

TEMPTING MR. SCROOGE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LOGAN CHANCE

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AMAZON

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For all you charcuterie lovers out there. It's just a fancy French term for an adult Lunchable.

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Special Gift

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Chapter 1

January

Baby Jesus is judging me. And I don't blame him a bit.

"If my boss wasn't a Scrooge incarnate, I wouldn't be leaving my job," I whisper to the tiny ceramic figure lying in a manger. "If I tell him now, it'll ruin Christmas."

The truth is, I haven't turned in my notice to my boss yet because I'm a coward. I'm sure baby Jesus knows this. Which is why I quickly tuck him next to his little lamb friend in the manger scene on my desk. It won't be hard to miss, set beside a tempting plate of sugar cookies that shimmer with edible glitter.

I step back and admire my handiwork.

Everything looks perfect, from the Charlie Brown tree on my filing cabinet to the twinkling lights around my office door to the animated Santa in the corner. Even I'm a festive vibe, dressed in a fuzzy green cardigan with golden bows. I've paired it with a slim red skirt and heels.

All of this to remind my boss, Nicolas Luge, aka Scrooge, the holiday is upon us. And he can't come up with a last-minute request to ruin my holiday plans, like he's done in the previous years.

I'm being proactive. Just not about turning in my notice.

I'll wait until I return from my trip, because he's just so darn grumpy. I don't think his face has the muscles needed for smiling. What's that famous saying? Use it, or lose it?

Well, Mr. Scrooge has definitely lost it. I don't think he even knows this is supposed to be the most joyous time of year.

It's like his genius brain cannot process happiness.

As I round my desk, the small bells dangling from my ears jingle with each step. It's annoying, but it'll be worth it. This seemed less psycho than dressing as a ghost to scare him into realizing people have lives and families who expect them to ski down a snowy slope at the Mountain Goat Resort in Aspen this holiday.

This weekend, I'll be drinking peppermint mochas by a roaring fire, laughing as my cousin, Lorraine, tells the family one of her infamous stories about traveling the globe.

"Do you have that report I requested?" Mr. Luge asks as his tall frame barrels into my office without so much as a hello.

I don't know why it shocks me that he never says hello. He's all business all the time. He just barges in asking for a report like I can read his mind. And I can. It's my job.

"Of course, I do," I say with a forced smile. "I'm the personal assistant to one of the most influential media moguls in the gaming industry." A fact he never lets me forget.

His dark eyes dart around my office, stopping to linger on the cookies, but he makes no comment.

I pick up a file folder from my desk. “Here’s the file with all the specifics you asked for on *SpectarCloud*.” I hold out the manilla folder. “Would you like a Christmas cookie?”

“No.” He might as well have said *bah, humbug* as he takes the folder from my hand. This week he’s been extra crotchety, working on a new fantasy game where dragons will battle each other for supremacy.

As his eyes scan the contents, his face sets into a frown, and I get mesmerized watching the way he twists his lips, concentrating. The way he lifts a hand to scrub at his beard. The way his suit jacket strains against his broad shoulders as he does.

Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention one highly important point—Nicholas Luge isn’t a grizzly old man. Quite the opposite. He’s thirty-four, and strikingly handsome.

Every aspect of his appearance draws me in, even though it’s wrong. The strong jaw, the rugged cheekbones and straight nose, the perfectly messy dark hair. The way his white dress shirt stretches across his chest. Even the high-priced shoes that hide his quite possibly perfect feet. I’ve never seen his feet, but I bet they’re impressive. They’re large. And you know what they say—

I shake my head and snatch a cookie from the tray. Why am I thinking about the size of my boss’ feet?

I’m sure baby Jesus is judging me, thinking I have a foot fetish, but I don’t. And I don’t have a fetish for my boss. He doesn’t need my admiration anyway. As one of the youngest men to make the *Forbes Billionaires List*, he gets enough from the world around him.

He glances over at me as I finish my cookie and his eyes track the movement of my tongue as I delicately lick any glitter residue from my lips. “Now that you’re done eating that cookie and jingling incredibly loud, can we go over the quarterly reports?” he says, eyes still on my mouth.

And that’s a prime example of my issues with him. Despite all that pretty packaging, I can’t get over his gruff attitude. It’s like he’s mad at the world, or he’s mad at me.

Either way, I can’t wait to leave this company and work at a place where I’ll be appreciated for my many talents.

I’ve got a degree in marketing.

Yet, here I am.

A lowly assistant.

Sure, I make great money. That’s one area where Nicholas isn’t a Scrooge. He always compensates me generously for my time. But I’m not doing what I love. What I feel I was born to do. Reach the masses with my genius marketing campaigns.

Nicholas isn’t the only genius in the room.

“Sorry for the jingling,” I say as I walk over to the filing cabinet. “But I’m letting the spirit of the holidays fill me with their joy. You should do the same.”

“Is that why your office looks like an elf threw up in it?”

I can practically feel him scowling as I reach into the cabinet and retrieve the quarterly reports. But that’s fine, because my plan worked. He noticed.

“If you mean merry and bright, then yes.” I spin around, beaming. “Fa la la,” I singsong on the way back to his towering presence, shaking my head a little

to jingle my bells.

His full lips press into a thin line, but I'm saved from his grumbly comeback by my cell phone ringing.

"What is that horrible sound?" he asks, drawing his stern brows together.

"It's 'Joy To The World', it's for the season." I smile up at him as I hurry past to see who's calling.

He steps closer to glance at my phone. "Sounds like a bunch of nonsense."

I hand him the file and snatch my phone to silence it. "My mother's calling. She wants to make sure I'm still coming to the family getaway." There. I'd call this mission a success.

Except it's not.

Because Nicholas stares straight through me, as if he can read my thoughts, and says, "Did you tell her you can't make it?"

My eyes pop and my bottom lip falls open. "What do you mean?"

"You're not going." He crosses his arms over his broad chest.

"I told you about this a month ago, and you said, and I quote, 'Skiing? Why would anyone want to strap two boards to their feet and slide down a mountain? There are other ways to get hurt.'"

He stands there like I've assaulted him. "Well, it doesn't matter. You'll have to postpone it, because we'll be going to Aspen for the Video Game Awards Ceremony this weekend. Book us two rooms."

And then he stalks out of my office.

A different person, a braver person, would rush after him and tell him to shove it up his ridiculously toned ass.

I'm not that person. I'm the good girl. The responsible girl who is wired to never say no. Besides, it's in the same city, so I can actually be with my family this week. Silver linings. I don't know how, but I will make time for them.

I just can't tell my mother I'll also be attending a work thing with my boss. I'll never hear the end of it. It'll be a repeat of last year when I blew off the family outing to Aruba so I could accompany Nicholas to a gaming convention. I'll just have to make sure I'll have ample time to sneak away for a few family outings.

I can do this.

I can be in two places at once.

And then I can focus on the job I've lined up for after the holidays.

I just have to dot a few 'i's and cross a few 't's on my contract with Mr. Pulse, but it's pretty much as good as done. Come the new year, I'll be the newest marketing executive at Pulse Gaming.

Owned by Garret Pulse.

Nicholas' bitter rival.

Chapter 2

Nicholas

I check the time on my custom Cartier watch for the tenth time, noting only three minutes have passed. The airport is abuzz with the excited chatter of holiday travelers. There are children running excitedly, parents lugging countless suitcases more than likely packed with presents, and happy couples holding hands.

It's utter chaos and part of the reason Christmas is the most stressful time of the year. Sure, it's fun for the kids, because there's no work on their part. They aren't working overtime to save up for the gifts. They aren't losing sleep trying to get all the presents wrapped. They aren't standing in packed stores like cattle waiting for dinner.

The excitement of Christmas disappears when you realize Ol' Saint Nick isn't flying around the world in a sled flown by reindeer in one night.

What's the point, really? Other than spending your hard-earned money on lavish gifts for family and friends you've hardly talked to all year.

I'd rather be working.

Which is why this awards ceremony in Aspen came at the perfect time. While others are overwhelmed with trying to keep up with family traditions that no longer feel real, I'll be in the company of like-minded people who are rewarded for their hard work.

I check my watch again, shaking my head.

That is, if my assistant ever shows up.

It surprises me that she's late. January Frost is the most organized, efficient, and confident woman I've ever met. She's unbelievably smart. Never needs me to repeat myself and gets the job done perfectly the first time, every time.

She really is my right hand.

The problem is, she's always so concerned with what other people think. She worries about making it home on time to keep plans with her friends. She worries about others in the company getting more recognition than her. Her biggest issue is she worries too much about what her family thinks.

Especially her mother.

January's a grown woman. A beautiful, sexy woman with the most intense blue eyes I've ever seen. She's got these full pink kissable lips and long silky brown hair. I'm sure she drives every man wild with her knockout body.

She may not realize it, but I pay attention. To everything.

That's part of the problem.

I'm constantly reminding my dick to stand down whenever she's around. It's a struggle most days.

If she weren't my assistant and I saw her outside of work, I'd definitely be sending a drink her way. But she *is* my assistant, so it's a moot point.

I glance down at my watch again and sigh. It's really out of character for her to be late. And now I'm worried, so I send her a text.

"Are you on your way?" I shoot the text off to her.

She answers immediately. "Yes, I'm coming."

I stare at the words, my mind going to a dark place. A dirty place. A place where I imagine January saying those exact words for me as I make her come over and over.

I shake my head, pushing the thoughts away. "Well, you're late."

She knows how I feel about tardiness.

"Five more minutes. Try smiling while I'm on my way. They say it improves your mood."

I blink, and then type back. "I don't need a mood enhancement. What I need is my assistant by my side." What I really need is a stiff drink to handle this trip with her. Every other trip we've been on I've had to fight my attraction to her, but I feel like it's getting harder and harder to do as time ticks by.

True to her word, five minutes later, I hear, "Sorry, sorry." Her familiar soft voice catches my attention over all the surrounding noise. January rushes toward me, pulling her suitcase while trying to keep her carry-on bag from falling off her slender shoulder. Her brown hair falls into her face and she's trying to blow it away with her full lips since she has no free hands.

I hide my amusement as she approaches.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Luge. The Uber I called never showed up, so I had to call another and he was running behind. Then we got stuck in traffic, and trying

to get close to the entrance of this airport is almost impossible with all these holiday travelers..." Her words fall away as her eyes meet mine. "You're not smiling."

"Hmm," I hum.

She swallows, nodding her head. "You should try it. See..." She gives me a dazzling smile, full of amusement. The sight of it nearly knocks me off my feet.

So, I turn and head toward our terminal to collect myself while she follows behind. Her heavy breathing catches my attention, and I stop walking to turn around.

"You sure pack a lot for a weekend awards ceremony."

Her eyes avert from mine as she adjusts her carry-on bag. "I like to be prepared."

"Prepared for the apocalypse?" I sigh and grab the carry-on off her shoulder. "What did you pack, bricks?"

She gives a small grin as she rolls her shoulder, which must truly be aching from the weight of this thing.

"No, just a few necessities."

I turn back around and continue walking, wondering what necessities she needs that weigh so much. Then I wonder what other things she's packed. Panties, bras, skimpy night clothes. I give my head a shake to knock thoughts of her tempting body out of it.

And just like that, we're shuffled through security and onto the crowded plane. Normally, I fly business class or first class, but with the holiday rush, I was just happy January could find us a flight at all.

After take off, I get busy with an acceptance speech in case I win. Ha. Who am I kidding? I'll win.

But that doesn't mean I'll have a speech prepared, because for the next six hours, January won't stop fidgeting next to me. Distracting me. At first, I tried to ignore her, but her elbow kept poking me. When I mentioned it, she apologized, moving it. Then she kept bouncing her leg like she was trying to shake a fucking spider off her. I reached over and squeezed her knee and she once again apologized.

Now, she's rocking restlessly in her seat and tapping out a song with her fingers on the tray in front of her. Her body keeps rubbing against me. Tormenting me. The tight yoga pants she's wearing should be illegal. And so should the beige sweater that keeps slipping off her shoulder. Her leg rubs against mine. It feels better than it should and I curse myself for wanting to put it over my shoulder while I drive into her.

I close my laptop and turn to face her. "Something wrong?"

Her brow dips as she looks at me. "Excuse me?"

"You're fidgety."

Her blue eyes hold my gaze before she looks away and pulls her hands into her lap. It's as if she didn't even realize she was doing it. She quickly adjusts her sweater, pushing it up her shoulder and a part of me is disappointed I ever opened my mouth.

"Sorry, must've been too much coffee," she whispers, crossing her legs and moving further away from me.

"Hmm."

She's acting weird and I wonder why. We've been to hundreds of conferences and business trips together. She's never like this. All antsy and

nervous.

Something's going on, and I have a feeling I know exactly what it is.



“MR. LUGE, WE HAVE YOUR ROOM READY,” THE CHEERY FRONT DESK CLERK says with a toothy grin.

I glance at January. “You booked two rooms, right?”

She steps closer to the counter. “Yes, there should be two rooms. I have the —” Her words stop as she digs into her oversized purse, most likely trying to fish out her phone. “...the confirmation, somewhere.”

The front desk clerk flips her blonde hair over her shoulder and looks back down at the computer. She's furiously typing away and I sigh, scrubbing a hand down my face.

My patience is running extremely low, because I'm tired from the long flight and ready to take a hot shower. Release some of the tension from having to sit so close to January while she practically writhed against me. Tempting me.

“I'm so sorry, Mr. Luge. It appears there is only one room booked for you.” She gives me a friendly smile. Like that helps.

By now, January has pulled up the confirmation info on her phone and shows it to the clerk.

“Oh, hm. Let me see what I can do.” She scurries away, and I glance at January's phone to check out the confirmation myself.

A few minutes later, a tall man with dark hair appears with the front desk clerk. His brown eyes meet mine and I can already tell he's not coming to

give me good news.

“Mr. Luge, I’m Graham Steele, the owner of Mountain Goat Resort. Leah brought it to my attention that you reserved two rooms and only one is available.”

“Yes, and I need two rooms.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible.” Mr. Steele stares right into my eyes, and I appreciate he’s not trying to make excuses. He’s not darting his eyes all over like schmucks who have bad news and are too afraid to tell it.

“He’s a pretty big deal,” January says in a low voice to Mr. Steele. “Huge. Gaming mogul and all, so if you could find us another room, that would be so appreciated. Because we *really* want to stay here. It’s a lovely resort. And I’m sure he’ll get over all the holiday decorations.”

I tilt my head at her unusual outburst while Mr. Steele gives her a slight grin. “I’m aware of who he is. I do apologize, but there’s been an issue with our reservations and we only have you down for one room.”

“You don’t have anything?” I ask him with a steady voice. I could be an asshole. Raise my voice. Demand a full refund. Demand a lot of things, but none of that nonsense will help.

He shakes his head. “Unfortunately, no, but I can give you the cabin my family and I are staying in.”

“That isn’t necessary. I’ll just check into another resort.”

January’s eyes go wide at my suggestion, and I get it. I’m sure she’s tired too. Already I’m thinking about this detour and how much longer it will take to get me to my hot shower.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Luge. This is the busiest week of the year. Nobody’s got any openings. Anywhere. I’ll just call my wife to get the kids packed up. The cabin will be ready in an hour.”

I can’t ask this kind gentleman to kick his family out of a cabin. “No, that isn’t necessary, seriously. We’ll figure it out.” I think about staying in one room with January. I just hope there’s two beds, because this is going to be hard enough being this close to her.

“Your stay here is obviously on us, and please let me know if you need anything. We’ll make sure we take good care of you.” He hands me a card, and then another. “This is my business card with my personal cell number on the back. This card is a meal voucher. You can use it at any of the restaurants and snack bars around.”

“Thank you.” I take the cards from him and pocket them.

The front desk clerk gets to work on making our keycard.

I turn to face January, and she offers a shy and timid smile, like a baby bird peeking out from its nest. “We’re sharing a room?”

“Looks that way.” I’m already walking toward the elevators with her carry-on and mine over my shoulders. I wheel my large suitcase behind me, and January rushes after me with her own.

“Seriously?” Her eyes are as big as saucers, and her bottom lip juts out.

“Seriously.” I tap a finger on the elevator button. I wish this thing would hurry. I know everyone around the office thinks I’m a grump.

I sometimes think I’m a grump, but they don’t know what I know.

And they sure as hell don’t have to share a room with a bombshell.

The very bombshell who refuses to offer up the very *bomb* I know she's keeping from me.

Chapter 3

January

Nicholas opens the door to our room and I step inside.

Cozy.

Very cozy.

Too cozy.

With one king-sized bed. There's a small leather couch across from a TV, positioned above a roaring fire. A perfect metaphor for my life right now. My plan is bursting into flames around me.

"I'll sleep on the couch," Nicholas moves toward it and drops his bag on the plump cushions.

"You can't be serious." I remove my jacket, and my next words come out before I think them through. "We can share the bed." I glance at the ginormous bed, covered in a plaid-patterned comforter, and think about Nicholas and I both sleeping there.

Will I be able to sleep so close to his masculine body?

I bet he snores.

Who am I kidding? A man as gorgeous as him doesn't snore. Oh god. I hope I don't snore.

Sure, I've had boyfriends in the past, but I asked none of them if I snore.

"That's unnecessary," Nicholas says, breaking me from my ridiculous thoughts.

It doesn't matter if I snore or not, I won't get much sleeping done. I'll be too nervous to snore.

"We can put pillows down the middle. Like a barrier," I proclaim, grabbing a few fluffy pillows off the bed and centering them down the middle of the mattress.

"This isn't the second grade. I'm going to take a quick shower. Call down and make a reservation at the restaurant, please."

"It wasn't that busy when we passed it in the lobby," I say.

He raises an eyebrow. "January, just make the reservation." He heads into the bathroom, and I grab my phone.

"February?" I say into the phone when my sister answers on the first ring.

"Mom is freaking out. Where are you?"

I inwardly groan. "I just got to the resort. Listen, Feb, I need to tell you something."

"If you're going to bail early because you have to get home to run errands for your crap boss, Mom will never forgive you."

I glance over my shoulder to make sure Nicholas is still in the shower. “No, it’s actually much worse.”

“What is it?” I can picture February’s face right now. She’s probably leaning into the phone with her blue eyes, a shade darker than mine, wide as saucers. “My boss is here.”

“What?” my sister shrieks and I have to pull the phone away from my ear. “Why?”

“It’s a long story.” The water to the shower shuts off. “Look, I have to go. I’ll call you later.” I quickly hang up and look around the room for the phone number to the restaurant downstairs. “Hi,” I say when they answer the phone. “I need to make a reservation for two in about fifteen minutes from now.”

“Ok, sure.”

I glance at the phone, noticing it’s almost eight at night. “Two people, last name L-U-G-E,” I spell out his name.

“Got it. See you soon.”

