



# One Night on the Naughty List

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** Dear Santa, All I want for Christmas is to get through the next twenty-four hours without embarrassing myself. I have no business spending the day with Bain Thatcher, my incredibly hot and totally off-limits boss. He's my opposite in every way: older, rich, and so drop-dead gorgeous women in the office call him the "panty melter." Did I mention he's hot? He's also coming off a nasty divorce, and I know romance is the last thing on his mind. Unfortunately, it's the only thing on mine whenever I'm near him. So it was pretty dumb of me to agree to accompany him to his family's Christmas party. I should have said no, but I couldn't resist his handsome face and sexy grin when he said he didn't want to go alone. His washboard abs might have had something to do with it, too. Ever since I got a glimpse of them, I've had trouble staying on the Nice List. Now I've got to handle three hours in the car with Bain Thatcher the Panty Melter, followed by a whole evening on his arm. I've spent three years hiding my attraction to my boss. It's going to take a Christmas miracle for me to hide it during this trip. I know you're busy, Santa Baby, but it would be great if you could hurry down the chimney and help me keep my oh-so-naughty thoughts to myself.

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:04 am*

Samantha

I straightened the things on my desk for the hundredth time since I arrived at work.

Maybe the thousandth. I lost track somewhere between checking my makeup with my iPhone camera and watching the door for Bain.

Bain Thatcher, founder and CEO of Bain Nutrition. My boss. My sexy-as-sin boss who did CrossFit and looked like Jamie Dornan's hotter, older brother. My boss who showed up in my office yesterday afternoon and persuaded me to accompany him to his family's Christmas party at the North Pole.

Not the North Pole.

North Pole, New York—a teeny, tiny hamlet deep in the Adirondacks. According to Bain, it had a kitschy Santa's Workshop tourist attraction and more squirrels than people. But we wouldn't be visiting the workshop. Bain's widowed mother threw a holiday gathering at his childhood home every year, and she expected Bain and his brothers to be there. It didn't matter that Bain Nutrition was in the middle of a new product launch, or that Bain and I were supposed to be knee-deep in our quarterly marketing meeting.

"Mom's a stickler for this party," he'd said, his blue eyes twinkling as he leaned against my office doorway. "Can I convince you to take our meeting on the road?"

It hadn't taken much convincing. And by "much" I meant "none." I probably would have agreed to go ice fishing with Bain Thatcher if he suggested it. I usually took

pride in my ability to carry on a conversation with anyone. It was a skill fat girls learned early on. Be funny. Be the nice one. Be the girl the boys like to talk to. “You’re so funny, Sam. I feel like I can tell you anything.”

But my skills deserted me the moment Bain walked into a room. He only had to smile and I was reduced to hot flashes and heat in inconvenient places. More than once, I rushed home from a long meeting with him and stood under an ice cold shower. It didn’t always work. Sometimes, I ended up in bed alone, my hand straying south while I replayed every smile or casual touch he gave me.

Nerves prickled down my neck, and I propped my elbows on my desk and put my head in my hands. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I said weakly.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll be doing him,” a familiar, teasing voice said.

I sat up. “Hey, Kara.”

The office manager leaned a hip on my desk and waggled her eyebrows at me as she sipped her coffee.

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” I scolded. “Aren’t you supposed to handle human resources?”

She gave me a suggestive look over her mug. “I would kill to handle a human resource like Bain Thatcher.”

“Kara.”

“Did you know the ladies in the accounting department call him Panty Melter?”

“Kara.”

“Ooh, are we talking about the date?” Alexis, the head of accounting, breezed in, her oversize coffee mug steaming. She was an attractive brunette with cat eye glasses and a killer sense of style. Normally, at least. Today, she was dressed like an elf.

Kara looked her up and down. “Aren’t you taking this North Pole thing too far?”

“What?” Alexis gave her a mock hurt look. Then she shook her head, making the bell on her hat jingle. “I thought we were launching the new protein bar today.” She looked at me. “Aren’t we?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes, but it’s a soft launch.” Bain Nutrition’s newest product was the North Pole Protein Bar, an on-the-go snack designed to give athletes the calories they needed to perform in cold weather. As advertising director, it fell to me to make sure the launch was a success.

Kara smirked. “I don’t think Bain does soft launches.”

“Or soft anything,” Alexis said. She lowered her voice. “Did you see his abs in the North Pole ad?”

I certainly had. I was there the day the photographer took the photos. It was my idea to have Bain dress up as a “fit Santa” for the advertising campaign. He was reluctant at first (“I’m not a model, Samantha”) but he warmed up to the idea after I promised no one would recognize him with a snowy white beard. Which was a lie, of course. I would recognize his chiseled stomach and broad shoulders anywhere.

“We all saw his abs thanks to Sam,” Kara said, saluting me with her coffee mug. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and get snowed in. Best date ever. I’ll be happy for you, but also jealous to the point of never speaking to you again.”

“It’s not a date,” I said. “It’s a marketing meeting.”

“It’s a date.”

Alexis’s expression turned dreamy. “Imagine getting snowed in with Bain.” She sighed. “A night alone with the Panty Melter.”

“It’s not a date,” I told Kara. I shot Alexis a stern look. “Stop that. No one’s getting snowed in.”

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“Sounded like a date to me,” Kara murmured, sipping her coffee. “We all heard him invite you.”

“It’s not.” Bain didn’t date girls like me. And I was a girl to him. How could I not be? He was thirty-eight to my twenty-five. Not old enough to be my dad or anything, but a far cry from the guys I dated. Because I only ever dated boys. Bain Thatcher was a man. In the three years I worked for him I’d never seen him out of control or unsure of himself.

Except maybe after Natasha left him. He took the divorce hard, probably because he lost both his wife and his business partner. Bain was the brains behind the business, but Natasha created all the recipes. I knew from a lifetime of dieting that health food usually tasted like cardboard covered in cheap chocolate. Bain Nutrition was different. The food was actually edible. As much as I disliked Natasha, I had to admit she was a gifted chef.

She was also blind if she thought she could do better than Bain. How any woman could walk away from such a man was beyond my comprehension. On my first year work anniversary, he brought me flowers. “Just my little way of saying thanks for all you do for the company.”

I may or may not have pressed one of the blooms between the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*, and I may or may not have treated myself to a little hand-gone-south action later that night. I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t my fault I worked for a real-life Mister Darcy.

But he wasn’t aloof like Mister Darcy. The stereotype of the arrogant, stuck-up CEO

did not apply to Bain Thatcher. On the contrary, he was generous and cool and touchingly thoughtful. On days before a new product launch, he bought everyone a catered lunch and served champagne. Once when the receptionist complained about her back aching, he ordered new chairs for the entire office and hired a masseuse to give the whole staff neck and shoulder massages.

My mother thought I made it all up. “No man is that perfect, Samantha.”

But he was that perfect, which meant he wasn’t going to be on the market forever. Natasha was a fool, but other women were not. Someone skinny and beautiful was going to snatch him up, and I was going to have to watch from afar while another woman got six-foot-three inches of Bain Thatcher all to herself.

So when he appeared in my office with his smiling blue eyes and wave of dark hair, my advertising instincts kicked in. Bain was a limited time offer. I’d fantasized about the man for three years. Now I had the chance to spend the day with him before he inevitably hooked up with the next Mrs. Bain Thatcher. It was easy to murmur “yes, of course I’ll go” while he grinned at me from my office doorway, a lock of dark hair spilling over his forehead.

The panic had set in later, when I got home and realized I agreed to spend three hours in a car with him, followed by a night at his family’s house.

God, I was in way over my head.

“Are you okay?” Alexis peered at me. “You look green.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, it is almost Christmas,” Kara said. “If you blush like you did when Bain was in here yesterday, you’ll match the color scheme.”

I put my hands on my cheeks. “Did I blush?”

“Like a virgin.”

Jesus.

Alexis waved a hand, setting off her bell again. “Don’t worry about it. I blush when Bain talks to me, too, and I’ve been married for five years.”

Kara snorted. “I’ve been married fifteen years, and I sometimes forget my own name when he stops by my office.”

They weren’t exaggerating. Bain was that hot. And it was criminally unfair, because he was also kind. And chivalrous. And smart and funny.

Seriously, Natasha was an idiot.

“So,” Kara said, “what are you wearing for your big date?”

“It’s not a date. It’s a—”

“Marketing meeting.” She rolled her eyes. “We know, we know.”

I nudged my foot against the bag under my desk, reassuring myself it was still there. “I brought a change of clothes and something a little more formal. Nothing fancy.” I managed to make my voice casual, nothing in my tone giving away the fact that I spent the previous evening tearing through my closet, my anxiety climbing as I tried on outfit after outfit, rejecting everything. Bain never said it outright, but little hints I picked up here and there over the years let me know he came from wealth. My jeans and T-shirts weren’t going to cut it.



I ended up at the mall, where I flagged down the first saleswoman I saw and blurted, “I need an outfit for the North Pole!”

It took a little clarification, but I managed to explain what I was looking for. And when I described Bain, her gaze grew shrewd as she murmured, “I have just the thing. Not many women have the body for it, but you can pull it off.”

I had no idea what she meant by that, but I had no choice but to trust her. As a rule, I avoided my reflection when I tried on clothes—a habit I developed in middle school, when kids first started calling me “Samantha Fat” instead of “Samantha Pratt.” Those days were firmly in my rear view mirror, but real mirrors still made my heart pound and my chest grow tight.

The distant bang of a door slamming, followed by the sound of general commotion near the front of the office, jerked me back to the present. Kara and Alexis turned as Bain strode down the hall, a cardboard carrier nestled with tall white cups in one hand.

“Hey, ladies.” He stopped outside my door, looking perfect in jeans and a wool sweater over a plaid shirt. “I hope you’re thirsty.”

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I felt his deep voice in my bones, and I could almost taste his scent—a heady mix of freshly chopped wood, spice, and maybe a hint of tobacco. As far as I knew, he didn’t smoke, but I’d seen a box of cigars on a shelf in his office, so he probably had one every now and then. Maybe he kicked back in his chair and crossed his ankles on his desk, his blue eyes gleaming through a haze of smoke. God, even the mental image of it made me wet.

“Very thirsty,” Kara said. “Trust us.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Dammit, Kara, behave yourself.

Bain gave her a look that was equal parts amusement and confusion—his usual expression when speaking to her. “Well, um, that’s good, I guess.” He looked between the two women. “I brought coffee, but I see you already have some.”

“That’s no problem, Bain.” Kara plucked the carrier from his hand and set it on my desk. “We’ll drink your coffee.”

Alexis nodded enthusiastically, setting her bell off.

Bain seemed to notice her outfit for the first time, and he smiled. “I see you dressed for the launch, Lexi.”

He did that—gave all his employees nicknames. Kara called them “Bain names” and claimed hers (Kara Kara) came from the way he shook his head and said her name twice every time she said something inappropriate. Which was often. Everyone in the office had a Bain name.

Everyone except me.

I fixed my smile in place as I watched him and Alexis banter back and forth. If anyone's name lent itself to a nickname, it was mine. There were so many variations with Samantha.

Sam.

Sammy.

Sammy Whammy Ding Dong.

