


L.L. Diamond



Catching
LIZZY

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by

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Published by L.L. Diamond

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To my husband:

This next year brings a new chapter in our lives together.

I'm so proud of you and all you've accomplished.

Chapter 1



LIZZY

I was a snow beast—the great snow monster from the north. What self-respecting designer would create such a hideous dress? I attempted to shove down the outrageous organza skirt that flared from my waist in a way that would make Scarlett O’Hara jealous, but it only bounced back. Then there were the large bows trimming the hemline. Somehow, they seemed to make the skirt wider.

“I won’t fit through the door of the chapel.” Would I even fit down the aisle? My father couldn’t escort me without tripping on a bow and face-planting in the middle of the procession.

“Oh, pooh!” Faith Bennet, my mother—the woman who bore me, at least—wore the most ridiculous dreamy expression while she picked at the puffed sleeves, making them balloon further than they already were. Meanwhile, my sister Jane gave a small snort, one hand on her sizeable baby bump. The little snort was trying not to laugh.

“I knew when I saw this in the bridal store that it would be perfect,” said Faith. My best friend and I have always called my mother by her first name. I’m not sure when it started, but at times, it seemed to make her more bearable. “If only I’d been able to have a beautiful gown when I married, but my mother wouldn’t hear of it.”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. How many times had I heard my mother’s wedding tale of woe? My parents’ wedding ceremony had been of the shotgun variety. Faith Gardiner had been three months pregnant when my grandparents discovered her condition, so Faith and Benjamin Bennet had been married two weeks later, which also happened to be my mother’s eighteenth birthday. Faith had no dream wedding. Instead, my grandparents took Faith and

Benjamin to the closest justice of the peace. The happy, or not-so-happy, couple were wed in the living room with no cake, no reception, and no pretty wedding dress.

“But this isn’t even one of the gowns I tried on.” I pressed down on the skirt again, but it poofed out further. I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t groan. Even the dress was mocking me.

“I know you loved the Vera Wang, Lizzy, but that one wasn’t romantic enough. You picked a gown with no lace! I mean, who wears a wedding dress without one stitch of lace?”

“A lot of people, Mom,” said Jane.

Faith waved off Jane’s response. “Wait until Bill sees you in this gown. He’ll fall all over himself.”

“Bill’s not really the falling type.” He was more the stick up the ass type if I was being honest. How was I going to spend the rest of my life with a man who chewed each bite of his meal exactly twenty times? He counted the stairs going up to make sure he had equal steps with his right and left leg. So far, I’d never witnessed what happened when the number of steps wasn’t even. I guess I would—one day? The thought made my eyes burn.

With a sigh, Faith clasped her hands together at her chest. “I don’t believe that. Bill always speaks so highly of you, Lizzy. He’s also dependable and has an excellent career ahead of him. I know he’s not rich—yet—but I’m certain he’ll get that promotion at de Bourgh. He’ll be the perfect husband. You’ll see.”

For the thousandth time this morning, I swallowed hard. The acid stinging the back of my throat made me grimace. I was going to vomit. I was going to hyperventilate. I was going to—

“We need to put on your veil! It’s almost time.” My mother practically skipped over to the box while I pressed my palm to my stomach as it churned.

“Is Aunt Maddie here?”

“I’m sure she’s being seated as we speak.”

I swayed in my spot. “I need a minute alone.”

Faith pivoted around so quickly that her shoes squeaked on the parquet floor of the Sunday school room. “We don’t *have* a minute. You walk down the aisle in less than ten minutes.” My mother’s familiar exasperated tone was the same as when I was ten and had skinned my knee, tearing my tights in the process.

“Mom? Did you check to see if Mrs. Goulding showed up to play the organ?” asked Jane. “I heard she was sick last week.”

“What?” I startled at how loudly Faith responded. She had two volumes: stage whisper and shrieking. “Are you sure? I never heard anyone say that, and Clara didn’t say a word.” Probably because Clara Goulding despised Faith and only agreed to play at the wedding for the money.

Jane shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know. I’m just asking.”

My mother huffed. “What would you girls do without me? I take care of everything as it is, but I still had to plan both of your weddings...”

As soon as the door closed, Jane caught my gaze in the mirror and lifted her eyebrows. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“No.” I tried to rub my eye with my hand, but Jane stopped me before I could smudge the twenty layers of mascara my mother’s cosmetologist applied to my eyelashes. If I cried, I’d resemble Tammy Faye Baker by the time the fourth tear ran down my cheek. “Why do you let her claim credit for planning your wedding?”

“Because it’s easier than arguing. In your case, you *did* let her plan everything.”

“Well, she’d marry Bill if she could, so why not give her the satisfaction?”

My sister shook her head. “You don’t have to do this, you know?”

“That’s easy for you to say. You fell in love with a guy Faith found perfect while Bill was the only thing I’ve *ever* done right—and she set us up.” If you asked my mother, Jane was the most perfect child ever created. She married Charlie, the ideal man, and was now expecting what would surely be the most beautiful baby in the world. If I hadn’t loved and idolized my sister like I did, I might’ve been jealous.

Jane’s hand rested on my shoulder. “By Mom’s standards, he’s ideal, but what of your standards? You can paste that smile on your face and say you’re happy, but I’m not fooled, Lizzy. You deserve more. You may not believe it, but I know it.”

I pressed my thumb between my eyes. Yes, it was a weird thing to do, but anything more would ruin the makeup caked on my face. “Can I just be alone for a little while? Please?”

Jane wrapped her arms around me from behind. “I love you.”

I embraced my older sister’s arms. “I know. I love you too. I’m sorry for being such a pain.”

“You’re not a pain.”

As soon as Jane closed the door behind her, I groaned at my reflection in the mirror. “I am the winter wildebeest. Just call me Abominable from the Rudolph Christmas special. The elves could use my skirt for a freaking tent! What was Faith thinking?” I never wore bows and rarely wore lace, and this gown had enough to make up for almost twenty-six years of frilly abstinence. Faith surely rubbed her hands together in glee at the sight of this overdone atrocity.

Organ music began from somewhere on the other side of the door, and my stomach rolled. I had to marry Bill, didn’t I? When I was a little girl, I’d imagined my wedding and the guy who I would meet at the end of the aisle. He wore a sleek black tuxedo and bore a remarkable resemblance to Zac Efron in *Hairspray*. Sigh! I loved a man with striking blue eyes. Bill’s were brown.

“Why are you marrying someone you don’t love?” I asked the mirror. I glanced down to my empty ring finger. Bill hadn’t bought an engagement ring, not even a cheap silver band. Instead, he gave a prolonged speech about how engagement rings and diamonds were a scam promoted by the jewelry industry. He never mentioned any of the human rights issues behind diamonds. No, only that he refused to pay a small fortune for a commodity that was withheld to keep the prices high and the stones in demand. Bill was romantic to the core.

A knock came from the door, and I swallowed hard. “Two more minutes! Please!”

If I walked out now, Faith would never forgive me. All I’d ever wanted was for Faith Bennet to say, “I’m proud of you.” Would marrying a man my mother loved finally earn me those words?

A voice inside me whispered that nothing would ever satisfy Faith Bennet. Well, that voice had started as a whisper after the engagement. The low murmur had grown and was more of a scream now. I was going to sacrifice a huge part of my life for what? Faith would never accept me for who I was.

My chest burned, and the heat expanded as it engulfed me. Well, Faith would not rule my life for one moment longer! I yanked the pins from my hair and shook out the fat curls, which stuck out in every direction from the shellacking of Aqua Net that had been applied by the hairdresser. “Hah!” I yelled at the mirror. I clapped my hand over my mouth. What if someone heard? What if they walked in on me? I crept over to the door and turned the lock as quietly as possible. No way existed for me to make my escape through the church anyway. I’d never get past the gauntlet of family and friends I’d encounter along the way. As it was, Faith was likely in the hallway waiting for me.

My legs trembled as I rushed to the window. What was I doing? I stopped for a moment and shook myself. No! I couldn’t think about this too much, or I’d chicken out. The window’s latch flipped easily, and I drew up the panel.

Thank God I was on the ground floor! I started to climb through the window one ballooned shoulder at a time, but when I reached the skirt, I had to shove against the frame to make even the slightest progress in freeing myself. I used as much force as I could manage. I pressed. I shoved. No! I wasn't moving! I tried to backtrack, but that didn't work either. No, no, no! I was stuck! Why did this kind of thing always happen to me? It was that awful skirt. Leave it to Faith to pick a gown that would ensure I couldn't escape.

“Lizzy, what are you doing?”

With a gasp, I turned my head, flipping my big hair so I could see the face that went with the low voice I knew well. My best friend in the world, Richard Fitzwilliam, leaned against the brick wall of Our Lady of Hope Catholic church with a crooked grin.

“Thank God! I'm getting the fuck out of here, and you're going to help me.”

His eyebrows shot up on his forehead. “That's the most sensible thing I've heard you say in the past five years!”

I exhaled and strained against the window frame. “Shut up, Dickie, and help me get out of this.”

Richard rolled his eyes and swaggered toward me. “Well, I guess I can. Since it's you.”

“How gracious of you.” I bit out the response.

“I know. I'm the epitome of kindness.” He grabbed me under the arms and tugged, but I only budged a little. My heart was beating a mile a minute and my palms were starting to sweat, and not in a good way. This was taking too long! Faith would eventually get through that door and find me half in and half out, my feet dangling to the inside.

Richard pushed against the wall with his foot for leverage, but we only gained a half-inch, if that. When Richard slipped his hands into the window and began manipulating the organza of the skirt, he growled. “What the hell is this dress, Bennet? You could house a small family in this skirt.”

I looked over my shoulder. “Why are you asking now? We have to hurry. My mother and Jane will be back any minute. Do you want my mother to know you’re helping me run away?”

“You forget—I don’t speak to your mother, and mine won’t have anything to do with her anymore, so I don’t care... Ha! I might ruin it, but I think I can compress this monstrosity. You work at freeing yourself. Just don’t kill me if I accidentally grab a handful of ass, okay?”

“I don’t care if you ruin the gown or grab my ass. Get me out of here!”

“Stop yelling at me and push!”

I heaved once... twice... three times, then blinked. Suddenly, I was looking up at Richard from the ground.

He reached down to help me to my feet with a stupid grin. “You can thank me later.” Lord, I wanted to slap him when he wore that smug expression. After all the pressing and shoving to get free, I swayed for a second when Richard stepped back. His gaze scanned down to my feet then back up, taking in the entirety of the abominable wildebeest atrocity. He covered his mouth and began to chuckle.

“Not now, Dickie! Where are you parked? You have to get me out of here.”

Chapter 2



RICHARD

When we reached my truck, I unlocked my custom 1970s electric Bronco and opened the passenger side door for Lizzy. “I know I have an old SUV, but that skirt still won’t fit.” Despite compressing the garment to get through the window, the humongous hoops had popped right back to their original state. What the ever-loving—! I’d shoved it down until it was half its size. How was that possible?

“I can’t get this thing off by myself.” Lizzy began frantically lifting armfuls of frilly material up from the asphalt under our feet. “What do you want me to do?”

I blew out a noisy exhale. “You owe me for this,” I muttered. Before I could consider what I was doing, I dropped to my knees, ducked under the layers upon layers of frills, and found the waist of the underskirt. My fingers traced from Lizzy’s belly button all the way to the back, but no fastenings. Had they sewn her into the damned thing? “Where’s the freaking button or snap?”

“It’s a drawstring.”

I repeated the process in the opposite direction. “I can’t believe I’m in your skirts.” I couldn’t help but laugh at my own joke. We’d been friends forever, and I’d never, ever imagined I’d have to do this!

“Oh, my God. You would go there.”

“Ha!” My finger caught the loop of a bow that popped from underneath the waistband when I pulled the fabric away from her waist. I tugged and tugged at the knot, but it wouldn’t give. “Don’t move.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to use my pocketknife, or we’ll be here for hours. Faith obviously doesn’t want grandchildren from you if she tied this.”

“Stop trying to be funny.”

With a quick flick of the blade, the underskirt fell, and I bolted from under the mass of fabric before I became trapped and suffocated in the fashion faux-pas fiasco of bows and organza... or was that tulle? As soon as I was back on my feet, I brushed at the knees of my black tuxedo pants. “I’m going to need to get them cleaned.”

Lizzy hurried up into the passenger seat without waiting for me to help her. “Stop whining and get in the truck.”

“I’m not whining.”

“I’ve never known a guy who was so fastidious about his clothing.”

I let out a cross between a laugh and a cough as I climbed inside the cab. “I bet Bill is.” She’d even told me how he could only wear suit coats with an even number of buttons.

“Don’t say his name ever again.”

I grinned as I started the engine. “Who? Bill?”

At her glare, I held up my hands. “Okay, okay! I promise I won’t mention him again.”

I let out another huge exhale as I drove out of the parking lot. All I needed was Faith Bennet to spot me liberating Lizzy from that prick she’d convinced her daughter to date and marry. Not that I cared. Faith could kiss my ass. I was Lizzy’s friend and would never abandon her—especially now!

After about ten minutes of silence, there was a sniff. “Richard, I think I need to go back.”

“You want to go back and face Faith?” The woman would eviscerate Lizzy.

“Ugh! No, she’ll kill me. On second thought, I need alcohol.” Lizzy’s voice was small, so when I stopped at the next light, I glanced over and flinched. Tears poured down her

cheeks which were now covered in trails of gloppy black. Most of the time, she hardly wore any makeup and was gorgeous as she was. The thick mask Faith had applied to Lizzy's face was now melting away. The effect was terrifying.

“Sweetie, don't cry. I promise everything will be okay.”

“You don't know that.” The words came out on a sob.

“Oh, but I do. You didn't love Bill.”

Her expression turned fierce, and she pointed her index finger directly at my chest. “I said not to mention his name!”

“You didn't love the tapeworm. Is that better?”

“Eww!” Her nose was starting to run and coalesce with the tears.

I kept a box of tissues in the back, so I grabbed them and put them in her lap. “Well? What did you want me to call him?”

“What was that list of names in *Bridget Jones' Diary*?” She sniffled.

“I believe it was ‘alcoholics, workaholics, commitment phobics, peeping toms, misogynists, megalomaniacs, chauvinists, emotional fuckwits, or perverts.’^[1] Which do you want to apply to You Know Who?”

“I can't believe you can still recite that from memory. Oh!” She pointed up ahead. “There's a liquor store in that shopping center. Pull in!”

“Firstly, we've watched that movie how many times? I've also read the book. As for the alcohol, I don't know if that's a good idea.”

“Come on, Dickie.”

“I wish you would stop calling me that.”

She giggled through her tears. “Your grandmother still calls you that.”

I turned into the parking lot and pulled into a space right in front of the store. “What do you want?”

“I’ll get it.”

She began gathering the folds of her skirt, but I grabbed her wrist before she could step out of the car. “In that dress? Without the underskirt, you’ll fall flat on your face.” I wasn’t going to mention the smeared makeup unless I had to.

With a huff, she slumped back into the seat. “Vodka, gin, whiskey. I don’t care.” As I started to exit the vehicle, she grabbed me by the shoulder. “On second thought, go big or go home. YOLO. You know and all that.”

“What does that mean?”

“That Scotch you always drink. I like that one.”

“The Aberlour?” She wanted to get drunk on a \$100 bottle of Scotch. “That’s going to be ugly in the morning.” I wasn’t exaggerating either. She may as well drink Jack if she wasn’t going to savor it.

She waved her hand. “Never mind. I’ll take a bottle of tequila.”

I greeted the man at the counter when I entered. The hard liquor was behind the counter, so I stood in front of the clerk while I studied the shelves behind him. I passed over the cheap crap, then pointed to a bottle of Patròn Silver. I wasn’t totally heartless. I would never let her get plastered on rotgut.

When I made it back to the truck, I handed her the bag. She ripped the paper off, then proceeded to use her fingernail to break the plastic seal.

“How are you going to...?” Someone could’ve knocked me over with a feather when she tipped the bottle back and drank down a quarter of its contents. Shit! I’d need to get her some water and soon. Maybe once she got tipsy, I could hide the rest before she got alcohol poisoning.

“What’s wrong?” She wiped her cheek, smearing the black streaks up her cheekbone and into her hair.

“Not a thing.” I winced as I started the car, and as soon as we were on the road, I tapped the steering wheel a few times.

“If you puke in my car, you’re going to clean it, then pay a professional to do it again.”

“I won’t puke in your car. Besides, I have the bag the tequila was in. Stop being such a wimp.”

“You ripped the bag, remember? It was also paper.”

“Oh, yeah.” She dropped her head onto the headrest.

“I’ll take you home.”

“No!” Her head shot up so hard I would be surprised if her brain didn’t ricochet off her skull. “My mother will be at my door as soon as she realizes I’m gone. I’ll be stuck inside. It’ll be a siege.”

“No biggie. We’ll go to my apartment then.”

“I have no doubt she’ll try there too. You haven’t moved in the past six years. Both of us would be trapped.”

I could’ve groaned. She was right. Faith would never leave me alone until I gave up Lizzy’s whereabouts. I’d never do that, of course, but I didn’t want to deal with the woman either. “Then what do you suggest?”

“I have to get out of town for a while, at least until Faith cools off. You’ll want to lie low for a few weeks.”

With a groan, I sagged then straightened. “I’ll have to call my assistant at some point. We’ll need to coordinate everything so I can work remotely for several days.” Lizzy wanted to believe Faith Bennet would cool off, but that woman had a memory like a rhinoceros. She never forgot anything and would ram her objections down your throat if you let her. I gripped the steering wheel and winced.

To tell the truth, I was surprised Liz was left alone long enough to get away. Faith was so engrossed in this wedding, I wouldn’t have been shocked if Faith had walked down the aisle herself, and in that insane dress Lizzy was wearing.

A second’s glance was all I needed to know the woman had selected the gown herself. Lizzy—my best friend since kindergarten—would never wear so many frills or bows, or a

monstrosity that appeared as though she was expecting to time travel back to the Civil War.

For as long as I could remember, Mrs. Bennet had talked about when her daughters married—when they found rich men. She had encouraged Lizzy’s friendship with me once upon a time. How many times had she insinuated the two of us would make a “lovely couple” or comment that I should take Jane, who was a mere year older, to this dance or that? Of course, that stopped four years ago when Faith Bennet saw me out on a date one night. At the realization I preferred men, I became the wealthy, unavailable man Faith Bennet no longer had time for, and she admonished Lizzy for remaining my friend.

No, Mrs. Bennet would never forgive her second daughter for running away on her wedding day—she also would never forgive me for helping—but I certainly wouldn’t mention that to Lizzy right now. Telling her that would only make her drink more, and she’d taken several more sips since she downed the first six or eight shots in one gulp.

The piercing sound of a screaming goat filled the cab, and I about jumped out of my skin.

“Oh, God! It’s Faith! She knows I’m gone.” Lizzy picked up her leather phone wallet and opened it, staring at the screen. We’d guffawed when we found that ringtone and set it for her mother. Now, it engendered terror.

“Don’t answer it. You know she’ll only lay a guilt trip on you.”

“I know.” Her head jerked to face me, her eyes bulging. “What if she tracks my phone? Do you remember that stalking case six months ago where the guy did that and the girl had no idea? It was all over the news.” Lizzy began tearing her driver’s license and credit cards out of the phone wallet.

“What are you doing?” Before I could stop her, she opened the window and hurled her phone as far as she could.

“Now, she won’t know where we are.” She wore a satisfied smile that wouldn’t last once she’d sobered and

recalled what she'd done.

“What if she finds my number?”

Lizzy snorts. “She deleted that years ago, and your mother would never tell her. I think we're safe.” She tipped back the bottle of tequila and took another gulp.

I couldn't argue about my mother. She'd overheard Faith attempting to lay a massive guilt trip on Lizzy in high school. If Lizzy had wanted to leave the Bennet's house, my parents would have used every legal means to keep her from having to go back. As far as they were concerned, Mrs. Bennet was just plain manipulative, and Mr. Bennet enabled her abuse.

I reached over and took her hand. “Hey, we can make it 275 miles before I need to charge the battery. Any ideas on where you want to go?”

She shook her head. “I don't care as long as it's far, far, far away from my mother.” Her words were slurring. She'd fall asleep soon. I squeezed her hand as another tear fell onto her cheek.

“Hon, you don't ever have to see Faith Bennet again if you don't want to.”

After she nodded, I turned my attention back to the road. The car was very quiet except for the hum of the heater. Lizzy wasn't sleeping, though. If she'd passed out, she would've been snoring like a freight train. She always snored when she was drunk. Other than the occasional sniff, she hadn't made a peep.

“Dickie?”

“Yeah, Liz?”

“If neither of us has found someone by thirty-five, will you marry me?”

“What about sex? As beautiful as you are, you're not my type.”

“Who needs it?” She waved her hand almost falling over in the process. “It's not like I ever got any from Bill. My vibrator has worked overtime for the past five years.”

My eyes almost popped from their sockets. She'd had a five-year drought, and she'd never told me! And how had her vibrator lasted five years? I shook myself.

I'd known she didn't love Bill, and I'd tried to make her see sense, but I'd never been successful. If I'd known, I would've gotten her drunk and found some decent guy to hook up with her. Anything to get her away from the stiff-necked suck-up. Heck, I had someone I'd always thought was perfect for her. Bill was even more of a fuckwit than I had imagined.

"You won't need me. You'll find the perfect man, get married, have those three kids you want, and live happily ever after."

She snuffled. "No man will want me once they meet Faith."

"They'll still love you, and because of that, they'll never let Faith near you again."

"That's definitely a fairy tale."

When she began to snore, I pulled off the road, capped the Patròn, and tucked it behind her seat. She didn't need any more. I watched her sleep for a moment while I bit at my lip. Should I? I'd be read the riot act for bringing a drunk friend to crash, but I wouldn't need to stop to charge. I could plug in my truck when we arrived. How many times had I wanted to... No, that decided it. Lizzy needed me to take care of her, and that was exactly what I was going to do.

Chapter 3



RICHARD

I pulled into the long driveway and followed the winding path until we reached the house. After two hours on the road, Lizzy had awakened, and her semi-sober state had been too much. The bottle of Patròn now contained less than half, and my best friend was a giggling, crying mess—albeit rarely at the same time. She would one moment say something that made her start laughing hysterically, and the next, she would mention Faith or Jane or some other devastating consequence of today and dissolve into sobs.

As we drew up to the garage, her eyes perked up. “Oooh, pretty.” Even I had to admit, my cousin’s house was impressive with the long, wooded driveway and its situation facing out over the lake. She hadn’t even seen the main façade of the property yet.

“Grab the garage door opener out of the glove compartment, please.”

Lizzy fumbled with the latch for a moment before the door dropped, and she startled. She brought the controller closer to her face and concentrated on the gadget like the fate of the free world depended on her pressing the button. After two attempts, the door opened.

After she tossed the controller back into the glove compartment, she relaxed back into the seat and raised the bottle of Patròn to her lips yet again. Shit! I needed to slow her down. My cousin was going to have kittens!

