

# A SPARK OF TROUBLE



LUCY LIMÓN

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OF  
TROUBLE



MERRY MISCHIEF

LUCY LIMÓN

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To my husband.

I wouldn't know how to write a love story without you.



## Summary

### *& Content Warnings*

**It's lust at first sight, and they're both in trouble.**

Chad, a flirty, hat-tipping park ranger doesn't date tourists. Iggy, a prickly, bargain-striking demoness doesn't date at all. Which should make their one-night stand a perfect arrangement for both of them, but after their passionate encounter, neither can just walk away.

After a drunken night with old friends, Iggy lands herself in trouble. She's sentenced to probation and confined to Winter Bliss. She can't leave, and he can't stop thinking about her.

What's worse, the only way for her to avoid jail time is to find a willing local to supervise her 250 hours of community service. When Chad lifts his right hand and swears an oath to do just that, she becomes his unwilling volunteer park ranger, and he becomes her court-approved compliance officer.

Now that they're living together and working together, is there any reason they shouldn't also sleep together? It's a temporary arrangement after all, and they both know better than to get too attached.



**Content Warnings**

- Explicit Sexual Content
- Struggle with anxiety induced mental block
- Loss of employment and subsequent grief
- Past childhood abandonment by parent

## Author's Note

### *Concerning Chad*

Chad first appeared as a minor character in the three-book series, 'Horned Up For The Holidays.' He was not well liked by readers or his fellow characters.

This is his love story.



## Prologue

*Iggg*



***Eight years ago.***

I snap my fingers and a fireball shoots through the air. It streaks across the empty amusement park toward the already partially charred remains of a carousel. One of the ponies lights up as it's engulfed by the angry, dense sphere. The *vengeful flame*. That's the name of the impressive, highly advanced spell.

Next to me, the sexy but otherwise underwhelming demon from my intro to marketing class groans lustily as the paint first bubbles then runs, exposing the aluminum body of the pony, which melts like a candle. He's in tight jeans and an

even tighter black T-shirt. A quick glance south, and I catch the bulge twitching in his pants.

“Light that one up next,” he says, voice thick and rough as he points to the bear figure next to the melted pony. We’re hardly the first demons to visit this abandoned amusement park. There are scorch marks and charred remains of rides everywhere. But whoever came before us, their *firemarks* have all been erased. Demons know better than to leave behind their distinctive pattern.

I snap again, and this time a bluish white arc screams through the air, but the figure it strikes doesn’t melt, it explodes. Debris, dirt, and glowing sparks gust toward us.

“Holy fuck!” My date throws his arms up to protect his face, but from behind them, he grins at me. It’s another highly advanced spell, entirely uncalled for in this situation unless one was showing off or getting impatient. I glare over my shoulder at a figure hiding in the shadows, but when I turn back, my date’s eyes are wide and wild with lust. “How do you do that? It’s so fucking sexy,” he growls, and a moment later his hands are sliding over me, his mouth on mine. He palms my ass as he asks, “Can we get out of here now? My dorm is ten minutes away. I’ll strap you to my horns and lick you the whole way there if you’ll let me.”

Ooh, that’s such a nice offer my thighs clench together. I wish I could say yes, but reluctantly, I push him away.

“Not so fast. It’s your turn. Show me what you’ve got.” I gesture to the carousel.

He throws flames well enough, or at least he has good aim. He hits his marks, but his fire is very ordinary, no swirls, arcs, variation of color, and no staying power. Not all demons are practitioners. Most are satisfied with their natural ability to produce fire and never dabble in anything more. He’s clearly one of those. He manages to burn the surface and cause some damage, about the same as a blow torch. I can tell by the beads of sweat on his brow, and the way he keeps glancing my way for my reaction, that he’s trying his hardest, so I make some impressed noises.

We kiss good night, and again his hands are everywhere, gripping me close as he presses his hips into me. He suggests his place again, and even though this is our third date, and I'd very much like to ride his face, his horns, and his cock, I decline.

"You're something special, Iggy, a full package demoness. When can I see you again?" he asks, breathing heavily and making no attempt to hide the boner straining against the seam of his pants. He presses it against me, grinding ever so slightly.

"Tomorrow?" I suggest as I inwardly preen under the complement of his arousal. He leans in for another kiss, but I turn and walk away, leaving him wanting more.

"I'll find something better for you to burn!" he calls after me. "And then maybe you'll unleash yourself on me!"

When I get to my car, a beat up, hand-me-down hatchback, my little sister is in the passenger seat. She's my junior by two years, but we look so much alike, we could be twins. We both have jet-black hair, though I wear mine short; and a double set of horns, a trait that runs in the family.

The black sapote caramels I bribed her with are long gone and the wrappers litter both seats and the floor. If she weren't here, I would be riding his horns across campus right now.

"Did I hear you tell him tomorrow?" she asks as soon as I slide into the driver's seat. She arches an eyebrow at me and crosses her arms, clearly pissed. "I'm not spending my entire weekend helping you impress this douchebag." She hates every guy I date.

"He's not a douchebag!" I insist, but she ignores me.

"First off, do you know how hard it is to throw some of those fire spells accurately, much less from a distance? And second, I've got my own life to live, Iggy! So unless you're planning to go it alone tomorrow, you better call it off."

I grumble under my breath as I try to think of some way to convince her to come along. "Just one hour. Help me burn a couple of things, and I'll tell him I have fire fatigue, and you

can go home.” And then I’ll hop into his bed and ride him the rest of the night.

“No!”

I growl at her. It’s such an unbearable drag that my dating life has come to this. I can only make it so many dates on my own before something happens to raise suspicions.

They always get suspicious.

It’s usually something small and stupid like I’ll refuse to light a candle, or I’ll turn down someone asking for a light, but that’s all it takes. I’ll see the question in their eyes and know that if there’s a next date, I’ll be dragging my sister along.

“What about next weekend?” A compromise.

“I can’t.” She shakes her head. “I’ve got the *Junior Warlock Semi-finals*. This is my last year to compete. I’m sorry, Iggy, but this has to be the last time. I can’t keep it up, and you shouldn’t either. What kind of relationship is this anyway? How long can it last?”

“What do you expect me to do? Should I start telling every guy I go out with that I can’t make fire? Go loud and proud as the poster child for the *iddies*?” I hiss the last word from behind clenched teeth, hating it to my core. It’s slang, just another way of saying I’m fire blocked, but somehow it feels like a slur.

My sister shudders. “Sweet Mother Below, could you imagine? You’d straight up kill mom, and you’d mortify dad into early retirement. He’d close shop on *Arcanous Gifts* so fast, and he’d never show his face at another *Blaze Craft Convention* again.” And he lives for those events. His life obsession is inventing new fire magic tricks and products worthy of a big reveal on the convention main stage.

We sit in silence for a moment as we both imagine it. “Maybe you could just focus on school for now and save dating for after college?” She gives me a half shoulder shrug. “I mean look at that guy,” she gestures out the window but my date is long gone. “Would you really be missing anything?”

“Sorry we can’t all lock down a first-born son of the Pyrian family dynasty,” I snort. Her boyfriend’s family is famous in the demon world and absolute giants when it comes to the business of fire magic. They’ve been dating since they were fourteen. Gross. Who would even want to be that sickeningly sweet?

“You can do better than *him*,” she says, crossing her arms.

No, I can’t. He’s just dumb enough not to notice fire arcs coming from the wrong direction. Anyone smarter is way out of my league.

I don’t know why I’m like this. I could make fire when I was a kid, but somewhere along the way, as the private lessons got more intense and my parent’s expectations soared along with my sister’s obvious natural talent, I developed a bad case of the *iddies*. The harder I tried, the worse it got, until sparks and wisps of smoke were all I could make.

“What about you?” I ask, staring at my hands. “Would you be mortified into early retirement too?”

“Are you kidding? With all the other reasons I have to be embarrassed of you, the *iddies* don’t even break the top five.” She grins at me, and I know she’s joking.

“Twat.” I stick out my tongue at her as I start the car. She cackles, showing off her perfectly sharp teeth. Ugh, everything about her is perfect, inside and out. It’s disgusting. I love her, but I hate her a little bit too, especially when she’s right.

I never had a boyfriend in high school. Teenage demons are all about fire, just a bunch of gossipy show-offs. My entire time in school, I only had two friends, and they were sworn to secrecy, because if anyone outside of them had found out, it would have been all over school in a heartbeat, and then my parents would have had to move us to Siberia.

“I’ll take a frozen wasteland and nipple frostbite over humiliation any day of the week.” My father was fond of saying with a wink and a big grin. “I’m only joking!” It was equally hilarious every time.

I thought college would be different, but it's not. It's exactly the same.

"I'll dump him and stick to one night stands from now on," I say with a defeated sigh, trying not to think about the long, lonely future that implies.

"Not from now on, Iggy! Just until..." She trails off, pulling at the sleeve of her hoodie and looking away. She doesn't dare say until I get my fire back. We both know that's never going to happen. But now an unspoken question hangs in the air.

Until when?

# Chapter 1

*Chad*



## ***Present day.***

My heart shatters as I watch the could-have-been love of my life clink champagne glasses with her new fiancé. It crumbles and spins out of my chest like clods of dirt coming off an all-terrain tire. *Noelle*. My broken heart sputters her name. Why him?

Sure, maybe Rom, the demon she's betrothed to, held her eye for the entirety of his five-minute toast. He directed his every word to her and only her, but does that make him her best option, the right guy? Jury's still out.

Every time I'm within earshot of Rom, I swear he's muttering '*fucking Chad*' under his breath. So, not an all-

around nice guy as far as I'm concerned.

But his most damning trait? Rom is an outsider. He may have been born here, but he moved away. He's only recently returned, and if that's not a red flag, I don't know what is. Outsiders are flight risks, tourists who come and go. They may pretend to put down roots, but they don't hold. She should know better than to tie her happiness to one of them.

The man with the mic calls for yet another round of applause for Rom's speech. Three rounds for the same speech? Seriously?

I guess it was pretty epic, I admit begrudgingly. She flushed full-body red in front of the whole town. I scan the tables around me. Well, maybe only half the town made the guest list, but all of Winter Bliss is celebrating the engagement of Noelle and Rom in spirit if not here in person. Everyone but me.

"I can't believe she's marrying someone else," I shake my head and mutter before I down the rest of my third champagne and start looking around for a fourth. The waiters are avoiding me.

From the seat next to me, Luís, my best friend and fellow park ranger, gives a long-suffering sigh. "She's happy, man." He doesn't understand my heartache. No one does. "She's glowing like a Disney princess. Just be happy for her." She does look like a princess—red hair, yellow dress.

"I am," I say with a sigh. I am. Really. Noelle deserves every kind of happiness. "I can be happy for her and devastated for me," I reply with a hitch in my voice and a brave smile. Now who's long suffering?

Luís snorts a laugh so hard that it fluffs his big, bushy mustache. He's way too proud of that thing. "Name one thing you love about her."

"Excuse me? What do you mean by that?" I'm offended even though I can't say why exactly. "Noelle's great. Everyone loves her."



“*Si, pero*, what do *you* love about her—specifically? You’ve been bellyaching non-stop since their engagement announcement arrived, but I barely remember you mentioning her before that. *Si de veras estas enamorado*, what is it you love about her?” He lifts an equally bushy eyebrow at me in challenge. “It should be an easy question.”

It should be and is. “Noelle loves this place. She’s practically the spirit of Winter Bliss personified. That’s what I love about her.”

“Uh, huh. *¿Qué más?* Just one more thing.”

“Isn’t that enough?” I ask with a huff. What’s he trying to prove with these nonsense questions?

“Enough? That she’s the unofficial mascot for our beloved hometown? No, *tonto*. That’s nowhere near enough.” He gives me an incredulous look, followed by an expectant one. He’s waiting for more.

“Well, as the unofficial mascot, she’s never going to up and leave, is she? I really love *that* about her.” It might be my favorite thing about her, actually. “The volcano would move away from Winter Bliss before she would,” I say, jutting my chin west, in the direction of the active volcano that bears the same name as our cozy little town: Mt. Winter Bliss.

Luís is quiet for a moment. His eyes drop to his own champagne flute. “Not *all* women leave,” he says softly. “And your mom did come back. Eventually.”

He’s right, of course. “She did come back,” I agree. Ten years later. Hardly a word from her for a decade. Then a year or two after I graduated high school, suddenly she was back. No apology, no explanation. Not that I’m sore about that. Not anymore. It’s been another ten years since then, and there’s nothing to be upset about because it’s all in the past.

I really need that drink. Dang it, still no waiter in sight.

“That’s all you’ve got? You’re madly in love with Noelle because she’s a permanent resident?” He shakes his head and mutters, “*¿Qué chingados?*”

I shrug. It feels like enough to me. I'm not picky. "We went out to eat together a few times," I add. It was fast food, and we were in high school, but it still counts.

"A woman who will eat a meal with you is a low bar, man," he says, shaking his head.

"I'm not picky," I say out loud this time, slumping further in my chair. Someone local and planning on sticking around. That's it. That's all I'm looking for. It's not too much to ask.

"Not picky?" he scoffs and rolls his eyes. "Do you know what your real problem is? You're like a dog with a bone. You hold onto things too tight." He snaps his teeth together and clenches his fist in the air, squeezing it for emphasis.

I glare at him as I kick out my shined-up, snip-toe boots and cross my arms across my chest. I had a really good wallow going, and he's ruined it by irritating me. Some friend, this guy. "If the bone's not wiggling to get free, it won't notice," I grumble. I'm not trying to trap someone, but yeah, I want to hold on tight. So what? Someone's gotta like that, right? Or at least not mind too much.

"*Vamonos*," he says, slapping my arm. "You're dampening the vibe. This is supposed to be a party. Let's get out of here."

"And go where?" I ask. Then I perk up. "Under the Volcano?"

"What is it with you and that shitty bar? You've already hit on every regular at least a dozen times. Let's give it a rest for the night, huh?"

"Give it a rest?" I snort. He knows me better than that. Under the Volcano is my favorite spot. It used to be our spot before Luís got himself hitched. "Tourist season is picking up. There'll probably be some new women there," I say with a grin.

"You know damn well you're not looking for a tourist. You're the most anti-tourist person I know."

"Not every day is a game day," I say. Flirting with tourists is like a low-stakes practice game. They keep me in top form, ready to hit a home run when I really need to. "I've got some

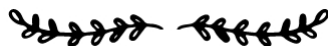
new lines to try out.” I pat my pocket where my notebook lives. I carry it at all times in case inspiration strikes, and boy did it strike this week. An electric storm of brand-new pickup lines. “Some real gems,” I say with a grin as I snatch up my cowboy hat and place it on my head just so, with a slight downward rake for a bit of dramatic flare. The ladies love it. I’m up on my feet now, hand twitching impatiently to be gone. Luís rolls his eyes and takes his sweet time heaving himself up out of his chair.

“I can’t believe I used to take advice from you on how to pick up women, *buey*.” He shakes his head. “You don’t know shit. The only one dumber than you was me.”

“My advice got you Babs, didn’t it?”

“Because she has a soft spot for idiots, and the line you fed me was the most idiotic thing she’d ever heard. She and her friends still laugh about it,” he says with a grimace.

“It worked. You can’t argue with results,” I say, spreading my arms. “Let’s go.” With a clap of my hands, I start weaving my way through a sea of tables, heading toward the parking lot. My long legs pull ahead. I’m six foot four to Luís’s five seven. He never can keep up. “I’ll meet you there,” I call to him over my shoulder. He waves in acknowledgment, and I pick up speed.



A really good dive bar is an underappreciated thing of beauty. It has to hit a perfect balance: just trashy enough that no one feels obligated to be on their best behavior, but not so trashy that it invites chaos. It can’t be a seedy, ‘anything goes’ kind of place. That’ll scare away the ladies, and then what’s the point?

Under the Volcano Tiki Bar hits the bullseye.

I park my truck, and not for the first time, I feel a wave of contentment as I take in the neon lights, the wraparound porch, and the scattering of tiki masks that decorate the exterior. This is my regular spot. This is home field.

I snatch up my phone from the dash just as it buzzes, and I read the message.

Luís

Sorry man, not going to make it.  
Babs needs more cold medicine and tissues.

See you Monday.

Shit. He isn't coming.

See ya Monday.

Love to Babs. Hope she feels better.

It looks like I'll be going solo this evening. Not how I prefer it, but I've been without a reliable wingman ever since Luís locked down Babs. With any luck, I won't be at this too much longer myself. Despite Luís's pessimism, there's a chance the future Mrs. Chad Robins is waiting inside that bar right this very second, and she's only one perfect pickup line away from realizing I'm the man she wants to spend the rest of her life with right here in the most beautiful place on earth. I hop out of my truck and hurry inside.

The noise hits me as soon as I walk through the doors. The TVs are on and the jukebox is blaring, but the pumped-in noise is drowned out by the raucous chatter of a boisterous Friday night crowd. Just the sight of the full tables and the line at the bar gives me a buzzy shot of energy. With this good of a crowd, it might be game day after all.

The bartender greets me with a friendly smile and a, "Hiya, man." He slides my beer of choice across the bar without needing to ask what I'll have. Greg is another underappreciated treasure and one hell of a barman. He serves up my usual: a beer to start with a Scotch on the rocks chaser.

The beer is just to loosen me up. The Scotch is what I'll walk around with. It has an air of sophistication, and first impressions matter.

"How's it looking tonight?" I ask Greg, hoping for some good news.

The bar is hopping, but he gives me a grim shake of his head. "Not much home-team talent out tonight as far as I can tell. Sorry, man."

Damn.

Greg lays down a coaster and slides my Scotch across the bar just as the entry door swings wide and on a gust of chilly October air, in walks a glorious sight — a group of ladies with no men in tow.

"What do you think? Home team?" I ask Greg.

He gives them a quick once over. "Doubt it," he says, unkindly bursting my bubble.

"There're five of them. One of 'em could be local," I say. Winter Bliss is a small town, but it's not so small that I've met everyone.

"You never know." He gives me a noncommittal shrug.

The group of ladies takes a table behind me, and I play it cool, pretending not to notice them.

"You'll never guess what he said to me! Just try to guess," the one with a blond ponytail says to her friends. I scoot down the bar to better eavesdrop on their conversation. It's a strategic move. I've got to get the lay of the land before heading in.

"Who?" one of her friends asks.

"The tennis instructor," she says. Then without waiting for any guesses, she continues, "He asked me how long we'd be staying at the resort. I told him through the end of the week." Greg was right, they're a visiting team. "And he gave me this flirty smile and said he could see us becoming 'good friends' by then. I said 'yeah, maybe,' because, I mean, hello tennis-pro bod, but then he came back with, 'Well, if we're going to

be friends, then I have to ask, if something came up between us, would you hold it against me?”

“I don’t understand,” her friend on her left says.

“Me either,” the one across from her says. “Is he going to fight you?”

The blond ponytail repeats the line, slower this time. “If something came up between us,” she extends a finger, miming a pinky-sized erection, “would you hold it against me.” She snuggles her pinky to her face.

Her friend across the table falls forward, burying her head in her hands, and laughs so hard her shoulders shake.

“Seriously?” she all but shrieks.

“Eww,” the friend on her left pulls back. “What a fucking *Chad*.” I wince at the sound of my name. I know she’s using Chad as a term and not talking about me, but still. It stings. “Gross. That puts me off tennis.”

All five agree so adamantly that I almost feel bad for the guy, whoever he is. He might be a tennis pro, but he’s clearly an amateur when it comes to hitting on women. *Would you hold it against me?* I snort. That’s got to be one of the oldest lines in the book. Outdated and inelegant. It took me all of two shots to retire that line in my teens. How is he still using it as an adult? Doesn’t he know that ladies expect a little poetry in their pickup lines these days, a little something special to set off that magic spark and make their hearts go *zing! He’s the one*.

I take a sip and grimace. Scotch is an acquired taste, I remind myself, and it’s only been a year or so. It’ll grow on me.

My hand drifts toward my pocket. I’m about to pull out my notebook and choose my first line of the night, but before I can, one of the five ladies gets up and heads to the bar, opening up an opportunity for a practice round, and I don’t want to miss it. Time to score where the tennis instructor whiffed.

I wait for her to place her order, then sidle up next to her. “Hello there,” I say, leaning on the counter, tipping my hat and swirling my drink so that the clinking cube of ice draws her attention. As soon as I have it, I swing for the fences. “You’re prettier than a night sky full of stars, and I should know, I practically live outside.”

She grins, but there’s too much amusement in it, bordering on a laugh. It’s definitely not the swept-off-my-feet smile I was hoping for. “I’m not here to meet people tonight,” she says, still grinning. “But thank you.” She walks away, and as she goes, I replay the line in my head. It was the ‘living outside’ bit that sank it. I was picturing myself wearing my park ranger uniform when I said it. I’m outdoorsy, not chronically unhoused. The uniform would have cleared that up. I’ll test it again another time.

I push off from the bar and head into the crowd. I’ve got a dozen more lines to try and no time to mope.

“I don’t usually strike up conversations with strangers.” Not true. “But there’s an undertow pulling me right to you, and I simply couldn’t resist.” I get a fairly nice reaction to that one, but she says she’s here with someone, so I mark it with a little star and a question mark in my notebook and move on.

“You ought to be careful. The way you’re heating up this place, you’ll make our volcano jealous.” It’s a dud. She’s not amused, flattered, or interested. I scratch a line through it. Damn.

It’s somewhat of a mixed bag with the rest of my lines, but in general, they all underperform, some worse than others. I can’t figure it out. The beauty of the natural world felt like the perfect wellspring. It knocks my socks off on the daily, and I was sure I had some gold this time. Why didn’t it pan out?

It’s not even nine, but I’m done. My notebook is nothing but scratched out lines, one star, and two question marks. Time to pack it in. I head back to the bar to settle my tab.

When Greg comes back with my card, he presents me with a drink I didn’t order. “Is this Scotch?” I ask. It looks like

Scotch, but I'm confused by the presence of a twist of orange and a skewered cherry.

"It's bourbon, an old fashioned, compliments of the stunningly gorgeous demoness at the end of the bar." He nods his head in the direction I should look and says, "Cheers man," with a toothy grin.

The bar is still crowded and half or more of the patrons are demons, so it takes me a second, but the moment I see her, I know it. Stunningly gorgeous is no exaggeration. She's got a sleek, slender build, and from the cut of her slinky black top, I'm picking up an edgy vibe. Her double set of horns gives the impression of a crown with their sinful curves. Her hair is short, dark, and tussled, and her eyes. My breath catches. Most demons have black eyes, but hers don't register as darkness or voids. They're magnets, pulling me in with their long lashes and gold liner that glimmers against her deep blush of reddish-pink skin. She winks at me.

My heart stops for a second, then picks up again, pounding in my chest like it's ready to run. It's not my usual reaction to a beautiful woman, and I don't know what to make of it. Probably not a good sign though.

"Are you gonna go talk to her?" Greg asks, and I can tell from the way he asks that he's surprised I haven't made my way over to her already.

"No," I say, tearing my eyes away from her. "No. She's not my type."

"You have a type? That's news to me," he says with a grin.

"She's not local. There's no way she lives around here." I take a drink, hoping the spirit will steady me, but one gulp, and I pull back in surprise. "Huh."

"What do you think?" Greg asks with a tilt of his head. The bartender in him is genuinely curious.

"It doesn't taste like bandaids," I say. It's the one Scotch tasting note I've ever picked up on.

Greg chuckles. "Should I make this your new regular?" he asks.



“No.” I put the glass down with a firm thunk and push it away from me. “I’m a Scotch guy.” This is not my drink. It’s smooth and balanced, with a toasty-sweet finish and a nose of citrus from the twisty peel. It doesn’t taste right.

“You hate Scotch. You grimace your way through it like you’re sipping on turpentine. Why not drink something that suits your palate a little better?” Greg asks.

I glance at her again. She’s still watching me, one eyebrow lifted, amusement drawing her perfectly gorgeous lips into a hint of a smile, and my head spins. “I know what suits my palate, and it’s not this,” I say with firm conviction. “This is...” I search for something wrong with the drink. “It’s too easy. I could chug a dozen of these without batting an eye. And then what?”

“I’d have to peel you off the floor,” Greg says.

“Exactly. It’s a dangerous drink. I’ll stick to Scotch.”

“Fair enough.” He shrugs and clears the glass from the bar. “See you next Friday,” he calls to me as he wanders off to help other customers. I lean against the bar, feigning a casual pose and keeping my eyes fixed straight ahead while, out of the corner of my eye, I watch the demoness. It takes a while, but eventually, she leaves. I give it a few minutes, then I make my own exit.

I step out the door, and there she is, standing on the porch under a neon sign. I freeze in my tracks. Now that she’s standing, I can see that she’s head to toe in black, from her stilettos to the leather mini skirt to her satin top so deep cut that it’s instantly clear she’s not wearing a bra. My heart starts racing again, full gallop.

“That’s not something I see every day,” she muses at me.

“What?” I ask with a hard swallow.

“A rabbit on the hunt.” The corner of her mouth twists in amusement, and when she smiles I see a flash of her pointy teeth. A warm flush creeps up my neck. There’s something wrong with me, probably the bourbon. I pull on my collar and

look around for a rabbit just to be sure she's not being literal. Nope. She's referring to me. How am I a rabbit?

"Do you mean my teeth?" I ask. Is that what she's referring to?

She leans in to take a look, and without thinking, I open wide, showing her my teeth.

"I hadn't noticed them, but you do have some big, square chompers," she says, then returns to leaning against the post. I close my mouth. "I was referring to your over-eagerness in there, hopping from table to table. And your nose. It moves when you talk, like a little rabbit." *It does not*, I think but don't say aloud. "Except you weren't foraging. You were hunting. A lot of shots taken with nothing to show for it. A pity." She gives a little shake of her head. "Luckily, the night's still young."

There's a suggestive purr in her voice as she looks me up and down. An electric-filled quiet stretches between us, and the hair on my arms tingles with the unmistakable feel of a storm building.

A warning sounds in my head and rings in my ears. I shouldn't be near this woman, and at the same time, I want to pull closer.

"No pickup line for me?" she asks with a disappointed pout. Hairbrain that I am, I take the bait, looking right at the bottom lip she's pushed out, round and full of temptation. I'm ensnared. The soft pillow presses up against the deep bow of her top lip, and just *fuck me*. She's made up of sharp edges, from the high arch of her eyebrows to the pronounced jut of her ankle bones. Those lips might be the only soft part of her, and I'm dying to taste them.

My boot scoots forward all on its own, scuffing against the wood planks. I pull it back and replant it firmly in place.

No.

I shake my head, trying to clear it. No. I don't know what it is about this woman, but she's not for me. If I'm a rabbit, she's a wolf.

She slinks toward me, a bedeviling glint in her eye. “Come with me.” She takes my hand.

*Run to your burrow and hide, you dumb bunny,* I tell myself, but when she tugs me forward, I follow.

“Where are we going?” I ask, a noticeable rasp in my voice. She smiles over her shoulder, but she doesn’t answer.

## Chapter 2

*Iggg*



### ***Earlier that day.***

I arrive at the Emberlight Resort and Casino an hour ahead of my job interview and attempt to give myself a tour of the facilities, but I'm turned back at every corner. It's a demon-run establishment. So, naturally, the security is on point. As I'm led back to the lobby for the third time, it's made abundantly clear to me that there'll be no nosing about where I don't belong.

Impressive, but no less than I'd expect.

It's not just the tight security I admire. The place truly lives up to the luxury name. The decor, though too pastel for my tastes, is elegant and sleek with tasteful touches of opulence,

and the staff are equal parts gracious, attentive, and hypervigilant.

“Ignatia Henix.” The receptionist calls my name, and I’m shown to the office of Skylla Flarelion, a legend in the marketing world. She’s what’s known as a brand maker. While credit for the resort’s success often goes to the founder, the board of directors, or some other C-suite executive who did fuck all, it was Skylla Flarelion who took the small-time casino in nowhere Idaho and grew it into the internationally renowned brand it is today. I can’t believe I’m in her office.

Fingers crossed she didn’t fact-check my resumé.

“Thank you for coming in, Ms. Henix.” She keeps her seat as I enter but inclines her head in greeting, and it might as well be a nod from the queen. I’m practically giggling inside. She’s in her mid-seventies. Her short hair is pure white, her horns are gold gilded and studded with a pattern of onyx, and the way she holds herself, even while seated, there’s no question this demoness is a capital ‘B’ Boss.

“Please, call me Iggy,” I say, managing to sound cool and collected, a feat I couldn’t have pulled off in my early twenties. But now that I’m well on my way to thirty, I can exude confidence and refinement in short bursts. If I had to keep it going for a day or longer, I’d buckle. But an hour-long interview? No sweat.

“Iggy. Why don’t you tell me about yourself?” She folds her manicured hands in her lap, my cue to impress her, and I launch into my memorized self-pitch. She asks me a series of questions, and I give my prepared answers. From where I’m sitting, it goes well. She nods three times, and the corner of her mouth crooks into the teeniest smile twice. But most importantly, she doesn’t question any of the ever-so-slightly exaggerated qualifications sprinkled throughout my resumé.

It was ill-advised, I’ll admit, fabricating qualifications, but feeling habitually and chronically under-appreciated at my current job had put me in a mood. A drinking mood. I wasn’t so much lying as I was dreaming in resumé format, imagining who I could be and where my career could go, if I could just

get my foot in the door somewhere better, somewhere where work quality mattered.

A couple of bottles of wine later, I hit send and blasted that heavily padded resumé to every open marketing position on the Career Monster job board.

I was shocked when it got a bite from an elite, luxury brand. I panicked and nearly declined the invitation to interview, but here I am.

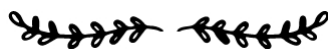
“Thank you for coming in.” She rises, and I hold my breath, hoping against hope she’s not about to say *don’t call us, we’ll call you*.

“Thank you for having me.” My heart pounds as I stand and firmly grip her extended hand. I wouldn’t dare insult her with a weak handshake.

“Final interviews are on Monday. See Yeera at the front desk. She’ll get you scheduled.”

*Yes, yes, yes!* I’ve made it to the last round. I’m a top candidate. This job is mine! Please, Mother Darkness. It has to be mine. I’ll work my ass off. I’ll do anything they ask me to do. Anything I don’t already know, I’ll learn. Weekends, evenings, every minute of every day, I will focus on this job and nothing else, if they give it to me.

“Thank you,” I say, clamping down hard on the elated smile threatening to hijack my face. I have to fight the urge to curtsy as I make my exit.



**I**t’s Friday, and while I could take the six-and-a-half-hour flight home, turn around, and take the same flight back on Monday, it seems easier to stay the weekend. I jump in my rental and instead of heading east toward the airport, I head west. From the Emberlight Resort on Mt. BZB, I drive down into the valley and arrive in Winter Bliss. It’s been at least a decade since I’ve been back to the small town I grew up in, but it looks the same. It’s as if time got turned around in this cozy little vortex and forgot it had anywhere to go.

I don't know anyone who lives here anymore, but there are inns aplenty in a town like this, and I have no trouble booking a room. I'm still buzzing with excitement from my interview, and all this energy has to go somewhere. So I lowball the innkeeper, a sleepy demoness wearing a cat-print apron. She perks up when she realizes I'm game to haggle. Her eyes swirl with an excited orange, and she crows with laughter when we finally strike a bargain. I'm grinning too. I got her down fifty bucks. Not bad. I had to forgo room service in favor of breakfast in the parlor, but that's fine by me. Who wants to eat in bed? Disgusting. We shake forearms, sealing the deal, and she hands over the tasseled key to my room with a little satisfied sigh.

It's not enough for me. Our exchange took the edge off, but I've still got cloud-nine energy pumping through my veins, mixed with nerves over Monday's pending interview. I need an outlet. Looks like I'll be stepping out tonight, maybe grab a few drinks and flirt with some cute randos. If I find one with some stamina, I'll make a night of it.

"No guests allowed in the rooms," she calls after me, as if reading my mind.

"That wasn't part of our deal."

"It's a strict house rule. Non-negotiable," she sniffs and gives me a judgy once over.

"Fine," I grumble. The world is full of prudes bent on ruining everyone else's fun.

I shuck my business attire and slip into something more me—black on black. I may have outgrown the black lipstick and lace of my gothic youth, but my signature color is mine forever. I head out just after dark in search of some nightlife. A neon sign comes into view, and I know immediately that this is where I'm stopping: Under the Volcano Tiki Bar. It's too delightfully kitschy to ignore. I pull into a packed parking lot and circle a few times until I notice a back alley with a single open spot just for me. There's a backdoor on the brick building set into an alcove. It has the tiki bar's name painted on it, but when I get closer, I see it's an emergency exit.

Turning, I'm stunned by the view. The bar is situated on just enough of a hill that this little alcove looks out over the whole town with its sloping roofs and hazy yellow street lights. In the distance, a full moon hangs in a cloudless sky, right over the silhouette of the town's namesake volcano. "What a waste of a gorgeous view," I murmur to myself and head around to find the front entrance.

I've no sooner slid onto an open barstool and placed my drink order when a pair of sexy forearms catches my eye. *Hello there, mister.* The forearms belong to a tall, dirty-blond man wearing a white cowboy hat and a dress shirt with cuffs rolled just high enough to tease me. *Mmm.* In college, I strictly dated demons. But once I gave up dating altogether, I branched out. I haven't been with a lot of humans, but I like the size of this one. Especially his hands. He digs into his pocket and pulls out a small notebook. He thumbs through it before shoving it back in his pocket and heading off into the crowd.

I watch him with mild interest as he and his notebook make their rounds. I catch a few words here and there, and I can't help but snort in amusement. His pickup lines are truly awful. Even the adorable tipping of his hat and dimpled grin can't save him. A long string of rejections unspools tragically before me. Yet he remains bright eyed and eager, hopping from one woman to the next without pause. A rabbit on the hunt, the phrase pops into my head, and it's an apt description. If rabbits hunted, this is how they'd do it.

I should be cringing away, but instead, I'm drawn in, fascinated by the fact that he doesn't seem all that upset. A little frustrated sure, a touch disappointed maybe, but nothing deeper registers on his face, and I'm baffled. As far as I know, humans feel embarrassment and rejection the same deep and painful way demons do. I don't understand how he can put himself through this.

As I continue watching, a pattern starts to emerge.

He'll look at a woman, and if his eyes dilate or his nostrils flare, two subtle signs of attraction, he veers course, avoiding that woman only to approach another. Is it conscious or



unconscious? I can't tell, but he does it again. And again. And again.

A man takes the barstool next to me and tries to strike up a conversation, but I can't be distracted now. I'm too invested in this mystery. What is this dimpled cowboy up to? Is he playing games?

I like to play.

When the barman returns, I order my favorite drink and have it sent to the white-hatted stranger. The bartender gives me what I can only interpret as an approving nod. When the drink is delivered, the white hat looks my way, and even from the far end of the bar, I see the way his eyes dilate when he sees me. His nostrils flare, and in a room already thick with the sweet scent of desire, my tongue instantly picks up the deluge of pheromones he dumps into the air, a dense, overpowering cloud. Holy Dark Mother. This man really likes the look of me.

In demon culture, it's considered impolite to notice the off-scenting of others in public, but he makes that impossible. Every demon seated at the bar starts in surprise, glancing first at him, then around to see what set him off so powerfully.

Me.

I twist in my chair, practically purring at the ego stroke. Well, I guess I found my random hookup for the night. I wink at him.

But just like with the other women who elicited any sign of attraction, he makes no move. In fact, he ignores me completely. Even knowing his pattern, it still stings of rejection. I suppose this is the game he's playing. It's not one I've played before. Maybe he expects me to approach him, but it doesn't strike me as the right move. I step outside to wait. I'll give him five minutes.

He takes his time, but when he comes out, I'm greeted by the same overwhelming sweet scent and heated look he shot me inside, and a thrill runs through me. I'm certain this beefy-forearmed, large-handed stranger is a gift from Below, sent to

help me work off my pent-up energy from earlier in the day. Thank you, Mother Darkness.

It's time to play.

I tease him, trying to draw him out, but he keeps his distance all the while devouring me with his eyes. I don't understand. If he wants me so badly, why doesn't he make a move? "No pickup line for me?" I finally ask with a pout.

Again, he doesn't answer. Stubborn. I take his hand, so deliciously heavy in mine and rough with calluses, and I tug him forward, leading him around the building to the alley where I parked.

When I glance back at his lanky form, a logistical concern pops to mind. I'm not sure the backseat of my rental car will accommodate both of us.

The concern fades as yet another gift from Below presents itself. The alcove with a view. Perfect. I pull him inside and press him up against the emergency exit. He flattens his back against the door. His face is partially shadowed beneath the brim of his hat, and he watches me through heavily lidded eyes. Inside he was constantly in motion to the point I'd almost call him fidgety, but now he goes perfectly still.

I rest my hands on his chest and feel his sharp intake of breath. He's pleasantly hot to the touch, giving off the baked warmth of sun-kissed sand. So nice. I lift up on my toes, stretching to bring my mouth to his and stopping just shy of contact. I hover there for a moment and listen as his breath goes shallow and raspy. His nose twitches, and I can't help but grin. I brush my bottom lip lightly over his, and a spark jumps between us. Just static, but at the flash, his wariness dissolves.

He tips forward, sealing his mouth firmly over mine, claiming it hungrily with a low growl. The brim of his hat smashes up against my horns, bumping against them until it's knocked askew and finally falls off his head. He kicks it aside, and then he's back, kissing me again. We lose our footing and stumble sideways until I'm pinned against the wall.

His palms land heavily against the brick, spaced around my head and caging me in. He shifts position, angling just right to deepen our frantic kiss. My lips give way, opening up at the pressure of his tongue. It sweeps in, taking what it wants, a demand pretending to be a kiss, and I feel it all the way down to my toes. My hands roam his torso, fisting his shirt and pulling at him. I want him closer, but he doesn't budge. I loop my fingers over his belt and tug. His hips stay stubbornly cocked back, leaving too much space between us.

I pull my chin sideways, coming up for air. "Do you want to stop?" I ask.

"No." He shakes his head, and by the heated look in his eye, I'm inclined to believe him, but he's holding back. I want more. At the very least I need him pressed up against me, but judging by the warmth pooling between my legs, I don't think that'll satisfy either. I need friction.

Overhead, the moonlight dims as fine wisps of clouds, which had been invisible in the dark sky only moments before, pass across the round body of the moon. Like sheer curtains drawn across a window, they create an illusion of privacy.

"Can I take out your cock?" I ask with a flick of my tongue over my bottom lip.

He swears under his breath, a string of colorful curses, but he nods and says, "Yes."

I grin at the delectable noises he makes as I unzip him. Little helpless moans, pained but eager. One stroke and his cock is hard and jumping in my hand. I run my fingers lightly up and down the length of him, and it's like playing an instrument but the notes are all softly moaned curses. His hips, however, remain motionless and too far away to do me any good. There's an unsatisfied ache between my legs that is loudly protesting his maddening self-restraint. I thought surely this would jump start things, but I suppose if I want to move things along, I'll have to keep asking for what I want next.

"Can I touch myself with it?" He shudders; his whole body trembles as he meets my eye. He swallows hard, and I see the conflict warring inside. Again with the restraint. *What's it all*

*for?* I think so loudly that I nearly give voice to my frustration. The air is saturated with the taste of his excitement. He wants me so badly that it's making *my* head spin. I'm wet and throbbing and playing with his cock. If he doesn't want this, doesn't want to want me, then why doesn't he just walk away?

"Go on. Touch yourself," he whispers permission as he levels me with a dark and needy gaze. That's more like it. I lift the hem of my skirt, push my panties to one side, and work his tip against my clit, rubbing it lightly, and fuck it feels good, a bit of relief but not enough. The heat is still building between my legs. He groans, but he doesn't thrust or press in. Sweet Mother Below, what is it going to take to get this man rocking against me? I take the tip of him and dip it in, just the first inch or so. A painful tease for both of us. Our panting breaths mingle as our lips skate over each other's. I pull him out and dip him back in again, just the same teasing amount, but I can feel my wetness coating him. His face blooms a pretty pink, and sweat prickles along his brow.

"Are you from around here?" he asks, his words breaking apart like waves on jagged rocks.

I grin and snort. "Now you've got a pickup line for me?" My head drops back with a throaty laugh. He has to be joking. The timing is too comical.

His head dips forward, and his nose sweeps up the length of my exposed neck. "I really want to know." There's no mirth in his voice as he mouths the words against my throat and then begins to lick. "Tell me, please." His teeth graze and nip at me. "Tell me you're from here." There's a desperate edge in his voice, and maybe that's why instead of saying no, I say...

"Born and raised." It's true, but it's not the truth. I lived here once, and there's a chance I will again, but I don't live here now and haven't for a long time. I could explain, but he cuts me off.

