

A romantic couple embracing in a festive setting. The man is on the left, wearing a dark, textured sweater, and the woman is on the right, wearing a light-colored, textured sweater. They are both looking down at each other. The background is filled with warm, glowing lights and snowflake decorations, creating a cozy and intimate atmosphere.

a BETTER LOVE holiday novella

Better

THAN THE BEACH

BRIT BENSON

better than the beach

A HOLIDAY NOVELLA

BRIT BENSON



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author's note

This story originally appeared in a holiday anthology in 2021 as a 12,000 word short story titled “A Holiday Layover.” It has since been edited and expanded into a 30,000 word novella.

While this novella is **a complete standalone**, it does take place in the *Better Love* world. For those of you who are familiar with the *Better Love* world, kindly note that this story takes place sometime between *Better With You* and *Nothing Feels Better*.

To Nanta Claus



ONE

cassie

DECEMBER

CANCELLED.

Cancelled. Cancelled. Cancelled.

First my connecting flight to LAX was delayed an hour due to weather, extending my already two-hour layover in Denver to three. Then it was delayed another hour, meaning there would be no way I'd catch my second connecting flight from LAX to Honolulu.

But I didn't panic.

Nope.

I got on my phone, and I found myself a second flight from LAX to Honolulu for later this evening. I'd have to hang out in the LAX airport for a while, but that was okay. I could do that. With the promise of sun and sand and gorgeous beaches for two weeks, I could easily handle a few more hours in an airport. I'd get a drink and some nachos, and soon I'd be sipping pina colodas in a bikini with my sorority sisters.

But then my flight to LAX went from delayed to cancelled, as did all the other flights out of Denver, until further notice.

So now, instead of sipping pina colodas on the beach in a bikini, I'm getting drunk on overpriced draft beer at an airport bar, wearing leggings and scowling at the heavy snow falling outside. I didn't even pack clothes for snow. Just bikinis.

I should have left earlier this week with the rest of the girls, but I had that stupid exam for my educational curriculum class that I couldn't miss, and then, since I was already on campus, I promised Lucinda that I would cover her weekend closing shift at the performing arts center where I work. I got to sit in on the sold out showing of the American Midwest Ballet Company's performance of *The Nutcracker*, and it was beautiful, but now I'm regretting it. I'm stranded at DIA the weekend before Christmas, and it's all because of that dumb educational curriculum exam for my teaching major.

I don't even want to be a teacher.

I want to do music therapy with kids who have dealt with trauma, but instead I have to make do with the extra music electives because, as my parents like to tell me, *Cassandra, there's no guaranteed career in music*

therapy, but we always need good teachers.

Of course, they'd think that. They're teachers.

"Stupid snow," I grumble. "Stupid Professor Cummings. Stupid Mom and Dad."

"Stupid Broncos," the bartender adds with a smile as she wipes the bar top next to me. When I arch a brow at her, she laughs. "Well, if we're listing things that suck, we might as well mention the Broncos. They lost us any chance of a championship this year."

"I don't know sports," I say with a shrug.

"Just trust me on this one," she says, and gives me a wink. "So where were you headed?"

"Final destination, Honolulu," I say into my beer. "But flew here from Indianapolis, then I was supposed to hop a connecting flight from here to LAX. Then LAX to Honolulu."

"Yikes on bikes, that's a trip." She grimaces.

"Yeah." I laugh. "But it would have all been worth it when I sank my toes in the sand with that first pina colada in my hand." I snort out a laugh at my rhyme, definitely feeling the effects of my three beers.

"Hey, you might still get there," she says, but she averts her eyes to wipe out a glass, and a feeling of dread hits me.

"You're lying," I say flatly, and she scrunches her nose. "Tell me the truth. How bad is it?" I ask, and gesture to the window, where the snow seems to only be getting thicker.

"Truth?"

"Yup."

"You might be in town for a few days," she states, and my stomach falls to my feet. "The forecast is saying it's only going to get worse. Ice is coming, too. Have you called hotels yet?"

"No," I breathe out. "I didn't think I would have to. It was just delayed..."

"You might want to start calling," she says, and slides me a printed list of all the hotels in the immediate area. "Start at the top. That's the closest one to the airport."

I thank her and grab the paper, then push through the growing crowd of people toward the window while dialing on my phone. By the time I hit the end of the list, I'm already scoping out the best potential corner of the airport to set up camp and cursing myself for not bringing a blanket or one of those little neck pillow thingies. Fricken hotels and their "no vacancy" baloney.

Stupid snow. If I have to celebrate Christmas in the airport, I'm going to be so bummed.

I elbow my way back to the bar so I can return the list of numbers, and the bartender must be able to tell I've had no luck from the look of defeat on my face, because she cringes.

"Nothing, huh?"

"Nope. No vacancies in all of Denver, it seems."

That's a bit of an exaggeration. There are probably vacancies somewhere, but none of the accessible hotels have them.

"Thanks for your help, though." I slide back onto my barstool, grateful that she kept it open for me, and order another beer.

"So, what's your plan now?" she asks as she slides me the pint, and I shrug and take a sip before answering.

"Guess I camp out on the airport floor for a while. I got a text while I was calling around that the airline is unloading bags, but I didn't check luggage. Got everything I need in my carry-ons."

She nods. "Smart. I always try not to check luggage."

"Same. I only packed sundresses and bikinis," I laugh, and then side-eye the snow. "They don't take up much space."

"So, the only warm clothes you have are the ones on your body?"

"Yup," I pop the p, then mentally check through my outfit. Old Navy leggings, a BU sweatshirt, beat-up Uggs, and a North Face shell. "Damn, I'm so not prepared for the Snowpocalypse."

She surveys me again while mixing a Bloody Mary. I watch her pull a pre-made garnish toothpick thingy from a cooler and stab it into the drink, then she walks away to drop it off. When she comes back, she sticks out her hand, and I raise a brow at her.

"Hi," she says with a smile. "My name's Mallory Evans. You can call me Mal."

I smile back and shake her hand. "I'm Cassandra Larsen. Call me Cassie."

"Perfect." She beams. "Now we're friends. I'm off in an hour. You want to come with me?"

I blink and let out a little laugh.

"Like, to your house?"

"Well, no." She snorts. "Unless you want to sleep on the world's smallest couch in the studio apartment I share with my husband and giant ass dog."

She widens her eyes for emphasis. “But my nan owns a small Bed and Breakfast in Golden. It’s technically not open right now because she closes for the holidays, but she won’t care. You’ll have your own room, and it’s a shared bathroom, but she won’t have any other guests, so it will essentially be yours. And she’s a great cook, and fucking hilarious, and it will sure as shit beat sleeping on the airport floor for the next few days.”

For the first time in a few hours, I feel the fist of anxiety loosen in my chest.

“How much does she charge?”

Mallory shrugs. “I don’t actually know, but it won’t be any more than the hotels in the area. What do you say?”

“You sure she’ll be okay with it?”

“Positive,” she says with a smile. “And you’ll love her. Might even decide to stay here through New Year’s instead of heading to the islands,” she adds with a wink, and I roll my eyes with a laugh.

“Doubtful,” I say, “but yeah, that sounds good. Great, even. Thank you.”

“Of course. Let me finish up and then we’ll head out.”

While Mallory closes out tabs, I open back up the airline app on my phone and turn on notifications for all flights. As soon as the planes can start flying out again, I’ll be on the next one to LAX. Until then, I guess I’ll be hanging out with Mallory’s nan in her B&B, trading cocktails and the ocean for cocoa and snow.

I shoot an update to the group text, letting my sorority sisters know what’s up. I get back a bunch of pictures of the bitches on the beach and I scowl at my phone. *Stupid snow.*

I close out of the group chat, take a deep breath, and give my mom a call. She answers on the first ring.

“I’ve been watching the news,” she says by way of greeting. “All the flights are grounded? Goodness, Cassandra, what are you going to do?”

“It’s okay, Mom. I actually found a Bed and Breakfast to stay at. I can wait out the storm there. It’s supposed to get worse, so it’ll likely be a few days before I can leave.”

“A Bed and Breakfast? Honey, what about the hotels?”

“No vacancies,” I say with a shrug, and I can hear her sigh.

“Did you call them all?”

“Everything in the immediate area, yeah.”

“Well, did you call them right away? How are they all booked already?”

I try not to take offense to her needling, but it's hard. I know she's worried about me, but it would be nice if she would just trust me for once. It's not like I can control the weather.

"I called them as soon as I knew I wouldn't be able to leave, and they're all booked probably because it's the holidays, and all flights are cancelled, and Denver is an international airport." I close my eyes and tilt my head to the ceiling. "It's going to be fine, Mom. The B&B is better than sleeping on the airport floor."

"Well, what's it called, this B&B? So I can use the google and check their rating?"

Shit. I don't actually know.

"Um, I forget, but I'll text it to you once we hang up."

"Okay. Cassandra, I'm so sorry. I know you were looking forward to your trip," she says, sounding legitimately sympathetic for a moment, but I don't fall for it. "I do think you should have just stayed home, though. This never would have happened if you would have listened to your father and me." Yep, here it is. The guilt trip. "You know your father and I never see you anymore. We wanted to be able to spend Christmas with you, and now you're going to be spending it all alone."

I roll my eyes.

"It's cool, Mom." *Lie.* "This is going to be great." *Bigger lie.* "I've always wanted to spend the holidays in the mountains." *Surprisingly not a lie, but I didn't know it was true until I said it out loud.* "I'm excited." *Huh. I kind of am excited now.* "Don't worry. It will probably only be a day or two, and then I'll be soaking up the sun in Honolulu." *Fingers freaking crossed.*

"Okay." She sighs again, just as Mallory steps up next to me zipping up a parka jacket. "But you know that—"

"—Mom, I gotta go. My ride's here so I'll text you in a bit. Love you! Bye!"

I hang up before she can pull me into another conversation. Or another guilt trip.

"What's your nan's place called?" I ask Mallory as I follow her through the airport. "I have to send it to my mom."

"Yeah, sure. I think it's just called Nan's Place or something. She doesn't have a website or anything—all her bookings come from Airbnb. Hold on, I'll shoot you her listing."

She fumbles with her phone and asks for my number, but she drops the

phone on the ground before she can do anything else.

“Shit,” she spits as she picks the phone up and inspects it. “This is my third phone this year. If I bust another one, my husband will riot.”

I laugh and give her my number, then a new text pops up with an Airbnb link. I click on it and thumb through the photos, looking up frequently to weave through the dense crowd of people as I follow Mallory to wherever she’s taking me.

“Oh, wow. This is amazing,” I exclaim as I scroll through the details on the listing.

The house was built in 1901 and has three floors, six bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a gorgeous patio with a hot tub and some beautiful views. With a red brick façade and two large bay windows on either side of the double-door, arched entryway, the house is a breathtaking sight. Add in the dormer windows on the top level and the white, elegant trimming, and it could definitely pass for some sort of historic mansion.

“Right?” Mallory boasts. “It’s been in the family forever. I don’t know how Nan keeps up with all that house, but she does. The town keeps trying to buy it from her—cause it’s so historic, or whatever—but she said ‘over her dead body.’” She snorts out a laugh, then points to an exit. “This way. I’m parked out here.”

I zip up my thin jacket and stick my naked hands in the pockets. No gloves, no hat, no scarf. The moment we step outside, the cold wind bites at my face and seeps through my leggings as if they’re not even there. *Damnit*. I might as well be in one of my bikinis for how well these leggings are working at keeping me warm.

“So, it’s about a forty-minute drive,” Mallory says once we’re sitting in her Subaru Outback, “but it will probably take us over an hour since it’s snowing. We’ll probably get into town just before the ice hits.”

“Wait,” I interject. “Are you driving out of your way to take me there?”

“Nah,” she reassures. “My apartment is in Golden, too. We’re looking for houses in the Denver area but so far nothing’s worked out.”

“You commute?”

“For this job, yeah,” she says as she pulls a window scraper out of the back seat. “I work at the airport part-time. I actually teach high school English.”

“No shit?” I say with a grin, then point to my chest. “I’m an ed major!”

“Oh cool,” Mallory exclaims. “High school?”

“Yeah. History.”

I try to force my voice into something resembling enthusiasm—something that sounds like *I can't wait to teach about dead people to teenaged assholes*—but I think I fail.

“Why don't you sound excited about that?” she questions playfully, and I laugh.

“Let's just say my parents are also teachers, and they pay my college tuition.”

I raise a brow, trying to say the rest without actually *saying* it. Mallory nods and takes a deep breath.

“Got it,” she says. “Well, it's none of my business, but...” She scrunches her nose at me, and I grimace.

“It's cool. Just say it.”

“Teaching is a labor of love, girl. It's rewarding and wonderful and necessary, yeah, but it's not a walk in the park. It's exhausting in every way possible, and some days the only thing getting me through the week is my passion for my job. My *need* to be in that classroom with those kids. So, if you don't have that passion...”

She trails off, and I nod, fully understanding what she's saying. It's actually something that I worry about a lot. *All the time*.

“I hear you,” I breathe out, and she sends me a small smile before hopping out of the car to brush the snow off the windows.

She works swiftly, and I feel bad I'm not helping, but I might as well be naked compared to her. She's wearing a parka, scarf, beanie, and gloves, and she's still shivering.

“Ready?” Mallory asks when she slides back into the driver's seat.

“Ready!” I chime, and she pulls out of the space.

The drive to Golden from the Denver airport is stressful.

The main roads have been pre-treated and plows are running, but the snow is still falling in thick blankets, so there are times when Mallory has to drive twenty under the speed limit because the visibility is so bad. I'm white-knuckling the sides of my seat, but she's cool as a cucumber. Used to it, I guess.

After about an hour and a half, Mallory pulls into the driveway of the most beautiful red-brick building. With the Christmas lights twinkling from

the eaves, a sparkling Christmas tree shining through one of the bay windows, and white candles glowing from all the others, the Bed and Breakfast is even more magical in person. A tingle of excitement runs down my back.

“It’s so pretty.”

“Right?” Mallory nods with a smile. “Come meet Nan. I called her after my shift when I was getting my stuff. She knows you’re coming.”

I grab my bags from the trunk and make my way up the walkway behind Mallory, thinking warm thoughts, because it’s cold as fuck. She walks in the front door without knocking, and I’m immediately enveloped in warmth and the sound of a crackling fire. I heave a sigh of relief, then get a whiff of spiced apples and peppermint. *Christmas smells*. My mouth waters, and a smile spreads over my face just as a woman who looks like she couldn’t be more than seventy comes prancing into the foyer to greet us. She’s wearing a pair of red linen pants and a cream cable knit sweater, and her silver-streaked brown hair is pulled back into a loose bun.

“Mallory,” the older woman croons, and pulls Mallory into a quick hug. “Glad you made it safely.” Then she turns her attention to me. “And you must be Cassie. So sorry to hear about your flight, dear, but you can stay here as long as you need.” She steps back and waves us into the house. “Come now before you freeze off your asses.”

“Cassie,” Mallory says with a grin, “meet Amelia Flowersinger of House Montrose, First of her Name, Lady of the Inn, Baker of Pies, Buster of Balls, and Mother to a bunch of wild heathens.”

Amelia laughs and swats Mallory’s shoulder.

“Your father is one of the wildest, child, and I dare say you take after him.”

“I’m an angel,” Mallory says and sends me a wink before looking back at her grandmother. “I can’t stay, Nan. I gotta get home before the ice hits, but thanks for letting Cassie crash here.” She leans over and gives the woman another tight hug. “We’ll come check on you in a day or so once the roads are clear.”

“Or maybe I’ll come check on you,” Amelia says with a wry grin.

“Oh no, you won’t,” Mallory scolds, finger pointed at her grandmother. “We don’t want you driving that snowmobile without one of us anymore, Nan. You promised.”

Amelia rolls her eyes and waves Mallory off, then sends me a

mischievous grin.

“You take out one mailbox...”

I can't help but giggle, and Mallory tries and fails to hide her own smile.

“Bye, Cassie,” Mallory says as she steps out onto the front porch, then points again to her grandmother. “You be good.”

“Thank you so much for letting me stay here, Mrs. Montrose,” I say sincerely once Mallory is gone. “Mal said you're not technically open, so I hope I'm not too much trouble.”

“Fooey, it's no trouble. And call me Nan,” she says, then beckons me to follow her through the house. “I'm happy to have you. You must be dog tired, so I'll give you a quick tour and then show you to your room.”

After showing me the common rooms on the lower level, including the massive kitchen and heated outdoor sitting area with the hot tub, Nan leads me to the second floor and into a beautiful guest room. There's a four-poster queen bed covered with a beige patchwork quilt, a large oak chest of drawers, a matching desk and full-length oval standing mirror, and a window seat complete with a cushion and several throw pillows. It's decorated for Christmas, and the room even has its own fireplace, though it is no longer useable. It's gorgeous, and I take a minute to soak it all up. I definitely wouldn't have gotten this kind of charm at the Hilton.

“Mallory said you haven't any warm clothes, so I brought in some things for you,” Nan says after I set my backpack and carry-on down. There's a small pile of clothing folded on the bed, as well as a couple pairs of thick, wool socks.

“Thank you so much,” I beam. “I packed for Hawaii beaches, not a Colorado snowstorm.”

“Well, now you won't freeze your tits off,” Nan says, and a laugh bursts from me. She grins at me and her eyes twinkle with mirth. “The bathroom is across the hall. Towels in the linen closet. I'm on the first floor if you need something and remember you can help yourself to anything in the kitchen.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Mon—I mean, *Nan*.”

Nan winks playfully, then wishes me a goodnight before walking out the door.

Once she's gone, I unpack my carry-on and place my laughable clothing selection into the top drawer of the dresser. Eight sundresses, six different bikinis, two pairs of cut off shorts, two ratty graphic tees, some basic underwear and bras, and two lacey, scandalous matching bra and panty sets.