As soon as I had the truck inside, I reached over and took the bottle. “Whoa! Let’s slow down. I don’t want to have to carry you.”

“You want some tequila?” She pushed the open bottle in front of my face. The familiar tang made my nose crinkle. I’d

had a particularly bad experience with tequila a few years ago after a breakup. Other than the occasional margarita, I never touched the stuff.

“No, but why don’t you let me hold it for you?”

Thankfully, she passed the bottle of clear liquid over to me without argument, then peered down at her lap. “Where’s my phone?”

“You threw it out the window a couple of hours ago. Don’t you remember?”

She snorted and covered her nose for a moment. “Oh, yeah.” A fit of drunken giggles made her bend over at the waist.

I hopped out to plug in the truck before making my way to her side of the vehicle. When I opened the passenger-side door, she all but fell on me, and I grabbed her to steady her on her feet. “Come on, let’s get you some water and a bed.”

“I’m not ready to go to sleep yet. I have to finish the bottle of tequi... tequil... tequila.”

“Sweetheart, I really don’t want to make a trip to the ER tonight. Why don’t we save the tequila for in the morning?” I’d be pouring it down the drain tonight, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Good idea, Dickie. I knew there was a reason I kept you around.” She lightly slapped her palms on my chest before she turned toward the door.

I had an arm around her back as I supported her on unsteady legs into the house. “You keep me around because I’m your best friend. Who else will you get to shop with you for the perfect dress?”

“Not Faith! She doesn’t like my fashion sense.”

“Yes, well, Faith is a dumbass with an unhealthy addiction to lace.”

Lizzy buried her nose in my neck and snort laughed. If I hadn’t already known she was wasted, that would’ve been a

sure sign. “Did you see the suit she bought for the wedding?” Her head lolled onto my shoulder while she looked at me.

“I did. She looked like a baby blue doily.”

My friend grinned. “Lace blouse, lace covered coat, and lace covered skirt. There’s nothing Faith can’t find in lace. It’s an evil superpower.”

No, Faith’s evil superpower was taking a beautiful and talented woman and reducing her to a self-conscious, approval-seeking mess. As much as Lizzy knew the truth for herself, I wasn’t going to beat her over the head by bringing all that up. She had to make the decision to stop allowing herself to be her mother’s punching bag once and for all, and I would be her staunchest supporter when that day came. I could only hope this was finally that day!

When we reached the living room, Will Darcy, my cousin, stood with his arms crossed over his chest, the forbidding expression he was famous for pasted upon his face. “Richard, what in the hell is going on?”

Lizzy dragged her head up. “Dickie, who’s the hottie with the stick up his ass? That scowl might just scare Faith, it’s so good.”

I fought to keep from laughing when Will’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead. “You brought one of your drunk friends to my house?”

“It’s a long story. Which room can I put her in?”

“Are you sure she’s not going to vomit?”

I glanced down at Lizzy, whose eyes appeared as though she was having a difficult time staying awake, but so far, she had no green around the gills. “I think she’s fine at the moment, but Mrs. R.’s puking pot would certainly not be refused.”

Will’s jaw clenched and released. “Georgie’s upstairs, so you’ll need to bring her to a hotel.”

“It’s after eight! Georgie’s asleep like the rule-following little mini-me she is. By the time your daughter wakes in the

morning, Lizzy'll be sober, and no doubt, nursing one heck of an alcohol and emotional hangover."

"Lizzy? You mean *the* Lizzy?"

"Yes, the one you refused to ever meet."

My cousin's foot began to tap in a furious rhythm upon the wood floor. "Because you were attempting to set us up. Don't get any ideas, Richard. I'm not interested."

"Why would I want to be fixed up with a tight ass like you?" Lizzy swayed with a finger pointing at Will's chest. "Geez, and I thought Bill could be a prick." She flounced the skirt of her dress, then giggled again. "These bows are the most ludicrous thing I've ever seen."

"Is she wearing a wedding gown?"

"What an astute observation! Yes, it's a wedding dress. She ran out on her wedding today and needed a friend to help her get away so she could think. I brought her here because you've said I'm always welcome, and this is the perfect place for her to gain some perspective on her life. Now, can I take her upstairs before I have to carry her?"

"I don't feel so good."

This time, when I glanced down, she was green. Fuck!

Before I could shuffle her into the half-bath down the hall, she folded over at the waist and puked all over my cousin's bare feet. Will squeezed his eyes closed, his nose scrunched, and his lips pressed tightly together.

"Will—"

"Take her upstairs. Second door on the left. That room has an en-suite. You won't be able to leave her alone tonight. She'll need someone to watch over her to make sure she doesn't get sick in her sleep. But I do want to talk to you after you get her settled in."

We turned at a gasp to my cousin's nanny/housekeeper standing in the doorway. "Oh, sir! I'll be back in a moment with some towels."

Lizzy slumped against me, and I groaned. “Crap! I guess I’m carrying her now.”

Chapter 4



Will

Leave it to Richard to bring a drunk friend into my house—a drunk pukey friend who had so much black mascara running down her face that she looked like something out of a bizarre horror movie, especially with that God-awful wedding dress. Had she actually picked that tacky, overdone meringue?

I sipped from the glass of Balvenie in my hand and let the slow burn of the Scotch relax every muscle in my body. Mrs. R. had tsked and tutted as she helped clean my feet so I could make it upstairs and shower before she broke out the cleaners and scrubbed the floor spotless. The living room now smelled of that natural grapefruit cleaner she loved. Not long after she'd finished, I'd spotted her with the large pot she used when Georgie was sick, a tall glass of water, and a bottle of what had to be pain relievers. The woman was a natural nurse. She would have some hangover cure whipped up for Richard's friend in the morning. No one suffered with Mrs. R. around.

"I know you're mad, but would you mind if I poured a glass? I could use one."

I waved Richard towards the decanter and pinched the bridge of my nose. My neck was so tight you could pluck it like a guitar and my head was pounding. "Your friend is okay?"

"Mrs. R. is sitting with her for a little while. I told her it wasn't necessary, but she insisted."

Richard sat and crossed his ankle over his knee as he took his first sip and swallowed. "Look. I'm sorry Lizzy puked on your feet. She'll be horrified in the morning and probably apologize until you can't stand it anymore, but she's the best person in the world who finally put her foot down to live her own life."

I gave a sort of hiccup of a chuckle. “By running out on her wedding? Or did the groom make a quick escape?”

“She left. The guy she’s been dating for the past five years is not right for her, but she’s always craved the approval of her mother, who’s a harridan.”

“So she was marrying someone to gain the approval of her family. That’s stupid.”

Richard dipped his chin and glared at me. “That’s rich coming from you. Why did you marry Anne again?”

I hated when that came up. He was always decent to Anne. They got along, but Richard hadn’t wanted me to marry her. Even though the wedding had been more of a business decision, I couldn’t regret it. If I hadn’t married Anne, I wouldn’t have my daughter, and I couldn’t imagine my life without Georgie. The few years Anne and I were together weren’t awful, by any means. We loved each other, even if we weren’t *in love* with each other. We were friends, and when she discovered she was pregnant, we were thrilled. If she hadn’t died, would our marriage have lasted forever? I don’t know, but the possibility wasn’t worth wondering about at this point.

“I need you to not bring that up ever again.”

Richard sighed and held up his hand, palm toward me. “Yes, I know. I’m sorry. I would never want Georgie to overhear. She may only be three, but she has your intelligence. It won’t be too much longer before she can understand.”

“Thank you.” Before I could say anything else, Richard’s cell phone blared out “Charlie Brown” by The Coasters. My cousin always had songs he felt fit the individual as their personalized ringtone.

“Oh, hell! It’s Charlie.”

“Charlie Bingley? Why is that an issue?”

Richard held up a finger. “Don’t say a word, or he’ll realize where we are. He can’t know or Jane will know.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Richard slid the bar on his phone. “Bings! What’s up?” He pressed the screen twice more.

“Richard, don’t screw around with me,” came through the speakerphone. “I know you know where Lizzy is. Jane is freaking out. She needs reassurance that her sister is safe.”

My eyes bulged at the screen. Richard’s Lizzy was Charlie’s sister-in-law? How had I never put two and two together, and how hadn’t I met her before? I’d met Jane. I’d avoided Richard’s introductions to any woman since I didn’t want to be set up with another voluptuous blonde my cousin deemed “my type.” He’d known I liked brunettes, but after Anne’s death, I’m sure he thought a rebound sex romp would be just what I needed to start dating again, but I’d never been a serial dater before Anne, so why would I start now?

“Look, Charlie, I know you and Jane want what’s best for Lizzy, but she needs time away from everything. I’m sure you understand. I can tell you she’s fine—if not a bit drunk—and she’ll call her sister when she’s ready.”

Charlie sighed. “Nothing I can say will persuade you to tell me where she is?”

“What do you think?” asked Richard. “The last thing Lizzy would want is for Jane to stress, especially in her condition, but she didn’t want anyone to know where we are. You know I’ll take care of her. I swear I won’t let her run off with a doomsday cult or tattoo an enormous black widow spider across her face.”

I was familiar with the exasperated breath that came over the line. Richard was trying Charlie’s patience. “Just so you’re aware, after Lizzy was discovered missing, Faith was in a dudgeon: cursing and shrieking. You know. The usual. Anyway, Ben yelled for her to stop, then proceeded to inform her he was tired of her malarkey and would be filing for divorce in the morning.”

Richard appeared as if he almost choked on his Scotch. “You’re kidding!”

“No, Ben actually checked-in at The Oberlin, that swanky hotel by the river. If he hasn’t tried to call Lizzy by now, I’m sure he will soon.”

His cousin set down his glass and dropped his head onto the back of the chair. “Lizzy can’t answer her phone. She hurled it out of the window before we left the Longbourn city limits. She was terrified Faith would track her with it.”

Charlie let out a sad chuckle. “Faith would too. I do not doubt that for a moment. But it’s good to know she’s with you so Ben and Jane don’t worry. Thanks for giving me that much.”

“Like I said, I won’t let anything happen to her,” said Richard.

“I know. The two of you always have each other’s backs. To be honest, Jane and I are relieved she came to her senses. You should’ve seen Bill when Faith began squalling that Lizzy was gone. He showed no emotion whatsoever. He stood stiff as a board until most of the guests filed out, then after his boss talked to him for a moment, he left with her. You could hear him kissing her ass as they walked down the aisle. Bill is, for all intents and purposes, a Vulcan who would never make Lizzy happy.” I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. Charlie loved his Star Trek references!

“I agree. Tell Jane I’ll have Lizzy call her when she’s ready.”

“I suppose that’s all we can ask,” said Charlie.

As soon as Richard ended the call, I sat a little straighter. “So, if your Lizzy is Charlie’s sister-in-law, how *have* I never met her?”

Richard gave a single bark of a chuckle. “Seriously? I’ve tried to get you to meet her for years. As for Charlie, Anne gave birth the weekend of their wedding, and you give some feeble excuse every time they invite you for dinner or a holiday. You’d think Charlie and Jane have enormous orgy parties with how you use Georgie as the reason you won’t go.”

As much as I didn't want to admit it, Richard was right. I'd been a horrible friend. Jane and Charlie always came to any dinner I had at the house, including Georgie's birthday parties, but I never took my daughter to their get-togethers. The ordeal to take a baby then a toddler somewhere on my own always seemed too much, or maybe that was an excuse to avoid awkward social situations. The truth was, I despised trying to make conversation with people I didn't know. I could manage at work where I designed green buildings for corporations or green dream homes for clients, but idle conversation was never my forte.

"I know. It was always easier to have people over here. Georgie had her toys, Mrs. R. to help out, and her own room for when bedtime rolled around. I haven't been a very good friend."

Richard sighed. "I wasn't trying to guilt you. Charlie and Jane have commented about how much easier it is for you to have them over, but at the same time, it doesn't mean they missed you less or weren't hurt when you refused their invitations. Besides, you see Charlie for work often enough that he knows you're not depressed or in some crisis."

That was true. I'd been fortunate enough to become friends with Charlie in college. When I took over my father's architectural firm, I'd needed a finance guru to wade through the books and keep the business in line. Charlie had been perfect for the job. I had someone to handle all of that for me, and unless I needed him at the office, he worked from home. We were both happy with the arrangement.

"As for Lizzy, if having her here is a huge problem, I'll take her to my parents' cabin tomorrow. The lake was too far to reach on the battery I had left on the Bronco, and your house was halfway there. I'd prefer to stay here in case she suddenly freaks and wants to return to Longbourn. Not to mention, no one will consider your house as someplace she'd go. In a few days, I can also more easily commute to the office."

"I've heard Jane and Charlie talk. Is her mother really so bad?" They made her sound atrocious.

“Faith is a force to be reckoned with. She’s all about appearances and money, and Lizzy’s never measured up to Faith’s expectations. Jane effortlessly fit into that mold with her long blonde hair and model looks, but Lizzy was always petite and fiery and preferred to play football with the boys to playing with dolls. She drove Faith nuts.”

I frowned and stared into my glass. How could a mother be so callous? I’d never treat Georgie differently whether she wanted to play football or play with dolls. As it was, Georgie’s favorite toys were my old Matchbox cars that Mrs. R. had found when we were cleaning out the attic.

“Look. It’s been a long day. When I found Lizzy hanging out of that church window, I’d been trying to figure out how to object without her mother putting out a hit on my life. I’ve known Lizzy since I was little, and she has a lot of thinking to do. Like me, she can work anywhere, but if you want us gone, we’ll get out of your hair.”

I put up my hand. “Let’s get through tonight, and we’ll see how things go. As long as Lizzy isn’t dangerous and doesn’t have a mouth like a sailor, I won’t ask you to leave in the morning.”

“Thanks, Will,” he said, rising. “I better relieve Mrs. R. Even though I’m sure Lizzy is done being sick for the night, I’ll stay with her until morning. She’s done the same for me more than once.”

“Good night.”

Richard lifted a hand before he made his way up the stairs. Other than the few days here and there that Richard stayed at the house, I never had houseguests. I might need to arrange some help for Mrs. R. if cleaning became more than she could handle while taking care of Georgie during the day. At least this wasn’t another one of Richard’s match-making attempts! Lizzy Bennet didn’t seem like the type Richard usually foisted on me. Besides, she was escaping her engagement. What self-respecting woman would get involved with another man after leaving one at the altar?

Chapter 5



LIZZY

The vile taste in my mouth was what greeted me when the first vestiges of sleep began to release me from their grip. “Holy guacamole! Did I eat someone’s dirty underwear?”

“No, you drank almost three-quarters of a bottle of Patròn.”

I rolled over to find Richard, with his eyes closed, lying behind me in the plush king-sized bed. My head throbbed, and I pressed the heels of my hands to my forehead in a futile effort to stop the torture. “Who put a jackhammer in my head?”

“That would be Mr. Patròn as well. There’s a bottle of ibuprofen and a glass of water on the bedside table behind you. That should make you feel partially human. Mrs. R. brought up a new toothbrush and some toothpaste. Those are in the bathroom.”

“Mrs. R.?” I scrubbed my cheek and tried to run my fingers through my hair, but they got caught in a rat’s nest of cheap hairspray and curls. “Argh! I’m stuck.”

Richard lifted himself to his elbow and helped free my hand. “Mrs. R. is my cousin’s housekeeper and nanny all rolled into one. What else do you remember?”

“Well, I climbed out of the window of the church. You helped me when I became trapped and drove me here— wherever here is. I know I drank tequila, and I have a vague memory of you helping me inside. A man stopped us, and the two of you argued, and...” My eyes surely bulged to the size of bouncy balls. “Please tell me I didn’t get sick on his feet.”

“On his bare feet. My cousin never wears shoes in the house.”

“Oh, my God!” I buried my face into the pillow. “We have to go somewhere else.”

“I can’t understand you when you talk into the pillow.”

I lifted my head. “We have to go somewhere else. I can’t face him after that.” I sat up crisscross applesauce and frowned. That memory was surely a tequila-induced hallucination. It couldn’t be real, could it? “Did I call him hot?”

Richard chortled on that one. “You did.”

With a groan, I dropped my face back at the pillow, folding myself over in my seated position. “I’m mortified! Just cover me with the quilt and carry me back out to the Bronco. We can go anywhere else. We can find some resort near here or a spa. I’ll pay.”

“No, if Faith gets more creative than we give her credit for, we have no way for her to trace you here.”

A sudden memory made me gasp. “I tossed my phone onto the highway.” My brand spanking new iPhone. I could afford another, but what a waste!

“Sorry, but I wasn’t going to run out into traffic to save it.”

“No, I wouldn’t expect you to.” I straightened and glanced down. “What am I wearing?”

“Will isn’t as tall as I am, so Mrs. R. brought you one of his t-shirts and a pair of boxers.”

My eyebrows rose of their own accord. “I’m wearing a strange man’s boxers?” That I was wearing the underwear of a complete stranger wasn’t something I heard every day, thank God!

“I’m certain Mrs. R. washes them in the hottest of water and dries them thoroughly. Besides, Will’s too much of a prude to have some disease.”

“Is this the guy you always set up with women who are the opposite of his type?”

Richard chuckled louder this time. “His expression when he sees these blonde women with their boobs almost hanging out of their clothes is worth every bit of the hassle and grief he gives me.”

“Isn’t he the widower? You can be a real asshole when you want to be. You do know that, don’t you?”

“I keep hoping the trauma will spur him to ask out someone he actually likes. I wouldn’t complain if he took home one of the girls I arrange for him either. The man needs to get laid. He’s far too uptight—not You Know Who uptight though.”

I glanced down to the pillow. The smudged mascara and foundation all over it showed that I hadn’t thought to take off my makeup last night. “I’ll need to buy him a new pillowcase.”

“You can try, but he won’t accept it.”

“Richard, what am I supposed to do for clothing? I can’t wear this for the next few days.” I waved my hands at what I would normally wear as pajamas.

“I’ll run out to Target and pick up a few things. I think there are a few other stores in the same shopping center. I can get you some body wash and shampoo as well.”

“Thanks. I do appreciate that. I’ll need something besides this to wear.”

He grinned as he rose. He wore a t-shirt and sweatpants that fit him perfectly.

“Where did you get clothes?”

After he peered down at his top, he shrugged. “I stay here at least one weekend a month. I have my own room, and I keep a certain amount of clothing here.”

“Oh.” He kept some clothing at my house too. More than once, we’d stayed up drinking wine or watching a movie until late—or early depending upon how you looked at it. Did he have clothing at everyone’s homes? If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve thought Richard was a mooch.

“By the way, Charlie called last night, fishing for information for Jane. I didn’t bother denying I knew where you were, but I told him you’d call when you were ready.”

That was good. At least Jane wouldn’t worry too much. She knew Richard would never let me do anything too stupid. “Thanks.”

“I also have the tea from the wedding.” His tone was that ridiculous high-pitched sing-song voice Richard loved to use when he had gossip.

“There’s tea? Other than Faith likely calling the FBI to track me down?”

“How about when she lost it, your father told her he’s filing for divorce?” Richard leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. “He’s currently staying at The Oberlin.”

“The swanky hotel on the river?”

“The very one,” said Richard.

“I’ll take ‘Things I never thought my father would do’ for a thousand, Alex.” My father had done no more than tolerate my mother for as long as I could remember. He would sometimes offer me a quiet place to hide in his study, but more often than not, he tried as much as possible to stay out of her target zone.

“I also told Charlie that calling your cell was useless since you decided to chuck it out the truck window.”

I groaned and covered my face with my hands. Was paranoia normal in a runaway bride? If so, I’d had more than my share last night. I hadn’t been that freaked out since Richard and I tried pot for the first time on the Fourth of July just before we both left for college.

Richard had gone to Harvard with his cousin while I’d gone to art school. As far as my parents had known, I’d gotten a full ride to Harvard and had moved to Boston with Richard. Little did they know, he’d dropped me off at the Rhode Island School of Design on his way. I received enough scholarships and financial aid that my parents never discovered the truth.

For four years, I'd been freaked out that they'd find out where I was. My father wouldn't have cared, but he'd have backed Faith. He always took her side so he could have peace once they returned home.

At a knock on the door, Richard cracked it and peered out before opening it the rest of the way to an older woman with a warm smile. She looked the picture of a storybook grandmother—a thin Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle with some blonde streaks in her graying hair. “Good morning, Mrs. R. You won't remember from last night, Lizzy, but Mrs. R. brought the ibuprofen and water for the bedside table.”

I scooted off the bed and stood, running my hands over my hair in a futile attempt to straighten the matted beehive on my head. “I'm so sorry for being such a hassle. I promise that I'm not usually so...”

“Pissed as a parrot?” asked Mrs. R. in a cheery English accent. She laughed and waved a hand. “Don't worry about it. I cleaned up Richie's messes when he was younger too.”

“Richie?” Suddenly, what the lady said sunk in. “Wait! You cleaned up my—” Where was the hole that would let me sink into the ground?

“Don't worry about it, dear. I'm certain yesterday must've gone horribly wrong for you to have arrived as you did.” She held out her opposite hand, which held several reusable shopping bags. “I noticed Richie never brought any luggage upstairs for you, so Georgie and I stopped by a couple of shops while we ran errands this morning. Whatever doesn't fit, just leave them in the bags, and I'll return them later.”

My jaw dropped as I took the bags from her hand. “While I really appreciate the trouble you took, you didn't have to do this. I never meant to put everyone out so much.”

“Oh, tosh! You can't go running around in my boy's t-shirts and underwear all day, and this is only enough to get you through a day or so. You'll be able to go out at your leisure instead of in a big rush.”

I glanced into one that had a package of panties at the top. Thank heavens! I wouldn't have to wear dirty underwear! "Thank you so much! I'll pay you back."

"Nonsense. I used the credit card Will gave me for the household expenses, so you'll need to pay him back—but I doubt that he'll accept anything."

Richard chuckled. "She's not kidding. My cousin never expects to be repaid for helping out."

"He's a good boy," said Mrs. R. If Richard hadn't mentioned who the lady was before, I would've thought she was this Will's grandmother by the dotting expression she wore. "I'll let you get dressed. What kind of coffee do you prefer? I know you'll want to take a shower, but I can have it ready when you come down to the kitchen."

"That's really not—"

"The largest hazelnut latte you can make, Mrs. R.," said Richard with a grin. "She prefers oat milk if you have some, and probably about three pumps of flavoring. She won't want it too sweet."

"Dickie!" I propped my free hand on my hip and glared at my best friend. This woman didn't have to wait on me hand and foot.

"Oh, don't get your panties in a bunch. Mrs. R. likes to take care of us, and since you're here, she's going to pamper you too, whether you want it or not."

"He's right, so you may as well give up now. I need to get back downstairs. Georgie was getting her art books from her room. Once you're dressed, come on down to the kitchen and we'll get you breakfast. Oh! There's a hair dryer in the second drawer of the vanity in the bathroom. Bring down what you don't wear today. I'll wash the rest and have those ready for when you need them."

The lady bustled off, and I punched Richard in the arm. "I can make my own coffee."

