands under my shirt, letting them wander up and

down the bare skin of my back. God, I can't seem to control my body from rubbing against his, my pussy grinding down on him, my nipples scraping the hard planes of his chest.

"More," I whisper into his slightly parted lips before pulling the bottom one through my teeth. "I need more, Kingsley."

"Goddamn right you do," he groans, covering my mouth with his.

His tongue slides against mine in needy, desperate strokes. I'm right there with him. Whatever fire he's lit in my core is raging out of control, and only Kingsley can provide relief.

The next second, I'm lifted, and the back of my thighs make contact with the cool marble of a side table matching the one I saw earlier.

He steps between my legs and nuzzles into my neck, his cinnamon and leather scent surrounding me as his hands grip my hips. I love it. I love how he's taking charge like he knows exactly what he wants to do to me.

I can't wait.

Kingsley breathes against my parted lips, his thumb pulling my chin down. He fills my mouth with his breath once, twice, then a slow, rolling lick of his tongue. A shudder wracks his body and he grabs my knees, spreading them wide and jerking me to the edge of the table.

"Your lips are so fucking sweet, Clementine," he murmurs before diving back in.

His hands trail up the insides of my bare thighs, and I whimper into his mouth when his thumbs brush against my most sensitive areas.

"M-more," I stutter, unable to hide the desperation in my shaky voice.

"So wet for me," Kingsley grunts. His lips brush the shell of my ear, making me shiver. Even that light, teasing touch makes me ache for so much more. "Can I make you come, beautiful?"

I nod and wiggle my hips, trying to get him right where I'm hurting the most. "Please," I whisper, fisting his shirt.

Kingsley doesn't waste a single second. His fingers slide through my soaking wet folds, stroking me up and down but never quite touching me where I need him the most. I tilt my hips, seeking relief, and Kingsley chuckles darkly.

"You need something from me?"

"Mmmhm," is about all I can say at the moment.

"Need me to fingerfuck this tight, wet little pussy?"

"Y-Yesss," I moan.

"Need me to make you come?"

I nod, then gasp and fall forward into his chest as he rubs the rough pad of his finger over my clit. Kingsley grunts in approval before crashing his lips down on mine. I immediately open up for him, letting him take control. I'm at his mercy, completely surrendered to the pleasure only he can bring.

When his thick finger circles my pulsing entrance, I cry out, the jagged, broken sound echoing around the office. I tense and release, more of my arousal dripping from me and coating his hand.

"God, Clementine. So responsive," he whispers, more to himself than to me.

I have no idea what I'm doing, but my body does. Primal instinct takes over as lust trickles through every vein, every cell, hitting me deep in my core. Releasing my hold on him, I lean back, setting my hands on the table behind me. I open my legs wider and tip my head back, letting him do whatever he wants to me.

Kingsley growls, the savage sound rattling my bones and making me impossibly wetter for him. Her leans over me, biting down on my exposed neck as his finger thrusts into me, stretching me wide open.

"Shit, beautiful. How are you so damn tight?" he groans.

I don't have a voice, let alone an answer for him.

Kingsley slowly slides in and out of me while grinding the heel of his hand against my clit. I arch my back, shoving my cunt down on his finger, silently begging for more. Kingsley gladly obliges. He shoves two fingers inside me, curling them up and stroking some incredibly sensitive spot over and over.

“Oh, God,” I whimper. “K-Kingsley, fuck...”

“That’s it, Clementine. I feel you. I feel this tight little cunt squeezing me so damn good. I know you want to come for me.”

All I can do is whimper. My soft, urgent cries grow louder and louder as the pressure deep in my core expands and pushes all the air from my lungs. Kingsley winds his fingers into my hair while still owning my pleasure and my pussy with his other hand.

He tugs gently but firmly on my long locks, forcing my gaze to meet his. Hungry, almost feral brown eyes stare back at me. Our heavy breaths mingle, his lips barely touching mine.

“Come for me, baby. Come on my fingers. Fill my hand up with your release. I want it all. It’s mine.”

His dirty words make me shiver and spread my legs wider, wanting that. Wanting to obey him. Wanting to give him everything he demands of me.

“I-I-I’m...”

“Yes. Fuck, yes,” he groans right before swallowing down my cries of pleasure.

A deep tug in my lower belly precedes an incredible, painful, blissful rush of liquid heat. All at once, my orgasm erupts from my core. Wave after wave of molten lava floods my body and singes my nerves as I spasm and jerk and gasp for air.

Kingsley groans, his fist tightening in my hair while his other hand never lets up its assault on my pussy. He doesn’t slow, doesn’t let me catch my breath before a second orgasm splinters into the first one. My arms and legs shake, and all I

know are his fingers scissoring inside me, stretching, stroking, and owning me completely.

I'm drained of every damn thing when he pulls his hand from between my legs, nearly collapsing on top of the table. Kingsley grins, a dark, satisfied gleam in his eyes. I'm shocked when he lifts his fingers to his lips and sucks off my juices. A whimper falls from my lips when he closes his eyes and growls.

Kingsley pulls me up and kisses me, letting me taste myself on his tongue. I'm still out of breath and trembling when we break apart.

"You okay, Clementine?" he murmurs, kissing the top of my head as he wraps me in his arms.

"Yeah," I breathe as I melt into his embrace. "Can't. Move."

Kingsley chuckles, the deep sound vibrating through him and into me.

"I've got you," he says seconds before lifting me into his arms.

"Hey!" I shriek, followed by a giggle.

"Gonna feed you, then tuck you in," he informs me as he strides into the immaculate kitchen.

Kingsley carefully sets me down on a stool behind the breakfast bar overlooking the kitchen. He kisses my forehead, then looks me up and down and gives a satisfied nod. He's freaking adorable, the way he's inspecting the job he did carrying me and getting me settled in a chair.

Thirty minutes and two grilled cheese sandwiches later, Kingsley spins me on the stool and scoops me up again. I wrap my arms around his neck and shake my head at him.

"I'm fine to walk on my own now," I tell him.

He shrugs and keeps walking down the hall until he stops in front of an open door, presumably the room I'll be staying in. For now, anyway. Obviously, I'm not about to move in with Kingsley. That would be ridiculous.

“As much as I want you in my bed tonight, I want you to get a good night’s sleep. We can talk more tomorrow, okay?”

I nod, and Kingsley steps inside the room, setting me down on my feet in front of the king-sized canopy bed.

“Who even are you?” I ask, tilting my head.

Kingsley smiles softly, making my heart melt. “I’m trying to take care of you.”

“But... why? You never told me earlier.”

The confusing, mesmerizing, sexy-as-hell man cups my cheeks, turning my face so we’re eye to eye. Deep, dark brown irises swirl with so many emotions it nearly brings me to tears.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he murmurs. “You’re mine.”

I gasp, and Kingsley captures the sound with his mouth, kissing me in slow, steady strokes like we have a lifetime filled with moments like this.

We finally break apart, and Kingsley leans over to pull down the blanket and sheets on the bed. “Get in, beautiful. Get some rest.”

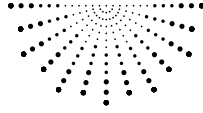
All I can do is nod and climb under the covers.

Kingsley presses the sweetest kiss to my forehead and whispers, “I’m right next door. Come find me when you wake up.”

I smile and nod, but my mind is racing with everything that happened tonight. I’m positive I’ll have another sleepless night, but the bed is so soft and comfortable, my eyes are closed before Kingsley leaves the room.

The last thing I remember is feeling safer and warmer than I have since my grandma passed. And it’s all thanks to Kingsley Bowman.

## KINGSLEY



I step out of the shower and dry off, thinking over everything that happened last night. Even after a rigorous morning workout and a scalding hot shower, I'm still antsy. I know I won't feel settled until I see Clementine again and ensure she's okay.

I checked on her when my alarm went off at five and again when I finished my workout. Both times, she was snuggled up under the covers, surrounded by pillows, and smiling so softly I didn't have the heart to wake her.

Stepping out of my ensuite bathroom, I head to my walk-in closet and browse my suit options before picking a charcoal one and a black button-up. When I'm all dressed, I hit the button for my automatic tie rack, watching the thing slowly spin until I see a green silk tie.

*Perfect. It matches Clementine's eyes.*

My phone dings with an incoming email. It's my automatic reflex to check it, though I have a feeling with Clementine in my life, I'll be putting my phone on silent when I'm home.

I almost slip my phone back into my pocket, but my eyes catch on the subject line of the email. It's about a property up in the Smoky Mountains that I haven't thought of in years. My company originally acquired the plot of land over a decade ago, maybe even fifteen years at this point. The plan was to turn it into a rustic cabin resort getaway, but that went to shit after the third construction crew quit.

Apparently, the conditions up on the mountain are not conducive to the kind of work we wanted to be done, and the trek up and down the mountain everyday was too much. The whole endeavor was a bust, and the land has sat vacant and forgotten. Until now.

The text of the email is short and to the point. The man, Wilder, recently got out of the military and is looking for a plot of land away from society. To be honest, he nailed the location, but I'm not sure he realizes what he's taking on.

There's a number at the bottom of the email, and I decide to give him a quick call. I can't imagine he'll still want the property once I give him the full history. An earlier version of myself would have jumped at the opportunity to dump a sale on someone stupid enough to not do their research, but now... I guess now, I just want to be a better person. I know exactly who to thank for that change.

"Yeah?" comes the gruff voice on the other end of the line. No hello, no greeting. That's fine by me. That will only make this call quicker so I can get back to my woman.

"Wilder? This is Kingsley Bowman, and I just received your email about the plot up in the Smokies. I just wanted to—"

"I'll pay over the asking price," he grunts. It's almost like each word hurts him. Or maybe he's just out of practice with talking. I can relate, though I'm getting better.

"The price isn't the issue," I start. "I can't in good conscience sell you the land without letting you know it's extremely difficult terrain to build on."

"Tell your conscience thanks, but I know what I'm doing."

"We hired three construction crews to clear the land and lay the foundations, and all three quit."

"Good thing I'm not bringing a crew then," he mutters.

"You're going to do everything on your own?" I ask, pulling the phone away from my ear and staring at it for a second.



“Are you talking yourself out of a sale?” Wilder finally answers.

“No, I just—”

“Got it. It’s dangerous, you think it’s a bad investment, you want to make sure I know what I’m getting myself into. Your advice has been heard and ignored. I’ll go five thousand above the asking price if you send the paperwork my way today.”

I blink a few times, then nod my head, even though he can’t see me. “Deal. Thank you for your business.”

Wilder grunts and then hangs up. Huh. I wonder what his story is.

I can figure that out later when I’m finalizing the paperwork. Right now, I have a sexy-as-hell angel in my bed that needs my attention.

