



Starts With a Bang

(Redemption Ridge #7)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The best way to get over a cheating jerk is to get under someone new.

Dominic isn't looking for love or salvation at the Thirsty Cowboy. He needs a temporary escape from the drudgery his life has become, and the universe provides him with the sexiest distraction he's ever seen. Sven is a sucker for sad eyes, thick thighs, and a Royal Cosmopolitan. He scores the trifecta of trouble when a broody hunk buys him a drink. Sparks fly, passions flare, and a simple kiss becomes a four-alarm blaze until an untimely interruption douses the men with an icy reality, pitting loyalty against lust.

They shouldn't They couldn't... Spoiler alert: they do!

It was supposed to be one and done but memories of their shared encounter won't let go. A single text triggers two years of conversations, healing, and an endearing friendship that could blossom into something precious if Dom and Sven were brave enough to take a chance.

An unexpected invitation could provide the nudge their scarred hearts need. Exploring their reignited passion for two weeks in Vail would be a heavenly hideaway if not for a hellish houseguest's resolve to cause trouble. Family rifts and uncomfortable confrontations abound, and embracing a future with Sven means Dom must face his past. Is their love strong enough to withstand the fire, or will they go down in flames?

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Sven

A martini glass with pale pink liquid landed on the bar in front of me before I'd even planted my ass on the stool. I looked up into the smiling eyes of my favorite bartender and knew a trip to the Thirsty Cowboy had been the right decision. The music was loud, the hunks were aplenty, and the only thing flowing faster than the pheromones was the alcohol. Just the distraction I needed.

"This must be a record, Joe." I saluted him with the Royal Cosmopolitan before taking a sip. Champagne turned an ordinary Cosmo into something extraordinary. Bubbles danced on my tongue and put a shimmy in my shoulders. "Thank you, my prince."

Joe chuckled and shook his head. "I can't take full credit. Your drink is compliments of the gentleman. He told me to make your favorite cocktail before you'd even made it to the bar."

He gestured to a dark-haired guy across from me. With his head down and overlong bangs shielding his face, I couldn't read his expression. How curious that he hadn't waited for my reaction when Joe presented his gift. Was it buyer's remorse or low self-esteem? Hunched shoulders suggested he carried a hefty burden on them. Maybe his battered bomber jacket was as heavy as it appeared, but the stranger gave off Atlas vibes to me. A familiar twang vibrated in my chest as if invisible fingers strummed my heartstrings.

Oh no. Not again. Yet I found myself asking. "Who is he, and what's his deal?"

Joe shrugged. “Cross the bar and find out.” And with that, the cute bartender winked and moved on.

There was no way in hell I was going to do that. I’d wait for the guy to look up, and I’d mouth a thank-you from a safe distance. Until then, I planned to scan the bar for a man who could distract me from my troubles, not contribute to them. A cursory glance yielded a few prospects, but the broody guy kept drawing my attention like an annoying magnet. The latest peek revealed the stranger had raised his head a little higher. I was closer to thanking him and moving on with my night. But then he notched his chin up more. I went from “hell no” to “hello” in a heartbeat. Hot damn, the man was disheveled in the sexiest way. Dark scruff covered a square jaw that made a comic superhero’s chin look weak. His mouth looked full and soft, even in its down-turned state. Damn, I loved kissable lips and wanted to turn the frown upside down.

I must’ve stared too long because hot and broody lifted his gaze to meet mine. Oh. My. God. Light eyes and dark hair were my favorite combo, and the maelstrom of emotion hovering near him like Pigpen’s dirt cloud only added to his magnetism. The guy was definitely wrestling with personal demons, and judging by the look of it, he was losing the battle. For a fleeting second, I wanted to cross the room, take up a sword, and help him fight. Okay, I wanted to kiss him better. But I kept my ass firmly on the stool. No matter what ailed Broody, I wasn’t the salvation he needed.

“Are you from around here?”

The question came from the guy sitting on my right. When I’d arrived, every stool had been taken, and a hunky cowboy had surrendered his seat to me. I’d thanked him with my trademark charm and received a malicious glare from his boyfriend, who sat on the stool beside mine. I’d yet to meet a man worth fighting over and had quickly diffused the situation with a compliment. And now, his cowboy boyfriend was nowhere in sight, and my neighbor wanted to be friendly. I turned my head and met

his cool blue eyes once more. This time, they were curious as they raked over my body. This was not my first rodeo, so I had a pretty good feeling of where the conversation was going, though the guy would benefit from better small talk to warm up a prospective third. I'd enjoyed threesomes when I was younger, but Blue Eyes wasn't built for it. He'd wanted to take me down earlier just for smiling at his man. What did he think would happen if I wrapped my lips around said boyfriend's cock? I liked my face arranged the way it was.

"No, thanks." I grabbed my drink and slid off the stool.

My gaze collided with Mr. Broody's across the bar again. He sat up straighter and attempted a smile that looked more like a grimace. Bless his heart. Would it kill me to thank him in person for my drink? I'd give him two minutes tops before moving on. Broody leaned toward his neighbor and said something that made him slide off his stool and walk away. Someone else moved to sit there, but Broody smacked his hand down before their ass could land. It looked like they might argue, so I hastened my pace before things got out of hand. Broody's gaze tracked my every step, but he didn't relinquish his hold.

"Excuse me," I said to the man who was trying to wrestle the stool away from Broody. "I believe that's my seat."

"Bullshit." The tawny-haired man spun around with a sneer on his face. He was prepared to argue with me until I dazzled him with my best smile. He grinned over at Broody and slapped him on the shoulder. "My bad, buddy."

I set my precious Cosmo on the bar and climbed onto the stool. An intoxicating smell of leather and bourbon tickled my nose. Was it Broody's cologne or a combination of his bomber jacket and the amber liquid in his glass? "I thought there was going to be a fight there for a second."

Broody raked his pale green gaze over the outfit I'd chosen with care. The cropped baby blue cashmere sweater was incredibly soft and showed off a tantalizing amount of midriff. Jeans with strategically frayed holes hugged my ass like a second skin and left nothing to the imagination. "Bet you're used to that," Broody replied when his eyes met mine again. His voice, thick and rich, held a hint of accusation that got under my skin.

I straightened my spine and searched for a proper scathing rebuttal, but my anger stalled out before I could land on one. Damn, he was gorgeous. The dark stubble was thicker than I first thought and looked rough enough to grate my nerves into confetti or leave delicious marks on my inner thighs. Full lips curved into a wry grin. So much better than his first attempt to smile. I had a pressing desire to lean forward and test their softness. Eyes the color of matcha locked in on my bare midriff, and I had to fight the urge to preen.

No, no, no. I'm irritated with him. "You think I like men fighting over me?" My frosty tone had those gorgeous eyes snapping up to meet mine.

A thick, dark brow arched upward until it disappeared beneath a swoop of unruly bangs. I longed to get this man into my salon chair for some serious grooming. "Don't you?" Broody asked.

"Noooo," I said. "That bullshit is for insecure drama queens, not confident kings. I'm here for a drink and a hard fuck." I lifted my martini glass from the bar and took a sip before setting it back down. "You've taken care of the first part, thank you very much, and now I'm curious to hear what you think about the second."

"Wow."

"Wow?" I repeated. "I can't tell if you're impressed or baffled."

Broody shrugged his broad shoulders, which pulled my attention to the rest of his body. It was hard to see what he had going on beneath that bomber jacket, but his thick thighs were perfection, and the bulge between them was definitely promising. I didn't need the guy to like me as long as he made me come. "You have definitely made an impression on me." A wolfish expression replaced the downtrodden visage I'd first noticed.

"Likewise," I replied coolly.

Broody chuckled and shook his head. "You're sitting here because you didn't find someone better when you scanned the bar for a better candidate than the mope who bought you a drink."

I could only blink for a few seconds. Was this guy for real, or was his wounded-soul vibe a ploy? And where had he learned his covert observation skills? The CIA? Broody must've taken my silence as a confirmation of his claim. His lips flattened into a grim line, and the expression in his gaze dulled once more.

"It's okay," he said. "I'm not too proud to accept a pity fuck right now." So his demeanor hadn't been a ploy. This guy was damaged goods, my personal Kryptonite. Broody broke eye contact and took a sip of his beer. "Forget it. This was a dumb idea."

I scooted my stool closer and tucked my legs between his thighs. The heat rolling off his body made me want to press against him and purr like a kitten. I drew a heart just above his knee instead. "It doesn't have to be."

Broody set his beer down and gripped my hips with powerful hands. The pressure and heat of his fingers quickened my pulse until sympathy was the last thing on my mind. The music switched from something fast and pulsing to something slow and sexy. "Do you like dancing?"

“I love it.”

He cocked his head toward the dance floor. “Do you want to dance?”

I shook my head. “I’m happy right here.”

Broody tugged my stool forward until I was within kissing distance. I couldn’t stop staring at his mouth as it slowly descended. I wasn’t sure if I had closed the distance or if he had, but nothing mattered when his warm lips pressed against mine. The kiss was tentative at first, chaste and dry. I lifted my hand and fisted the hair at his nape, showing him I meant business. Broody’s lips parted, and I took advantage of the opportunity, sweeping my tongue inside his mouth with the same confidence I did everything. Broody tensed briefly, then matched my energy with a sexy little growl. I kept one hand in his hair and rested my other on his thigh. Broody’s hands slid from my hips down to cup my ass. I had the feeling he was about to haul me into his lap right there at the bar. Did I care? Not really.

I wrapped my lips around his tongue and sucked. Then I slid my hand higher up his thigh until my fingertips grazed against Broody Jr. Damn, the dude was hung. There was no doubt in either of our minds where our night was headed. We went at it heavily, and I lost sense of time and place. I just knew my dick was as hard as a pike, and we’d only petted each other over our clothes. The music tempo changed again. Had we kissed through one song or two? I sucked Broody’s tongue again and traced the outline of his erection with my finger.

It was time to move someplace more private, especially when someone shouted, “No fucking way!”

I knew that voice as well as my own, and I ignored it. My brother, Kerry, was not going to cockblock me again. Broody tightened his grip on my ass, and I was glad to see he was just as determined.

“Stop tongue-fucking and ass-grabbing my brother, Dom!” Kerry yelled.

Broody jerked back so fast he nearly toppled off the chair, and since he didn’t let go of my ass, he pulled me with him.

Kerry, the troublemaking asshole, gripped us both by the shoulders and pulled us apart. “No way. Huh-uh. Not happening.”

Broody looked between Kerry and me, his expression growing more confused by the minute until something must’ve clicked in his brain. Green eyes widened. In horror or surprise, I couldn’t be sure. “Oh man, I forgot you had a stepbrother.”

Blood didn’t define family, and Kerry was my brother in every way that counted. My dad married Lucinda when I was eight years old and Kerry was sixteen. He’d taken his role as protector very seriously, and old habits died hard. Annoying asshole. Then it hit me that Kerry had addressed Broody by name. Dom. Alarms were going off in my head. Dominic Babb? As in Kerry’s best friend since elementary school? I studied Broody for any signs of the easygoing guy who’d hung out at our house all the time but came up empty. Then again, I hadn’t seen him since the summer after Dom and Kerry graduated from high school. That was twenty years ago, and I’d only been ten. No wonder he hadn’t recognized me either.

“Stevie, right?”

I managed not to groan at that old nickname. “No one calls me that anymore. I go by Sven.”

“Sven?” Dom asked in disbelief.

“One of our second cousins couldn’t say Steven when he was little and called me Sven. It just stuck.”

“I can’t believe it,” Dom said.

“I can’t believe you’re still groping my brother’s ass,” Kerry snarled.

“Oops!” Dom jerked his hands back.

“Now your turn, Sven,” Kerry warned.

I’d maintained my hand in Dom’s hair and left my fingers near his dick. I turned my head and hit Kerry with a glare that would quell most men. Not my brick house of a brother. “And why should I? We’re both consenting adults, Kerry. Go away.”

“I’ll tell you why,” Kerry replied. “Dom is in the middle of a nasty divorce, and he’s a hot mess.”

Dom flinched but didn’t bother denying it.

“And you,” Kerry said, rounding on me. “There’s nothing you love more than nursing the walking wounded back to life. Have you learned nothing from past mistakes?”

“Hey,” Dom protested weakly. “Walking wounded is a bit harsh.”

Kerry crossed his arms over his massive chest. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Dom shrugged and dropped his gaze. “He’s not wrong.”

I leaned forward and rested my hand on Dom’s leg, keeping it clean since Kerry was hovering. “It’s true I want to tuck you into bed, but not to feed you chicken soup and read you a book. I’m more of a Fuckingale than Nightingale.” I wanted to ride that enormous cock and allowed my gaze to broadcast my thoughts.

Dom let out a soft groan and leaned toward me.

“No!” Kerry barked. “I forbid it.”

Dom grimaced and removed my hand from his leg. “Kerry is one of my oldest friends. As much as I want to ignore him, I can’t. I’m sorry.”

I recognized defeat when staring it in the eye. Kerry looked so damn smug that I wanted to kick him. I slid off the stool and grabbed my drink off the bar. “Thanks for the Cosmo.”

“Thanks for reminding me I still have a pulse.”

I looked up at Kerry and said, “I don’t know when or how, but I’m going to make you pay for this.”

I sauntered off without a backward glance, but I didn’t need one to know Dom watched me. I felt the intensity of his stare. Another vacant seat opened up, and I met a few promising candidates for a night of fun, but my gaze always strayed back to Dom. He talked to Kerry for a while before my brother patted his shoulder and walked away. Had Kerry found someone to end his night with, or had he just moved on? Dom chatted up a few other guys, but he didn’t seem as engaged with them as he’d been with me. I tried not to let it go to my head, but I still tingled from the kisses we shared.

When it became obvious Kerry wasn’t coming back, I hatched a plan. What my brother didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. I wanted Dom, and his raging erection had revealed that he’d wanted me too. We could share one night, and Kerry would never need to know. If Dom left the bar by himself, I’d follow and make an offer I hoped he wouldn’t refuse. Around midnight, I got my chance. I tried not to be too obvious about my intentions and gave Dom a huge head start before I followed him.

The temperatures had dropped significantly since my arrival. I'd left my coat in the car because bulky outerwear would've ruined my look. Choosing vanity over comfort just might be the death of me someday. Then I saw Dom heading toward a sketchy white minivan in a dark corner of the parking lot. Was he a serial killer or a soccer dad? Neither thing appealed to me, and I couldn't decide which prospect was worse. I'd nearly changed my mind when a gust of wind raked its icy fingers over my bare abdomen. Then I remembered the heat rolling off Dom's body, his powerful grip on my ass, and the feel of strong thighs under his jeans. And that dick. I stepped up my pace so I didn't miss out on my chance.

"This isn't a good idea," Dom called over his shoulder without so much as a backward glance.

"All the more reason to do it."

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Dom

Reaching into my pocket, I removed my key fob and unlocked the vehicle. The headlights flashed on, but instead of going to the driver's door, I detoured around to the passenger side. I turned to face Stevie. No. Not Stevie. Sven. Maybe if I repeated it often enough, I could forget he was Kerry's little brother. Sven had stopped several feet away, and my headlights illuminated his perfect body. I hadn't been able to get him out of my mind all night. Other guys had flirted with me, but they weren't him. Sven.

What I was about to do was wrong, but I could worry about it later. I grabbed the handle on the minivan's rear door and slid it open. Sven was right. We were consenting adults and didn't need Kerry's permission. What had he meant about Sven not learning his lesson from past mistakes? It was on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I noticed Sven hadn't budged from his spot. I forced my gaze up to his face and registered his hesitant expression.

"Why a minivan?" Sven asked.

I saw our interaction in a new light and admired Sven's self-preservation. I was a virtual stranger who wanted to lure him into the back of my sketchy vehicle in a dark parking lot. "It's convenient for my work."

Sven took a few tentative steps closer. "So, no car seats or soccer ball hazards I need to be concerned about?"

"No kids," I said.

“Good to know.” Sven edged a little closer. “What about tarps, duct tape, and rope?”

I laughed for what seemed like the first time in months. “I’m not a serial killer either.”

“Phew.” Sven strode forward until he reached the open door. He squinted his cobalt-blue eyes and scrutinized the minivan’s dark interior. “No lights?”

“I disabled them.” Realizing how bad that sounded, I added, “I’m a private detective.” I gestured to the white van. “It’s nondescript, fits in everywhere, and lets me blend in during surveillance. Dome lights will make me stand out like a sore thumb during nighttime stakeouts.”

Sven pursed his lips and nodded. “Makes sense.” He reached inside the van and rested his hand on a captain’s chair. “How far back do these seats recline?”

“Climb on in and let’s find out.”

“Said the spider to the fly.” And Sven walked into my web.

I climbed in after him and closed the door before leaning between the front seats to start the engine. The sexy idiot wasn’t wearing a coat and had to be freezing. I wanted him warm and pliant and—

Sven’s mouth landed on mine before my ass hit the seat, and I forgot all about the temperatures and ethical decisions. The only thing that mattered was the way Sven made me come alive. The disabled dome lights and dimmed dashboard lights worked out well for investigations, but their absence sucked when two grown-ass men were trying to undress without getting hurt. Sven’s knee landed precariously close to my groin when he tried to remove his jeans.

“Ouch. Watch the goods.”

“I’m sorry.” His hands landed on my body, and I forgot about the near miss.

I nearly head-butted Sven when I leaned forward to shuck my jeans and underwear to my thighs.

“Whew, that was a close call,” he teased. “I’d hate to explain a concussion at the family dinner on Sunday.”

“Sorry,” I replied. “Maybe we shouldn’t—”

His lips miraculously found mine in the dark and silenced my protest. Oh, hell yeah. We were going to do this.

My biggest gripe was that the tinted windows muted the moonlight, so I couldn’t see much of Sven’s gorgeous body. Just the idea of holding him in my arms was enough to rev my engine into high gear. By tacit agreement, I ended up with my bare ass on the seat with my pants down around my ankles and my Henley rucked up under my armpits while Sven finished stripping off his jeans.

“Leave your sweater on.” I didn’t recognize the thick voice as my own, and the command caught me by surprise too. Sure, I’d noted how soft the sweater looked, but I hadn’t fantasized about feeling it against my skin. Now, I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Warm hands rested on my knees, and Sven leaned down to kiss me. I thought he’d meant it to be quick, but I cupped the back of his neck to hold him close. I licked the seam of his lips, and he opened for me as he climbed onto my lap. I fumbled with the buttons on the side of the chair until the armrests lowered, paving the way for him to fully straddle my thighs. Sven’s dick pressed against mine, and a chorus of moans

filled the van's interior. I gripped his ass with both hands, holding him tightly to my body.

"Not going anywhere," Sven whispered against my mouth. "I need a little room to work my magic."

I wanted to protest, but I relaxed my grip. I had to know what he meant by working his magic. In the next breath, Sven rolled his hips, and I knew. Hallelujah. I saw the light. Or I would have if my eyes hadn't rolled back into my head. Sven used his body to trap our dicks and rub them together. I didn't need illumination to know he moved with fluid grace. I could feel it in every fiber of my being. Lush lips met mine and teased them open. His tongue licked into my mouth in a dominant display that made me whimper for more.

My sex drive had been a desolate wasteland for many months, and I'd felt the first embers of arousal low in my belly when my gaze landed on Sven. His kisses at the bar ignited the cinders into flames so high that Kerry's interruption hadn't fully doused them. And now, with Sven tongue-fucking my mouth and grinding me into ecstasy, the inferno threatened to become a five-alarm fire.

I wanted to slow time and enjoy this longer, but my body had other ideas. My heavy balls tightened, and the familiar tingling in my spine spread. I broke the kiss to beg him to slow down, but the only thing that escaped was a needy whimper that revved Sven higher. I tightened my grip on his ass cheeks, and a fingertip brushed over his hole. Sven bucked in surprise, growled savagely, and rubbed my cock just right. Fireworks exploded inside me, and I shot my load all over Sven's dick and my stomach.

"Christ, that's so sexy," Sven growled.

He recaptured my mouth in a hungry kiss and rubbed frantically against my

oversensitive cock. I massaged his hole, pressing harder the faster he rutted against me until my fingertip breached him. Sven's breath hitched in my mouth, and I kissed him through his orgasm. He splattered all over my chest and stomach before breaking our kiss and collapsing against me. Sven's breath puffed against my neck, and I wrapped both arms around him. I think I even knew then that I was holding on to something rare and precious, but Kerry had been right about my state of mind. I was the epitome of the walking wounded, and Sven apparently had a sketchy history with guys like me. He deserved better.

"I can already feel you pulling away from me," Sven said into my neck. "I was hoping this would be the appetizer in a long night of indulgent feasting." He placed a kiss just beneath my ear, and I shivered. "Come home with me."

I'd never been more tempted to do anything in my life, but guilt was already moving in. "I can't."

Sven heaved a sigh and sat up. I missed his body heat already, but I wouldn't pull him back down into my arms. "Are you sure? Your hands still have a death grip on my ass."

And my fingertip was still in his hole. I eased it free and forced myself to release him.

"Damn it," Sven said. "Should've kept my mouth shut until after our wedding."

I snorted at his tenacity. Marrying me was the last thing on his mind, but my ego appreciated the boost. I couldn't resist pulling him down for one last kiss. And if I parted my lips and lingered longer, no one could blame me. Sven saw that as permission to explore my body, and I let him, forgetting to be ashamed of the extra weight I'd gained. When I ended the kiss, Sven sat up but didn't move from my lap.

"The way you smell should be a crime."

I would've been offended if not for the dreamy quality to his voice. "And how do I smell?"

"Like leather and expensive bourbon. What cologne is that?"

I shrugged. "Something I found when I packed my stuff to move. Must've been a gift from someone because I don't ever buy myself cologne." Putting it on had been an impulse, and I was glad I'd surrendered to it. "I can't smell half as good as you do."

Sven sat up, and my fingers reflexively tightened on his hips to keep him close. "Yeah?"

"Mmhmm." I kissed the pulse point on his neck and felt its rapid fluttering beneath my lips. "You smell like tangled sheets and sin." I took another whiff. "And me."

"Oh, I like that." Sven ran his fingertips over my bristly chin, then lower to caress my chest. "God, you're so sexy. You've got more body hair than a cub but not enough to be called a bear. What's the stage in between?"

"No clue," I said.

"You're so damn sexy. I want to rub against you like a cat."

My grip on my control was tenuous at best. I'd already betrayed my best friend after rutting with his brother in my seedy van. One slipup was bad enough, but anything more was unforgivable. My silence was the only reaction Sven needed. He pushed off me with another heavy sigh.

Sometimes I practically lived out of the van, so I had paper towels and wet wipes on hand. I leaned forward and snagged my phone from my jeans and turned on the flashlight to help us see. Sven arched a brow when I handed him items to clean up

with.

“Stakeouts, remember?”

His lips quirked into a half smile. “Uh-huh. It’s your shagging wagon, and there’s no shame.”

“I assure you this is the first time I’ve gotten off in this van.” But I’d bought the vehicle used, so there was no telling what had gone on in here before then. The thought spurred me to clean up faster and pull my pants on.

Sven had already returned to perfection by the time I’d tugged my Henley back down. He’d even slid his feet into his calf boots and plopped down into the seat beside mine. “What else do you keep in here for your stakeouts?” He lifted the console between our seats and sucked in a breath when he found my cache of snacks. “I don’t know the last time I ate.”

“How’s that possible?”

“Turn the lights off if you’re going to scowl at me like that. I don’t have an eating disorder. I ate breakfast, but my day got away from me, and I don’t think I’ve eaten since.”

Stress had that effect on some people, but I fell into the group of emotional eaters. I’d gained an easy twenty pounds since moving out of the house I shared with my husband. I turned off the flashlight and blinked until my eyes adjusted to the dark.

“Help yourself to anything you want,” I said.

“Anything?” If a voice had eyebrows, Sven’s would waggle them.

“Food,” I said. “Behave yourself, or I’ll have to toss you out.” And it was the last thing I wanted to do. I spent my days and nights solving cases that involved assholes and cheaters. Sven was a breath of fresh air, even without the mind-blowing orgasm.

“Fine.” A chip bag rattled beside me, followed by crunching and moaning. “Cheez-Its are still the king of snacks.”

“But which variety is best?” I asked.

The crunching stopped, and I wasn’t sure if Sven had swallowed or paused chewing to consider the question. After a few seconds, the crunching resumed. I fumbled around in the dark and grabbed a snack without looking. I’d packed the stash, so my choice would naturally be something I liked, but sometimes I preferred salty over sweet snacks. Ripping open the bag, I sniffed my prize to see what I’d chosen. I’d plucked the perfect treat because the miniature peanut butter sandwich cookies were both a little salty and sweet. I popped one in my mouth and chewed, thinking the night couldn’t get any better.

I received an explosive orgasm from the sexiest man I’d ever seen, though I should probably be ashamed of how quickly I came. But Sven had been just as horny and had lasted only a little longer. And guilt should’ve ridden my conscience hard, but I was too content to fret about Kerry’s opinion at the moment. I could wrestle those demons alone in my shitty apartment later. I had wonderful company and cookies to keep the loneliness at bay.

“Traditional cheese but extra toasty,” Sven finally said. “I hate the white cheddar ones with the intensity of a thousand suns, but I do like some of the duo options.” And here I’d thought he couldn’t be any more perfect.

“Mmmm. The duo with the bacon and cheddar crackers is my favorite.”

“Marry me,” Sven said. “Right now. Let’s go to Vegas.”

My sharp inhale sucked cookie crumbs down the wrong pipe, and I started to cough.

“Oh no!” Sven cried. “Do not choke to death in here. How will we explain it? Thank goodness your jeans aren’t still around your ankles.”

I wheezed and swallowed hard so I could speak. “I won’t be explaining anything if I’m dead.”

“Oh fuck! That’s right. At least my cousin is the sheriff in this county. That should save me from wearing prison orange.” He shuddered hard enough to shake the van. “I look terrible in that color.”

His outrage made me laugh, which made me cough harder.

“Surely, you have drinks in your shagging wagon.”

“Cooler,” I gasped. “Behind the seat.”

Sven brushed against my shoulder as he leaned between the captain’s chairs. He cursed a blue streak as he fumbled around for the cooler, which I found both adorable and amusing. I wasn’t on the verge of blacking out. I just had an irritating tickle in my throat. This happened to me more often than I wanted to admit. Eating too fast and laughing too hard had always brought it on, though the latter trigger hadn’t been an issue for several months. Hell, tonight might’ve been the first time I laughed in a year or more.

“Found it!” Sven exclaimed. He threw open the lid and then cursed some more. “Juice boxes?” The incredulous tone in his voice turned my dry cough into laughter. “You’ll die before I can penetrate the hole.” He snickered and continued digging

through the cooler. “That sounded kind of dirty.”

I cleared my throat. “And I’ll probably juice myself before I can get the straw to my mouth.”

Sven stilled. “Are we still talking about drinks?”

The gathering heat in my belly said we weren’t. “Yep,” I lied. “I usually squeeze the box too hard and end up wearing half the contents. I rarely buy them, and that’s probably why they’re the only thing left in my cooler. Time to restock my stakeout supplies.”

I turned on my phone’s flashlight and held the device over my head to assist Sven, even though the coughing fit had nearly subsided on its own.

“Aha! There’s one mini water at the bottom.”

I turned the phone off and set it on the console between us once he returned to his seat. He opened the bottle and passed it to me.

“You need some LED candles in here or something,” Sven said. “Mood lighting.”

“Despite how this looks, I don’t really live out of the van. And I’ve never invited a guy back here for a hookup.” I took a long drink, downing half the bottle in one go. The cool water soothed my dry, itchy throat, and I could breathe without the urge to cough. I recapped the bottle and dropped it down in the drink holder. “Thank you for the assist.”

“Even though I caused you to choke?” Sven asked.

“You just caught me off guard.”

“I hear that a lot.” Sven packed both innuendo and wry self-deprecation in those five words. “I don’t even remember what I’d said to rile you up.”

“You asked me to marry you,” I replied. “You wanted to go to Vegas.”

“Ahhh. That would do it.” Sven snickered. “Especially since you’re technically still married.”

The reminder was a kick in the balls. The contentment I’d felt before my coughing fit vanished in a poof, and the emotions I hadn’t wanted to feel rushed in. An awkward silence blanketed the van, and neither of us moved or spoke for several moments.

Sven heaved a dejected sigh. “Well, I went and ruined everything.”

“You didn’t.” Without considering the consequences, I reached over the console and covered his hand. Sven rotated his wrist and slid his fingers through mine. “You just moved the inevitable conclusion closer, perhaps.”

Sven squeezed my hand. “This part?”

I sighed and released him. “No, the part where we say goodbye.”

“Or we could talk about whatever is troubling you,” Sven suggested. “I’m a good listener.”

I turned my head in his direction, even though I couldn’t see him. “You want to hear me whine about my shitty marriage and the resulting divorce?”

“If it would make you feel better,” he replied.

“You’ve already accomplished that.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d come so

hard. Or so fast. “Unless you want to talk about your bad habit of picking up the walking wounded.”

Sven groaned. “Hard pass.” Then he sighed. “Can we be friends?”

I recalled the feel of his body against mine, the taste of his kiss, and the way he went wild when I brushed a finger over his hole. The embers of desire threatened to fan into flames again, giving me only one choice. “I don’t think so.”

He sighed again and reached for my phone on the console. He tapped the screen, illuminating the van. Sven had the audacity to look amazing in the blue light coming from the device. I should resent him, but I only wanted to pull him closer. He passed the phone to me. “Unlock it so I can enter my contact information.”

“Why?” I asked.

“In case you change your mind about us being friends.”

“I won’t.” Though I unlocked the phone and handed it to him.

Sven’s smile in the blue light was downright devious. “You will.” He tapped and typed for longer than the task allowed.

“Are you snooping?”

Sven snorted. “Nope. I just sent a text from your phone to mine so I’ll have your number too.”

“Not a good idea.”

“Fine.” Sven swiped his finger over my screen, then handed it back to me. “I deleted

the text, so you'll have to scroll through your contacts to find me."

"S for Sven."

He shook his head. "Too easy."

"H for Hellcat?"

"No again."

I threw up my hands. Fatigue was moving in, and I needed sleep. "It doesn't matter because I won't be using it, anyway."

The light went off on my phone, pitching the van back into darkness. I heard Sven move before I clocked his proximity. His lush lips landed on mine, and I sucked in a breath. Luckily, I didn't start coughing again. I searched for the fortitude to pull back, but my chivalry wasn't required. Sven kept the kiss brief, but his fingers lingered on my bristly jaw.

"So long, Dom."

"Goodbye," I replied.

Sven fumbled for the handle and slid the door open. Then he stepped into the night and closed me in the van. I climbed over the front seats and dropped behind the steering wheel but didn't start the engine until Sven made it to his car. My PI brain noted the year, make, model, and his license plate when he drove by. I had no intention of memorizing the information or using it to learn more about the mesmerizing man.

