





 *Stolen*
KISSES

 CASSIE MINT 

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3 Stolen Kisses

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One

Ali



The first party of the holiday season is always a doozy. Dad likes to start with a bang and get the gossip mills churning. Likes to make sure that every person in the city—no, the *country*—knows these are the parties to be at. This is where the great and the glorious come to misbehave.

Movie stars and famous directors. Billionaire CEOs and tech wunderkinds. The country's top lawyers, surgeons, and athletes—all of them laughing loud and drinking hard. Talking fast and snorting lines, safe within Dad's no-phones-allowed policy.

These kinds of people never get to let loose. Not like this. Not usually. There are too many cameras, too many eyeballs, too many repercussions.

Not at a Wainwright holiday party. It's a freaking free-for-all.

That's the promise. That's why they come.

"Keep near Saxon," Dad says tonight, brushing past me in the living room where I'm propped against a wall. He's

dressed in a tailored suit jacket and dark pants, his bald head reflecting the lights. He leans down to mutter in my ear, whiskey on his breath. “And stop looking so bug-eyed, Ali. Smile, for Christ’s sake. Do you want our guests to feel unwelcome?”

Um, yeah. Honestly? That would be fine by me.

I wish they’d all go home and leave us to some peace and quiet. I’m more of a PJs and movie night kinda girl, myself.

Still, these holiday parties are Dad’s whole *thing*, and he cares about them so much, so I paste a happy smile over my face. My cheeks feel rubbery, like my own features are a mask, but he squeezes my shoulder, satisfied.

“Atta girl. Do the rounds, huh? Top up some drinks. Break some hearts.”

My own heart aches as Dad turns away, calling out greetings and slapping shoulders.

He doesn’t mean to use me like this.

He *doesn’t*. I’m sure of it.

The Wainwright mansion is lit up with endless string lights, criss-crossing over the high ceilings. Paired with the glass walls and skylights above, it’s like having a sky full of stars indoors, pulsing above the packed crowds.

The air is hot and muggy, warmed by body heat and panting breaths. Music pulses from hidden speakers, dark and throbbing.

A whistle cuts through my daze, and a big, male body slumps against the wall beside me, making me jump. A world-class golfer squints at me, already so drunk he's fighting to see straight, and he leers as his gaze crawls up and down my body. He's wearing checkered golfing pants, a white t-shirt, and Santa hat, the whole thing slumping to one side.

“Hey, baby.”

This man is *technically* handsome. He's been pictured on the front page of sports magazines; he's starred in sexy calendars while barely dressed, and his face has sold men's cologne. Plenty of women around the world would love to flirt with this guy.

But as he leans closer to me, smirking and drunk, I cringe away automatically, still smiling my robot smile.

“Hello. Can I fetch you anything? Maybe another drink? Maybe spring water?”

Anything to get out of arm's reach.

But it's like I haven't spoken—the golfer gives me what he clearly thinks is a charming, lazy grin, those bloodshot eyes dropping to the faint shadow of cleavage above my dress.

Ew. Ew, ew, ew.

God, I wish I didn't have to dress up for these nights. Or wish I could wear the standard security uniform, like Saxon and his men: a no-nonsense gray suit with a white shirt and black tie. Something to blend into the background, something that screams, “Don't flirt with me!”

Instead, Dad always insists that I wear one of the dresses he buys just for these occasions. I tell him not to buy me anything, every single year, and every single year he gifts me a closet's worth of party dresses anyway.

I feel rude not wearing them, and it's so easy to hurt his feelings.

But I sure wish Dad would pick something with more... coverage.

Tonight's dress is one of the tamest options: a close fitting cream dress with thick straps, falling to mid-thigh, the hem studded with pearls. I figured I'd look demure... but the golfer clearly disagrees. He's smirking, slumping closer against the wall, his moist breath gusting against my neck.

“Don' need a drink, baby. I'd rather drink you.”

Drink me? What is he, a vampire? How exactly would that work? My smile slips as I frown, trying to imagine the logistics.

Before I've drawn another breath, a shadow falls over us both, blocking out the string lights, the revels, the crowd—all of it. A deep, gravelly voice rumbles through my bones as it says, “Everything alright here?”

The rush of relief is so sweet. I beam up at Saxon, our head of security, all the tension flooding from my body, and I don't even realize I've reached for him until I feel the fabric of his jacket sleeve under my fingers.

The golfer slurs something I don't make out, but let's face it—it's probably rude. People take one look at our head of security, and they make *judgments*. Split second decisions about the kind of man he is, based on his thick, dark beard and tattooed neck and twice-broken nose. And the sheer *size* of him, too.

We're all like row boats and tiny yachts bobbing out at sea, and Saxon's a huge freighter cutting through to port. He's on another level.

Saxon ignores the golfer and peers down at me. "You need a break from all this, Ali Cat?"

His nickname for me sends gooey warmth through my middle. It always does. Saxon's the only person who ever calls me that, and I treasure every single mention.

"Yes, please."

The golfer calls something after us both, something pissy judging by his tone, and I'm sure Dad wouldn't call this being a good host, but you know what? Right this second, I don't care.

If Saxon asks me to go somewhere, I follow. Simple as that. If he offers me his hand, I take it. Some rules are like gravity, central to the natural functioning of the universe, and this is one of them.

My fingers are dwarfed by Saxon's steady grip as he leads me through the living room to the kitchen, then out onto the terrace. All around us, famous faces grin and laugh and swig

from glass tumblers, pressing close as the crowd lurches and heaves.

Don't know how they can stand it—being squeezed together in one big, sweaty crush like that. I've always hated crowds. Even the busiest times at the grocery store make me feel queasy.

Out on the terrace, the night air is still warm and humid, but at least there's a breeze. The stars out here are better too, glittering high, high above where they belong. A gentle wind ruffles the grounds, bringing us the scent of dry soil and juniper, and insects shiver in a high-pitched chorus.

“You know, one day, I'm gonna have a *real* Christmas,” I tell Saxon as he leads me around the side of the mansion. The walls are brushed concrete around here instead of glass, so we have the illusion of privacy, even with remixed holiday tunes throbbing through the walls. Damn, how do you make carols sound so horny?

“Oh, yeah?” Saxon turns to face me when we reach a patch of shadow, his gray eyes searching my face and body. When he does it, it's nothing like that golfer's horrible leer. He's checking on me, always so tender and careful. “What's a real Christmas, Ali Cat?”

“Not this.” I wave at the sun-baked gardens, the decadent party, the guests laughing and splashing nearby in the terrace pool, dressed in nothing but their underwear. “I mean the postcard Christmas, you know? Snowmen and cold weather and hot cocoa and mistletoe.”

“Stockings and a fire in the hearth,” Saxon says.

“Exactly.”

This man gets me. He *always* gets me. Ever since Dad hired him as our head of security ten years ago, it’s like Saxon and I had a mind-meld. Or maybe he was just the first person to give twelve-year-old me the time of day. Who knows? Either way, I never have to explain myself to Saxon; never have to justify how I feel. He already knows.

Guess that’s what makes him so good at his job. *Nothing* escapes Saxon’s notice—not the tiniest detail. Even when he escapes with me to let me gulp down some fresh air, he always leaves his team on high alert.

Because there have been incidents over the years. I *know* there have, even though no one directly told me about them. Men dressed all in black who scaled our garden walls in the dead of night; bombs fixed under our family cars but found before they went off. Questionable packages in the mail. Stuff like that.

Dad is a powerful man, the heir to a wealthy family. He’s rich and famous, and not shy at all about using his influence in the world. That all comes with a cost.

But Saxon shields us from all that. Keeps us safe.

He’s still holding my hand, and I cling to his fingers, heart fluttering in my chest like a trapped butterfly.

Would our head of security still take me away for these moments alone if he knew about my crush on him? If he knew

that I picture kissing his gruff mouth every night, the image sending me off to the sweetest dreams?

Saxon turns his head and scans the shadowy grounds, the paths down there lit by ornamental lamps. Starlight glints in the silver strands that have only recently started threading his beard.

He's thirty nine. Seventeen years older than me. A little young for silver hairs, but then, this is a stressful job.

These parties must make things a thousand times harder for him, but Saxon never complains. He just nods and gets the job done.

“Did your dad buy you that dress?”

The low rumble of his voice jolts me back to earth. How long was I staring at him, lost in my thoughts, with cartoon hearts floating in my eyes?

Saxon frowns at the cream dress clinging to my small curves, and I bite my lip under his scrutiny. Fight the urge to fidget and pluck at the fabric.

“Don't you like it?” I ask stupidly.

But of course he doesn't. Saxon is a practical man, and this is a ridiculous dress for anything except standing around in, useless. The fabric is delicate, yet clings to my thighs so tightly I can't take full-length steps; the pearls are expensive but at least a few have dropped off the hem already, pinging over the floorboards inside. Frankly, it's a wonder the cream-color hasn't already attracted a dozen stains.

This dress is the manifestation of everything Saxon rolls his eyes at: vanity, impracticality, waste. And yet—

“I like it,” he says, voice rough. “On you, anyway.”

There’s a long pause, the moment taut and stretching between us. I press my lips together, inching closer, my hand damp where it clings to his. Because maybe, just maybe, this is *finally* going to happen—

Saxon drops my hand and steps back, face turned to the grounds again. His features are cast in shadow, impossible to read, but I don’t miss the way he shakes out his fingers. Like he wants to cast off my touch.

Oh.

My stomach plummets, and my throat squeezes tight.

So Saxon really doesn’t want me, whatever he says about the dress. Our head of security was being polite, and this crush is entirely one-sided. Not only that, but my touch *repulses* him.

I suck in a trembling breath, and Saxon glances at me in alarm.

“Ali?”

I’m already sliding along the wall, my legs like jelly even though I’ve sipped nothing but water this whole night. “I’m good. It’s fine. I’d better... better get back in there. You know what Dad’s like when I play hooky at these things.”

And I sound strangled, my voice too high pitched, so Saxon moves to follow me. He only jerks to a halt when I hold up one palm—as if I could ever really hold back his bulk. As if I'd ever *want* to.

Oh, god. My poor heart is so screwed.

“No, don't worry. I'm, uh. I'm gonna find a bathroom in there and... take care of business.”

Take care of *business*? Why, brain, why?

And my behavior must be truly odd, because Saxon doesn't smirk at that. Doesn't tease me for my choice of words. He frowns at me instead, watching me closely as I back away along the terrace, his bulk half-swallowed up by shadow. The whoops and splashes of the pool get louder, and the music does too as I get closer to the open doors, and still Saxon's watching me, his expression thoughtful.

Normally, I treasure every moment of peace I get at these parties. I have to gird myself up to head back in there, back to the wandering hands and too-loud voices and sloppy, drunk behavior, counting down the minutes until everyone leaves.

Not tonight. For once, I push back into the crowd, eager.

Wish it would swallow me whole.

Two

Saxon



Eleven months out of the year, I get along fine with Charles Wainwright. Oh, he's pompous and privileged and he throws his weight around in the world with barely any regard for the consequences, but frankly, that's the deal with working in private security. Most folks who can afford a protection detail are... let's say... out of touch with reality.

It's fine. I'm thick-skinned enough to let any accidental insults slide, and I like the work. It's practical. Tangible. Gives me a reason to stay in shape, too. Stay sharp.

At this time of year, though, with all these wild parties all December long... it gets harder and harder not to punch that man. Doesn't he see what he's doing to his own daughter?

It wasn't so bad when Ali was younger—too young to attend these nights. We'd barricade her up in her suite with a radio in case she needed anything, and I'd keep a man stationed at her door until every last party guest had gone home. I'm sure she slept like shit, but at least she was safe.

Since she turned twenty one, though, old enough to be around alcohol...

It's messed up, the way Charles Wainwright shows his daughter off.

He picks out tight dresses for her and makes her play hostess, topping up drinks and making small talk with men twice her age. He doesn't go so far as to let them touch her—or *I* don't, anyway—but it's a well known fact these days that the beautiful Wainwright daughter is a key attraction at these parties.

Because Ali is stunning. Far prettier than she even realizes; unearthly in her beauty, with that thick dark hair and those big blue eyes. And her father loves to show his good genes off, flaunting his daughter like he flaunts his mansion and his fancy cars. As if he deserves all the credit for it, somehow. As though his supermodel ex-wife wasn't involved in making her too.

