



Twin Babies with the Billionaire for Christmas

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Category: Urban

Description: A forbidden one-night stand—with a sexy-as-sin billionaire—left me pulling tinsel out of...everywhere.

And now I have two Christmas surprises growing in my belly.

It was supposed to be a one-time holiday fling, but Mr. Twice My Age is about to hire me to write his story. Now I'll have to study every inch of his life.

I need this job, so I've got to keep things professional. But this arrogant, irresistible man is turning my little bah-humbug world into a Christmas wonderland as he decks my 'halls' with his holly.

I thought I could handle him under the mistletoe...until I realized I'd be unwrapping his twin babies this Christmas.

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Rachel

I lean against the wall, nursing my drink and wondering why I let myself get talked into coming to this party.

The bass from the speakers thrums through my body, competing with the dull roar of conversation. Seattle was supposed to be my quiet refuge, not this noisy cacophony of bass, bad conversation, and tepid drinks.

My best friend has put on this early holiday party as a fundraiser for something or other. She pleaded with me to come out.

She works in PR and is as talented at planning events as she is at hustling people out of their hard-earned dollars for good causes.

I do admire her chutzpah, even if I want nothing to do with being here tonight.

I give the Seattle-themed holiday decorations a gimlet stare. I'm not in the holiday mood. Being cheated on and losing a loved one has a way of doing that to you.

I reach out and poke a tinsel copy of the Space Needle hanging from the little fake tree next to me. I'm frankly grateful that I don't live with anyone right now. I have no idea how to fake Christmas cheer.

Christmas tends to stick in my craw anyway. My family wasn't very...functional...and Christmas just wasn't a priority for my parents.

My brother and I had basically raised ourselves, but it had all worked out okay. For the most part.

My love for the holidays, however, had been completely destroyed.

"Rachel! You made it!" My friend Cara emerges from the crowd, her face flushed with excitement and probably a few too many cocktails. She pulls me into a hug. "I'm so glad you came. You do need to get out more! You need to let Danny breathe. He's a big boy now and you've found him a safe place."

Cara's the only one in Seattle who knows about my brother. In fact, she is the one who told me about the job that brought us here.

I couldn't let my brother remain in Alaska when there are so many excellent care options here in the Emerald City—as the locals call it.

That's the only reason that I'm here tonight. I know that he's close by and being taken care of.

I paste on a smile. "Hey, Cara. It's nice seeing you, too."

"Come on. Let me introduce you to some people. You can't hide in the corner all night."

"By 'some people', do you mean people who you want to spend money on cause you're repping?" I scan the room, but I don't see any familiar faces.

"Cara, I don't know anyone here. I don't know how I can help you with your goals if you have to explain who I am to literally every person we meet."

"You're a famous author!" she yells at me over the noisy chatter in the huge space.

“What better introduction could I possibly offer? Besides, you look hot. Now, shut up and follow me. Hopefully, my plan works, and you get to meet someone.”

I grimace. Someone? I’m not looking for “someone”. Before I can protest, she's dragging me through the sea of bodies.

I nod and smile at the blur of faces, already knowing I won't remember any names.

My mind wanders to the unfinished book waiting for me at home. Maybe I can slip out after an hour of this meet-and-greet nonsense.

"Oh my God," Cara suddenly gasps, coming to an abrupt halt. "Is that Tristan Black? Gosh! I didn't think he'd make it, but he owes me for that time I invited him to that fundraiser, and he couldn't make it. Usually, he's at his ranch by now, enjoying the snow and the cows or whatever.”

She's making it sound like the name should hit me like a punch to the gut, but it doesn't. I mean, I vaguely know the name, but that's about it.

“Snow and cows or whatever?” I repeat amused.

Cara is really good at saying things like this that explain nothing and make you have to ask a zillion more questions. It's one of the things that I love the most about her, honestly. However, it does make moments like this one a bit trying.

“Isn't that why you'd buy a monstrosity like a ranch?” She goes on like she's making perfect sense. “It sounds kind of...inconvenient to me, but whatever. To each their own. Oh, there he is!”

She tugs at my hand and nods her head to the side, indicating where I should look. I follow her gaze across the room, and there he is.

My heart skips a beat, then suddenly picks up speed. Everything about the man says stay away. He looks off-limits, even while he's cheerfully chatting with an older woman holding a champagne flute.

He's talking animatedly with a very small group of older folks, his handsome face creased with laughter. Success looks good on him—he carries himself with easy confidence.

Maybe it's the clarion call of wealth rolling off him that gives me pause, or maybe it's that he just seems so closed off. He's clearly charming the people around him, but he seems like he's only halfway present in the moment.

I can see his arrogance in the tilt of his head and the look in his eyes.

As if he can feel my eyes on him, he turns toward me, his brown eyes connecting with mine. They're an unusual color, a golden brown that makes me think of whiskey.

I feel the weight of his gaze all the way to my bones. I immediately flush. What is wrong with me?

His eyes narrow a little as he looks at me, and I realize I'm smiling at him. I hope it's not a wacky smile that makes me look crazy or nervous. I'm not always the best in these kinds of situations. It's so many people and so much activity that it makes me fretful.

I suddenly wish I was more confident, more worldly, more self-possessed. I don't know why, but I want to impress this man. I want that very much.

"I honestly still can't believe he's here," Cara gushes in my ear, breaking the spell between myself and Tristan. He turns away to talk to the little group of admirers in

front of him again, and I nearly sag with relief.

I wonder, in a belated way, why Cara's so familiar with this wealthy and important man, especially considering he's not in his twenties. Cara loves to hang out with younger men, even though she should be well and truly tired of their immaturity by now.

After all, we're both pushing thirty. It's time to move away from frat boys toward real, adult men.

"He splits his time between Seattle, New York, and Montana," Cara rambles on. She waggles her fingers at him, but I try not to meet his gaze again.

"New York is the city of my dreams," she says dreamily. "He's a major tech mogul. Black Solutions is a huge company."

I shake my head mutely, still looking at anything but Tristan. So, he's a tech mogul. I remember now, he and his company came up in a column I wrote on the top three fintech companies in the world. His dreams and ambitions came true in a big way, but I had no need to know anything more about him.

I thought of my old lackluster, boring job, and grimaced a little. I was so heartily glad that I was done with that kind of freelance writing. Biographies are so much more fun to write, and they pay better, too.

"We have to go say hi," Cara decides, tugging on my arm again.

"Wait, I don't think..."

But it's too late. We're already moving, and Tristan's gaze sweeps over in our direction.

Our eyes lock, and for a moment, I find myself transfixed. His eyes are even more amazing up close, and I realize that he has high cheekbones and a strong jaw. The crooked smile on his face instantly makes my heart skip a beat.

If I remember right—from my late-night fintech article research—he's in his late forties by now. The only sign that indicates his age is the threads of white in his dark brown hair.

Something like admiration or shock dawns on his face, followed by a frown, as if he's trying to puzzle something out.

I squirm a little, not sure what to make of his look. He turns to face us fully, moving away from the little group of older people he was talking to.

"Tristan, meet my friend, Rachel Smith. Rachel, this is Tristan Black, but you already know who he is. Everyone does." She giggles, the sound disarming and genuine. Cara is one of the bubbliest people that I know, and she is a great wingwoman at any event for just this reason.

"Rachel?" he says, his voice a mix of disbelief and something I can't quite identify. "Rachel Smith?"

This man is ridiculously handsome. I can feel a sense of power and intelligence radiating off of him that calls to me like a siren song.

I have always loved complicated...distant men...so it's no surprise that this brooding tech genius is kicking my libido into overdrive.

"I...wow. Where have you been keeping her all this time?" he asks as he glances at Cara. He almost sounds like he's reprimanding her.

"She just moved to Seattle recently. She's a writer," Cara says, ignoring his accusation.

He looks a little irritated at Cara's words. "I know that she's a writer, my dear," he says flatly. "She's the Rachel Smith, the famous biographer of the wealthy, notable, and sometimes notorious."

I laugh abruptly, startled by the fact that he knows who I am, and also that he would describe what I do in such an apt way. "Are you sure that you own a tech company and not a marketing firm?" I tease, surprised a little at my boldness.

I grin at him a little, and he smiles back. My insides immediately turn gooey with desire.

He shrugs, a hint of that arrogance peeking through. "I'm good at many things."

"Clearly," I say dryly, glancing around at the huge event, then running my gaze over his expensive suit. I lift a brow at him.

He chuckles, then snaps his fingers at a passing waiter. He snags three flutes of champagne off the tray that the man is holding and passes each of us a drink.

"Let's toast to being able to earn a living doing what you love, shall we?" he says with a smirk.

I hesitate, torn between curiosity and self-preservation. I really should know better than to keep talking to this ball of kryptonite.

His gaze is boring into me, and I shift my weight a little as I realize that my panties are soaked. I hate myself for wanting him, but I also don't really blame myself. He's probably the most handsome man I've ever seen in real life.

Deciding to surrender to the inevitable, I take a sip of the champagne and offer him another small smile over the rim of the glass.

“Oh, yes,” Cara says suddenly. “I forgot you just hired a biographer, Tristan!” She swings around to look at me—mischievous painted all over her face. “How fortunate that you guys are both here at my event.

Holy shit. She set me up.

Cara told me it was a prominent ‘friend’ of hers who hired me to be their biographer. But the only detail she would dish was how much the job would pay.

I was honestly so desperate to make a change that I jumped blindly at the opportunity. Not my most professional choice. But I figured I could publish under a fake name if I ended up writing for a creep.

“Yes, it’s fortunate indeed,” he agrees. He barely glances at Cara before turning his attention back to me. “Apparently, you’ll be working for me,” he says, downing the contents of the glass in one go.

“Working with you, you mean. I won’t be your employee. I’m an independent biographer, sir,” I say with a hint of annoyance.

“Sure, sure,” he says with a shrug. “I’ll be paying, and you’ll be staying with me, so you’re really just working for me.”

I cannot believe the arrogance.

“Look, Mr. Black...”

“Tristan,” he says charmingly and grins at me.

My traitorous heart immediately melts in my chest. I shove away all the sweetness that he is welcoming me to feel for him, however. His high-handedness is incredibly irritating.

“Look...Tristan.” Saying his name feels far too intimate for some reason. Maybe it’s because of the flash of desire I see in his whiskey eyes when I say it.

I forge stubbornly ahead. “I am a skilled biographer, and I set the terms and the limits of my contracts. If you cannot respect these stipulations, I cannot work for you.”

“Rachel...” Cara hisses beside me, but I ignore her. She knows how badly I need this move to Seattle. But I will not be pushed around by this wealthy, domineering man.

“Fine,” Tristan says, stepping closer to me. My heart leaps out of my chest, and a fresh wave of desire rolls over me. He smells like sandalwood and spice, and I swallow around the constriction in my throat.

“I know you don’t want to be here. I can sense it,” he says, his breath blowing across my ear. I feel his hand rest on the small of my back. “I know where you can have some peace and quiet. Follow me.”

I look around for Cara, only to discover she’s suddenly nowhere in sight. I’ve been ensnared.

I curse in my heart, but I seem to have no control of my will or my legs as I find myself following Tristan through the crowded room.

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Chapter One

Rachel

Excitement, anxiety, and lust war within me as Tristan leads me away from the crowds.

The warmth of his hand on my back sends tingles through my body. We wind our way through the party, eventually emerging onto a quiet balcony overlooking the twinkling Seattle skyline.

"Better?" Tristan asks, his voice low and intimate.

I take a deep breath of the cool night air, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders. "Much. Thank you."

He leans against the railing, studying me with those intense cognac-brown eyes. "So, you have rules and limitations on these kinds of contracts, apparently. Beyond being able to determine your own hours and where you stay and so forth, is there anything else that I should know before we start working together?"

I stare at him for a moment. I know I should be fighting against his presumptions, if only for the sake of calling him out on his haughtiness.

But I know, deep down, that this mysterious and handsome man has already tangled me in his web. I'm intrigued, and I won't say no to him.

“I’ll send over a contract tomorrow. Give me your email address. You can look it over and see if it will suit your needs.”

“So professional,” he murmurs, reaching into the breast pocket of his suit and pulling out a business card. “So proper and prim.”

“Prim?” I snort. “That’s a word that belongs in a Jane Austen novel.”

A hint of a smile tucks itself into the corner of his well-cut mouth. He holds out the card to me. “She’s one of my favorite authors.”

I take the card, sucking in a little breath when his fingers collide with mine. I feel like I’ve been zapped with electricity, and my greedy core clenches with want.

“You’re new to Seattle.” He’s stating a fact, not asking a question.

I hesitate, unsure how much to reveal. “I needed a change of scenery. Alaska was beautiful, but...”

“But not conducive to the life of a biographer?”

“Something like that,” I hedge. “What about you? Cara mentioned that you split your time between here, New York, and Montana.”

Tristan nods. “It’s one of the joys of running a tech empire. I’m always chasing the next big innovation.” There’s a hint of weariness in his voice that surprises me.

“Sounds exhausting,” I say softly.

His gaze sharpens. “It can be. But tonight...tonight I’m finding myself very glad I made the trip back for Cara’s party.”

The intensity in his eyes makes my breath catch. I should step back, put some distance between us, but I find myself rooted to the spot.

"Tell me about your most recent book," Tristan says, mercifully changing the subject. "I found the way you put together those generational stories fascinating."

I blink in surprise. "You've read my work."

He chuckles. "Did you think I would want to hire you if I hadn't?"

"No, I just..." I trail off, unsure how to express my shock that this powerful tech mogul had not only read my most recent biography, but that he seemed to have genuinely enjoyed it.

"I make it a point to be well-read," Tristan explains. "Your book caught my eye. There was something raw and honest about your writing that kept me turning the pages."

I feel a blush crawling up my neck at his praise. "Thank you. That means a lot, especially coming from someone like you."

He raises an eyebrow. "Someone like me?"

"You know, successful, busy..." I fumble for words. "I wouldn't have thought my book would be on your radar."

Tristan steps closer, and I catch the scent of him again. "The thing is, I'm full of surprises, Rachel. And I have a feeling you are too."

The air between us feels charged with electricity. Something about his tone when he says 'the thing is' makes my heart race. What's up with that?

I know I should make my excuses and rejoin the party, but I can't bring myself to move away from this captivating man.

"So, what's next for you besides writing for me?" Tristan asks. "Working on another book?"

I nod. "I am, actually. It's still in the early stages, but I'm exploring themes of love, loss, and the search for meaning in life."

"Heavy topics," he observes. "Drawing from personal experience?"

I tense slightly. "Aren't all writers, to some degree?"

Tristan holds up his hands. "Fair point. I don't mean to pry."

"No, it's okay," I assure him. "I've lost some people...and things in my life in the last few years. It's been challenging, to say the least."

His expression softens. "I'm sorry."

I shrug, trying to downplay the wave of emotion his sympathy evokes. "Life goes on, right? We adapt, we survive."

"We do," Tristan agrees quietly. I can see empathy in his eyes. We seem to be sharing an understanding, perhaps even pain. But before I can analyze it further, his underlying arrogant confidence resurfaces. "But tonight isn't about surviving. It's about living."

He reaches out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. The simple gesture sends a shiver down my spine.

"Dance with me," he says, and it's not a question.

I hesitate. "I'm not much of a dancer."

Tristan's smile is suddenly playful. "Neither am I. But I have a feeling we could be great together."

The double meaning in his words isn't lost on me. Every instinct is screaming that this is dangerous territory, that I should politely decline. But there's something magnetic about Tristan Black, something that makes me want to throw caution to the wind.

He takes my hand while I'm still thinking about what to do, and slips the other around my waist, pulling me close to him.

"Okay," I hear myself say. "Just one dance."

He leads me back inside. The music has shifted to something slower, more sensual. Tristan pulls me close again, one hand resting on the small of my back while the other keeps a gentle hold on mine. We begin to sway to the rhythm, and I'm acutely aware of every point of contact between our bodies.

"See?" Tristan murmurs, his breath warm against my ear. "Not so bad, is it?"

I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak. The combination of his proximity, the music, and the lingering effects of the champagne is making my head spin.

I should feel uncomfortable, out of my element at this fancy party with this raw, overwhelming man. Instead, I feel alive. I am more present in this moment than I have been in months.

Tristan asks me more about my writing, my move to Seattle, and my plans for the future as we sway to the music. His genuine interest is flattering, but I realize that he probably charms people for a living. After all, most successful men know how to be charming when it suits them.

The song ends, but neither of us makes a move to separate. Instead, Tristan's hand slides up my back, coming to rest at the nape of my neck. His touch sends a shiver through me, and I meet his gaze.

"Rachel," he says softly, his eyes searching mine. "I know we've only just met, but..."

My heart races. I know I should step back, make my excuses, go home to my quiet apartment, and wait to begin working with him. But the attraction between us is also undeniable.

Tristan's expression intensifies. "Come with me," he says, and again, it's not a question.

A thousand reasons why this is a bad idea flash through my mind. I barely know this man. He's too old for me, too influential, and—in his eyes—set to become my boss.

