

A HOLLY JOLLY ST. JAMES CHRISTMAS #2

COCOA, IVY

AND

ETHAN ST. JAMES



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J. S. COOPER

COCOA, IVY, AND ETHAN ST.
JAMES

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To everyone that wants to believe in true love, it does exist.

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Acknowledgments

Blurb

Ethan St. James is the Scrooge of my Life...

Most people have heard of love at first sight, but what I experienced with Ethan St. James was the opposite. He's the brother of my best friend Taytum's boyfriend and an absolute horror. I can't believe I have to spend the holiday season with him.

The problem is, he thinks my best friend is an opportunist using his brother because he's rich. And now, due to a misunderstanding, he thinks I'm trying to snag his other brother. Like, I need to trap someone into a relationship with me. There's no planet in the galaxy where I would feel desperate enough to date a St. James.

But when Ethan approaches me with an offer to stop my best friend from leaving and traveling across the world, I stop and listen. He wants us to pretend to get engaged to show his brother and Taytum that they are moving too fast. I don't think it's the best plan ever, but I'm not ready to lose her from my life. Especially considering she hasn't had the best taste in men in the past.

So now, here we are. Pretending we've fallen in love at first sight. I'm not sure we're convincing anyone, but the Christmas season seems to make everyone believe in romance.

Chapter 1

THREE CHILDREN DRESSED IN BRIGHT-COLORED THICK WOOL COATS STOOD ON the street in front of me, singing “Silent Night.” Their voices were quite beautiful as they sang their hearts out on the cold street. Reaching into my wallet, I pulled five dollars out of my purse and dropped it into their bucket.

"*T*hank you, ma'am."

"Thank you. Have a Merry Christmas." I nodded at the girl who had spoken. The other two continued singing, and I soon realized that the main girl had been the harmony in the group.

"*Y*ou too," the girl with the snowman headband beamed and then started singing again.

"*H*appy Hanukkah," the girl next to her said.

"*H*appy Kwanzaa," the one next to her said. And we all laughed. It really was the holiday season, my favorite time of the year.

"Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah and Happy Kwanzaa to you, too."

I continued on my way to Penn Station. I loved living in New York City. I loved being around so many diverse cultures and having the opportunity to try so many different restaurants full of delicious foods. I could have Ethiopian one night and Chinese another; Mexican on the weekend, and if I was just feeling absolutely homesick, I'd grab a slice of Chicago-style pizza.

"I hope Little Kimble has some good food," I mumbled before pulling my phone out of my handbag. I checked my phone screen as I made my way into the train station. I had no more text messages from my best friend Taytum, and I was worried about her. Taytum had gone to Little Kimble, hoping to surprise her boyfriend, Donovan. She thought he'd be exhilarated and excited that she wanted to join him and his family for Christmas. Unfortunately, it hadn't worked out that way.

He'd been cheating on her, and to her surprise, the journey ended up with her being dumped. It hadn't surprised me, though. I knew he was a jackass from the first moment I met him because he'd asked if I wanted to go to the bathroom and suck him off for a hundred dollars. I'd tried to tell Taytum, but she thought he was joking and testing me as a friend. She was naïve like that. She always wanted to see the best in everyone, especially the men she dated. Unfortunately for her, every last guy she dated was an asshole.

However, even though Taytum had bad taste in men, she just wanted to be in love, so she never listened when I told her I could tell right away that she was dating an asshole. I still loved her and would always support her, but I didn't want her to have another bad relationship. That was why I was now on my way to Little Kimble to save her from a potentially horrific new relationship. When she got dumped by Donovan, she pretended to be a girl named Annie, and took a nanny position with this rich

family, St James's.

Everything had gone smoothly the first couple of days until one of the brothers arrived and had blown her cover. He'd recognized her from the train and knew she wasn't Annie. She'd fallen out with Noah, the eldest brother, but now supposedly, he'd forgiven her, and they were in love. I wasn't sure what to think about the situation. It all seemed way too fast for me. So I'd decided to go to Little Kimble to check on things myself. I'd even taken off work even though my job didn't know that yet.

I slipped out my phone and quickly pulled up my work number. It rang a couple of times, and then the receptionist, Candace, answered the phone.

"Thank you for calling Clean Harbors Accounting services. How may I help you? This is Candace speaking."

"Hey, Candace, it's me, Danielle."

"Hey, Electra," she said, giggling.

"I'm not going by Electra anymore. It didn't quite fit me."

"I was wondering why you said Danielle again," she said in an absentminded voice. "What's going on? How come I haven't seen you this morning?"

“I’m at the train station.”

“Oh? Going somewhere?”

“Yeah. I’m headed to Little Kimble in Connecticut.”

“Connecticut?” She sounded surprised. “Why are you going to Connecticut?”

“Do you remember my best friend, Taytum?”

“Yeah. She’s the girl with the long dark hair, right?”

“Yeah, well, she’s kind of got a job there now, and I’m not sure it’s working out, and she might kind of need me to rescue her.” I knew I sounded vague, but I didn’t really want to get into the entire story with her.

“Oh gee.” Candace sounded worried. “I hope she’s okay.”

“Me, too. Well, anyway, I was just calling to say I won’t be in to work for the rest of the week.”

“Oh, okay. What do you want me to tell the boss?”

“Can you just say an emergency came up?”

“Sure thing. Will you be back next week?”

“I don’t know. Depends on if Taytum is okay and if I need to take her on a de-stressing trip. Her boyfriend dumped her, and she just lost her job. And well, you know how it goes.”

“You’re such a good friend, Danielle.” I could hear the sounds of clacking as she typed something.

“Oh, thanks, Candace, but I should go now. I want to try to catch the next train, and I think I only have fifteen minutes to buy the ticket and get to the platform.”

“Okay, sounds good. Tell Taytum the way to get over one man is to get under another one.”

I started laughing at her comment. “I think that might be the problem.” I hung up quickly before she could ask me what I meant and made my way to the ticket kiosks so I could get a ticket to Little Kimble. I was

excited to see these St. James brothers. The way she talked, they were the younger and better looking Baldwin brothers of Connecticut. Super hot and super rich. And even if I was only there for one night, I needed to see some eye candy and possibly get my flirt on.

I also wanted to make sure Noah wasn't another Donovan. I needed to see the guy who had convinced my best friend to sleep with him the first night she met him. Because Taytum just wasn't that sort of girl. I told her plenty of times that she should loosen up and have fun. But she was so caught up in romance movies and romance books and had a plan and a timeline for everything that it had never happened before. I wanted to meet the man who had gotten into her panties on the first night. I hoped he had been worth it.

*T*he ticket popped out of the machine, and I put my credit card back into my purse and looked for the sign to show me which platform to go to. My phone started ringing then, and I saw it was Taytum. I answered quickly so I could let her know I was on my way.

"*H*ey, how's it going?" I was excited to see her and wanted her to know that. Especially if I had to tell her to ditch Noah. I wanted her to know I only had her best interests at heart.

"*I*'m okay," she said softly, whispering into the phone.

"*O*h, no. What happened?" I frowned as I looked around for a coffee shop. I needed some caffeine. Preferably a peppermint mocha or a gingerbread latte with a scone or chocolate croissant.

"Oh, not much. I spoke to Noah about everything, and I just—"

"You just what?" My heart was pounding. "Do you want to come home?"

"No, not at all. I told you he's going to give me another chance, right? He said I can—"

"Wait. What? *He's* going to give you another chance. More like he's happy you're still going to have sex with him."

"No, silly." She giggled. "So yes, we will probably have sex again because I'm falling for him, and he's falling for me. I think this is the real deal. We're in love, and I want to spend the rest of my life with him."

"Wait, what?!" I almost shrieked. "What is going on, Taytum?" I lowered my voice when I saw an older lady with platinum-white hair giving me a dirty look. "The rest of your life, say what?"

"We had a really long, in-depth conversation, and I explained everything to him. He said he's willing to give me another chance, and the family is willing to see how I work out as a nanny. And I said I wouldn't expect the same pay that he was offering initially because I was accepting it under false pretenses, and he said don't be silly, and we ended up admitting we're in love with each other and—"

"Oh my God. Taytum." My heart thudded. "So you're staying forever?"

"I don't know about forever. I'm not sure where we'll end up. I like him, Danielle. I really, really like him. And I know this is really fast, and I know things with Donovan just ended, but my heart knows this is right."

"Um, girl, I don't care about Donovan. He was a douchebag." I played with my hair as I thought of the right words to say next. It wasn't like I could say, "Are you out of your ever-loving mind? What do you mean you're in love with this random guy you just met?"

"Why didn't you tell me you thought that, Danielle? I wouldn't have..." Taytum paused and then giggled. "Okay. Maybe I would have continued seeing him, but it would have made me pause."

"Yeah, right. You know how many guys you've dated that I've told you are bad news, and you've still continued to date them?"

"I know." She sighed. "Noah is a good one, though. I just wanted to update you. Everything's okay now with me, and I'm so excited that you will finally meet the love of my life—"

"It's been a couple of weeks," I mumbled under my breath as I rolled my eyes.

hat did you say? I didn't hear you." I heard some screaming in her
"W background and made a face to the air. "Oh, girl, I have to go."

"H old on a second, Taytum. There's something I need to tell you."

"W hat is it?"

"I 'm about to catch the train, and well..." My voice drifted off as I
caught the eye of a hunky muscular guy who was covered in tats.
"I'll have a piece of that, thank you very much." I smiled at him flirtatiously,
almost forgetting where I was.

"Y ou'll have a piece of what?!" She sounded confused.

"O h, nothing. I'm coming because I just need to make sure with my own
two eyes that everything's going well with you and Noah. Okay?"

"O f course. I already told Noah you were coming, but I wasn't sure if you
were really going to make it or not."

"O h, trust me, Taytum. I will definitely be making it." I watched as the
hot tattooed guy headed toward me and swiftly grabbed my lip gloss.
"I'll talk to you later..." I said hurriedly, about to hang up. But then I paused
as Taytum made a weird noise. What the hell was going on?

Chapter 2

"SO THERE IS ONE THING I SHOULD TELL YOU BEFORE YOU GET HERE." Taytum sounded hesitant, and I frowned. Had Noah already indoctrinated her in some way?

"What is it? Tell me." I wasn't focused on hot tattoo guy anymore even though I could see him looking me up and down like I was a tasty snack and he was ready to eat.

"So... Ethan St. James."

"That's Noah's brother, yeah?"

"Yeah, he's the second oldest brother."

"Okay. What about him?"

"He might not be so happy about you arriving."

"Why not? What does he care?"

"Maybe because he's not really that happy that I'm staying," Taytum admitted with a sigh.

"What? It's none of his business."

"Well, I think he thinks that because he was with me on the train when I was coming up to Little Kimble, and he overheard all the drama with Donovan..." She sighed loudly again. "I think he thinks I'm not legitimate or I'm not really in love with Noah."

"Oh my gosh. Do you want me to set him straight for you?"

"No, I'm really trying to get into his good graces. I understand that he's just being a protective brother to Noah, and I really want him to like me. The other brother Dylan really does like me, I think, so it's just Ethan." She paused. "Oh and Wes, the youngest brother. I haven't met him yet."

"Okay. Well, I'll try to be on my best behavior with Ethan the shark then."

"Thank you. I can't wait to see you, Danielle."

"Me too. So are you going to pick me up at the train station?"

"I will text you and let you know if I'll be able to pick you up or if the driver or Noah will pick you up. I'm not sure what my schedule is today with the kids."

"Oh." I was surprised. "So you're still the full-time nanny?"

"Yeah." Taytum laughed. "The kids and I get along well. And Lulu actually admitted she kind of knew I wasn't the other Annie as soon as she saw me. But she figured I looked like a nice enough girl, and she didn't want to ask questions."

"What?" I said, "You're joking."

"I'm not joking." She giggled. "The family is a little bit eccentric, but I like them because I am too."

"You're kidding me? This whole thing is absolutely crazy. She knew you weren't the nanny she hired, and she just went along with it? With her three kids?"

"I guess I seem trustworthy."

"Lots of people seem trustworthy, but that doesn't mean they are." I shook my head. "I cannot wait to meet this family. They sound like they're a little bit..." I paused, not wanting to be horrible and have Taytum ban me from coming.

"You're not going to be mean, are you, Danielle?" Taytum sounded worried. "I really love them, and they've welcomed me with open arms."

"I'll be on my best behavior, I promise."

"Thank you," she said. "Oh, I have to go. Pollyanna is calling for me. She wants to play a game, so I'll text or call you later. Let me know what time your train arrives, okay?"

"Will do," I said. And then hung up with a flourish. I shook my head as I stood there. I was happy for Taytum. I was glad she'd found love. If anyone deserved it, it was her. But the entire family sounded like they were off their rocker. I mean, who knew that the wrong nanny showed up and just went along with it without saying anything? I wasn't going to question anything until I met them. I was hoping to keep an open mind, but it was hard. My phone beeped with a text message from Isabella, and I messaged her quickly to let her know I'd call her as soon as I got onto the train.

I made my way to the platform and stopped as I realized the tattooed guy

was standing right next to me. "Oh, hi." I smiled at him. His eyes were dark and intense as he nodded.

"I noticed you checking me out," he said with a small wink, and I just nodded again. I liked hot guys, but I didn't like cocky and hot. "You recognize me from TV?"

"No, sorry." I shook my head. "I'm actually headed to my train now."

"It's my birthday, blondie." He ignored my comment.

"Happy Birthday." I nodded and watched as he flexed his biceps. Cringey.

"You know what I'd love right now?"

"I don't know...a big cake?" I shrugged as I quickened my pace.

"Cream comes out of me, not in me." He chuckled, and I shuddered at his gross joke. Why did all the hot guys have to be such assholes?

"Oh, are you a cow?" I looked at him with an innocent expression.

"What?" He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You said cream comes out of you. So I was thinking to myself, are you a cow, like do you produce milk? Or are you a pregnant woman?" I stared at his pecs. "Do your boobies produce milk?"

"Are you kidding me, blondie?" He looked so taken aback that I wanted to laugh.

"No, I'm not, but you're kidding yourself if you think your approach with me would get you even five more minutes of my time." I smiled sweetly at him. "So now, I'm not going to go into a bathroom and suck you off so you can ejaculate your steroid-tasting cream...and frankly, you're lucky because if you would have said that comment to me while I was down on my knees, my teeth might have sunk in a little too deep, compendo?"

His jaw dropped, and I offered him a small wave. "Bye, tat guy. You're cute to look at, but unfortunately, as soon as you opened your mouth, you became ugly."

"Bet you're not even a real blonde." He glared at me, and I ignored him as I reached my platform. Why did all the jackasses always find me? I pulled out my phone and called Isabella.

"Hey, what's going on? I saw you called me a couple of times this morning," she said breathlessly.

"Yeah, I'm at the train station." I wasn't sure I wanted to know why she was so breathless.

"What? Where are you going?"

"To Little Kimble."

"Little Kimble? What? Where Taytum is?"

"Yeah."

"But didn't she get busted and kicked out or something?"

"Actually, it turns out that Noah is into her and forgave her and is giving her a second chance," I said quickly. "But I'm going just to make sure everything's okay. And she's not being held against her will or something."

"Oh my gosh," Isabella said. "Do you want me to come with?"

"It's okay. I'm just getting onto the train, and it departs soon."

"Okay, well, you let me know."

"I will," I said. "Also, we should probably have a code word."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I was thinking, say I get there, and they're holding her against their will and then they do something to me. And then when I call you, they've got a gun or a knife to my head, and I can't say anything true about the situation."

"My gosh. Danielle, you sound like Taytum now."

"Well, she is my best friend. I suppose a little bit of her has rubbed off on me." I giggled as I walked to my carriage. A handsome guy was looking at his phone. I went to my seat and sat down and avoided eye contact. The last thing I needed was another exchange like the one I'd had with tat guy.

"So what's the code word?" she asked.

"Banana pudding," I said, licking my lips, suddenly craving the dessert.

"Banana pudding?" she repeated, doubt in her voice.

"Yeah." I laughed out loud. "It's not like that's something that comes up in everyday conversation, right?"

"I guess not. Unless you're going to a Southern restaurant and you want to get some fried chicken and macaroni cheese and some banana pudding." She giggled. "Okay, so if you say banana pudding, that means what?"

"That means you need to get your ass to Little Kimble to save Taytum and me."

"Okay," she said. "Well, you have a safe trip, and I'll speak to you later. I'm just getting ready to go to a party."

"Oh my gosh, Isabella, you're always going to parties."

"I know. I love my life," she said. "I gotta go. Bye."

"Bye." I hung up and sat back, wondering exactly what Isabella was up to. The guy who was sitting opposite me gave me a curious smile, and I tried

not to smile back. He was handsome but not really my type.

"So I couldn't help but overhear the conversation," he said, leaning forward.

"Oh? Were you eavesdropping?"

"No," he said, a smooth accented drawl to his voice. "Well, I guess I technically was, but you were talking loudly."

"I was not talking loud!" I said indignantly and then sighed. "Okay. I was probably talking loud enough for you to hear, so maybe I shouldn't call you nosy."

"Thank you for admitting that," he said. "So you're really into banana pudding, huh?"

"What?"

"I couldn't help but hear you talking to your friend about banana pudding. Did you get some from Magnolia Bakery?" He looked at me hopefully as if I was going to say "yes, and you are more than welcome to a couple of bites, stranger I've never seen before in my life, who could have a billion different diseases."

"No." I shook my head. "It's a code word."

"A code word? Please do tell."

"Well, I'm going on this trip to see if my friend is in danger." I figured what did it hurt for me to tell this rando part of the drama going on in my life.

"Oh, snap. Why? What happened?"

"She went to this small town to follow this guy she was dating and ended up meeting another guy. And now she's staying with him and his family. I don't know the exact story. Like is she being held there against her will? They sound kinda crazy, and I'm wondering if it's some sort of cult. So I'm going to make sure she's safe. If she's not okay, I'll bring her back to New York with me. But my other friend Isabella will call just in case they try to ensnare me in their cult as well."

"I see." He nodded as if that all made a lot of sense. "And your code word to the third friend is banana pudding."

"Yeah. If I say banana pudding, it means she needs to come and get us ASAP. And preferably with the police."

He started chuckling then. "Wow. Is this actually true, or am I somehow on a TV show I didn't know about?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds and then started laughing. "You're not on a TV show, and I know it sounds absolutely bonkers, which is crazy

because I don't normally have bonkers conversations. It's normally my best friend, Taytum, who has random conversations with people, but I guess she's rubbed off on me."

"Interesting," he said, looking bemused. "And what's your name?"

"Electra," I said, trying it out for the first time in person. I wrinkled my nose. "Actually, that doesn't sound quite right, does it?"

He blinked at me. "Sorry. What do you mean? Your name doesn't sound right?"

"It's not my actual name. It's the name I was thinking of changing my name to. But I don't actually like it now that I'm saying it out loud. I'm Danielle," I said, smiling at him.

"Hey, then. Well, it's nice to meet you, Danielle." His smile was genuine. He didn't look at me like I was on the way to the mental institution, so I was grateful for that.

"Thanks." I nodded. "It's nice to meet you too." I didn't want to ask him for his name, though. I didn't want him to tell me anything about cream or ask if I wanted something salty. I just wanted one guy to be normal on this long day.

Chapter 3

"I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU KNOW IF THEY HAVE ANY FOOD ON THIS TRAIN," I asked the guy sitting across from me as my stomach rumbled.

"Sorry. No," he said, shaking his head, a look of regret in his blue eyes. "It's not a long ride to Little Kimble, so they don't normally serve food."

"Oh, sad!" I said and looked out the window. "So are you from Little Kimble then?" I didn't usually converse with strangers, but I was in a talkative mood. I was nervous and excited to meet Noah and the rest of the St. James family. Granted, one part of me wondered if they were crazy. I needed to look out for my best friend. Taytum had always wanted a Hallmark Christmas movie-like romance, and it seemed that was what she'd gotten. If I was honest with myself, I wanted something sweet and special as well.

Taytum had said there were three other brothers, so maybe one of them would be right for me. Maybe not the second oldest one, Ethan, because he sounded like a jackass. And maybe not the third one, Dylan, because supposedly he was in love with his best friend and didn't know it, which I didn't know how that worked. But there was a fourth brother. I just couldn't remember if Taytum had told me his name or not.

"I have a power bar if you'd like it," the guy sitting across from me offered.

"Oh no, that's okay. Thank you. I'm so rude, when you asked me my name, I forgot to ask you yours."

"It's Wes," he said, smiling at me.

"West? Oh, that's different. Is that like short for Westchester?"

"No, just Wes. When I was born, my parents didn't know what they

wanted to call me and there were some carolers in the hospital singing 'Good King Wenceslas'"—he smiled—"and I suppose out of that, they decided to go with Wes."

"Oh cool! So you are a Christmas baby?"

He nodded. "I wasn't born on Christmas Day, thank God, because I would hate one present to be equal to two." He winked at me, and I laughed. "But I was born the week before. Kind of sucked for birthday parties, but it was not bad."

"Cool. So your family lives in Little Kimble, then?"

"Yeah. Yours?"

"No."

"Oh yeah." He laughed. "Your best friend is dating a guy in Little Kimble who may or may not be part of a cult."

"Exactly," I said.

"And if he is part of a cult, you're going to steal her away like a princess in the middle of the night by saying banana pudding."

I laughed. "Yeah, sure."

"And if she's not in a cult, what will you do then?"

"Then I will stay and perhaps find myself a new boyfriend or husband." I grinned. "Supposedly, they're really rich and really hot, and well, I'm single and ready to mingle."

He started laughing at that, and I laughed too. What I'd said wasn't exactly true. Yeah, I'd like to meet a guy, but it didn't matter if he was rich or even super good looking. I just wanted a decent guy. I just wanted someone who would make me laugh, someone who would challenge me, someone who would be loyal, sweet and take care of me. I started daydreaming about the perfect man.

"Are you okay, Danielle?" Wes said, and I blinked.

"Oh, sorry. I missed what you said."

"Oh!" He grinned. "I just said, well, I hope you find your Prince Charming on this trip."

"Me too. What about you? Do you have Mrs. Charming at home?"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm lucky that I'm not even in line to find a Mrs. Charming yet."

"Wait, what do you mean?"

"I have three older brothers who are also single, so my parents are more concerned about them getting into relationships than me."

"Oh! I always find it funny how parents want their children to be in relationships, and so many of them are in bad relationships themselves. It's like, why are you rushing your kids to be in a shitty relationship too?"

He stared at me for a couple of seconds and nodded. "Yeah. I know I'm lucky my parents are still together and very much in love, but I know most people don't come from families like that."

"Yeah." I shook my head. "My parents are definitely not together anymore, and they're definitely not in love. My mom is on her third husband who is horrible, but he makes a lot of money, so she puts up with that because she can go shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue every weekend." I rolled my eyes. "And my dad, well, he seems to like the bottle more than he likes anything else."

"Oh!" Wes looked at me with a sad expression. "I'm sorry, that sounds really hard to have parents like that."

"It's okay. I have my best friend Taytum, and we are like sisters. She's like my family. And sometimes I will go to her house for special occasions, though her parents are kind of crappy as well, if I'm honest."

"Oh no, are they alcoholics as well?"

"No," I said. "They're actually really nice people, and they're really in love with each other, but they are so in love with each other that they don't really have room in their life for anything else, which is really sad because Taytum just wants to be loved. And I think that's why she always wanted her picture-perfect Christmas, picture-perfect family, and picture-perfect husband." I shrugged. "It makes sense. She wants someone who will love her just as much as she loves them. But I know when she has kids or if she has kids, she'll love those kids just as much as her husband."

"She sounds like a really nice girl," he said. "I hope the guy she's met is a good guy."

"Me too." I sighed. "Because the guy she went to Little Kimble for was an asshole."

"So how did that work exactly?" He raised an eyebrow.

"She was dating this guy, not very seriously, but she's a dreamer. So she decided to surprise him on the train and go home with him to meet his parents for Christmas."

"Oh, boy!" Wes shook his head. "And it didn't go well?"

"Let's just say he had another woman on the train with him going home, and they broke up."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Well, she rebounded pretty quick because now she's with another guy."

"Oh!" he said. "Well, I guess it all worked out for the best."

"It did. She said she's in love with this Noah St. James now, and—"

"Wait, what?" Wes's jaw dropped.

"What? Don't tell me you know him?" I asked, laughing. "How small is Little Kimble?"

"I guess it's very small," he said, looking slightly guilty.

"What? Are they your next-door neighbors or something?"

"Or something," he said with a bemused grin.

"What? How do you know them?" I was starting to feel nervous now.

"Well, there's Noah St. James."

"Yeah."

"And then there's Ethan St. James."

"Yeah."

"And then there's Dylan St. James."

"Okay." I wasn't sure where he was going with this.

"And there's Lulu St. James."

"Yeah."

"And then there's Wes St. James." He gave me a wide smile.

"Oh shit." My heart dropped. What sort of bad luck was I having? I'd just spent the last hour telling Wes that I thought his family was crazy and probably part of a cult.

Chapter 4

“SO I HAVE SOME GOOD NEWS FOR YOU, DANIELLE,” WES SAID WITH A crooked smile, and I could tell he was trying not to laugh.

“Oh, yeah? What's that?” I felt absolutely mortified. I couldn't believe that I'd just shared so much personal information with someone who was a member of the St. James family. Taytum was literally going to kill me. And not a quick, painless death but an excruciating, aching death that would have me crying and begging her to stop

“So my big brother Noah is dating your best friend?” Wes asked, chuckling. “A lot has changed in the past weeks that I didn't know about.” He tilted his head to the side. “I'm just getting back from London, so I've been out of the loop.”

“Oh, how fun,” I said, slightly nervous. Fml. I was starting to remember the other things I'd said to him. Hadn't I made a comment about trying to get with one of the brothers? Oh man. I hope he didn't think I was trying to get with him. He was cute and all, but he wasn't really my type. He looked a bit young for me even though he seemed easygoing.

“Hey, it's okay. I hope you're not embarrassed.” He looked serious for a few moments.

“I'm not,” I squeaked out. “I mean, hey, I just told you all my business and my best friend's business, who's dating your older brother, and your other brother absolutely hates her. And I really don't want you to hate her as well because she's such a lovely girl. She deserves to be loved, and she deserves...” My words were barely coherent as I rambled.

“Hey.” He held his hand up. “I don't judge anyone until I meet them. I

can't wait to hear all about how it went down from Noah.”

“Taytum kind of pretended to be the nanny that your sister Lulu hired,” I said quickly, “but she wasn't really. It's a long story, but I promise you, she's nice.”

His eyes widened slightly at my comment. I tried to read his expression but couldn't.

“Wow. I sure have missed a lot,” he said slowly. “And what do you do for a living? Or is that too personal?”

“No, it's fine. I'm an accountant. I'm pretty good at my job. Like, really good. But I don't really enjoy it.”

“I'm surprised,” he said.

“What do you mean you're surprised? You're surprised I'm good at my job. Why? Because I'm blonde?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I'm surprised you're an accountant. You look like a movie star or something.”

I just gave him a look. “Are you trying to come on to me?” I said, laughing, “because that's such a cheesy pickup line.”

“I'm totally not trying to come on to you,” he said, shaking his head. “I'm just saying that you don't look like the sort of woman I would assume was an accountant.”

“What? What are accountants supposed to look like? Super stiff and boring mean or something?”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that. But you do have on...” He paused and smiled as he pointed at my ears. “Very quirky earrings.”

I played with my earrings and then started laughing. I had a pair of large purple earrings with partridges in a birdcage.

“Okay, well, I'm not a conservative accountant. I'm fun-loving, I'm young, and I live in New York City. And you know what? I don't really want to be an accountant anyway.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Oh, I feel kind of weird telling you my life story now that I know who you are.”

“Even more weird than telling me your life story when you didn't know who I was?” he questioned with a crinkle in the corner of his eyes.

“Ha, that's true. I don't really know exactly what I want to do. Consider Taytum, she's lucky. She's an illustrator. She illustrates children's books, and she really wants to write her own children's books and illustrate them. And

she teaches art classes on the side. She's so talented. It's amazing.”

“But what about you? What do you want to do?”

