

FOR YOU,
Mr. Jones



HOLLY WHITWORTH

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This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters,
places, events, and incidents are products of the
author's imagination.

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*This one is for me.
It's for the anxiety I no longer deal with. It's for the
growth I've made as an author. And it's for the book
I've always wanted to read.
I wrote it myself.*

Chapter One

Decker

Straightening my gray tie, I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. My sandy blonde hair is still intact from this morning, and my pressed navy suit with a crisp white button-up still looks like I just put it on. Perfection is something I strive for because maintaining a certain level of professionalism is important to me.

As I walk out of my bathroom and into my office, I notice my assistant, Greta, gathering her things for her last day here at Men's Shape magazine. She's been with me the whole two years I've been here. She's retiring and looking forward to spending time with her grandchildren. She said not to worry and that I'd be in great hands with my next assistant. But I'll believe it when I see it.

After gathering her things, she stands in the doorframe. Her short brown hair is behind her ears, and her dark-rimmed glasses are hanging on the tip of her nose.

“The guys are meeting you at The Bar in ten minutes.”

“Thanks, Greta,” I say.

It's a Friday night, and I meet with my former football buddies. We catch up while drinking a few beers. It's the only time I get out, and Greta always likes to ensure I don't miss it. She knows how much I need the time out of the office. If it weren't for her, I'd spend these Friday nights in my office working towards a better future for the magazine.

Taking an envelope off my desk, I meet Greta in the doorway. Handing it over to her, I say, “Here's a little happy retirement gift.”

Smiling, she takes it, “You shouldn't have.”

“Well, you deserve it. Thank you.” I smile slightly.

If I gave hugs, I would give her one right now. But that isn't me, and she knows.

She gives me one last smile before walking over and grabbing the small brown box of items she had on her desk. Greta was the best; I'm not sure the person she picked for her position can live up to my exact expectations. Whoever they are, she decided on them, knowing what I needed.

I watch as Greta makes her way down the hallway between the glass walls of other offices and presses the elevator button one last time. Once she enters, I walk back into my office to shut down my computer for the day.

The Bar is just down the sidewalk from the building, but I know I'll be late. The guys always wait for me, knowing I sometimes don't want to show, but we made a deal. Once I retired from playing football, we said we would have a specific day of the week to keep in touch. They chose Fridays, knowing it was the only night of the week they weren't playing during football season.

Taking my coat from over the back of the black leather sofa in my office, I slide it on before throwing a scarf over it. The weather here in New York City this early in December is already freezing, and I'm waiting for the snow to start falling. It's the only magical thing about this time of year, and it hasn't happened yet.

Turning off the lamp, the only light in my office, before leaving, I realize I'm again the only person here. It always seems to be the same every Friday night. You'd think meeting the guys would change that, but it hasn't. One day, maybe, when there's something to look forward to in my life besides work.

Once out of the office building, I walk down the sidewalk toward The Bar. Sometimes I think my life is lonely when I take these walks on

Friday nights, but then I'm reminded that I don't have much time to find that person. Even if I did, she probably wouldn't enjoy the amount of time I spend working.

When I walk into The Bar, I spot the guys at the same table we always sit at when we're here. Grady is the first to see me and throws me a wave. I walk over to the booth.

"Well, if it isn't Decker Jones. We were beginning to think you were going to be a no-show," Grady says, throwing his arm over the back of the booth with a smirk.

"Trust me, I thought about it," I say, sliding out of my coat and scarf before throwing them beside Jennings who is too busy on his phone to notice.

Taking the open seat beside Grady, I look over at Jennings, who looks frustrated while talking.

Pointing at him, I ask, "Who's he talking to?"

Grady looks up, "His mom. She hoped he'd come home for Christmas, and he's refusing again."

Jennings Johnson, starting quarterback for the New York Knights, will do anything not to see his family. I know this because he's my best friend and has been for years. Our friendship began when we got drafted for the Knights the same year. All the times throughout the years that I've told him he'll regret never seeing them, it still doesn't work. I'd do anything to see a loved one during the holiday season.

The waitress comes by to drop off three tall beers from the tap before walking away. Jennings gets off the phone, puts it on the table, and then takes a large drink from his beer. I don't want to mention his conversation with his mother, knowing he dislikes talking about it with me.

"How was Greta's last day?" Jennings asks, setting down his glass.

Grady's jaw drops, "Wait, today was Greta's last day."

"I will miss her," I say before taking a drink.

"Dude, she's seventy. It's about time you let her go," Grady says.

"So, who's filling her position?" Jennings asks, smiling.

Greta hired her replacement, and I haven't got a clue as to who it is. I put her in charge of the applications and hiring process, knowing she would hire the right person. Greta told me the woman picked had been given notes for preparation. So, I assume she will be ready to go on Monday morning.

"Her name is Annie Walsh. That's all I know," I take another sip.

"Annie? My bet is she's Greta's age," Grady says.

Secretly I hope she's her age because I don't have time for someone young who isn't going to know anything. The new girl will need to know her way around the office and my schedule.

"How's the season going?" I ask to change the subject.

"Pfft, like you don't already know. We suck this year, thanks to me," Grady says before taking a large drink from his glass.

Grady hasn't been playing his best this season since returning from an ACL injury last year. I know that bothers him when I watch them play, but he won't admit it. He's a wide receiver and was the best in the league when we played together two years ago. I know once Grady fully heals, he'll be back to playing like he once did.

"Chill, Grady. We're a team and play as a team, which means it's not exactly all your fault. But mostly, yes, it is," Jennings says before laughing.

"Your passes are shit, Jennings. Maybe we would win more than three games if you weren't thinking about who you're taking home after the game and focused on the actual game," Grady points his finger at Jennings.

“How about you both chill?” I blurt out.

Crossing my arms, I lean back against the cushion of the booth. Grady and Jennings both stop talking and give me a look. I already know what’s coming from them. They ask me every Friday night we are here. It’s their way of checking in on me.

Shaking my head, I lean forward and prop my elbows on the table. “I’m doing fine.”

“Are you, though?” Jennings asks.

“I am, and I don’t need you guys asking me whenever we’re here. Work keeps me busy, and I like it that way.”

“Say what you want to make us believe that everything is okay. It would help if you got out more to enjoy things outside of work. Quit showing up late to this every Friday night and make an effort to do something besides being an editor at the magazine,” Jennings says with a rugged look.

“Thanks for the same conversation we had last Friday,” I respond.

I get it. I do. Over two years ago, I lost my mother. Then shortly after losing her, I decided to take better care of myself, so I cut my football career short and retired. Then the magazine offered me the job as an editor, so I took it. Since then, I’ve been doing somewhat better than when I played football. But my life still misses having someone to love. The guys have all the reason to worry about me, but I’m a grown, thirty-three-year-old man who can care for himself.

“Have you thought about maybe loosening up a bit,” Jennings smirks, “You know, by getting laid every once in a while,” he then takes a drink.

“We’re not all you. Some of us can live without getting laid all the time. Besides, what I do on my own time works just fine for me.”

“The hand can only do so much,” Grady adds.

He's right, but with me, it's always more than just sex when I'm with someone. I add in emotions. That's not something I'm looking for and haven't in a long time.

"Look, let's enjoy a beer together. I'm fine. You two suck at football this season," I laugh before holding my glass up, "here's to hoping our lives work themselves out for the better soon."

Grady and Jennings lift their glasses to mine, and we all toast, "Cheers."



While I spent most of the weekend in my apartment in the middle of the city, I at least saw the guys win their football game on the big screen Sunday afternoon. This weekend I could've used the guy's advice and got out to do something that wasn't work-related, but I think it'd be better if I slowly eased myself into doing such things. So, I chose not to open my laptop and respond to emails, and instead, I used the home gym to work out for a couple of hours each day.

It's progress compared to past weekends.

Now that it's Monday, it's time to meet my new assistant at the office.

Like always, I stare at myself in my closet mirror while I button my clean, crisp white button-up shirt. Once I finish, I take my gray suit jacket that matches my pants off the hanger. I slide my arms through the armholes and bring the coat to my shoulders. I fix anything that looks out of place before taking one last look at myself in the mirror.

After gathering my keys, phone, and leather laptop bag, I walk out the front

door of my apartment and down the long hallway. Pushing the elevator button, the doors open, and I enter alone. I clear my throat just before the door opens and walk out. After a quick nod to the doorman, I step out of the two oversized glass doors of my apartment building and onto the sidewalk to make my way to the office.

Walking down the sidewalk just a few blocks to the office building, I contemplate stopping for coffee, wondering if the new assistant will have one ready for me when I get to work. There's a chance that Greta left something small out of her notes.

Stopping my steps right in front of The Brew House, I look up at the sign before noticing the line backed up to the door. The best coffee shop in New York City is always busy, so I never get to stop before work.

I continue my walk, wanting to arrive on time, and hope the breakroom has good coffee made today. It's Annie's first day, and if she doesn't know, then there's no sense in me running her out for some.

When I get to the office building, walking through the front doors, I make my way to the elevator and stand in line with the rest of the people waiting. The building has twenty stories, and the magazine has the tenth floor. Several companies are using the other stories of the building for their offices. Once the doors open, we all pack into the elevator like sardines and touch almost every floor button. Here's to the long stop-and-go ride to the tenth story.

When the long ride to my office is over, I make my way down the hallway to see the desk outside my office empty. She isn't here yet. I look at my watch to check the time and know she still has a few minutes before showing up since I arrived early today.

Walking into my office, I see a woman standing by my desk. I startle her when she hears me coming in and turns around, surprised.

"Hi," she says, walking up to me.

I feel like I'm getting punk'd. I look back to make sure Grady and Jennings aren't standing around the corner laughing.

Turning back around, “Annie?”

She smiles, “That’s me.”

Annie’s not what I imagined. She’s younger, with blonde shoulder-length hair with a black velvet headband holding it back from her face. She’s wearing a white sweater tucked into a black loose-fitting skirt with black boots.

Annie is quite stunning and *fucking hot*.

I stand there, unsure of what to say.

She puts her hand in mine, “You must be Decker Jones. Greta has told me so much about you.”

“Uh... Really?”

Dropping my hand from hers, I scratch the stubble on my face.

Annie crosses her arms, looking uncomfortable, while I place my laptop bag on the leather sofa and remove my jacket. Then I set it over the armrest.

“I’ll get going. I hope you don’t mind that I brought you breakfast with your coffee,” Annie turns around, pointing to the large to-go cup from The Brew House sitting by a freshly baked bagel.

“Thanks,” I barely spit out.

She got the coffee.

But that’s not the only thing she got. Annie literally took my breath away.

Strolling past me, Annie makes her way to the door. “If you need anything, let me know. Your first meeting for the day is at ten in the boardroom.”

She read her notes. Now I’m really fucking impressed.

I look at her leaving the office, “Thank you again. Will you please close the door on your way out?”

Nodding her head at me, she reaches for the handle, closing the door behind her. What the hell just happened? I’m never one to be speechless. There are times I can’t keep my mouth shut while working. I say too much, but Annie has left me stunned.

I watch her through the glass wall as she sits at her desk outside my office. Then I take a seat in my desk chair, opening my laptop. Since I decided not to work this weekend, I haven’t read Greta's email with all the information on Annie.

Looking at the bagel while waiting for my laptop to load, I decide I can’t let it go to waste. I usually start my day with coffee only, but since she brought it, I tear off a piece before putting it into my mouth.

“Damn,” I whisper.

That has to be the best bagel I’ve ever had. Where did Annie get it?

My phone starts vibrating across my desk, and when I look down, I see *Grady Miller* come across the screen. I fumble a bit, trying to grab it and answer it on speaker.

“Well?” he asks instantly.

My laptop loads, so I open my email.

“What?” I pretend.

“You know why I’m calling, dumbass.”

Greta’s email is one of the first I see, so I open it up. Scrolling down, I read off a few things to Grady.

“She’s thirty-one and had a business that shut down recently. Greta’s email doesn’t say what she did before here but that she knew Annie was perfect for

the job. She brought me the best damn bagel I've ever had, and she's...." I pause.

I can't tell them she's hot, and she took my breath away.

"Thirty-one. That's intriguing," I hear Jennings's voice through the speaker.

"Seriously. Both of you? Look, I've got to go. I will call you later, but really, there isn't anything else to add," I hang up while looking out the window at Annie.

She's looking at my schedule on her computer while drinking coffee. Having her here will take a while for me to adjust. I've never had anyone but Greta as my assistant, and now *this* stunning woman will be following me around everyday.

Chapter Two

Annie

As I sit across the boardroom for Decker's last meeting of the day, I glance over at him while he speaks to everyone. I quickly turn my head away, looking at the notebook I have set on my lap before getting caught. Decker wasn't what I expected when I applied for this editor's assistant job.

During interviews, Greta described Decker as a man who's a workaholic, doesn't go out much, and is single. I wasn't expecting such a good-looking man. There have been some awkward conversations between us today, but that is something to expect on the first day of a new job.

"I'll see you all at the photo shoot tomorrow. Good day," Decker says, closing the meeting and then grabbing his laptop off the desk.

I stand, clutching my notebook with notes for tomorrow's plans, before walking over to Decker.

"Need anything before I leave for the day?" I ask.

He looks up at me, "You're good to go."

I nod before walking out of the boardroom behind everyone else. When I reach my desk, I stuff my notebooks into my backpack and anything else I need. Decker strolls past me, walking into his office, but I don't look up at him.

Making sure I have everything I need to leave; I slide my coat and backpack on. I look around once more and then start walking toward the elevators.

"Annie," I hear Decker call out.

Turning back, I walk into his office door frame, “Yes?”

“You did great today, thank you,” he says.

“You’re welcome. See you tomorrow,” I say, smiling in return before turning back toward the elevators again.

The elevator opens after pushing the button, so I join the people leaving. I feel out of place with all these individuals dressed to the nines in nice suits and fancy dresses for work. I had trouble finding the outfit I’m wearing today. My best friend Lucy lent me some clothes to get me through the week until I could get out this weekend to buy more clothes.

Once we get to the ground level, we all exit the elevator in a line and head out the front doors. I walk to the curb to hail a cab when I reach the sidewalk. The office building is far away from my apartment, so I’ll need to add cab funds to my monthly bills. But I’ll still make more money than I would with my business.

Every cab passing by has someone in the backseat, and I get tired of waiting. I tighten my coat, cross my arms across my chest to keep it closed, and start walking. There has to be another spot I can catch a cab home.

I haven’t walked for long when I notice Decker just a few feet ahead of me. I try to stay close to him. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone, and answers it. Biting down on my lip and contemplating whether I should listen, I continue walking behind him. If I hear something, then it’s okay since I’m just a bystander.

“Jennings,” I hear him say.

Jennings? That’s who’s coming to the shoot tomorrow.

He then listens for a bit.

“Today was good,” he says, and I catch a glance of a smile on his face.

Decker's smile brings a smile to my face. Seeing him smiling today was rare. I think it's a good look for him.

"She was great, honestly. Greta did a good job filling her spot."

Oh, hell, he's talking about me. Now I want to listen to the rest of their conversation.

We stop at the corner, and Decker turns his head to look both ways before using the crosswalk to cross the street. I continue following him, but the crowd starts getting between the two of us. I can see he's still talking on the phone, but I can't make out a single word of what he's saying. Then he pulls the phone away from his ear and slides it back into his coat pocket. It's my sign to stop following and finally get a ride home.

Walking over to the curb, I wave once before a cab is in front of me. Thank goodness I didn't get caught following Decker and listening to his conversation.

Once the cab drops me out in front of my little apartment building just on the outskirts of the middle of the city, I pay the man before getting out. I walk through the front door and up the stairs to my second-level apartment.

I'm greeted by a mess in the kitchen, the first room I enter, from this morning's bagel-making. Ignoring it, I walk into the living room, setting my backpack down on the loveseat before taking a seat.

My apartment may be tiny, but it's okay for just me. I bought it years ago when I opened my business, knowing I'd never be home to enjoy it, so size didn't matter then. Now that I'm taking this new job, I may get out of this small space and try to open my business back up.

After relaxing on the loveseat for a few minutes, I walk over to my record player. I take out my *Frank Sinatra* Christmas vinyl and place it on the record player. Once I hear the song *White Christmas* play, I head into the kitchen to clean up my early morning mess.

Once a baker, always a baker. Just because I changed my career, for now, doesn't mean I need to give up my love for baking. The bagel I made for Decker this morning is just the beginning of baking and bringing in breakfast. For years, I woke up before the sun rose. I was baking bread, cakes, and cookies before most people had their morning coffee, and I want to stick to that routine. A part of me worries that if I stop doing it, I'll never do it again.

As I start washing the dishes in the sink by hand, my phone rings beside the sink. I see the name *Lucy* come across the screen before I quickly dry one hand on a towel, answering it on speaker.

"Annie!" she calls out.

"Lucy, how are the twins?" I ask.

Lucy Collins, my best friend since high school, is a nanny. I admire this job because it takes a lot for someone to love and care for someone else's babies.

"I just got them to sleep for the night. So tell me, how was your first day?"

I rinse a bowl, setting it to the side, "It went well."

"I'm so happy for you, Annie. I know this isn't where you thought you'd end up, but it's what you need to get your bakery back in business."

Drying off my hands for good, I turn around, leaning against the counter. "I know. Today wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be. I think I'm going to enjoy it."

"Is he like one of those bossy editors who doesn't smile?" she laughs.

I grin, "He's not bossy, but he doesn't smile much."

"Oh, their mom just got home. Talk later, Annie."

“Later, Luc,” I say before setting down the phone.

Walking from the kitchen, I grab Greta’s notes for Decker from my bag and take them to my room.

I fall across the bed on my stomach and open the folder containing information on Decker’s schedule. It seems to be the same every day, with meetings, photo shoots, and hours blocked out for him to write his pieces for the magazine. My eyes scan further down the calendar, noticing the week of Christmas is empty.

Then I see the small note Greta left off the side saying, *Bring this man some happiness.*

I’m trying, Greta. Tomorrow’s joy will come in the form of a blueberry muffin. Better get to bed so I can get an early start on happiness.



With a large container of a dozen blueberry muffins in tow, I walk into The Brew House. It’s still early, so I’m able to walk straight up to the lady behind the counter, ordering black coffee for Decker and a black and sweet for me. Once paid, I step to the side.

While I wait, I try to remember everything on the schedule for Decker today. There’s a shoot for the magazine with Jennings Johnson. After listening in on the phone call last night, I guess he’s a friend of Decker.

Pulling my phone from my coat pocket, I open it. I type in the search bar, *Jennings Johnson*. At the same time, the page loads, and the barista comes over to the counter with two coffees. She nods, and I slip my phone back into my pocket before taking them from her hands. The search

will have to wait until I make it into the office.

The best thing about getting up earlier than everyone else is the slow morning traffic flow into the office. There's not a taxi horn honking or crowd to rush through. You're free to walk and listen to the quiet morning sounds.

Once I reach the building, I walk into the lobby before waiting at the elevator for the ride up. When the doors open, I enter, taking the trip up alone. I reach the office floor, and the first order of business is to walk down to the breakroom and leave the blueberry muffins container. I place them in the center of the round table in the middle of the room. Before leaving, I open the lid and take out one muffin.

Walking down the hallway with two coffees and one muffin, I drop one coffee on my desk before entering Decker's office.

His space is fancy, with windows showing the city views, a large metal desk with a glass top, and a black leather sofa. He has his small bathroom in one of the corners.

The room seems classier than the man I met yesterday, and I wonder if all these things were here before him. I set the muffin and coffee down on the desk before looking around and walking out.

Sliding my backpack off, I place it on my desk chair before sliding my coat off and hanging it over the chair's back. I zip open my bag, take out the folder from Greta and my notebooks, and place them on my desk before laying my bag on the floor.

Once I'm seated, I fish my phone from my coat pocket. The elevator door opening catches my attention, and I watch everyone file out and make their way to their offices.

I pick up my coffee, take a sip, and then turn my attention to my phone. The search is the first thing that pops up when I open my phone. Scrolling down, I see photos of Jennings in a football uniform and then articles of him. I scroll down a little more and spot a picture of Jennings with Decker, both in football uniforms.

I almost spit my coffee out but hold it in, making me cough.

Of all the things about Decker in the folder, a former football player was not one of those. Is this something I should've known already? I can't say I've watched a single New York Knights football game. Sad, I know. There's not a single tv in my apartment.

Noticing the time, Decker should be arriving soon. I close my phone and slide it back into my coat pocket. I will have to save the rest of the search for another time.

As I continue drinking my coffee, I turn on my laptop to review the schedule. Even though I know we will be at the photo shoot most of the day, I need my ducks in a row before Decker gets into the office.

The elevator pings, catching my attention again, and this time when I look up, I see Decker and Jennings. They are deep in conversation. I watch as Jennings runs his hand through his light brown hair. He has on workout gear with the New York Knights logo and cute, black-rimmed glasses, but he is not my type regarding looks. He's almost intimidating.

Decker, though, is what catches my eye. He's wearing a nicely fitted, dark gray suit with a white button down leaving the two top buttons open.

When Decker looks at me, I turn to my laptop, pretending I didn't just get caught watching him walk in. I click on something and immediately start typing some letters that make no sense into the laptop. Then I pick up my coffee cup to look busy, so I don't have to introduce myself. My plan works as the men enter Decker's office without so much as one word to me.

Whew.

I watch through the window as they place their things on the sofa while continuing their conversation. Jennings walks over to Decker's desk, picks up the muffin I left beside his coffee, and shoves it into his mouth.

I want to say, *Hey, that's not yours*. But then I remember there's more in the breakroom.

Remembering what I need to be doing, I pry my eyes away from them and get back to today's schedule on my computer.

Before I know it, Jennings is standing right in front of my desk, muffin in one hand and holding his other hand out.

"Jennings Johnson, you must be Annie?"

Putting my hand in his, I say, "Annie Walsh."

He smiles, "Nice to meet you, Annie. I've heard...."

"Jennings," Decker interrupts.

I look behind Jennings to see Decker standing in the doorframe of his office.

"Nice to meet you too. Thanks for stealing Decker's breakfast," I say, looking back at my computer.

"This?" he holds the muffin up. "Where did you get this yummy goodness? I need another one of these."

Decker clears his throat.

"Good seeing you, Annie. I believe it's time for me to get ready for a photo shoot." He then turns around to walk back into the office.

Decker closes the door behind him.

Chapter Three

Decker

After taking Jennings down a floor to prepare for his upcoming shoot, I head back to my office to work on my latest piece for the magazine. Once he's ready, Annie and I will head down there to check how it's going.

When I walk into my office to finish the coffee from this morning and get some work done, I see another muffin sitting on my desk. Sticking next to it is a yellow Post-it note that says,

For You, Mr. Jones

From Annie

A smile comes across my face.

I'm not going to lie; I was a little upset when Jennings stole my breakfast straight from my desk this morning.

Picking it up, I take a large bite from the top, and it tastes heavenly. I then take a seat at my desk and begin typing my article. After a few seconds, I see Annie from the corner of my eye, walking back from the breakroom.

She's wearing another flowy black skirt, a light blue sweater, and her blonde hair tied half-back with a black ribbon.

I'm taken back by how adorable she is. She also seems to be very soft-spoken. Then again, she did tell Jennings off for taking my breakfast, so I'd say there's a little spicy side to her.

We've hardly spoken about anything these two days she's been

here. But I want to know more about her. Something about her has me very intrigued.

I didn't want to say hello to Annie in front of Jennings this morning, knowing he would give me shit for it. He would be the one to embarrass me in front of her, which is what he was going to do when he introduced himself to her this morning.

While typing on my computer, Annie answers her cell phone while working. My door is open, giving me an apparent reason to listen in.

"I'm going after work. Are you coming?" Annie asks whoever it is on the phone, and I can't help but wonder if maybe she has a boyfriend.

She listens for a bit before saying, "Okay. I'll call you when I get off. See you then."

A quick call, but it leaves me reeling and wondering.

Annie flips her head over in my direction, and I look back at my computer, typing a bunch of words that I don't even know. But at least I'm looking busy and not suspicious.

"Jennings is ready," a call comes through my speaker.

Nice timing.

Holding the button, I answer, "Be there in a second."

They prepared him quickly, but what was there to do to a man who already looked like he could be on a magazine cover?

Walking out of my office, "Want to go to the shoot with me?"

"Yeah."

We make our way down to the elevator, and I'm nervous. There hasn't been an alone moment between us, and I'm unsure what to discuss. She's been a phenomenal assistant, caring for everything before I ask her for

anything. So there's no point in talking about work.

Once the doors open, we enter the empty elevator together, and I push the button to go down to the floor. She's clutching her notebooks in her hand and looking forward. I don't want it to always be this awkward between us, so I make the first move.

"Have any plans tonight?" slips from my mouth.

That question may have been a bit forward.

Our eyes meet, "My friend Lucy and I are going to get a Christmas tree."

"I don't have a tree yet, either."

She turned her eyes to the door, "You should get one soon. I normally don't wait this long, but I've been busy."

"If you need to leave early, you're more than welcome to."

She smiles, "Thank you, but she already has to work late, so I'll stay."

The elevator stops, and doors open. I wasn't ready to end that conversation, but Annie might be available again soon to get to know each other.

We make our way down a long hallway, her following my lead, and then I stop at a set of double doors and open them.

They already have everything set up for the shoot when we walk in. There stands Jennings leaning against a stool wearing a pair of tight boxer briefs, shirtless. His variety of tattoos on his arms, chest, and thigh, all on display. My first instinct is to look back at Annie. She has probably never seen anything like this while working.

When I turn around, she has one hand covering her eyes while standing still, making me laugh. Greta loved these shoots, but I didn't cross

my mind that Annie might be a little embarrassed it.

I lightly grab the wrist of her other hand and whisper, “It’s okay to look. He’s used to it.”

She drops her hand from her face, and her cheeks are flush. It’s cute, and I wonder what other things might make her feel this way.

“If you want to stay back there,” I point, “to watch how things go, that’s fine. We won’t stay long.”

She nods before walking to the back of the room, where it’s dark.

Walking behind the cameraman, I watch everyone lead Jennings through the shoot. He’s a natural at this. It’s not the first time we’ve had him here.

We recently had a shoot with mostly starting quarterbacks, him included, naked and using balls to cover their body parts. Greta was drooling over the men in that photo shoot and kept asking when we would have another. Sadly, that magazine spread sent the media into an uproar, and since then, we’ve thrown underwear on whoever’s modeling.

During my football playing days, I had come to this studio for a piece in the magazine, which landed me this job when I retired.

“Give us something more,” the cameraman shouts.

With a football in one hand, while still leaning against the stool, white backdrop, Jennings takes his other hand and grabs his groin area.

At first, I laugh. But then I remember Annie standing at the back of the room, and that’s when I shake my head. Jennings did that on purpose.

Is he interested in Annie? She would be his type. He goes for the nice girls but always sleeps with the bad ones.

I continue to watch as they change Jennings into something else, less revealing, and take a few more photos with different backgrounds. I only

turned once during the shoot to check on Annie. She was looking through her notebook, ignoring the shoot.

She didn't need to learn much while here. We came today because it was my friend, and I thought she would like to see how they run—considering Jennings put on a little show, what a day for her to come.

When everything is over and Jennings gets dressed, he comes to me with his bag over his shoulder, “What’s with the new girl?”

I look back at Annie, who looks to be waiting for me, then I look back to Jennings, “What do you mean?”

“She didn’t take her eyes off you. I was naked, and she didn’t look at me once.”

I shook my head and said, “She’s just not used to this.”

“I think she may be crushing on you. You should hang out with her sometime. It wouldn’t hurt to see what happens.”

“Thanks for the advice. But she works with me.”

He laughs, “That never stopped me.”

He’s right. It never did stop him when he was hooking up with one of the trainers for the football team. She became super clingy with him. Fortunately, another player interested her and took her right off Jennings’ hands. He got lucky.

I want to think that even if I did pursue Annie, it wouldn’t mess up anything between us while working together.

“I’ll think about it,” I say.

He pats me on the shoulder, “Thanks for having me today. I’ve gotta get going to practice now.”

“Good luck with that.”

Before I can even finish, Jennings is leaving out the door.

When I look at the back of the room at Annie, she's on her phone, and I know she's waiting for me to leave, so I walk toward her.

"Ready?" I ask.

She slowly lifts her head from her phone with a frown before saying, "Yeah, sure."

She follows me as we walk out the doors and back down the hallway to the elevator. Once we get inside, she seems to act as if something is bothering her. Still interested in talking more with her from our earlier conversation, I break our silence again.

"If those photo shoots make you uncomfortable, you don't have to come with me anymore. I understand."

She looks over at me, "Oh, the shoot wasn't a big deal. Jennings seemed to enjoy putting on a show. I wasn't expecting him to be naked, but it didn't bother me. Thanks for worrying about me, I guess," she says before turning her eyes back to the elevator door.

"It's no problem. You seem like something is bothering you, so I want to make sure it wasn't the shoot."

"I think I sometimes miss what I'm supposed to be doing. Don't get me wrong, this job is incredible, but I don't feel like I fit in here."

"I know what you mean," I glance over at her, "I felt that same way when I came here, and over time it got better. Do I feel like I belong here now? Not all the time, but I like this place. I think you're doing an incredible job so far."

With a slight smile, she looks at me, "Thanks."

I still don't know what Annie did before coming here, but it means a lot to her, and she will want to return to it sometime. Maybe I should take

Jennings' advice and spend more time with Annie because I'm unsure how much time I have left with her here.



I've been sitting in my office for hours, working on some pieces for the upcoming magazine. Annie has been sitting at her desk, and I have occasionally looked at her. I know our conversation wasn't much earlier, but I hoped it helped brighten her mood more about being here.

As I've been sitting here, I've been thinking more about what Jennings said earlier. The time is coming when I need to do more things for myself. Spending time with someone other than the boys is maybe what I need. These last couple of years have been hard for me, but at some point I need to move on from this version of myself.

Looking down at the time, I realized it was way past our time to leave. Even though I told her she could leave early, Annie hasn't mentioned needing to go.

I close up for the day, and when I walk out, Annie is gathering her things.

"Sorry about the time."

"It's okay. Lucy told me an hour ago that she wouldn't be able to make it." She continues packing her notebooks into her backpack.

"I can help," I say with excitement.

With a shocked expression, she looked up at me, "Really?"

“Yeah. I don’t have any plans. I can help you get a tree and get it to your apartment.”

She zips up her bag and then slides it over her shoulders, putting it on, “Thanks, Mr. Jones but I can wait. I live across town and would use my car to haul it to my apartment and I didn’t drive it today. It’s a bit much. Really. I can wait.”

She begins walking toward me to leave.

“Then how about you help me get a tree? There’s a tree shop right next to my building. You can help me pick one and decorate it. I know it’s not the same, but it’s something. Then I can return the favor. Let’s say, Friday night?”

I expected to feel nervous about saying something like that but no. The only thing I’m feeling is hopeful. I want her to say yes.

Annie’s standing beside me, hands on her bag straps and smiling.

Without hesitation, she says, “Okay.”

I smile, “Great. Let’s go.”

Annie leads the way to the elevator.

Once the doors open, I walk in behind her before standing beside her. We haven’t even left the building, and I already feel good about this.

Do I tell Annie I haven’t bought or put up a Christmas tree in three years? I can’t say I intended to put one up this year, but it was my first thought when she said she could wait.

“Do you even have decorations?” Annie asks while glancing over at me.

“You know, thinking about it, I think there’s a box somewhere in my apartment.”

Once we got off the elevator, we made our way out the front door of our office building. We suddenly get smacked with cold air, and Annie tightens

her jacket around her.

I point in the direction of my apartment, “This way.”

She nods before we start walking down the sidewalk together.

“So, Annie, what did you do before coming to work with me?”

She lifts her hand to brush some hair from her face before saying, “I owned a bakery.”

“Wow... I can see why you said you don’t fit in at the office. That’s much different,” I am looking at Annie, but she doesn’t make eye contact.

“It was. I hated letting it go after all the years I had it open. The new franchise cookie business put me out shortly after opening a few doors down. I tried everything I could, but I failed.”

Putting my hand on her shoulder, she finally looks at me, “Hey, don’t say you failed. You ran a successful business. Who’s to say you won’t open it again one day.”

“That’s the plan. It’s why I took the job with you. I’m sorry,” Annie purses her lips together.

“Don’t be sorry,” I slide my hands into my pockets.

“Greta is friends with my mother and offered it to me the second it became available, knowing I was closing my business. But this job could help me save to open it again one day.”

“Well, I hope that one day you will. I’m happy that Greta hired you.” We continue walking, “Wait, so my breakfast you’ve been leaving on my desk. You make it?”

She laughs, “Guilty.”

“That bagel, Annie, was by far the best bagel I’ve ever had.”

Smiling, she says, “Well, thank you.”

Chapter Four

Annie

As I watch Decker stroll through the tree shop, looking at what's left of the Christmas trees, I wonder how on earth I got here with him. I wanted a tree, and now we're getting one for him. I'm not complaining because I'm enjoying this right now, and I don't want to know what Lucy will say when I call her later to tell her that I went Christmas tree shopping with my new boss.

"What about this one?" Decker asks me, holding up a six-foot pine tree with a smile.

The tree is a little sparse, but it will work.

"I like that one."

Decker looks it over again, bearing such a great smile, which is so sexy.

Then he turns his eyes back to me. "Great. This is the one."

"Good choice. Now how are we supposed to get it to your place?"

He points at the structure next to the tree shop, "This is where I live, so all we need to do is use a bit of teamwork to carry it through the building."

I look up at the building. It's not too tall, but it's a fancy apartment complex.

"Mr. Jones, you live next door to a tree shop, and you're just now getting a tree."

He picks the tree up with both hands and stops before me, "Decker please..."

you don't have to call me Mr. Jones, Annie. Also, I might've been too busy to get a tree yet."

Decker walks to the man standing at the entrance. Dropping the tree, he pulls the money to pay for it from his wallet. I've been holding his work bag while we've been here looking, and I'm still keeping it for him.

Once he finishes paying the tree man, he picks the tree up with two hands and starts walking, so I follow behind, "You need me to help?"

Turning his head back a bit, "I've got it. You watch from behind to make sure I don't hit anything."

"Got it." I give a thumbs up.

We reach the door of his building. I run ahead to open the door for him, and he slides in sideways, bumping his backside across my front, making me giggle.

Once the door shuts and we are inside the building, I run to the elevator and push the button. Decker catches up to me, dropping the tree from his hands.

"Up, right?" I ask.

"Yea, fourth floor," he says, a little breathless.

We stand there for a minute, and the doors open. Decker picks the tree up by himself again and then drops it when we get inside the elevator.

"Thanks for coming with me tonight," he glances at me, smiling, sending little butterflies to my stomach.

Was it his look or the thank you?

"I'm not really doing much, but you're welcome," I say, returning the smile.

"Well, we're just getting started. We still have to decorate this thing," Decker says, shaking the tree. I watch as needles fall to the ground.

He's just so sexy. I know I shouldn't be interested in my boss, but he's making it hard not to be. He hasn't been able to get rid of his sexy smile the whole time I've been with him tonight. It's making me wonder what Greta means by making this man happy. Was he not this happy before yesterday?

When the doors open, Decker hikes the tree up once more while we walk down the hall to his apartment. I walk behind him, keeping an eye on the walls making sure they don't get touched by any limbs.

He stops in front of what I would guess is his apartment.

Without dropping the tree, he nods to me, "Key is in the side pocket of my bag."

I slide my hand into the pocket of his black leather laptop bag and pull out a set of keys. Holding them up in the air, I shake them. "Got them. Which one?"

"Ummm... the gray one."

Looking down at the keys, I see they are all gray, so I choose one and stick it into the keyhole. It turns, unlocking the door. I push the door open, then hold it for Decker. Once he's in, I close the door and look around at his apartment.

It's an open, spacious, all-white modern apartment. The back wall is all windows, and you can see the bright lights from the city. His furnishings are nothing like his office and are the opposite, actually. He has a medium-sized white sectional in the living room, with a large tv on the wall. It feels cozy, like this is where he always is when he's not working.

"Nice place," I say, dropping his bag on his kitchen island.

In front of the windows, he drops the tree in the corner of the room, "Thanks."

I slide out of my coat and place it over the back of his chairback barstool. He walks toward me, removes his jacket, and puts it over the other barstool's back.

“Let me get that box of decorations. Make yourself at home.”

Before I can say anything, he’s in the other room, so I walk over to the windows overlooking the city.

He has the most incredible view of the city. All the buildings are lit with lights and a few billboard signs come into picture in the distance.

My apartment has a view of another apartment building next door. I once opened my window and met an older woman named Delores who smokes too many cigarettes. I haven’t opened my window since.

“Here it is.”

When I turn around, I find Decker, changed into a pair of dark gray joggers and a white shirt, holding up a small brown box. Just looking at him makes me weak in the knees.

“That was quick,” I say.

He sets the box down on the ground by the tree before picking up the remote from the coffee table, “What’s your movie?”

“What movie?” I say, confused.

“The movie you watch while you put up and decorate the Christmas tree?” He looks over at me.

“Oh,” I shrug, “I don’t have one. Growing up, my family would start a fire in the fireplace, and then we would listen to Christmas music on the vinyl record player my dad owned while decorating the tree. What is your tradition?”

He frowns while turning on the tv, “We would turn on *Miracle on 34th Street*. My mom would have baked cookies and let me decorate the tree while she set up the rest of the decorations.”

Our eyes meet, and I smile, “That’s such a sweet tradition. Turn it on.”

“Are you sure? Because I have the fireplace feature on this tv. It sounds real and everything,” Decker smirks.

I laugh, “Sounds tempting, but really the movie is a good choice. It’s your place, and we should follow your tradition. I would bake you cookies, but it would take a while, and I don’t think we have that amount of time left in the day.”

He turns on the movie, “I probably don’t even have ingredients for cookies.”

“I’m not surprised, honestly. I always have ingredients on hand for cookies.”

Decker sets the tree in the stand before walking into the kitchen quickly, bringing back a pair of scissors.

Holding them up, “Trimming the tree.”

“Oh, you didn’t wanna break out the saw for that?” I joke.

He laughs, “Pretty sure no one in the city owns a saw.”

I giggle before a warmth comes over my body. He’s cutting the Christmas tree with a pair of scissors. Who knew cutting tiny branches was hot? But here he is.

The muscular arms I didn’t realize he had until now are bulging out of the sleeve of his white shirt. While he’s bent over, I notice how well he fills out the butt of his gray sweatpants.

I’m tempted to check out the front. I want to know if that’s filled out too. But when Decker turns around, finished, I chicken out on the dick check.

I’m blushing when he walks past me to return the scissors to the kitchen.

“Want anything?” he asks.

“I’m good,” I reply, turning back to him.

Returning to the living area, he opens the box of decorations and starts digging through it, “Are you bringing cookies tomorrow?”

Decker starts handing me strings of lights from the box, and I stack them in my arms, “No. Tomorrow is cranberry-orange scones. One of my favorites.”

He stands, taking some of the lights from my hands.

“Those sound good.” He gives me a sexy wink.

That wink almost knocks me dead on the floor. My face is definitely a lovely shade of rosy pink now. Decker has a way of making me feel things I haven’t before.

I watch as he starts stringing lights around the tree. I walk over to help him bring the lights back to the front of the tree. We get into a rhythm, working together to get the lights on it while the movie plays in the background.

“So, tell me about the bakery?” he asks.

“Well, it was a small bakery located a few blocks from my apartment on the outskirts of downtown. It had the best customers, and I already miss them so much. I managed to keep it afloat for seven years, but once these chain bakeries opened, the bakery wasn’t getting enough business.”

His eyes find mine, “What was the name of it?”

I smile, “Sweetcakes. That was a name my mom called me growing up.”

He smiles back, and we continue stringing lights on the tree.

Decker wraps the remaining strand of lights around the bottom of the tree before plugging them into the wall. We both stand back and look at the tree. I glance at him as he stares at the tree with a smile. I don’t know what it is but seeing him like this makes me happy. There’s a reason Greta wanted me to bring him some happiness, and I now want to know why.

“So, tell me about yourself, Mr. Jones?”

“Decker,” he says, putting his hand on my arm.

Looking down at his hand before my eyes reach his, I say, “Decker, I know. I was teasing.”

He smirks, “Well, as you may already know, I played in the NFL for almost eight years. Then I lost my mom. So, I retired because I wanted to start taking better care of myself. The magazine had offered me a job because I was writing before I left football, so I took it. I miss football just like you miss the bakery. I should’ve stayed, but I made the decision rather quickly because I was struggling.”

Putting my hand over his that’s still resting on my arm, I say, “I’m so sorry about your mom.”

“She raised me alone, so I went through some things after she was gone, but I’m doing better. Greta was there for me, as were Jennings and Grady.”

“Well, if you ever need me. I’m here.”

“Thank you.”

I take my hand off him, “I also didn’t know until today that you played in the NFL.”

He laughs, “You’re kidding?”

“I don’t watch sports because I don’t own a tv.”

“Annie. Seriously?”

Removing some ornaments from the box, I say, “Very serious.”

He takes them from my hand, placing them on the tree, “Well, sounds like we need to get you to a game this season.”

“That would be fun.”

Grabbing a handful of ornaments from the box, I stand while handing over some for Decker to hang on the tree. All the decorations are black, white, and silver. It's not very festive, but I know they are the color of the New York Knights football team. It's unsurprising for a man to color-coordinate his Christmas tree to his favorite football team.

We get everything on the Christmas tree, and together we stand back to admire our work.