Even though I logically know that the boss part is not totally true...Tristan could decide to choose someone else for the project, or worse, he could fire me once we're up and running.

So, he does hold the power of my future in his hands...sort of like a boss. And I need this job, the pay is absurdly good, and I need to be in Seattle.

I've got to play my card right.

Shit.

But at this moment, none of that seems to matter. All I can focus on is the warm wetness in my panties and the weakness of my legs.

We make our way out of the party, barely stopping to say goodbye to a very smug-looking Cara. As we step onto the chilly street, Tristan's arm wraps possessively around my waist.

I look up at him, taking in the desire in his eyes, the anticipation thrumming between us.

For once, I silence the cautious voice in my head and allow myself to embrace the moment. I think I deserve that after everything that has happened over the last two years.

“There were...complications...in Alaska,” I whisper to him, my heart clenching at the memory of the man I had moved there for. It had seemed so kind of him to set me up with a beautiful she-shed to write in, and a lovely care provider to take care of my brother. Until I realized that the “nurse” wasn’t actually a nurse and was just another one of the women he was sleeping with.

Not long after that, I lost my aunt, who had always been more like a mother to me than my own distant, narcissistic mother. The pain is still sharp, even though it’s been six months since my Aunt Ellie died. I push down the anger and the sadness and blink at Tristan as if I’m resurfacing from deep water.

“I can’t give anything to anyone yet...I’m just picking up the pieces.”

“I’m not asking for anything,” he says quietly. He reaches up to press his thumb to my lower lip, and I instinctively suck it into my mouth.

His eyes go dark with desire. "I just want us to have fun. Are you up for that?"

"Yes," I say, and I mean it.

He rewards me with one of those dizzyingly sexy grins of his and slips his thumb from my mouth. He captures my hand and tugs me along with him as he walks rapidly toward the parking garage.

I tilt my head up and look at the stars twinkling over the city. I know it won't last, but for this moment, I feel painfully, brilliantly, beautifully alive.

I smile and hurry after Tristan.

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Chapter Two

Rachel

He would live in the penthouse apartment of a swanky building with a view of the water.

As we ride the elevator up to his floor, my stomach flip-flops nervously.

I feel torn between delight that this exciting, intriguing, and wild thing is happening to me, and terror about what it might mean in the morning.

He's about to be a client —Mr. Not my Boss — for God's sake, and here I am heading to his place to fuck him.

"Penny, for your thoughts?" he asks as he swipes his access card, and the elevator travels up one more floor.

"They'd cost you way more than a penny," I retort, and he laughs. The sound makes my heart pound in my chest, and my core grow wetter.

"I'll find out the going rate when you send that contract," he replies with another chuckle. He reaches back for my hand and then tugs me into his apartment with a sharp yank.

I fetch up against his chest with a gasp, and I realize that he's been hiding a raging hard-on in his bespoke slacks. I hear someone moan and realize that it's me.

“Fuck, I’ve been wanting to do this since the moment I saw you,” he says roughly, before his mouth comes down on mine.

The kiss isn’t gentle. It’s demanding and fierce. My lips already feel bruised as I open under the onslaught and tangle my tongue with his.

He slips his hand into my hair and pulls my head back so that he can trail kisses down the column of my neck.

He brings his lips back to mine, kissing me more slowly, allowing me to set the pace. Abruptly, he scoops me up off the floor. My legs wrap around his waist by instinct, and he carries me across the huge living room to the giant floor-to-ceiling windows that take up the far wall.

He starts stripping my clothing off—leaving nothing but my black heels—interspersing his efforts with kisses on my exposed skin. A kiss on my shoulder, a nip on the slope of my breast, a flick of his tongue over my firm belly.

I writhe and twist, the pleasure invasive, greedy, and glorious.

“Your breasts are magnificent,” he says softly, reaching up with both hands to cup them gently.

He leans forward to suck my nipple into his mouth, and I stumble back against the cool glass of the windows with a gasp. My head lolls back against the hard surface behind me as he moves his mouth to my other breast, sucking and teasing.

My hands come up to tangle in his thick, dark hair, and he utters a growl that I feel all the way to my core.

“You have too many clothes on,” I manage to say between panting breaths.

He laughs lightly, but he steps back. “Take them off, then,” he says to me, holding out his arms.

I hesitate, the cold of the windows against my bare skin making goosebumps prickle all over me. I’ve always chosen to sleep with men who take what they want and don’t ask for input.

I can’t remember a time that I’ve been invited to make any decisions in the bedroom.

I swallow hard. Courage , I tell myself. This is something you are doing for you .

I take a wobbly step forward in my high heels, and I see that same flash of need in his golden-brown eyes. It spurs me on with new confidence, and I wiggle my ass sexily as I mince over to him and start removing his custom suit, one piece at a time.

I slide the form-fitting coat off his broad shoulders, running the flat of my hand across his muscular back. His button-up shirt is still acting as a thin barrier.

I lean against him from behind, running my hands over his flat stomach, using the buttons of his shirt as a guide to find his belt buckle. I work it loose and then step around him to yank it free from his slacks.

I think about the last erotic novel I read, and I coil the belt in my hand, slapping it lightly against my open palm as I walk around him. This is so out of character for me that it feels like an out-of-body experience, but I’m loving it.

I circle him slowly, then reach out with the belt to slap him on the ass. He sucks in a breath, but he doesn’t move.

“You should apologize to me for bullying me into writing for you,” I say to him firmly as I walk around to face him again. I lean forward, feeling the weight of my

breasts as they move with me. I glance up as I start to unbutton his shirt to see his smoldering gaze trained on my chest.

“I should?” he says to me, that arrogance back in his tone.

I yank the shirt from his slacks and then press it back over his shoulder, pinning his arms back with it. “Yes,” I assert, leaning in to kiss him. He starts to reach for me, but I step away, pressing a finger to his lips. “Patience,” I say to him sternly. “No one asked you to do anything yet.”

A smile slowly curls across his lips, and he nods at me. “I can be patient.”

“Can you?” I ask coyly, reaching down to unbutton his slacks. I allow them to fall to the floor, and then I make another circle around him, running my finger along his skin just under the elastic of his boxer briefs.

“I think you’re used to getting what you want all the time,” I announce to him as I come around to face him again. I bring up my other hand and pull down his underwear, allowing his heavy erection to spring free.

I pause for a moment, a bit overwhelmed by the size of him. I don’t think I’ve ever been with anyone this big. His cock lifts once, twice, under my gaze, eager for me, eager for this.

“I’ve worked hard to get to do what I want, when I want,” he says to me.

I look up at him, slowly sinking down before him on my high heels, my knees spread wide. I see his gaze dip down to my exposed pussy, then jerk back up to my eyes. I reach out and wrap a hand around his cock, stroking him slowly. His eyelids flutter closed for a moment.

“Beg,” I say to him. I want him to plead, to make me feel like I have some agency in my sex life for the first time in years, if ever.

I want to bend this handsome god of a man to my will.

He called me prim. He wasn’t really wrong. It’s always been a good way to describe me. But I refuse to be prim little Rachel anymore. I want to be a woman I can look up to and admire.

“Not so prim anymore,” he rasps out, his hips bucking into my hand.

I laugh, bending forward to let my breath ghost over his heated flesh. “Beg,” I say again.

He reaches down and grabs a handful of my hair, tipping my head back so I have to look him in the eyes. “Please,” he says. “Please don’t stop.”

I smile at him and lean forward to take him into my mouth. The head of his dick is velvety smooth on my tongue as I take as much of him into my mouth as I can.

The noises he’s making as I work make my pussy drip with need. My breasts feel tight, heavy, and tender as they sway with my movements.

“Please stop,” he says to me abruptly, but he doesn’t make a move to step away.

I lean away, his dick popping free of my mouth. “Is there something...” I start to say, wanting to ask if I did something wrong. I feel off-balance suddenly, afraid I’ve been ridiculous, or silly.

But the heat in his gaze as he looks down at me restores my confidence immediately.

“I want to fuck you,” he says to me, his voice smooth like silk. “Please.”

I grin up at him and rise from my squatting position in front of him. My hands are still on his cock, and I squeeze him once, pleased with the reaction I see reflecting back at me in his eyes.

“You may,” I say graciously to him.

He closes his eyes for a moment and nods. Then he grabs me by the waist and whirls me around against the windows. My hands come up for support, my palms pressed against the cold glass.

He slides his hands down to my hips and tilts me back toward him. The head of his cock nudges into my wetness, and I moan loudly, wantonly.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he praises me as he slowly presses into me. His fingers knead my hips as he fills me, stretches me, makes me want to die from the pleasure that he’s giving me.

“Tristan,” I gasp out, my fingers slipping and sliding against the smooth glass surface as the pain and pleasure mix within me. “Oh, God, you’re so big. You feel amazing,” I choke out as he starts to move within me.

His driving strokes press me closer and closer to the window until I have to turn my face and press my cheek to the glass. My breasts are flattened against the surface, the chill biting into my nipples and adding to the intensity of the orgasm that is hovering close by.

“You’re so tight,” Tristan praises me, his words sounding desperate now as he drives into me harder and harder.

I'm crying out loudly with each thrust, the pleasure so intense that I almost can't stand it.

I lean back into him for stability, and it sends his cock all the way home within me. I shriek with the pleasure of the increased pressure, and the orgasm crashes down onto me. I feel a rush of my own cum trickle down my legs as my cheek presses painfully against the window. My legs shake as my pussy flutters, gripping his cock, urging him on.

"Jesus, that was incredible," he grinds out, stepping up the tempo of his thrusting. I try to stay upright, but I'm boneless with pleasure now. He reaches up and wraps a hand around my throat, pulling me back against him as he pumps into me once, twice, and then comes with a shout.

I feel the warmth of him within me and experience a primal thrill of triumph at him claiming me, marking me, making a mess of me.

I had no idea that sex could be like this. I feel unmoored from reality, drifting in a sea filled with the aftershocks of the shattering orgasm he just gave me. His long fingers around my neck and his thick cock buried within me feel like the only things keeping me from melting to the floor like a puddle.

"Thank you," he says to me, his breath whispering over my ear.

I shake my head a little, my movement restricted by his grip on my throat. "For what?" I ask.

"For being the opposite of prim," he replies, and I laugh.

"Shower?" he asks me, stepping back. I feel a pang of regret as he slips out of me and lets go of my neck.

“Sure,” I say, finally stepping out of my heels.

He offers his hand, and I take it, allowing him to lead me to the bathroom.

I will probably regret this tomorrow, but for now, I’m just basking in the afterglow of the most incredible sex I’ve ever had in my life.

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Chapter Three

Tristan

The sound of my best friend's car pulling up snags my attention.

We are supposed to already be seated, having lunch, and planning the next big meeting for the deal we've been working on. But Jay has an awful habit of being late for lunch. In the past thirty years that I've known him, I'm still unable to figure out why.

As I sit in the lobby I look around at the typical Christmas decorations scattered around the restaurant. I want so much to feel the holiday spirit like everyone else seems to be doing, but I just can't.

If it wasn't for my live-in housekeeper of nearly thirty-five years, I doubt I'd celebrate the holidays at all. But Nancy keeps things very festive at my house. She has since I was just a boy. It's just one of the many reasons I love her and will never let her go.

She is what makes my house a home.

But besides Nancy's holiday cheer, my family didn't make a big fuss about Christmas. However, I certainly hadn't lacked anything I needed throughout the rest of the year.

I had spent a few fun Christmases with family friends, and I had once gone on a

Christmas cruise with an ex, but I had long ago decided that the holiday spirit was something that you learned about as a kid.

Nancy did her best with me, baking lots of cookies and whatnot. But with Grinchy parents, it was still hard to connect with the Christmas and New Year's cheer all around you.

I sigh and scroll through my social media while I wait for Jay.

Rachel has stubbornly refused to leave my mind. It's unhealthy, but it's like she's wormed her way into my consciousness. And it's not because of the sex, even though that was great.

She just has this thing about her I can't seem to shake— her beautiful green eyes, her welcoming smile, her voice.

Above all, however, she had surprised me with her willingness to push the boundaries, with her wild abandon.

She sent over her contract, but I have just been staring at it all week, not sure whether I should have her write my story or not.

There is something a little terrifying about exposing my heart and soul, my truth, to someone who makes me feel dizzy with lust.

I abandon my social media doom-scrolling and open my email to thumb through the pages of the document once again as I wait. She's probably wondering why on earth I haven't already signed it and sent it back.

“What are you thinking about?” Jay puts a hand on my shoulder and makes me jump.

“You’re lateness,” I say. He chuckles and pats me on the back.

“You’re not expecting an apology, are you?” We make our way to my usual table in the restaurant.

One of the things I love about Oscar’s, my favorite restaurant, is the privacy it gives me. I’m heartily tired of being approached to give business advice, autographs, and pictures. I am a private person, and my line of work exposes me to a lot of social pressure I’d rather avoid.

Jay is one of the few people on earth who I enjoy spending time with. I know that I’m prickly, grumpy, and hard to approach, but he doesn’t care. His open, sunny, charming personality is a great benefit to my business...and to me.

We settle into our table and start to look at the menu. I ponder if I should have my usual or attempt to be creative for once.

When I’ve given up on the menu I look over at the bar. Do I want a drink? I catch sight of a woman at the bar, and my heart leaps a little in my chest.

“Rachel?” I mumble, but I quickly collect myself when the woman turns around. Of course, it’s not her. Rachel is slightly shorter, has more curves, and her hair is a dirtier blonde.

Jay snaps his fingers in my face. “Don’t go spacing out on me. You’re the one who called me to this lunch so we could work on the proposal we need to present.”

“Sorry,” I mumble, glancing again at the woman I mistook for Rachel and shaking my head a little. “I thought I saw Rachel at the bar.”

Jay gives me a curious look. "Who's Rachel?"

"Oh, no one," I say too quickly. "Just someone I met at Cara's party last week."

"Uh-huh," Jay says, clearly not buying it. "Doesn't sound like no one."

I sigh, knowing there's no point in trying to hide anything from Jay. He knows me too well. "Fine." I sigh. "She's a biographer. I think I might hire her to write my story."

"And?" Jay prompts, leaning forward with a grin.

"And nothing," I insist, though the memory of our night together flashes through my mind. "Just trying to decide if I want to have someone living in my house for at least a few weeks, following me around to work and family functions and so forth. You know I don't like company."

Jay leans back, studying me. "You know, for a genius, you're a terrible liar, Tristan. I haven't seen you this tripped up over a woman in, well, I think it's safe to say ever."

I scowl at him, but I can't deny the truth in his words. Rachel Smith has gotten under my skin in a way no one else has in a very long time. Our night together was intense, unlike anything I've experienced.

But it was supposed to be just that—one night. So why can't I stop thinking about her?

"Look," he says, his tone softening. "I know you've got your reasons for keeping people at arm's length. But maybe it's time to take a chance. If this Rachel has made such a big impression on you, why not reach out?"

I shake my head. "It's not that simple. She's young, Jay. Brilliant and beautiful, yes, but she's got her whole life ahead of her. The last thing she needs is to get tangled up with someone like me."

"Someone like you?" Jay repeats, raising an eyebrow. "You mean successful, driven, and despite your best efforts to hide it, actually a decent human being?"

I snort. "You're biased."

"I'm honest," Jay counters. "Tristan, you deserve happiness too. And if this woman might be a source of that happiness, don't you owe it to yourself to at least explore the possibility?"

His words hit home, and I find myself considering the idea. I just don't know how to approach time spent with her. Getting entangled with her on top of working with her on the book will complicate things.

"I'll think about it," I say, more to get Jay off my back than anything else. "Now, can we please focus on the actual reason we're here?"

Jay grins, knowing he's made his point. "All right, all right."

We spend the next hour hashing out details for the upcoming event. It's a combination of networking and entertainment that we host for potential investors and business partners: high-stakes poker, good scotch, and the chance to rub elbows with Seattle's business elite.

It's not my favorite part of the job, but it's necessary. We're wrapping up when my phone buzzes with a text from Cara.

Guess who just officially moved into the neighborhood...

Attached is a picture of Rachel, smiling and holding up a set of keys in front of an apartment building I recognize. It's about a twenty-minute walk from my place.

"Everything okay?" Jay asks, noticing my sudden distraction.

I nod, trying to keep my expression neutral. "Yeah, just a text from Cara."

"About Rachel?" Jay guesses, his grin widening at my glare. "I knew it! So, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. It's the holidays. Maybe she has plans and doesn't want to start working on the book right now." I stare at the picture of Rachel, excited, but also apprehensive.

"Did she say she didn't want to work over Christmas?"

"I don't know," I admit. "I didn't ask."

Jay stands up, clapping me on the shoulder. "You should welcome her to the neighborhood like a good neighbor. And maybe, just maybe, see where things go from there. Make it last at least a month if you can. I know I'll be proud of you, and Janet won't taunt you for a whole month."