Okay, so maybe my dad's version was a little out there. But Bain had never given me one. Even after three years and countless late nights working one-on-one together on marketing plans and advertising campaigns, I was still just "Samantha" to him. It didn't mean anything. He was probably just waiting for something unique to come to him. Something special and different. One day he'd say it, and I would know I was more to him than just his advertising director.

"Samantha?"

His voice snapped me out of my daze. "Yes?"

His blue eyes crinkled, the laugh lines at the corners in no way detracting from his sexiness. "I asked if you're ready to go."

No. I was in no way ready to spend the day—and most of the night—with Bain Thatcher.

"Yes," I said. "Absolutely."

“I’m going to grab a few things from my office, and I’ll meet you in the car. Oh, and bring your camera, would you? Mom puts up some pretty impressive decorations. I thought we might be able to get some holiday shots for the company.”

“No problem.”

He flashed a good-natured grin. “Fair warning, my mother is obsessed with Christmas. I hope you’re prepared for the North Pole.”

“I am.” Except I’m totally not. Not when his smile made me feel like the only woman on earth. It was a good thing I was sitting, because I was pretty sure my knees were weak.

“Great. See you out there.” He gave Kara and Alexis a wave and disappeared down the hall.

Kara waited until he was out of earshot, then turned to me. “What do you say, Sam, are you prepared for—”

I held up a hand. “Do not say Bain’s pole.”

She opened her mouth.

“Or stocking. Or Yule log.” Good grief, why did Christmas have so many sexual innuendos?

She pressed a hand to her chest. “I would never.”

I relaxed my shoulders.

“I was only going to say I hope you jingle his balls. I mean bells!” She and Alexis

high-fived, both of them cackling like hyenas.

All I could do was shake my head as I pushed back from my desk and grabbed my bag. It had everything I needed—change of clothes, toothbrush, a little bit of makeup, and the special outfit the mall saleswoman insisted was “stunning” on me.

Yeah, right. She also earned a commission on every purchase.

But it was too late to change things now. Bain was waiting.

I stuffed my camera in the bag. See? It’s a marketing meeting. He wouldn’t have asked me to bring it if he intended this to be a date. I could handle marketing, and I could handle my attraction to Bain Thatcher. I’d done it for three years. I could manage another three hours.

I just wasn’t sure what I was going to do about the night.

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Bain

Most of the time, I dreaded the drive from Albany to my mother's place.

Not this time.

It was a boring route—mostly highway and forest with the occasional lonely rest stop. I usually blasted music or listened to a few podcasts. Sometimes I drove in silence, letting my mind wander as my SUV ate up the miles.

My mind was doing a lot of wandering right now, and it had nothing to do with boredom and everything to do with the fact that Samantha Pratt was sitting next to me, her sweet scent teasing my nose and her luscious body making it hard to keep my eyes on the road.

There were half a dozen reasons she shouldn't be in my passenger seat, and all of them made me feel like a lecher.

She was my employee. Strike one.

She was twenty-five years old. Strike two.

She never showed the slightest interest in me as more than a boss. Strike three.

Okay, so maybe there weren't half a dozen reasons, but the three I had were plenty.

Except lately I had reason to question the last one. It wasn't anything specific. Just

subtle signs every now and then that made me wonder if maybe her unflappable professional exterior was in fact flappable. If maybe the occasional spark I saw in her big brown eyes was a signal and not just a trick of the light.

I used to be good at picking up signals. The old Bain probably would have already asked her out. But ten years of marriage had left me rusty. Natasha and I met in college, when dating apps were a novelty instead of the standard. I never learned to use technology to meet a woman. Never thought I'd need to.

Coming home late from work one night and finding my wife bent over the kitchen counter with her yoga instructor nailing her from behind was one hell of a way to realize I needed to brush up on my tech skills.

I eased my grip on the steering wheel. I wasn't going to think about Natasha today. However, I owed her in a sense. One of her chief complaints about our marriage—although she neglected to tell me until after she downward dogged on our counter—was that I was too straitlaced. A “rule follower,” she said.

So now I was breaking the rules. The “rules” said a CEO shouldn't date his employee, and that a man pushing forty shouldn't be interested in a woman in her mid-twenties.

I had to wonder if the person who first wrote down all the rules envisioned a woman like Samantha Pratt. Her height was the first thing I noticed about her. It was rare for me to be able to look a woman in the eye when I shook her hand. She came to my chin, which probably put her a touch over five-eleven.

And she filled out every single inch with curves that left me flushed and distracted.

Then she sat across from my desk during her job interview and told me all the things wrong with Bain Nutrition's advertising campaigns. Which, in her estimation, was

everything.

“You’re fresh out of college,” I’d said. “Forgive me, Ms. Pratt, but I doubt you know how to market a health food company.”

She’d looked me square in the eye and replied, “Well, that makes two of us, Mister Thatcher, because neither do you.”

I hired her on the spot.

It turned out she was right. I did not, in fact, know how to market a health food company. At least not as effectively as she did. In three years, Samantha had taken Bain Nutrition from a modest success to a household name. We worked closely together from the start, and I’d kept my appreciation for her curves to myself. I was a married man, after all, and admiring a beautiful woman was like seeing a painting in an art gallery. You look. You might even study it a bit. But you don’t pull it off the wall and take it home. At least not in my straitlaced, rule-following world.

Then my marriage fell apart a year later, and I didn’t want anything to do with looking or studying. I buried myself in work, keeping my head down as I replaced Natasha with a new chef and focused on growing my business.

But the fog lifted eventually. I pulled my head out of my ass and started noticing the world around me again.

I noticed Samantha. My body sure as hell noticed. She was built for sin, with a perfect hourglass shape that would make a saint bite his knuckles. Our one-on-one meetings and late nights became an exercise in self-control, as I struggled to match her cool, professional demeanor even as my chest grew tight and lust seared my veins like lit gasoline.



She had this shirt—a creamy silk blouse nearly the same shade as her skin—with a neckline lower than most of her clothes. Dainty white buttons marched down the front, just begging to be undone. She often paired it with a pearl necklace that dipped to deep cleavage.

I lived for silk blouse day.

It was a challenge to pay attention to sales figures and marketing reports when all I could think about was seeing her in nothing but that necklace, her curves on display, those impossibly long legs sprawled apart on my bed. Or my desk. God, I'd entertained some thoroughly detailed fantasies about locking my office door and following where that cleavage beckoned. I devoted entire afternoons to wondering if her nipples matched the charming blush that sometimes stained her cheeks.

I told myself that was common among natural blonds. That the slow spread of pink across her cheekbones and down her neck had nothing to do with me. How could it? There were thirteen years between us. There was a divorce between us. There were professional boundaries between us.

But my body didn't care about those things. Suddenly, I was ready to throw all the rules out the window.

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I just had to be certain she was prepared to do the same. Blame it on my straitlaced side, but I wasn't about to let my libido jeopardize her career. If I let her know how I felt and she didn't reciprocate, she would never feel comfortable at Bain Nutrition again. Unwelcome advances from a CEO had run more than one woman out of a job. It wasn't going to happen on my watch. Not to Samantha. She deserved better.

Then again, there were those blushes...

I was out of practice, sure, but I wasn't blind. My mother's Christmas party offered the perfect opportunity to spend time alone with Samantha without the pressure or potential awkwardness of a "date." My three brothers and their kids were loud and rambunctious enough to keep things from getting too intimate. On the other hand, there were plenty of places to sneak off to if the pink in her cheeks had something to do with me after all.

Wind buffeted the SUV, sending a gust of flurries straight at the windshield.

Samantha jerked and let out a little gasp.

"You okay?" I flicked on the wipers.

She gave me something of a sheepish look. "Yeah. I guess I'm still not used to New York snow, so I get nervous when the roads are icy. I grew up in Maryland."

"Outside of Annapolis."

She looked startled. "You remember that?"

“Dad is an accountant in D.C. Mom is a school secretary. No siblings, just cats.” I knew more—like how she’d begged for a dog (to no avail) and graduated first in her high school class (no surprise there)—but I left it at that. There was a line between showing interest and sounding like I had a dossier of information on her. I was rusty, but I wasn’t that rusty.

Her lips curved in a rueful smile. “My mother let me have the cats as compensation for being an only child. I think I finally stopped asking Santa for a baby brother or sister around fifth grade.”

If she kept smiling like that, I was definitely in for an uncomfortable ride. As it was, my cock tightened each time she turned toward me, giving me flashes of charming dimples and glossy pink lips. It didn’t help that her coffee cup in my center console bore the imprint of her mouth. My gaze kept straying to the plastic rim, my mind conjuring images of those full lips in other places. On other places. Around other places.

Keep it together, Thatcher. In a way, my reaction to her was a relief. Natasha hadn’t just broken my heart. She ripped it from my chest and chopped it to pieces like she diced vegetables during meal prep. Chop, chop, chop, go fuck yourself, Bain. For a while, I doubted I was capable of ever trusting a woman again, let alone loving one. My self-esteem nosedived, and celibacy seemed easier than risking another heartbreak.

It wasn’t easier now. Not with Samantha in my peripheral vision. She wore dark wash jeans that clung to her long legs and a loose-fit sweater that did nothing to conceal her generous chest. Even with cable knit masking her curves, my mind filled in the blanks. I’d shopped in the big and tall section since middle school. It took a lot to fill my hands. Based on my experience with Samantha’s silk blouse—which was extensive—I’d have my hands full with her.

At the moment, though, she'd fallen silent, dimples out of sight.

I shifted in my seat, subtly easing some pressure. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, I'm pretty sure I asked Santa to swap out a couple of my brothers for cats."

The dimples reappeared, and a little firework exploded in my chest. "You have three brothers, right? That must have been a busy house."

Ah, there was a nice, safe subject. "It's even busier now," I said. "At least when we're all home. I'm the only one without children. The others have four each, and my youngest brother has a fifth on the way."

Her brown eyes widened. "You're joking."

I shook my head, then winked at her. "I'm half convinced my brothers keep reproducing just so Mom will force me to play Santa each year."

"For real?" Now her eyes twinkled, gleaming with a spark of mischief I'd never seen before.

I needed to see it again.

"She has the full costume. Red suit, beard, everything."

She laughed—a low chuckle that went straight to my cock. "You should have told me you had experience dressing up as Santa." The mischief peeked out again. "When we did the North Pole ad campaign, you made it sound like wearing that white beard was the worst thing that ever happened to you."

The hint of naughtiness in her gaze was like a drug. One look and I was an addict. I had to catch my breath before I could reply. Even then, I heard flirtation in my voice

when I said, “Unlike you, my mother has never asked me to pose on a billboard in my boxers.”

Samantha rolled her eyes, dimples on full display. “They were board shorts. We needed to make Santa muscular and sexy. The ad wouldn’t work if we covered up your body.” As she talked, her eyes dipped to my shoulders and chest.

And just like that, the air shifted. Snow swirled outside, but heat blossomed between us.

She seemed to realize what she said—and where she looked when she said it—because she glanced away, adorably flustered. Ah, and there was the blush, the soft pink like a rose blooming against her creamy complexion. She sucked her lower lip into her mouth, worrying at it like she wished she could snatch her words from the air. A groan rose in my chest, and I had to work to stop myself from staring. I didn’t do a very good job. She was like a lavish dessert, all golden hair and peach-toned skin, her brown eyes like a dash of chocolate—a sweet surprise when you expected blue.