I scowl at the last item in my carry-on—an unopened pack of condoms—then shove it into the drawer next to the lingerie. So much for losing my virginity to a sexy long-haired surfer who looks like Jason Momoa and fucks like a god. I'll probably freeze to death in Golden, Colorado, with my cherry still intact.

Ugh.

I dig through the pile of clothes Nan left. Linen pants and cable knit sweaters similar to the ones she was wearing, a few pairs of sweatpants, and some crew neck sweatshirts. I grab a pair of gray sweats with the words “Golden High Mountaineers” written in blue down the leg, and a matching crewneck with the same words plus an image of some sort of mountain man looking mascot wearing ice skates and holding a hockey stick. Then I snag a pair of the wool socks and make my way into the bathroom.

I need a shower and then bed, ASAP. Tomorrow, I'll worry about how to meet up with my girls in Honolulu. As cute as this all is, it's not at all how I want to spend my winter break.

Stupid snow.



TWO

nolan

IT'S after midnight by the time I pull into my mom's place, and I've spent the last hour crawling my way through snow and icy conditions that had my eyes aching and my hands cramping.

I probably shouldn't have driven, but the roads weren't bad when I started the drive down from Boulder, and by the time my head cleared enough to realize I should check the weather, the snow had already begun. My options were to white-knuckle it the rest of the way to Golden or turn around and head back home.

But home isn't really home, anymore.

I grab my laptop satchel and duffle bag from the back seat, then make my way into the house from the side door that leads to the garage. I find Ma sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of what's probably chamomile tea.

"Nolan," she says with a sad smile. "I'm glad you made it safely. You had me worried sick." She stands from the table and embraces me. "No Colleen?"

I just shake my head and tighten my lips, and Ma sighs.

"I never liked that witch anyway," she says, then sits back down. "How long do I get you this time?"

"Figure I'll stay through the holidays," I answer, fixing myself a cup of tea since the water in the kettle is still hot. "All the exams are online, and I gave Colleen until then to get her stuff out."

"You trust her not to take your stuff, too?" Ma asks with narrowed eyes.

"Honestly, no. But I don't care at this point." I set my tea on the table and sink into the other chair, then scrub my hand down my face. *God, everything has gone to shit.* "This should have happened a long time ago, when I first found out about Max."

My mom reaches over the table and pats my hand. “You did what you could. You gave it a valiant effort.”

“Oh, I know.” I laugh, but it’s humorless. “I gave too much.”

She nods, but she’s not one to say *I told you so*. *Everyone* told me so, but I ignored them, because I was an idiot in love. Fucking joke. It’s all such a fucking joke.

And everyone is laughing at me.

“How are the roads?” Ma asks, mercifully changing the subject.

“Pretty bad. Visibility is terrible.”

“You shouldn’t have driven,” she scolds.

“I thought I could beat it.” I sigh, then shrug. “Anyway, I made it, and I don’t plan on leaving again until the storm has cleared.”

“Good,” Ma says with a nod. “I am so glad you’re here, Nolan. And I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’m glad you’re here alone, without Colleen, that sniveling, lying little cu—”

“Okay, Ma!” I cut her off, and she gives me a shameless smirk. I shake my head. She’s incorrigible. “I’m glad to be here, too.”

“Do you need anything else tonight?”

I can hear the exhaustion in her voice. Being the youngest of six boys, I was not planned. Ma had me when she was forty, but I’m still not used to her face showing her age. She’s always seemed young, with more energy than even me at times, but in the years since my father’s death, I’ve watched her mellow out more than I’d like to acknowledge. Four of my five brothers are still in the area, but I’ve been in Boulder working on my PhD, and I spent the last several holidays with Colleen’s family, neglecting my own.

I don’t get home enough. Every time I see her, the guilt weighs heavier.

“Go to sleep, Ma,” I tell her softly. “I’m probably going to be up trying to get some work done. I’m still wired from that drive.”

She places her teacup in the sink, gives my head a kiss, then pads out of the kitchen. I didn’t lie to her; I am going to be up for a while. But instead of doing work, I’m going to wallow.

I stare into my teacup until the chamomile turns cold, searching the liquid as if it can answer the questions plaguing my mind.

Where did I go wrong? What did I do to deserve this? Is Colleen right? Is this all my fault? Is there anything I could have done to prevent it? To *fix* it?

Well into the night, when my eyes start to drift shut, I move to the sink and wash, dry, and put away the teacups. Then I grab my bags and make my

way upstairs to my old room. It's long since been converted into a guest suite for the B&B, but it still feels like home.

I am five years younger than my youngest sibling, Oliver. Nearly fifteen years younger than my oldest sibling, Joel. But even still, it's like the walls have absorbed the sounds of the Montrose boys. If I close my eyes, I can feel the energy. The ruckus and rowdiness that the town has always known us for.

Even me, the studious one. The respectful one. The college graduate. The hockey star. The momma's boy. Even the best-behaved wolf in the pack is still a wolf. I guess I've forgotten that in recent years. But coming home this holiday season? I don't know. Something about it feels promising. Like maybe I'll reawaken the wolfish part of me that's lain dormant for so long. The one that Colleen tried to muzzle and almost succeeded in snuffing out entirely.

The next morning, I'm up with the sun.

I can't go for a run thanks to the snow that's still falling outside, so I make use of Ma's in-home gym. When I was growing up, it was just a weight bench and some dumbbells, but in recent years, she's added a treadmill, a bunch of Kettlebells, and a StairMaster. I run a quick five miles, work my abdominals until my muscles ache and I'm drenched in sweat, then make my way to the second-floor bathroom to take a much-needed shower.

I let the hot water cascade over my body, loosening my sore muscles and washing away the sweat. If only the weight on my shoulders could swirl down the drain, too. I use the shampoo my mom keeps for guests—some kind of eucalyptus blend—and when my stomach growls, I turn off the faucet and step out of the shower. I'm facing the mirror above the sink, toweling off my hair, when the knob turns, and the bathroom door swings open.

I whip toward the doorway and open my mouth to warn my mother that I'm in here, but instead, I am met with a girl.

No.

A woman.

A woman with long dark hair and delicate fingers. Her head is bent over, so I can't see her face, except for the blurry reflection in the fogged-up mirror. Before I can speak, she sets a toothbrush on the counter and looks up.

Our eyes meet, and she lets out a startled yelp. I throw my palms up, about to apologize for scaring her, when her eyes drop from my face to my

chest, then farther down. I can feel her gaze dragging over my body, and suddenly, my words are stuck in my throat. Her eyes widen, and she gasps again, reminding me that I'm not wearing any clothes, and my towel is bunched in the hand that I currently have raised in her direction. I'm completely exposed.

"I'm sorry," she whispers slowly, but she doesn't make a move to look away.

Her eyes are trained right on my cock, locked there, and for the first time in more than eight months, I start to harden. When her throat constricts with a swallow, my semi quickly grows into a full-on erection. I can feel it—thick, heavy and extending from my body—and I resist the urge to wrap my hand around it and squeeze. When she bites her lip, I have to stifle a groan, which shakes me from my lust-fogged trance. I drop my hands to cover my dick with the towel, and she blinks. The woman flashes her wide eyes back to mine, and a pink flush takes over her soft cheeks.

I say the first thing that comes to mind.

"You're wearing my clothes."

"Huh?" Her eyebrows scrunch, and she looks down at the sweatshirt she's wearing. "Your clothes?"

"Yeah," I rasp, then clear my throat. "Those are my high school hockey sweats."

"Oh." She gasps, and reaches for the hem of the shirt. "You want them ba—"

"Fuck, no, just—" I throw up one hand to stop her, keeping the other firmly over my dick, and clear my throat again. "Keep them on, please."

My heart is racing, and though I'm standing wet and naked in this bathroom with a rock-hard erection in front of a stranger, I can't take my eyes off her. She's fucking gorgeous. Tall, 5'9" or 5'10", and I can see the faint teasing outline of lush curves hiding underneath my baggy sweats. Her eyes are big, silver orbs lined with thick black lashes, and her lips are plump and slightly parted. Perfect for kissing. Perfect for *other things*. Add in the long, thick brown hair that I could easily wrap around my fist, and she's easily one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen in the flesh.

"I'm sorry," she says, and fuck me, even her voice makes my dick twitch. What a fine time for it to wake up. "I'll just, um..." She nods toward the door. "I'll just come back when you're done."

She ducks back into the hallway without another word, and I'm left

standing speechless with my hand cupping my hard-on.

What in the actual fuck just happened, and who the hell was that?

I didn't bring clothes into the bathroom—it's not like I expected anyone to be here—so I wrap the towel around my waist and rush back to my room to change.

The hallway is dead quiet. Not a floorboard squeak. No sounds that suggest anyone else is up here. But she is. I can *feel* her.

When I shut the bedroom door behind me, I hear another door in the hallway open and close, then the quick patter of footsteps. After I've dressed, I head down to the kitchen, stopping first at the closed bathroom door to hear the rush of the faucet and rustling movement. The idea of that beautiful girl in the bathroom still thick with steam from my shower fills me with lust, and the feeling is foreign yet familiar, uninvited but not at all unwelcome.

"Did you forget to mention something last night?" I grumble to my mother. She's sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and the comics section of *The Denver Post*.

"Oh yes," she says with a smile. "There is a young woman staying in the room across from yours. Her flight was cancelled, and from the looks of the forecast, she'll be here a few days."

"It would have been nice to know I would be sharing the floor with someone, Ma." I pour myself a mug of hot water and grab a teabag from the basket on the counter. "Almost gave me a damn heart attack when she walked in on me in the bathroom earlier."

"Nolan." My mother gasps. "Why didn't you lock the door?"

"Had I known someone else was here, I would have." I arch my brow and hit her with a pointed look. "I thought I was alone."

My mother hums and goes back to her comics.

"She's a lovely young woman. Be kind to her."

"I'm always kind," I protest, leaning against the kitchen counter with my tea in hand. "And why was she wearing my clothes?"

"Because I gave them to her. She's not one of your students that you can scare into submission, Nolan. She's stranded here until further notice, and I expect you to behave. She is my *guest*."

Before I can defend myself, the topic of conversation comes padding into the kitchen, and she's *still* wearing my clothes. When she sees me, her eyes flare wide, then flick quickly down my body before she forces a tight-lipped smile.

“Good morning, Mrs. Montrose.” The girl nods at my mother, then corrects herself when she sees the look on Ma’s face. “Sorry. Good morning, *Nan*.” My mother smiles in response.

“Good morning, Cassie. Did you sleep well?”

“I did. Thanks again for letting me stay.”

“It’s nothing.” Ma waves her off, then gestures to me. “I hear you had a run-in with my son this morning.”

Cassie winces and squeezes her hands together.

“I am so sorry,” she pleads. “I didn’t know anyone else was here.”

“He came in late last night,” my mom explains.

“It’s fine,” I say to the girl with a smile. “I should have locked the door.” I reach my hand out to her. “I’m Nolan. Youngest of the Montrose clan.”

When she grabs my hand, I can feel the jolt straight down to my toes. Her soft fingers tighten around mine, and I don’t stop myself from caressing her knuckles with my thumb. The feel of her under my fingers makes my mouth water, and the slight hitch in her breathing tells me she feels similarly.

“I’m Cassandra. Er, *Cassie*,” she rasps with a small smile. “I’m Cassie. Stranded traveler at the mercy of your mother’s kindness.”

I watch her lips move as she speaks. They’re pouty and pink, the bottom slightly plumper than the top, and they hitch up higher on the right than the left. A small, flirtatious smirk that seems innocent but is likely anything but. An image of her lips wrapped around my cock flashes through my mind, and I squeeze her hand once more before dropping it.

“A pleasure,” I say, and her eyes scan my face before falling to my mouth. “And you can keep the clothes as long as you need.”

“Oh.” She giggles a little—a light, tinkling sound that reminds me of sleigh bells or wind chimes—then tugs on the sweatshirt. “Thank you. I only have sundresses, so *Nan* lent me these.”

“Yes, she’s thoughtful like that.” I glance at the kitchen table, but my mother is nowhere to be found. Only the teacup and her comics are left. “Hmm. She apparently also has things to do today.”

Cassie fidgets in the doorway, her eyes taking in everything in the kitchen except for me, and I bristle. I want her attention back on me. I pull another mug from the cupboard.

“Tea, coffee, or hot chocolate?” I ask her, and when her gaze falls back on me, I smile.

“Oh, um, hot chocolate, I guess? When in Rome...”

I chuckle and slide her mug under the instant coffee maker before grabbing a hot chocolate pod from the basket Ma keeps stocked for guests.

“So, where were you headed, Cassandra?”

“You can call me Cassie. I don’t know why I said Cassandra.”

I can hear the slight warble in her voice. When I study her, I see her pulse fluttering in her neck. The elevated rising and falling of her breasts. The way she fidgets with her fingers and the hem of my old sweatshirt. How she bites her bottom lip as she watches me fix her drink. She’s attracted to me, and she’s nervous, and it’s thrilling.

I’ve spent my entire academic career studying human behavior, but no subject has ever intrigued me quite as much as the woman standing in front of me.

I step into her space and hand her the mug of hot chocolate. When she doesn’t back away from me, my heart leaps in triumph. She seems to lean in closer to me, and the air between us sparks.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and I watch as she wraps her hands around the mug and lifts it to her lips, blowing lightly on the hot liquid. It takes all my strength to pull my eyes off her mouth.

“You’re welcome.” I motion to the table where we both sit. “So where were you headed, *Cassie*?”

“Hawaii,” she says on a sigh. “I was supposed to meet up with friends in Honolulu for the holidays. One of my sorority sisters is from there, so we were going to stay with her family. But now I don’t know when I’ll get there.”

“The forecast is saying we’re going to get hit with more snow this afternoon,” I tell her, and her shoulders fall as she looks out the window at the foot of snow that’s already fallen.

“I know. And more ice after midnight. I’ve been refreshing my weather app like an obsessed person. If I’m lucky, I might be able to get to Honolulu just before Christmas.”

“How long was your trip supposed to be?”

“Two weeks.” She takes a sip of her hot chocolate, and my eyes track the movement, watching her throat contract as she swallows. “The plan was to celebrate Christmas and New Year’s on the island, then fly back to reality on January 1st.”

“That can still happen,” I reassure with a smile. “You won’t get the full two weeks, but you’ll have enough time to get a tan.”

She grins and rolls her eyes. The sight makes my chest tighten.

“Here’s hoping,” she says, and takes another sip. “So, are you Mallory’s uncle?”

“I am.” I nod, realization hitting me. “Is Mallory the one who got you the room?”

“She is. I owe her big.”

“Mallory is a good kid,” I say, and Cassie snorts.

“Kid? She’s older than me.”

The thought stops me short, and I again find my eyes wandering over the beautiful woman in front of me. I can’t see Mallory without thinking about the tiny terror in pigtails and pull-ups she used to be. But Cassie? She is *far* from a kid.

“How old are you?” I ask as I study her. She clears her throat and sits up straighter.

“Twenty-three,” she rasps. “How old are *you*?”

I take a drink from my mug before I answer. Having her eyes on me lights me up, and I want to prolong the moment. I have students her age, and some of them try to flirt, but I’ve never wanted their attention. I don’t acknowledge it. But their attention has never made me feel like this. I can’t remember the last time anyone’s attention made me feel like this.

“I’m thirty-four.”

I watch as her eyes flare slightly at my admission. Does she think I’m too old? Is she surprised? Repulsed? I suppose thirty-four seems ancient to someone still freshly in her twenties. I try not to wince at the thought.

“And what do you do?” Cassie asks, head cocked slightly to the side as she takes me in. Studying my face. Assessing. Suddenly, I’m aware of the fact that I haven’t shaved, and my hair is mussed. I’m concerned with how I measure up beneath Cassandra’s keen eye.

“I’m getting my doctoral degree in applied social and health psychology at University of Colorado Boulder.”

“Oh wow.” She leans toward me. “What’s that like? What are you studying? What’s your focus?”

I can’t help but laugh at her eager tone. Perhaps I’ve passed her first assessment.

“You’re interested in psychology?”

“I am.” She nods. “I’m really into music therapy, specifically. So how the body reacts to and copes with trauma, and how different therapies can be

used to heal. Stuff like that.”

“Is that what you do, then?”

Her smile falters and her shoulders drop at my inquiry, and though she recovers quickly, I notice the flash of defeat on her face. I’ve touched on a very sore subject.

“No,” she says lightly despite her tense muscles. “I’m an education major. History.”

Her smile is fake.

“Hm.” I look her over once more, note how she avoids eye contact and instead focuses on her mug. I change the subject. “Well, do you have any musical talents?”

She perks back up immediately.

“I do.” Her smile is real now, and I find my lips molding quickly into a matching one. “I can play piano, violin, guitar, and some basic drum stuff.”

“Basic drum stuff?” I tease.

“Well, I’m no Travis Barker, but I can keep a beat.” She rolls her eyes playfully.

“There’s a piano in the sitting room,” I tell her, and her eyes light up more than I thought possible. Glowing, sparkling, silver. I find myself inching closer. Her eyes are the moon, and I now have an entire ocean inside me.

“I know.” She’s practically vibrating with excitement. “Nan showed me last night. I’m going to check it out after breakfast.”

I realize, then, that she hasn’t eaten. Neither have I.

“Do you like eggs?” I ask, and she laughs that jingle bell laugh.

“I do.”

“Fancy an omelet?”

She laughs again, louder this time, and I laugh with her. I didn’t know how much I wanted that sound until I heard it. How much I needed that laugh, hers as well as mine.

“I definitely fancy an omelet.”

“It’s settled then. I’ll make you an omelet, then you’ll play me something on the piano.”



THREE

cassie

“DO YOU TAKE REQUESTS?” Nolan asks as I take a seat on the wooden piano bench.

