



WINTER

Penny Reid & LH Cosway ♦ Sierra Simone
Skye Warren ♦ Catherine Cowles ♦ Carly Phillips
Debra Anastasia ♦ Julia Kent ♦ K.A. Linde

WRAP ME UP

LH COSWAY AND PENNY REID •
SKYE WARREN • SIERRA SIMONE •
JULIA KENT • CATHERINE COWLES •
CARLY PHILLIPS • K.A. LINDE •
DEBRA ANASTASIA

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SONGBIRD

LH COSWAY AND PENNY REID

CHAPTER ONE

Ophelia

“**O**PHELIA! DID YOU hear me?”

“I—what?” Shaking myself from a daydream, my lashes fluttered as Sally—my supervisor—came back into focus.

A small, crooked smile curved her lips to one side. “Off in fairy land again.”

“No. At the Grammys, actually,” I mumbled, but she heard me.

Loud and sudden laughter filled the air, her ruddy cheeks sharp beneath tired yet twinkling eyes. “Goodness gracious. Fancy yourself the next Queen Bee, do you?” Her laughter redoubled and she wiped at her eyes. “Well, when you’re finished with the red carpet, Beyoncé, could you bring those bags with you on your way out?”

I glanced to where she’d gestured and found black bin bags, wrinkling my nose at the unpleasant smell wafting from them and irked that the morning-shift hadn’t already moved them to the bin.

As a maid at one of Dublin’s most prestigious five-star hotels, I earned €9.80 an hour and I spent most of my wages on rent. There wasn’t much left over for luxury, but my dreams kept me going. While I changed beds, cleaned toilets, and vacuumed—heck, even while I lie in my bottom bunk each night, my bed mate snoring overhead—I’d imagine myself somewhere else, usually fabulous, and usually completely ridiculous. For example, this evening as I clocked off from my shift for the night, in my head I was walking on stage to accept my Grammy.

This is so unexpected. Never in a million years did I think I’d be standing here in front of you all...

I'd be gracious and humble as I took my award then re-joined my husband, Henry Cavill, who sat in the audience. He'd spend the evening gazing at me lovingly, then we'd go home to our million-dollar penthouse and make love on our 1000 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets.

Okay, so I was more likely to be the one washing those sheets, but I'd rather live in my fantasies these days than do just about anything else. At least in my fantasies my hefty, long blonde hair was in something other than a bun or a single, plain braid.

Speaking of which, I need a haircut.

"Ophelia? The bags?" my supervisor prompted me again, not ungently. Sally wasn't a bad sort, always quick with a laugh and mostly fair—except when it came to the day-shift supervisor who I suspected she was sweet on.

"Sure, no problem," I answered. "I just wish the day-shift took out their rubbish. Wouldn't that be nice? Just once?"

"Aye, and that's a good, solid wish. Me mam always told me, be careful what you wish for on Christmas. It might just come true."

Lugging the bags out the staff entrance, I nodded to Sally as I passed and tossed them in the giant container behind the building, which smelled even worse.

"Thanks so much, love." Her voice said from behind me and I heard the sound of the locks clicking into place.

I turned, dusting my hands off on my jeans. "Well, if there's nothing else, I 'spose I'll be going."

"Course." Sally nodded briskly, shivering and glancing up at the starry sky. "Snow in the forecast. Take care and stay warm."

"You too, Sally."

She turned and called over her shoulder, "And merry Christmas. Can't forget about that."

“Merry Christmas!” I called back, watching her until she turned the corner and disappeared. I headed out onto the street, burying my face in my scarf to fend off the cold. My breath was visible in the icy temperature as I sang softly to myself, the soles of my rubber boots almost silent on the pavement.

Across the way was St. Stephen’s Green, the streetlights casting shadows on the greenery of the park. Further down, the Christmas lights that adorned the shops and restaurants at the top of Grafton Street appeared, twinkling in all their festive glory. The area was still a hive of activity, even at this hour. Some were hurrying to buy last minute gifts, while others socialized in bars with friends and loved ones. It was the exact opposite of tomorrow, Christmas Day, when everything would be closed, the streets of Dublin empty and quiet, like the opening scene to a post-apocalyptic zombie movie.

When I reached the bus stop, I groaned. The screen said it was an hour until the next bus. I had no other choice but to wait. Thinking I’d be warmer if I kept walking, I decided to take a stroll to kill the time.

Working the late shift on Christmas Eve wasn’t so bad when you had no one waiting for you at home. More or less just another late night in Dublin, except the streets were more festive. The weather was cold and the forecast had threatened snow, but the interior of the eateries shone brightly like beacons. Taking my time, I felt like Charlie Bucket peering in the windows at all the smartly dressed people merrily enjoying food and drinks. They all seemed so happy, so *together*, and I struggled for a moment to fit myself inside the pictures I kept passing, but I couldn’t. My imagination failed me and it drew a sharp contrast to how alone I was.

This was my first Christmas without Gran. Even though it had always been just the two of us, we still felt like a complete family. I guess that was the risk of only having one person, if you lost them, you were on your own.

Plus, she’d given me my love of music and singing, teaching me the words to traditional Irish songs from a young

age, encouraging me to lift my voice and sing acappella for her friends at the pub.

Lately, I'd started to go inside little hole in the wall pubs, the ones without music, where old men sat quietly sipping on pints. In places like that people listened, but they didn't stare at you or make a fuss. I wanted their ears, not their eyes.

Singing was my true passion. Sometimes I'd take to Grafton Street late at night, throw a hat on the ground and sing song after song. Often, I made more money from an hour of busking than I did from a full day cleaning at the hotel. The trouble was I was constantly battling stage fright, especially during the day. It was too bright, with too many people paying attention. At night there was the safety of darkness. Most of the people passing by were drunk, and I was far more comfortable with drunk people than sober ones. They were more easily pleased. . .

I passed another restaurant, then another, the sound of laughter chasing my steps. Rubbing the ache in my chest, I stopped at the end of the street, heaving a watery sigh, and feeling like the cold had stiffened more than just my bones.

On instinct I stepped inside a small pub, mostly to get out of the cold and away from the sound of Christmas Eve festivities. It seemed like a typical, garden variety place, dimly lit and smelling of ale, a long wooden bar, haphazard tables and stools tucked into nooks and crannies, ephemera from the last hundred years decorating the walls, and a sparse smattering of patrons nursing their pints.

But as I stood by the end of the bar and looked without really seeing my surroundings, I felt a song stir within me, clogging my throat as I battled with the compulsion to let it out. Maybe it was because I was so tired, or maybe it was simply because I missed my gran on Christmas and wanted—just for a moment—to feel close to her again, but I closed my eyes and let my voice take over.

I sat within the valley green

I sat me with my true love.

My sad heart strove the two between

The old love and the new love...

The loneliness and melancholy left my body as I sang. It sat on the surface of the lyrics, an invisible passenger flowing out into the room for whoever was there to listen. I took the loss expressed in the song and melded it with my own.

While sad I kissed away her tears

My fond arms round her flinging.

The foe man's shot burst on our ears

From out the wildwood ringing.

A bullet pierced my true love's side

In life's young spring so early.

And on my breast in blood she died

While soft winds shook the barley.

I fell silent, the last note ringing through the silence and through me. And then a few people clapped, bringing me back to the present. Exhaling heavily, I felt the familiar catharsis, the release, and with it also came peace. The feelings built up inside me until I had no other choice but to let them out through song.

And now it was done, I turned to leave. But the barman called, "Hey, young one. What's your poison?"

I glanced at him. "Beg your pardon?"

"A performance like that deserves a free drink," he said with a kind smile, motioning me over to where he stood at the end of the bar, both hands flat on the surface. His grey beard made me think of Santa Claus.

"Guinness," I said, drifting closer and finally pulling out a stool to sit. It was Gran's favorite. I didn't drink often, mostly because I couldn't afford to, but the taste of stout always reminded me of her.

“You’ve a beautiful singing voice,” the barman said like it was a fact, placing a glass down in front of me. “Merry Christmas.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He nodded then went to serve another customer, not realizing how much the small kindness meant to me. I felt a tear try to push its way out, but I sniffed it back. The last thing anyone needed was the sorry sight of me crying into my pint.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught movement and my gaze flickered up. A man had approached and I did a double-take. He looked almost exactly like that actor who played Luke Cage on Netflix’s Marvel superhero show of the same name. Except—I noted, studying him as he lowered onto the stool next to mine—he wasn’t as broad. But he was tall and handsome and had *presence*.

“What’s it called?” he asked, like we were in the middle of a conversation, his alluring brown eyes warm and interested.

And I realized I was staring.

Tearing my eyes away, I blinked several times and cleared my throat before I could find my voice. “What’s what called?”

“The song,” he said softly.

I frowned, staring now at a scratch on the surface of the gleaming wood bar. “You’ve never heard “The Wind That Shakes The Barley” before?”

The bartender returned with my Guinness, setting it down in front of me, a nice, proper inch of frothy head capping the dark stout. I nodded my thanks and the older man was off again.

Meanwhile, the movie star lookalike at my elbow said nothing. I gave into the urge to look at him again and discovered not only was he just as insanely handsome as I’d thought, but he was studying me unabashedly, his lips curving into a small smile as our gazes met. “Unless you can’t tell—”

his smile spread, showing me a scant bit of perfect, white teeth
“—I’m not from around here.”

I could definitely tell. For one, there was the accent, and for two, he held himself in a confident way that screamed *worldly*. This pub wasn’t his local, that was for sure.

“American?” I asked, lifting my glass.

He nodded, tracking the progress of my pint as I took a sip.
“New York. I’m here for work, but I leave tomorrow.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Tomorrow? You plan to leave on Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“Doing some sightseeing? Everything will be closed.”

“No,” he said easily. He leaned his elbow on the bar, like he was settling in for a while, and continued his perusal of me.
“I’m flying home.”

Now I squinted at him, because his words made no sense.
“How are you going to manage that?”

His smile returned and he said gently, “Well, see now, there are these contraptions called airplanes. And when—”

“No.” I laughed, shaking my head at his teasing. And then I continued shaking my head at the strangeness of this situation—sitting in a bar, on Christmas Eve, being teased by a Luke Cage look-alike. *Maybe I’m in one of my dreams? DON’T WAKE UP!*

“I mean, there are no flights in or out of Dublin on Christmas day,” I explained, turning to face him more completely. “There never have been. I hope someone hasn’t sold you a bridge in Brooklyn.”

“Ah. I see.” Now he blinked, his eyes cutting away and turning inward. “I-uh-well . . .” the mystery man’s head moved back and forth, like he was thinking things over, debating what to say. “I am flying out tomorrow, but not from Dublin

Airport.” Abruptly, he frowned, and seemed to give himself a little shake before lifting his eyes to mine again.

He watched me, and I watched him, and my stomach gave a little flutter. So I think I can be forgiven for speaking without checking with my brain, saying, “Like a bird.”

“Pardon?”

“You. You’re a bird, flying with no plane.” For reasons unknown, I waved my hand in front of us and then, because some very intelligent part of my brain was now paying attention, I stopped myself from speaking further by gulping my Guinness. While I gulped, I searched for a harmless topic to discuss, half expecting him to excuse himself and leave me to my bird-accusations.

But he didn’t move. When I set my beer down—now half gone—I glanced at him. Again he was watching me, his eyes still warm and interested.

Huh.

“Do you—” he started.

“And how have—” I began.

We both stopped at the same time, sharing a small smile and a chuckle. My goodness, he really was excessively handsome, especially when he chuckled. His smile plus the low, deep timbre of the sound had that flutter in my stomach growing more pronounced.

He gestured to me and said, “Please. You first.”

“I was just going to ask, how have you liked your stay?”

“Dublin’s a great city, but this wasn’t my first visit.” He scratched his chin. “I have some friends here, so I travel back and forth a lot.”

“A jet setter then.”

His smile deepened, persisted, and my breath caught just above my rib cage.

Yeah. This is definitely a dream.

“I get around. I’m Broderick, by the way.” He held out his hand, his gaze seeming to grow more searching, like the revelation of his name might mean something to me.

My gaze dropped to his hand and I looked at it for a moment, then finally shook with him. “A fancy name for a fancy lad,” I said, unable to ignore the warm slide of his palm against mine, and how warm and solid he felt. “I’m Ophelia. It’s nice to meet you.”

“A pretty name for a pretty voice.” He continued holding my hand, not shaking it, but not letting it go either. “And it’s nice to meet you, too.”

“You liked the song?”

“It gave me chills.” His voice dropped to almost a whisper, the smile dropping from his face, replaced with a rough kind of sincerity that gave *me* a shiver.

I looked away, flushing slightly, and he immediately released my hand, allowing me to turn back to the bar. I wasn’t used to compliments, not from strangers, and most definitely not from random, jet-setting, sophisticated men. Then again, I rarely stuck around long enough after performing a song for people to tell me whether or not they liked it.

“Do you sing professionally?”

“It’s just a hobby.”

“A hobby.” He sounded disbelieving.

I wiped my thumb through the condensation at the base of my pint and blurted, “No. Actually, more like a compulsion.”

“A compulsion to sing?” Now he sounded intrigued.

“If I don’t—” I lifted my hands, motioning to my chest. “I can’t seem to breathe, and it weighs on me, like wearing a hundred coats. It’s a heaviness, a burden, but also like a blockage. I get all backed up.” I paused to laugh, wrinkling my

nose at myself and all this oversharing. Maybe it was the beer. “Sorry.” I peered at him. “That sounds disgusting.”

“No, I get it.” He leaned closer, his expression intent and earnest, both easing and arresting a knot in my chest. “I don’t sing but I love music. I love listening to it, being around it. It feeds my soul.”

Again, we shared a stare, and a moment of quiet passed. Where had this man come from? He talked like he was in a movie. I’d never met anyone like him before. Maybe it was an American thing. He expressed himself so openly, without any self-consciousness or self-deprecation. And the way he looked at me, like he knew me, or was waiting for me to recognize him, it was all very . . . unnerving.

“Anyway,” he went on when I didn’t speak, leaning away now as though coming back to himself. “I just wanted to tell you that I enjoyed your song and I think you’re very talented.”

I blew out a breath. “That’s very kind of you but there are plenty singers out there with much better voices than me.” Ugh, what was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I just take the compliment?

“It’s not just about your voice,” Broderick countered. “The greatest singers aren’t always the best artists. The world is full of singers, but true artists are few and far between. The ability to connect with an audience, convey emotion, make the world feel the words—and more than just the meaning behind them, but live the experience—that’s what sets them apart. When you sang, I felt your loss. I felt the magnitude of it from twenty feet away. It moved me.”

His gaze dropped and he placed his feet on the ground like he planned to stand and walk away. A jolt of panic—that this man who seemed to truly understand how I felt about music might just disappear—sent a flare of heat climbing up my neck to my chin and cheeks and nose.

Before I quite understood the intent of my instincts, I stood first, jumping to my feet and stammering, “Thank you. It’s

good to hear I'm doing something right. Here, as a thank you, let me buy you a drink." Feeling oddly breathless, I lifted my finger in the air, attempting to get the attention of the bartender. I didn't have money to be spending on drinks at pubs, but this was the first time in a long time that reality had come close to being as enjoyable as one of my daydreams. I desperately wanted the moment to last.

"If anyone should be buying someone a drink, it should be me." Broderick covered my upraised hand and smoothly lowered it to the bar, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Normally, I'd get freaked out if a stranger initiated touch so quickly, but Broderick was strikingly genuine. I got zero creepy vibes.

Bringing my attention back to him, his fingers slid away. "But it's late, and I imagine you have someplace to be."

I sat back on the stool, content for now that he didn't seem inclined to imminently depart. My relief had me speaking without thinking. "Actually, no. I have no place to be."

He frowned at that, a flicker of confusion—or maybe concern?—behind his gaze. "Really? Nowhere to be on Christmas Eve?"

A light laugh slipped past my lips and I shrugged, picking up a cardboard coaster, fiddling with the edges, and feeling suddenly self-conscious. And silly. Maybe I should've let him leave. *What are you doing? Go home. Get some sleep. This is a dream, and dreams never last.*

A few seconds ticked past while I wracked my brain for some topic that would get us back on track.

But then, Broderick asked, "Do you ever perform on stage?"

I shook my head, relieved for the subject change. "Dark little pubs are about as far as my confidence will allow when it comes to performing." I peeked at him again, and then rolled my eyes at myself and explained, "I have stage fright."

He didn't seem surprised to hear this, taking it in stride. "I've known a few people with stage fright. It can be overcome if you work on it."

"Maybe," I replied, unsettled by his scrutiny as I took another sip from my pint. I wasn't used to talking about my singing like it was something I could actually do instead of cleaning hotel rooms for a living. It made me feel both weirdly scared and excited.

And yet, I didn't want to allow myself to get my hopes up. Sure, I daydreamed, but there was still a logical part of me that knew that's all it was. A dream. It would never be real.

I stared at the bottles on the shelves behind the bar and sensed Broderick studying my profile. Something about his attention now made the hairs on my neck stand on end. The earlier faint flutter in my stomach became a buzz. It seemed like a long time since anyone really looked at me.

"So, what do you call that type of song anyway?" he asked, once more breaking the quiet with his easy manner.

"It's a traditional Irish ballad. My gran taught me lots of them. She used to sing, too, before she passed. If you think I'm good you should've heard her. There wasn't a dry eye in the house when she sang." I wanted to look at him again, so I did.

"I wish I could've heard her," he said, sounding and looking sincere.

I nodded, swallowing thickly.

Broderick's eyebrows drew together. I could tell he perceived there was something off with me. "I can leave if I'm bothering you," he said. "Sometimes I just get so excited when I hear new music—"

"No, stay," I interrupted. "It's not you. My gran only passed away a few months ago, so I still get a little emotional when I talk about her."

“Oh, *oh*.” He frowned, his handsome eyes turning sad. “I’m sorry to hear that, Ophelia.”

I liked the way he said my name, the way his accent sounded out the syllables. I felt him looking at me again, but I tried my best not to make eye contact because there was something really empathetic about him. He had those soulful brown eyes that could just look at you a certain way and pull all your suppressed feelings to the surface. Then before you knew it you were crying your eyes out in front of a stranger.

“It’s okay,” I whispered. “Gran raised me, so I just miss her a lot.” He didn’t speak, but instead reached out and put his hand on mine again. Like before, it felt so natural and genuine, it didn’t even occur to me to withdraw. “Gran used to make Christmas special,” I went on. “Now I feel so lost without her. I feel like everyone has somewhere to go except me.”

“That’s not true. There are others with no place to go.”

I knew he meant himself, so I asked, “What about your friends? They didn’t invite you over?”

“They did.” His smile made another appearance. “But I wasn’t in the mood to make small talk with strangers at their family Christmas. I couldn’t even get a reservation at a nice restaurant because I left it until the last minute. And even if I had gotten one, I would’ve been the sad dude in the corner dining alone.”

I laughed quietly. “Okay, so I’m not the only one. But it still sucks to be alone.”

Broderick nudged me with his elbow, lifting an eyebrow. “Hey. I’m not the ghost of Christmas past. You’re not alone.”

Feeling my smile persist, some reflex had me nudging him back. “Well then, neither are you.”

CHAPTER TWO

Broderick

“**H**ERE IT IS.” Ophelia moved her arm in a sweeping motion. “This is St. Stephen’s Green.”

I looked at the grassy lawn—or what I could see of it—and the gravel path. “Wow.”

“Yes.”

“It’s green.”

“Very.”

“Even in the dark, in the middle of winter, it’s green.”

“Indeed.”

“Impressive.” I inspected Ophelia’s profile, adding, “And aptly named,” completely deadpan. She fought a smile. She’d been fighting smiles during most of our adventure this evening and she hadn’t laughed since we’d left the pub.

Finishing her beer with the world’s smallest sips, she’d offered to take me on a tour of her city after I admitted that I’d never gone sightseeing during any of my visits. I know, lame.

Presently, it was cold and dark. I was legit a complete stranger to her and we were arguably the only sober people on the streets of Dublin with the exception of the guitarist busking across from the park—whoever it was, from what I could hear they were good. She didn’t seem at all put off by the fact that I was a stranger, but she hadn’t allowed herself a full smile either.

Interesting. I wondered if she was nervous.

This woman with sad eyes had a grin that reminded me of sunlight peeking through rain clouds, and a laugh just as melodic and alluring as her singing voice. I was not deterred. I

would ease her fears. *Oh yes*, I would make her laugh. Before the night was over, I would have her gasping for air, even if I had to resort to stories about my Aunt Clara's potato salad.

"I applaud the name, *Saint Stephen's Green*." I turned to face her. "And, come to think of it, I like it when places are named literally, reflecting the location."

She quirked an eyebrow, stuffing her hands in her pockets. "Why?"

"Then there are no surprises. Take Central Park in New York. No surprises there. You know what to expect and it delivers on both its centralness and its parkness."

A small smile hooked her mouth to the side and I looked at her lips. They were nice lips, pink, full, a little pouty, and white puffs of air paired with her words as she spoke, "Yes. Sometimes the name can promise one thing, but reality is very different."

"Like where? Give me an example."

"Like . . ." she glanced over my shoulder as she thought it over, which meant I could study her pretty face. Intelligent eyes beneath dark lashes, oval face, pink cheeks, tendrils of blonde, curly hair peeking out from beneath her knit hat and framing her face. *Yep. No denying it. She's extremely pretty.*

I'd noticed in the pub, she was the kind of pretty that was impossible to ignore. But the richness and emotive quality to her voice, and the palpable sadness she carried, had eclipsed any thoughts of her attractiveness at the time.

"Like Brussels." She focused on me again, lifting her shoulders, bringing me back to the present. "Where are the brussels sprouts? If you go to a place called Brussels, I would think it should be covered in brussels sprouts. Right?"

What a goof.

"Have you been to Brussels?" I wasn't going to fight my smile, it felt too good and her accent was fucking adorable.

‘Think’ was ‘tink’ and I wanted her to hear her ‘toughts’ all night.

Ophelia turned her head slightly, eyes narrowing. “No. But I’ve seen pictures, and nary a brussels sprout in sight. False advertising if you ask me.”

Grinning at her goofiness, I decided once and for all she had no idea who I was. Or, if she did know, she didn’t care. I couldn’t remember the last time I spent any time with someone who didn’t know me as Broderick Addams, record producer to rock stars and pop royalty rather than just Broderick, *some dude*.

It was nice to be just some dude again. Really nice.

“Anyways.” Ophelia turned slowly, her steps unhurried as she walked along the periphery of the park, inviting me to join with the tilt of her head. “I know where I’m taking you next, but we don’t have much time.”

Catching up to her, I let my arm brush against her shoulder. Her shoulder then brushed against my arm, and this was my version of acting irresponsibly. Other than our initial handshake, every touch thereafter had been way out of my norm. I wasn’t big on initiating contact, especially not with women—any woman—I’d just met. Growing up in Mississippi, I’d lost my accent, but I’d never lost my awareness of where I’d come from and what I looked like.

The world saw me as a big, scary black man. Meanwhile, here I am, shopping on Pottery Barn for faux fur bathrobes and table linens. There were few things I enjoyed more in life than a beautifully set table. Add candles and a centerpiece and I was in heaven. I will sit at a table and eat shitty food if there’s a silver napkin ring, no lie. Don’t get me started on Martha Stewart Living, domestic porn at its finest.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked, not moving away from the subtle warmth of her body. In fact, I swayed closer, my arm brushing her shoulder again. I should’ve stepped away. I would, but not yet.

“You’ll find out when we get there.” She pulled her hand from her pocket, hesitated for a second, and then slipped her fingers into the bend of my elbow.

Ophelia wore no gloves. She was probably cold. I didn’t want her to be cold. I covered her hand with mine. Hey, hey, hey, don’t give me that look. Just being a gentleman here.

Right.

Like every touch before, it unsettled. Yet, it also seemed perfectly natural. A lovely woman with the singing voice of a siren and a goofy sense of humor and a fucking adorable accent wanted to hold my arm and walk closer on a cold, clear night in a beautiful, ancient city? Twist my arm.

I wanted to hear her talk again, so I asked, “You’re from Dublin originally?”

“That’s right,” she said, and it sounded like, *Dat’s right*, where the word *right* had a bit more air behind it than how we Americans say the word, a cool lilt to the ‘t.’

“Have you ever wanted to live anywhere else?”

“Let’s see. . .” She placed her index finger on her chin, her lips twisting. “Maybe not live, but I’ve always wanted to go to Fiji.”

“Fiji? What’s in Fiji?”

“Gorgeous sandy beaches, warm weather, scuba diving—not that I know how—piña coladas, a hammock.” Her eyes lost focus while she told me her list, and then she laughed lightly. “I’d have to take a bath in suntan lotion, though. Otherwise I’d burn to a crisp.” The words were self-deprecating. “Yeah,” she added quietly, “maybe not Fiji.”

Her downtrodden tone made me frown. “Yes Fiji.” My firm statement drew her eyes. “You want to go to Fiji? Go to Fiji.”

Her smile a flash—there, and then hidden—she faced forward again. “Fine. Then maybe I will.”

“Good.”

“Good.” The smile crept its way back to her lips and eyes, and pretty Ophelia was suddenly gorgeous Ophelia, which had me biting back an offer to take her bikini shopping for Fiji.

The woman didn't need any of that, and I didn't need any complications. Truth was, I shouldn't be with her now. I should still be in that little pub on South Anne Street, alone. I always spent Christmas alone out of choice. I never wanted to be with anyone but myself, and my thoughts, and my memories.

But there was just something about her that had drawn me in, that had made my usual choice tonight seem lonely instead of merely solitary.

“How about you?”

“Uh . . .” I frowned. “How about me, what?”

“If you could go anywhere, where would you go?”

The past.

I breathed a laugh, stopping a bitter smile. “Oh, I don't know.” My eyes moved from the twinkling Christmas lights lining the park to the man playing the guitar now just a hundred yards or so away, surrounded by a decent sized group of spectators despite the lateness of the hour. “I've always wanted to ride the Orient Express.”

“Ha! Wouldn't that be something?” Her arm squeezed mine and she skipped once, twisting to face me, our arms still linked. “What a glorious idea. I wonder if they run during Christmas.”

“They do.” I'd never taken it, never had the occasion, but I'd looked it up.

Trains were my favorite mode of transportation. First class dining cars set the best tables. Picturesque. Dark wood, Turkish rugs, white linen tablecloths, crystal, silver, and napkins folded like swans. Problem was, solo train travel was

like watching a baseball game alone. Half the fun is the talking about it.

Ophelia's quiet laughter had me looking at her. "What? What is it?" I'd finally made her laugh and I had no idea why.

"Oh, nothing." She shook her head, laughing again. "I was just thinking, if we were in a movie, this would be the part of the tale where you'd suggest—if we're both alone next Christmas—we meet on the Orient Express."

"Or you could suggest it." *What was that? Why did I sound like that?* My voice was all deep. Like, Barry White *deep*.

"Ha-ha." She rolled her eyes, using our linked arms to tug me forward while whispering, "Hey, let's stop for a moment, just until he's finished. He's so good."

I agreed, so I said nothing, letting Ophelia bring us to a stop toward the back of the crowd. Didn't matter much. I was almost a half-foot taller than everyone else so I could see just fine. The thing about the Irish is that—other than their Rugby players—they're a small people.

Take Ed Sheeran for example: big talent. Also, might be a leprechaun. And Bono, he's fun-sized. Betcha didn't know he's only 5'6". This guy, the one who was playing now, also looked like he was about 5'6". . .

I stiffened, finally recognizing just who was busking in the middle of the night in the middle of Dublin and exhaled a disbelieving breath along with a, "Holy shit."

Ophelia stepped closer and I glanced at her.

She was fighting another smile, leaning in to whisper, "Right? And I think these other blokes are too drunk to realize who's playing for them. Sodding eejits."

There was laughter in her voice, and I also chuckled, but then stiffened again, ducking my head on instinct. If he saw me, our famous performer would definitely recognize me. I didn't want that to happen in front of Ophelia. I was still just *some dude*. Maybe I'd never see Ophelia again after tonight,

but we had tonight. I wasn't ready to be Broderick Addams to her yet.

Just for tonight.

"Is this where you were going to take me?" I used her snack stature as an excuse to dip lower.

"No." She turned wide eyes on me. "But do you want to stay and listen?"

"Nah. I can hear this guy on Spotify anytime I want." I gestured with my head toward the sidewalk even as I turned. "Let's get going."

She followed and then quickly took the lead, sliding her hand down my arm to capture my fingers as we crossed the street.

"It's just up here. Just a little bit further."

Studying our hands, I asked, "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

"And it's open?"

"Yep."

"On Christmas Eve? At midnight?"

She chuckled again, like something about my words was especially funny, sending me a look. "Oh yeah, it's open."

"Can you give me a hint?"

"Um." She pressed her finger to her chin again, obviously debating how to respond. "How about, there will be singing."

"A club?"

"Noooo." She shivered, wrapping her arm around her middle and stepping closer to me as her teeth chattered. "Not a club."

Without pausing to think, instinct had me wrapping an arm around her shoulders and drawing her near.

. . . *What?* She was cold, right? What was I supposed to do? Let her freeze to death? No. The arm around her shoulders and the bringing her body to mine was all about sharing warmth. That's it. Anyway, she didn't seem to mind. Ophelia snuggled against my side, her arm coming around my waist like we'd done this a hundred times.

We were strangers. It should've been weird. It wasn't.

"We're almost there." She peered up at me, her eyes twinkling and excited as they lowered to my lips. "I think you're going to like this."

"You think so?" I muttered, almost adding, *Well, you would know.* But I didn't, because that would be crazy (even though I thought it and my subconscious apparently believed it).

In the next moment, she was guiding me up steps and I realized as soon as the music hit my ears where we were. Well, maybe not specifically where we were. Rather, what kind of place we were in.

Sending her a look as she stepped away from my hold, she held my eyes for a long moment, dipping her fingers in water to the right of the inside door. She then crossed herself. Ophelia led me to the pew at the very back of the church, a smile teasing at her lips as she lifted her own voice to join the choir at the front in their hauntingly beautiful rendition of 'Silent Night.'

She was right. I did like it. A lot.

Taking a moment, I glanced at our surroundings as the music filled the spaces around and within us. I was surprised by all the color, especially along the upper walls. Vibrant, giant frescoes in high contrast had been painted beneath arching windows. The ceiling was white or beige, impossible to tell without daylight, and green vines had been painted between the rafters, reaching from the back of the church to the alter.

Visually, it was louder, the art less muted but no less ostentatious than the Catholic churches I'd visited throughout Europe. But I decided I liked it better than St. Peter's gold gilt, pastels, and white marble.

After 'Silent Night' came 'Noel,' then a hymn I'd never heard before.

Sliding my arm around Ophelia's waist, I bent to her ear and whispered, "What song is this?"

"In the Bleak Midwinter," she whispered back, and I didn't miss the way she leaned into me, staying put instead of shifting away after answering my question.

I also didn't say what was on my mind, which was something like, *Of course the Irish have a Christmas carole with the word 'bleak' in it.* Nor did I sing. Singing was not one of my gifts to give. Instead, I listened to the choir, to the church goers surrounding us at midnight mass, to the gentle organ accompaniment. But mostly, I listened to the powerful voice—in every way a voice could be powerful—next to me and tried to anchor myself.

I couldn't. She swept me away. The edges of reality blurred, and she was not a stranger. I knew her. We'd met before, so many times, and we were where we belonged—which was together, anywhere, but always now.

At some point the singing stopped and we sat, my arm along the back of the pew, Ophelia tucked against my side. Readings were read and still we remained close. But when the congregation stood once more, she tilted her head toward the back and mouthed, *Let's go.*

Allowing her to lead me back into the night, the door closed behind us on the third *Alajuela*, shutting out the warmth and the song, but leaving us together, now.

Sending me a grin over her shoulder, she kept hold of my hand while climbing down the steps. "So, did you like it?"

Her voice was husky with use and I liked this new quality to it. In fact, I more than liked. It sent my blood humming to

the four—or five—corners on my body, warm and thick.

I wanted her close again, so I stopped her at the bottom stairs, intending to simply tuck her under my arm again. But that's not what I did.

Ophelia turned to face me, a questioning smile on her lips and the light of intoxicating happiness behind her green eyes. She gazed up at me, and I think she read my mind, because her grin quickly fell away.

But not the happiness. No. The happiness remained, mixing with anticipation.

Her breathing changed and she licked her lips, taking a shuffling step forward, her lashes fluttering until her stare lowered to my mouth.

My palms slid against her jaw, the soft, warm skin of her cheeks, and I tilted her head back. And I kissed her.

That feeling, that same feeling from earlier when I'd heard her sing for the first time—like my heart had been overwhelmed by a reality too big to be contained—arrested me. She was hot—her lips, her tongue—and yielding, but not uncertain.

I smoothed a hand down her side to her lower back, encouraging her to step more completely in my space. She did.

I threaded my fingers into her hair, pushing it from her head, sifting through the tangled curls at the crown of her head while she wrapped her arms around my neck, sucking on my tongue, making me even more crazy for the taste and feel of her.

Keeping friendly company on a lonely Christmas Eve was one thing, but this was no longer anything so simple or harmless. I wanted her and I wasn't thinking. I wanted her and, if she wanted me, the greediness within said there existed no reason we couldn't have each other.

“Where—” I pulled away to say the word, but not for long, wanting—*needing*—another taste before finishing the

question. “Where do you live?” I lowered my lips to her chin, jaw, neck, biting and flicking the skin with my tongue. “Are you close?”

“Yes. Very close.” Stretching to give me better access and practically climbing my body, her nails dug into my shoulders through the thick layer of my jacket. Her breath hitched, her hands grabbing frustrated fistfuls of my coat. “Please. Please come over.”

“Absolutely,” I growled against her skin, my hands sliding to her backside, pressing her more firmly against me. I wanted her to know and feel exactly what was on my mind.

Ophelia gasped again, but she didn’t pull away, instead seeking my mouth for another hot kiss, sending any of my remaining good sense packing.

It was Christmas, after all. And I’d been so, so, *so* good this year.

Until now.

CHAPTER THREE

Ophelia

“SO, THIS IS where you live?” Broderick asked, looking up and down the dark street.

“Yeah, sorry, I know the area is a bit dodgy.” I dipped my head.

“Hey,” he whispered, tipping his fingers to my chin. I brought my eyes to his and his look was intense, like he was reading my mind. “Not what I meant.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but words failed me. The way he spoke made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Being alone with him, the energy around us had built and now it felt electric. All of my senses were heightened.

“O...okay,” I finally whispered back.

It was quiet as we approached my house. It would be an understatement to say I was nervous about him seeing the place. Now that the rush of his kisses had subsided, I was starting to second guess my decision to invite him back. Fortunately, it was late and Christmas Eve, so most of my housemates would probably be in bed or off with their families. Maybe I could pretend I only shared with three or four people instead of twelve.

Broderick was silent as I scrambled in my bag for my key. I slotted it in the door and stepped inside. The aroma of too many dinners being cooked in the same kitchen immediately hit my nose. Then, the faint underlying scent of mildew. I chanced a peek at Broderick as he took it all in.

What was my plan again? Bring him back here and . . . ?

Even if he didn't notice the smell, he definitely saw the cramped hallway where an array of my housemate's possessions were haphazardly strewn. Several bicycles leaned against the wall alongside shoes, boots, coats and all manner of personal items. The walls were painted a pale yellow, with damp spots marking the ceiling. *Good thing the entryway light is broken.*

Over the last few weeks my eyes had adapted to the mess, but now I was seeing it afresh through Broderick's eyes and it gave me a weird pang of shame and embarrassment. I bet he lived in some swanky open plan apartment in Soho. Or a funky, hipster neighborhood in Brooklyn. Somewhere far removed from my own dank situation.

The kitchen light shone down the hallway and it sounded like one of my housemates had some friends over. *Wonderful.* Boisterous male laughter sounded and I glanced at Broderick again. His eyebrows were drawn, his lips a thin, straight line. I couldn't decipher what he was thinking. Was he judging me? Pitying me? Trying to concoct some excuse to leave? To be honest I wouldn't blame him.

"How many people live here?" he asked after a stretch of silence.

"A few," I answered evasively and grabbed his hand to pull him into the living room. I gestured for him to sit but he didn't look too keen. The sofa was old and moth-eaten, cigarette holes burned into the armrest. Empty beer cans were scattered across the coffee table, as well as some dirty cups and plates.

He probably thinks this is a crack den.

Why on earth had I invited him back here? Something came over me when he kissed me outside the church. I wanted more. I wanted one night where I could just forget about my life and lose myself in someone else, someone who lived far, far away and who I'd likely never see again. Just one night where reality and fantasy were the same.

“What constitutes a few?” Broderick went on, not letting up on his questioning. He finally sat and I stood by the coffee table, nervous. This was not going how I imagined. He stared at me, his gaze determined, not leaving me any room to change the subject.

“Twelve?” I replied, heart thumping, cheeks heating. Why was I so embarrassed? This bloke was a stranger. I didn’t have to care about his opinion of me, but for some reason I did. I cared immensely.

He blinked, and I saw the surprise flitter across his eyes before he schooled his expression. “How many bedrooms are there?”

“Three,” I answered honestly. It wasn’t like telling him the truth could do me any harm. I was a creature of interest, someone to distract him before he got on a plane and went back to whatever fancy life he led.

“That’s a lot of people for only three bedrooms,” he went on, his attention going to the chatter streaming in from the kitchen. “Are they all friends of yours from college or something?”

“No. I didn’t go to college. And we aren’t exactly friends. We all just live here. I stay out of their business and they stay out of mine.”

Broderick’s expression showed a hint of consternation. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees as he rubbed his temples. “But you know them, right? Please tell me they’re at least decent people for the sake of my sanity.”

I chewed on my lip, wanting to lie to make him feel better, but I’d told the truth so far so why stop now? “I know their names, but that’s about it.” I stared at him a moment. My answer didn’t appear to reassure him. In fact, it seemed to do the opposite.

Aaaaand now I felt defensive. *Grrr*. What business was it of his where I lived? We were strangers who’d decided on a whim to spend Christmas Eve together. He didn’t need to

worry about me. I could be murdered in my bed tomorrow and it wouldn't affect him one iota. "It's all I can afford and it's safer than sleeping on the streets, which is my only other option so..."

"*Ophelia*." He said my name like I made him feel both outraged and powerless. Something about it caused an unexpected wave of emotion to rush through me.

"Don't worry about me," I sniffed. "I'll be fine. This is only temporary. As soon as I have enough money saved, I'll get a place of my own. I've been considering moving an hour or two away and commuting to work. The rents are much cheaper outside the capital."

He listened to me speak and a flicker of something appeared behind his brown eyes. He opened his mouth, about to say something, when the living room door was pushed open. One of my housemates entered, bleary eyed and wobbly on his feet. He looked from me to Broderick, a can of beer in hand. I guessed he and his friends were the ones responsible for the empty cans scattered all over the living room.

"Amelia!" he said, loud and obnoxious. "Merry Christmas!"

Broderick looked to me, eyebrow raised as he mouthed, *Amelia?*

I shook my head, glancing at my roommate, whose name was Mikael. "It's Ophelia, remember? And Merry Christmas to you, too. Do you know what time your friends will be leaving?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Whenever they run out of booze probably." He flopped down on the couch next to Broderick and pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, lighting one up. Mikael was far too drunk to realize how rude he was being.

"So, don't I know you from somewhere?" he asked, turning his attention to Broderick, who appeared to be deciding whether or not to entertain the question. Before he

had the chance to say anything, Mikael's friends burst into the room, a bundle of noisy, drunken male energy.

Broderick met my gaze and we had something of a silent conversation.

Want to get out of here? His eyes asked.

Yes, please. Mine replied before I could stop them.

He stood from the couch, holding out his hand. I took it and he led me into the hallway. Mikael and company barely registered our departure. Broderick took charge, leading me up the stairs. I had a moment of panic, thinking he was going in the direction of the bedrooms to finish what we started outside the church, but then he surprised me when he said, "Pack up your things."

My brow furrowed. "What? Why?"

"I have an apartment here."

"You have an apartment *here*?"

"Uh, just one that I've been renting. I was supposed to stay for a few weeks, but business back home cut my visit short. The rent is already paid and I'm not going to be here so it might as well go to some use."

I studied him, trying to figure out if I understood correctly. "Let me get this straight. You want to let me stay in your apartment for free? But you don't even know me."

He tilted his head, his eyes wandering from my chin to my cheeks. "I know enough."

I lowered my gaze to the floor. "You should just get a refund. I could be anyone. I could be a maniac who'll thrash the place and leave you footing the bill for repairs."

He gave a low chuckle. "I'm pretty sure you aren't a maniac, Ophelia. And besides, the rent is already paid and it's non-refundable. So either you move in or the apartment sits empty. I know which one I'd prefer."

I inhaled sharply. This seemed too good to be true. It seemed like one of the daydreams I'd have while scrubbing toilets and changing dirty bedsheets at the hotel. Some mysteriously handsome American stranger I meet at a bar offers me a place to live rent free. A place all to myself. I mean, there had to be a catch. But as I stared into Broderick's bottomless, honest brown eyes all I saw was a kind gesture, human to human.

After sharing with so many other people, the prospect of being alone, truly alone, seemed like heaven. Why was he doing this? I was nobody to him. Emotion swelled within me, a mixture of gratitude and relief. A tear threatened to leak out, but I sniffed it back, my mind not quite made up.

But then he said, "Think of it like a Christmas gift. Merry Christmas."

"Broderick—"

"Are you going to turn down a Christmas gift? Rude."

That made me chuckle, and before I knew I was speaking, I said, "Fine. Okay then."

"Good," he nodded, seeming happy. Maybe it just made his conscience clear to know I was somewhere he deemed safe. The girl he met and kissed and swept off her feet for a night would be okay, for a while at least. Job done. Good deed completed.

"Now go pack," he urged. "Make sure you don't forget anything."

He shooed me into my room and I made short work of stuffing my few possessions into a large duffle bag. When I re-emerged fifteen minutes later, Broderick glanced up from his phone.

"I ordered us a taxi. It should be outside in a minute or two."

A lump formed in my throat. I still hadn't gotten a hold over my emotions. In fact, they'd only grown worse as I'd

packed and realized how little I had. There was nothing like being able to fit everything you owned in the world into a single duffle bag to make you feel small and inconsequential.

We stepped outside into the icy cold night and I felt shy all of a sudden. I could feel Broderick's eyes on me, but he didn't speak, didn't ask with incredulity if one bag was all I needed to go live somewhere for several weeks. I started mentally making plans. In the morning I'd call my landlord and inform him I was moving out. That way I could save my rent money and get a better place when I had to leave Broderick's apartment.

The lights of a car approached as the taxi pulled up outside. Broderick silently took my bag and slid the strap over his shoulder. I lowered myself into the warm car and wondered if the apartment had a bath. It was a luxury I hadn't had in a while, since the bath at the house was always way too gross to actually use.

Broderick told the driver the address and I noted that it was in a particularly upscale part of the city. I watched the buildings go by, my attention on the window when I felt Broderick's warm hand cover mine. I turned to him, his touch sending a spark of heat through me. Our eyes met and held a moment before I dropped my gaze, unable to handle the weird way we seemed to understand one another without needing to speak. I felt an odd connection to him from the very moment he approached me at the bar.

Like it was destiny.

I swiped away the ridiculous, errant thought.

"Here we are," the driver announced. "That'll be eighteen-sixty."

Broderick paid the fare, then led me inside the building. It was a modern, newish apartment block. We took the lift up to the seventh floor then walked to the end of the long corridor. Broderick set my bag down and I looked around. The place wasn't huge, but it might as well have been a mansion as far as

I was concerned. It was clean and new and I'd be able to relax without the constant worry that one of my housemates was going to burst into the room. One thing was for sure, I was going to savor every last second of the next few weeks.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, standing a few feet behind me.

I walked to the floor to ceiling window that led to a small balcony before turning around. "Well, *obviously* I'm used to some pretty high standards, but I suppose this will do," I said, and he laughed.

"Goof." He dropped his keys on the coffee table. "You can take the bedroom. It's just through there. I have to leave in a couple hours anyway, so I think I'll just power through and sleep on the plane."

My smile fell and my chest squeezed. I hated that he had to leave so soon. I felt like I was just getting to know someone hugely important and now he was disappearing. I made a concerted effort not to let how crestfallen I felt show on my face.

"So, you never did explain to me how you're managing to catch a flight on Christmas day."

A faint smile touched his lips, his eyes seeming to twinkle with mischief, and he muttered, "You really don't know who I am."

I frowned at him. "Should I?"

He rubbed his jaw, letting out a small sigh. "No, I guess not. Not unless you're in the music industry."

My interest piqued. He worked in the music industry? I wanted to ask a million questions, but confusion kept my mouth shut. Plus, did it matter? I'd probably never see him again after tonight. We only had a few more hours and I didn't want him to think I was only interested in him for his job, whatever it was.

A few seconds of quiet elapsed as we gazed at one another. It was weird, like we both liked looking at each other too much to admit how equally awkward it was standing here trading stares.

Once more, I entertained the idea of having sex with him. After all, I was beyond attracted to him and we had great chemistry. The sex would probably be fantastic. But something in me said no. The time didn't feel right, which was absurd. If I never saw him again, now was the time!

But . . .

I'd only be lonelier if we had amazing sex and then he had to leave right after.

"Can I make a request?" he asked then, his low voice breaking the quiet.

I eyed him curiously. "What kind of request?"

"Sing for me."

I looked around. "Sing? Here?"

"Sure," he nodded.

Self-awareness pricked at me. It was one thing for him to hear me sing in a darkened pub, alone in a brightly lit apartment was another thing entirely. But then, he'd done something truly kind by letting me stay here and if all I could give him in return was a song then so be it.

"Um, all right. What should I sing?"

"One of your grandmother's songs. Like the one you sang at the pub."

I took a deep breath and meandered over to the window, no destination in mind, my back turned to him. I definitely couldn't sing and make eye contact. That would be way too intense.

The apartment was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I felt Broderick's undivided attention on me. I closed my eyes and sang quietly, the first few lines of *The Foggy Dew*. Then,

as I got further into the song my voice grew louder, filling the space. I forgot about my audience of one and allowed myself to be swept away in the story, in a time gone by when men fought passionately for their country, men who were dead and gone but whose bravery lived on in the music that was passed down from generation to generation.

When the song ended and I fell quiet, a chill shuddered through me. I didn't immediately turn around. The tension in the room was too thick. Tonight had been a rollercoaster of emotions and again I was on the verge of tears. It was a combination of the song, missing Gran, the strange, sudden connection I felt to Broderick, his selfless gesture, and the fact that he was leaving in a few short hours.

"That was incredible," he said, breaking the silence, his voice rough. But I heard the awe in his tone and turned around. His eyes shone, and I wondered if he was feeling just as mixed up as I was right now.

"Thank you," I whispered and he gestured to the space beside him. "Come here."

I took a few tentative steps toward him and sat, my heart in my throat and my stomach twisting.

Fantastic sex, Ophelia! Come on!!

When he held his arm out, a warm smile on his lips and behind his eyes, it felt natural to lean into him and rest my head on his chest. I closed my eyes once more, listening to the sound of his breaths, his steady, reassuring heartbeat, and somehow—while still arguing with myself whether or not to give into temptation—I drifted off to sleep.

I came to with a start sometime later. Sitting up and glancing around the strange space. Memories of the night before flooded my brain and I cursed under my breath, clutching my forehead. He was gone.

My stomach felt empty and sick and I hadn't been expecting that—not that I'd had time to expect anything. It was completely irrational, but I wanted to cry. I'd never met

anyone like Broderick and, in retrospect, everything about him as seen through the filter of my dreamy recollections, felt once-in-a-lifetime.

Boo, Ophelia. Boo.

That's right, I was heckling myself.

I should've had fantastic sex with him.

He made me feel seen in a way no one ever had before, not even Gran, and I was infinitely sad because I knew, deep down, I'd never see him again.

Glancing around the room—half hoping he hadn't left, that he'd suddenly appear—I spotted a piece of paper on the coffee table. I picked it up and discovered he'd left a note.

My heart leapt.

Dear O,

I didn't want to wake you, but it seemed rude to leave without saying goodbye. Last night was perfect. I'll never forget it. Especially your sunbeam smile and your voice. You have a unique talent, Ophelia, a talent you need to share with the world. (Not just old dudes drinking pints in dark bars.) I'm leaving you the contact information for someone who I think will be able to help you make a start with a music career, if you're interested.

Thank you for spending Christmas Eve with me.

Yours,

Broderick Addams.

My cheeks heated when I finished reading, my mind a whirr with hope and possibility, but also a strange sense of niggling doom because his name sounded familiar. But I couldn't focus on that.

He thought I had the chance at a music career? The very thought made my insides go haywire. Then I looked at the

note again and realized—again—that he’d signed his full name. *Broderick Addams*.

I gasped, and then I leapt—*quite* ungracefully—from the couch and then jumped on top of it as another kind of hope seized me. If he never wanted to see me again then he would’ve just signed with his first name. Including his last name made me feel like he wanted me to look him up! *He wants to see me again!!*

Or . . .

Maybe I was reading too much into it. I frowned at his last name. Ugh. *What did it mean?* And why did his name sound so familiar?

Without overthinking it, I pulled out my phone and quickly typed his name into Google. And then I dropped my phone as my ass fell back to the sofa and I covered my mouth.

Shite.

“Holy fucking shite.”

Broderick Addams.

God. I knew him. I knew who he was. *Everyone* knew who he was—well, everyone who followed music. Producer with Blackbird Records, he’d worked on some of the biggest albums of the last five years. Like, tens of millions of copies sold, launching new careers, rejuvenating old ones.

And I’d just spent the night with him.

And he’d *kissed* me.

And I was now staying in an apartment he’d paid for.

My heart beat fast, thrumming away inside my chest, my mind a mess, torn. What would I do? What *should* I do? All my dreams could become a reality. Broderick Addams believed in me, thought I had talent. He could make things happen, if I wanted them to happen.

But . . . Happy Christmas, indeed.

I touched my lips with my fingertips, remembering the kiss—our kiss—and I felt hot with confusion. Did he like me for my voice? Or did he like my voice for me?

Be careful what you wish for, especially on Christmas. It might just come true.



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EXCLUSIVE SCENE: ILLUSIONIST SEEKS NEANDERTHAL

*Some time ago, before there was ever a Quinn or a Matilda,
two curious souls crossed paths...*



Jay

THIS PRICK ISN'T gonna see shit.

He's all up in my grill, bald head a shining, beady little hawk eyes following my every move. They always have the same idea, thinking if they keep their focus on my hands they'll catch me off guard. Figure out the trick.

Wrong.

It's the ones who stand back, outside the gathered crowd, only vaguely interested, that you've got to watch for. You ever been hanging out, waiting for a bus, or I dunno, standing outside a store waiting for your girl to try shit on, your eyes disinterestedly scanning the street, when all of a sudden you randomly spot some motherfucker slipping his hand inside a purse and stealing someone's wallet? The same rules apply to illusion. You're far more likely to see what I'm really up to if you're not actually looking.

I was in Chicago, one of my favorite cities. I had a couple night club shows lined up but today I'd taken to the streets, mainly because I needed some extra cash to pay for my hotel. I never really made a whole lot from my gigs, a couple hundred dollars at most, but I figured if I just kept performing, kept on hustling, maybe one day I'd make it to Vegas. That was where you earned the big money.

"You've got a card hidden inside your shirt sleeve, don't ya?" said Baldy, perspiration collecting on his forehead he was concentrating so hard. A decent crowd had gathered but this

dude was killing my buzz. I didn't get why some people couldn't just enjoy the show, they wanted to know how you were pulling it off. And they were always disappointed when you gave them the truth. That's why I never did. I hated the look of disillusionment in their eyes, much preferred the glittering excitement of mystification.

Shuffling the deck, I slid it back in my pocket and stepped away from him. "That'd be telling, buddy." His lips firmed in annoyance but I decided to ignore him and move onto another trick. "Okay, I need a volunteer for this next one, anyone interested?"

"Me! I'll do it," said Baldy but I pretended I didn't hear him, eyes scanning the crowd.

"I'd like to volunteer," a tall, pretty red head who was waving her hand eagerly in the air enthused.

I smiled and gave her a quick sweep up and down, a silent interview if you will. Right off the bat I knew she wasn't gonna work. I had to admit though, she was smokin'. Intelligent eyes, too. She had that whole sexy librarian thing going on. From what I could see under her dark green sweater, she had a fantastic rack, legs that went on for miles and a face that made fools out of men. I'd certainly have some fun unbuttoning all that prim and proper.

"Sorry, darlin', but I don't think you're right for this one," I said, my tone apologetic. "Someone else." I moved my attention over the crowd and found a short guy with his hand up. Unlike the red head, this dude was perfect. I was just about to call him forward when prim and proper spoke up.