I check the time once more, even though I know exactly what time it is. My mother’s usually in bed before nine p.m. So, I’m sure I won’t run into any of my family.

I still have no idea how I’m going to handle this week, and I don’t have time to dwell on it, because Nicholas steps out of the bathroom, his still damp hair sucking every productive thought right out of my head.

His eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I imagine him stalking across the room and tossing me on the bed. Rubbing that thick beard all over my body. Kissing me more senseless than I already am for having this fantasy.

The pleasing scent of woodsy soap follows him into the room, and I stand like a statue staring at him. He's dressed in a gray sweater with dark slacks, casual but professional. Sexy but still a Scrooge, because he barks out, "Reservation?"

"All set." I grab my purse, pocket my phone, and we head out the door.

The walk to the restaurant is a quiet one. In the elevator, I silently plead to the Christmas gods that none of my family happens upon us on our trek to the lobby.

I'm checking over my shoulder constantly as we walk toward the restaurant, which is nestled at the end of a long hallway in the resort. Before we reach the entrance, I hear a voice I know all too well.

The same voice that interviewed me, and offered me a job.

The same voice that said *I knew I would steal you away* when I agreed to the terms and accepted the job I have yet to tell my boss about.

"Nicholas," Garrett says, walking toward us with a cocky stride.

"Pulse," Nicholas says back with a clipped nod.

Garrett lifts his chin at me, and I hold my breath, hoping he doesn't mention my coming to work for him after the new year. Thankfully, he doesn't. He turns his attention back to Nicholas and says, "You came all this way to watch me accept my award. How sweet." Garrett places a hand over his heart.

My gaze ping-pongs between the two men. Garrett's a few years older than Nicholas, but not nearly as handsome. Sure, Garrett is ok, but his clean-shaven face does not compare to Nicholas' scruffy one. Garrett's blue eyes pale in comparison to Nicholas' dark eyes that seem to know no depth.

Nicholas laughs at Garrett's words, but there's no humor behind it. "I'm winning that award." He says it so matter-of-fact. Like the judging has already come through and they have already read his name out at the podium.

The way these two stare at each other is like two dogs in a kennel ready to attack.

Garrett glances at me. "Can you believe this guy? So cocky."

I want to agree, because, well, he is, but it rubs me the wrong way when Garrett says it. It's a situation where I may complain in my head about Nicholas, but it doesn't seem right for Garrett to do it. I keep my mouth shut, though, not wanting to get in the middle of this dog fight for fear of getting bit.

"You're the cocky one," Nicolas says. "That report your company put out was bogus."

I don't know which report he's speaking of, but if I had to guess it's probably one of Pulse's sales. Which have almost surpassed Nicholas'.

Garrett rears back, like Nicholas just hit him. But I can't help but notice, he doesn't deny the allegations. "I have a call to make." He excuses himself and I suck in a giant lungful of air. Thankful that Garrett said nothing about me coming to work for him soon.

Phew.

"I hate that guy," Nicolas says, and then he gazes down at me. His stare is heavy, and I quickly nod.

"Me too," I lie and Nicholas blows out a breath like my answer disappointed him.

Does he know?

No, he can't.

If he did, he would have fired me the moment he found out.

I'm not going to let it get me down. I follow Nicholas into the restaurant.

"We have a reservation for two," Nicholas says to the girl behind the counter. His phone rings and he steps away to answer it.

"Mr. Luge?" Only she pronounces it Loo-gee.

"It's Luge," I say. "Rhymes with Scrooge."

The brunette laughs at my words. "Right. Luge," she says.

"He really is, ya know?"

"Is what?"

I lean closer to her. "A scrooge."

The girl's eyes widen, and honestly, I'm not even sure why I'm relaying this fact to her.

She surprises me by saying, "Maybe he just needs to get laid."

Now it's my turn for wide eyes. "Maybe." I think about Nicholas' sour moods, and if this could be his problem.

When I first started working for him years ago, he wasn't as grouchy as he has been lately. Maybe he *does* need to get a little action in the bedroom.

I think about him with a woman. A lucky, *lucky* woman. What it would be like to be touched by him.

We glance over at his tall frame and both of us are quiet, most likely envisioning the same thing.

Nicholas disconnects his call and rejoins us. “Table ready?”

“Yes, right. Your table.” The brunette shakes her head, and I give her a sly grin. She retrieves two menus and leads us to a table in the back. “Here you are.” She sets both menus on the table. “Your server will be right with you.” She gives me a wink as she walks away.

She was definitely thinking about it, and I bet she’s thinking I should be that lucky girl that he should do it with. And if it means getting rid of his grumpy attitude for good, I’d take one for the team and do it. I’d tell him to put that smart mouth to good use eating my—

“Are you ready to order?” Our server steps up to the table and pours water into the glasses on the table. I grab mine and take a big swig to douse the heat flaring through my body. I’ve got to stop these ridiculous thoughts about banging my boss.

The server goes over a few specials, and Nicholas orders a steak while I order a chicken Caesar salad. Not because I’m one of those girls who won’t dig into a juicy piece of red meat in front of a man like Nicholas. There’s nothing better in the world than Caesar dressing. Nicholas loves ranch dressing with everything, but I’d much rather have a solid Caesar dressing. Just one more thing to add to the list of why I’m leaving. I mentally make that list while he taps away on his phone.

Reasons All I Want For Christmas Is To Quit:

He doesn’t appreciate me.

Too Scrooge-y.

Too hot.

Hates Caesar dressing.

Ignores me at restaurants and forces me to make lists in my head.

I glance around the restaurant while Nicholas continues doing whatever he's doing. For the many years I've worked for Nicholas, and the many dinners, lunches, conventions we've been on, I've learned he's not the conversationalist.

While he's busy, I take in the festive atmosphere. There's Christmas decor everywhere—twinkling lights, evergreen wreaths, and rustic ornaments on a gigantic Christmas tree. A blazing fire crackles in a large fireplace in the center of the back wall. It's quite cozy. Just like our room.

I think it's one of the resort's selling points. A fireplace in every room so you can feel warm and cozy with your loved one all night long. How romantic.

I inwardly roll my eyes, but then my mind shifts back onto what the hostess said. Does Nicholas just need sex? Will he be less of a grump?

It makes me wonder how long it's been since he's had sex. For all I know he could have had hot, wild, animalistic sex last night.

I keep staring at him, wondering if he's the primal lover. I shift in my seat. He has to be. I bet sex with Nicholas is one of those life-changing events that you never forget. I bet he can rock the sheets and break headboards.

I bet he knows just the right way to touch a woman, and—

“Januaryyyy,” I hear my mother's voice shout throughout the quiet restaurant.

Oh. No.

All thoughts of Nicholas rocking a woman's world, ok my world, melt faster than the ice in my glass.

“What the...” Nicholas’ words fall away as my mother and her short brown bob swoops down on our table like an eagle flapping her wings over a nest of baby eagles.

I love my mother, I really do, but I can’t deal with this right now.

“Mom... hi... what are you...” My skin flushes, and I can’t even form a proper greeting.

“January, why didn’t you call me when your flight landed?” She shoos her hand in the air with a big smile. “Never mind that. You’re here now.” She leans over and gives me a hug.

I’m still flabbergasted, but not as flabbergasted as Nicholas is right now. If this situation wasn’t horribly awful, I’d probably laugh at the way Nicholas stares at my mother like she’s got the wrong table.

“Who’s your friend?” My mother’s voice pitches up on the last words as she moves her attention over to Nicholas. Like I’ve been keeping this man a secret. Her brow arches. She scoots closer to him.

No.

“Oh, this is...” I blank. “Um...”

“I’m Nicholas—”

“Yes, Mom,” I cut in before Nicholas can say his last name. “This is Nicholas, my...”

She’d never understand why I’m working over the holidays when I plan on quitting after the new year. She knows I’m leaving my job and knowing her, she’ll blurt it out. She doesn’t know my boss’ first name, only his last name. And I honestly think she believes his last name *really* is Scrooge. “Just Nicholas.”

“Well, I’m Anne. January’s mother.” My mother reaches out her hand for him to shake.

“Mother?” Nicholas says, taking my mother’s hand in his. “Are you sure you’re not her sister?”

My mother beams at his charm and giggles like a schoolgirl.

“Mom?” I question her, wishing more than anything she’d just leave.

“Oh, I get it.” My mother makes a face like we have let her in on a huge secret. “You finally brought home a boyfriend.” She clasps her hands over her heart. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for so many years.”

“Mother,” I choke out. I glance over at Nicholas, and oh my god. Is he smiling?

Yes, Nicholas is all smiles and cute chuckles as he winks at my mother. “It was my idea,” he says, and I’m trying to keep up with the conversation going on right before my eyes.

“I figured it would be.”

“You know January’s the shy type,” he says with a coy grin that shows off his perfectly white teeth.

I blink at both of them.

“No, I’m not,” I say.

“See, you’re being shy now about being shy.” It’s like he’s been possessed. There’s even a twinkle in his dark eyes. “You know I like that about you, It’s adorable.”

I do my best to not gape at him as my mother swats at him playfully. “You’re adorable. Don’t let January keep you all to herself this week. The whole

family will want to meet you.” She points at him.

“That’s why I’m here.”

My eyes bounce between my mother and Nicholas.

“I’m surprised her awful boss let her get away,” my mother whisper-shouts with her hand up next to her mouth like he’s her confidante.

“He’s the worst,” Nicholas says and then his chocolate-colored eyes meet mine. He lifts a brow and I want to die in this moment.

I shake my head, like I’ve never uttered those words to my mother in my life.

“Well, I’m sure you two are hungry,” my mother says, stepping aside so the server can drop off our food. “I’ll let you two lovebirds eat.” She turns toward Nicholas. “And tomorrow we’ll meet you on the bunny slopes.” My mother leaves with a swoosh of her hips like she’s skiing away from us. “Bye, January,” my mother calls out. “Call me.”

In my mother’s wake, an awkwardness falls over the table.

I stare at my salad, too afraid to even meet Nicholas’ dark eyes. I peek at him from under my long lashes, and face his cold stare.

I’m mortified. “I can explain...”

Chapter 4

Nicholas

Can she explain? I'm doubtful that's possible. The fact she made our reservations at the same resort her family and Garrett Pulse are staying at has me questioning so many things.

I know her secret. There's not much that happens in this industry that's kept under wraps. I know *my* assistant, *my* right hand, has accepted a job with the man I loathe most in this world.

Pulse greeting us before was no accident. That slimeball knew exactly what he was doing, walking over and pissing on January, marking his territory. Acting like he all but won the award that'll be mine. He's trying to insinuate that everything belonging to me will soon be his.

Not on my watch.

If he wants to play hardball, I'm all in. And January's mother gave me the perfect setup.

She thinks January's here with her boyfriend and maybe, just maybe, if I play along, it'll persuade January to keep working for me.

Even if she believes I'm the worst.

I raise an eyebrow at January as I sip my scotch.

"I... well, I was hoping I could split up my time here and none would be the wiser," she whispers, averting her eyes.

I bite back a grin as I fold my hands on the table. "Is that so?"

My eyes lock with hers and my cock springs to life. I see the uncertainty, fear, and questions swimming in her gorgeous blue eyes. She's the most stunning woman I've ever been around.

Her perfectly pale skin blushes as she quickly drops her stare.

"My mother would not have understood if I told her I needed to be here with you instead of my family."

"Clearly, you wouldn't want to be in the company of the worst man alive," I reply.

A groan escapes her full lips as she covers her face with her hands. "My mother says the most ridiculous things."

I crack a grin, watching the embarrassment she's so desperately trying to hide. Obviously, January has told her mother what a horrible man she believes I am. It's a bit of a blow to my ego if I'm being honest.

"You know how pushy moms can be. She has an idea of how my life should be, and it doesn't matter if I agree or not. I'm sure you've felt that at some point from your mother." She gulps down her wine.

I completely ignore January's assumption that every mother is like hers. Mine is not. At all. She's also not up for discussion. And I need to make sure I play this week just right to keep January from going to work for a real asshole.

Because Pulse is no joke.

"I suppose we should discuss how this will go," I suggest.

Her blue eyes lift to mine and a tenderness I'm not used to stares back at me. It's tempting. This moment feels wrong somehow. Like she can see into my soul and knows my plan. A soft smile plays at her lips as her pink tongue pokes out to wet them. The urge to reach across the table and press my mouth to hers while my fingers sink into her silky brown hair has me tightening my hold on my scotch.

"You didn't need to do that. I never would've put you in a position to pretend to be my boyfriend." She briefly closes her eyes, slowly shaking her head. "This is going to be a disaster."

When I prove her wrong, I may very well win her back without ever losing her.

"January, I come face to face with some of the most hardened, overly confident, geniuses in the world. I can handle your mother, believe me." I offer a small grin as I pick up my cutlery to enjoy the steak in front of me.

"Right, ok," she says, sounding less than convinced.

She takes a few dainty bites of her salad and sets her fork down.

"We need to discuss some rules."

"Rules?" I ask, raising a brow.

"Yes, rules."

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at her trying to lay down the law. I'll give her this. Allow her to feel like she's in control of the situation.

I wave my hand out and nod. "Continue."

She bites her bottom lip as her eyes bounce between mine. This nervous side of January is something new to me, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't sexy as hell. She's always so in control and confident. This kink in her armor shows me that there is much more to her than I imagined.

I like it—a lot.

"Ok, so, um, rule number one is no kissing."

No kissing. Obviously. But it's now stuck in my head and my gaze briefly drops to her lips.

"Rule number two, no talking about work. Like ever."

Easy.

"Rule number three, nothing gets too personal. You can't take anything my mother says and use it against me."

I nod, leaning back in my chair.

"Most of the time you won't even need to be around. You can do your thing and I'll do mine. We don't need to do anything together. Like as a unit. One meeting at the bunny slopes and that should satisfy my mother."

I should just agree to her terms, ask her where to sign, and move on. But I don't. I'm feeling the need to push *my* assistant a little. Toy with her. Make her pay for accepting a job with the enemy. Oh, this is going to be fun.

My teeth graze my bottom lip, and it isn't lost on me that her eyes focus on exactly what I'm doing. As I cross my arms across my chest, her eyes drift down to watch my every move. It's addictive having her attention on me like this.

“So, tell me, January, what are we *allowed* to do?”

Those intense blue eyes snap up to mine as a rosy blush creeps up her neck and onto her beautiful face. “What?”

I study her. Her little tell. Oh yes, she's got a tell. It's the way she gnaws on her bottom lip when she's nervous. Like she's doing right now.

“There's no kissing, no talking about work, nothing personal. So what can we do? Can I wrap my arm around you? Hold your hand? Place my hand on your lower back?” I rest my forearms on the table and lean toward her. “Tell me what I'm allowed to do, January.”

Her lips are slightly parted and I swear I hear a faint moan escape them. She swallows roughly, reaching for her empty wine glass. When she realizes there's nothing left, she grabs her water glass and gulps it down.

Those sky-colored eyes find mine as her breathing has increased, much like my own. I reach across the table and rest my hand on hers. Her eyes widen and I wonder if she feels the sizzling of my skin touching hers as well.

“How about holding hands? Is this allowed?”

Her gaze fixates on our hands as she slowly shakes her head. “Yes, ok. Holding hands is allowed,” she whispers.

I smirk and pull my hand away.

We finish dinner in silence as I check my emails and read my acceptance speech again. Every so often, I lift my eyes to find January staring at me like

she's trying to figure me out. And I grin. So far, my plan is working. Maybe she realizes I'm not *that* bad of a guy.



PERHAPS MY PLAN ISN'T WORKING. AFTER DINNER AND A FEW MORE DRINKS, we finally made our way back to the room. January went right into the shower and has been in there since.

I made my bed on the couch and changed out of my clothes. If I were alone, I'd simply keep just my boxer-briefs on, but I don't think January would appreciate that too much. So, I've pulled on gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt.

Dinner tonight was more intense than I imagined it would be. I was acutely aware of everything January did. From the simple movement of crossing her legs, to the almost intimate way she took me in. Lately, I've had a hard time keeping my thoughts off doing some very naughty things to her and tonight has made it even worse.

As she takes a shower, I envision the water running down her naked body. I imagine the way her hands rub against her soft, wet skin. I picture her fingers rubbing her hardened nipples and sensitive wet folds. I fantasize about climbing in the shower with her, dropping to my knees, and tasting her as she cries out my name. I rub my hard dick through my sweats as the images flash clearly through my head.

The bathroom door opens, and I feel like a teenager as I quickly remove my hand and sit up straight. She stares at me for a moment before moving toward the bed. Her wet hair is gathered into a messy bun on the top of her head, and she's wearing a pink nightshirt that hits just above her knees. It's too damn much, the way it slightly hangs off one shoulder, and I avert my eyes.

“How was your shower?”

“Relaxing,” she replies, pulling the thick comforter back. “Are you sure you don’t just want to share the bed? I’m a very still sleeper and don’t take up much room.”

Sure, January. I was just fantasizing about my mouth all over you, let me climb into bed with you.

“I’m fine.”

She blows out a breath and climbs into the huge comfortable-looking bed. “Good night,” she whispers, turning off the lamp on the nightstand.

I move around a bit, trying to get comfortable. “Night.”

The only source of light now is the small lamp by the couch and I click it off before attempting to wrap the silly blanket adorned with snowflakes around myself. It’s more like a napkin for a guy with my height, but beggars can’t be choosers. I rearrange the pillow and rest my head on it as I straighten my legs. I’m too tall for this couch and my legs are uncomfortably up on the arm.

I sigh as I turn, pulling my legs closer to my body. It doesn’t work and I nearly fall off the couch, knocking into the coffee table.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

“You all right?” I hear in the darkness.

“Fine.”

When I try to adjust myself again, turning onto my stomach this time, I accidentally kick the lamp off the side table. It crashes to the floor, causing me to jump and January to scream.

“Fuck.”

“Mr. Luge, just come to the bed. If we are going to face my mother on the bunny slopes in the morning, we need our rest. I don’t think either of us will get much sleep with you on that tiny couch.”

She’s not wrong, but with the fantasy images in my head of her naked body, I’m not sure it’s the best idea.

I stretch my leg and knock my foot hard onto the end table.

“Fuck this.”

Bad idea or not, I can’t sleep on this couch. I grab my pillow and blanket and allow the moonlight to guide me toward the bed.

I climb on top of the comforter, and the soft mattress hugs me as I sink into it. A groan escapes me at the difference between the hard couch compared to this comfortable bed.

I feel movement as January shifts further to the other side, leaving a wide gap between us. I want to laugh at how ridiculous she’s being, but I’m also thankful.

The scent of her coconut shampoo invades my space, making me think back to her soapy body in the shower.

It’s definitely better if she keeps her distance. I drift in and out of consciousness until a hand slaps me across the face.

January’s tight little body is pressed snug against me. I carefully lift her arm from my head and turn toward her, studying her in the moonlight.