I was also determined not to search my phone for the contact he'd buried in there, but

my resolve there only lasted a few weeks. I blamed my weakness on my melancholy mood. The trip to my parents' house in Arizona for Thanksgiving was supposed to boost my spirits, and it had, but the dopamine hit hadn't lasted.

When I found the name Sven had chosen for his contact, I broke into one of my laughing-coughing-wheezing fits and was mostly glad Sven wasn't there to witness my humiliation.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:53 am

Sven

My phone vibrated against my stomach, rousing me from a post-feast coma. Expecting the interruption to be another Happy Thanksgiving text message from a friend, I chose laziness over politeness and ignored it. When the phone buzzed again immediately afterward, I figured the situation was a bit more dire. I cracked one eye open and lifted the device to read the display, but my carbo-loaded-sluggish brain didn't immediately connect the name to an identity. Marlowe?

Staring at the phone with both eyes didn't help. Damn my addiction to potatoes, bread, and cheese. My text preview feature was turned off, so the name was my only clue. Marlowe. There was a tickle in my brain as it tried to engage its gears. At least smoke wasn't coming out of my ears...yet. A third message arrived, and I squinted with purpose, but that got me no closer to solving the mystery.

Mystery ! My eyes widened in recognition at the same time my brother snatched the phone from my hand.

"Who the hell is Marlowe?" Kerry asked.

Marlowe was the code name I'd given Dom when I created a contact for him in my phone. I'd wanted a PI name, and Philip Marlowe seemed to be the most Dom-like of all the famous fictional investigators I knew. I'd have been much faster to recognize the name if I hadn't indulged in a second helping of my favorite side dishes. But I was on high alert now. I jackknifed out of my reclined position on the couch and leaped to my feet.

“Give me that.” Big brothers were the worst, especially when they were lumberjack-sized like mine.

Kerry held the device out of my reach. “Is this another sad-sack loser who’s going to break your heart?”

“No, it’s not.” My reply came too fast and was too furious to be sincere.

My brother shook his head sadly. “When will you learn?”

“At least I try, Ker.” Though my voice lacked animosity or accusation, the words were verbal darts, and the aim was true.

Kerry lowered his arm and extended my phone to me. “I don’t have to try. I’m happy with my life.”

The grim set of his mouth said otherwise, but I wanted to read the messages sooner rather than later. Arguing with Kerry wouldn’t accomplish that. I retrieved my phone and held up my free hand in surrender. “Hart’s Creek Rescue is a thriving business. You have wonderful friends and an adoring family. Your life is as rich as you want it to be right now.”

“Damn right it is.” Kerry sounded mollified, but his expression was still bullish as he eyed my phone like he might snatch it again. My brother outweighed me by seventy pounds of muscle, but my leaner stature made me more agile.

I darted out of reach and tucked my phone away. Making a French exit when Lucinda had gone to such lengths to prepare a feast would’ve been rude, but I avoided falling into the Southern so-long that required at least three rounds of goodbyes. I hugged Lucinda, the best bonus mom and employer on the planet, and thanked her for the most amazing dinner. Then I shouted a goodbye at the remaining stragglers before

ducking outside to leave. I wanted to read Dom's messages as soon as I reached my vehicle, but I didn't want to chance anything. The drive to my apartment only took fifteen minutes, but it stretched on for what seemed like days. I didn't even bother stripping off my outerwear when I got inside. I locked the door, flopped on my sofa, and pulled up Dom's messages on my phone.

Thur, Nov 24, 2022 at 6:00 pm

Dom: Casanova?

Dom: Really?

Dom: and Happy Thanksgiving!

The smile pulling at my lips actually hurt. I relaxed my jaw and did some facial stretches, but my lips went right back to the Joker position when I reread Dom's messages. A hundred responses flooded my mind. I parsed through the chaos and found the one that was guaranteed to provoke a reaction. He'd taken the time to search through his phone for my contact, and I wanted to keep him chatting.

Me: Happy Thanksgiving!

I included adorable emojis to make it look more festive and carefree. He didn't know that I'd been prepared to take Kerry down to the living room floor to retrieve my phone if necessary, or that I'd driven down the mountain road like a maniac, or that I ran into my apartment like the hounds of hell were chasing me. Dom didn't need to know my heart was in my throat as I typed those simple words and symbols. He just needed to react. My phone buzzed almost immediately. Eureka!

Dom: Casanova?

Me: I thought it was cute and quirky. You certainly figured it out easily enough.

Me: Or have you been searching for the hidden treasure this entire time?

Dom: Don't get a big head about it. I'm at my parents' place in Arizona. They're at the senior community center for a card tournament, and I'm bored out of my mind. I'd forgotten you even gave me your number until tonight.

Me: Uh-huh. You forgot.

Dom: What's my contact saved under?

Me: Y for yummy.

Dom: Be serious or I'm hanging up.

Me: Hanging up? Okay, Boomer.

When fifteen minutes passed without a response, I chided myself for blowing my opportunity with a snarky mouth. With luck, I could've talked Dom into a joint jerk sesh to finish the holiday in style. But no, my big mouth got me in trouble. Disappointment left a bitter taste on my tongue and a heaviness in my chest. And I realized that Kerry, annoying as he was, might've been right about his assessment. Dom was sad, though not a loser, and he could do some serious damage to my heart if I weren't careful.

Sat, Dec 24, 2022 at 3:00 pm

Me: Merry Christmas!

Sun, Dec 25, 2022 at 10:00 am

Dom: Merry Christmas

Sat, Dec 31, 2022 at 2:30 pm

Dom: Do I want the extra toasty Cheez-Its or the bacon and cheddar duo for a snack?

Me: Neither. Come to the Feisty Bull for our New Year's Eve Party. Surely, you remember what a good time those are?

Dom: Kerry invited me, but I'm not sure.

Me: Because I'll be there? I don't have to be. I have other parties I could attend.

Dom: Not everything is about you.

Dom: But yeah. It's about us.

Me: Ohhhh. There's an us?

Dom: No! There's no us. But there was for a few moments.

Me: Mmmm. I relive those moments every time I close my eyes or...

Dom: You're not helping.

Me: Sorry

Dom: No, you're not.

Me: Busted

Dom: I'm not sure I can look Kerry in the eye

Me: I don't want you to be alone tonight

Dom: I don't want to be alone either

Me: It's settled then. You're coming to the party. I'll keep my distance. No kissing. No touching.

Dom: I'll think about it

Sun, Jan 1, 2023 at 11:00 am

Me: You looked smoking hot last night. Keeping my word was the hardest thing I've ever done. I hope the new year is kind to you. Too bad it couldn't start with a bang.

Dom: You looked like a walking wet dream, but I think you know it. All those fawning men had to give you a clue. Which lucky bastard did you kick out of your bed this morning?

Me: None. I couldn't have the man I wanted, so I didn't leave with anyone.

Me: And to be clear, you'd still be in my bed and we wouldn't be texting.

Dom: Are you texting me from bed right now?

Sven: Yep. Want to know what I'm wearing? Or not wearing? Curious about what my hand is holding right now? I'll send a pic.

Dom: No don't.

Dom: Ha ha ha. A remote. You got me there. What are you watching?

Me: The Big Sleep. Humphrey Bogart plays Philip Marlowe and Lauren Bacall plays Vivian.

Dom: A fan of black and white movies?

Me: I used to watch them with my mom when I was little. They brought her a lot of comfort when she was sick, especially near the end when she needed the escape. The Big Sleep is my favorite noir film and Philip Marlowe is my favorite private detective. Don't be jealous. You're my favorite PI now.

Dom: Fuck me

Me: I can be ready in fifteen minutes.

Dom: That was an expletive and not an invitation. Is Marlowe your contact name for me in your phone?

Me: Yeah. I thought I told you that

Dom: No. I asked, but you acted like a smart ass and said Y for Yummy. Then you called me a boomer when I threatened to hang up.

Me: Oh yeah. How'd you know about the saved contact name?

Dom: Kerry tried to hire me last night to find out who the hell has been texting you. He saw the name on your phone on Thanksgiving. Said you've been acting secretly ever since.

Me: I have not. What did you say?

Dom: I told him you were a mature adult who didn't deserve an invasion into your privacy.

Me: Glad you agree I don't need his permission to date men. Come over.

Dom: No way. I would love to hear about this rich dating history Kerry eludes to though.

Me: That's a negative Ghost Rider. I'm more than happy to let you vent about your marriage troubles.

Oops, I blew it again. Would I ever learn not to push him so hard?

Tue, Feb 14, 2023 at 8:00 pm

Me: Happy Valentine's Day. Any plans?

Dom: *fist emoji*

Me: Can I watch?

Dom: no

Me: Okay. How about we jerk off at the same time. I'm already getting hard just thinking about the noises you make when you come. Are you busy now?

Dom: Bye

Mon, Mar 13, 2023 at 9:30 pm

I'd just stepped out of the shower when my phone went off with a text from Dom. I

toweled off quickly, slipped into my fuzzy bathrobe, and took the phone into my bedroom to read his message. I'd been kicking my ass daily since our last chat and vowed not to chase him off again with suggestive comments. Once cozy under my down comforter, I opened our text thread. My heart sank further with every word I read.

Dom: My divorce became final today. I celebrated by securing proof that my client's husband is a cheater too.

My thumbs hovered over the keyboard, trying to find the right words to type. Did I tell him I was sorry? That was hardly sufficient, considering Dom's revelation. My client's husband is a cheater too. He could've meant that he'd solved yet another cheating case, but context clues told me otherwise. Before I could form a response, another message landed.

Dom: Sorry to reach out so late. I just... I don't know.

Without thinking, I pressed the phone icon to call Dom instead of replying to his message. Would he answer?

"Hello?" Yes, he would. Dom's voice sounded raspy and rough, and my heart lurched even more.

"Hi," I said. "I'm sorry you had such a rough day. Want to talk about it?"

"Not in the least. I don't know why I texted you. You don't have to babysit me. I'm okay. Maybe I just didn't want to be alone tonight of all nights."

"I could come over," I replied. "I'd keep my hands to myself."

Dom laughed dryly. "I think we both know that isn't true." He cycled through a deep

breath. “And we also know that I wouldn’t want you to. I think this is much safer.”

Maybe not so much for my heart, but this phone call wasn’t about me. “Talking about your newly minted single status is off the table, and you’re probably not in the mood to jerk off together.” So much for my moratorium on suggestive comments. “Oh damn. I didn’t mean to say that. I can’t seem to help myself around you.”

I expected Dom to make an excuse to get off the phone or just disconnect the call. But a low chuckle rumbled through the phone. “This is why I reached out to you. No artifice or bullshit. Just you and the color you inject into my dull world.” Dom took a deep breath, and I expected him to take it back. “Thanks to you, I know how Dorothy feels when she steps into Oz for the first time.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me,” I told Dom.

“You need better friends.”

I liked that he considered himself my friend, and I hoped we could be more someday. But even I had a tight enough leash on my tongue to prevent either of those thoughts from escaping. “And now I want to watch The Wizard of Oz .”

Dom chuckled. “Me too.”

“I think it’s streaming on Max,” I said.

“Let me see.”

I reached for my remote and turned on my TV. I pulled up the Max app and opened it. Dom found the movie on his end too, and we pushed Play after the count of three. I stayed up later than I normally would on a work night, but the sacrifice was well worth it.

Mon, May 29, 2023 at 3:05 pm

Me: It's my birthday!

Dom: That's what it says on the giant birthday cake. Kerry didn't tell me that when he invited me to the Memorial Day barbecue. I would've brought you a gift.

Me: It's best you didn't. He would've wondered why you brought his brother a birthday gift. We're not supposed to know each other that well.

Dom: True!

Me: But I know how you can make it up to me.

Dom: Where are you texting me from? You're missing the party.

Me: I'm arranging a private celebration as we speak.

Dom: Then why are you messaging me?

Me: Come upstairs. Take a right at the top of the staircase and walk to the end of the hall. Lucinda converted that tiny spare bedroom into a laundry room. No one will look for us there.

Dom: Absolutely not!

Me: Just a kiss. It's the only gift I want this year. I'll keep my hands to myself. Promise!

Dom: No way.

Me: Not too proud to beg. On my knees, if needed. Please. Just one kiss.

A few minutes later, Dom closed the door and stalked toward me with the intensity of a big jungle cat, and I'd never been prouder to be a man's prey. "This is a terrible idea," he said.

I backed up because I knew it would only trigger his carnal instincts even more. Dom's nostrils flared as he slowly pursued me. My butt backed into the dryer, and there was nowhere else for me to go unless I darted left or right. Dom lunged forward, caging my body between his and the machine.

"Got you now."

I wanted to loop my arms around his neck and press my chest to his, but I'd promised. Instead, I placed my palms against the cool metal of the dryer and notched my chin higher. "Kiss me."

Dom searched my eyes for what seemed like eternity. The internal battle he waged played out in his vivid green gaze. I wanted this man more than anything in the world, but he needed to make the move here. The fog of indecision cleared from Dom's expression seconds before he claimed my mouth. My breath snagged in my throat, and my pulse raced when he teased my lips open and slid his tongue over mine. I'd been foolish to think one kiss would be enough. I gripped the edge of the dryer hard enough to bruise, but I kept my word, even when Dom pressed the full length of his body against mine.

He pulled back abruptly and stared down at me, his lips wet and puffy from the intensity of our kiss. "Touch me, damn it."

The savage whisper had barely left his mouth before I complied with his demand. I relearned the planes of his chest and the strong muscles in his back. I wanted to

explore below the belt but knew it would be a mistake. I'd be on my knees with his dick in my mouth at the slightest provocation, and Dom would likely resent me for it later.

"Sven!" Lucinda yelled from downstairs. "It's time to cut the cake!"

Dom jerked away from me and gasped like she'd dumped a gallon of ice water over his head. "Fuck!" He turned away from me and shoved both hands in his hair. "I can't go down there like this."

By this, he meant the rock-hard erection pressing against his jeans. I had a similar dilemma and used my limited brain cells to come up with a solution.

"Sven!" Lucinda called out.

"Be right down!" I called before she came looking for me. "You stay here and cool off," I told Dom. "I'll head to the bathroom across the hall. Splash my face with water." I placed my arm on Dom's shoulder, and he flinched away from me. It would've hurt less if he'd stabbed me in the heart. I cleared my throat and stepped away. "See you down there."

But I knew he'd be gone by the time I got downstairs, and I'd been right. I tried not to be obvious when I searched the house and backyard for him. I even pasted on a fake smile that fooled everyone into thinking I was the happy birthday boy. Well, all for one surprisingly astute asshole named Kerry Hart, who followed me outside when I left.

"You deserve better," he said.

I whipped around in the driveway so fast that I nearly dropped my leftover birthday cake. "Better than what?"

“Than who,” Kerry corrected. “I’m talking about the Marlowe guy you’re moping about all the time. You’re a year older and a year wiser. I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.” Or I had been during those precious minutes I’d had Dom all to myself. At Kerry’s skeptical scowl, I said, “Or at least I’m working on it.” The intensity of Dom’s kiss felt like a step in the right direction. “And that’s good enough for me right now.”

Kerry shook his head sadly. “Stop settling.”

“Can’t wait for your next birthday so I can attack you about your love life.”

Kerry held up his hands and backed away. “Fine.”

I’d won the skirmish, but the war would rage on.

Wed, Jun 7, 2023 at 7:30 am

Dom: Can’t stop thinking about that kiss.

Me: Uh-huh. That’s why you took off without even saying goodbye.

Dom: I couldn’t trust myself. We both know I was minutes away from bending you over that dryer if Lucinda hadn’t interrupted us.

Me: I wanted to blow you instead.

Dom: What did you wish for?

Me: It won’t come true if I tell you.

Dom: Are you sure about that?

Me: I smell a trap. Guess what?

Dom: What?

Me: I live out my birthday wish at least once a day. Sometimes twice. You're always the star of the show.

Dom: You're making this so hard.

Me: Your dick? I hope so.

Dom: That too. I need to get ready for work.

Me: Me too. Going to live out that birthday wish in the shower.

Dom: Asshole!

Me: Yes. That will be involved. Bought myself a new toy for the shower. Named him Marlowe.

Dom: I want to hate you right now.

Me: Oh, an angry jerk sesh. Can I watch?

Dom: No. You work this question into nearly every conversation we have.

Me: Because I always want to see you jack off that massive cock. Are you doing it right now?

Dom: No. Are we still on for weekly buddy watch tonight?

Sven: Yep. You ask this every week.

Dom: Because I figure you'll come to your senses one of these days and find someone better to spend your time with.

Me: Not going to happen.

Dom: But maybe it should. I might not ever be able to give you what you want.

Me: Then I'll take what you can give.

Dom: That's not fair to you.

Sven: I'll decide what's best for me. The Maltese Falcon at 8:30.

Tue, Jul 4, 2023 at 12:30 pm

Me: The festivities have started. Where are you?

Dom: Working. Took on a last-minute case and I can't get away. Sorry.

Me: Bummer. Still on for movie night tomorrow?

Dom: Too soon to tell. I'll let you know. Enjoy the barbecue.

Mon, Sep 4, 2023 at 10:00 am

Dom: Hey. I know you're sick of hearing this excuse, but I'm working on a case today. I hope you all have a wonderful Labor Day celebration.

Me: k

Dom: Don't!

Me: Don't what?

Dom: Don't "k" me. Don't be mad. I really am working. It's a complicated child custody case and I can't afford to fuck it up. My business is finally picking up, and I can't afford to lose momentum.

Me: I'm happy for you

Dom: You're not.

Me: I am. I just miss you. We hardly text anymore. We haven't buddy watched a movie in months. It was the bright spot of every week. Sorry. That's not fair to put on you.

Dom: This Wednesday. I promise.

Me: I'm going to make other plans. Kerry is right.

Dom: What's he saying about me?

Me: Kerry isn't saying anything about you. He doesn't know you're Marlowe.

Dom: What are you saying about Marlowe?

Me: Nothing. Kerry has just made some observations, and I think he's right. I need to stop mooning over Marlowe. Take care, Dom.

I wanted to launch the phone across the room, but I re-downloaded Grindr to my phone. I had every intention of reactivating my account and following through with my half-hearted threat to move on. But my thumb shook as it hovered over the download arrow because I didn't want anyone else. I tossed the phone aside in disgust and turned on my favorite Philip Marlowe movie instead. If I was going to be miserable, I'd go all out.

Sat, Nov 11, 2023 at 9:00 pm

Me: Happy fuckversary.

Dom: What?

Me: It's the anniversary where you fucked me over for other men.

My phone rang, and I picked it up. "Now you have time for me?"

"Are you drunk?"

"No." I hiccuped loudly.

Dom chuckled at my answer. "You sure about that?"

"Not drunk yet ."

"Then why don't you switch to something else to drink? Do you have water?"

"In the kitchen. That's so far away," I whined.

"Live in a sprawling mansion, do you?"

I snorted. “No, but the refrigerator feels like a long way off after I’ve drowned my sorrows.”

“Why are you home on a Saturday night?” Dom asked.

“I’m home every night.”

“Okay, why are you home alone on Saturday night?”

“Because the guy I want doesn’t want me back,” I replied. “Whew. This truth serum is serious shit.”

Dom laughed. “Truth serum. Is that what you’re calling it?”

“Label said it’s a rosé wine, but it feels too potent for that.” I giggled. “Maybe it’s because I haven’t eaten much today.”

“Do you want me to come over?” Dom asked.

“No. Not when you offer out of pity. I need you to want to be here.” I hiccuped again. “Does that make sense?”

“Actually, yes.” Dom sighed. “I want to be there. More than you know. I shouldn’t tell you this. Not after what you said in your last text.”

“What did I say?”

“You said you’d been mooning over me and you needed to get out and meet other people. I shouldn’t interfere with that.”

I snorted. “That was months ago. Guess how many new people I’ve met?”

“I don’t want to know,” Dom said.

“Zero. I tried. I really did. I only want you. Miss you so damn much.”

“Sven.”

“Don’t,” I said. “Don’t pity me. Just tell me what you think I shouldn’t know.”

“That I miss you too. I pick up my phone to text you multiple times a day. I think about you until it becomes a physical ache. But I’m not in the right headspace to give you what you deserve. I am the sad sack Kerry doesn’t want you to be around. I don’t know what your history is, but I don’t want to hurt you. And it feels like it’s already too late.”

“I mend broken hearts,” I said. “That’s my superpower. I attract men who’ve been shattered, and I put them back together—piece by piece—until they’re whole again. And they always end up going back to the person who broke them in the first place, and I’m the one left in pieces in the end.”

“They’re fools,” Dom said. “Each and every one of them.”

“Or maybe I’m the one who is fucked-up and just don’t know it.”

“No way,” Dom replied.

“You don’t know me.”

“Wrong. You’re beautiful and so fucking special.”

When the first tears fell, I knew it was time to cut the call short. “I’m sorry I drunk texted you.”

“I’m not sorry, but I thought you said you weren’t drunk.”

“Tipsy texted, then. I’m going to make the long journey into the kitchen and make myself something to eat.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes.”

“Will you check in tomorrow to let me know how you’re doing?”

“No,” I replied. “I will pretend this conversation never happened.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“To a fault.”

“Take care,” Dom said.

“You too.”

Fri, May 10, 2024 at 10:00 pm

Me: It’s been a hot minute since we last talked. Maybe you’ve deleted my contact from your phone. It’s Sven, by the way. I’m not drunk. Or tipsy. Anyway, Kerry is going to need you. If you don’t hear from him by noon tomorrow, please make up an excuse to call him.

Dom: I didn’t delete your number. I’d hoped to hear from you, but not like this. Is everything okay? Should I call Kerry now?

Me: Not a 911. He got served legal papers tonight. The three of us were at the bar when it happened.

Dom: Thirsty Cowboy? Three of you?

Me: Yes, the TC. We ran into Kerry there. He was dancing with Keegan when he got served.

Dom: Who is Keegan?

Me: A friend.

Dom: The kind that comes with benefits?

Me: I think you're losing the plot. I've never seen Keegan's face when he comes. Is that what you mean?

Dom: Pretty much.

Me: More on Keegan and Kerry later. Let's focus on the pending lawsuit. There was an incident with a former employee who broke every single rule at an accident scene and botched a rescue. The victim wasn't seriously injured, but he's still suing Kerry. Hart's Creek Rescue is everything to my brother.

Dom: On it. I won't let him down. Kerry's calling me now!

Sat, May 11, 2024 at 2:00 pm

Me: Did you seriously say that I am too old to shop in the twink department?

Dom: I didn't expect to run into you at the rescue station and panicked. I apologized

and tried to fix it by complimenting your banging body. That just earned a mean glare from Kerry.

Me: Did you have to flirt with Keegan?

Dom: I didn't flirt. I was being friendly. Kerry nearly took my arm off over him.

Me: He's so in love with Keegan.

Dom: I noticed.

Me: It's pitiful how hard he's fighting it.

Dom: I gave him a little nudge toward Keegan before leaving the station. He won't have to worry about the lawsuit much longer. I found tons of evidence disputing the plaintiff's claims and I only just started.

Me: Thank you for everything

Dom: My pleasure. Don't be a stranger.

Sven: I'm up for a buddy watch on Wednesday if you're available.

Dom: I'll make time. You pick the movie.

Sat, Jul 13, 2024 at 4:30pm

Dom: Free tonight?

Me: For you? Always! Do you want to make up our missed movie night?

Dom: I have something better in mind.

Me: Color me curious.

Dom: I need some surveillance help with a case.

Me: Ohh. A mission. I'm in! What do I wear?

Dom: Dress low-key. Nothing sexy. I need you to blend in at a bar and watch for someone to arrive. Snap a discreet photo or two if they do. I was just there asking questions last night and don't want the bar staff to get suspicious and tip off the guy.

Me: Is this dangerous?

Dom: Would I ask you if it was?

Me: No. You'd ask Kerry. But he's away with Keegan this weekend, doing a vineyard tour or something. My money says they'll be married before the year is out.

Dom: What's the wager?

Me: A kiss.

Dom: I'll take that bet.

Me: I'll be sure to use a lip mask every night to keep my pucker supple.

Dom: Uh, which pucker? What am I kissing?

Me: Guess we'll find out, won't we?

Mon, Jul 15, 2024 at 1:10 pm

Me: Kerry's lawsuit got dropped during the deposition. Normally, I'd assume that Kerry would've told you already, but he and Keegan skipped out before the celebration lunch to party in private.

Dom: That's the best news. Thanks for letting me know. I'll act surprised when Kerry eventually reaches out.

Me: We're having a party at The Feisty Bull tonight. You should come. I'll be good.

Dom: I have a hard deadline on a case I'm working. Kerry's lawyer was so impressed with my work that he's hired me to do freelance work for his agency. I'd come otherwise. Still on for our Wednesday movie?

Me: Yep.

Saturday, Oct 26, 2024 at 9:00 pm

I looked at my reflection in the upstairs powder room as I washed my hands. Though I'd dressed as the male version of a noir vixen for the Halloween party, my expression was more melancholy than seductive. Dom had said he'd try his best to make it, but I had resigned myself that he'd be a no-show again. I'd existed on a meager diet of Wednesday watch-alongs because that was the best Dom could give me. And it was enough most of the time, but on other occasions, the loneliness and pining became unbearable. Maybe I needed to try harder to meet new men.

I forced a neutral expression on my face, dried my hands, and left the bathroom. A man stood in the hallway, leaning against the wall with his head down. He wore a trench coat, suit, and a fedora. I didn't need to see his face to know who waited for me outside the bathroom. Any notion of meeting someone else vanished like my

willpower around a holiday dessert table.

“Dom, you made it!”

He looked up and gave me a rakish smile that matched his costume. The grin widened as Dom raked his gaze over my slim-fitting black pants, tight V-neck black cashmere sweater, and the pearl choker around my neck. “You look good enough to eat.” Heat bloomed in Dom’s cheeks, and I decided he hadn’t meant to say that.

“Right back at ya.”

“My costume isn’t too on the nose?” Dom asked.

“It’s perfect.”

We stood there, neither of us moving, as if we didn’t know what to say or how to act. We never had this problem during our movie-night chats. Conversation flowed freely as we debated and discussed the chosen entertainment. Someone cranked the music higher downstairs, reminding us we weren’t alone and anyone could stumble across us.

“Hungry?” I asked.

“Always.”

Leading the way downstairs, I felt the intensity of his stare on my ass. I hoped he didn’t miss a step and stumble. I desperately wanted to be under Dom’s weight, just not during a tumble down the stairs. I stopped when I reached the first floor and smiled when I noticed Kerry and Keegan slow dancing. Kerry wore a T-Rex costume, and Keegan had dressed up as Alan Grant from Jurassic Park. Every couple had their thing, and who was I to judge?

Dom came to a stop next to me and let out a snort. “Damn, love will find a way.”

“Pretty sure the quote is about life, not love.” I waggled my brows at him. “Ready to pay up?”

Dom’s gaze dropped to my mouth. “I’m not ready to surrender.”

There was so much I wanted to say, but I wouldn’t risk another setback. I’d wait for a signal from the universe that it was time to make my move. But I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t give him a little razzle-dazzle. I straightened my shoulders and swiped my tongue over my bottom lip. Dom’s nostrils flared, and he took a step toward me until he caught himself.

“Oh, I think you are. You’re just not ready to admit it.” I sauntered away, feeling the intensity of his stare on my ass. I had no doubt which pucker he wanted to kiss just then.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:53 am

Dom

“Just do it.”

Talking to myself—out loud, no less—had to be a sign that I was as pitiful as Kerry had described me two years ago. In his defense, he hadn’t used those exact words when he interrupted the sexiest kiss I’d ever had just because I was experiencing it with his brother.

Parked in front of Kerry and Sven’s parents’ house, I tried to work up my courage to go inside and make my move on Sven. I’d been waging this war ever since I woke up and was no closer to finding the bravery the situation required. Our random hookup had developed into one of the most beautiful and meaningful relationships I’d ever experienced, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted more, and that scared the hell out of me. But why? Sven had made his feelings abundantly clear, and yet my legs bounced hard enough to shake the van.

What was I afraid of? That I wouldn’t have enough time to dedicate to a relationship. Look how many movie nights I missed. Just thinking about it made my stomach cramp. I lived for Sven’s colorful commentary each week because my life felt dull without it. His flirty texts made me feel sexy and desired and alive. Sven was ready to take the leap and explore the crazy chemistry between us. I came close to surrendering on a few occasions but managed to pull back in time. What would happen if I gave in? “I could hurt him. I could disappoint myself. And I could ruin my friendship with Kerry.”

The DJ rolled out of the commercial break with Thanksgiving Day football scores.

When the opening strands of a popular Christmas song came through the speakers, I turned the radio off with a savage growl. “Thanksgiving Day isn’t over yet!” And now I was yelling at the radio.

A silhouette in the big picture window caught my attention. I knew exactly who it was, and I begged the universe to throw me a bone. Please don’t let Sven part the curtains and see me hiding in my van in front of his parents’ house like a coward. He might come outside to see what was going on, and I would be tempted to pull him inside and do very wicked things to him. My phone rang, and I jumped at the shrill intrusion. How dare someone disrupt my pity party. I expected to see Kerry’s or Sven’s name on the caller ID, but a photo of my smiling mother greeted me instead.

I accepted the call and held the phone to my ear. “Hi, Mom. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving!” The volume of my parents’ combined voices made me cringe. They thought they needed to shout to be heard through the speakers. I could tell them it wasn’t necessary until I was blue in the face, or I could hold the phone away from my ear.

“How’s Arizona?” I asked.

“Beautiful!” Mom yelled.

“Perfection!” Dad added. A wet, smacking sound came through the phone, and I knew he’d just kissed his fingertips. The gesture was as familiar as my own face.

“He can’t see you, dear,” my mother said. “This isn’t one of those face-to-face calls.”

My parents were only sixty-two years old, but they sounded one hundred and two when they talked about technology. And it never failed to make me smile. “FaceTime.”

“Whatever,” Mom replied. I didn’t need video call to know she waved off the reminder like a pesky fly.

The name of the technology didn’t matter to her. She only cared that I used it often to stay in touch with them. My parents had moved to Arizona a few years after I graduated high school. Dad had received an incredible career opportunity in Phoenix, and my folks were tired of Colorado winters. Not once in twenty years had they expressed remorse about their decision, and I flew to visit them during holidays whenever I could.

“I added a chef’s kiss,” Dad explained.

“I thought maybe you kissed Mom after calling her perfection,” I said.

“She is absolutely flawless, and a kiss sounds like a damn good idea.” Smacking lips and giggles came through the phone, and I cringed.

“Okay, you two,” I said. “Save that for later.”