"Why not?" Her brow was furrowed and she looked disappointed, like a kid who'd just been told she was too short to ride the rollercoaster.

I gave her another once over and reconsidered. There was something about her that made me feel bad, something that made me want to give her what she wanted.

"What do you do for a living?" I asked.

Maybe this could work. *Maybe*. I already had a fair idea of her profession, the top three possibilities being a statistician, an economist or an accountant.

What told me this, you ask? Well, a number of things, but we won't get into those now.

"I'm an accountant."

Booyah. Unfortunately, though, my first guess was correct. This trick just wouldn't work with her.

"I'm sorry. I gotta go with this dude," I said, nodding over to the other guy who'd volunteered.

She appraised me curiously. "Why?"

"Just the way the cookie crumbles."

"I'd really like to know," she persisted.

"Stick around and maybe we'll talk," I told her, then moved toward the man. I had no idea why I'd said that. People asked me questions all the time, but I never offered explanations. This woman, though, I liked the look in her eyes, if that made sense. Nevertheless, she didn't seem too happy with my brush off, folding her arms over her chest. I didn't *really* intend to reveal anything to her, but I did want to talk to her some more. Maybe she'd be open to joining me for a drink in one of the many bars that lined the street.

Pulling a pen and a piece of paper from my pocket, I handed them to the guy. "What's your name?"

"Ben," he answered, seeming a small bit nervous now that everybody's attention was on him. It was perfect.

"Okay, Ben, think of an object. Any object. Picture it in your head. You got one?"

"Yeah."

I watched him intently. "All right, not that one. Change it. Now change it again. One more time. Right, now you can safely say there's no way I could know what it is, right? In

fact, go ahead and pick a different one. This is the last time, I promise. You all set?"

He nodded. "Now, I want you to draw it for me. I'm gonna go stand over there with my back turned so there's no possible way I could see."

I walked away and he immediately started drawing. Turning, I counted to twenty in my head. "You done, Ben?" I called over my shoulder.

"Yeah," he replied.

"All right, now I want you to fold that bad boy up and put it in your pocket, somewhere I ain't gonna get my hands on it." Once he'd tucked the paper safely inside the back pocket of his jeans, I pulled a five-dollar bill from my wallet and handed it to the red head.

"Do me a favor and go grab me a paper from the newsstand, would ya, gorgeous?" I asked and a small blush colored her cheeks.

She looked away and I could see that something I'd said caught her off guard; her response a squeaky, "Okay."

I enjoyed watching her walk away, my eyes roaming that shapely behind. When she returned she handed me the paper, neatly folded in half. Her pretty eyes were alight with interest and I could tell she was getting a real kick out of all this. She might not have been a good candidate to volunteer, but she was the ideal spectator. I could tell she was bursting with questions but was holding them all back. Sometimes the human desire to be surprised trumped the need for knowledge, even in a woman as curious as this one.

I shook out the news rag then very carefully opened it to reveal a folded piece of paper inside the middle page. Some interested mutterings sounded from the onlookers while Ben swore under his breath, "What the hell?"

Removing it, I handed the rag back to the red head then unfolded the paper so everybody could see. A drawing of a pineapple was revealed and Ben swore some more.

“Check your pocket, buddy,” I said, a grin tugging at the edges of my mouth. I fucking loved this part. Ben slid his hand in his pocket, coming up empty. “It’s gone,” he breathed.

I held up the drawing. “Is this what you drew?”

He nodded fervently. “It’s not just what I drew, that’s *my* drawing...how the hell did you...”

I shot him a wink then raised my hands in the air. “I give you the beauty of illusion, ladies and gents.” They all started clapping and whistling, while a bunch of people came forward to drop some cash in my hat. They had no clue how much I needed it.

After a minute the crowd dispersed, and I picked up my hat, folding it in half and shoving it in my backpack. When I glanced up only one person remained and a grin tugged at my mouth.

“You wanna go grab a drink with me?” I asked, eyeing her.

She checked her watch. “I’m on my lunch break. I have to be back at the office in forty minutes.”

“I’ll make sure you’re back in thirty-five.”

“I’m involved. With a person. Who is my boyfriend . . .” she went on, then cringed. It came out awkward, like she was trying to convince herself that spending time with me was a bad idea. “Not that I’m implying that you’re inferring anything, I just like to be honest about statuses.”

I wasn’t an idiot. I knew what people saw when they looked at me. Tattoos, baggy jeans, scuffed boots and the premature grey patches under my eyes that spoke of living rough and too little sleep. By contrast, this chick was nothing like me. Maybe that’s why I liked her.

“I’m not asking to get hitched. Just one drink,” I cajoled. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

I saw her lips twitch and knew she wanted to smile. Yeah, she was charmed. How could she not be? I was a charming

bastard when the mood took me, even if I did look like a street thug.

“Okay, fine,” she relented. “No need to invoke Dr Pepper. Just one drink though.”

“Just one drink,” I said and held my arm out. She hesitated a long moment then carefully took it. “Now I’m in the mood for some cola. Did I just subconsciously suggest that to myself or did you?”

She smiled and let out a small giggle. “You do know Dr Pepper isn’t technically a cola, right?”

“I did not,” I grinned.

“Well, legally speaking, it isn’t,” she went on, her face animated. “Up until the 1960’s the drink was confined to the South and Southwest, because Coca-Cola and Pepsi had already built their respective networks of independent bottlers, and those bottlers held the exclusive contracts to turn the syrups into colas and distribute nationwide. In order to get around this, there was a federal court ruling in 1963 that declared Dr Pepper’s unique flavor marked it as not *actually* a cola product, hence allowing nationwide distribution. Much to Coke and Pepsi’s dismay, obviously.”

“Obviously,” I echoed.

Seriously, where had this chick come from? Who got this jazzed up about the definition of cola? I was in love already.

A moment of quiet passed between us as I led her to a decent looking cocktail bar and opened the door. She stepped through, casting her gaze to me over her shoulder as I followed her inside.

“You’re not going to tell me why you wouldn’t pick me to volunteer for your trick, are you?”

I pulled out a stool by the bar and gestured for her to sit. “Why do you want to know?”

She chewed on her lip. “I don’t really like not knowing things.”

I glanced at her mouth then back up to her eyes. “Yeah, I got that.”

“Is it because of my job?”

“Your job?”

“You asked me what I did for a living, and after I answered you seemed to decide definitively that you didn’t want me for the trick,” she explained.

I rubbed at my jaw. “Tricks like the one I did today work on suggestibility, and some people are more suggestible than others. There isn’t one simple answer as to how I determine a person’s suggestiveness. It’s more a collection of factors.”

“Such as?”

I chuckled. “You’re not letting this go, are ya?”

She smiled and shook her head. It was cute. I let out a deliberating breath and leisurely let my eyes run over her. She really was nice to look at, and the sexiest part was she didn’t even know it. “Well, in your case it was a matter of not being nervous enough. Usually, when I single people out, particularly in an environment where they have to come up on stage, they get nervous. It makes them a whole helluva lot more suggestible than a calm person. You were too calm for me to suggest anything to you, because you were far too absorbed with curiosity about my tricks to be nervous about being put on the spot. It’s also the reason why sociopaths don’t make for good volunteers. They don’t get nervous,” I joked and she paled.

“I’m not a sociopath,” she said fervently.

Christ, now I’d offended her. “I know that. That wasn’t what I was saying. I’ve had my fair share of experience with head cases to know you’re not one of them,” I told her, my voice unexpectedly sincere.

She studied me a moment, and it wasn’t often I felt like someone was really seeing me, but right then it felt like she did. Her expression turned a little sad. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

I eyed her. “Your sister or your mom?” A pause as I took in her expression. “No, wait, your old man?”

She sucked in a breath. “How did you...”

I tapped the side of my head. “I see more than most people, Janie.”

Now she gasped. “I never told you my name.”

Reaching forward, I picked up the lanyard that hung around her neck and flipped it over. “Pretty easy to figure out when it’s right in front of me,” I smiled, allowing my knuckles to skim her be-sweatered chest ever so slightly. I thought I saw the tiniest tremble go through her.

She put her hand to her forehead and rolled her eyes at herself. “Duh. I’m an idiot.”

I shot her a perceptive look. “We both know that’s not true.”

For the second time she blushed at me. I liked it. Turning to grab the barman’s attention, I ordered a beer then looked to Janie. She fiddled with the hem of her sweater, glancing overhead at the cocktail menu. I knew she’d made her choice when she sat up straighter. “I’ll have a margarita.”

I smiled. “Letting loose, huh?”

“If you think one margarita is letting loose, you should come to my knitting group sometime,” she replied.

“Oh yeah? You like to get tipsy while making mittens and shit?”

She shook her head. “Well, I don’t actually knit, but anyway, that’s a whole other story. The point is, I’m tall. It takes a lot more than this to get me drunk,” she said as the barman got to work on our drinks. I leaned my elbow on the counter and studied her. I had to admit, she had me intrigued. There was this mixture of innocence and worldliness about her that appealed to me. When the barman set her cocktail down in front of her, I watched as she took a sip, bringing the salted

rim to her lips. She tipped her tongue to it ever so slightly and my balls stiffened.

Quit looking at her mouth, ya perv.

I cleared my throat. “So, you like being an accountant?”

She shrugged and set her glass down. “I know what you’re going to say, it’s unusual for a woman to pursue a math based career.”

I frowned at her sudden defensiveness. “That’s not what I was gonna say at all. In fact, the whole ‘girls don’t do well at math’ thing is a form of cognitive bias.” She wore an interested expression so I explained further. “If you tell someone that the majority of people fail a certain subject, then that person is already more likely to fail because the idea has been planted in their noggin. It’s what they call a stereotype threat. There’s this study I read about once, where they took two groups of men and women and gave them a math test. The first group was told that men usually outperform women in the test, and the second was told that both genders typically performed equally well. You wanna guess what the outcome was?”

Janie’s eyes lit up. “The women performed worse in the first group and better in the second. I’ve read that paper. ‘Stereotype Threat and Women’s Math Performance’ by Spencer, Steele and Quinn, 1998.”

She paused then, looking embarrassed that she knew all the specifics. I thought it was awesome. Shooting her a wide smile, I clinked my glass to hers, “See, I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

She glanced at the bar top. “I read. A lot. I read a lot of things.”

“Yeah? Me, too.”

For a second we just smiled at one another. Then Janie asked a question. Actually, she whispered it, first glancing from left to right as though someone might be listening in. “Are you a member of The Magic Circle?”

This surprised a laugh out of me. “You’ve heard of The Magic Circle?”

“Of course,” she answered like it was obvious. “I thought you must be a member since you won’t tell me all the reasons why I’m not suggestible enough for your tricks. Each member of the organization undertakes an oath not to reveal their magical secrets to anybody except for other members under pain of expulsion from the circle.”

I grinned. “Where’d you hear that?”

“I read it on Wikipedia,” she answered simply. “It all sounds very exciting, in my opinion, like Harry Potter or something. You should apply to join.”

“Nah, too much like a cult for my liking. Besides, I’m too cool for that shit. The circle is full of stuffy Brits.”

Janie giggled, a wide smile on her face. She was too fucking cute when she smiled like that. I leaned a little closer and elbowed her in the arm. “Hey, I know I said I wasn’t asking to get hitched, but you ever picture yourself marrying a guy from Boston?”

I know, I was a shameless flirt.

Janie inhaled a sharp breath and grew flustered as she straightened in her seat. “Um...I...I don’t think so.”

I lifted my beer and took a swig. “No?”

She shook her head, her gaze focused intently on her margarita now.

“Well, maybe it won’t be to me, but I can definitely see that for you. There’s a big, manly Bostonian in your future, Janie Morris, you mark my words.” I was teasing her now, but it was fun. I liked seeing her blush.

She shifted a little. “So, um, what’s your favorite cognitive bias?” she asked and I chuckled loudly.

“That your way of changing the subject, sweetheart?”

She didn't answer my question, instead she kept on talking. "I think mine has to be the Dunning-Kruger effect."

"Oh yeah?"

Janie nodded. "It relates to how the less we know about a certain topic or skill, the better we think we are at it. The more we learn about things, the more we realize just how little our knowledge base actually is. I find it fascinating. Like, you get all these teenagers playing video games set in war zones, and the games teach little to nothing about actual combat, yet you'll get all these gamers going around thinking they could be real snipers, or dispose of bombs, or take down a terrorist organization. I remember when I used to spend the weekends playing *Street Fighter* when I was growing up. I actually felt a little like I could kick someone's ass at the end. In reality all I was adept at was tapping buttons at an alarmingly speedy rate," she finished.

"So, illusory superiority, right?"

"Right!" Janie exclaimed, a grin taking shape. "Now tell me yours."

I rubbed at my chin, thinking about it. Seriously, I know I joked about it earlier, but what exactly would it take to get this woman to hitch a ride to Vegas with me and get married? *What's your favorite cognitive bias* had to be the best conversation starter I'd come across in a while.

"You ever heard of the Just World Fallacy?" I asked and Janie shook her head. "It's like in the movies, where everyone always gets what they deserve in the end. People think that the world is ultimately just, so that when something bad happens we can say that person deserved it. That their previous actions were the cause and therefore they only got what was coming to them. In real life, though? Well, we're all just a bunch of monkeys flinging our shit around and there's no moral to the story. A lot of the time bad stuff happens for absolutely no reason at all."

Suddenly I was staring glumly into my beer, realizing I'd just depressed the fuck out of myself, and probably Janie, too.

"Sorry. Now I'm making your fun margarita hour into dreary Tuesday."

"No, no," Janie was quick to reassure me. "I actually find you incredibly fascinating and engaging." Right after she said it she clamped her hand over her mouth as though embarrassed. "Oh my God. I didn't mean to say that out loud."

I winked at her. "I thought you were too tall to get tipsy off one cocktail?"

"I'm not too big to admit I was wrong," she responded with a self-deprecating smile.

"Will do you something for me?"

She eyed me curiously. "What?"

"Come see my show tonight."

Janie glanced away and started rifling through her purse for something. "Uh, well, I have plans tonight. With the person," she mumbled.

"The person?"

"With which I am involved. The boyfriend."

"That's cool. Bring him with you."

"I don't think..."

"Give me your number and I'll text you the address," I cut her off before she could finish.

"I don't own a cell phone."

"Why not?"

She stuck out her chin. "I don't believe in them."

God, this woman, could she be any cuter? "You know what, I'm gonna use that one sometime. I don't own a car. Maybe if I go around telling everyone it's because I don't

believe in them they'll think I'm enlightened instead of broke as fuck."

Janie barked a loud laugh and she slid a bill onto the counter. "I really do have to get back to work now," she said, wiping tears from her eyes as I picked up the money and placed it carefully back in her hand. She jumped a little when my fingers brushed hers.

"Drink's on me," I told her.

We shared a look and then she withdrew her hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you...oh crappers, I just realized I don't even know your name," she said in horror, like she'd been incredibly rude not to ask.

I gave her a warm look. "My name's Jay Fields, and it was a pleasure to meet you, too, Janie Morris."

Her gaze drifted over my face, and for once I couldn't tell what someone else was thinking. Maybe I'd been too distracted by all that gorgeous, curly red hair. It was twisted up in a bun and I was struck with the urge to see it down.

"You should wear your hair down. It's too pretty to be up like that."

The compliment made her blush again but she didn't say anything, just ducked her head, gave me a final wave and made to leave. I'd moved fast, so she'd already gotten to the door by the time her bun unraveled. She paused midstride, glanced at the hair that had fallen around her shoulders and muttered to herself as she turned back to me, laughing. Sleight of hand could be useful for more than just magic sometimes.

I grinned and held up the hair tie for her to see. She shook her head again, shot me a parting smile, and went on her way.

◇ ◇ ◇

Janie

"SO, HE'S A magician?"

I nodded, glancing between the street map and the building's address.

“Janie, if you had a phone you could just Google the address. Why don't you just Google the address?”

“There is no accepted definition of the word ‘Google’ other than as an American multinational technology company specializing in Internet-related services and products. You want me to ‘*American technology company*’ an address? That makes no sense.”

“You know what I mean, smartass. I want you to do a search on the magical internets, on your cellphone—”

“I don't have a cellphone, but you knew that. And there is no such thing as magic.”

“And yet, here we are. On our way to a magic show.” Marie shivered as a gust of wind had us stopping and bracing. We waited for it to pass before continuing.

“I don't understand. The building should be right here.”

After I'd left Jay at the bar earlier today, I'd belatedly realized he never gave me the address for his show. Disappointment filled me. But then, later on, as I rummaged through my purse for a napkin, I found a neatly folded piece of paper that turned out to be a flyer for the club where he was performing. Again, he'd bamboozled me. I had no clue how he'd managed to slide it into my bag without me seeing.

“Do you want me to *American technology company* the address or not?” Marie whipped out her phone.

“Not. People located addresses for centuries prior to the advent of Google.”

“Or, they died in a tragic mugging on the streets of Chicago and were mourned by their cats. Forgive me if I'd prefer to use a little cell phone magic instead.”

There is no such thing as magic, I repeated in my head.

Sleight of hand, meticulously planned scenarios and outcomes, subliminal influencing and cold reading. That's all it was. And yet, there was something mysterious about Jay Fields. Something truly...well, magical. I'd spent less than an hour in his company and already I was eager to see him again, eager for him to marvel and astound me. He was captivating, and just like a magnet, he pulled me in.

The main reason I wanted to see his show, however, was because today was the first time in a long time that I'd actually felt excited. Lately, a lot of things had been bringing me down; my job, my relationship, so I just wanted to spend tonight being entertained. Let Jay tap into my imagination and sense of wonder like he'd done with every person standing on that street today.

"So, Jon had to work late?" Marie questioned, tugging up the collar of her coat to defend against the cold.

"Yes, we were supposed to have a date, but you know him, he's a workaholic."

Marie studied me in a way that made me self-conscious. "How's everything been going with you two?"

"It's been fine," I replied, not really wanting to talk about the man in my life.

My main squeeze.

My significant other.

My other half.

These days he certainly didn't feel like the other half of me, or in any way significant. In fact, he merely felt like the person with whom I shared a bed, a bathroom and kitchen/lounge facilities.

I loved him but, well, something was missing. Maybe it was never there to begin with. Or maybe I just needed to accept that it was a real-life relationship. Real-life relationships were nothing like relationships in movies starring Kate Hudson.

Marie arched a brow. “Just fine?”

“Fine is good. Fine is better than not fine. Fine is better than very many things.”

“Janie, the fact that you’re using the word ‘fine’ so much makes me suspect things aren’t fine.”

“We’ve been together a long time,” I said. “And when you’re with someone a long time, things are no longer exciting, passionate, electric or a whole host of other adjectives. When you’ve been with someone a long time, things are usually fine, and so, that is what they are between Jon and I.”

“You’re talking in circles,” Marie griped just as the door opened to a building we passed. It was a black door, nondescript, and didn’t appear to lead to a business. However, when it opened, a loud round of cheers and clapping rang out, before a familiar Bostonian accent said, “And that’s why I don’t buy microwaves from taxi drivers no more.” Laughter ensued.

“Weird punchline,” Marie muttered as I grabbed her elbow and pulled her inside.

“This is the place,” I said as we stepped into the dark club. It was one of those bars that people only knew about through word of mouth. Pretentious, yes, but obviously a good marketing tactic since the place was packed. When people thought something was exclusive, they tended to want it more. It was psychological. Like, if someone told me there were only five hot dogs left in a hot dog stand, I’d automatically want a hotdog more than I did a minute ago.

Actually, now I did sort of want a hot dog.

“This is it?” Marie asked, not sounding very enthusiastic about being pulled into an unmarked building.

“Yes, look! There he is,” I replied in a hushed voice and pointed to the stage where Jay stood doing a card trick for a woman in the front row. He wore the same jeans from earlier and a black tank top. Now I could see the extensive tattoos that

covered his arms, and though I'd never been particularly attracted to that sort of look, I had to admit they suited him.

Marie looked from the stage and then to me. "Okay, not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Some guy in a dickey bow pulling a rabbit out of a hat."

"I guess that is what we imagine when we picture a magician."

"He's a bad boy," Marie said, pointing her finger at the stage. "I never knew you were into bad boys, Janie."

"I'm not. I have a boyfriend. Jon, remember?"

"And he's cocky," Marie went on, ignoring my statement. "Look at that smirk and those dimples. The poor woman might as well hand over her panties right now."

The woman she referred to was the one Jay had roped into volunteering for his trick. I briefly wondered what *she* did for a living, still unsure if I was disgruntled or flattered that I wasn't suitable as a volunteer. I liked to imagine it was because I was just too darn smart.

"He's not cocky," I replied. "He's confident. Cockiness implies arrogance."

"Well, too much confidence can lead to cockiness," Marie said. "It's a fine line."

"Ladies, there's an \$8 entry fee, but I'll let you in for \$5 since you've missed a lot of the show," said a man in a black blazer. Neither of us had noticed him sitting by the door.

"Yes, sorry, we got a little lost. You don't make this place easy to find," I said, keeping my voice low so as not to interrupt the show. I rummaged in my purse for some money and handed him a crumpled ten. He gave us two ticket stubs and Marie and I quietly made our way to some empty seats at the back.

We brought our attentions to the stage when Jay spoke. “For my next trick, I’ll need another volunteer,” he said and scanned the audience.

Marie nudged me with her elbow. “You should do it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t make a good volunteer, apparently.”

She frowned. “What? Why?”

Before I could respond, Jay said, “You, the red head at the back, you had your hand up, right?”

I blinked. Jay was staring right at me, confident smile in place. How had he even seen me back here? And I definitely hadn’t had my hand up. The slight twitch of his lips told me he knew well and good that I hadn’t.

“I think you’re mistaking me for someone else,” I called out.

“Aw, don’t chicken out now,” Jay teased and people started turning their attention to me, whispering and speculating.

I straightened. “Somebody once told me that I don’t make a very good volunteer for magic tricks.”

“This isn’t your typical magic trick. You’ll be more of a spectator than a volunteer,” Jay pushed, undeterred.

“Go on,” Marie whispered giddily and nudged me out of my seat, “get your butt up there.”

Disgruntled, I stood and wiped my sweaty palms on my skirt, suddenly nervous. I tried to recall if I’d ever been on an actual stage before. Maybe in a childhood school play.

I walked up the rows until I reached the stage, but there were no steps leading up. Jay reached down and took my hand, his magnetic eyes meeting mine. They dazzled me, made feel like a kid stepping into a funfair. A jolt went through me at the feel of his palm. When was the last time Jon had held my hand? I honestly couldn’t remember. A second later Jay led me

to the center of the stage where there was a narrow bench. It was the only set piece, the rest of the area being empty.

Jay gestured for me to sit then pulled a newspaper out of his back pocket. They seemed to be a favored prop of his. He sat next to me, his thigh resting against mine and I wondered if it was intentional. Soft piano music started to play. Carefully, he unfolded the paper, first taking one sheet and spreading it out on my lap, then taking another and spreading it out on his. He continued in this vain, speaking as he worked his way through the paper.

“The Victorian art critic John Ruskin once said that a little thought and a little kindness are often worth more than a great deal of money. When I was a young kid, I didn’t have a home. I slept on the streets and in abandoned buildings, and sometimes the only thing that kept me from freezing to death was a bit of old newspaper that I used to cover my body.”

Both our laps were covered in newspaper. Something in my stomach unfurled at his unexpected, yet casually spoken words. He’d been homeless? A sense of sadness filled me up just to think it.

Still talking, Jay continued spreading the newspaper out over our laps until he used every sheet. Then, he began to carefully fold it, starting at the outer corners and working his way in.

“Someone might’ve left their newspaper on a park bench, not realizing that later I would find it and use it to survive another night. Maybe you could call that unconscious kindness. They had no clue they were helping me by leaving that paper behind. Then you have conscious kindness. One day I was performing magic tricks on the street, and a smartly dressed woman dropped a hundred-dollar bill into my hat. That hundred might’ve been a drop in the bucket for her, but to me it meant I could go buy myself a sleeping bag and food to last the next two weeks. It meant survival. The sleeping bag was cheap, sure, but it might as well have been a four-poster bed at the *Four Seasons* compared to what I was used to. Her

kindness that day was like seeing a flower bloom when you've been traipsing through an arid desert, because you know that means water is near."

I was captivated by his tale of hope, the soft piano music tinkering at my heart strings. I was so transfixed that I only now realized he'd folded the sheets of newspaper in a way to look like a bunch of flowers. He held them out to me, but before I could take them there was a rustle and a beautiful white dove emerged from the paper. I gasped. It flew out and landed on Jay's hand. My pulse thrummed, it was so unexpected.

"Her kindness was a miracle. It was a white dove flying out of a bit of tatty old newspaper. People don't need much. Sometimes we just need someone to be kind to us. One act of kindness can transform our lives. Often, our inclination is to hoard what we have, keep it all for ourselves, going to no use, when there's someone out there whose entire world could be changed if we gave them just a tiny portion of what's ours. Tupac Shakur said this world is a *gimme, gimme, gimme, everybody back off place*. He asked how one person could have \$32 million dollars and another person could have nothing," he swiped his hands around his dove and it disappeared. *Wow*. "And yet the person with 32 million can still sleep at night. I guess what I'm trying to say is, the only way the world will ever get better is if we're kinder, if we share a little of what we've got but don't need, with the next person who hasn't got it and does need it. After that day when the lady gave me that money, things started to slowly get better for me. It was the starting point to me getting off the streets. So, there's your proof."

As he spoke, Jay tore the newspaper flowers strip by strip. Pieces of paper fell to the floor like so much confetti, until only one folded and torn piece was left. "Kindness worked for me, and maybe it can work for you, too," he finished, then unfolded the paper. There was an audible gasp, because somehow, he'd managed to tear it in a way to form the words

“Be Kind”. He threw the paper into the audience, took a bow, then walked off the stage.

I sat there, enthralled, as the audience gave their applause. I couldn't move, was still absorbing his speech and the beauty of the act, the meaning of his words and the simple truth of them. This was the first time I'd felt true wonder since I was a kid. When I realized I was still sitting there, slack jawed, I got up, and instead of climbing off the stage I walked in the direction Jay had gone.

I found him backstage, placing his dove in a cage before taking a swig from a bottle of water.

“That was beautiful,” I breathed, snagging his attention. His smile lit up his face, and there was an energy about him, a kinetic field that shimmered and pulsed.

“Glad you liked it, Janie.”

“Why did you ask me up on stage?”

He gave a little grin and lifted a shoulder. “Felt like you needed a thrill.”

Hmmm, maybe I did. I certainly felt...I don't know, more alive somehow. But still, I sensed that wasn't the reason. “I don't believe you.”

“Maybe I just wanted an excuse to charm you. See if you'll take me home with you tonight. My hotel's been feeling a little lonely.”

My mouth fell open. I closed it. “I told you, I have a boyfriend, and we live together, so—”

“But if you didn't live together...” Jay arched a suggestive brow. Perhaps Marie was right about him being cocky after all. He threw his hands up. “Relax, I'm joking. I'm just happy you decided to come. I was a little disappointed when you didn't show.”

“I was late because this place is so ridiculously difficult to find.”

“Why didn’t you just Google it?”

“I...” I trailed off, not wanting to get into the whole Google thing again. “I don’t have a cell phone, remember? Anyway, I just wanted to say that I think you’re very talented, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you make it big one of these days. I only caught the end of your performance tonight and it gave me serious chills. Good chills. The kind you get when you’re reminded of a fond memory, not the kind a cat gets when it’s frightened. Did you know that we inherited goosebumps from our animal ancestors? When cats are scared, they get goosebumps and their hair stands on end to make them look bigger, and therefore more threatening to the predator that’s frightening them. Anyway, I’m getting off topic. What I mean is, your act is incredible, and I want to make sure you know it. Plus, your message really struck a chord with me, and with a lot of people in the audience I’m sure. You’re not just doing magic tricks, you’re making people think. And making people think is important. People don’t think enough these days, if you ask me.”

“Janie.” Jay’s voice was a seductive whisper.

“Yes?”

“Shut up for a second.” His eyes glittered as he took a step forward, placed his hands on either side of my face, and kissed me right on the lips. With tongue. My heart stuttered, and I wobbled on my feet. I was dumbstruck and tingling all over. One hand left my face so that he could wrap his arm around my waist, probably to keep me from toppling over, which I was thankful for. I’d taken my fair share of swan dives in my time and they weren’t pretty.

What was pretty was Jay’s warmth, and the soft, sure pressure of his lips on mine, the wet slide of his tongue on my tongue. I closed my eyes and surprised myself with a girlish moan. I rarely moaned, and certainly not girlishly.

He smelled good, too. Like cloves and manliness. Unwittingly, I reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him to me, wanting to prolong the kiss. When

Jon kissed me, it didn't feel like this. When Jon kissed me, I felt a surprising amount of nothingness. Right now, I felt a surprising amount of everything-ness.

Jay was alive in a way I'd never experienced before.

Wait a second, Jon!

In a rush, I pushed away from Jay and wiped my hand across my mouth as though that might erase the amazing kiss we'd just shared. As though it might eradicate the guilt that started to niggle at me.

I wasn't a cheater. I would never cheat, but...

Hell. I got swept up in the moment, and getting swept up in moments was the downfall of many a lady.

"I think I have a crush on you," Jay purred with that mischievous grin I was coming to recognize.

I wagged my finger at him, feeling breathless "That was... that was..."

"Phenomenal, I know."

"Oh, my goodness, you *are* cocky," I blurted, flustered.

"I prefer the term unquietly confident, or loudly self-assured, but cocky works, too," he said, stepping toward me again. I took a step back. He kept coming at me and I kept moving away until my back hit a wall.

"Hey, I get it. You're taken, but I couldn't help myself. You're a very tempting woman, Janie Morris."

I laughed then, because no one had ever described me as tempting before. Cute, yes. Chatty, sure. Clever, of course. But never tempting. I was flattered, I couldn't help it. I liked the way he saw me. He saw me in a way most people didn't, and it was a tiny bit intoxicating. Okay, a lot intoxicating.

I needed to get a hold of myself, go home to my boyfriend and forget about this mesmerizing man, this magician who had very much cast a spell over me.

And I didn't even believe in magic.

“You know, it's too bad I gotta leave and go back to Boston tomorrow. If I was sticking around this boyfriend of yours would have himself some serious competition.”

I giggled, unable to help being charmed. I folded my arms across my chest, probably to keep from grabbing him and kissing him again. It was wrong. I knew that. But Gloria Estefan was right, the bad boys made you feel so good. “I'm sure he would. If I ever come to Boston, I'll be sure to look you up.”

“And if I ever come back to Chicago, you better believe I'll be darkening your door, Janie Morris. Your door will be so fucking darkened you won't know where to turn. Or look.”

That didn't even make any sense, but I was still laughing. Jay had wacky sense of humor and a funny way with words. He came forward, pressed a soft kiss to my cheek before whispering, “I guess I'll see you around. Promise you won't forget about me?”

He was gone before I had a chance to reply. I didn't see which way he went, but I was suddenly aware of my hair around my shoulders. I reached up, unable to find my hair tie. Why that little...

He'd let my hair down again, and I hadn't even seen or felt him doing it. His sleight of hand really was up to scratch. That was two hair ties he'd stolen from me now. I was going to have to start keeping a tab.

I definitely didn't need to make the promise though, because there was no way I'd forget him any time soon.

“There you are,” Marie exclaimed. “It took me forever to convince them to let me come back here and look for you.”

“I was talking to Jay,” I replied, still a little flustered from his kiss and sudden departure – and hair accessory theft.

“Oh, where'd he go? I was hoping to ask him to come for drinks with us. I want to pick his mind about the trick he did

with the dove.”

“He’s gone. I’m not sure we’ll be seeing him again, not for a long time anyway.”

Marie seemed disappointed. “Well, that’s too bad.”

“Yeah, it is.”

I had a feeling Jay was one of those people who never settled anywhere. He flittered into your life, left a big impression, and then was gone almost as quickly as he came. Like a fairy god-mother, or a genie in a lamp. Only I never got my three wishes. Just a kiss I’d be dreaming about for many nights to come.

Marie slid her arm through mine. “Come on, let’s go to the bar. The first two lemon drops are on me.”

As she led me through the club, something on the floor caught my eye. It was a piece of torn up newspaper, but when I bent down and picked it up I realized it wasn’t just any old bit of paper. It was the same one Jay had thrown from the stage, the one the was shaped into the words “Be Kind”. Without thinking, I folded it up and put it in my pocket.

He had my hair ties, it was only fair I got to keep a memento of this most unforgettable and magical night, too.

◇ ◇ ◇

Keep reading ‘Six of Hearts’ [Here!](#)

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Sneak Peek: The Hooker and the Hermit

Calories: 4,000.

Workout: 4.5 hours in total.

Eggs: *Could go to my grave quite happily without ever seeing another one.*

✧ ✧ ✧

Ronan

I'D JUST FINISHED doing fifty chin-ups when the phone started ringing.

And if that wasn't the opening line of a narcissistic arsehole, then I didn't know what was. I'd spent way too much time around privately educated, privileged rugby brats, and their ways had finally rubbed off on me.

At least I didn't say I was getting my pump on.

Anyway, I'm not a narcissistic arsehole. However, I might be a bull-headed idiot with too short a fuse who lets his temper get the better of him when there just so happen to be paparazzi hanging about, but that's a story for another day. Or you could go out and pick up a tabloid.

Yeah, I was going through a bitter patch, but I had every right. I was sick of my private life being splashed all over the papers. Somehow, I'd never connected the idea of being good at a sport with the possibility of becoming a "celebrity."

I understood my role; I did my best for my league and for the sport. I knew what rugby needed from me, and I wasn't planning on letting anyone down. But if there was one thing I hated in this world, it was people who wrote about other people's personal lives for a living. Those people could all do with taking a dive off a very high building, in my opinion.

You see, bitter.

Picking up a towel, I wiped the sweat from my neck then went to pick up the phone. My little sister Lucy's face was flashing on the screen which made me less hesitant to answer. I thought it might be my publicist, Sam, with some new instructions on how I could clean up my public image, and I was in no mood for that shite.

"Luce, how're you doing?" I said as I held the phone to my ear and looked out at the Manhattan skyline before me. Some people might have been well up for living in a penthouse apartment in the center of New York, and yeah, it was my choice to come here; but I hadn't anticipated there would be nowhere to drive. Driving was one of the only things that kept me sane. Me and my 1969 Chevy Camaro and the open road. No stress, just miles and pure freedom. Ah, that was the life.

I should have done my research.

In order to make up for the lack of driving, I'd been working out more than usual, which was always a good thing when you played professional rugby for a living. Well, technically I was suspended from the team; but fingers crossed I'd be back in a couple of months, and I wanted to return fighting fit. You wouldn't think it to see the dark, moody eyebrows I was sporting, but I was a silver-lining sort of bloke. It wasn't my intention to be irritable; life had just dealt me a crap hand lately.

"Morning, bro. You sound out of breath. Did I catch you at a bad time?" Lucy replied. There was something about her tone that put me on edge. Usually she was cheerful and upbeat. The girl was full of sunshine. Right now she sounded hesitant, and, almost as if I was having a moment of foresight, I knew I wasn't going to like the reason why.

"Timing's perfect. How's everything at home?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. Ma's still spending too much money on clothes. I'm trying to teach her that material possessions don't equal happiness. It's a work in progress."

Ever since I'd made the big time, my mother had acquired expensive tastes. I didn't mind. My mother and my sister were the only real family I had. If my money could give them a good life, then I was all for it.

I chuckled softly. "It's not like she's snorting cocaine, Luce. She likes dresses. What woman doesn't?"

"There are so many things wrong with what you just said, I don't even know where to start, Ronan."

My smile grew. I always enjoyed baiting her. "What? Girls like pretty things. It's a known fact."

"You know what, I don't even feel bad about what I have to tell you now. Take out your computer. There's something you need to see."

My smile vanished and was instantly replaced with a frown as I walked through the penthouse to find my laptop. I flipped it open and brought up a new window. "What is it this time? Has Brona been spreading her lies again?" I asked.

"No, no, it's nothing like that. It's actually kind of funny. I read this blog all the time because I love the girl who writes it. At least, I think it's a girl. It could very well be an old bald fellow in a basement with a pet rabbit. It's called *New York's Finest*, and you were featured on Saturday. Only get this, she thinks you're Colin Farrell. How hilarious is that?"

My frown slowly disappeared as I typed in the name of the website and brought it up. Being mistaken for a famous Irish actor when you were in fact a famous Irish rugby player was positively whimsical when compared with some of the PR disasters I'd experienced of late. Then the article popped up, and I was frowning again.

There was a picture of me standing by the bar at my mate Tom's restaurant last week, signing autographs for a couple of women. It looked like it had been taken from a low angle, as though the person who took it was sitting at a table. It was a completely unexceptional picture until you factored in the

plethora of red arrows that surrounded it, each one pointing to some perceived flaw in my appearance.

Apparently, I chose my outfit while drunk, my footwear was disturbing, and my cock and balls were on display. I scowled and tried not to get pissed. I was going to give myself high blood pressure if I didn't quit getting so worked up about the media. Still, it was irritating how this blogger had totally ripped into what I was wearing. Clothing for me was all about function. I wore what was best for training purposes and gave not one iota of shit what I looked like.

Scrolling down, there was a short article written by someone who referred to themselves as The Socialmedialite, who called me both a leprechaun and a hobbit, and then went on to suggest I invest in a cup. Well, when I say "me," I mean Colin Farrell because that's who this person thought I was, which is ridiculous because I barely even look like him.

"Oh, you *so* look like him, Ronan," Lucy disagreed down the line, and I realized I'd said that out loud.

"I don't. This blogger is an idiot if she can't see how much I don't look like him. I bet she does her research on flipping Wikipedia, the amateur."

I scrolled down the page to the next post to see she'd snapped a photo of Bradley Cooper getting out of his car in workout clothes. There was a wet stain on his pants that was obviously sweat or spilled liquid. Nevertheless, The Socialmedialite had composed an article containing a list of possibilities as to how the stain had occurred. Some of the stories were way too detailed which made me think she was in serious need of a life. A number of readers had even commented below with their own scenarios. One person thought his personal groomer had tried to foist a bottle of clove oil on him to shave his face, and Bradley had swiped away the offending article, stating he would never shave off the source of all his sexy power, thus resulting in the stain.

Seriously, some people.

“This site is ridiculous,” I muttered while Lucy snickered in response. “It’s not even funny. And sausage is more German than Irish.”

“What are you talking about? It’s hilarious. It objectifies men in the same way women have been objectified for centuries. Turnabout is fair play, you know.”

“It’s stupid. And anyway, I’m way too tall to be a hobbit.” I stood up and walked over to look at myself in the mirror. At five feet eleven inches, I thought I was a decent height for a man.

“Oh, wow. Vanity, thy name is Ronan. She’s already getting to you, isn’t she? And she called you a hobbit because of those godawful shoes you were wearing.”

“My trainer suggested them,” I grumbled. “Don’t you have your yoga class to be getting to this morning?”

“Yes, I do, cranky. You’re obviously taking this all the wrong way. Don’t you know that the ability to laugh at oneself is the most desirous quality of all?”

“Not really in a laughing mood these days, Luce,” I replied gloomily and pulled a bottle of water from the fridge.

I could hear her sigh down the line. “I know. I’m sorry. I was trying to cheer you up. Promise I was. How is everything in the Big Apple? You settling in okay?”

“Don’t apologize. I’m a grumpy old bastard. And yes, I’m settling in fine. My car arrived yesterday which was kind of a cruel joke since all I can do here is sit in traffic. I should never have let Tom talk me into taking time off in New York. I wanted to go to Canada, get lost in the mountains or something.”

“Yeah, that would’ve been cool. But at least this way you get to go see the naked cowboy.”

“I don’t know who or what that is, but I think I’ll pass.”

“Spoilsport. I was looking forward to a picture of the two of you. Anyway, I’d better get going.”

“Okay, take care, Luce. I love you.”

She made a kissy sound into her phone that nearly deafened me. “Love you, too!”

The moment I hung up, my phone began ringing again, and this time it *was* Sam, my PR agent. I briefly considered ignoring the call but knew he’d have a fit if I didn’t answer. The man was more highly strung than Margaret Thatcher on the rag, God rest her.

“Sam, what can I do for ya, bud?”

“Oh, it’s more a matter of what I can do for you, my friend. But first, did you see you were featured on *New York’s Finest Saturday*?”

Seriously, I felt like I was stuck in *Groundhog Day*, and that film always got on my tits. “Yeah, my sister already had the good grace to inform me.”

“Well, I don’t know why you sound so glum about it. This is a big deal, Ronan. You’re virtually unknown over in the States. This could be the thing that helps you crack America. I can just see it now, a picture of you reclining in a pair of tighty whiteys advertising for Calvin Klein on the side of a skyscraper.”

“Fuck, man. Are you a psychic? How did you know that’s my one true dream?”

I could practically hear him pursing his lips in irritation. “I’m going to ignore your sarcasm because I have more news, and I don’t have time for your pissy attitude. I have a friend who works for Davidson & Croft Media there in New York, and they’re just itching to meet you. They think they can re-brand you. Clean up your image. You know, turn you into the David Beckham of rugby.”

“Again, do you have a crystal ball, because this shit is positively clairvoyant.”

“They want to meet you today at one. I’m emailing you directions,” he said impatiently.

I glanced at the clock. “It’s already half past eleven. I have to shower, and the traffic in this city is a nightmare. Can we re-schedule?”

What I really wanted to say was, *Can we forget about it altogether?* But I still had some sense of professionalism, and yeah, I guessed working with this agency could probably do me some good. It would be like pulling teeth, but I knew anything worth doing was usually difficult. I ended the call and went to hop in the shower. I was in and out in less than ten minutes and made quick work of getting dressed. When I walked by my computer, I noticed that the website was still open, and I had a sudden urge to vent.

It seemed like my life was being controlled by faceless people sitting behind computers writing stories about me, and I was sick of it. Sam always coached me to have a “no comment” policy on this kind of thing, but I wanted to have my say for once.

Months of silence meant I had a lot to get off my chest, after all.

So I sat down in front of my laptop, opened up a fresh email, and began to type. Fuck it if I was late to the meeting. If these people were so eager to see me, they could wait.

March 10

Dear Socialmedialite,

Just thought I’d enlighten your vacuous little mind as to a few things.

- 1. I’m not Colin Farrell, I’m Ronan Fitzpatrick. Go look me up. It’ll make for some colorful reading.*
- 2. Your fixation on the minute details of the male form leads me to believe that one, you have no life, and two, you have not been laid in a loooong time.*
- 3. I think that if you’re going to make these kinds of judgments on the appearance of others, then you should at least be open about who you are. Anonymity is the choice of cowards.*

My suggestions:

- 1. You actually do your research and make sure that when you think you're getting a picture of Colin Farrell, it's actually Colin Farrell. FYI: Ear-wiggling on the conversation of a group of giggling women does NOT constitute research.*
- 2. Go out and have a drink. Talk to a guy. Let somebody fuck you. You'll be amazed by what clearing those cobwebs can do for your frame of mind.*
- 3. Put up a picture. Tell everyone who you are. Let's see if you can handle people criticizing your looks the same way you criticize theirs.*

You're welcome.

Ronan Fitzpatrick

And send.

That felt good.

I quickly made a note of the address Sam had sent me and then went to catch a cab. Arriving at the agency's building, I stared up at the high-rise before walking in and announcing my presence to the receptionist. She was a slim, attractive blonde and immediately gave me the glad eye after she took in my appearance. If I was the same guy I was at twenty-two, I'd have been in there like swimwear. Unfortunately, I was a cynical, disillusioned twenty-seven-year-old with no patience for women and their wiles. Right now, all I was on the market for was no-strings sex. For years I'd been faithful to Brona, and then she'd gone and shoved my fidelity in my face by shoving my teammate's cock down her throat.

But maybe Brona did me a favor. My vision was now remarkably clear. These women were all glittery, seductive eyes and shallow propositions. All I could see was another version of her: superficial, dim-witted, materialistic fame-whores, looking for a place to hitch their star, only out for what they could get. Not surprisingly, that was enough to deflate even the most determined hard-on.

"I'm looking for Davidson & Croft. Can you help me out"—I glanced at her name tag before finishing—"Stephanie?"

She smiled, all white teeth and glossy lips, before giving me instructions to take the elevator up to the twelfth floor. When I finally reached the busy offices, a handler was waiting for me—more glossy lips and white teeth. I checked out her arse as I was led to a room where several people were sitting around a table, dressed in smart business clothes. I looked completely out of my place in my dark brown leather jacket, boots, jeans, and a plain black T-shirt.

They all stood the moment I entered, and a short woman who, I shit you not, looked like Danny DeVito in drag came and offered me her hand.

“Mr. Fitzpatrick,” she said in a voice that was surprisingly feminine, given her appearance. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Joan Davidson, and these are my associates, Rachel Simmons and Ian Timor. Come, have a seat.”

I sized her up quickly. She was definitely the one in charge; there was just something imposing—almost intimidating—about her despite her size.

“Same to you, Joan. And you can call me Ronan.”

I nodded hello to Rachel and Ian before sitting down as instructed. A moment of silence ensued as I cleared my throat, leaned forward, and steepled my fingers in front of me on the table.

Joan tapped a finger on her chin as she contemplated me. “So, Ronan. I have to say, I’m very interested in working with you. I’ve been in this business for a long time, and I love a challenge. I’ve been acquainting myself with the details of your career, and what I’ve learned leads me to believe we could make a big difference working together. So, what would you like to achieve with us? I want to know your vision so that we can help you actualize it. We like to tailor the experience here at Davidson & Croft to the individual.”

I let out a long sigh. “I’ll be straight with you, Joan—my agent back home sprang this meeting on me just over an hour ago. Publicity isn’t my thing. I’m an athlete, and I don’t get

the whole media circus that's been surrounding my life lately. I just want to play rugby and be left alone."

"Well, that's positively boring," Joan chuckled, soliciting grins from the thus far silent Rachel and Ian, and a glower from me. "And being left alone isn't an option, I'm afraid. You're the bad boy of rugby, the one all the girls swoon over."

I grimaced. "Yes, I understand what's expected. I'm aware of what the league is hoping to accomplish through me, but I'd like for it to be about how I play the sport *on* the field."

She continued as though I hadn't spoken, "The problem is you're a little *too* bad right now. We need to make you clean bad, acceptable bad. We want you to be Mark Wahlberg, not Charlie Sheen. We want to reform you. Think Robert Downey, Jr., but younger and without any prison time."

Rubbing at the back of my neck, I replied, "You see, this is the problem. All of what you just said went right over my head, love." I was playing dumb, and it seemed that Joan was shrewd enough to sense that.

"You hospitalized one of your teammates, Ronan."

My jaw tightened. Who did this woman think she was speaking to? "So what?"

"That's not a good thing."

"That's rugby."

"Usually it's supposed to be an opponent, isn't it? Not one of your own."

I shrugged. "Usually. But this time I made an exception because he slept with my fiancée."

She waved me away. "There's no need to be defensive. I'm here to remedy you, not incite you."

I blinked at her. She was here to *remedy* me?

Joan smiled. "Look, what you did was bad, but it's not the worst thing you could've done. The more time that passes, the more people will forget. And you'd be surprised how easily

that can be done. We get you seen going on a date with a much-loved actress, maybe giving a donation to a charity or two, and the tarnish on your reputation will begin to disappear. What do you say?"

I frowned at her and worked my jaw. This whole thing was making me itch, and I needed to get out of there. "I say I need to take a piss."

Joan didn't bat an eyelid at my harsh response. "Very well. The bathrooms are located at the end of the hall, the blue door on the right."

The one named Rachel stood like she was going to escort me to the head. I glared at Joan, who apparently understood my irritation because she waved at Rachel to sit and shook her head.

I swiftly rose from my chair and left the room. Stomping down the hallway, I stopped midway to the end and ran a hand over my face. I was ridiculously tired. I wasn't sleeping like I used to. I thought that spending a couple of months in a place far from where I came from would work, help me to detach from everything that had happened. Too bad my brain didn't know how to shut off.

Finding the bathroom, I quickly relieved myself and then began to make my way back to the meeting. I was passing by what looked to be the staff break room when I paused, considering ditching this whole thing and heading out to Tom's place for a while.

Glancing through the door, I saw a dark-haired woman sitting at a table. I noticed she had a cup of tea in front of her as she brought a cream cake to her mouth for a bite.

Her full lips curved to one side in a pleased smile laced with blatant anticipation. I'd never seen someone look so hot for a confectionary before. It was kind of sexy; and I'm not sure why, but it made me smile the first full-on smile I'd had in weeks.

Then she opened her mouth, setting the soft, sweet cake on her pink tongue, and I nearly groaned. *Kind of sexy* transformed into *fucking hot*. I didn't know this woman at all, but I briefly wondered if she was up for a bit of no-strings fun.

I must have made some movement to alert her to my presence because she looked up quickly, big brown eyes widening when she saw me. She swallowed just as a glob of cream fell from the cake and plopped right onto her top.

I chuckled, mostly to mask my voyeurism, and took a step into the room. "Messy bastards, those éclairs."

She just kept on staring at me, her eyes getting bigger and bigger by the second. I waited a few beats for her to say something, but she seemed stunned to silence. Fuck, I could tell she recognized me.

Of its own accord, my gaze wandered over her form, or what I could see of it: lush hips, full-figured but not fat. She wore a brown skirt, black tights, and a big gray top, her dark brown hair in a neat bun. Her clothes were plain. As I took in her face properly, though, I realized that she didn't need any glitz. She was incredibly striking in a very natural way. Especially since her cheeks and the ridge of her pretty nose were turning bright pink.

Lowering her eyes, her black lashes a stark contrast to her peachy skin, she picked up a napkin and began furiously rubbing the cream from her top. She was just making matters worse. I walked over to her, knelt down, and took the napkin from her hand. She actually flinched when I touched her. Jesus.

"Let me help. The idea is to dab, not rub," I said, getting all up in her space. I sneaked my hand under her top to pull out the material so that I could clean it. My knuckles brushed against her stomach, and I heard her suck in a harsh breath. Her skin was beautifully soft. I dabbed at the fabric, and the air in the room seemed to thicken. It lasted only a moment before she tentatively pushed my hand away from her, grabbed the napkin, and pulled back.

“I can manage on my own, thank you.” Her tone was impeccably polite, her cheeks now full-on red. She was definitely embarrassed. I *had* gotten a little too close. When I was drawn to someone, though, I often forgot about boundaries.

“I’m Ronan,” I said and presented my hand. Her gaze flickered to it for a brief moment, and I watched as she gathered a deep breath, almost like she was summoning courage. She fit her fingers in mine quickly, giving me a firm shake.

Her hand was soft and warm. It also shook as she withdrew it hastily.

“Annie,” she said, so quietly I almost didn’t hear. Her eyes barely settled on mine before she looked away again. Her lovely, pale throat was working without swallowing.

“It’s nice to meet you, Annie.” Christ, she was pretty. It was too bad she looked like she was going to have a heart attack if I didn’t leave soon.

Her skin was flawless, radiant. But her clothes became a source of irritation; she might as well have been wearing a tent. I wanted to see the shape of what lay beneath.

She also seemed a tiny bit apprehensive. Perhaps she thought I was a psycho who beat up his friends and put them in hospital. I never knew what people had read about me or what they believed.

When she had gotten most of the stain out, her eyes shot to mine, and there was something guarded and defensive in them, almost like she was bracing herself for a fight. “Can I help you with something?”

Deciding to hell with it, I went all in. I hadn’t felt an attraction to anyone in months, so I wasn’t going to let her slip through my fingers. “Your number would be a good start,” I said in a low voice.

Her eyes widened again, and it was obvious I’d caught her completely off guard. Quickly, the vulnerability was gone; it

was replaced first with flustered confusion and then hardened resolve. “No.”

Her single-word denial made me frown. Before I could ask Annie if she was already seeing someone, Joan walked into the room. “Ah, Ronan. I thought we’d lost you on your way back from the bathroom.”

“Just getting to know your lovely employee here,” I said, giving Annie a flirtatious wink. She looked like she wanted to flip me the bird, but she couldn’t since her boss was standing right there.

“Oh, Annie is our brightest and best,” said Joan with an expression that showed she truly respected the woman. Then she paused for a second as though struck by a thought. “You know, tell me if this sounds crazy, but I just had an idea.” She glanced at me. “Ronan, you said you were clueless when it comes to publicity, and Annie here is a whiz at cultivating a popular online presence for our clients. I think I need to pair you two up. Annie can teach you the social media ropes, show you how to play the game, while our team gets to work on revitalizing your public image.”

“You know what, Joan, I think that’s a brilliant idea.” I beamed at her. Of course I did. If it meant spending time with this gorgeous Annie, then I’d suffer through the nausea that social networking presented. And honestly, in a way, her rejection was refreshing. Most women saw my wealth and my fame and instantly had dollar signs flashing in their eyes.