"Oh thank fuck," he growls.

A dam breaking.

The concrete walls that have been holding him back come down with a crash of his body against mine, and I revel in the weight of him smashing me like mortar into the brick wall. He hikes up my skirt in a couple of quick, rough jerks and pulls at my panties, but the moment he hears the flimsy fabric start to tear, he fists the waistband with both hands and rips. The tattered lace falls at our feet. He palms my ass and hefts me off the ground, pressing me hard against the wall.

I grunt my approval. My legs wrap around him, feet dangling in the air. His hips pin me in place, and he pants against the base of my neck with his cock poised at my entrance.

“Can I?” he asks. The words are sharp, delivered on ragged breath.

I’m just as eager, breathing just as hard, but I pause for a moment. He waits. His heart is pounding so hard in his chest, it feels like it’s trying to break free of his rib cage and jump into mine. It steals my breath. My head spins with the intensity, and I marvel at the dangerous amount of heat that’s built up between us. If we don’t give in soon, one or both of us might combust.

A familiar heat rushes to my fingertips. I still get the sensations of fire magic even if I don’t produce fire. The feeling so rarely leads to anything that I’m caught by surprise when a tiny spray of sparks leap from my fingertips. It startles us both. I usually have to concentrate hard enough to break a sweat to throw sparks. “Shit! Your shirt.” I’ve peppered him with scorch marks.

“Don’t worry about it. It happens. Should I put you down?” he asks.

It’s not what I want at all, and I can tell by the way he asked it’s not what he wants either. “Don’t you dare. Not until you’ve fucked me.”

My dirty-blond cowboy is quick to oblige, sinking into me with an eager thrust that turns into a pounding rhythm. He surprises me by slipping a couple of his fingers between us and sliding them up and down either side of my clit. The

friction is gloriously satisfying. Our slick parts rub against each other with a squelching noise that riles him up. He thrusts faster and pushes deeper, hitting my inner walls and driving the breath right out of me.

The graze of his teeth on my neck.

The scrape of the wall at my back.

The dig of his hips wedging open my thighs .

I race to the finish, though it feels more like the finish races toward me. With his cock pumping and his fingers right where I need them, it's upon me so quickly that I'm caught by surprise. I come with a breaking of starlight across my vision and a startled cry of ecstasy. He feels it too; the waves of squeezing pleasure he's set off inside me. He lets loose a throaty noise followed by garbled swear and a moan of, "so good."

He clamps both hands firmly on my ass and comes soon after with a few more hard thrusts and his fingers digging into me. He grunts as his forehead drops onto my shoulder, and I only barely catch his muttered sigh, "Marry me."

His head pulls back in surprise. "I didn't mean—*shit*, Sorry, that was just a- a..." His already flush face goes a bit redder, and he stares at me in wide-eyed horror. "Sorry," he says again. I chuckle.

"Don't worry about it. It was good for me too." I smile, and he smiles back. I saw his dimpled grin plenty of times inside. He flashed it all around, but somehow, it looks entirely different when aimed right at me. My heart gives a jittery little stutter and heat rushes to my fingers once more.

"You can put me down now."

He presses a soft kiss to the tip of my nose, places me gently on my feet, and adjusts my skirt, smoothing it with what feels uncomfortably close to affection.

Shit. This was just supposed to be a quick hookup. Did I just make a mistake?

His grin goes lopsided and goofy, and it stays that way as he zips himself up and dusts off his hat. His hair's a ruffled mess, sticking up at all angles, and there are a surprising number of reddish pink markings all over his neck from where my teeth clamped down a little too eagerly. The sight of it unsettles me.

He stoops to pick up what's left of my ripped lace undergarments. "I'm sorry about these. I got a little carried away," he says with an apologetic grimace. "I think they're done for. Should I toss them?"

I nod, and he looks around, but there's nowhere to dispose of my thoroughly ruined panties, so he shoves them in his pocket.

"Can I get your number?" he asks. His eyes are bright and yet also softly tender, and yikes. It's a lot.

"I need to find a restroom and clean myself up," I say and walk away, hurried along by a sudden urge to put some distance between us.

"Wait," he calls after me. "What's your name?" His long legs catch up to me easily. "I'm Chad," he says. Chad? I give him a sidelong glance. "I know," he says with a grimace. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize for your name," I say firmly, and he shoots me another bright smile. I'm picking up on a lot of puppy energy, and that is not the vibe he was giving off earlier. He was unfazed, playing games, hitting on every woman at the bar.

"What's yours?"

"I'm Iggy."

"Iggy," he repeats. "I like it."

"Me too," I say. My name suits me. I've always liked it. "Thanks for a great time, Chad," I say as I hurry up the porch steps toward the front entrance.

"So can I get your number?" he asks again. He doesn't follow me up the steps. He stands at the bottom of them,

holding his damn hat against his chest and looking up at me with a disconcertingly hopeful look. This was definitely a mistake.

I'm something of an expert when it comes to random hookups, and one thing I've learned along the way is that some people are cut out for them. Some aren't. I'm usually pretty good at steering clear of the latter.

"No," I say with an apologetic grimace. It's not how these things go. But oh, Dearest Dark Void, his shoulders slump and his face falls. *Fuck*. He was out hunting tonight, wasn't he? Looking for a hookup? Well, we hooked up and now it's over. Doesn't he know how these things go?

"Look," I say as I slowly descend the stairs to stand level with him. "That was an epic fuck." I'm not just saying that to be polite. As far as random hookups go, this was top tier. We both got off, which isn't always the case, and our chemistry was scorching hot. I can already tell I'll be thinking about it later when I need to tire myself out for the night. "But I was just looking to blow off some steam. I'm only in town for a few nights."

"You said you were born and raised here." His brow crimps and he takes a step back, pulling away from me, and I don't know why, but it tugs at my gut with a guilty twist, like I kicked a puppy.

"I was. I was born at Mithridate Medical Center, and I graduated from Infernus Academy." I gesture in the general direction of each of the two local institutions, inwardly cringing at the personal details I just let slip. Demon's keep private things private. Only our very closest friends know the intimate details of our lives. It's an admirable trait the rest of the world could learn from. "But now I live in Boston." There, final detail and now our misunderstanding is cleared up. Only, he doesn't look any less hurt. *Shit*.

Okay, one more private detail, but this is the absolute last one he's getting. "I came into town for an interview. If I land the job, I could be moving back. But exchanging numbers? No. That feels... premature, and like I'd be jinxing myself. I



just can't do it. That makes sense, right?" That's as soft a rejection as I can manage. I don't really understand why I'm putting in this much effort. He's just some guy I'm trying to brush off. If he's still hurt after this, maybe it'll teach him a lesson about not getting clingy after a hookup. It's kinda the number one rule.

It's just sex. If you start to feel something, that's your problem. Ignore it, shove it down, or better yet—escape. Not before you've come, obviously, but immediately after, put some distance between you and whoever sparked an unwanted feeling. That's how you handle it. Not like this.

He looks down at his boots, thinking it over. When he looks up again, there's still a crimp in his brow but his expression is less pained. "Say I come by the bar in a couple of weeks and you're here. That'd mean you got the job, right? And you'd be sticking around. What if I asked for your number then?"

Oof... what do I say to that? It's not like I'll be settling down in Winter Bliss. If I do land the job at the Emberland Resort (fingers crossed), I'd opt to live on site, which, granted, is only an hour away, but I also wouldn't stay long. A year, two tops. It's too risky to stay at a place that hired me based on a fabricated resumé. It'd be much smarter to move on as soon as I have some real experience under my belt. And that's my plan. I'll use this one impressive job to springboard me along a career path of increasingly impressive jobs, until I've replaced all of the fake qualifications on my resumé with shiny-new, legitimate ones.

"Sure," I say, shrugging one shoulder. "If we ever run into each other again, ask for my number." *But the chances of that happening are infinitesimally slim, and I can't promise I'll give it to you,* I think but don't say.

"Okay, then." He nods, but there's no puppy energy about him now. He's gone back to being the man he was in the bar, the one remarkably unfazed by disappointment. "Have a wonderful rest of your evening, Iggy." He places his hat on his head, tips it at me, and then—cue a dramatic sunset—the cowboy walks away.



## Chapter 3

*Iggy*



Thankfully, Under the Volcano Tiki Bar is just decent enough to have individual bathrooms. I have a deep personal conviction that doesn't allow me to patronize establishments with restroom stalls. They're an atrocity, a heinous crime perpetrated against personal privacy.

But, as it happens, I forgot to check when I got here. Luckily, it worked out fine. I'm not in breach of my moral code as I lock the door, dampen a wad of paper towels, and wipe off the mix of bodily fluids caked along my inner thighs.

A quick refresh of my makeup, a finger-comb through my hair, and there. Good enough. I only need to make it past my B&B hostess without giving offense, not survive the exhaustive trials of my parents' scrutiny. That's a special treat reserved for the holidays.

*Shit.* I grumble inwardly, pissed that the holidays popped into my thoughts again. As soon as October arrived, holiday

dread set in hard this year, a full month ahead of schedule, which is ridiculous since I'll be spending the holidays alone.

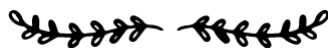
It's what I did last year too. I had to. My sister's fiancé was invited along with his family, and if there is anyone my parents want to impress, it's them. Their last name is synonymous with fire magic the world over, and their reputation as innovators and global producers is only further elevated by their wildly talented children. Fire magic savants all of them, just like my sister.

My mother tried to strike a deal with me ahead of time. "Rehire your private tutor, please, Iggy. Learn enough fire magic to get through the Advent rituals without embarrassing yourself, that's all I ask."

She offered to pay off my car loan. I countered with an offer to not go at all. "If I'm not there, there's nothing for you to be embarrassed about. Problem solved."

It's my solution for this year too. I'll spend the entire Advent, from Winter Solstice to New Ember's Day, hiding in my apartment, pretending to be out of town. It's the best way to avoid pity invites from neighbors and coworkers.

I stare in the mirror and try to force a smile. *It wasn't that bad*, I tell myself. I'll do something special this year. I'll make it fun somehow. It doesn't have to be a miserably lonely week. *Stop worrying about it.*



As I round the bar, heading to the exit, I hear my name. "Iggy?" I startle at the sound of it, but my surprise fades at the sight of a familiar face. I'm not used to seeing this particular face attached to a gym-sculpted body or dressed in movie-star chic attire, but still.

I know him.

Warmth floods my chest as I close the distance and move in for a hug.

"Vale? Holy Dark Mother! What in the Void are you doing here?" I ask, grinning ear to ear as I swamp him in a tight

embrace. As kids, Vale was the sort to stiffen up when I went in for a hug, but this time, he squeezes back, and that surprises me. I step back and search his face.

“Are you okay?” I ask. He’s one of my oldest friends, the only one I’ve kept up with since leaving Winter Bliss. After high school, we went in opposite directions. I headed east. He went west to L.A. We don’t talk often, but with some friends, the really good ones, that doesn’t matter. What is he doing back in Winter Bliss?

“Yeah, totally fine,” he flashes me a smile.

“Are you sure?” I press when his perfectly symmetrical smile stays a little too fixed.

“Yeah. It’s just so weird seeing you here. I thought you were still in M-m-massachusetts—?” Vale stutters. His eyes pinch shut and he mutters under his breath, “Fuck.”

For a split second, I consider pretending I didn’t hear it, but that feels wrong. “Shit, Vale. What happened?” I ask quietly. If hearing his childhood stutter resurface is a gut punch for me, I can’t imagine how it feels for him.

He grimaces but doesn’t answer.

“How about a drink?” I ask.

“I’ve already had a few,” he mumbles.

There comes a time in every friendship when a judgment call must be made: does this situation call for junk food shoveled into his mouth or liquor poured down his throat? Sometimes, the answer is both. I go with my gut. “I’ll get us a couple of rounds. You grab a table,” I say as I head to the bar.

My order is large enough to require a tray for transport: four shots, two high balls, and a pitcher of beer. My laden tray and I search out Vale, and when I finally spot him out on the patio, I freeze. Vale’s being attacked! I turn my back for five minutes and he’s gotten himself into a bar fight with a giant demon with massive curling horns. The assailant has him in a choke hold. Vale is covered in sweat and struggling against the beefy arm wrapped around his neck, but when his eyes lock with mine—he grins. He looks wildly happy.

What the fuck is happening?

I catch the assailant's profile and a name leaps out of my mouth. "Rex!" The assailant swings around to face me with Vale's head still firmly locked under his arm, and there's no mistaking him. This is Rex Perchaz, the third member of our childhood trio. For years the three of us were inseparable.

His eyes light up with recognition. "Freak!" he shouts my old nickname, and it rushes over me like a wave of nostalgia. I hate that nickname, but I love the guys who gave it to me. Which is why they're the only ones ever allowed to call me that.

"What are you doing here?" I drop the tray on the nearest table. Too stunned to keep my feet under me, I fall into an open seat. I shake my head as they join me, marveling at the unbelievable coincidence that has sparked a feeling of magic in the air. It's been well over a decade since the three of us were together. This is shaping up to be an extraordinarily lucky night, too improbable to be anything short of a divine conspiracy. Either Mother Darkness herself or the dark currents of the Abyss are scheming in our favor. I have faith enough to believe it.

"I'm in town for family shit. What the Void are you two doing here?" He grins at me, and it's the same wide and toothy grin from our youth only translated to a face twice as large and baby-fat cheeks redrawn with hard lines. He sits and his hulking form turns the chair under him into doll furniture. It would be easy to mistake his smile for a snarl, but I'm familiar with Rex's happy face, and it's clear as day to me—he's glad to see me.

"What family shit?" I ask, still glowing from the inside.

"My brother Rom's engagement party was tonight," he says and helps himself to a shot from the tray.

"Rom," I grumble, and my nose wrinkles even as I pour a beer and pass it to Rex. I pass a high ball to Vale and take the other for myself. I pause before I take my first drink, recalling the countless times we tried to get our hands on some booze in

high school. An unrealized obsession. Which makes this the first time the three of us have drank together.

Rex's deep grumble bubbles out of him and it takes a second for it to register as laughter. "You have no reason to dislike him," he says with an amused smile and a shake of his head. It's what he used to tell me all the time when we were kids too.

"Nobody does. That's what I loathe about him," I say. The perfect sibling. Rex and I were both cursed with one. Rom and my sister are basically the same: smart, accomplished, loved by teachers, and born with the horrifying natural ability to finish what they start. They suck. I bet their resumes have zero falsifications too. *Pfff.*

"Why'd that dick have his party here?" I ask. Rex's whole family moved to Texas our junior year. "I thought all of you lived in Austin."

"Rom moved back. He's marrying a local gal," Rex says.

"Can you imagine having to move back here?" Vale asks with a shudder. "To the land of perpetual mockery."

"Where everyone sees us as losers," Rex tags on glumly as he scratches at his big chin.

I don't argue even though I staunchly disagree. We weren't losers. We were just surrounded by people determined to see us in the worst light. Demanding demon parents, type-A overachiever siblings, hard ass teachers who set impossibly high 'minimum standards' for passing. It's a miracle Vale and I graduated, and a double miracle that Rex was only held back twice.

I catch a flash of white in my peripheral vision, and for a second I think it's a cowboy hat approaching. My heart thuds, but it's just a white shirt walking by. I scan the room. No hats anywhere.

"Iggy?" Vale asked a question I didn't hear, but he repeats it for me. "Would you ever move back?"

"Would I sentence myself to a lifetime *here* just to hookup with a local? No way. Rom's insane," I snort. There are a lot

easier ways to get laid. And above all else, that's what I look for in my relationships: easy and short. A one-night stand is my ideal, but I've been known to stretch things out over a weekend for someone special.

"But for a job? Maybe," I say. Not adding that if I move away from the East Coast, it'll be all the easier to avoid my family for the holidays. "For a good enough opportunity, I'd pull up stakes and move anywhere, even this backward little tourist trap." I don't mention my final interview coming up on Monday, or that if I get it, I'd be moving back to the area. We're good enough friends that I could share, but I might have jinxed it already when I told the white-hatted cowboy, and I'm not about to double jinx it.

"Not me. Not for a million dollars," Vale says. "Not for a billion."

"I would move back," Rex announces with a sly grin, one I recognize only too well. He's setting us up for something.

"Really?" Vale looks at him, eyes squinting, but he's also got an expectant grin like he's inviting the big guy to lay it on us.

"I would move back if they'd let me set off the volcano and flood the valley with lava," he says.

"Shit, man," Vale says, nose scrunching as he shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

"It was a joke," Rex says. "Get it?" When Vale shakes his head no, he turns to me. "You get it, right?"

"Sorry," I say with an apologetic grin. Rex's humor runs dark. Which is awesome, I always loved that. But it's the humor part of dark humor that he doesn't always nail.

"Why would they let me set off the volcano if it would kill everyone?" he asks.

"They wouldn't?" I say or ask. I'm not sure.

"Exactly. See, you get it. Cheers!" He clinks his glass to mine.



“Oh, ha!” Vale straightens up in his chair. “When pigs fly! When Mother’s Fire freezes over. When they let you set off the volcano—that’s when you’d move back to Winter Bliss.” He snorts a laugh.

“It ruins it if you have to explain it,” Rex grumbles, and his face pinches into a pout.

“Here’s to never moving back to Winter Bliss!” I say, passing around the shots and hoisting mine into the air. We clink and shoot them back.

The night flies by in a blur of chatter shit-talking, laughing so hard my sides ache, and a dizzying number of drinks. So very many drinks. I lose count long before I start passing mine off to Rex. He’s three times my size. He can handle it.

“Iggy, did you get in a fight?” Rex asks. He’s slumped over, covering half the table, bleary eyed and squinting, but his long arm has no trouble reaching my neck to poke at it.

“What are you talking about?” I say, swatting his hand away.

“You’re bruised up. Wait... are those hickeys?” Rex asks, sitting up before he leans all the way into my personal space. I palm his giant forehead and push him away.

“No!” I insist, even as I recall the heat of his mouth on me, biting and sucking. *Fucking Chad*, I grumble as embarrassment flushes up to the point of my ears. I rub furiously at my neck as if that’ll erase the marks he left on me.

I left marks on him too, I remember with a rush of heat that only adds to my embarrassment.

“They’re not hickeys!”

“Yeah they are,” Vale says with a snigger, his head wobbling a little unsteadily on his neck. “I saw ’em when you first walked out of the bathroom. You’re covered in them.” He giggles and Rex joins him. They’re both wobbly-headed, giggling at me.

“Shut up, dumbasses,” I growl.

“M-m-make us,” Vale says, stuttering for the second time tonight. “Fuck!” he snarls and chugs the rest of his beer.

Rex’s head snaps to Vale. “Who do I need to murder?” he asks, dead serious, and Vale and I both smile at *the bull* rearing its head.

When we were in school together, Vale was easy to pick on, what with the stutter and all. I was occasionally a target myself, but for other reasons. What I lacked in natural demon talents, I made up for with an abundance of style, pulling heavily from gothic and victorian fashion. Not everyone appreciated it. Fortunately for the two of us, Rex was big even back then, a bull of a boy, and hurting one of his friends was a sure way to get him charging straight in. He was in trouble all the time because of us, but no matter the punishments heaped upon him, he’d defend us every time.

“Someone pissed you off? Stole your lunch? Smacked you around?” he asks in quick succession, listing off the childhood triggers that used to make Vale’s stutter worse. “Who was it? I’ll turn ’em to ash.” His fist comes down hard on the table, toppling his drink. “Shit!” he curses, and pulling loose the tucked hem of his dress shirt, he sops up the spilled drink with it.

Vale still hasn’t said what happened, but, like Rex, I suspect some old trigger got to him. The last time I heard him stutter, we were teenagers. It’s time he talked about it, I sagely decide, and as any wise woman would do, I kick at him under the table, missing three times before I make contact. “Go on, tell Rex who needs murderin’,” I say, my words slurring.

“Last call!” the bartender shouts.

Vale jumps up. “I’ll get us a last round,” he says, tripping over his feet as he hurries off. A few minutes later, there’s a commotion at the bar. Vale is shouting or being shouted at. Either way, Rex and I are on our feet in an instant. We head to the bar. Or Rex does because his feet actually move, while I just sway in place. *Feet, what are you doing? Our friends need us. Get over there.*

“I said you’re cut off. And if any of you three try getting behind a wheel, I’m calling the cops,” the bartender says, looking pointedly at each of us. Rude.

“Fuck you, Greg!” Vale shouts at the bartender, then immediately apologizes. “I didn’t mean it.” He tries to hug him, but there’s a whole bar between them. Even so, we all agree it’s a very sweet gesture. Tears spring to my eyes, and I start to clap, but no one joins me. It’s fine, my hands missed each other anyway. I’ll save clapping for later when it’s a little less difficult.

I blink, and suddenly, we’re outside. There’s a car with the three passenger doors standing open. Vale, Rex, and I each pour ourselves into one. Did I call us a ride? How responsible of me.

The driver keeps badgering us for an address, and he’s getting snippier by the second, but even if I did know an address to give him, it’s not like I’d be able to think of it now because something smells so awful it’s making me giggle.

“Sorry,” Rex murmurs next to me. We’re both in the back seat. His eyes are closed, and he’s slumped against the door with his face pressed up against the window. I roll down my window and stick my head out, giggling into the cold night air. Rex, with his eyes still closed, joins the laughter, and that’s when we get kicked out of the car.

What the fuck? What’s wrong with laughing?

“Why’d our car leave? Did we tip?” Vale asks, eyes widening in fear. “I have a five-star *reputation* to *unhold*. This could ruin me.” He sounds genuinely concerned.

I’m about to tell Vale not to worry when Rex goes clomping off, snarling under his breath.

Looking around, I recognize where we are. We’ve been abandoned in the middle of downtown Winter Bliss. The plaza we’re standing in is surrounded on all four sides by the cutest of cute storefronts, and for a moment I’m convinced nothing has changed. But a few places have a new name or a fresh coat of paint. There’s one new awning, and the flowers in the

planters are purple instead of the orange I remember. That's it. If not for those minor inconsistencies, I could believe I've traveled through time and am, at this very moment, in danger of changing the future or erasing myself from existence.

There's not a soul around but us. It's so quiet I can hear the click of the traffic light as it changes from yellow to red.

Something about the stillness sobers me up, and it dawns on me that we might be in a bad situation. What are the odds we'll be able to hail another rideshare at, I check my watch, three in the morning? Slim to none, I'm guessing.

"Come on," I say to Vale, and we head over to Rex who's standing at the foot of the statue at the center of the plaza.

"Alaric Infernus," Rex announces when we join him. Sure enough, the statue atop the giant brick pedestal is Alaric Infernus, namesake of Infernus Academy, the demon school we attended together. He's cast in bronze, but there are lots of glass elements too. There are gas lamps shaped like flame in each of his palms, and dozens more circling along a spiral of pipe that comes up from his feet and arcs over his head. The famed practitioner of arcane fire magic is raising a firestorm. Very dramatic.

"More like Asshole Infernus," Vale says and we all crack up at that.

"Asshole Ignor-anus," I say with a snort and a grin.

"All-too-rich Doofus," Rex adds with a rumble. We've always been a hilarious trio, but tonight we're really on fire.

"I bet I could melt off the tip of his face," Rex says, and grabbing hold of the bricks, he hoists himself up, climbing the statue like a tree.

"Get down!" I shout at the same time Vale shouts, "Fuck, yeah!"

I catch Rex by the heel, but he kicks free, determined, and surprisingly nimble for his size.

"No fire!" I shout after him, and Holy Mother Below, does that bring back a whirlwind of memories from our youth.

Nobody liked to burn stuff more than Rex. His firemark is probably still branded on half the walls of our old academy. Rex ignores me and keeps climbing. His feet come down on one glass lamp after another, shattering them and bending the pipes with his weight. “Whoops,” he mutters each time but keeps going.

“Vale, do something,” I say. I don’t give a shit about the statue, but I do care about the consequences if Rex gets caught destroying the damn thing.

“On it,” Vale says and starts climbing. He breaks more lamps and bends more pipe on his way up.

“What are you doing?” I shout after him.

“Helping Rex,” he shouts down at me.

“He doesn’t need help! He needs to get down!”

Rex has already made it up to the top of Alaric’s bronze form. He wraps the grimly determined pioneer in a headlock, and gives him a noogie before punching him in the side, right where the kidneys would be. His fist meets metal. “Ouch,” he growls, shaking out his hand. “Tough old bastard. Fuck you!” he shouts in his ear.

“And fuck Infernus Academy!” Vale shouts in the statue’s other ear, eyes glowing red.

What the fuck has gotten into them? Rex snaps his fingers and a bright red flame leaps to his hand. Vale snaps too, conjuring a blue flame. They swirl the fire in their hands, encouraging it to accumulate and grow.

I don’t have any other option. I have to play the one card that’s always worked before. “Quit showing off! I hate it when you leave me out!” I shout, sounding like a bratty child, but—I can’t make fire.

I can shoot sparks on occasion or produce whiffs of smoke, but never flame. It’s deeply humiliating. Just making this small allusion to my lack of what should be a natural ability has my skin prickling with shame. It’s usually enough to pull these two hard-headed dumbasses back from the edge. But not tonight.

“Sorry, Iggy. This isn’t about you,” Vale says. An uncharacteristic fury has him in a chokehold. There’s no stutter now.

They look at each other for a quiet beat. Something passes between them. Their eyes glow brighter.

Oh fuck.

Rex slaps his flaming hand on one side of the statue’s head with a sinister grin. The tips of his fingers wrap the proud nose of the historical giant. It takes a second, but soon the nose begins to droop and then dribble down his face.

For a moment, I’m transfixed. His portrait hung all throughout the Academy, and we were taught to revere him as a founder, a pioneer, and a master practitioner of the arcane arts. But what I see when I look at him now is just another measuring stick. Another figure of idealized perfection I could never live up to. Watching his face melt is marvelously satisfying.

With a roar, Vale slams his flaming hand against the statue’s chest. I hear a creaking groan, but I don’t catch everything that happens next. The statue seems to slip. Rex loses his footing, kicking in the air. Vale tumbles down; Rex falls after him. They’re on their feet. One of them shouts and a fireball hits the statue square in the chest. Bricks crumble from the base.

“Oh no,” I whisper when the smell of gas hits me.

“Get down!” I scream, but it’s too late. The explosion knocks me flat on the ground. My awareness flickers in and out.

Flashing lights. Sirens.

My ears are ringing louder than the voices overhead.

Where are Rex and Vale?



I’m dead sober.

The three of us are in a jail cell and in a shit ton of trouble.

Vale's got a black eye and a gash along his jaw. He's still a little sloshed, but Rex is completely wasted. With a pang of guilt, I remember the numerous shots I passed to him instead of drinking myself.

"Did you know there are goats in Australia that can fly?" Rex asks. He's sprawled out on one of the benches, eyes closed, hair singed, shirt burned to a crisp. I thought he'd passed out, but I guess he's still awake.

"Nope, din-know that," Vale replies. He's standing upright but his one good eye is struggling to stay open.

"I might buy Birdie one. Maybe that'll make her smile at me again. She's got the prettiest smile," Rex says dreamily. He's been going on about a 'birdie' all night. At first, I'd been picturing a parakeet and politely ignoring my friend's cringey obsession with his pet bird. But nope. Rex is drowning in a sea of longing and frustration over a woman. Poor bastard. If we hadn't lost touch, I could have told him casual is the way to go. There's nothing as tortuous or horrifying as sticking around long enough to discover all the ways you don't live up to someone else's expectations. But right now, his love life is the least of our worries.

We're being held for the night, possibly longer. They won't say. Charges are pending. I've got my interview on Monday. It's for a job that's too good for me, but that just makes me want it more. What if they don't let me out in time? What if this ruins my only shot at really, truly making it in this industry?

None of my qualifications were real. I've worked for the same mom-and-pop shop for nine years, and most days I'm printing flyers and stapling them to community boards and phone poles around town. I'm not a real marketer. But I think I could be.

"Some goats can fly," Rex continues in his dreamy tone. "So pigs flying, that's not so hard to imagine."

“S’pose not,” Vale agrees, his chin nodding against his chest.

“My volcano joke was way funnier,” Rex says, and a second later, he’s snoring.

“We’re in so much fucking trouble,” I groan under my breath. I’m already overwhelmed by how bleak things are looking, and that’s before we get a visit from the bailiff a few hours later.

The door bursts open with a metallic clang and in she comes, a severe-looking demoness with the arcane markings of a devotee carved into her horns. “You have three options,” she informs us, producing three pairs of handcuffs with fire-stop gloves. “And you must decide as a group: trial by judge, trial by jury, or plead your case before the daemon tribunal. Which will it be?”



## Chapter 4

*Chad*



***Three weeks later.***

I like weekends as much as the next guy. They're good for getting stuff done around the house, maybe helping a friend finish a project, or heading out in the wee hours of the morning to find a good fishing spot, that kind of thing, but this weekend I'm itching to be doing something else.

"You want to head over to the bar?" I ask Luís as I get up from my camp chair, its legs are nestled in a thick carpet of orange maple leaves. "We're not catching anything," I add quickly, gesturing out to the lake and then to our fishing pole rigs. The crystal clear water is anything but blue. The surface is a mirror of confetti colors, the orange, yellow, and red of

turning leaves, and the hazy purple-gray of an autumn sky dotted with big white clouds. It's one of my all-time favorite postcard views, the kind that tempts me to take up photography, but photos never capture the feel of it.

Today, however, I keep glancing at my truck and the road that heads back to town.

Luís gives a slow shake of his head. "Sit your ass down, *cabrón*," he grumbles at me. "It was a two hour drive to get here, and we've been here all of thirty minutes. The sun's barely coming up." He gestures at the warming horizon. This low in the valley, the sun has a long way to climb to come up over the mountains, and the extra hours of morning shade make this a prime fishing spot, one of a handful we don't tell tourists about.

He turns in his camp chair to give me a pointed look. "She's not there, man. She went home, back to wherever her home is."

*Boston. She's from Boston.*

"I don't know who you're talking about," I grumble the halfhearted lie, and he doesn't dignify it with a response.

"Isn't this why you have that rule of yours? No tourists. You broke your own rule, and now you're paying for it. You've got to shake her off. Move on," he huffs, and I huff back.

He's rolled his eyes at my rule more times than I can count, telling me I was being thick-headed not to give some tourist or other a chance. "It's just geography, man. Grown-ass adults can figure that shit out." He was firm in that stance until I asked him to spend a couple of weekends camped out at Under the Volcano with me, a measly three-night run of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, two weekends in a row, and now his tune has changed. *Now* he's all for my rule. He even went so far as to bully me into fishing today, knowing that it means I might miss her.

"If I see her again, then she got the job and she's moving back. She's not a tourist if she lives here," I say with a bit of a

whine I'm not proud of.

*“Siéntate.”*

I sit.

I fidget in my chair as all around, the earth comes to life. Birds call and critters buzz, waking up to greet a new day, but the sound of it doesn't have its usual effect. Instead of settling into the easy quiet of the moment, I'm pulled inward. My hand tingles, and I flush with the remembered sensation of touching her for the first time, the way her palm fit against mine. Our fingers twined, and she tugged, leading me off of the porch.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my pulse kicking up a notch. She smiled and that look burned itself into my brain. Every time I've closed my eyes since, I've seen her looking over her shoulder with a devilish half smile. It stirs my insides with a dark and insistent kind of hunger. I don't like it.

Except that I do.

Somewhere between her pulling me into a dark doorway and me ripping off her panties with my bare hands, things shifted. I was no longer a rabbit. And she wasn't a wolf.

She purred at me. I growled back.

That doesn't make me the wolf, though. There are real werewolves in this world, with real inner beasts. I've just got this damn growling voice inside my head, and a constant hunger to have someone all to myself. But as a decent, good guy, I ought to ignore that and forget about her. Let her go.

*She's mine.*

She's not mine. *Fuck.* What's wrong with me?

She's a tourist, I remind myself. And Luís is right, I know better than to get attached to tourists. I should have listened when I told myself not to touch her. My tongue was plunging into her mouth at the time, but I know what I mean, and I tried. I slapped my hands against the wall and did all I could to not grab hold, but she kept tugging at my belt loops, and the wolf liked it so much, I couldn't resist.

*Damn it. I'm not a wolf.* I give my head a firm shake.

“You alright, man?” Luís asks, bringing me back to the moment.

“I gotta piss,” I say, but what I really need to do is walk this off. I take a lap in the woods, trying to dislodge the dogged memory, but no matter how much I wrestle against it, it refuses to let go.

If only she’d told me she wasn’t from here, maybe I could have resisted. Born and raised, she said, and I took it to mean what I wanted it to mean. I slid inside her like I belonged there. My mouth landed on her neck, and I bit and sucked like I could make her mine. Like I could keep her.

But the fit was too perfect. Everything about her felt too good to be true, and it was.

If a job is a good enough reason for her to move here, then another job could be a good enough reason for her to move away again. It’s natural for some people not to feel tied to a place, but I’m not one of them.

She’s not from here.

And I can’t be from anywhere else.

When I finally return to my seat, Luís asks again if I’m alright. I nod and settle into my chair.

A breeze picks up, coming down the mountain and over the water right toward us. It’s cool against my face. I inhale, and there’s comfort in the sharp notes of pine, the herbal smell of sagebrush, and the earthy sweet scent of mulched maple leaves. I take another deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I’m sorry, man,” I say, glancing at Luís. Warmth flushes at the back of my neck as I think of the three weeks he’s sat by me, letting me moan at work and kept me company at the bar when he could be off with Babs, living his own life. Three weeks over someone I encountered for all of thirty minutes, not a girlfriend, not a date, not even a full-fledged one-night-stand—he’s a better friend than I deserve. “You’re right. It’s time to move on.”

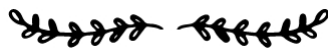
He gives a little nod.

I look out over the water and vow that starting this very moment, I'm clearing my head. I'm not gonna spend another minute thinking about her. It's not doing me or anyone any good. I take another deep breath, filling my lungs with fresh mountain air. He was right to drag me out here. I needed this.

Next to me, Luís straightens in his chair. "I've got a bite," he says. He's on his feet, and he snatches up his pole.

"Reel it in," I say, jumping up to see what he caught. The water ripples with movement below. "I think it's a bass."

"I'm hoping for trout." The fish breaks through the surface, and low and behold, it's a twelve inch trout wiggling on his line. We yip and hoot at the sizable beauty. A proud grin spreads across Luís's face as he holds it up. Trout is Babs's favorite.



Come Monday morning, I'm feeling good and whistling a new tune. I'd abandoned my notebook on my nightstand for the past few weeks while she-who-shall-not-be-thought-about lived rent free in my brain. But the notebook is back in my pocket, and my head is back in the game.

I come skipping down the stairs from my apartment over the garage wearing my park ranger uniform and fleece-lined bomber jacket against the cold morning air. Heading across the lawn and up the walk to the house, I knock on the front door, and as soon as I get the invite, I go inside.

"Morning, Darcy," I say, greeting my seventeen year old niece. "And Miss Haisley." I nod to Darcy's chubby, seven-month old daughter, strapped into a high chair. The baby lets out a high pitch squeal and bounces in her seat, and that has me grinning ear to ear. Even though she's greeted me like this every morning for weeks, I just can't get over the fact that her little baby brain recognizes me. It zings me right in the chest.

Darcy is always full of chit chat in the mornings, and today she tells me about the online classes she enrolled in that'll let her finish high school and earn college credits at the same time. "I like the sound of that." I nod encouragingly.

I make us some breakfast: eggs and toast, and a pot of coffee. And while we eat I let her know I've got some errands to run after work. "Do you want anything from the shops?" I ask.

"We need Halloween candy!" she says with an excited grin that takes me all the way back to when she was just a little kid. I only met her a few times back then, and one of those times, she was missing both her front teeth. I just about died from the cuteness.

"Yes," I say and point at her, "good reminder." Even with the pumpkins everywhere and decorations all over town, Halloween still snuck up on me. It's tomorrow. "How much do you think we need?"

She pulls a plastic witch's cauldron out from under the table. "This much." I'd say it's about three or four gallons worth. "But I want to pay for it," she adds quickly and starts digging in her pocket.

"No need. I'm on it," I say as I head out the door. "Call if you think of anything else."

Normally, I hit the highway and make a straight shot to work, but this morning, I swing through downtown. I've decided to widen my net and add a stop at Perkatory Coffee Shop to my morning routine. My personal feelings about the owner aside, Perkatory has far and away the best coffee in town, which also makes it a fine place to meet local ladies.

"I thought I'd need a shot of espresso to perk me up this morning, but then I saw you," I say with a soft smile, nothing too toothy or rabbit-like. I get a nasty glare, and rather than wait it out, I retreat to the back of the line. I fish out my notebook and scratch a line through that one.

"The sunset has nothing on your gorgeous hair," I say to the back of the lady ahead of me.

She turns and rolls her eyes at me. "Seriously, Chad? That was cute the first dozen times, but it's getting old."

"Sorry, Judy," I say, scrunching my nose in apology. I didn't recognize her.

If I'm being honest, the sunset is far prettier than her hair, but it feels like such a nice compliment, I can't help giving it a go every red-headed chance I get. A comparison to the sunset—the *sunset!* How is that not a killer line?

“It's fine,” she says with a little dismissive wave. “How's your dad doing these days?” she asks, and a little concerned wrinkle pinches her brow.

“Eh, fine I guess,” I mumble. It's not like she knows my dad or anything, but like a lot of locals, she knows his story, the man who went from being a school superintendent and noted public figure to a crotchety hermit living up on the mountain and taking shots at the tires of cars that get too close to his property line. He's a curiosity, and people can't help but ask about him. Maybe they even think they genuinely care. “I'll be stopping in on him later.”

“Oh, that's good of you,” she says. “Give him my best.” She turns to place her order, and I have a moment to decide. Do I really need another cup of coffee, or should I just duck out and try this again tomorrow when I've thought up some new lines?

I duck out.

A chilly breeze comes whistling down the sidewalk as soon as I'm outside, and I have to catch the brim of my hat to keep it from sailing off. As I'm unlocking my truck, I hear a set of heavy footsteps hurrying toward me. “Chad,” a deep voice calls my name. I turn to see Haratious Mercer, a squat, heavy set demon in a pinstripe suit, jogging toward me.

“Hiya, Harty,” I say, tipping my hat.

“I'm glad I ran into you,” he says, a soft wheeze in his voice. “Could you stop by my cabin, the green one near Frostwing Lookout, and check on the occupant? I haven't heard a peep from the gal since she booked the place.” Harty owns five rental cabins on Mt. Winter Bliss even though he's not exactly the outdoorsy type himself. “Her credit card keeps going through, so I'm assuming she's still alive, but if not, I'll need to get the place cleaned out before the stink devalues the property.”

I grimace. “If you think your guest is dead, why haven’t you notified the authorities?” I ask, a hard edge to my voice. Guest safety is a serious matter, not something to be flippant about.

“How would I know if she’s dead?” He throws up his hands in exasperation. “I *don’t* know. That’s why I’m asking you to go check on her.” He pauses for a beat before he pulls out a white envelope from under his arm. “And if she *is* alive, could you give her this welcome packet? I’ve been meaning to get up there and deliver it myself, but it’s such a long drive, and with the cost of gas these days, a single trip eats into my profits.” He extends the white folder to me, but I refuse to take it.

“Harty, are you gonna make me remind you yet again that the park rangers aren’t your personal concierge service? I can’t be checking guests in and out for you.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” he says with a tight smile. “I’m merely one of the local businesses that generates the tax revenue that pays your public servant salary. It’s obviously too much to ask for one teensy tiny favor every now and again. It’s best if I burn up my own tank of gas and bathe the mountainside in extra fumes even though you’re going to be in the area anyway.”

I sigh and snatch the folder from his hand. “I’ll drop it off.”

A grin lights up his face. “There’s a good man. I knew I could count on you,” he says and practically skips off with the giddy joy of having saved himself a three hour round trip.

I make it to the ranger station at the foot of the mountain at eight o’clock on the dot, right on time, but I might as well be late. Luís has already opened up shop. The gate is unlocked, the traffic cones are all placed, the green storm shutters are open, and there’s coffee and cookies set out in the guest welcome center. Luís is chatting with a pair of visitors in hiking gear. He hands them a map and tells them to be sure to stick to the marked trails and then sends them on their way.

“You could have left me something to do,” I grumble after the hikers have left. I like carrying my weight. It doesn’t sit



right with me when I don't.

"There's a job to be done whether you drag your ass out of bed on time or not," he says, and I mumble back, not really saying anything, just making unhappy noises.

The tune I was whistling this morning has taken on some sour notes, and I haven't even visited my dad yet. I didn't oversleep, I grumble to myself, but it's hardly worth arguing about.