Mom giggled, and Dad cleared his throat. There was so much I respected about my folks, and their love for one another topped the list. They remained best friends and allies, no matter what life threw at them. They didn’t see eye to eye on everything—no couple would—but my parents remained respectful and listened to one another’s point of view. In times of trouble, they turned toward each other instead of away from one another. Little moments like this twisted the screws on my shame for not being able to make my marriage work after the loving example they set for me. I knew it took two people to make or break a marriage, but I couldn’t help feeling that I could’ve—should’ve—tried harder. I didn’t miss my ex-husband, not with the way our marriage imploded in the end. I just regretted the cynical residue that lingered in the aftermath. It was like the glitter bomb from hell. Every time I thought the mess was gone, I’d find a shitty little reminder when I least expected it.

The curtains fluttered, and I wondered if Sven, the patron saint of pity fucks, picked up on my glum mood. Maybe I emitted those kinds of vibes instead of pheromones. Did Sven have a radar that detected the downtrodden and pitiful? I didn't want to be a pet project, though I'd sacrifice many things, my dignity being the first to go, for another chance of sex with Sven. Damn, the man's tongue and body did the wickedest things to me, and we'd barely passed second base.

"Dom, are you still there?" My mom's voice cut through my fantasy like a chainsaw.

I cringed, then cleared my throat. "Yes, I'm still here. What are you guys doing for dinner?" I asked.

"A bunch of us are gathering at the community center for a potluck dinner," Mom said.

They'd sold their spacious home when Dad retired and moved into a senior community. It sounded like a glorified nursing home when they first mentioned it to me, and I'd been skeptical about their enthusiasm. I quickly changed my mind once I'd thoroughly investigated the place. The community offered many accommodations, from single-resident dwellings to assisted-living care, meeting my parents' needs for the rest of their lives. The younger residents formed a traveling group to visit places all over the world, and I got tired just from reading the monthly activities available on the event calendar. These people ran circles around me, and I would've felt ashamed if I could muster the energy.

The conversation turned to the food everyone was bringing to the potluck, and my stomach growled. I'd had a bowl of cereal for dinner when I got home at eleven thirty the previous night. Dad shared his buffet strategies as if I didn't already know them.

"You gotta get those high-demand items first," he said. "Or else you get stuck with the food no one wants."

“You didn’t come up with that idea on your own,” Mom said. “You copied that from Grace Adler.”

“Who?” Dad asked.

“The stunning redhead from Will it was permission I gave myself to kiss Sven like I’d wanted to every day since he stepped out of my van two years ago.

Sven

The familiar opening of Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" chimed through my Bluetooth speakers. I shimmied my shoulders as I waited for the Christmas diva's vocals to begin, then sang the first few lines with her as I studied my outfit choice in the full-length mirror.

"Perfection," I declared.

The fitted emerald-green cashmere sweater showed off my biceps and toned chest. The soft, shimmery knit ended an inch above the waistband of my winter-white jeans. The length registered somewhere between respectable and flirty, and the peekaboo of golden skin invited a man to kiss me there before exploring lower. Not just any man though. I wanted the one I couldn't get out of my head. The trip to Vail meant more to me than an opportunity to live out my sexual fantasies about Dom. I wanted to prove to him we could have something truly special. Our charged chemistry hadn't dissipated one bit in two years. It had intensified until it became a living thing, feeding off our energy and growing stronger every time we were in the same room. I had two weeks to win Dom's heart and present myself as a worthy partner to his parents.

That meant I'd needed to gather as much information about his family as possible. With Dom working insane hours to tie up his cases before we left, I'd had to get creative. Lucinda was an excellent source of information since she knew Dom's parents and had stayed in touch with them after they moved. She wasn't as helpful with the aunt, uncle, and cousin since they lived in Fort Collins. She'd repeated the few things she'd learned from Molly Beth over the years.

The Carmichaels were much wealthier and ran in a different circle than the Babbs. I got the impression that the sisters' relationship was strained before Dom and Emerson's divorce and had only gotten worse since then. The Carmichaels' social media accounts portrayed a perfect couple living a life most would only dream of, but I wasn't buying it. Janet Carmichael's posts were more curated than the Instagram influencers who pedaled sponsored products. John Carmichael looked miserable in every photo. His deer-in-the-headlights stares and phony politician's smiles made me cringe. I'd made the mistake of looking up Dom's ex-husband's social media profiles to see what kind of guy his parents expected for their only son.

Emerson Baker-Babb—it annoyed me he still used Dom's last name—was everything I wasn't: educated, pedigreed, and a faithless bastard. But he was gorgeous, even if he lacked any fashion sense. Dom must've loved Emerson a lot at some point, and I'd wondered if he preferred his men to dress more conservatively. I knew my overt sexiness pushed Dom's buttons, but would my wardrobe embarrass him in front of his family? I'd worried about it more than was healthy when I could've just asked him. Dom was a straight shooter and would've answered honestly, but I didn't ask because I feared the answer. I packed extra options instead because it was easier.

I turned to the side and made sure my new jeans with the hefty price tag framed my ass like the advertisement claimed they would. I made another quarter turn and stared at my reflection over my shoulder. Hell yeah, they did. Money well spent. I mean, the thousands of squats and hours of weightlifting at the gym should probably get some credit for my pert round ass. "I'd do me," I said.

"Quoting that line from *Silence of the Lambs* while shimmying to 'All I Want for Christmas Is You' is next-level narcissism."

Shrieking, I spun around to face Dom with hands clutching my chest to keep my heart from beating its way loose. I didn't ask how he'd gotten in because I'd texted him the keyless entry code when I thought my last appointment at the salon was going to run

late. But I'd made it home in time to shower and get dressed after all. I silenced my phone and slid it into my pocket.

"I still can't believe you talked me into watching that movie after I avoided it for years." I still had nightmares months later.

"You made me watch *The Devil Wears Prada* , so..."

Dom remained leaning in the doorway, wearing a smirk on his ruggedly handsome face. Green eyes traveled the length of my body at a glacial pace, and he raked his bottom lip between his teeth. I was unbelievably happy to see him and more than a little relieved. I'd wavered between thinking the trip had just been a fantastic dream and worrying Dom would change his mind. But he was in my room, looking more delicious than any man should while wearing a chunky cable-knit sweater. Dom wore the look better than Chris Evans in *Knives Out* , and that was saying something.

Then again, considering our destination, maybe I should've been more worried than horny. "I don't want to be an accomplice to murder."

Dom's gaze snapped up to meet mine, and his brow furrowed in confusion. He shook his head as if to clear the cobwebs. "Say what, now?"

I marched toward him with a purposeful stride, stopping only when the toes of my brown leather calf boots nudged against his sneakers. I placed my hand on his chest and patted him while explaining my train of thought.

"I haven't seen that movie," Dom said. "But thanks for the compliment."

His tone said he didn't believe me, but I would prove just how sexy I found him. I slid my hand under his sweater and caressed his stomach. His muscles bunched and flexed beneath my touch. I ran my fingers along the waistband of his jeans and

dipped one beneath the denim. “My free-for-all begins now.”

“I think we should save it for the chateau,” Dom said. “We have a long drive and should get going.”

I reluctantly released him and stepped back. “I’ll just grab my suitcases.”

“Plural?” Dom asked. “How many do you need?”

“A few.” I turned and walked farther into the room. “The big beast has my wardrobe, and the smaller one is a tickle trunk.”

“Excuse me?” Dom’s voice was closer than I expected. I turned and found him right behind me. He was too busy scowling at the luggage and plowed into me. I stumbled, and he looped his arms around my waist to steady me. “Sorry.”

“Quite all right.” I settled my hands on his broad shoulders and pressed my body against his. “I like this.”

Dom’s hands landed on my ass. “Did you say something about a tickle trunk? What’s that?”

I wagged my brows. “It’s just what you think it is. Filled with all the things that might tickle your...fancy. Want me to show you?”

Dom’s cheeks turned a dark shade of pink. His mouth opened and shut a few times, but no words came out.

Taking pity on him, I patted his shoulder and stepped away. “I was just kidding, Grizz.”

“ Grizz ?”

“I looked up the stage between cub and bear in gay culture, and it said a wolf. That doesn’t suit you, so I decided to just call you a Grizz.”

“And that’s a compliment?” Dom asked.

“Oh yeah,” I replied. “I’ll show you how hot I find you.” Pivoting, I headed toward the luggage lined up against my closet door. “I didn’t know what to pack, so I brought—”

“Everything?” Dom reached around me and grabbed the handle of the larger suitcase.

“Ha! I only packed a tiny fraction of my wardrobe.” I grabbed the smaller piece of luggage and snagged the matching weekender bag off my bed before following him out of my bedroom.

“What’s in there?” Dom asked suspiciously.

“My personal hygiene products.” I struck a pose and added, “It takes a lot to look this good.” And I packed enough condoms and lube for endless fucking, but I’d let Dom discover that for himself later.

Neither of us spoke as we exited the building and headed to the parking lot. Dom pointed a key fob at a sleek black SUV directly in front of us and pressed a button. The headlights came on, and the doors unlocked. Dom stepped off the curb and walked toward the back.

“Um, did Santa arrive at your place early?” I asked.

“It’s a rental,” Dom said as he rounded the back of the beast. “Though, I could buy

this slick beauty outright with the money your family gave me for taking you off their hands for the next two weeks.”

Dom looked so pleased with himself over his little dig that I let him have it. He hit another button on the fob, and the rear hatch opened on a motorized whir. It seemed to take forever for the door to open all the way. Or maybe it was because I got lost in Dom’s eyes. The dreary, overcast sky made his green irises look brighter. Gray was a wonderful color for him. Dom narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Are you really that clueless about your sex appeal?”

Dom snorted and tossed my enormous suitcase into the back like it weighed nothing, then reached for the luggage in my hand. “I got this. Go ahead and get in.”

I patted his chest before walking around him to reach the passenger side of the vehicle. I stopped at the corner and looked over my shoulder. Dom had turned to watch me leave, and I caught him staring at my ass. “You’ll want a gray tuxedo.”

“Okay.” Then he shook his head. “Wait! Why do I need a tux?”

“For our wedding, of course.” I pointed to the sky. “Gray does amazing things for your eyes.”

Dom stared unblinkingly at me, and I took that as my cue to ease off. I continued to the front door and climbed into the passenger seat. The fully loaded SUV came with every amenity a person could want and then some. I’d packed winter gear but didn’t want to wear a coat in the car, so I turned on the seat heater. I retrieved my phone from my pocket before I put my seat belt on. The back door beeped as it closed, and the lock whirred as it engaged. A minute or two passed, and Dom still hadn’t joined me. I turned to look out the rear window and noticed he stood in basically the same

spot I'd left him.

Uh-oh. I'd done it now. I'd gotten him to agree to a sexual free-for-all and then kept pushing. The wedding reference probably shoved him right over the edge. I visualized turning down a dial in my head and cycled through a few breaths. The last exhale sounded a little shaky when I noticed Dom walking toward the driver's door. Should I apologize or pretend I hadn't said it? I didn't really know how I was going to handle it until the words came out of my mouth. The man got one butt cheek on the plush leather seat before my gums started flapping.

"I'm sorry about the marriage remark. It was too much too soon."

Dom shut the door with a wry smile. "It's okay, I guess."

"I should've at least waited until Christmas Eve at the earliest to pop the question," I teased.

Dom groaned and shook his head, but he started the SUV without tossing me out on my ass first.

"I'll behave," I promised.

"No, you won't. You don't know how. Your every breath is some kind of innuendo."

"It's your fault," I said as he backed out of the parking spot.

"How?"

"Because I want you all the time. It makes me crazy, and I lose control of my mouth. If you shoved something thick and hard in it—"

Dom hit the brakes a little too hard at the apartment complex exit. His sexy mouth quirked at one corner. “Is this your idea of behaving?”

I grimaced. “It’s me trying.” I mimed zipping my lips and throwing away the key.

Dom pulled onto the road, and we drove a few blocks before he broke the silence. “I hope like hell I don’t disappoint you. Our first hookup in my van was way shorter than I’d wanted it to be. Not sure what about those two minutes made you so eager to do it again.”

I snorted. “You made me come so hard I nearly blacked out.”

“Nah, the van was just really dark inside.”

“Shut up,” I said, slapping his arm playfully. “I bet if you ask most couples, they’d say their first intimate moments were less than ideal. What I remember about that night is how hot we were for each other. My skin burned where you touched me, and no one—and I mean this, Dom—no one has ever kissed me the way you do. You put your whole soul into a kiss. When I jerk off to fantasies about that night, I’m always thinking about your lips on mine.” I watched as we rolled right through a stop sign without so much as slowing down. Horns honked, brakes squealed, but Dom didn’t seem to notice. “You just blew through a four-way stop.”

“Seriously?”

“You didn’t hear the horns blaring or the cars screeching to a sudden stop?” I asked.

He waved that off. “I was asking about the kissing and jerking off.”

“Dom, I haven’t said a single untrue thing to you in two years. I wouldn’t start now.” Not when it was possible I’d get everything my heart had desired since we

reconnected. “Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“You are nowhere near the top of my sucky sex list,” I assured him.

“Is that kind of like a no-fly list?”

“Pretty much.” I looked over and caught him smiling. “Want to hear my top five?”

“Do I?” Dom asked.

“Yeah, you do. At least you didn’t count down to blast off like one guy I hooked up with,” I said.

Dom glanced over at me suspiciously. “Are you for real?”

“Always.”

“When you say blast off, do you mean climax?” Dom asked.

I re-enacted the final five seconds of sex with a NASA enthusiast. I made an explosion sound to mimic his orgasm.

Dom laughed so hard that he started to cough. With his track record, I worried he might be a danger to other drivers.

“Should you pull over?” I asked.

He wheezed and waved me off. His lips moved, noises came out, and I thought they might be words.

“What?”

He took a deep breath and said, “How did you react?”

“Well, I didn’t join him in the countdown,” I replied. “Somehow in this chaos, I climaxed on command too.”

Dom wheezed some more, and I wished I’d brought a bottle of water for the road.

I pointed to a gas station. “Pull in there. I’ll run in and get you something to drink.”

He gestured to the back seat and I angled my body for a look. He’d brought a large, insulated lunch box with him, so I finessed it forward until I could get a good grip. The thing weighed a ton, and I knew why when I opened the top. Dom had packed enough drinks and snacks to take us across the country and back. I smiled when I saw a few bottles of the winter cranberry Sprite I loved so much. I grabbed one of those and water for Dom before setting the lunchbox between my feet. Twisting the cap off the water, I handed it to Dom. He stopped at a red light and downed half the bottle before setting it in the drink holder. I put his cap back on and enjoyed a few sips of the Sprite.

“And then there was the time I matched with a magician on Grindr,” I said.

Dom lost it again, wheezing out a question in between gasps. “A magician?”

“None of that shit was listed on his profile,” I said.

“Did he pull a rabbit out of a hat?”

“No, but he shouted ‘abracadabra’ when he fished out a condom from his wallet. I got the fuck out of there.”

The light turned green, and Dom visibly pulled himself together.

“And then there was the mortician from the funeral home.”

Dom spluttered and swung the SUV into a shopping center and parked. Tears streamed down his face as he took a long drink of water. He cleared his throat a few times before turning his head in my direction. One glance at my face started the laughing fit all over again, and he averted his gaze. “I can’t look at you right now.”

“I think I said that to my reflection in the mirror when I got home from the date with the mortician,” I said. “The guy reminded me of the tall, gangly character from The Addams Family .”

Dom tilted his head back against the rest and laughed deep from his belly. It made me want to shove my hand under his sweater and feel the vibration. “Lurch?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. He didn’t look like Lurch. Just tall and lanky with huge hands. He was hung like a horse, but his dirty talk came out in a funeral director’s voice.”

Dom turned his head and met my gaze. His eyes shimmered like wet emeralds. “Did you...come?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Hung like a horse. Great hands. What could I do?”

“Then there was the hot ER doctor.” I tsked and shook my head. “Loved to have his frenulum played with.”

“Who doesn’t?” Dom asked.

“This idiot called it his friend-ulum and introduced us.”

Dom howled with laughter until I worried he might be sick. I decided that was enough horror stories for one day and waited for him to cycle down. He wiped his tears with the back of his hand and heaved a loud sigh. “Thank you.”

I leaned forward and cupped his face. “I dream of the sounds you make when you come, your scent, the rasp of your belly hair against my skin, and your spunk sliding up and down my dick.” I was getting hard just thinking about it and shifted in my seat.

Dom’s focus dropped to my lap before meeting my gaze again. He leaned in for a quick kiss that made my heart skip a beat. “More of that later. We better get on the road. My mom will worry if we’re late.” He shifted the SUV into Drive and navigated back to the street, but then he surprised me by reaching for my hand. “The sooner we get introductions over, the faster we can get to our room. Where I’ll introduce you to my fr—”

“Nope! Just drive.”

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:53 am

Dom

Sven's fingers were still entwined with mine when we arrived at the chateau, though he'd fallen asleep an hour ago. I'd reclaimed my hand on multiple occasions to perform driving tasks, but I always seemed to find my way back to him. Every time I reached for Sven, he sighed or performed a slight shimmy in his seat, as if I were falling right into his trap. And did I care if I was? Not really. Sven was the sexiest, smartest, and kindest man I knew. And he wanted me.

I knew the moment he woke up, even though he hadn't made a sound. Something stirred, an energy that was uniquely Sven and more addictive than alcohol or drugs. He was offering me everything I'd craved for two years, and though I agreed to the free-for-all he'd insisted on, I'd have to be a little nuts not to worry about the fallout.

Sven pulled his hand free, and I turned to look at him. He cupped my face and brushed his thumb over my scruffy chin. "Are you still in love with Emerson?"

"I'm not."

He searched my gaze for a few moments, then nodded. "Then let's get this awkward initial greeting over with so we can slink off to our suite for some naked exploration." He kissed me one more time before he removed his seat belt and reached for the door handle.

"Don't you want to ask me questions about my family?"

"I did plenty of research over the past two weeks and feel like I have a good read on

everyone.”

I quirked a brow. “I’d love to hear your analysis.”

Sven laughed and shook his head. “Is this a delay tactic?”

“Only partially.”

“Okay. Here are my deductions.” Sven cleared his throat dramatically before continuing. “Your parents are madly in love with each other. They are best friends who do everything together. Molly and Dominic Sr. are smiling or laughing in every photo they post on social media.”

“They have a lot of fun together,” I admitted.

“John and Janet Carmichael are the polar opposite. Woof.” Sven grimaced apologetically until I nodded my agreement. “I think your Aunt Janet is devastatingly unhappy, and she is possibly a borderline alcoholic.”

My mouth fell open in shock. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Besides the constant presence of alcoholic beverages in her hand, you mean? Alcohol abuse wreaks havoc on a person’s face. She thinks her photos depict a perfect marriage, but your uncle comes across as an unwilling participant at best and a prisoner at worst. The man looks like he would chew his own ankle off at any minute to escape her. I wouldn’t be surprised if golf isn’t his only mistress.”

I stared unblinkingly at Sven until the stretched silence made him squirm.

“Did I go too far?”

I shook my head slowly. “No, I’m amazed. You formed those conclusions just from scrolling through their social media accounts?”

Sven nodded. “I focused on what their posts didn’t say instead of what they’d written.” His brain fascinated me as much as his banging body.

“Give me an example,” I nudged.

“Okay.” Sven pursed his lips and stared out the windshield as he pondered his response. He cleared his throat when he was ready and met my gaze again. “We’ll start with your parents because they’re the easiest. I have an unfair advantage here because Lucinda is friends with your mom, but I didn’t need any help from her to know that your parents are the real deal.”

“They are,” I agreed. “Tell me how you know that.”

“I already remarked on the laughing and smiling pictures, which was my first clue. Nothing is ever forced, and sometimes their photos aren’t very flattering. The selfies are typically off-center or out of focus because they were too busy looking at one another. Often, one of them is mostly cropped out of the photo. Sometimes your mom’s hair is a hot mess, and your dad’s clothes are often disheveled. And I think he has a bad habit of dribbling food onto his shirt. None of that stuff matters to them. They only care about how the moment makes them feel. And they share their beautiful joy with the people they love. Their posts are pure and reactive instead of phony and curated.”

“Wow,” I whispered.

Sven continued without acknowledging my admiration. “Their pictures grabbed my attention, but their written posts were just as revealing,” Sven said.

“Do tell.”

“I considered what they were smiling and laughing about in the photos with their windblown hair and stained clothes. They’d found weirdly shaped—often phallic-looking foods. They’d stumbled across something that reminded them of a private joke that always made them laugh. Sometimes it was a pretty rock on a hike, and once, a tumbleweed nearly took out your dad.”

“Those things are so much bigger than you imagine,” I said.

Sven smiled. “That’s what your dad commented on your mom’s post.”

I laughed. “This apple didn’t fall far from the tree.”

“I could go on,” Sven said.

“Please do.”

“They go to community theater performances and try new restaurants. Sometimes the entertainment or meal is a miss, but the experience is always a hit because they’ve done it together. That comes through loud and clear in every post. Your mom often talks about what your father liked most about the meal instead of what she liked.”

“Though it’s pretty evident on his shirt, right?” I asked.

Sven laughed. “Not always, but sometimes. And your dad always comments on the sound of your mom’s laughter during a performance or the way she smiles or silently cries when especially moved. It’s like he prefers observing her reactions to the production rather than watching the performances himself.”

I tilted my head and recalled bits and pieces from my childhood. “We had our

favorite weekly shows, and my father spent more time watching my mother's reactions than the show. I'd forgotten that until you reminded me just now."

"You've internalized it, not knowing it was special. I bet you do now that you're an adult."

I nodded. "Yeah, my parents are the ideal couple."

"Your aunt and uncle couldn't be more different," Sven said. "A person wouldn't even know John Carmichael is a husband or father by scrolling his social media accounts if not for your aunt's incessant tags. His posts are about business and golf. Nothing about Janet or Christian."

"Uncle John is the definition of an absentee father and a disinterested spouse," I said.

"I think Janet's forced cheerful posts are even sadder. I have a lot of clients like her, and I work hard to make them feel seen and appreciated when they're in my chair."

"Those are some impressive observations and insight."

He gave a little bow and straightened in his seat. "But wait! There's more." Sven chuckled at his infomercial actor impersonation. "Your cousin and ex-husband work overtime to show the world that they're 'not that kind' of gay." Sven pointed at himself. "Flighty, flirty, and sexually free. They wouldn't be caught dead at a drag brunch, and I pity them. Your ex-husband dresses like a youth pastor and is the wrong kind of tight ass." Sven waggled his brows. "My ass is tight in all the right ways, but I'd bet money Christian and Emerson think gays like me are ruining things for gays like them. They probably watched as teens like me got bullied because my queerness had been on full display since birth. Their internalized homophobia may have even prompted them to take part in the harassment. Bet they're all too happy to claim all the rights afforded to them without having joined the fight to make it

happen.”

Sven’s cadence had increased as he spoke, and he gestured more than usual. He’d never come across as nervous before, so it was obviously a sensitive subject. I snagged his hand and brought it to my lips.

“You’re the best kind of gay,” I said. “Perfect in every way.”

Sven inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. “I’m no Mary Poppins, but I’ll do in a pinch,” he teased.

I turned my head and studied our home for the next few weeks. The two-story chateau was a magnificent beast made of glistening glass and rustic timber, set against a majestic mountain backdrop. Every light in the rental house must’ve been on because it shone like a gaudy beacon in the dying daylight, as if to say, “Look at me!” By going inside, I was participating in the farce. Everything wasn’t okay with our family, and two weeks in Vail wouldn’t fix that. In fact, this holiday would likely make everything worse.

Sven’s hand covered mine and squeezed. “You’re thinking awfully hard.”

“This is a bad idea,” I said.

“Then we should leave.”

I turned my head to study Sven. He’d gone to a lot of trouble to rearrange his schedule and clear the time off for my benefit.

He chuckled and leaned forward to kiss me. “I’m not doing this solely for you.”

“Did I say that out loud?”

“Nope,” he said. “Your expression gave you away. I’m here for myself too. I’ve never wanted a man the way I want you, and I will prove that you and I are the real deal.”

“How can you possibly know that? We haven’t spent much time together in the past two years.”

“How long did it take for your parents to figure out they were made for one another?” Sven pressed.

“One date.” At Sven’s raised brow, I added, “They got married a week later.”

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case.”

“But we haven’t had sex yet,” I protested. “We barely rubbed each other off in the back of my minivan.”

Sven closed his eyes and hummed happily for a few moments. He reopened his eyes, and the dark blue irises shimmered with wicked mischief. “Intimacy isn’t just about penetration, and I’m excited to explore all the ways we can please each other.” Sven glanced at the chateau and said, “But we can experiment and play anywhere. We don’t have to stay here. Parents as wonderful as yours would understand.”

“I’m not doing this for my parents,” I said. “If this is Nana’s last holiday, I want it to be special.”

And with that, I made up my mind. I killed the engine with grim determination. The interior lights came on as our cue to exit the vehicle, but Sven stopped me before I could reach for my door handle. He crooked his finger to beckon me closer, and I leaned toward him as if pulled by an invisible string. I didn’t get very far because I’d forgotten to remove my seat belt.

Sven chuckled as he pushed the button to free me, and I pulled the belt across my chest. “Just one kiss,” he said an instant before our mouths met.

His lips parted, and I deepened the kiss. I hadn’t meant to linger long, but the first glide of slick tongues made me hungry for so much more. Angling my legs toward him, I cupped the back of his neck to hold him in place, leaning into the moment instead of thinking about my next step. Or the one after that. I didn’t think at all. I just felt. Sven slid his hands into my hair and massaged my scalp. A breathy whimper filled the vehicle, and it took me a few seconds to realize it had come from me. God, his hands were magic. I couldn’t stop myself from imagining his skilled fingers in other places.

Next thing I knew, I was cupping his ass and hauling him halfway over the console. Sven growled and nipped my bottom lip to rev me up more. And that’s when a car horn started going off. One short beep followed by a long wail. Someone was really laying into that thing, and it took me too long to realize I was the someone. Sven pulled my arm back from the steering wheel and collapsed back into his seat in a fit of giggles.

“Sounds like...” His voice trailed off as he lost his breath. “Like you’re expecting them to...” Sven lapsed back into another round of laughter. “Come out and greet us.”

I looked back toward the chateau in time to see a group of people step onto the porch. “Fuck me.”

My cursing only made Sven laugh harder. “That’s one way to break the tension.”

“It’s still here,” I said, though a silent laugh rumbled my body.

Sven wiped his face and reached for the door handle. “Let’s get this weird part over

with so we can retreat to our room before dinner. You know, to unpack.” He wagged his brows suggestively.

I pushed out of the SUV and walked around to the back to get the luggage. A quick glance at the porch revealed only two people had remained. I recognized and adored those silhouettes. Mom and Dad lit up brighter than the house as we approached with our luggage. I was grateful the others went inside so we could share this moment in private.

“Mom, Dad, this is Sven,” I said.

My mom threw her arms around Sven and squeezed him tightly. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Me too,” Sven said, and I could tell he meant it.

Dad moved in on me, wrapping me up in one of his famous bear hugs. “It’s not too late for all of us to make a break for it. Your SUV is big enough, and I don’t care about my clothes and stuff inside.”

Mom let go of Sven and swatted Dad. “Dominic, stop that. You’ll give the boys the wrong impression.”

“That John is on his high horse about his latest corporate conquest or that Janet is on her second bottle of wine?” Dad asked. “Don’t even get me started on Christian and Emerson. Those uptight assholes who are just spoiling for a fight.” Dad turned to me. “Don’t you dare oblige them. Kill them with kindness.”

Sven nudged me with his elbow. “I told you I didn’t want to be an accomplice to murder.”

Dad cackled and opened his arms to Sven for a hug. “Sven, I am delighted to meet you. Dom talks about you all the time.”

Sven lit up like a Christmas tree. “Is that so?”

“No,” I said.

“Sure is,” my parents countered in unison.

Sven hummed appreciatively as he sized up my dad. “I can see where Dom gets his good looks and strength.”

Dad cackled. “Luckily, he gets his smarts from his mother.”

“And his sense of humor.” Mom looped her arm through Sven’s and led him toward the front door.

“Hey!” Dad called out. “What about the luggage?”

“You big, strong men can handle a couple of suitcases. I want to talk to Sven.”

I suspected our detour to the bedroom would have to wait. Damn it . I grabbed the handles for the largest bags and said, “Might as well do what she says. We won’t win an argument, and she’s taken my boyfriend hostage.” I halted for a second, shocked by how easily the word rolled off my tongue.

“Janet!” Mom yelled loud enough to raise the dead.

The entry was open to the second story, with an enormous antler chandelier overhead. That bastard had to weigh four hundred pounds. I hoped like hell it was bolted properly because Mom’s shouting might cause it to break loose. Beyond the

monstrosity was a double staircase winding up toward the second floor. A moderate sitting room was to the left of the entrance, and a study or small library was to the right. Mom and Sven walked under the staircase and moved farther into the house. She seemed eager to lead Sven straight into the lion's den, so I picked up my pace.

"Let's leave the suitcases by the stairs, Dad. Sven and I can take them up once we know which room is ours."

"Actually, you and Sven are staying in the primary suite on this floor." He cackled. "That went over like a lead balloon with Janet."

"How'd that even happen?" I asked.

"Molly Beth insisted we draw names for it, just like she insisted on paying for half this trip. There was no way in hell she was going to let Janet lord this over us."

I winced at the cost. "I can pay for my portion." It would cut into my savings, but I didn't want my parents to siphon money from their retirement accounts.

"Nonsense. This trip is a gift from your mother and me," Dad said. He gestured down a hallway just on the other side of the stairs. "Your room is down here at the end of the hallway. Nana is in a smaller suite down there." He gestured in the opposite direction. "The rest of us are on the second floor. Pray for us."

While I was happy for some distance between myself, the Carmichaels, and Emerson, I hated that my father was unhappy. But before I could comment, my mom's voice echoed through the house again.

"Janet! Come meet Dom's gorgeous boyfriend!"

I let go of the luggage and stepped up my pace. Dad joined me, sounding a little out

of breath.

“I don’t want to miss the fireworks,” he said, then muscled past me. “Your mother has practically vibrated with anticipation. She couldn’t wait to show Sven off. Molly Beth has been watching his TikTok videos religiously since you told us Sven was coming with you.” Dad looked over and winked. “Why’d you try to keep your relationship a secret for so long?”

“I, uh...”

“Afraid to jinx it, right?”

“Sure,” I agreed.

“Once you go public, you open yourself up to opinions,” Dad said. “Which are stinky like assholes.”

“Uh-huh.”

The back of the chateau opened into an enormous open space that combined a gourmet kitchen and a grand family room with a two-story stone fireplace and a chandelier the size of a compact car. The room was gleaming pale wood from floor to ceiling, broken only by shaggy white area rugs and furniture. A massive U-shaped sofa was centered in front of the fireplace, with a grouping of club chairs off to the side. The furniture wasn’t the same color but various shades of gray and white and finished with different fabrics. I wouldn’t have thought to pair leather with corduroy and velvet, but it worked somehow. The throw pillows ranged from over-the-top feathery numbers to somber tweeds and faux fur.