Her delicate features are barely visible, but I can just make out her sexy parted lips. A lock of hair has somewhat fallen out of her bun, resting against her soft skin. Her chest rises and falls in peaceful slumber, drawing my attention to her breasts, and that’s when I notice she has no bra on. Her

nipples are visible through the thin cotton, and I squeeze my eyes shut, quickly turning over.

Maybe tomorrow I should try sleeping on the floor.

I count to ten until I finally fall asleep, trying my best not to dream about January's pert nipples in my mouth.

Am I going to hell?

Probably so, but it'll be worth it.

The next morning, I wake with January wrapped around me. Her hair smells of coconuts, and I take a deep breath. I could get used to waking up like this every morning.

I try my best to slip out of bed without waking her. It's nearly impossible and as soon as my feet land on the floor she grips onto me tighter.

"January," I whisper.

She moans and the sound turns me on.

I need out of this bed pronto.

I try to wiggle free, and I slip her arm from around my neck and it falls to the bed with a thud.

"Wha—" January's eyes spring open and she quickly moves away from me.

"Sorry," she says once she's realized what's happened.

"I'm going to shower." And jerk off, because waking up next to her tight body has me hard as a rock.

She nods and I rush into the bathroom.

An hour later, January and I are stuffed into our most wintery get-up. She's cute in her oversized gray winter coat with a plaid-pink beanie and matching gloves. She smiles up at me, and it nearly knocks the breath from my lungs.

"Are you sure you slept all right? You look tired."

She's already asked me this question roughly fifty times.

I can't tell her the truth. That I tossed and turned trying my best to erase every naughty fantasy I was having about her. Even the sound of her breathing was turning me on.

"I'm fine," I snap out.

One day of pretending to be her boyfriend can't be that bad. I'll charm her parents so well that they won't know what hit 'em. They'll be so sad when they learn of our breakup. Maybe they'll offer to keep me and let her go. I smile at the absurdity.

I can't even picture life with a caring mother and father, because I don't know what that's like. January thinks her life is rough because her mother butts in all the time, and I'll agree it must be annoying. But it's obvious her mom cares about her wellbeing. I wish my mother would.

I wish my mother would just remember who the fuck I am.

"Don't forget the rules," January says, interrupting my thoughts.

I grin as we approach the slopes and grab her hand. Her eyes widen as her head swings to me.

"This ok?" I ask.

"It is," she whispers.

Both our hands are gloved, but the connection still causes an electric current to zap through me. I tell myself it's static electricity—definitely not that I like how her tiny hand looks in mine—as I blow out a breath and watch the vapor float into the air like a puffy cloud of smoke.

And then, I spot her mother. There's a man, grinning, walking along beside her. Must be her father.

They look *adorable*, and I curse myself for using a word twice now that I've never used in my life.

But they are. Her mother sports a pink snow bib with matching gloves and beanie, her brown hair just peeking out beneath it. Alongside her, January's father is in a deep blue snow bib, mirroring the style of her mother's, complete with the matching glove and beanie combo. As they approach, they have huge smiles on their faces.

“January. Nicholas. There you two are.”

There's a crowd of people walking behind her, and I wonder if she's leading a tour group. Is her mother a ski instructor? Bringing a group of people up here to get their first thrill on the bunny slopes.

The group of people stare and smile. Just like her mother and father.

“They're all here,” January whispers beside me. And that's when I realize...

I'm not just here to play the fake boyfriend for her mother and father.

No, I've got the whole family to impress.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Chapter 5

January

I debate skiing off this mountain, all the way home, as we stand on the bunny slope with my entire family moving toward us like a bunch of defensive linemen ready to tackle us.

I suck in a huge breath. I can't believe we're seriously going through with this.

"Hi, Mom," I say, giving her a hug as she beams at Nicholas.

The look on Nicholas' face is priceless. I wish I could take a picture and frame it. He appears shell-shocked as my large family approaches him.

And then, as if something snaps inside him, he transforms into a different person.

His smile widens, and he shakes Uncle Frank's hand, saying, "How do you do?"

Frank, of course, loves the attention, like the attention seeking man he is, and launches into a story about how he never thought I'd settle down with anyone.

It's embarrassing and surreal.

Nicholas makes his rounds, charming and charismatic, as he greets each one of my family members like there's nothing he'd rather be doing. They laugh. They smile. They even hug.

My father appears smitten, and he winks at me as he jokes with Nicholas about the first meeting being a "slippery slope."

Nicholas chuckles at his pun while I roll my eyes. Why isn't Nicholas like this at work? He's always so clipped and short with me, yet here, talking to my cousin, Lorraine, it's like he reserves his Scrooge side exclusively for me.

My sister, February sidles up next to me. "Boyfriend? I thought he was your boss."

I maneuver us away from the crowd. "Mom, cornered us in the restaurant last night. I couldn't tell her I was here with my boss. She'd never understand."

My sister raises a perfectly shaped brow. "So, you said he was your boyfriend instead? I think that's a little more farfetched, don't you?"

I roll my eyes. "Thanks. I'm not that undesirable."

My sister laughs and adjusts the red fleece hat on her dirty blonde hair. "That's not what I meant, but him?" She jabs a thumb over her cream-colored winter coat. "He's a ten." She glances over her shoulder at him and Nicholas glances over at us and winks. She spins back around. "Scratch that, he's more like a million plus ten. Wow."

“Feb, focus. He’s my boss.” I give him a little wave so it looks like I’m infatuated, and I can’t lie. It’s not hard to pretend. He’s drop dead gorgeous. “Ok, maybe he’s a little hotter than any man I’ve ever dated in the past, but —”

“He’s hotter than any man, period,” she cuts in. “Not just any man you’ve dated. Like the guy looks like a movie star. Look at him.”

We both ogle him and February has a point. He’s standing in the center of my large family, like a celebrity in the middle of a pack of raving fans, answering all their questions.

I’m seriously wondering if Aunt Charlotte will ask him for his autograph.

Reading my mind, February says, “Charlotte looks smitten.”

I roll my eyes again.

Aunt Char.

My mother’s younger, *younger* sister.

She’s a few years older than me, and has all the fake body parts. Boobs, nose, hair. Ok, not a full head of fake hair, but I know she has worn extensions on occasion.

Ok, all occasions.

“Feb, I don’t know what to do.”

My sister shrugs. “Just roll with it. Besides, after the new year you won’t have to see him again once you quit.”

“Shh,” I whisper-shout. “He doesn’t know I’m quitting yet.”

My sister’s eyes grow wide. “You haven’t told him?” She shakes her head, most likely judging me. Just like baby Jesus.

“I know. I don’t know what I’m waiting for.” A part of me hates change. In another world, I’d love to keep working for Brighting Gaming, but Nicholas will never promote me. He’ll never view me as a valued member of the team.

He only sees me as the lowly assistant who’s the workhorse.

Fetching coffee. Running his absurd errands.

Like the one time he asked me to pick up cake at a bakery in Hoboken. I didn’t make it back to the city until late, and then had to go to his skyrise condo to give it to him.

Why did he need a cake that late?

“I think you’re waiting for your feelings to go away.”

“What feelings?”

“There’s no way you can work for a man like that”—she jabs her thumb in his direction—“and not be totally attracted to him.”

I step back. “I’m not.” I mean, in my defense the man resembles a Greek God.

“Jan, please. This is *me* you’re talking to.”

The thing I hate about sisters is they always know when you’re lying. They can always see through your bullshit to the feelings tucked deeply inside. To say I haven’t thought about my boss is an understatement. I’ve had many naughty dreams about him, and I’ve wanted to make those fantasies a reality, but then he opens his mouth to speak and squashes all my desire when he snaps out his orders.

I haven’t seen February in many months because she moved to Magnolia Pointe, a small town in the middle of nowhere, and opened up her own coffee shop. And this seems like the perfect time to change the subject from me to

her.

“How’s Deja Brew?” I ask.

She gives me a flat look. “You’re so obviously deflecting. But I’ll let it slide. It’s killing it, and I couldn’t be more proud. Even if there’s a competing coffee shop owner making my life a living nightmare.”

Before I can get more details, Aunt Charlotte interrupts. “I never knew you were dating such a hottie. Now I see why you’ve kept him all to yourself.”

“Yeah,” I reply, not really knowing what to say. “Just wasn’t ready to share all that goodness.”

My mother gathers everyone’s attention with a loud whistle. “Ok, who’s ready to ski?”

The family cheers, moving away from Nicholas, and I have to commend him for being such a trooper.

Aunt Char slithers away, standing next to Nicholas as everyone turns their attention to my mother.

“He’s great,” my cousin, Bryon says, whispering close to my ear. “What does he do?” Bryon is one of those guys who always wants the 4-1-1 on everything.

He’s a few years older and already owns two construction companies. So, he thinks he’s better than everyone else.

I wish I could say *he’s a billionaire genius*, but that would blow our cover quicker than giving a child ice cream and seeing how long it takes to disappear.

“He’s in marketing,” I lie.

This appeases Bryon, and he steps away to gather his skis.

Nicholas makes his way over while my mother takes charge of the group. She's a take-charge kinda gal. I think it's one of the reasons she's so pushy in my life.

She likes that control.

I cast a glance at my father, and he smiles with a pride that was absent when I told my parents I got a new job in my actual field of study. Head of marketing for Pulse Gaming barely garnered a head nod from my father. Yet, now, with Nicholas by my side, he's the epitome of parental pride.

I shake my head.

"Sister?" Nicholas whispers next to me, lifting his chin at February.

I nod. Oh god. I hope he's not attracted to her. She's beautiful, so it wouldn't surprise me. What if he wants me to set him up on a date after this total fiasco is over? I'd be mortified. "She doesn't live in the city," I rush out.

Nicholas' brows draw together. "Um, ok."

"Like you couldn't date her if you wanted," I say, matter-of-fact, like the mere thought of him and my sister together doesn't repulse me.

Nicholas laughs, short and loud, catching the attention of my mother.

"Me talking about safety amuses you?" she asks him, and everyone turns their head toward us.

Nicholas coughs, trying to cover up his initial laugh. "No, sorry. All good, please continue."

My mother makes a face and launches back into her speech about safety on the slopes, and I lose it. I giggle so hard I can't stop.

Nicholas stares at me, and after a few seconds he laughs.

“Shh,” February says to us, but it’s no use.

Nicholas and I can’t stop laughing.

My mother rolls her eyes. “Oh, just go have fun, everyone.”

And we’re off.

“Why were you laughing?” Nicholas asks me.

“Just thinking about you and Feb dating.”

“Dating? I’m dating you.”

“Fake dating.” I whisper the words so nobody overhears us. I glance back up at Nicholas and for a split second a strange look overtakes his eyes. Like he’s disappointed.

But it’s gone in a flash as Byron interrupts us and gets Nicholas’ attention.

They talk about stock portfolios before Byron’s rushing down the slopes like it’s the hardest Black Diamond in the world.

Aunt Char sashays by and winks at Nicholas before putting her ski goggles on. I mean, come on. We’re on the bunny slopes. She makes a big show of it and next thing I know she’s off down the slope.

“Ok, you two,” February says. “Ready for a great day of skiing?”

“I guess I should mention now I’ve never skied before in my life,” Nicholas says beside me.

Feb’s all smiles and giggles. “I’m sure January can give you some good lessons. She’s a pro.”

“It’s nice to officially meet you,” Nicholas says in his most charming voice.

My sister nods. “I know who you really are,” she says, and then she pushes away to join half of the family at the bottom of the slope.

“She knows?”

I shrug. “I called her last night when you were in the shower.”

Nicholas nods like he understands. Like he knows the intricacies of having a sister who you don’t keep secrets from. “And she won’t tell?”

“Not February.”

“You sure?”

“She won’t. The person we need to be careful of is Aunt Charlotte.”

Nicholas smiles and it’s otherworldly. Why doesn’t this man smile more? It nearly knocks me off my feet. “Yeah, I think she’s my biggest fan.” He glances over his shoulder. “Oh, and the twins. Jared and Jeremy. They think I’m cool.”

“They think anyone who plays video games is cool.” I glance over at my fourteen-year-old cousins. “Oh, wait, you didn’t tell anyone you own Brighting Gaming, did you?”

“No, January. I did not,” he clips out each word.

“Phew.” I’m relieved. I can already feel my stress level at an all-time high and this week is just going to make matters so much worse.

Everyone appears to love Nicholas. Some a little more than others, and I’m going to hate disappointing my family when I have to tell them we broke up right after the vacation was over.

“We’ve got this,” he says.

My mother and father approach with their approving smiles. “See you at the bottom of the slope.”

“Not if we beat you down there,” Nicholas says, and my father laughs.

“I like him,” Dad says to my mother.

And then something unexpected happens. Nicholas wraps his arms around my waist and tugs me closer to him. “I like her,” he says as he nuzzles his nose into my neck. His lips brush against my skin and chills race through me. Along my skin. Up my spine. Everywhere.

I’m so shocked I can’t even speak. Instead I close my eyes, memorizing the way his beard feels against my skin.

My parents give us a wave before they push off and head down the slope like two Olympic pros.

“What are you doing?” I push him away.

We’re the only two left. I glance down at the bottom of the bunny slope and see all of my family waiting for us.

“I was just putting on a show,” Nicholas says. “Too much?”

I shake my head, trying to erase the memory of his strong arms wrapped around me. “No, it was fine.” I guess.

Was it fine?

Why did I get such a thrill when he touched me?

This is truly going to be a long week.



AFTER A GRUELING TIME ON THE SLOPES, WE RETIRE TO THE LOBBY OF THE resort, sipping on hot cocoa, and planning out the week.

“We have to go into town and do some shopping,” Aunt Yvonne, Frank’s wife, says. Her red hair falls in waves down her back as she points at my mother. “Anne likes the Christmas shoppe there.”

“It’s the gnomes,” my mother says. “I just can’t help myself. I want them all.”

“While the women shop, the men can go on a hunt,” Uncle Frank says, looking at all the men scattered around the room.

“Yes. Hunting is good,” Byron says. “I once went hunting in Vermont and took down an elk. Remember, Dad,” he says, glancing up at Uncle Frank for recognition of his great kill.

They recount the story while Nicholas sits next to me on a loveseat. We’re wedged up close together because the twins decided to sit on the opposite side.

Nicholas reaches for my hand and entwines our fingers.

We have skin on skin contact. With the roaring fire and close proximity to him, I feel hot. Really, *really* hot.

Can somebody turn down the fire?

I can no longer hear any of the conversation as Nicholas moves our joined hands to the top of his thigh. He draws lazy circles on the inside of my palm with his thumb, causing me to almost blackout from the intimacy of it all.

“What do you think, Jan?” my mother says.

“I’m sorry?” I ask, knowing full well all eyes are on me at the moment.

“She wants to know if you want to come hunting with me, or if I’m ok to brave the treacherous forest without you,” Nicholas says close to my ear. His hot breath fans out across my cheek, causing shivers in its wake.

“I think Nicholas can hold his own. I’d rather hang with my gnomies.”

I get a few laughs, and Nicholas squeezes my hand. He’s so close. Our thighs are pressed up together. One of the twins jabs me in the ribs, and it causes me to scoot even closer to Nicholas. I’m practically in his lap.

“Cute,” my mother says, talking about my gnome joke. “Tomorrow the men will hunt and the women will shop.”

“And all will be right in the world,” Lorraine says. “Like the one time I was backpacking through Europe. Nicholas”—he stops the lazy circles along my palm—“have you been to Europe?”

He nods. Because of course he’s been there. As his assistant I know every convention he’s ever attended. I know all of his travel plans because I make them.

“I was in Europe just last month,” he says.

My mother turns to face me. “Did you go with him, Jan?”

“Mom, I would have told you if I went to Europe with a boyfriend.”

My mother pouts. “You didn’t even tell us you *had* a boyfriend. How long have you two been together?”

Son of a nutcracker. Instead of going over rules with Nicholas, we should have been going over our backstory.

I stare at her, and Nicholas saves me, launching into a grand tale.

“I met January at a quaint bookstore just off Time Square last month. It’s one of those indie shops that serves overpriced coffee, but January likes it because all of the books have a certain ‘authentic’ smell.”

Oh my god. How does he know this?

“They smell like heaven,” I add.

Nicholas shifts beside me, squeezing my hand. “Personally, they just smell old to me, but the place has a cozy ambience to it. January was sitting on this pink couch, reading *Little Women* and I stepped up to her and asked, ‘Just how little are these women?’”

Everyone chuckles. But I’m gobsmacked, because none of that happened but the details of the place are correct.

How does he know I love that book?

How does he know I like to sit on the pink couch?

How does he even know about the pink couch?

“She gazed up at me, and said, ‘Excuse me?’ and I held up my copy of *Little Men* and asked if I could sit next to her and read.”

Everyone *awws*, and I turn to face him. I can’t believe how quickly he’s coming up with this story.

“Did she let you sit down?” February asks.

I glare at her, because obviously she knows it’s a fake story.

But I’m wondering how the story ends as well.

I try to picture it. Me sitting alone on the pink couch, reading and sipping my chai tea. Nicholas asking if he could sit next to me. Would I let him, if he weren’t my boss. If he were just a stranger in a bookstore?

I think I would.

I think we'd discuss Louisa May Alcott until the shop closed and the employees were kicking us out.

Nicholas holds up our joined hands and smiles. "What do you think?"

It's official. My family is completely in love with him.

And I'm afraid I might be falling off that same cliff as well.

Chapter 6

Nicholas

“I was able to have everything you need ordered and delivered for the hunt tomorrow. The hotel brought it all up while you were in the shower. These are the thermals you’ll wear under your clothes,” January says, holding up black and white camo-printed material.

I stare at her, grateful for her wisdom with what I’ll need. My pulse picks up thinking of her thoughtfulness. She knew I didn’t have any kind of hunting clothing and took it upon herself to take care of it for me so I didn’t look like a fool in front of her family.

There’s no way I can lose her as my assistant. I don’t know how I’ll function without her by my side.

“These are your pants. They’re waterproof, so it’ll be helpful with all the snow on the ground.” She tosses them on top of the thermals and picks up a shirt. “This is your top layer shirt. It’ll keep you warm in the cold.”

She hasn't looked at me, she's too busy pulling the clothing out of the bag and laying it all on the bed.

"I also had a pair of rubber boots delivered. You definitely don't want your feet getting wet out there."

I run a hand through my wet hair before shoving both hands into the pockets of my jeans. I'm afraid I'll grab her, holding her close to thank her. Instead, I stand next to her and she finally lifts her blue eyes to mine.

"Thank you, January."