I cross my arms over my chest and let out a tiny yawn. While I've been here, I forgot about the time. It must be late, and I should be getting home.

"Thank you for letting me help you, but I should probably get going."

Decker checks his watch before following me as I walk to the kitchen island to grab my things and put on my coat.

"Let me take you home."

Slipping my arms through my coat, "It's okay. I'm used to taking a cab. Plus, it's late, and I don't want you to have to go out."

"Can I at least walk you downstairs?"

"Sure."

Decker walks over to the front door, sliding on a pair of shoes, before opening the door for me to walk out. I should've taken him up on his offer to take me home, but coming here for the night to help him was already enough.

Once inside the elevator he releases a sigh, "I didn't want to tell you this earlier, but I haven't put a tree up since my last Christmas with my mom, so thank you, Annie. Thank you for helping me tonight."

Tears try to form in my eyes, but I stop them. I don't know what to say because he let me, someone he's known for two days, help him through something that means a lot to him. I understand all the smiles tonight. He is

slowly returning to who he was before he lost her.

“Decker, you’re welcome. I’m happy I could help.”

The doors open, and Decker follows as we walk into the lobby.

I stop before leaving the building, “So, I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Standing nervously in front of me, he smiles, “Yeah. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Decker.”

“Night, Annie.”

Walking out onto the sidewalk, I turn around to see Decker waiting. So, I hail a cab, and the first one stops. Getting into the back, I shut the door before seeing Decker head to the elevator.

Tonight was a good night.

After the cab drops me off at my building, I walk up the stairs to my apartment and see a small, long box leaning against my door. There’s a note taped to it.

Annie, sorry

This fake tree is my apology for tonight.

Love you, Lucy

I pick up the small box and hold it while I unlock my apartment door. Lucy shouldn’t have. But she hates canceling on me because of her job and always has to apologize. Tonight she sent me a fake four-foot Christmas tree, perfect for my apartment. Decker said he would go with me Friday night to get a tree, but I already know he has plans with the guys at The Bar, and that’s what he should do.

Chapter Five

Decker

When I woke up this morning earlier than usual, I knew I wanted to get to the office before I normally would for one reason, Annie. After spending the time I did with her last night, I knew I wanted to spend more with her. Whether that is in, or out, of the office.

When I get to work, I expect Annie to be at her desk, but she's not there. I look around the building to find almost everyone in their offices. Surely she got home alright last night. I didn't have her number saved in my phone to check in on her.

Setting my things down when I walk into my office, I check the clock on the wall to notice that it's still early and I need to calm down.

I take a seat at my desk, opening my emails first.

The minutes click by, and still no sign of Annie. I'm starting to get impatient and nervous that maybe something is wrong.

My phone starts vibrating across my desk. I quickly grab it, answering, "Hello."

"Where were you last night? I called you twice." Grady says.

"I was busy," I answer.

"Don't tell me you were stuck in the office because I don't want to hear that lame excuse. I went out with this crazy girl last night and needed you to help me escape the date."

"No, I was home," I say as Annie walks by my office door.

She's finally here.

"Why didn't you answer then? Are you hiding something from me? I get the feeling you have a secret," Grady asks.

"Look, I've gotta go. I'll call you later," and then I hang up.

Annie's standing behind her desk, unloading things from her backpack before setting it on the floor. She then picks up one of the coffees she placed on her desk and walks toward my office.

I get up from my desk as she walks through the door, "Annie."

"Decker, sorry I'm late. I slept in. I guess I snoozed my alarm and had no time to make scones. The coffee shop was busy, so it took longer than usual to get your coffee for you...."

"Annie," I interrupt her before standing right before her.

Our eyes meet, "Yes?"

Placing my hands on her arms while she holds my coffee up to take from her, "It's okay. You are not that late. You can make me your favorite cranberry-orange scones another time."

"Thanks," she frowns.

Taking the coffee from her hands, "Are you okay?"

"Not really. Today is the first morning in almost a decade that I didn't wake up early to bake, and it's making me feel very off, so no, I'm not okay."

Letting out a slight laugh, "Annie, what can I do to make you feel better? Tell me something that makes you happy."

She finally smiles, "Baking."

"Besides baking?"

She puts her finger on her chin, thinking before saying, “Pizza.”

“Great, I’ll get us a pizza delivered for lunch.”

She scrunched up her nose, “Isn’t that my job?”

Walking around my desk, I sit, “It is, but today it’s my treat. I’ll order it early because we’re going to be starving. Someone forgot our breakfast,” I smirk.

Squinting her eyes at me, she turns her head to the side.

I laugh before throwing my hands up, “I’m teasing.”

Then I watch as she walks out of the office, shaking her head. I feel bad. I do. I’ll never forget my first day here when waking up to play football wasn’t a thing for me anymore and how off I felt that entire day. Annie needs some cheering up today, and I’m just the man for the job.

Getting back to work on emails, I look over to see Annie sitting at her computer and reviewing today’s schedule. I haven’t even looked, but I, for some reason, think there are meetings lined up for today. That’s when I see Annie rush back to my door.

Peeking her head around the frame, “Meeting in the conference room in five minutes.”

I nod, but she’s already back at her desk, frantically searching for her notebooks and folders. I think she’s going to need a lot more than pizza today.

Grabbing everything I need for the meeting, I then meet Annie outside my office. Wrapping my arm over her shoulders, I whisper in her ear, “We got this. You’re doing a great job.”

Glancing at me, she says, “I hope you’re not lying.”

I smirk, “Not lying.”



Annie's lying across the black leather couch in my office as I sit at my desk, working on the magazine. We've had a day, a very long day. One meeting turned into a lot of meetings, and the pizza I promised for lunch never happened. So, we're making it happen now. Now that everyone has left the office beside us.

While we wait for the pizza to be delivered, I'm getting work done that I couldn't get to today. Annie looks to be contemplating this job still. She has her head propped on the armrest of one side, her feet lying over the other, and her arms crossed over her chest while staring at the ceiling.

I want to talk to her, but I'm not exactly sure what to talk about. What little happiness she had left this morning after showing up late was gone after the second meeting, and I know she hates it here. But I can't just let her go, not yet.

While typing on my computer, I see her take a deep breath. Almost as if she's working up the courage to talk about something, but she's waiting. I'll wait. I hope I seem interested and I'm trying to figure out if she feels the same.

I had to beg a bit to get her to stay late for pizza while I worked. She had all her stuff ready to go. When I said pizza, she quickly shoved all her stuff back under her desk to stay.

"Decker."

"Yes," I say.

She hesitates, so I close out of what I am working on and turn all my attention to her. Annie sits up on the sofa and crosses her legs.

“Have you ever had pizza in Chicago?”

Ahh what? She’s asking me about pizza.

“Yes, I have.”

I’ve had my fair share of Chicago pizza while traveling for football.

“Is it better than New York-style pizza?” she grins.

“Are you a folding the pizza in half and stuffing it in your mouth kind of pizza eater? If so, then yes. New York pizza is better. If you enjoy eating pizza with a fork, then I’d choose Chicago.”

“I’m definitely a folder. Gosh, all this pizza talk has me starving.”

I laugh. “Pretty sure you were the one who started this conversation. Why don’t you tell me what you *really* wanted to discuss?”

Just as she goes to open her mouth, the elevator doors open. The pizza is here.

I get up, “Give me a minute.”

Walking out of the office, I meet the pizza guy at the elevator. He hands me one large pepperoni pizza before thanking me.

I pay and tip the nice young kid before he gets back into the elevator.

When I walk back into the office, I set the pizza on the small table in front of the sofa. Then I sit next to Annie. She smiles before rubbing her hands together.

“Open it up,” she says.

I flip the box top over, and there it is—Hot New York-style pepperoni pizza.

Annie giggles before grabbing a slice. Then she wastes no time folding the pizza before lifting it up. Bringing it to her, she holds it high over her mouth,

taking a rather large bite. I should be grabbing a slice myself, but I'm so enthralled watching her happily eat a slice of pizza.

She moans and it sets me off. It doesn't take long before my dick is semi-hard against the zipper of my pants. The sensation bringing me back to reality.

Fuck. It really has been a long time.

Reaching over, I take a slice, folding it in half too before taking a bite.

After getting down her first bite, "You never did tell me which pizza was your favorite?"

"This one," I hold up the pizza in my hand.

Meaning this pizza right here, with her, and in my office.

I can't think of a time when I've had better pizza.

I know it wasn't at a crowded table full of football players having pizza while discussing the game we had just lost. It wasn't all the pizzas alone in the office. And I can't remember the last time I shared a pizza with my mom, so if I had to choose. It's this one.

She takes another bite, not realizing what I meant by my answer, and that's what I want for now.

Watching her be happy in this moment is everything. She walked into this office this morning feeling her worst. She needed this. I can't say I didn't need it too. I definitely wanted it.

"I'm sorry about today. I know it probably wasn't a good day for you. Meeting days are a lot to take in," I say.

"There's no need for you to be sorry. It's something I knew came with the job. I wasn't expecting it to be today when I had a bad morning. Tomorrow will be better. I didn't prepare myself for today well enough," she frowns.

I place my hand on her knee, “It’s okay. Don’t be sorry, Annie.”

She looks down at my hand before looking back at me. I have this strong urge to kiss her, but that would be totally out of line. I can’t tell if I’m thinking with my dick right now or with my heart. Because I like Annie a lot, but I’m also still semi-hard. And it’s getting harder to ignore it.

Checking her watch, “I should probably get going. I don’t want to be late again tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I agree, but honestly, I’m not ready for her to leave. I somehow think this is my fault for putting a move on her.

I take my hand off her knee before she gets up from the sofa.

Before I know it, she’s out of the office and grabbing her things at her desk. Getting up, I close the pizza box before situating myself. Then I put my coat on.

If she’s leaving, the least I can do is walk her out of the building.

Once I get everything turned off in my office and my bag slipped over my shoulder, I see Annie standing in the doorframe. She’s waiting for me.

“Can you walk me out? This building seems so creepy at night.”

Smiling, “Of course.”

I pick up the pizza box before walking out.

We walk down to the elevator together. Once we get inside, we stand close, side by side. It’s taking everything in me not to say anything right now, but I don’t want to chance ruining another moment.

I want time with Annie out of this office. We need some alone time, and maybe things would be different between us.

Annie turns to me, “Oh, I forgot to tell you. Lucy gifted me a fake tree, so there’s no need to get a tree with me on Friday.”

“Oh... Okay.”

That wasn’t something I wanted to hear. I was looking forward to spending time with Annie then, even though I knew I should be out with Grady and Jennings that night.

“You’re supposed to meet the guys at The Bar on Friday, so that wouldn’t have worked,” she adds.

“Right.”

I intended on telling the guys I have plans then, but it looks like it’ll be another night at The Bar with them. Maybe they can advise me on approaching Annie better because it doesn’t look like I’m getting anywhere. Then again, do I want to talk about her with them?

Once the doors open, I hold the pizza box over to Annie, “Here, you take it.”

Turning to me, surprised, “You sure?”

“Yeah. My treat, remember.”

She takes the box from me, “Thanks.”

We walk out the front doors, and just like last night, Annie tightens her jacket around her while holding the pizza box in the other hand, “Well, thanks for today and dinner.”

“Anytime. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She smiles, “Tomorrow,” then walks in the other direction.

I watch her as she walks over to the curb. She throws an arm up to hail a taxi, and one pulls up to the curb.

I think I know just what Annie and I need.

Chapter Six

Annie

By the third alarm, I was finally up. There was no way I was going to be sleeping in another day. I needed to get up early today, and if that meant setting three alarms to get myself up, then that's what I had to do.

As I roll out of bed, throwing the sheets off me, I rub my eyes to try to wake myself up. It's four a.m., and it definitely feels like it. Also those two pieces of pizza I ate before bed I thought were a good idea, were actually a bad one.

When I get out of bed, I head straight into the kitchen to start on the cranberry-orange scones I should've made yesterday. I begin by taking bowls out of the cabinet and then gathering all the ingredients.

After mixing everything in a bowl and laying the dough on a cutting board, I cut it before placing it on a baking sheet. Then I throw the sheet of unbaked scones into the oven.

While they bake, I jump into the shower to start getting ready for the day.

Today will be a good day. I've already looked over the schedule, and there isn't a single meeting today. There's a lot of time blocked off for Decker to work on his pieces for the magazine, so I get to relax. Maybe I can look up some new recipes for baking something new during my spare time.

After I get out of the shower, I pull the scones out to cool. Then I fix my hair into a ponytail, add makeup, and get dressed. Wearing black dress pants and a white blouse, I look at myself in the mirror on the back of my closet door.

Before walking out the door, I take two scones and put them into a container for Decker and me. I will share the rest with Lucy. They happen to be her favorite too.

I have a cab take me to The Brew House to pick up coffee, and once I have both our coffees in hand, I walk down to the building.

It's still very early, and I don't expect Decker to show up for another thirty minutes.

I ride the elevator alone, and once the doors open, I walk down the quiet hallway. I notice a white folder with a Post-it note when I reach my desk. I pick it up and read,

For Annie

From Mr. Jones

Laying my bag on the floor, I sit at my desk and open the white folder.

The first thing I see is a paper for two plane tickets to Cancun, Mexico. I flip the page, and there's a list of things; massages, scuba diving, an exclusive tour, renting a catamaran, and snorkeling. They all have a note by them telling me to book these things.

My head turns to Decker's office, and no sign of him.

What does he want me to do with all this, and who's this for?

I flip that paper over to see reservations for a resort with a booking for the week of Christmas. All of these papers have me so confused right now. Is this trip for him and a friend? Maybe for him and a woman I don't know about? What the hell is all of this?

Putting the papers back in order, I close the folder and toss it to the side. Greta didn't leave me a note about Decker taking a vacation that week, but that's what it looks like he's doing.

I get up from my desk and take one of the scones from the container. I take it along with Decker's coffee and place them on his desk. He should be here any minute. After reading through the folder, I'm ready for him to get here.

Last night with Decker was nice. I can't say I didn't enjoy our time together eating pizza in his office. He's sweet and thoughtful, but I'm not sure we should be getting close. I need this job.

When I turn around from dropping his breakfast off, Decker walks into his office.

"Good morning, Annie."

I nod before saying, "Morning."

"Can we talk about something?" he asks.

Squinting my eyes at him, "Does it have to do with the folder?"

He sets all his stuff on the leather sofa and closes the office door. He points at the sofa and says, "Sit."

Taking a seat, I cross my legs and rest my hands on my knee. Decker walks over to his desk, leaning against it while looking at me. One hand resting on his waist, the other scratching the little bit of stubble on his face.

"Let me think of the best way to say this," he starts. "That trip is for us."

"Excuse me?" I stutter a bit from the shock of his words. Why on earth would Decker be planning a trip for *us*?

"Let me explain this," he throws his hand out, "I've been taking this trip for the last two years, but I want you to go with me this year. I'll be working, so it makes sense to have you there too. I understand it's the week of Christmas, but surely that won't be a problem for you."

"No," I say.

"Are you telling me no?"

"I'm telling you no. I can't do that," I nervously laugh. "One, I

don't want to go frolic on the beach, somewhere warm, when it's Christmas. My family will want me to be there with them for Christmas. You're my boss, and it's a little out of line. Don't you think? Did Greta ever go on these trips with you?"

He starts pacing the room, looking worried, almost like he expected me to be okay with going away with him, a man I've known for all of four days.

Decker stops pacing, "She didn't. It's normal for an assistant to go on vacation with her boss though. We will have separate rooms. You will get paid double the whole week we are there. Plus, the trip will cost you nothing."

This trip is starting to sound tempting but missing my family for Christmas would be hard for me as it's something I've never done before. I know I could use the money of being paid double that week. That would be one week closer to getting my bakery back.

"Fine," I say.

Decker turns to me, smiling, "Really?"

I get up from the sofa, "I want you to know I don't want to go. My parents are probably going to hate you for this. Christmas is a big deal to my family and me. I don't want to be somewhere warm, I want to be here, but I'll go for you."

I know this is something Decker must have started after losing his mother, and the thought of him going alone makes me sad. He shouldn't be there alone on Christmas day.

"Annie, I promise this trip will be so much fun. I will try to make it feel like Christmas for you the best I can. We will get work in, but there will be time to explore and do other things."

If anyone should be making it feel like Christmas, it should be me for him.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones,” I say, knowing he hates it when I call him that. But he pissed me off just now.

I start walking towards the door to leave his office.

“Annie, thank you.”

When I return to my desk, I look over things on my computer while sipping my coffee. Decker may be happy about this trip, but it will take me a while to come around, and I will not be booking those extra activities anytime soon. We have a little over a week before the trip, and those things can wait.



Decker

Okay, maybe that didn't go as well as I had planned, but she said she'd go, and that's something.

Last night after I watched Annie get into a cab, I returned to my office and added her to my already-planned trip. Was it a little much for only knowing her for a couple days? Yes. But it wasn't stopping me.

I want to get to know Annie better, and what's better than being away from here? She will easily forget I'm her boss and maybe give in a little to me. We can perhaps take things to another level.

Where's all this confidence coming from lately? I have no idea. The guys might've told me to get out more, but I wasn't expecting it to go so naturally with Annie. Okay, so maybe more natural on my part and not hers, but she'll get there. I know she will.

Sitting at my desk, I pick up the scone she left for me and take a bite.

It's the most heavenly thing I've ever tasted. It's her favorite; so far, it might be mine too. I usually don't eat many baked goods for breakfast, but I have been enjoying them.

I get right to work on my articles and pieces for the magazine. I'm scrolling through the photos we took of Jennings the other day. Today will be an office day, but I won't complain because my view is good.

I look over at Annie while at her desk, sipping her coffee. She's probably contemplating this job still and now the trip.

The trip is not far away, and if I can at least get her to the airport and on the plane to leave with me, I know things will be different when we get back, and maybe she won't hate this job as much. Perhaps she'll stay.

I've never done anything like this for someone.

After focusing on football and repaying my mom by taking care of her after all the years she took care of me, I wasn't worried about settling down. I had my fair share of dating and relationships but never anything serious that I'd consider settling down for, and only a couple of them met my mother.

I'm not saying Annie is the one. I've known her for only days. But she makes me want to get to know her more, which I haven't thought about in a long time. Annie doesn't know me as NFL star Decker Jones. She knows me for who I am now, and I like that.

My phone starts buzzing across my desk, and when I look at it, I see the name Grady Miller on the screen. He's been calling a lot lately.

I answer, "Hello, Grady."

"Whoa, please tell me this isn't going to be another one of those hang-up phone calls?"

Looking at Annie again sitting at her desk, I say, “No. I won’t hang up on you, but what do you want?”

“Jennings and I are staying after practice today. You coming?” he asks.

“Yeah. I won’t be here late today. I can be there earlier than usual.”

I watch Annie as she gets up from her desk and walks down to the breakroom.

“Great. I’ll let Jennings know you’re coming.”

“I’ll see you later.”

Then Grady hangs up.

Getting together with them after practice is something normal for me. At least it makes me feel normal. I miss playing football every day, and it’s the only time that makes me feel like I still got it.

I return to work, but I can’t help but wonder where Annie had taken off to. If she isn’t at her desk most days, she’s with me or in my office. Looking down the hallway towards the breakroom, I see Annie walking this way with Beau Wilson—the man who’s slept with almost every assistant in the office building.

Beau Wilson once played major league baseball, but now he does advertising and marketing for the magazine. He and I have had our fair share of disagreements while working together. He’s the last person I want Annie around.

My stomach sinks when I see her laughing at something he’s saying. He stops at his office and crosses his arms, leaning against the doorframe. Annie stops with him and continues talking to him. She’s holding a bottle of water, which must be why she went to the breakroom.

Beau Wilson has his way with words. I’ve seen too many women in and out

of his office. I know what he's trying to do here, and I'll be damned if he tries his tricks with Annie.

I get up from my desk to stop this, but then I sit back down. I shouldn't. It isn't my place to tell Annie who she can and can't talk to. I don't need her to be more mad at me than she already is for today.

Trying to get back to work, I still can't take my eyes off them talking.

Beau places his hand on Annie's shoulder, and I don't even know what he says to her, but it has her smiling. It's bothering me so much because I haven't seen Annie smile like that since we put up my Christmas tree.

This trip can't get here fast enough.

Chapter seven

Decker

When I left the office, I came straight to the football field. I'm glad they asked me to come tonight because I needed to blow off steam. Work pissed me off when it should've been the other way around.

Annie getting hit on by Beau Wilson was the least of my worries. She didn't speak to me most of the day. I know it has to do with the trip and the fact she doesn't want to go. I could also blame Beau for her not talking to me, but I don't want to think about her with him.

The guys and I have been throwing around footballs for a while. Thankfully my mood today is the same as it always is, so they don't notice anything bothering me.

"How was the date the other night?" Jennings asks while throwing the ball at Grady.

Grady catches the ball, and we all gather in the middle of the field, "It was the worst date I've ever been on. She was great until she started talking about her ex. That's when I knew it was time to go, and Decker didn't answer my *Mayday* text. What were you doing then?"

He looks at me, and with a straight face, I say, "I told you I was busy."

"Yeah, doing what?" he continues, "anyways, I'm done dating for a while. I'll only be taking applications for new friends I can depend on."

"Good luck with that."

Jennings then adds, "Busy with someone?"

Crossing my arms, I look at them, "Something like that."

“You guys hungry? I’m starving,” Grady jogs towards the locker rooms, “Let’s get some pizza.”

“I had pizza last night,” I say.

I take off slowly behind Grady, and Jennings walks with me.

“What’s with you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” pointing to my chest, “This is me.”

Jennings stops, and Grady is already out of sight and in the locker rooms.

“You ask Annie out yet?”

I chuckle, “Sort of. But it wasn’t what you think it was.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she helped me put a tree up in my apartment. It was a good time. Then we had pizza in my office after work last night. That didn’t go so well. Today I asked her to go on the trip with me to Cancun. She’s fucking pissed at me now.”

“Woah, slow the fuck down, dude. I don’t know much about dating and spending time with women, but I know that asking her on a trip after knowing her for only a few days is crossing a line. You’re her boss.”

“You told me working together doesn’t matter.” I spit out.

“Working together and taking a trip together are two different things. Why on earth are you asking her to go because you don’t work on this trip? You go to get away.”

Looking toward the locker room, “I want to get to know her outside the office.”

He shook his head, “So you’re also taking my advice on getting laid.”

“She moaned last night while eating pizza. I tried to make a move, but she ended up leaving. Then I had to jerk off in the office bathroom. It wasn’t good.”

Jennings laughs so hard he can’t stand straight, “You’re fucked. You need better game.”

Grady comes out, “Are you two coming or not?”

Looking over in Grady’s direction, “Coming.”

Then I jog up to him, leaving Jennings behind. It was time for that conversation to end because I hated that my womanizing best friend was right.

I need a better game to get Annie.

The two of them change when we get to the locker room. I changed at the office into joggers and a hoodie, so I didn’t need to before going to eat.

My mood is worse now after my conversation with Jennings. I don’t know what has gotten into me since I met Annie.

When Grady and Jennings come out, ready with their things, we all load into Grady’s Cadillac Escalade and head into the city to Little Hero’s Pizza.

Pulling up to the curb outside the restaurant, we all get out. The hostess gets a booth big enough for six people, and I sit by Grady.

We all open our menus even though we know what we’re ordering. We get the same thing every time. I will get the same thing I got last night, but I know last night’s pizza was better.

The waitress comes by, takes our order, and then brings our drinks.

Grady and Jennings are discussing their upcoming game against the New England Lions. Their conversation sounds like noise as the restaurant seems loud for a Thursday evening. It’s busy.

Sitting straight up, with my elbows resting on the table, I look around the room. We've been able to go out more this football season without getting spotted as much, considering the football team is having its worst season yet.

"So, when is the charity event?" Jennings asks.

"It's next Saturday," I say.

My mother, Cindy, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis just a few years before it ultimately took her. Every year since my mother's diagnosis, I've held a charity event for kids. The kids meet some football players, and Jennings really likes to get in on the fun.

I continue, "I'll have to get Annie's help this week with the planning. She doesn't know about it yet."

The waitress brings our pizzas and places them in the center of the table. Without hesitation, Grady grabs a slice of my pepperoni pizza. Holding it up, he folds it and crams it into his mouth.

"Nice, Grady."

"What? It looked delicious," he shrugs.

"Is that Annie that just walked in? Who is that with her?" Jennings says as he has his head leaned toward the front door.

My heart starts racing. I know Annie walked in with Beau Wilson, probably on a date, and my chance of ever having her is gone.

Grady flips his head around faster than me because I'm scared to see who she's with, "Is Annie the blonde?"

"Yes, she is," Jennings answers.

I finally muster up the nerve to look; there she is, with a brunette woman. Annie's wearing joggers, a hoodie, and a peacoat. Not her typical office clothes, yet she still looks gorgeous.

Relieved, I turn back, “I think that is Lucy with her.”

“Lucy. I want to meet her,” Grady says.

It’s then that I see Jennings wave and motion with his hand, for the girls to come over to our table.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Helping you out,” he winks.

Before I knew it, Annie and her friend are at our table.

With a smile, I say, “Hey.”

Annie returns, “Hey.”

Pointing my hand out, “This is Grady Miller,” then wave over, “And Jennings Johnson, who you’ve already met.”

She nods to Grady, “Nice to meet you. It’s good to see you again, Jennings. This is my friend Lucy Collins. Lucy, meet Decker Jones, my boss.”

I clench my teeth when she says, *boss*. I wouldn’t say I like that word.

“You two want to sit with us? We already have pizza,” Jennings asks them with a grin. He isn’t interested but seems to be doing this for Grady and me.

Annie and Lucy look at each other before Lucy says, “Why not.”

I scoot down. Annie slides into the booth beside me, and Lucy sits by Jennings. Grady gets the short end of the stick and is stuck on my other side.

Once we are all comfortably seated, the waitress arrives to get the girl’s drink order and then returns with their drinks and plates. We all start digging in, and Annie is the first to break the silence.

“Decker and I ate pizza....” She pauses.

Taking a slice of pizza, I say, “Last night. It was a long day at the office, and Annie here has a thing for pizza,” I finish for her, and she glances over at me, blushing.

“Pizza is Annie’s middle name. She would eat it every day if she could.” Lucy chimes in.

“So Lucy, what do you do?” Grady asks.

Lucy picks up a piece of pizza from the tray Grady ordered. They must have the same taste because no one else here will eat mushroom and olive pizza.

“I nanny a set of four-year-old twin girls for Marcy McMann. You know, the trial lawyer here in NYC. She’s a fierce woman, but her girls are the sweetest.”

“That’s a job?” Grady asks.

Lucy squints her eyes at Grady, “Of course it is.”

“Lucy’s job is harder than my job. She does all the housework for Marcy, takes care of the girls, and gets them to all their activities. It’s a job.”

Annie takes a slice of pizza from my tray and folds it just like last night. She holds it high to take a bite. Please don’t moan because I don’t want to deal with a hard-on at this table with everyone else.

She takes a bite without any noise this time. *Thank the heavens.*

“What were you and Lucy out doing?” Jennings asks before taking a bite of his cheese pizza. So basic.

“I finally got off early for once, so I helped Annie decorate her tree while we ate scones, and then we wanted pizza, so here we are. What about you guys?”

I wish I could’ve helped Annie as we once had planned.

“We just left the football field. Jennings and I play for the New York

Knights. Decker did a few years ago, but now he has the pleasure of working with Annie.”

Finishing the pizza on my plate in no time, I wait on the rest of them. Instead of taking another slice, I slide my arm over the back of the booth behind Annie. Just a small gesture of wanting to make her comfortable. Or uncomfortable. I don't know if I'm ever doing the right thing around her.

Annie finishes her slice, even the crust, then crosses her arms over her chest and rests back, giving into my touch a bit. I can't help but grin just a bit without trying to get noticed.

Lucy and Grady, talking football, grab another slice of their mushroom and olive pizza. I'm beginning to think he might've just found the new best friend he was looking for. Anytime I want to see Annie, Grady can hang out with Lucy.

They all continue talking around the table. It makes me realize how much I've missed times like this. All of us here, hanging out and getting along, feels so right.

Jennings adds to Lucy and Grady's conversation while Annie and I watch on, so I turn a little towards her, whispering in her ear, "I'm sorry."

I felt like it was the most appropriate thing to say to her first because I meant it, and it took my conversation with Jennings to notice that it needed to be said.

She turns her face to mine, "For what?"

"For the trip and anything else I did wrong."

Placing her elbow on the table, she rests her head against her hand, "Decker, I want to go, I do. I want to go for you because I know this is something you do because of your mom's passing. I'll miss one Christmas with my family, and it'll be okay."

I grin, "It will be."

I'm feeling better now that I said something.

Annie and I are in our own world over on our side of the booth, and I want to make a move. Even though we are in front of our friends, I don't care what they see now.

I place my free hand on Annie's thigh, and her cheeks turn that lovely shade of rosy pink I've seen a few times already, "I'll need your help this week. You up for a challenge?"

She smiles, "What kind of challenge?"

"The one where you help me prepare for a charity event next Saturday. The guys and I get together to host it. It's for kids with MS. It's what my mother had, and I want to help however I can. Jennings dresses up as Santa and passes out gifts to the kids." I say, giving her thigh a little squeeze.

"I would love to help. I love that you do that. That's very thoughtful and sweet of you."

Our faces aren't that far apart, and I could kiss her right now, but I shouldn't. The trip is just days away; I'll save that for then.

The waitress drops the check, reminding me it's probably getting late, but I'm not ready to say goodbye. Annie and I work tomorrow, and I'll see her then, but this night turned into such a pleasant surprise.

Jennings grabs the check because it's his night to pick up the tab, and I continue my conversation with Annie, "Work should be slow tomorrow. So, you can hang out in my office, and I'll help you with everything we need to do for the event."

I say that because I genuinely want her to be with me and not around Beau Wilson. If I have to see him talking to her again, I won't be very happy.

"Okay," she nibbles on her lip before continuing, "Would it be too much to bake something for kids? I could make dozens of sugar cookies for them to decorate for fun."

I love the way she's thinking.

Lightly squeezing her thigh once more, "That's such a great idea. If you need any help with that, let me know. I can help you."

She laughs, "I can't see you baking."

Grady clears his throat. It catches both mine and Annie's attention, and we look away from each other and to the others at the booth.

"You two done so we can go?"

That's when I notice all the leftover pizza boxed up and the three of them staring at us.

I look over to Annie, "You ready?"

She nods, "Sure."

I take that as she wasn't ready, but the others are, so she agrees to leave.

Last night might've been a slow touch. Today at work was not my favorite day with Annie, but tonight just made up for all of it. Annie not only didn't hesitate to my advances, but she also spoke to me, and tomorrow she'll be all mine and in my office.

Chapter eight

Annie

“Well, that was cute,” Lucy says.

We are walking down the sidewalk to her apartment. We just left Little Hero’s Pizza, where we unexpectedly ran into Decker and his friends.

“What was cute?” I play dumb.

“Clearly, Decker has a thing for you. He seems smitten.”

Okay, maybe he does, but admitting that will be hard for me because what girl wants to say her boss likes her?

Decker has been friendly, and I thought maybe that it was just the type of person he was. Until last night, when he put a move on me that I wasn’t ready for.

“He’s nice,” I keep it short.

“Remember when you said he doesn’t smile much? That man couldn’t wipe the grin off his face during dinner if he tried. He likes you, and I think you should go for it. He may be your boss, but workplace fun wouldn’t hurt. I mean, you don’t plan on staying there long anyways. There could truly be something between the two of you.”

She has a point. I also have no plans to stay there.

“What did you think about his friends?”

“They were so much fun. We just had dinner with famous football players and didn’t embarrass ourselves. That should get us a gold medal,” she

pats my back. "I think you did the right thing taking this job."

I start thinking about Decker and I at dinner. We were so close, yet it didn't bother me. Seeing him out of the office and around his friends was great. He did apologize for the upcoming trip that I'm still not sure I want to go on. But that was nice of him to say I'm sorry.

Thinking of the trip, "There's something I need to tell you."

We get to Lucy's building, and she opens the front door, "What's up?"

We walk over to the elevator. After I tap the button for us to go up, we wait, "Decker invited me on a trip. Since his mother's passing, he's been going to Cancun during the week of Christmas. He said he would work there this year and wants me to accompany him. He already has everything booked for me and told me about it today."

"So, you're saying the boss, who has the hots for you, just booked a trip for only you and him to go to the beach during the week of Christmas?"

"Uh, huh," the door opens, and we walk in.

"Annie, I don't think he asked you to go because of work. He wants you to be there for him and spend more time with him out of the office. He wants you. What did you say?"

The doors close, "Well, at first, I told him no."

Lucy laughs, "You told him no?"

I then laugh because it sounds funny that I told my boss no. I'm not good at having a boss, considering I've always been my own.

"He started to pace the room, and after explaining a little bit more, I told him fine."

"Fine? Annie, this is comical. Like the whole situation."

Once the doors open, we walk out together.

“Well, what would you do?”

She unlocks her front door, and we walk into her expansive, open-floor-plan apartment in the city. Yes, Lucy has a much nicer place than me. Marcy McMann pays Lucy very well for watching the twins.

I sit on Lucy’s gray sofa, and she sits on the other end after placing her things on the kitchen island.

“Well, for one, I wouldn’t have said the words *no*, followed by *fine*. I would’ve said yes. Thank you so much, Decker, for asking me to go to Cancun with you. I deserve a free trip.”

I laugh before picking up a throw pillow and tossing it at her, “Lucy.”

She catches it before cuddling it to her chest, “Annie, really, though. You deserve a trip away for a week with a nice man who wants to spend time with you. When was the last time you ever did anything like that?”

I think for a second, even though I know I’ve never done it.

“Okay, maybe it won’t be so bad. But I’ve only known Decker for a few days. And you know how much Christmas means to me, and being here in New York is where I want to be then. I’m not going to lie, though. After tonight I want to get to know Decker better. I thought he was going to kiss me. And I wouldn’t have minded.”

Lucy tosses the throw pillow back at me, and I place it behind my head, “What was it about tonight?”

The electricity between us while we talked. It was like everyone else in the room was gone, and it was only the two of us—the same feeling I felt last night, except we really were the only people in the room.

“You know, his mom died from MS. He told me at dinner that he

holds a charity event for kids with the same condition, and I literally melted. Like right there in my chair, I was gone. How sweet is that, Lucy.”

“Wow, how is this man not married? Why didn’t you propose right there in the middle of dinner?” she laughs. “He’s a winner, Annie, and you’d be silly not to spend time with him. He clearly wants to get to know you better by going on a trip with him.”

Lucy is right.

I should try to shake the fact that he’s my boss. Maybe this time away won’t be so bad.

We both lay across her couch silently for a few minutes before Lucy gets up, “You staying?”

“Yes. Can I borrow some clothes for work? You have all the goods.”

“Of course.”

Getting up from the couch, I head toward Lucy’s guest bedroom, which is larger than the bedroom at my apartment.

She heads to her room, “Goodnight, Annie.”

“Goodnight, Lucy.”

Grabbing some clothes from the dresser in the bedroom, I change. Then I slide into the bed, pulling the soft pink velvet comforter over me.

Lying there staring at the ceiling, I think about tomorrow before I finally close my eyes to fall asleep.



Waking early in the morning, I bake Lucy and I chocolate chip muffins in her kitchen. Along with a pot of coffee for us to share. She knows my routine and always keeps baking ingredients in her apartment for me, which has been helpful when the twins are here. I can always whip up a batch of their favorite chocolate chip cookies.

After getting ready, laying out breakfast, and leaving the rest of the coffee for Lucy when she wakes, I gather my things for the day before leaving.

Grabbing Decker's morning coffee from The Brew House doesn't take long since I was close by, and then I head to the office.

When I arrive at the office floor, I notice Decker sitting behind his desk. I go ahead and walk in. He looks over from his computer when he hears me walk in.

Grinning, he says, "There you are."

I blush. Decker was waiting for me to arrive.

"Good morning," holding up the muffin and coffee, "here's breakfast."

"Where's yours?"

I drop the two items on his desk and then stand back, "Oh, I already ate and had coffee at Lucy's this morning. I stayed there last night."

I don't know why I told him that. He didn't need to know.

“Oh... Well, have a seat. We can talk about the charity event.”

Sitting on the leather sofa, I cross my legs and place my hands on my knees. I'm wearing a black fitted dress this morning and want to make sure I don't show my lady bits.

“First, you look really nice today.”

I look down at myself before locking eyes with Decker, “Uhh... Thank you.”

My face is probably a lovely shade of fire red. My cheeks are burning.

“Second, I think your idea of the sugar cookies is fantastic. Do you happen to have any more great ideas?”

“Umm... I'm not exactly sure. It's my first time discussing this with you besides last night, and I don't even know what you guys already have planned.”

He opens a folder on his desk and shuffles through it. I watch silently while he reads whatever is in front of his face. My cheeks still feel like they are on fire from his comment. I know what he's doing, and it's working. It worked last night, oh, and the night before too.

While Decker continues shuffling through papers, I hear someone walk by the door behind me. Turning back, I see Beau Wilson on his way to his office. He gives me a grin before I turn my head back around.

Decker's face says it all. He doesn't like Beau Wilson.

With his eyes squinted and a scowl, he watches Beau walk down the hallway and then turns his attention back to me.

“I don't like him either,” I announce.

“Really?” He sounds surprised.

“You know when someone is talking to you, and all you can think about while they move their lips is how badly you want to walk away from this conversation? But you don’t know what to say to stop them. Yeah. That’s how I felt when he was talking to me yesterday.”

Decker laughs, “So, what did you tell him to get out of the conversation?”

“That I had a boyfriend.”

“You do?” he frowns.

“No. But it was the only good thing I could come up with when he was flirting with me. I wanted to walk away. I didn’t even know what he was talking about.”

“He was probably talking about himself,” he laughs.

“Most definitely,” I pause, “and something along the lines of, *Come take a seat on my desk*. But don’t worry. The boyfriend trick worked,” I wink.

With a smile, Decker finally sets the papers to the side as if he was through with them. Then once again locks eyes with me, “Okay. These papers are all the children coming with their parents’ names included. It’s around one hundred, but more always show up. Can you manage that many cookies?”

“Yes. I can make that many cookies. Lucy will probably let me use her kitchen.”

Tilting his head, “Your kitchen isn’t big enough?”

“No. My kitchen is the size of a small closet.”

“Well, you can use mine. Give me a list of everything you need, and I’ll get all the ingredients and supplies. We can do it together. That’s if that is okay with you?”

“Thanks. That’s okay with me.”

This man is thinking of anything just to spend time with me. It’s charming.

Then I envision Decker rolling out cookie dough with his bare hands in his gray sweatpants and throwing flour at me while flirting. Gosh, I remember a time when I wanted a man to bake with me. Now I’m going to get that.

“Annie?”

“Yeah,” I blink, snapping back to reality.

“We can work on the charity event together in here today.”

“Okay,” I raise my hand, “I do have a question, though.”

He looks up, “Yes.”

“Will you show me how to do everything?”

With a sexy grin, he responds, “Of course.”

Chapter nine

Decker

Elated is the best word to describe how I felt when Annie asked me to show her how to do everything. It wasn't just that she wanted to work with me today. She was interested in wanting to be a part of the charity event. And if I liked her before that moment, I like her even more now. This event means so much to me.

Annie is sitting in my desk chair. She's working on my desktop computer, scrolling a list of businesses that always donate money and emailing them. I'm sitting on the leather sofa with my laptop placed on my lap. We've been working here for hours. We don't have to be here together, but neither has complained.

Looking up from my screen, I see Annie typing away.

"How's it going over there?"

Not looking away from the computer, she answers, "Good. I have to mail a few more, and then I can move on to the next thing."

Getting up from the leather sofa, I walk over and hover behind her while looking at the screen. Her head turns slightly to look at me before quickly turning it back around.

"I didn't know you knew the Hayes Brothers," she says.

"Oh yeah, I met Ryan Hayes while at The Bar one night. We used to hang out until he got married. How do you know them?"

She continues typing an email, "Small world. Ryan's wife Claire loves my chocolate chip cookies. It's her pregnancy craving, so I mail them to her in the Hamptons now since my bakery closed down."

It impresses me that she goes to great lengths to make her customers happy even though she no longer has the bakery. She has a heart and passion for something I've never seen her do. How many days until we bake cookies together?

Looking at my watch, I notice it's after lunch, "Hungry?"

She looks at the time on the screen, "Wow, I didn't even realize the time."

"Want me to have something delivered while you finish? The Sandwich Shop isn't far, and they are quick," I place my hand on her shoulders.

She doesn't respond to my touch, "Sure. But I feel you keep doing my job for me."

Pressing lightly onto her shoulders, I spin the chair around so she can face me. I lean forward to her level, "Annie, I'm just helping. And I'll continue to help you. It may be your job, but I don't care. I understand what it's like to be somewhere you don't want to be."

She lowers, "But...."

Holding my hand up to her, I interrupt, "No buts. Now you finish while I order us some lunch."

Her eyes meet mine, and she nods.

I stand before backing away from Annie and walking out of the room. I sit at Annie's desk and order us lunch from my phone. Once I finish, I stay seated in her chair and look through the office windows at her still working on my computer.

Her view through the windows into my office would be good if she were ever to watch me working. Then I wonder if she ever has.

I'd also like to think she was going to tell me she likes being here with me before I rudely interrupted her, but I guess I'll let my imagination keep wondering.

