

I PROMISED I WOULDN'T F*CK HIS BABY SISTER...

PROVOKING SAINT NICK



...BUT WHO WAS GOING TO KEEP
HER FROM F*CKING ME?

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Provoking Saint Nick

A Brother's Best Friend, Fake Relationship, Forced Proximity, One Bed, Steamy Christmas Romance

Echo Grayce

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Chapter One

Nick

****Dear Readers...****

if you're seeing this... hold up!

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GOD GRANT ME THE SERENITY TO NOT CHOKE THE WILDCARD OF RICH BITCHES.

Charlie fucking McAllister.

My best friend's little sister. Tormentor extraordinaire. Star of my every trauma as a teenager.

Oh, the irony of the youngest daughter of the richest family in Bar Harbor standing with her jean-clad hip propped against the Eat the Rich sticker. The

pithy act of defiance clung crookedly to the back of a rusted Jeep Wrangler.

Yeah, that was on brand for the little demon.

I bet Mommy and Daddy just loved that.

It was one week. I could handle her for one week.

When we were kids, she jacked my chili with pickling spices and when I gagged, she saved me by handing me a tomato juice laced with ghost pepper sauce.

When I broke my arm junior year and her mother insisted she help me pack for a trip to Boston, she cut the crotch out of every pair of underwear, shorts, and pants she packed in my duffel.

I flexed my fingers on the wheel, my one small show of anxiety because there was no way she didn't notice me pulling in and the longer I sat here, the more ideas she'd get.

If I just kept her away from my food and my suitcase, I might just make it out of this unscathed.

Only, everything about her narrowed eyes and the smirk tilting those full lips at the corners told me she was waiting for me, and she was up to something.

I grabbed my cell and shot off a text to Chance. This was my last rant until I got pushed through the annual McAllister/McAdams Christmas ski week.

For thirty years, on the week of Christmas, our families inconvenienced all of us at the worst possible time by summoning our presence. This was the third year in a row Chance missed, the military making it hard as hell for him to be home. I got it... but I didn't have to be happy about it.

Me: You're a real boner for not being here this week.

Chance: Turned to shit already, huh?

Me: Your sister is here.

Chance: You'll have to be more specific. I have two.

Me: Charlie, you asshole.

Chance: BAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA... good luck!

Me: Fuck you. May you catch your fucking dick in your zipper.

Chance: Dude, don't joke about that shit.

Me: Who's joking?

Chance: You'll be fine. Charlie's fun.

Me: If you're a sadist.

Chance: Actually, if you're a masochist. She'd be the sadist.

Me: Jesus, you think just like her.

Chance: You're not wrong, but you love me anyway.

Me: Yeah, well, just don't expect roses on Valentine's Day.

Chance: Baby, you never buy me flowers anymore.

Me: Cute.

Chance: You'll have fun. Just don't fuck her.

I froze with my thumb hovering over the keyboard. Not going to lie, if it didn't promise pain, definite stalking, and starring in a future episode of *Snapped*... nah, not even then.

Me: ...

Chance: Confirm asshole. No fucking my baby sister.

Huh, seemed like he was getting mad.

Me: ...

Chance: Listen, fucker... DO. NOT. FUCK. MY. SISTER.

Definitely mad. So, there was an upside this weekend. No peace for me, but then none for him either.

Me: ...

Chance: Remember... you have a sister too.

Only How

Me: Who will do everything possible to be abroad for every family ski trip for forever. Plus, she hates military guys. You'd have a better shot at getting my pants which I have to say... is never going to happen. It's not you—it's me

Chance: When I get my hands—

I didn't bother reading the rest of his message and instead whipped out the finale with a smile on my face.

Me: Now that you're just as miserable, peace out. And guy, really? I know the code. Besides, if I were planning to fuck one of your sisters, it would be Eve.

Chance: I don't like how you dropped her name like you had it in your head, ready to go.

Me: Later, dude.

I climbed out of my SUV, ignored the demon spawn, and circled around to the hatch to grab my bag. I'd hold on to it until I was in my room. Preferably on the opposite side of the resort.

She propped her bag against my back tire and leaned on my car. "We need to talk."

"No, we don't."

"You're not curious who I spotted when I got here then? Okay." She settled her sunglasses on the bridge of her nose and shrugged. "I thought you'd want a warning, but—"

I hitched my bag over my shoulder, shut the hatch, and crossed my arms. "Fine, who did you see, Charlotte?"

"Gross, don't call me that." She shivered and looked just like her mother when Chance and I tracked across her brand-new white tile foyer during her

annual New Year's party. The first and last party she'd allowed us to invite our friends to. Somehow, I didn't think Charlie would appreciate the comparison.

Instead, I tucked it away in my arsenal for later.

"It's your name."

Her lips flattened into a hard line. "It's on my birth certificate. That doesn't make it my name, Nicholas."

I grinned as I tossed my keys in the air and caught them easily. "Nice try, but my name doesn't bother me."

She raised her chin with smug delight. "But it bothers you when I call you Saint N—"

"Don't start that shit, Charlie." Irritation spiked my blood, and I shoved my fingers through my hair to keep from strangling her.

She'd gotten it in her twisted little head years ago that I was some sort of paragon of virtue. I wasn't. I just wasn't obvious about my recreational activities.

"Saint Nick is so dreamy. He's so smart."

Chance said not to fuck her. He didn't say I couldn't strangle her.

A rogue image flashed in my mind of my hand curled around her throat, her eyes glazed over... Jesus, okay, so 'fuck' and 'strangle' were clearly two verbs that didn't belong anywhere near each other in my head.

This was all Chance's fault. He's the one who'd brought up fucking her and inadvertently planted some sort of subliminal spank bank inspiration in my psyche.

The prick.

"The star player on every team. Le sigh. When he walks by, I just can't help but go tits up, ready for Saint Nick to—"

"Your parents should have spanked you." I pinched the bridge of my nose and squinted at the sudden pain throbbing in my skull.

"Aww, picturing me getting spanked. That's not very virtuous, Saint

Nick.”

Gritting my teeth, I took a step toward her. A menacing step. Every bit of frustration from the past week at my job colliding with the mouthy pain in the ass standing before me.

The snarl that rose from my throat had her hands up and surrendering... well, as much as Charlie surrendered to anything.

“Okay, easy... Don’t need to tarnish the halo or anything. I just thought you might want to know that your parents arrived with your favorite blond parasite.”

“You’re lying.”

She crossed her arms and casually leaned against my car. “Nope, pretty boy. She looked straight out of Saks and ready to pin you under her lethal-looking Jimmy Choo until you agree to put a ring on it.”

“I’d rather eat dirt.”

“That’s what I thought, so I figured I’d do you a favor so you can avoid that fate.”

“A deal with the Devil sounds like better odds.”

One week with Mariah Quinn, as a favor to my mother, and I hadn’t shaken her since. A cool and collected classy package on the outside, but pure venom pumped with cruel glee in her frigid heart.

She had zero chance at ever being anything to me. If she sank that heel into my chest, I’d bleed out before I’d give in to a life of poison.

Charlie branded me a saint, but I wasn’t. I just valued kindness and respect. If you were in my circle, I gave it freely. Everyone I met was in until they gave me a reason to push them out.

She reached for her bag with a single shoulder shrug. “Okay. Well, good luck with Mariah. I’ll see you at the lodge. I’ll be the one with the popcorn.”

A soul-sucking week of tactical maneuvers with Charlie waiting in the wings to pile on the snark loomed before me. I choked back the bitterness of surrender and reached out to grasp her arm. “Wait. What are you thinking?”

She glanced up at me, her eyes sparkling with victory. “All we have to do is show up together and you won’t have to worry about fending off the ice queen.”

“We are showing up together.” I had to be out of my mind to even consider this. Our families were intertwined like a strand of DNA. Our mothers had successfully remained best friends for over forty years. This plan meant a lifetime of our families reminding us we were an item once.

She rolled her eyes. “I mean together. As in, a couple.”

“A couple of what?”

One golden brown eyebrow arched. “Jesus Nick. A couple. Like tab A in slot B... a couple,” she said while poking her teal-tipped index finger through the ring she made with her other finger and thumb. “Tell me you haven’t had that dick on such tight lockdown it doesn’t even know what that is anymore.”

“You want to be my girlfriend?”

She let out a flippant laugh followed by a snort. “God, no. You could not handle me. But for the week... we could pretend. If done right, we’ll have a good time on the slopes instead of spending the whole time dodging our mothers—”

“Ah, I get it.”

“Good, because I was worried I needed to draw you a picture.”

Her shoulders relaxed, a sure tell this arrangement was not from the kindness of her heart, but for her own benefit.

Gotcha, little demon. I slid my hands in my pockets and rocked back on my heels. “Your mom brought someone for you too, didn’t she?”

“What—no,” she scoffed, the telltale sound of bullshit.

I grinned. “Liar.”

“I don’t l—”

“Careful, you’re about to tell one right now.” I curled my fingers under the strap of the duffel and slid it from her arm. “Who’d she bring?”

“Listen—”

“Who did she bring, Charlie?” I settled her bag over my shoulder.

Her gaze darted away and when she finally turned back, a grimace twisted her usually sassy mouth. “Daniel Sloan.”

My gaze snapped to hers where I caught a riot of emotions flitting through her piercing gray eyes. “He’s your—”

“Ex. Yeah. Which is even worse. Apparently, I’m so repugnant she can’t peddle me to a new guy, so she has to convince the old guy to take me back.”

“Ouch.” Mrs. McAllister had just moved a fraction toward the outer edge of my circle with that move.

Charlie shifted on her feet and chewed her lip. “Do we have a deal or not?”

Her mischievous energy dimmed with her admission and show of nerves. I couldn’t put my finger on why, but I didn’t like it.

“Deal,” I said, offering my hand to shake on it.

She shot me a suspicious glance. “Really? You’re not fucking with me, right?”

“According to you, I’m not that interesting.” I smiled and winked, letting her know we’re good. Something to get us back on solid Charlie and Nick ground where she was the scheming jester devising new ways to make me her fool.

Because as much as the jester was a pain in my ass, wounded Charlie sparked something in me I didn’t recognize. Something I didn’t care to examine. “Take my hand, Charlie.”

Her hand slid into mine and something shifted. Impossibly soft skin settled against my palm and her warm, tight grip had the hair along my neck prickling. Somewhere inside me alarm bells went off.

My best friend’s warning about his little sister burned in my pocket with my cell.

This week was about to punch me right in the dick.

Chapter Two

Charlie

I NEVER THOUGHT FOR A SECOND SAINT NICK WOULD AGREE TO MY proposition. I mean, yes, he's saint-worthy. So freaking squeaky clean I had the unshakable urge to spin my tires in a pile of mud and coat him from head to toe with unexpected fuckery.

Despite his golden boy ways, he'd never once extended his saintly gestures to me.

Not that I'd earned them. I'd spent a lifetime torturing him, doing anything and everything to get a rise out of him. Just aching to see one perfect strand of hair slide out of place. Just once.

He was just so inherently... good. Everything he touched turned to success. Nothing handed to him, just a natural ability to try something and in no time at all, excel at it.

Nick approached everything with unflappable patience and dedication, soon after he slid effortlessly into mastery.

No strutting or bragging.

His accidental perfection was unsettling.

Which meant he was the absolute perfect solution to thwart my mother and whatever she had up her sleeve with Daniel.

If he didn't drive me out of my mind before then.

Sunshine danced over his skin, glinting on the facial hair he'd let grow in.

Even the awkward stage between sexy scruff and neat beard was perfect.

He was completely oblivious to it. And wasn't that a punch in the tit? He was simply indifferent to his benevolence.

My proximity to Nick always seemed to highlight my inadequacies. Or so I thought. But perhaps proximity was the key. After all, if they believed I managed to snag him, that had to be points in my favor, right?

Well, feigned proximity. Whatever got us through the weekend. The bare minimum of polite PDA when we were in the company of our families and that was it.

I certainly didn't expect to earn me favorite status. Chance had that position locked tight by being selfless and going into the Army. Then when he had the opportunity to get out, he went career. Welp, there was no way in hell for me to compete with that.