“So I've always thought it would be cool to be an interior decorator. Like helping people choose furnishings for their house and wallpaper and paint color and countertops. And I guess it's because I really want to own my own home. I just live in a studio apartment, and I don't see myself being able to afford a house anytime soon, at least not if I live in the city. I guess I could move to New Jersey, but I don't really want to move to New Jersey. No offense in case you lived in New Jersey.”

“I don't,” he said, laughing. “I live in Manhattan, actually. My parents are in Connecticut. Have you thought about Connecticut?”

“Not really. It's kind of far from New York City. I've never really visited. This will be my first time.”

“Oh, well, then we will have to make sure it's a good time.”

“Thank you. And please, I know I said this already, but don't judge Taytum based on what I said...”

“Don't worry. I don't judge anyone. I'm the black sheep of the family.”

“Why is that?” I was surprised.

“Oh, just because I kind of do my own thing. When I graduated from high school, I took a gap year, which ended up being two years, and traveled around the world. It was amazing, and I loved it. And I came back and went to college. And then, instead of working for Noah, who I assume you know is in commercial real estate.”

I shook my head. “No. To be honest, Taytum and I never talked about his job.”

He smiled. “Well, that's good.”

“Really? Why is that good?”

“It means she's in love with him and not his business.”

“Oh, yeah. Taytum doesn't care about money at all. She's not good with money,” I admitted, laughing slightly. “But she's never been a gold digger or anything. Just in case you thought that's why she was with Noah. It was totally because he was hot and good in bed.” My face went red. “Oh my gosh. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.” He chuckled. “Maybe I wouldn't really have wanted to hear that piece of information. He's my brother, after all. But I'm glad to know that his prowess in the bedroom meant more than his money to your friend.”

“It did.” I licked my lips. “But anyway, back to what I want to do with

my life. Yeah, I think interior design. I'm just not sure how to get into it.”

“Maybe when we get to the house, you can speak to Noah.”

“Oh.” I raised an eyebrow. “Why? What would that do?”

“Well, he's in commercial real estate and some residential. But they always need stagers and stuff like that. Maybe he has an opening in his crew.”

“Oh, wow. That would be cool. Though I don't have experience and...”

“Hey, we all gotta start somewhere, right?”

“You're right. Thank you. So what is it you do?”

“I'm a travel writer,” he said. I know it sounds fun and exotic, and it kind of is. It's just very...” He paused and leaned forward. “Don't tell my family what I'm about to tell you.”

“I won't,” I said quickly.

“It can just be a very lonely life.”

“Oh really? Traveling the world?”

“Yeah. I meet lots of cool new people, but I don't have anyone who's a constant in my life, you know? I speak to my brothers and my sister and my parents and some friends every now and again, but there's no one special.” He shrugged.

“Well, it is what it is. If you don't love your job, why don't you think about doing something else as well?” I said softly.

He looked at me for a couple of seconds and nodded. “I suppose that would be the most logical solution to that problem. I'm just not sure what I would do next.”

“Oh, maybe brainstorm this holiday season. I'll help you if you want.” I smiled at him.

“That would be really nice. Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” I said, beaming at him. Maybe the St. James family wasn't so bad after all. Wes was a lovely guy. He already felt like a younger brother to me. It would be an amazing Christmas season if they were all this welcoming.

Chapter 5

"SO DO YOU KNOW HOW YOU'RE GETTING FROM THE TRAIN STATION TO THE house yet?" Wes asked me as we sat in companionable silence.

I shook my head. "No, not yet. Taytum said she's gonna let me know. In fact, I guess I should call her now and see if she's figured it out."

"Oh, you can just text her and tell her you've got a ride. My brother Ethan is picking me up, and I'm sure he won't mind taking you back as well."

"Ethan," I said his name slowly and distastefully. How did I tell Wes I wanted nothing to do with Ethan? That he was the Slytherin in the St. James family as far as I was concerned, and I hadn't even met him yet.

"Oh boy," Wes said with a huge grin. "What happened between you and Ethan?"

"Nothing! I don't even know him, but he doesn't like Taytum, and well, I just don't know that we're gonna get along. Anyone giving my best friend a hard time is really not on my nice list."

Wes nodded. "I see. Well, I will tell you that Ethan is a very nice guy. Granted, he's my brother, and I have to say that, but it's true."

"Okay." I laughed. "If you say so."

"He's a history professor, so sometimes he's a bit serious, but once you get under that shell, he's probably the sweetest St. James brother of them all."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow. "I haven't even met him, but from what Taytum has said, he doesn't sound that sweet to me."

"Well, maybe sweet isn't the right word." Wes laughed. "But I'm sure he wouldn't mind giving you a ride home with us. That way, it will keep Taytum and Noah from having to come out to the station as well."

"True. Okay, let me call her." I pulled out my phone and called Taytum.

She answered breathlessly. "Hey Danielle, how's the train? Oh, wait one second. Sammy, stop it! Stop throwing sand at your brother!"

I made a face as I looked at Wes. "Is everything okay, Taytum?"

"Yeah, it's fine. We're just in a sand pit and...Theo! No, just because Sammy did it doesn't mean...!" Taytum sighed. "Oh my gosh. Kids are crazy."

"Yeah, they are. Hey, I just wanted you to know that I'm on the train with Wes."

"Wes?" Taytum sounded confused.

"Yeah, Wes St. James, Noah's youngest brother."

"Oh cool. Wow. That's crazy. What a small world."

"I know it is. Well, anyway, he said that Ethan is picking him up, so I could just ride with him to the house."

"Oh perfect." She sounded frazzled. "Theo!"

"Okay, it sounds like you're busy, but I'll see you soon."

"Bye, Danielle." I heard the click in my ear and had to laugh as I looked at Wes and gave him a rueful smile. "I guess I will be fine riding with you and Ethan. Taytum sounded overwhelmed with those kids."

"Yeah, Lulu's kids are terrors," Wes said, laughing. "Why do you think we always get a Christmas nanny for the entire season?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to understand why. I haven't even met them, but they seem like they're the children of the corn or something."

"I wouldn't go that far," he said with a laugh. "But they're pretty bad. I'm hoping they won't be such hellions as they get older."

I laughed. "Yeah, I guess I'm excited to meet them. I know Taytum loves them already like they were her own children," I said even though that was a bit of a lie. I wanted Wes to really like Taytum. I didn't want her to have two St. James brothers who didn't trust or like her.

"Okay, cool. I'll just text Ethan and let him know," Wes said, pulling out his phone.

"Actually, would you not?" I said quickly.

"Oh?" Wes looked at me in surprise. "Why not?"

"I just would rather him not know for now. No particular reason, but I don't want him to build up a list of reasons he's gonna hate me before I'm even there."

"Okay," he said. "But I'm telling you, Ethan is a great guy," Wes said

with a small smile.

"I'll take your word for it." I licked my lips nervously. "Um, are you the brother who might or might not be in love with his best friend?"

Wes threw his head back and started laughing. "No, that would be Dylan, the third oldest."

"Oh okay. So all of you brothers know that?"

"Everyone in the entire family knows that he and his best friend are in love except for him. It will make a very interesting Christmas, that's for sure."

"Oh, why do you say that?"

"Because she'll be there this Christmas," he said with a small nod. "She's lovely, and we all love her, and we all hope that they'll finally realize they're meant to be together." He shrugged. "But you know how it can be."

"What, they're just stubborn or...?"

"I don't know what's holding them back." He shrugged. "I guess maybe when you've been friends with someone for so long, you just don't see them that way, or you don't wanna see them that way. I don't know."

"So what makes you think they're in love?"

"The way they are when they're together, and the way they act when either of them is dating someone else." He rolled his eyes. "It's crazy. My ex, she could see it the first time she met them." He made a face.

"Oh wow. Did you guys break up recently?" I asked, not wanting to be nosy but wanting to know.

"Yeah, Jenny and I broke up right out of college." He shrugged. "It was just one of those things. We were on two separate paths and wanted different things in life." He shrugged. "That was all. We didn't date for that long, so it wasn't like a horrible breakup or anything. I don't hate her or anything."

"Are you still friends?"

"No." He looked aghast. "I could not imagine being friends with her. We were each other's first loves. I don't hate her, but I don't need her in my life anymore. That just wouldn't work for me at all."

Chapter 6

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE ARE APPROACHING LITTLE KIMBLE STATION. Please gather your bags," the warm and melodic voice said over the speaker.

Wes smiled at me, and I nodded that I'd heard.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are approaching Little Kimble. Next stop is Little Kimble."

"Wow, I guess they really want us to make sure we don't miss the stop," I joked to Wes as we made our way out of the carriage.

"Yeah, they're good like that." He laughed. "There have been several people who have fallen asleep in the carriages and missed the stop and complained, so I guess they try to be extra diligent."

see, that makes sense. That's really nice." The train stopped suddenly, and we

made our way off and walked toward the exit.

Wes gave me a warm smile as he noticed the nervous expression on my face. "Don't be nervous, Danielle. My brother won't bite you."
"Wait, what are you talking about?"

"The look on your face. You seem like you're nervous. Like you're Goldilocks about to meet the three bears."

"Oh yeah, I am kinda anxious." I wrinkled my nose. "I didn't realize I was that transparent."

"You're not, but lest you forget. I travel the world. I meet so many different people. I find it very easy to read people." He smiled. "Well, most people."

"Oh, who don't you find it easy to read?" I asked him curiously.

"Jenny, my ex." He shook his head. "I always found it hard to read what she was thinking and feeling." He shrugged. "Oh, well."

"Oh," I said and was about to ask him more about her when we made our way outside toward the road. Immediately, I noticed a tall, dark-haired man with vibrant blue-green eyes standing there. There was a huge smile on his face. And he looked absolutely gorgeous.

"Hey, Wes." The guy walked over and held his arms out, and my heart dropped. "Little bro. You're finally back home."

"Hey, Ethan," Wes said, chuckling as they hugged. "This is..." He was about to say my name when Ethan's face looked me up and down. I could see his lips curling slightly as if he liked what he saw. The feeling was mutual, but I wasn't going to let him know that.

"Who is this? Someone you picked up on your travels?"

"No," Wes said. "As a matter of fact, I just...."

"You just, what? Don't tell me you got married and didn't tell anyone?" Ethan shook his head, his expression switching from disbelief to shock as he looked at my ring finger to see if he could spy a diamond. "Mom and Dad are not gonna be happy. But then you wouldn't be the second St. James boy to go rogue this Christmas."

Wes shook his head. "No, bro. This is—"

"Let me guess, your name is Kiki," Ethan said, looking me up and down. His eyes stared at my earrings. "Are those birds in a cage hanging from your ears?"

"Yeah, do you like them?" I said, touching my dainty earrings. If he

liked my earrings and appreciated them, maybe he wasn't so bad.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "They look like something a stripper with bad taste would wear."

Wes cleared his throat. "Ethan, this is Danielle."

"And that means what to me?" he asked, shrugging. I was starting to understand what Taytum meant. Ethan was a jerk. "Danielle from the strip club? Danielle from the cheap strip club?"

"This is Danielle from New York City. She's coming with us to the house." Wes frowned, but I could see he was laughing a bit at his brother.

"She is?" Ethan said. "Why?"

"I'm Taytum's best friend." I stared at him, thinly lipped. "You know Taytum, the nanny who's dating your brother Noah?"

"Oh." He glared at me then. "You're the best friend." He shook his head. "Ballsy move."

"Excuse me? What's that supposed to mean?"

“*R*eally? Your best friend lied to my brother, blatantly lied about who Now she's using him and trying to get her grubby little hands into his wallet, and you've come to what? To help?” Ethan folded his arms and stared at me like I was a kid about to go into time-out.

“*S*he's come to get a St. James brother as well,” Wes said, laughing and seemingly really enjoying the moment. I couldn't believe he said that. Wes suddenly realized his mistake as he looked back and forth between me and Ethan. “Sorry, she has not really come to catch one of us. That was just a joke she said to me on the train when we met, that she would try to hook up with one of the other brothers because we were so rich and handsome.” West paused and then sighed. “I'm not making this any better, am I?”

“*I*'m glad she was honest with you,” Ethan said snidely. “So at least you're better than your friend in that regard.”

“*T*aytum is not with Noah because he's rich. She doesn't care about money and neither do I. I was just joking around before I even knew who Wes was.”

“*T*hat's probably why you told him, then. You didn't even realize that you were telling a St. James brother that you were trying to get with a St. James brother for money.” Ethan shook his head. “You and your friend, you're not very smart, are you?”

I bit down on my lower lip. “I was just joking. I've just come to make sure she's okay. She didn't mean to lie. She's not that sort of person.”

"She was on the train in the same carriage as me," Ethan said with a sneer. "And she was going on and on about how she wanted to marry Donovan, who she was hoping to spend Christmas with. And nary a week later, she's with my brother and in love. Excuse me if something smells rotten in Denmark."

"I think the only thing rotten in Denmark is you." I sniffed.

He glared at me then and shook his head. "Don't blame me because I have a bullshit detector."

Wes shook his hands about. "Hey, guys, let's not forget this is the Christmas season, and we're all supposed to be happy and enjoy ourselves and—"

"And what?" Ethan said, staring at his brother. "Don't tell me you've drunk her Kool-Aid. Have you already got yourself a St. James brother then, Danielle?"

He said my name in such a way that made me shiver. "Wes and I had a very nice conversation on the train. It's not even like I was flirting with you, was it, Wes?"

"Nope. She didn't flirt with me," Wes said with a grin. "She didn't make a move on me. She didn't touch me. She didn't try to kiss me. She didn't ask if I wanted to join the low level club."

"*T*he what?" Ethan and I both said in unison. And then glared at each other.

"*T*he low level club, or maybe it should be the Low Mile Club." Wes shrugged. "I don't know, but there's the Mile High Club if you wanna hook up on a plane. What do you call it if you wanna hook up on a train?"

"*I* don't know," I said, shaking my head. "But good question."

*E*than snorted. "Come on, let's go. Mom and Dad are waiting for you."

"*I*'m excited to see them. The kids too. How are they?"

"*S*till crazy," Ethan said. "I thought this was going to be the Christmas they finally got some training from our Mary Poppins-esque nanny. But I suppose there's nothing Mary Poppins-esque about Taytum."

"*S*he's actually a really good person."

"*B*ut she's not Annie, the Mary Poppins nanny, though, is she?" Ethan looked at me, and I just shook my head. He was right of course. Taytum had lied, and I understood why he was not necessarily her biggest fan, but he didn't have to be so rude and childish about it. He should give her a chance. If his brother had forgiven her, then he should too. But I wasn't

gonna say that. I didn't wanna get on his bad side before we even got to the house. And I promised Taytum that I'd be friendly with him, and well, I loved my best friend, and I wanted her to be happy. If she had fallen for this Noah and she could see a future with him, who was I to get in the way?

"*Y*ou're definitely entitled to your thoughts, Ethan St. James," I said. "I'm just here to check on my best friend. Make sure your brother Noah is not using her for..."

"*F*or what?" he said. "He's paying her a hundred grand to be a nanny for a month. If anyone's using anyone, she's using him."

*J*bit down on my lower lip. He was really trying to get a rise out of me, and he was close to getting slapped as well.

"*C*ome on, guys, let's go home. I'm hungry, and I'm ready for some dinner," Wes said and gave me a small smile. I smiled back at him weakly. I liked him, but his big mouth had made things so much worse for me.

Chapter 7

WE WALKED OVER TO A BLACK RANGE ROVER, AND WES GAVE ME A LITTLE smile. "Would you like to ride shotgun?"

"No thanks," I said quickly, shaking my head. No way did I want to sit up front with Ethan St. James. He was the spawn of Satan or very closely related.

"No, I insist," Wes said. "You're a guest."

"She's not my guest," Ethan said, and I just rolled my eyes.

"You know what? I will sit in the front. Thank you." I smiled sweetly at Wes. "You're so thoughtful to think about me in that way."

I looked over at Ethan and made a face. "And you are just the spawn of..." Ethan stared at me with a smirk, and my voice drifted off as his eyes moved up and down my body in a seductive way.

"Hold on now," he said softly. "Are you really going to insult the man driving you to his family home?"

"No, of course not." I shook my head and gave him an innocent little smile. "I would never dare to do such a thing."

"Sure you wouldn't," he said, licking his lips.

He raised an eyebrow as Wes opened the passenger door for me.

"Whoa. Okay, cowboy," Ethan said, shaking his head as he got into the car.

"Thank you so much for your chivalry, Wes " I beamed at his brother as I slid into the car. He nodded and then closed the car door, and I buckled my seat belt. Ethan turned to me and frowned.

"Don't even think you're gonna get your hooks in my little brother," he

said under his breath.

"Excuse me?" I stared at him in shock.

"I'm just saying your friend may have got her hooks into my older brother, but you are not going to get your hooks into my younger brother."

"I don't want my hooks in your younger brother. In fact, I'm hoping that Taytum will leave your brother. If Noah is anything like you, then he's a jackass too."

He smiled at me. "Well, then we have one thing in common."

I blinked. "What do you mean? You think your brother's a jackass as well?"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm hoping that your friend will leave him as well." He pressed his lips together as Wes opened the back seat door and slid in.

"Okay, I'm ready for some delicious food. I hope Mom made meatloaf or something."

"I think she made lasagna tonight," Ethan said, and Wes licked his lips.

"Oh, yummy. I love Mom's lasagna."

"I take it she's a good cook then," I said, looking over my shoulder and smiling at Wes.

"She's the best. She makes dinner every single night, and when we were kids, we always sat around the table as a family. It was something that my parents wanted to ensure we had growing up."

"Yeah," Ethan said smoothly. "It seems that Noah won't have that for his family, though, if he stays with Taytum."

"Oh, why is that?" Wes asked curiously. I knew exactly what Ethan was gonna say, but I kept my lips shut.

"Well, it turns out Taytum can't cook. She could barely boil an egg."

"That's not true!" I interrupted. "That's unfair. She can boil an egg."

"Like I said, barely." Ethan snorted. "She even burnt the toast this morning. Like how do you burn toast that's in a toaster?" I looked out the window. There wasn't much I could say. Taytum wasn't the best cook, so normally, when she had me over, she ordered takeout, but she had so many other great qualities. "She is an amazing person, and I don't think the first quality most people look for in a wife or mother or partner is their ability to cook. I don't know if you know this, Ethan, but there are several delivery apps out there that can deliver food. There are also boxes that you can buy that are really simple guides to teach you how to cook food."

"So I'm taking it you don't know how to cook, either," he said, shaking his head as he started the car and pulled out.

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm..."

"Oh, you're just sticking up for your loser friend."

"Hey, now!" Wes said from the back seat. "That's not nice, Ethan."

"Dude, she's a liar. What can I say? She's taking Noah for a ride, and I, for one, have already seen through her."

"There's nothing to see through," I said, "Look, I understand, she lied initially, and she regrets it. Trust me. I spoke to her when it happened, and she wanted to come clean, but she just didn't know how to. She already felt a connection with Noah, and that's why she stayed. It had nothing to do with the money. If you knew Taytum, you would know. She's not someone who goes after money. She got offered a position at a prestigious museum being a guide, and she turned it down because she wanted to illustrate children's books even though she was gonna make far less money."

"Oh yeah, because being a guide at a museum is so, so profitable." Ethan said, "How much were they offering her? Two million a year." He paused. "No wait. Five million to show little kids around the museum, I bet." I bit down on my lower lip to stop myself from laughing at his sarcasm.

"That's not funny, and she wasn't going to be a guide to little kids. She was going to be a guide for wealthy donors to show them the paintings because she's so knowledgeable in art and could bring in more donations."

"Yeah. So you're saying she can sucker people out of their money," Ethan said, and Wes laughed from the back seat.

"Sorry. I know that's not funny, but you kind of walked into that one, Danielle."

I looked over my shoulder again and shook my head. "Really, Wes? I thought you were on my side."

"Hey! I'm Switzerland," he shouted. "Until I meet this Taytum, I don't really know where I stand." He shrugged. "I'm sorry. I do support you, and I like you, and I think you're fun and awesome. But Noah is also my big brother, and I do wanna make sure that she's not..." He made air quotes with his fingers. "Taking him for a ride." He laughed.

"Sure, okay."

"Though I feel like you're a good judge of character, Danielle, and I don't think you would've lied, especially as you didn't know who I was on the train. So I'm pretty confident she's a good girl."

Ethan snorted. "Yeah. Okay. I'm thinking we have a second actress that will be staying at our family residence."

"I'm not an actress. I'm an accountant."

"See what I mean?" Ethan held his hands up. "So you're good with money, huh?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, and I couldn't stop my lips from trembling. Not out of anger, but out of humor. It wasn't funny, but it was kind of funny. If I wasn't in this situation, I would've been laughing because I was walking into every single quip he was making.

"Maybe you wanna hand me your money, and I'll show you just how good I am with it." I smiled at him sweetly.

"Uh, no thanks. I don't have money that I wish to lose."

I rolled my eyes. "So what do you do? Ethan St. James." He stared at me for a couple of seconds and shook his head.

"No, no, no, no, no. I don't want you making any designs on me and my paycheck."

"Excuse me?" My face flushed red.

"Look, I know I'm hot, and I'm the second oldest St. James brother. You're probably thinking my best friend scored the first one, and you should go for the second one, but I'm letting you know right here, right now that I'm not interested. I don't care how many times you bat your big blue eyes at me or twirl your long blond hair. I don't care how many times you cross your legs or try to give me seductive little looks. I'm not falling for it."

"Are you joking? If you were the last man on earth, I wouldn't flirt with you. If you were the last man on earth, I wouldn't even wanna be with you." I was incensed by his words. "If it meant I would never kiss another man for the rest of my life, I still wouldn't because I sure as hell wouldn't wanna kiss you." I unfolded my arms and reached forward and turned on the radio. I didn't care if I was being rude or if it was his car. I wasn't listening to this guy anymore. I could hear him chuckling and turned to face him.

"Don't speak to me again, please, Ethan. Not even when we reach the house because I have nothing else to say to you."

"Ouch, bro." Wes started laughing. "You've upset another one."

Chapter 8

WE PULLED UP OUTSIDE AN OLDER VICTORIAN HOUSE, AND MY JAW DROPPED. It really was beautiful. I understood what Taytum had said when she told me she felt like she stepped into a Christmas movie. Lights were strung up all around the house, and a Christmas tree adorned with colorful ornaments was in the front yard. All that was needed was snow on the grass. And a deer peeking out.

I jumped out of the car before Wes could open the door for me. It'd been a polite thing for him to do, but I didn't wanna hear another sarcastic comment from Ethan. I was pleased when the front door opened, and I saw Taytum running outside before I had to say anything to Ethan.

"Oh my! There you are, Danielle!" Taytum squealed, and I ran toward her and gave her a huge hug. "How are you?" I said softly as I looked at her face, making sure she hadn't been crying recently.

"I'm great. It's so amazing here. How was the train ride? How was the drive over? How..." She paused as Ethan and Wes came up behind me. "Hi, Ethan." She beamed at him.

"Hello," he said in a not particularly friendly voice. I rolled my eyes, and Taytum made a small face.

"Hi!" she said, looking over at Wes. "We haven't met yet. I'm Taytum."

"So you are the infamous Taytum," Wes said, looking her up and down. "You're very pretty. I see why my brother has fallen for you."

"Oh, thank you," Taytum said and blushed. "He's inside playing with the kids. I heard the car pull up, and well, I wanted to greet Danielle." She linked arms with me. "Let's go inside. I can't wait for you to meet the kids and

Noah."

"I'm definitely interested in meeting them as well," I said, smiling back at her.

"Is Dylan home?" Wes asked as the two men followed us.

"I don't think so," Taytum said as she shook her head. "I think he went to go see his friend." She giggled. "The one... well, you know..." She smiled guiltily.

"The one he's in love with?" I said, and she laughed.

"Yeah, I mean, that's what Noah says."

"I agree," Ethan said.

"We all do," Wes said. "I think all of us know that Dylan should be with Gia."

"Hey! Nanny Taytum!" Pollyanna said as soon as we walked into the house.

"Yes, dear?" Taytum said, stepping forward.

"Can we have some gingerbread cookies and hot chocolate please?"

"Um, I don't think now's a good time. Dinner's coming up soon. Guess who's here?"

"Who?" Pollyanna ran into the corridor and then stopped. "Uncle Ethan! Uncle Wes!" She went running over to Wes and gave him a big hug.

"Hey, doll," he said, lifting her and swinging her around.

She giggled in delight. "Sammy! Theo! Uncle Wes is here!"

"Uncle Wes!" A little boy came running out with sticky fingers. He ran past me, and then a slightly taller boy came running out.

"Did you bring us any toys, Uncle Wes? What did you get us? Did you get me a choo choo train, did you, did you?"

Taytum stared at me with wide eyes. "You see what I gotta deal with all day?"

"I don't know how you do it," I said, shaking my head. "I thought you were exaggerating when you said they were a lot, but I think you were actually being nice. They seem like..."

"Don't tell me. You're a nanny too?" Ethan said, standing next to me, his eyes locking on mine.

"No, I never said I was a nanny. I told you I'm an accountant."

"Okay. I wasn't sure if you were gonna try to get paid for..." He stopped as Taytum looked at him with sad eyes. He shrugged. "Hey, it's not my business. If you fooled my brother, that's on him."

"I didn't fool him. Ethan," Taytum said with a sigh, "I love him. I..."

"You love him as much as you loved Donovan a couple of weeks ago?" he said smartly and walked away.

Taytum sighed. "I told you he really doesn't like me."

"I wouldn't worry about him. He's a jackass," I said quickly. "A real jackass and I'm really hoping Noah is nicer than him because if he's not, then..."

"Oh, he is lovely, Danielle. Trust me, he's the sweetest man I've ever met."

"I hope so," I said as we walked into the living room on the right-hand side of the corridor. I saw a tall, handsome man sitting on the chair. He stood, his eyes crinkling as he walked over to me with a wide smile.

"Hi! Danielle, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "And you're Noah?"

"Yes."

"It's nice to finally meet you. Can I give you a hug?" he asked, and I nodded. He wrapped me in his arms and then stepped back. "Taytum talks about you all the time. I feel like we already know each other."

"Taytum talks about you all the time too," I said, laughing. "And I definitely want to get to know you better, to make sure that she hasn't made a huge..." I paused, not wanting to be rude.

"Mistake?" He finished my sentence and chuckled. "Of course. Welcome to the family. Welcome to our home. I hope you'll enjoy your holiday season with us."

"Thanks for inviting me. I'm really touched, actually. It's not often that people invite a stranger."

"No, you're not a stranger," he said. "You're a part of the family. You are..."

"She's a stranger," Ethan said. Noah frowned as he turned to his brother.

"Really, Ethan?"

"What? Someone has to be the voice of reason here."

"Are you gonna keep repeating that statement?" I stared at him. "Are you like a robot or something? Are there batteries I can take out of you to get you to shut up?" Ethan stared at me in shock, and Noah chuckled.

"Well, now it looks like we have someone to put you in your place."

Ethan just snorted. "I'm going to the kitchen. Do you want anything?"

"I'm good," Noah said. "Thanks."

I waited to see if Ethan would offer me anything. I was surprised when he did. "I can show you to your room, Danielle."

"Oh?" I bit down on my lower lip because I didn't really want to go anywhere with him.

I looked over at Taytum, and she said, "Go on, I'm just looking after the kids."

"I guess, if you don't mind," I said to him. I could hardly say I did mind right in front of everyone, so I just smiled politely and nodded.

"Of course." He grinned at me.

"Thank you, Ethan. I appreciate you showing me to my room even though you don't want me here."

"What can I say? I'm a St. James. I was raised with manners." He looked at my lips and then turned around. I followed him and didn't say a word. We walked down the corridor, and he stopped suddenly and looked at me. "Hey, I'm not trying to be rude or give you a hard time."

"You could have fooled me," I scoffed.

"I just..." He sighed. "Well, you've gotta admit the situation is a little bit..."

"I know it's crazy. And... I know it's fast, and I know my best friend when she's fallen for someone. I really do want this to be the real thing, but I do have doubts myself. I wouldn't say that in front of her, of course."

"So then, why don't we devise a plan?" he said softly.

"What kind of plan?" I frowned.

"Hold on, let's get to your room first." He stopped outside a door and opened it, and we both walked inside. He closed it behind him and looked me up and down.