Getting up from her desk, I walk down to the breakroom. Opening the fridge, I grab two water bottles for Annie and me. When I turn around, Beau Wilson steps into the room.

I pretend he's not there when I walk past him. But then I feel his hand on my arm before I leave the room.

“Hey,”

Turning around, “What do you want, Beau?”

Like the asshole that he is, he sits on top of the table employees eat at on their lunch break. He props his feet on the seat of one of the chairs before leaning forward and smacking his hands together.

He drags his hand down his chin, “Your new assistant taken?”

Rolling my eyes, I say, “She's not interested,” and then turn to leave.

“Oh really, because the other day, she seemed interested. She wants me.”

It's taking everything in me not to punch this douche canoe in the fucking face. I've never liked this guy, and I think he deserves to know right now.

Clutching the water to my chest, I turn around and walk up to his face. “Fuck off. I know Annie isn't interested because she told me. And if I ever see you talking to her again, it will not be good for you. So, I suggest you keep to yourself and mind your own fucking business.”

With that, I quickly walk out and down the hallway.

Entering my office, I close the door behind me. And when my eyes look up from the ground, I see Annie walking toward me.

“There you are. I was just coming to look....”

Grabbing her by the hand, I pull her toward me. I place her against the back of the door, and my lips instantly connect with hers.

At first, she's surprised, but then she loosens up and kisses me back. Her lips are the softest and leave me wanting more. But suddenly, I realize I may have crossed a line with her.

I lift my head back and open my eyes before whispering, "Sorry."

Her eyes connect with mine. She's nibbling on her bottom lip as if she's nervous. It's then that I notice her hand on my chest.

Sliding her hand up my chest, around the back of my neck, she pulls me toward her. Our lips connect once again but this time with so much more force. Her mouth opens, letting me take more.

I'm still holding the stupid bottles of water in my free hand. I drop them to the ground before wrapping my hands around her waist and pulling her into me. She moans at the movement, bringing me back to the other night.

It doesn't take long to feel the arousal of all this in my fucking tight pants. I will be in so much trouble if we don't stop.

But who cares.

I slide my hands down the backside of Annie. Because let's face it, she looks so stunning in this dress today. And now that our mouths are consuming each other, I want to feel her.

Moving my lips to her neck, I hear her trying to catch her breath, causing me to want her so much more right now. Maybe we should take this into the office bathroom.

Squeezing her ass, I lift her. She wraps her legs around my waist as I back her into the door, pressing my arousal into her. As my mouth works its way back to hers.

Just when I get my fingertips under her dress while gripping her thighs, a knock comes at the door.

"Delivery for Decker."

I grumble under my breath, “Shit.”

Annie drops her legs, placing her feet firmly on the ground.

“Hold on a sec,” I shout.

My eyes connect with Annie’s. My facial stubble has caused a slight redness around her mouth and neck. I didn’t realize I might’ve been a little rough with her.

Lifting my hand to her face, I cup her face. Rubbing my thumb around the irritated area on her cheek while smiling.

I nod toward the bathroom, “Take all the time you need. I’ll take care of him.”

She grins before walking off.

Once she shuts the bathroom door, I try to hide the problem in my pants the best I can before opening the office door.

“Hey,”

The delivery guy hands me the bag, “Here you go, sir.”

Taking it from him, “Thanks.”

I look around the rest of the offices to see if anyone’s heads have turned in this direction. Surely, what we did behind closed doors didn’t catch anyone’s attention. Next time I’ll remember to close the blinds.

Walking across the room, I drop the bag on my desk before muttering, “Fuck.”

Annie’s still in the bathroom, and hopefully, I didn’t just mess things up between us by suddenly deciding it was a great idea to kiss her.

I was so riled up by Beau’s words that when I saw Annie, I just wanted to

kiss her. That's all it was supposed to be. But Annie reassured me that the spark between us was there, and damn, it was good.

Chapter ten

Annie

Looking into the mirror, I rub my blushed cheeks with both hands. What just happened out there?

I know what.

I just kissed my boss.

And not an innocent kiss. A kiss that could've led to something more.

Since walking in here to straighten myself out, I haven't been able to stop smiling. I don't know what to think about how quickly that came on, but I'm not the least bit upset about it. I thoroughly enjoyed every second of kissing Decker.

Pressing my hand to my chest, I shut my eyes to remember everything that just happened behind the door. I've been in here for more than a few minutes, and my heart is finally settling to a steady beat, and I'm able to catch my breath.

I can hear Decker on the other side of the door. He's probably getting everything ready for lunch. I'm not sure if this will be awkward for us now. Or if Decker felt the same thing I did during that kiss.

Finally deciding I'm good enough to leave, gripping the bathroom door handle, I take a deep breath before turning the knob and opening the door.

Decker is leaning against the wall beside the door when I walk out—waiting for me to exit the bathroom.

“You okay?” he asks.

I pause before nodding, “Yes. I think so.”

Looking over, I notice the takeout boxes on the table in front of the leather sofa, with the bottled water sitting next to them.

“Thanks again for getting lunch,” I say.

He places his hand on my shoulder, “You don’t even know what I got us. It could be terrible.”

“I doubt it.” I laugh.

He follows behind me as I make my way over to the sofa. So far, it doesn’t look like this will be uncomfortable for us. And it was lovely of him to check on me.

After taking my seat, he hands me a box before placing water before me on the table. Then Decker takes his seat next to me. He puts his box on his lap before opening it.

“I got us each pastrami on rye. It’s a New York classic, and I haven’t met anyone who doesn’t like them,” he says.

I open the box on my lap. It looks and smells so heavenly, making me realize my hunger. We’ve been so busy working on the charity event that the thought of stopping to eat never crossed my mind. I was thoroughly enjoying being able to help him.

Looking up, I notice the blinds are still open. It doesn’t look like Decker cares if anyone sees us because he scoots as close to me as possible. Our knees are knocking against each other.

He picks up his sandwich, taking a rather large bite. I join him.

As I swallow my bite and watch Decker thoroughly enjoy his sandwich, I start wondering if this will be okay between us now in the office. Is Decker going to want to kiss me again? If he hated it and things started getting weird between us, I would need to quit this job. There’s no way we could work together and not get along.

“Everything is okay between us, right?” I blurt out.

“What do you mean?” He screws the cap off his water before drinking from it.

I turn in the seat to face him, pretty much crossing my leg over his. “Is the kiss going to change anything? I need to know if I should quit this job before it does.”

He chuckles, “You don’t need to quit. If anything, this makes work more fun for both of us.”

I poke him in the side, “Mr. Jones, we can’t do that here.”

He places his hand on my thigh before saying, “You’re right. We shouldn’t. But if it happens again, I won’t stop it. And I sure as hell will close the blinds next time.”

Blushing, I giggle.

The thought of kissing him with the blinds closed next time makes me tighten my legs together. Decker had me feeling all sorts of things and ready to go further than we did. I can only imagine what would happen next time we are here with no one watching.

My eyes connect with his desk, knowing that would be where something could happen next time. And I wouldn’t mind it one bit.

The kiss with Decker was a surprise, but my attraction to him came the first moment I met him.

This week has been something new for me. I took a job that I knew nothing about. While it has been an adjustment, Decker has been the sweetest at helping me. It’s also been nice hanging out with him outside of work. I’m enjoying getting to know him.

I still don’t want to go on the trip though.

We both finish eating our lunch in silence. I clean up our mess while Decker takes a seat at his desk.

Since I used his computer most of the afternoon working on the charity event emails, he probably had some work that needed attention.

After throwing away our trash, I walk over to his desk. I gather up my things so I can get out of his way. We finished all the event work earlier, so I don't need to stay here.

“Where are you going?” His eyes don't turn away from his computer.

“Uh,” I say, “to my desk.”

Decker spins around in his chair. His eyes connect with mine.

“What are your plans tonight?”

I tilt my head, “I think I'm going home.”

“You think?”

“I'm going home.” I correct.

“How about you and Lucy join me and the guys at The Bar?”

I shake my head no.

“Why?”

“Because that's a guy's night thing,” I say, “Plus, Lucy has the twins tonight. I'm definitely not coming by myself. I've spent a lot of time with my boss this week. I'm going home.”

He grins, “Did you at least have fun with your boss?”

I hesitate before saying, “I did.”

I only hesitated because I wanted to mess with him a bit. He knew

the answer to that question before he asked me.

“Can I go to my desk now, Mr. Jones?” I ask.

He smiles before nodding toward the door.

Before I walk away, I straighten the bottom of my dress. Then I clutch my notebook to my chest. When I reach the door, I hear Decker clear his throat, so I turn around.

“Need something?”

“Yeah. I’m going to need you to wear that dress again soon.”

My cheeks feel on fire again, like when he complimented me earlier today. If the rest of my days working with Decker are anything like today. I’m going to need to get a desk fan, because it suddenly started getting really freaking hot in here.



I didn’t need to pressure Decker to join his friends at The Bar, as Greta’s notes mentioned. He let us both leave earlier than was expected, which was a surprise. Before leaving, he seemed excited to meet up with them, and I wondered if it had anything to do with what we did in his office.

Surely Decker isn’t one of those guys to talk about these things with his friends.

I mean, I’m going to tell Lucy. I have to.

When I arrive at my apartment, I throw my backpack on the loveseat before strolling into my room. I lay across my bed, face up, and dial Lucy. She’s

probably still at Marcy McMann's watching the twins.

She answers on the second ring, "Annie."

"Lucy. How are you?" I exclaim.

"You saw me this morning. Why do I feel you're calling to tell me something?"

Because I am, and this is how friendships go. They always know when you're calling to tell them something. Lucy knew by the tone of my voice.

"I was calling to tell you..."

"Wait a minute," she interrupts. "Tatum, do not stick that up your nose."

Then I heard a muffled voice as if she had sat the phone down and walked away from it.

I lie there waiting, nibbling on my bottom lip and beginning to think maybe I should wait to tell her another time. It's just that I feel like I need to talk to someone about it, and I highly doubt my mom would be happy to hear about this.

Suddenly I hear giggling on the phone and Lucy in the background yelling about something. I would guess one of the girls has the phone, and the other is getting into trouble.

"Reese? Is that you?" I ask.

"Yes," she says, "Tatum stuck a marble up her nose."

My hand comes to my forehead. "Reese, tell Lucy I will call her later."

"Lucy," she yells, "Annie, call you tomorrow."

Then the call drops.

It's fine. I'm fine.

It doesn't matter because I know I'll dream about Decker when I sleep tonight. I can tell Lucy another day.

Chapter Eleven

Decker

“I kissed her,” I say, “And it was fucking hot.”

Grady is sitting across from me in the booth tonight. And his expression is stunned. I could’ve given him an Annie update before telling him this.

“Holy shit.” Jennings shakes his head.

“Okay,” I say, “you two know Beau Wilson, right?”

“Are you talking about the guy I saw basically fucking that assistant on his desk when I came by the office once?” Grady asks.

“Yes. That guy,” I mutter, with a roll of my eye. “He was flirting with Annie yesterday outside his office. It pissed me off, but I couldn’t really do anything about it. Then today, Annie mentioned she didn’t like him.”

“Where is this story going?” Jennings asks.

“I’m getting there....” Waving my hand I continue, “Beau stopped me in the breakroom today. He asked me about Annie before telling me that she wanted him. After telling him to fuck off, I walked back to my office. I shut the door behind me as Annie was walking up to me. So I grabbed her and kissed her right there behind the door.”

Grady’s expression is still shocked.

Jennings chuckles, “Nice. Sounds like something in my playbook.”

“Trust me. This isn’t normal for me.”

“Let’s hope it’s not. Greta was older, and I’d like to think you never kissed

her.”

“Seriously,” I say. “You’re gross, Grady. She was like my grandmother.”

Jennings takes a sip before saying, “So, it sounds like your trip just got a lot more interesting.”

The trip. I almost forgot all about it. It never crossed my mind between spending time with Annie and the charity event planning.

“Uh... yeah,” I say.

“Are you going to see her this weekend?”

Asking Annie to do something this weekend had crossed my mind today before leaving the office, but she already made the joke that she spent a lot of time with her boss. I took that as she had plans already.

“No. I’m not even sure I have her number.”

I know I don’t have it, and I should. Not only because I want it but because we do work together. Annie’s phone number could be in the email from Greta. I’m sure I can find a reason to message her after I find it.

“I could get it from Lucy for you,” Grady exclaims while picking up his phone.

“How the hell did you get her number?” I ask.

“I asked for it last night before leaving Little Hero’s pizza. What, like it’s hard to ask? I simply told Lucy we should hang out as friends sometimes. Then she gave me her number.”

Wow. I’m terrible at this. I don’t know why I didn’t ask Annie for her number. I guess you could say it’s been a while since I’ve even thought about trying to date someone. At least I know I still have my game regarding kissing.

I sound pathetic.

“I’ll get her number.”

Jennings takes a sip, then smirks.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s just hilarious that we sat here a week ago, and you were a different person than you are tonight.”

I sit back, crossing my arms. “Yeah. Well, things can change quickly, I guess. I didn’t think I would show up to work with a gorgeous assistant who I enjoy being around.”

“I think this is good for you,” Jennings says. “I hated seeing you go through everything you did with your mom. Then spend the last two years trying to figure out who you are. You deserve someone who is gonna be there for you; someone good. I think Annie could be that person from what little I know about her.”

I hold my hand up. “First off, thank you. Secondly, I think you’re exaggerating a bit. We only had one hot make-out session in my office. Yeah, I saw her a couple of times out of the office this week, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

Grady laughs, “Dude. The trip could change everything.”

“I know it will. It could be something good, but it could also be something terrible. I’m taking Annie away from holidays she spends with her family. Traditions she has every year. She could easily not speak to me the whole trip.”

“Or,” Jennings interrupts, “you two could spend the whole trip doing things you need to do. Like fucking.”

“Come on,” I raise my voice. “We’re not talking about that.”

He smirks.

Jennings isn't wrong. I just don't want to admit it yet. And I definitely don't want to talk to him and Grady about things I would like to do with Annie on this trip. Have I thought about us maybe moving forward with getting to know each other? Yes, I have.

"Can we now talk about something else that doesn't concern me?" I ask.

Grady grins, "We can talk about how I'm leaving soon to meet Lucy. We're going to hang out and watch a movie at her place. Just waiting for her to get home from babysitting."

I rub my temple, annoyed.

He already has Lucy's number, and they are hanging out, *as friends*. I wonder if Annie knows about this. And who's Annie with if Lucy is hanging out with Grady? She's probably alone, which gives me all the more reason to find her damn number and see her.



When my eyes open, I instantly feel a slight headache from the extra beers I had last night. I rub my hands down my face before sitting up in my bed.

"Uhh..." I rub my temples.

I don't know what persuaded me to drink a little more than usual. It could've been that I was a tad annoyed when Grady left to go hang out with Lucy. Or maybe that I scrolled through every email I have with Greta, and I still wasn't able to find Annie's number anywhere.

Which means I'm going to need to contact Grady for it.

Throwing the covers off of me, I stand from the bed wearing only my boxer

briefs. Instead of the usual weekend routine of working out when I wake, I decided to skip it for a shower.

I walk into the expansive bathroom, connected to the main bedroom, and turn on the shower. Then I take off my boxer briefs before stepping into the walk-in shower and letting the hot water fall down my chest.

Lathering up the shampoo in my hand after grabbing the bottle and squirting it onto my hands, I wash my hair quickly before rinsing it.

Picking up the bottle of my favorite woody-scented body wash, I pour some into one hand before setting the bottle back down. I work it into a rich lather between my hands. Then I start washing my arms and chest.

When I get to my dick, I run my hand up and down my length. It doesn't take long till I'm stiff. This is part of my regular shower routine, but this time, the thought of my kiss with Annie comes to mind.

Using one hand to brace myself against the tile shower wall, I pump my dick harder with the other, running up and down my length quickly.

I remember how I felt when I held her against the office door yesterday. And the sounds she made trying to catch her breath.

I pick up the pace, clenching my teeth together.

The pressure is building inside me. Then the thought of taking Annie into the office bathroom and what could have happened there pops into my mind.

It only takes seconds before I'm on the edge. After a few more strokes, my release sprays onto the shower wall and down my hand.

"Fuck," I hang my head as I finish myself off.

Getting under the shower head, I rinse my body. Then I pick up my body wash to clean myself all over again.

I only lasted seconds at the mere thought of Annie. There's no

telling what would happen if I actually had her.

I need to get my shit together.

Rinsing my body again, I turn off the faucet. Then let the water drip off me before getting out of the shower. Grabbing the towel off the hook, I dry off before wrapping the towel tightly around my waist.

I run my fingers through my hair while looking in the mirror. For some reason, I look like shit even after the shower. It might be the alcohol from last night or the fact that I'm extremely rusty when it comes to making advances on a woman.

Then all of a sudden, I hear my phone go off in the bedroom.

"Who the hell is that."

Leaving the bathroom, I walk into my room, grabbing my phone off the nightstand. When I open it, there's a message from a random number.

I read the message. "Hey, this is Annie. Lucy said you needed something from me but didn't have my number. I hope you don't mind. Grady gave me your number."

"Fucking, Grady," I mutter.

Before responding, I save Annie's number into my phone as a contact. I'm pissed that Grady took it upon himself to help me. I don't even need anything from her besides just wanting to talk.

I take a seat on the side of the bed to think about what I can use as an excuse as to why I needed Annie's number. Rubbing my temple, it comes to me.

I type.

Me- Oh, yes. I needed the list of everything you need to make cookies at my place this coming week.

Shrugging, I whisper, “That should work.”

While waiting for her reply, I realized I had texted her back abruptly. Now I probably look like I was waiting around for her text.

Standing from the bed, I toss my phone on it before entering the closet to throw clothes on. I slip my shirt over my head before I hear a notification from my phone. I slide on some sweatpants. Then walk into the bathroom to finish getting ready.

I pick up my phone to read Annie’s response when I return to the bedroom.

Annie- Okay. I’ll send you everything in an email.

It’s the weekend, and we’re out of the office. I’m not her boss today. But yet, I want to respond with a bossy reply.

I think about it for a second before typing but I got nothing.

Me- Thank you

Yeah. It’s a stupid reply, but my brain is still too anxious about this whole situation.

Why do I feel things were better between Annie and me before we kissed? Is it going to be all weird between us now? She suspected this, but I told her no. But here I am, acting like I don’t know how to talk to a woman.

Slipping my phone into my pocket, I walk to the kitchen. I open the fridge and look around for something to eat. I’m starving. And while I don’t usually eat breakfast on the weekends, I could eat one of Annie’s bagels right now.

I take my phone from my pocket to order something to be delivered. An email from Annie pops up. I open it, scrolling down to see everything she needs. It looks like I’ll be going shopping today.

Chapter Twelve

Annie

Luckily for Decker, I had already typed up the email containing everything I would need to make cookies. I worked on it before we left the office last night. But for some reason, when Lucy gave me his number from Grady, which is all so strange to me, I thought Decker would want me for something other than a list of ingredients.

It's also surprising he didn't already have my number. I would've thought Greta gave him that when she hired me.

I slept in from the long work week this morning and didn't get up for my regular early morning baking. When Lucy called me this morning about the whole number fiasco, she said she wanted to come by and talk. So I figured we could make something together while we chatted.

She probably wants to talk to me about hanging out with Decker's friend. Or at least I hope that's what it is because that's what I want to discuss.

After a shower and getting ready quickly, I throw my hair up in a messy bun and put on jeans and a cream sweater. I put a Bing Crosby Christmas record on while I tidy up my apartment.

There isn't much cleaning needed since all I did was sleep here this week. I didn't know I was signing up for long working hours and hanging out with my boss outside of work.

I'm not complaining about the after-hours. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

As I'm washing the dishes from the sink, Lucy knocks twice before opening the front door.

"Hey," I say.

Lucy walks in disheveled. Her long brown hair is down but there are pieces blown across her face. She's wearing a tan pea coat over some leggings, an oversized sweater, and a pair of white Converse sneakers.

"It's cold out there," she says.

"It's December," I respond.

She walks into the living room, "Well, if it's going to be this cold, it could at least snow already."

I shrug, "True."

After setting her bag down, she returns to the kitchen. Crossing her arms, she leans against the counter next to me.

"So..."

I look up at her, "So, what?"

"Tell me about the kiss."

I set down a dish, then lean against the counter, mimicking Lucy. "Well, how was movie night with your new *friend*."

"You first," she nods.

"No, you because you didn't even tell me you and Grady exchanged numbers."

She huffs, "Fair enough. While you and Decker were making hearts eyes at each other at dinner the other night, Grady said he was looking for new friends. I offered to be his friend because he seemed fun. I gave him my number, not expecting him actually to use it. He did. So we hung out late last night and watched Remember the Titans. He let me gush about how cute Ryan Gosling was when he was young. Then he expressed how he has a small man crush on him."

“We were not making heart eyes,” I roll my eyes. “Well, I’m happy you found a friend in Grady. I can’t remember the last time I saw you with a guy around.”

“It’s been a while,” she says, “the twins are my life now. Besides you, my only friends are the moms who gossip during gym time.”

“They all probably talk about their new Lululemon leggings while drinking from their Stanley cups.”

“Yeah. You pretty much hit the nail on the head with that one.”

She walks over and opens my fridge, “What are we baking? Please say, brownies. I could go for something chocolate right now.”

“Wow. How did you know? Brownies,” I say, taking a bowl from one of the cabinets.

She closes the fridge, “Really?”

“No. I was thinking of cookies. But brownies are good. I don’t want to clean any more dishes.”

She jumps up, sitting on one of the only countertop areas I have in my tiny kitchen. Then she stares at me while I gather the ingredients for brownies. Finally, after feeling her eyes on me after a minute, I say, “What?”

“You didn’t tell me anything about the kiss yet.”

“Oh, yeah, that,” I say. “Umm... he just kissed me.”

She squints her eyes at me, “Liar.”

I laugh, “He grabbed me by the hand. He pulled me behind his office door and kissed me. Then I might’ve pulled him to me, and we kissed much longer. Something happened as he picked me up, and it might’ve gotten steamy.”

“Annie!” she exclaims.

I smirk, “I was having a moment, and it felt really freaking great. It’s been so long since a man made me feel wanted.”

“So, he wanted your number to go out tonight?”

I shake my head no, “He wanted me to send him a list of the ingredients. I’m making cookies for the charity event at his place.”

“Oh.”

I start mixing the ingredients in the bowl, “You should come help at the charity event. We can run the cookie station together. I don’t think Decker would mind considering you are now friends with Grady.”

“Yeah. Grady invited me.”

“This is all so weird.”

Confused, she asks, “What do you mean?”

“Talking about guys. You and I haven’t dated in so long. This conversation feels strange.”

“Woah. Hold up,” she puts her hands up. “Grady and I are just friends. I’m not looking to date since being a nanny takes up so much of my life. But you, yes. Please date. You deserve someone.”

I laugh, “Well, thank you. But you deserve someone too. We’re thirty-one. We have always put our careers before anything else.”

“Which is perfectly normal.”

I reach down, grabbing a pan from the lower cabinet. Then I place it on the counter and pour the brownie batter into the pan.

Lucy reaches her hand out, so I give her the spoon. She slides her finger up the scoop to get the batter and then licks her finger.

I put the pan into the oven before setting a timer. Then I lean back against the counter to continue talking to Lucy while we wait.

“I want to get some clothes for work. You want to go with me after this?”

“If that means you’ll quit borrowing all my good clothes. Then yes, I want to go with you,” she laughs.

“Sorry. I took this job so fast after closing down that I didn’t have time to get anything nice. And since you bought fancy clothes for all those events Marcy wants you to attend, it was easier for me to borrow them for now.”

“Well, I’m happy I could help.”

Lucy finishes with the spoon, tossing it into the sink. Then she jumps down from the counter and walks into the living room. So I follow her.

She stops the record player, “Can we listen to something not Christmasy?”

“Uhh, excuse me, but Christmas music is the only necessary thing to listen to during this time of year. Are we even friends?”

“I know your love for Christmas. I’m sorry,” she plays it again.

I sit on the couch, “Let me guess. The twins started telling Alexa to play Christmas songs again.”

She sits next to me, “Yes. They cry if I don’t let them. Since Marcy doesn’t like it when she’s home from work.”

“That is really nice of you.”

We sit in silence for a few seconds.

Lucy and I used to spend our weekends at the bakery. She would help me bake. Now it looks like we get to spend them doing things friends

should typically do on the weekends. I don't know how to adjust to this yet.

“Sooo...” she whispers.

“It's strange. Isn't it?”

“How much longer till we get the bakery back?” she laughs.

I pretend to count on my fingers, “Umm... a long time.”

“Looks like you'll need to hook up with your boss.”

I giggle, “Lucy Collins... that's not funny.”

I would hook up with my boss, but not to get my bakery back sooner. But because I want to. Yesterday, Decker made me want something more with him. It's only a matter of time before we get there if he keeps making me feel this desired.

Chapter Thirteen

Decker

It's Monday morning. I'm walking into work early, hoping to spend a little time with Annie before work begins for the day. I wasn't brave enough to message her about something nonwork-related over the weekend, so I'm eager to see her today.

I've concluded that messaging her about things outside work makes our relationship different. And I'm not sure I'm ready for something like that. It's been a while for me. I think it would be best if Annie and I keep things the way they have been going.

I take the elevator up to our floor. After the doors open, I walk out and down the hall. I spot Annie's backpack on her desk chair. So I know she's here somewhere.

When I walk into my office, Annie's bent over my desk in a tight black skirt that goes just above her knee, a white long-sleeve silk blouse, and black heels. Her hair is down and cascading around her shoulders. Fucking hell.

She stands, turning around when she hears me walk in.

"Hey," she grins.

Nothing stopping me, I walk right up to her. I take her face into my hand and then lean down, giving her a quick kiss on her soft lips.

She looks down while nibbling on her bottom lip.

I don't know what just came over me.

"Hey," I say, "You look really nice today."

I release my hand from her face, and that's when I observe her pink cheeks.

Her eyes connect with mine, "Thank you."

Realizing I'm still wearing my coat and holding my laptop bag, I set the bag on the sofa before slipping out of my coat. Annie is still standing by my desk.

I notice the coffee on the desk behind her but no breakfast.

"What did you do this weekend?" I ask.

"Lucy and I went shopping."

Walking back up to her, I place my hand on her shoulder before sliding it down her arm to feel the blouse, "And you bought this."

"I did. What did you do this weekend?"

I can't tell her I jerked off twice in the shower while thinking about her. Or that it took me four hours to find the perfect mixer for making cookies at my place this week. So, I tell her the most acceptable thing.

"I got everything on your list."

Then I drop my hand from her arm and walk around the desk to pick up my coffee.

She turns toward me, "Great. Hopefully it wasn't too much, and you didn't have trouble finding anything."

"No," I lie. "It was easy. It takes up my entire kitchen island. When should we get together this week to work on them?"

"Wednesday, maybe. It might take us a couple of days."

That is just what I wanted to hear. I'll get more time with her

outside of the office.

“Ok. So, we are set for Wednesday. That good with you?”

“Yes,” she nods. “Need me for anything else?”

I want her for many things, but most of those things have to wait until we’re alone. Or maybe for the trip. I wouldn’t mind kissing her again right now though. There’s also nothing to eat, making me wonder if she didn’t bake anything this morning. I know that isn’t normal for her.

“No,” I sip my coffee, “you can go if you want.”

“Okay.”

I watch her as she turns and walks out of the room.

When she gets to her desk, I continue staring at her through the windows while I sit in my desk chair. She pulls something from her bag before walking back into my office. I spin my head toward my computer so she doesn’t catch me watching her.

“I almost forgot this,” she walks in, handing me a container.

My eyes go to the medium-sized blue container, and I accept it from her.

“What’s this?”

“It’s two bagels,” she says. “I made them this morning.”

I grin, “Thanks.”

“You have an editor meeting at nine. Do you need me to be present?” she asks.

She doesn’t need to be there for the meeting. But the thought of her out of my sight doesn’t sit well with me. That would be the perfect time for Beau to come swooping in to put his dumb ass moves on her. Even though I

know she doesn't like him, that doesn't mean I still want him to talk to her.

"Umm..." I clench my jaw, "it's up to you."

The truth is, I can't control Annie even if I want to.

"Okay. I have one more thing to ask." She stands there patiently.

"Yeah?"

"Is there a chance I can leave early tonight? My parents invited me to dinner. They live in the suburbs, and I don't want to be out late."

"Of course," I exclaim, "You can leave whenever you want to."

Her face lights up, "Thank you."

Again, I watch her as she walks out of my office and to her desk. Then I finally turn my attention to work.

The upcoming meeting is an essential meeting with the head of the magazine. Grant White, who owns the company, told us we must be there as he had some vital information to tell us.

I'm sure it's just something he's changing with next month's spread. This type of meeting has been called before. And it never turns out to be as important as he makes it out, so I don't mind if Annie goes with me.

I finally open the container Annie brought and take out one of the bagels. Taking a bite, I immediately moan.

Gosh, these are so heavenly.

I will likely eat both of these this morning because I've been dying to get my hands on one since last week.

Trying not to devour the whole bagel, I return to work on my computer before the big meeting. All while having the best view out of the corner of my eye.

Annie is working away on her computer. I can't help but wonder what's going through her mind about me suddenly kissing her, again, this morning.



Standing from my chair in the conference room, I point my finger down at the table, “There’s no way. You can’t give us a fucking deadline in four days when we’re supposed to have the rest of the month.”

Grant stays calm, arms crossed in his chair, “Yes, I can. And I will. I want every single spread done and on my desk by five o’clock on Friday. Then you are all set to take two weeks off. We are shutting down the offices until the new year.”

Grabbing my papers, I stack them on the desk before picking them up, “Well, if that’s the case. I’m done here because I have shit to do.”

“You may go,” he points to the door.

At first, I thought he was pointing that response to me until I noticed other editors gathering their things and following behind me.

This meeting did not go as I thought it would.

They’ve never shut the office down for more than a week. And now I have to finish all my writing and the photos for the spreads in four days.

I planned to take the week off while on the trip with Annie and finish when we returned. It was the perfect plan. The same way I have done every year since working here.

Walking down the hallway, I pass Annie's empty desk and head into my office.

I'm so mad about this new deadline that I don't notice Annie missing until I sit at my desk.

My chest starts to feel heavy. And my breathing becomes rapid. I start feeling anxious. A heavy sweat starts taking over my body. I loosen my tie so I can breathe for a minute. Then rub my chest to take the pressure off.

Annie walks into my office, a worried expression on her face. She notices something is wrong with me right away.

"Decker," I hear her say faintly.

It's not long until I feel her hands wrap around me, pulling me against her.

"In and out," she says.

It's then I realize my breathing begin to slow down. The pressure on my chest is not as weighted.

I take in the smell of Annie as my head rests against her stomach, her fingers running through my hair. She smells like lavender, and it's so soothing.

Annie loosens her grip on me before bending down to my eye level. I'm still sitting in my desk chair.

"Are you okay?" Her expression scared.

I nod. But I'm still unsure.

"I'll be back."

She walks out of the office.

It's then that I realize I just had an anxiety attack. Sometimes they

come on so unexpectedly. But at least that was one of the smaller ones.

Annie comes rushing back into the room with water in hand. She unscrews the cap, handing it to me.

“Drink this.”

Taking it from her hand, I take a drink.

“Thank you,” I finally say something.

She returns to my eye level, “How long have these been going on?”

She knows.

I shake my head, “I’m fine.”

These are not something I like talking about.

I hand her back the water. She puts the cap back on before setting it on the desk. Then she takes her hand, placing it in my free hand on my lap.

She grins, “You can talk to me, you know.”

Our eyes connect, “This isn’t something I talk about.”

Tightening her grip on my hand, “But you should.”

“That meeting was shit.” I change the subject because I don’t want to discuss what happened.

“I heard.”

“Should’ve known. Information travels fast in this building.”

“Really? Have you heard the rumor about the editor making out with his assistant behind closed doors?” She jokes.

I smirk, “Yeah. I overheard that one. I also heard it was very heated

and those involved were extremely satisfied.”

“They were,” she grins.

She leans forward, her soft lips connecting with mine as she gives me a quick yet lingering kiss. I close my eyes, and when I open them up, she's standing before me. And her hand is no longer in mine.

“I should probably let you get some work done.”

She's leaving me here, and while I feel almost like myself again, I'm not ready to let her go.

I scratch the back of my neck, “Yeah.”

“I'll be right outside your door. Okay.”

“Thank you, Annie.”

“Anytime.”

And with that, she's gone back to her desk.

Annie now knows something about me that no one else does. Her ability to comfort me came so easily, and without asking numerous questions.

Unfortunately, it won't be the last time it happens.

Chapter Fourteen

Annie

I've been keeping a close eye on Decker in his office. He's been sitting at his desk working away on his spreads for the magazine. I want to make sure an attack doesn't happen again before I leave the office.

Knowing that Decker now has a lot of pressure to finish his work before Friday, I decided he could use some help.

While watching him write his pieces from afar, I have been working on choosing the photos for his spreads. Surely he won't mind my help.

I have all of them finished. And when I look at the time, I realize I should probably get going soon since it's five o'clock. Luckily I drove my car to the office today, so I wouldn't need to drive to my apartment after work to get it.

Standing from my chair, I pick my backpack up from under my desk and sit it in the chair. Then shut down my computer.

Before getting on my coat to leave, I walk into Decker's office.

"How's it going in here?"

His head quickly turns from his computer to me with a surprised expression. He scratches the scruff on his chin, "You're leaving already?"

I stroll over beside him.

"Yes. But I wanted to show you something first," I point to the screen. "Open up the links to your pages for next month's magazine."

He side-eyes me before turning around to look at his screen. With his hand firmly on his mouse, he scrolls it around, clicking on the first link.

The spread opens on the screen.

“I hope you don’t mind. But I chose the photos for you.”

“Seriously?” he exclaims before spinning around in his chair to face me.

His hands come to my hips, pulling me closer to him. That is until he looks past me, noticing the blinds are open. He drops them suddenly as if someone saw what he did.

Decker then stands from his chair. He takes my hand in his and pulls me with him toward the bathroom doorway. He walks in, and I follow his lead.

He yanks the door closed behind us as we come face to face. His eyes connect with mine as he grabs my hips pulling my body against his.

“I want to thank you properly,” he mumbles.

He wraps his hands firmly around each side of my face as his lips fall to mine. My core heats up almost immediately with his touch. I part my lips giving him access to more, and he takes it.

There’s something about how he makes me feel when he surprises me with moments like this. What we’re doing should feel wrong, but it doesn’t. It feels right. There’s so much attraction and chemistry there between us.

He drops his hand from my face as his lips move from my mouth to the crook of my neck. I bite my bottom lip as I feel his hands tightly squeeze my backside.

“God, I want to do so much more with you,” he whispers.

His words ignite a small blaze inside me.

Once his lips are back on mine, I reach for the belt of his pants and start

undoing it. He doesn't stop me but picks me up and sets me on the bathroom counter; our mouths never leaving each other.

I feel his hands on the front of my blouse, unbuttoning one button at a time, starting from the top. He stops before reaching the last couple of buttons and places his forehead against mine.

"We don't want to do this here," he mutters.

I try to catch my breath. "You're right. We don't."

Lifting his head, he smirks as he starts buttoning my top back up. I giggle, watching him because he is so damn sexy. And it's so sweet of him to button me back up.

After he finishes redoing his belt, he holds his hand out to help me down from the counter. Before I can reach for the door handle, he stops me.

"I didn't say I was done with you yet."

I spin and smile. "Oh, really. What else do you want me for?"

He brushes a piece of hair away from my forehead, his baby-blue eyes staring into me.

"I want to kiss you again." He says, before kissing my cheek, "And again."

"We would be in here all night then."

He chuckles, "We would. And I believe you have somewhere to go."

Shit, I do. While all this has been amazing, I forgot I have dinner plans with my parents.

I scrunch up my nose, "Oh, yeah."

He kisses my lips, "Did I make you forget?"

I nod, straightening his tie. “Maybe a little bit.”

He grips my hips, pulling me against him again, “Don’t forget about me while at dinner.”

“I won’t, Mr. Jones.” I kiss him. “You just made yourself very difficult to forget.”

He opens his mouth like he wants to say something but kisses me again instead.

“I should probably get going,” I say, even though I don’t want to leave.

“And I should probably get back to work.”

We stare at each other. Neither of us wants to make the move to leave this small bathroom.

After a few seconds, I finally decided to turn around and open the door.

So it isn’t apparent to anyone if they were looking through the windows, I walk out first, leaving his office. I put on my coat and slide my backpack on. That’s when I notice Decker leaving the bathroom and taking a seat at his desk.

Still reeling from everything that happened in that room, I nervously nibble on my bottom lip before walking to the doorway of his office.

“I’m leaving,” I say.

“Okay,” he scratches his chin, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I grin, “Tomorrow, Mr. Jones.”

“Thank you for everything today. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.”

And with that, I walk away and down the hall to the elevator.



An hour later, I pull up outside my parent’s red brick house with black shutters. It’s the house I grew up in.

My parents, Zeke and Camille Walsh, were high school sweethearts who married after college. My dad was a high school algebra teacher but retired over a year ago. My mom is a labor and delivery nurse at a hospital in the city. She hasn’t retired because she said she’s waiting to deliver a grandchild before she does. I just think she loves her job, and watching new lives come into this world makes her very happy.

My younger brother, by ten years, Jake, still lives with my parents. He refuses to grow up, and I’m sure he spends most of his days playing video games. Mom and Dad always say he needs time to figure out what he wants to do. But in reality, he got everything handed to him and isn’t ready to take care of himself yet.

Before leaving my car, I gather myself to ensure Decker didn’t miss any buttons. I’m positive my parents haven’t seen me dress this nice since I went to prom in high school over a decade ago. It’s always been jeans, a T-shirt, and an apron for me.

I get out of the car, close the door, and walk up the driveway to the medium-sized covered porch.

While it’s been a few weeks since I’ve been to a family dinner. I open the door.

“Hello! I’m here,” I shout.

I can already smell Mom’s lasagna cooking when I walk in, and it’s the best smell ever. Slipping out of my heels and coat, I leave them by the front door before walking down the long hallway next to the stairs that lead up to the second story.

“Mom, Dad, Jake,” I enter the living room.

“In here, Sweetcakes,” she says from the kitchen.

I frown. That nickname reminds me of the one thing I loved that I no longer have.

Mom pulls a pan of French bread from the oven when I reach the kitchen. She sees me when she looks up, and her eyes fall right on what I’m wearing. Giving me a big smile, she puts the pan on the stovetop and hugs me.

“Oh, dear. You look amazing.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I hug her neck.

I am my mother’s twin. She has shoulder-length blond hair and green eyes. And while she’s almost sixty, she still doesn’t look a day over thirty-five. Plenty of times, we’ve been called sisters while out in public.

“Dinner is ready. I’ll get your brother. Your father is in the study, reading.”

“I’ll get Dad.”

I walk across the living room to the other side of the house. The study is located just off that room.

When I walk in, my dad sits in his old rocking chair, his reading glasses on and book in hand.

“Hey. Interrupting anything good?”

His eyes look over the top of his book, and he grins, “Annie dear.”

“Dinner’s ready.”

He lifts his nose, smelling the air. “Lasagna?”

I laugh. “Smells amazing.”

He stands from his chair, setting his book down on the side table.
“That’s because it always is.”

He drapes his arm over my shoulder as we walk to the dining room.
“You look lovely. How’s the new job going?”

“It’s not that bad.”

My mind instantly goes to Decker, telling me not to forget him at dinner. I smile because I haven’t.

When we reach the dining room, Dad sits at the head of the table. Mom has already placed everyone’s table settings, like usual. She comes walking in with the lasagna pan when I take my seat.

“Jake will be down soon. We can start.” She sets the pan on the table.

I roll my eyes. “Does he do this every night?”

Mom looks at Dad as he places a large helping of food on his plate.

“Not every night.”

Dad snickers, “Yes. Every night.”

“He is signed up to take online college classes starting next semester.”

I load my plate with food, “Well, good for him.”

“So... how’s the new job?” Mom asks.

“It’s great. I’m finally figuring it all out. It’s so much different than the bakery.”

“That’s wonderful. Greta said she stopped by around lunch on Friday. She’s said you and Mr. Jones are getting along well.”

My face heats up, and I feel like every bit of blood drained from my face. I don’t remember Greta stopping by, so she probably saw what was happening behind the office door.

“Umm...” My mind goes blank. “Yeah. We are figuring each other out.”

Shit. That was not the right thing to say. Of course, we’re figuring each other out. But in a much different way than my parents would think.

My mom looks at me, confused.

She knows me better than anyone. She knows I’m hiding something. I need to get my shit together.

I clear my throat, “Decker is a great boss. He’s helped me and is patient, while I try to learn everything. I was able to help him out with his parts of the magazine today. He appreciated it.”

Ugh. I give up on this. He appreciated more than my help.

Mom and Dad have mouths full, so I choose to change the subject that has nothing to do with me and my boss’s physical relationship.

“So, how’s work going, Mom?”

She swallows, “We have delivered some of the sweetest babies lately. Most of their names are hideous, but the babies are so precious. And I already got off for Christmas Day.”

I take a deep breath.

It reminds me that I still need to tell my parents about the trip. I have a feeling this whole night I'm going to try not to talk about Decker, but he's going to come up anyways. Great job, Mr. Jones. I'm eating my own words of him being "very unforgettable."

I set down my fork and swallow. Here it goes.

"So. About Christmas...." I say, "I'm not going to be here."