And Eve, well, she worked in a predominantly male field as a carpenter and wouldn't be caught dead at one of our parents' dinner parties, rubbing elbows with our parents' friends, our dad's business associates, or God forbid, fending off some of the prospects our mother marched her way. No one even dared hint at her putting on a designer dress. They probably feared her coming at them with a nail gun. But she got a pass because she spent so much time sick as a kid.

So that left me. The one who couldn't be set up, steered in their direction, or settle down.

The one who actually loved her job as a massage therapist, a career choice my mother told me more than once was beneath a McAllister.

Basically, I was the fuck up.

Nick could be my arm candy... and my mom adored him, so it was a win-win. She'd be planning our babies before our heads hit the pillow tonight.

Our boots clicked over the damp asphalt as we made our way to the resort to meet our families and check in. We had maybe five minutes before we jumped under the microscope of two nosy mothers.

“Okay, so we need some rules.”

His lips quirked. “I’m pretty sure only one of us needs rules. Lots of rules.”

“Funny.” I adjusted my garment bag on my shoulder. “If you plan to sell yourself as my boyfriend, especially to our mothers, you’ll have to treat me like I’m not Nair headed straight for your balls.”

His head swung to mine, and he pierced me with a wary stare. “Is that a move from your playbook I haven’t encountered yet?”

“Yet, but we’re young. There’s still time.” I patted his shoulder and laughed at his horrified expression.

His assessing gaze raked over me, and his mouth turned down at the corners. “Maybe I just have a healthy fear your vagina has teeth and I’m not dumb enough to go anywhere near that nightmare.”

“Well, the joke’s on you... I have a fabulous vagina. Very responsive.”

“Your parents should have grounded you more,” he muttered next to me.

Choosing to ignore his surly disposition at the mere mention of my lady bits, I continued. “Besides, there’s nothing healthy about you fearing any vagina. Move that to the top of the list to tackle with your therapist. Lucky for us, you won’t have to get near my big, scary vagina to make it through the week. Neither of our parents will expect PDA if I’m dating you—”

He snorted. “Why does that feel like a dig?”

The frigid air chugged in and out of my lungs, leaving a biting sting with every breath. Cars rolled through the north entrance and lined up, waiting to unload. The resort gleamed as it did early in the season, with their vast revamping efforts from during the offseason on full display.

“Not a dig, just truth. You’re not flashy, pretty boy. But that works for us. We can go through this whole week with you doing nothing more than pulling out my chair and brushing your hand over my lower back when you guide me into a room. Oooh,” I said with a snap of my fingers. “And make a show of holding my hand at some point and our parents will be neck deep in

planning our wedding and the littles to follow.”

He skidded to a stop. “Littles?”

I grabbed his hand and tugged him back to my side. “Kids.”

“Jesus.”

“Jesus was a nice guy and all, but he can’t help you. Don’t worry. I’ve got your back.”

“Terrifying,” he muttered.

“Isn’t it? Anyway, just treat me like I’m human. I’ll put a hold on the Nair, and in a week, we’ll both have our freedom. Actually, less than a week when you think about it. Five days. We can handle five days. And no worrying about teeth... you won’t be going near either set.” Laughter bubbled up in my throat, releasing some of the tension coiled in my gut.

“Christ.”

“Ah, ah, no swearing, Saint Nick.”

“And it’s six days. Five nights, but six whole days.”

I yanked open the door for him, patted him on the shoulder, and gave him a little shove since it looked like his feet might refuse to take another step. The blood had completely drained from his face. “Get your shit together... it’s showtime.”

Chapter Three

A GUST OF WARM AIR CARRYING A HINT OF CINNAMON AND CHOCOLATE washed over us the minute we stepped through the doors, reminding me of a happy childhood here. When I spent most of my time with the boys and no one judged me for it.

The main room of the lodge where families checked in opened into a two-story massive room with knotted pine walls, tall windows facing the slopes, and dueling fireplaces on each end, both with stonework shooting straight up to the ceiling.

Cozy seating areas arranged in clusters of coordinating warm creams, blush, rose, and camel shades dotted the room, most already occupied by families and kids.

So many kids.

“Does it seem busier to you this year?”

“They added two black diamond trails and a new quad. It’s busier.” His voice rumbled next to my ear, catching me by surprise.

“Super.”

Garlands draped from corner to corner of every window, giving the room an underlying scent of the fresh, crisp scent of pine. Dueling arrangements of three interlocking wreaths, each at least four feet tall, hung high on the stone-face chimneys over the twin burning fireplaces. Golden bows gleamed in the

rays of the sun breaking through the clouds and streaming through the expansive skylights.

And none of it was nearly as stunning as the massive tree in the corner wrapped in a generous swath of white lights. Red suede bows adorned the tips of the branches and in between, delicate scalloped-edged angels with pleated skirts dangled from golden thread, a Christmas wish written on every single one.

And despite the kind of money everyone here had, so many of those wishes would go unanswered.

I managed to put away five thousand dollars to put toward them, and while I felt good about it, I hated that I couldn't do more.

Even more than that, I hated that my mother wouldn't bother grabbing a single one.

"There you are!" My mother feigned excitement at seeing me. Not because I was her daughter and she loved me, but no doubt because she thought she had the upper hand with Daniel firmly in her back pocket. I'm sure she thought she held on to this wonderful secret that would make me so grateful I'd act like a true McAllister for the first time.

News flash—I was a Charlie. I was going to act like a Charlie.

Which meant Daniel didn't have a chance. He never should have had a shot even if I acted like a typical McAllister, but then that was the whole crux of the problem.

I tried. I really did. There was a time I wore dresses, hung out with the "right" kids, and made sure I got straight A's. And at the end of the day, none of it mattered. Eventually my need to stand up for myself would come out in a rush of scathing words and it would erase everything I'd done to earn her pride.

Well, silence had never been my style. Not really. I could bite my tongue for a limited amount of time before someone inevitably flipped the switch and activated my smart mouth. If there wasn't a way to contain it entirely,

why bother trying to contain it at all?

Charlie logic. You're welcome.

She draped her arms daintily around my shoulders and bathed me in a cloud of Chanel No. 5. while giving me a quick air-kiss next to my cheek.

For a moment, I considered wrapping my arms around her the way I used to. A real hug like when I was a kid, before I realized it was possible to have the physical presence of two parents yet feel like an orphan.

"You're looking lovely, dear. A little puffy, but we've got a few days to work on that."

She whispered the barbs in a way no one else would hear them, but with a few sips of wine, and a group of people to cover her snide remarks with laughs, she'd get bolder. They'd become more frequent in the past few years as I pulled further away from the family and turned more and more into a person she just didn't understand.

One she had no hope of controlling.

Normally, I'd say something; after all, I'm not going to make it easy for her to throw digs my way. If she wanted to go there, she'd have to work for it by taking a few grenades of her own. But this time I had Saint Nick on my side, so maybe I could let it roll off until the buzz of our "new relationship" gave her a dopamine hit strong enough it knocked the subtle and not so subtle digs clean out of her.

I will not kill her. I will not kill her. I will not kill her. "Gee, looking forward to it."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Don't be smart, dear. It's unbecoming of a young lady."

"Too bad you didn't raise one."

Her mouth pinched with disapproval before she plastered on a glowing smile for Nick.

"Nicholas, sweetheart, it's so good to see you." She took his hands in her own and beamed up at him. "Aren't you just as handsome as ever."

Fuck yeah, this was going to work wonders on the stick up her ass.

He leaned in, towering over us both by at least a foot, and kissed my mother on the cheek. “You look just gorgeous, Mrs. McAllister. I love the new haircut.”

See? Smooth fucker. He did everything with ease and was just naturally good at all the things. He hadn’t seen her in months. And now he was the new hairstyle spotter? The shit.

And they weren’t just words. The sleek bob was new and until he mentioned it, I hadn’t noticed.

I wanted to be mad, but he made eye contact with me over her shoulder and winked. For a second, the sting from her insult faded.

We were in this together. At least for the next five days—oh, excuse me, five nights and six days. I bet if I asked him, he’d know the predetermined length of our fake relationship in hours and minutes. He was a numbers guy after all.

“Nicholas! Just look at you.” Mrs. McAdams swooped in and curled into Nick’s chest. Mothers and sons. They were so weird.

I wouldn’t call Nick a mama’s boy. I remembered a few decent meals he cooked on the grill, and I’d seen him handle laundry so it wasn’t like he was waiting for someone to take care of him.

But moms... they just loved doting on their little boys. My mother did it with Chance while Eve and I navigated minefields. And I’d definitely seen Mrs. McAdams do it with Nick over the course of our lives.

I rolled my eyes and at about the point my gaze reached two o’clock, my eyes locked on the asshat from hell—a total waste of perfectly good air, Daniel Sloan.

Daniel’s expression slid from blasé to smug satisfaction, like he was such a fucking catch and how lucky was I that he’d shower me with his attention, especially on the single biggest holiday of the year.

Santa and his fucking lumps of coal.

And from the cocky determination on his face, the man whose had probably rewritten our history and cast himself as some sort of paragon of virtue. The selfless savior who swooped in to make the McAllister fuckup look good. The problem with Daniel, when he set up a lie, he ran it through his head so many times he started to believe it himself. Going toe to toe with him and battling it out was a complete waste of energy and would only result in tearing your hair out in frustration.

I loved a good battle, but Daniel had never been worth it. He'd been a walking red flag from day one. He hated animals, thought kids should be seen and not heard, and treated the doorman, a charming, stooped man of almost eighty named Mr. Barnes, like absolute shit.

I low-key hoped Mr. Barnes took the opportunity to shove Daniel in front of a bus one morning.

Next to him, Mariah bit down on her bottom lip delicately because no doubt she didn't want to ding her lipstick while still conveying that come-hither energy—but really, all I got from the vibe she was sending was... *Get me, hot stuff. I have no boobs, no ass, but hey, anything from a designer hanger looks fucking phenomenal on me because I'm shaped like, well, a wire fucking hanger.*

But what really stood out was how... familiar they seemed with one another. Not a sex level—I mean, Daniel would totally fuck her; he'd fuck practically anything that moved, but Mariah? Despite hating everything about her and what she stood for, I had a hard time picturing her going there. Mariah may be calculating and mean to the core, but she wasn't stupid. She definitely wasn't desperate.

Not that I was either, but—never mind. He was an error in judgment. One of many in my life.

My mom's voice cut through my thoughts, the pitch pleasant to most, but shrill to me. "How funny you two arriving at the same time." She rested a hand on Nick's forearm and glanced between us. "We have a surprise for—"

Oh God... here it comes.

And with it, my chill fled.

“We came together,” I blurted.

Two perfectly coifed blond hairdos swung in my direction.

No longer snuggled against Nick’s chest, Mrs. McAdams blinked, an expression I didn’t recognize settling into her gaze. “Together?” she asked, peering up at him, dismissing me entirely.

Ouch.

My mom glanced back and forth between us. “You two? But why?”

Nick’s gaze eyes flicked in Mariah and Daniel’s direction, like a signal just between the two of us. A sort of rudimentary fake dating way of communicating or something. A little on-the-job training.

Sink or swim, bitches.

“Because...” Nick let his mom go, took a step back from her and toward me. Why that was so fucking hot, I refused to examine. Reaching for me, he slid his hand into mine—there was that zing again; I needed to Google how to stop that shit stat—and tugged me toward him. He spun me until we both faced our mothers with my back pressed against his chest and his free hand sliding over my stomach possessively. “Charlie’s my girlfriend.”

Smooth fucker.

God, he was warm. And hard. Muscled. Not hard hard. I’m pretty sure he’d consider chopping his own dick off before letting it get hard for me.

And why the hell was he holding me so tight? Like I belonged to him. I mean, I guess I did. Kinda. For fakesies and shit. But really, did he need to hold me that tight? Where my ass nestled right into his—actually, while I’m here... I wiggled, settling against him tighter.