All of a sudden, it struck me just how handsome he really was. His eyes were the color of the Caribbean Sea, and I could feel myself getting lost in them.

"So listen to me," he said, "I have a plan to break them up." He took a step toward me, and I felt breathless as I felt his breath against my lips.

Chapter 9

"I NEVER SAID I WANTED TO BREAK THEM UP," I SAID INDIGNANTLY. "TAYTUM is my best friend. I just want her to be happy. And if she's in love with Noah, and she wants to be with him and marry him and have a million kids with him, then I will support her."

Ethan stared at me. "Have you really thought this through, though, Danielle?"

"What do you mean have I thought it through?"

"Essentially, If Taytum remains with my brother, she'll be gone from your life."

"What are you talking about? No, she won't."

"My brother is a real estate magnate. He invests in properties all over the world. If she continues dating him and they get engaged and married, and have a billion babies, then she will likely be with him. And that means she won't be with you in New York. Going to bars and restaurants and partying it up till all hours of the night." I blinked at his words.

"Partying it up till all hours of the night?" I rolled my eyes. "I know Taytum did not say that because we have not done that since college."

"Well, I'm just assuming that..."

"That what?" I crossed my arms. "That we go out to parties and try to look for rich men and capture that in our web of seduction and deceit?"

"You said it, not me." His eyes were sparkling, and his lips were trembling. I could tell he was trying not to laugh. "But I'm just saying, Danielle, your friendship as you know it will be over if they stay together."

I looked at him thoughtfully and then looked around the room. I didn't

want to acknowledge what he was saying because it was partially true. If this was serious, Taytum would be gone from my life as I knew it. Who would I call with my life plans and name changes at random hours of the day and night if she and Noah became serious? She wouldn't have as much time for me.

"I don't wanna be selfish, though," I said out loud as I walked toward the window and looked outside. "This is a really pretty room," I said. "It has a lovely view." I turned to look back at him. He hadn't moved from his position by the door.

"My mom would be thrilled to hear you say that. She spent a lot of time and energy and money." He laughed. "She wanted to make sure every room was perfect."

"Well, she did a good job. I'm really excited to meet her."

"Are you excited to meet her?" he said.

"Yes, I'm excited. Taytum said a lot of really nice things about your mom, and I'd like to meet her. And your dad, Papa Pop or something."

"Pop Pop." He chuckled. "I guess you like the name, huh?"

"It's cute. I wish I had a grandpa that I could call Pop Pops."

"Yeah, I guess it is cute."

"Your children will be lucky when you have them." I tried to be polite.

"Oh, I'm never having kids." He vehemently shook his head. "I'm happy to be an uncle and focus on my job."

"Oh yeah. What is it you do again?"

"I'm a professor," he said, "of history."

"Oh yeah. I think someone did mention that to me." I nodded and looked him up and down. "I can see that."

"What do you mean?"

"You look like a professor. Old and grumpy and boring." I laughed then.

"Well, maybe you don't look like the atypical professor."

"You mean typical," he said.

"What?" I frowned.

"You said atypical. But I do look like an atypical professor. I just don't look like a typical one."

I just stared at him for a couple of seconds. "Are you joking with me right now, Ethan?"

"What? I'm just saying you said I don't look like an atypical, which I think you meant to say typical."

"Okay. Okay, whatever. I'm just saying that you don't look like the history professor I had when I was in college, who I thought had actually come from the Mesozoic age or whatever it's called."

Ethan nodded and smiled. "Not to cut you off, but about my idea..."

"What idea?" And then I rolled my eyes again. "No, I'm not trying to break up Taytum and Noah. I wanna see how he treats her and how they get along. Then if I don't like him, I'll tell her she needs to find someone new because that means he's just Donovan number two."

"Exactly. So you do agree with me?"

"What do you mean I agree with you?"

"That as far as she's concerned, Noah is just Donovan number two. Like if it wasn't Noah, it would've been Donovan."

"No. Donovan was horrible. You don't understand the nature of their relationship, and you don't understand her. Taytum is in love with love. She is a true romantic. She's always wanted a perfect romantic Christmas, and she wanted to make it happen with Donovan, not because she was in love with Donovan or because he was so great, but she just wanted that moment. Haven't you ever wanted something so badly that...?"

"Of course," he said, "but..."

"What?"

"Noah's the consolation prize because Donovan didn't want her?" He scoffed. "Lucky Noah."

"It's not like that." I sighed. "You just don't understand because you don't know her well enough. And maybe you've never been in love, so you don't know what that feels like. That all-consuming passion and..."

"So are you in love with someone?" He raised an eyebrow as he took a couple of steps toward me.

"No, why do you ask?"

"You speak about love so knowledgeably." He ran a finger down the side of my face.

"Well, that's because it's an amazing, beautiful thing, and one day, I hope to have the sort of love that books are made of. That songs are sung about. Folk tales that children tell their children." He started laughing then, and I wrinkled my nose.

"I mean that parents tell their children. Not children tell their children. You know what I mean." I glared at him. "You've never slipped up a word and said something incorrectly?"

"No, I don't think so." He shook his head. "I don't tend to say things I don't mean."

"Oh!" I growled at him. "You're so infuriating."

"I normally only hear that on my student evaluation reports." He laughed. "Not from random women I've just met."

"I thought you were gonna say random women you date, but let me guess, you don't date either."

"I'm a man, Danielle. I go on dates. I think I go on a lot of dates, and I think the women I go on dates with would tell you that I make a very good..."

"What? A very good what... lover?"

"No, I was gonna say companion. Get your mind out of the gutter, Danielle. Oh, let me guess? You're a virgin." He threw his head back then and started laughing hilariously.

"No, far from it." He then took a couple more steps closer to me. His eyes gazed down at me and roved over my body in a sensual way. He leaned down, and I felt his lips pressed against my ear. I shivered slightly at the touch, and then he whispered, "I think you'd find that I am one of the most amazing lovers a woman could have. However, I do not want to be locked up." He pulled away slightly, and I shivered as I looked up at him. I was turned on, but I wasn't gonna let him know that.

"Trust me, Ethan St. James, no one would wanna lock you up," I said with glitter in my eyes that told him I didn't find him attractive in the least. I was doing my very best to make him think I felt nothing toward him.

"I hoped you would." He grinned, then shook his head, and I turned away from him quickly. As I stared at his lips, all I could think about was if he pressed them against mine, and I knew I was absolutely crazy. Why on earth would I ever want Ethan St. James to kiss me? To touch me? To do anything with me? As far as I was concerned, he could keep far, far away. He was one of the most annoying men I'd ever met in my life.

Chapter 10

"SO JUST THINK ABOUT IT, DANIELLE. IF YOU FIND THAT YOU DON'T WANT TO lose your best friend to a random man she met because she was pretending to be a nanny, then come and talk to me. I have a plan, an idea I think will work."

"What's the plan?" I asked. I was curious now, not because I was actually interested in partaking in it, but because I wanted to know just how devious this man could be.

"You see, Danielle, I don't really trust you enough to tell you the plan until I know you're actually in on it with me."

Well, how would you know I'm in on it with you? I could say I was and —"

"We'd have a contract, of course, and we'd seal the deal in a way that would ensure you wouldn't back out."

"How would we seal the deal?" I stared at him. "Don't tell me some sort of blood pact."

"No, I'd prefer something a little sexier than that."

"You think I'm gonna sleep with you?" I burst out laughing. "You think I wanna break up my best friend's relationship so badly that I would sleep with you?"

"No, I think you would sleep with me because you're attracted to me, and you wanna know if I can provide as much pleasure as you think I can."

I scoffed. "You're full of yourself. You think I've even thought about you in that way for one second?"

"Oh, I know you have," he said, licking his lips slowly. "I know you've

thought, I wonder if he's good in bed? I wonder if he can..."

"I'm gonna stop you right there, Ethan, because I don't know you well enough to insult you in the many different ways I want to. Not interested." I looked him up and down. "I've had better than you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and you're definitely not my type. I don't do boring, dull, grumpy asses." I turned on my heel. "Where's the bathroom? I need to freshen up."

He nodded toward the side of the room. "It's over there. It's a private bathroom. You're lucky."

"Well, I'm definitely happy about that. You may go now, Ethan."

"Excuse me," he said.

"I said you may go. You showed me to my room, and I'm done with you and this conversation. I find you to be very rude. I find you to be impertinent. I find you to be full of yourself. I find—" He pressed his lips against mine, cutting off my words. I gasped as he pulled me into him and ran his fingers through my hair. My heart was racing as he pulled back from me.

"So you're gonna tell me you didn't enjoy that?"

"You can't just..."

"Can't just what?" he said, raising a single eyebrow.

"You can't just kiss me. I was just telling you off. I..."

"So if I said I wanted to kiss you again, you would say no?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, not knowing what to say. I didn't want to give him the benefit of the doubt and tell him that his lips had lit a fire in my soul, and I wanted him to do so much more than kiss me. His personality sucked, and I was annoyed that my body betrayed me like this. I was annoyed that my fingers wanted to reach out and play with his silky hair, and my body wanted to press against him so I could feel just how strong and muscular he was.

"I think you need to bark up another tree, Ethan St. James." I smiled at him sweetly. "Like I said, you're not my type, and your kiss did absolutely nothing for me."

"Really?" he asked. "And that's why your face is flushed right now." He laughed.

"Okay, sure." I glared at him. "Are you leaving now?"

"If you want me to." He took a step back. "Or I could kiss you again. Show you exactly how I got the name of Ethan 'Smooth Lips' St. James." I just couldn't help myself from giggling at the stupid moniker.

"Ethan 'Smooth Lips' St. James. Really?" I raised a single eyebrow at

him. "Who gave you that idiotic name?"

"Okay. Maybe it happened when I was in seventh grade, and two girls I kissed said I was the best kisser in the world, but hey, it's a true story. I am Ethan 'Smooth Lips' St. James."

"Ethan. Really?" I shook my head. "That's absolutely ridiculous."

"What? It made you smile, though."

"Yeah. I guess."

"You don't want me to give you my best kiss to let you see if you would also give me the same moniker?"

"I don't even know why you wanna kiss me. You don't even like me."

"I said I don't trust that you have the best intentions or that your friend has the best intentions for Noah. I didn't say I didn't like you. Uh, far from it. I find you very attractive. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you're one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. Save for your quirky earrings and your bullish personality."

My jaw dropped. "My bullish personality? You're the..."

"Tell me you don't want me to kiss you again right now," he said under his breath. I bit down on my lower lip, took a step forward, and grabbed his head. I pulled it into mine and pressed my lips against him. I kissed him hard and passionately. My tongue snaked into his mouth, and my fingers ran through his hair. I pressed my breasts against his chest and then dug my fingers into his shoulders.

I kissed him with as much sensual delight as I could, and then I pulled away from him. He looked gobsmacked, and I smiled. "Ethan, I don't need you to kiss me. I can kiss you. And while you may have been called Ethan 'Smooth Lips' St. James in seventh grade, I've been called... Danielle 'I never want this kiss to end' Goldhawk for pretty much most of my adult life." I licked my lips. "And yes, you're welcome. And yes, you can leave now."

Ethan stared at me wordlessly. I could tell he was stunned by my action. I was pretty shocked, but I couldn't say I regretted it. That had been an amazing kiss, and I knew I wasn't the only one who felt that way. If the hardness I felt pressed against me was anything to go by.

"Come out in five minutes," he said. "My mom will be in the kitchen. She wants to meet you. My dad too."

"Okay." I smiled sweetly. "I'll freshen up, and I'll be out when I'm done. Have a good day, Ethan St. James. You're dismissed." I laughed as I walked toward the restroom. He thought he would get the best of me, but little did he

know who he was messing with. I was Danielle Goldhawk, and I ate men like him for dinner. Generally, it was in my dreams, but he didn't have to know that.

Chapter 11

"THERE YOU ARE, DANIELLE." TAYTUM RUSHED UP TO ME AS I ENTERED THE kitchen. "Nana J, Pop Pop, I'd like you to meet my best friend, Danielle. She's come to visit for Christmas."

"Hi, nice to meet you." A handsome older man stepped forward and held his hand out. "I'm Pop Pop."

"Nice to meet you too, Pop Pop." I chuckled slightly at his name.

I looked behind him to see a stunning older lady with gray-white hair standing at the kitchen island, putting cookies on a plate. She beamed at me kindly.

"Hi, Danielle," she said in a sweet, older voice. "I've heard so much about you."

"Oh, all good things, I hope."

"Lots of lovely things. Taytum really values your friendship."

"Aw, I love Taytum. We're best friends, but she's also like my sister." I beamed at Tatum.

"So what's going on here? Where are the kids?"

"Their mom, Lulu, took them out." Taytum gave me a look. I could see the surprise in her eyes.

"I guess she felt guilty that she hadn't spent much time with them, so she wanted to take them for ice cream, just the four of them."

"Oh, cool," I said and then pressed my lips together. I didn't want the family to think that I didn't like kids or that I had just come to hang out with Taytum, especially as she was working.

"It will be a good time for the two of you to catch up," Pop Pop said,

giving me a wide smile. "The kids can be a lot, which I'm sure you've already realized."

"They all seem really sweet," I said quickly and looked around the kitchen to see if I saw Noah or Ethan.

"So the boys are in the backyard," Pop Pop said. "We're going to have a barbecue tonight. I hope you like barbecue chicken and ribs," he asked me, and I nodded eagerly.

"I love me some barbecue," I said. "Is there anything I can do to help? Make a salad or some mashed potatoes or something?"

"Oh, how kind of you to offer, dear," Nana J said, "but I've got it handled. Why don't you and Taytum go and explore the town or something? You've got a couple of free hours."

I looked over at Tatum to see how she felt. "What do you think? There's a Christmas tree in town. I'd love—"

"Oh, what's going on here?" Noah said, walking into the kitchen.

I stared at his tall, handsome frame and watched my friend as she looked over at him with loving eyes.

"I was just telling Danielle I could take her to the city center to see the Christmas tree."

"Oh!" he said, frowning slightly. "Just the two of you?"

"Yeah. I think it will be cool. Sure, it's not as grand as the tree in Rockefeller Center, but—"

"But I was hoping I could take you to see it."

"Oh, I know. We can still go later, though." She gave him a smile, and he nodded slightly.

He looked over at me. So I was thinking, and of course let me know if you're not into this, but I thought that perhaps we could if you were interested," he stammered, and Taytum laughed.

"What are you trying to say, Noah?" Pop Pop shook his head.

"I think he's trying to come up with something so you don't go to see the Christmas tree without him."

Taytum stared at him for a couple of seconds. "Is that true? Does it really mean that much to you if I take Danielle?"

"Of course, I want Danielle to see it, but I thought it would be something special we could do. I wanted to see the way your eyes lit up the first time you gazed upon the star at the top." I tried not to roll my eyes.

It was sweet, but it was a little too sappy. But I could tell from the way

that Taytum was reacting that she was eating it up. She loved this shit. "We don't have to go see the tree. I wouldn't mind just checking out the house and the backyard."

"Okay." Taytum nodded as Noah came over and gave her a big kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks, Danielle," he said, looking at me. "I really want you to see the tree as well, so maybe all of us can go together."

"Maybe," Nana J said, "you guys can actually go after the barbecue. All of you."

"Yeah, that could work." Noah nodded.

"And I think that Gia is coming over this evening with Dylan, so maybe they'll wanna go as well."

"Ooh, Gia." Taytum's eyes widened. "Is that the infamous best friend?"

Noah nodded. "Don't act crazy when she comes over."

"What are you talking about?" she asks innocently.

"Don't be like, 'Oh, are you Dylan's best friend that he's been in love with for years?'" Noah gave her a look.

"As if I would do that." She paused and looked at me. "So, Danielle?"

"Yes, Taytum."

"Don't go asking Gia if she's the best friend you heard about who's in love with Dylan or Dylan's in love with her or..."

"Girl, I'm not a bigmouth. You know that."

"True." She grinned. "I don't have a huge mouth, but sometimes I like to talk, and I forget what I'm saying."

"We know." Noah laughed.

Nana J and Pop Pop stared at us. "It's going to be a great evening."

"I think so," Taytum said, answering them.

I could tell from the look on her face that she really loved them already. And I could tell from the way they were looking at her that they thought of her as part of the family as well, which was a good thing. Taytum's parents were sweet and kind and loving in their own way, but they'd never been able to offer her the family unit she'd always dreamed about. I'd always hoped she'd meet someone with a large, warm, welcoming family, and it seemed that Noah St. James had just that. That didn't mean I was ready to accept the relationship just yet, no matter what I told Ethan. If I thought Noah was controlling or disloyal or rude, I would do my utmost to get Taytum out of there.

"Hey, Noah! What's going on? I need help with the ribs." Ethan came into the kitchen.

His eyes were immediately upon me, and I glared at him before turning to Tatum.

"So want to give me a tour of the house?" I rushed out. I did not want to spend another second in the same room with Ethan.

Yeah, I had the upper hand slightly from the kiss I'd given him, but I wasn't sure if I had rattled him or myself because all I'd been able to think about were the way his lips had felt pressed against mine, and the warmth of his body as we had stood there. The shock in his eyes had made me want to laugh for a couple of seconds, but the moisture in my panties had made me want to think. He was swoon worthy. To be fair, all of the St. James men appeared to be swoon worthy, but that wasn't enough to give up your life. And I loved Taytum, and I wanted her to have found the one. I just didn't want her to disappear from my life for a guy who wasn't worth it.

"You want to check out the library?" Taytum interrupted my thoughts, and I just blinked.

"Sorry, I must have been in another galaxy daydreaming about something."

"Sure," Ethan said, chuckling.

"What?" I looked up at him.

"I think I know what you were daydreaming about, Danielle."

"Oh yeah, and what's that?" I stared at him for a couple of seconds, and he just grinned.

"I think you were daydreaming about me and our chemistry, and the fact that we've fallen in love at first sight."

Chapter 12

MY JAW DROPPED AT ETHAN'S WORDS. WAS HE JOKING? I COULD SEE FROM the expressions on everyone's faces in the kitchen that I wasn't the only one shocked by his words.

"Why does everyone look so stunned?" Ethan said as he walked over to me.

"What did you just say?" I said again as he put his arms out and wrapped me in them. He then leaned down and kissed me on the cheek, and my eyes widened.

"I said, hey, we're in love."

"What?" I started laughing then. Was he high?

"I know everyone doesn't believe in love at first sight, but we do. Right?"

"We do?" I blinked at him as he looked around the room with a huge smile.

"So I know this is kind of crazy, and no one would ever expect this of me, but when Danielle and I first laid eyes on each other, we..."

"We what?" I said quickly. He wasn't about to tell them that I kissed him, was he?

"We felt an immediate attraction and connection," he said. "And when I showed her to her room, she kissed me."

My jaw dropped, and my face went red. "I, it's just not like that. I mean, I..." I bit down on my lower lip. I could see that Taytum was gawking at me.

"You kissed him?"

Noah also looked shocked. "Whoa. I thought Taytum and I moved fast, but you go, girl!"

Pop Pop and Nana J looked at each other with small smiles.

"Ethan, I really think you're twisting this and..."

"Did you or did you not kiss me?" he said loudly.

"Uhm, yeah, but you know?" I cleared my throat awkwardly. This was not how I'd seen this conversation going down.

"And did you or did you not say to me that you didn't need..." He paused. "Well, I don't wanna spill all your secrets."

"Ethan, I..." He looked around the room.

"We were gonna keep it secret because we didn't wanna rain on Noah and Taytum's parade, but we might have love at first sight going on here."

My face went super hot and super red. I couldn't believe this. What the hell was he doing? There was no love at first sight between us. If anything, there was hate at first sight. He grinned at me. "And, no, my parents are super cool, but I don't think it's right for you to sleep in my bedroom tonight."

"What?!" I almost shouted.

"I know you wanted to, and I know you feel like just because Noah and Taytum have slept together and they spend every night with each other, you should be able to sleep in my room. But Taytum still technically has her own bedroom."

"But I never..."

He smiled at me and touched my shoulder. "We're not moving too fast. I think we're moving at just the right pace. Once you know, you know, right?"

I had no words. I looked over at Taytum's wide eyes. I looked at Noah's narrowed eyes, then I looked at Pop Pop and Nana J, who seemed to be taking it all in stride. I didn't know what to say because I had no real reason to give them for kissing Ethan. And I didn't wanna tell them that I was unsure of Noah's role in Taytum's life and that I didn't know if they were a cult, and I was planning to steal her away if I didn't like Noah. That just felt weird, but...

"Hey guys, I'm all alone outside." Wes stood by the French doors at the back of the kitchen. "What's going on?" He looked around the kitchen. "Oh my gosh. Did someone die?"

"No," Taytum said, shaking her head. "We just had a little shock."

"What's the shock?" Wes asked, walking into the kitchen and grabbing a cookie off the plate in front of his mom.

"Wes, you're gonna ruin your dinner."

"It's fine, Mom. I'm a growing boy, and I love your cookies."

"I know, but no more than one." She spoke to him as if he were still a

little kid, and that made me smile.

"Ethan and Danielle kissed," Noah said to Wes, and Wes's eyes widened as he looked at me and then at Ethan.

"What? No way. You're kidding, right? Is this April Fools in December?"

"It's not April Fools," Ethan said, walking over to his brother and putting his arm around his shoulders. "Danielle and I felt a spark immediately."

"But you guys were arguing like cats and dogs in the car." Wes blinked. And I nodded.

"Exactly. We were totally going at it."

"Yeah, because the sexual chemistry was just that instant," Ethan said, grinning at me. "I mean, I don't know about you, but I think this is something real."

I shook my head. I think that you're a..." I bit down on my lower lip. I didn't wanna use the word jackass in front of his mom and dad, but he totally was. What game was he playing, or was that it? Was this the game? Was this the plan? He'd said he wanted to convince Noah and Taytum that they were moving too fast. So maybe this was his plan. Maybe he wanted them to see how ridiculous it was for people to fall in love so quickly, but at least they'd waited a couple of weeks. We had literally just met today.

Though when I thought about it. Taytum had slept with Noah on the first night, but she hadn't told him she loved him, which is absolutely crazy. He was crazy, and he was making me look bad.

And then Taytum put her arms around me and squealed. "Oh my gosh, this is so exciting. We're both having our Hallmark Christmas movie moments." I stared at her in disbelief. She couldn't really believe we were in love. Could she? "Oh. Danielle, this is absolutely amazing. She started jumping up and down. Shall we call Isabella and tell her?"

"No," I said. The last thing I needed was for Isabella to think I had fallen in love at first sight.

"Who's Isabella?" Pop Pop asked.

"She's our other best friend," Taytum said with a grin. "But she's different from us. She doesn't want a Hallmark movie moment. She probably wants a..." She bit down on her lower lip.

"Continue," Noah said.

"Well, more like an X-rated moment." She giggled. "She's kind of out there."

"Ooh, she sounds like my kind of girl," Ethan said, and I glared at him.

"Really, honey?" I said in an almost sarcastic tone. "You just said you were in love with me, but now you want my best friend too?"

Ethan looked at me, a light in his eyes as he licked his lips. "Oh, there's no one I want more than you, baby cheeks."

"Baby cheeks?" I bat my eyelashes at him.

"Yeah, baby cheeks. You're the one for me. I can just feel it."

"Oh, aren't you so cute smoochy-woochy." I walked over to him and pinched his cheeks and then tapped his stomach. "You remind me of a cute little teddy bear," I said in a little baby voice. "You've got such squishy cheeks and a squishy little stomach."

He stared at me for a couple of seconds. I could see the laughter in his eyes. "I think you'll find that there's nothing squishy about me at all."

"Now, now, children," Pop Pop said, shaking his head. "Why doesn't everyone go into the yard and start getting dinner ready?" He then turned to me. "But my dear Danielle, if you have indeed caught my son Ethan's eye, you must be very special because his mother and I never expected him to ever fall in love, let alone at first sight."

"Yeah," I said sarcastically. "I never would've thought so either."

Chapter 13

"HEY, DANIELLE, WE NEED TO TALK," TAYTUM APPROACHED ME WITH A HUGE smile on her face. She really did have a glow, and it made me happy to see her so at ease.

"Oh, in fact, I need to talk to her first," Ethan said, making an apologetic face. "I think I outed us before Danielle wanted me to, so I would like to apologize to her in person. Is that okay?"

"Oh, sure," Taytum said with a quick nod. She offered him a look of understanding, and I wanted to tell her not to be so nice to him. Ethan was a master manipulator. "I'll be outside. Okay, Danielle?"

"Uh-huh," I said, smiling, and watched as Taytum, Noah, and Wes went back outside. Nana J and Pop Pop stared at us, and Ethan took my hand like we were old lovers. He treated me with a familiarity I'd always longed for in a relationship but had never expected. I'd certainly never expected it coming from a man I was in a fake relationship with.

"Come, let's go and talk in the study."

"Uh-huh," I said anger in my voice as we left the kitchen. "What the hell was that about?" I hissed at him as we entered the corridor.

"What?" he said, feigning innocence.

"It's not funny. How could you tell them I kissed you?"

"You did kiss me, though, right?"

"Yeah, but you know I didn't kiss you because we're in love."

He started laughing then. "Yeah. Well, you kissed me because you wanted to play a game with me, and I'm continuing that game."

"You jerk. This is more than a game. I kissed you because you thought

you were all that, and I was letting you know that you're not."

"Okay, because you didn't enjoy the kiss," he said as we walked into a study with a white couch and lots of cute art on the walls.

"No, I just..." I blinked at him as all coherent thoughts left my brain. "Look, I don't even know what's going on here, but you and I are not in love. Far from it."

"I know we're not in love, but the kiss was hot. You agree, don't lie."

I just stared at him and rolled my eyes. "You need to go and tell them that was a joke."

"No, I don't. I know that part of the reason you are here is to make sure that Taytum isn't acting flighty." He pursed his lips and gave me a knowing look that made me want to smack him.

"Don't call Taytum flighty." I glared at him.

"That your friend might have jumped into things too soon, and I'm also worried that my brother has jumped into things too soon."

"Yeah, sure. Maybe they have sexual chemistry, just like you and me."

"We don't have sexual chemistry."

"Maybe they have passion in their loins."

"Oh my gosh, you've been reading too many romance books."

"Have I?" he asked, winking.

"Yes. Who has passion in their loins?"

"Would you rather me say maybe my brother's dick gets hard when he sees her? Just like my dick gets hard when I see you."

I guffawed at his words. "You're disgusting."

"What? I try to be delicate about it, but you—"

"Whatever, Ethan St. James, You're gross."

"Is that why you love me?" he asked in a low, soft voice and then burst out laughing. "Anyway, if you're going to play games with me," he continued. "I'll also play games."

"So what's the game in telling everyone we're in love?" I asked, even though I was pretty confident. I already knew.

"Well," he said slowly, "we're going to pretend we're in love, and that will culminate in a very fast engagement."

"What?" My jaw dropped. "You're crazy."

He shook his head. "That's exactly what I want Noah and Taytum to think."

"What do you mean?"

"Look," he said, "if I propose to you within a week or so, they'll definitely think we're moving too fast. So when I say, well, you guys are moving fast, it might make them reevaluate their own relationship."

I blinked at him. "That's horrible."

"No, it's not horrible. What's horrible is if your friend travels around the world with my brother, you never get to see her again. And my brother loses a couple of million to your friend because she's tricky."

"My friend is not a gold digger."

"I don't know that," he said, looking me up and down.

"Oh, what? So now I'm a gold digger too?"

"You did tell my brother on the train that you are hoping to get your hooks into a St. James brother as well."

"I was joking. Obviously, I'm not interested in any St. James brothers. Okay? Noah is with Tatum. Dylan is in love with his best friend, Gia, and Wes. Well, Wes is too young for me."

"Uh-huh," he said. "You know you want Wes, but I guess you can't have him now."

"What do you mean I can't have him now?"

"My little brother will not want my sloppy seconds."

"Really? You kissed me so I couldn't be with Wes?"

"No. I kissed you because I think you're hot, and you were giving me eyes like you wanted me to kiss you."

"I wasn't giving you any eyes. I was staring at you with hatred because you're a jackass who thinks he's—"

"You do realize that every time you call me a jackass, I just get harder and harder, right?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, wondering if I dared to do what was in my brain. I pressed my lips together and smiled secretly at how naughty my thoughts were.

