



Saving Mr. Bell

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Category: LGBT+

Description: When is a kidnap not a kidnap? When its a rescue.

Rudolf Bell does NOT need saving. But after the worst performance of his life, there are those who disagree. All he wants is to have a good time and forget everything for a while. Easier said than done when the media have done a hatchet job on him. His careers not over, though. Not until he says so.

Arlo Thomas has never forgotten the classical pianist who looks more like a rock star, even if his documentary about the precocious talent never saw the light of day. Seeing Rudolf's bad press spurs him to drastic action. It's not kidnap if it's a luxurious cabin and it's for Rudolf's own good. Right?

When a rekindled friendship turns to passion in the remote winter wonderland location, Arlo's determination to resist Rudolf slowly crumbles. As the days pass, Rudolf may have to admit he did need saving, and that Arlo's the perfect man to do it.

It's a shame snow melts and all good things must come to an end before Christmas.

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Rudolf

I turned my head, the bright lights of the nightclub making me blink and reminding me of being on stage. Of sitting there frozen while thousands of people stared at me expectantly. Waiting... Wondering... Trying to work out what was going on with the man they'd paid an exorbitant amount to see.

No! I wasn't going there. Not tonight. More booze. That was what I needed. Enough to stop me from remembering how badly I'd fucked up a few weeks ago. I'd thought I was drunk, but apparently I wasn't drunk enough.

Once I reached the closest bar, I slammed my hand down on it, the noise satisfying enough to make me laugh. "Another drink," I demanded of no one in particular. Fingers hooked around my left biceps to tug me away from the bar, but I planted my feet and refused to be moved. When they didn't let go, I turned to face whoever was manhandling me.

I'd expected to find Nelson, my bodyguard, but where Nelson was tall, muscular, and wider than any man had a right to be, this guy was thin and willowy, and looked like a strong breeze might blow him over if he wasn't careful. He had a piercing through his eyebrow and another through his nose, the glint of light from the nose ring momentarily hypnotizing me before I snapped out of it.

"I think you've had enough," Mr. Thin and Willowy said, his brow creased with a concern that seemed unwarranted when I didn't know who he was.

"Yeah? Well... I don't." I flicked my arm hard enough that he had no choice but to

let go. Where was Nelson? Why wasn't he telling this guy to back off? Oh, that's right. I'd given him the slip at the hotel. I'd pretended to take an early night and then snuck out. "And I don't know who you are to be telling me what I can and can't do."

Hurt immediately blossomed on the guy's face, extreme enough for guilt to filter through the alcohol. Fuck! Had I spent last night with him? I struggled to recall the previous night, brief snatches coming back to me. Someone's house. A private party. This guy's? So much booze and drugs on offer that I couldn't even remember leaving, never mind what had happened in the hours before my departure. To say it was a blur would be an understatement. If I'd had sex, I'd topped, the lack of any soreness telling me that even if my memory couldn't.

"Owen," the guy said, the name meaning nothing to me. If something had happened between us, I either hadn't known his name or I'd consigned it to the list of things that weren't important. Which was pretty much everything, more things joining the list with every day that passed.

"Owen," I said. "Right. Course. I knew that." I turned back to the bar. "I get to decide when I've had enough. No one else. Not you. Not my father. Not even Father bloody Christmas. He can put me on the naughty list for all I care. I think I'll cope." I laughed, turning back to see if Owen appreciated the joke. He wasn't there, nothing but a space where he'd been standing. It didn't last long, spaces close to the bar as much in demand in this nightclub as they were in any.

I caught the barman's eye, my wink doing exactly what I intended, and making him bypass whoever should have been next to serve me instead. "A double vodka and Coke," I requested, "and whatever you're having." I fumbled in my pocket for a note, handing it over without bothering to look at what denomination it was, and with little regard for whether I got change. That was one advantage to being famous and the riches that came with it.

I drank my double vodka at the bar and then asked for another. Or maybe it was two. Fuck knows. I sure as hell didn't. The next two hours were a blur of more booze, dancing—where I had no shortage of willing partners cozying up to me—and conversations that made little sense while I was having them, and that I already knew I wouldn't recall a single word of the following day.

When the lights came on to signal the end of the evening, I swore. How was it that time already? “Come back to my place,” an accented voice urged. “We can carry the party on there. I have plenty of drink, some drugs, and...” His voice took on a distinctive flirtatious note. “Something else you might be interested in.”

The something else was presumably his cock. I squinted up at him, my drunkenness having reached a level where all his features swam together. It was difficult to get excited at the thought of having sex with someone you couldn't see properly. “Thanks, but no thanks.” I staggered back a few steps, apologizing when I bumped into someone. I ricocheted off them and into someone else, and then into a Christmas tree. Perhaps I'd had a little too much to drink. Perhaps.

“Rudolf, come back. I'll call you a cab. Make sure you get safely back to the hotel.”

Same accented voice. What country was I in, anyway? Japan? No, that had been last week. Something beginning with an A. Australia? Azerbaijan? The fucking Antarctic. Probably not the latter. I didn't think there were many nightclubs there. At least I hoped we weren't in the Antarctic because I was in for a very rude and very cold surprise once I found my way out of this nightclub, if so. I found a cloakroom ticket in my pocket, leaning gratefully against the wall for support while the attendant went to find my coat.

She was back within a couple of minutes. I struggled into my coat, glad to find that non-drunken me had teamed it with gloves, a scarf and a beanie hat. My luck held when I located my phone in the pocket. I pulled it out, drunkenness rendering the task

more difficult than it needed to be as I scrolled through my contacts to find the number I needed. There were missed calls, but I didn't bother to look who they'd been from.

She answered on the third ring. "Rudolf?"

"Yeah, it's me," I slurred.

"Where are you? Nelson says you're not at the hotel."

"Not his fault," I said charitably. "Gave him the slip. Wanted to be on my own for a few hours."

My manager let out a sigh worthy of any soap opera. My father had hired Jade Turner because she had a reputation for running a tight ship and didn't suffer fools gladly. Unfortunately, I seemed to be one of those fools. My father had hired everyone involved in my daily routine. Nelson. Jade. My publicist. My driver. My personal assistant. My hairdresser. The list went on and on. "Rudolf, we've talked about this time and time again. You can't just take yourself off whenever you feel like it. It's not safe. Nelson's your bodyguard for a reason, and you need to use him as such."

I closed my eyes against the lecture I'd heard before. "Yeah, yeah," I said.

"I presume you're drunk?"

I laughed at the censorious note in her voice. "As. A. Skunk."

"Tell me there's no press there."

"Don't think so."

“Where are you?”

“At a club.”

“What club?” I shrugged before realizing she couldn’t see it. “Dunno. I don’t even know what country I’m in.”

“Austria, Rudolf. You’re in Austria. You’ve been in Austria for three days. You were meant to take part in a charity concert, remember? Only, after what happened in Germany, we had to tell everyone you were ill. A story which isn’t holding any weight because you’ve done nothing but get pissed and high since then.”

“Right... Austria. I knew that.”

“You can’t keep screwing up like this. We need to sit down and discuss which rehab facility would be best—”

“I’m not going to rehab!”

“I don’t see any alternative. You can’t go on like this. There’s only so many times I can do damage limitation before your name becomes mud and no one will touch you.”

“I’m. Not. Going. To. Rehab.”

“I’ll talk to your father. See what he has to say about it.”

I closed my eyes against the wave of fatigue washing over me. My father would say yes. He and Jade always agreed, and I didn’t get a say, even though it was my life. It had been the same for years. In his eyes, he’d shaped me; he’d hired all the best music teachers; he’d surrounded me with all the things I needed to be an enormous

success.

In my eyes, it was a cage. One I couldn't escape from. All I could do was numb myself against it by whatever means necessary. Drink. Drugs. Sex. None of it helped. Because the merry-go-round my life had become was still there waiting for me when I came out the other side.

"Rudolf!" The sharpness in Jade's voice told me it wasn't the first time she'd said my name.

I sighed. "I just need a car to take me back to the hotel. That's why I called."

"I can't send one if I don't know where to send it, can I? I need something from you, Rudolf. A clue where you are. A smoke signal. Carrier pigeon. Something."

Snarky bitch. I focused on the neon sign across from me, the letters blurring together until I finally deciphered them, the process giving me a headache. "Lugeck-Alm." No doubt I'd butchered the pronunciation. Thankfully, she didn't ask me to spell it or I'd probably have gone for F-U-C-K Y-O-U.

"It's on its way," she said after a slight pause. "It'll be there in ten minutes."

Ten minutes sounded good to me. Spotting the restroom, I headed that way, my bladder reminding me that even the most enthusiastic of dancers couldn't sweat out all the vodka.

"What's that noise?" Jade asked.

"I'm taking a piss," I answered honestly.

"Lovely."

“Don’t ask if you don’t want to know the answer.” I left a pause, enjoying the release it gave me to empty my bladder and knowing she wouldn’t hang up. “How much do I pay you?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I just figure it’s enough that you can put up with this.”

“You don’t pay me. Your father does.”

The surge of anger was immediate. “It’s my money,” I gritted out.

“There’s no point in trying to reason with you when you’re drunk. We’ll talk tomorrow.” And then, as if to prove I didn’t know her as well as I thought I did, she did hang up, leaving me glaring at my phone.

The cold when I spilled out onto the street was biting. It might as well have been the Arctic. Or the Antarctic. Whichever one we were closer to, my geographical knowledge not the best even without the vodka sloshing around in my system. Even more jarring than the cold, though, was the immediate flash of cameras, the burst of light bright enough that I lifted my hand to shade my eyes.

Never had the sight of the car idling at the curb been a more welcome sight, and no doubt Jade—and Veronica, my publicist—would thank me for giving the paparazzi as few drunken pictures as I could manage. At least none of them tried to talk to me, as I almost skidded across the pavement and threw myself into the back of the car.

“Drive,” I said as soon as the door closed. “Get me the fuck out of here.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Something about the way those words were said was off, but I was too busy watching the reporters get smaller in the rearview mirror to give it much more than a passing thought. I relaxed back against the seat, my hangover already making itself known.

“Seatbelt,” the driver demanded.

I rolled my eyes as I pulled it across my chest and clicked it into place. I guess it was understandable that he didn’t want to be immortalized as the driver who killed Rudolf Bell should we crash. I’d give him that one. Even if I did it with attitude. I stared at the back of his head, the light too dim for me to make out his face in the rearview mirror. Back in London, I had Gustav as a driver, my father having vetted him to make sure that the riskiest thing about him was how overgrown his mustache got.

In Austria—now that Jade had reminded me where I was—I’d had the same driver for the entire trip. A man named Dagobert. Dagobert might have long since left his bodybuilding career behind, but there was no getting rid of the tree-trunk like neck it had left him with. This man did not have a neck like a tree trunk. Ergo, he wasn’t Dagobert. See, who needed to be sober for critical thinking? Not me.

Considering it was late, I surmised Dagobert was required elsewhere. I hadn’t asked him whether he had a wife or kids, because I’d be moving on soon. Different day. Different country. So what was the point? But he probably had, so it stood to reason he was needed at home. No need to let my imagination run away with me. If I remembered rightly now I was sobering up, it was less than a fifteen-minute trip to the hotel. I’d be tucked up in bed in twenty minutes. Alone. Probably wishing I had picked someone up from the club. “Was Dagobert not available tonight?”

“Na.”

Austrian German for no. There was no point in asking the guy more if he didn’t speak English. I leaned my head back against the seat and closed my eyes. When my

internal body clock said that close to fifteen minutes had passed, I opened them, expecting to see the bright lights of the district where I'd been staying. My phone rang as I stared out at the encroaching darkness and I pulled it to my ear.

“Where are you, Rudolf? I thought I could at least trust you to get in the car once I sent it. Let me guess, someone threw themselves at you and you just had to go home with them and never thought to inform me?”

Jade. An even more pissed than usual Jade. “I'm in the car.”

“No, you're not. I've had Dagobert hassling me for the last ten minutes. He has a home to go to, you know. He can't spend all night sitting in front of a nightclub. Not to mention that he's currently being paid for not driving you. Your father and I were just discussing how to get you to cut down on unnecessary expenses. How I'm supposed to do that, I haven't got a clue.”

“By sending me to rehab, presumably.”

“Yeah, that.” Jade gave a bitter laugh. “So... just tell me where you are and I'll send Dagobert to come pick you up.”

“I told you where I am. I'm in the car.”

“What car?”

I didn't like the confusion in Jade's voice. It made my palms sweat and my heart race. When you were in the public eye, you always knew you could have a target on your back. That's why I had a bodyguard. A bodyguard I'd left back in the hotel.

“Rudolf, you're worrying me.”

Yeah, I was worrying myself. Just who the fuck was I in a car with? And why hadn't I at least checked when I got in that Jade had sent him? Could I be any more of a fuckup?

I surreptitiously wrapped my fingers around the door handle and tugged.

Locked. Although, what I thought I was going to do if it hadn't been, I wasn't sure. Would I really have done a kamikaze roll out of the car? And then what? Run off into the freezing cold? Being kidnapped and ransomed wasn't my idea of fun, but neither was dying of exposure.

"Hang up the phone."

I jerked my gaze to the rearview mirror to find eyes on me. No Austrian accent this time. English all the way. Did that make it better or worse? "Jade, you need to call the—"

The car lurched to so sudden a stop that it threw me against the front seat, the impact enough to wind me even with the seatbelt on. I was still shaking my head and trying to work out whether I had a concussion when the phone was snatched out of my hand. Had Jade heard enough to raise the alarm? Probably not. Which meant no one would likely miss me for a few more hours, leaving me at the mercy of some stranger who wanted God knows what. And he hadn't even had to try that hard to kidnap me. I'd volunteered myself. Fucking idiot.

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Arlo

Two weeks earlier

I stared at the newspaper's headline. Musical sensation, Rudolf Bell crashes and burns in a spectacular fall from grace. Did I really want to read on? Something made me, though. The same something that'd had me following his career for the last few years.

Twenty-three-year-old Rudolf Bell, the piano wonder kid who dresses like a rockstar but plays classical music like an angel, flounced off stage halfway through his show the other night. His unexpected departure came after a succession of uncharacteristic bum notes, leaving the audience clamoring to know whether they'd get a refund.

I contemplated the information so far. Too right, it was uncharacteristic. The Rudolf I'd known couldn't have played badly, even if challenged to do so. His fingers had been like lightning over the keys. Lightning that teased and tormented, that filled the eardrums with an emotion that went straight to the soul. It had left me and everyone else on the documentary crew in awe.

It had been a documentary that never saw the light of day, Rudolf's father pulling the plug long before we had enough usable footage. I could play the piano. It was the reason I'd been interested in making the documentary. But compared to Rudolf, I was a rank amateur. One who'd refused to play in front of him for fear of humiliating myself.

That had been six years ago, and I'd kept tabs on him ever since, following his

meteoric success: the sell-out tours, the girls who screamed for him like he was Justin Bieber. Which, in a way, he was, the messy blonde hair, the Kohl-lined eyes, the tight leather outfits that molded to his muscular physique, and his trademark bare feet, making him just as alluring as any popstar. But where they crooned or danced their way into girls—and boy's hearts—Rudolf let his fingers do the talking. And they were very persuasive, sparking a craze, where people who'd never shown the slightest bit of interest in classical music, suddenly declared their love for Beethoven, Bach and Rachmaninov, amongst others.

I skimmed the rest of the article, not surprised to find the usual overdramatized tabloid narrative, the last paragraph really hammering its point home.

So, it seems Rudolf Bell's hedonistic lifestyle has finally caught up with him. Is he going to be the latest star to go the way of so many others, his talent—and it's undeniable that he is talented—not enough to stop him from spiraling into the gutter. Such a waste. We hope we're wrong, but history tells us we probably aren't, and that the descent has already begun.

Rudolf followed me around for the next week, metaphorically speaking anyway, the newspapers obsessed with speculating what would become of him. With all the public interest, it didn't come as a surprise to switch on Michael Carter's chat show and find Rudolf as the hyped-up star guest. I sat through a comedian pimping the tickets for their latest tour under the thin veil of 'catching up with the host,' and then an actor. Same process, only it was a film, not a tour, before Rudolf came onstage to thunderous applause.

I moved closer to the TV so I could study him. Barefoot, of course. People would be disappointed if he wore shoes for a public appearance. They seemed to be disappointed when he wore them out clubbing. He was presumably meant to stroll over broken glass just to satisfy some sort of fetish.

He wore a suit, rather than leather, but a designer one with the sleeves rolled up to look effortlessly casual. No tie and an open collar completed the look of having gotten dressed in the dark. His hair was in his eyes as usual, many people speculating over the years how he could even see to play the piano. I could answer that for them. Rudolf didn't need to see. He was good enough that at his best, a blindfold wouldn't have held him back. He felt the keys; he didn't see them.

It was only when you looked closer that you could see the signs of a 'hedonistic lifestyle' as the media phrased it: the shadows under his eyes that no amount of make-up could hide; a slight redness to them; and a restless energy he did his best to bring under control, but with limited success.

The interview started amicably enough, the lead-in questions little more than small talk. Michael Carter had been in the game long enough that putting a guest at ease was second nature. He even made Rudolf laugh a time or two. That changed when he got onto the subject of Rudolf's last concert, the one Rudolf had abandoned halfway through. "So..." he said as he leaned forward slightly in his seat, "want to tell my audience what happened at the Barenboim-Said Academy? Did you just not fancy it, or did you have something better to do that night? A hot date, perhaps?"

His attempt at turning it into a joke didn't stop Rudolf's lips from firming into a thin line. Nor did it stop his shoulders from rising until he forced himself to relax both, flashing a smile at the camera that most people would have taken at face value. I didn't. I'd spent two weeks with him while we'd made the documentary, and I could tell a genuine smile from the ones he plastered on his face for his adoring public. They were as different as night and day. "Well, you see, Michael, my fans only deserve the best." My phone rang, and I ignored it, not taking my eyes off the screen to see who it was. "And that night, I couldn't give them my best, so it didn't seem fair to continue."

Sensing blood in the water, Michael leaned forward another inch. Any farther and

he'd topple out of his chair and land on Rudolf. "And why couldn't you give them your best? Is it as the media has speculated that you'd been out the night before, that you were suffering from a lack of sleep and perhaps other excesses?" He flashed a knowing smile at the studio audience, like the fact that he was referring to drugs and alcohol was a secret shared between him and the three hundred of them.

"Not at all," Rudolf assured him. "Everyone has an off day."

"Of course," Michael said. He winked. "And I'm sure I will one day." The studio audience dutifully laughed. "So you weren't suffering from a hangover? Or perhaps still drunk?"

A slight twitch in Rudolf's cheek said he didn't appreciate Michael's directness. The questions would have been shared in advance with Rudolf's publicist, and I doubted that had been among them. But like any good interviewer, Michael pushed the boundaries with what he could get away with. As someone who also interviewed and had used every trick in the book, I could hardly blame him for seizing the opportunity to bend the questions slightly.

"I wasn't," Rudolf said. "Either of those." If it was a lie, it was a good one, bereft of any tells that gave it away as such. "I wasn't feeling great that day, if you must know."

"Oh?" Michael Carter's eyebrow rose. "Nothing serious, I hope? Is this why you've canceled all your concerts in the run-up to Christmas?" He dropped his gaze to the cue card on his lap, although I doubted he needed it. It was probably more of an affectation. "Six concerts in three different countries. What about those disappointed fans? Do you think they'll accept you're not feeling well next time they see you falling out of a nightclub?"

Ouch! That definitely hadn't been on the agreed list of questions. I bet whoever

Rudolf's management and his publicist were these days, that they were spitting feathers backstage. Someone's head would roll, and it wouldn't be Michael's. That was just the way things worked.

"Not canceled, postponed," Rudolf said with admirable smoothness, considering the provocation of the question. "The show will go on, just at another time."

The chat show host gave a bob of his head in response. "So you'll be back behind a piano after New Year?"

The slight twitch of Rudolf's fingers said that wasn't a given. I doubted that's what he'd been told to say. Sure enough, he flashed a smile and toed the party line. "Of course. I just need some time away from the piano. I'll be honoring all the personal appearances I agreed to, though. Like being here tonight."

"And does that break include a stint in rehab? That's what all the newspapers are saying, that you have a drink or a drug problem..." Michael paused for dramatic effect. "One that needs dealing with sooner rather than later."

Rudolf smiled, but it was reminiscent of a shark. "I don't have a drink or drug problem. I'm twenty-three, and like most twenty-three-year-olds, I like to have fun. It's just that the paparazzi don't lie in wait for most twenty-three-year-olds. They don't follow them around, waiting to take pictures in compromising positions. They're not there when I spent the night in my hotel room watching a film and get an early night."

"They'd probably be happy to if you invited them," Michael quipped.

Rudolf laughed. "Probably. But they'll be waiting a long time for that invitation."

The last few questions were much softer, Michael knowing he couldn't push it too

far. Not if he wanted celebrities still to come on his show. I could almost see the relief on Rudolf's face when the interview finally reached its end, and he made his escape to applause just as enthusiastic as when he'd come on, without having given the watching media—and they would watch—even a shred of ammunition they could use against him. Rudolf hadn't been drunk or under the influence. He hadn't been rude or let Michael get to him. He'd been calm and professional and not done his reputation any further harm.

I sat back in my chair and considered the interview. He'd also been dead behind the eyes, as if someone had sucked all the life out of him. Not your problem. No, it wasn't. Yet, I couldn't get him out of my head. He had an entire team of people around him, but he wouldn't be the first celebrity to be viewed as nothing more than a cash cow. And they didn't care how he was feeling or what happened to him five or ten years down the line, as long as he was making bank now.

What would be the next headline I'd see? Him overdosing in a hotel room? The media would lose their shit with told-you-so articles if that ever happened, and no one would care that at the heart of it, the world had lost a supremely talented individual who hadn't even reached his twenty-fifth birthday.

A ghost of an idea made itself known and even as I fought against it, I slid my phone out of my pocket and dialed a number. Bryce Carey picked up on the third ring. "Arlo, me old mucker. How the devil, are you?"

"Good. Listen, you remember that favor you owe me?"

Bryce's sigh was the perfect mixture of regret and resignation. "Yeah."

"I'm calling to collect."

"That depends on what it is you want."

“I need you to use some of your contacts and get hold of Rudolf Bell’s schedule for me.”

“You didn’t hear? Wonder boy has officially started his burnout tour. They’ve canceled all future dates until next year. And if you think they’ll actually happen, then you’re more of an optimist than me.”

“Harsh.”

“But true.” I could hear the shrug in his voice. “He’s not the first person the industry has chewed and spat out, and he won’t be the last. Shame though, because that boy could create magic on a piano.”

“He’s postponed his concerts, but he hasn’t postponed his public appearances. Can you get his schedule for me or not? And when I say schedule, I mean where he’s staying as well.”

Bryce let out a low whistle. “That kind of information isn’t easy to come by.”

“No, it isn’t, but if anyone can get it, you can.” I figured there was no harm in massaging his ego a bit. As one of the longest serving publicists in the industry, anyone Bryce didn’t know wasn’t worth knowing.

“Why?”

Even though I’d expected the question, it still made me wince. “It’s probably better you don’t know.”

“Arlo!” There was a world of warning in the way he said my name. “What are you up to? And why on earth does it involve Rudolf Bell? You made a documentary on him once, right? One that never got finished. Do you harbor some sort of grudge against

him?”

I laughed at the ridiculousness of Bryce’s assumption, when, if anything, it was the opposite. During the time I’d spent with Rudolf, I’d liked him far more than I’d expected to. I’d expected him to be brash and cocky, and instead he’d been sweet, sensitive, and funny, the two of us bonding when the cameras weren’t rolling over everything from losing mothers early in life to our love of films made before either of us were born.

Nothing had happened because he was only seventeen to my twenty-three. Yes, I’d been a precocious talent too, something else we’d had in common. But there’d been an undercurrent there. Something that said if he hadn’t been so young, and a rising star, and had I not been working, and had his father not been lurking in the background, that something more than friendship might have been there for the taking. However, since receiving my marching orders, I hadn’t seen him since. I’d thought about him, though. More times than was healthy. And even if I’d never crossed his mind, I couldn’t just sit back and watch his life go down the drain.

“I’d rather you agreed not to ask questions.”

“That does not engender confidence in me.”

I shrugged, even though he couldn’t see me. “Well, it’s all you’re getting. Can you get the information for me or not?”

Bryce’s sigh held a world of pain and went on for longer than necessary, presumably in case I hadn’t caught it in the first five seconds. “Fine. I’ll email it to you.”

“How long?”

“Oh, so you’re in a rush for it now, are you?”

“How long, Bryce?”

“I don’t know. This afternoon probably. I’ll polish up my magic wand and wave it around a bit. Just so we’re clear, if you’re up to no good, I will deny this conversation ever happened.”

“Understood. And I’d expect no less.”

It was less than an hour before the email landed in my inbox. That was one hell of a powerful wand Bryce had in his possession. I made notes while I studied the list of dates and places, and then I spent the rest of the afternoon carrying out research and weighing up various possibilities.

Once I had a workable scenario scribbled on my notepad, I sat and stared at it. What the fuck was I doing? People went to prison for stuff like this. Common sense dictated that I stop letting my imagination run away with me and try something more traditional, like, oh, I don’t know, emailing him or getting hold of his number and calling him. Except, I already knew there’d be zero chance of success with either of those scenarios, and that it wasn’t what Rudolf needed. And I was doing this for him. Or at least I told myself I was.

Present day

There was a moment of stunned silence from Rudolf as I tore the phone from his hand. Adrenaline had me almost throwing it from the car window before I reined myself in. We might need it at a later date, Rudolf unlikely to have memorized any important numbers in this technological age. I settled for ending the call and removing the SIM card so the phone couldn’t be tracked instead.

The task was fiddly enough that Rudolf recovered from his shock enough to realize we were at a standstill. He did what ninety-five percent of the population would do in

that situation: he went for the door. It didn't seem to matter that I wasn't stupid enough not to have engaged the central locking, desperation making him think he could prize it open if he just used enough force. "Don't! Think of your fingers." Rudolf's hands as the tools of his trade were insured for millions, but that wouldn't matter if he did something career-ending to them.

"Fuck my fingers! You can't keep me here."

I flicked on the interior light, undoing my seatbelt at the same time and twisting round in my seat so he could see me. "Rudolf, don't be stupid. It's me. You remember me, right?"

He blinked at me, the glassiness in his eyes and his struggle to focus, a dead giveaway for how drunk he was. Not that I'd expected anything less when I'd followed him from his hotel to a nightclub, and then sat outside it for two hours, trying to work out how I was supposed to lure him into the car without attracting attention.

I'd mentally prepared myself to follow him back to the hotel, where I'd sit outside and contemplate how out of my depth I was in thinking I could pull off an intervention like this. But then something wondrous had happened, Rudolf mistaking me for his driver and getting in of his own accord, and all I'd needed to do was drive away. Which is exactly what I'd done, getting out of Salzburg before Rudolf suspected things weren't what they seemed.

"Arlo?" There was a note in his voice that said he thought he might be dreaming.

"In the flesh." I grinned at him. He didn't return it, staring at me without blinking, his confusion understandable. "Long time, no see," I said.

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Rudolf

What the hell was going on? Since when did documentary makers, successful ones at that, kidnap people? Because hell, yes, I recognized him. The man who'd driven me away from the club was Arlo Thomas, the same man who I'd spent time with a few weeks shy of my eighteenth birthday, my father's idea to feature me in a documentary to elevate my public profile ending as suddenly as it had begun.

Arlo and the film crew were there one day and gone the next, without even having had the courtesy to say goodbye. I hadn't seen him since. Until now. I'd seen mention of him in the media, my attention snagged by it being someone I'd once known, but our paths had never crossed. If this was some new-fangled way of getting an exclusive interview, I wanted no part of it.

"Rudolf?"

Right. I hadn't answered his question. "Yeah, I recognize you." He smiled again, all white teeth and disarming friendliness. "How long has it been?" The answer held little interest for me apart from as a means to make conversation. That's what you did with kidnappers, right? Kept them talking. Made them like you.

"Six years."

"That long, huh?" Time flew when you were on a never-ending whistlestop tour of the entire globe. His apparent friendliness filled me with hope of resolving this quickly. "Listen, I'm sure we can work something out interview-wise, but this isn't the way to do it."

Arlo laughed. He actually laughed. “You think I want an interview?”

“I can’t think why else you’d trap me here and take my phone.” I held my hand out. “Speaking of which, I’ll have it back now.” I wiggled my fingers in the universal sign for waiting and running out of patience.

Arlo turned back to the front and stared out of the windscreen. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because then you’ll call someone.”

“Well, yeah, that’s what phones are for.”

“I didn’t go to all this trouble for you to raise the alarm.”

“All what trouble?”

The pause was long enough to make me think he wouldn’t answer. “Finding out where you were going to be, waiting for you to come out of the club.”

So, this was premeditated. Whatever this was. If he didn’t want an interview, then what the fuck did he want? “You know you sound like a stalker, don’t you?”

His fingers tightened around the steering wheel. He was wearing leather gloves. It made me think of motorbikes. Motorbikes and murderers, but I didn’t dwell for too long on the latter. “Yeah. I’m aware.”

I reached to the side and rattled the door handle, my movements less urgent now the panic had subsided. “Listen... just let me out. No one has to know about this. I’ll tell Jade I went under a bridge and we got cut off, and that I opted for a cab because I

didn't want to wait for the car to come get me. There's nothing I do that would surprise her."

Arlo chuckled. "I bet."

"Nothing that wouldn't piss her off either," I added as something of an afterthought.

"Are you sure you want me to let you out?" When I frowned, Arlo jerked his head toward the window. I followed his gaze to what lay outside, all my focus having been on the man behind the driver's seat. And what lay outside was... nothing. No buildings. No cars. No houses. No streetlights. Nothing but trees as far as I could see. Which wasn't far when it was pitch-black.

"Because I don't think you could walk back to Salzburg," Arlo said conversationally. "Even if you could work out what direction it's in, it's at least ten miles. There are probably bears out there, or wolves."

I swallowed, not liking the sound of tramping through the undergrowth with wild animals on my tail very much at all. "You're just saying that to scare me."

Arlo shrugged. "I'm not really up on the flora and fauna of Austria. How about you?"

I wasn't, but I wasn't about to admit that. "In that case, you'll need to turn the car around and take me back."

There was a moment where I thought Arlo might agree, but then he shook his head. "Not happening. I've come too far to quit so soon."

He reached over to the passenger seat, my mind going into overdrive, time slowing. Was he going for a weapon? A knife? A gun? But when he lifted his hand, there was no flash of cold steel. No yawning barrel of a gun, either. Just a tartan blanket. I

swallowed down a bubble of hysterical laughter that wanted out.

Arlo threw it between the seats, and I caught it. Next came a bottle of water. “It’s not drugged,” he said when I eyed it warily.

“Course not,” I retorted. “I never thought it was.”

Arlo’s snort as he started the engine said I wasn’t convincing anyone. I drank half the water in a series of long gulps before tucking the blanket around me. I had it, so why not? There was no point in being cold if I didn’t need to be. “At least tell me where you’re taking me.”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

I didn’t expect to sleep, but there was something about the movement of the car and the warmth of the blanket that made me drowsy. The lateness of the hour and the amount of alcohol I’d imbibed probably had something to do with it as well. Besides, there was nothing else to do. I couldn’t look at my phone because Arlo refused to give it back, and he’d lapsed into silence, the dark, winding road demanding all his concentration.

When I woke, the world had turned white. I jerked upright, wondering if I was dreaming. But no, it really had turned white.

“It’s snowing,” Arlo said, strain present in his voice.

“I can see that. Why?”

“It’s cold enough that the water vapor in the clouds has frozen. Therefore, instead of rain, we get snow. Most people think it’s frozen rain, but it skips that stage altogether and—”

I cut into the science lesson before he could bore me back to sleep. “That’s not what I meant.” I didn’t really know what I’d meant. Only that things were going from bad to worse. I could barely see the road, the flakes large and heavy enough that they obscured what little visibility hadn’t already been stolen by the encroaching darkness. “Should you be driving in this?”