The pads of his fingers dug into my skin. A barely perceptible growl rumbled from his chest against my back.

I tilted my head and smiled up at him, the absolute picture of adoration and love—and innocence.

It would totally be out of character—and let's face it, impossible—to give up fucking with him, so until we could go back to the way things were, this would have to keep me satisfied.

And him very dissatisfied.

Our mothers' expressions were worlds apart. My mom was absolutely ecstatic, judging by her huge smile. The smile she always strived to avoid because of lines and shit. Apparently, my managing to snag Nick warranted the risk of adding to the years that threatened to march across her face the minute she gave up chemical peels, exotic skin regimens, and Botox.

Mrs. McAdams on the other hand... Her lips puckered in the slightest hint of disapproval, and she aimed some serious side-eye at my mom.

I guess that told me where I stood.

Daniel and Mariah sidled up, both looking us over. Daniel glowered at Nick's hand on my stomach. Mariah wore a more feral version of Mrs. McAdams' expression, also one hundred percent aimed at me.

Nick smiled next to me, his bearded cheek brushing mine, oblivious to the battle lines forming between two best friends.

"This is actually perfect," my mother gushed. "There was a problem with the rooms. We were going to be one short, but since you two can room together, I can let the desk know we're all set."

Chapter Four

Nick

“ROOMING TOGETHER WAS NOT PART OF THE DEAL.” I GROWLED DOWN AT THE little demon as we headed to the private dining room. Normally, we’d all head up to our rooms to unpack before we met for cocktails at six. By six thirty, we’d head to our dinner reservation, but the influx of people staying for the week changed everything.

The concierge had our bags, we had no clue what to expect from our shared room, and the settling in I looked forward to, now wouldn’t happen until after dinner. A time I used to relish spending in the lodge bar with Chance.

He’d pay for abandoning me... again. Yes, not his fault, but at the moment, I couldn’t care less.

I thought I could do this. Minimal touching. Polite. Act like I actually like her. Limited displays of affection, but there was no warm up, no time outs, no water breaks.

By flipping the routine, I was in this... all the way in it for the next several hours. I didn’t have time for the freak out I so desperately needed after the way I fought my body’s reaction to her.

My head may not be all in on this ruse, but my dick slapped his thigh and jumped on the horse with a rowdy yeehaw like he was about to live his best life.

The dipshit and I were going to have a long talk about whatever the hell kind of brain damage he'd suffered between rolling in the parking lot and checking into the hotel that all of a sudden had him wanting to dive all the way into this fake relationship.

Daniel's condescending gaze traveling the length of Charlie's body only made it worse. Somewhere in the depths of my brain, my psyche whispered words I failed to realize could activate possessiveness in me.

He's had her.

Why the hell did that bother me so much? Other than the obvious, she was too good for him. Anyone could see that, couldn't they?

But her mother didn't.

Fuck.

Why could I see it?

She shot an elbow into my ribs. "Well, it's not like I planned it to be stuck in a hotel room with you, hot shot. And you're welcome, by the way. My presence adds a level of protection for you, because Queen Succubus up there had plans for you. Sinister plans."

They couldn't be worse than the very round, soft, way-too-fuckable ass Charlie just ground on my dick in the lobby. Thankfully, she'd slipped from my grip before she discovered my very real, raging hard on growing against her. It took everything to fight my instinct to grind against her, especially when Daniel's gaze met mine in challenge.

Bring it, you shithead. You'll lose.

Lines blurred. The unwelcome stirring of trouble swirled in my gut and hadn't stopped two-stepping on my peace of mind since.

Don't fuck my baby sister...

Cool guy. Got you.

But who would keep her from fucking me?

Only in every single way but the one involving a spine tingling orgasm for me. Not that I wanted her. My dick seemed to, but that was just

chemistry, biology, animal instinct—whatever. He didn't run this shit. I did.

Chance would not get out of this without suffering. I'd come up with a way to fuck with him even half a world away.

“Your mother was chilly.”

I blinked down at her at the quiet hesitation in her voice, the words taking a minute to process because until today, I'd never once heard Charlie anything other than confident, brash, and larger than life. This was the second hint of vulnerability in less than an hour throwing one more unknown into our new dynamic.

The new dynamic messing with my regimented life in every single way.

“What? No, she wasn't.”

She stopped short and whipped around with her cool glare in place. “Really, who got the better end of this deal?” she said with a snort. “My mom got you, and your mom...”

I took a step toward her and told myself I did it to keep this conversation from blocking the entire hallway. When really I didn't want to leave her any way to escape. Reaching behind her, I clasped the end of that wavy ponytail and gave it a tug tipping her face up to mine. “My mom what, Charlie?”

She rolled her lips inward, the edges of her straight white teeth scraping along her bottom lip before it popped free. “Got this.”

She swept her hand along her body and I tensed, my initial confusion about my mother settling into a pang of disappointment.

I had every reason to go head-to-head with Charlie. She'd been fucking with me unfettered for over a decade because, no matter what she did, you didn't pay back your best friend's little sister. Especially when you had four years on her and were old enough to know better. Well into adulthood and careers now, I had the freedom to shed the kid gloves. But now that I could, she revealed this hint of insecurity and it stole every bit of thunder in doing so.

I'd never paid too much attention to the dynamic between Charlie and our

parents, but I was watching now—to prove her wrong or me right, I didn't know.

With my hand settled over her lower back, I led her to the far side of the room, to the same table our parents reserved year after year. I pulled out the chair closest to the fireplace, where I knew she preferred to sit. Something about the crackle of the fire or something like that.

The year she turned twenty-one, the last time Chance was with us, she barely touched her food. Instead, she sat there facing the fire, her feet up on her chair, her knees to her chest, a hot toddy in her hands. Firelight danced along her warm brown waves, catching on the natural copper strands threaded throughout. She'd shut out the world and just basked in being. All flushed cheeks from the alcohol, with a smattering of freckles. I'd never seen her so at peace, with the flicker of mischief still lingering distantly in her luminous eyes.

I hadn't seen her like that since. Until now, I hadn't even recognized I'd been trying to catch a glimpse of her like that again. Soft, almost languid, with simmering spunk.

We'd work on that.

Why I suddenly cared? I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

I cupped her elbow and turned her to me before she could sit. She'd lost a bit of her shine back there. The mischief waned in her eyes. The exchange with our moms wormed its way in and whispered lies to her. A part of her bought the bullshit they sold.

But for the next week, she was mine. Mine to care for, to protect, and I needed to get my ass in gear and pay closer attention.

For the time being, what hurt her, hurt me. We were a unit. Tighter than the ones we were born to.

“Charlie.” My voice came out thick, almost gritty with disuse which defied logic since we'd been talking every since we met up in the parking lot. I tucked my fist under her jaw, brushed my thumb over the tip of her chin,

and tipped her face up to mine. “Just so you and I are clear...” I swallowed against the lump in my throat making my words gruff. “There’s nothing wrong with this.”

Her lips parted on a surprised gasp.

The sound crawled right inside me. That was the only explanation for why I tugged over her bottom lip, pulling it just a touch away from her teeth before letting it snap back.

This wasn’t a display for our parents. It wasn’t for Mariah and Daniel. This was ours and what it meant, I had no idea.

But damn. Now, I wanted to find out.

I leaned in, my breath fluttering over the shell of her ear, making her shiver against me. “Now sit.”

For once, she did as she was told with no comment. I could get used to this. Who knew off-balance Charlie could be so docile. I took my seat next to her and studied the menu despite the constant suspicious glances from the little demon.

Some of us didn’t need ghost peppers and scissors.

I smiled.

Chapter Five

Nick

OUR FATHERS CHATTED AT THE OTHER END OF THE ROUND TWELVE-TOP TABLE, bringing their work right into the holiday trip with them as they always did. Profit margins, investments, scaling up businesses, yada nada. Our mothers usually settled into light gossip about mutual friends. Who was getting married, having kids, which ones bought a winter place in Florida—and of course the ones not doing well—hospital stays, new medications, and rehab. With all those topics exhausted, they'd soon try to finesse bankruptcy gossip from our dads.

But so far this year... silence. Mrs. McAllister's gaze bore a hole into us and my mother... well, she'd taken an intense interest in the menu and from her pinched expression, shit played the starring role in every dish.

Her eyes cut in our direction, a look of pure disapproval landing right on Charlie, prompting fiery anger I never thought I'd feel toward my mom.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Jeremy. I'll be your server tonight...”

Charlie's leg bounced next to me. With every lift of her heel her knee brushed mine.

Brush, brush, brush, brush...

Chaotic energy bubbled from her until I was sure she would launch like a rocket straight from her chair at any moment.

When I glanced over, I caught her sneaking a peek at my mother.

I reached over and laid my palm on her thigh, only I overshot and my fingers curled around the inside of her leg. My breath stuttered in my lungs with the contact. Chance, that fucker... this was all his fault. None of this was in my head. Not a single thought of Charlie in that way and all it took was one ill advised text conversation I unfortunately started to send us down this road to—well, I don't know where, but the week loomed in front of me like a bad omen as the heat from her thigh warmed my palm.

My fingers flexed ever so slightly.

She gasped, the sharp intake of breath making her breasts thrust out.

Big mistake.

And too late to change my mind.

I slapped a smile over every warning bell blaring in my skull and gave her a reassuring squeeze, ignoring the way my blood spiked. A few seconds later, I slid my hand down to her knee where I kept it until I felt the tension radiating from her come to a head, and finally its release with a barely perceptible sigh.

So much for the hand on the lower back leading her into the room... we just blew right past that part into some weird space where we plunged forward too far, then yanked ourselves back.

There was no way I would share a bed with her. Nope. Not going to happen. The room better be a double.

After our moms ordered, the waiter turned his attention to Mariah, who ordered salmon and a house salad. Hold the dressing.

She looked like her order, and again, I wondered what I was thinking when succumbed to a week with her. Longest week of my life. Every moment, I learned something new about her, something ugly that made it nearly impossible to tolerate her. She worshipped at the altar of manipulation and tactical maneuvers. Every action designed to attain power. Mariah's efforts to hook me were never about me; they were about connections. I

represented another wrung on the ladder to status and influence.

Too bad she hadn't taken a closer look.

I came from a successful family, but their success was just that. Theirs. Clearly a concept she hadn't grasped in the circles she traveled in. Not for the first time, I had to wonder what my mother was thinking pushing this match anyway. Mariah's father was one of my father's biggest competitors. They had a rivalry that bordered on unhealthy more often than not. It wasn't like they were going to merge or all of a sudden become fast friends just because their kids married.

For Mariah's part in this, she had likely never looked beyond my family's success into my actual clientele. I was not my father. I respected him. I learned everything I know from him, but my motivations and vision of success was all my own. As a financial planner for individuals, I focused more on the middle class. I made money, but my bank account would never be as wealthy as my parents. Something I was fine with as long as I felt good about my job.

I'd recently taken consulting contracts for larger companies on a case-by-case basis. It wasn't to make my bank account fatter. It wasn't about my own retirement one day. It served as a way to help more people. The minute I took my first contract, I upped my pro bono client percentage from five percent to ten.

Everything about the decision felt right. Two-parent working families trying to plan for their children's college and their eventual retirement. Others wanting to stretch what seemed like a great financial portfolio, unless one of them or their children came down with a chronic illness.

I helped the people in the gray area. The ones who didn't have a fat enough portfolio to interest your average investors. They were the most vulnerable. They had a good start, but no one to teach them how nurture it.

But they had me now, and I took care of their money like it was my own. And at the end of the day, I knew my job helped real people find stability

instead of lining the pockets of the rich.

Mariah definitely wouldn't approve.

I caught a glimpse of Charlie narrowing her eyes at the menu sporting an evil little grin.

Somehow, I thought she would.

"I'll take the ribeye," Charlie said next to me, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Charlie, dear..." Her mother began, the sound of her voice making me tense. "Don't you think something a little lighter would be best?"

I eyed the hand Mrs. McAllister laid on Charlie's wrist, her condescending lilt grating on my nerves.