"Here, *tonto*. Will this make you happy?" Luís asks as he hands me a work order. "The trail up by the crater needs clearing. Grab your tools and get your ass up to the summit. See if you can get it clear before the hikers catch up to you."

I snatch the paper with a grin, and I'm off, purposeful energy lightening my mood and adding some bounce back to my step. I pack the truck with everything I might need and take the service road up to the first lookout point along the crater rim. A tree's come down, a small one, but it's blocking the trail and it's taken out one of the interpretive signs that gives visitors facts about the wildlife and history of the area. A chainsaw makes quick work of the tree. Thankfully, the sign post didn't snap, and I'm able to reset it with some fast setting concrete. I can't do anything about the cracked plexiglass though. That'll be a special order.

At five, I head out to Last Hour Road and take it up to my dad's cabin. I stop by twice a week, but he's never expecting me. Today is no different.

"What are you doing here?" he asks by way of greeting. He's sitting on his porch in a robe and jeans as scruffy and bedraggled as ever. I haven't seen this man clean shaven or in proper clothes since I was ten.

"Just checking in on you," I say with a forced smile. "I have some wood for the pile," I add.

"I don't need that over-priced park ranger wood," he says with a snort. We sell bundles of split logs at the ranger station to raise funds, and yes, it's over-priced, but in addition to being a necessary source of supplementary income for the

park, it also discourages inexperienced guests from taking an ax to a perfectly healthy tree and killing themselves in the process.

“It’s not from the station. A tree came down,” I say.

“I don’t like the smell of pine.”

“It’s not pine.” He’s so fucking picky about everything.

“If it’s not split, it won’t dry right.”

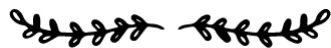
“It’s split.”

He looks away, and that’s the end of it. I move the wood to his pile out back, reorganizing it so that green wood is at the bottom and the stuff ready to burn is easy for him to grab.

I ask to come in. Sometimes he says yes, but most often he says no.

“I wasn’t expecting guests,” he says, even though I come every Monday and Thursday. Standing next to his rocker on the porch, I show him pictures of Darcy and Haisley on my phone, his granddaughter and great granddaughter. Haisley’s hair is really coming in now, and it’s a poof ball in all of my favorite photos. He pretends not to look, but I see his eyes darting over.

It’s time for me to head out, and as I’m leaving, I say, “Don’t forget, we’re all getting together for Christmas this year.” I’ve been giving him twice weekly reminders since the idea came to me—a Robins family Christmas. Everyone in plaid pajamas, hot chocolate, a tree with presents. We haven’t had one of those since I was a kid, but this is baby Haisley’s first Christmas, and I’ll be damned if it’s not perfect.



I backtrack to Last Hour Road and drive another twenty minutes until I come to the gravel lane that leads to Harty’s cabin, high up on the north-facing slope. It’s surrounded by dense trees, and built almost right up on the back wall of a corrie. It gets very little sunlight, and this area is always about ten degrees cooler than the sun-facing south side of the

mountain. It's a miserable little cabin, dark and chilly. Not a place I'd stay.

There's no car parked out front, but from the driveway, I can see right into the kitchen. A light flips on, and I catch sight of a shadow moving across the wall. Looks like Harty's guest isn't dead after all. That's a relief.

I check the time. I'm going to be cutting it close to get the Halloween candy before the shops close. Hopefully, this will be quick. I cut the engine just as a figure steps into the frame of the window, a stunning demoness with a familiar set of double horns. My heart stops, skips several beats, and then starts up again at a mad gallop, hammering, racing out of control.

It's her.

Holy fuck, it's her! She's here. My head goes fuzzy with excitement, and I can't remember what my reasons were for saying it was time to move on, but none of it stacks against the one simple fact that she's still here. This changes everything.

I grab the door handle. My feet are ready to fly toward that cabin, but a question pops to mind and freezes me in my tracks. What do I say when she answers the door?

*What do I say?*

I reach for my notebook and start thumbing through it, tearing one of the pages in my frantic search for something good, something fitting for a moment like this. Something that'll sweep her off her feet.

“What are the odds I'd find the most beautiful person in the world right here in the most beautiful place on earth?” I read the line outloud to myself.

Perfect.

## Chapter 5

*Iggg*



As soon as I step out of the shower, the weak, miserable little shudder I was trying to get rid of returns. I used all of the hot water. It did nothing. According to the internet, a hot shower was supposed to cure me. I'm pissed that it didn't.

My phone chimes from the nightstand, and when I grab it, it's a notice from my bank. A charge has been declined. Opening the app, I scroll through my recent charges: groceries, the cab that dropped me here, three cabin rental charges for a week each, and three non-compliance fees from the county. One for each week I've failed to complete any community service. It was the third non-compliance fee that just declined.

Three weeks, that's it. That's all my life savings could cover. I'm officially broke.

Grumbling and shivering, I towel myself off and head to the kitchen stark naked. The chills can also be cured by hot beverages according to the human health forums, and there are an insane number of them ranging from medical journals to

home remedy blogs. It's mind-boggling just how freely and openly humans post about their quivering, frail body's inability to keep itself warm. "Wear hats, galoshes, mittens, scarves. Pile on the blankets, drink hot beverages, take hot showers! Stay indoors, avoid the wind and drafty buildings or *the chills* will get you!" How embarrassing.

Not a single demon forum had a word to say about the so-called "chills," leaving me no choice but to try the human remedies.

My teeth chatter as I cross the living room, and as I pass the dark fireplace, I shoot it a longing glance. There's a lovely stack of wood piled next to it. If only. If only I could sit in the glow of a fire and lose myself in the dancing flames, I know it'd chase away these stupid chills. It's the only remedy demons share openly and loudly online.

Have a headache? Try staring into a fire.

Trouble sleeping? Try staring into a fire.

Severed limb? Try starting a fire with your good limb and stare into it.

I fill a mug from the tap and try to ignore the ache in my bones as I stick it in the faux-wood paneled microwave. I'd kill for some coffee, but without a light for the stove, the kettle does me no good.

My hand lifts on its own, landing on the larger of my two right horns. I've told myself to quit touching it, but I can't help myself. My fingers trace obsessively along the GPS monitor clamped to it. Another shudder wracks my body, a mix of chill and shame.

My stomach growls, demanding food. I'm hungry, but not hungry enough to eat another can of tuna. That's all I have left. It took every shred of self-preservation I had to force myself into the grocery store after we were released from the courthouse. I had no way to cover the dull metal collar with its blinking yellow light that they'd affixed to my horn. The best I could do was duck my head as I entered the store. It did nothing to hide the horn monitor, but I kept ducking anyway as

I ran down the aisles, throwing items into a basket. It didn't take long for an employee to start following me, an orc in a blue button-down shirt and brown vest. Every aisle I turned down, he was there. I ignored him and kept filling my cart.

I almost abandoned it all when I got to the register and recognized the cashier, a demoness I went to summer camps with as a kid. I nearly bolted, but reason scratched its way to the surface, fighting tooth and nail to be heard over my blaring flight instinct. If my plan was to hide away for the next ninety days and wait out my probation, I needed this stuff.

She recognized me. I could tell by the smirk on her face, and as I imagined her telling this story later to anyone who would remember me, I fervently prayed she'd at least forgotten my name. I whisper the same prayer again now, as my eyes squeeze shut.

As soon as my bags were back in the cart, the orc in the brown vest reappeared. "Ma'am, would you mind stepping aside with me? I'd like to check your bags."

"Why?"

He glanced at my horn monitor. It was his only answer, the only one he needed. I followed him, thinking we were headed to some creepy backroom, but it was so much worse. He took all of three steps before he asked for my receipt and started checking the items in my cart against it, right in clear view of everyone still in line. As he meticulously checked off each item, shame crept over my skin like snails leaving behind slick trails of *ick*.

"May I check your purse?" He extended his hand, clearly expecting compliance.

"No!" I turned to hide my purse from him.

"I saw you put something in it," he insisted.

"Bullshit, you liar!" My temper flared, and for a second, I was ready to defend myself. You don't think I have the balls to take on an orc? Just fucking watch me. Besides, if I *was* going to steal something, there's no way this oaf would ever catch

me. I bucked up, shoulders squaring, but his posture didn't change in the slightest as he asked me a simple question:

“Would you rather I call the police and let them search your bag?” He glanced at my blinking monitor again. My defensiveness cracked as easy as an eggshell, and all my rage oozed out onto the linoleum floor. I handed over my purse with a little whine, practically hyperventilating with embarrassment as his meaty hand rummaged through it. Remembering it now, I prickle all over.

Despite all that, I wish I'd done a better job shopping. I'm out of nearly everything, and it's only been three weeks.

What I wouldn't give for some chocolate.

Fruit. Cheese. Hot buttered toast and hard boiled eggs. But no matter how hungry I am, I'm not going back out there.

Maybe I'm being childish hiding away like this, self-defeating, self-destructive even, but as I watch my mug make its lazy circle, I pose a question to Mother Darkness.

*What did you expect me to do?*

Was I supposed to keep my chin up, rise above my troubles, endure with poise and grace? Well, too bad. It's bullshit to expect that of anyone, least of all me. I've never pretended to be the kind of person who could make the best of a bad situation.

My stomach gives another loud grumble, and as if in response, there's a knock at the door. I startle at the sound, eyes popping wide. *Holy Dark Void. Who the fuck is knocking?* A deranged serial killer wandering through the woods probably. Or worse, the police.

My arms instinctively wrap my tits, hiding them from any peeping police officers. They're here to arrest me. I knew they'd come eventually. I have a damn tracker on my horn for fuck's sake. They obviously know where I am. Not that I'm out of bounds. I've stayed within the county as ordered, but I'm still what my packet calls 'noncompliant'. I've yet to serve any of my community service hours. I'm sure they're pissed about that.

My pulse races, and for a moment, I'm frozen in place as fear courses through my veins. But after a long moment of nothing but silence, I tiptoe toward the door. If I don't say anything, maybe whoever it is will go away.

I no sooner have that thought than there comes another knock at the door, and it's a knee-jerk reaction to shout, "Who's there?" My teeth chatter, and there's a shrill edge to my voice.

I hear the repeated clearing of a throat. "Um... it's Chad. Chad Robins. Park Ranger Chad Robins." I don't say anything, and after a pause, he continues. "I'm here on behalf of the owner, Harty Mercer. He asked me to check in, make sure you weren't dea- uh... make sure you were alright."

The only name that rings a bell is Chad. But it can't be the cowboy from the bar. It just can't be. I tiptoe back to the kitchen to sneak a peek out the window. My heart gives an agitated stutter. *Fuck*. It's him. White hat and everything.

I curse the Dark Currents of the Abyss as I slink back to the door. Who knew the currents would do something as perverse as delivering my most recent random hookup to my doorstep at this exact moment when I'm belly-skating across rock bottom. It's too cruel. The points of my long ears burn hot with embarrassment even as another shiver shakes me to my bones.

"I'm fine!" I shout through the door. It occurs to me that if I don't open it (not that I was going to), he won't know it's me. It's not like he'd recognize the sound of my voice, we barely talked, but I should probably disguise it anyway. "You can tell the owner I'm doing great," I say, dropping my voice a bit and adopting a southern accent. I cringe at the sound and abandon the idea.

"Glad to hear it," he says, then, clearing his throat again, he continues. "What are the odds I'd find... er..." he falters, and I hear the scrape of his boots on the wood planks. "Could I come in?" he asks.

"No!" I pull back as if the door lunged at me. One hand instinctively clamps over my horn monitor, hiding it from



view, as the other continues holding my tits in place. I don't want anyone else to see me with this, and definitely not him, a man who's sexy hands and forearms I've been picturing to get myself off. And gods, the way he ripped my panties. My neck flushes hot at the memory, burning twice as hot as my ears.

I'm supposed to live on in his memory too, and the memory of every past sexual partner, as some kind of magical sex goddess. It's my legacy. Sort of. Not one my family can be proud of, and not the one I ultimately hope to leave behind, but still. I refuse to tarnish it by opening the door and letting him see me in my current state of disgrace.

There's another scuffing sound, and I guess it's him pressing himself up against the door because his next words sound like they're being whispered right into the wood. "Do you need help? I can break through this door if you're in trouble."

Oh great, he thinks I'm a hostage. "Please don't." I roll my eyes. "I'm not dressed, that's all," I explain even though I don't owe him an explanation. I go back to holding my tits with both arms. "I'm completely naked. So, sorry, but you can't come in." For the past few weeks I've been opting out of clothes. I only have two items with me: the blouse and skirt I wore to the bar, not exactly a comfy outfit to wallow in. Everything else is still in my suitcase back at my original B&B because I couldn't muster the courage to face the hostess to retrieve it, not after the grocery store.

I wait for him to respond, but he's silent. I lean against the door and press my ear to it. What's he doing out there? He better not still be thinking about breaking down the door when I already asked him nicely not to.

"My apologies for catching you when you're, um—" He clears his throat, and there's the faintest hint of fluster in his voice. "I could swing around another day. Do you need anything from town? It'd be no trouble. I'm always coming and going," he offers with a hopeful note in his voice.

It's awfully tempting. My driver's license is suspended for the duration of my probation. I had to hire a car to drop me at

this cabin. It cost a small fortune. My mouth starts to water as I think of the drive-thru places I could ask him to go. I picture him returning, arms loaded with bags of groceries and greasy take out bags, and my stomach growls so loudly, I'm sure he hears it.

But I'd have to open the door. My skin crawls at the thought, and my body gives another hard shudder. It's not worth it. I'll starve.

"I need matches!" I blurt out. *Fuck*. I clamp my hands over my mouth, and my face blooms with the sharp sting of embarrassment. I can't believe I said that out loud. I was going to say no thanks, and now I might as well have declared myself a defective, worthless demon.

"I have some in my pocket," he says, and I don't note any judgment, not even curiosity, in his voice. He's human. Clearly he doesn't understand what an awful confession that was.

"Could you slide them under the door?" I ask a little too eagerly.

"Can I get your phone number?"

"What?"

"The matches are yours either way," he says, and the little, square book comes sailing under the crack. "But you said if I saw you again, I could ask." The silence draws out as I stare down at the matches, stopped right between my feet. So small and unassuming, yet this tiny bundle is pure magic. I snatch it up and squeeze it to my chest. *I knew it!* The moment I pulled the sexy cowboy with the big dimples and square front teeth into the alcove, I had a feeling divine providence was at work, and now my suspicions are confirmed.

"You can say no," he says.

I take back everything bad I said about the Dark Currents. Mother Darkness works in mysterious ways, and if she's set divine currents flowing in my favor, I would be stupid to impede them.

I recite my phone number.

It's an act of both faith and logic. Yes, I want the Dark Mother's favor, but I'm also staying in an isolated cabin without a car or any kind of defenses. None of my friends or family know where I am. What if a bear attacks? What if there's an avalanche? A park ranger having my phone number is a good thing. It's practical.

“Got it,” he says, and the next moment, my phone buzzes.

CHAD

Hi.

Hi.

Thank you for the matches, Park Ranger Chad Robins.

I'm being cheeky by using his full name and title, but his reply feels entirely sincere.

CHAD

I hope they keep you warm. Have a wonderful day, Iggy.

I don't like that he remembers my name.

But I also really like it.

A small smile pulls at my lips, and a moment later, he's driving away. The sound of the gravel crunching under his tires is such a mundane, ordinary sound that doubt sets in.

I'm far from devout. I've never been a practicing member of a circle. I mostly take comfort in the idea of things like gods and goddesses, the pantheon, chaos imps, the dancing flame, the fateful currents of the Abyss, and such. If there are ways to discern coincidence from fate, I don't know them.

One of my mother's fondest sayings pops to mind. "You get out of things what you put into them." It was her not so subtle way of attributing my lack of success with fire magic to a lack of effort, but maybe her saying really does apply here.

I hurry to the fireplace, matches clutched firmly in hand. "Thank you, Mother Darkness," I murmur as I start stacking logs on the hearth. I stuff the loose stack with sheets of crumpled paper towels and empty cereal boxes and light them.

It takes some time, but the logs eventually catch, and when they do, I sob into the back of my hand at the beauty of it.

Life falling apart? Try staring into a fire.

Seriously. Try it. It's unbelievably soothing. A tonic for the soul. Pure magic.

I scoot as close to the fire as I can get and, sitting cross-legged, I stare into the glow. The chills finally leave me and the ache in my bones fades. I let my arms fall open and invite the waves of warmth to caress my naked skin. My breathing slows. My eyes close, and my head falls back as I concentrate on the sound of the soft crackling, every small pop its own release.

The book of matches is still in my hand. I press it to my chest like a talisman over my heart and mutter prayers first to Mother Darkness, and then to Celion and Semeryll, two of my favorite gods of the pantheon in hopes that they'll return the favoritism.

I don't ask for anything too specific so as not to tempt any of the mischievous gods to meddle. Instead I ask for favor, for a turn of fortune.

*Please. Please. Please.*

Calm descends and with it comes a measure of detachment. I'm floating outside of my troubles, and from here, they're easier to look upon.

I didn't go to the interview.

I could have. There was nothing stopping me from showing up and seeing what they'd say about my GPS monitor, but I ran away instead.

"Hello, this is Iggy Henix," I said, using my professional phone voice. "I'm a candidate for the Senior Marketing Specialist position. I've accepted another offer, and they need me to start right away. Unfortunately, I won't be available for the final interview. Would you please cancel my appointment?"

"Done. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

“No.” I nearly choked on the single syllable and hung up.

A single tear runs down my cheek. I wish I could say that was the only tear I’ve shed the past few weeks, but I’ve cried all over this little cabin. I’m sure my tears have soaked right down to the woodgrain.

Tonight I shed only one. That’s the magic of fire.

After a good, long and soothing stare, I open up my phone. There are missed calls and unanswered text messages from family, work, and some friends back in Boston. But I don’t want to talk to any of them.

Old friends. That’s who I need right now.

I’m not dead. I’m just an idiot and a mess. Sorry guys.

VALE

Hi, there. My name is Vale. I’m also an idiot and a mess, and I vote we make that the new name of our group chat.

REX

Here! Here! But only if you cut the ‘sorry’ bull crap. I’m not sorry about being an idiot or a mess. That sounds like someone else’s problem. Let them deal with it.

I snort a laugh.

How are you guys doing?

VALE

My fake wife is a ball buster who keeps a rat for a pet. My career is suffering. And I’m trapped in my childhood traumaland. But you know. All good.

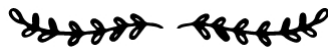
REX

Birdie hates me. Or idk, maybe she's so into me she can't handle it and that's why we're not fucking?? That's a real thing, right?

VALE

Don't fuck birds, bro. I told you this already. Seek help.

Vale knows that Birdie is the woman Rex is obsessed with but he teases him anyway because that's how awkward teens show each other love. We carry on for a while, and soon, I feel lighter than I have in weeks.



I wake early the next morning to the sound of a truck coming up the gravel drive, and this time I don't assume it's just some other guest passing through. I know it's him. My heart starts to pound, and I don't know if it's from excitement or fear. I still don't want anyone to see me with this horn clamp, but he's not just anyone. He's the man who brought me matches.

There's a crunch of boots and then a thud of him coming up the porch steps. I hold my breath, waiting for the sound of his knock. It doesn't come. His truck starts up, and he drives off.

My curiosity sends me scrambling toward the door. I open it a crack, and there, sitting on the porch, is an orange basket filled with candy and a balloon on a stick that says 'Happy Halloween.'

*Chocolate!* I make a wordless, giddy noise as I snatch up the basket. It's a sign! I know it is. My prayers have been heard, and for whatever reason, sexy, white-hat Park Ranger Chad Robins from Under the Volcano Tiki bar is the delivery system once again.

I'm grinning ear to ear as I return to my spot in front of the fireplace, add a few logs, and stoke the fire. I sigh contentedly

at the warm glow as I tear into wrappers and stuff sticky, gooey goodies into my mouth. Eating a bucket of Halloween candy for breakfast, naked and alone, might not sound like a particularly triumphant moment, but it feels like one. Things are about to get better. I can feel it as surely as I feel the rush of sugar coursing through my system.

From the bedroom, I hear the faint chime of a phone notification, and the first thought that pops into my head is: It's something good. I'm feeling optimistic, almost expectant as I hop up and head to the bedroom to check it.



## Chapter 6

*Chad*



I swing by Perkatory Coffee Shop on my way to work with a notebook full of flirty openers in my pocket, but I'm not here to try them out on the women waiting on coffees. Not today. These lines have all been written with one specific woman in mind, Iggy.

I can't believe she gave me her number. Standing outside her door, I was taking deep breaths, trying to slow my racing heart and mentally preparing for a no. Anxiety pangs were shooting through my chest, a bad sign that I wanted it too much, and that her no was gonna be a gut punch.

Maybe I'm an outlier, but accepting rejection with grace isn't something anyone in my life ever tried to teach me. I had to learn along the way, and learn it I have. I'm proud of that. If she'd said no, I'd have wished her well and meant it, and then been on my way.

But she didn't say no.

Her number is saved in my phone. I keep pulling it out and looking at it just to make sure it's still there, like I'm a kid with a geode in his pocket.

I've had a couple of days to figure out what to text her. I stay up late into the night, but none of the words that come to me are the perfect ones I'm searching for. Luís was right, I'm an idiot. I've spent too much time thinking about the perfect in-person pickup line to deliver with a smile, a nod, or maybe even a wink. None of my lines feel right as text messages. Too much meaning is lost.

My best line, the one that feels the most accurate, would surely fail the hardest: *You make me feel like I'm breathing in my first breath of morning air.* I think I'd have to shove her outside at the crack of dawn just so she'd understand what I mean. Even then, how would she know what the morning air does to me? When I breathe it in, my chest feels like it's expanding way bigger than it was ever meant to. The freshness and coolness doesn't just wake me up, it makes me feel like I'm coming alive. It'll start my head spinning after a few big breaths, but I'll keep gulping it in and getting dizzy because I just can't get enough of it.

She makes me feel like that, but how do I say that in a text?

When I get to the counter, I order a half-dozen scones, a present to leave on her doorstep like I'm some dumb barn cat leaving her dead mice. Hopefully she likes blueberry, lemon, and ginger enough that these will buy me another day to figure out what to say to her. She'll know I'm thinking about her, if nothing else. That's gotta be worth something, right?

I leave the box of scones at her cabin just as the sun is rising, moving quietly so as not to wake her, then head back down the mountain to the ranger station. On the way, I try to call my one and only brother, Drew. He's seven years my senior, and he left home shortly after our mom up and moved away. I haven't seen or spoke to him much since then, but I got his number from Darcy, his one and only daughter, and I've been leaving him messages every few days. I'm going to get through to him at some point, but his voicemail picks up again. So it's not going to be today.

“Hey, Drew. You’ve gotta start picking up your phone, bro. It’s shitty and annoying that I can’t get you on the line. Like I said before, I’m expecting you for Christmas. No excuses. I know you and Darcy have some things to work out before then. That’s why I’m giving you plenty of forewarning. Get on that.” I’m about to hang up, but then I add, “Haisley’s getting real chubby.” A grin spreads across my face just thinking about how red that drooly little girl’s cheeks were this morning. “I’ll send you some pictures here in a bit, but you’ve gotta see her in person. She’s something.” I hang up without saying goodbye.

I don’t even have time to set down my phone before it rings, and, like a dummy, I answer it with an expectant, “Drew?” Of course it’s not my estranged, grumpy, stubborn-ass brother.

“Chad! It’s Harty Mercer. I didn’t hear back from you about the renter. Is our gal alive or not?”

“Sorry, Harty. Yeah, she’s whole and sound. No worries there.” Not that I’ve actually seen her except a quick glance at her through the window. I suppose she could have a broken leg or something. Hmmm. Maybe I should have asked.

“Well, that’s unfortunate.” Harty heaves a heavy sigh, and I bristle at that.

“How is that unfortunate?”

“I was hoping you’d say the place was empty. I’ve got an interested renter inquiring about the cabin. Now I’m going to have to evict her. An unpleasant task on top of a long drive,” he grumbles, followed quickly by, “The police will do that sort of thing, won’t they? Free for taxpayers, I imagine. I’ll call them.”

“Whoa there! Just a second, Harty. Why are you trying to evict her?”

“Her card was declined. I’m not running a charity. If she can’t pay, she can’t stay.”

“It’s probably a mistake. Or what if she has another card?”

“Then she should have paid with it. I’m calling the police.”

“Wait, just wait! How about I stop by and try to clear up the matter before you go calling the cops, huh?” I can only imagine how much that would freak her out. A run-in with the police is probably the last thing anyone is expecting when they rent an isolated cabin way out in the woods.

“I suppose if I get her payment today, along with a late fee of say, fifty dollars, then there’s no harm done,” he says as if it’s the most gracious thing anyone has ever said.

“Alright then. I’ll swing by after work and let her know.”

“After work? I thought you’d be going now,” he says, and there’s a sharpness in his voice like he caught me trying to pull a fast one on him.

“No. I’ll go at five,” I say. I just left there, and if I turn back around, I’ll be late for my job, my real job, the one I actually get paid to do, not this Harty Mercer side hustle I seem to have picked up.

“I can’t wait until five. She needs to pay up or be gone by noon.”

“Fine. I’ll head over as soon as I can,” I say with a sigh. I guess this is what I’ll be doing on my lunch break.

I can hear the grin in Harty’s voice as he says something about me being a credit to public servants everywhere. “I’ll be telling the mayor as much next time I see him.” I don’t bother to tell him I’m a state employee, not city. I don’t think he understands anything about the public sector, and he certainly doesn’t know what a park ranger does.

At eleven, I radio in to tell Luís I’ll be taking my lunch early.

“Did you put out the fire?” he asks.

“Yeah, but the trashcan didn’t make it. We’ll need a new one.”

“Hot coals?” he asks.

“Sure enough,” I chuckle. It doesn’t matter how many signs we post about how to properly dispose of ash, city folks are

trained from birth to throw everything in a trashcan, whether it belongs there or not.

As I'm driving up the mountain, I start second guessing my offer to help clear up this payment issue. "Do you have another credit card to pay for the cabin?" I don't want that to be the first thing I've said to her since Monday, but it's too late now. Maybe I can soften it with a good opening line.

My knock on the door is met by a startled, "Who's there?"

"It's Chad. Can I come in?" I ask.

"I'm naked!" she shouts.

"Still?" She was naked last time I knocked too, and I feel the same heated rush I did then. "Have you been walking around naked all week?" I mean to sound like I'm teasing, but I guess it doesn't come off that way.

"So what if I have? Don't be a prude." I'm picturing her. I need to stop. Blood is rushing south, straight to my pants, and there's nothing but a flimsy door between us. If I don't stop, I'm going to knock it down.

"Furthest thing from it," I say, trying to keep my voice steady and casual and not like I'm fantasizing about kicking in a door. I shake my head, trying to clear the frankly disturbing thought. What's gotten into me? I would terrify her, and rightly so.

"I have clothes," she says a little too insistently, and it strikes me as odd, especially since I didn't ask.

"I assumed you did." But now I'm wondering if I shouldn't have.

"I just wasn't expecting anyone!" There's an edge of panic in her voice and it sounds like she's scrambling around the cabin.

"And yet someone showed up. Could you put some clothes on so we can talk?"

"Why do I need clothes?" she asks. She sounds agitated, and her voice continues to travel back and forth, closer and further from the door. What is she doing in there?

“So I can come in,” I say. Not that I’d mind coming in otherwise, but the conversation we’re about to have is going to be awkward enough. Clothes should definitely be on.

“Nobody can come in here!” Her voice is shrill. “Please go!”

I’m stumped. I don’t know what else to do. So, after shuffling in place for a moment, I head back to my truck and sit there a minute before I pick up my phone.

Are you in trouble? Tell me the truth.

A couple of minutes tick by, and I start to think I won’t get a reply, but then my phone buzzes.

IGGY

I am the trouble.

Is there anything I can do to help?

IGGY

Are you a highly skilled de-troubler?

Like wizard level.

I know she’s being cute, and I don’t want to sound like I’m bragging, but yeah, I’ve got some skills.

Handyman Level. Bonded and certified. Elbow grease can do anything magic can do and then some.

IGGY

Lol. Not true.

Sometimes true. Try me.  
What's your smallest trouble?

IGGY

The job I came for didn't pan out. Can you fix that for me?

I'm sorry to hear that. I wish I could.

IGGY

I got fired from my old job. They were pissed when I stopped showing up. Official notice of termination arrived yesterday. Anything for that?

Uh-oh. The declined credit card is starting to make sense. This might not be the quick fix kind of issue I was hoping it was.

So let me guess—you're dead broke?

IGGY

yup.

I'm relieved. Of all the things that can go wrong in life, having money problems is nowhere near the worst of them. She's upset now, sure. Being broke sucks, but she'll be alright.

Been there, done that.

IGGY

Not like this, you haven't.

I once lived on a beach out of a backpack for three months.  
I ate sand for supper and befriended a hermit crab, named him Ned.

It takes a while for her to answer.

IGGY

How'd you get off the beach?

A friend offered me his couch.

It was Luís, actually, and he did more than that. He drove cross country to pick me up and brought me home. Then he vouched for me and helped me get the park ranger job.



Do you need a couch?

IGGY

I've got a couch in here.

Two actually, if the little armchair thing counts.

Well, that might be the best segue I'm going to get.

The owner told me your credit card was declined.

IGGY

I know. I got that notice too.

I was supposed to ask you for a new form of payment.  
Do you have one?

IGGY

No.

Do I have to leave?

By noon, or he's threatening to call the police.

IGGY

Shit.

Is there somewhere I can take you?

IGGY

How far away is that beach?

About 15-16 hours. If we leave now and drive through the night, we can be eating sand for breakfast. My treat.

IGGY

Tempting. But unfortunately, I can't go that far.

I'm about to ask what that means, but I see the typing indicator pop up on the screen, so I wait. It disappears and reappears enough times that I'm expecting a lengthy paragraph, but all she sends are three words.

IGGY

I'm a convict.

An escaped convict??

IGGY

No.  
Obviously not.

I'm a very much not-escaped convict.

You're not in jail.

IGGY

They didn't give me jail time. Just probation.

I don't know if I'd call myself a convict then. Seems misleading.

What was it, a misdemeanor?

IGGY

I was convicted. I'm a convict.  
Several misdemeanors.

Public intoxication? Drunk driving?

IGGY

Why do you want to know?

I need to know what kind of miscreant I'm going to have sleeping on my couch.

IGGY

I can't take you up on that.

Do you have somewhere else to go?

IGGY

no.

You don't have to stay with me. You can stay with my niece. There's a guest bedroom you can take. I'm sure she'll be fine with it.

IGGY

Why are you helping me?

Because I like you.

IGGY

Because we fucked.

Because I like you.

And because I don't need a reason to help someone who's found themselves in a spark of trouble.

\*spot of trouble.

It takes a bit more convincing, but she finally agrees to let me put her up with my niece. Allowing me into the cabin is another matter. She's adamant I can't come in until I remind her of our noon deadline, and even then I have to promise several times not to judge her.

I'm not prepared for what I see when I step inside. The fireplace looks like it exploded. Trails of ash lead off in every direction. Her feet and hands are black with it. The tiny white towel she's wearing is as smudged as her face. I can see tear tracks running down her cheeks. She's not crying now, but she's clearly been doing a lot of it.

I feel a pang of guilt as I wonder if I should have known giving matches to a demon was a bad idea. Is this my fault?

Her face scrunches with embarrassment as she follows my gaze and takes in the scene too. "I was sad," she explains with a shrug that's also a grimace. "I don't know how to clean it up. The more I try, the more it gets everywhere. I just keep making it worse," she admits sheepishly.

"I think we might have to leave it as is," I say scratching at the back of my head. Harty is gonna be pissed. "Do you need help packing?"

"I need a shower." She looks up at me, eyes wet with unshed tears. Without her heels, I'm a full head taller than her. She just stands there, looking smaller than she is, and waits for me to say something.

"Go on. You've got time." She hurries off to the bathroom.

As soon as I hear the water running, I whip out my phone. "Hey, Harty, your guest is going to be checking out, but you might want to send up a cleaning crew before your next guest arrives, a good one." He asks about the rental fee he's owed

for the week and the late fee. “You’re not getting either,” I tell him. He starts cursing, and I hang up to call Luís.

“I need to take a half day. Something came up.” He doesn’t ask any questions, just says he’ll cover for me. “Thanks, man. See you Monday.”

She comes out wearing the same outfit she was wearing the first time I saw her, only now her hair is wet and her skin is fresh and dewy. The smell of her fills my nostrils and steals my breath. I want to pull her into my arms and sway to the music that’s suddenly playing in my head.

Where’s a damn jukebox when you need one?

“This is it,” she says, gesturing up to one of her horns, and I shake my head clear of the spell. She squirms uncomfortably as I note the metal cuff she’s wearing. It’s got a blinking yellow light.

“What is that?” I ask.

“My GPS monitor. I told you, I’m a convict.”

“Oh. Where’s your stuff?” I ask looking around for a bag or suitcase.

“You’re looking at it,” she says with a sigh. All she’s got are the purse on her shoulder and the clothes she was wearing the night she was arrested, the same night we met. Everything else, she tells me, is back at a B&B in town.

Which means, if I’m doing my math right—she’s not wearing any panties because, well, because I ripped them off of her and took them home with me in my pocket. I swallow hard and avert my eyes to stop them from trying to stare a hole through her skirt.

I’m not saying I still have ’em, but if I did, I should probably find a better place to hide them when I get home.

“We can swing by and get your stuff,” I say, clearing my throat.

She gives me a wide-eyed look, and I don’t know how I know what it means, but I quickly add, “I’ll run in.”

“Thank you,” she mumbles, relief clear on her face.

We get in my truck, but before I slide the key into the ignition, I turn to her.

“I’m sorry you’ve had such a rough time lately. It seems to me like you could use a friend in your corner.”

“Friends are how I ended up in this mess,” she snorts.

“Maybe you need a new friend,” I say.

“You mean one like you?” she asks, tilting her head at me, eyes going a touch narrow.

“Yeah, like me,” I say.

She considers me for a moment. “You do seem like you’d be a good friend to have around,” she says softly, and her eyes drop to her hands folded in her lap. She’s every bit as lovely as I remember, and yet all the same breathtaking features that I described as hard and sharp under the neon lights look soft and fragile to me now.

“Great. So, then it’s settled—we’re friends from here on out,” I say firmly. Just friends. Nothing more. Drawing that line hurts like I’m cutting myself, and I wince, but I have to do it. She’s in a tight spot, and that makes her vulnerable. If I feel it, I know she has to feel it too, and she needs to know I’m not the kind of guy who’d take advantage of her situation. I plan to do anything and everything in my power to help her out, but I want to make it crystal clear that I won’t expect anything and she won’t owe me anything.

She looks up at me. A question flashes behind her eyes, and I’m not sure she understands what I’m trying to say, but after a moment, she nods. “Okay. I mean, I’m not exactly in a position to negotiate, am I?” she says with a soft snort, and my ears perk at that. I’m dying to ask what that means. Would she negotiate for more? How much more? And what does more look like? New fantasies start blooming in my head of us cuddled on the couch, us slow dancing under neon lights to songs playing on a jukebox, me waking up at first light, windows open to let in the fresh air, and she’s in my bed. My

heart starts to race, and my neck flushes warm, but I bite down on my questions. I can't ask.

“If you want to be friends, we're friends. A deal is a deal.” She straightens up and offers me her arm in a gesture I recognize but don't understand. I thought the forearm shake was a business thing for demons, but maybe it applies to personal relationships too. I don't know. We shake, and she turns to look out the window. I start up the truck.

I won't be trying to come up with any more perfect lines, not while she's down on her luck and trying to get back on her feet. Even after that, I don't know if it'd be right. I open up a box in my mind, and I start collecting all the thoughts and fantasies of her I've carried with me for weeks, along with the new ones I just dreamt up, and start packing them away. I tape it up good and tight and shove it as far back in my mind as it'll go.

“Friends,” she says softly, still looking out the window at the trees going by, and it's probably just wishful thinking but, to my ear, she sounds disappointed, and my heart goes racing for that box, ready to tear it open already. I only barely manage to stop myself. Damn it. This is gonna be unbelievably hard.



## Chapter 7

*Iggg*



*Four weeks earlier.*

The handcuffs that bind my wrists clink together as the three of us—me, Vale, and Rex—await our hearing. We're seated behind a long black table, dressed in hideous orange jumpsuits, and my skin burns under the disgrace of this forced attire. It reeks of school uniforms and my parents dressing me like my sister, hoping I'll turn into her. This is why I don't wear clothes I haven't picked for myself. They always feel like they're stealing something from me.

But it's the fire-stop gloves that are the real mockery. With or without them, I pose no threat. And the shame of it, of

being fireless, doesn't just ride along my skin. It eats at my soul.

The room is cavernous, the walls roughhewn, and even if I didn't know we were thirty feet underground, I'd swear I could feel the weight of the world overhead trying to crush us. It's hard to breathe in here.

We rise at the bailiff's order. The one and only judge enters the courtroom and takes his seat at the bench. He's a deep red demon with cool undertones that make him almost purple, and he's nearly as wide as he is tall, but it's the scowl that's practically folding his face in two that has me worried.

We chose wrong.

The tribunal was a terrible idea. I can feel it in my gut. Chills run up my spine, and a nervous sweat breaks out across the back of my neck.

"The tribunal is not bound by any predetermined sentencing guidelines," the advising bailiff warned us back in our cell. In opting for the tribunal, we opted out of a lawyer, leaving us responsible for pleading our own case. "Under tribunal law, the judge has full authority to issue any punishment he deems fitting to the crime."

That was enough for me to vote no initially, but then Rex came back with a counterpoint. One I couldn't ignore.

"There's an upside. Like all things demon, a tribunal's rulings are kept private." He said he knew from personal experience but didn't elaborate. "They never share records with outsiders, not with other cities, the state, nobody. We'll serve whatever sentence they give us, and once it's over, there'll be no record of it anywhere except here in Winter Bliss. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, it'll be like this night never happened."

"Is that true?" I asked the bailiff. "What would happen if, say, an employer tried to run a background check on me?"

"If the company is headquartered within the county, they would receive a highly redacted copy of your record, consisting of dates and a one-word verdict, either guilty or

innocent. A company outside the county would have their request for records denied entirely,” she said. It’s not the answer I was hoping for. The Emberlight Resort is within the county, but maybe this is all premature anyway. Maybe we’ll be found innocent. I’m in.

“Sounds good,” Vale says reluctantly, and that makes three of us.

“Excellent.” The bailiff lights up. “I’ll contact the judge immediately. He likes to adjudicate these cases as quickly as possible to keep everything hush hush.”

And now we’re here. What happens next isn’t a trial. It’s the judge shouting, and Vale pleading to take all the blame, and Rex elbowing him to be quiet, and me hissing at both of the stupid idiots.

It’s chaos.

We’re found guilty on all charges: vandalism, criminal mischief, aggravated criminal damage, negligent and reckless use of fire, and conspiracy to commit property destruction.

“Your deplorable actions have not only scarred the heart of our beautiful town square, they’ve also disrespected the memory of a legendary figure, a great man.” Vale snorts. “As punishment befitting your shameful crimes, you are hereby sentenced to twelve weeks of probation and—*two-hundred and fifty hours of unpaid labor.*”

I gasp. Vale swears. Rex’s head drops to the table with a groan. The judge continues on, railing against our affront to history, but I hear only fragments. My ears are too full of static. He means to humiliate us. That much is clear, and the shame of our sentence is not lost on us.

Humans cringe at the idea of being paid for things they think shouldn’t involve money: sex, friendship, family, etc. But humans are backward as fuck. They don’t see the fallacy in their own logic. When partners exchange pleasure for pleasure, the value one partner places on the other is conveyed in the effort they put into making the other feel good. When value for value isn’t possible, money opens the way for more

complex exchanges. An employer pays a worker, and the salary conveys the worth the employer places on the worker's contributions to the company.

Money literally represents value in the clearest, cleanest, most honest way possible. It belongs at the heart of every meaningful transaction.

For the next twelve weeks, we will have no value. The judge has deemed us worthless.

"My wife! She needs me," Vale shouts out in desperation. My head snaps up in surprise. *What?* Is he concussed? He's not married. I'm sure he's not.

But then a petite human in a pixie cut steps forward and claims to be his wife. My jaw drops. She's lying. She has to be. There's no way the judge will buy this. But he does, or at least he goes along with it, and it turns out the bailiff wasn't joking when she said the judge has the authority to issue any punishment he deems fit.

As we shuffle our way out of the courtroom, I have this one small comfort—my sentence is less horrific than Vale's. I wasn't assigned a spouse. Thank you Mother Darkness. Thank you every god of the pantheon. I shudder at the very thought.