As much as I hate to admit it, Jay's right. Janet is his wife, and I love her, but she can also be a pain in the ass—mine. She's constantly harping on me to find the right girl and settle down.

I send a reply to Cara's text, asking for Rachel's apartment number so I can surprise her.

"Thanks for lunch," Jay says as we head out. "And Tristan? Don't overthink this. Be yourself. Besides, you're not too old for her. You still look the same as you did when we first met."

I shake my head. "You're full of shit," I tell him.

Jay laughs. "Fair point. Good luck, boss. See you at work."

I watch him walk away toward the parking garage and sigh. This is crazy. I'm Tristan Black, tech mogul and business tycoon. I don't do silly impulsive things. I don't chase after women. And yet I still find myself figuring out how best to visit Rachel at her new place.

I get in my car, heading toward a nearby bakery. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right.

Cara texts me that Rachel loves chocolate cake. It's a small detail, but it's a good enough suggestion to help me formulate a plan.

The next morning I'm standing outside Rachel's new apartment building, a box of gourmet chocolate cake in hand. A white-haired occupant passes me with a naughty smile on her beautifully wrinkled face, and I feel like a teenager.

This is ridiculous. I'm a grown man, for God's sake. I shouldn't have to be doing this. Yet I take a deep breath and press the buzzer for her apartment.

"Hello?" Her voice comes through the speaker, and just the sound of it sends a jolt through me.

"Rachel? It's Tristan."

There's a pause, and for a moment, I'm sure she's going to tell me to go away. It's been over a week and I haven't committed to having her write my story or reached

out at all.

Much to my surprise, she buzzes me up. "Come on up."

I make my way up to her floor. As I approach her door, I hear muffled voices inside. She's not alone. The thought hadn't even occurred to me that someone else might be visiting her.

What if she has a boyfriend? What if the night at the party was just a fling for her, too? I never asked.

The door opens, and there she is. Rachel looks even more beautiful than I remember, dressed casually in jeans and a soft sweater. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a messy bun, and there's a smudge of what looks like ink on her cheek.

Her eyes are so green in the bright morning light. She's absolutely breathtaking.

"Tristan," she says with a sweet little smile. How can she look so pulled together when my heart feels like it's going to beat right out of my chest?

I wonder if our night together just didn't mean that much to her, or maybe she's just better at putting on a cool facade than I am.

"What are you doing here?" she asks when I continue to just stand there, staring at her.

I hold up the cake box, feeling suddenly foolish. "I heard you moved to the neighborhood. Thought I'd welcome you properly."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "With cake?"

"Chocolate," I clarify. "Cara mentioned it was your favorite."

I can read the surprise and pleasure in her eyes. She chuckles. She's about to respond when a crash from inside the apartment draws her attention. "Is everything okay?" Which is followed by a masculine voice calling out, "Yes, just a plate."

I tense, my earlier assumption resurging. But Cara would not have sent me that picture if Rachel wasn't available. Her reaction surprises me. She looks more anxious than guilty, glancing back into the apartment with worry.

She turns to me, and says in a lower voice, "I'm sorry, this isn't a great time. And no, it's not what you think."

She trails off, biting her lip. I can see the conflict in her eyes, and I realize I've put her in an awkward position by showing up unannounced. What an idiot Jay was for convincing me to do this on a whim like some idiot high schooler.

"Of course," I say quickly, trying to mask my embarrassment. "I should have called first. I'm sorry to intrude."

Rachel shakes her head. "No, it's...it's really sweet of you to stop by. I just..."

Another crash from inside, followed by what sounds like breaking glass. Rachel winces.

"I should go," I say, taking her hands and placing the cake in them. "Here, take the cake. Consider it a housewarming gift."

I hand her the box, our fingers brushing in the process. Even that small contact sends a spark through me.

"Thank you," Rachel says softly. "Really, Tristan. This was unexpected but nice."

I nod, taking a step back and taking in the apartment. Something feels off, but I try not to assume too much. "Maybe we could grab coffee when things are less hectic for you? We can talk about my biography and the way forward." I smile to make her less conscious.

She hesitates for a moment, then nods. "I'd like that. I'll...I'll give you a call?"

"Sounds good," I say, trying to keep the eagerness out of my voice. "Take care, Rachel. And if you need anything, don't hesitate to call me." I try not to look into the apartment.

I turn to leave and I hear her softly close the door behind me.

Chapter Four

Rachel

The cool Seattle morning air nips at my skin as I jog along the straight, unfamiliar path. It's early, and the sun is barely peeking over the edges of the apartment buildings all around me, but this is my favorite time of the day.

I smile at a balcony that has a cluster of little blow-up Christmas decorations on it. One of them is Rudolph from the Claymation Christmas movie. I try to remember the movie, but all I have are vague impressions of it in my mind.

Having never experienced a “normal” Christmas leaves a huge social hole, even as an adult.

People like to reminisce about these kinds of things all the time during the holidays, and I just have to stand there feeling awkward. I don't ever know what's worse, having to admit that I have no idea what they are talking about, or having to admit that I never got to have a normal Christmas as a kid.

I've tried both solutions, and both are equally awkward beyond belief. Now, I just settle for a vague smile of agreement and hope that no one asks me for any input.

The quiet solitude allows my mind to wander, to think about what I'm writing next, or simply enjoy the peace before the city fully wakes. Today, I'm the one who needs to wake up. I need to wake up from the unhealthy thoughts I've been having about Tristan.

To have an affair with a client, which is what he is or might soon be, is bad for business.

One wrong move could ruin the reputation I've built over the past seven years. I didn't work so hard, get my first job writing for the governor of Alaska as an undergrad student, and come all this way, just to complicate things for myself.

The thing is, the harder I try to shake the thought of him, the more he worms his way into my consciousness.

Why hasn't he signed the contract ? This question has been playing on a loop in my mind for a week. The holiday season is going to kick into full swing, and if he doesn't secure my time soon, I figure he will just wait until after New Year's to get back to me.

It doesn't make sense—he seemed so eager to get started at the party. But then again, he was also eager for other things.

My mouth twists into a frown as I think about the possibility that he never intended to hire me at all, that the offer to have me write his story was just meant to convince me to climb into bed with him.

“And it worked, didn't it?” I say out loud to myself, bitterness in my words despite my huffing breaths as I jog.

Running should help distract me, but it's not doing much this morning. I push myself a little harder, relishing the burn in my muscles.

It's been almost a week since I moved, and I'm finally starting to feel settled. Danny's adjusting well to his new care facility, and I've managed to establish a routine that balances my writing with his needs.

Danny is autistic. He is verbal and usually very gentle, but when he gets overwhelmed or frustrated, he can become combative.

I am quite intimate with his triggers though...sensory overload, frustration, communication challenges, or changes in routine. I love my brother, more than anything. But his care became too much for me on my own.

Now, the only thing left is getting a new writing job that will cover the mountain of bills.

I have money in savings, of course. All writers have to save up for dry spells. It's just that I was hoping that I would have no trouble booking new, influential clients as soon as I moved to Seattle. This is a big city full of big egos, after all.

The fact that my only lead is Tristan worries me. The fact that he hasn't already signed his contract worries me even more.

Lost in thought, I almost miss the "No Trespassing" sign as I round a bend in the trail. I slow my pace, debating whether to turn back or risk continuing. The path ahead looks inviting, winding through a beautiful park area. Surely a quick run through it wouldn't hurt anyone?

I make my decision quickly, and pick up my pace again, darting past the sign. The path narrows, becoming more secluded. It's beautiful here—the morning light filters perfectly through the trees. I make a mental note to bring my notebook next time. This would be a perfect spot for writing.

I'm so engrossed in my surroundings that I don't hear the approaching footsteps until it's too late. I round a corner and slam straight into a solid wall of muscle.

"Oof!" I stumble backward, arms windmilling.

A strong hand grabs my elbow, steadying me. "Whoa there! Are you okay?"

I look up, my face flushing as I recognize the man attached to the hand on my arm. "Tristan?"

His surprise quickly morphs into amusement. "Rachel. Fancy meeting you here."

I step back, suddenly very aware of how sweaty and disheveled I must look. Tristan, on the other hand, appears barely winded, his running clothes clinging to his muscular frame in a way that's entirely unfair.

"I, uh...hi," I stammer, tucking some hair behind my ear.

Tristan's eyebrow quirks up. "This is private property. Didn't you see the sign?"

Guilt washes over me. "Oh crap, sorry. I wasn't thinking. I just got caught up in the run and..."

He holds up a hand, cutting off my rambling apology. "Relax, Rachel. I'm kidding. No harm done."

"You're not going to call the cops on me?" I ask, sarcastically.

Tristan chuckles. "Considering it's my property, I think I can let it slide this time."

My eyes widen. "You own this? All of this?" As if it should come as a surprise that a billionaire tech mogul like him could afford to own this.

He shrugs, looking very unembarrassed. "I own the building my apartment is in. The trails and paths are attached and are for the use of owners. I don't come out here often, honestly. It's just nice to have the privacy."

I nod, thinking of the modest apartment I'm renting nearby. The gap between our worlds suddenly feels very wide. I catch his eyes scanning me and falling on my breasts. I know that my nipples are peeking through my black top.

His lips instantly curve into a silly smile.

"Well, I should probably head back," I say, taking a step in the direction I came from.

"Wait," Tristan says, reaching out as if to stop me before thinking better of it. "You don't have to leave on my account. Like I said, no harm done. You're welcome to use the trails whenever you'd like."

I blink in surprise. "Really? Are you sure?"

He nods. "I don't say things I'm not sure of. It would be a shame to let them go to waste. Besides," he adds with a grin, "it's nice to have company out here occasionally. Maybe we can run together from time to time while I talk about myself. You do need to hear me actually talk about myself, don't you?"

Of course, I do. How else am I supposed to write his biography? But first I have to be hired.

"Thank you," I say, genuinely touched by the gesture. "That's very kind of you."

"Don't mention it," Tristan replies. He glances at his watch. "I should get going, early meeting. But, uh, if you're not too busy, maybe I'll see you later today for lunch? We still have to sit down and talk about the contract, I presume?"

There's a firmly authoritative and sure note in his voice that makes my stomach do a little flip. "Yes, of course," I say, aiming for casual. "Have a good day, Tristan."

He flashes me one last smile before jogging off down the path. I watch him go, admiring the view before shaking myself out of it. This is dangerous territory , Rachel, I remind myself. Getting involved with someone like Tristan Black can only lead to complications.

Still, as I resume my run back to my apartment, I can't get rid of the effect of his hand on me.

Fuck! I mentally curse, only now remembering that I promised to go see Danny.

Tristan is already out of sight. I take out my phone and text his number. Cara gave it to me after she found out what happened between Tristan and me the morning after her party.

Sorry, raincheck? I almost forgot. I have to run an errand today. It'll take the whole day, but I'll be free tomorrow if that works.

His reply comes in almost immediately.

That works. Take your time.

And because I have to be at the facility early, I pick up my pace again.

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Chapter Five

Rachel

I arrive at the care facility, and the familiar scent of antiseptic greets me. There's a Charlie Brown Christmas tree perched on the sign-in desk.

I sign in, reaching out to make one of the little bells on the tree tinkle merrily with the end of my finger, then I make my way to Danny's room.

This is a top-rated care home and the staff here are wonderful, but it's still hard seeing him in a place like this. My parents weren't good at taking care of him. My father wasn't there for either of us, and my mom was just busy dating and traveling.

I wonder if Danny feels like I have done a good job filling in for his absentee parents. I hope so.

I knock gently before entering. Danny is sitting by the window, staring outside. He turns his head slightly as I enter, his eyes lighting up when he sees me.

"Hey, Danny," I say, forcing a cheerful tone. "How's it going?"

He gives me a small smile. "Rachel. You look...tired." His pauses get fewer when he's relaxed, and he looks relaxed today.

I chuckle, pulling a chair next to him. "Yeah. It's been a busy week. Lots of writing."

"New book?" he asks, his interest piqued.

I nod. "Yes. It's coming along, but it's taking a lot out of me. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever get it right."

The thing I love most about my relationship with Danny is how open I can be with him.

Danny tilts his head, considering my words. "You will. You're a good writer."

His simple encouragement warms my heart. "Thanks, Danny. That means a lot."

"Did you meet the new person you have to interview?"

I almost forgot to mention it. "Yes, I met him." I try not to blush. Danny is very observant, and I don't want him to think there's anything inappropriate going on with my new client.

"Good job, sis." He nods repeatedly. "Cara helped you meet him, right? I miss her. Can she visit soon?"

"Isaac will be in Seattle soon," I say, mentioning Cara's younger brother who Danny loves to spend time with. "He and Cara will visit."

His smile broadens. Danny is not very comfortable with strangers, but my friends have been around for years, and they've managed to charm him.

We sit in companionable silence for a moment, watching the trees sway gently outside the window. I can see the reflection of our faces in the glass, mine looking weary, his calm and composed. He shows me some of his recent drawings, and an idea comes to mind, but I don't say it to him, not yet.

"You should take a break," he says suddenly, breaking the silence.

I look at him, surprised. "A break?"

He nods. "You need to have fun, too." He points toward a group of three kids playing outside to indicate what he means.

I sigh, leaning back in my chair. "It's just hard, you know? Balancing everything at once, so I want to take my time."

Danny reaches out, and places his hand over mine, a rare gesture. "I'm okay here. The staff are nice. You don't have to worry."

"Danny..."

"I know," he says softly. "But I'm twenty. Go out. Meet people. Have fun. Get a boyfriend."

I laugh, squeezing his hand. "You don't just get a boyfriend at the store, you know," I tease.

He blinks at me, clearly not appreciating my little joke. I grow more serious and reach out to touch his hand.

"All right, I'll try. But you have to promise me something, too."

"What?" he asks, curious.

"Promise me you'll keep working on your art. I don't ever want to miss seeing your drawings."

Danny's face brightens. "I will. I promise."

We talk a bit more about my new client, and he gives me some surprisingly insightful feedback. Danny sees things in such a black-and-white way. I often wish that I could do the same.

I feel lighter when I leave. As I walk out to my car, I'm thinking about his words.

Maybe he's right. Maybe I do need to take a break, have some fun, and not be so thoughtful about every move I make. Still, my fun can't be had with Tristan.

The day passes quickly. Mostly with Danny. But once I'm home I get to do a little bit of writing before falling asleep.

I'm making good progress on my own book, but it's emotionally draining sometimes, and by Friday, I know I'll be in desperate need of a break.

So I promise myself to hit up Cara for some girl time. Before then, I'll keep to my morning runs.

I refuse to contemplate anything about adding Tristan to my schedule. Other than hammering out job details.

The very thought of Tristan overwhelms me, and I just want to feel like things are under control, if only for a few hours.

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Chapter Six

Rachel

When I wake, my room feels colder than usual. I lace up my running shoes, eager to get myself in a good mood for the day by running in the cold.

I set out, my feet carrying me toward Tristan's property. I tell myself it's just because the trails are nicer, but I can't deny the little thrill of anticipation I feel at the thought that I might see him.

I'm about halfway through my usual route when I spot him. Tristan's leaning against a tree, looking far too put-together for someone who's supposedly out for a run.

There's someone with him, but as soon as I get closer, the other man takes off, barely nodding as he swooshes past me. But I do get a glimpse of him. He has brown hair like Tristan and beautiful ocean-blue eyes.

"Fancy meeting you here," I call out to Tristan, echoing his words from our last encounter.

He grins, pushing off the tree to fall into step beside me. "Pure coincidence, I assure you."

"Uh-huh," I say skeptically. "You always go running in designer sweats?"

Tristan glances down at his clearly brand-new workout gear. "What? These are old."

I roll my eyes, but I can't help smiling. There's something disarming about his playful disregard for these things. "I know you have money to burn, but those are not worn-in running joggers. Or at least, not for peasants like me."

"Having a little money to enjoy the finer things comes with the territory." He glances at me with those very seductive cognac eyes that always completely melt my heart.

"Is it the being able to enjoy things that keeps you looking so young?" I ask teasingly.

"Good genes," he says, flashing me a silly grin.

We settle into an easy rhythm, jogging side by side. Every silence between us is comfortable, broken only by the sound of our breathing and the crunch of gravel beneath our feet.

"So," Tristan says after a while, "How's your writing going?"

I'm surprised he remembered. "It's going," I hedge. "Some days are better than others."

He nods, seeming to sense my reluctance to elaborate. "What's the book really about? If you don't mind me asking."

I hesitate. I'm usually pretty guarded about my works-in-progress, but I suppose for someone who's actually read my work before and enjoyed it, I can share a little bit more.

"It's about family," I begin slowly. "Love, loss, the search for meaning. How we navigate relationships when life throws us curveballs."

"Those are very deep and personal subjects," Tristan observes.

I shrug. "Life is deep and personal."

He's quiet for a moment, and when he speaks again, his voice is softer. "Is it autobiographical?"

The question catches me off guard. I stumble slightly, and Tristan's hand shoots out to steady me. The brief contact sends a shiver through my body. God! The thought of all the things those hands are capable of doing to me flashes through my mind.