Annie didn’t seem so keen on the idea of teaming up, and okay, maybe I could understand her hesitation. I’d practically groped her under the guise of helping her get out a stain, but still, she looked like she found me about as appealing as second-hand underpants.

She cleared her throat, which I noticed was still red with embarrassment, and spoke up. “I’m very busy at the moment, Joan. Perhaps somebody else could help.”

Joan waved away her protestations. “Nonsense. Tell Rachel to take some of your workload, free up your schedule. I think you two will work well together. I just have a feeling.”

There was something in Joan’s expression that brooked no further argument, and Annie seemed resigned as she nodded her acquiescence, her big brown eyes flickering to mine and then to her teacup.

Joan clapped her hands together. “Wonderful! Come with me, Ronan, and we’ll figure out a schedule.” As the tiny woman led me from the room, I gave Annie one final heated smile.

This day was looking up already.



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MAKING HER MELT

SKYE WARREN

CHAPTER ONE

*T*OO EARLY TO sleep, but too late to go anywhere. Especially in this weather. Ethan stretched out in bed, the sheets cool and rough. This time was the in-between, the hazy middle ground when his defenses lowered enough to admit what he wanted—or who he wanted.

“Pathetic,” he muttered.

Better to admit the truth, if only to himself. Then maybe he’d finally pick himself up, move to his hometown, and somehow manage to forget her.

Even though years overseas hadn’t made him forget. He was pretty sure leaving town wouldn’t make him forget his best friend’s girlfriend either. But at least he wouldn’t have to watch them, happy together, smiling, laughing, kissing, while his gut clenched in a tight knot of jealousy and shame.

At least he’d be in the countryside, able to breathe again.

Able to breathe without the constant erection he had around her. It was getting harder to hide it. He’d jerk off before seeing her, but that only seemed to make it worse. Because every time he stroked himself, every time he came, gasping, her face flashed through his mind. Then he’d see her in real life, and his body would charge up, ready to make fantasy a reality.

And—oh great—now he was hard again. Alone. In bed.

There was only one thing to do about that, but he wasn’t going to think about Lia this time. It wasn’t respectful to her, wasn’t respectful to his best friend. Fuck, it wasn’t even respectful to himself. He could jerk without thinking of her, couldn’t he? God, he hoped so.

Porn, that was the answer.

He flipped on his phone until he found a site full of beautiful, naked women. Nameless. Faceless. Not Lia's name. Not her face. Just breasts and hips, just bare skin he could imagine against his. He scrolled down the page—and then stopped. This woman had dark skin—a little darker than Lia's but it still made him think of her. Lia's breasts would be smaller, but he could look and imagine. He could touch himself and pretend it was Lia's hand instead...

No. *Stop thinking about her.*

He forced himself to keep scrolling until he had a different woman, one with pale skin and fine red hair. She looked at the camera with a sultry expression, a *wanting* expression, unlike Lia in every way, because damn sure he'd never seen her look at him that way. That expression was for Chris. This... this was for Ethan—a glossy picture of a stranger, cold and emotionless, and his own hand, pulling too hard and too fast, making it hurt. It was all he deserved, and he made himself face the reality of it, the coolness of the sheets against his skin—not a warm body. The emptiness of this room, of his apartment.

The loneliness of it.

And it worked, somehow. Because he was that hard up, that hungry, and his balls drew up tight. Hot pressure raced down his spine, two seconds from coming, on the razor's edge, something like pain in his cock, fist tightening. His phone *bzzzed* in his hand, making him flinch, holding him in that sharp moment, almost coming but not yet, and then the image on his screen flipped from the nameless woman to a woman he knew very well.

Lia. He groaned, helpless and pained.

Her eyes were sparkling, because he'd made some stupid joke, and her smile had been so bright he ached with it, and he'd snapped the picture right in that moment and set it on his phone so that whenever she called—

Oh God, she was calling. And he was coming, unable to wait a second a longer, especially when he was looking at the woman he really wanted, the *only* woman he wanted. His cock pulsed and spurting and spilled hot come down his hand like lava. The air sucked out of the room like it did every time she smiled or talked to him or motherfucking *called him while he was masturbating*, and he was panting, eyes closed, trying to calm down already. And most of all, trying to pretend like she hadn't just made him climax when he pressed the *Answer* button.

"Hey." His voice came out rough and breathless. He felt like a fool for answering the phone with one hand while his other was still coated in come, but he wasn't going to miss her call. Wasn't giving up the chance to hear her voice even if they'd just hung out yesterday.

"Are you okay? You sound funny."

And she sounded like goddamn air, like relief and life and *sex* even though he shouldn't want her anymore. Shouldn't want her at all. "I'm fine. What's up?"

"Well," she said, dragging out the word. "There's this thing tonight, and I wanted to go. Chris has a work event, so I thought maybe..."

"I'll go."

"You don't even know what it is."

But you'll be there. He forced himself to laugh, though it came out choppy and false. "You know me. I always have Chris's back."

"Thanks, man," came Chris's voice from far away.

And that was when he realized he was on speaker. Great, just what he wanted while covered in his own come—to talk to his best friend. "Don't mention it," he said. *Ever.*

"Do you want to drive or should I?" Lia asked.

"Text me the details," he said. "I'll pick you up."

Then he hit the *End* button, because *shit shit shit*, he was so completely screwed. How had he thought he'd get over her? He wouldn't. He couldn't. He'd have to move, leave town, and soon—like tomorrow. The idea had been brewing for a while now. Ever since he got back. It would hurt so fucking much not to see her again, but it would hurt worse to stay.

CHAPTER TWO

LIA STROLLED THE Trail of Lights, trying not to look at the dire expression on her friend's face. Trying to pretend she didn't know something was wrong. But Ethan had been strangely quiet—pensive, almost regretful—since he picked her up.

The Trail of Lights was Austin's answer to holiday cheer, a mix of retro Christmas displays and corporate sponsorship. Fat kernels of kettle corn marked the wooded path more clearly than wood-cut signs. Families had walked the Trail of Lights since its opening in late afternoon.

Nearing midnight, the crowd had thinned to mostly couples. They linked their arms and canted their heads toward each other, sharing the heat of their bodies and the steam of their breaths.

Not like Lia and Ethan. The inches between them felt like a mile.

She examined a Grinch whose lit up smile looked properly demonic. And somewhat lonely. "I always felt bad for him."

"Of course you did," Ethan said.

"What? I mean, the Whos down in Whoville had warm beds and Christmas presents. The Grinch had to live in a cave all by himself."

"He had his dog." Ethan tweaked his own dog's ears. Oreo pranced around their feet, made frisky by the crisp air and the kernels of kettle corn he'd swiped from the ground.

"He did have the dog," she conceded, studying Ethan. "Like you."

Come to think of it, Ethan was a little Grinch-like. Not the looks. His skin had a steady tan from all the running he did, no green in sight. Although he did rock an evil grin when he teased her.

“We have that in common,” he said. “The dog. And the cave. And being a surly bastard.”

“You’re not a bastard.” He could be surly, though. Like tonight. “Anyway, the Whos acted all nice and inclusive, but look at their population. Everyone was the same. The Grinch was the outcast who just so happened to look different. Coincidence? I don’t think so.”

Ethan grinned at her. “I take it you’re not going to read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* in your classroom.”

“Maybe I would,” she muttered, adding, “if I ever have a classroom.”

Of course he noticed. His brow creased in concern. “Hey, you’ve only got a few weeks.”

A few weeks and a shiny new diploma might not be enough. “I talked to the director yesterday.”

“And?”

And it didn’t look good. Lia had worked in the private school to pay her way through college. It had been more than a part time job to her. She’d made costumes for the school play on her own time. She had worked front and center at every fundraising carnival. Now she was graduating with a degree in early childhood education, but the director claimed there were no positions available.

Except there were.

“She says they need someone with more experience to fill that first grade spot.”

Ethan frowned. “That’s bullshit. You have *years* of experience with kids, and at that school. Who the hell else are they going to find?”

Ethan’s defense did bolster her, but it didn’t change facts. They were hiring right now for next school year, and once they gave that spot away, it would be a full year before she could be considered for a teaching position again. “She offered to

increase my hours to full time, but I'd still be an aide. Not a teacher."

"You can apply around though, right? To other schools in Austin?"

She shrugged, not quite over the sting of yesterday's rejection. She had busted her ass for that school. She'd made friends... at least she'd thought she had.

If they didn't want her as a teacher, who would?

Ethan put a finger to her chin and lifted. His fingers felt cool against her skin, but warmth filled her cheeks. Her gaze met his. He looked determined. Pissed. And something else she was afraid to identify. "They're crazy if they think they'll find someone better for those kids than you. You work harder than anyone, but more than that, you care about them. Really care." He glanced over at the display. "Like the way you interpreted the Grinch."

"Because I subverted a beloved classic?"

"Because you take the books seriously, even though they're for kids. You take the plays and the art projects and everything seriously. Everyone gives it lip service. But you, Rosalia Monroe, you actually give a fuck."

Somewhere during his speech he'd leaned in—canted forward, sharing heat and swapping breaths—and her heart began to pound. She searched his dark eyes, but the thousands of lights shielded his thoughts. All she could see was the familiar angles of his face, the dusting of golden scruff on his jaw, the shadows under his eyes.

"Can I put that on my resume?" she whispered.

He nodded solemnly. "Rosalia Monroe, Instructional Badass."

A slow smile claimed her. "You're good for my ego, you know that?"

He backed away with a half-smile. "Telling it like it is."

Oreo whined and stomped his feet, and just like that, the spell was broken. Lia looked around, surprised to realize the trail had thinned out to almost nothing. Just how long had they been ogling Grinch? And just how close had they gotten? There were only inches between them.

She stepped back. “I was hoping for some hot chocolate before we leave.”

“Let’s head for the tree,” he said, his voice gruff.

The trail ended at a tall tent of lights—the proverbial Christmas tree. It was formed from massive strings of lights, spiraling high into the air, far above them. Little kids would stand underneath, spinning and spinning until they felt dizzy and sick. And underneath the light-formed tree, concession booths stood in for presents, serving warm drinks and buttered corn on the cob.

But they were too late. Most of the stands stood empty now, hollow boxes that had already been unwrapped. Some stands were already vacant, with only littered napkins to show they’d ever been full. Others were in the process of being put away, tired concession workers loading their supplies.

Ethan hailed a man behind the kettle corn stand who was pushing the giant metal popper onto a cart. “Hey, wait up. You have any hot chocolate left?”

“Only water bottles,” the vendor shouted back, his face red from exertion.

“Damn,” Ethan muttered. Then, “We’ll take two.” He didn’t stop there—he handed off Oreo’s leash to her and rounded the wooden counter. With a nod, he bent down and pushed the barrel onto its cart.

The vendor wiped his brow. “Thanks. I usually have a helper for that.”

Ethan shrugged, because praise always made him antsy. He could dish it but he couldn’t take it.

“Just for that, I’ll give you these water bottles free of charge,” the man said. “And this last bag of popcorn. I was saving it for the ride home, but you two should have it.”

“We can’t take your popcorn,” Lia protested.

The man patted his belly. “I can do without. Besides, a young couple like yourselves should share a bag. It’s part of the experience.”

“No, we aren’t a—”

“We’ll take them,” Ethan cut in, giving her a look.

Okay, so he was a kettle corn fan. Got it.

He pushed some money on the man despite his objections before handing her a bottle and the bag. “What?” he asked to her pointed look.

We aren’t a couple. So why did you let him think we were? But she couldn’t ask that. It would only show it bothered her, when there was no reason for it to. It didn’t matter if the guy selling kettle corn thought they were a couple.

So a man and a woman were walking together.

At midnight.

It didn’t mean they were a couple. They were friends. Big difference.

But she didn’t have to answer; Ethan already knew. His face was dark and impassive, the colorful lights above them only deepening its shadows. “How’s Chris doing?” he asked.



ETHAN GRIT HIS teeth as Lia launched into her third story about how great Chris was. And yes, Chris was smart and funny and obviously kicking ass at the internship with a state senator. But did she have to sound so breathless when she talked about him?

He’d brought this on himself.

Yes, of course he'd go with her, anywhere, anytime, like he was some kind of stand-in boyfriend. Just walk and talk and laugh with her, but don't go home with her. No, she was going home to Chris.

Chris, who had emailed him after the phone call. *Thx for covering.*

As if they were still back in Afghanistan, covering each other's asses. But Lia wasn't a shift they could trade or a ration he could lend. She wasn't a barrage of gunfire he could deflect. She was Chris's girlfriend, and Ethan needed to fucking remember that.

No matter how hot she looked with a handful of kettle corn.

"God," she moaned. "This is so freaking good. Why did you never tell me this was so freaking good?"

Maybe because you're making sex noises, and if you keep that up, my dick's going to be hard. He wasn't sure which bothered him more, stories about Chris's general awesomeness or Lia's kettle corn orgasms every time she took a bite.

Her lips would be sticky by now, coated in caramelized sugar and salt. He'd give anything just for one lick, but she wasn't his to taste. She wasn't his at all. The only thing he could do was grip the steering wheel and glare at the dark Austin roads as he drove.

Wind whipped inside the truck cab, coming in through the tilted rear windows where Oreo had his nose pressed to the night air, ears flopping wildly.

"Chris thinks the senator's going to run," Lia said.

Chris worked for a state senator who was considering a run for the House of Representatives. Ethan knew he had big plans for his representative's career—and his own career, eventually. There would be travel, and eventually, an apartment in DC. Lia would be gone, and Ethan would have no reason to hang around anymore.

No reason to stay and nowhere else to go.

“Maybe you can look for a teaching position in Washington,” he managed to say in a normal voice.

She gave him a strange look. So maybe not that normal. “I’m going to stay in Austin,” she said, but he didn’t believe her. Couldn’t believe her. Chris would end up spending more time in DC, especially once he made the inroads he wanted to. Especially when he ran for office. And Lia would be there to support him, because that was the kind of wife she would be.

He was suddenly grateful he hadn’t eaten any kettle corn. He might have chucked it back up.

“Well,” he forced out. “Maybe you should keep your options open. You can take the full time job as an aide as a temporary thing until you and Chris figure out where you’re going to live.”

She looked annoyed now. “I already know where I’m going to live. The same place I’m living now.”

Why the hell couldn’t he leave this alone? But he couldn’t. It bothered him that she was acting like things would stay the same. “You’re going to be graduating in a few weeks, *Lia*.”

“Thanks for the newsflash, *Ethan*.”

“That means I can’t meet you and Chris on campus for lunch between classes.”

“So we’ll see each other after work,” she said. Stubbornly.

He closed his eyes briefly before focusing on the road again. Nothing but darkness, the trees a shadow wall pointing toward home. Lia’s home with Chris, the place Ethan didn’t belong. All three of them were friends, but things had already begun to change when Chris had graduated this past spring and gone to work for the representative full time.

“Everything will be different,” he said, unable to say more. Unable to say, *You can’t be alone with me anymore*.

Even tonight had been a mistake.

“We’re friends, Ethan. All three of us, best friends. It wasn’t school that made us friends. It’s the fact that I’ve known both of you forever, before you even deployed.”

That softened him, a little, to remember her as the skinny preteen she’d been. He’d had an unhealthy fascination with her even then, but she’d only had eyes for Chris. All the ladies had eyes for Chris, which Ethan had never minded.

Except with her.

He pulled into the parking lot of her apartment and jerked his truck to a stop. The vehicle shuddered at the suddenness, and kettle corn spilled onto her lap and rolled all over the floor of his car.

“Oh,” she exclaimed. “Crap.”

“Sorry,” he muttered, not feeling all that sorry.

“Ethan?”

He rummaged under the seat for some fast food napkins and tossed them at her. “Here,” he said without looking at her. “Don’t worry about the rest. I’ll put Oreo in the front seat and the popcorn will be gone before I get home.”

“Ethan.”

Finally he met her gaze. Her eyes had turned to moons, wide and reflective. He saw in them a thousand tiny lights on a string. He saw in them everything and nothing and a future he couldn’t be a part of. Technically he could see her tomorrow, for lunch. And the next day. But staring at her in the twilight, it felt like goodbye.

“You’ll get a real offer,” he said. “As a teacher, at a great school. And wherever you end up, they’ll be lucky to have you.”

He had hidden his feelings for so long, it felt strange to want them exposed. But in that moment, he did. He hoped she knew what he meant also, that Chris was lucky to have her.

Her eyes glistened—with what? With liquid night. With ink. With anything but tears, but then they slid down her cheeks and he couldn't pretend any longer.

“Go,” he said roughly. *Go to him. Go live your life. Go away where you can't make me ache and want and hurt anymore.*

“I'm sorry,” she said, her voice high and trembly. Like a plea.

“Just get the hell out.”

She turned from him and stumbled out of the truck. It wasn't safe, her running out of the truck that way. He started to get out, started to follow. But the moon blanketed the empty parking lot, lighting gravel like stars, and her path was clear. He watched her take the few steps down into her apartment's entryway.

But she just stood there.

Her hand reached up to knock. Her head lowered.

With a sinking feeling in his gut, Ethan realized her little zippered purse was on the floor of his truck, half covered in popcorn. It must have her keys. His throat felt tight. He grabbed the leather pouch and jogged across the parking lot.

He reached her just as the door opened. Chris stood there, wearing a rumpled shirt and slacks. His eyes were bloodshot but he started to smile. Then he saw Lia's face. Ethan couldn't see her—she wouldn't look at him—but it must have been bad. Chris's gaze met Ethan's, questioning. *What happened?*

Ethan didn't have an answer. He couldn't very well say, *I'm in love with your girlfriend. I have been for years.*

“You forgot this,” he said instead, holding up the pouch. But Lia was already slipping past Chris into the apartment they shared.

Chris's eyes lightened with something like recognition. He saw what was happening, felt the tension in the air and knew what it meant—maybe that was for the best. Now he'd know

better than to ask the fox to guard the henhouse. But it wasn't worry that filled Chris's expression. Not even jealousy. Instead it was a sort of smugness, and it made Ethan wonder if Chris had seen his feelings all along.

"Did you have a good time?" his friend asked, too polite to be real. He had seen Lia's face, and Ethan must look torn to shit—like he felt inside, but Chris was cool as the air around them.

"Fan-fucking-tastic," Ethan muttered. Losing Lia—not that he'd ever had her, was hard enough. Knowing his best friend found it funny did not help his mood.

Chris smirked, eyes flashing, and Ethan had a sudden glimpse of how he would look as a politician. Determined and mildly sleazy. Resentment was a hard knot in his gut. Why did this fucker get the girl? But then he remembered that this fucker had his back many times; they'd survived that way.

Then his anger evaporated and he was left only with disappointment.

"Take care of her," he said as he turned to leave.

He had driven all the way home, and Oreo had eaten all the kettle corn, by the time he realized he still had Lia's purse. Right when he'd decided he couldn't keep meeting up with her throughout her day, tagging along which only made things worse. He needed to end this tonight.

So he dropped Oreo off in his empty apartment and started the drive back.

CHAPTER THREE

LIA BRUSHED HER teeth to get rid of the salty sweetness of the kettle corn. She showered to get the smoky evening air from her skin and hair. But something remained, something earthy and sharp, a sense that she had experienced something important, that it lingered with her still.

Steam coated the bathroom mirror. She looked at her hazy reflection—her black hair curly from the moisture, eyes wide. She looked like her mother, who was Puerto Rican. Her father had never been identified, but it was clear from her dark skin that he'd been black. She had stood out in Paseo Boricua, the Chicago neighborhood where her mother lived. When her aunt moved to Austin to take an adjunct professor position at UT, Lia had begged to go with her.

Lia had enrolled in Austin High School for 9th grade. She'd been gawky and terrified upon realizing she stood out here more than ever. When a few sophomores had teased her—and touched her—two seniors had stepped in to tell them off. Chris and Ethan. She'd been struck by hero worship then, and she couldn't honestly say it had ever worn off.

Her skin was dark, like one of her cousins might have at the end of the summer, deeply tanned. But she looked that way even in winter, and she'd stood out. Not here in Austin. Not with Ethan and Chris. Ethan's skin was pale; when it got darker it got redder, perpetually flushing, even under the weight of the sun. While Chris was a dark brown, his palms and elbows beige in stark contrast. She never felt too light or too dark, with them. She was between them in every way, sandwiched in the middle whenever they went, protected.

Despite the difference in age and background, they had let her hang around them until they graduated. Then they'd both enlisted—and before they shipped off, Chris had asked her to

be his girlfriend. What could she say? *Yes. And thank God. And I'll miss you both so much.*

She and Chris had been together since, every leave and ever since he'd gotten back. Years. Forever. So why did it suddenly feel strange for him to see her naked? With the door half-shut, she dropped the towel and slipped on a nightgown. He was waiting in the same place, with an expectant look on his face.

Chris was waiting for her on the bed. "How were the lights?"

His voice was loaded, and she knew it was only a matter of time before he demanded answers. He'd definitely seen her tears when she'd come inside. "They were beautiful."

"And how was Ethan?"

She shrugged. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I'm asking *you*."

There was an edge in his voice, like the smoke abrading her throat. Like the tears pricking her eyes. His voice scratched over her skin, and she wondered how she'd ever thought this was safe.

She delayed answering by stepping into the closet. Her clothes were hung up in neat rows on one side, his on the other. He was always neater than her—military straight. That was part of his draw. His perfection. But now she realized she'd never measure up.

"He seemed...upset," she said. An understatement. Ethan was the laid back one. Stoic. Occasionally surly. What he'd done tonight, though—*Just get the hell out*—had been completely out of character. It had hurt, to be honest, especially after...

After it had seemed like he might kiss her. Even though she knew he wouldn't, couldn't. Even though she never would have let him.

“You two have always been good friends,” Chris said, a loaded statement.

“All three of us were friends,” she reminded him. “*Are* friends.”

He shrugged and said nothing.

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“You’re graduating soon. Everything will be different.”

Wow, he sounded just like Ethan. *Annoying as hell*. “I don’t understand how my graduating college has anything to do with being friends with Ethan.”

“Don’t you?”

Her temper boiled up, but she forced it down. “I’m still me. He’s still him,” she said evenly.

“You’ll be working full time. Plus there’ll be responsibilities. More fundraisers and events in the evenings as the campaign picks up. Then when we move to DC—”

“Whoa. What? Shouldn’t I be consulted on moving to a different city?”

“I told you he was running.”

“Yeah, I figured there’d be some traveling. But he’d only move there if he wins.”

“Nice. I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

That stung. Was she being unsupportive? She hadn’t meant to be, but she’d honestly expected Chris to discuss something like that with her. Even if his boss won the seat, he would maintain an office in Austin, and she had figured Chris would work there. Wrong, apparently.

She made herself cool down. “I’m not saying no, I’m just saying I’d like to be consulted.”

“I’m sorry for assuming my wife would actually come with me,” Chris said, voice loaded with sarcasm. “I should

have figured you'd pick living near your friend to living with your husband."

Stunned, she stared at him. "*That* was your proposal?"

For a moment they simply stared at each other, harsh breathing filling the dark bedroom. Then he stood and approached her. She tensed, even though she knew he'd never hurt her. It still felt scary, not knowing what he was feeling. Not knowing what *she* was feeling.

Confusion. Hurt. Guilt. That last one threw her the most. She hadn't even realized she'd done anything wrong, but she felt guilty as if she had. It made her feel like a car off the rails, bumping over rocky ground, heading into a downward slide.

"Look," Chris said, shaking his head. "I didn't mean to propose like that. I had a thing planned for how I was going to ask. After your graduation."

She looked down, unable to bear the strange light in his eyes. His words were calmer now, but his energy was more intense than ever, unsettling and sharp. A subtle challenge underscored his words, sending shivers down her spine.

"You can still do that," she whispered, which was a cop-out. A delay tactic. They both knew it.

His eyes flashed in anger. "We don't have to wait. You'll get your dinner and your ring. But you can say yes to me now, can't you?"

"To what?" She laughed unsteadily—no humor. "What's the question, exactly?"

"Marry me," he said, and it didn't sound like a question. It was a command, and her unease rose another level. It was like looking at Chris through that clouded bathroom mirror. She recognized the shape of him, but he was distorted too. Familiar and yet not.

She loved both Chris and Ethan in their own ways. And she'd thought her love for Chris had morphed into something deeper. Or maybe she'd just been so desperate not to end up

alone again. The outcast again. If so, it was wrong to use him that way.

It would be wrong to say yes.

“Can I think about it?” she asked quietly.

His eyes went cold. “Are you breaking up with me?”

Was she? She wasn't sure. But it didn't seem like a good idea to make big decisions right now. Maybe this would all seem like a bad dream in the morning.

“No, I'm not breaking up with you. It's just late. I want to go to sleep. Besides,” she added, trying to lighten the mood. “I'm still holding out for a candlelight dinner.”

His expression remained stark, like a sculpture. “Then let's go to bed.”

She could tell by his tone that he didn't mean to sleep. “I'm tired.”

He shook his head, slow. “Not too tired.”

Oh man, he was going to make her decide. Right here, right now, based on whether she had sex with him. It felt like answering every question. Are we still together? Are we getting married? Are you willing to do anything I want? He had never been pushy before, never *needed* to be pushy before. She preferred to be pliant; she preferred to be the peacekeeper, but what was happening now didn't feel like peace.

It felt wrong, but throwing an entire relationship, a potential marriage away, based on weird feelings couldn't be right. She just needed time to think, but he wasn't giving her that. Maybe that was fair, considering the weird vibe between her and Ethan tonight. *The attraction*. She could call it what it was.

For whatever reason, it had happened. She'd wanted Ethan, and she thought he'd wanted her too. Chris had seen that, and he was understandably bothered. He wanted to stake his claim. She could let him.

To get them through to the morning, she could.

She reached down to the hem of her nightgown and lifted. Then she was naked, standing in the dim light coming through the blinds, just like she had been hundreds of times. His gaze and hands and mouth were on her, just like they had been hundreds of times. He was a little rougher, and she was a little more distracted, but they had done this too many times. They knew where each hand would go and exactly how much foreplay would happen before he came inside her.

Except it didn't happen that way.

Chris's hand on her neck guided her to the bed, face-first. She bent on her hands and knees. They had done this position before, but not often. *Staking his claim*. Her gut twisted, rejecting that claim. Her mind shouted *no*. She didn't say it out loud, though. Everything was too uncertain. Him. Her. *Ethan*.

She groaned as Chris entered her, sudden and deep. Her fists held onto the sheets while he rocked her hips back and forth with his body.

The sounds came way too late. Banging. Knocking the bed against the wall? But no, it was farther away, like from the front door. Then there was a voice. "You guys here? Dropping this off. Someone lock up after me."

"Ethan," she whispered, but Chris's grip on her hips was too firm and it all happened too fast.

Then Ethan was standing there, staring. His eyes were wide. His hand held a clutch—her clutch.

She looked back, but Chris's eyes were closed, brow furrowed. Her body had seized up, frozen, aching like a full body cramp. Her mind was cramped too, realizing she'd made a mistake. A long string of them, culminating in her exposed position on this bed. Even her heart was cramped, squeezed tight in a too-small space. Ethan wasn't the Grinch, no matter how grumpy he could be. She was—her heart two sizes too small. But it had grown now, in this horrible moment, when two relationships were ruined. All because she couldn't see

what was in front of her until it was too late. *Ethan* was in front of her... and Chris was behind her.

She must have made a sound, because Chris slowed. Then stopped. His grip tightened on her hips, and she knew he'd seen Ethan.

Surely Chris would tell him to leave. That was the right thing, wasn't it? If there were an etiquette book on friends and lovers, that's what it should say. But in all the years they'd all three been friends, in the years she and Chris had been a couple, it had never come up.

Except it must have happened, once or twice. Ethan must have come upon them or stood outside the room, hearing the sounds they made. And she had never known because Ethan had always silently left.

Not this time.

"Hey, old friend," Chris said, and he didn't sound friendly.

She shivered at his tone, and he ran a hand along her thigh, as if trying to calm her.

It didn't help.

Ethan was bathed in shadows, his expression a mystery. She could feel his indecision, could see the line drawn in the carpet between them. He didn't speak. But he didn't turn away, and that was answer enough.

"Come here," Chris said. "Come see our girl."

And then the craziest thing happened—Ethan actually did that. He crossed the room to stand by the bed. Was she dreaming this? If so, this was the wildest dream she'd ever had. But the cock pulsing inside her was real. The man standing beside the bed, staring down at her, his eyes dark with confusion and desire and a spark of jealousy, was real too.

"Chris," she whispered, needing reassurance.

He didn't have any. "You'll like this, Lia. You've always liked it best when the three of us hung out. That's what we're doing."

But it wasn't. Hanging out was watching a movie or playing poker or building a pillow fort because she'd had the idea and they were all three drunk enough to do it. Hanging out wasn't sex. She didn't bother to correct him though, because Chris knew that. Ethan did too, judging by the dark look he sent Chris over her shoulder. The tension between them felt raw and dark and almost violent—and it ran through her body like a current, raising the hair on her neck, awakening every part of her body.

Especially the part joined to Chris.

"We should stop," she said, although it came out more like a squeak.

Chris tugged her back, off her hands, still on her knees. This way she was fully exposed to Ethan, and he took full advantage, staring at her breasts. This way Chris could whisper into her ear, cold encouragement, harsh promises: "You trust Ethan, don't you? And you trust me. We're going to show you a good time."

And then the words that broke her heart, whispered by the devil behind her. "Ethan's dying to show you a good time."

She knew they were true. Ethan may have walked away for years. He may have respected their space and kept his distance and a thousand other things to keep the friendship going. He was clearly done with that, and it hurt. It hurt to know he was throwing friendship away, even if her body was ready to trade up for something better.

She trembled with how ready she was, tiny vibrations that started from deep in her chest and radiated outward, to her hands and toes and pussy. It was strange that Ethan had initiated this, strange that Chris had egged him on. But the strangest of all was that Lia hadn't put a stop to it. With a single word—that was all it would take.

Strange, because she wanted this to happen. Whatever this was.

“Touch her,” Chris said, because he seemed to be the only one capable of speaking. It was up to him to direct, to grant permission.

At least until Ethan said in a rough voice, “Lia?”

And she knew what he was asking. Ethan wouldn’t let her be passive in this, and she both loved and hated him for it.

“Please,” she whispered.

Ethan moved slowly in response, dropping his finger on her collarbone and drawing a path down her body—over the inside curve of her breast and underneath, down the slope of her belly and through the small thatch of hair.

This was a dream, an erotic winter dream—visions of sugar plums dancing in her head—and only by telling herself that could she hold still as Ethan dipped lower.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, his voice thick.

Her inner muscles clenched, and she knew Chris had to feel it. In fact, he pulsed and flexed inside her.

“She is,” Chris said, and in those two words the mocking disappeared. Instead it felt like Chris had said it would be: the two of them worshipping her. As if maybe it had always been that way.

Ethan found her clit and circled. Her breath caught, and she pulled up higher. But there was nowhere to go, impaled on Chris’s cock, held captive by Ethan’s fingers. He teased her gently at first, bringing her to the state of arousal that had been missing earlier. Her hips rocked against his hand and back against Chris, caught in the middle.

The movements at her clit became steadier, stronger, and her whole body tightened, ready to break. Ethan’s gaze locked with hers, dark and almost angry. Why was he angry? And more than that, were his fingertips brushing against Chris’s cock? Everything was so slippery down there, everything

harsh and insistent—it seemed almost inevitable that they would touch.

That thought sent her over, and she cried out, shuddering, riding Ethan's fingers and Chris's cock at the same time. Chris tensed and groaned behind her, his body like a wall, his hands like a vice, holding her captive and supporting her all at once. Her vision went black as the last pulses of her orgasms swept through her, lights dotting the vastness like a Christmas tree sloping through the sky.

Chris slumped over her back, spent, and when she rolled him off, Ethan was gone.



ETHAN DROVE WITHOUT seeing anything. He didn't see the lit up dash in his truck or the open roads beyond. He didn't see Lia's body, curvy and soft, kneeling on rumpled sheets, being pounded from behind.

Dominated. That was the only word to describe what had been happening in that room, the kind of thing Ethan had never let himself imagine doing to her. She deserved better than that. She deserved Chris, but he wasn't supposed to treat her the way Ethan would. Rough and mean.

"You really need to stop thinking," he muttered to himself.

He drove without feeling anything. He didn't feel the freezing shower he put himself in. He didn't feel the hard, cool bed he slid into. And he definitely didn't feel arousal, at seeing the most beautiful body imaginable.

It wasn't even imaginable. He knew the shape of her outside her clothes, he knew the dusky color of her skin. His mind had filled in the rest. Even though he'd known it would make things worse. In dreams and while he jerked himself off, he'd imagined her naked body—but he'd been wrong.

She was so much more beautiful, more alluring than his mind had been able to conjure. He didn't see it anymore. He'd never feel her near him, ever again. But she was already

written into him, scalding him inside, leaving scars where she had been.

When he got home and climbed into bed, Oreo followed him and landed in a heap next to him. He smelled like smoke and was no doubt leaving dirt and bits of dried leaves on the bed, but Ethan didn't care.

"That's over," he said aloud, as if to tell Oreo. As if to tell himself.

Mooning over a woman he couldn't have. Over his best friend's girlfriend. It was pathetic and unfair and a hundred kinds of wrong—but most of all, it was over.

Even if his fingers still smelled like her arousal.

"You need more room to run, anyway," he told Oreo. The apartment had always been on the small side for a big dog.

A snore answered him.

"Yeah," he sighed. Sleeping did sound pretty great. Too bad he couldn't imagine doing it. Not until he was far away from here. And maybe not even then.

But at least he couldn't feel anything. At least, in the pitch black, he couldn't see.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DAY DAWNED cold and drizzly, the kind of grey skies and steamy air that Austin didn't see often. It felt appropriate, though. It matched Lia's mood. The rain continued to fall until late afternoon.

She sat on the back porch, sipping tea. There was only one class on her schedule today, and technically it was a one-on-one with her independent project advisor. She had emailed him to let him know she'd be missing it and asked to reschedule.

She spent her time doing something else. Something important.

Which meant she wouldn't go to work today, either. They hadn't scheduled her for any paid hours, but she was going to paint the pirate ship for the kindergarten play. On her own time. She was also going to tell her boss that she'd accept the full time position as an aide and the small hourly raise it came with.

Except now...

Now all of those plans felt a million miles away, hazy and uncertain. That steam-clouded bathroom mirror was back again, standing between her and the world. But now it seemed like a good thing. The distance let her examine what she really wanted.

Standing in the middle, everything had felt locked in. Her job. Her role. Even Chris—locked in.

She heard the front door to the apartment open and glanced back through the sliding glass doors. Chris walked in, his shape indistinct. And she knew nothing was locked in, nothing at all. They were choices, and she was no longer sure they were the right ones.

Scratch that, she was sure they weren't.

That left a pretty big landscape for her to walk and find the right one. But she would.

She stood and met Chris in the dining room. He was staring at her purse in the middle of the table, waiting for her to take it and go. Her small car was already piled high with her stuff—he couldn't have missed it. He knew what she was doing, and he looked... tired.

"I'm sorry," she said, because it felt right. She *was* sorry, that she couldn't be what he wanted, what she'd thought she could.

He sat down at the table. "Lia."

Just that. Her name. She sat down across from him. They were almost strangers now.

"Don't hate me," she said.

He grimaced. "I don't. I couldn't. I was being an asshole last night."

Well, yeah. But she'd been an asshole too, even if she hadn't exactly meant it that way. She thought he hadn't meant it that way either. They'd both been hurt and confused and lashing out. That was okay, as long as she made it right.

"I don't know what's going to happen, but I just—"

"It's okay." He gave her a dark look that somehow made the mood lighter. "You can say his name. I'm not going to freak out. Not again."

"Nothing happened," she said defensively.

He sighed. "Even if it did."

"It didn't. There was a weird moment, that's all. And it's my fault for not really stopping to think about things sooner. I've just been so focused on graduating, on getting to this point, and then..."

"And then everything's different."

Those words again. They pinged inside her, and this time she knew it wasn't annoyance she felt. It was fear. And pain. She'd liked the way things had been. Loved them. Her two best friends in the world, near her. She'd seen them both every day. Loved them both, in different ways. She couldn't have that anymore, and it hurt like hell.

"You don't have to leave," he said. "I can leave."

She shook her head. "Our lease is up soon anyway. And then, what? You're moving to DC, right?"

He nodded. "Most likely. Now that..."

Now that they weren't together, there was nothing to keep him here. Had she always been a weight for him, an anchor to his past while he'd been trying to move forward? Well, she was glad she wasn't anymore. She was glad he could move to DC, unencumbered.

"Anyway, I talked to my friend. I can stay there until I graduate."

"Where will you go after that?"

A moment passed. "I have no idea."

He smiled. "The Lia I know always had a plan."

Yes. The truth of that hit her in the chest—and squeezed. She was a planner. That likely wouldn't change, not in the long run. But in this moment, in the weeks before her graduation, she wanted to drift. She wanted to look around and know that she could go anywhere. Even if she decided to stay here.

"I hope you'll still talk to me. From DC or wherever you go."

"Of course I will." His eyes turned soft, more tender than they had been in years, since back when they were kids and she was a gangly pre-teen. "And you have to give me updates on you. And Ethan."

She looked down. "I'm really not sure—"

“I am. It needed to happen. Maybe I always knew it would happen.”

“Have a crystal ball?” she teased, feeling more sad than playful. It hurt to be saying goodbye to him, and almost hurt worse that he was letting her go with his blessing. Almost as if he knew what would make her happy, *who* would make her happy—maybe before she did.

“No.” He met her gaze. “But I have eyes. I saw the way he looked at you.”

Her throat tightened. “And how was that?”

“The same way I did,” he said, and then she couldn’t hold back anymore. The tears fell, and one of her best friends was there to hold her and comfort her and swear that everything would turn out okay. Even though it didn’t feel like that. It felt like the end, but she didn’t know how to begin again.



IN THE BOOK and the movie, the Grinch was able to right his wrong immediately. He packed a sleigh and sped over mountain peaks. But Lia had a meeting with her advisor the next day, to make up for yesterday. And then she was scheduled to work.

The school bustled with that energy she loved. Even with the students at their desks and the doors shut, Lia could feel their enthusiasm and curiosity vibrating through the air. Her low heels clicked down the rubber floors until she reached the administrative offices.

The longtime secretary sent her a warning glance and whispered, “She’s expecting you.”

“Great,” Lia said, pretending her stomach wasn’t in knots. She didn’t like disappointing anyone—especially someone she had grown to respect over her years here.

She was disappointing everyone.

Her boss stood as she entered. Melanie was a slender woman with razor sharp eyes. “Where were you yesterday?”

Lia eased the door shut behind her. The whole office didn't need to hear this. Not that it mattered much. She'd be gone soon. "I had something personal to take care of." Normally she would stop there. But nothing was normal anymore. "I wasn't scheduled to work yesterday anyway."

Melanie frowned. "The play is in a month."

"I'll finish the set and the costumes before then. But I won't be here for the play itself."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm submitting my two weeks' notice." This was what she should have done when Melanie turned her down for the teaching position. Lia had been too scared then. She was even more scared now.

"Lia, sweetie. I see what's happening. You're graduating. I'm sure you were expecting a bigger raise. And maybe if I speak to the board, I can work something out. But not if you start throwing threats around. That's not how we operate."

"I'm not threatening anything," she said, her voice strange and wobbly. She cleared her throat. *End of an era.* That's what it felt like, through every cell of her body. Her time in college, her part time job here, Chris. Over now. "I'm quitting."

Melanie sighed, looking much older. "Lia, you're invaluable here. We need you."

"No, what you need is a full time aide. But that's not what I am anymore. I'm a teacher. Or I will be."

In the ensuing silence, her boss leaned back in the creaky leather chair and closed her eyes. "I was afraid this would happen."

"Then why—" Lia snapped her mouth shut.

Melanie answered anyway. "Because this is a private school with a traditional board. The first thing they're going to ask me is how many years of experience you have, aka how many grey hairs do you have." Her gaze flicked over Lia's

appearance with a faint smile. “Whereas you look younger than twenty two.”

Her stomach twisted. It hurt to hear why she hadn’t been in the running—even if she’d known the reason already. And the older teachers *did* have valuable experience, a certain confidence in the classroom that Lia admired. But Lia had things to offer too: enthusiasm and compassion. That counted for something.

Didn’t it?

“I’ve loved every minute here,” Lia said honestly.

Melanie smiled, her eyes crinkling in places they hadn’t years ago, when Lia had first started here. “There’s a classroom waiting for you.”

Relief filled her at the vote of confidence. “God, I hope so.”

“I’m sure of it. And you’ll do great.”

Lia left the school a few hours later, covered in brown and black paint. Her hair was tied in a messy bun. She must have been a mess, but she couldn’t stop. Couldn’t wait to see Ethan and tell him what she’d decided.

Couldn’t wait to ask him to join her.

She wasn’t sure how it would work out—or if it even would—but she was damn well going to try.

The parking lot of the duplex where Ethan lived was deserted, but that didn’t mean anything. He didn’t have a roommate, but the guy renting the other unit hung around all the time. He had joked that he was Ethan’s foster friend, someone to hang out with when Chris and Lia were busy. She’d always hated that joke.

But he sometimes borrowed Ethan’s truck, so maybe Ethan was home. Even if he wasn’t, she knew where he kept the spare key. She’d wait inside.

Knocking met with silence. She pulled the key from under the basic *Welcome* mat and stepped inside.

To an empty apartment.

His lumpy couch was still here and his gouged dining table with the mismatched chairs. On the surface it could have been any other day, but she felt the difference. The emptiness was more than his absence. It felt... permanent. Which was crazy, of course. Ethan wasn't going anywhere—especially not without telling her.

Unless he really was really mad at her, far more than she had suspected. Unless he hated her. Unless he thought their friendship was over, which seemed worst of all.

She crossed the threshold to the other unit and banged on the door. “Hey! Open up!”

A few minutes later, a bleary eyed bachelor opened the door. “Seriously, it’s eight in the morning.”

“It’s four in the afternoon,” she said impatiently. “And I need to talk to Ethan.”

“So call him.”

She had, last night. And again this morning. He was clearly more than busy. He was avoiding her. “Do you know where he is? It’s important.”

Ethan’s neighbor scratched his head. “I know where he’s not.”

Lia blew out a frustrated breath, tempted to give this guy her drugs-are-bad lecture just because he was annoying her. “Yeah, he’s not home.”

“Nah, that’s what I mean. He left. Packed his dog and his shit and hit the road.”

She’d never quite understood the expression of the jaw dropping. Until now. Her mouth opened, in shock, in horror. He’d really, actually gone without a word to her. “Where’d he go?”

“No idea. But I heard him talking to the landlord. I don’t think he’s coming back.”

CHAPTER FIVE

ETHAN HEFTED THE ax over his head. It landed with a satisfying crack. Wood flew on either side, skipping over the brittle grass like pebbles on water. Shards of wood dotted the frosted landscape.

He made no move to pick them up.

Christmas was yesterday—not that it mattered. The firewood pile beside the cabin already reached his shoulders.

That didn't matter either.

What mattered was the endless, empty frost-glazed hills.

Dearling was a small, tightly-knit community nestled deep in Texas Hill Country. The people here worked hard labor, drank hard liquor, and trained all year for the annual pie eating contest. They had welcomed Ethan with curious smiles and begrudged respect—for his uncle, he assumed, who was a bonafide military hero. And maybe some for Ethan's own history, even though he'd just done a couple tours before getting out. It gave him something in common with the husbands and fathers and brothers around here, a connection he'd never felt on the bustling UT campus or the teeming sixth street clubs in Austin.

Though for all that he liked Dearling, it didn't seem to matter much either. What mattered was the force of the ax and the burn in his shoulders. They distracted him—at least for a while.

He reached for the next log and centered it on the stump. This was between him and the earth, a little mutual destruction to pass the afternoon. By nightfall he'd be sore as hell and hopefully tired enough not to see *her* in his dreams.

A foreign sound traveled through the thin winter air. Tires crunching on gravel. He frowned. Who the hell would come

out here?

Maybe some local Good Samaritan had come to make sure he was prepared for the coming frost. He'd reassure them, though. Uncle Griff's cabin had come fully stocked with a lifetime supply of beef jerky. Besides, Ethan was used to it. Most people imagined Afghanistan as a hot, dry desert, but the nights could be brutally cold. And the high elevations near Bagram got snow year round.

Oreo was going wild from inside the cabin. The pit bull whined through the door, clearly eager to serve and protect. Either that or to check for snacks. But he'd been locked inside so he wouldn't lose an eye from a stray shard of wood.

Ethan turned the corner of the cabin, expecting one of the dusty trucks he always saw when he stopped into town. Dearling, Texas, was quaint and country and the perfect escape for him.

Instead he saw a familiar blue sedan with a dented fender that had been like that when Lia bought the car.

"You've got to be kidding me," he muttered to himself. First he saw her in his sleep and now he had visions of her car while he was awake?

How far did a man have to run to get a little peace?

But Oreo wouldn't be barking his head off for a vision. This was real. *She* was real. *Jesus*. His pulse quickened. He squinted, but the glare on the window made it impossible to see. A hollow space opened up in his chest, knowing she'd followed him out here. Knowing she'd probably called his cell and gone to his empty apartment long before this. He hadn't seen or felt much of anything in the month since he'd dragged his ass to Dearling, but that was already changing.

The door opened and a boot landed on gravel. Pointed toe, slender ankles.

He wondered idly how terrifying he looked right now. Women tended to shrink away from him when he stood at full height. And when he glowered. Lia had teased him about the

glowering, and he'd responded that this was the way his face looked. That had only been partially true. That *was* the way his face looked when he had to watch the woman he loved kiss and hug and fuck his best friend.

Lia stood and wobbled slightly, finding her footing on slippery rocks and the sloping drive. She spotted him and did a little wave, more reserved than he'd ever seen her. She reminded him of the young Lia, the lanky preteen with hopeful eyes.

"Merry Christmas," she said quietly.

Remorse tasted bitter in his mouth. There was a time she would have thrown her arms around his neck. She would have made him wear a Santa hat, and he'd have pretended to hate it. "Merry Christmas."

"Nice digs," she said, lying her pretty little mouth off. His uncle was career army, which meant he travelled more than he didn't. That gave Ethan a place to crash when he needed it. Far as he could tell, that was the only function the barebones cabin could serve. He didn't mind, especially since he could be alone. Just him and Oreo.

Up until two minutes ago, anyway.

"You get lost on the way to Lake Travis?" he asked pointedly. As in, *what the hell are you doing here?* It wasn't nice, but he was done being nice. Done pretending he could be friends with her.

There was a big fucking difference between friends and lovers.

She cocked her head. "I'm going to have to invite myself in, aren't I? Yes, I think I am. Honestly, Ethan."

Then she was pulling a large paper bag from the car and strolling toward the cabin. He managed to remember his manners and took the bag as she passed. Denim hugged her ass exactly the way he wanted to, up close and personal. He couldn't stop staring.

So much for manners.

She pushed the door open and Oreo leaped onto her chest, knocking her directly into Ethan. The press of her body was so much warmer and sweeter than any time he had imagined it.

Jesus.

He set her aside and batted Oreo on the side. “Get off of her, you big lug.”

She wasn’t mad, though. She was laughing, and her smile made his heart beat faster. This was exactly what he didn’t need. Her, him, and a raging erection the cold had done nothing to stop. He slammed the door before all the heat escaped.

No use. The generator had choked and coughed its way through last night. Apparently it had a hangover today because nothing in the way of warm air had emerged from the vents this morning.

“Sorry about the cold,” he said, gruff enough to sound insincere. But he meant it—she deserved better than this. At the very least, she deserved a functioning central air system and decent insulation. All he had to offer was a moth-eaten knit throw.

He held it out to her.

She took the blanket and settled in on the lumpy futon, looking right at home. Oreo curled up on her lap to get rubbed, his ass hanging off because he wasn’t a puppy anymore.

Well, wasn’t that cozy. He scowled. “I’d offer you something to drink but I don’t have anything except water.”

Lia’s expression was playful, as if she knew a secret he didn’t. Hell, she knew a whole passel of secrets he didn’t. Like what the hell she was doing here. “I figured you were roughing it when I found out the address. But I didn’t realize it would be this... Survivor Man.”

He shoved some magazines off a crate and sat down opposite her. “How *did* you find out the address?”

“Uncle Griff.”

Damn. She'd met his Uncle Griff at Ethan's high school graduation, when she had already been dating Chris. Uncle Griff had taken to Lia hard and fast. *Why can't you find a girl like this one?* his uncle had asked, then laughed like it was hilarious.

Then Ethan had punched him in the face.

No, he hadn't. But he'd thought about it. Griff had seen his interest in Lia, and that was why he gave him a hard time. A girl *like* her? No, he wanted the real thing. He wanted Lia, but he couldn't have her.

“Why are you here, Rosalia?”

“Oh, I'm Rosalia now. Well, you can relax, okay? Chill. I'm just here to chat.”

“What am I, a book club? I don't chat.”

She shook her head sadly. “I'm afraid you're wrong, Ethan. You're very chatty.”

He shot her an annoyed look, even though it felt so damn good to be near her again. Especially because it felt so damn good. “I've never chatted in my life. Once I clicked into a chatroom by mistake and then left before saying anything.”

She smirked. “I'm storing *that* topic away for future reference. I want to know exactly what you read that made you back away slowly. And I mean chatting in public. You know, with actual words?”

“Never happened. I don't even know you. Why are you in my house?”

“I see your sense of humor hasn't improved in the past month.”

“Nothing has improved in the past month,” he muttered.

“Hah! I knew it. I knew you couldn't be happy out here. I came to chat with you, like we always did. We talk every day

and then suddenly *poof*; you're gone. No phone calls. No emails."

His chest tightened. Despite her flippant tone, real hurt flashed through her eyes. He was an asshole.

"It was rude," she continued. "We almost booted you from the book club, but we decided to give you one last chance. There was a quorum and everything."

He stared at her for a full beat before his mouth quirked. He couldn't help it. Everything seemed so fucking amusing when he was around her. She was like some sort of clown, except instead of a red nose and rainbow hair she had a killer smile and black curls he wanted to crush in his hands.

"Have you ever actually been in a book club?" he asked.

"Yes, and we're reading *Lia tells Ethan to stop moping and then he does*."

Sadness weighted his chest, and he closed his eyes. If only it were that simple.

"How's the boyfriend, Lia?"



THE QUESTION STOPPED Lia cold. It was the same casual way he'd asked after Chris so many times they'd talked. A little playful, a pretense that he didn't know Chris as well as she did—or better.

Now she heard the bite in the question. The bitterness.

She looked down at Oreo while she played with his ears, giving herself time to contain her disappointment. On the two hour drive out of Austin, she'd built up images of Ethan looking sexy, smiling, and welcoming. He had only been one of the three—sexy as hell in the thin T-shirt that barely contained his muscles. She'd built up fantasies. Castles in the sky built from pecs and a dimple coated with scruff.

But it was time for a reality check. And a confession.

"We broke up."

He blinked once. Twice. “No, you didn’t.”

She tried to pretend that didn’t hurt. “Yes, we did.”

“You can’t break up. You’re perfect for each other.”

So, this reality check was coming in the form of a sledgehammer to the heart. Okay then. “Our goals didn’t align,” she said tightly.

“What are you talking about? You both wanted the same things. A house, a family. The whole picture.”

“A lot of people want those things,” she snapped, knowing she sounded grumpy and not caring at all. “That doesn’t mean they should pair up and get married because of it.”

Ethan ran a hand over his face, looking stressed. Looking more stressed than Chris had been when she’d left him. “This can’t be happening.”

She rolled her eyes. There were a lot of things she’d do for Ethan Montgomery, but holding his hand through *her* breakup wasn’t one of them. He was just going to have to deal with it. Or maybe he could finally return to Austin, where he and Chris could hang out and commiserate over how dumb she was for ruining a good thing.

Her impulsive trip into the country had gone from *ill-advised* all the way to *completely humiliating*. They had years of friendship between them. And there’d been that moment at the Trail of Lights that hinted at more. But that was the old Ethan. The familiar Ethan. This Ethan was barely tolerating her presence. He didn’t want her here even when he thought she was with his best friend. Without that tie, she was nothing to him.

Her stomach turned over, and she nudged Oreo’s head from her lap. “You know what? I think I’m going to leave.”

“You can’t leave.”

“You seem to think you can tell me what to do. *You can’t break up. You can’t leave.* Well, guess what? We broke up a month ago. And I’m leaving right now.”

She grabbed her purse, her movements jerky. Oreo tangled in her legs, as if conspiring to keep her there. Ethan's palm landed on the door just as she reached it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was being a dumbass."