We're uncuffed, allowed to change, and ushered to a small office where we meet our probation officer, a large orc woman in a tight-fitting khaki uniform. Her name badge matches the nameplate on her desk: Gertie Dale. "Alright, the terms of your probation are spelled out here. You will each need to sign a copy indicating you understand them." Her voice is gruff and matter-of-fact, like she's reciting a well-worn script. She hands us each a packet of stapled papers, then proceeds to summarize for us.

"You are confined to the county for the duration of your twelve-week probationary period. You are not permitted to set foot in any establishment that is licensed as a bar or liquor store during this time. All of your driver's licenses are suspended as of today, and you are each responsible for

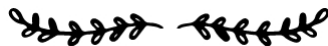
completing two hundred and fifty hours of community service by the end of your twelve weeks. That's roughly twenty one hours a week." Vale groans loudly, like he's been punched in the gut, and I make my own soft sob.

Officer Dale rolls her eyes. "You know in some cultures, people just volunteer their time out of the kindness of their hearts. Community service is not that big of a deal. That's not to say you can skip it," she adds quickly. "Should you fail to complete a minimum of twenty hours of community service in a given week, you'll be fined a thousand dollars a week, up to twelve thousand dollars total, and you'll still be required to complete all two hundred and fifty hours. Those don't go away."

"Before I release you, I'll be fitting each of you with a GPS monitor to track your whereabouts. That information comes to me, and I will log any violations and report them directly to the judge. I will also be giving you time-stamp devices. This device must be activated by your deputized community service compliance officer before they can start logging your time."

"Who's that?" Vale asks.

"You are each responsible for finding your own qualified candidate to serve as your CSC officer. The instructions are all in here." She taps the packet, but then reminds Vale that his wife is his compliance officer. "You other two better get on that quick. Your community service starts Monday and your fines will start accruing the following Tuesday. You'll also be checking in with me every thirty days. It's another thousand dollars if you miss a check-in, and jail time to boot, if the judge deems it. So, don't be late."



*Present day.*

I look over at Chad Robins the Park Ranger, studying his profile. We're seated close enough I can smell his aftershave and the starch of his uniform. He looks exactly how I remember him from the bar, back when I thought he was just a random guy with sexy forearms and a cock I wanted to ride.

And now what do I think?

*He's an imp*, a superstitious part of my brain insists. Like the gods of the pantheon and the Abyss itself; I'm not sure imps actually exist, but I like the idea of them. Agents of chaos roaming among us, working havoc in the world, sometimes for good, sometimes for evil, often for no reason at all. They give me comfort.

Chad is human, but he's a crafty one, imp-like if not an actual imp. It's not something I saw coming when I first spotted him, not with those dimples and his cute little hat tricks, but now that I think about it, what a perfect disguise. I wonder just how much I've underestimated him.

He appeared out of nowhere in my hour of need and laid friendship on the table like a fucking pro. A brilliantly impish move, far craftier than I would have given any human credit for. And even though I'm on the losing end of our bargain, my pulse flutters and I bite my lip, turned on by how smoothly and unassumingly he negotiated our terms. It took me a second to realize that's what he was doing.

There's no shame in taking advantage of the kindness of strangers. It's almost a shame if you don't. The world is full of do-gooders, walking, talking take-a-penny trays, just begging to be used. Use them. Because if you don't, you might just find yourself indebted to family or friends and not repaying them is as shameful as working for free.

I make a mental note to be more careful around him in the future, but at the same time, I let my eyes roam freely up and down his body, not shying away from any parts I care to admire. He's driving. He won't notice.

He's wearing his white hat again, and I'm starting to suspect it's his cowboy affectation, his small-town charm, that's to blame for my underestimation of him. His sleeves are rolled up, showing off his thick forearms, and I recall it was equal parts them and his large hands now firmly gripping the wheel that first drew my attention back at the bar. And that was before I knew what his fingers could do. I find them twice

as beautiful now, and I have to tear my eyes away before I get too hot and bothered.

I wish he'd asked for something easier to make good on, or something fun like sexual favors. I would've happily boned him for however long it took to make us square, but he went straight for friendship, and now I'll have to repay him like a friend, *tit for tat* with interest equal to my gratitude. Again, it's a bad deal for me, but, *fuck*, is it hot. I touch the side of my neck just to confirm that I am indeed perspiring ever so slightly.

There is an upside for me, and that's that friends will do more for you and with fewer questions. Take Vale and Rex, for example. I haven't seen either of them in years, but if that statue had been a person they'd burned and blown to bits, I'd have helped them bury every last bloody piece.

So at least there's that.

I can pretty much ask him for anything, so long as I know it has to come back to him in some way. Which is why I don't hesitate to make my first request. "Run me by the court house, would you?" If I'm going to be racking up debt to him, I can't afford any more county fees.

"Sure thing," he says, and at the next stoplight, he hangs a left.

When I get inside, Vale is seated in the lobby across from Officer Dale's office. "Is Rex in there?" I ask, nodding toward the closed door.

"Yup. You don't look so hot," he says as I take the seat next to him.

"Same to you, scruffy," I retort, and he chuckles as he rubs a palm over his stubble. Clean shaven and immaculately coiffed, that's his usual movie-star look, but today, he looks like a dryer sheet that's been tumbling for too long.

"What a fucking month, huh?" He rubs at his temple.

"Tell me about it."

We sit quietly for a few minutes before he clears his throat. “Hey, I wanted to run an idea past you.” He glances at me but doesn’t meet my eye. That doesn’t bode well. “This doctor I’m working for, or fake married to or whatever,” he stumbles, “she’s a special psychologist. If you want, I could set up an appointment for you to see her.”

I pull back and give him a hard look. “Excuse you. A special psychologist? What exactly do you think is wrong with me?”

“The *iddies*,” he mumbles quietly, but I can’t believe he’s said it out loud. I hiss at him to be quiet as my head swings around to make sure no one is close enough to hear. “She could treat you, or at the very least, diagnose you,” he adds quickly.

“Oh yes, please! Have your little doctor friend create a file on me, officially label me as defective, and send it off to some national medical database so that it follows me around the rest of my life,” I hiss at him. “Can she tack on a DNA sample and credit report too?” Outside of my immediate family, Rex and Vale are the only two people who know I can’t make fire. And that’s already too many people.

“You didn’t destroy the statue, Iggy. You should have let us tell them.” He crosses his arms and shakes his head. The officers noted only two fire marks on the scene. It was an opportunity. If I’d told them I can’t make fire, they might not have booked me, but instead I told Rex and Vale if they valued their lives, they’d keep their mouths shut.

“Like they were going to believe you two drunk idiots, anyway,” I huff.

“Maybe they wouldn’t have, but they’ll definitely believe her. She’s brilliant,” he says, and I catch the smile he’s trying to hide.

“Oh, Sweet Mother Below.” I roll my eyes at him. “Are you seriously falling for some small-town doctor just like in your movie?”



“Life imitates art.” He snorts. “She’s more than a doctor. She’s a scientist, a psychologist in a *highly specialized* field,” he says, sounding way too impressed. “If you had an official diagnosis from her, my lawyer says your appeal would move quickly. You could be done with all of this in a day or two. You could go *home*, Iggy. Don’t you want that?”

“You talked to a lawyer about me?” I growl.

“It was all hypothetical. I didn’t mention your name.” He throws his hands up, showing me his palms, like that’ll convince me he’s innocent. “But yeah, of course I did. You shouldn’t be here. It’s not fair.”

“It’s too late.” The damage is done, and it’s my own stupid fault. With the number of shots I pushed onto Rex, the big guy could have broken a lot more than a statue. I’m just glad neither of them were seriously hurt.

“It’s not too late. We’re only thirty days into a twelve week sentence. Let her diagnose you.”

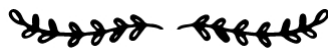
“No.”

“Why not?”

“I said no!”

He snorts and mutters to himself loud enough for me to hear. “I told her it didn’t have anything to do with her. Demons are too fucking stubborn for their own good.”

*Rude.*



When the door opens, I cut in line ahead of Vale. He shouts after me, “What the fuck, Iggy?” and I throw him the finger.

“This is what you get for talking to lawyers and doctors about me behind my back,” I say as I push past Rex with a quickly murmured, “Hey, buddy,” before I close the door and take my seat across from Officer Dale.

“Miss Henix,” she says my name like a weary sigh. She’s wearing the exact same khaki uniform and her hair is braided

the same way as it was thirty days ago. It's enough to give the impression that she never leaves this place. "I certainly wasn't expecting to see your pretty face today, seeing as how you've been blatantly non-compliant with your community service." She shifts back in her chair and raises a green eyebrow at me like she's expecting a good excuse. I have none.

"I'm glad I could exceed your expectations?" I say and flash her a big smile.

She snorts a laugh. "Cute," she says. "But cute isn't going to pay off your fines. You've already accrued three thousand dollars in non-compliance fees, and you're staring down the barrel at four thousand! Your time stamp device hasn't even been activated yet. Do you still have it?" she asks. I pull the bracelet-shaped device from my purse and place it on the desk between us.

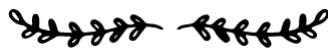
"Brand spanking new. Not a scratch on it," I say, hoping that might count for something.

"It's not supposed to be new. It's supposed to be seeing regular use. Was that not clear? You were supposed to find a volunteer position at an appropriate institution and a supervisor willing to swear in as your community service compliance officer. Have you even started looking?"

"Yes! I'm working on it," I say, a blatant lie.

"Well, you better work faster. You have until Monday to start logging hours. Otherwise, the judge will issue a warrant for your arrest, and the remainder of your twelve week sentence will be served behind bars."

*Fuck.*



I'm in and out in twenty minutes. When I get back to the truck, Chad asks if I have any other errands to run. Based on his obliging smile, I'm assuming he's tallying up the extra I'll owe him for additional excursions. I make the same calculation before reminding him of his offer to pick up my luggage from the bed and breakfast. It's worth it. I need my stuff.

“Right! We’ll swing by there, and then head to my place,” he says and starts the engine.

“I thought I was staying with your niece,” I say as he pulls away and we head across town.

“We live on the same property,” he says.

“Oh, good.” That’s handy. “You’ll be close by if I need anything,” I say.

He glances at me and a slight blush warms his cheeks, turning them a very yummy pink. “A stone’s throw,” he says and shoots me a flirty soft smile. *Damn it.* I definitely should have counter-offered with sexual favors. I’d like to crawl into his lap right now.

Instead, I’m going to need to start writing down what I owe him. Conveniently, there’s a pocket notebook up on the dashboard. “Can I have this?” I ask as I snatch it up and flip it open. It’s full of tight, neat handwriting, and without thinking, I read aloud from the top of the page, “Meeting you is as delightfully unexpected as a fresh spring rain on a bright, sunny day.” I snort a laugh as he snatches the notebook from my hand.

“That’s private,” he says, and the blush in his cheeks goes from pink to red.

I laugh, I can’t help it. “Are you *planning* what you’ll say when you ‘unexpectedly’ meet someone?” I ask. Come on, that’s funny.

“I like to prepare for all sorts of scenarios,” he says gruffly. “If I meet someone special, I don’t want my head to go blank, choke and miss my shot. I want to have a good line ready. That’s not so dumb, is it?” He glances at me, and I can tell he’s genuinely asking.

“No,” I admit. Not when he puts it that way. “It’s not dumb. In fact—” I straighten in my seat as a brilliant idea lights up my brain. “I could help you!”

“Help me?”

“Yeah. I’ll help you come up with conversation starters, pickup lines, or whatnot. I’ll even help you practice so that you sound natural when you’re making your moves and reel in the ladies.” I wiggle my shoulders and make a kissy face at him.

He shoots me a questioning sidelong glance.

“What?” I ask. “You’re helping me. I’ll help you.” Tit for tat. “Because we’re *friends*.”

“Because we’re friends,” he repeats.

“What do you say? Does this sound like an acceptable way for one friend to repay another for their kindness?” I ask. *Come on, agree to it*, I think at him loudly as I bite my nail. I need this. I have a negative bank balance and very few useful skills. If I’m going to pay him back, I’m going to need to take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself.

“You want to help me pick up women?” He glances at me, his brow crimped.

I flash back to the night at the bar as I watched him hop from one woman to the next, trying to pick up anyone and everyone. At the time, I found it amusing, but now—I don’t know. My stomach gives a little uncomfortable twist. I push the feeling aside. “Yep, I want to help you bag every babe in the whole town,” I say with my most confident smile, the one I’ve been practicing for interviews.

“I’ll think about it,” he says, but he doesn’t sound too enthusiastic.

“What’s there to think about?” I ask with an edge of desperation. “You need my help!” I insist. “You are *way* too free with your adjectives. You stack them up like pancakes and pour on the syrup. It’s too much. Good ad copy is punchy, enticing. It makes its point in the fewest words possible.” I feel it the moment I move into marketing mode. My brain kicks into gear. I focus. I’ve never thought about flirting as a type of marketing, but with two seconds to consider it, I’m a hundred percent sure the rules of the industry apply here.

“I’m not trying to *advertise* myself,” he says with a dismissive snort.

“Then that’s your first mistake. You’re a tall, sexy guy with dimples, for fuck’s sake.” I gesture at him up and down. “The visuals are delivering. Your ad copy must suck if you’re not sealing the deal. Let me help you.” *This* I’m good at. I know what I’m talking about. I really could help him if he’ll let me.

He gives me a dubious look, but eventually he nods. “Alright, if that’s what you want.”

“Yeah, it’s what I want!” I grin and slap the dashboard in my excitement. “This is great! We’re going to wallpaper your bedroom in moist panties. I’ll have PETA on your ass for all the thigh meat you’ll be chomping. Your cock will be so wet, we’ll have to fit it with a life vest. You’ll be balls deep in—”

“We’re here!” he shouts and hops out of the truck.

*Oh.* I look up to see a two-story tudor home with a brown roof, white brick, and green trim. *What a cute place.*



## Chapter 8

*Chad*



Playful vulgarities spill from Iggy’s mouth so casually you’d think we were old high school pals shooting the shit. I’m trying to hide the effect of it, but her dirty mouth combined with the plump pout of her bottom lip gets my heart pumping, and fuck if I don’t want to grab her, run her up to my bed, and tear her clothes off.

But that’s not being a good friend, and we’ve both agreed, a friend is all she needs right now.

“We’re here!” I shout and bolt out of the truck so fast I forget to cut the engine.

I leave it running and hightail it inside. I’ve already given my niece a heads-up. She knows we’re coming, but there’s no harm in announcing our arrival, especially if it’ll give me a chance to walk off the tightness in my pants.

“Darcy’s excited to meet you,” I say a few minutes later, when I return to turn off the truck and help Iggy with her

suitcase. “I live just up there.” I point to the stairs leading up to the apartment above the detached garage.

I roll Iggy’s giant, gold suitcase up the walk to the front door, and she follows behind me, but when my hand lands on the doorknob, I hesitate. People usually only have one of two reactions when they first meet Darcy and Haisley. They either assume they’re sisters and start talking down to Darcy like she’s an overgrown tween; or, if they realize she’s Haisley’s mom, they start grilling her on how old she was when she got pregnant and where the father is, etc., like they’re entitled to that information. Yes, she’s a young mom, only seventeen, but she’s a fine young lady who shouldn’t have to be the bigger person every time a stranger can’t keep their fucking curiosity in check.

Iggy doesn’t bat an eye. She shakes Darcy’s hand and bops the baby on the nose. “You have a lovely home,” she says, calling it a dreamy fairytale cottage, which is exactly what I thought when I first saw it.

“Oh, no,” Darcy says. “This isn’t—”

“Let me show you to the guest room,” I cut in, grabbing the handle of Iggy’s bag and leading the way down the hall.

But instead of following me, she asks Darcy if she’s sure it’s alright that she stays. “Just two months, and then I’ll be out of your hair. I won’t stay a day longer, I swear. And if I start driving you crazy, give me the secret signal, and I’ll vanish. You won’t see me for the rest of the day.”

“What’s the secret signal?” Darcy asks, tilting her head up at Iggy with a big grin on her face. She likes her already, I can tell. Who wouldn’t?

“We have to agree on one,” Iggy says. “How do you feel about a classic? The double bird. You do this—” she flips the middle fingers of both hands at Darcy, “and I’ll know you’ve had all of me you can take. I won’t ask any questions. I’ll just go.”

Darcy turns red in the face and hides her laugh behind her hand, but she agrees to the secret signal.



“This is it,” I say, pushing open the door. Iggy wanders in a couple of steps before shooting me a puzzled look over her shoulder. She explores further, disappearing into the closet first then the bathroom. Her head pops out.

“This isn’t Darcy’s room?”

“Nope. It’s the guest room.”

“But it’s the master.”

“Darcy likes the one by Haisley,” I explain. It’s not like she couldn’t have taken this room if she wanted to, but she refused it.

I leave Iggy to settle in and head to the kitchen to rustle up an early dinner. I missed lunch, and I’m starving. I’m guessing Iggy has to be hungry too.

A quick rummage through the fridge, and I’ve got my menu sorted: shrimp scampi over linguini and a baby green salad. I’m no trained chef or anything, but I’ve been cooking for myself since I was ten. I can whip up a decent meal for a special occasion, like say, welcoming someone new to the home.

It’s almost too comfortable the way we all settle in around the kitchen table, a four-top that now has an occupant for each side, kinda like it was meant to be. Iggy’s changed clothes, still in all black: black leggings and a slouchy black top with a spidery pattern in silver thread. It’s nice passing food around, sharing a meal, and chatting and laughing about nothing. By the end of it, my exhales start coming out like soft sighs.

“So, how do you know Chad?” Darcy asks. I straighten up in my chair, but before I have time to wonder what she’ll say, she’s already answering.

“I picked him up at a bar a few weeks ago, took him out back, and showed him a good time,” Iggy says, matter-of-factly. *Well, she’s honest*, I think as my face grows warm, and I take a big swig of my water.

“Wait, you’re *that* woman?” Darcy asks.

“What woman?” Iggy and I ask at the same time. I’m not in the habit of sharing the details of my romantic life with Darcy. So I’m genuinely curious who she thinks she’s talking about.

Darcy glances back and forth between us before she gives me her sheepish answer. “Weren’t you trying to run into someone at Under the Volcano? You kept saying you needed to stop by on your way home, like every day, for weeks. I thought you were looking for someone special...” she trails off, blushing. “You usually just go on Fridays, don’t you?” she asks.

“Yep, I go on Fridays,” I say, answering her last question to avoid her first.

“*Every* Friday?” Iggy asks and raises an eyebrow at me, but it’s Darcy who answers.

“Without fail. That’s where he goes to practice his pickup lines,” she says.

“How do you know that?” I ask, not hiding my surprise.

“Babs told me,” Darcy says with a shrug. Luís’s wife, of course she knows what I’m up to.

“Big mouth,” I grumble under my breath.

“Today’s Friday,” Iggy says, perking up. “Are you going tonight?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. I’d much rather stay here. I’m having a good time. But Iggy doesn’t like it. At first she protests, then she questions why not, and finally, she flat out insists.

“Yes you are. We made a deal. I’ll help you practice, like we agreed, and then you’re going.”

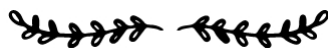
“Why don’t you go with him?” Darcy suggests with a sly smile.

Iggy and I have established that we are just friends, I know that, but it doesn’t stop the hopeful spark from lighting up my chest. I’d love to take her back to Under the Volcano. I know exactly which song I’d play on the jukebox when I ask her to dance. Friends can dance, can’t they?

“No.” Iggy shakes her head in a firm and decided no, not even considering it for a second. It stings of rejection even though I know it shouldn’t.

“No bars for me. Judge’s orders.” Darcy and I both glance at her horn monitor. Oh yeah, that. Iggy flushes a deeper pink and her shoulders stiffen, but she recovers quickly. “If we’re done here, you and I have homework.” She stands up from the table and extends a hand to me. I take it, and every nerve in my body sings at the sensation of her palm sliding against mine. She tugs, and I lift from my chair to follow after her, the dumb bunny once again.

I want this woman so fucking bad I can’t see straight. But even if she weren’t in a tough spot, and even if it wouldn’t make me the world’s worst human being to hit on her when she clearly just needs a friend, it’s like she said, she’s only here for two months. Then she’s gone.



“Come on, whip it out,” she says as soon as we’re settled side by side on the couch. I took one end. She could have taken the other, but nope. She takes the middle seat facing me and tucks her feet up under her.

“Excuse me?” I ask, eyes bugging. Did I hear her right?

“That little notebook of yours. I know you’ve got it shoved in your back pocket. Let’s see it.” She extends her hand, and I press myself flat against the backrest. I wish she’d been asking me to unzip my pants instead. I do *not* want to show her my notebook.

“Forget it. Let’s start fresh,” I suggest.

“No. You’ve obviously put a lot of thought into what you want to say. That’s the best place to start. Let me look it over.” She extends her hand further until it’s hovering above my lap, and I don’t know if it’s her proximity or the thought of her flipping through my private musings that has my heart racing, but it’s thumping loud in my ears as I reach behind me and pull out the little moleskin notebook. I close my eyes and grimace as I place it in her open palm.

“Be gentle,” I grumble, then shoot her a wary glance.

She flicks her tongue out and chuckles. “Don’t be nervous,” she says, and I’m reminded of the fact that demons can taste things humans can’t, feelings in the form of scents in the air. I don’t know the extent of it, but I feel my wariness spike. “You’re in good hands. I promise I will be so, so gentle,” she assures me with a soft purr, and why, just *why* does everything out of her mouth have to fill my head with dirty thoughts?

She winks at me and then starts skimming my notebook. I clock every little facial movement, from the way her brow lifts and the way her lips twitch, to the way she glances sideways when she’s chasing a thought. I eat it up, staring right at her. She’s reading, she won’t notice. I could do this all night, just find her things to read and sit here soaking in the view.

I want to touch her.

“You’re a nature brand,” she announces as she closes my notebook and drops it on the coffee table. “Would you say your ideal audience is hikers and campers?”

“I’m not picky,” I reply, not entirely sure I understand what she’s asking me.

“Well, get picky, because we need to define your target audience. If outdoorsy women are exclusively your thing, then your passion for nature metaphors might serve you well. When you picture your perfect woman, what do you see?”

Well, that’s an awkward question because a month ago, I would have said I pictured a certain librarian or any local lady with two or more generations living in Winter Bliss. But now? I glance at her and quickly look away. “I’m just looking for someone who will stick around.” I shrug.

Her face scrunches, and for a second, she’s giving me the exact same look Luís gives me when I say something like this. “You’re not adopting a puppy you want to let off the leash,” she says. “What kind of *attributes*, looks and personalities, are you attracted to?”

“All kinds.”

She snorts.

“No really,” I insist. “I honestly think I could be happy with anyone. I’m not the romantic type.”

“Not romantic?” She scoffs at me. “Your notebook is full of poetic allusions, metaphors, and odes to the sunset. Do you know yourself at all?” Her head tilts so far sideways she looks like the judgy cat that frequents the ranger station. I’ve named her Lady Sable, and she only gets treats on Thursdays.

“Those are just pickup lines,” I say.

“What about this?” she snatches up the notebook, flips to one of the last pages, and reads aloud. “*Seeing you is like breathing in my first breath of morning air. The feel of you in my lungs sets my head spinning, but I’ll keep gulping you in, taking every breath I can get until my lungs burst. And still I’ll want more.* That’s seriously not about someone? That’s just a line?” She gives me a doubtful look even as one hand presses against her chest. I don’t think she knows she’s doing that.

“That one might have been about someone,” I mumble, dropping my eyes to the toe of my boot.

“Okay, great! Let’s get this woman in the sack. Next time you see her, you’re going to have the perfect line. Something on brand but not too complicated. Is she outdoorsy?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” I answer, and she comes back at me with another question, then another and another. She tries her best to pry details from me, but my answers don’t satisfy her. When she gets frustrated, she changes up her strategy by asking me some hypotheticals.

When I land back on, “I’m not picky,” she growls at me, like seriously bares her teeth and makes a little rumbling sound. I can’t even describe what it does to me. I just know it makes me want to pounce on her. So I have to fight the urge.

“Alright forget her,” Iggy says, waving her hands in the air as if to clear a ghost from the room. “She’s obviously some kind of an enigma. Let’s use me as an example. What’s the first thing you noticed about me?”

“How stunningly gorgeous you are.” The answer slips out of my mouth far too easily.

She flashes me a smile so big and full of teeth, I can't help but chuckle. The look on her face is all gloating pride with not a hint of modesty. I like it. I like her.

Yeah, I just really like her.

“In this scenario, where you've noticed a sophisticated, stylish, and stunningly gorgeous demoness at the bar—” I chuckle again, this time at the extra adjectives she snuck in there. “You'd walk up to her, your target audience, and say, “Hello gorgeous, can I buy you a drink?” That's it. That's all you say. It's quick, simple, and to the point. That's good copy. I could plaster that on a billboard alongside your face and sell just about anything bar related, some fancy glassware, an expensive bottle of bourbon, you name it.”

“But that wouldn't work on a woman,” I scoff. “It's too simple.”

“Oh really?” She lifts a brow at me. “I guess you'll find out tonight when you test run it,” she says, then proceeds to instruct me on exactly what I should do to make the line work, step by step. “Now try it,” she says and motions with her hand for me to proceed.

“Now?”

“Of course now. You need to practice before you go. It was part of our agreement. Go ahead.”

I twist sideways on the couch until I'm facing her. My knee bumps against hers and neither of us pulls back. The point of contact tugs at my gut and sends warmth coursing through me. For a moment, that's all I can think about.

I let out a slow breath. Then I stretch out my arm along the back cushion. My hand strays off course and my fingers brush against a strand of her hair. I want to tuck it behind her long, pointed ear, but I force my hand to the back of the couch and grip the cushion tight. I lean in a little, just enough that I get a whiff of her shampoo and maybe a nightbloom perfume. I suck it in. The last rays of evening sun are streaming through the window, turning her pink complexion a shade orange and

reflecting golden light in the deep pools of her black eyes. I stare.

“Hello, gorgeous.” There’s a huskiness to my voice that wasn’t there a second ago. As instructed, I flash her my dimples, but only for a second. I’m overusing them, she said. A little goes a long way. “I’d like to buy you a drink. What do you say?”

“Fuck, yeah!” She slaps her hands to either side of her face and lights up with a brilliant grin. “That was excellent.” She nods and starts fanning herself only to pause and glance down at her crotch. “You got my panties wet.”

“Iggy,” I say crossly as I pull back, fighting off a wave of desire. I want to do more than pounce on her now. “You can’t say stuff like that.”

Her tongue flicks out, and I’m not sure what she’s tasting, but she smirks at me. “You liked it. No need to play the prude,” she says.

“Furthest thing from it. It’s just a lot to hear and not react to. That’s all I’m saying.” A *lot*. My hands are dangerously close to moving on their own.

“Look, if you were demon, you’d already know how you did. But you’re not. So I’m giving you verbal feedback. When you go to the bar to test out your lines, isn’t this what you’re testing for? Whether or not you successfully get your target lady to cream their panties? I’m just letting you know—*that one did the trick*. I am decidedly damp.”

*Grab her. Give her what she wants.*

“I better head out,” I say and jump up from the couch. If I don’t get out of here now, I’ll topple this demoness backward, pull down her leggings, and fact check the state of her panties with my tongue.

I flee the house, climb into the cab of my truck, and stick the keys in the ignition, but I don’t start it. I just sit there with both hands gripping the wheel. Maybe it was a mistake bringing her here. Maybe I should ask around and see if

someone else can take her in, someone who isn't aching to touch her and only seconds away from losing control.

Minutes tick by, but I don't move until the phone in my pocket buzzes, once, twice, four times in a row. It's Iggy.

IGGY

You've got this!

Those panties are gonna drop like flies. You'll see.

You're way too sexy for them not to.

I can't wait to hear all about it.

This woman might be the death of me, but I can't move her off onto someone else. I said I'd help her, and I will. I'll just need to keep my distance while she's staying here and steer clear of the house. Starting now.

I start up the truck and throw it in reverse. *Where the hell am I going?* I ask myself, but I have no clue.



Saturday morning, just as I'm getting out of the shower, I hear a knock at my door. I wrap a towel around my waist, and when I open it, there's Iggy. She's wearing an oversized black t-shirt with a faded band logo, and if there are shorts under it, they're too small to peek out from under the hem. She smiles at me, haloed in soft morning light.

Beautiful.

I take a mental picture, wishing I could print it. "Mornin'," I say, voice coming out rough.

"Good morning," she says and then steps around me, inviting herself into my studio garage apartment. I close the



door and watch her as she gives herself the tour, looking at everything and running her hands over my things like she owns the place. There's just something about her obvious nosiness that has me grinning.

"What can I do for you?" I ask, and she finally settles. I have a sofa, but she takes a seat on the foot of my bed.

"How'd it go last night?" she asks, and again she's looking around, searching for something. Ah, looking for evidence, I realize.

"It was fine," I say.

She runs her hand along the comforter of the bed I already made, considering it the same way she studied the lines in my notebook last night. Her tongue flicks out to taste the air.

"I didn't bring anyone home," I say. "If that's what you're wondering."

"Oh." Her face pinches. "So, it didn't go great." She lets out a sigh. "I'm sorry. We'll work on it some more. I know I can do better." Her brow creases, and I don't know how to feel about her disappointment that I didn't sleep with someone else last night.

"You were a big help. My night was perfect because of you."

She perks up at that. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I nod. Parts of it were perfect.

"Good. Because I need to ask you for another favor."

*Uh-oh.* "What favor?" I ask, tensing as I scratch nervously at the back of my neck. What more could she possibly ask of me?

She hops up from the bed, and pulling up her shirt, she reveals that she is indeed wearing some very tiny yellow shorts. It's like someone drew on her with highlighter, and I have to say, the way her hips curve around, heading south into exquisitely long legs, that's a part I'd highlight too.

To my surprise, her skintight shorts have pockets, and from one of them, she pulls out a clunky, metal bracelet. She presents it to me as solemnly as if it were a key to her chastity belt.

“I need you to be my Community Service Coordinating Officer,” she says. She explains what that is and how she’s already racked up thousands of dollars in fines for non-compliance. And the worst bit, the part that clearly has her scared, is she only has until Monday to start her service or she’s facing jail time.

Her problem isn’t complicated to understand or sympathize with, but the situation it would put me in is far too complicated. “I’m sorry, I can’t,” I say, turning her down flat. “We don’t take volunteers.”

“It says you do on the website. There’s a listing for a volunteer park ranger.”

“That’s for teachers during the summer, or for retired park rangers to come back and help out during busy seasons.” They’re a huge help, and they do great work. I already know that’s how I’m going to spend my retirement.

“It doesn’t say that,” she says.

I let out a sigh. I can’t be taking her to work with me. I can barely keep my hands off her now. I need to function at work and get shit done. I don’t need to be distracted and tempted all day. I’d crack. “I just can’t,” I repeat.

“You can,” she insists. “I checked. Park Services is an approved institution, and you’re a fulltime employee. That makes you eligible to serve as my CSC Officer. All you have to do is swear in.”

“No. Absolutely not.” I hand her back the bracelet, and I am dead serious. This is not something I can or am willing to do.

How is it then that fifteen minutes later I’m on the phone talking to an automated deputizing system?

“Chad Robins,” I say when the digital voice asks for my name. I give it my address, phone number, and job title. I even

swear an oath. It tells me to hold up my right hand while I'm repeating after it, and I do, even though I know there's no way for it to verify over the phone.

The device in my hand starts blinking red, and the device on her horn blinks back the same red. I'm instructed to secure the bracelet around my wrist. It locks tight, and the digi-voice tells me it will unlock when I've logged the required number of community service hours. I can't remove it until then without penalty. Next, it tells me to touch my device to hers.

She comes to stand in front of me where I'm seated on the bed, placing her bare knees between mine. I want to run my hands up under her shirt. It'd be so easy, and I already know what I'd find there if I did. Those little yellow, skintight shorts, just begging to be peeled off.

She lowers her head, angeling her horn at me. I lift my wrist and clink my time tracking device against her GPS monitor. When both lights turn green, the digi-voice continues. "Your devices are paired. You—Chad Robins—are now the court approved community service compliance officer for—Ignatia Henix." It hangs up.

"I guess that's it," she says, bumping her knee against mine and grinning. There's a lightness about her. The worry has lifted from her shoulders. It's nice to see even if I'm already regretting this. "You were about to get dressed. Should I leave?" she asks, giving me a quick up and down. And there's something in the way she asks that, unless I'm misreading it, hints at a willingness to stay. Is that a proposition? My blood runs warm.

I'm still wearing just a towel, and if she doesn't leave now, this isn't going to be some cute tease of a show where she gets a peek at something while I get dressed. I'll drop this towel, strip her down, toss her onto my bed, and be buried inside her in two seconds flat. "Yeah, you better go."

She looks disappointed, but not half as disappointed as I am when she turns and heads to the door. "See you Monday," she says over her shoulder.

"Be ready to leave by 6:20," I call after her.

“What?” She spins around, and the look on her face is pure horror. “You’re joking.”

“No, ma’am, I am not. Be in the kitchen by six if you want breakfast. I do not run late.”



On Sunday, I’ve got a personal errand to attend to. It takes me in the opposite direction from my daily routine, out east to Mt. BZB.

When I arrive at the Emberlight Resort, the woman I’m here to see is conveniently stationed at the front desk. She is sophisticated and polished, with a shiny silver manager badge pinned to the front of her light gray blazer. Her tied-back hair is a soft silver-gray with faint streaks of blond. Her eyes are the prettiest green.

“Hi, mom,” I say.

“Chad.” Her brows lift in surprise and she cocks her head at me. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Do you have a minute to talk?” I ask. The wide open, brightly lit lobby is quiet, only a few guests trickling in and out. It’s not too difficult for her to step away, and we find a seat.

“You wear jewelry now?” she asks, noting the bracelet around my wrist.

I briefly debate telling her about Iggy, but we’re not that close and it feels a little too personal. “It’s something for work,” I say, which is kinda true or true enough.

“How’s your father?” she asks.

“You know.” I shrug. “Still existing.” She nods as if I’ve given her a full picture answer. “I’ve invited him for Christmas. I expect him to make every effort to be there,” I say.

“Well, you shouldn’t. He’ll only disappoint you,” she says matter-of-factly.

“I expect you to be there too,” I say.

She presses her lips into a thin line before giving me the same excuse she's given every holiday since her beloved career in hospitality brought her full circle, right back to this tiny corner of the world. "It's the busy season."

"I understand that, but it's also Haisley's first Christmas. We're all going to be there to celebrate with her. No excuses." She makes another thin-lipped face.

"Have you at least brought photos of my great grandchild to tempt me?" she asks.

"I have," I smile, and I bring out my phone.

After swiping through a few for her, she takes my phone and studies the image. Her eyes go soft and a faint smile touches her lips. "I should have had a daughter," she murmurs so quietly I almost don't catch it. She runs a finger lightly over the chubby cheeks on the screen, then hands me back my phone. "I can't make any promises, but I'll try."

"I'll accept that for now, but fair warning, I intend to keep asking until I get a yes," I say.

She gives me a light laugh and rises from her chair. I'm guessing our visit is over, but then she surprises me by walking with me out the door. It's chilly outside and she's not dressed for it, but she keeps walking with me anyway.

"Any travel plans?" Her breath turns into tiny cloud wisps when she talks. Her tone is casual, but I know it's a test. You'd think she and I talked a lot more frequently than we do based on how many times I've answered this question.

"Nope, no plans currently," I say.

She makes a disappointed noise. "You need to get out there and see the world."

"I've seen parts of it," I say, but by the look she gives me, I know what she's thinking: if I haven't crossed an ocean, I haven't seen anything worth seeing.

"I don't understand how you don't feel trapped in that smug little town," she shakes her head. "Men are just different, I suppose. They don't feel suffocated by a small life."

*What's wrong with a small life?* I wonder.

“Are you seeing anyone?” she asks, not missing a beat.

“Nope, not currently.”

She nods. We walk in silence for a bit, but I can see she has something else to say. “I worry about you, Chad.” That catches me by surprise, and I’m unexpectedly touched by the thought that she thinks about me enough to worry.

“No need. I’m doing just fine,” I assure her.

“You’re thirty and still single,” she says, and my nose crinkles at the way she says it, like I’m knocking on death’s door. “The older you get, the harder it is to find someone. Especially when you’re so much like your father, anchored in place. Do you know that when he and I met, he told me it was love at first sight?” I don’t say anything, but yeah I’ve heard his side of this story many times. It’s *not* one of my favorites.

“He got it into his head that I was the only one for him, no one else would do. He was so certain that he eventually convinced me,” she shakes her head, mouth pinching. Despite their twenty years separated, I’m pretty sure he still believes it.

“I shouldn’t have said yes, but as it turns out, marrying him was only the second stupidest thing I ever did.” I glance at her, wishing I knew how to politely shut this down. I’m already itching with discomfort, and I don’t want to hear what comes next.

“When I got restless and begged him to leave with me, he told me children would help me feel more settled, and I let him convince me. Twice. I don’t think he even wanted kids. He just wanted to trap me here in *his* perfect life,” she says, bitterness thick in her voice.

Inside, I wince over every word. I get the impression she thinks her story about regretting having me and my brother isn’t one I should take personally, but if I’m honest, it stings.

By the time we reach my truck, I’m not feeling all that good. She turns and places a hand on my cheek. It’s icy cold and I want to pull away, but I don’t. “Promise me you’ll try not to follow in his footsteps. I would be terribly disappointed

if you ended up as a lonely, self-pitying, mountain-dwelling loon.”

“Yeah. So would I,” I mumble, mostly to myself. I remove her hand from my face and take one last opportunity to remind her why I came. “I’ll see you at Christmas.”

## Chapter 9

*Iggg*



Sunday night I can't fall asleep, and I lay awake in my bed. I haven't felt this anxious since my years at Infernus Academy when every Sunday night felt like this. I cough experimentally, just like I used to back then, hopeful I might be getting sick. But there's no rasp, no phlegm. Not that calling in sick on my first day is an option, not if I want to avoid jail anyway.

Why am I anxious? I needed a community service position, and now I have one. Problem solved. And yet my hands continue to rub nervous circles over the sheets. Not for the first time, I wish I was in my own bed. The room Darcy has put me up in is beautiful, lovely, comfortable. But my black comforter back home is quilted with bats and crows, and my black sheets are printed with a passage from my favorite gothic murder mystery in gold lettering. It's all so cozy and perfect.



A light comes on outside my window. It's coming from the garage apartment, and my head pops off the pillow. I must have left the curtains open, not intentionally of course, but now I know Chad's home. I lick the air, like I'd be able to taste him from here. I'm nowhere near that good. Although, if anyone's scent could travel this far, it'd be his.

The man tastes deliciously sweet, like all the time. I pick up his off-scent of arousal so often, I've started to wonder if there's something wrong with my tongue, like he's burned his scent permanently onto it so that I taste him even when he's not around. Or maybe humans are entirely different from demons. Maybe their scents don't translate to the same feelings as ours, and I've been completely misreading him. Or maybe being super smelly is just normal for humans.

*Gah!* This is the kind of information that would have been useful to learn in school. Far more useful than all the town founder crap they drilled into our heads. Look where that load of garbage got us.

At the moment, my working theory is that Chad is perpetually horny. It would explain his ongoing obsession with pickup lines and his weekly nights out at the tiki bar. He's been trying to satisfy a very active libido, which I can both respect and admire. The only twinge of disappointment comes from thinking that his powerful reaction to seeing me for the first time was par for the course for him. I preferred the flattering thought that I was special. It felt good. The ego stroke to end all ego strokes.

*Or maybe he really is an imp*, I chuckle to myself. My own personal imp who crawled up out of the Abyss just for me.

I lay back down, and as I stare at the warm glow of his window, I feel myself settling in. My anxiety calms and my thoughts drift to the other evening when we sat on the couch together.

*"Hello, gorgeous. I'd like to buy you a drink. What do you say?"*

A warm tingle runs over my body. *Fuck*, I wish he could've smelled me just then. I wanted him to. And Saturday morning

in his apartment. I know I was off-scenting my arousal then too, but he's not a demon. He had no way of knowing how badly I wanted him to drop that towel. If I hadn't just asked him for a huge favor, I might have been more bold in hinting. It didn't feel right to press at the time, but now I regret it.

“Drop your towel. Lay back. Grab the headboard and don't let go.” That's what I should have said. I'd like to see him completely naked, panting, pink in the face, and off-scenting for me.