He didn't even flinch. "No, you can't. Mrs. R. doesn't let anyone touch her espresso machine. Not even Will is allowed,

and he bought it for her two Christmases ago.”

“So what happens if Mrs. R. is sick or out of town?”

He frowned. “Mrs. R. has never been sick or out of town that I remember.”

I started to shove my best friend out the door. “Go. I want to shower and see if I can salvage my hair.”

Richard chortled and glanced over his shoulder at the rat’s nest. “We could shave it all off.”

“Bite your tongue!”

Once the door closed, I exhaled, set the bags on the bed, and pulled out what was inside. Aside from the package of panties, a cute pair of Levi’s, a pair of black sweatpants, a pretty sage green top, a dark blue cardigan-style sweater, two t-shirts, and two bras came out of the first bag. The sizes were surprisingly correct. I scanned the room, but my wedding dress... I suppose the wedding dress wasn’t mine, but Faith’s. Not that it mattered, but the gown was gone—not that I would miss it! Mrs. R. must’ve used it and the underclothes to guess my sizes. I suppose that abomination was good for something. Now, would Richard’s hot cousin have a place where I could burn the darned thing?

After I shook myself, I opened the second bag, which contained a pair of sage green Vans sneakers. How did Mrs. R. know I loved Vans? The last bag had a co-wash for curly hair, mousse, a diffuser and wide-toothed comb, and a divine French-milled lavender soap. I’d still need to run out for more clothing depending upon how long I decided to hide from the world, but as the lady had claimed, this was enough to get by for a few days.

Gah! I needed a shower. I couldn’t spend the rest of the day smelling of stale tequila and Faith Bennet’s nauseatingly sweet perfume. When I finally looked at my reflection in the mirror, I almost screamed in fright. I appeared like a creature out of a horror movie with all that black smeared all over my face. A shower couldn’t have come at a better time!

Chapter 6



LIZZY

Between the amazing rainfall showerhead and the bath products from Mrs. R, I emerged from the shower feeling semi-human again. The ibuprofen was beginning to kick in, but I needed more water and coffee to offset the tequila from the evening before.

One of the tops Mrs. R. had purchased was a fun, retro-looking Vans t-shirt with a funky mushroom design on the front. I loved comfy but quirky t's, and Vans had been one of my favorite brands ever since Richard and I had skateboarded all the time when we were younger.

When I appeared in the kitchen, Mrs. R. smiled and clasped her hands. "Oh, I knew that top would work for your coloring. I went Christmas shopping with Richie a couple of years ago and was with him when he bought your gift. I remembered you loved Vans. I hope that hasn't changed."

"No, the brand is still one of my favorites. Thank you for remembering. As soon as I can make it to an ATM, I'll pay you back."

Mrs. R. waved me off. "Nonsense, I was happy to help out. Now," said the lady as she pointed to the table. "Your latte is ready, and I poured you a glass of orange juice. I always find it helps put me to rights after too much wine the night before."

When Mrs. R. gestured to the table, I noticed the little girl sitting there quietly painting. I sat down in the chair beside her and glanced over at the cup of water and paint with water sheets in front of her.

"What's your name?" I asked.

She lifted her gaze from the paper. "I'm Georgie. Who are you?"

“My name’s Lizzy. I’m a friend of Richard’s.”

“Unca Richard?”

“Exactly, Georgie,” said Mrs. R. “Miss Bennet, did you bring the clothes down so I can put them in the wash?”

I shook my head. “It’s not necessary. I can wear them new. And please, call me Lizzy.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. I was going to wash some of Georgie’s laundry, so I can throw your new clothes in with hers. I don’t know about you, but I prefer to wash everything before it’s worn. I’m more comfortable that way.”

Before I could protest further, Richard entered and held out the bags to Mrs. R. “Here you go. I saw them on her bed and remembered you asked her to bring them down.”

“Unca Richard!” The little girl ran to Richard forcing him to drop the sacks so she could run into his arms. He tossed her into the air, making her giggle, then blew a raspberry on her stomach before settling her on his hip.

“Hey, Squirt.”

Mrs. Reynolds picked up the dropped bag with a smile. “Thank you, Richie, dear.”

As soon as Mrs. R. disappeared down the hall, I caught Richard’s gaze, “Richie, dear?” I mouthed.

“Shut it, Bennet.”

“That’s not nice, Unca Richard.” Georgie had her chin tucked into her chest with a stern look on her face. She was the most adorable child I’d ever seen. Soft black ringlets fell past her shoulders with chubby cheeks I wanted to pinch and the brightest blue eyes—just like her father’s. She wore little blue jeans and a black and white striped top with a shiny red heart on the chest.

“You’re right, Georgie. I should be nicer to my friend, shouldn’t I?” The child nodded then scooted down to return to her painting.

“This is your cousin’s little girl?”

“Yes, and she looks so much like him. I’d never known a daughter could be a mini-me of her father.” He grabbed his keys from a hook. “Are you ready to go shopping? We can pick up whatever Mrs. R. missed plus some supplies if you want to work while you’re here—or until I can stop by your house and pick up your tablet and laptop. If you can’t work in the house, there’s a guest house that’s never used. I’m sure Darcy would let you use the kitchen table and the counters over there to dry anything you want to paint, or you could just escape there for peace and quiet. Although, this house is big enough that you should be able to find peace and quiet somewhere. There’s a brilliant attic room with huge windows. You’ll love it.”

I rose. “That sounds good, but can I finish my coffee?”

Mrs. R. hurried back in, opened a cupboard, and walked over with a travel mug. “Here, I always keep these handy. Will, more often than not, leaves for work with one every morning.” She transferred the hot latte, then handed me the cup. “Have a lovely time.”

I grabbed the sweater Mrs. R. had bought and trailed after Richard. Once we were in the Bronco and driving toward town, I leaned my head back on the headrest and faced him. “Where’s Georgie’s mother?”

“Anne died during childbirth. She had an aneurysm. She’d never had any symptoms until it ruptured during labor. Poor Will was helping her push one moment, and the next, they forced him out the door. Georgie wasn’t in a position to use forceps. They tried, but it didn’t work, so they performed an emergency Cesarean, then did everything they could to save Anne, but she still died.”

My heart broke open for both his cousin and the child who would never know her mother. “How horrifying.”

“Richard, does Georgie only paint those paint with water sheets, or does she have other art supplies?”

He sighed. “My cousin doesn’t want Mrs. R. to have to deal with the mess of more. Georgie has crayons, but Will likes that if something spills, water is easy to wipe up.”

I scraped my teeth over my lip. “Would you mind if I purchased more for her?”

“Why would I mind? Will might be put out, but I don’t think Georgie will paint the walls. She’s quiet, but she’s smart as a whip. I’ve told him that for some time now, but he refuses to listen.”

“I just figured that if I was painting, she might want to try it. It would be easier if she had her own supplies. To be honest, I didn’t even know they made paint with water coloring books anymore.”

“Knowing my cousin, I’m sure Will searched them out online.”

When we entered Lambton, I straightened and took in the town center with its quaint shops and charming holiday decorations. Christmas would be here in a few days. My stomach tightened. I’d never spent the holidays anywhere but with my family, but I wasn’t nearly ready to go home yet.

I paused. Christmas was right around the corner, and the Darcys had a wreath on the door but no decorations inside—no Christmas tree, no stockings. Didn’t he celebrate with his daughter?

“Richard? What about Christmas? Your cousin doesn’t own a tree.”

He shook his head. “You noticed that, huh?”

“I admit I hadn’t thought about it until now.”

“Will stopped decorating after Anne died. At first, he said Georgie was too young, then when she was a toddler, he said she could pull a tree down on herself.” Richard steered his truck into a parking space. “You know, let’s get a tree before we head back. Mrs. R. and Georgie will love it, and we can decorate it this evening.”

“What if your cousin—?”

“Don’t worry about that stick in the mud. I’ll handle him.”

I didn’t want to infuriate the man. “What if we go somewhere else? Your cousin was fairly angry last night. I

don't want to get on his bad side if we're staying there."

"Meh! He'll be fine." He opened the door. "Come on. I have a place here I've been dying to take you." He led me down a few storefronts to a shop with the cutest clothes in the window and a sign that read "Victoria's Vintage." When he led me inside, I couldn't help but smile. Richard knew I adored second-hand clothing stores. You could find the most interesting pieces in some. On any given day, the right shop could be a treasure trove of cool clothing.

"Richard!" A beautiful Black woman with long black braids stepped out from the desk and kissed Richard on the cheek. "It's great to see you." A hint of an unusual accent laced her voice. If I had to guess, I would say she was French.

"Vic, this is my best friend Lizzy."

Her perfectly plucked eyebrow lifted. "The one you told me about. I'm so happy to finally meet you." She held out her hand for me to shake.

"Victoria keeps an eye out for leather coats I might like."

The lady held up a finger. "Speaking of which." She hurried into the back room and emerged with a garment bag. "I had a call about an estate in the next county two weeks ago. This gem was packed in a trunk in the attic."

When she pulled the coat out of the bag, I gasped. "That's amazing. How old is it?"

"It's a 1940s biker jacket." She handed the hanger to Richard, whose jaw had yet to close. He adored vintage coats and practically owned a collection. "I also purchased this." She unzipped another bag hanging from a hook nearby to reveal the most beautiful white gown. "1950s. Can you imagine this moldering away in an attic? I don't know many who would fit into it, though."

Richard stepped up and fingered the satin. "I bet Lizzy could."

"You want me to try that on today?" The notion seemed a bit odd. I'd taken off—more like Richard and Mrs. R. had

removed—a white gown the night before that I'd be more than happy to burn.

“Why not? It's gorgeous. I bet the designer was someone famous in their day for Vic to have bought it.”

“Ceil Chapman worked with celebrities and such. She was *huge* in the 1940s and 50s.”

I lifted my eyebrows and breathed. If what the woman said was true, shouldn't it be in a fashion museum? What was it doing in a second-hand shop in Lambton? And wouldn't she charge a small fortune for it? “I don't know.”

Victoria grabbed the hanger and looped her arm through mine. “Richard's right. You might fit, and I've been dying to see this baby on someone. I'm too tall.”

I hardly had time to argue before I was pushed inside the fitting room with the gown. Well, if the owner of the shop wanted to see it on a real person, why not? I wasn't short, but I also didn't have Victoria's five-nine or five-ten height, either.

As soon as the strapless dress was over my breasts, I drew the curtain open, and Victoria startled and whirled around. “Oh, you're the perfect height! Here, let me help you zip it up.”

When the bodice tightened around my chest, I let my hands drop to my sides and looked in the mirror. The ruched neckline was higher on one side than the other and the bodice clung to my curves until it flared at my waist with a piece of satin that almost waterfalled from the left side of the waistline. The graceful line of the skirt fell to the floor.

“It's a little long.”

“Not if you wore heels.” Victoria's long braids swished back and forth as she circled, tugging and primping the gown as she went.

I lifted to my tiptoes. She was right.

“Come. I have a three-way mirror for dresses like this.” Victoria led me to a small alcove on one side and helped me up onto a platform.

“Whoa, Lizzy! That dress is made for you.” Richard leaned against the wall with raised eyebrows. “You should buy it.”

“When would I wear it?” I laughed. “I work from home, I rarely go anywhere to need a gown like this, and I just ended my engagement.”

Richard rolled his eyes. “Bill will not be the only man to propose. Besides, this is a million times better than the... What did you call it? Oh, yeah. The winter wildebeest dress your mother picked out.”

Victoria frowned and glanced between them. “Your mother selected your wedding gown?”

With a glare, I stared down Richard to shut him up. “It’s a long story.” I hadn’t remembered mentioning winter wildebeest to Richard. Maybe while I was drunk?

“Well, if you change your mind,” said Victoria. “You know where to find it.”

My best friend gave me a look, but I only returned a stubborn one of my own—at least I hoped it was.

“You know you could wear that to my parents’ New Year’s party.”

“The runaway bride wearing a white dress less than two weeks after she was supposed to get married. Oh, yes, that would go over well!”

He shook his head and walked away. The timing was all wrong. As much as I did love it, I couldn’t wear it. Not now.

Chapter 7



Will

As soon as I entered the house, the rich aroma of Mrs. R.'s cooking drew me to the kitchen. I'd had a meeting with a potential client at noon that had run long and another meeting directly after, so I hadn't managed lunch. I was starving.

I stepped into Mrs. R.'s custom kitchen and stopped in my tracks. While Mrs. R. hummed over a pot of what smelled like her famous stew, Richard's friend Lizzy sat at the table with my daughter, a paintbrush in her hand as she glanced over at the paper in front of Georgie.

"Her hair is lovely, but why don't you give her some eyelids? She looks a bit frightened. Don't you think?"

Georgie giggled and peered up at the woman with what could only be described as hero worship. Since Anne's death, I'd always been careful about who I introduced to my daughter. I know I should trust my cousin's judgment—Lizzy Bennet was hardly a stranger to him—but I'd never so much as spoken on the phone with her. And speaking of my cousin, where was the lout?

"Oh, Will, there you are," said Mrs. R. She'd turned while she stirred. "Dinner's almost ready. Why don't you put your briefcase in your study? By the time you return, the bread should be warm."

Lizzy glanced up from what she was doing with a slight curve of her lips. What was she painting with my daughter? I walked over and glanced at the table. In front of Lizzy sat a notebook-sized sheet of paper with some doodles and what appeared to be small illustrations, but when I looked over at Georgie's paper, I frowned.

"I don't let my daughter paint with watercolors yet. They're too much of a mess for her to clean up on her own."

Miss Bennet lifted her one eyebrow and shrugged. “I don’t mind helping her. Your daughter is very creative. Why not give her the tools to express herself?”

My teeth ground together at the woman’s presumption, but before I could open my mouth, Mrs. R. was at my shoulder. “You should see what our little Georgie painted today.” She held out several sheets of thick paper with different items on them. The first was a rose. The fact that I could tell it was a rose was enough to make me put down my briefcase and take the painting from my housekeeper’s hand.

“Georgie painted this?”

My daughter climbed up on the chair to my other side. “Lizzy found the flower outside. It’s a camella.”

“A camellia?” Lizzy’s voice was clear and patient.

“Yes, that,” said Georgie.

“You helped her with this?”

Lizzy shrugged one shoulder. “I did very little really. I set the flower on the table and pointed out how the color changes with the light and shadow. She’s observant and intelligent for a three-year-old. If you look at the table, she made very little mess.”

“She’s three and a half.” I almost mumbled the words while I made a quick inspection of the table.

“You have to see this one,” said Mrs. R. with a nudge to my arm. She held out a painting of a sunset with the shadow of land to one side and the water at the bottom reflecting the brilliant colors of the evening sky.

“Lizzy helped me. She let me use her paint!”

“It’s the type of scene I did in art school when we studied watercolor washes. The background is easy. The shadow can be simple or complicated. In this case, I found a picture with a simple shoreline. Georgie wanted to put in the birds, so I showed her how.” She pointed to a few V-shaped patterns to one side of the paper with the doodles. “Your daughter shows

a lot of promise. Do you like her artwork?" The woman's eyebrow winged up.

I started. "Yes, I do. Of course, I do." I kissed my daughter's ebony curls. "Georgie, these are wonderful. Can I have this one?" I held up the sunset. "I'd like to frame it and hang it in my office."

My daughter's face lit up, and her head bobbed up and down. "I made it for you."

"She did," said Miss Bennet. "As soon as she finished, she said she was going to give it to you." Lizzy stacked the papers on the table and picked up the cup of water. "I'm going to clean this so we can eat at the table. Excuse me." She glanced at me before she disappeared into the laundry room. She must've been using the larger sink in there to be out of Mrs. R.'s way.

I handed Mrs. R. the papers in my hand, picked up Georgie, and gave her a big kiss on her forehead. "I hope you had fun with Lizzy this afternoon." I would've usually had my daughter call her Miss Bennet, but it seemed that either Richard had introduced her as Lizzy, or she had introduced herself that way. I didn't want to confuse Georgie by calling her new friend Miss Bennet.

Georgie nodded so hard I didn't know how she wouldn't have a headache. "She can draw everything, Daddy."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

I smiled and scooted her towards the half-bath off the hall. "Go wash your hands."

As soon as I heard Georgie loudly singing her ABCs, which meant she was soaping her little paws, I went to my office, pulled off my tie, and set my briefcase on my desk.

"Did you see Georgie's paintings?"

I startled when I realized Richard was sitting in the chair by the window with his laptop in his lap. "You could have said something when I walked in."

“It was too much fun watching you jump,” said Richard. “So, did you see them?”

“I did. I had no idea she was even capable of something like that. I almost feel guilty for buying her coloring books and paint with water sheets.”

“I wouldn’t feel guilty. When we were at the art supply store, Lizzy commented on how Georgie concentrated on what she was doing, believing it was a sign she could manage more. She wanted to let her try paints. We were purchasing some artist’s watercolors for Liz, so she bought a small palette of children’s watercolors for Georgie.” That would explain what my daughter meant when she said Lizzy let Georgie use her paints.

Mrs. R. hurried in with more art paper in her hands. “Richard Brian Fitzwilliam, why did you not tell us Miss Bennet is Charlotte Lucas!” I’d never heard my housekeeper whisper so loud.

Richard blew out a noisy breath and stood. “Lizzy usually doesn’t talk about it much. She told you?”

“No, while Georgie was taking a nap, you shut yourself in here, and Miss Bennet worked at the kitchen table. She’d these set out to dry in the kitchen when I came in to make dinner. I finally got a look at them while she was setting the table. I don’t know the characters, but I recognize the style. Most who know her would.” As she explained, Mrs. R. let the paintings in her hand drop so we could both see them. The first was an illustration of an older woman, who resembled Mrs. R., her graying hair pulled back in a bun and a grandmotherly expression on her face. The second was, without a doubt, Georgie, her black curls framing her face and her wide grin showing her teeth. Her little shoulders were pulled up as though she was laughing. I couldn’t help but smile at the image.

“These are incredible,” I said. “They look like that series of children’s books Georgie loves so much.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. R. as though I was an idiot. “Those are by Charlotte Lucas.”

I frowned as I looked at the pictures again. “Why would she use a pseudonym for children’s books?”

“Because her family, with the exception of Jane and Charlie, are assholes,” said Richard. “Her mother wasn’t supportive of her getting an art degree and thought writing children’s stories was a waste of time. I offered to let Lizzy move into my apartment so she could do as she wished when she graduated college. She simply told them she had a job in some office and used my apartment as a studio until the sale went through on her own home.”

“Her family has no idea she’s practically a household name?” Mrs. R.’s voice was high-pitched.

Richard shrugged. “Her sister Jane knows as does her husband, Charlie Bingley, but the rest know nothing. Her mother would likely believe her to be scraping by and chastise her for not having a real job. Her family is as dysfunctional as they come. I’m always amazed at how normal she and Jane turned out. You should meet the two youngest.”

Mrs. R. shook her head. “Such a shame, that. Well, dinner is ready. I am sure Miss Bennet has the table cleared and set by now.”

“Say no more, Mrs. R.” Richard followed her from the room. I swear my cousin had a hollow leg. I’d never understood how he can eat as he does and never gain weight. He worked out, but the man had to have a crazy metabolism.

As I made to join them, I happened upon Miss Bennet standing outside my study door. “Hi.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I wanted to apologize for last night.”

“Which part?”

She winced and licked her lips. I stared at her tongue as it disappeared into her mouth. Wait! Why was I staring at her tongue?

With a deep inhale, she clenched her hands together in a way that had to be uncomfortable. “I’m sorry for all of it: arriving at your house drunk, calling you hot, puking on your

feet.” Her cheeks turned a brilliant shade of red when she mentioned calling me hot.

“You don’t think I’m hot then?” I bit my cheek to keep from laughing as the blush on her cheeks deepened. I had no idea someone could turn that red without holding their breath.

“I... I...”

“Relax,” I said. “I’m teasing.” I released the chuckle I’d been suppressing, and her eyes widened.

“Okay. That was unexpected. Richard always calls you uptight.” She squeezed her eyes closed. “God, I’m sorry. I can’t seem to stop putting my foot in my mouth.”

I laughed harder. “Don’t apologize. My cousin tells me I’m uptight to my face. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

She’d opened her eyes but shook her head. “I still shouldn’t have said it.” She shoved her hands in front of her, holding some cash. “Here. Mrs. R. bought me some clothes and toiletries this morning. She said she paid for them with your credit card. I want to pay you back.”

“I’m not worried about it. I’m sure whatever Mrs. R. spent won’t break me.”

Her hands shoved the money forward again. “You don’t even know me. I can’t let you buy me clothes.”

“You bought my daughter art supplies today, didn’t you? You taught her to paint? Don’t worry about the clothes and whatever shampoo and soap my housekeeper purchased. As far as I’m concerned, the money was well spent.” I had to admit the dark color of the shirt she wore brought out the varied flecks of green in her eyes. Now that I had a good look at Lizzy Bennet, I had to admit she was attractive—more than attractive, really.

I cleared my throat and scratched the back of my neck. “We should get into the kitchen or Mrs. R. might serve dinner without us.” As I made to follow, I came to a sudden halt and stared at the blue spruce by the fireplace. I should’ve known Richard would buy a tree. The boxes of Christmas decorations stacked to the side of the room meant that Mrs. R. had joined

in on the conspiracy. I sighed. I'd never wanted to deal with a young toddler and breakable Christmas decorations. Anne also loved Christmas and had talked and talked about how much fun the holidays would be with our child. Decorating without Anne here seemed somewhat of a betrayal. I had to get over it, though. Anne wouldn't have wanted me to withhold the magic of Christmas from our daughter. Perhaps it was time to let go.

As I entered the kitchen, Mrs. R. held up a bottle of wine. "I have a lovely claret to go with the stew. Miss Bennet, would you like a glass?"

Lizzy held out her hand. "Thank you, but no. I had enough to drink last night."

My daughter patted the chair beside her. "Lizzy! You can have juice with me!"

As Lizzy sat beside Georgie, she situated my daughter's glass so it wasn't on the edge of the table. "I'd love a glass of juice like yours. Thank you, Georgie."

Most of our dinners consisted of me, Mrs. R., and Georgie at the table. On those rare evenings I worked late, I usually ate leftovers while sitting at my desk. I'd always told Richard I liked my quiet life, and that I didn't need anything more. Now that we were all gathered together like this, I had to admit, this wasn't so bad.

Chapter 8



RICHARD

Will stared at Lizzy throughout the entirety of the meal while I bit my cheek to keep from laughing. He was utterly fascinated. Oh, he tried to hide it. He'd talk to Georgie for a short while, then ask Lizzy a question about watercolors or if an art program existed that would be appropriate for Georgie. Georgie was three! She wasn't looking for art school. She simply liked to paint, and even though she showed promise, who knew what her passion would be when she grew up?

Lizzy stood and started stacking plates. "The meal was wonderful, Mrs. R." She'd always tried to help clean up. From the moment they met, my mother loved my best friend's down-to-earth personality. After two or three dinners, Mom even let her help her in the kitchen just so they could chat. The last dinner Lizzy ate at my parents' house, I'd had to join the two of them drinking wine in the kitchen so I could be a part of the party.