"What are you smiling about?" He took a step closer to me, observing my face.

"What? I can't smile?"

"I didn't think that was something you'd smile at."

"Why? You expected me to tell you off?"

"Yeah," he said, "I like it when you tell me off."

"Why does that make you even harder?" I said, and his eyes widened.

He bit down on his lower lip. "So are you going to kiss me again,

Danielle?"

"No, I don't think so." I took a step forward and pressed my hand against his chest. My finger traced up and down his silk shirt as I stared into his eyes. "I'm going to do something else."

"Oh," he said. His breathing had got heavier, and his body was now stiff.

"Yeah," I said as I ran my fingers all the way down to the front of his jeans.

He stared at me, shocked as my hand lightly cupped the outside of his jeans and felt his cock. "Hmm. I wouldn't really call that hard," I said as I gave it one last squeeze and then moved my hand away.

His eyes widened, and his pupils dilated as he stared at me. "Did you just squeeze my cock?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yeah. I think it was your cock. You kept going on about how hard it was, so I wanted to see. And yeah, you were exaggerating. Unless that's how hard it gets. And then that's not anything I would be boasting about if I were you."

He grabbed my hands and pulled me into him, and I gasped as his lips came down on mine, and he kissed me passionately.

I couldn't resist. I wanted him just as badly as he wanted me, and of course I was lying about his cock. It had felt firm and hard between my fingers, and my entire body was shaking at the thought of seeing it up close and personal.

His hands moved down to my ass and squeezed, and I ran my fingers up to his neck and played with his hair. I pressed my body against his, and I felt his fingers reaching up under my shirt and unclasping my bra. I knew we were moving way too quickly, but I couldn't stop myself.

This was amazing. This was hot, and no matter how much I disliked him, I didn't want to stop this moment. It was just too exciting. He pulled my top up and pulled my bra down, and I glared at him as he leaned down and kissed my collarbone, his left finger playing with my nipple.

I closed my eyes and gasped. As he started sucking on it, he looked at me with a wicked grin. "So now, Miss Danielle Goldhawk, what do you have to say for yourself?" His right hand then moved to my other nipple, and I moaned out loud as his lips came down on mine again, and his tongue entered my mouth. I heard a knock on the door, and we both froze.

And then I heard Noah's voice. "Hey, Mom told me." He paused. "Oh, sorry."

I groaned inwardly as I heard Ethan chuckling.

"Sorry, man." Bad time.

"I guess so." Noah sounded shocked. "I thought that was all a ploy or a bad joke just now in the kitchen, but I guess I was wrong. Wow, you two are really in love."

"Yeah, man. Why would I joke about something like that?" Ethan said smoothly, and then I heard Noah closing the door behind him.

Ethan looked down at me with a wicked grin. "And that's how it's done, dear Danielle."

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, confused and irritated. I looked down at my naked breasts and saw that Ethan couldn't keep his eyes off them either.

"You've got a beautiful body," he said.

"I know." I smiled at him sweetly and started unbuttoning his shirt.

His eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"If my shirt is off, so yours should be too."

"But I thought..."

"You thought what? You thought that once your brother walked in and caught us, I'd be nervous and embarrassed and hurriedly put my bra and my top back on? Oh, no, no, no, no. Ethan, you think you know me, but you really don't. Two can play whatever game you want to play." And then I took his shirt off and stared at his naked chest. It was divine. He was muscular and tan. I pressed my lips against his right nipple and tugged on it gently. He grunted as his fingers moved up and down my back.

"Fuck, you're so hot," he said. "Why are you so hot?"

"I don't know. Why are you such a jerk?"

His eyes glittered as he stared down at me. "You know we're not in love. Right?"

I started laughing then. I couldn't believe he actually thought that I thought he was in love with me. "I know we're not in love, but that doesn't mean that we can't enjoy each other."

"Okay. I'm more than willing to enjoy you, Danielle. I just want you to know that the physical side of our relationship is very different to the pretend side we'll be putting on for my family."

"Whatever." I shrugged. "I don't even care. In fact, if you want to play games and act a fool around your family, so be it." I bit down on my lower lip as I undid his belt buckle, his eyes wide as I popped open his button and

undid his zipper. I tugged on his jeans, and they fell to the ground. I stared at him standing there in a pair of black boxers. His cock was hard and pressed against the material. I slipped my finger inside and pulled his cock out. He gasped as I got onto my knees and licked my lips as I stared up at him.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Taste test." I winked at him as I took him in my mouth and sucked. He groaned as his fingers played with my hair, and I bobbed my mouth up and down on his hardness. He tasted salty and sweet at the same time, and I couldn't quite believe what I was doing. This man had me going crazy, but I didn't want to stop.

"Fuck," he said. "We can't do this right now." As he dragged me away from his cock, he looked down at me and pulled me up, his lips crashing down on mine. As we kissed, I felt his cock pressed against me, and I moaned slightly. I just wanted to feel him inside me.

"What? Why not?" I said breathlessly as I pulled away from him slightly.

"Because everyone is waiting for us in the backyard, and as much as I want to fuck the shit out of you right now, I also don't want my parents to hear you screaming out my name."

I blink at him. "You're so..."

"I know." He shrugged. "I'm full of myself. Yeah, I might be a grumpy professor, and I might have my head in the books, but I know how to bang a woman until she can't get enough." He smiled wickedly at me. "Maybe I'll let you see tonight if you're a good girl."

I stared at him and shook my head. "You know what, Ethan St. James?"

"What?" he asked.

"Maybe if you're a good boy, I'll let you fuck me, not the other way around." I looked him up and down and then walked to the door. "Ciao, I'm going to check out the barbecue now." I exited the room and left the door wide open. His jaw was hanging low, and I gave him a little wave as I hurried back down to the kitchen. "Hey, Pop Pop. Hey, Nana J," I said quickly as I smoothed out my hair and pulled out some lipstick from my back pocket. "I'm just going outside, okay?"

"Sure. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's great. Thank you so much for your hospitality." I hurried into the backyard and saw Taytum looking toward the door. Her eyes lit up as I came out.

"Girl," she said, running up to me and grabbing my hand. "We need to

talk. You and Ethan. What?"

I stared at her. "Look, there's something I need to tell you..." I made a face.

"What were you and Ethan just doing in that study?" she asked me. "Noah said that you guys were about to, you know." She wiggled her eyebrows. "Do the damn thing. Those were his words and not mine, by the way."

"We were kind of making out, but..." I bit down on my lower lip. I realized at that moment that Taytum wouldn't understand what was going on between Ethan and me. Especially if I said I was here to make sure that Noah was a good guy and that Ethan and I both had plans to break up the relationship. Though I would only go through with it if he turned out to be a huge dud. Taytum wouldn't like the fact that I doubted their relationship for even a second. That was why I didn't want to tell her what I was up to until I figured out if he was the one for her.

"Continue." She frowned slightly, and I could see her brain going into overdrive.

"Well, you know," I said quickly, "Ethan and I just had that chemistry as soon as we met." I ran my fingers through my hair. "I can't help but be attracted to him."

"Oh, Danielle, imagine if we become sisters for real." Now she was excited and getting carried away.

I blink at her in confusion. "What?"

"Well, if you marry Ethan and I marry Noah, we'll be sisters-in-law. How awesome would that be?"

"Oh yeah," I said softly, "so awesome." I didn't want to tell her that there was no way in hell that would ever happen.

Chapter 14

"DANIELLE, I JUST CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DIDN'T TELL ME YOU HAD A THING FOR Ethan." Taytum looked surprised and slightly upset. I couldn't believe she was actually buying this story. She really had been drinking true love and soul mate Kool-Aid. "Did you think he couldn't tell me?" she asked softly.

"No," I said quickly, trying not to make a face. "Look, Taytum. This whole thing is not as it seems. It's a lot more complicated than one would think at first glance." I paused. I wanted to tell her the truth, but I knew I couldn't. She would be so hurt if she knew that the reason Ethan and I were communicating at all was because he wanted to break up her relationship with Noah and was trying to convince me to help him.

"But you kissed, right?" Taytum stared at me with wide eyes. "You never kiss guys that quickly."

"I know. But trust me, girl." I shook my head, protesting that the kiss meant anything. "Yes, we kissed, but not because I'm..." I paused as I saw a guy walking into the backyard.

"Who's that?" I nodded toward the French doors that led to the yard from the kitchen.

Taytum looked to the side just as the guy held his hand up in a friendly wave.

"Hey, everyone!" His warm and melodic voice filled the backyard.

Taytum's eyes lit up, and she started beaming. "Oh my gosh, that's Dylan. He's the other St. James brother." She then lowered her voice. "I don't know who that girl is, though." Next to him was a pretty girl with shoulder-length curly black hair with golden-brown highlights. She had a bright smile on her

pretty face as she waved. She wore a pair of trendy ripped jeans and a peasant blouse, and I wondered if she was the best friend I'd heard so much about.

"Hey, Taytum," Dylan said as he stepped forward, "I want you to meet Gia, my best friend."

"Hey, Dylan! So glad you're back. And hi, Gia, I'm Taytum. I'm the nanny."

Dylan started laughing as he looked over at Gia. "She's not just a nanny. She's dating Noah now."

Gia's eyes were warm as she took in Taytum. "Oh my gosh, you're Taytum! Dylan was telling me all about you. I can't believe you're dating Noah."

"Me either." Taytum laughed. "And Dylan, Gia, this is my best friend, Danielle. She's come to spend the holidays with us."

"Oh cool," Dylan said, holding out his hand to me. "I've heard a lot about you."

"All good things, I hope," I said with a laugh as I shook his hand, and he nodded.

"And this is Gia, my best friend. We've been best friends since childhood," he repeated as if trying to convince us she was just his friend and nothing more.

"That's me," Gia said, grinning as she looked over at Dylan. "We act like brother and sister sometimes because we argue so much."

"No, we don't!" Dylan said, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, we do!" She grinned. "I think people would think we were related if we didn't look so different from each other." She giggled, and Dylan shook his head as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Do we look different?" His eyes crinkled as he gazed at her.

"Just a little bit." Gia laughed and then looked back over at Taytum and me. "But it's really nice to meet you both. How long will you be staying in Little Kimble?" she asked me.

"Through Christmas if Mr. and Mrs. St. James don't mind."

"Oh, my parents are more than happy to have you," Dylan assured me. "They must be so happy right now because we've got a full house."

"We do, don't we?" Taytum said with a nod. "There's Noah and then there's Ethan and Dylan. There's you, and Wes is here. And then Danielle, you're here. I'm here. Lulu's here. Gia is here. And the kids."

"Wow," I said, "your parents must be really chill and cool if they don't

mind having so many people here."

"They love it."

At that moment, Gia saw Wes and waved. "Hey, Wes, how's it going?"

"Not bad. How are you, world traveler?" He walked over and gave Gia a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Not bad," she said, laughing. "Guess who I bumped into in New York City last month?"

"I don't know," he said, "the naked cowboy?"

"No." She rolled her eyes. "One more guess."

"Um, I have no clue. Madonna?"

Gia just sighed and looked over at Dylan. "Why is your brother so goofy?"

"I don't know," Dylan said. "Don't look at me. We have the same genes but not the same goofiness."

"Yes, you do." Gia laughed and threw her head back. I watched as her curls bounced up and down. She looked over at me. "So have you heard about Jenny?"

Wes groaned, and Dylan's eyes widened.

"Actually, I have. That's Wes's ex-girlfriend, right?" I smiled at Wes, glad I already knew something.

"Yep," Gia said, smiling conspiratorially and then looking over at Wes. "I saw Jenny."

"Okay." Wes shrugged. "Good for you."

"And she's going to be in Little Kimble this Christmas."

"Wait, what? Why?" He sounded confused. "I thought her family moved to like Minnesota or something."

"They did, but they're going to Alaska."

"That sounds like my parents," Taytum said. "They're gone for the holidays as well."

"Yeah," Gia said, "my parents too. That's why I'm spending Christmas here with you guys."

Dylan smiled at her. "Don't lie. You're spending Christmas here because you wanted to be with me."

"Yeah. Keep telling yourself that, Dylan." Gia rolled her eyes. "Anyway, Jenny and I were catching up. We're good friends." She looked over at Taytum and myself.

"Oh, that's cool. I didn't know that part," I said.

"Yeah. Well, I spent so much time here when I was younger because Dylan and I are best friends, and well, Wes and Jenny dated for a while, so she was always here too. And we just sort of bonded." She grinned. "I guess the three of us will bond in a similar way."

"I hope so," Taytum said a little too eagerly.

"And now Danielle will be bonding with Ethan too," Wes added, and I glared at him.

"Oh!" Gia paused and then looked at Wes and back at me. "Oh my gosh! Did I just put my foot in it? Are you two dating?"

"No," I said quickly. "We just met on the train."

"Yeah, she's too busy making out with Ethan to have time for me," Wes said, winking at me.

"Ethan?" Gia and Dylan both looked shocked.

"You and Ethan did not make out?" Gia asked me, leaning forward. "He's like the grumpiest St. James's brother around. I can't remember the last time I saw him dating. He's always about the books."

"Yeah, well, we kind of just..." I didn't know what to say as everyone was staring at me.

"Did I hear my name?" Ethan came sauntering over to the group.

"Did you and Danielle make out?" Dylan asked him.

"Yeah. Why? Is Danielle telling you all about it? The way my lips crushed against hers and the way her fingers ran through my hair?" Ethan winked at me. "It was hot, babe."

"Don't call me babe, Ethan."

"Sorry." He chuckled. "I don't know the words you like and don't like yet. Just because we fell in love at first sight doesn't mean I know everything about you." If I had a knife, I would have gutted him right then. He was really overdoing it and making a mockery of love.

"You what?" Gia almost screamed.

"He's joking," I said, glaring at him.

"Honey, everyone here should know. It's not a secret."

If I had a knife right then, I would've stabbed him in the heart. I wouldn't care that I'd get arrested for murder and possibly go to jail for the rest of my life.

"So guess what, Ethan?" Taytum said quickly. I think she could tell I did not appreciate the direction of the conversation.

"What? If you're going to tell me that you want me to go to Tiffany's with

you so you can show me the sort of ring that Danielle is hoping for, then give me a few hours." He chuckled, his eyes dancing as he gazed at me.

"Are you out of your mind, Ethan St. James?" I screeched, and everyone burst into laughter.

"That is what our parents ask every single day," Wes said, and Dylan held his hand up so they could high five.

"You got that right." Dylan and Wes laughed as Ethan took a couple of bows.

"Anyway, like I was saying," Gia said, "Jenny's going to spend Christmas here. I had initially invited her to spend time with my parents and me, but then my parents decided to go out of town. Then Dylan invited me here, so Jenny's coming too."

"No." Wes wrinkled his eyebrows. "Why are you doing this to me? That sucks." All of a sudden, his expression changed, and he looked upset. As I stared at him, I wondered why he cared so much. The way he'd spoken on the train, his breakup with Jenny had been very amicable, but the way he was talking now led me to believe it had been anything but friendly.

Chapter 15

"SO IT KIND OF SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE NOT HAPPY SHE'S STAYING?" TAYTUM asked Wes with a curious expression. "I thought you guys were still friends."

"I wouldn't say we were friends." He shook his head. "In fact..."

"Hey, Danielle!" Ethan spoke above his brother.

"Yes?" I stared at him.

"Can I talk to you for a couple of seconds?"

"Do we have to?"

He laughed. "Oh, darling, you know when I say talk, I mean smooch a little more."

My face went bright red. "Actually, Ethan..."

"Go on, Danielle." Taytum pushed me toward him, and I stared at her. "What? You deserve to find love too. I'm so happy for you both," she squealed.

I bit down on my lower lip and headed over to Ethan. "We can talk for a couple of seconds, then we need to come back and help with dinner." I followed him to the side of the house. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Stop with that stupidity about us being in love. We're not in love. We're..."

"I didn't wanna talk." He grinned. "I was telling the truth." He pushed me up against the side of the house and pressed his lips against mine. I didn't fight him. I kissed him back passionately, loving the way he made me feel even though he aggravated the heck out of me. Finally, he pulled back with a glint of laughter in his eyes. "So how do you like my crazy family so far?"

"The only person I think that's crazy in this family is you, Ethan St.

James."

"Aw gee, Danielle Goldhawk. Do you really think I'm crazy?" he asked in some sort of Southern twang, and I couldn't stop myself from laughing. "Don't quit your day job, Ethan. You're not cut out to be an actor."

"But I was hoping I'd be a voice actor or something. You don't think I have a nice voice?" he asked in another twang.

"No, I don't," I said in my best Southern accent, and he started laughing as well.

"So what do you think of Gia?"

"She's super pretty, and I can see her chemistry with Dylan. I just..."

"You just what?" He batted his eyelashes at me.

"Why are you doing that?" I poked him in the chest.

"Why am I doing what?" He shrugged.

"Why are you batting your eyelashes at me like you're a sixteen-year-old girl hoping I will ask you on a date?"

"Oh, Ms. Danielle, will you please ask me on a date to the movies and for a burger?" he asked in a little country girl voice.

"Please don't do that again. That is disturbing." I shook my head.

"Why, you're saying I can't do a sixteen-year-old girl's voice?"

"No."

"Well then, that's good, right? I think you'd rather be with a hunky, masculine man like me."

"Who said you're hunky and who said you're masculine?" I chuckled.

"Um, I think we both know I'm very virile and masculine," he said as he put his hand up above my shoulder and pushed his body into mine. I could feel the length of his hardness pressed up against me.

"Okay, so someone's horny," I said, batting my eyelashes at him.

"How could you tell?" He licked his lips slowly as he stared into my eyes.

"Hmm. Because you're a man, and whenever men see me, they normally get turned on."

He shook his head and laughed. "You really are something else, aren't you, Danielle?"

"Yeah, I'm hot, and I know it. And because I know it, I also know that I don't have to settle for a guy like you."

"Settle for a guy like me! If I was anyone else, I might be offended by those words."

"Well, I didn't mean to offend. I was just telling the truth. You are a hot

blonde, and I like blondes, and a lot of guys like blondes."

"But you do realize I'm very attractive as well?"

"Okay, and...?" I shrugged.

"And a lot of women wanna be with me."

"Well, go find the women who wanna be with you and leave me alone. I came here to spend time with my best friend and to make sure that the man she's fallen for is not another loser. I didn't come here to waste time bantering with you."

"We don't have to banter," he said softly. "We can kiss and do other stuff." I stared at him, not answering. "You don't wanna know what the other stuff is?" I shook my head. "Really?" He said, "You don't wanna know." I still didn't answer. I could tell it was annoying him. "I know you wanna know, Danielle. You're just being petulant."

"I'm not petulant," I said. "I don't care."

"Really? You don't care?"

"No, I don't." We both paused then as we heard voices from around the side. "What's that?" I frowned. "Is that Noah?" I blinked, and we walked to the front of the house. We stood at the side next to a large tree, and I saw Noah in the driveway talking to a lady with long red hair.

"Oh shit," Ethan said under his breath, and I frowned up at him.

"Oh shit, what? Who's that?"

"That's Noah's ex-girlfriend."

"Okay, and?"

"I don't know why she's here."

We both stood there for a couple of seconds, and I watched as Noah put his arm around her shoulders. I could feel myself going stiff. I watched as she reached up and ran her hand down his back and then up again and started playing with his hair. I gasped and turned away. Oh, hell no. That was it. That jackass was done. I was pissed. Noah thought he could carry on with his ex with Taytum in the backyard. Who did he think he was? He was a jerk. He was just as bad as Donovan, if not worse.

Ethan stared at me. "Okay. Well, you look mad."

"Um, my best friend's boyfriend is at the front canoodling with his ex."

"Well, we can't say that they were canoodling."

"Okay. What would you call it if you saw someone you were dating with their arms wrapped around someone they used to date?"

"Okay." He held his hands up. "Noah is my brother, and I love him, but

he's been called a ladies' man several times in his life." He shrugged and looked away.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, what, am I gonna lie?" He stared at me for a couple of seconds, and I just stared back at him.

"Fine," I said. "I don't want Taytum to get upset, and I don't think your brother is the one for her because if he was, he would've pushed her away as soon as she started trying to—"

"Hey, you don't need to convince me." Ethan interrupted me. His expression was thoughtful. "Like I said before, I'm open to the idea of us breaking them up."

"So just exactly what is the plan?" I asked him, not wanting to commit, but the fury in my body made me want to do something to get Taytum out of this ridiculous situation.

"We pretend that we've fallen ridiculously in love. I know that might be hard for you." He shrugged. "But I think you can act."

"Uh-huh. And what then?"

"And then I propose." He laughed. "And we plan a crazy large wedding, and I start talking about giving you huge sums of money and..."

"Oh my gosh, you're trying to make me sound like a gold digger."

"Okay, maybe I won't talk about the money, but we'll be so over the top that Taytum and Noah will think to themselves, *this is way too fast*. And then hopefully they'll realize that their relationship is also way too fast."

"I don't know that that sounds like the best plan."

"Trust me," he said. "Once people see their own actions in others, they become much more contemplative. So are you in?"

Chapter 16

"I DON'T THINK IT'LL BE A GOOD IDEA." I SHOOK MY HEAD AS I STARED AT him. "Granted, your brother is a dog, and I don't want my best friend to be with someone like him."

"Hold on a minute." Ethan frowned. "Noah is not a dog."

"Um, yes, he is. And you agree. And that's why you want us to break them up."

"I don't want to break them up because he's a dog. I wanna break them up because she's a gold digger."

"No, she's not a gold digger. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Um, I barely know you, Danielle. Why would I believe anything you're saying?"

"Excuse me." My jaw dropped. "So now you're calling me a liar?"

"I'm just saying that you profess to dislike me. You profess to think that I'm a jerk, yet you kiss me and play games with me, and you act like it's all good."

"Since when have I acted like it's all good? As far as I'm concerned, I have made it blatantly clear that I'm not interested in you and do not want anything to do with you. The only reason I'm here instead of New York City where all my friends are and all the fun is..."

He started laughing then. "Oh, all the fun in New York City, with the billions of people and all the piss."

"Excuse me?" I blinked at him.

"Uh, the streets smell like urine in New York City."

"No, they don't." I rolled my eyes. "You're such a snob."

"Why am I a snob? Because I like clean streets that don't smell of..."

I rolled my eyes. "You know what? We're done here. I'm going to go and tell Taytum exactly what her boyfriend is doing in the front yard with his ex, and you will be my witness."

"Hold up a minute," he said. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you go rush to tell Taytum you saw Noah standing with his ex, when we don't really know what was going on..."

I blinked at him. "Um, they had their arms around each other. She looked like she was about to kiss him."

"But we didn't see that. And if you go professing that you saw him cheating, and I back you up, she's gonna hate you. And he's gonna hate me. And they will probably stay together and just never talk to us again."

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. I hated to admit it, but he was right. What proof did I have? I hadn't even taken a photograph. And I knew Taytum. She never liked to admit that a guy was a jackass. When I told her that Donovan had made a move on me, she assumed that he was just testing me because of the friendship. She totally always gave guys an opportunity to lie to her. I don't know if she was just gullible or naive or what. And it did get on my nerves that she trusted these idiots over me. That was just who she was. She wanted to believe the best in everyone. And I didn't wanna risk our friendship. Not for a jackass like Noah St. James.

"Fine," I said. "So we're going to pretend we're in love." I could barely say the words without laughing. "No one is gonna believe I'm in love with you."

"And why is that?" he asked with a small smile.

"Because I wouldn't dare to be with someone like you."

"But you forget, Danielle, people have already seen us making out."

"People is your brother."

"Yeah, but you've admitted to everyone that it's true."

I glared at him. "Because you put me on the spot."

"Yeah. Well, aren't you glad I did now?"

"No, not really, because I don't really want to."

"Just listen to me. Look, I don't know what's going on between them. Maybe they just have the most amazing chemistry, and they can't see past that."

"Okay. If that's what you think."

"I'm surprised at my brother because he's hot. He gets a lot of hot women, and I don't know why this one has turned his head."

I blinked at him and pressed my lips together. He was so gosh damn rude.

"I think you're hot," he continued, as if those were magic words that should make me melt at his feet.

"Oh, should I be thanking you for that compliment, Ethan?"

"No, I'm just stating a fact. I think you're hot. You don't see me giving up my life to try to be with you."

"Noah's not giving up his life to be with Taytum." I shook my head. "You're totally exaggerating this whole thing."

"Well, I'm just saying she's turned his head. I don't know why they just can't have hot sex and move on like every other normal red-blooded American."

"Maybe they don't wanna be like every other normal red-blooded American. Maybe they wanna be like every other normal red-blooded European or African or Asian or..."

"You know what I mean," he said. "Men and women are all the same the world over. We're all attracted to certain people, and we all want to have some fun. That doesn't mean..."

"You're such a bastard, and you're so unromantic." I rolled my eyes.

"What? I'm just speaking facts."

"Yeah, but granted, I don't know Noah's game, but I would like to think that some guys out there who aren't dogs will actually meet a woman, find her attractive, kiss her, maybe even make love to her, and still wanna be in a relationship with her. And if you make any sort of comment like why buy the cow when the milk is free, I will slap you."

"Hmm. I might say that just to get you to slap me," he said with a devious expression on his face.

"What?" My jaw dropped.

"Hey, you've never had a little pain with your pleasure?"

"No." I blinked at him. "But if I'm honest," I said, tilting my head to the side, "my best friend Isabella is kind of into that sort of thing."

"Ooh. Now where is she?"

"Oh my God. Don't tell me you wanna pretend you're in love with Isabella now?"

"No, but it would be intriguing to meet someone who is into what, masochism? BDSM?"

"I wouldn't go that far." I shook my head. "She's gone to a couple of sex clubs, and she's played around with whips and chains and..."

"Whoa, she's done a lot more than I have." He laughed. "Whips and chains, huh?"

"I don't know about chains. I know there was a whip once because... Anyway..." I pause. "I'm not gonna tell you the details of her love life."

"Well, why not?" he asked. "I'm curious to hear about them."

"Let's stay on track," I said quickly.

"What do you mean stay on track?" He rolled his eyes.

"Well, here's the thing. If I'm going to do this with you, we need to have a real plan."

"Okay, and what's the real plan?"

"You can't spring crap on me like you did earlier without letting me know in advance."

"What did I spring on you? You're the one who kissed me."

I pressed my lips together. "I'm talking about when you told everyone we were in love. How anyone believed that crap was beyond me because I think it should have been quite obvious in my face that I'm not in love with you."

"Oh, but Danielle, if you had a mirror, you would've seen just how excited you looked when I said those words."

"What are you talking about? Do you not understand emotions? Excited is something very different from mortified."

"You were not mortified," he said, laughing.

"Trust me, I was."

"Okay. If I kiss you again, will you be mortified?"

"The kiss had nothing to do with it. I was mortified when... Anyway, we're going around in circles now, Ethan. You need to listen to me."

"You're quite bossy, aren't you, Danielle Goldhawk."

"Why'd you like saying my full name like that?"

"Oh, there are many things I'd rather do, trust me."

Chapter 17

"SO DANIELLE, ARE WE GOING TO STOP PLAYING GAMES OR WHAT?" ETHAN looked at me with a smirk, and I stared at him for a couple of seconds, unspeaking.

"I'm not playing games, Ethan. I'm just being honest with you. And if you don't like my honesty, that's..." I paused and shrugged. "Well, that's on you."

"I love honesty," he said as he looked me up and down, "but I don't think you're being honest with me."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"Because every time I say something, I can see you staring at my lips."

"Yeah, right." I burst out laughing. "That's in your head, dude."

"I don't think so, but I don't have all night to debate the point. Are we on or not?"

"What do you mean are we on? On what?"

"Don't play dumb, Danielle. You know exactly what I'm saying."

I sighed. "Hold on," I said. I walked quickly toward the front of the house and looked. Noah was still standing there, but this time, he was next to the Christmas tree, and his arms were still around the redhead Ethan had said was Noah's ex. Did she have her arms around his neck? I wasn't close enough to see properly, but it looked to me like they were close to kissing. What the hell? I turned back around and looked at Ethan. "Yeah, we're definitely on. Let's do this."

"Okay, cool." He grinned at me widely. "So what's the plan?"

"What do you mean, what's the plan? This was your idea. I thought you already had a plan."

"I did have a plan, but you said you wanted to be in control."

