

THE NAUGHTY LIST

*The Billionaire's*  
**CHRISTMAS**  
**WISH**



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**FERN FRASER**

# The Billionaire's Christmas Wish

**Fern Fraser**

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# The Billionaire's Christmas Wish

## **Audrey**

Spending the week before Christmas working on a movie with my lifelong, off-limits crush wasn't exactly on my holiday wish list. I'm eager to focus on my career, not face up to old feelings. But one smoldering look from Luca Regis reminds me that some fires never go out. Although I've spent years toeing the family line, this Christmas, I'm rewriting the rules.

## **Luca**

As Hollywood's most sought-after film director, I have it all—success, fame, and money. But these things are meaningless without the love of my leading lady, Audrey. Our families disapprove of our relationship, but we are meant to be together. I'm set on winning her heart, no matter what it takes. This Christmas, I'll pull out all the stops to make her mine.

**The Billionaire's Christmas Wish is a low-angst, extra spicy holiday romance. You can expect an Over the Top Obsessed Billionaire, Forbidden Love a la Romeo and Juliet, and Family drama.**

The Billionaire's Christmas Wish

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*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 1

## Audrey

The backlot of Studio 6 is buzzing with activity. The piercing whine of power tools is making it difficult to think. Luckily, I only have one thing on my mind.

I'm the lead makeup artist on the Christmas movie 'The Naughty List.' Today is my first day on set, and the production meeting starts in 45 minutes. There's no time to waste—I need to find the director, Luca Regis.

I weave past riggers and scaffolding with purpose, eyes scanning the elaborate set. Garland-draped lampposts line a fake cobblestone path, while artificial snow blankets the storefronts like icing on a gingerbread village.

A thick tangle of cables blocks my path. No way around. "Coming through!" I call out before leaping gracefully over the obstruction.

"Hey, watch it!" shouts a burly rigger, clutching his hard hat.

"Sorry!" I reply with an apologetic wave without slowing my determined pace.

The smell of wet paint mixes with strong coffee, making my head spin. I lean against a scaffold to get my bearings, keeping clear of the rigging crew. I scan the organized chaos, marveling at the craftsmanship, when I spot Luca—script in hand—deep in conversation with a crew member.

Luca towers over those around him, his fitted shirt showing off an athletic physique. His tousled dark hair makes him look like he rolled out of bed or went cruising with the windows down.

Every time I see him, my stomach gets tied up in knots. Why does he have to be the perfect blend of rugged hotness and charm?

Luca Regis is wealthier than royalty and wickedly handsome, and today, he's wearing black, the same look he wore on the cover of *Variety Magazine*. Praised by critics and scholars alike, while the headline was fitting—*Hail the King. Luca Regis—The Last Auteur of modern cinema*, the photos didn't do him justice.

Luca notices me in his peripheral vision. The man beside him is talking nonstop, but Luca ignores him. Running a hand through his hair and across his stubbled jaw, he studies me with dark eyes.

His gaze lingers, a strange expression on his face.

*Is he thinking about that night?*

Luca excuses himself and begins striding toward me. “Audrey! It's good to see you. You look great.”

Effortlessly charming, as always. I tuck my hair behind my ear and laugh self-consciously. “So do you.”

Luca moves closer, blocking anyone else from view. His gaze is intense. “You came on short notice.”

My pulse races and my knees threaten to buckle. “I couldn't turn down the job when I heard you were directing.”

One slow, heart-stopping smile is all it takes for me to unravel completely. I thought I was strong, but he could make me do anything with that smile.

“Do you have time to look around before the production meeting?” he asks.

I take a deep breath to calm my jangled nerves. “Absolutely.”

As the snow machines hiss around us, tiny flurries of snow fill the air. Luca guides me, pointing out little details as we walk. His hand is resting on my lower back, making it difficult to focus on anything except his touch.

Finally, we stop. “This is where we’re shooting the pivotal love confession scene.”

The lead actress is hiding a life-altering secret from the man she loves. If I were her, I wouldn’t be faking. If only Luca understood the irony.

My throat tightens. “She’s torn and confused. This is where she bares her soul.”

“You read the script,” Luca says with an approving nod.

“You always said to be prepared before starting a new job,” I say.

“Good to know my influence rubbed off on you.”

His voice, deep and resonant, ripples through me, triggering the all too familiar ache in my chest.

I clear my throat, my gaze shifting to the set as I change the subject. “The set looks fantastic—your team did an amazing job. How did you pull this off?”

He shrugs. “I have my ways.”

I give him a playful punch on the arm. “Show off.”

“You know me—I only work with the best.”

“And you never back down from a challenge,” I add.

His face darkens.

*Does he think I’m insulting him? Suggesting that he didn’t fight for me when he had the chance?*

Luca’s phone buzzes. He looks at the caller ID, and then at me. “I need to take this.”

He steps away, leaving me in the middle of the snow-covered set. The artificial flakes settle on my hair, making me feel cold despite the heated soundstage.

I watch Luca, his face grave as he talks in hushed tones. When he ends the call, he walks back to me. “I’m sorry.”

“Trouble?”

Luca reaches for my hand, his fingers warm as they envelop mine. “Auds, I need to deal with a lighting issue.”

Ignoring my disappointment, I force a smile. “I’ll see you at the production meeting this afternoon.”

After being apart for a year, I’m desperate to reconnect. I’ve missed him so much, but this hectic first day on set isn’t the time or place for a personal reunion.

Luca and I grew up together as family friends. At thirty-two, he’s six years older than me. Luca was making waves in Hollywood while I was playing with eyeshadows and lip gloss in high school.

When I pursued my passion as a career, Luca opened doors for me. We’re discreet about our connection, and we’ve never worked together—until now.

He’s always been protective, sometimes overly so. Once, when we were playing ball at his house, I threw a wild pitch that shattered the living room window and knocked his mom’s prized vase off the shelf.

I was terrified of getting in trouble since everything in the Regis house seemed irreplaceable. Luca looked at my tear-stained face and marched inside to take the blame. That was the moment I fell deeply and irrevocably in love.

The only problem? Loving Luca was forbidden.

Our parents refused to acknowledge our chemistry. No matter how often I asked why we couldn’t be together, they brushed my questions aside.

I’ve tried to get over him. If I were sensible, I’d stop pining, but how do you get over a man who is part of your emotional DNA?

I’ve spent months strategizing how to win his heart. It’s risky, but I’m tired of letting our families’ rules dictate my life. I feel like I’m caught in a modern-day Romeo and Juliet saga. Only my version is all angst and no poetry.

Working together will be tough—maybe even masochistic—but life’s short. I’d rather try and fail than keep living a lie. I

hate keeping secrets. Some people believe keeping secrets is a necessary evil. I disagree. They lodge in your heart like splinters, burrowing deeper over time, causing more heartache each day.

If Luca rejects me and I keep it together, then maybe—just maybe—I can move on. Either way, it's a fresh start—like a self-imposed detox.

Or an exorcism.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
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# Chapter 2

## Audrey

**O**n my way to the makeup trailer, a piece of tinsel flies into my eye, causing a sharp, scratching pain. Blinking only makes it worse—it feels like sandpaper on my eyeball.

I race to the trailer to swap out my contacts, a two-handed job, when the phone rings.

It's my sister Ivy.

I wedge the phone between my shoulder and chin, hold one eyelid open, and try to tune out the brightly flickering bulbs while listening to Ivy vent.

“You know how Mom gets about the Christmas cake,” she huffs, irritation sparking in her voice.

Our mother's holiday traditions are set in stone, even with twenty relatives coming over.

I try to calm Ivy down. “You know what she's like. Let it go.”

“Why is she so stubborn?” Ivy huffs.

“Dad, too. With those two, it's always my way or the highway,” I sigh.

Ivy's right, but trying to change our parents' minds is pointless—a lesson I learned the hard way. Although I don't live at home anymore, the thought of being single and dealing with their nonsense for the rest of my life is depressing.

The tiny lens slips from my fingers, and I fumble the phone. It thuds onto the counter. I quickly set the phone down and switch it to speaker mode—a move I should've made earlier. Ivy hears the noise and stops mid-rant.

“You’re not stressing, are you?” she asks.

“I’m fine, but I can’t talk long, or I’ll be late for the production meeting,” I explain hurriedly.

“Isn’t this the movie our big-shot Hollywood friend is directing?” Ivy asks.

“That’s right.”

I sift through a jumble of hairbrushes and makeup containers, hunting for the damaged contact lens, but it’s vanished. Damn. I don’t have spares, and my glasses are in the car.

I give my outfit a final once-over—my best black jeans and a blouse. I smooth out imaginary creases, picturing my hands as Luca’s. I imagine him lifting my hem, slipping his hands underneath, caressing my skin.

“Have you caught up with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Brooding?” Ivy asks.

I swallow hard. “Briefly,” I say, fiddling with my blouse.

“Does Luca know about your engagement, Audrey?”

If Ivy could see my burning cheeks, she’d tease me mercilessly. Not what I need right now.

“We’re shooting our first scene this afternoon. There’s so much to do. I’ll tell Luca when the timing’s right.”

“Good luck!” she replies knowingly.

I roll my eyes at her tone. “This is a huge opportunity. I should get going—if I nail it, they might consider me for another job.”

Ivy’s laughter echoes through the phone. “Nail what—the part or Luca?”

“You’re terrible,” I chuckle.

“Take a chance, sis. Who cares what anyone else thinks?” she urges.

“It’s complicated. There’s family stuff to consider, not just my broken engagement.”

“Engagement? Come on. You and Brent lasted what, a hot minute?”

“Six months,” I correct her.

“You didn’t love him. You acted out of duty, but if there’s a chance for you and Luca, you need to take it.”

I sigh, torn between obligation and desire. “Easy for you to say. You’ve always been the brave one.”

“Give yourself some credit. You’re trying your best.”

“I’ll call you later,” I say, grabbing my bag.

I rush from my trailer, determined to make a professional impression on my first day.

When I arrive on set, the producer, Julianna Kensington, addresses the crew. She welcomes us but stresses that we only have one week before Christmas to film the movie. The pressure is intense.

I look around the room at the set designers, the props manager, the production designer, the assistant director, and the rest of the crew.

Everyone is focused intently on Julianna as she passes the mic to Luca. He oozes confidence, effortlessly commanding the room—a maestro in his element.

Luca’s gaze seems to linger, but under the blinding stage lights, it’s hard to tell. Without my contacts, everything looks hazy, forcing me to squint against a growing headache.

I pull out a notebook, doodling as I imagine what life could be like if I got my heart’s deepest desire this Christmas.

Although I’m paying attention to Luca’s speech, my mind drifts back to that unforgettable New Year’s Eve—the night that altered my life forever.

Every detail remains crystal clear in my memory—the crowded, stuffy room and our impromptu escape to the garden. The crisp night air and serene atmosphere as we talked and laughed among the fairy-lit trees made everything feel enchanting.

When Luca asked me to teach him to waltz, I was surprised but couldn't refuse. No music played, yet the mood felt magical. Feeling inspired, I started humming a song.

With a firm grip on my waist, Luca extended his other hand in a waltz position. I slipped my hand into his, and we danced as fireworks lit the sky.

Despite Luca's usual grace in everything he did, dancing was an exception. He kept stepping on my toes, awkward and hesitant in his movements, grappling with the dance.

The rare show of vulnerability was entirely forgotten when he gripped my waist and pulled me close. When warm, soft lips met the tender spot between my neck and collarbone—pulsing heat began throbbing between my legs.

Breathless and dizzy, I believed all my dreams were about to come true when he looked into my eyes and told me I was beautiful. He kissed me, his lips soft yet assertive, as if claiming his territory.

I felt like I was in heaven until some party guests interrupted, the moment slipping away. Afterward, we rejoined the party, acting as if nothing happened. I played along, thinking we were keeping our kiss secret until the right time.

I believed his kiss promised something more, but when it was time to leave, Luca patted my back as if we'd only shared a drink instead of a life-changing moment. Whether caught up in the celebrations or just messing around—I'll never know since he never explained his actions, leaving me puzzled.

Somehow, my parents found out about the kiss. They convinced me to do something I didn't want. Now Luca thinks I'm engaged, which wasn't true. My life spiraled downward, but I'm determined to turn things around.

Julianna's voice slices through my daydream like a blade.  
“Audrey?”

My pencil stops mid-doodle. Of course, my hair chooses this moment to fall in my eyes. I toss it back, straining to focus on Julianna.

“Um, sorry, I zoned out for a sec.”

“We’re shooting a critical scene with Kane and Scarlett this afternoon,” she says, all business. “Scarlett needs to look the part, understand?”

Although I can’t read Luca’s expression, his gaze burns like a spotlight on my skin. I sigh inwardly, cursing my missing contacts.

“Absolutely. That’s why I’m here—to make Scarlett shine.”

Ugh. It’s a stupid thing to say. I don’t want Luca to think I’m an airhead.

I swallow hard, pushing the lump in my throat back down. “Not that she needs help since she’s already stunning,” I add quickly.

The meeting continues as Julianna runs through the schedule, assigning tasks and delegating responsibilities. After the meeting, I try catching Luca’s eye, but he’s engrossed in discussion with the lighting crew.

Although there’s so much I want to say, the timing isn’t great. He’s busy, I get it—we both are.

I’ve made mistakes in life, but that doesn’t give me the right to disrupt his. As much as I’m desperate to confess how I feel and see if we can be together, maybe I should wait. Rushing could lead to more hurt, and I owe it to both of us to handle this properly. That’s assuming he isn’t already in love with someone else.

Reluctantly, I make my way back to the makeup trailer.

The narrow passageways between trailers are cluttered with large boxes and props—oversized candy canes and giant snowflakes. I dodge them along the way, but in my rush, I almost collide with Kaiden Huxley, a gruff former stuntman.

Startled, I jump back—he’s built like a bulldozer.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. I was looking for Laura’s trailer,” he says.

Kaiden’s name isn’t on the call sheet. The look on his face tells me this is a personal matter.

“Laura’s in the wardrobe trailer getting fitted for tomorrow’s scenes. It’s down that way.”

He smiles. “Appreciate it.”

Heavy footsteps echo in the corridor as someone approaches our direction. We both turn to see Luca striding purposefully, almost menacingly toward us. His dark brows draw together, eyes flaring as they bounce between me and Kaiden.

“Are we finished here?” Luca’s smooth baritone holds an edge.

Apprehension crosses Kaiden’s face. “I was just asking—”

Before Kaiden can finish, Luca steps between us and closer to me. His voice is cold, his eyes stern. “You can go now.”