"And the twice-baked potato," Charlie added, completely ignoring her mother. If you didn't notice the way her hand had balled into a fist on the table.

Mariah grinned, her expression cruelly victorious. I'd never lay my hand on a woman, but for a split second, I entertained the idea of watching Charlie whoop her skinny little ass.

"All those carbs. They'll go straight to your—"

Nope. NOPE. I couldn't do it. "I'll have what she's having, please, and add an extra side of twice-baked potato." My voice left no argument. Charlie's stiff shoulders relaxed with my words as a breath of tension whispered from between her lips. Her fist opened until her palm lay flat on the table.

Mariah sighed with a roll of her eyes and Mrs. McAllister's mouth snapped shut... a welcome victory.

How often did she deal with this shit? Had this happened before in front of me and I just didn't notice? Christ, my mother never would have treated me like that.

But what about my sister, Holly?

I'd never really paid attention, but now I had to wonder.

The conversation resumed. Charlie's dad asked me about my investment firm and my direction in the company. The ice thawed between our mothers enough to spark a discussion about the expansion of the golf course at their country club and the memorial garden they'd been planning. Even Daniel and Mariah took part in the chatter, but none of them, not a one, asked about Charlie.

What the hell?

And the minute the food arrived, Charlie just stared at it.

She'd eat it. She was too defiant not to, but the shit her mother said would be there in every bite.

Well, I could fix that.

Grabbing my fork, I reached over and scooped up a good sized bite of the potato from her plate. Whipped and fluffy with sour cream, the crust dotted with applewood smoked bacon over cheddar cheese; I made sure I got a bit of everything.

Her gaze locked on that first bite, and her tongue darted out to brush her lips.

Yeah, she wanted it. And she deserved to have it without a heaping of guilt.

Turning toward her, I curled my hand around her neck and waited for her to meet my eyes. "Come here."

Glassy eyes met mine before dropping to my mouth.

My gut bottomed out.

My parents worked hard to instill manners and responsibility in me.

PDA? A huge no-no. But right here, right now, I wanted to take a note from Charlie's playbook and add a little defiant shock value to the evening. Fueled by an underlying current of disdain for her mother's words, I said fuck-all to the lessons in propriety and captured her smart mouth in a determined kiss.

Every goddamned sound faded away to the echo of our breath mingling

between us and the drum of my heart pounding behind my ribs.

Her flavor? Bad decisions and mango Chapstick with a hint of my-life-will-never-be-the-same.

At the sound of the squeak from her throat, I squeezed my fingers over the column of her velvety neck, my thumb resting over the spot where her heartbeat raced under her skin.

As a true glutton for punishment, I nipped at that bottom lip before letting her go.

Forehead pressed to hers, I smiled at her dazed expression. “Now, open that smart mouth of yours and eat the potato, Charlie.”

Her lips parted and I settled the fork on her tongue, never taking my gaze off her mouth. My chest squeezed and my jeans shrunk a couple sizes, suspiciously only in the zipper area, as her lips closed around the fork. Time slowed, every last second of feeding her searing itself into my brain. With a low, sultry hum, she dragged her mouth back until the tines popped from between her plump lips.

Fuck my life.

I shifted and silently cursed myself.

Before dinner, sharing a room had been an annoyance.

But now... now five nights had danger written all over it.

And despite every warning flashing through my brain like a light machine at a rave, I didn't have even one ounce of self-preservation to stop the gruff words that came next.

“Good girl.”

Chapter Six

Charlie

WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?

Okay, so I had a lapse in confidence. My mother made comments all the time and usually I let them roll off, but in the wake of the judgment from Nick's mother, and Daniel and Mariah having a front-row seat, I just—I don't know. My brain farted, okay?

Then her saint of a son stuffed me with potato. My potato, his potato, the communal potato.

And now I never wanted to feed myself again.

My feminism swooned and crumpled in a heap between us. When I tried to pick her up, she flitted off like Peter Pan's elusive shadow.

The backstabbing little bitch.

I pushed through the door to our room, Nick strolling along behind me with his hands casually in his pockets like nothing had happened.

Like he didn't just feed me. *Feed me!*

Like he hadn't just, in spite of the food judgment and in the classiest way possible, made me want that fucking potato again. As though he hadn't all but told me to lie back and relax my pretty little head about it because he lived to serve.

I couldn't be the only one affected here. I refused. I would not be one of the many women falling over tits up for him.

No.

My gaze settled on my garment bag hanging casually in the closet courtesy of the concierge and a slow grin spread over my face. The answer to having the upper hand suddenly clear.

Poor Saint Nick.

He was about to have a rough night.

He pulled the cushions off the couch one at a time, the confusion written on his face morphing into dread. "It's not a bed."

I moved the bag to the hook on the inside of the bathroom door and glanced at him over my shoulder. "The bed is right there."

"There's only one."

"Look at you, you can count."

"I'm not sharing the bed with you, Charlie."

Jesus. I might need him to start calling me Charlotte, no matter how much I loathed the name. Now that I heard the low rumble of my name on his lips as he fed me, I ONLY heard my name in that tone.

Nick feeding me was far more intimate than sleeping next to me, but whatever. I shrugged and grasped the zipper. "Fine, take the couch."

"It's scratchy."

I blew out a breath that came out as a half sigh, half laugh. "So be a grown-up and just sleep on the damn bed, Nick."

"With you?"

"It's a king size. I think we can manage. Why, think you can't resist me?"

What I was about to do was rather cruel considering his current crisis, but I'd ask forgiveness later.

Actually, I would rather go down in flames.

I dragged the zipper in one long pull around all three sides and let it fall open, my gaze on him the whole time.

Mr. Composed, I'm totally going to rock your russet world disappeared right before my eyes. Saint Nick, the one who was definitely, probably not so

fun at parties, appeared complete with wide eyes and his mouth hanging open.

Over six feet of rock-hard athletic body, forearms for days, and a fucking beard made for riding covering a square jaw so bloody sexy it made clits ache with a single glance stood there, absolutely speechless.

He raised a finger and tilted his head as though he planned to say something, but then his mouth snapped shut.

A muscle ticked in his cheek.

His ass landed on the couch with a thud.

He interlaced his fingers and settled his steeped fingers against his lips while sliding me a sidelong glance.

Some people traveled with twice as many clothes as they need. Some with an array of makeup cases equipped with colors for any event.

Me... I brought a self-love arsenal that would make a repressed mama's boy's ass pucker with just one glimpse. "Don't be scared, Saint Nick. They're for me, not you."

His eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "All of them? How many holes you got?"

I laughed. "Some are more accommodating than others and capable of taking on multiples. The female body is rather amazing like that." I rolled my lips over my teeth to stifle my laugh at the strangled sound coming from the man behind me.

"I'm not getting in that bed with you," he said with a hint of censure in his tone.

"Suit yourself."

I grabbed my pajamas and ducked into the bathroom. The fan muffled my giggle while I dragged my jeans down my thighs. I'd bet I'd find him in the same spot when I finished.

Good. I would not be off-balance by myself. Especially since this sharing-a-room thing totally killed my weekend plans to diddle my skittle on

every luxury surface imaginable.

I dragged a brush through my hair and threw it up in a messy knot on my head before I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and tossed out my contacts.

A few minutes later and feeling more like me than I had since I arrived, I found Nick leaning back on the couch, a bottle of vodka tipped to his lips. His gaze locked on the garment bag as it rocked back and forth from the force of me whipping the door open.

The first bottle lay empty on the coffee table, and he clutched a third in his other hand.

“Poor Saint Nick. I drove you to drink.”

“If this were any other year, I’d be at the bar right now.”

“So, go. No one’s stopping you.”

“This relationship,” he said making an air quote gesture with his fingers, “Is stopping me. You really want our moms to see me drinking alone?”

I shrugged and peeled back the covers of the bed. “There could be a lot of reasons for you to be there alone. Watching a game. I have a headache. I got my period. Maybe you stuffed me with so much potato there’s no room right now for your eggplant.” With potato fantasies still playing in my brain, I shot him a smirk, my gaze landing on his zipper. “Or maybe you’re more of a baby carrot kind of guy.”

“Judging by the size of the holes you cut out of my pants, shorts, and boxers, you had eggplant fantasies.” His lips curled down in the corners with a sarcastic edge I wasn’t used to seeing on him, but I actually kind of like on account of the expression proved he’s human like the rest of us. “Either way, there’s only one way you’d ever find out and that’s if I lose my mind and decide to smack your smart mouth with it.”

The picture he painted was so out of left field with his personality I doubled over choking on laughter. Tears sprang to my eyes. I slapped my palms against the bed and doubled over with a wheeze.

“The day you smack anyone with your dick is the day I’ll let a dude tell

me what to do.” When I finally managed to look up at him and breath again.

A look I’d never seen crossed his face and the last of the laughter died on my lips. Trapped by his heavy gaze, I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Neither of us looked away, but he finally blinked and the tension snapped.

Goddamn potato hallucinations. That’s all this was. It had to be.

“Good to know, Charlie,” he said quietly.

The words hung in the air like a fucking promise, but a promise of what?

“Why don’t you ever go to the bar with us?” he asked as he flopped his head back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling.

“Because Chance can’t handle the fact that I fuck about as often as he does.” Met with silence, I settled under the covers and glanced over to find him staring at me.

Hard.

“What?”

“Do you?” he asked. The muscles in his cheek jumped.

Huh.

“Do I?”

“Fuck as often as he does?”

It was like he was seeing me for the first time. No bullshit antics. No defense mechanisms. He was looking at me like a man looked at a woman.

His gaze crawled over me and I shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal despite the way my heart raced in response.

“What’s my motivation to lie? What translates to big dick energy for you guys is branded promiscuity for me, so the truth doesn’t exactly make me look good.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed when he swallowed and he nodded, his eyes flicking back to the bag. “The big one. I don’t—” He shook his head and gulped down more vodka. “That one confuses me.”

“Ahh, this sucker.” I hopped up and slid it out of the long mesh accessory

pocket and held it up with both hands. “This is the Wanachi Mega Massager.” I gave it a swing and slapped the head into my palm, the snap echoing in the room. “She’s a girthy one, right? Seventeen inches long. The head is four and a half inches tall on its own.”

This—humor. This felt like safe ground.

He ran his fingers through his hair. “You’re a massage therapist.”

“Yeeeeeeesss.”

“But a regular one, right? You don’t—you’re not—”

He gestured to his lap, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “Not what? Into happy endings?”

“Yeah.” He drained the rest of the little bottle in his hands.

“Only my own? Sure. But I’m not a sex worker.” I shrugged. “No judgment. Just not my thing.”

“So this weekend you planned to—” He waved his arm, but didn’t say the words.

The vodka had definitely started taking hold, and apparently, I was just going to keep filling in the blanks. “Masturbate?”

He blinked, opened his mouth, snapped it shut, then blinked again.

I grinned. “Yes.”

“Jesus.”

“Everyone does it.”

“I know but—”

I dropped the massager on the mattress and plopped down next to it. “Even you, Nick. I bet you do it more than the rest of us.”

“Charlie,” he growled with a glare aimed my way.

I crept my fingertips over the curve of the wand and wiggled my eyebrows. “You into long showers, Nick?”

“Shut it, Charlie.” He slammed the empty bottle on the table and leaned forward, dropping his elbows on his knees. “God, your brother is a real asshole for not being here.”

“Wanna fuck with him?”

He dragged his fingers through his hair and his gaze snapped up to mine.

“What do you mean?”

“How do you think he’d feel about us rooming together?”

“He’d hate it.” He shook his head and his lips twitched. “God, would he hate the hell out of it.”

“Exactly. Come here.” I patted the bed and waited for him to weave his way over. He caught himself on the corner and steadied himself before shuffling between the wall and mattress.

“God, that shit is going straight to your head, isn’t it?”

“Yes, thank fuck.” Weaving on his feet, his gaze landed on my boobs. “You’re not wearing a bra.”

“They’re just boobs, Nick. Your mom has them.”

His eyes squeezed shut. A flush spread over his cheeks, the liquor warming him from the inside out.