"I didn't say I wanted to be in control. I said..." I blinked at him. "Well, you know."

"No, I don't know unless you tell me."

"I meant to say that I don't want you to do anything without telling me exactly what you're going to do."

"Okay, well, I can do that. So what do you want me to tell you?"

"The plan's how far in advance?"

"Um, what do you mean how far in advance?"

"Like do you want me to give you a minute by minute? An hour by hour? A day by day?"

"You're just being facetious now." I glared at him.

"No, I'm not. I'm trying to do what you want me to do."

"Really? And you think I want you to give me a minute-by-minute breakdown of how this will go?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe you want to know at 9:05 p.m. I'm going to kiss you, and then at 9:07 p.m., I'm going to touch the side of your face lightly, and then at 9:10 p.m., I'm going to expect you to put your arms around my neck, and then at—"

I put my hand up. "Stop, please."

"What?" He chuckled. "Too much detail?"

"Yeah, way too much detail. And none of that is going to happen."

"Um, if we want to convince everyone that we're in love and that we are going to get engaged—"

"Whoa! I never said anything about getting engaged."

"Uh, that's the whole point of this, Danielle. The fake engagement, showing we're moving too fast so that Taytum and Noah can realize they are totally in over their heads."

"I just don't think Taytum will believe I'm getting engaged after a couple of days. Even the love at first sight thing is totally ridiculous. I have no idea how Wes believes any of that, seeing as he saw us arguing in the car."

"I wouldn't say arguing. I'd call it bickering."

"Oh really?" I rolled my eyes. "Is that what a history professor would say?"

"Yes, it is." He grinned.

"And bickering sounds so much better, huh?"

"Well, there's a level of flirtation to bickering."

"Really? When my grandparents used to bicker, I didn't see any flirtation there."

"Well, there must have been some at some point"—he laughed—"because they made either your mother or your father who ended up making you."

I just stared at him for a couple of seconds. "Okay. I'm not even going to address that, Ethan."

"Because you know you can't. You know it's true."

"Do I know that my grandparents made my mom? Yeah, I do. But when they used to bicker over who would heat my grandfather's socks or who would go and pick up the mail, it certainly wasn't done flirtatiously."

"You don't know what was going on behind closed doors," he said with a wink.

"Uh-huh. Okay, well, let's just take it a day at a time and see how it goes."

"Okay. Well, I do want you to know one thing, Danielle."

"What is that?"

"At ten o'clock tonight, I'm going to sneak into your room and—"

"And what?" I blinked at him.

"I'm going to pull you into my arms."

"No, you're not." I shook my head.

"Oh yes, I am."

"Um, we'll see." I laughed.

"I'm going to pull you into my arms, and then we're going to—"

"We're going to what, Ethan St. James?"

"Ah, that will be a surprise."

"No, no, no. I don't think you get this. There are to be no surprises."

"Oh yeah? And why is that?"

"Did we not just talk about this for the last billion hours?"

"I wouldn't say a billion. Don't tell me you have problems with time as well."

"Excuse me?" My jaw dropped.

"Well, you have a problem with the correct word usage, and now it seems like you have spatial difficulties as well."

"You're such a jackass."

"You know what? One of my students in American History 101 said the very same thing on rate my hot professors dot com."

"There is not a website called rate my hot professors dot com."

"There really is." He grinned.

"Well, if there is one, you're certainly not on it."

"I certainly am. I'm rated the number one hottest professor at my university."

"I guess there are no other professors at your university?" I raised an eyebrow, and he chuckled.

"So you're in the habit of making out with ugly guys, then?"

"No. Why do you say that?"

"Because if you don't think I'm hot, and we made out, what does that say about you?"

I just stared at him for a couple of seconds. "You're trying to drive me crazy, aren't you?"

"Not really. Though it would be fun trying. You want to go inside and get some hot chocolate?"

"Um, I want to go get some barbecue. I'm hungry."

"Okay, we'll have some ribs and chicken, and then afterward, we'll have s'mores with hot chocolate."

"Okay, I guess."

"I love cocoa," he said. "It's probably my favorite drink ever."

"Really?" I looked at him in surprise.

"Yeah. What so surprising about that?"

"I just figured it would be an alcoholic beverage, like beer or something."

"I like my hot chocolate with some Irish cream."

"Oh, okay. Don't tell me you've never had cocoa with Irish cream."

"No. Tonight will be my first time."

"Ooh," he said, "I like the sound of that."

"You like the sound of what?"

"That it will be your first time."

"I've had sex, you know?"

"Oh yeah? Um, so are you saying that we're going to have sex tonight, and it won't be your first time?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying," I blurted. "Ethan St. James, you are just the absolute most—"

"Danielle. Danielle?" Taytum's voice came hurrying around the corner. "There you are. What are you doing?"

"Oh, Ethan was just showing me, um—"

"I was showing her the roses," he said quickly.

"There are no roses at the side here." Taytum blinked and then grinned. "Oh, is that your code for making out?" she said, winking at me, and I groaned.

Chapter 18

"TAYTUM, WHY DON'T WE GO AND GET SOMETHING TO EAT? I'M FEELING VERY hungry."

"Oh, making out makes me hungry too," she said, and I just rolled my eyes.

"I'll speak to you later, okay, Ethan."

"Okay, sweet cheeks," he said, rubbing my back. I gave him the death stare, and he just chuckled.

"Save some food from me, guys, okay?"

"Oh, of course. You're not coming as well, Ethan?" Taytum looked at him in surprise. "I thought you would be really hungry by now."

"I'm just going to check something at the front, and then I'll be back."

"Oh, okay," she said, nodding. "And if you see Noah, will you tell him that the food is ready? I'm not sure where he went."

I stared at my best friend for a couple of seconds wanting to tell her Noah's at the front about to make out with his ex-girlfriend. But of course I didn't because I knew what she would say. She either would start crying or wouldn't believe me. I'd been down that road with her before when I told her about Donovan asking me to suck him off, and she hadn't wanted to believe it.

"Okay, I'll let him know," Ethan said with a nod.

His eyes pierced into mine, and he gave me a surprisingly sincere smile. He reached out and rubbed my shoulder. "It'll be okay," he murmured into my ear. "We'll figure this out. I don't want your friend to get hurt any more than I want my brother to get hurt."

Looking into his eyes, I nodded and let out a deep sigh. "Are you coming, Danielle? Taytum asked.

"I'm coming."

"I'll see you later," I said to Ethan, and we shared a small look as he headed toward the front. I followed Taytum toward the back, near the grill. Wes was laughing about something with Dylan, and Gia was standing there eating a chicken wing.

"There you are, Danielle. You have to come get some of this chicken," she gushed, holding up the wing in her hand. "This is absolutely delicious."

"Why, thank you very much." Dylan grinned at her. "I'm glad you approve."

"You're not even the chef, Dylan." She rolled her eyes. "You always want to take recognition for everything."

"Hey, if I'm going to take the blame, I might as well take the recognition as well." He laughed.

"So Danielle, Taytum, what would you guys like? We have burgers, hot dogs, chicken wings, and chicken legs. And the ribs are nearly done."

I licked my lips. "Oh my gosh, I'm so hungry. I'll have a burger and a wing, please."

"Sure." He pointed over to the table. "We have some potato salad, baked beans, coleslaw, Hawaiian rolls, and all sorts of other side dishes."

"Ooh, you guys are so awesome."

"You can thank my mom." He laughed.

"And what about you, Taytum? What would you like?"

"I'll have the same thing as Danielle. A cheeseburger and, actually, I'll have a hot dog as well."

"Hey!" Noah's voice sounded from beside us.

He smiled at Taytum. "You're hungry, huh?"

"Yeah, I am. Where have you been?" She looked at him for a couple of seconds before walking over to him and giving him a quick hug.

"Oh, I was just on a phone call, work stuff," he said, lying smoothly.

My eyes widened. I could not believe it. What the hell? He certainly had not been on a work call.

"Oh, okay." Taytum laughed. "What do you want? Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving. I would like a burger and a hot dog and some ribs and—"

"Hold down. Hold up," Dylan said, shaking his head. "You can't eat everything, Noah."

"Oh yeah? Who says I can't?"

"Uncle Noah." Pollyanna came running over to him and grabbed his leg. "Spin me around. Spin me around."

"Maybe we'll spin you around after dinner."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Noah," Lulu said as she walked over to Pollyanna and pat her on top of the head.

"Hey, Pollyanna," she said softly. "Uncle Noah is about to eat, and you and Sammy and Theo need to eat as well. And I don't think it's a good idea for you to get spun around because we don't want you to throw up, do we?"

"I guess not. But I want to go on the trampoline, and then I want to go to the park. Nanny Taytum, can we go to the park after dinner?"

Taytum smiled at her and nodded. "Sure."

Noah looked at Lulu. "Are you okay with that?"

"Hey, if Nanny Taytum wants to take them to the park, who am I to say no." Lulu looked delighted at the fact that the kids would be out of her hair.

"Will you come please, Uncle Noah?" Pollyanna said, tugging on his hand.

He nodded. "Of course, I'd love to."

"Sammy, Theo! Uncle Noah and Nanny Taytum are going to take us to the park and then we're going to get ice cream and maybe cupcakes." Pollyanna went running, and I started laughing at the look on Noah's face.

"Well, I don't remember saying all that, did I?" Lulu started giggling.

"I have to give it to my girl. She sure knows how to get what she wants. I guess she's just like her mama," Noah said, and Lulu laughed as she hit him in the shoulder.

"Whatever, Noah." She looked over at Taytum.

"So I was wondering if we could possibly take the kids to the zoo next week. Sammy told me he would love to go see some lions and elephants, and I told him that maybe you'd take him."

"Me?" Taytum squealed slightly. "By myself? Or are you coming? Or...?" She looked at Noah, and his eyes widened.

"Lulu, I don't think it's fair for Taytum to take all three kids to the zoo by herself. That's going to be a lot."

"Well, can't you go with her?" Lulu shrugged.

"Can't you go? You're their mom."

"I'll go," I said quickly, wondering if Noah and Lulu were about to get into an argument right in the middle of the family dinner.

"Really?" Taytum looked at me. "But you're not a huge fan of kids."

"Yeah, but it will be fun," I said, smiling at her.

"Hey, I'll go as well," Ethan said from beside me.

I turned around, surprised to see him. I hadn't even heard him approach.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," I blurted.

"But I'd love to." He smiled down at me and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"I want to see how good you are with kids so we can figure out how many kids we want to have one day."

"You what?" My jaw dropped, and my eyes widened. I looked over at Taytum, and her eyes were wide too.

"You guys are not talking about having kids already, are you?" She blinked. "But what?" She sounded incoherent.

I looked at Ethan, and then I looked at her. He was really pushing this way too far.

"What can I say, Taytum?" He shrugged. "Once you know you're into someone, you just know. And Danielle and I knew from the moment we laid eyes on each other as soon as she got off that train that we were meant to be."

"Wow, that's so romantic," Gia said, looking at me and then Ethan. "You must be something real special, girl, because I have never heard Ethan say a romantic thing in his life."

"I couldn't believe that." I shook my head, and my face flashed.

"So are you going to sneak into my bedroom tonight?" Ethan winked.

"Ethan!" I hit him in the shoulder.

"What?" he said. "We're all adults here. They know what we want to do."

"Ethan," I said, glaring at him.

"What? I'm just asking. If it's too soon for you, just let me know."

Chapter 19

I WRAPPED MY HEAD IN A TOWEL AFTER MY SHOWER AND SAT DOWN ON THE edge of the bed. It had been a long evening. Dinner had been fun with the engaging and friendly St. James family. I understood why Taytum had fallen in love with them so quickly, but I still couldn't get over what I'd seen; Noah with his ex-girlfriend. And what made it even worse was the fact that he'd lied. He'd lied and said he'd been on a business call, but I had very clearly seen that he hadn't been on a call. His arms had been around her, and well, I didn't even wanna think about what happened after I turned away. It was too devastating for Taytum.

I was in over my head. Everything about the situation was totally crazy. Taytum's situation was upsetting. And my own situation with Ethan was confusing. There was something about him that I actually liked, which was crazy because I found him to be obstinate and annoying. But he was cute, and he was a good kisser. And I thought he was funny, really funny. And I didn't often find men who could banter with me without taking my comments personally and getting upset. I liked that we could go back and forth, and he gave as good as he got.

I sighed. I really wanted to talk to Taytum about everything that was going on, but I knew I couldn't. I picked up the phone and called Isabella. I knew she was at a party and probably wouldn't answer, so I was shocked when she answered on the second ring. "Oh gosh, are you at the Southern Fried chicken restaurant?" she called out.

"What?" I was confused by her comment.

"Do you need me to get some banana pudding?" she said loudly.

I started laughing then. "No, I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I don't need any banana pudding."

"Oh my God. You said it. Text me the address."

"No, I only said it because I was letting you know I don't need it," I said quickly. "It's fine. It's not a cult."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I don't need any banana pudding."

"Oh God! Text me the address now, and I will come rescue you guys."

"Isabella! Sorry, I shouldn't have said the word."

"What word?" she asked quickly.

"No, I said I'm not gonna say it."

"You're not gonna say what?"

"I'm not gonna say the words because if I say it, you're going to think I'm saying it because I want you to come rescue me, but I don't."

"You're confusing me, Danielle."

"You're the one who's confusing me, Isabella." I lie back on the bed. "But I have something to tell you."

"Okay, what is it?"

"So I met the other St. James brothers."

"Okay, and?"

"And they're fine and funny, but there's one..."

"Oh no, Danielle. Don't tell me you've fallen for one of them as well."

"No," I said quickly. "Of course not."

"Okay, so what is it then?"

"He wants us to pretend that we've fallen in love at first sight. And he told everyone before I agreed and they believed him because we kissed and everyone asked, was it true that we kissed? And I said, yes, it's true. But I only said that because I didn't wanna lie."

"You kissed this dude already?" Isabella sounded shocked. "But you never kiss on a first date."

"It wasn't a date," I said, annoyed.

"So even worse, you kissed this guy, and it wasn't even on a date? So you're telling me you kissed this guy?"

"Yes, but it was because we had this crazy chemistry. He's very attractive even though he's super annoying." I rolled my eyes as I lay back and thought about Ethan's blue-green eyes and cocky expression. "He's totally not my

normal type. He's not tatted and doesn't have huge muscles, but he's really handsome, and he's funny, and he's smart. He's actually a history professor, which, go figure."

"Um, you're sure talking about the guy a lot for someone who doesn't like him."

"I'm just saying we had this chemistry, and well, I've not experienced that sort of banter with a man before, but it's totally not gonna work out because..."

"Because why?" She asked.

"Because he wants to break up Taytum and Noah."

"Oh, why?" She sounded surprised.

"Because he thinks that Taytum is using his brother because he's rich. And I was like, no, Taytum is not using him. She doesn't care about money. She's not that sort of person."

"Oh, she's totally not that sort of person," Isabella agreed. "Does he not know Taytum?" And then she giggled. "I guess not, though, seeing as Taytum just met Noah."

"Yeah, I try to say she's a sweet girl, and I'm not down for breaking them up, but..."

"But what? You're not trying to break them up, are you?" Isabella sounded shocked. "Danielle, what are you doing? Taytum's your best friend."

"I know, and I love her. But you know she makes bad decisions with guys."

"Yeah, I mean, she did with Donovan, but..."

"Noah's not any better. I saw him at the front of the house cuddling and canoodling with his ex."

"No way!" Isabella shrieked. "So he's a dog."

"Oh, he's totally a dog. And then when he came to the backyard where me and Taytum were hanging out with the rest of the family because we were having a barbecue, he said, and I quote, 'I was on a business call.'"

Isabella didn't say anything. "So what did you say then?"

"I didn't say anything. You know Taytum."

"What do you mean, you didn't say anything?"

"She always likes to give guys the benefit of the doubt, and I don't want her to hate me and trust him."

Isabella sighed. "I think you should have said something, Danielle."

"I wanted to, but anyway, Ethan came up with this plan."

"What plan?"

"We're gonna pretend we're engaged..."

"What?"

"We're not gonna pretend we're engaged. We're gonna pretend we fell in love at first sight."

"Didn't you just get there a couple of hours ago?"

I started laughing. "I know, it sounds ridiculous, right?"

"Who the hell is gonna believe you guys are engaged?"

"Apparently, the St. James family believes it already."

"You mean he's already told everyone you're in love?"

"Yeah, I told you because we kissed."

"Oh yeah. I forgot you guys kissed already. These guys must be really good looking if both you and Taytum have fallen for them already."

"No, I haven't actually fallen for Ethan. I'm just pretending to so that Noah and Taytum realize that they're moving way too quickly."

"I don't really follow what's going on," Isabella said. "And I'm not sure how much longer I can chat."

"Oh, are you still at the party?"

"Yeah, I'm in line for the dungeon room."

"You're what?" I sat up straight. "Did I just hear you correctly? Did you say you're in line for the dungeon room?"

"Yeah." She giggled. "It's this room where you go in, and you get to—"

"I don't think I wanna know, Isabella."

"Fine," she said. "But anyway, now I know you're safe. I'm gonna continue with my night. Okay?"

"Okay. Well, I'll call you tomorrow."

"Sure. Call me anytime. Well, not in the next hour because I'll be busy."

"I get it," I said. "Good evening, Isabella."

"Night, girl," she said and hung up.

Putting the phone down on the side of the bed, I stood and walked over to the mirror and looked at my reflection. I still looked like the same Danielle, but inside, I felt different. Inside, I felt like I was a new woman, and I knew why. It was because of Ethan. He'd awakened something in me. Something I thought was dormant. That excitement that happened when you met a guy you were interested in, who was interested in you. And I was nervous because I totally didn't want that.

Chapter 20

I LAY IN THE BED TRYING TO FALL ASLEEP. BUT I WASN'T TIRED. I JUST HAD so much on my mind, especially after my call with Isabella. A part of me was hoping that Ethan would come by the room just so I could shut him down. I sat up as I realized I was feeling parched and wanted to get some water. I looked down at my shorts and T-shirt and wondered if I should put a bra on.

I looked at the time, it was 1:30 a.m. I was unlikely to meet anyone in the kitchen at this time of night. I was pretty sure I'd be okay. I snuck outta my room and headed down the corridor toward the kitchen. The house was deathly quiet, which was so different from earlier when all of the family had been awake and laughing and joking around. I walked into the kitchen, headed to the fridge, and pulled out the jug of water. I reached into the cupboard and took out a glass. I was just about to pour myself some water when I heard footsteps behind me. I mumbled to myself, "Please let that be Taytum." I looked over my left shoulder and saw Ethan standing there, wearing a huge grin as he looked me up and down.

"Hey there, sleepyhead."

"Hey," I said softly, holding up the glass of water. "I was thirsty."

"Oh, I wasn't sure if you were looking for some cocoa," he said, smiling at me.

"No, just some water."

"Because I promised you hot chocolate with Irish cream, and I wasn't able to deliver."

"That's okay." I laughed. "I had ciders, and they were pretty good."

"Yeah, I enjoy cider myself. I can make you some cocoa now if you'd

like?"

"Oh no, you don't have to." I shook my head quickly. "I just wanted some water to keep myself hydrated, you know?"

"Sure." He nodded. "But hot cocoa with toasted marshmallows can keep you hydrated as well."

I bit down on my lower lip. "That does sound tempting." I nodded.

"Oh, what'd you say? It won't take me but a couple of minutes."

"If you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind," he said. "I offered, right?"

"Yeah. Okay. That sounds good. Thank you."

"You're welcome. So you couldn't sleep either?"

"No, I told you I was thirsty."

"You weren't thinking about me, were you?"

"No, Ethan." I rolled my eyes. "I was not thinking about you."

"No need to act like that would be the furthest thing from your mind," he said, running his hand through his hair. "I like your shorts, by the way." He looked down at my red-and-white winter Snoopy shorts. "And your T-shirt."

"You just like the fact I'm not wearing a bra," I pointed out, laughing.

"Well, yeah. I like that." He looked directly at my nipples, and I could feel myself blushing. I was not going to let him make me feel self-conscious, though.

"You gonna make this cocoa or what?" I asked as we stood there.

"Sorry, I didn't realize you wanted it so badly."

"I want cocoa, Ethan. Not you."

"Okay." He laughed. "I see you get me."

"I do get you. And I know you're into double entendres and always..."

"Always what?" he asked, taking a step closer to me. His lips were practically against mine.

"Um." I licked my lips nervously. "I'm not sure what I was gonna say."

"Oh, I thought you were gonna say that, you know, you want me to kiss you?"

"No. I think we've already established that if I want to kiss you, I will do it myself."

Then what are you waiting on, Danielle?" he asked, moving his face closer to mine.

"What do you mean, what am I waiting on?"

"I want you to kiss me, and you want you to kiss me, so..."

I blinked at him and swallowed hard. And then I felt his hand on the side of my face, bringing my lips toward his, and his lips pressed against mine. And he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me in toward him. I sighed against his lips as his tongue entered my mouth, and I kissed him back passionately. My hands moved up to the side of his face, and I played with his silky hair. He grabbed my ass and brought me into him. And I felt his hardness press up against my stomach as he ran his fingers up and down. I moaned as I reached my hands up under his shirt and touched his warm skin that felt like silk. His lips moved to the side of my face and kissed down my neck. I gasped because he pushed his left hand up inside my T-shirt and ran it toward my nipple.

"You're so sexy. You know that, Danielle?"

"I thought you were gonna make me some cocoa," I asked, chuckling, almost too high-pitched. The sound was unfamiliar and raspy to my ears.

"Oh, but this is so much better than cocoa." He lifted my top off and kissed down between my breasts and then took one of my nipples in his mouth and sucked. I closed my eyes and reached down and pulled his T-shirt off as well. He grinned at me as I opened my eyes, and I leaned forward and kissed his shoulder and then down his chest. He was a lot more built than I'd expected him to be.

"What are we doing?" I said, shaking my head and looking around. "We're in your parents' kitchen."

"Everyone is fast asleep," he said. "Don't worry about it." He grabbed me and lifted me to put me onto the kitchen island and pushed me back slightly.

"Ethan!" I gasped as I felt his fingers on the top of my shorts, and he pulled them down. "Ethan!" I gasped as he ripped them off completely and spread my legs wide.

"Yes, dear?" He grinned down naughtily at me.

I closed my eyes and gripped the island as his head bent down between my legs, and I felt the tip of his tongue on my wetness. "Fuck!" I moaned slightly as he sucked on my clit and licked back and forth. My head was screaming at me, but my body didn't wanna stop. It just felt so good. I hadn't had a man touch me or tease me like this in a really long time. And Ethan knew exactly what he was doing. "Oh yeah," I said. "Don't stop." As he slipped his tongue inside me, he moved his thumb to my clit and rubbed back and forth.

I couldn't believe the sensations running through my body. He'd groaned

as he pulled his tongue out of me. "What?" My eyes blinked open, and I noticed he was just staring down at me.

"You are a fucking goddess," he said, his palms brushing over my nipples. I cried out slightly at the touch. Every part of my body was so sensitive. "You are the sexiest woman I've ever seen, Danielle," he said. "And I need you. I want to have you now."

"Then what are you waiting for, big boy?" I winked at him. "I'm yours."

Chapter 21

ETHAN PICKED ME UP AND HELD ME IN HIS ARMS. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" I asked him as he pressed me toward him.

"I'm taking you to my room," he said in a deep, husky voice. "I want to make love to you, and I'm not sure the kitchen is the right place for our first time."

"Make love?" I repeated, staring at him with wide eyes. The reality of the situation hit me. "I don't know if—"

"If what?" he said, his eyes on mine steadily.

"I don't know if tonight is the right time," I said. I grabbed his head and pressed my lips to his and then pulled back. "I admit, there is something between us. It's passionate and it's fun, and it's kind of crazy because we just met."

"But?" He raised a single eyebrow.

I reached up and touched it, running my fingers across the fine silky hairs on his face. "I like it when you touch me," he said softly. And then we heard a boom from outside the kitchen, and he froze.

"Oh my God. Please don't let that be your mom or your dad. I do not want them to see me in your arms naked."

"They'd believe the story, though."

"Yeah, but I don't want them to believe it this way. I don't want them to think I'm some sort of ho."

"Are you calling Taytum a ho?" he asked, chuckling.

"No. I mean, she's not." I bit down on my lower lip. "Okay. I know I sound hypocritical because they hooked up on their first night, but—"

"But what?" he said, tilting his head to the side. And then we heard another creak.

"Please, Ethan, put me down. Let's hide somewhere."

"It's okay. It's just the house."

"What do you mean, it's just the house?"

"It's an older house. It creaks." He smiled at me. "Why? Does that scare you? Do you not like creaks in the middle of the night?"

"I don't think anyone likes random creaks in the middle of the night." I scoffed. "It makes you think you're in a haunted house or something."

"I wouldn't be surprised if one of my grandparents or great-grandparents haunted this house." He chuckled.

"That doesn't make me feel better."

"Don't worry. I'll protect you." He held me closer, and I just shook my head.

"Well, if you're taking me to your room, you better take me now before I change my mind."

"Roger that," he said, winking at me as he hurried out of the kitchen. He carried me down the corridor toward a room at the end and then opened it quickly. He stepped inside and put me down on his bed before going back to close the door. I looked around me, curious what his bedroom was like.

"This is nice," I said. "Did your mom decorate it as well?"

He walked back over to the bed and shook his head. "No." He got down next to me. "I actually decorated it. You can't tell? I have a photo poster of Britney Spears." He pointed to the side of the room, and I chuckled.

"Don't tell me you were into Britney Spears." I shook my head. "I just can't see you dancing to her music."

"What? You didn't think I was into 'Oops!...I Did it Again'?" He laughed as he lay down on his side and stared at me.

"No. I'm kind of surprised you were into 'Oops!...I Did it Again.'"

"Well, I was never into her music, but she sure was hot. Don't repeat that to anyone, though." He chuckled.

"Oh, and why not?" I asked.

"Because my students might never take me seriously again if they knew I had a Britney Spears poster on my wall growing up."

"Yeah, I bet they would. I'm not sure what I would've thought if I found out my history professor had a poster of a pop star on his wall."

"It's not like I have any posters of her in my current apartment," he said.

"True." I nodded. "I'm going to take your word for it. I don't know if that's true or not."

"It's true. I don't." He grinned. His fingers ran up and down the side of my arm. "So what are we going to do now?" he said in a silky soft voice. I stared at him for a couple of seconds, surprised that he wasn't already on top of me pulling his cock out, wanting to have his wicked way with me.

"So what?" I said, lying on my back, playing with my hair and staring at him coyly.

"I wasn't sure if you had something to taunt me with."

"No," I said, reaching over and touching his chest. "Why would I taunt you?"

"Because you seem to like to do that," he said, pressing his lips against my collarbone. I shook my head as I gazed at him. I could feel a fire in my belly. I wanted him to touch me. I wanted him to take control of me. I wanted him to dominate me. I wanted him to be the alpha male I knew he was. "What are you thinking right now?" he asked me, his eyes gazing over my naked body with dark intensity.

"I'm thinking you have a lot of talk and not much action."

"What do you mean I had a lot of talk?" he asked, pressing his lips to my cheek.

"I mean you were going on about whips and chains and pleasure and pain, and you're not even touching me."

"I wanted to make sure that this is what you wanted," he said as his fingers pressed lightly against my breast.

"It is," I said. "I'm here, right?" He broke into a wicked grin, and then I moaned slightly as his fingers slipped down my belly toward my sweet spot. His fingers nudged gently and parted my legs, and I moaned as he rubbed me softly.

"You're still so wet for me, Danielle." His voice was deep and husky, and all I could do was moan in response. I was so ready for him. I needed him.

"Ethan, just stop talking," I said, pressing my finger over his lips. And he grunted as he took my finger into his mouth and sucked. I moaned slightly, then pushed his shoulder back down on the bed. He looked at me with wide, surprised eyes, and I grinned at him as I rolled over on top of him. I straddled his lap and rubbed myself back and forth on him before leaning down and kissing him. He reached up and played with my breasts, and I moaned as he shifted me on top of him so I could feel his hardness right between my legs.

"You are the absolute hottest thing."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Do you keep saying that because you want me to repeat those words to you?" I giggled as I looked down at him.