"Sorry," he says quickly. "I didn't mean to pry. I just thought I'd get to know a little more about the person who'll be writing my biography. Since she's still settling in, and we can't seem to find time to talk."

"No, it's okay," I assure him. "It's just. It's complicated." I take a deep breath. "There are elements of my own experiences in there, yeah. But it's not a memoir or anything."

Tristan nods. I think he understands. "As a writer, I bet oftentimes it's easier to process things through writing about bigger topics."

"Exactly," I say, relieved that he gets it. "What about you? Any hidden literary talents I should know about?"

He laughs. "God, no. The most creative writing I do is tweet about tech innovations."

"I don't know," I tease. "I bet you could write a thrilling exposé on the cutthroat world of Silicon Valley."

"Oh yeah, real page-turner," Tristan plays along. "'Chapter One: The Billionaire's Bitcoin Betrayal.'"

We both laugh, and I'm struck by how easy this feels. For a moment, I let myself forget about the complexities of my own life.

I'm completely blind to the age difference between us, his wealth and status, and my personal preference for simplicity. It's nice to have this easy moment with a handsome man on a beautiful morning.

Thankfully, this is not a place the media can get into and take pictures. I've seen a few of his paparazzi shots on the internet, but I never paid attention until now to how exposed he must be to their clutches when he's just living his life.

We near the end of the trail, and Tristan slows to a stop. I pause beside him, suddenly aware of how close we're standing.

"I'm glad I ran into you," he says softly.

"Me too," I admit. "Even though I'm pretty sure this may have been planned."

Tristan laughs.

There's a charged moment where I think he might lean in to kiss me. Part of me wants him to, consequences be damned. But then he takes a small step back, breaking the spell.

"Can you come over in a few hours?" he asks. "We can finally talk about my book."

I nod. "Sure. Can you send me the address?"

Despite having already been fucked in his penthouse, the champagne made me a little fuzzy about the exact location.

Tristan pulls his phone out of his pocket and texts me his address. I hear my phone chime in my pocket, but I don't take it out to look at it.

"See you in a couple of hours?" he asks me. I notice a hopeful glint in his eyes.

"Yep," I agree, trying to ignore the swoop of awareness in my stomach at the thought of spending more time alone with him, away from prying eyes.

"You know, if you ever want a change of scenery for writing, my penthouse has some great views. You might remember," he winks and continues. "You'd be welcome to use the study, although I suppose you'll be spending more time at my house anyway once you start writing about me. Your apartment is not very inspirational...no offense."

The offer—though completely arrogant—takes me by surprise, and I chuckle at his comment. "Oh, I couldn't impose like that. I will be in your way a lot as soon as I start the project."

"It's not an imposition," he insists. "The place is too big for just me anyway. And sometimes a new environment can help spark creativity, right?"

I bite my lip, considering. It is a tempting offer. My tiny apartment, while cozy, isn't the most comfortable place to work. And it would be nice to have a quiet space away from the distractions of everyday life.

"I'll think about it," I say finally.

Tristan nods, looking pleased.

"Who was the guy with you?" I ask suddenly, remembering the man who ran off as I was jogging up.

“Oh, that’s Jay. He’s my friend. He lives just down the way as well.”

He grabs my long ponytail, which hangs over my shoulder and throws it back out of the way. I don't know why, but something happens to me the moment his hand brushes against my nipple, and I think he knows. I think he intended that.

He grins at me. “See you in a couple of hours.”

I watch him jog away, and I can't help the feeling that I'm standing on the edge of something. A part of me I thought I'd buried long ago...wants to leap.

Damn Cara for sending this man my way.

I'm staring at my laptop screen, willing the words to come. But my mind keeps drifting back to my encounters with Tristan.

His offer to use his home for work tempts me. It would be so easy to take him up on it, to immerse myself in a beautiful, inspiring space, but there will be more to it than that, and I know it.

I can't let myself get distracted. I force my attention back to the blank document before me. I've just managed to eke out a few sentences when my phone buzzes, and it's a text from Tristan.

I'll send my driver to pick you up in 30. See you soon.

I stare at the message. I grumble a little at his assumption that I want to be picked up and ferried around like an employee.

Besides, I know it's not wise to put myself in such close proximity to Tristan...alone. I know what we can get up to.

The attraction between us is undeniable, and I'm not sure I trust myself to keep work and my personal life straight when it comes to him. I already had a taste of him, and he tasted so good.

I press a hand to my forehead as I think about my situation. I very much don't want to become a tabloid headline, all because I just can't resist Tristan's numerous charms.

I can just see it now: AUTHOR GIVES UP CAREER FOR BILLIONAIRE or maybe RACHEL SMITH, FAMOUS BIOGRAPHER, TURNS TO WRITING ROMANCE.

I sigh and make a note to ask Tristan about why he's still single. A handsome man of his age would normally be married and probably would have kids.

Maybe if I can just make him seem less...enticing in the name of working on his story, I can create some mental space between us.

I turn my attention back to Tristan's text. I type out a reply, contemplating whether to send it or not, before I accidentally push the send button.

In future, I can walk over when I'm ready.

I need to establish some boundaries here. I'm not some woman he is trying to take on a date or impress.

Almost immediately, my phone buzzes again, but it's not him. Cara is planning a get-together tonight and has invited me. Her brother, Isaac, will be there. That sounds like something I won't want to miss.

Cara and Isaac have been the anchor that has kept my world from floating away in a sea of misery and depression for so much of my life.

Isaac is a little younger than Cara and I. He has been in college for what seems like an eternity. Thankfully, his trust fund makes it easy for him to afford to try out a bunch of majors before settling on something.

About two years ago, he had decided to change course entirely and he settled into a broadcasting major. He was instantly in love with the new program and claimed that he was going to become a big star with a podcast.

Cara and I had smiled at him and nodded, knowing that Isaac changed his mind so often that this might be nothing more than a passing fancy.

However, he had stuck with it and had been unwilling to take time off of school up until recently. He had even stayed on campus during the holidays to work on projects and study.

It had been too long since I had seen him. I was excited to find out what he had been up to over the past couple of years.

I shoot my reply off to Cara.

Be there with bells on!

She gets back to me instantly.

Be careful. That almost sounded like Christmas cheer.

I smile a little as I lock my phone screen. I glance at the time on the screen and rise to my feet. I only have a few minutes to get ready before Tristan's driver will be

showing up. I want to look professional, so I definitely need to change.

I wander over to my closet. What to wear to convince a handsome billionaire who makes your panties wet just by looking at you that you don't want him at all and that you are a totally professional author person?

“There's probably no outfit alive that's powerful enough to do that,” I grumble to myself as I start to change clothes.

Chapter Seven

Tristan

“We need to let them go, Jay. This is business, after all.”

Jay looks at me from across the freshly organized desk in my home office, he doesn't look very happy with my decision. But it doesn't matter right now. I won't waste more money on something that has proven to be a dead end over the last six months.

“I'm not letting you have your way this time, Jay. I won't be funding that project anymore.”

He believes in offering partners ample chances, but in this case, we may just be losing money for nothing. The project had gotten off to a great start, but we had run into issues with the outsourced partner team who was doing the lion's share of the work.

Over the course of the past three weeks, delivery had been pushed out more than once, leading to me having to move around a bunch of other project timelines to compensate.

I always made sure that we rolled out at least one new product right before Christmas so that we could catch Black Friday shoppers and also last-minute holiday gift purchases. This year, I had wanted to have three new products out and ready to be enjoyed by the masses.

This project was supposed to be one of the three, yet it was stagnant at this moment, floundering around without anyone to tie up the last few steps in a neat and tidy bow. I'm a tech mogul, not a developer. I can't just pick up the reins and create solutions for the people who actually designed these products.

Jay also didn't know how to build software. We were both great at project management, but we're not the kind of tech gurus that are needed to clean up this mess.

Usually, this wasn't an issue, but this particular project had become a total nightmare and I was more than ready to be done with dumping money into it.

"What if I fund it another month?" His question takes me by surprise. "What if I fund it from my own pocket, Tristan? Will the company pay me back after we start turning a profit?"

This is a challenge and one that I'm rather interested in. I push back in my chair and tilt my head back. I like a challenge and Jay and I occasionally engage in wagers like this for fun.

"And you're sure you won't be wasting your money? Because I care about you losing money. Janet won't let me hear the end of it if I say nothing."

I can just imagine Janet pushing her finger into my chest and telling me that I encourage Jay to waste money on crazy projects just so that we can compete over who is the most successful businessman.

She has raised hell over this kind of thing a few times in the past, and I hate being dressed down by her...especially when I know that she's right.

Janet is a sweetheart, but she's also a fireball. Jay loves her bossy nature, but she

frankly scares me a little sometimes.

“Don’t worry about it, Tristan. I believe in this project even if you don’t.”

“Okay. Go ahead, Jay. I wish you good luck with it. I am thoroughly sick of their inability to keep to timelines and their complete incompetence when it comes to communication.”

“Yeah, but no need for luck. You don't believe in it anyway.”

“I shouldn’t have to believe in luck for it to work for you. You believe in it, so that will have to be enough.”

My office door opens, interrupting our banter. My housekeeper, Nancy, is poking her head into the room.

“Good morning, Mr. Black. The writer is here, sir.”

“Bring her in, Nancy.”

I glance at Jay, who winks at me as Nancy closes the door behind her again.

“What?” I say, unreasonably annoyed by his amusement.

“You look...nervous,” he says with some surprise. “Can I stay to officially meet her? Is she going to be working here at the house?”

I shift in my leather chair. “We still have to finalize the contract, remember? With her moving in down the way just a few days ago, and my busy schedule, we haven't had time to talk about it. As to working here, she will have to shadow me everywhere for a while. She has to get to know me and my life to write about me with authority.”

Much to my surprise, Jay doesn't tease or say anything anymore. He just observes me as I shift around uncomfortably in my office chair. I feel entirely exposed, uncertain about where to put my hands or even how to sit.

What is wrong with me? I can't remember being this nervous about meeting with anyone since I was fresh out of college and looking to get my first tech job.

There's a knock at the door to my office, and Nancy shows Rachel in.

I admire Rachel's blonde hair, red lips, and the floral dress that somehow both obscures and reveals her figure. She is a stark contrast to Nancy, who, as always is wearing all black, has short, curly dark hair, and is about a foot shorter than Rachel, though neither woman is tall.

Rachel stops abruptly when she sees Jay and offers him a small smile. My jaw nearly drops, but I don't allow it to. I can feel that smile like a physical caress and I'm immediately jealous of Jay for receiving it.

This is not like me at all. I usually pride myself on being an understanding guy who doesn't get jealous.

"Mr. Black," she says, her voice steady. Her words shake me out of my emotional distress, and I manage to smile at her in a way that I hope seems normal.

I stand, buttoning my suit jacket. "Thanks for coming over," I tell her. I reach out for her hand and she shakes it.

I try and probably fail, to control the jolt of electricity that races through me at her touch. My cheeks feel a little hot and I hope that I'm not blushing.

"You didn't offer me much of a choice," she says with a little smirk. "Your driver

was very nice, by the way.”

I grin, unrepentant. “I was afraid that you’d slip away again if I didn’t corner you. Rachel, this is Jay.”

“Hello,” she says cordially to Jay, offering him her hand. I nearly laugh at the smitten look on my friend’s face.

Rachel is beautiful in a non-traditional way, but it’s the way that she makes everyone in the room feel so seen that makes her so attractive.

Clearly, Jay is not immune to her charms despite the fact that he is besotted with his own wife.

“Jay is a good friend and a business partner. He might be here in the future when you are working.”

She smiles at Jay and nods. “I’ll have to set up an interview with you, Jay. I want to discuss our subject here,” she glances at me with a twinkle in her green eyes, “I’ll need the perspective of his friends and family as well.”

I can feel Jay’s gaze darting between us, his expression shifting from amusement to curiosity. I can practically see the gears turning in his head.

“Jay,” I say in warning, “you’d better not throw me under the bus.”

Jay laughs at that and rises from his chair. “You know I only pick on the people that I care about,” he says back.

He gives Rachel an approving nod, then turns to me.

“I need to head out and take care of some errands. It was nice to meet you, Rachel. I’ll be seeing you around.”

We both watch him leave and then I indicate that Rachel can sit in the chair that he vacated. She sits down, arranging her dress carefully, not meeting my gaze.

“Is anything the matter?” I ask, observing her clear discomfort.

She’s quiet for a few seconds before she speaks again.

“I was starting to think we wouldn’t actually be working together after...what happened.”

I’m honestly a little offended by that, but I play it cool. And I can understand her worry. Our communication has been shifty.

“Well, you’re an excellent biographer. Your accolades precede you. One night of unforgettable sex can’t change that.”

I know it wasn’t just that. It was so much more. But a part of me had hoped that it hadn’t ruined her like it ruined me. She’s invaded my brain. It might have made it easier to keep this situation under control if she hadn’t felt the same way.

I can tell, however, that she is worried about the fire in our connection.

It makes it all too real and the attraction humming between us sits in the middle of the room like an elephant that no one wants to acknowledge.

I admire her bravery for speaking about it at all when I haven’t been able to admit that I am struggling to keep my hands off of her each time I see her.

She shakes her head in disagreement. “The thing is, one night of unforgettable sex can change everything,” she says ruefully. She slowly meets my gaze, and the heat I see in her eyes makes my cock twitch.

“The thing is,” I say to her slowly. “We’re adults. We can keep ourselves under control.”

She makes a little face. “To write your story, I will need to be around you all the time for at least a couple of weeks. Are you sure that we can manage to keep things professional throughout that whole time?”

She looks me dead in the eyes, “I’m not sure I can write an objective book about a subject if I am sleeping with them.”

I lean back in my chair, willing my body to calm down. She’s right. We’ll need to keep things on the up-and-up, but that will be easier said than done.

“You live right down the way,” I tell her. “You can come and go as you please so that you don’t feel trapped with me. We can make this work.”

She nods, but she doesn’t look convinced.

“Also,” she says to me, glancing around at the obligatory Christmas decorations in my study, “it’s just about to be the holidays. Are you sure that you want to tackle this kind of work when you are going to be busy with family and friends and parties?”

“Don’t you need to talk to them to write my story?” I ask her.

She nods. “Yes.”

“Well, then it’s good timing to be working on the project now.” I pause and frown a

little. “I don’t really pause work to observe the holidays, anyway,” I tell her.

A slightly bitter expression twists her pretty mouth. “Okay, got it. I wouldn’t have guessed by your decorations,” she says.

“Well, if I’m being honest, this was all done by my housekeeper, she is more like a house manager” I admit.

“A ‘house manager’? You can be a little bit intimidating at times,” she admits to me, her head tilted to the side. “Are you going to be able to let down your guard so that I can learn enough about you to write a really good book?”

“Hey, I’m super friendly if you know me well,” I retort.

She lifts a brow at that. “Well, since I don’t know you all that well, my observation stands.”

“You know some things about me really well already,” I tease, wiggling a brow at her.

She frowns, but her eyes are laughing at me. “That is exactly the kind of thing that you can’t do,” she chides me.

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Sorry. I promise I can be good...and be open with you.”

“Do I make you uncomfortable?”

“No, you don’t.” Her response is a little too quick and self-conscious.

I immediately think of her sucking my cock, spanking me with my belt, telling me to

beg. It's fascinating that she was able to play the role of dominatrix so well when we were having sex, but now she seems almost ashamed about what happened between us.

The way she had taken control of things had been a huge turn-on for me. I don't want her to feel weird about it.

I think about my "dating" life over the past few years. It's been a lot of mindless sex, one-night stands followed by maybe a few days of texting or a couple of dates, and then it ends.

I wasn't looking for anything more with Rachel either, but I genuinely like her. Her company makes me feel...at home.

I clear my throat. "Well, I need to head to the office for a little bit now. Do you want to come with me? We can grab some food after."

"Sure," she agrees, rising to her feet and smoothing her skirt. "Oh crap, I'm actually supposed to meet Cara later for food. You're welcome to join though," she adds.

"Oh, okay," I say, snapping my fingers. "But let me sign that contract before we head to the office."

She lifts a brow at me. "Don't you want to negotiate the price?"

I shake my head. "God, no. Your fee is fair. I don't have to think twice about the stipulations in your contract."

I sign on the digital signature line on my phone and hit send. I look up at her and smile. "There, you should have it in your inbox now. I might even need to pay you extra when you're done. If I'm really happy with your work, that is."

She smiles at me, a real smile this time. “Oh, trust me, you will love your story when I’m done with it,” she tells me.

We stare at one another for a couple of moments, awareness flowing between us. I have this sudden crazy desire to sweep her up off her feet and bend her over my desk, but I resist.

We are supposed to be professionals now. No more funny business. I promised.

I just hope I can keep that promise.

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Chapter Eight

Rachel

“Need a hand?” Tristan glances at me as I sit in the front seat of his sports car, my hand pressed to my forehead.