Off balance Nick was actually kind of fun to watch.

“Nope. No talking about anything on my mother or father. Nada.”

“God, you must be fun in the bedroom. Yeesh.” I unlocked my phone. “Take your shirt off.”

He didn’t even argue, which told me just how hard the liquor was hitting him. Good, the sphincter would stop being so stubborn and just sleep in the bed.

His black Henley hit the floor.

My mouth ran dry.

Dark hair curled over his hard chest, narrowing to a trail running along the valley of his abdomen and disappearing behind his zipper to the thick bulge there.

Ummm...

He flicked open the button of his jeans, his eyes following my gaze as I followed the hair even farther down.

He smirked. "I'm not hard."

He said it like he was proud of the fact. Proud of that super self-control. And all I could think was if he was that big and not hard, how big was he when—not the point.

I shook my head. *Snap out of it, hussy.* "Good to know, Romeo. Come on... selfie time."

"And..." he trailed off pointing a finger at me. "You might be surprised by how I am in the bedroom. Shocked even." He dropped onto the bed and scooted in next to me.

"Sure I would." I snorted and slung my arm over his shoulder and angled the lens just right. With the alcohol swirling in his gut, he might have thought he talked a good game, but I was not biting. "Now smile."

Chance was going to lose his shit, and I couldn't be happier. I was perfectly sober, but Nick was sporting a super cozy buzz and he'd leaned into me in a way I knew Chance had never seen before. In the background, the toy collection hung on the door promising one hell of a night.

Ah, solid ground. Charlie the troublemaker, perfectly sober, plying Saint Nick with alcohol and seducing him into a night of debauchery.

I tossed a tongue emoji on it and typed ROOMIES! in all caps before sending it off.

Then I silenced my cell. *Have a good night, bro.*

"God, I'm tired," he muttered next to me.

"You're lit."

He gave me a thumbs-up and dropped his arm just to have his fingers land on the massager. His eyebrows drew together, and he yanked his hand back.

Not lit enough, apparently. I picked it up and held it up between us. "Don't be scared... if you're so worried about your virtue, this is your best friend."

"That looks like a goddamned virtue collector for a giant."

“Ha! Good one. The fear in your eyes means you won’t cross it. Your virtue is safe. You were so worried about my vagina having teeth, but see, no teeth marks.”

He stretched and his jeans slid lower. “We’re sleeping with it?”

I glanced up at his face. His face was safe. Except his head lolled in my direction. His eyes slid closed partway, and a sloppy grin played over his mouth.

The mouth that had kissed the fucking breath clean out of me at dinner in front of everyone. The mouth that despite logic, I wanted to do it all over again. “Yup. Right between us. He enjoys being the little spoon.”

He let out a deep, grating laugh that had my nipples pebbling painfully hard under my tank top. Saint Nick transformed into Stunningly Sexy Nick in that moment and knocked the air from my lungs.

I blamed the potatoes for this.

Chapter Seven

ALL THOSE WHO GOT A GOOD NIGHT OF SLEEP RAISE YOUR HAND.

Oh look, not a single hand in the air. That tracks.

I dragged my weary ass to the coffee bar and grabbed a steaming cup of confidence. No way I was joining the table without something to keep me on my toes. A tall cup of coffee with a shot of espresso would ensure I conjured up the perfect comeback at just the right time should the need arise.

It always did, without fail.

The minute I walked into the room, Nick's mom's eyes landed on me and hadn't stopped tracking me since. Our families did everything together growing up. Summers spent at the lake with huge barbecues, boating, and bonfires. Winters on the slopes not only here, but on family trips to Utah and Colorado.

I'd never once felt like a pariah with the McAdams family. My family, sure, that's what happened when you were one of three kids who all went off and became who they were in their hearts and not who their mother wanted them to be. My choices never seemed to bother Nick's mother, but then, she'd never had to worry about me being anything other than her best friend's daughter.

My mom had likely spent the better part of their night gushing over my conquest with my dad. I could only imagine the choice things Nick's mom

said to his.

Maybe I'd test all the waters this morning. I grabbed a monster Danish. Lots of calories. Fat for days. Turning to the table, I spotted Daniel taking a seat, his eyes finding me almost immediately.

What the fuck was he up to anyway?

To say we hadn't ended well would be a colossal understatement. He cheated, I caught him, and instead of raving like a lunatic, or exacting public revenge like so many women would, I went straight for very personal revenge.

It made me wonder if he was really here hoping to find a way back in with me or if my mother summoning him had everything to do with payback.

Cool and calculated, a quality I liked about him at first, until I didn't, he tracked my every move as I weaved through the tables toward them.

No blinking. Not even a hint of a smile.

Payback for sure.

Something told me to avoid being alone with him... because he might just push my ass off a lift or something.

Okay, so I kind of regretted coming down without Nick now. Not so he could protect me, but buddy system and all that. Witnesses were a good thing.

When I arrived at the table, my dad was right there to smile and kiss my cheek and Nick's dad followed suit.

"You look ready to conquer a few black diamonds today," my father said, tucking me in under his arm.

"You know it." I leaned into him, laying my head against his chest for the briefest of moments, before glancing up. "How about you? You want to take on The Dagger with me?"

He was already shaking his head before I finished the question.

"I'm going to leave that trail to you, young lady." He gave my shoulders a squeeze. "Skis or snowboard today?"

I leaned into the affection—needing it, taking from it what I no longer got from my mother. “The board. Every day.”

Giving me one last squeeze, he let me go. “You be careful.”

“Always.” This was why I preferred hanging out with the guys. No passive aggressive comments. Just straight shooters.

Now to see how Nick had done at shutting down my mother.

She’d always been careful about her figure. And while she’d made a few comments over the years, she’d never been quite so blatant and never in front of others. Or at least in front of non-family. Daniel and Mariah having a front row seat only added insult to injury leaving me choking on bitterness.

My mom acted as though my eating red meat and a potato would send Nick running for the hills.

If it had that effect on him, I didn’t want him anyway. Plus, Nick would never do that to me. If anything, Nick was solid. A rock of dedication. He’d never betray—

God, I’m talking like he’s really my boyfriend and this isn’t just some convenient way to avoid two assholes who actually would be rather good for each other.

If they’d stop looking at us and start looking at each other, we could all take a damn breath already.

I pulled out the chair next to my mom and slapped the Danish down between us with a snap of attitude.

She did a double take, her lips pinching together, before she finally smiled. “Where’s Nick?”

Mrs. McAdams glanced over, her attention one hundred percent on my answer despite Mariah still chatting beside her.

“I tired him out last night,” I said with a wink, unable to resist goading Nick’s mom. “He’s sleeping in.”

“Oh, I—*Oh!*” My mom’s hand flew to her chest and her cheeks turned pink.

Ewww.

The sheer joy on my mother's face at the idea that I rode Nick, stayed on for more than eight seconds, and stuck the landing had bile climbing up the back of my throat.

"Yes, best to let him sleep then." The sheer delight on her face stood in stark contrast to whatever the hell was going on with Mrs. McAdams's expression.

I tore off a piece of pastry and popped it into my mouth, holding Mrs. McAdams's gaze the entire time.

My mother positively bubbly about my not-so-sexy sex life with Nick? Now that was one I didn't have on my bingo card.

She offered not one peep about the food since clearly I had spent the night servicing my man, and I intended to ride that high as far as it would take me. If I didn't plan to take on the hardest trail on the mountain, The Dagger, I'd let it walk me right back to the coffee bar for a second danish.

She didn't need to know I'd spent my night tossing and turning, studying him in the dark every time my eyes popped open, which seemed to be about every hour.

Still under the influence of the potato, no doubt.

I traced over his every feature. The dark, wavy hair smoothed back from his forehead and the disgustingly long lashes a woman would kill for. Stretched out on his back, he fell asleep where he laid, his hand up over his head, the other drawing my gaze to where his palm rested against the deep V carved along his abs, his long fingers curled along his jeans brushing the bulge behind his zipper.

Every time he stretched, I held my breath, waiting to see if the waistband slid lower.

By the time early morning filtered through the gauzy curtains, I had a seething lady boner and a raging clit shaking her angry fist.

God, but he was beautiful and so very different from... well, anyone.

Any other time, I would have just grabbed a toy or two, disappeared into the bathroom, and taken care of business, but I couldn't bring myself to give up the view. I probably should have just touched myself right there beside him. He slept like the dead.

But by the time I got out of bed, he'd finally shifted, and the position was photographic gold. I ducked out while he was in the shower, but not before sending Chance another message while ignoring his litany of threats in dozens of others.

I pushed his buttons on the other side of the world and pushed a few more here. Hey, I took my normalcy where I could get it.

A firm hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed.

"Good morning." Nick aimed the words at the table before bending down and stopping right next to my cheek. His hand drifted to my neck, his fingers tangling in the ends of my ponytail giving it a firm tug. This was the second time he'd pulled my hair and Jesus fuck, this was so going to be my new fantasy. He turned me toward him just enough to settle his lips along the shell of my ear.

"You're in so much trouble, spawn. When I get you alone, it's payback time."

My nipples tightened to painful points.

Saint Nick must have checked his messages from Chance.

The low rasp of his voice vibrated over me. Warm, minty breath brushed along my skin, sending a powerful burn singing through my blood. The two conspired against me, tapping into the unfulfilled, furious lust from my long horny night stuck between my beloved toy arsenal and Nick's hard, languid body.

He drew my face to his and soundly claimed my mouth in a slow, deep kiss. His tongue caressed mine with unhurried long strokes while his fingertips kneaded my flesh. The combination left me a puddle of humming, aroused mush slumping in my seat.

A little over twelve hours ago, I told Nick he couldn't handle me.

Now I had to wonder if I could handle him.

It took one potato and two bone-melting kisses before I realized the game we played. Every time I thought I had the upper hand he'd strike.

So far, the score was his three to my zero.

What the fuck had I started?

Chapter Eight

THE SECOND KISS TOLD ME I WAS IN DEEP SHIT.

What was supposed to be a private word of warning for the picture she snapped of me in the early morning hours *and* a sign of affection for the table became possession.

The minute I tasted her again, it sparked a craving.

The mini bar was powerless to erase her taste. I spent a disgusting amount of time in the shower, fucking my fist, biting my forearm to keep her name from spilling from my lips.

Satisfyingly dissatisfied, yeah, I know, it made no sense, but here we were. And when I was done, I stepped out of the bathroom to find her gone.

In the silence of our room, her brown sugar and vanilla voodoo body wash scent still lingering, want flooded me. In that singular moment, the only thing I could think about was when I could taste her again.

Ignoring everyone at the table including my own parents—definitely unlike me—I reached for her. And if anyone was unclear about where I stood with Charlie McAllister, they weren't now.

My fake girlfriend got less and less fake with every laugh, every touch, and every shared breath.

Fuck me.

Now, snapping my boot into my binding, with a breakfast I don't

remember tasting swirling in my gut, her kiss lingered despite every bold flavor I'd pummeled my tongue with since.

The condition better not be permanent.

With my second boot snapped in, I pushed off, ski skating my way over to the lift where Charlie waited in line.

"You took off without me."

She peeled the straps out of her helmet and settled it on her head. "You were in the shower for a really long time, Nick. With all of my toys. Coincidence?"

"I don't need toys."

"Went old school and used your hand. That sounds like you. Classic."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just an observation. You're simple. Polite. Keepin' it vanilla with the self-love. It's all... well, consistent. Very you."

I tugged her straps and dragged her toward me until her board stopped between my skis and I loomed over her. My proximity forced her to crane her neck to meet my eyes.

Good.

"Keep it up and you're going to find out just how impolite I can be." Tension settled in the ridge of my shoulders. Just a few more inches and I could take another taste.

Hovering over her, I took in her heavy eyelids and the loaded glance flicked to my mouth.

I breathed her in.

"No need for the show," she whispered. "There's no one around to see it."

"Maybe it's not for them, maybe—"

"Well, aren't you two cozy," Daniel said, skidding to a stop right next to us.

I dropped my hands, and her head swung in his direction. "Fuck off,

Daniel.”