“Probably not,” Arlo said, his cheerfulness at odds with the way he hunched over the steering wheel. “But do you really want to stop here?”

Here, was more trees on either side of the road and nothing else. “I want to be in my luxury hotel suite in Salzburg with central heating and room service. But what I want doesn’t seem to matter to you.”

Arlo didn’t respond. I stayed awake for the rest of the trip, worried that if I dropped off to sleep again, I might miss the part where we skidded off the road and ended up in an icy ravine. The road only got bumpier and the snow heavier until I gripped the seat and wondered if it was too late to find religion and start praying.

“Bad weather wasn’t forecast,” Arlo said out of the blue. “I checked, and it wasn’t supposed to happen for a few more days.”

“We should sue,” I said just as the car hit a pothole and launched me into the air for a few seconds before I crashed back down.

“Yeah,” Arlo agreed.

When the car rolled to a stop ten minutes later, I didn’t know who was more relieved, me, or the man behind the steering wheel taking in air like he’d been holding his breath for the last twenty miles. After what felt like an age, he sat up straighter. “Are you ready to run?”

Once upon a time, I'd watched a horror film about a group of bored businessmen who'd gotten their kicks by luring tourists to a remote location and then hunting them. It'd been an absolute gore fest, the tourists meeting a grizzly end one by one, until only one survived to raise the alarm. Is that what this was? Was Arlo making a documentary on sick fucks who got off on torturing people? Why me? Did someone hate me enough that they'd requested me, like a menu, but for people rather than food? "Will you chase me?" Will somebody else chase me while you film?

Arlo frowned. "What? I just thought you'd want to get inside quickly out of the snow." He gestured out of the window and I saw what I'd missed while I'd been letting my imagination run away with me, namely an old-fashioned log cabin.

"Tada!" Arlo said. "We got here safe and sound. It took longer than I expected because of the snow, but better late than never."

"And here is?" Him not bothering to answer didn't come as a surprise. That seemed to be his *modus operandi*, to only answer the questions he wanted to.

Arlo unclicked his seatbelt. "It's either come in, or stay in the car."

Yeah, I'd already worked that out. I just hadn't decided which option was preferable. I checked my watch. Four in the morning. Which meant the entire journey had taken less than two hours. It seemed longer. I must have only slept for about an hour. I eyed the log cabin with some trepidation, still not entirely sure it wouldn't harbor a group of bloodthirsty businessmen who wanted to cut off my fingers and string me up from the ceiling. Perhaps I needed to stop watching horror films.

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Arlo

We both ran. The good thing about snow was being able to shake most of it off before it melted. I'd take snow over rain any day for that reason. Although a couple of hairy moments on the drive here where the car had been difficult to control had nearly changed my mind on that score.

With me not being a hundred percent sure I'd make it back tonight, either alone or with a companion, I hadn't left a light on in the cabin. I had left the wood burner going, though, the interior of the cabin warm and toasty as we stepped inside. I flicked on the light, relieved to see the blizzard hadn't left us without electricity. While I stamped the snow off my boots, Rudolf turned in a slow circle. "Who else is here?" he asked.

"Just us."

"Right."

I couldn't tell whether it was a relieved 'right,' or one wishing there was someone else here. "I'll give you a tour." It was a reasonably sized cabin. It ought to be for the amount I'd paid for it. The object that resided in the other room had overridden my original wish list of what I'd been looking for when I'd set out to rent a cabin in Austria relatively close to Salzburg. The way I'd seen it, it was fate—the universe's way of telling me that what I was doing was the right thing.

Rudolf had called it a kidnap, but it wasn't. Not really. He'd come round to the idea once he'd sobered up and had some proper sleep. I started the tour in the room we

were in, most of it dominated by a large, comfortable sofa, and a small dining table with two chairs. It doubled as a kitchen, the stove and everything else you'd expect to find in one situated toward one end. "Living room and kitchen," I said.

I led him into the next room, flicking a hand at the king-size bed. "Bedroom."

"One of two, I presume?" Rudolf asked.

I winced. "No, there's only one."

Rudolf said nothing. He didn't need to, his body language saying it for him. The bathroom took little explaining, given there was nothing but a bath with a built-in shower, a toilet, and a washbasin. I led him into the last room, the one which had sealed the deal. The owners of the cabin had set it up as a games room, complete with a billiards table. That wasn't what had twisted my arm, though. It was the piano at the front of the room. I ran a hand along its black polished lid, the instrument quite the beauty. "This is why I chose this place. I thought you might appreciate having one here, that it was worth the sacrifice of an extra bedroom."

Rudolf stared at the piano for long enough that I wondered whether a person could fall asleep with their eyes open. Finally, he turned away from it. Without touching it. Without running his fingers over the keys and checking whether anyone had tuned it. It was, because that's one of the first things I'd done when I'd gotten here. "You should have saved yourself the bother and gone for the extra bedroom."

He went back into the living room and I followed, Rudolf looking completely out of place in his club gear as he stood in the middle of the room. I didn't know what reaction I'd expected from him when he saw the piano. Joy? A smile? A look of fondness, perhaps. But it hadn't been a complete detachment. For all the attention he'd shown it, it may as well have been a chest of drawers.

Was I reading too much into it? He was tired and from the way he'd reacted earlier, no doubt still recovering from a huge dump of adrenaline into his system. Could I have gone about things in a better way? Revealed my identity earlier so he wouldn't have panicked as much as he had? Probably. Getting away from Salzburg and from all the people around despite the late hour had been the priority, though, if I didn't want to get caught. Anyway, there was no changing how events had unfolded now; there was only dealing with the aftermath.

"You should go to bed," I urged. "Get some sleep."

"And where will you sleep?" Rudolf's voice was tight, and he avoided looking at me when he asked, his discomfort broadcasting the direction of his thoughts.

"On the sofa. It's plenty big enough." He gave a jerky nod and turned toward the bedroom. "Use anything that's in the bathroom. Toiletries, towels, shaving stuff, I mean. What's mine is yours."

"Too kind." His tone didn't say he thought I was kind. His tone said fuck you. I was going to have some serious explaining to do once he'd slept.

After collecting bedding—luckily there was plenty going begging—I lay on the sofa under a blanket and listened to him potter around the bathroom. He took a shower, which I guess wasn't a surprise when he'd been clubbing. He'd been in the club too long not to have danced. Had he had sex with anyone? And why did that matter? It was none of my business. He'd left on his own, so if he had hooked up with anyone, it had stayed within the confines of the club. Was Rudolf the type of person who got down on his knees for someone in a bathroom stall? It was more likely, given his celebrity status, that someone had gotten down on their knees for him. Why was I still thinking about this?

I turned on my side and closed my eyes as Rudolf came out of the bathroom, listening

to his footsteps as he went into the bedroom. There was the soft snick of the door closing and then silence. Exhaustion had me succumbing to sleep not long after.

Memories of what I'd done came slowly the next morning, or as I discovered when I checked my watch, nearly lunchtime. Not surprising when it had been nearly five before I'd gotten my head down. Had I done the right thing? I guessed only time would tell. Rudolf hadn't exactly greeted me with open arms the previous night.

The cabin was silent. Silent enough that I struggled free from the mound of blankets, shot to my feet, and made sure the cabin door had remained locked. It was. Padding barefoot across to the bedroom door, I pressed my ear to it until I heard soft snores coming from the other side.

Not wanting to miss Rudolf getting up, I showered, shaved, and dressed quickly. I needn't have bothered rushing—the bedroom door still firmly closed when I came out of the bathroom. I tamped down on the temptation to open it an inch and check on him. It was doubtful he'd thank me for it.

When I looked out of the window with coffee mug in hand, it came as something of a shock. The snow had continued throughout the night, reaching a depth where the tires of the car were barely visible.

It had stopped snowing for the time being, the sun almost blinding as it reflected off the untouched powder, but the damage had already been done. It was hard to think of it as damage, though, when it was so beautiful. Especially at this time of year. What more could you want in early December than a picture-perfect postcard world right outside your door? I might not have planned for it, but I'd appreciate the hell out of it now it was here. I only hoped Rudolf would feel the same. How could nature at its finest not stir him? He'd have to be dead inside not to look upon it with awe.

I made a start on breakfast while I waited for Rudolf to join the world of the living.

Despite not having anticipated being snowed in, I'd gotten enough supplies to last until Christmas. Probably longer if you didn't mind making your own bread and using powdered milk instead of fresh. There were plenty of logs to keep the wood burner going, and an axe and larger logs in the storage shed adjoining the cabin for when they ran out. I was looking forward to getting in touch with my caveman side and wielding an axe.

The decision on whether to wake Rudolf once breakfast was ready was made for me when the bedroom door opened just as I was dividing the bacon, eggs, sausage, tomato, and mushrooms between two plates. I'd made toast as well, the unsliced loaf lending itself to slices as thick as doorstops. Well, that and my lack of skill at wielding a bread knife, which didn't bode well for the axe. "Perfect timing," I said cheerily as Rudolf came to stand on the opposite side of the breakfast bar. He'd dressed, his club gear not looking any more at home in our rustic surroundings than it had the previous night.

His hair was all over the place, but then it was most of the time, artful messiness, his trademark look. He looked pale, the hangover I'd suspected might hit him presumably in full flow. I held the plate out. "You'll feel better once you've eaten this."

He didn't take it, passing me by to crouch and look through the kitchen cupboards instead. Shrugging, I carried both plates over to the small dining table, before returning to pour him a coffee. I placed it next to his plate, along with a glass of water and a couple of painkillers. If he really couldn't eat, that would do the job just as well. By the time I sat, he was still going through the cupboards. "Come and sit down." No response. "Maybe if you tell me what you're looking for, I can help."

"Alcohol. There must be some."

Ah! So Rudolf was more of a hair of the dog that bit him type person, was he? "I

brought a couple of bottles of wine with me, but I thought better of it and got rid of them.”

Rudolf straightened to glare at me. “Why?”

I waved a hand, the gesture meant to encompass his frenzied search. “So this didn’t happen.”

“Got rid of them where?”

I stared at him. He was obviously hoping for an answer that would reveal a retrievable place, like I’d thrown the intact bottles in the bin. “I poured it down the sink and then threw the bottles away. There’s not a single drop in the cabin.”

Rudolf thought hard for a moment. “I’ll ask the neighbors.”

“No neighbors. The nearest cabin is about twenty miles away. Maybe more.” I gave the glass of water on the table a little shake and pointed to the painkillers. “So you’ll have to make do with these.”

He crossed the space and threw himself into the seat opposite, reluctance etched in every sinew of his body, and there was plenty of it on display, his club getup comprising a sleeveless T-shirt which molded itself to his impressive physique and that didn’t stretch far enough not to afford a quick glimpse of abs when he shifted position. He swallowed both tablets in quick succession before washing them down with half the glass of water.

“Eat,” I urged. “Before it gets cold.”

He stared at the plate, but made no move to pick up the knife and fork. “Did Jade put you up to this?”

“Who’s Jade?”

The look he leveled me with said he wasn’t buying my ignorance. “My manager. She’s been threatening to send me to rehab for some time. And I always tell her what she can do with the idea.”

I took a bite of sausage, the action seeming to spur Rudolf into eating something himself. He started with a forkful of scrambled egg. When that seemed agreeable, he moved onto the bacon.

“Perhaps she’s just looking out for you.”

“She isn’t.”

“How do you know?”

Rudolf stabbed angrily at a mushroom. “Because she’s a first-class bitch who has pound signs in her eyes whenever she looks at me. All she’s concerned about is getting me back in front of a piano as quickly as she can, so she gets her percentage.”

“Doesn’t she get her percentage whether or not you play? I mean, you’re still doing public appearances, right? That’s why you were here in Austria.”

“Only because I can’t get out of them. And If I disappeared from the public eye altogether, then I wouldn’t have any need for a manager, would I? And she knows that.” He paused for a moment to chew. “Anyway, I don’t have a problem with alcohol or drugs, so I’m not going to rehab. No matter what her or my father might have to say on the subject.” At my slightly raised eyebrow, he offered an explanation between bites of food. “She’s basically a mouthpiece for him.”

“How is your father?”

It was like a dark cloud descended on Rudolf as he reached for his mug and drank some of the coffee. “Same old.”

“That good, huh?” My dealings with Jeremiah Bell had been few, but they’d been enough for me to know he was a formidable man: a man used to getting his own way, and who had put himself front and center of his only child’s destiny. It hadn’t seemed that strange when Rudolf was seventeen, but if he hadn’t slackened his grip on the reins—which it sounded like he hadn’t from what Rudolf was saying—it was far more unusual now his son was twenty-three, and might offer some explanation why Rudolf was acting the way he was. He hadn’t rebelled as a teenager, so perhaps he was doing it now in the only way he knew how. When Rudolf only offered a shrug, I changed the subject. “How did you sleep?”

“Okay. The bed’s comfy enough.”

“I know. I’ve slept in it. Don’t worry, I changed the sheets,” I added as an afterthought.

“I wasn’t worried.”

Right. He’d probably woken up in no end of strange men’s beds if the rumors of his conquests were true. Although, knowing the press, there was embellishment there.

Rudolf sat back in his chair, seeming surprised to find his plate empty. “I don’t normally bother with breakfast,” he explained. “Now... how about you tell me why you’ve brought me here? Are you going to chain me to the bed and use me as a sex slave?”

My cock gave a traitorous twitch at the image he’d conjured up even as I said “no,” the word coming out sharper than I’d intended. Because older Rudolf, even with all the sharp edges he’d gained since last we’d met, was an incredibly attractive man. “I

forgot the chains.”

“But you took my phone off me.”

I tilted my hip so I could slide my hand into the pocket of my jeans. Once I’d extracted Rudolf’s phone, I slid it across the table toward him. He looked relieved until he switched it on. “Haha, hilarious. It’s not much good without the SIM card, is it? What did you do with it?”

“I don’t remember,” I lied. Before he could call me on my bullshit, I leaned across to where I’d left my phone charging. “It wouldn’t matter if it did still have the SIM card in. There’s no reception.”

He snatched my phone out of my hand and studied it with a scowl. “Oh, you thought of everything, didn’t you?”

I laughed. “Not really. The reception was already sketchy, but it existed if you picked the right spot. The blizzard seems to have finished it off completely, though.”

Rudolf shoved my phone back across the table, annoyance etched in the gesture. “Are you going to answer my question?”

“Which one?”

Narrowed green eyes met mine. “Why. The fuck. Am I here? Is it like an Annie Wilkes in Misery thing, only instead of getting me to write you a new version of a novel, I have to sit and play the piano for you?”

I let out a sigh. I’d hoped to avoid this conversation for longer, but that had probably been unrealistic. Of course, Rudolf wanted to know why he was here. Anyone would in his situation. I took a sip of my rapidly cooling coffee as a delaying tactic.

“Well?” Impatience lent the single word a sharpness that broadcasted Rudolf’s frayed patience.

“We got on well before, right? When we were making the documentary.”

Rudolf shrugged. “I suppose.”

Ouch! Tell me my fondness for you only went one way without telling me. “I thought we did.”

“Is this going to be a long story?”

“I’ve kind of kept tabs on you since.”

“Kind of?”

“Okay. I have.”

“So it is an obsessive fan thing?”

“I’m not a fan. I’m a... friend. At least I hope I am.”

“A friend who never calls... never writes... never said goodbye when you left.”

I winced. “Once your father pulled the plug on the documentary, he wanted us out of his house pronto and made it clear saying goodbye wouldn’t be welcomed.”

“Big surprise,” Rudolf said with an eye roll. “That’s how Jeremiah operates. He loves throwing his weight around.” He waved his hand in a “go on” motion.

“Lately, you’ve been spiraling.”

“Spiraling?”

Was there a better word I could have used? If there was, it was already too late. “You know what I’m talking about. Sex, drugs—”

“Rock ‘n’ Roll,” Rudolf added acerbically. “So this is supposed to be what? Rehab without the medical professionals and the white walls? I’m going to say it once more for the peanut gallery... I do not have a problem with drugs or alcohol.”

I leaned both my elbows on the table and studied him. “Yet, the first thing you did today was search this place for alcohol.”

“I wanted some. I didn’t need it. There’s a difference.”

“There is,” I agreed. “But it’s hardly a healthy, well-adjusted habit, is it?” I kept talking before he could interrupt. “If it helps, I don’t think you’re an alcoholic. But, I think you’re heading that way if you don’t make some changes. What happened at the Barenboim-Said Academy was painful to watch.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

I held my hands out in a placatory gesture. “Then, we don’t have to talk about it. But for someone with an immense talent like yours, it’s concerning.”

“I’m more than the music I play.”

“You are. No one’s saying you’re not. But whether you play should be a choice. Not something you find yourself unable to do because you’re too hungover, or still high, or you just can’t bring yourself to care anymore.”

Rudolf crossed his arms over his chest. “So let me check I’ve got this right. Your aim

in bringing me here is to rescue me from myself. To hold me captive until I remember who I am again. What happened to the costume? Couldn't you find one in your size?"

I frowned. "Costume?"

"The white knight costume. I guess you had to swap your trusty steed for a Volkswagen for practical reasons."

"Something like that."

"How long?" Rudolf asked.

"How long what?"

"How long are you planning to keep me here?"

"I don't know. I hadn't really thought that far ahead. A week. Two weeks. Through Christmas if you wanted to stay that long."

"Through Christmas." Rudolf laughed. "Do you know how many public appearances I'm scheduled to do before Christmas? I'm leaving Austria in a few days to head to Switzerland for a magazine interview. Then I have a meet and greet somewhere else. Then I'm doing something or other in France." His pause said he was trying to remember what. After a few seconds, he shook his head. "Doesn't matter what it is. I'm expected. I can't just hole up in a cabin for weeks because you've decided you're concerned about me."

"Do you want to do those things?"

Rudolf's frown said the question confused him. "That's hardly the point, is it?"

“When was the last time you took a break?”

“I play the piano and do promo. I don’t work down a coalmine. I’m lucky I get to tour so many wonderful countries.”

“And how much of them do you get to see? And I’m not talking about the interior of a concert hall or a nightclub.”

“Enough.”

“Do you?”

Rudolf stood. “Look... I’m not going to argue about this. I have enough people running my life without you putting yourself forward for the role. So... grab your car keys and let’s go.”

“I can’t.”

Rudolf treated me to another eye roll. “Because you care. Yeah, yeah. Blah, blah, blah. Save it for someone who wants to hear it.”

Okay then. It wasn’t like I thought he’d be happy about my intervention, but he was taking it harder than I’d expected. I’d hoped he’d see my perspective and might be glad to see me after all these years. But, apparently not. “Look out of the window.”

He sighed, but headed over there. “What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“The car.” I could tell from how quiet he went as he stood at the window looking out that he understood the point I was making. I still felt the need to hammer it home. “So... as you can see, we’re not going anywhere until the snow thaws. And we may be in for more snow. With my phone not having reception, I can’t pull up a forecast.”

Rudolf spun on his heel and disappeared into the bedroom. Presumably to sulk for a bit, which was warranted. At least he'd eaten his breakfast, and I didn't have to worry about him starving to death for however many hours he holed up in there. I resigned myself to sitting and reading my book while I waited for him to come out.

However, within five minutes of entering the bedroom, Rudolf was out again. This time, he wore his coat, scarf, hat, and gloves. I jumped up as he headed straight for the door. Unfortunately, after collecting some wood for the burner from the porch earlier, I'd left it unlocked. "What are you doing?"

"What's it look like?" Rudolf said as he yanked the door open and stepped outside. "If we can't drive anywhere, I'll walk."

"You can't do that." My admonishment ended up directed at solid wood as the door swung shut behind him, and it became obvious that Rudolf already had. "Fuck!" Swearing didn't make me feel any better as I scrambled for my boots, the laces proving tricky in my haste and forcing me to slow down. What if he just disappeared, never to be seen again? What if I was the person responsible for the world famous classical pianist breaking his neck in the middle of nowhere?

It would be the end of my film-making career. It'd be the end of being able to step outside my house without being hounded as well. That was assuming I didn't go to prison for kidnapping. My plan relied on Rudolf not pressing charges and speaking in my defense if what I'd done ever became known. But he couldn't do that if he was lying dead in a ditch or he froze to death.

It took far too long to struggle into suitable outerwear, but going out without it was asking for trouble. Panic lent my movements a jerkiness as I finally, after what felt like hours, stumbled out into the snow. I was glad of my waterproof boots that reached mid-calf as I jumped off the porch and immediately sank into deep snow. What was Rudolf wearing on his feet? I couldn't remember from the previous night,

but I doubted his footwear was suitable for trekking through snow. Clubbing and snow hikes weren't two activities that usually went together.

I shouldn't have worried about Rudolf disappearing into thin air. Not when his tracks were easy to see in the otherwise undisturbed snow. He had at least a five minute start on me, but I was confident I could catch him.

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Rudolf

I realized my mistake as soon as I stepped off the porch, my black Vans not designed for tramping through the snow. But with no alternative except to return meekly to the cabin and pretend I hadn't flounced out of there in such dramatic fashion, I pressed on.

The air was biting, colder than it had been yesterday, but at least it wasn't snowing. Yet. It would be just my luck if another blizzard started up before I reached civilization. I wasn't buying Arlo's story of there being no other cabins for twenty miles. Who built a cabin in the middle of nowhere? Surely even the most antisocial of people liked to have neighbors of some description. What if there was an emergency? Especially if bad weather fucked up the phone reception. Therefore, I reckoned I'd find another cabin a mile or two away. If you're going in the right direction. Yeah, there was that.

With the snow so deep, it was impossible to tell where the road lay, so I just struck out in the general direction I remembered from the previous night. Except, it had been dark, and I hadn't been sober, and I'd still been in shock over being abducted—could you class it as an abduction when you'd gotten into the vehicle of your own accord?—so it was possible my recollection was off. But this was the direction I was going in.

It was hard-going in the snow, the physical effort required to lift my leg to take a step already tiring before the cabin was even out of sight. The cabin where the door hadn't opened, and Arlo hadn't come after me. What was that about? Oh yeah, he cared alright. Not enough to leave a warm cabin to make sure I was safe, but he cared.

Bullshit! He obviously expected me to return with my tail between my legs once I'd seen the unforgiving environment. Well, fuck that. He didn't know me well if he thought I gave up on anything that easily.

Which, he didn't.

Arlo and I had been acquaintances for two weeks, six years ago. Friends, he'd called it. Had we been? We'd certainly got along well, Arlo making me laugh like no one else could. And then he'd been gone. Without so much as a note. With friends like that, who needed enemies? And now he thought he could... what? Just stroll back into my life with his kidnapper's kit and a smile. Technically, I knew there'd been a distinct lack of duct tape or cable ties involved in the previous night's extraction, but the intent had been there. And fanning the flames of my indignation helped me pick up the pace.

I glanced back at the cabin in time to see the door open and a figure step out. Oh, Arlo had decided to move his arse, had he? That was big of him. I'd been avoiding the densely wooded area to my right, but with Arlo on my tail, I veered into it, more concerned about staying out of sight than I was about following a road I couldn't even see. It was a decision I regretted almost immediately, the foliage only growing thicker the deeper I went, and snow-covered branches bombarding me at every turn. I took one directly to the face, the momentary blinding causing me to lose my balance and pitch forward into the snow.

“RUDOLF?”

I lifted my face and spat a mouthful of snow out. At least it wasn't yellow. “Leave me alone, Arlo! Go back to your little prison cabin.” I struggled to my hands and knees, the snow feeling more like sinking sand. Not that I'd ever been in sinking sand, but that's what I imagined it would feel like.

“You’re being ridiculous.”

I struggled to my feet, indignation lending me an extra burst of energy. “Oh, I’m being ridiculous, am I? And there I was thinking you were the one who traveled all the way to Austria, waited outside a nightclub, abducted me, and then brought me to a remote cabin in the middle of nowhere. But yeah, I’m being ridiculous by wanting to leave. Am I supposed to accept my fate meekly and spend Christmas with you?”

“You’re twisting things.”

He sounded far too close, my head start all but gone. I struggled on, my damp clothes making forward progress more difficult. Was the snow getting deeper? It felt like it. Or was it just fatigue setting in? The hangover didn’t help. The painkillers—and probably the food as well—had made it better for a while, but physical exertion had reawakened the pounding in my temples, and nausea had decided now would be a good time to rock up and introduce itself. “I don’t think I am twisting things. And we can see whose side the Austrian police take once I reach civilization.”

“You’re going to set the police on me?”

I leaned against a tree, using the excuse of looking back as an opportunity to take a breather. Arlo wasn’t close enough to see, but he was definitely getting nearer. With his clothes far better suited to the weather than my club gear, it was inevitable, he’d catch up. A case of when rather than if. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“You want me to go to prison? An Austrian prison at that.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t give a damn what happens to you.”

“I guess that’s where you and I differ.”

“I guess it is.” I slipped, this time landing on my arse. Great! Now my back was just as wet as my front. I might as well roll around in the snow and be done with it. I struggled to my feet again, the cold affecting my movements. Despite wearing gloves, my fingers were stiff and uncooperative, the wool sodden. And I wasn’t entirely sure I still had toes, my feet completely numb.

Was it cold enough to get hypothermia? Probably, if I was out here long enough. I tried to recall what I knew about it. Not much, apart from the brain getting confused at the end and interpreting the extreme cold as heat so that people took their clothes off and froze to death even quicker. Well, I had zero inclination to take my clothes off, so I took that as a good sign.

“You’ll get hypothermia. You’re not dressed for this weather.”

Fantastic! He was reading my mind now. “I’m fine.” If fine was wet, cold, nauseous, and miserable. “Never been better, in fact. Everyone should take a bracing stroll after breakfast.”

“Or frostbite.”

Fuck! I hadn’t considered frostbite. Was that what was happening to my toes? Would they turn black and drop off? I’d never considered having much attachment to my toes, but I’d prefer them to stay where they were and remain pink. And it would really scupper my audience’s fascination with my bare feet if a few toes fell off. “You’re just trying to scare me.”

“Not really. I’m worried.”

Arlo had to only be a few meters away now. He’d be on me in no time at all. I picked up my pace, trees giving way to... more trees, the forest uncompromising. How long did forests usually go on for? Miles? If so, I was fucked. “Well, you should have

thought about that before you dragged me here against my will.”

“I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to walk out of here.”

“Admit... you lied... about how far... the closest neighbors are.” My words were coming out in pants. I rarely worked out to this degree, my body screaming at me and asking what the fuck I thought I was doing?

“I didn’t lie.”

The words were so earnest they sent a shaft of alarm through me. “You must have done.”

“I didn’t.” I stopped dead, turning toward Arlo’s voice just as he stepped out from behind a tree. In contrast to me, he was all bundled up, and I couldn’t help but be jealous. “Jesus!” he said as soon as he saw me. “What happened to you?”

I sighed. “I fell. A few times.” I lifted one foot. “These shoes are shit for walking through snow.”

Arlo grimaced. “I have boots you could have borrowed if you’d asked.”

I laughed. “Oh, yeah. I’m about to run away from you and hope you don’t follow, can I borrow your boots to do that? Oh, and maybe your very warm looking coat as well.”

He came a few steps closer, his expression one of concern. “I wish you had done that.” He jerked his head in the direction I’d been going in. “Hopefully, you’ve seen for yourself that there’s nothing close to the cabin. Nothing but trees, anyway. There’s a river if you go west. But apart from that, it’s just trees and wildlife.”

“Promise me you’re not lying. Swear on your father’s life.” Arlo’s hat was too low

for me to see his eyebrows, but I'd have bet anything he'd raised one in the way I remembered him doing.

"My father's life?"

Something dreadful occurred to me. "He is still alive?" Arlo had talked a lot about his father during the couple of weeks we'd spent together when the cameras hadn't been rolling. It was his father being an actor that had resulted in Arlo spending so much time in his formative years on film or TV sets. Without that, he'd theorized that a role behind the camera would never have occurred to him. He'd met his mentor when the man had filmed a documentary about Arlo's father, and the rest was history, Arlo working as his number two until solo opportunities had come his way at a tender age.

"Yeah, he's still alive."

Relief slammed into me, sharp enough to make me forget for a minute how cold I was. "Good."

Arlo smiled like I'd said something funny. "I'll pass on your congratulations for his continued breathing next time I see him. You know, when he flies to Austria to visit me in prison." He wanted me to say I wouldn't call the police on him, but I wasn't sure I wouldn't yet. "I swear on my father's life," Arlo said, "that the closest cabin is twenty miles away. Possibly more. It's not like I measured it." He looked up as the universe decided it would be the perfect time to make it snow again, large flakes dropping from the sky.

I heaved out a sigh. "For fuck's sake! Has it not snowed enough?"

"I don't think it works like that."

"Well, it should." I sounded like the spoiled musician everyone liked to think I was.

But in this case, it felt warranted.

“Let’s go back to the cabin,” Arlo urged. “We can get warm and talk.”

The sensible part of my brain knew that was the only option, but the stubborn part refused to admit defeat that easily. “I’ve come this far.”

“You’ve come a mile at most,” Arlo said. “One down. Nineteen to go.”

I glared at him. “There’s no need to disparage my achievements.”

He grinned as he held his gloved hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Okay, I won’t. I also won’t point out that you’re going in completely the wrong direction for the neighbor’s cabin?”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Maybe someone built a cabin you don’t know about.” I picked a random direction and gestured that way. “It’s probably just over there.”

“Maybe.”

“And,” I said. However, I’d been going to finish that sentence blanked out of existence as a distant howl punctured the silence. I automatically moved closer to Arlo. “Was that...?”

“A wolf.”

Another howl answered the first, this one sounding closer, the hair on the back of my

neck standing on end. “Wolves,” I corrected. “I thought you were making it up about Austria having wolves.”

Arlo shook his head so vehemently that for a moment, I feared it might go on forever. “I wasn’t sure, but...”

“You were making the bears up, though, right?” Another headshake, my heart dropping somewhere close to my frozen feet. “Fuck!”

“Yeah,” Arlo agreed.

We both started back in the direction we’d come, the tracks making it easy to retrace our steps. I was shivering now, the pause in movement having dropped my core temperature lower. “Can bears and wolves co-exist in the same habitat?”

“I have no fucking clue.”

“Next time you abduct someone, perhaps you should do more research.”

“I’m not planning on there being a next time. I wasn’t really planning on there being a first time.”

“I feel so special.” Another howl had us both stumbling, the distance back to the cabin suddenly seeming insurmountable. Was that one of the same wolves who’d howled? Or a different one? I bet there were people who could tell. Zoologists or wolf specialists. But as I was neither, in my head there were at least three wolves now prowling the undergrowth. Three hungry wolves who probably ate people.

Arlo had taken hold of my hand, the gesture surprisingly intimate despite us both wearing gloves and my hands being so numb that I doubted I’d have been able to feel him even if I wasn’t. He was using the grip to pull me along faster, Arlo clearly no

more a fan of bumping into a wolf than I was. “Couldn’t you have abducted me in Acapulco? You could have dragged me off to a house on the beach where I could sunbathe naked and work on getting a tan?”

Arlo laughed. “You’ve never toured in Acapulco.”

“I know. Musical philistines, the lot of them. I should go there, anyway. Have you ever been?” Talking made me feel better, even if my teeth were chattering so much that words were a struggle, and I wasn’t entirely sure what I was talking about.

“Acapulco?”

“Yeah.”

“No, I haven’t. It’s a very specific place to bring up. I’m not even sure where it is exactly.”

“Mexico. I don’t know why it came to mind.” The cabin was in sight now. I could almost feel its warmth reaching out to me. “Going loco in Acapulco, maybe. You know that song?”

“Yeah, but I’m surprised you do.”

“Why? Because I’m supposed to eat and breathe classical music? I am allowed to listen to other stuff. I like a lot of old songs.”