I don’t know my woman’s morning routine yet, but I’m eager to discover everything about her. As I enter the kitchen, I get my first glimpse of what a typical morning looks like for Clementine. I can tell right away that she’s not a morning person, but I don’t mind. That means I’ll be able to wake up early and make her breakfast in bed.

She’s bent over the counter, poking different buttons on my coffee maker, and grumbling to herself. Her wavy blonde hair is twisted into a knot on top of her head. Frizzy strands have escaped, catching the morning light and making her look like a goddamn angel with a glowing halo surrounding her frame.

Even in her disheveled, groggy state, Clementine is the most adorable, stunning creature I’ve ever seen. Her curves fill out my oversized shirt, and from this angle, while she leans over the counter, I have a perfect view of her ass and thick, creamy thighs.

I try to bite back my groan, but Clementine must hear it anyway. She looks at me over her shoulder, her cheeks glowing pink.

“Oh. Hi. Hey,” she says, clearly surprised by my presence. “I was about to make coffee and get dressed, but I didn’t

realize there were coffee machines on the market more complex than a frickin' rocket ship."

Clementine glares at the kitchen appliance as if it's being difficult on purpose, pulling an amused chuckle from me as I walk further into the kitchen and hold my hand out for her to take. She easily slides her hand in mine, and I gently tug her forward until she's pressed against my chest with my arms wrapped around her.

"How about I make coffee while you get dressed?" I whisper into the top of her head before kissing her there.

Clementine leans back slightly so I can see her sparkling green eyes. "I only have my clothes from yesterday, which aren't very professional. Just jeans and a sweatshirt."

"Well, it's a good thing I had my personal shopper drop off a few outfits for you to try on," I say with a smile. I love how her eyes widen, and I vow to surprise her with gifts all the time.

"Wait, really? Like, they're *here*? Hold on, you bought me clothes?" Clementine peers up at me in disbelief.

I lean down, brushing my lips up her neck, pausing to nip the sensitive spot below her ear. "I've also felt you come on my hand and heard your cries of ecstasy," I murmur into the shell of her ear. Her breath catches in her throat, and I hum with dark satisfaction, knowing I can get my girl worked up with my words alone. "So maybe clothes aren't that big of a deal, hmm?"

Clementine takes a step back, her face flushed and breathing shallow. She composes herself and narrows her eyes at me. I laugh, and her faux frown drops in an instant, replaced by the sweetest, most genuine smile.

"I like your laugh," she says softly.

"I like *you*," I tell her, unsure what to do with her kind words. Can't say anyone has ever mentioned my laugh, but that's probably because it's been too damn long since I've had a reason to be joyful.

"How did you know my size?"

“Let’s just say I’ve been studying you and your curves for a lot longer than the last couple of days. You drive me crazy, you know that, right?” She smiles and nods, nibbling her bottom lip. “Do you have to go into your office today?” I ask.

She purses her lips and furrows her brow, thinking about my question. So damn adorable.

“No, I was planning on checking in with all the vendors and nailing down the schedule so we’re on the same page and all that. Can you believe the party is tomorrow?”

“I can’t believe you planned an entire event with little to no help from the grumpy asshole in the corner office.”

“You’re right. I am kind of amazing,” she says, lifting her chin and sashaying past me to the couch, where five bags of clothes my shopper purchased and dropped off are waiting. “Holy crap, you know I only wear one outfit at a time, right? And usually just one per day,” she calls out from the living room.

I grin and join her, gathering the bags and nodding toward the room she stayed in last night. “And now you have options. Go ahead and pick out your favorite while I make coffee.”

Clementine furrows her brow. Her green eyes dart from the bags of clothes to my face, then back to the clothes. I worry for a moment that this is too much, but then my girl giggles, grabs the bags from my hands, and races down the hall to try them all on.

Thirty minutes later, we’ve had coffee and scones, and we’re on our way to Clementine’s first stop, Bergman’s Boutique on 5th. They sell many things, so I’m told, from ball gowns to diamond-encrusted napkin holders. Apparently, we’re renting several decorative items for the table centerpieces.

I don’t care what the hell we’re doing as long as I’m with Clementine. Looking over at her now, I can’t stop my eyes from lingering on the slight cleavage peeking from her blouse. I had my personal shopper pick out some casual pants and

tops, as well as more professional attire. The majority of the clothing items, however, were Christmas-themed.

My girl chose a dark green blouse with hand-stitched snowflakes on the sleeves and collar. Her skirt is red and green plaid, and she finished the look with black tights with more snowflakes to match her shirt.

“This is the place!” Clementine announces, pointing at a storefront with an immaculate golden sign.

I pull over, finding a spot to park on the crowded streets. Usually, I’d have a driver, but I want my woman all to myself today.

We walk in, and Clementine is all business. She’s bright and cheery, of course, but I’ve never seen her in action while working. Well, except for when she was trying to get my opinion on something, but I imagine most of the people she works with aren’t as difficult as I am.

I hang back while she does her thing and find myself wandering the aisles of gowns and fancy dresses. I doubt my woman has anything like this, and I suddenly have the need to provide it for her. I want her to have everything, including a glittery dress that sparkles almost as much as she does.

I somehow sense her nearby, and I look up, my eyes fixed on her gorgeous features and soft, wistful smile. Clementine is halfway down the next aisle, her hand reaching toward one of the gowns with a bodice covered in black sequins. The skirt of the dress is made of lace and taffeta, giving it the perfect Disney princess shape.

Clementine finds the price tag and immediately stops touching the dress as if she might ruin it and have to pay full price. Good thing that’s exactly what I plan to do. Once I have a little fun, first.

“Hey, beautiful,” I say as I walk up behind her.

“Hey.” She gives me the cutest little smile.

“I want to show you something over here.” I take her hand and guide her to the back of the store, where the dressing rooms are.

She lifts an eyebrow in question but follows me until I open one of the doors and lead her inside. “What are—”

Before she can finish her question, I press her against the closed door of the dressing room and devour her lips. I slide my hands up and down her curves, gripping her juicy ass and helping her roll her hips against me.

“God, Clementine,” I rasp, nearly out of breath. I can’t keep my hands off her, and I don’t want to. “Need to taste you.”

I sound like a feral beast and worry for a second I’m coming on too strong. But then Clementine grips my hair and angles my head to kiss me. *Goddamn*, the woman knows how to drive me insane with that mouth of hers. I can’t wait to feel her hot little tongue lapping at my dick.

I kiss her until we’re both breathless. “Are you with me, Clementine?” I ask once I can speak again.

“You’re going to... to... right here?”

I grin at the fact that she can’t put into words what we’re going to do. But not here. Not that, anyway. “Baby, I’m not going fuck you in this dressing room, however much I really, *really* want to. But I need to taste you, Clementine.”

“T-taste?” she asks, sincerely confused.

God, she’s so innocent. I love it.

Her cheeks flush a bright red, and her eyes widen. “Oh. *Oh!* No one’s ever, I mean, I haven’t ever... Wait, are you like for real right now?”

“Dead serious, beautiful. I want to taste that sweet pussy. I want your honey on my lips. I want my tongue buried deep inside your cunt when you come for me. Is that okay with you?”

I’ve never spoken like this to anyone, never had the desire to. Clementine seems to love it as much as I do, which makes my dick impossibly harder.

She nods slowly. “Yes, please.”

I chuckle darkly. “How can I deny you anything when you ask me so sweetly?”

Before she can respond, I drop to my knees, shove her skirt up her thighs, and pull down her tights. I can smell her arousal the closer I get to her core. I growl when I see her juices dripping down the insides of her thighs.

“So fucking wet,” I growl. “No panties?”

“Your shopper didn’t include any,” she whispers, looking genuinely embarrassed.

She has absolutely no idea the effect she has on me, no idea about her own sexuality. Hell, yes, I want to be the man to show her how much pleasure her body can take.

“Don’t ever apologize for that, Clementine,” I say, looking up at her from between her thighs. “Never, ever say sorry for being so wet and ready for me. You’re incredible, love.”

I didn’t mean to call her *love*, not yet, at least, but Clementine seems pretty distracted right now. She nods and tangles her fingers in my hair, letting me know she wants more. She has no idea how much I have to give.

I grin at her and dip my head to run my nose through her soaking folds, breathing her in. I growl and grip her hips harder as her scent turns me into some sort of rabid beast. I flatten my tongue and take my first lick of her sweetness. I can’t believe I’m the first to taste her and be the first to have her completely.

I lick every inch of her before sliding my fingers inside her pussy nice and deep. She moans as her thighs tighten around my head, but I push her legs apart, guiding one over my shoulder. I lap, suck, and lick at her clit while my fingers slide in and out of her tight little hole.

Her cunt is incredible, delicious, and honey-sweet. I can’t help myself; I growl softly as I suck and lick her faster, faster, faster, her slick juices dripping down my chin. I’m rock hard and pulsing with need. I want her to come. Need it like air.

“Let me taste it,” I command. “Let me taste every drop.”

“Yes,” she pants. “Oh, my god, Kingsley. Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop...”

“Say my fucking name again.”

“Kingsley! King... King,” she pants, her breathy whimpers making precum leak from my dick like a faucet. God, I like being her King. She’s sure as hell my Queen.

I growl and lick her faster, fuck her with my fingers harder. I don’t stop. I don’t show mercy. I chase her pleasure until she chokes out a sob and comes so damn hard.

She trembles and tenses and shakes uncontrollably in my hands. I taste every drop, losing my damn mind when my sexy woman floods my mouth again. I love it, love her soft moans, her smell, her wet heat as it slides down my tongue.

I straighten Clementine’s tights and skirt and glide up her body, kissing her soundly so she can taste herself. She melts into me, resting her head on my shoulder and shaking slightly. I cup the back of her neck and massage her gently, bringing her back down.

“You okay, baby?” I murmur into her hair.

“Yup,” she answers breathlessly.

I grin and kiss her forehead, taking a step back to adjust my painfully hard erection. Clementine is enraptured in pleasure, and I can’t wait to feel it all with her. Next time she comes, I want to be deep inside her tight little pussy, feeling it from the inside out.

“Um, so, that was... thanks,” she says, immediately rolling her eyes at herself.

“There’s more where that came from,” I tell her, resting a hand on the wall next to her head. Jesus, her glassy eyes and wet lips are so tempting, but I need to get her somewhere more private before I touch her again.

“That would be agreeable with me,” she says, swaying ever closer.

“Oh, yeah?” I say with a chuckle and a grin.

Clementine is still flushed and catching her breath, but she nods and manages a wink. So damn cute.

“You stay here for a beat, then meet me back at the car.”

“What? Oh!” Her expression turns from confused to shocked. “We’re in *public*,” she whispers.