Mrs. R. stood and held out her hands. "Let me take those."

"I don't mind helping," said Lizzy. "You cooked after all."

"Lizzy!" Georgie bounced over and tugged on her new idol's jeans. "Come see my room! We can play with my dinosaurs."

"I would love to see your dinosaurs, but let's help Mrs. R. clean up first. Will you open the dishwasher for me?"

Will's eyebrows were high on his forehead when his daughter did as she was asked. As soon as the dishes were loaded, Lizzy held out her hand to Georgie. "Let's go take a look at those dinosaurs. Do you have a favorite?"

"I like the Stegasawrus." I had to smile at Georgie's mispronunciation. She was a smart kid and from what I could

tell from other children her age, spoke well, but she still had those little speech impediments that only added to her overall cuteness factor.

My cousin stood and loaded his own plate into the dishwasher. “I feel like a Scotch. What do you think, Richard?”

I pulled myself up from the chair. “You don’t need to ask me twice.” After I loaded my dish, I followed Will to his study and plopped down on the sofa.

After he handed me a drink, he turned on the gas fireplace. “Whose idea was it to get a tree?”

With a chuckle, I propped my free arm across the back of the couch. “You saw it and said nothing until now? I must admit I’m shocked.”

“I know how to behave around guests, even ones I didn’t invite.”

I savored the warmth and rich honeyed tones of my drink before I swallowed. “You should ask Lizzy out.”

He made what Mrs. R., behind closed doors, would call his uptight prig face. “What kind of friend are you? She only ran out on her wedding yesterday.”

“To a man she never loved.”

“That doesn’t mean she won’t need time to process what’s happened. Besides, I’m not interested in dating anyone.”

My eyes practically rolled on their own. “Oh, please. You’re so attracted to Lizzy it’s ridiculous. I saw how you were almost tripping over your own jaw at dinner. If she’d worn anything remotely sexy, you would’ve had a puddle of drool dripping from the table to the floor.”

Will shifted in his chair, but his expression was unfazed. “You’re the one being ridiculous.”

“What’s Richard being ridiculous about this time?”

My cousin startled but recovered quickly while I opened and closed my mouth. What was I supposed to say? “Just a

stupid argument we have whenever we get together.” I’ve believed for years that Will and Lizzy would be perfect for each other, but he was determined he didn’t need a girlfriend or a wife. He’d cared about Anne, and her death had been a shock, but he deserved to be loved. Lizzy deserved to be loved as well. They were also my two favorite people in the world—who weren’t my parents, that is. I wanted them both to be deliriously happy. If they could do so together, it would be even better.

Lizzy had continued to look back and forth between us. “Okay, well, are we going to decorate the tree tonight? Georgie is super excited. Her dinosaurs are decorating their own tree upstairs as we speak.”

“You put a tree in her room?” Darcy’s eyebrows drew down in the middle, and his voice was a tad raised.

“Of course not,” said Lizzy. “She’s playing make-believe.”

My cousin’s shoulders relaxed. “Oh, sorry. Yes, we can decorate it tonight. Let me find the lights.”

Lizzy grinned. “Great! I’ll go get Georgie.”

When she turned, I caught my cousin ogling the goods as Lizzy walked off. I snorted. “No, you’re not interested at all, are you?”

He turned somewhat red and glared at me. “Shut up, Dickie.”

“Hey, only Lizzy’s allowed to call me that.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

I attempted to argue, but before I could say a word, Will walked out of the room.



Will

I had to admit that decorating the tree was not as bad as I thought it would be. For the most part, I helped Georgie hang a few, but she also had Richard as well as her new friend Lizzy lift her to put on the higher ornaments.

When I wasn't helping my daughter, my eyes wandered to Lizzy—the way she chewed her lip when she considered where to put an ornament, how her hair fell around her shoulders, how soft the skin under her ear appeared to be. My lips ached to suckle that tender spot. What was wrong with me? I'd never had these irrational urges before. My gaze drifted down to her ass as she turned and bent for another ornament. Great! Now my palms itched! I was losing my mind.

At a snicker, I turned to my cousin who laughed with the most annoying crooked grin. “See anything you like?” he asked in low tones.

I pushed my glasses up my nose with my middle finger. The move was one I'd used since middle school, childish, but effective when you didn't want to teach your three-year-old daughter how to swear.

“I found the star,” said Mrs. R. She held the silver tree topper in the air with a triumphant grin.

Lizzy leaned closer but didn't touch the piece. “Is it covered in glitter?”

“Heavens, no,” I said. When Anne had picked it out, I had balked at the glittered appearance, but thankfully it was no more than the texture and brought none of the heartache glitter caused. Anne used the cursed stuff once, early on in our marriage, and glints of the shimmery crap lingered in the house for at least a year.

“I had a professor for papermaking, who also taught bookmaking. She had a ban on glitter in her studios. She called glitter the herpes of craft supplies.”

I choked on my Scotch, and Richard came over and slapped me on the back with a stupid grin.

Lizzy winced at my cough. “Sorry, I suppose I should’ve warned you before I said that.”

“No problem.” I’d barely managed to rasp out the words.

“Daddy, can I put the star on top?” Georgie bounced up and down at my side.

“Who else would do the honors?” I scooped my daughter up, and Mrs. R. handed her the star. “After all, if we want Santa to come, we need that star on the tree, don’t we?”

Georgie nodded with serious eyes. “We’ll have the bestest tree!”

“Yes, we will, Squirt,” said Richard.

Lizzy stood on a step ladder and showed Georgie how to put the star on while I did the not so heavy lifting. When Georgie’s feet were back on the floor, Mrs. R. held out her hand. “Come on, Georgie. Bath time.”

“Can I play with my toys?”

“For a little while, but it’s getting close to bedtime. If you want a story, you can’t take too long.”

My daughter’s head whipped around. “Lizzy, will you read to me?”

Miss Bennet’s eyes darted to me and back to Georgie. “If it’s okay with your daddy I will, but he may want to read to you.”

After seeing Georgie with her at dinner and decorating the tree, my daughter’s request hadn’t surprised me. Georgie often asked Richard when he stayed with us. “I don’t mind, but I’ll be in to kiss you goodnight.”

“Yay!” My daughter hopped in big frog jumps as she headed toward the stairs with Mrs. R. following behind. “I want to read Grinch!”

Lizzy tilted her chin and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “I understand if you want to read to her, or if you’re uncomfortable since you hardly know me.”

“Georgie asks Richard when he stays. She’s also asked Jane and Charlie when they have dinner with us. I’ve also known of you through others for years. I promise I’m not uncomfortable.”

“My glass is empty,” said Richard. “Can’t have that, can we? I’ll be right back.”

After he’d disappeared into the study, Lizzy began picking up tissue paper and wrapping from the ornaments. “Georgie is an adorable little girl. She learns quickly too.”

“Mrs. R. and I have read to her a lot since she was a baby, and she enjoys music. We’re constantly searching for new learning methods that aren’t sitting down in a classroom. She’ll do that soon enough.”

She straightened and caught my gaze. “Well, you’ve done an excellent job so far.” She glanced at the door of my study before she continued cleaning up. Was she hoping for Richard to return?

“You don’t have to do that, you know?” She was a guest. I would give Mrs. R. a hand whenever Lizzy went upstairs to read to my daughter.

“It’s no bother. I know you usually don’t buy a tree, so—”

“I should have this year. You and Richard made me see that. You may not have intended to remind me in that way, but the push is a good thing. Georgie had a blast decorating, and she’ll have her first real Christmas with her presents under the tree.”

“What did you do before?”

“I put them under the Ficus in the corner.”

One corner of her lips lifted. “The stick with two leaves?”

I cleared my throat. “It had more leaves last year. Mrs. R. moved it. The next thing we knew, the darned thing had dropped all but those two leaves in protest.” Lizzy laughed and something in my chest tugged, as though pulling me toward her. I stiffened to keep from leaning closer.

“I’ve heard they’re finicky creatures.”

With a shrug, I set my glass on the table. “I wouldn’t know. I have a black thumb. Before Mrs. R., I killed any houseplant I tried to keep. I even killed cacti.”

Her hazel eyes twinkled, and she shook her head. “That’s impressive.”

“I’m a man of many talents.”

“Miss Bennet,” said Mrs. R. from the foot of the stairs. “Georgie is tucked into bed and waiting for her story.”

Lizzy pointed toward the stairs. “I’d better go.”

As she left, I had to resist the urge to follow. I didn’t want to make Lizzy uncomfortable by sitting with them while she read. After all, we weren’t married, and that seemed more appropriate if we were a family. Otherwise, I would seem more like a distrustful stalker.

“I still say you should ask her out.” Richard leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed, and his glass in one hand.

“Shut up, Richard.” I turned around, looked at the tree, and almost choked on my drink. If they were staying for Christmas, I needed to have a gift for Lizzy. She had to have something under the tree. What was I supposed to do?

Chapter 9



Will

The most miserable place on the face of the Earth on the weekend before Christmas was the mall—at least it was for me. So, why in the ever-loving heck was I shopping in one on the 23rd of December? I’d never been a glutton for punishment before. Perhaps this was retribution for staring while Lizzy walked all over my house, sat on my couch, and played with my daughter the last few days.

Richard had been insufferable as always, sniggering and shaking his head. One day, that man was going to be attracted to someone in my presence, and I was going to embarrass the bejeezus out of him!

Thankfully, Lizzy didn’t seem to notice her best friend’s sly comments or crooked grins. She was immune to his ludicrous behavior as well as my lust-struck gaze.

Even at work, my mind wandered at odd hours to what was happening in my house—well, at all hours of the day if I was being honest. What was Lizzy doing? My inner pervert appeared during a meeting with a client to dwell on Lizzy a little more. Thank the heavens for desks! I would have been humiliated if not for mine.

Now, I was walking with my cousin behind Lizzy, who carried my daughter. I’d insisted upon carrying her due to the overwhelming hoard of unwashed masses that were squeezed into the building like sardines, but Georgie had decided Lizzy was the only person who could pack her around. As for how many people were in the mall, wasn’t there a maximum occupancy? We had to be way beyond that number.

Lizzy made me jump when she gasped, stopped, and pointed, nearly hitting me in the face with her hand when I almost ran into her back. “Oh! I love books! Can we go in?”

We shoved our way inside the bookstore. Georgie pointed to the back corner with the children's displays, and Lizzy indulged her. When we stepped onto the bright grass green carpet, my gaze halted on a cardboard cutout in front of me. The characters were more than familiar. Georgie had the books, and at the moment, I had several watercolors in a similar style in my home.

Richard stepped beside me, and I pointed. "Those are hers, aren't they?"

"Yes, she wrote that series while she was in art school."

"Does Fitzwilliam and Sons publish her work?"

Richard lifted his eyebrows. "Of course, we do. I insisted she show her artwork and ideas to Dad when we were in high school. She had most of the Patty Catty books written and illustrated by then. He would've signed her at sixteen, but with her thick-headed parents, he understood why she wanted to wait. He saw to it she had an excellent agent the moment she turned eighteen, and her first book was published six months later. She had a full ride to RISD, but she never needed money from her parents for living expenses once she became a household name, which wasn't hard to accomplish by the way. I'd helped her prep the manuscript, and Dad was quietly having a publicity package assembled in preparation, so the book was practically ready to go to print the moment she signed. Her birthday was in January, her first book was out in late May, and that summer, we told her parents we were taking a road trip, one last fling before college. They had no idea it was a publicity tour. My internship with the company that year was to accompany her to certain bookstores and summer programs all over the country. When she first showed me her illustrations, I knew she would be amazing, and she is."

"Does she still do book tours?"

He tipped his head back and forth. "Not really. She's made enough of a name for herself that she doesn't need them. We sometimes hit a few big cities: New York, Chicago, Boston, and so on. You have to understand that once you make a name for yourself, blogs, magazines, and reviewers are

salivating for your next book. The publicists take care of everything. Lizzy mostly just has to write and illustrate now. She's done the hardest part, even though she'll still go to schools and read her books from time to time. Most of all, she loves to visit the art classrooms."

As we stood and watched Lizzy sit down on a bean chair with Georgie, a woman approached her. Lizzy smiled and nodded as the lady handed her a pen and a book.

"That's the only drawback to her visiting a bookstore," said Richard. "Not that she minds."

The woman waved over a little boy, who tucked his chin into his chest while Lizzy asked him questions. She signed the book before she handed it to the boy and passed the pen back to the mother, who ushered her son away.

"Is she recognized often?"

"Not often, but when she goes into a bookstore, and someone happens to see her picture on the back of a book..."

"Unca Richard!" Georgie ran up and jumped at my cousin, who caught her and hauled her up to his hip.

"What's up, double stuff?"

Georgie giggled. "Can we go to the playground?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "What about the book you were reading with Lizzy?"

"The stow was n't long. Can we go?"

"I'll take her," said Richard. "Text me when you're ready to do something else."

"What about Lizzy?"

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "What about her? She's an adult. Or are you scared for your virtue?"

Georgie frowned and glanced between us. "Daddy, what's vituw?"

I glared at Richard. "Uncle Richard's being silly again. Don't worry about it."

With what sounded like a cackle, my cousin slipped through the shoppers with my daughter. When I turned, Lizzy was at my shoulder. “I’ve found what I want. Do you want to shop more in here at all?” In her hands were children’s books—her books by the artwork.

“Are you buying your own books?”

She narrowed her eyes a bit. “Who told you I write? Richard?”

“Mrs. R. recognized the style of what you painted at the house your first day with us.”

Lizzy grinned with a nod. “Mrs. R. is quick. I like her. As for the books, your daughter’s had me read my books since I arrived. She doesn’t have these, so I thought I’d buy them for her for Christmas, if that’s okay.”

I waved my hands in front of me. “You already bought her the paints and watercolor paper. As much as I appreciate the thought, you don’t have to buy her more. She’s already received her Christmas gift.”

Lizzy exhaled. “I understand, but what if I want to? She’s hardly spoiled, and the sweetest little girl. I don’t think a couple of books are going to put her over the edge.”

“When you put it like that.”

With an arch smile and a spring in her step, she started toward the counter, but not before snagging a plush toy of one of her characters and wagging it back and forth. “It’s Miss Patty Catty. You can’t say no to her, can you?” She pretended to pout.

I sighed. The toy wasn’t what I was having difficulty saying no to.



After I made my purchase, I followed Will through the fiction sections of the store. As we meandered through the

different aisles, I watched what he picked up, and the expressions he made before he set them back on the shelf. I needed a gift for him under the tree, but his present needed to be better than a couple of children's books and a plush toy. I'd been staying in his house after all.

At one point, I glanced down at his tight ass in those jeans he wore. After business suits all week, the denim hugged in all the right places and highlighted his assets much better than trousers—not that I was complaining about Darcy in a business suit!

Those Clark Kent glasses he wore around the house also made me need to fan myself. The last few nights, my dreams had not been the garden variety ones I forgot, but ones where I straddled his lap and removed those glasses to show him just how much I'd missed sex. I didn't have that much experience, but Lord, it'd been too long!

“Lizzy?”

My gaze jolted back to his. I hadn't been looking at his butt again, had I? “Huh?” That was eloquent!

“Are you ready? I need to get Richard something completely useless while he isn't with us.”

“Why?”

“Because I do it every year. I love seeing his face when he tries to figure out what to do with my gift. Richard can buy himself whatever he wants, so the challenge is being creative enough to find something he doesn't need.”

“Do you have a specific place you go for that?”

We found a novelty shop, and when I located a squirrel finger hand puppet, Darcy looked no further. The unmitigated glee on his face, when I approached him with the box in hand, made my insides do a flippity-flop. God, I needed to get my raging hormones in check!

After we purchased the finger puppet, we passed an alcove of sorts with seating, but today, no one milled about or relaxed while waiting for their shopping relatives. Instead, the area was cordoned off with a huge “Home for the Holidays”

banner hanging from the ceiling near the thoroughfare. As we reached the entrance, the lady who had approached me in the bookstore stood at the gate, her son coloring at a table behind her. “Miss Lucas! I don’t suppose you’d want to help out our adoption event. The shelter is overcrowded, and we’d love to find some homes for these sweethearts before the holidays.”

I bit my lip and peered over at Will, but his expression gave no hint of his feelings of whether he wanted to rush me off or whether he cared if I stayed. “What would you want me to do?”

“Well, you have a couple of holiday stories. The mall could announce you are to read one in the meet and greet pen right there.” She pointed to a white picket fenced area with fake grass covering the stained cement floor. “We have a number of docile dogs we could put in with you, if you don’t mind, while you read?”

With a sort of shrug, I nodded. “What about *A Holiday for All* and you put cats in the enclosure? Miss Patty Catty is the protagonist after all.”

The lady perked up. “A wonderful idea! I’ll send Olivia down to the bookstore for a copy. Why don’t you browse through the kennels? We have a four-month-old litter of kittens, born late in the season of course. They might be perfect.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “Why don’t I go get the book? I can grab Richard and Georgie on my way back. I’m sure they’d love to watch.”

I nodded and put a hand to his forearm before he could rush off. “Thank you.”

The lady from the shelter waved me inside. “This will be wonderful. We so appreciate your willingness to help. I’m Evelyn, by the way, and a volunteer on my off-hours. We’re a small operation and almost all volunteers, but we’re no-kill, always short on funds, and always full on rescues.”

“I’m glad you thought of the idea. For the last two years, I’ve tried to use my platform to raise money for shelters and

rescues as well as awareness, and this will be fun.” We reached the cages, and I smiled. “I confess I’ve wanted a pet for a long time, but at first, I had to travel some whenever I released a book, so I never wanted to leave them behind. Now, I rarely need to go, but I haven’t taken the time to find the right pet.” I didn’t want to say that I just ran away from my wedding and my ex-fiancé hated the idea of a pet. I’d never understood why, but Bill would’ve spontaneously combusted if I’d brought home so much as a gerbil. Evelyn’s eyes would probably burst from her head if I told her the truth of my disaster of a life.

The lady smiled. “Maybe you’ll find the perfect companion today.”

“I’m staying with a friend through the holidays. I don’t know if he would mind.”

“We could always hold them until you’re ready to go home. I don’t mind fostering a pet for you. Just keep it in mind.”

“Thanks. I will.”

When we reached the kittens, I laughed as they rolled around with each other and played. Evelyn was right. They were perfect.

Reading before strangers had always been odd, but this was different than any event I’d ever done. As soon as the mall made the announcement over the intercom, families began to arrive, and soon, the mall had set up a local PA system and a screen so those in the back could hear and see me. Even the evening news showed. My insides were a mess. I hadn’t done a live reading for a crowd in a long time—not that the crowds had ever been this size! Meanwhile, I marveled at how quickly the rescue and the mall had everything corralled and ready to go.

Richard, Darcy, and Georgie stood at the front while I read. At first, the kittens were rambunctious and had a wonderful time running around me while I sat crisscross applesauce toward the back of the enclosure so I was more easily seen, but not long after I started the story, the kittens

settled in around me. One particularly fluffy grey and white kitten with little toe socks sat in my lap and fell asleep. Her brother, who was equally fluffy and grey but with no white followed his sister. He cuddled up to his littermate and soon snoozed quietly too.

Evelyn controlled the crowd like a pro after I finished. A large number of families approached the entrance with brand new copies of my books for me to sign. They must've cleared out the store in the mall.

With the help of Richard and Evelyn, I signed their books without disturbing the kittens, whom I cuddled as soon as I was done. Georgie was allowed inside with me and had a blast playing with the kittens that weren't sleeping while Darcy watched me with a strange look on his face. Did he not like cats? Was I being childish? I didn't care if I was, but I'd love to know why he kept staring at me like that!

Chapter 10



LIZZY

I sat on the floor in front of the fire, a glass of wine in my hand, while the lights on the tree twinkled and the flames from the gas fireplace reflected on the pretty glass baubles. I loved Christmas, and Christmas Eve with the Darcys and Richard had been the most peaceful gathering I'd ever experienced. The past holidays in the Bennet household teemed with Faith's caterwauling, my youngest sister Lydia either raving over what she did receive or pouting over what she didn't, and Katie, who was one year older than Lydia, either bragging or complaining, depending upon what Lydia received.

I set my glass on the coffee table and drew my legs into my chest, my head relaxing back onto the couch. Despite Richard's ardent insistence that I shouldn't feel guilt for severing ties with my family, the remorse wasn't for severing contact. On some level, I'd known when I'd climbed through that window that this would be the result. My heart and mind had calmed in the week since. Instead, my guilt stemmed from the lack of remorse I'd experienced. I should've felt some sort of regret, so why wasn't I?

My brand-new cell phone sat next to my glass of wine. I'd purchased it at the wireless store before we'd left the mall. When the device was powered up, what was waiting for me was nothing worse than I'd expected. My voicemail was full to the brim of Faith's scolding diatribes and offers of peace should I return to marry Bill. Meanwhile, Bill left a message saying he never wanted to see me again. I had no complaints. By all appearances, we got along well enough, but I'd bit my tongue I don't know how many times during our every interaction. If I'd given in to Faith, I doubt our marriage would've lasted two weeks. The everyday strain would've finally made me explode. Why had I given in for so long to my mother's expectations? I'd defied her so I could have the

career I wanted, but I suppose it was easier to give in to those demands on my personal life. If my mother was busy planning my wedding and husband, she wasn't paying attention to what I did professionally. I'd worked too hard to make Charlotte Lucas a success.

I turned my head at footsteps padding along the plush area rug. Will came to a halt when he noticed me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I was going to put out the gifts."

"Would you like some help?" I ogled his butt once again in plaid flannel pajama pants as he bent over.

He set a few bags under the tree. "Stay where you are. I only have one more."

After he placed one last large present near the wall, he picked up the wine bottle on the coffee table and glanced at the label. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"I'd be happy to have the company. I can move up to the sofa if you like."

"Don't move if you're comfortable." He poured his own glass, then sat beside me on the floor. "I hope our Christmas Eve wasn't too quiet for you."

I shook my head. He was wearing the Clark Kent glasses again. "No, I was thinking how perfect it was." His cologne surrounded me, and I inhaled deeply. He smelled better than any man I'd ever known. Whether my current opinion was based on the expensive cologne or some part of him that made the scent better, I couldn't say. At the moment, I wanted to rip that t-shirt he was wearing from his body and bury my nose in his chest. I'd never been a shameless hussy before, but if I stayed at Darcy's for any longer, I might turn into one.

He pointed to the phone. "Have you called your family?"

"Not yet. I've had plenty of voicemails. After I sorted through those, I'd had enough for a while."

"Is everything settled from...?"

"From my wedding that didn't happen? Yes, Bill said he didn't want me to contact him. My older sister and her

husband left a few worried messages before Richard told them I was okay, and my mother—Well, she said nothing I didn't expect. I doubt she'll speak to me for a while, if ever."

Darcy winced. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I shouldn't have let the engagement go that far. It's funny how clear everything is when you decide to take control of your life. I plan on returning after New Year's and selling my house."