Kaiden mumbles something before slipping away.

In the past, Luca’s fierce protectiveness made me feel safe. There’s something intimate about being shielded by someone who knows you completely. But I wasn’t in danger.

“I think you were a little too harsh on Kaiden,” I tell him, admonishing him for his extreme reaction.

His dark eyes are stern, and his jawline rigid, as if I’ve done something wrong without knowing it.

“What are you doing?” he grumbles when Kaiden is out of earshot.

“Ah... my job?” I say, unsure of what he wants from me.

“That’s not what I mean,” Luca says, his voice deep and demanding. “Why did you ignore me during the crew meeting?”

My temper rises. “I didn’t ignore you!”

I step forward but freeze when Luca crosses his arms.

“What game are you playing?” he asks, an edge in his tone I’ve never heard before. Luca’s changed. He was never this short-tempered.

“W-what do you m-m-mean?” I stammer. “I was only giving Kaiden directions.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Why did you ignore me during the production meeting?”

“I didn’t ignore you. Some—” I begin to explain about the glitter falling into my eye, but he holds up a hand to stop me.

“Yes, you did.” His voice rises. “When Julianna was talking to you about Scarlett. I was looking at you. You looked me straight in the eyes, flipped your hair, and turned away. Don’t deny it.”

I quickly try to find the right words to stop the tension from escalating.

“Luca—”

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 3

## Luca

I ‘ve met many beautiful women through my work, but Audrey stands apart. With just one glance from those dark eyes, she ignites a spark in the room and me.

She’s irresistible—everything about her drives me wild—her megawatt smile, sassy exterior, and the soft heart she masks underneath.

Audrey awakens a primal and intense hunger, stirring a deep part of my psyche. My body flexes instinctively like a wild beast patrolling its territory.

She’s everything I want in a woman, and seeing her again reminds me how much I’ve missed her. Without Audrey, I feel like I’m drowning in a vat of hot oil bubbling in one of the lower levels of hell. Absolute hell, the one with pain and endless suffering.

A void opens in my chest—making me want to say, ‘screw being noble’ and confess how I feel. But it’s too late. I’m a fool. She’s engaged now and off—limits.

It kills me to think she belongs to another man, but I swore to respect her boundaries. I vowed to keep my hands and opinions, *cough*, to myself because the only thing that matters is her happiness.

Audrey’s hair catches the light. One strand juts out, tempting me to tuck it behind her ear, yet I hold back the urge. I can’t cross the line with such an intimate gesture. It’s too painful, stirring memories of our moonlit tryst when she looked at me with stars in her eyes.

Now, there's steam blowing out of her ears. The narrow-eyed stare sharpening her delicate features would make another man crumble, but not me. I love the pure passion flowing from the Mediterranean blood in her veins.

Audrey can beat her fists on my chest. She can tear my skin to shreds and leave me a bloodied mess. I don't care. I'll take whatever she gives—I'll do anything for her.

I steel myself for the onslaught. I deserve it.

"Don't you dare accuse me of anything! Not after that stunt you pulled," she says.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me." I reach for her hand, but she backs away, looking at me as if I were a stranger.

"You can't act like a brute just because you see me talking to another man!"

My behavior was ridiculous. I don't blame her, but I need to fix this. Quickly.

My voice echoes through the empty backstage area. "Audrey, please, talk to me. Why are you so mad you ignored me during the meeting?"

Her lips remain pursed, arms crossed. "I wasn't mad at you. I couldn't see you."

My stomach clenches. "What are you talking about?"

She blows out a breath. "I tried telling you earlier. Glitter fell in my eye. I tried changing my contacts, but Ivy—" She shakes her head. "The details don't matter. I wasn't wearing my contacts or glasses, so everything was a blur."

Come to think of it, she was standing at the back of the room. Audrey didn't ignore me. It was a simple misunderstanding.

I run a hand over my face, scraping my whiskers, and groan. "Why didn't you say so sooner?"

Audrey tilts her head slightly, studying my face. "You wouldn't let me get a word in."

I look away. "I'm sorry."

“Did I embarrass you in front of everyone? Is that why you’re behaving like this?”

*Embarrassed?*

“Do you think I care what anyone thinks?” I challenge, my eyes locking onto hers.

Audrey raises an eyebrow, a hint of amusement twinkling in her eyes. “Oh, Luca. First Kaiden. Then you think I snubbed you—aren’t you being a little dramatic?”

“Of course. I feel things deeply. It’s how I create art,” I tell her, leaning against the wall, my gaze unwavering.

She laughs a bit too sharply, shaking her head. “You sound like a pretentious idiot. Say that to someone else, and they’ll likely slap you.”

My eyes never leave her face, captivated by the way her cheeks flush a delicate pink.

“Is that so?” I muse, an ironic half-smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. I shake my head. “That may be true, but I can’t help myself when it comes to you. I’ll always look out for you.”

“I appreciate it, but I don’t need your protection. We’re not kids anymore, playing ball at your house. You remember, right?” she teases.

I had better pull myself together. “I’m sorry. I overstepped. It’s not my place anymore now you have what’s—his—name in your life.”

“About that—”

“Forget it.”

“You’re not the easiest person to read anymore. You’re guarded, even with me,” Audrey points out, her eyes meeting mine with a scrutiny that makes me uncomfortable.

I feel a pang of guilt. She’s nailed it. My shoulders slump.

“You’re right,” I admit, my voice tinged with vulnerability as I lift my eyes back to hers. “I’m sorry for snapping. I was

frustrated seeing you talking to Kaiden, but I have no right to feel that way.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. There’s a long silence as Audrey processes my words.

“I forgive you.” Audrey pulls away. “But next time, talk to me before you jump to conclusions.”

The heat from the stage lights causes sweat to break out over my skin. I stick a finger in my collar to loosen it and let in fresh air. The prickly feeling works its way to my chest, making it uncomfortably tight.

I shift my stance, shoving my hands into my pockets to stop myself from doing something reckless—like pressing her against the nearest wall and tasting her pouty pink lips.

Instead of confessing my undying love, I fill two cups with coffee and hand one to her.

“You’re a lifesaver,” she says, taking it.

Our fingers brush. My dick responds. Why did it have to spring to life now? Audrey quickly glances away.

“The set looks festive. All that glitter,” I remark, kicking myself for the lame attempt at small talk.

Her dark eyes sparkle. “I agree. What are you doing for Christmas?”

I pause. I consider conjuring up a sob story for a split second, but she’s already called me out on my drama, so I squash the impulse. “Low-key affair for me,” I say.

“That’s a shame.” Her voice is gentle. “The holidays are meant for sharing with the people we love.”

“I suppose you’re spending the holidays with,” I cough, choking on her fiancé’s name like it’s laced with arsenic.

The air between us thickens, filling with tension you could cut with a knife.

Behind us, Dan, the Key Grip, toots the horn of a golf cart loaded with equipment and props. Dan parks the cart and heads toward us, holding a box filled with decorations.

Oblivious to having interrupted our conversation, he cuts in. “Hey, boss. I asked Julianna about the snow fight scene, but she suggested I ask you,” he says.

Audrey dips her head, permitting me to deal with the interruption. As I answer Dan’s questions, I watch her out of the corner of my eye. She’s distracted.

My gut twists with unease. What is she hiding?

I expect Dan to leave when I answer his questions, but he plucks a sprig of mistletoe from the box. Holding it above Audrey’s head, he says, “What are you waiting for? It’s Christmas.”

Audrey looks at me, one brow arched high—an invitation.

The urge to thread my fingers through her hair and tip her head back so I can kiss her full, pink lips is overwhelming.

I want to feel every inch of her body. Bite her. Mark her. Fuck her so damn hard she’ll scream my name as she falls apart. Despite my desires, the urge to protect her is stronger—and always will be.

“Dan, show some respect. Audrey’s practically a married woman.”

“Easy, boss. It was only a bit of fun.”

“Yeah, well, take your mistletoe somewhere else.”

Dan grumbles but hurries back to the golf cart and drives away. I shouldn’t push my luck, but need to think up a reason to spend more time together—the two of us. Some quick rehearsal time alone, maybe a late night planning scenes.

I grab Audrey’s hand, giving it a brief squeeze. She leans in, her lips tantalizingly close, like she’s going to kiss me.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she whispers.

Before I can respond, the assistant director’s voice crackles over the comms unit shattering the spell. “We’re waiting for you on set.”

Audrey pulls away, and I feel myself unraveling. I wish she would act on impulse and run away with me, but that’s not her

careful, responsible style.

Every instinct urges me to beg her to stay, yet I wave goodbye, knowing I'll see her later. Watching her walk away, I notice something—her ring finger is bare. No engagement ring.

A reckless glimmer of hope ignites. Did she call off the engagement, or did he? My mind spins with questions.

Or maybe there's a simple explanation, like not wanting to damage the ring at work.

As I walk away, my skin prickles with awareness. Unable to resist temptation, I look over my shoulder and catch her staring. Her eyes reflect the same yearning and desire I feel.

She gives a slow sexy smile.

I smirk with every filthy thought and bad intention shining in my eyes.

I call out. "We'll have to catch up properly soon."

"I'd love that."

*Fuck.*

I'm in trouble, and trouble never looked as good.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 4

## Audrey

Exhausted after a long day of filming, I arrange the supplies and brushes in front of Scarlett. After soaking a cotton pad in makeup remover, I look at her in the mirror.

“Close your eyes—this won’t take long.”

Scarlett’s locks cascade in soft curls as she lifts her gaze from her phone. “What a day, huh?”

I swipe the pad across her eyelids, erasing smoky quartz and rose gold shadows. “Glad it’s over. We could all use a breather.”

“Poor Luca—did you see his face? I thought steam might pour from his ears.”

I press the cotton pad lightly to her cheek and wipe the foundation. “Abel did a number on him, didn’t he?”

She hesitates. “That’s an understatement. Abel was a wreck. Rushing through his lines like a freight train and stinking of booze. I was changing outfits, but I heard he stormed out.”

The troublesome actor annoyed everyone on set. Tension rolled off Luca until he finally had enough and pulled the actor aside.

“After the tenth botched take, Luca told Abel to sober up before setting foot on set again.”

She arches an expressive eyebrow. “Ooh, must’ve been a scene. How did Abel take it?”

I pause, dipping a cotton swab into the makeup remover. “He was mad enough to punch Luca, I think. But he settled for

throwing his Santa hat onto the ground and storming out like a petulant child.”

She chuckles, a snort sneaking its way in. “Unbelievable. Some people just don’t get it. This isn’t a playground.”

I wanted to call Luca about my broken engagement last night, but I didn’t. Today’s stress confirms I made the right choice, although it weighs on my mind.

I step back to admire my handiwork. “Almost finished.”

The door to the makeup trailer creaks open, parting wide enough for Edie, the wardrobe assistant, to peek through.

Eyes wide as saucers, Edie whisper-shouts, “Pssst...the ducks are on the pond!”

Given the tension from earlier in the day, her coded warning sends a buzz through the room. I catch a look of anxiety in Scarlett’s eyes.

“Luca’s at it again, huh?” I ask.

Edie’s head bobs and a loose smattering of curls escape the edges of her beanie. “I wouldn’t want to be in his crosshairs, not today. Steer clear, okay?”

Dipping a washcloth into a bowl of warm water, I wring it out and pat Scarlett’s face. “Any idea what set him off this time?”

With a skittish glance at the door, as if half-expecting Luca to materialize, Edie shrugs. “No clue, but it won’t be you.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Edie,” I say, focusing on my work.

Edie retreats, closing the door softly behind her. Scarlett’s eyes lock onto mine in the makeup mirror. “What’s the deal with you and Luca?”

I flinch, caught off guard.

“There’s no *us*,” I quickly reply, wishing it weren’t true.

Scarlett grins. “Really? Your eyes say different, honey. And the way he looks at you, girl, anyone would think you hung the moon.”

I laugh it off. “We’ve been friends for years.”

She shakes her head. “Classic denial, and—”

Before Scarlett can probe further, the trailer’s steps rattle and groan. The door swings open, and Luca struts like a lion claiming his territory.

Ignoring Scarlett, his gaze lingers on me. I look away, face flushing with heat, ignoring the butterflies in my stomach.

“Ever heard of knocking?” I sass.

Scarlett gasps, shocked by my audacity, clearly not used to the crew talking back to Luca.

Luca glares, fists balled by his sides. “Scarlett, can you report to Ryder in Security for a headcount?”

Scarlett nods, then looks at me, her lips curved, as though her suspicions are confirmed. She swipes a makeup remover pack and leaves.

Security? I switched off my comms unit when I left the set, assuming I wouldn’t need it.

I remove my tool belt, lay it beside the brushes, and turn to Luca. The tension in his jaw could cut glass. His eyes are wide, his face etched with worry. My gut tightens. Something’s wrong.

“Did something happen?”

His eyes search mine. He looks me over before resting his hands on my shoulders as if grounding himself.

Without a word, he pulls me into a comforting embrace. His scent—so achingly familiar—engulfs me. He strokes my hair while whispering my name softly. It’s just me and him. The world around us melts away until I remember we’re in danger.

Crushed against his chest, my voice is muffled. “What’s going on? You’re scaring me.”

An incoming message crackles on the comms unit attached to his belt. “All clear on set. Fire is contained.”

I pull away, searching his eyes for answers. “What fire?”

Luca shrugs, waving his hand dismissively. “You mean you don’t know?” I admonish.

He lets out a deep breath and runs his hand through his hair. “A fire broke out on set. Security called when I was in the edit suite going over the dailies.”

“Is anyone hurt?”

“No injuries and only minor damage.”

It was a close call. “Does anyone know what caused it?”

Luca shakes his head. “Not yet. I came straight here when I heard. I needed to know you were safe.”

“Thanks for checking on me,” I say softly. “It sounds like the experts have it under control. You hire the best people, so we don’t worry about the worst happening.”

We stare at each other for a long moment. “Sorry Auds. I overreacted, didn’t I?”

I could drown in the depths of his magnetic, dark gaze. Being near him feels right, like coming home.

My voice drops to a whisper. “You were worried about me.”

“Always,” he says, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “But I’m sure what’s his name wouldn’t like knowing my paws are all over you.”

The mention of my ex-fiancé crashes through, spurring me to act.

“His name is Brent, and don’t worry. He wouldn’t care.” I let the words hang, feeling their weight in the charged atmosphere between us.

Luca’s brows furrow. “Why wouldn’t he care? I’d never let another man touch you if you were mine.”

After the New Year’s party, I never heard from Luca. He didn’t even call when I got engaged; instead, he sent flowers. He distanced himself, but I suspected the problem had something to do with our parents.