“I know,” I whisper back, cupping her chin and turning her face toward me. “Imagine what I’ll do with you once I get you home.”

Clementine’s face turns bright red, but she can’t hide the desire and lust shining in her eyes. Instead of responding, she opens the door and shoves me out. I chuckle while she sighs, but I know she loves it. My sweet Christmas angel may be innocent, but she knows what she wants. And I’m the lucky bastard who’s going to give it to her.

I clear my throat and adjust my tie, willing my dick to stand down enough for me to function. The older woman behind the cash register gives me a knowing look, but I simply shrug, making no apologies for giving my girl two incredible orgasms.

Besides, I don’t think the saleswoman will mind when I purchase the gown Clementine was looking at earlier, along with matching shoes and jewelry.

I look over my shoulder to ensure Clementine is still in the dressing room, then walk up to the register and hand the woman my black AmEx and my business card. “Keep these on file. My assistant will be by later this afternoon to purchase this dress,” I say, holding up the gorgeous gown, “as well as matching accessories.”

The saleswoman’s scowl turns into a smile, and I know she’s thinking about the commission she’ll take home from this sale. “That’s one lucky girl,” she says with a wink.

“I’m by far the luckier one,” I tell her, unable to keep the sappy smile off my face.

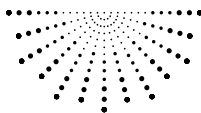
We exchange the customary holiday wishes, and I head out to the car, waiting for my Clementine. Before she arrives, I quickly call Ben and relay the plan to him. He’s far too excited



about the romantic gesture, but I suppose that's a good thing. He loves shopping, and I told him if he could find the perfect shoes and jewelry, he could also get something from the store.

I assume his squeal of excitement is confirmation that he's up for my plan. I hope Clementine likes her surprise.

## CLEMENTINE



*K*ingsley has been my chauffeur all day, and I won't lie; a girl could get used to this treatment. He's taken me to every boutique, catering company, and rental store I've asked him to, and he's been attentive, sweet, and unbearably sexy.

"Where next?" he asks as he joins me in the car.

Kingsley has been such a gentleman, helping me in and out of the car at each place we stop. It's partially so he can touch me and make me tingly all over, but it's also a protective gesture.

"That was the last stop," I tell him, fidgeting slightly in my seat.

We haven't discussed what happens now. I stayed the night with Kingsley, though in separate beds, and he hung out with me all day while I ran around and got everything ready for the party. Is he going to take me back to my apartment? The other residents and their drug habits haven't changed since he refused to drop me off yesterday. That only leaves going back to his place, but I don't want to assume...

"Perfect timing. You have a package waiting at home," Kingsley says as he starts the car and glides into traffic effortlessly. Driving in the city seems terrifying, and I'm thankful I don't have a car.

"How do you know I have something at my apartment?" I question. My stomach drops a little, knowing our time together is coming to an end.

Kingsley glances at me with a confused look and one brow raised. “I meant our home. My home, technically, but it’s yours now, too.”

His attention is back on the road, but I keep staring at him, trying to digest his words. *Our home?*

“Shit, was that obsessive? I can’t stand the thought of—”

“Thank you,” I whisper, placing my hand on his thigh.

Kingsley grips the steering wheel with one hand and places the other over mine. “I know we still have a lot to talk about, but I’m sure about this. Let me prove it to you.” He squeezes my hand, and I tighten my grip on his thigh. “Careful,” he warns. I smirk, sliding my hand further up his thigh. “Baby, it’s been a long fucking day of having your taste in my mouth and not being able to lay you out and do it all over again.”

“Well, who’s fault is that?” I tease, my heart racing in my chest. How is this man so irresistibly sexy and sweet at the same time?

“I have no regrets, only unfinished business,” he says smoothly, giving me a wink.

I giggle and roll my eyes, but I love seeing this playful, flirty side of him.

Before long, we’re pulling into the underground parking lot of Kingsley’s building. He helps me out like he’s done all day. But this time, he walks me backward and presses me against the side of the car, caging me in. I look up as he looks down, and our lips collide in an all-consuming kiss.

He dives into my mouth, stroking my tongue with his and making me moan softly. Kingsley rests his hand over my throat, lightly wrapping his fingers around it and causing a sharp, wicked desire to wash over me and pulse through my veins.

“So responsive,” he grunts, sliding his hand down my neck and chest until he’s cupping my breast.

I arch my back, pressing myself further into his grasp, showing him I want more. I want whatever he’s willing to give

me.

One minute, he's caressing my curves and winding me up tighter and tighter, and the next, he's stepping away from me. I'm left sagging against the car and frowning at him. Kingsley smirks, and yup, it's just as sexy as I thought it would be.

"First, your surprise. Then..." He trails off, but the look he gives me lets me know exactly what he's thinking. Or at least, I hope.

"Fine," I say exasperatedly, though he knows I'm mostly kidding.

We take the private elevator up to his penthouse, *our* penthouse, apparently, and sure enough, a large cream-colored box with a gorgeous red silk ribbon tied around it is waiting for me. Three red bags with matching cream tissue paper are artfully arranged around the box, which is clearly the centerpiece.

"Go on. Open it," Kingsley urges.

I look up at him, at the gifts spread out before me, then back at Kingsley. He looks... joyful. Excited. *Alive*. I hope I had a little something to do with that.

I crouch next to the pile of presents and pull the ribbon off the box, carefully opening the lid. When I see what's inside, I blink a few times, unsure I can trust what's in front of me. "Wh... How... What? H-how did you know...?"

I saw this dress at the first place we visited this morning. I have no reason to wear it and even less means with which to purchase it. This dress cost nearly three thousand dollars. I can't imagine what's in the other bags and how much all this cost him.

I don't realize I'm crying until Kingsley kneels next to me, taking my hands in his. "What did I do? I thought it was a good present, but is it too much? I want you to come with me to the party. As my date," he rushes to say.

I'm having a hard time catching up with everything that's happening.

“And I saw you looking at that dress earlier,” he continues. The poor guy looks like he’s about to have a panic attack. “I thought you liked it, so I had Ben go back and get it, along with everything else you’ll need, but if you want a different gown—”

“Kingsley, this is incredible,” I whisper, hoping to stop him from spiraling. “These are happy tears. A little overwhelming, but in a good way because I can’t believe you did this for me.” I look over the dress, and it’s even more stunning than I remember. “It must have cost you a fortune. I don’t even know what to say.”

“Say you’ll go with me,” Kingsley murmurs as he stands to his full height. He holds out his hand, helping me up.

“I’ll go with you,” I automatically respond.

Kingsley smiles and pulls me closer. His hands find my hips, keeping me anchored to him while I loop my arms around his neck. “Say you’ll stay with me tonight. I promise we won’t do anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

“And if I’m comfortable with everything?” I ask softly.

Kingsley growls, and the next thing I know, he’s sweeping me into his arms and carrying me toward his bedroom, bridal style. I giggle at his eagerness and then gasp when he tosses me onto his bed, falling on top of me and kissing me breathless again.

“Need you naked, angel. Need to see all of you. Every single inch.” He sounds like he’s in pain.

Kingsley is not the kind of man to beg for anything, but I hear the raw hunger in his voice. Knowing he wants me that much makes me feel unbelievably sexy and powerful.

I push him off me, giving him what I hope is a sexy, teasing smile. It must work because his eyes turn dark and stormy the moment he realizes this is going to happen, that I want him as much as he wants me.

I start unbuttoning my blouse, but Kingsley stops me. I give him a questioning look, but he kisses the tip of my nose and unbuttons my shirt for me. He continues to undress me

slowly, taking off my bra, skirt, and tights, scattering sweet kisses along my skin as he goes.

When I'm fully naked before him, Kingsley stands back and looks me over from head to toe. I can't believe this sculpted Greek god of a man finds my curves attractive, but looking at him now, there's no doubt he likes what he sees. His jaw tenses, his nostrils flare, and his hands clench into fists at his sides. The already impressive bulge in his pants swells even bigger, making me lick my lips.

"Jesus Christ, you're even better than I imagined. Get on the bed, baby, and spread your legs. Let me see your pretty pussy."

I don't hesitate to follow his command. Once I'm spread out for him on the bed, he stands in front of me and stares right between my legs. I should be shy or embarrassed, but the way he's looking at me banishes every single thought except that one word. More.

He wipes a hand down his face and shakes his head as if pulling himself from a trance. Slowly, Kingsley peels off his shirt, revealing his hard, delicious muscles. I can't wait to feel them pressed against my chest while he slides in and out of me.

My dirty thoughts have more wetness leaking from me. It drips down my slit and tickles my back entrance, making me shiver. Kingsley practically snarls, his eyes locked onto my core. He makes quick work of the rest of his clothes and strokes his massive cock.

"I don't even know where to begin," he says more to himself than to me.

His confession makes me bold. I slide my hand down my torso and dip my fingers into my pussy, rubbing my clit and then spreading myself open for him. "How about right here?"

"Fuck," he groans, falling to his knees and dragging my ass to the edge of the bed.

Kingsley bats my hand away and buries his face between my thighs, sucking on my folds and making me cry out. He

has me so on edge from undressing me that my orgasm slams into me as soon as he makes contact. I twist beneath him on the bed, but he tightens his hold on my thighs, pinning me in place while he laps up my release.

“Again,” he says into my throbbing cunt, licking me up and down, over and over, keeping me right on the edge and then throwing me over into another orgasm.

He places sloppy, open-mouthed kisses up my stomach and between my breasts while I float back down to earth. When he kisses me, I taste myself on him and moan, deepening our kiss until he pulls back and gasps for air.

“Ready, love?” he asks, rubbing his hard cock up and down my slit.

“Yes,” I breathe, nodding.

“Do you trust me?”

“With all my heart.” I don’t hesitate to answer.

“Good. That’s good, baby. It’s going to hurt, but I promise I’ll make it so good you’ll forget all about the pain in a second.” He presses his dick inside me, just a little bit, stretching me wide open. “Relax, Clementine. Let me in,” he murmurs, kissing me deeply as he thrusts all the way inside.

There’s a moment of pressure. A slight pinch. A split second of pain. And then he’s inside me, stretching and filling me so perfectly. I cling to him as he holds himself still.

“I’ve got you, love. I’m right here.”

“Kingsley, please,” I whimper.

He grunts, shaking with the effort of not moving. “It’ll pass soon, baby.”

“No, that’s not...” I wiggle my hips, causing him to go even deeper. “Yes!” I gasp. “Please, I need you to move.”

Instead of answering, Kingsley hisses out a breath and angles his hips before backing off and slowly entering me again. His thick cock slides against the walls of my pussy in shallow, controlled thrusts. But that’s not what I want.

“More, Kingsley, I need more.”