I warned Charles earlier today: his guests got bolder over the season last year. They went from admiring Ali from a distance, like a priceless painting, to pressing closer, trying to chit-chat. Trying to flirt.

Charles laughed my warnings off, his goddamn juicer rattling on his kitchen counter as he squished orange after orange for his breakfast. The man has a private chef, but he insists on being the only one to touch his beloved gadgets.

If only he was half as protective over Alison.

“I’ll talk to her,” he’d said, then promptly called her in and lectured her on not getting cornered in a coat room tonight. As though it’s on *her* to keep herself safe, and if someone crosses a line, it’s because she got sloppy and let the side down.

Such bullshit. I nearly cracked the marble kitchen counter in two, I was gripping it so hard, watching Ali blush and stammer her agreement.

That is *not* what I wanted.

I was trying to help her. Trying to get her out of these parties, since she clearly hates every minute.

Ali pauses on the terrace by the doors, firming her shoulders and taking a deep breath. Then she plunges back into the party, back into the heat of the crowd, a ghostly white pearl pinging off her dress and bouncing over the paved stones.

Heart in my throat, I follow her slowly. Giving her a chance to put some distance between us, since I clearly freaked her out back there. Must have done something or said something that made her skitter away like that.

Fuck. Was I looking at her funny? Staring at her with all the hopeless longing I carry around for her, all day every day? The yearning carved into my big, ugly face?

My knees crack as I crouch down by the doors, picking up the dropped pearl and rolling it between my finger and thumb. It’s just like Ali: small, delicate, precious, unmarred.

Beautiful. And wasted on these wild, hungry crowds.

They part like an ocean when I head back inside, my broad shoulders cutting a merciless path through the kitchen. I walk slowly, eyes flitting over faces and hands and furniture and patches of shadow, cataloging every detail. Weighing up present and future risks.

That man by the giant, stainless steel refrigerator is a real estate mogul, a man who buys up whole streets like others buy trading cards—and he's also an angry drunk. Right now, his face is flushed. He's getting close to the point when he'll start swinging, which means it's time for one of us to stuff him politely in his car. Let his long-suffering driver take him home.

I walk on, making eye contact with one of my men by the door and jerking my chin at the mogul. My guy steps forward, slipping easily through the crowd.

Over in the living room, the lights are dimmer, the bodies twined together as they dance. Some of the women here tonight are famous actresses and singers; others are premium escorts. One or two are CEOs and lawyers in their own right, but not as many. Those businesslike women don't tend to have much patience for Charles Wainwright and his parties, and it's no mystery why.

Women like that fight tooth and nail to be taken seriously. Are they really gonna risk it all for a single night of empty hedonism?

Charles always says they're too frumpy to be invited, but we all know better. He's just a piss baby about rejection.

My gaze zips to Ali, like always. That girl draws me like a magnet. Even when I don't have eyes on her, even when she's in another room, some part of me is always *aware* of her. On alert, muscles bunching under my clothes, ears straining for her sweet, husky voice.

She's squished herself between the monstrous Christmas tree and the wall, hiding away from the party guests between the branches. Watching them with glassy eyes and downturned lips, her sadness clear even from across the room.

Fuck. Did I really do that? Did I mess up with her that badly on the terrace?

Or has someone else crossed a line?

My pulse thumps in my ears as I stride through the room, cutting a steady path through the dancers, the music loud enough to rattle my teeth. It's hot and sweaty in here, the air tangy with a chemical mix of perfumes and colognes, so maybe *that's* why Ali looks ready to cry. She's always been easily overstimulated.

She sees me coming, and her jaw firms. Something sparks behind her blue eyes, something defiant, but by the time I've reached her, she's folded in on herself again. Pale fingers fiddle with the Christmas tree branch that cuts across her middle.

"I decorated the tree last week," Ali tells me, her quiet voice cutting through the music somehow. Even when she mumbles, I always hear her every word. I'm tuned to her. "Then Dad got an interior designer to redo it."

My stomach hurts. “I know.”

“So that’s on my Christmas wish list, too.” Her fingers brush over the green needles. “A tree I can decorate and make as messy and unsymmetrical as I like, with homemade ornaments and cheap tinsel. And no one pulls it down afterward and redoes it.”

She’s changing the subject, keeping us away from whatever happened back there, but if this is what Ali needs...

Christ, I’d give Ali anything. I’m a sucker for this girl, and the pearl lovingly tucked in my pants pocket is Exhibit A.

“Shouldn’t you be patrolling?” she says as I lean against the wall next to her, my eyes fixed on the party. Better to watch the dancers than to get lost in her smooth skin, her blue eyes, her dark hair. Ali is addictive that way: once I start looking at her, I can’t stop. “Goose-stepping through the revelry? Checking in with your platoon?”

My cheeks ache when I smile, the muscles stiff and unfamiliar with the movement. Not surprising, really. I only ever smile around Ali.

“I can keep watch from here.”

It’s strangely comfortable after a while, leaning in the corner of the room, listening to baubles jingle and branches rustle whenever Ali shifts. After a long, calm pause, I reach to the side without looking. Brush past spiky green needles and the warm glass of string lights, to find Ali’s hand and knot our fingers together.

The sigh that gusts out of her... she sounds so *relieved*.
What's that about? Has she been anxious this whole time,
waiting for me to reach for her?

Because Ali grips my hand back, clinging on like I'm her
lifeline. And that's fine with me, even if my chest cracks open.

Charles Wainwright may show her off like a sports car, and
these crowds may want one thing from her and nothing else,
but while I'm around...

Ali is safe.

Safe and treasured.

Three

Ali



The next morning, I'm hunched over the breakfast bar, chewing on granola and yogurt and scrolling through real estate listings on my laptop. This is my new favorite hobby: picturing myself in each place, and imagining how I'd live there. Deciding what color I'd paint each hypothetical room.

Dad would never approve, of course, but he doesn't realize that I've been *working* over the last few years while I completed my online English Lit degree. All this time, I've been running an editing business from home.

That means I have my own money. I can find an apartment if I like—hell, if I look in the scruffier parts of town, I could even scrounge up the down payment all by myself. This could happen. This could work.

No more deranged holiday parties? No more car bomb checks? No more taking a bodyguard with me everywhere I go, even to the bathrooms at the mall? *Hell* yeah. I'm in.

But as I open up another apartment listing, tilting my head and peering at the photos of a cramped but cute studio, a wall

of heat comes up behind me.

Don't need to turn around to guess who that is. I could pick Saxon out of a line up with my eyes closed. He just has so much *presence*, like the sheer, crackling masculinity of him sends shock waves through the air.

“What’s that?”

His deep voice is always a thrill. Always makes my toes curl.

“Downtown apartments,” I tell him, spinning my laptop so Saxon can see better over my shoulder. “Look, this one has a little balcony. Cute, right?”

There’s a long, loaded pause behind me. My stomach sinks, even as I keep clicking through the listings, pointing out my favorite features in a chirpy voice. Like if I ignore the sense of doom settling over me like a fine dust, I’ll never have to face it.

Eventually, a big hand rests on my shoulder. “You can’t move out,” Saxon says quietly, and the empathy in his words makes my eyes burn. “Not until you can afford your own security detail. You know your Dad will never pay for two; he likes having you near too much.”

“But if I’m away from here, anonymous—”

“You’ll never be anonymous, Ali Cat.” Our head of security hates breaking this news, it’s clear from his mournful tone. “Your family’s too rich and too famous. And *you’re* too...”

He trails off. I wait.

“Pretty,” Saxon mutters at last. My cheeks heat, but I’m too miserable right now to enjoy the compliment. “Doesn’t matter where you go in the whole country. Beauty like that doesn’t blend in.”

I scoff, all my insides aching. I’m really trapped here? Forever? Because no book editor can afford a bodyguard, that’s for sure.

“I’m not *that* pretty.”

It’s Saxon’s turn to scoff. “You are,” he says shortly, squeezing my shoulder before he lets go. The bar stool next to me squeaks in protest as he settles his bulk down, dragging my abandoned breakfast over the marble counter.

He can have it. As I snap my laptop closed, cutting off those downtown apartment daydreams, I’m too queasy to eat another bite.

Because... when does it end?

When do I get to live my own life?

When can I be more than a dolled-up hostess at my Dad’s Christmas parties; a long-forgotten kid with a mother who pretends she doesn’t exist; a source of gossip for C-list celebrity websites?

Poor little rich girl, I know. I’m lucky in so many ways. But this sucks too sometimes, okay? And I didn’t ask for any of it—all I want is to decorate my own damn Christmas tree.

“I’ve got today off,” Saxon says out of nowhere, scraping the spoon along the bottom of the bowl. Man, he finished that off quick. Saxon’s like a magician with leftover food—you blink and it disappears.

And now that he says it, it’s obvious our head of security’s not on duty right now. Saxon always stays overnight on party nights, but if he was working today too, he’d be in a fresh gray suit and black tie. Instead, he’s dressed in a plain black cotton t-shirt, the fabric stretching over his shoulders and chest, and soft-looking jeans that hug his thighs.

He’s got those biker boots on too. Did he ride his motorbike here yesterday? God, whenever I see Saxon on that thing, it’s like my uterus dances a little jig inside me.

“Got fun plans?” I say, tearing my eyes away from the spot where Saxon’s ink disappears into the neckline of his t-shirt. Tattoos wrap around both arms too, so how much of him exactly is covered in artwork? Would he ever tell me? *Show* me? “What does a big ol’ brute like you even do for fun, anyway? Throw axes? Topple trees?”

Saxon’s beard shifts as he grins, and I fight the urge to punch the air in triumph. He’s always so stoic, so serious, and getting a smile out of him feels like winning the jackpot. Already, my apartment blues are drifting away, blown off like cobwebs in the breeze.

“You’re close,” he says, gray eyes sparkling as they watch me. “Thinking of getting a tree for my place. Throwing tinsel on it or whatever.”

I'm so jealous, I could gnaw through my own arm—but a childhood in the spotlight has taught me better manners than that. “Sounds fun,” I say brightly. “Hope you have a good time!”

Saxon snorts, shaking his big head. When he pushes off the stool and straightens to his full height, I'm surprised his dark hair doesn't brush along the ceiling. Surprised he doesn't block out the freaking sun.

“Be ready to leave in ten minutes, Ali Cat. You're my lead tree designer.”

My heart *slams* against my rib cage. Already, I'm hovering three feet off my stool, levitating with excitement. “But Manuel's supposed to watch me today—”

“Manuel knows I'll handle it. Ten minutes, baby girl. Don't make me wait.”

I'm out of the kitchen faster than the roadrunner, my fluffy socks skidding on the tiles.

* * *

Eight minutes later, I'm jogging after Saxon through our underground garage, breathing hard after the world's fastest shower. Our steps echo through the cavernous room. My dark hair is tangled and damp, thrown up in a messy bun, and I'm pretty sure my boxy red t-shirt is on back to front above my leggings.

It may be too warm for a sweater, but red is a festive color, right? And if I'm having a Christmassy day with Saxon—a

normal girl's Christmassy day—you'd better believe I'm going all in.

“Can we drink mulled wine?”

Saxon snorts. He's not even out of breath, his long strides carrying him easily across the concrete. “It's not even ten AM.”

“Well, can we sing Christmas carols?”

“*You can.*” My gruff guardian angel signals for me to stand back as we reach the nearest armored SUV, then he grunts as he bends down to do the usual checks. And I know I should be thinking bomb-related thoughts, but the only thing on my mind as I watch Saxon work is the size of his thick, muscled thighs, those jeans clinging to them like the denim loves him as much as I do.

Those thighs are like tree trunks in their own right. Saxon's whole body is massive, but not in a body-builder gym bro kinda way. There's a softness to him above the bulk—like where the curve of his belly brushes against his t-shirt as he moves. He's *real*.

A real man. One you could touch and taste.

My lower belly pulses and twists. Already, I'm too hot under my clothes, and I've barely watched our head of security for one minute.

A whole day alone with Saxon? Seriously? Reaching behind myself slowly, I pinch my own ass to check I'm not dreaming.

Ow.

Nope. This is happening.

“We’re not taking your bike?” I ask as Saxon opens the SUV passenger door, waving for me to climb in. His mouth twitches.

“And how would we transport a tree on my bike? You gonna balance it over your little lap?”

Oh, right. Duh.

“Well, *one* day, will you take me out on your bike? That’s on my bucket list too, you know.”