I clench my teeth so hard as I watch my mother's shocked expression.

"Well, where are you going to be?"

My father continues eating as if this conversation isn't happening.

"Somewhere warm." I shrug.

"Nonsense." She exclaims, "We've had the same traditions since you were a baby. We spend Christmas Day together every year."

"Mr. Jones has asked me to go to Cancun. It's for work."

It's not for work.

I'm almost positive now that he wants me to go for pleasure. And a lot of it, I'm sure.

"Sounds like fun, honey." My dad says casually as if it's perfectly normal to vacation with your brand-new boss.

"Zeke," she smacks his hand, "did you hear that correctly? Your daughter won't be here on Christmas Day."

Jake comes into the room, "What did I miss?"

“Nothing,” I shout.

“All I’m saying is if she wants to go somewhere warm. And frolic around in a bikini with her boss, then go for it. More power to you.” He fist pumps the air.

Oh my gosh, this just got worse.

Thinking of being in a bikini on the beach with Decker makes me nervous. No doubt, my dad knows Decker’s intentions.

Jake takes a portion large enough to feed all four of us and places it on his plate, “I want to go somewhere warm for Christmas. And look at girls in bikinis.”

“Gross,” I say, “Get a job first, and maybe you can.”

He smirks, “I’m mowing lawns in the neighborhood.”

I laugh, “It’s December, Jake. Lawns don’t need mowing. Unless you’re getting paid to,” I gag, “hook up with someone in the neighborhood. Suppose you know what I mean. And if so, please don’t tell me that’s what you’re doing.”

Jake doesn’t even get to respond because Mom interrupts all of us.

“Jake is not mowing lawns. Or sleeping with a neighbor. He’s delivering pizzas for Little Hero’s Pizza on the weekends.” She pauses, “And Annie, I think Cancun with your boss for Christmas will be great. Enjoy it. You deserve it. Even if it means breaking the same tradition you’ve had for thirty years.”

Was I upset with Decker for the trip? Yes, but now I think I would like a trip where he will probably explore every inch of my body. I will thoroughly enjoy having his hands all over me as mine will be all over him.

I tighten my legs together under the table while thinking about Decker. If the way he makes me feel just thinking about him indicates how I will feel when we are officially alone, then I want it. I’m ready.

Chapter Fifteen

Decker

After a late night at the office, I decided to sleep in and come in late for work. I left Annie a post-it note on her computer before I left so she would know first thing this morning.

I roll out of bed exhausted and go into the bathroom to shower.

It was hard enough that I had so much to write for my articles, but what made it worse was that all I could think about was Annie, and what I wanted to do with her. So needless to say, I didn't finish until late last night.

Then I was left wondering if she thought about me. Was she going to tell her parents about us? The trip came to mind a few times, and I'm sure she told them she wouldn't be there. They probably hate me.

I shower quickly because I don't have the time for the usual shit I do in the shower, which I'm hoping will soon be a thing of the past for me as Annie and I have been getting closer physically.

Putting on my matching navy-blue suit with a crisp white button-up, I go for no tie and open the top two buttons. Then I slide on my tan leather shoes. I look into the full-size mirror in my closet, running my hands through my hair to make it look decent.

When I walk into the living room, I pick up my laptop bag off the couch and grab my keys off the kitchen island, but not without looking at the piles of stuff still sitting there for Annie and me to make cookies. I wasn't lying when I said it covers the whole island. There are baking sheets, containers to store the cookies, a brand-new mixer still in the box, and all the ingredients.

Looking at everything makes me smile because I can't wait until she gets here to see it. I know she's going to like it.

I leave my apartment, taking the elevator down to the parking garage. I see my black Porsche Macan waiting for me when the door opens.

Unlocking the doors, I hop inside and take off towards the office building. I wanted to drive today, hoping that Annie would let me take her home from work.

It must be my lucky day because a spot opens right out front when I arrive at the office. I pull in, park, and get out.

After taking the elevator up, I walk out and down the hallway. Only to notice Annie missing from her desk. Her bag is in its usual place, and the post-it note is still in the middle of her screen where I stuck it last night.

I look over at my office to see that she isn't there. I spin around on my feet, and she's nowhere in sight, so I walk into my office.

There's coffee on my desk with a post-it note attachment to my screen.

We need to talk.

-Annie

"Shit," I mutter.

Surely she doesn't think we overstepped boundaries. Maybe she wants to cancel the trip since she talked to her parents. Or perhaps I've exaggerated everything, and it's not a big deal.

I sit at my desk, taking a sip of my coffee, and it tastes so good because I'm so fucking tired.

It's then I catch sight of Annie out of the corner of my eye. She's walking from the break room. I check to ensure the asshole isn't behind her. And he isn't.

I stand from my chair but before I can even leave my desk, Annie's eyes find mine through the window, and she smiles as she strolls to my doorway.

I need her.

She walks in, "Good Morning."

"Morning. Close the door behind you," I say.

Without hesitation, she closes the door before walking over to the sofa to sit.

Today she's wearing another black skirt, which is not as tight as yesterday's, and a baby blue sweater with heels.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

She looks around, "I'm sitting."

"I want you here," I hold out my hand next to me.

She grins while shaking her head and then stands beside me.

"What do we need to talk about?" I cross my arms over my chest, but I want to touch her so badly.

"You want all the bad news?" She frowns.

She's so fucking cute.

"Well, is there good news?"

She takes a deep breath, "Good news is my parents didn't mind when I told them about the trip."

I uncross my arms and take a deep breath. This news maybe isn't going to be so bad.

“Keep going,” I say.

“Bad news is I’m positive Greta stopped by and saw us making out behind the door on Friday. There’s also a snowstorm coming Saturday night which could cancel our flights on Sunday for the trip.”

Okay. So, it could be worse.

“Why do you think Greta saw us?”

“Last night at dinner with my parents, my mother said Greta stopped by during lunch on Friday,” she says, “Greta told my mom it looked like we’re getting along well.”

“She most definitely saw us then,” I nod. “Did your parents suspect anything could be happening between us?”

Annie bites down on her bottom lip. A sign that she’s most definitely nervous. “I told them it was for work. But I don’t know if they think it’s anything more than that.”

I chuckle because I know Annie has figured it out too. It’s not for work.

“So there’s a snowstorm? We can leave when it’s cleared out.”

The way Annie is standing beside me looks innocent to everyone outside the office window. If someone were to walk by, they wouldn’t see me if I touched her. So, I spin my chair back a bit. Then slide my hand under her skirt at the back of her thigh.

She side-eyes me but doesn’t back away from my touch. So I rub her bare skin with my thumb.

“You have any more news for me?”

“That’s all I have for now.” She blushes.

“Good. I have a question.” I continue brushing the back of her

thigh with my thumb as my hand slowly inches upwards.

“Yes.”

“Did you bake this morning?”

“No,” she shakes her head. “It was a late night for me. So I slept in.”

“Are you okay with that?” I ask.

I want to ensure she’s still happy even if she doesn’t follow her usual routine.

“Yeah. I can make something when I get home.”

That’s when an idea comes to me.

“Come over after work. You can make me something,” I say, just as my hand reaches the bottom of her ass.

She looks nervous, “Maybe.”

I tilt my head to the side as I feel she’s wearing a thong. Her face turns red as I inch closer to touching her right where I want to.

“Come,” I push her thong aside, sliding two fingers inside her to feel how wet she is for me.

“Right now,” she mumbles.

She’s so tight, it’s turning me on, and my dick is pushing so hard against the zipper of my pants. She’s dripping for me, and I want to bend her over my desk right now, but this isn’t the time.

Pulling my hand from under her skirt, I stand from my chair and get behind her.

“Tonight,” I whisper into her ear, “Come with me.”

Taking the two fingers that were just inside her, I glide them over my bottom lip slowly. I lick my lip to taste her, then place those fingers in my mouth and suck them clean, all while she watches me over her shoulder.

She sucks in the air between us while closing her eyes. She tastes just like I thought she would, sweet.

Suddenly my phone, located in my laptop bag on the sofa, goes off. Annie finally exhales from holding her breath and opens her eyes. I'm not happy we got interrupted again, but we have almost finished here anyway.

"You should get that," she says.

"I should, but I'm waiting for an answer,"

Annie spins around, facing me, and straightens my suit jacket for me. "Okay."

"Good," I smirk. "Now I should probably get that."

She's turned on her feet, walking toward the door to leave my office. I follow behind her but stop at my bag. Digging through the side pocket, I find my phone and pull it out, only to find out that it was just Jennings calling.

Walking over, I close my office door while calling Jennings back. I haven't spoken to him since Friday, so I'm unsure what he wants.

"Yo," he answers.

"Did you need something?" I sit at my desk.

"Yes. We're staying tonight after practice. Are you coming?"

I tap my mouse to turn on my computer screen. "Can't. I have plans."

"Okay then. We have a home game next Thursday night." He says.

“I saved two suite tickets for you since I know those are your favorite ones to come to. Grady’s family has the rest of the tickets. And he also invited Lucy. I thought you might invite Annie. Since you’re dating.”

“We’re not dating.” My eyes roam over to her, “I won’t be able to make it. Our flight leaves Sunday, and we’ll be gone all week.”

“Not dating. You can’t come to your favorite game. Can’t come to throw some footballs with us because you have plans with her. But you can take her on a trip where we all know what will happen.” I can feel the eye roll through the phone.

What he’s saying makes sense.

“Correct.” I clear my throat.

“There’s a snowstorm coming Sunday.” He adds.

“I’m well aware.”

“Have you considered staying here to spend Christmas with everyone who cares about you?” He asks. “Make new traditions.”

My eyes are still on Annie as she works.

I haven’t thought about doing anything else, but I also haven’t thought about the trip as much lately, either. She doesn’t mind going now, so I don’t know if I should change plans.

“Thanks for the suggestion. I’ll think about it.”

“Really?” he exclaims.

“We will probably go on the trip but hold those tickets.”

“Will do,” he says. “Have fun on your date tonight. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

He laughs through the phone.

“It’s not a date, Jennings. We are only getting to know each other,”
I finally turn my eyes away from Annie and to my screen.

“Whatever you say. I’ll let you go.”

Then the phone goes silent.

Setting my phone down on my desk, I lean back in my chair.

There are so many things on my mind at the moment. And for some reason, I feel like, for once, just going with the flow of what happens instead of my usual plans.

Turning my eyes back to Annie, I can’t help but wonder if she has anything to do with it.

Chapter Sixteen

Annie

While it may look like I've been working hard today, I'm not. Instead, I've been dreaming of being touched by Decker; having his hands all over my body. The number of times I've typed dick instead of pick into the schedule is outrageous. I shouldn't think about how my boss slowly glided his hands under my skirt and felt how wet I was in his office this morning. And I know I shouldn't be thinking about what we may do at his place tonight. But it's all I can think about.

"You ready?"

My eyes follow the voice to Decker leaning against the doorframe of his office. He looks so handsome, standing there with hands in his pockets, sleeves rolled up showing off his toned forearms, and waiting for me to answer. Did it just get hotter in here or is it just me?

"Yeah," I clear my throat, "Sorry, I was just finishing up."

I wasn't actually finishing up anything but my dirty thoughts.

Standing from my chair, I gather my notebooks before picking up my bag off the floor. I look up to see Decker gone from the doorframe and putting on his coat to leave.

After stuffing my bag and getting my coat on, I meet Decker at his door. We are the only people left in the building since he has been trying to finish up his spreads for the magazine.

"Are you sure you want me to come over?" I ask entirely for the sake of being nervous.

"Yeah," he winks. "What will you make me?"

“Depends on what you have,” I say as he drapes his arm over my shoulder.

We walk down the hallway to the elevator and get in when the doors open.

He kisses my cheek, dropping his arm from my shoulder. “I have it all.”

“Who did you hire to buy it all?” I joke.

He snorts, “I bought it all myself. Thank you very much.”

“I’m excited to see if you’ll impress me or not,” I say as the doors open and we walk out.

“I have a feeling you’ll be thoroughly impressed, Ms. Walsh.”

After we walk out the front doors of the building, Decker points his hand toward a fancy SUV. The doors unlock as the taillights flash.

“Get in,” he orders.

“This,” I throw my hands out, “is your car?”

“Just get in the car Annie,” he says, walking to the other side.

As he ordered me to, I get in the vehicle. The all-black leather interior is shiny. There’s no crumb in sight or anything signaling that he’s had this for a long time.

“New?” I ask as he gets in.

“I’ve had it a few years. Why?”

“It’s in pristine condition. My ten-year-old Honda Accord. Well...” I say. “It’s been thoroughly used. And maybe a bit dirtier than this.” I glide my hand across the leather console.

“Buckle up.”

“Oh, right,” I say.

My nervousness is starting to show. I tend to ramble about nonsense when I’m nervous.

After I buckle my seatbelt, he starts the car and drives out into traffic.

“Where was your bakery located?” he asks.

“It was a few blocks from my apartment. The location was terrible, but it was all I could afford then. I worked odd jobs and waited tables until I had enough money. It took me a couple of years, but it was worth it.” I drift.

Without taking his eyes off the road, he says, “I admire that. My mom worked hard to be able to provide for me. She always made sure that I was not only taken care of but that I got to play football. We didn’t have much money for me to play football at the best schools. It paid off in the end for her. I was able to get into a great college on a scholarship. After I got drafted in the NFL, I paid her back for everything she did for me.”

I smile as I feel little butterflies in my stomach.

“You’re a good man, Decker. Your mom did a great job raising you,” I poke his arm.

Part of me wants to ask him about his dad. Or if his father was ever there for him. He does all these things because of his mom. I just don’t want to ask about something that may be a sensitive topic for him.

“Thank you. But I owe everything I am to my mom. She never let me give up. I don’t know if she would be happy with my choices since she passed.”

I frown, “Why do you say that?”

His eyes look over at me quickly before looking back on the road. We're close to his apartment building, but I'm not ready for this conversation to end. I want to know more about why Decker is who he is.

"Well..." he bites the inside of his cheek, "I gave up playing football. I shouldn't have, but I did. I thought it was what I needed to do at the time. I missed games when she was sick in the hospital. I knew I needed to take better care of myself after she died. So I got an easier job. But this job brings added stress and pressure I didn't have before. Playing football was easy and natural because I did it most of my life."

I nod.

It makes so much sense why he accepts me coming into a job I don't understand or like. Or how off I feel when I don't bake, because he knows that's what makes me happy. He gets me because I'm going through the same thing as him.

"Don't be hard on yourself about it," I say. "She would be happy with anything you choose to do because she loved you and would've supported any of your decisions."

He pulls into the parking garage and parks next to the elevator. Then he turns off the car.

He turns to me before softly saying, "Thank you."

I smile, "Anytime."

Getting out of the car at the same time, I follow closely behind him as we get into the elevator and make our way up.

We're silent, and I'm okay with that. I feel more at ease now after our conversation in the car. I have a little bit of a better understanding of Decker.

He doesn't ever show much emotion. Besides the anxiety attack that we still haven't talked about. But I like that he can be vulnerable with me

and show a side he may not offer many people.

Once we exit the elevator and walk down the hall to his apartment, Decker already has the keys in his hand to unlock the door. I patiently wait behind him while he turns the lock. Once it clicks, he turns to me, “I take it back.”

“Uh...” I say, confused, “you take what back?”

“I take back that you’re going to be thoroughly impressed. If you hate it, just be honest and tell me.”

I laugh, “Just open the door. We’re talking about ingredients here. It’s okay if you bought the off-brand. They work and taste the same as the more expensive ones.”

He chuckles, placing his hand on his chest. “Okay. Your words, not mine.”

When he finally opens the door, he holds his hand out for me to walk in, so I do. He comes up behind me and flips the switch by the entrance to turn the living room light on.

Then, I notice the kitchen island covered with anything and everything to bake cookies, including a shiny cream retro stand mixer still in the box.

I gasp, “It’s a SMEG.”

“If it’s off-brand, I can return it and exchange it.” His expression was worried.

“Are you kidding? No way. A SMEG is like a dream of mine.”

He slides out of his coat, “Really, because when I saw it, I thought of you.”

My heart swells by his words.

He thought of me.

I take off my coat, hanging it on the back of his barstool.

“My apartment isn’t big enough for a stand mixer, but if it were, this would be the mixer that would sit on my counter.”

Knowing he did great, he smiles, “Let’s open it.”

I walk back over to the door to slip out of my heels. Decker had already cut the tape and opened the box when I returned to the kitchen. You can see and feel his excitement over the mixer.

As he takes the packaging out of the box, he asks, “So, if you don’t have a mixer, what do you use?”

“A hand mixer.” I take some of the packaging from his hands.

“A SMEG hand mixer?” He pulls the mixer out.

“No,” I laugh. “It’s an off-brand.”

He sets the mixer on the counter, and my heart is pounding out of my chest. It’s from the excitement and the thoughtfulness. Also, the fact that he thought of me when he saw it. I don’t know how he would know something like a shiny retro mixer would make me happy. I put a cheap stand mixer on the list for him. I wasn’t expecting him to buy something this nice.

Placing his hand on his hips, he steps back to look at it, “Well, what do you think?”

“You know,” I scrunch up my nose, “I guess now is the time for me to be honest.”

His face falls.

“I’m kidding. You couldn’t have picked a more perfect mixer. I bet it took you hours to find one. You can’t just buy these everywhere.”

He casually says, “Only took me a couple of hours.”

I stare at him, waiting for the correct response because he didn’t find this at the first store he entered.

“Okay,” he laughs, “it took me four hours.”

“Here.” I take the mixing bowl off. “Let me wash this.”

I walk over to the sink on the island and start rinsing and washing the mixing bowl by hand. Decker puts away the box from the mixer. And when he returns, he hands me a towel from a drawer to dry the bowl.

“Did I get enough supplies for this weekend?” he nods at the stuff scattered across the island.

Drying the bowl, I say, “Yes. I think so. I feel like it’s been a while since I baked so many cookies at once. It looks like enough stuff, but we will find out tomorrow night.”

He leans against the counter, “I hope you don’t mind. I ordered a pizza before leaving the office. It should be here soon. I knew we would want dinner.”

I set the dry bowl on the counter, “I don’t mind. I’m hungry.”

He stands, “I’m going to go change. There’s money on the counter for a tip when the pizza arrives.”

I look over at the twenty-dollar bill on the kitchen island's counter. “Okay.”

As I put the bowl back on the mixer stand, Decker walks past me. When he’s out of sight, I look over the baking supplies on the kitchen island. I gave him a small list, yet there were so many things here that weren’t there.

Like bags of chocolate chips.

I can’t help but wonder if there was a reason for buying so much

more than I listed.

Walking over to the fridge, I open it to see a gallon of milk and enough sticks of butter to make double the number of cookies I had planned for the charity event.

It looks like there are all the ingredients here to make Decker and me a small batch of chocolate chip cookies tonight. Since that's what I'm here for, right?

I open a box of stick butter, removing two sticks to soften on the counter.

After I set them down and shut the fridge, there's a knock at the door.

It's probably the pizza.

I grab the twenty off the island for the tip. Then I open the front door to my brother standing there looking over the delivery receipt.

He looks up, "Delivery for.... Uh. What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here? Mom said you deliver pizzas on the weekends."

"I got called in."

Decker comes behind me, pulling his shirt down from just putting it on.

"Annie," Jake says, "What are you doing at legend football player Decker Jones's apartment?"

"You know him?" Decker asks.

I huff, pointing my thumb out, "Decker, meet my younger brother Jake. Jake, this is my boss."

“Oh, shit. He’s your boss.” Jake’s jaw drops.

Decker holds his hand out. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Jake hands me the pizza box before shaking hands with, apparently, the legend. This is the first time I’ve had to see someone star-struck by Decker, and I hate that it has to be my brother.

“If you left your room occasionally, you would know that Mr. Jones here was my boss.”

He ignores my slight jab at him. “Can I get your autograph?”

Decker takes the receipt from my brother’s hand before walking back into the apartment. I suppose he is signing that.

Jake and I stand in an awkward silence. I’m sure he wonders if we have actual work to do or if we will be doing something else.

“So,” Jake says, “You never answered why you’re at his apartment.”

“Work...” Decker interrupts, handing him back the signed receipt, “We have some work to do.”

“Yes,” I say.

Jake grins before letting out a tiny chuckle, “Whatever. Well, enjoy the pizza.”

“We will,” I wave as Jake walks off.

When he’s out of sight, I feel Decker’s arm wrap around my waist. He pulls me back into the apartment as the door closes behind us.

“You didn’t tell me you had a brother,” he says closely into my ear.

“Well, you never asked me,” I shrug, “Also, you lied to him. I’m not here for work Mr. Jones.”

“What are you here for?” he asks.

In his arms, I spin around with the pizza box still in hand.

“You tell me,” I say because even I’m unsure what I’m here for.

Chapter Seventeen

Decker

Annie's standing before me. Her eyes are focused on me as she's waiting for me to answer the one question I don't know I have an answer to.

"You're here to bake, right?" I say.

Her eyes look down at the pizza box in her hand and then back up at me, "Right."

She walks into the kitchen then sets the pizza on the counter. I follow behind her and take a couple bottles of water out of the fridge for us. When she turns back around to me, I hand her one. She takes it from me before opening the pizza box to take out a slice of pepperoni pizza.

"What are you going to make?" I ask.

She purses her lips, "I was thinking of making cookies. Since you bought more ingredients than I listed for you."

So she noticed. I couldn't help but buy a few extra things than she listed. Since she helped me put the tree up, I wanted to be able to have something on hand for cookies, just in case.

"Sounds good."

After taking a bite of her pizza, she sets it down on the pizza box lid. She picks up a stick of butter off the counter, opens it, and drops it into the mixer.

"You want to help?"

"I'll watch," I say, "I can't remember the last time I baked

something.”

“Did you bake with your mom?” she asks, adding sugar to the bowl.

Annie makes it so effortless to bring up my mother. Besides the guys, I haven’t talked this much about her with anyone.

I lean against the counter, “My mom was the type to pick treats up from a bakery. Anything that made it easier for her.”

Annie smiles before adding the rest of the ingredients to the mixer. While it mixes everything, she walks over to turn on the oven before turning around to me.

“Sheet pans?”

I nod to the cabinet next to the oven. Annie opens it up, removes a small pan, and sets it on the stovetop. She stops the mixer and takes the bowl off. I can’t stop watching her as she takes control of my kitchen. Since I moved into this apartment, a woman hasn’t been in the kitchen.

Scooping out the dough with a spatula, she drops small amounts around the pan until the mixing bowl is empty.

When she finishes, she sets the bowl in the sink before returning to the pizza box to continue eating.

“Was your mom the one who taught you how to bake?” I ask before finishing the slice of pizza in my hand.

She smiles, “She was. Since I was little, we’ve kept this tradition every year, where we bake all kinds of sweets on Christmas Eve. We spend the whole day in the kitchen. Then we package everything up in cute boxes and take it to neighbors or family.”

I bite the inside of my cheek while I think about asking her if we should cancel the trip. She is once again talking about something she does every year that she won’t be able to do while away. As I get to know her more and more,

the further the trip is from my mind.

The oven dings with a noise to let her know it's ready. She spins on her feet to pick up the pan, throwing it into the oven.

Leaving the kitchen, I go into the living room. I grab the remote and turn on the television. Annie joins me and takes a seat on the sectional.

“Have a movie preference?” I ask.

She shakes her head no before resting it on the back of the couch. I quickly click on the first movie I see, which happens to be one of my favorites, *Home Alone*.

Then I set the remote down on the coffee table, walk over to turn the lights on the Christmas tree by the window, and come back to sit close to Annie on the couch.

“Are you tired?” I ask, “I can take you home soon.”

She scrunches up her nose. Something I noticed she does when she's maybe nervous, and it's cute.

“Just a little bit.” She holds her hand up and pinches her index and thumb together, indicating her tiredness. “Don't worry about taking me home. I can get a cab.”

I want to offer her a ride home again, but there must be a reason why she doesn't ever want me to take her home. I have a feeling she's worried about what I'll think of where she lives.

We sit there for a few minutes in silence. I've wanted to get close with her since we left the office. Instead, we've been getting close in a different way. She seems to have such an effortless way to ask me about my life. At the same time, some things are just easier to talk to her about. There are still a lot of things that I want to keep to myself though.

“So,” she opens her mouth, “I want to talk about today.”

I sit straight up, “If it’s about what happened in my office, was that not okay?”

“I didn’t mean that. I mean about what happened yesterday.” Annie clenches her jaw, “I mean the attack in your office yesterday. Sorry.”

I exhale, “That’s not something I like talking about. The guys don’t know. I’ve only been dealing with it since my mom’s death. And since I retired from football.”

“Have you thought about seeing anyone about it?” her eyes find mine. I can see a bit of worry in them, and I think what happened scared her a bit.

“No. I know I need to if it continues.” I frown.

She sits up straighter, “I know you write, but do you ever read? I find reading to be relaxing. It takes me to a place where I can escape. I haven’t picked up a book lately, but reading can be therapeutic. There is a large bookstore in the city that has eighteen miles of books. We should go some time.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve opened a book,” I say. “But we should go. Have you ever been there before?”

The timer goes off in the oven, which takes Annie by surprise. She stands from the couch and walks into the kitchen. I hear the range open and close.

“I’ve never been inside, but I’ve walked by it before.” She answers from the kitchen.

The smell of cookies instantly moves through the apartment, making my mouth water. I know I’m about to eat so many cookies even though I don’t eat a lot of sweets.

It’s then that I hear Annie’s phone ringing from her bag. I place my arm over the back of the couch and turn around to look at her in the kitchen.

She walks around the island, opens her bag on the barstool, and takes out her phone.

“It’s Lucy.” She looks up at me.

“Answer it,” I nod.

She takes the call, “Hey, Lucy. What’s going on?”

Annie then places her hand on her chest as her face lights up with panic. She isn’t saying anything, but whatever it is, it has me worried.

“Yes,” she finally answers, “I’ll be right there. Give me a few minutes.”

She listens a little longer before saying, “Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

“Everything alright?” I ask.

She places the phone back into her bag and then grabs her coat, sliding it on.

“I’ve got to go. Lucy says one of the twins is sick, and she’s worried about her. Marcy is out of state for a meeting and won’t return until tomorrow night. Lucy thinks Reese needs to see a doctor but doesn’t want to call Marcy, so she asked me to stay with Tatum while she goes to the hospital.”

I get up from the couch, “I’m taking you.”

“Okay,” she doesn’t argue.

Walking to the door, I slide on a pair of tennis shoes before slipping my coat on. Annie puts her backpack on and meets me at the door.

I hate that our night has to end abruptly, but this is important.

I open the door, Annie walks out, and I follow her lead.

“Has this happened before?”

“Yes,” she says. “Lucy is used to something like this. And I’ve helped watch the girls for her. Her job is not easy. Marcy works more than she is home with the girls. Lucy is more than prepared for these situations.”

I shake my head before pressing the elevator button.

When the doors open, we take the elevator down to the parking garage in silence. We get into my car, and it hits me that we were in the middle of something before leaving.

Turning on the car, I say, “Shit. The cookies.”

“It’s okay. I turned the oven off.”

“You didn’t want any?”

Smiling, she says, “No. They are for you, Mr. Jones.”

Pulling out of the parking garage, I say. “You like calling me that, don’t you?”

“Maybe,” she grins. “We are going to Lucy’s apartment, which isn’t too far from here. Just make a left at the next light.”

“The twins even stay with her?” I ask.

“Sometimes. When Marcy goes out of town, they sleep over at Lucy’s. She feels weird sleeping at someone’s house when they aren’t there.”

“Makes sense.”

Making the left turn, as Annie told me, I drive further into the city.

“It’s just right up here,” she points. “You can drop me off at the front doors.”

“If you need to help Lucy out tomorrow, let me know. You can take the day off if you need to.”

I pull up outside the building Annie pointed out, parking the car by the front doors. Annie grabs her backpack from the floorboard and slips it on before opening the door.

“Thank you for tonight and the ride,” she says. “I will let you know if I can’t be there tomorrow.”

She turns to me before grabbing the handle to open the door, and I take this moment to do something I’ve wanted to do all night.

Taking her face into my hand, I lean in giving her a quick kiss goodbye.

I lean back, dropping my hand from her face. She bites down on her bottom lip before smiling at me. “I’ll see you later.”

“Goodnight, Annie.”

She opens the door, getting out of the car. Looking back with the door in her hand, ready to close it, she says, “Goodnight, Mr. Jones.”

Then the door closes. And I watch as she strolls to the front doors and opens them, walking inside.

And just like that, our night together was cut short and over.

I throw my head back on the headrest as I watch Annie disappear into the elevator. Then I look for any oncoming traffic before driving out onto the road.

My phone buzzes with a text message when I get closer to my apartment.

When I stop at a stoplight, I pull my phone out to see that the text is from Annie.

Annie- I'm so sorry, but I forgot about the mess in your kitchen.

I laugh while trying to think of a response. I see three dots appear and disappear before looking up to see the light is still red. When my eyes go back to the text thread, I see she messaged me again.

Annie- I owe you ;)

Cute. She doesn't even use an emoji. I finally think of the perfect response.

Me- I'll only take payments in the form of bagels. Don't worry about the kitchen. I'll leave it for you to clean tomorrow night. ;)

I look back up just as the light turns green. Then I drive a little further down the road and pull into the parking garage and park my car.

When I get up to my apartment, I open the door to all the lights left on, along with *Home Alone 2* playing on the television. The place still smells like freshly baked cookies. I walk over to the stove, pick up a cookie and then take a bite.

"Mmm..." I moan.

I'm so pleased she left all of these to me. Apparently, I have a newfound love for sweets. It must be because of all the years I didn't eat them. And the fact that it's all she makes me. Besides the bagels. Those could possibly contain sugar too. I'm no baker.

I pick up two more cookies, eating one while walking into the living room. I fall onto the sectional, letting out a sigh. This isn't how I wanted the night to go. Pulling my phone out from my pocket, I open it to my messages with Annie. She never replied to my text. But I know she's busy helping Lucy.

While watching the movie on tv, with the Christmas tree lit up, I finish the cookies I grabbed. It makes me smile sitting here because it brings me back to memories of Christmas with my mom. I think I made a good choice putting up a tree this year. And while it's hard to admit it, I think going back to old traditions is something I need to do.

There's only one thing that would make this moment better, and that's if Annie was here with me.



The sound of my alarm going off wakes me. I sit straight up in bed before rubbing my tired eyes, then reach over to smash the button on my alarm clock, turning it off. I wasn't ready to wake up.

I stayed up late last night cleaning the cookie mess in the kitchen while watching Christmas movies on tv.

Tossing the covers off me, I stand from the bed and stretch my arms out before walking into the bathroom to start the shower.

I never heard back from Annie last night, so I expect to hear from her soon if she will be in the office today. We had plans tonight to start the cookies for the charity event on Saturday, so I'm wondering if she can still come over.

After a quick shower, I get dressed in my matching gray suit with a white button-up. I take one look at myself in the mirror, running my hands through my damp hair to fix it. Then I slip on some tan leather shoes before grabbing my bag and throwing on a coat to leave.

I take the elevator down to the parking garage because it's still early enough that the traffic wouldn't be too bad if I drive to work. I throw my bag in the passenger seat before starting the car.

Before taking off, I pull my phone from the side pocket. There still isn't a text or missed call from Annie, making me think she will be in the office today.

On the drive to the office, I pass The Brew House. I look out front, hoping to see her there, but she isn't. I think for a second that maybe I should stop and get us both coffee, but Annie always does a great job getting that herself.

When I reach the office building, I park in the only available spot before getting out and walking in. While waiting for the elevator, I rub the back of my neck, feeling anxious.

Now is not the time for this.

The doors open, and I hurry in alone and stand against the back wall. I take big deep breaths and exhale. I suddenly start feeling more myself, but I continue inhaling and exhaling until the doors open again.

I'm fine by the time I walk out onto the office floor. But I instantly notice that Annie and her things aren't here. I walk into my office, set my stuff down, and remove my coat.

Then I walk over to my desk and sit, turning on my computer. Today I don't have anything but the last two spreads to finish. And if I get them done, I can give my full attention to the charity event. Then it'll be two weeks of no work.

I'm sitting at my desk for no longer than five minutes when I hear a knock at the door.

"Delivery for Decker Jones."

I look up to see a man. He's holding a coffee cup in one hand and a brown bag in the other.

"Come in," I say, confused.

He walks in. "This is a delivery made by Annie Walsh."

When he gets to my desk, I take the coffee and bag from his hands.
“Thank you.”

“No problem.” He walks away. “Have a great day.”

I instantly open the bag to see a bagel and muffin inside.

“Hey,” I shout, “There isn’t a note.”

“No, sir. I was just instructed to deliver the goods and tell you who they were from.”

I nod as he leaves the office.

Getting up, I walk over and take my phone out of my bag. I instantly dial Annie and wait for her to answer while I sit at my desk.

“Hey,” she answers, her voice sounding sleepy.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” her voice more evident, “I’m so sorry. I set an alarm to call you this morning, but I guess I turned it off in my sleep. I was up late, waiting for Lucy to get back from the hospital. The other twin is now sick, so I think I got maybe a couple of hours of sleep.”

“Don’t worry about it. Thanks for the coffee.”

She laughs, and I know she’s smiling.

“I put the order in around 4 am. I don’t think I’ll be in today. Lucy could use my help. She was starting to feel sick too. So I may have my hands full today.”

“Oh.” I scowl. “Well, try to get some rest. If you need my help with anything, let me know. I’ll finish the last two articles today, but I’m available if you need me.”

“Thanks, Decker. I appreciate it.”

“Later, Annie.” I hang up.

It looks like I’m on my own today. Which means I’ll be getting all my work done. It also doesn’t look like Annie will make it to my place tonight. I may have to come up with another plan.

Chapter Eighteen

Decker

It's still daylight outside when I complete all of my work. I didn't leave my office until I knew I was done, which worked out because while stressing about finishing it all before the end of the week, I managed to get it done early. Now I can focus on the charity event before leaving Sunday for the trip.

I pick up my phone to send Jennings and Grady a text message in our group thread. While working today, I came up with an idea for something.

Me- Meet me at my apartment at seven. Don't ask questions.

Grady- Can I bring beer?

Jennings- He said no questions. But yes, bring beer.

Me- Please bring beer. I'll supply dinner.

Jennings- Don't tell me Annie dumped you already, and you need a shoulder to cry on.

Grady- He and Annie are dating?

Jennings- He said no questions. But yes, they are.

Me- Just be at my apartment at seven. I'll explain everything when you get there.

Grady- Oh. Deck means business

I ignore Jennings' response because he knows nothing is happening

between Annie and me. He's just trying to start something. They have to get to my place because I will need them. *Real bad.*

After making my last pass through all the spreads I had for the magazine, I sent them to Grant. I wanted to add a nice middle finger to the message title, but I need to keep my job right now. Luckily, Annie was amazing at helping me get the photos chosen for the spreads, and I didn't need to spend any time changing them. They were perfect.

I organized my office back to the way it was this morning. Then I slide my coat on, grab my bag, and leave the office. Almost everyone is still working, so it makes me happy knowing I'm leaving early for once.

Checking my watch as I leave the elevator and walk out the building's front doors, I have thirty minutes to figure out what I need to do to make this plan come together before the guys arrive. If I can't figure it out, surely, they can help me.

On my drive home, I think about how Annie and the other girls are doing. I didn't hear anything from her after our phone call this morning. But I'm sure Grady may have an update considering he's found a friend in Lucy.

I arrive at my apartment and change into sweatpants and an old football t-shirt. Then I put in an order for burgers and fries for delivery from The Bar. The guys should be here any minute. I'm going to get them full and very happy before breaking the news that they're about to bake some cookies.

Yep. That's right.

We are going to be tough football-playing men doing the most domestic thing ever because that's what we have to do. After thinking about it, it's the only thing we can do to help the girls. I know it was Annie's idea to have the cookie station, but I like it, and I still want to be able to do it.

I turn the Christmas tree lights on. Then flip on Sportscenter on the television just as Grady and Jennings come through the front door together.

"Hey. I brought the goods." Grady holds up a case of beer.

“Hey.” I give a thumbs up. “Set it on the counter.”

“Wow. Your place looks great.” Jennings looks around.

When he says that, I realize I don’t think either of them has seen a tree up in my apartment during this time of year.

“Thanks.”

Grady walks into the kitchen. “Holy shit. What is all this stuff?”

The baking supplies on the kitchen island have been there for so long that they feel like a part of my apartment.

“It’s uh,” I stutter because I can’t tell them my plan yet. “Annie is making cookies here for the charity event.”

It’s basically the truth but they don’t need to know I’ve stretched it a little. We could screw these up so badly that I’ll need to buy more ingredients. Then Annie will just have to stay over until all the cookies are baked to perfection.

Yeah. We’re going to screw this up.

Jennings walks into the living room with me and falls onto the sectional. He grabs a throw pillow and shoves it up behind his head. He’s wearing his black-rimmed glasses and sweats, and his light brown hair is damp as if he just showered.

“You two just leave practice?” I ask.

“Yeah. Coach put us to work since we lost on Sunday.” Jennings frowns.

Grady joins us in the living room and falls on the other side of the sectional, which reminds me why I got the thing in the first place. There’s room for all of us to hang out on it without touching each other.

“So,” Grady puts his arm over the back of the couch. “From the looks of all the butter and milk in your fridge, did Annie move her bakery into your apartment. Is she here now?”

I laugh, “She’s with Lucy. You, of all people, should already know that.”

“Well, Lucy says she’s with you almost every night.”

“Isn’t Lucy sick?” I change the subject.

“Yeah,” Jennings says, “Grady sent like ten different soups to her apartment during the middle of practice.”

“What is she sick with?”

Grady puts his feet up on the coffee table. “It’s the flu.”

Ugh. Hopefully, Annie doesn’t catch this. I want her to be able to come to the charity event on Saturday.

“So, what are we here for?” Jennings asks.

“Well. I was going to wait until after we ate, but I guess I’ll tell you now.” I cross my arms. “We are going to be baking cookies. Or at least attempting it. Before you guys start complaining, I need you to know that this is a favor for Annie.”

“What the hell,” Grady sits up. “I don’t know a thing about making cookies. I throw footballs for a living and don’t even know how to cook.”

“I know. Annie offered to make cookies for the kids to decorate on Saturday. But as you already know, she was taking care of Lucy and the twins. That means Annie will more than likely be catching the flu. Her idea is great, and we should still do it.”

Jennings sits up, “Do you even have the recipe for her cookies?”

“Shit.” I drag my hand down my face. “I don’t have it.”

“I can get it.” Grady leans forward.

There’s a knock at the front door. The food is here already.

I get up from the couch to answer the door. When I open it, the delivery man stands with our food. I pay him, grab the bag, and walk back into the apartment.

Setting the bag on the open area of the island, I’m starting to feel like maybe this plan was stupid. I thought that taking this off Annie’s hands would be a kind gesture, but I honestly don’t think we can pull it off. I mean, I don’t even have her recipe, and I can’t possibly use someone else’s.

“I got it,” Grady stands, walking to the island.

“What?”

“I have Annie’s recipe.” He sits opposite me. “Lucy just sent it over to me. She said she had it saved into her phone. Don’t worry. I told her not to say anything to Annie.”

He hands over his phone. I take it from him, and the recipe photo is open. Scrolling down, I read the list. I should have everything since Annie sent me the ingredients. Quickly reading over the directions, I see that maybe it won’t be so hard. But at the very bottom of the card, it reads *refrigerate for two or more hours*.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“What?” Jennings comes over, taking a seat by Grady.

“It says here that you have to refrigerate the dough for more than two hours.”

Grady hysterically laughs but I find nothing funny about this because it’s already asking for so much to make the damn cookie dough.

Jennings takes the phone from my hand and reads over the recipe.

“I think this is manageable. What we can do is make all the dough tonight. Then tomorrow, we can come back over to make the cookies. It’s not like we are decorating them or anything. Sugar cookies are easy. I’ve done it before.”

I finally start taking the food from the bag and handing the guys their food. “Okay. So you have faith that we can do this? At least one of us here is smart.”

Jennings will find or have a solution to almost anything. He may sleep around with a lot of women, but he’s brilliant. He graduated top of his class in high school and college.

We all open our take-out boxes and start eating.

“Dude,” Grady says with a mouthful of fries, “better give us a round of beers. We’re going to need it.”

“Oh, yeah.”

I walk over to the fridge and grab three cans of beer. Then I step back to pass them around.

“So. Anything new to tell us about you and Annie?” Jennings asks.

I shake my head no, even though there’s been plenty of new things between Annie and me. It’s just a lot of stuff I want to keep to myself.

“Nothing new.” I lie. “Annie helped me with my articles. I finished those while she was out of the office today. I’m sure she will catch what Lucy has, so I don’t know when I’ll see her again.”

“Sunday, right? When you two leave for the trip of a lifetime.” Grady winks.

“You can think whatever you want. It’s just going to be the normal trip that I take every year. Why don’t you tell me about you and Lucy?”

Grady swallows his bite before saying, “We’re friends. We have a lot in common, actually. We are both devoted to our jobs. And we like

watching movies in our free time. She's a lot of fun to be around when we can hang out. Her nanny job keeps her pretty busy. And now she's sick. Speaking of sick, have you checked on Annie at all?"

I haven't besides this morning, and now that he has asked me, I feel bad that I haven't. While I have thought about her today, it's difficult for me to focus on the feelings behind what is truly going on between us. Is what we have just an attraction to each other, or is it more? It's too much for me right now. I like being around her, and I think about her constantly, but I'm not sure I'm ready for anything more.