I always did love surprises.

But as much as the flush in her cheeks made a thrill trip through me, I couldn’t let her embarrassment linger. I nodded toward the bag at her feet. “Did you remember your camera?”

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“Oh!” Her gaze bounced between the bag and me, and she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, her movements fussy. “Yes, I’ve got it here.”

“I hope you don’t mind me asking you to bring it along. When I say my mother goes all out with decorations, I’m not exaggerating. She takes living in North Pole very seriously.” Which was an understatement. My mother was one step away from adopting a herd of reindeer and letting them graze in the backyard.

“I don’t mind,” Samantha said. She licked her lips. “I mean, we’re supposed to be talking marketing strategy.”

If she kept doing things with her mouth, the only talking I’d be doing was a series of grunts. I made another discreet adjustment and forced my gaze to the road. “Well, for the upcoming quarter, I’d really like to focus on our social media presence.”

Her golden head bobbed up and down in my side vision. If she had paper and a pen, she’d be taking notes. She did that a lot, her smooth brow furrowing as she scribbled things down during our meetings. She chewed on the end of her pen, too, which had a tendency to make me forget whole sentences. And my name.

Snow pelted the windshield, and I flipped the wipers up a notch. “I hate to pile more work on you, but you’ve handled our social channels so well over the past three years.” I dared a look at her. “I’m hopeless with it, as you know.”

“I know,” she said, a smile in her voice.

The warmth in her tone made my heart beat a little faster. “I just don’t understand

why everyone has to talk in code. Why can't people spell things out?"

Her laugh hit me in the chest and frazzled its way outward, banging against every nerve ending, ratcheting up my desire. "What's stumping you now? I already explained LOL and LMAO."

You, sweetheart. You're stumping me. But in the most delightful way possible. "What's SAME?" I asked her. I spelled it out. "I keep seeing that one."

For a second, she was silent. Then she burst out laughing.

"What?" I smiled, confused but utterly enchanted. It was a good thing traffic was light, because I was losing my battle to keep my eyes off her.

She put a hand over her mouth, clearly trying to contain her mirth, but her eyes squeezed shut as she started laughing again, her thick lashes so long they made shadows on her cheeks.

I made my voice low and gruff. "This is employee insubordination, Ms. Pratt."

Wrong thing to say. Immediately, my mind conjured up all the ways I could "correct" my wayward employee—all of them NSFW. Oh yeah, Samantha had explained that one to me, too.

Still chuckling, she lowered her hand. "It's not an acronym. It's just same. Like saying 'I feel the same' when you agree with someone." She snorted and crossed one jean-clad leg over the other. "I can't wait to tell Kara you said that."

"Don't you dare," I said, my throat going dry as my gaze ran from her rounded ass to her booted foot. There was a whole lot of denim-clad real estate between those two points, all of it cranking my discomfort to record levels.

She patted my arm, her movement sending a swirl of vanilla and sugar around me. “Don’t worry, Bain. Your secret is safe with me.”

Her touch was brief, but the heat from her fingers seemed to go right through my sleeve to my skin. Jesus, I had it bad. Reluctant humor spread through me. I’d been worried about being too old for her and now I was hard as iron, my heart beating faster than a teenage boy’s at the prospect of kissing his first girl.

She swung her foot a little, her leg bouncing up and down.

I gripped the wheel, blurting, “So what made you decide to go into advertising?”

Smooth segue, Thatcher. Masterful.

She ceased her bouncing. “It’s kind of a boring story.”

“I’m sure it’s not.” Nothing about Samantha was boring.

I felt the moment she decided to give in and answer. “It was in high school. My class didn’t have enough money to put on a prom, so I had the idea to ask people in the community to chip in by sponsoring a senior. It worked because people got personally invested. Sponsors got to have a say in the colors and the theme. I set up an online poll so they could vote on the music playlist.”

“That’s a hell of a great idea.”

“Once word spread, local businesses got involved, too.” She let out a soft laugh. “I had more money than I knew what to do with. I got a bridal salon to donate dresses to all the girls, and a tux shop gave the boys free rentals. There was a photographer and a limo company. We even got catering covered.”



Admiration swelled in my chest, and my voice came out huskier than I intended as I met her gaze. “So you saved prom.”

She shook her head, but a small, satisfied smile played around her mouth. “I don’t know about that.”

“It must have been quite a night. Did you have fun?”

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Her smile faded. But she recovered quickly, giving a little shrug. “I, um, didn’t go.”

A faint alarm sounded in my head. I had an idea where this was going, and I didn’t like it. As gently as I could, I asked, “Why not?”

“I didn’t have a date.” Another shrug. “I carried a lot of baby fat as a kid, and I became a chubby teenager. You know how boys can be at that age.”

Yeah, stupid little shits. She played it off, but her shrugs said everything. I was angry on her behalf. They said time healed all wounds, but I’d learned the hard way that some wounds stuck around. They formed scars. Some days you could almost forget about them, but then you bumped one out of the blue and all that pain rushed back, reminding you how bad it hurt when you were first wounded.

But you could make the pain fade again. Sometimes the best medicine was another person telling you things were okay. That things could be different or better.

“Samantha,” I said softly, making her look at me. “I know it’s probably wildly inappropriate for me to say this, and Kara will scold me if she finds out, but trust me when I say you definitely wouldn’t have to worry about snagging a prom date now. Boys are boys, yes, but they grow up and become men. And any man would be proud to have you on his arm.”

Her reply was just as soft. “Thanks, Bain.”

“You have a beautiful figure,” I added. Then I winced inside. Figure was something my grandfather said. Maybe next I could talk about fiber supplements or ways to

keep arthritis from creeping in.

For a moment, silence hung between us. I braced myself for her to recoil or turn away, her body language uncomfortable.

But she gave me a shy smile, her dimples making an appearance as she caught my eye. “I won’t tell Kara you said that. Although, I’m sure she’d enjoy scolding you.”

Her cheeks were full of that glorious pink again.

And it seemed I had my answer.

Samantha Pratt’s blushes had something to do with me, after all.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:04 am*

Samantha

I can't believe I told him about prom.

I was careful to keep my gaze straight ahead as Bain exited the highway and turned down a two-lane road that was icy but recently plowed. Mountains rose in the distance, and thick trees, their needles laden with snow, soared overhead. The scenery was breathtaking, but all I could think about was my off-limits boss who had suddenly become a lot less off-limits.

Or had he?

I gnawed my lower lip, reviewing the past two and a half hours. Every time we tried talking about work, our conversations veered into more personal topics. I told him I loved cooking but was terrible at it. He made me laugh until my eyes watered with stories about his brothers' antics. We discovered a mutual appreciation for Project Runway.

"Mondo was robbed," Bain said, fiddling with the temperature controls as we headed farther north.

I nodded. "Definitely."

"I mean, Gretchen wasn't a bad person. She was just—"

"Harsh," we said together.

We grinned at each other, and any anxiety I felt about spending time alone with him melted away. How could I be nervous when he was so easy to talk to? When he made me laugh and went out of his way to be nice? He didn't have to be. I was his employee, and the trip was supposed to be about selling nutrition bars, not discussing my pitiful teenage dating life.

Not that my current dating life was much better.

But he didn't treat me like an employee.

Because he's nice. I kept telling myself that. Bain Thatcher was just naturally nice. I shouldn't read into things.

Still, something had passed between us when I talked about his "sexy Santa" bod—and again when we discussed his dreadful social media skills, his quick grins and easy laugh making me catch my breath. The air had seemed to crackle, and the look in his blue eyes had been anything but nice. An intensity had burned there—the heat of it moving over my skin, making me flushed and restless. My nipples had tightened, and my sex clenched. Mortified, I'd crossed my legs, squeezing my thighs together in hopes of quelling it. But that just made things worse.

The trip wasn't even half over yet, and I was gritting my teeth as a wave of lust threatened to crash over my head and drag me under. It didn't help that he smelled so damn good or that he kept running a big hand through his hair, tousling the thick waves in a way that made me think of how he must look after a night in bed. Maybe he slept on his stomach, his arms hugging his pillow, all the hard, masculine angles of his face relaxed into something softer and more boyish. It was a lucky woman who got to wake up to that view.

"What do you think of the view?"

Bain's voice made me jerk, my face going cold then hot as my heart pounded and I wondered if I'd spoken out loud. Then I saw he was gesturing at the snowy landscape.

I released a cautious breath and let my gaze wander over the mountains. "It's beautiful. Are those ski trails?"

"Yep." He shot me a smile. "City slickers drive north with brand new skis and hundred-dollar goggles and end up with a broken ankle. My brothers spent most of their teenage years up there working as ski patrol."

"What about you?" That seemed right up Bain's alley. He was always leaving work early on Fridays to go rock climbing or "try out" skydiving or any number of activities that would make a life insurance broker cringe.

"Not a chance," he said, a smile playing around his mouth. "Trust me, you do not want to see me on skis. I'm about as graceful as an elephant."

I doubted that, but I held my tongue.

"I was an elf," he added.

What? I swung my head around. "An elf?"

"In Santa's Workshop in town."

"You're joking."

"Just about every kid in North Pole works there at one point or another." His smile broadened, making his eyes do the sexy crinkle-at-the-corners thing. "I was employee of the month six months in a row. My mother framed the certificates."

“You dressed up as an elf?” I fought back laughter.

“In curled toe shoes and tights.”

I lost my battle to avoid laughing. The image of Bain in a pair of tights was too hilarious. When I caught my breath, I said, “I would pay to see photos of that.”

## Page 9

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“I’m sure my mom has them somewhere. She might be too busy to dig them out tonight, but I can show you the next time you visit.”

My heart skipped a beat. The next time? He said it so casually, like it was a given I would make this trip again. Was he just Naturally Nice Bain being nice? Like the front desk person at a hotel saying “we hope you’ll stay with us again soon” or a customer service rep asking “is there anything else I can help you with?”

Or was he hinting at something else?

Kara’s voice rose in my mind. “It’s a date.” She’d been so certain. I could use her analysis right now. I looked at my bag, which held my phone. A text was doable, but Bain would wonder what I was up to. He might even ask if I was talking to someone back at the office—a normal thing for a CEO to inquire about. And I’d have to say yes. I was a terrible liar. I blushed and stammered and admitted everything under the slightest bit of pressure.

Before I could think up a witty response to his comment about me visiting again, he cleared his throat and asked, “Do you mind if I make a quick stop? I promised my mother I’d bring a Yule log.”

For the second time, I swung toward him, questions buzzing in my head. “Like a sponge cake?” I vaguely remembered that being a Christmas tradition in some families. Not mine. My parents ordered Chinese takeout and played Bing Crosby’s holiday songs.

But Bain shook his head. “An actual log. Mom lets the grandkids decorate it, and then



we throw it on the fire on Christmas morning.”

“But...” I glanced out the window. “How are you going to get one?”

He smiled, his expression almost indulgent—as if he found my confusion charming. “I’m going to find a sturdy branch and chop it up.” He jerked his chin toward the back of the SUV. “I brought an axe.”

I felt my eyebrows climb into my hairline. “Do you often pack an axe when you travel?”