With the contract signed and a brief tour of his office wrapped up, we head out.

Cara had sent the address of the pub-style restaurant she wanted to meet up at, her brother was going to be joining too. Danny was also being brought over by a car from his home.

“Maybe,” I say, not sure why I suddenly feel a little faint. Maybe I’ve been working out too hard the past two weeks. Or maybe it’s Tristan.

In some ways, I don't get why he is so hard for me to resist. He’s arrogant and too confident at times, but he’s also charming, sexy as hell, and fun to be around.

Don’t mess up your whole career with this one single writing contract , Rachel Smith , I chide myself. I close my eyes and try to steady myself.

The world swoops a little around me again and I try to swallow down the bile rising in my throat.

I absolutely do not have time to be getting sick right now. Maybe I caught something at that dumb party of Cara’s but it’s been long enough I would have thought I’d have

been sick sooner.

Should I tell Cara I can't make it and go home? I struggle with myself as I try and control the way that my body is feeling.

Tristan gets out of the car and comes around to open my door and help me out. As I rise, I feel another swoop of vertigo and stumble into him for a moment. I see his eyes go wide with awareness, their depths very golden.

We stand for a moment, breathing fast, our lips close enough to give in and steal a kiss. But then I feel nauseous again, and I close my eyes.

"Let me help you," he tells me, leading me around the car to the side of the restaurant. "Do you need to go home?"

I shake my head, leaning against the chilly concrete wall behind me, willing the moment of unease to pass. What is wrong with me?

"I want to see Isaac, and I promised Danny," I say to him, pushing away from the wall and straightening my shoulders.

"Danny?" he asks with some confusion.

I sigh, biting my lip. I'm not sure why I'm protecting my brother from everyone like this. After all, he loves people, and I'm not embarrassed about having a special needs sibling.

It's just, I don't want anyone to hurt him again. All of that stuff with my ex and the fake nurse...it had been really tough on him. I don't want him to go through that again.

“My brother.”

“Oh, you never talk about him,” he says, offering me his arm. I take it, grateful for the support.

“He’s here in Seattle, too. He has special needs. There were...issues with his care staff in Alaska, and I’m just...protective of him, is all. We are basically alone in the world at this point. He’s my only real family.”

“I get that,” Tristan says to me.

“Will you walk me around the block so I can get some air?” I ask.

“Of course, Rachel.”

We walk in silence while rain lightly mists our exposed skin. I see the sign for the pub approaching around the block again. I slow down a little, suddenly unsure if I want Tristan to meet my brother.

How will I explain him to Danny? What will I say when Danny doesn’t get to see him after the project is over?

“Do you want me to go back home?” he asks, realizing the potential reason for my hesitation.

I sigh, tapping my foot against the wet pavement as I think things over. I stare into his beautiful golden eyes and try to decide what to do. This whole contract is already proving to be entirely irregular.

“It’s just,” I say, then hesitate. I straighten up and shake my head. “No, you can come with me.”

He pulls me closer to him and rubs a hand soothingly up and down my back.

“I’m happy to do whatever is easiest for you,” he tells me.

His eyes are trained on my lips, and I suddenly realize that he’s leaning in for a kiss.

“Hey,” I tell him, raising my finger and placing it over his lips. “Don’t make me regret this, Tristan. It’s hard enough as it is.”

I want things to remain as they are...I think. Either way, Tristan is already proving to be slightly more than I can handle. He encroaches with such authority that it’s hard to resist him.

He swiftly snags my hand and kisses the back of it. I open my mouth to protest, but then my heart melts and I just smile a little at him.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s get you in out of the cold.”

“Excuse me for a moment,” I say an hour later, rising from the booth and walking quickly to the bathroom. I can feel everyone’s eyes on me as I hurry away, but I’m too distracted by the bile rising in my throat to care at the moment.

I barely make it to one of the bathroom stalls before I throw up. I’m getting sick , I think worriedly as I spit out the lingering bad taste in my mouth and lean against the wall of the stall.

I try to distract myself from the swooping, roiling nausea within me by training my mind on how well Danny and Tristan have been getting along. It has been nice to see Isaac as well. I haven’t seen him in a couple of years and I forgot how funny he was.

I think about the one Christmas that Danny and I were able to spend with Cara and Isaac. Their parents had decided to go to the Bahamas for Christmas because they were so tired of the wet, rainy Seattle weather. Cara and Isaac had invited Danny and I to come along.

It had been the most fun I could remember having in years. We had gotten sunburned, gone on a catamaran excursion, and snuck some adult drinks out of one of the parties at the resort. Danny and I had thrown up for hours afterward and Danny had refused to drink ever again.

I remembered as well that Cara had met a gorgeous Italian guy there and had snuck away with him one night. She had come back to our little bungalow and whispered all about her first time and how anticlimactic it had actually been.

I could still remember the little Christmas gifts Danny and I had been given on Christmas day. Danny had gotten a leather-bound sketchpad, and I had been given a pretty bracelet with a little star on it.

Cara had pressed her lips to my cheek and whispered that she just knew I was going to be a star someday.

I have worn the bracelet every day since. I stared at it wistfully as I leaned against the bathroom wall. Christmas wasn't my favorite time of year, but at least I had this one, shiny memory to cling to.

Just as I start to think that I'm going to be okay to go back to the table, I'm throwing up again. I clutch my long hair in one sweaty palm, willing my body to stop rebelling.

“Rachel?”

The voice is Cara's and I breathe in through my nose for a moment, then manage to

reply.

“Sorry,” I manage to croak out. “Just not feeling very good.”

“Can I help?” Cara asks, her voice worried.

I sigh, not sure what to say.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, my head feeling fuzzy.

“Is she all right?”

I recognize Tristan’s voice and I want to expire from shame.

“She’s not feeling well,” Cara says to him. I can tell she’s leaning out the bathroom door into the hallway.

“I can take her to my place and take care of her,” Tristan offers. “I can call a private IV care provider to get her hydrated and feeling good again.”

“Oh, that sounds like a great idea,” Cara agrees. I hear the door squeak as she leans back in my direction. “Did you hear all of that?” she calls to me.

“Yeah,” I reply. “Look, you can just take me to my place. I just need to get some sleep, I think.”

“Let me take care of you, okay?” Tristan calls back. “Please?”

I suddenly think of when I made him beg for me to put my mouth on his cock, and I flush despite how sick I feel.

Maybe it's the memory of what his pleading did to me that night, or maybe I'm just so tired of always doing everything alone. Either way, I realize that I'm going to give in.

"Okay," I say in a small voice. I flush the toilet and step out of the stall. I nearly giggle when I see Cara holding the door to the women's restroom open and Tristan peeking through the gap in the door at me.

"I'll be out in a second," I reassure him, making a shooing motion at him.

He winks at me and backs away, and Cara shuts the bathroom door. She looks at me worriedly as I wash my hands. I stare at my pale reflection and make a face. I look awful.

"You need to be sure that you're not pushing too hard," Cara chides me. "You don't want to be sick over Christmas."

I listen to the Christmas carols playing over the speakers in the bathroom. I want so much to feel something like the holiday spirit—for once in my life—but all I feel right now is...defeated.

Being sick over Christmas seems appropriate, frankly.

"It's just been a lot lately," I admit to my friend. I give her a wan smile. "But don't worry. Things are settling down."

"I'm glad Tristan connected with you," Cara says with a secretive little smile. "I knew you guys would be perfect for one another."

I grimace. "Cara, so help me, you can stop trying to play matchmaker now, or I will..."

She raises her hands in surrender and shakes her head but there's a wicked glint in her gaze that tells me that that is exactly what she's doing.

"Hey, it's good for both of you. You get to write a good book and make some sweet cash, he gets some publicity out of the deal, and then maybe...if you're both up for it...you might also get to enjoy some side benefits if you know what I mean." She winks.

I roll my eyes and put my hands on my hips. "You are incorrigible."

She nods. "You're not wrong. So tell me...is Tristan incredible in bed? Older men always are, you know."

I blush so fiercely that I realize there is nothing I can say to deny that we've had sex.

Cara grins at me and claps her hands. "That's all the answer I needed." She leans closer and holds her hands about six inches apart, one brow lifted inquiringly.

"Oh, God no," I say right away with a shake of my head. I hold my hands much farther apart and her eyes go wide.

"Holy shit. Did he almost kill you?"

I giggle, still feeling flushed. "In the nicest way possible." I look down for a moment, then look at her sidelong. "It was nice. I felt...empowered...I....made him beg."

She crows with laughter. "Girl, I wish you wrote erotica instead of biographies. I'd love to hear your retelling of your hookup."

I press my cold hands to my cheeks. "I don't think I was probably all that good at what I was doing," I admit with a nervous chuckle. "I was trying to channel the dirty

book I had just finished the day before.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Cara says to me. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“Like what?” I ask.

She narrows her eyes and leans in again. “Like he wants to throw you on the table and fuck you right here in the restaurant.”

I gasp a little, taken aback. “What? No.” I say a bit stupidly.

Cara shakes her head. “You’re blind if you can’t see it,” she assures me. “Come on. Let’s let Prince Charming take you home so that you can get to feeling better.” She takes my hand and starts to pull me toward the bathroom door.

“As soon as you’re better,” she says over her shoulder, “I expect you to get right back to enjoying that fine-ass specimen you’re writing about.”

“We said we needed to start being professional,” I say weakly.

She snorts. “Suuuure,” she says. “Like that’s going to happen.

I don’t argue with her because I know she is probably right.

We make it back to the table and I say my goodbyes and give my brother a hug. Cara and Isaac promise to make sure he gets back to his care home safely.

Feeling exhausted, I take Tristan’s arm and allow myself to be led to his car. We hurry through the now ice-cold rain that is falling from the sky, his hand clutching mine so I don’t slip and fall in my heels.

It's nice, being together like this, and it's also terrifying.

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Chapter Nine

Tristan

She's huddled quietly in her seat on the other side of the car.

Her profile is occasionally lit by the streetlights as we drive, and I feel a sharp stab of something protective sitting just beneath my breastbone.

I hate seeing her feeling sick, but I think I can help.

"I'm sorry you're feeling like shit," I say to her as I navigate a corner slowly, trying to keep from jostling her around.

She flaps a hand at my words, her eyes closed.

"I think I might have just pushed myself too hard between the move and life," she says, her voice thin.

"Cara says you've been under a lot of stress," I say to her as I get onto the freeway to take us back to my place.

My phone pings and my smartwatch tells me that it's a message from the IV service with an ETA for their arrival. I had set up the appointment while she was finishing up in the bathroom.

She sighs softly, and my heart does that funny clenching thing again.

“Danny and I...we were living with my boyfriend in Alaska,” she says. “He and I had been together for a few years, but we both traveled a lot and lived a few states apart. It was making things tough on the relationship so he offered to build me a writing space and hire a live-in care professional for Danny at his place in Alaska.”

“That was a big move for the relationship,” I say neutrally, slowing down for traffic and switching lanes.

She sighs again. “I thought so too.” There’s bitterness in her tone.

“What happened?” I ask carefully.

She’s silent for a while, and when I look over, I see tears slipping down her cheeks. I feel terrible all of a sudden for pressing her to keep talking about this.

“The ‘nurse’ he hired to care for Danny was just some girl he was sleeping with on the side.” She sounds like she’s speaking through gritted teeth. “I caught them together in the shower one day when I came home early from a work trip.”

“Oh damn,” I say. I suddenly want to find this guy and punch him in the face.

“Danny was crushed,” she says. “It’s hard for him to understand telling lies or being dishonest because he can’t really do any of those things. He just knew that we were moving and that I wasn’t going to let that woman or my ex see him anymore.”

“Poor kid,” I say empathetically. “And poor you.”

She looks over at me for a moment, managing a smile as she swipes at the tears on her face. “Cara is a good friend. She told me she’d find me someplace to live here in Seattle and that she’d set everything up. I was shell-shocked at the time. I have... pretty bad taste in men, as it turns out. This isn’t the first time something shitty has

happened to me, but it's the first time Danny got hurt too."

"That's why you didn't want me to know about him," I say astutely.

She looks over at me, but I keep watching the road.

"Yeah," she says in a small voice. "I'm sorry. You're not like that, I know, but we just...don't know one another at all."

I nod. "It's okay. You're allowed to take care of Danny and put him first," I reassure her.

"I'm the only one who ever did," she murmurs.

"Were your folks busy all the time with work?" I ask, thinking of my own father, who was never, ever home.

She sighs. "I hate Christmas," she says abruptly.

I look over at her, and she tries to smile, but the expression doesn't hold any joy.

"My dad left when Danny and I were little. My mom was getting alimony and the house was paid for. She just...took off all the time...with boyfriends, leaving me and Danny alone. She always told people that Danny was younger than his real age because she felt...embarrassed by his social skills."

I wince internally at the pain in her words. Her parents sound awful. I can understand her pain.

"When I was eleven, Mom promised that she'd stay home with us for Christmas for once. I was so excited. She had decorated the house, we got a Christmas tree, and we

even bought gifts and wrapped them. I thought everything was going to change. Danny was also happy about the holidays for once.”

She goes silent again and I see her swallowing past a lump in her throat.

“Two days before Christmas, a man came to our house and rang the doorbell. He was some ex of Mom’s, and he said that they were going to be gone for a few days but that she would be back. Danny and I spent Christmas alone. We didn’t even open our gifts.”

“My dad was a terrible person too,” I say, but I don’t expand on the thought. I reach over and squeeze her shoulder. “Having shitty parents can ruin everything.”

She swallows audibly again. “Thanks for listening,” she says, her voice sounding a little choked. “Sorry to dump that on you.”

I shake my head. “Don’t be sorry. You are allowed to be sad.”

I navigate the turn off the freeway. We sit in silence as I complete the rest of the drive to the parking garage of my place and park the car. I get out and come around to open her door.

“The IV service will be here in a few minutes,” I tell her, offering her a hand.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she says to me weakly, taking my hand and wobbling to her feet.

“Yes,” I say to her, leaning over to sweep her up into my arms. “Yes, I did.”

She looks like she wants to protest being picked up, but then she surrenders and leans her head against my shoulder. I climb into the elevator, enjoying the feeling of her

lithe curves in my hands.

I use my keycard to let us rise to the top floor, and then walk inside, calling for Nancy. She comes bustling out of the kitchen, her eyes going wide when she sees Rachel in my arms.

“The IV folks will be here soon,” I tell my housekeeper. “Can you buzz them up for me?”

“Yes, sir, of course,” she says quickly. “Do you need anything else?”

“Some water would be good,” I tell her as I walk toward my bedroom.

I set Rachel on her feet and slip off her coat and scarf, then I help her to sit down on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” she says to me, looking ashamed of her weakness.

“Don’t be,” I tell her. “You can’t help being sick.”

I help her to scoot back so that she can rest her head on the mountain of pillows at the top of the mattress. She sighs and closes her eyes.

“Doing okay?” I ask her, sitting down beside her and reaching out to press my hand to her forehead.

She opens one bright green eye and looks out at me from under my hand. There’s a little smile hiding in the corner of her mouth. “No one has checked my temperature since I was a little child,” she says to me.

I smile. “Same, actually.”

“Do you have a relationship with your parents?” she asks me abruptly.

I wince. This is the part of my story that I hadn’t wanted to ever share with anyone, but I realize that she needs to know this stuff to help her write my story.

“If you’re not ready to tell me, it’s okay,” she assures me.

I take a moment to get up and take the glass of water that Nancy has brought to my room, thinking about what to say. I pass her the cool glass and watch her drink some of the water before I reply.

“You need to know so that you can talk about my life,” I say. I pause. “Do you need to like, record me or something?” I ask.

She shakes her head, then cringes and closes her eyes for a second. “I can keep it all up here,” she says, pointing at her temple.

I smile and reach over to squeeze her hand, which is resting on her stomach. It’s cold and clammy, and I feel a little sliver of worry worming its way through me. To distract myself, I get up and start moving around changing clothing.

“Dinner and a show?” she asks me with a sly little smile.

I waggle my brows suggestively. “Only the best for my biographer,” I tease, slipping out of my jeans and then pulling some joggers out of a drawer. I see her eyes linger on the bulge in my boxer briefs and I feel an intense rush of satisfaction about that.

I clear my throat and keep talking. “My dad was a successful man, but a wretched drunk. He hit me, and he hit my mom. I was one of those kids who always had some story about falling out of a tree or off his bike, you know?”

Her eyes have shadows in them as she nods. “Some people shouldn’t be parents.”

I blow out a breath and then slip a more comfortable shirt on.

“My mom loves me, but she’s weak,” I say a bit sharply. I’m surprised that I’m still hurt about all of this after so many years. “She loved him even though he was a terrible person, and so she stayed, which meant I had to stay. He finally went to live with his mistress and left us alone when I was about thirteen.”

“That must have been at least somewhat more peaceful,” she says.