"I haven't." I take a drink.

"She's your assistant, so you should," Jennings nods. He knows me better than anyone, and maybe he can sense that I have things on my mind.

I take my phone from the pocket of my sweatpants and open it. Pulling up my messages with Annie, I decide this is a good way to check on her.

Me- Just checking on you

That's it. It's just a simple text message.

I set my phone on the counter and finish eating my food while trying not to look over to see if she's even going to respond.

Grady and Jennings finish their food. They get up from the barstools, throw away their trash, and grab another beer from the fridge.

I notice Grady looking at something on his phone.

His head pops up, "How in the hell do you soften a stick of butter?"

"Shit," I grumble.

It's going to be a long night.

Chapter Nineteen

Annie

After washing my hands for the hundredth time in the last few days, I leave the bathroom and walk across the living room. I crack open Lucy's door and check on her. She's still sound asleep in her bed. It's time for me to leave for work.

Lucy told me she would be fine staying by herself today and that I should go to work. Marcy came and got the girls last night when she got into town. But I stayed with Lucy to make sure she got everything she needed. It seems like all three of them are finally on the mend from the stomach bug that they picked up. I haven't shown any symptoms yet, so I think I'll be okay.

When I woke up this morning, I had a text message from Decker checking in on me. I fell asleep early last night to catch up on some rest, so I didn't hear my phone go off when he sent it. I responded this morning, letting him know I would be in the office.

I set up anything Lucy would need on her nightstand before grabbing all my stuff and leaving her apartment. Grady sent her a million different soup flavors yesterday so she can warm those up if she gets hungry.

The cold air blows across my face when I leave her apartment building. The temperature today has dropped quite a bit, and it's a sign that snow is on the way. Since it was so cold, I decided to hail a cab to The Brew House instead of walking.

Walking out to the curb, I wave my arm, and the first one stops before me. I take my backpack off before getting in and place it on my lap for the drive. It's early enough this morning, so the traffic is light. Getting there shouldn't take long.

A few minutes later, the cab arrives. I pay the driver before exiting and walk up to the coffee shop. Opening the door, I walk inside and get in the small line. Then I hear a familiar voice ordering two coffees ahead of me. I step to the side and look forward. There is Decker standing at the front of the line.

I quickly walk up behind him. “What are you doing?”

My voice took him by surprise. He turns around before saying, “Hey.”

“This is my job.”

He smirks, “It is, but haven’t you taken care of enough people the last few days?”

I watch as he pays the barista before stepping to the side to wait. Letting out a huff, I move to stand beside him. “I don’t like it when you do my job.”

He shakes his head. The smirk is still on his face.

“I’m serious, Decker.” I glare at him.

“So, I don’t get to be Mr. Jones today.”

The barista brings over the two coffees and hands him each one. Before he can reach for them, I take them from her hands.

“Thank you,” I smile.

Decker follows behind as I quickly approach the front door holding both coffees. He somehow makes it in front of me, opening the front door for us.

I frown. “I was going to order you breakfast, you know. I didn’t make anything this morning.”

“I don’t need it, but thanks.”

Once we are out the door together, I turn to the right and start walking towards the office building. It only takes a few seconds to realize Decker isn’t

walking beside me. When I turn to look for him, he's walking to his car parked next to the curb.

"Get in," he shouts.

"Isn't it going to look weird if we show up together for work?"

He laughs, "Just get in the car, Annie."

Stepping toward his car, I open the door and get in. He takes both coffees from my hands when I close the door and sets them in the cup holders. Then he starts the car.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I think I've washed my hands enough not to catch the stomach bug they had."

"It's a stomach bug?" He looks surprised.

"Yeah. Why?" I buckle up.

He pulls out onto traffic, "Because Grady said last night that it was the flu."

I giggle, "It's not the flu. The doctor said the girls were just dehydrated from being sick. Lucy has it now. It was just a twenty-four-hour stomach virus. The girls must have caught it in gym class."

"Grady must have taken her symptoms and diagnosed her himself."

"Probably. So, how was work yesterday?"

"I finished the articles. I ran through them last night before sending them to Grant. So today, we can work on the rest of the charity event planning."

"That's great. I knew you would get them done early."

He looks over at me, his eyes connecting with mine as he smiles. "Thanks for having faith in me."

I smile back. “You’re welcome.”

Decker turns his eyes back to the road. And we continue the drive in silence.

After just a few minutes, he parks out front of the office building. I grab both coffees before opening the door and getting out at the same time as Decker.

We walk in the doors together and wait for the elevator. He takes his coffee from my hand and sips it as we wait. I haven’t tried mine yet because I’m almost positive he ordered me the same black coffee he gets, and I don’t want to hurt his feelings with the facial expression I’m going to make if it’s disgusting. I need something sweet in mine.

When the doors open, he lets me walk in first and then stands beside me while we ride up. We’re once again silent, and that’s okay. I have a feeling we will be working together all day. And more than likely in his office. Where once again, something could happen. I can do all my nonsense rambling then.

The doors open on our floor, and I walk out first.

I instantly see the thousands of red and green streamers draped across the ceiling. “What the…”

“Who let Buddy the Elf in this place?” Decker follows.

I put my hand over my mouth as I laugh. This place looks like a little kid decorated it for Christmas. Along with the streamers, there are snowflake cutouts along the walls, mistletoe hung in all the doorways, and string lights framing the windows.

“What is this for?”

“Shit,” Decker says. “This means the company Christmas party is tonight. Don’t worry. You don’t have to go. I’ve never been to one.”

“Oh,” I say as we break away from each other.

Before I reach my desk, Beau Wilson walks up as Decker enters his office. “Coming to the party tonight?”

I turn, getting a glimpse of Decker, who’s glaring at Beau so hard one would think he wanted to punch him.

“Uh.” I turn back around. “I don’t....”

“We’re coming,” Decker interrupts as he drapes his arm over me. “Together. Right?”

My eyes look up at Decker. He literally came out of nowhere.

“Right.” I look back at Beau. “We are coming together.”

It appears as though I’m coming to the company Christmas party tonight, and Decker is my date. Who knew? I’m not even sure why he said that. As far as I knew we were supposed to be making cookies tonight and since I wasn’t there last night to help, we are already a day behind.

Beau gives Decker the identical glare Decker gave him. Nice. These two hate each other, and I get to be the middleman today.

“Well, I’ll be looking for you,” Beau adds.

I fake smile, knowing he’s just trying to stir up trouble. “Well, I won’t be looking for you.”

Decker tries but fails to hold in a laugh which pisses Beau off more.

Embarrassed, Beau finally walks away from us. And I shake my head as Decker takes his arm off my shoulder.

“Why did you say that?” I mumble.

“Say what?”

I walk around my desk as he stands beside it. “That we are going to the party.

You've never been to one, and we also have plans to make cookies tonight. We are behind schedule already."

He shrugs, "We don't have to stay long."

"Okay." I sit. "But we have to get to your place sometime tonight and at least start the process of making cookie dough. We may need some reinforcements."

"You think we need help?" He places his hands on the edge of my desk before leaning over it, getting closer to me.

"Maybe. Four hands are not enough to make hundreds of cookies before Saturday."

He grins, "I've got this under control."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He takes his hands off my desk and walks towards his office. "It means, don't you worry about a thing Ms. Walsh. Mr. Jones has it all taken care of."

I swear, if this man orders premade cookies from another bakery, he is going to get an earful from me. Cookie decorating was my idea, and I still want to help out in any way that I can.

With Decker in his office, I finally pick up the coffee he ordered and take a sip. I was expecting to spit it out, but to my surprise, *Mr. Jones* knew I liked it sweet. It tastes perfect, which makes me smile. But how did he know?

Chapter Twenty

Decker

Spinning around in my chair, I watch Annie at her desk as she finishes working on the schedule for when we return from Christmas break. This is the last thing she needs to do before this stupid ass party starts that I wish I hadn't said we would attend. I want to get Annie out of here and to my place. Now that I know she's not sick, I want to finish where we left off in my office yesterday.

She's been working around me all day wearing this tight black dress I haven't seen her wear yet. And I've wanted to put my hands on her since she got cranky with me this morning at the coffee shop. But the office has been crowded with everyone roaming around trying to finish the last of their work.

Together we have been working on the last few things before the event on Saturday. She's been in and out of my office. We haven't spoken about anything besides work and charity event-related things, so I didn't tell her anything about last night. I'm waiting to tell her when she comes over tonight.

It took Grady, Jennings, and I hours to figure out the correct dough-making method, but we did it. My fridge contains all the cookie dough we will need to make the cookies. And my hands are tired as fuck. They also still feel oily from all the sticks of butter we melted in the microwave from trying to soften butter. We had to resort to TikTok videos showing us the best way to soften butter. Who knew that all it took was pouring boiling water into a glass cup, dumping it out, then placing that cup over the stick of butter? We had ten glasses set up all around the kitchen, softening sticks of butter.

I don't know how Annie does it.

I continue watching as she closes her computer screen and turns it

off. She gets up from her desk and starts walking toward my office door. I start shuffling the papers before me, then clear my throat when she walks in.

“Everyone’s in the conference room. Are you ready to go?”

Here’s where I should say let’s skip the damn thing.

“Yeah.” I mutter instead.

When I get up from my desk, I’m internally rolling my eyes and cursing myself for hating Beau Wilson. If that man had left Annie alone as I asked him to, I wouldn’t be attending this lame Christmas party.

Annie is standing in the frame of my office door, mistletoe hanging over her head. I’ve never been one to believe in kissing someone under the mistletoe, but right now, I couldn’t think of a better person to stand under it with.

When I reach her, I look around the rest of the office before taking her face in my hands and placing a kiss on her oh-so-soft lips. It takes her by surprise, but a few seconds later, I finally feel her hands wrap around my neck.

I stop, lifting my head back to look at her. Her eyes are closed as she purses her lips. She then opens them slowly, a smile forming.

Letting go of her face, I point my finger up. “Mistletoe.”

She looks up just as I see Beau Wilson standing behind her. *Take that douchebag.*

“Right,” she breathes.

“Let’s go drink punch. And stand around.”

She laughs, “We can’t stay long.”

“I’m all for leaving early.”

Together we walk down to the conference room. Before we even get there, I can see the room is full of people through the windows. Everyone has a clear cup of red liquid in their hands. The room decor matches the rest of the office. It's all so tacky.

We walk in, and I hear talking about how someone spiked the punch. Annie must have heard it because she looks up at me.

“Looks like I’m getting the punch.”

“Grab me one, too.”

I spot Beau standing by the punch bowl at the back of the room. He’s talking to some other co-workers.

I put my arm over Annie’s shoulder, “Actually, I’m coming with you.”

She guides us through the crowd to the back of the room. There’s Christmas music playing, and it gets louder as we get closer. It’s playing Frosty the Snowman, and I can guarantee Beau picked the music for this party. If you even call this a party.

Beau hands Annie a cup when we reach the table. “Here you go.”

Before I can snatch that shit away, Annie says, “No thanks.”

I once again can’t control spitting out a laugh.

This woman. Whenever she has replied to this idiot today, it has turned me on. I mean, she’s always turning me on, but it's so hot when she rejects him right to his face.

After turning him down, Annie grabs two cups and scoops the red liquid into them with the ladle. She gives Beau a friendly fake smile before turning toward me and handing me my cup. I take one sip, and it tastes like some sort of kid’s party punch but with vodka. Like a lot of vodka.

“Ehhh...” I hand her the cup back. “I’m driving tonight. You finish it.”

“Does Mr. Jones want me drunk?”

It wasn't a thought, but now that she mentions it, maybe it isn't a bad idea.

“No,” I say. “Pour that shit out. I'm sure I have something better at my place.”

She takes a sip, “Ehhh... it burns.”

“Right? I feel like someone's trying to crank this party up a notch. There will be some conference table dancing before the night ends.”

She laughs, “If it's to this song, we may want to stay for that. It could turn out awfully embarrassing for someone.”

“So,” my eyes scan the room as I turn to face her. “How long are we staying?”

She scrunches up her nose, “Not long. I wanted to come because you said you'd never been and I thought it would be fun for you to do something new. But now I see why you have never come.”

I smile, “Oh, Annie. You think I need a little fun?”

“I think you could use some.”

“Okay then. Tell me something exciting that we should be doing instead of this?”

She puts her index finger to her chin, “Anything would be more fun than this. But if I could choose one thing, it'd be ice skating in Central Park.”

I'm taken aback.

“Have you ever done that?”

“No,” she shakes her head, “but I've always wanted to.”

“I’ve never been.”

“Which now gives us all the more reason to do it.”

Once again, I look around the room at everyone standing in various groups, with their terrible drinks in hand, as they converse with the people they see every day. I really could use something exciting right now.

Taking Annie’s hand in mine, I lean in and whisper into her ear. “Then let’s go.”

Her head turns ever so slightly as her eyes find mine. I think she’s trying to figure out if I’m joking with her. She gives me a squinty scowl before asking, “Now?”

I roll my eyes because she obviously wasn’t thinking I was serious. With our hands still together, we walk out of a boring conference room party just as the song Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer comes on. They need to fire their party planner before next year.

She says nothing as we walk down the hallway and reach her desk. I let go of her hand before walking into my office. Then I slide on my coat, grab my bag, and turn everything off. Just as I get to the doorway, Annie meets me there, ready to leave with hands gripping the straps of her backpack.

Reaching up, I grab the mistletoe above the door and pull it off. Then I slide it into my bag.

Annie laughs, “What are you doing?”

“I might have some use for that later. Now let’s get out of here.”

We take the elevator down and walk through the foyer of the building. I open the front door for us, and we both get hit with the cold breeze sweeping through the air. It reminds me of why I drove this morning.

“Brrr...” Annie says as we walk out.

“We will be alright.”

Annie pulls her coat closer together. I unlock the doors when we reach the car, and we both get in. I start the car to get warmed up as Annie brushes her hair back from her face.

“Shoot. I’ll need to change. I can’t wear this dress.”

“You need me to run you home.”

She slides her backpack off, setting it on her lap. Then she unzips the zipper and digs around the bag. “I have something in here I can change into.”

“You can use the backseat.” I offer.

She looks into the tiny backseat before her eyes turn back to mine. “Okay.”

Getting out of the car, she leaves the bag in the passenger seat. The back door of the car opens, and she slides in. Leaning forward, she reaches into the bag, pulling out jeans and a sweater.

“Go ahead. I’ll change while you drive.”

Looking into my side mirror, I see no oncoming traffic, so I pull out and drive toward Central Park. I can hear her in the backseat changing. My eyes go to my rearview mirror to check on her. She’s sliding on her jeans under her dress, so I don’t see anything I shouldn’t.

I look away as I continue driving. We come up on a red light, so I stop. I try so hard not to look into the rearview mirror again, so I look out the window at all the people walking along the sidewalk.

“Can you unzip my dress for me?”

I bite down before turning around. Annie has her back in the middle of the seats as she waits for me to unzip her dress. I gather her hair,

placing it over her shoulder and out of the way. Then I grip the zipper at the top of her dress before pulling it down, unveiling her black lace bra underneath before I get to the bottom.

I wish I weren't doing this in the car because I want to rip that whole dress right off her. It's becoming increasingly difficult to not think about, and the front of my pants are becoming a little snug.

Clearing my throat, "Got it."

She looks over her shoulder before saying, "Thanks."

The car behind me honks its horn, causing me to turn back and notice the light changed to green.

I continue driving as Annie slides out of her dress and slips her sweater on. She leans forward, grabbing a pair of white sneakers from her bag. I chose not to look in the mirror anymore because unzipping her dress was more than enough for me right now.

We finally arrive at Central Park. Annie gets out of the back door on the same side of the car as me. She slips her coat back on before putting a beanie over her hair.

"Ready?" I ask.

She claps her hands together, "As ready as I'll ever be."

We walk through the park a little ways before reaching the ice rink. When we arrive, I pay the man at the stand, and he hands us our skates. We walk over to a bench by the rink and take a seat.

"Please tell me you've at least tried ice skating before somewhere else?"

I watch all the kids and adults skating around like it's easy. I've never done this before, so I really hope Annie can help me get this down.

"Oh yeah, that's a no. This is my first time. What about you?"

Shit.

“Well, it looks like we will be learning this together.”

I slip out of my shoes and put on the skates. Annie does the same. When she finishes, she lets out a deep breath before standing.

“Come on,” she holds out her hand.

I take it before standing. I’m clenching my teeth like there’s no tomorrow.

I’m scared.

Luckily, I’m still on my feet when I stand straight up. Annie flashes me a smile before we walk to the ice rink. I’m breathing heavily because I need to get this right and not look like a dumbass while I’m with her. This is supposed to be fun. I’m trying out something exciting because, apparently, I’m lame. She didn’t say that, but I get what she means.

We stand at the entrance waiting for a clear space before trying this together. After a group of kids go by, Annie squeezes my hand. Okay it’s now or never.

I take the lead, and she follows. I’m just moving my feet, gliding across the ice. Surprisingly not losing my shit. I turn to see Annie’s face tense, but she’s gripping my hand tightly using it to help balance herself. She seems calm enough to keep going. Her skates glide across the ice, and for two people who’ve never been skating before, from afar, no one could ever tell.

“We did it,” she shouts.

“We did it.”

We’ve made one loop around the rink without falling. And it makes me smile.

“So,” I say. “Why ice skating?”

“I don’t know, really,” she slips and tightens her grip on my hand to keep herself steady. “Woah. Sorry about that.”

“You’re doing great.”

“Back to what I was saying,” she starts again, “I think ice skating is a Christmas tradition for some people. I’ve never been, so why not try something new to see if I would enjoy it.”

“And then, if you enjoy it, you’ll make it a tradition?”

“Yeah. Years ago, Lucy and I unintentionally laid around eating snacks and watched Christmas movies for a whole day. We decided then to make it a tradition. We’ve been doing that for about five years now. What about you? Besides the trip, what is something you do?”

We do another lap around the rink, “That’s the only thing I do now for Christmas. It’s not that I don’t like the holiday. I don’t have anyone to spend it with anymore. I didn’t have any family besides my mother. Going there takes me away from all this here in the city. And by the time I return, the holiday has passed, and everyone is looking forward to the next year.”

When I look over at Annie, her eyes are on me. She places her free hand over our hands together. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up your mom,”

“It’s okay. When I’m around you I don’t mind talking about the loss of her.”

I don’t want to admit to Annie the comfort I feel when I’m with her. Because I don’t think I’ve even come to terms with the fact that she makes me feel that way. She makes it easy for me to talk about my mother. That is something I haven’t done around anyone since I lost her.

Annie shivers before saying, “You want to get out of here?”

“Yeah,” I answer. “Let’s go somewhere warm.”

We do one more lap around the ice before exiting. I help Annie

take a seat on the bench. Then I sit next to her as we slip out of our skates and back into our walking shoes. When I get my shoes on, I pick up her skates from the ground along with mine and return them to the stand.

This idea turned out to be pretty fun time. I'm glad she mentioned it.

I hold my hand out to her, "Well, does this stack up to becoming a new tradition for us," I cough, realizing what I said, "I mean for you."

She shrugs her shoulder and scrunches her nose before taking my hand, "Eh... I haven't decided on that yet."

Standing on her feet, "What did you think?"

I smile, "I think it was just what I needed. So, thank you."

Chapter Twenty-one

Annie

I'm waiting in the living room while Decker makes a quick change in his bedroom. We just arrived at his apartment not long ago. My body is still trying to warm up from ice skating. I could've stayed there for hours with Decker, but I knew we needed to come here at some point tonight.

He walks out of his room wearing gray sweatpants with a black Knights football shirt. His hair is wet, telling me he took a quick shower. I've always been attracted to him. But lately, all the kisses, touches, and his opening up more to me have made this attraction grow into something more. It's been so long since I've felt that way about someone.

"You want anything?"

"I'm okay," I answer.

Decker walks into the kitchen, "Come here. I want to show you something."

I stand from the couch and walk toward the kitchen. Decker is wearing a big grin on his face when I reach him.

"Close your eyes."

I laugh, "Why?"

"Annie, just close your eyes."

"Fine." I bring my hands to my face and place them over my eyes tightly, so I can't see anything.

I feel Decker's hand on my hips as he spins me to the right. If my sense of direction is correct, I'm standing in front of the fridge. I can feel him behind

me now; his hands come around mine as he grips them.

“Okay,” he pulls my hands away for me, “Open.”

I’m standing in front of an open fridge when I open my eyes. They immediately go to a refrigerator full of containers of sugar cookie dough.

“Oh my,” I put my hands over my mouth. “You did this?”

He comes around me so I can see him, “Yeah. Well, Grady and Jennings helped. We got this all done last night.”

When we walked in, I noticed all the stuff lying across the kitchen island was gone, but I assumed Decker had gotten tired of it, so he stored it away for now.

“Wow. This is amazing.”

“Lucy sent your recipe to Grady.”

Placing my hand over my chest, my eyes connect with him, “Thank you. You didn’t have to do that. It was my idea and all.”

He smirks, “I wanted to.”

The way he thanked me for helping with his articles suddenly pops into my head. I could return the sentiment. I want to.

Decker’s expression fades as he waits for me to do or say anything. So I go for it.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I lean against his chest and kiss him. He parts his lips, giving me more access as his arms go around my waist, bringing me into him.

We’ve done this before, but it’s always been in the office. We can go as far as we want here in his home. And right now, I want all of him.

“Come on,” he whispers against my lips as he takes my hand.

Pulling me with him, we take off toward his bedroom. He has the same thing on his mind as I do. The attraction has been there between us since day one. It's time that we finally do this.

We walk into his dark room, the only light coming in from the floor-to-ceiling windows of the city lights. He leads me to his bed before wrapping his arms around me again and kissing me.

As he pushes my hair from my neck, his lips leave mine. The tip of his nose brushes my ear before he whispers, "Get on the bed."

He drops his hands from my face, and they go straight to the buttons of my jeans. In seconds he has them unbuttoned. As he pulls them down, I lift the hem of my sweater, pulling it over my head and tossing it to the ground.

Decker licks his lips before running his hands down my body, his touch giving me chills. He kisses my neck before helping me fall back onto the bed. His body hovers over mine as he runs his hands over my chest, his lips returning to mine.

Our mouths clash together in a frenzy as I feel his hand go from my chest to my thong. He slides his hand through the front and slips two fingers along my center. He slides them up and down a few times before taking his hand away.

I'm already on edge and so turned on by his touch that I could come in seconds.

"You're already so wet for me," he whispers.

"I've wanted this so much," I breathe.

Standing from the bed, he removes his shirt before tossing it aside. I gaze at the toned muscles of his chest and smooth, firm planes of his stomach. He slowly makes his way to the bed. His hands then come to each side of my thong. He drags it down my legs and drops it to the floor. Grabbing my knees, he spreads my legs apart in front of him.

Crawling between my legs back onto the bed, he places kisses from my

stomach to my lips before connecting his eyes to mine. He then slides two fingers in and out of my sex, teasing me.

I close my eyes as I feel myself so close to the edge. I hate that it's been so long that even his slight touch has me almost undone.

“No,” he whispers, “Not yet.”

Opening my eyes to his voice, I see him stand from the bed again. He's just feet away from me, and my body is aching for his touch.

He moves something on top of his dresser before opening a drawer.

When he returns to the bed, he strips out of his sweatpants. I sit up on my elbows, watching him open a condom wrapper with his teeth. After dropping the wrapper to the ground, he slides the condom over his dick. That's when I take in his length. *Fuck me.*

I fall back onto the bed and place one hand on my chest to calm my breathing.

He spreads my legs with his hands again, and I close my eyes and bite my bottom lip. I'm so nervous now, and I shouldn't be.

I feel Decker's lips on my neck after he crawls back onto the bed, hovering over me. His nose grazes my ear before he says, “I'm going to fuck your pretty little pussy, but first, I want you to come for me.”

Before I can even process the words from his mouth, I feel his head between my legs. He runs his thumb over my clit slowly before taking it away. Then he uses his tongue to continue the motion.

I moan as he picks up the pace licking and sucking in a steady rhythm. My hands go to his head as I run my fingers through his hair—the pressure building up inside me.

He continues with such intensity, I squeeze my legs together as I come on his lips.

My breathing is rapid. The command he already has over my body is insane.

Lifting his head between my legs, he says, “Good girl, Annie.”

Once again, I place my hand over my chest to help calm my breathing as he places kisses across my stomach. Sliding one hand between my back and the bed, he unclasps my bra. Then I slide the strap down on my shoulder and help pull it off from the other side.

“I’ll go slow.”

I nod, letting him know I heard him because I don’t even know what words would fly out of my mouth if I tried to speak.

He reaches down, takes his dick in his hand, and finds my entrance. He pushes himself into me slowly before pulling out. Then again, adding a little more this time. He continues until he’s completely buried inside me.

I exhale as he works a rhythm, stretching me to fit perfectly around him. He places his hands on the bed on each side of me as his mouth connects with mine.

Our mouths are all consuming as he increases his movements. I don’t know how, but I can feel the pressure building up inside of me again.

God, he’s good at this.

His lips leave mine as he lifts back up. He places my legs in front of his chest and holds them together as he drives harder and harder into me.

I moan even louder than earlier as I feel myself coming to the edge again, but the build-up is much stronger this time.

“Fuck,” he mouths as he slows down.

I grab his arm. Breathing heavily, I say, “Don’t stop. I’m right there.”

Digging his fingers into my legs as he grips them, he picks up his stride again. This time so much harder as his breathing becomes rapid.

When I feel his dick jerk inside me as he finishes, I join him.

His body falls next to me, and we lie there side by side as we try to even our breathing out. I stare at the ceiling as I think about what just happened. I am not the type of person to do this, but there's always been something different about Decker.

He rolls over on his side to face me, and my eyes go to him. Brushing a piece of hair off my face, he places it behind my ear before kissing me.

"I'm going to go clean up," he says before getting up from the bed.

I sit up as he walks into the bathroom, flipping on the light. He turns on the sink, and I examine the room for my clothes.

Taking the blanket off the end of the bed, I wrap it around me as I stand from the bed. Spotting my sweater, I pick it up and cling it to my chest. I hear the bathroom sink shut off, and the light goes out.

Decker comes into the bedroom, "What are you doing?"

My eyes look up at him standing there naked. "Looking for my clothes."

He comes over, taking the sweater out of my hands. "You're staying."

"But." I barely spit out.

"Annie," he says. "We just had sex. The last thing I want is for you to leave already."

Walking over to his dresser, he pulls a t-shirt from a drawer and tosses it to me. "Put that on." Then he grabs my thong from the floor where he left it and hands it to me. "And this."

I drop the blanket from around me and slip the shirt over my head, "Sorry. I've never done this type of thing before."

He chuckles, “Can’t say I have either.”

I shrug to myself. *Well, that’s nice to know.*

The shirt falls to my thighs, hiding the thong I just put back on.

Decker slides his sweatpants on, “Come on. I’m starving.”

Taking my hand, he drags me with him out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. “What do you have to eat?”

“I have no idea.”

He drops my hand to open a couple of cabinets but comes up empty. I open the freezer while he continues looking through the cabinets. The freezer is empty, which looks a lot like my own apartment.

Opening one last cabinet, he says, “How long does pasta cook for? All I have is a box of noodles and a jar of Rao’s sauce.”

I laugh, “You own a box of pasta but don’t know how long it cooks. Let me see it.”

“Hey, I never said I was a cook.” He says, “Sometimes I’m hungry at the grocery store, so I put random things in the cart but never cook them.”

He hands me the pasta box and sauce. I read over the directions because I know all pastas are different. I don’t cook much, but I know how to.

“Says here, ten minutes. Can you wait that long?”

“I can wait.” He smirks, “As long as you’re the one cooking it.”

“Okay.”

“Great. I’ll find us a movie.”

He kisses my cheek before walking into the living room, leaving me alone to

find everything in his kitchen.

After I wash my hands, I open the bottom cabinet by the oven to find a pot. Filling it with water at the sink, I watch Decker in the living room turn on the Christmas tree light before searching the television for a movie. It makes me smile. And I begin to wonder if he leaves them on every night.

Turning on the stove, I start the process of boiling the water. Then I searched his cabinets to see if there was anything to add to the pasta. I'm reminded of all the cookie dough when I open the refrigerator.

“Shouldn't we start the cookies?”

“I thought we could take the day off tomorrow. We can work on them then.”

I close the door and walk to the island to see Decker in the living room. “Take the day off? Are we allowed to do that?”

Putting his arm over the back of the couch, he faces me, “Yeah. Why not? We finished everything we needed to do before the holidays. After seeing everyone run around the office today, I expect no one to be there tomorrow.”

“Okay. We will make them tomorrow, then.”

The water starts boiling on the stove, so I turn around and dump in the whole box of pasta. I open a drawer, looking for a utensil, when I feel Decker's arms wrap around my waist. He spins me around on my feet and kisses me when we are face to face.

“I won't keep you out late.”

“Thanks,” I joke. “I wouldn't want to stay out past my bedtime.”

He kisses my forehead before walking away, and I frown. For some reason, when he told me to stay after sex, I thought that would mean for the night. Tonight has been amazing. I wish it didn't have to end so soon.

Chapter Twenty-two

Decker

When my alarm clock goes off, I open my eyes to a room filled with the morning light through the windows. I turn off my alarm and roll over. The pillow next to me is empty, just like every morning. Today though, I wish it wasn't.

I didn't ask her to stay last night because that meant something deeper between us. Which is more than I think I want right now. So there's no reason for me to feel so bothered this morning.

Dragging myself out of bed, I get in the shower. Annie and I have plans today, and I'm sure she will be here soon, so I'll need to be ready.

I wash up quickly before getting out. I throw on a pair of joggers and an old Knights T-shirt. I flip the television onto the news when I enter the living room, then settle into the couch and put my feet on the coffee table.

I've been up all of thirty minutes, and I'm already bored out of my mind. I should be at the office today, but there wasn't a reason for us to go in. We have everything done until the new year.

Getting up from the couch, I head to the kitchen and start a pot of coffee. I lean against the counter with my arms crossed while I wait for it. Then I think about Annie in my bed last night. I feel like I've been waiting for that moment for months, but I've only known her for almost two weeks.

While I know we both wanted it, was it too soon?

I run my hands down my face before turning around to grab a mug from the cabinet. I hear a knock at the front door.

That's got to be her.

I walk over to the door, and Annie is standing there with a smile when I open it. She's wearing a coat over a white sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers.

"Morning," she says.

Opening the door wider, I say, "Good Morning."

It's been hours since I last saw her, and I'm glad she's here. And I'm even more happy that she brought nothing with her. So I get to be the one serving her this morning.

She walks into the apartment, and I close the door. I return to the kitchen and take another mug from the cabinet for her.

"So..." she enters the kitchen, "How are you this morning?"

"Tired. Bored. But now that you are here, we will finish the cookies and whatever else we need to do before tomorrow."

The coffee pot finishes, so I pour it into the two mugs before me.

"Who's doing all the setup and decorations for tomorrow?"

I sprinkle sugar into one mug before handing it to her, "A company will be at the football field in the morning to do all that. I've used the same company every year. So it's something I don't have to worry about."

She nods before taking a sip.

"Thanks for letting me know you made it home last night."

Again, Annie didn't let me drive her home. She got a cab instead. And that is something else bothering me this morning. After we ate dinner here last night, she only stayed to clean up the mess before leaving. I told her the least she could do was let me know she made it home, and she did.

"You're welcome."

“Well, ready to show me how to bake cookies?”

“Yeah.”

She sets her mug down on the counter before opening the door to the refrigerator. Grabbing the containers of cookie dough, she stacks them against her chest as one hand holds them up. I walk over, taking some from her to help her out. Then we set them on the kitchen island.

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised with how easy this will be.”

“Oh yeah, because making the dough was embarrassingly hard.”

“Really? You didn’t tell me that.”

Shit. I forgot I wasn’t going to say anything.

“We just had issues with the butter. It was not a big deal once we figured it out.”

“Let me guess. Softening?” She laughs.

Annie grabs an open bag of flour from the cabinet. She sprinkles it all over the counter, and then empties the dough from one of the containers onto the flour.

“You bought a rolling pin, right?”

“A rolling what?”

She holds out her hands, “A stick with handles on the end.”

“Yes,” I hold up one finger.

I go over to the lower cabinet by the oven and pull out a white rolling thingy. Whatever she called it. Then I hand it to her.

“Thanks.”

Standing back, I watch her sprinkle more flour onto the dough before rolling it out. She's giving it all her strength.

It looks like she could use some help. So I walk up behind her, putting my hands over hers, and help her roll it out.

Slightly turning her head to me, we make eye contact.

"Tell me about the bakery. You haven't told me a lot about it."

She smiles before turning her eyes back to the dough on the counter. We work together again, rolling the whole thing out before she sets the roller to the side.

"Well," she says, "you know it was on the outskirts of town. And I closed it down not long ago, so let me think of something you don't know."

I laugh, "Tell me the details."

"Okay." She grabs the cookie cutters. "I painted the inside a pale yellow. I wanted the interior to be a happy space when customers came through the door. I got there every day around four in the morning to start the day. Lucy helped when she could, but I did almost everything myself. The customers were some of the best people I ever met. I miss them."

I move beside her. "Do you keep in contact with any of them?"

"No," she frowns, and I catch it. "Other than Claire, I don't talk to anyone or make anything for anyone but you."

I feel for her. Annie's story isn't much different than my own. We both made choices to leave something we love doing for something that isn't right for us. If she feels the same way I do, we both made the wrong decision, which hurts.

"So, why close it? I know that place had to mean so much to you."

She exhales and continues working on cutting cookies instead of making eye contact with me again. "Because I have savings. I told myself if I

ever had to dip into it, I needed to rethink my business. I used it twice before the new cookie chain opened near my bakery. When I noticed business slowing down shortly after, I chose to close the doors. I wallowed in self-pity for almost two months before my mom told me about the assistant job.”

“And now you have to deal with me.” I laugh. Hoping it’ll bring a smile to her face. But it falls flat. She doesn’t change her expression as she finishes punching out the last cookie.

“Can you tell me about your favorite customer?” I ask.

She smiles, and I feel like I won.

“She was one of my first customers. She came in for years and always ordered the same thing—a mini chocolate pie.” She starts placing cookies on a sheet pan, and I help. “I never got her name, and to this day, I wish I would’ve. But I always called her Patsy. She would hum a Patsy Cline song while waiting for me to box her pie. Anyway, she came in randomly for about five years and stopped one day. And I never saw her again.”

“Did you ever talk to her much?”

“We usually just talked about the weather and sweets. I remember she loved the snow and usually came in more during the cold winter. I always hated that I didn’t get to know her, but I was by myself and normally so busy when she came in.”

I stare at her as she finishes putting the cookies on the tray. It’s like she can feel my eyes on her, so she looks up.

“Enough about me. Tell me about football.”

“We won some games and lost a lot of games. I traveled a lot. I mean, honestly, just playing the sport made me happy. It was something I did for most of my life, and to give it up,” I shake my head. “It was not my best decision.”

She slides the first pan of cookies into the oven. “But it was what

felt right at the time.”

“Exactly.”

“So, would you go back?” She leans against the counter.

“I don’t know that I could. I’m not the same player I was two years ago. I would love to, but it’s not in the cards anymore. But you, you need to open up your bakery.”

She grins, “I will one day. When the time is right.”

Returning the smile to her, I stand on my feet. “Are we going to need reinforcements, or do you think you and I got this?”

I think we got it.”



I arrive at the football field early. Even though I don’t play for the team anymore, they’ve always been nice enough to let us do this event on the field. Most of the team comes out to play with the kids, sign autographs, and even throw some footballs around.

Annie and I finished all the cookies in a few hours yesterday. She packed them up in the containers before leaving. I told her I would bring them to the field with me.

She should be bringing all the supplies for decorating the cookies. That was something she and Lucy worked on last night.

Since this is happening today, the guys and I skipped going to The Bar last night. So, I'm looking forward to seeing them today. They will be wearing their best Christmas gear as Santa and his elf.

With the cookie containers stacked in my hands, I walk out on the football field. The adrenaline I feel every time I'm here is still there.

Looking around the arena dome, I see all the tables are set up how they should be. And in the middle of the field is Santa's chair with presents and a Christmas tree next to it.

I walk over to one table and set down the containers. I'm claiming that as the cookie decorating station. The other stations include coloring, ornament making, making a plate for Santa's cookies, and games.

This event brings me so much joy. I know my mother would love that I do this every year for her. I just wish she could be here.

"Hey!" I hear a shout from behind me.

Turning to the voice, I see Grady, Jennings, Lucy, and Annie.

My expression is surprised. I didn't know she was coming with them. "Hey."

Grady runs up to me first, giving me a side hug. "Looks good in here."

"Yeah," I look around at all the setups as the rest catch up. "Just like it does every year."

"Where's my suit?" Jennings asks.

"It's in the locker room."

The girls finally catch up with us. Annie smiles at me. That's when I notice she and Lucy are wearing ugly Christmas sweaters. But it doesn't even look bad on her. She makes it look cute.

“Grady told us to wear Christmas attire,” Annie says as she must have noticed me looking at her.

“Did you all come together?” I had to ask.

“Yeah,” Grady says, “I invited Lucy, so I picked her up. Annie was with her, so we all came together.”

I nod.

I don’t know why I didn’t think to bring Annie with me. It would’ve been a great excuse to pick her up from her place. But my mind has been on other things today.

“Well,” I say, “let’s go ahead and set everything up at the tables before you two change. The rest of the team should be here soon.”

“Sounds good,”

Grady walks off toward the coloring table, and Lucy follows.

Each table has everything ready in tubs under them except for the cookie station, which is the table I walk to, knowing Annie will follow me.

And she does.

We get to the table together and we are finally alone. Annie takes off her backpack and sets it down. After unzipping it, she pulls out all the extra stuff she told me she was bringing.

“I hope this is enough.”

I look down at all of the squeeze bottles of icing, which is a smart way to store the icing for the kids to decorate, and next to it are like twenty containers of sprinkles.

“It’s okay if it isn’t, but it looks like enough.”

She spaces out the containers of the sugar cookies we made together along the tables covered in red tablecloths. I watch as she sets up the

bottles of icing and sprinkles next to the cookies. She then sees me watching her.

“What?” she laughs.

“You’re the only person I know that can make an ugly sweater look good.”

Looking down at her red sweater with a colorful Christmas tree on the front and a pompom as the star, her eyes return to me. She blushes, “Well, thank you. I wish I hadn’t worn this, but Lucy begged me.”

I laugh, “I like it. It’s festive.”

“So,” she crosses her arms, “how are you today?”

“I’m good.”

“I know you will be thinking about your mom. I want you to know that I’ll be here for you if you need me.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Now all I want to do is kiss her. I haven’t in what feels like days. I’ve held back all temptation. But now that she’s here for me today, I want to thank her.

My eyes scan everyone around the field. Grady, Jennings, and Lucy goof off at one of the tables. I don’t mind that they see, but I like things private between Annie and me.

I approach her, cup her face with one hand, then lean in and kiss her lips. I give her one more kiss before dropping my hand. Our eyes connect, “Come over tonight?”

She frowns, “I have to pack.”

Shit. The trip is tomorrow.

“Right. So do I.”

“Did you forget?”

“No,” I lie. “It just hasn’t been a priority lately.”

The second part isn’t much of a lie, as the trip is something I haven’t been thinking about. It’s a week away with her, so I don’t know how it keeps slipping my mind.

I hear some commotion, and when I look up, I see most of the team walking out of the locker room. That means we’re close to the start time. And I’m ready to see all these kids.

Chapter Twenty-three

Annie

“Spill the tea,” Lucy says.

I’m too busy watching Decker across the field, playing with a little boy in a wheelchair. He tosses him the football, and it has to be the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Hello,” she nudges my shoulder.

“Sorry,” I shake my head and pay attention to her. “What did you say?”

“Tell me about you and Decker.”

“I’m not sure there’s a lot to tell. We have been seeing each other a lot out of the office, but I wouldn’t say there’s much of anything going on.”

This isn’t the place to mention that we slept together. While that usually is something Lucy and I would share with each other, I feel like holding back that piece of information until there is something between Decker and me. We have a great physical connection, but emotionally he’s tough to crack.

“When does your flight leave tomorrow?”

“In the morning.”

More families walk out onto the field to join us. The event started not long ago, and I am smitten with Decker for putting this together. It warms my heart to know that while he may run away from Christmas after losing his

mom, I know he still has a soft spot for the holiday.

Lucy and I continue to place cookies out as more kids and parents come over to our table.

A tiny, red-haired girl in her mother's arms, sees the cookies on the table and her eyes widen with excitement.

Smiling, I offer, "Want to decorate a cookie?"

She tucks her head down shyly. Her mother sets her feet down on the ground before the table.

I scoot a cookie closer to her, "What's your name?"

She barely looks up and says, "Maddy."

Leaning down, I say, "It's nice to meet you, Maddy."

Giving me a grin, she touches the cookie, and I hand her a bottle of red icing and Christmas sprinkles. I help her squeeze the bottle and outline the Santa-shaped cookie. She picks up the container of sprinkles and dumps it over the cookie.

I hear Lucy laughing. When I look back at her, she's staring out onto the field. So I look out to where her eyes are looking. I immediately see Jennings wearing the Santa suit and Grady following in his elf gear.

Putting my hand over my mouth, I laugh.

"Hey," I point to Jennings in his Santa chair, "look who's here, Maddy."