Kingsley pulls almost all the way out and stares between us where the evidence of my virginity is smeared on his cock. We both groan at the sight. I had no idea how hot it would be.

I cry out when he slams home in one hard thrust, rocking me to my very core. One hand glides down my body, cupping my breast, then kneading the soft flesh of my hips. I’ve always been self-conscious of my curves, but they fit perfectly in his hands as he caresses and worships every inch of me.

Kingsley continues his exploration of my body, sliding his hand up and down my outer thigh. He grips me behind my knee, opening me up more for him and pressing my leg up against my chest.

“Oh, my god. Yes, yes, yes!” I moan. At this angle, he’s hitting that spot again, the one that sparks every single nerve ending and makes me shake uncontrollably.

“There it is. So. Fucking. Hot,” he groans between rough strokes.

My pussy gushes for him, our bodies making wet, sticky sounds as we grind against each other and chase our pleasure. Kingsley buries his face in my neck and grunts each time he hits home.

My muscles tense and pull tight against my skin as he pounds into me over and over, splitting me open and demanding my orgasm. My entire body throbs, not understanding what’s about to happen but wanting it anyway.

“I feel you, baby. You’re so close.”

I nod, whimpering and panting into his mouth before sealing my lips over his. My nails bite into his shoulders, my back bows off the bed, and my thighs tighten around his hips as I come. *Hard*. It feels like my chest is being ripped open as I scream for him to keep going, harder, deeper, more, more, more.

I expect him to come with me, but he keeps hammering into me until I’m completely spent. I don’t have any time to recover before he pulls out, grips my hips, and flips me over



on my stomach, positioning me on all fours and thrusting back inside.

“Jesus, fuck. So tight,” he grits.

I can’t even *breathe*, he’s so deep inside me, stroking his thick cock in and out and taking what he needs from me. I’m sore and swollen, and still, I want more. I rock back into him, making him growl and tighten his grip on my hips.

“Yes, Kingsley, I love it like this,” I moan, unsure where this confident, bold side of me is coming from.

“Goddamn, baby. I’ll give this to you every single day if it makes you happy.”

I can’t speak, so I nod and whimper a response. Kingsley must like it because he picks up his speed, using his strong arms to bounce me off his cock. My fingers curl into the sheets as I throw my head back and let out a broken cry.

A storm swirls deep in my core as the pressure gathers and threatens to consume me, body and soul. Kingsley reaches around me and rubs furious circles over my clit, grinding his dick against me and filling me up completely. My orgasm flashes through me like lightning piercing through the sky. The storm clouds break open, raining pleasure and washing me out to sea. I’m drowning in ecstasy when I hear Kingsley’s thunderous roar. He empties himself deep inside my pussy, his cock twitching and filling me with so much cum it spills out of me.

He collapses on top of me, pressing my body into the mattress. I love feeling his weight, like he’s anchoring me right here, keeping me in the moment.

Eventually, Kingsley rolls over onto his back, getting settled before he drags me over his chest and tucks me into his side.

“Holy fuck,” Kingsley says in astonishment.

I grin. “Yeah. Holy fuck.”

He laughs, making me giggle in return.

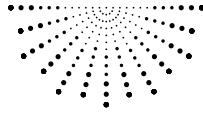
“Love your laugh,” he says softly. “I was addicted to it from the first moment you stepped into my office.”

I sigh with contentment, resting my head on his chest and tracing patterns over his defined muscles. Kingsley relaxes even more at my touch, and I melt against him as he strokes my back with his fingertips.

“I was hoping I would hear yours one day,” I say, breaking into a yawn. “Mission accomplished.”

“You’re too good to me,” he murmurs, kissing the top of my head. “Get some rest, Clementine. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

## KINGSLEY



I wake up with Clementine in my arms, the way I want to start every morning from here on out. My girl murmurs something in her sleep, then sighs and rolls away from me, resting on her back with her eyes still closed.

Perfect. Just how I want her. I kiss her rosy cheeks and trail my lips down her neck while sliding my hands up her bare thighs, torso, and breasts. Clementine shivers beneath my touch but doesn't wake up.

Her smooth, porcelain skin contrasts with her dusky pink nipples, which are hard little peaks begging for my teeth and tongue. Without wasting another second, I lean down and suck on her breast, teasing her with little bites and soft licks. Clementine moans softly and bows her back, offering herself up to me, even in her sleep.

I switch to her other breast, giving it the same attention. I can fucking *feel* her heart pounding in her chest. I swear I smell her getting wet for me. The thought makes me groan as my hand comes up to play with her other nipple.

I devour my sweet little treat, sucking, licking, and nipping at her sensitive flesh. Each swipe of my tongue elicits a breathy moan, making my dick ache and leak precum.

“Kingsley?” Clementine’s confused, sexy little voice fills the room. She whimpers for me as I pinch one nipple and bite down on the other. “Yes! Oh, God, yes...”

I look up at her, grunting with satisfaction when I see her eyes closed and her face scrunched up in pure pleasure.

Clementine's lips part as she sucks in air. She rocks her hips, rubbing her wet heat against me. I don't think she's even aware she's doing it.

"You like when I play with your tits, beautiful?"

"Mmmhm," she moans, finally opening her eyes.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from coming. Her eyes are deep and dark, glazed over with lust. She licks her lips and winds her fingers through my hair, pulling me toward her.

"I think I'll like anything you do to me," she whispers before sealing her lips over mine.

Clementine dominates this kiss, taking what she needs from me. Her tongue tangles with mine as I swallow her passion and greedy little moans. She pulls back, gasping for air. I nuzzle into her neck, breathing in her sweet, sugary scent. I can't help but lick her skin, wanting her taste on my tongue.

"Kingsley," Clementine breathes. "I... need you."

"Need me to do what, baby?" I trail kisses down her neck before sucking on the sensitive spot beneath her ear.

"I ache for you," she whimpers. "I feel so empty."

*Fuck me*, I can't believe she's all mine to satisfy. Mine to treasure and love.

I growl and take her lips in a punishing kiss. God, yes. I want to be the one to fill her up. I want to tear into that little pussy until she's crying out my name and shuddering in my arms.

"Mine," I rasp, staring directly into her bright green eyes.

"Only yours," she whispers. "Only ever yours."

"I like the sound of that," I murmur before licking a stripe up her neck and nibbling on the sensitive spot below her ear.

Clementine wiggles beneath me and spreads her legs wide, letting me settle between them. My heavy cock glides through her folds, making us both groan.

She clutches my biceps, digging her nails into my flesh as I suck on her pulse point. “P-please. It hurts. I hurt without you. Need it. Need you...”

“You have me, love. You’ll always have me.”

Clementine nods and thrusts her hips, grinding against my cock as I gather her juices. She’s soaked for me.

I line myself up with her pulsing entrance and surge forward, filling my woman completely and giving us both what we crave. Slowly, I pull out, groaning when her pussy knots around me and tries to suck me back in.

“More,” Clementine whispers, wrapping her legs around my hips. “Deeper. I want it all.”

“Fuck,” I growl, pulling out and slamming my dick back inside her greedy little cunt. She feels so damn good, so tight and wet for me.

Clementine inhales sharply and then exhales a breathy moan. Her pussy ripples around me, sucking me in deeper, deeper, so fucking deep I see stars behind my eyes. I grit my teeth, hanging on to my orgasm by a thread. Clementine clings to me as I rock in and out of her. My thrusts become more forceful, and my needy girl loves it. She plants her feet on the bed and lifts her hips, meeting me brutal thrust for brutal thrust.

I scrape my cock along her front wall, searching for that one spot...

“Fuck!” Clementine cries out as she spasms around me, her muscles flexing and releasing, squeezing me so damn tight as she comes around me like a goddess.

I snap.

I hammer into her, hitting her G-spot over and over, grunting as I fuck her right through her first orgasm and into another. Clementine screams my name and claws at my back, tearing up my skin. It hurts so damn good.

“Again,” I growl, burying my head in her neck. I know I should slow down, but the way my woman moans and writhes

beneath me, I don't think she minds.

My spine tingles with the first signs of my orgasm. My muscles flex and tense as I try to shove it down. I'm not ready for this to end yet. White hot bliss courses through me, but I need her to come again before I give up the fight.

I sit back on my heels and pull up her legs to rest them against my chest, changing up the angle. Her already tight pussy squeezes my cock like a vise, pulling a growl from somewhere deep in my chest as I thrust harder, faster, deeper inside her. Clementine's glazed-over eyes roll to the back of her head and her mouth hangs open, rewarding my rough strokes with greedy little whimpers as I bring us closer and closer to our climax.

"Oh, God. I think I'm..."

"Yes, baby. That's right. Come for me. I want to feel you come all over my hard fucking cock."

Her body responds to me immediately, that sweet pussy massaging me as I lean in for another kiss. She arches her back, and I know she's close. Just a little more. Fuck, I'm going to come, but I need her to get there first.

"Yes," she whispers. "Yes, yes, yes..."

"Who does this pussy belong to?" I snarl, unable to hold back the beast inside me.

"You," she cries out.

"Say my fucking name, angel. Say my name when you come for me."

"Kingsley! Fuck, Kingsley, King—"

I feel her climax as it rushes through her, overwhelming her curvy little body as she clamps down on my thick dick over and over. I pound into her spasming cunt, losing a little more of myself with each rough stroke until I'm nothing more than a wild animal rutting inside my mate.

Clementine tenses for a heartbeat then claws my chest as a raw scream rips from her throat. I roar her name as we shatter

together, our old selves breaking apart, making way for the new life we're going to build together.

I reluctantly pull out of my woman and collapse beside her, draping her limp, sweaty body over mine. I can feel her heart slamming against her chest as she gasps for air. I rub Clementine's back in calming circles, letting her know she's safe with me, even in this vulnerable state.

My beautiful girl finally looks up at me, her green eyes filled with satisfaction and awe. Yeah, I'm going to put that look on her face every chance I get.

"I never thought I'd be a morning person," Clementine says, still catching her breath. "But I might change my mind if I wake up like that every day."

I chuckle and roll us over so she's on her back. I hover over her with a hand on either side of her head and rub my nose against hers, loving how she scrunches up her face and grins at me.

"I think I can arrange that," I murmur before taking her lips in a slow, gentle, loving kiss.

I want my girl to know I'll take care of her in this way, too. Yes, I'll gladly wake her up with an orgasm or three every day, but I'll also cherish her. Love her in any and every way she needs.

When we pull apart, I'm about to tell her all that when my phone rings. I groan, and half a second later, Clementine's phone dings with an incoming text, then another, and another.

"Real life is calling," Clementine says with a sigh.

"We can ignore it and stay here forever," I tell her, still pinning her to the bed while placing sweet kisses over her forehead, cheeks, and nose.

"Is that an option?"