I pull a hand under the covers and my fingers wiggle their way into my panties, where they rub slick circles in my perfect rhythm. My mouth pops open as warmth builds and my climax approaches. My thighs squeeze together around my hand, and here it comes. I gasp out at each little spasm, and then my body goes slack as I let the cozy sleepy chemicals wash over me.

Just before my eyes drift closed, I take one last look out the window and see his light go out.



I wake up at five in the morning, groggy but too anxious about the day ahead to fall back asleep. I unpack my entire suitcase and lay everything out on the bed, and like a mad woman, I arrange and rearrange the items in every possible configuration. I don't have a whole lot to work with, and yet the limited choices only make my job harder. If I'm going out in public where people will see me and my damn GPS monitor clamped to my horn, at least my outfit can be on point.

Okay, starting at the top again. A blazer looks the most like a uniform, and that feels appropriate. But I don't have slacks, and a pencil skirt doesn't strike me as sufficiently outdoorsy. So, nix the blazer and the skirt. I continue on until I've eliminated everything and have to start again. I'm ready to tear my hair out, and that reminds me I still need to shower. I grab my toiletries and stomp off to the bathroom.

I'm just shutting off the water when I hear, “Iggy! Get your ass out here right now or I'm leaving you behind!”

I run from the bathroom, dripping wet, only to collide with Chad. He's fully dressed in his park ranger uniform, jacket, hat, gloves, and sturdy boots. He's clearly ready for a day up on the mountain.

Whereas I'm naked.

His eyes bulge and face flushes before he glances sideways. He clears his throat. "I've been sitting in the truck honking for twenty minutes," he growls, eyes still firmly averted.

"That was you?" My nose wrinkles. In my head, I was cursing a rude neighbor.

"Yes it was me!" he shouts, throwing his hands in the air. "I made you breakfast. I knocked on your door twice to give you time checks. And now it's a quarter to seven. We're running twenty-five minutes late, and you're not even dressed!" He glances at me and seems to get stuck for a second, before he tears his eyes away again.

He is bright red in the face now, and yes, it's very surprising to see that red is a good color on him but, *holy fuck*, where did the time go?

"Please put some clothes on. Please," he whispers, and there's something in voice that sounds pained. I've really irritated him. Shit!

"Give me five minutes!" I duck into my room and don't bother towel off. I throw on an outfit, grab my makeup bag and race out to the driveway.

As soon as I'm in the truck, we take off, and after a few minutes of silence, Chad speaks up. "Look, I'm sorry I raised my voice. That was uncalled for. But this can't happen again. I don't run late."

"Sorry," I say and leave it at that. What else is there to say? I'll admit, if only to myself, that there are a number of things I'm not good at, and running on time is one of them. I'm more of a 'window of arrival' kind of person. Which is why I showed up an hour early to my interview at the Emberlight Resort because planning for my own shortcomings is something I've learned to do. Mostly.

As soon as we park, I ask him to log me in.

“I’ll do it inside,” he says.

“No!” I practically shriek, as my heart starts to race. “Here, please. I don’t want anyone to see.”

He gives me a look that says I’m trying his patience, but he does it. Lifting his wrist, he taps his bracelet to my GPS monitor and I feel the haptic feedback buzz between the two devices, confirming that it’s done. I’m officially logged in for community service for the first time. The threat of prison lifts, and on my next exhale, one of the many knots in my stomach loosens.

Now I just have to get through the rest of this day.

Once we’re inside the ranger station, Chad introduces me to Luís who has the title ‘Senior Ranger’ stitched into his uniform. “This is Ignatia Henix. She’s going to fill the volunteer ranger position for the next eight weeks.” Oh Dark Mother Below. It’s not that I didn’t know the title, but hearing it said to someone else, my stomach still goes queasy and a prickling of shame runs over my skin. Volunteer. She’s here to *not* get paid. My eyes drop to the floor.

“Alright. I’ll let Ben know we won’t need him until after the new year. You’re late, by the way,” Luís says, turning to Chad.

“I’m aware, and I apologize,” Chad says, an edge to his voice. When I glance between them, I’d say Luís looks oddly amused. Chad, on the other hand, looks thoroughly embarrassed. Join the club, buddy.

“Well, get her a uniform. Did you bring any other shoes?” Luís asks me.

“No,” I say. He’s eyeballing my leopard print heels, and despite my embarrassment, I’m miffed that neither of them seems to appreciate all the consideration that went into deciding these were my most outdoorsy shoes.

Chad disappears and returns a minute later with a pants and jacket set and hands me the hanger. I hold it up. It’s an atrocity. They couldn’t pay me to wear this, and make no

mistake, no one is offering to pay me. Thankfully, this is a volunteer position, which means everything I do is voluntary. “I can’t wear this.”

“Looks like the right size to me. Try it on,” Chad says.

He may be correct, it may be my size, but it looks like a one-ply army uniform knock-off. And worse, it reminds me of my sentencing. Before our trial, our advisor had us change into orange jumpsuits. I had a bad feeling about it then, and I wish I’d listened to my gut. The jumpsuits did not help our cause, and when it came time to stand before the tribunal, I didn’t even have the dignity of my own clothes to help me stand tall in the moment.

I’m making a better call today. I’ll keep the outfit I picked for myself, the one that preserves my comfort and self-worth. I’m sorry, but I am not spending the next eight weeks of my life walking around in what is essentially just another convict’s uniform.

“It doesn’t go with my shoes,” I say, offering up a simple explanation. I’m obviously not going to share the orange jumpsuit anecdote with them. And since we’ve already established I don’t have any other shoes, discussion over. I drop the awful thing on the back of a chair and wipe my hands clean of it.

Chad rolls his eyes and starts heading toward the door. I follow him.

“You’re staying here,” he says over his shoulder.

“What if you need help with something?” I say, continuing to follow. The best thing that can come from today is me getting an opportunity to pay off some of my debt to him. It’s my one and only goal in being here, well, that and not going to jail, but that box was checked the moment he scanned me in. Now I just have to clock enough hours to satisfy the court.

“I can handle these work orders myself.” He turns to face me. “If you want to be useful, help Luís here at the station.” He gestures for me to turn around.

“Luís is not my friend,” I say. Glancing back, I see Luís lift an eyebrow at me, so I tag on, “No offense.” He shrugs and goes back to reading a newspaper.

But Chad gives me a thoroughly peeved look. “So?”

“So why would I help him?” It’d be a colossal misuse of time and effort when I have a very real and pressing need to start repaying the debt accruing from room and board, not to mention all the other things Chad has already done for me. I started writing it down yesterday, and I’m feeling a little suffocated again just thinking about it.

“Because it’s your job.”

“Job? What job? I’m not getting paid,” I hiss the last part under my breath.

“You’re working off your debt to society, and I took an oath to ensure you do it. I swore to be a responsible citizen and uphold the sentence of the court. So either you stay here and help Luís, or I can log you out.” He lifts his wrist, flashing his bracelet and—*threatens* me.

My insides go up in flames. I feel my lip start to curl back, exposing my sharp teeth. I’m seething, but damn, he’s going red in the face again, and who knew that could be a good look for a blond?



The next morning is no better. As soon as I get to the kitchen, he’s right back to being irritated.

“Where’s your uniform?” he asks.

“At the station.” Where I left it on purpose.

“You were supposed to bring it home. And I told you you needed to wear work-appropriate shoes.” He glares at my feet.

“You said closed toe shoes,” I grumble back.

“Closed toe, no high heels.” His hands fly up in exasperation.

“These are wedges. And they *are* closed toe! They’re practically sneakers.”

“Then just wear sneakers!”

I snort.

“Damn it, Iggy! Work with me here. Please, just go change your shoes.” He’s kneading his forehead.

“I only brought three pairs. And if you didn’t like these first two, I can promise you, *fashionista* Chad, you’re not going to like the third one.” They’re thigh-high, skin-tight, black sheer boots with a line up the back of the leg and silver spiked toes, my ‘just in case there’s a bar with a good goth scene’ boots. “I’m wearing the best shoes I have,” I say, my face burning with a mix of anger and embarrassment.

“Oh.” He blinks at me and scratches at the back of his head.

“I gotcha, girl,” Darcy jumps up from her chair and comes back with an armful of flats and sneakers, but it’s a pair of brothel creepers that catch my eye.

“The Fairy Fentysea collection? I want these.” I snatch them up before I realize my problem. “I don’t have any money.”

“Well I don’t want to *give* them to you,” Darcy says.

“Smart.” I nod approvingly. These are designer and limited edition. Giving them away would be a crime.

“But I’m happy to let you borrow them.” She smiles at me.

“So...?” I wrinkle my nose at her. “What does that mean?”

“You can use them for as long as you’re here. Free of charge.”

I grin at that. She’s not half the negotiator Chad is, but that’s good news for me. She lends me some socks too, and when I slip the shoes on, I’m delighted by my discovery. “We’re the same size! I want a full inventory of all borrowable items in your closet. We’ll negotiate terms when I get home,” I say, as I hurry out the door. Chad is already waiting in the truck.

When we get to the station, he hesitates to scan me in. “You’re supposed to show up in uniform. It’s not optional, but

I'll make one last exception. Starting tomorrow, no more leniency." I roll my eyes, and he fixes me with a hard look. "I mean it."

We'll see.

When Chad tries to leave me behind again, this time I refuse to be left. I'm not spending another whole day with Luís. It was painful watching him make ugly flyers then print them on an ancient inkjet that was clearly low on cyan toner. He also covered one of the big picture windows with cheap posters of under-developed, washed-out photos, which he claimed was necessary because of the morning glare, conveniently forgetting there are existing, aesthetically acceptable solutions to that exact problem. Has he ever heard of blinds? Curtains?

I get my way by ignoring Chad's protests, jumping into his truck anyway, and buckling myself in. We head out along the trails roaming the mountain. He tries to pretend I'm not there as he checks on campers, picks up roadside trash, and performs other menial labor. But I catch his eyes sliding over to me fairly often. Almost involuntarily.

Those tiny glances shouldn't affect me as much as they do, but I feel it in my pulse every time. I make no attempt to ignore him. He's the only thing worth watching out here, so I enjoy the show of him going about his sweaty business. As the day gets hotter, his jacket comes off and his sleeves get rolled up, and *hello*. There are the forearms I've been dreaming about. Despite the tension between us, I still enjoy the fun little glimpse into how he forged those gorgeous things.

Every now and then, I ask if there's anything I can help with, and each time he says, "Not in those clothes."

"Are you asking me to strip down, Park Ranger Chad Robins?" I tease the third time he repeats it.

His head snaps up from the log he's splitting, and for a moment his eyes go heated as his gaze rakes me up and down. "I believe I was asking you to double up on clothes. Something that'll cover those thighs and those pointy ankles."



He points accusingly at me, and there's a grumble to his voice, but also a touch of humor. He's teasing me back.

"Why would I do that?" I kick my legs out. It's too chilly for shorts, I'll admit. I regretted the decision as soon as I stepped out the door this morning, but I'm a hot-blooded demon. I'll survive, and shorts are more outdoorsy than slacks.

"Putting aside the fact that it's a requirement of the job, you mean?" He cocks an eyebrow at me. "You could do it just to have mercy on me." He picks up his ax and goes clomping off into the woods, grumbling something about me killing him a little more each day.

It might be the grumpiest compliment I've ever gotten, but I still like it.

At the end of the day, we head up Last Hour Road toward the residential cabins. For a second, I wonder if he plans to dump me back at the rental cabin he retrieved me from, but then he makes a turn down a private drive, and the cabin we stop at is not one I recognize.

"Stay in the truck," he says sternly, which is fine with me. I'm not in the mood to chat with strangers anyway, especially not the hobo-looking gentleman sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair. He's wearing a bedraggled, untied bathrobe with nothing but dirty jeans underneath. I hope we're not here to run off a squatter.

My face goes hot with embarrassment as I realize that's exactly what Chad was sent to my cabin to do. I press back in my seat, fighting the urge to slide all the way down on the floorboard and turn into a puddle of shame.

The man Chad is talking to spots me in the truck. He leans forward in his rocker, his chin jutting toward me. Chad glances at me over his shoulder but when he turns back, he shakes his head no at the old man. I wonder what he asked.

The man gets up and starts walking my way. Chad steps into his path, attempting to block him. The old man steps around, and Chad follows behind him with an irritated scowl on his face.

I roll down the window as he approaches.

“I’m Henry Robins. This is my property you’re on,” he says. And *holy shit*, this is Chad’s dad. My eyes dart back and forth between the two men. Personal hygiene and wardrobe aside, there is a pronounced family resemblance, the nose, the cut of the jaw, the very square front teeth.

“I’m Iggy,” I say, extending my hand through the window. He pulls back for a second before taking my hand, and we shake.

“I hear you’re a new coworker,” Henry says, narrowing his eyes at me.

“Something like that,” I say, giving Chad a soft smile. Coworker not volunteer. That was nice of him. Henry catches it, and his eyes light up with suspicion.

“Something like that, huh? You two didn’t bother to get your stories straight before you ambushed me?” he says, glaring at Chad before turning back to me. “Who are you with, the IRS?”

I snort at that. “Do I look like someone who’d take a government job?” I ask.

He blinks at that before his face hardens into a scowl. “I’ll tell you what you look like—” he starts but is interrupted by Chad’s low grumble.

“Watch yourself.”

“You look like someone who could pull the wool over the eyes of a trusting fool, some good-hearted boob with no common sense.” He swings back to Chad. “How many times do I have to tell you not to trust strangers? And now you’ve brought her onto my property? Why can’t you follow simple instructions? I swear you pull this crap just to try my patience. I’ve told you time and again, if you’re not gonna use the sense God gave you, then at least have smarts enough to listen to good advice when someone is beating you over the head with it!” Henry is snarling and sneering, and his arms are flailing in Chad’s direction like he wants to swing at him.

Something sparks in my chest.

I glance at Chad. His jaw is set, but his posture is relaxed, almost decidedly so. He's bigger than his dad, taller, stronger, fuller in the chest. I think he must have figured out a long time ago he could take him down if he wanted to, but he won't.

He's like Rex.

The thought pops into my head, surprising me, but it's true. The big guy was quick to defend Vale or me but could rarely be bothered to defend himself. He'd wail on anyone that got in our faces, but he'd take a punch aimed at him and keep walking. Well, I didn't like it then, and I don't like it now.

"Hey!" I shout at Henry. He comes to a startled silence. "Pipe down, old man. I owe your son a debt, and I'm not above repaying it with a pound of flesh." I hold his eye for a second before smiling coolly. Rex didn't always swing. A good threat was sometimes enough.

The old man glances at Chad then back at me. There's a flash of a surprise on Henry's face that quickly morphs into a grimace. He turns to Chad, studying him for a long, hard minute before he says, "Are you two coming in?"

Chad looks surprised by the question and starts to walk away. "No. We've got to go." He hurries around the truck and jumps into the driver's side.

"Next time, then," his dad calls through the window. "We're gonna have a chat, the three of us," he says, looking right at me.

"Only if you're wearing a shirt," I say, flashing him my teeth in another threatening smile as we pull away.

Next to me, I hear a soft chuckle. Turning, I catch Chad giving me a curious look. There's a half-smile tugging on one side of his face, but I'm not sure what it means. I smile back anyway.



On Wednesday, Chad makes good on his threat, and even though he's already driven me all the way out to the ranger station, he refuses to scan me in.

“I need these hours.”

“Then do what you’re supposed to do to earn them. Volunteer rangers wear uniforms. Period. You know where yours is.”

I’m outraged, and I bug him incessantly, dogging his heels. But he waits until four pm to turn on me. He crowds me up against the side of his truck, sending my pulse spiking at the feel of his breath against the tip of my ear and the warmth of his body so deliciously close to mine.

“This is me being generous,” he says in a low growl that sends a shiver through me. He taps his bracelet to my monitor and logs me in. As his hand drops, his fingertips graze lightly down my bare skin from my shoulder to my wrist. The lightest scrape of his roughened hands, the faintest heat of his flesh calling to mine, and warmth pools low in my belly. But just as I’m about to reach for his belt loop, he pulls away. I’m left there panting ever so slightly.

I get one stinking hour of logged time for the entire day.

On Thursday, he does it again, the jackass.

“I have to get twenty hours a week or they’ll fine me. You have to scan me in!” And now I think he’s enjoying himself just a little, because when he turns to me, there’s a glint in his eye.

“That’s something else I’ve been meaning to point out. Twenty hours is the *minimum*, and despite what you think, you can’t afford to do the bare minimum, not when you’re already a month behind. You need forty hours a week if you’re going to finish two hundred and fifty hours in time.” He steps right into my personal space, just like yesterday, leaving only the tiniest sliver of distance between us. It sets my heart racing, and I think he knows it, the bastard. “Forty hours,” he repeats. “If I’m here, you’re here.”

And what choice do I have? I haven’t done the stupid math, but of course he’s right. “I agree to your stupid terms,” I hiss from between clenched teeth.

His face has been flushed red most of the day, but this is the deepest it's been. I want to tear open his shirt and see how far the color has spread, how far under his skin I've gotten.

His lips graze featherlight against the shell of my ear as he whispers, "Good. Because you don't have a choice." An electric tingle shoots across my body. He takes a couple of hard breaths, hovering so invitingly close, but again, just when I'm tempted to grab for his belt loop, he turns and stomps off.

When we leave work on Friday, I only have eighteen hours logged for the entire week despite forty hours spent at the ranger station or roaming around Mt. Winter Bliss in Chad's truck. No, I didn't help with a single thing, but he refused my offers of help. So that's on him.

When we pull up to the house, he leaves the truck running, apparently waiting for me to get out.

"Aren't you coming inside?" I ask.

"Nope. I'm headed to the bar."

"Do you want help with lines?" Maybe that can count as my last two hours, and I'll at least avoid being fined for this week.

"No."

"Fine!" There goes another thousand dollars I don't have. I throw open the door, and just as I'm hopping out, his voice goes low and stern.

"You better be in uniform on Monday."

"Why?" The single word explodes out of me. Why the fuck does he care so much about this damn uniform?

"Because volunteer rangers wear uniforms. And because I'm your boss, and I said so."

"My boss? If I'm not getting paid, I don't have a boss. What don't you understand about that?"

"What don't *you* understand? You have a debt, an obligation, and now, thanks to this," he holds up his wrist, "so

do I. I gave my word that you would do the job and that job has requirements.”

“My sentence is for hours, not effort, not labor. *Hours*. I’m showing up for those hours, as required. I read my probation packet cover to cover. There is nothing in there about uniforms. That’s *your* requirement. You’re the one trying to add your own set of rules to my sentence. *You* are causing this problem, not *me!*” I slam the door of the truck and stomp off.



When the light finally comes on in Chad’s garage apartment, the mixture of frustration and bitter outrage I’ve been stewing in for hours has simmered down to something more useful: resolve. We’ve arrived at an impasse. Something has to give.

When I knock on his door, it swings open and I catch the reek of alcohol and the accompanying bar smells that have soaked into his clothes.

“I am here to negotiate new terms,” I announce, chin lifting high, mouth set in a firm line. I mean business.

“What terms?” he asks, his brow creasing as his eyes blink in and out of focus.

“The uniform, for starters. It’s ugly and I hate it, but it appears to be a sticking point for you. I’d like to negotiate and see if we can come to an agreement to resolve that and a few other matters.”

He crooks an eyebrow and, raising an arm to support himself, he settles his weight against the door jam. Then, leaning close enough to look me right in the eye, he says, “Why should I negotiate with you? You haven’t done a damn thing I’ve asked all week.”

I ignore the warmth radiating off of his body, refusing to let it draw me in. I will not grab his belt loops, I promise myself, and instead, I roll my eyes. “I’ve been showing up, haven’t I?” And technically, that’s all I’m required to do.

“It’s not enough!” he growls.

“I guess that depends on whose side you’re on, doesn’t it?” Someone on my side would support my effort to adhere to the letter of the law and understand my wish to avoid giving away any more of myself for free. Someone on the court’s side would sound like him.

“Just showing up isn’t anything to be proud of, Iggy. None of our volunteer rangers get paid, but they wear the uniform and they do the job anyway because taking care of the park is its own reward, something to feel good about.”

“Oh, and where exactly do I cash in on that reward? Is there an exchange line at human stores where I can tell them how good I feel about my court-ordered unpaid labor, and they’ll give me work appropriate shoes and replace my body wash that ran out last week? Is that how it works in your world?”

He sighs and runs a hand over his face. “What are you getting out of this now?” he asks. “If I spent all my time and energy refusing to do the basic duties of my job, just waiting out each day like a jail sentence, that’d eat at me a lot faster. It’d drive me crazy. I’d feel worthless.”

And there it is.

I take a step back, and I don’t have to be looking in a mirror to know my eyes are flashing red. My back straightens and my head lowers. I’m not going to gore him, but it’s instinctual to lower horns to an enemy.

“I may not be worth much, but I am *not* worthless.” I spit out the hated word, but the bitter taste of it remains sharp on my tongue. “I don’t give a shit what you and some asshole judge think. I have value.” I spin to leave, but he catches me by the wrist.

“I’m sorry, Iggy. I didn’t mean that,” he says with a note of exasperation.

I’ve wrestled with anger and shame most of my life, and if there is one thing I’ve learned, it’s that halfhearted apologies only make things worse. I yank my wrist free, ready to storm down the stairs.

“Don’t go,” he pleads, and there’s something in his voice that tugs at my stomach. I stop, but I don’t turn to face him. “Look, I know it’s been a frustrating week.” He lets out a slow breath, and I can practically hear him trying to pick his next words. “But you and I don’t have to see eye to eye for me to think the world of you. Iggy, you’re the most incredible person I’ve ever met, and if I’ve made you think anything different, I am truly sorry.” He steps closer and reaches for my hand again, his fingers fluttering lightly against mine.

I turn, and his face falls when he sees the tears streaming down my cheeks. He pulls me into his arms. One hand tucks my head under his chin while the other wraps around my back.

I quietly sob.

“You are a rare find, Ignatia Henix, a priceless treasure,” he says and there’s a steely note in his voice that gives his words weight enough to sink into me.

When I finally collect myself, he invites me inside, adding, “I think we have some negotiating to do.”

I wipe my nose on his shirt as I nod.

A half hour later, we’re seated on his couch. A deal is on the table. Every nerve in my body is singing with excitement.

It comes down to this. “So, currently, I’m putting you up and letting you stay without charging you anything,” Chad says. He’s sobered up some at this point, but he’s still showing the signs from his evening at the bar. “But under our new agreement, I’d be paying you to work at the station with room and board. And that would make you happy?” He scratches the back of his head, looking perplexed, but the proposition sends a dizzying delight running through my veins. I flush warm all over.

It’s an incredibly favorable deal. I’ve done the mental calculation of how much I paid per night at the B&B, which only included one meal a day. I’m getting three here, plus transportation, plus I’ll no longer be accruing the friendship debt, which the interest rate alone was going to bury me. If I had to turn it into a dollar amount, I’d say I’m earning less



than my last job, but not by as much as you'd think. It's only a pay cut if I don't factor in the fact that this one job will essentially count double for me: I'll be satisfying my probation with my hours spent there, while any actual work I perform will pay for my living expenses. I'll be actively paying off my debt as I go. At the end of each day, Chad and I will be square.

"Yes, yes, yes, a deal's a deal!" I thrust my arm out at him, trying to grab his forearm, but he pulls back.

"Whoa, whoa. I have some other stipulations I want to go over first."

"Fuck, that's hot," I say right out loud, and he gives me a heated look in exchange. My knees squeeze together, and not for the first time, I wish he had a demon tongue so he could taste me. I'm already picking up sweet notes of his arousal on my tongue. I wish he knew mine was there too.

"Name your terms," I say. There's a huskiness in my voice that he definitely picks up on.

He licks his bottom lip before he speaks. "You're going to be on time every morning, ass in seat at 6:20 a.m. exactly. And you're going to be in uniform." He glances sideways, and following his gaze, I see the uniform flung over the arm of his couch. I recoil at the sight of it.

I pull back and cross my arms as I consider his terms. It's a less favorable deal if he's not budging on the uniform, but even so, I have to force a glare to hide my smile. "Then these are my terms." I list them off on my fingers. "One, you will never call me a volunteer again. Two, I get to decide where posters go inside the lobby. No wait, I want to redesign the posters then decide where they go; and three, I get to update the flyers and any other marketing material too." I hold up another finger as each item pops into my head. "Four, everything I redesign, I get to include in my portfolio. And five, I get to use you as a reference as a branding and marketing client. Those are my five terms."

He snorts, but nods. "I'll have to run some of that past Luís, but I'm sure he'd be amenable. He hates doing all of that stuff. And I'd happily be a reference provided you do a good job."

“Good job? I’m going to blow your fucking mind.” I lean heavily into the word blow. He flushes a soft pink, which is accompanied by another plume of his scent filling the room. “Deal?” I ask.

“Deal,” he says, straightening up in his chair. Then, clearing his throat, he extends his forearm.

We grip and shake, sealing the deal, but we don’t let go. We both linger. Our eyes and arms stay locked, heat building between us until the thought that’s been buzzing in my head comes tumbling out of my mouth. “I wish you could taste me.” His nostrils flare, but his nose can’t tell him what his tongue would already know if he were demon. “My panties are soaked. I’m so turned on right now, all I can think about is your cock. If I go back to my bed aching like this, I’ll touch myself all night and still wake up dissatisfied. I need you to take care of this for me. Please.”

He’s out of his seat so fast, I squeak in surprise. I’m not even sure where exactly he grabs hold of me. All I know is I’m bodily lifted from the couch, carried to the bed, and tossed onto my back with a bounce. He strips off his shirt, ripping some buttons loose in his haste. Then, nudging my thighs open with his knees, the shirtless cowboy crawls his way up me.

His strong, weathered hands slide up my bare thighs, followed by his mouth, until he reaches my yellow pajama shorts. He bites at the fabric, right over my hip bone. He sucks at the spot. His tongue licks up over the hem to leave a scorching trail across my skin. “We don’t have to do this,” he murmurs. “If you change your mind, you can leave any time you want.”

Leave? “Not until you’ve fucked me every which way you can think of.”

He growls and his teeth press into me again while his hands squeeze my thighs. His breathing is heavy, and the taste of his off-scenting is so potent, it’s making my head spin. He works a hand under my shorts and wiggles his fingers under my panties. I’m slick and wet, and he wastes no time sliding a finger inside me. I let out a delighted little whimper.

“You like that?” he asks. And I bite my lip as I consider how to respond. There’s something kind of charming about the fact that he has to ask.

“I like it even though it’s a tease,” I tell him. “It’s a good start, but I want more of you.” I clench around his finger. His other hand clutches at me, squeezing, and his teeth nibble at the cloth.

“I’m glad to hear it.” His voice is raw and gruff, and it sends a shiver radiating through me. He slides another finger inside me and starts licking my clit over my shorts. His tongue is forceful and rough, but the sensation is blunted by the double layer of fabric. The teasing continues to build so nicely, sending buzzy signals up and down my body.

Just when my thighs start to tremble and little flutters are pulsing around his fingers, he pulls out.

“Why’d you stop?” I protest. I was right on the edge.

He crawls further up me and tugs at my shirt. “I want you completely naked when you come on my tongue,” he says. “I want to see every shiver it sends through your body.”

“Then you’d better strip me down,” I say with eager agreement, sitting up to help him accomplish the task. He grabs handfuls of my shirt, and as he pulls it up over my head, I feel the haptic buzz of his bracelet passing too close to my monitor. He’s logged me in.

“Shit,” he says as he tosses my shirt to the side. He moves to tap my monitor again, to log me out, but I grab his wrist. “No.” I shove his hand into the pillow, holding it down. He stares at me, a question clear on his face.

I push him back until he’s laying flat on his back. Then I throw my leg over his hips, and I pull myself into a seated position, straddling him. “I need two hours on the clock, and you’re going to give them to me.”

“You can’t be serious,” he whispers, even as I see the way his eyes dilate.

## Chapter 10

*Chad*



“Two hours,” she repeats, but I’m barely listening. Her naked breasts are pink, softly round, and tipped with deep red nipples. There’s a slight jiggle every time she talks, and I’m mesmerized. They hover right above my head, so tantalizingly close, my lips part on their own, hungry to suck and taste them. “You don’t think you can last a measly two hours?” She’s teasing me, and when I meet her eye, there’s a wicked glimmer behind them.

“Iggy.” Her name drags out of me somewhere in the range of a groan. I know what she’s asking for, what she wants us to do. She’s pinned my wrist with the bracelet. If I push against her, I can break free, but her grip is firm enough I can tell she wants me to feel restrained, and it sends blood rushing to my cock. Even so, I know one thing for sure. “We can’t do this. It’s not right.” Counting this as volunteer hours? That’s just wrong.

But even as I say it, my free hand finds her thigh and squeezes, kneading into her flesh. She's smooth and warm to the touch, topless in just her tiny yellow shorts. I want to tear them off of her and feel every inch of her against me. I want her so badly, I can hardly breathe.

But I've scanned her in, like she's on the job—the job at the park, the one she refuses to do.

All week long, I've been wrenching my eyes away from her, holding my breath when we're in the truck so that the smell of her doesn't drive me to something crazy, balling my hands so that I don't grab her. I work my ass off all day long just to behave like a normal human being, and what does she do?

Not a single thing I ask.

She's the most stubborn, infuriating, and unbearably beautiful woman I've ever met.

"We shouldn't," I croak the words, but my protest is already far less certain than it was only a second ago. She licks the air, and we both know what she tastes. I'm so turned on I can't see straight. There's no way her tongue isn't picking it up.

She smirks at me.

"Are you saying this is wrong?" She grinds her hips against mine and, *fuck me*, she wasn't lying about the state of her panties. I can hear a faint squelching, and tunnel vision sets in. Everything else, no matter how close, is far away and fuzzy. Only she's in sharp focus, every tiny detail, every little sound. Every one of her movements catches my eye, the way her short, dark hair falls around her face, the way the crotch of her yellow shorts darkens with moisture.

*Is this wrong?*

The question sends me down a different thought trail. I've taken her in. I'm her employer or landlord, or some mixed up version of the two according to our new deal. There's some kind of implied line, *isn't there?* One I shouldn't cross.

I shove the thought away. I'm in no mood to philosophize over implied lines because—

“I want this,” I say as I stare at the place where her shorts sit atop my jeans and wish desperately there was nothing between us. “Just let me scan you out first.” I don't want to stop, but we can't count it as community service, we just can't.

“Why? Do you feel guilty?” she asks. With her free hand she starts working my belt buckle loose.

“Yeah,” I nod. A part of me does feel guilty that I've already let this many minutes tick by on the clock, but I'm ashamed to admit it's nowhere near as pronounced as it should be. I should be firmly refusing to let this go a minute longer. Instead, I let her slender fingers nimbly unbutton my fly. I press my hips into her touch the same eager way my cock is pressing into the seam of my pants, begging for more contact.

“Good. You should.” She lifts herself off me, keeping hold of my wrist as she strips off her shorts and then the hidden panties underneath, a double layer she easily soaked through. She's naked, and I groan at the glorious sight.

Next, she tugs at my jeans with both hands, yanking a couple times for every inch or so of my briefs she exposes.

“I should what?” I ask. My head has gone fuzzy, and I've lost the thread of our conversation. I lift my hips to aid in her tugging efforts. She gets them down far enough that I can kick my pants off.

“You should feel guilty for withholding my hours. That was wrong of you.” I almost laugh, that's not what I feel guilty about. It's what we're doing right now with the clock running. We can do this, I want to do this, “Just let me—” I reach my wrist toward her and she bats it away.

“No.” Her eyes flash as she throws one long, pink thigh over my hips, straddling me. My eyes eat her up. Her hand traces along the band of my briefs, and soon she's tugging those down too.

My cock pops free, standing at full attention while she discards my last item of clothing. We're both fully naked.

She's not going to let me log her out, and I'm not about to stop this. She needs these hours because of me, and I need her. Doing this is wrong, but denying her feels wrong too.

"I won't do it again," I promise, head falling back at the feel of her fingers running lightly over my naked skin. Her touch torches the last of my resistance.

"Good. Then consider this my way of accepting your apology." She grips my cock and it jumps in her hand, straining upright between us. My head snaps up, and I'm singularly focused on the wrap of her fingers. I didn't apologize, I almost point out, but then her hand starts to move, running up my length. It's like a live wire passing over me, jolts of pleasure. She bends forward to lick the tip, and a growl rips out of me.

I want her so fucking badly, that I'm almost angry about it. No one has ever made me feel this unhinged, driven me this wildly crazy in every possible way. She strokes me up and down a few more times, and I'm fisting the blanket beneath me. Hunger mixes with pleasure, but there's an aftertaste of insanity.

She lifts her hips and positions my cock right at her entrance. "Yes or no?" she asks. She reaches for my wrist and squeezes it, drawing my attention back to the bracelet. She's giving me one more chance to make the right call. But I've already realized there are only wrong calls to make. And I know which one I'm choosing.

Her eyes are lidded, and her breath has a soft pant to it. She's a mirror of my desire. It's written all over her face as she stares down at me from under her dark lashes.

She tilts her hips to touch herself with my tip, and my enthusiastic consent comes rolling out of me, "Fuck yeah—yes!" It's more sound than words, like a wave that started in my belly only to crash against my teeth on the way out of my mouth.

She slides down my cock, wet, silky, snug, and too fucking perfect for words. I'm vaguely aware we've done this before,

but not like this. As intense as our first encounter was, this is far beyond that. It's entirely, un-fucking-believably new.

She sets the pace, moving painfully slow and making tiny satisfied whimpers as she eases her way down every inch of me. She stops when she's fully seated. Her thighs are spread wide and snug around my hips, and the delicious weight of her keeps me satisfyingly and deeply buried to the hilt. It's pure bliss. My arms fall wide as I soak it in, the most glorious moment of my life.

When she starts to move again, hunger ignites in my belly. I need more. My heels plant and my palms grip her ass. "Are you ready to ride?" I ask. She nods an impish, eager grin. "Then hold on tight."

She goes for my hair, taking fistfuls, and her heels hook under my thighs. This is no amateur rider, I note with delight. Iggy knows what she's doing. I roll my hips up off the bed, pressing deeply into her. When I let them drop, she slides up my cock with a silky wet glide, but before I come free, she digs her heels and pulls herself to my seat again with a squelching slap. Her timing is perfect. We both grunt our approval.

"Faster," she urges and pulls at my hair. I grin up at her, only too happy to oblige. I go full gallop, pounding into her over and over. Her tits rise and flop so beautifully. But as much as I want to stare, I can't stop my eyes from rolling with how good she feels sliding up and down the pole of my cock.

Hot urgency starts to build in the pit of my stomach. My balls tighten, and I groan.

Then, out of nowhere, an old fear twists my stomach. I grip her ass too firmly. I'll leave bruises if I don't let go, but I can't. I've locked on. It's not just lust and pleasure driving me now. Beneath it, my ever-present hunger to hold on to someone is sounding like an alarm. *Don't let her go*, it warns even though she's right here with me, not trying to leave. But just as I start to panic, Iggy speaks.

"I need a little more," she pleads. She's close, chasing her own pleasure with sharp little breaths. If I touch her just right,



I can send her over the edge. I don't have to think about it. One hand lets go to slide between her legs, and I use the back of two fingers to massage a *V* down either side of her clit. I need to make her feel good and that imperative silences the alarms.

"There!" she gasps, and I'm swept back up in the moment, enthralled by the half-lidded look of ecstasy on her face. Her wetness coats my fingers, and her pussy starts to flutter.

She lets out a throaty moan as she comes, her walls squeezing and rippling up and down my cock. The feel of her is too much; I couldn't stop myself if I tried.

I erupt like a volcano, coming recklessly alive, spurting deep inside her before riding the aftershock of satisfied tremors.

My head falls back, and all I see are trailing bright spots across my vision. Amazing.

"That was perfect," she sighs as she flops down on top of me. My hands slide up her back, pulling her tighter to me.

She's perfect.

We fuck the night away and make an absolute wreck of my bed. But not once does the panic return. I'm too distracted by all the many beautiful sights and sounds.

When I go down on her for the first time, a new obsession sets in. Watching her from this vantage point, framed by her own thighs, and seeing the way she trembles and shivers, there's no contest. Every lake view in the world be damned, Iggy shaking with orgasm is far and away the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Immediately after, I pull her into a spoon with her backside against me. She's slick with sweat but still eager. She tilts her hips back, and I push inside her. I slide a hand around to cup her between her legs and press down with the flat of my palm. I'm learning this is the way she likes it when she's oversensitive from just having come. I set a slow, luxuriating pace, sliding in and out of her with sloppy wet noises as she

rides my hand. When we both come again, me with a grunt, her with a soft moan, I pass out still inside her.

As soon as I wake up, I check the time. It's been a lot longer than two hours. The faint blush of first light is peaking through the curtains.

"I'm scanning you out now," I tell her. She gives a sleepy nod. And as I tap my bracelet to her horn cuff, I place a kiss on her bare shoulder. "We're never doing that again," I tell her, and I'm dead serious. My head is a lot clearer than it was last night. She was supposed to earn those hours helping the park, not driving me wild in my own bed. It was inappropriate at the very least, possibly a crime. "That was a one-time thing."

"I don't know who taught you how to count, but we did it a lot more than one time." She yawns and rolls over to face me. Her hair is a wild nest, and she has a loopy grin on her face. The sight of it smacks me in the heart so hard it puts a loopy grin on my face too. "Was it a particular position that offended you?" she asks as she slides a hand between my thighs to cup my balls. She squeezes them lightly and then grips my shaft, and I go from semi to fully hard in just a couple of strokes.

I topple her onto her back and climb on top, placing my knees between hers. I push her thighs apart, sliding down to settle between them, then I dip my head in for a long lick, but before I make contact, she grabs me by the hair.

"Wait. You didn't answer me. What didn't you like?"

"I wasn't talking about a position. We're doing all of them again, a bunch more times. But it'll be off the clock from now on. *That* was a one-time thing."

I miss her response if there is one because as soon as I lick her, her thighs clamp down around my ears.



I'm walking funny come Monday. My body is so loose and wrung out, it's like my bones have turned to rubber. And I can't stop smiling. That is until I step into the shower and I'm blasted by icy cold water. I jump back out, swearing under my breath. I know I gave it plenty of time to warm up. The water

heater must be busted. *Damn it.* I don't have time to fix it now. So I wrap a towel around my waist and scoop up an armload of my stuff.

The cold morning air rushes over my wet skin and sucks the warmth right out of me as I hurry up the walkway to the main house. My teeth are chattering by the time I get inside.

"Is someone running late?" I hear an amused voice just as I'm stepping into the bathroom. I pop my head back out the door. It's Iggy. She snuck out before dawn this morning, and my heart stops the moment I see her face. But then a jolt of irritation gets it going again.

"What the hell are you wearing?" The question grumbles its way out of my mouth.

"My uniform," she says and does a sassy little pirouette.

"You cut it up?" I ask, purely out of disbelief because she's clearly taken scissors to the jacket. The once full-length sleeves are now a few inches short of her elbow, and the waist only extends to a midriff.

"I improved it. The little patch thing is still here," she taps at the ranger badge above her breast pocket. "I figured that was the important part." Beneath the jacket she's wearing a dark checkered blouse with a high neck and puffed sleeves. She's layered on gold necklaces, and I have to admit, the look works for her. But that's not the point.

"It's *all* the important part! It's called a uniform because it is supposed to be *uniform*."

"That makes sense," she admits. "But the damage is done now." She shrugs. "I'm off to enjoy a leisurely breakfast since I'm ready *early*. Wait," she stops in her tracks. "Who's going to make our breakfast if you're in the shower?"

I shoot her a glare before I close the bathroom door only to hear the faint sound of her laughter coming from down the hall. The hot water soothes my grumbles, and I'd like to stay here a while under the steamy spray, but time is a luxury I'm short on this morning. Still, no matter how much I try to stay

focused on the task at hand, my thoughts continue to drift to a conversation Iggy and I had over the weekend.

I'm the idiot who insisted we establish some ground rules, and now, for better or worse, we have them. My only real goal was to draw several hard lines to ensure there'd be no repeat of our on-the-clock romp, but once the conversation was going, it sort of spiraled from there.

"Work is strictly work. No fuzzy lines. I've got it," she said, sounding exasperated. "And you're right. I'm only here until my probation is up. So you shouldn't have to abandon your dating life," she said, coming to a conclusion I hadn't anticipated.

"That's not what I was saying." I was trying to soften my hard stance by pointing out this was a temporary concern. Worrying about what was on the clock or off the clock would end as soon as her community service was up, but I was also trying to get a read on her interest in staying versus going and jumbled the two. I guess I got my answer to both questions.