"Some kind of ass," she muttered.

"Every kind of ass. It took me by surprise and I said stupid shit."

"Don't worry about it. I shouldn't have showed up uninvited. So how about I go and we pretend this never happened?"

"Stay. Please stay."

She sighed. He really had no right to look so adorable when he'd just been so insensitive. Between Ethan and Oreo, she had two pairs of pleading eyes on her, and she was helpless to say no.

"I'm leaving," she said, but Ethan looked so stricken that something inside her softened and gave way. "I think the tacos survived the trip, but if they sit in the cold much longer, they're probably not any good."

Both man and dog perked up.

"Tacos?" Ethan asked, still wary.

"From your favorite taco truck. With extra pico."

The low sound from his chest made her think of tangled sheets and pulsing shadows. And that was only for *tacos*. They were amazing tacos, but still. Imagining him actually tangled in sheets or bathed in shadows sent a shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the chill.

By the time she had returned to the cabin with her paper bags in hand, Ethan had built a fire. Oreo danced at her feet as she passed out tacos for everyone. Two for her, a handful for Ethan, and a special meat-only taco for the pit bull. She watched the canine dig into his dinner on a foil plate.

"What's wrong?" Ethan asked.

She realized she'd been staring at the dog with something like longing. "I was the one who found him. Remember that?"

"How could I forget?" he asked, and she saw that night in his eyes.

Oreo had been half-starved and incredibly skittish. Chris had wanted her to leave. *Call animal control if you're worried*, he'd said, and probably that would have been the smart thing to do. But she didn't know how long it would be until they came or if the dog would still be around. So she'd lured the dog into the backseat.

"I had these protein bars in the trunk. They didn't even taste good, but he went crazy for them. Got him inside the car because he knew there was more where that came from."

"And I'll be eternally grateful you did that." Ethan's lips lifted in a wry smile, almost shy. "But then, that's you. Always looking out for someone else."

She shook her head. Not that time. The apartment she shared with Chris didn't accept animals, and he hadn't been interested in having a pet, so the dog had gone to Ethan. It was Ethan who took him to the vet. Ethan who fed him tacos and half-pound burgers until he'd reached a normal weight.

You both wanted the same things. Once upon a time, she'd thought so too. But this was what she valued—Oreo and meat-only tacos. And a man who wouldn't give up on a dog when everybody else did.

The mood grew solemn. As if he read the direction of her thoughts, his eyes grew curious. "Why, Lia?"

At least he hadn't called her *Rosalia* again. The only person who called her that was her aunt. And her mother when she called on major holidays. And Ethan, apparently, when he wanted to pretend they weren't close friends. "Chris and I... we care about each other, but not like we should. We were together out of habit. You were part of that habit, like the glue that held us together. When Chris started focusing on his

internship, when we felt you starting to pull away, there was nothing left holding us together.”

He winced. “I never should have come back that night.”

Images flashed through her mind. Ethan, walking into their apartment, the shock on his face. And before that, at the apartment door, Chris, looking surprised and... smug? Ethan’s eyes widening in the moments that she climaxed, his fingers easing her through her orgasm.

“I know I acted like a jerk that night, but walking in on you... seeing you...” He looked more uncertain than she’d ever seen him.

She felt herself soften. “It was a weird night. For all of us.”

How could she explain to him how she’d felt, when she barely understood it? Guilty, as if he’d caught her doing something she shouldn’t have done. She and Ethan had spent hours together, talking, laughing, even when Chris wasn’t home. She’d never done a single sexual thing with Ethan, but when he’d opened that door and found them naked...she’d felt like she was cheating on him.

He shook his head, looking genuinely miserable. “But then it happened, and I knew I needed to leave. That was the best thing I could do for you. Leave.”

Her heart broke a little at that. “You were my best friend.”

Even if that had been wrong, to be best friends with him while she was with Chris.

“I wasn’t trying to break you guys up,” he said, jaw clenched. “I acted like a jackass, but I never would have done that on purpose.”

“You aren’t responsible for us, Ethan. You couldn’t break us up or keep us together. Only we could do that.”

He fiddled with his empty foil wrapper. His gaze met hers, wary and kind. “I thought you were happy there. With him. I wanted you to stay happy.”

A sense of relief unfurled inside her. She had known breaking up with Chris was the right decision. But coming here, seeking Ethan out, that had felt like jumping off a cliff.

Those earnest words, the longing in his eyes—they were her net.

She leaned forward at the same time he did. They held that way, her lips inches from his, warm air forming a cocoon. Like breathing against the glass and watching it fog up. Her mind had clouded, blocking out any thoughts of defenses. She had no way to protect herself from the soft press of his lips or the ache it inspired in her. There were no walls left standing when he kissed her more firmly. She crumbled into pieces—into the lips that fused to his and the hand that held his arm and the toes that curled in her boots.

His hand slipped behind her neck and pulled her closer. Just that one touch, and she felt his presence surround her. He enveloped her like a mist and she breathed him in. Her whole body arched into him. Her breasts brushed his arm through her sweater. Maybe it was strange that he'd rubbed her off before they'd kissed, but it made this part easier. Her body was already primed for him. It knew what to expect—pleasure—and she rubbed against him in hope and expectation.

He groaned into her mouth, hot and desperate. “Lia. *Lia.*”

Before she could answer, his hands were on her hips, moving her, shifting her. He tucked one of her legs over his so that she straddled him, her core against his. Even through all that thick denim, she could feel his erection pulse, and she clenched in response.

“Oh God,” she whispered. How had they gotten here so fast?

How had it taken them so long?

“So good. You feel so fucking good.” He laughed unsteadily, and she knew he understood the impossibility of them. The inevitability. They had always been leading toward this, always been reaching for this without knowing it.

“Touch me,” she said on a breath, and he did. He obeyed her words, but he turned the tables, commanding her with his firm hands and warm breath. *Hands around my neck*, he said without words, and she curled herself around him, tangling her fingers in his soft, short hair. *Rock against me*, he said, and she moved her hips in time with his.

She had imagined him every way she could think of: fast and breathless. Slow and gentle. But she had never quite brought her fantasies to this—to this quiet, determined force of him.

Be mine, he said, and she melted in the warm embrace of his arms. Her body turned liquid and lax. She buffeted against the cliffs of his chest and lapped the shore of his lips.

It wasn't enough, to be moved and directed. She wanted to run her cool fingers over him, like ripples over rock, until the earth shuddered beneath her.

The zipper rasped as she eased it down. He grunted as her fingers felt the length of his cock. He was still in shadows though. She pushed the flaps aside, eager to find him, her fingertips brushing against hot velvet.

His breath caught, and his body shuddered, ready and willing and—not there at all.

She blinked, but the cold rush of air hadn't deceived her. He had crossed the room to get away from her. Crossed the whole freaking cabin. His movements were jerky as he straightened his clothes and looked anywhere but her.

He paced in front of the fireplace, not meeting her eyes.

She curled up, protecting herself. The lumpy cushion was still warm from his body. “Ethan?”

“You're not ready yet.” He spoke to the ground, pacing, pacing. “It's only been, what? A week since you broke up? Two?”

“A month,” she said, and watched him flinch. He knew the breakup had happened just after he left Austin. She spoke

softly, “But let me decide what I’m ready for, and when.”

He stopped walking and faced her. “All right. You may be ready, but I’m not.”

CHAPTER SIX

ETHAN COULD HANDLE the hard plains of Kashmir, but a single night on his Uncle Griff's couch had him cursing under his breath. Though his discomfort wasn't only the wayward springs. His dick had been hard all night with nowhere to go.

Just like last night. And especially this morning.

Being near Lia made him permanently hard. He had always known she was sexy—and smart and funny and freaking adorable. He had always known he couldn't have her. But seeing her lush curves, bared to him, fluid with motion, had flipped a switch in his brain. Touching her slick folds and feeling her shudder as she came had fundamentally changed him. His dick didn't understand why it couldn't be inside her. *Because she's the girlfriend of your best friend. Because there's a code of brotherhood, of honor, and at one time that code had been all Ethan had.*

Because she didn't choose you.

That had been the reason he told himself, except now she was here. In his fucking bed.

Her hair spread over the pillow in dark glossy waves. Her hair had always reminded him of the dark chocolate she liked to eat, the kind with percentages on the package, as if the candy had been melted down and then spun into silk thread. He imagined leaning down over the bed and breathing in the bittersweet scent of her. He'd press his face into the strands and then... what?

Only Lia could make him want to lick a lock of hair. And smelling her while she was sleeping? He was so fucking gone—gone over a woman he didn't have.

And wouldn't have.

She wasn't with Chris anymore, but she wasn't with Ethan either. Not yet. Maybe not ever. He wasn't sure he could stomach being second choice. It wasn't a matter of stupid masculine pride. Okay, it wasn't *only* a matter of stupid masculine pride.

The truth was, she'd been with Chris for a long time. She'd chosen him, day after day. For years. So what made now different? Except that Chris wanted to move to DC. Maybe that was the only reason Lia had noticed him. He had no plans to leave Texas, and he was conveniently in love with her.

No, Ethan couldn't be with her, constantly doubting her. Doubting himself.

She moved in her sleep, resettling on what he knew was a lumpy mattress. Her arm stretched, exposing the perfect curve of her breast beneath her camisole. Her nipple pressed gently against the thin fabric. He flushed with want, from the top of his skull to the soles of his feet. Who needed firewood when your body was a furnace?

Then she made a sound, a cross between a moan and a whimper. What was she dreaming about?

God, that nipple. His fingers twitched at his side, longing to touch.

Creeper, he told himself, but he couldn't make himself look away. Especially because the cabin had never been so freaking small. Anywhere he went, he could see her. Smell her. *Feel her*.

By four a.m. he gave up, unable to sleep and unable to keep watching her.

"Take care of her," he muttered to Oreo before heading outside.

Logs were still strewn across the frozen grass. He started adding them onto the massive pile of wood beside his cabin before reconsidering. He had more than enough to get him through, even if the freeze lasted until New Years. On a whim,

he loaded some onto his truck bed. Maybe someone there would need it.

The diner was aptly named *The Diner* and was run by a very kind, very pregnant woman named Natalie. She grinned and slid him a menu when he pulled up to the counter.

“What can I get you?”

“I’ll take two coffees and... I don’t know. What’s a good breakfast to go?”

Her eyebrows rose. “You got company?”

He grunted something that could have been a *yes*.

“Is your uncle back in town? I know some people who’d want to say hello.”

Shit. “No, not my uncle. Just a friend from town.”

And there was that curiosity in her gaze. He couldn’t even blame the townspeople. Not a lot changed around here, something that was both good and bad. Good because it gave them stability when Ethan knew exactly how unstable other parts of the world could be. Bad because the tendency towards prying made it hard for him to lie.

Although he hadn’t lied. He and Lia were just friends.

A sly look passed over Natalie’s face. She glanced toward the kitchen and then met his gaze. Her voice was low, husky, as if she was asking him something illicit when she said, “You like blueberries?”

“Sure, I like them well enough.”

She narrowed her eyes. Then her lips firmed. “Look, I’ll give you breakfast, but these are my terms. You can’t pay for it. And you can’t tell anyone I gave it to you.”

He eyed the loose white powder coating her apron. “Blueberries means what I think it does, right? Like, the fruit.”

She snorted. “No, it’s not just fruit. It’s a highly addictive substance known as pie.”

He grinned. “It’s eight o’clock in the morning.”

That earned him a finger point. “And for that, you’re not getting any.”

She shook her head—apparently he had a lot to learn—before going back to the kitchen. He couldn’t help smiling while he waited. Couldn’t help nodding at the curious strangers on stools. The town made him feel like Lia did, as if ordinary things were fun and interesting, as if the colors were brighter and the air crisper.

Lia. How long until she left him? And how could he make her stay?

Soon enough she’d be back in Austin, where college kids wore their sarcasm like armor. With the hipsters and the lobbyists and all the other people like Chris. Ethan had felt like there’d been a troll under every bridge, asking questions he couldn’t answer. Who was he? What did he want?

But Darling didn’t feel like a bridge. It didn’t even feel like a road. It felt home.

“Hail this afternoon,” said an older guy from two stools down.

Ethan tried to remember his name. Mr. Winterman? Appropriate, really, for both weather and the man’s snowy crop of hair. “That’s what I heard.”

Mr. Winterman nodded toward the back, where the diner owner had gone. “She’ll give you enough to get through the night, in case the roads ice over.”

Shit. The thought of Lia driving on icy roads made his gut clench.

Natalie returned with a large paper bag. She cast furtive glances at the other customers before handing it over. “Remember, this didn’t happen.”

He accepted the heavy bag with bemusement. “How much is in here?”

“Hail this afternoon,” she said, as if that explained everything. And he supposed it did. Icy roads meant he might not be able to get back in town until tomorrow. This would tide him over. He’d told Lia last night he wasn’t up for a relationship with her—or what would surely be amazing sex. But then again, he wasn’t sure he could let her go.

When Ethan started to pull out his wallet, Natalie shook her head. “We had a deal.”

“Not for this much food,” he protested.

“It’s on the house,” she said firmly. Then her expression turned hopeful. “It’s the least I can do for our new deputy.”

He coughed and looked around, hoping no one had heard. Not only was Mr. Winterman in hearing range, but he didn’t look the least surprised. It appeared news travelled fast—even when it couldn’t be called news yet.

He’d gotten the job offer from Joe Peterson, the town’s sheriff. He liked Joe. Straight talker, hard worker. Dedicated to his town. But how could he put down roots here, hundreds of miles away from where Lia lived and worked and loved to be? The job had seemed like a boon, the glimpse of a lighthouse in a storm. But Lia was his anchor. She always had been.

“I’ll think about it. By the way, you know anyone who needs firewood? I’ve got extra in my truck.”

She beamed. “See? Already looking out for us. I’m sure I can find some families who could use it. Leave it on the side of the diner.”

He picked up the bag and little cardboard cupholder with two coffees. “Will do. And thanks for breakfast.”

“Sure thing. Oh and Ethan?”

“Yeah?”

She winked. “Enjoy.”

Why did he get the impression she wasn’t just talking about blueberries? God, he hoped there was actually food in

here. He was starving, and more importantly, he had no desire to feed Lia beef jerky from his pantry for breakfast.

Though feeding her anything at all would be pretty sexy. Even jerky. But especially blueberry pie. He remembered the twinkle in Natalie's eye and realized the town of Dearling may be hardcore in more than just their work ethic.

He wanted to show Lia the town. Hell, he wanted to show Lia off, in the town. To tell them she was his, that she was staying. But first he'd have to apologize to her for being an idiot last night... and all the years before. She may have stayed with Chris all that time, but Ethan had never given her a reason not to.



LIA WOKE UP with a hard knot in her stomach—a combination of dread and relief. Last night had been awkward and frustrating, and strangely enough, seriously arousing. An unlikely combination. Or maybe not so unlikely considering Ethan was involved. That was him rolled into one scruffy, scowling, sexy as hell package.

A warm body heaved a sigh against her back, blowing damp air across her neck. A paw pressed hard against her spine, likely leaving a bruise. And making her smile too. That was another reason she needed to leave.

It would be way too easy to get comfortable around here, even when it was clear she wasn't really welcome.

Oreo snorted, and a spray of dog snot hit her cheek.

"Lovely." She sat up on her elbows and squinted into the bright cabin. No sign of Ethan.

His truck was missing from the gravel driveway. Where had he gone?

Didn't matter. Maybe it was for the best. This way she could squint into the crystalline morning with no one to see her bedhead. She could run barefoot over the crunchy grass to

grab her cosmetics bag. Her cosmetic bag, which was inside the overnight bag—she rolled her eyes at her own optimism.

She'd wanted to spend the night... with Ethan. Not lying on Ethan's bed, awake, knowing he was lying awake on the lumpy futon not eight feet away.

And maybe it was for the best that she could drive away from the tiny, rustic cabin without having to say goodbye. Now she understood why Ethan had bolted that night. The prospect of a morning after made her stomach turn over.

"Don't look at me like that," she told Oreó's mournful stare. He seemed to know what her hurried wash up in the bathroom meant. It was like the walk of shame. Only, her shame wasn't because of the sex. They hadn't had sex, but the scorching kiss and over-too-fast full body contact had been nothing short of blissful.

Her shame came from what happened after. The painful knowledge in his eyes that he'd been second best, like some kind of secret. It had felt like she was cheating all over again, even though she was firmly single now. It was too soon for Ethan. Too soon for her.

She couldn't settle in with a new guy. Couldn't be the sidekick all over again. Even if Ethan didn't see her that way, it's all she would be. It was all she *could* be, until she'd built a life for herself, without the crutch of Chris or Ethan to lean on.

She searched for a pen and paper to leave a note. *Sorry I tried to have sex with you against your better judgment. Going back to Austin so I can feel like crap. Oh, and by the way, I'll probably masturbate to the memory of your tongue in my mouth and your hands on my hips.*

Or maybe she'd write something less humiliating but far more painful. *I'm sorry. Goodbye.*

Have a nice life.

It hurt so damn much to leave him like this. What if she never saw him again? Or what if she *did* see him again but he refused to speak to her? It came as a relief then, when she

finally did find a pen and paper. Because Ethan had already used them to scrawl a note for her.

Getting breakfast. – E

Short and to the point. She couldn't help but smile, despite her lingering sense of dread. It was almost enough to make her stay. She imagined him walking into an empty cabin with a box of donuts. Imagined the flicker of confusion in his eyes. The disappointment. Assuming he was disappointed. Oh God, would he be disappointed if she was gone—or relieved?

That way lay madness.

Because even if he was disappointed, he'd made it clear he wasn't ready for them to be more than friends. Just... why did he have to be so thoughtful? And hot, with his abs and his lopsided smile? Driving up yesterday, he'd looked like a lumberjack. A shirtless one...

Why did he have to be everything she wanted?

She glanced at the sky through the window. Clear. A blue so pale it was almost white. There was no reason to wait any longer. She'd just been stalling, anyway. Hoping he'd make it back before she left.

She didn't leave the present she'd gotten for him.

She didn't leave a note.

She ignored Oreo's doleful eyes and drove toward Austin—and kept driving, even when the sky turned dark. It started to rain. And then the rain turned to ice. And the ice grew large, banging on the top of her car, probably leaving dents. The hard sleet slowed her car down, the low visibility, until she was almost at a crawl. It took three times as long to get home.

When she got there, the signal caught up to her phone. A flurry of missed calls and texts dinged at the same time.

Why'd you leave?

At least tell me you're okay.

Goddammit.

The last one had made her smile, just a little. She could picture him standing there, frustrated, saying that word, while Oreo pranced around his legs. She clutched the phone in both hands, wondering whether to call or text.

In the end, she typed, *I'm okay.*

Which was about as final as she could be. He got the message. He didn't call again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ETHAN SLAMMED THE door to the pickup shut and headed into the police department. *Department* was maybe too strong a word for the three-man shop that kept the peace in Dearling, Texas, but Ethan was proud to be part of it. In fact, his new position had everything he could have wanted. A way to use his skills. A chance to help people. If only it wasn't located a hundred miles away from a certain woman...

Stop thinking about her. But that hadn't worked when he was in Austin, and it didn't work now. Even the damned blueberry pie that Natalie sent home with him every night made him think of Lia, and how he hadn't gotten to share it with her. He'd had ideas for that pie and her body. Then his dick had taken one look at the freezing rain and Lia-less cabin and gone into hibernation.

Maybe he'd just call one more time. *No.*

The sheriff was waiting for him inside the station. Joe Peterson was tall and slender and sharp as a fucking tack. He cocked an eyebrow. "Cold?"

Ethan barked a laugh. "Looking forward to the summer. I hear they're brutal."

"Well, don't get comfortable yet. I've got one more job for you to do."

That got his attention. "What happened?"

In the six weeks he'd been working here, he followed a standard route around the city and surrounding areas. Deviations from the schedule meant someone had fallen in a field or a barn had been vandalized.

Joe shrugged, seeming almost... sheepish? It was hard to pin down, because Ethan had never seen that expression on his boss before.

“The new teacher needs an escort at the school,” Joe said. “It’s locked up now for winter break. The principal let her in this morning to setup her classroom, but Ms. Cline lives far enough away to make the drive dangerous. I need you to go to the school, lock up after her, and make sure she gets home safely. There’s a storm coming.”

“Got it.” He didn’t need to ask why he got the short end of that stick. He was the rookie—and besides, he was young and single. It stood to reason he would pull the late-night babysitting shift. Even if the pie in his passenger seat cooled with every extra minute.

Joe cocked his head, eyes shrewd. “Oh, and lieutenant?”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “Sheriff?”

“She’s new to town. Try to make her feel welcome.”



THE SOUND OF gravel crunching drew Lia to the window of her new classroom, where construction paper snowflakes already decorated the edges. A truck with *Dearling County* painted on the side bounced to a stop in the school’s gravel parking lot. Beyond, a gorgeous vista of blue-gray hills and white-streaked sky made her chest ache.

And there he was. *Ethan*.

They’d told her the Sheriff’s office would be sending someone. She’d hoped it would be him ever since the principal had let slip about the “handsome” new deputy. He stepped out of the truck, legs long and shoulders broad, his whole body a scorching hot drink in that deputy’s uniform. She wanted to strip him down, to peel away layers of cotton and wool, until nothing covered him but the hair on his body and the goosebumps of his skin.

Get a grip, Lia.

They had a lot more things to work out before they could get naked together. Assuming they ever did get naked together... She busied herself collecting the papers she wanted

to go over before classes started. The previous teacher had left lesson plans, and Lia planned to follow them. There was no reason to disrupt the children any more than they already would by having a teacher leave in the middle of the year for a family emergency.

She slung the tote bag over her shoulder and took a final look at the room. Brightly colored posters and kid-painted projects stared back at her. It was far from a blank slate, but she hoped that she would make a mark here.

The hallways were empty, and her warm boots squeaked softly on the tile.

And then there were two sets of squeaks. Two pairs of boots moving closer.

Her heart sped up. She rounded the corner and almost—*oof!*—ran into him. “Oh God,” she breathed. Because she’d just launched herself into his chest. His strong, wide, uniformed chest.

His eyes widened. “Lia?”

Hadn’t she planned for this? Dreamed of this? She forced a smile. “Surprise.”

“What the *hell* are you doing here?”

Not the reception she had hoped for. But not a surprise either. “I’m the new teacher.”

He didn’t seem pleased. His eyes were almost black in the shadowed hallway.

“I figured that one out.” His voice was cold, and she shivered. He noticed, his eyes narrowing. “Let’s get you out of here. The heat’s not even on. You stayed here all day?”

She swallowed, her throat dry. “I was... setting up my classroom.”

He shook his head like she was ridiculous, and she *felt* ridiculous. What had she thought? That he would haul her into

a bear hug? And then strip her naked, lay her down, and warm her up with his hands and tongue and body?

“Let’s go,” he said, turning on his heel.

Yeah, that was exactly what she’d thought. She followed him out, cheeks burning.

He opened the door for her and helped her inside, where it smelled like sweet fruit and warm crust. But his touch was cool, mechanical. Like he’d do for any teacher. Not the hot way he’d touched her before. What if she’d made a terrible mistake?

What if he didn’t want her here?

“I’m staying at the Darling B&B,” she said, voice shaking despite her best efforts. She’d gotten a discounted weekly rate on the room since they didn’t have many visitors.

He grunted and missed the turn, without looking her way.

“Ethan?”

“You’re coming with me,” he said gruffly. “We need to talk. Privately. You got a problem with that?”

Her heart skipped a beat. At least he didn’t hate her. Wait, what if he hated her? No, she had to hope he wanted her. It was the only thing that had kept her going through the weeks of application and interviews. Of knowing she was close to him and praying it would be enough.

Oreo provided just the distraction she needed. He jumped on her with enough force to push the breath out of her, licking her face, until she laughed and Ethan pulled her away.

“Just how many tacos is Oreo eating these days?” she asked.

He gave her that familiar smile, the one that made her heart pump double time. “He’d eat a whole taco stand, if I let him.”

The dog in question wagged his tail, clearly eager for dinner. Or maybe some of whatever was in that bag Ethan

held.

Ethan's gaze met hers and locked. The memory of their previous kiss flashed through the air around them, like sunlight. Like twinkling lights on a string. His eyes turned wary. Was he worried she'd expect something from him?

Well, he wouldn't be totally wrong.

She turned away and ran her finger along the countertop. "You don't seem happy to see me. In fact, you didn't seem happy to see me last time I drove up. You're going to give a girl a complex."

His voice was gruff—and closer than she'd expected. "I was surprised. Then. And now." There was a long pause. "You left."

"So did you. Without a forwarding address. Without even a goddamn note. Without answering my calls." He'd left her in Austin, left her to wonder and worry. It had hurt, and it hurt worse to think she'd made him feel that way, because she'd done the same thing. "But I came back."

"*Lia.*" There was urgency in his voice—power and desperation too.

She kept her gaze turned away, unable to face him. Unable to bear it if he lied... or if he told the truth. "Am I too late?"

Instead of his voice, she heard the rustling of paper. And Styrofoam? She turned. Her gaze dropped to the box he held. Something was written across the top in black marker. *Top Secret.*

His mouth lifted in a small rueful smile. "How do you feel about blueberries?"

Um... "I like them?"

He shook his head solemnly. "That's what I thought too. Before."

He opened the lid, revealing the largest piece of pie she'd ever seen. *Slice* wasn't the right word for it. This had to be a

third of the pie. Plump purple blueberries spilled from the sides. A browned crust was studded with tiny sugar cubes. The liquid part of the filling had bubbled up from a cutout star and caramelized during baking.

A little circular container held vanilla ice cream, and while the weather might not be ideal for chilled desserts, the thought of them paired made her mouth water. As did the sweet sugary scent.

“God,” she said.

“I know,” he said grimly, his brown eyes sparking with heat, and it felt a little like they’d both had an orgasm against their wills. Just from *looking* at the pie. What would happen when they ate it? “I’ve been waiting to share this with you. Waiting and wondering if I ever would.”

Then she didn’t have to wonder anymore, and neither did he, because he had grabbed a fork and tugged her to sit. The place where his hand touched hers felt like a firecracker, exploding into light before fading to smoke.

She breathed in deep and shivered, her senses suddenly alert. She could feel the heat coming off the pie. *The heat coming off Ethan*. She felt her own heat, pressing out, a tactile thing that could explore and touch and need, a manifestation of her own greedy desires.

Her thighs pressed together on the hard wooden chair. A coarse and fatalistic excitement thrummed through her body as she watched him dig a piece with his fork.

Everything had always been leading to this: his arm reaching toward her, his gaze on her mouth. The softly spoken command. “Open.”

And she did, her lips parting like the proverbial red sea, and him marching between. He had sour-sweet berries for soldiers and flakes of crust to carry them. Flavor burst on her tongue, and she swallowed convulsively, savoring the hint of earthy berry skin left behind. Her eyes fell shut.

“Jesus,” he muttered, with just enough country twang to twist her up inside.

I know. I know. I know.

She found the strength to return the favor. But not with a fork or any other pretense at politeness. This felt feral, as she gripped three berries between thumb and forefinger. They were slippery on her skin, hard to hold on to, but she squeezed them tighter, feeling them burst on the ride to his mouth.

Open, he’d said to her, but she didn’t extend him the same courtesy. Where he was polite, she was demanding, and she pressed the berries to his full lips. He opened for her, welcomed her, drew her in with the suction of his mouth and the playful slide of his tongue.

He fed her another bite, this time with his fingers, and she sucked them clean, relishing the hint of salt with the sweet. They traded pieces of pie until half of it was gone, until both of their fingers were dyed blue with the juices, until her tongue felt swollen from sucking him.

His lids were low now—with arousal, she recognized. A mirror image of her own startling need.

He sat back, and she waited, heart sunk low, for him to tell her they were done. Done with pie. Done with this strange form of flirtation and sex. *I can’t do this*, he’d say, and the honest regret in his voice would only make her feel worse. She had lost him before she’d even known she wanted him. Just by dating his best friend. Just by being Ethan’s platonic friend for so long.

She’d been well and thoroughly friend-zoned by her own stumbling stupidity.

But his expression didn’t glint with remorse. Instead his eyes were dark with lust—and anticipation. “Stay,” he murmured, his voice gruff.

Please yes, her body answered, but she wasn’t ready to give in. His rejection the last time had hurt, even if she’d

known he had his reasons. She wanted to see him suffer... just a little bit. "Stay for what?" she asked, daring him, taunting.

He met her challenge with one of his own. "Let me lick you dry. I bet you're wet for me right now. I want to taste you while my mouth is still sweet from the pie. I want to drink you down for dessert."

CHAPTER EIGHT

HER EYES WERE wide, cheeks flushed. Her breath caught. Because he'd shocked her. Maybe it was too much, too fast. They'd only kissed and touched—so briefly. But then he thought about the years he'd spent waiting for her, and he knew it couldn't happen quick enough. He'd never have her fast enough, deep enough.

It wasn't only loyalty that had sent him running from Austin after he'd walked in on her and Chris. It wasn't only jealousy. It was also the bone-deep satisfaction he'd felt at seeing her on her knees—even if he'd wanted her in front of him instead.

He wanted her on her knees, mouth hugging his cock. He wanted her eyes focused on him. He wanted her begging and desperate and needy. Imagining her that way had kept him up countless nights, tugging relentlessly, roughly at his dick as if that could somehow compare.

But this was Lia. Sweet, smart, bold Lia who probably didn't want him pushing her around during sex.

Unless she did. "Please," she whispered, and he almost came in his boxer briefs.

He shoved the food aside—the pie too—to make room for her. "Step out of those jeans for me, sweetheart. I want to see those long legs and creamy skin."

He was quiet most of the time. Probably soft spoken for an army grunt. But he liked to be loud in bed. And rude and demanding. Not everyone liked it, but he couldn't change himself.

Not even for her.

Her breathing sped up. Her eyes turned glassy, but she stood and obeyed him without question. He knew he'd

surprised her, but so far she'd reacted perfectly to him, as if he'd hummed a tune and discovered her following behind. The Pied Piper, just for her, and he'd lead them both underwater.

When her legs were bare, he fought the urge to go onto his knees, to press his open mouth to her calves and kiss her feet.

There'd be time enough for that later.

“Get your ass on the table,” he said hoarsely.

“Ethan?” Her voice wavered. Had he gone too far? Not that it mattered if he had. They were already here, past the edge and falling free.

He softened his voice. “It’s okay, baby. Just scoot that pretty ass on the table. I want your pussy where I can see it.” He kept going when she complied, wanting to reward her. “You want me to see your pussy, don’t you? So soft and pink. You want me to kiss you there.”

She settled on the table, her legs pressed together, modesty clinging to her half-naked body in shreds. “It’s so bright,” she muttered, eyes cast down.

He never wanted her embarrassed with him. He would have turned off the light to spare her, but the whole cabin was filled with shadows, the day’s last light streaming through the windows. And his sympathy wasn’t quite strong enough to make him leave her alone.

“I want to see all of you,” he said, implacable. “Every shadow. Every part. I’m going to spread your legs and press my face in between. There isn’t a part of you I won’t see or touch or lick, understand? All you can do is take it.”

Just like that, it didn’t matter. Didn’t matter that she had been with his best friend. He’d take the risk that Chris would speak to him again—someday. This wasn’t that future, and it wasn’t their shared past. This was now, when he pressed the heel of his palm to his dick to appease the ache. It would be a long time before he got relief, and he intended to make Lia pay during every minute of it.

If she was willing. “Nod if you understand.”



LIA STARED AT the man and tried to focus. He wanted her to be at his mercy. He wanted her to give herself over to him and hope he would be kind. He wanted to really make sure she wanted this—and she couldn’t think of anything sweeter.

She nodded.

He slid one heavy palm between her knees and spread them. Cool air rushed over her sex, and she gasped. He was going to take her—finally.

She stopped hoping he would be kind about it. She wanted him raw instead—feral, and the rough nudge of his thighs between hers told her she’d get just that.

Except she didn’t. Instead he touched her softly, trailing blunt fingertips across her collarbone, a course brush of calluses over her arms. Feeling her, teasing her, tracing the same path his eyes had done when he’d walked in on her and Chris.

“Why did you come back, Rosalia?”

Rosalia. His stern tone sent shivers down her spine. “I got a job here.”

“And that’s why you’re here. In Dearling.” His voice was flat, plain statements of fact instead of questions. Because he already knew the truth. And he wouldn’t let her get away without knowing it too.

“I’m here for you.” The words came out on a breath, more cool air than sound.

“I’m your friend. That’s why.”

Her throat grew tight. “You *are* my friend.”

His eyes softened. “Oh, Lia. Why didn’t you tell me when you got the job? When you *applied* for the job?”

“Maybe because I wanted to do something without you and Chris helping me.”

“We didn’t do a damn thing except hang around you, and that was a favor you gave us, Lia. Every single thing you accomplished, you did on your own. And if I made even one second of your day easier, then I’m grateful.”

She blinked.

Remorse flickered across his expression. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be. I don’t know what I did to deserve you, that’s all.”

And she didn’t feel worthy.

He stepped forward, his eyes solemn and dark. “I was an idiot for waiting that long to tell how I felt about you. But I was also an idiot for walking away. I’d be your friend, if that’s all you wanted.”

Oh no. Just friends? There was a huge freaking difference between friends and lovers, and she’d never be satisfied with the former. She slipped her hands beneath his shirt, reaching up his back. His muscles flexed under her touch, and she felt a rumble of pleasure through his chest. God, this was delicious. Every move she made was answered by his body, every touch reflected in his.

His voice went husky. “Guess not, then.”

She didn’t hesitate. “Always friends, Ethan. And more.”

She worked her way down his body to show him just how much more. She showed him with her hands on the zipper of his uniform, with her lips against the hot shaft in her palm. She showed him with her tongue, mixing the sweetness of berries with salty precum. He groaned above her, shuddering and swearing until he dragged her to the bed, practically tripping on his clothes, almost tearing hers off.

Then he was inside her, then he was home.

And so was she.

She managed not to scream only by biting his shoulder, and he jerked and groaned his release in reply.

Snow came down that night, pale flecks through the night air. They watched through the window, warm from the fire and the company and the heat of their bodies.

It was the middle of the night before either could be moved to get food. Lia dug through the paper bags and found enough to feed them for several days before they'd have to dip into the pantry. There was a whole tub of mashed potatoes and a box of yeasty biscuits. There were hamburger steaks topped with grilled onions and gravy.

And she, she herself, carved the roast beast.



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MY PRESENT THIS YEAR

SIERRA SIMONE

FOREWORD

In the world of obscure fandoms, there lies an unlikely candidate: the 2009 Folgers commercial titled, innocuously, “Coming Home.” Having been a fan of this commercial and its V.C. Andrews-ian subtext for many years, I decided to at last enter the halls of the vaunted “Coming Home” fandom this year and submit my own take on the story.

And as a tribute to this stepbrother’s long-stifled passion, I’ve added a little twist on the idea of maids a milking...

CHAPTER ONE

Nick

I'D KILL FOR a goddamn cup of coffee right now.

The sun has finally—*barely*—pushed its way into the sky, which is still mostly pink and orange, and it's cold enough that my hands hurt even inside my gloves. My breath blooms into clouds in front of my face as I walk up the street, my boots crunching into the snow.

I'm coming up to a house I don't recognize and have never been to before: a dove gray Colonial with black shutters, white trim, and a dark red door. The windows wink with electric candles someone forgot to turn off last night, and the greenery hung on the outside is lacquered in ice. My mother and stepfather bought it while I was in Georgia—the Republic of Georgia, mind you, not *peach cobbler and tax breaks for movies* Georgia—but it weirdly does still feel like coming home. Maybe it's the Martha-Stewart-esque Christmas decorations my mom has always been a fan of, or maybe it's that it looks warm and happy from the outside, like a house in a Christmas commercial.

Although it'll be missing one key commercial ingredient—the cozy family with their cozy Christmas morning clothes. That's because the Charles-Mumford family is on a sunny Caribbean cruise until New Year's, and so the house will be empty, all mine until they return. Which is good, because on the walk from the bus stop on the Dartmouth campus, I made a *plan*.

Firstly, I'm making the biggest cup of coffee the minute I get into that house, I swear to God.

Scalding, bulletproof coffee. Hot enough to reglaze the ceramic of my coffee mug.

And secondly, because it's been three years of living in a crowded Tbilisi flat with four middle-aged Peace Corps volunteers—three years of having no privacy and showers that only stayed warm long enough for me to wash my hair and not much else—I'm going to jerk off. I'm going to wait until my right hand is nice and warm from holding my coffee, and then I'm going to spend all of Christmas Day mitigating three horrible years of masturbation-celibacy.

(And regular *celibacy*-celibacy—but I don't like to think about the reasons for that too much. Or rather, the *reason*, singular, because there is only one.)

She won't be here, I remind myself as I walk up to the front gate. *No one will.*

What I'll do when they all get back, I'm not sure. I've taken a job here in Hanover as a counseling psychologist, and while theoretically the plan is for me to live with Mom and my stepdad until I find a place of my own, I'm worried about spending even a single day in the same dwelling as the third person of the Charles-Mumford household. My cock—already stirring for the long overdue promised land of some lotion and the incognito browser on my phone—hardens at the thought of her.

Nora Charles. My forbidden fruit.

My MIT-attending, IPA-drinking forbidden fruit.

And it's not that I'm seven years older than her. It's not even that she's too naive and innocent and good to be corrupted by me.

It's that she's my stepsister.

And *that* is a realm of so fucking forbidden that it's never even occurred to my mom and stepdad that it could be a problem. It's never even occurred to Nora herself—and I've made goddamn sure of that. The day I realized that I was getting hard for my stepsister was the day I signed up for the Peace Corps and made plans to leave the country.

Then why did you come back?

I'm a good enough psychologist to suspect the answer to that. It's the same reason I didn't sleep with anyone in Tbilisi, the same reason I don't admit to myself whom I fuck in my wet dreams.

The same reason anyone is drawn toward someone they can't have, really, which is that we like being tempted. We creep closer and closer to the fire, and we tell ourselves it's because we want to watch the flames . . . but really, it's because we want to feel the heat.

I won't be burned though. I'll be out of this house by the time everyone is back from their cruise, and no one will be any wiser as to Nick Mumford's stepsister problem.

And in the meantime, coffee and jizz.

I set my battered suitcase down on the snowy stoop, find the fake rock in which my mom has hidden a key at every house she's ever lived in, and pull the key from its cavity. After I unlock the door, I replace the key and then straighten to turn the knob. But it opens before I even start to push, swinging back to reveal my sweetest dream—and my worst goddamn nightmare.

Nora is here. Nora is here, and she's right in front of me, and she's everything I've been craving for the last three years. The blonde hair. The cinnamon-colored freckles. The faint, barely-there cleft in her chin.

Nora.

I stare hopelessly, even as heat churns up my thighs and my heart thuds against my ribs. She's wearing short pajama shorts and a baggy MIT T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, a small tattoo peeking from behind her ear. She still has a tomboy's body, with a swimmer's shoulders and a runner's thighs, and subtle, firm curves that tease me from underneath her pajamas.

She mistakes my shock for stupefaction, I suppose, because she laughs. "You don't have the wrong house, Nick. It's me, Nora. Your stepsister?"

“I—”

Before I can think of anything to say, she lunges forward and pulls me into a tight hug, and I nearly groan from the feel of her body pressed against mine. I’m grateful for my thick peacoat, which I hope disguises the worst of my body’s reaction to her.

She pulls back with a beam, and through my haze of lust, I note that she’s still got the same bright energy she’s had since the day I met her—the day of our parents’ wedding four years ago. The years spent with the competitive assholes in her engineering program haven’t dulled her shine at all, and the thought makes me irrationally happy, even as I want to pin her against the door and bite her neck.

“I thought you were on a cruise,” I manage to say. My voice is choked and strange, but she doesn’t seem to notice. Or maybe I’ve done such a good job convincing the world that Nick Mumford is wholesome and pure that she’s writing it off as jet lag or something.

She smiles again, a wide, dimpled smile that heats my blood beyond bearing. “The snow yesterday meant the flight got pushed to this afternoon. Dad and Jennifer are leaving for Burlington in a couple of hours.”

Dad and Jennifer. Panic flares anew. “Just them? You’re not going too?”

She lifts a shoulder. The cold air has pinked her cheeks and her nose now, and through her T-shirt, I can see the taut points of her nipples. “I did so much traveling last semester for research that I decided I wanted to spend my break sitting on my ass and eating cookies.” Her blue-gray eyes crinkle a little at the corners. “And it worked out, because now you won’t be all alone for the holidays.”

Well. Fuck.

I blink down at her, trying to sort out the dread from the horny excitement—and then sort those from the professional

guilt I feel for being so deeply fucked up when my job is to un-fuck other people.

She bounces a little on her toes. “Come on, Nick. I’m freezing my tits off. Let’s go inside and get some coffee.”

Coffee. Okay. I can do coffee. I can walk inside this house where Nora is and have some coffee. And maybe I don’t know what I’ll do after that, but if there’s a hot breakfast beverage at least, the morning will still be slightly hewing to my plan.

Very slightly.

But I’m cold, and so is she, and I don’t know how much longer I can refrain from looking at the extremely visible evidence that her tits are freezing off, so I say, “Yes, coffee would be great, thanks.”

I grab the suitcase and stomp the snow off my boots before stepping into the warm, wood-floored foyer of the house.

“Here,” Nora says, and she unbuttons my coat before I can stop her.

“Oh, I’ve got it—”

But she’s already pulling it off me, her slender fingers brushing over my collarbone and shoulders as she slides it off my body. I feel that innocuous touch like I’d feel hot coals raking across my skin, and I nearly die.

“There you go,” she says. “It’s like you’re really home now, even though you’ve never been here before. Come on, I’ll show you the way to the kitchen.”

She hangs my coat from one of the wooden coat pegs mounted above the entryway bench, and after kicking off my boots so I don’t track snowmelt all over what’s clearly restored hardwood, I peel off my gloves, set my suitcase next to the stairs, and follow Nora into the kitchen.

I try not to notice the way her ass moves under her pajama shorts and quickly fail. It’s tight and pert, and moves like it would respond well to a spanking. My palm itches just looking

at it, and the ache behind my zipper reminds me that it would very much like a spanking to happen.

That's not who Nick Mumford is. That's not who I've let myself be. Any *urges* I've had, I've sublimated into studying and then working, and I've never let anyone know—not even people I've dated—that I want anything other than gentle vanilla sex.

“Are you hungry?” Nora asks over her shoulder as we walk into the kitchen. Like the rest of the house, it's been recently remodeled, and it's all so my *mom* that it feels familiar even though I've never been here before. Exposed shelving, imported Farrow and Ball paint, one of those giant farmhouse sinks. You know the vibe.

“I ate breakfast on the plane,” I say.

“You must be exhausted, flying all night. All the way from Georgia?”

I watch as she pulls out a red container of pre-ground coffee, her ponytail sliding across her back as she moves. And then I shake it off and make myself look away, look at literally anything else. I'm in my mom's fucking kitchen, perving on her *stepdaughter*. I have got to get myself under control.

I study the backsplash harder than any non-grout-related professional should as I say, “I actually came from Georgia by way of Ghana. There was an NGO summit in Accra about integrating more psychological services into what NGOs provide, particularly the medically-oriented ones.”

“I'm guessing the coffee you had there was better than this stuff,” Nora says, dumping an indiscriminate heap of coffee into the coffee maker's basket.

“Honestly, everywhere has better coffee than that stuff,” I say and realize I'm watching her out of the corner of my eye. Fuck.

How am I going to stay here? Am I going to have to find a hotel?

In Hanover? On Christmas?

Double fuck.

I hear the click of the coffee maker's lid and the mechanical griping of the machine starting to brew. Within seconds, a smell that is admittedly very pleasant fills the air. Nora goes to get the mugs from one of the exposed shelves and shuffles back to the coffee machine.

"Are Mom and Mike asleep?" I ask, trying desperately to get my mind on anything other than the engineering student shuffling around in her pajamas, looking for all the world like a college student the morning after she stayed the night somewhere for sex reasons.

"I think so," Nora says and removes the coffee pot before the machine is done brewing. She's oblivious to the coffee continuing to drip out of the machine, hissing onto the burner as it does. "They have to get up soon, though, if they want to make it to Burlington in the snow."

She replaces the pot and then hands a mug to me. I'm careful not to touch her as I take it, because I still haven't recovered from the feeling of her hands brushing over my shoulders, and that was with the thin wool of my sweater between her fingers and my skin. I'm not sure what would happen if we touched directly.

The coffee is just as warm as I'd fantasized about on my walk up to the house, and I breathe in the steam coming up from the motor oil colored surface. Despite the look of it, it really does smell good, and maybe it doesn't taste as bad as I remember—

I take a sip and then make a face.

"Mm-hmm," Nora agrees, taking her own sip, but she doesn't make a face. "I'm used to cheap coffee," she explains at my look. "Lots of late nights in Cambridge."

"Studying?" I ask and then take another sip so I look like a normal, casual stepbrother and not like I'm trying to extract information about what she does with her nights.

She gives me a closed-mouth smile from over the top of her mug and then takes a drink too. She doesn't answer.

I look around the kitchen again and notice the far end of the kitchen leads to the living room, where a Christmas tree currently twinkles in the weak December sunshine. There're no presents under the tree though.

"We opened all our gifts last night," Nora says. I look back at her just in time to see her hop onto the counter. When she sits with her thighs spread, I can see the shadow of panty-covered pussy peeking from around the crotch of her shorts. Fuck me.

I have got to find a way to take care of myself, and fast. Seeing her when I haven't been able to manage more than the occasional wet dream in the last three years is unbearable.

I move to the kitchen island as nonchalantly as possible and face her once I'm standing behind it.

"So, um, how's school?" I ask. Even though I ask clients all kinds of questions, ranging from the small-talky ones to the intense, excavatory ones, my question still comes out stilted and awkward. The problem with our blended family is that we never did completely blend; Nora was almost eighteen when Mike married my mom, and I was in grad school, using my dad's house in Pennsylvania as my home base. I first met Nora at the wedding, and then I only saw her a few more times before the fateful day when I decided I had to leave—and leave so thoroughly that there would be no opportunity for me to see Nora again for a long, long time.

So even though we're technically family now, there's still a gulf between us when we're together in person. Like we're two people playing a stepbrother and stepsister on television instead of the real deal.

"It's good," Nora answers. Her slippered feet kick idly at the cabinets below the counter. Her nipples still poke through her shirt. "We've been working with a university in the Netherlands to see how their government is building climate

resilient infrastructure, and next semester, we'll be working on coastal drainage projects on the eastern seaboard." She pauses. "How was Georgia?"

How could it have been? It was my horny exile, my escape from her. I spent every second of it cursing the day my mother met Mike Charles.

"It was fine," I say neutrally. "It was what it was supposed to be."

She stops kicking at the cabinets and looks at me. She tucks her luscious lower lip between her teeth and then releases it with a steadying inhale.

"Nick," she starts. "Why did you—"

"Nick!" I hear my mom exclaim, and then she and Mike crowd into the kitchen with their suitcases. "We thought we heard voices!"

I give her a hug and then shake Mike's hand. "I only got here a few minutes ago, Mom. I heard your flight was delayed."

"And good thing, because now we get to see you before we go," Mom says with a happy look. I know it was hard on her, me being in the Peace Corps and not coming home for any holidays or vacations while I was gone. But it was for the best. It would be a lot harder on her if she knew that I wanted to have her college-aged stepdaughter ride my lap for hours at a time.

"Are you leaving now?" I ask, looking at the clock. "I thought you wouldn't need to go for a little while at least."

Mike tutted at me. "I'm not taking any chances with these roads. And now that I know it'll just be your mother and me, I'm *very* eager to get on that plane."

"Gross!" Nora and I say at the same time as our parents beam at each other.

"Well, I'm glad you'll have each other," Mom says, bustling over to give me a final hug goodbye. "Nora even got

things for a Christmas dinner for just the two of you!”

I look at Nora over my mom’s shoulder and see she’s blushing. “I’m excited to have a cozy Christmas, that’s all,” she mumbles.

“Nothing cozy about a meal with side dishes and rolls that needed rising time,” Mike says. “And it’s time we get a move on, Jenny-doodle.”

With a final, *final* goodbye hug from Mom, she and my stepdad wheel their suitcases out and leave the house for the next week.

And then it’s just me and Nora alone.



THREE HOURS LATER and I’m close to dying.

I might be dead, actually. I might be dead and in a special hell for pervy stepbrothers.

I’m sitting on the couch with Nora curled up on the other end. *A Christmas Story* is playing on the TV, and she’s fast asleep, snoring gently with her slippered feet tucked against my thigh. I need to get up and leave; I need to get myself to an empty room and some privacy, because I’m pretty sure that I’m reaching the *call your doctor* timeframe of having an erection by now.

I’d tried to scuttle off to my room after Mom and Mike left, and I’d even gotten as far as shoving my suitcase in a closet (and unzipping my pants), but then the smoke detector had gone off downstairs with the piercing screech of a submarine hull breach alert. Hot terror had flooded me as I’d hurriedly zipped myself back up and raced downstairs to make sure Nora was okay.

I’d only realized how fucking panicked I’d been that something bad had happened to her when I got to the kitchen and saw her safe and standing on a chair, hopping up and down to try to reach the alarm. The relief that crashed over me

was a cold, cresting wave, and I came up sputtering on the other side, ready to breathe again.

“I thought the house was on fire,” I’d said, and even though it was a bad idea—even though it was the *worst* idea—I reached up and took hold of her waist. It was firm and warm under her T-shirt, and when I swung her off the chair and set her on her feet, there was a moment when I was still holding her waist, and she’d braced her hands on my shoulders . . . and it felt for all the world like we’d been dancing. Like we *were* dancing.

“I . . . um,” she said, blinking up at me. “I burned the Cornish hens.”

I’d looked over at the stove, where a tray with charred hens stood smoking into the air. That explained the piercing alarm, at least. I’d abruptly dropped my hands from her waist and then stepped around her to mount the chair and reset the alarm.

The silence left behind after the shrieking had somehow been just as loud.

The memory of her waist scalded my palms.

“I thought you were an engineer,” I said finally.

Nora sniffed. “I study the physics of river deltas and alluvial fans. Not the thermal combustion of poultry. And Jamie Oliver made it look so easy.”

And that was how we ended up eating a Christmas meal that was just cranberry salad, buttered rolls, and green bean casserole—which was fucking delicious and who liked Cornish hens anyway?

But after dinner—and after I did the dishes while she sat on the counter and told me more about artificial coastal drainage—she’d wanted to hang out and watch TV, and there’d been no way to refuse without sounding like an asshole. And the last thing I wanted on this earth was to be an asshole to her.

I was already something so much worse.

And now here I am, still aching, and with the reason for my ache asleep next to me, her feet wedged against my thigh. The blanket she'd pulled over herself has slid down over her hip, exposing the backs of her legs and most of her bottom. And the shorts have ridden up *just* enough to show me a sliver of pert cheek.

Merely looking at it has me ravenous, and it takes me a few minutes to recognize that I'm slowly, unconsciously flexing my hips, rubbing my cock against the inside of my jeans.

I could come this way. All I'd need is a few more minutes . . . or to drop my hand to my lap and finish the job.

I look back over at her again. She's still completely asleep. I don't think she'll notice . . . if I . . .

The minute my hand makes contact with the throbbing bar of my erection, my eyes roll back in my head. I know it's fucked up to be hard while sitting on the couch next to my sleeping stepsister, and even *more* fucked up to touch myself while I'm here, but I'm past caring. It's been three years of wanting her, three years of denying myself, and I've tried so hard to push this wanting away, and I can't, I just can't.

My hand moves over the denim of my jeans, squeezing and rough. Normally this wouldn't be enough—the strokes are too subtle and too short, the denim too thick—but I'm so worked up that none of that matters. It especially doesn't matter when I can see the tempting curve of her bottom, when it's crying out for someone to palm it, grip it. Claim it.

Fuck, I'm close, and I don't even care that it's going to happen inside my jeans, that it's going to be messy and a *very bad idea*—

Next to me, Nora stirs, stretching a long, catlike stretch that pulls the blanket all the way off her and also lifts the hem of her T-shirt to expose a taut, pale gold stomach. One of her feet makes it into my lap and pushes against my erection.

My hand falls to the side and my head falls back on the couch. It takes everything I have not to rock my hips against her foot. Her fucking *foot*. Clad in a puffy plaid slipper.

As a psychologist, I'd never say this to a client, but I will say it about myself:

I'm unhinged.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep," she murmurs, giving another shivering stretch. Her foot is still pressing against me, and I close my eyes and swallow. I need to move it. I need to move myself out of this living room and into the guest room and then not come out until I can move out of the house for good.

After what feels like an eternity, she moves, pulling her foot off my lap. I wonder if my erection is as visible as it feels—which is like it's the most visible thing in New Hampshire right now—and it's the shame tickling inside my gut that makes me sit forward to move. I should leave.