She turns her head slightly before getting excited. Then she takes her mom's hand to walk off. I pick up her cookie and place it into a clear treat bag. And then I hand it to her mom before they walk away.

"Bye," I wave.

“Looks like Santa beats cookie decorating,” Lucy comes up behind me.

“I mean, look at him. He’s way more interesting than me. He also has gifts.”

“Maybe I should go sit on Santa’s lap,” she jokes.

“Tell him I want a bakery while you’re over there.”

Lucy winks before walking away.

I watch as she follows all the kids on their way to meet Santa. Decker is standing in the middle of the field, talking to a man carrying a baby in one of those baby-wearing devices. When he catches me looking at him, Decker gives me a smile before they start walking over in my direction.

When they reach the table, he stands next to me.

“Ryan, this is Annie, my assistant.” He holds his hand out. “Annie, this is Ryan Hayes.”

He holds his hand out, “So this is who’s making those ridiculously amazing cookies for Claire.”

I shake his hand, “That’d be me. Is she here?”

“No. Claire’s been exhausted lately. The pregnancy has her sick most days. She stayed home in the Hamptons. It’s just me and little Henry today. We thought we could come to check this out and get a photo with Santa.”

I smile as I watch Ryan bounce to keep Henry calm as he looks around at everything in amazement.

“Thanks for coming out today,” Decker says.

“It’s no problem. We donate every year, and I was happy to be able to bring my small one with me today. Maybe next year, we will do more than

take a photo with Santa.”

“You will have your hands full next year,”

“Oh, I know. I’m looking forward to it. Claire and I have waited a long time for this. I’ll make sure to bring her next time.”

“Please do. I miss seeing her. Tell her I said hi. And it was very nice to meet you.”

“You too,” he nods. “We better get in line.”

Ryan walks away with Henry to get in the now long line. Decker stays next to me as we watch all the kids jump on Jennings’s lap for a photo. Grady is posing next to them in every shot, making me laugh.

“Are you having fun?” Decker asks.

“I am,” I turn to him. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Of course,” he grins. “I’m going to see if they need any help.”

He pats my shoulder before walking towards the center of the field where basically everyone here is gathered. I stay at the cookie table and observe.

It’s been really heartwarming seeing this side of Decker today. The soft side that I wish I could see more of.



All of us stayed around after the event ended. We cleaned up before the company came out to pick up their things. The guys have been throwing around footballs while Lucy and I sit on the bench on the sidelines.

This day has turned out to be one of the best days. Just watching all the kids leave with smiles on their faces. And it was sweet watching all the guys with the kids. Especially Decker. But him throwing footballs has to be one of my new favorite things to watch him do.

You can tell how much he loves it.

And he also looks so sexy playing.

Decker in a suit is nice. Then there's him in joggers. Don't get me wrong, naked him is hot, too, but I didn't really have a lot of time to peruse his muscles then. But Decker, with a hat on backward, licking his lips, and throwing a ball while wearing the biggest grin on his face, makes me really blush. The kind that makes my cheeks feel like they are on fire.

I've slept with him. And he's making it hard not to want to do it again.

"We've got to go," Grady shouts as he returns the ball to Decker.

"Are you kidding? Where are you guys going?" Decker catches the ball before walking to the middle of the field.

"We are going to the movies," Lucy says to me.

"Oh." I stand from the bench.

Lucy joins me, and we walk to the center of the field towards the guys. They are standing in a circle talking.

"Ready?" Grady looks at Lucy.

"Yeah."

"I'll take Annie home," Decker says as his eyes find mine for reassurance.

I nod, letting him know that was fine.

There's no going back now. I knew eventually, Decker was going to want to know where I lived. He's offered to take me home many times before, and I always turn him down.

"You wanna head out too?" Decker says.

"Yeah," I add. "I'm good to go."

We all walk toward the exit of the field. Grady, Lucy, and Jennings are walking ahead of Decker and I.

"Are you hungry or anything?" He looks over at me.

"I'm good," I look ahead at everyone walking to their cars. "You can just take me home. It could take me a while to pack.

"Same."

We get to Deckers's car.

"You guys have fun!" I yell out before opening the door.

Lucy spins around at Grady's car, "You too. Call me tomorrow before you leave."

I wave, "I will."

Decker and I get into his car, and he starts it. We are quiet as he pulls out of the football field parking lot.

After today, a part of me wishes that I had known Decker when he played football. I think he was happier then. Instead, the him that I know now seems incomplete and almost broken. He won't admit that, but I can sometimes see it. I can sense that he is emotionally detached. And I hate that for him.

I'm looking out the window when Decker places his hands on my knee.

“What are you thinking about over there?”

I put my hand over his hand as I turn in my seat, “I’m wondering how someone who doesn’t like spending Christmas in NYC can put on such a great Christmas event for kids. You almost had me thinking you were The Grinch before today.”

He chuckles, “Today was my Christmas.”

“Well,” I smile, “I’m glad I could be there for it.”

“You know,” he looks out the front window, “we will be together on Christmas day.”

“We will. But it’ll be different. We will be exploring beaches instead of things you normally do.”

He purses his lips. I can tell he’s thinking about something, but there’s no hint as to what. He is a hard man to follow.

Deciding to change the subject, I say, “I live off Camdenton Street. It’s the apartment building on the corner.”

He takes his hand off my knee and starts typing the street name into his navigation. It tells us we aren’t far from our current location but I knew that.

I’ve always been hesitant for him to know where I live because it’s nothing special. I spent more time and money on my bakery. There was no reason to put so much into a place I was barely home to enjoy.

“Was your bakery close to your apartment?”

“Yes. It was just a couple of blocks away.”

He glances at me, “Would it be ok with you if we drove by it?”

“Yeah,” I smile, “I don’t mind.”

There are days that I drive or walk by the old bakery because I want to look at it. It's empty, and the Sweetcakes sign still hangs above it. The building holds fond memories for me. And when I see it, they all come flooding back.

Chapter Twenty-four

Decker

We arrive outside Annie's old bakery. It's a small building with apartments located above it. The overhang above the windows and doors is yellow with white stripes. A large white sign that says *Sweetcakes* in pink hangs above the front door. It's cute and very much what I pictured it to look like.

Annie opens her door after we park out front by the curb. I follow behind her. We can't enter the building, but I want to look inside.

"Well..." she draws out.

"I like it."

Walking up to one of the large windows, I peek inside using my hand. I see a short white counter with a cake display case attached to it. A couple of small white dining tables with yellow metal chairs pushed into them.

I stand back and see Annie looking in through the other window.

"Let's sneak in."

Surprised, she jumps back and whispers, "We can't sneak in."

"You're right." I laugh.

We can't go in, but I wish we could. I would like to see her face while she tells me all the stories about things inside this place.

Looking up and down the street, I notice the building could be better. Besides where her bakery was, the other buildings on the road are either rundown or abandoned. Annie had said the location wasn't great, and she was right. It is in the middle of nowhere, with hardly any other businesses

around.

The cold breeze in the air swirls around, blowing Annie's hair around her face as we stand there still outside the old bakery.

“Want to go home now?”

Tightening her coat around her, she says, “Yeah.”

The cold air reminds me that there is supposed to be a snowstorm tomorrow, but we are leaving for the beach, which sounds much better than this.

We get back into my car, and I crank the heat on.

Annie's apartment is just a few blocks around the corner. If her apartment is anything like the buildings next to the bakery, I think I know why she hasn't wanted me to bring her home. She's embarrassed, but she has no reason to be.

“This is it.” Annie points out.

I pull up to a four-story red brick building and park by the curb. The building has one small red door as the entrance. It's similar to something my mother and I lived in when I was little.

We get out of the car and meet on the sidewalk.

Annie looks over at me, “Ready?”

I nod, “Sure.”

Following behind her, we walk up to the entrance. Heading through the door, there are metal mailboxes along one wall and wood stairs on the next. We pass a couple of doors on the way to the staircase. I follow her as we walk up to the second floor.

When we reach that floor, Annie walks over to a black door and pulls out her keys. I stand behind her as she unlocks her apartment before

opening the door.

We walk in and are immediately in the tiny kitchen she mentioned.

The kitchen has one counter for prepping food next to a small sink. There's a tiny black fridge and an oven. There are only a couple of short shelves above the cabinets for storage, and it has glass jars holding her baking ingredients.

I watch Annie stroll past the kitchen into a small living space off the side with a couch and coffee table. My eyes go to her record player and the short Christmas tree beside it.

"Welcome to my space." She says as she takes a seat on the couch.

"It's very," I look around the room before my eyes connect with hers, "You."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I sit next to her. "This space may be small, but it fits who you are. You don't need a lot to be happy, and I like that about you."

Her lip goes up as she smiles, showing a tiny dimple on her left cheek. I lean, giving her a quick kiss on the lips.

"Were you embarrassed? Is that why you never want me to come here?"

"It's just this place isn't anything like yours."

"Annie. It doesn't need to be. I grew up in an apartment just like this with my mom. There's nothing to be uncomfortable about with me."

She lays her head on my shoulder as we sit there together.

"Can I ask you something personal?"

"Sure."

“What happened to your dad?”

I knew this was going to come up at some point. And I think I’m ready to talk to Annie about it.

“I never met him,” I lean my head against hers, “My mom didn’t tell me much about him growing up. All I knew was that he was into some bad stuff and got in a lot of trouble. He was in an accident when I was little and died. I looked him up once in college and discovered he had a bad history with drugs. I’m grateful my mom chose to raise me on her own. I don’t know what my life would’ve been like if she stayed with him.”

She wraps her hand around my arm and squeezes it, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright. My mom gave me a great life raising me on her own. She never got married, but she dated. While I didn’t ever have a dad, there were times when a man was around to help her with me.”

“I think your mom would’ve loved what you did today.”

I smile, looking up at the ceiling, “I know she would’ve. I wish she could’ve been there.”

“Me too.”

I also wish my mom could’ve met Annie. I think she would’ve loved her.

We sit there together in silence. I know I need to go home to pack, but I don’t want to leave yet.

“Can you help me with something?”

“Yeah.”

Annie lifts her head off my shoulder before standing from the couch. “Can you help me get a box down from the top of my closet?”

I stand, “Of course.”

Following Annie, we enter through the door just off the living room to her bedroom. There is a bed, a small dresser, and a nightstand. She walks around the bed and opens her closet door. Pointing up, she says, “This one.”

I walk around the bed and get in front of her. Reaching up, I grab a medium-sized box from the top of her closet and bring it down before setting it on her bed.

“What’s in here?” I ask.

“It’s my summer clothes.”

She opens the box, and I sit on the edge of her bed. I watch her as she digs through some of the clothing on the top.

“I don’t even own a swimsuit.”

Shocked, I say, “You’re kidding.”

She laughs before looking up at me, “I wish I were, but when you work all the time during the busiest months of the year. Going to a pool and getting a tan were the farthest things from my mind.”

“You never took trips?”

She shakes her head, “No, this would be a first since I vacationed with my family in high school.”

I knew Annie was invested in her business, but I guess I never knew the extent of that until now. She literally never took a break from it.

“Okay. So we can go buy you one?”

“We’re not going to find a swimsuit in the middle of winter in New York City.”

I clench my teeth, “True. We can get you one when we get there.”

She frowns as she closes the box.

“Everything okay?”

Giving me a half smile, she shakes her head yes.

“Well,” I stand, “I’ll get going, so you can pack.”

“Okay.”

Annie stays close behind me as we walk out of the room. When we reach the front door, I turn around and cup her face with my hand. “I’ll see you at the airport in the morning.”

“See you tomorrow.”

I brush my thumb across her cheek before dropping my hand from her face. Then I spin around, open the front door, and leave.

As I walk down the stairs and out the entrance of her building, an anxious feeling fills my chest. The sensation is unexplainable.

When I get into my car, I inhale and exhale before looking up to the window to Annie’s apartment. The lights turn out in her living room. I stare for just a second before driving away.



It’s late. And I’m still packing my bag for the trip. I’ve gone through all my summer clothes and changed my mind about all of them over and over again. It usually isn’t this hard. I’ve done this twice before. My bag should’ve been packed days ago.

Looking at all the clothes lying across the bed, I close the luggage bag. I walk out of my room and into the kitchen. Opening the fridge, I take a water bottle before closing the door.

When I enter the living room, I turn on the Christmas tree lights before sitting on the couch. I unscrew the cap on the water and take a sip while looking at the tree.

It's been years since I've had a tree up, but this one has brought me a feeling of joy since Annie and I put it up. I've turned the lights on almost every night. I can't help but look at it and think about Christmases with my mom. She was the reason I hadn't put one up. But I don't regret setting this one up at all.

I remember that night and how Annie and I talked about traditions.

My phone starts ringing on the coffee table. I set down my water to pick up my phone. I see that it's Jennings.

"Hello," I answer.

"You ready for tomorrow?"

"Yeah," my voice is low as I lie.

I'm clearly not packed and ready. I wouldn't say I was mentally prepared to leave, but Jennings doesn't need to know that.

"Pack all the condoms. You'll need them."

Leaning forward, I shake my head, "Thanks for the reminder."

"No problem. But to me, you sound like shit."

"I'm fine."

"You always say that when something is going on you don't want to talk about. I know you better than anyone. Talk to me."

I clear my throat as I run my hand down my face, “I haven’t packed.”

Jennings laughs into the phone, “A week away with Annie, and you don’t want to go.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to go.”

“Then what is it?” he asks sternly.

I look over at the window and see the reflection of the Christmas tree lights, “I don’t know. There have been so many things going on lately that I don’t understand.”

“Umm...” he stalls. “Look, I’ve seen the two of you together. You like Annie, and I can see that. So, I know she isn’t why you are having trouble wanting to go.”

I stand from the couch and walk over to the windows. I look out in the direction of Annie’s apartment as I wonder what she’s doing right now.

“I’ll figure it out,” I say. “I think it could just be that I haven’t spent a week away with a woman in a while.”

He laughs again, “Yeah. That’s it.”

I turn away from the window, “I’m going to finish packing. I’ll let you know when the plane lands.”

“Alright. Sounds good. Later, Deck.”

I hang up before tossing my phone on the couch.

Walking back to the windows, I look again in the direction of Annie’s apartment. She’s probably packed and ready to go. She deserves a trip like this. And a week away with her is something I want to do.

I’m just not understanding this feeling. It’s like I’m missing something.

Chapter Twenty-five

Annie

I arrive at the airport two hours before our flight, so I grab a coffee before finding a few seats open at our gate. My only bags are a small luggage bag and my carry-on, so I place them in a chair to save for Decker while waiting for him to arrive. I haven't heard from him, so I'm unsure when he will get here.

Sitting in a chair, I sip my coffee while looking around at everyone walking to their gates. I had difficulty waking up this morning for this trip since it took me all night to pack my small bag. I knew I didn't have a swimsuit, but what I hadn't realized was my summer clothing was slim. I figure I can switch up outfits with what little stuff I did manage to find.

"Hey," I hear Decker's voice behind me.

I turn around to his voice. He's standing there holding a coffee, wearing joggers, a hoodie, and a baseball cap—his bag over his arm.

"Good morning."

He comes around, taking the open seat next to me, "I knew you'd be here early."

I smile, "You know me so well."

"Did you get everything?"

"I think so."

I'm sure there's more missing from my bag than just a swimsuit. Going on trips isn't exactly yearly for me like it is for him.

We both sit in silence as we drink our coffee.

I'm replaying my checklist in my mind. *Clothes, bathroom products, plane snacks, chapstick, called Lucy.* Shoot, I forgot to call my mom.

"I've got to make a phone call."

He nods, "Go ahead."

Opening my bag, I dig through it to find my phone at the bottom. I take it out and let out a deep breath before calling.

"Annie, dear."

"Good morning, Mom."

Decker crosses his arms before leaning toward me, almost like he wants to listen.

"I was calling to let you know our plane leaves soon."

"Are you going to make it before the snowstorm?"

My eyes go to the window; it looks cold outside, but I haven't seen any snow yet. I checked before coming here, and the storm had been pushed back a few hours. I wouldn't be lying if I said I hoped the storm hit early so we couldn't leave.

"Yes. We won't have to worry about the storm hitting us."

"We will miss you, but I know you will have the time of your life on this trip."

"I'll miss you guys too."

"You're going to have so much fun. We will have presents and treats waiting for you when you return."

I frown, "I'll come over when I get back. Sorry, I can't be there to help make

cookies, but I promise I'll make it up to you."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. I'll get your brother to help me this year."

I laugh, "Jake doesn't know anything about making cookies."

Decker grins before taking another drink of his coffee.

"Well, I'll let you go. Keep in touch while you're away."

"I will. I love you."

"We love you too."

I hang up before sliding my phone back into my bag. Then I go back to drinking my coffee while we continue waiting.

Decker then turns in his seat to me, "You said it yourself. I know you so well."

I squint my eyes at him. "What?"

"Just a few minutes ago, you said I know you so well. And I think I do." His eyes connect with mine, "You don't want to go on this trip, Annie. Hell, I don't even think I want to anymore."

I let out a small nervous laugh, "What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm saying is..." he places his hand on my leg, "This trip has been the farthest thing from my mind since I've spent more time with you. I don't want to take you from your family for Christmas. And I don't need to take you away to spend time with you. Let's make traditions, Annie."

He stands, holding his hand to me, "You in?"

Sitting there, shocked and still trying to understand what he was saying, I put my hand over my mouth. Of course, I'm in, but I want to make this the best Christmas ever for him.

I stand from my chair and hold up one finger, “On one condition.”

He smirks, “What’s that?”

“You spend Christmas with me and my family.”

He tilts his head to the side, thinking about my offer. Then he holds his hand out to me again. “Okay.”

Putting my hand in his, “Great.”

Walking over to the chair holding my bags, he picks them both up before saying, “Now, let’s get out of here.”

I laugh because I can’t believe what’s happening right now.

“Where are we going?” I ask as we walk away from the gate together.

“My place,” he says, “First thing on the list. Getting snowed in together.”



I watch Decker as he strolls through an aisle of the grocery store. If we’re going to get snowed in, we will need food and necessities. I’ve already thrown everything in the cart for hot chocolate, which is a must and he’s thrown in ingredients for pancakes. Something he says is a must too.

I’m still processing the fact that we are staying here for Christmas. It means I will need to ensure he has the best Christmas, which is quite the task. But I’m ready.

Decker walks ahead as I push the cart through the store for us. I take the last look in the cart before we head to the front of the store to pay. It’s basically a load of junk, but that’s what you’re supposed to eat when you can’t go

anywhere.

“We’re going to need pizza.”

“We always eat that.”

He’s smiling when he turns to me, pointing a finger, “I blame you.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I say, “I’m just a girl who loves pizza.”

He opens the cooler, grabs a frozen pizza, and throws it into the basket.

We continue walking, “I know this wasn’t your diet before I met you. You going to blame me for that too?”

He laughs, “I will say I’ve never eaten so many bagels, muffins, and cookies until I met you. But I love them, so I can’t blame you for those.”

I paused when the word *love* fell from his lips. That’s a word I don’t think I’ve ever heard him say before.

He stops suddenly when he realizes I have stopped pushing the cart.

“Are we finished here?” he asks.

I nod, “I think so.”

If we put any more into the basket, it’ll be a lot of work trying to get the bags to his apartment.

He follows behind as I push our stuff to the front register to check out. While we wait in line, I look out the window to see tiny snowflakes falling in the air.

“It’s snowing,” I mutter as I glare back at Decker standing behind me.

His face lights up with a smile.

“You enjoy the snow?” I ask.

“It’s the only magical thing about Christmas time.”

I grin, “I agree.”

Decker helps me load the groceries onto the conveyor belt for the cashier to ring us up. Once she packs them into bags, I pick them up and place them into the cart.

Decker pays for our groceries before helping me grab everything to leave.

When we walk out of the store, hands full, the snow begins to fall heavier.

He manages to unlock the doors. The rear trunk opens, and I place the bags in the back before he follows me.

When he closes the door, I walk around to the passenger side. Noticing all the snow piled on the front of the car, I use my hands to gather a small snowball.

I look up to see Decker either had the same idea or caught me making a snowball because he had a larger ball in his hands and was ready to throw.

Dropping my ball, I throw my hands up. “No, no, no...”

“You’re already surrendering. We’re just getting started.” He smirks.

He throws the ball, smashing right into my chest.

“That’s it, Mr. Jones.” I gather another snowball but larger and throw it. It misses and hits the car behind him.

When my eyes go back to him, he already has another ball formed in his hand. Throwing it, it hits me right in the face.

“Ahh...” I wipe the snow from my face. And that’s when I feel Decker’s arm wrap around my waist as his other hand helps clean the snow from my eyes.

“Sorry,” he says, “I didn’t mean to get your face.”

“It’s okay.” Our eyes connect.

Suddenly the cold snow on my cheeks doesn’t matter as I stare into Decker’s blue eyes. His lips go up as he flashes me a smile before leaning into me and placing a kiss on my lips.

He puts his forehead to mine and whispers, “We’re going to have the best Christmas, Annie.”

My heart swells as I mutter, “Just for you, Mr. Jones.”

Giving me one more quick kiss, he lets go of me before walking around the back of the car to the driver’s side.

Chapter Twenty-six

Decker

Annie fell asleep on the couch an hour ago. Since covering her with a blanket, I've stayed beside her feet. We watched movie after movie as the snow fell heavily outside. There has to be at least eight inches of snow on the ground. Meaning we will probably be snowed in for a couple of days. But I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Not even on a sunny beach.

I'm right where I should be with someone I want to spend this special time of year with. I don't know what Annie is to me yet, but I want to figure it out. Since the day I met her in my office, I knew there was something about her that I was really attracted to.

I look at my watch to check the time. We bought food earlier today, but neither of us have hardly eaten anything, and I'm starving. Since Annie's still sound asleep, now would be an excellent time for me to make something for her to wake up to.

Slowly getting up from the couch, I stand on my feet. I pull the blanket closer to Annie's face before walking toward the kitchen. Opening the cabinets, I see all the junk food we bought earlier today. I will need to return to my gym soon, or I'm going to start gaining unwanted weight.

I grab the boxed pancake mix we bought at the store. I can't think of anything better than breakfast for dinner during a snowstorm.

Reading over the directions from the back of the box, I realize this will be easy enough for me to cook. Annie is obviously the better cook between the two of us but I think I can manage pancakes.

I mix the pancake batter in a bowl on the kitchen island. A Christmas movie is playing on the television while Annie sleeps, and the

lights from the tree reflect off the windows lighting up the space. It makes me smile as I realize I made the right choice by staying here for Christmas. I don't know what kind of plan we have for making traditions, but I'm up for anything as long I get to do it with her.

After turning on the stovetop, I take a skillet from one of the bottom cabinets. I place it on the stove before grabbing a stick of butter from the fridge. One of the things my mother taught me was to use a buttered skillet when cooking pancakes to get the nice crispy edges.

Scooping out the pancake batter from the bowl, I drop it into medium size amounts on the hot skillet. It makes a sizzling sound, prompting me to turn around to ensure I didn't wake Annie. She's still sleeping, but if the sound doesn't wake her, I know the smell will soon.

When I turn back around, I flip the pancakes and wait for them to finish.

Pancakes for breakfast were something my mother always made for me when I was young. I always opted for regular, while she loved chocolate chip pancakes.

I pile the finished pancakes onto a glass plate. Then I drop more of the batter onto the skillet. I continue this process until all the batter is gone from the bowl.

When they are all done, I take two plates from the cabinet. I pile three pancakes on both before warming up the syrup in a glass jar in the microwave. Warming the syrup makes the pancakes taste better for some reason.

When I bring two pancake plates into the living room, Annie is still asleep. I set them on the coffee table before brushing my hand down the side of her face to wake her.

Her eyes flutter before she stretches her arms out.

"Hey," I grin, "I made food."

She sits up, and her eyes widen when she sees the plates on the table. “Mmm... smells so good.”

I sit beside her, “I hope you don’t mind.”

“I love pancakes,” she smiles, “And breakfast for dinner is like my favorite.”

Lifting the warm jar of syrup, “You care?”

She shakes her head, “No, you can go ahead. Just make sure you don’t miss any spots.”

I pour the syrup all over her pancakes before finishing off the jar on my plate. Annie picks up her fork and digs in. I follow her lead.

“Thanks for dinner.”

“Well,” I swallow, “you always make me something, so I thought it was my turn to return the favor.”

“I’m impressed, Mr. Jones.” She winks.

It’ll never get old hearing her call me that. What started out as a way to tease me, has grown into something more meaningful. I’ve yet to call her anything besides her name. I should work on that.

“So,” I say, “What do you want to do this week?”

Shrugging her shoulders, she says, “I’ve been thinking about some ideas, but I’m not sure yet.”

“The guys have a home game on Thursday. Jennings saved me two tickets. If you want, you and I can go to that.”

Scrunching up her nose like she does when she isn’t sure about something, she says, “Sure. That will be fun. You know I don’t watch sports, so you may need to explain some things to me while we’re there.”

I laugh, “I can do that.”

She swallows another bite, “What made you change your mind about the trip?”

We haven’t talked about this today. I knew Annie would ask this at some point since I surprised her at the last minute. We also have yet to tell anyone that we stayed in the city.

“You.”

“Me?” she points to her chest.

“When you were talking to your mom,” I drop my fork and sit back to look into her eyes, “I thought about my mother and knew she would want me to do things with you if she were here.” Placing my hand on her knee, “I think she would’ve loved you. And taking you from traditions and family isn’t right.”

She places her hand over mine, “I wish I could’ve met her.”

I lower, “Me too.”

She exhales before nibbling on her bottom lip.

It means a lot knowing that Annie cares how tough it is for me to talk about my mother. Honestly, most of it just comes out so much easier with her than I’ve ever expected.

Pulling my hand from Annie’s leg, I lean forward to finish eating. She takes her last bite before sitting back on the couch and covering back up with the blanket.

“We really should just go to bed.”

I couldn’t agree more with that statement.



Annie and I cleaned the kitchen and living room together before deciding it was time to go to bed. Even though Annie napped, she insists she's still tired. I'm exhausted from lying around all day, considering I don't often do that.

I pull the sheets in the comforter back on the bed when Annie says, "Are you sure you want me to sleep here?"

"Annie, I'm sure. Just get in the bed."

She's standing on the empty side of the bed with her arms crossed and wearing the cutest pink silk pajama set. I know she's hesitant, but I regret not asking her to stay last time, so I've been waiting for this.

Clenching her teeth, she finally pulls the covers back before sliding into the bed and covering up. I slide under too before reaching over to turn off the bedside lamp.

I hold my arm out to Annie so she can come closer to me. And she does. Wrapping my arm around her, I rest my hand on her lower back as her head rests on my chest and her arm drapes over me.

I can hear her breathing. It's so quiet in the room.

"Decker?"

"Yeah."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

She lifts her chin to me, “For staying here. For changing your mind. I want to make this the best Christmas ever for you.”

“And I know you will.”

She rolls onto my chest, resting her hands under her chin. I can’t see her well, but I know her eyes are on me.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask.

“About how I want to thank you properly.”

I laugh, “What’s it gonna be, Annie?”

Pushing off my chest, she settles on her knees on the bed before placing herself on my lap. She lowers, sitting on my dick while her fingers trail down my abdomen.

“This is a start.” She whispers.

I wrap each of my hands around her thighs, squeezing them tight. It is a start, feeling myself harden under her.

Grabbing the hem of her shirt, she pulls it over her head, throwing it to the floor. The room is so dark I can barely see her perfectly round breasts laid bare before me. I lift one hand from her thigh and pinch her nipple between two fingers. I watch her head fall back to my touch as she grinds down on me.

Sitting up from the bed, I grab the back of her head, bringing our mouths together. She moans against my lips before I move my mouth down her neck to her chest and take her nipple between my teeth.

She moans again, “More.”

My mouth leaves her breast as I lift her. I pull my legs out from under her laying her back down on the bed slowly. If she wants more, she’s going to get it.

I grab the top of her shorts with my hands and pull them off her before standing from the bed to strip from my boxer briefs. Then I walk over to the dresser and remove a condom from the top drawer.

When I walk back to the bed, she's lying there waiting with her legs spread on the edge of the bed. I reach down and slide my finger through her center. She's wet and ready as I insert two fingers into her.

“Fuck, Annie. You're always so ready for me.”

I stretch her using my fingers before pulling them out. Then I tear open the condom with my teeth before rolling it onto my dick and throwing the wrapper to the floor. I crawl on the bed between her legs.

“Ready, baby.”

She nods before I reach down, lining my dick up with her entrance. I slowly push myself inside her, adding more as I pace myself. She fits so perfectly around me when I'm fully inside her. I could go all damn night like this.

She closes her eyes, and her hands grip my arms as I pick up my rhythm. I lean forward to be closer to her, and my lips work their way up her neck before our lips connect again.

“Let me show you,” she whispers against my lips breathlessly.

I put my forehead to hers, “You want to ride me?”

She nods, biting on her bottom lip.

Pulling out of her, I lie on the bed as she straddles me. Using one hand, she lines my dick back up to her entrance before slowly lowering herself down. When she's taken me to the hilt she starts to rock back and forth.

I grip her hips to help guide her, “God baby, this feels so good.”

She increases her tempo, using her hands on my chest to brace

herself. Moaning, I feel her inner walls begin to tighten. She's close. I'm almost there with her. The build-up is already putting me on the edge because she feels so fucking good grinding on me.

"I'm almost there," she mutters.

I tighten my grip on her hips, helping her keep the rhythm, "I know. Come on my dick, Annie."

The words out of my mouth are like fire as she works herself faster on top of me. Her grip on my chest is tense as I feel her pussy clench tighter around my dick. In a matter of seconds, she moans loudly as the pressure gives way and she comes, my release following right behind her.

I moan, squeezing her thighs to hold her in place, "Shit."

She drops on my chest, her head lying at the crook of my neck. I can feel her breathing heavily on me, and I wrap my arms around her as we lie there.

"I think you fucked me properly."

She snorts. Too breathless to say anything yet.

Lifting off me, she stands from the bed. Immediately I miss being inside her. It's been a while since I've fucked multiple times in one night, but tonight I want to spend the rest of the night buried in her.

"Come back," I say.

She laughs, "Give me a second."

I watch her as she walks into the bathroom. She grabs a towel from the counter before walking back into the room. Tossing it at me, she says, "Clean up, Mr. Jones, because we are far from finished."

Dropping my head back, I laugh as I stare at the ceiling. Being snowed in with Annie is going to be so fucking fun.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Annie

I groan as I open my eyes. It is daylight outside, and I know it has to be early, but I am not ready to wake up. Rolling over, I pull the covers over my naked body as I look at Decker sleeping hard against his pillow.

My body feels sore this morning, but I don't mind because last night with him was one to remember. I watch him sleep for a few minutes before quietly slipping out of bed.

I grab his shirt, lying over the back of a chair in the corner of his room, and slide it over my head. Then I tiptoe out of his room into the living room. I walk over to the large windows to see snow piled along the streets. They cleared off the roads and sidewalks overnight. It seems as though we may get to go somewhere today.

Walking back into the bedroom, I see Decker is still sleeping. So I slip back under the covers and cuddle up next to him.

His arm wraps around me as he pulls me closer to him.

"I think we should get out today."

He moans as he digs his face between the pillow and my neck, "Can't we just stay here all day."

"We can, but I have an idea. We don't have to stay out for long. Then we can come back here and do anything we want."

He groans, "You're such a morning person."

"I'm well rested."

“Or just well fucked.”

I giggle as he kisses my neck, “Decker.”

He shakes his head as his lips move from my neck to my cheek, “Try again.”

“Grinch.”

I know what he wants me to say, but why not joke around?

He laughs, “Nice try.”

“Fine,” I huff, “Mr. Jones, can we please get out of the apartment for an hour tops?”

He hovers over me, our eyes connecting. “Yes. But first,” he tugs on the shirt that I’m wearing, “this shirt looks so good on you.”

“Thanks,” I look down at his black Pigeons shirt, “It’s comfy.”

He grins before standing from the bed, naked. I sit on my elbows and stare at his tight ass as he walks into the bathroom. I hear the shower turn on. Then the shower door closes.

“Are you joining me or waiting?” he yells.

“Umm...” I shout, “I’ll wait.”

I get up from the bed and walk into the kitchen. I’m not sure if coffee shops will be open when we leave, so I start a pot of coffee for Decker and me to share.

While waiting, I grab my phone from the counter where I left it last night. I do a quick search on where I want to take Decker today. I find out that it isn’t far from his place. Surely, they will be open today.

I walk back over to the window. People are walking on the sidewalks. And there’s already a little bit of traffic. Since there’s no chance of snow today, it looks like everyone is going back to their daily routines.

Decker walks into the room shirtless and wearing only a pair of sweatpants. He walks over to the coffee pot, pouring some into two mugs. When I meet him in the kitchen, he hands me my cup.

“Thanks.”

“So,” he leans against the counter with the mug in hand to take a sip, “What are you wanting to do?”

“I can’t tell you yet.”

He squints his eyes at me before taking a sip.

“And we’re walking there.”

“Annie. This place better be worth it.”

I smile, “It will be. I Promise.”



Tightening my coat around me as we walk out of the building, Decker asks me for the fifth time, “Are you sure you don’t want me to drive?”

“It won’t be a long walk,” I say.

It’s freezing out, and I found only one winter outfit in my bag. It was a thin sweater and jeans. But luckily, I was wearing a coat at the airport when Decker decided to change our plans from sun to snow.

Decker follows my lead as I make a left turn on the sidewalk. The

snow is piled up at least four feet high along the curb.

“No snowballs today.” I say, “Got it?”

“I don’t know if I can agree to that,” he grins.

“At least none to the face.”

He snorts, “I still feel terrible about that one.”

We continue walking with the rest of the morning crowd down the sidewalk. We are only a block away from where I want to take him. The look on Decker’s face tells me he’s not impressed yet with this surprise . Honestly, I don’t blame him. I’m really not good with surprises either.

I bite the inside of my cheek as we round the corner. Okay, so maybe this idea sucks. But I guess there’s no going back now.

The light brick building with a red overhang comes into sight. It reads *The Strand bookstore—18 miles of books*.

“We’re here.”

His eyes go up to the sign, “You found the bookstore.”

“I did,” Giving him a big grin. “If we’re going to be snowed in. We could at least read something.”

We walk up to the door together.

“Over 2.5 million new, used, and old books are here,” I say as I walk through the door first. Decker follows closely behind me. When we are just a few feet in, both of us stop and take in all the books.

“So I see where the eighteen miles of books comes from.”

“Incredible. We should definitely find something in here.”

He clears his throat, “What exactly are we looking for again?”

“Faires, dragons, maybe some dino smut.” I shrug.

He snorts, “That stuff exists.”

“Hate to tell you this,” I say, “but yes, it does. However, you are looking for the self-help section.”

“Do we need to separate?”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

Decker starts to the left, and I go up the stairs in the middle of the room to the next floor.

Wandering down the aisles, I run my fingers over the spines of the books lining the shelves. I didn't have the intention of getting myself anything. But I guess it wouldn't hurt to pick up a romantic comedy or something cheesy. It's been so long since I've read.

Decker is the reason I wanted to come here. I know there are some things he's dealing with. There has to be something here to help him with the grief of losing his mom or help with his anxiety. He seems fine most days, but he's battling some internal struggles that he doesn't like talking about.

I spend the next several minutes going in and out of a few bookshelves. I'm holding a couple of books as my eyes look for anything that stands out.

“What are you doing?” Decker's voice appears to my right.

“I'm seeking my next read.” My hand leaves another book spine as I turn to him. “Did you find anything?”

He holds up two books, “A couple. One to help better understand and manage anxiety and the other for working through the grief of losing a loved one.”

“That's great,” I take them from his hand and look over them,

“This is a start.”

He takes the books back, “Did you find anything?”

“Just a book about friends turning into friends with benefits. And another about a football player falling in love with his best friend's sister,” I joke.

He laughs, “Really?”

“No, they aren't,” I cradle the books to my chest, “but those would be some great storylines.”

“You want to walk around some more before we leave?”

I smile, “Sure.”

Decker and I stroll to the section where he got the books he chose.

Together we looked for anything that Decker could read. We end up grabbing a couple more books before paying, my treat because it was my idea. And then we leave the store.

“Thanks for this.”

We start moving down the sidewalk, “I know it's not much. But it's at least something that, maybe, can begin to help you. I wish I knew what you were going through so I could be more helpful.”

“Annie,” he slides his hand into mine, “you've helped me more than you know. Without you, I would've never thought to come here or made it through that attack in my office.”

My mind barely registers the words coming out of his mouth because I'm so smitten by him holding my hand for the first time. He's being affectionate in public, and it's giving me warm and fuzzy feelings.

I squeeze his hand. “You want to go back to your apartment?”

“We don’t have to. I’m enjoying being outside actually.”

“We could always steal some kid’s sleds in the park and go sledding.”

He burst out laughing, “Don’t tell me that’s something you’ve done before.”

“I haven’t. But I’ll admit I’ve thought about it before. I would watch kids sled from the bakery window at the small park across the street. It made me wish I didn’t work so much and would slow down occasionally.”

Pulling me closer to him, “Let’s go to the park.”

“Really?” I exclaim.

He smirks, “But we’re not stealing a sled.”

“Fine,” I tighten my grip on his hand, “We don’t have to sled.”

When I look over at him, he’s smiling. It looks like he has something up his sleeve.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Decker

Sledding is something I haven't done since I was probably seven years old, but when Annie mentioned it, I knew it was something we needed to do. Traditions, right? That's what I want Annie and I to make.

So, now I'm carrying a large red sled in my arms as we walk through the park. Yes, we bought it. And Annie's expression tells me she is more than ready to take this thing for a ride. I may be feeling a little hesitant about how much I want to do this. I'm thirty-three and know how my body will feel in the morning. It isn't the same body I played football with.

Giddy like a little girl, Annie stops walking and turns towards me, "This spot is perfect."

I drop the sled on the ground before checking out the spot at the top of a small hill, "This looks like it'll work."

She clutches the bag of books to her chest before zipping them up into her coat so nothing happens to them.

Taking a deep breath, I then line up the sled. Annie doesn't waste any time as she gets on the front of the sled and then pats the spot behind her.

"Come on, Decker."

"I'm coming."

Clenching my teeth, I finally sit down behind her. I wrap my arms around Annie as I keep my feet in the snow, so we don't take off yet. Her hands come over mine, and she holds them so I won't let go of her. I won't let her fall.

“Ready?” I mutter into her ear.

She grips my hands, “I’m ready.”

I push my feet off the ground before placing them on each side of Annie as we start to descend the hill. It’s slow initially but picks up speed once we get a few feet down. Thankfully, we manage to stay in our lane and not veer into anyone else.

“Ahh…” Annie screams out as she giggles.

Her response makes me smile as I hold tight to her the whole ride down.

We reach the bottom of the hill without crashing. Annie is quick to get off the sled and stand at her feet.

“Let’s go again.”

“You sure like asking for *more*, don’t you?”

She shakes her head before resting her hands on her hips, “Should we try a higher hill.”

I look around at all the families in the park sledding. The larger hills are taken, but I know Annie isn’t going to back down.

“Okay,” I pick up the sled and carry it under my arm, “Let’s go.”

She takes off for the largest hill out here, and I follow. We didn’t dress for playing in the snow, and Annie must be cold. But I know a few times down the hill will make her happy before we return to my apartment.

When we reach the top of the hill, she puts her hands together and shakes with excitement. Once again, I drop the sled and stand next to her.

I put my hands on my hips as I look down the hill, “Well, this is going to be fun.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“Not at all.”

This hill is going to kill us. If we make it down, at least. A giant pile of snow is sitting right at the bottom from where someone shoveled it off the sidewalks. We’re going to slam right into it. I just know it.

Annie gets on the sled, and I blow out my last breath as I get on behind her. I wrap my arms around her again and hold on tight this time.

Here it goes.

I push off the ground with my feet before placing them on each side of Annie as we slowly start going down the hill. Pulling her closer as our speed picks up, I put my chin on her shoulder as she grips my arms while laughing.

The cold air blows into our faces as the sled goes faster. We are approaching the end of the hill, and the pile of snow is right there, just waiting for us to slam into it. I make a sudden quick decision and tilt to the side, making the sled turn just a bit. But the side of the sled comes up, and instead of hitting the snow pile head-on, Annie and I fall over and roll into the pile.

She’s laughing hysterically as we both lie there in the snow. The sled stopping a few feet away from us.

I sit up quickly to check on her.

Her arms are out as she lies there on her back. She looks unharmed as she’s wearing the biggest grin on her face. I can’t help myself at this moment. I lean over and kiss her. Her hands come up at the sides of my face as she deepens our kiss.

I lift my head back as our eyes connect. She runs her tongue across her bottom lip before biting down.

“Again?” I ask.

“I think I’m good.”

I stand and hold my hand out to her. She takes it, and I help her up from the ground. When she's on her feet, she dusts the snow off of her with her hands.

"Well," she huffs, "That was so much fun. But I literally can't feel my fingers."

"Me neither."

Walking over to the sled, I grab the string hanging off the front and drag it behind me as Annie and I walk back up the hill. When we reach the top, I see a group of kids building a snowman.

"Hold on a second," I tell Annie.

She stands there as I walk over to the group of kids.

I pull the sled up before me, "Here you go. You guys can have this."

A little boy bundled up in a blue coat with a beanie smiles as he says, "Really? Thank you!"

"You guys have fun," I wave goodbye as I walk back to Annie.

"That was very sweet of you."