He frowned. "Where will you go?"

"My sister and her husband live about an hour from here. I think I'll look for a house near them."

"Richard lives closer to Charlie than to Longbourn. You'd be closer to him too."

"How long have you known Charlie? He's never said."

"I've known him since boarding school." He took a sip of his wine.

I gasped. "You're the Will who helped him pass English Lit! Charlie's told me a lot of stories, but I never put two and two together until now."

He chuckled, and one corner of his lips curved. "Yeah, I suppose that's me." Good Lord that half-smile did funny things to me. I swear five years of abstinence had gone to my head. My body was humming from just sitting next to this man, and he hadn't even touched me. If he didn't lay his hands on me, and soon, I was going to have to deal with this myself!

His hand covered my free one. "I want you to know you can stay here as long as you like. Georgie loves you, Mrs. R. loves you, and you're easy to be around."

"I wouldn't want to impose."

He trailed his fingers down my cheek. "Trust me. I'd let you know if you were imposing. I kind of like having you here." His gaze dipped to my lips.

"Kind of like?"

His mouth lifted on one side. "Okay, more than kind of."

His face was impossibly close in the dim light and set my insides on fire. I drank down the remaining half-glass of the wine and set the glass back on the coffee table. This was it! I was either going to die of humiliation, or I was going to get laid—at last. I couldn't take it anymore.

“Lizzy, are you okay?”

I took in a fortifying breath and lunged, pressing my lips to his. He inhaled sharply, but a moment later, his lips moved against mine. When his tongue sought entrance and began doing naughty things, I groaned and curled my fingers into his hair.

No further invitation was needed for me to straddle his lap and lean into his kisses. I'd been in a desert of dry, chaste pecks for so long, that I'd forgotten how much I loved this. I hadn't had many boyfriends, but kissing had been fun once upon a time. However, none of those experiences measured up to Will's kisses, Will's muscled chest against my fingertips, and his erection now nestled between my legs.

His lips trailed down my neck, and he nibbled on my collarbone while I traced a fingernail around the nipple pressing through his shirt.

A large, warm hand slid under my shirt and up the side of my rib cage. “You've been driving me crazy all week. Do you know how tempting you are? I keep finding myself watching you, wondering what this would be like.” He latched onto the base of my neck and sucked hard. He was going to leave a mark, but I didn't care.

I moaned and frantically lifted his shirt to touch his bare skin. “Is that why you were always staring?”

He nodded and looked up at me, his gaze meeting mine. “I was determined to give you time after everything... If I need to wait—”

“I never loved him. I promise I don't need time.” I kissed him soundly. “What are the chances of someone entering?”

His eyebrows drew down in the middle. “Georgie is sound asleep, Mrs. R. has her own suite off the kitchen and rarely

leaves once she's settled for the night, and about five minutes ago, Richard took a glass of Scotch upstairs with him. I'd say we're safe. Why?"

I grabbed the hem of my pajama top and pulled it over my head. "That's why."

His eyes lit up at the sight of my bare breasts. "Sweet Mary, Jesus, and Joseph."

A laugh bubbled from my throat. "You say the sexiest things, Mr. Darcy."

His hands grabbed my ass. "I'll show you sexy, Miss Bennet."

He held my hips tightly as he latched onto one of my nipples. The wicked things he was doing with his tongue shot through my body and rocketed straight to my core. I was lost to whatever he was going to do as I ground against the hardness encased in the soft flannel below me. My hands fisted his shirt before I attempted to drag it over his head.

"Wait!"

I flinched back as he pulled his shirt back down and took off his glasses. Without hesitation, he removed his shirt and drew me against him. We both hissed when our bare skin made contact.

As I fumbled to untie his pajama pants, he grabbed my hands and drew back. "Lizzy, are you sure?"

I held his earnest gaze and my heart seemed to grow in that moment. "I've never been more sure about anything in my life."

His hands slid down the back of my pants and hauled them down until I had to stand to remove them from my feet. After he'd removed his own, he pulled me back down and kissed me until I saw stars. "Shit, I don't have any condoms."

"I'm on the pill, it's been a very long time since I was with anyone. I also have regular checkups every year."

His chin hitched back. "Like how long?"

“Years.” I dropped my forehead against his shoulder.
“This is mortifying.”

His fingers flexed and gripped my rear again. “It’s been years for me too. Since before Anne...”

I put my finger over his mouth. “Are *you* sure?”

He nodded and swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing.
“God, yes.”

That was all I needed to claim his lips again. Our hands explored, and when his fingers dipped down between my legs, I gasped and took him in hand. “None of that. I want you inside me now.”

After I guided him into me, I dropped my forehead against his. “I’m so close.”

“That’s good,” he said, “because I’m not that far off either.”

“Then we’ll just have to do it again, won’t we.”

He dug his fingertips into my hips, lifted me, then pulled me back down onto him. “I love the way you think.”

I rode him slow and easy while our gazes held. His jaw clenched and released. He was obviously trying to maintain control, and the longer we moved together, the tenser he became. Concentrating on him also helped stave off my own release. I didn’t want to orgasm too soon. I was enjoying this way too much! “You’re killing me, Lizzy.”

With a grin, I quickened my pace and shifted until he touched that place inside that would make me shatter. I bit his shoulder when I came to muffle my cries while he dropped his head back against the seat cushions of the couch and groaned.

“This is the best Christmas Eve ever,” I said into his neck.

His warm chuckle sent a shiver through me. When he shifted us, he laid me on my back next to the tree and started kissing his way between my breasts. “It isn’t over yet.”

Chapter 11



Will

I blinked and frowned when I woke up the next morning. Something was different—very different. With a sultry moan, a feminine body shifted against my side, and the night before flooded back. After twice next to the Christmas tree, once in the shower, and once in my bed, you’d think my body would be satiated, but I guess I was making up for lost time since I was hard as a rock.

“Merry Christmas.” As Lizzy breathed her sexy greeting, warm fingers wrapped around me. “Oh, he’s as happy to see me this morning as he was last night.”

The woman of my recent fantasies was climbing over me when the doorknob rattled. “Daddy?”

Lizzy and I froze.

“Hey, Squirt! Why don’t you let Daddy sleep in this morning? It’ll be the best Christmas present in the world, I’m sure.” At Richard’s voice, Lizzy looked over her shoulder at the door, then relaxed as the voices grew softer and disappeared.

I ran my fingers through my hair. “I’m so glad I remembered to lock the door last night.”

“You aren’t the only one. Can you imagine Richard’s smug look if he caught us like this? We’d never hear the end of it.” She glanced down. “I suppose it isn’t hot when your daughter knocks on the door.” She settled on top of me and nuzzled my neck.

“No, but I could get very used to this.”

“Mmm,” she said lazily. “Me too.”

After a very long and very wet kiss, I sat up, so she straddled me as she had last night. Apparently, the

remembrance was all I required to forget the knock on the door. “As much as I want you, we should go down. I can’t leave Georgie waiting.”

She sighed and nodded. “I understand, but we both need a shower first. We smell like sex.”

I shifted and stood. Lizzy’s legs wrapped around my waist as I took her into the bathroom. One more shower, and we’d celebrate Christmas with our family. Our family? When had I begun thinking in those terms?



I beat Lizzy downstairs, but she’d had to sneak back to her room in my robe before she could dress. I’d stuffed her pajamas in my dirty laundry, but those would need to be moved soon. Otherwise, I’d start getting odd looks from Mrs. R.

When I entered, Richard flashed me a huge grin. “Merry Christmas, Cousin.” I gave him a side-long glance. Richard loved Christmas, but he was never this chipper, especially first thing in the morning.

“Merry Christmas, Will,” said Mrs. R.

I returned their greeting while I strode over and kissed Georgie on the cheek. “And what do you have for breakfast this morning?”

“A cinnmin roll!” Georgie held up her sticky fingers, then giggled when I jumped back to keep from being glazed.

Mrs. R. sat down beside my little imp while I prepped my coffee from the espresso Mrs. R. had made for me. “What has you so happy this morning, Richard?”

With his coffee in his hands, he was leaned back against the counter, so he faced me. “Oh, I just like being right about things.”

I rolled my eyes. “What do you think you’re right about this time?”

“I don’t think,” he said, chuckling. He bent closer and motioned me to shift a bit toward him. “You see, I came downstairs last night for another glass of Scotch.”

I stiffened.

“Relax. I didn’t see anything, but the snowman pajama pants near the foot of the stairs and the sounds coming from near the tree were enough to let me know someone was enjoying themselves a great deal. Of course, I didn’t get my second glass. I returned upstairs and watched a movie before I fell asleep. I did hear you and Lizzy come upstairs around midnight. It must’ve been quite a Christmas Eve.” He laughed again before he straightened.

I opened my mouth and pointed at his chest.

“Don’t get your undies in a wad. I won’t tease her about it. If she needs to talk, I’ll listen because I’m her best friend, although I don’t need any details.” He grimaced. “The two of you can keep those to yourself. That said, if you hurt her—”

“I have no intention of hurting her, Richard.”

“You know that when I tried to set the two of you up, I thought it would lead to a date or two—not shagging under the Christmas tree.” As much as he meant his threat, he was also enjoying himself far too much.

I turned to face him. “We didn’t exactly plan that, but it felt right at the time. We’re consenting adults, so let us figure out what all this means for ourselves.”

“That was my plan.”

Lizzy entered in a forest green turtleneck and red and green plaid pajama pants; her damp coppery hair pulled up in a clip. She wore no makeup, and her creamy skin glowed. “Good morning, boys. Merry Christmas.”

“Nice turtleneck,” said Richard.

She tugged at the fabric under her chin. “Thanks. I thought the color was perfect for today.” And I’d been careless

and given her a good-sized hickey at the base of her neck.

My housekeeper looked up from wiping Georgie's hands. "Oh, Miss Bennet, your latte is in the large red cup."

"You're a lifesaver, Mrs. R. Ooh! Are those cinnamon rolls? I'm starving." Lizzy sat at the table and leaned toward Georgie. "Are they good?"

My daughter could only nod with the bite she was chewing, making Lizzy laugh as she took a sticky bun of her own.

"I can't wait to see what Santa brought," said Lizzy. I bit my cheek to keep from laughing when Georgie's eyes widened.

Richard and I joined the ladies at the table, and once breakfast was devoured, we moved into the living room. I turned on the fire while Mrs. R. plugged in the lights on the tree. Lizzy glanced at me and blushed. If we'd been alone, I wouldn't have been able to resist repeating last night's festivities.

We'd all agreed Georgie should open hers first, so while she played with her new toys, we could open ours at a more leisurely pace. My daughter was excited to open Lizzy's gift bag with her new Charlotte Lucas books and the Miss Patty Catty toy inside; Richard's gift was a box of tutus and other frilly dress up clothes. Georgie insisted on putting on a rainbow tutu with sequins before she opened the gift from Santa, a wood play kitchen I'd asked for Lizzy's help wrapping before we'd gone upstairs. I'd been at a loss as to how to cover it and make it a fun surprise for my daughter.

While Georgie began stirring and cooking at her kitchen, Lizzy and I handed Richard his gifts. When he opened mine, he stared at it. "What am I supposed to do with this?" Lizzy grinned as he opened hers. "*The Idiot's Guide to Being Awesome*. Where do you find these books?"

"No one wants to look at my online search history," she said.

Mrs. R. received a silk scarf from me and Georgie, a certificate for a massage from Richard, and a bottle of wine and a romance novel from Lizzy. How had she known Mrs. R. loved novels? I could only suppose they talked about books one day while I was at work.

Lizzy's gift to me was thin and flat and appeared to be cardboard when I ripped the paper away. When I lifted one piece of cardboard, my daughter's portrait in watercolors stared me in the face. Lizzy hadn't painted it in her usual illustrative style. The resemblance was spot-on down to the little freckle Georgie had on her nose.

"I wasn't sure how you'd want it framed, or I would've done it."

"No, this is wonderful. I'm happy to take care of the framing. Thank you so much for doing this."

I made to stand. "Lizzy's is next, but the gift from me and Georgie isn't in here."

Georgie gasped. "I want to help!"

I took my daughter's hand and led her to a storage room off the basement. We'd hidden our gift well, but since kittens couldn't exactly be put in a box for more than a small amount of time, we'd needed to have somewhere to stash them until we were ready. Georgie helped me put them in the box, and I put the lid on the top. Mrs. R. had done a phenomenal job wrapping the present, complete with air holes and a huge metallic red ribbon on top.

Since I needed both hands to carry the gift, Georgie skipped ahead. I just had to hope she wouldn't tell Lizzy before I could get in there. When I entered, Lizzy held the oddest thing I'd ever seen. "What are those?" My tone couldn't be anything but distasteful.

She guffawed. "They're hairy leg leggings."

Richard grinned. "I think they'll attract a load of men. Don't you think, Will?"

I restrained my growl at the idea of Lizzy attracting men other than me and shook my head. "No, they're awful." I set

the present on the floor in front of Lizzy while her eyes widened at its size.

“What’ve you done? I don’t need anything extravagant.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I wouldn’t call this extravagant.”

Lizzy looked at me for a moment, but her head jolted back to the box. “Was that a meow?”

“Open it!” Georgie jumped up and down. For her age, she was doing a remarkable job of not ruining the surprise.

When Lizzy pulled the lid away, she inhaled sharply. “Oh my God! How did you know?”

“Evelyn mentioned that you filled out the paperwork to adopt them after the signing. You could have asked to keep them here, but you didn’t, so I asked Evelyn if I could complete the adoption and pick them up on Christmas Eve morning as a gift for you.” I drew an envelope from my pocket. “You’ll need to sign one more form. The rescue fees are paid, and Evelyn said we could bring the last of the paperwork in tomorrow when the shelter opens.”

Lizzy lifted the grey and white kitten from the box and put it in her lap followed by the solid grey one. “They’re so adorable. Thank you. I don’t know what to say. I don’t even know where to get bowls, food, and kitty litter on Christmas Day.”

Richard tugged some gift bags from behind the tree. “That’s all taken care of. All of us chipped in and bought everything you’d need.”

“I have a litter box set up in your bathroom, and we have one in the laundry room if you bring them downstairs,” said Mrs. R. “I read two cats need three, but I wasn’t sure where to put the third. I’m sure we’ll figure that out in the next day or two.”

Lizzy’s eyes were shiny as she cuddled the first, then the second kitten and kissed their heads. I rolled a couple of cat nip toys across the floor and the kittens pounced. “Thank you,” she mouthed to me.

I nodded, even though I didn't need her thanks. Aside from Georgie's cry of delight at her play kitchen, Lizzy's teary eyes and wide smile were the best Christmas gifts I received that day.

Chapter 12



LIZZY

I stood at the French doors, sipped wine, and watched the snow as it started to fall outside, creating a fairy tale landscape of the view out toward the lake. Christmas was always a magical holiday, but between the company, the kittens, and the snow, this Christmas was more so than any other in my memory.

The kittens were cuddled together in a flower-shaped cat bed that had been in a box of supplies Richard had bought. I still couldn't believe they'd all banded together to make sure those kittens came home to me. I'd fallen in love with them when they'd curled in my lap while I read at the mall. Now, they were mine—all of their fuzzy little toe beans and cute whiskers belonged to me.

Warm arms slipped around my waist and drew me back against a solid wall of chest. "What are you thinking?"

"That I've never had a better Christmas. I loved watching Georgie get so excited over her gifts, and everything that happened today. I love that you didn't spoil her with a million little things that meant nothing but gave her one larger something that she wanted more than anything."

"She doesn't need a gazillion toys to strew all over the house. Her grandmother will come tomorrow and bring her more gifts than she'll know what to do with. I'll have to sort through them and donate whatever Georgie doesn't use."

"You could set your foot down and tell her one gift." As soon as Jane had her baby, Faith would likely behave in the same way, but Jane and Charlie would be too nice to say no.

"I've told her. She doesn't listen." He glanced at the cat bed and chuckled. "I see the kittens are worn out."

“Thank you again for them. I never would have presumed to bring them here.”

His lips brushed near my ear. “You should’ve been able to ask me. The night you arrived with Richard, I was an asshole, and I’m sorry for that.”

I laughed, set down my glass on the mantel, and turned in his arms. “He brought me here drunk and a complete mess, and I puked on your bare feet. You had every right.”

“Still, Richard wouldn’t have brought you here without good reason. He can be an idiot, but he’s not a thoughtless idiot. I should’ve trusted him. I don’t want you to feel like a visitor. You can stay as long as you need.”

With a sigh, I leaned my forehead against his jaw. I loved that he was so strong and solid. “At some point, I have to go home.”

His arms wrapped tighter around me. “You said you want to sell your house. You can stay here until it sells.” As much as the idea appealed to me, we’d had sex for the first time last night. While Will seemed to like me, what were we doing? Was this a fun romp between friends for him? Was it something more? At some point, I needed to work up the courage to ask.

My hands curled into his hair at his nape. “Richard offered his guest room, but I’m not sure what I’ll do. I used his spare bedroom as a studio while I waited to close on my house. He’s never said the words, but I know I got in the way.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He brought the guy he’d been dating home for lunch. By the way they walked in, I don’t think they meant to actually eat. I know he’s not seeing anyone right now, but depending on how long it takes to find a house I like, he may find someone. With the new baby coming, I don’t want to intrude on Jane and Charlie for long, even though I know they’d insist. I don’t need much space really. Most of my work is done on my tablet, so it’s not like I’m always painting. I could just rent a small studio until I find somewhere.”

Darcy gave a slight jolt. “Speaking of Jane, did you call her?”

“I was waiting for later. Faith and my dad were supposed to be there, but since Dad supposedly told my mother he wanted a divorce, I wasn’t sure what anyone’s plans were anymore.”

He pulled away to glance at the clock. “It’s nine. Would your mom—”

“Faith, please call her Faith.” Maybe if she’d ever behaved like a mother, I’d be more comfortable with people calling her that. I never had.

“Would Faith still be there?”

I sighed. “Probably not.” I took out my phone as Will started to move away. I grabbed his hand. “Where are you going?”

“I thought I’d give you privacy.”

I shook my head. “I’d rather you stayed, if you don’t mind.”

His mouth curved at the very edge as he pulled me to sit on the sofa with him. “Whatever you want.”

My fingers trembled some as I found Jane in my contacts list, pressed her number, and turned on the speakerphone. On the second ring, she answered. “Lizzy!”

“Hi, Jane.”

“I can’t believe you waited this long to call.”

With a laugh, I rolled my eyes. “It’s only been a week.”

“A week after you ran out on your wedding. I know you don’t love Bill, and Richard said you were okay, but I wanted to hear your voice with my own ears.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I just needed some time.”

Jane exhaled. “I suppose I can understand that. Have you heard from Bill?”

I dropped my head back onto the cushion of the couch and held Will's hand tighter. "When I set up my new phone, I had a voicemail from him. He doesn't want to see me or talk to me again, which is fine. I'm sure I embarrassed him. His boss was at the wedding, and you know he spoke of her incessantly. And, if I'm being honest, I don't want to see him again either. A clean break is best. Thank God I don't have belongings at his house, and he never had anything at mine. We have no messy residuals to clean up."

"Mom is still upset; in case you didn't know."

I winced. I could imagine how Faith had been behaving. She was likely hounding Jane and Charlie for information. "She left me several voicemails too. As much as I've avoided severing ties with her, it's time. I know the split will make matters more difficult for you, but—"

"Lizzy, don't worry about that. Charlie and I will manage." Her voice became muffled for a bit, like she had her hand over the phone.

"Lizzy?" Jane's husband never failed to sound cheerful, no matter the situation. He'd always reminded me of a terrier: intelligent albeit a bit hyper, and always smiling. I'd even created a character based on him for one of my books—a Jack Russell of course.

"Hey, Charlie."

"Don't worry about us. We'll manage with Faith. You do what you need to do."

I couldn't help but stifle a sob. "Thank you." Will's hand released mine, but before I could protest, he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and drew me to his side.

"Lizzy, did Richard tell you about your father?" Charlie's voice held a hint of laughter.

"He did, but I'll believe it when the papers are signed. You know he never wanted to divide his assets with Faith. He'd rather die miserable than give her one penny."

"I can't argue with you, but maybe this time is different."

“I don’t know, Charlie. He hasn’t left me one message, not even to see if I’m okay.”

Charlie gave a rough exhale. “I get it. I do. But do know that he’s asked us. Obviously, we couldn’t tell him much, but he was relieved to know you weren’t lying in a gutter somewhere. In the meantime, I don’t suppose you want to tell us where you are?”

I looked at Will, who shrugged. “Not yet. This Christmas has been so peaceful. I’m dreading going back to Longbourn. I think I’m going to sell the house and move closer to you and Jane.”

“Jane and I would love that,” he said. Charlie was always so happy and positive. He was perfect for Jane even though she was more serene.

“I’d better go. Give my love to Jane and kiss the bump for me. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Merry Christmas, Lizzy.”

“Merry Christmas.” As soon as I hit end, I wrapped my arms around Will’s chest. “Thank you for being here for me.”

“I don’t think you really needed me.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe not, but I’m glad you stayed.” I stood and tugged him toward the French doors to the patio.

“Where are we going?”

“I want to walk in the snow.”

“You’re not wearing a coat or shoes. You’ll freeze.” He hurried off and returned with coats, a pair of snow boots for him, and a pair of Uggs I’d bought at the mall on sale.

When we stepped out, I tipped my face up into the falling snow. “It’s so beautiful.” After, I held out my hands and let the fat flakes fall into my palms.

Will wrapped his arms around me like he’d done at the window. “The lake looks like it’s freezing around the edges.”

“The weather has cooled down a lot this week. Does the top ever freeze over?” During the day, the French doors in the back overlooked a stone patio and steps that led down to a fire pit that was surrounded by trees. The lake behind the trees only made the scene more picturesque. If you counted the steps and lower level, the stone patio was enormous, and I bet it was amazing decked out with a table and chairs and a grill in the summer.

“I can’t ever remember the top icing over. I grew up in this house, then moved out, of course, when I returned from college. My father passed away not long after I married Anne. Mrs. R. moved in with us, and this house sat empty. We lived on the other side of Lambton until a year after Anne died, when I sold that house and moved here. I wanted to raise Georgie where I grew up.”

“I don’t blame you. This place is beautiful.” Last night, I hadn’t considered whether Anne had lived in this house, but now that he’d mentioned it, a part of me was relieved she hadn’t. I suppose it was normal for a widower to bring home a woman to a bed he once shared with his wife, but the thought sort of made my insides twist.

“You’re shaking,” he said.

I smiled. “That’s your cold nose against my cheek.” All of a sudden, icy fingers found their way under my coat and turtleneck. “Oh, you’re going to pay for that!” I turned and slipped my hand under the elastic waistband of his pajama pants.

He gasped and grabbed my hand, entwining his fingers with mine. “Truce!”

I laughed and grazed my nose along his jawline. “I love your cologne. It does things to me.”

“Does it? That’s good to know.” His low rumble of a chuckle sent tingles all over.