My lips twist. “I guess, but she was...I don’t know...damaged by all of his abuse. She won’t get diagnosed, but she probably should. I spent the rest of my childhood parenting her, basically. Without Nancy, I would have been in real trouble most days. My mom wasn’t all there after Dad left.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and I can tell she means it.

I force a smile onto my face. “It all turned out fine,” I say with false cheer. “Dad finally drank himself to death and I took over the company.”

“You’ve done very well for yourself,” she says.

I shrug. “It was the only way I could think of to atone for what he had done to so many people. Turns out, Dad wasn’t just shitty to us...he was shitty to everyone.”

“Did you ever...want to do something else with your life?” she asks me.

I bite my cheek a little, but then I smile. “I always wanted to have a ranch, spend time outside, get dirty, and grow my own food, that kind of thing. So, about ten years ago, I bought a spread in Montana. I spend as much time there as I can. I feel

more...myself out there, even if I can't stay there full time."

"I grew up in Alaska," she says to me. "I never feel at home in a big city. I miss the peace of being away from the hustle and bustle."

"You'd like my place in Montana," I tell her. "We'll have to go there."

She eyes me for a moment in silence, and I feel a little reprimanded. That's right. We are supposed to be professionals.

The only reason she would have to go to Montana would be to see another aspect of my life in action. Since it's the dead of winter, however, we probably won't make it out to Montana before she needs to start writing the book.

"Rachel Smith?"

We both swing toward the door to see Nancy escorting the IV provider into the room. He's carrying a bag of medical supplies and he has a smile on his face.

"That's me," she says from the bed. Her voice sounds a little stronger, which makes me feel better.

"What's been going on?" the medical professional asks, and she shrugs a little.

"I might have the flu or something. This all started today," she replies.

He starts to ask her about her symptoms, and I nod to Nancy to leave the room. I don't want to hover while the IV guy is asking her personal questions.

She clearly wants there to be a dividing line between our professional interactions and the personal time we will inevitably have to spend together for her to write my

book, and I don't want to step on her toes.

I glance back over my shoulder to look at her lying propped up in my bed. Even pale and depressed-looking, she's still amazingly beautiful. My heart beats out of cadence for a moment as a swoop of emotion rolls over me.

She was just supposed to be a woman I slept with casually and also the person to write my story.

Is it possible, though, that she's become something more?

Chapter Ten

Rachel

“What symptoms have you been having?” the IV tech asks me as he starts pulling out tubes, needles, and bags of IV fluids.

“Nausea and dizziness,” I say. “I threw up a bunch of times at dinner.”

“How long ago was that?” he asks me.

I look at my watch. “About an hour ago.”

“Still feeling nauseous?” he asks me, and I nod. “Did you have anything to drink tonight?” he asks next.

“Nope,” I say, shaking my head. I can’t even imagine what I’d be feeling like if I had. The thought makes me want to barf all over again.

“When was your last menstrual period?” he asks me.

I frown a little. In all of the chaos of my hasty move from Alaska, and getting Danny settled in at his care home, I’ve lost track. I tend to forget to count the weeks, so I use a tracking app to calculate my cycle so I don’t have to deal with unfortunate surprises that can ruin things like white slacks.

I drag my purse over to my side and dig out my phone so I can look at the tracking

app. I feel a rush of panic roll over me when I look at the date. I was supposed to have had my period by now.

“Umm,” I stutter, staring at the tracker. I suddenly remember the feeling of Tristan spilling himself inside of me, and the fierce stab of pride that I felt at being marked by him in that moment.

“Is there anything in the stuff you are going to give to me that could hurt a baby?” I ask, my heart racing.

He smiles at me. “If you think you might be pregnant, I can take that into account as I treat you. I work with a lot of people who struggle with morning sickness.”

I look over his shoulder quickly, and I’m relieved to see that Tristan has left the room. Sagging back against the bed, I decide I can’t explain myself to this stranger. After all, he can’t offer me a pregnancy test.

“Thanks, that would be great,” I manage to say. I barely feel him placing the IV line in my arm. I stare up at the ceiling as he does his job, my mind fretting in circles about what to do.

Pregnant , I think helplessly. What the hell was I thinking having sex without protection?

I think about all of my friends who have spent years trying to have kids and failing, and here I am, making the first casual sexual mistake of my life and getting pregnant immediately.

My mouth twists in rueful acknowledgment that Tristan is probably extra virile or something. After all, he is a bit older.

The IV tech makes polite conversation with me as he works, and I manage to keep up some semblance of engagement despite my whirling thoughts. By the time he takes down the second bag of fluids, I'm starting to feel a lot better.

"How are you doing now?" he asks me.

I smile. "So much better," I tell him.

"Good deal," he replies, starting to pack up his things. "If you don't feel back to normal by the day after tomorrow, I suggest that you see your doctor or head to the ER," he says.

"Okay. Thanks," I say as he finishes cleaning up his supplies.

"All done?" Tristan asks as he steps into the room.

"Yup," the man says.

"I can pay right now," Tristan tells him.

"Perfect," the man says, digging in his pocket for his cell phone.

"Tristan," I say, starting to sit up a little. "I can pay."

Tristan just waves me off and hands over his black card. The man takes it and handles the transaction, then gives me a little wave as Nancy leads him out of the room.

"Want a bath?" Tristan asks me once we are alone again.

I stare at him, trying to process everything that has happened. Freed of the crippling nausea, all I can do is worry about my potential pregnancy and stare at the man I

might be having a baby with, wanting him to tear my clothes off and make me forget my worries.

“Rachel?” he asks me, looking worried at my continuing silence.

I cough. “Sorry,” I say quickly. “Actually, yeah, a bath sounds really nice.”

His face relaxes, his brown eyes are golden and warm. “I’ll start on that for you. Don’t go anywhere. I’m about to channel my inner five-star hotel.”

“Har, har,” I say back, shaking my head at his joke.

“I come complete with a great sense of humor,” he calls to me from the bathroom.

I snort. “If you’re a dad making jokes in front of his kids.”

“Those are the best kinds of jokes,” he says back, his voice echoing.

I bite my lower lip, then give in to temptation and ask the question that is hovering on my mind. It’s not an unreasonable question for a biographer to ask anyway.

“Do you ever think about having kids?” I call to him.

I hear the water start running into the bathtub and then I hear him puttering around through cupboards or drawers for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he finally says back. “Kids are a big responsibility, you know? And I travel all the time and I’m so busy with work. Maybe it’s a good thing that I’ve never gotten anyone I’ve been with pregnant.”

I feel a little chilly, but his words make sense. Most busy people who have huge

companies to run don't want kids. He's not the first person I've interviewed to say this.

"What about marriage?" I ask before I can stop myself. I wrinkle my nose a little. Are the pregnancy hormones already scrambling my brain? Why am I asking such intimate questions while I'm lying in his bed?

You might not even be pregnant, silly, I think. Stop planning an entire future with this famous tech mogul who likely doesn't want anything more than casual sex with you.

He steps back into the bedroom and meets my gaze. "I guess marriage is kind of in the same category as the kid thing," he says with a shrug. "No one has ever been a good fit to share my life with and it's not like my childhood lends itself to understanding how to have those kinds of relationships, you know?"

"You seem to naturally take care of everyone around you," I point out. "Even if they don't really want you to."

He chuckles. "I guess you're right. I know I can be kind of domineering. I just want to be sure that people take care of themselves and get what they need, you know?"

I nod. I actually do know. I worry about being too restrictive with Danny. Ever since our parents had skipped out on us, I've had to be his mom and his dad. It's not easy, and for a kid trying to raise another kid, becoming a tyrant is all too easy.

"Come on," Tristan says to me. "Let's get you into that bath."

He holds out his hand, and I reach out and take it, feeling the calluses that I now know are from the time that he spends at his place in Montana doing what he loves.

There is something so intimate about knowing that this part of the physical experience of touching him has to do with a part of his life that he holds dear. Before I can stop myself, I squeeze his fingers.

He looks at me in surprise, warmth flooding into his gaze, and he squeezes back.

“Thanks for taking care of me tonight,” I say sincerely as he leads me into the huge, spacious bathroom. The tub is giant, and I can see that it's jetted. I've always wanted to have a tub like this in my house, but I've just never had the budget to even consider adding one.

“No problem,” he says to me as we come to a stop by the tub.

Tristan's eyes lock onto mine, and the air between us seems to thin. I can hardly breathe. Before I can process what's happening, he pulls me close and takes my lips in a shocking and yet delightfully sweet kiss.

For a moment, I'm lost in the feeling. His lips are soft but insistent, and I find myself responding with equal fervor. My hands move of their own accord, combing through his hair as he deepens the kiss.

There are so many things going through my mind. I might be pregnant, he's a client, he doesn't want to get married or have kids. And yet, all I can think about are his hands squeezing my breasts, his lips on mine, the tangling of our tongues.

The scent of the bath salts that he put in the water wraps around us as steam fills the space. My earlier illness is completely forgotten as my core throbs with want, my hands reaching around to cup his firm ass, my legs parting to press his thigh between them.

“We don't have to do this,” he murmurs against my lips. “You don't feel good.”

“Shut up and fuck me,” I hear myself say, and I don’t even question where those dirty words came from.

Something about this man makes me throw caution to the wind, makes me feel empowered, sexy, in control.

Besides , I think to myself, I can’t get pregnant a second time .

Chapter Eleven

Tristan

“Shut up and fuck me,” Rachel says to me.

My cock throbs painfully at her words. She keeps intimating that she’s always been passive in bed, that she’s always let the men in her life control her. I can’t imagine how that can be the case, given how authoritative she is with me.

There’s something so hot about knowing that I bring out this side of her that she has never gotten to explore before. It adds a layer of intensity to intimacy with her, which I’ve never experienced with anyone else.

I know she’s been sick, and I don’t want to make her feel like she has to do this, but she seems even more eager to have sex than I am. She’s straddling my thigh, rubbing her pussy against the softness of my joggers, a soft mewl of desire falling from her lips.

The steam from the bath is wrapping around us, heating the air between us even more. I reach up and cup her breasts, feeling her nipples harden through her top. She arches back away from me, pressing her breasts into my palms.

“Tristan,” she moans, my name sounding like a plea. “Don’t stop.”

“I thought you were the one who liked to make me beg,” I tease, pressing soft kisses along her neck and then breathing into the hollow of her throat.

She just squeezes my butt harder in her hands, and my hips push toward her body of their own accord.

I start stripping her out of her clothing, and she lets me, gripping my shoulders as if she might puddle to the floor if she isn't holding onto me.

I think about her ex cheating on her, hurting Danny in the process, shattering her life. I pull her nipple into my mouth and watch her head tilt back with pleasure, her full lips parting.

How could someone reject this gorgeous, complicated, kind woman? I can't wrap my head around it.

I realize that the bath is probably more than full enough, and I release her breast to lean over and shut off the water. When I straighten up, I meet her green gaze which is trained on my face.

"We said we wouldn't do this," she says, her voice raspy.

I nod. "We did. Do you want to stop?"

She stares at me for a moment, her chest rising and falling as she breathes hard. "No," she whispers, her voice almost too quiet to hear.

"Thank God," I say, realizing only now just how hard it would have been for me to walk away and leave her to take her bath alone.

I start taking off my clothes, desperate to have her skin touching mine. My dick feels like it's being strangled by my joggers and underwear, and I sigh with relief as I slip them off.

“You’re so big,” she says to me, reaching out to run her fingers along my shaft.

I close my eyes, enjoying the featherlight contact.

“It’s been an issue in the past,” I admit, feeling a little shame coil through me. Porn might tell everyone that bigger is better, but when you bring a girl home, and your dick is too big to fuck her without hurting her, you realize that’s not always the case.

“It’s not an issue for me,” she says quietly, teasing the tip. My cock flexes toward her touch eagerly. “I think you’re perfect,” she says, her voice louder.

I look down at her and step back so she can’t reach me. She frowns a little, but I just smile. I reach out and slip my fingers through her wetness. She gasps and rocks forward as if she can’t help herself. I pull my hand away and suck my fingers into my mouth, my eyes smiling at her.

“You taste amazing,” I say to her. “I want to taste more of you.”

“Then do it,” she says to me, a bossy note entering her voice.

I wing a brow at her. “Ask nicely,” I say to her.

She pouts, and I almost give in and start kissing her again.

“Please,” she says to me, sounding a little petulant.

“Please, what?” I say back, smiling wider as she scowls at me. “You know how to ask for what you want.”

She looks down at my cock, as if willing it to get inside of her without my permission. She looks down at the floor, and whispers, “Please will you...put your

mouth on my pussy.”

She’s speaking so quietly that I can barely hear her. I step closer and reach out to tilt her chin up so that she has to look at me.

“There’s no shame here,” I say to her. “You can say what you want and mean it. It’s sexy as hell when you tell me what you want.”

She searches my gaze and I see the fear, the worry. I again want to beat up every guy who made her feel this way.

“Say it,” I demand, gripping her chin and pressing a savage kiss to her lips. “Make me do what you want.” I nip her lip hard, and she sucks in a surprised breath.

I lean back in time to be rewarded by the flash of anger that crosses her face. Good. I want her to get out of her own way, to feel like she could demand the things she wants from me.

“Get on your knees and put your mouth on me, Tristan Black,” she says through gritted teeth, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say agreeably. I snag a towel off the counter and kneel on it before leaning forward and sliding my tongue through her slickness.

Her hands come down and grab my hair, and she tugs hard, pressing her pussy into my mouth, seeking more from me. I delve my tongue into her, pressing her open over and over again.

She’s crying out now, holding onto my hair like it's her only anchor in the storm of her pleasure.

I move my attention to her clit, sucking, teasing, pushing her closer and closer to the edge. She's pumping her hips in time with my movements, leaning back farther and farther as she chases her release.

I grab her hips to steady her, and sink my tongue into her welcoming heat again, mimicking what my cock is going to do to her next.

"Oh my God, Tristan!" she cries as she comes on my tongue, her pussy fluttering as her taste fills my mouth.

"Good girl," I praise her, squeezing her hips gently as her orgasm takes her, helping her to stay upright. I look up at her as I lift my mouth away from her soaked flesh, my gaze running over the planes of her flat belly, and the undersides of her perky breasts.

Her lips are swollen from my kisses, and her cheeks are flushed. Her lashes lay like dark blonde half-moons on her cheeks.

She's gasping for air as her hands come down to rest on my shoulders. She finally looks down at me, her eyes glassy with pleasure, a small smile hovering over her lips.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"Any time," I say teasingly, and she rolls her eyes.

I rise to my feet, and her gaze lands on my straining cock.

"Now you're going to take my cock," I tell her.

I climb into the tub, hissing a little at the heat of the water as I sink into it. I offer her my hand, and she takes it, but when she starts to get into the bath facing me, I shake my head.

“Turn around,” I tell her.

She looks at me for a moment with her brow furrowed, but then she complies, stepping into the tub and leaning back against me. My hands come up to cup her breasts, and she sighs with pleasure, leaning back even more.

I tweak her nipple with one hand as I lift her up onto my thighs with the other. I bring both hands down to cup her perky little butt and lift her up enough to be able to position myself at her entrance.

She grabs the sides of the tub for balance, and I slowly bring her down over my cock.

She keens as I stretch her and fill her, and I nearly spill myself inside of her as soon as I slide all the way home. She’s as tight as I remember her being last time, her pussy clenching greedily around me.

My hands come up to grip her breasts again, and I pinch her nipples as I whisper in her ear, “Clench and release, baby. Clench and release.”

She immediately knows what I want, and she starts squeezing her pussy and then releasing it. I tease her nipples in time with the movements of her internal muscles, nearly expiring from trying to hold back from coming.

“Tristan,” she moans, wriggling against me a little, looking for more movement.

“Patience,” I say, pressing her forward a little, my hand slipping under the water to work over her clit. She moans in response, forgetting the cadence she had begun with her inner muscles, moving now automatically as she chases her orgasm.

I support her as she starts fucking me again, the water sloshing and rushing around us with the movement of our bodies. I can feel my orgasm racing toward me, but I want

her to come first.

I reach up and catch her shoulders in my hands, drawing her back against me as I slide farther down into the water. My arm wraps around her, holding her tightly against me, leaning back against my chest, as I continue my ministrations on her clit.

“Tristan, please make me come,” she gasps out, her body shaking.

“You can only come again when I say so,” I tell her, holding perfectly still, pressing her body against me harder as she tries to keep moving in the direction of release.

She makes a sound of frustration that is nearly my undoing, but I grit my teeth and say in her ear, “Kiss me.”

She angles her face back, kissing me a bit sloppily in between small, gasping noises.

I poise my hand over her clit, and I use the other hand to drive her down further onto my cock. She shrieks in my ear, and I tell her, “Come for me, Rachel,” as I roll her clit between my fingers.

Her orgasm is so strong that she jerks and twists in my arms, her loud cries deafening me, but I don’t mind. I grip her hips with both hands again and thrust one more time, roaring out my release as I come inside her welcoming, tight heat.