"Only if you want to," he said huskily. I watched as he reached over and grabbed a condom wrapper from his nightstand and ripped it open. I blinked as I watched him slipping it on his hardness. "You want to be on top or should I?" he said grunting as I looked down at him.

"I think I'll go first." I grinned at him and grabbed his cock and moved it between my legs and shifted forward slightly. He grabbed my hips and moved me back, and I cried out as I felt him inching his way inside me. "Oh yeah," I moaned as I gyrated my hips back and forth until he was entirely in me.

"Oh shit," he grunted as he grabbed my hips and bounced me up and down. I shifted forward and moved my body in sweet motion to ride him hard and fast. He reached up and grabbed my breasts and played with them as I bounced and rubbed against him. My body felt like it was about to explode. I'd never felt this much pleasure in my life. "Oh, Danielle," he said. "How have I waited all my life to feel something like this?"

"I don't know." I laughed as I looked down at him. "Maybe because you hadn't met me yet." We stared at each other for a couple of seconds as I stilled, and something in our gaze made my heart stop for a few moments. This was something real. This was something special. This was something that had nothing to do with how long we'd known each other. It was like our spirits knew that we were connected in some way and were delighted that we were together. I started to understand what Taytum felt for Noah. Maybe it didn't matter how long you knew someone. Maybe instinctively, when you met the right one, you just knew.

I frowned for a couple of moments as I realized what I had just thought to myself. Was Ethan the one for me? Was he? "What are you doing, Danielle?" he groaned as he rolled me over onto my back, and I stared up at him. I blinked into his dazzling blue eyes, and he brushed the hair away from my face before kissing my forehead, my cheeks, and finally, my lips. His tongue entered my mouth as he positioned himself between my legs, and he thrust into me at the same time that his tongue thrust into my mouth. My fingers reached up and dug into his back. My fingernails moved up and down as he plunged into me harder and faster. I couldn't believe how great it felt. I couldn't believe I was doing this, but I loved it.

I loved absolutely every moment of it. I had never felt more alive in my life. And then I felt myself coming hard and fast, and I knew it excited him because he grabbed my hands and he squeezed, his intense eyes on my face. "Keep coming for me, honey. Keep coming," he said, thrusting into me harder and harder until his body stilled, and he shuddered. Collapsing down on me, he kissed me passionately. I lazily ran my fingers up and down his back, and he kissed the side of my face before finally pulling out of me and looking at me. "Well, I'll say that we definitely have raw chemistry," he said with a wicked little grin.

"Yeah, I guess I could admit that," I said sleepily, yawning slightly. I started to get up. "I guess I should make my way back to my—"

"No," he said, pulling me into his arms. "There's no need."

"Oh," I said softly, wondering if he was feeling the same thing I was. Was he falling for me too? Was this real?

"How great will it be if someone walks in and catches you in my bed tomorrow?" he said with a crooked smile. "They'll definitely believe we've fallen for each other then." And of course, my heart sank at his words. This was just a game to him. Yeah, he enjoyed the sex, but it was nothing special to him. Not like it was starting to feel to me. I nodded slightly and just gave him a quick smile. "Sure," I said, "that sounds good." I didn't want to argue. Not at this point. I closed my eyes and pretended that I didn't want to cry. My body was still on a high, but I was disappointed that I'd given myself to a man who considered this all one big game.

Chapter 22

I WAS MAD AT ETHAN, AND I WAS ANNOYED WITH MYSELF. I COULDN'T believe that I'd gotten myself into this situation. Not that I was ashamed or embarrassed about what I'd done even though it had been a little bit fast. I'd acted upon the attraction between us just like he had. I just didn't like his smiley tone and his condescending attitude. I wanted to leave the bed, but I didn't want him to think I was reacting to his comment, so I just lay there. He stroked my hair in a loving way, and I hated how much I enjoyed it. I wasn't sure when I fell asleep, but I awoke several hours later, and Ethan was beside me snoring. I smiled to myself as I watched his chest rise and then fall. He did have a really handsome face.

I also knew there was no way in hell I wanted anyone to walk in and catch me in his bed. I gingerly moved the sheet off me, then rolled to the side and slipped out of the bed. I looked down to make sure I hadn't woken Ethan up, but I was lucky he was still fast asleep. I quickly gathered my clothes up off the floor and made my way to the door as I threw them on. I was going to have to speak to him about his plan. I wasn't sure I could go through with it. It felt duplicitous, and I didn't want my best friend to think I would lie to her, especially to break up her relationship. That just wasn't who I was. And it also made me sad that she was so excited for me, that she thought this was real, and that I could fall in love within a couple of hours.

I knew she was blinded by her own relationship, but could she really be so self-absorbed that she couldn't see the crap that Ethan and I were throwing at each other? Was it not blindingly obvious that we couldn't stand each other? Sure, we'd kiss, and sure there was a flirtation between us. So that was

because we were both relatively attractive people, and she knew better than anyone that I hadn't flirted or hooked up with anyone in a long time. Part of my attraction to him was due to the fact that I had been in a drought. She knew what that was like, so I knew that wasn't the only reason.

Plenty of men would've been more than happy to have their wicked way with me, but I had not gone down that road because I hadn't been interested. And while Ethan was the sort of guy who made you want to pull out your hair at times, he was also funny. And it had nothing to do with his devastatingly good looks. He was charming in his own way. He had made me feel alive in ways that I hadn't felt maybe ever. It was weird because on the other hand, he was one of the most obnoxious, annoying people I'd ever met in my life. But I suppose that was why the sex between us had been so good. Even though he was infuriating, he turned me on like no man ever had before.

He knew exactly what to do and exactly what to say to turn me on. And he'd done way more than just turn me on. He'd given me the best, most delicious orgasms of my life. I bit down on my lower lip worried who I might come across as I made my way along the corridor to my room. I took a deep sigh of relief as I entered my room and closed the door behind me. I locked the door for good measure. There was no way I wanted anyone sneaking in on me in the morning. And I wouldn't put it past Ethan to find out that I had woken up, come to my room, get into the bed, and then have his wicked way with me anyway. I wasn't taking any chances, not until I figured out exactly what I was going to do.

On the one hand, I didn't trust Noah St. James as far as I could throw him. I was pretty confident he was a cheat. And it wasn't just because I'd seen it with my own two eyes. What sort of millionaire fell in love with someone that quickly, especially someone he'd found out was a huge liar. I mean, I loved Taytum, and I knew she was amazing, but he'd just met her. I didn't trust that what they had was real. I just didn't see how it was possible for two seemingly sane normal people to fall in love and want to spend the rest of their lives together.

And I knew Taytum; she loved to see the best in everyone. She would ignore the signs that he had another girlfriend and was possibly getting back with his ex. She hadn't even told me about his ex. Did she even know he was still in contact with her? Plus a guy like him, someone who was that good looking, probably had many exes. And for all I knew current as well, maybe

he was one of those callous guys who wanted a harem of women. And maybe that was why he didn't care that she'd been lying because she was just one in a long line of people.

Granted, I didn't think that was true. And granted, he seemed to care about honesty, so it would make sense that he would have told her that he was a polygamist. But I didn't know what to think or who to trust anymore. And if I was honest with myself, I didn't even know if I could trust my feelings or thoughts. I had been the one to let Ethan convince me that our plan was smart and good and it could work. And I didn't know if I went along with it because I just wanted to spend more time with him and I liked the idea of playing his fake girlfriend, or if I really believed his plan could work. Because it had worked so far, but maybe it had worked too well. Everyone in his family thought we were in love. And now even I was hoping for more, which was not a good sign because I knew this was all a game for Ethan. He didn't want me. He didn't need me. I'd be surprised if I ever heard from him again after Christmas.

And while that was not what I wanted, if I was going to continue in this charade with him, I would have to come up with my own rules—no kissing, no more making love, and no hand holding. I knew it would be hard to convince people of the fact that we were in love if we had no physical intimacy, but I'd allow him to touch my shoulder every once in a while and maybe give him a hug. We could pretend we were going slow for propriety's sake, which normally would be the truth. I'm not the sort of person I would want to be hooking up with my new boyfriend in front of his family, even if it were a real relationship. I could feel my eyes getting heavy as I lay in the bed. I was overthinking and overanalyzing this entire situation. But I knew it was because I was trying to think of a way to protect myself and my heart. Even though I had just met Ethan St. James, I was starting to fall for him. My subconscious knew that, even if my brain didn't want to admit it.

Chapter 23

“DECK THE HALLS.” TAYTUM’S SOFT VOICE CARRIED THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE as she taught the kids Christmas carols, and I smiled at the pure joy I heard in the little voices as they sang after her. I picked up my teacup and sipped some of the Earl Grey that Mrs. St. James had made for me.

“I do love the sounds of children singing.” She hummed along as she cut up carrots. “I take it you slept well, Danielle?” She beamed at me, and I tried to nod nonchalantly. What had she heard? I was starting to feel self-conscious. This was the third time she’d asked me how I slept since I’d come out this morning. A part of me wondered if Ethan had said anything to anyone. Though, I still hadn’t seen him this morning to ask him in person.

“Good morning, Danielle,” Ethan said as he walked into the kitchen with a bright smile on his face.

“Oh, hi. Morning,” I said quickly, looking around, trying to make sure that I didn’t sound suspicious or guilty of anything.

“So what are you up to this morning?” he said as he walked over to me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I glanced at him in surprise and then looked over at his mom, who was smiling at us both.

“Oh, I’m not sure. I’ll see what Taytum wants to do. I know she’s probably babysitting or looking after the kids, but maybe I can help her.”

“Is that what you really want to do on your break?” he asked me with a raised eyebrow. “Look after three bratty kids?” I stared at him with wide eyes, and he chuckled. “It’s fine. I’m their uncle. I can say that.”

“Now, now, Ethan,” his mom said, shaking her head. “Would you like some breakfast?”

"Yes, please," he said. "Pancakes would be great."

"Okay, my boy." She gave him a beaming smile and then looked at me.

"Would you like some pancakes as well, Danielle?"

"Oh no, that's fine. I don't want you to go to the bother," I said quickly.

"Well, it's no bother. I love cooking, and Ethan wants some."

"Blueberries and chocolate, please, Mom."

She started smiling again. "Oh, and would you like me to make Mickey Mouse faces as well?" He chuckled then and looked at me.

"My mom's the best."

"She really is," I said, smiling at the connection the two of them had.

"So are you sure I can't make some for you as well, Danielle?" she asked me sweetly.

"Sure, I'll have a pancake. Thank you." I grinned at her and then looked up at Ethan. "So how are you?" I asked formally. His eyes twinkled as he glanced down at me.

"Pretty good. I had a really nice night. What about you?"

"Um..." I swallowed quickly. "Not the best night. Didn't sleep that well."

"Oh no," he said, "that's not good. Any reason?"

"Um, no." I shook my head.

"You're not sore or anything?"

I glared at him. "Sorry, what?" How could he say that in front of his mom? Did he have no shame?

"You were running to the train yesterday, right? And then you said you hadn't run in a while, so I was wondering if your muscles were sore?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm fine. Thank you. I'm not sore at all."

"Aw," he said, "pity." He bit down on his lower lip, and I blushed. I could still feel him inside me. I could still feel the way his lips had pressed against mine, the way his skin had felt against my fingertips. The memory was a delight, though I didn't want to be thinking about sleeping with Ethan with his mom right there.

"So what are your plans today, guys?" his mom asked as she poured flour into a mixing bowl.

"I'm not sure. I was going to—"

"I have an idea," Ethan cut me off. "Danielle, why don't I take you into town? There are some places I'd love to show you. In particular, a house."

"A house?" I said, looking at him.

"Yeah, the Hawthorne House."

“Oh, yes. That would be lovely,” his mom said. “Oh, Danielle, you have to go. The Hawthorne House is amazing. And Ethan knows so much about it, being the historian he is.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. “Is it like a museum or something?”

“Or something,” he said. “I want it to be a surprise. You’ll see when we get there.”

“Okay.” I nodded. Taytum walked into the kitchen then and smiled at me.

“Hey, morning, Danielle.”

“Morning.” I stood, walked over to her and gave her a hug.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked me, staring into my eyes. I nodded quickly.

“Very well, thanks. You?”

“Yes. I always sleep well with Noah.” She grinned at me and I bit down on my lower lip, trying to hide my annoyance. Noah, that jerk. He was not good enough to Taytum. He was a jackass. He was potentially cheating on her, and I knew she would be heartbroken if she found out. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that he was a dog.

"Hey, Taytum, I'm going to take Danielle into town today. That's okay, right?" Ethan asked her softly.

"Yeah, sure. I'm just going to be with the kids. Where are you guys going?"

"I'm going to take her to the Hawthorne House."

"Oh, cool." She sounded excited. "Noah's told me all about it. That will be so amazing." I looked at her and then looked at Ethan.

"Um, what is so amazing about a random house in a small-ass village?"

"You'll see," Ethan said. "Don't tell her anything, okay, Taytum?" he said to her with a warning voice.

"I won't." She giggled. "I just came to get some juice for the kids. But I'll see you guys later."

“Sounds good,” I said, nodding. “Have a good day, Taytum.”

"You too." She grinned. "I'm so glad you're here, Danielle."

"Me too," I said. "I'm glad we get to spend the holiday season together." I watched as she walked over to the fridge and took out three Capri Suns and then grabbed a couple of packets of Knotts.

"Just in case they're hungry." She laughed and then exited the kitchen.

"So, Danielle," Ethan said, taking a seat next to me.

"Yes, Ethan?" I stared at him, studying his almost perfect features. He

really was a handsome man, and he was staring at me in a way that was making me extremely uncomfortable and self-conscious. The light in his eyes made me believe he did like me. It made me feel warm and cozy inside, and a part of me wished that feeling was real. A part of me wished this was more than just a game to him. A part of me wished we weren't doing this because we were both worried that Noah and Taytum had made a huge mistake getting together.

"So let's finish breakfast, and then we'll head out. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, blinking, confusion written all over my face. "Was that what you were going to say?"

"Yeah." He nodded quickly. "Of course. What else did you think I was going to say?"

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head. He jumped up then and walked over to get a cup of coffee, and I stared at his square, broad shoulders. He was tall and fit and everything I desired in a man. A part of me wished we'd met under different circumstances. A part of me didn't want to get caught up in the holiday season and the festivity of Christmas lights and decorations. It was easy to fall under the spell of Ethan in an environment like this. But I had to remember this wasn't real. This was just a game.

"So this is the tree where Jeremiah Hawthorne proposed to Gemma Nightingale," he said, smiling at me as we stood under a tall oak tree.

"So let me get this straight. He had just returned from war, and she was the nurse he'd fallen in love with but had never known her name?" I stared at him in surprise. He nodded. "And she just happened to be in the same village as him?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "Visiting an uncle and an aunt."

"Wow," I said.

"And he proposed to her right here," he said and pointed at the little steel sign on the tree. *Jeremiah proposed to me here.*

"Wow, that's so romantic. And he built this house for her?"

He nodded. "To thank her for staying by his side for so many nights."

"But wasn't he unconscious?"

"That's the most romantic part about it," he said. "Even though he was unconscious, he somehow fully remembered everything she told him about her dream house and her hopes that one day she would get married and have a family and live in the perfect home."

"And he built it for her."

"Yep. He even built her a library because he remembered she said her favorite thing to do when stressed was read books."

"Wow," I said, "that's true love, isn't it now?" He nodded.

"And you see this lemon tree?" We walked to the other side of the garden.

"Yeah."

"Every summer, she would pick the lemons and make him lemon meringue pie because that was his favorite dessert."

"Wow." I was at a loss for words. "Thank you for bringing me to this house. I've never heard a story quite like this before."

"Yeah, me either. When I was young, our parents would talk about the Hawthorne House all the time and how when two people were in love, they would come here. The man would propose under this tree, and that meant they would have a happy marriage."

"Wow. That's so cool. You said they were married for fifty years?"

"Fifty-three years. They had five children. Three boys and two girls, and ten grandkids." He smiled. "They're actually buried in the cemetery in town if you want to go check it out."

"Oh, I don't know about that," I said, shaking my head quickly. "Cemeteries make me feel creeped out."

"Oh, why is that?" he asked, staring at me with a look of wonder in his eyes as if he really cared.

"I don't know. Death and thinking about ghosts and spirits, well, it just makes me uncomfortable," I said quickly.

"I can see that," he said. "I used to feel the same way when I was younger, but I'm a history buff, and nothing is more exciting to me than visiting the graves of historical figures."

"There's nothing more exciting to you than that?" I teased him, giggling slightly. He ran his hands through his hair and chuckled.

"Okay. Maybe that's not exactly true. That's not the most exciting thing in the world, but I do enjoy venturing to different graveyards across the world."

"Interesting."

"Hey, look at you two." An elderly lady walked toward us, and I looked over at her in surprise.

"Hi," I said, smiling.

"Hello," Ethan said, nodding.

"I just wanted to say that you two make such a lovely couple," the elderly lady beamed at us. "I just love to see young couples in love exploring the

town and learning about our forefathers."

"Thank you," I said, blushing slightly, waiting for Ethan to correct her.

"Thank you," he said and grabbed my hand and squeezed. "We are really happy to be here as well, aren't we, Danielle?"

Chapter 24

"SO THAT WAS WEIRD, WASN'T IT?" I SAID QUICKLY TO ETHAN AS THE OLD lady walked away.

"I thought it was quite nice," he said, staring at my lips. I could feel my heart racing. The look he gave me was turning me on while, at the same time, it made me feel closer to him, which was crazy because this wasn't real.

"Yeah, I guess it was sweet, but it doesn't really apply to us because—"

"Because why?" he said softly.

"Because we're doing this to break up Taytum and Noah so they don't make the biggest mistake of their lives."

"Of course," he said, nodding, "that's exactly why we're doing it." He squeezed my fingers and pulled me toward him. "But do you know what I want to do right now?" he said softly, his hands moving to the side of my face and bringing my head toward his.

"No," I said, my lips tingling as I gazed into his eyes.

"I want to kiss you," he said, and I felt his lips against mine. I wrapped my hands around the back of his neck, pressed my body into his, and kissed him passionately. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and I could still taste the syrup from our earlier pancakes.

We kissed for a few more minutes, and then I felt his fingers running up and down my back and squeezing my ass. He slipped his hand up my shirt, and his fingers played with my bra strap. When I felt his hand moving to the front of my top, I quickly stepped back and pushed him away.

"Ethan, what are you doing?" I said, glaring at him in shock.

"Getting a little bit carried away. Why? Am I intimidating you?"

"You're not intimidating me, but I don't think you undoing my bra in public is the way for us to go forward."

"I wasn't going to undo your bra," he said, winking at me. "I was just going to cop a quick feel."

"Ethan," I said, blushing.

"What can I say? You have magnificent breasts, and I want to touch them. It's not like I pulled up your top and pulled down your bra and started sucking on your nipples or anything."

I stared at him, my face bright red, and he started laughing. "Okay, maybe that was a bit much."

"You think?" I asked, shaking my head. "Oh my gosh, that was crazy."

"But you can't tell me that doesn't turn you on even the least bit."

"What doesn't turn me on?" I said, glaring at him.

"I don't know. Making out in public, touching, doing things we shouldn't."

"Um, no, that doesn't turn me on."

"So I guess you're not an exhibitionist?"

"Are you saying you are?"

"I wouldn't say I like to spy on people, but I don't mind being in public taking some risks. But I guess spying on people would mean I'm a voyeur, which I'm not."

"Well, I do," I said, "and I think we should go back home now."

"Oh," he said, "I thought we could go into town and get a drink."

"I don't think so, Ethan St. James."

"Why not? Are you scared of me?"

"No, I'm not scared of you, thank you very much."

"Okay, if you say so."

"You're really full of yourself, aren't you?"

"Well, I'd much rather you be full of me." He winked, and I blushed again.

"So unique, Ethan."

"What?" He laughed. "I like being around you. Is that a crime?"

"Just remember why we're doing this," I said, saying that for his benefit as well as mine. I didn't want to start believing that this was real. I didn't want to start thinking we actually had something between us.

"Okay," he said, nodding quickly, "I'll remember. It's for my brother and for your best friend. It doesn't mean we can't have fun along the way."

I stared at him and just shook my head. "Can we go back now? I'm ready to..."

"Let's go," he said.

We walked in silence back to the house, and as we approached the front door, I stopped and looked up at him, "Thanks for taking me to the Hawthorne House," I said softly. "It was cool and interesting and really lovely to hear a heartwarming story like that."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," he said, nodding, his eyes searching mine as if he was seeking an answer to a question he'd never asked.

"It almost makes you want to believe in true love, you know?"

"I do know," he said, "but these are different times now."

"Yeah, they are."

"Oh, well," I said as the front door opened, and Taytum was standing there.

"There you are, Danielle. I've been waiting for you to get back."

"Oh?" I said in surprise. "How come?"

"Well, Lulu decided to take the kids into town, so I have time to hang out. Noah's doing some business, and I thought we could chat or something."

"Of course," I said, "that would be great." I turned and looked at Ethan. "Well, thank you again."

"No worries," he said smoothly. "Anytime."

Taytum grabbed my hand, and we hurried inside. "Oh my gosh. Tell me all about your adventure with Ethan." She giggled as she looked at my face. "You're blushing, Danielle."

"What? No, I'm not," I said.

"Yeah, you are. So did you have fun?"

"It was cool," I admitted reluctantly. "The Hawthorne House is really cool and—"

"I heard the story, but I haven't been yet. Noah said he will take me. It's so romantic, though, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I can't imagine being unconscious at war and having a nurse look after you who you never really see and then meeting up in a town three years later and somehow instantly knowing she was the same person. Makes you believe in soul mates, doesn't it?" she said softly.

"Yeah. In a way." I nodded.

"I'm so glad you're here, Danielle." She grabbed my hand as we walked

into the backyard and took a seat on the chaise lounge. "I love Noah so much, and I didn't think you would understand because everything went so quickly, and I didn't really know him. But isn't it just miraculous that you found the same sort of love with Ethan?" She beamed at me, and my heart sank.

She really believed Ethan and I had a connection. I wasn't sure whether she was testing me, but then as she continued talking and gushing, I realized that she was so caught up in her own love story that she believed it was true. A part of me wanted to tell her about the night before and how I saw Noah with his ex-girlfriend, but I didn't want to break her heart. I didn't want to stick a knife into her and make her bleed.

"So we're just the two luckiest girls in the world, aren't we? And you know what?"

"No, what?" I said, barely able to talk, suddenly starting to feel miserable.

"We're going to be sisters."

"Huh?" I stared at her.

"Well, when Noah and I get married, I'll become a St. James, and if you and Ethan eventually get married—"

"Whoa, what are you talking about?"

"I know. I'm just saying you'll be a St. James too, and then we'll both be St. James, and we'll be real-life sisters."

"We're sisters already." Taytum grinned at me in that familiar way.

"We're not blood-related, but I look at you as my sister."

"And I look at you as my sister too," she said. "And you're my very best friend in the whole wide world. I'm just so glad we've both found someone we love and who loves us and who we want to spend our lives with."

"You really love Noah, don't you?" I said, staring at her.

"I do." She nodded.

"You talk about him differently than you have everyone else you've dated." I looked at her thoughtfully, my heart shrinking into my stomach.

She was so happy. She believed in the fairy tale, yet I knew the fairy tale wasn't true. There wasn't going to be a happily ever after, and I wasn't sure if she would be able to make it out of this relationship and still be the same person. How many times could you go through rejection and pain and...

"Hey, why do you look so sad, Danielle?" Taytum frowned as she touched the side of my face. "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine," I said. "I guess I'm just feeling emotional. So much has happened so quickly and—"

"I know," she said, "it's crazy, right? But I guess when the lovebug hits you, it hits you."

"Yeah," I said, biting down on my lower lip.

I wasn't sure what to say to Taytum, and a part of me was scared and worried that she'd hate me for this deception. Another part of me was scared that I was really falling for Ethan and wanted this to be real, which made it even worse.

"I just want you to be careful, Taytum," I said to her softly. "I know that Noah is an amazing guy and handsome and everything you've always wanted, but just be careful, okay? Some men are good actors." I could feel myself starting to well up, and before I knew it, tears were streaming down my face.

She looked at me and hugged me close. "Oh, Danielle, don't cry."

"I just want you to be happy." I sobbed. "I just want you to have everything you've always wanted. I want you to find your soul mate and be in love, and you deserve the best. You really do. I love you, Taytum. You are my best friend, and I just want that for you."

"I know, and I want that for you too," she said.

We heard a knock on the door, and I pulled back quickly. I looked over, and I saw Ethan standing there with a perplexed expression on his face as he stared at me. I hurriedly wiped the tears away from my eyes.

"Hey, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine," I assured him.

"We're just feeling overwhelmed here," Taytum said with a small smile. "Danielle just wants to make sure that Noah and I are right for each other, but she has nothing to worry about because we're perfect for each other just like you two are," she said.

And I felt all the joy leaving me because this was one deception I didn't know if she'd forgive me for.

Chapter 25

I COULD SEE A LOOK OF CONCERN IN ETHAN'S EYES AS HE SURVEYED MY FACE. "Hey, can we talk?" he asked softly, and I nodded. I got up and walked toward him. "Let's go to my room," he said. And I just stared at him. "Not for anything fun." He gave me a small smile, and I rolled my eyes.

"Who said it's fun for me?" I asked, and he started laughing.

"I'm pretty sure it was fun for you." I didn't respond. We walked toward his room, and as he stepped inside, I took a deep breath and followed him in. I watched as he closed the door, and then he turned toward me. There was a look of concern on his face and tenderness in his eyes. "Are you okay?" he said, reaching up and touching my cheek.

"I'm fine, thanks."

He pressed his lips together, and I felt his thumb brushing the teardrop away from my face. "You were crying?"

"Yeah. I'm upset, and I hurt for my friends."

"Why? What happened?"

"Your brother is a dog, and he's cheating on her. And she's already had her heart broken, and I don't want to be responsible for breaking her heart again. I want to tell her that your brother's a douchebag, but I don't know how."

He took a deep breath. "You're crying because of Noah and Taytum?" He blinked.

"Yeah. You saw what I saw."

He let out a deep sigh. "You're crying because you think Noah is cheating on Taytum with his ex-girlfriend?"

"Yeah. You're the one who told me that," I said. "And we both saw them."

"What did we actually see, Danielle?" He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head slightly.

"What do you mean? What did we actually see?"

"Did we see them making out? Did we see them making love?"

"Well, no. They're not going to do that right in front of the house. But we saw them close and intimate and..."

"We saw them intimate?" He stared at me for a couple of seconds. "We saw them hug."

"Yeah, and that's a form of intimacy."

"Um, people hug their friends. People hug their family."

"It's intimacy because they're still friends." I frowned. "What are you talking about? You're the one who told me that he was cheating on her. You're the one who told me he was no good. You're the one who told me we need to ensure they don't end up together, and I went along with it."

"I told you that because I don't want my brother to end up with a gold digger." He blinked at me, and I glared at him.

"Taytum is not a gold digger. She couldn't care less how much money your brother has. She loves him because she thinks he's a nice guy, and maybe because he's handsome, and..."

"Because he's handsome?" He laughed.

"Yeah, and?" I glared at him.

"So do you think I'm handsome?"

I shrugged. "You're okay."

"Many people say that I'm the more handsome brother."

"I wouldn't say that. I think Wes is gorgeous." That was a slight lie. I did think Wes was a good-looking guy, but I didn't think he was the most handsome St. James brother. Ethan was right. He was definitely the best looking, even if that was just to me. "I'm sure Taytum would disagree and say Noah was the best."

Ethan stared at me for a couple of seconds. "What are you thinking right now?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

"There was a twinkle in your eye," he said, laughing. "I want to know what you were thinking."

"Uh, YOU might want to know, but I'm not going to tell." I winked, and

he laughed. I started laughing then as well because he was making funny faces, and I couldn't stop myself.

"I'm glad to see a smile on your face instead of a frown," he said.

"Yeah, well, I'm trying to be happy, but I can only hope your plan will work because I don't want to see my best friend heartbroken and dejected."

He stared at me for a couple of seconds. "Look, I may have slightly exaggerated Noah's relationship with his ex."

"What do you mean slightly exaggerated?"

"As in he dumped her years ago and he was never that into her, but they remained friends, and he wishes the best for her."