Saxon clips my seat belt without answering, gray eyes roving down my body once more before he steps back and shuts the car door. Inside, I’m left with nothing but my own shallow breaths, leggings rustling softly as I squirm, squeezing my thighs together.

I’m surprised I don’t fog up the windshield, I’m panting so hard. Surprised I don’t melt into a desperate little puddle, all in the time it takes Saxon to climb in, belt up, and back us out of the parking space, our vehicle purring slowly through the darkened garage. The engine rumbles beneath us, vibrating through my quivering body.

His hands are big and scarred where they rest on the steering wheel. Saxon always has to push the driver’s seat *all* the way back to fit his legs, and even then, his dark hair brushes the ceiling.

It's cut close on the sides, a bit longer on top. Thick and tuggable, and threaded with a few silver hairs up there too. I'd tease him about that, but I never like highlighting our age gap to Saxon. Feels like scoring an own goal.

“So we're going to a Christmas tree farm?”

“We're going to a Christmas tree farm,” he says.

“And I can pick?” I ask, grinning as I push my luck.

Gray eyes flick to me, amused, then Saxon watches the road as we pull out onto the street. “And you can pick. Choose wisely, Ali Cat.”

Oh, I will.

Saxon is gonna let me decorate his Christmas tree? Maybe other parts of his apartment too?

This will be my goddamn masterpiece.

Four

Saxon



Should've known I was setting myself up for trouble when I took Alison out for the day. Oh, I cleared it with Charles and with the rest of the security team, obviously, but I should've run it past my own common sense a few more times first.

Her and me.

Alone.

Was so sure I could handle it like a professional, and *now* look at me. I'm worn ragged already, trailing after Alison between rows and rows of Christmas trees in pots, taking an Olympic level of effort to keep my eyes off her tight, swaying ass.

Her red t-shirt is on back to front. Should I point that out? What if she whips it clean off right out here in the open air and gives me a heart attack?

“What about this one?” Ali stops at a squat, chubby-looking tree, stroking her fingertips over the branches. “Are your ceilings high? How much space are we working with?”

Every time I get close to her, I smell the shampoo scent clinging to her damp hair. It's driving me crazy.

"Plenty of space," I say, pointing my nose into the warm breeze instead. It smells like baked dirt, juniper, and car exhaust—and like those Christmas tree-scented air fresheners that people dangle from their wing mirrors, though I guess this is the real deal. "Just don't pick a massive tree meant for a town square and we're good."

Ali giggles, flashing a smile back over her shoulder, and I about crash to my knees in worship.

Not good. It's early in the morning for my control to be so threadbare.

Guess it's no surprise. I spent all night by her side, after all, holding her hand through that party, and that would wear down any man's defenses.

Charles lectured me about it—about keeping Ali from her hostess duties.

Works for me. I'll take the blame each time, and she can spend the parties unbothered. I'd do a lot more to assure this girl's happiness.

The sun rises slowly into a pale blue sky, with scattered puffs of cloud pushed by the breeze. And Ali takes an age to pick her tree, strolling through a bristly green maze, but I don't mind the wait, trailing along behind her with my hands in my pockets. Gives me a chance to keep an eye out, scanning our

environment for threats. I'm armed, like always, but I don't have backup out here, so I need to stay sharp.

Sure, this little caper means I'm working on my day off, but what else would I be doing otherwise? What else would be better? I'd probably just hit the gym, same as always, and try to sweat out the last few years' worth of sexual frustration.

"Can we pick up decorations on the way to your place?" Ali calls back to me. She's got her hands on her hips, eyeing up a tall spruce.

I scratch my chin. "Yeah."

Just as well that she asked, because it's not like I've got anything at home Ali can use. Truth be told, I've never bothered much with decorating for the holidays—not even string lights. What's the point when I live alone, and spend most of my time at the Wainwright place anyway?

But I can get in the spirit.

I can have Ali in my space for a few hours without losing my mind.

This is fine.

* * *

Fuck, it's hard being alone together. All our usual rules keep fading away, receding in my mind's eye until I almost forget that Alison is a Wainwright, that she's my boss's daughter, and that this is a professional relationship. Supposed to be, anyway.

It just all feels so *right*. Being with her; the two of us alone. Undisturbed and uninterrupted for hours together, first picking out a tree at the farm, then stopping off for decorations, then finally swinging by a roadside diner to chow down an early lunch before we head to my place.

Everything is easy with Alison. I'm never much of a talker with anyone else, never have much to add, but with her, I've got things to say. And she laughs easily, smiles easily, is so quick to please that it gets me thinking ridiculous thoughts.

Thinking that *this* is how it would be... if Ali was mine.

Mine. As soon as that thought drifts across my brain one single time, it clangs to a halt and refuses to leave.

Mine.

Mine.

Ali should be mine. My baby girl.

Lord knows I'd take better care of her than Charles Wainwright ever has. I'd see to *all* of her needs, too; all the needs that he's oblivious to. Like right now, as she fidgets in the passenger seat of the car as we drive the final mile to my place—Ali's clearly worked up. Flushed and breathing hard, squeezing her thighs together in those skimpy black leggings, swallowing back whimpers as we rock over bumps in the road.

Makes it hard for me to think straight. And I don't kid myself for a moment that her body's cravings have anything to do with *me*, not when she's been kept under lock and key her whole life.

The poor thing's pent up. Needy.

But I could help her with that. Could scratch her itch. Make her moan.

“Thank you so much for this, Saxon.” Ali's words are breathless as her little hand lands on my thigh and squeezes, and I about go cross-eyed as I put the SUV in park. We're in the underground garage for my own building, an echo of the one we left this morning—but this one's shared with all my neighbors, smaller and less well lit, with a jumble of different vehicles. “I owe you big time.”

Don't think it.

Don't think how she could pay you in kind. Don't be a goddamn creep.

“No problem,” I rasp. “Let's get this show on the road.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes and a trail of pine needles later, Ali stands on my living room rug, her fists propped on her hips. Brown paper bags and canvas totes filled with decorations spill around her feet, and she squints at the tree in its ceramic pot where it looms in the corner.

“Two inches to the left,” she says.

I rustle the tree over, sweating buckets under my shirt. It's sticky work lumping holiday supplies around, especially up to the tenth floor.

“Your other left.”

I roll my eyes behind the branches and comply. And with the sun beating through the French doors that lead to my balcony, this room is quickly turning into a sauna. Not quite the winter wonderland Ali had in mind, but I can't control the weather for her. If I could, I would.

She stops to put on a festive playlist anyway, the music drifting softly from the speakers on my TV. Songs about building snowmen and jingling all the way. And it's funny—Ali has barely spent ten minutes in this apartment, but already she seems so at home. Weaving around the furniture like it's second nature; using my gadgets as easily as if they were hers.

Like she's meant to be here. With me.

Fuck, I'm delusional.

"It's perfect," Ali breathes, beaming up at the Christmas tree we bought at the farm. Well—rented. Apparently after the season is over, we return it in its pot, and it goes back into the soil until next year. Eventually, once it's done its time, the tree will retire to a patch of forest—a fact that made Ali sniffle with joy. God, she's soft.

Though she eyes the tree with something like envy now as she crouches down, rummaging through the shopping bags for string lights. "You know, even this plant is allowed to work outside the home. This tree has more freedom than I do."

"It doesn't have legs," I point out, but Ali huffs and blows a stray lock of hair from her eyes. It slipped out of her messy bun an hour ago, and it's been haunting me ever since. Want to

wind those glossy black strands around my knuckles; want to tug on them until her lips part.

“You’re missing the point.”

“So I am.” My knees crack as I squat beside Ali, sifting through the bags too. The box of string lights is buried at the bottom of a canvas tote, and I hand it over with a wink. It’s so freeing being here together like this, not fretting about security every single second.

We’re safe here. Private.

Alone.

“Charles—I mean, your dad mentioned something the other day about a work contract for you. Some big designer getting in touch? That could be something, right?”

The sun flares against the glass as I push to my feet again, and I cross to the balcony doors to push one open. Better to coax in a breeze and chase away this stifling heat.

Ali sucks on her teeth, standing too as she unravels the knotted string lights. “Modeling,” she mutters, with as much distaste as if she’d been offered a job scooping up radioactive waste. And I know Ali doesn’t have a problem with models, doesn’t think badly of the profession really, but after everything that happened with her mother...

Guess it makes sense. Who’d want to follow in the footsteps of the person who rejected you? Who threw you away and resented you for ‘ruining’ her stick-thin body?

Even if Ali *is* one of the most beautiful young women alive, even if she does make strangers literally stop in their tracks, mouths hanging open as she passes... that doesn't mean she needs to take the obvious road.

Christ, I thought the fella working the Christmas tree farm was going to swallow his own tongue when he saw her, especially when she started bouncing on her toes with excitement.

Because the thing is... Ali has no idea what kind of effect she has on people. Not *really*. She hasn't been allowed out in public enough to properly notice, and she's not vain enough for it to occur to her independently. She thinks she's *pretty enough*. Averagely nice to look at.

Meanwhile hordes of men she's never met counted down the days to Ali's eighteenth birthday online. Fuck, I hope she never finds out about that. Those assholes had no business coveting her when she was so young.

“Can I plug these in somewhere?”

I point her at an outlet behind the tree, head spinning, sick with guilt. Because I can comfort myself with the fact that *I* didn't notice Ali like that until a year ago, I can tell myself all the excuses I like, but the fact is, this girl is still way too young for me. I'm still a creep for even noticing her at all.

Seventeen years. There are seventeen years between the two of us. I'm almost old enough to be her—

“Saxon?”

Scrubbing one palm down my face, I drag my brain back into gear. Force myself to stop spiraling and focus. “Yeah?”

Ali’s wrapped the string light around the bottom two-thirds of the tree, but she’s struggling to reach the higher branches. As she strains, her arms stretching overhead, her red t-shirt rides up and shows a taut strip of bare navel.

I can see her belly button. Can see the faint jut of her hip bone.

Kill me now.

“Will you help me with this?”

Shit. I tear my gaze away, and I guess my body’s paying better attention than my brain, because I’m already striding across the rug, already taking the string lights from her hands, already reaching up to wind them around the topmost branches. And Ali’s trapped between the tree and my chest, so delicate, her body heat blending with mine, but neither of us mention how close we’re standing now. Neither of us mention the way my chest heaves, brushing up against her with every inhale. If I’m not careful, my ragged breaths will knock her forward.

“You being so big comes in handy sometimes,” Ali says, her voice shaky.

I grunt, scowling at my hands as they work. Don’t trust myself to reply.

* * *

“There’s one more thing,” Ali says hours later, as the sun bleeds into the horizon outside and she brushes imaginary dust from her hands. Her black bun is sagging to one side, her forehead dewy with sweat and her neck flushed, but she’s done a great job. Can’t deny it. My one-bed bachelor pad by the waterfront has been transformed into an explosion of Christmas cheer.

There’s the tree, obviously, with golden string lights wound through the layers and red velvet bows nestled among the green needles. Silver frosted baubles drip from the branches, and a glittery star marks the very top.

But Ali also swagged tinsel beneath my breakfast bar, and hung a wreath on the front door, and burned scented candles to make my place smell like allspice. She even hung a stocking from the mantelpiece and gave my floor lamp a tinsel crown.

Now she’s clutching a canvas tote to her chest, shifting back and forth between her feet, looking guilty.

“What did you do?” I ask, faux stern the way she likes, and Ali laughs nervously. When she draws a sprig of mistletoe from the bag, dropping the tote to the rug, I forget to breathe.

“It’s traditional,” she says in a rush, practically hopping from nerves now. “You’ve got to have mistletoe at Christmas. It’s, like, the law.”

I clear my throat with effort. “Right.”

Ali tiptoes toward me like I’m a wild animal. Like I might bolt, or maybe charge at her. Guess she’s not wrong, because

both those things are on the table right now.

She waves the mistletoe weakly. “So where should we hang it? Above the front door?”

I cough out a laugh and shake my head, although none of this is funny. Not really. Or if it is, the joke is on me. “Not at the front door. I’m not planting a smacker on every delivery person who comes to my door in December.”

Ali presses her lips together against a smile. “Where, then?”

And I shrug and pluck the mistletoe from her hand. She’s right in front of me now; close enough to feel her heat again, to smell her shampoo, and maybe that’s why I do it. Why I lose my ever-loving mind.