His eyes twinkled. Clearly, he was having fun with this. “In upstate New York, I do. If the snow keeps up, the weight could take down a few trees. It’s much faster to clear it yourself than wait for the police to come. Plus, you get free firewood.”

He made it sound like a tree falling in the road was a good thing. My head filled with visions of bearded mountain men in Santa’s Helper costumes splitting firewood in the middle of a highway.

“You know,” I told Bain, “I think upstate New Yorkers might be their own special breed.”

He let out a bark of laughter. “You’re probably right. Give us a chance, though. We grow on you.”

Oh, no need for that, I thought as my heart sped up. Between his smile and his deep, rich laughter, I was in serious danger. I concentrated on keeping my gaze straight ahead as he took us down a series of back roads. After a few minutes, he stopped next to a snowy field dotted with towering evergreens.

He put the SUV in park and turned to me. “Want to help me look? Finding the log is

half the fun.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, picturing Kara’s face when I told her he said that. “Okay,” I managed.

“You have gloves?”

“Yes.”

“Hat?”

“Yes.”

He nodded and got out. Before I could even pull on my beanie, he was at my door, holding it open and offering me his arm in an old-fashioned gesture that made my stomach do a dizzy little flip. Flurries rushed into the car, but I hardly noticed as I put my mitten-clad hand in his. I let him help me out, my feet sinking into deep snow. I wobbled, reflexes making me clutch his arm.

He steadied me. “You all right?”

“Yes,” I said, not trusting myself to meet his gaze. His rich, woodsy scent surrounded me like a hug. “But I can’t see my boots.”

He gave a soft chuckle. “You’ll be okay. You’ve got long legs.” He shut the door and went around the back of the car. A second later, he reappeared with an axe over his shoulder.

And, suddenly, the lumberjack romance novels Kara raved about made a whole lot of sense.

Regular Bain Thatcher was sexy.

Bain Thatcher with an axe should have come with a warning label. Snow dusted his dark waves, and the white winter landscape made his eyes impossibly blue.

He gestured toward the trees. “I see a few promising-looking branches over there. We won’t have to go far.”

I nodded, although walking through the snow was the least of my concerns. I was more worried about maintaining my composure around Lumberjack Bain.

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“Nice hat,” he said, smiling as his gaze lifted to my head.

Heat rushed into my cheeks, and I brushed the edge of my knit beanie, which said “BAIN” in big letters. It even had a pompom. Self-conscious, I said, “I had a ton of these left over from the photo shoot. I forgot to grab a hat at home this morning, so I took one from my office.” God, I was such a nerd, wearing company gear outside of work. I was like the guy who wore a band T-shirt to the same band’s concert.

But Bain’s eyes shone with appreciation. “I like it, Samantha. When I was a kid, I used to write my name on my prized possessions so my brothers wouldn’t take my stuff. This way, everyone will know you belong to me.”

His words set off a bomb of desire inside me, the blast lighting up every nerve ending. I probably should have been offended, considering he basically claimed me as his property, but I wasn’t. Because being claimed by Bain Thatcher wasn’t offensive at all.

The wind picked up, sending a spray of snow into the air.

“We should get a move on,” Bain said. “I don’t want you to get too cold.”

I tugged my Bain beanie lower on my head. “Ready.”

Grinning, he motioned for me to follow, and I fell into step beside him, our boots crunching across the snow. It came to my knees in some places, making icy wet seep through my jeans. Fortunately, he was right and we didn’t have to look too hard to find a suitable branch. After about five minutes, he bent and hoisted a sturdy piece of

wood. He used a gloved hand to dust off the snow, then turned to me. “What do you think?”

“Looks good to me,” I said, “but keep in mind I have limited experience in Yule log selection.”

That got another grin out of him. He used the axe to point to a tree stump a few steps away. “You sit there.” He gestured to another nearby stump. “I’ll split this branch, and we’ll be on our way.”

I settled on the stump, which was cold but otherwise surprisingly comfortable.

Then Bain stripped off his jacket and sweater, and all my comfort poofed right out of existence. He swung his arms back and forth, making broad sweeping movements that should have looked dorky but somehow didn’t. “Gotta warm up,” he said, giving me a sheepish look. “I’m not as young as I used to be.”

Not from where I’m sitting. All that CrossFit had clearly paid off. Flipping over tractor tires and jumping rope for an hour didn’t sound like a good time to me, but I could certainly appreciate the results.

He lay the branch across the stump, then picked up the axe and swung it two-handed in a graceful arc, splitting the wood with a precise crack that echoed in the cold air. Without missing a beat, he swung again, his flannel shirt riding up and giving me flashes of his trim stomach. I’d seen it before, but it didn’t matter. My throat still went dry, and I found myself leaning forward as I caught glimpses of the dark happy trail that marched down his abs and disappeared into his waistband. My gaze drifted lower, taking in his strong thighs and the bulge between them.

No man had ever affected me the way he did. Until I met him, I never understood what people meant when they talked about their heart skipping a beat or desire

making their blood heat. I just assumed those were euphemisms—the kind of poetic talk people used because saying “I met a guy and I like him” didn’t sound as romantic.

Now I knew those feelings were very real, at least when you met the right person. The problem was there were a whole slew of reasons Bain wasn’t right for me, not the least of which was his status as my boss. And not just my immediate supervisor. He owned the company. Even if he harbored some deep, passionate desire for me—a laughable idea—he would never act on it. He rarely mentioned Natasha, but he said more than once how much he regretted entangling his marriage and his business. “Work and relationships don’t mix,” he’d muttered one night as we sat on opposite sides of the conference table in his office. I’d looked up from the reports I was reviewing, startled by the sudden comment. He’d given me a tired smile and tapped his own stack of paperwork. “Sorry. Just going through applications for the new chef.”

He’d replaced Natasha at work. And if he showed no signs of replacing her in his heart, well, that was none of my business.

But it didn’t stop me from squirming on the stump as lust made my sex clench. For once I was grateful for the cold and the occasional gusts of icy wind, since my cheeks were about as hot as the fire between my legs. As the flurries swirled thicker, I imagined them hitting my skin and sizzling out.

After a few more swings, he lowered the axe, leaving a neat log about the size of a shoe box perched atop the stump. He ran a hand through his hair, mussing the waves and dislodging snow. His shoulders heaved, and his shirt must have been damp from his efforts, because it clung to his muscles.

I squeezed my thighs together, suddenly jealous of fabric.

Axe in hand, he scooped up the log and headed toward me, his face flushed as he crunched through the snow, his long-legged gait easy and confident. Watching him, I had to revise my earlier assessment. He wasn't a lumberjack. No, with his tousled hair and the winter backdrop, he looked more like a Viking returned from a raid.

A Viking striding straight at me, a cocky grin on his face as he brandished the log. "I think it turned out pretty good." He stopped, our boots almost touching. "What do you think?"

I had to tip my head back to meet his eyes. "It's good." My voice came out husky, so I cleared my throat and tried again. "It looks great."

He frowned, his gaze running over my face. "You're cold. We need to get you back to the car."

"I'm fine." As I said it, wind swept across the snow, making me shiver involuntarily.

"You're freezing," Bain said. He stepped back, his frown deepening. "And soaking wet."

Before I could gasp at his unintentional double entendre, he tossed the axe and log aside and scooped me off the stump.

"Bain!" My voice came out in a high-pitched squeak as he swung me into his arms. The only thing to hang onto was him, and I flung my arms around his neck. "Put me down!"

"I will." Without missing a beat, he started for the SUV, his strides as smooth and easy as before. He cradled me against his chest, his grip around the backs of my thighs dangerously close to my backside.

Desire flared, making me flush from head to toe. “You’ll hurt your back.”



“Nonsense.”

“I can walk just fine.”

He looked down, his face so close I could see the ring of dark blue around his eyes. He quirked an eyebrow. “I know. I’ve seen you do it several times now.”

“Bain.”

“Samantha.” He kept walking, the smile in his eyes just about taking my breath away.

There was nothing to do but ride it out. Ride him out, I mentally corrected. I stayed as rigid as possible, but it did little good. My body pressed against his from shoulder to ankle, with all the soft bits in between meeting the hard, warm ridges of his arms and chest. I wanted to melt against him. To snuggle my face in his collar and take in his scent. Meanwhile, his body heat sank through my clothes, making a million little sparks fire against my skin.

As we neared the car, I tried to make my tone stern, but it came out prim and more than a little flustered. “You can put me down now.”

He set me on my feet but kept a light grip on my upper arms—as if he wanted to make sure I stayed upright.

Good thinking. Because my knees were weak. All I could do was stand there, my BAIN beanie slipping down my forehead, every nerve trembling like a plucked bowstring. We faced each other, our breaths little puffs of smoke that met and

mingled. Everything—even the snowflakes—seemed to slow. The flurries drifted lazily around us, the air itself suspended.

Waiting.

He gazed down at me, his teasing expression gone. In its place was a look I'd never seen before—an intensity that made me feel both rooted and restless. Like something important was about to happen and I could no more stop it than hold back the wind. I was locked in place, a wild thought throbbing in my head like a heartbeat.

He's going to kiss me.

He reached up and straightened my hat, tugging the pompom back. "There. Safe and sound."

The world sped up, the hushed anticipation snatched from the air. Confusion and uncertainty swirled inside me, and it took me a second to realize he referred to carrying me across the snow.

I stepped back, jarred by the sudden shift between fantasy and reality. "Thanks."

Silence stretched, nudging even more distance between us. Just as awkwardness started to grip me, he dug his keys from his pocket. He thumbed a button, and the SUV's engine purred to life. "You stay here and get warm," he said. "I'll grab the log. Then we can be on our way."

"Sounds good." I smiled so he'd know everything was fine and normal. No big deal. I'd hidden my attraction to him for three years, and all that practice did me good now as I opened the door and got in. He shut the door after me and set off across the snow, gathering the Yule log and his axe.

I sat back in my seat and let out a shaky breath. What the hell just happened? Had I imagined the whole thing? Imagined the look he'd given me? The SUV's heater blasted hot, dry air over my face, making my eyes water. I stripped off my gloves and stuffed them in my jacket pockets. Outside, Bain headed back to the car, the log under his arm.

I hadn't imagined him sweeping me into his arms. God, I could still feel the hardness of his chest against my side. But he did it to keep me out of the snow. Because he was a gentleman. He would have done the same for Kara or Alexis. He was the kind of man who rescued kittens from trees and helped little old ladies put groceries in their car. The kind of guy who chopped a real Yule log for his Christmas-loving mother.

He was also my boss and about a million miles out of my league. I looked at the little clock on the instrument panel.

2:30 p.m.

Bain's mother was expecting us by 3:00. How long could a Christmas party take? Four hours? Five? Somehow, I had to make it through the rest of the afternoon and evening without embarrassing myself. I checked off my game plan in my head.

I would go to Bain's Christmas party.

I would smile and act polite.

I would mingle with his family and eat dinner without dropping gravy on my clothes.

(Probably better to avoid gravy altogether, actually.)

I would say goodnight and go home.

And I would never agree to a “marketing meeting” again. At least not one for the road. Clearly, all my cold showers and solo bedroom sessions weren’t enough. My body was lost for Bain, even if my head knew it was foolish to hope.