“Will...” I dropped my forehead against his coat and closed my eyes. If I didn’t ask now, I didn’t know when I would be able to do it. “Will? What are we doing exactly?”

Chapter 13



LIZZY

At the question, Will stiffened some, making my heart clench. “What do you mean?”

I straightened and caught his gaze. My words needed to be perfect. I didn’t want him to think I’d regretted one moment, but I had to know if this was more than a temporary diversion for him. “Well, one moment we were getting along kind of like friends, and the next, we were having sex under the Christmas tree. I suppose I want to know if this is a Christmas fling for you, if we’re sort of friends with benefits, or if you see us continuing to see each other after the holidays. I don’t want to freak you out, but I have feelings for you. I know it’s quick. My heart kind of dove in head first without my brain keeping up.”

Will’s eyebrows furrowed as I spoke. “Oh.” He cleared his throat. “So, I suppose the first thing you need to know about me is I’ve never done flings. I can’t say I’ve never been friends with benefits with someone because that’s how you could characterize my marriage with Anne.”

“You never loved her?”

“I did, but as a very good friend and never more. Her mother and mine were best friends. They’d always expected us to marry, and my father supported it. As much as he loved my mother, he inherited my mother’s shares of Fitzwilliam and Sons Publishing when she died, so while he made good money as an architect, he had the benefit of that windfall during their marriage and after. They never wanted for anything. Since Anne owned a portion of de Bourgh, he saw a similar situation for me. I could marry Anne and never have to worry about money.”

My entire body stiffened. “Georgie’s grandmother is Catherine de Bourgh?”

He frowned. “Yes, why?”

“You should know my ex-fiancé is an executive at de Bourgh. He would French kiss the ground Catherine de Bourgh walks on if given the opportunity. From what I understand, she was at the wedding—the one I ran away from. Maybe I should hide away in my room when she comes tomorrow. I met her once, and she was severe enough then. I can’t imagine how she’ll behave now.”

Will’s mouth turned up on the edges. “Catherine’s always severe, and for some odd reason, she’s always enjoyed employing boot lickers. Don’t worry about her presence tomorrow and do as you normally would. If she has a problem with you being here, I’ll handle it. She has no say over who stays in my house or who I date—even if she thinks she does. Her behavior is one of the reasons I put the shares of de Bourgh in trust for Georgie. The profits collect in an account for her, and one day, she’ll have the funds to go to college wherever and for whatever she wants. She’ll also have a generous retirement fund as well. I don’t receive any benefit, so Catherine can’t hold that over my head.” He pulled me a bit tighter to him. “As for what we’re doing, I found myself attracted to you when Richard brought you into my house in that ridiculous wedding gown. Even with your mascara smeared and your hair a mess, you were beautiful.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re a liar, but I’ll forgive you this time.”

“You don’t need the makeup, you know. You’re lovely without it. Since that night, I’ve been drawn to you physically as well as who you are inside.”

“You said that’s why you were always staring.”

He chuckled. “Yes, that’s why I was staring. A part of me has wanted to ask you out, but I hesitated. We hardly knew each other, and you’d just had a huge upheaval by not getting married. Richard told me you didn’t love your fiancé, but running out on a wedding is still a big deal. When you kissed

me, any concerns I may have had didn't survive the touch of your lips on mine."

His hand glided over my hair in a gentle caress and settled on my shoulder. "I've never experienced what I do when I'm with you. It feels so natural to hold you—to kiss you. When your fingers play in my hair as they are now, I get goosebumps and chills. I don't know what this is, but it's definitely much more than a fling. I have feelings for you too. I'm actually dreading when you need to go. If you haven't guessed by my suggestions that you stay, I don't want you to leave. I loved waking up to you in my bed this morning, not to mention finding you painting with Georgie at the table this week when I got home from work. I hadn't ever considered dating or marrying again because of Georgie. Not every woman would want a stepdaughter, and I worried about how it would all work, but Georgie adores you. I adore you."

My eyes burned and I blinked to keep from turning into a crying ninny at his beautiful words. "Georgie's a pretty special little girl. Her daddy's pretty special too."

He pressed his forehead to mine. "I'm glad you feel that way." His lips met mine in a soft kiss. "What do you think of making out at the bottom of the Christmas tree again? Or we could cuddle in front of the fire. We don't have to do more. I'm happy just holding you."

My heart skipped about four beats. "After last night's escapades, I think I'll be pulling spruce needles from every crevice for the next week if we do the first."

He chuckled and kissed me once more. "I'm happy to volunteer for that duty."

I couldn't help but shake my head with a grin. When I turned, something tucked off to the side and surrounded by stone caught my eye. "Is that a hot tub?"

"It is. I love it after a workout. I'll come up from the basement and soak for a while."

I backed from him and pulled off my coat, tossing it over an Adirondack chair that hadn't been put away for the winter.

Once I stashed my boots underneath, I hissed as I tiptoed towards the large tub. With a lift of his eyebrows, Will stepped over to the side of the house and flipped a switch. All of a sudden, the steaming water teemed with bubbles.

A light flickered on at the bottom, and Will glanced inside. “It’s not common in the winter, but sometimes, we get bugs like you would in a pool. I always check. I don’t like to bathe with spiders.” He turned the light off.

My gaze met his and held while I stripped off my top and my pants. He hadn’t moved, so I hit his arm with my pajamas. “Hey, this isn’t a striptease. You have to get naked too.”

“I plan to, and you’ll be able to watch me while in the tub. First, let me grab our wine and bring it out with some towels. Trust me, you don’t want to have to make that run to the house naked and wet and in the snow.”

He returned quicker than I would’ve expected. I sat back with my wine while he took off his clothes, and heavens to Betsy, he did not disappoint! In the dim light from the windows of the house, the definition of his abs could be seen as well as a glimpse of what was down below. When he turned to put his clothes with mine on the chair, I could’ve cheered at the marvelous sight of his ass.

“That smile is a bit unnerving,” he said.

My gaze shot back up to his face. “Sorry; just enjoying the view.”

He took a sip of his wine before he drew me onto his lap and set my glass on the side of the tub. “You are so beautiful.”

What we did next would have shocked any spiders had there been any in the hot tub. That said, I was thrilled no one witnessed what happened under the water—or on top of it for that matter.

When the snow picked up, we wrapped ourselves in towels and used Will’s study to dry off and put our clothes back on. The kittens were snoozing away, which wasn’t a surprise. They’d played so much today; they were surely exhausted.

We cuddled on the sofa and enjoyed the lights on the tree while we finished our wine. After, we carried the kittens up to Will's room for the night. Turns out waking a sleeping kitten was a lot like waking a baby—it was something you avoided at all costs. The duo was wide awake when we closed the door behind us. They decided to explore and attack our feet under the covers. We used a wand with feathers on the end to keep them running around and jumping in an effort to wear them out, but after entertaining them for about ten minutes, we gave up and devoted ourselves to entertaining each other under the duvet.

Chapter 14



Will

The next morning, Catherine arrived earlier than I'd expected. Georgie had just finished her breakfast, and as she did every time Catherine visited, my daughter huddled to my side while her grandmother tried to lure her over to kiss her cheek.

Catherine was, by no means, a warm woman. She could frighten the living daylights out of most children, to tell the truth, but as I kept telling her, Georgie would warm up quicker if she'd visit more often. A half an hour around major holidays wasn't going to endear her to her granddaughter any time soon. I also wasn't sure I liked the prospect of Georgie anticipating her grandmother's visits only to receive gifts—not that Catherine bought age-appropriate gifts.

Last year, she purchased Georgie an antique and very collectible porcelain doll. Now, that thing scared the ever-loving shit out of me. The last thing I needed was a creepy Annabelle doll that sat in the corner of Georgie's room, giving me and her nightmares. A week after Catherine gave her the terrifying horror movie look-a-like, I called around until I found a collectibles shop that was pleased to purchase the darned thing. I'd deposited the money into Georgie's savings.

Catherine's hand dropped to her side, and she huffed. "William, why won't she come?"

"Would you come if someone spoke to you in a stern voice and snapped at you as if you were a dog?"

The woman stiffened. "I did no such thing."

I held my breath so I wouldn't snort. This woman had been a friend of my mother's, although I couldn't imagine the two of them ever having anything in common. Even Anne had found her mother's antics ludicrous most of the time—

somewhat similar to Lizzy and her mother, but without the animosity.

“Oh, excuse me. I hadn’t meant to intrude.”

When Catherine’s eyes widened, I wanted to groan. This would not go well. “Who is this? You’re dating?”

“Lizzy, wait!” I motioned her toward me since I couldn’t move; Georgie had a death grip around my knee. “Catherine de Bourgh, I’d like you to meet my girlfriend, Lizzy Bennet.”

Lizzy’s eyebrows twitched when I called her my girlfriend, but her reaction wasn’t too obvious, thank goodness. We hadn’t discussed details like that, after all. “It’s lovely to see you again, Mrs. de Bourgh.”

Catherine gasped. “She jilted my executive assistant last week, humiliated him in front of me and his family. You cannot be dating her. I won’t allow it!”

Lizzy tucked in her chin. “Executive assistant? Bill claimed he was your chief operating officer.”

“He what?” Catherine’s nostrils flared, and she hit her cane on the floor. “He most certainly is not! I’d never put such an imbecile in charge of the daily operations, but that’s beside the point!” She emphasized her tone with another rap of her cane. I’d never figured out why she needed one. Anne said Catherine merely enjoyed hitting it against things—and sometimes the ankles of people who pissed her off.

Lizzy glanced between us. “I’m sorry. Is there a point?”

Catherine gave an indignant cry. “Of course there is, you ignorant girl! I’ve chosen my son-in-law’s next wife, and it most certainly will not be *you*.”

This time, I stiffened. “I beg your pardon. I don’t need you to find me a bride.”

“If you are consorting with trollops such as this, you most certainly do!”

It was all I could do not to laugh hysterically. Trollop? From what I’d gathered, Lizzy never let Bill touch her in the time they were dating and engaged. His kisses to her cheek

were all she could tolerate. If it wasn't for her mother's constant tirades about how no one would ever marry her, Lizzy would've never gone on a second date with the idiot much less agreed to marry him.

I picked up Georgie and passed her to Lizzy. "Take her to the kitchen, please." I was grateful when Georgie went to Lizzy without argument. In a matter of seconds, they'd left the room.

"William—"

Before Catherine could begin a new diatribe, I held out my finger. "Catherine, I am informing you here and now that I will date and eventually marry whomever I want. No amount of your infernal demands, yelling, or even blackmail will persuade me to do as you desire."

"But Mary King was divorced last year. She—"

"No! I married Anne because it was your wish as well as my mother's. Thankfully, we were friends, and I wasn't miserable because of that fact, but I *will* choose my next wife, who I have every intention of loving. I will not marry again without love."

"Love! What's there to love when there's money and power?"

I clenched my hand into a fist at my side. "Lizzy and I could care less about both, and we'll do as we see fit for our own happiness."

My former monster-in-law's nostrils flared. "We'll see about that! I will not allow some common riff-raff around my granddaughter. If you don't do as I say, I'll consult an attorney and gain custody of my granddaughter."

"How do you propose to do that? Any attorney worth his salt will ask how often you visit your granddaughter—how much of a role you play in her life. When they learn that you come, at the most, three times a year, no court or judge will give custody. How do you think the observed visit will go when Georgie won't leave my lap to go near you?" I propped my hands on my hips while I stared her down. "I'm not afraid

of you. Now, until you can treat my guests with respect, you *will* get out of my house!”

Catherine hit the floor with that stupid cane once more. “A house that you fund with de Bourgh money!”

“I don’t see a penny of those funds. I put them all in trust for Georgie. I didn’t feel right taking them.”

The lady sniffed. “Her name is *Georgiana*.”

“Catherine, get out.”

“Well, I never!” With an exaggerated walk, her cane being used to lead her through the room, Catherine departed and slammed the door behind her.

When I entered the kitchen, Mrs. R. shook her head. “Good riddance, I say. Mrs. Darcy assumed that eventually this would have to happen, but I’m glad she didn’t live to see the day. To have to banish her mother wouldn’t have been easy on the poor dear.”

“I don’t imagine it would,” said Lizzy. “I’m sorry for entering when I did. I hadn’t heard the doorbell ring.”

I exhaled heavily and sat at the table with Lizzy and Georgie, who colored from her perch in Lizzy’s lap. “No, she needs to know now that she’ll never control my life, and she’ll never control Georgie’s either. I’d never allow it.”

Lizzy covered my hand with hers. “I heard what she threatened. You’re an excellent father. No judge would ever rule against you.”

“I know. I just wish Catherine had taken her gifts with her.”

Mrs. R. glanced toward the living room. “You don’t think there’s another one of those awful dolls in there, do you?”

“What could be wrong with a doll?” asked Lizzy.

Mrs. R. stood and put a hand on one hip. “A normal child’s doll, nothing. A possessed bit of porcelain demon spawn—a great deal.”

I had to laugh at Mrs. R.'s description. "You never mentioned that it creeped you out too."

"You were the one who had to get rid of it," said Mrs. R. "I had no say in the matter. However, I did say a fervent prayer of thanks the morning you drove off with that horrid thing."

Lizzy covered her mouth and laughed at the same time as Richard entered. "I thought I heard the dulcet tones of Catherine de Bourgh but I'm shocked to find she's no longer here."

"I had to kick her out. She was terrifying Georgie and insulted Lizzy."

Richard grinned and glanced at Georgie still coloring. "It's about flipping time."

"Don't apologize, Richie. I happen to agree with you."

My cousin glanced at me then Lizzy and lifted his eyebrows. "Well, since everything here seems well in hand, I'm going into the office to do some catching up. My mother wanted you all to know you're invited to her New Year's Fete, so don't make any other plans."

I dropped back into my chair. "I'd forgotten about that."

"I don't remember seeing you there in the past," said Lizzy.

"Because he uses Georgie as an excuse even though I'm perfectly capable of watching her." Mrs. R. dipped her chin and leveled me with a hard look.

"I despise big black-tie affairs like that. If I went, Richard's mother would make me dance with women I don't know."

Lizzy lifted one eyebrow. "Do you object to the dancing or the women?"

I ran my fingers through my hair. "If it was a woman I liked, I might be fine with it, but attempting to make conversation with a strange woman is a pain. Most of them also assume I'm as wealthy as the Fitzwilliams and have offered themselves for the evening when it's all over."

“That was before you married Anne,” said Richard. “You went to the de Bourgh events then, if you remember.”

“And those weren’t much different, except I didn’t dance with strange women. I did, however, have one woman who approached me at the bar and hit on me, despite my wedding band.”

Richard snickered. “I remember that. As I recall, Caroline Brittney was the unfortunate recipient of Will’s haughty glare. Truly, she could’ve cared less. She’s out to ensnare a wealthy man, even if he was married. She’s the type to wait around in the hopes of him leaving his wife for her. From what I understand from my mother, she’s spoken of it often enough in the ladies’ rooms. Everyone knows her scheme.”

I swallowed hard. Those sorts of women never appealed to me. I’d dated a few girls in college, but so far, Anne had been my only long-term relationship. I’d never been one to enjoy flitting from woman to woman.

“I’ll never understand that mentality,” said Lizzy.

As she bent down to show Georgie something with her coloring, my heart beat harder than it had before. We hardly knew each other, but Lizzy was what I wanted. I was falling in love with a woman I’d known for barely a week. Who did that? I mean, you hear stories, but I never dreamed I’d be one to fall so quickly.

Good Lord, Richard would be insufferable when he found out!

Chapter 15



LIZZY

Will and I had tucked in Georgie, but I'd had to return to my room to change into my pajamas. We'd spent the last few nights going at it like bunnies, but I was nervous for a different reason tonight. I hoped he wouldn't be disappointed, but I suppose if he were, not much could be done about it.

His warm grin greeted me when I entered his bedroom, and my stomach tightened. He set down his book and patted the bed beside him. "Don't forget to close the door."

"Um, Will?"

His eyebrows dipped. "What's wrong?" He stood and rounded the end of the bed to take me in his embrace. "You look nervous."

I scraped my teeth along my bottom lip. He might be disappointed, but he'd understand. Heck! I was frustrated. "I started my period this afternoon." My teeth went right back to wearing at my lip.

His body gave a slight start, but he pulled me a little tighter to him. "I hope you don't think I'll be mad."

This time, my body gave somewhat of a jolt. "No! I'm simply embarrassed. Since I'm on the pill, I'm pretty regular, so I suppose I could've told you it was coming..."

"Hey." He tipped my chin up with one of his fingers. "I'm happy to cuddle and talk. Don't get me wrong, I love being with you, but perhaps a few days of abstinence will give us a chance to know each other better."

I let out a sizeable exhale. "I'd like that."

Without further explanation, he drew me over to the bed, and we lay down on top of the duvet facing each other on our sides. "Where are the kittens?"

“They were sleeping on the bed in my room, so I left them for the moment. The door is open, so they can find me if they want.” Since the rescue fixed them before they were adopted, they weren’t tiny, and they’d proven that they could manage the size of Will’s house without any problems.

“Have you decided on names for them yet?”

“I’m thinking Tuna and Roe.”

He chuckled in that warm, rich tone that washed over me. “You’re naming a kitten for a fish and fish eggs?”

“Why not? I’ve always liked the idea of naming a cat after a fish or sushi.”

His fingers entwined with mine. “So which is which?”

“I’m thinking the boy is Tuna and the girl is Roe.”

“Isn’t ‘Ro’ sometimes a nickname for Rosanna or other girls’ names?”

I propped my head on my hand. “That’s exactly why I wanted to name her Roe.”

He kissed the back of my hand. “I love it.”

“Daddy?”

Will sat up as though shocked by the mattress. “Georgie? What are you doing awake?”

“Tummy hurts.”

In a heartbeat, he was across the room and had pressed his palm to her forehead. “She’s warm.”

As I approached, Georgie put her hand to her mouth. In a flash, Will’s bare chest, pajama bottoms, and bare feet were covered in vomit. I couldn’t help but cover my own mouth with a gasp. My shock only lasted a second before I grabbed Georgie and rushed her into the bathroom. The poor thing was sick again, but thankfully, this time in the toilet.

Will entered, walking stiffly, obviously trying to keep the mess to a minimum “At least she didn’t get my hands. I was able to text Mrs. R. for help. Are you okay?”

I knelt by Georgie's side. "I think she's stopped for the moment. Throw your clothes in the hamper and take a shower. I'll throw Georgie's pajamas in with yours. I'm sure once she's had her own bath, she'll want to cuddle up to you in bed."

While I removed Georgie's pajamas and started filling the tub, I'd missed the wet Will show behind the glass of the shower. In any other situation, I would've loved to sit with a bowl of popcorn and watch the water trickle down his abs to that trail of hair and down... I cleared my throat and sat a bit straighter at a knock on the door.

"Miss Bennet? I have the mess out here cleaned up. Do you have Will's dirty clothes? They'll need to go in the wash before they stink up the house."

I held up a finger to Georgie. "I'll be right back." As soon as I handed Mrs. R. the hamper, she passed a box with a dropper bottle inside and a temporal thermometer.

"Will said she's warm. If she's running a fever, give her whatever the dosage is on the side for her weight. Will has a scale in there that'll work well enough."

I nodded and hurried back in before halting about a foot from Georgie. Mrs. R. knew I'd be in the bathroom with a naked and showering Will. When did she realize about us?

"Lizzy?"

Georgie's miserable whimper made me spring back into action. After the thermometer said she had a 101° fever, I gave her a dose of the medication, a lukewarm bath, and washed her hair. Will hurried out and returned dressed with some of Georgie's clothing in his hands.

As soon as she was in clean pajamas, Will carried her into the bedroom and lay down on the bed with her curled against his side.

"I'll just go to the other room."

Georgie held out her little hand. "Don't go."

"I don't want you to leave either," said Will.

Since I couldn't very well refuse, I crawled onto the bed and turned toward Will, much as I had been before. Georgie grabbed my hand and held it until her tiny body relaxed with sleep.

"I brought a pot in case the poor dear needs it again." Mrs. R. didn't say anything else or appear shocked. She simply set the pot next to Will on the bedside table and made to bustle back out.

"Thank you, Mrs. R."

The older lady smiled at Will. "You're welcome."

As soon as she'd gone, Will ran a hand through his hair. "This wasn't how I'd planned tonight at all. What am I? A puke magnet?"

I smiled. "A very handsome one."

He shook his head. "Thank you for your help too."

"I have to admit that I was shocked when she first got sick. I had a momentary urge to giggle at the sight of you. I mean it was the second time in how many days?"

He pressed his cheek to his daughter's head. "I can understand. The cool bath and acetaminophen helped her temperature. She's not as warm."

"I'm sure she'll feel better in the morning, and Mrs. R. will know exactly how to re-introduce food and liquids so they don't bother her stomach."

"Mrs. R. knows it all. She helped out with me when I was a little boy. My parents hired her when I was four. I've told her she doesn't have to work if she doesn't want to and can still live in her suite, but she insists."

"What would you do if she retired?"

"Oh, probably hire a housekeeper to come in and clean a couple of times a week. I'm sure Mrs. R. would still want to continue taking care of Georgie, but it'd take a load off of her."

“Maybe you should have someone come in and clean anyway.”

He gave me a side-eye. “You know those are fighting words to Mrs. R.? She’d kick them out so hard, they’d have an orthopedic shoeprint on their ass.”

I chuckled. “Not such a great idea then.”

“Not to her anyway.”



RICHARD

When I’d brought Lizzy to William’s, I hadn’t done so with a plan in mind. Yes, I’d always thought they’d be perfect for each other, but considering Lizzy had run out on her wedding, I was seeking somewhere to stay where her family wouldn’t think to look, not to finally set up my cousin with my best friend.

They were adults and capable of making their own decisions, but I did have concerns. They were my two favorite people in the world—other than my parents—and they deserved happiness. I did hope they would find it together, but I didn’t want either hurt if a happy ever after didn’t happen for them.

Mrs. R. was walking through the living room when I entered, her terrycloth robe tied tightly around her waist. “You were certainly at the office late. You missed all the hubbub around here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Georgie must’ve picked up a stomach bug somewhere. She went into Will’s room and got sick all over him. Poor man. That’s twice in one week.”

I held my breath for a moment to keep from laughing. “Is Georgie okay now?”

“She seems to be. She’s fast asleep with her father and Miss Bennet, so I didn’t want to intrude.”

“Lizzy’s in there?”

“Oh, yes. She helped get Georgie cleaned up and gave her some medicine. The three of them make a lovely family picture, don’t they? I do think Miss Bennet’s good for Will. He’s never had someone to help him laugh at himself—other than you, that is.”

I had to shake myself. “When did you realize they’re a couple? I only knew because I found them together on Christmas Eve.”

Mrs. R. gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “Oh, pooh. Those two were as obvious as could be from the start. When I heard them frolicking, shall we say, in the hot tub last night, I knew they’d finally acted on the chemistry between them. So, it started on Christmas Eve, you say?”