Our eyes lock and bounce between each other. Her eyes soften as she stares at me. My heart pounds in my chest, and I squeeze my hands into fists to prevent them from grabbing hold of her as I take her in. She looks stunning. Her brown hair cascades down around her shoulders in soft waves. The blue sweater she's wearing hangs off one shoulder and I've never in my life been so turned on by an exposed shoulder. Her full pink lips are wet, begging for me to steal a taste. Her slender body shakes with a small shiver, and I wonder if it's me or the chill in the air. I want to wrap my arms around her, sharing my body heat with her, but I remind myself she's not really mine.

She clears her throat and we both snap out of whatever bubble we were in. A slight blush creeps onto her cheeks as she looks back down at the clothing on the bed.

"You're welcome."

There's an uncertainty in the air around us and she must feel it too because she excuses herself to the bathroom.

I blow out a breath, scrubbing my face as I try to collect whatever it is that I'm feeling. I glance down at the clothes on the bed and shake my head. This is far from my usual attire. Camouflage is not exactly my style—I'm more

inclined toward the polished look of expensive suits and ties. As I pick up the pants, January comes out of the bathroom.

I glance at her, lifting an eyebrow. “So, this is really what I need to wear?”

She laughs lightly, shaking her head. “I know it’s not what you’re used to, but believe me you’ll be glad you did.”

My eyes drift back to the clothing and I nod. “This won’t be so bad.”

I don’t know if I’m trying to convince myself or her.

“You don’t really need to do this. I can call my dad and tell him that we’ve decided to do something on our own today.”

She’s tried convincing me that I should sit this excursion out. She’s worried that I won’t be able to keep up since I’ve never been hunting. It only makes me want to do it more. I never back down from a challenge. This is no different.

“I’ll be fine, January. Go enjoy your day with the girls.”

She bites her bottom lip, glancing from me to the door. The uncertainty from before is back, but this time it seems she’s nervous about leaving me.

It does something to me, causing a warmth inside me I’ve never experienced. I grin and step toward her. This time I don’t keep my hands hidden, I reach out and gently touch her bare shoulder. She sucks in a breath as her eyes widen, but I don’t remove my hand. The heat of her skin on mine sends a shock through me, straight down to my dick.

I squeeze her shoulder and grin. “You don’t need to worry. I’m good with people.”

She backs away quickly, grabbing her purse. “Right, don’t forget, no mention of work. They can’t find out you’re my boss.”

Like a bucket of cold water dumped on me, I straighten. “Yep.”

After she leaves, I change into all the camo and look at myself in the mirror. Definitely not something I’ll be wearing again.

It’s time to meet the guys in the lobby, so I make my way down, feeling ridiculous in this expensive resort camo, but once I see the rest of January’s family dressed the same, I feel better.

“Nicholas,” January’s father greets me.

“Charles, how are you?”

“Ready for a day in the woods,” he replies with a smile.

“We’re all here now. Everyone have everything? Hats and gloves?” Frank asks, looking around.

I reach into my pockets and realize I don’t have gloves. January mentioned there was a hat, but I must’ve missed.

“I’ll meet you guys outside. I need to go buy some gloves and grab my hat,” I announce.

“I always bring extra. Let’s run to my room real quick,” Mark, January’s uncle, says, slapping my back.

“Great. We’ll meet you both outside at the van,” Charles announces.

They exit the hotel as I glance at Mark. He smiles and nods for me to follow him.

“I appreciate this.”

“No worries. I remember the first time I was invited to a hunt with this crew. I didn’t even own a pair of boots,” he says, shaking his head with a chuckle.

He rattles off his room number so I can go grab my hat first. Thankfully, January did in fact order a hat for me. I grab it out of the bag and make my way to Mark's room.

As I enter his room, he walks out of the closet and pulls out a large black bag. He drags it to the bed and unzips it, pulling out camo item after camo item.

I'm astonished at the amount of different items he has. I'm pretty sure I even saw camo socks and boxers in the mix.

"Honestly, I've never been hunting a day in my life."

"We've all been there." He hands me a pair of heavy gloves. "Try these on."

I slip them onto my hands and they fit perfectly. There are tags hanging off them and I look up at him.

"These are brand new?"

"Yeah, I bought a few new pairs this season."

"I'll give you the money for them," I reply, taking the tag off and checking it.

"No need, consider it an early Christmas gift."

It's incredibly generous of him, but I can't allow it. I'll have January order him a new pair and send it to his house.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Well, you look the part, even if you have no idea what you're doing."

If only he knew that hunting wasn't the hardest part I'm trying to play.

"Thanks a lot, Mark. I really do appreciate this."

We head back out of his room and down the long hallway, into the elevator. He leans against the wall, looking at me. He's younger than Frank and Charles, probably in his mid forties. His dark hair and eyes are similar to mine, but he has a more relaxed appearance. Probably because he's not pretending to be something he isn't.

He's married to Emily, Anne's other sister, and I realize that they're named after the Bronte sisters; Anne, Emily, and Charlotte. He's also the father of the twins.

"Thanks again for your generosity."

"Seriously, it's not a problem. Being the new guy is never easy, especially with this bunch. Individually they're all amazing, but put them together and the competition becomes a little much sometimes."

"Competition can be motivating," I reply as the elevator doors open.

That's one of the most honest things I've said since meeting January's family. It causes my chest to tighten a bit because I don't like lying to them. They all seem like great people, a little overbearing, but still you can see how close they all are. It feels kind of nice to be accepted into a group like that.

Even if it's just temporary.

We find the van outside and climb in. Charles drives, while Frank sits in the passenger seat. The rest of us are crammed together in the back three rows.

"You look like one of us now. Not so preppy," one of the twins says.

I smirk looking down at myself. "Thanks, I think."

"All right, listen up," Charles announces as he puts the truck in drive. "Nicholas is new, so I'm going to explain everything. We're going to my buddy, Mike's property. He allows us to come in and hunt when we're here.

He's got a few hundred acres with some massive elk. Odds are we won't get one, but it's still fun."

I want to ask what the point of going is if he says we won't get an elk, but I keep my mouth shut. It's not like I'd know what to do with one anyway.

"You ever shoot an elk, Nicholas?" Frank asks, glancing over his shoulder.

"I believe it was a moose," I reply.

They all turn to look at me.

"No shit," Byron shouts.

"Really?" the twins ask together.

"A moose?" Charles exclaims.

"Where?" Frank yells.

I glance over at the twins and wink.

"In a big game hunting... video game," I say.

The twins burst out laughing, giving each other a high five. Frank shakes his head, turning his attention forward. Charles smiles in the rearview mirror at me and I lift my shoulders.

"I knew you were bullshitting," Byron mumbles.

"Learn to take a joke, Byron," Mark says with a hearty chuckle.

As we pull up to the property, I'm amazed at its beauty. A pristine blanket of untouched snow covers the ground, catching the sun's rays and casting a gentle glow into the bare trees surrounding us. The entire place looks heavenly. It's peaceful, like a place I could sit and stare at while I drink a hot cup of coffee.

The van door opens, and as we all pile out, I feel like a clown climbing out of a car with endless clowns following me.

“I already spoke to Mike and gave him a run down of the day.” Charles turns his attention to me. “Have you ever shot a gun that wasn’t attached to a TV screen?”

“No.”

He nods and opens the back of the van. “Before we head out, let’s have Nicholas take a few practice shots to get used to it.”

My eyes widen as they pull their guns out of the van. I’ve never held a gun, never mind shot one.

“Relax, you just aim and pull the trigger. Nothing to it,” Mark whispers, clasping my shoulder.

Charles and Mark explain everything about the gun to me. It’s a 308 caliber rifle, apparently just what we need to take down an elk. They take the time to explain all the parts of the gun, all the safety instructions, and even have me load it. They explain how important gun safety is, and I’m paying attention like there will be a test after.

“All right, you ready to take a few shots?” Charles asks.

My confidence has increased during the teaching session, so I nod and take the gun from him.

“Just look through the scope, center the red dot on the target, and pull the trigger,” Mark instructs.

I do exactly as he explains and squeeze the trigger.

Bullseye.

“Damn,” Frank whispers behind me.

“Nice shot, Nicholas. Try again,” Charles encourages.

I won’t lie, it feels good I’m doing so well for my first time shooting. Even if the next few shots aren’t exactly a bullseye, they’re all on the target.

Years of practice with video games, I guess.

“Great job,” Charles says, slapping my back. He turns around smiling like a proud father as he wraps his arm around my shoulder. “He’s a quick study, that’s for sure. How about we head out?”

As we walk toward the edge of the woods, the twins rush to be on either side of me.

“That was awesome. You really never shot before?” Jared asks.

The only reason I know it’s Jared and not Jeremy is because I noticed he has green and black camo gloves and Jeremy has white and black.

“No, that was my first time.”

“But you’ve shot in video games,” Jeremy says.

I grin, looking down at him. “Yes, I’ve definitely shot in video games.”

“What’s your favorite game?” Jared asks.

I want to tell them all about the new game I’m coming up with, but that would blow my cover and put January in a horrible position. Instead of getting them excited about all the inside information I have, I keep it general.

“*Skyrim.*”

“I’ve never heard of that one.,” Jeremy says.

“Yeah, it was one of the best open-world games. Awesome soundtrack. Awesome storyline. It was excellent.”

“Will you play it with us one day?”

“Sure.” I smile. I want to expand on how I’ve been trying to outdo that game my whole career, and I think I just might with my new game, *SpectarCloud*, coming out this year. If I can ever focus on finishing it.

Instead, I keep thinking about a certain blue-eyed, brown-haired assistant. One that is quickly becoming an obsession of mine. I think it’s partly the reason I’ve been so on edge the past couple of months.

“Shh, you’re going to scare the elk,” Mark whispers, looking back at us.

Jeremy rolls his eyes, but obeys his father.

The longer we walk, the more grateful I am to January for purchasing such warm clothing. I definitely won’t be complaining about the camo anymore, that’s for sure.

“You know January works for a gaming company,” Jared says.

I grin, nodding my head. “I did, in fact, know that.”

“She says her boss is an asshole,” Jeremy whispers.

Part of me finds it funny, but another part of me, a bigger part of me is hurt hearing this. Anne, January’s mother, made a reference when I first met her about January’s boss being awful. Now the twins are calling me an asshole. Is that how she really feels? Does she think I’m *that* horrible to work for?

I admit the past few months I’ve been a bear to work for, but she must know the stress I’m under. The inability to pull her into my arms and make out with her, share an intimate moment, it takes a toll on a man.

“What else has she said about him?” I’ve sunk pretty low if I’m trying to get information out of fourteen-year-old boys. Maybe I am an asshole.

“I heard her telling Aunt Ann once that she really liked him at first, but then he just wasn’t as cool as he used to be,” Jared says.

“Cool?” I ask, lifting an eyebrow.

“It was something like that,” he says, lifting his shoulders.

“He makes her do a lot of things, I guess. But I think working for a video game company would be awesome. I wouldn’t care if I had to bring things to his house. I’d ask if we could play video games,” Jeremy says, laughing.

I feel about two-feet tall right now as I question whether I’ve been as dreadful as she claims. It *is* her job after all, but there’s a real possibility I’ve overstepped and let the anger for my attraction to her cloud my vision.

“You know, you’re only the second guy that January has ever brought home,” Charles says.

I don’t even know when he made his way back here. Bryon is leading now, but my attention is focused on what Charles just said.

“I am?”

“Oh yeah. That other guy, he was a real asshole.”

There’s that word again. Am I any better?

“I remember that guy. Parker or Cole,” Frank says.

“Parker,” Mark corrects. “He was awful to January.”

I snap my head to Mark, dipping my eyebrows. “Awful how?” I do *not* remember this asshole. The thought of him mistreating her has my blood boiling.

“He talked to her like she was beneath him. Always demanding her to go get him something. Pretty much treated her like he was paying her. If you get what I’m saying,” Frank says, shaking his head.

Oh, I get what he’s saying. My hands are in fists as I imagine him commanding her around. Treating her with no respect.

“Anne had to keep me away because I wanted to toss him out on his ass,” Charles says.

“You should’ve. He’s lucky I wasn’t around,” I say.

“He was a jerk and January finally saw it for herself,” Mark explains.

I’m angry, disappointed, and worst of all jealous. The thought of someone else being close to her, touching her, kissing her, having sex with her—it stirs a jealousy in me I’ve never felt before.

January deserves someone who’ll treat her with respect and admiration. Someone who’ll fight for her, not against her. She deserves to be cherished. To be with someone who makes her laugh, brings her comfort, encourages her dreams. Someone who makes her smile in public and scream his name in private.

January deserves a man like me.

The real me.

Not the me that’s constantly been squashing her requests for time off so I could spend more time with her.

The realization causes me to stop walking as I stare into the snow-covered trees surrounding me.

“Hey, you all right?” Mark whispers, clasping his hand on my shoulder. “No need to get all worked up about her ex. It was a long time ago.”

I swallow. “I’m all right. Just realizing how deeply I’m falling for January.”

He laughs as he slaps my back. “Well, considering you’re her boyfriend, I’d hope so.”

I blow out a breath. All this time I thought I was on the hunt for an elk, but it appears I’m out here hunting for something completely different.

Like redemption for the way I’ve treated January in the past.



CHARLES WAS RIGHT. WE DID NOT KILL AN ELK, BUT WE DID SEE A FEW which was exciting for me. It was a good time. I’ve never spent a day with a group of guys like this before. After I was able to push down everything I was thinking about January, it was better. The jokes, the stories, and even the teasing. The camaraderie shared between these guys is something amazing. Something I didn’t realize I’d like to have until today. I felt like a part of a family.

“I’m ready for something hot to drink,” Frank says as we near the resort.

“Definitely. A hot meal and sitting with my loved ones by the fire,” Charles agrees.

“I’m sure Emily is going to want me to change before dinner,” Mark says with a fond shake of his head. “You know they all will.”

They all laugh and I find myself joining in. I find myself enjoying this. I’ve never done *family* things like this. I didn’t realize how much I was missing out on until today.

We park outside the resort, but Charles turns his head before unlocking the doors. “Today was a day I’ll always remember. We didn’t get any elk, but we

did gain another hunter and family member. That's what matters most."

I smile, glancing around at everyone, a little overcome with the bond I'm feeling toward them. "Thanks everyone. Today was eye-opening."

And I mean it.

We head inside the resort, and I stop in my tracks when I see January. She's wearing a short, red silk dress, cut low in the front, showing off a great deal of delicious cleavage. The sexy black heels accentuate her toned legs, and I lick my lips, wanting to dive between them. Her curled hair spills down her back, the glossy tresses pointing my gaze to her rounded ass. But what really captures my attention is the way her laugh echoes around me. So carefree, so confident, so damn beautiful.

My eyes lift and I notice she's standing under the mistletoe.

This is it. This is my chance to finally kiss January Frost.

Chapter 7

January

The men barrel through the doors, and I catch sight of Nicholas. My breath hitches.

He's dressed in his camo-gear, and I have to say, he's even sexier than normal. Don't get me wrong, I'm on Team Suit, but this new rugged look, it's mesmerizing.

Our eyes meet, and I'm ready to walk over toward him and pretend to be a girlfriend greeting her man after a big hunt. Climb him like a Christmas tree.

But I am rooted to the spot because his stare is all-encompassing.

It's powerful, and heady.

Then he moves toward me.

Fast.

I want to back up. I want to fly forward. It's the unknown. I don't know what to do.

It isn't until Nicholas stands right in front of me, wrapping his strong arms around my waist that I realize I know exactly what I want.

A kiss.

And he delivers.

Oh boy, does he deliver.

His firm lips land against mine, and I feel like all the air has been sucked from my lungs.

Chills shoot down my spine as he pulls me closer and his tongue presses at my lips, begging for entrance.

I open my mouth for him and our tongues collide in a fervent frenzy to get closer to one another. The world fades away as I stay frozen in this moment, memorizing the way his tongue traces along mine. The way his firm hands grip me so tightly. The feel of his hard body against mine. The feel of his beard rasping against my skin.

My body fuses with his, and I cling to him, accepting everything he's giving me.

Someone whistles, and Nicholas breaks the kiss.

My eyes have a hard time opening, but when they do, they fixate on his dark eyes. He's staring at me, and I can't make out what he's thinking.

He glances up. "Mistletoe."

I step back, dropping my hands from his chest. "Oh, right."

"Kiss her again," Byron shouts from across the resort lobby.

I roll my eyes, and move away from Nicholas. “Ha ha.” I glare at Byron.

“I’m going to go up to the room and change before dinner.” Nicholas gives me a half-smile before he walks away from me.

The rest of the men leave to do the same, and I’m left with my aunts and mother. And of course, February, who rushes over to me once Nicholas is out of earshot.

“Did that just really happen?” she says, grabbing ahold of my arm.

I’m not gonna lie. I’m still a bit shellshocked. “I, uh, don’t even know.”

“He’s a keeper,” my aunt Emily says, walking away with Isabella in her arms.

The rest of the women follow her, and I’m left standing with February, and honestly, I don’t even know what to think anymore.

“I can’t believe he just did that.” Feb stares at me. “Wait, how was it?”

I’m still in a daze of being kissed by Nicholas, and I lick my lips, still feeling him there. “It was nothing,” I say, completely lying to my sister. I can’t very well tell her it was the best kiss I’ve ever had.

No, I can’t tell her that.

I can’t tell her that my knees are still a bit weak from it.

No.

I hate him.

Right?

“Sure.” She nods her head. “I usually look like I’m in a daze when it’s nothing too.” My sister doesn’t believe me, and I don’t blame her. I’m a crap

liar.

We head after my mother and our aunts, and standing right in front of me is Garrett Pulse. My eyes bug out, and I try to hide behind my sister, but it's no use.

"Ah, January," he says, his smile all too bright and cheery for my mood right now. "I was hoping I'd see you again."

"Hi, Mr. Pulse."

"Please, call me Garrett."

"Garrett. Oh, this is my sister, February."

He shakes her hand. "Interesting name."

"Our parents thought it was cute. Two girls, January and February. Nice to meet you, Mr. Pulse. I've heard great things."

I glance over my shoulder at the bay of elevators, hoping Nicholas doesn't return at this moment. Thankfully, the coast is clear.

"I was hoping I could get a quick opinion of yours on a few things," Garrett says to me. "Nothing major, but I wanted to run a campaign by you."

I nod. "Sure. Yes. Absolutely." I keep nodding, trying to end this conversation before Nicholas steps off the elevator, or worse, my mother swings back to find out why we're not joining her for dinner.

"Great. Do you have time a little later this evening?"

I tug my lower lip between my teeth. Do I? "Yes, sure." I should decline, because how will I even be able to slip away for a few minutes to speak with this man? But I need him gone, so I nod like a loon, agreeing to everything.

"Great," Garrett says. "I'll meet you in the hotel lobby bar around eight."

“Can’t wait.” I pull my sister away, and speed walk to the restaurant to find the rest of my family.

“What are you going to tell Nicholas?” Feb asks.

I shrug. “I don’t even know. I’m a horrible person.”