Still, the way he’d looked at me...

I shook my head, then yanked my BAIN beanie off. Big girls only landed the hot guy in books and movies. I worked in advertising. I knew better than anyone that make-believe only sold because reality sucked. In the real world, the chubby girl didn’t get invited to the dance, and she certainly didn’t date a sexy CEO with piercing blue eyes and a Gold’s Gym worth of muscles.

This was the real world. And I had a game plan.

Now I just had to stick to it without getting my heart broken.

Bain

I should have kissed Samantha when I had the chance.

As we drove the short distance to my mother's house, I kicked myself for backing down. It would have been so easy to kiss her—to cup her jaw, lean in, and press my lips to hers. To find out if she tasted as sweet as I imagined. For the briefest moment, I could have sworn she almost swayed toward me, ready to make a move of her own.

Then I'd straightened her hat. I might have been absent from the dating scene for a while, but even I knew that was a swing and a miss.

Worse, confusion had flashed in her eyes. When she took that little step back, I could almost feel her throwing up walls, shielding herself from hurt.

It killed me not to pull her right back and crush my mouth against hers.

But I had a good reason for holding off. No matter how many signals she threw out, I had to be absolutely certain she would welcome a kiss—and that she had somewhere to retreat if she didn't. An empty forest was no place to test the boundaries of our relationship.

That didn't stop me from stealing glances at her as we approached my mother's house. Her cheeks were still that soft pink, and she was sucking at her bottom lip again. Her pale hair fell in waves down her chest, the ends curling around a high, firm breast. She had no idea how good she looked.

She had no idea how good she'd felt in my arms.

I probably shouldn't have carried her, but she'd been damn near irresistible sitting on that stump, her peaches and cream skin glowing against the snow, my name embroidered on her hat. Call it caveman instinct, but something about laying eyes on a beautiful woman after swinging an axe made blood pump to certain places, and it wasn't my brain.

Judging from her swift intake of breath after I swung her into my arms, her blood had raced, too. I knew she was self-conscious about her size, although goodness knew she had no reason to be. She was soft in all the places a woman should be, her curves melting against my chest and stomach. Her brown eyes had widened as she clung to my neck. Then they widened some more when I put her down and our gazes met. Her lips had parted, and she seemed to hold her breath.

Waiting.

If I waited much longer, I risked blowing my chance—or making the flash of hurt in her eyes permanent.

Not going to happen.

First, though, I had to get through my mother's party. It was going to be torture when all I wanted to do was take Samantha back to Albany. Take her to dinner. Take her to my place. Take her to bed.

Not necessarily in that order. I was flexible.

As I turned down the narrow mountain road that led to the house, I caught her eye. "Just a heads up, my family can be a bit overwhelming. The place gets loud with twelve kids running around, especially at Christmas."

She smiled, her dimples showing. “It’s okay. It can’t be any worse than Kara and Alexis singing karaoke at the company holiday party.”

“God, I forgot about that.” I laughed, and her smile grew, making her even more beautiful. I could get used to having her beside me—to teasing her just to see if I could make those dimples appear.

The house emerged between the trees. My brothers’ vehicles were already in the driveway, which meant the volume inside was probably at noise pollution levels.

I took another quick look at Samantha and caught her worrying at her bottom lip again. Her brow was furrowed, and she twisted her hands together in her lap as her gaze moved over the line of cars.

My heart squeezed. She was probably nervous. Whenever she spoke of her family, she described a loving but small circle made up of her parents and a handful of distant, elderly relatives. By contrast, there was an army of Thatchers inside my mother’s place—most of them under the age of ten and likely hopped up on sugar and excitement. I’d be lucky to get a word in edgewise with her once we went inside.

Samantha’s frown deepened.

And, suddenly, I realized I needed to take a chance a lot sooner than I thought.

I parked behind my oldest brother’s car and turned to her. “Before we head in, I wanted to, uh, tell you a few things.” Heat crept up the back of my neck, and my heart fluttered around my rib cage like a trapped bird. Under other circumstances, I might have laughed at my predicament—a divorcé nearing his sell-by date sitting in his mom’s driveway, too nervous to tell a girl he liked her.

But I couldn’t laugh about this. It was too important. And there was a fragility to

Samantha. Something delicate and precious that needed protecting.

Her expression was open and expectant—the same look she gave me when I asked her to write something down or swing by my office for a quick meeting.

Shit. This was going to be harder than I thought. The SUV's interior was silent except for the sound of snowflakes pelting the windshield. The fluffy stuff gathered around the wipers and coated the glass, enclosing us in a wintry cocoon.

I cleared my throat. "Thank you for agreeing to come." I glanced at the house, which had gone blurry through the snow. "It's hard flying solo at these types of things, especially this time of year. My brothers have families. I have a health food company."

Her eyes softened. "You and Natasha didn't want kids?" She blanched, then looked down, clearly regretting the question. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked something so personal."



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“No, it’s fine.” I smiled, hoping to put her at ease. “Natasha never wanted any. For a long time, I thought she’d change her mind. Then she didn’t and time went by and...” I trailed off. The kid thing hadn’t bothered me initially. Natasha and I were young, and I was starting my company. Besides, I had enough nieces and nephews to lavish attention on. By the time I realized I might like a child of my own, I was signing divorce papers.

“You could still have them,” Samantha said. There was a little pause, then she swallowed and added, “If you met the right person.”

Wind buffeted the car, but I hardly noticed. Quiet stretched between us as our gazes held. With the snow swirling outside and the air still warm from the heater, it was as if we sat inside a snow globe. Her scent teased my nose, and her brown eyes pulled me in, promising something sweet and soft and absolutely everything I needed.

“I could,” I heard myself say. “If I met the right person.”

Her lips parted.

I drifted toward her, my jacket rustling.

“Uncle Bain!” A muffled voice shot straight through the windshield.

Samantha and I jerked in unison, as if someone splashed us with cold water.

In a blink, half a dozen miniature versions of my brothers surrounded the SUV, and a chorus of “Uncle Bain!” filled the air. A pair of dark pigtails sporting glossy red-and-

green plaid ribbons bobbed in and out of view outside my window. The door popped open, revealing a bunch of red-cheeked faces.

The owner of the pigtails grabbed my leg and let out a squeal. “Uncle Bain, you have to get inside right now, Santa is coming in TEN MINUTES!” The last part was said at a volume best suited for dolphins and bats.

“Calm down, pipsqueak.” I bent and pulled my youngest niece onto my lap. “This is Ella,” I told Samantha. “But I call her Elly Belly because she has this weird thing on her tummy that looks like a button.”

The little girl laughed, exposing a prominent gap where her two front teeth were missing. “It’s my belly button!”

I gave her a look of mock confusion. “What are you talking about? No one has a button on their belly.” I looked at Samantha. “Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

She smiled and shook her head, playing along. “Never.”

Ella tipped her head to the side. “Uncle Bain.”

“What?”

“Everyone has a belly button!”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do!”

One of my older nephews standing around the door rolled his eyes. “Of course he does, Ella, he’s teasing you.”

I grinned at him. “Hey, Patrick. What’s this about Santa showing up in ten minutes?” I gave him a meaningful look over the top of Ella’s head. At fourteen, he knew there was a reason I always seemed to disappear the moment Santa arrived.

“Grandma wants Santa to come before dinner so you should”—his gaze dipped to Ella—“ah, get inside.”

Ella squeezed my hand, her blue eyes pleading. “Hurry or we’ll miss him!” Clutching my hand, she scrambled off my lap and tugged, the strength of her grip surprising a laugh out of me.

“All right, we’re coming!” I gave Samantha a helpless look. “You ready for this?”

She unbuckled her seat belt. “I think so. Should I wait to change?” Her gaze darted to the gaggle of kids outside my door, and doubt shaded her eyes. “I brought something a little more formal to wear, but I can stay in jeans if we’re in a rush.”

I wanted to lean across the seat and kiss the anxiety off her face. But we had an audience, so I had to settle for a wink. “I think Santa will be happy to wait a bit longer. You have time.”

She nodded, but the apprehension remained.

Ah, to hell with it.

I grabbed her hand and planted a quick kiss on her knuckles. “Relax. My family is going to love you.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the kids nudge each other. A couple of the younger boys made smooching sounds. Ella piped up. “Uncle Bain, is that your girlfriend?”

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Samantha's cheeks turned pink.

My cheeks might have turned a little pink, too. But I had more than a decade of uncle experience under my belt, so I knew deflection mingled with a bit of bribery was the best strategy for dealing with curious kids.

"Brace yourself," I told Samantha under my breath. "They've got worse zingers than that at their disposal."

I got out of the car and hunkered down so my head was at Ella's level. In a stage whisper I said, "I'll tell you what she is, but you have to keep it a secret."

She nodded, her eyes darting from Samantha to me.

"One of Santa's Helpers."

"For real?"

"For real." I straightened and shooed everyone toward the house. "First one inside gets to drink Mountain Dew for dinner."

They tore off in a flurry of happy screams and flailing limbs, snow flying from their boots. Patrick scooped up Ella, her pigtails jostling up and down as he ran. When I turned back to the SUV, Samantha was climbing out, bag in hand.

"Let me," I said, rounding the front and taking it from her.

“Santa’s Helper?” Her expression was equal parts exasperated and amused.

“Why not? Technically, you helped me when I played Santa for the ad campaign. And you help me all the time around the office.”

She shook her head, but a smile played around her mouth, doing all sorts of funny things to my heart rate. “I don’t know what’s going to get you into more trouble, pretending I’m Santa’s Helper or promising a bunch of kids Mountain Dew.”

Oh, I was in trouble all right, and it had nothing to do with soft drinks or telling little white lies to children.

I tipped my head toward the house. “What do you say, Santa’s Helper, want to go get into trouble with me?”

Samantha

I'd spent three hours worrying about meeting Bain's family. Over the next three hours, I realized all that worry was for nothing. The Thatchers were a large clan, but they were also a welcoming one—if a little noisy.

About a minute after walking in the door, one of Bain's sisters-in-law pressed a peppermint margarita into my hand and gestured to a group of attractive women seated around a roaring fireplace in the great room. "Come sit with us. We want to hear Bain stories."

One of the women hollered, "The more embarrassing, the better!"

Before I knew it, I was three margaritas deep, dishing gossip with new friends, and laughing as Bain and his brothers maneuvered a ladder into the house so they could put a star on top of the tree. So far, they had dented their mother's drywall, knocked over a nutcracker, and took out a tray of sugar cookies.

As I sipped my drink, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned and found Ella next to my chair, a solemn look on her small, round face.

"Ella?" I set my drink down. "What's wrong, honey?"

"You're not wearing red."

I glanced down. Crap. With all the commotion—and a generous amount of tequila—I forgot about changing my clothes.

Her voice quivered. “How can you be Santa’s Helper if you’re not wearing red?”

Bain caught my gaze, clearly ready to intervene, but inspiration struck. I smiled at Ella. “Sometimes Santa’s Helpers have to travel in disguise. But I brought my red outfit with me.”

She seemed to think it over. “Why haven’t you changed?”

Damn. Kids were hard.

Bain crossed the room and knelt next to her. “Because she was waiting for Santa. But he’s supposed to be here in about...” He looked at me, a question in his eyes.