I cleared my throat. “I know little more than you do at this point. Neither has said much to me so far, so I have no tea to spill.”

“You’re no fun, Richie.”

“Good night, Mrs. R.”

My feet were heavy as I climbed the stairs. My room was one of the first on the hallway, but after setting down my briefcase, I crept to the last door on the right, which happened to be open tonight. When I leaned against the door frame, my eyebrows jumped high on my forehead. Mrs. R. was right. They did look the loving family. Lizzy and Will slept on their sides facing each other, with Georgie in the middle. All three of their hands were joined and tucked to Will’s chest.

My heart settled at the picture in front of me. Maybe I didn’t have to worry about either of them. Maybe somewhere, deep down, they knew what they were doing after all.

Chapter 16



LIZZY

The next evening, Richard appeared in the kitchen with a long garment bag. “Your dress for the New Year’s ball, my dear.” The goof bowed in front of me with a huge grin.

“We’re all going?”

Mrs. R. waved her spatula in the air. “Not me and Georgie, dear, but I do think the three of you should go. Georgie and I will hang out here and have a Disney movie night. Maybe we’ll watch *Tangled*. That’s such a cute one, and she hasn’t seen it yet.”

I took the dress from Richard but glanced back at Georgie. “I love *Tangled*.”

Richard started ushering me toward the living room. “I bet you’ll love that dress more. Go put it on. I want Mrs. R. to see you in it.”

With a growl of an exhale, I went up to Will’s room and hung the bag on a hook in his closet. My closet was much smaller and didn’t have a hook high enough for a long dress. When I unzipped the bag, I gasped. It was the vintage gown from the secondhand shop in Lambton. I’d loved that dress, but how much had he spent on it? I was almost afraid to ask.

I took off my jeans, t-shirt, and bra, which wouldn’t have worked in a strapless dress, and drew the white satin up over my hips. I’d managed the zipper most of the way when warm fingers touched my upper back. “Here, let me help you.”

I smiled at Will over my shoulder. “When did you get home?”

“A minute ago. I haven’t even stopped in the kitchen yet. What’s this?”

I turned and held out my arms. “What do you think? I tried it on my first day here in a vintage shop in Lambton. According to the store owner, the designer was huge with celebrities in the 1950s.”

He stared at me with such a strange expression. I shifted and crossed my arms over my chest. “You don’t like it.”

With a start, he threw up his hands in front of him. “No! That’s not it. You’re stunning. The dress looks like it was made for you. Forgive me. I’m dumbstruck.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I love it. I love you.”

My stomach flipped, and my heart began beating so hard I pressed a hand to my chest. “What did you say?”

“I said I love you. I saw you in that dress my first thought was ‘I do.’” He took my hands and dropped to one knee. “Marry me, Lizzy.”

I could’ve fallen on my ass when he dropped to one knee. How my eyes were still in my head was a mystery! “What? How? We’ve only been seeing each other—if you could call it that—since Christmas Eve. It’s not even New Year’s!” The words were rushed, and my voice was oddly pitched, but this was fast, wasn’t it?

He jumped to his feet and cradled my cheeks in his hand. “But my heart knows what it wants. I’ve never been so happy in my life as I’ve been when I’m with you. From the moment you mentioned selling your house, I’ve suggested staying here because I can’t imagine you leaving. You fit with me and Georgie, and I can’t imagine a better mother for her. I know this may seem crazy. I’m being impulsive, and I’m never impulsive. Yet, everything in me says that this is right—that we belong together. Say you’ll marry me. Say you’ll spend the rest of your life with me because you feel the same way.”

As he spoke such beautiful words, my eyes started to burn, and my entire insides fluttered as though a million butterflies were flying and twirling in circles. As much as I’d known I needed to start house hunting online, I’d delayed. I didn’t want to leave Will and Georgie either. “I think I loved you when I puked on your feet.” Even though Will chuckled at

my response, tears were running down my face. “No, I’m not sure when exactly I started to love you. It was a million little things you’ve done or said since I arrived: what a good father you are to Georgie, how you love and accept Richard for who he is, how you love Mrs. R. like she’s part of the family, and I can’t leave out that I’d totally marry you for your body.”

Even though his cheeks reddened at my compliment, he lifted his eyebrows. “Is that a yes?”

“Oh, yes.”

My body lit up like fireworks when he took me in his arms and kissed me.

“Let’s get married for New Year’s.”

I gave a slight bark of laughter, then bit my lips closed for a moment. “You’re serious.”

“We’ve decided to be together, so why wait? I know what I want, and I don’t want to delay for endless months, or even a year of planning, before we can start our life together. What I would wish for is you in that gorgeous dress with a veil and wherever we can find to have a ceremony. As long as we’re not in some oddball Vegas chapel, I’ll be content.”

“I remember Jane had a two-day waiting period after they got their marriage license.” I’d always wanted a Christmas Eve or New Year’s Eve wedding, but Faith had insisted no one would come. Could I have the wedding of my dreams so easily?

He looked at his watch, then pulled out his phone and tapped at the screen. “If you change, we can make it to the clerk’s office before it closes. That way, the license will be good to go the day before we need it.”

I found myself nodding. “Unzip me, please.”

Will returned the gown to the garment bag while I slipped on my jeans. “The wedding license is the simple part. What about where we’ll get married? Who will officiate? What about guests? If your family is there and Jane isn’t... Well, she’ll kill me.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and nodded. “Let me make a phone call in the car. I think I know of a place. We can have Charlie and Jane meet us there before my aunt and uncle’s party, we get married, then we go celebrate the new year with a few hundred of Fitzwilliam and Son’s guests.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“Any nerves?” He lifted his eyebrows.

“Oddly, no,” I said with a grin.

When we made it downstairs, my newly minted fiancé poked his head into the kitchen to tell Richard and Mrs. R. we had some last-minute errands to run. As we were leaving out the door to the garage, Richard yelled something about the dress, but we high-tailed it before we were inevitably delayed. Will opened the car door for me before he slid into his seat, and after driving around the bend in the driveway, he paused and pulled out his phone. In a moment, the tell-tale ringing of him calling someone filled the cabin.

“Hello? Darcy? Is that really you? You haven’t called in ages. How are you?”

“Hi, Ed. I’m great actually.” He grinned over at me. “Sorry to call for a favor when I’ve been such a crappy cousin, but... I’m engaged.”

“You’re what?” We both jumped at Ed’s loud exclamation. “You said you were never getting married again, and blah, blah, blah. What on earth happened?”

Will glanced over at me. “I fell in love.”

“Oh, geez! By that sappy tone, I’d say the unlucky lady is with you.”

“I am,” I said.

“You do know what you’re in for, don’t you? He’s moody on the best of days, and a downright boor the rest of the time.”

I laughed. “I’ve seen his moods. I’m not afraid.”

“She’s a brave woman. So, what’s this favor you need?”

Will chuckled. “Yes, I know. Since you’ve met Lizzy, informally of course, I was hoping you’d marry us on New Year’s Eve.”

“That’s in three days! You do know that, don’t you?”

“I haven’t lost my brain, Ed, just my heart. So, can you do it?”

“You have the marriage license?”

Will winced. “We’re heading to the clerk’s office right now.”

The man gave a guttural exhale. “The things I do for you. I suppose you’ll want to have it in the chapel?”

“If it’s available. Yes.”

“I suppose you’ll also want to have it before Mom and Dad’s holiday party?”

“That would be preferable,” said Will.

“Okay, text me a picture of this license so I know you have it. If everything’s in order, I’ll see you at five. There’s a wedding at three, but they’ll be long gone to the reception by then. The ceremony isn’t lengthy, so we’ll be fashionably late to the party.”

“Sounds perfect. Oh! And Ed, don’t tell Richard about this. We kind of want to surprise him.”

“Wait, why?” All of a sudden, Ed burst into laughter. “Lizzy Bennet, is that you?”

I frowned at Will. “Have we met?”

“Only a couple of times. I’m Richard’s younger brother, Teddy. Do you remember me?”

With a grin, I shook my head. “Of course, I do. Your mother told me you’d become a minister. I just couldn’t reconcile that with the little boy who used to spy on me while I was changing in the pool house.” Will jerked the wheel a bit, but I put my hand on his knee.

“Hey, I’m not Catholic, so I can still get married someday. If I *had* been raised Catholic, trust me, I would’ve converted.”

“Look, Ed, we’re pulling into town,” said Will. “I’ll message you that photo as soon as we have it.”

“Sounds good. I look forward to seeing you on New Year’s Eve.”

“I owe you one. Thanks, man.”

“Anytime, Cuz.”

When the line clicked, Will had stopped at a light and looked over at me. “He watched you change clothes?”

I lifted my one eyebrow. “He was ten, and I was thirteen. His mother caught him, and she tore his butt up for it too. To my knowledge, he never tried it again. For what it’s worth, I had my back to where he’d found a gap in the curtain, and I’d only taken off my shirt. He got the totally exciting view of my thirteen-year-old back. Can you live with that?”

“Maybe I won’t beat him up since he didn’t see anything major.”

I inhaled sharply. “You’d beat up a man of God.”

“He was my cousin first, so yes.” Will’s chin gave a definitive dip at his proclamation.

I rolled my eyes. “Boys will be boys, I suppose.”

We parked at the closest lot to the courthouse. Much to our surprise, the clerk’s office was empty, and within a half-hour, we walked out with a fresh marriage license in Will’s hand.

We’d spotted a bridal shop a block away on our drive in, so after Will sent a photo of the license to his cousin, he held my hand as we walked down the sidewalk until we reached the storefront. I didn’t need an ornate veil, but they had one in stock that was simple, elegant, and would trail the ground behind my gown. How much I liked it must’ve been obvious when the lady placed it on my head because Will whipped out his credit card and had it wrapped up before I could object to him paying.

As I passed a display, I picked up a shoe and held it aloft for the sales lady to see. “Do you have these in an eight?”

Will grinned at the almost wedge sneaker decorated in lace and pearls. “I should’ve known you’d pick something different.”

“They may not be elegant, but they’ll be under my dress, and my feet won’t hurt. It’s a win-win. They also have enough of a sole that my dress won’t drag the floor.”

The shoe fit perfectly and would be ideal for a night of dancing—or standing around talking to family if that was Will’s preference.

When we walked out, Will insisted on carrying my bag. “We’ll need to think of an excuse to get Richard to the church.”

“We need to pick up his brother for the party. What about Mrs. R. and Georgie? We can’t get married without them.” I looked over my shoulder at the store. “Should we have bought Georgie a flower girl dress?”

Before we’d gone far, we’d turned around and headed back into the shop. Will found a cute dress with a white bodice and a pink tutu-style skirt. “She has some pink Mary Janes she can wear with it.”

We took a different route back to the car, looking at window displays in some of the quaint shops. “Lizzy, I have my parents’ rings, if you don’t mind us using those. I think you’ll love my mother’s wedding set, or I wouldn’t have suggested it.”

I hugged Will’s arm to my side. “I love the idea of wearing your mother’s ring.”

Chapter 17



Will

In the last two days of the year, I'd been a busy man. I went to work both days but used the bulk of my time making arrangements for a car to take us to the church and the New Years' ball after, as well as a honeymoon of sorts for Lizzy and me. I'd also arranged a flower shop to deliver some flowers to the chapel as a surprise for Lizzy.

I'd even hired a car to take Mrs. R. and my daughter home from the wedding. Mrs. R. had problems with night vision when she drove, so I preferred not to take any chances with either of them.

On the big day, I told Mrs. R. that Ed wanted to bless the family for the new year. He'd never done so before, so Mrs. R. was flummoxed at the idea, but agreed to have Georgie ready in her new dress. When I told Richard of the blessing, he only chuckled and declared Ed to be getting sentimental. He never questioned my plans or behaved suspiciously.

I'd also had my parents' rings cleaned and ensured the prongs were good on my mother's wedding set. We'd sized Lizzy's finger the night we passed the jewelry store, and thank goodness, the rings didn't have to be adjusted. Once I put them on her finger, I wanted them to stay there.

Since the wedding would be a surprise for everyone, we'd agreed she wouldn't wear her engagement ring until tonight. If someone noticed it on the way to the chapel, so be it.

Lizzy looked beautiful in her gown when we got into the car. I'd put the box with her veil in the back before Richard had come out of the house. It was one of the few times I'd not minded him dragging his feet.

As soon as we were settled into the limo, Richard started laughing. "Where did you find those shoes?"

My fiancée lifted her feet with a grin. “I saw them in a shop window in Lambton when Will and I ran errands a couple of days ago.”

“Quite practical. Your feet won’t hurt after a long night of dancing and mingling,” said Mrs. R.

Lizzy gestured toward the older lady. “See? Mrs. R. understands.”

Georgie sat between me and Lizzy in her dress, which by Mrs. R.’s dipped chin and raised eyebrows was overkill. My daughter also wore her pink puffer jacket since the weather was freezing. Richard’s friend at the vintage shop had apparently called him about a cape for Lizzy that he’d brought home yesterday—in white, of all colors. He had no idea how much of a help he’d been.

When we pulled up to the glass chapel set into the forest, Lizzy gasped. “In the snow, it looks like something out of a fairy tale.”

Ed was waiting when we entered. He hugged me, Lizzy, Richard, then Mrs. R., and pretended to steal Georgie’s nose. “Are we ready?”

Richard glanced around the inside of the chapel. “Since when do you bless families for the new year, Teddy?”

“We’re not here to be blessed in that way, Richard.” I lifted Lizzy’s hand and displayed her engagement ring. “We’re here so Lizzy and I can get married.”

Mrs. R. covered her mouth before she squealed and hugged me. “I can’t believe you’re being so impulsive, but I’m so happy for you.” She embraced Lizzy. “For both of you. I can’t believe you two kept this a secret. What about flowers? What about a veil for the bride?”

As Mrs. R. asked the question, the driver opened the door and brought in the sizeable box for the veil. “Excuse me, but you forgot this in the trunk.”

“That’s my veil, Mrs. R.,” said Lizzy.

My housekeeper waved her hands in front of her face. “I just might cry.”

I knelt in front of Georgie. “Would you like it if Lizzy and the kittens lived with us all the time?”

“You mean she won’t go home?”

“No, our house would become hers too.”

Georgie nodded and jumped up and down. “Yes! I want Lizzy, Tuna, and Woe to live with us!”

As I stood, I held out my hand to Richard. “What do you say? Do I have your blessing? I feel I require it more from you than anyone else.”

Richard growled and took my hand. “I knew the two of you would be something.”

The door opened again, but this time, it was Charlie and Jane who entered. Jane immediately gasped and grabbed Lizzy, embracing her. “You don’t know how thrilled I am to see you.”

Georgie bounded over to Charlie, who swung her up into his arms. “Hi there, Georgie. Have you been having fun with Lizzy?”

My daughter nodded and hugged Lizzy at the same time as Charlie in an adorable double embrace. After, Charlie faced me and held out his free hand. “You never did say why we needed to meet you here. What’s going on?”

“They’re getting married,” said Richard in a higher pitched tone than usual.

“Married!” Jane stared at Lizzy as though she’d spontaneously sprouted a hairy mole on the tip of her nose.

My fiancée bit her lip and gave a sheepish shrug. “Will you be my maid of honor?”

Jane’s mouth still hung somewhat agape. “You know I will, but this is all so fast, don’t you think?”

“I know, but I’m happy, Jane,” said Lizzy. “I wanted you and Charlie to be here. I’m starting the new year with a new

attitude and a new life and leaving parts of my old life behind. Why would I do that without you?"

Her sister's eyes became shiny, and Jane dabbed at her eye. "You're going to make me cry. I hope my dress will work."

My fiancée laughed. "You could be wearing a paper bag, and I wouldn't care."

With that internal heater she's carrying, she wouldn't be cold," said Charlie. "She refuses to turn the heat to a normal level. I'm freezing my tootsies off in the house so she can be comfortable."

Jane looked over her shoulder. "When you're seven months pregnant and your ankles are the size of baked hams, we'll talk about your comfort."

Charlie grimaced and drew his wife to his side to wrap an arm around her. "You're right. I'm sorry for being insensitive."

Ed clapped his hands together. "So, are we ready to go then?"

"I need my veil on," said Lizzy.

Her sister waddled forward. "I'll help you."

"I'm walking her down the aisle," said Richard.

My best friend pointed at Richard. "Hey, you've been saying forever that the two of them would be perfect for each other."

Ed pointed to a box in a pew. "Will, you ordered those, I believe."

Richard slapped me on the back when he peered inside to find Lizzy's bouquet, a mixture of evergreen and white roses with a couple of pinecones. The arrangement was by no means traditional, but Lizzy would appreciate the uniqueness—at least I hoped she would!

Mrs. R. pinned on our boutonnieres before Richard brought Lizzy her flowers. Charlie held Georgie's hand at the midpoint of the aisle with her basket of rose petals.

As soon as I was at the head of the aisle with Ed, Charlie showed Georgie how to sprinkle the petals down the aisle. When they reached the top, I tugged him by the sleeve to stand beside me, then hoisted Georgie to my hip. “Since Richard is giving Lizzy away, you’re my best man.”

Charlie grinned so wide I thought his face would crack. “I’m honored, Darce.”

Even though I’d already seen Lizzy in her dress, she took my breath away as Richard led her down the aisle. She glowed. No other word existed to describe it. When I finally stood before Ed with Lizzy beside me and Georgie in my arms, an incredible peace washed over me. This was my family. As I’d said to Lizzy in my proposal, this was how it was meant to be. I couldn’t explain how I knew it, but I did. What had happened to make me suddenly so sentimental?

When Ed said we were man and wife, Lizzy’s eyes brimmed with tears as I kissed her. With Georgie in my other arm and family around me, I kept it chaste, but I tried to convey every bit of emotion running through me at that moment. When I released her lips, she laughed.

“I love you, Mrs. Darcy.”

“And I love you, Mr. Darcy.”

“We need better pictures than a phone,” said Mrs. R.

Ed reached behind a pulpit to one side and pulled out a DSLR. “I asked Dad if I could borrow his camera to take some photos of the chapel in the snow.”

Laughing, Richard took the equipment from his brother. “A man of God shouldn’t lie.”

“Well, I *was* sworn to secrecy. And I didn’t lie. I did take photos of the chapel and uploaded them to my work computer.”

Richard took countless photos of me and Lizzy, some with Georgie, then took every combination of us and our guests that could be imagined. Charlie even ran out to get our driver to take photos of all of us together.

When all was said and done, Mrs. R. took Georgie in the car that had arrived for them, and Richard and Ed decided to ride with Charlie and Jane, which left me and my bride to ourselves in the limo. When we were alone, I took her in my arms and kissed her soundly.

“Any regrets, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Because of how quick this has been, I thought I’d be nervous while we said our vows, but I wasn’t. It was the strangest thing. As I stood there with Teddy reading off the service, I knew I was where I was supposed to be.”

I furrowed my forehead. “How you felt isn’t strange at all. I had the same sensation. Thank you for running out on your last fiancé.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

Lizzy pressed her lips to mine with a loud smack. “You’re very welcome. Thank you for catching me when I fell.”

“When you fell?”

She tipped her head back and forth. “When I fell from Faith’s grace.”

I rolled my eyes. “She never deserved you.”

My wife kissed me until I was dizzy. “And when my heart fell for you, you caught it and kept it safe.”

“Neither of those things requires thanks since I wouldn’t be this content if we hadn’t met and fallen in love.”

When Lizzy kissed me again, we were done talking—at least for now.

Chapter 18



LIZZY

“Sir, we’ve arrived,” said the voice through the speaker.

The partition had been up in the limo when we’d gotten in, and Will had taken advantage of the privacy to the fullest. His hand was up my gown and had been wreaking such havoc that I’d somehow failed to notice when the car stopped.

He groaned, removed his hand, and flopped back on the seat while I shook out my skirt. “I’ll need to find a place to check my make-up before we go in.” I was still breathless and a bit dizzy from the toe-clenching orgasm he’d given me a moment ago.

With a nod, he shifted in the seat and winced. “The ladies’ room is across the hall from the ballroom. We can both ensure we don’t give ourselves away before we enter. I just need a moment.” He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

We’d removed my veil before the car had departed the church, so it sat on the seat across from us where I could spread the delicate fabric out. I’d moved my bouquet next to it. I hadn’t thought of flowers. I suppose the essentials had been more important. Richard had taken care of the dress, so Will was all I needed. After all, he’d been the one to consider a veil. The rest had been what had occurred to me while we were at the bridal shop.

My new husband cleared his throat. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Will texted the driver, who opened the door a moment later. “Sir.”

“Thank you,” said Will. He offered me his hand, and we walked inside the plush hotel. The crystal chandeliers down

the event corridor sparkled, their light reflecting off the glass and mirrors adorning the walls.

When we reached the restroom, he pointed down the hall. “The men’s is just down there, but I should be back before you come out.”

After a quick peck, I hurried inside. After all the kissing in the limo, I wasn’t sure how I looked. Even when I wear makeup, I don’t pile it on, so I could pray it wasn’t too bad. At least I’d remembered to put lipstick and a few necessities in the clutch Mrs. R. had scavenged from a trunk in the attic, otherwise, I’d have been in a jam.

When I stepped in front of the mirror, I had no color left on my lips whatsoever, but thankfully, my hair didn’t look worse for wear. I’d pulled it up at my nape with curls hanging free around my head. A few pins seemed to have loosened, so I pushed them back, then applied fresh lipstick.

My eyes caught the glint of my wedding set on my finger, and I paused. I hadn’t had much time to really look at it when we were at the church. Since we were keeping the engagement, such as it was, from everyone else, Will had wanted the rings to be a surprise, so he hadn’t shown them to me together. Heck, I’d hardly had time to peek at the engagement ring before we were at the chapel.

The engagement ring boasted of a round cut white diamond that was well over a carat, with smaller diamonds along the sides of the white gold band, almost resembling round leaves. The wedding band was composed of alternating small oval diamonds with tiny round diamonds in a matching white gold setting. The combination was simple and elegant. Even if I had picked them myself, I couldn’t imagine choosing anything different.

Will awaited me when I opened the door, and he grinned when he saw me. “There’s my beautiful wife.” He took my hand and kissed my fingers by my rings. “I love seeing my mother’s rings on your finger.”

“I hadn’t had a chance to look at them until a moment ago. They’re perfect. Thank you.”

As soon as we stepped inside, Richard threw up his hands. “There you are! My mother’s been asking where both of you were since we arrived fifteen minutes ago. Where have you been?”

“I think the driver took the scenic route,” said Will while my face burned.

Richard looked at me and narrowed his eyes some. “Uh-huh. I’m not sure I buy that, but I’m also not sure I want to know.”

“William!”

Mrs. Fitzwilliam hurried toward us with her arms outstretched. “It’s about time you showed up!” When she glanced to me, she did a double take. “You came with our Liz?”

Before Richard’s mom could hug me, Will pulled me closer to his side. “No, Aunt Grace, I came with my wife.”

Mrs. Fitzwilliam halted, looked between us, and started coughing, a palm flying to her chest.

“Mom?” Richard stepped up to her side and put his own hand to her back.