"You didn't have to. You told me the day we met that you were looking for someone local. That's *very* important to you, and I know you want to find her as soon as possible. Plus, I've agreed to help you with your branding and write you some new pickup lines, and I don't back out on deals. I guess all we need to decide is whether or not we go back to being strictly friends with no benefits."

"I would hate that," I answered honestly.

"Oh good. Me too." She smiled, and my heart stuttered to see the relief on her face. "Then this is how we'll do it—you'll keep up your Friday routine so that you're staying in the game, getting some practice in, and not missing out on the chance to meet your someone special. If you find her, or even a *potential* her who you want to try out for a few nights, you and I will go full platonic. But until then, I say we do whatever we feel like the other six nights of the week. Deal?"

I know I need to quit making deals with this woman, but there wasn't any part of me that wanted to turn down the

possibility of her spending six nights a week in my bed from now through the new year.

“Deal.”



On Tuesday, we swing by my dad’s house again. It’s a cold day, and a stiff breeze rattles mostly bare branches. Despite that, I’m still surprised by the sight of my dad in a shirt with a coat on, no bathrobe, and he’s also clean shaven.

“Is everything alright?” I ask warily as I come up the porch steps.

“Where’s your colleague?” he asks, leaning around me to see if Iggy’s in the truck. She is. “Come on in. Bring her with you,” he says, rising from his rocker.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” I say scratching at the back of my head, but he ignores me and heads inside, leaving the door open behind him. To my surprise, he’s made an effort to tidy up. The dining table and chairs are all clear, and the three of us take a seat there. I can’t remember the last time my dad and I sat around a table together.

“Are you from around here?” my dad asks. It’s the first thing out of his mouth once we’re all seated. Not hello, not how are you, nothing.

“In a manner of speaking,” Iggy says, leaning back in her chair, an amused smile on her face. But when his face pinches into a scowl, she tells him no, that she lives in Boston, and that she’ll be returning home as soon as she can.

“You do know my son’s not fool enough to mess around with an out-of-towner?” he says.

“Dad,” I grumble.

“And if you respect him, you’ll leave him be.”

“Alright,” I say, rising from my chair. “Iggy, it’s time for us to go. Would you head back to the truck and wait for me there?”

She doesn't argue, but she does shoot me a questioning look before she gets up to go.

"What's gotten into you?" I turn on my dad as soon as the door closes behind her.

"She's got her hooks in you! You think I can't see it? All that sass and charm she's spraying at you like a firehose. You're in danger! And you might turn your nose up at every other piece of advice I've ever given you, son, but not this one. You need to steer clear of that woman, you hear me? Promise me you will."

"I can't steer clear of her. We work together, and she's staying with me until after the holidays." Plus, I don't want to steer clear. I want to steer right into her for now and deal with the shipwreck later.

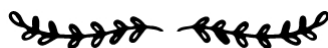
He shakes his head and mutters ominously. "I knew the moment I saw your mother that I'd never love anyone else and that one day she'd leave me. I knew both of those things at first sight. And that one's got the same look about her."

"Speaking of holidays," I say, dismissing his allusions to his failed marriage with a weary sigh. "I'm still expecting you for Christmas."

"Will she be there?" he asks, nodding his chin toward the door Iggy just left through.

I hadn't really thought about it, but my heart gives an excited squeeze as I realize she probably doesn't have anywhere else to be, which means, "Yeah, she's gonna be with us on Christmas Day." I have to fight back a delighted smile as a swarm of butterflies tickle my insides.

"We'll see," he says, crossing his arms, still glaring at the door.



Things change at the station. Iggy goes toe to toe with Luís over control of the lobby and the guest center and wins more battles than she loses. The ugly posters come down, and when Luís insists we can't afford blinds, she has me drive her

to a craft store. We install some rice paper window film that filters out the glare but lets in a bright, diffused light. It's lovely.

She steals all of the ink cartridges out of the printer and holds them hostage until Luís gives up his rant about overhead costs and finally orders a new cyan cartridge.

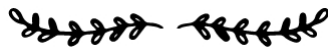
The first thing she redesigns are our flyers and shoves a large stack into every employee mailbox, mine, Luís's, and the two part-time weekend rangers. Her post-it note on each stack contains a list of distribution sites for dropping our flyers. Her knowledge of Winter Bliss is a bit dated, so she gets the names of a few places wrong, but other than that, it's a good list.

"I liked her better when she was quiet and mopey," Luís grumbles to me one afternoon while we watch her toss all the expired granola bars that have been sitting in a bowl by the coffee machine for the last three years. "What'd you do to her?"

I shrug. "I didn't do anything," I say. "I think this is just her."

"Then who'd I meet last week?" Luís asks.

I shrug again.



"Do you want to get lunch with me today?" I ask on our way into work the following week. She's been strictly adhering to our 'work is work, no fuzzy lines' ground rule, which I should appreciate but, in reality, don't care for. Almost as much as I don't care for how little I see her during the day.

She was dead serious about wanting to redesign all of our marketing material. She's taken over the only computer in the office and is on it most of the day while I'm out and about doing my usual rounds. It probably shouldn't feel like too much time apart, but it does. And even though I see her every night, I'm starting to miss her anytime she's not around.

“I can’t,” she says, mouth twisting. “My salary, though generous, is funneled through a barter system which limits my liquid assets,” she says. When I shoot her a puzzled look, she clarifies. “I don’t have lunch money.”

“My treat,” I say, smiling at the way she describes our new arrangement, which, as far as I can tell, is the same arrangement we had before. She accepts, and it’s official. We have a date lined up.

Luís agrees to let us take a long lunch as long as we promise to bring him something back. On the drive, Iggy talks shop, wanting to know which are the best views around the park and if we can get photos for the projects she’s working on.

“Yeah of course, I’d love to show you around the park.”

“Could I include you in some of the photos?” she asks.

“What for?”

“Perspective, if nothing else,” she says. I am smaller than a mountain. So yeah, why not?

Once we hit Winter Bliss, we start looking for a place to eat.

“Who let the Grossman brothers open a custard shop?” she asks, her nose wrinkling as we pass Grossman Bros Frozen Treats.

“That’s one of three locations,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “That’s too many.”

“I don’t know. They all seem to be doing good business,” I say.

“I went to Infernus Academy with those assholes. Each and every one of them wholly and truly sucked.”

“Oof, then you’re not gonna like hearing this, but the custard is really good.”

“No, don’t say that.” Her face pinches.



“And they have great burgers,” I say as I make a U-turn and pull into the drive-thru.

“Traitor,” she grumbles under her breath.

“Just trust me.”

We take our food to a park, but it’s too cold to sit outside. It’s been snowing all week. So I leave the heater running and we have a fast food picnic in the truck looking out over a frozen pond.

“Fuck,” she says after trying a spoonful of custard. “This *is* good. I hate it.”

“Then I hate it too,” I say as I take my own bite. “You gotta admit though, there’s something nice about a chain owned by a local family instead of some national corporation.”

“Depends on the family,” she shrugs. “I guess that’d make you a big fan of Perkatory, huh? A national brand owned by a local Winter Bliss family. You must be ecstatic.”

I shrug. “I don’t know if I’d consider the Perchazes local,” I say.

“Why not? Their family has roots here.”

“Yeah, but they all moved away. If you leave, you’re not local,” I say. It’s as simple as that.

“Didn’t Rom move back?” she asks. “Surely he can be reinstated into your cabal of locals, if not the entire family.” She’s teasing me.

“I suppose,” I grin. “He is engaged to the librarian. Maybe after they get hitched, I’ll consider him a full-fledged local again.”

“The redheaded gentleman with all the bow ties?” she asks, her face brightening.

“His niece, actually,” I say, smiling at the memories that stirs. I loved going to the library as a kid. Being greeted by a big smile and a fancy bow-tie certainly left an impression. It’s funny, but I haven’t thought about the old librarian in a long time.

“Age-wise, I guess that makes more sense.” She nods. “But I’m sorry to hear Mr. Bow Ties isn’t running the library anymore.”

“Oh yeah?”

She nods. “He gave me my first fashion boner. The man was dapper as sin.”

“Fashion boner.” I chuckle. “That’s not a real thing. Is it?”

“It’s like you and your nature boners.”

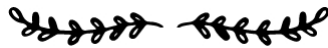
“Excuse me? Not once.”

“Oh please, you’re popping them all the time. You can’t honestly tell me you’ve never felt something swell inside you when you’re looking out at one of your beloved scenic views.”

“Sunsets,” I admit. “And sunrises. Clouds. A beautiful lake. Rainy days.” I glance over at her, and add one more. “The smell of morning air.”

“Oof, you’ve got it bad.” She shakes her head.

“You have no idea.”



**F**riday is officially the worst day of the week. I’ve never hated a day as much as I’ve come to hate Fridays. It’s our platonic night, the one night of the week Iggy sleeps in her own bed.

We have dinner with Darcy and Haisley most evenings, unless they’ve gone out somewhere. On those nights, Iggy and I head straight to my apartment after work and make a marathon of it. I’ve started keeping my fridge stocked with cold drinks and have a cabinet full of snacks, just in case it turns out to be one of those nights.

But a couple times a week, Iggy insists on working on pickup lines with me, and that includes Fridays. She’s determined to not back out on a deal I no longer care anything about and would happily release her from.

“What else have you got?” she asks, biting her lip as she taps her pen against the notebook in her lap.

“You’re looking so sweet and creamy, I could spread you like butter all up and down my toast,” I say. Her head pops up and she stares at me wide-eyed for a beat before her eyes go narrow with suspicion. She’s on to me. “There’s something there, right?” I say, keeping a perfectly straight face.

“You’ve gotta be shittin’ me.” She studies me harder, looking for a crack.

“You don’t like it?” I ask, frowning in feigned concern. “Is it the toast? Toast isn’t sexy enough, is it?” I’m barely keeping a straight face, but I press on. “How about this? You’re so sweet and creamy, I’d like to dunk my baguette into your Land o’Lakes, and just soak.” I can’t make it all the way through the word baguette without cracking a smile, and that sets her off laughing.

“You dumb ass!” she cackles and throws her pen at me.

“A baguette is sexier than toast, right? It’s French,” I say. “That one’s a keeper. Write it down.” I tap on her notebook.

“That’s the worst one! And you’ve been bombing all night.” There are tears streaming down her face now, she’s laughing so hard.

“I don’t think you know what you’re talking about. Butter is my new muse. I’m definitely catching a wife with that one.”

She doubles over, and as she’s snorting into a throw pillow, her fingers suddenly spray off a round of sparks. She bolts up right.

“Sorry!” she yelps. It’s not the first time this has happened, and like before, I tell her not to worry about it. What I don’t tell her is that I’ve started to pick up a pattern. I’m not always sure what’ll do it, but I have noticed that if I can get her relaxed enough or wild enough, she loses control and starts sparking. I’ve made it my new secret mission to find out all the ways there are to make her spark.

She stares at her fingers, brows knitted as she bends them and turns them over. I’m curious what’s going through her head, but I don’t pry.

“Should we open a bottle of wine?” I ask, hoping she’ll say yes and we can just keep doing this all night, but she checks the clock.

“It’s almost eight,” she notes, tucking her hands under her thighs. And I know what that means. It’s time for me to head to Under the Volcano. I don’t want to go, but I get up anyway and head out the door.

Fucking Fridays.

I already know this is going to be another night of batting zero despite all our pickup line prepwork. It’s hard enough to pick up women when I’m not all that interested in doing it, but I make it downright impossible by skipping the bar, driving out of town, and climbing into the bed of my truck. I lay out on my back to look at the stars, and I spend the next few hours just wondering what Iggy is doing.

## Chapter 11

*Iggg*



**T**omorrow is Thanksgiving. Personally, I'm not an observer of the holiday, but it turns out Chad is, and he seems genuinely concerned that he almost forgot about it. He drives us straight to the grocery store after work. The parking lot is packed, and the inside is a scene straight out of my nightmares. From the moment we step in the door, crowds press in on us from all sides.

I push our cart while Chad walks ahead and tries to clear the way, but it's like digging a canal with a spoon. We move forward one painful inch at a time, hindered further by the fact that he's entirely too courteous to people who cut us off. When I hiss at him to make use of his big boots, he shoots me an admonishing look and says it's our fault for being 'last minute shoppers.'

"And what are they?" I ask spreading my arms to indicate everyone around us. He gives me another one of his looks before turning to apologize to someone who bumped into him.

Apparently, we're to be held to a higher standard than the general population.

"What are we having for dinner tonight?" I ask when my stomach starts to grumble.

"I don't know yet. Why do you ask?"

"Well, now that meals are part of my pay, I should get some say in our menu, don't you think?"

"Nope," he says with a firm shake of his head. "I do not think that at all. If you wanted menu input, you should have negotiated for that."

*Damn.* He's right, and it starts my eyes fluttering and sends warmth rushing right to my panties. "Are you open to renegotiating?" I ask on a heavy breath. He doesn't hear it or see the heated look I'm giving him because he's too busy checking items off his list.

"Sure. You can pick tonight's dinner if you do the dishes," he says over his shoulder, throwing out an opening offer like it's second nature. My panties dampen even as my nose wrinkles.

"More work? I already put in a full day's work," I grumble. I was hoping he'd say something along the lines of 'if you lay topless in my bed, I'll cook you anything you want.' Why couldn't that be his offer?

He turns to give me a pointed look as he tosses another couple of boxes into our cart. "You are aware that I also worked a full day, right? And I already do most of the cooking and cleaning. And Darcy does the rest."

"Of course I'm aware. But you realize it's *your* house, and I had zero input on the distribution of chores. So, if you're trying to make me feel bad, it's not going to work. Guilt is a poor negotiating tactic," I say with a sniff.

"Is it? You and I were raised very differently, then," he says as he tosses one last item into the cart. Then, turning, he smiles. "I think that's the last of it. We can get out of here."

“Thank you, Mother Darkness!” With me in the lead, we make our way to the checkout lines, not fast, but at the top speed I can manage. I don’t have boots, but I’ve got the cart, and I’m not afraid to use it.

I pick the line, and Chad comes up behind me. The weight of his large hands comes to rest on my hips, easy and comfortable, and he nuzzles into my neck. “So, is that a no to my offer?” he asks. His warm breath sends tingles running over my skin. Seduction is a much more effective tactic. I’m not about to tell him that, but the way my breath catches might tip him off anyway. He places a light kiss at the base of my neck and my head tilts sideways to give him more access.

“I’ll wash up if we can have eggs for dinner,” I say. “That’s what I miss the most.”

“I make eggs all the time,” he says. His lips hover over my skin, and I press up on my toes, trying to bring us back into contact.

“You do,” I admit. His eggs tend to be scrambled and taste of butter. They’re good. “But I like them hard boiled.”

“I’ll make you eggs any way you want them.” And his lips press into me, brushing the sensitive spot just under my ear. I melt.

“Will you boil them for fifteen minutes?” I ask breathily as the tip of his nose traces the shell of my ear.

“Yikes,” he chuckles into my hair. “That’s way too long. Have you ever made eggs?”

I turn just enough to shoot him a glare. “A properly done egg takes time,” I say. Our mouths hover only inches apart, and his eyes land on my lips.

“Fifteen minutes? You’re sure that’s what you want?” His brow creases even as his eyes stay locked on my lips.

I nod. “Until the yolk is green. That’s how I like them.” He’s pressed up against my back and still too far away. I reach back until my hand glides around his neck.

“They’re going to smell,” he warns, then groans softly as my nails rake lightly across the nape of his neck.

“Like sulfur,” I confirm, and turning my neck a little further, I brush a soft tease of a kiss across the corner of his mouth.

He uses my belt loop to pull me the rest of the way around. The impulse item shelf rattles at my back as I bump against it, and heat spikes between us. “We need to get out of here soon or things are gonna get inappropriate,” he says with a hint of humor mixed with concern.

“You started it.” I grin then flick my tongue at him.

His eyes go hooded. “Are you tasting me?” he asks, his voice roughening into a low grumble.

I bite my lip and nod.

“What do I taste like?” His eyes flash as he stares hungrily at my mouth.

Before I can answer, someone behind us shouts. “Do you mind? You’re holding up the line!”

We straighten up, and he steps back, putting some distance between us before he turns. “Sorry,” he says and gives a friendly wave. I shoot a nasty glare in the same direction.

The shopper ahead of us makes way, and it’s then that I get my first good look at our cashier. I break into a cold sweat. How did I make it in the door, up and down the aisles, and all the way here without realizing this is the same store I came to right after I was released from jail? She’s the demoness I recognized from summer camp. Shit. I scan the front of the store, and there, just a few registers down bagging groceries, is the orc store manager.

*Fuck that guy*, I grumble inside. Chad starts emptying our items onto the belt, while I teeter between a mild panic at the thought that the orc manager will pull me aside again if he sees me and seething at the memory of him doing it last time. I hope he gets a papercut from every bag he touches every day and forever, until the end of time.



“Chad,” a cheery voice lights up as he steps up to the register, and my attention snaps back to him. A friendly smile warms his face, aimed right at the cashier, and she’s giving him one right back. A snarl pulls at my lips, but I catch it in time to smother the sound. Not that anyone is asking me, but I strongly disapprove of him knowing her. I don’t like it.

“You’re looking good. Is that a new hat?” The cashier looks him up and down, in a completely obvious way. Her posture straightens, and she goes from slouched to boobs lifted, front and center, in the fluttery bat of an eye.

“Hiya, Marsie.” *Marsie*, right. That’s her dumb name. “Same hat,” Chad says, tipping it at her. And that’s when I resolve that next time we’re practicing flirting, I’m going to tell him to full stop on tipping his hat. Nobody should get to see how doofy and adorably charming he is until they’ve earned it, and Marsie certainly hasn’t.

“I guess you’re just wearing it extra well today,” she says with a wink.

*Oh, is he, Marsie?* That’s how he always wears his hat. On his head. What an unimaginative compliment. I glare at her, the tips of my fingers growing hot. I shake them out under the counter, trying to cool them off. The last thing I need is to set off sparks, cause a scene, and have the store manager on me again.

“I haven’t seen you out lately. Did you find a new regular spot?” she asks, her smile never slipping.

“Nope,” he says.

What does she mean she hasn’t seen him out? I try to catch his eye, but he’s looking the other way and scratching the back of his neck.

“I’ll be at Under the Volcano this Friday. How about you finally buy me that drink? Taylin and I are over.” Her eyes flutter in the least subtle invitation I’ve ever seen.

“Uh, sure. Maybe not this Friday, but next time I see you, I’ll buy us a round,” he says with a polite nod.

I feel the sparks coming off my fingers and hear the sizzle of them hitting the floor and the skirt of the counter. *Shit*. I can't stop them. Chad's quick to notice and even quicker to pay. Then he slides a hand across my lower back and steers us out of the store, guiding me with one hand and our cart with the other. I'm not sure how he manages both because I'm too busy glaring over my shoulder.

As we pass the orc manager, the fucker nods and smiles at me, or at Chad. Either way, what the fuck? More sparks.

Outside, heavy gray clouds have rolled in, and we jog our way to the truck through an icy rain. By the time we reach it, I've calmed a little and the sparks have died out. My fingers feel almost back to normal. By demon standards that was a minor incident, but for me, it was a lot. I'm a little shaken as I climb into the truck.

"You know you don't need to worry about her, right?" Chad asks softly as he starts it up. "Or anyone, if you didn't want to," he mumbles with a quick glance in my direction.

I straighten up in my seat. What does that mean? He knows I'm leaving after the holidays. This arrangement of '*six days a week of whatever we feel like*' is temporary. Fridays are his real life. It's not my place to worry about what he does on those nights, who he sees or buys drinks for. That's our deal. And that's what he's kindly pointing out to me, that I was dangerously close to stepping all over it.

"I'm sorry," I mumble back. And I truly am. I'm equally sorry and embarrassed. I may not be the world's finest example of a demon, but I do take my deals very seriously. I swear I do. "I'm so sorry. That won't happen again."



Chad and Darcy start cooking at the unholy hour of six the next morning, and barely controlled chaos rules the day. Around noon, I ride along with him to drop off holiday food at his dad's cabin. Chad gets a grunt, which passes for a thank you. It doesn't faze him, but it irks me. I get a glare and a, "Still around, I see."

To which I reply, “Would you like to pay now or should we add this to your tab?”

Henry and Chad give me the exact same startled look.

“Oh? No charge again?” I ask Chad, feigning surprise with raised eyebrows. Then, turning back to Henry, I say, “He’d make a terrible demon. I’d never go this far out of my way for my family without expecting quite a bit in return, plus interest.” I chuckle, but he knows I’m not joking.

I don’t understand how humans justify taking advantage of family. Strangers sure, but *family*? The more important the relationship, the more effort you should put into making things square and the more generous you should be in repayment. Humans seem to do it the exact opposite, and I have to wonder how they don’t end up resenting each other.

If, like me, you want to avoid messy family obligations, then don’t accept anything from them. Easy.

“I didn’t ask for anything in return, and I don’t need it,” Chad insists, but he’s lying to himself. You don’t keep up this level of care for someone you don’t want anything from.

“You want him to come for Christmas, don’t you?” I ask.

Chad glances at his dad. “He knows he’s invited.” Of course he knows. Chad invites him twice a week, but Henry waves him off every time.

“Well, now he knows he’s obligated. We’ll see you at Christmas, Henry. Agreed?” I glance around the table set with a feast for one, and then offer him my forearm.

He scowls for a moment, but then to both Chad’s and my surprise, he takes it.

“Fine,” he grumbles. We shake, and Chad and I leave.



**B**y the time we get back to the house, Darcy has set a beautiful table. She surprises me with an unrecognizable dish that I eventually come to understand is her take on a demon classic, just horrifically undercooked. The top is supposed to be blackened to a shattering crisp. Her version is

golden brown, but it's still a touching gesture. If she were my mom, I'd refuse to eat it, but I can measure Darcy's and my relationship in days and weeks, which means I can accept her kindnesses with little to no obligation to repay her. It's nice. I need more new acquaintances in my life.

We sit down together, Chad, me, Darcy, and Haisley in her high chair, and the strangest part of it is the constant conversation. Of course, my only basis for comparison is the demon tradition of the Silent Hour Feast on New Ember's Eve, and as the name implies, the meal is consumed in complete silence.

"Where'd you work before you got the park ranger job?" Darcy asks, alternating bites for herself and the baby.

"That's personal," I say with soft reproof. She's human and therefore slightly oblivious to the boundaries of proper etiquette. She can ask what type of work I do, but she shouldn't ask for specifics.

"Oh. Ok. Where'd you go to college?" That's also specific.

"I have a close friend who still doesn't know that," I tell her. Although, I already like Darcy more than the friend I'm thinking of, so maybe I'll tell her in a year or two, if we keep in touch.

"You told me about you and Chad the first day I met you. Wasn't *that* personal?" Darcy gives me a puzzled look, and I understand her confusion.

"It wasn't personal at the time," I say. "So I was free to share."

"Is it personal now?" Chad asks, and even though he looks relaxed the way he's leaning back in his chair, I see a touch of pink creep up his cheeks, and I think he might be holding his breath.

"Yes, obviously. If she asked me about you now, I wouldn't tell her a thing." Why would he ask that? Doesn't *he* think we've moved into personal territory? Since agreeing to be *friends*, we've also slept together a multitude of times, worked together, and bound ourselves with several original and

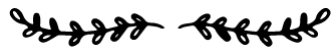
renegotiated deals, most of which are ongoing. Our relationship is the very definition of personal. It is quite possibly the most personal relationship I've ever had.

I shift uncomfortably in my chair as that thought sinks in.

He doesn't say anything, just smiles down at his plate, and I catch the soft impressions of where his dimples are starting to show.

"Do you want to hear about other meaningless hookups I've had?" I ask, turning back to Darcy. That seems to be something she's interested in, and it's something I can share freely.

"No," she and Chad answer in unison, and echoing their outburst, Haisley screeches. Well, I tried. It's their stupid tradition to talk during a feast anyway. If they don't know how to make appropriate dinner conversation, I can't help them.



Dishes are officially my new nightly chore. I don't have to do them by myself, but I have to help. Every night. It's not terrible, but I'm embarrassed to admit that this new agreement was arrived at while Chad had his fingers inside me and he was whispering vaguely bargain-ish terms right against my clit.

It was so fucking hot, I entirely failed to make any kind of counteroffer. To be fair to me, it felt like a very, *very* good deal at the time, but now that I'm standing at the sink with my head a little clearer, I think it boiled down to: "I'll make you a deal, how about you help out with dishes from now on?" And I agreed. *Harumph.*

That's what I get for following him to his apartment for a 'traditional nap' after the Thanksgiving meal. Naps are tricks. I know that now.

Just as the last of the dishes are put away, my phone buzzes. I fish it out of my pocket and freeze.

"Everything alright?" Chad asks, leaning back against the counter as he throws a dish towel over his shoulder. I do a

double take because my brain fritzes a little over how sexy that looks. I mean, yes, he's rolled up his sleeves too, and his forearms are crossed right over his chest, but *why is the addition of a dish towel so hot?* I shake my head clear.

"I'm just, uh—I need a few minutes," I say and head down the hall to what I've started calling my Friday-night room to check the message. It's from my one and only sister, Ardesca.

ARDI

Hey. Do you have a new job?

Fuck. I was very careful to make sure word of my volunteer position didn't leak to anyone. But sisters are snoop and cunning. A nervous prickle runs up my skin.

What did you hear?

ARDI

I went by the shop to see you. They wouldn't say exactly, but I'm guessing you don't work there anymore. And you weren't at your apartment. Where are you?

What are you doing in Boston?

ARDI

I wanted to see you. In person. You keep dodging me.

I'm not there. I'm out of town.

ARDI

Are you going to make it home this year?

For the holidays, she means. It really upset her when I didn't go last year, but this year, even if I wanted to, I have no choice. I'm stuck in Winter Bliss.

No, sorry. Not this year.

ARDI

That'll be two years in a row. What did I do, Iggy? Just tell me.

Ugh, little sisters.

You didn't do anything, dummy. I'll be home next year.

Probably. I don't know. Maybe.

I promise.

I don't hear back from her. So I hop over to another messaging app, the one I use for my mom.

This is the last year you can expect my absence for the holidays.

MOM

I never asked you not to come.

True. What she asked was for me to hire a magic tutor and learn to make fire before I came. Technically, not an uninvite, but it had the same effect.

MOM

You're welcome to come this year. Everyone would love to see you at the Silent Feast. I hope you can make it.

The Silent Feast? I grit my teeth. One hour of just eating and no talking, and of course, no fire rituals. The perfect event to invite me to so that I don't slip up and tell Ardesca's beloved and oh-so-talented fiancé, Silas, or his very impressive parents that I can't make fire. That's what she's inviting me to.

How kind of you, but I can't come this year. I will, however, be there for the entire advent next year, from Winter Solstice to New Ember's Day.

MOM



Wonderful. I look forward to hearing regular updates on how you're progressing with your tutor.

Her icon goes gray. She's marked herself as unavailable.

I grumble inwardly through an hour or two of TV. Darcy and Haisley already went to bed. I expect my black mood to last the night, but at some point while I'm curled up next to Chad under a thick blanket with a few logs crackling in the fireplace, it starts to fade.

By the time we turn off the TV, it's gone. I've arrived at the conclusion that my mom's unreasonable expectations are her problem. She'll just have to learn to accept that and me. I'm showing up just as I am next year, and weirdly, I'm feeling confident about it. Like, somehow it'll be fine and not a horrific disaster. Where'd that come from?

Chad and I leave the house to head to the garage apartment. He starts groping me the second we're out the door, and when he pinches my ass, I squeak and throw a few unintentional sparks. He lunges at me with a wolfish grin, but I take off before he can pinch me again, laughing and squealing as I run from him. My feet crunch across the icy lawn. He gives chase, crunching right behind me with big, long strides. He catches and releases me twice before I even reach the stairs.

"No more deals tonight," I yell at him over my shoulder as I race up the steps. I'm not getting tricked again by his magic mouth and long, thick fingers. I'm one step over the threshold when he scoops me up and carries me to his bed, kicking the door closed behind us.

"How about just one more?" he asks as he bounces me down. He unzips my pants and pulls them off so fast, I hardly have time to register it's happening.

"There's something I really want," he says, as he strips off his shirt.

I should say no, but I'm staring at his bare chest. His pants start coming off next, and *damn it*, I can't resist. "Go on," I say warily. I scoot up toward the headboard, giving myself

some distance and, hopefully, a sporting chance. The closer he is, the worse I negotiate.

“Have you ever been to the Truthfire Festival?” he asks just before he starts crawling up the bed, closing the distance. Holy Mother Below, it’s a magnificent view. My heart is racing and ready to burst at the sight of him.

I have to stop him.

I plant my foot on his chest, holding him back while I answer. “I snuck in a couple times as a teen. Why do you ask?”

He rises to his knees, and one of his big hands lands on my foot, covering it and holding it to his chest. He caresses the top of my foot, giving me a heated look, then with a light touch, he runs his deliciously warm palm from my ankle to my knee and back, sending slow electric tingles across my skin.

“Did you have fun?” he asks as he moves my foot from his chest to his shoulder and places a light kiss on the inside of my ankle.

“I never got to see much of it,” I say, breath hitching. His mouth moves an inch up my leg and plants another soft kiss. Then another. The Truthfire Festival is considered adult only. Unattended minors were quickly rounded up and sent home; I doubt I was there twenty minutes.

His lips continue traveling up my leg, leaving a sweetly burning trail of kisses behind. His lips pass my knee and keep going. By the time he’s made his way up the length of my leg, there’s a pool of heat between my thighs, right where he’s looking next.

“How about we go together this year?” His mouth presses into the cloth of my panties, and he sucks ever so lightly. Even with the buffer, the contact draws a soft groan from me. His fingers hook the waistband, and he starts pulling my panties down. He follows the fabric with his mouth, kissing his way down the inside of my other leg.

He tosses my panties aside and looks at me, expectant. Right, he asked a question.

“How is this a deal?” I ask, proud of myself that I caught that. I won’t be agreeing to whatever he says like I did earlier today. Fool me once.

He pushes my legs further apart and comes to sit on his heels right in front of me, his knees pressing into my spread thighs. My head goes fuzzy, and I nod once before I stop myself. What am I nodding about? There’s nothing to agree to yet. Quit it.

He motions for me to raise my arms over my head, and I do. He strips off my shirt.

He leans forward and slides a hand behind my back to unclasp my bra while his mouth hovers at my ear. “New Year’s Eve is on a Friday this year. I want to negotiate to spend it with you, the whole day. What would it take?”

He returns to resting on his heels and tosses my bra aside. His eyes go heated as he watches my bare breasts swell with each breath I take. My nipples go taut under his gaze. He reaches out with both hands to palm them, first with gentle squeezes, then firmer, hungrier, before he takes my nipples between his thumb and forefingers and rolls them. I hiss, and he replies with dirty grumbles deep in his throat, and the sound alone has wetness dripping between my legs.

“What if you meet someone between now and then?” I ask. The thought tumbles out of my mouth, sending a sharp pang through my chest. But before he can say anything, I push the feeling aside and supply my own answer. “I’ll be your backup. If you don’t find your someone special before then, I’m your date. Deal?” It’s not really a deal, it’s a contingency clause at best, but close enough.

He doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, he hooks his hands under my knees and, moving down the bed, pulls me away from the headboard until I’m flat on my back.

He keeps my thighs spread open as he lowers himself on top of me, pressing us chest to chest. I sink into the bed under his weight. The tip of his cock is positioned right at my entrance, and it bumps against me, throbbing along to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Deal.” He smiles, dimples on full display.

His skin is lusciously warm against mine, and everywhere we make contact is its own little world of bliss. Everything around us slows. The electric sparks give way to a glowy kind of heat, and we pause to linger. I know he feels it too, this warmth that radiates between us in these moments, after our clothes have come off but before the throes of passion. He found this place first, paused first, just like we’re doing now.

His eyes go soft as he stares at me. I stare back, retracing all the details of his face I already know by heart. The line of his nose, the curve of his lips, the square of his teeth.

His fingers brush through my hair, along my scalp, then trail behind the long point of my ear. As his hand moves, his eyes stay with mine. I had no idea this glowy place existed. I may never have found it if not for him, but now that I know it’s here, I like it too.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs as his fingers trail down my neck. His hand pauses in its southward glide to cup my breast. His palm, so deliciously large and rough, massages me tenderly, almost reverently. Again he lingers, eyes soft, as he takes his time to wonder at the feel of me.

His hand continues on, passing over my stomach, until he has to lift his hips to reach between my thighs. He rubs a few slow circles over my clit until I’m rubbing back against him. The roll of my hips picks up speed, and soon I’m panting for more pressure, more friction. My hips lift in an insistent invitation.

The glowing moment is wonderful, but I’m ready for more.

“So perfect,” he mumbles against my neck.

“And dripping wet. Do something about it, please.” I wrap one of my legs around his and pull him closer.

“I’m going to. A couple of times,” he promises, but he’s taking too long. I nip at his neck to hurry him. He chuckles.

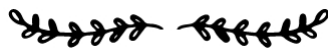
The bed sways as he shifts his weight to his knees and elbows, gaining purchase. With one long drive, he thrusts his

hips forward, pushing into me until he's fully and deeply seated.

We both moan.

The bed rocks, gently at first, until he picks up speed, and the sweet words he is mumbling against my skin become rough and guttural. He grips my thigh, yanking it higher. I gasp as he hits my inner wall.

My nails sink into his back as I make a noisy, wordless plea for him to keep going.



*How is it already December?* I wonder as I stare out the passenger window watching the trees go by.

There was a children's book of old-world lore I used to read over and over when I was a kid. One of the stories was about the very first imp to ever crawl out of the Great Abyss. His name was Time, and Time, like all the imps that would follow after him, was capricious and mischievous. He'd take one day and stretch it out so far that it'd eventually wrap around the whole world. The sun would catch up to itself and burn its own behind. Time would dance a jig and cackle at his clever trick. Then he'd shrink a season down to a single breath, place it on a dandelion head, and blow it out to sea. There goes Fall. He'd laugh and wave.

As it turns out, Time is a devious little fucker.

I've been in Winter Bliss for sixty-one days now. The first thirty were a lonely eternity that crawled by miserably slow. The next thirty flew by in a blur of changes and unexpected surprises. Thirty more, and I'm free to go home. I'm pretty sure I should be excited, but instead I'm itchy with apprehension. Only I can't quite put a finger on what there is to feel apprehensive about. The days are moving quickly now. That's a good thing.

"You coming?" Chad asks. He's climbed out of the truck, but he's still holding his door open, giving me an amused look.

“Yeah, sorry.” I snap out of it and follow him, but something still feels off when we get inside. Maybe that’s why I pick a fight with Luís.

“*¡Váyanse!* Get her out of my hair,” he says to Chad. “I’m not throwing out perfectly good coffee!” he insists. At the end of each day, if there’s any coffee left in the pot, Luís sticks the whole carafe in the fridge, and the next morning, he puts it back on the hot plate to reheat it. It’s gross. But he doesn’t serve it to guests, and I never drink it. So why did I decide to make a stink about it today?

“Come on,” Chad ushers me toward the door. “I actually do need some help. Are you okay getting your hands dirty?” he asks.

“Doing what?”

“The lava channels need to be cleared.”

“What does that mean?”

“On New Year’s Eve, they’ll be setting off the volcano,” he says. He means New Ember’s Eve, but I just nod. It’s the same day but an entirely different holiday. Demons set off the volcano for New Ember’s Eve, while New Year’s Eve revelers pop little noise makers and wave four-inch sparklers. It’s not a competition, but demons are clearly winning. “By this time of year, lots of critters have made homes in those channels. We need to evict them for their own good.”

“That sounds like a lot of work.”

“It is. It’ll take a few weeks. Less if I’ve got some nimble help.” He winks at me.

I smile smugly. I am nimble, and he knows it. I gave him a good demonstration of that just the other night.

As soon as we’re back in the truck, my discomfort returns, and I know what it is. “Could we leave early today?”

“For your check-in? Yeah, of course. I already cleared it with Luís. Don’t worry, I’ll get you there well ahead of closing time.” Of course he remembers it’s my sixty-day check-in with my probation officer. He probably gets some kind of

notification as my court-approved community service compliance officer.

My back is already aching come noon, and we've maybe cleared out a mile of one lava channel. Thankfully, Chad throws out an idea. "Last year we had three feet of snow on the ground. This year, it's mostly leaves and what not. We could go grab a couple of leaf blowers from the maintenance shed, see if they speed things up."

"That! Let's do that." I snap my fingers and point at him. It's a very good idea, but not so impressive that I expect the pile of leaves at his feet to leap to life. Tongues of flame jump three feet high. Chad rips his jacket off and starts beating at the pile, and he doesn't stop until the leaves are scattered and every last bit of fire is stamped out.

"Holy fucking shit," I mutter behind my hand. I didn't move to help. I just stood there, wide-eyed and flabbergasted. "I'm so sorry, it was an accident," I say even though I'm only seventy percent sure that was me. I felt a tug in my gut and a rush through my arm burst from my fingertips, but somehow I'm still unsure I could have done that. Me.

"Was it though?" His eyes narrow at me in disbelief.

"What do you mean?" I ask, brow pinching. "Of course it was an accident."

"Demon's snap to make fire, Iggy. You think I don't know that? That's public knowledge!" He's mad. His face is bright red and his jaw is twitching, but he's right. I snapped my fingers and made fire. Like a demon. "Sparking is one thing. It's natural and you can't always control it. I understand that, but fire is no joke. It's not funny, and it's not something to play with, especially not in a forest full of dry brush," he says sternly, then starts pacing back and forth.

I take the tiniest taste of the air. He's not furious. He's scared. Fire is terrifying to non-demons.

"Of course it's not a joke," I say emphatically. "I honestly did not mean to do that. I've never—I couldn't—" I want to explain but words are jumbling in my head, and my mouth just

keeps popping open in awe every time I look at the blackened patch of earth. The fire may be out, but I'm still sparking inside.

As soon as we're back in the truck, I'm on my phone. I have questions.

Vale! I made fire! What do I do?

VALE

Put it out.

I roll my eyes.

Thanks, smartass. I mean what do I do now? How do I do it again?

VALE

I don't know, but congrats!

Would you PLEASE ask your fake doctor wife?! Am I cured?

VALE

Real doctor, fake wife. Gimme a min.

Time stretches the next five minutes into a million years, the little fucker, but Vale finally writes back.

VALE



Okay, here's what she says: if it happens once, it can happen again. Start a journal of when it happens, where you are, what you're doing, who you're with, and what you're feeling, etc.

Okay. Then what?

VALE

Then come see her.

Nope.

His fake doctor wife is tricky, I see. Just for good measure, I add:

You better not tell her my name.

VALE

She already knows your name.

Big mouth!

VALE

I didn't tell her. She was at our trial.

Oh yeah. Sorry.

VALE

Hey, what's your firemark look like? Are you a spiral or a burst pattern?

Oh shit! I didn't get to look. Damn it!

VALE

You'll see it next time. That's exciting, Iggy. Congrats again. I'm really happy for you.

My eyes well up, but I quickly wipe them dry. Vale's fake doctor wife is lucky to have him. I hope she knows that. I might start keeping a journal anyway, just for me.

By the time we get to the courthouse, it's getting close to five, and I'm squirming in my chair.

"We'll make it," Chad promises, but that's not what I'm worried about. I made fire and there are only a couple people in the world who understand what a big deal that is. Vale knows, but a text exchange isn't enough. I need to see my friends in person.

As soon as he rolls up to the curb, I jump out, sprinting as soon as my feet hit the sidewalk. He pulls off to go park, and right before I reach the door, I bump into a giant wall of muscle.

"Rex!" I throw my arms around the big guy and burst into tears, gibbering an incoherent mix of anxiety and excitement.

"Hey, freak," he greets me by my nickname, voice low and soothing as he pats my back and grumbles over my head. "Who do I need to murder?"

## Chapter 12

*Chad*



When I wake up the next morning, Iggy's wrapped up in my arms. She grunts in her sleep and wriggles, but I don't loosen my hold. There's a faint aftertaste of a bad dream lingering in the back of my throat. It's bitter and acrid like smoke and char.

She started a fire last week. If the conditions had been just right, if the wind had been blowing and the brush a touch dryer, it could have been a disaster. But the moment the fire leapt, I didn't care if the whole mountain went up in flames. I was terrified for her safety alone. For a split second, I forgot she was a demon and the thought that flashed through my mind was—*you're not taking her from me.*

I've stomped out more than my fair share of errant fires in the past, but I've never given one as ruthless a beat down as the one she started in the lava channel that day.

I murdered that fire.

As soon as it was out, my anger shifted directions. I wanted to throttle her for being careless with something so important to me. But she swore it was an accident, and she looked honest-to-goodness stunned. She just kept staring at the patch of scorched earth, and it took me a solid five minutes to snap her out of it.