“Five minutes,” I said.

He smiled, then turned his attention back to Ella. “Can you do me a really big favor? A super important one?”

She gave a vigorous nod.

“Go gather all the other kids and tell them Santa will be here in five minutes.”

She was gone before he finished his sentence. A second later, her loud shrieks echoed through the house. As the adults chuckled, Bain helped me to my feet. “Follow me, Santa’s Helper.”

I could feel everyone’s eyes on us as we left the room. Or maybe the tingling on my scalp and the heat running like a warm current through my body was a direct result of being close to Bain as he led me through the house and up a grand staircase with a polished banister.

“The house is beautiful,” I said, running my hand up the smooth wood.

We gained the landing, and he put a palm in the small of my back, guiding me down a hallway lined with doors. “It’s too big for Mom, but she won’t hear about moving. Ah, here we go.” He ushered me into a bedroom with a twin bed and a bookcase groaning with trophies. My bag sat on the floor at the foot of the bed.

I did a quick spin. “Is this—”

“My old room, yeah.” He put a hand on the back of his head and scrubbed his nape, his demeanor almost shy. “It’s really more of a time capsule, actually. I’m surprised my baby book isn’t in here.”

“I wish it was. Bain baby pictures would be some seriously good blackmail material.”

He laughed. “Sorry, but you’ll have to make do with me in a Santa costume.” He raised an eyebrow. “Change and meet me in the hall in five minutes?”

My blood pressure spiked. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine feeling a sweep of lust over a rendezvous with Santa, but there I was, struggling to play it cool while my nipples tightened and my breath caught. I could still feel the imprint of Bain’s hand in my lower back—as if his touch was a brand that seeped straight through my clothes to my skin.

“Yes,” I managed to say. “Five minutes.”

His blue eyes held mine, his gaze steady. “Five minutes, then,” he said softly.

I held my breath until he left, then let it all out in a rush that ruffled the hair at my temples. I’d planned to do something fancy with my curls, but there was no way I was going to risk being half-naked when he knocked on the door. Moving quickly, I



stripped off my clothes. In bra and panties, I went to my bag and pulled out the dress the woman at the mall said was “tailor made” for my body type.

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No turning back now. I couldn't play the role of Santa's Helper in jeans and a sweater. As I stepped into the dress and fumbled with the zipper, I regretted my three margaritas. The material was far more form-fitting than anything I owned, and it clung to my hips and chest. The long sleeves were modest enough, but the low, square neckline showed the tops of my breasts and enough cleavage to shock a stripper.

Well, maybe that was pushing it. But I was definitely out of my comfort zone. I caught my reflection in the mirror over the dresser, which showed a flushed woman with tousled blond waves, a frazzled expression, and a fire engine red dress. I ran my hands over my waist, marveling at how much smaller it seemed with the tight material nipping it in.

There was a soft knock, and Bain rumbled, "Can I come in?"

Instantly, my heart pounded. I darted to my bag and grabbed my heels. "Yes! I'm ready."

I'm totally not ready.

I bent and yanked on one heel, then the other as the door opened and he entered in full Santa costume, a white beard dangling from one hand. He stopped on the threshold, an arrested expression on his face.

Oh no. Was it the dress? It was too much. Too tight. Too revealing. Unflattering. A hundred other words revolved through my head, familiar insults spinning like a merry-go-round of doubt. My hand fluttered up, and I pressed a palm against my

chest.

“You look...” He swallowed.

My mind filled in the blanks.

Bad.

Silly.

Fat.

“Stunning,” he said, his voice like gravel. “You look stunning.”

The merry-go-round lurched to a stop. Unless he was a really good actor, the shock in his eyes was real. There was heat there, too, and it was like a tossed match on kindling inside me. Whoosh. Bonfire.

Somehow, I stayed calm on the surface, even smoothing a wrinkle from my skirt. “Thanks. That’s what the saleswoman said.”

“She wasn’t lying,” he muttered, his gaze following my hand. He cleared his throat, but his voice was still rough as he added, “Maybe I’ll order you to dress like that at work from now on.”

The bonfire blazed higher, the admiration in his eyes like a laser beam warming the exposed skin of my neck and chest. The idea of him ordering me to do anything, let alone dress for him, made electricity crackle over my skin. He spoke of work, but he was no longer my boss. Not quite. All the polite confines of that relationship blurred, the edges going fuzzy and indistinct. The events of the day rolled through my mind—our banter in the car, him carrying me through the snow, the intense looks that

passed between us—making me wonder if Kara was right.

That maybe this wasn't a marketing meeting, after all.

Bain

Later, I wasn't sure how I made it out of the bedroom without closing the distance between me and Samantha and showing her exactly how much I liked her dress. Some part of my subconscious must have remembered there were a dozen children ready to storm the upstairs if Santa didn't get his ass in gear.

I made it out of the room, but I couldn't keep my eyes off her as she helped the other adults herd the kids into a line so they could sit on my lap and rattle off their Christmas list. I should have known she'd take on the Santa's Helper role with ease. Advertising was second nature to her and, for better or worse, the holidays were one big marketing exercise. Fortunately, no one seemed to notice Santa was a little distracted by his employee.

And Samantha was a walking distraction. Forget the silk blouse, her red dress seized my attention and didn't let go. The fabric clung in all the right places, hugging her chest and hips and highlighting her luscious curves. Her breasts rose from the neckline, two pale, perfect mounds that made my head spin as I fought to pull my gaze away.

Fought and failed. She laughed at something one of the kids said, her head thrown back, dimples on full display, golden hair spilling down her back. God, I was devouring her with my eyes, and I was helpless to stop. Her legs went on forever, stretching from her sweetly rounded hips to her dainty ankles circled by thin, black straps. My gaze returned there again and again, roving from the tiny buckles to her polished toes to the three-inch heels that put her right at my eye level.

Perfect.

“Uncle Bain?”

I jerked my head around so fast the pompom on my hat smacked me in the mouth.

Patrick stood next to me, a knowing look on his face.

“Uh, hey, Patrick.” I sat up straighter in my chair. “Easy on the ‘Uncle Bain’ stuff, okay? The little kids haven’t figured me out yet.”

“Sorry.”

“What would you like for Christmas?”

“I already know what I got. Mom hides her shopping bags in the linen closet.” He looked toward a corner of the room, where Samantha was retying one of Ella’s hair ribbons.

Damn. That red dress blew my silk blouse fantasies right out of the water. With her curves wrapped up tight and her golden hair gleaming in the firelight, she was as pretty as the presents stacked under the tree. And like a kid on Christmas morning, I wanted to unwrap her. It wouldn’t take much. Just a long, slow glide of that zipper down her back and I could find out if her skin was as soft as it looked.

Patrick spoke. “You like her a lot, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said absently, my gaze glued to Samantha.

“Then you should make a move.”

Didn't I know it.

Wait. What? I swung my gaze back to him. "Where did you learn that expression?"

"I dunno. Around."

Around? Good grief, maybe I wasn't ready for kids. I tried for a stern look. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Now scram before I decide to put coal in your stocking."

He put his hands up, all careless teen bravado. He got two steps away, then turned and lowered his voice. "Just sayin', Uncle Bain, if you're going to kiss her, you should probably lose the white beard."

"SCRAM."

His laughter made Samantha lift her head. She met my gaze, her face both amused and questioning.

I shrugged, then quickly motioned the next Thatcher in line forward. For the next hour, I split my time between ho-ho-ho-ing and struggling to keep my gaze off Samantha. Despite my best efforts, I was only successful at the former.

At last, she approached my chair hand-in-hand with Ella, and I didn't have to pretend not to notice her anymore. I knew what I wanted for Christmas. It was about five-foot-eleven and wearing a pair of stilettos I'd give just about anything to have hooked around my back.

But I couldn't think about that now. Ella stared up at me, awestruck, a half-eaten candy cane in her hand.

I patted my knee. “Do you want to sit?”

In response, she scrambled onto my lap and pinned me with a look any middle manager would be proud of. “Did you get my list?”

“I sure did.” I hadn’t, but I had texted with her mother. “One Elsa doll, a bike without training wheels, at least four LEGO sets, and an iPhone.”



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She lifted a finger. “They have to be good LEGO sets.”

“I’ll make a note.” I looked at Samantha, who gave a quick nod.

“On it, Santa.”

Ella smiled. “Okay. Well, be careful flying around to all the other houses.” Her missing front teeth turned “houses” into “houthes.”

“I will.”

She hopped down. Samantha held out her hand, but Ella shook her head. “It’s your turn.”

Samantha frowned. “What?”

“Your turn.” Ella gave my knee a pat, her candy-coated fingers sticking to the cheap polyester of my suit. “You won’t get what you want unless you sit on Santa’s knee and tell him.” She said this in a slightly irritated tone, as if she could scarcely believe she had to explain how it worked.

My throat went dry. Under any other circumstances, I’d roll out a red freaking carpet if it meant getting Samantha on my knee. But this wasn’t the time or place for it. Not when the mere thought of having her exquisite body perched on my thighs made my dick twitch.

I looked around for my brother, but the seats around the fireplace were deserted. As if

on cue, muffled laughter and the sound of clinking glasses drifted from the dining room. The rest of the adults were MIA, which meant Samantha and I were on our own.

“Go on,” Ella said, taking Samantha’s hand and urging her toward me. “It’s not scary.”

Easy for you to say, kid. Because my heart pounded so hard I felt lightheaded.

Samantha looked a little faint herself. Her gaze dipped to my lap then jerked straight back up again, her brown eyes huge in a face that had gone pale.

“I’ll help you,” Ella said, pulling harder.

Samantha dug in her heels. “It’s all right, Ella. I’ll tell Santa later.”

“But he’s leaving now.” Ella’s mouth turned down, her small face anxious. “If we keep him waiting, he won’t make it to all the houses.” Her voice rose and her lower lip trembled.

I knew an impending tantrum when I saw one, so I had no choice but to gesture Samantha forward. Cool. Play it cool.

“Hop on up,” I told her, making my tone as light as possible. Easy. Impersonal. That approach had served me well over the past three years, hiding an inconvenient attraction to my employee. It could get me through another thirty seconds.

Samantha moved slowly, never taking her eyes off mine. As she neared, vanilla and sugar teased my nose, making me wish I could tug my beard down and take her in properly. I reached for her without thinking, my hand going around her hip to guide her down.

She sat gingerly. Carefully. Like she thought she might break me.

Maybe she was right to think that, because I felt like I was on the verge of shattering. The second her ass met my knee, a shock wave went through me, the ripples of it traveling across my skin. Stroking every nerve ending.

My cock tightened. Alarm bells clanged in my head. I couldn't look at her—not directly, anyway. Not without losing control. Still, she was hard to ignore. Warm, soft woman filled my lap, her creamy breasts trembling at the lower edge of my vision.

She shifted ever so slightly, her thighs rubbing against mine. My cock hardened even more. The alarm bells clanged louder. I was like a car coming apart as it raced down the road, the engine choking and the wheels flying off. Sweat trickled down my back. I was losing it, straitlaced Bain unraveling at last.

Voices reached me—my brothers and their wives moving back into the great room. Samantha twisted a bit, obviously straining to see who was coming, and her backside nudged my shaft.