A good man and good stepbrother, not to mention a good mental health professional, wouldn't be here right now.

"Nick," Nora says softly. I pause and open my eyes to look at her. She's now sitting cross-legged, her tousled ponytail over one shoulder. I catch a glimpse of the small tattoo inked just behind her ear, but I still can't make out what it is. She didn't have it when I last saw her.

"Do you think," Nora asks, chewing on her lower lip a moment before continuing, "that if we'd met when we were younger we'd be closer now?"

My lips part, but I'm not sure how to respond. We'd met when she'd been about to turn eighteen and I'd been finishing up my grad degree. She'd been occupied with enjoying her senior year in high school and I'd been buried balls deep in my thesis work. And we'd both regarded our parents' love affair with the detached amusement of grown children, knowing that it wouldn't change much about our lives. And it hadn't. Nora had remained *Mike's daughter* in my head for a long time.

"Maybe," I finally say.

“Do you think,” she goes on, her eyes cast down to her lap where she’s fiddling with the edge of the crocheted throw blanket, “that we’d feel more like a real brother and sister? If we’d met earlier, I mean.”

I stare at her. She’s still looking down at her lap, her cheeks burning a bright pink and her fingers twisting tightly in the blanket. She’s a buffet of nervousness, of things unsaid, and through the veil of pounding desire, the trained counselor in me recognizes it.

“Are you saying that you don’t feel like that now?” I ask carefully.

“I always wanted an older brother,” she says. “Ever since I was a little girl. And when I found out that Dad was marrying Jennifer and that I’d finally be getting one, I was so excited. Even though I was nearly in college by then, I still thought it would be like I’d imagined when I was a girl. Someone to hang out with, play with. Someone who would keep me safe from guys my age, who’d make me feel special in the way only an older brother can.”

“Nora—”

“Did I show you my tattoo?” she asks abruptly. “I got it after you left for Georgia.”

“No. You haven’t shown me.”

I expect her to describe it or maybe to twist on the couch to show me, but I don’t expect her to scoot closer. I don’t expect her to raise up to her knees and then to swing a knee over my lap.

I don’t expect her to straddle me.

My hands fly up and catch her waist before she can lower herself all the way down—before she can feel the massive erection inside my jeans. But holding her like this, with my hands on her waist, with her soft center so close to my groin, is a new circle of pervy stepbrother hell. If we were fucking, I’d be holding her just like this while I drove up into her. If we

were fucking, she'd be looking down at me in this exact same way, with flushed cheeks and a heaving chest.

But we're not fucking. And we can't fuck.

And if I was on the edge of losing it before when she had her homely little slipper against my lap, then I'm doubly on edge with her pussy hovering over me.

I swallow. "Nora, I don't think this is a good idea."

"What?" she asks. "I'm just showing you the tattoo. Look."

She turns her head to the side so I can see the tattoo better. It's a small rain cloud with a cute little face, and its raindrops trickle down her neck in a series of smaller and smaller dots, until they vanish entirely.

Holy shit.

I think I know what this tattoo is. I think I know what it means.

My chest suddenly feels three times too small.

"The last time we saw each other, it was the first Christmas we'd spent together. Do you remember?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"And I told you all about my first semester at MIT and how I knew what I wanted to do with my life."

Despite my lust-poisoned blood, the memory is vivid and clear. An etched rendering in my mind. Nora and I sitting awkwardly on the floor of Mike's old house, the one he and Mom lived in before they bought this one. The parents asleep, the fire crackling nearby. Nora with her IPA pilfered from her dad's fridge and me holding a spiked apple cider that was more whiskey than apple.

"You told me you wanted to protect people from floods and storms. You told me you wanted to build cities and systems to keep people safe from the climate crisis."

She'd wanted to save the world, Nora Charles. And she glowed with the absolute certainty that she could.

She still does.

“And then you told me that you're happiest when it rains, because it means you can do your best research. Your little river delta mockups and floodplain models would be ready for you to watch and poke and prod.”

She turns her head back to meet my gaze. “You called me a little rain cloud. Do you remember? You said I was going to bring life back to the world, drop by drop.”

My chest is feeling smaller and smaller—too small for the air I need to drag into my lungs, too small for my thudding, jerking heart.

“And you got a tattoo of it,” I say.

She touches her fingertips to the inked skin. “It keeps me going, sometimes, what you said that night. I didn't want to forget.” She drops her hand, slowly, and it comes to rest against my chest. “It made me feel special. And you'd think after spending so long wanting an older brother to make me feel that way, that I would've felt all sorts of stepsisterly feelings after that. But that didn't happen, Nick. That didn't happen at all.”

I don't know if she can feel me trembling underneath her, but I am. I *am* trembling. Because that night—the two of us alone, drinking by firelight—something *had* arced between us. And the awareness of *her*, of her full lips and her tits just the right size for my hand, of her radiant hope for the planet and her earthy love of hoppy beer, of the tempting vee of her cunt and her sharp, practical intellect, had slammed into me like a meteor.

I'd wanted to fuck her that night.

I'd wanted to push her down in front of the fire, pull down her pants just enough to get inside, and then fit myself into her wet entrance and pump.

And that's when I knew that I had to leave.

Had she sensed it? Had she guessed? I hadn't touched her, hadn't even hinted at how I'd felt that night, but maybe she'd seen the hunger in my face anyway. Caught me breathing deep and fast while I'd searched for an excuse to get away to my room, where I'd spent the night gritting my teeth and doing remedial meditation exercises so I wouldn't jerk off.

"Do you feel brotherly things for me, Nick?" Nora asks, her fingers trailing over my neck.

I want to die. I can't tell her the truth, I can't ever tell her, and yet she's practically in my lap, she's petting me, she's alluding to . . .

No. She can't know.

"I'd never been a brother before Mike and Mom got married, so it's hard to say."

She tsks, but she doesn't seem upset. If anything, the flush in her cheeks has deepened and there's a glitter in her blue eyes that suddenly makes me wonder if I've had the power dynamic between us all backward.

"I bet you don't let your clients dodge questions like that, do you?" she says. "But it's okay if you don't want to answer. I have an easier question for you. When you were upstairs earlier, were you masturbating?"

CHAPTER TWO

Nora

SHOCK IS SCRAWLED all over Nick's handsome face. He blinks up at me with light-brown eyes, color rising under the light tan he's acquired abroad. He licks his lower lip, like he's desperately trying to think of the right answer, and I decide to stop him right there.

I'm sick of all the right answers between us. I'm sick of all the unsaid things, of the small talk, the safe talk. The careful, generic emails we sometimes exchange that say nothing at all.

I want the truth.

"Your jeans were unbuttoned when you came downstairs to check the smoke alarm," I say before he can evade the question or even outright lie to me. "You were hard . . . like you are now."

He's still holding my waist, and so I'm up on my knees, straddling him but not sitting in his lap, which means I can reach down to prove my point.

The moment I graze his erection, he stiffens, his hands squeezing my waist hard enough that I feel his fingertips digging into my skin through my shirt.

"Nora," he says, his voice darker than I've ever heard it. "Don't."

I don't move my hand, but I don't lift it either.

"Why not?"

"You can't." A line appears between his eyebrows. Not a line of confusion—a stern line. A line that tells me he wants to take me over his knee. The excitement I feel at the thought intoxicates me. "*We* can't," he says for emphasis.

“We can’t?” I ask, curling my fingers around his impressive length. “Then stop me.”

He doesn’t.

“You know we shouldn’t,” he says, voice still dark. His pupils are dilated into onyx pools, his hands still digging into my waist. I wonder who else has seen Nick Mumford like this. This all-American boy with his dark blond hair and his square jaw, this upstanding citizen who could’ve gone into private practice right off the bat and instead traveled halfway across the world to donate his time to strangers. Everyone—his mom, my dad, every tangential aunt, cousin or neighbor—thinks Nick is *capital G* good. Above reproach. Wholesome as fuck.

And I’m the only one who knows he isn’t.

I’ve known for sure since the last Christmas we spent together, but I think I knew even before then. It was something in the way he held himself, something in the way he smiled and generously listened to every word someone had to say. On the outside, he looked empathetic and attentive, like precisely the kind of person who should be a psychologist and a counselor, but there had been a certain care to it all, a deliberateness. Like he had to make sure that no one ever looked too close, that no one ever tried to peel him up at the corners.

And why would they? He’s the six foot tall Harvard grad with dimples and a mild comic book addiction. He’s what comes out of the Ideal Son generator; he’s what every parent dreams of having in their kid.

And he’s currently bruising his stepsister’s waist while staring at her mouth like a starving man.

I lean down as close as I can and whisper near his ear, “Who’s going to tell?”

Something inside of him snaps.

I feel it in his rough, gripping hands, hear it in the low growl coming from his throat, see it in the sudden, predatory tense of his jaw. He pulls me down onto his lap, one hand

threading through my hair, the other curling around my hip to hold me tight to him. The erection in his jeans is thick and long and wedged right against my sex, and I whimper into his mouth as he yanks me in for a kiss so hot that my lips feel seared by it.

He wastes no time, not a single second, and his tongue licks at the seam of my mouth and sweeps inside before I've even parted my lips to allow him entry. He probes my mouth like it's belonged to him for years and he's only just now been given access, and I can feel him savoring me, tasting and sampling and breathing me in.

He kisses to ravage me, to feed on me, and I love it, I love it so much that I'm rocking against his stiff cock, I'm panting into his mouth. I've wanted this for *so long*, I've wanted him since the day of the wedding and I saw him in a tux helping some great-great aunt shuffle to a seat. I've wanted him since the moment I saw those light brown eyes, flooded with a darkness that seemed visible only to me.

Maybe I wanted him because I've always been fascinated with flooding, with *drowning*. Pressure. Because I knew how the physics of destruction and creation were so very nearly the same.

Nick Mumford was havoc and flow, he was alluvial lust and surges of power, he was *force*, hidden behind a warm smile and a noble vocation.

And finally—finally—he's flooding me. Flooding through me. I might never be able to stand in the eye of a hurricane or submerge myself in the deepest part of the sea, but *this*—

This has to be much the same.

The hand in my hair tightens, pulling my head back so he can burn his lips down my neck to edge of my shirt.

“Off,” he says, his voice brooking no argument.

“Okay,” I agree happily, peeling my shirt free of my body. I didn't wear a bra today because I never changed out of my

pajamas, and I'm so grateful, because the *look* on Nick's face right now...

This is standing in a hurricane, or being swept out to sea. This is my own personal flood, with no infrastructure to divert it and no ark to endure it.

I'll drown with him and love every second.

His hand comes back to fist in my hair and his eyes are dark as they rove down my naked upper body.

"Your tits are perfect," he says with rough appreciation in his voice, and God, if anyone could hear him now. The golden boy unmasked at last. "I want to bite them when I fuck you."

"Maybe I'll bite you," I tease breathlessly, and he licks his lower lip.

"All right," he says, a sharp smile curling his lips. "I think I'd like that, little rain cloud."

The nickname weaves a little knot in the middle of my throat, as tight as the knot in my belly as I start riding his lap. *Little rain cloud*. It feels so right to hear from his lips.

Not just what I do, but who I am.

One hand continues to hold my hip and the other drops from my hair to the waistband of my shorts. He moves slowly but intentionally, his fingertips tugging the stretchy fabric all the way down. Then he looks at what he's exposed, a swallow moving down his throat as he sees my bare mound. Maybe even the first hint of pink.

"Lean back," he says gruffly, and I do, bracing my hands on his knees behind me and leaning back. His thumb traces over my folds. Presses. Pushes away.

His gaze burns at what he sees. "You've got something precious here," he says, his thumb pushing slowly into my hole. I pant a little at the invasion. "Have you fucked before?"

"Yes."

This doesn't seem to bother him; just the opposite, in fact. "Good," he says. "I don't think I can be careful with you." He pushes his thumb all the way in. My thighs are screaming like this, but it feels so good to have him inside my body that I don't care. "Take these shorts off."

He pulls his thumb free and sucks it with hooded eyes as I stand up and shuck off my shorts. But when I make to toe off my slippers, he shakes his head.

"Your feet will get cold," he says. I nearly argue—we've got a fire crackling in the fireplace, and I can think of other ways to keep my blood pumping—but then he gives me a look that says *this is for your own good* and I leave them on.

I shiver a little where I stand. Not from any chill but because I realize that maybe there is a part of me that still craves those stepbrotherly things. The protectiveness, the authority, the bossiness. I want it all as much as I want to impale myself on the thick organ pressing against his fly.

Nick pops open the button of his jeans and unzips himself, freeing that monster of a cock as he tugs his jeans all the way off and pulls his boxer briefs to the tops of his thighs.

"Are you on birth control?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "And I'm clean."

He gives me a look that would be wry if it weren't so forbidding. "Me too. I was tested before I went to Georgia. I haven't been with anyone since." He says it almost like it's my fault.

"For three whole years?"

"I only wanted you," he explains. "Come here, Nora."

"But what would you have done if I'd never made a move?"

I step toward him and he grabs me the second I get close enough, pulling me back down into his lap. We both gasp out a breath as I sit on his erection. Soft to hard. Wet to velvet.

“So you admit that tonight was planned?” He’s giving me that stern look again, and it sends heat fluttering all over my belly.

“Once I found out the flights were cancelled and decided to stay home, yes, I knew it was time we stopped pretending that we didn’t want each other. But you didn’t answer me, Nick. How long were you going to go without sex?”

“It wasn’t a conscious plan,” he says. “Up.”

I rise and he probes gently at my cunt. “But you must be miserable,” I say. “Three years . . .”

“You’re wet enough for fucking. Do you need to be stretched?”

“I don’t. Nick—”

“Yes, I’m miserable, goddammit,” he says suddenly, fisting his cock. “Is that what you want to hear? I came to the front door this morning thinking I was going to have a week of jerking off constantly, of finally draining myself dry, and then it turns out the very reason I’m so hard up is here all week. Ready to make it *worse*. And now I need to come so badly that I was about to do it right here on this couch while you were asleep.”

That tidbit is so delicious that I smile at him. “You should have,” I tell him and slide my hands around his neck. “And then you should’ve made me clean you up after.”

His eyes flash with how much he likes that idea. “But then I would have missed this,” he says, rubbing the wide head of his cock against my pussy. “I would have missed having your cunt milk me dry instead.” He stops rubbing, wedging himself against my opening and fitting the tip of his penis just inside of my body. “Down, Nora. You started this, and now you’re going to finish it.”

I spread my knees a bit farther apart and ease down a thick inch, and then two. I didn’t want to be stretched before because this is my favorite part of intercourse: these first

breathless, airless moments. These first thrusts bringing a biting friction and fullness along with the pleasure.

My head drops down as I sink farther onto his cock. My skin prickles everywhere, and my nipples are so tight and so hard that they hurt. Nick's erection is pure, raw invasion inside of me.

"You're not there yet, little rain cloud," he tells me. "Keep going."

Another inch, and then another. And then I slide the rest of the way down, fully impaled to the root and shivering as he sucks in a sharp inhale.

"Fuck," he says, closing his eyes. "I knew you'd feel this good. I fucking *knew* it."

He gives an experimental stab of his cock, rocking up into me, and I moan. The way he fills me is insane—beyond words, beyond thoughts. I can't even catalog all the places where I feel him, because I feel him *everywhere*. His thighs under mine, his cock splitting me in two. His giant hands covering my breasts, his heaving chest under my palms.

His eyes slide open, still half hooded, and he gives me a critical look. "You're cold," he says.

Goose bumps pepper my skin—even the flesh of my breasts under his warm touch—and I'm trembling, I know I am. But it's because every nerve ending is singing with sensation, because I'm caught between the need to move and the unbearable fullness I feel.

"I promise I'm not cold," I whisper.

He gives me another look, that overprotective older stepbrother look, and then reaches over for the blanket abandoned on the other side of the couch. He wraps me in it, taking care to make sure my shoulders are covered, that my legs are covered. There's only a narrow gap in the middle, letting cool air waft in and exposing the inner curves of my breasts, which he gives an avaricious glance before looking down to where my cunt is spread around his dick.

“Can you use me or do you want my thumb?” he asks.

“I can use you,” I manage, leaning forward so that I can rub my clit against his body as I move.

He pulls me in for another fierce kiss, a free hand going to my ass over the blanket and urging me to ride him. “Good,” he says against my lips. “You need to come quick. It’s been too long and this pussy is too good.”

I start moving faster and faster, angling and testing and searching for the best position to rub me both inside and out, and I think I find it just in time, because Nick’s body is as rigid as a statue underneath me, like it’s taking all his willpower not to seize me and pound into my cunt like he paid for it.

His dick feels incredible inside me, like it was made for me to fuck, and each time I move, he rewards me with another ferocious kiss, like he’ll take kissing in lieu of coming for now.

It’s building inside me so fast, so strong, a storm surge, a tsunami, that I surrender the moment it reaches me and crushes me under its tide. I cry his name, breaking our kiss and burying my face in his neck. He smells like coffee and soap, and I breathe him deep as I break apart on top of him, my womb contracting and waves of sensation cresting through me in a tumult of power and froth.

He manages to let me, although I can feel the subtle shaking all throughout his body as he keeps himself still.

I slump forward against him and murmur, “Your turn.”

The only response I get is an animal grunt as he wraps his arms tight around me and then starts thrusting with powerful upward drives of his hips. He was right, earlier—it doesn’t take him long—but holy shit, it makes up for its quickness with its intensity. He throws his head back and lets out a noise that’s half curse, half roar as he unleashes three years of need inside my waiting pussy. His muscles strain and tense to hold me tighter and also to drive deeper and harder, and I abruptly come again, squealing into his neck as he milks himself dry.

It's not over.

He shifts so that he's now bouncing me up and down on his cock, his jagged exhales filling the room.

"You're too tight," he grits out. "Can't stop."

"Then don't," I say. "No one needs to know how much you need my pussy."

Growling, he pulls me off his dick and sets me on the couch. For a moment, I'm stunned by the sight of his penis—ruddy, huge, dripping with semen. I've never been with someone who stayed this hard after coming, and I've never seen raw, brutal need like this.

A cock covered in seed and *still* hard. Eyes belonging to a man so hungry he could eat worlds but will settle for me.

He shoves me back onto the couch cushions and wastes no time in mounting me and sliding back inside. He starts stroking right away, holding me down with the weight of his body and his lust.

My toes are curling with pure pleasure, and I know I'm about to come a third time.

"No one has to know," he says in a husky voice. "It can be our little secret how good this cunt is. How it's the only one that satisfies me. How I'll have to sneak some whenever I can. Hmm?"

I never thought I'd hear him talk like this, and it's killing me, it's burning me alive. Filthy and wrong and hot, and as he leans down to nip at my breasts, my eyes stray over the top of the couch to the entrance to the kitchen.

He looks up and follows my glance.

A laugh pours out of his throat. "We could sneak it on the couch, if that's what you're wondering." He moves us—rough, fast, pulling out long enough to turn us on our sides, and then plunging back in again. He's behind me, with his back to the couch and my back to his chest, and one of his large hands is tucking the blanket around both of us now. My head is

pillowed on one of his arms. “From the kitchen, it would look like only one person was on the couch. Like someone was just innocently watching TV. No one would know I was behind you, taking what I shouldn’t be.”

His hand moves under the blanket, toying with my nipples before sliding to the swollen bud between my legs.

“Is that what you’ll do?” I murmur. “Every time you visit, fill up on me? Get inside me every chance you get?”

“You know it,” he says. His fingers are so good on my clit—firm and expert and steady—and my eyes slide closed as another climax threatens. “At night, during the day. Whenever they’re not looking. I’ll be screwing their precious Nora until she’s dripping and wrecked.”

We come at the same time, me pressing my face into his arm, him growling through his final thrusts. And then there’s nothing but our ragged breathing as we both drift down together. I can feel his chest moving fast and hard behind me, the soft wool of his sweater sticking to my sweaty back, and I can also feel the first trickle of him dripping out.

And . . .

“You’re still hard,” I say dozily, reaching down between my legs to trace around the stiff root of him. He gives a grunt and then a little push.

“Still not done,” he says, and with muscles no psychologist has any right having, he moves me easily to the floor and rolls me onto my stomach, making sure I’m on the blanket first.

I’m as limp as a noodle now, fucked totally boneless by my stepbrother, and my eyes flutter closed as I lay my head on my arms and he crawls behind me, entering in a single slick motion that has me sighing with happiness.

Finally. After all these years, I have him.

I knew he wanted this, and I’ve wanted it of course, and it felt so stupid to let a little thing like being his stepsister get in the way . . .

Sated as I am, pleasure still sings through me as he pistons in and out of my cunt. The fire is warm on my face and the blanket is soft underneath me, and from my vantage on the floor, I can see the handful of small presents still under the tree, shoved all the way to the back where they'll wait for whatever random dentist or coworker they're meant for.

This is the way to do Christmas, I think dreamily. Getting fucked into the floor by a secretly pervy golden boy. Knowing that you have a week of filthy sex waiting for you after.

It's so wet and messy between us now—my inner thighs are covered in him and I feel slick everywhere—and it only makes it sexier as he bears down and fucks my cunt like a man possessed. I can *hear* the sex as well as feel it, and it makes me giggle underneath him.

“What?” he asks hoarsely, still toiling away above me.

“You. It's a good thing I'm on birth control, because otherwise, I'd be very pregnant by now.”

Hearing that seems to do something to him, and he swears near my ear as he spears me even harder. “I've been waiting to give it to you for so long. And *fuck*, the money I'd pay to fuck you until you were pregnant . . .”

A faint, weak climax detonates behind my clit at his words, and then he gives me all his weight as he rides me until the brutal finish. I can feel him swelling and pulsing inside me, and the rigid muscles of his abs tensing against my ass as his entire body works to pump me full of his release.

Finally, he slips free with a grunt, his head dropping to my back as he lays on top of me.

There is a new possessiveness to his touch now; his fingers stroke my upper arms and his thighs trap my own.

I love it. I love it.

“I'll have to fuck you again soon,” he murmurs. “Tonight won't be enough.”

“We have all week,” I remind him in a sleepy whisper. But even as I say it, I know that I want more than a week. I think I want even more than sneaking around.

I don’t know how we’d get more, or even if Nick wants it too. But I think I want to try to figure it out all the same.



I WAKE TO snow hissing against the window and Nick’s erection against my ass.

With a smiling yawn, I stretch and then turn to tell Nick *good morning to you too*, but see that he’s still fast asleep—even though his body is already raring to go. Even with a slightly sore pussy, the idea of fucking him again is tempting enough that I nearly wake him . . . but decide not to. He needs the sleep after his flight anyway.

I slide free of his warm embrace, shiver my way to my closet and wrap myself in a robe, and then look back at him before I go downstairs. In his sleep, he is all golden boy again—the pale, snowy light glinting off his blond hair and dark blond eyelashes, the shadows sketching the movie star jaw and nose. But there is also something deliciously naughty about seeing him in my bed. Like he really had snuck in during the night to take what he needed and then decided to stay.

Mmm.

With that sexy thought, I push my messenger bag full of college shit off my slippers, slide the slippers onto my feet, and then trot downstairs after brushing my teeth. The snow is back with an attitude today, pelleted and icy, and the downstairs of the old house is colder than a witch’s tit. I light a fire in the living room and then go to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

That’s where Nick finds me. He comes behind me and buries his face in my neck. “How do you smell so good?” he mumbles, drawing in a deep lungful.

I turn around and see him wearing a clingy Henley and pajama pants. “Because you made us shower before bed last

night,” I tell him. “Coffee?”

“Please, and also I regret to inform you that you may have to shower again.”

“Why’s that?”

His hands find my hips as he walks me all the way back to the counter and hoists me up. “Guess.”

I spread my legs, showing him that I’m bare under the robe. “But you made me sore last night. Aren’t you going to kiss it better first?”

He cocks a grin—a wide, dimpled one that’s surely fluttered hearts all over the globe. “For hours.”

He’s tall enough that when he gets to his knees, his face is right where he wants it, and he starts with slow, almost romantic kisses along my inner thighs and over my mound. “Did you mean what you said last night?” he asks, looking up at me as his fingers trail up my seam. “That you don’t feel like my stepsister?”

I hesitate. I said that last night because it’s *partly* true . . . true in the sense that what I want to do with Nick normally has no business being done with a stepbrother. But I don’t think it’s the whole truth. Not anymore.

“I feel like I want you to be all of it,” I say. “The protective parts and the possessive parts. The sweet and the hungry. There’s still a slice of me that wants what a stepbrother is supposed to give a stepsibling—even while I still want us to fuck. I think . . .” I pause, looking down at his face, which is totally inscrutable right now. A counselor’s face. “I think you being my stepbrother is part of what I want. I just want us to be more too.”

He closes his eyes and presses his face against my thigh, and for a moment, I worry I’ve said the wrong thing, that this is one perversion too far. It’s one thing to fuck and pretend like we’re not related by marriage, but to fuck *and* be that to each other . . .

“Thank God,” he mumbles into my thigh. “Thank God. I feel the same way.”

“You do?”

He opens his eyes and looks up at me. “I didn’t run away because I wanted to be a bad stepbrother, Nora. I want to be a *good* stepbrother. But I don’t want to stop this.” He kisses my pussy, a gentle but deep kiss that has me arching against him. “And I don’t think I *can* stop this,” he admits, and I know exactly what he means.

If it’s a compulsion, then we are compelled. If it’s a sin, then we’re damned.

Some things just have to happen.

He licks a wet stripe up my cunt and then dives in, lapping and searching, sucking on my clit, teasing me until I’m wild. My robe has fallen partly off my shoulders as he stands up and frees his organ, which is thick and ready.

“And when this week is over?” he asks, notching the crown against my wet hole and slowly spearing me. “You still want me to be all of it?”

The intrusion of him sends pleasure racing along every nerve ending, from my scalp to the soles of my feet. “Yes,” I gasp, looking up from where he’s spreading me to his face, which is scrawled all over with the primal hunger that he’s hidden from the world so well. “Unless . . . unless you don’t?”

He gives me a harsh kiss, piercing me deep and holding me there as he does. “Oh, I do, little rain cloud. Trust me.”

“Do we hide it?” I ask against his lips. “From our parents?”

He pulls back a little. “I know I say a lot of dirty shit when I’m worked up,” he says, “but I don’t want to sneak around. Not forever, at least. What’s between us hasn’t gone away in three years . . . what if it never does? What if we’re always this sick for each other?”

I thread my fingers through his hair. “Our parents might not be happy about it,” I warn him.

He laughs a little, and I feel it in the flex of his cock inside me. “That’s putting it lightly.”

“It won’t be easy.”

“We’ll find the right way to tell them,” Nick says. “But I don’t think it’s a choice, not in the long run.” He looks down my partially robed body to where our bodies join in a flush of heat and slick. “I think we were always going to end up like this. It was inevitable. *We* were inevitable.”

The orgasm building in my body agrees with him.

All of me agrees with him.

“So we’re really going to do this?” I whisper as he pulls out nearly to the tip and drives back in again. “Be all of it for each other?”

“Yes,” he says. “Yes.” He’s getting close, and so am I. “And I want to give you everything, Nora. Everything you want.” He presses his forehead to mine; I feel the pre-orgasm shivers trembling through him. “A ring, a house. Babies. I want everything with you.”

“You’ve already started giving me everything I want,” I say as my body quivers right on the edge. “You’ve given me the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“But I didn’t get you anything,” he says, looking regretful.

“You did,” I say, touching his face. “Because you’re my present this year.”

He smiles—real, almost bashful happiness breaking across his face like a sunrise—and then together we tumble into bliss, knowing that we’ll have everything for each other on the other side.



Want more Christmas mayhem from Sierra Simone?

Check out A Merry Little Meet Cute, a holiday raunch-com cowritten with Dumplin' author Julie Murphy!

CHRISTMAS SHOPPING
FOR A BILLIONAIRE

JULIA KENT

CHAPTER ONE

THE CALL TODAY from my old boss, Greg, two days before Christmas at 2:12 p.m. should have tipped me off. I *should* have let it go to voicemail. I *should* have ignored it and not stopped decorating the Christmas tree in my boyfriend's apartment. The tree that Declan had ordered from some place in Nova Scotia where all trees look like something out a movie set and the super-nice Canadians hire Tibetan refugee monks to rub the trunks down with virgin coconut oil and chant "Om Mani Padme Hun" for universal nirvana.

That is, before they chop the tree down to ship it by helicopter to a waterfront high rise on the Long Wharf in Boston, where it will look pretty for two weeks and then get the chipper treatment at a recycling center. That's a form of reincarnation, right?

But I *don't* ignore Greg's call even though I might be a little intoxicated by the sight of my man wearing a Santa hat, tight jeans, and a snug green cashmere sweater that makes me want him to hurry up my chimney tonight.

(C'mon. You knew the pun was coming).

"Hey, Greg. What's up?" I answer.

Declan is hanging one of the new ornaments I bought him, a candy cane made from glued cloves. Mom's friend holds a Sustainable Free Trade Christmas Fair every year, and I'd been told a young African girl made the clove ornament to raise money to buy a three legged-goat for milk to feed her family, or something like that.

The details are fuzzy because I couldn't listen through my sobs as I handed fistfuls of money to Mom, who just picked out a few items and patted me on the back, mumbling something about how I am just like my father. He had been banned from the fair two years ago when he bought all five

hundred handmade Christmas cards from the Ivory Coast refugee who was promoting slave-free chocolate, sobbing with guilt and apologizing profusely for his KitKat addiction.

“Did Carol call you?” My old boss sounds frantic. Greg isn’t the type to descend into hysteria. A chill runs up my spine, and it isn’t from the nine inches of snow that blanketed Boston yesterday. I know that tone of voice.

That is the tone that got my hand shoved down a toilet in the men’s room of a fast food restaurant when I worked for him as a mystery shopper, evaluating customer service at stores and companies.

The tone that gave me a brand-new car that looked like a Goliath took a steaming dump on top of it when we were doing branded advertising for a website.

The tone that made me listen to podiatrists wax rhapsodic about toe fungus as they eyed my feet like I was starring in a fetish story from one of my dad’s old *Hustler* magazines that he kept stored in his backyard Man Cave.

That is the tone of desperation.

“No. Carol did not.”

Declan looks at me, tilting his head to the left and making a low voice in the back of his throat that indicates displeasure. While I work for Declan’s company now, I fill in for the occasional mystery shop. My oldest sister, Carol, has my old job now and sometimes does the *really* professional maneuver where she calls and begs and whines and pleads and threatens to tell my boyfriend all about that time I bought a chest enhancer and got my budding nipple caught in the springs, in order to get me to take on a shop.

Yeah. Professional like that. Carol would make a great women’s prison kitchen chef.

So Greg is a step above. “Carol had a mystery shopper no-show on her, and she can’t come in because of your nephews. Something about needing a babysitter—”

“We can go over and watch Jeffrey and Tyler!” I say in an overeager voice as Declan continues his vocal imitation of Jamie Fraser from the *Outlander* series, making more guttural sounds than a female sea lion with strep throat.

Of course, I offer to babysit. Because the alternative is...

“That doesn’t work. Something about one of the kids having the bubonic plague,” he adds. Carol can get a wee dramatic, but I vaguely remember Mom telling me one of the kids had something that generated more snot than a bunch of postmenopausal women watching *Steel Magnolias*.

“Did you try Josh?” Josh is the company technogeek, and he almost never gets pulled into mystery shopping. Right now, though, I’ll throw him under the bus if it means staying here with Declan for the rest of the day, my eyes memorizing the tight little ripples of muscle between his lower ribs as he stretches up on tiptoes to hang an ornament. His sweater pulls up enough to make his torso look like it was finely carved from tanned alabaster.

On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me

A humping in the bedroom so fine I forgot my name.

(So what if it doesn’t rhyme. Just go with it).

“We need a female,” Greg stresses. I look down at my overflowing bosom, tightly encased in a green wrap shirt that makes my cleavage pour out like a split muffin top. Damn. For once, having breasts *qualifies* me for a job.

“He looks really good in drag,” I tell Greg.

Declan halts in mid-stretch and plants his feet firmly on the floor, turning to me. He points to himself and shakes his head slowly, eyes steely green.

Not you, I mouth.

“Good,” Declan says with his hands on his hips, one knee bent, like a man in pose to argue, the male equivalent of Talk to the Hand.

“Josh *does* that stuff?” Greg asks, incredulous.

“No,” I confess. “I just don’t want to do whatever it is *you* want me to do.”

“We need a sexy female elf.”

“A sexy female *elf*?” Did I hear him wrong?

Declan appears instantly at my side, suddenly *very* interested.

“You would be a very good sexy female elf,” Greg and Declan simulcast in my ears in two completely different tones of voice. Both, though, carry the tiniest hint of desperation.

“Who’s there?” Greg asks. His words are a bit muffled, as if floating through cotton.

“Why are you talking so weird?” The cinnamon-scented Christmas candles on Declan’s sleek marble mantel send a glow high into his arched ceiling. The city is spread out before us on one side of the high-windowed penthouse, the ocean on the other side. Panoramic views are fine and all, but the best scenery is two inches away, his lips closing in on my neck.

“It’s the beard,” Greg says, jolting me out of my turning into a maid a-milking, my hand reaching for Declan in a place that makes him inhale sharply, then smile against my ear.

“Beard?” I ask.

I twist my way out of Declan’s arms and make a pouty face. He joins me, looking disturbingly like my cat, Chuckles. I didn’t know Declan had a Grumpy Cat face. You date a man for eight months and then one day you discover he looks like a cat doing a Paul Ryan imitation. Thank God that’s not his O face.

I shudder and Declan mistakes that for my being cold, wrapping his arms around me.

“I’m Santa,” Greg explains. “We’re evaluating the customer service quality of the Children’s Christmas Village set-up at the mall. Our Santa no-showed and I had to jump in.”

“You’ve got the body for it.” Greg doesn’t just have a bowl full of jelly—he’s the entire Smucker’s plant.

“Hey!” He sounds genuinely offended.

“You can talk about how I can be a *sexy elf* but I can’t mention your beer gut?”

“It’s not a beer gut!”

“Fine. *Wine* gut.”

He lets out a long sigh of resignation. “*That’s* better.” Because it’s true.

“You want me to come in and put on a sexy costume to play the female equivalent of Buddy the Elf at the mall two days before Christmas because no one else will do it?”

“Right.”

“Why?”

“Why *what?*” Greg’s breath is coming in huffs of nervousness.

Grumpy Declan sees me wavering and finishes my hot toddy for me, returning to the tree to decorate.

“Why should I do it?” I challenge.

“It pays \$30 an hour and you get a free picture with Santa.”

“I make more than that working for Anterdec Industries now, and I am not sitting on your lap.”

“I didn’t ask you to! I’m only here for a little while longer, and then the new Santa comes on board. You can sit on *his* lap.” He pauses. “Wait. You make more than \$30 an hour now?” He seems more scandalized by *that* than by the idea of having me in his lap.

“You can sit on my lap right now, for free,” Declan murmurs, nibbling on my ear.

“He’s paying \$30 an hour.” I point to the phone.

“You want me to pay you to sit on my lap?” Pulling me into it, he shifts in just the right way. I groan, inhaling cinnamon and sex, exhaling weakness and loyalty.

“Shannon, please? Please?” Greg is begging. “Carol said she might be able to come at five o’clock and take over for you, but I’m really stuck here. All these kids are lined up, their hopeful little faces cheering for Santa, and they want to know where the elf is.”

“Awwww.” Declan’s hot tongue in my mouth makes it hard to answer.

“And the dads are asking, too.”

“Ewwww.”

I push Declan away and eye him closely. He’ll make one hot dad someday. I imagine a little girl in his arms, Declan carrying her to the Christmas Village for a visit with Santa, me waddling behind pregnant with our first boy. It’s a pleasant vision, and one that Declan seems to share, if I’m reading the look in his eyes right.

Christmas at the mall is such a cornerstone of my childhood that I begin to weaken. All those kids. All those parents. And if I don’t go in...

“Bottom line is that there’s suspicion that one of the photographers is stealing cash payments here, and some of the Santas have been coming in drunk, so in the interest of making the holiday a joyful experience for every single kid—kids like Jeffrey and Tyler—if you could get your butt down here and help your old boss, I’d really appreciate it.” Greg’s voice shifts from pleading to commanding, and the combination means—

Damn.

A long sigh escapes from me, making Declan freeze, his tongue perfectly centered now on that soft spot of skin beneath my earlobe, the gateway to all things warm, wet, and naughty.

“Where are you?” I ask Greg.

Declan’s turn to groan, and *so* not in the good way.

Greg names a mall about twenty minutes away.

“I’m on my way.”

I hang up to find that I am suddenly on my boyfriend’s Very Naughty List. I deserve a spanking, but I’m about to get a tongue lashing instead, and not the kind that makes me rip the sheets off the bed.

I give him *my* best Grumpy Cat look.

“You’re leaving? You’re seriously going to push aside this carefully planned day so you can go dress up in a sexy elf costume...”

His voice shifts from self-righteous anger to aroused intrigue, the morph so gradual yet distinct. His green eyes match his sweater, dark hair recently clipped in a style that makes his face even more masculine, the cut jawline lickable. Long eyelashes frame steady, sharp eyes that comb over my body with more suggestions than a waiter trying to upsell you on the chef’s special.

Meeting the son of Boston’s most famous billionaire while conducting a mystery shop eight months ago was the best stroke of luck I’d had since counting the right number of M&M candies in the contest jar at Dad’s favorite auto parts store when I was nine and bringing them home, but this was better.

Because I can eat *this* prize without getting a stomach ache.

Wait. That doesn’t sound right...

“Yes.” I shrug helplessly. “He wouldn’t call if he weren’t desperate.”

Declan’s mind is a million miles away, his eyes smoking hot and aimed right at me. And then I realize he’s not a million miles away. He’s five miles away, at the mall, listening to “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” with visions of something way dirtier than sugar plums dancing in his head.

“Do they let you bring the costume home?” he asks.

I whack him hard with a fistful of tinsel. It flies up in the air and whirls around us, like a piñata filled with Angel Dust and disco balls from the 1970s.

Which is about on par with what we experience when we arrive at the mall.

CHAPTER TWO

YOU KNOW WHAT the North Pole smells like? Frightened kid pee, scented baby wipes, and Tiger Moms.

What are Tiger Moms? The same women who rule over their piano-playing prodigies, the kids mastering Chopin before they were weaned, who make Yo-Yo Ma look like a drunk homeless dude playing a broken recorder in East Cambridge, who raise soccer players who make Luis Suarez look like Rainbow Brite—and they’re lined up here at the mall with their kids, and they’re not taking “no” for an answer.

To anything.

“Tycho! Tycho!” screeches one blonde mother who looks disturbingly like Jessica Coffin with under-eye bags. “Tycho, don’t you dare sit down. You’ll crease!”

Crease. She’s dressed the kid in all white and he looks like a cross between President Snow from *The Hunger Games* and a Ralph Lauren ad. He’s three. *Three.* And you put him in white? Mommy Masochist.

Creasing is the least of his problems. Most three year olds can’t follow a two-step command, or watch an entire episode of *Bubble Guppies* without wiping nine boogers on the couch cushions, and she expects him to not *crease?*

“I don’t like waiting! You said your waiting app told you we wouldn’t wait, Mommy. Give me your phone. I want to play Paplinko!” Tycho whines. “Eat at P.F. Chang’s! I want to order from your app!”

“Manners!” his mother snaps back.

Her eyes glow red with the kind of intensity that only a well-educated, over-entitled *Nanny Diaries*-type mother can cultivate. My own mom suddenly seems cuddly and harmless,

like Mrs. Brady with a side of Mrs. Weasley and a touch of Peg Bundy.

Okay, a *lot* of Peg Bundy.

“We were told, in the app, that there would not be a wait!” she yells at me. I am standing in front of Santa’s throne, a veritable pantheon to the advertising geniuses who have turned Christmas into a religious holiday, serving the new gods: Visa, MasterCard, Discover, and American Express.

“App?” I ask, resisting the urge to pull the butt floss out of my crack. Butt floss? Oh, yeah. After Declan dropped me off at the main doors to go hunt a wooly mammoth...er, find a parking spot (either were equally likely on December 23rd at 3 p.m. in this particular mall parking lot), I’d found Greg, who had wordlessly handed me the elf suit.

I’ve seen models on GoDaddy Super Bowl commercials wearing more than this.

“App!” Mommy Masochist screams, texting while she’s yelling at me, her eyes on the screen but her lips devoted entirely to me. “The app!”

“An app for...what?”

Demon eyes flash at me and she holds up one perfectly French-tipped finger. “One second,” she says with a supercilious air that makes me want to crack that fingernail in half and use it like a ninja star to shave off that arched eyebrow. She’s blonde, hair pulled back in a twist, and she is wearing all red, open-toed shoes in December in Massachusetts, where nine inches of snow means everyone I know wears Fuggs and looks like a Jawa for four months of the year.

Red stiletto heels, open-toed and with these crazy ankle strap things that make her feet look like red flamingoes. If that’s fashion, then my Salvation Army wardrobe is starting to look good.

She ends her textfest and centers all her attention on me, taking as much time as she pleases to size me up. Her eyes

catalog my bright green, satiny outfit, with sequins that spell out *Ho Ho Ho* across my boobs.

A careful examination under the blinking fluorescent lights of the employee bathroom two hours later will show that yes, indeed, I walked around the mall for three hours with just *Ho* on each nipple.

But I digress...

The green fabric cuts into my armpits, the shelf bra was designed for a ten-year-old gymnast, and what might have been appealing in a Mae West kind of way as the bustier pushes everything up instead makes me look like a can of Pillsbury biscuits.

One that someone pulled the string on.

And twisted.

The green, shimmery stockings are two sizes too small, and the crotch threatens constantly to pull down about six inches lower, which would make me look like I am wearing harem pants...except I'm wearing the closest thing to a g-string anyone can imagine, a tiny little red taffeta skirt circling my crushed hips like a bad case of eczema.

The costume design department for *Blades of Glory* is weeping with jealousy right now for not coming up with this.

Or maybe they did...

"Nice outfit," Mommy Masochist says. "I need to speak with your manager," she adds slowly. Her eyes cut away. "And tuck in your nip."

I look down. Yep—headlight escaped, pointed right at the security guard by the service desk, who starts to stroke his billy club suggestively.

"Thanks," I mutter, because one good turn deserves—

"Manager," she snaps. "You're useless. And slow." Her face softens a little. "Are you—do you have a helper? An aide who works with you? I think it's great you have a job and all.

Is there a program manager I can—STOP IT, TYCHO! DO NOT SIT ON THAT BENCH! CREASE! CREASE!”

A cold rage replaces the scent of peppermint and pine that the mall is piping through the heat registers. I’m breathing ice and frost and I wish I had Elsa’s power, because I could freeze a bitch right now. Turn her into a mall Han Solo.

“I am not developmentally disabled,” I say, searching for Santa, er...Greg. He’s gone, and the line of moms, a few dads, and tons of kids is getting longer.

“Then you’re just stupid *and* useless. Why is there a wait? We paid the exclusive premium for Santa’s Special Delivery, and—”

“Ho, ho, ho!” Greg busts out, materializing from the direction of the bathrooms. Either he’s pretending to be Santa or he’s reading my breasts.

In full Santa costume, he’s pretty amazing. Breathtaking, really. His belly fills out the costume perfectly, his eyes twinkle in a warm, inviting way with the skin wrinkling around them in a calm, compassionate manner, and his beard is fake but so realistic I want to tug it, just to make sure he didn’t magically grow it overnight.

“Your elf is ruining Christmas!” Mommy Masochist announces in a voice loud enough to make several children, and one dad, start to cry. I suspect the dad is her husband, Daddy Doormat, because Tycho runs over to him and buries his face in the man’s knees.

“Crease, Thomas! Crease!” Thomas the Daddy Doormat is wearing white jeans (those are a thing? For men?) and a white turtleneck, with a red wool sweater the exact color of Mommy Masochist’s shoes.

“I’ve never had an elf ruin Christmas,” Greg booms, his voice so Santa-like that shoppers slow down from their fast clip through the mall, pull phones away from ears to gawk, and come to complete halts at the baritone that fuels old dreams tucked away long ago.

He's kind of magical.

"In fact, Shannon the Elf here has come to our rescue to help make sure every good little boy and girl gets their turn." It's working—she's thawing and smiling now, her eyes a bit frozen in place as she realizes she's the center of attention but not in control of it. All those years of Greg playing Santa at the community center are paying off.

"Thank you," she says softly, giving him a look that says she could just as soon hug him as sever his limbs and hide them in the Verizon kiosk. "But the app says we're supposed to be here on time."

"App, Santa?" I ask helplessly.

Greg pulls me aside. "There's this new app the owners rolled out. For \$79 you can sign up in advance and come at your appointed time and jump the line. No waiting."

"So the rich get to buy their way to no lines but the people who can't afford it have to wait for eternity? How is that fair?"

"Is it fair that when I was a kid Santa brought one toy and my neighbors all got five? Santa's an unfair bastard."

"What?" Mommy Masochist asks, eavesdropping. "Please keep your voice down!" she snaps at Greg. "I can't have Tycho tormented by nightmares about hearing Santa talk about...*Santa*, and calling him a bastard!" She throws her hands up and then reaches into her purse for her phone, muttering something about getting a refund and how nothing works properly these days because employees don't know how to do their jobs.

I look at the enormous sea of wiggly children, tired parents, and crabby mall workers.

"What now, Santa?" I ask.

"Off we go," Greg says, walking past Mommy Masochist and letting out a loud "ho ho ho," to the children's delight. The throne has a place for Santa to sit, and I'm there to hand out candy canes, keep people in orderly lines, and encourage the

kids to look at the photographer, who charges \$39 for a blurry photo of your kid sitting on the lap of a man who hasn't gone through a CORI background check.

(Actually, *Greg* has, but not the average mall Santa).

Tycho is first in line. He looks at my chest and points, shouting, "I want nanas!"

Doormat Daddy gives my breasts a nervous grin and says, "Tycho, we're all done with nanas. Remember? We had your weaning party—"

Greg turns the color of his beard and I turn the color of my elf suit as we both realize what "nanas" are.

"Want nanas! Want nanas!" Tycho screams. Visions of a three-year-old vampire-diving into my overflowing nanas and drinking direct from the tap—a decidedly dry tap—make me cross my arms and push back my breeding date by, well, *never*. How does never sound? Sorry, Mom. No billionaire grandkids. I'm too traumatized by being turned into an unsuspecting wet nurse while wearing a naughty elf costume.

"Crease! You're creasing!" Masochist Mommy cries out.

And that's kid number one in a sea of them.

Merry Christmas.

CHAPTER THREE

ONE HOUR LATER I am ready to give myself a tubal ligation with a mascara wand.

Sex ed classes shouldn't teach abstinence, or the mechanics of sex, or even birth control. They should march those teens to the mall two days before Christmas and make them play Santa's Helper for a few hours. That would drop the teen pregnancy rate by a good fifty percent, *tout suite*.

I love kids. I do. The world revolves around Jeffrey and Tyler when I'm with them, and in my thirties, after I make director or vice president, I plan to have a couple. Whether Declan wants them or not is still a mystery, because we don't talk about it. Ever. There's this shadow between us that seems to have formed not by intention but more by omission.

The longer we don't bring it up, the bigger it becomes.

The photographer, a lovely older woman named Marsha, who dresses in a Mrs. Claus outfit that makes her look like Betty White, approaches me and Greg.

"My shift's over," she says, a bit nervous. "The new photographer is talking to the parents."

We look at a man in black jeans, a grey leather jacket, and a collared business shirt talking to parents in line. Twenties are changing hands.

Greg stands and we put up the "Santa is Feeding the Reindeer—Back in Five Minutes!" sign. Parents groan, but the new photographer seems to be keeping them occupied.

"You know him?" Greg asks Marsha, who shakes her head.

"Never seen him before, but he says he's a sub the owner sent. I texted the owner and he hasn't replied, so..." She

reaches for a clipboard on the small counter behind Santa's throne and starts writing numbers on a spreadsheet.

Greg and I exchange a skeptical look. "We need to document this," he whispers to me. "They either pay through the app or at checkout. Cash isn't supposed to change hands." One of the many sour aspects of being a mystery shopper and customer service evaluator is that you end up busting people who are embezzling, or cheating customers. It always involves cash.

Marsha looks at me with agitation and pulls me aside. "Your nipple is, um..." She points down and I growl, shoving the girls back in place.

"Thank you." If this were a Dickens novel I would be the Ghost of Christmas Nip Slips Present.

"Jory was less...buxom," she murmurs.

"Jory?"

"The old elf. The one who always worked here before. So much turnover." She slings her purse over her shoulder and gives a wave, looking repeatedly at the new photographer, then shrugging. "I'm doing some shopping, so I'll pop back in after a while and see how it's going. I've been here for nine seasons and I can spot someone who isn't going to work out."

Greg and I share a knowing look, and he turns away from the crowd to text the client and let them know what's just gone down.

Marsha crooks one finger at me and whispers in my ear: "This Santa is too nice. Betcha he won't make it two more days." She has no idea who we are, so I play along.

Greg is texting the client, but then stops, alarm crossing his face. "Shit!" he exclaims.

"Hush!" I hiss. "Santa doesn't say 'shit'!"

"He does when the replacement Santa is stuck in the parking garage! Says he's been in there for more than forty-five minutes and can't find his way out."

“I believe it,” says a familiar voice. Warm hands are on my shoulders, and Declan adds, “This parking lot is designed by planners who hate human beings.”

I laugh. He doesn’t. But he plants a kiss on my cheek and lets go of me, walking around and emitting a low whistle.

“*Whoa.*” His eyes rest on the overflowing volcano of flesh that is my chest line.

“Ho,” he says as he looks at one breast. “Ho,” he says for the other. “Nice. It’s like a Christmas eye doctor’s chart.”

Greg’s texting furiously, then looks at us, horrified. “He says he just came out of the exit to the mall near the turnpike and he’s heading back home! Says it’s not worth it!”

Declan shrugs, eyes glued to my breasts. “You said *sexy* elf costume,” he says in a weird voice.

“This isn’t sexy?” My eyebrows are buried in the mall skylight.

“This is a *slutty* elf costume.”

I glare at Greg. “Told you.” I turn to Declan. “I’m sorry. I know it’s a bit much—”

“What are you apologizing for? Slutty beats sexy any day.” His hands slip around my waist and he pulls me into a kiss.

Greg texts and clears his throat. “Um, guys? I have a serious problem here. No replacement Santa, and I have to take Judy to a doctor’s appointment.” Greg’s wife is a long-term breast cancer survivor, and while I don’t know the details, everything has been in a good place for a while. The look on his face makes my stomach sink, though.

Declan goes somber, too.

And then Greg and I turn simultaneously and give Declan the once-over, like Clinton and Stacy on *What Not to Wear*.

Except we’re doing the Christmas Mall Edition: Santa Style.

“Oh, no,” Declan says, reading our minds. “No.”

“It pays \$30 an hour and you can get a free picture on the next Santa’s lap.”

“I make \$30 every time I cough,” Declan snorts. I’ve never heard him snort before. Today is a day for discoveries and revelations. Grumpy Cat looks and snorts. What’s next? Farting in bed and not excusing himself? Or, worse, pulling the covers over my head and Dutch Ovening me?

Mom says men save that for the second anniversary.

“Your nipple is, um...” Greg says. To me. Speaking of revelations. I tuck it back in. I might need to walk over to the scrapbook store and get a little rubber cement so these puppies will stop trying to escape.

“What’s your currency, man?” Greg asks Declan, gone from begging to outright negotiation. “You’ve got me by the balls.”

“I’ve got my own balls. Don’t need yours.”

The parents in line are murmuring louder and louder. “If there’s no Santa, the entire mystery shop is compromised, and twenty kids out there are going to start crying,” I say to Declan, pleading.

His eyes rake over my body, angry and determined, the deep “no” in there. He means it. I know he does. I use the only leverage I have.

“Greg says I can take the costume home with me. If you fill in for Santa.” I reach between us and make a suggestive stroke. The North Pole does indeed exist.

Declan groans. “Ho. Ho. Ho.”

I stand on tiptoes and lick his ear. “I will be one for you if you do this. It’s only for an hour or two,” I plead.

“I look nothing like Santa,” he says in a hard, flat voice, but arousal flickers in his eyes. He looks behind the wall and

sees the sea of kids. Those green eyes look worried. He's an old softy underneath this granite-like appearance.

I think. I hope so.

"Name your price," Greg adds, already taking off the costume, handing Declan the hat.

Eyes the color of my suit flash at Greg, angry and exasperated. "Quit calling her for mystery shop jobs. Forever."

Greg's hand shoots out. "Deal." He takes the jacket off and hands it to Declan with a warning. "It's hot in the suit, so you might want to take your sweater off."