“Like what?” Arlo seemed just as keen to keep me talking as I was on doing it. Either he was concerned I might collapse, and he’d have to carry me the rest of the way, or he appreciated something to think about other than wolves. Which of course got me thinking about wolves again and ignoring Arlo’s question about music. “Will they come to the cabin? Snow must make it more difficult for them to hunt, right? They

might come looking for food.”

“I like the fact that you keep asking me questions about them, like I know the first thing about them. How many wolves do we have in the UK?”

“Zero.”

“Exactly.” He paused. “The cabin’s secure, though.”

“I hope so.”

“It is.”

We’d reached the ‘secure cabin,’ Arlo yanking the door open he’d not stopped to lock, and both of us throwing ourselves across the threshold. This time, he locked it and pulled the bolt across. When he turned to face me, he winced. “Shit! You’re blue.”

Shivers were wracking my body now, the warmth of the cabin only seeming to make me colder. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be warm again. Arlo gave me a little shove toward the bathroom, my physical state so poor I couldn’t have resisted even if I wanted to.

“Take your clothes off,” Arlo urged. There was a joke there somewhere, but I couldn’t grasp onto it, never mind vocalize it. “Once you’re undressed, get in the shower and stay in there for a while.” He helped me off with my outerwear like I was a child. Is that how he saw me, like I’d always remained seventeen in his head? It would go some way to explaining why he thought I needed rescuing, and why he thought he was the person to do it. Who else did I have, though? My mother died when I was seven, and most other people in my life had been hired by my father and reported to him.

“Can you do the rest yourself?” There was no impatience in Arlo’s tone, just a quiet concern.

“What?”

“The rest of your clothes? I can help you if not. I don’t mind.”

If I hadn’t had the approximate core temperature of an icicle, I might have blushed. Which was strange. Since when did I blush? I got plenty of sex and wasn’t shy about it. “I can manage.”

“Great.” Arlo backed off a few steps with an unreadable expression on his face. Did he want to undress me? That was food for thought once my brain started working properly again. “Wait... One minute.” He ran out of the bathroom, returning in less than a minute with a fluffy white bathrobe in his hands. “Put this on when you get out of the shower. I’ll put some soup on so we can warm you from the inside. Call me if you need help after all.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” I wasn’t sure at all, but it seemed like the right thing to say. However, peeling my sodden clothes off with fingers stiff from the cold proved quite the challenge. So much so that by the time I managed it and stepped into the shower, I was considering adding it to my CV—that I didn’t have—under my greatest achievements. As I tipped my head back beneath the warm water, I had to concede that as escapes went, mine wouldn’t be breaking any records in terms of success.

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Arlo

Rudolf took my advice and stayed in the shower for a while. Long enough that the image of him slumped in there refused to leave my head and I shouted through the door on three separate occasions to check he hadn't passed out and was okay. By the third time of asking, Rudolf's shouted response over the sound of the water held a great deal of irritation. Enough to make me fear for my life if I persisted. If he was well enough to get annoyed, how bad could he be?

My newfound confidence in him bouncing back quickly lasted until he left the bathroom and I saw his face. He might have lost the bluish tinge, but he was still too pale. I immediately pooled all the spare blankets in the cabin and bundled him beneath them on the sofa. Finding a hot water bottle stuffed at the back of a cupboard, I filled it and insisted he hold it.

"You missed your calling," Rudolf said as he dutifully accepted the offering and it disappeared into the blanket mound.

"What?"

"You should have been a nurse."

"Yeah?"

"Only... I'd suggest not kidnapping your patients. Let them come to you instead."

I returned to give the pan of soup on the stove a quick stir. "I wish you wouldn't use

that word.”

“Nurse?”

I leveled him with a stare. “Kidnap.”

“Am I or am I not here against my will?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“But it’s for my own good?”

“You don’t have to say it like it’s an absolutely outlandish concept.”

“Oh, trust me, I do. It’s been six years, Arlo. People don’t stay incommunicado for six years and then decide they’re the person to swoop in and save them.”

“Who else was going to do it?” Rudolf slipped further under the blankets, the action not quick enough to hide the wounded expression on his face. “I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, you did. It’s fine. Poor little lost boy surrounded by people but with no one to talk to. Is that what you see when you look at me?”

I filled two bowls with the chicken soup, putting one on a tray and adding a couple of slices of bread and a spoon before carrying it over and positioning it carefully on Rudolf’s lap. “Is that what you are?”

He pushed the blankets down far enough that he could free his arms to hold on to the tray when I let go of it. “Who the fuck knows? I’m usually far too busy for that level of reflection. And friends are difficult when you’re in the public eye. You know that.”

I conceded the point with a slight inclination of my head. “So... take a break. Take some time to reflect on things. You might find it useful.” My soup, I carried over to the kitchen table.

Rudolf lifted a spoonful to his mouth, his expression saying it was nicer than he’d expected as he swallowed. “In case you haven’t noticed, I have issues with the way you went about it. That’s why I keep using the kidnap word.”

I thought hard for a moment. “Okay. How about I agree to take you back to town?”

“You will?”

I nodded. “I accept I did the wrong thing and that I can’t keep you here against your will.”

“But?”

“But...” I flashed a smile. “Although I want to take you back, I can’t because of the snow. Like it or not, we’re both stuck here until the roads are clear enough to drive.”

Rudolf let out a sigh. “And how long will that be?”

I shrugged. “A few days. A week. Two? There’s no way of knowing.”

Rudolf ate his soup in silence for a few moments. “I want my SIM card back.”

“I wasn’t lying about the lack of reception.”

“I know. You showed me your phone. I still want it back. Call it a guarantee that you meant what you said about taking me back as soon as the roads decide to play ball. There’s other stuff on there. Music. Photos. Messages. We’ve got the same phone, so

I'll share your charger." He narrowed his eyes in a challenge. "Can I have it back or not?"

"Sure. I'll find it later. It's in the car."

Rudolf nodded. "And how long before we starve to death?" His brow furrowed. "Can you eat wolf?"

"I suppose so. It's meat. It's probably one of the many things in the world that supposedly tastes like chicken. How are you figuring on catching one?"

Rudolf tore off a piece of the bread and dipped it in the soup, his expression thoughtful as he chewed. "A trap?"

"Do you know how to make one?"

He shook his head. "Not a trap, then. A blow to the head?"

"And you're going to get close enough to do that, are you? I have a feeling I know who'll come out on top in that encounter, and spoiler alert, it's not you."

"You could come up with some ideas."

"I have a great idea."

"What?"

I did my best not to smirk, but lost the battle. "Instead of going caveman and hunting wolves, we could eat the food I brought with me. I brought enough to last until after Christmas. Probably till New Year as long as we don't go crazy."

“You could have just said that.”

“I was about to, but I didn’t want to spoil the fun you were having hatching plans to take down a wolf. I found it admirable, considering how your last jaunt outside ended. Speaking of which, how are you feeling?”

“Okay. I’m gradually defrosting.” Rudolf’s brow furrowed. “What about electricity? What if the weather gets worse?”

“If the lights go out, we’ve got candles.”

“No generator?”

I shook my head. “Afraid not. We’re fine for heating as long as we chop some more wood.”

“We?”

“Me,” I corrected with a slight smile. “I wasn’t suggesting you get your hands dirty, princess.”

“Screw you!” The curse only made me smile wider. There was something infinitely enjoyable about winding Rudolf up. Probably something to do with having all that passion and focus directed my way. “So we won’t starve, or freeze to death.” Rudolf left a deliberate pause. “Just... die of boredom.”

“There’s stuff to do.”

“Like what?”

I jerked my head toward the other room, Rudolf stiffening slightly. Did he think I was

going to mention the piano? No way I'd risk ruining the fragile truce by bringing it up. "There's a room full of games in there. Cards. Dominoes. Board games. Probably other stuff as well. I haven't had a good rummage yet."

"Wow!" Rudolf drawled. "I'm not sure I can take the excitement. It's like you've brought me to a retirement home."

I ignored the snark to point to the pile of boxes in the corner. "And there's that stuff I brought."

Rudolf's head swung that way. "What's in there?" He held up a hand. "Wait! Let me guess. Knitting needles and a stamp collection for us to pore over."

I rolled my eyes. "Knitting's fashionable these days. Did you not see Tom Daley at the Olympics?"

Rudolf smirked. "I assure you if I'm looking at Tom Daley, I'm not looking at his hands."

"Is he your type?"

"Young? Fantastic body? Good at what he does?"

"Married with kids," I added, just to be awkward.

Rudolf shrugged. "Fine. I'll just have an affair with him. He can use me for sex." He turned his attention back to the boxes. "What is in there?"

"Christmas stuff. Decorations. I thought we could do the cabin up."

"I don't normally do Christmas."

“Neither do I,” I answered honestly. “That’s why I thought it might be fun.”

“Maybe.”

At least it wasn’t a straight hell no. I’d take it. And it would give us a chance to get to know each other again while we were doing it.

Rudolf shifted slightly. “I don’t have clothes. Or deodorant. Or shaving stuff. Or a toothbrush. Or—”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? That’s all you have to say? Did none of this cross your mind?”

“I figured you could share my stuff.”

“Your underwear?”

“I don’t mind. Or you could go commando if you’re not comfortable with that.” There was a heat in my cheeks that had nothing to do with the soup I’d just eaten. “As for the rest, you’re leaner than me, but we’re about the same height, so my clothes should fit you. Help yourself to whatever you want. You’re sleeping in there, anyway.”

“Am I supposed to share your toothbrush?”

I collected Rudolf’s tray from his lap. “I have a spare.”

“Hallelujah,” he said with mock cheer. “I have nothing to my name except a phone without a SIM card, and clothes completely unsuited to the environment I find myself in, which are probably ruined now. Oh, and I’ll be spending my days playing bridge

and rummy. But at least I'll own a toothbrush. Who knew I could fall so far in twenty-four hours?"

The gleam in his eye said he wasn't being wholly serious. It reminded me that the old Rudolf had possessed a great sense of humor. Even if it often veered toward sarcasm. "You'll survive."

"Maybe they'll send the SAS to rescue me from the rescue."

I took the bowls over to the sink. "I'm not sure the SAS are good with snow."

"I thought the SAS were good with everything."

"Well, I wouldn't hold your breath waiting for them." We lapsed into silence while I washed the dishes. It didn't last long before Rudolf broke it. "When does the first ghost get here, anyway?"

I turned to face him. "What?"

He made a show out of rearranging his blankets. "I figure you're taking on the role of Jacob Marley, so that means I'll get a visit from the Ghost of Christmas Past, Present, and Future."

I laughed. "What have you done to be casting yourself in the role of Scrooge?"

Rudolf winked. "I can't tell you or I'd have to kill you."

Now that he'd dropped the antagonism, it was easy to remember why I'd liked him so much years ago. Did looking forward to spending time with him, and being pleased I had him all to myself make me a terrible person? If so, I was going to hell, and I didn't need a ghost to tell me that.

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Rudolf

I wouldn't go so far as to say I'd embraced my incarceration, but like Arlo had pointed out, there was no escaping it until the weather cleared. So it was rage against it or make the best out of a bad situation. And all raging against it had achieved the previous day, was to bring me closer to wolves than I'd ever dreamed possible, and to give me a sneak preview of what hypothermia might feel like.

Besides, I couldn't remember the last time I hadn't had to field calls from Jade and a million other people, most of them either wanting something from me, or keen to voice their disapproval over something I'd done, was about to do, or hadn't done. There were far too many people in my life with opinions who weren't afraid to air their views.

Where would they think I'd gone? I'd told Jade just before Arlo had grabbed my phone that I was in a car. The nightclub must have had cameras. Would they check CCTV and see me getting into Arlo's car? Would they look for it? Or would they assume I was just up to my usual tricks and had gone home with someone? That we were screwing each other's brains out, and I'd re-emerge in a couple of day's time. I wasn't sure which of those scenarios would be preferable, but either way, eventually, they'd realize something was up. The question was whether they'd care.

"Rudolf?"

I took one last look at myself in the mirror. I'd helped myself to a pair of Arlo's sweatpants and a T-shirt. Both were a little large on me, but nothing baggier than someone might choose to wear, anyway. I'd scraped my hair back off my face and I'd

left my feet bare, the cabin warm and cozy enough for socks not to be required.

“Are you expecting me to bring you breakfast in bed?”

“You should,” I shot back. “It’s the least you should do.” I might be resigned to my plight, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t remind Arlo every chance I got that I was here under duress, my stay as temporary as I could make it. As soon as the weather cleared and enough of the snow melted, he could drive me back to Salzburg and I could get on with my life.

He appeared in the bedroom's doorway and I met his gaze in the mirror as he studied me. “Why do you look better in my clothes than I do?”

I rolled my eyes. “If you’re fishing for compliments, you kidnapped...” His expression had me self-correcting before he could get his knickers in a twist about me flinging that word out there again. “...you borrowed the wrong man.”

“Borrowed?” Arlo’s lips twitched. “You make yourself sound like a cup of sugar.”

I winked. “Well... I can be quite sweet.” Shit! Was I flirting? Did I want to flirt with Arlo? He wasn’t my usual club bunny twink with gym-honed muscles, but there was no disputing him being good-looking. Arlo was more your classically handsome male with chestnut brown hair, blue eyes and symmetrical features all rounded off with good bone structure. Would he flirt back?

“I just came to say your breakfast is getting cold.”

That was it? I flirted with him and that’s what I got. It was probably as well, but it rankled. It might be a tad egotistical of me, but I was used to more of a reaction. Whether because of my looks, my fame, or a combination of the two.

After the fry-up yesterday, breakfast was a healthier affair of home-made porridge, making me think the previous day's had been a deliberate attempt to counteract some of the alcohol in my system. Which was... Well, it was damn thoughtful was what it was. It was good porridge, Arlo not bothering to hide his pleasure when I told him as much.

Once breakfast was done with, both of us happy to concentrate on eating rather than talking, I retired to the sofa while Arlo unpacked one of the boxes he'd pointed out the previous evening with a childlike enthusiasm far more charming than it had any right to be. "Do the stars of some of those hard-hitting documentaries of yours know you go giddy over glittery snowmen?"

Arlo lifted his head from his scrutiny of what was indeed a glittery snowman. A pink one at that, although there appeared to be blue ones as well. From what I could tell, it was a tree ornament. I decided not to spoil Arlo's fun, as he held it between finger and thumb and watched it spin, by pointing out that there was no tree to hang it on. He was an intelligent man; he'd work it out eventually. It was possible an unopened box might contain one, but I doubted it, none of them big enough unless the tree was tiny. In which case, the hulking snowmen would dwarf it.

Arlo grinned. He had a nice smile. I'd thought so six years ago, and it hadn't deteriorated since, probably because that wasn't a thing with smiles. "Are you asking if I shared my love of tacky Christmas ornaments with the head of the mafia? Funnily enough, it never came up."

"He was Italian," I mused. "They're big on family, right? I bet they really go for it at Christmas. You missed an opportunity there. You could have bonded and got him to admit some stuff that would have won you accolades."

Arlo's response was to throw the snowman at me. I snatched it out of the air one-handed and subjected it to scrutiny. Up close, it looked more classy than it had from a

distance, and I could see why it had mesmerized Arlo, the sparkles catching the light. “My mother loved Christmas,” I said, unable to keep the note of melancholy out of my voice.

“I know, Rudolf Bell,” Arlo said.

Yeah, my name was a nod to just how much she’d loved the festive period. Not the Bell part obviously, although it had crossed my mind that with her and my father being such polar opposites, that it was possible she’d married him for his surname. But definitely teaming a name already linked to Christmas because of a certain red-nosed sleigh-pulling creature with a surname that also had a link. And then, of course, there was my middle name. My middle name that no one in the world apart from my father and me, and possibly some other relatives, knew. Which made the next words out of my mouth, especially to someone who made his living by ferreting out facts from people, difficult to understand. “You should hear my middle name.”

Arlo dropped the miniature Christmas tree he held like it was a hot coal to stare at me like I’d just fed him the juicy tidbit to end all tidbits. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a Christmas-themed middle name as well.”

“Okay, I won’t.”

“What is it?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He shuffled closer, the boxes forgotten for the time-being. “Yeah, I would.” His brow furrowed, like he was thinking hard. “The notes I had on you when I was making the documentary never mentioned a middle name. I would have remembered.”

I smirked. “Well, there are certain things you swear everyone to secrecy about. As far

as I'm concerned, when people ask, I don't have one."

"Interesting!" He narrowed his eyes. "I bet I can guess it."

"I bet you can't."

He crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes taking on a hard glint that, despite it having been years since I'd last seen it, I recognized as his professional stance.

"Angel?" I shook my head. "Holly?" Another shake. "Snow? Icicle?"

I frowned. "Wouldn't that be more winter themed than Christmas?"

The suggestions came thick and fast after that until they bordered on things more ridiculous than the truth. Which was impressive, considering.

"Blitzen?"

"Yeah, that's right," I drawled with a derision the suggestion deserved. "My middle name is the other twelve reindeer."

"Imagine," Arlo said with a laugh. "There wouldn't be room on the birth certificate." He gave a sigh. "I give up. Tell me."

Now that the moment had come, I was having second and third thoughts about telling him. I shook my head. "You must have Stockholm syndromed me."

"I think it takes longer than twenty-four hours."

"Maybe you're just really great at it."

"I don't know whether that's a compliment or an insult." Neither did I to be honest,

so I settled for a shrug. Arlo returned to the boxes, looking thoughtful as he removed more objects from them. “What if I promise not to tell anyone?”

“You’d better not because if you do, I’ll know where it came from.” I took a deep breath. “Wenceslas. As in the good king.”

Arlo tried to keep a straight face, but it only lasted a couple of seconds before he gave in to his amusement. “Rudolf Wenceslas Bell,” he announced with some gravitas. “Now that is a doozy.”

“Isn’t it?”

“You are definitely one of a kind.”

Now I was the one unsure whether I was being complimented or insulted. Arlo picked something out of the box with a frown. “What?” I asked, my curiosity piqued, and keen to talk about something other than my name.

He held it up. “Nothing says Christmas like an elephant.”

I laughed. “The elephant in the room.” I wouldn’t get a better opening for something that had been on my mind ever since we’d arrived at the cabin and I’d realized Arlo’s intention for the two of us to stay here. “Speaking of which... I can’t imagine your husband is too happy about you being here.”

Arlo’s first reaction was surprise, like it was okay for him to know everything about me, but I wasn’t supposed to return the favor, even though he was in the public eye, too. His marriage might have come as a shock to the public, coming out of the blue as it had, but that had only meant more speculation, not less. The media had given a surprising amount of column inches in their gossip columns to theorizing how the two men had met, and how long they’d been seeing each other before they’d tied the

knot, probably made worse because neither man had given an interview.

After surprise came a reflex movement of right hand to left, his fingers attempting to toy with a ring that wasn't there. I'd already clocked its absence but had thought little of it. Some people chose not to wear one. The third reaction of a rigid back and tense shoulders clued me in on that probably not being the case. "It's a valid question," I pointed out to lessen the tension. "Most men wouldn't be keen on their husband holing up in a cabin with another man. No matter how innocent their intentions might be. Don't tell me you found a rare unicorn of a man who doesn't get jealous, or I'll be the one getting jealous. No wonder you married him so quick."

My comments didn't make things better. Instead, they made things worse, Arlo standing, like the contents of the boxes no longer held any interest for him and spending an inordinate amount of time dusting off jeans that didn't need it. "We separated."

"Oh?" I frowned. "That wasn't in the newspapers."

"No."

I waited for him to elaborate. He didn't, marching into the bedroom and coming out with a pair of boots that he put on. After the boots came a scarf and then his coat, all donned in silence. I cracked first. "I'm guessing you don't want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Then we don't have to." I might have said the words, but the way he'd clammed up only made me more curious. They'd only gotten married in February, which, given it was early December, meant it hadn't even lasted a year. A separation didn't mean it was over, though. They might just be giving each other space. Or something might have happened. Had one of them cheated? I couldn't picture Arlo as the cheating

type, but all I knew of his husband was that he was an actor, the two of them presumably meeting because they moved in similar circles. “You don’t have to leave the cabin to get me to stop talking. I am capable of realizing that I’ve put my foot in it and shutting up.”

Arlo managed a smile. “Good to know.”

“So, where are you going?”

“I thought you might fancy a wolf sandwich later and we’re missing the key ingredient.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you don’t want to answer, just say zip it, Rudolf.”

“Zip it, Rudolf.” He laughed when I narrowed my eyes at him. “We have tree ornaments, but we’re missing a tree.”

“And?”

“And there are loads out there.”

“Christmas trees?”

“Yep.”

Were there? I tried to remember from the previous day, but I hadn’t taken much notice of the trees except to note that there were far too many for my liking, and that they’d made seeing where I was going during my bid for freedom difficult. “And you’re what? Going to chop one down?”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Do you have an axe?” The look Arlo gave me said that was too stupid a question for him to waste time answering. I changed my question. “Have you ever chopped a tree down before?” Arlo’s shrug wasn’t reassuring. “It’s a yes or no answer. There’s no I might have done, but I can’t remember. There’s no I started once, but then I got distracted and did something else instead.”

“Then, no, but how hard can it be?”

“If you have some nasty tree-related accident, where does that leave me?”

“Here. Alone. With a good story to tell.”

“I don’t even know where the car keys are.”

Arlo went over to the bureau at the side of the room. He pulled the drawer open and lifted a bunch of keys out. He jangled them for a few seconds and then dropped them back in the drawer and closed it. “There you go. Now you know where the car keys are in case I chop my leg off because I can’t tell the difference between that and a tree trunk.”

I stood. “I’m coming with you.”

Arlo’s gaze dropped slowly to my bare feet. “I get it. You didn’t give yourself frostbite yesterday, so you want another crack at it.”

“You said you had spare boots.”

“I do.”

“Do you have a spare coat?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then.”

“I don’t need supervising.” Arlo looked genuinely indignant at the accusation that he might.

“Can you carry a tree on your own?”

He sighed, but I could tell by his expression that I’d won the argument.

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Arlo

It turned out I may have been a little overconfident in my ability to chop a tree down, a bundled-up-in-my-clothes-Rudolf laughing at my first attempt at delivering a blow to the tree's trunk when I didn't leave so much as a dent. "That was a practice swing," I said.

He snorted when the second swing was no better. "What was that one?" He held his hand out. "Give it to me."

I stared at him like he was insane. "How much are your fingers insured for?"

"A stupid amount." He wagged the fingers in question in a gesture to hurry up. "They'll be on the axe handle. Not on the blade."

"I don't think we should take the risk."

We both tipped our faces up to stare at the sky as a couple of snowflakes drifted down. It seemed Austria still had more snow to dump on us. "How long do you want to be out here for?" Rudolf asked, his tone making it clear his vote was for not that long. It would have been a perfect moment for a wolf to have their say and emit a howl, but the surrounding area remained blissfully quiet.

I passed the axe over reluctantly. "Be careful."

All I got in exchange for my concern was an eye roll. The first blow embedded itself in the tree trunk perfectly, Rudolf turning his head to give me a smug look.

“Luck,” I muttered. “Let’s see if you can hit the same spot twice.” Rudolf doing exactly that forced me to eat my words. “So you’re better than me at wielding an axe. Big deal.”

He hefted the axe once more, hitting the same spot for a third time. It wasn’t a thick trunk, the tree I’d chosen relatively small because it needed to fit in the cabin. Given Rudolf was already halfway through, a few more blows should do it. He smirked. “Why do you sound so upset about it, then?”

“I’m not,” I lied, wishing I’d crept out here while Rudolf was still asleep. It would have given me time to get the hang of it without him breathing down my neck and critiquing my efforts. “You’re better than me at playing the piano as well. You don’t see me getting upset about that.”

“I’m better than ninety-five percent of the population at playing the piano,” Rudolf said with an edge to his voice that sounded suspiciously like bitterness.

“Ninety-nine percent, surely,” I corrected.

His next two blows felt like he was taking something out on the poor defenseless tree trunk. It was powerful enough to topple the tree. Thankfully, it fell in the opposite direction, no heroics needed to shove Rudolf out of the way. It showered us with an avalanche of snow as it hit the ground, both of us forced to spit bits out and wipe it off our faces with coat sleeves.

Rudolf straddled the fallen tree like it was a conquest, axe resting casually against his shoulder like he wielded one regularly. “Voila! One tree.”

It turned out I could get it back to the cabin on my own if I dragged it, Rudolf happy to let me do the deed after his exertion of chopping it down. “How are you going to get it to stand up?” he asked as he trailed after me.

I pointed to the extension at the side of the cabin, the space, half storage area and half shed. “There’s stuff in there. I figure there’ll be a pot or something.”

“You figure, do you?”

“Have a little faith.”

“I had faith you could chop a tree down.”

“No, you didn’t. That’s why you insisted on coming with me.”

“And my concern proved to be justified. Who lives here?”

I shrugged. “No idea. I rented it through an agency and never asked.”

While I searched for something I could use to stand the tree up, Rudolf had spotted the chopping block. It seemed he’d gotten the bug for being destructive, immediately setting to work on the pile of logs and splitting them into smaller ones which would fit in the wood burner, with an ease that was impressive. I took a break at sifting through the junk to watch him for a moment. “You said this was my job, yesterday.”

He paused to remove his borrowed coat, sweat standing out on his brow. “That was yesterday. A man’s allowed to change his mind. If I’m stuck here, I may as well be useful. Besides, I have a vested interest in keeping the cabin warm.”

“True.”

I found a potential pot. As it was a little on the large side, I kept looking, noting anything else that might be of use during our stay. A few things I pocketed, like the string I happened across, in case it came in useful for something else. Possibly for tying the tree to something if my pot idea proved as unsuccessful as my tree chopping

had.

“I reckon I could be a lumberjack,” Rudolf said as he cleaved another log in two with perfect precision.

I smiled. “I reckon you could do anything you put your mind to.”

“Really?”

Something about my answer seemed to matter to him. Enough that I straightened to look at him. There was something wild and abandoned about a Rudolf who’d gone to town with an axe. He was sweaty, his hair all over the place, and his cheeks flushed. This was probably what Rudolf looked like after fucking. I quickly tamped down on the errant thought, refusing to go there. “Yeah.” My voice was softer than I’d intended. I cleared my throat and held up the pot. “Do you reckon we could make this work?”

Rudolf studied it for a moment. “What are you planning to fill it with?”

“Rocks?”

“And the rocks would be...?”

“Under the snow.” This thread of practicality that I’d never expected a world class pianist to have was really starting to grate. I pointed to the far corner of the shed. “There’s a shovel.”

“Do you need me to dig for you as well?”

“I think I can manage that.” Thankfully, I did manage it, digging something I’d done before. Finding rocks under snow was like the world’s most disappointing treasure

hunt, but I got there in the end, filling the pot almost to the brim because it was better to have too many than not enough.

It took a long time, a considerable amount of energy, and Rudolf's help to maneuver the tree through the doorway of the cabin, quite a few pine needles sacrificing their lives before we were successful. But finally we had the tree upright in a corner of the cabin, the pot full of stones doing its job adequately. Once I'd removed my outer gear, I collapsed back on the sofa, breathing hard. "Decorating it can wait till tomorrow."

Rudolf eyed me with amusement. "Are you okay, old man?"

"I'm only six years older than you."

"And what a tough six years it must have been for an aborted attempt at chopping a tree down, and a bit of digging to leave you such a physical wreck."

I closed my eyes and enjoyed the darkness behind my eyelids. "And you're what, Mr. Physical?"

"More than you, apparently. At least I don't need a nap."

"Shhh... I'm trying to sleep." A sound had me opening my eyes after less than a minute to find Rudolf stripping off his borrowed T-shirt. He stood side on, meaning I could study him from beneath my eyelids without him being aware of it. The Mr. Physical comment had been a joke, but there was nothing wrong with Rudolf's physique, his chiseled torso not conjuring up the image of someone who sat behind a piano for hours on end. Which, me and his millions of fans already knew, because part of his rock star who played classical music persona were his stage outfits being sleeveless or sheer enough to have you believe you could see straight through them.

Seeing something on TV and having it just a couple of meters away were very different things, though. Should I want to, I was close enough to touch. I'd just need to sit up, lean forward, and stretch out my arm. And then Rudolf could call me a lecherous old man instead of just an old man.

"You're not really going to sleep, are you?" Rudolf turned my way as he asked the question. Worried I'd get caught checking him out, I closed my eyes before he completed the turn. And then in a performance not even worthy of an amateur dramatics society, I feigned rubbing my eyes before opening them and sitting up, keeping my gaze focused on his face and not letting it drift downwards. "Huh?"

He checked his watch. "It's two in the afternoon. I asked if you were really going to sleep?"

"No. Is it really that time? We haven't had lunch."

Rudolf disappeared into the bedroom. When he came back, I couldn't work out whether I was relieved or disappointed he'd donned another of my T-shirts. "How many of my T-shirts are you going to wear in one day?"

He gave an exaggerated eye roll. "You said to help myself to your clothes."

"Yeah, but I didn't realize it was going to be like stage outfits. You know, one for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

"I was sweaty. I thought you'd appreciate me not making the cabin stink. Proper axe work makes a man work up a sweat."

"Proper?"

Rudolf's grin confirmed my suspicions that the word had been the provocation I'd

taken it as. He wandered over to the kitchen area, opened up the cupboard, and peered at its contents. “Don’t worry. I’ll sort out lunch. I wouldn’t want you to strain something.”

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Rudolf

I'd ended up sorting out lunch and dinner, spending time in the cabin's kitchen surprisingly relaxing. Not as relaxing as taking an axe to a tree or a log, but it ran a close second. I might have playfully teased Arlo about it, but it had surprised me to find I had an aptitude for it despite never having held one before. Perhaps if I looked into my family tree, I'd discover my great-great-grandfather used to be a lumberjack.

Arlo's initial reaction to me demanding to have a go was mild compared to what would have happened back home if I'd tried to do any manual labor. Your hands, Rudolf, think of your hands. Arlo had been correct about them being insured for a ridiculous amount of money. Not me . My hands. Like they were two independent entities capable of existing separately from the other.

I'd pooh-poohed Arlo's idea of playing a game after dinner, choosing to stand at the window and watch the snow come down instead. We really weren't getting out of here anytime soon. It only took ten minutes of staring at an endless sea of white before it lost its allure. And without a TV, there wasn't much else to do in the cabin. "Fine," I said, with as much exasperation as I could muster. "I'll play a game. But I get to choose which one. I'm not playing bridge with you."

Arlo raised his head from the book he'd been reading with a frown. "I don't know how to play bridge."

I went into the adjoining room, the piano mocking me as I walked past without offering it so much as a glance. Yeah, and it could keep mocking me because I wasn't touching it. Even its existence made me want to grab the axe and chop something.

Preferably, the piano itself.

Arlo appeared in the doorway, leaning against the doorjamb in a pose of studied casualness with his arms crossed. “Go on, then. What are we playing?”

I bypassed the billiard table and went to the shelf of games at the back, running my finger along them as I discounted them. “Monopoly, no. Takes too long. Buckaroo, no. I’m not six. Trivial Pursuit, no. Too intellectual, and I’m shit at any category other than music.” I frowned at a game whose name I not only didn’t recognize but couldn’t pronounce. “Too Austrian.” I paused on the next one. “I found one for you.”

“What?”

I held it up with a grin. “Bingo. I bet that gets your heart racing.”

“Six year age difference,” Arlo said with wry amusement. “That’s all.”

I ran my finger over a few more boxes, none of them taking my fancy. With the games on the shelf all discounted, I moved on to the ones in the cupboard. “We need something a bit more physical.”

“Do we?”

“I do.”

“Like what?”

I had a feeling if I didn’t choose something soon, Arlo would return to his book and leave me to my own devices. I grabbed a pack of cards. “Poker.”

After an initial moment of surprise, Arlo dutifully followed me over to the table in the

corner. “Not what I’d call physical.”

We sat opposite each other, Arlo raising an eyebrow as I tipped the cards out onto the table and treated them to a deliberately showy shuffle. “I had an ex who was a croupier,” I explained.

He smirked. “And that’s what you spent your time together doing?”