“Get up,” I said, the words blunt and hard. I gripped the arms of the chair, because if I touched her, I was done.

The voices grew louder. I grew harder.

Samantha moved, but she was too slow.

I sprang to my feet, self-preservation forcing me up so fast I nearly dumped her on the floor. She stumbled, letting out a sharp gasp. I reached for her, but she was already rounding on me, her eyes two dark pools of shock and hurt.

“Samantha.” I forgot all about being Santa. Forgot about our audience.

But it was too late. Her mouth pinched, the hurt in her eyes deepening to pain.

Then she spun and left the room.

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Samantha

A single thought drummed through my head as I hurried from the great room and fled up the stairs.

I was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Bain didn't want me. There was no connection between us. I'd mistaken his kindness for interest.

And I ruined everything.

God, I screwed up. My job. My career. My relationship with Bain. In one stupid, stupid move, I trashed three years of friendship and work. His shock and disgust had been unmistakable. The moment I sat on his lap, his mouth had compressed in a flat line, and his whole body went tense.

"Get up." Two words delivered in a clipped, harsh tone. It might as well have been "go away" or "get out."

Well, I was.

Tears burned my eyes and throat as I ran down the hallway to his room. The door was ajar, a wedge of light beckoning. I raced for it, the first tears spilling down my cheeks.

A hand grabbed my arm, making me yelp.

Bain spun me around. He'd shed his hat and beard, his dark stubble showing on his square jaw. His eyes were stark and concerned.

He was beautiful.

He didn't want me.

Tears clogged my throat. I tried to pull free of him.

"Not a chance," he muttered, his expression shifting from concerned to something I didn't recognize. I didn't have time to puzzle it out, because he cupped my face in two big hands and crushed his mouth to mine.

For a split second, all my wild, frantic thoughts coalesced into shock, and a muffled whimper of surprise emerged from my throat. Then my mind blanked as he kissed me, his tongue hot and wet and demanding. It wasn't a gentle kiss—not a polite meeting of lips. He tipped my head back, holding me steady while he devoured me, pushing past all my defenses in one confident, aggressive sweep.

It was so easy to kiss him back. Our tongues moved together in a give and take that left me breathless and dizzy, my pulse like a jackhammer in my neck. He kissed and felt exactly how I'd imagined he might—his lips warm and firm, his stubble scratching my face as his hands cradled my head and his chin brushed mine. His cologne teased my nose, and I wanted to just keep inhaling it, taking in as much of him as possible.

Then he was walking me back, still kissing me as he guided us through the doorway and into the bedroom. Shivers coursed over my skin, and somewhere in my brain a thought surfaced like driftwood bobbing on water. This is really happening.

He broke off the kiss, pulling away just enough to meet my gaze, and I nearly gasped

at the look on his face. My smiling, good-natured boss was gone. In his place was a dark stranger with flushed cheeks and narrowed blue eyes that seemed to stare into my soul.

“I was a fool downstairs,” he said, his voice like sandpaper, his mouth wet and blurry from our kiss. “I want you. I’ve wanted you for a long time.”

I heard him, but I could scarcely believe what he was saying. The best I could do was stand there, heart racing, my lips still buzzing.

He rubbed a thumb over my cheekbone, smudging my tears away. “I planned to do this the right way. To take things slow. Then I saw you in this dress, and I don’t think I can go slow anymore.”

“I don’t want you to,” I said, my normally bottled-up thoughts spilling everywhere.

He looked like he just won the lottery—like he couldn’t believe his luck. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” God, I’d never been more sure of anything in my life.

His breath hitched. I waited for him to kiss me again, but he stayed still, his gaze searching mine. Then he spoke in a low voice, a warning in his tone. “I don’t intend for this to be a one-time thing, Samantha. If we do this, I’m going to want to do it again and again. Nothing will be the same between us. So you have to decide right now if you’re okay with me and all my baggage.”

I lay my palm against his jaw, savoring the scratch of his five o’clock shadow on my skin. Marveling that I actually got a chance to touch him so intimately. “What baggage?”

“I’m old,” he said bluntly. “I’ll be thirty-nine in a month. I’m your boss. I’m divorced. I—”

I put a finger over his lips. “I don’t care about any of that.”

Relief shaded his eyes. Then his baby blues turned hot and sexy. He took my fingertip in his mouth, giving me a gentle nip.



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How could any woman reject this man? Something fierce rose in my chest. Fuck Natasha. “I’m glad you’re divorced,” I blurted.

A slow smile spread across his face, making him impossibly handsome. “Same.”

Oh, he was good. So very, very good.

I swallowed. “So what happens now?”

“Well,” he murmured, sliding his hands down my shoulders to my back, “I’m still your boss.”

Heaven help me, he was going to play it dirty. My sex clenched, my body in full agreement with this turn of events. I quirked an eyebrow, trying to play it casual. “So you’re going to boss me?”

He stepped fully into me, already sliding my zipper down, his gaze boring into mine the whole time. “That’s right.” My neckline gaped. I caught it and held the dress to my chest, shyness overcoming me. The desire in his eyes was real, but he’d never seen me undressed, of course. What if he didn’t like what he saw?

He stood back and started undoing the buttons on his coat. “I bet you’ve never been ordered around by a man in a Santa suit before.”

I put a hand over my mouth, holding back laughter.

Humor gleamed in his eyes as he stripped, tossing his coat and pants aside. When he

was naked except for a pair of black boxer briefs that hugged his thick, muscular thighs, he rested his fingertips on his hips and gestured toward me with his chin. “Lose the dress.”

“Wh-What?”

“You heard me.” The humor fled his eyes, and suddenly I recognized the look he’d given me when he spun me around in the hallway. It was primal. Possessive.

Maybe a little dangerous.

“Ten seconds,” he said.

I felt my eyes widen. “You’re counting down?”

“Ten.”

My sex throbbed, my panties already wet. I clutched my dress. “What happens when you get to zero?”

“Eight.”

“You skipped nine!”

“Five.”

“Bain!” I moved fast, wriggling a little as I pushed the dress down my hips and let it plop on the floor. Heart racing, I stepped out of it and straightened, thankful I let the saleswoman talk me into buying a matching black silk bra and panties set. The bra was good quality, doing the whole lift-and-separate thing expensive bras were supposed to do.

But I was still self-conscious standing there in my underwear and heels. My cheeks burned, and I knew without looking that my chest was bright red.

If Bain noticed, he didn't let on. His blue gaze swept me, and a wicked smile played around his mouth. "I'd order you to take off the rest, but I think I'd rather do it myself."

He was so damn sexy. So heartbreakingly perfect with his tan skin and muscled body. But he was still my boss, and we hadn't totally crossed the line. Not all the way. There was one last chance to shove the genie back in the bottle. One word from me, and he would, too. We could blame the night on poor judgment—on a long day or too much alcohol.

He'd warned me. Once we did this, nothing was going to be the same.

But I didn't want it to be.

Blood pumping hard in my veins, I lifted my chin. "So come take off the rest."

Bain

It took me about two seconds to absorb Samantha's invitation. When I did, I moved fast, pushing her onto my old bed, my hands already roving over her skin. The mattress squeaked as I stretched over her and slipped my knee between hers.

She did a little roving of her own, sliding her hands across my shoulders and down my biceps.

I might have flexed a little. I wasn't above showing off if it meant getting her hot.

God knew I didn't need any help in that department. My cock was like a bar of iron in my boxer briefs, the fabric damp. I wanted nothing more than to strip her bare, spread her legs, and plunge into her softness.

But I also wanted to savor her.

Her bra fastened in the back. I felt around her, finding the hooks and pulling the satin away.

Damn. Just damn.

"Fucking gorgeous," I breathed, too stunned to do anything except stare. Topless Samantha was a sight to behold. Her golden hair spread across the pillow, and her full, round breasts seemed to quiver under my gaze. Her nipples were like pink gumdrops—two perfect treats begging to be sucked and kissed.

I let my gaze wander lower, taking in her black satin panties and her endlessly long legs. Her round thighs and curvy hips. Jesus, even her knees were pretty, the little hollows a perfect spot for my tongue.

She squirmed, a blush stealing across her skin.

I cupped an ample breast, admiring my tan fingers against her porcelain skin. “You’re even more beautiful than I imagined.”

Her brown eyes were doubtful. “Really?”

The hesitation in her voice wrecked me. I wanted to find the assholes who trampled her confidence and knock a few heads together. But that was all in the past. I had her with me here and now, and there was a simple way to show her just how incredible she looked to me.

I took her hand and guided it to my cock.

Her eyes went wider than ever, and her lips parted on a gasp.

A chuckle escaped me, the end of it more of a groan. “Any doubts now?”

She shook her head. Then she pressed her hand more firmly against me.

My hips jerked. I seized her wrist before she could do further damage. “You do that again, and this is going to be over before it starts.”

“Sorry,” she said, but mischief danced in her eyes.

“Arms above your head,” I told her.

She licked her lips. “Playing boss again?” She said it sassy, but the hitch in her voice gave her away.

“I am your boss.” I slipped a hand under the waistband of her panties and cupped her sex, getting a moan out of her. “Put them up. Grab the headboard.”

She complied, biting her lower lip as she gripped the wood. The position thrust her tits out, the heavy mounds jiggling.

Fucking irresistible.

I kept my hand where it was and dipped my head, capturing a pink nipple in my mouth.

She lifted off the bed, moaning in a way that made me even harder.

She was like sugar on my tongue, her soft breast plump against my chin and mouth as I flicked and circled her nipple. I nibbled the soft peak, alternating between nipping and suckling.

She writhed beneath me, her smooth legs tangling with mine as she pushed her pussy into my hand. I cupped her more tightly, my fingers pressed against her hot, damp folds.

Suddenly, touching her there wasn't enough. I released her nipple with a popping sound and went to my knees.

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She watched me through heavy-lidded eyes, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Don’t let go of that headboard,” I said.

“Or what?” she asked, her voice breathless.

I hooked my fingers on either side of her panties and slid them down, snapping them off her ankles and tossing them over the edge of the bed. Her thighs were parted just enough to give me a glimpse of her clit, the swollen nub pink and glistening. I slipped a thumb between her slick, puffy lips and pressed it, saying, “You get punished.”

She shivered, moaning. “How?”

“I’ll lick your pussy until you scream yourself hoarse.” I gave her clit a couple strokes, gliding easily around the hard, wet point.

“Th-That’s not much of a punishment.” She gulped a breath. “I think I’d like it.”

“Well,” I said, rubbing faster, my dick throbbing at the way her hips jerked with every pass, “I’m a very lenient boss.”

Her eyes slid shut. “Yes.” She stretched the word out on a moan, her brow furrowing.

I continued to stroke her, gliding my thumb from her opening to her clit and back again as I coaxed moan after moan from her. Part of me wanted to deliver her “punishment” then and there—to push her thighs apart, bury my head between her legs, and lap up every bit of her cream. Lick her inside out until her legs shook and

she forgot everything but my name.

But there was time for that later.

Right now, I had to see more of her. “Open up, sweetheart,” I murmured, my eyes on her sex. She was golden there, too, her neat thatch of curls wet from her juices.

She obeyed, spreading her thighs.