The laugh was out before I could stop it earning a hard glance from Charlie’s ex.

“So much energy. Is Nick not burning that off with you between the sheets? Too bad. She can be a real wildcat—”

“Finish what you’re about to say and you leave in an ambulance. Got it?”

Charlie gasped.

Daniel puffed out his chest. “Bring it.”

“Nope. You guys are not doing this shit.”

“She’s right,” Daniel said. “How about we make this dignified? The Dagger. First one to the bottom wins.”

“We haven’t even done a practice run yet,” Charlie said.

“You need one, Nick? I don’t, but hey, I can wait if you want to get a run or two in if you think you need the practice.”

This son of a bitch. He’d had his eyes on me, and definitely on us, but had he spent any time focusing on Charlie in all that time?

No.

Because he didn’t want her. She was reduced to a toy he’d cast aside that he suddenly wanted to play with the minute someone else showed interest. He needed to control her. Nothing more, nothing less.

To him, she was merely a possession.

Couldn’t he see she was the last woman on the planet to let a man possess her? Or did he just not care?

Maybe that was the challenge.

It stopped here.

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

The chilly ride to the top of the mountain took eight minutes in all. Eight minutes of Daniel whistling on one side of the quad like he already had this in the bag and Charlie shooting daggers at both of us while muttering the word “idiots” as often as possible in between.

“This is stupid and juvenile.”

“He won’t stop until someone puts him in his place.”

“I’ve got news for you, Nick. I know him a lot better than you do and even then, he will not stop.”

Only a handful of skiers joined us on the single most dangerous trail on the mountain. Hairpin turns leading into dangerous narrow sections wide enough for just one left little room for passing. Whoever took the early lead would hold the edge for most of the ride.

Steep inclines, craggy rock outcroppings jutting out over those sections only upped the stakes. If you made it through all of that, moguls lay in wait, ready to attack your body until your teeth rattled.

Charlie shuffled over and grabbed the front of my jacket, pulling me in close.

“Baby, if you want one more kiss, all you have to do is say so,” I said, unable to resist the opportunity to get under her skin.

“God, you’re a boob. Listen—” She hooked her gloved hand through the goggles on my helmet and yanked my head down to hers. “He cheats. He loves the hairpins, but he sucks at moguls.”

I glanced to where Daniel stood watching us. “Got it. Does this mean you’re okay with me kicking his ass now?”

She glanced over her shoulder, her lips flattened with irritation. “Kick his ass, but you’ll still only be second place, because I’m taking you both out.” She nipped at my upper lip and darted her tongue out for a lick before she released my goggles, letting them snap against my helmet.

“That’s my girl.”

For now.

I shot a wink at the asshole ex and grinned. He didn’t stand a chance.

On the count of three, we took off. Actually, the asshole jumped the start because he was an absolute shit bag.

What Charlie ever saw in that guy, I’d never know. He was good looking

enough, I suppose. A full head of hair and in shape, but his character reeked of deep rot.

Tucking low, I launched down the first hill, taking every bit of speed the packed snow would give me. In a matter of seconds, we'd veer left into unpredictable territory riddled with danger.

The wide ninety-degree turn narrowed from thirty feet wide to ten at most. The angle of the turn and outer lip created a slingshot effect, scooping us right along with it and pitching us diagonally down a three-foot wide ledge along a rock face overlooking the beginner and intermediate trails unfolding down the mountain.

From their vantage point below, this part of The Dagger looked like a Hot Wheels track attached to a wall, with us shooting across toward Devil's corner where we'd have to jump to make the one-hundred-and-fifty-degree sharp right shooting back the other way before pitching us into the wooded wasteland. A section littered with trees and rock and completely ungroomed.

I dug in my edge, shaving off a bit of speed, but ready to take the corner and stay tight on Daniel's skis.

Still thirty feet short of the turn, I spotted Charlie's teal jacket out of the corner of my eye before she dropped over the edge.

The air lodged in my lungs. My ski bobbed, but with another glance, I saw her land on the trail below and shoot straight out of sight.

Fuck but my heart.

She learned the trick from Chance, and she'd gotten good at it on the board. So I knew it was coming, but I never expected her to push it and take on a fifteen-foot drop this soon just to get ahead.

Daniel and I both cut hard right, catching our edges deep, before twisting our shoulders and pushing off at the knees.

The minute we made it to the bottom, I gained on him through the trees. He followed the path already cut by two or three skiers before us, but I shot left where the trees were thicker and stayed low to avoid the branches.

We were head-to-head on the moguls with Charlie's words in my head.

My lungs ached. I kept my knees loose, as the force from every bump threatened to shoot straight through my legs into my skull the minute I tensed up.

At the end, I glanced back to find Daniel still fighting the last third of the section. I tucked and crouched low, racing down the trail where it widened out, darting in and out of other skiers. Spotting Charlie, I headed right at her and slid to a hard stop.

Lungs heaving, we both hunched over, sucking in precious gulps of air as Daniel came skidding in last.

He yanked his goggles from his eyes and glared over at us. "Best two out of three."

"Nope, I won. You guys want to do some dick measuring, you're doing it without me," Charlie said as she arched her back and stretched her neck from side to side.

"Give it up, man. You lost."

"Not yet I didn't," he said, baring his teeth. "Two out of three. Now!" He reached out, catching Charlie by surprise when he grabbed her wrist and tried to yank her toward the lift.

"Hey—"

"Get. Your. Hand. Off. Her." Hot piercing anger pounded in my chest. I swung out and knocked his arm away when he didn't let go of her fast enough.

In seconds I was out of my bindings and in his face, forcing his eyes up because I had at least three inches on him. "Fuck with her and find out, Sloan."

His chest swelled with a furious drag of air into his lungs before he bumped into mine. For a minute, he seemed as though he might push.

Do it.

Fucking do it.

Was this how he acted when they were a couple? Did he lay a hand on her then too? I couldn't picture her letting anyone get away with abusing her, but then, I never expected to see her hesitate to eat because of some pithy comment from her mother either.

He blinked, his shoulders drooped just slightly, and I knew he'd cave.

And I should have let him walk away when he did.

He brought his palms up and took a step back.

"Best two out of three. Now." I clicked into my skis, my eyes never leaving him as he headed for the quad.

"Is that the first time?" I snapped my pole against my boot to knock the packed snow off.

She gripped my jacket. "Nick—"

My gaze flashed to hers. I didn't know what she saw there, but she let me go and swallowed hard.

"Is that the first time he put his hands on you in anger?"

"He's still breathing right?"

"Unfortunately. Yes or no, Charlie?"

"Yes. It's the first time. And last. If it makes you feel any better... he got his before we broke up."

"Good. How?"

"I superglued his dick to his thigh while he slept."

The rage in my chest loosened its grip and I laughed. "Of course you did. Wow."

"Hey, he cheated." She shrugged with no emotion behind the words. Simple. Direct. 100% Charlie. "This is getting—I don't know. I'm sorry. This wasn't supposed to be complicated."

"No complication. He needs his ass beat. You already did it. He's a slow learner. I'll finish the job." I grabbed her collar and hauled her up under my mouth and dropped another kiss on her lips because apparently I'm racking them up now. "Go have fun... I'll find you later."

“You’re going to be sore as fuck.” She cupped my cheek, and I turned my head and nipped at her thumb.

“That’s what hot tubs are for. I’ll meet up with you later. We’ll talk about that reckless move you pulled up there.”

She laughed and shoved me toward the lift. “Can’t wait.”

Chapter Nine

I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE CATCHING FEELINGS, BUT THAT WAS EXACTLY WHAT was happening.

Nick's fault.

All of it.

For someone blindsided by our arrangement, he sure knew how to play the part with ease.

Because of course he did. Like I said, he's good at everything. *Everything.*

His every reaction to any slight in my direction screamed, "She's mine."

Every cell in my body noticed, from my clit to my freaking stupid heart.

I loved Nick.

Now don't go getting excited. Of course, I loved him. He'd been an annoying part of my life for forever. One more testosterone-wielding butthead to intimidate the boys I liked and be an all-around watchful eye. He and Chance starred in so many of my firsts. They taught me how to ride a two-wheeler. They took me fishing, hiking, and camping. Everything they did, for the most part, they invited me to do too.

I grew up shooting hoops with Nick, roasting marshmallows with him, and stealing the good tube every chance I got when we were out on the lake.

And he let me... every single time.

He'd been stitched into every part of my past, but what we were doing here in the present, it made me want for a whole different future.

This wasn't supposed to happen to us.

I needed distance.

Which was why I was in an outdoor hot tub, a blanket of stars in the inky sky overhead, with the subtle hum of skiers and lifts drifting over from the mountain where night skiing was in full swing, with three guys from New York City.

Without Nick.

Hey, I left him a note. And he couldn't say I didn't warn him he'd need a hot tub later.

Besides, it wasn't like I was cheating. Nick and I weren't real, and these guys were definitely not interested in the equipment I had.

In the short time I'd been out here, I'd gotten to know them. It only seemed right sharing communal hot tub waters and all. Matt, Seth, and Seth's husband, Landon, owned a marketing firm in the city. They hightailed it to New England as a reward for a successful year firmly in the green.

Since Seth was a Maine native, they came here. From the way they hung so close to one another, I strongly suspected Seth and Landon had an open marriage, and Matt dabbled in some kinky adventures with them.

They seemed like the audacious types who could appreciate my collection upstairs.

And if I was right, their sexy plans might be a bust if I couldn't work the twinge out of Matt's back he earned after a full day of black diamond runs.

"You've got a huge knot right here." I pressed down with the heel of my hand and rolled along the hard ball under his skin while I held his shoulder, keeping him as still as possible.

He groaned. "It hurts, but for the love of God, I'm begging you to not stop."

"I'm not a quitter. I won't stop until you feel relief."

“Am I interrupting?” Nick’s amused voice rumbled behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. He stood there, a grin tipping his lips, a pair of swim shorts slung low on his hips and a towel flipped over his shoulder.

“Hey.” Oh god, that sounded breathless. Or maybe it was just me.

Matt glanced over his shoulder with an arched brow.

Okay, so not me. I totally sounded like a bitch in heat after gobbling up the view.

“Hey,” he said, leaning against the beam nearest to the tub. “Steppin’ out on me?”

“I have a feeling you’d be welcome to join us,” I said with a laugh. Matt sat on the lower step between my thighs while I pummeled the muscles in his back. Seth and Landon, well, they occasionally brushed against me as they made out in the corner closest to me.

Matt hummed, his interested gaze snagging on Nick and traveling over him top to bottom. “He’s definitely invited. He yours?”

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s not,” Nick answered with a firm nod. “I’m hers.”

His tone left no room for argument, the sound setting off butterflies low in my belly. Two words and he had me knocked right back off balance, even more so than this morning with Daniel.

“So, I’ll just appreciate the view then.”

“What on earth!” My mother’s shrill voice cut across my nerves and the butterflies fluttered to the pit of my stomach in a slow death, cooling my fevered blood and obliterating any buzz of arousal lingering in my veins.

Okay, so this looked bad. I definitely appeared to be stepping out on my man orgy style.

And my mother, God love her, was actually standing there clutching a set of pearls around her throat.

Because, of course she was.

Nick grinned and nodded to me, that smug smirk saying, *how do you plan*

to explain this one?

Challenge accepted.

“What’s going on here?” Nick’s mother demanded from where she stood with my mom when no one spoke. Ironically, she was not clutching a set of pearls. Instead she had her hands on her hips, her chest puffed out, ready to battle.

A total mood... and one I had to respect despite having been on the receiving end of sharp daggers flying at me from narrowed eyes.

“It’s okay, Nick’s a cuck. He likes this.”

Nick’s mouth flattened into a grim line and his eyes blazed with a furious intensity, promising revenge.

“A cuck? What’s a cuck? Is this a sex thing?”

Matt glanced over at Seth and Landon, who’d stopped fucking each other with their tongues long enough to take in the show. They all burst out laughing and in unison said, “For everyone but the cuck.”