The deep timbre of his voice vibrates through the air and across my skin, and I have to fight to keep from shivering.

I’m surprised how well I’ve maintained my calm in front of this man. I can’t remember the last time I was this attracted to someone. Those hazel green eyes. That thick chestnut hair. The beard—oh, my god, the beard. He’s absolutely gorgeous.

Even the last guy I liked didn’t have quite this effect on me. He didn’t make my heart squeeze in my chest or turn my legs to jelly, all while still filling me with a strange sense of confidence. It’s the way Nolan looks at me—like I’m fascinating, or beautiful, or maybe both.

God, let it be both.

“Depends on the request,” I quip, then play a few warmup scales. The entire time, I can feel the weight of his gaze, and I’m emboldened by the attention.

“Piano Man,” Nolan says, and I roll my eyes with a laugh.

Without another word, I launch into the Billy Joel classic. When I start softly singing along, Nolan joins in, and of fucking course, the man’s voice is just as sexy as the rest of him. I stop after the first chorus, then turn my eyes on him.

“You thought you’d stump me with ‘Piano Man?’” I deadpan.

“No,” he jokes. “That was a softball toss.”

He taps his full lips with a long, dexterous finger, and my eyes stick on the motion. How can such a small gesture be so hot? Damn. I am *such* a virgin.

“Your Song,” Nolan suggests after a moment, and I shake my head at him.

“Child’s play,” I say as I tap out the opening notes. “The beauty of Elton is that you never really get the same version of his songs twice, but this is the way I play it.”

Like the last song, I play through the first chorus, but I let Nolan sing solo. When I pull my fingers from the keys and turn to him, I find Nan has joined us.

“Girl, that is talent,” Nan beams. “How about ‘Blackbird’? You know that one?”

I smile and play, singing along with Nan and Nolan, and this time, I play straight through. They suggest a few more songs, and I surprise them by knowing all of them. I love the challenge, and I surprise myself by how much I can remember. It just feels good to play, to remind myself that I can, that I love it. It’s magic, music. Cathartic and healing and pure magic. What I wouldn’t give to be able to share this with people who need it...

“Enough requests,” Nolan says, shaking me from my spiral. “Play something you love.”

I think it over for a few seconds, then arch a brow playfully at him.

“You’ll probably know this one. It’s from your *era*.”

He gasps, feigning offense, and I launch into “On The Way Down” by Ryan Cabrera. I get lost in the lyrics and chords, and by the time I finish, I realize I’m the only one singing. When I turn to my audience, Nan is gone, and Nolan is looking at me with such intensity that my stomach erupts with butterflies.

No one has ever looked at me like that before. Ever.

The longer our eyes stay locked, the faster my heart races. My nipples harden and brush against the rough fabric of the baggy sweatshirt. My panties dampen and I resist the urge to rub my thighs together. I suck my bottom lip into my mouth and drag my teeth over it, reveling in the way his eyes track the movement. The way his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. It’s thrilling and nerve-wracking. I can’t handle it, so I blink and look away.

“I think I’m going to, um, go. Do some reading. For class or something.” My words come out rushed and mumbled as I stand quickly from the bench. I’m a terrible liar. I don’t have reading to do for class. I’m sure he can see right through me.

“Sure,” Nolan says. “Thanks for playing for me.”

I nod awkwardly and hurry out of the room and up the stairs.

When I get to my room, I shut the door behind me and pull out my phone, but instead of texting one of my sorority sisters, I open my group chat with my friends, Ivy and Bailey. It's kind of weird how we became close—I had a thing for Ivy's boyfriend before they were dating, but he only had eyes for her—but now I'm just glad I have them regardless of how we met.

ME
SOS

IVY

Uh oh. What's up?

BAILEY

Sup?

ME

Abridged version, my flight out of Denver is grounded for the next few days because of the Snowpocalypse and I'm at this B&B in Golden CO.

And there's a guy here...

IVY

Oooh, what's he like?

BAILEY

Is he hot?

ME

34. PhD candidate in psych. Freaking gorgeous. And he can sing. And he made me an omelet. And so so nice.

Ivy's video chat request rings through first, followed by Bailey's, and within seconds, my screen is filled with their smiling faces. Ivy looks curious, and Bailey looks...well, she looks like trouble.

"Bone him," Bailey says by way of greeting, and Ivy and I both laugh. "You did plan to lose the cherry over winter break. He might not be a cabana boy, but I think this is a pretty sweet plot twist. Bone him."

Instead of answering, I flick my eyes to Ivy, and her lips are dancing in a smirk.

"What do you think, V?"

"I'm with B," she says with a shrug, finally letting her smile loose. "You wanted to have sex. Might as well do it in a mountain retreat B&B with a

sexy scholar while snowed in.”

“Put the *lay* in layover, Cass,” Bailey says with a snort.

Ivy giggles, then adds, “You’re going to be safe and smart, so what’s the problem?”

“What if he doesn’t want to bone me?” I whisper as insecurities begin to creep in.

I’ve never been insecure with guys. I’m a virgin because I haven’t wanted to have sex. I wasn’t saving myself, and I’d had a few opportunities, but I just wasn’t interested. Until now. But even though I’ve never been shy, I’ve never tried to seduce anyone, either.

“Bullshit,” Bailey spits, and Ivy snorts.

“Is he giving the impression he’s not interested?” Ivy asks, ever the pragmatic voice of reason.

“Doubtful,” Bailey chimes in. “You’re gorgeous and most men are horndogs.” I bark out a laugh. She’s such a cynic. “Seriously. As long as he’s single, bone him.”

“Well, he’s here alone for the holidays, and he’s not wearing a wedding ring...” I muse. “I’ll find out if he’s single. And then maybe...”

“Bone him,” Bailey and Ivy say at the same time.

“Operation Seduce the Scholar,” Ivy croons, and when I hang up the phone, the butterflies in my stomach are back in full force, and I’m formulating a plan.

Later in the afternoon, I make my way back downstairs with every intention of finding Nolan and working my charm.

Or at least attempting to, since I’m not sure I even have charm let alone the know-how to effectively work it.

I made sure to put on some makeup, highlighting my eyes and lips with the help of cosmetics, and I gave my hair a bit of a curl. It’s too cold for a sundress, so I’m wearing more of the clothes Nan lent me: linen pants, a cable knit sweater, and wool socks. It’s not the most tempting of outfits, but I’m cozy and warm, and it reminds me of childhood Christmases. Rosy red cheeks from playing in the snow all day, warming fingers around a mug of hot chocolate with those little marshmallows. I have to admit, I wouldn’t get this kind of nostalgic, soul-deep feeling in a bikini and flip-flops.

Just as my feet hit the landing, the soft sound of Christmas music drifting

from the sitting room is interrupted by a loud clatter and a grunt.

“Damn it,” Nan grumbles, and I rush toward the sound, smacking straight into Nolan on the way.

He grips my waist to keep me from falling, and he says, “excuse me,” just as I blurt, “sorry!” We stand there, his hands on my body, burning into my skin, and our eyes locked, until another sound of distress causes us to break apart.

We step into the sitting room to find Nan surrounded by boxes and wrapping paper. On one side of the room, the boxes seem to be filled with wrapped gifts, and on the other, the boxes are full of unwrapped items. Toys, mostly, but I see some clothing and books, too.

“What’s all this?” I ask, and Nan looks up from where she’s sorting through the contents of a box that’s tipped over.

“Just in time,” she says with a grin. “I need some extra hands.”

Nolan chuckles and walks to his mother’s side, taking a box of little plastic building bricks from her.

“’Tis the season of Saint Nanta Claus,” he says, flashing me a smirk that makes my stomach jump before looking back at Nan.

“Nanta Claus?” I say, stepping up to the box and peering inside. “What’s a

Nanta Claus?”

“Me, of course,” Nan says with a wry grin.

“Every year,” Nolan explains, “Ma works with the local businesses to coordinate a holiday gift drive. She’s been doing it since before I was born. At some point along the way, someone called her *Nanta Claus*, and it’s stuck.”

Nolan grabs a tube of wrapping paper and takes a seat on the floor, gesturing for me to grab a toy from the box and join him.

“The gift drive is a holiday tradition for the town. The local businesses help all November, collecting donations or taking small gift requests for families in need. When I was younger, my brothers and I would make the rounds and collect the donations, then ol’ Nanta Claus here would put us to work sorting, wrapping, and checking off items on her giant list. And on Christmas Eve, we’d deliver the gifts.”

“That’s so fun,” I say, beaming at Nan from my spot on the floor. She sends me a wink.

“Can’t do it without my little elves, though,” she jokes, making Nolan grin as he expertly wraps a remote-control car with practiced ease.

“I didn’t know you were still doing this,” he says, placing the perfectly wrapped toy to

the side and moving to another.

“Well, you haven’t been around much the last few Christmases,” Nan says plainly, and I watch as Nolan’s brow furrows. He flicks his eyes from his mother back to the gift in his hands.

“Who’s been helping you?”

“Your brothers. Mallory and Patrick. The neighbors.” Nan smiles, handing me another toy to wrap. “Your brother Craig brought the last round of donation boxes to me on the snowmobile last night, and now I have two extra sets of hands for wrapping. It’s never hard to find help when it comes to spreading holiday joy.”

“Well, I for one am eager to assist,” I say honestly. “I think this sounds like a wonderful tradition.”

“And who knows, you might enjoy it so much that you decide to stay and help us on Christmas Eve. We’ve done it a little differently in recent years. Everyone in town comes to the community center to celebrate together and that’s how we distribute the gifts. Perhaps you’d like to help,” Nan says, and I huff out a laugh.

“Well, I don’t know about that. That sounds fun, but sandy beaches and saltwater are still calling my name. All I want for Christmas this year is a tan.”

Nan hums, but doesn’t say anything else, and for a few moments, we work in comfortable silence. The only sounds are the Christmas music playing on the stereo and the rustling of gift wrap as we fashion each gift with colorful paper and a shiny red bow.

“Do you have any holiday traditions, Cassandra?”

Nolan’s deep voice cuts through the silence and goosebumps prickle my arms and neck. His voice is like crushed black velvet. Like rich chocolate mousse. Bold and smooth and utterly indulgent. I inhale slowly and clear my throat before answering, but my voice still sounds quivering and weak in comparison.

“Well, my family always decorates the Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving, and on Christmas Eve, we watch *It’s A Wonderful Life*.” I finish wrapping the toy in front of me and reach for another. It’s a board

game, and I smile at it. “When I was younger, I used to make ornaments for my grandma. Every year, it was something different. Snowmen made of felt and cardboard. Plastic bulbs filled with confetti and construction paper snowflakes. Always something new. I stopped doing it once I got to high school.”

“Do you get to see your grandmother often now that you’re in college?”

I shake my head no at Nolan’s question, then glance at him. When our eyes meet, I can tell he sees the sorrow in mine.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he says softly.

“Thank you.”

He breaks eye contact so he can slap a bow on the giftwrapped item in front of him, but when he looks back at me, the sympathy has been replaced with something more cheerful.

“I know it’s not Christmas Eve, but it’s been a while since I’ve seen *It’s A Wonderful Life...*”

My smile is immediate, and I nod excitedly before Nolan can even finish his statement. He laughs.

“Let’s finish up in here, and then I’ll make us some popcorn. We’ll do it the right way. Ma, can we snag some of your sugar cookies?”

Nolan glances to the spot where Nan had been wrapping gifts, but she’s disappeared. Come to think of it, I can’t recall when I stopped hearing her soft humming blending with the Christmas songs on the radio. Nolan chuckles and shakes his head, then sends me a wink.

“If she’s not here to object, the cookies are fair game. Montrose Boys’ House Rules.”

I laugh. “And how many times did the Montrose boys get in trouble because of that rule?”

Nolan shrugs coyly, but his grin is wicked, and my skin tingles with nerves as I trail him from the sitting room into the kitchen.

“Where do you think she got to?” I ask as Nolan gets to work popping popcorn, pilfering sugar cookies, and fixing mugs of hot cocoa. He pauses a moment and pulls open a drawer next to the fridge.

“Snowmobile keys are still here,” he says as he takes a set of keys and shoves them in his pocket. “She’s around here somewhere. She’ll pop back up when you least expect it.” He looks at me with a smile and offers me a mug, steam wafting from the top. “Shall we?”

I take the hot cocoa, brushing my fingertips over his as I wrap my hand

around the warm ceramic, then nod.

“We shall.”

I turn and head back into the living room with Nolan following behind me. I pass up the armchair and sofa, then settle onto the overstuffed loveseat.

Nolan hesitates. I can see him considering the spot beside me and weighing it against the armchair and sofa. Before overthinking it, I speak up.

“Oh, um, I thought you could sit here? Next to me.” I force a friendly smile and try to keep my hands from fidgeting and showing off how ragged my nerves are. “You know, so we could share the popcorn. If that’s okay?”

I drop my arm and pat the cushion next to me, and his eyes follow. When Nolan’s lips turn up on the corner and he points his feet in my direction, my heart starts to race. As he sits on the loveseat beside me, his thigh and arm brush against mine and the rush of heat in my chest is undeniable. I turn my attention to the television as Nolan pulls the movie up on a streaming app and try not to act like such a virgin.

“So,” I break the silence and grab a handful of popcorn, “you’re here visiting for Christmas?”

I see him nod out of the corner of my eye, but I don’t look away from the television.

“Yeah. Here with the family through New Year’s, I think.”

I hum and flick my attention to him. I can’t help it. I want to see his face when he answers my next burning question.

“...Just you? No girlfriend or boyfriend?”

I place another kernel of popcorn in my mouth, and his gaze tracks the movement before settling on my lips, then back to my eyes.

“Just me,” he says. “No girlfriend or boyfriend.”

I feel my lips jump with the urge to grin. Feel my cheeks heat with excitement.

“Oh,” I say as casually as I can, and he chuckles in a way that rumbles deep in my stomach.

“Yes. *Oh*,” he says. Then after a pause, speaks again. “And you? Will you be meeting up with someone in Hawaii? A...partner? Boyfriend or girlfriend?”

I shake my head slowly.

“Nope,” I say clearly. “No boyfriend. No partner at all. Just friends.”

He grins, and maybe it’s some delusional part of my brain taking over, but his grin seems pleased. Nolan Montrose seems happy that I’m single, and

that leaves me feeling emboldened.

Thirty minutes into the film, Nolan stretches his arm along the back of the couch, and the movement causes my body to sink toward him. Where our sides just brushed against each other before, we're now pressed together. I can feel the heat from his skin seeping through my sweater. I can feel his chest rise and fall with his breathing.

We're practically cuddled together on this loveseat, and instead of straightening himself to put the little bit of distance back between us, Nolan settles into the new position. He turns toward me, and I feel his arm curve just slightly. It's not resting on my shoulders by any means. His fingers aren't touching my arm where his hand rests loosely on the couch back. But he doesn't move away. His body welcomes mine, cradles mine, and I can't stop the triumphant smile from taking over my face.

Phase two of Seduce the Scholar activated.



FOUR

cassie

IT'S late morning when I make my way down the stairs and into the kitchen the next day.

Nolan and I stayed up late talking long after the movie ended, and it wasn't until I could barely keep my eyes open that he insisted we head off to bed. He walked me to my bedroom door, tucked my hair behind my ear, and whispered, "Sweet dreams, Cassandra."

I fell asleep with his lips and voice in my head. The way he looks and sounds when he says my name.

I find Nolan sitting at the kitchen table with a newspaper open in front of him. He smiles and stands when he sees me.

"Good morning," he greets. "How did you sleep?" I watch him walk to the coffee maker and set a mug under the machine.

"Good morning. I slept well, thank you. You?"

He pops a new coffee pod into the machine and pushes the button to brew. As the mug fills with coffee, he turns his smiling face to mine.

"I slept well, also. Ma said she'll be finishing a quilt in her room for most of the day, but to holler if you need anything." Nolan takes the now-full coffee mug, gestures to the kitchen table, and sets it down in front of the empty chair next to his. "French vanilla creamer, milk and sugar, or black?"

My smile stretches. He made that coffee for me; the gesture is so intimate and kind. Had he known how I take my coffee, he probably would have fixed it, as well. He's a thoughtful man, and before I can stop myself, I wonder what it would be like to be loved by a thoughtful man. To be touched by a thoughtful man. I wonder in what other ways he's thoughtful...

"Creamer would be great," I tell him, shaking myself from the direction in which my thoughts were sprinting. I bet my cheeks are flushed. "Do you

think Nan will be around for lunch?”

I haven't seen her since yesterday afternoon, and weirdly enough, I kind of miss her.

“Probably,” Nolan says, grabbing a container of creamer from the fridge. “She asked if I could fix grilled cheese and tomato soup for you—a perfect snowy day lunch—and it also happens to be her favorite. She'll likely join us.”

I smile and move to the empty chair and take a seat. Lunch with Nan and Nolan sounds nice. Very nice. He places the creamer in front of me, then sits back in the chair next to mine.

“Thank you for making me coffee.”

I pour the creamer in the mug and stir, and I feel his eyes on me the whole time. When I dart my gaze in his direction, sure enough, he's staring at my hands. Slowly, I run my fingers up and down my mug. His eyes are drawn to the movement, and he watches me drag them up, then down, up again, then down.

Perfect. This will be fun.

“I was hoping to figure out the hot tub this evening,” I say softly, and his eyes dart from my hand to my eyes, then down to my lips. I smile in a way that I hope looks sexy and coy. “Would you want to join me? Show me how to start it up, at least?”

He pauses, seconds that feel like hours, and I'm about to bail on the plan, apologize to him and hide in my room until the snow melts, but then he smirks. Full lips pulling up on the side, sensual and suggestive, and when our eyes lock, I can't hide the way my breath hitches. He knows what I want, and he wants it, too.

“The hot tub sounds great.”