The largest artificial Christmas tree I’d ever seen stood in the corner. It had been flocked until every branch was covered in an inch or more of fake snow. There had to

be thousands of lights on that sucker. Silver and gold ornaments hung from every branch, and I couldn't decide if the tree was beautiful or gaudy.

"Check out the television," Dad said.

I'd clocked the massive beast hanging over the fireplace, but I was more concerned about Mom's troublemaking at the moment.

"You have a gorgeous fireplace and fancy television in your room too," Dad added.

And I couldn't wait to check them out, but I'd need to reclaim my boyfriend first. Damn, that was rolling freely in my brain now.

"Molly Beth!" Janet yelled back. "Hush before you wake Mother!"

I turned toward the kitchen and saw that the Carmichaels and Emerson had gathered around a massive kitchen island. Even more impressive was the amount of booze and food littering its surface. Someone had gone to the store or had groceries delivered. My stomach growled, but I didn't want to rummage for snacks and draw attention to myself. I nearly snorted out loud. I could've taken everything off the island without their notice. Their attention was on Sven, who stood proudly at my mother's side.

"This is Dom's boyfriend, Sven." Mom turned and smiled at him. "You're even more gorgeous in person."

"You're too sweet." Sven lifted his hand and waved. "Hello."

"Hello," chorused the Carmichaels.

Emerson was too busy raking narrowed eyes over Sven to remember his manners. His brown eyes sparkled with malicious intention when he finished his perusal. He

sniffed and turned his head, and that's when his gaze connected with mine. Eyes I used to adore widened in surprise, which was stupid since he had to know I was coming. His lips parted, and he shifted on his stool as if to get up but changed his mind at the last minute. Emerson turned and spoke softly to Christian, who jerked his head in my direction. Sadness was the first emotion I clocked in his familiar blue eyes, but his expression quickly turned to defensiveness.

My aunt and uncle stood beside one another, gazing from one grouping to another as if they weren't sure where to look or what to say. If I wanted alone time with Sven, and I did, it would be up to me to end the awkward standoff. I paused next to Sven to kiss his temple before moving into the kitchen. I extended my hand to my uncle, who shook it firmly, and then I brushed a kiss against my aunt's cheek. She was thinner than I'd ever seen her, and I was worried about her.

"It's good to see you both," I told them. "It's been too long."

And I realized I meant it. They hadn't handled the situation between Christian and me very well, but he was their son. I would give them a pass this time, but I couldn't say the same about Christian and Emerson. Ignoring their existence wouldn't work and would only cause more trouble, so I faced them from the opposite side of the island and offered a cordial nod. It was the best I could do at the moment. I left the Carmichaels and Emerson in the kitchen and walked to my mother and Sven.

"Have we decided what we're doing for dinner?" I asked Mom.

"There's a brick oven out back, and we're going to do wood-fired pizzas," she said excitedly. "I bought every type of topping I could think of to cover all the bases."

"Sounds perfect." I leaned closer and whispered, "Everything is going to be fine. You don't have to try so hard."

She patted my cheek and sighed. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I held out my hand to Sven, and he slipped his fingers between mine. “We’re going to unpack and get settled. Let me know when you’re ready to make dinner. Wood-fired pizza is my favorite, but I’ve never seen it done.”

“It will be a first for all of us.” Mom winked. “Dad and I watched some YouToo videos, so we have a plan.” God, could they be any cuter? I didn’t bother correcting her. “You two go rest, and I’ll let you know when it’s time.”

I led Sven back to our luggage and took the hall in the direction my dad said. There was only one bedroom, and it was a doozy. It was three times the size of my apartment. The bed was big enough for a small army and covered with luxurious linens I couldn’t wait to mess up with Sven.

“Holy shit. No wonder Janet is pissed we won this room in the drawing.”

“Drawing?” Sven asked.

I repeated what my dad said as I inspected the fireplace and the massive television above the mantel. “Wonder if this is a smart TV. I could access my streaming accounts and show you what your entertainment has been missing.” I spun around and noticed Sven was nowhere in sight.

He poked his head out of a doorway and beckoned me closer. “You’ve got to see this bathroom.”

My jaw dropped when I entered the room. The mixture of marble, wood, and copper gave the space a luxurious Western charm.

“Look at that bathtub,” Sven said, then pointed in case I didn’t see the massive

copper structure on the opposite end of the room. “Do you have any idea what I could do to you in there?”

“I can’t wait for you to show me.”

“And that shower!” Sven walked to it and practically put his face up against the glass wall like a kid outside a toy shop at Christmas. His breath even fogged up the glass a little. “Marble benches. I can’t wait to bounce on your thighs in there.”

“My ass just clenched at the thought of sitting on cold marble.”

Sven pointed to a control panel near the shower. “It’s heated. And there’s an option to warm the floors and turn on a ceiling heater for when you step out of the shower.”

“Just need a refrigerator and a microwave, and we’d be all set. Wouldn’t have to leave the room.”

Sven looked wistfully at the shower. “Would you mind if I freshened up before we...”

I smiled wickedly. “Of course not. I’ll check out the rest of the room and meet you on the bed.”

Sven stood on his tiptoes and kissed me. “I won’t be long.” He turned to the shower’s panel and started fiddling with the options. Water came out of the multiple showerheads and the jets along the far wall. “Oh, this is exciting.”

I chuckled and ducked back into the bedroom to give him privacy to explore the shower. I kicked off my shoes and admired what would surely be our sanctuary from my family’s chaos. For a second, I wondered what they were discussing in the kitchen, but Sven’s off-key singing dragged my attention to what mattered most.

There was plenty of room in the dressers, and I found a walk-in closet that was bigger than my bedroom. I didn't know how many outfits Sven brought, but he'd have plenty of room to store his things and make himself feel at home. Instead of unpacking, I stretched out on the bed. The comforter felt like it was made from clouds, and the pillow had the perfect amount of firmness. Yep, I was going to make the best of my time in purgatory.

I raised my arms over my head and smiled as my favorite fantasy of Sven played out in my head. The dreams of him riding my cock would become a reality as soon as he finished in the shower. My limbs and eyelids felt heavy, and I seemed to sink deeper into the cloud as the tension drained from my body. I'd just close my eyes and rest them for a few seconds while I waited for my boyfriend to join me.

Next thing I knew, someone snored loudly in the bed. My eyes flew open, and I realized I'd rolled over onto my left side and had fallen asleep. I was the one snoring. Sven sat propped up against the headboard beside me, reading something on his phone. He was bare-chested and wore only a pair of red-and-green plaid lounge pants.

Sven looked over at me and smiled. "Hi, sleepyhead."

I sat up too fast and made myself dizzy. That's when I noticed the crusty spot on the corner of my mouth. Great, I'd not only fallen asleep on him, but I'd snored and drooled. "I can't believe you didn't take the keys from my pocket and leave."

"Why would I do that?"

I lay back down and covered my head with my pillow. "I wanted things to go better this time." My words came out muffled by the pillow, but he heard me just fine.

Sven snatched the pillow off my face and shifted on the bed to straddle my hips. He

leaned over me and braced his hands on either side of my head. He rocked his hips forward, and I didn't bother to hold back the moan.

"That right there," Sven said. "Your immediate reaction to me drives me wild."

He rocked his hips again and sent desire zinging through my blood. If I didn't take control of the situation, things would be over too fast again. In a series of fluid motions, I grabbed Sven's hips, rolled him to his back, and tucked myself between his spread thighs. "It's my turn to drive you wild."

Sven

I stretched my arms over my head and surrendered fully to whatever Dom wanted to do to me. He began with a trail of kisses that started behind my right ear and snaked down my neck. The softness of his lips and the rasp from his scruff made me squirm. “I’ve dreamed about having you on top of me.”

“Bet you never guessed I’d be this heavy.”

Though his words sounded muffled against my skin, his insecurity came out crystal clear. And I was having none of it. “The reality of you is so much better than the fantasy.” His lips paused, and I braced myself for a deflection or another jab at himself, but Dom continued his trek down my body, working horizontally over my collarbone. “I can’t imagine how sexy it will be when we’re skin to skin.”

Dom lifted his head and met my gaze. The worry in his green eyes made my heart ache. “You say that now, but you haven’t seen me without a shirt in two years. I’ve gained some more weight since then.”

I cupped his handsome face and held eye contact, willing him to see my sincerity. “You are absolutely perfect, Grizz.” I lowered my hands to the bottom of his sweater and gently tugged. “Take this off, and let me prove it.”

Dom’s expression remained uncertain, but he eased up onto his knees and pulled his sweater over his head. I sat up before he could drop it on the bed and nuzzled my nose against his stomach. Dom didn’t sport a thick pelt of fur on his torso; he had the perfect amount of dark hair covering his belly and chest. Dom oozed masculinity

from every pore, and it drove me insane. I cupped his ass and alternated between rubbing my face against him and kissing his skin as I unbuckled his belt.

Dom growled and cupped the back of my head. “I thought I was supposed to be driving you insane.”

“Already there.” I unbuttoned his jeans and tugged the zipper down to reveal black underwear. The scent of Dom’s arousal was maddening, and I needed more. I pressed my nose against the straining fabric and inhaled deeply.

Dom’s fingers tightened in my hair. “Fuck.”

I tugged his jeans and underwear down enough to reveal the top of his pubic hairline. I was getting closer to the treasure but stopped to nuzzle my nose in his neatly trimmed curls. The scent of his arousal was even stronger, and I slipped my tongue beneath his waistband to tease the rigid flesh beneath it. Dom gripped my hair and pulled me back. I tilted my head to meet his gaze and was satisfied to see no trace of his earlier insecurities. Naked hunger stared back at me. “If I don’t get your monster cock in my mouth in the next—”

Ping. Dom’s phone notifications were likely set at a normal volume, but the timing of the interruption made it sound obnoxiously loud. He glanced over at the bedside table and grimaced. “It’s my mom.”

I tried to tug his pants back up, but he stopped me.

“We can pretend we didn’t hear the phone. I’d rather have you than—”

Ping.

“Damn it,” Dom snarled.

Ping. Ping.

Dom scowled at his phone like it was his mortal enemy. “Christ, woman. One text message will do.”

Ping.

He lunged for the device and stared at it in disbelief as he read the texts. “Wow, Mom. She said, ‘We’re getting ready to make pizza,’ and then followed it up with, ‘before Janet passes out.’” Dom lifted his head and met my gaze. “She told us to come out if we’ve finished.”

I wagged my brows. “Finished what? You’ve only read three messages, and she sent four. What’s the last one say?”

Dom shook his head. “I’m too embarrassed to say.”

“Show me, then.”

Dom turned the phone around and revealed an eggplant emoji. Beneath it was a blue replay arrow. Dom tapped it, and dozens of eggplants swirled across the screen. I flopped back on the bed and covered my mouth to hide my laughter, but my shaking shoulders betrayed me. Dom tried to scowl, but his lips kept twitching at the corners. He wanted to give in to the hilarity of the situation too.

He set his phone down and crawled over to me, repositioning himself between my legs. Dom lowered his head, and I thought he was going to kiss me, but he stopped a few inches from my mouth. “You find this funny?”

“Hilarious.”

He smiled then, and I wanted to taste it.

“Kiss me,” I urged.

Dom captured my mouth in a hungry kiss. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and urged him to lower himself until his bare chest pressed against mine. My hands explored his muscular back and ghosted over his ribcage. I bucked my pelvis upward, trying to align my erection against his. Dom gripped my hips to hold me still. “Oh no, you don’t.”

He rolled off me and stood up on the other side of the bed. “It’s bad enough I fell asleep on you. I will not make a bad situation worse by coming in five seconds again.”

“I can count down for you,” I offered.

Dom’s shoulders shook as he recalled my hookup horror stories. “You made that stuff up to make me feel better.”

I sat up and raised my right hand as if testifying. “Everything I said was true.” I patted the bed. “We haven’t finished yet.”

Dom groaned and stepped back. “Nope. Not when they’re all waiting for us and speculating about what’s taking us so long to come down.”

I smirked at him. “Pretty sure they’ll all know the answer.”

But maybe Dom didn’t want his ex-husband thinking about us having sex. Emerson’s gobsmacked reaction to seeing Dom was still fresh in my mind. The fool looked like a cartoon character with his bulging eyes and gaping mouth. Dom told me he was completely over his ex-husband, but it was obvious Emerson didn’t feel the same. A

familiar dread unfurled in my belly. I'd found myself in this same situation more times than I wanted to count. Not this time. I might've found myself in a similar plot, but the characters were vastly different.

Dom was nothing like my ex-boyfriends, and I knew my self-worth now. And Emerson? There was nothing diabolical about this villain. He was vain, selfish, and would broadcast his every move. He'd already made his first mistake when he'd sized me up and dismissed me as zero threat. Fine by me. I was used to people underestimating me and actually preferred it that way. I'd faced far more fearsome foes. Emerson Baker—I refused to add the Babb—would soon learn I wasn't someone to trifle with.

Ping.

Dom looked at his phone and groaned. "Mom just warned that Nana is about to come looking for us. She'll distract her the best she can." Dom closed his eyes and tilted his head back.

"Praying?" I asked.

"For my erection to recede." Dom cycled through a few breaths. "Might help if you put a shirt on. Your body is perfection. And your skin..." Dom lowered his head and opened his eyes. The smoldering heat hadn't ebbed one bit. If anything, his green irises had darkened with desire. "Are you that silky smooth everywhere?"

If I were nice, I would've answered his question with a one-word response or deflected it altogether. I would've rummaged through my suitcase and put on a shirt that wouldn't get ruined by pizza toppings in case his ex-husband got catty or his tipsy aunt got clumsy. But I didn't feel nice, and I wanted to send a clear message when we returned to the family gathering. I scooted off the bed and stood before him. Dom's nostrils flared because he knew something was afoot. I kept my eyes locked

on his as I shoved my lounge pants to the floor, then stepped out of them and kicked the pants aside.

Dom's gaze traveled the length of my body, lingering on my smooth pelvis. I turned so he could see that my ass was every bit as smooth. Feeling especially shameless, I bent over and spread my cheeks apart to bare everything to him. The animalistic growl rumbling from his chest made the vulnerability all worth it. I turned to face Dom just as he closed the distance.

"I want cake for dinner," Dom snarled.

And, oh, how I wanted to feed it to him. I cupped his jaw and pressed a kiss to his mouth. "When we have more time."

I dropped to my knees in front of him and pulled his jeans and underwear down to his thick thighs. His erection sprang free, and I wrapped my lips around his cockhead.

"Sven." Dom's whisper was pure reverence. His hands went to my head, fingers sliding through my hair.

I lifted my gaze, and we locked eyes as I took him down, a slow, wet glide until my nose brushed against tight curls. Resting my hands on his thighs, I moved up and down his shaft, reveling in the way his big body trembled with excitement for me. Nothing and no one would stop me from rocking his world. Dom's mouth fell open, and his eyelids dropped to half-mast. That's the look I wanted. He didn't care about anything but the pleasure I gave him.

Dom's grip on my hair tightened as he rocked his hips and fucked my mouth. I hollowed my cheeks to suck harder and increased my tempo. "You little minx."

He thrust a few more times, then pulled out suddenly. Hot seed splashed against my

lips, and I stuck my tongue out to catch the next burst. Dom aimed the rest of his release there, and it overflowed onto my chin and dribbled onto my chest. He looked incredibly savage and sexy as he continued to rut against my tongue. I closed my mouth around his cock and sucked the full length of him one last time, making sure I cleaned him thoroughly.

“On your feet now,” Dom demanded.

I rose on shaky legs to stand before him, and he wrapped his arms around my waist.

“I should make you wait for hours before I let you come.”

I had only planned on making him happy, but his threat brought out more of my inner vixen. I brought his hand to my dick and smiled when his fingers curled around me. “You wouldn’t.”

His big fist stroked the length of my erection, and he surrendered with a wry smile. “I couldn’t.”

Dom released my dick to pick me up and toss me onto the bed. He dropped to his knees between my thighs but didn’t suck me into his mouth. He pushed my legs toward my chest, spread my ass cheeks, and kissed my pucker. I moaned, wanting more. Dom sucked his thumb into his mouth and then pressed it against my entrance, tracing around and around the rim, not sucking my dick until I whimpered and squirmed.

Firm lips sucked me down to the root and worked me relentlessly. I was already revved and ready, so it didn’t take long for my climax to reach the flashpoint.

“Gonna come,” I warned.

Dom didn't heed my warning but doubled down on his efforts.

"Seriously, like in five...oh shit...two." My breath caught in my throat as the intensity of my release caught me by surprise. Dom swallowed every ounce of my pleasure and looked damn pleased with himself when my dick slid from his lips. "That countdown trick is harder than I realized. I might need to work on my timing."

He kissed my inner thigh, and the rasp of scruffy whiskers against sensitive skin made me shiver. "I think you're perfect."

I reached down and ran my thumb over his bottom lip, which was slick with saliva and my essence. "Your lips are red and puffy. Looks like you've been sucking cock."

"Good," Dom said as he stood. He leaned over to kiss me without a care for the mess he'd left on my face. "You look like you've been blowing me, and you're going to smell like my cum unless you wash up again."

No fucking way. I'd wipe my face, but I wanted to go into the lion's den smelling like I'd just had sex with Dom. I rubbed his release into my chest, signaling my intentions. Dom's eyes darkened again.

"I might not survive the next two weeks."

"You'll go out happy," I promised.

"Got that right." Dom kissed me once more before he straightened and pulled his pants up with trembling hands. "Damn, I really want to just hide away with you for the rest of the night. What are the odds I could call my mom and place a pizza order for delivery to our door?"

As tempting as that sounded, I didn't want Emerson and Christian to think we were

hiding from them. Freaking faithless putzes. “Not likely. And I want to meet your Nana.”

“You’re going to love her, and she’s going to be crazy about you.”

“Then I better get ready before she comes looking for us.” Brushing past Dom, I headed to the luggage. I wheeled the bigger suitcase and heaved it onto the bed. “I know Kerry suggested I rile up your uptight family members, but how far do you want me to push it?”

Dom shook his head and laughed. “I want you to wear whatever makes you happy.”

I looked through my shirts and picked a charcoal-gray sweater. It was lightweight enough that I wouldn’t get overheated, and the fabric fit me snugly enough to show off my physique without looking like I was trying too hard. After a quick trip to the bathroom to wash my face, I returned to the bedroom to find Dom fully dressed. I stepped into the jeans I’d had on earlier and pulled them up my legs. Dom made a strangled noise, and I looked up at him.

“What?”

“You’re going commando?”

I grinned wickedly. “Who’s going to know besides you?”

“How will I concentrate when I know you’re bare under there?”

I wagged my brows. “Think of it as an incentive to get through this evening and get back here.”

Dom nodded. “I can put up with anything if I get to take you to bed tonight.”

Winking, I pulled my sweater on and posed. “Will this do?”

“You’d make a burlap sack look stylish.”

That made me laugh. I crossed the room and stood in front of him. “Your lips are still puffy.”

“So are yours.” He inhaled. “And you smell like sex.”

Maybe on some level, I should’ve considered that his parents would also be in the kitchen. Nah. I would worry about that later. I had a claim to stake first. “Ready to do this?”

Dom’s green eyes sparkled with humor. “You look like you’re going into battle.”

I winked. “And I won’t hesitate to cut a bitch.”

Pizza toppings covered nearly every surface in the vast kitchen when we rejoined the gathering. Pretty much everyone was in the same spot, except for the addition of a petite blue-haired woman holding court at the island. I’m not talking the silvery-blue tone that a lot of senior women accomplish with a rinse. Helen’s hair was as blue as my eyes. I searched for signs that she wore a wig but couldn’t find one.

“Um, that’s a new look,” Dom whispered.

I’d seen enough pictures of Helen on Janet’s feed to know her hair was usually snowy white. I volunteered at several senior facilities and could tell when the elderly were nearing the end of their life. Nothing about Helen hinted this would be her last holiday. Her skin looked vibrant, and she’d put effort into every aspect of her appearance. Her pale pink sweater and ivory slacks gave Helen an upscale casual vibe. She’d coiffed her hair and applied makeup to perfection.

What was going on? Was her supposed illness a ploy to reunite the family? If so, who was pulling the strings? And how many romance tropes could we cram into one vacation?

Helen glanced up, and her eyes lit with pure delight when they locked on Dom.

“Nana!” The warmth in Dom’s voice made my heart swell.

Helen wasn’t the only one who’d noticed our arrival. I clocked the reactions around the room, which mostly ranged from curiosity to joy. Only one person looked like they’d sucked on a lemon, and I couldn’t—check that— wouldn’t avoid his toxic regard. I locked eyes and figurative horns with Emerson, whose lips tilted up in a slight sneer. I’d enjoy every second of taking this disloyal bastard apart.

“Dommy!” Helen said.

Well, that diverted my attention, and Emerson was all but forgotten. I looked at Dom and mouthed, “Dommy?”

He narrowed his eyes and whispered, “Don’t you dare.”

“Oh, I’ll dare if you ever call me Stevie again.”

“Bring your young man over here to meet me,” Helen said.

Dom led me over to her and only released my hand to hug her. “I’ve missed you so much, Nana.”

“I’ve missed you too.” She pulled back and patted his cheek before turning her green gaze in my direction. Her irises were so similar to Dom’s, which only endeared her to me more. Hot pink eyeglasses hung from a silver chain around her neck, and she put

them on for closer inspection. “My word,” Helen said. “You might be the most beautiful man I have ever seen.”

“Oh, stop,” I said, even as I gestured for her to continue. The encounter earned laughs and chuckles from everyone except Gloomy Gus across the island.

“You could cut cocaine with those cheekbones,” Helen declared.

“Mom!” Janet exclaimed. “That’s so inappropriate.”

Helen glared at her daughter. “When have you known me to be any different?” She turned her attention back to me, leaning even closer. “And that mouth.”

“Yeah, well.” I pointed toward my lips, which were still puffy from the exuberant bedroom activities with her grandson. Talk about inappropriate. “This thing has a mind of its own sometimes and can get me into a lot of trouble.”

Helen cackled and wagged her brow. “Bet it gets you out of trouble a lot too.”

“Mom!” Molly Beth and Janet said in unison, though the tones of their exclamations were at odds.

Molly Beth had found the remark funny but felt obligated to chastise her mother. Janet was ready for the ground to swallow her whole. She reached for her full wineglass and took another sip.

“Mother, I organized this gathering especially for you,” Janet said. “I’ve created an itinerary of games and activities to make this an amazing holiday.”

Several groans chorused throughout the kitchen, including Dom’s. I’d wisely kept my trap shut and avoided the death glare Janet cast around the room.

“So, the least you can do is behave,” Janet admonished.

“We organized this holiday,” Molly Beth corrected. “And I have to say, Janet, Mom looks like a picture of health and vitality. We should all be as lucky to be so vibrant at her age.”

“Excuse me?” Helen looked between her daughters. “What’s this talk about my age and appearance? Did you expect to find me on my deathbed?”

Molly Beth crossed the room, and we got out of her way. She took her mother’s hands in hers. “You were sleeping when I arrived, so this is just the first time I get to admire how lovely you look.”

“Cut the bullshit,” Helen said. “What did Janet say about me?”

All eyes turned to Janet, who was enjoying another drink of wine. She lowered the glass from her mouth and set it on the counter. It had been completely full when we entered the kitchen, but it was now nearly three-quarters empty. “Why are you blaming me?”

“Because you and the facility director are in cahoots,” Helen said. She turned to Molly Beth once more. “Did she tell you I had one foot in the grave?”

Dom’s mother winced. “No, of course not. The facility expressed concerns that you weren’t doing well.”

“I’ve had several nurses and residents tell me they’ve heard you crying out at night for God to take you home or that you’ve claimed to see heaven,” Janet said. “If this is your last Christmas, I want it to be special. I don’t want Christian and Dom to be at odds anymore, and I...” Her words trailed off as her lips trembled. “And I miss my sister. It’s bad enough she moved to Satan’s armpit years ago, but we used to talk on

the phone every day. Now, she can barely speak to me with a civil tongue.”

Molly Beth whirled around and said, “Your son—”

“Molly Beth.” Dominic’s voice was firm but gentle with his wife. “We talked about this.”

Dom’s mother held her hands up in surrender. “You’re right. I’m sorry,” she said, gesturing to the room at large.

A curious thing happened next. Helen released a snort so tiny that none of us would’ve heard it if the room hadn’t gone so quiet. But we had clocked it and turned to look at her. Helen’s slim shoulders shook, and she lifted her hand to her mouth. With her head tilted down, it was impossible to tell if she was laughing or on the verge of a sob.

Molly Beth reached for her free hand and gently squeezed. “Mom, it’s okay. You can tell us what’s wrong.”

Helen looked up, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. My heart sank at whatever news she was about to deliver.

“I knew something was wrong.” Janet crossed the room and stood next to Molly Beth.

The sisters joined hands while they waited for Helen to deliver bad news. The trembling in Helen’s shoulders moved to her torso, and I looked to Dom for guidance. He’d tucked his free hand in his front pocket and watched the whole thing with a smirk on his face. What the hell was wrong with him? I looked at Helen again and realized her tears weren’t from sorrow but from repressed laughter. Another snort erupted from behind her hand, and her green eyes widened in surprise or

mortification. I couldn't be sure which one.

"Nana?" Christian asked. "I can't tell if you're laughing or crying."

Helen lowered her hand, and bawdy laughter erupted from her pink-painted lips. She cackled until she struggled for breath. She placed a hand on her chest and sucked air into her lungs. The gesture would've been alarming if I hadn't noticed the pure joy in her expression.

"She can't breathe!" Janet cried. "Call for an ambulance!"

"No," John said. "She's not suffocating, Janet. She's laughing at your ridiculousness."

Janet whirled on her husband. "At least I give a damn about my mother."

"Helen isn't a malicious bitch like the woman who birthed me," John fired back.

I leaned into Dom. "Do you think your mom grabbed popcorn during her shopping trip?"

Molly Beth had heard me and turned twinkling eyes on me. "Of course."

Dom chuckled. "Mom, I hope you bought a lot because these next two weeks are going to feel like two years."

They shared a laugh before turning their attention back to the show. John and Janet were slinging verbal darts about who was the best parent, spouse, and child. Everyone tuned into their arguments except for Emerson, who couldn't tear his eyes off Dom. I was debating how boldly to stake my claim when Dom's big arm snaked around my waist and pulled me closer. He pressed a kiss on top of my head before lowering his

mouth to my ear.

“Bet we could sneak back to our bedroom and fool around some more,” Dom whispered.

I turned and kissed his lips. “Hell yeah.”

I could tell from the heat of Emerson’s glare that he’d watched our interaction and had correctly guessed what we were planning. Good. I took the first step away from the cacophony of chaos in the kitchen. Dom followed suit, and we’d sneaked a few feet away before someone whistled shrilly. The room went immediately silent, and all eyes returned to Helen, who withdrew two fingers from her mouth.

“Blessed silence.” She sighed heavily before pinning Janet with a dark glower. “If you must know, your spies aren’t overhearing me pleading with God to bring me home. They’re eavesdropping when I’m having sex with Barney. He might have snow on the roof, but fires are still raging in the ole furnace.”

Dom nearly choked on his next breath, and he wasn’t alone. It was unlikely anyone in the family wanted to know that Helen had an active sex life. Me? I gave her a thumbs-up because she was doing life her way.

“Yeah, I know you get it,” Helen said. “Dom, you’re a seriously lucky man to have found this wildcat.”

Dom smiled down at me. “And I damn well know it, Nana.”

I didn’t need to look at Emerson to know he was burning with anger. I could smell the smoke from across the kitchen. I smiled up at Dom and kissed him.

“Mother.” Janet spoke slowly and evenly as if fighting to stay calm. “We’ll talk about

your relationship with Barney later. It's not a polite conversation to have in mixed company."

"There's nothing to discuss," Helen replied. "Barney and I are consenting adults with our cognitive skills intact. We are in love, and thanks to modern pharmaceuticals, we can physically express it often." Helen turned her stool back to the kitchen island, signaling the conversation had ended.

Janet's fingers trembled as she fiddled with her necklace, and I felt sorry for her. "Well," she said, glancing around the room. "Since I have everyone's attention, maybe it's a good time to tell you about the activities I have planned."

"Even though I'm not dying?" Helen asked.

"Especially for that reason, Mother." Janet rubbed her palms against her slacks as if they were sweaty. "I, um, figured we'd bake and decorate sugar cookies. I haven't done that since Christian moved out, and I thought we could turn it into a little competition."

Dom looked at me and sighed. "Might as well hand Sven the prize now."

Everyone turned in my direction. "We do something similar in my family. We spend a weekend baking Christmas treats, and the sugar cookie bake-off is the highlight of the event."

"He's won the last two years," Dom said. He'd just learned that at Thanksgiving, but he made it sound like he'd been on hand during each victory. "I'm not sure about my baking skills, but I'm definitely down for eating cookies."

"Obviously," Emerson mock whispered to Christian.

I'd give Dom's cousin credit. He didn't look remotely pleased with his boyfriend's comment. Dom didn't let on if it bothered him, but I suspected the dig about his weight had struck the mark. I'd just have to show him again how sexy I found his body.

"What's your favorite creation?" Molly Beth asked me.

"Last year, I baked a sugar cookie church with stained glass windows."

"Your talent knows no bounds," Dom said.

I forgot we weren't alone and kissed him again. Molly Beth's happy squeal and Helen's "aww" reminded me of where we were.

"To be continued," I told Dom and earned a wink in response.

"Sounds to me like you haven't had much competition," Emerson said. "Maybe you'll find going up against someone with an art degree is a bit more challenging." He'd kept his tone light, but his expression was confrontational as hell.

I released Dom and faced Emerson full-on. "I look forward to doing battle with you."

Janet wandered over to the counter and took another gulp of wine. "And I bought matching pajamas for everyone for a Christmas Eve photo."

It was the kind of dorky thing my family did, so I was surprised by the negative response in the room. Lucinda had even arranged for us to get together before we left so I wouldn't miss out. I loved that woman like mad and couldn't wait to fill her in on all the drama I'd witnessed.

Janet looked at me and winced. "I didn't know you were coming at the time I placed

the order, Spencer.”

“Sven!” Dom and Molly Beth said.

Janet waved them away. “Sorry. I didn’t do it on purpose. I just don’t associate the name Sven with a twenty-year-old American male.”

“I’m thirty, but thanks for the lovely compliment.” I looked at Dom and whispered, “She thinks I’m your boy toy.”

Janet’s brows shot up. “Thirty? Really?”

“Good skin care,” I replied. “And my name is actually Steven. I’m named after my father, just like Dom is named after his.” Then I told them how I earned the Sven nickname. The story got a few chuckles and smiles.

“Maybe I can find you a similar pair of pajamas in town,” Janet said. “I need to do some shopping.”

“I’m not technically family. You don’t have to go to any trouble for me.”

“Neither is Emerson,” Helen said dryly.