"I don't have anything on under it," Declan explains.

"That's fine," I peep. My mouth waters. He gives me a glare. I stand by my words.

"Where's the pillow?" Declan asks as he slips into the Santa pants. Luckily, he's wearing black leather shoes that are perfect.

"What pillow?"

"The pillow for my belly."

Greg laughs, his real belly shaking. "I didn't need one. I think there's one back on the counter." And then he's gone, calling back, "Merry Christmas to you, and to you a good hour."

"You are going to pay for this," Declan grouses. "And these pants are a little wet." He sniffs one leg. "Is that pee?"

"No," I lie.

He's standing just behind the wall on the back of Santa's throne, jeans peeking out from his Santa suit, red suspenders hanging down. In one fluid movement, like something out of a stripper show, he reaches for the hem of his green cashmere sweater and slowly pulls it up, biceps flexing, his skin gleaming under the calibrated Christmas lights in the mall.

It's one of those moments that should have a soundtrack attached to it, something Barry White. Slow and sensual, the kind of music that gets you wet and throbbing. Time stops, and all the moms walking by telepathically communicate the presence of my hot boyfriend taking his clothes off, pecs on display, a free peep show at the most stressful moment in the Christmas rush.

A regular community service Declan's performing here.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Mommy Masochist taking pictures and texting someone. Whatever. Tycho managed not to crease for his photo and now he's running around with a \$9 cupcake from the gourmet bakery in the mall, chocolate smears everywhere. He looks like a Tide commercial.

The sweater makes Declan's thick, dark, wavy hair stand up a tiny bit with static electricity, and he reaches one perfectly sculpted arm up to smooth it back. I hear a decidedly female moan from behind me, and then look. *Really* look at the moms around us, most biting their lower lips and squirming.

That's right. Look all you want. I'm the one who gets to touch.

He slides the red suspenders up over his shoulders and looks like something in a Santa firefighter's calendar. If he had a big hose in his hands right now.

Boy does *that* sound porny.

Let's try again: "Hey!" I murmur, sliding up next to him and placing a strategic hand on his hip. *Mine*, I communicate telepathically in a voice designed to make all the other women's heads explode like a cantaloupe dropped from a second-story window.

Mine.

"Hey what?" He's still pissed. Doing the Santa bit, but pissed.

“How about you bring the suit home, too? We can play Santa Disciplines the Naughty Elf,” I whisper in his ear as he dons the fake beard.

“That’s one of your father’s favorite games,” Satan says from behind a fake ficus across the way.

CHAPTER FOUR

“MOM?”

“Just look at you two! I knew Shannon was here as a beautiful little perky elf, but Declan as Santa! You two were meant to be together,” Satan, a.k.a. my mother, says, reaching in to give Declan a kiss, ignoring my protests.

My sister Amy is with her. “Perky is right. Shannon, your, um, headlight is...” I look down. One is pointed toward New Hampshire and the other toward Antarctica.

I turn around and readjust. “What are you two doing here?”

“Amanda texted to let us know.”

“I hate her.”

“She’s your best friend. You can’t hate her.”

“Why isn’t she here doing the elf impression?”

“She’s delivering toys to needy kids.”

“Flimsy excuse.” I look around the wall and see that Mommy Masochist is back in line, dragging a very chocolate-y Tycho. The line’s gotten a lot longer suddenly. Doubled, even.

“Wow,” I say. “The line’s really getting long.”

“Blame it on Hot Santa,” Amy says, pointing to Declan, who scowls.

“You look just like Chuckles!” Mom gasps.

It makes Declan’s frown darken. Even Mom backs off.

“Please don’t call my boyfriend ‘hot,’” I chide Amy. “It’s gross.”

“No,” she explains, pulling out her phone. “#HOTSANTA. Some mommy blogger who’s here at the mall started it on

Twitter with pics of Declan getting dressed, and now Jessica Coffin's made it go viral."

"What?"

She's holding up a picture of Declan in all his broad-chested, thick-pec glory, adjusting one red suspender and looking good enough to ride.

Like Santa's sleigh.

"But, but—" he protests. "That was five minutes ago!" He's rattled, and Declan doesn't *do* rattled.

"Five minutes is like a day on Twitter. You could end up with a flashmob," Amy says.

"Hot Santa, huh?" I smack his ass and send him on his way. "Time to go make some good little girls and boys very happy."

"I think he's got mostly naughty girls out there," Mom says.

"Humph," is all I can reply. I see the photographer out there, working the longer line, more cash changing hands. Greg trusted me to get this right, and I will. I march out there, ignoring my mom and sister, wondering if the day can get any weirder. By the time I get to the guy, he's worked his way to the front of the line.

The new photographer ignores my outstretched hand as I try to introduce myself and says something in a clipped, accented voice to the mom standing with her little boy. She smiles nervously at him, clearly not understanding a word he says. He sounds like a mix of a Russian hit man and the Swedish chef from the Muppets.

Which means he'll probably shoot me dead with a silenced gun and have my body made into something they serve at the shady burger joint in the mall food court before he finishes a cigarette.

"Come here! Look here!" he says in that severe accent, his eyes dead. The guy could be anywhere from twenty to fifty,

with a face so angular you could use it to dig a hole under the Berlin Wall (circa 1988).

The little boy who is about to perch himself on Declan's lap begins to cry as the photographer sighs, throws his hands up, and spews a stream of foreign-language invective that might well be the words to *Goodnight Moon* but sounds like a laundry list of all the ways he's going to cook this boy's pancreas for dinner.

"We have our own photographer, actually," the mother says nervously as she comforts the sweet boy, whose eyes are teary. He has bright blonde hair and a giant cowlick on his forehead hairline. The green eyes make me think of Declan.

The photographer starts screaming in what I now realize really *is* Russian, making a handful of kids in line start crying, parents on smartphones texting and calling and trying to look like they're doing something.

And then: Santa starts shouting back at the photographer. In Russian. Declan speaks *Russian*?

The Russian man spits on the ground. Santa hands the kid off to his mom and stands, grabbing the photographer's arm and pulling him behind the wall on the other side of Santa's chair.

A massive wave of anxiety and fear spills through me as Amy and Mom hide behind a planter and my nipples decide to try to run away, too. I can't catch my breath and everything happens so fast I feel the room spin.

There is this 1980s movie that Mom and Dad loved to watch over and over when we were teens. It's *A Fish Called Wanda*, and there's this scene where John Cleese speaks Russian to Jamie Lee Curtis and it makes her so hot and horny she turns into a sex machine. I always giggled with embarrassment, and later lots of eye rolls, at the idea when we watched the film.

But finding myself horny, wet, and suddenly turned on from zero to humpgirl by the sound of Declan speaking

Russian makes me see that Jamie Lee Curtis and I are soul sisters.

Getting *that* aroused while wearing a too-tight elf costume that turns into a g-string when I stand up straight is all kinds of *wrong*.

Declan's hissing in his deep, clipped voice, so angry and cold looking that I wonder if he's really a Russian hit man and the American stuff is just an act. Maybe he's not actually the VP of marketing for his father's mega-billion corporation. Maybe he's a secret double agent working for some shadow government and I'm just his cover.

I take a careful inventory of my elf costume.

Green satin. A skin volcano up top. Sequins unthreading. High heels with candy cane striped stiletto points. If I'm a double agent's cover, then the Illuminati are in really big trouble.

The photographer tosses his camera onto a chair and barrels down on Declan, snatching Declan's Santa hat off his head and throwing it down, stomping and spitting on it. His face is inches from my boyfriend's, red rage all over as the Russian words are flying back and forth in a volley that is making my little red nub try to break away and drown itself in a fifth of vodka.

The Russian dude wrenches Declan's arm, then rips his red jacket off Declan, who is now shirtless and bearded, fighting this guy.

"Beat his ass, Santa," one of the dads in the crowd shouts. A bunch of the fathers have let go of their kids' hands and are craning to catch a view of the fight. I grab the first thing I can use as a weapon, just sitting there on the counter, and run after, whacking the Russian dude over and over.

With the belly pillow from the Santa costume.

And then the photographer reaches for something on his hip, and everything goes into slow motion. Declan grabs his arm and twists it, hard. The guy headbutts Declan, a sickening

crack breaking through the pan-flute version of “The Little Drummer Boy” that fills the mall’s sound system. Every parent is still, eyes wide and mouths shaped by shock.

Blood trickles into Santa’s beard and down his bare chest. I scream.

Declan ignores the blood and reaches for the guy’s hip just as a swarm of overstuffed mall cops (any of which could easily play Santa) arrive on their Segways. He lifts up the guy’s jacket and exposes the hip where he was about to reach and—

A gun.

As the security guys cuff him and call for police backup, some of the dads have phones high in the air, taping everything. Not a single mom or dad has covered their child, pulled them behind a post or a piece of furniture, or walked away. Fortunately, the kids just stayed in line, good little do-bees who haven’t had every Santa fantasy crushed.

Something falls out of the photographer’s pocket as he’s half dragged off. A giant pile of money. Then another.

“Hey! We paid extra for the good pictures!” a parent calls out. “You can’t take the photographer away!” The mall cops step in and try to calm the crowd while I run to Declan.

“You speak *Russian*?” I gasp as Declan walks toward me with a swagger. Either that, or he’s staggering.

“My nose is fine, thank you,” he says, irritated. “And yes, I speak it. Have since high school.” He glares at me. Mom and Amy run up, Mom holding out a tissue. He takes it and presses it against his nose as he tips his head up, eyes locked on me. “I go through that and all you can ask me is...”

“What the hell was that?” I snap. “You speak Russian to some angry photographer and next thing I know you turn into Jason Bourne!”

“You figured it out,” he deadpans.

People are golf clapping. “Go, Santa! America! America!”

“What does America even have to do with—” Amy starts to ask, but Mom cuts her off.

“All those children! Santa can’t be ruined for them!” Mom clucks, grabbing the Santa jacket and working to help Declan back in it. There isn’t much blood on the beard, and Mom dabs at it, frantic. “We need to get you back in that chair.”

“Mom’s just worried we won’t get a picture with you guys,” Amy says drolly.

“Picture?” Declan asks in a ragged voice. The mall cops come over and I walk away to answer questions. The long line makes this all tough, with a million questions that need to be addressed. Declan casts a long look my way. I can’t tell if he’s more upset about his injured nose or being left alone to converse with my mother.

I dispense with the mall security by begging for an hour to clear the line, which seems to have tripled. Declan’s peeling himself off Mom and Amy is texting. He settles in Santa’s chair to thunderous applause and I realize: we have no photographer.

Great.

As if on cue, Marsha walks past carrying some shopping bags. She comes over behind the Santa chair and reaches for her clipboard.

“I’ll take over. As long as I get to sit on Santa’s lap for an extra long time,” she says with a wink. I have no leverage here, so I just nod. Noddy the Elf.

“Hot Santa,” Amy says as I walk past him to join her, shaking her phone at me. “Word’s getting out. Look at all those women in line.”

I peer into the crowd. “They don’t have any kids with them.”

“So?”

“Shouldn’t you bring a kid to see Santa?”

“I think they just want to sit in Santa’s lap and visit the North Pole, if you know what I mean,” Amy says, snickering.

“She means they want to sit on Declan’s penis,” Mom translates.

CHAPTER FIVE

“**T**HANKS, MOM,” I cough, “for the explanation.”

“Just being helpful! Oh, look—there’s Agnes!” Mom runs off toward the end of the increasingly long line. Agnes is a ninety-something regular in Mom’s yoga classes.

Declan is warm and gracious with each child who comes through, and if I weren’t completely gobsmacked by how helping Greg out has turned my boyfriend into a Special Ops CIA dude who speaks Russian, I would pay more attention to my ovaries. They appear to be clapping, cheering, fanning themselves and putting on makeup for a special occasion with Santa, because damn if Declan isn’t amazing with the kids.

Charming and fatherly and sweet, yet ruthlessly efficient. The perfect blend of high-powered executive and Chevy-commercial dad.

He’s made to be a father.

A giggly woman *sans* child asks if she can sit in Santa’s lap and he says, “I’m taking all the little kids first, and then we’ll work our way through the big kids,” adding a wink.

I look through the line. There are about ten kids sprinkled in among the forty or so folks queued up. I walk out and pull the kids and grateful parents forward.

“Hot Santa is kind of a dick,” the rejected woman mumbles, walking away.

My mother hands her a candy cane and a yoga business card. “Merry Christmas!” The woman just glares and mutters to the other women in line. The single women in line thin out, about half leaving.

“Once you’re done with the kids, can senior citizens be next? This bladder isn’t as young as it used to be,” shouts a familiar voice.

“Ho ho ho,” Declan shouts, then mumbles to me, “I’ve been peed on enough. Don’t need to add Agnes to it. Do whatever she wants.”

“What is Agnes doing here?” I ask Mom, who turns out to be remarkably helpful, handing out candy canes and directing people to the pay station. Amy wanders off to huff the Lush bath products.

“I canceled yoga today when I learned you were coming here, and when they asked why there was a huge stampede of people who figured they might catch a glimpse of Declan. No one ever dreamed they’d get to sit in his lap!”

“Neither did he.”

Her eyes take in my costume. “You’re a little bigger than me, but not much. You get to keep that costume? Can I borrow it?”

Declan waves me over and I walk away from her without a single word, because I know why she wants to borrow it, and while costumes can be cleaned, brains can’t. Once that image is imprinted in my mind—of Mom and Dad playing Santa and the Naughty Elf—I might as well get an official Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot range model air rifle—

And shoot my eyes out.

We get through the kids and Declan begs for a short break. Out comes the “Santa is Feeding the Reindeer—Back in Five Minutes!” sign. Declan walks around back and stretches. The mall cops seize on the chance and come over to explain that the Russian dude was a garden-variety scammer, telling parents that for an extra \$40 he’d make sure they got their pictures to them on CD on the spot. He’d pulled the same scam at five other malls this season.

And a fingerprint check showed he was part of a mafia ring, too.

“Russian? You speak Russian? We’ve been dating for how long and I don’t know this?” I bark.

He shrugs. “There’s a lot we don’t know about each other. What foreign languages do you speak?”

“Southie and Pig Latin.”

“See! I didn’t know that. You polyglot.”

The security force people leave us alone and Declan takes a minute to hydrate and just breathe without a little kid on his knee. I look down the long walkway in front of us and do a double take.

“This section really brings out the crazies,” I say.

“Your mom’s a bit weird, but crazy might be an overstatement—”

“Not her. I mean, she is, but—see that guy walking toward us?” I point to a tall, older man wearing glasses and a brown down coat. He walks slowly, shoulders hunched, and is carrying a cat in his arms.

A cat wearing reindeer antlers, and as he gets closer—

“Is that cat wearing a red nose that lights up?” Declan whispers out of the side of his mouth.

“Holy smokes!” I peep. “What a nutcase.” The guy comes closer and avoids eye contact. The area is loud and the glow of red and green Christmas lights makes everything a bit dim, but he stands out. I’ve never seen a cat so angry before, either. So grumpy. So pissed off.

So—oh my God.

“DAD?”

Chuckles tips his eyes up at me, the red light from his battery-powered nose making his irises glow evil red, like Dracula’s cat come to kill Santa Claus and steal the Spirit of Christmas.

And, frankly, I can’t blame him.

“What are you doing to Chuckles?”

“More like what is your mother doing to my manhood,” Dad mumbles just as Mom comes over and makes a big to-do of the cat.

“Look at Chuckley-Wuckley!” Mom squeals, holding him out from her, arms stretched with a limp animal planning how to smother her in her sleep, his eyes glowing with hatred and LED-inspired evil.

“Chuckles is figuring out how to pull your liver out through your nose and snack on it while you writhe in death throes, Mom,” I say. My cat nods slowly and Dad shivers.

“He’s so cute, though! The family Christmas picture will be so perfect.”

Dad cuts me a look that says *Don’t even say it* as he pulls his jacket off in the stifling mall.

But I say it.

“Family Christmas picture?” I turn fifteen again. Mom has this way of making me turn into a screaming teenager with a persecution complex. “What family Christmas picture? There will be no family Christmas picture!”

“Especially if your nip is hanging out like that,” Mom says.

Amy comes back smelling like avocado, coconut, and way too many rose hips mixed with Ralph Lauren’s Polo. Like Jamba Juice meets Milton Academy.

“Walked through the perfume counter at Macy’s, huh?” Dad asks her.

“WHAT CHRISTMAS PICTURE?” I thunder as I shove my hand down the front of my bustier.

“Is that Josh over there? In line?” Amy asks me as I wrestle my own boobs like I’m the female lead in a tentacle porn movie.

“Josh?” My old coworker? Technogeek Josh, the one I tried to throw under a bus and get Greg to call today instead of

me? A red wall of fury fills me. He should be the humiliated one here, with nipple slips and peeing kids and...

I look over and sure enough, he's in line in a group of three guys, all way too stylish to be straight. I march over, hand still down my front.

"What are *you* doing here?" I demand.

He looks up, face friendly. Like his friends, he's wearing all black and grey. In a mall swimming in green and red, they're a welcome reprieve.

"Hi, Shannon! We're here for Hot Santa. What are you..." He and his three buddies watch me giving myself a breast exam. "Um, do you need some privacy?"

"Why are you guys in line? Do you have little kids with you?"

They instantly look uncomfortable. "No," Josh confesses. "We're here to see Hot Santa." He, like my sister, holds up his phone. The same damn picture of Declan in red suspenders.

"Where did you learn about this?" I demand.

"Jessica Coffin," Josh and his friends intone.

"You realize you're about to sit on my boyfriend's lap!"

Josh goes from embarrassed to mildly horrified. Then kind of interested. "Really? *Declan* is Hot Santa?"

"Declan McCormick?" one of his friends asks, fanning himself. "Oh, hot, hot, smoking hot Santa! I've got a lump of coal he can turn into a diamond by letting me shove it in—"

"Yes!" I shout. "Mine!" I growl savagely. "MINE!" My girls are in proper place, but the g-string cuts into my ass, giving me a Brazilian. It's like a built-in Epilady string.

"That is hot," Josh says in an admiring voice.

"No. Just...no." I can feel a complete public meltdown coming on.

“You wear jealousy well,” one of his friends murmurs. He looks at his phone. “Hey! Coupon for Lush!” They all skitter off and I wonder what I’m missing with this whole Lush craze.

I’m not about to find out, though. Something far more lush is in my immediate future.

A strong, insistent hand circles my forearm. “Ho, ho, ho, little elf, Santa needs your help,” Declan says in a jocular voice. A bunch of kids, all of Josh’s friends, and ten women in line wave at Santa, who is now dragging me off to the employee break room, where he slams the dented metal door shut and deadbolts it. He rips the beard off, slips out of the Santa jacket, and—

Hot Santa’s hot mouth is on me. Hands roam over the slutty elf costume, soon finding their way inside the bustier, and Declan is *not* just readjusting my headlights. He pulls one breast out and tongues the nipple, making it rock hard.

“We can’t have sex in here!”

“You’d prefer I ravish you on Santa’s chair, in public?” He pulls my other breast out and sucks lightly. My entire body tightens and twangs like a plucked guitar string. “Kinky.” He pulls back and gives my body a visual once-over. “I *like* kinky.”

“I’m not having sex in the Christmas Village of a mall!” My words come out more like a moan than a protest, because his mouth feels so damn good on my caged breasts, the slick heat of his warm tongue forcing my blood to pound through me like the 1812 orchestra, cannons at the ready for the big finish.

“Then this will have to do.” He pulls the tight costume down my body, the cold, painted concrete wall behind me stinging my shoulders, back, and hips. His mouth is all over me, his chest pressed against my belly, those suspenders rubbing against just the right parts as he deliciously peels me out and I’m standing there in nothing but fishnet thigh-highs.

“Oh my God, Shannon,” he whispers, eyes eating me up. “You are so beautiful.” My red nub is beeping so loudly it sounds like Rudolph’s nose. I grab the red suspenders and slide them off each shoulder and he drops trou, then he drops *trou*, and oh, Santa baby—

“I’m going to explode if I can’t get in you, Shannon,” he hisses as his naked body becomes a wall of hot, silky flesh pressed into mine.

I reach between his legs and cradle him. “I can tell you’re Santa,” I murmur.

“Huh?”

“Santa’s sac.” I make a move that makes him groan and chuckle.

“What does that—”

“It’s so big because he only comes once a year.”

“You’re making Santa scrotum jokes when we’re—oh, you naughty girl.” And he pulls back and spans me, hard, the sound like a thunderclap of erotic dreams come to life. Somehow a condom appears in his hand. Perhaps it’s a little holiday magic.

“That stings!” But I open my legs, and he’s in me in seconds. Jokes fade, our bodies releasing all the pent-up lust and frustration.

“You are so hot,” he mutters in my ear, thighs tensing, his body primed for climax. We have mere minutes, and while I normally need more foreplay than one spank and a ball fondle (for him), my orgasm is at the ready, eager for Santa to empty his sac at my place.

The friction and the slick of our bodies working together, all fire and need, the clench of his hands on my hips, the slow drag of my fingernails against his back are almost enough.

“Speak Russian to me,” I beg, and he does, making my core clench instantly, his tongue on my earlobe the final touch that makes me burst into fireworks. His body tenses and I feel

his heat pour into me, even through the condom, his shudder and hoarse cry caused by me. Me.

Mine.

As we slump against the wall, the snickering starts.

“Oh, Santa!” I moan.

“Oh, Slutty Elf!” he groans.

I burst out laughing so hard I push him out of me as he finishes, giggles overcoming us as we give in to the absolute absurdity of the past hour and a half.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” he whispers in my ear, fingers grazing my bare shoulder, tracing a line down to my nipple. His hot breath tickles my hair as he kisses me slowly, finally finding my mouth.

“You aren’t too bad yourself, Santa,” I whisper when we break apart, warmed through.

“Chuckles in a reindeer costume,” he laughs, reaching down to remove the condom, tie it off, and throw it in a trash can next to...another condom. Oh, gross. Who has sex in a mall employee break room—

Oh.

People like *us*.

“What did you say to me? In Russian?” I ask as I straighten my stockings and try to squeeze myself back into the sausage casing that masquerades as my elf costume.

He’s buttoning his Santa coat and doesn’t look up, just laughing to himself.

“Declan?”

He won’t look up. “Let’s just say Santa’s sac will be visiting you quite a bit more often than once a year, and I need to look up the Russian word for ‘slutty.’ I only know the word for ‘whore.’”

“You called me a *whore* while we were having sex?” I twist around to catch his eye so fast the g-string nearly gives me a colonoscopy.

“Not on purpose.” He opens the door and we walk out into the industrial hallway toward the public bathrooms.

“Not on purpose? You mean, like, ‘Whoops! I called you a whore in Russian while buried balls deep in you,’ like you might say, ‘Whoops, I forgot to pick up milk while I was at the store’?”

My words echo down the linoleum-floored hallway. And then I realize we’re not alone.

“See?” Mom says to Dad. “I told you we’re not the only ones who play The KGB Agent and the Bond Girl.”

CHAPTER SIX

“**I** AM GOING to pretend I never heard that,” Dad says, making a beeline for the men’s room. He hands a still-fuming Chuckles over to Mom, who strokes his fur and hums “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” while Chuckles raises one paw and—if he had claws—looks like he’s imagining how he’d stroke Mom’s vocal cords and shred them while singing “Kumbaya.”

In that reindeer getup he looks an awful lot like Anthony Hopkins playing Hannibal.

“We need to get back to work!” Declan announces, storming off.

“Sounds like Santa was already in someone’s chimney, busy at work—”

“MOM!”

I storm off and follow Declan. We come to the end of the hall and into the main part of the mall to raucous applause. The line is twice as long now, but no one has kids with them. It’s all elderly women and gay men.

Declan goes behind the Santa chair and I realize I need caffeinated reinforcement. I stumble over to the espresso cart near the service desk and dig into my breasts again. I can store anything in there, including a sweat-soaked twenty.

At least, I hope that’s sweat...

Two double Mexican mochas later, I come back to find Declan already in the chair, Amy and Mom there to help, and a series of old ladies from Mom’s yoga class tittering. I drink as much of my spicy-hot nirvana as I can before setting it down and getting back to work.

“You don’t smell like Santa,” one of them giggles, making fun of a line from the movie *Elf*. “You smell like beef and cheese!”

“Actually, he smells like sex,” Mom says cheerfully. I kick her.

“Elves can’t kick people!” Amy informs me. I kick her, too.

“Shannon the Violent Elf,” Amy mutters as she hands a candy cane to yet another old lady who just got more male muscle contact from my boyfriend than she’d had since he was born.

And then:

“Hi, Auntie Thannon!”

I look at Mom and Amy. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Mom kicks *me*. “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. Now smile!”

“Smiling is my favorite,” I say as I frown. Chuckles nods.

“Auntie Thannon!” Jeffrey and Tyler sprint through the crowd and both of them leap into my arms at the same time, knocking me backwards onto my ass. Something in my costume rips.

“Day-um!” Amy says just as Dad appears, his face shocked as he quickly looks away.

“Um, honey? Cross your legs. No one needs to see your clam,” Mom whispers in my ear.

“You have a clam?” Jeffrey asks. “I have a hermit crab. What’s your pet’s name?”

“What a nice surprise!” I shout in an overly friendly voice. Carol comes up behind them, eyes turned to triangles, narrowed with laughter at my appearance. “I thought the kids were too sick for you to work here.”

She ignores that comment. “Shannon the Christmas Can-Can Dancer. How nice.”

“At least there’s no nip slip,” I mutter.

“Lip slip,” Mom says, pointing to my crotch. A three-inch tear in the costume has, um, made private parts of me not so private.

I look around frantically for anything I can wear, then spot it. Perfect.

I wrap Declan’s green cashmere sweater around my waist.

“That’s cashmere!” Mom gasps. “It will pill!”

“My labia are on display in a place where people are snapping pictures at a rate faster than the paparazzi following Lindsay Lohan.”

“But it’s cashmere!” She’s scandalized. I don’t care.

“We’re here to see Santa and take the family Christmas picture,” Carol explains.

“There is no family Christmas picture!” I scream. My cries echo through the high-ceilinged mall at the exact moment the Muzak system cuts short and the service desk announces:

“We will now start the canine Santa time. I repeat, bring your favorite furry kids on down to Christmas Village and get some bow-wow-wow holiday cheer.” The clerk says this with the enthusiasm of a Brazilian announcing Germany’s win in the World Cup.

“Let’s give Tyler and Jeffrey a turn first,” Mom pleads as a slow trickle of dogs on leashes, attached to green-and-red-covered owners, makes its way to the Christmas Village.

Carol grabs five-year-old Tyler, marches over to Declan, and unceremoniously plunks him down. Tyler hates strangers. Despises face hair. Can’t stand loud noises. And yet he looks calmly at Declan with absolutely no facial expression whatsoever, eyes blinking.

“What do you want Santa to bring you, buddy?” Declan asks in a soft voice, familiar with my nephew’s language disorder. For a kid who can’t say much, little Tyler looks Declan firmly in the eye and says:

“You need to pee.”

Tyler confuses “I” and “you” and is potty trained, but...

Declan jumps up and Carol swoops in, hurrying my little nephew off to the bathroom as his older brother, eight-year-old Jeffrey, climbs shyly onto Declan’s—er, Santa’s—lap.

“I don’t need to pee,” Jeffrey assures us. His lisp that was deeply pronounced just eight months ago has faded, a hint of it left. His features have broadened and he’s in third grade now, on the cusp of being a bigger boy. This might even be his final year in Santa’s lap.

Mom snaps picture after picture, ignoring her duties and reveling in being Grandma. Dad beams and records the whole little moment as Jeffrey chatters on and on and on, giving Santa a list of requests longer than anything you’d find on the wish list of one of the wives in those fancy reality television shows about over-consuming rich people.

Carol rushes back with a (hopefully) emptied Tyler as we all hear Jeffrey loudly request the latest video game system, and then he goes quiet.

“But I have one final thing, and Santa?” he whispers.

“Yes?”

“First of all, I know you’re really Declan, because Santa needs lots of helpers, and you’re one of them.”

Declan, er...Santa just smiles.

“But, um, I’ll ask anyway.” He goes still, his face falling. I swallow, my mouth dry, and all the ambient sounds of the mall fade to a series of whispers, like time slows down.

“I don’t need any of those video games or systems or points. I don’t even need the robot. What I really want is my dad.”

Tears prick at my eyes, and Carol’s hand floats to her mouth, trembling.

“Can you tell the real Santa I just want my dad for Christmas? Or, maybe”—Jeffrey’s eyebrows connect in concentration—“maybe if he’s too busy, like Mom says, maybe just *a* dad?”

Declan’s eyes register so many emotions—surprise, anger, compassion, confusion, befuddlement—but he manages to stay composed as Mom, Amy, Dad, and I try to secretly wipe tears away. Dad’s spare hand is in a fist, the other one still taping the scene. He’s angry not at Jeffrey (of course), but at Todd, my older sister’s ex-husband who took off and who hasn’t seen his sons in far too long.

Casting his eyes about, Declan catches mine and I shrug in solidarity. I don’t know what to say, either. Whatever Declan says is fine, because no one can do the right thing here.

Other than Jeffrey and Tyler’s father, and he isn’t exactly in the running to provide a Christmas miracle.

“Tell you what, buddy,” Declan says quietly. Carol is furiously wiping tears away and turns her back on the scene. Mom’s standing there, sniffing. Amy is looking at me, our exchange one that doesn’t need words.

“What?” Jeffrey says, eyes down. A rumble of dog sounds builds around us as big dogs and little dogs, hairy dogs and shaved dogs, all line up for their chance at Santa.

“I’ll tell Santa what you want, just like you asked me to.”

“You will?” Jeffrey’s eyes light up, his face completely changing to one of pure joy. “Do you think he’ll help bring my dad home?”

Declan widens his eyes, the fake white eyebrows covering for a multitude of emotions no eight-year-old could understand. Hell, the adult man in the costume is clearly struggling to comprehend.

“Um, well, Jeffrey, I don’t know. Santa isn’t all-powerful, but I know—I *know*—he’ll try.”

Jeffrey nods somberly. “Okay.”

“But I know something else.”

“What?”

“Even if your dad doesn’t come for Christmas, I can’t be a dad for you, but I can be an uncle.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

MOM GASPS AND shoots her eyes my way. I drop the candy cane in my hand. Everyone stops breathing. Declan's eyes are only on Jeffrey, whose head is bent so close their foreheads are touching.

“Uncleth are great! I've never had one before! My dad only has sisterth. Mom only has sisterth. I have a ton of aunth so I don't need any more, but an uncle is wicked cool!” His lisp comes out when he's excited.

Declan envelops Jeffrey in an enormous bear hug. His eyes are glistening with undropped tears as he says to the boy, “Be good for your mother, and nice to your brother.”

Jeffrey whispers something in Declan's ear. It makes them both smile, and Declan says, “You bet.”

And then my little nephew scampers off, leaving the rest of us with shattered hearts. Declan looks at me and winks, then addresses the crowd.

“Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas,” Declan bellows as he sees the crowd of dog owners lined up. If we weren't so crushed for time I'd try to talk to him—

Uncle?

—but we can't. The new Santa is coming in fifteen minutes, but we have to do this last bit.

Mommy Masochist comes running over with a yappy Bichon Frisé in her hands, perfectly white (of course), uncreased, and wearing green and red bows.

Dad drops Chuckles to the floor and I realize the poor cat is on a leash. No wonder he's plotting more violent deaths for us.

“I reserved my time for my family picture with our dog, Mr. Puffinschmitz Snowfighter III at exactly 4:55 p.m., which

is in exactly one minute, and I expect—”

“Is she wearing ankle laces?” Dad asks under his breath, just as—

“AAAIIYYYYYYYYY,” Mommy Masochist screams as Chuckles pees all over one ankle. She kicks Chuckles across the room, where he lands right in Santa’s lap. Declan shouts and Chuckles hisses, back arched to the full in a complete and utter feline imitation of Mommy Masochist, who is screaming in a pitch made only by dog whistles.

Two giant German Shepherds break free from their owners and descend on Chuckles and Declan, one of the dogs encasing the cat’s head entirely with its mouth, though Chuckles maneuvers just so, leaving the dog with a mouth full of antlers, clinging to Declan’s lap.

“Off! Down! Ho ho ho!” Declan shouts. Chuckles sprints to a giant water fountain and springs into the air, landing with a furtive grace on the very edge of the top marble tier of a five-layer water cascade. He pauses to lick a paw as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Chuckles!” Mom screams, racing to the fountain. “Get down!”

SPLASH! A Great Pyr jumps into the fountain, followed by a rush of dogs that resembles something out of *101 Dalmatians*. A gaggle of Segway-powered mall cops appears, blowing whistles and accomplishing absolutely nothing as Amy, Dad, Carol, Jeffrey, Tyler, me, and Declan all run to the fountain to try to do, well, *something*.

Tyler crawls into the fountain and shouts “Wa-duh! Wa-duh! Da dog is in da wa-duh!”, splashing with glee.

Carol stares in surprise. “That’s a new sentence!”

Mom, Dad and Amy grin as Jeffrey jumps in, too, and begins scooping his hands into the water and stuffing handfuls of something in his pockets. He’s soaked, and tiny dogs swim past him in the eighteen-inch-deep water, their heads tipped

up, eyes on the prize of Chuckles, who now rules over his domain.

The King of the Mall.

“Money!” Jeffrey shouts. “Fwee money! Look, Mommy. It’s fwee!”

I hear laughter behind us as a crowd of mall shoppers just takes in the scene, a few taping it. Josh is laughing in the crowd, across the large fountain from us, and he pulls his phone out. He snaps a ton of pictures as Mom cries out for Chuckles and the rest of us just laugh, the kids throwing handfuls of “fwee money” from the wishing well into the air.

A white-haired old man lingers by Santa’s seat, and I realize it’s Declan’s replacement. He’s standing next to a shapely young woman.

“Hi!” I ask. “Are you the new Santa and elf?”

She eyes me up and down. “I, uh, brought my own suit.”

“What’s ‘O O’ for?” the old man asks, looking at my boobs. I look down.

“Great. More sequins fell off,” I mutter. My breasts tell people what to say when they’re coming. Excellent. Directing the replacements to the changing area, I sigh a big, long blast of relief. We’re done.

We made it through the miracle of Christmas.

Two strong arms wrap around me, bending me backwards in a dip so low my loose hair brushes the carpet. Soft, hot lips cover mine and a fake beard presses into my face, a welcome tongue exploring and teasing as Declan’s hands hold me in place, his heart cradling me, too.

He pulls back and I look up, dizzy with desire and joy. “I love you,” I say.

“I love you, too,” he says back, then leers. “And you’re bringing that costume home.”

“My family Christmas picture! It’s ruined!” Mom cries.

Josh comes over and says something to her, the two hovering over his phone. He taps a bunch of times, then does one final tap.

“I got one. And I think it’s the best family Christmas picture ever.”

And it is.

But I don’t appreciate it when Josh sends it in to the website Awkward Family Photos, because, um, I have another wardrobe malfunction.

And their caption when they post it?

Jolly Old Saint Nip.



Thank you so much for reading Shannon and Declan’s story. What started out as a short novella turned into a 600+ page saga of life, humor, and crazy love.

Readers have asked me to continue the story of Shannon and Declan, and so I have. You can read about Declan’s proposal in the next book in the Shopping series...

Shopping for a Billionaire’s Fiancée

All of our best dates end up in the emergency room....

I planned the perfect proposal. Plenty of lobster, caviar, champagne and—her favorite—tiramisu. The perfect setting. The perfect woman. The perfect *everything*.

Dad gave me my late mother’s engagement ring, platinum and diamonds galore. Shannon wouldn’t care if I slid a giant hard-candy ring on her finger instead of a three-carat diamond designed to impress.

But my future mother-in-law, Marie, will pass out when she sets eyes on that rock, which will give us two minutes of blessed silence. That woman talks more than Kim Kardashian flashes her naked backside on the internet.

I was going to make it perfect, from the color of the tablecloth to the freshness of the roses. And it *was* perfect.

Until Shannon swallowed the ring.

✧ ✧ ✧

Thank you so much for reading Declan and Shannon's holiday story! If you haven't read the rest of the Shopping for a Billionaire series, you're in luck – there are 13 books!

[Start with *Shopping for a Billionaire*](#), the top-10 New York Times bestseller.

SNOWBOUND

CATHERINE COWLES

CHAPTER ONE

Emery

I LEANED FORWARD, squinting into the inky black night. Did rural Oregon not believe in streetlights? I'd thought I had seen darkness before, but it had nothing on this. The only light came from my headlights shining against the thickly falling snow—and the occasional passing vehicle.

My stomach twisted as the road made a sharp curve, taking me higher up the mountain. I gripped the wheel harder, my hands damp with sweat. This had been a no-good, very-bad idea, but it was too late to change course now.

A pair of headlights shone in the distance in my rearview mirror. The rhythm of my heart picked up to an erratic pace. I strained to make out the color or type of vehicle as I shuffled through the registry of cars I'd seen behind me so far. Gray Mercedes SUV. Red pickup truck. White Honda sedan. Black Toyota 4Runner.

But I couldn't make this one out; it was too far back. That was probably a good thing. They couldn't be trailing me from that distance. Except it was the dead of night, and I had my high beams on.

I swallowed hard and considered turning them off. I was already terrified of careening off one of the steep drop-offs. Traversing the mountains of Wolf Gap in the pitch-black darkness pretty much guaranteed it.

"It's not him." I spoke the words quietly to myself, saying them over and over like a mantra or a whispered prayer. Unfortunately, my prayers had basically gone unanswered of late, which was why I had made the ridiculously rash decision to pack a bag and drive two thousand miles from Nashville to middle-of-nowhere, Oregon, just days before Christmas.

Because I wanted to feel safe for the first time in a year. Wanted to remember what it was like to breathe deep and feel free. And there was only one person who'd ever made me feel that way.

It wasn't that my family wasn't amazing. My mom and brother would do anything for me. But they'd already done everything they could and had paid way too high of a price.

That twisting sensation came back. Guilt. It ate away at me more and more with every moment that passed. Because I was potentially bringing trouble to someone else's doorstep.

I let out a long, steadying breath. "He doesn't know where you are."

I'd taken every precaution imaginable. Left my cell phone at home, opting for a convenience-store burner instead. Took off in the dead of night. Slept in my car in campgrounds on the way here, instead of checking into hotels. And hadn't told a single soul where I was going. I was safe. For now.

The snowfall picked up speed and strength. The thick, white flakes clogged my windshield. I clicked my wipers so they moved at super-speed.

Normally, all of this would've enchanted me. There was nothing that said *Christmas* like a snowstorm, and the snowfall we got in Nashville was rare and a sad imitation of what was around me now. But I'd also never driven in it.

A fork in the road up ahead had me panicking and reaching for my printed directions. I didn't remember anything about a fork. I quickly scanned the paper and then jerked my head up. The deer came out of nowhere—a majestic buck with a rack that could do more damage than I wanted to imagine.

This wasn't happening. I wouldn't recover if I killed Bambi in my quest for freedom. I slammed on my brakes. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

My car slid to the right and into a hard spin. The sound that came out of my throat resembled that of a hyena—or

maybe a cat forced into water. I struggled to correct the wheel, but it only spun faster in the opposite direction.

My eyes squeezed shut. It was instinct. I didn't want to see whatever was coming. I simply braced for impact and prayed I didn't take Bambi with me when I went.

Blood roared in my ears. The world went silent around me—and there was one face I saw in my mind. One I hadn't seen in years but would've given anything to trace with my fingertips.

My car slammed into something with a sickening crunch, and my eyes flew open. Some sort of whine came from the front of my vehicle, and then the engine simply died. I pressed my hand to my chest, willing my heart to slow as I took in my surroundings.

I'd landed in some sort of snowbank. I leaned forward towards the point of impact. No, not just a snowbank. A boulder covered in snow. The entire front end of my car was smashed in. The kind of destruction that said there was no way it would run again. Not without some serious repairs, at least.

I leaned my head against the steering wheel. The urge to cry was so strong. The pressure behind my eyes and the burning in my throat were so fierce, it took everything I had to shove them down. But if I started crying now, I'd never stop.

Instead, I forced myself to sit up and reached for my purse. I pulled out the burner phone and tapped a key. The screen illuminated. No signal.

My grip on the phone tightened. "Okay, next best plan." I used the light of the phone to see my directions and the printed map. It looked as if I were only about a mile from the cabin. I did boot camp classes. I could walk a mile in the snow. No problem.

I reached into the backseat for my coat. It was the warmest I owned. I tugged it on, along with some gloves and my beanie. I shoved my purse into the duffel I'd brought with me and slung it over my shoulder.

I opened the door of my car and stepped out into the snow. “Holy fuzzy bunnies on steroids!” I’d never felt cold like this before. It was the kind of frigid that stole your breath and sank into your bones.

Sucking in air, I muttered a curse. Breathing was a mistake. It felt as if I were inhaling shards of glass. “Move, Emery. Just freaking move.”

I started in the direction of the cabin. I was on the final road now. There was no way for me to get lost and end up as a human popsicle. Not if I stuck to the road.

A path that was covered in at least a foot of snow. “Don’t think about that. One foot in front of the other.”

Even with the strain of the hike higher up the mountain, a shiver ran through me. Ten minutes later, I couldn’t stop shaking. I thought for a moment about turning back for my car. At least that would provide some shelter from the elements—but but no heat.

I pressed on, as true fear washed through me. I hoped Bambi was living his best life right now, appreciating my sacrifice. I was getting punchy in my hypothermic state.

A light glimmered through the trees, and my heart picked up its pace. My legs followed. I would’ve broken into a run if I could’ve managed it. Instead of following the road, I used the light as my guide, cutting through the trees and wading through snowdrifts.

By the time the cabin came into view, I was soaked to the bone and shaking like a leaf. I could just make out the building in the dark. A perfect, quaint escape from the world. Nothing like the man who resided inside.

I forced myself forward, up the steps, and towards the red front door. I knocked before I had a chance to second-guess my options.

Footsteps sounded on the other side, and the door opened.

I sucked in a sharp breath. He looked completely different and yet exactly the same. His hair had darkened over the years. His jaw grown sharper and covered in stubble. But those green eyes. They were the same ones I always got lost in.

“Em?”

My nickname on his lips was almost enough to bring me to my knees. I couldn't get out a word in response.

His brow furrowed. “What are you doing here?”

“I need help.”

CHAPTER TWO

Cooper

I WAS GOING to hell. Emery was freezing, standing in my doorway, soaking wet. Talking about needing help. And the only thing I could think about was kissing the life out of her. Drew would kill me if he had any idea that thought was rattling around in my brain about his little sister.

I shook my head. As if that would somehow clear it of the thoughts that had forced me to run fast and hard from Nashville years ago. Running hadn't helped, and neither would this.

Stepping back, I motioned Emery inside, my gaze running over every inch of her. I wanted to commit every detail to memory. Even though she was pale and shaking, she was so damn beautiful. But Em didn't need me gawking at her right now.

"Come on. Let's get you warmed up. Then we can talk."

She nodded robotically and followed me deeper into the cabin. I motioned to the bathroom between the two small bedrooms. "I'll get you some dry clothes to change into. And a hot shower should help."

Emery nodded again without speaking. That wasn't like her. Em was always so full of life and fire. Never afraid to speak her mind.

"Wait," she said, holding up a duffel. "I have clothes in here."

I took in the bag. It looked reasonably weatherproof. "Okay. Just yell if you need anything."

She gave me another bobbleheaded nod and closed herself in the bathroom. I frowned at the door as the water turned on.

Forcing myself away from the bathroom, I moved into the living room, throwing a few more logs on the fire.

Maybe I should call Drew. There was no service up here, but I had my satellite phone for emergencies—the same one I carried into the national forest when I was on duty.

My fingers twitched to reach for it. To try to figure out what was going on with Emery. But something told me to wait. Maybe it was the questions I'd get back from my best friend. Maybe it was that I wanted to hear it from Em herself.

The water switched off, and I headed for the tiny kitchen to heat some milk. A few minutes later, I heard the door open. Stepping into the living room, I held out a mug to Emery. "Hot chocolate."

She smiled down at the cup. "My favorite."

"Extra marshmallows."

Emery chuckled. "You always did know the way to my heart."

My ribs tightened around my lungs, making it hard to breathe. "What are you doing here, Em?"

She bit her bottom lip. "It was probably dumb to come—"

"I didn't say that. I asked why you showed up on my doorstep in the middle of a blizzard with no car and nearly freezing to death. How'd you even get up the mountain?" She could've gotten lost and ended up hypothermic.

"My car's in a snowbank about a mile down the road."

A muscle fluttered in my cheek. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I don't exactly have your number."

I'd made sure of that.

"And I didn't want anyone to know that I was coming," she hurried to say.

My eyes narrowed, and I motioned to the couch. "Sit."

She scowled at me. “I’m not a dog.”

“Please,” I added.

“That’s a little better.” Emery eased onto the couch and set her hot chocolate on the coffee table. She reached for a blanket on the back of the sofa and pulled it across her lap. She stared at it for a moment, blinking a few times. Tears glittered in her eyes. “You kept it?”

“Of course, I did.” I could no more get rid of the blanket she’d knitted for me as a college graduation present than shoot my hand off. “Talk to me, Em.”

She looked up, her gray eyes glittering. “I messed up.”

“Then we’ll fix it.”

“This is bad, Coop. I thought he was a good guy, but he’s anything but.”

My spine went ramrod straight. “Who?”

Emery jerked upright at the growl in my voice. She swallowed hard, gripping the blanket. “His name is Steven. We went on a few dates about a year ago. He seemed nice at first. Works in the governor’s office. We met while volunteering at an animal shelter.”

My hands fisted so tightly; I nearly cracked a knuckle. I’d known what leaving meant. That she would move on. Date, fall in love, get married. But the idea of someone else touching her, hearing the laugh I felt was only for me...it tore at something deep inside.

Emery worried her bottom lip again. “He got overbearing so fast. Wanted things to move too quickly. I told him I wasn’t interested, and he just wouldn’t back off. He kept calling and calling. I changed my number. He got the new one. He’d show up at my work to bring me flowers. It was beyond awkward. And I started to get scared.”

“Did you tell Drew?” I asked. Em and her brother were close. He’d taken on the role of father when their dad passed.

She buried her face in her hands. “It was so bad. Drew confronted Steven, and Steven baited him into throwing a punch. He has a lot of connections, and Drew ended up in lockup overnight.”

“Were charges pressed?”

Emery shook her head. “Steven said he didn’t want to hurt someone so important to me. But it was almost like that was a threat. When I tried to get a restraining order, the cops thought I was just retaliating against Steven for getting my brother thrown in jail.”

I muttered a slew of curses under my breath. “Then what happened?”

She shivered and pulled the blanket tighter around herself. “He broke in one night. No one would believe me that it was him. But I just *knew*. A few pairs of my underwear were missing, and there was a red rose on my pillow.”

Tears slid down Emery’s cheeks, and it was more than I could take. I pulled her into my lap, cradling her to my chest. “It’s okay. You’re safe now.” And I’d do anything to keep her that way.

CHAPTER THREE

Emery

AN ENGINE SOUNDED in the distance, and my head snapped up, away from Cooper's warmth, the feel of his arms wrapped around me, and the steady beat of his heart. He rubbed a hand up and down my back. "It's okay. It's just Hayes, the friend I called."

I swallowed, my throat sticking on the movement. "The sheriff."

I hadn't had the best experiences with law enforcement in Nashville. They were skeptical, at best. Insulting, at worst.

Cooper pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "I told you, he's a good guy. Got into law enforcement for all the right reasons."

I looked up at Cooper. "Like you?"

Coop had wanted to be a park ranger for as long as I could remember. And he'd made it happen. For years, he'd worked in the national parks outside of Nashville but then he'd run to the other side of the country to serve in the mountains here.

Cooper smiled. "I just like losing myself in the wilderness."

I couldn't get myself to answer his grin because he'd left me behind to do it.

A knock sounded on the door, pulling me out of my spiraling thoughts. Cooper moved me from his lap to the couch and stood. I missed his heat instantly. The comfort. The safety.

He pulled open the door, revealing a man in head-to-toe snow gear, holding a helmet and goggles. Cooper motioned him in. "Get inside, it's brutal out there."

Hayes moved towards the mudroom, unzipping his parka and stepping out of snow pants and boots. It left him in jeans and a flannel shirt. “Thank God for snowmobiles.” He glanced in my direction. “That your car in the snowbank a ways back?”

I nodded, my face heating. “I don’t have much experience driving in snow.”

Curiosity filled his expression. “Where are you from?”

I looked at Cooper, who nodded. “Nashville.”

Hayes’ gaze traveled from me to Cooper and back again. “So, you want to tell me what has Coop making me haul ass up the mountain in a blizzard?”

“Easton...” Coop warned.

He held up a hand. “Happy to do it. I’d just like to know why.”

Cooper lowered himself next to me on the couch and took my hand. “She has a stalker.”

All humor fled Hayes’ face as he took the chair next to mine. “Start at the beginning.”

Cooper squeezed my hand encouragingly. I told Hayes everything I’d shared with Cooper. I added some additional details. The lewd nature of many of the phone calls. The ones that woke me in the middle of the night but were nothing but heavy breathing. Hayes listened with only empathy in his expression. He took notes on his phone and interjected for clarification now and then.

When I finished, Cooper pulled me against his side. “What can we do?”

Hayes looked at Cooper and then me. “I can write up an emergency order of protection tonight and have it served to Steven in Nashville. But you have to be in my jurisdiction.” He glanced at Cooper. “Can I list this as her residence?”

He nodded. “She’ll be here for as long as it takes for this creep to leave her alone.”

A shadow passed over Hayes’ dark blue eyes. One I recognized. Something that came from seeing some of the darkness the world had to offer.

Hayes scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “I’m gonna be honest. I don’t have a good feeling about what I’m hearing. He’s showing clear signs of obsession. That doesn’t go away quickly.” That shadow was back, and it danced around his irises. “Might not ever go away. Our best hope is that he violates a restraining order, and we can put him in jail.”

Nausea swept through me at the thought. “I can’t put Coop at that kind of risk. Maybe I could rent an apartment in town —”

“You’re staying here,” Cooper gritted out.

“I think that’s the safer play. I wouldn’t want you alone right now,” Hayes said.

I turned to Cooper. “What about when you’re on duty? You leave for weeks at a time.”

“I’ve got some time off I haven’t used.”

“I can’t make you do that.”

Cooper pulled me closer. “You’re not *making* me do anything.”

I stared up into those emerald-green eyes. I wanted to lean in. To close the distance between us.

Hayes cleared his throat. “I’m gonna get going. Get this written up tonight so I can call Nashville PD first thing tomorrow.”

I forced my gaze away from Cooper. “They’ll tell you I’m crazy.”

“And I’ll tell them they’re entitled to their opinion as long as they do their damn job.”

My lips gave the faintest twitch. “Thanks, Hayes.”

He stood, looking down at me. “Don’t want to see anyone get hurt because of an obsession like this. You be careful. Stick with Coop. He’ll keep you safe.”

I wanted to stick with Coop a little too much. Cooper stood, too, talking with Hayes in muted tones as Hayes put on his snow gear.

I toyed with a loose thread on the blanket as the guys said their farewells. The strand needed to be repaired. I hadn’t packed any of my knitting tools, but I’d bet I could get some in town.

The couch moved as Cooper sat back down. “What’s going through that head of yours?”

“I need to fix your blanket.” I held up the affected corner.

“That’s really all you’re thinking about?”

“Why’d you leave?” The question was out of my mouth before I had a chance to stop it. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“You know, Em.”

I lifted my gaze to his. “Do I?”

Cooper leaned back on the couch cushions with a sigh. “We were spending too much time together. I was thinking about things that had no business being in my head.”

My pulse did a stutter-step in my neck and then rose to a full-out sprint. “Would it be so wrong to want me?”

The only way to describe Cooper’s expression was *pained*. “You guys went through so much when your dad died, and Drew put so much pressure on himself to take care of you and your mom. He was always so protective of you. Never wanted any of our friends anywhere near you. I just—I couldn’t add more stress to his plate.”

I got it. I really did. Drew had nearly killed himself with how hard he worked after Dad died. Dad’s cancer had left us

with more medical bills than we knew what to do with. Drew had worked two jobs so I could stay in college. He'd immediately stepped into those shoes that Dad had left empty.

But that didn't change how much it had hurt when Cooper left. "You broke my heart. It felt like I was losing everything all over again."

"I'm sorry, Em. I am. I just—" He reached out a hand, cupping my face. "I never want to cause you pain." His thumb stroked my cheek. "Thought about you every damn day. Hell, sometimes it felt like every moment."

"I missed you," I croaked. "I don't want to lose you again."

Fire blazed in those emerald depths. "It may have taken seeing you scared out of your mind and frozen half to death to knock some damn sense into me, but I don't want to lose you either. Never again."