Chapter Twelve

Rachel

Tristan Black has long been a man of mystery. A tech mogul who arrived on the scene almost as if by magic, turning everything he touches to gold like Croesus. He's a mystery, and yet he's a genuine person who cares about the people around him.

I sit back and stare at my laptop screen, then run my hands through my hair in frustration. It's probably a recipe for disaster to try to start on a biography while you are waiting for the results of the three pregnancy tests sitting on your bathroom counter.

Grumbling, I set my laptop aside and carry my mug of tea over to the window. I look down sightlessly at the street below as I think back over the past twenty-four hours.

Tristan and I had fucked once more after getting out of the bath, and then he'd woken me up with morning sex. I thought of how I had soaked the sheets the last time and blushed. Tristan had seemed incredibly pleased about that, so I had felt less embarrassed than I would have otherwise.

Three times. What the fuck was I thinking?

I have never, ever had any trouble sticking to a plan—doing the right thing. That particular aspect of my personality is what had gotten Danny and me through when our dad took off and our mom kept shacking up with new boyfriends and leaving us alone for weeks at a time.

Something about Tristan, though, makes me just chuck caution to the wind. As soon as I see the lust in his eyes, it's like I can't keep my hands off of him.

I turn away from the window when the timer on my phone goes off. Time to confirm what I already instinctively know to be true.

I have felt fine this morning, thankfully, but the thought of going to look at the results of the tests on the counter makes me feel a little queasy anyway. I swallow hard and force my feet to get moving.

There it is, two pink lines. On each test. All positive. I'm pregnant.

The room spins around me as the reality sinks in. I'm carrying Tristan's child.

Tears form in my eyes, and a combination of emotions overcome me. There is fear, excitement, and utter confusion. What am I going to do? How will Tristan react?

I sink to the bathroom floor, my back against the cool tile of the bathroom wall. My hand unconsciously moves to my still-flat stomach. There's a life growing inside me. A tiny combination of me and Tristan.

The thought is both thrilling and terrifying. A couple more minutes pass as I sit there, lost in thought. I imagine telling Tristan, picture his reaction. Will he be happy? Angry? Will he accuse me of wanting to entrap him?

No, he won't do that, but still...he's in his late forties and has never been married or had children. What if this isn't what he wants? He didn't sound that excited about the idea of kids or marriage when I asked him about them yesterday.

I finally drag myself off the bathroom floor, and wander through my apartment, touching familiar objects, trying to ground myself in reality. But everything feels

different now. I'm different now.

I catch sight of myself in the mirror hanging in the hallway. Do I look different?

Can anyone tell just by looking at me that my whole world has shifted on its axis? I study my reflection, searching for any external sign of the life growing inside me, but of course, there's nothing to see yet.

I'm growing more restless now. Despite my eagerness to keep Tristan at arm's length, I find myself craving the comfort of his presence.

Even if I'm not ready to tell him about the baby, I want to be near him. I need to see him, and I know that only proves my true feelings for him.

I decide not to tell anyone else about the pregnancy for now.

I need some time to process and I really just don't have the bandwidth to make good choices right now. Besides, I have a job to do, and it gives me an excuse to be around the man who doesn't yet know that he's the father of my child.

How are you feeling?

I look at the text on my phone from Cara as Tristan and I ride down in the elevator from his penthouse suite to head to his office. I need to interview the people that he works with and see more of the company. But I'm feeling listless, worried, distracted.

I see that you read my texts, lady. What's going on?

I glance at the latest text and rest my head against the elevator wall.

“Friends sometimes, eh?” Tristan asks, and I nod, biting my lip like I do when I'm overwhelmed.

“You make it hard for me not to want to grab and kiss you when you do that.”

His words bring me back to reality with a jolt.

I shoot him a glance and then shake my head with a smile. His delicious scent surrounds me, sandalwood and spice.

This morning, I can barely stand how painfully handsome he looks staring down at me. I feel guilty that I can't tell him about the pregnancy yet. The fact is, I'm scared of what will happen when I do.

I've only just met him, I have a book to write about him, and if I'm being honest...I cannot face the thought of him stepping out on me like my ex did, like my father did.

I reach out and cup his face with my small hands, pulling him down in a kiss. He fumbles for my breast in return, growling with what I can only describe as an animalistic desire.

We quickly separate when the elevator stops and the door opens. The man working at the front desk nods at Tristan and says hello.

We step out and make our way outside the building. It's chilly today, and I shiver a little as we walk to the parking garage.

I take in the Christmas decorations that were placed on the streetlamps last night and try to reach for some happiness about the holidays.

I think of the tiny life inside of me, and I start to feel excited. Christmas is meant to

be truly special when you're little.

Sharing the joy of the holidays with my baby will give me a fresh outlook on a holiday that my family sucked at celebrating.

"Now that I know your thoughts cost way more than a penny," Tristan says, breaking into my imaginings, "I know I can't afford to ask what they are."

I look over at him as we approach his car and chuckle.

"Everything okay?" he asks me.

I nod, feeling bad all over again about not telling him about the baby. "Yeah," I lie. "Just trying to find some holiday cheer."

He nods. "If Nancy didn't decorate for me, I wouldn't have anything up for Christmas. It's a conflicting time of year for me."

"Me too," I say, feeling warmed a little bit by his understanding. People everywhere love Christmas, so being a child who couldn't enjoy the holiday was isolating. Tristan's ability to see and comprehend my pain is huge for me.

"Does Danny like the holidays?" Tristan asks.

I shrug. "He's kind of like me. He doesn't really even know what Christmas is supposed to be like."

Tristan doesn't reply. He just starts the engine and drives out onto the street.

"Are you worried about me interviewing your staff today?" I say, a teasing note in my tone.

He shoots me a sidelong look, then chuckles again. “Nah,” he says. “Everyone who works for me loves me.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, superstar,” I say back. “Just promise me that you will be okay with me being honest about what they say when I write the book.”

He meets my gaze, something warm hiding in the golden depths of his eyes. “It’s like I say about everything, Rachel. I want you to be your genuine self with me. I want you to be totally honest.”

I know that he’s talking about sex now, not work, and I flush a little. I suddenly recall him licking me in the bathroom, the gush of warmth as I came in his mouth, the soft, springy feel of his thick hair under my fingers.

As if he can sense my arousal, he reaches over and trails his fingers along my thigh. Tingles race along my skin, prickling my scalp and making me feel excited and nervous at the same time.

“I trust you, Rachel,” he says to me, his voice low.

I feel a rush of lust at the sound of his voice, but then guilt rushes in on top of it. He trusts me. But I’m not being honest with him about everything, and I feel terrible.

I swallow hard and wrap my fingers around his, giving them a little squeeze. He links our hands, and we drive like that all the way to his office, looking for all the world like a couple, even if we are just supposed to be business associates.

Chapter Thirteen

Rachel

“So,” I say to the young man seated across from me. “What is working for Mr. Black like?”

“He’s really cool,” the kid says with a smile. “He makes sure that we have access to the resources that we need to be good at our jobs and he’s really fair. Plus, he doesn’t mind helping with the work, which is awesome.”

I type a few notes on my laptop, nodding my head. I dismiss an email from Starbucks reminding me that I have a free holiday drink coupon I haven’t used. I can’t have naughty things like sugary coffee now. I don’t want to do anything that will be bad for the baby.

I do think fondly for a moment of the cute holiday cups and the sweetness of a peppermint mocha, before turning my attention back to my interview.

I finish asking questions of the young man, who hurries off to go back to work, and then I rise to go stand by the huge windows that look down onto the park below.

There’s some kind of Christmas fair going on and it looks fun. I check my watch. Maybe Tristan and I can head down there after work to check it out.

“Knock, knock?”

I look over my shoulder to see Tristan standing in the doorway with a silly smile on his face. He comes to join me at the window.

“Some kind of Christmas fair thing,” I say to him unnecessarily.

He nods. “Yeah, I think they do that every year.”

“Ever been?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Naw. I’m always too busy.”

I turn toward him, stepping closer in spite of myself. I instantly feel my panties getting wet. “Want to be less busy than usual and go check it out after work?”

He looks down at me, his eyes trained on my lips. I smile slowly, loving that I can tell how much he wants me.

“Sure,” he says a bit huskily, leaning toward me like he might kiss me.

There’s a knock on the conference room door, and we leap apart like we’ve been burned. Tristan clears his throat and stuffs his hands into his pockets.

“Let me know when you’re done with interviews,” he says gruffly. He glances at the woman in the doorway and then moves past her. “Denise,” he says to her as he slips out of the room.

“You must be Rachel,” Denise says to me, coming to take a seat at the conference table.

I eye her, noting her severe, professional suit, her stick-straight black hair, and her perfectly made-up face. She’s very beautiful in an angular, alien way.

She looks like she walked right off the catwalk at some kind of fashion show. I wonder vaguely how long it takes her to get ready each day.

“Pleased to meet you,” I say, settling in across from her and waking up my computer. “You work in sales?” I ask.

Denise nods. “I’m the sales manager.”

“How long have you worked here?” I ask her, looking at my laptop screen and hitting the enter key to start a new list of information and quotes.

“Long enough to get the measure of Tristan Black.”

I blink, hearing something spiteful in her tone that gives me pause. I look up at her and see that she has her lips pursed, and her eyes are flashing with emotion. I don’t quite know what emotion, but her expression does not make it seem like she feels positive about Tristan. At all.

“Pardon?” I finally say.

She twists her lips to the side and then runs her tongue over her teeth to make sure there isn’t any lipstick on them. She smiles at me, her expression right for friendliness but her eyes showing anything but personable charm.

“I’ve been here long enough to learn that Tristan Black is a hopeless womanizer.”

I blink rapidly again. My brain is whirling as I try to take in what she is saying.

“In his personal life or...?”

She laughs, the sound a bit like a cackle. “Oh everywhere. There are women in the

world, and Tristan likes to have his way with them. Even me,” she says, tilting her head to the side. “I’ve been a target of his lustful attentions as well, but I figured things out very quickly and extricated myself from the situation.”

“So, you slept with Mr. Black?” I ask her, wishing that my heart wasn’t twisting with pain in my chest.

I don’t have any official claim on him, and certainly, I should have assumed he would have enjoyed his single life before he met me. After all, he doesn’t even know about the baby, so he has no reason to view me as anything more than another protracted hookup.

“We...had our fun,” Denise says coyly, giving me another sweet smile. “But I would be more concerned if I was you, over the very young women that are always being hired here. He just seems so...chummy with them...and there was that one girl, what was her name...oh! Her name was Amy Searles, I think. You should ask to see the legal documents regarding the...situation...that happened when she was here.”

I feel sick, but it’s not from morning sickness this time. Was Tristan really like this? I haven’t known him for very long, so it might be that the version of him that I have been spending time with...sleeping with...is not the real man.

But Cara knows him and likes him. It’s all too much for me. My brain feels like it’s going to turn off entirely.

I somehow manage to stumble through the rest of the interview, only a small portion of my attention on Denise. By the time that she rises to her feet and minces out of the room on her spiky black heels, I wish I had never made the mistake of spending all this time with Tristan. I wish I had never fallen in...

My heart stutters to a stop. I’ve fallen in love with him .

“Oh, God,” I say out loud, rubbing at my temples and closing my eyes. “Oh God, oh no.”

I stare at the notes that I took from Denise’s interview, and I realize that I have to check on the details of what she said before I condemn him, but suddenly it all feels like too much.

I start to pack up my things, suddenly in a panic to escape from Tristan, from his company, from the other people I was going to interview. Maybe it’s the pregnancy hormones, or maybe it’s just that I’m suddenly waking up to the situation I am in, but suddenly, I feel completely overwhelmed by the fact that I am in this position.

“I’ll come back tomorrow and do the rest of the interviews. I’m sorry,” I say to the woman at the front desk as I rush by.

I think I see someone standing by the elevator as I hurry out, but I don’t wait around to see who it is or to find out what they want from me.

The cold, wet wind slaps against my face, and I shiver, wrapping my hastily-donned coat around me. I pull out my phone and call for an Uber, then hurry toward the corner where it will pick me up.

I have been such an idiot , I think to myself, my heart aching in my chest. I just can’t get my life running right, no matter what I do.

Chapter Fourteen

Tristan

I pull out my chair and settle in. My eyes are sweeping the boardroom to make sure everyone is already in here. But I just want to find out where Rachel went in a rush earlier. She had just run past me in the lobby as if I wasn't there.

We had been having so much fun together. The night we shared was one of the best I'd had in many years. It might have been the best night I've ever had with any woman.

She did seem off this morning, though. I can't quite wrap my head around what may have happened.

I sent her a text but she didn't reply. I was worried but now was not the time.

Focus, Tristan.

Ali, our new content strategist, is sitting across the table from me. She's typing away on her laptop and talking to the content writer next to her. My thoughts wander again.

I suppose Rachel might be feeling sick again. She had seemed to bounce back quickly from her illness, but maybe she had relapsed.

I also know that she won't admit it yet, but I know the power I have over her—or at least, over her body. I love the way it responds to me, my presence, my eyes, my

touch.

Shit.

I don't own her. She's a full-grown adult. But leaving without saying a single word to me is not exactly a grownup thing to do.

Goddamn it, Tristan. Focus.

Jay sits to my left, his usual confident smirk firmly in place. He's been my best friend since high school, the kind of guy who's always up for a challenge, especially when it involves pushing boundaries.

Together, we've turned Black Solutions into the powerhouse it is today. And today, we're about to take another big step.

I lean back in my chair, letting my gaze sweep across the table again. Rachel's face flashes in my mind.

She often has a focused expression while working, though there's always that tender softness in it. Maybe it's the warm, welcoming aura that always surrounds her.

"Sorry I'm late," Denise says as she struts into the room, her heels clicking loudly on the tile floor.

I glance at her, eyeing her smug expression. I think about the single date that we went on and I feel a little disgusted.

I had clearly been swayed by her beauty, but her personality had shown through right away. She was a good sales manager, but she was not the kind of woman I wanted to sleep with.

“You’re looking nice today, Tristan,” she murmurs to me on her way to her chair.

I feel revulsion roll over me.

Unbelievable.

I resist the urge to look at her with annoyance.

I feel deeply disgusted by Denise’s attentions. For the first time, I think I might need to find a way to let her go. I don’t think I can stand dealing with her on a daily basis anymore.

“All right,” I begin, my voice cutting through the chatter. “Let’s get started, shall we? We’ve got a lot to cover today, and I want to make sure we’re all on the same page before we move forward.”

Jay gives me a nod, and I know he’s itching to be the first to share the news he’s been holding back. I let him have the floor.

“We’ve been working on a new product, something that’s going to set us apart in the market.” He pauses, letting the tension build, before dropping the bombshell. “It’s a social app, but not just any social app. This one’s built for the next generation—a fusion of gaming, social networking, and AI-driven content creation. We’re calling it Fuse.”

I observe the room for their reaction to this. They are abuzz with excitement and curiosity. Fuse is specifically Jay’s baby. He fought hard for it, and it’s going to change the game for us.

Young people are going to eat this up—instant messaging, gaming, and the ability to create viral content with just a few clicks. It’s going to be huge. He showed me the

test results, and it was the most unbelievably promising thing I'd seen in a while.

“The development process is complete,” Jay continues, his voice full of pride. “We’re ready to go to market, but we need to decide on a launch date. I’m thinking we go big—maybe host a live event, something that’ll make waves.”

I watch the reactions around the table. Most of them are nodding, excited by the prospect. Ali in particular, looks very excited.

Jay points out the best feature on the app was Ali’s idea, and that she should be congratulated for her input.

“I agree,” I say, turning my attention back to the table. “But before we lock anything in, I want to review the numbers from our analytics team.”

I nod to Maya, our analytics team rep, and she pulls up her PowerPoint. “Since Ali took over our direct content marketing, we’ve seen a two-hundred percent increase in engagement across all platforms,” she announces, not without admiration. “That’s in barely two weeks of testing. The strategies she’s implemented have been incredibly effective.”

I allow myself a small smile. I’m impressed by how quickly Ali has turned things around in that department. “Ali,” I say, turning to her, “would you mind walking us through some of the key strategies you’ve used?”

“Of course,” she replies, her voice steady. “One of the main things I focused on was understanding our audience better. We analyzed the data to identify the content that resonated most, then doubled down on creating more of that, while also experimenting with new formats.”

As she talks, I watch the room. Most of the board members are nodding, clearly

impressed. But Denise? She isn't even listening. She's just staring at me.

There is something like a smug smile on her lips, and I frown at her. What is going on with her?

When Ali finishes, Denise is quick to interject. "Those are great numbers, Ali, but don't you think they're a bit exaggerated? A two-hundred percent increase sounds almost too good to be true. Perhaps we should double-check those figures."

I suppress a sigh. Here we go again. She's always being difficult with the other women in the company. "Our analytics team is thorough, Denise," I say, my tone cutting. "If Maya's reporting a two-hundred percent increase, then that's what the data said."

Denise's eyes flick to mine, and I see a brief flash of frustration before she schools her expression. "Of course," she replies, her voice dripping with insincerity. "I'm just saying we should be cautious."