I nod, about to go in for another kiss, but then my phone rings again, followed by Clementine's.

"It's the day of the party," she says, reminding me of the hectic schedule we have today. I frown while she pouts, but I

begrudgingly move out of her way, letting Clementine answer while I check my phone.

Twenty minutes later, we're cleaned up and on our way out the door. Clementine is wearing another outfit my shopper picked out, and God, it's not helping me keep my hands to myself. She opted for a more professional look today, with a plum-colored pencil skirt and a silky cream blouse that hugs her curves.

"Where can I drop you off?" I ask as I help her put on her coat.

"Oh, I can take a cab, but thanks."

I spin her around and look into those mesmerizing green eyes, raising a brow to let her know that's not even remotely an option. She rolls her eyes, but I know she likes me looking after her.

"At my office in Midtown," she finally answers. "I have a ton to do before the party, but I can't wait to see you."

"Same," I say, leaning down to kiss her. It feels like we do this every day before heading off to work. That thought warms me and settles somewhere deep in my heart.

"I'll be the one in the ridiculously fancy and over-the-top gown some guy got for me."

"Some guy?" I narrow my eyes at her and pull Clementine closer.

She giggles when I nuzzle into the side of her neck, tickling her with my scruff.

We head down to the underground parking garage and I help my girl into the car, loading up her dress, shoes, and other bags of accessories in the back. I wish I could drive her around again like I did yesterday, but I need to get some face time with the Jorgensons before tonight's event.

After showing the overseas investors around the office and introducing them to the major players at King's Holdings, I treated everyone to lunch at a bistro that usually has a month-long waiting list. That was followed by a helicopter ride



around the city from the personal helipad on top of our building.

Negotiations for property investment and a partnership between our two companies began two hours ago. Even though I know this is a huge meeting with a massive company that could nearly double the revenue of King's Holdings, I can't stop thinking about Clementine.

I should have texted her earlier, but I haven't had more than two minutes alone since meeting with the Jorgensons this morning. Slipping my phone out of my pocket and discreetly looking at it under the table, I wince when I see it's completely dead.

*Shit. When did that happen?*

I must have forgotten to charge it yesterday or last night, which makes sense. I was a bit distracted by my sexy little Christmas miracle.

"Isn't that right, Kingsley?" my CFO asks.

I dart my eyes at him, and he tips his head toward the PowerPoint slide projected onto the screen.

"Yes. Yes, sorry, I was just..."

"Ah, yes, young love," Anders Jorgenson says. The seventy-year-old man chuckles and rests a hand on his rounded stomach. "I remember when romance didn't involve texting, you know," he says with a teasing smirk.

"I do, too," I inform him with a grin. "I'm not *that* young."

He smiles and nods. "This is true. You're old enough to have an impressive empire here in the States." Everyone in the room sits a little straighter. *Is this it?* Is he going to consider our offer? "Let's discuss the details tomorrow after the party."

Anders nods again, clearly communicating this is the end of the conversation. Everyone gets up and shakes hands as we file out of the boardroom. Anders hangs on to my hand and pats me on the shoulder.

"I look forward to meeting the woman you've been thinking about all day," he says with a wink.

“I’ll be sure to introduce you,” I promise.

I return to my office and tear through my desk drawers, trying to find a phone charger. Dammit, why don’t I have Clementine’s number memorized? Then I could use a landline to get hold of her.

“Gotcha,” I say under my breath as I reach for the tangled phone charger.

A moment after plugging it in, my phone lights up, revealing several missed calls and texts from Clementine. God, I’m an asshole. I took her virginity last night, ravished her again this morning, and then from all appearances, abandoned her. Good thing I know where to find her.

Glancing at my watch, I curse at myself when I see it’s already past five-thirty. The party starts in less than an hour, and I still need to run home and change into my tux and black shoes, then book it across town to the venue. I gather my things in a rush, noting that my phone has a little over five percent battery life. Just enough to make a call to Clementine.

She doesn’t answer, so I try again as I hit the button for the elevator ten times in a row. I know it won’t make the damn thing go any faster, but it makes me feel like I’m doing something. As I step into the elevator, I start typing a text, hoping that if she’s too busy or upset to answer my call, she may read a text.

Of course, this is the moment my phone dies for the second time. Jesus, I can’t get to that venue fast enough.

As soon as I get home, I tear off my suit and change into my matte black tux with silk details on the cuffs and collar. I slick my hair back enough to look like I tried and slip on my dress shoes that always make my pinky toes numb by the end of the night. I don’t know how women wear heels. These things are torture enough.

I’m ready in record time, and my driver is already outside waiting for me. *I’m coming, Clementine. Please forgive me.*

I’m bombarded with employees the second I step out of the car, everyone wanting to get a word in with the big boss.

Usually, I'd mumble some half-hearted pleasantries and keep my head down until I find a dark corner to sulk in. I don't want to be that guy anymore. Clementine deserves to be with someone who values people as much as she does, not a grumpy, growly dick who can't have meaningful relationships.

"Hi, there," I greet one employee.

"Mr. Bowman, sir, it's great to see you. We weren't sure if you'd show up."

I stare at him, expressionless, watching him squirm a bit at his admission. Then I laugh and shake his hand. "Wouldn't miss it for the world. My woman coordinated all this. She did an incredible job, don't you think?"

Some employees around me raise their eyebrows while others whisper to each other. Several women and a few men drop their shoulders as if they had any sort of chance with me. Clementine is the only one for me. Now I need to find her and ensure she knows that.

Making my way inside, I'm stopped a few more times, but manage to find a clearing by the hot chocolate bar. I grin when I see not one, not two, but three tables lined up to accommodate all eight flavors of hot chocolate. Perfect.

"Mr. Bowman," Anders Jorgenson says from behind me, the now-familiar Norwegian accent letting me know who it is before I turn around.

Dammit. I need to find Clementine, but I can't exactly brush him off now.

"Mr. Jorgenson," I reply, turning to face him. But he's not alone. His sons, whom I've already met, and presumably his wife and two daughters-in-law, are with him. A few kids are underfoot, and I assume they belong to this brood as well. Double dammit. I'm meeting the whole family.

He starts the introductions, only to be interrupted by the last person I hoped to see tonight.

"There he is!" my mother exclaims.

She's dragging someone with her, someone vaguely familiar with platinum blonde hair, unnaturally plump lips, and nearly orange skin from tanning too much. She's rail thin and wearing a tight dress paired with five-inch heels. It dawns on me that I've met her before at an insufferable dinner party with my parents last year. I have no idea why she's here, however.

"I was worried you got held up, but I'm glad you're here," my mother continues, shouldering her way into the circle of people. She practically shoves the other woman toward me, making her stumble in her ridiculous high heels.

I automatically reach out for her to keep her from falling on her face, and she leans into me, pressing her body against mine. The woman wraps an arm around my back, and I realize all too late this is a setup. I try stepping away from her grasp, but then my mother drops the biggest bombshell of all.

"What a perfect time to officially announce your engagement!"

"My wh—"

"Show them that ring, honey," my mom directs.

The woman clinging to me—I think her name is Tammy? Tiffany? Brittany?—sticks out her left hand, where a giant diamond glitters under the warm Christmas lights hung around the room. I'm too stunned to say anything at first. I blink at the ring, instantly recognizing it as a costume jewelry piece my mother sometimes wears. This is all her doing.

"How could I not say yes when he offered this?" the woman says, flaunting her ring and wiggling her fingers to catch the light.

"I didn't—"

Before I can finish my protests, I hear a soft gasp. My heart sinks to my stomach as I look over my mother's shoulder to see Clementine standing close by. Tears well up in her gorgeous green eyes, and fuck, it *hurts* knowing I'm causing her pain.

"Wait, Clem—"

She holds up one hand, palm out, stopping me mid-sentence. With a slight shake of her head, I understand that she needs to get through the night before dealing with this. I suppose crying and yelling at her client isn't very professional. I hate it, but I respect her dedication to her job. That doesn't mean I'm not going to start planning my apology this fucking second.

I have a lot to make up for. Not only for my phone dying and seemingly ignoring her all day but for this awful, shitty plan my mother hatched without my permission. What the hell was she thinking?

"Mother," I say in a curt, clipped voice. "Will you and this woman I hardly recognize join me in the back so I can tell you both what a colossal mistake you've made?"

"Hardly recognize?" Mr. Jorgenson asks.

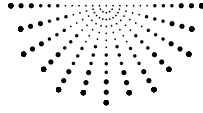
"I'll explain later," I tell him. "Please excuse us. I hope this doesn't impact our business together, but right now, I need to figure out how to win over the woman I love. The real woman I love, not..."

"Ashley," the woman admits.

Damn, I was way off.

"I may not understand the mess you've gotten yourself into, but I know love when I see it," Anders says. "Go after her, and whatever you do, don't let her get away. Love like that only comes once in a lifetime."

## CLEMENTINE



I walk into my apartment, kick off my heels, and collapse onto the couch, letting out a sob as the miles of ruffles and sequins on my dress puff out around me. I'm surrounded by scratchy material, and my push-up bra is digging into my ribcage, but I have no energy left. Not even enough to strip out of my dress.

Engaged? *Engaged?! I guess that answers the question as to why he didn't answer any of my texts or calls throughout the day.*

How could I have been so gullible? Of course the ridiculously rich, stupidly handsome CEO has a woman in his life. So that makes me... the other woman?

Tears and snot run down my face as I ugly cry, the pain of betrayal burning a hole through my chest. I choke out a whimper, remembering how Kingsley held me in his arms this morning. He kissed me so sweetly before we parted ways for the day, and I believed we would continue to share kisses like that for a long time. Maybe even the rest of our lives.

Am I that naive? Kingsley was annoyed by me from the very beginning, which I took as a challenge. Maybe he had a different challenge in mind—see how long it would take to get me in bed. Was I a fling? Someone to “get it out of his system” with before he got married?

God, it hurts even thinking that word. He was engaged the whole time. And that ring... I thought this dress was a lavish

gift, but that thing had to have cost twenty times as much as everything he spent on me yesterday.

Rolling onto my side, I grab a pillow and bury my face in it, screaming into the void.

*I wish I could call my grandma.*

The thought slams into me, knocking the air from my lungs. She would know what to say to bring me back from the brink of a meltdown. My grandma was kind and wise and never made me feel silly or stupid for making mistakes. Even giant mistakes like falling in love with an engaged man and giving him my virginity.

Taking a deep breath, I yell into the pillow once more, putting all of my frustrated, angry, heartbroken grief into the action. My throat is sore and my voice is scratchy, but I feel a tiny, miniscule bit better.