CHAPTER FOUR

Emery

IN A FLASH, Cooper hauled me against him and pushed to his feet. “You want this with me?”

My fingers threaded through his hair, and I met his mouth in a kiss that had years of need poured into it. Of heartbreak. Of missing him. It said everything I didn’t have the words to say.

Cooper strode towards his bedroom, not losing my lips for a second. I pressed myself harder against him, not wanting even a millimeter of distance. I was scared that if I lost the contact, even for a moment, I might lose it forever.

He lowered me to his bed, his hands framing my face as my fingers fisted in his shirt, not wanting to let go. His thumb swept over my cheekbone. “I’m not going anywhere.”

My throat burned. “Prove it.” The words were a low whisper.

Cooper’s eyes flared with a mix of need and something more. His fingers found the hem of my sweatshirt, taking it and my t-shirt off in one fell swoop. Those green eyes heated as he swallowed. “No bra?”

I fought the blush trying to rise to my cheeks. “I wanted to be cozy.”

Cooper reached out, his hands cupping my breasts, thumbs circling my nipples. “I like cozy.”

I let out a low moan as I pushed into his hands. I was desperate for more contact, pressure, anything that was Coop.

Then his hands were gone and pulling off my sweats, along with the sleep shorts beneath them. The rush of cool air had me sucking in a breath.

“I’ve got you.” Cooper trailed his hands up my legs until his fingers found my heat. He stroked and toyed, driving me higher with each movement.

I arched into him, my hips moving of their own volition. “Coop.”

“Need something, Em?”

“You.” It was all I had ever been missing.

Cooper shifted so fast; I barely caught the movements as he pulled off his shirt and jeans. He froze. “Shit, I need a condom.”

“I’m on the pill, and it’s been a long time for me.” I didn’t want anything between us in this moment. I wanted to feel all of him.

Cooper’s expression softened. “It’s been a long time for me, too, and I’ve been checked.” He stroked my cheek. “That trust. It means the world.”

I rose, taking his mouth in a kiss that said it all. When I pulled away, Cooper’s eyes were a sea of green fire.

“Love you, Em. Always have, always will.”

My chest seized. “Never thought I would hear those words from you.”

“But they were always there. Even if I couldn’t say them.”

I pressed my palm over his heart. “I love you, too.”

Cooper slid into me then. A slow glide that resulted in a delicious stretch.

“Coop…” It was all I could manage to say.

We found a beautiful rhythm. One unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. One that I knew would change me forever.

My back arched as my hips rose to meet Cooper’s, but I didn’t lose his eyes for a moment. Instead, I drowned in everything that was Cooper: his gaze, his touch, his love. His thrusts picked up speed as his thumb circled my clit.

“Fall with me, Em.”

That was all it took to send me spiraling—the call to do it with Cooper.

Light danced across my vision as my fingers dug into his back. We came apart together, and I knew that what we formed now would be something altogether different for us both.



I WOKE COCOONED in warmth. I swore Cooper was like my own personal electric blanket. And as delicious as the heat was, I couldn't resist shifting so I could see his face.

Cooper was so beautiful. The sight of him made my chest ache. His features were relaxed in deep sleep. A lock of hair swooped across his forehead. So very gently, I brushed it away from his face.

Then I grinned like an idiot. Beamed so wide, it actually hurt. My fingers itched to touch more—every inch of Coop. If I stayed in this bed, I'd do exactly that, and from the deep breaths he was emitting, I knew Cooper needed the sleep.

Slowly, I slid towards the edge of the bed. He didn't stir as I rose. I searched the floor in the low light, pulling on my sweats from last night and stealing a pair of Cooper's socks from his dresser.

I eased the door open and then closed it softly behind me. I padded into the kitchen, heating some milk for another mug of hot chocolate. Once that was warming me from the inside out, I moved around Cooper's home. It was so him. Simple, no frills. One bookcase filled with a wide array of titles—everything from Stephen King to Barbara Kingsolver.

The fireplace had framed photos on top that I hadn't noticed before. My eyes zeroed in on one of Drew, me, and Coop. The guys had their arms around me, and my head was thrown back mid-laugh.

He'd kept me with him. Even when I'd thought he'd moved on. The realization made my chest tighten, but with a

good kind of pain.

I forced myself away from the mantel and moved towards the front door. Cooper had set my Ugg boots by a heating grate, and they'd thoroughly dried out overnight. I slipped them on and stepped outside onto the front porch. I should've put on a jacket. The cold made my face hurt. But it was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen.

The sun rose in the east, illuminating the mountains behind the cabin. Snow blanketed everything in a thick, white cover. And the world was silent. So still. As if the snow muted everything.

I couldn't help but be pulled off the porch towards the majestic sight. I saw why Cooper loved this place. Yet my chest ached at the thought of saying goodbye to Nashville. Coop hadn't asked, but I didn't want this to be long-distance. After just one night with him, I knew I could never be away from him for long periods.

A hand clamped over my mouth, and I let out a strangled scream. Someone pulled me back into a broad form.

"You think you can run from me? Make me look like a fool after I told everyone we were working things out? Think you can spread your legs for some trashy park rent-a-cop?"

Panic surged as nausea swept through me. Steven's hot breath hit my face as I thrashed in his hold. He only gripped me tighter.

I bit down—hard—on his hand. It didn't do as much damage as I would've liked since he was wearing gloves, but it was enough to stun. His hold loosened the barest amount, and I screamed like hell.

Steven cursed and pulled a gun from the waistband of his pants. "Shut up, whore. You're gonna learn your place if it's the last thing I teach you."

The front door burst open. Cooper came charging out in only sweatpants, holding a rifle. I saw the rage sweep through

him as he took in the sight in front of him. His weapon rose in a flash. “Let her go.”

Steven held me so tightly, I struggled to breathe. “She’s mine. I’d rather see her bleed out in the snow than let her go with you.”

Cooper’s eyes narrowed, and I knew he was assessing the shot. He simply needed an opening.

I moved on instinct, bending my head forward and then throwing it back with all the force I could muster. A sickening crunch sounded, followed by a howl of pain.

I dropped to my knees, covering my head. Three shots rang out, one after the other. Then, there was nothing but ringing in my ears.

Warm arms wrapped around me, lifting me. “You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

I trembled as Cooper carried me into the house.

“I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

I burrowed into Cooper. All I wanted was his arms around me. His warmth. I didn’t know how much time passed before the sheriff’s department personnel swarmed the cabin.

Hayes was there, worry creasing his face. “You okay?”

I nodded. “Coop got me.”

“He’s handy with that rifle.” Hayes gripped Cooper’s hand in a shake. “Good aim and quick thinking.”

A muscle in Cooper’s jaw fluttered. “I just wish I would’ve gotten out there sooner.”

I leaned in closer. “You made it just in time.”

Hayes scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “It’s a good thing. I did some digging last night and found out that Steven was under investigation for a woman’s disappearance in D.C. when he was working there a few years ago.”

Cooper sucked in a sharp breath, his muscles tensing beneath me.

I placed a hand over his heart. “I’m right here. He can’t hurt me anymore.”

Hayes nodded, as more shadows danced in his eyes. “You did what you had to, Coop. You’ve got Emery right next to you, safe and unharmed. Not everyone is that lucky.”

Cooper pulled me closer against him, nuzzling my neck. “I’m not going to let you out of my sight for the next decade.”

That was just fine with me.

EPILOGUE

Emery

Christmas Day

IBURROWED DEEPER into Cooper's hold as my brother stared us down. I finally stuck out my tongue at him. "Stop giving me dirty looks."

His brows pulled together. "I'm not. I just...I never saw this coming. Coop and my sister..." He gave an exaggerated shiver as if it were the grossest thing he'd ever heard.

I scowled at him. "You make that face again, and I will tell you about our sex life in great detail."

Cooper burst out laughing, his body shaking mine with each chuckle.

Drew turned an unattractive shade of green. "That's just evil."

My mom grinned as she set down a plate of her famous Christmas cookies. "You kinda earned it, Drew." She leaned over and pressed a kiss to my temple. "Over the moon that you two finally got your act together."

Drew gaped at her. "You knew?!"

Mom rolled her eyes. "You would have to be blind not to see the sparks coming off these two."

Cooper held me tighter against himself as he laughed harder. "She's right, D. It was pretty obvious that I was head over heels for her."

My brother let out some sort of *harrumph* sound. "Some pact."

While Drew had given Cooper a bit of a hard time when he found out, he'd been so relieved that I was okay that it hadn't

gone beyond that. But I had a feeling the shit-talking would be around for a while.

I tipped my head back and kissed the underside of Cooper's jaw. "Some pacts are worth breaking."

Drew gagged. "Dear God, my eyes!"

Mom smacked him on the back of the head. "I'll take these cookies right back to the kitchen if you don't quit."

Drew grabbed a cookie and shoved it into his mouth. "Shutting up."

My mom turned in my direction. "Want to help me prep dinner?"

"Sure." I didn't want to leave the warmth of Cooper's hold, but I knew that was code for Mom-talk time. We hadn't had much of a chance since she and my brother had arrived in Wolf Gap yesterday evening.

She wrapped an arm around my shoulders, guiding me towards the kitchen. "You holding up okay?"

"Is it wrong to say I'm happy?"

"Of course, it isn't."

"A man died, Mom."

She shuddered. "Not a good one. I'd say it's justice. Maybe that family who lost their daughter will have a modicum of peace now."

The Nashville police had searched Steven's house and found evidence that linked him to the woman's disappearance. Even now, dogs were searching a state park in Virginia for her body.

"I don't know if you ever get peace from something like that."

Mom pulled me into a tight hug. "I'm so glad you thought quick and fought back. And that Cooper has such fast reflexes."

“Me, too,” I whispered.

“Your dad always loved Coop,” she said, still holding on.

My chest gave a painful squeeze. “I know.”

“He used to say to me, *I hope Emery finds a young man like that.*”

I pulled back a fraction, my eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “Really?”

She nodded. “He would’ve loved this. And he would’ve gotten a real kick out of giving Drew a hard time about it all.”

“I miss him.”

“I know, baby. Me, too. But he’s still with us. Inside us. He made us all who we are today.”

I wiped a stray tear from under my eye. “He had the best heart.”

Mom laid her hand on my chest. “The same one you’ve got.”

“Everything okay?” Coop asked softly.

Mom beamed at him. “Just had to check on my girl, and we got a little emotional.” She made a shooing motion. “Go on and eat some cookies. Both of you.”

“I thought I was supposed to help you with dinner.”

She rolled her eyes again. “You know that’s not why I asked you in here. You’ll just get in my way while I’m cooking.”

I chuckled. “You’re a one-woman army.”

Cooper wrapped an arm around my shoulders and bent to whisper in my ear. “Come with me.”

“Okay.” I couldn’t resist.

We left my brother chowing down on cookies and put on our jackets. Coop pulled my beanie lower on my head and

then wrapped one of his coats around me. “You have a city jacket. You need the real thing.”

I scrunched up my nose at him. “Mine’s fine.”

He lifted a brow. “You weren’t cold walking up here the other night?”

“Okay, you may have a point...”

He gave me a quick kiss and led me outside. The sun had already set, and the sky was full of glittering stars. I leaned back against Cooper as we took it all in. “It’s beautiful here.”

“I think I’ll keep the cabin when I move back to Nashville. We can come out on vacations. Maybe I’ll rent it out the rest of the time.”

I whirled on him. “You’re coming back to Nashville?”

His brows drew together. “I told you I wasn’t leaving you again.”

“I know, but I thought I’d have to move here.”

Cooper framed my face with his hands. “Em, your family means the world to you. I’d never force you to do that.”

“It wouldn’t be forcing me. I love you. I don’t want a life where I don’t see you every day.”

His lips brushed against mine. “I love you, too. That’s why I already called my old boss in Nashville. He said I can start back the first of the year.”

“You’re sure you’re okay leaving this?”

“Em, don’t you already know? I only ever want to be where you are.”



Curious about Sheriff Hayes Easton? Get his story in *Tattered Stars*, a small-town, enemies-to-lovers romance with all the suspense you love. [Read now >](#)

A VERY DARE CHRISTMAS

CARLY PHILLIPS

A MONTH BEFORE Christmas, Riley Dare strode through the mall, taking in the holiday décor. The mistletoe, thick tinsel wrapped around every post and railing, the candy canes hanging from the ceiling and the Santa Claus at the far corner, all reminded her it was Christmas time. Having grown up in Florida, she didn't need snow or cold weather to tell her it was the holidays. She'd take her seventy degree Miami weather any time.

She walked past Santa's set up. The line for the jolly man stretched throughout the entire first floor filled with mothers and screaming kids. She was grateful she and Ian had brought their daughter, Rainey, and son, Jack, to meet Santa a few days ago, before the crazy lines began. Her four-year-old had taken one look at Saint Nick and screamed bloody murder. Needless to say, the photograph they'd taken hadn't been the happy one they'd hoped for.

Today, she was alone and on a mission to buy gifts. It might be early but she had good reason to get a head start. She didn't have much family, just her stepmom, Melissa. But Ian... when she'd married him she'd married a large, extended family.

Ian had four siblings – two brothers and two sisters – each of them married, two with kids. Ian also had two step brothers – one of which was married, and a step sister. And if that crazy amount of people wasn't enough to keep up with and buy gifts for, his New York family was coming to town on Christmas day, including three cousins, all married, two of whom also had children.

Was it any wonder she was laden with bags and gifts and utterly exhausted? But she loved everything about her life... except her daughter's night terrors. Rainey woke them screaming most nights and though the pediatrician promised it would pass, waiting, worrying and suffering through the painful shrieks wasn't easy and made her bleary eyed during

the day. Not to mention her son wasn't a great sleeper... and life wasn't easy at the moment.

She could have done her shopping online but there was nothing like seeing something in person, touching it, and knowing you were choosing the perfect gift for each person. Besides, her mother in law loved to spend time with Rainey and Jack, so she'd freed Riley up to shop.

Oh! She'd forgotten her mother in law, Emma and her husband, Michael! Two more people to add to her list. She walked to the side of the aisle and dropped her bags close to the wall. She began to dig through her purse for her list. She hadn't put it on her phone, preferring a handwritten page she could cross out and make changes on. She added the two names, shaking her head at her forgetfulness.

Before she could gather her bags again, her cell rang. She pulled it out of her purse and saw Ian's name on the screen. "Hi," she said, more breathlessly than she'd like.

"Hi, baby. How's it going?"

She laughed, a wry sound escaping her lips. "My shopping list is growing. Are you sure your family isn't getting bigger as we speak because it sure feels like it is."

He laughed. "I told you to let my assistant handle the gifts."

"And I told you that's rude," she chided.

"So? I don't like how exhausted you sound."

She smiled at his protective tone of voice. Over the years, he hadn't mellowed and she understood the way he expressed his love. Ian could be... overbearing but he adored his family and felt it was his job to care for them all.

And she wanted to be the one who took care of him. It was just that lately, she was always so exhausted. Too tired for dinners out alone, too tired for her to cook his favorite meals, and too tired for sex... and that wasn't like her... or them. Not at all. From the minute they'd met, the sexual attraction had

been off the charts and he'd never hesitated to tell her exactly how much he wanted her, how he intended to take her, and follow through on every word. Those days felt like a long, long time ago not a few short years.

"Don't worry. I'm almost finished for the day," she said. Though her list was extensive and long, she'd been working her way through it. But she was dragging more with each step and she didn't want him overly concerned. She'd just have to make a final shopping trip another time.

"I'm leaving the office now. I'll meet you at home," he said. He was the owner of the Miami Thunder football team and his work never ended, but this was early for him to take off for the day.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"It'll be better soon."

She frowned at the cryptic answer. "Ian –"

"Love you, baby. See you in a few." He disconnected the call before she could reply. "I love you too," she muttered.

She gathered her bags up in her arms and decided she'd head home and meet her husband. She'd have to pick up Rainey and Jack from her mother in law's, but she wanted to see Ian first.

A little while later, she walked into the house, having noticed his car parked in the garage. She dropped the bags on the mudroom floor and strode out through the kitchen.

"Ian?" she called out.

"Right here." He stood in the center of the family room, a red scarf in his hand.

"What's going on?" she asked, a spark of excitement shooting through her at the obvious silk garment he'd used on her before.

"Come here," he said in a commanding voice she hadn't heard in too long.

A full body tremor took hold. Her nipples puckered, as if even they remembered the times he'd use that voice right before pinning her to the wall, her hands above her head, his lips on hers, his hard cock pressing into the softness of her sex.

She stepped towards him. "Why is that out now?" she asked, pointing to the scarf, her physical awareness of what was obviously to come a tangible, exciting thing.

"Turn around."

She swallowed and did as he asked. He wrapped the scarf around her eyes and tied it behind her head. "Now you're mine."

Her heat pounded hard in her chest. "I've always been yours," she murmured. "What is going on?"

"You'll see," he said and before he could argue, he lifted her up and into his arms.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on as he carried her through the house and outside into the warmer air. He placed her in a car, then settled in beside her.

So he was in the back too, she mused. They were obviously in a limousine, Ian's favorite form of travel.

"I have to pick up the kids," she reminded him.

"All taken care of." He slid her skirt up her thigh and placed his hand on her bare skin. She shivered at his masculine touch.

With her sight gone, all she could do was focus on the things going on around her. The movement of the vehicle, headed heaven knew where, and her husband's fingers moving upward, those talented fingers trailing their way north, until his roughened fingertip slid over her sex.

She sucked in a shuddering breath. "What are you doing?"

"What does it feel like?" he asked, chuckling, a low, pleased sound.

She swallowed hard. “Arousing me,” she whispered, hoping that the sound proof divider was up separating them from the driver of the limo. She trusted Ian enough to assume it was.

“You are definitely wet, baby. It’s been too long since you’ve come for me.” His fingers danced over her clit and she exhaled a low moan.

“Keep it up and we’ll be rectifying that very soon.” She wiggled her hips in an attempt to get him to continue.

But instead of increasing pressure, he slapped her lightly on her sex. “Gotta build up the tension first.”

She shivered in arousal and frustration as he removed his hand.

Throughout the remainder of the drive, his palm clamped hard on her thigh, a reminder of what she wanted... needed... and couldn’t have.

Yet.



IAN DARE WAS a man of action. When he desired something, he took control and made it happen. So how had he let his personal life get so off track?

One little tyrannical mini-Riley and a baby, that’s how. His children occupied their every thought, action and plan they made. He adored his munchkins but he missed his wife.

Which was why he now led her, blindfolded, out of the limo and carefully up the stairs to his private jet. He kept one hand wrapped securely around her waist.

“Step,” he instructed her. “Step again.” He continued the process until she entered the main cabin.

Thank fuck this plane had a bedroom because after sliding his fingers over her damp pussy, he couldn’t wait to taste her, devour her, and make love to the woman he adored.

Once he had her onboard, he pulled off the blindfold. “Welcome. We’re going on vacation,” he told her. He’d managed to pull this together in the span of thirty minutes, calling in friends and favors.

She blinked as she focused on her surroundings, her pretty brown eyes opening wide. “Ian! What about the kids?” she asked.

“With my mother for the weekend.”

Concern etched her features. “But... the night terrors.”

He’d worried about the same thing. “Mom assured me she’s raised enough children to be able to handle them and the baby.” He folded his arms across his chest, not willing to give in on this argument. They needed time together and they needed it now.

“Okay,” she said, still obviously worried about her children. He was too but he trusted his mother.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I debated not telling you until we landed but you don’t look thrilled about this trip yet so I’ll fill you in. Turks and Caicos,” he said, naming the Caribbean island. “I rented a house from Lola Corbin and Rep Grissom,” he said of the famous singer and her Miami Thunder player husband.

Pleasure finally lit up Riley’s expressive face. “Ian!” She jumped into his arms and he caught her, falling back into the plush seats.

“I guess this means you’re happy?” He brushed her hair off her face, the tight grip on his chest easing.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, wriggling her sweet pussy against his hard erection. “It means I’ve missed you.” She pressed a kiss against his lips, warm and delicious and everything Riley. “I’ve missed *us*,” she whispered.

“Me too. And We’re going to spend this weekend catching up with each other and then we’re going to plan on alone times

so we don't lose one another ever again." He rubbed his nose against hers and she sighed, obviously pleased.

That's all he wanted. To keep this woman happy for the rest of her life.

"Excuse me, Mr. Dare? It's time to take off," the flight attendant said, interrupting them.

Ian kissed Riley once more before urging her up and off him, placing her in her own seat. "Seatbelts, baby. But once we're in the air, that bedroom has our name on it."

She grinned and buckled in. He did the same and soon the plane was taxiing down the runway.

He kept his hand on her thigh and waited until they were at a steady, safe altitude before he unhooked her seatbelt and carried her to the bedroom in the back of the plane.

"Get ready," he instructed her, placing her down on the bed. "I'm going to let them know we don't want to be disturbed, but then I'm all yours." He stared at her flushed, eager face. "Or should I say you're all mine?" He couldn't wait to get his hands on her sweet curves.

Except when he returned from assuring their privacy, his wife was fast asleep. He sat by her side and stroked her cheek, for the first time, really seeing how exhausted she was. He frowned, knowing something had to change. She was stubborn and wanted to raise her family the old-fashioned way but he didn't work so hard just so she could run herself ragged.

A plan formed in his mind as he let her rest, watching over her.

He'd let her rest for now. They'd have complete privacy and time to enjoy one another soon enough.



RILEY DIDN'T HAVE a chance to explore the rental house, which was completely gorgeous, from what she could see at a glance. The entire back wall showed off the infinity pool out back and the spectacular turquoise ocean beyond.

No sooner had they walked into the house than Ian pointed to the carry-on bag he'd put together for her. "Bikini. Now."

And there was the bossy man she'd missed while they were busy living life.

"Yes, sir!" Riley gave him a sassy retort, feeling refreshed courtesy of her nap on board.

He swatted her ass with a nearby towel.

She jumped, squeaked, felt the sting of arousal travel through her and ran for the bedroom, rolling her carry on along with her. She had a hunch Ian had packed her very few pairs of panties and clothes. Which was just fine with her. She wouldn't be needing them.

She opened her suitcase and pulled out a red bikini, Ian's favorite that she wore when she sat out at the pool behind the house... or had before her second child. With her even more well developed curves, she hoped it fit now.

As she put it on, her breasts plumping out of the cups and her hips visible, she realized Ian wouldn't care. And wasn't she a lucky girl?

She strode into the other room, strutting a little because she knew he was waiting. She stopped short when she caught sight of him. Wearing a pair of boarding shorts, his tanned muscular body on display, her body perked up at the sight.

"See something you like?" he asked.

"That and something I haven't seen... or paid attention to in too long." She strode over to him and hooked her finger into the waistband of his shorts, running her fingers over his taut stomach. "I missed you," she murmured.

A seductive grin lifted his sexy mouth. "I missed you too. And you look good enough to eat."

Ignoring her hands in his pants, hands that wanted to travel downward so she could wrap her hands around his cock, he picked her up like she weighed nothing. She immediately wrapped her legs around his waist, causing his hard erection to

press against her core. A delicious wave rocked through her and she sighed with pleasure.

“Oh, Ian. Thank you for this. We needed it.”

“Anything for you, baby.” He grasped the back of her head, sealed his lips over hers and nothing else mattered.

He kissed her hard, pushing her up to the nearest wall. She moaned, hooking her heels behind his back and rubbing herself against him. With a low, throaty groan, he thrust his tongue into her mouth at the same time he rocked his hips against hers. Dizzying swells of desire took hold and immediately brought her close to a fast climax. One she desperately wanted and needed.

She tangled her fingers into his hair and pulled, indicating what she needed. “Ian please.” She had to come. Needed to take the edge off the building arousal.

He broke the kiss, staring into her eyes. “Trying to run the show?” he asked.

“Trying to come,” she said, her voice a hoarse rasp.

He let out a low laugh. “I’ll let you have your way but only because this weekend is all about you.” He eased back, holding her against the wall with his hips and slid his fingers into the waistband of her bathing suit. He coated his fingers with her moisture and rubbed her clit, back and forth slicking over her exactly how she liked.

She groaned, her arousal spiking. She arched her hips, giving him better access and he curled his finger, gliding inside her core. She squeezed her inner walls, clutching around him.

“You’re so hot, so wet, baby.”

“It feels so good. Harder,” she said, writhing against him.

He pressed his thumb against her clit and began steadily pumping his other finger inside her.

“Ian!” She held onto his shoulders and rode out the orgasm that slammed into her, as he continued to flick and rub at her clit until she collapsed in his arms.

He kissed her lips before carrying her to the bed in the master nearby. He sat her down on the mattress, sliding her legs to the edge of the bed. He pulled off her bikini bottoms and hooked his thumbs into his waistband to shuck his shorts as well.

His thick cock stood erect as he spread her thighs. “Got a few things to tell you before I fuck you, baby.”

She blinked, her brain fuzzy. She might have come already but one look at him and she imagined the feel of that hard cock inside her. But she recognized that tone of voice. Whatever he wanted to say, it was important.

“I’m listening.” Even as her sex pulsed all over again and the desire to have her husband thrust into her was overwhelming.

“We’re getting a live-in nanny. You need someone to take the burden off you so you have time for everything else in your life.”

His words took her off guard. They’d discussed this. He knew her feelings. She wanted to raise her children herself. Have Rainey and Jack know their mommy woke them up and put them to bed.

“But –”

He shook his head. “But nothing. What’s money if we can’t use it to help make life a little easier? And we need time together as a couple as much as we need it as a family.”

As if to punctuate his statement, he gripped his cock and pumped his hand up and down with his hand, come glistening at the tip. Then, not playing fair, he glided the hard length along her clit.

“Oh,” she said moaning at the delicious sensation. But she knew he was distracting her, assuming he’d get his way if she

was too sex-drunk to care.

“I respect you want to do it all yourself, but there are ways to manage things so you can have it all.”

She bit her lip. Yes, she'd always argued against help in the house, wanting to take care of her husband and her kids, on her own. She'd given up work after Jack was born, not an easy decision but her desire to stay home with the kids outweighed the desire to go to the office. And she was lucky enough to be able to make that choice.

She knew they were fortunate but she wanted to raise her own kids. She also knew her husband wouldn't give up.

And he continued to tease her clit with his erection.

She swallowed hard, digging into her reserves to negotiate. “I'll take a live-in housekeeper,” she managed to counter. “I can still be the one who handles the kids.”

“Uh uh. A mix of both. You need flexibility,” he said, his tone insistent.

She processed it quickly. With that kind of situation, she could control what was her domain and what wasn't, so decided not to argue. “Agreed.”

“See? I can compromise.” He grinned and slid his thick cock into her sex.

Finally. She arched, pulling him deeper so he pulsed deliciously bare inside her. And then reality intruded. “Ian, you're not using protection.” A slight panic took hold.

She'd gone off the pill before having Rainey and he'd used condoms afterwards because she hadn't wanted to keep playing with her hormones. But they hadn't talked about more kids just yet and they really did have their hands full with two. Still, the thought of another infant had her heart filling already.

He stilled, his hands on her thighs. “I'm good with another baby... now that you've agreed to my terms and will allow help,” he said with a knowing grin.

Terms. As if her agreeing to support around the house and with their children was such a hardship. He was such a silly, controlling man. If he'd come to her and had the conversation like a rational human, she'd have agreed. But that wasn't Ian's way. He liked to impose his will when he thought he was doing what was best for her or his family.

He arched his back and thrust forward, grinding his hips against hers. "Need an answer," he reminded her through clenched teeth. "Am I pulling out?"

"No," she groaned, completely okay with rolling the dice on another baby. As long as he kept going. "Fuck me, Ian."

He didn't make her wait. He pounded into her, his eyes on hers the entire time. With Ian, it didn't matter how fast or slow, how hard or soft, each time was special. Each was making love. Each cemented the bond they had between them.

He knew how to make her soar.

He knew how to love her.

And when she climaxed, he came with her on a shout and full body shudder that triggered a second orgasm for her before he eased down on top of her.

✧ ✧ ✧

IAN MADE SURE the rest of the weekend passed in an orgasm induced haze for his wife. A butler arrived at the house to cater to their every meal, cocktail, whim and need. They had all the time in the world to focus on each other... to talk, walk on the beach, lay in the sun, soak in the pool, catch up, make love and call home.

Often.

Because at the end of the day, they had a little girl and a baby boy they adored and were worried about and they were a family. And, Ian thought, with a little luck that family was about to grow. He was so damned lucky and he would never take his good fortune for granted.

✧ ✧ ✧

A FEW WEEKS later, Riley had purchased all the presents for the family and her house was decorated for Christmas. In a little while, Ian's family was set to descend en masse. She wasn't nervous, she just anticipated being overwhelmed and if she was going to feel crazed, she was worried Rainey might react as well.

"Come here, princess."

"What, mommy?" Rainey walked up to her and crawled onto the couch seat beside her.

Riley wrapped an arm around her daughter's little shoulder. "So remember I told you we have a lot of people coming over today?"

"Yes. All my aunts and uncles and cousins."

Riley smiled, brushing Rainey's brown curls, so similar to her own, out of her face. "That's right. I just want you to know you can come find me for a break any time you want."

"Are they bringing presents?" Rainey asked.

Riley sighed, doing her best not to laugh. "I don't know and it's rude to ask, right?"

Rainey bobbed her head. "Yep. But it's Christmas so they're probably bringing me toys!"

Riley rolled her eyes. With the big Christmas tree already loaded with wrapped presents on display in the living room, was it any wonder her daughter expected more gifts? Which was just one reason they were going together to drop off toys at the women's shelter tomorrow. So her daughter didn't grow up unaware of what it meant to give to others.

And when her son was old enough, he'd join them on those trips. Right now, he still napped, thank goodness, which was where he was right now. Sleeping in his crib.

"How are my girls?" Ian asked, joining them in the den.

"Daddy!" Rainey ran for him and he scooped her into his arms. "Ready for a big day?" he asked.

Before she could answer, the doorbell rang, indicating the gang had started to arrive.

He carried her to the door and opened it. Riley came up behind him. His step-brother, Alex and his wife Madison were first to arrive. Madison had a casserole dish in her hands and Alex had a huge box with a big red bow. Looks like her daughter was, in fact, going to be loaded up with presents.

“Alex!” she said to the man who’d been her best friend even before she’d met Ian. “Madison! It’s so good to see you. Right?” Riley nudged Ian with her elbow as he put Rainey down.

“Good to see you, man.” Ian shook Alex’s hand. Their truce had come at a hard-won cost thanks to their father’s behavior, but they’d managed it and now got along. Even if they occasionally pretended it was still a hardship.

“Come on in,” Ian said.

Alex paused though, and knelt down to get eye to eye with Rainey. “Someone’s gotten to be a big girl!”

“You just saw her last week,” Riley reminded him.

He laughed and handed her the present. “Think you can add this to your pile under the tree?” he asked.

“For me!?” she screamed, causing Alex to wince.

“Better get used to the decibels,” Madison said with a grin.

Riley glanced at her. “Why? Are you...?”

“She’s pregnant!” Alex said with a proud grin.

“Great way to ring in the holidays. Congratulations,” Ian said.

Riley was already too busy hugging Madison and congratulating her. She was thrilled her sister in law and friend was pregnant because now she didn’t have to do her own nine months alone.

Yes, she had news for Ian. He'd gotten her pregnant that weekend on the island.

"Oops more company," Alex said, glancing over his shoulder. "Let's get inside."

Alex's siblings came next, Jason and Sienna, the only two single ones left in the family. They also loaded up Rainey with presents. Rainey was in heaven.

Riley was about to shut the door when another two car loads of family arrived. The New York contingent showed up straight from their hotel. Gabe, Izzy and their son Noah, who was a little younger than Rainey, walked in.

Rainey greeted them, grabbed her cousin's hand and off they went, according to Rainey, to find cookies.

"Gotta love these kids," Izzy said. "Good to see you but I need to make sure Noah doesn't eat the whole plate full!" She blew a kiss and followed after the kids.

"Good thing our new nanny runs the kitchen as well as the kids," Ian said, laughing.

As usual, when Ian made a decision, he implemented it with speed and thoroughness. He had Loretta vetted and hired within a week of returning from their vacation. Riley had to admit she adored the older woman.

Gabe grinned. "It's the best, isn't it?" He stared after his wife and child, a loving look on his face.

Ian slapped his oldest cousin on the back. "Nothing better," he agreed. "Let's go have a drink. The others can find us when they make their way inside."

Riley waited by the door, greeting Amanda and Decklan and their daughter, Hannah, along with Max and Lucy. Finally, Ian's last siblings trickled in, Dylan and Olivia and their toddler daughter Annie, and Scott and Meg, and their son Cole. Last but not least, Avery and her rock star husband, Grey arrived. Riley's stepmom was traveling with her husband and

couldn't make it, and Ian's mom was home with the flu, her husband Michael taking care of her.

After hugs and kisses and directions to the tree for all the gifts, Riley finally closed the front door behind all her guests.

Nobody had mentioned or invited Robert Dare. Even if Ian and his siblings wanted to forgive him for living a double life and having another family, the current rumors of him cheating on Alex and his siblings' mother, Savannah, killed any good will some of the children had left. It was sad, but he reaped what he sowed. And as for Savannah, well, she'd known he had a wife when she'd had her initial affair with him, so it shouldn't be a surprise he'd repeat patterns now.

The entire Dare family was under one roof and Riley, who'd grown up with an angry man as her father, knew how lucky she was that fate had given her Ian along with his big clan. So she did the smart thing now. She headed inside to enjoy her family. The ones who mattered.



IAN WASN'T AN easy man. He wasn't easy to know, to deal with or to love. He knew this. And as much as Riley had changed him, there was much that remained the same. She loved him anyway, thank fuck. It went without saying that she was his world.

But he loved his family too. It hadn't been too long ago that in his mind, family had consisted of his two brothers and two sisters, period. He had refused to acknowledge his half-siblings because his father had not only cheated on his mother, he'd had an entire other family he'd hidden from them. Time and Riley had changed that and now Ian had not just accepted them but invited them into his home. And yes, into his heart. His New York cousins were an added blessing.

As he watched them mingle and interact, he counted those blessings, his gaze drifting to his wife. Riley rushed around to make sure their company was fed and had drinks in hand, despite having help to serve and clean up. All while running

after Riley, who managed to find trouble no matter what. White out she showed her cousin, highlighters she'd discovered in the kitchen, and chocolate she wasn't supposed to have any more of before lunch.

And she did it all with an indulgent grin on her face.

He pulled her aside. "Come with me." He led her into their bedroom and shut the door behind them.

"Ian, we have company."

"That doesn't mean I can't have a few minutes alone with my wife," he said, nuzzling her nose against his.

She sighed. "I love you," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I love you too."

She bit down on her lower lip. "I wasn't going to do this now but... why not? It's Christmas. I want to give you your present," she murmured.

He arched his hips against hers. "Yeah? Right now?" His cock nestled into the vee of her thighs.

"Not that, your dirty man. Get your mind off of sex for a minute."

He laughed. "Okay what's my present?" he asked.

She leaned in and whispered in his ear. "You're going to be a daddy again. Merry Christmas."

His heart skipped a beat. "Seriously?"

She eased back, meeting his gaze. "I wouldn't joke about that.

"God, Ri. That's the best gift you could ever give me. I love you so damned much. And I love our family."

"And I love you, Ian Dare." Her lips found his and locked in a long, wet, sensual kiss... until a loud banging sounded on the door.

“Mommy! Daddy! I spilt milk on my dress!” Rainey wailed, the loud banging continuing.

They broke the kiss, laughing. “This is what we asked for,” Ian said with a grin.

He stepped over to the door and swung it open. “Mr. Dare! I’m sorry. She got away from me.”

“That’s okay, Loretta. I’ve got her,” Riley said, rushing over to her crying daughter.

“We’ve got her,” Ian said. He grabbed her and lifted her up into his arms. “Let’s go clean you up, princess. Then you can get back to your cousins.”

Riley slipped her hand into his and together they took care of their daughter and headed back to enjoy Christmas day with the family. After all, they had a lot to celebrate.



Thank you for reading a Very Dare Christmas by Carly Philips. If you haven’t read the series, you can start with [DARE TO LOVE](#).

ONE CRUEL WEDDING
NIGHT

K.A. LINDE

CHAPTER ONE

Katherine

I MARRIED THE devil, and now, he wanted his due.

Camden Percy tracked me around The Plaza ballroom. There was never a moment when my new husband didn't know where I was. Like a wolf stalking his prey through the dense, frozen forest. The ending was always the same. The conclusion well past determined.

I'd known what I agreed to. We'd arranged the entire thing ourselves. A contract signed in blood and bound by lies. His money for my body. And as he was the heir to the Percy Hotel fortune, it was a beautiful bargain. Except for the fact that I hated him.

Even though I needed him.

I was the infamous Manhattan ice queen, Katherine Van Pelt. The reigning bitch of the Upper East Side. And yet, I was nearly penniless. My goddamn father had defrauded all of his clients and the IRS. They'd taken everything, except my nearly drained trust fund and Central Park penthouse, and they would have stolen that, too, if he hadn't given it to me clean and clear before it all fell down around us.

I played the part well enough that few had any idea that I was drowning, but Camden Percy knew. He'd found out. And he'd offered a solution. A cruel bargain—become his wife, have access to his vast wealth at my fingertips, and surrender all else to him.

How could I say no?

Now, I stood in a custom-designed Elizabeth Cunningham wedding dress, my head spinning from the champagne and the ceremony and *him*.

Him hunting me through the crowd, as if he knew that tonight was the night he could finally pillage his adversary. Tonight was the night that my defenses were all for naught. Tonight was the night when I chained myself to the lion and threw myself into his cage.

He knew. And he was pleased.

Those decadent, dark eyes, highlighted with flecks of gold, shone in the reception lighting. His Savile Row tuxedo held tight to all the muscular lines of him. His perfect lips, ready to roam and ravage ... to command. To control.

He was a god among men. Through it all—the wedding, the endless photographs, the reception—Camden Percy held himself above all the rest. Nothing and no one could drag him down from Olympus as he surveyed the peons. And despite how much it infuriated me, I was another one of his mortals. He'd offered a hand to lift me up among the gods, but I wasn't a god to him. I had every intention of proving him wrong. I was shackled to him, but I would not cower, and I would not beg.

“Darling,” Camden said as his orbit finally collided with mine again. He offered me his hand. “Come here for another picture.”

“Of course.”

With eyes as hard as diamonds, I placed my hand into his. He tugged me closer, drawing me flush against him. A shiver went through me, and he noticed. His gaze drifted down to mine, and for a second, we stared up at one another. I hoped from the outside, as the camera flashed, that we looked besotted. But all I felt in his embrace was a roaring rage.

He leaned forward, brushing his mouth against my earlobe. “Don't forget to smile. It's the happiest day of your life.”

I tensed at the bastard's words, but I'd been a model. I knew how to smile through the pain.

It felt like an eternity. Though it was only a few minutes before I could pull free from him. The wedding planner

appeared then, inserting herself seamlessly.

“Timeline is running smoothly,” she said, glancing down at her iPad. “We’re thinking ten more minutes, and then we’ll do the official exit.”

“Perfect,” I said.

“We’ll get it all set up on the front steps of The Plaza. I have the contact for the limo. Do you need anything from me?”

I shook my head. “We’ll mingle until you’re ready for us.”

“I’m on top of it.”

Then, she disappeared through the crowd, preparing everyone for us to parade down the steps of The Plaza, out onto the New York streets beyond, and into our happily ever after.

Camden’s hand returned to the base of my spine. I could feel the heat of him through the lace. I wanted to jump backward, but there was nowhere to go and nowhere to run. Hardly anyone, except my Crew, even knew that this had been arranged. It would look bad if I started rearing back from him rather than running to him. So, I remained poised and kept my eye on the prize.

“Our grand finale,” Camden said casually.

“Happily ever after,” I crooned back at him.

He smiled something fierce and deadly. “The princess finally married her prince.”

“We both know that you’re not the hero of this story.”

“No. I’ve never pretended to be.” His hand tightened on my waist. “But the ice princess isn’t the heroine either.”

“Then we’re both villains. How charming.”

“Could be worse.

I broke for a second, a laugh escaping my mouth. “How?”

My friends looked on from a short distance. There was pity in their eyes. They'd never admit to feeling it, but it was there all the same. They wanted so much more for me. But what *I* wanted had been stolen from me, and I'd followed through on my end of the deal. So, here I was, with the man of my nightmares.

He drew me in again. His lips falling almost tenderly against mine. I forced myself to give in to that touch. Anything less would break our charade.

"You could be bored," he growled.

I turned to stone at the words. He was right. For some reason, he knew me enough to know that boredom killed my relationships more than anything else ever had. I had one person I'd wanted my entire life. One person who had kept my interest all these years. Everyone else had just fallen away.

And then there was Camden Percy.

"And," he said, drawing nearer, "you could not *want* me."

"I don't want you."

He arched an eyebrow. "Now, now, pet, you're not a liar either."

I hated that he was right. I might not be in love with him ... but he set me on fire in the bedroom. An act I'd indulged in only a handful of times over our long engagement. Mostly because I hated to admit the desire, even to myself. How could I hate Camden Percy with the fire of a thousand suns and also want him to demand control of my body in the bedroom?

"Showtime," the wedding planner said before I could respond.

Camden shot me a look of pure power. He'd won that round. Dammit.

"Shall we?"

He offered me his arm, and I took it.

We walked forward through the ballroom and back through The Plaza until we reached the front entrance. The foyer had been cleared for our big exit. Much of the reception had emptied to the steps, and the photographer waited at the end of the stairs to take our picture. I'd planned every single inch of this event. The more planning, the less I had to fake.

"Whenever you're ready," the wedding planner said.

Camden was still looking at me. He hadn't once moved to glance out at the crowd beyond.

"What?" I asked.

He swept a loose curl off of my face. "There."

I glared at him. "Don't do that."

"I can do what I like."

Then he took my arm and pulled me into the onslaught. A smile bloomed on my face as rose petals and rice were thrown into the air. I laughed effortlessly as I mimicked pure joy at our departure. Before we crossed the final line, Camden drew me to a stop.

And before everyone, he lifted me off the ground and kissed me with abandon.

I threw my arms around him, kicking my feet up. I was hoping for the perfect shot, but somewhere in the middle, I was lost. He still held me. He still kissed me. My body crushed to his as I slowly slid down his front and back to my feet. His hands moved to my hair as he drew out the kiss, long and languid.

This was not a mere performance. This was ... *want*. Carnal and base.

There were cheers and hollers from all assembled. Picture after picture was taken as he bent me backward and continued his perusal of my mouth. His tongue invading and taking and needing. And there was not a thing I could do about it.

Nothing but enjoy it.

A damn good kiss was a damn good kiss.

Finally—*finally*—he withdrew.

He tapped a kiss on my nose. “There.”

“What?” I gasped softly as something fluttered in my stomach.

“That’s how you deserve to be kissed.”

CHAPTER TWO

Camden

FOR THE FIRST time in a long while, Katherine Van Pelt had no comeback.

Which was exactly how I had planned it.

“Come,” I told her.

I took her hand and drew her toward the limo. Cameras flashed all around us, and the limo driver opened the door for us. I stepped in first, and then Katherine sank into the seat next to me. She gathered the hundreds of layers of her dress and pulled them into the car after her. The wedding planner rushed over and helped her arrange it neatly. Then the door was shut, the window rolled down, and Katherine waved like she’d won fucking Miss America as we slowly pulled away.

“Roll up the window,” I said.

Katherine glared back at me, but she pressed the button to roll it back up.

And finally—*finally*—we were alone.

“Thank God that’s over,” Katherine said. She fiddled with her dress, arranging it this way and that.

“Indeed.”

I slipped my phone out of my pocket and scrolled through my work email. My father was a right asshole, who never let up. Not even on my wedding day. He’d been there, sitting in the front row, and *still*, he’d sent me shit to deal with. Things that couldn’t wait. If I hadn’t been looking forward to our honeymoon before, I was now. A month in the Maldives with limited internet and no way my father could ruin every moment sounded like precisely what I needed.

“You’re really doing that right now?”

“Yes.”

“It’s our wedding day.” When I didn’t respond, Katherine rolled her eyes—a habit I intended to break promptly—and turned away from me. “I can’t wait to get out of this dress.”

“Now, that is something we can agree on.” I lifted my gaze to take her in.

She was mesmerizing. If there were ever a word for the woman I’d decided to tie my life to, it was that. Her looks beguiling. Her mind enthralling. Her authority spellbinding. She was a witch in every sense of the word, and she could make you fall in love with her as quickly as she could curse you.

“That isn’t what I meant,” she snapped. “The boning has been pinching me for the last hour.”

“Beauty is pain.”

“Obviously.” She turned away from me. “We should have gotten a hotel room.”

“I own an entire hotel chain,” I growled back at her.

“So? We could have stayed at The Plaza.”

“We’re not getting a hotel room when I have the penthouse on top of one.”

“Whatever. I wanted a suite.”

“You’ll have a suite in the Maldives.”

“That’s a villa,” she chirped, her lips curling upward. “I wanted something ... extravagant.”

I set my phone down and then grasped her hand in mine. She tried to reel back, but I had her now. Her eyes widened slightly and then narrowed to slits.

“What are you doing?”

I pressed a kiss to the inside of her palm. “You’ve mistaken me for another man, *wife*.”

A kiss on her wrist.

“I have not.”

A kiss up her forearm to her elbow. I tugged her closer, sliding her across the backseat of the limo until she was nearly resting against me.

A kiss on her shoulder.

“Have I given you the impression that I care what you want?”

Her jaw clenched. If she could have killed me in that moment, she would have. Instead, she jerked her arm away from me.

“Charming.”

“We’re staying at the penthouse. In a few short days, we will be in a private *villa* in the Maldives for a month. You can have me all to yourself.”

Her face soured. “Just what I’ve always wanted.”

“I’m well aware,” I drawled and then returned to my phone.

Katherine glared at the contraption and then scooted back across the seat to stare out the window on the short drive. Well, it would have been a short drive if not for the typical New York City traffic at Christmas. It was usually a bit of a nightmare, but four days before Christmas, the entire thing was gridlock.

“At least I don’t have to pretend anymore,” she said sweetly.

“You don’t know how to do anything else.”

She scoffed. “That’s not true. I’m an authentic ice princess ninety percent of the time. It’s only when I have to pretend to be in love with you that the last ten percent is the hardest acting gig of my life.”

Oh, Katherine.

She always thought that she had the upper hand. That her blows would land. But I was impenetrable. After years of hearing the absolute worst from my father, a man who would rather let me suffer in a construction zone with asthma problems than admit he was wrong, she could never cut deep enough.

I glanced up from my phone, and my gaze was deadly. She didn't shrink back, and it was half the reason I'd decided this would work. I wanted to break her. Cut down every inch of that perfect persona until she had nothing left to cling to. Body, mind, and soul, she *would* be mine.

My voice was low when I said, "Pretending to be nice has got to be harder."

There was no reaction, save a tightening of her hand into a fist. She was the ice princess for a reason. She could, too, survive all manner of insult. Especially the ones that were true. Neither of us would ever be considered *nice*. Nothing so blasé as that. We were survivors. We were conquerors. And together, we were unstoppable.

She said nothing else as the limo finally pulled up in front of Percy Tower.

I'd moved into the penthouse at fourteen. Even at a young age, I had known exactly who I was. And that I needed out of my father's house. My mother was long gone. His parade of new girlfriends and new wives had teetered past annoyance. *This* was home. It always had been.

"Showtime," she murmured to herself.

"How many paps do you think ran from The Plaza to intercept us?"

She shrugged, and a devious smile crossed her face. "If they're smart, all of them."

I hid my grin at her self-importance. She wasn't wrong. Our wedding was the event of the season.

The driver rushed around to open the door and helped Katherine from the backseat. I followed in her wake. A crowd of gaping tourists stared at my new wife in her wedding dress. Flashes from paparazzi and unsuspecting bystanders continued as I drew her to me.

Hotel security exited the glass doors to escort us inside. Katherine kept a painted smile on her lips the entire time.

“Mr. and Mrs. Percy!” a photographer cried out. “One more kiss!”

Katherine stilled, her back to the photographer. “Mr. and Mrs. Percy.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “Has a nice ring to it.”

“No way in hell am I changing my name.”

My grip tightened on her. “Shall we give them what they want?”

Before she could respond, I turned her in my arms, dipping her until her long, dark hair nearly grazed the New York City sidewalk. Then I kissed her. She went pliant in my grasp, a soft intake of breath only loud enough for me to hear.

No matter what she said ...

No matter how many times she acted as if she hated me ...

Her body betrayed all of her secrets.

CHAPTER THREE

Katherine

MY BACK CRASHED back against the elevator wall as I crossed my arms over my chest. Done. We were done. No more paparazzi to deal with. No more fake smiles. No one and nothing but my husband.

Husband.

The word stuck in my throat like peanut butter on the roof of my mouth. I'd always envisioned a very different scenario for myself. What girl didn't have a dream wedding, a dream husband, a dream life in mind? I'd gotten the dream wedding in every way that mattered to the fashion and wedding magazines that were going to be featuring me and Camden. But the rest ... that was so far out of reach that it would never be obtainable.

I'd learned at a young age how to influence and manipulate the people around me to get what I wanted. I could teach a master class in it. And still, it hadn't been enough. The man I was marrying didn't love me. I wasn't madly in love with him. In fact, he was the devil of the Upper East Side. Shackling myself to him was the worst-case scenario.

And there was no game I could play that Camden Percy couldn't outmatch.

The private elevator dinged on the top floor, opening to Camden's penthouse. Despite the fact that I had been here countless times, that we'd even slept together on and off for the last year, I'd never stayed a night in his residence. I'd never been in his bed, and he'd never been in mine. That had always felt too intimate. Like we were crossing a line. But we were now married.

So, tonight, I couldn't see a way to escape it.

Part of me wondered if I even wanted to.

What would it be like to give my body to someone like him? What would he do with it if I let him?

I strode inside as if I owned the place, going straight for the wet bar. I skipped the bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket and reached for the harder stuff. Just as I grabbed the scotch, Camden was there. He took the bottle from my hands and replaced it.

“I don’t want you to be drunk,” he commanded.

“I wouldn’t get drunk off of that.”

“You hardly had a bite to eat all day.”

“It was my wedding day. I was busy.”

He ignored me and popped the top off the champagne. He poured bubbles into a champagne flute. “Here.” I took the glass from him, and he lifted his in a toast. “To us.”

“Mmm,” I purred. “To us.”

I downed half the drink, letting the bubbles addle my brain. I was going to need that whole bottle to calm my nerves. I hadn’t let myself think about what was about to happen. But now that I was here, there was nothing else in my brain.

Camden finished his champagne in a long gulp and then discarded his glass. He fingered the bow tie at his neck, untying it and letting it hang from around his collar. All the while, he watched me like a hawk as I sipped the champagne. He seemed relaxed, and it got my hackles up. I had no reason to be nervous here. I was far from a virgin. It wasn’t as if it was even our first time together. It shouldn’t be different. And I was furious that it *felt* different.

“I’m surprised you haven’t shredded my dress already.”

He leaned a hip into the wet bar. “We have all night.”

“We should get it over with.”

Camden ignored me as he took a step forward. He reached for my champagne and set it down next to him. Then he tipped my chin up to look at him. “I have no intention of making this quick.” I shivered at the words. “I want to draw out your pleasure for so long that you beg me to let you finish. Over and over and over again. I want you so sated that you forget that you ever had sex with anyone else in your life. That *this* is the only memory you can conjure.”

I gulped. “I’ll never beg.”

His lips tilted upward. “Is that a challenge?”

“No,” I growled. “It’s a promise.”

“We’ll see.”

But I was certain he had taken it as one.

I had limits. I would never resort to begging. Never.

He spun me around without another word. There were five thousand tiny buttons down the back of my dress. Each one had been carefully closed by the designer herself this morning when I was practically sewn into the thing. A part of me wondered if he’d cut the thing right off of me. It would be a relief, if I was honest.

But no.

Camden Percy had eternal patience. His fingers moved across the row of buttons, removing each and every one of them. And as he did it, slow and deliberate, his fingers trailed across the delicate skin on my back. A brief touch here, a soft touch there. I closed my eyes at the caress of his skin against the base of my spine. Then lower, revealing the virginal white lace of my thong, the round top of my ass.

His quick intake of breath told me he was looking even if he wasn’t yet touching. Desire pooled in me that I could make his breath hitch, even just a little.

Then he popped open the last button, and the strapless dress released from my body and pooled at my feet. I was left

in nothing but my white thong, a blue garter studded with diamonds, and my white Valentino heels.

“Much better,” Camden said. “Step out of it.”

Without a thought, I did what he’d said. A pleased hum came from Camden’s throat when I didn’t protest. I was as happy to be rid of the one-of-a-kind dress as he was.