My intuition was correct—Luca’s jealous.

With the snap of a finger, the stakes change. We're not two friends restrained by family obligations but souls on the verge of a fiery collision.

The question is, will we survive the impact?

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 5

## Luca

Audrey stares at the makeup brushes scattered on the counter, her brows knitting together. She sprays a brush with cleaning fluid, scrubbing hard as if trying to get rid of more than makeup.

Why is her fiancé so cavalier, and why does she let him treat her that way? Call me old-fashioned, but a man who doesn't care if another man touches his woman is an idiot. I grit my teeth and fight to control the surge of anger.

Fuckface doesn't deserve Audrey, and if he's hurt her, there'll be hell to pay.

"Why wouldn't he care? I'd never let another man touch you if you were mine."

"We broke up," she says, her lip quivering as she wipes the brush on a towel.

I pause, momentarily stunned by her revelation. "I'm sorry, Auds," I say, although a glimmer of hope flickers inside.

Could this be a Christmas miracle?

Lifting her gaze, she locks eyes with me. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"You're acting as if it's nothing," I observe, puzzled by her calm demeanor.

"Chill out, Luca. You're not planning to go all John Wick on the guy, right?"

"Did he hurt you?"

She shakes her head.

“It’s for the best. We wanted different things.”

Her perfume fills the air as she grabs a brush, reminding me of our night together last New Year’s Eve.

Pulling away from her after we kissed still makes me feel sick, but what choice did I have? All hell broke loose when our parents discovered what happened in the garden. They forced me to back off, insisting it was best for Audrey even though they never supplied a good reason. They were hell-bent on keeping us apart, as if loving each other was a crime.

Audrey’s close to her family and never upsets her parents. While I wouldn’t say I liked following orders, I only agreed because I thought it was best for her. But in the background, I was biding my time and planning on making a move when the dust settled.

When my father told me she was engaged, my world fell apart. I alienated friends and family, shutting out anyone who tried to “fix” me, but there was nothing anyone could do. In a last-ditch effort to maintain my sanity, I packed my bags and moved overseas.

I bought a secluded cabin in Rorvik, a small Northern European country. The sun barely shone in that frigid, barren place - a fitting match for my frozen heart. It was my personal hell, but the only place that made sense without her.

I wallowed in despair, drifting into darkness for months, unable to function. My career hit a standstill.

The chance to see Audrey arose like a flicker of light in the dark. Nick Saint, a producer I’d never heard of, offered me a job on *The Naughty List*. It isn’t my preferred style of movie, but I accepted it when I found out Audrey was on the crew.

I needed to see her again before losing it and ending up in a padded cell. Although I lost her once, I won’t make the same mistake.

*Carpe diem* and all that.

“Luca. Do you copy?” The assistant director’s voice crackles from the comms unit, interrupting our conversation.

It's the private channel reserved for the director and assistant director. After unclipping it from my belt, I hold it, thumb hovering over the push-to-talk button.

"Aren't you going to answer?" Audrey quizzes.

Unable to take my eyes off Audrey, my grip tightens, my thumb closing over the button. Annoyed on account of being interrupted, my tone is unnecessarily gruff. "Copy."

"All cast and crew accounted for. Over," the AD says.

That's great news because I don't need to leave the trailer.

"Thanks. Confirming all clear. No change to tomorrow's call time. Over."

"Night, boss," the Assistant Director says, sounding relieved. She can go home now.

"Is everything okay?" Audrey asks.

I turn off the radio and catch her reflection. I give her a terse nod.

I'm here if she needs emotional support or a listening ear. I'm invested in her well-being, not just the parts that directly benefit me. That said, I'm relieved she didn't share her breakup story. I can't guarantee I'd have handled it well.

I'm not an asshole, but I'm jealous and possessive. So yeah, maybe that makes me an asshole.

"Everything's fine on set, but how about you, Auds? I'm sorry about your engagement. Are you okay?"

A bright smile lights up her face but doesn't reach her eyes. She waves her hand, dismissing the issue. "I'm here, aren't I?"

\* \* \*

## Audrey

Luca's thigh brushes against mine. The light touch is electrifying. A sharp inhale fills my nose with the musky scent of his cologne. I hold my breath as if trying to capture his essence.

Goddamn this man. His dark eyes search mine, intense and probing. Our parents encouraged us to treat each other as siblings when we were young. But Luca's staring the way a brother never would.

When I lick my lips, his gaze drops to my mouth. His hooded eyes tease me with promises, melting what little self-control I have left. If he asked me to strip down right here, I'd do it without hesitation. It's definitely not something I'd do for a brother.

I've waited so long for this moment. I'm done with waiting. Right now, I'd give my right arm to go home with him so I could wake up to those eyes.

"Now," Luca says.

"Now? As in, right now?" I ask, surprised by his urgency.

His full lips twist into a wicked smile. "Why not? Do you have other plans?"

Holy freaking cow. The husky tone in his voice shoots straight to my core.

"I'm free tonight if that works for you?"

A slow, sensual smile stretches across his face. "Tonight's perfect. I don't like the idea of you going home alone. Besides, have you seen the weather outside? It's getting pretty bad."

I glance out the window; the sky has turned a menacing shade, a storm clearly brewing. I'm all in this time, but that doesn't mean I'll make it easy. I'll offer him the thrill of the chase, not because I want to run away, but because I want to get caught.

“I can’t stay late. We have an early call time,” I say, leaning closer. Heat radiates between us. “But maybe we could make the most of our time?”

His lips curve into a grin. “No problem. We’ll get down to business right away.”

He pushes to his feet and gathers our belongings. I wasn’t quick enough to call him out on the spicy double entendre. I need to up my game.

“Where are we going?” I ask as I throw on my coat.

He holds the door open. “My apartment in Santa Monica.”

My stomach tightens. “I haven’t been to your place since—”

“It’s the same old place. I just moved back, and it feels drab. The place needs a little cheering up.”

“You mean it’s dusty and covered in cobwebs? It must be awful,” I tease.

A slow smile spreads across his face. “Come home with me, Auds. I need you.”

Those three little words set my heart ablaze. When Luca offers his hand, I take it. The connection is instant. It draws me to him like a magnet.

We’re playing with fire, and this time, I’m not afraid of getting burnt.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 6

## Luca

Audrey smiles when she sees the burgundy Tesla Model S in the parking lot.

“New wheels?”

The corners of my mouth lift in a subtle, self-assured curl. “How about you tell me your thoughts on climate change first? Then I’ll answer your question.”

Her laugh is uninhibited and joyful. I’ve missed her and never want to spend another day apart.

“What’s so funny? The car’s a masterpiece!”

“It’s a work of art.” She grins, eyes twinkling. “But you? Mr. Clean Energy? Come on, you’ve got gasoline running through your veins.”

People think my bank account defines me, that I’m a spoiled brat who swaps out sports cars like they’re disposable razors. But only one voice cuts through the noise—Audrey’s. She looks past the opulence, straight into the heart of who I truly am.

“If I weren’t directing, I’d be the happiest grease monkey you’d ever meet,” I confess, opening the passenger door for her.

Audrey slides inside gracefully. The buttery, soft leather seat hugs her curves. The steel frame and self-driving calculations will protect her in an accident—only the best for Audrey.

Swinging into the driver’s seat, I turn on the engine. The engine’s growl kicks up as I drive out of the parking lot.

“What’s the verdict?”

Her fingers briefly grace the armrest, then pull away. “It’s great—”

“But?”

Audrey fidgets, restlessly shifting in her seat. “It doesn’t purr under me like your old muscle cars did,” she says.

“I bought a Tesla when I was living in Europe. It felt like the right thing at the time.”

“I get it. It’s noble.”

“Living in Rorvik opened my eyes to what’s important—” I hesitate, letting my voice trail off when the traffic light shifts to green.

I reach across the center console and take her delicate hand in mine, so she doesn’t think I’m still talking about the environment.

Audrey is the first thing I think of in the morning and the last at night. I believe our connection is unbreakable. I’m ready to find out if she feels the same. Life’s too short to live without passion.

\* \* \*

AUDREY QUICKLY HANGS HER COAT BEHIND THE DOOR WHEN we arrive at my apartment. She walks past the cherry wood table covered with mail, eyes wandering from the dark, polished hardwood floors to the long windows framing the incredible beach view.

“I was expecting the set of Hocus Pocus, but the place is immaculate.”

Her laughter fills the room, warm and unguarded. I catch her eye and grin, unapologetically pleased. It’s a small trick to play—a little bait and switch.

I walk over to the oak sideboard, its wood grain smooth under my fingertips, and pull out a box filled with Christmas decorations. “It feels flat and lifeless, Auds. Can you help me add a little bling?”

“So, are we here to talk about work, or is this a decorating party?”

I shrug. “Bit of both.”

“Five minutes in, and I’m at your beck and call like your personal servant,” she teases, arching a brow.

My thoughts immediately go to images of her naked. I shift position to hide the effect she has on my body. “Servitude has its perks,” I reply with a cheeky grin.

Audrey dives into the box, searching through the contents and methodically arranging tinsel and ornaments on the ground. She untangles a string of lights and drapes them over a tree branch. The colors burst like fireworks—reds, golds, and silvers. She then pulls out a messy clump of fairy lights and glass baubles.

“These don’t look too good. They’re all tangled,” she says, carefully pulling at the knotted wires and delicate glass.

I extend my hand in a gimme gesture. I might as well make myself useful.

“I’ve got it,” she says, tugging at the jumbled mess.

I lean in and press a kiss on her cheek. “Hot chocolate?”

A glimmer of a smile graces her lips. “Yes, please.”

I return with two mugs of hot chocolate and set hers on the coffee table. I settle onto the couch, smiling at what she’s achieved.

Heavy glass ornaments dangle from the lower boughs while strands of tinsel wind around the tree like ribbons. The fairy lights twinkle, and the sounds of a crackling fire piped through the speakers complete the picture.

I thought the state-of-the-art fireplace was too much when I installed it, but now, as I gaze at Audrey, bathed in the soft glow, I realize nothing is too good for her. It’s perfect, just like her.

As Audrey works, she swings her hips back and forth suggestively. The incredibly sexy view is getting me harder by

the minute. I inch to the edge of my seat. If only she'd bend over and reach for her toes.

I bring the mug to my lips and lick away a bit of foam lingering on the rim. Audrey glances over her shoulder. "You're staring."

I gesture with my chin toward the tree, which is now almost fully decorated. "Admiring the view. And the lights twinkling and whatnot."

I reach into the box and take out two Santa hats. "You need one of these to get into the festive spirit."

Amusement dances in her eyes. "You want me to be your jolly little elf?"

She erupts into a hearty laugh when I wiggle my eyebrows, causing the pom pom on top of her hat to wobble.

"Why not break out those awful Christmas sweaters while you're at it? Who doesn't love them this time of year?"

She knows full well my family never wears them. "My sweaters are at the cleaners right now, but I thought the best part of the holidays was unwrapping presents."

I love how her eyes glitter, but looking and not touching her is akin to torture.

"You dropped one," I say, trying to distract myself.

"Where?" she asks, looking at me with sultry eyes. Her expression is the perfect blend of innocence and mischief, making it even harder for me to resist her.

I point to the silver bauble under the tree.

"I'll have to bend over and pick it up," she says with a wink.

"You're so bad. I bet you're on Santa's Naughty List."

"Maybe," she says, thoughtfully tapping her index finger on her lips.

I invite her to sit on my lap. "Why don't you come and tell Santa what a naughty girl you've been."

She arches a perfectly sculpted brow. “I’m not sure if I should. I don’t see a beard or rosy cheeks, only a wicked gleam in your eyes.”

“Wicked gleam? That’s all for you.”

Audrey shimmies into place. The slow grind sends a jolt of pleasure straight to my cock. The pained look on my face makes her wriggle harder like she’s doubling down, deliberately trying to drive me out of my mind.

I grip her hip, and she holds still. “You’re killing me.”

She walks her fingers to the front of my shirt, fussing with the buttons while her other hand gently rests on my upper arm with a feather-light touch. Heat blazes a trail through my body. My muscles tighten. Things are heating up fast, but I’ve been waiting a long time for this moment.

Finally—it’s game on.

Audrey adjusts my collar, her fingers lingering against my throat. “Are you going to ask me what I want for Christmas?”

I love how she looks at me as if I’m the answer to her prayers. I want her to look at me the same way every day.

My voice drops to a whisper. “Will you be a good girl for Santa? Because if you are, you can have anything you want. As a special treat, Santa will let you touch his sack and play with his special toy.”

Audrey tilts her head and lets out a laugh. “I can’t believe you just said that with a straight face.”

Brushing her hair aside, I cup the back of her neck. “I love the way you laugh. I want to hear it every day.”

I kiss the delicate skin on her neck, and she sighs softly. I’m a goner.

“You’re stunning, Auds. I want you—always have.”

“Luca.”

The look in her eyes lets me know she feels the same way. “Shhh. I can feel it, too.”

I pull her close, gripping her waist as I crush my lips to hers. She kisses me back fiercely, her desire matching mine. Audrey's arms slide around my neck, eliminating any space between us.

Desperate to feel her smooth skin, I slowly pull up her shirt. She trembles under my touch, and I only pause the kiss while she catches her breath. I kiss her neck softly and discover a sensitive spot beneath her ear.

Gently, I pull the sweater up until it slides over her shoulders, revealing the lacy red bra beneath. As I move down her body, planting kisses along the way, I pause at her collarbone, my teeth scraping the skin.

Her nipples are poking through the lace bra, and unable to resist, I capture one between my lips. Audrey moans, her hands fisting in my hair. My dick springs to life with painful urgency.

I grip her hips, helping her grind against my swollen cock, giving us both the friction we need. Audrey's scent—intoxicating and pure—fills the air.

But the moment I think all my Christmas wishes are coming true, a loud knock on the door shatters the moment.

*What the actual fuck?*

Another interruption. This time, the delivery driver with the takeout we ordered earlier.

Audrey shakes her head. "Terrible timing."

Planting a tender kiss on her nose, I rise from my seat. "Stay where you are. I'll be right back."

With a playful glint in her eyes, Audrey lifts her right hand. Her thumb presses down her little finger while the other three stand tall and rigid as if at attention.

"Promise I'll be a good girl."

I wipe sweat from my brow, hoping there's enough blood circulating away from my groin to make my legs move.

Where do I need to go to be alone with her?

Mars?

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 7

## Audrey

Luca leaves to collect takeout, giving me a quick breather to pull myself together. Being here with him is fantastic.