“Amongst other things.” It would have been a perfect lead-in to bring up the subject of his husband again, but he’d clammed up to such a degree this morning, I didn’t want to risk a return of that same tension. Not when we’d been getting on so well. “He taught me a few things. I taught him a few things.”

“It sounds as if you liked him. What happened?”

I looked away from Arlo’s all-seeing gaze, concentrating on the cards. “He was in Monaco. I was... everywhere else. By the time I returned to Monaco, he’d grown bored of waiting and moved on. I couldn’t say I blamed him.”

“But you wonder what could have been?”

I shrugged. “It was a while back. I don’t lie awake at night thinking about him, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“If he’d been the one, he would have waited for you,” Arlo said softly.

“The one,” I scoffed. “Don’t tell me you believe in that stuff?”

“You don’t?”

“Not really.” I didn’t pick Arlo up on avoiding answering by turning it into a

question. Cards thoroughly shuffled, I sat back in my chair, keeping my gaze trained on him so I could see his reaction. “By the way, we’re playing strip poker, just to make things a bit more interesting.”

Arlo didn’t disappoint, rocking back in his chair like I’d struck him. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“No? Why not? Because you’re married?” Good one, Rudolf! Your plan not to mention it lasted 3.8 seconds before you put your foot in it.

“Nothing to do with that.”

“You are still married, though?” While his fidgeting said he wasn’t exactly comfortable with the line of questioning, he at least was staying put, which was a vast improvement on this morning.

“Legally.”

“Do you think you’ll get back together?”

“No.”

A definitive answer without a pause that only made me more curious.

“I’m going to keep asking until you tell me to zip it.”

Arlo let out a sigh. “You’re looking for a story where there isn’t one.”

“Well, you see,” I said. “I once knew this documentary maker, so I learned from the best. He made me talk about my poor, dead mother, and everything.” Arlo’s wince made me feel guilty when that conversation had happened off-camera and had

involved discussing Arlo's similar experiences, not just mine. "If it's not a story, then just tell me. It's your own fault for borrowing me. Had you not brought me here, I wouldn't be able to ask annoying questions, would I? Who do you think I'm going to tell?"

"It wouldn't matter if you told someone." I stared at him until he cracked. "Fine. Bruno and I mistook lust for love in the worst possible place to do that."

"Vegas?"

Arlo nodded. "We tried to make a go of it. But it didn't take long to realize that beyond wanting to do each other, we had nothing in common."

"I'm sure there are successful marriages built on less."

Arlo laughed. "Maybe... if the lust doesn't wear off, but for us, it did, and then we found ourselves with nothing but awkward silences and a desire to avoid each other."

"Ouch!"

"Yeah."

"So, it was a mutual decision?"

Arlo's lips quirked in a way that told me that despite his protestations to the contrary, there was more to the story. "I found him in bed with his costar."

"Double ouch."

"And the worst of it," Arlo admitted, "was that I'd found my husband in bed with another man, and I didn't really care." He dropped his gaze to the table, his hair

falling over his brow. “So yeah, it’s safe to say that getting married was not one of my better decisions, and that’s putting it mildly.”

“You don’t know if you don’t try.” As an attempt to make him feel better, it was weak.

“Trying is dating and then living with them, not immediately putting a ring on it.”

“Alright, Beyonce.” At least that got a smile. “So...” I announced with an eyebrow wiggle. “Strip poker! We’ve established that your not-husband won’t care, so what’s your issue?”

“I don’t really have to spell that out, do I, Rudolf?”

“You’re worried that one glimpse of my naked chest will have you overcome with lust.”

“No.”

“Well, then.” I stretched my legs out in front of me, nudging Arlo’s shoe with my bare toes. “You’ve got an advantage over me.” I dropped my gaze, doing a quick inventory of how many items I wore, and realizing that perhaps sweatpants and a T-shirt weren’t the best starting position for a game of strip poker. “Thank God, I’m wearing underwear.”

Arlo

Three items of clothing! Was that all that stood between me and a naked Rudolf? God help me. That quip from Rudolf about being overcome by lust at the sight of his naked torso hadn't helped either, my denial a lie, when that's exactly what had happened when he'd stripped off earlier.

Before I could think of a suitable excuse not to play, Rudolf dealt a hand with a flourish that dared me to protest. He eyeballed me as I slid the cards off the table, fanned them out in my hand, and studied them. "I'm going to win anyway," he said with a smirk. "So it's you who should worry about being naked."

Funnily enough, that didn't make me feel any better. The cards were part of a set, complete with plastic poker chips to use as a stake. Rudolf won the first hand with a king to my ten, my left boot the sacrifice. My right boot went the following round to a pair of threes.

"See," Rudolf boasted. "Told you I was going to win."

Cocky little shit! I jerked my head toward the piano only a few meters away. "Are we going to talk about that?"

Rudolf's gaze couldn't have moved any slower if someone had tied ropes to his eyeballs and dragged them there. It lingered, though, the first time I'd seen him even look at it. "Not tonight."

"Fair enough. Just... I'm here, you know, when you want to talk about it."

Rudolf's nod was jerky, and I felt bad for bringing it up. Whether what I'd said had distracted him, or he was due a loss, anyway, he lost the next round. Which meant being subjected to Rudolf dragging off his T-shirt like he spent evenings moonlighting as a stripper. "Just... take it off," I begged when the elaborate act strayed too far into titillation that I was a long way from being immune to.

Rudolf winked. "I thought you might appreciate a bit of a show."

"I don't." I do. Too much.

Rudolf pulled the T-shirt the rest of the way off and flung it in my direction, forcing me to catch it before it hit me in the face.

"Idiot!" My irritation might have been convincing if I hadn't laughed, Rudolf joining in.

The next two rounds saw my socks reunited with my boots.

"Three, two," Rudolf announced.

"What?"

He grinned. "I have two items of clothing left. You have three. Assuming you're wearing underwear, that is?"

"I'm wearing underwear."

"Glad to hear it. I'd hate to be sitting here with a man with loose morals."

I shook my head. "I think I liked you better when you were drunk."

“No, you didn’t. No one likes me when I’m drunk.”

So why do it? The question hovered on the tip of my tongue, but I pulled back from asking it. I had a feeling we’d get to that when we got to the piano. “You’re right. I don’t like you better drunk.”

Rudolf won the next round, propping his chin on his hands and leaning forward as I removed my T-shirt. “Nice body,” he said as I pulled it over my head, “for a documentary maker.”

“Shut up!” My cheeks flamed as the scrutiny continued. I’d assumed the papers had done their usual hatchet job when describing Rudolf’s supposed promiscuity, but the man in front of me was a world away from the way he’d been at seventeen. But then, who didn’t still have an awful lot of growing up to do at that age? I know I had.

“You’re not shy, are you, Arlo?”

I gestured at the cards. “Are we playing or not?”

Rudolf wagged his eyebrows. “And now he can’t wait to get the rest of his clothes off. Or...” He left a deliberately long pause. “You can’t wait for me to get the rest of mine off. Which is it?”

“Neither.”

“Hmm...” He kept his gaze trained on my face as he dealt another hand. After blushing like a teenager, I had my poker face in hand, though. Which was handy, given we were playing poker. The problem was that come the end of this hand, one of us would strip to our underwear, and I couldn’t decide whether it would be worse if it was me or him.

Rudolf threw in two cards, raising an eyebrow at the two he picked up. Pleased, or a carefully orchestrated bluff? I threw in three cards, picking up the five of spades to go with the pair of fives I already had. The three of a kind left me in a strong position unless Rudolf had something better. I studied his face, but he wasn't giving anything away. If only we weren't in a remote cabin in the middle of nowhere, and I could rely on an interruption.

Rudolf looked up from his cards. "Why did my father pull the plug on the documentary?"

The abrupt change in subject matter had me reeling. "What?"

"You heard."

I cast my mind back. A lot of water had passed under the bridge in the last six years. "He decided he wanted to restrict your public profile. That making you so accessible that early in your career would be counterproductive. The whole everyone loves a mystery thing."

"Right." Rudolf lay down his bet, and I matched it. "So, it wasn't because he was concerned with how friendly we were getting when he still had illusions about me being straight?"

I froze. I'd always suspected that was the real reason, but it wasn't the one I'd been given. "He told you that?"

"Of course not. He told me the same thing he told you, but you saw his face on the night when he came in and found us both laughing."

He was talking about a night where Rudolf and I had holed up in a comfortable lounge room away from the rest of the crew and spent the night watching goofy

comedy films about as far from the documentaries I made as it was possible to get. Jeremiah Bell had walked in, taken one look at us sitting close enough on the sofa that we touched, when there'd been plenty of room to avoid that happening, and laughing together, and hadn't bothered to hide his displeasure. It wasn't the first time we'd spent the evening alone together, but it was the first time anyone had witnessed our growing camaraderie. "Nothing would have happened."

"Because I was eighteen?" Rudolf pulled a face. "Nearly eighteen."

"That, and I was working, and it would have been hugely unprofessional of me."

"But you wanted something to happen?"

My fingers tightened around the cards, and I had to force them to relax. Rudolf's gaze was like a heat-seeking missile trained on my face as he waited for me to answer. "It was a long time ago."

"So you don't find me attractive?"

How was I supposed to answer that? "I've told you why I brought you here."

"You did, and I believe you."

"Good. Because it's the truth."

"But that doesn't mean you don't find me attractive. It's a simple enough question that only needs a yes or no answer."

Simple? Right. For him, maybe. I should never have told him Bruno and I were done. I could have used my still-husband-in-a-legal-sense as a buffer. I met his gaze. "I'm not attracted to you," I lied.

Rudolf shrugged. "See. That wasn't so hard, was it? I can cope with a man not finding me attractive, you know."

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"I'm not that fragile." He lay his cards down to reveal a pair of jacks. In any other round, it would have been a great hand. He mistook my silence. "Time to get your gear off, Arlo. Let's see what type of underwear you wear."

I lay my cards down with painstaking slowness. "Afraid not."

He sat back with a look of surprise at being bested. "Huh! I stand corrected." He rose from the chair and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of the borrowed sweatpants. "Good job you're not attracted to me or this could get awkward." He gave them a little tug, the fabric lowering an inch. Not enough that I could see anything, but enough for the promise to be there. "I lied, by the way."

"About what?" The words were a rasp, but I refused to clear my throat.

"About wearing underwear. You forgot I don't have any on account of you snatching me from the middle of my night out."

I stood so fast the table rocked and the cards slid onto the floor. "Time for a drink. Maybe some toast as well while we've still got fresh bread. Do you want some toast?" I headed for the next room with Rudolf's laughter ringing in my ears.

"Arlo, come back," he called after me once he'd stopped laughing. "I was joking. I am wearing underwear. I borrowed some of yours. Let's finish the game."

I put the kettle on, expelling a breath as I did so. "The game's finished."

“Why?”

“Because... I never wanted to play in the first place and I let you talk me into it.”

Silence. No crack about bingo being more my speed. No jibe about being too scared of losing. Nothing. I scratched at my bare chest while I waited for the kettle to boil. I hadn't thought to grab my T-shirt during my hasty departure from the other room. There were plenty in the bedroom, even with Rudolf wearing them like they were going out of fashion. It was a good job the cabin came with a combination washer/drier, especially if we were sharing underwear.

I really should have considered Rudolf not having clothes when I'd hatched my crazy plan to rescue him. In my defense, I'd never envisioned us being snowed in. Without the weather causing mayhem, I could have asked him for a list of stuff he needed and driven to get it. Who was I trying to kid? Without the blizzard making the roads impassable, I would have been driving Rudolf back to Salzburg. He was only being so accepting of his fate because he recognized we were both stuck.

The kettle finished boiling, and I got two mugs out of the cupboard. I turned so my voice would carry in the right direction. “Rudolf, do you—?” I didn't get any further because he was right there, employing a stealth the SAS would have been proud of. I only realized it was intentional as he pressed me back against the counter and his lips came down on mine.

I'd never given thought to how Rudolf Bell kissed. Why would I when I'd never expected to be on the receiving end? But if I had, I might have realized he'd go about it the same way as he did his music: teasing and tormenting, only with his tongue instead of his fingers. Both parts were equally talented. Desire throbbed through me as he kissed me so thoroughly that it felt like I'd never been kissed before. Our bodies pressed together from crotch to hip, and I felt an answering hardness meeting mine as the kiss continued.

When he pulled back, he was smiling. “You, Arlo Thomas, are a liar who lies.”

“What about?” I sounded like a man who no longer knew which way was up. Which was an accurate reflection of how I felt.

By shifting his hips slightly, Rudolf reminded me he might have stopped kissing me, but that our lower bodies were still glued together. “About not being attracted to me.”

I could hardly deny it when my cock told a different story. “I thought it was best.”

“Why?”

I shook my head, words eluding me for a few seconds. “Circumstances.”

“Ah, yes, circumstances.” Rudolf sounded amused by my answer. He backed off to lean against the counter diagonal to where I was, arms crossed over his bare chest. “We’re both adults, Arlo. I’m not seventeen anymore. And as you keep pointing out, there’s only six years between us. Neither of us are virgins, so if something happens, you’re hardly corrupting me.”

“You’re more likely to corrupt me.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Don’t believe everything you’ve read about me. A tabloid once had me attending orgies in Amsterdam.”

“Did you?”

“No!” He sounded outraged that I’d even asked. “I’ve never even had a threesome. I’m not going to claim that I’m shy when it comes to sex. I’m not. But absolutely all of my sexual interludes have only involved one other man.”

“How traditional of you.”

He shrugged. “I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with people who are up for that sort of thing. I’m just not. Maybe it’s a selfish thing and I prefer my partner to focus entirely on me.”

“Understandable.”

He levered himself away from the counter and crossed the room to stare out into the dark night. “Just so we’re clear, that was more than an honesty test. I’m attracted to you too. I was attracted to you when I was seventeen and I’m still attracted to you.” He turned back to face me, his lips curving into a smile. “And to think I thought there wouldn’t be anything to do in this cabin.”

I was still trying to think of a suitable response when Rudolf turned away from the window and headed for the bedroom. “No tea for me. Bed calls. See you tomorrow, Arlo. Sleep well. Dream of me.”

Dream of him! I expected I would, the taste of him still on my lips.

Rudolf

Normally, I would have been up and about by this time. Instead, I lay naked beneath the duvet and listened to Arlo move around the cabin, pondering whether he'd shout me for breakfast. Apparently not, the time where we'd normally have had it long past. Which meant...

Actually, I didn't know what it meant. It could mean anything from him being considerate enough to let me sleep, to him postponing the moment he had to face me again after our kiss of the night before.

The kiss I'd forced on him. Not that he'd put up much of a fight. The kiss that had been incredibly enjoyable, and that I hoped, Arlo willing, would be a precursor to more kisses. If I was going to be stuck here, I may as well enjoy myself. And now we'd gotten any possibility of Arlo's husband being an impediment out of the way, I couldn't see any reason we shouldn't. Two gay men who liked each other trapped in a cabin together. It would be a travesty not to go there.

I let my mind stray to the other stuff. Other stuff like my life. A life I was currently taking an enforced break from thanks to Arlo's misjudgment in rescuing me. I wasn't craving alcohol, which proved I'd been right all along when I'd insisted I didn't need to go to rehab. I wasn't craving drugs either. Just sex. Was I a sexaholic? I gave the thought more consideration than it deserved before reaching the conclusion that it was sex with Arlo that interested me, rather than sex itself. If I'd found myself snowed in with an aging lumberjack, I seriously doubted I'd have lusted after him in the same way. Although, he might have been able to give me some useful axe tips.

I'd been gone two days. Had anyone informed the police of my disappearance? Would my father be worried, or would he just assume I'd taken myself off somewhere and that I'd turn up when I was good and ready? I'd bet everything that I owned Jade would be furious rather than concerned. Would Nelson get it in the neck? Much as the bodyguard's presence as my permanent shadow grated on me sometimes, I didn't want him getting flak when the fault for my disappearance was all mine. It's not like he could have tied me down and forced me to do anything against my will.

I was supposed to be scheduled for a TV appearance tonight. And a few hours after that, I was supposed to be on a plane to... I thought hard. Nope. I didn't have a clue where I was supposed to be flying to. Was it normal to have so little knowledge of your own movements? What did that say about me? Jade would probably be keen to answer that question, her disdain for me never far below the surface, the civility that hid it paper-thin. Besides, like she'd pointed out the last time we spoke, in her head, she answered to my father.

Wherever I was supposed to be going, my no show at the TV studio, and then the airport, would definitely ring alarm bells. No matter how drunk, or high, or just plain unbothered I was, I'd never missed an official appearance.

Tired of my company and thoughts, I swung my legs out of bed. Arlo was nowhere to be seen when I crossed the hallway to reach the bathroom. After a quick shower and shave, I returned to the bedroom and pulled sweatpants on, forgoing Arlo's underwear to truly go commando this time. Halfway to putting a T-shirt on, I paused. Grinning, I left it on the bed and went out into the cabin with my chest bare. If Arlo didn't like it, he should have thought of that before he kidnapped me. Actions have consequences.

Sure enough, when I found him in the small kitchen area staring into the fridge, a furrow appeared on his brow when he glanced my way. "You realize," he said, "that

the rules of strip poker only extend to the evening it's played on and you're allowed to get dressed now?"

I leaned against the kitchen counter—the same one we'd kissed against the previous night—and smiled at Arlo. "You sound like such a prude. It's not like I'm wandering around here with my cock hanging out." I gave a deliberate pause. "I mean... I could. You only have to ask."

"That won't be necessary."

"I've been informed on many an occasion that it's a very nice cock."

"I'm sure it is."

"Don't you want to know what makes it nice? Whether it's length, or girth, or just plain old-fashioned artistic appeal?"

Arlo's lips twitched. "I'd hoped I'd get breakfast before being forced to discuss your cock."

"I figured you'd already have had it. Breakfast, that is. Not my cock."

Arlo shook his head. "I was waiting for you."

"Well, you'd have to for my cock. It's attached."

Arlo's glare went on for longer than necessary. "Do you think we could stop talking about your cock?"

"Are you regretting, kid... borrowing me yet?"

“Yes.”

I clapped a hand to my chest suitably dramatically. “Ouch! The man’s words are like a barbed prong to the heart. How can he trample all over my feelings like that?”

“You’ll get over it.”

I followed his gaze to the fridge, the door still standing open. “I know there’s no TV in this frozen oasis, but I’m worried if your mental state has deteriorated to where you think watching the contents of the fridge is suitable entertainment. Perhaps we could find some paint in the shed. I could put a bit on the wall for you, set you a chair up in front of it. We’ll monitor your heart rate in case it gets too exciting for you. You can’t be too careful at your age.” Rather than looking annoyed at my needling, something about it made Arlo smile. I narrowed my eyes at him. “What?”

He turned my way. “Do you realize how much better you sound?”

“Than what?”

“Than when you got here. Still think you didn’t need a break?”

“Maybe I did,” I grudgingly admitted. “Speaking of which, I’ve got a question for you.”

Arlo closed the fridge and turned to face me. “Go on.”

“Do you think it’s normal that I don’t even know what country I was going to next?”

“Romania,” Arlo said without a pause. He grimaced. “Which is not what you asked, and me knowing that makes me sound like a stalker. I guess it depends.”

“On what?”

“You have lots of people working for you. No one would blame you for choosing to sit back and let them run your life, while you concentrate on the thing no one else can do, playing the piano like you were born to it.”

I ignored the last part, the mention of the piano threatening to derail this conversation completely if I let it. “What if I didn’t choose it?”

Arlo frowned. “What do you mean?”

“What if...?” I thought about what I wanted to say. “What if I don’t feel like I have any control whatsoever, like someone else makes all my decisions for me?” My father ran my career for me when I was a kid, right?” Arlo nodded. “Which... you’d expect because I was a kid. But at what age does that not become necessary anymore?”

Arlo stared at me until he realized I actually expected an answer. “Erm... I guess some people might say sixteen, but sixteen is still pretty young, so maybe, eighteen. You’re officially an adult at eighteen, so I don’t see how anyone could argue it not being old enough. Unless they were a very irresponsible eighteen-year-old and then it would be different.”

“So it would be a problem,” I said, “if someone was twenty-three and their career was still being micro-managed to the same degree as it was when they were fourteen?”

Arlo’s brow furrowed. “Yeah, I’d say so.”

“Thought so.” I left the kitchen and went over to stare at the bare Christmas tree, Arlo coming to stand next to me. “Are we decorating this today?” I sensed Arlo was keen to continue the conversation I’d started, but that he didn’t want to push me. For a

documentary maker trained to sniff out a story, he could be considerate like that. Both six years ago and now.

“Nah!” Arlo said. “It can wait. It’s not going anywhere. I vote we have some fun instead.”

“Fun?”

“Don’t say it like you think I don’t know the meaning of the word.”

I laughed. “Okay, I’ll bite. What constitutes fun for you? You’re not going to invite me to a front-row seat at the fridge, are you? Because if so, I’ll pass. I’ll put my socks in order instead.”

“You don’t have any socks.”

“I’ll put your socks in order.”

“You know full well I was working out what we could have for breakfast. As for the fun, I saw something in the shed yesterday while I was searching for the pot for the tree.”

“A ghost? A massive spider? A little man who’s made his home there.”

Arlo gave me a you’re-not-remotely-funny look, or at least that was how I interpreted it. “A sledge. It was in the back corner under a load of stuff. It looked to be in good nick, from what I could see. There’s a hill in the opposite direction from the way you ran the other day.”

“I didn’t run.”

“There’s a hill in the opposite direction from the way you went for a long unannounced one-way stroll in unsuitable clothing the other day and nearly froze to death. I thought we could take it out.”

I wanted to say something about us not being children. Except sledging sounded fun, and I had said I wanted to do something more physical, so I’d be shooting myself in the foot. “What about the wolves?”

“I don’t think they’re into sledging. I figured I’d leave them out of the invite.”

I let out a weary sigh. “You know what I meant.”

“It’s not that far, and we’ll keep an eye out.”

“Are you sure you’re not just trying to make me put more clothes on?”

“Guilty. That, and take you somewhere you can’t get your cock out unless you want it to turn into an icicle.”

Once we’d cleaned the dust and cobwebs off the sledge, it became apparent that it wasn’t just in good nick, but that it was fairly new. If someone had ever used it, it couldn’t have been more than once or twice. It was a decent size as well, and a proper wooden one with tracks rather than the plastic tray ones I’d used as a kid during the rare times in England when the weather gods had granted enough snow to make it viable.

I’d bundled up in Arlo’s clothes again, the walk to the hill farther than the previous day’s jaunt in search of a tree. It was a perfect winter’s day, the sky a deep blue and the sun appearing for the first time since we’d been here. If it had stopped snowing, and the sun was out, that meant the snow would melt, the thought a discomfiting one.

How long did it take for roads to become passable again once the thaw set in? A day? A couple? Longer? If today's revelation about the way my career was being handled had shown anything, it was that stopping still for ten minutes without taking mind-altering substances was useful. And now I wanted more time. And yes, I wanted to explore this thing between me and Arlo, last night's kiss still very much at the forefront of my mind, even if he seemed determined to act like it had never happened.

"Hill," Arlo announced completely unnecessarily, especially accompanied by a point as it was.

"Wow! Is that what it is? I thought we'd stumbled across a slumbering dinosaur covered in snow."

Arlo laughed. "Well, if it is, I'm still going to slide down his back after all the effort of cleaning the sledge up and walking here."

"His? That's very sexist of you. It might be a lady dinosaur."

"Their back. There you go. I've covered all bases, whether they're male, female, or non-binary. Happy now?"

"Ecstatic," I said non-ecstatically as I eyed the hill. It was steeper than I'd imagined when Arlo had described it, which was both good and bad. Good for sledging, but not so great for getting up there. But then I guess it was a suitable metaphor for life that anything worth having you had to work for. At least that's what I'd told myself during the hours of practice at the piano that had left my fingers sore.

Arlo went first, which meant I had a bit of a wait while he trudged up the hill, the trip strenuous enough that he had to pause to get his breath back a few times. It probably didn't help that I shouted comments critiquing his efforts that usually ended in "old man" after him, safe in the knowledge he wouldn't waste energy by coming back

down to remonstrate with me.

His descent down the hill gathered speed quickly, Arlo clinging on for dear life as the sledge showed no mercy in tossing him into the air every time it hit a bump. There were a few moments where I thought he might come off, but he always righted himself. He was laughing and breathless when he finally came to a stop a few meters away at the bottom of the hill. “Now that,” he shouted, his cheeks red from excitement and exertion, “was worth the climb.”

And then it was my turn. After the flak I’d given Arlo, there was no way I was going to stop for a breather on the way up. Thankfully, gym visits and dancing in various nightclubs around the world—probably more the former, if I was honest—had provided me with decent endurance. So although I was out of breath and my legs were burning by the time I reached the summit, I hadn’t stopped.

It seemed even higher now I was up here, Arlo looking impossibly tiny from where he waited at the bottom, shading his eyes against the sun. I realized I should have brought my phone with me, that perhaps there might have been a chance of getting a signal up here. Oh well, too late now.

Positioning the sledge carefully took effort. You wanted it close enough to the edge that it took little effort to go over, but not so close gravity took the decision of when that happened out of your hands.

I took a moment to enjoy the view and the quiet before pushing off. And then there was no changing my mind, even if I wanted to. The world blurred in a rush of white and blue, icy wind nipping at my cheeks as I gathered speed. I hit a bump, my stomach lurching and my gloved fingers wrapping tighter around the sledge. Laughter bubbled up, wild and uncontrollable, as the sledge veered right, the ground dropping away beneath me.

Why hadn't I done this since I was a kid? I went to countries all the time where snow was plentiful. Why had I been getting drunk in nightclubs and picking up random men when I could have been doing this instead? What was the point of being financially solvent if I never took time to enjoy the simpler things in life? Like beautiful views and the feel of adrenaline coursing through my body. Sure, there was adrenaline when I was on stage. The nerves that came from the pressure of giving a good performance never went away, and probably never would, but it wasn't this. This joy. This freedom.

My arrival at the bottom of the hill was far less controlled than Arlo's, the sledge hitting a bump extreme enough that even my firm grip didn't stop me from separating from it. I tumbled from it and rolled, my limbs at the mercy of momentum. The snow crunched as hurried footsteps came my way, reaching me just as I rolled onto my back and spat snow out. When I opened my eyes, Arlo was looming over me with a look of concern. "Rudolf? Are you okay?"

I smiled up at him, this man that I knew but didn't know. "I... have never been better." I moved my arms and legs in a coordinated movement. "Snow angel," I announced with utmost seriousness.

There was a moment where Arlo eyed me like he thought I might have a concussion before he started laughing. He fell in the snow next to me and we carried on laughing while we made snow angels together.

It took one more trip each before we worked out that the sledge was plenty big enough for two. Traveling down together cut out one person having to get cold while they waited at the bottom, as well as meaning we got to share the experience. And I'd be lying if I said that I didn't enjoy sitting between Arlo's legs with him wrapped around my back. We tried it the other way round on one trip, but quickly reached the conclusion when we ended up marooned halfway down the slope while the sledge continued to the bottom, that, out of the two of us, Arlo was far better at steering and

controlling the sledge, as much as anyone could control it, anyway.

I lost count of the number of trips up the hill we made, the payoff significant enough that even as our energy waned, we still kept doing “one more.”

Arlo

I couldn't remember the last time I'd enjoyed a day as much as this one, something about watching Rudolf laugh and joining in with it, a tonic money couldn't buy. I realized on our fifth, or maybe it was our sixth, trip down the hill that while I might have told Rudolf he needed a break, that I'd been an accidental hypocrite in not realizing I needed one too. What with the breakup of my marriage and making three full-length documentaries this year, I'd been just as much of a workaholic as he had. I'd just done it with less alcohol and drugs. I wouldn't include sex on that list because, as I'd told Rudolf the previous night, Bruno and I hadn't been lacking in that department during the first few months of our relationship before things went wrong.

"One more?" Rudolf asked as he lay panting next to me, our shoulders touching.

I imagined the trek up the hill, my thighs already so sore that walking tomorrow would no doubt prove quite the trial. I shook my head. "No, I'm done. I'm liable to collapse halfway up if I go up again. You can, though."

Rudolf struggled to his feet and eyed the hill. "No. I think I'm done as well. We must have been up there a squillion times."

"At least."

Rudolf held out his hand, and I took it, letting him pull me to my feet. With his eyes shining and his cheeks flushed, he couldn't have looked happier. And it made me happy. There was something else as well, something that made me smile. I tapped his nose with my index finger. "Your nose is red."

He batted my hand away, green eyes narrowing. “Don’t you dare say it.”

“Say what? I don’t know what you mean,” I lied.

“Good. Keep it that way.”

I didn’t say it. Instead, I pursed my lips and whistled the first few bars of Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. I would have carried on, but apparently being pelted in the face with a snowball makes whistling difficult. Who knew? I spat snow out, Rudolf’s aim a little too good.

The annoying little shit was smiling as he backed off with his gloved hands raised in a defensive gesture. “Oh, come on, you deserved that. You know you did.”

“For whistling?” I bent and scooped up a generous handful of snow.

“For whistling that song. Have you any idea what it was like for me at school? One of my schoolmates even wrote a version where he changed all the words to being about me.”

“Creative,” I said, as I shaped the snow into a ball. “I’d like to meet him. What were the lyrics? Perhaps we could do a duet.”

“Don’t throw that,” Rudolf warned as I lifted my arm.

“Or what?”

“Or...”

I didn’t wait to see what threat he’d come up with before unleashing the snowball. He ducked, but not fast enough, the snowball hitting him square in the forehead.

Anticipating that retaliation would be imminent, I rugby-tackled him to the ground, both of us letting out an “oof” as we landed. My intention had been to rub snow in his face like we were twelve.

I kissed him instead.

And not like we were twelve.

Like we were two men giving in to our mutual attraction and making the most of being alone in an isolated wilderness with no else around for miles.

When I drew back, Rudolf blinked up at me, the kiss seeming to have taken him as much by surprise as it had me. I kissed him again, taking my time with this one, luxuriating in it. Luxuriating in him and how much I wanted him, even though I’d done my best to deny it. Well, I guess the cat was well and truly out of the bag now. At least we couldn’t go any further than kissing out here. Because of the snow. And how cold it was. And how many layers of clothing we wore.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” I admitted once I stopped kissing him.

“I’m not complaining. It was definitely better than getting pelted by snow.”

“Thanks. I’ll put that on my CV. Arlo Thomas—a kiss from him is better than getting pelted by snow.”

“You have a sex CV? Color me impressed. You’re a dark horse, aren’t you?”

I kissed him again, this one more to shut him up. Rudolf didn’t seem to mind. He hadn’t minded any of the kisses, joining in enthusiastically. And he was one hell of a good kisser. He drew back first this time, the look he gave me speculative. “If we were back in the cabin, I’d be trying to get you out of your clothes around about

now.”

“And I’d probably let you.”

Rudolf smiled. “Bingo! We have progress.”

I turned my wrist and peeled the edge of my glove down so I could see my watch.

“Jesus! Do you know what time it is?”

“Enlighten me.”

“Half-past two. We’ve missed lunch again.”

“I wondered why I was hungry. We should probably head back before it gets dark.”

I climbed to my feet and hauled Rudolf to his, laughing when he leaned in and stole another kiss, the vertical one just as enjoyable as the horizontal ones had been.

Back at the cabin with the sledge once more returned to the shed, there were other things to worry about before we got round to food, like peeling off all the layers of clothes, most of the external ones wet from the time we’d spent in the snow. Rudolf’s back had taken the brunt while we’d been kissing, my weight pressing him down making it worse. It was for that reason that I offered to let him take the first shower. He paused in the bathroom doorway in just his T-shirt and underwear, and I did my best not to stare at his thighs. His lean, muscular thighs that were tanned for the time of year. “Want to share a shower?”