"That's not what you said yesterday."

"And she's moving to Norway for a job and wanted to say goodbye." He made a face. "I know you're going to kill me."

"You what?" My jaw dropped. "She's moving to Norway. As in Norway, the country in Europe?"

"I prefer to say Scandinavia," he said, then wrinkled his nose. "I guess now's not time for a joke?"

"Ethan, the only reason I went along with this absolutely ridiculous plan was because you told me Noah and his ex were friends with benefits."

"Did I actually use those words, though?"

"You basically made it seem like they were still hooking up and getting together and were still in love and..."

"I don't think I said that, and Noah was never in love with her."

I grit my teeth. "You are horrible. Did you lie to me just to get me into bed?"

He blinked at me and smirked. "Really, Danielle? You went to bed with me because I told you Noah had a thing with his ex."

"No. But..."

"But why? Let's be real. There's been a spark of attraction between us since we first laid eyes on each other."

"No, the first time I saw you, you were obnoxious and rude, and I wanted to slap you," I said, glaring at him.

"Yeah, but a slap is just one centimeter away from a caress," he said.

"Really? You can tell yourself that, Ethan, but that's not true."

"Look, I know I messed up, and I shouldn't have said that, and..."

"And what?" I said, almost shouting at him. "You know what? I don't even care. I'm going to my room and calling everything off. The deal is off."

"Look, I exaggerated because I wanted you to know that Noah is the sort of guy who has never been in a long-term relationship. He's never been committed, and I don't know that he can commit. I don't know if he has what it takes to be in a solid, long-term relationship and never cheat." He stared at me, and I could see the sincerity in his eyes. "Granted, he's not cheating with his ex, and granted, he might not cheat this week or this month or this year. But there will come a time when he won't want to be a ball and chain. He's not going to want to be locked up. And then what happens? Would you rather your friend walk away now or walk away in five years when she's even more in love?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. "That's not our decision to make, Ethan."

"So what? You don't think she's made a mistake?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. "I don't know if she's made a mistake anymore. I know that she's gone too fast, and I know that he could possibly break her heart. And I know that I don't feel right lying to my best friend."

"Just a couple more days," he said. "Let's see how they feel when we announce our engagement."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't think so, Ethan. I'm not interested in doing that anymore."

"Look," he said, "before you found out I exaggerated about Noah's ex, you wanted to break them up as well, right?"

I didn't say anything.

"Well, nothing has really changed. We still don't know if they're together because they actually think they're in love or it's just heavy lust. Look at us," he said, stepping forward and wrapping his arm around my waist. He pulled me into him, and I felt his lips crush down on mine. I wanted to push him away, but my body wouldn't let me. I kissed him back. I ran my fingers through his hair and then squeezed my thumb and index finger into his shoulders and gasped as he slipped his hand down the back of my pants and squeezed my ass.

"What are you doing, Ethan?"

"What I've wanted to do all day since I saw you."

"Well, you shouldn't be doing that."

"Why not?"

"Because," I said.

"What? You don't want me?"

He stared at me for a couple of seconds. "It's not about if I want you." Yeah, I'll admit it. I want you. I'm attracted to you. But you disgust me right now. I don't like what you've said and done. And I don't appreciate how you manipulated me."

"I'm sorry," he said, removing his hand and stepping back. He had a contrite look on his face, and I could tell he meant what he was saying. "I messed up. I should have been honest with you. I just..." He shrugged. "I don't know. Just as much as you want to protect your best friend, I want to protect my brother. But that doesn't stop me from wanting you, or wanting to be close to you, or getting to know you better." He let out a deep sigh.

"A part of me wished we met under different circumstances, but we didn't," I said softly. "We met because my best friend is your sister's nanny, and now she's dating your brother. And while neither one of us knows if what they have is real, I'm not going to allow you to lie to me or manipulate me again. I will continue this plan only because I think it's important for Noah and Taytum to see what it looks like for two people to rush into a relationship. And let's see what they say when we pretend to get engaged. Maybe it will force them to step back and evaluate if they're moving too fast.

"A nd I'm not doing this for you or because I think it's the best idea in the world. I'm doing it for my best friend. I'm doing it for her sanity and her heart because I know in the past, she's ignored signs and gone with emotions that she hoped to be real that weren't. And I know firsthand how much sex appeal you St. James brothers have. The only difference is I'm not going to let you turn my head or make me think that what we have is something it's not. That's what I appreciate about you, Ethan. You haven't tried to lie to me. You haven't tried to tell me that this is love or you feel something for me deeper than you do."

than blinked then, which surprised me. He looked like he wanted to say

E something, but he didn't. I wondered what he was thinking. I wondered if he was trying to hold back that, for him, this had just been a one-night stand, a night of fun.

"A nyway," I said, "I'm going back to my room. And I hope that the next time we cross paths, you won't try to lie to me again."

Chapter 26

I STARED AT MY WATCH. IT WAS 11:00 P.M., AND I COULDN'T SLEEP. ETHAN had tried to get me to spend the night with him, but I told him I wasn't interested. I could tell from the look on his face that he'd been hurt, but he understood why I just couldn't forgive him right away. Taytum was probably fast asleep with Noah, and I was glad she had him. I was glad she was enjoying her time with him. They seemed to have a really close and loving relationship, even though they'd only known each other for a short time. It was hard for me to fathom how they could be so close and look at each other like they were in love. Could people really fall in love that quickly? I wasn't sure.

I tried to ignore how I felt about Ethan because it confused me. I barely knew the guy, and I wasn't even sure I liked him, but I was drawn to him like a moth to a candle flame. Something about him made me feel alive, made me feel sparks of happiness, and made me feel warm inside.

I got out of bed and decided to head to the kitchen to make some hot cocoa. It was a trick I had from my childhood. I'd always make cocoa to help me fall asleep. I think it was the warm milk.

I took the milk out of the fridge and poured it into a mug and put it in the microwave to heat before looking in the cupboards for some cocoa and marshmallows. As the milk finished warming, I heard footsteps, and I froze, hoping it wasn't Ethan coming to talk to me. As much as I enjoyed our conversations and being around him, I just needed to be alone. I needed to process what I was thinking and feeling. I needed to understand my own feelings.

"Hey there, Danielle."

Wes's cheery voice entered the kitchen, and I turned around and beamed at him. I saw Dylan and Gia following him, and they both smiled at me.

"Hi. What are you guys up to?"

"We were going to go into the backyard and light a fire in the firepit. What are you doing?"

"I was just making some cocoa because I couldn't sleep."

"Ooh, that sounds good," Gia said. "Maybe I'll have some as well."

"Sure," I said. "I can make some for everyone if you want."

"Yes, please." Wes nodded, and Dylan smiled sweetly.

"Yeah, that sounds good." He looked over at Gia. "Do you want to have some Irish whiskey in your cocoa?"

"Ooh, why don't we all have Irish whiskey in our cocoas?" Wes suggested. And I laughed because their happiness was infectious.

"Okay."

I stared at my boiled milk. "I have an idea. I had microwaved this, but the best hot chocolate comes when you steam the milk on the stove and then you melt the chocolate directly into it. Let me see if I can find a pot, and then I can make it."

"Sure, and I'll go and get the Irish whiskey," Dylan said.

I watched him walk out of the kitchen and then looked over at Wes and Gia. "So what were you guys doing?"

"We were playing chess," Gia said with a small smile. "It's sort of something we've been doing for a long time."

"Oh, I don't know how to play chess. It always looks so hard."

"It's not so bad," Wes said. "I'll teach you one day if you want."

"That would be really nice, thank you." I nodded. I heated the pot and then poured milk into it and started melting the milk chocolate.

"Ooh, it already smells good," Wes said.

"Thank you, it should be delicious. I've been making cocoa since I was a little girl," I said, smiling at them all.

"Let me get cups for everyone," Gia said, opening the cupboard. Dylan smiled at me, and I could see a scrutinizing look on his face.

"Hey, is everything okay?" I asked him, wondering what he was thinking about.

"Yeah. You know, I just wanted to say that you and Taytum are amazing, and I'm so glad Noah and Ethan have you both."

I bit down on my lower lip. That was not what I expected him to say.

"I agree," Wes said. "When I see Noah and Taytum, it's just amazing."

"And let's not forget that you completely changed Ethan," Gia said quickly. "What a lot of people don't know," she continued, "is that even though Noah is the oldest, he was more like the businessman of the family, trying to make sure the family's finances were taken care of. But Ethan, he was the caretaker of the family. He's the one who checks in on everyone. His life has always been just his job and his family. I can't remember a time when any woman has penetrated his shell and made him laugh and smile and be protective and ... "

She paused as I stared at her in shock. "Sorry, I'm not overwhelming you, am I?"

"No, but it's really not that serious," I said quickly. "We just met recently, and ... "

"But it's clear you guys had that chemistry and really feel for each other."

"Well yeah, we have chemistry," I said, not knowing what to say, not wanting to admit to them that the only thing we had in common was that we wanted to break Noah and Taytum up, and we enjoyed snogging every once in a while.

Wes stared at me for a couple of seconds. "You know, it's weird because I've never seen Ethan so taken with someone before, and I've never seen him do anything but go on and on about the classes he's teaching and history lessons." He chuckled. "But since he's been around you, there's a different sparkle in his eye. It's almost like ... well, it's almost like you captivate him more than history does, which is absolutely crazy." Dylan nodded because history has been his life for as long as we've known him.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that at all. I think that it's really cool that you guys have found each other," Wes said. "As soon as you guys met when we got off the train, I could see the sparks flying."

"Ha ha," I said. "More like daggers flying."

He chuckled then. "You guys did banter back and forth, but isn't that a sign of love at first sight?"

"What?" I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Don't they say that love and hate are pretty much the same thing? Indifference is when you should be scared. Indifference means you just don't care."

"I guess so." I shrugged. "I wouldn't say we're in love, but ... "

"You're in very heavy like," Gia said as I poured the hot liquid into the cups.

"He is a good-looking guy, and he's funny, and yeah, we have chemistry," I admitted. "And I guess I do like him, which is weird because I've never liked anyone this fast before, and it feels like it's fake, but ... " I shrugged. "I don't know. I just don't know what to think anymore."

"It's okay," Wes said with a small smile. "Sometimes when you know, you know, and it doesn't have to take months, or years, or decades. Sometimes you just know right away."

Chapter 27

"NIGHT, GUYS," I SAID AS I HEADED TOWARD MY ROOM. "IT WAS REALLY NICE chatting with you all."

"I had a great time," Gia said, smiling. "Sweet dreams."

"You too."

"Night," Wes said.

"Night, night," Dylan said.

I made my way into the room and smiled. It had been really nice chatting with them and getting to know them. The St. James family really was lovely, and I understood why Taytum adored them so much.

A small cough made me freeze, and I turned on the light in the room. I saw Ethan sitting in a chair with a book in his hands.

"Hey," he said.

I blinked without moving toward him. "What are you doing in here?"

"I wanted to ask you if I could take you out tomorrow."

"Um, why?"

"To say sorry for lying about Noah's relationship with his ex."

"Okay, sure. How long have you been in my room?"

"A couple of hours," he said.

"Oh, you waited for me that long."

"I wanted to speak to you and ask you before I went to sleep." He stood and walked toward me. "Did you enjoy hanging out with my brothers and Gia?"

I stared at him in surprise. "How did you know I was talking with them?"

"I went to the kitchen to get a drink, and I saw you guys outside."

"Oh, why didn't you join us?"

"Because I figured you probably wanted some space from me." He gave me a warm smile. "I know I can be a bit of a jackass sometimes."

"You can say that again." I laughed, and his eyes glittered. He reached out and grabbed my hands.

"It's weird, you know?"

"What's weird?" I asked him curiously, my heart racing.

"It's weird that I felt so bad about the fact that..." He paused and shrugged.

"What are you trying to say, Ethan?"

"I don't know. I'm distracted by your lips. I just want to kiss you."

"Ethan, is that what you really waited for?"

"Would it be so wrong if I wanted one good night kiss?" he asked, and I blinked as I stared at him.

"Just one," I said softly as I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his. I melted into his arms as he kissed me back, and I felt his fingers running through my hair. I loved the feel of him. I loved the smell of him. I couldn't deny him what he wanted because I wanted it as well.

I grabbed his hands and pulled him toward the bed, and we fell down, laughing. His hands pulled my top off, and I reached over and pulled his shirt off. My lips fell to his chest and kissed down toward his abs. He groaned slightly as my hand moved down to the front of his boxers and rubbed gently until I felt him growing hard. I bit down on my lower lip, loving how quick he responded to my touch. He reached over, ran his fingers across my shoulder, and moved my bra strap down. I moaned slightly as he pulled the front of my bra down and leaned forward and sucked on my nipple.

"Oh, Ethan," I moaned.

"Yes, my dear," he said softly as he unclasped my bra and pulled it off. I licked my lips, slightly nervous.

"Ethan, should we be doing this?" I asked him even though my fingers ran down his chest.

"I think if you want to and I want to, what's the issue?" he said. His tone seductive, and I moaned out loud, I slipped my fingers down and rubbed against his hardness, and he growled against my ear. "When you touch me, you make me feel alive," he said in a husky tone. "You make me want to rip my clothes off and show you just how much of a man I am."

"I think you're showing me pretty well right now how much of a man you

are, Ethan St. James."

"You love saying my name, don't you?"

"It rhymes," I said. His eyebrow furrowed as he gave me a quizzical look.

"I don't know what your definition of rhymes is, but my name does not rhyme."

I giggled slightly, "I know it doesn't rhyme-rhyme, Ethan St. James, but it's rhythmic."

"Did you say the wrong word, and now you're covering up for it?" he said. I started laughing then.

"Yes."

"Oh, Danielle, you make me laugh," he said, pressing his lips against the side of my face. I felt his hands running up and down my back, and I just gazed into his beautiful eyes. There was a spark, a magic, a connection between us unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Sometimes when I watched movies or TV shows, I felt I could see the chemistry and the spark. I'd always wanted that. I'd never expected to feel it. Though a part of me questioned whether what I was feeling was a spark or if it was just lust, my entire body felt like it was on fire. It was probably a bit of both, but I didn't even want to think about that now.

I was in over my head and knew I was playing with fire, but fire had never been so attractive to me. I didn't even care if I got burned. "You know, I want you naked right now, Danielle," he said. I stood, and he frowned slightly. "Please, don't leave."

"No, silly, I'm not leaving." I pulled off the rest of my clothes and threw them to the floor, and he let out a low whistle.

"Holy shit," he said, gazing at my body, "You are gorgeous. If I was a painter, I'd paint you, but I'm not, and if I did paint you, it would look like shit, so I'm not going to, but ..."

"Oh Ethan," I said, slapping him on the shoulder. He chuckled, and I watched as he got up and pulled off his clothes as well. He walked toward me and then pulled me into his arms, my naked breasts pressed against his chest, and I frowned as he took my hand. "What are you doing?"

"I'm holding you close. I'm dancing with you naked."

"What?" I said, and then he started humming. "I know that song. Isn't that 'Tennessee Whiskey'?" I gasped as he continued singing, and I was surprised at the timbre of his voice. It was deep and melodic. "You can really sing," I said out loud.

"Don't be so shocked," he said as he twirled me around.

"You sing, and you dance?"

"I guess I do, ma'am," he said, winking at me.

"What are you, like the perfect gentleman or something?" I held a hand up and laughed. "Actually, I can answer that question myself. Definitely not the perfect gentleman."

"Maybe I haven't been in the past, but maybe I can be in the future," he said, grabbing my hand and holding it tightly again as we sashayed across the room. He continued singing, and I closed my eyes, feeling like I was in a movie, a movie that wouldn't be on ABC or CBS but definitely HBO Max. It felt nice. It felt intimate and sweet at the same time. "Open your eyes, Danielle."

"Why?" I said, blinking and looking at him.

"Because when I gaze into your pupils, I feel like I can see the entire world reflected at me."

"What?" I said, laughing. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I try to be romantic, but I'm a historian. I don't have anything romantic to say."

"Really? You're a professor. You've taken English classes, right?"

"Well, of course," he said.

"So you can't think of one romantic thing to say to me?"

"Well," he said, "I have one quote that I can completely butcher, but ..." He paused and shook his head. "No, I can't do that."

"What, what quote?"

"I was going to change a very famous historical quote to seem more romantic, but it just wouldn't be right."

"Tell me the quote."

"I'm sure you've heard it before in a movie or something."

"Ethan, just tell me." He stopped then and stared at me.

"Okay, here we go." He cleared his throat and then started speaking in a loud British accent, "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender." He stopped suddenly. "Winston Churchill," he said. "You knew that, right?"

"No." I laughed and shook my head. "What's that from?"

"It's a speech he gave during World War 2."

"Oh, okay." I nodded. "So you were going to change a quote from World

War 2 into a romantic one?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm an idiot, huh?"

"No, I'm not sure what you would've changed in that quote to make it romantic."

"I don't know either," he said, shaking his head. "I'm trying my best, though."

"You don't have to try with me, Ethan. I just like spending time with you. You can be who you are."

"Then I will tell you this," he said with a small smile, "Danielle, Danielle, you make me think of ice cream and lollipops and days gone by; you make me think of pie in the sky." I giggled then, and he bit down on his lower lip. "Okay, I'm not a great poet either."

"It's okay," I said, stepping forward. I looked down between his legs, and I saw that his cock was standing at attention. "You have other things that work well for you."

"Oh, I do, do I?" he said in a low voice, and I just licked my lips in response. "You have things that work for you as well," he said, stepping forward, and I felt his fingers on my belly. He moved them all the way down between my legs, and I gasped as he rubbed against my clit gently. "You already feel wet for me," he said as he slipped a finger inside, and I moaned out loud. As he fingered me hard and fast, I felt my body shaking, and I reached forward and held his shoulders.

"Oh my," I cried out, and he just grinned.

"I love how vocal you are, how responsive you are to me," he said, leaning down and kissing me hard. "Fuck, you're so sexy. You know that, Danielle?"

"Really? How sexy am I?"

"You're so sexy that I'm going to fuck you hard and fast right now, and then I'm going to do it all over again because I just can't get enough of you." He slipped his fingers out of me, and I watched as he pushed them into his mouth and sucked. "Fuck, you even taste amazing." He leaned forward and kissed me on the lips, and then I felt his arms picking me up and dropping me down on the mattress.

"Hey!" I said as he got on the mattress next to me. He moved over so he was on top of my body, and I looked up at him. There was a dark intensity in his eyes.

"I need to have you now," he said, reaching down. I spread my legs, and I

saw him positioning his cock at my opening.

"Oh fuck," I moaned as he slipped just the tip inside me. "Are you trying to drive me crazy?" I whimpered as he pulled out again.

"Only a little bit," he said, laughing. I felt him rubbing his cock back and forth before finally pushing inside me. I cried out as he leaned down and pushed his tongue inside my mouth. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and my fingers ran up and down his back.

"Oh my gosh, Ethan, what are you doing to me?"

"I can't talk right now," he grunted as he thrust into me harder and faster. My breasts bounced against his chest, and I knew that I could happily die like this. This was the best sex I'd ever had, and I didn't even care that he was someone I hadn't even known last week. I didn't even care that he might have been a sworn enemy of mine in another life. I didn't even care that he didn't trust Taytum or want her to be with his brother. At that moment, all I cared about was the feeling of him inside me, fucking me hard and fast. As I felt ready to climax, I gripped him.

"Fuck," he said, "this is unreal." And then we both came together, our bodies shaking as he continued plunging into me hard and fast. He rolled over once he'd come and then ran a finger down my chest lazily. "You're fucking hot, Danielle, and that was the best sex I've ever had." He reached over and idly played with a nipple and smiled at me sweetly with a sexy look in his eyes. "Give me five more minutes, and then you can be on top."

"You want me on top?" I asked, licking my lips.

"Oh yeah, baby. I want you to ride me like a fucking stallion."

Chapter 28

"SO WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME? BACK TO THE HAWTHORNE HOUSE?" I teased Ethan as we walked down Main Street.

"No. I thought I'd take you to my favorite pancake restaurant first."

"Oh?" I stared at him in surprise. "Pancakes, huh?"

"If you haven't figured it out yet, I kind of like them."

"I think you kind of love them." I giggled.

"You would be right about that." We walked in companionable silence to the pancake restaurant, and I smiled at the name, Have a Pancake Day.

"So could you eat pancakes for every meal?" I quizzed him.

"Could you not?" he said, and I chuckled.

"No, I don't think I could eat pancakes for every meal."

"What if it was crepes for some of those meals?"

"But are crepes technically a pancake?"

"I think they are," he said. "You could have regular pancakes for breakfast with maple syrup, and for lunch, you could have a crepe with cheese and ham and spinach. And then for dinner..."

"Oh, no. Not more pancakes for dinner as well," I said.

He laughed. "You know it sounds good."

"I don't know."

"So what's your favorite food?"

"I would say that my favorite food..." I paused. "Wow, I've never really thought about that before."

"No one's ever asked you what your favorite food is?" he asked me in surprise.

"No. Is that a question people often ask others?"

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I know that when I've gone on dates..."

"Hold up," I said and stared at him. "Is this a date?"

"Technically no, but kind of yes." He gave me the warmest, most handsome smile I'd ever seen from him. My heart exploded in happiness.

So this just wasn't sex. At least that was what I hoped. It was hard for me to admit that I was falling for him. I really liked him, and it didn't hurt that the sex was absolutely amazing.

I felt warm inside as I thought about the way he'd been staring at me this morning. The look on his face made me feel loved, and I knew it was stupid to feel that way because we didn't have love. We just had lust and passion and everything that made my body tingle.

"Hello, Danielle," he said softly, and I blinked.

"Sorry, what?"

"You were totally daydreaming about something."

"Yeah, I was just thinking about dutch oven pancakes," I said quickly, "with lots of apples."

"Really?" he said, his eyes wrinkling as he stared at me.

"Yeah. What else would I be thinking about?"

"I don't know. I was thinking..." He leaned forward and whispered into my ear, "I was thinking that perhaps you were remembering the way I felt inside you this morning."

My face went bright red at his words. "Ethan." I hit him in the shoulder.

"What? It's true, right?"

"No, of course not. I was not thinking about that. I..."

"I think you protest too much."

"No, I'm not."

"I'm just saying that it's okay, Danielle. I was thinking about it as well."

"Really?" I said, staring at him.

"Yeah. I was thinking about the way your pussy lips hugged my cock so tight." He bit down on his lower lip. "Fuck, I'm growing hard now just thinking about it."

"Ethan," I said, glaring at him.

He started laughing. "So I guess you're not into dirty talk, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Some women love it, and some women hate it, and you don't seem to be

loving it right now."

"This is neither the time nor the place for you to be talking about your C-O-C-K."

He burst out laughing even harder then. "You can say the word, you know."

I glared at him. "I'm not saying that in a pancake shop in the middle of the day."

"But maybe tonight you'll say it?" He winked at me, and I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"And I'll have you know, I don't mind dirty talk. I just prefer it in the bedroom."

"Ah, you're more of an action girl, huh?"

"Yeah, I would say so. I mean, all talk and no action makes Ethan a dull boy, right?" I winked at him, and he growled.

"You're making me harder than a tent pole right now," he said in a deep voice, and I just giggled. I didn't know why I thought it was funny or why I was feeling so turned on, but I was.

"So what are we doing after pancakes?" I asked him curiously.

"Well, I thought we could go to a local animal shelter and play with some dogs."

"Oh. Okay."

He grinned. "Okay, I have to admit. I volunteer at this animal shelter every time I'm in town. And it's something I normally do, but I figured you might enjoy it as well?"

"Yeah, it sounds really nice." I looked at him in surprise, and he gave me a look.

"What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"You just didn't strike me as the sort of person who would be into volunteering at animal shelters."

"Why? Because I'm really gruff?"

"Well, I wouldn't say gruff, but..."

"But what?"

"Yeah, I guess I didn't feel like you were the sort of person who would be into playing with dogs."

"I love dogs," he said. "In fact, I want to have three dogs and two cats and horses and goats and sheep."

"You do? When?"

"When I get married and have kids. I want my family to be warm and cozy and self-sufficient and..." He made a face. "Well, that's awkward."

"Why is that awkward?" I said to him as we sat down at a table.

"Me telling you about my plans for the future. What about you? Could you see yourself living on a farm?"

"You want to live on a farm?" I started laughing.

"What's so funny about that?"

"I just can't see you living on a farm."

"Why? Because I'm a history professor?"

"Kind of." I shrugged.

"Yeah, well, I've just always thought it would be cool. Don't get me wrong. I'm not going to be growing crops or anything to sell"—he started chuckling—"but lettuce, cucumbers, and whatever."

"Wow, that sounds cool. So..." I paused.

"Yes?"

"You're a history professor, right?"

"Yes."

"Can you list the presidents?"

"Of course I can list the presidents. I would hope every history teacher could list the presidents."

"Can you also name their vice presidents?"

"I think I can do that," he said with a smile.

"Really? You can list the presidents and their vice presidents?"

"Yeah. You can quiz me if you want."

"Okay. Tell me the first ten presidents and their vice presidents."

"Sure. I can tell you the years they were in office as well."

"No way," I said.

"Yeah way. Shall I start?"

"Go ahead, Ethan."

"Okay, so from 1789 through 1797, we had President George Washington. His first lady was Martha Washington, and his vice president was John Adams. Then from 1797 to 1801, we had President John Adams. Yes, you heard that correctly. His first lady was Abigail Adams, and his vice president was Thomas Jefferson."

"Thomas Jefferson was a vice president before he was president? Wow, I had no clue."

"I take it you weren't a history geek?"

"No, I wasn't," I said, laughing. "Continue, though."

"Okay then." He smiled. "From 1801 to 1805, we had Thomas Jefferson. His wife, Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson, had actually died before Jefferson assumed office. His vice president was Aaron Burr, which you probably heard of if you've ever seen Hamilton or listened to the Hamilton soundtrack."

"Oh my God, I love the Hamilton soundtrack. I can't believe I never got to see it. I really need to see it."

"Yeah, you do. Maybe one day we can go." I stared at him in surprise for a few seconds. Was he talking about us having a relationship outside this Christmas holiday, outside of the pretend relationship?

"Continue," I said quickly, not wanting to think too much about what he'd said.

"And then from 1805 to 1809, we had Thomas Jefferson again, but he had a different vice president," he continued. "He had George Clinton."

"Was George Clinton related to Bill Clinton?" I asked, and he just chuckled and shook his head.

"Then from 1809 to 1812, we had James Madison, who was married to Dolly Madison, and George Clinton was the vice president for him as well."

"Okay, hold up. Hold up. It seems like you really do know everyone, but how do I know you haven't just memorized it?"

"I suppose you don't know."

"I'm going to give you a year," I said quickly, "and then you have to tell me who was president. Okay?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Okay. 1897."

He paused for a few seconds. "Hmm. 1897. That would be President William McKinley, and his vice president was..." He paused. "Garret A. Hobart."

"Wow. Okay, 1905."

"That would be President Theodore Roosevelt, also known as Teddy Roosevelt, and his vice president was Charles W. Fairbanks."

"Okay, and 1953."

"Well ending out 1953, we had Harry Truman, then taking the commandership from him was Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had a very infamous vice president. I wonder if you can guess," he asked me.

"I have no clue."

"Come on, Danielle. Think hard."

"I don't know. JJ Simmons?"

"Who?" he said, laughing out loud.

"I told you I don't know. That was just a guess."

"Richard Nixon."

"Oh. I thought he was president."

"He was president from 1969 through 1973, well actually through '74, but he was vice president under Dwight D. Eisenhower."

"Wow. You really are a nerd, aren't you?"

"I guess some people might call me that, though I have to say on Rate My Professor, my average rating is a 3.5."

"Only 3.5? That sucks. I never would've taken a class with a professor with a rating of 3.5."

"Well, then I guess you never would've been lucky enough to have me."

"What do your students say?"

"They call me a hard-ass," he said, grinning, "but I like to push them. Makes them really want to learn, you know?"

"Sure. I guess so."

"So, Danielle, tell me about you. What makes you tick? What makes you come alive?"

"What makes me tick and come alive?" I repeated after him. "I guess, well, I like to travel, though I haven't traveled as much as I wanted to. My friendship with Taytum is amazing. I love how we can discuss our fears and our joys and our dreams and hopes."