A pin drop would’ve sounded like a bomb exploding in the tense silence.

“Mother,” Janet warned. “We discussed this.”

“No,” Helen said. “You talked, and I tuned you out.”

John snorted. “Sounds familiar.”

Janet glared at her husband. “You’re not helping.”

“That also sounds familiar.” John took a sip of his beer and saluted his wife.

Yikes. Things were way more tense between them than I’d originally thought.

“Janet,” Helen said, pulling her daughter’s attention to her. “You’ve got all of us here. Let that be enough for now.”

“But, Mother—”

“You can’t force these things,” Helen said. “A baking competition won’t change the past. Forcing people under one roof for two weeks won’t automatically result in the healing you want to see happen. You need to relax and let things unfold organically.”

Janet’s lower lip trembled, and Christian reached for her hand. She waved him off and stepped back. “I need more wine.”

“I think you’ve had enough for tonight,” John said.

Janet downed the rest of her wine and set the empty glass down on the counter. “I’ve had enough, all right.” She pivoted and left the kitchen without a backward glance.

Helen watched her go with worry etched on her face. “Maybe I was too hard on her. I’ll go apologize.”

“Why don’t we let her regroup a bit, Mom,” Molly Beth said. “Then we’ll both go up and talk to her.”

“She’ll pass out for the rest of the night,” John said. “Drinking herself into a stupor like a lush is what Janet does best.”

“Dad,” Christian admonished. “That’s a horrible thing to say.”

John shrugged. “It’s true.”

Molly Beth turned and squared up against John. “Maybe we should discuss doing something about her drinking problem.”

“You can lead a horse to water, but…” John’s words faded into laughter. “Well, that adage doesn’t apply. Janet drinks plenty. But I can’t force her to get help.”

“Have you talked to her about it?” Molly Beth asked.

“Or given her a single reason to want to get sober?” Helen asked.

“Why are you both taking this out on me?” John threw his hands up. “Women! Am I right, guys?” He quickly remembered there was only one other man in the room who had romantic experiences with women.

“No, you’re not right,” Dominic Sr. said.

John rolled his eyes. “I’m going outside to check on the fire for the pizzas.”

Molly Beth made big eyes at her husband and nodded her head in John’s direction.

“I’ll come too,” Dominic said.

“Now you’ve got my back,” John grumbled, but he slapped his brother-in-law on the shoulder.

Molly Beth turned her steely gaze on Dom, and he sighed heavily.

“Fine.” He kissed me firmly on the mouth, then whispered, “Behave.”

I just batted my eyelashes.

“I’m going to tackle the pizza dough,” Molly said. “Christian, you’re on cheese-shredding duties, and the rest of you can prepare the toppings. I’ve taken care of the meats already, but I need someone to wash and slice the vegetables.”

Me having sharp knives around Emerson probably wasn’t a good idea, but the dude would learn that my tongue was the sharpest tool in my arsenal if he didn’t straighten up. Helen must’ve seen something in my expression because she reached for my hand.

“You are a lovely Christmas surprise,” she said. “I want to know everything about you.”

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Dom

“Stop spying through the window, and come enjoy the fire,” Dad said. “Everything is fine.”

I reluctantly turned away from the back of the house. The warmth from the brick oven tempted me, but I’d rather stand in the cold shadows and keep an eye on Sven. “I’m not so sure about that.” My guy had a murderous expression on his face and a sharp knife in his hand.

My guy. I liked the sound of it so much it scared me. Between my failed marriage and the cynical nature of my job, it felt like a Christmas miracle that I could even consider taking a chance on love again. But Sven made me believe, and I didn’t want to waste precious time twisting hope into doom. It was easier to expect the worst in someone because then you wouldn’t be disappointed when things went sideways. That was no way to live. Hell, that wasn’t living at all; it was barely existing. How had I let such a limited worldview become my norm?

I halted and turned to look into the kitchen again. The pendant lights above the island acted as a spotlight, showcasing Sven in all his beauty. And not just his looks. It was the way he held himself, the confident way he moved, and the joy he brought to those around him. Well, maybe not Emerson with his scrunched nose and grim mouth, but he didn’t count. Nana tilted her head back and laughed at something Sven said, and he beamed like he’d won the lottery. Mom and Christian turned from their tasks with smiles on their faces too. They both contributed to the conversation before continuing their tasks. Everyone looked relaxed and happy. Except Emerson.

He looked up suddenly as if sensing my presence. I didn't think he could see me from where I stood in the shadows, and it didn't matter if he did. He'd only been a side note in my observations while Sven had been the center of them. If Emerson had mistaken my presence and intentions, then I'd happily set him straight. That would require me to speak to him, but that was inevitable anyway. Ignoring him and Christian would only make my family feel worse, and it could give my ex a false sense of importance in the narrative of my life. He could mistake my silent treatment as pining or jealousy all he wanted. I thought of the brief but powerful interlude I'd shared with Sven in our room and smiled. Emerson would be so wrong. He was nothing but an asterisk and a footnote in my life story. I wanted Sven to be the main plot, my leading man, and the theme that summed up my life. Damn, I had it bad.

"Sven can handle himself," Uncle John declared as I joined him and Dad.

"That's what I'm worried about. And Sven hates the color orange."

"Why?" John asked.

"He says it's the only color that doesn't look good on him," I replied.

"No, I wanted to know why it's a consideration," my uncle explained.

"It's the standard color of uniform used in jails and prisons these days."

My remark earned some chuckles, but I wasn't kidding. Sven had already threatened to cut a bitch.

"He's good people," Dad said. He used the fire poker to move the wood around a bit before setting it down and clasping me on the shoulder. "I'm happy for you."

"I am too," John said. "The thing that happened between you, Emerson, and Christian

was a nasty business.”

“John,” Dad warned.

My uncle held up his hand. “I need to say some things that are long overdue. I don’t agree with the way our family handled the situation. We all chose sides, regrouped to our corners, and came out swinging like prize fighters.”

Dad nodded. “Then we stopped talking at all. We buried our heads in the sand and pretended the others didn’t exist.”

John turned away from the fire and looked at me. “For what it’s worth, I am truly sorry you got hurt. And I regret any part Christian played in it. I should’ve said so when it happened. I was too busy trying to shelter my son instead of holding him accountable for his actions.” John looked at the house. “He claimed things didn’t happen the way you thought they did.” He held up his hands to signal peace. “And I don’t know the truth, but I know Christian has missed you every day of your absence. I sometimes think he only puts up with Emerson’s bullshit because he’s the last connection he has to you. A breakup also means he lost you for nothing. Chris has always loved you like a brother, and if this farce of a holiday affords him even a few minutes to speak with you, then I guess I will suck it up and not be the Grinch.”

Uncle John caught me off guard and left me momentarily speechless. I swallowed down the lump in my throat. I wanted to promise to hear Christian out, but I didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up. “Thank you, Uncle John. That means a lot to me.”

He nodded and clapped my other shoulder before looking at my dad. “The fire looks good. Are we ready to give this a try, Dominic?”

“Ready as we’ll ever be.” He studied the flames a little longer. “We should probably test out a simple pizza to work out the kinks before we get to the good stuff.”

“I’ll go in and put something together,” I volunteered.

“You just want to get back to your man,” Dad teased.

“Guilty.” Why deny it? “You guys coming in to get refills, or would you like me to bring out the next round when I return with the test dummy pizza?”

“I’ll go inside and see if your mom needs help,” Dad said.

“I’ll monitor the fire,” John replied. “But I’ll take a beer when you come back out.”

“Sure thing, Uncle John.”

A wave of heat rolled over me when I stepped through the back door, and not because of the temperature shift. The sensation came from the look in Sven’s eyes when they connected with mine. His gorgeous mouth curved into a Cheshire-like grin because Sven knew he had me where he wanted me, or at least he would once we escaped to our bedroom.

“So you’re a hairstylist, huh?” Emerson asked snidely.

My ex had unwittingly lobbed an insult he would soon regret. If I’d harbored a single ounce of love for him, I might’ve tried to deflect or absorb some of the hell Sven was about to unleash on him. Instead, I snatched a few green pepper rings from the pile in front of Sven. I kissed him square on the mouth before settling against the island next to him. I leaned toward Nana and said, “Watch this.”

She snagged a pepper ring from my hand. “This is a piss-poor substitute for popcorn, but it will have to do. We can’t very well pause live entertainment.”

I noticed Mom and Christian had turned from the counter. The earlier joy I’d

witnessed in their expressions was gone. Chris looked worried, and Mom was pissed. She met my gaze, and I could tell she wanted to interfere, but I shook my head slightly. Dad snagged a handful of shredded cheese and settled against the counter next to Mom, looping an arm around her shoulders to either hold her back or give comfort. She smiled up at him and relaxed.

“I am a hairstylist,” Sven said calmly. “Is that a problem for you?”

Emerson screwed his facial features into mock surprise. “A problem? Of course not. It takes all kinds of people and careers to make the world go round.” Emerson sighed heavily. “Some pursuits are cliché and perpetuate stereotypes that are harmful to the queer community.”

Sven sat up straighter. “Harmful? I make my clients, mostly women, feel good about themselves. Sometimes they sit in my chair during the hardest times of their lives. Divorces, deaths, career struggles, illnesses, battles with infertility. I listen as they vent about feeling unappreciated or underserved in a world that sees them as inferior. Most of them are battling exhaustion from raising kids and trying to be everything to everyone. My salon chair is a safe place for them to get it all out. They literally let their hair down and unburden their souls. I’m more than a student of hairstyle trends. I’m a friend, an ally, and an amateur therapist who cheers them up. My one goal is to make sure there’s an extra pep in their step when they leave the salon, and I have never failed. I do home visits for those who struggle to get out, and I make rounds at the senior facilities. Do you have any idea how many women have asked me to make sure they look perfect for their funerals? Do you know how hard that is? Most stylists won’t do it, but I’ve learned from the best.”

“Lucinda,” Mom said.

Sven smiled at her. “Yes.”

“Who’s that, dear?” Nana asked.

“My stepmother,” Sven told her. “She was so kind to my mom when she was sick. It probably seems weird to some, but my mom knew that Lucinda would be the one to see me grow up. And Lucinda wanted to assure my mom that I would be in excellent hands. She turned our living room into a home spa. I’ll never forget the blissful expression on my mom’s face after Lucinda’s careful pampering sessions.” Sven looked at Emerson. “I’m proud of my career path. You might think I’m a cliché or a sellout, but that says more about you than it does me.”

Emerson at least had the good sense to look contrite. “I’m sorry about your mother.”

“Thanks,” Sven said.

I could tell he wanted to say more, but he returned his attention to slicing peppers. He glanced over and saw that I’d eaten the pilfered rings and handed me a few more with a wink.

Uncle John opened the back door and poked his head in. “I’m freezing my nuts off out here. Where’s the pizza and my beer?”

“No one told me you were ready,” Mom said. She nudged Dad with her elbow as if he were solely responsible. She carefully transferred the pizza dough to a large paddle and carried it over to the island. “Who wants to go first?”

I told her we’d decided to do a test run to assess our skills before we wasted a lot of toppings.

“You’re so smart,” she said, patting my cheek.

“It was my idea,” Dad protested.

“My bad.” Mom wrapped her arms around his middle and kissed him. “You’re so wise.”

“Married you, didn’t I?”

Sven leaned toward me. “Are they always this cute?”

“Yes,” Nana, John, and Christian replied.

“Well, I see where you get your charm,” Sven told me.

“You’re the only person on the planet who’d accuse me of being charming,” I told him.

“Got that right,” Emerson muttered.

Sven tensed and was prepared to give my ex a good verbal beatdown, but I winked to let him know the barb hadn’t landed. In fact, it seemed like a good time to end the silent treatment I’d started when I moved out of the house I’d shared with Emerson.

“I’m right when it counts,” I said, staring into Sven’s gorgeous blue eyes. The energy pulsing between us was a drumbeat in my ear. “Want to help me make a test pizza?”

“I’d love to.” Sven grabbed the pizza paddle and slid it toward us. “This better not have come from your parents’ tickle trunk,” he whispered.

The notion made me shudder. I leaned down and pressed my lips to his ear. “You’re going to pay for that,” I whispered.

I should’ve known Sven would turn a simple pizza assembly into an art form. He ladled sauce into the center of the dough and spread it out with a spoon, smoothing

and adjusting until it formed an even layer of red over the surface. And then he started on the cheese distribution, which took almost as long to get right.

“This could take a while,” Nana said.

Sven smiled but didn’t look up from dusting the pizza with a blend of Italian herbs. “You can’t rush perfection.” He raised his head and met Emerson’s gaze, even though he hadn’t been the one to comment. “And I take great care of the people and things that mean a lot to me.”

Bright pink splotches bloomed across Emerson’s cheeks, and he narrowed his eyes. I could see the moment a biting reply formed on his tongue, but my ex looked in my direction before he released it. I’d let him get away with whatever he’d wanted during our marriage. It had truly been the Emerson Baker-Babb show, but I hadn’t realized it until the damage was done to my psyche. My expression let him know he would not get away with that bullshit any longer. Not that Sven needed me to stick up for him. Emerson dropped his gaze, and Sven reached for the pepperoni.

“I thought we would just do a cheese pizza to make sure we get the crust right first,” I told him.

“It might be a good idea to see how the brick oven responds when the grease from the fattier toppings drip down into the fire,” Sven suggested. “We might have to adjust how much wood we’re using.”

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Dad said.

Sven formed a heart with the pepperoni slices and slid his masterpiece to me. “For you.”

Our eyes met and held. I was once again struck by how poignant the moment felt.

Sven had laid more than a pepperoni heart bare. It was a symbol of what I could have if I were brave enough. Our surroundings faded away until the kitchen island felt like a center stage, with the bright pendant lights acting as spotlights. But we weren't actors going off a script. This was real life—his and mine. I cupped his neck and lowered my head for a soft kiss.

“I'll take exceptional care of it.”

Sven smiled dreamily. “I know you will.”

“Want to come with me to fire the pizza?” I asked.

“I thought I got to play with the oven,” Dad whined from somewhere in the shadowy background. The pout in his voice made Sven smile. We didn't acknowledge him otherwise, but Mom hushed him.

“Absolutely,” Sven said. “I better grab my coat.”

I moved so he could slide off the stool. And the rest of the kitchen and its inhabitants came back into focus as soon as Sven's feet hit the floor. I chuckled and rubbed the back of my neck. “Sorry. The world often disappears when we're together.”

Mom clutched her heart and melted on the spot. John looked amused, while Dad and Christian looked happy for me. I didn't bother checking Emerson's reaction. Sourness rolled from his direction, and I wouldn't let its stench ruin my mood.

I swatted Sven's pert backside playfully and said, “You won't need a coat. Just grab a throw blanket off the back of the couch.” Then I grabbed the pizza paddle off the island and looked at my guy. “Ready to test your skills?”

He clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. “Oh boy!”

“I’m coming too,” John said.

“And me,” Dad called out.

The four of us headed outside, where I ceremoniously presented the pizza paddle to my dad. “With this privilege comes great responsibility. Can you handle it?”

Dad snorted and shook his head as he took the paddle from me. “I knew that damn speech was going to come back and bite me in the ass someday.” He looked both irritated and impressed. “You’ve kept that on ice for twenty-two years.”

“Sure have.”

Sven joined me with a throw blanket wrapped around his shoulders. It was gray, chunky, and inviting. “What’s happening here?”

“It’s the same speech I gave Dom when he got his driver’s license,” Dad said. “He’s been biding his time to use it on me.”

Sven met my gaze. The moonlight turned his dark blue eyes into sparkling gems. “Is that true?”

I smiled and kissed his upturned lips. “I can be extremely patient.”

It’s how I survived tedious stakeouts, combing through proverbial haystacks to find the needles and putting all the pieces together to form complete pictures. But my patience could be a hindrance—a crutch to lean on—when I should really throttle down. Like with Sven. I should’ve never waited two years to make another move on him. And I sure as hell shouldn’t have procrastinated coming clean with Kerry all this time. I had some mending to do, but one of those would have to wait. Tugging the blanket off Sven, I wrapped it around my shoulders and opened my arms in

invitation. Sven stepped into me and buried his nose against my chest. I wrapped us in the soft cocoon, and the world faded away again.

And as it turned out, my patience came in handy throughout the rest of the evening. Dad's test pizza turned out great and only required a few adjustments to the process. We built several more pizzas, ranging from meat lovers to veggie lovers and everything in between. We sampled each new pizza when it came out of the oven instead of waiting until they were all baked. Some were bigger hits than others, but none of them were duds. And the energy in the house was high but good. Maybe Aunt Janet had been onto something with her idea, and I thought it was a real shame that she was missing out. Mom had gone to check on her, but she was asleep, as John had predicted.

I'd hoped that the pizza experiment would be the end of the festivities for our first night. We'd navigated some tense moments but had gotten through them without fighting. Why not end the night on a high note? Mostly, I wanted to get Sven naked and under me. I even volunteered for kitchen cleanup duties to speed things along. My mom had a different idea. She'd found a closet full of games when she scoped out the chateau on arrival, and Emerson, the asshat, encouraged the idea. He'd never liked board games, and I knew his response was retribution when he suggested we play Monopoly. I grudgingly played along and was glad I had when Sven bankrupted his ass in record time.

John, who'd made a fortune as a financier, was impressed. "I think you should come work for me. You'd make a killing."

"Thank you, but no," Sven said. "I enjoy overseeing my investment portfolio, but I have no desire to advise others."

Enthusiasm for family game night waned once the next person fell to Sven's superior skills, and I capitalized on their low energy with an exaggerated yawn, an arm stretch,

and a head roll. I thought I'd carried off the act well, but I caught my parents smirking and elbowing each other.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Emerson snarled from the sofa he'd retired to after losing. "Take your lover to bed already."

It could've been awkward if we let it, but I pushed back from the table and extended my hand to Sven.

He took it and stood up. "Thanks for a fun evening," Sven said.

"Good night, everyone," I called out over my shoulder.

Sven's carnal expression made my heart pound hard enough to drown out their responses and my own insecurities. He wanted raw and honest reactions from me, not staged performances. Sven's eagerness became even clearer once we were alone in the room. He had his sweater up and over his head before I closed the door.

"Whoa!" I moved in and captured Sven's hands before he could unbutton his jeans. "Half the pleasure comes from undressing you and revealing your stunning body."

"Oops. My bad." He bent to reach for his sweater, but I stopped him again.

"Let's not get crazy."

I pulled Sven into my arms and captured his lips in a slow, sensual kiss. The urge to devour arose, but I swatted it down like a pesky gnat. The orgasm Sven had given me earlier took enough of the edge off so I could enjoy and savor every inch of him. I released his lips and moved my mouth over his neck, kissing and nipping the sensitive skin there. Sven practically purred like a kitten when I kissed my way down to the curve of his neck. I sank my teeth into his tendon, and he moaned loudly.

“Oops,” he whispered. “I’ll try to be quieter.”

“Since when?” I teased as I went to work on his button and zipper.

Sven chuckled and angled his head to give me more access to his neck.

I took a hint and returned my mouth there. “I don’t want you holding back,” I said between kisses. An awkward family breakfast was the furthest thing from my mind. I nipped his jaw and trailed my tongue over his bottom lip. “I want you just as you are.”

Sven reached for the hem of my sweater, and I raised my arms to help him remove it. The urge to suck in my gut was strong until Sven growled low in his throat and stroked my belly. “My Grizz.”

Sven swiped his tongue over my nipple, and my train of thought shattered into a million pieces. He liked my reaction and did it again. I cupped the back of his head, and he sucked the hardening bud into his mouth. Trailing my free hand around his waist, I gripped his sweet ass and hauled him even closer. I couldn’t get enough of him and wouldn’t be satisfied until I was finally inside him. Two years of pining turned a swirling eddy of desire into a tsunami of need that threatened to override everything else. But my patience persisted.

We kissed and touched for a long time, pausing long enough to kick off our shoes and remove our socks before getting on the bed. As much as I wanted to strip off our jeans, it would test the limits of my control. Sven was bare beneath his denim, and my thin underwear wouldn’t offer much barrier to protect me from myself. I tucked Sven under my body, making myself right at home between his spread thighs. His hands roamed up and down my back, grabbed my ass, and slid under my waistband. He thrust up into me, rubbing his erection against mine. But my patience persisted.

I worked my mouth down his torso, nipping and kissing as I went. Having Sven's dick in my mouth once already wasn't enough. I needed to taste him again. And maybe I wanted to drive him to the edge of insanity, like he did me. I unbuttoned his jeans and pulled the zipper down enough to expose the head of his dick. I tongued him there until his hips bucked, and he yanked my hair. His eagerness was evident in his verbal cries and his salty essence on my tongue.

"Is this what you meant when you said you'd make me pay?" Sven asked breathlessly.

I remembered saying those words but couldn't remember why or what I'd intended. That he felt punished was enough. I raised my head just enough to make eye contact. "Just getting started."

And I meant it. I unzipped a half inch at a time and paused to lick the revealed flesh before continuing down. I didn't rush the process, no matter how often Sven cursed me or yanked my hair. He was good and crazed by the time I worked his jeans down to his upper thighs, and so was I.

"Don't make me come yet," Sven pleaded. "I want you inside me."

I wanted that too, so I abandoned his dick to lick and suck his balls and taint. While blowing against his pucker, I debated rimming Sven within an inch of his life. But I'd already worked myself into a frenzy. I eased away from Sven enough to pull his jeans down his long, toned legs and remove the rest of my clothes.

"Are the condoms and lube still in your bag?" I asked.

Sven's gaze was locked on my jutting erection, and I didn't think he'd heard me until he pointed to the nightstand. He blinked and met my gaze. "It's the only thing I unpacked so far."

“Priorities,” I teased as I opened the drawer. There were even more condoms than he’d shown me. “You packed enough for us to be stranded here for months.”

Sven snorted. “That might be true if you hadn’t edged me for two fucking years.” He jerked his head toward the drawer. “Suit up and slick up. Tonight, you ride.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sven’s eyes watched my every move as I rolled the condom on and smeared lube up and down my shaft. He pulled his knees back to his chest, exposing his hole as I climbed back onto the bed. His pucker flexed when I drizzled the cool liquid over it, and Sven gasped when I massaged the lubricant into his sensitive rim.

“Two fingers,” he demanded. “Let’s go.”

My cock throbbed, and I knew I wouldn’t last long once I was inside him. I needed Sven to be just as wild and ready as I was. Ignoring his instructions, I played with his opening, only slipping one finger in. I watched the flush spread over his face as I worked it in and out. I moved into position and propped his ankles on my shoulders, but I kept toying with his hole. On the next thrust, I curled my finger and pegged his prostate.

Sven cried out and undulated his hips. “Dick.”

“Are you demanding my cock or cursing at me?”

“Get that thick dick inside me now,” Sven clarified. “And, yes, you’re acting dick-ish.”

I threw him a bone—not the one he wanted—and added a second finger. I alternated between pegging his prostate and massaging it. Sven’s eyes turned desperate as his

dick pulsed and drooled.

“Please,” he begged.

I kissed the inside of his knee and removed my fingers from his ass. We locked gazes as I lined the head of my dick to his hole and pushed inside him. Sven’s mouth opened on a silent cry, and my breath caught in my throat. I was desperate to bury myself inside him, but he was so tight, and I refused to hurt him.

“Okay?” I rasped.

Sven shook his head. “Not enough.” He reached up and cupped my face. “Give me all of you.” And I knew he meant more than my cock.

I turned my face and kissed his palm. Then I gave him what we both wanted. I let down my defenses and sank all the way home, pausing so he could adjust to my girth.

Sven lowered his legs to my waist and crossed his ankles above my ass. “Come down here and kiss me.”

I covered his body with mine and captured his lips in a smoldering kiss. Sven, who’d probably never followed someone else’s lead a day in his life, rutted beneath me, rubbing his dick against my stomach and riding my cock in shallow bursts. My resistance broke. I pulled back and snapped my hips forward. Sven’s eyes rolled back in his head, and my articulate man muttered gibberish. His entire body tensed, signaling he was close to orgasm, so I pulled out and thrust back in. Harder this time. Hot cum jetted against my stomach, and my control snapped. I rutted inside Sven, milking every drop from him while chasing my orgasm. Then I buried my dick to the hilt and followed him over the edge.

Sven held my face in both hands and watched me lose myself inside him. I couldn’t

close my eyes or look away. He wanted to see every raw emotion, and I gave it to him. He pulled me down on top of him when the last shudder ebbed, and we clung to one another until our breathing eased. I worried my weight was too much, but Sven tightened his legs around me every time I tried to move.

“We have to clean up sometime,” I teased. “We’ll be stuck together if we’re not careful.”

He sighed and released me. “I don’t want you to lose a single belly or chest hair on my account.”

I eased my dick out of him and rolled to his side. My legs weren’t ready to support me yet. I looked down at my torso and tried to see myself through his eyes. Any definition I used to have from playing sports or working out was gone. I struggled to believe Sven, who could have anyone he wanted, found me sexy. A niggles of doubt wormed its way into my afterglow. Kerry had said that Sven loved a project. Was that how he saw me? I closed my eyes and exhaled. Nope. Not going there.

“That heavy sigh sounded ominous,” Sven said.

I opened my eyes and met his worried gaze. “Traitorous thoughts trying to ruin this magical moment.”

“Is it so hard to believe this is real?”

“It’s becoming easier every minute.” I leaned forward and kissed his lips. “That’s what makes it scary. If this was fake, there would be nothing to risk. We could screw around and go our separate ways. But I don’t want that.”

Sven rested his hand on my cheek. “I don’t either.”

“I want the real thing with you.” Admitting it out loud was scary as hell. My heart was in my throat, even though Sven had already confessed to having deeper feelings for me.

“You don’t know how happy that makes me.” Sven kissed me with a tenderness that stole my breath. He pulled away and searched my eyes. “Believing might not come easily, but someday, you will trust me with your heart. I won’t ever let you down.”

The truth of his words shone in his steady gaze. Nothing I received for Christmas that year could top the present that Sven gave me.

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Sven

I nuzzled my nose against Dom's chest and grazed his nipple while inching my leg higher between his thighs. We'd fallen asleep in a tangle of limbs and had made no move to unravel ourselves during the night. I hadn't known I could sleep this way. Hell, I hadn't known I'd wanted to, but now I couldn't imagine sleeping any other way. Or with anyone else. Why the hell had I let Dom cling to his resistance for so long? We could've been doing this for two years.

A low, sexy growl rumbled through the early morning silence. The hand gripping my ass tightened, and the idle fingers in my hair came alive, carding through the strands and pressing against my scalp. "You're going to get something started."

The sleep-roughened threat sounded more like a delicious promise to me, and I burrowed deeper into him until my leg brushed against his balls. "Should I apologize for waking you?"

Dom lazily trailed a finger along my ass crack. "I've been awake for a while. You make the cutest little noises when you sleep."

I eased back and looked up at him. "Do not."

The room was too dark for me to make out anything but Dom's white teeth flashing in a broad grin. "Do too."

Dom tried to soften his voice to imitate a coo and a sated sigh. It sounded like a deranged bird or a teen boy stuck in the awkward puberty phase where his voice

hadn't decided to stay high or go low. I wasn't sure if I should be mortified or impressed. I was leaning toward the former when Dom pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"You sounded so content," he said.

I tightened my arm around his waist and sighed.

"Just like that," Dom said.

My sigh was nothing like the noises he made. "Did I sound like I never want to leave your embrace?"

"Yeah, like that."

"Good," I said. "Because it's how I feel."

Dom inhaled, and his breath got snagged. He let out a little cough, and I knew what was coming. The air in the house was dry, and I should've brought a bottle of water to bed for him just in case.

I sat up and slid from the bed. "You need a drink."

"It's just a tickle in my throat," he replied. "Come back."

I turned on the table lamp and blinked against the sudden light. "I'll dash to the kitchen and grab cold water for both of us. Then we'll test out some of the shower features." We'd cleaned up after sex, but we were both too tired to experiment with the options. I grabbed the pajama bottoms off the floor and pulled them on. "I'll be right back."

Dom looked like he might protest until he barked out a warning wheeze. I held up my

forefinger and eased out of the bedroom. The wood floors were cold beneath my bare feet, prompting me to move swiftly down the hallway. It seemed like the odds were in my favor. Not a single floorboard let out a squeak as I navigated the massive house in the dark predawn hours. A swath of light cut a path through the darkness at the back of the chateau. It was bright enough to guide my way without having to turn on overhead lights. I'd get in and out of there in no time.

I stepped into the gathering space and discovered I wasn't the only one up and about. The light above the stove provided just enough illumination for me to see Janet shut the refrigerator door and turn in my direction. We locked gazes at the same time and gasped as we clutched our chests. Janet's eyes looked as big as saucers in the dimly lit room, and they grew impossibly larger when she took in my state of undress. Whoops.

"I didn't think anyone would be awake," I whispered. "I just came in to get water."

That's when I noticed Janet still wore the same clothes from the previous evening. Her hair stood up like she'd just walked through a cyclone on her way to the refrigerator. Janet's mascara had smeared into black crescents under her eyes. She sniffled, and I realized I'd interrupted a very private moment.

"I'll come back."

"No, please," she said, waving at the refrigerator as she stepped away. "Go ahead and help yourself."

I felt her gaze on me as I walked into the kitchen, mindful of how little I'd put on to retrieve the water. What did someone say to a woman he'd just met the previous night? I didn't want to ask how she'd slept since it seemed she'd passed out in her clothes. The weather hardly seemed appropriate, and I didn't know enough about sports to make idle chitchat. Politics was out of the question.

“Dom is a lucky guy.” Janet let out a mortified squeak and slapped a hand over her mouth. She stared at me with wide eyes for a few seconds before lowering her arm again. “That was inappropriate, and I’m so sorry.” The words came out muffled, but her embarrassment rang out loud and clear.

“Don’t be,” I said. “If I’d known you were out here, I would’ve put on a shirt.”

She lowered her hand. “And cover up your hard work? Seems like a crime.” She covered her mouth again and shook her head in disbelief.

Flaunting my assets had been my strategy for a long time. I’d leaned toward tight pants and belly-baring shirts for so long it had become a habit more than a preference. I’d gone from nerdy Stevie to suave Sven and hadn’t looked back. Sven’s bold attire and attitude shielded Stevie’s tender heart from those who’d abuse his trust. And it wasn’t an act, per se. Somewhere along the way, Sven and Stevie merged into a powerhouse personality that loved fiercely and fearlessly while looking like a million bucks.

I opened the refrigerator and removed a bottle of water, drinking half of it before recalling my good sense. I released the door, but I got a good look at Janet’s face in the flash of light before it closed. Her nose was as red as Rudolph’s, and her cheeks were blotchy and wet from crying. Sex became the last thing on my mind when faced with someone who could be in a crisis.

“Do you need anything?” I asked, gesturing to the refrigerator. “Did you get something to eat?”