After lunch with Nan and getting our asses kicked by her in a game of cards, Nolan and I part ways with an agreement to meet by the hot tub at dusk. He's going to shovel the walk out front, and I'm going to “do some reading.”

It's a lie, though. I don't have anything to read. I'm going to freak out, instead. I shoot an update to the group chat.

ME

He's single. Phase three of Seduce the Scholar activated.

IVY

Ow ow!

BAILEY

BONEAGE!

I turn in a circle in front of the oval mirror in my room. The green bikini I'm wearing is definitely my skimpiest, with triangles of fabric covering my breasts and between my legs, and thin strings holding everything together. Even the ass coverage is minimal. This is what I was going to use to hook me a young surfer hunk. Here's hoping it will work on Nolan.

I look hot enough to tempt him into taking my V card, right?

I scan my eyes over my body again. I bet he prefers older women who wear classier bathing suits. Women closer to his age. Women who don't look like every other girl in the classes he TAs.

Damn it.

I take a deep breath, then snap a pic and send it to Bailey and Ivy because I need the confidence boost. Immediately they respond with compliments, emojis, and a few vulgar GIFs. I'm so grateful for these two.

Okay. I'm committed. It's now or never.

I grab a towel and make my way downstairs. When I step onto the patio, the heating towers are turned on, the hot tub is running, and a small firepit is blazing.

But there's no Nolan.

I glance around and wait a few moments, but even with the heating towers, it's cold as shit out here, so I get into the hot tub without him.

After a bit longer, my thoughts start to spiral, and I worry I've been stood up. I'm ready to discard the plan and enjoy the hot tub alone when the wooden pergola above me lights up with colorful Christmas lights, and a small speaker starts to play Bing Crosby's "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas."

The surprised smile on my face stretches wider when I see Nolan step up to the hot tub wearing a pair of plain black swim trunks, and I drink him in. His body is sculpted, with pectorals and abs that make my mouth water, defined biceps I want to grab on to, and a deep V on his hips. *The dick denoter*, Bailey calls it.

Damn it. He is way hot. So hot that I am squirming a little on the bench

seat and praying that he thinks the flush on my face is from the temperature of the water.

God, I am *such* a virgin.

“You figured it out?” Nolan says as he sits on the hot tub edge and swings his legs around.

“Figured what out?”

“The hot tub.”

“Oh,” I say, furrowing my brow. “I thought you did this. It was on when I came out.”

Nolan chuckles and shakes his head.

“My mom,” he says, as if that answers everything. I’d question him, but when he sinks down across from me, he lets out a low, rumbling groan that makes me erupt in goosebumps.

“That good, huh?” I rasp.

“Fuck yes.”

Seriously nothing has ever been hotter than the word fuck on this man’s lips. I have to change the subject before I pounce on him—sex is the end goal, yeah. But by slow seduction, not scary sneak attack.

“Tell me about your dissertation,” I say, and he smiles, eyes still closed and head dropped back.

“I’m focusing on parental alienation of maternal figures within divorced or separated heterosexual couples, and how it affects the mental health and emotional development of pre-teen boys. Specifically, when that’s paired with the parentification of younger siblings.”

“Wow,” I breathe out. “And how’s it going? What are you arguing?”

“Fascinating and heartbreaking, as you can probably imagine,” he says, and lifts his head to look at me. “Of course, we’ve determined that alienation of the mother can instill a misogynistic mindset in the boys, one that is likely modeled by the father. But also how parentification can shield younger siblings of some of that trauma.”

“Because the oldest sibling gets the brunt of it.”

“Correct,” he nods solemnly. “But I’m also looking at how parentification can actually shield the older sibling in some ways, too. A necessity to mature rapidly, to take on more responsibility, can also cause the child to view both parents from a different lens.” He sighs sadly. “But ultimately, it’s like trading one trauma response for another.”

“Either way, the child’s mental health is negatively affected,” I muse.

“You know, studies have shown that music can be used as a therapeutic method to improve social and emotional aspects in kids. Provides emotional support, encourages expression, that sort of thing.”

“This is something you’re passionate about,” Nolan says, his response sure and almost reverent. I can once again feel his eyes on me. Exposing my vulnerabilities and laying me bare. “Why isn’t this what you’re pursuing? And don’t tell me it’s because you want to be a teacher,” he adds with a laugh. “I don’t believe that for a minute.”

I puff out a breath and shrug. “It’s not in the cards for me.”

“Then shuffle the deck,” he states, pointed and clear, his serious eyes locked on my face. “Not everyone finds a career path that lights them up, so when you’re one of the lucky few who do, you owe it to all the other people in the world to pursue it.”

He reaches over and takes my hand, giving it a squeeze, then runs his fingers over my knuckles. My breath quickens at his touch.

“Shuffle the deck, Cassandra.”

I can’t look away from him. From the conviction in his eyes, the commanding tone of his voice. I don’t realize I’ve drifted closer until his other hand wraps around the back of my neck and pulls me in.

His lips slide over mine, and I open for him immediately, tangling our tongues as he pulls me onto his lap and squeezes my ass with the hand not tangled in my hair as he kisses me senseless. He groans into my mouth and moves his lips to my neck, tugging on my hair so my head bends to the side, giving him better access.

“Fucking hell,” he growls into my skin, “I’ve been wanting to do that for days.”

He bites down lightly on the sensitive skin where my neck meets my shoulder. I gasp and move my hips, making him groan again.

He’s hard beneath me, and all I want is to feel him.

I move again, grinding myself onto him, moving my hips back and forth over his erection. I slide my hands over his chest and plunge my fingers into his hair just as his mouth latches onto my nipple over my bikini top. When he bites down, I cry out, pain and pleasure blending into something heady and new.

He tugs my bikini top to the side, exposing both my breasts, palming them then rolling my nipples between his fingers.

“You are perfection,” he rasps, eyes flicking from my breasts to my face.

He holds my gaze and repeats himself. “You are utter perfection. This body is made for worship.”

“Are you going to worship it?” I whisper, and his lips turn up in a wicked smirk before he quickly lifts me onto the edge of the hot tub. I gasp, then gasp again when he unties the strings on the sides of my bikini bottoms.

“Fuck,” he says, then swipes his fingers through my slit. I whimper and press closer to him. “Look at this pretty pussy, Cassandra.”

He slips one finger into me, and I moan. The only fingers that have been inside me in the last five years are my own. Before that, it was a fumbling high school boyfriend, and neither of us felt anywhere close to this good.

“Yes,” I whisper as he pumps, adding a second finger and rubbing his thumb over my clit. His eyes are trained on my face, pupils blown wide, watching my reactions to his touch. “That feels so good, Nolan,” I breathe out. “So good.”

“I want to suck on your clit and fingerfuck you until you come,” he says, and his voice is all sex and hunger. He wants me, really wants me, and I want him to take me.

“Yes,” I say quickly, nodding my head, and he wastes no time.

Nolan dips between my legs and licks up my slit before sucking my clit into his mouth. His tongue massages and swirls, flicks up and down, and drives me absolutely mad, all while his fingers are pumping steadily in and out. I urge him on breathily, and it’s only a matter of minutes before I’m coming with a strangled cry.

Before my head stops spinning, Nolan pulls me back in for another kiss.

“I want to fuck you,” he rumbles against my mouth between kisses. “Can I fuck you, Cassandra?”

“Yes,” I say again. “Please.”

I tug on his swim trunks, ready to let him take me right here before he stops me.

“Wait,” he says, halting my hands with one of his. He brings my knuckles to his lips and presses a soft kiss to them. “We need a condom.”

Right. Protection.

“I have condoms in my room,” I say quickly, and he furrows his brow. “I bought them for Honolulu,” I explain shyly.

“You planned on using them in Hawaii?” Jealousy swirls in his eyes, and his voice is rocky with lust and anger. “A boyfriend?”

I shake my head quickly. “No. Just to, um, hook up. I don’t have a

boyfriend, remember?”

His eyes bounce between mine, and when he sees that I’m not lying to him, he nods.

“Good. Okay.”

Nolan stands and helps me up, scooping me out of the hot tub, then grabs a towel and wraps me in it. Holding my hand, he leads me toward the house. Just before we get to the stairs, I blurt out a confession.

“I’m a virgin,” I state awkwardly, and he stops walking. “I’m a virgin,” I say again.

“You’re a virgin,” he repeats, and I watch as his eyes cloud. *Shit*. He’s going to bail.

“Yeah, but I want this,” I stress, fully expecting him to come at me with something like *are you sure*, or *sex is serious*, or *I don’t have sex with virgins*. Instead, he just studies me, eyes scanning mine, running over my face. I have to remind myself to breathe.

“That’s why you have the condoms?” he asks after a minute. “To lose your virginity in Hawaii?”

He says it as if stating the answer to a crossword puzzle. He’s not judgmental, not shocked. It just...*is what it is*. His tone eases my nerves a little. If I was worried Nolan would judge me or think less of me for any of this, I was wrong.

“Exactly,” I say, then laugh lightly. “To a bartending surfer.”

He smirks, then sighs.

“I understand that you’re an adult, and you can make your own decisions, but I have to say—”

“I know,” I cut him off, feeling awkward. “I know. It’s just sex. It’s not a declaration of love or a request to date or whatever. I don’t expect anything from you beyond this. Just, um, a little holiday fun.”

“Holiday fun?” he repeats slowly, and I nod.

“Yes. No strings.”

Nolan is quiet for a moment, then he chuckles and takes my hands in his. Before he speaks, he holds my eyes and doesn’t look away.

“What I was going to say,” he repeats slowly, “is that I am *not* a bartending surfer. I surfed once in my whole life, and I swallowed about half the Pacific. I’m much more comfortable on ice skates than I am on a surfboard. I’m no bartending surfer...but how would you feel about an ex-hockey player turned soon-to-be-professor?”

I shrug and return the smirk. "He'll do."

He growls playfully, then bends down and throws me over his shoulder.

"*He'll do*, huh?" I squeal, and he smacks my ass as he heads up the stairs. "I'll have your head spinning with all the things I'll *do*, Cassandra." He drops me on my bed, my towel falling open to expose my naked flesh, then levels me with a wicked grin. "Call me Professor."

Oh, hello, yes please.

"Yes, Professor."

I watch as he unties his swim trunks and pushes them to the floor. His thick erection springs free and he wraps his fist around it, tugging twice. I'm naked, panting and squirming with need, and he chuckles.

"We won't do anything you don't want to do," he says slowly, eyes devouring my skin. "If at any point you're uncomfortable or you want to stop, you will tell me, okay?"

I nod and he arches an eyebrow.

"Words, Cassandra. I need to know you'll tell me if you need anything from me."

I nod again. "Yes, Professor. I promise."

His lips curl into a devious grin, and his eyes flare with heat.

"I'm going to take care of you. Will you let me do that?"

I nod again. I'm just a nodding, gaping, naked bobblehead.

Nolan's eyes drag down my body like a rough caress and settle on the throbbing, wet ache between my thighs. He licks his lip and stalks toward me, his intentions clear, but I sit up quicky and put a hand on his chest, stopping him. When his eyes meet mine, I drag my hand down his chest and abs, then wrap my fingers around his erection. He's hot and heavy, silken soft, and so damn sexy. He groans and sinks his fingers into my hair.

I push him back a few steps, then drop to my knees in front of him.

"I've been fantasizing about your mouth around my cock," he rumbles.

I lick my lips instinctively and stroke him, darting my gaze between his hard cock and his lustful eyes. He groans when I stroke him again, and his hands in my hair tighten, tugging at the root. My scalp stings, and I love it.

"Do you want to take my cock down your throat, Cassandra?"

"Yes, Professor," I breathe, then give a long lick up his shaft before sucking the head into my mouth.

He hums in pleasure. I can feel his fingertips pressing into my scalp, cradling me. I take him deep into my throat and he hisses, tugging at my hair

again, giving me that bite of pain that I didn't realize I was craving.

"Fuck, yes. This fucking mouth." He tugs my hair, making me tilt my head back. "Look up at me, baby. Let me see those gorgeous eyes while you swallow my cock."

I do as he says, and he sucks a deep breath in through clenched teeth, then presses me more firmly onto his erection. I gag around him and my eyes water. He lets off on his grip long enough to let me breathe before pushing my head back onto him until I gag again. I keep my eyes on him, even when tears trickle down my cheeks. I take him into my throat, swallow around him, gag on him, and I don't take my eyes off his euphoric face.

His desire, his lust for me, knowing that I'm the reason he looks this way, is so fucking enthralling. My pussy throbs with the need for contact. I want to reach between my thighs and rub at my clit, want to slip my fingers inside and fingerfuck myself the way Nolan did in the hot tub. But I keep both of my hands on Nolan, moving from the base of his cock to his thighs, to the firm globes of his ass cheeks. Squeezing. Rubbing. Pulling him closer to my face so I can swallow more of him.

He brings his hand to my cheek, caresses my flushed skin and swipes at a tear.

"So beautiful," he rasps. "I wonder how this pretty face would look wearing my cum."

I whimper and press my thighs harder together. Oh my god, this man is dirty.

"I could paint your lips with it." He growls as he thrusts into my mouth. "Fuck, I could paint your breasts with it. You would look so gorgeous covered in me, Cassandra."

Nolan Montrose is every sexy professor fantasy I've ever had, and surprisingly, now that I think of it, I've had a few. I swallow around his thick erection, then lick and suck and bob up and down until he's groaning and pulling himself away from me.

"Condom," he says, and I point to the top drawer of the dresser. I climb onto the bed as he grabs the box of condoms, rips it open, and brings a strip of them back to the bed.

"Lie back," he commands, so I do. He runs his hands roughly down my thighs and then parts them, exposing me fully. The gust of cold air makes me gasp and he smirks.

"I'm going to devour this pretty pussy, Cassandra." He slips a finger

inside me, and I gasp and wriggle, needing more of him. “I’m going fuck you with my tongue, going to lick and suck your clit until you’re soaking wet and coming on my face, and then I’m going to fuck you with my cock. Do you want that?”

“God, yes,” I practically shout, and he presses down on my clit with his thumb.

“Yes, who?” he grinds out as his thumb rubs torturous circles over my clit.

“Yes, Professor,” I cry out. “Fuck me, please, Professor.”

Nolan drops between my thighs and brings me to orgasm twice with his talented mouth and fingers before finally rising up, sheathing himself with the condom, then lining himself up with my entrance. He kisses my lips and I hum, tasting myself on him. Tasting his desire for me. He rubs the head of his erection along my slit, taking care to press on my clit with each pass, until I’m writhing with impatience and need.

“Fuck me, Nolan, please,” I cry against his mouth then suck on his bottom lip. “I want it. I want you.”

“Cassandra, I am going to own this pussy. Do you understand?” His voice, so controlled, so smooth and dark, like fine leather or expensive bourbon, sends a rush over my body. “I’m going to own it.”

“Please,” I plead, and the leash on his restraint snaps.

Nolan guides one hand between us and rubs lightly on my already sensitive clit as he pushes his cock into me steadily. I can feel every inch stretching me, molding me around him. It doesn’t hurt, not really, but it’s uncomfortable at first. Unfamiliar. When he’s seated fully, he pauses his hips while still tending to my clit with his thick fingers. He allows me time to adjust and lets out a deep groan.

“You have no idea how good you feel wrapped around my cock,” he says in my ear, then he kisses my neck, my jaw, my lips, and presses his forehead to mine. “Let me know when I can move,” he says, and his voice is strained.

Instead of answering, I tilt my hips, the movement making us both moan. God, this is amazing. I rock some more, gliding him out a little, then back in.

“Fuck, baby,” he chokes, and I move my hips faster. I’m drunk on the idea that I can make him feel good, dizzy with pleasure and power. When I clench around him, he growls and takes control.

Nolan rises up on his arms, his strained biceps caging me in, and quickly thrusts in and out. Long strokes, pulling almost all the way out and then

plunging back in. It feels so good that I'm a whimpering, moaning, mewling mess, and I don't even care. When he speeds up, I cry out, and when he rubs my clit with his thumb, I almost scream.

This is what I've been missing? Jesus, I never want it to stop.

Nolan throws my legs over his shoulders, the new position hitting me deeper than I thought possible.

"Oh my god," I cry. "This is... You are... Oh my *god*..."

"I own this pussy, Cassandra," he grinds out before speeding up, so he's pounding into me. "Rub your clit," he commands, and I obey immediately, moaning the second my fingers make contact. "Rub your clit until you're coming all over my cock."

When I come, it's with a strangled cry. My eyes are watering, my throat is raw, and my body hurts in the most delicious way. Nolan comes seconds after, groaning into his release with a few final thrusts into me. He pulls out and drops down next to me, then slides his arm under my shoulders and moves me so I'm lying on his chest.

"Better than a bartending surfer?" he asks playfully, knowing full well what my answer is going to be.

"So much better, Professor."



FIVE

nolan

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up in Cassie's bed to the sound of her phone chiming. When I open my eyes, I find her sitting against the headboard in near darkness, her frowning face lit up from the glow of the phone screen.

"What's up?" I ask softly, and when she turns to me, a smile erases the frown lines.

"The airline," she says, and wiggles her phone. "I'm on a flight out tomorrow afternoon."

I knew this would happen. I wasn't expecting to feel so disappointed when it did. I thought I would have more time with her. Not just for sex, though it's the best it's been in a long ass time, but to talk. To learn more about her. *Everything* about her. To laugh with her some more.

We had sex three times last night; it was better each time, and between we talked and laughed and teased. Fuck, I haven't smiled like that in, well, I can't even remember. Maybe never. Certainly not in my five years married to Colleen.

"That's exciting," I say, trying to keep my voice upbeat when really all I want to do is beg her to stay. One more day. Maybe two. Maybe just through Christmas. "Looks like you'll get to spend Christmas on the beach after all."

"Yeah." She shrugs. Her smile is weak.

"Well, let's make the most of the day." I sit up and clap my hands, forcing excitement into my voice. "Have you ever been snowmobiling?"