There's no awkwardness. Everything feels so right. After a lifetime of feeling stifled and boxed into a scripted life, I'm free to breathe.

Luca walks in, arms laden with boxes of food. The aroma—spicy, rich, and mouthwatering—fills the air. A mischievous grin tugs his lips when he spots me perched where he left me, still wearing my red bra.

“Good girl.”

The deep rumble shoots straight to my core.

My eyes dip, then flick to him through a veil of lashes.

“Santa's favorite girl.”

“Yes, you are.”

The way he looks at me stirs raw, exhilarating emotions I've never experienced. Dinner can wait. I'm hungry for something more intoxicating.

Luca sinks beside me on the couch and scoops me onto his lap. He wraps his arms around me, cuddling me while his fingers trace delicate patterns on my scalp, pleasure surging through my body as he tenderly massages my head.

I brush my hands across his well-defined muscles, feeling the roughness of chest hair beneath his shirt. He gently lifts my chin. My lips part in anticipation.

“So beautiful. Need to kiss you.”

When our lips meet, fireworks erupt in the dark sky behind my eyelids. I feel him everywhere—firing through my nerves, flowing through my cells, throbbing with every beat of my aching heart.

After what feels like an eternity, we pause to catch our breath. He reaches for the hat he discarded earlier and puts it on his head.

Luca strokes his jaw, giving me a narrow-eyed look. “You didn’t tell Santa your wish.”

“Santa interrupted.” I run my hands along his thighs, loving how his muscles flex and tighten. “Are you listening now?”

He picks me up off his lap, twirls me around, and sets me on the couch. Luca drops to his knees. He settles in front of me, resting his hands on my legs, his touch grounding me.

“Tell me your wish, and I’ll make it come true.”

His intense, erotic stare, combined with heat from the fire, causes me to break out in a sweat. “You already are,” I tell him.

He smirks before kissing a trail down my body. When he reaches my breast, he rips my bra aside and flicks my nipple.

My nipples are stiff peaks. Luca draws one deep into his mouth. Liquid heat courses through my veins—my pussy clenches.

A deep sound rumbles from his chest.

“You like that?” he asks, his voice gruff.

How did he know what I’d need when I didn’t know myself? Unable to speak, I mewl.

I quickly unzip my jeans and lift my hips so he can slide them down my legs. When they pool at my ankles, I kick them aside.

Without another word, Luca lowers his head and starts to kiss the inside of my thighs. He kisses up my legs, then kisses a trail from one hip bone to the other.

My legs are shaking from the anticipation of his mouth on my aching sex. I lean back, lifting my pelvis toward his mouth—an offering.

Hooking his fingers under the waistband of my panties, he drags them down my legs. I grip the edge of the sofa to steady myself, lift one foot, then the other so that he can remove them.

“So wet.” His eyes darken. “You have the most beautiful pussy. Spread your legs nice and wide so Santa can see you.”

“Luca.” I blush a little because it’s the first time he’s seen me naked.

I try to turn away, but he holds me in place by resting his hand on my belly. “Santa says, behave.”

Luca wraps a hand around the back of my knee. He pulls my leg over his shoulder, parting my legs wide enough for him to see everything.

I feel empty and ache to be filled—intimately connected with him this way. I’ve never felt this before, but I do now. And I want it with him.

I whimper, spreading my legs wider. The rough pads of Luca’s fingers against my clit is almost too much.

Searching for relief, I squeeze my thighs together. Luca’s rough growl stops me in my tracks.

He slides two fingers between my folds, exploring. When he reaches my opening, he thrusts his fingers inside. He pumps them in and out while I buck and grind, contracting around his thick fingers.

I’ve never felt such intense need, but I do now—and Luca’s the only one who will satisfy me.

“I want your cock.”

“Not yet,” he says. “I’ve waited a long time for this moment. I’m going to savor every single second. I’ll lick your pretty pussy until you come on my tongue.”

I gasp with need at the dirty words falling from his lips.

“Luca.”

“I’ll do it again and again until you’re begging.”

“For what?”

“Me to fill you up.”

My head drops back, and I close my eyes. “I need you.”

Luca explores my body, teasing my most intimate place, flattening his tongue and tasting every inch of me.

I grip his hair, holding his head in place and grinding against his mouth. When Luca growls, the sound resonates, the vibrations going straight to my core. His skillful tongue flicks and swirls feverishly as he devours my swollen, sensitive flesh.

Although it’s our first time together, he’s slow and thorough, like he has all the time in the world. He seems focused on my pleasure, but I sense something else.

At first, I can’t put my finger on it until I realize—he’s enjoying himself.

Liquid heat pools in my pussy, dripping into his mouth as he continues coaxing pleasure out of me, one lick at a time.

The pressure in my core is building, and when I roll my hips, seeking friction, he becomes a beast—biting, sucking, and licking as he works me to a crescendo.

“You’re a fucking goddess. So beautiful.”

Shockwaves of pleasure cause my back to arch. I scream his name when a powerful orgasm tears through me. Luca’s breathing as heavily as I am, determined to extract every ounce of pleasure from my body.

I ride the wave until it crashes, leaving me trembling and breathless.

“I can’t wait to be inside you,” he says as he removes his shirt. It drops to the ground with a soft whoosh.

When he presses his lips to mine, I taste myself. He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, catching it with his teeth and then

soothing it with a flick of his tongue.

“You’ve been a very good girl. Santa has a present for you.”

I lift my gaze to his. “Can I unwrap it now?”

Smiling, he kicks off his shoes, quickly followed by his pants and boxer briefs, leaving him gloriously naked in front of me.

I wrap my fingers around his painfully hard length, taking my time stroking and exploring. His expression tells me everything I need to know about what he enjoys.

When my grip tightens, he utters a string of curse words. He pulls my hand away before quickly taking a condom from his jeans.

Rolling it on, he positions himself between my legs. His deep voice rumbles, “Ready?”

I’m lost in lust, aching for him to fill me up. “You know what I want.”

He looks practically feral. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Take me,” I whisper, my voice low and seductive.

Every inch of me is screaming for him to fill me, but he isn’t moving.

I wonder what he’s doing until I realize he’s asking for consent.

“Fuck me, Luca. What are you waiting for?”

When Luca breaches my entrance, every nerve ignites with pleasure. Luca pauses, waiting for my body to adjust to his size. “Deeper?”

“Yes, please.”

“Please, what? You want me to slide my cock into your tight little pussy?”

“Yesss,” I hiss.

He tugs my hair, pulling me in for a passionate kiss. I wrap my legs around his waist, locking them into place. Now he’s hitting all the right places.

Heat courses through my body. My nails dig into his skin with each powerful thrust.

I roll my hips, matching his rhythm—pleasure builds, becoming stronger. My pulse is racing, my veins throbbing with adrenaline. I feel him straining, his desire driving me higher and higher, setting my skin on fire.

I didn't expect a second orgasm, but as I writhe beneath him, I'm unable to control the wild sensations taking over my body. I'm desperate for release.

Suddenly, he stops, holding me on the edge. My whisper echoes off the walls. "Please."

I feel his smile against my skin. He holds onto me tightly and moves with a frantic intensity, thrusting deeper.

"Harder!" I beg.

He buries his face against my neck and breathes in deeply. "Jesus."

Waves of pleasure course through my body, making me quiver. My inner muscles clench, drawing his cock deep into my body. He's teetering on the edge of release, and I'm the one who pushed him to his limits.

Luca's rhythm becomes erratic until finally, he groans, finds his release, and collapses.

Wrapping my arms around him, I sigh contentedly, stroking his hair until his breathing settles. My limbs are heavy and content, and my eyelids flutter closed.

Luca wraps his body around mine. It's such a tender moment. So intimate. He'll take care of me like no one else can.

This moment is pure perfection.

It's everything I always wanted—until he slips from my embrace.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 8

## Luca

I've lain awake countless nights, imagining what this would feel like. I painted a picture in my mind of every detail, even down to what Audrey would sound like in the heat of passion when she cried out my name.

The throaty sound she made when she shattered proved better than any of my fantasies. The best part? Loving Audrey is no longer a dream. It's my new reality. By accepting me, Audrey's fulfilled my deepest wish.

Lying by the fire, I gently run my fingers through Audrey's hair. The moment feels perfect—her head on my chest, the fire crackling, the air thick with the scent of sex and sweat.

Audrey snuggles into the blanket, eyes heavy. When she falls asleep, I'll carry her to bed. Until then, I'll bask in her beauty, imprinting this perfect moment into my memory for safekeeping. Although, I really should get up and fetch a washcloth before she drifts to sleep.

Audrey's shoulders tense as she sits up abruptly, almost like she's been waiting for something terrible to happen.

"Where are you—"

"I'm right here," I assure her. "I was only going to get a washcloth."

I immediately cup her face, thumbs lightly brushing her cheeks, holding her gaze to anchor her in the present moment.

I don't want to leave her. Opting for the next best thing, I reach for the tissues. After cleaning her, I throw out the used

condom and tissues, grab a blanket, and drape it over us, sealing in the warmth of the moment.

As I trace gentle circles on her wrist, she's absorbed by the rhythm, her tension melting away. Each stroke is a silent promise, an affirmation that she's the center of my universe.

She takes a deep, shuddering breath, her mood shifting.  
"Luca."

"Yes, love."

"I need to get something off my chest."

"Shhh," I whisper, pressing a finger to her lips.

"No more secrets or misunderstandings, okay? If things go sour between us—"

I brush my fingers across her cheek and whisper, "Shh—it's okay. It'll be alright."

"I'm not built to handle the disappointment."

I'll be equally crushed. I blame my family and their stupid rules and her family for enforcing them.

"You can tell me anything," I remind her.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the engagement sooner. I didn't want to upset you." Audrey casts her eyes downward, avoiding mine.

"You could never upset me."

She looks up, skepticism in the way she raises her eyebrows.

"No? You stopped talking to me, then took off to Europe and \_\_\_"

"That wasn't your fault." I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "I should've been there for you."

After a long silence, Audrey whispers, "My parents pushed me to be with Brent."

I clench my jaw before forcing out, "You did what you felt was right."

The words taste like ashes.

“I said yes out of duty.” Her voice cracks on the last word.

I reach for her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You were in an impossible situation. We both were.”

“I should’ve stood up to them.” Audrey’s voice wavers as she fights back tears.

Seeing her anguish is too much. I gently wipe a stray tear from her cheek. “Hey...it’s going to be okay.”

She smiles faintly at my touch. “I don’t want to be with someone I don’t love. My heart belongs to you. It always has.”

When her eyes meet mine, everything fades away. It’s just Audrey and me and the fragile hope building between us. Something shifts inside—like a key turning a lock.

My heart gives a nervous jolt. I’m finally part of something greater—we have a future together.

“I love you, Auds—always have. Always will.”

“I love you too,” she whispers in return.

A deeply contented sigh rises from my chest. “Thank fuck you feel the same. I can’t live without you any longer.”

“Same. I can’t imagine my life without you in it,” she says, her voice laced with raw emotion.

“I’ve always wanted you, Audrey. That night we danced in the garden was—”

“I never wanted it to end,” she says softly.

“Me either. If we hadn’t been interrupted, I don’t think I could’ve stopped myself.”

She bites her lip. “Stopped yourself from what?”

“From claiming you, making you mine.” I take a measured breath. “Everyone said keeping my distance was best for you. I respected the boundaries, even though it killed me.”

Audrey’s brows furrow. “Who said that? Our parents?”

I nod slowly. “I won’t get into details, but I thought I was doing the right thing. I was wrong.”

“Is that how you felt all along?”

“Always,” I confess.

“I was afraid you were only teasing. Flirting but nothing more.”

I reflect on the times she sat beside me during family dinners, our thighs touching. “It’s the only way I could interact with you.”

Her eyes glisten with emotion. “I noticed everything. Your attentive touch, the way you’d look at me. I just didn’t let myself believe...”

“Offered you drinks, plated your food, or refilled your drink.” My voice trails off, and I shake my head at wasted years.

“I remember,” she says softly.

“And every time it happened, I was warned to back off, so I did. I didn’t overwhelm you with my need for you. Sometimes I can be too much. Too intense.”

“I love your brooding intensity.”

“That’s just it, Auds. I don’t want to be brooding and intense. It’s killing me. I’m permanently grumpy because I’m holding back my feelings. I’m falling apart without you in my life.”

“I loved the old you, the new you, and any future version too.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Best Christmas present ever,” I murmur.

“It isn’t Christmas yet,” she says with a playful smile.

“It is for me. You make me a better man, and I love you.”

I pause before continuing. “Auds, did anyone ever tell you why we couldn’t be together?”

Audrey nervously chews her lip.

“No. Whenever I asked, I got the same ‘mind your own business’ brush-off.”

“Me too,” I confess. And worse, but I won’t tell her that.

“Are our parents hiding something?” she asks.

I run a hand through my hair and blow out a breath. It hurts my soul to think we could have been together sooner. “Maybe someone’s committed murder, and they’re covering it up.”

She laughs. “A conspiracy theory?”

I throw my hands in the air. “I don’t know what to think!”

She’s staring as though she can see the gears turning in my head.

“Murder sounds like the plot from one of your movies. It doesn’t make sense, but do you think it could be something sinister?”

For a brief moment, we’re both lost in a maze of possibilities, each more perplexing than the last.

Her eyes light up. “Maybe someone had an affair with someone they weren’t supposed to. Maybe we’re cousins. Or—”

I’ve considered the possibility, too, and chuckle darkly. “Auds, our families came from the same village. We share the same olive skin, dark eyes, and hair, but it’s because of our heritage. Not because we’re siblings.”

Audrey sighs, tension leaving her shoulders. “You make it sound so logical, but why won’t they give us a reason?”

I clench my jaw. “It better be a damn good reason to justify us missing out on years together. If I find out it’s because of a stupid feud over a couple of goats—I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“You’ll blow a gasket.”

I take her hands in mine. “Unless they have an ironclad reason we can’t be together, I say we move forward with our lives.”

Worry clouds her eyes again. “If they reject us, it’ll hurt.”

“It’s time we prioritized our happiness.” I give her hands a reassuring squeeze. “I’m ready to stand by my decision to be with you.”

“Don’t worry, Auds. I won’t let anyone steal you from me and lock you in a monastery. As long as I draw breath, you’ll never

be alone or become a crazy cat lady.”

Laughter bubbles out of her, lighting up her face. “You have a funny way of seeing the world, you know that?”

“It’s what makes me special.” I give her a big smile, hoping she sees how much joy she brings. “Better get used to it because you’re stuck with me.”