"What's one of your dreams?" he asked me.

"I know this will sound crazy, but one of my dreams is to run the New York Marathon."

"That doesn't sound crazy," he said. "Have you ever applied?"

"No. I can barely run a mile."

"But you want to run the New York Marathon?" He looked confused now.

"Yeah. I didn't say it was an attainable goal."

"It could be attainable if you wanted it to be," he said softly.

"I know." He leaned forward and grabbed my hands and squeezed my fingers, and I stared at him in surprise. "What is it?"

"Can I ask you a question, Danielle?"

"Of course. You've been asking me questions."

"Is the reason you don't want Taytum to be with Noah because you're worried you'll lose her if this is real?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, surprised at his astuteness. I shrugged slightly and looked down at the table. "I don't know. Maybe. Yeah, in a way. I'm also worried that your brother's going to break her heart, but..."

"He hasn't really given you a reason to worry, right?"

"Yeah, well, I want to say that Taytum hasn't given you a reason to think she's a gold digger."

"True." He nodded. "Aside from the fact that she lied and pretended."

"We know why she lied."

"Okay." He nodded. "And you're right. I don't know. But my brother comes from substantial wealth and..."

I sighed. "You just aren't going to get it."

"I don't want to argue," he said quickly. "Can we change the subject?" I stared at him for a few seconds, feeling incensed and wanting to protect my best friend from him slandering her name, but I nodded because I didn't want to ruin this moment. We were getting to know each other on a deep level, a level that I hadn't even hit with guys I dated for months.

"You know what I like about you, Danielle?"

"No. What?"

"I like that you're yourself. I like that you're feisty. I like that you stick up for your best friend. I like that you wear funky earrings and don't care what anyone else has to say about them. I like that you're sweet and you're kind and you're smart and..." He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I just wanted to say that I like you."

"I like you too, Ethan St. James."

"Well, look at us getting all sentimental in the holiday season."

"Look at us indeed," I said, smiling.

"Why are we back at the Hawthorne House? I thought you said we weren't going to come back here," I asked him quizzically as we walked into the garden and toward the tree again.

"I figured we could see the beauty of the gardens in the late afternoon."

"Okay," I said, nodding. It had been a long, fun day. We'd explored pretty much the entire town, and I'd really gotten to know Ethan, what he liked and didn't like, and we'd had so much fun. We'd had ice cream and donuts. We'd gone to the park and swung on the swings. He'd taken me to a bookstore and bought me a book of poems by William Wordsworth, who he said was his

favorite poet. We'd kissed on Main Street next to a grocery store, and some kids had laughed at us. He'd just waved at them and stared at me. And I stared back at him at his handsome face, and I couldn't help but feel special. I couldn't help but feel caught up in the magic of it all.

"Come," he said as we walked over to the tree.

"It's a beautiful tree," I said, "though I did say this yesterday as well."

"I know." And then he got down on one knee, and my jaw dropped.

"What are you doing, Ethan? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he whispered. "Just go along with it."

"Go along with what?" And then my heart sank because I heard clapping. I looked over my shoulder, and there was Taytum with the kids. And then next to her was Noah and Wes and Dylan and Gia and his parents and Lulu, and I could feel my face going white. "What's going on, Ethan?" I said quickly.

He looked up at me, his eyes shining. "Danielle," he said so loudly that I almost felt like we were on a TV show. And then I saw a flash of lights about five feet away from us. A photographer was taking our photos.

"Ethan, what's going on?" I said quickly.

"Danielle," he said again, "we have not known each other for even a week, yet we have a connection. We have something that money can't buy. We're soul mates. We're lovers. We were destined to be, and I wanted to take this opportunity with my entire family here to ask you to be my wife, my one and only. I knew from the moment..." His voice cracked then, and I bit down on my lower lip. This could not be happening to me.

"Ethan," I said.

He shook his head. "I knew from the moment that I met you, you were special. Will you marry me, Danielle? Will you make me the happiest man in the world?"

I didn't know what to say. I felt like I wanted to freeze up and die. This could not be happening.

"Danielle." Ethan's eyes widened, and he nodded to his family. "You know what you have to do," he said under his breath, and I realized this was just part of the game. This was part of his plan.

I nodded as I looked at Taytum. I had to do this for my best friend. She had to see how ridiculous it was for her to rush into a relationship so soon after a horrible relationship.

"I do," I said. Ethan jumped up and pulled me into his arms. I felt his lips

crushing down on mine, and the family cheered around us. He kissed me passionately, but I found it hard to kiss him back. It didn't feel special. It felt like an act. Had the whole day been an act? Had him showing me around town and getting to know me and acting silly been part of the plan all along?

"She said yes, everyone." He held my hand up and beamed at me. I stared at his family members, and I could see happy and confused expressions on everyone's face. I looked at Taytum to see how she would feel, and though she was smiling, I could see slight confusion on her face as well. She looked over at Noah, and he looked down at her and shrugged.

"Welcome to the family, Danielle." Wes stepped forward and gave me a big hug. "I didn't think I'd be saying that to you or anyone else within a week of meeting them, but hey. I know you, and I like you, so I guess it was meant to be."

Chapter 29

"WHAT DID YOU DO, ETHAN?" I CHASTISED HIM AS WE WALKED BACK TO THE house, his family behind us.

He was holding my hand, and I so wanted to pull my hand away from him, but I didn't want his parents or anyone else to say anything.

"What do you mean what was I doing? You agreed we'd get engaged."

"I did not expect you to propose at the Hawthorne House in front of your entire family. You made me look like an idiot."

"What?" He frowned as he looked down at me. "Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad. I'm just ..."

"This is the plan, right? We pretend we're in love. We pretend we're going to get married so that Noah and Taytum can look at their own relationship and realize how stupid they're being in moving so fast."

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, and I could feel the anger taking over. I pulled my hand away from him.

"Oh my gosh. You're not mad, are you?"

"I'm not mad. Why would I be mad?"

"Is it because you don't like the ring?"

He nodded to my finger, and I stared at the diamond ring he'd placed on it.

"Where did you even get this ring from?" I asked him, not wanting to admit just how much I loved it.

If we were really going to get married, I would want this exact ring, but I wasn't going to tell him that.

"I went out yesterday," he said with a small shrug.

"But we went out yesterday, and I didn't see you buying any rings."

"Ah well, can't tell you all my secrets."

"So you're not going to tell me when you got the ring?"

"Does it matter?" he asked, his eyes gazing at mine curiously.

He reached to try to take my hand again, and I shook my head.

"Don't, Ethan."

"What, you're saying you don't like my touch anymore?"

"I'm saying that I'm mad at you. I'm saying that you sprang this on me. I'm saying this is ridiculous. Was the entire day just a joke? A farce?"

"What do you mean was the entire day a farce?"

"When you took me out and showed me all those places and... Nothing. It doesn't matter."

He shrugged. "Is it that time of the month?" he asked, and I gawked at him.

"Oh no, you did not just say that."

He held his hands up quickly. "Oh my God. I'm sorry. It was a joke. I know women don't like it when you say that."

"Really? It didn't seem like a joke to me, Ethan St. James."

"It was a poor joke. I'm not Dave Chappelle or Adam Sandler. I don't have good timing or whatever," he said quickly.

"Uh-huh."

"So, guys, shall we have some champagne when we get inside?" Wes asked as we finally reached the house.

"Yeah, that sounds great," Ethan said and looked at me. "You're okay with champagne, right?"

"Yeah, sure. I'm just going to go to my room for a little bit if you don't mind."

"Sure," Ethan said.

"Hey, I'll come with you." Taytum's voice sounded from behind me.

"Hey, it's okay. You don't have to if you want to stay with Noah for a little bit."

"No, I want to come with you," she said, and I could see a weird expression on her face.

"Okay. If you want to come with me so you can wash your face too. That's what I plan on doing."

"No, I want to come because I want to talk," she said.

I stared at her, and I could tell that my tone hurt her. "Sounds good," I

said. "Come on."

We walked to my room, and as soon as I closed my door, Taytum blinked at me. "What is going on, Danielle?"

"What do you mean?"

"You and Ethan."

"Yeah. What about us?"

"You couldn't stand the guy. You were arguing with the guy."

"He couldn't stand me. I doubt he's really going to have his arms open for my best friend."

"Yet you just got engaged?"

"What can I say? Love is a funny thing, right?" I gave her a pointed look.

"Yeah. I guess it is." She gave me a quick hug and then smiled widely. "I'm just so happy for you. I cannot believe we both found love."

I gawked at her. I couldn't believe what she'd said. That was all she'd had to say to me, and she'd swallowed my crap just like that? Was she really that far gone?

We heard a knock on the door. "Hello?" I said.

"It's me," Ethan said.

I sighed and walked to the door. "Yeah. So can I..." I saw Noah standing behind him. "Oh, hey."

"Hey," he said, "can we come in?"

"Sure. If you want to." I nodded. "Taytum and I were just chatting."

"Sounds good."

Noah cleared his throat. "So that was a little bit of a surprise."

"What was?" Ethan said, giving him an innocent look.

"You two getting engaged," Noah said.

He walked over to Taytum and put his arms around her waist. Taytum looked at me. "Come on, you have to admit that was fast, Danielle."

"You guys got together quickly as well."

"True," she said with a small smile.

"So Taytum and I think that while it's great you guys have found each other, it just seems like maybe you're not..."

"We're not what?" I blurted, scared he was going to say we weren't good actors or we weren't fooling anyone.

"We just want to make sure that you're not rushing into anything," he said. "Getting married is a decision that should take a lot of thought and—"

"Yeah, aren't you and Taytum practically engaged?" Ethan cut him off.

"You guys barely know each other. You don't really know if she's a gold digger, which I'm sure she's not."

"I'm not a gold digger," Taytum said, looking hurt.

"He knows you're not a gold digger," I said quickly. "He's just joking. But he's not a good comedian. He's not the next Dave Chappelle or anything."

Ethan looked over at me then and grinned. "I wonder where I've heard that one before."

"I wonder, too," I said, glaring at him.

"Guys, I think you're both amazing," Noah said. "Obviously, I don't know you that well, Danielle, but if you're best friends with Taytum, I'm sure you must be amazing."

"Thanks, I guess," I said, laughing.

"And I just want to say I support you guys, but I wondered if you guys are planning on getting married right away or if you were going to wait?"

"Why do you care?" Ethan said.

"Because I just want to make sure you guys know what you're doing," Noah continued.

Taytum looked over at him. "Yeah, we just want to make sure."

"Really, Taytum? That's not what you said to me five seconds ago," I pointed out.

"I'm worried. It's just not like you, Danielle."

Ethan cleared his throat. "Well, you guys seem to have moved fast, and you don't have a problem with that."

Noah stood there for a couple of seconds and just stared at us. "Look, guys, I'm going to be the first one to tell you that I understand what it is to fall in love at first sight. I understand what it is to look at someone and know they're the one. They're your one and only." He stared down at Taytum. "Sometimes when you know, you know. Isn't that right, darling?"

Taytum looked up at him. "I agree," she said, nodding.

"Noah is not like anyone I've ever met before in my life, and if Danielle has that with Ethan, well, I support them one hundred percent."

She smiled at me sweetly. I looked at her and tried to smile back, but I couldn't. I could feel tears coming from my eyes. This was not going as planned. I looked over at Ethan, and he had a weird expression on his face as he stared at me.

"Yeah," he said, "when you know, you know, I guess."

I bit down on my lower lip. It was time to end this fast. It was time to tell

them that we wanted to break them up. That we thought they were moving too fast and wanted them to reevaluate their own relationship. But I couldn't. I didn't know how to because I knew in my heart that I had fallen for Ethan. Even though I'd agreed to a plan to break up this other relationship, I knew I loved him.

Couldn't believe it. I had fallen in love with someone I barely knew. He made me feel alive. He made me feel wanted. He made me feel loved. He made me feel like the only woman in the world, and I guess it was karma because this whole charade was breaking my heart. They wouldn't be negatively affected by a St. James brother. It was me. I had fucked up. I'd fallen for the man who had told me it was just a pretense, and now I didn't know what to do.

Chapter 30

"ON CHRISTMAS EVE, MY PARENTS LOVE FOR US TO SING CHRISTMAS carols," Ethan said as we made our way to the living room.

"Oh, that's really nice." I nodded, not able to look at him.

"Hey, is everything okay? You haven't been acting the same since a couple of days ago when we talked with Noah and Taytum in my room."

"I just don't think this is a good idea, Ethan," I said, shaking my head. "I don't want to pretend anymore, and I feel like we made a mistake. It feels really icky to be lying to my best friend, and I'm surprised you aren't ashamed to lie to your brother."

He stared at me for a couple of seconds. "So you're saying you don't want to kiss me anymore?"

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that—"

"Are you saying you don't want me to touch you or play with your hair or make love to you?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. Were his lips twitching? Was he laughing at me? "What is your problem, Ethan St. James? I'm telling you that —"

"You're telling me that what?"

"I don't want to pretend." I pulled the ring off my finger and gave it to him. "Look, I don't want to be in this fake relationship or engagement or whatever it is. I want to tell Taytum the truth about everything. We messed up. It was a stupid idea, and maybe we don't have to pretend anymore." Stepping closer to me and grabbing my hands, he said, "Maybe we can make it real."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, staring at him.

"You drive me crazy, Danielle. You know that, right?"

"You drive me crazy," I shouted at him. "You're the—"

"No, I mean it in a good way." He cut me off and pressed his lips against mine. We stopped outside of the living room.

"Wait, what do you mean, you mean it in a good way?"

"I understand what Noah was saying," he said, pausing, his eyes warm as he gazed at me. From inside the room, I could hear the kids singing, "Jingle bells, jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin flew away."

I giggled slightly. "They're so cute. We should go into the room."

"No, not yet." He grabbed my hands to stop me from going inside. "We need to talk."

"Talk about what, Ethan? We're always talking, but we don't need to anymore. I think your brother's a good guy."

"He is," Ethan said.

"Yeah. And Taytum is a good girl. She deserves someone good. And she's not a gold digger, so just leave them alone, okay?"

"I know she's not a gold digger," he said softly.

My eyes widened. "Oh, and how do you know?"

"I know because you told me."

"I've been telling you."

"I know, but I didn't know your character in the beginning. I know your character now."

"Okay. And what? So now you believe me?"

"Yeah. I believe everything you say. I trust you."

"Okay." My heart was racing now, and I didn't know why.

"I know we haven't known each other for a long time, and I know this has been a crazy whirlwind of an experience. Maybe we've rushed into things, but perhaps that's not such a bad thing."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, and I know this might sound crazy, but I don't want the ring back, Danielle."

"What? You want me to keep the ring?"

"Yeah, and maybe we're not ready to be engaged, but look at it as a promise ring."

"What?" I stared at him. "We're not teenagers in the eighties."

"Yeah. Well, do we have to be?" He pulled me into his arms. "Danielle, I

might just be a history professor and someone who doesn't really know what love is or what love means. And maybe I've been jaded in the past, but I'm falling for you. Really and truly falling for you. In fact, I'd go so far as to say I have fallen for you. I love you. I love everything about you. When I took you out and showed you around town, it was because I wanted to see if you liked the places I liked, and I wanted to know your favorite ice cream, and if you could eat pancakes with me any time of the day, and if you'd swing in the swings without being embarrassed. I think we're soul mates. There's not one thing I don't like about you. There's not one thing I would change."

"You don't even know me, Ethan."

"I know enough to know you're mine, and I'm yours, and I don't want to spend a day without you." My breath caught, and I could tell from his expression that he was being honest. And I knew in my heart and in my head that I wanted that, too.

"You're serious, Ethan?" I said, reaching up and touching the side of his face. He nodded and smiled at me.

"I'm as serious as I've ever been. But don't keep me waiting. How do you feel?"

"I love you too," I said softly. "I really love you." I bit down on my lower lip. "I feel like I sound like such a hypocrite and crazy and—"

"Why?"

"We're both hypocrites. Don't you see that, Ethan? We were both going on and on about Noah and Taytum falling for each other so fast, but look at us. We've fallen even faster."

"My brother was right. When you know, you know," he said softly. "I've always heard of love at first sight, but I didn't know if it was real until I met you."

"You did not fall in love with me at first sight. You wanted to send me packing back to New York City," I said, laughing.

"No. My heart burst into a million pieces as soon as I saw you. You changed me. You changed the way I think. You changed the way I see life. You changed the way I communicate, which is crazy to say, but it's true. You make me a better man, Danielle, and I want to be the best man for you."

"We're crazy, aren't we?" I said, leaning forward and kissing him. I wrapped my arms around him, and he kissed me back hard.

"I love you so much, Danielle."

"And I love you too."

"What's going on out there?" Wes came to the door. "You guys aren't making out again. Come on. We're singing Christmas carols."

"We're coming," Ethan said, chuckling as he pulled back from me. "I was just telling Danielle how much I love her."

"Oh, my gosh, you two are crazy." He shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"But I'm glad. I knew from the first moment I met Danielle on the train that she would be perfect for you."

"What?" I said, my jaw dropping as I stared at him. "You did not think that." "Trust me," he said with a smile, "I did. I thought you were amazing, and I thought you would be a perfect match for Ethan. And I am so glad that you guys have connected. I can't lie, it's fast, but I guess the St. James men fall quickly."

"Do they, though?" Ethan said, laughing, and we all looked over at Dylan and Gia whispering about something in the corner.

"Just because they haven't realized they're in love doesn't mean they're not in love," Wes said in a low voice. And we all nodded and smiled.

"I really hope they figure it out soon, though," I said softly. "They're perfect for each other."

"Not as perfect as you are for me," Ethan said as he held my hand, and we walked into the living room.

"There you guys are," Mrs. St. James said. "What song shall we sing next? Do you have any favorites, Danielle?"

"I really like 'Hark the Herald,'" I said.

"Me, too," Ethan said with a small smile. "I used to sing that all the time when I was younger, didn't I, Mom?"

"Yes, you did," she said with a warm smile. "I guess that's why you're soul mates." I looked over at Ethan, and he looked at me, and at that moment, I knew this was my person, my lobster, my one and only.

Ethan St. James was the man I had been waiting for my entire life, and I'd met him when I'd least expected to. I looked over and saw Taytum and Noah staring at me with wide smiles, and I knew I would have to tell her everything later tonight. And I knew she'd understand because she was my best friend. She knew I only wanted the best for her, and I knew she only wanted the best for me.

And I felt a slight thrill in me as I realized in my core that we would be sisters. We would be family. I looked around the room and realized I was happier than I'd ever been. These crazy, lovable people were going to be my

new family. I looked up at Ethan. "I love you," I mouthed, and he grinned down at me.

"I love you more," he said.

He whispered, "And I can't wait to fuck you rotten tonight. Promise me one thing." I felt myself blushing as I looked up at him.

"What do you want me to promise you?" I asked him with a soft smile on my face.

"From here on out, we sleep in the same room. I don't want to go another day without waking up next to you in the morning."

"Okay," I said softly. "I promise." I kissed him on the cheek, and he beamed at me as if he was the happiest man in the world. And at that moment, I realized it didn't matter how long you knew someone. When someone was the one for you, they were the one, and nothing could ever stop that.

The End

Thank you for reading Cocoa, Ivy, and Ethan St. James. I hope you enjoyed it. Please [join my mailing list](#) to never miss any of my books.

Enjoy a teaser from my upcoming book, Thirty Day Boss below. Preorder on [Amazon](#), Apple Books, Nook, Kobo.

Chapter One Simon

Are you nearly here?

Simon, I'm waiting in the bed with barely anything on. 😊

I'm naked, if you don't know what that means.

I stared at the texts from Louisa and stopped myself from responding with something rude. The last thing I needed was for another employee of mine to go to HR complaining that I'd spoken to them disrespectfully. Though, even HR had to agree that it was better for me to turn down women in a blunt way than to sleep with them. Not that even one of my employees had given me credit for that fact. They heard the rumors

and assumed they could get me into bed. They didn't realize that I, Simon Cambridge, never mixed business with pleasure. It just wasn't the way to get ahead and be successful. And I was very successful. Growing up as I had, money was very important to me. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I hadn't had anything given to me. I wasn't a trust fund kid or Ivy league educated bro. I'd sweated and literally bled for everything I had and I wasn't going to have my empire taken down by a hot chick in a short skirt. Not that I never indulged in anything pleasurable. Many of my Friday nights were spent quite indecently indeed.

I got a new toy that I want you to try on me.
Mr. Cambridge...I can send you a photo if you want.

*T*hat one made me pause. I was a red-blooded man, after all. Who didn't want to see naked photos? My phone pinged as another photo came through, and I stopped dead on the street as I stared at the explicit photo.

Within seconds a warm body bumped into me from behind, and I felt the nasty shock of hot liquid running down the back of my shirt, towards my gym shorts, and down my calves.

"Watch where you're going," I growled as I turned around to see who had knocked into me. I looked down into an annoyed face with an upturned nose and angry brown eyes.

"I should watch where I'm going?" She gawked at me as she looked down at her spilled coffee cup. "You're the one that just stopped dead in the middle of the street."

"You should have been following far enough behind that my stopping wouldn't have affected you." I crossed my arms. "You ever heard of the rules of the road?"

"Do I look like a car?" She spat out distastefully as she glared at me. I looked her up and down and realized that she was actually quite cute. She had a pretty face, even if her curly dark hair looked a bit of a mess. She was wearing a Survivor shirt and a pair of black leggings with hot pink sneakers. It was then that I noticed her coffee had spilled on her as well.

“Do I have to answer that?” I shot back at her as I lifted up my wet shirt. “You owe me a new shirt and a cleaning bill for this one.”

“You owe me a new coffee.” She stared at me pointedly as my phone beeped. “Sounds like you never heard of don’t text and walk...” She licked her lips, and I noticed that they were pink and plump. “If you hadn’t been looking at your phone, this never would have happened.”

“If you hadn’t been all up in what I was doing, you could have stepped to the side.” I raised an eyebrow at her as I glanced down at my phone. It was Louisa again. I sighed. I was going to have to speak to HR. I didn’t need this harassment.

“Sounds like your wife wants to know where you are.”

“I don’t have a wife.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” The woman beside me smirked as if she knew a secret that I didn’t. I hated to admit it, but this little firehouse had me intrigued. She was totally not my type, and I didn’t like her bad attitude, but she was so different from the women I normally came across,

“I suppose your husband thinks you’re a catch.” I stared at her empty ring finger. “Oh wait, no husband.”

“Maybe I’m not wearing my ring.” She blinked at me.

“I doubt it.” I chuckled. “Now the question becomes, do you have a boyfriend?”

“Not that that’s any of your business, but yes, I do. Travis and I are very happy.”

“Travis, huh?” I felt a twinge of disappointment at her admission. Not that I cared in any intrinsic way, of course. A woman like her would equal headache, in whatever capacity of your life, she was in.

“Yes, Travis Van...” She paused. “Well, I’m not telling you his full name.”

“Uh-huh.” I looked at my watch. I was late for the gym. I always liked to arrive at 7 pm and then work out for an hour before doing some more work. “Well, I have to get going.”

“Twenty dollars, please.” She grabbed a hold of my arm and then dropped it quickly as she realized what she’d done.

“Twenty dollars for what?” I stared down at her. “Are you crazy?”

“For me to get another coffee.”

“Coffee is four bucks, lady. What is this, a shakedown?”

“Actually, it was \$9. I got a hot mocha, double espresso with a pump of

caramel.” She licked her lips again, and I wanted to ask her if she needed me to buy her some chapstick or something. But I didn’t want her to realize that I was checking out her lips every instance that I got.

“That sounds like a really healthy drink...” I grinned at her and her eyes flashed at me. For a few moments, I thought she was going to say something snide to me in response, but instead she started laughing.

“My best friend Anabella is always on at me about my drink orders.” She shrugged. “I figure I might as well enjoy what I’m eating and drinking before I die, right?”

“I hope you’re not dying anytime soon?” I internally chastised myself for being rude to her. If she told me she only had months to live I would write her a check for ten thousand dollars.

“Oh I hope not.” She looked aghast. “I’m not sick, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good,” I said with a nod, ignoring the pleased feeling inside my stomach. I didn’t know this woman. Her lifespan was none of my business.

“So, about my drink...” She looked up at me, a challenge in her eyes.

“About my \$250 t-shirt.” I said, looking down at the coffee stain on my white t-shirt. I lifted it up and looked at my skin. “And the third-degree burn you gave me.”

“What?” Her jaw dropped and I could see the panic in her eyes. “Look, you’re the idiot that stopped in the middle of the street, it’s not my fault that...” Her voice trailed off as I gave her my most intimidating stare. I was enjoying this little moment. She wasn’t wrong that I’d likely caused the kerfuffle between us, but I wasn’t going to admit that. A businessman never admitted his faults. My phone pinged again and a brilliant idea crossed my mind. I answered the phone and handed it to the girl in front of me.

“Answer that please,” I said softly, and she blinked at me in confusion as she took the phone. “You won’t have to pay for my top if you just have the most obnoxious attitude you can muster.”

“Hello,” She said as she shook her head, her eyes staring into mine with genuine humor. “This is Gemma, who is this?”

Gemma. I stared at her face. The name suited her. Gemma. A woman who wasn’t even attempting to flirt with me. Gemma. A woman whose mouth was bound to get her into a lot of trouble one day. And preferably with me.

“Louisa, who?” Gemma rolled her eyes at me. “Who am I? Who are

you?”

I grinned at the attitude in her voice. She seemed to really be getting into the role.

“I’ve never heard of you before in my life Louisa.” She sneered into the phone. “How do I know who?” She blinked. “Simon Canbridge?” I pointed at myself quickly, and she made a face. “Oh you mean Simmo?” She purred into the phone. “My Saturday night lover and dom.” She winked at me as my jaw dropped. “Sorry he’s Simmo to me and I’m pussy cat to him.” She paused and then purred into the phone. I had to admit that the sound turned me on slightly. “Louisa darling, be a doll and leave Simmo alone. It’s not that I mind about sharing...” She looked me up and down. “Because I don’t. But Simmo, well, he has erectile issues. And I’d really hate for my nights with him to go from ten minutes of pleasure to five.” She grinned wickedly at me then and I just shook my head. Gemma had taken the call in a direction I hadn’t seen coming. She pulled the phone away from her ear and rolled her eyes. “You have a crazy lady on the other side of this phone. Do you want me —.”

“Nope.” I snatched the phone back from her and pressed end. Hopefully, Louisa got the hint that her psycho stalker ways would not work on me.

“You just hung up on her?” Gemma’s eyebrows rose. “That was rude.”

“Was it, pussy cat?”

“Don’t call me that.” She made a face. “You’re an arrogant jerk.”

“You’re a clumsy lady with a big mouth who...” I paused as I saw her gearing up for us to argue again. I held my hands up in the air. “But all is well that ends well.”

“It didn’t end well for me.” She sighed. “I still have no coffee and...” She paused as I opened my wallet and pulled out a hundred-dollar note, and handed it to her. “That’s too much.”

“I don’t carry notes smaller than that.” I shrugged.

“What?” She blinked at me in surprise.

“So enjoy your next week’s worth of coffee on me and try not to spill it on any more guys.”

“Hopefully, no guys just stop in the middle of the street to...” She paused. “Anyway, I’ve said my peace. I will be on my way now.”

“It was nice to make your acquaintance, Gemma.” I offered her a small smile and laughed as she shook her head.

“I wish I could say the same, but then I’d be lying.” She shrugged.

“Goodbye, Simon, may we never meet again.” Her brown eyes stared into mine for a few seconds and she blinked a few times as if she were deciding if she wanted to continue her slaughter of words against me. I found myself laughing as she walked away from me and wondered if I was losing my touch with women. Women never responded to me in the way this Gemma had. They were usually all over me. I wasn’t sure how I felt about her attitude towards me; not that it mattered. It was very unlikely that I’d ever see her again. I was about to call out to her, when my phone started ringing. As soon as I saw that it was one of my venture capital partners, my brain switched into business mode. The number one focus in my life was always business. It had to be. It had been the one constant in my life that had improved everything and I was never going to let anything stop me from having hyperfocus. I’d worked too hard to get to this point in my life. I’d done it even though the odds had been against me.

Preorder on [Amazon](#), Apple Books, Nook, Kobo.

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Jaimie
XOXO