Feb stops walking and tugs on my arm so I’m facing her. “Listen, you’re not really dating Nicholas.” She’s right. “You don’t have to tell him where you’re going, or who you’re meeting. Just tell him you’re meeting me.”

“Yes. Ok, you’re right.”

“See, easy.”

“What’s easy?” Nicholas says from behind me.

I swing around with a big smile on my face. “I’m meeting Feb for drinks later. At eight.” I glance over at Feb and nod.

I’m sure he can tell I’m lying, because I’ve always been really bad at it.

Luckily for me, my sister excels at the gift. She’s a pro, and she turns to face Nicholas and says, “That’s right.” She parks a hand on her hip and points a finger at him. “And you better let me have some girl time with my favorite sis.”

“Of course,” Nicholas says. “But to be fair, she is your *only* sister.”

“True. True,” I say all too quickly, trying my best to lead them both to the restaurant.

Nicholas stares at me, and I swear he can see right through me.

Straight to the suffocating guilt at my rotten core.

I really hate lying to him.

Soon, I won't have to worry about it. And I'm not sure how I feel about that anymore.



I'M DOWN AT THE HOTEL BAR AT EXACTLY EIGHT O'CLOCK. I'VE ORDERED A glass of white wine, and I run my finger along the delicate stem of the glass as I wait for Garrett Pulse.

And wait.

He's late.

And I'm annoyed.

One thing I appreciate about Nicholas is he's always on time. It shows respect. Obviously, Pulse doesn't care about my time, because it's nearly fifteen minutes after the hour.

"January," Garrett says, slithering like a snake onto the stool next to me.

"Mr. Pulse, how are you this evening?" I try to push away my agitation of him being late and focus on why I'm so nervous. I keep glancing over his shoulder, waiting for Nicholas to appear at the entrance, or worse, my family.

"Garrett," he says as he calls the bartender over with a raise of his hand. He orders a Moscow Mule, and then turns his attention back on me. "I was surprised Nicholas didn't say anything about losing you to me. Have you told him yet?"

Busted.

The bartender hands him his drink, and I clear my throat as Garrett takes a sip. I swipe my hands over my brown corduroy pants. After dinner, Nicholas and I went up to our room and I changed into something more casual. I didn't

want to give Garrett the wrong idea by showing up in a sexy dress.

Although, the way Nicholas' eyes swept over my beige sweater and brown pants paired with knee-high brown boots, you'd think this outfit is just as sexy as the dress.

I grab my wine glass, trying to think of a way I can answer his question.

I decide on the truth. "I haven't told him yet. I was waiting until after the holidays to put in my formal notice."

"I can assure you he won't be happy." Garrett chuckles in a way I suddenly find annoying.

Am I going to hurt Nicholas by leaving?

I normally would be happy about this. Two days ago I would be chuckling annoyingly right along with Garrett, but for some reason, I'm not.

Do not get confused about a kiss that didn't mean anything.

"I'm sure he won't," I say more to myself before taking a long pull of my Chardonnay.

"Enough about him. I'd like you to look over this campaign we're planning on launching right after the holidays. I know you don't officially start until then, but I'd love to get your thoughts on it."

He slides over a folder, and I pick it up. When I open it, I look at the pictures of an older game he's relaunching. I glance over a few key aspects of the campaign, and nearly gasp when I see that he's ripping off Nicholas' marketing campaign for his new game, launching in March.

This is not good.

This will destroy Nicholas' whole campaign launch, and there won't be enough time to start from scratch.

"Where did you get the idea for this?"

Garrett's watching me closely. He knows I know it's a complete copy. I should throw the folder in his face and call him out, but I'm torn.

I want the job of marketing exec, but now I'm wondering if we have a mole in our offices. Sure, Brighting Gaming has a lot of enemies, but not anyone who works for them.

I bet it's Ron Dawson. He's a creep and a half.

I bet he's the one leaking information to the marketing team over at Pulse Gaming.

"I have some of the *brightest* minds on my team."

I don't miss the way he emphasizes the word *brightest*. As in Brighting Gaming. There's definitely a mole.

"I'll look over this more later and give you all my notes in the morning." I fake a yawn. "I'm really tired and we've got a busy day tomorrow." I try to offer him a smile, but now I don't feel so well.

Acid churns in my stomach as I say my goodbyes, and thank him for picking up the cost of my wine. I shake his slimy hand, and rush to the elevators, slipping his file into my oversized bag. I suck in a deep breath once I'm safely inside the elevator and now I don't know what to do.

I think back on the time Nicholas embarrassed me in a marketing meeting not too long ago. He was going over a few campaigns with his top executives, and I stepped into the room to deliver him his coffee.

As I set his coffee down in front of him, I noticed a typo in the headline of the advertisement. I pointed it out, and let's just say the marketing team didn't appreciate it one bit.

I'll never forget the way Nicholas stared at me with a look of bewilderment on his face.

He finally raised a brow and asked, "Is that all, Ms. Frost?"

I quickly left and felt like a fool for opening my mouth. I thought I was helping, but now I see Nicholas has never valued my opinion unless it's about his schedule. Or the errands he sends me on.

No, he doesn't care about me.

Kiss or not.

Maybe this whole Pulse Gaming campaign will serve him right.

But if that's true, then why do I still feel like garbage.

Chapter 8

Nicholas

The sound of ice hitting the side of my glass of scotch echoes around the quiet room. As I sit in the oversized chair, staring at the door, trying to contain the annoyance I feel, I nearly want to combust.

When January told me she was having drinks with her sister, I knew it was a lie. She's a terrible liar. The way she averts her eyes, the slight blush that creeps onto her cheeks, and the subtle way she moves further away from me.

I don't know what she's doing or with whom. It's definitely not having drinks with February and damn if it doesn't make me wonder if she's down there right now talking to Pulse. He's not a man I trust, especially with *my* January.

It's bad enough I know he's stealing her from me, but the thought that she's left me sitting in this room while she mingles with my enemy has my annoyance turning into anger. And dare I say, jealousy?

I close my eyes as I try to erase the images of them laughing over drinks and think back to January under the mistletoe. I was a man possessed, unable to control the need to kiss her. The way she laughed so carefree. The sexy red dress she had on, showing off her incredible body. Her silky hair falling down her back in soft waves. There was no way I could control myself.

When my lips touched hers, my whole world stood still. At that moment I wasn't pretending to be her boyfriend. I wasn't her boss. I was a man that wanted this woman more than I thought possible. I kissed her with everything I had and she kissed me back with exactly the same.

There was nothing "pretend" about that kiss. Not from me and not from her. It may very well have been the first real thing between us.

I hear the door handle and snap my eyes open.

January comes in, quietly closing the door. Does she really believe that I climbed into bed and fell asleep while she was gone?

Her back is to me as she keeps her hands pressed against the door.

"Did you have fun with your sister?"

She jumps and spins around with wide eyes. Her chest rises and falls rapidly and I wish it would stop because the movement draws my attention to her full tits pressed against her sweater. She rests her hand against her chest and I sip my scotch trying to keep myself from moving toward her.

"Yes, it was great," she says with too much fake enthusiasm.

"Did you talk about everything you needed?"

She gives a small grin and turns her back to me as she opens the closet door.

"Umm yes, I suppose we did. She's having a tough time with a guy that owns a competing coffee house."

“Ahh yes. The competition usually is a snake in the grass that can’t be trusted.”

There’s no reply and I’m partly grateful and highly disappointed.

She bends over to look for something in the closet and my dick hardens staring at her perfectly round ass. The way her pants hug it has me wanting to rip them off her so I can squeeze it myself.

As she stands up her hair falls around her and I want to sink my fingers into it. I adjust my position, moving my hard cock as I continue to stare. She’s getting her night shirt, the one that I’ve noticed just barely covers her ass and I suppress a moan.

“I’m going to change.”

She disappears into the bathroom and I push the heels of my hands into my eyes. “You’re walking a fine line here, Luge,” I whisper to myself.

All the fantasies I’ve had about January flash through my mind as I try desperately to fight the need I felt earlier when I kissed her. Only this time it’s not the lips on her mouth I want a taste of. I want to know her scent invading my nose. Her sounds echoing around me. Her taste coating my tongue.

“Fuck,” I whisper, standing up.

Just as I do, January comes walking out of the bathroom in that nightshirt. Our eyes collide and neither of us can look away.

She swallows nervously as she chews her full bottom lip and I realize I’m going to cross the line. Everything about this woman has me on fire and I can’t pretend anymore.

I move quickly across the room and sink my fingers into her silky brown hair, tilting her head up toward me. She sucks in a sharp breath, but her eyes soften as they search mine.

“I kissed you earlier and you left,” I whisper.

She bites her lip harder as she nods.

“But it made you feel things, didn’t it? It left you wondering what happens next, right?”

Her eyes bounce between mine as she decides what she’s going to say.

“Yes,” she whispers.

I crash my lips to hers and she moans immediately as our tongues once again collide. Her small hands hold onto my hips as I tighten my hold on her hair. It’s hard, rough, and sloppy. Our tongues tangle, fighting for more.

I pull back slowly, dragging my teeth against her bottom lip. We’re both breathing heavily, the need for more burning inside me like a wildfire.

“Let me show you what happens next, January.”

I grab the bottom of her nightshirt and lift it, pulling it off her. For the first time I see her exposed to me and she’s breathtaking. My fantasies did no justice to the perfection before me.

“Wow, you’re stunning.”

A slight blush creeps up her neck as she blinks up at me.

My fingers sink into her ass, causing my dick to press harder against the restraints of my pants. I easily lift her small frame and she wraps her legs around me. She doesn’t question me or herself. She holds onto me like we’ve done this before and she’s ready for more.

I gently lower her onto the bed and climb over her, claiming her mouth. She grabs ahold of my arms like she's holding on for dear life.

With just a simple kiss she gives herself to me. Her legs open wider, her kiss becomes more intense, and her entire body relaxes beneath me.

It's empowering.

The kiss continues as I run both my hands up her silky body and palm her tits. I pinch both her nipples and she lets out a deep moan that I swallow down. She lifts her hips and I push mine against her allowing her to feel exactly what she's doing to me.

As she whimpers, I break the kiss and move my lips down to the soft skin of her neck. I lick, suck, and bite down on her flesh as she moves beneath me. Another moan echoes around us as I bite down on her neck and tweak her hard nipples.

I lift my eyes, capturing the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. January's head is back, her lips are parted, and her eyes are closed. She looks like an angel experiencing ecstasy.

Overcome with feelings I've never experienced, I slide my hands down to her hips and dig my fingers in as I kiss a path down to her tits. I do the same to her tits that I did to her neck. Sucking, licking, biting. Teasing her by avoiding her sensitive nipples.

She lets out a small frustrated groan, and I grin against her skin. January may think she's starting to fall apart, but damn if I don't feel like I'm starting to be put together.

After I feel like she's had enough teasing, I finally suck a hard nipple into my mouth.

"Yes," she moans out.

Again I grin, overcome by the intensity between us.

I suck on her rigid nipples, biting both before kissing a path down her stomach. Her soft moans of pleasure and my wet lips on her skin combined with our heavy breathing are the only sounds in the room.

When I reach the top of her panties, I break away and glance up at her as my thumb rubs against her clit through her silk, very wet panties.

“January.”

It takes her a moment but she finally lifts her head so our eyes collide. Her skin’s flushed and my dick twitches at the sight.

“If you want me to stop, tell me right now.”

Her eyes bounce between mine as she sucks on her swollen bottom lip. “Keep going,” she whispers.

A growl rips from me as I shred her panties in two, tossing the pieces aside. Her bare, wet pussy is before me, and like a man starved, I feast on her.

“Fuck, January, I’ve never tasted anything so intoxicating before. Open your legs wider and rub this sweet, wet pussy against my face while I feast on my favorite meal.”

She cries out as I bite down on her clit, but does exactly what I told her to do.

“Good girl.”

My tongue lashes against her as I’m intoxicated by her taste. I’ve never craved something before but I know I will now forever crave the taste of January Frost.

As my assault on her pussy continues, she rubs it against my face. Her taste, her scent, and her soft moans have me growling against her. It’s all too much

and not even close to enough.

I suck on her clit and push my fingers into her. She cries out as I feel her tighten against my fingers.

“That’s right, January. Give me your release. Let me rip it from you,” I groan.

“I’m so close,” she moans, moving against my fingers.

I pick up my speed, fucking her with my fingers while I suck and bite on her sensitive clit. She’s unraveling and I’ve never wanted it so badly.

Her loud moans switch to screams. Her pussy is squeezing my fingers like a boa constrictor. Her body is shaking, as she gets closer to falling off the edge.

I’m slamming into her, realizing that she likes it hard and fast. Just like me.

“Oh, yes,” she cries out.

“Give it to me, January,” I demand.

My lips wrap around her clit and I suck as I curl my fingers. And that’s all it takes.

My name falls from her lips as her release crashes over her body. It’s exhilarating to behold. Makes a man religious, ready to worship her all night long.

I pull my fingers out of her and lick at her while wave after wave of her orgasm continues.

As she settles I lick up her pussy and place a kiss on her clit, causing her to jump. I grin as I look up at her from between her legs.

She lifts her eyes to mine and she looks completely sated.

It's beautiful.

"Fucking perfection," I say with a small grin.

It's the truth. January Frost is not just a fantasy, a fake girlfriend, or my assistant.

No, January Frost has somehow crept beneath my skin and became mine.

Chapter 9

January

I can't believe I came all over Nicholas. I was a woman who didn't care about anything but to live in the moment. I'm never like that.

It's not who I am.

After Nicholas finished with me, he left to clean up in the restroom, and I passed out. And when I woke up this morning he was nowhere to be found.

I head down to the lobby, ready to meet my family for a day of fun. My nerves are on high alert when I exit the elevator and scan the lobby looking for my family. Or Nicholas.

I just don't know what to say to him.

'Hey, last night was great, here's my two week's notice.'

Ugh.

I'm a horrible person.

I'm definitely on Santa's naughty list.

When I don't see him, I breathe out a sigh of relief. Phew.

I barely get that breath out before February rushes toward me.

She grabs me by the arm and pulls me aside. "Did you see what the family wants to do today?"

Oh god. Knowing my family it could be anything. I just hope my mother and her sisters aren't already planning my wedding to Nicholas.

"No, what?"

She smiles and it fades just as quickly as it appeared. "Game day in one of the ballrooms."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Dad booked the ballroom and we have an array of corny games ready to be played." Feb parks a hand on her hip. "There's even a ring of chairs in the middle of the room."

"Oh, what's that for?"

Feb shrugs. "Who knows. Knowing Aunt Char it's probably some hippie sharing circle we'll all have to partake in."

I think about sharing my innermost feelings and cringe. I can't tell my family anything about last night. "Is Nicholas already in there?"

She nods. "Yep," she says, letting the P pop from her lips.

Ugh. "What a nightmare."

"Dad's already trying to pick out blindfolds for Pin The Tail On The Donkey, it's kind of funny."

I scrub a hand down my face. “Feb, listen to me. Something happened between us last night.”

Feb’s eyes grow large. Too large. She’s nearly exploding with anticipation of what could have possibly happened. She smiles, creepily I might add, at me. “What? Like something sexual?” She gasps. “Did you two have sex?”

I glance over my shoulder to make sure no one is listening to us. “No.” I pull her into a nearby ladies’ room and check the stalls to make sure we’re alone. “We didn’t have sex,” I say, once I know it’s clear.

“What happened?”

I lean against the sink, closing my eyes, trying my best to block out the memory of it. But it was just too good. A smile spreads. “I don’t even know,” I breathe out. “It all happened so fast.”

“Do you want it to happen again?” she asks.

I pop my eyes open, and nod, slowly, over and over. “Yes,” I murmur.

She gives me a gentle smile. “Look, I’ll admit, he’s the hottest man I’ve ever seen, but...” She doesn’t even need to finish her sentence.

“I know. He’s my boss. Soon-to-be ex-boss.” I spin around and place both hands on the counter, staring at myself in the mirror. “I don’t know what to do. How can I face him?”

“Well, what did he say afterward?”

“I fell asleep.” I’m such an idiot. “It’s been so long, and just with everything going on... I zonked out.”

Feb laughs. “That good, huh?”

I close my eyes, remembering once again the way it felt to have Nicholas' hands on me. His lips on me. His tongue. "Better." I glance at my sister's reflection through the mirror. "What do I do?"

She shrugs. "Maybe he barely even remembers."

I laugh. "Are you kidding?"

"You know how men are. Bang 'em and forget 'em."

"Yeah, it wasn't like that at all."

Feb steps next to me. "I'm sure he's just as awkward right now as you are."

"It was a mistake." I straighten. "We can't let that happen again."

Feb nods. "Exactly. I bet he just got wrapped up in all the pretending."

I chew on my lower lip, thinking about her logic. Is that what happened? Was he just pretending and got caught up?

"I don't know," I say. "All I know is that I do not want to play twelve-year-old birthday games with him all day."

She puts her arm around me. "Well, maybe this will be good for you to confront your feelings."

"I don't have feelings."

"Mm-hmm."

We exit the bathroom in silence and walk down the resort hallway to one of the ballrooms.

We step inside and I roll my eyes at all the ridiculousness that assaults my eyes.

Nicholas stands in the center of the room, the twins next to him as they lay a Twister mat down.

This can't be happening.

"Hi, girls," my mother says as she walks by. "Gang's all here," she yells across the ballroom, announcing our arrival.

Nicholas' eyes snap up and meet mine. My cheeks are on fire as I give him a small smile.

Everyone is here, and I feel like all eyes are on me. My father and Uncle Frank stop their chat and stare in my direction. Even Aunt Yvonne glances at me from the bounty of food she's putting together on a table on the other side of the room.

I plaster on a fake smile and move toward Nicholas.

Here goes nothing.

"Hi, sleepyhead," he says as he kisses the top of my head.

"Hi."

"Ah, February. How was girl's night?" Nicholas asks my sister, and I inwardly cringe. He knows I wasn't with my sister last night and I feel horrible for lying to him.

But I can't let him know I was with Pulse.

And now that I know there's a mole in Brighting Gaming, I'm at a loss of what to say or do.

I hate this.

I hate that there's a mole in Nicholas' company and now I have to do something about it. There's no way I can work for Pulse, right?

Feb launches into a story about meeting me at the bar and how we drank a little too much, and I want to die. Nicholas raises a brow, staring at me as she continues to blab lie after lie.

I don't think Nicholas is buying any of it.

"Stop," I finally say. "I wasn't with Feb last night."

My sister's mouth drops open.

"Sorry, Feb," I say to her, and then grab Nicholas' arm to pull him away from my family so I can tell him the truth.

But before I can do just that, my mother announces it's game time. "Who's ready to play some games?" She says it with one of the biggest smiles I've ever seen.

This can't be real life.

I nod apologetically at Nicholas. "We'll talk later."