"Yeah," I take her hand, "I didn't want to carry it back to the apartment."

She shakes her head before resting it against my arm as we walk hand in hand back toward the apartment. She feels like ice, and I can't wait to warm up with her.

Today has been one to remember. It's been so long since I've had this much fun with anyone other than Grady and Jennings. What Annie and I have been doing together, is simple yet brings me so much joy.

When we reach the apartment building, Annie finally unzips her coat, pulling out the bag of books. She holds them as we take the elevator up.

I unlock the door before we walk into the warm apartment. Annie sighs in

relief before taking her coat off and hanging it over the back of a barstool. I slip out of my shoes at the door.

“Hot chocolate?” I ask.

“Yes. I can make it.”

Annie walks into the kitchen and takes everything for hot chocolate from the cabinet. She got so many extra toppings at the store yesterday that I’m eager to see what she will put in it.

I sit on the kitchen counter and watch her warm milk on the stove and add the chocolate. Then she pours the mixture into two mugs before bringing them over and setting them next to me. It already smells so good.

“First,” she grabs a can of whipped cream from the fridge, “You start with this.”

“You didn’t even ask me what I wanted.”

“Oh, sorry,” she scrunches her nose. “What do you want?”

I smirk, “I’ll take the Annie special.”

Unimpressed, she says, “You’re in for a treat.”

I watch her as she drops tiny marshmallows into the mug. Then she shakes the whipped cream before piling it high. She tops the cream with a drizzle of chocolate syrup and then adds a wafer roll into the mug.

She holds up her creation, “Here you go. The Annie special.”

Everything in the mug looks like it will hurt my teeth, but I expect nothing less from Annie.

I take the mug and inspect it before taking a sip. It’s surprisingly delicious. But I can’t think of anything Annie has made for me that isn’t good.

“Not bad.”

She takes a drink. When she draws the mug down from her lips, a speck of whipped cream is on the corner of her mouth. I reach up, wiping it away with my thumb before leaning forward and kissing her soft lips.

I'm finding myself being more affectionate with her and that scares me.

Her lips leave mine, and she whispers, "Thanks."

I set the mug down beside me before hopping off the counter to stand on my feet. "Let's get warm."

"Good idea."

Walking over to the Christmas tree, I turn on the lights. Then I toss a couple of folded-up blankets from a basket onto the couch. Annie takes the books we bought today from their bag and stacks them on the coffee table.

"I'm going to change."

"Oh, me too."

We walk into the bedroom together. I grab a pair of sweatpants from the drawer as Annie digs into her bag.

I strip out of the cold and damp clothes before putting on the sweatpants. Then I grab a shirt from the top of my dresser and slip it over my head. Annie is still digging through her bag when I'm changed.

"Can't find anything?"

"No," she glances at me, "This is all summer clothes."

"Here," I open my drawer and take out a pair of sweats and a shirt. Then I toss them to Annie. "Wear this. It will be huge on you, but you can make them work."

I can't help myself as I watch her strip out of her clothes. She slides my shirt over her head, and it drops down to just above her knee. I just want to wrap

my arms around her and snuggle in bed.

“I’ll need to go to my apartment tomorrow.”

“Huh,” I shake my thoughts, “Why?”

“I don’t have enough clothes.”

I lower, “You can do laundry or wear some of my clothes.”

I’m not ready for Annie to leave.

“Decker,” she scowls, “I can’t wear your clothes to the game on Thursday.”

“Okay. I can take you there tomorrow.”

She slips into my sweatpants before tying them and folding them over once. Tucking the shirt in the front of the pants, you can see them barely hanging on her hips. Her wearing my clothes sparks this desire in me that catches me off guard. I don’t think Annie has looked sexier.

She tosses her hair up into a ponytail. “We should probably tell everyone we’re here.”

“Yeah,” I answer. “I’ll call Jennings.”

“Is he the one person you’re closest to?”

“We got drafted the same year for the Knights. Jennings is like a brother to me. I don’t tell him everything, but he understands me better than anyone. He’s smart but makes some dumb choices. It’s partly because of some issues with his family. We tend to disagree on those things.”

Annie follows me as I walk back into the living room and turn on the tv. She grabs the two mugs of hot chocolate that we left on the kitchen counter and sets them on the coffee table next to the books.

I scroll through the movies before deciding on one. Annie sits on the couch first, and I sit beside her. Wrapping my arm around her and pulling her close,

she snuggles into my chest. This is the best way to end a perfect day with her.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Annie

Decker pulls up to the curb right outside my apartment building. I get out to open the back passenger side door and grab my bag. He rolls the front window down.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours to get you for the game.”

I lean in the window, “Okay. I’ll be here.”

“Okay.”

We discussed this before leaving his apartment, but I think he needs some reassurance.

Crossing my arms, I say, “I’ll see you soon.”

He gives me a wink before rolling the window up. I wave to him before turning around to walk up to the sidewalk and into my apartment building.

Decker said he had some errands to run before the game. So it seemed the perfect time to come to my apartment for clothes that were not summer and not Deckers. Don’t get me wrong. His clothes are so comfy, and they smell like him. They just aren’t acceptable for wearing out in public.

When I walk into my apartment, I gather all my clothes and start a load of laundry. I can’t remember the last time I washed anything. And while Decker offered at his apartment, I didn’t have much to clean, so I brought it all home.

I start a John Mayer record on the record player before tidying up my apartment. The last time I was here, I was in a rush for the airport and left this place in a mess.

Reminiscing on the last few days with Decker, I hum *Your body is a wonderland*.

The last few days couldn't have gone better. I feel like I broke through some of the hard shell that Decker holds around him. He showed signs of affection. And while he hasn't opened the books we bought, I know he's working towards figuring himself out.

When my apartment finally looks good enough, I get into the shower. My tiny shower with a plastic curtain doesn't compare to the two shower heads and a glass door that Decker has at his place. We didn't shower together, but his shower was perfect for two people.

I quickly wash my hair and body before getting out. I dry off and wrap the towel around myself. My wet hair falls over my shoulders as I look in the mirror. I grab my brush and run it through my hair, wondering if I have time to bake something quick.

This whole time I've been staying with Decker, I haven't baked a single thing. It wasn't something on my mind while spending time with him. I miss it, but the break from thinking I needed to make something every day was lovely.

Instead, Decker and I indulged in junk food, pancakes, and overly sweet mugs of hot chocolate. I don't regret any of it. We made memories.

I check the time on my phone before getting my blow dryer out. I have a little under an hour before Decker will return to get me. And I have no idea what I'm going to wear. It doesn't look like I have the time to make anything.

I blow dry my hair quickly before straightening it. Then I put on the same amount of makeup as I would for the office.

The nerves are starting to set in. The game is going to be fun. But I know I'll be meeting so many people Decker knows but I'll have no idea who they are. I consider myself a people person, but tonight is a different level of people. I don't know a single thing about sports.

I'm searching through my closet when I hear a knock at the front door. Still wearing the towel around my body, I walk to the door and look in the peephole. Decker is standing outside my door with a bag in his hand.

Barely opening the door, I peep my head around it. "Come in."

He smiles before walking in and closing the door behind him. When he sees me, his eyes get big.

"What a greeting!"

"Sorry," I say, "I was just looking for something to wear."

"Here," he holds up the bag.

I take it from him, and he follows me into the living room. I sit the bag on the couch and open it. I pull out a black shirt with a silver and white Knights logo on the front.

"Awe, Decker. Thank you," I say, clinging it to my chest.

He grins, "Turn it around."

I flip the shirt around in my hands and hold it out. The back says *Jones 33*.

"You know how hard it is to find a shirt for a retired football player. Near impossible. But the sports store at the stadium still had a few in the back."

Reaching up on my toes, I kiss him. "I love it."

"Go put it on."

"Okay, I'm going." I walk into my bedroom.

I lay the shirt down on my bed. Then I take a thong and bra from the dresser and put them on.

"Your apartment looks nice," He shouts.

“I spent a lot of time cleaning up today.”

After slipping on a pair of jeans, I put the shirt he gave me over my head before looking into the mirror. I turn around to look at the back. Seeing his name makes me smile.

I pick up my expensive white, with silver glitter star tennis shoes off the floor and walk into the living room. I spent a lot of money on these shoes because they were a trend. But now I’m glad I have them because they are perfect for this shirt.

Putting them on quickly, I look up to see Decker staring at me.

“Is this okay?”

He smirks, “It’s more than okay. Annie, you look really good.”

“Decker,” I stand from the couch.

He walks over, cupping my face with his hand, and leans in, kissing me. “Other than my mom, I’ve never seen a woman wear my number. And now I hate that you never got to see me play.”

“Me too,” I whisper.

The truth is, I want so badly to know that Decker. The happy man that he was then. I could’ve met his mom. But I didn’t, and there’s a reason for that. I don’t know what it is yet, but I’m trying to figure that out.



Holding hands, Decker and I walk into the stadium. Jennings gave us suite tickets, and we are sharing it with mostly Grady’s family. Lucy will be here, and I couldn’t be happier. I haven’t seen her since the event here last

Saturday.

We take an elevator up to the room. I'm so nervous that I can barely speak words. Decker's hand is providing me with a little bit of comfort. But I know at some point tonight, I'm going to need to talk.

When the doors open, we exit and then walk just a few doors down.

“Ready?” Decker asks.

I squeeze his hand, “Sure.”

Decker opens a door, and we enter a room full of people. I spot Lucy right away talking with a dark-haired woman that looks to be our age. She gives me a quick wave before continuing her conversation.

Tables are scattered throughout the room. The ones by the wall are covered with food in different bowls and trays. The rest are standing tables and a fridge stocked full with drinks. When we enter the room, I can see the field off the back.

Loud music is playing as I walk closer to the seats available for us to watch the game. There are football players on the field warming up. A couple tv's hang from above the chairs, and tv announcers talking about the game are playing on them.

It all overwhelms me, but I know it will be fun.

Decker turns to me and points to an older couple getting plates of food, “Those are Grady's parents, Susan and Tom.”

I nod.

“The girl Lucy is talking to is Kate. That's Grady's sister. I don't know her well, but Jennings can't stand her. She likes to test his intelligence and patience.”

“Does Jennings family ever come?”

“No,” he says, “they live in California.”

I nod as Lucy walks over to us.

“Annie,” She hugs me.

“Lucy, I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Grady would’ve frowned upon our friendship if I didn’t come.”

“Decker,” I hear a man’s voice behind me.

We all turn around to see an older man standing at the door. He walks in as Decker says, “Jerry.”

“Hey,” they shake. “The team told us you’d be here. Once the announcers heard, they wondered if you would come for an interview to discuss the game.”

“Wow,” he looks at me as he drags his hand down his chin. “Yeah. I can do that.”

“Who’s this?” Jerry asks as he holds his hand out to me.

“This is....” Decker pauses, “my assistant, Annie.”

My cheeks heat up with embarrassment. I was hoping Decker would call me something other than that for some reason. I reach out and shake his hand, “Nice to meet you.”

He smiles, “You too.”

“I’ll be back,” Decker squeezes my shoulder before leaving the room with Jerry.

Once they are out of sight, Lucy looks at me, “You okay?”

Walking over to one of the chairs, I sit. Lucy takes the seat next to me. My eyes go up to the tv hanging above my head. I want our conversation

to be private.

I lower my head, “I’m fine. I just didn’t expect him to introduce me as his assistant. I get that’s what I am, but we’ve been spending so much time together.”

“Grady has mentioned that Decker has been through a lot. Maybe he doesn’t know what he is to you or vice versa.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I’ve seen a different side to him the last few days. But we haven’t talked about us.”

“If anything, this is a good sign. It means you see him as something more.” She grabs my hand to comfort me.

Decker appears on the tv screen above me. He’s smiling as he waves to all the fans standing around the announcer’s table before sitting in the middle of the four men talking. The music is so loud that I can’t hear anything they’re saying.

I nudge Lucy and point up, “Look.”

“Look at that,” she says. “He looks so happy to be up there.”

As I’m watching Decker on the screen talking football, Grady’s sister Kate comes and sits on the other side of me.

“Hey, I’m Kate.”

“Hello, I’m Annie.”

Kate is beautiful. While Grady has black hair, Kate has long dark brown hair. But they have the same blue eyes. She is wearing a New York Knights hat, and a black football jersey with Grady’s name and number on the back.

She looks up at the screen, “You came with Decker?”

“Yes. I did.”

“Have you met Jennings?”

I laugh because I know where this conversation may be going.

“Jennings came in for a photo shoot at the office the first time I met him. He grabbed his package while wearing underwear.”

Lucy burst out laughing as if she’s never heard that story before.

“I’m not surprised,” Kate says.

My eyes go back up to Decker on the screen. All the guys at the table are laughing at something he said. He’s still wearing a great big smile on his face, and it warms my heart.

“I think Jennings is a good guy,” Lucy adds.

Kate scoffs, “He and I don’t get along. He may be hot, but he has the personality of a brick. He thinks he’s smarter than me because he attended a better college.”

“Where did he go?” Lucy asks.

“Stanford.”

“Holy crap,” I blurt out. “I had no idea.”

Kate sits back and looks at the screen above us, “So, Annie, what do you do?”

“I’m Decker’s assistant. I used to own a bakery, but a couple of months ago I had to close down. I couldn’t compete with the big franchise cookie shop that opened down the street.

“Surely you’ll open it again one day.”

Kate seems so lovely.

“Soon, I hope. What do you do?”

“Oh,” she flips her hair behind her shoulders, “I still live with my parents. I’m in grad school studying to become a doctor.”

“That’s amazing.”

The screen on the tv moves from the guys talking to the football players on the field. I can hear the pre-game starting, so I turn my eyes to the football field.

“I’m going to get some food,” Kate says, “I’ll catch up with you two later.”

“Sounds good,” Lucy answers.

“She seems nice,” I shrug.

“I like her.”

Lucy and I stay in our seats as we watch the game begin down on the field. After the national anthem, the teams run out onto the field. Standing from my seat, I look around to see if Decker has made it back up here. But I don’t see him.

I sit back down as the game starts. Lucy is already cheering and yelling. Unlike me, she actually knows football, so I laugh to myself while watching her enthusiasm.

“Hey,” Decker’s hand grabs my shoulders, “Sorry it took so long.”

I turn around and see him sitting in the chair behind me. “Hey. That’s okay. You did great, by the way. I couldn’t hear anything, but it looked like you were having fun.”

“It was awesome. I can’t believe they wanted me to do that.”

I smile, “I’m glad you got to experience it. I’m happy for you.”

“You hungry or anything? I’m going to grab some food.”

“Yeah. I’ll come with you.”

Getting up from my seat, I meet Decker in the aisle, and together we walk up to all the food laid out on the tables. There’s so much game food, veggie trays, and fruit. I grab a plate and go straight for the hot dogs, and he does the same.

Decker grabs two cokes from the fridge before we walk back over to the seats. He sits in the back row, and I sit beside him.

“They asked me to come back for the next home game.”

“What?” I exclaimed, “Decker, that is amazing! Are you going to do it?”

He takes a bite and nods his head.

“You should.”

This opportunity is just what Decker needs to get him back into the sport. It may not be to play football, but talking about a sport he loves so much is the next best thing.

Chapter Thirty

Decker

The Knights won. Tonight turned out to be better than I could have ever imagined. I even got to experience it all with Annie there.

Annie and I just walked through the door of my apartment. I asked her to stay with me until Christmas, which is just a few days away. She accepted since we still have things we want to do before then.

“Thanks for tonight. I enjoyed it.”

“I’d consider you a sports girl now.”

She giggles as she walks into the bedroom, and I follow.

“Almost. The game was fun. But it took four-quarters of explaining before I fully understood it.”

“I thought it was cute you didn’t know anything.”

Annie walks over to her bag sitting in the chair by the window and pulls out her night clothes before entering the bathroom to change.

I join her and prep my toothbrush before brushing my teeth.

Standing in the closet, she changes into a black silk pajama set. I can see her changing in the mirror.

“What are our plans for tomorrow?” she looks up at me.

I shrug before spitting in the sink.

“We could go buy decorations and decorate your place. I can bake cookies,

and we can watch a movie. Something you and your mom used to do.”

I finish brushing and rinse my mouth out. Then I meet Annie in the closet as she buttons up her sleep shirt.

“You remembered me saying that?”

“Of course.”

“Let’s do it then.”

She smiles, “Great.”

When I walk back into the bedroom, I tuck myself into bed while waiting for Annie to finish in the bathroom. I’m glad she’s still staying with me because I wasn’t ready for whatever this is to end.

She comes out of the bathroom. Her ponytail bouncing as she walks around the bed. Pulling the covers from her side, she slips in and scoots to the middle.

“Do you have any decorations that were your mom’s?”

I turn off the bedside lamp and lie down facing Annie, “I think I have a small box in the gym closet. I didn’t keep a lot of her things. Only the sentimental stuff.”

“We don’t have to open it if you don’t want to. I was just wondering.”

“It’s okay. It may be something I open on my own first. I don’t know. I haven’t looked at the things in that box since I brought it here.”

She scoots closer to me and snuggles up against my chest. “We can get you some new things.”

“What are you going to bake?” I wrap my arms around her.

“I don’t know.”

“It feels like it’s been a while since you’ve made something.”

She sighs, “It has, but the break has been kinda nice.”

“Breaks are okay. It doesn’t mean you quit.”

She yawns, “I know.”

I rub my hand up and down her back while she’s in my arms, “The day you didn’t bake and were late coming into the office, I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look on your face. It was probably the exact look I had on my face when I woke up, and playing football wasn’t an option for me anymore. Don’t ever give up baking, Annie. I don’t want you to make the same mistake I did. I’m not saying this because I think you ever will. I’m saying this because you....”

I hear a snore.

I look down at Annie. She’s sound asleep against my chest.

Resting my chin on her head, I whisper, “I’m saying this because you mean something to me.”

While she sleeps, I lie there with my eyes wide open. The adrenaline from tonight is still keeping me awake. I don’t want this day to end yet because I don’t know when I’ll feel this type of happiness again.



A sweet smell mixed with the smell of coffee wakes me up. I instantly sit up on the bed and rub my eyes before looking over at the empty spot next to me. Annie must be in the kitchen making something.

I stand from the bed and slip on the sweatpants lying on the floor. The clock

on the nightstand reads nine o'clock. I slept in. But it was needed considering how long it took me to fall asleep.

When I walk into the living room, I see Annie pouring coffee into a mug in the kitchen. She's wearing the same thing she slept in, but her hair is now in a messy bun. There are muffins on the counter still in the pan, as if she had just taken them out.

She hasn't noticed me yet, so I walk into the kitchen, wrap my arm around her waist, pull her into me, and kiss her cheek.

"Morning,"

Her hand surrounds the side of my face, "Good morning."

I let go of her, grabbing another mug from the cabinet. "Smells amazing in here."

She grins, "I made chocolate chip muffins."

"You know," I say, pouring coffee into my mug, "my mom loved chocolate."

"Really?" She sits on the kitchen counter and sips her coffee.

"Yes. She would add chocolate chips to anything. Pancakes, muffins, brownies. She always had chocolate in the house in some form."

Annie giggles, "What was your mother's name?"

I lean against the counter, "I've never told you before."

She shakes her head.

"Her name was Cindy Jones. Jones was her maiden name."

That's something I don't think I ever told anyone. In school, I didn't know anyone else who was raised by one parent. I never wanted anyone to know I had never met my father, so I kept it hidden for all these years. It wasn't until I matured and in college that I finally admitted that I never had a dad.

“Cindy,” she mouths before taking another sip.

“So, I guess we’re going shopping today?”

She picks up a muffin from the pan beside her, “Guess so. Shopping is not my forte.”

“Same.”

She takes a bite and moans.

I walk over and take one from the pan. They are still warm. I take a bite from the top and swallow. It’s so good and reminds me of the ones my mother once made.

“I’m going to shower in a second,” she says.

“Okay. I think I will look for that box in the gym.”

She half smiles, “That’s a great idea.”

Annie hops off the counter and takes her mug and muffin with her into the bedroom. I finish my muffin before walking into the gym on the other side of the apartment.

I walk in, noticing a light layer of dust on the weight bench. I knew it had been a while, but I didn’t realize just how long. Before Annie, coming in here to work out was something I did daily to pass the time.

Opening the closet door, I flip on the light and see the box at the bottom. It’s the only box I have left of her. I pull it away from the wall just a bit before opening it.

The first thing I see is my baby album. Instead of opening it, I set it to the side. I dig into the box, finding a few more albums before my eyes land on a snow globe. I pick it up and shake it. The fake snow is falling on the city of New York. I remember gifting this to my mom the Christmas after I got drafted.

I didn't just give her the snow globe to add to her small collection that Christmas. The globe was my way of telling her that I bought her a house. She spent all those years supporting me and making sure I had everything. The house was my way of repaying her.

It was in the suburbs, so she didn't have to deal with the city's hustle anymore. Or deal with her not-so-nice apartment in the not-so-nice area of the city. The apartment I grew up in. I'll never forget the tears she cried that day.

I set the globe behind me to take it to the living room. It can be the first decoration Annie and I set out. I'm unsure if I want to share the story behind the globe with Annie yet.

Searching through the box for anything else, I come up short. It's just a bunch of things I made as a kid, along with photos. I put the album back on top before closing the box and pushing it back against the wall.

I pick up the globe before getting to my feet. I shake it one more time before playing the music. The song *White Christmas* plays while all the snow falls to the bottom of the globe.

When I return to the living room, I set the snow globe on the coffee table before entering the bedroom. Annie is making the bed with a towel wrapped around her.

"Find anything?"

"A snow globe."

"Awe," she puts the last pillow on the bed, "That's a perfect start to adding more decorations."

I rub my hand across the scruff on my face, "I'm going to shower."

"Okay," she says, "I'll get ready quickly so we can go soon."

"Sounds good."

Walking into the bathroom, I start the shower. A slight anxious feeling fills my chest. I look into the mirror and frown before taking deep breaths to calm myself down. Annie enters the room, dressed. She comes up behind me and wraps her arms around me in a hug. Her head rests against my back as she says, "I'm here if you need me."

I put my hands over hers and close my eyes as a feeling of comfort replaces the anxiousness, "I know."

She knows. She always knows when I start to feel this way.

I'm realizing, slowly, that I need her and that terrifies me.

Chapter Thirty-one

Annie

I hold up two stockings. One is knitted red and green with reindeer. And the other is knitted silver and blue with snowflakes. The options are slim since we are just days away from Christmas, and everyone already has stockings.

“Which one?” I ask.

He looks them over before pointing to the silver one. “That one would match my tree.”

“But you need Christmas colors in your apartment. Be festive, Decker.”

“Do I even need a stocking? It’s just me, and I don’t think Santa’s stopping at my apartment.”

“You need one,” I put the silver and blue back on the shelf and clutch the red and green one to my chest. “Even if it’s just for decoration.”

“I didn’t see one at your apartment.”

“Good point. I’ll get one too.”

I grab the matching red and green one for myself.

Decker and I have been in and out of stores today. So far, we have only the stockings in my hand. I guess you could say we don’t technically own them yet. But we’re getting somewhere. I did get a gift for my parents though.

“Want to get some pizza when we leave here?”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.”

It's close to dinner time, and all we've eaten is the muffins I made this morning.

"I'm ready if you are?" I take one last look around the store.

"Don't have to ask me twice," he laughs, making fun of me.

I nudge him with my elbow. "Look, I hate shopping too."

"And you wonder why I don't have decorations already."

We head up to the register, and I set the two stockings down for the cashier to ring up. She scans them before bagging them. Decker pays her and I take the bag before leaving the store.

We walk down the sidewalk, "Tomorrow is the baking tradition I do with my mom. You want to come with me?"

"I have plans with Jennings and Grady. We always go to The Bar. It's like our Christmas tradition."

"That will be fun. Besides the game, you haven't spent that much time with them."

He puts his hand in mine, "That's because I've been spending all my time with you. And I did see them at the event."

"Right. Why does that seem so long ago but it was just last week?"

"Probably because we haven't worked in over a week and we canceled the trip. We've been making our days long by lounging around eating food that's not good for us. This last week has been relaxing and something I think we both needed. We've slowed down."

We reach a crosswalk, and after we look both ways, we cross the road and continue down the sidewalk.

While Decker is right when he says we've slowed down, I feel our

relationship has progressed faster. We are growing physically and emotionally. He's opened up more, but I know he's still reserved. This morning when I caught him having a moment in the bathroom, he didn't want to talk about anything. And I know he's holding some things in, and it's okay. He will open up to me when he's ready.

We come upon Little Hero's Pizza. Decker opens the door before holding it open for me to enter first. I walk up to the hostess and ask for a table for two when Decker comes behind me. He takes my hand, holding it while we wait.

"Want to hear something funny?" He asks.

Before I can answer, the hostess motions to us that our table is ready. So we follow her to the back of the restaurant to a booth for two.

I sit first, and Decker scoots in next to me.

"Tell me what's funny."

He laughs before clearing his throat, "The night I saw you here with Lucy. Before I looked at the door, I thought you were here with Beau Wilson."

"That explains why you were so friendly that night. You were relieved I wasn't here with another man."

"Maybe I was," he winks. "But also, I knew if I didn't make a move, you'd fall for Beau's tricks."

I laughed, "I would never fall for Beau Wilson's tricks. He reeks of sleezy arrogance."

"That's the truth."

The waitress takes our order, which is what we always get, and brings us two drinks.

He leans into me, "So, does tomorrow mean we are ending our sleepovers?"

"You mean it'll end our streak of spending almost every waking hour

together? It will, but we'll be together on Christmas day, right?"

"Yeah."

His expression is fallen, making me think he's worried about spending Christmas day with my family and me. And I knew it was asking a lot from him to come, but I couldn't let him sit alone in his apartment on Christmas day.

"My family doesn't bite. I promise."

His mouth finally moves upwards, "Such a relief to know."

A man approaches the table and says, "Well, if it isn't Decker Jones."

"Hey," Decker shakes his hand.

It's then that I notice who he is. He was one of the guys at the table with Decker during the game last night.

"Have you heard from Jerry today?"

"No, I haven't," Decker replies.

"I'm probably not the guy to tell you this, but I think they want you to come to work with us broadcasting the game full-time. The people loved having you on the panel last night."

I put my hand on my chest as a rush of excitement washes over me. This is the best thing that could happen for Decker. He has wanted to be involved with the sport again, but he didn't know in what capacity.

"Really?" Decker exclaimed.

"This is great news," I say.

"Oh... Matt," he shifts in my direction, "This is my assistant, Annie."

Matt holds his hand out to me as my heart sinks into my stomach. This

assistant title isn't fun anymore. I want to be something more and after this past week, I thought we were heading in that direction

Trying to hold back the tears forming in my eyes, I shake Matt's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Well, I'll let you guys go. Hopefully, Jerry will call you soon. I can't wait to work with you."

Decker waves to Matt, "Thanks. I'll talk to you soon."

Matt walks back over to his table as Decker turns to me and says, "Wow. This is unbelievable. I'm going to call Jerry."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. I watch as he calls Jerry and I start to think maybe things between us aren't what I thought they were.



I set the pizza box on the counter before slipping out of my coat and hanging it over the back of the barstool. We had half a pizza left because after Matt left our table, I wasn't very hungry. I had this unsettled feeling in my stomach that wouldn't go away. Maybe I'm reading too much into this, but I can't help it.

Decker didn't eat much either because he was on the phone until we left the restaurant. They talked about Decker taking on a full-time position broadcasting the football games. He didn't accept anything yet. I sensed some hesitation in his voice while he was on the phone, but I don't know what would hold him back.

I sit on the couch as Decker takes off his coat and shoes at the door.

"What did he say?" I ask.

He sits on the other side of the sectional, “He offered me the job. Then told me what I would get paid and what the job entitles.”

“That’s great.”

“It’s a lot to think about because it changes everything. It would mean that you wouldn’t be my assistant anymore.”

I swallow because what I’m about to say will be very honest.

“Maybe I’m tired of that title anyway.”

“Annie,” he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, “Why would you say that?”

“I’m not saying it because I don’t want to work with you anymore. I’m saying that because it seems to be the only title you use to introduce me to people, and I don’t want to be that for you anymore. I feel like things between us have developed into something more; that I’m something more to you.”

He lowers his head as he thinks.

“We’ve spent all the last week together and have been having a good time. I’ve basically moved in, sleeping here every night. We’ve had sex. Yet you continue brushing me off as your assistant to everyone.”

“Okay, would you rather me tell everyone we’re fucking.”

“Come on, Decker,” a tear forms and drops from my eye, “that was really mean and not the only thing that is happening here.”

“It was. That’s not what you are to me, Annie. You are more, but I can’t be the man you want me to be right now. I’m broken and hurting. I have issues I need to deal with, so how can I be there for you? I can’t.”

“I’m not asking you to be,” I wipe my face with my hand. “I’m a big girl Decker. I can take care of myself. I just want to be there for you. And I

thought we were....”

I stand from the couch and walk toward the room. “Nevermind.”

Decker comes into the room behind me, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to bed.” I open my bag and take out something to sleep in. “Right now, I don’t have anything more to say to you. And I think we both could end up saying something we don’t mean. So I’m going to sleep to prevent that from happening. I suggest you do the same.”

He stands there with crossed arms, “You’re not leaving?”

“No,” I walk past him to the bathroom.

“Good,” he shouts.

I change into my pajamas and brush my teeth. When I return to the bedroom, Decker’s already in bed with the lamp still on.

I walk around, pull back the covers and get into bed. “Are you not going to brush your teeth?”

“I will in a minute.”

Rolling over, I face the window. Then I feel Decker’s arm over me as I wipe my face. “I’m sorry.”

“I know and I’m sorry too.”

“Please be here for me, Annie, because I want you to be. But it isn’t going to be easy because while you do mean something to me, I hate that I don’t know what that is yet. And I don’t know when I will.”

I close my eyes in an attempt to fall asleep because while my heart hurts just a little bit, his heart hurts worse. I know that I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to be there for him. He needs me and I care too much to not be here.

Chapter Thirty-two

Decker

Tossing and turning on my stomach, I groan. I don't want to wake up yet because I feel like shit from all the sleep I didn't get. My eyes flick open once I remember what happened last night. Annie's not there.

I jump from the bed and walk into the kitchen to find it empty. There's a post-it note on the coffee maker.

Went to my parents.

Be back later.

Annie

I groan again before looking at the clock on the stove. It's ten thirty in the morning.

"Fuck," I mutter.

I missed her and she didn't say goodbye.

When I turn around to leave the kitchen, I see a container with another post-it note. I walk over to read it.

These are for you

Sorry we didn't make them

last night.

The smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies fills the air as I open the container. How early did she wake up? Because I don't remember smelling these this morning. I take one out and pop it in my mouth before closing the lid.

On my way back to my room, I notice the two stockings on the coffee table. I pick one of them up and look around the room. We didn't finish the tradition last night.

I set the stocking back on the table before running my hands down my face. "Shit."

I've got to make this up to her.

The note she left on the coffee maker said she would be back later, so there's still time today that I can make this happen.

When I return to my bedroom, I take my phone off my nightstand. I sit down on the side of the bed and call Jennings.

"What's up?"

"Can we meet at The Bar at noon?" I ask him.

"You want a beer at noon?"

Looking over at the bathroom, I say, "I have plans tonight."

"Since when do you have plans for Christmas Eve?"

"It's Christmas Eve? I'm so lost on what fucking day it is."

"Are you okay? Do I need to come over there?"

"No. Just meet me at The Bar at two now. I have something I need to do. Also, call Grady and fill him in on all this. I'll tell you everything when I get there."

I hang up the phone before he can tell me no, then toss it on the bed. I've got to get Annie a gift for Christmas before I meet the guys at The Bar.

Walking into the bathroom, I turn on the shower. Looking at myself in the mirror before getting in, I notice another post-it note stuck on it. I lean over the counter to read it.

Merry Christmas Eve

I'm sorry

Pulling the note off the mirror, I hold it between my thumb and index finger. Annie doesn't need to apologize. It's my fault. I need to get my shit together before it's too late.



“Why would you say that? That’s messed up, Decker.”

As if I didn’t already feel like shit, Grady knows how to make me feel worse.

I lift my beer and take a sip before setting it back down. “I was just a little angry with myself because Annie asked me what we were, and I couldn’t answer her. I know what I said was wrong. That’s not what she is to me.”

“What is she to you then?” Jennings asks, sitting across from me in our usual booth.

“When I first saw her in my office, I was immediately attracted to her. Then

by the end of the second day of having her as my assistant, I just wanted to get to know her. There was just something about her that intrigued me. And now, she's my comfort. She's always there when I need her, and she doesn't even know it." I sit back and cross my arms, "I don't know what I would do without her."

Grady chuckles, "So, it sounds like you have your answer."

"It's not that easy. What if I can't be the person she needs or expects me to be for her?"

Jennings clears his throat, "What do you mean?"

"Love, Jennings. She's going to want me to love her." I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table, "And that's something I don't think I can give."

"Why because you lost someone?"

"Maybe. I don't know. You can't love someone when your heart is still broken."

Grady leans forward, "You take a chance because she could easily be the one to help you repair it."

"Yeah, what he said," Jennings agrees, "Because you know if you don't take that chance and she leaves, then it's going to hurt worse."

My chest begins to feel anxious. The thought of not having Annie crosses my mind and leaves an unsettling feeling in my stomach.

"Do you want Annie to have a broken heart because you wouldn't try to love her? Then she runs off and finds someone else. How would that make you feel?" Jennings says.

I don't even want to consider what he is talking about.

"Easy for you to say because you don't even take a chance having feelings for any woman."

Jennings points down at the table, “My parents were the most unhappy couple on this earth. I watched my dad make my mom feel like shit. Marriage isn’t even on my radar because of him. So that’s my problem. But you, Decker, I’ve seen you come back to life these last few weeks. And I know you see it too. Annie is the only reason behind that.”

We all sit there and stare at each other in silence.

“I need your help.”

Grady sighs, “We just helped you.”

“Not with Annie,” I pause. “Okay, it’s about Annie, but it has nothing to do with feelings. I need decorations for my apartment. I want the place to feel like Christmas.”

Jennings shakes his head, “You want decorations the day before Christmas? Where the fuck are we going to find that kind of stuff.”

I throw my hands out, “Hell, if I know. Annie and I went around yesterday and couldn’t find anything.”

“What’s that department store on the corner of 34th street with that big nutcracker out front?” Grady asks.

“Gimbels.”

“Yeah. That’s it. Lucy and I were in there yesterday buying gifts. They had a ton of Christmas decorations.”

“Well...” I rub my temple, then take one last large sip of my beer. I set it down, “Looks like we’re going shopping.”

Jennings groans, “You’ll owe me for this.”



Annie

The timer goes off on the stove. I put on a mitt before opening it and pulling out a small batch of raspberry thumbprint cookies. Setting them down on the counter next to the crinkle cookies, I shut the oven door and remove my mitt.

My mother and I have been baking for hours now. And in that time, I checked my phone approximately fifty-seven times. I still haven't heard anything from Decker.

Maybe my notes weren't enough. I don't know.

He was sleeping like a baby when I left this morning. I wanted to talk to him before I came here today, but I didn't want to wake him.

I woke up early enough to make a small batch of cookies for him because I felt terrible that we didn't finish our plans last night. I shouldn't have opened my mouth.

"What's next dear?" My mother asked.

"Umm... We have to prep the cinnamon rolls for breakfast, and that should be it."

My mother and I outdid ourselves this year. We made almost every Christmas goodies you can think of in front of us. She's already boxed a few things up and taken them to the neighbors. I have plans to bring a little something to Decker. Along with our batch of cinnamon rolls for breakfast.

The dough has been rising in a bowl in the warm kitchen for a few hours and should be ready now.

“I’m glad you two decided to stay here for Christmas.” She empties the dough out on a floured counter.

“It’s been nice staying home. Even though I would’ve gotten a nice tan.”

My parents know I’ve been spending time with Decker, but I haven’t mentioned that I’ve been staying at his place this week.

“Decker is coming tomorrow, isn’t he?” She rolls out the dough.

I stand next to her and watch, “Yes, he is. I hope that’s okay.”

“Oh, dear. Of course, it’s okay.”

I hand her a softened stick of butter. And then, I watch her as she evenly spreads it over the dough. She adds the brown sugar on top of the butter before sprinkling cinnamon over it. We then work together to roll the dough and cut it.

I pick up the rolls and place them nicely into glass pans.

Once we have them all finished and ready with cling wrap over the top, I help my mom package up the rest of the cookies and clean the kitchen.

There’s still daylight left when it comes time for me to go. I wanted to stop for one thing before going to Decker’s apartment. I haven’t gotten him a Christmas gift yet. And after thinking all day about what to buy a man who has everything, I think I figured something out.

I walk into the living room, where my parents watch television and are cuddled on the couch together.

“I’m going.”

“Already?” My dad asks.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I know. I was teasing.”

“Well,” Mom stands, “be careful driving back to the city.”

“I will.” I hug her.

“We can’t wait to meet Decker tomorrow,” Dad adds.

“Oh, boy,” I roll my eyes, “No embarrassing me, okay?”

“Annie, dear. We won’t do that.”

They definitely will say something to embarrass me at some point tomorrow.

I head toward the front door. “Bye. Love you.”

“We love you too, dear.”

I walk out the front door and to my car. I place my things, treats, and rolls in the passenger seat. When I get in, I check my phone again before setting it in the cupholder. There is still nothing from Decker.

Chapter Thirty-three

Decker

I grab the stocking off the table and hang them on the hooks on the wall. Then I step back and look at everything in the living room. It looks like the department store threw up in my house, but it feels like Christmas.

There's a lighted garland hung across the shelf under the television; wreaths hanging over the back of the barstools tied with red ribbon; a train around the bottom of the tree, going around in circles. I also replaced the black and silver ornaments with red and green bulbs.

There are a few Santa figures placed in different areas. I lit a Christmas candle on the coffee table. Everything here is making this place feel like a home for Christmas.

I even added wood tags to the stockings with our names on them.

I hate that Annie and I didn't get to do this together, but there's always next year. Right now, I want to make things right with her.

A knock comes at the front door, and I smile. I stroll over quickly, and when I open the door, there's Annie.

"Hey," she smiles. Her hands are full of containers and a glass pan, and she has a large bag over her shoulder.

"Hey. Let me help you."

I take the containers in her hand, and we walk into the apartment together.

"Wow, Decker. It looks amazing in here." She set the stuff down on the island.

“I might’ve done some shopping today.”

She walks into the living room, “It feels like Christmas.”

Standing back, I watch her as she takes in the room. She’s baked all day but still looks like perfection. Her blonde hair is pinned back with a black velvet headband, and she’s wearing a cream sweater with jeans.

She turns back around and looks at me standing in the kitchen. Walking toward me, she says, “I brought some things from today.”

She stops and stands by me as she opens a container, “These are some of the things my mom and I made; cookies, candies, and such. And the glass pan is cinnamon rolls. They will rise overnight, and I’ll bake them in the morning.”

I stare at her as I try to process what I want to say.

She catches on and looks at me, “Are you okay?”

Reaching, I cup her face and stare into her blue eyes. “I’m sorry again. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

She smiles, “Decker, I know. Thank you, but that was yesterday. Today’s a new day, and we can put that behind us. I want to be here for you.”

“And I want that too.” I kiss her and then put my forehead to hers, “I want to take a chance on us, but know that my heart is sensitive. My mind tells itself things it shouldn’t, and I’m not perfect.”

Her hand surrounds my face, “I’m not asking for perfection. All I’m asking for is this Decker. Because even though he’s hurting and damaged,” she places her other hand on my chest, “he still deserves to be loved and cared for; to feel like he’s somebody special. It’ll be worth it if I have to spend the rest of my days making you feel that way.”

I close my eyes to stop the tears from forming. I would be stupid if I didn’t allow myself to make this work with Annie. She’s putting her happiness on the line for mine. But yet, joy is all we’ve been feeling when we’re together. Have I just been too blind to see all this?

She kisses me, and I wrap my arms around her and pull her into me. I want to be as close as possible to her right now.

I whisper in her ear, "I got you something."

Lifting her head back, she says, "I got you something."

She lets go of my hold and pulls a wrapped box out of her bag. Then she walks into the living room and sits on the couch, "Come on. I don't want to wait until tomorrow."

I laugh before walking in there, taking the seat next to her.

"Here," She hands it to me.

I shake the box before giving her a big grin.

Concerned, she says, "Oh, don't shake it. I don't know how good it's wrapped inside there."

I unwrap the paper and toss it to the floor. I can't remember the last time I opened a gift for Christmas. The last one was probably from my mom.

A square white box is before me, and I'm nervous about what's inside. I lift the lid, and tissue paper is the first thing I see. I push it back with my hands and see glass ornaments. They are all different, a pizza slice, ice skates, a sled, a football, a hot chocolate mug, and a Christmas tree.

"These are our traditions. Now we can have them on the tree and never forget them."

"Annie," I choke, "I love them, but I will never forget them anyway."

"I won't either. It has been the best Christmas."

I take a deep breath to calm my heart, "Well, now I don't even want to give you my gift. This is the best gift ever."

I don't think anything will ever top this moment, either.

"Oh, it can't be that bad." She giggles.

My gift doesn't have any special meaning to it.

I set the ornaments on the coffee table before standing from the couch and grabbing her wrapped present under the tree.

Handing it over, I sit on the coffee table across from her. "Here."

She's giddy with excitement as she unwraps the paper, "It's a SMEG hand mixer."

"See, I told you my gift isn't as good."