Because I raise the green sprig over our heads, white berries clinging to the twigs, and say, “How about here?”

Ali’s breath hitches. Her eyes sparkle so bright. And her hands lift up, cautious at first, then spread over my chest, two sudden shocks of contact. Of heat.

God help me, as Ali pushes up onto her toes, I don’t stop her. I don’t stop her for a second. Inside the chaotic whirl of my mind, I’m urging her on, begging her to *do it. Do it.*

She pauses a breath from my mouth—and look at how I’m leaning down to help her, stooping to get in range. So desperate for a taste that I forget everything—my training, my professionalism, the age gap between us. Everything but how badly I want this girl.

I'm done for. Cooked.

Ali's warm breath wafts against my lips. It tastes like peppermint, like the candy cane she's been gnawing on as she decorates all afternoon. In the background, a man sings softly about driving home on Christmas Eve, and my bones are creaking from the effort of holding this still.

"Can I?" Ali whispers, like we aren't ninety percent of the way there already.

I nod, and that alone makes our lips brush. Lightning zaps down my spine, and my blood rushes through my veins, pumped by my anguished heart.

It's a barely-there kiss. Less than a second of contact before she stumbles back, blushing hard.

And it detonates a crater in my chest.

Five

Ali



Dad throws a Tuesday poker night and a fancy dinner party on Thursday, but the next big event is on Saturday. That's how our holiday seasons go each year: smaller events in the week, little blips to keep Dad happy and keep tongues wagging about the Wainwright social calendar, and then on the weekends... it's carnage.

Tonight's party is themed. A masquerade. All the guests are dressed in priceless gowns and tailored tuxedos, glittering with wealth and swarming through the mansion like a perfumed tide, hungry for drama behind their masks.

Music throbs and clothes rustle; laughter rumbles and women shriek. The energy tonight is itchy, restless. People are anonymous, and they want to misbehave.

Me? I'm popping bottle after bottle of champagne in the kitchen, topping up glasses for the guests. Normally, you'd expect a party like this to have swarms of staff on hand, but not at a Wainwright function. There's just me, or folks serve themselves.

That's part of the promise: the privacy thing. No risk of stray phones or leaks to the press from some gossipy college student working a pop up bar. Once in a while a guest will complain, but not for long. Not when they see how wild things get when everyone can finally let loose, unwatched.

“Another drink, sir?”

“Can I top you up, miss?”

“Champagne?”

My face feels waxy from smiling below my mask, but at least serving drinks passes the time. It makes Dad happy, too. And it keeps me in the brightly lit kitchen, away from shadowy corners and groping hands, right where Saxon can keep an eye on me.

Saxon.

Biting hard on my lip, I pour another glass of champagne. Every time I feel the head of security's eyes on me tonight, warm shivers coast under my skin. Is he near?

“Having a good night, sweetheart?”

Dad's glowing from booze, his bald head shiny with sweat, and his steps are a little wobbly as he swaggers toward me in the kitchen. He's dressed in a white tuxedo with a black pocket square and bow tie, and his mask looks like a white wolf. There are lipstick marks on his neck, too, but I forcibly wipe those from my brain.

“Sure. Want another drink?”

There's no point telling my Dad I'd rather be holed up in my bedroom all night than down here serving, like when I was a teenager. Reading fan fiction for my favorite TV shows and snacking on a big bowl of popcorn.

He knows. I've told him a hundred times, but he insists that I come to these parties regardless. Says it's about showing a united Wainwright family front.

Except... what is so *united* about him wandering off with some strange woman for most of the night, or gallivanting with his guests, while I serve drinks in the kitchen? Our masks don't even match. His is a wolf, and mine is a black kitty cat.

The next glass I pour is sloppy, my movements jerky with resentment, and bubbly fluid sloshes onto the kitchen tiles by our feet.

"Whoops," Dad says cheerfully, reaching back to grab a cloth from near the sink. I open my mouth to thank him for cleaning up, but then he nudges the cloth into my hand. "Better wipe that up before someone slips. Thanks, sweetheart."

By the time I crouch down carefully in my tight gray dress and heels, gripping the marble counter for balance, Dad is long gone. Doesn't he realize how hard this is in this outfit? Would it have killed him to help?

Two large black leather shoes stride across the kitchen tiles, coming to a stop mere inches away. Just like that, my bad mood melts away like a spring frost, and I'm already grinning when Saxon squats beside me.

“Give me that,” he mutters, plucking the cloth from my hand. He swipes it across the puddle, mopping up the spilled champagne with cranky movements. “Who are you, Cinderella? Jesus Christ.”

He’s not mad at *me*, he’s pissed off at Dad. God, I love when Saxon gets grumpy on my behalf, bristling with irritation behind his short beard. It’s such a thrill.

And I’ve missed him this week. He’s barely looked in my direction since our secret K-I-S-S, even if it *was* the most chaste peck on the lips the world has ever seen. Dad probably wouldn’t even care if he knew, and yet Saxon acts like we got busy in the backseat of that borrowed SUV.

If only.

But I can’t be mad that he’s avoiding me, because he blushes too. Every time I’ve walked past Saxon this week, his cheeks have flushed pink above his beard. It’s the cutest freaking thing I’ve ever seen.

“Hello, stranger,” I purr at him, laughing when Saxon flushes around the edges of his mask. On Dad’s orders, even the security team are wearing masks tonight—plain black and utilitarian, but masks all the same.

Saxon shoots me a look as he scrubs the tiles. “Behave.”

There go those warm shivers again, coasting down my limbs; there’s that excited, fizzy feeling in my stomach. When Saxon holds out a hand to help me stand up, I cling to his strong fingers like I’ll never let go. The swooping sense of

vertigo I get—that's not head rush from standing up too quickly. No, sir.

That's all Saxon. Being near him again, feeling his heat. Smelling the soap on his skin.

And maybe I *won't* let go. Maybe I'll climb this man like a lemur scaling a tree, and I'll wrap myself around his big trunk and refuse to ever be peeled off again. Maybe I'll live up there on his broad shoulders, or make a nest in his beard.

"Alison," Saxon says in warning when I just stand there, holding his hand.

Huffing, I let go and step back.

Reality bites.

"You can't avoid me forever, you know." Smoothing the front of my gray dress, I try to keep my tone light and teasing. Try to hide my mounting frustration, and how badly I miss this man with each passing day. How haunted I am by our forbidden brush of lips. "Not sure if you've noticed, but I seem to attract trouble at these parties. You'll be swooping in to save me again any minute."

Saxon growls something under his breath, but I don't catch it. Not with the thumping music and the shrieks of laughter drifting in from the terrace, and the bodies surging in and out of the kitchen like waves breaking over the shore.

"What?" I say, squinting up at our head of security. Shoot, he looks so handsome tonight with his dark hair combed back and his broad shoulders pressing against his suit, looming over

me like a grumpy, gorgeous giant. An earpiece crackles in his ear, but Saxon rolls his neck and ignores it. His eyes are piercing gray behind his mask.

“I said, you might as well stay close to me, then. Save me time.”

His words are casual, but his posture is tense. And... oh, I get it. This is bothering Saxon more than usual—the crowds of strangers; the wandering hands and hungry eyes. We may have *barely* kissed, but is that a possessive glint in his steely gaze? Is that a jealous set to his jaw?

Works for me. Oh hell yeah, that works for me.

“Okay,” I say brightly, and Saxon flinches like this wasn’t his suggestion. “I’ll stay close, you big grump. But you have to promise me one thing.”

“Mm?” He’s already leading me from the kitchen, one big paw wrapped around my wrist. I totter after him in my stupid heels, beaming from ear to ear, because this is seriously no hardship. Staying close to Saxon? That’s my *dream*.

“You have to promise not to fall in love with me,” I say, quoting one of my favorite comfort movies as he leads us through the press of people.

Saxon doesn’t bother with a reply, tugging me along faster. Maybe he didn’t hear.

* * *

“Masks seriously make people go loopy,” I observe, sitting on the fifth stair in the mansion lobby. It’s one of those big staircases that splits off in two directions on the next floor, and a gold length of tinsel has been draped across it halfway up between the bronze metal banisters, ‘discouraging’ the guests from going upstairs.

Like that stops anybody from doing anything. They’re *here* to misbehave. If anything, telling these guests they can’t do something is like waving a red flag at a bull.

Still, it’s quieter in this part of the house, the music drifting in from other rooms. Whenever guests burst through the lobby doorways, their heels clacking against the hardwood floor, Saxon and I watch them like we’re on safari.

Some of the guests are too wrapped up in each other to notice us, kissing each other fiercely, clothes tugged into disarray. One couple in the corner is a heartbeat away from doing it, right here in the lobby, with the woman’s dress shrugged down around her waist and her bare boobs out for anyone to see. Their masks are still on, though. Guess they need *some* privacy.

I keep eyeing Saxon when I think he’s not looking, but he hasn’t gawped at that woman’s chest once. In fact, whenever that pair moans extra loudly, he rolls his eyes, and when the man starts pushing the woman to her knees, he lurches to his feet beside me and offers a hand.

“Time to go. Come on.”

My heart squirms happily as I take his hand, pulled gently to my feet. My own strappy silver heels dangle from my other fingers, slipped off to save my toes hours ago.

Time moves so strangely at these parties. Sometimes ten minutes feels like it lasts for years, and then three hours whoosh past in a blink. What time is it right now? I have zero idea. Sometime between midnight and dawn.

Hanging out with Saxon, though—this always rushes by too fast. Especially when he hustles me up the stairs, holding the tinsel for me to duck under, muttering darkly about lobby blow jobs.

“Saxon, I *have* seen porn,” I tell him, laughing as his shoulders shoot up around his ears. You know, for a bearded, tattooed, motorbike-riding tough guy, our head of security is kind of a prude—when it comes to me, anyway. “You don’t have to rush me out like I might faint.”

“You’re not seeing that guy’s dick,” he says flatly, marching me up to the second floor. The walls are glass up here too, supported by huge industrial beams, and the floors are hardwood.

An abandoned champagne flute and a man’s undone bow tie scattered on the floor confirms my theory: guests are roaming through this whole mansion, tinsel boundary be damned. I squeeze Saxon’s hand, then knot our fingers together. He lets me.

Is he jealous? The huge older man by my side seems jealous, his silver-flecked beard bristling with agitation. I love

it.

“Saxon?” I say. “You can slow down. You don’t need to frogmarch me all the way through the house, okay? I don’t *want* to see that guy’s dick. Obviously.”

Our steps slow, fireworks bursting out in the darkness beyond the glass walls. My self-assigned bodyguard sucks in a long, deep breath, then gusts it out all in one go. His mouth twitches when he glances down at me. “Good. Sorry.”

“There is something I want to show you, though,” I say, a sudden, devious plan coming to me on the fly, because if Saxon’s finally softening up with me again, you’d better believe I’m gonna milk this moment for all it’s worth. Who knows when I’ll get this chance again? “Can we go to the library?”

Saxon narrows his eyes at me, like he’s trying to sense a trap. There definitely is one, but I smile at him sweetly. “... Sure.”

Ah, this big, beautiful sucker. I love him so much.

Six

Saxon



Alison is plotting something, but I don't know what. And maybe I'm an idiot to let her do it, maybe I'm walking to the gallows, but I let her pull me through the second floor of the mansion, past priceless abstract paintings and dropped pieces of guests' clothing, all the way to the library.

It's always been one of Ali's favorite rooms, ever since I've known her. For starters, it's one of the few rooms where Charles Wainwright lingers for hours, paging through the latest tech news and swiping on his tablet, and I know she craves the feeling of another person in the room. Not interacting, necessarily, but... that sense of company.

And for another thing, two of the huge metal bookcases are assigned to her, and Ali takes her collection of reading material very seriously.

She collects signed hardbacks and special illustrated editions. Manga and graphic novels and sci fi and poetry—zero pretension, zero theme to her collections. Only

enthusiasm, zany and eclectic and bright. Her reading nook is one of my favorite places in the house, too.

She leads me there now, flicking on the overhead library lights and dimming them as she goes. Weaving past industrial-style work tables and bookshelves crammed with popular science and business books and back issues of fancy journals. All this stuff is Charles's taste, but Ali's corner is the place to be.

Instead of a table and chairs, she's got a giant gray bean bag to read on, with fluffy throws and a floor lamp to cast good light. She waves at the bean bag now, gesturing for me to sit on that thing like there's a chance in hell I'd ever get up again if I did.