She raised one hand and brushed the edges of her eyes with the other. “I’m okay.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, Will, but did you say *wife*?”

I held out my hand to show her my wedding ring and did a little happy dance. “We were married tonight. Teddy officiated the service.”

Richard’s mother looked over her shoulder. Teddy stood not far behind her, and when he noticed the direction of his mother’s gaze as well as who she stood with, he startled and disappeared into the crowd. Mrs. Fitzwilliam shook her head as she returned her attention to us. “I should kill that boy for not saying anything.”

“I swore him to secrecy,” said Will. “We wanted a small affair, and we planned everything at sort of the last minute. Ed

had an opening in his schedule, and I knew the chapel would look like something out of a fairy tale in the snow.”

“For what it’s worth, Teddy borrowed Dad’s DSLR camera, and we took photos before we came here.” Thank heavens for Richard! His mother looked prone to burst!

Mrs. Fitzwilliam put her palm to her forehead. “I can’t believe you did this, William. And you! You just ran out of your wedding to Bill Collins less than two weeks ago. When did the two of you start seeing each—?” Mrs. Fitzwilliam’s eyes widened, and she peered over her shoulder before grabbing Will’s forearm. “Oh, shit! Catherine is going to have a fit! I’d almost forgotten she was here.”

Will frowned and branded me with the palm of his free hand to the small of my back. “Catherine never comes to this party.”

“She did this year. She said she wanted to talk about you when we greeted her. Could she have known about the two of you?”

“I kicked her out the day after Christmas for insulting Lizzy and threatening to sue for full custody of Georgie.”

Mrs. Fitzwilliam snorted. “As if she’d have any chance of that.” This was one of those moments where Richard and his mother looked so much alike, I had to laugh.

“Mom,” said Richard.

He held out his phone in front of her, and she clutched her chest. “I can’t believe I missed this! Where’s Robert? You need to show your father those. Oh, look at dear sweet Georgie. I bet she adores you, Liz.”

“Of course, she does.” Will rubbed my back.

“You know, Richard has been saying for years the two of you would be perfect for each other.”

“Yes, but I hadn’t expected them to hook up and practically elope in less than two weeks, especially after she got sick on his bare feet the night she was supposed to get married.”

His mother shook her head. “So that’s where you took her! We all knew you’d probably helped her get out of there. Mrs. Bennet was screeching that fact to the entire church full of guests, but we didn’t know where you’d gone. I assumed you’d taken her to the cabin.”

“I thought of it,” said Richard, “but I couldn’t get there on what was left of my car battery. We stopped at William’s to recharge and so Liz could sleep off the three-quarters of a bottle of Patrón she drank—”

“Thanks for telling her that part, Dickie.”

Mrs. Fitzwilliam chuckled. “I don’t blame you, dear. Bill was an ass. We were hoping you’d see sense. You refused to talk about it before.”

“Can we stop discussing the engagement that should’ve never happened?” Will almost groaned out the words. I had to agree with him though. The entire debacle was a mistake I’d made and should’ve ended before it started.

A slow song began to play, and Will grabbed my hand. “Excuse me, Aunt Grace. I think I’ll dance with my *wife*.”

When Will’s arms wrapped around me, I melted against him and let him lead. My temple pressed against his cheek, and he brushed his lips against my hair. “Forgive me for losing my temper back there.”

“That was you losing your temper? If it was, it was pretty tame. Besides, I’m a bit tired of talking about what happened. I just want to leave that entire mess behind us.”

Jane and Charlie appeared at our sides, and Jane pulled me into a hug. “I’m so happy for both of you. Will’s needed someone like you for far too long.” I kissed my older sister’s cheek before Charlie gave me a quick embrace then took his wife back in his arms to finish the dance. By the dark circles under Jane’s eyes, they wouldn’t stay long. Charlie should get his dances while he could.

Will sighed when we returned to our previous position, swaying around the middle of the dance floor. I caught a glimpse of Catherine de Bourgh gesturing madly while she

spoke to Mrs. Fitzwilliam and Richard. That was the last I saw of the woman. Knowing Richard's mother, she booted Mrs. de Bourgh before the imperious woman could cause a scene.

“Do you think they'll continue to play slow songs? I'd happily remain like this the rest of the night.”

I closed my eyes and savored the sensation of his strong body pressed against mine. “If they don't, perhaps there's a dark corner where we can cuddle during the faster music.”

His low chuckle made the flesh on the back of my neck pebble. “I love the way you think, Mrs. Darcy.”

Chapter 19



Will

As soon as the crowd had counted down to midnight and I'd kissed Lizzy until she saw stars, I led her from the ball to the elevators. Little had she known that while she'd been fixing her makeup and hair, I'd checked us in at the desk and had key cards to our own honeymoon suite burning a hole in my suit pocket.

I pulled her into the elevator, touched my key card to the reader, then pressed her against the wall once the door closed behind us. My lips found the sweet spot on her neck as she laughed a husky sound that made my blood boil.

“Why, Mr. Darcy, what are you up to?”

My hips pressed against her as I stopped her mouth with my kiss. I'd been grasping for a better hold on my restraint since we'd arrived, but I was dying to let go. My tongue caressed hers and her hands clutched at my sides as I plundered her mouth. I wanted to drown myself in Lizzy—to smother myself in her sweetness and heat until I couldn't think of anything at all.

When the elevator opened, I hauled her over my shoulder and strode straight through the vestibule to our suite and into the bedroom where I dropped her onto the bed. My hands shook as I drew off my coat and tie, tossing them toward a chair in the corner. I had no idea if I made it, but whether my clothes were on the floor or not was the last thing I was worried about.

Lizzy went to work on the button of my pants while I removed my cufflinks. I think I dropped them onto the plush carpet when my cock was suddenly engulfed in the warmth of her mouth. “Fuck, Lizzy.”

My fingers entwined into her hair while she sucked and licked until I couldn't take the exquisite torture a moment more and had to wrench myself away from her. "Dress. Now." Good Lord, she'd reduced me to speaking like a Neanderthal!

After I unzipped her gown, I toed off my shoes and hopped out of my pants. No sooner had I looked up, than I almost fell on the floor. "You were wearing *that* under your dress all evening?" My voice was almost a squeak, but good Lord! She wore a short corset-style strapless bra with strands of seed pearls, garters, and a barely-there thong. "You do know that's like pouring lighter fluid on a raging inferno. When did you even buy that?"

"Online shopping can be a beautiful thing. I've been anticipating this moment since I ordered it and paid a small fortune for express shipping. I have to say, honey, you did not disappoint." She glanced down at my straining erection before licking her bottom lip.

If I'd been more in control to begin with, I'd have gone slow and touched the lace and admired how the ensemble fit, but I'd been a hopeless case the moment she'd put her mouth on me.

I lunged for her and pinned her down to the mattress, my lips devouring hers. Somehow, I managed the garter snaps on one of her legs and rolled from her just long enough to get that scrap of lace meant to be panties off one side.

As soon as I covered her again, I slid home with a growl. "I'm sorry, Lizzy. I'm too far gone."

She bit my ear lobe with that seductive laugh that only fueled the fire. "I'm not complaining."

The sting of her teeth against my tender flesh caused me to lose all reason. I wasn't gentle or worshipful. She was mine. She would be mine for the rest of our lives. My desperation to be buried inside her made me plunge fast and deep until that familiar frisson traveled down my spine.

I hiked Lizzy's knee over my elbow and thrust deeper, making her gasp and squeeze her eyes closed. "Don't stop."

Within seconds, she shattered, crying my name into the high ceilings, her orgasm milking mine from me until I couldn't hold myself up and collapsed on top of her.

"I can't move," she said.

"I'm sorry." I made to roll off her, and she tightened the leg wrapped around my hip.

"No, I don't mean for you to go."

"Your mouth should come with a warning label."

She was frowning when I lifted onto my elbow. "For what?"

"Warning: may cause extreme loss of control."

A grin bloomed upon her face. "Is that what made you so insatiable?"

"I think it was a combination of tonight being our wedding night, the lingerie, and your wicked mouth. I know it's probably disappointing, but hearing about your engagement to Bill all night probably contributed. I hope you'll forgive me for that."

Her hands came up to cradle my cheeks. "Will, I know it sounds crazy, but I never slept with him. He wanted to wait for marriage, and believe me, I didn't argue. I was dreading the wedding night. If I hadn't run out, I don't know if I could've gone through with it."

My forehead dropped to her shoulder. "I know. I've never been insecure when it comes to him. I just hated that when people learned we were married, they had to talk about your last engagement. It's stupid. They were shocked, and I would be too, but I wouldn't bring up someone's ex-fiancé in that situation. It's tacky."

She nodded. "No, I understand. I didn't want to speak of it either. The plus side is we won't see most of those people until New Year's Eve next year. I'm sure they'll forget all about it by then."

I cupped her rear in my palms and squeezed. "I love you. I never thought I'd find anything like this. Seeing stars and

goosebumps were for romance novels, not real life.”

After I rolled us over, Lizzy rose to straddle my waist and glanced down. “I’m a mess. My panties are still hanging on one thigh.”

“I think you’re gorgeous, Mrs. Darcy. I particularly like the recently tumbled look.” I rubbed my hands up and down her thighs. “I don’t want to let you go yet.” She reached behind and managed to remove her wedding sneakers while I unhooked the garter completely and tossed the thong away. “Maybe you can try wearing this in five years. I think I’ll have been getting enough regular sex by then to be able to withstand it.”

“Are you saying you’ll be bored with me?”

I unfastened her bra and tossed it into a corner on the opposite side of the room. “Hell no. Just that I should have some semblance of control—I hope.”

I sat up and began kissing across her gorgeous chest. “We have this room for the next four days, and I intend to take full advantage of being blessedly alone for the entirety of that time.”

“Will?” Lizzy’s fingers wove into my hair, her nails digging into my scalp as I concentrated on driving her crazy with my mouth and tongue.

“Hmm?”

“Make love to me.”

I drew her face down so I could kiss her lips. “That’s exactly what I’m about to do, sweetheart.” I had no intention of sleeping tonight. Well, I suppose we could sleep between loving each other. I’d have to feed Lizzy eventually as well, but that could wait until morning.



LIZZY

Will had thought of everything, including packing a bag with a few essentials I had at his house so I wouldn't have to do the wedding dress walk of shame when we departed the hotel. Having the driver bring our bags up to the suite while we were at the ball was a stroke of genius.

As much as I loved Georgie and Richard, I had to admit that the four days of solitude in our suite had been magical. We ordered room service, soaked in the jacuzzi tub with champagne, which ultimately led to other activities in the jacuzzi that could still make me blush, as well as christening nearly about surface or workable furniture in our rooms.

Before we'd left this morning, Will and I had shared the shower. I'd soaped him, but although he'd started soaping me, we'd needed another shower after he pressed me against the tile, his strong body flush to my back as he pushed into me over and over. In the end, I'd had to press my cheek to the cold stone tile and brace myself with my palms until I sobbed and cried out in release. I still don't know how I didn't dissolve into a puddle on the floor.

"You're blushing, Mrs. Darcy." He still wore that goofy happy grin he'd been wearing more and more since we became engaged. That expression was going to totally creep Richard out.

When we pulled into the garage, Will kissed me before taking our bags out of the trunk. We'd stopped by my house before coming home, and I'd grabbed my work supplies as well as packed a couple of suitcases of clothing and toiletries to tide me over until the movers could pack the rest and bring it all here. We'd also decided what we would keep, donate, or sell.

"Do you want to see the guest house? I'll do any renovations you want to make it the studio you need. There's also a room over the garage with huge windows and hardwood floors. You could decorate it however you want. Whichever you prefer is yours."

While we were honeymooning, we'd done a lot of talking. When we discussed where I was in my career and how I

needed a space to write and illustrate, Will offered the guest house as a studio. I'm not sure he'd ever had guests. He'd said it hadn't been used in years. "Maybe after Georgie goes to sleep or tomorrow morning. I'd like to spend some time with Georgie before she goes to bed."

"Tomorrow would be better. The rain will probably freeze on the back steps when the sun goes down."

We entered the kitchen, and my heart swelled when Georgie's eyes lit up. "Daddy! Mommy!"

My head jolted toward Will. How had Georgie thought to call me that, and what would Will say?

He swung his daughter up into his arms and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. "Have you had a fun time with Mrs. R.?"

The little girl nodded. "We played in the snow!"

"I bet that was fun," I said.

Georgie held out her arms to me. After I hugged her and gave her a kiss on the cheek, she scooted down to return to her colors.

Mrs. R. stepped over. "We went to the grocery store two days ago and ran into a couple of people who saw you at the ball. One or two asked Georgie if she was excited to have a new mommy. I wasn't sure how to handle it, and I didn't want to disturb you, so I bought her a children's book about how there are different kinds of mothers: adopted, step, and so on, as well as what a mommy does. I've read it to her while you were gone. Since then, Georgie has been calling Lizzy 'Mommy.' I hope that's okay."

Will lifted his eyebrows at me. "What do you think?"

"If she wants me to be, I don't have a problem with it. I'm honored. We won't let her forget Anne is her mother too."

Mrs. R. wiped a tear from one eye. "I'd hoped you'd feel that way. She's been so excited that Lizzy is going to live here with the two of you." She patted my arm and bustled back to the stove.

My husband entwined his fingers with mine. “I guess we really are a family then.”

“I suppose we are.”

“I never thought to ask Santa for a wife for Christmas.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “Who does?”

“Only a man as desperately in love as I am with you.” He leaned down for a kiss, but I pulled back a bit.

“Then it’s a good thing Santa knew what you wanted without asking.”

“You’re not kidding.” Before I could say another word, his lips claimed mine. Who was I to complain?

Chapter 20



Will

After helping Mrs. R. clean the kitchen, I ambled into the living room, and as I stepped around the sofa, I had to smile. Lizzy lay on the floor near the tree with Georgie fast asleep and tucked to her side, her head on Lizzy's shoulder. My wife stared at the lights while she combed our daughter's hair back from her face with her fingers. They looked so peaceful and serene. I pulled out my phone and took a picture before the moment was lost forever. When I approached, my wife turned and smiled with a dreamy look on her face. "Hey there."

"I wasn't gone that long, was I?"

Lizzy glanced down in an awkward movement. "I think she was too excited at the prospect of Santa coming tonight. She fell asleep before I even finished the book. Tuna and Roe conked out not long before Georgie did." The kittens, who were fully grown now, were cuddled together on their bed near the fire.

With a grin, I bent down and picked up Georgie, lifting her to my shoulder. "I'll be back in a minute."

My daughter never stirred when I tucked her in and ensured she was settled for the night. Christmas Eve had been a boisterous affair. Richard and Stewart, Richard's current boyfriend, had come, as had Charlie and Jane with Henry, their baby boy, and Mrs. R. had made an incredible meal we all enjoyed. After an evening of games with Georgie, we'd opened one gift from under the tree before Richard and Stewart took their glasses of Scotch out to the quiet solitude of the hot tub.

When I returned, Lizzy hadn't moved and gazed up at me with a soft expression that made my heart swell. "Did she wake up?"

“No, she’s out like a light.”

I settled in beside her, shifting my arm under her head so we could cuddle. Not quite a year had passed since we were married on New Year’s Eve, and I’d never been happier. I’d never been one to linger at work since I’d had Georgie, but now, I couldn’t wait to be done so I could get home to my family.

My hand found the bump of Lizzy’s stomach, and I drew up her sweater to touch the swell flesh to flesh. “How’s my little ballerina?”

She laughed and placed her hand over mine, moving it to one side. At a nudge from some appendage, I buried my nose into her hair and kissed her forehead. “Active tonight, then?”

“Very, but he’s always active after I eat, and the sugar in the tiramisu Mrs. R. made has probably kicked in.”

When Lizzy had missed her period, she’d initially chalked it up to stress. She’d just released a new book with new characters, and her father had reached out, wanting to re-establish contact. On top of it all, she’d come down with a sinus infection, and it seemed the doctor had forgotten to warn her about the effect of mixing antibiotics with birth control. Not long after, morning sickness reared its ugly head, and she’d finally capitulated and taken the home pregnancy test. The little plastic stick had a plus sign, of course. Both of us wanted more children, so we weren’t upset. We just hadn’t made those plans yet, but as they say, “Life is what happens when you’re making other plans.”

The morning sickness had lingered for five months before it tapered off. She was rarely sick anymore, thank goodness. I’d about pulled out all my hair on a couple of days when I’d had to take her to the emergency room for monitoring and fluids. Hyperemesis gravidarum was not a term I’d been familiar with before, but I knew it well now.

“The tiramisu settled okay?” She’d eaten so slowly, but we’d all been patient and kept her company while she ate. Georgie had been the only one who itched to leave the table, so she played at her toy kitchen in the corner.

Lizzy nodded. “So far, so good. I probably should’ve eaten fruit, but I couldn’t resist Mrs. R.’s dessert. It was too tempting.”

“At the last check up, you were still a bit underweight. As long as you’re not ill, I wouldn’t worry about it.” The doctor wasn’t concerned, but I’d been buying her treats on my way home every day—anything for both of them to be healthy.

I continued to run my palm over our child before I shifted closer to her side. The moment we’d put up the tree, I’d been having flashbacks of loving her in the warm glow of the Christmas lights last year. To say that I’d been anticipating Christmas Eve was an understatement!

My hand traveled further and gently massaged her breast. “Will,” she said in a murmur.

One thing I couldn’t bemoan was pregnancy hormones! Once the nausea started to subside, my wife had been hungry in more ways than one.

I trailed my lips down her face until our lips mingled in a lazy dance, our tongues touching and caressing. When I began to draw her sweater over her head, she stopped my arm. “What about Richard and Stewart?”

“They’ll come in through the laundry room. That way they don’t drip water all over the place.”

She bit her lip as she sat up and drew the soft ivory sweater with evergreen trees over her head. When she released her bra, my gaze flitted down to her breasts, which had grown in the past few months. I loved her pregnant body, every single voluptuous curve.

“My eyes are up here.” Her throaty laugh made me claim her lips and press her down to the floor. I used my arms to support my weight, so I didn’t crush her or the baby. As much as I’d wanted to take this slow and savor her, I lost the war when she removed her bra. I kissed down her chest and removed her jeans.

As I reached for her panties, she held out a hand. “Why am I the only one undressed? Strip. Now.”

I whipped my own sweater over my head with a grin.
“Yes, ma’am.”

After I’d removed my boxer briefs, I grabbed the same plaid blanket we’d used last year and covered us as Lizzy laid down on her side. I hovered over her, and we began to kiss once again when the tell-tale squeaking of the French doors filled the room.

“Oh, God! My eyes!” said Richard. “Don’t you two ever use the bedroom?”

My forehead dropped to Lizzy’s shoulder, which shook with her giggles. “Don’t you know how to knock? Why wouldn’t you come in through the laundry room anyway?”

“Because I came in for more Scotch!”

I exhaled with a growl. “Take the bottle with you, for all I care. Just get out! And when you’re done, come back inside through the laundry room. I made sure it was unlocked before... well, before!”

I looked up in time to catch Richard returning to the doors with the bottle in his hand. He paused with his head down.

“For future reference, is this going to be an every year occurrence?”

Lizzy tipped her head back to see the doors. “For all of our sanity, assume that it is. How’s that?”

“Good to know. Hopefully, none of your children sneak down to see if Santa is real. Just saying.” With that, he left.

I dropped to the side and groaned. “I really need to oil those hinges.” I ran a hand through my hair. “Well, that’s done.”

My wife pouted and grazed her fingernails along my chest. “I hope not.”

“He does have a point about the kids. I don’t think Georgie would do it this year, but maybe one day.”

Lizzy kissed the center of my chest. “You know my aunt’s family would hang a curtain across the opening to the living

room every Christmas Eve. The children were told not to look behind the curtain, or Santa would blow smoke in their eyes and take all their presents. That said, we definitely need to make sure the doors to the patio are locked in the future.”

My palm found the bump once again. “I still can’t believe Georgie will have a little brother or sister in the next couple of months.”

Her hand wandered down to my side and my hip. “We do seem to rush everything.”

I sidled closer and kissed her neck. “Not everything. Besides, just because something happens in a hurry, doesn’t mean it’s a terrible decision. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Other than Georgie, you mean.”

My lips pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead. “I love Georgie so much, but a huge portion of my heart was missing before you came and filled it. Each part of my happiness is like a piece to a puzzle: my family, which includes Mrs. R., Georgie, you, and this little one are all large chunks, but you own the biggest piece. I wouldn’t know true happiness if it weren’t for you. I’m so glad I caught you before another man could.”

A tear fell upon her cheek as her hand wrapped around my nape and pulled me to her for a passionate kiss. “No other could’ve captured my heart like you have. I love you.”

As she drew me back over her, my heart pounded in my ears as I lost myself in the wife that a year ago, I hadn’t known I’d needed or even wanted. What I wanted a year ago didn’t matter now, though. Lizzy was mine and she would be for the rest of our lives. And while I’d never had a favorite holiday, I could now unequivocally say that Christmas and New Year’s Eve were the best of them all!

Acknowledgements

This plot bunny took over my brain while writing *A Worthy Woman* and wouldn't let go, so once I had AWW released, I went for it. It felt so good to write a low angst fun story after three Regencies in a row. I hadn't planned on making it a Christmas romance, but that all sort of fell into place as I wrote.

I have to thank Carol for jumping in at the last minute and whizzing through the chapters. I'm so thankful you were free to go through this on short notice. Thank you also go to Marie and Debbie, who will proofread with little notice on the matter. They're both always available in a pinch.

Thank you to Michael for pumping up my confidence on writing gay characters. It was so much fun to mention something Richard says or does to him in this and hear him laugh or roll his eyes. The way Darcy pushes his glasses up his nose on Christmas Eve is all Michael. What else are you to do around kids? I mean, really!

Lastly, big hugs to my family, who are always supportive. My husband is vacuuming as I read this, and it is a huge help when I'm on a deadline. Thank you!

I said "lastly," but as I say to my swimmers when I change something last minute, "I lied." I also have to send my thanks to all my readers out there. Without you, these books would probably be crowded in my brain and driving me nuts!

Thank you!

About the Author



L.L. Diamond is more commonly known as Leslie to her friends and Mom to her three kids. A native of Louisiana, she spent the majority of her life living within an hour of New Orleans before following her husband all over as a military wife. Louisiana, Mississippi, California, Texas, New Mexico, Nebraska, England, Missouri, and now Maryland have all been called home along the way.

Aside from mother and writer, Leslie considers herself a perpetual student. She has degrees in biology and studio art but will devour any subject of interest simply for the knowledge. Her most recent endeavors have included certifications to coach swimming and a number of fitness certifications. As an artist, her concentration is in graphic design, but watercolor is her medium of choice with one of her watercolors featured on the cover of her second book, *A Matter of Chance*. She is also a member of the Jane Austen Society of North America. Leslie also plays flute and piano, but much like *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet, she is always in need of practice!

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Coming Soon: Book 4: Jane's story (Untitled)

Catching Lizzy

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