Audrey’s laughter fades, but her eyes sparkle with amusement. “I wouldn’t want to be stuck with anyone else.”

Her words make my heart swell. Unable to resist, I brush my thumb against her cheek. “From now on, where you go, I go. Your battles are my battles.”

Audrey leans into my touch, her expression growing serious. “It won’t be easy standing up to our families.”

“Maybe not.” I tilt her chin up. “But we’ll face it together.”

I lean in, pausing just before our lips meet. Audrey closes the distance, kissing me with fierce tenderness. In this moment, nothing else matters but her.

When we break apart, Audrey rests her forehead against mine. The vow hangs unspoken between us—wherever this path leads, we walk it hand in hand.

Audrey is everything to me—I won’t lose her again. I’ll protect what we have from anyone who tries to come between us.

Because one thing is clear—Audrey is mine, and my heart entirely belongs to her.

I’ve made my decision. It’s time to confront my parents once and for all. I’ll make sure this Christmas together isn’t our last.

I’ll give her anything her heart desires and more. So much more.

I’ll give her everything.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 9

## Audrey

The following day, the crew is hurriedly packing and setting up for a reshoot due to a technical glitch. We're running behind schedule, and everyone's nerves are on edge.

Luca and I are tucked into a quiet corner backstage, stealing a quiet moment. He looks as drained as I feel.

My voice barely rises above the clatter of crew moving equipment.

"I thought we'd pull an all-nighter, but you handled it. You're the glue holding us together."

"Take credit where it's due, Auds. Your attention to detail is incredible."

I beam, my heart expanding at his praise.

People scurry away, and the noisy clatter dies down. As soon as we're alone, Luca places his hands firmly on my hips.

This incredible and complicated man cups my chin, blazing dark eyes staring like I'm his most precious possession.

Suddenly, the air between us is electric.

Luca's hand tangles in my hair, tugging firmly. I gasp. He dips his head so we're inches apart, brushing a sweet kiss onto my lips.

Resting his forehead against mine, he says, "One more scene to shoot. Then we can get out of here."

Although work is a struggle, I'm motivated to push through to get home as quickly as possible. "Can't wait."

Luca's husky voice sends a thrill straight to my aching core. "We're working on something special tonight, and I want to get down to business right away."

I have a witty comeback for his spicy innuendo, but he pulls away, disappearing before I can call him out. This man—always full of surprises. One moment, he's a sexy beast, and the next, a teddy bear.

Luca can transform ordinary moments into something magical. He makes the world a better place. We spend all our free time together. We are inseparable, and our love feels like a treasure—our little secret.

While the crew senses the electricity between us, they respect our privacy enough to keep their distance. Everyone, that is, except actor Abel Clarke.

Quite often, when we're alone, Abel will make comments that skate close to the edge of decency. Hardly surprising—Abel has a knack for grating on people's nerves—he's a bona fide pain in the ass.

Despite the fact he irritates me, I can handle him. Luca's keeping his cool, but he's already dealing with so much. I see his clenched jaw and how his knuckles turn white when gripping his tablet—no need to burden him more.

I'm in the makeup trailer, watching the clock and increasingly frustrated by Abel's tardiness. He's not answering calls, and I have a sinking feeling this doesn't bode well for the scene we have left. Each minute we delay puts the shoot at risk of blowing over budget.

On top of that, Christmas is breathing down my neck, and gift-hunting for Luca is proving impossible. Every time I try to shop online, someone barges into the makeup room.

What do you gift a man who seems to have it all? The search consumes me, but time's slipping through my fingers.

I try Abel again but can't reach him. I can't stall any longer. As I weave through the maze-like hallways toward the set, I nearly trip over Abel, Abel sprawled on a crate, decked out in his ridiculous Santa Suit costume.

His pinched features make him look like a cartoon character. The deeply etched scowl tops off the look. The sight turns my stomach.

Abel smirks, his eyes narrowing with self-satisfaction. “What’s up, gorgeous? Ready to make me look even more irresistible?”

I stifle a gag as a vile stench wafts from him, forcing me to inhale shallow breaths.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say, unzipping my makeup kit more forcefully than necessary.

“Ah, playing hard to get, I see,” he drawls, his scowl morphing into a sleazy grin.

I bite the inside of my cheek, focusing instead on applying saline to his bloodshot eyes.

“Keep your eyes open. This will help with the redness.”

“Or you could say I’ve got that natural smolder, huh?” He winks, making my skin crawl.

The temptation to roll my eyes is overwhelming, but I resist. “Sure, let’s go with that,” I reply, screwing the cap back onto the bottle.

As Abel stumbles away, a knot of worry forms in my stomach. If Abel derails the shoot further, it could jeopardize the entire project. I dial Luca immediately and give him an update.

Luca’s gaze finds mine as I enter the set. Our eyes lock, and for a fleeting moment, the world falls away. Then I see him take a deep, steadying breath—bracing himself, gathering the strength for whatever challenge lies ahead.

Abel cuts past me and struts on set. Cocky and arrogant, he mutters a disparaging comment under his breath. My hackles rise.

I fumble, dropping a can of hairspray onto the epoxy floor. I race behind the pressurized missile, swearing under my breath.

Abel sits beside Laura. When she catches a whiff, her pretty face turns green. Luca and the cameraman put their heads together.

Although they're speaking in hushed tones, they're discussing Abel—specifically, his ability or inability to work if the sour look on Laura's face is anything to go by.

I can't walk off a live set, but I'd better grab a wastepaper basket. She might need it.

Luca pulls Abel aside for a discreet one-on-one. Abel nods enthusiastically, reminding me of a bobblehead toy before moving to his mark. Luca strides to his place beside a bank of portable monitors, his jaw tight and fists clenched.

Members of the crew exchange pointed looks. I'm not the only one who notices how his body language tells the real story.

I move closer, settling beside Kaiden, hovering in the wings. Kaiden looks concerned, but Laura's more relaxed when he's around.

Across the set, Luca's eyes meet mine, and for a moment, they flicker with something dark, something intense. It's as if he's wrestling with some inner demon. But as quickly as it came, it vanished.

"Lock it up," Luca says, giving the crew the signal to start rolling—the director of photography nods before peering into the camera gate.

"Roll sound," he calls.

Abel graces us with a ridiculously loud burp when the sound operator confirms he's recording.

People groan, but Luca doesn't bat an eyelid. Impatiently tapping his foot, he folds his arms over his chest.

"Go again!" he commands.

The crew repeats the process, but this time, we get as far as the camera rolling, and Luca calls, "Action!"

Laura delivers her lines perfectly, and I breathe a sigh of relief. But when it's Abel's turn, he blows his cue.

Poor Luca. A muscle in his jaw ticks, but he has the patience of a saint.

“Go again!” he calls.

I wish I could stand close enough to soothe him.

Abel tries pulling Laura into his lap during the scene but misses and falls off his Santa throne. Laura jumps away in time to avoid getting hurt.

“Cut!” Luca clenches his fists but exhales deeply, choosing restraint over aggression.

There’s an edge to Luca’s voice, his patience wearing thin when he confronts the actor. The tension between the men is palpable.

“Get it together, Abel. Act professional, for everyone’s sake.”

Abel tips his chin towards me. “Why should you care? You’ve got your hands full with that tasty bit on the side.”

*Asshole!*

Luca shudders. I barely have time to breathe before he delivers a perfect uppercut, smashing the actor’s jaw.

The sickening sound of bone on bone makes me feel like throwing up. But the pain isn’t enough to stop the drunk actor, who lunges at Luca, fists flying. My heart jolts.

As the men grapple, Abel stumbles, barreling into Laura, who lets out a shrill cry of surprise.

Kaiden’s face hardens into a mask of fury. He swiftly catches her before she can hit the ground.

“She’s pregnant,” he announces as stunned silence falls over everyone.

As Kaiden leads Laura away, I fly to Luca’s side, my heart pounding and stomach flipping.

Luca’s lip, marred by a deep cut, is already swelling, matching the puffy flesh around his cheek and eye.

Although it’s a terrifying moment, Luca has never looked more handsome. He fiercely protected me and others around

him.

I grasp his hand, eyes darting over his knuckles. He only has a few scrapes. “Oh my god. Are you okay?”

“No broken bones,” he says but winces when he presses his fingers to his lips.

“Come with me. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

My arm winds around his waist, steadying and guiding him to a quiet corner away from prying eyes.

He slumps into a chair, his gaze unfocused. I hurry to retrieve a first-aid kit. I’ve glimpsed this raw edge of Luca before, but never in public.

I get the sense he’s working through deeper frustration, as if a hidden layer of his soul is clawing its way to the surface, aching to break free.

I swipe disinfectant over his knuckles, carefully avoiding the deepest cut. “You were spoiling for a fight, huh?”

“Abel had it coming,” Luca snaps.

“You really roughed him up.”

“You sound surprised.”

I’ve always wanted Luca in my corner, with his complete focus on defending us.

Leaning in, I whisper, “I know what you’re capable of. You’re unstoppable.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” he says, all fired up. “I’m only warming up.”

When he moves closer, his thigh grazes mine, and I start to feel a pulsing sensation between my legs. I ache to kiss him, but people will see.

“I’ve been thinking about fucking you all day,” he murmurs into my ear. “Let’s go somewhere quiet.”

Voices sound nearby, jolting us back to reality.

“What about the shoot? Abel’s ruined everything; we could be here all night.”

Luca shakes his head. “I’ve figured out a way around the problem, but we’ll need a short break.”

A smile quivers on his lips. It blooms into a knowing grin—a look I’ve seen before.

Nerves ripple down low in my stomach. “What are you suggesting?”

“Come with me,” he whispers. “I know a secluded spot where we can be alone.”

Glancing furtively, Luca pulls me toward a shadowy alcove behind the elaborate set.

Pressed together in the tight space, I meet his smoldering gaze, my pulse quickening.

I cradle his stubbled jaw, drawing him into a fervent kiss. Luca responds hungrily, his strong arms enveloping me. His hands travel down my sides, igniting sparks along my skin.

As we kiss, he lifts my leg and wraps it around his hip. My hips are angled just right so I can rock against his erection. His hard cock is straining against his zipper.

I’ve never done anything as crazy as this. We could get caught at any time. I’m appalled at my slutty behaviour, yet it feels so good being with Luca and I don’t want to stop.

I roll my hips, chasing friction, loving the sounds he is making. He makes me feel like the sexiest woman alive.

I moan against his lips. “You feel so good. I want you so much.”

He’s breathing hard, his eyes dancing. “I want to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to walk straight.”

I kneel in front of him and undo his jeans. “I think this is the most fun—definitely the hottest thing I’ve ever done at work.”

My fingers glide across the tip. I look up to meet his gaze, his throbbing cock inches from my lips. “I’m going to make you come.”

A dark smirk crosses his face. “Give me that mouth.”

Luca guides his impressive cock to my mouth. My tongue darts out to moisten my lips.

He pulls back teasingly. “Beg for it.”

I swear under my breath. “Please. I want your cock so bad.”

He’s watching me with rapt attention as I take him in my mouth. I savor the taste of him, feeling him slide against my tongue as I massage it along the underside of his shaft.

I keep sucking him off, strength and power in each stroke of my lips and tongue. When I reach up to massage his balls, he wraps his hand in my hair, watching with hooded eyes.

I release him with a pop. “I want you to fuck my throat.”

Luca’s never looked at me this way before. My body trembles with lust at the look of pleasure on his face.

“My dirty girl,” he says, his voice husky.

I take his pulsing cock deep. As deep as it will go. Down until he bumps the back of my throat. Tears spring to my eyes.

He groans, head falling back, body shuddering with pleasure as I hollow my cheeks and increase the pressure. His hips buck, and my mouth stretches as wide as it’ll go.

Luca’s grip on my hair tightens. “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

As I cradle his balls, he shudders, gushing down my throat. I swallow it all, every drop until he’s a panting mess, and there’s nothing left.

Luca slips free, still semi-rigid, and pulls me to my feet. He zips himself into his pants, and the other hand trails down my body, resting lightly on my hip.

“Stay with me,” he says, his voice rough with desire.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I mean forever, Auds.”

He’s my everything, and I’ll never leave his side again.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 10

## Audrey

I promised Mom I'd help with Christmas prep after finishing work. Work wrapped up sooner than expected, so Luca's apartment became our first stop. I won't disappoint her, but we've got time to burn.

The only problem is Luca follows me around the apartment, everywhere I go. He won't give me a moment's peace, constantly peppering me with questions—*Who's going to lunch? What's on the menu?*

He's the chink in my armor— my ultimate weakness. Resisting him feels as futile as denying the laws of gravity. I'd rather stay home with him than chop onions for Mom any day of the week.

I picture Mom and Ivy waiting for me to help them prepare Christmas dinner. If I don't tear myself away soon, I'll be trapped here, lost in him.

"Luca, I promised Mom. I don't want to let her down." I stare wistfully, wishing we lived in a bubble.

My hand feels warm in his grip, his thumb stroking softly. "Don't go," he murmurs, looking at me with his sinfully sexy smirk.

"It's the first time you've seen your parents since we've been together. How do you feel? Will they sway your opinion about us?"

His words hang in the air, the undertone of jealousy unmistakable.

I hear the slight edge of anger in my voice, surprised by my defensiveness. “What? No! You think they’ll easily brainwash me?”

“That isn’t what I mean.” He sighs, sliding his hand to my wrist. “I’ll come with you.”

“We made a plan, remember?”

We decided to keep up appearances for now. We’ll spend Christmas day with our families, then meet in the evening. We’ll tell them what’s happening - not ask permission.

Luca takes my hands, his tone playful but eyes serious. “I wish I could keep you in my evil lair forever, hidden away where no one could take you from me.”

I kiss him softly. “Later, my love. We’ll figure this out.”

My voice is gentle as I pull away, moving towards the door.

I grab my coat and steal one last glance at the handle before walking out, leaving my heart behind.

\* \* \*

# Luca

My love for Audrey is as real as the air I breathe. Without her, I am nothing—an empty shell. Together, we weave a delicate dance of trust and mind-blowing intimacy.

Although she doesn't want to upset our families so close to Christmas, I'm furious that we've wasted precious years apart that we could have been together. The life we deserve is within reach.

Christmas or not, the time for playing by the rules is over. I'm determined to fight for the future Audrey, and I deserve. Love alone won't win this battle.

I love Audrey, and nothing anyone says will change that. But you don't get what you want by waiting around. You have to fight for your beliefs and ask for what you need.

The only way I'll get what I want is by taking matters into my own hands.