“So, it is a sex thing,” his mother said. “Nick, are you gay?”

“No, Mom, I’m not gay.” He took each of their elbows and steered them back the way they came, but not before shooting a hot, hard look over his shoulder and mouthing the words, “You’re dead.”

Chapter Ten

CHARLIE WAS TRYING TO KILL ME.

I couldn't prove it, but if this were a trial, a jury of all men would seal her fate.

“Charlie!” I half growled, half yelled her name as I barged into our room. I stood in the fucking lobby in nothing but swim shorts, having to explain to both of our mothers in front of at least thirty people eavesdropping what cuckolds are. The next half hour I tried to convince them I was not one, Charlie was only kidding, and no, I didn't need to see a sex therapist.

My hammering heart echoed in my ears, and blood pounded through my veins. My palms ached from clenching my fists for over an hour and now she had to pay.

We were supposed to be a team on this.

As near as I could tell, I was getting a glimpse of what an actual relationship with Charlie would be like. Practical jokes, misunderstandings, a lot of anger, a constant state of horniness, all morphing into the singular desire to wrap my hands around that soft neck and choke the life right out of her.

My moral compass had a workout coming.

Stalking to the closed bathroom door, I pounded with the side of my fist. “Get your ass out here, spawn.”

The sound of her muffled laugh broke through the red haze, followed by a loaded sigh. But it was the third sound reaching my ears that changed everything.

Buzzing.

That. Little. Shit.

“You better not be doing what I think you’re doing.”

“Be out in a few minutes!” she called, her voice grating on my every ball-aching nerve. The sound of the jets kicking on drowned out the sounds that followed, leaving me with nothing but my very vivid imagination and deprived, aching dick.

The fuck she would.

Saint Nick, my ass.

I grabbed my wallet and slid out the two bobby pins inside. The beauty of resorts like this tucked into nostalgic towns in the northeast? They liked to hold on to their original aesthetic, focusing on restoration instead of modernization. It also meant I could be in that bathroom in under ten fucking seconds.

I stripped the rubber ends off with my teeth. With a couple of twists, I had the pins straightened and buried in the lock.

As an only child, I had no older brothers to teach me this kind of shit, but I had Chance. And Chance loved getting into places he didn’t belong.

I would bet he never thought I’d be using the skills he taught me to barge in on his baby sister while she got off in our tub, but hindsight was a kick in the balls. At least for older brothers.

The lock caught, clicked, and released. My chest tightened. I sucked in a breath and threw open the door.

The tub stood on a two-tier platform just under a picture window facing the west side of the mountain, putting her on display like an offering.

If I stood on that first step, right at the edge, I could tip her head back and fuck her throat. The vivid image flashing in my mind propelled my feet, and

in three strides, I was on the first tier and fuck my life, as I suspected, the perfect lineup.

She completely ignored my presence and continued to focus on her pleasure. Another part of her plan to drive me batshit crazy, no doubt.

Frothy water lapped over her breasts. Full and round, they rose and fell with her labored breathing. She pinched the one and her lips parted on a gasp. Her other hand disappeared under the water. With her head thrown back, her eyes squeezed shut, her throat flexed as a strangled cry tore from her throat.

Motherfucker.

Water sloshed as she bucked against her fingers. It shed over her skin, running in rivulets over tight nipples, as her lungs heaved with the power of her orgasm. She let go of her nipple and threw her arm back and gripped the lip of the tub. Bowing up, she sent more water rocking up the side, giving me a quick flash of her thighs flexing, her soft belly, and tattoos wrapping from her back around her ribs.

She better plan on more because she'd be doing this all over again.

On my watch.

Under my command.

Who was going to keep her from fucking me was the right question. Only little did I know, the fucking came as everything she did except ride my cock. Fucking me was the wounded look she struggled to hide. It was her making light of our sleeping arrangements and making the setup so ridiculous, I slid into sleep without agonizing over it. It came in the way she said fuck you to the showdown between Daniel and me and beat us both because both because she didn't need a man to compete for her.

And it came in the way she studied me when she thought I was sleeping. Curious, soft eyes raking over every inch of my skin. Instead of the predictable heat of attraction, I found a quiet wonder and affection.

Between the soft and the spunk, I was about to break the code and fuck the spunk right out of my best friend's little sister.

A pink flush flooded her cheeks, and she smiled before glancing up at me. “Can I help you?”

Shoulders tight, cock aching, I loomed over her, burning with want. We’d get there, but first, “I just wasted the good part of an hour trying to convince our mothers that I don’t need a sex therapist.”

“Bummer.” Her laugh mocked me.

I had a powerful urge to not just bury my cock in that tempting throat but bury it so deep she choked on it.

“Meanwhile, you take off up here and decide it’s playtime.”

She scooped up a handful of water, and ran it over the best tits I’d ever seen. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I was frustrated.”

“Frustrated? You were frustrated.”

Her gaze snagged on the front of my shorts. With her eyes blazing, she bit her lip.

She wanted it. Good, because she was getting it.

I yanked the string of the waistband and forced them down until my cock sprang free.

Her eyes shot open wide, and I smirked down at her while I grasped my shaft and gave it a long, purposeful stroke.

“You want to talk about frustrated,” I said, reaching for her hair and burying my fingers in the wet waves. I locked the strands in my grasp and tugged until a surprised gasp broke from her lips.

“You’ve had me on the ragged edge from the minute you wiggled that round ass of yours against my dick in front of our parents. Then the kiss—”

“That kiss was all you, Saint—”

I yanked her head back. “Do I look like a fucking saint to you right now, spawn?”

Her hand crept between her legs to the bare pussy just under the surface of the water. “Do you think breaking in here and pulling my hair makes you

anything else?”

I bent over her and pinched her jaw between my finger and thumb and hovered over her mouth, not touching, but close enough that I felt the puffs of breath panting from her lips wafting over mine.

“Breaking in and pulling your hair is only the beginning.” With my eyes on her, I bit her bottom lip.

She gasped. From arousal or pain, I didn’t know. I didn’t care. When it broke free, I let her go and swiped the bite with my tongue.

Beyond the ripple of water laid a hot-pink vibrator at the bottom of the tub between her legs. “Seems like a shame to settle on just one when you have an arsenal.”

“I’m limited on hands.”

“Hmmm,” I hummed over her mouth. “That you are. I can fix that, but first...” I ran my hand along the column of her neck, not letting myself go any farther. Pushing to my feet, I guided my cock to her mouth and ran the head along her plump lip. “Open, spawn.”

Defiance blazed in her eyes, but she parted her lips anyway.

I hooked my thumb over her bottom lip and tugged. “You’re going to have to open a lot wider than that.”

When she did, my balls drew tighter, and I pulled down, tipping her head back even farther, stretching that throat open before sliding into the hot, wet cavern of her mouth.

Teeth scraped along the veins of my cock and I shivered, my eyes sinking closed, my hips aching to flex until I felt her throat bulge under my fingers from the invasion.

“You’ve done a lot of shit to me over the years, but the picture you sent Chance of me cuddling that fucking cunt rocket out there, that’s the one you’re going to pay for, for years to come.”

I thrust deep, and God fucking help me, her throat accepted me. She grabbed my ass, her nails sinking into my skin, the sting prompting my hips

to buck, sending me deeper.

Her burning gaze never left my face, even as tears sprang to her eyes. She whimpered and squeezed her thighs together, her fingers clutching the edge of the tub until her knuckles turned white with the force.

Back bowing, she bucked, and I pulled back while she took a jagged gulp of air. Before she could get her bearings, I buried myself deep again.

“You should see the sight you make stretching around my cock, spawn.” I grazed my fingers along her cheek. “That devious little mouth of yours utterly destroyed by my cock.

She stretched her other hand behind me and sunk her nails deep. A gleam of satisfaction burned in her eyes as she arched until she had both arms wrapped around my hips and the globes of my ass at the mercy of those biting claws tearing at my skin.

With a rebellious glint in her watering eyes, she devoured me with her mouth and marked me with her nails until beads of sweat broke out along my spine. My body begged for release in the scorch of flames flowing under my skin.

And I wanted more.

Locking both hands on her throat, I closed my eyes and sucked in a painful gulp of air. “Do it again.”

I focused on the rosy flush spreading over her breasts, coveting the tight nipples I planned to spend an obscene amount of time devouring.

Her nails caught on the previous scratches even as they carved new ones.

Helpless to stop the growl, I yanked free.

She smiled up at me as she swiped away the saliva running from the corners of her mouth. “If these are the consequences of that picture, you better sleep with one eye open, because I see so much more humiliation in your future.”

“We’ll see if you still feel that way when we’re through. Out of the tub.”

“Where are we going?”

“Wherever the hell I want, and right now, I want you out of the tub.”

I kicked off my shorts and tossed her a towel. Leaving her there to dry off, I grabbed the garment bag off the door and threw it on the bed.

She watched me from the doorway as I lay a pillow down the center of the mattress and lay the wand along the middle.

“What—”

“Get on the bed.”

“Nick—”

My gaze snapped to hers. “Get on the fucking bed, Charlie.”

She swallowed hard and slipped the towel from the knot between her tits before sauntering over. All accentuated movements, the little shit tried to short-circuit my brain with a view of her ass and flashes of her glistening pussy as she crawled smack in the middle of the mattress, right behind the wand.

Ink carved along her spine and shoulders, lightning jagged and sharp like veins threading under her skin, shooting in every direction.

It was her. Pure lightning. Loud, electric, powerful, unexpected, and fucking wondrous to watch.

“I’m disappointed, Charlie.”

I stepped toward her.

“So many toys and accommodating holes, yet all you had in that tub with you was a simple pink vibrator.” I dragged my fingertips over the clear plastic sleeves holding an array of toys in a variety of shapes, sizes, smooth, ridged, you name it, she had it.

“It got the job done,” she said with a shrug.

“Did it? So you’re completely satisfied? No part of you left wanting?”

“Sure.” Her thighs squeezed again. It was subtle, but I saw it and I knew she was a liar.

My eyes cut to the plugs in a row under the vibrators, the variety of lube, all promising unique pleasures.

And the clamps.

So many ways to use her body and all sat unused.

Until now.

I took the nipple clamps out first, I tested the tension. I assumed she's already adjusted them to those tight little buds of hers, but the ache from the broken skin on my ass demanded I push her. I twisted each of them a half turn, and she rewarded me with a sharp, surprised breath.

No doubt she thought I didn't know my way around her equipment.

Heat flared in her eyes as I reached for her, drawing my finger along one stiff peak. She swayed toward me and I clamped the first nipple, eliciting a shiver as pleasure zinged through her.

"You're a liar, spawn. Your mouth is all lies, but your face tells the truth. Your parted lips, the flush blooming over your creamy skin, the way you try in vain to soothe the ache between your legs... They've all conspired to reveal the liar you are." Kissing her mouth, teasing her tongue with mine, I pinched the other nipple until she was whimpering and panting out my name in a needy whisper.

Another clamp snapped into place, drawing a sharp hiss.

I traced along her ribs, over the swell of her belly, and dipped my fingers between her legs.

Hot, drenched, and pulsing with her futile attempts to grasp at any bit of relief she could find. Her thighs flexed on me as I parted her impossibly wet pussy and sank two fingers deep.

I ground my teeth as the ache in my balls ratcheted up several notches from the feel of her wet heat gripping my fingers. Pulling them free, I brought them to her lips and sent them deep... to the knuckle. With every tug of her tongue, I memorized her mouth, her mewling pleasure telling me just how much she liked the taste of her own pussy.

Chapter Eleven

I WASN'T JUST GOING TO FUCK CHANCE'S LITTLE SISTER.

I was going to destroy the desire for any man beyond me.

“I bet you do this when you're alone. You can't reach that sweet pussy with your mouth, but you find a way to eat yourself, don't you, spawn?”

She tried to deny it past my fingers, but the challenge in her eyes gave her away. Wrenching free, I took her mouth hard and deep.

Musky and addicting, her flavor burst on my tongue, and I couldn't get enough. I wanted to devour every inch of her pussy clear to her ass. I wanted every hole filled up and her riding that fucking wand until she was a crying, convulsing mess as overwhelming pleasure swept her away.