She laughs. "Yes, I have."

"But have you ever been snowmobiling in Colorado?" I arch a brow, and her smile grows as she shakes her head. "Well, that settles that. Today, we snowmobile. Tomorrow, you head to sandy beaches and frilly cocktails." I

stand and start to pull on some sweats. “You’re leaving that green bathing suit with me, though,” I say seriously, my voice low and stern. “That’s mine now. No one else will see you in it.”

Her eyes flare and she bites her lip, making me groan.

“Yes, Professor,” she whispers seductively, and I’m on her in a blink, pushing her back onto the bed and burying my face between her legs.

If I only have one day left, I’m going to take advantage of it.

After breakfast, Mallory, her husband Patrick, and my brothers Duncan and Craig, show up at the house with three more snowmobiles with sleds attached.

“My little elves,” Ma says as she throws open the door and lets them in. “Just in time.”

“Mallory!” Cassie skips past me and embraces my niece, and Mallory laughs as she sways back and forth.

“Glad to see you’ve survived the snow,” Mallory says, stepping back and grinning at me before looking back at Cassie. “And with grumpy old Uncle Nolan, too. I’m sorry. I told you you’d have the house to yourself.”

“Cassandra and I have gotten along quite well, Mallory,” I interject with a smile. “I’ve been on my best behavior.” Mallory laughs and lets me pull her into a hug. “I think you’ve gotten taller, Pip Squeak.”

She elbows me lightly in the stomach at the nickname I gave her when she was just a toddler, then pulls back and rolls her eyes.

“Maybe if you came around more often,” Mallory says with a shrug, and before the guilt sours my good mood, my brother drops a big hand on my shoulder.

“The Prodigal Son,” Craig says, pulling me in for a quick hug. “Good to see you. Almost forgot what you looked like. Heard you’re here solo this time.”

I flick my eyes to Cassie quickly before looking back at my brother. I haven’t told her about Colleen. And even though we aren’t anything—won’t have anything beyond this snowy extended layover—I feel like she deserves to hear the story directly from me in private, and not through misspoken gossip between my meddling older brothers.

“Solo,” I tell Craig cryptically with a nod. “And will likely be solo from now on.”

“Well, I wish I could lie and say I’m sorry to hear it...” Craig says, just as Duncan cuts him off with the signature Montrose boys’ troublemaking grin.

“But we’re definitely *not* sorry, and Ma would box our ears if we lied.”

I huff, then turn to Cassie, meeting her wide, interested eyes with a smile.

“Cassie, these are two of my older brothers, Craig and Duncan. You know Mallory, and this is her husband, Patrick.” I point to each person as I introduce them, and Cassie sends each of them a soft smile in greeting. “Everyone, this is Cassie.”

“Sorry you got snowed in with Professor Serious.” Duncan gestures to me with a wink. I roll my eyes, used to the teasing. “Least Ma’s house is festive and it beats sleepin’ in the airport.”

“It definitely beats the airport,” Cassie says with a laugh. “And *Professor Serious* hasn’t been *too* bad. He’s pretty good company, actually.”

“Oh, he must not have bored you with all his psych talk yet,” Craig jokes. I shake my head and try to act annoyed.

“I like the psychology talk,” Cassie defends, and while I feel everyone’s eyes train toward me, mine won’t budge from Cassie’s. Her sparkling irises dance with an inside humor that only she and I share. “You can bore me with the psychology talk anytime you’d like, Professor.”

I’m sure someone else says something smart assy—probably Duncan—but I don’t pay any attention. I just hold Cassie’s gaze and try to keep myself from picking her up and carrying her back to her room for round five.

“Alright, elves, stop dawdling, we have things to do.” My mom’s voice breaks through the haze and Cassie and I both look toward her. She grins, claps once, then starts barking out orders. “Craig and Patrick, you can load up these gifts from the living room. Duncan, you and Nolan can get the rest of the packages from the garage. Mallory, you, me, and Cassie can head to the community center and start decorating.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out the snowmobile keys just as Ma turns to me, sticks out her palm, and raises an eyebrow.

“Keys,” she states firmly.

I don’t budge.

“Keys, Nolan Blair.”

“Oh, she middle-named you.” I hear Duncan say, and my mom swats behind her, hitting him in the gut.

“Mallory can drive you,” I say slowly. My mom doesn’t drop her hand.

“Nolan, I’ve been driving one of those rigs longer than you’ve been alive. Give me those keys. Now.”

I glance over her shoulder at my older brothers. Both are subtly shaking

their heads no. I flick my eyes to Mallory and she's mouthing the words "don't do it" over and over again. I start to curl my hand around the keys when my mother clears her throat.

"Nolan Blair Montrose, do not make me say it again."

I close my eyes, and I hear Duncan and Craig sigh as I surrender the snowmobile keys into my mother's outstretched hand. She then brings her other hand to my face and pats my cheek.

"You're a good boy, Nolan. That's why I love you more than your brothers."

She pushes past me and out the door, then my brothers shove past me, making sure to knock their shoulders into me as they go.

"You're on search squad next time she goes missing," Craig says.

"Yeah, and if she takes out any more mailboxes, you're replacing those, too," Duncan adds.

"That was one time!" I hear my mom holler from outside and I sigh, then look at Cassie to find her stifling a giggle.

"Nolan Blair Montrose, are you a mama's boy?" she whispers, lips twitching with the need to stretch over her face. I shrug in confirmation.

"Come on," I say as I take her hand. "Let's get you suited up."

I take Cassie to the large coat closet by the back door and pull out snow pants, a snow jacket, a pair of boots, and a helmet.

"Some of these are Ma's, and I think those boots are Mallory's, but they should all fit."

She thanks me, and I watch as she steps into the pants. I kneel and help her into the boots, then stand and zip up her coat. Before handing her the helmet, I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, then trail my knuckles down her jaw.

"Have I told you that you're beautiful?" I ask, and she lets out a soft laugh.

"A few times, I think."

"Hmm." I lean down and take her lips with mine, kissing her slowly before pressing my forehead to hers. "Have I told you that you drive me fucking crazy?"

I feel her lips curl into a smile against mine.

"No," she whispers. "I don't think you have."

I kiss her once more, then drop my hands and take a step back before speaking.

“You drive me fucking crazy,” I say clearly, and I watch her chest jump with a hitched breath.

“In a good way?” she asks quietly, and I can’t stop the smile that tips up the corners of my mouth.

“In the best way.” I reach for her hand and start walking toward the front of the house. “Now let’s go be good little elves for Saint Nanta Claus before she starts to get mean.”

Cassie’s tinkling giggle hits me right in the fucking gut. I didn’t lie. She drives me crazy in the best fucking way, but damn it, I think that might not be a good thing.

It takes us until late afternoon to decorate the community center and set up the gifts for the town gift drive.

The twelve-foot tree is filled with colorful ornaments, lights, and garland. There are stockings strung up over the pretend fireplace backdrop behind the giant red velvet wing-backed chair where Santa will sit to hand out gifts. Every wall in the building is displaying holiday art created by the kids at the local elementary school. In a few days, this building will be full of laughter and chatter of the townspeople celebrating the holiday together, and I find myself overly excited to once again be able to participate in the festivities. It’s been years, and I’ve missed this small-town holiday spirit.

Cassie gets along perfectly with my family, which is something I try not to take too much delight in. Colleen never got along with anyone, and with every raised brow I get from my brothers today, I know they are thinking the same thing.

I’ve never been the type to date around. I like commitment. I like relationships. A holiday fling with the woman stranded at my mom’s Bed and Breakfast is not something I’d usually partake in, but I’ve also never been good at hiding my feelings. I know my brothers can tell something is going on between me and Cassie. They don’t know specifics, because I don’t kiss and tell, but I’m sure my growing affection for her is obvious. My eyes never stray far from where she is. My hands seek out her warmth at every possible moment. If I thought I could kiss her freely without making her uncomfortable or having to deal with razzing from Craig and Duncan, I’d do it.

But every time I get the urge, I remind myself that she is leaving

tomorrow. Her life is a thousand miles away, and it couldn't be more different from mine. Cassie is a twenty-three-year-old coed with her whole future ahead of her. I'm a thirty-four-year-old divorcee who is anchored in the world of academia for the next few years, at least. This is only meant to be a fling. Sex. She's leaving tomorrow, and I have to be okay with that.

"You ready to hit the trails?" I ask Cassie after the last ornament has been hung on the tree and all the presents are safely tucked underneath it. "We still have a few hours of daylight left."

Cassie beams at me.

"I'm more than ready."

"Take her around the north trail that goes up by the cabin," Ma says. "There is still some brush that needs to be cleared from the trail that runs along Back Creek."

I glance at Craig and Duncan.

"You guys haven't been keeping up with the trails?" I tease. "This place really does go to Hell when I'm not here. Can't trust you two to do anything."

"Watch it, little brother," Duncan taunts and then throws an empty gift box at me.

I bat it away just as Craig tries to put me in a headlock. I manage to dodge him, but I'm not so lucky with the tube of wrapping paper Dunc swings at my head. It cracks me across the cheek, and I pause long enough that Craig goes for my knees and takes me to the ground, then Duncan pounces. In a matter of seconds, my face is pressed into the floor and I'm panting under the weight of my older brothers as they pile on top of me. One of them has my arms pinned behind my back, and the other is sitting on my legs.

"Can't trust you guys to do anything," Craig mocks me, his voice high-pitched and squeaky. "This place goes to Hell when I'm off being super important and boring at the university."

"Calling it like I see it," I force out, fighting against his hold in an attempt to flip our positions. I can hear Duncan laughing, and I twist my foot free just enough to kick at something soft. He groans, and I let out a strangled whoop in triumph.

"Surrender," Duncan commands.

"No."

"Surrender, dweeb!" Craig says, and I'd laugh at the old insult if I could get enough air in my lungs. Instead, all I can do is choke out a rasped *never*.

“You might be the password child,” Craig whispers in my ear, “but I can still kick your nerdy little ass.”

He quickly loosens his hold on my arms with one hand, but before I can break free, he shoves a slobbery wet finger in my ear and wiggles it around.

I yell. A fucking wet willy. I hated when they’d do that to me as a kid. I hate it even more now. The violation gives me a full body cringe, and I’m about to shout some choice words at them when my mother’s voice stops us all in our tracks.

“Boys! What on Earth? Did I raise a bunch of mountain heathens? You two get off your brother right now.”

In a flash, the weight is off my back, four hands grip me by the armpits, and I’m hauled off the ground and onto my feet. I swing and get one good punch to Duncan’s gut before my mom shouts again.

“Stop it!” She glares at me before turning her disappointed stare on Craig. “Craig Andrew, you should know better. I expect this behavior from Duncan, but you? You’re older. You should set the example. And to be acting like this in front of our guest? Shame on the three of you.”

“Sorry, Ma,” Craig grumbles. Duncan snickers, but his laugh is cut short when my mom levels him with one of *those* glares.

“Apologize to your brother,” Ma says to Duncan, and I turn toward him with a smug smile.

“Sorry, dweeb.”

I have to swallow a laugh and my mom sighs.

“Seriously, boys, you are adults. Act like it.”

The moment my mother is out the door, my brothers turn on me, but I’m already sprinting to the exit with my hand clasped around Cassie’s, tugging her giggling body with me.

Cassie slides onto the snowmobile behind me, locking her arms around my waist, and I take off toward the trails on the outside of town. The skies are a clear blue, the wind is near non-existent, and the temperature has risen just enough to keep our fingers from falling off. She laughs and squeezes me tighter with every dip and curve in the trail, and I’m thrilled to be spending this moment with her. To be sharing this part of myself with someone who is truly enjoying it.

It’s the most fun I’ve had in a long time. It’s the happiest I’ve been in years.

I try to convince myself that this happiness is solely the result of finally

being with my family for Christmas, and has nothing to do with the intelligent, kind, gorgeous woman currently wrapped around me.

I try. But I fail.

When we're nearly to the cabin, I veer off the trail and take Cassie to a small clearing that overlooks a valley. It's one of my favorite places to hike when the weather is nice, and right now, with the snow glittering on the evergreens, it's a breathtaking view.

"Oh wow," Cassie breathes out after sliding off her helmet. "This is beautiful."

"It is. I thought maybe we could watch the sunset before turning back for the night."

She grins. "That would be nice."

I sit back on the snowmobile, then ease her back onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her waist in a way that leaves no space between us. Even through our thick jackets, I can feel her warmth. I focus on the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes, and I rest my chin on her shoulder. The sound of an approaching snowmobile causes us to look back toward the trail, but the rider passes quickly.

"Probably Duncan on his way to attempt a snowball fight," I muse into her hair.

"Should I be worried? Duncan and Craig don't seem like they'd play fair."

"They definitely don't," I say with a laugh. "But I know how to fight dirty when I need to. I'll protect you."

I give her side a playful squeeze and Cassie giggles.

"Your brothers are a lot of fun. I wish I could see you all together." She grows quiet for a moment and rests her head back on my shoulder. "I always wanted siblings. It was lonely growing up. I'd always get jealous of my friends who came from big families."

"Hmmm." I press a kiss to her temple while I think it over. "Growing up in the Montrose house was a lot of things, but I can honestly say I was never lonely. Maybe because I was never alone," I joke, and she laughs, but shakes her head.

"No, it's more than that. I can tell. You all have a really strong bond. I picked up on it immediately. Even with Mallory, I could see it. Your family is close, and I envy it."

We fall back into comfortable silence, and I replay her words. Cassie is

right. My family is close. We always have been. Even with the years I spent distanced from them, our relationships never weakened. And though Oliver is stationed in North Carolina, he's still active in our group text threads. My brothers are my best friends. Ma and Pop raised us to be close, and it's a bond that's lasted. I've missed them so much more than I realized.

"Thank you," Cassie says after a moment, shifting so her eyes meet mine. "For letting me be part of your family over the last week. I'm so grateful to Nan for letting me stay in her house, and I'm grateful to you for keeping me company. For *everything*."

The flare of her eyes tells me she's not just talking about the Christmas movies and mealtime conversations, and her already pink-tinted cheeks flush deeper. I hold her tighter and turn my mouth into a soft smile.

"It's been my pleasure," I say honestly, and I mean it.

I pull the glove off my hand, then slide my bare fingers over Cassie's jaw before pulling her lips to mine. I welcome the warmth of her mouth, her tongue, and when she whimpers, I almost lose it. The kiss was supposed to be brief and sweet, but it heats quickly, until she's turned completely around and is straddling my hips on the snowmobile.

When she rocks forward, I can't swallow back my groan. I harden immediately, and when she pushes down on my erection, I match her movement. She gasps into my mouth, so I repeat the motion.

"What are you trying to start out here, Cassandra?" I ask, the words low and dark. I dig my fingers into her hips and encourage her to continue to move. "I can feel your heat. Your desire."

"Yes, Professor," she says, quickening the roll of her hips over my erection.

I kiss her again, harder, faster, and she rides me, fucking me fully clothed on the back of the snowmobile as the sun sets. There's a voice in the back of my head telling me to stop, to get us back to the house for the night, but I don't want to stop. I don't want it to end.

I'm about to lose all sense of reason when there's a loud beep and then Craig's voice booms through silence.

Cassie and I both startle at the noise.

"Nolan! Nolan, you copy?"

My brow furrows for a moment before I remember the walkie. We always bring them on the trails because cell service is spotty and unreliable out here. Leave it to my older brother to interrupt what could be my last moment alone

with Cassie.

I grab the walkie begrudgingly and answer.

“Copy, Craig. What’s up?”

“You got Ma with you?”

Cassie jerks her head back and her eyes go wide, and I glance behind me, remembering the sound of the snowmobile from earlier.

“No,” I tell him quickly, already knowing what he’s going to say next.

“Welp, she’s in the wind. Took the rig and everything. We’re going to take the Back Creek trail to check for her. You anywhere near the cabin?”

Cassie is already up from my lap with her helmet back on before Craig finishes talking, and I spin my body around, so she can slide back into the seat behind me.

“Yep, I’m about ten from the cabin. I’ll head now and radio back when I get there.”

I put the walkie away and crank the engine back up.

“You think she’s okay?” Cassie asks, and I can hear the worry in her voice. I give her hand a squeeze before answering.

“She’s probably fine,” I say clearly, and then I get us back onto the trail and head toward the cabin.

Five more minutes on the trail, and my body relaxes when I see chimney smoke coming from the vicinity of Pop’s cabin. It was Ma I heard earlier, and she’s probably in the cabin now. I’m relieved, but also ready to scold her for scaring us all.

Sure enough, when we pull up to the cabin, the lights inside are on and the smoke is coming from the chimney, but Ma’s snowmobile isn’t anywhere I can see it. I park, and Cassie follows me up the porch steps and into the house quickly.

“Ma?” I say as I step into the living room. The woodstove is lit, but from the look of the logs, it’s not been going long. “Ma.”

I walk through the small living room and kitchen and check the bathroom, then the two small bedrooms. Everything is empty. When I step back into the main area, Cassie is holding a bottle of wine with a puzzled look on her face. I glance from her to the bottle, then to the table in front of her.

Two wine glasses are set out on the table, and so is an old VHS tape and a plate of my mom’s sugar cookies.

I realize what’s happened at the same time the walkie beeps in my jacket pocket.

“Professor Dweeb, copy.”

I roll my eyes. Duncan is such an ass. You’d never know he was in his mid-forties by how he acts.

“Let me guess,” I drawl into the receiver. “You found her and she’s fine. Scrapbooking with the mayor or knitting with the sheriff’s wife?”

Duncan snorts a laugh.

“Close. She’s at Jim Satchell’s house gettin’ pissed on spiked cider and tryin’ to teach Buddy how to roll over.”

I don’t even try to wipe the smile from my face, and when I glance at Cassie, she’s got her hand covering her mouth to quiet her giggles, and her eyes are shimmering with delight.