When Audrey leaves, my place feels like an empty shell. With nothing to do but pace the empty apartment, my mind is racing with everything I want to say to my parents.

What if this goes deeper than Audrey and me? What if my parents reveal a shocking secret that changes how I see them—like a hidden crime, betrayal, or that Audrey and I are related?

I shake off the worrying thought. I can't sit around and let worry gnaw my insides. I need to know what keeps them from accepting Audrey into our family.

I jump in my car and hit the gas hard, making the tires squeal as I speed out of the driveway. My stomach knots up as I clutch the steering wheel.

The palm trees that line the roadside and the waves gently kissing the shore would typically soothe my soul on the drive

to Malibu. But today is different. Each passing mile only heightens my unease.

I need something to take my mind off the tension building inside. I've been playing phone tag with my cousin Chase for days.

Eager for any diversion, I hit redial on the dashboard. Quick off the draw, he answers on the second ring.

"Frank's pizza. All our operators are busy, but we'll be with you shortly."

I crack up laughing, my shoulders dropping an inch as I exhale. "Thank god for you, man. How's the new bar going?"

"Ah.... Interesting."

I'm straining to hear over the music and the racket in the background.

"Why? What's happening?"

"I need your help with the—"

Suddenly, the background noise drops away, and I hear him again as though he's gone to a quieter place. "You know who."

I chuckle at his attempt at discretion. "No problem. I postponed the princess's visit until after filming wraps up, so she's free to visit you and see your new bar."

"Sounds like a tough shoot."

"Don't ask. But it's good news for you."

While living in Paris years ago, I befriended Prince Anders of Rorvik. We're close friends. These days, he and his family frequently use my farm to escape the public eye.

This Christmas, Ander's sister, Princess Astrid, is traveling to the United States, and I had promised her a tour of my movie set.

Chase asks nervously, "Will Astrid bring a team of bodyguards?"

“Only one guard. He’s highly trained ex-military. You know the type.”

Chase immediately catches my meaning and laughs. “One protective lover is better than a team of bodyguards.”

His words resonate. “Damn straight.”

“Thanks, Luca. One less thing to worry about,” Chase replies, exhaustion evident in his voice.

“Still chaotic at home?” I ask, knowing things have been complicated for him lately.

He sighs heavily. “You know how it is.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I mutter under my breath, my cousin’s words ringing in my head as I consider my family drama.

I approach the gated entrance to my parent’s house. “I’ll check in with you tomorrow,” I say before hanging up.

The security gate swings open, and I drive past the manicured hedges that line the winding driveway. My stomach knots with anxiety.

This is it. No turning back now.

One thing’s certain—today, the family secrets end. I’m here to expose the truth, no matter how messy. Only raw honesty will fix this broken mess.

The imposing house towers over me, no longer welcoming, only threatening. My heartbeat pounds, drowning out the engine’s soft hum as I park at the mansion.

As emotions whirl inside, I see only secrets hiding within these walls, not happy memories.

What clues did I miss? Were there signs I ignored? Could I have prevented this mess by paying attention?

The guard dogs, Argo and Borax, bark and howl as they tear across the grass, bounding toward me.

The Belgian Malinois were bred in the kennels I keep in Rorvik. I gave them to my parents as a gift a few years ago.

Dad's estate manager, Trey, has been working for my parents since I was a boy, and while the dogs are young, Trey is not.

He's breathing hard. "Easy, you two."

I pocket my car keys and kneel to give the dogs a hearty scratch behind the ears. "It's okay. I've missed them," I admit.

"Mr. Regis. I wasn't expecting you."

I was in a hurry and hadn't considered the possibility my parents could be out. "Are my parents home?"

"They're inside," he confirms.

I enter the grand foyer with its crystal chandeliers and sweeping staircase, calling out, "Hello!"

The familiar scents and lavish Christmas tree radiate a sense of home, but I can't focus. Audrey occupies my thoughts.

Mom appears, surprised. "Luca! Just in time for gin rummy."

In the sitting room, Dad smiles and deals the cards. I settle into a leather armchair as Mom pours whiskey.

We play a few rounds, sipping whiskey, the ice clinking in our glasses the only sound.

Dad notices my restless tapping. Peering over his bifocals, he breaks the silence.

"Something on your mind?"

Dad's voice takes on the tone he reserves for business rather than family.

I exhale heavily. "You know I'm working with Audrey."

"Mm, yes. Roberto mentioned it," Mom mutters, not meeting my eyes as she clenches her jaw. "How's the filming?"

Is she being serious?

My grip on the crystal tumbler tightens. "I'm not here about the movie. We need to talk about Audrey."

Tension charges the room. I refill my whiskey for liquid courage.

Mom shoots Dad a loaded glance before staring at her cards, jaw tight.

“You heard she broke her engagement?” I say, steadying my voice.

Dad clears his throat, a storm brewing behind his expressionless face. He leans back, crossing his legs.

“Sad business. Audrey’s parents were quite upset,” he offers cautiously.

I scoff. “Audrey’s parents should be thankful. She dodged a lifetime of unhappiness.”

“Why do you care about Audrey’s happiness?” Mom interjects, her voice rising.

My nails dig into the leather armrest as I lean forward, holding their gazes for maximum impact.

“I love her, that’s why. And you’ve forbidden your oldest friend’s daughter from me. Why? I don’t understand why you two are so hell-bent on keeping us apart.”

The words land like an indictment in the tense air. Dad rubs his forehead, carefully considering his response.

“Son, things get complicated when personal and professional relationships mix.”

I expect that excuse. “This is about my life, not yours,” I shoot back.

“It’s not just business, Luca,” Mom says, voice strained. “It’s decades of trust between our families. We don’t want to jeopardize that.”

I laugh bitterly. “So you ruin my future instead? Acceptable collateral damage?”

Acid churns in my stomach as I refill my glass. Dad meets my eyes. “There are things you don’t understand.”

“Enlighten me,” I press, my patience worn thin.

Dad leans back, fixing me with an inscrutable look. “It’s ancient history. No need to re-open old wounds.”

I bristle. “Well, your ‘history’ is ruining my future. I deserve the truth.”

All I know is our family changed their name when they immigrated from Italy after the war. But what does any of that have to do with Audrey?

Mom touches Dad’s arm. He bows his head, facade cracking as sorrow carves lines across his face.

Voice thick with emotion, he recounts a generations-old tale of forbidden love and enduring family feuds. Of secrets twisting like barbed wire, tearing lives apart.

I listen, rapt. There are hidden burdens in our family, still carried in pained silence. Witnessing this rare emotional side of him, I understand my father’s stubbornness and drive stem from deeper wounds than I realized.

As Dad finishes the story, I sense he’s holding something back.

I steer the conversation back to my burning concern. “What does Audrey’s family have to do with this?”

“They’re from the same village. They understand.” His reply is vague.

I pounce on it. “But Audrey and I don’t! Why punish us?”

He meets my stare, shame, and remorse flooding his eyes. “The lovers in the story are your Great Uncle Lorenzo and Audrey’s grandmother.”

I’m shocked into silence, trying to process this revelation. Stunned, I have to ask, “Does this mean Audrey and I are related?”

Mom crosses herself as Dad shakes his head. “No,” he says firmly.

At least that potential problem is ruled out.

“You always said Nonno had two brothers. Now, there was a fourth - Lorenzo? Why haven’t I heard his name before?”

Dad’s lip curls in disdain. “Lorenzo caused trouble. The affair brought much suffering, and his name became cursed.”

“A curse.” My voice breaks.

Dad sighs heavily, regret shadowing his face. “We meant well. We tried to guide you.”

Mom whispers through tears, “We made sacrifices for the greater good.”

The ‘greater good’ cost me years with Audrey. I smash my glass against the wall, causing shards to scatter across the floor.

“You made us feel ashamed for loving each other! And for what?”

“We tried to protect you,” Mom whispers, her eyes brimming with tears.

I let out a caustic laugh. Protect us? The irony. All they did was inflict pain.

I stand abruptly, chair scraping loudly. “We respected your wishes, but you didn’t trust us enough to tell us the truth. You manipulated us!”

“Luca!” Mom’s voice breaks.

Too late.

Clarity cuts through hurt and anger as I storm to the car, not looking back. I don’t need them in my life anymore.

I only need Audrey.

My phone buzzes with her message. Heart leaping, I pull over to read it.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter II

## Audrey

The sweet scent of baked apples envelopes me as I enter the house.

“You took your time!” Ivy chirps.

I bite into an apple, savoring the crisp burst. “I was busy doing something.”

Her grin must make her cheeks ache. “Some *thing* or someone? Spill it—does it have anything to do with Luca?”

“Who else?” I reply, letting the dreamy sensation swirling inside me show on my face.

“It’s about time!”

“Why do you say that?”

“The two of you working together? Like a ticking time bomb waiting to go off.”

A sigh escapes my lips, some of the knot in my chest loosening. “We’re together, but keeping it a secret for now.”

Ivy gives me a knowing look. “I get it. But if you two have sparks, you owe it to yourselves to see where they lead.”

My brows furrow. “I don’t want to cause problems.”

“Auds, for the record, I admire you.”

Surprised by her sudden confession, I ask why.

“Because you put others first at the expense of your happiness.”

I pause. I've always avoided making waves, but that's changing. Despite what my parents might think or want from me, Luca is my priority now. Living without him is impossible.

Tears prick my eyes. "That's one way to look at it. Another is that I've been a coward."

"You're the responsible older sister, but you need to figure out what's holding you back."

"A sense of duty? Fear of breaking Mom and Dad's hearts?"

Ivy leans against the counter. "Courage isn't about being fearless. It's about what you do despite fear. What will you do?"

Her words hit me like cold water, snapping everything into focus.

I needed the nudge—a final push to topple over any lingering doubts. "You're right."

"This seems like a good time to let you know I got a job up north. I'm moving out after Christmas," she proudly announces.

I stare at her in disbelief, stomach twisting. "Wow. You weren't kidding about leaving home after the holidays."

"Nope," she replies firmly, her lips set in a straight line. "One-way ticket."

"That's a big step. Do you think Mom and Dad will accept it?"

Ivy rolls her eyes so dramatically that I'm surprised they don't get stuck.

"I expect guilt trips, but it's my life. I'd rather start fresh without the family drama."

I'm stunned. While I'm glad she's following her passion, our parents will be devastated. Telling them about Luca feels like stepping into a minefield now.

I pull Ivy into a tight hug, fighting back tears. I'm going to miss her like crazy.

We've been talking for so long that I lost track of time. I need to get back to Luca soon before Mom and Dad return.

"Did you hear the kitchen timer go off?" I ask Ivy.

"Nope."

She hooks her arm through mine as we walk downstairs, but unease washes over me.

Ivy's face scrunches up, and we exchange a worried glance. "Ugh, do you smell that?"

We hurry to the kitchen, where thick smoke is pouring from the oven. I wave away the stinging haze and yank out the blackened casserole.

"So much for helping Mom. She's going to kill us."

"There goes Christmas," Ivy moans.

"We'll figure something out. Open the windows."

Ivy rolls her eyes. "Sure. Maybe she won't notice the smoke if we turn the place into an ice box."

There's no way to salvage the food, and it's so awful it's funny. Soon, we're laughing so hard we're doubled over, clutching our stomachs.

Mom bursts in, panicked. "What happened?"

Hot on her heels, Dad lunges for the fire extinguisher mounted under the sink.

"Stand back," he warns before spraying foam everywhere. The kitchen becomes a surreal white-covered mess.

"Yum," Ivy says.

She's patting her stomach, which sets off a new wave of hysterical laughter.

My phone chirps with Luca's ringtone. I mumble an apology and dash outside, barely able to hear him over the blaring fire alarm. The call cuts off abruptly.

I leave Luca a hasty voicemail, promising I'll be home soon, before returning inside.

I put on cheerful Christmas music, trying to lighten the tense mood. Dad sweeps up foam debris while Mom scowls at the blackened remains of dinner.

A knock at the door. Dad pauses, broom in hand. We share a look.

“The Fire department?”

I shrug. “We didn’t call.”

“Don’t want them breaking down the door on Christmas Eve,” Dad mutters, leaning the broom against the counter.

\* \* \*

# Luca

Roberto's eyes narrow as they meet mine, judging me silently.

"Evening, Roberto." The door clicks shut behind me, the echo a stark reminder that I'm not entirely welcome here.

Roberto's piercing gaze remains fixed on me. "Your parents called earlier. They told me you had... words."

Heat surges through me. I'd already decided not to burden Audrey with the news tonight, but the audacity of my parents calling Roberto infuriated me.

"You mean secrets," I shoot back, letting the accusation hang.

"Telling Audrey—is that what's best?" Roberto challenges.

I force myself to hold back my anger. "I'm not the one keeping secrets."

Roberto sighs, a heavy, resigned sound that grates on my last nerve. "I was protecting her from the past."

I don't want his excuses. "By keeping her in the dark about something that happened so long ago that you all believe is a curse?"

I glare at him, waiting for a response, but he's silent.

"That's not protection, it's manipulation," I snap.

"Don't hurt her, Luca," he warns.

I ball my fists, anger swelling inside me. Hurting Audrey is the last thing I want.

"Maybe it's time you let Audrey make her own decisions."

"Be careful, Luca," Roberto warns, but his words fade as the kitchen door suddenly opens.

"Luca? What are you doing here?" Audrey asks, looking surprised.

The moment I see her, I sweep her into my arms and spin her around.

As I set her down, Roberto makes a snarky comment, matching the stormy expression on his face. I ignore him.

“Merry Christmas,” Roberto mutters bitterly before leaving the room.

Audrey turns to me. “I missed your call earlier, but you didn’t leave a message. Was it something important?”

I was supposed to wait for her at the apartment but couldn’t wait any longer.

“We need to talk.”

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 12

## Audrey

Why is Luca here when he was supposed to wait at my apartment?

“We need to talk,” he says gravely.

I force a laugh, trying to make light of the mess in the kitchen. “Were you checking up on me?”

He arches an eyebrow. “No, but if I’d known you were setting fires, I would’ve come sooner.”

My cheeks flush.

“Can we go somewhere more private?” he asks.

I nod, and Luca threads his fingers through mine. We walk down the hall in sync, our steps matching.

Once we’re in a quiet, dimly lit sitting room, we settle together on the couch.

A lock of dark hair falls across his eyes. I fight the urge to reach out and touch him. As if reading my thoughts, Luca sweeps it back with a weary sigh.

Sensing the anger radiating from him, my body tenses. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I just came from my parent’s house,” he says grimly.