I did. But if we shared a shower, we’d start kissing again. And if we were naked while we were kissing, as one was in the shower, one thing would lead to another. And despite resigning myself to the fact that sex with Rudolf was going to happen, I wanted to savor the anticipation for longer. I wanted to imagine what it was going to

be like to touch him in places I still hadn't seen yet—his hipbone, his inner thigh, the crease of his groin. His armpit, as weird and as kinky as that might sound. Had I ever thought about someone's armpit before? I'd married Bruno and never given a moment's thought to his armpit either before the impulse wedding or after.

Rudolf frowned. "What are you thinking about?"

"Your armpit."

I laughed at his expression, Rudolf for once seeming unsure how he was supposed to react to that nugget of honesty. Which was understandable. "Go and have your shower."

He tipped his head to one side and fluttered his eyelashes, his shock of blond hair falling over his brow. "Are you sure I can't tempt you? I'll let you scrub whatever parts of me you want to scrub. It's up to you whether you use a washcloth or your tongue."

The offer had a stab of arousal going through me, but I stuck to my guns. "Not tonight." Thankfully, he didn't push it, withdrawing from the doorway, and the familiar sound of the shower starting up a few moments later. I pottered around the kitchen until Rudolf called to say he was done and the shower was all mine. He'd left the bedroom door ajar, but I resisted the temptation to peek inside. To say we were in the middle of nowhere, the cabin had some of the best water pressure I'd ever experienced. Perhaps that was why: no competing with other households.

Having not bothered this morning, I shaved as well, a little voice at the back of my head asking me whether I was concerned about giving Rudolf stubble rash? I ignored it, refusing to entertain the suggestion that I was so sure we'd end up kissing again. Dressed once more, I found Rudolf in the kitchen, frowning at an onion. "What did it do?"

“Huh?”

“The onion. It seems to have upset you.” I sat on the stool at the breakfast bar, resting my chin on my hand. “Did it refuse to clap at one of your concerts? Did it steal one of your original compositions?”

Rudolf rolled his eyes, but I barely noticed. Now that I knew how enjoyable kissing him was, I was struggling to focus on anything but his lips. “It stands accused of being an onion.”

“I would say it’s guilty. Unless it’s a cleverly disguised potato. In which case, I believe there are extra charges that need to be brought against it for misleading the public.”

“I hate chopping onions,” Rudolf explained.

“So... don’t.”

“I’m making Spaghetti Bolognese. It’ll taste shit without onion. I was hoping if I stared at it for long enough, it would just volunteer itself into slices.”

I laughed. “Give it here.” Rudolf rolled it across the counter toward me and then crossed his arms over his chest and waited. “I’m clever, but I’m not that clever.”

“Huh?”

“Knife? Chopping board?”

He passed both across, and I set to work on it. “I never knew you could cook. I guess I assumed you’d have someone do that for you.”

“Back in England, I do. A chef hired by my father.” Rudolf pulled a face. “Which begs two questions.”

“Go on.” I sniffed as the onion fumes got to me.

“Why is it yet another person my father hired, and I got no say in? I mean, don’t get me wrong, he’s a fantastic chef. But maybe I want a chef who can cook Thai food. Or Japanese. Whereas Santino, in case you can’t tell from the name, is Italian, so it’s all pasta.” Rudolf laughed. “Which I appreciate is ironic while I’m boiling spaghetti. But yeah, I’d like to have had some input. And it’s not like he’s been there since I was a child. He’s a fairly recent hire in the last few years.”

“And the second question?”

Rudolf sighed. “The second question is why I’m still living with my father?”

“How often are you actually there?”

“Not that often.”

“That’s probably your answer, then. It’s just easier. Moving takes time and effort.”

“I should have made time. I could have a nice little penthouse in Central London overlooking the Thames. A bachelor pad.” He looked up, noticing for the first time how much I was struggling with the onion. He reached across and wiped a tear away with the pad of his thumb. “No need to cry for me, Arlo. I’ll be okay. My father’s enormous house and the Italian food made by a personal chef aren’t that bad.”

I batted his hand away. “Ha bloody ha. It’s the onion, as you very well know.”

“Which is why I hate chopping them.”

“Does it ruin your make-up?”

He pointed a wooden spoon at me. “If I were you, I wouldn’t remind me that your ill-timed abduction has left me without eyeliner.”

“You don’t need it.”

“The girls like it.”

“I daresay the boys do, too. I’m just pointing out you have gorgeous eyes with or without eyeliner.”

A faint flush crept into Rudolf’s cheeks. “You’re making it really hard not to kiss you right now.”

I smiled. “Good.”

We didn’t play any games that evening, both of us happy after the exertions of the day and the delicious meal Rudolf had served up to sprawl on the sofa. I’d switched the main light off, leaving us with just the glow of a single lamp and the wood stove. It created a cozy atmosphere, which left me more at peace than I could ever remember being.

“You should share the bed,” Rudolf announced out of the blue. “It’s plenty big enough for two. It’s not fair that I get a double to myself while you have to sleep on this.”

“It’s a comfortable sofa, not a bed of nails.”

“Still...”

“Stop trying to dress up an attempt to get me into bed as concern.”

Rudolf grinned like I knew he would. “Shit! Busted. You should sleep in the bed, Arlo. Naked. And we should cuddle for warmth just in case something happens to the wood stove while we’re sleeping and the temperature in the cabin plummets.”

“I presume you’ll also be naked?”

“Of course. I’d hate for you to feel like the odd one out.”

“So kind.” Rudolf was sprawled diagonally across the sofa, mostly lying, but the sofa too short for his feet to fit with me on the end. Acting on impulse, I bent over and scooped them into my lap. He lifted his head but said nothing, straightening so he could lie more comfortably.

“I could go to sleep,” he eventually said.

“Then go to sleep. What’s stopping you?”

“Hmmm...” Taking gentle hold of one ankle, I picked up his left foot and studied it. Rudolf lifted his head again. “Am I just supposed to ignore you being weird?”

“These are very famous feet.”

He let his head thud back on the arm of the sofa. “Right.”

“They are.”

“If you say so.”

“Whose idea was it to play the piano barefoot that first time?”

“I wouldn’t say it was an idea.”

“No? What was it?”

Rudolf smiled to himself. “I didn’t like my shoes. They were very un-me, so I refused to wear them. My costume designer at the time told me I could hardly go on stage barefoot and was extremely snooty about it.”

“So you called her bluff?”

“Yeah, I said watch me, and did exactly that.”

“And the media loved it.”

“Yeah,” Rudolf said with a slight sigh. “And now I’m stuck with it, no matter how freezing cold the auditorium might be. And the rest of the image came from people liking it and seeing how far I could push it before someone said, hang on, what does he think he’s doing when he plays classical music? Except no one ever did. I reckon I could go on stage naked one day and no one would bat an eyelid.”

I placed his foot gently back on my lap. “Maybe don’t choose the freezing cold auditorium for that.”

Rudolf smiled. “Can you imagine? All my press coverage would be about how being blessed with musical talent was to make up for other areas. Which... in case you’re worried, I’ve had no complaints.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Because you like small cocks, or because you have no intention of going anywhere near mine?”

I rolled my head sideways to look at him, Rudolf lifting his head again with a look of challenge as he waited for the answer. “That’s a very direct question.”

“It is. Are you pointing that out so you don’t have to answer?”

“Possibly.” I shifted Rudolf’s feet off me to the sofa so I could get up. “Wait there. I’m coming back.”

“Where are you going?”

I ignored Rudolf’s question as I went into the bedroom and rummaged through my luggage until I found what I was looking for. I held it aloft as I walked back into the main room. “Massage oil.” Rudolf obligingly lifted his feet, and I maneuvered myself back into my original position, settling them back on my lap as I sat.

“Lube,” Rudolf said.

“No. Massage oil.”

“Same thing.”

“A condom would disagree.”

“Well, if you’re having arguments with condoms, I would say labeling liquids is the least of your problems.”

I squeezed some oil into the palm of my hand. “Are you ticklish?”

“I don’t know. No one’s ever massaged my feet before.”

It turned out he wasn’t. It also turned out that there were several places on Rudolf’s

feet where digging your thumb in made him moan like he was having sex. At least that's what I imagined he sounded like while having sex. "Stop doing that."

"I can't. It feels too good."

"I'll gag you."

"Promises, promises." Once I'd done one foot, I started on the other, Rudolf tucking a cushion behind his head so he could watch. "Did your hubby get this treatment?"

"Bruno?"

"Do you have another husband I don't know about?"

"No."

"Bruno, then?"

"No."

"Why not?"

It was an excellent question. Why was I carrying out what most people would consider an intimate act on Rudolf when I'd been married for months and had gone nowhere near my husband's feet, nor felt tempted to. "His feet aren't famous. In years to come, I want to tell people I've massaged Rudolf Bell's feet."

"Thank you for not using my middle name."

"Rudolf Good King Wenceslas Bell's feet."

“The extra bit is not required.”

I laughed. “No, but it’s funny.”

Rudolf’s brow furrowed. “Bruno’s a famous actor. I mean, not Robert De Niro famous, but he’s pretty well-known.”

“So?”

“So...” Rudolf let out another moan as I hit one of his magic spots. “If he’s famous, it stands to reason his feet are famous too.”

Apart from the occasional moan, we lapsed into silence for a few minutes. I’d given up on getting him to stop. I’d just have to put up with my brain cycling through what sounds he might make when other more sensitive parts of his body were stimulated.

“I should be on TV now,” Rudolf said. Was I supposed to apologize? “I’d rather be here.”

A firework went off in my chest at the whispered words, and I didn’t have to think twice about how to respond. “I’d rather you were here, too.”

Rudolf

This was nice. More than nice. A warm, cozy cabin; nobody around for miles; no phone reception equalling zero interruptions—thank God I hadn't thought to take my phone to the top of the hill when we'd gone sledging because what if I'd gotten a reception?—and, last but not least, a handsome documentary maker giving me a very unexpected but hugely enjoyable foot massage. I was greedy and wanted more, though. I wanted the bubble of intimacy to continue to its natural conclusion. Not because I was a sex addict, or because I was used to getting my own way when it came to sex, but because I liked Arlo and found him attractive, and I didn't want to squander the opportunity for this experience—no matter how unorthodox its origins—to be all it could be.

Arlo was still massaging my feet, his teeth digging into his bottom lip in an endearing fashion as he focused on his task. I let out another moan as he dug his thumb into the insole of my foot, this one deliberate. I grinned when Arlo gave a slight shake of his head, but didn't comment. I might have believed his annoyance if it wasn't for the swelling under the heel of the foot not being massaged.

I moved that foot slightly, rubbing my heel against the length of him, Arlo's sharp indrawn breath music to my ears. "Oops, sorry," I lied.

Arlo lifted his head to glare at me. "You're a menace."

"I am. You should... I don't know, tire me out or something." Another headshake. "What are you scared of?" I was genuinely interested in Arlo's answer. After the kisses he'd instigated in the snow, I'd assumed we were on the same page, that he'd

given in to the inevitability of what would happen. But it was two steps forward and one step back with Arlo. Although, he surely had to realize the mixed messages he was giving with the foot massage.

“I’m not scared. I’m just trying to be the sensible one.”

“Sensible!” I gave the word the contempt it deserved. “Call me judgmental, but I think you threw away any illusions of being sensible when you hatched your plan to rescue me.”

Arlo snorted. “I thought you were going to say when I got married in Vegas to someone I’d only been seeing for a couple of weeks.”

“That as well. There you go. You’ve got form.”

“ That does not make me feel any better.”

With the foot massage apparently having reached its conclusion, I hoisted myself higher against the sofa arm. High enough that I could wriggle out of my T-shirt and drop it on the floor.

Arlo followed its progress and continued to stare at it. “We need to do some laundry tomorrow.”

“Yep. Laundry. That’s what I like men thinking about while I’m stripping off.” I lowered my hands to the waistband of my sweatpants and wriggled out of those too.

“With two people sharing clothes, we’re going through them quickly.”

I lay back in just a pair of Arlo’s black briefs. “Can you do anything else with that massage oil?”

The request got through to him, Arlo dragging his gaze away from the discarded T-shirt and directing it my way instead. I wagged my eyebrows suggestively at him as he raked his gaze over me, unmistakable heat flaring in his eyes as he studied me. “You want a massage?”

“Yeah. I do.”

His gaze lingered on my crotch, my cock tenting the front of the briefs. “We need towels. I rented this place. I can’t cover the sofa in oil.”

I was off the sofa in a flash to fetch some. In the spirit of optimism, I took a detour to get condoms and lube from the jeans I’d been wearing when I’d arrived.

Thank God, Arlo had snatched me from a nightclub. Anywhere else and I might not have had them on me. In retrospect, I was thankful I hadn’t used them on a sexual experience that would have paled in comparison to the man waiting on the sofa.

Arlo stood when I arrived back, taking the towels from me and arranging them so they covered the entire sofa. I took advantage of his distraction to stash the condoms and lube down the side of the sofa cushions. They weren’t a secret, but why risk spooking him if I didn’t have to? “You should... er... strip as well,” I said with a slight smirk. “You know, because of that clothes shortage you were talking about. No point in getting oil all over them if you can avoid it.”

My smile grew when he followed my instruction without argument. Ah, so that was the key with him, was it? Dressing everything up as a practical consideration. I’d have to remember that. I lay back on the sofa as Arlo stripped to his underwear. He did a double take when he finally looked up. “You’re the wrong way round.”

I interlocked my fingers behind my head and gave a deliberate stretch. “I’m exactly where I need to be.”

“You’re a—”

“A menace, I know.”

He straddled my calves, the heat of his bare thighs fiery against my skin. He was as hard as I was, the rigid line of his cock clearly visible through his briefs. My fingers itched to reach out and trace it, to rub my thumb over the tip and see if I could tease out some moisture, but I needed to be patient, to reel him in bit by bit. First came getting his hands on me. Then, I’d play it by ear. I had a plan, but it needed to be a flexible one. And although my endgame was to get that delectable cock inside me, I wouldn’t use that as my only yardstick for success. There were hundreds of things we could do that didn’t include penetration. Hundreds of extremely pleasurable things. Fucking was plan A, but I had plans for Arlo all the way to Z.

“I wasn’t going to say a menace this time.”

“What were you going to say?”

“I was going to say a tease.” Arlo upended the bottle of oil and dripped a thin stream of it onto my chest.

“A tease promises things they have no intention of delivering. I’m happy to deliver. I’m so happy to deliver you could call me the postman.”

Arlo’s lips twitched. “Rudolf Good King Wenceslas The Postman Bell. Got it.”

My response froze on my tongue as he flattened his palms against my chest and massaged the oil in. While he concentrated on moving his hands in circular strokes over my skin, I watched him, drinking in his dilated pupils and flushed cheeks. I lasted a minute before surging up to capture his lips, Arlo not taken so much by surprise that he didn’t kiss me back. We were both panting by the time the kiss ended.

“You never wanted a massage, did you?” he asked, his voice husky.

I maneuvered myself into a different position, one that let my thighs fall open, Arlo settling between them and our hard cocks pressing together. “Not really.”

Arlo rested his forehead against mine, his breathing ragged. “I’m so hard.”

“I know. I can feel.”

“I want...”

“Whatever you want, you can have.”

He laughed. “What if I was about to say I wanted you to wear a pig mask and oink?”

I stroked my fingers over his back, tracing the firm musculature. “Darling, if you can find a pig mask in this place, I’ll try it, if that’s what does it for you.”

His eyes were shining with mirth when he lifted his head. “What about a cow one?”

“Mooooo.”

“How did I ever think I could resist you?”

I pulled him down for another kiss. “I like the way you just used past tense. Does that mean we can stop pretending this isn’t going to happen? We’re going to be stuck here together for at least a few more days.” Longer, hopefully. “Why shouldn’t we enjoy ourselves?” Arlo’s silence said there was at least one reason, but that he wasn’t prepared to verbalize it. Instead, he lifted my right arm over my head and dropped a kiss in my armpit that tickled enough for me to crease up. I stopped laughing when his fingers trailed down my body to hook in the waistband of my briefs. He tugged

gently, dropping a kiss on the bare hipbone he uncovered. My cock throbbed as he did the same with the other side, the tender gesture hotter than it had any right to be.

I held my breath as both hands came into play, the action of pulling my briefs down so slow that I held my breath. We both laughed as my cock popped out like it was a jack-in-the-box. And then there was only Arlo staring at it. Nerves had me breaking the silence. “I’ve had no complaints.”

“Shhh...”

I shushed, lying back against the sofa arm and letting him look his fill. I was fully hard, my cock standing to attention. When his lips finally slid over the tip and his tongue explored its contours, I bucked up. There was nowhere to go, though, Arlo’s powerful hands holding me down while he took me deeper. Which left only one outlet for communicating how good it felt: moans and random words. I indulged in both while he sucked me.

It was impossible not to watch him as he pleased me, my brain drinking in the hollowing of his cheeks and the hair that fell over his brow. I’d found him handsome when I was seventeen, but now, he was the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen. Definitely the most gorgeous that had ever blown me, and I thanked whatever gods had brought us to this point.

My chest was rising and falling rapidly by the time he released my cock and sat back to stare at me again. Now what? I didn’t ask out loud in case he changed his mind. Instead, I waited, the damp spot on the front of his briefs showing that blowing me had aroused him almost as much as it had me. When he reached past me to delve down the side of the sofa cushion and plucked out the condom and lube, I laughed. “I thought I’d been stealthy.”

“I’m not sure you could be stealthy if you tried.” He toyed with the condom for a few

seconds. “Is this really what you want? I can finish you with my mouth. We don’t have to—”

“Do you want me to beg? Please, Arlo. Please fuck me. Blow jobs are nice. More than nice the way you give them. But what I want, what I really want...” I slid my hand over the bulge tenting Arlo’s underwear, cupping it when he didn’t protest and feeling the length of him. “... is you inside me. Fucking me. Rubbing over my prostate. Going deep. Making me see stars.”

Arlo let out a groan and pressed his forehead against mine again. “Stop! You’re going to make me come.”

With words? Interesting. “Better get that condom on, then.”

He held his hands up, his palms glistening. “Oily. Unless you’re willing to wait while I wash my hands...”

And give him time to think better of it. Like hell I was. I snatched the condom off him and ripped it open with my teeth. “Get your pants off!”

“The way you say it is so romantic.” Despite his mockery, he did it, the cock revealed as he maneuvered his way out of them, making my mouth water. He let out a hissed breath as I rolled the condom down his length and added a generous amount of lube. “I guess I’ll have to do this myself, then?” This was me fingering myself, Arlo watching intently as I gave myself first one finger and then two. I wasn’t used to putting on a show, my cheeks heating.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he said as I writhed on them, stimulation of my prostate forcing a few drops of pre-cum to bead on the tip of my cock. I might have spent longer on it, but Arlo ran out of patience before I did, grabbing my wrist and pushing my hand to the side as he crouched between my thighs.

“Yeah, fuck me,” I begged as he moved into position. Despite the fingering, the stretch as he breached me was enough to have me letting out a sharp breath. When he backed off, I grabbed him, wrapping my hands around his muscular arse cheeks and holding him in place. “Don’t you dare!”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

And he didn’t, giving me shallow thrusts until I grew accustomed to him. When he slid in completely, I let out a sigh of satisfaction. “So good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

His first set of thrusts were long and luxurious, neither of us in a rush now we’d reached this point. The sound of snow falling off the roof had me turning my head to the window, neither of us having drawn the curtains when we didn’t have neighbors. “It’s snowing again,” I said with a smile.

Whether it was because Arlo didn’t understand why that pleased me so much, or because he had far more interesting things on his mind as he again sank his cock into me, he didn’t offer a response. Perhaps he thought I always provided a weather forecast while getting fucked, the thought threatening to make me laugh.

Eager to speed things up, I drew my hips up, wrapping my calves around Arlo’s muscular back. He took the hint, picking up the tempo to fuck me harder.

Pleasure zinged along my nerve endings and I gave myself up to it, riding the edge of desperately wanting to come while also wanting it to last. Arlo seemed to feel the

same, his thrusts slowing before he seemed to lose himself to the animalistic pleasure once more. We rode that knife edge as long as we could until it became more torturous than pleasurable. It only took a few strokes once I wrapped my hand around my cock to come, Arlo following me over the brink with one last deep thrust a minute or two later.

We kissed lazily until Arlo's shrinking cock forced him to deal with the condom. I watched as he rose from the sofa to get rid of it in the kitchen bin, admiring the long lean lines of his body. "Will you share the bed with me now?"

He was laughing when he turned back to face me, giving me the same scrutiny as I'd given him as I lay sprawled across the sofa. "Do you think we'll get any sleep?"

"Do you think that matters? It's not like either of us has a jam-packed schedule tomorrow. The snow won't melt overnight." Thank God.

"True." Arlo reached up to do a triceps stretch. First one side and then the other. "Christ! I feel like I've been through a meat grinder."

"No one's ever described fucking me like that before."

He rolled his eyes. "I was thinking more of the sledging, as you very well know." He came to stand by the side of the sofa. "Yes, I will share a bed with you, Rudolf." He held out his hand. "After we've had a shower."

I took his hand and let him pull me upright, the faint twinge in my arse making me feel like a man who'd been well fucked. Funny that. "Now, you'll share a shower with me. Everything has to be on your terms, doesn't it?"

Arlo laughed at the outlandish statement, just as I'd known he would. "Oh yeah, it's all me, me, me."

We were both still laughing by the time the shower had warmed enough for us to step in. Arlo decided I needed help to scrub the oil off my chest, him touching me, leading to more, until I was on my knees beneath the spray of water, coaxing Arlo back to hardness. It took a while, allowing for a perfect opportunity for me to call him an old man again. But it was worth it for the intensity of Arlo's second orgasm. By which time I was hard again, Arlo returning the favor.

I couldn't have said how late it was before we eventually tumbled into bed together, but after two orgasms and the energetic day we'd had, there was no conversation, both of us asleep as soon as our heads touched the pillow.

Arlo

Waking up next to Rudolf made me smile. Sleeping, he looked like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, a far cry from when he was awake, with his teasing and smart quips. I studied him for a few minutes before easing myself out of bed without waking him. Which proved quite the trial when, just as I'd expected, every single muscle screamed about its overuse the previous day. I needed to go to the gym more if one day of sledging affected me this badly. I vowed to stick to a better exercise routine, even as I admitted to myself that it would probably only last a few weeks.

Rudolf didn't stir as I dressed. I hadn't been joking when I said we needed to do laundry. If we didn't, we'd be walking around naked within a couple of days. I shushed my subconscious when it insisted on asking whether that would be so terrible. Now we'd fucked, I was supposed to want Rudolf less, not more. I left the bedroom before I could give in to the temptation to wake him with my lips and tongue. I'd brought him here to rest and I wouldn't be the cause of him not getting enough.

Only once I was sitting on the sofa with a coffee did I allow myself to replay the events of the previous night. What are you scared of? Rudolf's question had hit home, because I hadn't needed to think about the answer. I was scared of falling for him and then having Rudolf walk away without so much as a second glance. He had men and women falling over themselves to get to him, so I wasn't fooling myself I was anything more than Mr. Right Now to him.

I'd escaped a failed marriage with my heart intact, but I wasn't sure I could do that with him. I'd brought him here because no matter how irrational it was after six years

of no contact and the brevity of our previous acquaintance, I cared about him. The quandary was what I did now. There were only two options. Back off at a million miles an hour—emotionally not physically unless I was going to wander off into the wilderness and live with the wolves—and face Rudolf’s understandable wrath, or push any thoughts of having my heart broken to the back of my mind and live in the moment.

The bedroom door opened, my head jerking up as a sleepy Rudolf walked in. He only wore sweatpants, his pause for an elaborate stretch threatening to transform an already dangerously low-slung waistband into a glimpse of cock as every muscle stood out in stark definition.

He prowled my way, knowing exactly what he was doing and what effect it would have on me. He’d been brought up on image, had had it drummed into him from an early age, and was used to his body language and gestures being picked apart by the media. Yeah, this was a man in full control of his body.

He straddled me, plucking the mug of coffee from my hands and pushing me back against the sofa. The word “morning” was close enough to my lips that I felt it as well as heard it. And then he kissed me. Not a shy exploratory kiss, but a demanding, possessive one that picked up exactly where we’d left off the previous night. I was putty in his hands as I kissed him back, Rudolf making the decision for me. Living in the moment it was then, and I’d just have to hope I came out of it with my heart no more than bruised.

I traced his spine while we kissed, ran my fingertips over warm velvety skin, before toying with his waistband in a threat to slide my hands beneath the fabric and cup the perfect globes of his arse.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked when the kiss finally ended. Such a provincial question with his weight resting on my rapidly hardening cock.

Rudolf brushed back a lock of hair as it fell over his eye. Given his hair existed in a permanent state of overlong messiness that looked like he'd just gotten out of bed even when he hadn't, it fell right back. He ignored it this time as he smiled. "I did. Like a baby. How about you?"

"Yeah. Good."

"Any regrets?"

"No."

"Liar! Your lips say one thing and your eyes say another." Rudolf squeezed his hand between my body and his, tracing the outline of my fabric covered cock. I had no defense as his fingers slid beneath the fabric in search of bare skin. With my hands still resting on his lower back, there was no question of not following his lead and giving in to my earlier urge to cup his arse cheeks. He kissed me again as he wrapped his fist around my cock and stroked me to full hardness.

The next few minutes were a blur of heat, friction, and gasps, that ended with a condom on my cock—Rudolf doing the honors again. I gripped onto him for dear life, my gaze fixed on his face, as he impaled himself on me, gravity playing its part as he sank slowly down. The smile of success when he managed it was everything.

I kissed him until he lifted up, balance too difficult with our lips fused together. Denied the pleasure of kissing him, I explored his chest, running my fingers over hard abdominal ridges and toying with his nipples until desire had me gripping his hips instead, encouraging him to lift higher and slam down harder, my orgasm approaching like a freight train.

He came first with his hand wrapped around his cock, hot cum splattering my chest to leave me feeling marked, something I had zero issues with. Digging my fingers into

his skin, I surged up, driving myself deep until I cried out, my muscle stiffness completely forgotten. “You’re going to kill me,” I gasped out when I came back to earth, Rudolf’s head resting on my shoulder.

He lifted his head to reveal a smile a mile wide. “Can you imagine? The papers would have a field day with that. Pianist and documentary maker fuck each other to death in remote location. Was it a suicide pact? Was it a sex game gone wrong? Who knows? But we’ll waste thousands of column inches between now and eternity speculating about it and coming up with every permutation. By the time they’ve finished, you probably will be someone who likes their lovers to wear a pig mask and God only knows what hatchet job they’ll do on me. Probably something involving drugs.”

Concentrating on what he was saying was difficult when he was also easing off me and getting rid of the condom. By the time he’d finished his rant, if that’s what it was, he’d pulled his sweatpants back up, tossed me a towel so I could wipe the cum off my chest, and was already over by the coffeemaker to pour himself one. He sipped it while he rooted through the cupboards in search of breakfast.

I lifted my hips and pulled my sweatpants back up, still somewhat shaken by typhoon Rudolf being so eager to instigate morning sex, and the energetic way he went about it. I’d been fooling myself to think I had any say in what happened until the weather released us from its grip.

“What’s the plan for today?”

I looked up to find Rudolf staring at me expectantly as he cracked eggs in a bowl and added milk. “Omelet,” he said, “with cheese and bacon. Is that okay for you? Assuming you haven’t had breakfast already?”

I shook my head. “I’ve had nothing except coffee.”

“Oh, you’re that sort of guy.”

I heaved myself to my feet and went to stand on the opposite side of the breakfast bar, narrowing my eyes at him. “What sort of guy?”

Rudolf smirked. “The kind who prioritizes caffeine above everything else.”

“ You’re having a go at me about vices.”

He paused from whisking the eggs to offer me a wink. “I haven’t had a drink in three days. Do you notice any withdrawal symptoms?” I shook my head. “Can you tell Jade that?”

“If our paths ever cross, I will. I’ll take great satisfaction in telling her how wrong she was about you.” I picked a crumb off the countertop and crushed it between my fingers. “What about when you leave here?” Even saying the words was painful. It would happen, though, and probably sooner rather than later, unless we had another blizzard. “Do you think you’ll slip back into old habits?”

Rudolf shrugged. “If I want to.”

“And do you?”

He lifted his gaze to mine and stared at me for a few seconds. “Being here doesn’t feel quite real. It’s like we exist in a separate bubble. Does that make sense?” I nodded because it made perfect sense. “So... I don’t know how I’ll feel when I leave. Much as your intentions were pure, you can’t just wave a magic wand and fix the things that aren’t right in my life. It doesn’t work like that.” Rudolf upended the eggs into the pan and set about grating cheese. “And I don’t want to make you promises I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep.”

“I don’t want you doing that either. I’d rather you were honest and didn’t tell me what I want to hear.”

He flashed me a grateful smile. “Good. We agree then.” He paused. “So… plans?”

“Laundry.”

Rudolf rolled his eyes. “Exciting. Are you going to sit and watch it going round? Or can I persuade you away from it?”

After contemplating decorating the tree and, yet again, not mustering up the enthusiasm, we went for a walk in the afternoon. Rudolf linked our arms to press us together—no complaints from me—and we headed in the same direction he’d gone during his doomed escape attempt.

“We should ask each other questions,” he announced about ten minutes into the trek.

“What sort of questions?”

“General knowledge.” He gave me a little shove. “Questions about each other, Dumbo. So we can get to know each other better.”

Why? If you’re just going to leave, what’s the point? I didn’t verbalize my instinctive reaction to his suggestion. Besides, there were things about Rudolf I was curious about. Although, it was probably best not to launch right into the type of questions I wanted to ask. “Favorite color?”

Rudolf’s slight eyebrow raise questioned whether that was the best I could come up with. “Black.”

I gave him a scathing look. “You can’t have black as your favorite color.”

“I can. And I have. So there.”

“Black’s not even a color. It’s an absence of light.”

Rudolf let out a frustrated breath. “Alright, Mr. Physics. Chill out. No point in getting your knickers in a twist. Not when I have to share them. You asked, and I answered. I can’t help it if you don’t like what I have to say. Lord, help me if you’re going to be like this about every answer I give.”

“I was just pointing out...” I stopped as Rudolf did a side-to-side head bob worthy of any recalcitrant teenager. “You’re such a child.” The severity of my tone was ruined by the laugh I couldn’t hold back.

He flashed a grin at me. “Must be that six years you have on me.”

“Must be.” I dragged him in a different direction, something catching my eye through the trees. “Fine. So... black. Mine is—”

“I’m not wasting my question on something as mundane as your favorite color.”

“So, what do you want to know?”

“Favorite sexual position?”

“Why?”

“So we can do it when we get back to the cabin.”

“Maybe we’ve already done it.”

“We’ve only done two. Missionary and me straddling you on the sofa this morning.”

He pursed his lips. “Why don’t you want to tell me?” He let go of my arm to round on me, his eyes wide. “Are you a kinky fuck, Arlo? Is that it? You can tell me, you know. I’ll only let three news outlets know and mention it next time I’m on Michael Carter’s chat show. Apart from that...” He drew a gloved finger and thumb across his lips in a parody of pulling a zipper across.

“It’s a treehouse,” I said, staring up at the dark shape above our heads now we’d reached it. “I wonder how long this has been here and who built it?”

“Yeah, it’s a treehouse. Stop changing the subject.”

“Doggie,” I said, glad we were outside and that my cheeks were probably already red from the cold.

“Really?” My answer seemed to both please and surprise Rudolf. “Want to do me doggie style, Arlo?”

I tested the first rung of the ladder propped up against the treehouse to see if it would take my weight. “Very much so.”

“Then your wish is my command.”

Keen to explore the treehouse and glad of something else to think about that wasn’t Rudolf on his hands and knees, back arched to take my cock, I started to climb the ladder. I got to the fourth rung before one snapped, Rudolf grabbing hold of my ankle to steady me. “Be careful.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“I’m serious. If you fall and break your leg, I’m gonna be the one stuck here with you. And it’s not like I can call for help or drive you to the nearest hospital. I

probably wouldn't even be able to get you back to the cabin." Rudolf turned in the direction we'd come, his brow furrowed as he sized up the distance and terrain. "I suppose if I went and got the sledge, I could put you on that and drag you back."