“Buddy the pig?” I ask Dunc.

“Buddy the pig,” he confirms. “You headin’ back here? I told the kids I’d be back to read the bedtime story, but I gotta put the rigs up first.”

I glance back at the wine, the VHS tape, and the cookies, and then I laugh.

“We’re going to stay at Pop’s cabin, so I’ll lock up the snowmobile in the morning.”

“Copy that, brother. See you tomorrow.”

I set the walkie on the table and then lock eyes with Cassie.

“What’s all this?” she asks curiously, lips twitching in that deliciously tempting way as she gestures to the items my mom seems to have set out for us.

“This, Cassandra, might be the mythical magic of Saint Nanta Claus.”

She laughs. “Nan did this? Why?”

I shrug. “I learned a long time ago not to try and find the reason behind her antics. It’s best not to question them. Instead, let’s just enjoy them.”

I pour us each a glass of wine and turn on the old television set. I pop in the VHS tape, *A Christmas Story*, and settle into the couch next to Cassie. We drink our wine, eat our cookies, and laugh at the movie together. It ends too quickly, then Cassie falls asleep with her head in my lap and my fingers in her hair. The whole night, I work to fight off the impending reality.

She is leaving tomorrow, and I have to be okay with that.



SIX

nolan

I WATCH Cassie pack her clothes into her carry-on bag.

The skimpy sun dresses and bikinis heat my blood just as quickly as they create a surge of jealousy. It takes everything in me not to demand she stay here in this room for the remainder of the holidays. Perhaps longer.

I say nothing, though.

I've been unable to leave her side since she first told me about her flight yesterday morning, but I've managed to keep my possessive thoughts to myself. Even when she pulls the nearly empty box of condoms out of the dresser drawer and shoves them into her bag quickly, ears burning red and cheeks flushed pink, I maintain control.

I don't want to scare her off, but I've been thinking of ways to breach the topic of staying in touch. She owes me nothing, I know, and our lives are in very different places, but the idea of losing her so soon...

It's unacceptable to me.

"Are you excited to finally soak up the sun on the beach," I ask, forcing a lightness in my voice that I don't feel as she zips her bag closed.

I take it from her without prompting and follow her out the bedroom door and down the stairs.

"I suppose," she says. "I did want to get a tan before spring semester starts."

Her excitement feels just as fake as my own.

"The beach will probably be better than this frigid cold," I tell her. "We've got another heavy snow coming tomorrow."

When her feet hit the bottom of the stairs she turns to me, sadness flashing in her eyes briefly before her lips curve into a suggestive smile and her cheeks tint with another pink blush.

“I don’t know about *better*...”

Her voice trails off, and for a moment, she just stares up at me, her eyes scanning over my face as if cataloging it in her memory bank. I allow myself to do the same, just as I have for days, until every laugh line and freckle and dimple are perfectly recorded.

I step down off the last step, closing the distance between us to reach out and brush a strand of hair behind her ear. She leans into my hand and her eyes flutter shut. I’m opening my mouth to speak as my mom rounds the corner from the kitchen.

“Here, Cass,” Ma says, shoving a blueberry muffin into a paper sack. “I made these this morning. Take one with you.”

“Thank you, Nan.” Cassie’s smile is subdued but grateful as she tucks the muffin into her backpack. She’s wearing my hockey sweats that I told her to keep, and her carry-on is clutched in my hands.

“Well,” I say brightly, “if you’re ready, I’ll bring your bag to my car.”

“Oh,” Cassie says, “I thought Mallory was taking me.” She shows me her phone. “She’s on her way.”

Damn it. I thought I would at least get the drive with her to talk.

“Text her back and tell her I’ll take you,” I urge. “I wanted to talk to you about music therapy master’s programs. I was thinking you and I could stay in touch.”

“Oh, yes,” my mom butts in. “You could mentor her, Nolan. You’d be so good for each other.” She looks at Cassie and winks. “He’s a good man to have in your corner. No sense in letting your *friendship* stop now.”

Cassie’s eyes flare and her cheeks flush, then she looks at me with a shocked expression that makes me bark out a laugh. My mom is such a meddler. Cassie isn’t used to it.

“Text her,” I say again, and Cassie nods.

“Sure.”

I wait as Cassie types out the text, then Ma gives her a hug and wishes her well.

“Come back anytime, Cass,” my mom says. “It was wonderful to have you.”

“Thank you for everything, Nan.” Cassie steps back with a genuine smile, her eyes misting slightly. “This was the best possible way to spend the Snowpocalypse.”

I grab Cassie’s backpack and throw it over my shoulder with her carry-on

in my other hand, and we head out the door. I'm popping the trunk when a familiar car pulls into the driveway, blocking my way out.

Colleen.

"What the fuck," I grumble, dropping Cassie's bags to the ground. "Wait here," I say to her, then I walk up to Colleen's car. "What do you want, Colleen?"

"It's Christmas," she croons, flicking her eyes from Cassie to me, then reaching out and putting her hand on my bicep. I shrug her off. "I wanted to spend Christmas with my family."

"Then go find them." I growl, just as Mallory's car pulls up to the curb. "I have to go, Colleen, and you're blocking me in."

"Where do you have to go?" she questions, her brow furrowing as she once more looks from me to Cassie. I step in her line of sight, but she sidesteps me. "Who is this?" Colleen's voice is nails on glass.

"I'm Cassie," Cassie answers smoothly. "And you are?"

"I'm Colleen." Her voice is all artificial sweetener and toxins, and I brace myself for what comes next. "I'm Nolan's *wife*," she spits, and I hear Cassie gasp behind me.

"*Ex-wife*." I growl, then turn to Cassie. "She's my ex-wife, Cassandra."

Colleen scoffs as I pick back up Cassie's bags.

"Come on," I say to her, then head to Mal's car, where she's currently standing with both hands on her hips glaring in our direction. "We'll ride with Mallory."

"Nolan," Colleen whines as I breeze past her, clasping Cassie's bags in one hand and her hand in the other. "Nolan, we can fix this. I want to try again."

"Too late, Colleen. Go back to Boulder. Finish packing your stuff."

"Is everything okay?" Mallory asks as I drop Cassie's bags into her trunk. "What's the bitch want?"

"Don't fucking care," I grumble, barely restraining my irritation.

"Nolan," Cassie whispers, "she's coming over here."

I sigh. "Colleen, get the fuck off this property before I call the cops."

I open the passenger side door and gesture for Cassie to climb in.

"I need to talk to you," Colleen insists, and I laugh, watching as Cassie buckles her seat belt. "Nolan, I need to talk to you," she says again, louder this time, as I open the door to the back seat. Mallory cranks the engine, and just before I slide into the back, Colleen gets louder.

“Nolan, I need you,” she yells, gasps come from Cassie and Mallory as anger clouds my vision. “You promised. You promised you would be there if I needed you, and I do. I made a mistake, but you promised. I made a mistake and I know that now, but you promised.”

When I finally look back at Colleen, there are tears streaming down her face and her hands are wringing together in front of her chest. She’s a mess, and she’s not above making a scene. And though I don’t want to, though I want to keep my fury blazing so I can leave her here sobbing in the snow, I feel sympathy for her.

Colleen hasn’t cried once since our separation. Not once. And for the briefest of moments, the old instinct to protect her, to soothe away her pain, flares up in my chest. She sees it, sees my slight hesitation, and I watch hope flicker over her face. When I don’t move toward her, though, she clenches her teeth in frustration. When she flicks her eyes to Cassie, I know even before Colleen opens her mouth that she’s going to go for the throat. I watch in horror as she splays her hand over her abdomen—her implication loud and fucking clear—and she forces out another dramatic sob.

“I want us to be a family again,” she chokes through her tears. “I know you’ll be a great Daddy just like we always dreamed about.”

My eyes fall shut, and I take a calming breath through my nose before turning away from Colleen and facing Cassie. I look her straight in the eyes, and the shock and concern I see there pains me ten times worse than Colleen’s theatrics.

“Uncle Nolan, she’s going to miss her flight,” Mallory says, and I nod in her direction before zeroing back in on Cassie.

“I’m sorry,” I say honestly, and Cassie’s brows furrow as her eyes dart between me and Colleen. Fucking Colleen.

“I need to talk to you,” Colleen screeches again, and my shoulders droop in defeat. “We’re supposed to be a family, Nolan! In sickness and health! We’re a family!”

She’s not going to leave this alone until I talk to her.

I can feel the eyes of the neighbors on me. In my peripheral I can see one of them step out onto their porch, watching this scene go down unashamedly with arms crossed. I tamp down my embarrassment and square my shoulders. I have to deal with this now. If I don’t, it will never go away.

I hold Cassie’s eyes and take her hands in mine. I squeeze them lightly.

“Ride to the airport with Mallory,” I say, hoping she sees what I’m not

saying. *I'm not done with you. We're not over. I'll explain everything later.*
“We’ll talk as soon as you land.”

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles, and Colleen shrieks behind me. I clamp my eyes shut in fury. I’m going to fucking lose it if I’m not careful.

“Okay,” Cassie whispers. “Talk to you soon.”

I give her a small smile, then shut the door.

It’s not until they’ve driven off that I realize I never got her phone number. But that’s okay. I’ll get it from Mallory when she gets back. I turn back to the headache behind me.

“What the fuck do you want, Colleen?”

Her lip wobbles and she moves her hands to cradle her abdomen again. She snuffles and forces a smile.

“I need you, Nolan. I want us to be a family again.”



SEVEN

cassie

THE MOMENT MY PLANE LANDS, I turn my phone back on and send a text to Mallory.

I let her know I landed safe, then ask if she could give me Nolan's number. I use the "he wanted to tell me about master's programs" excuse, because what else would I say? I'm really hoping I'll be able to bang your hot uncle again someday, but I forgot to get his contact info?

No, thank you.

Even if it is the truth.

I stick my phone in my pocket and follow everyone down the aisle to deplane, then make my way to the exit. I was hoping my excitement for this beach vacation would reignite by the time I stepped outside and breathed in the salty sea breeze, but instead all I feel is disappointed. I try to ignore the quiet longing I feel for a charming Bed and Breakfast and snowcapped mountains.

"CASSIE! Over here!"

I look up to find two of my friends waving at me from a topless Jeep, so I head toward them and climb into the back seat. Kaia grew up here, so it makes sense that she's driving, and she turns to give me a big grin.

"I'm so glad you made it! My mom's been worried for the last week, so now she can stop obsessively checking the weather app."

Kaia pulls away from the curb and starts driving. I keep my eyes glued on the scenery. It's beautiful, no doubt, but I find myself frowning at the palm trees and angry with the heat. I give my head a little shake and slip on my sunglasses.

I am here to have fun, not mope over the end of my holiday fling.

"And you're just in time, too," my other friend, Penny, chimes in. "We're

going to have a party on Kai's beach after the Christmas feast."

I send Kaia a grin in the rearview mirror.

"You have your own beach?"

"It's the beach close to my house," Kai says with a laugh. "But it's mostly just us and the neighbors. Not very well known to tourists."

"Speaking of neighbors," Pen says, then turns all the way around in the seat to look at me. "Kai's neighbor is gorgeous, *and* he surfs, *and* he bartends."

Pen wiggles her eyebrows, no doubt remembering my lose the V-card plan for winter break. My stomach flips remembering just how that plan turned out.

"A *bartending surfer*, Cass," Pen stresses when I don't react, and I force myself to smile.

"A bartending surfer," I repeat, and without meaning to, my hand clutches at my phone in my pocket.



"Let's go, Cassie! We're going to be late!"

"Coming!"

I give myself another glance in the mirror while I listen to the phone ring. It goes to voicemail just like it did the last two times I called, but this time, I decide to woman-up and leave a message.

Hi. You've reached the voice mailbox of Mallory Evans. Please leave a brief message and I will call you back as soon as I can.

"Hey Mal, it's Cassie. Just calling to let you know I landed safely, and I'm finally putting my sundresses to use. I'm not sure if my texts have gone through, but um, I figured I'd call."

I hesitate, contemplating whether or not I should mention Nolan, but then I decide against it.

"Anyway, give me a call when you get this. And tell everyone I said Merry Christmas. Talk to you soon."

I hang up with a sigh, then pull up my group chat with Ivy and Bailey.

How many texts are too many texts at this point?

BAILEY

How many have you sent?

ME

Three texts. Three unanswered phone calls. One voicemail.

IVY

It's only been one day, and it's Christmas Eve. I'm sure they'll get back to you soon.

I wince as I read Ivy's message and send one of those little embarrassed emojis.

ME

So, you're saying I've hit my limit?

BAILEY

Yes

IVY

For now

For now. I sigh and tell them thank you and wish them both Merry Christmas before sticking my phone in my dress pocket and heading back into the living room where my sorority sisters are all waiting.

We all follow Kaia's mom and dad out the door and toward the neighbor's house. Their backyard is already all set up for a Christmas party, with tables full of food, music playing from Bluetooth speakers, and twinkle lights strewn up in the trees.

Before I can even get a few feet into the backyard, my eyes catch on a gorgeous man in red swim trunks, a plain white button down, and a Santa hat. He's beautiful, I have to admit, and when he smiles at me, I can't help but smile back. Kaia grabs my wrist, stopping me from walking any farther and when I look at her, she's grinning mischievously at me.

"Stay, Cass," she says quietly through her smile.

I narrow my eyes, but before I can ask her what the heck she's doing, a deep voice, warm and smooth like honey, steals the words from my tongue. When I glance up, I find the hottie in the Santa hat.

"Kaia," the man says, greeting my friend and pulling her into a hug. "Thanks for coming."

“I’m here every year. Where else would I be?” Kaia teases, then she turns to me. “This is my friend, Cassie. Cassie, this is Etana, my neighbor.” She raises her eyebrows. “He surfs and bartends.”

Ohhhh. The bartending surfer.

And just in case I needed further confirmation, I catch a glimpse of Penelope smirking and winking at me from over Etana’s shoulder. *Subtle.* My sorority sisters really want to get me laid.

If only I was as excited as they are.

“Nice to me you, Etana,” I say honestly.

I smile up at him, his deep brown eyes glinting with kindness and humor, and he flashes me a charming grin of straight, white teeth.

“Glad you could finally make it. Kaia’s been telling me about you,” he rumbles. “Sorry to hear you got stranded in a snowstorm.”

Etana shivers dramatically, and I laugh with him and Kaia.

“It wasn’t so bad,” I say with a shrug. “I made some new friends. Went snowmobiling. It was fun.”

He scrunches his nose and gives his head a shake. I laugh louder.

“What? Not a fan of snow?”

“Tropical weather or nothing at all,” Etana says, then he elbows Kaia playfully. “I’ll never understand why this one decided to go to a frozen wasteland for college.”

“Ugh, shut up, Etana,” Kai groans, and I shrug. “It’s Indiana, not the Arctic.”

“I mean, he’s not wrong,” I joke. “Frozen wasteland is a decent description of winter in the Midwest.”

Etana steps between me and Kaia, slinging his arms over both of our shoulders and escorting us into the backyard.

“Lucky you’re here now, Cassie,” he says. “As soon as you experience the kalua pig and the Shaka Santa, you’ll never want to celebrate Christmas any other way again.”

Etana is right about a few things.

The Christmas feast is delicious, and the kalua pig is one of the best things I’ve ever tasted. When Kaia’s dad tells us a story about Kanakaloka, the Hawaiian Santa with his outrigger canoe pulled by dolphins, I’m smiling so big, my cheeks hurt. The idea of Santa all decked out in swim trunks and flip flops is something I find adorably charming. Pair that with the ukulele music and the palm trees decorated with Christmas lights, and it’s definitely a

holiday I'll remember fondly.

But Etana was also wrong, because as charmed as I am with my tropical Christmas vacation, I still find myself dreaming of snowcapped mountains and hot cocoa.



I spend the rest of the week doing exactly as I'd originally planned.

I drink fruity cocktails and spend the majority of my days on the beach soaking up the sun with my sorority sisters. I live in bathing suits and sundresses. Etana and Kaia attempt to teach me how to surf, and I almost get the hang of it, but I'm definitely not buying my own surfboard anytime soon. The island is gorgeous and having a Kaia as a tour guide makes the experience that much better. She knows all the best local attractions, and she and Etana make sure that my visit is one that I'll never forget. All things considered, I have the vacation of a lifetime.

But when my group chat with Bailey and Ivy chimes with a text notification a few days after Christmas, I can't help but let myself be honest with them.

IVY

How's the beach?

ME

It's fine.

Nice.

It's nice.

BAILEY

Let me guess. You're missing a certain mountain town and a certain sexy professor?

ME

I can't help it.

I'm having fun. This place is beautiful. Am I a complete idiot for wishing that I never had to leave Colorado?

IVY

You're not an idiot.

BAILEY

Have you heard anything?

ME

Nope. Not a peep.

BAILEY

Sorry, C. That sucks.

IVY

Maybe he'll contact you after the holidays.

ME

Yeah, maybe.

IVY

You're only in Hawaii for a couple more days. Try to have fun and make the most of it.

“Cassie,” Etana calls, tearing my attention from my phone screen.

When I glance up, I find him grinning down at me with his solid, tan body haloed by the glow of the setting sun.

“Hey,” I greet him, shoving my phone back in my bag and sitting up on my lounge. “What’s up?”

Etana’s grin is wide and warm, with just a hint of mischief.

“What do you think about tiki bars and dancing?” he asks.

I flick my eyes behind him to find Pen and Kaia making kissing faces and winking at me, and I have to look away quickly before I lose it and Etana thinks I’m laughing at him. When I meet his eyes again, I sit up a little taller and stretch my smile a little wider.

I’m here to have fun, damn it. Moping on a sun lounge is no longer allowed.

“Well, Etana, I think I’m a fan of tiki bars and dancing.”