"What?!" She holds it up, "I love it!"

"I knew you wanted one, but now I don't even know how much you'll even get to use it because I don't know if I'll ever let you leave my apartment." I grab the box, "I'll take it back."

She giggles before snatching it from my hands, "I love it. You're not taking it back. You got it for me. Not all gifts have to be some deep meaning behind them. They can be useful too."

I stand from the coffee table, "Can we go to bed now? It's been a long day, and I want to properly fuck you into tomorrow."

"Decker Jones," she exclaims.

"It's been days," I whine.

"It has been, hasn't it?" She laughs.

I hold my hand out, "Now let's go. And when I'm finished with you. We can eat all those damn treats you brought me."

She takes my hand, "Now we're talking."



Opening my eyes, Annie is the first thing I see. She's lying beside me with the brightest smile as she stares at me. I reach out, grab her and pull her into me.

She rests her head against my chest, "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Annie."

I just want to stay here all day, but I know Annie and I have plans with her family. It's stressing me out thinking about spending the day with her family, but I know Annie wouldn't want me to be alone today.

Annie lifts her head, kissing me on my chin before leaving my arms and slipping out of bed. She's naked, and I can't complain about the view as I rest my head on my pillow.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

She picks up my shirt off the floor and slips it over her head, "I'm going to put Christmas breakfast in the oven."

When she's out of the room, I slip out of bed to find myself stiff. I look towards the doorway before walking into the bathroom. Hopefully, she won't be in the kitchen long because I need her right now.

I walk over to the sink, turning it on before splashing water on my face to wake me up. Annie comes into the bathroom and starts running the shower. After drying my face off, I see her stripping out of my shirt in the mirror.

"Are we showering together?" I ask.

She comes over to me, “Yeah.”

Wrapping my arms around her, I pick her up and set her on the bathroom counter. My lips go right to her neck, making her giggle.

Brushing my lips over her ear, I whisper, “I want you bare, Annie. I want to feel all of you. Please tell me I can have you that way.”

Her hands surround my face as she moves my head so our eyes connect. “You can have me that way. We don’t have anything to worry about.”

I kiss her lips before trailing my mouth down her neck to her chest. I take her breast in my hand and squeeze it before biting her nipple. Her head falls back against the mirror as she relaxes to my touch.

She spreads her legs. And I already know she’s ready for me.

I drop my hand from her breast and brush my thumb over her center. She moans as I tease her just a little.

I pull my hand away, and she opens her eyes before saying, “No.”

“Give me a second.”

Lowering myself to the ground, I spread her legs further before bringing her closer to the edge of the counter.

I feasted on her twice last night, but I’ll never get enough of how sweet she tastes.

Working my thumb back over her clit, I rub her in a circular motion, using just the right amount of pressure on her. Her head falls back again as I find an easy rhythm. I don’t want her to come just yet, but I want her close before entering the shower.

I lean forward, remove my thumb, and replace it my tongue instead. She tastes like heaven as I my mouth nips, and licks her already sensitive clit, building her orgasm.

Annie's hands wrap around my head as her body shakes, and her thighs squeeze together. She's there, so I remove my mouth and watch her face fall.

"Keep going," she mouths.

I grin, "No, baby."

She pouts her lip as I stand on my feet. I lean forward and kiss her before lifting her from the counter. She wraps her legs around me as I carry her to the shower door.

We get into the steaming shower, and I ease her legs down so she's standing.

I push Annie up against the wall, holding her hands above her head with one hand. Using my other hand, I circle inside her entrance with two fingers before pulling them out and slowly guide my dick inside her. I watch her mouth open and eyes close as her head falls against the shower wall.

My head goes to the crook of her neck, and I kiss her before moving my mouth to hers while I thrust myself in and out of her.

"Tell me no one else has had you like this," I whisper against her lips.

She moans before muttering, "Only you."

I continue slowly fucking her against the wall when I feel her pussy tighten around me. Her eyes begin to close and just like I wanted, she's almost there.

"Look at me." I say, "I want you to see what you do to me. I want you to look in my eyes as you fall over the edge and know that no one else will ever make you come like this."

She lifts her head forward, and those beautiful blue eyes lock on to mine. Her breathing becomes rapid as she opens her mouth. Watching her take all of me is the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen.

I pick up my pace, pumping into her with everything I have. Still holding her

hands above her head, I feel her clench around my dick so hard as she crashes, that I can't control my orgasm anymore.

I let go of her hands to grip her hips as my control snaps and I come hard and fast inside her.

“Fuck, Annie,” I kiss her cheek.

“Tell me you're stressed without telling me.” she grins as she tries to catch her breath.

“Not that this is the best time to bring it up but it's your parents.”

“And I told you, you'll be just fine.”

I pull out of her and then rinse under the water, and she moves to the second shower head to do the same. I watch her remove the sprayer from the wall and rinse me from between her legs.

There is no going back now that I've had her that way and I won't be able to think of anything else for at least the rest of the day. This is going to make dinner with her family very interesting.

We finish cleaning up before I turn the shower off for us to get out. I grab Annie a towel first and toss it to her.

She dries off before stepping out of the shower before me. Sniffing, she then says, “Oh, gosh. The Cinnamon rolls.” Then she takes off out of the bathroom.

She put those in before we showered, and we may have taken longer than we thought.

I wrap my towel around my waist before stepping out of the shower and closing the glass door behind me just as Annie returns.

“Whew, saved them.”

“Good, because I'm hungry.”

Standing in front of the mirror, she brushes out her hair, “My parents are making us dinner.”

“I know but I think snow is coming, so we probably shouldn’t stay too late.”

“I know,” she comes up and kisses me, “I’ll be looking forward to getting snowed in again, even if it’s for a few hours.”

“Snowed in? Annie baby, we don’t have to be at work for another week. We can pretend to be snowed in all week.”

“Can we talk about the offer?” She frowns.

“We aren’t talking about it now.” I place a piece of wet hair behind her ear, “We’re going back to the office, and I can figure out the offer later.”

Leaving Annie at the office without me is out of the question. I can’t do it. If I can do both jobs, then that’s what I plan to do.

“What we can talk about is how I’m so happy I no longer have to jerk off to thoughts of you in the shower anymore.” I joke.

She glares at me through the mirror, “No, you didn’t.”

“Oh, yes, I did. Multiple times.” I wink.

Walking into the closet, I search my clothes for something to wear. I hear the blow dryer start, so I grab two of my nicer shirts. I walk out of the closet and hold them up from Annie to choose.

“Neither.” Her hair blows across her face, “That’s too dressy. You should wear something comfy.”

“Annie,” I shout, “I’m not wearing goddamn sweatpants to your parents.”

She laughs before saying, “Wear the shirt on the left.”

I hold up the shirt on my left, and she nods before returning to the mirror to dry her hair. When I return to the closet, I drop my towel and get dressed, putting on a navy sweater over the shirt she picked and jeans. Then I look into the full-length mirror.

She's right; I do look dressy.

Annie is finishing her hair and makeup when I walk out. I approach her mirror and run my fingers through my hair to fix it.

She glances over at me, "That looks good."

"Good," I recheck myself, "Because I'm not changing. I'm too lazy to find anything else."

Leaving the bathroom so she can finish, I walk into the living room, and the smell of cinnamon rolls hits my nose. "Mmmm..." I moan.

I turn on the tv, playing *A Christmas Story*, before walking into the kitchen. Taking a roll from the pan, I place the gooey deliciousness on a plate and pour myself a mug of coffee. Standing at the counter, I eat it while taking in all of the Christmas stuff around the living room.

This all feels so right. It's crazy that I thought being on a beach in Mexico would've been better than this. I never want to be anywhere but right here on Christmas day ever again.

Annie enters the kitchen, wearing a loose white sweater gently tucked into the front of her jeans. She passes me to grab a mug and breakfast for herself. She sets her plate and coffee next to mine on the counter. Then takes a bite.

"I'm going to demand you make me these more often."

"And bagels?" she asks.

"Yes," I wrap my arm around her, kissing her cheek, "I'll never get enough of anything you make me."

Chapter Thirty-four

Annie

We pull up outside my parents. Decker parks behind my dad's truck and takes a deep breath. He's said no more than five words on the way here. All five words were cuss words, and while he says it was the traffic, I think it was just him talking to himself. He's nervous, and I understand.

I reach over and grab his hand, squeezing it. "There's nothing to worry about."

"I just," he huffs, "I want them to like me but also..."

"You're worried because it's family," I interrupt.

He nods.

"Decker, I know this is going to be hard for you. But I also know you are strong."

He squeezes my hand before releasing it to open his door. I get out of the car too and open the back door to grab the present I brought for my parents. When I look up, Decker holds two gifts in his hand.

"What the hell are those?" I ask.

He points to the perfectly wrapped gifts, "Presents."

We walk to the door together, "You got my family presents."

My mother opens the front door before I can even ask what's in those perfectly wrapped boxes in his hands.

"Why, hello. Welcome to our home." The door flies open.

“Decker, this is my mom, Camille. Mom, this is Decker.” I nod with my hands full.

Decker says, “Nice to meet you, Camille.”

She gives him a big grin, “Well, aren’t you handsome.”

“Mom,” I whine.

She carries the gift from his hands into the house, and we follow her.

Decker leans in and whispers, “I already think I won your mom over.”

I shake my head, “With your looks.”

We walk into the living room, and my parents already have a fire started in the fireplace, Christmas music playing, and snacks galore all along the coffee table. The house looks like my mom woke up before sunrise and cleaned every inch. I know this because the house did not look like this last night. She places Decker’s gift under the tree before leaving for the kitchen.

My dad walks in from his study and holds his hand out, “Hello. I’m Zeke.”

“I’m Decker,” He shakes hands with my dad.

I place the presents under the tree in the corner of the room and watch them talking out of the corner of my eye.

“Wow, I can’t believe we have a legend in the house.”

Decker laughed, “I’m no legend, but thank you.”

“Have a seat,” my dad points to the couch, “Camille set out all kinds of food. Help yourself to anything you want. Annie’s brother Jake is somewhere around here. I’m going to go help Camille in the kitchen.”

“Thank you,” Decker replies.

“See. Nothing to worry about.”

“You should’ve given me the rundown on what your parents do before we arrived. I don’t know why I didn’t think to ask.”

We sit on the couch, “Oh, right. My mom is a labor and delivery nurse for a hospital in the city. And my dad is a retired algebra teacher. He spends most of his days here reading. And you know Jake. Delivery boy but also still lives here.”

“Nice.”

“JAKE,” I hear my mom yell up the stairs from the kitchen.

“Jake plays a lot of video games,” I mumble. “And he’s likely going to invite you to his disgusting room to play with him.”

“Thanks for the heads up,”

I place my hand on Decker’s leg, “How are you doing so far?”

“I don’t have anything to worry about, as you said. This house feels homey, and I feel comfortable so far.”

“That’s good,” I smile, “I grew up in this house.”

“So, there’s still a room here with your things in it from high school?” he asks.

“Maybe,” I wink.

“Is it all pink, frilly, and has boy band posters on the wall?”

I fake laugh, “You wish. I think you’d be surprised what’s still sitting in it.”

My dad returns to the room and sits in his chair by the fireplace. He turns the television to the football game before asking, “So, Decker. Tell me about yourself?”

“Umm,” he straightens in his seat, “Well....”

“Annie, honey. You want to help me in the kitchen?” My mother appears.

Decker looks at me and nods, letting me know it’s okay. I stand from the couch and follow my mom into the kitchen.

“Where do you want me to start?” I ask.

“Where you want to, dear.”

I grab a potato masher from the utensils drawer and help by mashing the potatoes as my mother returns to basting the ham. I’m trying to get a good view into the living room to listen to what they are talking about, but all I can hear is my mom’s Christmas music playing.

“I think it was nice that you invited him here today.”

“Yeah,” I look into the living room, “but there’s something I should probably tell you.”

“What is it?”

I exhale before scrunching up my nose, “Decker and I are kind of seeing each other. I mean, we are, but it’s new still.”

My mother’s eyes widen before whispering, “You’re sleeping with your boss.”

I smack my face, “Mom.”

“What?” she puts the ham back into the oven, “Your Dad thought this is what was going on when you said you were going on that trip with him.” She peeks into the living room and then looks back at me, “He seems like a lovely young man.”

“He is,” I smile, “But like I said, this is new. So don’t go embarrassing me.”

“I won’t, dear.”

I finish the potatoes and help my mom throw the rolls into the oven. When I return to the living room, I notice Decker and my dad are gone. I clench my teeth as I leave the room and walk around the house looking for them, starting in my dad's study.

They aren't there.

I walk to the front door and hear lots of talking upstairs. So I make my way up, and when I make a right, I see all three of them in Jake's room. Decker and Jake are playing a video game, and my dad is just watching.

I peek my head through the doorway. Decker gives me a grin as his eyes are on the tv screen. They are playing a football game, and my dad cheers them on.

"Dinner is almost ready."

"Okay, we will be down soon." My dad answers.

When I return to the kitchen, I help my mother set the table.

"Oh, Annie," she exclaims. "When I was cleaning the house this morning, I found a small box of things from the bakery. I don't know how it got here, but I left it for you to take home."

"Thanks. It's just the box of important stuff I didn't want to leave at my apartment, but I'll take it."

I know what box she's talking about, and I feel like now may be a good time to go through it again. It holds some of my favorite memories from the bakery. It may be something Decker would want to look through with me. The box was left here, so I wouldn't go through it by myself and cry anymore about having to shut the place down.

The men come down the stairs and into the kitchen. Jake looks pissed, while Decker has a smile on his face. My guess would be Jake lost the game.

"Just in time." My mother announces.

The guys sit at the table, discussing their game as I help Mom put the food out. Then I take my seat by Decker. He glances over at me and winks before placing his hand on my thigh under the table.

My father says grace before we all make plates and begin eating.

“I think you did a damn good job announcing that game the other night.” My dad says.

“Thanks,” Decker almost blushes.

“They asked him to do it again,” I add.

“That’s great. They could use a man like you at the table every week. You’re someone who knows what they are talking about.”

“Thank you again. I had a great time up there.”

“So, do you two have any more plans for today?” My mother asks.

“No,” Decker answers before looking at me, “I just have plans to spend the rest of the day with Annie.”

I blush before changing the subject, “So, Jake. How did the game go upstairs?”

Giving me a glare, he says, “We’re having a rematch.”

“So I take it you lost?” I say before taking a bite.

He rolls his eyes before my dad says, “He got creamed.”

Decker bursts out laughing.

We all continue eating, making only small talk. When we are through, the men return upstairs for another game as I help Mom clean the kitchen.

“We can’t stay much longer, Mom. Another snowstorm is coming.”

“I know. The only thing left is gifts.”

My mother loads the leftovers into containers while I wash the dishes and then clean the tables and counters.

Just as we finish, the men come right back down the stairs. Jake is looking even more pissed than before, which makes me giggle.

He spends all that time in his room perfecting his gaming skills, only to get beaten by a man who plays real football and doesn't touch video games.

“We're opening presents, everyone,” My mom announces.

Every year my mother plays Santa and passes everyone their gifts.

We all take seats on the couch as she starts reading tags and hands out gifts.

“This one for you, Decker,” she passes him a big red and white striped gift.

I smile when he takes the gift. When you come to my parents, no one leaves without a gift. My parents have always been very generous people.

He nudges me before whispering, “They didn't have to.”

“I know. They wanted to.”

Decker sets the gift on his lap and waits for everyone to get theirs so we can all open them together.

Once she passed out all the presents, we open the gifts all at once. I opened new baking supplies, Jake got new video games, and Decker got office supplies. My parents like to give useful gifts based on a person's profession, which I love but I know not everyone does. Decker doesn't make any indication that he doesn't like what my parents got him and I know he appreciates the gesture either way.

Decker stands, “My turn. Camille, you can sit.”

I'm just as eager as my parents and Jake for this moment because I have no idea what's inside these boxes.

He hands them their gifts and says, "Go ahead."

Jakes cheers as he opens his box and holds up a signed jersey of Deckers and some football cards. And then he thanks Decker.

My mother gasps as she opens her box, "A trip to Cancun.... Decker."

My eyes widen at Decker. He gifted them the trip we canceled.

He grins and shrugs before saying, "Someone once told me that gifts can be useful. And I thought since Annie and I didn't go. The two of you could use this trip more than us."

Talk about impressing my parents. They are going to treat Decker like he hung the moon. My dad's speechless as he looks over all the papers Decker had in their box.

Chapter Thirty-five

Decker

Annie's parents are amazing. Their home is just what I imagined it to be. The dinner was one of the best home-cooked meals I've had in years. And this Christmas is one for the books.

I'm more calm than I thought I'd be today. There haven't been any anxious feelings. Instead, I feel a sense of peace. I feel like I'm gaining a family I once thought I'd never have. And all these feelings make me want to spend all the time in the world with Annie.

I stand from the couch as her parents continue looking over the trip I gifted them. I hold out my hand to Annie, "Come on."

"Where are we going?" she asks, surprised.

"I want to see your room."

She rolls her eyes before taking my hand and standing from the couch. "Okay."

We hold hands as we walk up the stairs. Annie guides me to a door just down the hall from Jake's room. She turns the handle and opens the door to a pale-yellow room with a twin-size metal bed and a vanity on one wall.

"See, my room is kinda boring."

My eyes go around the room. There are no posters of boy bands, just photos of cakes that I assume she made. On the side of the vanity are pictures of her pinned into the wall. She is wearing an apron and holding up different desserts and awards.

"I used to compete in baking competitions."

“And it looks like you won them all.”

She laughs, “No, I lost a few, but those just made me want to become better.”

“How long have you been baking?”

She sits on the bed, “Since I was seven, maybe. Baking with my mom at Christmas made me realize my passion and love for it.”

I walk over to her on the bed. I lift her chin with my finger and kiss her. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Your family has stolen me from you all day.”

She giggles before I kiss her again.

“You want to get out of here before it snows too heavily.”

“Yeah,” She stands from the bed. “Did you have a good time?”

“I did.”

She takes my hand, and we walk out of her room and back down the stairs. When we reach the living room, her parents have already cleaned up the mess from opening presents. And Jake must have already resorted to his bedroom.

“We’re going to head out,” Annie announces.

“Yes, dear. The two of you better be careful on your way back. It’s already started snowing.”

Annie starts gathering our things before handing me a load to take to the car. When I walk out the front door, the snow falls slowly, but I know it will pick up soon. I load the car before walking back inside.

“Don’t forget that box, Annie,” Camille says.

“What box?” I ask.

Annie slips her coat on, “It’s the one by the front door. It’s just some things from the bakery. I’ll take it to my apartment later.”

I nod before slipping on my coat.

Annie gives hugs to both her parents.

“Thank you, guys,” I say when we reach the front door.

“It was our pleasure,” Zeke says.

I lift the small box from beside the front door, and we walk out together. Annie gets into the car as I put the box in the back. Then I open the driver-side door. I wave goodbye to her parents before getting in.

“Whew,” she exhales.

“That was great,” I kiss her cheek, “Now let’s go home.”

I back out of the driveway, and we make our way back to the city.

Reaching over, I take Annie’s hand, bring it to my lips and kiss it before resting it on my lap. “What do you want to do when we get to the apartment?”

“I don’t know. What’s something you did with your mom on Christmas?”

I think back to the last Christmases I had with my mom. Since it was only her and I, we would end Christmas Day by taking down her decorations. But since I just put up all the decorations I bought for Annie, I wouldn’t say I want to do that.

“We didn’t have anything special we did. How about you and I make one last tradition?”

She smiles as she looks at me, “What do you have in mind?”

My mind tries to devise the most New York thing to do for Christmas that I've never done before. I feel like Annie and I have done almost everything there is. Then it hits me.

“Let's see the Rockefeller Christmas tree, order take-out, and watch one last Christmas movie.”

She squeezes my hand, “I like that idea.”

We drive a little further through the suburbs when the snow gets heavier. We stayed later at her parents' than we should've, but I don't regret it.

“It looks like we didn't beat the snow.”

I flip my windshield wipers up, “I know. You want to look at the radar for me.”

She pulls out her phone. After a few seconds, she says, “It may get heavier for a bit, but it's going to stop soon.”

“We should pull over up here. We can wait out the snow.”

“Okay,” she agrees.

Looking ahead, I see an old, abandoned gas station perfect for us to park for now. I pull off the road and park up next to the building. Then I turn off the car.

“We shouldn't be here long. It'll be dark when we get to the city, which is the best time for us to see the tree anyway.”

She looks over at me and smiles.

“Want to get in the backseat while we wait?”

“We can keep each other warm.”

I clap my hands together and pretend like I'm cold. She giggles before

opening the door and hoping in the back. So I do the same.

When I close the door, Annie snuggles up, and I wrap my arm around her. As her head lays against my chest, she says, “I hope I was able to make this Christmas special for you.”

“You did, Annie. But the day isn’t over,” I kiss the top of her head.

She’s made this more than special; it is the best Christmas ever.

Annie sits up, throwing her leg over me. She sits down on my lap, facing me. Our eyes meet as her hands come up at the side of my face. She then mutters, “I have a great way to pass the time.”

“You want to, here.” I point down.

She nods as she drops her hands to slip out of her coat. Then she lifts the hem of her sweater before pulling it off over her head.

“I can’t say I’ve ever done this before.”

She leans forward, whispering, “Me neither.”

I grab her head and pull her towards me as our mouths crash together. She tugs on my sweater, and I take my coat off, my mouth briefly leaving hers. Then I pull my shirt over my head.

Annie slides into the seat beside to take off her jeans; before I know it, she’s naked. My dick is throbbing even though we’ve had more sex in the last 24 hours than I’ve had in two years. With her, there will never be enough.

I quickly undo my jeans and tug them down to my knees. Annie smiles before resuming her previous position on my lap.

She wraps her hands around my head as our mouths come together again. I reach down and cup her entrance before sliding in two fingers. She is so wet for me already; we’re just getting started.

Stroking my cock with my hand, I then line it up with her entrance. She

pauses our mouths as I slowly slide into her. Then she pushes herself down on me, taking my dick right to the base, fitting perfectly inside her.

Her head falls back as she moans.

“That’s right, baby,” I murmur.

Annie’s hands grip the back of my neck as she finds her rhythm. I hold her hips to help guide her; cheeks already getting flushed as she breathes heavily. I can already feel her tightening around me.

“Oh, Decker,” she mouths.

“Let go, Annie. I want to see you.”

She quickens her pace, tightening her grip on me as she slams down harder on my dick.

She shouts, “Oh God!”

And I watch her head fall back, eyes closed, and mouth open as she finishes riding out her orgasm.

Now that she’s taken care of, it’s my turn but I’m not ready just yet.

“Get on all fours baby,” I say as I scoot over to the door.

Getting off my lap, she takes up the rest of the backseat, getting on her hands and knees. I lift from the seat and slide my dick in her from behind. I grip her waist with one hand while reaching around, rubbing her clit with the other.

This backseat is small as fuck, but we are making it work.

She moans as I thrust into her and stroke her at the same time. This position feels better than I dreamed. I’m trying to savor this, but I don’t think I can hold on more than a few seconds.

I increase my speed on her clit, and she screams out my name as I feel her, once again, tighten around me. I ease up on my thrusts knowing she is spent,

and I hold her still as I pump once more before coming inside her.

Annie rolls over, my dick leaving her as she lays on the seat. Putting her hand to her chest, she smiles.

“We’re going to have to do this again,” I smirk before sitting.

She nods, “Yeah. This is needs to happen again.”

Chapter Thirty-six

Annie

Turns out I'm a really bad weather girl. The snow never stopped, and after an hour, Decker and I decided to drive slowly to make it back into the city. When we arrived, it was too late, and there was too much snow on the ground to make it over to the Rockefeller tree. So, we decided to add that to next year's traditions instead.

We just got to the apartment. Decker drops the box my mom gave me on the floor by the tv, and I leave the gifts on the kitchen counter.

It's been a long day, and I think we are just ready for sweats, takeout, and our last Christmas movie for this season.

I fall onto the couch and sigh.

"What movies are we thinking of?" He takes his coat off.

"What's your favorite?"

"Umm..." he sits beside me, "Die Hard."

"That's a Christmas movie?"

"Of course, it is."

"I was hoping you'd say The Holiday or Love Actually."

"You can pick," he stands, "I'm going to change."

I stand from the couch too and follow him into the bedroom. Walking over to my bag, I grab a comfy pair of pajama pants and an old shirt.

Decker turns to me after he grabs something from his dresser, “You know, there’s nothing in the rest of this dresser. You can put your stuff in here.”

“Thanks. But don’t you think that’s a big step,”

“It is,” he replies and disappears into the bathroom. “But I think I’m ready for that.”

I bite my lip as I look around the room, holding my clothes in my hand. Leaving things here would be something huge for our relationship, but I’m ready if he is.

Wandering into the bathroom, I meet him in the closet. “Okay.”

He looks up as he slips on his pants, “Really?”

“Yeah. I guess it won’t hurt to leave some things here.”

“Exactly.” He puts his shirt on, “I think it’ll be good for us.”

He kisses my forehead before returning to the living room.

I change clothes quickly before standing in front of the mirror to put my hair up. I hear a knock at the front door and Decker answering it.

When I walk back into the living room, Decker has the coffee table all set up with our food and drinks. The movie *The Holiday* is on tv and ready to play. He’s sitting on the couch, and his eye flicks up to me.

“I’ve never seen that shirt before.”

I look down at my old yellow bakery shirt with the Sweetcakes logo across the front. My eyes return to him, “This one is a first edition. Made this when I first opened the bakery.”

“I like it.” he grins.

When I take the seat next to him, he starts the movie.

“What’s in the box from the bakery your mom sent with us?”

“Oh, it’s just some old photos and awards. It’s full of things that hurt too much to look at that so I left it at my parent’s so I wouldn’t open it. The heartache was too fresh in the beginning.”

“Would it be fine with you if we opened it now?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Opening it now with him is good since he knows so little about the bakery besides what I told him. And I feel like I’m finally okay with the fact I had to close it.

He gets up from the couch and picks up the box off the floor. Carrying it over to the couch, he sits in his spot and places the box on his lap.

“You ready?” He asks.

“Yes,” I nod, “I’m ready.”

He opens the top and pulls out a photo. It’s from the ribbon cutting ceremony. In the photo I’m wearing the shirt that I have on now.

“How cool.”

“Yeah. That was a good day.”

There are people all around me, along with my parents.

I point out, “Some of those people were there on the last day too.”

He runs his finger over the photo before setting it beside him.

Next, he pulls out a plaque, “It says you got first place.”

I laugh, “No. It says I won the best cupcakes in the city.”

“Damn, I haven’t even tried one of your cupcakes to agree to this

award.” He gives me a teasing glance.

“Oh, they are good.”

“I wouldn’t know,” He jokes.

He set that next to him before pulling out another plaque, “Annie, you don’t have to brag about how good your stuff is anymore. These awards prove it. Not that I didn’t already know. It’s a damn shame this place doesn’t exist.”

“It does. There’s just no storefront for it anymore. I make it all for you.”

Decker pulls out a photo, “Who are these people?”

Taking the photo from his hand, I look at myself, surrounded by many of the regulars.

“That’s me. With some of my favorite customers on the last day.” I point to a few, “Walter, Catherine, Claire, Penny, and Bob. Most of them came for cookies.”

He smiles before setting it down to see what else is in the box. Pulling out a few more awards, he lands at the bottom of the box. He then picks up the last photo from the box.

“Annie,” he mutters.

I look over at a photo of me with some more customers.

“That’s Patsy.”

He shakes his head before turning to me, “No, Annie. That’s my mom.”

My eyes widen before I put my hand over my mouth. “Your mom?”

A tear forms and falls down my cheek. He stands from the couch and hands the photo over to me, "Hold on."

Taking it from him, Decker leaves the room for a minute and returns with a framed photo. He hands it to me, "See."

Looking over the photo, I see him in his football uniform standing beside her. The lady that came in several times over the years, but never got her real name. I run my finger over her face in the photo before crying more tears.

"Where was this picture?" I ask.

He runs his hand down his face as he sits beside me, "The first night that we had sex, I put this in my top drawer. It's been on my dresser since I moved in here, but I put it away that night because, I don't know. I wasn't ready to talk about her much then. And we were about to do something I didn't need that photo to see."

I look at the photo of me with her again.

"Annie, this means she knew you. You said she only came in the winter months?"

"Yeah."

"I think she came into the bakery while I was at away games. Maybe it was like she treated herself to my wins... I don't know."

He's shocked just as much as I am.

"But Patsy Cline? You would've known that."

"My mom listened to all kinds of old music. I couldn't tell you any of the artists. Listening to music was what she did in her car while I was at practices or games. She would hum music, but I never knew who it was. It was just familiar music. And you would know because older music is what you know."

“Chocolate pie,” I mutter.

“She loved chocolate. I told you that. And she didn’t bake. She got treats.”

“We should’ve known.”

“We know now.” He takes the photo from me. “This means you met her, Annie. Gosh, I wish I had been more present before she died. I was always so busy with football. I don’t remember if she told me anything about pie, the bakery, or you.”

“Now I know why I never saw her again,” I choke up.

Decker turns and wraps his arms around me. “I can’t believe you knew my mom.”

“Do you think Greta knew when she hired me?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “Greta didn’t know her.”

“You know, when Greta hired me,” I move back out of his hug, “She left me a notebook, and inside was a note that told me to bring you some happiness.”

He laughs as he shakes his head, “I would say you accomplished that.”

“Yeah. But you brought me some too. I guess I didn’t realize how much I needed some happiness too.”

He lifts my chin with his hand and kisses me before standing from the couch. He takes the photos from my lap and sits them up on the coffee table.

“Annie, I would introduce you to my mom, but it looks as though you’ve already met her.”

I giggle, “I shouldn’t call her Patsy anymore.”

“She would’ve thought it was funny.”

“Well, what a day.”

“Right,” he sits down to eat. “This is probably my favorite day ever.”

I smile, “Mine too.”

Chapter Thirty-seven

Decker

Taking deep breaths as I pace, I can hear the crowd of people out there waiting on me. I'm pursing my lips as I hear my name being called. I close my eyes before walking out, remembering what Annie told me. *You got this.*

In my navy suit, I walk out and wave as I sit at the table.

"Thanks for having me again."

"It's a pleasure."

For thirty minutes, I sit there and talk about the one sport I love. Adrenaline pumps through my body as I feel like I'm doing what I'm meant to be doing. While the table is similar to the desk I sit behind in the office, it's not the same. Being at this table brings me joy whereas the other brings me stress and anxiety.

I know what I need to do.

I say goodbye to other guys I did the show with before taking the elevator to the one thing I know brings me joy, Annie.

Opening the door to the suite, she's standing there with my old jersey number on, a hot dog in her hand. She's the cutest damn thing I've ever seen. I walk over and kiss her cheek in front of everyone in the room.

"You did awesome." She holds her hand up, "From the looks of it because I couldn't hear a thing."

I laugh, "Thanks."

Grabbing a hot dog, she and I walk over to the chairs and sit while the game

starts. I lean over to her and whisper, “I think I’m going to take it.”

“As you should because you deserve this,” she grins.

She knows how happy this would make me. And she wants what’s best for me.

We both turn towards the game just as Jennings throws a pass to Grady, and he makes the touchdown. We all stand and cheer. The Knights look good and may get a chance in the playoffs if we win.

We retake our seats, and I lean over to Annie again, “I have plans for us when we leave here.”

She scrunches up her nose, “What plans?”

I shrug, “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

We finally devour our hot dogs. And continue watching the game.

Jennings throws another pass to Grady that, again, ends in a touchdown, putting the game at 14-0 for the Knights.

Annie finally understands the game, and I overhear her and Lucy discussing it. It wasn’t long ago that attending these games was hard for me. Sitting up here and watching while they got to play was brutal. It was all a mistake on my part. But tonight, I can say that I am thoroughly enjoying this, and it might’ve worked out for the best.

While off this last week, I finally opened up some of the books Annie and I bought at the bookstore. I have been reading through some of them, and I’m starting to better understand myself and how to deal with my loss and anxiety. But I’m still looking into getting more help.

It’s halftime when I receive a text message.

I quickly respond, putting my phone away in my pocket.

“Hey,” I nudge Annie, “Come on, let’s go.”

“Now?” she asks.

It’s cute that she loves a sport she once didn’t know a thing about.

“Yes. I have something I want to show you.”

She says goodbye to Lucy before standing from the chair and taking my hand. Together we walk out of the suite and ride the elevator down to the parking lot.

We head to the car, “So, I’ve been thinking.”

“About what?” she asks.

We get in, and I start the car, “It’s New Year’s Eve. And I want this next year to be the best for both of us. And after reading through some of those books. I think my best option is to seek some help. I’m thinking about going to therapy.”

“Oh, Decker, I think that’s great.”

“I haven’t had an episode for a while now. But that doesn’t mean I’ll never have one again. I don’t think it’s fair to you if I continue putting all that pressure on you.”

She reaches over and rubs my arm, “I know, but I’ll always be here when you need me.”

“I know.”

Pulling out of the parking lot, we head back into the city. Annie is looking around at everything we pass, trying to piece together where we’re heading, but I don’t think she would know this place.

We park right next to the address I was sent. I look at the building with a pink front door before saying, “I think this is it.”

“What are we doing here?”

“We’re looking at something for somebody.”

I’m not lying when I say that.

I messaged my friend Ryan Hayes a couple of days ago. Since he’s in real estate, I asked him if he knew of any buildings available in the area for rent. He gave me this address and told me to look at it and let him know if we would be interested.

“Come on,” I open the door.

I walk around to the sidewalk and meet Annie. She’s looking up at the building. A giant billboard featuring the Hayes Brother’s real estate is above the door.

I take her hand before walking to the front door. I pick up the lockbox hanging from the doorknob and enter the code Ryan sent me. Inside is a key that unlocks the front door. Removing the key, I stick it into the lock and turn unlocking the door.

Annie is standing behind me, speechless.

After I open the door, we walk into the space with only a wood counter and a few metal worktables.

“It’ll need work,” I say.

“Work for what?”

“Your bakery.”

She gasps, putting her hands over her mouth and shaking her head no.

“Annie, it’s what my mom would’ve wanted. She supported my dreams, and I know she would’ve supported yours too.”

She spins, looking, “But I don’t have enough money saved yet.”

I cross my arms, “And that’s okay. I want to help you.”

She walks around, taking everything in.

“Want to hear the story about this place?”

She nods.

“This was where Claire started her flower shop with her best friend. She said this place took off shortly after meeting the Hayes. They have three locations and moved out of this one recently because they outgrew it. This place is in a good location. You can take off here, Annie, and be the best bakery in New York because I have faith in you.”

She still doesn’t say anything.

“Do you want to go back to the office without me?”

She finally lets out a laugh, “I don’t. But this place needs a kitchen and paint, and I’ll need to buy all new cooking supplies and ingredients. Your help will end up being more than I have saved.”

I understand what she’s saying. But it doesn’t matter to me. Because I want this more than anything for her, she deserves it.

“Do it for Patsy,” I raise my voice.

She spins around and walks over to me. I wrap one arm around her waist and brush her hair back from her face with the other, saying, “She would want you to say yes.”

“Yes,” she whispers, “I’m doing it for Patsy. But mostly, I’m doing it for you, Mr. Jones.”

I smile brightly, “Gosh, you haven’t called me that in a while, and I missed it.”

She giggles before kissing my lips.

My phone goes off in my pocket. I let go of Annie to pull it out. It's a text message from Grady. I read it before saying, "Looks like the guys won their game and are headed to the playoffs."

"Yay," Annie claps, "More games for my Sports Broadcaster."

This new job is going to be just what I need. I'll get a dream job and still have time to be with Annie and help her open this amazing space for her dream.

It's funny because the one place that brought us together, we are both saying goodbye to and while it's bittersweet, I'm ready for what's next.



Annie

It's New Year's Eve. Decker and I are finally taking down the Christmas decorations and packing them away. I wrap the ornaments I gifted him in bubble wrap before putting them into a box. Then wonder what ornaments we will add to the tree next year.

Decker takes the stockings down from the wall and tosses them on the top of the box before I put the lid on it.

"I think that's it."

I fall onto the couch and lie there, looking up at the ceiling. I close my eyes to envision what I want the new bakery to look like. I see yellow walls with the name in white letters on one wall. I feel a poke on my forehead, and Decker's face appears before me when I open my eyes. "Boo, what are you thinking about?"

I sit up, cross my feet, and rest them on the coffee table. “How would you feel if we named the bakery Patsy’s Sweetcakes?”

He smiles before sitting next to me, “I love that idea.”

“Would your mom love that idea?”

“Yes.”

My eyes go to the two photos of her still sitting on the coffee table from a week ago. Sitting next to them is the snow globe Decker set out that was his mom’s.

“Where did your mom get the globe?”

He clears his throat before saying, “I gave it to her when I bought her a house in the suburbs. It was my way of repaying her for all those years she spent supporting me. That’s why I want to help you, Annie.”

“It’s like your way of repaying me for helping you?” I ask, confused.

He places his hand on my thigh, “You helped me in a lot of ways. I overcame things I don’t think I ever would have. You helped calm my anxiousness and allowed me to feel happiness again. Believe it or not, I was never one to express emotions with touch. It was something I didn’t see growing up. But with you, I always want to show you that I care about you. I can’t keep my hands off you now. But I also want to help you as an act of love.”

My head turns towards his, “You love me?”

He takes my hand and places it on his chest, “I do.” he plays with my fingers as he looks over at me, “I’ve been lying to myself. I didn’t think I could love anyone after losing my mom. But you showed me that I could feel love again and I feel it for you.”

“I’ve loved you since you threw that snowball at my face.”

He intertwines our fingers, “For me, it was probably the night we bought the tree.”

I laugh, “We had only known each other for two days then.”

“Well, I wasn’t in love with you then, but I knew that I could fall in love with you. You’ve brought me back to life, Annie.”

Leaning over, I kiss his lips just as the timer on the stove goes off. He lets go of my hand as I stand from the couch.

I walk into the kitchen and take the mini chocolate pies from the oven before setting them in the fridge to cool. We will celebrate the new year eating the one thing we know Decker’s mom loved. And Lucy, Grady, and Jennings are coming over to celebrate with us. I can’t wait.

Decker comes up behind me, “Those smell so good.”

“You say that about everything I make you.”

He kisses my cheek, “Because it’s all good. And I can’t wait for the rest of New York to find out.”

“It’s still surreal that we’re doing this. We’re going to have a bakery.”

“And I can’t wait. I’ve already talked to some companies about getting in there this week to install a kitchen and anything else you want.”

“Really?” I exclaim.

“Why wait?”

“That’s true,” I say, “It’s not like I have a job anymore. And Valentine’s Day will be here before we know it, and that’s a great holiday to start with.”

“See, the sooner, the better.”

I spin in his arms, “Since those are cooling, do you want to head over and get your things from the office before everyone gets here?”

“Yeah,” he nods. “Let’s get that out of the way.”

After slipping on our shoes and coats, we take the elevator to the parking garage before getting into Decker's car.

It will be the last time in the office that started it all. And I'm ready to say goodbye.

We pull up outside the office building. Decker and I hold hands as we take our last elevator ride to the office floor. All the hideous Christmas decorations still hang when we walk out of the doors, making me laugh.

"Gosh, this office seems haunted."

I clench my teeth, "It feels that way."

Decker drops my hand and walks into his office. I walk over to my empty desk and check it to ensure I didn't leave anything. I look through the window at Decker as he opens a medium-sized box and puts his things in it.

Once I'm done, I meet him in his office. And a sort of sad feeling comes over me as I remember some of the moments we had in here.

I look around the room, "Well, this place holds some pretty great memories for only working here for a few weeks."

He laughs as he looks up at me, "It does, doesn't it."

I sit on the couch, "My cheeks were on fire when you commented how nice that specific black dress looked on me."

"Oh..." he smirks, "I remember that black dress."

Pointing to the bathroom, I say, "And you thanked me for helping you in there."

He laughs, "I should have done more then."

I stand from the sofa and walk over to him at the desk, "Any regrets, Mr. Jones?"

Wrapping his hands around my waist, he squeezes my butt before lifting me and setting me down on the desk. “Just one,” he kisses my neck, “I regret never bending you over this desk.”

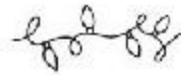
I move my hand over the desk, “What’s holding you back now?”

His hands slide up behind my neck, “Nothing.”

I can’t think of a better way of saying goodbye to this office. We are moving on to new places and things. And we get to do it together.

The End

Playlist



I CAN SEE YOU - TAYLOR SWIFT
CHRISTMAS - DARLENE LOVE
IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME - ANDY WILLIAMS
ELECTRIC TOUCH - TAYLOR SWIFT
HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY LITTLE CHRISTMAS - JUDY GARLAND
FIX YOU - COLDPLAY
CHRISTMAS TREE FARM - TAYLOR SWIFT
JINGLE BELLS - FRANK SINATRA
YOU ARE THE BEST THING - RAY LAMONTAGNE
SCIENCE - NIALL HORAN
YELLOW - COLDPLAY
DRESS - TAYLOR SWIFT
WHITE WINTER HYMNAL - FLEET FOXES
FEEL IT STILL - PORTUGAL. THE MAN
HEAR YOU ME - JIMMY EAT WORLD
JUST DAY YES - SNOW PATROL
TO BUILD A HOME - THE CINEMATIC ORCHESTRA
CAROL OF THE BELLS - TRANS-SIBERIAN ORCHESTRA

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