His contingency plans were sweet. Not needed, but sweet. And I proved that by shimmying up the rest of the ladder with no further mishaps. It was a fairly roomy treehouse and even had logs built into it for seats. No treasure or historical artefacts, unfortunately, but I'd take it, regardless. "Are you coming up?"

Rudolf muttered something that had me smiling despite not knowing what he'd said. I hadn't needed to; the tone was enough. His head appeared at the top of the ladder a minute later. "Watch your hands, Rudolf. Climb a ladder, Rudolf. Plummet to your demise, Rudolf."

I laughed. "Don't you think you're being a tad dramatic? We're ten-feet up. Not doing a tightrope walk between two high-rise buildings."

Rudolf plonked himself next to me, the seats providing a perfect vantage point to look out across the snow-covered forest. "I don't like heights," he admitted.

"Ah! I see. You didn't have to come up."

He shrugged. "I'm fine now that I'm up here. It was the climbing up I didn't like. And I daresay going down won't be the most fun I've ever had." He rested his chin on his gloved hands. "It's your turn to ask a question."

"Last serious relationship?"

"That's easy. I've never had one I'd class as serious."

Do you want one? What about with me? "You're only twenty-three. You've got

plenty of time.”

Rudolf made a little huffing sound. “It’s like that guy in Monaco. How would I even make it work when I spend most of my time flying from place to place and staying in hotels?”

“When you fall in love, you’ll find a way.” And whoever it was, I already hated him with the passion of a thousand suns.

“Do you think?”

“Yeah. Your priorities will change.”

“What about you?”

“You know when my last serious relationship was. You can’t get much more serious than marriage.”

“Will you marry again?”

“I don’t know.” It was an honest answer to a question I’d already given a lot of thought. “I hope so. I’d hate to think that one failed marriage is it for me.”

“It won’t be.”

“No?”

Rudolf shook his head enthusiastically. “You, Arlo Thomas, are quite the catch. Someone’s going to realize that.”

Someone! No thought that it could be him. If that didn’t hammer home the short-term

nature of our fling, then I didn't know what did. "I hope you're right."

"Kids or a dog?" Rudolf asked.

"Both."

"Huh!" He gave my answer a lot of thought. "I'm more of a cat man myself."

"I like cats too, but you didn't give me that as a choice."

He turned his head to grin at me. "Always push for what you want and don't settle for second best."

"Good advice." I snagged his gaze as I shuffled closer, intent on kissing him. Because if I didn't kiss him in a secret treehouse in the middle of a frozen winter wonderland, then what was I even doing with my life? Our lips were about to touch when a scrabbling sound below the treehouse had us both freezing.

"What the fuck is that?" Rudolf mouthed.

I shrugged, and we both crept forward to peer over the side. Rudolf grabbed my shoulder, presumably because of his problem with heights. Whatever I'd expected to see, it wasn't three wolf cubs in the snow. It made me think that rather than a treehouse, this was a hide, put here for spotting wildlife.

Rudolf and I both watched enraptured as they chased each other round, the depth of the snow compared to their small stature not seeming to bother them one bit.

Even when the mother turned up, our fascination didn't turn to fear. Whether it was because we were safely off the ground and confident the adult wolf either couldn't, or wouldn't, climb the ladder, or whether it was because the wolf cubs were just so

damn cute, was up for debate. Whichever one it was, we watched them for the best part of thirty minutes, with huge smiles on our faces, until the small group finally disappeared out of sight.

Rudolf

In my dream, I was playing Mozart's Allegro Sonata, and just like on that fateful night in Germany when even my talent had let me down, I couldn't make my fingers do what they were supposed to. Playing the piano was like breathing, but that night, it had been more like suffocating. I'd been close enough to the audience in the front row to see their furrowed brows, to see them look at each other as they silently asked what was going on.

That wasn't a question I'd been able to answer then, and weeks later, I still couldn't answer it. I'd left the stage, and I hadn't played the piano since, had barely even looked at one. Hell, I'd spent the last few days near one and hadn't so much as touched a single key. So I wasn't appreciating this dream. I wasn't appreciating it at all, especially when dream me was mangling the notes even worse than I had in Germany.

Except, when I opened my eyes to the familiar wall of the cabin bedroom, the music continued. The other side of the bed was empty. Well, of course it was—the piano wasn't playing itself. Although I couldn't help wondering if it could, whether it might do a better job. Back when we'd made the documentary, I'd invited Arlo to play my piano, a Steinway worth an obscene amount of money. Arlo had paled, stuttered out an excuse that had been far from convincing, and I hadn't offered again.

I rolled onto my back and tried not to listen. I'd pretend I was asleep and stay in bed until he got bored and stopped. That way, we didn't have to discuss it. We could go about our day as normal. No stress. No strain. Exactly the way Arlo had intended when he'd brought me here. Which begged the question why, after days of respecting

my wishes and acting like the piano didn't exist, he'd decided to play the damn thing today?

Ten more minutes passed, Arlo moving on from butchering Mozart to Brahms's lullaby. That one was easier, so it was a little better, but not by much. It didn't, however, do as intended and lull me back to sleep. How long could he play? My subconscious laughed at the question when there'd been days where I'd played for hours straight without stopping for food or water, and had only dragged myself away when my bladder threatened a messy protest if I didn't. That was different, though. Playing the piano was my life. It used to be your life.

When Arlo moved onto Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, I sighed and swung my legs out of bed, resigning myself to the inevitable. Once I'd pulled on sweatpants, I wandered out into the main room, taking a deep breath before sticking my head into the adjoining room. "Why are you torturing me?"

Arlo smiled, but kept playing. "Because I'm playing the piano or because I'm playing it badly?"

Both. "Because it's too early for something this heavy."

Arlo's fingers stilled on the keys and he changed to Beethoven's Ode to Joy. "Better?" I winced as he played the next set of notes wrong. He grimaced. "Ignore those."

More wrong notes followed. "What about those?"

Arlo flashed me a grin. "Those as well. I bet you're realizing why I never played for you six years ago."

"It crossed my mind."

He stopped playing and shifted his weight back on the piano stool. “I didn’t want to see that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“The look that says you wish I’d had a better piano teacher when I was a kid.”

“You had a teacher?” I winced. Wow! That had been brutal, even for me. “I mean...”

“You said it. You can’t take it back. Poor Mrs. Shufflebottom will turn in her grave. Or at least she would if she was dead. Last I heard, she was still going strong, though, and had eight grandchildren.”

“You expect me to believe that was her name? She sounds like a Roald Dahl character.”

“She had certain similarities to one. If I could grow a mustache as magnificent as hers, I’d never shave. She taught me every Wednesday and Friday after school for three years.”

I couldn’t help myself. “And had she ever seen a piano before?”

Arlo shoved the piano stool back and stood. “We can’t all be born with magic in our fingers and music in our heads.” He swept a hand over the vacated stool. “Come on then, show me how it’s done. Put my playing to shame.”

I almost fell for it, Arlo’s maneuvering damn close to expert. No doubt he could play better than he’d made out. Maybe not much better. But he’d definitely fumbled a few notes he could have made. He thought that if he got my hands back on the piano keys that the universe would realign itself and everything would be alright. If only life was that simple. Instead of taking the seat offered, I took a step back. “I’m hungry. I’m

guessing I'm cooking breakfast, that playing music took priority for you today."

By the time Arlo joined me in the kitchen, I already had sausages sizzling in a pan. I didn't look at him as he came to stand on the opposite side of the breakfast bar. "Sausage sandwich," I said. "I thought we could use the last of the bread."

"Fine by me." Silence stretched on just that beat too long before he broke it. "I'm sorry, Rudolf. I thought if I could get you playing again... that you'd get over this stage fright thing."

"It's not stage fright."

"No? Then... what is it? Talk to me. Tell me about Germany."

I turned the sausages over before lifting my gaze to Arlo's. "You're expecting a traumatic story. Something somebody said, maybe. You're going to be disappointed because I don't have one for you."

"So what happened?"

I set to work on buttering the bread while contemplating the question. "I used to love playing. Like really love it."

"I know you did. I remember. While we were making the documentary, you lived and breathed music. Sometimes we'd be talking, and you'd get this look on your face, and I'd know you weren't listening to a word I was saying, that you'd gotten an idea for a musical composition in your head and you were desperate to try it out. Your enthusiasm was..."

"Sad?" I suggested.

“Inspiring. I wondered if...”

The reluctance to end his thought had me searching Arlo’s face for clues about what he’d been going to say. “You wondered what?”

“I wondered if you’d ever look at a person the way you looked at a piano.”

There was a lot of information to take from what he’d said. I settled on humor first. “I can promise you I’ve never had sex with any of my pianos. No matter how much money anyone has offered me to film it.”

Arlo’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s a joke, right?”

“Well... no one’s actually offered me money to have sex with a piano. Yet. But people have offered me ridiculous sums to pose naked on top of one. So the good news is that even if I never play again, I have ways of earning an income. For a few years, anyway. I just have to get my cock out for the paying public.”

“I’m sure any photos would be more tasteful than that.”

“Probably.” I replayed Arlo’s comment about the way I looked at a piano and went down a different avenue. “Did you like me back then?”

“What?”

I could tell from his expression he knew exactly what I was referring to, but was buying himself some time. “Six years ago.”

“Of course I liked you.”

“Yeah, but did you like me?”

“You were seventeen.”

“I was a month away from being eighteen.”

Arlo rolled his eyes. “And that makes all the difference.”

I fixed him with a stare. “You’re avoiding the question.”

“Says the person who still hasn’t told me what happened in Germany that night.”

I pulled a face. “Fine. Answer the question and I’ll tell you as best I can.”

“Promise?”

I let out a weary sigh as I took the cooked sausages off the stove. “I promise.”

“If I say yes, I’ll sound like a pervert.” Twin flags of color had appeared on Arlo’s cheeks. They made him look so adorable that it was all I could do not to reach across and pinch his cheek like he was a kid and I was his auntie.

“Still not an answer.”

“Yes.”

It was so grudging that I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. “Pervert!”

“You’re not funny.”

“Good job I’m not a comedian, then.” I sliced the sausages and shared them out equally between the two slices of bread. “Sauce?”

Arlo shook his head. “Just pepper.”

I added a generous amount of pepper to both and then shoved one in his direction. After pouring myself a coffee, I joined him at the small dining table. The curtains were open, sunlight streaming in through the window. No fresh snowfall. Sun. The snow felt like an hourglass ticking away the days and hours. Or maybe it was hours and minutes.

“Germany?” Arlo asked after a few minutes. “I kept my side of the bargain.”

I blew out a breath. “I don’t think the story starts in Germany. I think it starts months before that. Maybe as much as a year before.”

“Go on,” Arlo urged.

“It’s simple. Somewhere along the line, I lost the love for playing.” I might have said it was simple, but my increased heart rate as I admitted the truth, and the slight sweatiness of my palms, showed that for the lie it was. “It was fine at first. I could go through the motions and nobody seemed any the wiser. I guess when you’ve been playing as long as I have, muscle memory takes over.” I took a bite of my sandwich, Arlo waiting patiently for me to continue while I chewed and swallowed. “After all, what does it matter if I’m not feeling it?”

“It matters,” Arlo said quietly. “It’s like any job. If you start hating it, then it becomes torture.”

“I didn’t hate it. I wouldn’t go that far. It just didn’t feel the same as it once had. Maybe that’s inevitable, and it happens to everyone.”

“Your schedule was too busy. Your management should have known that.”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

“How many documentaries do I make a year?” Arlo asked.

I hid a smirk behind the rim of my mug. “You don’t know?”

“Two or three. I made four one year, and it made me want to go and live in a cave for six months. It was too much. It made me hate the process. Just like you playing too much robbed you of the joy of it. I vowed to have a better work/life balance after that. Luckily, I can do that because there isn’t anyone to tell me what to do. No one I listen to, anyway.”

I contemplated his words while I made inroads into my sandwich. Was it that simple? “I don’t know what happened in Germany,” I admitted. “I’d been out the night before, but it wasn’t what I’d call a wild night. I’d had a few drinks, but no drugs. I’m not an angel, but I don’t do drugs nearly as much as the media make out. I hadn’t picked anyone up. I’m not a complete idiot. I knew I had a concert the next night.” My fingers curled around the table edge while I did what I’d avoided doing ever since that night: recalling it in vivid technicolor. “I didn’t want to go on stage, so I guess I already knew something was amiss. Jade told me not to be so stupid, that I couldn’t let the audience down, that it would be a logistical nightmare she wasn’t willing to deal with in terms of ticket refunds and media attention.”

Arlo snorted. “I’m rapidly coming round to your way of thinking that she’s a bitch. And I haven’t even met her.”

“I guess if I was being kind, I’d say she thought I was throwing a tantrum, that she was doing her job and reminding me of the consequences of my actions. It wasn’t like she could have forced me to go on stage if I’d really dug my heels in.” Arlo’s facial expression said he didn’t agree, that there was more than one way to force someone to do something they didn’t want to do.

“Anyway, I went on. And it was fine at first. There’s always an energy that comes from the audience that helps no matter how tired or rundown you are.” I took another bite of my sandwich. I hadn’t cooked it to let it go cold while I rambled about Germany. “I did a show once in... I think it was Portugal. Or maybe it was Spain. Definitely a Mediterranean country. I had flu and I was running a temperature. I felt like absolute shit and just wanted to stay in bed. Yet, I played better with the flu than I did in Germany. I just couldn’t seem to find my groove. And the harder I tried, the worse it got. I’ve never experienced anything like it before. I could have kept playing, but the audience deserved better. And the next piece I had coming up was Chopin’s Ballade No. 4, which in case you don’t know is challenging at the best of times. God knows what I would have done to that piece of music. So I bailed and left the stage.”

“Have you played since?”

I wanted to lie. I wanted to tell Arlo that of course I had, that I wasn’t a child scared of my own mind. Knowing he’d see straight through it, I shook my head.

Arlo took a sip of his coffee. “You’re burned out. You know that, right? All the alcohol, the drugs, the”—his lip curled slightly—“one-night stands are about you self-medicating. It was your way of trying to relax when what you really needed was a break from everything.”

“Maybe. But how pathetic is that? I sit on my arse and play the piano, for God’s sake. I’m not negotiating multi-million pound deals or running into burning buildings to save lives.”

Arlo was already shaking his head before I got halfway through my speech. “I’ve seen the way you play and you give everything. Heart and soul. It’s physically and emotionally draining. You can’t do that night after night for years on end and not expect it to take its toll. How many concerts did you do last year?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea.”

“You averaged three a week,” Arlo informed me. “I worked it out. And that doesn’t include all the personal appearances or charity events, or—”

“I get it,” I said, worried that listening to a long list of things I did would make me exhausted just from hearing it. “I need to do less.”

“That, and you need to find the joy in it again. You need to remember why you did it in the first place.”

When Arlo stood and held his hand out, I knew exactly where he was taking me, a pit opening up in my stomach. I took his hand anyway because I trusted him.

Arlo

I was all too aware of the precipice I balanced on, that I risked making things worse when I had zero qualifications as a therapist, which was probably what Rudolf needed. Instead, I was relying on blind instinct, and so far today, that hadn't served me well, my plan to get him to show me how it was done so heavy-handed that he'd seen through it in seconds. It wasn't all bad, though. He had opened up and at least talked about it.

And instead of distracting him and doing something fun, I'd dragged him back to the piano. The stool was plenty big enough for two if we sat close. No hardship there. Rudolf sat, but kept his fingers on his lap. My heart thudded in my chest as I rested my fingers lightly on the keys. "Mrs. Shufflebottom liked duets."

"Did she?"

There was no reading anything from Rudolf's tone. "She did. And she loved Christmas."

"I'm still not convinced you haven't made her up."

I laughed. "If we're ever back in England at the same time, I'll take you to meet her."

"Is there a Mr. Shufflebottom?"

"Why? Are you thinking of having a crack at her? It was the mustache that did it for you, wasn't it?"

A reluctant smile pulled at the corners of Rudolf's lips. "I do like a good mustache."

I ran a hand over my clean-shaven face. "If only I'd known I would have grown one for you. Maybe you would have fallen in with my dastardly plans quicker if I had."

"Oh, undoubtedly. Lack of a mustache was the major flaw in your plan."

I took Rudolf being able to laugh and joke as a good sign. Of course, that might change once I started playing. And there was no guarantee he'd feel any desire to join in. A lot hinged on me choosing the right song. With that in mind, I ran through my repertoire, wishing I'd had more time to add to it over the past few years.

Only when the silence had long since grown sharp edges did I play, launching into the first few notes of Fly me to the Moon . I could tell from the slight lift of Rudolf's eyebrow that the choice of song had surprised him. He'd probably expected me to go for something classical, something more suited to him. But that was precisely why I hadn't.

This time, I played to the best of my ability. Which wasn't by any means expert, but was a damn sight better than I'd been playing while I'd waited to see whether Rudolf would leave the bedroom or choose to ignore me. When I reached the point where someone else would normally join in, I held my breath, telling myself that if he didn't, it was no big deal. It would just mean I'd pushed him too far, too fast, and he wasn't ready. He was only twenty-three. He had all the time in the world to get over whatever mental blocks had taken root.

When a tentative hand crept into view and started playing an accompaniment to my notes on the higher keys, there was no holding back my smile. By the time we reached the most energetic part, where we both needed two hands, Rudolf was smiling too, the sight bypassing my cock and going straight to my heart. When the song reached its end, I turned to him. "Was that so bad?"

“It was surprisingly good fun,” he admitted. “What else have you got?”

Over the next hour, we worked through several light-hearted songs, Rudolf easily able to improvise the second part, such was the depth of his talent. We’d tried it the other way round on a couple of songs, but I’d failed miserably, much to Rudolf’s amusement. I didn’t mind him laughing at me as long as he was laughing. Seeing him playing the piano and enjoying it was the only gift I needed this Christmas.

“How about something Christmassy?” Rudolf suggested. “I thought you said Mrs. Shufflebottom, who may or may not exist, taught you some Christmas duets.”

“She exists.” I thought for a moment, knowing I risked ruining everything by playing the song I wanted to when it strayed into classical territory. But how could I not when it was the perfect song? “Carol of the Bells,” I announced. “Or as I like to call it, The Carol of Rudolf Bell.”

“You smooth talker, you.”

“That’s me. I’m wasted making documentaries.”

“You are indeed.”

With it being a classical piece, I got the full Rudolf Bell experience, his fingers dancing over the keys to leave me feeling like I always lagged a step behind. The huge smile on his face as he played said he didn’t mind. Once we’d finished, I sat back with a contented sigh. “I can’t believe I just got to play a classical duet with the Rudolf Bell.”

He gave an exaggerated eye roll. “Shut up.”

“I’d ask for your autograph if I had something for you to write on.”

“Shut. Up.”

“I suppose you could sign my chest.”

“I’ll do something to your chest.”

“Promises, promises.”

Rudolf heaved out a sigh, and I gave him time to gather his thoughts. “So I guess I can still enjoy playing. Maybe I just need a break from my usual repertoire.”

“And to play less,” I insisted, determined to hammer the point home. No one could endure a schedule like Rudolf’s for the last few years and stay sane.

“And to play less,” Rudolf agreed. “Although my schedule is set for at least the next year, so that won’t go down well.”

“They work for you. Not the other way round.”

“They work for my father.”

“Then let him play the damn piano.” Something about that tickled Rudolf and he cracked up, tears streaming from his eyes when he eventually stopped laughing. “Care to share the joke?”

“Picture the packed auditorium. The lights go down. A hush falls over the crowd as Jeremiah Bell places his hands on the keys. And then... Twinkle twinkle little star rings out. I did not get my musical talent from my father. It was all from my mother, God rest her soul.” Rudolf stood. “Thank you.”

I squinted up at him. “For what?”

“For showing me that things aren’t as dire as I’d imagined. Even if your method of going about it was about as subtle as a sledgehammer.”

“Would you expect anything less from me? You know, given I abducted you from outside a nightclub.”

Rudolf’s only response to that was a small smile before he left the room. I let him go, sensing he might need some time on his own to collect his thoughts. Once a few minutes had passed, I wandered into the adjoining room. It was empty, Rudolf either in the bedroom or bathroom. I picked one of the Christmas ornaments up, the box sitting next to the bare tree we still hadn’t decorated. Would Rudolf want to be involved in decorating it? The evidence of the past week said probably not. I hung the glittery snowman on a branch midway up the tree and picked up another.

“Arlo!”

“Yeah?”

“Come here! You’ll want to see this.”

See what? What could Rudolf possibly have stumbled across in the bedroom that he deemed that interesting? I placed the second snowman back in the box. “Coming.” The sight that met me when I poked my head in the door had me grinning from ear to ear. Rudolf had stripped off his sweatpants and positioned himself on his hands and knees so his arse faced the door. His look back over his shoulder was nothing short of provocative. “Doggie style,” he said with a leer.

“I can see that.”

“He held up a condom. Last one, so... no pressure, but make it worth it.”

I went over to my suitcase and pulled out a box. “Tada!”

“Remind me,” Rudolf said, “to take you to task later for denying you were bringing me here as a sex slave, despite making sure you had a shitload of condoms at your disposal.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Of course it wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t!”

“You’re lucky I’m more relieved we’ve got some.” Rudolf jerked his chin at my clothed state. “Clothes off. Only one of us is naked here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rudolf made a sound of pleasure in his throat. “Sir! I could get used to that.”

I rid myself of my clothes in record time, Rudolf’s naked perfection a lure that demanded action. It was funny that I’d ever thought I stood a chance of resisting him. He’d sealed my fate as soon as he climbed into the back of the rental car. I ran a hand over his flank, Rudolf arching his back in response. “I was thinking,” he said, “that this would be a perfect pose for those porn shots of me on the piano. What do you think?”

“I think only I should get to see you like this.” I winced. That had come out sounding far more possessive than I’d intended. Of course, other men would get to see him like this. All his future boyfriends. A husband one day.

“Oh, really,” Rudolf virtually purred. “Want me to have your name tattooed on my

arse?”

Yes. “That won’t be necessary.” I rolled the condom on, my cock already hard enough to drill wood.

“What do you want it to say?”

“I don’t want it to say anything because I said no.” I dribbled lube on my cock and gave it a couple of strokes to get my fingers lubed up.

“Arlo Thomas was here?”

“Classy.”

“Property of Arlo Thomas?”

“I don’t think that would stand up in a court of law.”

Rudolf laughed. It cut off abruptly as I slid my lubed fingers between those perfectly muscled cheeks of his and brushed the pad of my thumb over his hole. He relaxed forward, resting his forehead on his arms, the only sound his labored breathing. “So this is how I get you to shut up,” I teased as I pressed the tip of my thumb inside.

“Until I start squealing, yes.”

“You can squeal as loud as you want here and no one will hear you.”

Rudolf laughed silently, his body shaking. “On my first night here, I would have taken that as a threat.”

I pushed my thumb deeper to open him up. In this position, all bets were off to how

long I'd last once I got inside him, so the least I could do was offer a measure of foreplay. I gave him a few strokes with my thumb before swapping it out for a finger, and then two, Rudolf gyrating beneath my ministrations. My other hand wasn't idle, sliding over thigh, stomach, and nipples, before finally wrapping around Rudolf's hard cock. I kept it still, just feeling the weight of it resting in my hand as I gave his arse my full focus, Rudolf's moans coming at more regular intervals. And because it was him, they were almost musical. I might have joked about the music we'd been playing being the carol of Rudolf Bell. This, though. This was the carol of Rudolf Bell.

"Fuck me, Arlo. Fuck me like you mean it."

How was I supposed to turn down a request like that? And I did mean it as I climbed on the bed, rested my hands on his lower back, and pushed slowly inside. This would be someone else soon. But today, it was me. And I was going to make him come so hard he'd see stars.

We found a rhythm quickly, Rudolf's back muscles flexing as I drove into him and he pushed back. In this position, he personified topping from the bottom, Rudolf still managing to be the one in charge. I stroked his cock while I fucked him. Or at least I thought I did, but maybe it was more Rudolf fucking my fist. We filled the room with harsh pants and moans as we worked toward our common goal. My hands left indentations on his skin from how hard I gripped him as I thrust harder and deeper, straining to fuck him the way he wanted it. "I could fuck you forever," I gasped out, barely aware of what I was saying as pleasure gathered at the base of my spine.

Rudolf shook beneath me with silent laughter. "Lovely sentiment, but I'd be way too sore."

We let our bodies do the talking after that, coming so close together it was as near as damn it simultaneous. Certainly the closest I'd ever managed. I dealt with the

condom immediately before joining Rudolf in the bed, my lover still breathing heavily. He turned his head toward me and I kissed him. Kissing was the one thing missing from the fuck I knew would prove the yardstick for sexual partners for years to come.

We lay together under the covers for some time, sometimes kissing, sometimes talking about meaningless stuff, sometimes tracing patterns on each other's skin, but always touching. It was a moment in time I wished I could freeze. A moment that told me I'd been right to fear falling for Rudolf, but that it was too late because I already had.

Rudolf

The last few days had lasted both a lifetime and no time at all. And yes, I recognized that wasn't possible, but that was how it felt. Arlo and I were inseparable. We'd baked bread together. Mostly Arlo, with me watching and pretending I was interested in what he was doing rather than just him. We'd chopped wood. Complete role reversal there, with Arlo doing the watching and urging me to do it shirtless so he could take some photos to sell to the media. We'd bickered during both.

We'd gone for long walks in the snow without running into any more wolves. We'd played stupid board games that I'd deny playing until my last breath, but that had made me laugh so much I couldn't breathe. We'd bickered some more. We'd worked our way through Arlo's supply of condoms, my lover still unable to come up with a convincing reason he'd had them with him.

We'd made a snowman. The biggest and best snowman. Arlo's words, not mine, but I'd secretly agreed. We'd shared things about ourselves from the past six years. Thoughts. Hopes. Dreams. Arlo dreamed of winning an Oscar for one of his documentaries. I just dreamed of being happy and fulfilled, of having the freedom to express myself. We'd played the piano some more. I'd even attempted to teach Arlo a more complicated piece, fitting my hands over his like some parody of the famous scene from *Ghost*, but without the pottery wheel.

The tree, however, remained undecorated, apart from the snowman Arlo had placed on it a few nights ago. "It might catch on," I said.

Arlo rolled his head my way from where he sprawled across the sofa in just a pair of

shorts. “What might?”

I slid my hand up his thigh, loving the feel of the hair beneath my palms. But then there wasn't anywhere on Arlo I didn't like to touch. Crease between his neck and his shoulder. Soft inner thigh. Ticklish armpit. Hell, even his ankle hadn't escaped my attentions. I'd mapped every inch of Arlo and still intended on checking I hadn't missed anywhere. “Minimalist tree decorating. You could trademark it and pass it off as some kind of statement. A rage against the commercialization of Christmas or something. Follow it up with a documentary.”

Arlo threw a cushion at me. I caught it and threw it back, laughing when Arlo's supine position meant he couldn't move fast enough to avoid it and it hit him in the face. “Don't dish it out if you can't take it, Thomas.”

“I told you what happened with the tree. I got a better offer. Would you rather I'd taken one look at you on your hands and knees as naked as the day you were born and said, hang on, I'll be back in a bit once I've decorated the tree.”

“If you had, you wouldn't still be breathing. And I'd have set fire to the tree. Which would have made all my efforts in chopping it down with my superior axe expertise completely pointless.” Arlo rolled his eyes at “superior axe expertise,” but I let it go to wander over to the tree. “It doesn't seem right that only you've put your stamp on it, though.” I rifled through the box of decorations, bypassing the snowmen to see what lay beneath. Angels? Nope. Didn't really do it for me. Little Santas. Better, but not ideal. “Ah!” I announced. “There isn't really anything else that could represent me, is there?”

I plucked out a reindeer and, after some careful consideration, added it right next to the snowman. So close that they touched when they swayed. “Voila!”

“Voila indeed,” Arlo said with a laugh. He pushed himself up to sitting on the sofa.

“C’mere.”

I went, Arlo wrapping his arms around my back and burying his nose in my crotch. “Want me to blow you?”

Was that even a question? Was the pope Catholic and all that jazz? I couldn’t imagine ever saying no to an offer like that from him. “Yeah!” I could already picture the rest of the afternoon. We’d made tentative plans to revisit the treehouse to see if we could see the wolf cubs again. That wouldn’t happen. The afternoon would be a slow, sticky celebration of naked bodies and I was all for it. They had wolves in zoos. Or I could just look at a picture of one.

Arlo’s eyes were pure sex as he hooked his fingers in my waistband and tugged. “I’m going to blow you and make you come, and then I’m going to fuck you. Any objections?”

“Not a single one.”

We both frowned as a noise came from the bedroom. I’d been here eleven days and I could categorize every single sound in our private space. Washing machine. Kettle. Piano. Snow falling off the roof. Laughter. Moans. Running water. Wind through the trees. And this was none of those. It was tinny. Artificial. Like something from another world.

Arlo frowned, his fingers tightening on my hips. “What is that?”

“My phone.” Could he hear the dread in my voice? I’d barely looked at it since Arlo had returned my SIM card and I’d reunited the two things. It had held its charge because I hadn’t used it. Why would I listen to music when I had Arlo to talk to? Why would I look at photos when he was infinitely more attractive than anything I’d photographed? Why would I reread messages when none were from him?

“How long have we had reception?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea.” I’d bet everything I owned the answer was not long, though, or it would have rung before.

“You should probably answer it.”

The sound cut out. “Too late.” The relief that cut through me as sharp as a knife was short-lived, the phone starting up again only a few seconds after stopping. The same person? Someone different? I’d never set it up so I had different ring tones for different people. Now, I wished I had, because while I couldn’t think of anyone I wanted to talk to, there were varying degrees ranging from Clint, the guy who did my hair who I’d missed an appointment with at the bottom of the scale, to Jade or my father at the top.

“Maybe don’t answer it,” Arlo said in a complete turnaround from him being the one to suggest I did exactly that.

“I have to. Things don’t disappear just because you ignore them.” I knew that from experience. It took more. Like enough alcohol to tranquilize a horse. Arlo’s fingers clung to my hips for a second before he peeled them away. I reached my phone just before it stopped ringing for the second time, snatching it off the top of the chest of drawers and bringing it to my ear without looking to see who it was. “Hello.”

A sharp intake of breath. “So you do still answer your phone?”

Jade. “Apparently so.”

“Do you know how much damage control we’ve had to do?”

Her phrasing was interesting. All business. Nothing about people being concerned

about my welfare. Which I guess I shouldn't surprise me considering she was my manager, but some expression of concern at me having disappeared off the face of the earth for eleven days would have been nice. Or something about my father being worried. Perhaps I was being unfair and that would come.

She didn't wait for an answer to her question, which was just as well because I didn't have a clue how much damage control they'd had to do. A lot judging from the tone of her voice. "You've missed six public appearances, Rudolf."

"Have I? That's a lot in the space of eleven days. Who came up with that schedule?"

"You've had flu, by the way. Terrible flu that meant we had to call for a doctor and you couldn't get out of bed. It was the best excuse we could think of that wouldn't damage your reputation. Of course, the media didn't believe a word of it. They've had you on a weeklong bender."

"Of course they have." I wandered back out into the main part of the cabin, the bedroom feeling too claustrophobic. Arlo was exactly where I'd left him, his expression too carefully blank to be natural. When I mouthed "Jade" at him, he nodded.

"It's cost us an awful lot of money."

"Us?" I questioned.

"You."

I stopped by the window, staring at Arlo's rental car parked outside. Where the snow had previously reached the top of the Volkswagen's tires, now it was less than halfway. On some level I'd registered the snow becoming easier to get through, but I'd become an expert at ignoring it, and Arlo hadn't mentioned it either.

“The magazine interview would have been incredibly lucrative. Not to mention the reach they have across several countries.”