“The shoes stay on,” I said, my voice guttural as I marveled at the erotic sight of her legs flung wide and her toes pointed in the strappy black heels, her open sex dripping cream. I paused, soaking it all in, determined to sear the image into my brain so I could call it up later.

Memory was nothing compared to the real thing, though, and suddenly I couldn’t get inside her fast enough. Balancing on one hand, I maneuvered out of my boxer briefs, all my jerking and twisting making the mattress squeak again.

Samantha slit her eyes open. Her gaze went straight to my cock and her eyes popped a bit more. Apprehension flitted across her face.

Understandable. I was six-foot-three, and my equipment matched my shoe size.

“Bain—”

“It’s all right,” I told her, gripping my shaft at the base. “I won’t give you anything you can’t handle.”

She nodded, but her eyes stayed firmly on my dick. Which didn’t really help matters.

“Samantha,” I said softly, and she lifted her gaze. “I have protection.”



For a second, confusion crossed her features. Then she blushed, all awkward and adorable. “Oh. Um. I’m on the pill and... It’s been a long time.”

My heart turned over. “It’s been a long time for me, too. And I got tested after Natasha.” Memories rose, and I pushed them down. “After she left.”

Samantha’s eyes went soft. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I moved over her, wedging my hips against hers. “I’m not anymore.” And I wasn’t. Whatever pain I’d experienced led me to this moment. To the gorgeous, funny, sexy woman beneath me, her long body a perfect match for mine. I rubbed my cock along her slit, dragging my shaft up and down, bumping her clit.

Her lips parted, a shaky sigh fluttering out. The headboard creaked. She’d squeezed it too hard. “If you keep doing that...”

“Doing what?” I held myself above her on one forearm, my other hand busy with her pussy.

She gave me a look. “You know.”

“I do.” I smiled. Then I lowered my head until our lips were almost touching and whispered, “Spread as wide as you can for me, baby.” I didn’t want to hurt her.

I wanted to knock her world off its axis.

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She obliged me, pulling her knees up and pressing them flat, her heels digging into the bedspread.

“That’s a girl,” I murmured, my pulse jumping. Sweat prickled my forehead as I gripped my shaft and eased inside, giving her a couple inches. She clamped all around me, and I froze, summoning every bit of restraint to stop myself from plunging all the way inside.

“Bain?” She touched my face, breaking my rule about keeping her hands on the headboard.

No matter. We’d both enjoy me meting out her punishment later on.

I rested my forehead against hers. “It’s okay. You just feel incredible.” It was an understatement. Her pussy gripped me like a tight, hot glove. I lifted off her and looked down, needing to see.

Mistake.

I thought seeing her spread open in a pair of stilettos was erotic. Wrong. This was erotic. Her pussy stretched around me, swallowing my shaft. Unable to help myself, I sank deeper inside then pulled slowly out. Veins stood out on my cock, which now glistened with her juices.

She made a soft sound, and I looked up to find her watching, her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Do you see that?” I asked, drawing her gaze. “See how wet you are for me? How you’re soaking my cock?”

Another soft sound—agreement mixed with a moan.

God, I need to hear that again. I pressed my hips forward, sliding all the way in. Heat enveloped me, singeing my shaft.

So fucking good. Nothing had ever been better.

She hooked a leg around my hip, taking me just that much deeper. Urging her hips against mine.

And it was off to the races.

I slid in and out, thrusting against her, one hand gripping her hip.

The bed shook, springs squealing, and I let out a huff of laughter.

“What is it?” she asked, a sexy little hitch in her voice.

“It’s been a while since I had to worry about my mom catching me with a girl.”

We laughed together. Then we moved together, falling into a rhythm that made the bed shudder and the headboard knock against the wall. I gripped her hips in both hands, holding her steady while I pumped in and out, my dick hitting her clit again and again.

She tipped her head back, the tendons in her neck straining as her mouth opened and she gasped my name.

I pressed my lips against her jaw, tasting the salt on her skin. “Say it again.”

“Bain,” she sobbed.

“Again.”

“Bain.”

It was the sweetest sound, my name on her lips. I pumped faster, sweat rolling down my face. My balls slapped her ass. Pleasure coiled inside me, a spring wound tighter and tighter. Ready to let go.

Her tits jiggled furiously, her nipples standing up like proud little spears. She arched her neck harder, her face and neck a livid pink as she started to come.

I dug my fingers into her hips, jerking in and out of her so fast the twin bed shivered across the floor. My vision dimmed. The spring compressed impossibly tight.

Then I was coming on a shout, my thrusts wild and disjointed as I shot deep inside her, giving her every last drop. The world shrank, until it was just me and her in a sea of stars, a universe collapsing and reforming. I thrust a final time and held it, my face in the hollow of her neck, our sweat mingling, my dick twitching inside her.

She pushed her fingers into my hair, holding me against her. We stayed like that for a minute, the two of us floating back down to earth.

As sweat cooled on my skin, I lifted my head and pushed her hair back from her face. “You okay?”

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She nodded, her cheeks going pink.

I kissed the tip of her nose, unable to resist teasing her. “Still shy with me after all that?”

“It’s just...” She licked her lips, her expression serious. “What about the office? I can’t have sex with the boss.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I think you just did.” I nudged my hips forward, letting her feel my cock still buried in her pussy. “Yep. You screwed the boss.”

“Bain.”

“Samantha.”

She tried to look irritated, but she ended up smiling. “I love the way you say that.” She dragged a hand over my stubble, and I turned my cheek into her palm, practically purring like a goddamn cat. Her smile grew, and she added, “I don’t even mind not having a Bain name.”

I cocked my head. “A what?”

Her dimples flashed. “You don’t know about that? You give everyone at work nicknames. Kara calls them Bain names.”

“Nothing but trouble, that Kara Kara.”

“Exactly.”

She was cute as hell and so completely irresistible I kissed her again, my chest mashed against her soft breasts as I took her mouth. She tasted of peppermint, sugar, and a faint hint of tequila, and I smiled, knowing she’d had my signature drink—crushed candy canes, schnapps, and a whole lot of Patrón.

Her fingers stroked through my hair, and I forgot all about alcohol as goosebumps rose on my skin and I sucked on her bottom lip, just absolutely lost in her.

When we were both breathless, I pulled back and stared into her eyes. “I think I have the perfect Bain name for you. And it might solve the whole sex-with-your-boss problem, too.”

She looked up at me, waiting.

“I won’t call you Samantha,” I said softly, stroking her hair again. “I’ll call you my girlfriend. And, in time, I hope to call you something infinitely more dear.”

Her lips parted, and for a second she seemed to stop breathing. “Did you just quote a Mister Darcy line?”

“Guilty. You already know about my Project Runway habit. You might as well know about the Jane Austen movies, too.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Bain Thatcher, I think you might be the perfect man.”

“Not perfect,” I said, bending to kiss her again. “Just perfectly yours.” I slipped out of her and rolled, tucking her body against mine.

She snuggled her face in the hollow of my neck and gave a contented sigh.

Maybe I wasn't the perfect man, but I was a goddamn lucky one.

Drowsiness tugged at me, and I held her tighter, ready to give into sleep. Just as I drifted off, a woman's muffled shriek sounded from downstairs.

“Who promised the kids Mountain Dew?!”

Samantha

One year and twelve days of Christmas later...

\* \* \*

I sank into a wicker chair in the sunroom, my dress poofing all around me. Through the windows, snow drifted to the ground, the flakes fat and fluffy. A flash of light caught my eye, and I looked down, startled anew at the honking diamond on my left ring finger. No matter how many times I saw it, I could never quite believe it was real.

Now that a wedding band had joined it, maybe everything would finally sink in.

I'd married the perfect man, and not even my aching feet or full bladder could dim the excitement singing through my veins.

"Hey, you," said a low, familiar voice, and I looked up to see Mr. Perfect himself standing in the doorway.

My husband. God, I was never going to get tired of saying that.

He walked toward me, gorgeous as hell in a crisp black tux. A sprig of mistletoe wrapped in red ribbon nestled on his lapel—a nod to our Christmas-themed wedding. His mother had been over the moon when we told her we wanted to have the ceremony in North Pole, and she'd happily flung herself into organizing. The result was a winter wonderland beyond my wildest dreams.



But the real dream was the blue-eyed man looking down at me, a soft smile on his face.

“You’re a vision,” he murmured. “Mrs. Bain Thatcher.”

My breath hitched. “Say that again, please.”

He pulled me to my feet and into his arms, the full skirt of my white gown flowing around us. “Mrs. Bain Thatcher,” he whispered. He placed a soft kiss on my forehead. “My dear, darling Samantha.”

I leaned into him, content to stay in his arms forever.

He fingered one of the curls that had slipped free from my updo. Concern filled his eyes, and he moved his hand to my cheek. “You all right? You look pale.”

“Just a little queasy.”

The concern grew. “Queasy? Is it something you ate?”

“No.”

“You’re certain?” He pulled back a little, his gaze running over my face. “Maybe it was the champagne. You probably didn’t eat enough, and now—”

“Bain.” I fought back a smile. “It’s not anything I ate, and I didn’t have any champagne.”

He frowned. “Yes, you did. I saw you during the toast.”

“I pretended to sip it.”

“But... What?”

I lost the battle not to smile. Placing a hand on his stubbled jaw, I said, “Let’s try this another way, you silly, sexy man.” I took a deep breath. “You can’t play Santa ever again.”

“Why not?”

I took his hand and guided it to my stomach. “Because you’re not going to be the only Thatcher brother without kids anymore.”

For a second, he was totally frozen, shock glazing his eyes as he stared at my midsection. Then he lifted his gaze to mine. “You mean...”

I nodded, joy bubbling inside me, ready to overflow. “We’re having a baby. You’re going to be a father.”

He seized my face, his expression stunned and intense and overjoyed. “You’re sure? Are you okay?” He moved his hands to my shoulders, babbling. “God, you should sit down. You’ve been dancing for hours.”

Laughing, I grabbed his hands. “Stop. I’m fine.”

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He cupped my face again, looking at me like I was something rare and precious. “Why didn’t you tell me, sweetheart?”

“I suspected, but I wasn’t sure until a few days ago.” Warmth entered my cheeks as I added, “I mean, it makes sense. I’ve been off the pill for a while, and we don’t use condoms.”

“And we fuck a lot,” he said.

I gave his shoulder a playful slap. “Stop that. You’re going to be a father.”

Tears filled his eyes. He rested his forehead against mine, his breath soft on my face. “This is the best wedding gift I could have asked for. I love you, Samantha. You’re my whole world.” He put a big hand on my belly. “You and this little one.”

My heart swelled. He was truly perfect. Just... perfect.

“How are you feeling?” he whispered, sliding his hand from my stomach to my hip.

“Good. A little tired.” I gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I have to pee every five minutes.”

He smiled. “I’ll carry you over the threshold and straight to the bathroom.”

“In a minute,” I said, grinning like a fool and not caring one bit. “First, we should probably go back to the reception and rescue the DJ before Kara makes him play ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ again.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“She changes the lyrics to jingle bell cock.”

His eyes crinkled with amusement. Then amusement turned to desire, and he leaned in, love shining in his gaze. “We’ll go back, but first I want to kiss my wife.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, murmuring, “It’s a date.”

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