We say goodbye to Kaia’s family at the airport on January 1st. Once my

carry-on is safely stowed overhead and I'm buckled into my seat, I take out my phone to put it in airplane mode. I text my parents first, so they know I'm boarding. I text Ivy and Bailey the same. Then, even though I already know what I'll find, I open my text thread with Mallory and reread the last text I sent.

It's unanswered just like the rest of them.

I check my call log, but there are no missed calls from Mallory, either. In fact, when I tried calling her a few days ago, I got the automated message that her voice mailbox was full. I frown at my phone screen, then pull up my group chat with Ivy and Bailey once more.

ME

When will you guys get back to town?



The knock on my apartment door comes at 6:30 p.m. on the dot.

I grin as I make my way through the living room. Ivy is never late. She got back to campus yesterday and insisted we hang out tonight before the spring semester officially starts in a few days.

When I open the door, I find Ivy and Bailey grinning at me, arms full of reusable grocery bags, so I fling the door open and let them in.

"Hey guys," I greet as they kick off their shoes. "You can put that stuff in the kitchen."

"You really do look tanner," Bailey says with a wiggle of her eyebrows. She sets her bag on the kitchen counter and starts pulling out some plastic containers. "Like a Sports Illustrated swimsuit model."

I bark out a laugh.

"Oh, and you have cute little freckles, too," Ivy adds, and I nod.

"The sun brings out my freckles," I say, and Ivy sighs as she pulls a wine bottle opener out of my drawer and gets to work uncorking the bottle of white wine she brought.

"I wish I could tan," she says, grunting a little as she tugs on the bottle opener. "I just burn, burn, burn."

“Oh, but you make such an adorable tomato,” Bailey says, and I watch as she pulls a plate from the cabinet and starts unloading cookies from the containers she brought.

“Those look amazing,” I say, my mouth practically watering as I survey the cookies.

“I kept it simple,” she says. “Chocolate chip. White chocolate macadamia nut. Oatmeal raisin.”

I glance at Ivy and she’s smirking at me. She’s thinking the same thing I am. When it comes to baking, Bailey never keeps it simple. Ivy slides a glass of wine in front of me, then Bailey puts a plate of cookies down next to the wine, and they both set their eyes on me.

“Alright, C,” Ivy says firmly. “We’ve got about half an hour before the guys get here. So, spill it. Tell us what happened.”

So, I do.

I tell them everything. I even rehash the things I already told them, so there isn’t a single event that took place that they don’t know about between the time my flight was cancelled in Denver to right now in my Indianapolis apartment. And even though I don’t want to, even though I try super freaking hard not to, I cry.

“That fucking bastard,” Bailey seethes as she hands me a tissue, and Ivy growls in agreement. “What a fucking asshole. We could kill him. Ivy watches enough murder shows that we could probably pull it off and make it look like an accident.”

I bark out a sad laugh, wiping my tears from my eyes, and shake my head.

“Thank you, but no. No murderous plots.” I shrug. “I’d said it was just a holiday fling. We didn’t make any promises to each other or anything like that. He didn’t owe me anything. I mean, it hurts to be ghosted, yeah, but I don’t have anyone to blame but myself for my unrealistic expectations.”

Bailey grunts, clearly disagreeing with me, and I glance at Ivy to find her studying me with her problem-solving face.

“Do you think something happened?” she asks curiously. “Like maybe something with his ex-wife?”

“If she was actually his ex,” Bailey adds angrily. “He could have lied.”

I shake my head and grab another tissue from the box on the counter.

“I don’t think he lied. I’ve thought about it a lot. I think he was telling the truth when he said they were divorced.”

“And do you really think she was...” Ivy’s eyebrows shoot up, trailing off and implying the word without actually saying it.

I snort a laugh and shrug again.

“Maybe? I don’t know. She never said she was pregnant, but the way she was cradling her stomach...the way she said he would be a great daddy, yelling about being a family...”

I replay the moment in my head as I bring my glass of wine to my lips and take a sip.

“Maybe she’s just a manipulative bitch,” Bailey says flatly, and I choke on my wine. “Shit, sorry,” she says with a laugh, and I wave her off as Ivy reaches over to rub my back through my coughing fit.

“She kind of seemed like someone who could be considered a manipulative bitch,” I concede after I’ve caught my breath, and Ivy and Bailey both laugh. “It definitely felt like a *messy* situation.”

“So, it sounds like you dodged a bullet,” Bailey says, and I huff a laugh.

“Yeah, maybe.”

We sit in silence for a moment before I finally give voice to my feelings. The ones I’ve been working through since my last phone call to Mallory went unanswered.

“I think what hurts the most is that I thought I was important enough to at least warrant a call or something, you know? Like, relationship or whatever aside, he said he wanted to talk to me about master’s programs, but then he never followed through. He’s getting his doctorate in psychology, you know? He’s successful in my dream career field, and I thought it was finally the sign I’d been waiting for that maybe it was something I could do. Like I finally had someone in my corner, for once. I felt, I don’t know, validated.” I sigh and roll my eyes. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter now. He’s there and I’m here, and this is how it’s supposed to be anyway.”

“Why do you need his validation to pursue something in your dream career field?” Ivy asks, and I pause. I blink at her, but I don’t answer. She continues. “I mean, why does it matter if he’s in your corner or not? He’s just a man. It’s *your* career, not his.”

I glance at Bailey, and she pops an eyebrow.

“Good dick doesn’t mean shit,” she says, and I bark out a laugh. Bailey smirks. “I agree with V. Don’t base your self-worth on this one dude who ghosted you. He’s just one dude. You had good sex—”

“—*really* good sex,” I interject, and Bailey’s smirk stretches into a grin.

“*Really* good sex,” she amends, “and that’s awesome. You liked him, and then it ended, and that hurts. It might hurt for a while, honestly. But don’t let him being a fucking douche negatively affect your confidence in yourself.”

“He’s not a douche,” I say with a sad smile, and Bailey rolls her eyes playfully.

“Yeah, yeah, so you said.”

Ivy tops off our wine glasses and adds a few more cookies to my plate before speaking.

“I’m sorry it didn’t turn out how you wanted it to,” she whispers, then pulls me in for a tight hug.

“Me too,” Bailey says, then throws herself at me and Ivy, so we all three sway on our feet in our tight embrace.

“Thanks, guys,” I mumble, careful not to get a mouthful of Ivy’s blonde curls.

“Anytime, Cass,” Bailey says, and as we release each other, there’s a knock on the door.

“I’ll let them in,” Ivy says, and she skips to the front door while Bailey and I grab the cookies and wine to bring into the living room.

I’ve already got the furniture rearranged into a circle with the coffee table sitting in the middle, and we’re setting plates down as Ivy enters the living room with three tall guys trailing behind her. Kelley is Ivy’s boyfriend, Riggs is Bailey’s boyfriend, and Jesse is Kelley’s roommate. The first two take turns giving me a hug and plopping down on furniture, then Jesse picks me up and spins me in a circle, making me giggle, before setting me back on my feet with a little pat on my head.

“Looking like a regular beach bum, C,” Jesse says with a grin.

“Thank you,” I say back.

“I brought the good stuff to the party,” he says with a waggle of his brows, then he swings a bag off his shoulder and digs through it, pulling out a familiar looking box.

It’s a card game that Jesse loves, but the last time we played, I got my ass handed to me. I groan, but Jesse chuckles and drops to his knees by the coffee table, pulling the lid off the box and grabbing the deck of cards.

“I suck at that game, Jesse,” I grumble and throw myself onto the couch dramatically. “Can’t we play something else? I think I have Scrabble or something.”

“I tried to talk him out of bringing it,” Riggs says with a shrug.

“It’s his newest *thing*,” Kelley adds apologetically, and I roll my eyes. Jesse just ignores them, then turns to me.

“You don’t suck at this game, C. You just had shitty cards last time.”

He winks and hands the card deck to me. I look from the cards to his face and back at the cards.

“Okay?” I say and he barks out a laugh.

“You had shitty cards and lost last time, so this time you get to be dealer.”

I blink at him, and he blinks back, then rolls his eyes.

“Go on, Cass,” he urges. “Shuffle the deck.”

My smile is instant, and suddenly, I get it.

I get to *shuffle the deck*.



EIGHT

cassie

AUGUST

“ARE YOU NERVOUS?” Ivy asks over our video chat as I check myself out in the mirror.

“Don’t be nervous, C,” Bailey chimes in. “You look hot, very professional, and you’re going to love it.”

“She’s right, Cass,” Ivy agrees. “This is what you’ve wanted. This is what you’re meant to do. It’s a brand-new adventure and it’s going to be great.”

I smile at my phone where it’s propped on my counter.

“Thanks, guys.” I breathe out a sigh, visualizing exhaling my nerves. “It’s just weird. A new state. A new program. Essentially an entirely new *future*, and I’m doing it all without knowing a single person.”

“You’ve got us,” Ivy reassures. “We’re just a video chat away.”

“And we’re definitely coming skiing this winter,” Bailey says with a laugh. “You know the guys want to break their necks on some snowboards.”

Bailey’s referring to her boyfriend, Ivy’s boyfriend, and their other friend, Jesse. My chest aches. I miss them, but I swallow down my doubts. I might be over 1,000 miles from everyone I know and love, but this is where I’m meant to be.

Enrolling in the Masters of Music Therapy program at Colorado State University wasn’t my first choice, but they were the only one that offered me a scholarship and didn’t require me to retake electives. With my parents no longer helping financially, I couldn’t turn it down.

I still get sick when I think of how close I am to Golden, though. The urge to drive down there, just to scope things out, is strong.

But I won’t do it.

Nolan made it clear what he wanted from me when he ghosted me, and that is absolutely nothing. I waited for weeks for his phone call only to get radio silence. After my texts and calls to Mallory went unanswered, I gave up. I was heartbroken, even though I knew I had no right to be. Ivy and Bailey did a pretty good job of trying to keep me occupied in the weeks after I got back from Hawaii, and soon enough the chaos of the spring semester took over, and I didn’t have the time or energy to let myself be sad.

And now? Now I’m fine.

I'm over it.

Okay, maybe I'm not over it. But I'm not heartbroken anymore. And just because I'm in the same state as Nolan Montrose doesn't mean I'll ever have to see him again.

I say goodbye to Ivy and Bailey, then head to campus. Today is the first day of classes, and I'm brimming with excitement. After that game night with my friends, I decided to take Nolan's advice and "shuffle the deck" when it came to my future. I started researching music therapy programs and applied to a few. I figured if I didn't get accepted, no one but me, Ivy, and Bailey would have to know, and I would take it as a sign that being a history teacher was what I was meant to do.

But I did get accepted.

To more than one.

And now I'm here at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, about to take my first class in the curriculum to become a music therapist. I can hardly believe this is my life.

I step into the small auditorium and take a seat in the third row. Close enough to the front that I can be fully present, but far enough back that I don't look like a kiss ass. I take out my tablet and scroll through the syllabus. It's an upper-level psychology class focusing on the psychology of gender in cultural context, and I am so pumped. I looked the professor up online and she's supposed to be kind of a hard ass, and even that excites me. I just...god, it feels so good to be thrilled about the future. To be pursuing my passion, just like Nolan said I should...

I shake my head.

This isn't about him. He was just a guy. We had sex, had some fun, and then it ended. A whirlwind holiday romance for the books. I sigh. I will not let myself fall into what-ifs. Not again.

The auditorium starts to fill up, and when the door at the front opens, my eyes bounce up to get a good look at Professor Antonetta Aloise-Young. I couldn't find a good picture online. I only know that she's in her fifties and she's a freaking boss. Instead of seeing a woman in her fifties, though, a man walks in. A tall man with broad shoulders, dark brown hair, and a thick beard on a strong jaw, accentuating plump, kissable lips. And though I'm not close enough to see them right now, I know his eyes are a hazel green. I also know that the body beneath his shirt and tie is sculpted and smooth. His hands are magic, his tongue is—

I can't breathe.

I'm just gaping as he drops a leather briefcase on the desk and greets us. His voice is exactly as I remember.

"Good morning," he says. "I'm assistant Professor Montrose. I'll be working with Professor Aloise-Young this semester. She and I have split the sections in half, and I will—"

He stops short when his eyes fall on me. It feels like hours that we stare at each other, but he must recover quickly, because no one else seems to notice. I did, though, and I can't pay attention for the rest of the lecture. I avert my eyes and stare blankly at my tablet until the people around me start to leave.

"Ms. Larsen," Nolan's voice booms, "I'd like to see you for a moment, please."

When I glance up, he's leaning on the desk, arms crossed, face a stern mask. His eyes are on me, and like before, I can feel him everywhere. I put my stuff in my bag, stand, and walk slowly toward him. For a moment, we just stare at each other.

"I think we should go to admissions and get your courses transferred," he begins, and I narrow my eyes at him. "We should probably talk to the psychology dean, too, and disclose the nature of our relationship."

I shake my head. "What? Why?"

When he raises an eyebrow at me, my jaw drops. I scoff, offended by what I think he's implying. When I respond, I keep my voice hushed, but there's no hiding the emotion in my tone.

"You think I can't handle myself? I'll be fine, *Professor*. You don't have to worry about me." I hitch my bag on my shoulder and turn to leave, but he grabs my arm and halts me.

"You will not leave, Cassandra," he commands, and despite my anger, my belly clenches with desire.

"I will," I grind out. "You don't have to worry. I won't make a scene. I won't tell anyone. Pretend like you don't know me just like you have for the last eight months."

"You're angry," he states, and when I look at him, I'm pissed to find a small smirk on his lips.

"No shit, I'm angry, Nolan." My voice is raised, but I quickly lower it to a whisper. "You ghosted me. Why say you'll call? Why act like you cared at all? You ghosted me, and now you're acting like you think I'm going to be some sort of threat or something. Like my being here is a liability because

you don't think I can handle myself."

"I didn't ghost you," he says, and I realize he still has a hold on my arm, but his touch is soft, and his thumb is caressing my skin.

"Bullshit," I spit out.

"It's true," he says, and he tugs me closer. "I didn't have your phone number, and I couldn't get it from Mallory because after dropping you at the airport, she lost her phone, and the most recent contacts hadn't backed up. I didn't even know your last name. I had to get that from Mallory, too, and even then, she told me she thought it was Carson. I didn't know your last name was Larsen until I saw it on the roster just now."

I narrow my eyes and look away, running his excuse through my head, looking for holes. He's right. I never gave him my phone number, and I guess I never did give him my last name, either. I just assumed his was the same as Nan's. It's almost comical. How is it that we learned so many intimate details about one another during my short stay in Golden last year, but we neglected to do something as simple as exchange last names.

But still...

"I texted her several times after I left," I argue. "She could have gotten my number."

He shakes his head.

"She couldn't get a new phone until January. She has phone insurance, but she'd used up all of the replacement coverage for the year. Mallory goes through a lot of phones..."

I do remember her saying something about that.

"But...but I called her..."

"You did?" he asks, confused. "When? Did you leave a message?"

"Yes," I say. "One. And then after that her inbox was full."

"If she heard your voicemail, she didn't tell me. Honestly, with Mallory's luck with phones, I wouldn't be surprised if something happened, and she lost all her voicemails before she even got to listen to them. I don't know why, Cassie, but as far as I know, no one had heard from you after Mallory dropped you at the airport."

My shoulders fall, and I frown as I try to once again pick apart what he's telling me.

"I tried to find you, Cassandra." He puts his free hand on my other arm. "Do you know how many Cassandra Carsons there are in the United States?"

I shake my head.

“Eight hundred and fifty-two.” He laughs. “The fifteen listed in Indiana weren’t you. Trust me. I called them all.”

I can’t help my surprised smile. “I’m from Ohio. I only went to school in Indiana.”

“And your last name isn’t Carson,” he adds with a wry grin, and I shrug.

“That, too.”

“I even made my Facebook searchable in case you tried to reach out to me,” he says, and we’re so close now that I can see every fleck of green and gold in his eyes.

“Why would I? I thought you were done with me.” I shrug, and he puts his hands on my waist, pulling me so I’m standing between his legs.

“I wasn’t, Cass,” he purrs. “Not even close. I almost hired a PI, but my psychology degree told me that was going too far.” He chuckles and presses his forehead to mine, smiling, lips whispering over my own. “I can’t believe you’re here. I thought I’d lost you. How are you here?”

I shrug.

“I shuffled the deck,” is all I can say, but his smile grows.

“I’m glad,” he says.

My fingers are trembling so much that I have to dig them into the fabric of his shirt to still them.

“I know we said no strings,” he says, his voice a low rasp. “I know you weren’t expecting anything beyond our tryst in Golden, but I want more. I want *you*. Do you want me? Do you want this?”

“Yes,” I breathe out, and he wastes no time taking my mouth in a passionate kiss. I tug him closer, pressing myself into him.

“I want you. I want this,” I say between kisses. “So much.”

He pulls back quickly.

“Then let’s go to the dean. I’m not wasting any more time.” He grabs my hand and leads me toward the door. “We’ll go to the dean and disclose our relationship, then I’m taking you back to my place. Then this weekend, we’re going back to Golden. Ma is going to die of happiness.”

“Wait,” I say, pulling my hand from his, standing awkwardly in an empty hallway. “What about Colleen? Isn’t she your wife?”

He shakes his head, anger flaring in his eyes briefly.

“I’ll tell you all about it, in depth, later. But the short version is this. She is my *ex*-wife. Has been since September of last year, but we were separated long before that. I allowed her to live with me—in the guest bedroom—until

she could find a place, but I kicked her out just before Christmas because I caught her fucking her boyfriend, who also used to be one of my good friends, in *my* bed. We're not together now, and we weren't together when you saw her in December, either."

He grabs both of my hands and looks straight in my eyes, and I let what he's said wash over me, but then something else nags at me, and I wince.

"What?" he asks. "Cassandra, what is it? Tell me."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before speaking.