A soft sob escaped her, and she turned her back to me. Janet’s narrow shoulders shook, and I was on the verge of mentally kicking myself when she faced me again. “I can’t remember the last time someone asked me how I was feeling or if I needed anything. I think it might be my fault. I’ve become so antagonistic. You saw the way

my husband talks to me. My sister avoids me like the plague. And my own mother can barely tolerate me, and she dyed her hair that awful shade of blue just to spite me.”

I wasn’t in a position to help her with any of her personal entanglements, so I said the first thing that came to mind. “I could make you something to eat if pizza doesn’t sound good.”

Janet smiled weakly. “The pizza looks so good. I want to try it, but I’m not sure my stomach could handle it.”

I opened the refrigerator and took stock of what we had on hand. I saw eggs, ham, cheese, and leftover veggies. “I could whip up an omelet.”

“You’d do that for me? A virtual stranger?”

I peeked around the open door and met her gaze. “I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t willing. What do you want in yours?”

“Load it up with all the goodies,” Janet said.

She turned on a few lights and sat down at the island while I gathered ingredients and tools to make her breakfast. The extra vegetables and thinly sliced ham left over from the pizza party were perfect and only required a little dicing for the omelet.

Janet planted her elbow on the countertop and rested her chin on her hand. “I’m sorry I went upstairs so early last night. Did I miss much?”

“We played Monopoly after dinner,” I replied.

Janet chuckled. “Okay, maybe I’m not that remorseful. Board games have always

been more Molly Beth's thing than mine."

"What is your thing, then?"

"I, uh..." Janet sat up straighter and stared into space for several moments. "I'm embarrassed to say I don't know."

"How's that possible?" Though I had a pretty good clue.

"I'd turned myself into the perfect corporate wife. My entire existence has revolved around advancing John's career. More opportunities was the best thing for our family. It meant money, fancy trips, and a better education for Christian." Janet inhaled a long, shaky breath. "But nothing has ever been enough." She looked at me as tears welled in her eyes. "I'm not enough. If I died tomorrow, John would be half-assed to plan my funeral. He'd work right up until the service and return to his office immediately after." Her gaze fell, and she drew a circle on the marble with her finger. "I can't believe I'm telling you this after only meeting you last night."

I chuckled. "I'm used to it. People tell bartenders and hairstylists things they'd never say to anyone else."

I immediately regretted the reference to drinking. There was no way in hell Janet didn't know she had a problem, but her lips curved into a wry smile.

"There is something special about you. I'd say it's your aura, but that sounds woo-woo. Do you kids refer to vibes these days, or is that like a hippy-era thing?"

"We say vibe." I cocked a brow. "And I'm thirty. Hardly a kid."

She waved me off with a tsk. Janet started to say something but coughed. "My mouth feels like a desert."

I turned back to the refrigerator. “There’s juice, water, and soda.”

“I’d kill for a glass of orange juice, but I shouldn’t. All those carbs.”

I pulled the jug out of the refrigerator and grabbed a juice glass from the cabinet. “It’s Christmas, so calories and carbs don’t count.” I halted before pouring. “Unless there’s a medical reason you can’t have it.”

“Nope.”

I poured the juice and placed it in front of her. Janet lifted the glass, took a deep breath, and sipped the juice. She sighed happily, then took another. Janet held the glass out to me, and I topped her off. I left the jug on the counter in case she wanted more and returned my attention back to prepare the omelet. I’d just sprayed the skillet with nonstick spray when I heard footsteps approaching from the hallway.

Dom rounded the corner and slid to a stop when he saw me at the island with Janet. “There you are. I worried you’d come to your senses, nabbed my keys, and were on your way back home.”

He’d only put on a pair of gray sweatpants before coming to find me, and I couldn’t tear my eyes off him. The skillet slid in my grasp and snapped me out of my daydream.

“Dom, darling,” Janet said, patting the stool beside her. “No one who looks at you the way Sven does would behave so cowardly.”

Dom looked at Janet, and I could tell the moment he really saw her. He had a decent poker face and gave little away, so it wasn’t likely she noticed his reaction. The sloop in his shoulders was subtle but expressed his sadness. The way he plucked the seam of his sweatpants betrayed his discomfort. Understanding that Janet was going

through something was one thing, but knowing what to do about it was another.

Dom straightened his shoulders and relaxed his fingers once he'd processed his thoughts. He walked to the island and sat on the stool next to her. "Do you want us to put on shirts?"

"Don't be silly," Janet said, then downed the rest of the juice in one gulp. "Hit me again."

I could tell by the slight furrow in Dom's brow that he was worried there'd been alcohol mixed with the juice. I picked up the jug and refilled her glass to show there wasn't.

"You're a doll," Janet said before giving her full attention to her nephew. "Ignore the awful state you've found me in, Dom." He opened his mouth to protest, but she patted his hand to cut him off. "That's not important right now, but an apology is." She cycled through a deep breath. "I'm sorry that I reacted so poorly when we found out about Christian and Emerson. I'm not saying I should've turned my back on my only son, but I could've been much more understanding about your position. You deserved our love and empathy." She covered his hand and squeezed. "I'm truly sorry."

"Thank you, Aunt Janet. That means a lot to me. I'm sure I could've handled the situation better too."

She shook her head. "You and your parents were the casualty of Emerson's betrayal." She closed her eyes and released a shaky breath. Janet met Dom's gaze. "And Christian's too, despite his insistence to the contrary. Your uncle feels the same way, but I don't know if he'll ever admit it."

"We talked about it last night." Dom smiled at his aunt. "I think having this holiday

together was a good idea.”

Janet’s eyes filled with tears. “You do? What about the matching pajamas?”

Dom snickered. “Don’t push it, Aunt Janet.” He came around the island and wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. “And what are you doing over here?”

“Making an omelet for Janet.”

“You’ve got a keeper,” she said.

Dom nuzzled my neck, and I held my breath so I wouldn’t giggle. “I sure do,” he said.

“Do you want me to make you something to eat too?” I asked Dom.

“Nope. I don’t like to eat early, but I wouldn’t mind trying to get another few hours of sleep.”

I knew better than that. He wanted to get me naked, and I wanted it too.

“Didn’t sleep well?” Janet asked.

“I rarely do when I’m not in my own bed,” Dom said. “I’m a terrible traveler in that way.”

I knew very little about Dom’s life between the time he left after high school and when he returned. I had two weeks of his undivided attention, and I planned to put it to good use.

“What about you, Sven?” Janet asked. “Do you like to travel?”

“I do, but I don’t sleep well either. I just try to view it as extra time for experiences and adventures.”

“You guys really are a good match. There’s nothing worse than being an insomniac in a relationship with someone who practically dies when they close their eyes.” The bitterness in her voice told me she spoke from experience. “God, what must that be like?”

Dom and I knew she hadn’t addressed the question to us, so neither of us answered. Dom released me and returned to the island, and I missed his body heat immediately. I offered to toast bread or a bagel to go with her breakfast, but Janet declined. She seemed so appreciative when I slid the plate in front of her.

“This is almost too pretty to eat,” she declared as she cut into the omelet. Her eyes widened when she took the first bite. “Mmmmm.” Janet covered her mouth with her hand as she chewed. “This is the best thing I’ve had in a long time.”

I’d seen the photos of gourmet meals on her social media accounts and suspected she’d exaggerated just a bit. “You’re too kind.”

Janet shoveled another bite into her mouth and shook her head. She pointed at the plate as she chewed and swallowed. “There’s soul in here. Nothing flashy or fancy. Just pure affection for food. Someone has taught you well.”

“Lucinda,” Dom and I said together.

Janet smiled affectionately. “Molly Beth speaks so fondly of her.”

“The regard is mutual,” I replied.

Dom coaxed additional holiday plans out of Janet, and I groaned when she mentioned

a day on the ski slopes.

“You don’t ski?” Janet asked.

“Nope. Hot chocolate by a fireplace in the lodge is more my speed.”

“Dom, you love to ski,” Janet said.

“Not since my shoulder injury.” He rubbed the area as if just the thought pained him.

“Well, darn,” Janet said. “I guess I really suck at this.”

“There are many other things we can do together or even break into groups,” I suggested. “There’s no need for anyone to be unhappy or do things that don’t appeal to them. I’m dying to visit the shops and boutiques in town, and Dom would rather take a chef’s knife to the eye than do that.”

Janet cackled and nearly spat out her eggs.

“Exaggerate much?” Dom asked, but his eyes shimmered with delight.

“Oh, so you’re going to tag along for the shopping expedition?” I asked.

“Hell no, but I’d choose that over getting stabbed in the eye.” Dom leaned down and kissed me. “I’d even carry all your bags like a pack mule.”

Janet clapped her hands softly. “I need to grab some last-minute gifts, and I’ve heard wonderful things about the restaurants and boutiques in Vail.”

“Looking forward to it,” I said.

Janet set her fork down and pushed her plate away. She'd eaten nearly three-quarters of it but claimed she couldn't eat another bite. She looked as frail as a bird, but I didn't push her, and neither did Dom.

"I'm going to head upstairs and take an everything shower. I'll feel so much better afterward." She slid off the stool and rounded the island to hug me. "Thank you so much, sweetheart."

"My pleasure. Same time and place tomorrow?"

Janet giggled again and swatted my arm playfully as she stepped away. "You take good care of this one, Dom." Her eyes widened, and worry furrowed her brow. "I didn't mean that to sound like you didn't take care of Emerson."

Dom put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. "I knew what you meant, Aunt Janet. And I will take excellent care of this guy."

She reached for her plate, but I stopped her. "I'll clean up."

"But you cooked," Janet protested.

"Okay, Dom will clean up."

Janet laughed again and waved me off. "See you guys in a few hours."

"Few hours?" Dom asked once she disappeared. "What exactly happens in an everything shower?"

"Depends on who's doing it, Grizz." I picked up Janet's plate, but Dom snatched it from me.

“You said this was my job.”

“I was just teasing,” I said, reaching for the plate again. Dom jerked it out of reach, and I wasn’t about to throw down with him in the kitchen over a simple task. I settled in at the island and told him about what my everything showers entailed.

“Hair mask, shampoo and condition, body scrub, and a facial?” Dom repeated each word slowly, as if learning a whole new language. “That sounds like a lot of work.”

“It is,” I agreed. “But you feel amazing afterward.”

Dom finished tidying the kitchen and returned to my side. He pulled me into his arms and kissed me hungrily. “You are going to feel amazing because I am going to take excellent care of you, as I promised.” He stepped back and tugged me with him. “As soon as we get back to our room.”

We turned and froze because Emerson stood between the great room and kitchen. He’d had the decency to put on a shirt with his lounge pants before coming down, but what made me happiest was the scowl he wore on his face.

“This isn’t your house,” Emerson said. “Others are staying here too.”

“What’s your point?” Dom asked.

“This,” Emerson replied, waving his hand up and down in our vicinity. “None of us should be subjected to your groping and making out in the common spaces.”

“I’d heard of your kind before, but this is the first time I’m seeing one in the wild,” I said.

Emerson visibly bristled. “What do you mean? My kind?”

“An uptight, fuddy-duddy gay man with a stick shoved so far up his ass that he can’t possibly make room for a lover.”

His face transitioned from pink to red and then faded to white before he managed to speak. “I don’t have to explain or justify anything to you.”

I leaned into Dom. “But buckle up because he’s about to do just that.”

Dom snickered and tried to cover it with a cough.

“You think this is funny? Your boy toy insults your husband and—”

“Ex-husband,” Dom and I said together. It wasn’t clear which of us had sounded surlier.

“And he’s thirty, for crying out loud,” Dom said. “And get off your high horse. Maybe you’ve forgotten about the way you treated me while playing house with Christian, but I have not. You don’t have a moral high ground to stand on.”

Emerson’s brow rose, and his lips curved into a devilish smile. I couldn’t figure out why he looked so pleased, but he didn’t wait long to enlighten me. “I’m glad you brought up our marriage, Dom. I’d hoped to have a private moment to talk to you and clear the air.”

Doubtful that was what he wanted to discuss, considering the heat in Emerson’s eyes when he saw his ex-husband last night. I could tell Dom wanted to refuse, but he was in a tough spot. If he resisted, he’d only encourage Emerson to think Dom was still hung up on him. And the very last thing I wanted was for this twat to think he intimidated me. I turned, rested my hand on Dom’s chest, and looked into his gorgeous green eyes. Dom looped his arms around my waist as naturally as if he’d been doing it for the past two years.

I went up on my tiptoes and kissed him. “I’ll meet you in the bathroom, and we can put our own spin on the everything shower.”

Dom kissed me before he released his hold. “I won’t be long.”

I met Emerson’s cocky gaze and sneer with a dismissive glance and smirk. This guy was no threat to me and the future I was building with Dom. I had no reservations about leaving them alone, but I found Christian waiting around the corner in the hallway. Was everyone in the house awake? I could tell by the haunted expression in Christian’s gaze that he’d heard at least the last part of our exchange with Emerson. I wanted to tell him it would be okay, but the conversation from the kitchen drifted to us before I could open my mouth.

“Dom, I think I made a mistake.”

Emerson’s voice had lost the sharp edge that he’d used on me. Dom’s cousin staggered back like he’d taken a knife to the heart. He braced an arm against the wall for support. And I’d be lying if I said my bravado held firm. I’d been down this road too many times before. But this was Dom. He was an honest and good man. He’d told me he was ready to turn the page on his marriage to Emerson, and I’d believed him. I would not stand nearby and dishonor him by eavesdropping on his conversation with his ex-husband. And Christian shouldn’t either.

“I don’t think you should stand out here and listen,” I whispered.

Christian swallowed hard. “I have to know the truth, and I won’t get it from Emerson directly.”

I patted Christian’s arm and smiled sadly. “Honey, you’ve already heard everything you need to know.”

I stepped away and walked back to the bedroom I shared with Dom. The conversation with Emerson might take longer than Dom planned, so I didn't want to start the shower yet. I sat on the rumpled bed that smelled like Dom and me. Determination coursed through my body—hot and fierce. I'd met a man worth fighting for, and I would stop at nothing to claim Dom as mine.

Dom

I watched as Sven exited the room with his head held high, taking all the warmth and color with him. Knowing his history of dating losers who went back to their exes, I couldn't help but worry about where his thoughts might take him. Sven had held my gaze with unwavering confidence seconds ago as he issued an invitation to join him in the shower after this unwanted chat. But had that all been for show? I knew damn well how swiftly insecurities could crop up and wreak havoc. I didn't want Sven to doubt me, not even for a second.

"Are you even paying attention?" Emerson's voice was closer. Too close. I snapped my head back in the direction he'd been standing, only to find he'd moved within touching distance. He raked his gaze over my bare chest and down to my sweatpants, making no effort to hide his interest.

I crossed my arms over my chest and screwed my expression into something that hopefully gave off closed-for-business vibes. Even if I'd only faked my feelings for Sven, and I hadn't, I had zero interest in hearing the bullshit that was sure to follow. I knew exactly what mistake Emerson was about to confess to, and there wasn't the first stirring of emotion in my chest. Not a single heartstring moved. But that hadn't always been the case. For months after our separation, I'd fantasized about Emerson coming to his senses and begging for me to take him back. It didn't take me long to realize that yearning had more to do with my pride than a tremendous loss of love. Our marriage had been over before Emerson sank his claws into Christian, but I had been too dumb to recognize it.

My posture and my expression must've gotten my mood across because Emerson

swallowed hard and eased back a few steps. It was best not to leave things up for interpretation, however. “Honestly?” I asked. “No, I wasn’t paying attention to you. I’ve already dismissed whatever it is you’re about to say and climbed into the shower with Sven. You might as well spit it out, Emerson. What mistake do you think you made?”

The emphasis hadn’t been an accident on Emerson’s part. He was always hedging his bets. When this conversation didn’t work out the way he’d intended, he would crawl back into Christian’s bed and ensure his position in my cousin’s life was secure. Knowing that didn’t affect me the way I thought it would. I felt sorry for Christian, even after what he did to me. But Sven was his cross to bear now.

Emerson huffed. “You’re not going to make this easy, are you?”

“Sven is waiting, remember?”

My ex-husband vibrated with anger at the mention of Sven’s name. Bet I would’ve heard his teeth rattling if not for his tightly clenched jaw. Emerson took a steadying breath and relaxed his face. “I’m not buying this relationship farce you’re trying to sell your family. Sure, you’re horny for the guy, and who wouldn’t be? Everything about his physical appearance is designed to arouse. And that song and dance about making women feel better about themselves. Volunteering to take care of seniors. Yada yada yada.” Emerson rolled his eyes. “He’s a con artist and will show his true colors soon.”

“You mean like fuck around with my cousin behind my back?” I asked. “Oh, wait. You did that while married to me. Sven is nothing like you. What you see is what you get. And the things you can’t see, like his heart and soul, are even more beautiful than his face. My feelings for him are very real.”

“I didn’t have a physical relationship with Christian until after you moved out,”

Emerson said. “I’ve told you this repeatedly, but you don’t listen.”

“An emotional affair is still cheating.” And I wasn’t sure I believed his claim—then or now.

“And it was a mistake,” Emerson replied. “I already said that.”

Not in so many words, but I wasn’t about to split hairs when I wanted to end our conversation and get back to Sven. “I regret the way our marriage ended,” I said. Emerson’s eyes widened, and his lips curved into a wicked smile. I let him sense a victory for a millisecond longer before I dashed his insincere hopes. “But I am glad it’s over. I don’t love you, and I haven’t for quite some time. The horrible way you treated me was a blow to my pride. Christian is the one who broke my heart, but that’s for us to work out.” Though I didn’t see how that was possible if Emerson was going to be in the picture.

Fire flashed in Emerson’s eyes, and his face turned a vibrant shade of pink. “You don’t mean that.”

“I’ve never meant anything more.” I unfolded my arms and sidestepped him. “There’s nothing else to say to you, so if you’ll excuse me, I have plans for this morning.”

Spotting Sven’s open suitcase on the bed nearly gave me a heart attack. Was he leaving? Had he assumed I was just another asshole who couldn’t see what a gem he was? Then I noticed the open closet and dresser drawers. We hadn’t taken the time to unpack yet, which meant—

Sven stepped out of the closet with both hands on his hips. “It’s not happening.”

“Excuse me?”

He walked around the bed and stopped in front of me. “I’ll take that pipsqueak down to the mat. I’ll fight to the finish for you, Dom.”

I bit my inner cheek to keep from grinning because humor was the last thing this conversation called for. “So, you overheard my conversation with Emerson?”

Sven narrowed his eyes. “Just the part where he confessed to making a mistake.” Sven shook his head. “He thought he’d made a mistake. Freaking putz. He made a big mistake all right.” Sven poked my shoulder. “I let the other guys go without so much as a backward glance. Not you, Grizz. We have something special, and I’m going to prove it to you.”

I wrapped my hand around Sven’s wrist and pressed his palm flat against my chest. I wanted him to feel my pounding heart. I settled my other hand on his hip. “No man worth having makes you fight for his affection. There’s nothing to prove, and there’s definitely no need to take Emerson to the mat. I made my choice quite some time ago, even if it took me a while to admit it.” I lifted my hand and caressed his cheek. “You’re the only man I want.”

Sven closed his eyes and inhaled a shaky breath before meeting my gaze once more. Unshed tears turned his dark blue irises into polished jewels. Maybe it was because we’d recently watched Titanic , but I thought Sven’s eyes were more gorgeous than the Hope Diamond. “I’m in real trouble here, Dom. I more than like you. And I’m teetering on the edge of something life-changing. I need to know you feel this too.”

“Life-affirming,” I amended. I settled my forehead against Sven’s and shared his next breath. “And I’m right there with you.”

Trembling lips curved into a soft smile. “It’s scary.”

“Yes, but less so when we fall together.”

Sven looped his arms around my neck and pressed his body flush against mine. “Don’t let go.” It was the most vulnerable I’d ever seen him.

I settled my hands on his hips to keep him there. “I’ve got you.”

Sven stood on tiptoes to put his mouth closer to mine. “Don’t play with my heart,” he whispered.

“Never.”

I sealed my promise with a kiss that made me feel centered and dizzy at the same time. It was such an oxymoron, but it was no less true. Angling my head, I deepened our kiss and led Sven to the bed. The everything shower had sounded promising, but I wanted to love Sven without restrictions and not be at the water heater’s mercy. I banged my elbow into something hard and must’ve hit a nerve because the arm went numb for a few weird seconds. That wasn’t enough to stop a man on a mission.

My first instinct was to throw Sven’s luggage to the floor, but his bags looked expensive, and it would create a tremendous noise that could draw a crowd of concerned people. I steered Sven to the opposite side instead. The bed was large enough for five adults, so we’d have plenty of room to make out and make...love? Did people still say that? Don’t overthink it, dumbass. We climbed back onto the bed. I positioned myself against the headboard, and Sven immediately straddled my lap. It reminded me of our first encounter in the van, except our state of undress was reversed. If this was our do-over, I was going to make damn sure it was incredible.

Sven wrapped his arms around my shoulders and leaned into the kiss, rubbing his tongue against mine in the same slow, seductive pace as he rocked his hips. The friction was just as incredible, even with our lower halves partially clothed. Sven’s lounge pants were made of thinner fabric and barely provided a barrier between my hands and his skin when I cupped his ass cheeks and hauled him even closer. His

heated flesh invited me to knead those firm globes. Sven's heightened body heat intensified his natural scent and made me want to rut like a beast. I steadied my nerves and my hands, tracing a slow, seductive path along his ass crack to circle and tease his entrance.

Sven broke our kiss and let his head fall back, exposing his neck to my lips. I feasted on his sensitive flesh, reveling in every whimper and shiver as I marked him as mine. Fingers carded through my hair, pressed against my scalp, and gripped the strands by the roots. "I need you inside me again."

"Hmm-mmm," I mumbled against his neck. Lifting my head just enough to articulate, I added, "This feels like a new beginning, and I won't be rushing through it. I'm going to strip you down and love you like no one ever has."

Sven's moan was a token protest that made me chuckle. "I'm nearly half-naked now."

I gripped his firm ass cheeks through the thin excuse for fabric. "I'm aware. It's no wonder Janet was blushing furiously when I came looking for you."

Sven thrust harder against my dick. The tingling in my spine turned into sparklers on the Fourth, crackling and snapping with energy. Much more of this and I'd shoot off like a bottle rocket again.

I folded my legs and tipped Sven over onto his back. His legs stayed wrapped around my waist, and I seized control of the thrusting. "You're at my mercy now."

Sven's smile was indulgent, but the expression in his eyes said, "Bet me."

I lowered my face to capture those cocky lips at the same time I slowly rolled my hips. Sven's lush mouth parted on a gasp, and I deepened the kiss, demonstrating

with my tongue what I would do to his ass—claim him completely and irrevocably. Sven’s grip on my hair changed from desperate to tender once more, and then he explored me in other places. Nimble fingertips ghosted over my face with the curiosity of a sculptor who might recreate my likeness out of clay. The deft caresses moved lower to my neck, shoulders, and upper chest before trailing around to my back. His fingers were the matches, and my body was the strike strip, stoking fires wherever we went until the wildfire consumed my entire being. Nothing and no one existed but this man beneath me.

And I realized that merely thinking these things wasn’t enough; I needed to avoid past mistakes and tell Sven so he’d never have a reason to doubt me. Releasing his intoxicating lips took a herculean effort, but I did it. Sven looked up at me with half-lidded, lust-drunk eyes, and I committed the expression to memory.

I brushed the hair off his forehead and stared into his brilliant blues. “I hope you always look at me like this.”

“And how am I looking at you?” Sven asked drowsily.

“Like my body holds the secrets of the universe.”

Sven’s smile was slow and sly. “It does, and I have the key.”

“I would freeze time and spend the rest of my existence in this exact moment if I could,” I told him.

Sven’s gaze grew dreamier. “I didn’t know you were so romantic.”

“Honestly, I didn’t either. Maybe our long courtship brought this side out of me.”

“Courtship? More like two years of edging.” Sven tightened his legs around my hips.

“But I wouldn’t change a single thing because it has led to this nearly perfect moment.”

“Nearly perfect?” I asked with a quirked brow.

“Get your pants off and slide that dick inside me. That’s the perfect moment we want to freeze forever.” Sven carded his fingers through the hair above my right ear. “I don’t want to use condoms with you. No barriers. Just your body inside mine. I haven’t been with anyone since I met you, but I’ve maintained testing, and I take PrEP.”

A sudden inhale nearly triggered another coughing fit, but I avoided humiliating myself and ruining the mood. “I haven’t been with anyone else either.” My dry spell stretched back to my marriage, but there was no need to bring that up. “Are you sure?”

Sven lifted his head and kissed me. “I’ve never been more certain of anything. And hurry before the house wakes up or another one of your exes appears and wants a reconciliation.”

I snorted as I pulled back from his embrace. Sven raked his gaze over my bare chest and settled on the erection straining against my sweatpants. He sat up and pressed his lips against my stomach before tilting his head back to look into my eyes. Sven inched my sweats down a few inches to expose the head of my leaking dick.

“Or you could fuck my face.” Sven trailed kisses over my abdomen, getting closer to where I wanted his mouth yet remaining just out of reach.

I groaned and cupped the back of his head, more to hold on to something than guide him. I loved his brand of torture and would subject myself to it anytime he wanted. Seconds before, burying myself in his ass was the only thing on my mind, but the

allure of that mouth around my dick was a temptation I couldn't resist. Sven angled his head, and my cockhead brushed against his cheek, leaving a trail of precum on his face. I wanted to see release coat his lips and dribble down his chin again. I wanted—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

An insistent knock at the door made us jerk apart.

“Rise and shine, lovebirds!” Nana yelled through the door. “Time's a-wasting, and I want to spend time with Sven.”

The only thing that could block a cock faster than a protective brother was a feisty grandmother. Sven pursed his lips to keep from laughing while I wanted to fall to the bed and throw a fit.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Quit hogging Sven to yourself, Dommy,” Nana said. “I'm giving you ten minutes before I bring the big guns.”

I didn't have a clue what she meant by that, and I didn't want to find out. But ten minutes? “Nana, that's hardly enough time to brush our teeth.”

“Then you better stop wasting time arguing with me. The clock is ticking.”

Sven scooted toward the edge of the bed with a regretful expression. “To be continued.”

I bit back a curse and pulled my sweats up. “She gets an hour. Two max. Then I'm dragging you back here to ravage you, and I won't care who knows it.” I swallowed hard. “Without protection.”

Sven stood from the bed and faced me. “No barriers.”

I didn’t know if Nana had really set a timer, but we didn’t push our luck. There were only a few minutes to spare when we stepped into the hallway.

“Hey.” Sven placed his hand on my forearm to halt me. “Christian overheard your conversation with Emerson.”

“All of it?”

Sven shrugged. “He was in the hallway when I rounded the corner and stayed after I left. I know he heard Emerson tell you he thought he’d made a mistake. I told Christian that he probably didn’t want to listen, but he insisted.”

I puffed out my cheeks and exhaled. I had a deeply conflicted conscience where Christian was concerned. There was just too much to process, and I needed a tanker truck’s worth of coffee before I could deconstruct my thoughts. I leaned in for a quick kiss and said, “Thanks for letting me know.”

“A million thoughts just raced through your mind, didn’t they?”

I chuckled and linked my fingers with his. “Maybe not a million, but there were a lot of them. I need coffee, and I need Nana to get her Sven fix.”

“So you can get yours?”

“I’ll never get my fix of you,” I told him.

Sven stopped at the end of the hallway and turned into my chest. “Don’t toy with me.”

I cupped his face. “Never.”

My parents, John, Janet, and Nana were in the kitchen. Christian and Emerson were nowhere in sight, but I wouldn’t have expected otherwise. Oh, to be a fly on their wall. I nixed that notion as soon as it popped up. As Nana said, time was a-wasting, and I wouldn’t give that debacle another thought.

“Here he is, Nana,” I said, presenting Sven to her with a flourish. “You have an hour to soak up his brilliance before I steal him away again.”

Nana snorted. Her light blue velour tracksuit sported a giant snowman, who conveyed an ornery expression in his coal eyes. “That’s what you think. Janet has some great ideas, and we’re going to check a few off her list, starting with baking cookies.” Nana pressed a finger to her lips for a few seconds. “And I have an idea for something we can add to the festivities.”

“Thanks, Mother,” Janet said. I could tell she’d put a lot of effort into her appearance. She wore tailored jeans and an ivory sweater with a gold-and-silver Christmas tree on the front. Janet wore her hair loose around her shoulders and had applied light makeup. She looked younger and happier than I’d seen her in a long time, and Nana’s praise made her radiant. “What’s your idea?”

Nana clapped her hands together and rubbed them. “An ugly sweater contest. Maybe on Christmas Eve.”

Janet smiled brightly. “I love that idea.”

“Me too,” Mom said. “But I didn’t bring anything like that with me.”

“They sell the ugly-ass things in stores nowadays,” Nana said. “Or we can buy plain sweaters and make them ugly with bits and bobs we find around town.”

“I think that sounds fun,” Sven said.

Dad placed his arm around my mom’s shoulders. “I’m in.”

“Count me out,” John said. He turned from the counter with a travel mug in his hand. He took a casual sip like he didn’t know he’d brought the room down. I studied his dress slacks, button-down shirt, and suit jacket. My uncle hadn’t dressed for a leisurely day in the cabin.

“Going somewhere?” I asked.

John held up his mug in my direction as if to salute me but didn’t meet my gaze. He set the cup down to fiddle with the platinum Rolex on his wrist. The custom watch was an anniversary gift from Janet and cost more than I made in a year, a fact Emerson had loved lording over me years ago. “A former colleague is in Vail for the holidays,” John said as he turned back to the counter. “We’re going to meet up for breakfast and catch up on old times.”

Uncle John was the worst liar on the planet. The dropped eye contact, the fidgeting, and the vague reference to a colleague were flashing red signs. Silence blanketed the kitchen as we waited for Janet’s reaction. She’d gone to great lengths to make the holiday special, and it seemed like someone was determined to ruin her efforts at every turn.

My aunt straightened her spine, notched her chin, and turned her back on her husband. “What cookie should we make first?”

“Snickerdoodles,” Mom called out.

“Sugar cookies,” Dad suggested.

“The ones rolled in coconut,” Nana answered.

John narrowed his eyes and studied Janet as if seeing her for the first time. He shook his head, grabbed his coffee, and left the room. Janet’s shoulders drooped a little the moment he was out of sight, but she held her head high. Mom and Nana exchanged a look that told me they didn’t buy John’s excuse either.

“I think we should make linzer cookies,” I said, knowing they were Janet’s favorite.

Mom caught my eye and winked. “Janet makes the best jam for the center.”

“Raspberry,” my dad agreed.

“We can use Christmas tree cutouts in the center,” Nana said.