The air is thick with tension between us as we join in a few games. I'm not going near the Twister board. I don't need Nicholas and me tangled in a compromising position. I don't think I'd be able to control myself.

I won't lie. I do have feelings for him.

He presses his hand to the small of my back when we finish a bean bag toss game, leading me toward the table of refreshments.

He's smiling. "This is a lot of fun."

I shake my head. "You don't have to lie. No one thinks this is fun."

He grabs a bottle of water, twisting off the cap and chugging nearly half the bottle down before saying, "I do. I didn't grow up with a lot of family."

I grab a cookie and take a seat in one of the nearby chairs. Nicholas sits down next to me.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I ask.

I try to think back to any information I’ve learned about Nicholas while working for him, and can’t think about a single time when he mentioned any family members.

He shakes his head. “No. It was just me and my mother for many years.” He stares at his water bottle. “My father left when he found out my mother was pregnant with me. She worked a ton of jobs, all the time. I remember her leaving me at the mall, in the arcade to play video games, while she worked at the food court.”

“Is that where you grew to love video games?”

He nods. “Yeah, video games were my babysitter more times than I think my mother is willing to admit. I don’t mind, though, it’s made me who I am today.”

I smile. “Where is she now?”

Before he can answer, my Aunt Char stands in front of us. “Come on, you two. We’re about to play musical chairs.”

“You can’t be serious,” I say.

Nicholas stands. “I love that game.” He holds his hand down to me, and I slip my hand into his. “I should tell you I’m really good at this game.”

“Nobody is good at musical chairs. It’s not a skill-type game.”

“Oh, there’s definitely a skill.” He’s got this smarmy smile and I laugh a little.

“No, there’s not. There’s only one skill, just get your ass in a chair when the music goes off.”

Nicholas chuckles. “Trust me, I’ve got this.”

We walk toward the chairs in the center of the room. My mother goes over the rules. There’s twelve chairs for the thirteen of us playing, and my mother will be manning the music.

Uncle Frank and Byron step up next to me.

“Prepare to lose,” Byron says with a sinister laugh.

“Winner gets the Frost Family Cup,” my mom says, and I snap my eyes to where she stands.

Please don’t tell me she still has the family cup. She does.

She holds it high above her head, and I peek over at Nicholas.

“What is that thing?” he asks with an enormous grin on his face.

I want to crawl into a hole.

“In my defense I was eight years old when Feb and I made that atrocious thing.”

Nicholas stares at the trophy my sister and I made. The bottom of the cup is random Barbie legs we had lying around. Those things pop right off, so easily. The top of the cup, if you can call it a cup, is a giant golden cowgirl hat. The body of this trophy is basically a whole lot of tin foil and washi tape.

“Who’s going home with this gem?” My mother holds it up proudly, feathers dangling from the Barbie legs.

“Oh, I’m winning that thing,” Nicholas says.

I'm mortified, thinking of that atrocity in his hands. "No, you can't possibly want that."

"I'm putting it in my trophy case."

Nicolas has a glass case in his office, filled with gaming awards, plus a copy of every game he's ever created. The Barbie legs trophy will stick out like a sore thumb.

"No," I say, horrified.

The music plays, and I'm in motion before Nicholas. I've got one mission on my mind: Don't let Nicholas win that thing.

"All the Single Ladies" blares through the speakers and I stick as closely as possible to the chairs as I go around in a circle.

The music cuts out and I plop down.

Aunt Emily is the first one out, and her husband laughs as she walks over to stand with my mother.

"Ready?" my mother shouts.

The music plays, and once again, I'm trying to stick close to the chairs. My heartbeat amps up as we move around in a circle.

The music stops and Uncle Frank is out.

This continues until only Nicholas and I are left with one lone chair nestled between us.

I can't believe this.

Nicholas smiles at me as my family watches. "Can I get you to autograph the trophy when I win?"

I shake my head, my smile growing. “There’s no way I’m letting you leave this room with that thing.”

The music starts, and I’m caught off guard. I rush around, trying to stay close to the seat of the chair.

The music stops and I sit down, landing right on Nicholas’ lap.

His hands grip my waist and he growls out the word, “*Mine.*”

My brain knows he’s talking about the chair, but my body reacts as if he’s talking about me. Claiming me. Letting everyone know that I’m *his* and nobody else’s.

I should get off his lap, but for some reason I can’t.

And it’s not like he’s releasing his hold on me either.

I glance over my shoulder, gazing into his eyes and they look the same as they did last night.

Dark.

Heated.

Completely turned on.

I’m sure my eyes mirror his.

The spell is broken as my father hollers out, “Nicholas is the winner.”

The rest of my family cheers and laughs as my mother steps forward with the Frost Family Cup.

I stand from his lap, completely frazzled as my mother hands him the cup and makes a huge show about the whole thing.

Nicholas holds onto the cup as if it’s gold.

As if it's a treasure. And I suck in a breath when I realize he stares at me the same way.

Chapter 10

Nicholas

January and I walk to our room while I proudly hold the Frost Family Cup. She's embarrassed by it, but I think it's incredible. I didn't have anything like this growing up. My family never played games while laughing and joking with one another. It's something I only saw on TV, so to be a part of it today was truly fun.

I was determined to win the Frost Family Cup. Partly because January didn't want me to, but partly because it made me feel like I belonged with this group of amazing people. This trophy means something to me, so as I hold it with a smile on my face, it's real.

I've won many awards in the industry I'm in, but the Frost Family Cup means more to me than all of those put together.

This trophy represents family, love, and laughter.

I will proudly display it.

“You can just give me the cup and I’ll hold onto it until my mother starts looking for it again.”

I glance down at her as I press down the handle to our room. “This trophy is mine. I’m not giving it to you. It will be proudly displayed.”

She groans as we walk into the room. “The winner usually sticks it in a closet.”

I place the trophy on the coffee table and stand back grinning as I stare at it.

“I won this. It’s not going to be hidden.”

The uncertainty in her eyes is not lost on me. She doesn’t want me to have this family cup because I’m *not* family.

And she’s leaving me.

“We have to talk,” she whispers, searching my eyes.

Emotions are thick around us as the joking comes to a screeching halt. My heart pounds in my chest as my breathing quickens. I couldn’t keep my eyes off January today. When she walked into the party room, I felt like the wind was knocked out of me. Vivid images of what happened last night played in my head and all I could think about was wanting more.

Wanting every piece of her.

I step up to her and slip my fingers into her silky hair. “Not now.”

Just as the words leave my mouth I claim her lips.

I know what she wants to tell me.

She wants to tell me she’s leaving me for Pulse.

I’m not ready to hear that.

Not yet.

She's going to leave me, but I'm going to make sure it's the sweetest goodbye for both of us.

I break the kiss and step back, pulling my shirt off as I stare at her. Her eyes are heavy with lust and I lick my lips.

“Undress for me, January.”

She doesn't protest, she keeps her eyes on me as she slowly pulls off her sweater, dropping it on the floor next to my shirt. I unbutton my jeans, allowing them to fall to my ankles and kick my shoes and socks off. My jeans get kicked off next. She follows my lead, unbuttoning her jeans and pushing them off, adding them to our growing pile of clothes.

“Good girl, but I want to see all of you. Bra and panties off too.”

Once again she does as I ask. Her nipples harden under my gaze and I'm willing to bet her pussy is dripping with need.

“Fuck, January, you take my breath away.” I step against her, feeling her soft skin against mine for the first time and I growl, biting down on her ear. “I tasted you last night and I've been craving more ever since.” I move my lips down her neck, sucking lightly as my hands glide down her silky skin.

I reach between her legs and drag my fingers through her wetness. A possessive groan leaves me as I look into her eyes.

“You're dripping wet, January. Do you have any idea what a turn-on that is for me? Knowing I've hardly touched you and your body is begging me for more.”

I don't give her a chance to reply, I lift her, sit her on the couch, and kneel between her legs.

“Spread your legs for me, let me see what I do to you.”

She does not disappoint and when I see her wet pussy I lose all control.

“Fuck,” I growl.

My fingers dig into her thighs as I keep her legs spread wide as my mouth covers her wet lips.

“Oh god,” she cries out.

I frantically lick at her, her taste coating my tongue. I wasn't kidding when I said I've been craving it and having it again is making my already hard dick, painfully rock solid.

I feast on her as if she's my last meal. Licking, sucking, biting. She moans moving her hips, rubbing her velvety soft pussy against my face. I growl against her, knowing she'll feel the vibration and I grin when she cries out.

My tongue lashes against her hard and fast, pulling her closer and closer to the edge. She's moaning louder, rocking her hips faster, and is nearly about to combust. All these signs are a clear indicator my girl's about to give me what I'm so desperate to take.

“Nicholas, I'm so close,” she cries out.

I push my fingers inside her as my tongue flicks wildly against her sensitive clit. She shouts as her orgasm crashes over her and I'm in ecstasy as I'm rewarded with her release.

When she finally starts to settle, I kiss a wet path up to her mouth and press my lips against hers. She opens immediately and we both moan when she tastes herself.

Her small hands slide down my body and when her fingers brush against my painfully hard cock, it jerks. She grins against my lips as she rubs her hand

over my boxer-briefs.

I break the kiss, groaning as my eyes close.

“My turn,” she whispers.

My eyes snap open, colliding with hers. I grin as I stand to remove my briefs.

“Who am I to deny you?”

She smiles as she gets down on her knees in front of me.

A sight that will be burned into my memory for the rest of my life.

Her big blue eyes look up at me. Her tongue pokes out to wet her full lips. The way her long brown hair hangs down around her draws my attention to her perfect tits. Her hands rest on my thighs, burning my skin with her touch.

I reach down and grab myself, pumping my cock as our eyes lock.

Her eyes darken as she wraps her hand around mine, stopping my movements.

“I said it’s my turn.”

I remove my hand and grin. “Fuck, yes it is.”

My fingers sink into her hair as she takes me deep into her mouth.

“Oh fuck,” I groan.

January digs her fingers into my thighs and bobs her head, taking me in and out of her hot mouth. It takes her a few minutes to find her rhythm, but once she finds it I see goddamn stars.

She’s taking me to the back of her throat, moving faster than I thought she’d be able to. It feels so good, and she’s only just getting started. She uses her tongue as well as lightly using her teeth.

“Fuck, January, this feels incredible. Keep going, make me come.”

Her fast pace as well as her teeth scraping against me has my body shaking. My knees nearly buckle beneath me.

I’ve fantasized about this very moment so many times, but nothing has prepared me for the reality. Her talented mouth, her soft sounds, and the sight of her lips wrapped around my dick takes my breath away.

It’s also bringing on an orgasm that is going to rip me apart.

“That’s it, January, such a good girl.” I moan as the first wave hits me. “Fuck, I’m going to come. Take it all. Take every last drop.”

My release hits me like a Mack truck. I grab tightly onto her hair as I come down her throat and she does in fact take everything I give.

When I’m finished, she pulls me out of her mouth and licks her lips.

“Fuck,” I whisper, pulling her to her feet and slamming my mouth against hers.

I swallow down her moans as we both move our hands against each other. Her soft, silky skin pressed against my hard body has my dick coming back to life.

She has no idea what she’s doing to me.

I have no idea what she’s doing to me.

The only thing I do know is that I need more.

We’re both panting when the kiss ends and her flushed face lifts to mine.

“Earth-shattering good.” Her blush deepens and I push my hardening dick against her. “Get your sexy ass on the bed, January. I’m not nearly done with you yet.”

I grab her hand and lead her to the bed. She climbs on, laying her head on the pillow. It takes me a minute to move because the image of January Frost laid out for me is something I can't turn away from.

When I finally get myself together, I climb on top of her, nestling between her legs. My cock teases her pussy as I stare into her eyes.

“Tell me you want this as much as I do.”

Her eyes bounce between mine as she nods her head.

“Say it, January. I want to hear you say you want this too.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and presses a soft kiss to my lips. “I want this too, Nicholas.”

I lean forward and kiss her neck, sucking lightly as I rub my cock between her wet folds. She moans and moves her head slightly, silently begging for more. I take advantage and bite down on the soft flesh.

“Oh yes.”

I kiss down her throat, moving to her tits. Her hard nipples greet me and I lick, suck, and nip at each of them. Her back arches as I work her over, pushing her tits further into my face.

It's fucking hot.

I kiss back up to her lips and suck her bottom lip into my mouth, letting my teeth drag against it as I pull away.

My heart pounds wildly in my chest.

There's not a time I've ever been this turned on. This fire that January has started has no possibility of ever being extinguished. I reach over to the nightstand, looking for my wallet and the condom I put in there many ages

ago. I hope it's still good. Ah, success. I rip it open with my teeth before pushing up onto my knees between her legs.

I roll it over myself as she watches. Her eyes darken just like before.

As I sink back down onto her, I link my fingers with hers, pushing her arms above her head. The tip of my dick pushes against her entrance.

“You're incredible, January. Breath-takingly beautiful.”

With those words, I push inside her. We both moan as I stretch her out. Her tight pussy sucks me in and when I'm deep inside her, I tighten my fingers on hers.

“You alright?”

“Oh god, yes.”

I grin as I slowly move in and out of her. I keep the slow pace as long as I can. I don't want to rush this. I want this to be something that neither of us are capable of forgetting.

Yet, this slow pace is not something I'm used to and I'm not sure I'll be able to keep it going much longer.

Her nails dig into my fingers as she lifts her hips.

“You want it faster and harder?”

I know she does, but I want to hear her say it. I want her begging me for more.

“Yes.”

I keep the slow pace, teasing her, as I stare into her eyes. “Beg.”

A blush creeps up from her neck onto her face as she chews her bottom lip. I'm unwavering with my movements, waiting to see if she'll do it.

Hoping she'll do it.

Just when I'm starting to think she won't, she tightens her grip on me.

"I want it faster and harder, Nicholas. Please fuck me."

As if I'm no longer in control, I drive into her hard and fast, fucking her at a speed that has us moving up the bed. Her moans grow louder each time I slam into her and it only spurs me on more.

I release her hands and slide my hands down her body, grabbing onto her thighs and moving to toss them over my shoulders. This gives me a better position to pound into her the way we're both craving.

"Oh yes," she cries out.

I drive into her, watching my cock disappear into her dripping wet pussy.

"Fuck, January. I can't look away from your pussy wrapped around me, watching how wet my dick is each time it comes back out. It's goddamn ecstasy."

She shouts as I relentlessly slam into her over and over. Harder and harder. Pushing us both close to falling over the edge. I can feel her pussy tightening around me and I growl.

I rub her clit and her back arches off the bed. "Fuck, I'm so close. Don't stop."

"Not something you need to tell me."

We're both panting and sweating. Her hands are now on my shoulders and she's digging her nails hard into my skin. I rub her clit faster, pounding into

her. I lift my eyes from where we're connected to her face.

I thought watching my dick fuck her was intense, but it's nothing compared to looking at her beautiful face. Her lips are parted, she's glistening with sweat, her cheeks are pink, and her eyes are heavy.

She's angelic.

"Oh god."

"That's right, January. Give me your orgasm. I want you to come on me," I growl.

I pinch her clit as I slam into her and she screams my name as I rip her release from her. I don't slow my pace though. I keep pumping into her causing her orgasm to go on and on. Her nails dig further into my flesh and I feel my balls tighten.

My release tears through me as I come hard inside her.

After a few minutes, I put her legs back onto the bed and slowly pull out of her. She jumps slightly at the feeling and it gives me satisfaction that she won't forget how good this felt tomorrow.

I press my lips to hers and kiss her. It's not like any kiss we've shared before. This one is different. It means something. At least for me.

It's slow, soft, and sweet. It's me trying to tell her without words how I feel.

I hope she feels it because I sure as hell do.

We break the kiss, both of us breathing heavily. I quickly get rid of the condom and lay next to her, pulling her into my arms.

She rests her head on my chest and I kiss the top of her head.

"This is real for me," I whisper.

“For me too.”

I close my eyes, relieved and thankful she’s feeling the same.

No other words are spoken as we both drift off to sleep.

Naked.

In each other's arms.



WE’RE HAVING A QUIET BREAKFAST IN OUR ROOM. AFTER LAST NIGHT, I wasn’t ready to share her with the rest of the Frost family just yet.

“You really don’t have to pretend to like this thing,” she says, jabbing her thumb toward the Frost Family Cup I have sitting in the middle of the table.

“I don’t pretend. I’m not a child. This is a prestigious award I’m proud to display.”

She laughs, shaking her head, looking gorgeous. Her hair is piled on top of her head, wearing just a nightshirt with her one knee pulled up onto the chair. She looks just as sexy as she did last night when she was coming all over me.

“You’re ridiculous.”

I lift my shoulder as I sip my coffee. “Don’t be jealous.”

She rolls her eyes as she smirks.

Yesterday she asked me about my family and we got interrupted. It’s not something I like to talk about, but for the first time ever, I want to.

I want to let January into the deepest parts of me.

I clear my throat as I put my coffee down. Her eyes lift to mine as she chews her pancakes.

“Yesterday you asked me where my mom is and we got interrupted.” She nods, adjusting herself in the chair. “My mother’s in a nursing home. This isn’t easy for me, so I just need to say it.” She nods. “She worked her ass off to take care of me all by herself and what did she get for it? Alzheimer’s.”

“Nicholas, I’m so sorry. How advanced?”

I shake my head, glancing down for a moment to collect myself. “She has good days where she remembers who I am, but those are few and far between these last few years.” I lift my eyes to January’s and I see the emotion swimming in them. “She took care of me and now I take care of her. She’s in the best facility money can buy, with the best doctors in the field. The nurses she has are amazing with her and I’m grateful for them all.”

She gets up and comes over, sitting on my lap. Her arms wrap around my neck and she rests her head on my shoulder.

“She’s lucky to have you.”

“No, I’m the lucky one. Remember the night I had you pick up that cake from Hoboken?”

“Yes. I remember being so mad about that.”

“Really? You were mad?”

“Who needs a birthday cake late at night, and from Hoboken?”

“My mother loves that bakery.”

January’s body stiffens. “I feel so awful. Was the cake for her?”

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “Yes. It was.”

She props up so she can look me in the eyes. “I’m so sorry. Had I known...” her words fall away.

I reposition her back to where her head is on my shoulder. “It’s ok. The night didn’t end too well. My mother ate one bite and threw the rest of it against the wall. She got agitated. Which I guess is normal.”

“For people with Alzheimer’s to get agitated?”

“Yeah. I guess they feel helpless and somewhere deep down I think they know they can’t remember and it makes them angry.”

She sits up to look at me with watery eyes. A tear rolls down her cheek as I swipe it away with my finger.

“Don’t cry for me, January. Please, it hurts me more to see you upset.”

She clears her throat, quickly wiping her eyes. “I’m sorry. I just can’t imagine. I’ve got this huge, loud, crazy family and you’ve only got your mother.”