He *always* referred to the house in Malibu as ‘home,’ but not this time.

His eyes are distant. “Luca?”

My chest aches. Whatever he came here to tell me must be bad. *Really bad.*

It looks like his parents got into his head and made him change his mind. Now he's going to end our relationship.

I can't bear the thought of living without him, but I don't want to make it worse.

I clear my throat.

"Wait, let me go first. It's fine. You don't need to say anything. I understand if you don't want to be with me."

The lie makes my throat tight. I cough. It quickly develops into a coughing fit, as if I'm choking on the treacherous words.

"Auds, you think I came here to break up with you? Fuck no! This whole situation has gone too far. It ends now."

His gentle kiss reassures me. I'm embarrassed I lost control so quickly.

"Luca, what's wrong? You're scaring me," I say, my voice tinged with a vulnerability I can't mask.

Resting his forehead gently against mine, he cradles the nape of my neck in his broad, warm hand—a soothing gesture that comforts and claims me as his own.

Luca's breath feathers over my skin as he whispers, "Look at me, Auds. This is real. You and me, just like this."

"Yes, it is," I murmur.

Nothing compares to the love I feel for this man. The best part? He feels the same way.

"Stay here in this moment with me," he implores softly. "I don't ever want to let you go."

"Me neither," I breathe.

I'd do anything to be together forever. Rather than surrender to fear, I cling to the fact that he's here now, reassuring me—nothing will tear us apart.

I gently take his clenched fists, massaging my thumbs over his knuckles until some tension leaves him.

"Luca, why don't we come clean now? My dad saw you twirling me around—the cat's out of the bag. What's the point

in waiting until tomorrow?”

Luca’s jaw hardens like granite. The silence is so deep it’s almost deafening. He takes a deep breath. “Before you decide, there’s something you need to hear.”

I straighten, senses heightened.

“I learned the truth from my parents. About why they kept us apart all these years,” he says.

“I’m listening.”

Luca recounts the sordid story, sharing what he learned from his parents in excruciating detail. I listen in stunned silence, blindsided by this dark history I knew nothing about.

I was learning of his great-uncle Lorenzo’s doomed love affair with my grandmother for the first time.

The news rocks me. Raw anger and hurt lodge in my throat. I understand these old fears run deep, but this is on a different level.

We spent years living under the shadows of our ancestors, pawns in a game we never asked to play. They acted not to protect us but themselves.

Strains of conversation and household noise filter through the walls. The thought of facing my parents makes me sick to my stomach. At least the truth is out, ugly as it may be.

“So we’re paying the price for something that happened to our grandparents years ago? And with a great uncle you didn’t even know about until tonight?”

His brows furrow. Sensing my distress, Luca pulls me into his arms again, stroking my hair gently.

“That’s right. It’s not our fault.”

A wave of guilt washes over me. The shame is suffocating and makes me want to scream. “I should have stood up for myself. Stood up for us.”

With his eyes downcast, Luca shakes his head.

“I made mistakes, too. I believed that courage meant staying away from you. I was wrong. So wrong.”

My fingers find his, intertwining as if holding onto our shared future.

“Luca, if things hadn’t worked out the way they did, with us working together, I would have lived my life full of regret.”

Luca’s eyes reflect the same longing and desperate need I’m feeling. “We’re together. Nothing else matters.”

I can’t wait to go home to Luca’s, but more questions churn through my mind.

“Your parents must realize that keeping us in the dark was wrong. Did they explain why they finally confessed?”

Luca’s jaw ticks, the old anger resurfacing. “My father said it was ‘ancient history better left buried.’ But I refused to let the matter drop.”

I nod, contemplating what I now know. “What do we do now?”

He gives me a heart-melting smile. “We’ll stick around until the New Year’s Eve wrap party. We have no obligations after that. What would you say to taking the first plane out of here and starting over?”

Starting a new life is tempting, but just because it’s possible doesn’t make it right. We need time to restore trust, but I won’t give up hope.

“Running from our problems will only repeat the cycle. We’ll face it head-on.”

Luca’s brow creases. “You’re more forgiving than me. I don’t know how to face them after this betrayal.”

“I’m proud of you, Luca. You’re hurt but strong.”

He smiles ruefully, a compromise of sorts. “Anything for you, Auds. You don’t know how long I’ve waited for this moment. How many nights I’ve dreamed of us being together.”

“The holiday season is all about miracles,” I muse, not stopping to think about it too deeply, or I’ll lose my mind.

I've avoided conflict and difficult situations my entire life, and this time, I'm ready to fight for what I believe in and need. But what I won't do is compromise my core by pretending to be someone I'm not.

Our eyes meet when I cradle Luca's cheek. "If we approach them openly and honestly, they'll accept us being together."

"And if they don't?"

"We gave them a chance, which is more than they gave us."

Luca turns his head to brush a fervent kiss over my palm. "See why I need you? Because you're always seeing the good in others. It's what I love most about you. Left to my own devices, I'd have given everyone a piece of my mind and ruined everything."

Life without the love of my life is unthinkable. "Promise me we'll always be open with each other, no matter what."

He covers my hand with his and looks into my eyes. "I promise."

We share a lingering kiss, sealing our commitment to truth and trust. Soon, the kiss turns possessive, leaving me breathless.

"I want more than a kiss, but that'll have to wait till later," he says.

"Not too much later," I tell him as a thrill rushes through me. "Let's go home."

Luca grins. My heart is fit to burst with joy.

It's our first Christmas, but my best Christmas. It doesn't matter if it's bittersweet as long as we're together.

We may have lost precious years we could have spent loving each other, but nothing will tear us apart now.

If my life were to start over today and I were to spend the rest of it with him, I'd consider myself the luckiest woman alive.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 13

## Luca

Audrey means everything to me. She is more precious than the most priceless work of art. I love her more than the moon loves the stars, and the sun loves the sky. She is that special.

Each new day, my love for her only grows stronger—the thought leaves me awestruck.

I'm determined to become a better man for her, providing anything she needs and giving her all she desires. If I were a child, I'd love her more than Christmas.

Waking up to find her beside me this morning is the greatest gift. Sunlight streams into the bedroom, bathing Audrey's sleeping form in a golden glow.

I kiss her shoulder softly before slipping out to prepare a special breakfast—pancakes drizzled with syrup and topped with berries—a tray of mimosas we can enjoy together, cozy in bed.

Maybe I'm trying to ease my guilt at being apart from her family today.

When I return, Audrey stirs, smiling at the sight. "You know how to make Christmas morning special."

We share the romantic breakfast in bed, playfully feeding each other between sips of mimosa.

"Mmm, you got a little syrup on your neck."

I lean in to lick the syrup off, savoring the sweet flavor on her soft skin.

My lips trail down the column of her throat. “You’re delicious. I could do this all day.”

“So are you,” she replies in a sultry voice, her eyes shining with desire.

Her tongue traces my lips, making my cock throb with need. My hands sweep up her back.

Audrey shivers with pleasure. My lips brush against hers, and every inch of me hums with desire. She runs her fingers along my back, over my ass, and reaches down to stroke me.

My cock throbs, precum dripping from the tip. Her touch only makes me harder.

As our bodies press together, I feel her heartbeat thrumming. I moan into her mouth before losing myself inside her.

Sweet little gasps escape her lips. She wants me as much as I want her. I’m on fire.

She wraps her velvety legs around me as if trying to anchor her body to mine. Gripping each other tightly, my hips rock against hers, fucking her harder, chasing her pleasure.

I fill her completely, hitting her sweet spot with each stroke. A moan escapes her lips, and she arches with pleasure. I feel her inner walls gripping me tightly as she pants for air.

“So fucking hot,” I groan as my orgasm begins to build.

Her juices are spilling onto my shaft, coating me with her arousal.

Audrey lets out another moan, this time louder. “Faster, harder, fuck me!”

My mouth covers hers, muffling her moans as I slam into her again and again. We move together, hips rolling, pressure building to a climax.

“Come for me,” she whispers, fingers caressing my face.

I slam into her one last time. She cries out in response, her walls loosening their grip on me, her juices soaking my cock.

I collapse on top of her, struggling for breath as I savor our connection.

“That felt so good,” she says, a satisfied grin dancing across her face.

“Better than ‘good’?” I ask, pressing my forehead against hers.

“Magnificent,” she purrs.

Lying in bed, our feet tangled together, we talk over the top of each other, sharing our innermost thoughts, feelings, and hopes for the future.

I gently trace small circles on her back, not wanting ever to leave the cozy sanctuary of our bed this Christmas morning.

A knock at the door, heavy and insistent, shatters the peaceful mood. We exchange worried glances.

Audrey gives me a brave smile and squeezes my hand before rising to answer the door. I follow reluctantly, my shoulders tense.

Our parents stand clustered on the landing.

They’ve had time to think, probably commiserating overnight. Now they’re in our home, begging for forgiveness.

Being the gracious woman she is, my love ushers them inside. I bite my tongue, wishing I could slam the door in their faces after the pain they’ve caused. But I stay silent out of respect for Audrey.

As they file inside, my father avoids my glare. Audrey arranges her delicate features in a careful mask, but I see the hurt lingering behind her eyes.

Audrey’s mother dabs at her red-rimmed eyes.

“We’re so sorry,” she says, her voice thick with emotion.

“We’ve come to make things right.”

Although Audrey is quick to forgive, I’m not convinced. However good their intentions were, they were misguided and caused Audrey harm.

“You can’t fix this with an apology,” I snap through gritted teeth. Audrey places a calming hand on my arm.

“What we did was wrong,” my dad says, pausing as if the words are hard to get out. “It was a mistake.”

Crossing my arms defensively, I glare. “You think?”

Audrey shoots me a pointed look, and I pull myself together. Offending them is irrelevant, but upsetting her is unthinkable.

Our parents hang their heads, realizing the damage they’ve wrought with their interference and secrets.

“You love each other,” Roberto says, gazing at his eldest daughter lovingly.

“We always have,” I declare without hesitation.

A tense silence fills the room as if everyone’s holding their breath. A look passes between my parents. They regard me thoughtfully.

“I’m sorry,” Mom says, her voice quivering as if she’s on the edge of tears. Audrey’s mom nods in agreement.

“What we share is real and meaningful,” I say firmly. “How you handle the past is your choice, but for us, it’s time to start building a future together.”

Audrey squeezes my arm, a pulse of warmth in a room that’s gone cold. I wrap my arm around Audrey’s shoulders and pull her into a nook by the window.

She cleaves to me, the gesture a living testament to our intimacy—her warmth seeps into my very bones. I tenderly kiss the top of her head.

I can’t stop staring, touching her, or kissing her. I need to keep her close and never let her go. No one will take her away from me ever again.

“We want a better, brighter future together as one family,” Audrey says.

Carmella’s mouth drops open. “Are you pregnant?”

The room goes silent, tension snapping like a live wire.

Audrey laughs. “Ma!”

“Ahh... I see you like the sound of that?” I laugh.

Audrey was right. Getting angry would only make things worse. She’s usually right, though offering them more coffee wasn’t a good idea.

We’ll see them again in a few hours. We’re having lunch with Audrey’s parents and dinner with mine.

Although I don’t want our parents staying longer than necessary, there’s something important I need to do first—no point waiting any longer.

I let go of her hand, excuse myself, and leave the room.

\* \* \*

AUDREY IS EVERYTHING TO ME. I WOULD DO ANYTHING TO protect her, even if it meant shielding her from the people in the living room.

While studying Audrey’s radiant face, I realized there’d never be a “perfect” time for anything— there’s only now.

If I’m going to be the man Audrey needs, sticking to my values matters. I’ll be someone she can count on—a man who always has her back.

I’d imagined the proposal playing out differently, but suddenly, all my meticulous planning seemed pointless. All that matters is that I make my intentions clear to everyone.

When I return, Audrey searches my face, concern in her eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“There’s something I need to say.”

Audrey’s eyelids flutter as she gives me a shy smile.

Taking her hand, I turn to her parents. “I was going to ask this beautiful woman to marry me tonight. But there’s no reason to wait.”

I glance at her father.

“If you approve, wonderful. If not, I’m not asking permission. Please don’t mistake this as disrespect. The simple truth is I love your daughter beyond words and cannot live without her.”

She is everything to me. I’ll do anything for her, and she’ll never want for anything.

At least, not if I can help it. If that means protecting her from anyone in this room, then so be it. I’ll protect her with my life.

Sinking on one knee, I pull a black velvet box from my pocket. “Audrey—”

The words lodge in my throat as seconds stretch into eternity. Finally, I flip the box to reveal a dazzling Tiffany solitaire diamond on a platinum band.

“Luca,” she gasps, eyes dancing between the ring and my face.

With trembling fingers, I slide the ring onto her hand. I meet her stunned gaze and rasp, “I love you.”

Tears well up in her eyes. Time stops, the universe shrinking to this single, perfect moment.

“Yes!” she cries, throwing her arms around my neck. “A thousand times, yes!”

This woman holds my heart in the palm of her hand. I hug her tight, relief and joy flooding through me.

I vaguely hear our parents’ congratulations and surprise in the background, but I can only focus on the woman in my arms.

“The proposal should’ve been more romantic,” I say as we pull back.

She cups my cheek, her eyes bright with love. “It was perfect.”

I press a lingering kiss to her lips. “I was afraid of losing you,” I admit quietly.

Audrey takes my hand, linking our fingers together. “You’ll never lose me,” she promises. “I’m yours, forever.”

We break apart just long enough to accept congratulations from our families. Following the handshakes and hugs, I usher

them out the door.

Audrey turns to me as soon as we're alone.

“You know what would make this proposal even more perfect?” she asks, trailing her fingers down my chest.

I see a wicked glint in her eye.

“What are you thinking?”

Without a word, she takes my hand and leads me up the stairs to our bedroom where we can celebrate our engagement in private.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Chapter 14

## Audrey

**B**y the time we finish celebrating, my skin is shimmering with perspiration.

I'm blown away by the unexpected events of the morning. I turn to Luca.

“What a whirlwind! Our parents showing up to apologize, and then your surprise proposal on top of it all!”

“I've waited so long for the perfect moment but realized the timing and location weren't important. All that mattered was asking you to be mine forever.”

His words settle deep inside my heart. The proposal was as pure and potent as I could've ever imagined. As I flex my fingers, the diamonds sparkle.

Luca takes my hands in his. “The ring reminds me of you—elegant, timeless, and radiant.”

“It's beautiful, Luca,” I tell him.

“You can exchange it. If it weren't Christmas, I would have reserved all of Tiffany's for a private viewing so you could choose your own.”