I don't know how long I've been wallowing in self-pity, but the itch of the tulle and taffeta is finally irritating my skin enough for me to do something about it. I haul my ass off the couch and begin the process of unbuttoning my dress and climbing out of it. I wasn't too worried about it when I was putting the damn thing on before the party. I was counting on having help getting out of it from Kingsley, but...

My heart twists up in my chest, tightening to the point of pain. The grief from the loss of my grandma mingles with the heart-wrenching betrayal by the only man I've ever loved, making it hard to breathe.

With trembling hands, I undo each button, then pull the mini zipper down on the side of the dress before stepping out. I leave the garment on a pile on the floor in front of the bathroom, along with my bra and panties.

Inside the bathroom, I turn on the water, disappointed but not surprised that it's lukewarm. The water feels colder than usual. Grittier, somehow. I guess I'm already spoiled after only two showers at Kingsley's penthouse.

Stepping out of the shower, I feel cleaner on the outside but no more settled on the inside. My emotions are a tangled

knot sitting like a lead weight on my chest, and the more I try to figure them out, the more questions I have.

Why did he buy me this dress if he was going to embarrass me in front of his business partners and fiancée? Also, if he had a fiancée, why did his mom waltz in two weeks ago and ask if he had a date?

As I dry my hair with a towel and pull on my comfiest pajamas, I wrack my mind for the answers. Ultimately, the *why* doesn't matter. The image of Kingsley holding his arm out and her hugging him and showing off her ring will forever be burned into my brain. It makes me sick to my stomach.

I braid my damp hair to keep it out of my face, then sulk back to the couch and curl up with my blanket. Going over the whole day in my head, I should be more focused on what a huge success the party was. The catering was exactly what I envisioned, the decor was classy yet warm and welcoming, and the hot chocolate bar was a huge hit.

Everyone I talked to seemed to enjoy themselves and the family-friendly atmosphere I worked hard to cultivate. It wasn't easy merging corporate America with family values, as the two are usually on opposite sides of the spectrum, but I think I pulled it off pretty well.

Instead of being proud of the fruits of my labor, all I can think about is Kingsley's betrayal. And how stupid I am. I fell right into his trap, and I only have myself to blame. Next time, I won't trust as easily. Or at all. I don't know that there will ever be a "next time" for me.

In such a short time, Kingsley filled my life with his surprising sweetness and adorable grumpiness. He also gave me my first kiss, my first, well, *everything*.

My phone rings, startling me out of my depressing thoughts. I almost shut the damn thing off, assuming it's Kingsley trying to contact me, but then I see the name flash across the screen.

"Tempest?" I ask as soon as I answer. We grew up together back in Oklahoma. Tempest and I would walk to and from



school together most days in elementary school and middle school. She lived in the trailer park across the street from my grandma's house.

"Hey! Hi. How's it going?" she asks. She sounds a bit out of breath, like she's doing physical labor.

"I'm, uh... I'm good," I lie.

"Yeah, me, too," she says sarcastically. I'm not sure why, but her deadpan response pulls a laugh out of me. I didn't think I was capable of feeling anything but heartache at the moment.

"I'm really okay, just some work drama," I tell her. Technically, I *was* working for Kingsley, so it's not a total lie.

"Mmhm," Tempest says dubiously. She was always great at reading people. "How about you tell me all about when we meet up for lunch?"

"Oh. I thought you knew, I moved to New York a few months ago, after..."

"After your grandma passed away," she finishes for me. "I know. I went to the funeral, I just... I felt like I didn't belong. I wanted to see you, to say something, but it had been a long time since we really hung out, and... I don't know. I was a coward."

"I appreciate you coming," I tell her. It's a rare moment of vulnerability from my old friend. She never felt like she belonged. Her clothes were out of style or dirty, her shoes were always falling apart, and everyone knew the teachers paid for her to go on our field trips and forged her mom's signature. It's not like her mom cared one way or the other. "Plus," I continue, "you're literally the last person in the world I would call a coward. Remember when you poured milk over Sammy Garnett's head in third grade? He was like a foot taller than you and the meanest kid in school!"

"Yeah, well, he deserved it. He called you a bitch!"

"We were nine," I say with a soft laugh. "I'm pretty sure he called me a wussy, not a bitch."

“His intention was the same though. To make you feel shitty. So, I decided to make him feel shitty, too.”

We both laugh at the memory. I have countless examples of Tempest standing up for me, for anyone who needed it, really. Even though she was one of the shortest people in our class, she never backed down from a fight, especially if it was to protect someone else. I suppose growing up with a single mom who was either strung-out or out finding her next fix made Tempest tough and independent in a way most kids don't need to be.

“I actually am in New York City now,” she says, surprising me. “Oh, shit,” she curses under her breath. A whooshing sound comes through on the other end of the line, and then what sounds like a pile of wood or something heavy dropping to the ground.

“Everything okay?”

“Yup! Totally,” she answers far too quickly to be believed. “Definitely didn't just mess up this shipping order and drop it everywhere. *Fuck a duck,*” she mutters to herself.

“Are you at work? Wait, you're in New York? We have so much to talk about!”

“I know, that's what I'm saying!” We both laugh. “Short answer, yes, I'm in New York. I, uh, well, I needed to get away, I mean I needed a change of pace, you know?”

I heard her slip-up. She needed to get away. My heart hurts thinking about what the last few years have been like for her. I went off to college, but Tempest stayed in our small hometown.

“Yeah, I get that,” I say, instead of calling her out on it.

“Just got a job at the docks a few days ago. I was thinking when I get my first paycheck, I can take you out for lunch or coffee or whatever. You know, start repaying you for all the extra lunches your grandma made me during the school year and all the meals she made sure I had during the summer months.”

A sad, wistful smile curls up one corner of my lips. Grandma did always pack a huge lunch for me to take to school, knowing Tempest likely wouldn't have one. We also tried having her over several times a week for dinner and sent her home with leftovers.

"There's no need to repay me, but I would love to catch up."

"Awesome!" Another crashing sound filters in through the phone, and Tempest curses again. "Better go. Apparently, I can't multitask."

"Thanks for calling. Seriously, it will be good to see you," I tell her.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. Gotta go!"

The line cuts a second later. I hope everything is okay. I can't picture Tempest working at the docks, but then again, I haven't really known her for a few years now.

Sighing, I toss my phone on the coffee table and snuggle back down into my blanket and pillow cocoon. That was a great distraction from my current state of affairs, but now the silence is being filled in with more thoughts of what happened tonight.

I'm determined to shut off my brain and not devote any more energy to Kingsley Bowman, but I know I'm full of shit. He's all I see when I close my eyes. The neighbors upstairs turn their music up, and I groan, knowing it will be another sleepless night.

I blink a few times, feeling a bit drugged. Light shines through my one window, meaning I must have slept through the night. Apparently, getting your heart ripped out and trampled on wears a person out.

My phone beeps, which must have woken me in the first place. I yawn and stretch out my sore muscles, though I'm unsure if the stiffness is from all the physical labor I did yesterday while setting up for the party or from the aching depression overtaking my limbs. Probably both.

Grabbing my phone, I see the notification is an email from my boss. I'm supposed to have today off, but maybe going into the office isn't such a bad idea. At least it will distract me from my personal life.

*Ms. Clarkson,*

*Congrats on a successful event last night!*

*I know it's supposed to be your day off, but it seems the contract with the venue states we need to do a final walkthrough once everything is cleaned up and get the event planner's signature to sign off on everything.*

*Hopefully, this errand won't take long, and you'll be able to enjoy the rest of your day off. You deserve it.*

Great. Going back to the scene of the crime. Not exactly the work assignment I was hoping for, but it needs to be done. I guess I should be thankful I can handle everything from the venue and not stop by the King's Holdings building. I don't think I can face him right now. Or ever.

I reply to my boss's email and somehow find the will to pull the covers off and start the day. My grandma knew I hated mornings, so when I got down to the breakfast table before school, she would smile and tell me I managed to get out of bed, which meant the hardest part of the day was over.

Granted, some days held much harder things than waking up, but she was right about eighty-five percent of the time. That's pretty good when it comes to grandmotherly advice.

I smile at the bittersweet memory and go through the motions of getting ready for the day. I'm glad I'm not on a schedule, seeing as it's taking me three times as long to get anything done. Everything feels heavy and overwhelming.

Finally, I'm dressed, my hair is decent enough, and I have everything I need to cover with the employees at the venue in my purse. Taking one last look around my apartment, which looks even more depressing after spending time in Kingsley's penthouse, I shake my head and step outside.

Two of my neighbors are hanging around in the parking lot, and I tighten my hold on my purse while walking briskly

toward the subway. I knew this place wasn't exactly the Ritz when I signed the lease, but Kingsley was right. It's not safe here.

Not sure what the hell I'm supposed to do about that. I guess I'll add that anxiety to the growing pile of problems in my life.

By the time I climb the steps to the venue, I'm already regretting this venture. I should have told my boss I was sick or, at the very least, ignored his email for a few hours and slept in a bit.

Instead, I'm hauling a giant purse up a freaking mountain of stairs. I swear there weren't this many stairs yesterday. Plus, my head is pounding, and my cute ballerina flats are scuffed from someone stepping on my foot while I was getting off the subway. And to top it all off, my hair tie broke, which is rude as hell. If I have to keep my shit together, so should my hair tie.

I press my hip against one of the glass doors, nudging it open enough to slip inside. The building is mostly empty since it's used primarily for huge events, so I shuffle my way unnoticed to the East Ballroom, where the King's Holdings party was last night.

Taking a grounding breath, I open the door, unprepared for what's inside.

The tables have all been put away, the tablecloths are folded in one corner, and the chairs are stacked against the back wall. Most of the garland, lights, and woodsy decor have been taken down, and the floors look recently swept and mopped.

That's not what has my attention, however.

In the center of the nearly empty ballroom is a giant Christmas tree, different from the others set up last night. This one is real, and it's decorated with a string of popcorn, red garland, and what appear to be hand-cut snowflake ornaments from holiday-themed scrapbook paper.

Next to the tree, a portable electric fireplace is set up with two hanging stockings hanging. The warm yellow and orange flames cast a golden glow over the entire scene that looks like it's ripped straight from a Norman Rockwell painting. A gorgeous area rug frames the space, and a deep red velvet couch is positioned in front of the fireplace. A small coffee table holds two mugs and a plate of cookies. It's so cozy and familiar, I feel like crying.

*Who did this? And why? And do I have to take it down?*

I look around the room, not seeing any employees yet. Maybe I can examine the cute Christmas setup a little closer while I wait. Then we'll discuss tearing it down so I can get the deposit back.

Walking up to the tree, I notice it's a blue spruce, like the one Kingsley and I picked out for his office. I trace the edges of one of the paper snowflakes, wondering who put in all that effort.

"Clementine?"