“And you,” I say, searching her eyes to see if she’s feeling the same way I am.

She wraps her arms around my neck and holds on tightly. My heart widens deep in my chest. I can feel the weight of it. Like it’s expanding to let this woman in. To live there. It’s growing, blossoming like a weed that’ll never die, no matter how much I try to eradicate it.

I can feel her tears on my neck as she peppers it with kisses. Her hands roam up and down my back, moving to my arms. She straddles me and rubs herself against my hardening dick.

I lift her, walking toward the bed and sitting down with her still straddling me. She pulls at my shirt and I lift it off as she does the same with hers.

Damn.

I could get used to this. I could get used to somebody caring about me.
Somebody who'll worry about me.

Someone who's there for me when my life gets to be too much.

Someone like her.

Chapter 11

January

I need to tell him. I have so many things to tell him. I have to tell him that I had planned on going to work for Pulse Gaming.

Even though I no longer plan on working for Garrett now. I mean, how can I? He stole Nicholas' whole campaign for *SpectarCloud*.

I have to tell Nicholas that he's got a mole in his company.

However, as I sit here, him looking at me like I'm his most prized possession, I can't bring myself to say the words.

I can't bring myself to tell this man I'm quickly falling for, that I was going to leave him high and dry.

A spike of uneasiness settles deep within my core. I can't lie to him. But before I can say anything his dark eyes meet mine.

"I need you, January," he whispers to me before planting his mouth right over mine.

I kiss him back with everything I have. With all the words I can't bring myself to say to him. With all the feelings emerging. Have they always been there?

Have I always secretly had a thing for my boss?

Is that why I hated him so much?

Was it really something else?

All I know is the way he touches me has my body building toward this pinnacle moment. One I don't ever want to stop.

He lies on the bed and I straddle him. We're both completely naked, and the feeling of his dick rubbing along my core sets my skin on fire.

I want this more than anything, and all the reasons why I shouldn't be doing this evaporate with each kiss of his lips on mine.

I need this.

And I'll think about all of the other things later.

He kisses me tenderly, but it grows rougher by the second before we're completely feral for one another. He whispers sweet nothings in my ear as he pushes deep inside me. I nearly shout out that I love him, but I keep quiet.

Where are these thoughts of love coming from?

Yes, I've known him for a while, but still.

I push all the heavy thoughts away and focus on the here and now. The way he touches me like I'm his. It turns me on.

Who knew I'd really like possessive Nicholas?

But I do.

“I just want to stay in here all day and do this,” he says, and I nod my head in full agreement.

He pushes his dick in deeper, and we both still.

“You have to move, Nicholas,” I tell him because I’m so close to coming. I just need a little bit more.

“I need a second,” he says in a rush. “You just feel so good, and I feel like if I keep pushing I’ll come and admit things to you I shouldn’t be admitting so soon.”

My breath catches in my throat. Is he saying what I think he’s saying? I gaze into his eyes, and I can see the words he’s trying to hide so easily there.

“Oh fuck, January. I can’t keep anything from you. I’m falling hard for you.” He thrusts a little deeper. “I’ve been falling for you since I first laid eyes on you.”

I can’t believe the words he’s saying to me. “Really?” I whisper on a moan as he continues to push inside me.

“Yeah. You’re everything to me.”

I cup his cheek and tug him toward me. I need to kiss him. I need to silence this moment before I end up confessing my whole heart to him.

So instead of telling him everything, I kiss him.

He kisses me back as our bodies pick up speed. Before long the sounds of our lovemaking fill the room and my body is so darn close to unraveling it’s not even funny.

I could get used to this.

Even though I know once this is over I'll need to tell Nicholas the truth and I don't think he'll ever forgive me.

In fact, I know he won't.



“ARE YOU SURE YOU CAN'T COME CAROLING TONIGHT?” MY MOTHER ASKS.

“Sorry, Mom. Nicholas wants to take me to a fancy dinner tonight.” I don't dare tell my mother the truth. That Nicholas and I are slipping away for the real reason why we've flown to Colorado. An awards ceremony where Nicholas is up for Game Developer of the Year.

My mother would never understand.

She'd learn the truth and know I lied about Nicholas being my fake boyfriend.

“I think it's romantic,” Feb says, helping me keep my secret.

I give her a quick wink. “Thanks, Feb.”

“I think she's in love,” Feb tells our mother.

My eyes widen. “I am *not* in love.” Even though earlier when we were making love in our hotel room I felt the emotion stronger than I've ever felt before.

But it can't be love.

It just can't.

Right?

“Is this true, January?” my mother asks. I’m thankful it’s just my mother, February and me hanging out in my mother’s hotel room this afternoon. If I had to explain my feelings to the whole family I’d probably chicken out.

“I’m not sure.” I’m tired of lying about how I feel. “I think a part of me does love him.”

Feb and my mother’s eyes grow serious. “I didn’t realize it was that serious,” Feb says.

“I didn’t plan for it to go down this way.” And that’s the truth. When I agreed to let Nicholas play my fake boyfriend, I never expected to fall for him.

I never expected we’d sleep together. I can tell my sister is dying to ask me if anything physical has happened, but she never will in front of our mother. I’m also dying to tell her everything, but I won’t.

Because it’ll never happen again.

It can’t ever happen again.

Even if Nicholas is hands down the best sex I’ve ever had. There’s no way we can have a future together.

Even after sex earlier, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him what I needed to tell him. About Pulse.

It’s upsetting, and I swear my mother and February can tell something is plaguing me.

“I’m sure everything will work out for the best,” my mother says out of nowhere. “I need to get ready.” She heads into the bathroom, leaving me and Feb alone.

“Spill the tea,” she says as she scoots closer to me on the bed.

I run a hand through my unruly locks. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

I don’t even have to answer because she’s already pumping her fists and acting like a looney tune. “Real mature. I have had sex before.”

She’s not listening, instead she’s smiling wide and begging, “Tell me he was good. I bet he was good, right?”

I relent. “So good, Feb. Like world-changing.” I shake my head. “What am I going to do?” I end up telling her everything. About Nicholas. About Pulse and him stealing Nicholas’ plans. I even tell her that I think I might be falling in love.

When I’m done spilling all the tea, she flops back on the bed.

“Wow,” she whispers. “You have to tell him.”

I nod. “I know. I just don’t know how.”

“Tell him tonight. Before he accepts his award. Or maybe you should wait until after.”

I think about what my sister says. Should I wait until he’s accepted his award?

Yes.

“He’s going to hate me.”

She shakes her head. “No, he won’t. You haven’t done anything wrong. You got a new job because you hated him. He can’t fault you for that. And now you’re not going to take that job because of what Pulse did.”

“True.” She makes a fine point.

I'll tell Nicholas everything.

Well, except for the falling for him part. I'll keep that one to myself until I know without a shadow of a doubt this thing between us is real.

Chapter 12

Nicholas

This is it.

The real reason January and I made the trip to Aspen—the awards ceremony.

The ballroom has been transformed into an elegant, professional setting. White Christmas lights surround the entire room, giving off a soft glow. The tables are covered with green tablecloths and a centerpiece of red Poinsettia. There's a dance floor that the tables surround with a few sprigs of mistletoe hanging above. The stage is set to go with a podium and a few chairs for the presenters.

I told January I was leaving early to give her privacy, but the true reason for leaving was to give myself space. My mind is clouded with everything going on with January. The way she makes me feel is unlike anything I've experienced before. I can't think straight when I'm around her and I need to perfect my acceptance speech in case I win.

Which is pretty much a given.

Especially since I'm up against Pulse and a no-name guy who is just starting out.

The satisfaction of beating Pulse will make this even better.

I grin as I read over my acceptance speech, pleased with how it sounds.

“Testing.”

I glance over my shoulder as they test the microphone. That means it's about to begin.

Just as I think it, the doors open and people usher in. I stand deciding I'll go meet January in the hallway, but she beats me to it.

She walks in and my knees just about give out on me.

She's breathtaking.

My pulse races as my eyes travel up her body. She's wearing a bright red, silk dress with thin spaghetti straps. It hugs her upper body, showing off her perfect tits. As it moves down her body it has more of a flow. Unbelievably sexy and elegant.

Her brown hair is curled and pinned up, drawing my eyes to her soft neck. I need to adjust myself just by staring at her.

Our eyes lock across the room and I swear my heart skips a beat.

I'm drawn to her like Santa to a plate of cookies.

We reach each other, and I gaze into her bright blue eyes.

“January, you leave me breathless. You look stunning.”

A small smile plays at her full lips as she runs her fingers down my gold tie.

“I could say the same.”

The urge to wrap her in my arms and press my lips against her is too much to handle, so I rest a hand on the small of her back, leading her to our table. I pull her chair out for her and as she sits I press my lips against her ear, saying, “When this is over I’ll show you what you’re doing to me.”

I sit next to her and notice the heat in her eyes. I rest my hand on her thigh under the table and grin.

She clears her throat as she glances around the room. “It looks magical in here.” She’s right it does, but it didn’t appear that way to me until she entered. “Do you have your acceptance speech ready?”

I nod, patting my jacket pocket. “Yes, all ready.”

She’s fidgety next to me. Her legs bounce and she’s playing with her fingers. Something is bothering her and if I had to guess it’s the idea of being in the same room as me and Pulse.

It may be making her nervous, but it’s pissing me off.

The thought that he thinks he’s going to take January away from me is infuriating, but now after everything that’s happened, it’s not happening. I refuse to let her go—professionally and personally.

She’s mine.

I sure as hell won’t share her with Pulse—on any level.

As the evening goes on she relaxes a bit. She’s chatting with others around the table as we enjoy a festive meal of ham, roasted potatoes, and green beans.

After dinner is cleaned up, they announce the award will be presented in about an hour.

I lean against January, squeezing her thigh. “Dance with me.” I don’t ask her, I’m demanding it of her. As if I could ever demand anything of her.

Her eyes sparkle as she nods. “I’d love to.”

I escort her onto the dance floor, filled with couples dancing close. Her arms rest on my shoulders as mine slide down her back. I stop myself just before I reach her ass, trying my best to keep this looking somewhat professional.

We move slowly to the music as our eyes stay locked. Her body pressed against mine feels like a missing puzzle piece I didn’t realize I’d lost. The silk of her dress beneath my fingers, her intoxicating scent, and her softening eyes are just solidifying what I already know.

I love this woman.

It’s not a question.

Not anymore.

I’ve fallen in love with January Frost, and it’s time I told her.

It no longer matters to me if I win tonight because I already have.

“After the ceremony, we need to talk.”

Her eyes slightly widen but when she notices my happiness, I feel her relax in my arms.

She nods, saying, “Yes, we do need to talk.”

We don’t say anything else. We hold each other closer as we move slowly across the dance floor.

I’ve fought for everything I have and I will fight for January. She’s not leaving me. Once I tell her I love her, it will change everything.

“Everyone, please take your seats.”

We reluctantly let go of each other and sit back down.

She rests her hand on mine and smiles. “Are you ready?”

“I was born ready.”

She laughs and the sound vibrates through me. Being the one to evoke joy from her causes my heart to race.

This girl has no idea what she’s done to me.

Not yet, anyway.

As the lesser awards are given out, I glance around the room. A room filled with like-minded people who are all trying to be on top of the gaming industry. When my campaign launches in March, it’s going to blow everyone’s mind and I’ll exceed the popularity and wealth I’ve already achieved.

“Now, for the moment we’ve all been waiting for. It’s time to announce Game Developer of The Year.”

I adjust myself and January reaches under the table, resting her hand on my thigh. My eyes slide to her, and her entire face lights up.

“Don’t be nervous, you’ve got this.”

I rest my hand on top of hers and grin. “I sure do.” And I’m not talking about the award.

“The nominees are Nicholas Luge from Brighting Gaming Company. Garrett Pulse from Pulse Gaming. And finally, Conner Goodman from Maxam Gaming.”

January's fingers dig into my thigh and I chuckle at her excitement as they open the envelope.

“Nicholas Luge from Brighting Gaming Company.”

January squeals with excitement as my name is called. It just makes this moment even better. I squeeze her hand as I glance at her. Unable to control myself, I press a soft kiss to her cheek before standing.

The cheering is loud as I make my way to the stage, but the pounding of my heart is even louder. I just kissed January Frost in front of everyone. It's exciting, empowering, and thrilling. I want to grab the microphone and declare my love, but the simple kiss may have just been enough.

“Thank you,” I say, smiling as I wait for the clapping to stop. My eyes search the crowd and when they find January, I keep them locked on her. “I had a speech all prepared, but I'm just going to say what it is I'm feeling.” I clear my throat, resting my hands on the podium. “I'm honored to be your choice. There are hundreds of incredibly talented men and women I've been up against and yet you saw something more in me. Things don't always play out how you expect. It's shocking and confusing. The doubts you feel make you wonder if what you're doing is right. You fight within yourself to make sense of it all but in the end, standing here before you proves it's always worth the risk. I'd like to thank the woman who is my right hand, hell, my left hand too, January Frost.” I nod to her. “I appreciate everything she's done for me. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be here right now. Thank you for your support and encouragement. It means everything to me.”

January wipes her finger under her eye and I know she understands. I smile as I look around the crowd. “Big things are coming, so I'll see you soon.” I grab the award off the podium and hold it up. “Thank you.”

The crowd erupts into applause as I get a standing ovation and I shake the hands of the presenters, thanking them.

When I step off the stage, January stands out among everyone. The happiness making her face glow and her tear-filled eyes has me picking up my pace to reach her. People are congratulating me as I pass by, but right now my only thought is getting to *my* girl.

I give her a big hug, not wanting to ever let her go.

“Congratulations, Nicholas.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I whisper, pressing a soft kiss below her ear.

“Well, this is cozy,” a nasally voice interrupts us. “Congratulations, Luge.” Pulse’s attention shifts to January and my hands fist at my side. “After the epic launch of my campaign next month, that January helped me with, even before officially joining Pulse Gaming, it’ll be *me* next time.” He tosses a folder onto the table and I glance down at the papers spilling out of it.

My head snaps to January as I frown. “My idea. What?” I’m so confused. “You gave him my idea?”

“She’s already a huge asset to me,” Pulse sneers.

“I can explain,” she says, stepping closer to me, but I’m no longer listening as I pick up the papers.

Are you kidding me?

It’s my campaign. But with Pulse’s logo all over it.

I glance at January. “What is this?” I keep scanning the documents. This can’t be true. I knew she took a job with him, but this? I glare at her, and she opens and closes her mouth like a fish out of water.

One lone tear rolls down her cheek and my heart shatters.

She's destroyed me.

Completely.

Chapter 13

January

Garrett Pulse did me dirty. This time I'm not lying when I say I hate him, but as I look at Nicholas, I can tell his world is obliterated. He has to know I had nothing to do with this, right?

Right?

"She'll be a great addition," Pulse says, and I wish his word vomit would stop already.

"I'm not coming to work for you anymore. Are you kidding me?" I glare at him. How can he even think I'd be fine with this.

I hate him. I really do. I don't usually like to use the word hate, because it's ugly, but I do hate him right now.

However, it doesn't appear to matter. Nicholas steps away from me.

"Nicholas," I whisper, tears rolling down my cheeks at a steady pace. "Please..." my words fall away when I realize he's no longer listening to me.

This can't be happening.

Nicholas flips through the papers. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

Before I can even answer, Pulse is wrapping an arm around me. His cheesy smile is wide and garish. I'm repulsed. "She's been everything to me."

I want to puke.

Did he really just say that?

"Everything?" Nicholas echoes.

"That's not true," I say, pushing Pulse off me. I step away from him, closer to Nicholas, to try to plead my case. "You have to believe me."

He just has to.

He can't seriously think I had anything to do with stealing his campaign.

The sound of Pulse's laughter beside us makes me want to throat punch him. And pull his perfectly coiffed hair. I want to stomp on his foot.

"Looks like you two have a lot to discuss. See you after the holiday, January."

"Um, no you won't." I park a hand on my hip. "I'd never work for a snake like you."

He's already walking away and even though I know he heard me, he doesn't acknowledge it.

I spin around to look at Nicholas, but he's still reading over the papers in his hands.

"This is everything. There's no way this is a coincidence."

"I know."

His eyes are watery, and I wonder if a man like Nicholas cries. Gazing up at him right now, I'm thinking he does.

It melts my heart.

I want to wrap my arms around him. Tell him we'll figure this all out together. We'll find the fucker who's been stealing his ideas and passing them off to Pulse.

I take one tentative step forward, and he takes one step back. "Nicholas..." my words fall away when I notice he's no longer listening to me.

"I knew you were going to work with Pulse, but I never thought you could do something like this."

Wait. What?

"You knew?"

His eyes finally meet mine, and I feel like I've just been sucker punched. There's so much hurt hidden behind his irises. "Yes. I don't know how you thought you could hide something like that from me. I know everything."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I thought maybe I could convince you to stay." His eyes stare straight through me.

"Convince me?" I step back. "By sleeping with me?" I can see everything so clearly now. This whole week is playing out in my mind. The meeting with my mother. How Nicholas was so quick to agree to being my boyfriend.

My heart pounds in my chest.

I'm an idiot.

“What? No?” His voice is drowned out by the symphony of chaos going on in my brain right now. “Tell me you didn’t have anything to do with this.” He holds the folder up with one hand.

I stare at the folder, taken aback that he could actually think so little of me. Ah, who am I kidding? It’s how he’s always viewed me.

A lowly assistant. Not worthy of being a trusted member of *his* team. Of his marketing department.

An assistant he decided to sleep with to stop me from working for the enemy.

I’m disgusted.

“You used me,” I say as I back away further from him. “You care about winning that much?” It’s not really a question, because I know the answer.

Nicholas will win at any cost.

Just look at the award he’s won tonight. The game of musical chairs. I knew he was competitive, but I could never have foreseen this.

I’m such a fool.

“January, it doesn’t really matter if I care about winning or not, because tonight, I’ve already lost.” He holds the folder up once more. “This campaign was everything to me, and now I’ve lost. My company is ruined.” He sounds so defeated, and I don’t know if I’m happy or sad at the sight of him right now.

I feel sick.

“You’re right. You just lost me.” I walk away and he doesn’t follow.

It’s better that way because there’s no more words left to say. By either of us. A tear falls down my cheek and I don’t bother swiping it away. I no longer

have the energy.

I hurry right to February's room, not bothering to go back to my shared room with Nicholas.

She opens the door and her eyes look me up and down. "Are you ok?" she asks as I push into her room.

"No," I say as I flop onto her king-sized bed. "I'm not ok at all."

She sits down on the bed next to me. "Want to talk about it?"

I sit up, my tears freely falling now. "I don't even know where to begin."

She grabs for the box of tissues on the table next to the bed and hands them to me. She brushes back my hair. "Start at the beginning."