“You just mentioned it.”

“Don’t give me shit, Rudolf. I’ll be billing you for the overtime I’ve had to do over the past few days.”

I tuned out and let her words wash over me without listening to most of them, only the odd one getting through. “... percentages... had to promise them you would reschedule and do it for free.” I raised an eyebrow at that one. “... written apology signed by you...”

“Signed by me? Who signed it?”

Jade let out a frustrated sigh, like she didn’t want to be bothered with such questions. “I don’t know. It’s hardly important.”

“If someone’s forging my name, I think it’s incredibly important. I’d quite like to know whether it was the publicist or the cleaner.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“Oh, I’m missing the point, am I?” Annoyance crept into my voice, Arlo turning from where he’d left the sofa to make tea to stare at me. I didn’t look at him, concentrating on the scene outside instead. The perfect winter scene that seemed tainted by having Jade’s voice in my ear while I viewed it. If only I’d never insisted on Arlo returning my SIM card, I could still exist in a state of sweet oblivion. Instead of having to listen to her harangue me, I’d have Arlo’s mouth on my cock, teasing out an orgasm. “I’m fine, Jade, in case you were wondering. I assume you forgot to ask that question.”

“What?” She sounded genuinely befuddled by my comment.

“I’m assuming you’ve tried to call me multiple times. Usually, if someone goes missing for eleven days and can’t be reached, people fear the worst.”

“Rudolf, whatever game you’re playing, and whoever you’re playing it with, it’s time to stop. You’ve had your fun. Time to come back to the real world.”

I rested my forehead against the cool glass, wishing for a blizzard to start up. It didn’t. It hadn’t snowed in three or four days. Maybe even longer. Time had become an alien concept. This cabin had no sense of place or time. It was just Arlo. For once, though, Jade was right. It was time to return to the real world and face up to things.

“Where are you?” Jade asked.

I laughed at the question. “Where are you?”

“In France. Where you should be.”

“I’m still in Austria.”

“Where exactly?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

I risked a glance at Arlo. Never had making a cup of tea required so much concentration. “It’s complicated.” I might have once stated that I’d throw Arlo to the Austrian police, but that was another world. No way was I going to mention his name. Not to Jade. Not to anyone. Which left me in something of a bind. Well, that

and the fact that I wasn't lying when I said I didn't know where I was. "Somewhere outside Salzburg. I got snowed in at a cabin and there was no phone reception. I didn't deliberately take myself off the grid. It just happened." Jade made a noise which disputed that without her needing to put it into words. "I have a car, but the roads aren't clear enough for it to be safe. A few more days, maybe." And if I was lucky, it would snow again.

"I can send someone," Jade said without hesitation. "I'll make sure they have a roadworthy vehicle. Four-wheel drive. Snow chains. Whatever's required. I just need to know where to send them, so cough up the information."

Arlo appeared next to me. He passed across a piece of paper and I stared at the words written on it. This place is called Villa Taube.

"Villa Taube," I said.

"Great. Now we're getting somewhere. I'll have someone there by tomorrow morning and they'll drive you to the airport. Be ready, Rudolf. No more fucking about. We'll talk when you get to France. You can make a statement about your illness to the media, say that you're almost back to full health and that you'll be resuming your promotional duties once you're well enough. I've made a list of private clinics. You can choose which one you'd prefer, but you need to attend one of them."

"Oh, I do, do I? Thanks for letting me know that. Very kind of you." I hung up before she could say anything else that would have the rage building in me boil over.

Arlo passed me a mug of tea and I curled my hands around it, the slight sting of a too hot mug welcome on my palms. "I'm guessing," he said carefully, "the conversation didn't go well?"

I shook my head, my throat too thick with a mixture of emotions to risk saying anything. Arlo lingered for a moment, but when I said nothing, withdrew to give me some space. I stared out of the window until the mug in my hands had gone cold, all without taking a single sip.

Arlo

Three hours after taking the phone call from his manager and Rudolf was still upset. He wouldn't admit to it, but he didn't have to. It was in his monosyllabic replies to any question I asked, the hour he'd spent staring out of the window, the time after that he'd spent alone in the bedroom when we were usually together, and in the way he was playing with the food I'd put in front of him rather than eating it.

It felt like one conversation with his manager had undone all my good work in bringing him here and getting him to open up. I appreciated it wasn't quite that simple, but it was hard to know what to say that wouldn't make things worse. The alternative, though, was just letting him walk out of my life without saying anything. "So, what happens tomorrow?" I asked. "After Jade has someone pick you up, I mean?"

Rudolf moved a meatball from one side of his plate to the other. "They're going to drive me to the airport."

"What about your stuff at the hotel in Austria?"

He shrugged. "No idea. She never mentioned it. I guess she'll get someone to pick it up if she hasn't done so already. The room was only booked for a couple more nights after you—"

"Borrowed you."

A hint of a smile, gone so quickly I wasn't sure I hadn't imagined it. "It's all

replaceable. Clothes mostly.” He dropped his gaze to his chest, where he wore one of my T-shirts as usual. “I haven’t worn my own clothes in over a week, so I’m not going to get my knickers in a twist over them. If they’re gone, they’re gone.” He plucked at the fabric, pulling it away from his chest. “Do you mind if I borrow this tomorrow? I don’t want to wear my club clothes to the airport, in case I get papped.”

“Take anything you need.” I cut a meatball in half and ate it. “And then what?”

“I’m supposed to fly to France.”

“And what, just pick up where you left off?” There was no keeping the disdain out of my voice. “Will your father be there?”

Another sidelined meatball joined the first as Rudolf shrugged again. “I doubt it. He’s probably back in Hertfordshire.”

Hertfordshire was where the family home was. It was the same place where the documentary crew and I had filmed, the mansion big enough to house all of us until Jeremiah had given us our marching orders and virtually had us escorted off the premises. “Won’t he want to see you? He’ll have been worried, surely?”

“I don’t know.” Rudolf gave up on any pretense of eating after only a few mouthfuls and pushed his plate away. “Sorry. I’m not hungry.”

“It’s fine.” It wasn’t fine because it had me concerned what would happen when Rudolf left here. Would he slide straight back into the hedonistic lifestyle that stopped him from having to think? “You don’t have to go tomorrow.” And there they were, the words I’d been doing my best not to say in case they sounded too desperate. “You can stay here. I’ve rented this place right through to the week after New Year. We can stay here. It’s been fun, right?”

A longer smile this time, genuine warmth in this one. “It has been fun. I won’t say I’ve enjoyed every minute because the first day was decidedly rocky. You know, what with my brush with hypothermia... But after that.”

“So... stay. When the car comes tomorrow, tell it to drive away. Tell them you’ll come back under your own steam, that you’re taking Christmas and New Year off.”

Rudolf reached up to massage his neck while he contemplated my words. He’d say yes and everything would be alright. We’d continue the way we’d been. Lost in our own little bubble of happiness. “I can’t,” he finally said. “Life doesn’t work like that.”

I leaned forward, any interest in my meal long gone. “Who says? We’re in charge of our own destiny.”

“It’s a lovely fantasy.”

“It’s not a fantasy. You can be anything you want to be, whether that’s Rudolf Bell, world-renowned concert pianist, or Rudolf Bell, gardener.”

“Gardener!” He raised an eyebrow. “Where did that come from?”

I shrugged. “You’re good with an axe. I guess I went from axe to spade. But, my point is that what you do doesn’t define you. It’s just one part of you. You’re so much more than that.”

“Maybe.”

“Definitely.”

He smiled. “You’re sweet.”

“But?”

“But nothing. I was just making an observation that Arlo Thomas, the man who asks the hard-hitting questions in his documentaries, is actually quite sweet.”

“Yeah well,” I grumbled. “What I do doesn’t define me either.”

“I have to go tomorrow. I’m just putting off the inevitable if I don’t.”

The annoying thing was he was right. Out of the two of us, he was the one being objective about the situation. “I could come with you.” I hadn’t known I was going to make the offer until the words were already out there. It made sense, though, the idea gaining substance in my mind. I could look out for him. Do what no one else in his life seemed willing to do. Put the man first rather than his career.

“No.” The immediate rebuttal might have been delivered softly, but it didn’t stop it from stinging like a bitch, and I had to work hard to keep my expression neutral. “I have to face up to things on my own. There’s going to be a lot of questions asked about where I’ve been, what I’ve been doing.”

“Tell them to fuck off. Tell them it’s none of their business. Tell them you’ve had enough of dancing to their tune.”

Rudolf took my plate and his over to the sink and started filling it with water. “You telling me what to do is no better than them telling me what to do.”

Ouch! That shut me up. Because I was guilty of that. I hadn’t turned up at his hotel and asked him if he wanted to come away with me. I’d just taken it upon myself to decide for him. Therefore, no matter how difficult it was, I had to let him do what he thought was right. This wasn’t about me. It was about him.

We didn't have sex that night, and I was glad. It would have felt like a melancholy act, a goodbye that I didn't want to say. Instead, we lay wrapped in each other's embrace, the darkness enshrouding us. I wanted to tell him how I felt, but doing that would put pressure on him.

"Are you still awake?" I finally asked when the silence had gone on for too long.

"Yeah. Just thinking."

I trailed my fingers down his arm, memorizing the way his skin felt. "About what?"

"Stuff."

"Oh well, glad we cleared that up."

"I'm coming back here, you know?"

A tiny kernel of hope exploded in my chest. "You are?"

"Unless you don't want me to?"

"I want you to." I need you to.

"Then, I will." I wanted to believe him, but I was realistic about all the things in the big wide world that could change his mind. "And if I don't, you could always kidnap me again."

"Oh, we're back to using the word kidnap, are we?" I didn't have to see Rudolf's smile to know it was occurring. "Yeah, well, you should probably know that I used up all my favors to get hold of the information about your whereabouts."

Fingers carded through my hair, his touch feather-soft and oh so welcome. “I’d love to know who told you that.”

“I bet you would.”

“I could torture you.”

“You could try.”

“You need to remember that I’m good with an axe.”

“I can hardly forget when you keep reminding me every opportunity you get.”

“Shit! That reminds me. I need to chop some wood for you in the morning before I go.”

I pinched him, Rudolf squirming away with a laugh. “I can manage.”

“Just don’t chop anything off that I like.”

“I’m not going to chop my cock off.”

“I was talking about your hands.”

“Of course you were.”

I tried to stay awake and keep Rudolf talking for as long as I could, unwilling to give in to the inevitability of the next day arriving, but eventually I fell asleep with Rudolf snoring softly next to me.

Everything was painfully normal the next day—Rudolf even rediscovering enough of

an appetite to eat breakfast—until the midnight blue Land Rover drew up outside just before midday. The driver didn't come in, leaving the engine idling outside while he waited. There was no emotional goodbye. No kiss either. There was just Rudolf lifting a hand in one last wave as the vehicle drove off, with him in the back of it. He hadn't repeated what he'd said last night in the bedroom's darkness about coming back, and I hadn't asked, too scared he'd laugh it off and put it down to drowsiness talking. Would he be back? And if so, when? Tomorrow? The next day? I guess only time would tell. All I could do was wait. And be here for him if he returned.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and stared at the number I'd inputted that morning.

Arlo: Safe trip X

An hour passed before I got a reply.

Rudolf: Thanks.

One word. No kiss. It didn't bode well. At least I had his number, though. It was something.

Rudolf

The driver wasn't someone I recognized, and he wasn't chatty. Either because he had limited English, or because he was pretending that was the case to get out of talking to me. It didn't bother me. I wasn't exactly in the mood for conversation myself, happy to sit and watch the scenery go by. Well, not happy. That wasn't the right word to use.

"We go straight airport," the driver announced, his first words in thirty minutes. "Closest one."

"Great." I couldn't have given the word any less enthusiasm if I'd tried. "And then what? Is Jade meeting me there?"

"Jade is..." His brow furrowed. "I cannot recall word in English." A cow? Too pissed off with me? "Besch?ftigt."

"Ah, besch?ftigt," I parroted without having a clue what it meant and no doubt butchering the pronunciation. "Sounds like Jade."

"Boozy!" the driver announced proudly.

I hid a smirk at the image of Jade being so incapacitated she couldn't get on a plane. Maybe I could put her in rehab instead. "I think you mean busy."

"Yes, busy." The driver slammed his hand down on the steering wheel. "English has many same words. Pronounce one way means one thing. Pronounce other, something

different.”

“Yeah.”

“You have German name. You not speak German?”

I shook my head. “My mother was half German, but she didn’t speak it very well herself, so she never taught me.”

“Pity. German is good strong language.”

He was chattier after that, introducing himself as Jakob and telling me about his wife and three children. At least it made the journey pass quicker, and it distracted me from thinking about the miles I was putting between myself and Arlo. We soon left the wilderness behind, Jakob taking us through the center of Salzburg before drawing up in front of the large gray building with Salzburg Airport emblazoned across the front.

I sat and stared at it. For the last eleven days, it had been just me and Arlo. In the car, it had been just me and Jakob. Now, there were people everywhere. Coming out of the airport. Going into the airport. Getting in and out of cars. So much metal as well. And noise, even without opening the car door. “Is airport,” Jakob said helpfully with a wave of his hand, presumably in case I’d failed to notice the building.

“Yeah... It’s definitely an airport.” I unclipped my seatbelt and said goodbye to Jakob, and then there was nothing left to do but take a deep breath and immerse myself back in civilization. At least there were no photographers, either outside or inside. I stood as people rushed past me, some of them not polite enough to give me space and almost barging me out of the way in their rush to be wherever they needed to be.

“Rudolf?”

I turned to find a mountain of a man waving his arm at me. Nelson. Of course they’d send him. He’d probably been given strict instructions to pick me up and put me on the plane if I showed any signs of changing my mind. I fought the urge to walk in the opposite direction, knowing it wouldn’t do me any good in the long run. I walked slowly, though, dawdling as much as I could. How pissed would Nelson be on a scale of one to ten for me giving him the slip that night? Because I didn’t doubt he’d gotten it in the neck.

“Nelson,” I said when I couldn’t make the trip last any longer and came to a stop in front of him.

“Rudolf.” Was that a hint of a smile on his face? I couldn’t think of any reason he’d be smiling. Perhaps he had wind. He held something out and I took it warily. “Your plane ticket,” he explained somewhat unnecessarily as I stared down at the rectangle of white paper, focusing on the word Paris. “Jade has booked you a suite in the Four Seasons Hotel.”

“And you’re supposed to accompany me there?”

“I’m supposed to accompany you.”

I narrowed my eyes at Nelson, something off about his careful wording. I studied the ticket again. It felt like a merry-go-round, like accepting the piece of paper in my hand as fact would delete all the hours since I’d left that nightclub. Delete Arlo. I’d told him I’d be back, and I’d meant it. But how was I supposed to do that if I was in Paris doing Jade’s bidding? I had his number. I could call him, but that wasn’t what I’d told him, and more importantly, it wasn’t what I wanted. If I called him, I’d be making excuses.

“The gate closes in fifteen minutes,” Nelson stated. “We need to make a move.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t move, though. I just kept staring at the ticket. Then I carefully and deliberately ripped it in half. “Whoops.”

The only discernible reaction from Nelson was a slight raise of one eyebrow. “I’m guessing you have no intention of getting that flight?”

I shook my head and then I stood tall, craning my neck back to look into Nelson’s face, the bodyguard at least a foot taller than I was. “No. Do you have something to say about that?”

The glimmer of a smile again. This time, it definitely was a smile. “I do. What plane are we getting?”

“One to London.”

Nelson nodded. “I see.”

“And you can’t stop me from doing that.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“No?”

Nelson shook his head. “I work for you. You tell me to jump and I ask how high.”

“Since when?”

“Always have. You were just too... distracted to notice it.”

I had an inkling he'd been going to use another word, but had censored himself. "So what if I tell you to get on the plane to Paris? Will you do what I say?"

Nelson thought for a minute. "No."

"Right..."

"Because my job is to keep you safe, and if I let you get on a different plane, I'm not doing it."

"I guess we're both going to London, then."

Nelson smiled. "I guess we are."

We dropped lucky with flight times, a Lufthansa flight leaving for Heathrow within the hour. I bought two tickets, and we took a seat on the concourse to wait for boarding to start, Nelson somehow squeezing his bulk into a seat far too small for him. He pulled his phone out and stared at it with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "I will have to let Jade know you won't be arriving in Paris as expected."

I let out a hefty sigh. "If you do that, she'll shout at you and then she'll call me and shout at me." I pulled my own phone out. "So we may as well cut out the middleman, which is you, just in case you're not getting that reference."

Nelson held his hands up. "Not going to argue with you."

"I bet you're not." I stood, an upright position seeming a much better vantage point to make the call from. I paced for a few steps, gave myself a good talking to, and then pressed call before I could chicken out.

"Jade Turner."

She sounded... pleasant. Which told me she hadn't checked the caller ID and didn't know it was me. Had we ever had a conversation I'd describe as pleasant? I didn't think so. She'd exploded into my life one day and set about making it as miserable as possible. And I'd let her. Well, it was time to stand up to her. Time to stand up to everyone who thought I was nothing but a puppet to be pushed in front of a piano or a camera.

What was it Arlo had said? Something about being the captain of my destiny? He was right. He'd been right about everything. I had been spiraling. I might not have an alcohol or drug problem, but I'd have developed one eventually, given I'd been using any means necessary to avoid confronting my unhappiness. And I had needed a break. An opportunity to get my head on straight and work out where things had gone wrong. I hadn't asked to be saved, but I'd needed it. "It's Rudolf."

"Oh." It was amazing how she could squeeze disappointment, irritation, and the desire to end the conversation before it had even begun into a tiny one-syllable word. "You should be on the plane. Is the flight delayed?"

"I'm not coming to Paris."

"You can't—"

I didn't give her space to finish. "I can. And I am. I'm getting a plane to Heathrow. And then I'm going home to speak to my father. I need you to get on a plane to London and meet me there."

"I can't just drop everything here."

"You can't drop looking after my interests to meet with me ? I suppose it would be different if I said my father wanted to see you."

“Does he?”

There was a note of confusion in Jade’s voice, like she could no longer work out which way was up. Why had I let her push me around for so long? “He does,” I lied. It was possible she’d call him, but I’d take the risk. I wanted to see her face-to-face. Not in Paris, though. It was better to kill two birds with one stone. More, if I could. “I’ll see you back at the house in Hertfordshire. Oh, and Jade.”

“Yes?”

“Get the earliest flight you can. No dilly-dallying.” I hung up before she could respond. When I turned back to Nelson, his smile stretched from ear to ear. “What?”

He looked me up and down. “What happened to you in Austria? You’re like a different man.”

I sat back down, stretching my legs out in front of me while I pondered how to answer the question. In the end, I settled for the truth. “I met a man. Well... technically, we’d already met. So perhaps I should say I reconnected with a man. He made me see things in a different light and I’m taking charge of my life from here on in. I would say no more Mr. Nice Guy, but I never was that, especially when I was drunk. So I apologize for anything mean I ever said when I was pissed. Or when I was sober,” I added as an afterthought.

“Apology accepted.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Nelson said with a grin. “Anyway, you never struck me as mean. More... lost.”

The house looked the same as it always had. Same latticed windows. Same ivy-covered exterior. Same carefully striped lawn, the gardener under strict instructions to never let the grass get beyond regulation length.

Nelson stood silently at my shoulder as I attempted to view it with the eyes of a stranger rather than someone who had grown up here. I knew I'd had a privileged upbringing, but studying the ten-bedroom house after spending the best part of two weeks in a one-bedroom log cabin made me view it slightly differently. Not that the log cabin hadn't been luxurious. It had. I doubted there were many with a piano in situ.

"When was the last time you came home?" Nelson asked, his voice surprisingly soft for such a big man.

My brow furrowed as I thought about it. My schedule hadn't allowed for more than a day or two off, and who wanted to spend that time on yet another flight?

I did a quick set of mental calculations, the answer surprising me. "A couple of years."

Nelson nodded. "You don't come home for Christmas?"

I shook my head. "Not for a while. I had a concert in Australia last Christmas Eve. It was too far to fly back, even if I wanted to. I spent Christmas day on the beach."

"Sounds fun."

Had it been? I couldn't recall. Had I spoken to my father that day? If I had, it had been a quick five-minute phone call with neither of us saying much of consequence. It had been months since I'd last spoken to him, most of my news of him coming from Jade. And most of what she'd said had done nothing but build resentment. It

made me wonder what she said to him about me.

Stood here though, looking at the house and remembering the good times—of which there'd been plenty—I had to wonder why I'd never questioned Jade's version of events, why I'd never picked up the phone and spoken to him myself.

The door opened with me still standing on the drive. Not Jeremiah Bell. Jade. Of course, she'd gotten here before me. "Must have hopped on her broomstick," I muttered. Nelson gave a snort of laughter, but didn't comment.

"We have a lot to talk about," she said. Her gaze drifted over me, a slight furrow appearing on her brow as she took in Arlo's clothes. "If this is your new image, then we have even more to discuss than I thought." I swept past her and into the house. "I thought we could meet in the dining room," she called after me. "It has that large table."

"No."

"What?"

I turned to face her, walking backwards so I could still make progress toward where I wanted to go. "I said no. I must have said that word to you before?" Her expression as she trailed after me said I hadn't. Interesting. Perhaps I'd relied too heavily on actions speaking louder than words, and finding my voice a lot earlier would have solved no end of problems.

"If not the dining room, then where?"

"My father's office. I assume he's here?"

"He is." I spun round at the familiar deep rumbling voice to find myself face-to-face

with the man himself. Jeremiah Bell was a stocky, dark-haired man with blue eyes and a neatly trimmed beard. Undoubtedly handsome, but about as unlike me as it was possible to be, most of my genes inherited from my mother. I might have doubted paternity if it wasn't for us having the same shaped nose. Before I could speak, he gripped my shoulders and studied me, his brow creased in concentration. "Jade's concerned you're having a breakdown."

I laughed. "Is that what she said?"

Jade sighed. "You're behaving erratically, Rudolf. Even more erratically than usual."

I shrugged my father's grip off and stepped into his office. It was reassuringly familiar, all dark wood paneling and green velvet. The decor had never matched the rest of the house. It did, however, match the man who spent most of his time in here, which is how I'd known where to look for him.

Both my father and Jade followed me in, wearing matching expressions of concern. Where Nelson had gone, I had no idea. He probably figured he was better off out of it, and I couldn't say I blamed him. I leaned against the corner of my father's desk and crossed my arms. "First," I stated, "I'm not having a breakdown. I have never had a breakdown. And while we're on the subject of what I'm not. I'm not an alcoholic or a drug addict either. Or a sex addict." My father's eyebrows drew together at the last one and I almost laughed. Yeah, maybe I didn't want to discuss sex with my father. "So, I don't, nor have I ever, needed to go to rehab."

Jade frowned. "I only want what's best for you."

"Not true," I argued. "You want whatever keeps me on stage performing night after night so you can pick up your percentage and make yourself a nice little nest egg." Before she could deny it, I turned to my father. "You were the one who hired Jade. Why her?"

“She had the best credentials out of the people I saw. She knew the most about the music business, and she had previous experience of working with classical musicians.”

“I’m very good at what I do,” Jade said, almost looking hurt by me questioning her ability to do her job.

“Maybe you are,” I conceded. “But you’re not the right person for me. I need someone who listens better and who is capable of feeling empathy.”

“I can feel empathy!”

Yeah, she was definitely hurt, but I’d come too far to back down just so she could keep her ego intact. “Just not for me, apparently.”

“What are you trying to say, Rudolf?” My father spoke with a carefully measured tone.

I met Jade’s gaze. “You’re fired.”

She blinked a few times and then looked to my father. “Tell him he can’t do that. You hired me, not him.”

My father regarded us both silently for a few seconds. “I hired who I thought were the best people for Rudolf. If he says differently, then that’s his decision. You should have talked to me about this,” he said to me. “I thought you were happy. I thought everything was going well.”

“Not really,” I admitted. “I can’t keep going the way I am, or one day I will have that breakdown. The alcohol, the drugs...” I left sex out of it this time. “They were all about not having to face up to things. If I gave myself time to think, I had to confront

how miserable I was.”

“You should have talked to me,” Jade said.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Really? You never treated me like I was anything but a massive pain in the arse. You wanted a robot with no flaws who didn’t need to sleep and could work a ridiculous amount of hours.”

“I wanted—”

My father cut in, his focus on Jade. “I think you should probably leave now. You’ll receive payment for the notice period specified in your contract.”

“If it helps,” I said to her, “it’s not just you that’s fired. I want a clean slate. New manager. New publicist. New everything. And I’ll be setting my own schedule from now on. A reduced one where I have time to breathe, and time to do other things besides work.”

She shook her head. “This is going to cost you so much money.”

I shrugged. “I don’t care if it leaves me without a single penny to my name.”

My father put his hand gently on Jade’s shoulder and steered her toward the door. “Thank you for your hard work these past few years, Ms. Turner. I’ll make sure you receive an excellent reference.”

I left the office to find Nelson leaning against the wall outside as my father continued with Jade all the way to the front door. With the office door having remained open, Nelson had presumably heard every word. “I know,” he said as my father closed the front door with Jade on the other side of it. “I’m fired.”

Was he? I thought about it for a moment. I'd seen a completely different side to Nelson today now that the blinkers were off. And he'd seemed no fonder of Jade than I was. "Actually... no, you're not. Not unless you want to be. If you can still stand working for me, your job is safe."

Nelson smiled. "Anything you say, boss."

My father had hired a team to come in and decorate the house to its usual high standard for the festive period. The tree was an eight-footer that almost touched the ceiling of the living room, tastefully decorated in white and gold. Yet all I could think about when I looked at it was another tree hundreds of miles away. One I'd chopped down myself that only had a snowman and a reindeer hanging from it.

Would Arlo decorate it in my absence? I doubted it. I pulled my phone out and checked my messages, but he'd sent nothing apart from the one wishing me a safe journey while I'd still been in the car. It had only been that morning, but it seemed like a lifetime ago. It was funny how being in a different country could do that to you. Like miles became days.

My father came to stand next to me and we stood and regarded the tree together in silence for a few moments. "I'm not a big fan of Christmas," he said, "but I do this for your mother because I know if I didn't, she'd come back and haunt me."

I laughed. "Yeah, she would."

He cleared his throat. "I really thought Jade was the right person to handle your affairs."

"I know." I'd known that as soon as he'd taken my side without questioning it. "I have to take a certain amount of responsibility for not speaking up when I should have done. We should have talked more." Understatement of the day.

“I called you after what happened in Germany. I wanted to check you were okay.”

“You did?”

“You don’t remember speaking to me?”

I racked my brain to recall such a conversation and came up blank. “No.”

“There was a lot of music and you were...”

“Drunk,” I supplied when my father tried too hard to be tactful.

“Yeah. I’m not sure you even realized who you were speaking to. I asked you to call me back, but...”

I winced. “Sorry. I was a bit of a mess.”

My father turned his head to study me. “What changed?”

“Someone rescued me from myself.”

“Someone?”

“Do you remember Arlo Thomas?”

My father thought for a minute, a frown marring his brow until realization struck.

“The documentary maker.”

“The documentary maker,” I agreed, my lips curling into a smile. “I’ve been with him for the last eleven days in a log cabin in Austria.” I studied my father carefully. When there were zero signs of disapproval, I continued. “We’re kind of a thing. Or at least I

hope we are. I promised I'd go back. I just need to sort my life out first. He's been good for me. He helped me rediscover my love of music." And so much more.

"I see." A guarded response from my father, which told me nothing. "Did you bump into each other?"

"You could say that." There were definitely times when the truth didn't help anyone, and this was one of them. If I told my father that Arlo had pulled some strings to find out my movements, tracked me down to a hotel in Austria, and then waited for me outside a nightclub, my father would be justified in telling me to stay away from him. If everything turned out the way I hoped, I doubted it would be a story we'd be telling people when they asked how we'd gotten together. "Why did you pull the plug on the documentary back then?"

My father reached out and poked one of the tree ornaments—a bell, ironically—to set it swinging, and we both followed its movements. "You were growing too enamored with each other."

"And you wanted me to be straight?"

He turned his head and pinned me with his gaze. "You might not believe me, and I might not always have gone about it in the best way... Ms. Turner's appointment is proof of that, but I've never wanted you to be anything but happy. Man... woman... donkey... It's all the same to me."

I snorted. "Well, the good news is I'm definitely not into donkeys. If it wasn't the gay thing, what was it?"

"You were too young. And you were both too ambitious at that juncture in your lives. How do you imagine it would have gone if you'd gotten together?"

I gave it some thought, picturing the Arlo I'd met six years ago. I hadn't been a virgin, but I hadn't exactly been brimming over with sexual experience either. "I don't think we would have lasted."

My father turned to face me. "And do you think you'll last now?"

I pictured Arlo's face—the slight lop-sided way he smiled; the way he rolled his eyes; the slight flush that suffused his skin when he got aroused; how he threw himself into any activity, whether it was sledging or playing cards; the way he couldn't use an axe for shit. "I really hope so."

My father pulled me into a hug, and I went willingly. I really had been blind for the past few years to believe he was the enemy. I vowed to do better from now on. With everything. My career. My family. And my boyfriend, assuming Arlo would have me. My father rested his chin on top of my head. "I'll look forward to meeting him. Perhaps he'd be good enough to pretend it's the first time."

I laughed. "Temporary amnesia that only affects one period in his life. I'll tell him, and I'm sure he'll be happy to oblige."

"I have one piece of advice for you," my father said. "Something you might not want to listen to."

I pulled back so I could see his face. "What?"

"You've just sacked your manager and all the other people who work for you."

"Not all," I argued. "I still have a bodyguard." My father's expression wasn't quite an eye roll, but I suspected he'd thought about it. "Most," I conceded.

"So before you disappear again, you need to put things in place. Someone to pick up

the pieces if you're serious about making your own decisions from here on in. Or your reputation might not recover enough for you to have that luxury."

Just because I didn't want to hear it, didn't mean he wasn't one hundred percent correct. Perhaps I'd been a little hasty in firing Jade, but it had felt too damn good for me to truly regret it.

Arlo

“I’m coming back.” Whatever I did in the cabin, wherever I was, those words kept playing on a loop. I’d believed them for the first three days, any noise from outside making me rush to the window in eager anticipation of watching Rudolf get out of a car and run into my arms. By day four, that confidence had waned. And now it was day seven. An entire week. All without a single word from Rudolf since he’d replied to the one and only text message I’d sent him.

Sure, I could have called him, but something had stopped me from taking that step. An unwillingness to face the truth? A fear of rejection? I didn’t know. All I knew was that he hadn’t come back. Was he back clubbing? Had he gone straight from my bed into someone else’s? If so, there was no pretending I wasn’t jealous and that it didn’t hurt.

Abandoning the breakfast of porridge I’d barely touched, I went over to the Christmas tree. I still hadn’t decorated it, determined to wait for Rudolf. I reached out and ran my finger over the reindeer ornament Rudolf had hung there. I missed him. I missed everything about him. His laugh. His scent. His teasing. The way his hair was permanently in his eyes.

The last week had been torture, everything in the cabin reminding me of him. The bed we’d slept in together. The sofa where we’d first been intimate. The piano we’d played. The table where Rudolf had tricked me into playing strip poker and I’d confided in him about what a shit show my marriage had been.

Feeling like the walls were pressing in on me, I struggled into my boots and coat and

stood outside on the porch. Which direction? Not East. That was where I'd chased Rudolf on that first day when he'd been intent on escaping, and where we'd cut the tree down. Not South. That was where we'd found the treehouse and watched the wolf cubs. Not North. That was where the hill where we'd gone sledding lay. Which left only one direction where Rudolf hadn't left his imprint. The river it was, then. While the snow was no longer deep, it hadn't melted altogether, lending my surroundings that pretty winter postcard effect.