It doesn't matter that she would have been fine or that I would have been toast, because it's not the fire that's giving me nightmares. It's the fury that raged inside me like a wild animal, claws out and teeth gnashing. It's a feeling I can't unfeel. And now I know what's coming for me, what it's going to feel like on January 1st, the day her probation is over and she packs up and leaves.

It's going to be fucking awful, but I'm not ready to start mourning what I haven't lost yet. I squeeze her close, and she grumbles something that sounds vaguely like "go away." I chuckle and nip at her earlobe. I'm not going anywhere.

Just then, my alarm sounds.

Oh shit, I almost forgot. "Wake up, we've got to go," I say as I jump out of bed, brimming with excitement.

"It's Sunday," she grumbles, and without even opening her eyes, she manages to aim her grump face right at me. That's the adorable face I wake up to every morning, and every morning, it makes me smile. I jump back into bed to kiss and pinch the grumpiness off of her. When she's giggling and swatting at me, I know I've done it.

Outside, we're greeted by a couple inches of fresh fallen snow, a blue-gray sky, and white fluffy clouds reflecting the soft, pale yellow glow of a winter sunrise. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the sharp and crisp morning air. I couldn't have asked for a more perfect day for our holiday excursion.

"What's that?" Iggy asks, pointing at the thermos I'm holding. She's wearing one of my jackets. It's too big for her, but when I offered to borrow one from Darcy, she insisted on wearing one of mine. And do I fucking love the sight of her wrapped up in my clothes? Yes. Yes, I do.

“I’m bringing some hot cider,” I say. “It’s cold out. A hot drink keeps the chills away. Do you have a scarf?” I ask, noting her bare neck. She gives me a look so sour, I burst out laughing. “Why do you hate scarves?” I ask.

She ignores my question, giving me a side eye as she saunters off toward the truck. “We’re taking the station wagon!” I call after her, and she corrects course, heading around to the front of the garage.

When the four of us—me, Iggy, Darcy, and baby Haisley, dressed in her finest elf onesie with giant plush ears sewn onto the hood—are all piled into the wagon, we head out. Everyone wants to know where we’re going, but too bad, it’s a surprise. I turn on the radio. The local stations have been playing Christmas music all week, and the one up next is a classic: “Winter Wonderland” sung by the late, great crooner, Elvin Fae Prince. Perfect.

I reach for Iggy’s hand, and the moment our palms touch, she laces our fingers together and pulls my hand into her lap. Warmth travels all the way up my arm and lights up my chest. My heart starts glowing like a bulb with too much wattage coursing through it.

Everything is perfect.

By the time we arrive at our destination, Darcy’s already figured out the surprise. “We’re going to chop down our own tree?” she asks, and in the rearview mirror, I catch the sight of her face lighting up.

“Yup,” I confirm as I park the wagon in the makeshift parking lot that’s just an open field.

“Is this a family tradition?” Iggy asks once she’s back at my side with her hand in mine again. This is new, the hand holding. Sometime after the fire, it just sort of started happening. I’d reach for her, or she’d reach for me. And now, we seem to be a little bit stuck on each other. I’m not sure what it means, but I like it. And I’ve decided I’m going keep doing all the things I like doing with Iggy for as long as I can, down to the very last second.

“Eh, yes and no. My family never did this,” I say, not adding that once my mom left, we stopped celebrating holidays all together. “But I used to tag along with a friend’s family when they went to chop their tree. They had to get a special permit back then, and those were limited. But now that there’s a Christmas tree farm, anyone can do it.” I was so enamored of the idea when I first heard about it that I volunteered a couple of weekends to help plant the first crop of trees.

“So it’s not your family tradition, but you want it to be,” Iggy sums up.

“Exactly.” I smile down at her then glance over at Darcy. Haisley is strapped to the front of her chest, and I can’t help myself, I tug on one of her elf ears.

The entrance to the farm is just ahead, and as we pass a board with prices, Darcy’s eyes bug. “I didn’t know trees cost so much. Let me pitch in.”

“Nope. I’ve got it,” I wave her off. Before she can argue, a voice calls out.

“You made it!” Looking up, I see Birdie, the owner of the tree farm and surrounding acreage, walking our way. Darcy hurries out ahead of us, and she and the baby are greeted first. “Is this Ms. Haisley? Look how big you’ve gotten! Oh, the ears!” Birdie gives a delighted cackle. “I love them.”

“I’m learning to sew. First attempt,” Darcy grins, proud of her handiwork.

“Birdie,” I tip my hat in greeting as soon as we catch up to them. “You’re looking as lovely as a swarm of Gosta fireflies at dusk,” I say, laying on the charm.

“Oh, that’s a nice one, Chad.” She nods appreciatively, and I shoot Iggy a smug ‘I told you so’ look. At her insistence, we’ve continued practicing pickup lines, and when I threw out this exact one the other day, she snorted and implied that I wasn’t even trying. Clearly, I was spinning gold.

I’m looking to gloat, but Iggy’s attention is caught elsewhere.

“You’re Birdie?” she asks, an overly-interested expression creasing the corners of her face. Shit. For a split second I think she’s going to ask Birdie about the fiancé that jilted her, but then I remember she’s a demon and relax. That’s a personal question.

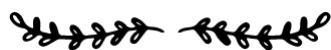
“I am,” Birdie answers with a courteous smile. I see the moment she notices the GPS monitor clamped to Iggy’s horn. Her face takes on the same overly-interested expression, and she gives Iggy a not-so-subtle once over. “You must be Iggy.”

“Guilty.” Iggy beams, but it’s not a normal smile. There’s definitely mischief lurking behind it. “I’m so pleased to meet you—Birdie,” she says, laying a little extra emphasis on Birdie’s name as she sticks out her hand in what would pass for a friendly gesture if, again, not for her smirky little smile.

Birdie hesitates only a moment before shaking the offered hand. “You’ve got a lovely property,” Iggy continues. “And look at that.” She points to a spot in the distance, what looks like a sheltered viewing area built squarely on the top of a very steep hill. “I bet building way up there was a massive pain in the ass. Tell me—just how big and dumb was the big dummy you tricked into lugging all that stuff up there?” A bit rude, but Birdie chuckles.

“Real cute, freak,” a voice grumbles behind us, and I turn around to see a behemoth of a demon standing there, arms crossed over a massive chest, his neck and arms covered in tattooed flames.

On instinct, I step in front of Iggy.



I’m introduced to Iggy’s close, personal friend, Rex. Rex Perchaz. Rom’s brother.

Great.

It turns out Birdie and I are in the same boat, serving as compliance officers to two of the three miscreants who blew up the town square statue and got themselves sentenced to community service.

It really is a small town.

I guess I should have recognized Rex by his nose and horns. Let's just say there's a strong family resemblance, but it doesn't take me long to realize that Rex isn't his brother. He's not growling *'fucking Chad'* at me under his breath for one, and, well, I happen to appreciate that.

But then he and Birdie give us a tour of the property, and that's when I really start to warm up to Rex. He knows his stuff when it comes to construction, power tools, and heavy machinery. He's got a lot of toys in the barn. It puts the tool shed at the ranger station to shame, and I want to play with all of them. But before I get a chance, we move on.

"Are we going to come back to the barn later?" I ask, tripping over the waddling kid goat that's been tailing Rex everywhere he goes. He's all belly. What are they feeding that thing? When we get up to the lookout, I get headbutted in the shin when I try to step over the pudgy-monster. I was just trying to see what Rex was pointing out, some kind of special brace he used to frame out this giant pergola.

"Are you trying to make friends?" Birdie asks, walking up, grabbing my hand and pouring treats into it. "He likes these," she says with a conspiratorial wink.

Um. No. I was not trying to befriend a goat, but now I've got a handful of sticky pellets. So I shove them under the snarfler's snout and nearly get a finger chomped off for my trouble. Ouch. Dang it, goat! I'm trying to pay attention.

"How'd you hold it up there to secure the corners, a forklift?" I ask.

"Nah, just a step stool—" Rex lifts up on his toes, stretches his arm up overhead, and smacks one of the support beams. He's almost seven feet tall. So yeah, a step stool plus his wingspan, and the giant demon can raise a roof all by himself. Fuck, that's cool.

"It's beautiful up here," Iggy says, a thoughtful look on her face.



“Beats some stupid luxury cabins, am I right?” Rex grins proudly, if a little smugly. I guess cabins were the original plan back when Birdie and her then fiancé first started building this place.

Iggy nods. “Yeah. Definitely a smart move not going down that road, not with The Emberlight Resort only one mountain over. Leave luxury to them. You’ve got your own thing going on here. What’s this place called again?”

“Wild Hearts,” Birdie says, scratching the head of the prairie dog riding along in the front pocket of her overalls. Iggy tilts her head thoughtfully at the varmint.

“This little guy doesn’t strike me as *wild*,” she says and feeds him one of the carrots Birdie has been passing around. Her pockets are full of all kinds of animal treats.

“Birdie’s a wildlife expert,” I say, jumping in. “Sure, her ranch animals are all domesticated, but she’s the area’s unofficial rehab center for injured wild animals.” All the park rangers know to bring them here because we can trust her to rehabilitate and release them responsibly. And she does it on her own dime, which spares us from the grim alternative.

As we hike back down the hill, Iggy and Birdie chat more about Wild Hearts. I catch tidbits about a brand and marketing plan. But there’s something I’m a lot more interested in. I hurry over to ask Rex about the double-headed ax I saw hanging in the barn. I know it’s overkill, but I’d really like to give that thing a swing, so I have to ask, “Can I borrow it to cut down our tree?”



There’s more Christmas music and cider to be had when we get home and start decorating our freshly cut, if a bit hacked up, Christmas tree. My friend’s family had a special box of heirloom ornaments that had been crafted, collected, and passed down to them. Neither Darcy or I have anything like that, so we bought up a half-dozen sets of color-matched ornaments at the craft store. That’ll do for this year, but I’ve got my heart set on building our own collection eventually.

As we're untangling a box of lights, Iggy asks how many guests we're expecting now. She's picked up on my goal of getting everyone to the house for Christmas Day, and asks for periodic updates like she's following a sporting match.

"Same. No new confirmations," I say. Her lips purse into an unhappy line.

Once the lights are wrapped around the tree, I leave Darcy and Iggy to it while I get started on lunch, but I have a good view from the kitchen. Iggy's nervous to help with the ornaments, worried about hanging the wrong things together.

"That's just Rudolph. You can put him next to a star. He doesn't mind," Darcy assures her.

"But how do I know which ones deserve places of honor on your display tree?" she asks, giving our boxes of ornaments dubious looks.

"You can pick whichever ones you like."

"No," Iggy gives her head a firm shake. "This is your house. You should choose which deities are honored here."

"Oh, you're mistaken," Darcy says, and I think she's going to correct her about the ornaments representing deities, but instead she says, "This is Chad's house." Without being asked, she shares her story of showing up one cold January night, seven months pregnant and asking if she could stay on my couch. Well, of course. She was only sixteen then, and she'd had a big fight with her dad. "I was only going to stay a night or two until I figured out what to do. But then Chad set up the nursery and we just stayed," she says and shrugs. "Anyway, this is his house. We're just guests."

"Permanent guests, welcome to stay indefinitely," I amend.

"Why does he live over the garage?" Iggy asks.

"I told him Haisley and I could take it!" Darcy blushes. She's embarrassed? Nonsense. What for?

"It was my choice!" I butt in. I wanted some privacy, and they needed a home. There was an easy, no-brainer solution, and it made everyone happy.

“That’s very generous of him,” Iggy says, which, on the surface sounds nice, but there’s something I don’t like in the way she says it. She sounds stricken. Darcy nods, agreeing.

“It’s nothing,” I insist.

“Darcy.” Iggy shakes her head. “How will you ever repay him?”

“I don’t know yet,” Darcy says softly.

I drop what I’m doing and stomp into the living room, instantly livid. “Nobody’s asking her to repay anything.” How dare she even suggest that?

I expect Iggy to push back but, to my surprise, it’s Darcy who pops up off the floor and squares up on me. Her face flushes red as she stomps a foot. “Nobody asked you! I’m talking to Iggy. Go back to the kitchen, Chad.” She literally shoos me like I’m a house fly. I huff for a second, shifting agitatedly in place. “Go,” she insists, and I finally retreat. “He never lets me talk about this,” I hear Darcy grumble. There’s nothing to talk about. “I don’t have the money now, but can I tell you what I’ve been thinking?”

I briefly hope Iggy will shut this down, but of course not. Why would she when she instigated this whole nonsense conversation? I strain my ears, doing my best to eavesdrop. I don’t like this. I’m itchy all over, irritated, and uncomfortable. If I’m happy to have them here, why does there have to be any talk of payment at all? Iggy and I are going to have a serious talk later. This is unacceptable. I don’t need her putting ideas into Darcy’s head about her owing me anything.

“Oh, that’s good—makes sense—” I hear Iggy say, followed shortly by, “No, that’s excessive even when inflating for gratitude, but do you know what he’d really value?”

My ears perk with curiosity, but just then, there’s a knock at the door, and I stomp over to it, jaw clenched as I swing the door wide. I don’t know who I was expecting, but it wasn’t—

“Mom?” I blink in surprise.

“I’m here to meet my great-grandchild,” she says with a little hands up gesture that I interpret to mean if that’s okay.

“Yeah. Sure. Of course. Come in,” I say, giving my head a little shake, trying to clear it as I stand aside to let her in.

It would be the understatement of the year to say that Haisley is a big hit with her great-grandmother. The gasps, the cooing, the number of times my mom kisses her plump fingers while saying how much she wants to eat them is almost alarming. Like, we should probably account for all ten digits before we let her leave.

I know it’s a cute moment, but I’m still riding the wave of irritation from earlier. I just can’t let it go. So instead of sitting nicely with everyone, I’m up and down, pacing.

“What would I do with Haisley?” Darcy asks, and I have to try to catch up with the conversation.

“There’s on-site daycare. It’s very good. She’d be well taken care of, and I’d pop in on her too, wouldn’t I? Yes I would.” My mom says as she rubs noses with Haisley. I’m guessing there’s an opening at the hotel. Darcy’s been talking about a job, but I already told her there’s no need. I’ve got us covered.

“Are you sure it’s for all employees?” Darcy asks, looking skeptical.

“I’m positive. It’s a demon-run business. They don’t sideline half their workforce just to save a few pennies on employee benefits. They’re more practical than that. Aren’t they, my precious?” she coos at Haisley before turning to Iggy and striking up a new conversation.

I want to follow what they’re saying but my head is buzzing, and I only catch some of it.

“What type of work do you do?” my mom asks. Iggy answers, and there’s a brief conversation about a woman named Skylla Flarelion who they both seem to admire.

*Would Darcy move out if she got a job?* I wonder. What would I do with an empty house? I’m up out of my seat again. “Anyone want a drink?” I ask. Everyone declines, but it’s definitely time for a beer.

“Are you in Winter Bliss for private or open reasons?” my mom asks. She’s well versed in talking with demons, and it shows.

“Private,” Iggy says, and my mother moves on quickly. They talk about places they’ve traveled. All the questions and answers are incredibly vague, but both women seem perfectly satisfied with that.

I’ve got the start of a good buzz by the time my mom decides it’s time for her to go. I see her to the door, and as she’s putting on her coat, she says, “She’s got a striking look, so worldly and fashionable.” She’s breathy with approval. “With just a bit of an edge, but not so much it’s unbecoming.”

I nod.

“Edgy, but poised. That’s so important. And sharp!” she gushes.

“I know,” I say. I’m well aware of Iggy’s many good qualities.

“And she’s already given me her name.” My mom beams as she pats my arm excitedly. “Did you know there are demons I’ve worked with for years at the hotel, and I still don’t know their names? But, Iggy—” she thrills just saying the name. “Warm and open. Well, by demon standards anyway. I wonder how that goes over with other demons,” she muses and for a moment she’s lost in thought before she comes back with a final conclusion. “I like her.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I like her, too,” I say, and it’s true, even if I’m currently pissed at her, and the minute I get her alone, she’s going to hear about it.

“That’s—” she falters, and her eyes soften before they crimp. “That’s unfortunate,” she says, and for a second I’m confused. “She’s not right for you.” She reaches out and places a hand on my forearm. I want to pull back, but I don’t. “I’m only saying this because I care. Chad, you won’t hold onto a woman like that. You’re a small-town man, and she’s a cosmopolitan woman. Think of all the places her life will take her that aren’t Winter Bliss. I bet she’s already chomping at

the bit to get out of here.” To her credit, she does actually look sorry to tell me this, but it still cuts through my chest like a fucking knife.

I swallow hard. “Iggy’s happy here,” I say defensively, more wanting it to be true than knowing that it is. Which of us knows her better, huh? My mom who just met her, or me? I’ve known Iggy for months now, and no, she’s not a fan of her current volunteer status or her legal situation, but she smiles a lot. Every day. That’s gotta mean something, right? It means she’s happy, and if she’s happy—

I try to break off the thought, but there’s no denying it now. I’ve been secretly hoping she’ll stay, that she’ll fall in love with Winter Bliss and never want to leave.

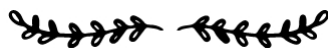
“You should be looking for someone better suited to you, someone more—” She pauses, searching for the right word. “Outdoorsy. Actually ...” Her eyes light up as a thought strikes her. “A new ski instructor just started at the resort. I’m pretty sure she’s single. Should I invite her to Christmas?”

“No,” I say firmly.

“No, you’re right. I’m sure she has better things to do. Clients, probably. And how awkward would it be to invite her and then not show up myself?”

“You’re not coming?”

“Oh, who knows. I requested the day off, but it might not get approved,” she says with a noncommittal shrug, then reminds me again that it’s the busy season. “I’ll let you know as soon as I hear.”



“We need to talk,” I say when I hear the bathroom door finally open. As soon as we got to the apartment, Iggy disappeared into the shower. I think it was a strategic move, but if she thinks I’m going to forget and let it go, she’s sorely mistaken. We’re having this conversation tonight.

“What if we play first and talk later?” Iggy asks, voice husky, and when I look up, I flash hot all over. She’s naked.

My body responds, sending blood rushing south, and I'm sucking in air through flared nostrils.

I have to tear my eyes away before I lose my train of thought. "Would you put some clothes on?" I ask.

"What's got your tail in a kink?" she asks, and out of my peripheral vision I see her move to the bed, not to the dresser or the closet. She's not doing what I asked. Typical.

I can't risk looking at her. My thoughts will scatter. So I move to the window and stare at the curtains as I say, "You can't go around telling *my* family that they owe me for—for whatever I choose to do for them." I didn't mind it so much when she strong-armed my dad into coming to Christmas. I'm not sure anything short of that would have worked on the old goat. But with Darcy, she crossed a line.

"I'm not telling them anything they don't already know," she says.

"Yes you are. You're putting things in their heads," I insist. "I don't want them to pay me back, and you're making them feel like they have to. I don't want anything from them."

She snorts. "Yes you do. But you think it makes you some kind of hero to lie to yourself about it, to pretend like you're fine giving without getting anything in return."

"We're family. That's what we do for each other."

"No. It's what *you* do. You make one-sided bargains with unspoken terms and hope that their vague sense of indebtedness and guilt will turn into love and affection. It's not a good strategy," she says, and despite how snarky her words are, her voice is soft, full of sympathy, and it's the sympathy more than anything that has me bristling.

"I *want* to take care of them. No debt, no guilt. I just want to do it," I insist.

"I know you do, but that's not all you want. You just won't admit it."

"What is it you think I want?" I spin to glare at her. It's a mistake, one I regret instantly. My blood is already pumping,

and the moment I look at her, there's the wolf. Hungry and furious, he prowls forward out of the deep shadows of my mind. That's not me.

Except that it is.

"You tell me," she says, voice sharp and demanding. "Do you know? Have you let yourself think about what you'd say if anyone ever asked you what you want?" She takes a seat at the foot of my bed, crossing her legs and straightening her back to lift her perfect breasts.

My eyes lock on, and lust sings in my blood, mixing with fury over all the things she's saying that I don't want to hear. Every muscle from my jaw down to my toes tenses as I fight the urge to lunge at her, to—

"That's it—say it. What is it you want?" She uncrosses her legs and spreads them wide, exposing her pussy, wet and every shade of red. Tempting, but no.

"I want to come on your tits." There's a snarl in my voice as my eyes roam up from her exquisite pussy to her luscious, round breasts. The wolf wants to leave his mark right there.

"Then do it." Her nipples tighten, growing hard, and she lifts her chest to aim them at me.

Three long strides, and I'm at the bed. I grab for her thigh to drag her closer, but she pulls away. "No. You don't need to touch me for this." She spreads her legs again, only now she leans back on her elbows. The tantalizing weight of her breasts shifting to either side. I swallow a growl as I imagine palming them, squeezing and rubbing them in rough circles.

She extends her hands until the tips of her fingers start circling her nipples. "Get out your cock," she says. "You want to come on my tits, I want to watch you make yourself come while looking at me. That's the deal. No negotiating." Her fingers keep up the slow, circular rub over her nipples. Her palms cup the sides of her breasts, pressing them together. She's fondling herself the exact way I want to fondle her. *The fucking tease.*

I unzip my pants.



As I pull out my cock, her tongue flicks out. She thinks she has an advantage because she can taste the air, but she has her own tells. “I don’t have to be a demon to smell you, you know,” I snarl at her. “I only have to touch you for thirty seconds before you’re creaming yourself. I can smell it every time.”

She doesn’t break eye contact as she nods. “Sometimes less than thirty seconds. Sometimes all I have to do is look at you. I got myself off in the shower thinking about you just now, and I’m already dripping for you again. Don’t just hold it. Stroke it.”

I grip the base of my cock firmly in hand and start stroking, running it up to the tip and back down. Fuck it feels good, and the view of her touching herself, legs spread, it’s doing the job. I’m hard and throbbing, and the wolf is loving it.

“Tell me what you see when you look at me,” she says.

“A vamp,” I say meanly, baring my teeth at her as I deprive her of the compliment I assume she’s after. But she lights up with a delighted grin anyway, and it’s infuriating how fucking beautiful she is right now.

“Definitely,” she nods, and the crown of her head dips toward me. “What else?”

“A horned seductress clenching her snatch at me.” Claws out.

Her breath catches and her eyes go heated, “Mmmm,” she moans, deep and throaty as her chest heaves, tantalizing me further. “I *am* clenching my snatch. I’m thinking about the last time you were inside me.” *Fuck*. I pick up the pace of my strokes. She pinches her nipples for a second before she smashes one tit up and dips her head low enough to lick it.

“Again,” I growl at her even as my cock responds. Every nerve is alive and eager for friction. She licks her other nipple, and I pump harder, marveling at how good my own hand feels. It’s never come close to this before. Each and every stroke tugs right at my balls.

Beads of moisture start dripping from my tip, and when she notices, her pink tongue sweeps over her sharp teeth, leaving a wet trail over her lips. She likes this. Lust and hunger are written all over her face, and her desire feeds me the way gas feeds a flame. Every ragged breath she takes, every roll of her wicked hips, has me shuddering closer to the edge.

She makes a new move, and my eyes snap to her hand. It roams from her breast down to her pussy, and she opens her lips for me to see, improving the view just a fraction more. Her thumb rubs over her clit and she lets out a soft groan as she pleasures herself. My eyes go spotty and my knees just about buckle.

“Get over here,” I growl, and my dirty little demoness smirks as she slinks off the edge of the bed, coming to rest on her knees just at my feet. She squeezes her gorgeous tits together, lifting them to me like an offering plate.

A fleeting thought enters my brain: She’s a goddess on her knees. For me.

My hand freezes.

“Come all over me. I want to be sticky with your cum when I ride your face.”

*Oh, fuck.* That sends me crashing over the edge. I grip my cock, and my hips jerk as I spurt all over her chest. Slick white fluid splats from her shoulder down the rounds of her breast, but it’s the glob that hits the top of her cleavage and slides down into it that has my full attention. I sway in place, vision coming and going, as I slip a finger in and out, dipping and smearing my cum between her exquisite tits.

“You have five minutes to recover, then you’re jerking off again. This time, aim for my ass,” she says, rising from the floor.

“I thought you were going to ride my face,” I have just enough breath to say before my knees give out. I stumble forward and collapse on the bed.

“You can do both at the same time.”

Ah, so it's to be an early death for me? *Fuck it.* This is how I want to go.

## Chapter 13

*Iggg*



**W**e had a fight.

And we made up.

That's all that was.

So why do I feel so undone, like I'm half dissolved and floating in a blinding afterglow? Maybe if he fucks me a few more times, it'll go away.

"Are you awake?" I whisper.



**F**riday is all hands on deck. Luís calls in the two weekend rangers, plus the two retired rangers who, when needed, trade-off taking the volunteer position I'm currently filling. We're behind schedule clearing the lava channels of wildlife, and now there's a rush to get it done ahead of the Truthfire Festival on New Ember's Eve. It's grueling work, especially with winter in full swing and three feet of snow on the ground.

Gods I miss making flyers.

I pause for a breather. “Would you look at that view?” I point up to the summit, and I’m startled to feel the way my chest swells. It’s just some wisps of clouds clinging to a craggy peak, but damn. “I didn’t know snow could make it even prettier,” I say, almost to myself.

“Yeah, it’s real nice this time of year,” Chad agrees from a few feet away, but he doesn’t look up from where he’s shoveling, and so he doesn’t get that glowy look that tells me he’s taking in one of his favorite views. *You’re not looking*, I’m about to say, but then he turns to me. “Wait until you see it on New Year’s Eve. It’s magnificent. There’s a spot just south of town square with a perfect, unobstructed view. I was thinking you and me, we’ll pack a picnic and some blankets, and after we’ve done some of the festival stuff, we’ll head there, wrap ourselves together, and wait for the show. Nice and cozy.” He stops to rest his chin atop the handle of his shovel and grins at me, and there’s the bright-eyed look I was expecting earlier, only he’s not looking at the volcano.

My heart squeezes, and a scary thought pops into my head. *He’s my favorite view too.*

“Sounds amazing,” I say, biting at my lip. He assures me it will be. “Is it a one-time kind of thing, or do you think someone would want to come back to see it again?”

“It holds up on repeat. Definitely. There are lots of people who return every year.” He nods.

“Maybe I’ll turn into one of those people,” I say with a little nonchalant shrug, like I’m not feeling him out, not testing the waters. What would he think of me coming back to visit? I glance at him, looking for his reaction.

“Yeah?” He gives me a soft smile before his eyes narrow. “Wait. You’re not getting sweet on Winter Bliss, are you?”

I snort. When I applied for the job at the Emberlight Resort, my plan was to stomach Winter Bliss for however long it took to earn the work experience I’d claimed on my resumé, and use that experience to get me in the door somewhere else,

anywhere else that wasn't *here*. But now any hope of that is ruined. Even if I hadn't ditched out on my interview, I have a criminal record accessible only to employers inside this county.

As long as I never try to work here, I'll never have to worry about it.

But that doesn't mean I couldn't visit. I glance back up at the summit. It'd be nice, actually.

*Damn it.* Maybe I am a little sweet on Winter Bliss. If only it weren't such a long way from home, an eighty-hour round trip if I tried to drive it. But if I get a good job, I could probably afford a monthly flight. I'd see him twelve weekends a year. It feels like too little.

"Would you ever ... ?" I stop myself from asking the rest of the question.

"Would I ever what?" he asks.

"Never mind." Would he come visit me in Boston? If we were both willing to travel, it could work. Every other weekend. That's not as good as seeing him every day, but it's a decent amount of time together. It could work.

*I want this to work.* The weight of that certainty settles in my stomach.

But is that what he wants? I'm not ready to ask. What if he says no? Or worse, what if he says yes, but he's lying to himself? He's not that good at knowing what he wants, and he's entirely too good at accepting scraps.

When we pack it in at the end of the day, Chad insists he has no energy to go to the bar even though it's Friday and he's supposed to. He gives a giant yawn, stretching his arms way over his head as if to prove just how beat he is. "I just can't do it." I don't want him to go either, so I don't argue. The deal we made seems to have imploded. A failure I'm okay sweeping under the rug if he is.

But five minutes later, when Luís invites him to dinner, Chad's exhaustion magically vanishes. "Can I bring Iggy?" he

asks, already looking excited. “My treat,” he adds quickly, glancing at me.

Luís gives me a hard look. “Babs told me to invite Chad out for a night with friends. Are we friends?” he asks me.

“I consider us work acquaintances on friendly terms,” I say after a moment’s consideration.

He snorts. “Well then, by all means. The more the merrier. See you there at seven sharp. Dress up. It’s fancy.”

*Fancy?* Excitement sparks in my chest. This is the one fashion challenge my suitcase is up for, and I pull out all the stops. Sexy, sleek, sophisticated? I’ve got looks to choose from. I get dressed in my Friday-night bedroom so that I can do a grand reveal. The moment I step into the living room, Chad’s mouth pops open. He stares at me like I’m the first fire he’s ever gazed into.

“You look—” He swallows hard.

“Like a swarm of bugs at sunset?” I tease.

“Yeah. Like a firefly,” he says softly and nods. “You look luminescent tonight, Iggy.”

I preen as delighted flutters run up and down my skin. It’s a very good compliment, one he will not be writing down. No one else gets called luminescent. That one’s just for me.

He’s dressed up too, and Mother Below, he looks sinfully handsome. I’ve never seen him not in jeans or his work clothes. “I didn’t know you owned a suit,” I say.

“Don’t get too excited. I only have the one,” he says, and there’s a touch of color in his cheeks.

“It’s a good one.” It’s a tailored fit in a warm black or perhaps a very dark brown material. It shows off the width of his shoulders, the taper of his hips, the length of his legs. He has a blue shirt on under the jacket, the same color as his eyes.

“You’re breathtaking,” I say, an honest opinion. The sight of him makes it hard for me to breathe.

“Well then, we’re well paired. Shall we?” He offers me his elbow.

As we drive through downtown, there are decorations everywhere, and it’s just like I remember from when I was a kid, a lively mix and match of holidays. Everywhere there are strings of lights, tinsel garlands, fire plinths, and street-wide banners announcing the Truthfire Festival and welcoming out-of-towners to Winter Bliss.

“Hey, just a heads up.” Chad squeezes my hand. “Babs, uh—” He gives a nervous chuckle. “She’s a talker. And blunt. But she’s got a heart of gold.” He glances at me for a reaction.

“I don’t mind bluntness,” I say, not adding that the aversion to it is mostly a human trait.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. This is going to be great.” He smiles at me reassuringly, but I didn’t feel the need for reassurance until he smiled at me like that.

As we near the door of the restaurant, I spot a gleaming wall of bottles behind a stately bar. I pull to a dead stop.

“What’s wrong?” Chad asks, squeezing my hand.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to be here.” My skin prickles as my free hand lifts to cover my horn. Sometimes I almost forget about my monitor and the restrictions it imposes.

“You’re fine,” he assures me. When I give him a doubtful look, he tells me he had the same worry and made a call. “It comes down to the liquor license,” he says. “Bars and liquor stores are off limits, but a restaurant is fine.”

His certainty is all the reassurance I need. I relax, and slipping my hand through the crook of his elbow, we walk in together. From the coat check, we’re shown to our table. Luís and his blunt wife, Babs, are already there, and it’s clear by the look on her face, Babs didn’t expect me. Thanks, Luís.

She shoots her husband an irritated look before introducing herself to me with a smile. Babs is an orc, and even seated, she’s a head taller than Luís.



“I guess we’re just waiting on Grace now,” Babs says with a grimace as she taps the table nervously. “Oh, there she is!” Babs rises from her chair, stretching her well-muscled body to its full height to wave across the room. “Grace!”

We all turn. Grace is an orc too. Strong and elegant in build, dressed in satin. First impression? She’s fucking gorgeous. I’ve never seen anyone besides an orc pull off the look ‘barbarian seductress,’ and tonight, Grace nailed it. As she strides across the room on long legs, tusks flashing, I briefly imagine she’s just stepped off the runway on her way to war.

*Oh, fuckety-fuck.*

“I should go,” I say, getting up out of my chair.

“Why?” Chad asks, reaching for my hand.

“Oh, are you two together?” Babs asks, pointing back and forth between us.

“We’re, uh—” I pull my hand out of his as I stumble for a word. Sleeping together. Temporarily shacking up.

“Why?” Chad asks me again, this time rising from his chair in a ‘if you’re going, I’m going,’ kind of way. He’s not paying attention to anyone else, eyes glued to me, and he’s missing the clues.

“She’s the new park ranger,” Luís jumps in. “With us until January. Then she’s moving away. Isn’t that right?” He looks at me. I don’t have a chance to answer.

“Oh, *you’re* the new park ranger! No, no, you have to stay,” Babs insists. “I’ve been wanting to meet you. And as long as you’re not together, it’s no problem. The more the merrier.” She gives a relieved sigh, but smacks Luís on the shoulder anyway for good measure.

I take my seat, and Chad follows suit. “Are you okay?” he asks.

Seconds before Grace arrives, I whisper. “You’re on a blind date.”

He pulls up rigid in his chair.

“Relax,” I say, reassuringly. “It’s fine. And it *is* Friday.” I give him a rueful smile. I guess our bargain isn’t done with us even if we thought we were done with it.

“Grace!” Babs stands up to give her friend a warm hug. “Everyone, this is my good friend Grace.” She motions for Grace to take the open chair next to Chad. “Oh, Grace, this is Iggy, a new park ranger. She and Chad just work together.” She waves a dismissive hand in my direction. “Chad, you obviously remember Grace. From what I hear, you’ve hit on her before.” Babs wrinkles her nose at him. “Which didn’t help our cause any, mister, but don’t you worry. I vouched for you, I said, ‘Grace, he’s a ten! You know, if you just give him a chance, and, well, if you look past a few things. And if you don’t get turned off by the name Chad.’” She pauses to laugh, and I have to fight the urge to kick her under the table. “Then he’s a solid ten! And look, she showed up. Thank you, Grace!”

“Of course. I’m happy to be here.”

A waitress comes by and I order an old fashioned. Chad orders a Scotch, neat. He grimaces his way through a couple of sips, but no, no, my friend—tonight’s not a sipping night. I switch our glasses and he downs the old fashioned in a couple of gulps before shooting me a quick smile that does nothing to hide the agitation behind his eyes.

“Grace, tell Chad what you were doing just the other day.” Babs turns to Chad, clearly bursting to tell him herself, and so she does. “Grace bought a burial plot. Tell him about it, Grace.”

Her friend blushes at first, but then she smiles, and as if she needed any more winning attributes, she has a dimple too. It’s only in one cheek, but it shows itself when she talks. “I know it sounds a little morbid, but there’s this beautiful hill where my grandparents were laid to rest, and when I went to visit recently, I noticed there was one plot left overlooking Teapot Lake. And I just had this feeling that it was meant for me. An overwhelming peace, and I didn’t think twice. I bought it right then and there.”

“She’s planning on being buried here, Chad. Isn’t that nice? She’s going to live and die right here, and you wouldn’t even have to think about where to put her when she’s gone. She’s got that all figured out already.” She winks at him, grinning ear to ear.

There’s a part of me that wants to laugh at the strangeness of the conversation, but it’s hard to do that when my stomach is sinking. Babs, without an ounce of subtlety, is nailing it. The one thing Chad actually does want is someone local, someone who will stay in Winter Bliss. It’s the *one thing* he’s been clear and adamant about since day one.

And here she is.

We order food. It comes. We eat, and all the while, Babs is determined there will be no awkward silences. She came too well prepared.

“Chad, tell Grace about your catch,” she says. When he looks confused, she gives a weary sigh. “A couple of months ago, you and Luís went fishing.” She turns to Grace, “Luís caught trout, which is my favorite. Chad, tell Grace what you caught.”

“Bass,” he supplies.

“Bass is my favorite!” Grace lights up.

“Bass is her favorite, Chad! When Luís got home and told me about it, I just knew it was a sign. He said to me, ‘Chad caught some bass,’ and immediately, I was like, ‘Babe, do you know who likes bass? Grace! Grace loves bass.’ That’s how I knew the two of you had to meet.” She beams proudly for a second before her nose wrinkles and she gives Chad another disapproving look. “Of course, I didn’t know at the time that you’d already hit on her a few times or that it’d be so much work to convince her to give you another chance.”

Because I’m watching closely, I catch the look Chad shoots Luís, but I can’t tell what’s behind it. Irritation maybe? When I glance at Luís, he’s grimacing and rubbing at his forehead.

“Five or six times, I think.” Grace says. “And the last time he compared me to a tree.”

Chad winces.

*Five or six times?* He is persistent, but that seems like a lot, even for him. I dip my head forward to get another look at Grace. Yes, she's beautiful, but if I had to lump her into one of two groups, I'd put her with the woman Chad avoided when he was making his rounds at Under the Volcano.

But clearly he didn't avoid her.

Something he told me once, pops to mind. "If I meet someone special, I don't want my head to go blank, choke, and miss my shot. I want to have a good line ready. That's not so dumb, is it?" My stomach sinks further until it's sloshing in my toes.

He was practicing that night, hitting on tourists. And why was he doing that? So that when he met a woman like Grace, someone special, someone local, he'd have a good line ready.

She's the type of woman he's been practicing for.

"He meant it nice, Grace. I already told you that." Babs, sensing the roadblock, is already tunneling through. "He loves trees! He's a park ranger. You just have to understand that sometimes he means things as compliments that you wouldn't think are compliments. Don't you, Chad? Chad?"

"I love trees," Chad mumbles as he tips back his glass and the ice clinks against his teeth. I've kept the old fashioned coming. Maybe that was a mistake. I've never seen him look more uncomfortable than he does right now. I want to take his hand into my lap. I want to feel the sturdy weight of it resting on me as I tell him everything's fine. He'll be fine. But he's on a date, and I can't touch him.

"See, Grace, it wasn't about your legs. Nobody thinks you're stocky. That's all in your head because of Jaffo, the dumbass. But Chad's not like that. Isn't that right, babe?" She looks to Luís for support, but all she gets is a mumbled something about him not being privy to what's going on in Chad's head. "Iggy—" Her head swings to me. "You know Chad. He'd never compare someone to a tree as an insult, would he?"

A mean little monster perks up inside me. *Say yes! Tell her it's a terrible insult and it means he's repulsed by her and she should leave.*

“No. He’d never do that.” My voice cracks, mirroring the sound in my chest, followed by a sharp pain. I take a sip of water. It only helps with one of them. “A tree compliment is very on brand for him,” I add, forcing a smile and hoping it looks genuine enough to hide how queasy I feel.

“See, Grace, it’s his *brand!*” Babs nods a thanks at me for supplying such a perfect word.

Grace looks mollified. Her dimple is showing itself again, and I catch the dart of her hand under the table as she squeezes Chad’s knee. I have to fight the urge to swat her away.

He jolts, and Grace does it again, only this time with a giggle. “Are you ticklish? How adorable.”

Babs insists on ordering three desserts for the table even though there are five of us. “Bring extra spoons, please. We’re all gonna share.” But no sooner are the spoons passed around than Babs notices our table’s candle has gone out. “Oh, no!” she pouts. “Iggy, would you mind?” She pushes the candle to me, and it’s my turn to go rigid as I quietly panic inside.

“Sorry, no.” I push it away with a trembling hand.

“Oh, come on. Just a little snap,” Babs insists, sliding it back toward me.

Chad’s hand comes down, stopping it. “If she says no, she means no.” He picks up the candle holder and puts it firmly back where it was.

Babs huffs, affronted, but Grace’s eyes sparkle. “That’s a very good answer,” I hear her murmur. She shifts in her chair, crossing her legs toward him, and the look she gives him is nothing short of a smolder.

It sends another painful crack through my chest, like my ribs are breaking one by one.



e should do this again,” Grace says to Chad. We’re all outside now, saying our goodbyes. Even in a long winter coat, she looks powerful and elegant. Chad hesitates. “I can’t.” He glances at me. “The holidays are coming up. I’m spoken for, I—I think.”

“Oh, tell me about it! I’m going to be out of town for the next two weeks, visiting three different cities. But I’ll be back in time for New Year’s. Do you have plans?”

Chad glances at me again. “Yeah, I, uh—”

“He has back up plans,” I say, cutting in to stop him from doing something he’s sure to regret after I’m gone.

When he first brought up New Year’s and offered to spend the whole day with me, I could have taken that deal, and then I’d have every right to keep it. New Year’s would be mine, fair and square. But, no. Instead of agreeing, I did what everyone else does to him. I offered him a fraction of what he was hoping for. Scraps.

And he didn’t just take them. He was happy about it, excited even, because a lifetime of scraps had taught him how to be happy with very little, a fraction of what he deserves.

“Oh, so you’re free? Wonderful! I never miss the Truthfire Festival. Do you like it?”