"In December she, um, *implied* that she might be pregnant, or that there was some sort of *family* to be concerned with?"

Before I'm finished speaking, Nolan is shaking his head back and forth.

"Colleen and I don't have any children, and she is not pregnant with my child. She's not pregnant with any child, actually. But even if she were, it wouldn't be mine, because you were the first person I'd had sex with in almost a year."

The confession almost knocks the wind out of me.

"And now?" I whisper and he smirks.

"And you're also the *last* person I've had sex with."

My smile takes over my entire face.

"Good," I quip. "Because you're the only person I've had sex with."

There's no mistaking the heat and lust and possessiveness in his eyes.

"Good." He growls, then tugs me back down the hallway. "Let's get this over with so I can take you home and have you the way I've been dreaming about since you left me in December." His gaze sets me on fire. "Fuck, Cassandra, the things I'm going to do to you."

"Yes, please, Professor."

Hours later, after we've successfully transferred my class section and signed the necessary university documents, we're tangled naked in Nolan's sheets. My body aches from the things we've done and from the things I crave.

"I still can't believe you're here," Nolan says sleepily into my hair, his fingers trailing up and down my naked back. "I'm so glad you decided to pursue music therapy, but I never would have guessed you'd enroll in the program on the same campus where I was just hired as an assistant professor."

"I know," I say dreamily. "And to think it all happened because CSU

awarded me a scholarship.”

Nolan stills. “A scholarship?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I applied for a few at the other universities, too, but CSU is the only one that came through.”

I feel him sit up. “What was the scholarship, Cass?”

“Oh, um, the Hutchinson Women in STEM Award,” I say. When I roll over to look at him, he has a curious smile on his face. “What?” I ask.

“My mom.” As if that answers everything.

“Nan?” I question. “What about her?”

He chuckles.

“Her maiden name is Hutchinson, Cassandra. Her father, my grandfather, was Dean of Students at CSU a long time ago, and Ma made history with the research she conducted here as an undergraduate. All while popping out and raising a brood of boys, too.”

I furrow my brow. “Okay...”

“That’s her scholarship, Cass,” he says with another burst of laughter. “She has final say on who gets it.”

“No...” I shake my head, disbelief and awe mixing in my smile. “Can she do that?”

Nolan shrugs and pushes me onto my back.

“She can do whatever she wants. It’s her money.”

He climbs on top of me, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth, and I moan, wrapping my legs around his waist. The feel of his erection rubbing against me heats my blood to boiling.

“And anyway,” he says as he kisses up my neck and rubs himself up and down my slit, “at this point, I don’t care how you got here. All I know is you’re not leaving again. Understood?”

His voice is a commanding growl, and I nod quickly.

“Yes.”

“And who owns this pretty pink pussy, Cassandra?” he asks as he rubs the head of his erection over my clit, making me squirm.

“You do,” I say, and he stops short.

“Who does?” he asks sternly, his dick pressed hard against my entrance. I try to move, to slip him in, but he holds back.

“You do, *Professor*,” I pant out, and I can feel him smile as he finally, *finally*, pushes into me.

“Good girl.”



epilogue

NOLAN

CHRISTMAS, 16 MONTHS LATER

“IS THAT EVERYTHING?” I call to Cassie as I stare at my very, very full car.

I sure hope it’s everything.

“Just about,” she mumbles, and I turn to see her shuffling toward me with even more gifts piled in her arms. I rush to her and take the haphazard pile before she slips on the ice and breaks something. “Thank you,” she breathes out.

“Honey, I love your enthusiasm for the season, and I know you really enjoy giving gifts, but I really don’t think we can fit anything else in this car.”

Cassie rolls her eyes and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t worry. That’s all of it.”

Thank god.

I shove the rest of Cassie’s packages in the car, then check my watch. We’re still good on time. If we leave now, we should make it to Ma’s before noon. I shut the trunk and turn to tell Cassie as much, but she’s disappeared again.

“Honey, we really need to get on the road,” I call to her as I head back toward the house, but I stop in my tracks when she comes back out the front door with her school bag slung over her shoulder. I watch as she locks the door. “Cassie, I thought we both agreed that we wouldn’t be doing work this week.”

She turns to face me and props her hand on her hip, then raises an eyebrow. Cassie knows I’m just teasing her, but she’s not one to back down.

“I saw you pack your laptop, Professor Montrose. If you’re planning to grade papers, then I’m going to work on my thesis.”

“Touché,” I say with a grin.

She winks and saunters past me on her way to the car, sliding into the front seat without looking back at me. My girl has worked incredibly hard in this program, and I couldn’t be more proud of her. Her thesis is nearly finished, and she’ll likely be graduating with honors in May. She even already has a job lined up for after graduation. She’s thriving, and it’s such a

beautiful thing to witness.

I don't bother trying to tame my smile as I climb into the driver's seat and pull onto the street. I reach over and take Cassie's hand in mine, she puts Christmas music on the radio, and then I drive us to Golden with jolts of excitement building in my chest with each mile of highway we cover. When we pull up roughly ninety minutes later, I'm practically giddy.

"Oh wow, it's beautiful," Cassie says as she takes in Ma's Christmas decorations. "She really went all out this year."

I nod as I pull into the driveway and put the car in park, then survey the house. Every single window is lined with white lights and adorned with a classic pine wreath sporting a red bow. The trees in the front yard are also covered in twinkling lights, and there is a whole Santa's sleigh and eight reindeer tableau on the highest ridge of the roof. Add in the candy canes, nutcrackers, and snowmen scattered about the front yard, and Ma's house is something straight out of a holiday bedtime story.

"She definitely didn't pull any punches," I agree. "With Oliver finally able to be home for holidays this year, I think she wanted to create her own little Christmas wonderland."

"She succeeded," Cassie says, then grins at me. "I'm excited to see Oliver and Bev. I bet Wyatt is huge by now."

It's been almost a year since we've seen my brother Oliver and his family, which means their youngest son is almost two. I'm excited to see them, of course, but it fills me with immense joy that Cassie is just as excited. She loves my family, and they love her.

I love her.

"You know Dunc is going to give you a hard time about being the favorite brother," I tease, and Cassie rolls her eyes.

"You just keep Duncan and the boys occupied and I'll hang with the spouses. Then Dunc will be your problem, not ours."

She bats her eyes innocently, so I wrap my hand around her neck and pull her toward me until her lips are just a breath from mine.

"Boys?" I say, my voice a low rumble. "My brothers are almost twice your age."

We're so close that when she smirks, I can feel the motion better than I can see it.

"You six are no better than children when you're together. I said boys, and I meant it."

“Hmm,” I hum, then lean forward and take her lips with mine.

I coax her mouth open with my tongue and sink my fingers deeper into the hair at the nape of her neck. When she whimpers, I consider forgetting the plan and pulling her straight to my old bedroom to kiss her some more, but then a loud CRACK has us jumping apart with startled gasps.

“What the fu—” I start to shout, but then stop short when Duncan throws another snowball at my windshield. Craig, of course, is cracking up beside him, which gets Cassie giggling.

“I said what I said,” she sings, then she hops out of the car.

Cassie makes it five steps in the direction of my brothers before Oliver grabs her from behind and spins her in a circle, causing her to let out a shriek that quickly turns to giggles.

“Oliver, put my girlfriend down,” I say dryly, so he turns and hands her off to Duncan.

“Nolan says to put Cassie down,” Oliver says to Dunc, so Dunc takes her and turns to Craig.

“Professor Dweeb says to put Cassie down,” Duncan repeats, and hands Cassie over to him.

Her giggling hasn’t stopped, and when Craig turns and acts like he’s going to unceremoniously drop Cassie into a snowdrift, she yelps and clings to him in a way that makes her laugh harder. I have to bite my cheek, so I don’t also start laughing, and instead I stalk up to Craig and put my arms out. Craig grins.

“Professor Dweeb said to put his girlfriend down,” he says, and then he hands Cassie over to me.

She threads her arms around my neck and raises a sassy eyebrow at me.

“See?” she teases. “*Children.*”

I sigh and press a quick kiss to her lips before setting her back on her feet. When she quickly scurries away from me, I realize my mistake a split second before Oliver tackles me right into a snowdrift.

By the time I make it out of the snowdrift, my three brothers and I are all soaked from the snow, and my mom sends us straight upstairs to change. She doesn’t even say hello. Just points to the stairs. So, me, Craig, Oliver, and Duncan clomp up to our old rooms in a solemn line, leaving little puddles of melted snow behind us.

When my feet hit the landing again, this time dry and wearing a pair of my old hockey sweats, I find Cassie standing in the family room chatting

with a very pregnant Mallory, her husband Patrick, and Craig's husband Andrew. I kiss Cassie on the head and take her empty hot cocoa mug, then head into the kitchen to refill it.

I'm popping the hot cocoa pod into the machine when Oliver slides up next to me.

"How's it going?" he asks, and I pull out my phone to check the notifications.

"Everything is on time," I say after reading a few texts. "All going as planned."

I press START on the machine, and when I finally glance at Oliver, he's smirking at me.

"You're nervous as fuck."

"Is it obvious?" I ask with a laugh.

"Not a bit, actually. You're cool as a cucumber."

"Well, it's an act. I'm nervous as fuck."

Oliver drops a hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze.

"It's going to be great, Nolan. I'm really happy for you, and Bev is ecstatic."

Oliver doesn't elaborate, but he doesn't have to. Bev *hated* Colleen with a passion, but Bev *loves* Cassie. I just grin and pick up Cassie's fresh mug of cocoa.

"Thank you," I tell my youngest older brother. "I'm glad you're here."

I bring Cassie her fresh mug of hot cocoa, and the smile she gives me is fucking radiant. Then I find myself talking to Mallory and her mom Naomi about the gift they got my brother Joel for his birthday last month. It's some sort of meat smoker, which is Joel's newest favorite hobby, and Mallory is not happy about it.

"It was cool at first," Mallory says, "but now every time I go over there, Dad's got some new meat for me to try, and my stomach just can't handle it."

"Well, at least I convinced him to take it from the garage into the shed. The whole house was starting to smell like beef," Naomi says, and I can't hold back my laughter.

I'm laughing so hard that I almost miss the vibrating of my phone in my pocket.

Almost.

My eyes go wide, and my heartbeat kicks up as I pull the phone out and check the message. Mallory's hand clasps onto my forearm.

“Uncle Nolan, is he here?” she whispers, and I nod.

“Five minutes,” I say.

“Is it weird that I’m nervous?” Naomi asks, and Mallory snorts out a laugh.

“It’s okay, Mom, I’m nervous too.”

I tune them both out, then maneuver myself so my back is to the wall, and I have the perfect view of both Cassie and the entrance to the family room. Then I check my watch every minute on the minute for the next five minutes, until I hear the faint sound of car doors opening and shutting in the driveway. I glance around the room and catch the eyes of each of my brothers, but Cassie is still chatting unaware with my mom and Andrew. I swear, I don’t breathe until I hear the front door open, and then I don’t blink until my brother Joel appears in the doorway of the family room.

“Ho ho ho,” he says jovially, getting everyone’s eyes on him. “I’m sorry I’m late, but I had to pick up some special packages.”

Then he steps out of the way, and two girls walk in with giant smiles on their faces.

“Oh my god!” Cassie jumps from where she was perched on the piano bench and rushes to her friends, tackling them both in a hug. “Oh my god, what are you doing here?”

I can hear Ivy and Bailey giggling, but before anyone can answer Cassie, her parents walk into the room, and Cassie squeals louder. She moves to try and hug all four of them at once, and then her mom and dad start laughing, too.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my god, why are you here?”

I can hear the happy tears in her voice, and I’m filled with relief. I was excited for Ivy and Bailey to show up—Cassie talks about how much she misses them regularly—but I was nervous about her parents. They’ve only recently started talking again, and I was hoping the relationship had been repaired enough that their presence here for the holiday wouldn’t cause Cassie stress. From the looks of it, I made the right call.

Cassie is still crying when she finally releases them, swiping at her tears and calming her giggles.

“Seriously, though, what are you doing here?” she asks again, and it’s Bailey who pipes up.

“Colorado is supposed to be great for snowboarding,” she says with a shrug, and Cassie barks out a laugh.

“You two are going to snowboard?”

“Nah, we’re going to get drunk on spiked cider with you and Nan.”

“Hell yes, you are, honey!” my mom calls out, and everyone laughs.

“Nolan thought it would be nice if we surprised you for the holiday,” Cassie’s mom says, and when Cassie turns to me, I’m already walking toward her and wrapping her in my arms.

“Thank you,” she says, and I press a kiss to the top of her head.

“Anything for you,” I say into her hair.

We usher everyone into the house and do introductions. Ivy and Bailey visited last winter, so they know everyone except for Oliver and Bev and their kids, but this is Cassie’s parents’ first visit to Golden. It’s their first time meeting anyone in my family other than me, actually. It’s a bit stilted at first, but by the time we’re heading to the community center for the holiday gift drive, the awkwardness is gone, and the conversation and laughter is flowing.

Some of that, admittedly, might be due to Ma’s spiked cider, but I’ll take what I can get.

Ma passes out little elf hats and makes us all wear them, which is at least an improvement from when she used to make us wear entire elf costumes. These days, the only person in full costume is Ma herself who wears a red velvet dress with white fur trim and a red velvet hat.

She definitely leans into the Saint Nanta Claus nickname.

Cassie’s parents even join in on the fun, passing out gifts and singing carols. By the end of the night, it’s another magical holiday gift drive for the memory books.

“Oh, there’s one last gift under here,” I hear Ma say loudly, and we all glance her way to see her pluck a large giftbag out from underneath the giant Christmas tree. “Cassie, dear, this one is for you.”

My mom walks slowly toward Cassie, holding the bag out with a mischievous grin on her face.

“For me?” Cassie says with a laugh. “Is there a kid from town named Cassie? I thought we were exchanging gifts in the morning?”

Ma shrugs and holds the bag out, giving it a little shake.

“Says your name, Cass,” she says, and Cassie slowly reaches out to take the bag.

Her eyebrow rises in question, and she glances from Ma, to me, then to her friends, and back to Ma.

“Nan, what have you done?” Cassie asks warily, making my entire family

chuckle.

“If you don’t want it, give it here, I’ll have it,” Duncan says, pretending to swipe for the bag, but Cassie yanks it out of his reach quickly and sends him a stern warning.

“Keep your hands off of this, Duncan. It’s mine.”

“Then open it!” one of my nieces says, which starts the rest of the kids shouting encouragements at Cassie as well. Eight kids can make quite a ruckus, and not for the first time, I find myself wanting to apologize to my mom for having to raise me and my brothers.

“Okay, okay,” Cassie says with a giggle. “I’ll open it!”

Slowly, she pulls the tissue paper out of the bag, dropping it to the floor piece by piece until there is none left. Then she lifts a medium sized box from the bag. She lets the bag fall to the floor and rips the wrapping paper off the box, then huffs a laugh when she sees what’s inside. I know even before she pulls it out what it is.

Another gift bag.

She empties the tissue paper from that bag until she can see what’s inside, and then she gasps. When she pulls out the small playing card box, letting the gift bag fall to her feet, her hands are shaking. Slowly, she looks from the playing card box to me and the tears forming in her eyes cause matching ones in mine.

Shuffle the deck has become something of a mantra for us since Cassie came back to me. It’s what we say before making big decisions or before changing plans. It’s how we remind each other that no matter what life throws at us, we’re in control of our happiness. It’s another way to say *I trust you, I love you, and as long as we’re together, we can accomplish anything.*

One look at the playing card box, and Cassie knows immediately what I’m about to do.

“Open it, Cassandra,” I say, and her tears start to fall faster.

Carefully, she opens the playing card box and dumps the contents of it into her palm. She drops the empty box to the floor, her free hand coming up to cover her mouth as she stares at the ring sitting in the palm of her other hand. When she finally looks from the ring to me, I take the ring from her palm and lower myself to one knee before her.

“Cassandra, I love you so much. There’s not a day that goes by that I’m not grateful for the chain of events that brought you into my life. A winter storm, a canceled flight, a kind airport bartender—”

“You’re welcome!” Mallory chimes in, and Cassie giggles. When I glance at my niece, she’s all smiles and tears, just like everyone else in the room.

“Thank you, Pip Squeak,” I say with a grin, before turning my attention back to Cassie. “From the moment I set eyes on you, I knew I was a goner. It didn’t even matter that I was standing naked in the bathroom, and you had just rudely barged in on me, because as soon as we locked eyes, nothing else mattered. Nothing. All I could see was you. All I could think about was you. You’ve had me captivated from the very beginning, and it’s been like that every day since. You make me proud to be yours. I love the life we’ve built together, and I can’t wait to experience the future with you by my side. I love you with everything in me, Cassandra Larsen. Will you do me the greatest honor of becoming my wife?”

The room is so still that only the sounds of quiet sniffing can be heard, and I hold my breath as I watch the face of the woman I love. It’s only a matter of seconds, but it feels like hours before she finally agrees to make all of my dreams come true.

“Yes,” she says, putting her left hand out so I can slip the ring on her finger. “Yes, I’ll be your wife, Nolan.”

Cheers erupt from the room as I surge to my feet and kiss my fiancée, lifting her off the ground and spinning her once just to hear her giggle against my lips.

“I love you,” I tell her. “You have no idea how happy you’ve just made me.”

“I love you, too,” she says back. “I can’t wait to be your wife.”

The End

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about the author

Brit Benson writes real, relatable romance. She likes outspoken, independent heroines, dirty talking, love-struck heroes, and plots that get you right in the feels.

Brit would almost always rather be reading or writing. When she's not dreaming up her next swoony book boyfriend and fierce book bestie, she's getting lost in someone else's fictional world. When she's not doing that, she's probably marathoning a Netflix series or wandering aimlessly up and down the aisles in Homegoods, sniffing candles and touching things she'll never buy.