“Turn for me.”

I should have said something snippy, kept him on edge, but he was admiring me. I soaked up his attention. So, like a girl in a music box, I spun.

His hands were in his pockets when I rotated halfway around to face him. My perky, perfect breasts—best that money could buy—caught his eye, and I saw hunger there. He skipped down my navel, between my legs, down my exposed thighs. The thought made me hot all over. He said not a word. Just stripped me bare with his gaze.

And when I got back around, he still hadn’t said a word.

“Do I meet your inspection?” I asked with a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

“You know precisely what your looks do for you.”

I did. Didn’t fucking hurt to hear his opinion though.

“Yes, but what do they do for you?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Fishing for compliments?”

I huffed and took one step away from him, prepared to flee. “If you don’t want—”

But he snatched my wrist in his hand before I could get any farther away. “I do want.”

The action had been perfunctory. Not that Camden did anything without thinking. Still, he’d reacted on instinct.

He stepped closer to me, and I held my chin up. Never backing down.

“I don’t have to tell you that you’re beautiful for you to believe it. You don’t need to hear it from my lips to know that I think so.” He still touched nothing but that wrist, and I wanted more. “You belong to me now.”

“I belong to no one.”

“Ah, that is where you are wrong.” He reached for the other wrist, knotting them together. He jerked me forward another step. I met his gaze with defiance, even as my body pulsed. “You signed on the dotted line. You knew exactly what you were getting in the bargain. You’re *mine*.”

And the growl in his voice unmade me.

I was his. I’d signed my body away. I’d never been coy about it. He could have my body. Use it how he saw fit. But I’d never love him.

“Let’s get started,” he said, drawing his thumb across my painted bottom lip.

CHAPTER FOUR

Katherine

CAMDEN WALKED ME backward, away from the wet bar and firmly into the living room, until my knees hit the armrest. He turned me around and pulled me flush against his chest.

“Tell me you want me.”

“No,” I said stubbornly.

He pressed a firm kiss on my neck. “Should I check to see if you’re lying?”

I gulped. I’d gotten hot just at his perusal of my body. If he moved his hand inside my panties, there was no way he wouldn’t find me slicked wet.

“Well?” he asked.

“It’s not you.”

“Oh?”

“It’s just ... physical.”

“That’s want, love,” he told me as he dragged his finger over the inside hem of my thong. I closed my eyes as he teased me. “Should I feel?”

“No,” I blurted.

He froze. “No? Do you want me to stop?”

No. I didn’t want that at all. It wasn’t a no like that. It was a semblance of power. The control I felt slipping away. Camden had it all, and I just wanted a sliver. A part of my dignity to hold on to for afterward.

I clenched my jaw and forced the word out. “No.”

“No what?” he teased, nipping at my earlobe.

“Don’t stop.”

“As I thought.” He released my wrists finally. “Put your hands on the couch.”

It took every ounce of my will to shove my pride somewhere I wouldn’t have to look at it. Because, damn it, I bent over at the waist, shoving my ass against his lengthening cock, and braced myself against the couch.

“Better.”

Then and only then did he dip his hand inside my panties. I had to bite my tongue to stifle a groan at the first touch of his finger against my clit. Everything felt like it had been building up to this moment. And though I’d told myself that I wasn’t looking forward to it, my body sure told another story.

“So wet for me,” he growled.

“Yes,” I gasped as he dragged a finger through my slicked folds and drew it up to my clit.

“Oh, I do like when you use that word.” He removed his hand from my panties, and I protested, pushing my hips backward in want. He swatted at my ass, and I stopped moving. “I was going to say that you deserve a reward for being so good ...”

I bit back the *please* that threatened to erupt out of me. Instead, red ran up my chest and neck at the thought of reward and even more ... punishment.

“What do you think?”

“I ... I won’t move,” I told him, hardly recognizing myself.

He patted my ass affectionately before dragging my panties over my narrow hips and down to the floor. His finger snagged on the garter around my thigh. He tugged it back and let it snap against my leg.

“I like this.” He did it again. “We’ll leave it on.”

Camden nudged my feet apart, and I stepped out of the thong, spreading myself wide for him. He could have thrust his hard cock deep inside of me at this angle. A perfect position for his taking, but he'd never go straight for the easy take. Not here. Not after everything.

Somehow, I was naked before him with nothing but a baby-blue garter and high heels while he was still entirely clothed. He couldn't be comfortable in that tuxedo, but he made no move to remove it. And God, I wanted him to.

He dragged his hands up my inner thighs, starting at the knees and working upward. A finger skimmed along my waiting pussy before his hands grabbed my ass and squeezed. I'd never had much of an ass, but he caressed it like it was the most magnificent thing he'd ever seen. Getting a full hold in both palms.

Then he spread my cheeks wide, completely opening me to him. My body reacted at the first touch of his finger sliding inside of me. I bucked backward, a groan escaping my lips. His free hand smacked my ass. He had one finger inside my pussy, and I was already half-crazed, wanting more, more, more.

"Don't move," he ordered.

I clenched my hands on the couch and tried to remain still. But it was hard. It was *really* hard. He was inspecting me, watching as he drew that single digit in and out, in and out. A second one was added, and I trembled all over. My knees were wobbly, and I could feel the first flush of an orgasm building within me.

"Do you like this?" He pushed into me harder, finger-fucking me as he would with his cock.

It took all my strength not to collapse forward. "Yes."

"And what do you want?"

I clenched my jaw. I had no intention of answering him. He could tell from my body what I wanted. I was soaking wet already.

“Hmm,” he muttered and then withdrew his fingers.

I opened my mouth to protest, glancing backward to ask why he would torture me so. But then my jaw dropped. Camden Percy was on his knees behind me. A flush radiated through me at that thought. He was *on his knees*.

He widened my stance and then buried his face into my pussy. There was no way in hell I could hold back my moan. His tongue attacked my clit, licking and sucking and swirling around it. His hands grasped my ass and held me open for him. It was all I could do to hold on to the couch as his tongue ravaged me.

We had fucked many times. Always rough and fast and angry. So that when we were done, we were more furious with each other than when we'd started. Pissed off that we could take pleasure from one another, yet we found no pleasure in each other's company. Fierce, raw moments of bliss and then pain and rage. There had never been another way. Not with us.

He'd certainly never fallen to his knees and eaten me out like I was a four-course meal. Who was this husband of mine? Could it be that under the layers of his tailored suit, there was an actual man inside? Not just a fire-breathing dragon.

As I crested toward my climax, my entire body shuddering with the pulls of his mouth against my clit, he thrust his two fingers back home. I cried out as everything contracted.

“Oh God,” I yelled.

He pulled back from my clit, still working his fingers in and out of me as I came long and hard. “My name. Only my name.”

“Camden,” I gasped. “Fuck.”

He pressed one more kiss to my throbbing clit and withdrew his fingers. “That's right.” He affectionately ran his hands over my bottom again. Then he helped me stand. My knees threatened to buckle, but he kept me up. “Say it again.”

I met his gaze, naked in his arms. “Camden.”

His smile was deadly. “Good. Now, look what you’ve done.”

He gestured to his cock straining hard against his tuxedo pants. I salivated to see how I’d turned him on. He’d made me come, but I’d made him so hard that he was threatening to bust a seam.

“Take care of it.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Camden

KATHERINE COMING ALL over my hand and mouth had been like a perfectly timed crescendo in an orchestral concert. Every moan from her mouth, every gasp of my name, every shudder through her cunt had been the satisfying conclusion to a beautiful performance.

Her eyes widened at my crude words. For a moment, I saw the hardened veneer peek back out. I saw the moment when she wanted to fight me. I'd told her to *take care of it*. As if it were her problem and she'd better fucking find a solution.

I doubted very much that this beauty had sucked on much cock. It seemed beneath her in some way. As if she had elevated herself so far on a goddamn pedestal that she could take everything she wanted but give nothing in return. Well, it certainly wasn't going to be like that tonight. And she wanted me to fuck her. I wanted ... no, *needed* to fuck her. But she was mine now, and I wanted to get this right.

"Well?" I said, command in my voice.

She clenched her jaw, and then the petty mask evaporated. She swallowed, and then determination came into those eyes. The same stubbornness that she used every day as a weapon was now being wielded against me.

Her body straightened as the effects of her orgasm began to wear off, and she reached for my tux. She ripped at the buttons on my jacket and yanked it open. Then she jerked it over my shoulders and let it fall to the ground. She went for the waistband of my pants as I removed my cuff links and slowly rolled my sleeves up to the elbows. She tugged the zipper to the base with such force that I thought she was going to rip it.

“Careful now,” I teased. “That’s a four-thousand-dollar suit.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “As if you can’t afford another one.”

“I don’t like when other people break my things.”

“No,” she said confidently. “Only you get to break what’s yours.”

My blood heated at those words. I grasped her jaw in my hand and drew her close, her fingers still on my zipper. “That’s right. And you’re mine now.”

“Are you intending to break me?” Her eyes were ice.

“Count on it.”

I released her, but she didn’t move for another minute. Just met my stare with her own fire. And then she thrust her hand into my boxer briefs and wrapped it around my cock.

It was ecstasy, having her grip me so tight and drag her palm up and down. But it was the anger in her eyes. The light that said she thought she was in control. It was almost adorable. She might have my cock in her hand, but she didn’t have control of the situation. The only reason she was doing this was to prove a point. She had no idea that it was *my* point that she was proving.

She pushed my boxers and trousers off of my waist. I kicked out of my shoes and let my pants drop, discarding them alongside the shoes. One hand still jerking off my cock, she nimbly released each of the buttons on my shirt until it fell open to reveal the rest of my body. She stilled for a moment, her eyes on my abs. Then, she pulled her free hand up to my skin and dragged her nails down the front of my body.

“Oh,” she whispered.

It was possessive. All the early mornings at the gym sure paid off in that one look. That one word.

My hand covered her wrist, and I drew her toward the empty chair. I sank into it, drawing her down with me. Her hand was still on my cock as she scooted off of the chair and to her knees between my legs.

“This is what you want?” she asked petulantly.

“No, it’s what you want.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Mighty confident about that.”

“That’s me.” I leaned back in the chair, resting my hands behind my head. “Are you going to stare at it or suck it?”

Her hand tightened briefly around my dick, but I liked it rough. It didn’t bother me one bit. She could be a little more heavy-handed for all I cared. Then, the most glorious thing happened—she leaned forward and took the thick length of me into her mouth.

I released a breath at the wet heat of her. I couldn’t help but imagine sinking into her pussy. This wasn’t as good, but it was pretty *damn* good. And even better than I’d imagined, as I’d been concerned that it would take an act of God to get her to suck me off.

And now that she was: dear fucking God, thank you.

Saliva dripped from her mouth as she laved her tongue against me. When I was good and wet, she bobbed for apples on my cock.

“Don’t neglect the balls, love,” I said in a tightly controlled voice. If I released everything now, there would be no way to come back.

She wrapped her hand around my balls. I grunted as she fiddled with them. Fuck, it felt so fucking good.

My hands went into her hair. There were approximately seven hundred pins keeping her long tresses back in an intricate braid. It was meant to last all day, and it had done its job. But I liked every inch of that thick mane. I wanted it loose and perfectly pullable.

So, as she went to town on my dick, I extracted pin after pin in her hair, tossing them to the ground at our feet.

She pulled back long enough to look at me in surprise as a loose strand fell forward into her face. “What are you doing?”

“Did I tell you to stop?” I growled.

“My hair will get in my face.”

I cocked a brow up. “I assure you, it will not.”

Then I guided her head back where I wanted her. She hummed—whether in approval or disapproval, I didn’t know—and it felt so good that it took everything in me not to thrust up into her mouth. I wanted to fuck her pretty little mouth so bad, but I wanted her to last the night too. I wanted her to leave her trust in me for a little bit longer.

When the last pin pinged to the ground at our feet, all of her hair cascaded forward, concealing her face. I gathered it all up in my hands and held it like a rope. She spent hours and hours on her hair every week. Every delicate strand handled with such care. And now, I had it in my hand in one big clump, using it to tug her further and further onto my cock.

I was big. Maybe too big for her right now. But I thought she could take me.

She gagged as I drew her closer to my body. Her eyes glistened as she looked up at me for a split second.

“That’s it. Take me all the way. I’ll come instantly.”

She withdrew enough to take another breath, and then she moved back down on me until her nose touched my body and my cock filled her throat. True to my word, the very feel of her taking me all the way in triggered my release. I came in hard spurts deep in the back of her throat.

“Fuck, Katherine,” I growled her name.

Katherine went still as I emptied myself. Then she pulled back, swallowing me along the way.

“I see why you like it,” she said, sitting back on her heels.

I cracked an eye open in question.

“The way you said my name ...”

“Oh, you like that, too?”

She said nothing more. She'd clearly realized that she'd given away too much. One thing too many. But now, I had it, and I could tuck it away for safekeeping.

“You definitely deserve a reward now,” I told her.

I lifted her up and over my shoulder. She shrieked as I came to my feet, and heedless of her concern, I carried my wife up the stairs and to my bedroom.

CHAPTER SIX

Katherine

“**W**HAT ARE YOU doing?” I cried out.

My head was facing his ass, staring down the long descent. It was a *long* way down if he tripped and released me. Of course, his grip was tight on my legs, and my waist was braced against his broad shoulder. He had perfect control of me. It did nothing to lessen my fear as he climbed a giant set of stairs ever upward.

It wasn't until we reached the second-story landing that I finally relaxed into him. Yelling and beating on his back hadn't gotten him to let me go. There was no way he was going to do a single thing until he wanted. This wasn't exactly the *carry your wife over the threshold* moment I'd envisioned. But he carried me through the doorway, and then we were in the massive master bedroom.

Camden strode across the room and then dropped me like a weight onto the king-size bed. My back hit the comforter and sank into the layers of plush material. I was naked, save for my garter. My heels had fallen off somewhere on the way upstairs. Camden was still in his white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. But he shucked it off, leaving him as naked as I was.

“You could have let me walk.”

“Where's the fun in that?” he asked as his face dipped to my knee.

He placed a kiss on the inside of my knee and then up. A trail of kisses until he got to the last remaining piece of clothing. His nose ran along my inner thigh. His eyes met mine for a brief moment before he sank his teeth into the material of the garter.

I gasped at the raw intimacy in the movement. Then he dragged it inch by inch down my leg and off of my body. He fiddled with it in his hands, drawing it back like a rubber band.

“I didn’t get to do this at the reception.”

“You said you didn’t want to.”

I’d done a bouquet toss. Lark had caught it with a gasp, but Camden had refused point-blank to do anything with the garter.

“You think I wanted anyone else in that crowd to have a piece of you? You think I wanted others to watch as I got under your skirts?”

I huffed. “And here I thought, you just didn’t want to get under my dress.”

He released the garter, letting it fly across the room. No poor single man to catch it in sight. Just us, all alone.

“Is that truly what you thought?” He grasped my hips and drew me toward him until my ass nearly hung off the bed. “That I didn’t want this?”

Time held, suspended in that moment. Things had never been simple between us. How could they be with an arranged-marriage contract as our starting point? But the sex at least had been easy. A rough, desperate, tearing affair but simple. There was a reason that I’d thought he’d want to just tear my clothes off and be done with it. This was a side of Camden that I’d never seen before.

It wasn’t exactly ... caring. But it was indulgent.

“I didn’t know what *this* was,” I finally admitted.

“You’ll learn.”

My head spun with that answer. Had he really refused the garter tradition because he didn’t want anyone else to see us together? Because he’d been concerned? That ... was not the Camden Percy I knew at all. It had to be a joke. A misstep. He

couldn't be real right now. He was just in a post-blow-job, lust-induced high.

Already, his cock was lengthening again. As if he could hardly get enough of me tonight. He drew my legs tight around his hips and slid himself back and forth against my waiting pussy.

My eyes closed on a groan. He wasn't even inside of me, and already, he was setting me on fire. I tried to move my hips to adjust the tip lower, to get him inside of me, but he didn't give an inch. Just ran his cock against my clit, increasing the friction slowly over time.

"Camden," I moaned.

"Did you want something?"

I wouldn't beg. He wanted me to crawl for him, but I had too much pride. He wasn't going to *not* fuck me just because I refused to beg. No man had that much control.

"Tell me what you want."

I squeezed my eyes shut and reached for his hands. I wanted everything. I wanted to be fucked so hard and rough that I would forget this day had ever happened. Somehow, I *wanted* so desperately for my new husband, the husband I'd taken out of necessity, to be the one to fuck me like this.

But I couldn't let any of that pass my teeth. I couldn't tell him that. I couldn't hand over that level of control.

"Fine," he ground out. "We have time to get there."

He pulled back from me, and I moaned in protest. Then, his hands grasped my hips and flipped me clear over. He pushed my chest down into the mattress and lifted my ass into the air.

In one hard, long stroke, he filled me. I was already dripping wet from our earlier sexual acts, so he had no resistance as he drove into me. My hands balled into fists in the comforter as he pulled back and thrust in so hard that it forced me forward across the bed.

He climbed onto the mattress after me and lifted my ass higher again. Then he reached for each of my wrists, wrenching my arms backward from the shoulders and using them together as a counterweight to plunge in deeper. Pain raked through my shoulders and my pussy. My body pliant and welcoming it before the pleasure followed, higher and higher.

I came with a shout that ripped through me. I'd had no warning. One second, I had been building, and the next second, I couldn't hold back, coming all over his cock.

"Fuck," he said as he released my wrists.

His hand came down bruisingly hard on my ass. I cried out, still in the throes of my orgasm. Then he shoved me forward and off of his cock.

"What ..."

He moved to his back and drew me on top of him. "Finish me off."

His smile was a challenge, and there was nothing I could do but accept. I settled back down on him. We groaned together at the feel of him filling me. Then I began to move. Up and down, up and down. Bucking against him and rolling my hips as I forced him closer to the brink. And as I worked him over, shockingly, I could feel the buildup of my own orgasm right there at the edge.

"I think I'm ..." I lost the train of my thought.

"Third time's a charm," Camden said. Then, he took over the roll of my hips. His hands moved me in tempo with his renewed thrusts. I braced myself against his well-muscled chest. "Come with me."

And then everything exploded. Camden roared like a lion as his climax hit him fresh. He reared up hard into me as I let go again. I shuddered around him, giving myself over to Camden Percy.

I fell forward over his chest, breathless. His hand came to my long hair, and he gently brushed it out of my face. He

didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He'd wrung it out of both of our bodies. I had nothing left to give. It had been a long and trying day. I could already feel sleep threatening to pull me under.

Camden forced me to get up and use the bathroom. Then he tucked me into the covers of his bed. I had no argument left in me. He pressed a kiss to my temple before heading into the bathroom.

I heard the shower turn on, but sleep was dragging me down.

The last thing I thought before I succumbed to it entirely was this:

Maybe I made the right choice after all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Camden

MY WIFE WAS asleep in my bed.

My wife, Katherine Van Pelt, was asleep in *my* bed.

What a fucking sentence.

I leaned forward against the railing of my top-floor balcony.

I'd taken a quick shower and changed into low-slung pants and a robe before heading into the bedroom. She was already asleep, but I was wide fucking awake. I retreated downstairs and poured myself a glass of scotch.

Snow was falling in soft drifts toward the city below. Christmas was fast approaching. My least favorite holiday. It only ever reminded me of my father being a fucking terror, insisting on a family dinner. Who the fuck knew where my sister was? But she was never reprimanded for missing. Just me. Just his failure. Despite keeping the entire company afloat.

I rattled the ice in the bottom of my drink. My fingers were freezing, and I should go inside soon. I'd turned the heaters on outside, but this high up, it was always too cold for anything but the hot tub.

Still, I didn't move.

Everything had finally happened. I'd married Katherine. I'd gotten her to bend to my will. If not break. Not yet.

I wanted to enjoy it. I wanted to be upstairs, curled around her as she slept. But I couldn't let myself revel in it. I knew what it would bring if I gave in. How quickly everything could be snatched away. And with Katherine, it was particularly precarious. Every step had to be carved out of stone until it

stuck. Otherwise, I knew exactly where she'd run at the first sign of trouble.

Oh yes, I knew all too well.

My hand tightened on the glass before I released it with a sigh. I downed the remaining contents and dropped it on the table. I absentmindedly glanced at my phone. I wasn't tired, and yet I was exhausted. I couldn't go to sleep, and yet I was more than ready to be in bed. I'd never been indecisive in my life. And so, I told myself I was choosing to stay awake on my wedding night. That I wanted to look out across the New York City skyline, watch the snow, anticipate the coming of Christmas. There was no other reason keeping me from sleep.

Then noise startled me from my own brooding. I whipped around and found a confused Katherine standing in my white tuxedo shirt and nothing else. My blood heated.

"Fuck," I hissed.

She tiptoed across the living room and cracked the door. A shiver ran through her as the cold leaked inside. "Camden?"

"What are you doing up?"

I left my spot at the balcony and came inside to keep her out of the cold. I drew the door closed. Her eyes were half-lidded, as if she'd dragged herself up out of a deep sleep.

"I woke up, and you were gone." She bit her lip and looked away from me, as if waking enough to realize she'd uttered those words out loud.

She'd been wondering where I was. She looked, dare I say, concerned by my absence. She'd come looking for me. Had all I needed to do was show her exactly how good it could be for her to relinquish control?

"I was letting you sleep."

"Oh," she said, drawing her arms across her chest. "You're not going to sleep tonight?"

"I wasn't tired."

I didn't know what possessed me, but I pulled her into my arms, tucking her against me. She dropped her head against my shoulder with the tiniest yawn.

"I'm very tired."

"I can see that," I said, stroking her hair back. "We should get you back to bed."

She glanced up at me with a small pout on her lips. "You're coming?"

And how could I deny her when she asked like that?

"Of course."

I stepped back out to bring my glass inside before ushering her upstairs. Katherine dropped my shirt and crawled into bed. Heat flared through me. Despite the incredible sex we'd had earlier, I was far from sated. I wanted more from her. So much more.

But she was tired. She would accept more sex now if I offered, but I could see she was already half-asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. I would take care of her first and foremost.

I shucked off my pants and robe before getting into bed after her. It was a king. It was big enough that neither of us had to touch throughout the night. I could stay on my side, and she could stay on hers. But she didn't.

She scooted into me until her back hit my chest. I stilled entirely, waiting for the moment when Katherine Van Pelt returned and snapped at me for touching her. But she didn't. I waited and nothing. So, I dropped my arm around her chest and banded her against me.

She made the softest little sigh. Happy.

She sounded happy.

I had no idea what to make of her. Was she delirious? Had today been that exhausting that she'd snuggle against me like this?

I didn't know, and frankly, I didn't care.

It was one night. Tomorrow, things would be back to normal, I was sure. I'd enjoy it while I could.

And maybe find a way for it to be like this long term.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Katherine

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke slow, as if from a long spell. My eyelids fluttered open, and I stared up at the unfamiliar ceiling. I was in a tangle of crisp white bedsheets. The comforter so soft and cozy that I felt as if I were cocooned in a cloud.

I was in Camden's bed. I'd spent the night.

Last night came back to me like an IV drip—one drop at a time.

The argument in the limo. The fake smiles for the paparazzi. The way he'd removed my dress. The sex. I shivered all over at every scandalous, delectable detail.

But there was more. I'd passed out. I remembered waking to an empty bed, and in a haze, going to look for Camden. Had that happened? Had he really tucked me back in, pulled me close, and never let me go?

It couldn't be.

That wasn't Camden Percy.

And he wasn't here now.

I shucked back the covers and could see an indent where his body had been. He had come to bed last night at some point. I hadn't imagined that. Was the rest true too?

I tossed my legs over the edge of the bed. I stepped into his enormous walk-in closet, packed full of rows and rows of suits. I found a sweater and pulled it over my head. I hadn't thought that I'd actually stay the night. So, I hadn't left any clothes here.

After going into the bathroom and fixing my hair, I headed down the staircase.

Camden was seated at the kitchen counter with a Chemex full of coffee in front of him. He was reading the Sunday morning paper like an actual adult. Already, he was in a dark blue pinstripe suit and loafers.

“Morning,” I said, raising my chin.

“Good morning.” His eyes flicked to me. The sweater I was wearing, my bare legs, and then back up. “Nice sweater.”

“Yeah, I didn’t pack anything.”

“I have clothes for you,” he said, returning to his newspaper.

I stilled mid-step. My brow furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I knew you’d be here. I spoke with your personal shopper. She sent over a few parcels. They’re in the billiards room.” He gestured to the closed double doors.

“Wonderful,” I said as if I wasn’t actually amazed that he’d had the forethought.

He’d spoken to my shopper and had clothes sent over. Who did that?

“And, Katherine?” He stopped me before I opened the doors. “Wear something warm.”

He dismissed me after that. It wasn’t a request. It was a command. And thus, I bristled at it.

No, last night hadn’t happened. He hadn’t been caring or comforting or kind. He hadn’t cuddled me, holding me as if I were a precious, rare object. That must have been a dream.

I wrenched the doors open, and my eyes bulged. He’d said a few parcels. He hadn’t said a *new* wardrobe. It was as if I’d stepped into a fashion shoot. There were two hanging racks full of dresses and pants and blouses and jackets. A dozen pairs of designer shoes and all of my favorite brands of makeup.

The opulence of it all wasn't what shocked me. It was that it felt like a gift. And yet, I knew it wasn't. It was a bribe. His money for my body. And this was a show of all of his money. A little something that I'd have when I was here, offering myself to him.

No gifts. We hadn't exchanged anything on our wedding day. No need when the terms had been written so clearly. We had appearances to maintain. This was the only way I could do that.

I stripped out of his sweater and exchanged it for a camel-colored cashmere sweater that clung to my body as if it had been made with my measurements. When I actually looked at the labels and my shopper's notes, my mouth hung over. Every article of clothing *had* been hand-tailored. Fuck, it had been a long time since I'd been able to get everything personally fit for me besides the dresses I wore to events.

I slid into a pair of black pants, black boots, and a long dove-gray coat. I touched up all my makeup and returned to the kitchen a few minutes later. Camden finished off his coffee and then stood.

His eyes appraised my outfit. "That will do."

"So glad that I meet your approval."

Something inside of him stilled at the bite in my voice. He nodded. As if he'd realized that everything was back to how it had always been. "Shall we?"

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

I followed him to the elevator. The limo waited for us at the entrance, and we drove toward the park. A few minutes later, we were dropped off in front of Central Park. I pulled gloves out of the pockets of the jacket and tugged them on.

Camden took my arm and tucked me in close. I kept looking at him sideways, waiting for the catch. But he said nothing as we strolled down the path. Christmas was

everywhere in the city. Tourists flocking through the park, laden with packages. We passed carolers singing holiday music. The ringing bell of a Salvation Army Santa asking for loose change. Everyone was bundled up against the cold. Snow had covered every inch of the ground last night, and it was a winter wonderland, perfect for sledding, snowball fights, and constructing snowmen.

Finally, we walked down the frost-laden steps and to the nearly frozen lake behind Bethesda Fountain.

“What are we doing here, Camden?” I asked finally.

“I want you to move in.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“You heard me.” Finally, his gaze shifted to me. “I don’t want you to live in your place.”

“But ... why? You don’t want me around all the time and in your business.” My mind was reeling. “Is this why you got me a new wardrobe?”

“One of the reasons. Though I don’t see why I need to have a reason for it. You have my money.”

He produced a black card out of his pocket and offered it to me. I wanted to reach for it, snatch it out of his grasp. But something made me stall.

“You’re just giving me that?”

He tilted his head to the side. “If you don’t want it ...”

“What’s the catch?”

“Katherine,” he said evenly, “you are my wife.”

When I still didn’t move to take it, he sighed and slid it into my pocket.

“You don’t have to suspect every one of my actions.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Don’t I?”

“No. I’ve no intention of treating you poorly. This is our life now. You should find a way to enjoy it. Spend my money.

Move into my penthouse. Be there ... with me.”

There wasn't quite a hitch in Camden's voice. But he'd paused, as if he had to fight to admit the last part. To let himself be ... not exactly vulnerable, but at least exposed to my ridicule if I denied him.

And suddenly, I realized that I hadn't dreamed last night at all. Every part of it had happened exactly as I'd imagined. Camden Percy had hidden this side of himself so thoroughly that I'd thought there was nothing beneath him, only the bastard on the surface. My mask was evident. But his was so plastered to his skin that even *I* hadn't known it was a mask at all.

As terrifying as it was to let my guard down, I'd chosen this. He was offering more than I'd thought he would. Even with a contract in place. And a small part of me—the part that had drawn his body against mine and fallen asleep in his arms—wondered exactly where this could go. Wondered if I could be happy here ... with him.

“Okay,” I said.

His eyes widened a fraction. “Okay?”

“I'll move in.”

And then to my surprise, without a photographer in sight, Camden tugged me close and pressed a firm kiss to my lips.

Everything was finally working out for me. For us. I'd never suspected that I'd fall for the man I had an arranged marriage with. But here we were, on a precipice, prepared to fall.

It was a Christmas miracle.

An arrangement, a wedding, a wedding night, soon Christmas, a honeymoon, maybe even love ... and a partridge in a pear tree.

✧ ✧ ✧

Thank you so much for reading Katherine & Camden's wedding night! If you love them like I do and want to find out what happens when Camden asks for an heir, check out [CRUEL MARRIAGE.](#)

SKATING ON THE STARS

DEBRA ANASTASIA

GAZE

XOXOXOX

“**W**HO TAUGHT YOU to skate?” Pixie Rae gave me a suspicious glare.

“The Burathons. When I was with them.” I searched her face for any hint of pain. I knew it was there. I hoped she could see the pain in my eyes, too. She was alone then, but not now. And never again.

Pixie was sitting on a fallen tree while I laced up her ice skates. Luckily, Teddi had the same size feet and enjoyed the frozen lake trips as much as I did when we were younger. I wanted Pixie to have a memory like mine. Once I was sure her skates were on properly, I stood on mine. We waddle-walked to the edge of the lake. The conditions were perfect. The ice was as clear as magic.

Pixie hesitated to put her skate on the surface. “Are you sure? This looks like it will crack in a second.” I let go of her hands and pushed myself on my skates to make sure she knew it was safe. I skated backward in a circle and then back to her. Her eyes were wide as I stretched out one hand to her.

“See? Fine.” I stuttered my steps as I transitioned from ice to snow.

Pixie pursed her lips but trusted my hand enough to grab it. I skated behind her and enveloped her in a hug as she experienced the ice with blades for the first time.

I was able to right her for the first three pushes, and then she started to get the hang of it. I wasn't surprised. She was an agile human. She didn't enjoy sports as much as I did, but she could play them decently if she wanted.

That was my Pixie. No matter what she set her mind to, she could figure it out. Even if it meant surviving our childhood in the city together.

I wasn't in a huge rush, but I had a destination. Valentine's Day had expectations, after all. I kept a grip on her hand or put my fingers on her back as she figured out more and more how to move on skates.

"Like rollerblades, right?"

She was good on skates with wheels. We had two sets at our apartment by the college.

"Yeah. Except for the giant optical illusion that I'm on top of water that is ready to crack any second." She gestured with her hand at our feet.

I couldn't hide my grin. "Well, I didn't plan that, but I'm glad it happened."

Usually the ice was frosted, and you could rarely see to the depths below, but this freeze was different. The slow build of the cold allowed large chunks to form without the impurities that would normally cloud it up.

It was close to dusk, but there was enough sunlight to see straight through to the bottom in some spots. The sandy bottom revealed a few jagged rocks. It was hard to perceive the depth.

The whole effect made the simple act of ice skating seem far more thrilling than usual.

"I feel like this exact ice will slip into my nightmares for the rest of my life." Pixie squeezed her eyes shut.

"That was not the feeling I was after." I slowed us both down and caught her at her waist. "You okay? I can get you out of here in a hot minute."

Her cheeks were pinking up from the cold. I kissed each one.

“I’m good. I’m safe with you.” She leaned up and tried to give me a kiss on my nose. She overextended and slipped. I pulled her to me and kept our balance. “See? Now let me get my juggling knives out and see how you do when I add those.”

“Come here, hilarious.” I swooped down and picked her up, slinging her over my shoulder. “Don’t kick or you’ll turn my brain into a kabob.”

I felt her put her hands on my back to steady herself. “Gaze. What the hell?”

I wanted her to see the setup before we lost the light. I skated her around the outcropping of trees so she could see what I had planned.

Once I saw the candles flickering, I slowed and set her down.

She was focused on her feet and then glanced up. I watched her face while she took in the scene.

Earlier, my brother, Ruffian, helped me set it up. We arranged a huge heart shape with LED candles. Then I spread out a blanket with a large picnic basket. In it were some sandwiches and a cake with “Will you marry me?” written on the top in icing.

Tonight was a big night. It had to go perfectly. When Pixie went from sighing happily to screaming, I knew something awful was going down.

✧ ✧ ✧

PIXIE RAE

GAZE HAD A flare for romance, I had to hand it to him. It wasn’t necessary. I was his no matter what. We would always be each other’s person. You couldn’t have one of us without the other. And the beautiful scene in front of me with the flickering candles was awe-inspiring. I loved that he had gone to all this work.

But then, the huge picnic basket moved once. Then again. Then one more time. A hairy hand stretched out, opening the basket from the inside.

I knew I was screaming, and I should have probably stopped. There had to be a reason for what I was seeing. I clapped my hands over my lips.

Gaze leaned closer to me and then followed my line of sight.

“Oh shit.” Gaze took off on his skates so quickly, I had to toss out my arms to keep my balance. He could skate really, really fast. He slid next to the blanket as if it was home base.

He grabbed the basket and the hand disappeared back inside.

“Oh no. No. You evil little thing.” Gaze flipped open the basket and slowly an adorable, huge raccoon popped his head out. “Not the cake. Shit.”

The raccoon licked his chops.

“You ate the whole cake? No. No!” Gaze wagged his finger at the raccoon.

I was taking a video before I realized I had my phone in my hand. It was a habit. When something was video-worthy, it was a reflex.

The raccoon scrambled to get out of the basket. Gaze didn't seem to know if he wanted to trap the raccoon inside the basket or shoo him away.

Finally, Gaze's super quick reflexes kicked in and he popped the lid closed. The raccoon protested with a squeak.

“What do I do?” He was holding the basket close to his chest.

“What were you trying to do?” It sure seemed like the raccoon was a surprise, so I didn't think it was a new pet.

Gaze frowned and didn't answer me.

I moved slowly in his direction. My skating skills were super new.

When I got close enough, I held onto Gaze's bicep. His distress was next level, and he was usually calm.

"If you ate the cake, you dumbass..." He lifted the lid again, and the adorable raccoon looked up at us both. He was covered in something thick and white. I slapped the lid down.

"Is that rabies? Is he sick?" I swallowed hard. I was a city girl, but I knew rabies was bad news.

"No, that's icing. From a cake. And this fat bastard ate it." He shook the basket a little.

"Was that my Valentine's Day gift? A cake from Gideon's Bakery?"

The basket made another squealing noise.

Gaze's eyes were wide. "Sort of."

"Well, we have to let him out, right?" My skates were getting away from me, sliding out on opposite sides.

Gaze looked from the basket to me and back again. A decision was made. He let go of the lid and wrapped his arm around my waist so I wouldn't fall.

The second the pressure was off the lid, the raccoon scrambled out of the basket. He plopped out on the ice and lay on his back with a swollen tummy.

"Oh, he ate the whole damn thing." Gaze set the basket down and turned his back on the furry guy long enough to help me sit on a blanket that was laid out on the ice.

The raccoon swung his legs from one side to another. He was like a turtle lying upside down on his shell. He smelled like a candy factory.

Gaze shook his head. "This is ridiculous."

"Happy Valentine's Day, babe." I knew he'd been up to something special. His brother, Ruffian, had been visiting a

few days in a row. And Ruffian sucked at hiding things from me. I didn't know what it was, but he always acted like I'd just caught him stealing from a cookie jar around me.

I was guessing this whole setup was a collaboration between the brothers. It made my heart swell. I loved that they were connecting. The raccoon flipped over finally and started waddle-sliding himself across the ice.

“Oh no.” Gaze pulled out his phone and hit FaceTime. I watched the scene from the blanket on the ice as Ruffian came into view on Gaze's screen. “Look what was in the basket when I got here.” Gaze flipped the screen to show Ruffian the slovenly raccoon.

“Oh crap. Did he get into the cake at all?” Ruffian was driving and I heard Teddi pipe up, “Aw, he's so cute. He looks sick, though.”

Teddi was Ruffian's girlfriend/partner in crime. Well, actually the opposite of crime. They did good stuff together.

“I'm on my way. Don't let that raccoon out of your sight.”

“You guys are pretty intense about this cake. We can get another one,” I said.

Gaze shook his head and proceeded to skate-stalk the hairy little thief. “I have to keep that thing.” He was talking more to himself than to me.

“Should I take off my skates and help you?” I kicked out my feet to start on the task.

“No. Please don't. Just sit right there and take in the scene. This romantic, memorable scene.” The raccoon audibly farted. “*Seriously?*”

“He's got a lot to process if he ate a cake,” I offered by way of defense for the little guy.

Gaze concentrated on blocking the raccoon's attempted escape into the surrounding woods. He was watching the lines the raccoon would likely travel. I started filming again, because I had nothing left to offer to him.

Ruffian came out of the woods with Teddi close on his heels.

“Bro.” Ruffian skidded across the lake.

Teddi slid like she was wearing skates instead of Converse sneakers.

“Dude, you said nothing would touch the basket. That clear ice is too scary for animals.”

Ruffian made a face. “Yeah, I did say that.”

Gaze made a frantic gesture at the raccoon.

“I see him.” Ruffian pulled up to a stop and Teddi slid-skated next to me, sitting on the blanket.

“How’s it going?” She tossed her long hair over her shoulder.

“I guess it sucks?” I shrugged.

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t know.” Teddi patted my arm.

“This day is getting weirder and weirder.” I recentered the camera on the boys.

“Isn’t this the cutest setup, though?” Teddi smiled while she looked over at the LED candles and the blanket. “They had the hardest time making a heart shape.”

“Aw, it’s a heart shape. You guys were pretty close to us?” They arrived like they had been waiting to do so.

“Ruffian was supposed to run the drone they rented. But now we’re doing this.” Teddi put a mittened fist to her lips.

“I guess we wait until it takes a crap?” Ruffian was squatting low and looking at the panicked raccoon.

Gaze ran his hands down his face, pulling in his cheeks. “He’s a wild animal.”

“That’s the tough part, for sure. At least we still have him. I guess we have to trap him?” Ruffian held up his hands in a defense type maneuver.

“You’re supposed to be the wildlife expert, so do your thing.” Gaze was getting more frustrated with each passing second.

“I never said I was an expert, just that when Mom and I lived in the woods, I knew a few things about it. Plus, he’s got a collar on.” Ruffian took off his jacket and held it up like he might try to swaddle the fat raccoon.

I made eye contact with Teddi. She had pulled off her mitten to scratch her nose. “Your nail polish is so cute.”

The pale blue color had gold lines running through it.

“Right? I was thrilled when I bought the nail polish stickers. So easy.” She held out her hand. “Depending how this turns out, I have a great red set for your nails. We can do it tonight.”

I had no idea why a raccoon gorging on a cake had anything to do with me painting my nails, but sometimes Teddi was four steps ahead of a situation in her head, so I just nodded encouragingly.

“What do you guys have in store for tonight? The big ol’ heart day.”

Teddi crinkled her nose. “Just staying in today. After this.”

“No one is making a whole lot of sense today. Did you notice that, or is it just me?”

Gaze and Ruffian were now fight dancing with the raccoon. The beast seemed to have gotten some of his mobility back.

“Oh, it’s not just you. Hang in there, pretty lady.” Teddi grabbed the overturned basket and righted it.

Ruffian tackled the raccoon and swaddled him in the jacket. I made sure I was still videoing. Gaze pumped his fist and then seemed to think better of it. “Now what?”

The raccoon’s little face peeked out from the material. He looked guilty but not nearly scared enough for a wild animal.

“Peaches!” a woman’s voice echoed off the ice. “Hairy baby, where are you?”

At that point, the raccoon almost scurried free. I noticed his collar had what looked like an Apple AirTag on it. It made a beeping noise. Ruffian scrambled to keep a hold on him. A high-pitched whine came from the raccoon and the screaming lady got closer.

Ruffian tilted his head. “Um, this thing is making noise.” He pointed to the tag around the raccoon’s neck.

A woman in high boots and a blue fuzzy robe slid into our scene. “I’m so sorry. Did Peaches get into your food? She’s just awful.” She put out her hands and Ruffian let the raccoon go. It waddled straight to the woman and climbed her like a tree. “Oh, you got into something, all right.” She held out a sticky hand covered in frosting. The raccoon licked the woman’s face.

Ruffian and Gaze crowded the woman and drenched her in hushed whispers. She looked alarmed, but also amused.

“Oh no. That’s awful.” She tilted her head until she made eye contact with me.

“This has to be the weirdest date Gaze has ever taken me on.”

Teddi lifted something out of the basket and then palmed it before I could see what it was. “Interestingly, this would *not* be the weirdest date I’ve been on with Ruffian.”

Before I could ask her to explain herself, Teddi got up and slid to the boys and the lady. She put her arm around Ruffian and his head dropped to look in her outstretched hand. Then Ruffian yanked on Gaze’s sleeve until he looked in Teddi’s hand. Gaze’s shoulders dropped in what seemed like relief.

The raccoon lady started laughing and jiggling the raccoon in her arms like it was a baby.

It all hit me at once. The candles, the drone, the picnic basket. Gaze was trying to propose to me, and everything had

gone sideways on him. Oh, my poor guy.

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GAZE

I TOOK THE sticky ring from Teddi's hand and slipped it into my pocket.

Ruffian whispered in my ear, "Check it out, the little bastard didn't eat it after all!"

I'd been so tense thinking about how screwed up my proposal had gone, that having the ring back was like a sign that everything was going to be okay. I felt my spine unclench.

"I need a new plan. I can't salvage this. I don't want Pixie's proposal story to at any point include my talking about sifting through a domestic raccoon's litter box."

Teddi's smile got bigger somehow, and I could tell Ruffian was holding back a laugh out of sheer willpower.

Teddi leaned forward to whisper, "How about tonight at the party? Instead of an engagement party, it could be a surprise, you're about to be engaged party."

Ruffian shrugged and then sped forward to help the raccoon lady across the ice. "I don't want her to slip carrying this guy back."

I nodded at my brother, grateful that he had the sense to be the gentleman while I was still trying to figure out my life.

Teddi touched my shoulder, having to reach up because of our height difference. "It'll be great. My friends and I will help. You know we can throw a hell of a party."

"Okay. That's going to have to do." I turned to face Pixie Rae, who was sitting completely amazed on the blanket. Maybe she knew? Maybe she figured it all out?

I ran through the events of the last hour. I could maybe just make this about ice skating. And let Teddi and her buddies do their work. They were excellent at pulling off last-minute

parties. She had an entire charity that helped families grant wishes for kids in need. Adjusting a few things for tonight's party would be a piece of cake for her. Undigested by a raccoon cake, I hoped.

After the raccoon and its owner were off the ice, Ruffian came back. "Listen, you guys hang out here for a little while longer, then come on out like we planned." He held out a hand to Teddi, who took it.

Finally, I was able to sit with Pixie on the blanket. She rubbed my back.

"Everything okay?"

She was so pretty, the sunset throwing colors all over the glass ice to try to dazzle her.

"Yeah. Everything's perfect." I cuddled her to me and we listened to Ruffian and Teddi drive away. The chill picked up even more when the sun slipped below the trees, so I took a few minutes to clean up the candles and baskets. After I helped Pixie up, I jammed the blanket into the basket with the candles.

Once we were ready, I held out an arm to Pixie. She clamped on tightly. As we glided slowly, Pixie gasped.

"Check it out. It's like we are skating on the stars."

She was right. The ice was working like a mirror, reflecting the night sky as we cruised over it.

I thought about the diamond in my pocket and contemplated doing it here. But the sticky icing made me stop. I wanted Pixie to have a shiny ring. So instead, I just pulled her close and kissed the top of her head.

◇ ◇ ◇

GAZE

MAYBE I WAS stressing too much. I bet that's what Pixie would tell me. She and Teddi were off getting dressed for what Pixie

thought was a dinner reservation with my brother and his girlfriend for Valentine's Day.

Austin was washing the engagement ring in the sink over a colander.

I was standing by watching like he was diffusing a bomb.

"So, are you one-hundred percent sure this ring was never in a raccoon's digestive tract?" He was wearing latex gloves, just to be sure.

"No. I mean, Peaches might have choked on it or something." I put my hand in my hair and pulled a little.

"Super great idea putting Mom's ring in a basket for the wildlife." Austin lifted an eyebrow in my direction.

I rolled my eyes. "I guess I'm nervous."

"Why would you be nervous? You and Pixie are fused together all the damn time." He added some more jewelry cleaner.

"I know, I know. It's just a big step. What if she still wants to get out there and live a little? Date some other guys?" I started to pace. I was not this nervous when I mentioned that I wanted to ask Pixie to marry me. I even asked Mike for Pixie's hand in marriage, because he was the closest thing to a father either of us had.

Once I had let the cat out of the bag, Ronna got involved and offered me the family ring. "First kid of mine to get married gets the family ring."

I was so touched I had to swallow a few times. I was adopted. I was adopted as an adult by the Burathons. That they would consider this for me was mind-blowing and humbling. I had gotten Austin, Teddi, and Milt on the phone before I accepted the ring, making sure it was okay with them. They were thrilled and teased me about being Mom's favorite. I teared up a little. This family loved big the whole damn time you were on the planet with them.

Austin dried the ring carefully. “Gaze, how would you handle Pixie going on a date with another dude?”

“Uh.” The thought filled me with a throat-stomping amount of rage.

“Yeah, don’t think it’s an option for you guys, because I don’t think Pixie wants you dating anyone else either.” He held out the sparkling ring to me.

“Good point.” I took the ring and walked it over to the waiting box. Putting the ring in cake was stupid. Well, it would have been fine if it wasn’t for Peaches. But now I had to ask Pixie to marry me in a room full of all our family and friends. I’d wanted it to be private except for Ruffian as Milt’s drone’s pilot. The video I’d planned of a swirling drone over clear glass-like ice as I dropped to one knee was just a failed nightmare now.

If she said no...

Austin interrupted my thoughts as if he could read them, “Just get the girl, brother. You know you belong together.”



PIXIE RAE

TEDDI AND I were ready to meet the boys. She was driving. I looked down at my new red nails. Super fancy thanks to Teddi’s quick work. She made sure we both looked picture ready, because Ronna had mentioned that she wanted some framed pictures of us and the guys.

But I knew. It made sense why Gaze was so nervous. The drone, the raccoon eating what had to be a ring—it all made too much sense. Of course, I was trying not to get my hopes up. Because if I was wrong, I didn’t want Gaze to think I was disappointed in anything he’d done for me. Even if it was just ice skating in the stars that was ruined by a little furry burglar.

I went along with it. Teddi was texting back and forth with what seemed like a million people, but she could multitask like

a boss, so we were both in the car on time and ready for romance. She'd even asked me to make sure my bra and panties matched.

I was expecting to go to The Brew Shed for dinner, but when Teddi turned the car in the wrong direction, I started to play a game on my phone instead of mentioning it. Four more turns and she pulled off the road.

I turned to her. "You wanna tell me what's going on here?"

"Absolutely not. Do you trust me, Pixie?" She leaned over me and pulled a scarf out of the glovebox.

"Most of the time." I tucked my phone into my purse.

"Good enough. Put this blindfold on." She held out the scarf to me. "But let me help so you don't mess up your makeup."

After Teddi tied the red scarf in a bow, she checked that I couldn't see her. All I could see was an outline of her. She clapped quickly and bounced up and down in her seat. "I'm doing such a great job with this." Then her tone got serious. "I could probably be a spy."

I didn't have the heart to tell her I was pretty sure she was trying to sneak me to a place for Gaze to ask me to marry him. If she got serious about the spy thing in the future, I would let her down easy.

I briefly let my head swirl with marriage plans. The dress. The man. Songs. Cake. The honeymoon. I bit down on my smile. I had to let Teddi think she was good at this.

She parked the SUV and came to my side. After she helped me out and took my purse from my hands, she led me through a parking lot. I could actually see my feet and hers when I looked straight down.

Then we were walking through a doorway into a darkened room. I saw a few other shoes, and although it was quiet, I could feel the presence of others.

When Teddi finally let go of my hands, she said, “I’m going to take off your blindfold.”

I had to blink a few times as the lights went up and the crowd yelled, “Surprise!”

But then I saw Gaze, standing in front of me with his hand behind his back.

“Hi,” I offered.

“Hey,” he replied, full of nerves and hope. He looked like he was about to play the most important basketball game of his life in a pool full of hungry sharks.

“You okay?” I stepped close to him and held out my hand. If he was nervous, I was going to help him no matter what.

“I will be.” He finally gave me a smile and took to one knee.

It wasn’t a surprise, but all of a sudden I was overwhelmed with nerves, too.

The room quieted, but I doubt anyone heard Gaze except me.

“Pixie Rae, we’re already married in my head, but will you do the party and stuff with me?”

He was right. We were already part of each other’s souls and always had been. I nodded. “I love parties. Let’s do it.”

He stood and scooped me up, pressing a kiss to my forehead while running a hand down my hair. “Really?”

I laughed. “Of course. The answer is always yes if you’re the question.”

He kissed me and then seemed to remember he had another job. Soon, there was a spotlight on us. Then two. I could barely see Gaze through them.

He struggled to see me and then carefully slid a beautiful diamond ring onto my finger. Music started playing and a few

confetti cannons made me jump right into Gaze's arms. We kissed again.

The spotlights were swung around the room and I could see where we were. It was the storefront that held Teddi and Ruffian's charity. All the girls from the Me Parties were here. I saw Austin and a pile of his friends. Taylor and some of my other friends were jumping up and down in the corner. Ronna and Mike and Ms. Josephine were there as well. I looked down at the ring. It had two sapphires on either side, and I recognized it from Ronna's finger.

Gaze watched me study the ring. He preemptively answered the question that was forming in my head.

"Yes, that's Ronna's. Apparently, the first kid of theirs to marry gets the ring. I asked Mike for permission to marry you as well." Gaze's deep eyes held all the things I was thinking.

That our love was amazing, and that we now had a family that cherished us—it was a gift. A blessing.

I turned to face Ronna and Mike. They had their arms around each other and were looking at us with pride.

I felt my eyes tearing up. "We've got it made, Gaze."

"We do. I love you so much, Pixie Rae."

"And I love you, Gaze Patrick."



AFTER THE PARTY, I had my shoes off in Gaze's truck. My phone was dead and Gaze dug out a charger for me. After plugging in the phone, we both glanced at the ring.

"We've got a lot to do." Gaze ran a finger over my knuckles.

"We do. There's no rush, though, right?" I turned toward him. I wasn't sure if he had more things up his sleeve, or if it was just the proposal.

"Oh, hell no. That's my last surprise. It was killing me not to tell you what was going on. I suck at keeping stuff from

you.” He moved my hair behind my ear.

“Good. I want to do this with you, for sure. Maybe we can get married in the backyard?” I wasn’t interested in anything too fancy.

“Mike and Ronna will love that.”

I cuddled up to his chest, but the console between us got in the way. “I think we owe them some stuff, just to let them know how cool they are.”

“They know. But I agree. A backyard wedding sounds perfect. You know we can use Teddi for some ideas.” Gaze threaded his fingers between mine.

“She’ll turn it into an event, that’s for sure. Your biggest problem will be who to pick as your best man.” I pointed out the obvious. Austin and Gaze were so tight, but Ruffian’s recent appearance had also meant the world to Gaze.

He exhaled and shook his head. “That’s a good problem to have.”

“That’s a great way of looking at it.” I moved to crawl over the console, and Gaze helped me.

I hiked my dress up a bit and straddled him.

“This is giving me great flashbacks.” He ran his hand up my thigh.

“Same here.” I settled onto his lap and laid my head on his shoulder.

Gaze wrapped his arms around me.

“How long have you been planning this?” I held my left hand up.

“Since the day I shot a Nerf dart through your window.” He grabbed my hand and kissed the ring.

“Really, since we were kids?” I watched as his eyes hooded over with emotion.

“Yeah. You’ve been it since the word go, Pixie. You know that.” Gaze let go of my hand and slipped his behind my head.

“If it’s always been forever, then we have nothing to lose, right?” I leaned forward and tasted his lips.

We kissed long into the evening before Gaze insisted we head home. The wedding was a formality. A fun one, but unnecessary when it came to him and me. We were forever anyway.

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Thank you for reading SKATING ON THE STARS by Debra Anastasia! If you want more Gaze and Pixie, be sure to read [DROWNING IN STARS](#).

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