Janet brightened as if her husband’s betrayal was behind her, but maybe that was how she’d survived nearly five decades of marriage. And perhaps that was where the misunderstanding between us had begun. Refusing to settle for someone who wouldn’t be true to me, I severed ties, no matter how painful. I would not go quietly into the night; I made noise—lots of it—and I unapologetically disrupted the lives of everyone I loved. Maybe it was a generational thing or a power imbalance. Janet might’ve mistakenly believed John held all the cards in his hands. Whatever the reason, she’d denied, deflected, or drowned her sorrows, but it seemed like maybe she was tired of living that way.

“I brought my cookie recipes with me,” Janet said.

“I can start breakfast while you look over the recipes to see if we have everything we need,” Mom said.

“Dom and I can tackle the grocery run if it’s needed,” Sven offered.

Janet cupped his face with both palms. “You’re such dears, but I’d bet hard money that Molly Beth planned for every contingency when she ordered groceries. Her memory is nearly photographic.”

“You better believe it,” Dad said. He tapped two fingers against his temple. “Doesn’t forget a damn thing.”

“Except the reason I enter rooms most of the time,” Mom replied dryly as she hopped up from her stool. “Who wants to help with breakfast?”

“Bad hip,” Nana said with a wink. “Think I’ll support you from here.”

Dad headed into the living room and the massive television, where it seemed he wouldn’t have to wrestle anyone for control of the remote. “I’ll find something good to play in the background while we work.”

I figured we meant that he’d hold down the couch and sample the products, but it seemed Christmas miracles were a thing. Dad found National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation and turned up the volume. Then he returned to the kitchen to help prepare breakfast.

Janet ate very little and bragged about the omelet Sven made for her earlier that morning. “Best one I’d ever had.”

Sven slowly shook his head. “Charmer.”

Kitchen cleanup went fast when all of us chipped in, even Nana. Her hip miraculously healed about the time Clark Griswold’s sled careened out of control in the movie. She nearly pitched herself backward laughing and forgot to continue the farce. She also claimed she was once as hot as the woman in Clark’s swimming pool fantasy.

“I believe it,” Sven said.

“Now who’s the charmer?” Nana teased.

Neither Christian nor Emerson came downstairs at any point during the morning. Not even when the cookie smells permeated the chateau. I could tell Janet was concerned, but she didn’t comment for fear of crossing some kind of line. She checked her phone frequently, and her expressions were hard to gauge. Was she looking for messages from John or Christian? My thoughts wandered to my cousin more than once, and I was glad to see him turn up midafternoon. I was even happier that he was alone. He forced a plastic smile on his face that fooled no one. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked like he’d been tumbled in the dryer for an hour.

“Chris?” Janet said as she approached.

He held up his hands and shook his head. “I’m fine.” But he said it in the universal tone that expressed he was definitely not fine.

Janet stiffened but retreated to the island to roll balls of cookie dough through cinnamon sugar.

“Bullshit,” Nana said. “You look like you just gargled with toilet water.”

Poor Sven had just taken a sip from his bottle and nearly choked on it. I tried not to laugh at his reaction to Nana’s colorful commentary while I rubbed his back.

Christian’s mouth quirked up on one end. “I’ve had better mornings, Nana, but I’m not in the mood to talk about it.”

“Did you come to your senses and send Emerson packing?” Nana continued as if she hadn’t heard Christian.

“Mom, Chris said he didn’t want to talk about it.” Janet then turned to her son. “But did you?”

“Did he what?” Emerson asked when he entered the room, looking as serene as a nun at mass. One would never guess that he’d tried to wreck multiple hearts just hours earlier.

“Well, damn. You’re still here,” Nana said. “That’s one Christmas miracle dashed this year.” She sighed heavily and shook her head. “I’ll live long enough to see my grandson come to his senses.”

“Pretty sure you said that before,” my mom quipped.

“And my wish came true,” Nana said. “I just didn’t expect the leech to attach himself to my other grandson.”

“Leech?” Emerson vibrated with outrage. “Are you going to let them talk about me like that, baby?”

Sven and I locked gazes. His eyes nearly rolled back in his head before he returned to his task.

Before Christian could respond, the front door opened and shut, followed by zealous whistling that grew louder as someone approached the rear of the house. John appeared seconds later, looking more relaxed than I’d ever seen him. I’d say he was drunk, but I’d never known my uncle to drink and drive. I recalled the way I’d felt with Sven in the privacy of our bedroom and knew the activity that had put the bloom in my uncle’s cheeks.

“Wow, you guys have been busy,” John said as he helped himself to a linzer cookie. “Is this your recipe? No one makes better ones than you do.”

“She made the jam from scratch this morning,” Mom told him.

Nana tightly gripped a paring knife. Where the hell had that come from, and who’d given it to her?

John bit into the shortbread cookie and moaned.

Janet approached her husband with a serene expression. “Good?”

He swallowed the bite and smiled. “The best.”

“Enjoy it because it will be your last,” Janet replied calmly.

My eyes darted to Nana, but my mom had wisely confiscated the knife and moved it out of her reach. I met Sven’s gaze, and he mouthed, “I won’t be an accomplice.”

“What do you mean?” John asked with the cookie halfway to his mouth.

“You weren’t meeting with a former colleague, John. Your personal assistant is in Vail for the holidays too. That’s where you’ve been.”

“You’re drunk or paranoid, Janet. Even if Faith was here, it wouldn’t be that strange. Lots of people spend their holidays here.”

My aunt whipped her phone out of her pocket so fast that John flinched. “I’m sober as a judge right now.” She tapped her phone a few times before turning it around to show him something. “Here’s the lovely Faith showing off her luxurious accommodations to her followers. She doesn’t make enough money to afford a room that costs a thousand dollars a night.”

“You’re reaching,” John said.

Janet swiped her finger quickly over her phone as if scanning through a carousel of photos. “Ah. Here it is.” She zoomed in on the image and turned her phone around again. “Here’s my proof that you were in her bed.”

Christian moved over to his parents and looked at the device. He stiffened and aimed a scathing look at his father. “Dad?”

Sven turned a wide-eyed look in my direction and mouthed, “What is it?”

That’s when I noticed something missing from John’s wrist. I tapped my own and mouthed, “Watch.”

Sven’s eyes widened before he turned his attention to the drama playing out.

“That’s your Rolex,” Janet said, confirming my suspicions. “The one I had custom-made for you. The watch that was on your wrist when you left but isn’t there now. I’ve suspected your affair for a while, and now I know.”

John snorted. “The only thing you’ve been cognizant of the past three years is the amount of liquor in our bar at home. You’ve been blinded to anything else.”

“Don’t blame me for your failings, John. I can get sober, but you’ll always be a cheating bastard. I hope Faith understands that she’s just one in a string of affairs. There’s nothing special about her, and you’ll move on once you get bored.” Janet snatched the remaining cookie from his hand. “Pack your bags and go. I want you out of here and our house in Fort Collins. I don’t want to speak to you or talk to you. We’ll communicate through lawyers until we’ve dissolved the life we made together.”

“Fine by me,” John said with a careless shrug. “Faith is different from the others because I had planned to leave you as soon as the holidays were over. She’s the love

of my life.”

“Ew, Dad. She’s younger than me,” Christian said.

John pointed at his son. “You have no right to judge me. Look at the company you keep.”

“Hey!” Emerson said. “Why is everyone turning on me?” He pivoted to face me. “Did you tell them about our conversation? That was private.”

“What conversation?” Mom and Dad asked.

“The one where he told Dom he’d made a mistake and wanted him back,” Sven said.

“Hey, you little shit,” Emerson said as he advanced on Sven. “Stay out of our business.”

I stood up so fast my stool nearly toppled, but it was Christian’s words that stopped Emerson in his tracks.

“I want you to pack and leave too, Em,” Christian said.

Emerson stopped and turned. “Baby, you don’t mean it. We can work it out.”

Janet snorted and blushed. “This is when I’d normally take a big ole drink of wine.” She reached for her glass of sparkling water instead.

“I don’t want to work anything out with you,” Christian stated firmly. “Just go. I’ll make arrangements to move out of the condo when I return.”

“But...I...we...” Emerson was speechless, a rare occurrence.

“I’m not heading back to Fort Collins,” John said. “I’ll stay in Vail with Faith.”

“You can drive my car back,” Christian told Emerson.

“But you and Janet will be stranded here.”

“No, they won’t,” I said. “Sven and I will take a detour to Fort Collins on our way home.”

Christian held my gaze for several seconds. “Thank you.”

“That should be a fun ride,” Emerson said. “You guys can all talk smack about me.”

Sven pivoted on his stool to stare down Emerson. “The fuck we will. We’re going to do carpool karaoke all the way home. I’ll start on a playlist soon. Name your genre, Janet.”

“Anything from the seventies!” she replied.

“Disco is always a fun time,” Sven said as he picked up his phone. “Christian?”

“I’m real partial to music from the nineties,” my cousin said. “Bet I know all the words to every TLC song.”

Emerson acknowledged his dismissal with a huff and stomped from the room. John stared at Janet as if really seeing her for the first time.

“Better get going,” she said. “Don’t want to keep Faith waiting, and congratulations on your pending fatherhood.”

Everyone in the room gasped. Plot twist!

“Dickhead,” Nana growled.

John blanched. “How did you...”

“Know?” Janet finished. “She’s been dropping hints all over her social media for the past few weeks.” She shrugged and walked away from him. “And your plans to leave me prove it. You’re not in love with that child. You love how she makes you feel young. But all the other mistresses did too. There could’ve only been one difference between Faith and them. It wasn’t hard to figure out you were dumb enough to get her pregnant.” Janet reached the island and turned to face him once more. “I’m about to live my best life, and you’re about to ruin yours. Late-night feedings and diapers at your age. You’ll be in your eighties when he or she graduates from high school.”

“We’ll have money to hire a nanny to help us with the baby.”

Janet toasted him with her sparkling water. “Not after I get done with you.”

I didn’t think John’s pallor could get worse, but I was wrong. He looked like the walking dead when he shuffled down the hallway to pack his things.

Sven looped his arm around Janet’s waist. “You’re a badass.”

“Not yet, but I will be.” She looked at Christian, and her expression sobered. “I’m sorry. This is a double whammy for you.”

He nodded mutely, looking shell-shocked for several moments. “I’m going to have a sibling?” He shook his head as if trying to shake the shattered pieces of his mind back into place. Then Christian met my gaze. “Can you and I find some time to talk later?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Everyone started talking at once, and I used the diversion to sneak Sven back to our room.

Sven

I launched myself into Dom's arms as soon as he shut the bedroom door. He stumbled from the impact but remained upright. Gripping my ass, he hauled me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. Our lips met in an all-consuming kiss that stole my breath and my restraint. My holiday goodwill to all evaporated as soon as Dom's wicked tongue rasped over mine. Come hell or high water, I was going to have this man and the new beginning he promised me. Dom took several steps toward the bed but then stopped and backtracked to the door. I pulled my mouth away and searched his gorgeous green eyes.

"Forgot to lock it." Dom released my ass long enough to correct his oversight, but he didn't immediately start toward the bed afterward.

"Good thinking. I adore Helen, but I won't be held responsible for my actions if she interrupts us again. I want that do-over you promised." Wagging my brows, I slid my hand into his hair to massage his scalp. Dom's eyes drooped, and his lips parted on a moan. "I'm going to do you over sooooo good." I bounced in his embrace. "Take me to bed before someone comes looking for us."

Dom chuckled as he carried me to the bed and deposited me onto the mattress. "Don't worry about interruptions. They have plenty to talk about and won't even notice we're missing." Dom crawled onto the mattress, and I scooted back to make room for the rambunctious activities I had planned.

"Good."

Dom positioned himself between my thighs and kissed my neck. “So good.”

I closed my eyes and willed my brain to think only of the way this man made me feel. No thoughts about family—his or mine. Just the feel of his lips on my skin. The weight of him on top of me. The way arousal made my dick swell. But my brain had a mind of its own and wouldn’t fully relax into the moment. It felt like there was unfinished business or something I needed to say to make this a true do-over. But Dom and I had talked everything out. A dawning pierced through my lust daze like the sun dispersing a thick fog. The light grew brighter and wouldn’t be denied. With a resigned sigh, I gripped Dom’s shoulders to halt him.

He raised his head and looked down at me. Arousal and confusion wrestled for dominance in his green gaze. “What’s wrong?”

“We’re claiming this as our fresh start, right?”

Dom nodded as confusion seized control of his expression. “You don’t want that?” He shifted backward as if to move off me, but that was the last thing I wanted.

“I want our fresh start more than anything.” I tugged Dom back into place, and he relaxed against me until I spoke again. “It’s just, I think we need to come clean to someone before it can happen.”

Dom groaned, and I didn’t stop him when he rolled off me. Flopping to his back, he stared at the ceiling. “I suppose you’re right. But I don’t wanna.” He’d said the last bit in a pouty voice that made me smile.

I rolled to my side and nestled closer, resting my head on his shoulder. Dom wrapped an arm around me and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I mean, we could have fresh-start orgasms to take the edge off,” I suggested. “Then we can call Kerry to fess up.” I pursed my lips and pretended to consider the situation. “That might require us to have

another round of do-over sex.”

Dom turned onto his side to face me. “We’re going to redo the do-over?”

I shrugged. “Why not? It’s Christmas. Calories don’t count, and we can have as many fresh starts as it takes until we get it right.”

“Sounds like Groundhog’s Day ,” Dom said. “I sure as hell don’t want to relive this day over and over.” He leaned in and lightly kissed my mouth. “Let’s do this right so I can have you all to myself. I want to experience new things with you, not replay the same things.”

I bolted up, scooted toward my nightstand, and retrieved my phone from the charger. I pulled up Kerry’s contact but didn’t press any of the icons that would connect us. Dom had propped himself against the headboard in my brief absence. Worry furrowed his brow, and his mouth looked as grim as the first night we met. I crawled onto his lap and straddled his thighs. “You have nothing to fret about.” I kissed Dom until his lips softened beneath mine and the tension eased from his muscular body. My phone slipped from my hand and fell to the mattress, but I didn’t care. I needed Dom to know that I was his, no matter how Kerry reacted to our news. “We don’t even have to tell him that his cockblocking attempts two years ago didn’t work,” I said. “It’s none of his business.”

“We said we wanted a fresh start,” Dom said. “That means complete honesty and accountability. Kerry told me to lay off his brother and...”

“You got laid by his brother instead,” I teased.

Dom winced. “That wasn’t exactly what I’d planned to say.” He kissed me gently. “I’m prepared to take whatever heat Kerry dishes out because I’m not giving you up.”

“One more kiss for courage, and I’ll call him.”

“Just don’t FaceTime,” Dom said. “Your lips are already puffy from last night and this morning and—”

A soft giggle and a growly curse came from the vicinity of the bed. The two distinct voices belonged to people I loved dearly, but they were out of place in the privacy of our bedroom. I’d packed many things for the trip, but Kerry and Keegan were not among them. Jerking away from Dom, I glanced down and saw that I’d accidentally dialed my brother’s number when my phone slipped from my hand. I bit back a groan as I put the call on speaker.

Forcing cheerfulness into my voice, I said, “Oh, hey, Ker and Kee. Merry Christmas!”

Keegan snorted. “It definitely sounds merry on your end.”

My best friend gave me the reprieve I needed. “And how’s your holiday going?”

“Nice try,” Kerry growled. “You didn’t fuck-dial me to find out how our Christmas is going. And you didn’t check in last night like you promised. Guess I know why.”

“But hey, at least we know you made it there safely,” Keegan said. “We won’t keep you—”

“Hang on a damn minute,” Kerry said. “No one is hanging up until I get some explanations.”

The color leached from Dom’s face, and I pressed my lips to his ear as Keegan and Kerry playfully bickered on the other end of the connection. “He’s pulling your leg,” I whispered. “I know what Kerry sounds like when he’s pissed, and baby, this ain’t it.

I say we give it right back to him.”

Before Dom could form a response, I thrust my hips forward and released a little moan. A shiver of pleasure raced down my spine, and I nearly forgot this was an act of retaliation.

Keegan giggled, and Kerry gagged. Dom’s face turned the color of a tomato.

“Sorry,” I said without an ounce of apology in my voice. “Can’t seem to help myself.”

“Look, I’ll save everyone the hand wringing and unnecessary explanations,” Kerry said. “I knew this was coming. The two of you can’t take your eyes off each other when you’re in the same room.”

“Sooo, you no longer think I’m the walking wounded who doesn’t deserve your brother?” Dom asked.

Kerry snorted in derision. “Of course not. You weren’t ready two years ago, but you are now. The same goes for Sven. I think you guys are perfect for each other. Why else do you think I suggested the holiday hijinks? Glad to see everything is going according to my plan.”

“Actually,” Keegan interjected. “Sven going with Dom was my idea.”

“But I took the suggestion and ran with it,” Kerry said. “We make a good team.”

“The best,” Keegan replied.

Kissing noises came through the phone, and I disconnected the call. They’d forgotten all about us, but it didn’t hurt my feelings. I was ready to get lost in Dom and leave

the rest of the world behind. “It’s time to do you over so good,” I said.

Dom lunged forward, taking me to the mattress in an aggressive move that left me breathless. Mouths met and hands roamed as if touching and kissing for the first time. We used every inch of the bed, rolling here and there to remove one article of clothing at a time until only our underwear remained. I found myself tucked under Dom once more, and I loved the weight of his body on mine.

“Are you sure?” The hornier Dom got, the rougher his voice became. Those three words held enough gravel to pave a road to Denver.

I stroked my toes over his hairy calf. “About us?” I thrust my hips up to remind him of how turned on I was.

The friction provoked a thrilling growl from his broad chest. “About not using condoms.”

I tucked my thumbs in the waistband of Dom’s briefs and shoved them down until they got snagged on his thick erection. “Get these off so you can bury that monster in my ass with nothing separating us.”

Dom pushed up enough for me to ease the fabric over his dick. I shoved his briefs until I couldn’t reach them, then used my foot to take them the rest of the way. Dom kicked them off and sat up to retrieve the lubricant from the bedside drawer. I reached down to remove my underwear, but Dom’s possessive snarl stopped me in my tracks.

“You’re my gift to unwrap,” he said.

Unravel was more like it. Dom took his sweet time working my underwear down my legs, stopping to kiss and nip erogenous places I didn’t know existed. Dom tossed my underwear over his shoulders once they cleared my legs and retraced his kisses back

to my throbbing erection. He lay between my thighs with his head hovering where I wanted it, but he was still too far away. I slid my hands into Dom's hair and cupped the back of his head but didn't try to get him closer. I was going to savor him cherishing me, and I guess part of that was having Dom look at my bared body as if he were committing it to memory. Or maybe he believed that this wasn't real.

"No one will snatch this away from us," I said.

Dom's gaze snapped up to meet mine. "Promise?"

I massaged his scalp the way he liked. "Promise."

Dom lowered his head then, taking my dick into his mouth. He licked and sucked as if I were the best thing he'd ever tasted. I didn't just lie there like a passive participant. I encouraged Dom with words and touch to get the pace and pressure that pleased me the most. He worked me right up to the edge before he eased away. My body trembled with frustration until Dom reached for the lube, and then I quaked with anticipation. Would it feel different without condoms? Would I feel the rush of his release when he filled me? Several more questions floated through my mind, but all thinking ceased when he slicked his dick with an eager fist.

"God," I said throatily. "You're going to fuck me like a well-oiled machine."

Dom's smirk was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. "Yes, I am."

Then he used those slick digits to open my ass, first one, then two, and finally three. I propped my ankles on his shoulders, and he rendered me into a pliant pillow princess incapable of coherent speech as he worked them in and out. My cock jerked and leaked precum all over my stomach. Dom dipped two fingers from his free hand into the small pool and sucked them into his mouth. He closed his eyes and moaned as if my essence was exquisite.

“Dom.” His name was a whispered plea for mercy. “Inside. Now.”

He pulled the fingers out of his mouth and turned his head to kiss my calf, never stopping his ministrations in my ass. A finger grazed my prostate, and I saw stars.

“Please,” I begged him.

“Feeling good?” Instead of waiting for an answer, Dom massaged that bundle of nerves and nearly ended the party before it could really start. “Hell yeah, it does.” Dom eased his slick fingers free, and my pucker quivered in protest. “That’s nothing compared to what I’m going to do to you.” His confidence was sexy as hell, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away from his eyes when he nudged his cock against my hole. Dom thrust forward, entering me in one long, slow motion.

The slick glide of him made me gasp. Sex without condoms felt different, more intense. He was so hot and big, stretching and filling me to the point of pain without pushing me past it. Dom’s lips parted on a blissful moan, and his eyelids drooped halfway closed, but he kept his gaze steady on mine until he bottomed out. Then he broke eye contact to look down at the juncture of our union.

“Look at us.” Dom traced my stretched opening with his thumb as he withdrew, dragging his dick back over my pucker excruciatingly slow. I tightened my clench, ensnaring his fat cockhead before he could pull completely free. Dom bared his teeth like a savage beast and slammed back inside of me. The impact jarred a whimper loose, and I worried he might mistake the sound as distress. I locked my legs around his ass to hold him close and signaled that I not only could take whatever he could dish out, but I also encouraged it.

Dom came down fully on top of me, capturing my lips in a scorching, open-mouth kiss that mimicked the savage fucking he gave me. I touched Dom everywhere I could reach, paying special attention to his ass and loving the play of muscles as he

pumped in and out of me. He captured my mouth in a hungry kiss that stole my breath. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, trying to get as close to Dom as humanly possible as he fucked me within an inch of my life.

There'd be no mistaking the sounds of our labored breathing and bodies slamming together if anyone else was nearby, but I was too far gone to worry about something like that. My climax built into a thrilling crescendo as Dom angled his thrusts to pound my prostate. All too soon, the dam broke, and I bit Dom's shoulder to keep from shouting out my pleasure. My release pumped between us, coating our stomachs. Dom eased back enough to see the mess we made, then sat back on his haunches, keeping his dick buried inside me as he pumped me with shallow thrusts. Strained muscles told me Dom was close. I lazily trailed my fingers through the cum on my stomach and enjoyed the way his jaw tensed. I lifted my digits to his mouth, and he licked them clean.

Dom held my hips in a bruising grip, fucking me long and hard. He panted and rutted inside me, chasing his orgasm, and I couldn't wait for him to bathe my insides with his spunk. He slammed deep and came on a grunt, then pulled out to finish spurting all over my stretched opening. Dom pumped his cock to make sure I got everything he had, and then he slid his dick back inside me for a few shallow thrusts.

Dom eased his dick free and smeared his release into my quivering rim before he eased back down on top of me. I rose up for a kiss, and he met me halfway. We were messy and sticky, but neither of us cared. The only thing that mattered was the bliss our fresh start brought us. He finally eased back and braced the weight of his upper body on his elbows.

"You're so fucking gorgeous I almost can't stand to look at you," Dom said.

"I'm sweaty and smell like cum. I bet my face is red and my hair is a mess."

“And you’re still the sexiest man I’ve ever seen.”

I shook my head. “That’s you. So strong and masculine. I just want to burrow inside you.”

Dom pushed off to lie beside me. “You can burrow inside me anytime you want.”

I arched a brow and turned into his embrace. Settling my hand over his pounding heart, I said, “Are we talking about the same thing? I meant I wanted to climb into your body and live there. It sounds like you meant...” I let my words trail off to invite Dom to answer for himself.

“Your dick in my ass,” Dom said.

“You do that?” I asked. Judging people’s preferences was dumb, but I was just as guilty as the rest. “I pegged you as a confirmed top.”

“Pegged, huh?” Dom asked. “Heard what you did there.” He circled my wrist and brought my hand up so he could kiss the palm. “It isn’t possible for you to climb into my chest and live there, but you’ve metaphorically pitched a tent in my heart and took up residence. Why not stake your flag in my virgin ass too?”

Dom’s confession melted my heart and turned the rest of me into a puddle of goo. I still had at least one working brain cell, and it was stuck on Dom’s invitation.

“About that flag staking...”

Dom inhaled and chuckled at the same time. I snagged the water from the nightstand before a coughing fit could ensue, and he downed it in one long go. He cleared his throat. “Crisis diverted.”

“We need to work on breathing exercises,” I said.

Dom quirked a brow. “Into breath play?”

“Hell no. I won’t yuck someone else’s yum, but that’s not for me. I meant mindful meditation. You can learn breathing exercises to calm stress and anxiety.” I chuckled at Dom’s dubious expression. “You doubt it now, but I’ll make a believer out of you yet.”

Dom tackled me to the bed and kissed me. “You already have. And after some recovery time, you can stake your flag.”

“Whose recovery? Mine or yours?”

Dom dug his fingers into my sides, and I flopped around on the bed like a fish out of water. “Was that a crack about my age?”

“No,” I squealed. “I just like to deal with specifics.”

Dom used his size difference to pin me to the bed and learn all the places I was ticklish. The fooling around led to kissing and petting and making out like I’d never done before. I couldn’t kiss or touch him enough. This was the moment I’d happily live in for the rest of my life. But then we discovered our recovery time didn’t take as long as we’d expected. And I learned the art of giving and receiving in a whole new way.

Helping Dom discover previously unexplored pleasures was the highlight of every sexual encounter I’d ever had. Watching his expression morph from uncertainty and discomfort to curiosity and ecstasy was the moment I wanted to relive forever. I loved him with my mouth, hands, and cock until I coaxed a powerful orgasm from him. No barriers. When I came inside Dom, I staked that metaphorical flag and dared

anyone to take him from me. I collapsed onto his chest afterward, and he wrapped his arms around me. His heart pounded beneath my ear, and his pucker flexed around my softening cock. I knew true contentment for the first time in my life.

“So worth fighting for,” I whispered.

Dom

I couldn't recall the last time I'd submerged myself in a bathtub, but I was probably under the age of ten, and it had likely occurred against my will. I'd taken the "God made dirt, so it doesn't hurt" mantra to heart as a kid. My mother had likely exhausted every creative way to lure me into the tub. Sven helped me rediscover how fun it could be to get dirty and showed me how wonderful a leisurely bath could feel, especially for tender, previously unexplored body parts.

White LED candles of various heights and widths surrounded us. Their light—soft and flickering—mimicked the real thing without posing a fire risk. I reclined against the freestanding copper tub while Sven lounged against my chest. I watched the dance of candlelight on his skin as I lazily stroked his arms, his chest, and his lower belly. Whenever I neared a ticklish spot, Sven wiggled in my embrace. The friction of his backside against my groin tried to arouse my dick from its deep slumber. I was nearly certain that two powerful orgasms were my limit for the day, though it was proving to be the season of miracles.

"I could stay here forever," Sven said dreamily.

"The water will eventually get cold."

Sven tsked. "Ye of little faith." The world-weary sigh that followed might've been overkill coming from anyone other than Sven, but it made me smile. My education was seconds away, so I lay there without comment or defending myself. "You drain some of the cooled water and top off with more hot."

I pressed a kiss to his temple. “I stand corrected.”

“Good. I plan to keep you here all to myself. Not even Helen would barge into our bathroom to drag us out.”

I snorted but didn’t bother correcting him. Nana would stop at nothing to get her way. It was no wonder she and Sven had bonded immediately. Like recognized like. I rested my head against the rim of the tub and closed my eyes, willing to let Sven take absolute control of our bathtub. “I’m at your mercy, Captain.”

A companionable silence washed over the bathroom, broken only by an infrequent ripple of water as one of us shifted in the tub. I lost track of time and had nearly fallen asleep when Sven bolted upright. I pried one eye open and studied him. He tilted his head back and sniffed the air.

“Smell that?”

I blinked and willed my brain to wake from its post-climax slumber. I sniffed the air, too, and registered one of my favorite aromas from my childhood. Tomatoes, garlic, and basil. A wicked smile spread across my face as I studied Sven’s excited expression. Well played, Nana.

“Dom, what is that divine aroma?” As if on cue, Sven’s stomach growled loudly.

Other than snagging a few cookies for quality control, we hadn’t eaten since breakfast. A quick glance up at the skylight revealed a darkening sky. It was almost dinnertime. I sat up and wrapped my arms around Sven’s waist. I laid a trail of kisses across his shoulder and up his neck, stopping at his delectable ear.

“You’re in for a real treat,” I whispered.

Sven turned his head and met his gaze. “Beyond what we experienced in here?”

I pursed my mouth and pretended to consider the question. “Equal value but completely different categories. One fed our soul while the other will nourish our bodies. Nana is making her famous chicken Parmesan. It smells like there’s about thirty minutes left to dinner. Mom will have set up a charcuterie board filled with dozens of snacks to tide everyone over.”

Sven sniffed the air again. “A life-affirming day.”

Maybe I should’ve felt insulted when Sven launched himself out of the water like a magnificent dolphin, but I sat back and enjoyed the view of his slick body. He’d nearly towed himself dry before I followed his lead but at a slower pace. That bath had gone a long way to ease the ache of bottoming for the first time, but I wouldn’t be sprinting toward anything. Sven looked over his shoulder when he reached the door and froze.

“Are you hurting?”

I shook my head. “I’m just a little tender.”

He worried his bottom lip between his teeth, and I dropped my towel on the floor and strolled toward him, dripping water in my wake. Snagging him by the towel around his waist, I pulled Sven into my arms. I kissed his mouth until he released his lip and kissed me back. I chased thoughts of hunger and worry from his mind, leaving him panting softly when we parted.

Cupping his face, I said, “This minor discomfort is a beautiful reminder of how it felt when you slid inside me for the first time. No regrets.”

Sven exhaled a relieved sigh and left my ass in the bathroom to fend for myself. “I’m

going to see if my favorite Nana needs help with dinner.”

He'd already dressed and left the room before I dried off and cleaned the mess I'd made on the floor. Chuckling, I got ready for the evening. I was thankful to have a few minutes to myself to process the momentous events of the day. I wasn't sure when Christian would want to talk to me, but I figured sooner was better if we had any hope of resuscitating our relationship and salvaging the holiday vacation. We'd never go back to how things were before Emerson Baker entered our lives, but we could forge a new path if both of us were willing. Christian indicated he was ready to put in the work. I had to understand his betrayal, and that required an uninterrupted and uncomfortable conversation I hadn't been willing to entertain until now.

My cousin was nowhere in sight when I rejoined my family in the great room. As promised, Sven was in the kitchen with Nana. She held up a spoon as he leaned forward to sample her special marinara. Sven's eyes rolled back in his head, and he moaned loudly. It reminded me of some of our more intimate moments, and I wriggled on the couch. The subtle movement caused a slight sting in my ass, so I sat still. Sven dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around Nana's waist.

“Run away with me,” Sven pleaded.

“Christ, not again,” I called out. I hadn't meant to joke about Emerson leaving me for Christian, but the words were out before I processed the thought.

The world screeched to a sudden halt, and all eyes swiveled toward me. It was probably a good thing Christian wasn't there to overhear my comment. Janet slapped a hand over her mouth, but I couldn't tell if it was to stifle a laugh or a gasp. Dad blinked owlishly from the opposite side of the massive U-shaped couch, his book dangling from one hand. Mom narrowed her eyes as if that could help her read my thoughts. Sven popped up like a cork, and his mouth couldn't seem to decide if it wanted to stay open or shut. I shrugged and reached for the television remote.