My heart stills at the sound of his voice. *What is Kingsley doing here?*

He's behind me, but I don't have the strength to turn and face him.

"I'm doing the final walkthrough, and then we'll be all done here," I tell him, trying to keep my voice detached. I hope he understands that I'm not only talking about the party. Kingsley and I are done, which he made very clear last night.

"Please give me five minutes," he begs.

The emotion in his tone makes my heart ache, even though I'm angry and hurt because of his actions. I still don't like that he's in pain.

"One of the employees will be here soon," I inform Kingsley, my back still facing him. This tree has never been more interesting. If he refuses to leave, I'll have to start counting pine needles until he gets the hint.

"Actually, they won't be here for another four hours."

This causes me to look at him over my shoulder, which is a big mistake.

Kingsley Bowman, CEO of King's Holdings, looks like a hot mess. His hair is a bit wild, his eyes slightly red with bags underneath them, and he's in his tux pants and button-down shirt from last night, though he's lost the tie and jacket. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, and the first two buttons are undone, completing the frazzled look.

Still, he's Kingsley freaking Bowman, so he's still as handsome and sexy as hell, even with shadowy eyes and wrinkled clothes.

I step toward him, then pause, unsure what to do. I'm worried about him while also hurt and pissed. "What do you mean no one is coming for another four hours?" I finally ask, hoping to keep things professional.

Kingsley looks down, rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous gesture. I don't think I've ever seen him nervous or anxious about anything.

"I sort of... I kind of bribed the staff to let me stay all night after they cleaned up. Ben and his husband helped haul in the tree and let me borrow one of their couches and rugs."

I furrow my brow, not at all connecting the dots. Why would he do this? "And the email from my boss?"

"He was very understanding and reasonable when I called and talked to him."

"What about the tree decorations?" I ask, a little piece of my heart softening as I subconsciously sway closer to him.

Kingsley lifts his head, and those brown eyes show me every emotion on his mind. The man actually blushes, his cheeks and the tips of his ears turning from pink to red.

"I looked up some common Christmas traditions since I have no experience with that kind of stuff. I wanted to give you the kind of warm, loving atmosphere your grandma had when you were growing up."

I don't even know how to begin to comprehend what he's saying. Kingsley must take my silence as rejection, so he keeps right on talking.

"The popcorn string took way longer than I thought it would, but it was fun once I got the hang of it. I know the snowflakes leave a bit to be desired... Honestly, I'd never cut one out before. It took a few tries to get the folding right, but once I did, I think a few of them turned out okay."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, then runs a hand through his hair and sighs.

"Kingsley, I don't even know what to say," I whisper.

"Before you say anything, I need you to know I'm not engaged. I never was. I barely know that woman. I met her once at a dinner party and never talked to her or saw her again until last night."

"But why did she say she was your fiancée? And the ring?" I want to believe him. I really, really do. But I know what I saw, and his explanation isn't nearly good enough.

"My conniving mother," he grits. "She... she has a twisted view of relationships and, well, pretty much everything. It's all transactional with that woman, including marriage. She married my father for wealth and status, and in return, he had numerous affairs while she knowingly looked the other way. It makes sense, in her fucked up way of thinking, that if the overseas investors wanted a family man, having a surprise engagement with someone who has lots of connections seemed like the perfect plan."

"I saw..." I trail off, unsure I'm strong enough to say what needs to be said. "I saw you holding each other," I whisper.

"I know this sounds like a convenient answer, but I swear on my life and my company that it's true. My mother pushed the woman at me, and she tripped in her heels. I held my hand out to keep her from falling, and she took the opportunity to cling to me. It made me sick to my stomach. I never want anyone else who isn't you that close to me."



Kingsley looks down, closing his eyes as if caught in a bad memory. I hate that for him, and even though I don't know what to believe right now, I have to comfort him. I close the distance between us and place my hand on his chest, right over his heart.

He gasps softly, his eyes capturing mine. Kingsley looks unbearably vulnerable, and I blink back tears.

“For a long time, my parents were the only example I had of marriage. But I don't want that.” He rests his hand over mine and places his other hand on the small of my back. “I want something real. I want a partner who challenges me and makes me better. I want someone I can trust, someone I can talk to about everything and nothing. I want to enjoy spending time with my wife, and I want to spoil her and ensure she knows every single day that she's loved.”

I sniffle as the first tear falls. Kingsley removes his hand from on top of mine and wipes away my tears.

“She sounds like one lucky woman,” I manage to choke out.

Kingsley smiles down at me, brushing a few strands of hair out of my face before cupping my cheek. He leans down and presses the sweetest kiss to my forehead, then steps back and gets down on one knee.

My jaw drops as I wait for his next words.

“I'm hoping that woman will be you, Clementine. I love you. I love you more than I thought I was capable of. I'm so sorry for the pain my mother caused, and I can't apologize enough for not contacting you all day yesterday. I was in meetings, and at some point, my phone died. I now have a charger in my office, car, briefcase, and every room in the penthouse. I also purchased a ten-pack of external batteries that will always be charged in case I somehow find myself without one of those chargers.”

I grin at the man who has stolen my heart completely. The worry and sincerity in his voice, coupled with the pleading in

his rich brown eyes, puts any doubts to rest. “That seems like a reasonable response to having your phone die once,” I tease.

Kingsley doesn't smile. The serious look on his face never changes. “The one time it died, it almost ruined the best thing I've ever had. It hurt you, and I never want to be in that position again.”

“So... are you going to ask me, or—”

“Clementine, will you marry me? Will you forgive me for hurting you and for letting my mother come between us? Will you be my partner, my friend, my sexy, sweet wife? Please say yes because I don't know what I'll do if—”

I tackle Kingsley to the ground, and he catches me, laughing and pressing kisses all over my face. He flips our position so I'm on my back and he's holding himself above me.

“Is that a yes?” he murmurs.

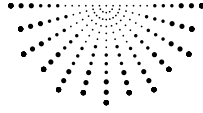
I purse my lips to the side and tap my chin as if considering his question. Kingsley nuzzles into my neck, his scruff even scratchier than usual since he hasn't shaved yet today. I giggle and nod, but that's not good enough for Kingsley.

“Say it,” he commands, resting his forehead on mine.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I love you, too, Kingsley. I forgive you, and of course I want to marry you. Yes, yes, yes,” I repeat over and over until Kingsley kisses the air from my lungs.

“Let's get out of here, beautiful. I know just how I want to celebrate.”

## KINGSLEY



Thank fuck.

I had no idea how I was going to make up for the betrayal and hurt I caused my woman, but I had to do something. Anything. She told me it was her first Christmas without her grandma, which sparked an idea. I couldn't throw everything together in the time that I had, but I think I did a good job hitting the basics. Enough to show Clementine I can provide this for her. I can give her a warm, safe, happy place every day of the year, not just on Christmas.

I pull into my parking garage, glancing over at Clementine. She's fidgeting in her seat, and God, I get it. After being apart all day yesterday and the drama of everything last night, I need to be with her again, need to touch her, need to kiss her, need to prove to both of us that we're here and we're in this together.

Clementine hardly waits for me to put the car in park before she hops out. I follow her, looping an arm around her waist and tucking her into my side as we wait for the elevator.

Once inside, I stand behind Clementine, my hands gripping her hips and then sliding up her torso, pausing to squeeze her breasts. My woman leans her head against my shoulder and arches her back, pushing her chest further into my hands.

I groan as I rub my aching cock against her ass, imagining how fucking amazing she's going to feel one I'm inside her again.

The elevator dings as the doors open, causing Clementine to jump and squirm in my arms. She steps out of the elevator, and I follow, not wanting her to be out of my sight for a second. My hand finds hers, and I spin her around, hauling her into me for a devastating kiss.

She moans as I slip my tongue into her mouth and consume every inch of her. My hands slide down her curvy little body and grip the hem of her candy cane striped dress, slowly inching it up.

We break the kiss only long enough for me to take her dress off completely and toss it to the side. Clementine jumps into my arms and hooks her ankles behind my back. I growl and kiss down her neck as she arches her back and presses her body into mine.

“Fuck, I need you,” I grunt before nipping at the sensitive skin below her ear.

“I’m yours,” she pants, rubbing her hot little pussy over my stomach, letting me know she needs me, too.

“Take a shower with me.” It’s not a question. It’s a command.

She nods and twists her fingers in my hair, pulling me down for another kiss.

I carry her into the bathroom in my bedroom, only breaking the kiss when I set her down on the counter of my double sink. She claws at my shirt and I help her take it off. As soon as it’s over my head, Clementine runs her hands up and down my chest and abs.

“Love your touch, angel. The things you do to me...”

I groan as her hands trail lower and she palms my already hard cock. I step back, chuckling when she scowls at me. Turning on the shower, I adjust the temperature so it’s hot, filling up the bathroom with steam.

I quickly get rid of my pants and boxer briefs before returning to undress the rest of my woman, but I find she’s already beat me to the punch. “Bad girl. You’re supposed to let me take off your clothes.”

“Oops,” she says in a totally fake contrite voice. “Does this mean you’ll have to punish me?”

“Fuck,” I growl. “Is that what you want? Me spanking that tight ass?”

She bites her lip and nods, staring me directly in the eyes, challenging me to take her up on her offer.

In one quick move, I spin her around and press her down on the counter so her ass is presented so beautifully for me. Before she has a chance to protest, I crack my hand over her soft flesh, loving the way it jiggles and turns pink.

Clementine cries out in shock and then lets out the sexiest fucking moan. “Again,” she begs.

I wrap her hair around my fist and tug, lifting her head so she’s looking at me in the mirror. “I’m in control, Clementine,” I tell her firmly. “Say it.”

Her eyes go dark and her nostrils flare. Fucking hell, I love knowing this turns her on as much as it does me.

“You’re in control,” she says.

I spank her again, harder this time. “Who is in control?” Another spank followed by her gasping for air. “Say my name, baby.”

“You are, Kingsley. You’re in control.”

“That’s right.” I shove two fingers in her soaking pussy, never breaking eye contact with her in the mirror.

“Oh!” she cries out at the unexpected invasion.

I withdraw my fingers just as quickly and lead her to the shower, closing the glass door once we’re both inside. Water spills over her hair, shoulders, breasts, and lower.

I run my hands up and down her slick body and kiss her thoroughly. “You drive me crazy. Fucking insane,” I growl before kissing her again.

My hands find her ass, and I lift her, pressing her into the wall. Clementine grabs my shoulders and hangs on while I kiss

down her neck and rub my cock through the folds of her pussy. She flutters around me, trying to suck me in.

“Your greedy little cunt needs me, doesn’t it, Clementine?”

“Yes,” she moans, throwing her head back and banging it against the wall.

“Careful,” I murmur under my breath, kissing her cheek.