I grab a tissue, dotting at the tears beneath my eyes. I tell her everything, leaving no stone unturned. There's even a few graphic details about the scorching hot sex we've shared thrown in.

When I'm done, we're both lying on our backs on the bed, staring up at the white ceiling above us.

"I'm so sorry, Jan."

"I just can't believe he'd actually think I'd steal that idea and give it to Pulse."

February sits up straight. "You have to find out who did."

I've got my suspicions. "How?" I ask, but my mind is already spinning with exactly how I can call out the company mole.

"You have to try. You have to prove to Nicholas you didn't steal his idea. He deserves that much at least. I don't believe he used you like that." She gets off the bed and walks around the room. "I know he really liked you. I could

tell by the way he looked at you.”

I roll my eyes. “He never looked at me in any certain way.”

“No man would ever sit in a ballroom and play silly games with a bunch of crazies just to impress a girl he doesn’t like.”

I shake my head, sitting up in the process. “He’s got this competitive streak. He likes to win. And him sleeping with me kept me out of Pulse’s grip.”

Feb parks a hand on her hip. “No, he liked you.”

I think about the night we spent together. The way he kissed me. Touched me. Was it all fake? Was he just trying to persuade me not to work for Pulse? “Why wouldn’t he tell me he knew I was quitting?”

“Maybe for the same reason you kept that you were quitting from him.” I wince, because it’s true that I’m not innocent, and she sighs. “I don’t have all the answers. All I know is you have to figure out who the mole was that is selling him out. Think about it, who all would have access to that campaign material.”

“I don’t trust this guy, Ron Dawson, but I don’t know.” I have no way to know if he’s the man we’re looking for. I don’t really know how to solve this crazy puzzle.

“Can you do some snooping? Maybe there’s something in your emails? Or Nicholas’ emails?” Feb is doing her best to figure this out, but I’m not sure there’s anything I can do.

I shake my head. “I can’t get into his personal email.”

“That would be where the evidence is, right? But who would be stupid enough to send confidential company information on a company email? The IT department could easily find it at Nicholas’ request,” my sister says.

“So, how do I figure it out?” I glance up and my sister has the biggest grin plastered on her face. “What?” I ask her, because her head is already nodding like she’s working up a master plan in that big brain of hers.

“Pulse. You have to get him to tell you. You have to get him to spill the tea.”

I scoff. “He’d never.”

February sits down next to me and grabs my hand. “No, that’s just it. He’s dying to tell somebody. He’s the cocky type, right?”

I nod.

“See. Those cocky men want to brag about how they conquered the world. I bet you wouldn’t even have to get him that drunk.”

“Drunk?”

She stands, heading toward her closet. “I brought a slinky dress. It’s perfect.”

“Wait, what are you thinking? He’d never tell me anything.”

She stops rummaging through her clothes to stare at me. “He would if he thought you were coming to work for him.”

I can’t believe I’m about to agree that her plan makes sense. Before I can answer a text buzzes onto my phone.

I grab it, glancing at who it’s from. “It’s from Nicholas.”

“What does it say?”

I read aloud, “Left the resort. Room’s all yours. You can clean out your desk after the holiday. Merry Christmas.” I keep rereading the message, looking for any hidden clues within the words. Any little inflection of a secret meaning, but there’s nothing there. Just a message letting me know it’s over.

Done.

Finito.

My nose stings, and I can't swallow past the lump in my throat. I keep staring at the phone, reading his message over and over until the words turn fuzzy from unshed tears.

"This will do," Feb says, pulling a silver dress out of the closet. "Now, call Pulse and get him to meet you in the bar."

I hold up my phone. "Shouldn't I reply back to Nicholas?" I wouldn't even know what to say, but my heart tells me I need to say something back to him.

"Not until you have something concrete to tell him." She points at my phone. "Now, text Pulse."

I pull up Garrett Pulse's contact info and send a quick text asking him to meet me in the resort bar before I can chicken out.

"Done."

I feel like I've just sold my soul to the devil.



MY SISTER WAS RIGHT. THE MINUTE I MET GARRETT PULSE DOWN IN THE resort bar, he couldn't wait to spill his secrets. No matter how naughty they are.

He confirmed my suspicion that it was Ron Dawson who helped deliver the blow to Nicholas' campaign. And to drive the final nail into Brighting Gaming, Pulse told me that he planned on naming his newest game *SpectarCloud*. The same name as the game Nicholas has been developing for years.

Sure the games won't be identical, but this is enough to ruin Nicholas.

I nod along as Pulse continues on and on about his diabolical plan to ruin Nicholas, all the while acid churns in my belly. The thought that I had ever planned on working for this asshole makes me sick.

But I play the part, telling Garrett everything he wants to hear, at just the right times. He doesn't suspect that I've downloaded an app to record this whole conversation.

This arrogant man who has a need to win all the time is telling me everything, and I play along.

As soon as I leave the bar, I head back to my own room. The room I once shared with Nicholas. A part of me is dying to play back the recording of Pulse spilling his secrets, but another part of me can't get over the fact that he slept with me to win.

Pulse and him are more alike than I thought.

Pulse couldn't wait to tell me how he won. To brag about his victory. Would Nicholas have done the same thing?

If he really didn't care about me, he would have told me how he used me to beat Pulse, right? My head is so confused, and as I open the door to the suite we shared, my knees nearly buckle.

He's gone.

Everything. Even his manly scent has left the room.

I glance at the bed, and tears fill my eyes.

The Frost Family Cup sits on the made bed.

I pick it up, giving a small laugh at the memory of how proud Nicholas was when he won this.

How proud I was to call him mine to my family.

Chapter 14

January

The past few days have passed in a blur of holiday cliches. My sister returned to New York with me, and we spent the past few days doing all things Christmas. I'm surprised we didn't go caroling down Broadway.

The moment I got back into town I sent a copy of the recording of mine and Garrett's conversation over to Nicholas. It's been days with no acknowledgement that I've ever even sent it over.

Did he even receive it?

"I have to go back to Magnolia Springs," Feb says, hugging me at my front door. We're standing in my apartment's hallway, saying our farewells.

"Don't leave. Live here forever."

She beams, releasing me from the bear hug she's given me. "Wish I could, but New York has plenty of coffee shops."

"Yeah, but none of them have as good a latte as your shop does."

She smiles. “Thank you for that.”

I wish I had some of my sister’s comforting coffee right about now. I’d take anything to help squash the sting of Nicholas’ silence.

But I get it.

He hates me.

Maybe he always has, and he did use me to prove some macho point against Pulse. I should be angry at that fact, but instead my heart is broken. The anger of what he’s done is nonexistent. Instead there’s an emptiness of where he once was.

“What will you do for work?”

I shrug. “I’m thinking I’m going to write a book on marketing. Or maybe teach.”

“I’d read that book. I need all the help I can get with Deja Brew.”

“I thought your shop was doing good?”

Her face falls flat. “It was. For a while. Then this asshole from the city opened up his Mug Life Coffee Shop across town and now the numbers have been down.”

I wrap my arms around my sister. “I’m sorry, Feb. Maybe you need to do something to shake things up.”

“Like what?”

“You need to establish yourself as the industry leader.”

“How?” Her look of confusion makes me giggle.

“I don’t know. Declare you have the best latte in town, or something. I mean, your lattes are pretty spectacular.”

She shrugs. “Maybe.”

I hold up my pinky. “Swear to me you’ll do it.”

She holds up her pinky and we connect them. “Swear, but you have to swear to me that you’ll listen to Nicholas when he comes to talk to you.”

“He’ll never come here.”

My sister’s eyes light up as she glances over my shoulder. “Never say never.” She nods a little, motioning that there’s somebody behind me.

I twirl around, my eyes landing right on Nicholas.

He’s here.

At my apartment.

I haven’t even cleaned.

Oh god. I’m standing here in a flimsy chiffon robe. I want to crawl away and hide. My hand raises to the messy bun on the top of my head, and I try to readjust it so it doesn’t look like a pile of mess up there.

“What are you doing here?”

He smiles, and oh my god. It’s unlike any I’ve ever seen him make before. Is this his apology smile?

“I’ll leave you two to talk,” Feb says, giving me one last squeeze before she shuffles off down the hallway.

I watch her fade away for a second before my eyes are back on Nicholas.

“Can we talk?” he asks me.

I nod, tightening the tie to my robe as I usher him into my place. I look around. There's no quick cleaning this place. It looks like an elf threw up in here. "We went a little overboard for Christmas," I tell him as I lead him over to the oversized blue sofa in my apartment.

He glances at the gingerbread house made out of candy and graham crackers on the counter and his eyes light up. "Looks good."

"I thought you didn't like Christmas things?" Hence the name Scrooge.

He shrugs as he sits next to me on the couch. "I never said I didn't like Christmas things. I said I never celebrate because I have no one to share it with."

My heart saddens for this man who has spent the past few years not celebrating because he hasn't had anyone to celebrate with. "Why are you here?" I ask him, wanting to stay on point.

"I have to thank you, and apologize to you, and tell you that I owe you everything."

"Oh." I'm gobsmacked. What is he talking about?

He scoots closer. "It's all happening because of you."

"What's happening?"

He grabs my hand. "You recording Pulse with that confession has been huge. We fired Ron, obviously, but Ron told us everything. About how Pulse was working with the Gaming Commission to get me banned. How he was misleading his own shareholders. How he's basically in a world of shit because of what he's done."

"Really?" My mind works double time to try to keep up.

“Yes, really. Pulse is going down, and my company’s already seeing the boost. We’re developing new things, and...” he pauses. “I, um, need a new marketing director. I want you.”

My chest squeezes at his words. My cheeks grow hot. I know he’s saying he wants me to come back to work for him as a marketing director which should have me jumping for joy right about now, but having him say the words *I want you* does something different to me. It makes me wish that he *wants me*, wants me. You know, like in the put-a-ring-on-it-forever kind of way.

“Work for you?” My mind is having a hard time remaining stoic. I’m not sure what to even think right now.

Did he use me?

“Yes, I’m offering you a job.”

“But, you think I betrayed you. You used me as a pawn in your little vicious game with Pulse.”

Nicholas shakes his head. “No. No. None of that is true.” He grabs my tiny hands in his. “You have to believe me. When I walked away that night, I knew deep down you could never betray me like that. I was already looking for ways to find the rat when you sent me the recording.”

“Did you sleep with me to get me to stay?”

“What?” he asks like it’s the most preposterous thing I could ever ask. “No. Never. I slept with you because I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Whoa.

I’m over here thinking about how much I *like* this man, and he’s dropping the ‘L’ word. I gaze into his eyes, looking for any signs that he could be lying. I see nothing.

Instead, what I see is a man I've completely fallen for as well. I didn't realize I loved him until he just said the word. First.

"I love you," I say back to him, knowing without a doubt that I mean what I'm telling him. I've worked for him for so long, and in that time I've been falling day by day. I didn't want to face the fact that I was a smitten kitten.

So, instead I pushed him away.

He cups my cheek. "I know for a long time I've been a grump to work for, and I'm sorry. It's because I've been falling in love with you since the first moment I met you, and I was trying to fight it."

"Why?" Why didn't we just profess our love on day one? It seems ridiculous now that we didn't.

"I don't really know. You always acted like you weren't interested. Besides, you were my assistant. I didn't want to cross that line."

I grin. "Well, can you cross that line when I'm your marketing exec?"

His face lights up. "Why? Are you not going to take the job if I won't?"

I shake my head.

"Good. Because there's zero lines between us now. It's my company and I make the rules. But just know, I couldn't have done any of this without you."

"Like your prestigious award," I say, thinking about the award he won in Aspen.

"Yeah, where is that award by the way." He glances around my apartment.

"Um, you took it home." Why would he not take the gold and glass video game console shaped award home? It looked like it cost thousands of dollars. Heck, it probably did.

“Not that award. I’m talking about the Frost Family Cup.”

I shake my head. “I think we burned it.”

He smiles and it lights up his entire face. “You better not have burnt my award. I earned that thing fair and square.”

I’m laughing now as he moves closer, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Pretty sure I chucked it off the airplane.”

“Lies,” he whispers. “I’m not leaving here until I get the cup back.”

I narrow my eyes. “Looks like you’ll be staying forever then, because I’m pretty sure we wrapped it up and gave it away to Toys for Tots.”

“I guess I’m staying forever, then.” And with those words he leans in, captures my lips, and kisses me until morning.



THANK YOU FOR READING. [CLICK HERE TO READ A BONUS SCENE WITH Nicholas and January in Aruba.](#)

Keep reading for a SNEAK PEEK of LATTE BE DESIRED, February’s Story.

Sneak Peek LATTE BE DESIRED

Chapter One February

I'm going to be the best stalker that ever stalked. I check my lipstick in the window of Ellie's Deli as I pass by. It's bright red, a shade I never wear, but today is all about not being recognized.

"Hi, February," Mrs. Deagle says as she passes me on Main Street.

My steps falter. "Hi, Mrs. Deagle," I say. I guess I'm not as incognito as I thought. However, this doesn't deter me. The *Mission Impossible* theme song drifts through my head as I slink down the street, trying my best to be as invisible as possible.

When I woke up this morning, I did *not* expect I'd be on my way to spy on my competition. But sales have been terrible this past month, so a girl has to do what a girl has to do. It wasn't until my barista, Chantilly, told me she had to look for another job because I wasn't giving her enough hours that I decided to take action. She's my best barista, but I just don't have the hours to give.

Times are rough over at Deja Brew. When I first opened, I remember waking up everyday having to pinch myself to believe that this was my life. I love coffee, so opening a coffee shop in a small town like Magnolia Point was a dream come true.

Then, a gloomy storm cloud floated into town by way of Harrison Riggs, and he opened a coffee shop on the other side of town called Mug Life Coffee. It's horribly overpriced, and too loud to enjoy a cup of java. Or so I believe. I've never actually been there, but that all changes today.

I want to spy on the competition. Do a little stalking.

I've never met this infamous owner, but this town speaks about him like he's basically God's gift.

We'll see about that.

I slip into the coffee shop unnoticed, and I take in my surroundings.

It's got this woodsy-industrial vibe going on. Rock music plays from the speakers, and it's not as loud as I had imagined. It's a stark contrast to the Taylor Swift tunes I blast from the speakers in my shop.

I step further into the shop and smile at the barista behind the counter. She's ready to greet me, but I'm not ready to be greeted. That's not how stalking works. Instead of walking up to the counter, I turn to look at the wall with contemporary art hanging on it.

My plan to stall works, and she pushes through a door to go to the back of the store. I swing around, taking another look at my competition.

I hate to say it, but it's a nice shop. It's manly and has strong bones. There's even a mural of a pine tree forest behind one counter where they make the drinks. I want to hate everything, but I don't.

I move toward the counter, wanting to get a closer look at what type of coffee machines he's using. Before I can inspect anything, the front door swings open and in walks Drake Gregory, my ex-boyfriend. The scum of the earth who dumped me for my best friend, Starla. I freeze at the corner of the counter as he holds the door open for Starla, and I want to literally die when I see the baby bump protruding from her dress.

She's pregnant.

Drake got Starla pregnant.

Drake, the very man who told me he never wanted children, has gotten my ex-best friend pregnant after six months of dating her.

And by the looks of her, she's ready to pop. Which leads me to believe he was sleeping with her well before we broke up.

Well, damn.

I swing around, looking for another exit, but they're blocking the only one.

I can't face them, so I duck behind the counter, where the baristas stand to make coffee. Thankfully, the place is empty. I'll just hide here until... forever.

I don't really have a solid plan, but I *do* know I can't face him.

The uncomfortable position I find myself in does nothing to calm my nerves. My heart is practically beating out of my chest.

Another customer walks in, and then another.

Shoot.

"February?" Drake says, leaning over the counter to get a better look at me.

I pluck a mug off the bottom shelf, and stand with a smile. “There, I found it.” I set it down like it was my plan all along to find that mug.

Drake and Stella share a look of confusion, and, seriously, I wish I could wither away. “What are *you* doing here?” Drake asks in a condescending tone.

I wish I had noticed how he spoke to me, like he was a far superior being, while we were dating. Would have been nice to notice he had a thing for my best friend too. But I didn’t, so here we are.

Without thinking anything through, I blurt out, “I work here. What can I get for you?”

The barista has finally returned from the back and stares at me slack-jawed. I smile at her, pleading with my eyes for her to go along with my ridiculous story.

Starla glances down at her belly, patting it with her hand. “Decaf for me. Baby doesn’t like caffeine.”

“Oh, a baby. Wow.” I’m flabbergasted, and my voice pitches to an obscenely high octave. “I didn’t realize you were pregnant.”

Drake tilts his head. “Yeah, we’re due in a couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks?” I choke out. I don’t need to do the math in my head to know Drake got her pregnant while we were still together. *I will not throw this mug at him.*

By now a small group has formed a line, and I can’t believe I’ve gotten myself into this predicament. But, I’m not going to stop the charade. How can I?

“I don’t understand why you’re working here, February,” Starla says. “You have your own coffee shop.”

There’s a tall man standing behind Starla, and by the looks of him he wants coffee. I ignore Starla. “Sir, can I get you some coffee?”

He steps closer and raises a brow, but Drake just won’t let it go.

“Feb, why are you working here if you own your own shop?” Drake echoes his new girlfriend. Scratch that—fiancee. Her ring nearly blinds me as she places her hand on his arm.

I’m gonna be sick.

I keep blinking, trying my best to pretend I know what I’m doing. That I belong behind this counter.

The barista steps forward. “Can I help you?”

“No need, Bren.” I read her name tag. “I’ll help this customer.”

“But...” Bren’s words fall away as I step closer to the customer Drake interrupted from ordering.

He’s a strong, rugged type with a beard and muscular arms. They’re folded across his broad chest, and black ink swirls in artful designs along his huge forearms. I meet his green eyes, and see there’s something shining within their depths. Pity?

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here,” Drake says, and then he looks at Starla. “Want to go somewhere else?”

She nods. “It was nice seeing you, Feb.”

Lies, I’m sure.

Drake leads Starla out of the shop, and I slump against the counter. I can't believe that just happened.

"Excuse me," the forgotten customer says.

"Oh right." I grab a to-go coffee cup and the sharpie sitting beside it. "What's your name?" Might as well go all in.

"Harrison Riggs. I'm the owner of this shop, and I think I'd remember hiring you."



Want to read more about Harrison and February? [CLICK HERE to preorder now!](#)

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If you'd like to join the Logang, you can [CLICK HERE!](#)

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Logan Chance is a USA Today, Top 20 Amazon, KDP All-Star, and KDP All-Star UK bestselling author with a quick wit and penchant for the simple things in life: Star Wars, music, and smart girls who love to read. He was nominated best debut author for the Goodreads Choice Awards in 2016. His works can be classified as Dramedies (Drama+Comedies), featuring a ton of laughs and many swoon worthy, heartfelt moments.

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