“He has jokes.” Of course, Nana was the first to recover from shock.

And the world rushed back into motion again. Dad went back to reading his book. Janet, Mom, Nana, and Sven worked on dinner. I found *Die Hard*.

“And now it’s Christmas,” I said to no one in particular.

But the comment triggered a debate that had become as classic as the movie. Was *Die Hard* a Christmas movie, or was it a movie that took place at Christmastime? I ignored the debate and enjoyed the movie since I’d already declared my stance. I picked up enough of the conversation to know that the verdict was split down the middle between the two camps. Dad, Janet, and Mom were adamant that *Die Hard* was not a Christmas movie. Sven and Nana agreed with me. Three versus three.

“Hung jury,” I declared.

Another round of debates ensued, each one making another pitch, only louder. The noise prompted Christian to join us with a puzzled expression on his face as he tried to pick up on the various threads of conversation. Then he noticed what I’d put on the television.

“And now it’s Christmas,” my cousin said.

A chorus of cheers and boos filled the house. I held up a fist, and Christian bumped it as he passed. He plopped down on the couch and curled a leg under him. As hard as I tried to watch the movie, my gaze kept wandering back to the kitchen, where Sven seemed so at home with my family.

“Dom,” Christian said. “Think we could have that talk now?”

It was better to rip that Band-Aid off. I’d allowed the wound to fester long enough. I

tilted my head to the back door. “Let’s check out the fire pit. It might be nice to sit around it later and drink warm beverages.”

“Sounds great. I’ll grab our coats.”

A fancy propane fireplace sat in the middle of the pit. Christian opened the cabinet underneath and fiddled around until flames rose from the glass rocks on top. He pushed a few buttons, and the fire climbed higher.

Who should speak first? Christian was the one who initiated a conversation, so shouldn’t he be the one to break the ice? I kept my mouth shut and let him find the words to speak when he was ready. I checked the rest of the patio setup while he toyed with the fireplace remote. There were several patio heaters situated around the seating area to help ward off the cold. I turned a few of those on and removed the covers from the chairs. The cushions were dry but cold beneath my ass. Considering my previous activities, the chill felt good.

Christian eventually sat down. He planted his elbows on his knees and stared at the fire for several moments before he turned his head and met my gaze. “I loved Emerson first.”

It wasn’t the conversation starter I expected. “Excuse me?”

“Fuck.” Christian blew out a frustrated breath and scrubbed his hands over his face. “I’m sorry.”

“To be clear, what are you apologizing for? Sleeping with my husband or starting this conversation with a combative remark?”

“I didn’t sleep with Emerson while you were married,” Christian said. At my pointed look, he cleared his throat. “Well, I did, but not until after you’d officially separated.

What you walked in on that day...”

“Was you in bed with my husband.”

“Cut the shit, Dom,” Christian growled. “We were both dressed and above the covers. I’d just helped him make the bed after the furniture store delivered it. Emerson said he needed help setting it up because you wouldn’t make time for him. We’d just flopped down to see how it felt.”

I snorted. “Bet Emerson told you a lot of things that weren’t true.” I held up my hand when Christian opened his mouth to respond. “I know what I saw, Chris. You were lying so close together. Barely a foot separated you, and you were holding hands. I recognized the expression in Emerson’s eyes as he stared at you, and you—”

“Looked like a besotted fool.”

“Yes.”

“Because I was,” Christian agreed. “And I had been since the first day I met Emerson in college. We became inseparable friends immediately, but I always wanted more. I brought him home to meet my family over the holiday break a year later so he could get a look at the future he could have with me.” Christian inhaled, and his nostrils flared. “I just didn’t expect him to find that with you.” The raw sadness in his voice tugged at my heart.

“I didn’t know.”

Christian nodded. “The two of you only had eyes for each other.”

“If I’d known, I wouldn’t have pursued him,” I said.

“And I think you believe it,” Christian said, staring into the flames. “You probably would’ve tried to deflect his interest, but Emerson had made up his mind about you the instant your eyes met. He’d have never let you go. Knowing I’d never have him for myself, I settled for what I could have. I stood up for you at your wedding and cried in private for my lost dreams. I forced myself to date and try to find someone else who sparked that same fire inside me.” He smiled sadly. “I even came close a time or two, but Emerson always reeled me back in.” Christian turned and looked at me. “There was never anything physical between us. Em just knew the perfect things to do or say to ensnare my attention and hold it. Next thing I knew, I was blowing off dates and forgetting important anniversaries with boyfriends to spend time with him while your career was taking off.”

“Sounds like Emerson.”

“Pretty sure I realized how unhappy he was in your marriage before either of you did. He started inviting me to do things with him he’d normally ask you to do. Museum openings and curated events he’d set up. That kind of stuff. When I pressed him about why he hadn’t asked you, he’d just say you were busy or that you didn’t like artsy kind of stuff.”

“I didn’t, but I attended those things anyway because he was my husband. I worked long hours to pay our bills so he could focus on obtaining his master’s degree and PhD. When you love someone, those are the kinds of sacrifices you make. But Emerson had to always be number one. He resented my time away, even though I did it to make his dreams come true.”

Christian shook his head. “Nothing is ever good enough for him. I think that’s why he pursued me. He wanted to hurt you.” He swallowed hard. “I want to believe I didn’t encourage his attention, but I was too consumed with him to consider your feelings.”

“That’s usually how affairs work,” I replied. “And you engaged in an affair with my

husband. Emotional cheating still counts. I won't let you off the hook for that. I am sorry that I unknowingly hurt you in the beginning, Christian, but you intentionally stabbed me in the back. We must acknowledge that if we hope to have some kind of relationship someday." I waited for the denial to come, but it didn't.

Christian held my gaze. "You're absolutely right. I'm sorry for how I betrayed you. I've regretted it every day since. Laying the blame solely at Emerson's feet would be unfair. I encouraged his anger and outrage anytime he complained about your marriage, and it enabled him to treat you poorly. I can't expect you to forgive and forget. Hell, I don't think I'll ever forgive the role I played in destroying our family." Christian looked over his shoulder toward the house. "I wasn't paying a bit of attention to my mother's mental and physical decline. I have so much to make up for, and I'm not even sure where to start."

"This conversation is a good place," I told him.

Christian looked at me with a mixture of hope and disbelief in his expression. "Hardly."

I held up my palms. "I'm not making any promises. You and I will have to take this one baby step at a time. I think your mom needs you the most right now. Dissolving my six-year marriage was complicated enough, so I can't imagine how overwhelmed she is right now."

"I won't let her down," Christian said. "She can count on my full support."

"Mine too. I'm going to give her some advice on how to ensure John won't hide assets from her divorce attorney. They'll hire a forensic accountant to make sure he hadn't already engaged in underhanded tactics since he'd apparently planned to leave her."

“I always hated being an only child, but thirty-seven years is a big age difference between siblings.”

“Better than becoming a father again in your sixties,” I said.

“I can’t even imagine,” Christian said. Then he chuckled and shook his head. “I loved my mom’s line about Dad not affording the nanny once she got through with him. I hope she takes him to the cleaners and uses the money for a fresh start.”

“And what about you?” I asked.

Christian puffed out his cheeks and exhaled. “There’s no future for Emerson and me.” He slapped his hands on his thighs and rubbed them back and forth. “I’ve known that for quite some time. Emerson got his thrills from hurting you and watching our family splinter. When he didn’t get you back this morning like he’d planned, Emerson came back to our room like nothing happened. He didn’t know I’d overheard the conversation and tried to gaslight me when he learned the truth. I want to say I immediately fell out of love with Emerson after I heard him admit he wanted you back.”

“That’s not how the heart works,” I said.

“Nope. Like with us, I will have to rebuild my future a step at a time. I’ll block his number and sever all ties once I move out and find a place to live. Maybe I can find someone who will actually love me.”

“You deserve a better relationship than your parents had,” I told Christian.

“And you deserve a love like your parents have.” He nodded toward the house, and I followed his direction. Sven stood at the island with one arm around Janet and the other around my mom. I couldn’t hear what he was telling them, but they were

laughing hysterically at his antics. “Seems to me you’re already off to a good start this time.”

I smiled as I watched my family. Nana walked over to Sven and fed him a bite of something. He didn’t propose again, but he appeared to sway a little. “Yes, I am.”

Christian slapped his knees and stood up. “Think I’m going to head upstairs for a little while. I’m not very good company tonight.”

I wanted to tell him that moping alone in his room wouldn’t help, but I’d done that for several months after my marriage to Emerson ended. Who was I to lecture anyone? “I think Nana mentioned something about playing euchre later.”

Christian grimaced. “Does Sven know how vicious she can be?”

I chuckled. “He’s about to find out.”

“Best to see what he’s made of now,” Christian said. “See you later.”

“See you.”

I stared at the fire, enjoying the play of flickering flames. The door opened several minutes after Christian went inside. I glanced over my shoulder and watched as Sven approached. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself. Is it okay if I come out?”

I tugged Sven onto my lap and wrapped my arms around him as soon as he landed. “Better than okay.”

“How was your chat with Christian?” Sven asked.

“It was a start.” I turned my head to rest my cheek between Sven’s shoulder blades.

“Anything is possible,” Sven said.

“You make me believe that’s so.”

Sven turned sideways on my lap so he could see my face. “I can’t take credit for the miracles of the holidays.”

I cupped his face and pulled him closer. “It’s the miracle of Sven.” And I let my kiss convey the magic he introduced to my soul.

Sven

A soft bed with luxurious bed linens, a large bowl of buttered popcorn, and a movie on the television was the perfect way to end the night. Dom was snuggled at my side and not on the other end of a phone connection. This was the arrangement I longed for during all our buddy-watch nights. I loved having Dom next to me where I could witness his reactions to whatever we watched. I felt his laughter rumble through his body and saw the wry curve of his lips as he criticized the wholly unrealistic action sequences playing on the screen. I mostly watched him instead of the movie, and I understood why Dominic preferred to see the world through Molly Beth's reactions.

"This is better than I ever imagined," I said.

Dom nodded as he lifted a handful of popcorn. "It's not a terrible movie if you just accept the franchise is meant for entertaining escapism and not as an accurate representation of...anything."

"I couldn't tell you a single thing that's happened so far," I said. Dom looked at me with a quizzical expression that made me laugh. "I know that you're the neatest popcorn eater I've ever seen though. Not a single kernel has dropped on the bed." I gestured to my side, where several buttery kernels had rolled to their final resting place on the comforter. "You don't take your eyes away from the screen to eat or drink." I cocked my head to the side. "How'd you keep up a steady text commentary with me during buddy watches?"

"I barely looked away from my phone on those nights," Dom said. "I was more interested in your thoughts and reacted to your opinions rather than sharing my own."

I cocked my head to the side and narrowed my eyes. “You mean you liked to rile me up by arguing?”

Dom shrugged and ate the popcorn in his hand with maddening neatness. I hadn’t planned to knock his kernels free. My hand had acted independently when it snaked out and smacked his arm. That was my story, and I was sticking to it. Dom stared at me with a shocked expression that quickly morphed into one of retribution. Instead of being afraid, I shivered with delight. He tackled me to the bed, spilling the rest of the popcorn onto the comforter, and pinned me beneath him. Dom’s fingers sought my ticklish spots, and I alternated between laughing and begging for mercy. I’d been well and truly fucked, so I didn’t think it was possible to have any spark left. Turned out I had a can-do libido that would arise, literally, to any challenge.

“Huh-uh,” Dom said when he felt my arousal prodding him. “You’re not getting rewarded for bratty behavior.”

“Yet you’re kissing a trail down my stomach.”

“Teaching you a lesson,” he replied.

I tucked my arms under my head and submitted myself to his mastery, watching as he worked my dick with his mouth and hands while maintaining eye contact. Dom crawled back up my body after he swallowed my release. He kissed me, and I loved the way I tasted on his tongue. I would’ve returned the favor, but he hadn’t gotten hard again and seemed content with two orgasms for the day.

“Well, have you learned something important?” Dom asked when we parted for breath.

“What it feels like to be cherished.”

Dom's lips parted into a wide smile. "Good, because you are."

I brushed my fingertips over his cheeks, his bristly jaw, and his full mouth. "I'm falling in love with you, Dom."

"I'm falling for you too."

"Don't let go," I whispered.

"I've got you."

Just like the earlier conversation about our intense feelings, we sealed our vow with a kiss. One stretched into two and then became a make-out session that lasted long beyond the rolling credits on the movie.

I knew the rest of the holiday wouldn't pass without bumps or potholes in the road just because we'd culled the toxic people from the group. I expected John's and Emerson's presence to linger in haunted expressions, but Janet and Christian proved to be more resilient the next morning. They'd worked together to prepare a lovely breakfast for everyone.

"I baked cranberry and orange scones," Christian said. "First time in several years, so they might not be up to scratch."

"They smell like heaven," I said, reaching into the breadbasket and helping myself.

Helen assessed her oldest daughter over a cup of coffee. "You look fifteen years younger since tossing the cheating bastard out." Then she reached for a scone. "Christian, you probably haven't baked pastries because Emerson banned butter and sugar in your home. It's unnatural if you ask me and probably accounts for his miserable existence."

“Mom,” Molly Beth whispered.

I bit my lip and lowered my head so I wouldn’t laugh. Dom, who’d just taken a drink of orange juice, spluttered but managed not to choke. I peeked from the corner of my eye to gauge the other reactions around the table. Dom Sr. covered his mouth with his napkin while Christian saluted his grandmother with a scone.

Janet snorted. “It’s okay. There’s no need to tiptoe around us.” She placed her hand on Christian’s shoulder, and he smiled at her. “We’ve had a shock, to be sure, but both of us have already taken steps to put our lives in order. We’re going to come out of this stronger than ever.”

“I have no doubt,” Molly Beth said.

“What miracles have you pulled off this close to Christmas?” Helen asked.

“The first thing I did was hire legal representation,” Janet replied. “My dear friend is one of the best divorce lawyers in Colorado, and she is all too happy to stick it to John.”

“Glad to know there’s at least one woman John hasn’t already stuck it to,” Helen said.

“Mom!” Molly Beth said.

“You’re right,” Helen replied. “You and I never fell for his smarmy ways either.”

“She missed the point of my objection,” Molly Beth said to Dominic.

“No, love. She ignored it. Big difference.” He leaned toward his wife. “Why would you expect anything different after all this time?”

Molly Beth shrugged and reached for a scone.

“What about you, Christian?” Helen asked.

“I’ve called some friends, and they’re going to help me pack and move out as soon as I return to Fort Collins. I’m going to stay with Mom until I can sort out a place of my own.” Then Christian snickered. “Apparently, Emerson is so universally disliked my friends offered to move my stuff out before I got back. One of them was ready to go over as soon as we disconnected the call.”

“I’m so happy you have amazing friends,” Helen said.

Janet looked at her watch and made a sound of distress. She picked up her fork and tucked into her breakfast.

“Do you have somewhere you need to be?” Molly Beth asked.

“AA meeting,” Janet said. “There’s a group in Vail. I’ll attend their meetings until I can get home and find a local group.”

Helen stood up, rounded the table, and hugged her daughter. “You make me so proud.”

The tears came then, first with Janet, then Helen, and finally Molly Beth. We picked up our plates and carried them to the family room to give the women some privacy. Janet looked nervous about her meeting until someone suggested we go to lunch and do some shopping afterward. Dom looked less eager about the shopping part, but he quickly got into the spirit once we walked through the charming town. He even snuck off once to make a purchase he wouldn’t let me see.

“You’ll have to wait until Christmas,” Dom said.

“Two days? That’s forever.”

He showed me mercy on Christmas Eve. We tiptoed back out to the tree after everyone went to bed. Dom moved the gifts around and pulled out a box wrapped with shiny red paper and adorned with a silver bow. “Don’t bother telling me it’s too pretty to open. I saw you tear into your birthday gifts.”

I looked up from his present to meet his gaze. “But this is from you.”

Dom leaned forward and kissed me. “And there will be many more. Open it.”

I took the stick-on bow off the package and placed it on Dom’s bare chest. “Just so you know, you’re the only present I need.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said, gesturing for me to hurry.

I carefully unwrapped the gift, much to his annoyance, and held my breath when I opened the lid. Shredded silver paper filled the box, and I gave Dom a suspicious look.

“There’s something delicate in there, so handle it with care.”

I carefully sorted through the paper strips until I bumped into something made of glass. Curving my fingers around the cool surface, I eased it from the protective bed. I knew immediately the significance of both the gift and Dom’s words of caution when a beautiful crystal heart ornament hung from my fingers. Tears filled my eyes. This was more than a Christmas ornament; this was Dom giving me his heart and urging me not to break it.

“It’s stunning.” I carefully laid the heart in the palm of my other hand and studied the intricate details. It wasn’t made of solid, smooth glass but several delicate strands

knitted together like a sweater. My own heart pounded in my chest like a bass drum when I looked into his eyes. “I will treasure this always.”

Dom reached forward and gently stroked the glass heart. “There were several options to choose from, but this one snagged my attention and wouldn’t let go.” He smirked. “Kind of like the man holding it.” Tears slid down my face, and he brushed them away. “The knitting on this ornament reminded me of how you put my heart back together again.”

“Dom,” I whispered.

His green eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “One text thread at a time until you pieced me back together again and wove yourself into the fiber of my being in ways no one else ever has or will.”

Gently placing the heart back in the box, I set it aside and crawled into his lap. I’d made a similar sentimental purchase from the same boutique he’d bought my gift. I reached under the tree for his present and handed it to him. “Merry Christmas.”

Dom kissed me before accepting the box I’d wrapped in navy blue paper with silver snowflakes. He took forever to untie the silver ribbon, even though his body thrummed with eagerness.

“Demure season is over, baby. It’s time to indulge,” I told him. “Tear into it.”

Dom glanced up with a scowl. “I don’t know what a demure season means.”

I waved him off and threatened to unwrap the gift myself. Dom twisted his upper body so I couldn’t snatch the box, but he moved his nimble fingers faster. He chuckled when he saw the store logo on top of the box.

“Yeah, yeah. Great minds,” I said.

Dom snickered as he removed the lid. He stared down at the ornament for so long that I wondered if I’d made a mistake. I’d found a display of round silver ornaments with illustrated couples painted on them. I’d found one with a similar likeness to us. The brunet guy even had a thick covering of scruff on his jaw. Cartoon Dom and Sven stared lovingly into one another’s eyes and wore matching sappy grins. The artist had painted a gorgeous mountain view in the background and the year below the couple. Dom gently traced the ornament with his index finger.

“Turn it over,” I said.

Dom followed my instructions with great care. “Our first Christmas,” he read.

“Of many,” I told him.

Dom lifted his head, and it was my turn to brush away his stray tears. “How many?”

I carefully took the box from him and set it next to mine before giving him my full attention. “As many as you want.”

“All of them.”

I pushed Dom to the rug and lay on top of him. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

The stretch of days between Christmas and New Year’s Eve was the best of my life. Dom and I alternated between rowdy family time and tender private moments. I drifted through my days in a blissful fog I never wanted to clear.

I watched the flames dance in the outdoor fire pit and nestled closer to Dom. I’d never considered myself a lap cat, but my ass had never met thighs like Dom’s either.

Thinking I was cold, he wrapped the throw blanket tighter around us.

“Everything okay? You’re awfully quiet,” Dom said.

“I refuse to believe that all good things end. Why can’t we just float from one good thing to another without saying goodbye?”

Dom nuzzled his cold nose against my neck. “Where’d that come from?”

“I just love this vacation bubble so much, and it’s making me sad to think about leaving it.”

Dom cupped my face and turned my head so he could look into my eyes. “Are you worried about what will happen to us when we get back to real life?”

“No. Maybe,” I admitted. “We both work a lot of hours. I have never felt so secure in a relationship, and I don’t want to lose this.”

“So we won’t,” Dom said.

“That easy, huh?”

“It can be,” he replied. “Tonight is the perfect time to make some promises to each other.”

I chuckled. “Most resolutions fail within the first month.”

“We’re not most people, and I’m not talking about making casual resolutions with little to no thought given to how to carry them out.” He tapped the end of my nose. “I want to make firm commitments to you.”

I angled closer to his big body. “Sounds like you’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Because you’re always on my mind.”

The melody to Willie Nelson’s song played in my head, but Dom kissed me before I could hum it. Best not to ruin this beautiful moment with my off-key renditions. “I love this idea. You go first.”

“Honest communication. Always.”

“Agreed,” I said, then kissed his lips. “Our relationship comes first. Always.”

“Easiest yes I can make.” Dom’s mouth lingered against mine when we sealed that promise. “Your dreams are my dreams, and mine are yours.”

“Hell yes!” I nipped his bottom lip after our kiss. “We create traditions like movie nights and stick to them.”

“Absolutely.” Another promise sealed with a smooch, but Dom slid his tongue between my lips to deepen our connection.

The patio door opened behind us, but we didn’t bother pulling apart.

“Countdown to midnight has started,” Molly Beth said. “The ball is dropping.”

“Child, can’t you see they’re focused on different balls?” Helen asked. “Close the door and leave them alone.”

I pulled back from Dom and smiled. “God save Helen, our queen.”

“She’s a national treasure.”

“I love you, Dom.”

He sucked in a breath but didn't cough. Dom's eyes shone brighter than the stars above. “I love you too.”

From inside, his family cheered when the clock struck midnight. I looped my arms around Dom's neck and said, “Happy New Year.”

“The happiest.”

Fat snowflakes fell gently from the sky like nature's confetti as Dom kissed me.

Dom

My mom's arms tightened around my neck like a boa constrictor, but I soaked in her love instead of trying to wriggle free. Breathing is overrated, right? "We're so proud of you," she whispered. "You've worked so hard for this moment."

"Move over, Molly Beth," Dad said. "It's my turn to hug our son."

Mom's hold eased, and she slowly pulled back. "Fine, I'll squeeze the life out of Sven instead." She scanned my office for the love of my life, which didn't take long.

Dominic Babb Investigations couldn't afford to lease more than a small commercial space. The reception area in the front was not much bigger than a broom closet, but I couldn't afford to hire someone to answer phones and greet clients. The kitchenette was only big enough to fit a minifridge, a coffee maker, and a microwave. I could barely turn around in my private bathroom, but I didn't plan to spend much time in there. My office was just big enough to fit a secondhand desk and a few filing cabinets. The most expensive thing in my new professional space was the executive leather chair Sven had bought me. The place wasn't much to look at, but I was incredibly proud of it.

"Where is Sven?" Mom asked.

"He couldn't have gone far, love," Dad said. "You'll get to see him plenty since Dom and Sven are putting us up in their guest room until after Thanksgiving." He stepped around Mom and wrapped me in a bear hug. His proud-papa slap on the back rattled my bones and knocked the wind out of me. Dad pulled back and gripped both my

shoulders. “Are you sure you don’t want us to find one of those airy bed-and-breakfast places or a Virgo rental?”

I couldn’t hold back the chuckle at his latest hatchet job, but it was the closest he’d gotten to Airbnb and VRBO. “Wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied.

Sven and I had purchased a fixer-upper over the summer and called in every favor owed to us to help create the perfect little nest. Mom and Dad would be our first guests, and we were excited to host them.

“He’s just jealous of how much I fuss over your cat,” Mom said, hooking her elbow through Dad’s.

“Better check your mom’s luggage for Tom before we head back to Arizona in a few weeks,” Dad teased.

We’d adopted a tabby kitten a few months ago, and he immediately took over our home. The shelter called him Roscoe, but Sven changed his name to Tomcat Magnum after his third favorite PI, Thomas Magnum. I held the top honor, knocking Philip Marlowe to second place.

“He’s the sweetest grand-kitty in the entire world,” Mom said.

Dad placed his arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the door. “We’ll see you boys back at the house.”

I sat down, laced my hands behind my head, and reclined my fancy chair. The back of it smashed into the wall, and I chuckled. I’d told Sven the big bastard was too large for my office, but he insisted I have it. My phone buzzed with an incoming text. Speak of the devil.

Sun, Nov 8 at 2:30 pm

Sven: Is the coast clear?

Me: Clear of what?

Sven: Your adorable parents.

Me: If you're hiding from them now, what's it going to be like in a week? Or two? Or three?

Sven: It's not what you think. Shut your office door.

Dom: Why?

Sven: Just do it. And lock the front door. I don't want someone popping by and ruining our fun.

I'd lived with Sven long enough to know that fun could come in any form. Some of the happiest moments in my life came while grouting tile, scraping paint, and sanding hardwood floors with him. He made me laugh at myself and the world, helping me to see things in brilliant HD colors. So, I'd lock one and close the other without asking questions.

Not that Sven kept me guessing for long. My ass had barely landed back in the fancy chair before a soft knock came at the door.

"Come in," I said.

Only Sven could make an art form out of turning a knob and opening a door. It slowly swung open to reveal the sexiest person to live. He'd put on the black leather pants that drove me insane and paired them with a shirt I'd never seen. Sheer black fabric with lacy flowers clung to his perfect torso and showed off the nipple piercings he occasionally wore. The shirt had a matching hood that Sven had draped over his

golden hair. Oversized black sunglasses shielded the blue eyes I loved so much, but I knew they were smoldering seductively behind the dark lenses.

“I need to hire a private detective,” Sven said throatily. “And I’ve heard you’re the best.”

“Nah,” I said. “That would be Bart Billingsley. Want me to find his number for you?”

Sven’s mouth quirked up at one end. But he stayed in character as he stepped into my office and closed the door behind him. “I only want you. I’m desperate, Mr. Babb. How can I convince you to take my case?”

I leaned back like I was considering it, but my chair smacked into the wall again and ruined the illusion. I gestured to the seat in front of my desk. “Why don’t you sit down and tell me how I can help you?”

Instead of taking the offered seat, Sven rounded my desk and straddled my lap. His insistence on buying the sturdy chair finally made sense. I grabbed that sweet ass with both hands and pressed my nose to his neck. Sven released a soft whimper and said, “I’m hoping you can help me find something I lost.”

“Your virginity?” I teased.

Sven snorted. “Nope. This is something more recent.”

I sucked on his earlobe, then tugged it with my teeth. “Your sanity. I should’ve known it abandoned you when you offered our guest room to my parents for nearly a month.”

Sven swatted my shoulder. “Hush and play along.”

“Fine.” I gave his ass one last squeeze before releasing it. “When did you last see this

missing item?”

“Last night,” Sven replied. “I had it with me when I was setting up my boyfriend’s new office.”

“Boyfriend, huh?” I asked. “Is it serious?”

“Very.” Sven traced his fingers over my scruffy jaw. “It’s been almost three years since he lured me into the back of his seedy van and rocked my world.”

I quirked a brow. “Did he lure you, or did you follow him?”

We’d debated the question several times in the last ten months but were no closer to finding the answer. Each retelling included fabricated or exaggerated details that riled one another up. Our verbal sparring always turned into rowdy sex, so neither one of us was too keen on determining the true culprit’s identity.

“That part isn’t important to finding what I misplaced,” Sven said. “Are you going to take my case or not?”

“It’s going to cost you.”

“I’ll pay any price,” Sven said. “Don’t you need to take some notes? That’s how the private investigators do it in the movies.”

I rolled my eyes and opened the drawer I’d designated for notebooks. On top of the stack sat a black velvet ring box. My heart hammered beneath my breastbone.

“Aha! There it is!” Sven leaned over and snagged the box from the drawer. “I knew coming to you for help was the right thing to do.” Sven took off the sunglasses and tossed them onto the desk. Then he lowered his hood. His eyes were shiny with unshed tears, and his lips trembled when he smiled. “Dom, I hope you know how

much I love you.”

I settled my arms around his waist. I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn't get the words past the lump in my throat. Swallowing hard, I tried again. “I do.”

Sven cupped my face. “You've given me your heart and trust. You've surrendered that sexy body to me. We've bought a house and made a home. We adopted the world's most adorable cat. And it's still not enough. I need more.” Tears spilled down Sven's face. If he wasn't holding a jewelry box, I might've been concerned.

“What else can I give you?”

“Your name.” Sven flipped open the box to reveal a simple gold band. “Will you marry me?”

I looked from the ring to the hope shimmering in Sven's brilliant blue eyes. So many words flittered through my mind, but when I opened my mouth to respond, only a loud snort escaped. Sven flinched as if I'd slapped him, and I wished I could take it back. I scrambled for the right thing to say to fix my blunder, but I knew it would take more than words. I stood up from my chair, taking Sven with me. He squeaked in surprise and wrapped his arms and legs around me. I put him down once we reached the narrow hallway outside my office. I grabbed his coat off the hook and handed it to him.

“You're throwing me out?”

I cupped the back of his neck and smashed my mouth to his. “Don't be ridiculous. I just need to show you something, and I don't want you to get cold.”

“This afternoon isn't going how I imagined it,” Sven grumbled as he slid his arm into a sleeve.

“You’re telling me.”

I put on my coat and reached for his hand. To his credit, Sven took it without question, a trust I’d never betray. I led him out the back to where I’d parked the van Sven had affectionately named Columbo. I hit the fob to unlock the van and headed to the passenger side, just like I had that night almost three years ago.

“Let the record show that you are definitely luring me out to the seedy van this time,” Sven said.

“Noted.”

I opened the rear sliding door and gestured to the interior, where I’d placed LED candles around the interior surface. A wicker basket sat on the floor, and I opened the top to reveal a bottle of champagne, a loaf of bread, a variety of cheeses, and a selection of fruits. I reached into the bottom and picked out a velvet jewelry box like the one Sven held in his hand.

“I had a plan,” I told him. “I was going to drive you someplace remote, turn on those candles, and woo you with fancier snacks. Then I was going to propose and fuck you to within an inch of your life after you accepted.”

Sven released a snort between his trembling lips, then slapped a hand over his mouth.

“See!” I said, tugging Sven into my arms. “How ridiculous are we?”

“Ridiculously in love,” Sven amended.

I flipped open the box to show him the platinum band I bought him. As shiny as the diamonds were, they paled in comparison to Sven’s eyes when he looked at me.

“Marry me.”

“I asked you first,” Sven said.

I cocked my head to the side. “Is this going to be a repeat of our running argument about you stalking me outside the Thirsty Cowboy?”

“Stalked you?” Sven rolled his eyes. “Give me a break.”

“There’s only one way to settle this.”

I grabbed the picnic basket, took my man by the hand, and led him back inside, where we tested out the durability of both the executive leather chair and my wooden desk. I ended up with strained muscles in my back, drywall damage from the chair going through the wall, and snack crumbs cemented to my stomach after I missed a spot of spunk during cleanup. But I held my shimmering future in my arms, and we wore one another’s promise on our fingers.

Sven lifted his head from my shoulder. “This,” he whispered. “This is where I could spend the rest of my life.”

I kissed his lips and slicked back his damp hair from his forehead. “No way. We’re just getting started.”

The End!