I continue rubbing my cock through her wet slit, bumping against her clit with each shallow thrust. Clementine bucks her hips, trying to position me where she wants me.

I sink my teeth into her shoulder, causing her to yelp in surprise. “I’m in control, baby,” I remind her.

I reposition my hold on her, sliding one hand closer to her center and teasing the split in her cheeks with my fingers. Clementine jumps in my arms, making me chuckle darkly. I capture her lips in a scorching kiss while slipping one finger over her tight little rosebud.

“Kingsley...” she whispers, breaking our kiss.

“Do you trust me?” I ask her.

“Yes. I trust you.”

“Good girl.”

With that, I thrust my hips and rub my cock on her clit while pressing the tip of my finger inside her ring of muscle.

“Oh!” she gasps in surprise. “Oh... my *god*...” she groans.

“Mmm... you like that, dirty girl?”

“I think I do,” she replies in complete surprise.

I wiggle my finger in her ass up to the first knuckle and withdraw. In and out I thrust my finger while stimulating her clit until I’m in all the way. I position my cock at her entrance, taking my finger out and leaving her empty, loving when she whimpers at the loss.

Then, I slam my dick into her tight pussy while shoving two fingers up her ass.

Clementine screams and comes violently in my arms, her pussy and ass clamping down on me.

“Fuck me, god... fuck me,” she cries, burying her face in my neck and digging her nails into my shoulder.

“Jesus, woman,” I grunt, trying to hold onto my release.

I grind my cock into her cunt, going impossibly deeper. When she’s barely recovered from her first orgasm, I pull back and set a relentless pace, fucking her hard. I leave my fingers buried deep in her ass, letting her adjust to the feeling.

“Oh, my god, I can’t... I’m going to come again...”

“No,” I snarl. “Not until I say so.”

Clementine whimpers and clenches around me, her muscles drawn up tight. I know she’s about to explode, but I love seeing her try to keep it at bay.

“Don’t you come, Clementine. Don’t let go. Don’t you dare.”

I remove my fingers from her ass and grip her cheeks tight enough to bruise as I jackhammer in and out of her. Clementine lets out these pained moans each time my cock bumps up against her cervix. Her pussy flutters, her legs squeeze my hips, and her curvy body shakes with the effort of holding back her orgasm.

“Please, King, please...”

I withdraw my dick all the way and slam into her one last time.

“Now, baby. Come for me, Clementine.”

And Jesus, does she come.

Her pussy knots around my cock, squeezing me so damn tight it hurts in the best way. Clementine inhales a sharp breath as wave after wave of pleasure wracks her body. She claws at my back, making me roar my release and fill her with my seed. I come so damn hard I feel like I might pass out.

“Breathe,” I say to myself as much as her.

Clementine gasps for air and clings to me as her body trembles with the last of her orgasm. I slide her down my body and hold her close, kissing the top of her head.

When we've somewhat recovered, I step back and pour body wash into my hands before rubbing it over the dips and curves of her body. Clementine leans into me for support, making me smile at how thoroughly fucked and sated she is right now. When I'm done, she soaps me up and places a sweet kiss over my heart.

I cup her face and kiss her deeply, passionately, but slowly. One drugging kiss leads to another and another, and before I know it, I'm spinning her around and placing her hands on the wall.

I sink into her from behind and fuck her slowly with one hand cupping her breasts and the other rubbing circles over her clit. We come together in a wordless release.

Gathering her limp body in my arms, I turn off the water and dry us off before tucking her into my bed and crawling in beside her. I run my fingers through her hair and kiss her forehead until she finally opens her eyes and gives me a shy little smile.

"That was amazing," she whispers.

"Yeah, love. It was."

She sighs contentedly and I tuck her into my side, running my fingers up and down her back while she traces patterns over my skin in featherlight touches.

"Thank you for loving me," Clementine whispers. "And for making me feel safe. I didn't know if I'd ever have a warm, loving home again, but you've given me everything."

I press a kiss to her forehead and temple, breathing her in and holding her close. "I'm trying. I want all of that for you and more. Can you tell me about your grandma? Did you live with her?"

Clementine nods, then rests her head against my shoulder. "I never knew my parents. I don't think my dad knows I exist,



and the only person who knows who that is, my mother, died while giving birth to me.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” I murmur. What a rough start to life. It’s even more incredible knowing how bright and vibrant she is today, despite the pain she’s endured.

“But my grandma stepped in and took care of me from that very first day. She filled my life with so much love and laughter.” Clementine sniffles, but I hear warmth in her voice. It’s a good kind of grief, still painful, but somehow life-giving as well.

“I’m glad you had her,” I say softly.

“Me, too. She always encouraged my creative side, signing me up for painting classes, ceramics, scrapbooking clubs, and just about anything our local craft store offered. When I told her I wanted to go to school for interior design, she was so happy for me. She said it was perfect for me.”

“It is,” I tell her, smiling along with my girl as she reminisces about her grandmother.

“Then she was diagnosed with breast cancer my freshman year of college. I knew it was worse than she was letting on, but I thought we had more time. I came home over the weekends to take care of her, but it wasn’t enough. Three weeks after I graduated college, she passed away.”

“Clementine,” I whisper, bundling her even closer to me. “You’re not alone anymore. Never again,” I promise. “I wish I could have met her. She sounds like an incredible woman.”

“Maybe... never mind,” Clementine says, shaking her head.

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking... her birthday is in March. Maybe... maybe we could take a trip to Indiana to visit her grave? I know it’s far away, and—”

“Of course,” I assure her. “We can go right now. I have a jet on standby.” I start to sit up, but Clementine pushes me back down with a hand on my chest.

“Thank you for your willingness to go, but I think I want to stay in bed a little longer.” The way her eyes flash has me forgetting about everything other than my sexy, insatiable woman.

“Is that so?”

“Mmmhm,” she says with a nod.

“That can be arranged as well.”

Clementine grins, and I lean down for a kiss, tasting her love and happiness and making it my own. We’re going to have a million moments like this one, and I’ll cherish them all.

## EPILOGUE



### CLEMENTINE

“*W*hat kind of tree are we getting this year, Karla?” I ask our six year old. She puffs out her cheeks and looks up at me, her deep brown eyes the same color as her father’s.

“Mmmm...” she hums before letting out her breath in a dramatic sigh. “White pine.”

“That’s racist!” Derek, our ten year old shouts as he races past us and jumps into a pile of snow.

“Nuh-uh!” Karla protests while I stifle a laugh. “That’s the name! That’s the *name!*”

“I want the same kind we got last year with the crazy branches. Barstool fur or something like that,” Derek says. He scoops up some snow in his gloved-hands, packing it into a ball.

“Balsam fir,” I correct him, keeping my eye on my mischievous boy. I’m always impressed at how much information my kids retain. Usually, it’s embarrassing mom moments or things I definitely didn’t mean for them to overhear, but in this case, they both love Christmas tree shopping.

“Yeah, that one!”

“You better not be planning to throw that at your mother and sister,” Kingsley says, stepping in line with me as we walk through Carlisle’s Christmas Tree Farm. We’ve been coming to the same place every year since that very first holiday Kingsley and I spent together over a decade ago.

“What snowball?” Derek asks, hiding his hands behind his back.

Kingsley kneels down and gathers up some snow, a playful grin spreading over his handsome face. He tosses the loosely-packed snowball in Derek’s direction, missing on purpose. Derek laughs and throws his handful of snow at his father.

Karla giggles and claps her hands, getting in on the fun, too. Before long, the three of them are throwing snowballs back and forth, and then Karla and Derek make snow angels while Kingsley heads over to me.

“Having fun, beautiful?” he asks, wrapping me up in a hug. I snuggle into his embrace, breathing in his spicy, woody scent.

“Of course,” I say in a contented sigh. “I love tree shopping. It was our first Christmas tradition.”

Kingsley squeezes me tighter and kisses the top of my head. “The first of many.”

My husband rocks me back and forth, and I know he’s remembering all of the traditions we’ve added over the years. Decorating the tree with popcorn strings, hanging hand-made paper snowflakes in the windows, and of course, lots of hot chocolate throughout the season.

When Derek was born, Kingsley and I started getting each other a new Christmas ornament every year to summarize our favorite memories and highlights. Some years, like when the kids were born, we give each other similar ornaments that are still special in their own way. Most years, however, we have different stories and memories we cherish, and it’s so sweet to hear what things Kingsley treasures.

This year, after setting up the tree, we’re going to take the kids shopping for their own ornaments. If it’s anything like selecting the tree itself, I know my children will have lots of thoughts and opinions.

“You fill my life with so much love and joy,” Kingsley whispers. “I never thought Christmas would be my favorite time of year.”

I smile and press a kiss to his chest before leaning back slightly and looking up into his kind brown eyes that have been my safe place for so long now. “You just needed someone to show you how to celebrate the right way,” I reply, grinning up at him.

My husband bends down and trails kisses up my neck before brushing his lips against the shell of my ear.

“I needed *you*, my sweet Clementine. Love you so much.”

“Love you, too,” I murmur, parting my lips to welcome his kiss. Kingsley gently presses his mouth to mine, sipping from me before sweeping his tongue inside and gliding it against mine. His kiss is slow, deep, and grounding.

We only come up for air when we’re showered with snow, both of our kids breaking us apart groans and gagging noises.

I laugh while Kingsley chuckles and laces his fingers through mine. “I’m thinking a blue spruce,” he announces as he continues walking through the snow-covered rows of trees.

“You always want a blue spruce,” Derek complains.

“How about a noble fir?” I suggest.

“Yes!” Derek whoops, doing a jump-spin into a pile of snow.

“Yeah!” Karla enthusiastically agrees.

“Looks like you saved the day once again,” my husband says to me, squeezing my hand.

“I guess you’ll just have to thank me later,” I tell him, lifting an eyebrow suggestively.

Kingsley groans, making me laugh.

“You’re perfect for me, Clementine,” he says, the warmth in his voice filling me up and drawing out a cheesy smile.

“And you’re perfect for me.”

“Are you guys going to kiss again?” Derek whines.

Kingsley wags his eyebrows while I swat at his chest playfully. “Not right now,” I say, never breaking eye contact

with my husband. He pouts, which is adorable.

*“You better not pout, I’m tellin’ you whyyyy!”* Karla sings.

“Love my family,” Kingsley says, scooping up our little girl. She hugs his neck and smiles at him like he’s the greatest man in the world. He really is.

“And we love you,” I tell him, looping my arm through his. It’s going to be another amazing Christmas, all thanks to my husband and beautiful family.

\* \* \*

**THE END**

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Cameron Hart is a USA Today bestselling author of contemporary romance. She writes books with lots of heat, plenty of sweet, and just enough drama to keep things interesting.

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