“It’s good,” he says, brow knitting.

“Good? It’s magnificent!” She asks for his phone and adds her number. “Call me. We’ll meet up for a drink then head downtown and find a good spot to watch the volcano go off. I’ll bring some blankets. We’ll make it cozy.” She’s off with a wave and kisses blown in all directions.

Babs and Luís follow suit.

Chad stares at his phone for a second then turns to look at me, a question clear on his face.

He doesn’t see it.

Grace doesn’t live thousands of miles away. She’s not *some* of what he’s been looking for. She’s everything he’s ever

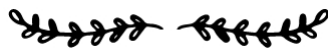
wanted, and I can't stand by and let him choose me instead, choose scraps when he deserves so much more.

I can't because—because I—

My heart spasms in my chest, and I swallow hard. It doesn't matter why, I just can't. He deserves better.

We walk back to the truck in silence. On the way home, I stare out the window as my hand absently rubs the aching spot in my chest.

I don't cry until I'm alone.



That night I dream I'm back in the rental cabin, sitting in front of the fireplace. There are cast-iron tongs in my lap, but I toss them aside and grab the burning logs with my bare hands. I want to shape the fire, sculpt it, join it. Tongues of flame lick at my wrists and engulf my hands, and if I squint my eyes just right, I can pretend I made them.

But the more I handle the logs, the more soot goes everywhere. Soon, ash coats my hands, my face, my feet. Trails of it lead off in every direction, marking the paths I've wandered to and from the hearth.

*What have I done?* I ask myself as I look around. *I've made a terrible mess of everything.*



I wake up in my Friday-night room feeling hollow and dry. No more tears.

We gather for breakfast, and there's an unspoken tension between me and Chad. Darcy doesn't seem to pick up on it. She's feeding Haisley and chatting excitedly about Christmas. She wants to know how many people are coming.

Chad says he's not sure. He hasn't heard from his brother, and his mom is still a maybe. His mouth pinches, and I feel a spike of irritation on his behalf.

"I thought your mom confirmed," I say.

“She submitted for the time off. I haven’t heard anything more than that.”

“Why doesn’t she follow up—with them and *you*?” I ask, as the first flush of anger creeps up my neck.

“It’s the busy season.” He shrugs.

Scraps. I grind my teeth. For all that his mother was better behaved and better groomed, it turns out she’s exactly like his dad.

“It’s cold today. Can we have a fire?” Darcy asks with a fake shiver and a bright smile.

“That’s a great idea,” Chad says, returning her smile with one that might be convincing if it didn’t look like he was trying so hard.

Darcy is good with matches, thankfully, and doesn’t ask for my help in getting a blaze going. When Chad comes over, he picks a spot right next to me and settles in so close our thighs and elbows sandwich together. I discreetly flick out my tongue, curious what’s in the air between us. It’s not sweet or sour, so not arousal or fear, not that I expected either. Those two are just the easiest to identify. This is something else.

Sadness? Or is that just me?

I take a quick glance at him, and he catches me. He holds my eyes for a second before he snuggles in closer. I hook my ankle over his and go back to staring into the fire. I stare and I ponder, but once I’m done, I can no longer sit still.

“Can I borrow your truck?” I ask. Chad doesn’t say no, exactly. Instead, he offers to drive me wherever I need to go. I tell him it’s something I need to do alone.

“Your license is suspended,” he reminds me.

“It’s something I need to do with Darcy,” I amend.

Darcy snorts. “I don’t want to be your chauffeur.”

“Yes you do. You like spending time with me.”

“You don’t know that,” she says, but I see the uncertainty that flickers across her face.



“I know everything,” I say, and I make a show of flicking out my tongue in her direction. “You think I’m a badass.” Flick. “With perfect hair.” Flick. “Great clothes.” Flick. “And you idolize me.”

“That’s not how demon senses work!” she protests, and next to me, Chad chuckles.

“How would you know?” I ask, cocking an eyebrow at her.

“I looked it up,” she says, her cheeks flushing pink.

“Well, since you know so much, you can educate me while you drive me around. Go put some shoes on.” Darcy huffs but gets up.

“Will you watch Haisley?” She asks Chad over her shoulder as she deposits the baby into a playpen.

“Yep, I got her,” Chad calls after her as she leaves. Then to me he asks, “Where are you going?” His big hand slips under mine and he lifts my palm to his lips, placing a tender kiss right at the center.

“I’ll tell you later,” I say as I rub my thumb across his bottom lip.

“What if I ask you to stay?” There’s a soft pleading in his eyes that has my heart aching once again.

“We’ll be back soon.”

Once we’re in the truck, Darcy starts the engine. “Where to?” she asks.

“The Emberlight Resort,” I say, as I buckle myself in. “There’s someone I need to talk to.”

## Chapter 14

*Chad*



The minute the truck pulls away with Iggy and Darcy inside, I'm on my feet, agitated and pacing. As long as she was near, the wrecked-to-my-core feelings that overtook me last night when she headed into the house instead of upstairs to our apartment eased up just enough I could ignore it. It's something I'm good at. I can ignore most unpleasant feelings, especially if it helps me hold onto even a scrap of contentment.

But there is no contentment without her.

It's a realization I've been coming to for awhile now. Over the past few months, I've explored and discovered Iggy, from the way she'll throw sparks if she's excited or laughs too hard, to which of her grumpy faces respond best to my methods of de-grumping her. And each new discovery is like a bright new star I've had the privilege of hanging in the night sky. Any one of them will make me smile, but when I step back and try to

take in the beauty of all of them at once, I'm struck dumb and flooded with wonder.

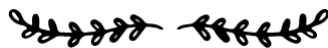
When I thought she was like morning air and my lungs were going to burst, I had no idea how much more overwhelming it could get.

She's not just the air I breathe. She's the light in the darkness. She's all that I want and everything I need.

I love her.

And I am not going to lose her.

"Come on, Haisley. We've got stuff to do."



*Two weeks later.*

A few days before Christmas, I head to Luís's office and shut the door.

"It's Iggy's last day, huh?" he asks once I take a seat.

"Yep. As soon as I scan her out, she's all done." Iggy's probation won't be up until January, but she's put in the work and hit her two hundred and fifty hours of community service ahead of schedule. And boy can you see the effect of her efforts all over this place.

Apparently, we'd been thinking about Winter Bliss State Park all wrong. It's not a park at all, she said. It's an adventureland full of natural dangers that can only be explored safely thanks to a team of highly experienced and fearless park rangers. Our faces, mine in particular, are plastered all over the new posters, flyers, and whatnot. She insisted on using both my titles, too. Park Ranger and Search and Rescue Leader.

"That's a volunteer position," I tried to point out, but she gave me a quelling look and asked what I was trying to imply about the importance of volunteer positions. I dropped it.

Once her new ad campaign went into full swing, I started to get recognized by strangers. As someone who's done more than my fair share of approaching strangers, it's a bit of an eye opener being on the other side. Someone will make eye

contact and start heading my way, and what pops to mind is, *Uh-oh, how weird is this going to be?*

Is that what women were thinking when I approached them?

Iggy wanted to do even more. She proposed billboards and wrapping the station's trucks in advertising. She even went so far as designing both, but when she presented them to Luís, he took one look at the price point and laughed so hard he cried. Thank goodness. I did not want to be driving around in a truck with my face on it.

"Good for her," Luís says, and I narrow my eyes at him. He sighs. "I tried to apologize. I did! She wouldn't hear me out."

"What did she say?"

"That if there was anything going on between the two of you, it was very personal, and she absolutely would not be talking to me about it."

I try to hide my grin as a warm feeling squeezes my chest. She's a demon and keeps things private, I know that, but that's not all there is to it. She's also protective of me. She's never said as much, but she doesn't have to because I've seen it firsthand. She looks out for me, and, well, it makes me feel things I don't have words for.

"And you? Are you still sore too?" When I confronted him, he swore he didn't know it was supposed to be a date. Babs wanted me to meet Grace, that's all she'd said to him. "A few months ago, you would have been over the moon and thanked Babs up and down for doing something that nice for you!" He's not wrong.

"I know," I mutter. "I'm not holding anything against her."

"Good. Because if that night was anyone's fault, it was yours, *tonto*. You're the one who kept telling me things were temporary, not exclusive, no attachments, *puras mentiras*. You were still hitting up Under the Volcano every Friday for shit's sake. When did things get this serious?" he asks, looking equally baffled and hurt. He has every right. He's my best friend. I should have told him a lot more than I did, but I guess

I've come to understand a demon's instinct to protect certain thoughts and feelings, to keep them private so that nobody can tell you you shouldn't be having them.

"I should have known it was serious from day one," I answer truthfully. I've never felt about anyone the way I felt about Iggy the first time I saw her. It scares me to think how easily that could have been the end of it. If fate hadn't intervened, I'd have walked away with nothing but a burning memory of the most painfully stunning woman I'd ever seen and a pair of her torn lace panties shoved in my pocket. Thankfully, I got a second chance. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"So this is it then, huh?" He frowns down at his desk, looking unhappy.

I hesitate just a moment before I nod. I hate to have to tell him, and he's not going to like hearing it, but, "I got the job."

"That was quick." His frown deepens.

"I guess they've had trouble keeping the position filled. A lot of turnover," I say.

"Bodes well," he snorts. "I can't believe you're going to be working in a *pinche* municipal park." He sneers over the word municipal and shakes his head.

"It's what I'm qualified for." Lu s taught me everything I know about caring for a park, but on paper, I don't exactly shine. I've got a high school diploma and no formal education or training.

"Watering potted plants and raking cigarette butts? I think you're selling yourself short, *tonto*."

"That's just the opening duties," I say defensively, suddenly glad I didn't share with him how much of my day will be spent manning a ticket booth. "A job's a job. It gets me to Boston, and I can always get a better one later."

"*Si pero*. Are you really gonna be happy? *¿De veras?*" He just keeps shaking his head like he can't wrap his mind around it.

“I’m not going for the job. And yes, I’ll be happy.” I smile, and I know it’s true. “Wherever she is, that’s where I’ll be happy.”

“Why not tell her, then?” he asks.

“I’m going to, tonight, but I wanted to have something lined up first so she doesn’t feel pressured to take me in, you know?”

“You mean like how you took *her* in?” he asks, crooking an eyebrow at me.

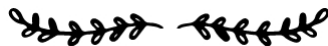
I roll my eyes. “This is different. I’m moving to be close to her, not to invade her life.”

A somber silence settles between us, and there’s no putting it off any longer. I place my ranger badge on the desk along with the keys to the truck and slide them toward him.

“Thank you for everything,” I say, voice cracking on the last word. Shit, that’s embarrassing.

He nods. “Do me a favor. Try not to end up homeless on a beach, ok? But if you do—I drove cross country to pick you up once. I’d do it again, no questions asked. ¿*Me entiendes?*”

Well, fuck. I’m up out of my chair. Luís is getting a hug whether he wants one or not.



“**Y**ou changed clothes,” Iggy says as soon as she sees me. She’s changed as well. Neither of us will be needing our uniforms anymore.

“Had to. I have a date tonight,” I say, smiling as I approach. She’s already turned off all the lights. The welcome center would be dark if not for the last bit of daylight coming through the frosty, rice-paper-covered windows. I wrap one hand around the small of her back and pull her close. She melts against me, lifting her chin to rest on my chest.

“I like looking at you,” she murmurs, and there’s a softness in her eyes as she gazes up at me.

“I like looking at you,” I murmur back before bending my head to brush my lips against hers in a light kiss. “You ready?”

She hesitates before she nods. “Not as ready as I thought I’d be,” she admits. “But, yeah, scan me out, *boss*.” She tags on the last word just to tease me, and for that, I squeeze her ass.

Her eyes light up in surprise. “So inappropriate,” she mutters, arching a brow at me in a way that makes me want to bite her.

I lift my wrist and tap my bracelet against her monitor. There’s the familiar buzz of connection, but then the bracelet makes a series of beeps it’s never made before. The clasp unlocks, and I have to catch the device as it falls from my wrist.

“All done,” I say, hefting it once before I slide it into my pocket.

“Your part is,” she says, her hand lifting to feel where her monitor is still in place.

“You’re almost there,” I say and press a light kiss to her forehead.

Outside the sun is setting and the temperature has dropped. The air is biting cold. When we get to the station wagon, I pull out a spare coat and hold it open for her. “I brought this for you. You’re going to need it.”

“Oh really? Tell me more.” Her eyes sparkle. She’s intrigued, and she should be.

“Nope. It’s a surprise,” I say as she slips into the coat. I zip her up with possessive satisfaction, then nuzzle my nose against her cheek. I don’t think I’ll ever get over seeing her in my clothes. It both soothes me and riles me up at the same time. I like it.

We head up Last Hour Road for a few miles before turning onto a maintenance road that loops around the far side of the mountain. When I hear the ping of a cell phone, it surprises me. I’d have thought we were out of range by now, but I guess not.

It's Iggy's. She pulls it out to read a message. I glance at her a few times, and as she reads, something changes. Her eyes and her posture all tighten until I can almost feel vibrations coming off of her, but without a word, she takes a deep breath and relaxes. There's a slight shake in her hand as she carefully slips her phone into her bag.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I'll tell you later," she says.

"Should I be worried?" I ask.

"No," she says. "We've got a surprise to get to. I don't want us to be distracted is all. I'll tell you later, I promise."

Fifteen minutes later, we come to the end of the road. "We'll have to hike in from here," I say. I expect at least a mild protest, but nope. She just licks the air, and I know she tastes how excited I am, because she hops right out and eagerly takes the backpack I'm holding out to her. I heft my own backpack and a duffel too, and we're off.

By the time we reach the spot at the top of a rise, it's full dark and the stars are out. There's no sign of movement below, not yet, which is good. We haven't missed anything.

"There," I say, pointing to the gaping mouth of a dark cave. "Keep your eyes there."

"What am I looking for?"

"Shhh. Just watch. You'll see," I whisper.

It starts with a spark. A torch is lit, then another and another. Twelve shadowy torch bearers converge in the woods, form a line, and then wind their way through the dark woods to enter the cave. From our vantage point, we can see inside. The torches are placed in holders, and the figures form a loose circle. Iggy goes very still and shoots me a nervous glance.

The figures begin to murmur, and as their murmurings grow louder, they raise their arms overhead. Sparks shoot from their hands, trailing wisps of smoke like firecrackers. The torches respond, flames leaping and casting dancing shadows in bright, unnatural colors across the cave walls.



“That’s a very complicated spell,” she whispers, hunkering down behind the nearest boulder. “If they mess something up, if it gets out of control, I can’t protect you. We should leave.” Her breathing is quick, her eyes are wide.

“They know what they’re doing,” I say with soft reassurance. I kneel down beside her just as a loud boom rips through the air like a crack of thunder. She startles and shoots me another uneasy look.

“They’re waking up the volcano,” I say, and I brush her cheek with the back of my fingers. I didn’t expect her to be nervous. “They do it every year. They call it *tuning*, but I think it’s a practice run.” That gets her attention.

“No fucking way,” she murmurs as she scrambles back up to her feet, apprehension giving way to fascination. As we watch, a glowing red pool bubbles up from the floor at the center of the circle.

“Lava,” she points and sucks in an excited breath. “They’re calling up lava.” Even in a whisper, her voice has jumped an octave. Her eyes are shining, and her hands are squeezing together right under her chin. I’m missing the show because I can’t tear my eyes away from her profile, so I just keep staring at my favorite view in the whole world.

“The cave is a vent,” I explain. “A small access point where they practice without spoiling the big show.”

She gasps.

The pool bubbles and belches hot sprays of molten rock, spreading out and inching toward their feet. Not one of the figures flinches or pulls back, but the tempo of the murmuring changes, slowing to a stop. There’s one more loud crack, and it’s done. The figures confer for a while. Then, apparently satisfied, they take their torches and leave.

“Come on.” I grab her hand. “This is what we really came for.”



The cave is wide and lofty, but the moment we step inside the air is warmer, and everything is lit by a soft orange glow.

“Is it safe for you to be here?” she asks, eyeing the pool of lava.

“Yeah. They’re careful to put it back to sleep after. It won’t go off again until midnight on New Year’s Eve.”

“How careful?” She grabs my elbow and tugs me back when I try to take a step closer. She’s not worried for herself. Just me.

“Very, very careful,” I say. “Should we set up camp?”

“We’re staying?” She looks up at me with surprise.

“Up there.” I point. There’s a ledge that leads back into a wide open area, flat enough to serve as our bedroom for the night. “Unless you don’t want to,” I add.

“No! I want to. This is incredible.” She looks around again, and I do too. The cave is a natural wonder, and even I can feel the magic here.

Camp is simple, a pile of blankets and sleeping bags, some kitchen gear, and enough food and water to get us through the night. Once that’s all arranged and looking comfy, it’s time to tell her what I’ve been up to. Hopefully, she’ll see it as a good thing, a welcome surprise.

“Iggy, will you come sit by me?” I ask. She takes a seat on the ledge. As she squeezes in tight and twines her arms through mine, a thought pops into my head—she’s the only one for me now.

My mouth goes dry and my heart starts pounding. *Please see it as a good thing.*

“I’m moving to Boston,” I start, and the rest just tumbles out. I can hardly hear myself because of the ringing in my ears, but I hope I’m saying all the things I meant to say about how it feels like she’s rewritten every notebook I ever tucked into my pocket until every word was about her and every thought behind them a prayer that I’d find her someday. And

now that I have, “I can’t stay behind and let you leave without me. I can’t say goodbye.” I nearly choke on the word.

I tell her I have a job, and that I promise to give her space if she needs it. “I won’t try to take over your life, I swear.” But then I run out of words and trip to an ungraceful stop. “I guess that’s it.”

I try to read her expression, but there’s not much to pick up on. She looks, I don’t know, contemplative, I guess, staring out over the glowing orange pool below us. “Please tell me what you’re thinking,” I finally say when I can’t stand it anymore.

She looks at me. “That’s a very sweet offer but—” Her eyes drop, and my heart sinks.

*Oh fuck*, she doesn’t feel about me the way I feel about her. She doesn’t want me in Boston. My head swims. I try to suck in a breath, but my ribs feel like they’re caving in.

“Would you entertain a counteroffer?” she asks.

I choke out a laugh. I’m not reassured, but this is a very Iggy response. I should have seen it coming. “What’d you have in mind?” I ask, clearing my throat, trying to hide the rasp of devastation already straining my voice. I can’t do long distance. I’m sure that would kill me. I need to be *with* her.

She reminds me of the outing she and Darcy took a few weeks ago. “I’d already updated my portfolio with everything I’ve designed for the park,” she says, and I nod, but I don’t understand the connection. There’s a loud buzzing in my head, drowning out some of her words, and I’m having trouble following. “Do you remember me talking about her?” Iggy asks.

“Skylla Flarelion,” I repeat the name she just mentioned. She nods, but it’s the only part I heard, and the name seems so irrelevant at the moment that I can’t place it.

“I was ready to break into her office, bargain, beg if I had to. Whatever it took. I wasn’t going to leave until she heard me out. But I didn’t have to beg. She’d already seen the park campaign, and that bought me three minutes. Just three minutes, so I had to make it good.” She’s excited about

something, but it's not about me moving to Boston, that much I've gathered. She pulls her phone from her bag and, tapping the screen, she hands it to me. "When I left, I thought it'd gone well, but I didn't know for sure until this email came through on our drive here. Read it."

I skim, glancing up at her as often as I look down at her phone. "It's a hire letter?"

She nods, and says, "For an entry-level marketing position, not the one I applied for originally, but it's a good fit." For a moment, I assume she's gotten a new job in Boston. She'll be too busy for me. That's what she's saying, but then I see the signature line.

"The Emberlight Resort." I pull up straight. My heart throws up warning flags that this is too much to hope for. Don't believe it just yet, not until she says it.

"You're staying?" I ask. The words are rough as they tumble out of the cement mixer's worth of hope and dread churning inside my chest.

"I'm staying," she confirms.

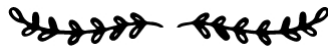
My heart stops. The world stops. There's a crack of something breaking inside but it feels good, like something that should break. I lunge at her, toppling her onto the pile of sleeping bags and blankets with a growl. And then I'm squeezing and biting, nibbling her all over, up and down. I'm wildly happy, bordering on unhinged, and she knows it. She giggles and wriggles under me as she laughs her wicked little heart out.

I want to tear her clothes off. I want to touch and taste her. I want inside her so badly I'm nearly blind with it, but not yet.

I pin her body under mine and cup her face with both hands, stilling us so that I can say what I need to say. I'd planned this. I was going to be gentle, brush her lips tenderly and whisper soft things against her skin. But that's not this moment. I'm wild with joy. It's rebounding and doubling on itself every moment. My hands are already shaking with it, and if I wait any longer, I won't be able to speak.

My fingers slide back along her scalp and lace into her hair, tugging and holding her head firmly in place so that our eyes are locked and she can't look anywhere but at me. She sucks in a sharp breath.

"I love you," I say and crush my mouth to hers.



I ggy is a demon.

I've known that from the moment I first saw her, but when she breaks away from me in the middle of the night, something about that knowledge changes. She throws off our pile of blankets and stumbles forward, falling onto her hands and knees right at the ledge.

She's completely naked, just how she fell asleep, and she stares into the lava.

I call her name. Her reply is a series of demands. She needs me, she says. She wants me to take her from behind while pulling her horns. The harder the better.

When I don't move, her black eyes flash at me over her shoulder. They dance with a fire that is so much like a reflection, I look around for it. But I didn't start a fire. We didn't need one. The fire is only in her eyes.

I rise naked from our bed and walk over to her with slow, uncertain steps.

"Don't be afraid," she whispers.

Her lips are swollen like she's been biting them all night. Her pink skin is flushed dark, edging toward red. And her black hair is spiking up from her crown, all of it except a few sweaty strands that cling to her face and neck.

She's breathtaking.

I fall to my knees right at her backside, but when I reach for her hips, her skin is so hot, I pull back.

"Touch me," she pleads, a desperate need coloring her voice.

I slide both hands up her back, then down around her ass. She's unbelievably hot, but I can take it.

"You're sure you want this?" There's something like a tinge of delirium clinging to her, and I need to hear her say it.

"I'm going to bliss out," she replies, and it takes me a second, but I recall the term *Fire Bliss* and I realize this is my doing. I put a demon to bed right next to a lake of lava.

"I'll be far away but right here. I'll feel you the whole time. Grab on and ride me through to the end. Can you do that for me?" Demons the world over travel to Winter Bliss to chase this state of euphoria. A fire can induce it, but from what I understand, a volcano is an order of magnitude more potent, and she's already swept up in it.

"I can do that," I say solemnly, like it's a vow I'm making. Like I'm swearing to be whatever she needs in this moment.

My cock is hard and ready, positioned right at her entrance. She's so soaking wet, I slide all the way in on one stroke, and as the *Fire Bliss* takes her, so do I.

I wrap my hands around her horns, and I give Iggy everything I've got, pushing her pleasure as high as it'll go. I tease her clit, yank her horns, and pump harder every time she begs for it rougher.

The sight of her back arching as I slam into her, the noises that spill from her throat, all of it pushes me toward the edge so fast, I could have come in a few strokes. But I fight back against my own orgasm, holding it off for longer than I've ever had to delay it before. I'm trembling and aching, drenched in sweat, but I won't stop because Iggy needs more.

I become aware of just how painfully human I am in this moment. A demon wouldn't struggle. He'd be fueled by the same fire that's throbbing like a heartbeat through her. His legs wouldn't cramp. His sides wouldn't ache. It'd be an easy ride for him all the way to the end.

I don't care. I don't need this to be easy. I'll do every single hard thing Iggy asks me to do. I will give her all the pleasure she can handle. I will work like a dog to make sure she's

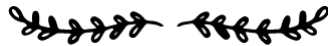
always satisfied and that she never, ever wishes for someone else.

She screams my name, and it's music to my ears. I pull harder on her horns and she lets out a deep groan as she comes, squeezing along my cock. Her body shudders and shakes, and she collapses to the ground.

"Perfect," she murmurs and passes out.

I'm drenched in sweat. My balls are swollen, aching and tight, but I'm deliriously happy as I scoop her up and take her back to our bed.

"I love you," I murmur over and over against the damp curve of her neck as I pull her sweltering, slick body, into the spoon of mine.



The next morning, I brew us some coffee and pour it into a thermos to keep us warm on our hike back to the truck. The sun is just starting to rise as we head out. There's fresh snow on the ground, fine wisps of fog curling through the trees, and all of it is blanketed by the chirps and soft hums of early morning critters.

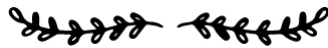
Walking beside me, Iggy is positively glowing. She had a very good night, and so did I, the best night of my life. She woke up a few times, desperate and needy, and on our second go around, I came so hard I nearly blacked out. But after that, I learned entirely new ways to satisfy her. My chest puffs proudly just thinking about it.

She sucks in an appreciative, deep breath. "The air smells so clean," she says and immediately takes another deep lungful.

"Careful," I warn. "Too much of that'll make you dizzy."

She crooks an eyebrow at me and says it's hard to take me seriously when I have a goofy grin on my face. If only I had a mirror to show her her own face. "Your dimples have been on full, shameless display all morning." She purses her lips at me, and I chuckle.

What can I say? I'm happy.



Christmas Day arrives. It's finally here.

Me, Iggy, Darcy, and Haisley get up early to prepare. We've got a fire going, music playing, and a dinner table optimistically set for seven. Darcy baked all day yesterday to fill three baskets with breakfast breads, muffins, and pastries. They're set out on the coffee table, along with mugs, small plates, and some doily napkins that aren't going to serve any useful purpose except for making Darcy happy.

Everything's ready.

My father is the first guest to arrive. I half expected him not to show, but not only is he standing on my doorstep, he's holding a gift. "For the baby," he mutters and shoves the newspaper-wrapped box at me. When I invite him in, he recoils. "Who all's here?" he asks with a frown. I answer, and when I mention Iggy, I make it clear that he'd better be nice. "Is your mother coming?" he asks warily. I nod. He grunts and asks a few more questions including what we'll be eating. When he's finally satisfied, he comes in.

"This is your house?" he asks, looking around as I lead him through to the living room.

"It is," I say, and I can't help it, my chest swells with pride when he gives a little nod. If it's not an expression of approval, it's close enough.

My mom shows up next, and as soon as I open the door, she shouts, "Look who I brought!" Stepping aside, she reveals my brother. He's scruffy and his face is etched with deep scowl lines. He looks just like our dad, which means he also looks a lot like me. If I'd leaned into life's miseries as much as they both have, I'm sure we'd all be near identical.

"Chad," he mumbles my name in greeting, eyes darting away.

"Thanks for coming, bro." I grin. I step back and invite them in.



“Go meet your grandchild.” My mom pushes him down the hall then calls after him. “You’ve got five minutes and then she’s mine!” I spot the price tag on the back of his Christmas sweater as he shuffles away. I’m guessing he got strong-armed into wearing it on the ride over.

Turning back to my mom, she makes an awkward gesture that I belatedly realize is her leaning in for a hug. It’s the holidays, so—we hug. “I’m glad they gave you the day off,” I say.

“They didn’t. My request was denied.”

“But you’re here?” She wouldn’t quit her job. No way.

“I had to figure it out. I made a couple of trades and called in a favor.” She shoots a nervous glance over my shoulder before whispering, “I made a deal. It was kind of terrifying. Very stiff negotiator, that girl.” She hurries off in search of Haisley, and I go looking for Iggy to confirm what I suspect, that this was her doing.

She lights up at my question, shooting me a mischievous grin. “It’s not a handshake deal, either. It’s a full-fledged contract, notarized and everything.” She’s alone in the kitchen, mulling the apple cider. “But it wasn’t me. It was Darcy. She really stuck it to her. I was so proud when I read it.”

She tells me that on their drive up to the resort, Darcy started asking questions, and by the time they arrived, it was all planned out. While Iggy went to track down Skylla Flarelion to beg to be reconsidered for a marketing job, Darcy would go find my mom. The deal they struck essentially gives my mom great-grandmother privileges so long as she meets certain family obligations, “Which extend to you, by the way. Darcy made sure of that.” That last bit lands like a punch to the heart. “Did you know they offer contract drafting and notary services right there at the resort? Isn’t that considerate?” she asks, clearly impressed by her new employer.

“Very thoughtful,” I murmur as my throat constricts. She nods, agreeing wholeheartedly. But when she opens her mouth to speak again, she goes rigid. Her eyes dart to me.

“Why do you taste like that?” she asks.

“Like what?” I manage to croak out. I should taste like happiness right now, I know I should. But whatever I’m feeling, it’s not light or bright. It’s squeezing and racing and—

“Terror?” She licks the air again and her face pinches in concern. “That can’t be right.”

“No, I think you nailed it. Terror.” My palms feel clammy and there are spots floating in my vision.

“I’ll send everyone home right now,” she growls.

“No,” I reach for her, stopping her with a hand at her waist. “This is what I wanted.”

“You wanted a panic attack?”

I chuckle. “It’s not that bad,” I say. Sure, my heart is pounding, but the spots are already clearing. “I wanted a Robins family Christmas, and I got it.” Everyone is here. “But that’s not the part that’s terrifying—it’s you.” She’s the reason this is the first real Christmas I’ve had in twenty years, and that’s only one of the ways she’s changed my life, changed me.

She studies my face for a moment before leaning into me. Her head comes to rest on my shoulder, and she’s careful where she places her horns. Her nose brushes my neck. “You terrify me too,” she murmurs the soft confession against my skin. “But I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying right here.”

She offers me the exact reassurance I crave, and it hits a tender spot. My arms wrap around her, and everything agitated inside settles down until all traces of uneasiness are gone, but things have changed. *Right here* isn’t as important as it used to be.

“You don’t have to stay anywhere you don’t want to be. Just stay with me, and I’ll stay with you. Wherever you go, I’ll follow.”

## Chapter 15

*Iggg*



**H**e wakes me with a fresh cup of coffee and kisses that linger. “If you’re going to make your appointment, you have to get up,” he whispers. He offers me his coat on our way out the door and bats my hands away, insisting on zipping it for me. He opens the car door. Inside, he takes my hand and laces our fingers together. Each little moment is an opportunity. I pause. My lips part and the three little words balanced on the tip of my tongue nearly tumble off of it.

*I love you.*

I swallow them down unsaid. Again.

What’s wrong with me? He’s already said it, which should make this easier, but he had to go and orchestrate a perfect moment. We were inside a volcano, for fuck’s sake. Right next to a pool of lava. And my chosen moment is when—while riding shotgun in his truck? How does that compare?

I should have said it then too, but he was stealing the breath right out of my lungs. If I'd had any idea how hard it would be to find an equally perfect moment, I wouldn't have let that one pass.



“Stretch your arms out, palms facing up,” a calm female voice coming through the intercom instructs. I do as I'm told, taking a nervous glance around the all-white pod I'm standing in wearing nothing but a hospital gown. The immolation room, that's what Vale's fake doctor wife, Coco the special psychologist, calls it. Our first two appointments were just talking. Apparently, those went so well she thinks I'm ready for this. We'll see.

“What do you mean you don't make fire?” Chad asked when I told him I wanted to try this. “You've scorched up all my furniture. I have to buy new sheets every few weeks to replace the ones you burn through. And you almost started a forest fire. If you ask me, you're kind of a fire hazard.” My eyes welled up, and I had to fight back a sob.

It's the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me, but sending off sparks and one accidental almost-forest-fire isn't enough. I'm ready to face this thing.

The good doctor comes over the intercom again, and this time she tells me to tap into my latent ancestral memory of the dancing flame. It's a memory all demons are born with, and it's the same advice my tutors used to give me. “Picture it in your mind and hold it there.” I try, but every time I picture the dancing flame, I'm back in the private instruction hall with a pair of tutors muttering disappointedly over my head while my parents wait outside, impatient and embarrassed.

They're not here, I remind myself. And this isn't for them anyway. I don't give a fuck what they think.

This is for me.

I let out a slow breath, relax my shoulders, and let a new picture form in my mind. It's a cave warmed by a glowing lava pool. Chad's thighs are coiled with mine. His pounding heart

beats against my chest. He smiles, and there it is—the warmth I’m supposed to feel, the safety and contentment. I don’t need the dancing flame. I have a new memory to draw from.

Fire blasts down from the ceiling, bathing my hands in a fierce heat that sinks into my bones, flowing one direction and then the other, until I can feel the difference.

Fire flowing into me.

Fire flowing out.

*I’m doing it!* My eyes pop open, and I let out a startled gasp. I’m making fire, and it’s not just at my fingertips. There’s heat coming straight from my core, pulsing in tempo with my heartbeat. It courses along my limbs until it leaps free from my hands, raw and powerful.

*Is this what it was always supposed to feel like?*

My mouth falls open in wonder as I stare at my hands. Dearest Dark Mother Below, this is amazing. Tears spring to my eyes, but the droplets evaporate before they can fall.

“You did exceptionally well today, Iggy. You should be proud of yourself,” Coco says, standing at the open door, hands primly clasped in front of her.

“Thank you,” I murmur as I take a dazed step out of the immolation room. I run a shaky hand through my hair, and it catches on something at my temple. I feel at it with my other hand, trying to figure out what it is. It’s a hard glob. And there’s a matching one on the other side of my head.

“You melted my barrettes!” I glare at Coco accusingly, and without thinking, I reach out and pinch a tiny section of her hair and singe it.

“Damn it, Iggy! I told you last time, you can’t burn my hair every time you get upset.”

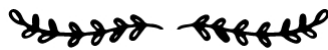
“Sorry,” I grimace to hide a laugh. “Bad habit,” I add. It’s what my sister and I do to each other. Even small sparks will melt hair. She hated it, but Coco is not my sister. She’s a new acquaintance, and even if it’s a tiny bit fun to see her lose her composure, she’s right, I shouldn’t treat her like she’s more

than that. “What am I going to do?” I whine. “I have a date tonight.” An important date. It’s New Ember’s Eve. A volcano is going to erupt at midnight. It’s my best opportunity to tell Chad how I feel. I can’t do it with metal boogers in my hair! I start to panic.

Coco tugs at the melted barrets. They don’t budge. Her lips purse as her doctor brain whirrs into high gear. “Back in the immolation room. We’re going to have to melt them off.”

It works, but I’m a couple shades redder than my usual color when I step out. Demons are not impervious to flame. That’s a common misconception that demons choose not to correct. We’re born resistant, and a lifetime of producing fire from our own bodies builds our resistance to near imperviousness. Unless of course, you’re me.

Two rounds in the immolation room, and I’m essentially sunburned.



As I’m getting ready for the night, slathering a cooling mask over my face and neck, a nagging feeling keeps distracting me. It’s New Ember’s Eve, a sacred day for demons, one we’re supposed to spend with our families, even if you don’t want to.

Chad did it. He spent his holiday with his family, and most of them are annoying, awful people.

It was nice.

Another pang of guilt shoots through my chest, and I throw down my makeup brush with a grumble.

I’ve met someone and I’m moving to Winter Bliss.

I send the text and wait. It’s an olive branch, an offering of long overdue personal updates. Keeping private things private is a rule for strangers and acquaintances. When it comes to close friends and family, you’re supposed to open up and share. It’s a sign of love and affection. And I love my sister.

ARDI

Whhhhhhaaat????

Oh, and I got a new job!

I almost forgot that part.

ARDI

Is that why you're not here? You could have told me!

Who is he?

Send me pictures!

And his IQ test.

Does his dick glow?

I snort a laugh as the rapid-fire questions continue. She has too many for me to answer now.

I'll call you tomorrow and tell you everything.

ARDI

Promise?

Promise.



The Truthfire Festival is as quaint and lovely as the little town that hosts it. It's also as loud and chaotic as the demon magic running wild through its streets.

At a stall up ahead, a petite fairy bundled in a winter coat and mittens sells a delicate, hand-spun glass flower to a heavy-set demon stripped down to a loin cloth. He's marked up in blue paint and wearing a fire crown that belches plumes of colored smoke from his head.

"Nope. Not that way," Chad steers me away before we reach them. "That's Harty Mercer. He's still pissed about his cabin." We duck down the next street and head over one more. "This is our spot," he says, coming to a stop and pointing at the clear, unobstructed view of Mt. Winter Bliss. He starts pulling a blanket out of his bag. It's stuffed tightly in there and he has to keep yanking at it.

"Can I help?" I ask.

"I got it."

I check my watch. It's getting close to midnight, and a sudden fear grips me. I was planning to wait until the volcano erupted, but a new thought pops to mind. If I wait until then, this year will be gone. Do I really want to let it go by without saying it? The spasm in my chest acts as a spur.

"Hey." I tug on his sleeve. "I love you."

He glances my way and smiles. It's a nice smile—I catch a glimpse of his dimples—but it's not the glowing smile I was expecting. "I'm glad to hear it," he says and goes back to tugging at the blanket until it's free.

"You're *glad to hear it*?" My voice grows sharp, and my chin juts as I give him full stink face. Okay, sure, maybe my timing is underwhelming and not nearly as thoughtful or theatrical as his was, but it's still a love confession.

"Iggy." He drops the blanket, and for a moment he just looks amused. But then he draws near, reaches for my hand, and folds it into both of his. He grows very serious. "I know I said I love you, but it wasn't entirely accurate. I'm miles and miles past that. Falling in love with you is a small dot on the



horizon at this point. But if that's where you are, I'll take it. I really am very glad to hear that you love me back. I'm content with that for now."

"For now?" That doesn't sound reassuring. "Until when?"

"Until you're ready for all the rest."

"Like what?" I ask. "Moving in together?"

"That, yep. And the rest."

"Rest of what? Marriage?" I whisper the last word.

"Yep, that too. All of it. You're the one who said I needed to be honest with myself about what I want from the people in my life, and that's what I want from you: everything. All that there is to share in life with someone, I want to share with you. I'd marry you today if you were ready."

He squeezes my hand once before he stoops to pick up the blanket and spreads it out. He takes a seat and pats the spot next to him.

I don't move.

"I'm happy to wait until you're ready. I really am. And in the meantime," he continues, "we've got plenty to keep us busy. We've got to get you moved. You're starting a new job. I'm going back to mine. And we've got a trip to plan." He pats the blanket again, and this time I take my place beside him.

Winter Bliss is going to be our home. It's the right choice for both of us, but we've also decided we should travel. Chad was a lot more excited about the idea than I thought he'd be. "Traveling with someone sounds a lot more fun than traveling alone," he said, but we haven't decided where we're going yet.

"What do you think of Europe?" he asks, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me in tight. "My mom keeps insisting it's nice."

"It has its old world charms," I snort. I'd wanted to see more of Europe myself, but after hearing his mom casually mention the *old world charms* roughly three thousand times, I'm kind of indifferent now.

“We should go to New Zealand!” The idea pops in my head and my whole brain lights up at it. “I bet you’d love it.” He would. They have natural beauty on lock down, incredible state parks, and some of the world’s most impressive geothermal wonders. I try to picture Chad’s reaction to seeing a fiord in person for the first time and my excitement spikes again. I bet he passes out.

“New Zealand,” he agrees. “First chance we get.” Then, with one finger, he lifts my chin so that I’m looking at him. “To be clear, I won’t be waiting impatiently. There’s no pressure. No rush. Just know that I’ll be on the lookout for a sign that you’re ready for more.”

“Do you mean something like the secret signal?” I ask, teasing him with a reference to the double bird sign I taught Darcy when I first met her.

He laughs. “Sure, that one.”

“Well, that won’t work. *That* one actually means leave me alone.”

“Between you and Darcy it means that. Maybe between you and me it can mean something different.”

“Maybe,” I agree. “Let’s give it a shot.” I pull back and give him the double bird.

He freezes except for his eyes, which keep darting from my hands to my face.

“Am I doing it?” I ask. “Am I sending the right signal that I love you? That I want to marry you and spend the rest of my life with you?”

“Are you joking? Please don’t be joking about this,” he says, a pained expression on his face.

“I’m not joking. I’m signaling. I’d never joke about something as meaningful as a life-long, legally binding contract.”

He’s still for a heartbeat. Then he’s up on his feet and pulling me up behind him. “Tonight! We’re getting married tonight.”

“What happened to no rush?” I ask with a laugh as he starts moving us through the crowd, leaving our blanket behind.

“That was before you said you’d marry me. Where’s that damn judge? I know I saw him.”

“There.” I point to a figure a few blocks away, walking along the far side of town square. “But he’s not going to do it now. It’s a holiday,” I say, already losing sight of him in the crowd.

“Oh yes he will,” Chad insists and we’re off, running across the square.

All signs of the exploded statue are gone and there’s a new one in its place. I don’t pause to look as we race past in search of the same judge who sentenced me here in the first place, to a brand new life in Winter Bliss.

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