Tearing my mouth from hers, I snatched the garment bag and hauled it over to us. “How much can you take?” I traced over her bottom lip while she glanced down at the plugs.

“How much do you want to give?”

All. I wanted her impossibly full. When reality hit us tomorrow, when we were supposed to snap out of this arrangement, I wanted her to choose me... and this.

“Everything.” I slid the biggest plug from the pocket. Heavy cool glass sat heavy in my palm as I snatched the tingling lube from the sleeve. Setting the toy in her palm, I flipped open the cap and squeezed a generous amount

into my cupped fingers.

With my nose buried along the edge of her neck, I savored the way she tipped her cheek against me, wordlessly pulling me in even more.

I trailed my fingers over the crease of her ass and dipped deeper, rubbing the thick liquid along her tight hole.

She jerked in my arms, her gasp loud in my ear.

Every touch killed me bit by bit leaving me dying inside. Desperate to taste her. To fuck her. To keep her.

“You drive me insane, spawn. Everything you say, everything you do. You are the lightning, and fuck if I can’t resist your strike.” I sank a finger in her ass while tugging the cord to the nipple clamps and she cried out, her body bowing into me, her face turning into mine, where she slayed me with a deep, devouring kiss.

We each fought for the upper hand as our tongues tangled, our teeth gnashed, and I continued fucking her hole with my finger.

“Add another,” she moaned into my mouth.

She didn’t have to tell me twice.

The minute I gave her what she wanted, she cried out, sinking down, driving me deeper, taking more, until she was quivering in my arms, with beads of sweat dotting her fevered skin.

She fucked herself mercilessly on my hand and I should have known, should have been prepared for her to slay me this way.

My pulse pounded behind my eyes, every breath tearing its way out of my chest. I yanked my fingers free and stepped back, the abrupt loss causing her to fall forward on her hands.

“Turn around and put it in.”

Gasping, she tossed her head back, wet ropes of hair slapping against her back, her glazed eyes full of questions.

I nudged the underside of her jaw and bit her chin. “Turn around where I can watch that plug stretch you wide before disappearing into that tight little

asshole. Now.”

The sheer look of awe on her face had me grinning. Struck silent, she scrambled around and bent down until her nipples dragged over the sheets.

Pre-cum leaked down the head of my cock as I stroked. I couldn't help but reach out and palm her ass while I settled in for the show. She brought the cool glass to her asshole and huffed out a series of tight breaths as she pushed it in farther, slowly stretching that ring of muscle until her lungs heaved.

Just past the widest section, her body naturally drew the toy in, her asshole settling around the base, locking it in place.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears as my heart threatened to explode in my chest. I flicked the switch to the wand making it vibrate to life. “Now ride.”

She reached for me, but I stepped away. I just wanted to watch her. Needed to watch her. “Straddle it, Charlie.”

She growled, her hands fisted against the bed, making her look like a rabid little fox, glaring up at me. “I swear to God if you don't fuck me—”

“I am fucking you. Just as brutally as you've fucked me with your antics since you could walk,” I said. “Now wrap those fucking thighs around that wand and ride, Charlie.”

She craned her neck, like she had to shake off the visceral instinct to defy me. But I waited her out and continued to stroke my cock, slowly, methodically, leaving no ridge untouched with each pass.

With her gaze locked on my movements, her body took over.

Settling over the wand, she adjusted, her fingers disappearing between her legs and parting that pretty pink pussy until she had the head nestled against just the right spot.

Her eyelids drifted shut and her hips rolled. Lips parting on a gasp, she disappeared into a haze of need, her hands moving over her own skin, teasing the cord between her tits, tugging her nipples before letting them snap back.

A low groan slipped from her lips.

“Talk to me, baby. Tell me how you feel.”

“Full. Hot. God, I ache.” A whimper escaped as she ground down against the vibrating head. “Nick, please...”

“Soon, baby. God, if you could see yourself right now... I’ll never scrub this view of you from my mind. Keep rolling those gorgeous hips and haunt me forever.”

Chance may not forgive me. I had to accept that when I had no way to tell him just what his little sister did to me, both in and out of her clothes.

She delighted in driving me to madness and in the quiet moments between, unconsciously snagging my heart with windows into her own.

And right here and now, her brazen side, with a complete lack of shame, exuded such potent sexual power I had to fight the urge to drop to my knees in actual worship while watching her come apart.

A guttural cry tore from her throat filled the room. Her hips jerked in a jagged pattern as she clasped the wand and ground her clit against the head. With her head thrown back, she spasmed and shuddered, drowning in sensation.

Every move, every sound, the scent of sex filling the room, it all carved itself into my memories ensuring a lifetime of playing this moment over and over again as I grasped at all the same sensations rocking me in this moment.

My throat ran dry and my palms itched to touch her. I forced myself to stay back, to stand on the outside of her orgasm as it shook her to the core.

Push and pull. All the time. In the smallest of ways, everything between us reduced to the fragile balance of opposing forces.

Snatching a condom from my grooming kit on the dresser, I made my way to the bed and climbed up, settling in behind her. Her head fell back against my shoulder while I rolled on protection. I licked along her salty shoulder, the flavor of her damp skin tattooing itself on my tongue.

Everything had changed. We’d never be who we were to each other before.

I tucked my hand under her hair and gripped her neck and guided her

down until her face settled against the mattress, her ass high in the air, and the wand vibrated against her swollen clit. The jeweled base of the plug winked up at me. With a firm tug, just enough to send sensation rippling through her, I worked myself inside her.

“God, you’re so full. I feel that glass filling that fucking amazing ass dragging along the side of my cock from the inside.” I sank deeper, gritted my teeth, and shook my head as the orgasm I’d been staving off screamed for more. “Christ.”

She let out a choked cry. “Nick! I can’t—just do it. It’s so much. I’m begging you. Please. I need to come again.”

My hands gripped her ass. I dragged her up, her hips jutting in the air at a crude angle. “You can and you will do it,” I said and sank the rest of the way in. “Trust me, baby. I’ll take care of you.”

She yelped but ground back on me the way she did with my fingers, so I moved. I leaned over her and fisted her hair with my other palm curled around her hip. Dragging out of her tight heat, my hips suspended with the tip sheathed in her soaking slit, I pumped back in hard and deep.

Her arousal soaked my cock, but still I wanted more. I set a punishing pace with her ass in the air where I played with the plug. I teased us both with torturous careful strokes until almost seated fully in her. And that’s where I slammed the rest of the way in with enough force she bucked.

Every time she lurched forward, I tugged on that gem between her cheeks, eliciting pleasure-filled cries until she was screaming, her pussy squeezing me with the orgasm ripping through her.

More. I wanted more. Craved more.

I needed her shivering with the force of my cock pummeling her, until the echo of me fucking her pulsed with her every step. If she rolled over in bed, I wanted the way I carved her up and hollowed her out to be the reason for the groan sliding from her lips.

Over and over, I took her. My seductive strokes turned to demands until

she was fighting to stay on the bed and the wand she straddled, soaked with her, vibrated against my balls and ass.

The tingle began in my spine, the burn spreading under my skin as I fucked her into the mattress with everything I had, until tears streamed down her cheeks.

My balls drew up, I gnashed my teeth, and a feral growl tore from my throat as I hammered my release into her.

Her marks burned on my ass with each thrust. She burned in my heart with every cry.

Still, I needed more.

Wrapping my fingers around the handle, I popped the plug free and set off one last climax, leaving her screaming, beating her fists on the bed.

Still pulsing inside her, I turned off the wand, curled over her back, and smoothed away the hair clinging to the side of her face.

My breath caught at the picture she made as laughter bubbled from her throat and tears splotched her red cheeks. She glanced at me from the corner of her eye. “You definitely lost your halo tonight,” she said with a rasp making me wonder if I’d hurt her.

Not that she minded, considering I pushed her, and she not only met my demands, but toed past the line even farther.

I brushed my knuckles over her cheek. Her eyes sank shut. She leaned into the feel of my skin grazing over hers. “I only ever had the one you gave me, so I guess it’s only fitting that I gave it up for you,” I said quietly.

I scooped her up and settled her under the covers. The toys went to the tub where I’d clean them up later. I grabbed a couple of waters, snagged a bottle of ibuprofen from my bag, and crawled into bed with her.

The minute I raised my arm, she burrowed in beside me and sighed.

“Does it hurt?” I asked as I ran my fingers along her throat.

Her hand drifted over my abs before wrapping around my thickening cock. “Not enough to stop me from doing it all over again.”

“You won’t be happy until you can’t walk or speak, will you?”

“Or maybe I want to get my fill before it’s all over.”

“Don’t piss me off, spawn,” I growled the words against her neck as I pulled her over me so she was straddling my hips.

“Listen, it’s not my fault the clock is ticking.” There it was again. That look of doubt. Vulnerability in the way her eyes landed everywhere except for on mine.

I dragged her mouth down and relished the excited squeak she let out as I sucked her tongue into my mouth and smiled. “That’s a good one.”

She broke the kiss, she sat up, a look of confusion swirling in her eyes. “Huh?”

Tracing the tip of my finger between her breasts, I took in her flushed skin, the rise and fall of her chest, her hair wild around her head as it dried. Waves tumbled over her shoulders and down her arms. I toyed with the ends, unable to tear my gaze away from her.

God, the sight of her stripped bare of all the shit life heaped on her slayed me. No makeup. Just a warm glow and flushed skin. My lungs squeezed. “How did I not see just how stunning you are? God, woman, I wish I could show you what I see when I look at you.”

She swallowed hard, her eyes wide. “Nick,” she breathed.

This right here was why I’d needed to memorialize the very second I fell for Charlie McAllister.

I glanced over at my cell in my hand. With a flick of my thumb, I brought up the picture I’d snagged while I kissed her, and made sure I didn’t get too much in the image. I was definitely taking a fist to the mouth when Chance got home, but if I sent him a picture of his baby sister’s tits, he’d stop my heart, and rightfully so.

My fingers were intimately wound in her hair, my fist tight, our mouths slightly open, with a definite subtle glimpse of tongue. Charlie looked well and thoroughly fucked.

I grinned, attached it to the litany of messages to and from Chance, and hit send.

“Oh my God! What are you doing?”

“Just clearing up our relationship status.”

“But we’re not—”

“We are,” I said quietly. Tossing my phone on the bedside table, I speared my hands into her hair and held her still before me. She was rosy and soft, with a lazy smile on her face. A look I planned on seeing every day for an incredibly long while. “I showed up Friday planning to tolerate you for the weekend. I’m leaving planning to have you drive me out of my mind all day, every day, for a lifetime. This doesn’t end here, Charlie. It’s only the beginning.”

I hope you loved Nick and Charlie!

If you’re up for more smutty Christmas goodness, preorder Chance and Holly’s story now!

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about echo grayce

Echo wields words as a heart-piercing sword cutting through characters' souls, leaving them vulnerable yet resilient in the face of love's trials and tribulations. If you want passion-packed small towns and fierce hearts so steamy they'll grab you by the throat like the ultimate alpha-hole with skillful hands and forearm porn for days, Echo is your girl. Every book promises beautifully brutal romances with a dose of angst, a double shot of romance, followed by a scorchin' hot sexy times chaser that will leave you panting for more.

Born and raised in New England, she's got Ben & Jerry's in her heart, and real Vermont maple syrup dripping through her veins. She's an unapologetic Swiftie embracing her Fuck-With-Me-and-Find-Out era, and a certified Fall Out Boy groupie who's low-key addicted to ink and metal—hello tattoos and piercings!

When she's not plotting world domination, she's busy either crafting stories that'll make your heart race faster than a caffeine-induced heart palpitation or designing some of romancelandia's most coveted covers for fellow authors.

To all you lovely readers out there, Echo has one thing to say: she adores every one of you who read her books, turning her dreams into reality. As for talking about herself in the third person? Well, let's just say she's over it.

Echo out, but her fierce heroines and steamy stories are here to stay!