"It's around here somewhere," Ali says, pushing up on her toes to check the shelves. Some of them don't have books on yet, so they're filled with her treasures instead. Her most beloved memories. Stuffed bears from when she was a kid; trinkets and snow globes from her limited travels. That kinda stuff. "Make yourself comfortable."

I will—by standing, and never getting sucked into that bean bag monstrosity. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I watch Ali and wait.

Her dress tonight is another clingy, slippery fabric—dove gray this time, and strapless, with a slit up the thigh. My throat goes dry just looking at her, with that trim waist and those black waves cascading down the back of her head. Even her mask is cute, with those pointed cat ears.

Did she pick that one because of my nickname for her? I hope so.

She tosses her silver heels to the floor without looking, still rummaging through the shelf. When she finds whatever she's looking for, Ali makes a pleased sound and spins to face me, eyes bright behind her mask.

Clutched in her fingers is a rumpled sprig of mistletoe. My heart lurches, and I have to clear my mouth before I speak.

“Is that the same one? The one from last week?” My voice is so gravelly, it's like rocks shifting on a mountainside.

Ali nods, so nervous and excited. “Uh-huh.” Is she worried I'll say no? Worried I'll push her away? She thinks more highly of my self control than I do, that's for sure.

“You kept it,” I say stupidly, pointing out the obvious, and when Ali beckons me closer, I step forward on leaden legs.

And Christ, I've tried so hard to keep away over the last week. Tried not to even look in her direction if I can help it. Been kicking myself endlessly, cursing myself out for taking advantage of this sweet girl, kissing her like that—even if it was just an innocent peck. Even if *she* initiated it.

But here I am again, clearly learning no lessons, because I'm hungrier than ever for another taste of those lips. Don't know if a peck will be enough this time; don't know if once I start, I'll be able to stop. I'm jonesing for more. Have been since the second I dropped her home last week.

“One kiss,” I say as I crowd her against the bookcase, just in case Alison has more control than I do. Maybe *she* can pull the brakes on this for us. “Just one, okay?”

Because... fuck. Ali is so young. So sweet and perfect and off limits, and I’ve got no business putting my scarred hands on her. No business obsessing over her the way I do.

So Alison needs to pull the brakes. Needs to pull *my* brakes, or else I’ll crush her against this goddamn bookcase and lose my mind over her, just as bad as those party guests downstairs.

“One kiss,” she promises me sweetly, turning around briefly to place the mistletoe at my eye level, next to us on the shelf. “I’ll behave, I swear.”

And it’s not her I’m worried about, not really, but when Ali turns back and starts unknitting my tie, I make a strangled sound. Maybe I should be wary of her after all.

Because Ali’s smarter than a whip, and for some unknown reason, she’s clearly decided that what she wants for Christmas this year... is me.

It’s a phase, I tell myself as she drops my tie to the floor, then starts flicking my shirt buttons open, one by one. Air washes over my chest, cooled by the ever-present AC, and my nipples harden beneath my white shirt. Is that a hint of gray in my chest hair? Does she see it? Does she care?

It’s a phase.

It’s a phase.

She's chasing a thrill. Not you.

“You said one kiss,” I grit out as Ali hums, pushing my shirt open wide. She leans forward, rubbing her cheek over my tattooed chest, her lips dragging over my overheated skin... but not kissing. Not yet.

Ali leans back and winks, her blue eyes sparkling behind her black kitten mask. Her dark hair is mussed, tumbling over her shoulders, and her neck is tinged pink with excitement.

So this was her plan.

I don't hate it.

But goddamn, I'm harder than marble already; so hard my gut aches.

Ten fingertips trail down my throat, my chest, my belly, all the way down to rest on my belt. My cock swells impossibly harder, pushing against the layers of my clothing. Reaching for her.

“I know.” Ali wets her lips, and her hesitation is the first sign of nerves. “One kiss, I know. But I didn't say *where* I'd put it, did I?”

Holy. Shit.

I wait, heart thundering, but she doesn't move again. Ali gazes up at me, waiting for permission. Waiting for me to go along with this; to take an equal part in what we're doing here tonight.

As if I could stop this now. I'd sooner tear out my own spine.

"Be a good girl, then," I hear myself say, finally breaking out of my statue-still posture. *Yes*. This is happening. Her dark hair is silky and warm when I pet it; her little sigh when I trace her bare shoulders scrambles my brain. "Be a good girl and give me your kiss."

Ali beams at me, lit up from the inside like I've just gifted her a bouquet of gorgeous flowers, and moves to kneel at my feet. I stop her first, one hand on her elbow.

"Wait."

Her eyes widen with disappointment, but that's not what's happening here. I'm not changing my mind.

"Take this off."

Her mask comes off easily, slipping off her glossy hair, and I toss it on the floor by my tie. You'd better believe—if Ali's gonna touch me like that, gonna taste me like that, I want to see *her* doing it. Not some anonymous woman.

Need the memory to be crystal clear. Need it to last me until I'm old and gray.

Well. Older and grayer.

"Okay," I grunt, and Ali bursts out laughing, scratching her fingers through my chest hair again. "Carry on."

But first she rocks up onto her toes, rubbing her cheek against mine—and peels my own mask off, dropping it on the

pile. The headache I've been carrying all night suddenly eases, and the cool air on my face feels so good and fresh.

“You're right,” Ali says, her voice soft in the empty library. The music from the rest of the house is faint in here, and we're alone. Finally alone again, tucked away and hidden from the door. “No masks, Saxon. I want to see your face when I do this.”

She kneels.

Inside, I die and go to heaven.

Ali's fingers are pale and delicate as they work my belt open, the leather creaking. The buckle clinks, and my belt sags apart.

Next is my pants button. Ali bites her lip and flicks it open, glancing up at me first. The shock of her baby blues down there, peering up at me, so wide-eyed and innocent...

It nearly takes me out at the knees.

“Hurry,” I rasp, and there's no dignity to it, no pride in the way I'm begging her, but just the sight of Alison down there on her pretty knees is enough to get me ready to blow. “Hurry.” And I want to be inside her mouth when it happens, damn it, want to feel the hot, silky slide of her tongue—

“Bossy,” Ali whispers, shaking her head with a teasing smile. “I knew you would be. Or I hoped so, anyway.”

Shit. Can't wait.

Batting her hand out of the way, I tug my zipper down and groan with relief as my cock presses forward. It takes a few quick movements to draw it out fully, to get it in my fist, grip pumping lazily, the ruddy head aimed at Ali's chin.

"Yes." The word hisses between my teeth, my bare chest heaving up and down. Feels good. Looks even better with her down there, so close.

And Ali's wide-eyed. Startled, but not afraid. No, if anything, my girl looks thrilled with this latest turn of events, and those clever eyes watch the exact way I touch myself, cataloging every detail for her own reference. She licks her lips, her pink tongue flashing in and out of view, and I watch, dumbstruck, as my hand fists in her hair. As it guides her wet little mouth to my cock. Am I really doing this?

"One kiss," I remind her, and I barely recognize my own ragged voice. Barely recognize myself at all. "Make it count, Ali Cat."

Blue eyes flick up to me, amused and hungry, and then those plump, pink lips press together in a moue.

Ali plants a single, chaste peck against the head of my shaft, and stays there. Looks up at me and winks, the little terror.

No. Oh, god.

She can't mess with me like this. She can't tease and work me up and not deliver, because I swear, I'll lose my damn mind.

“Ali,” I warn, grip tightening in her hair, but she hums and laughs, the vibration a sweet torture... then parts her lips and finally sucks me down into her wet, welcoming heat.

One kiss.

That’s the promise we’ve made, and Ali doesn’t break it for a second. Once her lips touch my shaft, they don’t break contact again—not even as her cheeks hollow and her head bobs. Not even as I groan, crowding her back against the shelves, her glossy hair wrapped around my fingers, barely believing this is more than a fever dream.

Because Ali sucks and slurps and hums around my cock, not breaking the kiss even when she rocks back on her heels, swollen lips pressed against the tip, her mouth shiny and wet. Her cheeks are bright pink.

And those eyes.

Those round, blue eyes stare up at me with such shameless longing, such adoration, that it’s like someone picks up my insides and rattles them all around. I’m jumbled up and disoriented, a world class mess.

“Ali,” I groan, gripping her hair and pushing back inside. Her lips part, skating along my length, and she *lets* me. Lets me thrust into her mouth, rubbing over the soft pad of her tongue, and all the while I’m breathing hard and barely holding it together. Cracks are splintering through my self control. “Christ, Ali. Such a good girl. That’s it. Suck me, baby.”

She hums and smiles around my cock. Hollows her cheeks and obeys, so sweet and perfect, and I know she likes this because she's squirming too, rubbing against her own heel. Humping her own foot, trying to get off, even when it makes me bend my knees to follow her mouth down, trying to stay level with her.

All good with me.

Christ, she's magnificent.

And I figured she was pent up, figured she was needy after being held under lock and key for so long, but I had no idea Ali would be such a goddess. Hungry and pliant, so eager to obey, so beautiful in the golden light of the library, her slippery gray dress pooling over the hardwood boards.

Fireworks burst through the glass, lighting up the night sky. The dark, throbbing party music bleeds through the floor, but that's all far away right now. On another planet.

I glance up and find myself staring at that crumpled sprig of mistletoe. The thing that started this all; that resulted in two stolen kisses now. Two moments that should never have been.

This is just a game to her, I remind myself for the hundredth time, but it's not working anymore. Not stopping my heart from beating against my rib cage, like it's trying to burst out of my body and get to Alison. It doesn't keep me from muttering strings of filthy praise, and thrusting harder into her mouth, and wiping away her tears with my thumbs, tracking smudges of mascara across her cheeks.

She's not crying because she's upset. It's her body's natural reaction to me invading her throat, and I'm sure about that because Ali gasps and moans around my cock, grinding down harder against her foot—then freezes up, eyes screwing shut, her whole body shuddering as she comes.

I go still inside her mouth, jaw clenched... and come with a belly-deep groan.

Alison swallows every drop—of course she does.

My perfect, off-limits girl.

Seven

Ali



Saxon's weird after our second encounter—no surprises there. But this time, it's not that he's avoiding me. It's way more fun than that. No, for the whole next week Saxon is glued to my side, his hungry, unblinking gaze fixed to my face, my hair, my body. Never looking away.

Like he's trying to commit every detail to memory. Like he's trying to soak me up through his eyeballs. Every time one of his men get too close to me, he *snarls*.

Saxon doesn't try to touch me again, but that's okay. That's fine. I'll wait for him to come around. Honestly, I'd wait fifty years for this man.

And in the meantime, I've got plenty of distractions to keep me from going loopy with craving our head of security. Things like freelance editing work—rush jobs over the holidays—and buying last minute Christmas presents. Things like daydreaming about a *relationship* together, and what that would be like.

Would Saxon defer to my father? Let him make decisions about us?

The answer clangs into my brain as soon as I ponder the question: Hell no.

Saxon may work for Dad, but he does not bow and scrape, and he's *always* put me above his job. It's laughable to even think it.

In fact, without Saxon around, something tells me the last few years would have been a hundred times worse. He's always the grown-up in the room; the voice of reason. My safe harbor and my protector.

And now, the source of my squirmiest daydreams. Oh god, when can I touch him again? When will he touch *me*? I fan myself, suddenly hot under my PJ collar.

“Doing okay there, Ali Cat?”

Saxon's deep voice drifts from the living room doorway, and my head jerks around. Forget the holiday movie I've been watching to kill time on this Christmas Eve morning—there's something better to entertain me now.

Saxon's dressed for work in his gray suit and black tie, his dark hair combed back and his beard trimmed. Don't wanna pat myself on the back too much, but since we first kissed in his apartment, he looks... younger. Energized, and refreshed by life.

Sure, there are still faint lines at the corners of his eyes, and there are those silver strands in his hair and beard. But

Saxon looks vibrant and powerful, his muscles bulging beneath his clothes, and when he stares at me like that, his mouth curving up...

I fan myself again, with both hands this time.

“Please,” I call over, “stop messing with me like this, staring like you’re gonna eat me up. Teasing then never delivering. I’ll catch fire under my clothes, Saxon. I’ll burn to a crisp.”