I smile and squeeze his hands. “It's perfect. You handpicked it for me, and I'm keeping it.”

“Good. But if you change your mind—”

I shake my head. A piece of his heart lives in this ring, and I'm holding onto it forever. It's never leaving my finger.

“When did you get this? You were so busy on the film set.”

“Pfft.” Luca dismisses the question as if it’s just one of the many luxuries of being incredibly wealthy.

Snap your fingers, and someone will deliver an engagement ring to your office.

“Christmas or not, we’re tying the knot as soon as possible,” he declares.

“Where will we find a venue at such short notice?” I wonder.

Luca’s eyes twinkle mischievously as he says, “Miracles happen, but Vegas is a good backup plan.”

“Vegas?” I muse, picturing the glittering lights of the Strip.

It may be cheesy, but it has a certain charm. On the surface, my fiancé is a dreamer, but underneath it all, he’s a realist.

Luca’s voice turns husky with desperation. “If we can’t get a flight, we’ll drive until we find someone who will marry us and live happily ever after.”

I squeeze Luca’s hand, reassuring him I don’t mind when or where we get married. There’s no rush for us to figure out the details.

“Sounds perfect.”

“Where do you want to go for our honeymoon? How about Paris?” he asks.

I wrinkle my nose.

“Ouch.” He chuckles. “Good point. It needs to be somewhere special.”

I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. All I meant was that I wanted something simple. “We could try—”

His expression shifts as if he had a lightbulb moment.

“Iceland! We can see the Northern Lights.”

I tap my chin, pretending to deliberate. “It doesn’t need to be extravagant. I was thinking about something fun, like Comic-Con. We could nerd out in cosplay.”

Luca barks out a laugh. “Only if I get to pick your costume. How do you feel about Princess Leia’s gold bikini?”

I swat his arm but can't help laughing, too. "In your dreams."

He wraps me in a warm embrace. "As long as you're by my side, my dreams have already come true."

I roll my eyes but can't keep the smile off my face. "You're such a cheeseball."

His eyes crinkle. "But you love it."

He's right. I do. "Now that's settled, I got you a gift for Christmas."

Luca's eyes light up.

Suddenly shy, I explain. "It isn't extravagant like the ring you gave me. It's for the mantel above the fireplace."

Grinning, Luca accepts the large, rectangular parcel and tears the wrapping to shreds.

He stares open-mouthed at the framed photo I've given him—a picture of the two of us from a few years back. Our younger selves beam innocently behind the glass, frozen in pure joy.

The gesture genuinely touches him, and I'm relieved my gift left such an impact.

I make a mental note to surprise him with thoughtful gifts more often, starting with his upcoming birthday in April.

Luca hangs the picture. Wrapping his arms around me from behind, he pulls me close against his solid chest, and we admire it together.

"I love it, Auds," he murmurs, kissing my hair. "Thank you."

I smile softly and trace my fingernails lightly down his forearm, feeling the fine dark hairs rise in response. He pulls me closer with a contented sigh, his breath rumbling against my back.

"I haven't given you a Christmas present yet," he says.

I lift my hand with the dazzling ring. "This is enough."

He tuts. "An engagement ring isn't the same as a Christmas present."

"You're spoiling me."

“I haven’t even started.”

Before I can respond, Luca scoops me into his strong arms. As he carries me to the bedroom, I take in the scene around us—strewn across the floor are glossy gift bags bearing names like Bulgari, Cartier, and Van Cleef & Arpels.

Luca carefully steps over the mess, lays me down on the plush duvet, and hands me a meticulously wrapped gift box topped with an elegant bow.

I prop myself on my elbows, box in hand, and look around the room.

I’m stunned. He wasn’t joking when he said he’d been planning the proposal. It looks like he couldn’t decide which ring to give me and stockpiled several.

He must have hurriedly pulled everything out of the drawers for the spontaneous proposal.

“What’s all this?” I ask, gesturing at the chaotic scene.

Luca’s eyes widen slightly before he recovers, a secretive smile tugging at his lips. “It’s nothing. I’ll clean it up later.”

He crawls on top of me, his warm weight pressing me into the mattress, and places a searing kiss on my lips, stealing my breath away.

I’m not that easily distracted.

Cupping my palm gently over his mouth, I push him back. “Luca, the room is a disaster. What happened?”

He smiles sheepishly. “Luca Regis! You’re blushing.”

He scratches the back of his neck. “Ridiculous, right?”

I cup his cheek, touched by his devotion. “It’s incredibly romantic. But what will you do with all the rings?”

He lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “That’s for me to know.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re plotting something, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” he smirks. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

I gasp in mock offense. He looks at the box in my hand.  
“Aren’t you going to open it?”

I undo the ribbon and peel back the paper to reveal a black velvet jewelry box. My breath catches as I open the hinged case.

Nestled inside are diamond earrings, perfectly complementing my engagement ring.

“You’re building me a whole set now?” I say with a playful smile. “So everyone knows I belong to you?”

Luca chuckles, his eyes warm. “Maybe I am. Do you like them?”

“They’re beautiful,” I breathe, gently lifting the earrings from the box.

Their gentle weight feels natural as if they were made for me. On closer inspection, I notice delicate engraving on the back of each earring—the initials A.R.

“Audrey Regis,” I read softly. Joyful tears spring to my eyes as I imagine the day I take Luca’s last name. “Thank you, my love. I’ll wear them proudly.”

He growls playfully. “Come here. It’s your turn to blush.”

Luca wraps his strong arms around me. His lips find mine, and he kisses me with exquisite tenderness.

His hands slide up my sides, the touch sending shivers across my skin. Luca’s fingertips blaze a trail down my body until he reaches the apex of my thighs.

I gasp, my breath quickening.

He skillfully brings me to the brink, then eases off. Blood is roaring in my veins. Wetness is pooling between my legs. I’m burning alive— I can’t get enough.

“Need you,” I whisper against his chest.

He answers with a low growl. One hand tightly grips my waist while the other teases my sensitive flesh with precision-like strokes.

My head falls back. “Yes, oh, please.”

“I’ve got you, baby.”

Luca drives me higher and higher until I’m spinning in a freefall. My body quivers as a wave of bliss rolls over me.

Luca holds onto me tightly as I come down from the blissful high. He kisses me deeply before pulling away, a satisfied smirk teasing his lips.

“That was amazing!” I pant against his cheek.

I slide my hand over his erection, wanting to please him in return. He’s hard and ready, but he moves my hand away and then tenderly presses a kiss to my forehead.

“No, that was for you,” he whispers, his warm breath tickling my skin. “All for you.”

I trace the contours of his face, memorizing every angle and plane. He nuzzles into my touch, a contented hum reverberating through him.

“I love you,” he murmurs.

“I love you, too.” My voice catches.

His eyes are dark pools brimming with adoration. “You are mine.”

My heart fills with joy. “And you belong to me.”

When he tells me nothing will tear us apart, he does so without a trace of doubt in his tone. I believe him. Our destinies are intertwined until the end.

*The Ballantrays*  
**CHRISTMAS  
WISH**

# Epilogue

## Luca

The scent of freshly brewed coffee pulls me from sleep.

Audrey's side of the bed lies empty, the sheets tangled. I was hoping she would've stayed in bed to celebrate our anniversary. She must have something special planned, but so do I.

I pad downstairs, following the rich aroma wafting from the kitchen. The smell of pancakes sizzling fills the air.

Audrey is standing at the stove, hair piled in a messy bun, spatula in hand. I lean against the door and drink her in.

After seven years of marriage, she's even more beautiful. Audrey glances up, meeting my gaze, and her face brightens into a radiant smile.

"Morning, sleepyhead," she teases. "I was wondering when you'd get up."

I come up behind her, nuzzling her neck. "It smells amazing in here. I better grab some of your famous pancakes before the hungry hordes eat everything."

She playfully swats me away with the spatula. "There's enough to share."

Right on cue, tiny feet pound down the stairs. Our five-year-old twins barrel into the kitchen, all tangled bedhead and pajama-clad limbs.

Ziggy crashes right into my legs, nearly knocking me over. He's a boundless ball of energy, keeping us on our toes.

"Daddy, Daddy! Is it time for pancakes?" he asks, big brown eyes pleading.

I ruffle his wild, dark curls. “You bet, buddy.”

“Daddy, look!” Ziggy says as he holds up his pancake shaped like a dinosaur. “It’s a T-Rex!”

Looking at Audrey, I point to the plate and chuckle. “Future paleontologist?”

She shrugs. “Yesterday, he wanted to become a firefighter.”

Meanwhile, our daughter Zara rests her chin on the counter, quietly watching each pancake’s transformation from batter to golden brown.

Where Ziggy never stops moving, Zara is content to sit for hours sketching on her drawing pad. Her curious, creative spirit reminds me of a young Audrey.

Audrey places the pancakes on the table, and I drizzle syrup over them, savoring the sweet aroma.

Ziggy shares his adventures from preschool, talking nonstop and waving sticky, syrup-coated hands for emphasis.

“Me and Milo, we played dinos at recess! I was the super speedy raptor, and he was the big T-Rex. We roared and ran everywhere on the playground!”

“Sounds like quite the adventure,” I say, tousling his hair.

Zara nibbles her pancakes politely, listening to her brother’s story. But I can see the spark of imagination in her eyes as she mentally sketches a playground filled with dinosaur children.

Watching my family, my heart swells with love and pride. The twins are the greatest gifts Audrey could have given me.

After so many years of being kept apart, we are now two souls reunited against all odds.

I catch Audrey’s eye, and her knowing look says she understands what I’m thinking. Under the table, she threads her fingers through mine.

After breakfast, Audrey sends the kids outside to play while I tidy the kitchen. Audrey returns, the dishwasher’s loaded, and the final food container closes with a satisfying snap.

“The leftovers should be good for Mom and Dad when they come over,” I tell her.

She gives me a coy smile. “You already asked Grandma to take the kids tonight.”

I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her close. “Your parents are globe-trotting around Asia. Someone needs to look after the kids.”

“Do you have something special planned for our anniversary?” she asks.

I nuzzle into her neck, breathing her in. “Maybe. You’ll have to wait and see.”

Audrey laughs, swatting me playfully. “You’re terrible.”

“Only for you,” I whisper. I tilt her chin and capture her lips in a deep, passionate kiss.

After a blissful moment, we break apart, foreheads touching. I enjoy spoiling my wife. It’s time to show her what she means to me.

I hold out my hand. “Come with me. I have a surprise for you.”

Audrey’s eyes widen when she recognizes the jeweler’s logo. “What’s this?”

“A little something for our anniversary.”

Audrey unwraps the gift and gingerly traces her fingers over the diamond bracelet.

Audrey’s transfixed by the glittering gems, but I’m captivated by her expression - the stunned look on her face, the delighted gasp, and the tears glistening in her eyes.

She turns to me. “Luca, it’s gorgeous. Thank you, but you didn’t have to do this.”

What’s the point of having money if I can’t spend it on the woman I adore?

I silence her protest with a kiss on her forehead. “Nothing’s too good for my girl. Happy anniversary.”

I help her fasten the clasp. The bracelet looks perfect on her wrist, the diamonds glittering. But to me, Audrey's smile shines brighter than any jewels. I'm lucky to have her in my life.

"Are you ready for your gift?" Audrey asks, eyes dancing. She retrieves a small wrapped box from the cabinet.

I carefully unwrap the paper, not wanting to tear it. Nestled inside is a framed photo of the four of us at the beach last summer.

Audrey cradles a tiny seashell in her palm. "Remember when you gave me this shell? You said our love was as infinite as the tides."

I pull Audrey into an embrace, whispering, "It's perfect. Just like our family. Happy anniversary."

After a blissful morning together, the whirlwind returns as the twins come crashing back inside. We spend the day playing games and sipping hot cocoa by the fire.

"I can't believe it's been seven years already," she marvels, swirling her glass.

"Best seven years of my life," I reply. "I was thinking we should take the kids to Disneyland."

"They'll love it," she says.

"Can you imagine their faces when they see the fireworks over Cinderella's castle?"

She snuggles into my arms. "You promised me a trip to Disneyland. Glad you didn't forget it."

"I've been working on my fitness so we could meet Mickey Mouse and ride the teacups."

She laughs. "You're ridiculous."

I kiss Audrey's forehead, lingering in her warmth and familiar scent.

As I stare into the flames, my mind drifts back to our honeymoon in Paris. Audrey's hand in mine, we strolled along

the Seine River, window-shopped along the Champs-Élysées, and explored the city of love.

I remember how good she looked in her white sundress, her hair cascading down her back.

Audrey clears her throat, bringing me back to the present. “Luca, what are you thinking about?”

Firelight dances in her eyes. “Our honeymoon. Paris. You in that white sundress.”

She quickly looks at the children playing nearby, who are blissfully unaware.

Her voice drops to a sultry whisper, her breath hot on my ear. “I still have that dress, you know.”

I feel a surge of desire as I remember railing her while she wore it. “You were wearing it that time on the balcony of our hotel room.”

Audrey traces lazy circles on my chest. “I wore it when we were in the little alleyway behind the boulangerie, too.”

*How could I forget?*

I check the time. “If the babysitters don’t arrive soon, I’m going to fire them.”

She blushes, a mischievous grin spreading across her lips. “I’ll go and find the sundress.”

Our anniversary celebration is about to get a lot more interesting.

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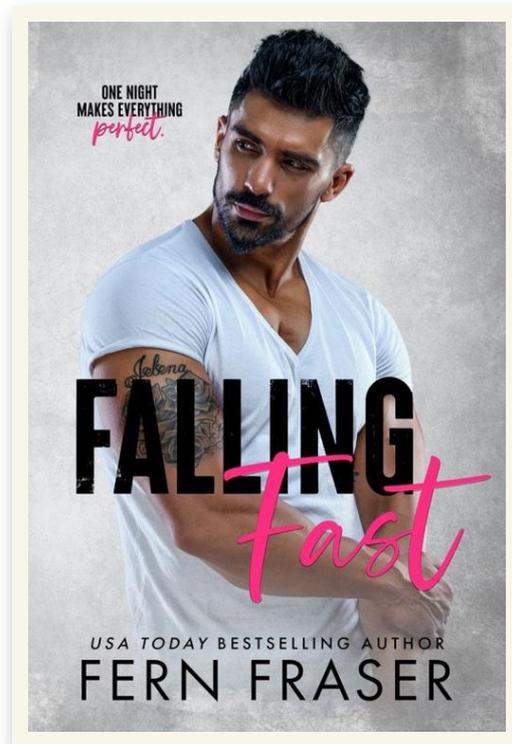
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