Once I reached the river, I watched the current carry away twigs and leaves. It was the twenty-first today, meaning it would be Christmas in four day's time. Was I really going to spend it here alone, tortured by the memory of a man who clearly wasn't coming back? We'd had great sex; Rudolf wasn't a good enough actor to have faked it to that degree. But perhaps for him, that's all it had been, and I'd been naïve to believe it was more. Just like you thought you and Bruno would last when you married him. Yeah, I wasn't the best judge when it came to relationships.

I lowered myself to a large, flat rock that provided a perfect seat, ten minutes passing in silent contemplation before I reached a decision. A week was long enough to wait. I'd return to the cabin, I'd pack my stuff, and I'd drive to the airport. I wasn't sure where I'd go after that, but that wasn't something I needed to decide right now. Somewhere hot, maybe. Where I could lie on the beach and pretend it wasn't Christmas.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out to stare at the screen.

Rudolf: Hey!

Seven days of silence and I got, hey. It should have annoyed me. Yet, the warmth in my chest spoke of anything but annoyance. Wherever he was, at least he'd thought of me. What if this is him telling you thanks for the good times, but that was it? Well, there was only one way to find out if that was the case.

Arlo: Hey yourself.

Worried the conversation might end there like our last text exchange, I quickly typed out another message.

Arlo: How are you?

Rudolf: I'm good. Really good, actually. Life is back on track.

What did that mean? Just ask him if he's coming back? What's the worst that can happen? That was easy to answer. He could say no. And then at least you'll know and you can get on with your life and stop lingering here like a lovelorn fool.

Rudolf: Is this like some sort of tribute to Goldilocks?

Had he sent that to the wrong person? A photo loaded slowly, the image a bowl with porridge in. Wait! That was my bowl. The one I'd abandoned because I didn't have any appetite. Which meant...

Rudolf: Or are you re-enacting the Marie Celeste? Because it feels like a bit like that. You know, abandoned building but with signs that someone was here not too long ago. I was tempted to stick my finger in the porridge and see if it was still warm, but I managed to resist.

Arlo: You're here!

Rudolf: Duh!. Where are you?

I half fell off the rock. In my haste to clamber to my feet, I skidded forward on a patch of snow, narrowly avoiding tumbling into the river. "Try not to kill yourself, you idiot," I chided as I righted myself.

Arlo: On my way back. Wait there. Don't go anywhere. I'll be ten minutes. Fifteen at most.

Rudolf: I'll be waiting.

I'd never cursed as much at anything as I did at the snow on my way back, the stupid white stuff curtailing all my efforts to set a new land/speed record. When the cabin came into sight, my hopes of seeing Rudolf standing in the doorway looking out for me, as eager to see me as I was to see him, were dashed when it was firmly shut, just as I'd left it. Probably to keep the heat in. There was another car parked behind mine, a four-wheel drive. Rental, I assumed, unless Rudolf had splashed out.

I completed the last few meters in a run, snow be damned, before flinging the cabin door open. A jeans and T-shirt clad Rudolf, hair as wild as ever, and his feet bare, leaned against the kitchen counter watching the kettle boil. He turned his head as I exploded through the door, his lips twitching at the manner of my arrival. "Ah, there you are. Perfect timing. Kettle's just boiled."

"You came back!" My coat and gloves proved uncooperative as I hastened to get free of them. My boots were a little less rebellious, but not by much.

"I said I would." Rudolf paused from pouring boiling water into two mugs. "Ah! You didn't believe me. You thought I was just saying that."

"No. Yes. Maybe." I shook my head, my thoughts a mad whirl with Rudolf right in front of me and looking good enough to eat. "I don't know. Not at first, but then you didn't text, you didn't call, you didn't—"

"Write a letter or send a pigeon." He grimaced. "Yeah, I know." He ran a hand through his hair. "I had this crazy notion of being back before you'd noticed I'd left, like in a day or two. But it didn't work out like that." He aimed a look of accusation

my way. “You didn’t call either.”

“No.”

He lifted his chin. “Why not?”

“Because... I don’t know.”

Green eyes narrowed on me, sizing me up. “Yeah, you do. Be honest. I can tell when you lie now.”

That was concerning. “Because I thought that even if you had meant it at the time, that you might have changed your mind, that it was nothing but sex for you, that we were a moment in time you’d forget about as soon as you returned to civilization.” There you go. How’s that for honesty? It wasn’t quite telling him I loved him, but it wasn’t far from it. It certainly set my stall out for wanting him, for wanting a permanence we’d never discussed.

“I wouldn’t have come back if that was the case.”

“I know that now.”

“Yet, you’re all the way over there, just staring at me.”

I stalked over to him, carefully extracting the mug of coffee from his hands and placing it on the kitchen counter before yanking him into my arms. He was warm and pliable and smelled like Rudolf. “How long can you stay?”

“How long do you want me here?”

“How long’s a piece of string?”

“How long is the River Nile?”

“What?” I breathed against his hair.

“Oh, sorry. I thought we were just asking questions about how long stuff is.” He stroked his hand down my back, his touch making me shiver after doing without it for so long. “I sacked Jade.”

“Good. She sounded like a bitch. How did your father take it?”

“Surprisingly well. I’ve been letting her drive a wedge between us. If I’m honest, I don’t think she did it deliberately. She just really thought she worked for him and that I didn’t get a say in anything. Partly my fault for not seeing it and for letting it go on for years. Mistakes were made by all parties. I sacked everyone else as well. Everyone except for Nelson.”

I searched my memory banks for whether I was supposed to know that name and concluded I didn’t. “And Nelson is?”

Rudolf’s hands slipped lower to the swell of my arse, my cock immediately showing its appreciation. “My bodyguard. He should have been with me that night at the nightclub. You know, to stop me from getting into fights. Or from getting into strange men’s cars.”

I nuzzled Rudolf’s neck. “Thank fuck he wasn’t there, then. Or God knows where we’d be. How come he made the cut?”

Rudolf shrugged. “I discovered months later than I should have done that he’s a nice guy with a decent sense of humor. Plus, he’s built like the proverbial brick shithouse. Anyway, my father pointed out that I couldn’t sack everyone and then just run away, that if I wasn’t going to sort stuff out myself, that I needed someone to do it for me.”

“And did you find someone?” Rudolf was hard, the ridge of his cock pressing against my thigh.

“Yeah. Sophie Lamb. Have you heard of Faustino Maslin?”

“The violinist?”

“Yeah. She manages him. I called Faustino, and he only had good things to say about Sophie, so I hired her. Sophie is going to sort all my shit out. Clear my schedule. Apologize to anyone who needs apologizing to on my behalf. Make a statement to the media. And then in January, we’re going to sit down together and come up with a plan for my future where I’m not constantly circling the globe. She told me that less is more, that limiting my concerts will only make me more in demand.” Rudolf pulled back, his eyes shining. “So in answer to your question, I’m here for Christmas if you’ll have me?”

“I’ll have you.”

Rudolf tipped his head back, his hips starting a slow grind against mine. “What about after Christmas? I want you in my life. I just wanted things sorted first so I could focus on you properly.”

So straightforward, but that was Rudolf all over, far braver than I’d ever be. A man could change, though. A man could even put a failed marriage behind him and not let it stop him from saying something he knew to be true, no matter how scary it might be. “I want you in my life too. So much. I...”

Rudolf raised an expectant eyebrow when I didn’t finish. “You...?”

“I love you.” The words came out in a rush and then I held my breath for what Rudolf’s response might be. My heart thudded in my chest as he extricated himself

from me and took a step back.

“Good.”

I stared at him open-mouthed, so amazed by his flippancy that I forgot to panic. “I tell you that, and that’s all you’ve got to say. Good?”

“I’m just relieved you’re not trying to marry me.”

“That is not funny.”

“It’s quite funny.”

“For you, maybe. I’ve still got all the fallout from the media to weather when they find out.”

“You can borrow Sophie. Note, I said borrow, not kidnap. I know the two things have the same meaning in your head, but they’re really not the same. I like her, but not so much I want to get up one morning and find her tied up on the sofa.”

I’d stopped listening, more interested in the bare skin being revealed as Rudolf pulled his T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. “I’m hot,” he lied. “Must be something to do with the hatchet job someone did on the logs for the burner.”

“They’re fine.”

“I looked in the shed. They’re massive. I’m surprised you could fit them in.” I said nothing as his fingers moved to the fastening of his jeans, refusing to admit that I’d had to take the logs back outside to chop into smaller pieces when I’d had that exact problem. Rudolf undid his button. “I have plans for us for the next few days.”

It was hard not to assume that all those plans were sexual when Rudolf accompanied his words with pulling down his jeans, his underwear coming with them. And if they were, he wouldn't hear any arguments from me. I stared at his cock, my mouth watering. "Yeah?"

"We need to decorate the tree."

"Okay."

"I have presents to put under it and they'll look stupid if it's not decorated."

"Presents?"

"For you."

"You got me presents?"

"Duh! It's Christmas. I could hardly turn up here empty handed."

"You're enough of a present." Especially stood stark naked as he was. I couldn't think of anything I wanted more.

"You smooth talker, you."

"It's true." I made a mental note to drive to Salzburg. Rudolf might have presents for me, but given I hadn't fully believed he'd return, I had nothing for him. It would have felt like tempting fate.

Rudolf wrapped a hand around his cock and gave it a stroke. "Where was I? Oh yeah, plans. I want to go sledging again while there's still snow."

“I can live with that.”

“I want you to teach me to make bread.”

“You’re very demanding.”

“Yep. You’ll need to get used to that now we’re together.”

“I’ll adapt.”

“Naked Twister.”

“Sounds fun.” Or at least what it would lead to sounded fun. I had a feeling the game itself would be short-lived.

“Lots of sex.”

“I’ll do my best. Can we start now?”

Rudolf grinned. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve already started. I’m just waiting for you to catch up.”

I was on him in a flash, hustling him toward the bedroom and not stopping until we had a mattress at our back. I spent the next hour reacquainting myself with all things Rudolf, the moans I pulled from him only spurring me on to find new unexplored places. In true Rudolf style, he waited until after we’d both orgasmed to tell me he loved me, too.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:04 pm

Rudolf

I woke first on Christmas Day, heaving myself up onto one elbow to watch Arlo sleep. His lips curling up at one corner made me wonder what he was dreaming about to make him smile. Was it awfully selfish to hope it was me? Had I become so possessive I needed to commandeer his sleeping hours and his waking ones? Yes, was the undeniable answer to that.

Absence might have made me realize I'd fallen for him, the hours of sorting my life out dragging like they were weeks, but in the past few days I'd discovered that there were degrees of being in love, my feelings for him only growing now neither of us were holding back.

I trailed gentle fingertips over his cheek, Arlo's smile growing wider. "I love you," I said, the words still enough of a novelty that a rush of emotion accompanied them. "And I know I joke about stuff, but I'll always be grateful for you saving me when I didn't know I needed it. My hero! We need to get you a cape."

Arlo stirred, and I waited for him to offer his own sweet words. Probably something along the line of he'd do it a hundred times if he needed to, from now until eternity. "Wolf cubs," he said, his eyes still tightly closed. "Furry."

I blinked. "What?"

"Soft. Want to stroke one."

I laughed as I swung my legs out of bed. So much for him dreaming about me. That

would teach me to believe in my own hype. Pulling on sweatpants—my own this time, although sharing Arlo’s clothes had proved a hard habit to wean myself off, particularly when he didn’t seem to mind—I went to make breakfast. I paused by the decorated tree to admire it for a few seconds. It was far prettier now it had gained more than two ornaments. It leaned slightly to one side, Arlo accusing me of not chopping it straight while I maintained that he’d been too lazy to dig enough rocks up to anchor it securely. The real reason probably lay somewhere between the two, but neither of us would admit it when bickering and baiting each other was far more enjoyable.

Arlo still hadn’t surfaced by the time I’d cooked breakfast, so like the good boyfriend I was, I carried both plates—a full English because it was Christmas and it reminded me of the first morning we’d spent together, minus the hangover and the bad attitude on my part—into the bedroom on a tray. “Rise and shine, sleepyhead.”

My boyfriend made a meal out of heaving himself up against the pillows. I didn’t mind. Not when it gave me time to ogle his bare chest. He ran a hand through his hair. “You cooked breakfast?”

“No, the little gnome who lives in the forest did it, but I didn’t see why he should take all the credit for it, so I took a leaf out of your book and I bundled him into the back of the car and drove him out to the middle of nowhere. A different middle of nowhere.”

Arlo maneuvered the tray onto his lap. “It’s a good job I like sarcasm.”

“Isn’t it?” I sat cross-legged on the bed with my tray in front of me. “Or we wouldn’t last two minutes.”

“Do you think we will last?” Arlo grimaced as soon as the question left his lips. “Ignore me. Don’t answer that. I’m apparently intent on ruining Christmas. I’ll get

my name changed to Grinch.”

“Grinch Thomas. I like it. It has a nice ring to it. Plus, it’ll be a great icebreaker when we go to parties.” When Arlo didn’t smile, I contemplated what he’d said some more while I chewed and swallowed. “I get it, you know. You hate having a failed marriage behind you because you don’t like failing at anything.”

“Does anyone?”

I shrugged. “Some people are better at it than others. You said it yourself, though, that you were too hasty with Bruno. We’re going to take things much slower.”

Arlo laughed. “Are we?”

I took his point. We were kind of living together, and we’d jumped into bed within days—ninety-five percent my fault, but whatever. “Yeah, we are. No holidays to Vegas. No setting foot inside a jewelry store. Easy.” It begged one question, though. I toyed with my fork while I considered whether now was the right time to ask.

“What?” Arlo asked.

“Are you getting a divorce? I know you’re not getting back together, but you’ve never mentioned formally ending it.”

“Does it bother you, me still being married?”

I paused from eating to hold Arlo’s gaze. Joke, or tell the truth? I went for the latter. “Hell, yes. I don’t like other men having a claim on what belongs to me.”

There were two reactions Arlo could have to my words. Either it would make him want to run, and if that was the case, maybe I was wrong and we wouldn’t last. Or

he'd like it.

The slow smile that spread across his face as he nodded said he liked it. "Yeah, we're getting a divorce. We just agreed to wait until we've made a joint statement to the media. You know how these things have a habit of escalating out of control unless you keep a tight lid on them. And Bruno and I might not have agreed on anything else during our marriage, but we agree on being in better control of our divorce than we were with our marriage."

"Makes sense."

Arlo nodded. "And just for the record, I didn't need to ask that question."

"What question?"

"The one about whether we'll last. You love me and I love you, so we'll make it work."

"We will," I agreed. "And if I forget that, you can always kidnap me again."

Arlo groaned. "You're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Nope."

We cooked Christmas dinner together, Arlo in charge of the turkey and the potatoes while I did the rest, both of us taking our roles seriously while also having fun with it. Neither of us had any complaints about the finished meal. In a show of belief that hadn't passed me by, Arlo had stocked one of the kitchen cupboards with wine.

I had one glass. Not because I had anything to prove, but because that's all I needed. I was no longer the man of a few weeks ago who needed to numb his misery with

alcohol, drugs, or the sexual admiration of a random nameless man. Genuine happiness had filled in those gaps. I didn't have to deal with Jade anymore. My father and I were back on good terms. I didn't have to go on stage until I felt ready. And last but certainly not least, I had Arlo.

We'd left opening presents until after dinner, Arlo insisting on making a solo journey to Salzburg a couple of days ago and returning with wrapped gifts he'd added to mine under the newly decorated tree. It dawned on me as we sat with presents in front of us that being in love didn't mean we had everything sorted, like my question about his divorce this morning. "We're going to live together, right?" I asked as I picked up the first present Arlo had instructed me to open and shook it, the action not providing any clues to what lay inside.

"Do you want to?"

I'd grown used to Arlo's habit of answering a question with another question. It might be an evasion tactic that served him well with the people he interviewed, but I wasn't one of them. "Do you?"

Arlo's lips quirked. "It's not a straightforward thing, is it? I work all over. You work all over. Saying yes doesn't solve that problem."

"No, but it's a start."

"You know the answer is yes."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to hear it."

"Then yes."

I dug my finger into a gap in the paper and ripped it open. "A wise man once told me

that when I fell in love, my priorities would change and I'd make it work."

Arlo laughed at his own words coming back to haunt him. I'd known when he'd said it he hadn't pictured himself in that role. Things were always more straightforward in theory than they were in reality.

"I guess we just need a base, and an agreement that we'll make time for each other," he said.

I ripped the paper off to uncover a box. "There you go. Easy. Where?"

"England?"

"Works for me. Maybe I can have that penthouse flat in Central London after all. And then I'm still close enough to visit my father." I opened the box and laughed, a pig mask staring back at me. "See. I knew you were a kinky devil. I'll start practicing my oinking and then we can see how loud you can make me squeal."

"Obviously, that one's a joke present. I couldn't resist when I saw it. We can start flat hunting once New Year is out of the way." The next gift was underwear, Arlo telling me it was so I didn't have to share his, and that I could model it for him later. Then he shoved another small box into my hands, this one unwrapped. I raised an eyebrow at it being from a jewelry store. "If this is a ring..."

Arlo rolled his eyes. "It's not a ring. Don't make it sound like I can't be with someone for five minutes without proposing."

"Well... if I said that, history would back me up."

"Just... open it." I opened it to find a chain with a hexagonal wooden pendant. "It's kind of snowflake shaped. I thought it could remind you of this place."

“It’s beautiful,” I said honestly. “And I take it back about you not being allowed in jewelry stores. That would be a travesty when your taste is this good.” I leaned over and kissed him. “Help me put it on.”

Arlo did, and then opened the gifts I’d gotten for him, a watch, and a box set of books he’d mentioned wanting to read but hadn’t gotten around to. The last gift had my heart rate picking up as I held it out. “This is for both of us.” Arlo took it and studied the envelope like he expected to be able to tell its contents without breaking the seal, the delay only making me more nervous. “I told Sophie it was a test for her, to see how quickly she could get things done. She came up trumps and had it all sown up within days. There was no way I couldn’t hire her after that.”

Arlo frowned. “What?”

“Open it.” He did and stared at the piece of paper inside, blinking like he couldn’t quite believe the evidence of his eyes. “Imagining other people here after us just didn’t feel right.”

He raised his head and stared at me. “You bought this place?” I nodded. “How?”

“Apparently, they’d been thinking about selling for a while. And once Sophie mentioned my name, Annika, that’s the lady who owns this place, couldn’t have been more keen for me to buy it.” I jerked my head to the next room where the piano sat. “She’s a classical music fan, hence the piano. She’s attended some of my concerts. I offered to throw in front row VIP tickets once I’m performing again and she even knocked some money off the asking price.”

Arlo looked like someone had slapped him in the face with a wet fish. “We’ve been here days and you haven’t mentioned it.”

“It’s a Christmas present. I’m not in the habit of blurting out what people’s Christmas

presents are.”

He waved a hand to where the pendant rested on my chest. “That’s a Christmas present. This is…”

“An investment. My accountant is always telling me I should put some of my money into property, so I have.” I tapped a finger on the deed he held. “Besides, it’s got both of our names on. Half yours, half mine. I figured it could be a bolt hole for both of us. I can’t see the paparazzi bothering with the drive, even if they find out about it. And if they do, we can always feed them to the wolves. The cubs need to eat. Although some of those fuckers would probably give them indigestion.”

Arlo shook his head. “I can’t believe you set this up before you came back.”

I shrugged. “Like I said, Sophie did all the hard work. I just answered her calls and said yes or no, and agreed to give some tickets out for a show that doesn’t exist.” Arlo waved the piece of paper in my direction. “You had that much faith in us?” He lifted his gaze to mine again. “I hadn’t even told you I loved you at that point.”

I gave him my cockiest grin. “I kind of knew. It’s like I keep saying, you’re an awful liar. Your face gives away a lot of stuff you don’t mean to. You were like a cartoon character with hearts coming from your eyes when you looked at me.”

Arlo leaped across the space and bore me down to the carpet, arms braced on either side of my head so I had to stare up at him. “You’re a…”

“A menace… A tease,” I finished for him. “Yeah, but I’m your menace and your tease. Whether you like it or not.”

Arlo grinned. “Oh, I like it. I like it a hell of a lot. Kidnapping you was the best decision I ever made.”

“At least you admit it was kidnap now. It—”

I didn’t get to finish what I was saying on account of being thoroughly kissed.

Arlo

I shifted in my seat, nerves getting the better of me as I stared at the lone piano in the center of the stage. I checked my watch. Ten more minutes before Rudolf was due to come on. I'd offered to stay backstage with him, but he'd insisted on going it alone. Now, with nerves eating away at me and ten minutes feeling like a lifetime, I wished I'd kept badgering him until he'd given in. At least then, I could have spoken to him and confirmed whether he still wanted to do this.

Shifting my gaze from the piano, I tried to concentrate on something else, the enormous Christmas tree at the side of the stage decked out in blue and silver, providing an adequate distraction. It had never been the plan for Rudolf's break to last the best part of a year; that was just the way things had turned out. I'd reaped the benefits of it, though, Rudolf accompanying me to Mexico when I'd made a documentary on drug crime on its streets, and to the USA later in the year for the far more lighthearted topic of wrestling.

The media had taken news of my divorce about as well as they ever took anything, and despite Rudolf and I being careful not to be seen together for at least a month after the announcement, they still added two and two together and came up with five to paint him as the other man, something I couldn't apologize enough for. Rudolf had taken it in his stride, pointing out that he'd had far worse things said about him, and that it made a change from being portrayed as a drug-addled sex addict. But it had felt like another thing he had to endure.

I checked my watch again, only a minute having passed. I prayed he came on stage on time or I wasn't sure I'd cope. Both Sophie and I had tried to dissuade him from

having his first concert at the Barenboim-Said Academy in Germany, but Rudolf had refused to budge. To him, it made perfect sense to exorcize his demons by reappearing on the same stage he'd once walked off halfway through performing. I hoped he would exorcize those demons, but there was no guarantee. He'd played the piano since, often putting in long hours, but I'd been his only audience. There weren't many people who got to wake up to a Rudolf Bell concert right outside their bedroom door, and I cherished every one of those moments.

Five minutes to go. A woman and her husband took their seats at the end of the row and I offered a nod when she looked my way. I'd never seen her before, but I knew those were the seats Rudolf had earmarked—as promised—to the couple he'd bought the cabin from. Our cabin. We'd spent three weeks in summer there, the break a completely different experience without the snow, but no less enjoyable for it. And at the end of next week, once Rudolf's series of concerts was complete, we'd go there again for our second Christmas. I couldn't wait for it to be just me and him. First though, I had to share him with an auditorium of a thousand people, the sense of expectation that permeated the air as they waited for his arrival on stage almost palpable.

The media were here, because of course they were. They were probably hoping he'd mess up again because that was far better fodder for their newspapers than him doing well. Rudolf's father hadn't been able to make it because of bad weather in London grounding flights. As if I'd summoned him by thought alone, my phone vibrated and I pulled it out of my pocket to find a text.

Jeremiah: How's it going? Is he nervous?

Given Jeremiah had once thrown me out of his house and terminated a project because he was concerned I might corrupt his son, it was nothing short of amazing that the two of us got on so well now. And if anything, things were the other way round these days, Rudolf far more of a corrupting influence than I could ever be.

Arlo: He's not on stage yet. Soon.

Jeremiah: Get him to call me later. I don't care how late it is.

Arlo: Will do.

When the lights dimmed, my heart lodged somewhere in my throat, a hush falling across the auditorium. Rudolf never had anyone introduce him, my lover deeming it as unnecessary admin, and pointing out that the audience knew who they were here to see, and that if they needed a compère to remind them, they perhaps shouldn't be out on their own.

It was another two minutes before Rudolf appeared on stage. He might have been naked in my bed only that morning, but even I wasn't immune to the striking picture he made dressed in black jeans that molded to him like a second skin, and a sleeveless white T-shirt that showed off his muscular arms. His feet were bare. Because new start or no new start, there would have been uproar if he'd dared to wear shoes. His hair was styled to look like it hadn't been styled at all. The media described it as "his just got out of bed" look. Well, I was an expert on what Rudolf Bell looked like first thing in a morning, post fucking, and any other hour of the day you cared to mention, and at no point did it look like that without help.

The crowd surged to their feet to applaud his entrance, and I went with them. If any of them had attended his aborted concert—and it would surprise me if they hadn't—they'd obviously forgiven him. To them, he probably oozed confidence. I knew him well enough to see the signs of strain: the tightness around the eyes, the shoulders an inch higher than they should have been, and the fingers curled into his palms hard enough for his nails to leave marks.

When he bounded over to the piano and took his seat on the stool, the audience sank into their chairs like they were so attuned to him, they wanted to synchronize their movements to his. We'd discussed at length whether he should say something, Rudolf

seeming to think he should at least acknowledge his long absence. It was Sophie who'd pointed out in that calm manner of hers that Rudolf always let his music do the talking, so why would he change that?

Rudolf took a moment to get comfortable before turning his head and looking straight at me. I gave him an encouraging smile, one that hopefully said I had every faith that this would go perfectly, and if it didn't, it wouldn't matter a jot to me and I'd love him regardless, because I'd never fallen for Rudolf Bell, public figure. I'd fallen for the sometimes sweet, sometimes acerbic, but always sexy as hell, man who lay behind all that.

Rudolf lowered his hands to the keys, and I held my breath. If there was one thing that had caused disagreements in the past few months, it was what Rudolf's opening piece should be. He'd been all for facing his demons straight off and playing Allegro Sonata, the piece that had caused him so many problems, with Sophie and I standing our ground and insisting it was far too complex and that he needed to work up to it.

Or—and this had been Sophie's suggestion—leave it out of his set list altogether. I'd known Rudolf wouldn't go for that because one thing he wasn't was a quitter, but it had been entertaining to watch Sophie come up with reasons. How Jade had ridden roughshod over Rudolf for so long when he had no problems standing up to Sophie, I had no idea.

Rudolf had eventually agreed to start with something simpler, but in those expectant seconds, before he pressed down on the first key, I didn't know whether he'd stick to the agreement or do what he wanted. His unpredictability, as infuriating as it might be, was what made life with Rudolf so interesting and would continue to do so for years to come.

I reached into my pocket and fingered the small box I'd been carrying around with me for the past month. I was unsure of the reception my proposal would get when I finally found the right moment to make it. It could be a yes. It could be a no. Or it

could be a quip about Arlo Thomas striking again and a question about whether the ring came with a ticket to Vegas?

As the first strains of Chopin's Nocturne in E flat major filled the auditorium, I relaxed back in my seat. Rudolf had stuck to what we'd agreed. He played it perfectly, emotion leaching out of every note. Twenty minutes passed in the same vein, Rudolf holding the audience—including me—in the palm of his hand. He reached the end of his current piece and, knowing what was next, I said a quick prayer.

Rudolf paused, tension creeping into his shoulders. His mouth moved over to the mic and the audience leaned forward expectantly. "The last time I played this," he admitted, his voice loud in the otherwise silent auditorium, "I did things to it I'm sure would have horrified Mozart if he were still alive. So I've got to tell you I'm a bit nervous about playing it again."

"Just do your best," a woman with a heavy Germanic accent shouted. "Nobody can be perfect a hundred percent of the time." If she'd been closer, I might have kissed her for choosing the right words at the right time.

"Yeah," a man shouted from farther back. "We'll all still love you regardless." Him, I wouldn't have kissed because other men telling my boyfriend they loved him was a step too far.

"Thank you," Rudolf said into the mic. "I just don't want to let you down. Again."

The audience surged to their feet to clap and cheer. Once they'd settled down, Rudolf started to play. By the time he was halfway through the piece, it was clear he had nothing to worry about, that lightning wouldn't be striking twice.

The rest of the concert passed in something of a blur, my judgment that the first half had been perfect sorely tested when Rudolf played even better, and I had to admit that

perhaps he'd been right in wanting to get Mozart out of the way so he could relax.

The lights came on as the audience rose to their third standing ovation of the night. Was that some sort of record? And then Rudolf was bowing and going off stage and the audience was chattering excitedly, most of it in German. I waited to go backstage until most people had already filed out, security checking my pass before letting me through.

The corridor bustled with people, some of whom I recognized from Rudolf's team, while others were unfamiliar to me, likely staff members of the Barenboim-Said Academy. It took a lot of "excuse me's and sorry's" before I got close to Rudolf's dressing room.

I heard him before I saw him. "Where's Arlo? Security has been told to let him through, right?"

"He's got a pass," the familiar voice of Sophie said. "It gives him backstage access."

"So where is he?"

I increased my pace, Sophie looking relieved when I rounded the corner. "I'm here." I gathered Rudolf into my arms and held him tight, aware of other people being present, but not caring enough about anyone except Rudolf to lift my head and find out who they were. "You were incredible out there," I whispered into his ear.

"Yeah? I thought they'd resent me for being away so long."

"There wasn't one person in that audience who gave a damn about that. They were just glad to have you back playing again."

"It's like I told you," Sophie said, immune to moments she perhaps shouldn't involve herself in. "People appreciate things more when they have less of them."

We both ignored her.

I brought the car to a stop in front of the hotel and lowered the window so I could shout out of it. “Hey, sexy man. Jump in my car and I’ll give you the ride of your life.”

Rudolf shook his head wearily as he stowed his case in the boot before climbing into the passenger seat. “If you’d said that the night outside the nightclub—”

I interrupted him before he could finish. “You’d have been in there like a shot and we wouldn’t have had all the drama of you pretending you didn’t want to be there.”

He rolled his eyes. “Actually, I was going to say I’d be single now, that I’d have run so far and so fast that I’d have probably crossed the Austrian border on foot.”

I laughed. “Likely story. Keep telling yourself that.”

During the drive to the cabin, I pondered the ring still burning a hole in my pocket, that perfect moment still not having arrived. What if I waited forever? What if a moment wasn’t perfect until you made it that way? I slowed the car before bringing it to a stop, nothing but trees on either side of us and the road empty of any other traffic.

A furrow appeared on Rudolf’s brow. “Don’t tell me we’ve broken down.” He lifted a hip and maneuvered his phone out of his pocket, releasing a breath as he studied the screen. “Thank God, we’ve still got reception. Who do I need to call?”

I snatched the phone out of his hand and threw it in the back seat. “We haven’t broken down. I just needed to talk to you. Well, to ask you something, really.”

“Yes,” Rudolf said.

I frowned at him. “You can’t say yes when you don’t know what it is.”

“I already did.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What if I was going to ask you to be the star of my next documentary?”

He shrugged. “Then, yes.”

“Really?”

“Why not? Things are going well for me again and if there’s one person I could trust to portray me accurately, it’s you.”

I tamped down on the warm feeling in my chest and focused on my aim. “What if I was going to ask to you to join me in the search for undiscovered tribes in the Amazon rainforest, and then when we find them, live with them?”

“Wherever you go, I go. It might be tricky to get a piano there, though. I might have to take up the xylophone.”

“What if I was going to ask you to marry me?”

“Then definitely yes.”

“Just like that?”

Rudolf shrugged. “You’re divorced and we’ve been together for almost a year, and I kind of love you.”

“Kind of?”

He grinned. “Just keeping you on your toes. You know I love you to the moon and the back. What were you going to ask?”

I maneuvered the box out of my pocket and passed it across, Rudolf's mouth forming into an "o" of surprise when he opened it. "Oh, you really were going to ask that?"

As proposals went, it wouldn't go down in the annals of romance, but I still felt better for it being out there, like a weight had lifted off my chest. "Does that change your answer?"

"Ask me properly."

I took my seatbelt off and twisted round to face him. It wasn't a bent knee, but it would have to do. "Rudolf Wenceslas Bell, will you marry me?"

"I would have done if you hadn't used my middle name."

"Expunge that from the record," I announced to no one.

"In that case, yes," Rudolf said.

It was the sweetest yes I'd ever heard, Rudolf yelping as I tried to pull him into my arms, both of us forgetting that I might have taken my seatbelt off, but that he still wore his. We both fumbled for the catch, one of us eventually releasing him from it.

And it was the perfect moment. Because it was us, and because we worked. I was still smiling from ear to ear when I started the engine and flicked the radio on, Carol of the Bells playing on cue like some sort of cosmic sign.

The End