Saxon grins and shakes his head as he strolls into the room. I shift self-consciously on the sofa as he approaches, tugging at the hem of my pajama shirt, but I don’t look *too* bad. Just ruffled and sleepy. I’ve brushed my teeth and combed my hair, because I’m not an idiot, okay? There’s always a chance Saxon is near in this house.

The sofa groans as he sits down beside me, propping his elbows on his knees—and he’s not inappropriately close, but still near enough to touch. Near enough to smell his clean, manly smell, and feel his heat near my legs.

Thump, thump, thump, goes my heart.

Saxon squints at the TV, trying to make sense of the green, hairy creature ranting about Christmas. “Pool party tonight,” he says, acting casual.

Yeah. It’s a Christmas Eve tradition at the Wainwright mansion: a big, blowout pool party, with dozens of rented luxury hot tubs dotting the grounds, and a serve-yourself cocktail bar by the terrace pool. Music and celebrities and

barely dressed bodies, every direction you look. Writhing together, wet and slippery.

I hate it. Maybe in the summer, if I attended with Saxon, something like that could be almost fun... but on Christmas Eve? All I want to do is curl up and drink hot chocolate, watch movies, and wrap last-minute gifts.

Instead I'm trapped in Hedonism Central.

"Someone's going to drown," I mutter, because that's the fear that haunts me every single year. All those drunk people in the water? I've told Dad a million times that it's dangerous, that something bad will happen sooner or later, but he refuses to do anything about it. Says that people sign waivers to attend, and that's good enough.

When I was a kid, I used to watch the terrace pool from my bedroom window with binoculars glued to my eyes, my phone by my side in case I needed to call 911. I barely blinked all night, I was so worried—and I saw some stuff that I was definitely too young to see.

But Saxon's mouth twitches, and he cracks his knuckles idly. "Want to hear a secret?"

Um, yeah. "Obviously."

"There are undercover lifeguards. I hire them every year, and Charles—your Dad's always too far gone to notice."

...Huh. "That's very sneaky of you."

Saxon shrugs, unrepentant. "I'd rather risk a leaked photo than an accidental death. Charles may be my employer, but he

doesn't rule my conscience."

Agreed, and wow, I feel so much lighter already. Like I can breathe properly again, drawing sweet, sweet air into my lungs.

"Dad gave me my swimsuit already." I try not to sound too bitter, but I can't help it. Sourness laces my words. Because who wants their own father handing them a bikini and telling them to look nice tonight? Nobody, that's who.

I tried it on an hour ago. It fits, unfortunately, with red and white stripes like a candy cane. Although at least it's in that retro style, with high-waisted shorts and a halter top, so every scrap of me won't be on display.

Saxon says nothing for a long while, his jaw clenched and eyes hard. He doesn't look at me, keeps staring right at the TV when he finally says, "You don't have to wear it if you don't want to, Ali Cat. I'll take care of it. Just say the word."

And I *melt*. Just like that, I turn into a big, gooey puddle on these sofa cushions, because lord, I love this man so much.

Saxon is the only one who looks out for me like this. The only person who protects me, and who cares what *I* want. He takes care of me. Nurtures me.

Loves me.

I dare to reach out and pat Saxon on the shoulder. He's sculpted under there, sturdier than granite, and is it my imagination, or does he lean into my touch?

“It’s okay. I’ve already decided: I’ll go to the pool party tonight, and then that’s it. I’m done. Even if Dad hates me for it... I can’t do this anymore.”

Our head of security gusts out a long sigh, and when he glances over at me, his eyes are warm. “Can’t pretend I’m not relieved, Ali. If one more asshole tries to corner you, I’ll wind up with blood on my hands.”

Should *not* find his bloodthirstiness so sexy, but here I am. I bite my lip, practically wriggling on the sofa cushions. “Oh, yeah? You’d rough up a man just for me?”

“I’d flatten him.”

And we’re grinning at each other like goofballs, drawn toward each other across the sofa cushions, when Saxon’s earpiece crackles, then a tinny voice starts talking in his ear. I sink back, disappointed, as Saxon stands up and strides out.

One day.

I pick at a loose thread on my sleeve, stewing and cranky.

One day, I’ll be able to talk to that man endlessly, without interruption. I’ll be able to smile at him freely, without worrying how it looks to other people, and I’ll kiss him as many times as I like.

I sure hope so, anyway.

Else I’ll go mad.

* * *

The pool party is decadent and wild. Stars pulse high overhead, music throbs through the mansion grounds, and all around is the sound of splashing and laughter. It's nearly midnight, and already the barely-clothed bodies wandering from hot tub to pool and back again are stumbling, weaving their merry way, slurring as they call out to each other.

Nearly midnight.

Nearly Christmas.

Sinking down to my shoulders in the terrace pool, I try to ignore the sadness pressing on my chest.

You know, my father wasn't always like this. Wasn't always such a party animal, more concerned with wild experiences and notoriety than with spending time with his daughter. Watching him now, with a woman half his age balanced on his shoulders at the other end of the pool as he pretends to buck her off... I barely recognize him.

Did he ever love my mother?

Was he heartbroken when she left? Is *that* why I'll greet Christmas day in a candy striper bikini, lonely and bored in our terrace pool, trying not to catch anyone's eye?

Because everywhere I look, there are crushes of people. *Hordes* of people, all grinning and jubilant, some of their faces familiar from blockbuster movies or the ten o'clock news. All singing off-key Christmas carols and pressing close to each other in the pool, their slippery limbs sometimes brushing mine and making me shudder.

Jeez. Don't these people have families to go home too? Aren't they tired of all this yet? What's the point of being rich and famous if your life is this shallow?

"Hey, Wainwright girl," a nearby man calls, sloshing toward me through the chest-high water. I blink, sinking down to my neck.

This guy's famous—a musician, I think. A rock star, with long dark hair dragging in the pool behind him as he stumbles forward with that wide, bright grin.

He's broad-shouldered and tattooed and technically handsome, but you know what? That all only works for me with one man.

"How long have you been hiding in here, huh, Wainwright girl? We've all been looking for you," the rock star says through his grin, talking too loud and waving an arm behind him, showering the party-goers with errant spray. Someone curses him out; someone else laughs like a hyena.

And all around, pairs of eyes turn on me, suddenly curious.

Some eyes are narrowed; others have pin-prick pupils. Some are nosy and some are glassy with drink. But they *all* feel like needles, prickling at my skin, making my heart pound, and suddenly... I can't do this anymore. I can't play the polite host to make my father happy. Not for another single second.

I thought I could make it through one last party, but you know what? I can't.

I won't stand around half dressed, smiling at men who call me 'Wainwright girl', letting them stare. Won't act like this whole party doesn't make me feel jaded and heart-sore.

"Excuse me," I mutter, turning to the edge of the pool. This won't be a graceful exit, but the steps out of here are too far away, and I can't nudge my way through so many people to get there. Not when they're all staring at me like this. No, thank you.

My hands brace on the terrace paving stones, still warm from the afternoon sun. The rock star says something behind me, but I don't catch it.

I'm ready to leave. Ready to head up to my room, take a long, hot shower, then bundle myself up in bed and count down the minutes until everyone is gone.

Pushing hard on the stones, I jump up, water sloshing everywhere. And I'm raising one knee, about to crawl out of here no matter how undignified it looks, but a strong hand grabs my messy bun and yanks me back into the water.

"Oh no you don't," the rock star yells, cracking up with laughter, like this is all such a hilarious joke. "You don't get away from us that easily, Wainwright girl."

The back of my head burns from where he yanked my hair. I whirl around and stare up at this man, this *stranger*, frozen with confusion and fear and rage.

What's his plan here? He's going to keep me in this pool against my will? Even with people staring at us and some

guests whispering behind their hands and my own useless father somewhere on the grounds?

Who knows? Whatever the rock star's plan, I don't get to find out—because a strong hand reaches past me, grabs a fistful of the musician's dark hair, and yanks him up out of the pool in one ruthless motion.

“How do you fucking like it?” Saxon spits, lifting the other man as easily as a feather pillow. He shakes him by the hair, ignoring his yelp of pain, then dumps his sprawled body on the terrace.

Eight

Ali



Two of the other security guards step forward, grabbing a wet arm each, and it's just as well they're taking that guy away, because Saxon looks ready to rip him limb from limb. He looms high above me on the poolside, his chest heaving and his face cast in shadow. His fists are balled at his sides.

When Saxon glances down, I jerk back in the water. It's nothing real—it's prey instinct. Automatic. I'm not scared of him at all, I never could be, and I'm so, so glad he's here.

But Saxon's expression shutters.

"Come on," he says gravely, crouching by the pool and lifting me out from beneath my arms. Water cascades down my body, speckling the terrace and spotting Saxon's shoes, but he holds me like something precious. Sets me gingerly on my feet, everything so different from the way he slung that rock star around like a garbage bag. "Where's your towel?"

My teeth are chattering, despite the warm night, and I wish I could shrink into nothing. "Inside."

Saxon grunts and sweeps me up against his chest, bridal style. And I'm gonna soak through his suit, gonna leave the biggest wet patch ever, but when I point that out to our head of security, he doesn't seem to care.

He strides through the party inside, jaw set, expression thunderous, carrying me from room to room. And it's quieter in here than before, with most of the crowds out in the grounds, but there are still guests cringing out of his path, watching us go. Their whispers follow us all the way to the lobby and up the stairs.

My bedroom is on the third floor, at the back of the house. Saxon carries me there directly, my body clutched tight to his chest, his muscles rock solid with tension. He doesn't say a single word, not for the whole way there, and after a minute or so, I get worried.

“Saxon?”

He sniffs hard and keeps walking. I pet his beard.

“Saxon? I'm okay, I swear.”

He *growls*. Those big arms tighten around me.

And even though tonight has sucked so, so much, even though that rock star pulling my hair freaked me the hell out, with each passing second cradled in Saxon's arms... I feel better. The tension seeps away, and my lips curve into a wobbly smile.

“I can't believe you dragged him out by his hair.”

Saxon huffs. “Should've ripped it clean off.”

Words! That's progress.

"His hair is probably insured for thousands."

"Well, so are his hands, but I'd break those too."

And I shouldn't be grinning at this, shouldn't be enjoying Saxon's protective rage so much, but I can't help it. This night has taken a wonderful turn.

We're alone, and Saxon's carrying me to my bedroom. As we pass a clock in the hallway, I gasp and smack his arm. "Five minutes to midnight! It's nearly Christmas Day."

And Saxon huffs again, too worked up to humor my festive fever, but his grip on me softens a tiny bit. Some of the tension leaves the corners of his eyes, and his steps slow down, like he doesn't want this moment to be over too soon.

Neither do I.

"Thought I might kill him," Saxon confesses quietly as we approach my bedroom door. "When I saw him grab you like that, when I heard you yelp... I saw red, Ali Cat. If Manuel and Pete hadn't been there too, I don't know what I would've done."

And he sounds so tortured, confessing to me like this; his gray eyes are so miserable as they flick to me and away. And I *know* he's thinking about my stupid, knee-jerk flinch, the way I twitched away when Saxon looked at me back there, but I don't know how to set that right. Don't know how to reassure this man that I feel safe with him.

I pet his beard again. Can never touch this man enough.

And Saxon sighs, long and low, as he nudges my bedroom door open and carries me across to the bed. It's big, bigger than one person could ever need, with an industrial bronze metal headboard.

Everything in this house is my father's taste. How would I decorate my own room if I had the chance?

I'll tell you one thing for sure: Holiday. Decorations. Everywhere.

When Saxon lays me down on the mattress, a shadow passes behind his eyes. The moonlight spilling through the window glints against his beard, and I'm expecting a kiss, a comment, anything except the way he straightens and starts to leave. His long strides carry him across the room in a blink.

“Uh. *What?*”

Saxon pauses with his hand on the doorknob and glances back. I'm bolt upright on my bed, pink-cheeked and furious—hell, even my nipples are two angry beads beneath my bikini top.

Saxon frowns. “You need something, Ali Cat?”

I scoff. “Um, *yeah* I need something. I need *you*, you big jerk.”

Saxon watches me for a long, long moment, the wheels turning in his huge head. Then slowly, oh so slowly, he shuts my bedroom door.

And flips the lock.

I shiver.

“You sure about that?” His question is casual, polite, as he strolls back toward the bed, hands tucked in his pants pockets, but Saxon isn’t fooling me. I see the tense set of his shoulders; the hard clench of his jaw. The way his gray eyes bore into me, like he could pin me to the mattress by gaze alone. “You seemed twitchy back there.”

He stops beside the bed, but he doesn’t sit. Doesn’t beckon me closer. Doesn’t do anything except loom over me in the moonlight, so big and broad and *right*, waiting for me to make the next move.

“I was.” My throat is dry, and I swallow hard. “I was twitchy, but not because of you. Never because of you. *Please*, Saxon.”

His eyes slam shut, a shudder rolling through his big body beneath his suit. Think he likes hearing me beg.

And hey, I have zero shame about begging for what I want! Not from this man, anyway. So while his eyes are closed, while he’s straining for the last shreds of his self control, I slip off my bikini top and drop it silently to the rug beside the bed. Warm air washes over my bare skin, and goosebumps break out on my arms.

When Saxon opens his eyes again, he curses under his breath. Sucks in several long, labored breaths, his chest working under his shirt, and drags a shaky hand down his beard.

“Ali,” Saxon rasps. “Baby girl. You’re killing me here.”

“Good.” I wet my lips, heart hammering. “Come down here and teach me a lesson.”

For such a big man, Saxon moves fast when he wants to, exploding forward with power and grace. From one breath to the next, he’s kneeling over me on the mattress, hands on my wrists, shoving me back against the bed with my arms above my head. And he’s not gentle, not wholly in control, but that’s okay.

Unlike those assholes out there at the pool party, I trust Saxon. He would never hurt me.

And besides, I *like* when he gets wild like this; I like when he tosses me around like his plaything. Saxon hunkers over me, blocking out the starlight, dwarfing my bare limbs with his huge, warm body, and I swear: there’s nowhere else on the planet that I’d rather be.

“You’re a brat, you know that?” The words are dark and low, and my blood simmers in response. My body arches up against him, and I choke back a breathless laugh.

“You love it. And besides, if I didn’t push all your buttons, you’d *never* get around to kissing me.”

It’s true, and we both know it. Saxon would’ve stayed in the background for years, watching over me, silent and steady. Never presuming to offer anything more; never imagining that I might want him back.

This is so much better, and I'll never be sorry for teasing us to this edge. Already, his heat and scent and presence is nearly overwhelming, and my eyes are damp with relief and joy.

This has got to be it, right? I've kissed his mouth. Gone to my knees for him in the library. How else can I possibly prove that I want this man?

"Ali," he says quietly. "Alison."

Then he ducks his head, and... brushes his cheek against mine.

It feels good, don't get me wrong, but I poke at his shoulder. "What are you doing? Kiss me."

Saxon makes a rumbly noise, then rubs his face against my neck. And it finally twigs, my brain too soupy and slow after the night's events—this is his revenge after my antics in the library. *His* stolen kiss.

Without my brain even getting involved, my thighs spread apart.

And Saxon laughs, smoky and pleased, as he sniffs and rubs and *almost* kisses my chest, my bare nipples, my stomach, my hips... my trembling thighs.

"Oh, please," I whine, tangling my fingers in Saxon's dark hair. He's still fully dressed down there, looming over my bare body in his suit, and the contrast makes something twist in my lower belly. My pulse thuds between my legs, heavy and

insistent, and the cry spills out of me without warning:
“Please, daddy.”

Saxon turns to stone. He’s rigid down there, a breath from my bikini shorts, every muscle in his body suddenly tense.

Oh, god. Oh, god, oh, god.

Why did I call him that? I’ve blown it.

Because sure, I’ve called Saxon *daddy* a thousand times in the privacy of my own mind, especially when I’m having a little me-time late at night, but that doesn’t mean he wants to hear it out loud. Doesn’t mean he won’t think I’m a freak for even thinking it.

“What did you say?” Saxon says at last, his voice strained. The words rumble against the juncture of my legs, even without his mouth on me. His breath torments me through the last layer of fabric.

“Nothing!” My voice is too high, breathy and strangled. “Sorry. No, I didn’t—didn’t say anything. I mean, I did but I said, ‘Please, Saxon.’”

And maybe I can babble my way out of this; can say I hit my head in the pool or something. Maybe I can lie my ass off and make this okay again.

But: “Liar,” Saxon says softly, and he still hasn’t moved. Hasn’t touched his mouth to my desperate body, but hasn’t leaned back either. Is he repulsed or not, damn it? I’m losing my mind here, sweating and shivering in the center of my giant bed.

“Don’t be mad,” I whisper, and Saxon’s head jerks up. Gray eyes fix on me, ravenous and barely restrained.

“I’m not mad, Alison.” Two big hands grip my bikini shorts and tear them in half, merciless and matter of fact, and I yelp, body rippling toward the ceiling. The shreds of red and white fabric fly over Saxon’s shoulder, landing somewhere with a soft *whump*. “I want to hear it again.”

“D-daddy,” I say, forcing the word through chattering teeth. Everything about this is so much, so intense, and I can barely stand it, even as I desperately want more. “I said please, daddy.”

And Saxon *groans*, burying his face between my legs.

It’s hot and wet and tingly and torturous, his tongue swiping the length of my slit and rubbing at my clit. Saxon leaves no part of me untasted, shows no mercy even when I gasp and writhe and moan, and every time I call out *that name*, it only spurs him on.

He likes this too?

He... feels the same way?

Like he’s mine and I’m his; like he watches over me. Protects me. And in return, I’ll be Saxon’s good girl and I’ll make him feel so loved, I’ll let him work out all his stress and frustrations on my body, I’ll take such good care of him too—

The crack of his palm against my ass makes me howl, pulse thudding between my thighs, and I hope Saxon can

breathe down there because he's wearing my thighs like ear muffs.

“Again,” he grunts, mouth still sealed against my slit, and I gasp out his new name again.

“Daddy.”

On and on it goes, until I'm worked into a shuddering heap on the bed, my back damp with sweat and my chlorine-scented hair spilling over the covers.

I come with his tongue inside me. With my eyes screwed shut, and my heart so full, and waves of pleasure crashing through my body.

Then Saxon kneels up, wipes his mouth on the back of his hand, and shrugs off his suit jacket.

“Stay there, baby girl. I'm not done with you yet.”

Nine

Saxon



You know, I thought I knew my place in the world. Thought I understood myself and my innermost cravings. Then Alison Wainwright opens her pretty mouth and calls me *that* name, begs me like that, and I...

Turns out I don't know anything at all.

Because in all my thirty nine years on this earth, it never once occurred to me. Never even crossed my mind that hearing her call me *daddy* would be something I'd want or crave. But the second Ali whined it, the second she declared me her lover and protector in that singular way, everything changed. My whole universe flipped upside down and rearranged.

Daddy.

The title thuds through me with each frantic heartbeat, flooding my muscles, my nerves, my veins. It's rewritten in my damn DNA, and as I lick Alison into a writhing heap, as I make her come and come and come...

I'm a different man.

Made new.

This man is done with stolen single kisses made okay with mistletoe sprigs. This man is done with sneaking around and feeling guilty; with worrying about age gaps and other people's reactions. With holding back.

I'm done. Suddenly and completely past that shit.

"You're mine," I grit out as I shrug off my white button-down shirt, tossing it over my shoulder to join my suit jacket and tie. Alison lays beneath me on the bed, pink-cheeked and so pliant, her chest heaving and her limbs askew. And those blue eyes as they stare up at me are filled with such worship, my heart gives an unsteady lurch. "Mine, you hear?"

"Yes." Her smile is full of adoration. Full of relief. "I've been yours for a long time."

As if to prove it, she waits patiently as I strip the rest of my clothes, then lets me grab her legs and yank her further down the bed. Lets me crawl on top of her like a predator. Everything I do, every growl and squeeze and hungry grunt, makes her smile like it's Christmas.

Which, hang on—

"Merry Christmas, Ali Cat."

She beams as I cover her with my much larger body, my furred belly rubbing against her toned stomach. "Merry Christmas. Santa got it really right this year."

Ha. "You're not wrong. Wrap your legs around my waist—yeah, just like that." Is there any better feeling in the goddamn

world than feeling her soft thighs gripping me? Squeezing me?
“Now hold on tight.”

Obedient as ever, Alison goes still, body rigid, holding her breath. But no, that won't do, not if she's tensed up like that, because I'd rather smash my head against a wall than hurt this girl. Would rather jump off a cliff than leave a single scratch on her.

“Relax, baby.”

A shaky laugh. Alison rolls her eyes. “I'm trying, but it's scary, okay? I've never done this before, and you're... well...”

Big.

Built like a brick shit house, with the monster appendage to match. I hear that.

And for the first time in my life, I wish things could be different—but this is how I'm made, and Alison is *mine*, and I will burrow my way inside her, by god. Deep inside her, so deep I feel the life energy thrumming through her: that's where I belong.

But tensing up will only make things worse, so I duck down and seal our mouths together, *finally* kissing my girl. Finally. And it's not a stolen peck, not a chaste brushing of lips—this kiss is deep and dirty and slow.

Ali gasps and groans. She kisses me back; nibbles my bottom lip and sucks on my tongue. And it feels so good, so hot and liquid and perfect, that my brain almost forgets what I'm doing here. How I'm trying to help her.

But my body remembers. It rocks against her, shaft rubbing along her damp, swollen slit. Oh, yeah.

“Feel that?” My words rumble against her lips, and Ali whimpers. Nods feverishly. “Feel how good it is when you relax? Don’t tense up, baby. Let me in. Let me in. Trust me.”

“Okay, daddy.”

Jesus H. Christ. This girl will be the death of me.

And even with her body relaxed, even with her slicker than a slip’n’slide, it takes us a while. It’s a steady process of nudging forward and letting her adjust; of rubbing her clit until she melts against the mattress again, tossing her head with frustrated pleasure. My forehead is creased with focus, my breaths coming in short, anguished puffs, and my spine is damp with sweat, but I don’t care.

There’s nothing I’d rather be doing right now. No one I’d rather be with.

Alison Wainwright is *mine*.

Mine.

Mine.

My perfect girl.

“Oh.” When I’m halfway in, things start to speed up. Ali starts rocking her hips up, chasing that friction, her thighs squeezing my hips. “Oh, god. Oh, god.”

Tell me about it.

“You’re so hot inside, baby. So searing hot. My perfect little furnace.”

She whimpers and tosses her head. I slide an inch deeper, cursing under my breath.

And by the time I wedge all the way home, by the time we’re sealed as tight together as we can physically go—I’m ruined. Feel like I’ve run a marathon, and had my heart wrung out like a dish towel.

“Alison. Ali Cat. Shit, you feel too good.”

She nods, burying her my throat, and lets me thrust. Lets me pick up the pace, clinging to my shoulders the whole time.

“You’re too good. Too perfect. Shit, I’m not gonna last. You feel too fucking good.”

And I’d be ashamed of this fact, I’d be embarrassed by the confessions spilling from my lips—except that Alison *loves* them, moaning and bucking her hips, clearly getting off on the fact that she’s wrecked me so badly. Getting high on her effect on me.

Well, if that’s what she likes... then I guess that’s what I like, too.

“So that’s what you wanna hear, huh?” I push up on my hands, thrusting so hard her tits jiggle, watching my girl with narrowed eyes. The room around us is all moonlight and shadows, the sounds from the party outside muted by the glass windows. Red and gold fireworks explode out there, bursting over the night sky.

“You want to hear how I can’t control myself with you? You want to watch me lose my cool? Turn me into some ten-pump chump, losing my goddamn mind over your perfect pussy? That’s what you want?”

And Ali *beams* up at me, her whole body rocking with my thrusts, and nods that beautiful head. “Yes, daddy. That’s what I want.”

Jesus.

My hips slam harder, punishing her with each thrust. And Alison takes it all, lets me use her and drip sweat on her and tug her nipples between my teeth, moaning like it’s the best thing she’s ever felt.

“No more parties after this.” I force each word between gritted teeth, because my whole body is coiled tight now, desperate to come. Every second I hold off is a goddamn miracle, my body stroking into hers, lighting up every nerve ending.

“No more Wainwright mansion. No more shitty Christmases and sad little bucket lists that break my heart. You’re coming home with me, you hear? You don’t need another bodyguard when you’re with me. You’re mine now, Ali. *Mine.*”

“Oh, please!”

Alison comes for a second time with her little hand jammed between us, rubbing away at her clit, her knuckles brushing my belly. And the second she clamps down on me,

the second those ripples shudder through her body, I drop to my elbows on top of her and follow with a roar.

It's so good it's painful. Wrenched from the center of my body; from the depths of my fucking soul.

I fill her up with spurt after spurt, until she's dripping on the bed and I need a gallon of water to recover.

And I may be an old bastard, but I'm already planning round two.

* * *

Three years later

“Close your eyes. You ready? Are they closed?”

Alison scoffs, climbing out of the truck with her mitten-clad hand in mine for balance. Snow crunches beneath her boot heel as she steps down, and a pine-scented breeze lifts her glossy dark hair. “I'm wearing a blindfold, Saxon. What does it matter?”

She can't see my stern look, but I give her one anyway. “Don't care. Close 'em.”

“So bossy.” A smile plays around Ali's mouth, and I squeeze her hand before I lead her to the cabin door.

Our steps are slow and careful, her balance wobbly without her vision, and you'd better believe I'm taking no risks with my pregnant wife as I guide her up the snowy steps.

I'd better shovel and sweep those later before she comes this way again. When it comes to Alison, I play it safe.

She's precious. The most important thing in my life by a country mile.

She has been since the moment I met her.

"It's cold here," Ali says, her head turning blindly as I fiddle with the key in the lock. "Smells fresh, too. Like how I imagine the mountains smell."

There's a real good reason for that, and I *know* this is Ali's dream, know this is the kind of place she's always longed for, but I'm still buzzing with nerves as I get the door open and flick on the lights. As I scowl at the empty fireplace, heart sinking.

Should I go in there now and light the fire? Make the full impact?

But what if she gets cold waiting out on the deck?

"You've gone all quiet," Ali observes, finding my shoulder after a few false attempts and rubbing me through my thick winter jacket. "Whatever you're all frazzled about, it'll be fine."

"I'm thinking second thoughts." It's always so easy to confess things to Ali, even when she's not blindfolded. She loves me the way I love her: with no reservations, and no take-backs. Even if I've miscalculated here, she'll love me just the same, and it's that thought that gets me breathing again. My

shoulders relax, and I steer my wife into the doorway and face her at the cabin. “But here goes nothing. Surprise, baby girl.”

Her silky hair clings to the blindfold, but it tugs away easily. Ali gasps, staring wide-eyed into the cozy mountain home, and she claps her mittens together under her chin.

“I figured... you always wanted a snowy Christmas...”

“It’s perfect,” Ali breathes, bouncing on her toes in her brand new snow boots. “Oh my god, there’s a *fireplace*. And a rocking chair! And bookcases and throws and wooden beams and it smells like sap and pine—”

“The works,” I agree, chest loosening. Well, I can’t have gone *too* wrong, even if she doesn’t know the kicker yet.

“Thank you.” When Ali turns to me, eyes so bright, I could get lost in them forever. Could swim around in her baby blues. “This is the best vacation ever.”

Yeah. That’s the thing...

“Doesn’t have to be,” I say carefully, trying to gauge her reaction as I say the words. She’s sweet and excited, mittens still clutched beneath her chin. “Doesn’t have to be a vacation unless you want it to be. We could live here full time, baby. It’s ours. I bought it.”

Her mouth drops open and just like that, the nerves are back, crowding my throat. Making my chest feel tight.

“We don’t have to,” I rush to say, kicking myself inside for thinking this was ever a good idea. “It can just be an investment property, or a rental home. We can flip it or only

come here once a year, whatever you want. But I know you've always wanted a normal life, and the thing is, out here in the sticks like this, no one gives a shit about the Wainwright family. Even beautiful as you are, no one would know you from Eve. So I could get a local job and you could do your editing work, and no one would ever bother you. We wouldn't have to worry about that anymore. But if this is dumb—”

“It's not dumb.” Ali plasters herself against my chest, and her voice is shaky. “It's *so* not dumb, Saxon. We can really live here? Start over like that? In the snow?”

I press my smile against her hair. “Don't think it snows in the summer, baby.”

“I don't care.” My wife laughs, soft and perfect, and presses a kiss to my throat. “Oh my god, I don't care. I love it.”

Thank god for that.

This was a risk, and it'll be a major change for both of us... but if it's better for Ali, it's better for me. Plain and simple. I live to make this woman happy. It's my whole deal.

“Well, come in and see it first before you agree.” I nudge her into the cabin, voice gruff. “But let me light the fire before you judge it. See the full effect.”

“I already love it,” she says again, and I'm light in my boots, floating with a job well done, as I lead her through the mountain home, pointing out the kitchen and the en suite and the nursery for our growing baby. And she's right: Ali belongs

here, with snowflakes melting in her dark hair. Her red Christmas sweater matches her flushed cheeks, and she looks so at home, like a puzzle piece slotting into place.

“But will *you* like it?” Ali asks, forehead creased with concern, but there’s no need for her to fret.

If she’s near, I’m happy. If she’s content, I’m fucking ecstatic.

Our kiss tastes like fresh mountain air.

“If you’re here, Ali Cat? Always.”

* * *

Thanks for reading 3 Stolen Kisses! I hope it gave you all the best festive feels. :)

For a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She’s sweet and innocent—and that’s like catnip in this strip club. It’s okay, though. I won’t let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

And for more Christmas spice, check out the rest of the Santa Daddy series! Read on for more details.

xxx

Welcome to the Santa Daddy series!



Father Christmas? It's more like **Santa Daddy** for these good girls. They've made the list and their daddies are checking it twice in this steamy Christmas collab from some of your favorite instalove authors.

Naughty Noelle by Tory Baker- <https://geni.us/naughtynoelle>

Addicted 2 Candy by Loni Ree - <https://mybook.to/Addicted2Candy>.

3 Stolen Kisses by Cassie Mint - <https://books2read.com/3stolenkisses>

The Daddy Claus by Loni Nichole -
<http://mybook.to/DaddyClaus>

Warming Up Coco by Mayra Statham -
<https://mybook.to/WarmingUpCoCo>

Daddy's Little 1 by Violet Rae -
<https://geni.us/daddyslittle1>

Teaser: Santa Baby

The front door opens in a swirl of snowflakes, three locals stamping their boots before they enter the bar. I wave at the new-comers from behind the pump, pulling a dark, glossy ale into a pint glass. The bar is crammed, like always, each booth and table and scrap of floor space packed tight with laughing bodies. A fire flickers in the grate on one wall, and the sound of carols mingles with the hubbub of conversation.

It's always busy at Jack's, but tonight is Christmas Eve. Every grown adult in the town has made the pilgrimage here, to laugh and drink and be merry before the marathon that is Christmas day.

And tomorrow morning, the town's parents will nurse throbbing hangovers, questioning their wisdom as their kids squeal and tear open gift paper. The holidays are a wonderful thing.

“Watch yourself.”

My best friend Gina bumps me with her hip. Gina's worked behind this bar for almost ten years—way longer than I have—and she's still looking out for me, even when I should know better by now. Her long dark hair tumbles over her generous curves, and her kohl-lined eyes stare pointedly at my hands.

I jolt, slamming the pump off a split second before the glass overflows.

“Thanks,” I mumble as I hand the ale over and take the man’s money. “Jack would kill me if I spilled beer everywhere again.”

Gina snorts, tugging the dishwasher open. “No, he wouldn’t.”

No, he wouldn’t.

Jack may own this bar, may pay all our wages, may be my freaking *landlord* on top of all that—but our boss is no tyrant. If anything, he’s too forgiving. Kinder than we deserve.

It only makes me want to please him more.

The glasses clink as we unload the dishwasher, moving in swift, practiced movements to restock the shelves below the bar. We’ve done this dance a thousand times before, and it’s soothing to fall into a rhythm. To not speak to customers for a few minutes.

Look, I love the regulars at Jack’s. I like meeting new people too. But sometimes, it’s exhausting to be *on* for hours at a time. After my longest, busiest shifts, I feel like barricading my door and never speaking to another human being again.

No one except Jack, maybe. I can’t imagine ever not wanting *him* around.

“I got Jack a present.”

Gina's words bring an ugly pinch to my chest. Jack and Gina are friends. There's no reason to be jealous, and even if there were—what right do I have to that feeling? None. Jack sees me as a worker, nothing more.

“Oh yeah?” I slide the last glass on a shelf and close the dishwasher with a thump. *Be normal, Clara.* “What did you get him?”

Gina grins and tugs a drawer open next to the cash register. Balled up inside is a red Santa's hat, edged with white and finished off with a pom pom.

“Oh my god.” I stare down into the drawer. “You *didn't*.” A woman leans over the bar, waving for service, and I go to meet her. Gina's cackles float after me, and I huff a reluctant laugh before greeting the woman. “Hey there! What can I get you?”

A Santa hat. A *Santa hat*. I bite my lip against a smile as I pour the woman's wine. That's pretty cheeky, even with a super sweet boss like Jack. I can see where Gina's coming from—Jack is burly and bearded. There's silver threaded through his hair, and there's something all-knowing about him too. He *always* knows when we've been bad.

But Santa in the stories is a jolly, grandfatherly figure. And Jack is...

Well. There's nothing *grandfatherly* about our boss. Not with his motorbike and his piercing blue eyes, or the tattoos that wrap around both arms.

But here's my secret: I'd give anything to sit on Jack's knee.

* * *

It was the usual story. Cliched, but no less sad for being that way. My mom's new boyfriend, getting handsy with her teenage daughter. Me telling my mom, and her choosing the new guy over me.

A tale as old as time, I guess. I'm lucky I was seventeen, really. I knew enough about the world to get myself out of there. To take a cross country bus to a brand new town on the edge of a big wood, and to hit the pavement, looking for work and a room.

I tried everywhere. The grocery store and the pharmacy. The library and the nursing home. Nowhere had jobs going—or if they did, they didn't fancy hiring a scruffy runaway to fill the role. Can't blame them, really.

Jack's Bar was the last place on my list. I mean, it was a *bar*. If I weren't desperate, I wouldn't even bother asking, but the sun was sinking in the sky and a cold night was drawing in, and that wood on the edge of town was looking way less friendly than in the daylight.

Jack took one look at my threadbare clothes, soaked through from the rain, and the half-empty duffel bag sagging on my shoulder, and he hired me on the spot. He even let me rent the room above the bar for peanuts, handing over the key right there at my 'interview'.

Interview. Ha. If I'd knocked over every chair in this bar, he'd still have hired me. Jack's wonderful like that.

He didn't ask me tons of questions. Didn't look at me funny, like my mom's boyfriend did, although even back then I probably wouldn't have minded. Jack had less silver in his hair, but he was still a silver fox. All hard muscles and burly shoulders; strong hands and a strong jaw to match.

But my teenage crush went unnoticed. Didn't even register. And Jack didn't let me work behind the bar until I was old enough to drink the booze myself. Until then, I spent almost four years cleaning the booths and collecting empties; helping with filing in Jack's office and placing orders for supplies.

It was good of him to find me work like that. Itty bitty tasks to justify paying my wage. But when I finally got behind that bar... that was such a great day.

I figured he must see me as an adult at last. A grown woman, not a child in need of saving. Twenty one years old—someone he might look at twice. Someone he might look at *closely*.

No such luck. Not so far, anyway.

“You're really going to give him that hat?”

I stand shoulder to shoulder with Gina, scrubbing down the bar during a brief lull. The hours are wearing on, but there's no sign in the crowd waning. New people squeeze through the

door every ten minutes, and the roar of conversation builds louder and louder, nearly drowning out the carols.

In the far corner, someone stumbles into the tree, the string lights jiggling, and I wince. It's a scraggly little Christmas tree that I saved up for and bought with my own money—another attempt at saying *thank you* to Jack, for everything.

I'll be thanking that man my whole life and it won't be enough. And that sad little tree... I don't know what I was thinking. Jack hasn't even noticed. But I still wish the customers would be a bit more careful.

"Why not?" Gina nudges me, and it's like she's reading my mind. "You bought him a Christmas tree. We're on theme."

"But Jack will think you're teasing him. Calling *him* Santa."

Gina barks a laugh. "Well, I am."

God. There's no use arguing. When Gina gets an idea, it's full steam ahead. And I love that about her, love her humor and drive, but part of me still squirms at the thought of this gift.

I don't want her calling Jack old. Not even as a joke.

Because what if he listens to her? Then he'll *never* look at me that way.

* * *

Check out [Santa Baby!](#)

XXX



Cassie Mint

About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT insta-love with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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