"Caution is important," Jay cuts in smoothly, trying to diffuse the tension, "but so is recognizing success. Ali, you've done a fantastic job, and I'm confident those numbers are accurate."

Ali gives a small nod of thanks, her gaze dropping to the table for a moment. She's clearly not one to bask in the spotlight, but she deserves this recognition, and I'll be damned if I let Denise or anyone else downplay that achievement.

"Moving on," I say, redirecting the conversation. "We need to finalize the launch date for Fuse . I want something soon but with enough time to build up the hype. Jay, what's your take?"

"I say we aim for the New Year. That gives us plenty of time to create buzz, but it's

close enough to keep the momentum going.”

I consider it, then nod. “Perfect. Anything else on the list of things that we need to talk about?”

There is some scattered chatter, but I tune it out. Jay calls the meeting to a close for me because I am thinking about Rachel and not about the meeting.

“Everything okay?” he asks me, confused.

“He’s fretting about Rachel, I bet,” Denise says as she wanders over. Everyone else has left the room. It’s just myself, Jay, and Denise left.

I glance at her, my brow drawing down. “Did you see Rachel leave in a rush earlier today? She isn’t responding to my texts.”

Denise’s smile widens. “Well, she was in her interview with me, but then she just hurried out. It seemed like she was upset about something I said.”

I feel coldness wash over me. “What did you two talk about?”

Denise’s smile turns into a little smirk. “Oh, you know, this and that. I did mention some company...drama. I might have mentioned Amy. I felt like it was only fair that she know since she needs to write the truth about you.”

“You told her what?” I demand, rising to my feet and looking over her. She just smiles at me, standing stiffly in her super-high heels before me with her arms crossed over her fake breasts.

“Tristan...” Jay says to me his tone clearly a warning.

“I thought she should know about how women are treated around here.”

“We provided evidence to clear the company name and to resolve the Amy debacle, Denise,” I remind her. “Per company policy, none of this is supposed to be discussed with anyone...especially someone who doesn’t work here.”

She shrugs. “So sue me,” she says flippantly.

“I just might have to!” I exclaim, driving a hand through my hair. “Why would you do something like that?”

She shrugs, stepping around me and walking toward the door to the conference room. “I thought that it was obvious that you two were sleeping together. She should know who she’s having sex with.”

My mouth opens and closes, but no sound comes out. I am just staring at Denise, trying to piece together why on earth she would do something like this to me...to Rachel.

The mess with Amy was not my fault. She testified during the investigation that she had made up her allegations to try and wrangle money out of me.

Why would Denise bring up something like that at work, when she knew that she wasn’t allowed to speak about the case to anyone now that it was closed and over.

“Denise, come with me,” Jay says, rising to his feet and escorting her from the room.

“Fuck!” I hiss as I storm toward the full-length windows and glare down at the street.

I hear Jay walking back into the room, but I just stare out the windows at the rain, watching the Christmas lights twinkling as the rainwater runs down the glass in front

of me.

“That woman is going to get herself fired,” Jay says quietly, coming to stand by me.

“What the fuck is wrong with her?”

Jay sighs. “You are so blind, Tristan.”

I swing to the side to look at him. “What?”

He rolls his eyes. “Tristan, that woman has been determined to end up dating you the entirety of the time that she’s worked here. She isn’t over you turning her down, and she’s willing to blow up everything to get your attention. I don’t think she even cares if it’s negative attention at this point.”

My heart feels heavy as the truth of Jay’s words sink in. “Dammit.”

“What’s really going on with you and Rachel?” Jay asks me, his brows lifted.

I rub my eyes with the heels of my hands. “Too much. Not enough.”

“Ah,” Jay says. “And do you plan on telling her that?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He snorts. “You should know by now that women often believe one another before they will believe the men in their lives. If Denise has said something negative about you, Rachel will probably believe her words in spite of her feelings for you.”

“Do you really think that?” I say.

“I know that,” he says. “Whatever you think Denise told Rachel, you had probably better get ahead of it.” He claps his hand on my shoulder. “I need to get home to dinner, or I’ll get in trouble with my better half. Get on this mess, or you might lose whatever you have going on with Rachel.”

“Thanks for your advice,” I tell Jay, and I mean it.

I listen to his retreating steps and then I pull my phone out of my pocket. I take my time composing a text for Rachel.

We need to talk. But until then, I’m going to send you some documents to look at. You need to know the real story.

I sigh and drop my phone back into my pocket. I need to pull up some documents and share them with Rachel to clear my name.

I don’t know that anything else about our relationship can be salvaged, but at least she won’t think terrible things about me.

Chapter Fifteen

Rachel

My phone pings in my pocket and I glance at my smartwatch. It's a text from Tristan.

I grumble something rude and hit ignore on my watch as I walk into the bar that Cara invited me to.

It feels good to be doing something that's just for me. It feels good not to be sitting at my desk, struggling to write a book.

It feels good not to have to think about Tristan for a moment. At least, that's what I'm trying to do.

I'm excited to find my best friend and her brother sitting around a large table and waving at me. I barely get enough time to hug and kiss them before Isaac pulls me down into a chair. "Sit, girl."

I gently roughen his dark curly hair. Isaac has the most beautiful olive-brown skin ever, and his hazel eyes glow in the dim light.

"Spill," Cara demands as soon as I sit down. "How's life been hanging out with the rich and famous?"

I laugh, signaling the bartender for a glass of water. "It's interesting," I say carefully.

Isaac leans forward, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "How's working with the infamous Tristan Black? As dreamy in the boardroom as he is in the bedroom?"

I nearly choke on my water. "Isaac! The bedroom?"

He grins unrepentantly. "What? Don't tell me you haven't at least thought about it. That man is sex on legs, and you've had a taste, I can tell."

I feel my cheeks burning. "It's not like that. We're keeping things professional," I lie.

Cara raises an eyebrow. "Don't lie to us, babe," she chides.

I shoot her a sharp glance. She already knows my secrets and she clearly isn't interested in keeping them.

"We already all know what's going on," she says placatingly. "You don't need to keep us in the dark about all the details, right?"

I sigh, taking a large gulp of water. My mouth is still dry when I set it back down. "So, you caught me I guess," I admit, my heart racing. "But it doesn't mean anything."

Cara rolls her eyes. "Whatever," she scoffs. "Everyone who knows you falls in love with you. Tristan can't be any different."

I look around the table and huff out a big sigh.

"Things are...complicated."

Isaac's face grows more serious. "What's wrong, babe?"

I instantly start crying. The waitress walks over to get my order and then frowns a little and rushes away to avoid my emotional outburst.

“Oh my God,” Cara says, reaching out a hand to touch mine. “What happened?”

I take another sip of my water and then sniff loudly. Isaac passes me a napkin, and I blow my nose. “I...I just found out...I’m pregnant.”

“Holy shit!” Cara exclaims, squeezing my hand. “That’s amazing news!”

I shake my head, “what?” Fresh tears stream down my face. “I found some things out while I was interviewing people at his company today. I...I don’t think that I even want to tell him.”

“Oh, gosh,” Isaac says, “are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“It’s pretty bad,” I whisper, sniffing loudly.

“Are you talking about that girl who worked for the company?” Cara says, her voice sharp.

I nod. “Denise said...”

Cara snorts loudly. “That bitch. God, I hate that woman. Tristan needs to fire her.”

I glance at Cara in surprise. “I mean, she seems a bit tough, but...”

“She wants to fuck Tristan. I figured that out the first time I saw them together at the same event,” Cara says bluntly. “I bet she can tell that you guys have something going on, so she decided to tell you a single part of the truth about that, just to make you feel this way.”

“What actually happened?” I ask, trying to get myself under control so that the poor waitress can come back to our table.

Cara shakes her head. “I only know a little bit of the information about it. You really need to talk to Tristan about it.”

“He’s been texting me but I’ve ignored him,” I admit, blowing my nose again.

“I’m sure he sent you information about what happened,” Isaac says. “It’s what I would do.”

“You wouldn’t do something terrible like that in the first place,” I insist.

Isaac sighs and shakes his head. “You don’t know what happened, Rachel. You could be wrong about this.”

“I just...I need time,” I say, shaking my hair back away from my face. “I want to raise this baby away from anything salacious, away from fame, away from the spotlight. It might not matter what information he sent to me.”

Isaac reaches out and touches my hand. “Rach, we get it. But aren't you just trying to close yourself off completely again? You deserve happiness too. You deserve some fun in life. You deserve to take a chance. You’ve been sad about all the stuff that happened in Alaska for too long.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” I agree with a sigh.

The waitress comes over to see if we want to place an order. I welcome her over with a watery smile and place my order. By the time she walks away, I have managed to get my emotions somewhat under control.

“Look, love,” Cara says to me as she sips from her glass of wine. “We’re here for you...for whatever you decide to do. A child is always a gift, Rach. You are going to be such a good mom.”

I start feeling like I’m going to cry all over again and I fan my face with my hands.

“Okay, okay,” Cara says to me. “Enough with the tears.” She leans closer to us. “Do you guys want to hear some truly amazing gossip I heard about Emmy Carter at a party last night?”

I allow the change of subject, letting Cara and Issac’s words wash over me and soothe away some of my distress.

I have real things to think about later, but for now, I just want to be happy.

We’re here for you...for whatever you decide to do. A child is always a gift, Rach. You are going to be such a good mom.

I hold Cara’s words close to my heart. They are helping me to hang on. I wave goodbye to my friends and step outside into the cold, damp night.

I turn around to start walking to my car...and run straight into Tristan’s chest.

I stumble back, holding up a hand as if to ward him off. I’m not sure if I just don’t want to talk to him or if I’m so startled that he is here that I’m just trying to give myself a moment to think.

“Sorry,” he says, holding up his hands placatingly. “I didn’t mean to crash into you.”

“What are you doing here?” I demand, feeling a little angry.

He has the courtesy to look abashed.

“Cara said she was out with a friend when I asked where she was. I knew it had to be you and I know this was her favorite place so...”

“Are you stalking me now?” I demand, wrapping my coat more tightly around my body. “Is that what happened with Amy?”

His brows furrow, and he shakes his head, taking a step toward me. “No! Rachel, that is not what happened at all. I sent you all the information about what happened. Didn’t you read it?”

I sigh. “No, Tristan. I have other things going on in my life than your sordid past.”

“Sordid!” he says loudly. “That’s rich, coming from someone who has been sleeping with the man she is writing a biography about.”

I feel the words like a physical blow. “Excuse me?” I whisper, my hand pressed to my heart.

He looks regretful and tries to take another step toward me. I step away, holding the distance between us. He looks uncomfortable and shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Are you going to refuse to finish the book?” he asks me bluntly.

I sigh and shake my head. “I don’t know right now,” I admit.

“I won’t be paying you for any of your time if you don’t agree to finish it,” he says to me, his tone petulant.

My eyes widen. I need the money from this book to help get Danny and me settled here. I need to do some repairs to my place, Danny needs some medical care that we couldn't get access to in Alaska, and I would like to finally have some savings.

I cannot believe that he is holding the book over my head like this.

He never cared about me at all, I realize. He just wanted to fuck me and get his way. I feel my heart turn cold in my chest.

The weight of his words is pressing down on me. This is about more than just a book. This is about control, about Tristan asserting his dominance in a way that's both infuriating and undeniably effective.

"I'll get back to you tomorrow," I say shortly, turning around and striding away.

"Rachel..." Tristan says, but I ignore him.

"Fuck you, Tristan!" I growl over my shoulder and walk faster. I swipe at the fresh tears that are slipping down my cheeks and try not to think about how hurt I am right now.

I get into my car and start driving back to my place, the road is blurry due to my tears. My phone pings with a bunch of messages and I see that they are from Tristan, but I could care less.

I make it home in record time, despite weekend traffic, and park my car in the garage. I grab my purse and slide out of the car, holding my coat closed as I hustle into the warmth of the lobby of my apartment building.

I ride the elevator up to my floor, feeling relieved to be heading to my own place. I've spent more than enough time at Tristan's place lately.

I open the sticky front door and step inside, then frown. I hear the sound of running water. Worry curls through me as I shut the door. Moving as if in a trance, I wander toward the hallway that leads to my bedroom and come to a clumsy halt.

There's water running through the ceiling of my place, down the walls, and flooding down the hallway. I carefully navigate the flooded hallway, my heels holding me out of the couple of inches of water that are puddling on the floor.

I step into my bedroom and grimace as the carpet makes a squishing noise.

"Dammit," I mutter, wanting to just run out of my apartment and get in my car and never come back.

My phone rings in my pocket, and I scowl when I see Tristan's name on the screen. Rolling my eyes, I take the call, just to get him off my back so that I can deal with this mess.

"What?" I snap into the phone, making my way across the soaked carpet to open my closet. At least most of my clothing is dry.

"Rachel...I'm sorry...I shouldn't have said any of that," he says, sounding a little frantic.

"You're right about that," I say ungraciously into the phone. I feel a sudden pang of morning sickness and bite my lip, leaning against the wall with my eyes closed for a moment.

"Look," he says, "I don't want you to feel forced to do anything. I just...I just would really appreciate it if you would take a look at the court documents and the HR reports I sent you. Denise...she's bitter and not very nice and..."

I turn away from the wall and curse as I see that my coat is wet now, too.

“What’s going on?” Tristan asks, his voice concerned.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “My apartment is completely flooded. I think the water is coming from the floor above mine. It’s...really bad.”

“I’ll be right there,” he says abruptly.

“Tristan...no, I can take care of this myself,” I start to say, only to realize that he has hung up the phone.

“I literally have the worst luck of anyone, ever,” I mutter to myself, leaving my bedroom to go into the hall and rummage for my suitcase. I need to at least pack up some essentials since I will clearly be staying in a hotel tonight.

I mince into the kitchen to find the landlord’s phone number, which I tucked into a drawer with all of my lease documents. As I start to dial the number, I close my eyes and pray for strength.

I’m not sure how much more bad luck I can deal with right now.

Chapter Sixteen

Tristan

I tap my foot impatiently in the elevator as I ride up to Rachel's floor. A flooded apartment right before Christmas sounds like a recipe for being homeless over the holidays.

I know she's mad at me, but I hope she will at least let me help her find someplace to stay. It's the least I can do after being a dick to her outside the restaurant.

"What is wrong with you?" I ask myself out loud, dragging a hand through my hair.

It was hardly Rachel's fault that Denise had brought up an old work scandal. She didn't deserve my held-over frustration from the incident with Amy.

I walk down the hallway to Rachel's door and knock. I can hear her talking on the phone, but I can barely make out the words.

I hope that she doesn't leave me standing here like a fool, for too long.

"Yeah. Okay, I guess. Sure. Bye," she says, the sounds getting clearer like she's right on the other side of the door.

I rock back and forth on my heels as I wait for her to open the door. Suddenly, she swings it open and then I'm staring into her green eyes which look haunted with rage.

“Welcome to my swimming pool,” she says, her tone harsh with irritation as she steps back to allow me in.

I walk inside and cringe when I hear my feet splashing through standing water in the foyer.

“Holy crap,” I say, looking around at all the water...everywhere. I also can’t help but notice a complete lack of any sign of the holidays. It’s a little sad.

“Yeah...” she says ruefully, pulling her hair back into a ponytail with her hand and closing her eyes.

She presses a hand to her stomach as if she doesn’t feel good.

“Come here,” I say, putting my hand on the small of her back and guiding her toward the sofa. I notice that she still has her coat on, and I pull it off her shoulders before I help her to sit down. “Can I get you anything?”

“A place to live?” she says dryly, sounding completely exhausted.

“When can they fix this?” I ask.

She sighs. “Someone is on their way over to shut off the water, but other than that, they told me it’s close to Christmas and they can’t promise me anything until after the New Year.” She buries her head in her hands.

I had suspected as much, but I had hoped, for her sake, that they might be able to get things sorted out sooner. Although, from what I can see, this is not going to be a simple cleanup process. Even outside of the holidays, this looks like weeks of work to clean up.

“You can stay with me,” I say to her before I can stop myself. I know she will probably say no, but I want to offer.

She moans into her hands, but otherwise, she doesn’t respond.

I blow out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding and come to sit next to her. I place my arm around her shoulders and give them a squeeze.

“I should be so angry at you,” she mumbles into her hands.

I smile a little. “Yeah,” I agree, “frankly, you should.”

She finally lifts her head from her hands and looks around at the mess of her apartment. She sighs loudly and flops back against the sofa cushions.

“I don’t even know how I should feel about anything that happened today,” she admits to me. “However, I don’t have a place to stay and I don’t really have the money for a hotel, especially in Seattle.”

“My place is huge,” I reassure her. “You can have your own space and I won’t bother you at all. That is unless you want to keep working on my book.”

She meets my gaze for a moment, and I hate the look of betrayal that I see in her eyes. I also feel like I see something that looks strangely like guilt shining out at me before she looks away.

“I need time to think....and to look over those documents...before I make a decision about the book. I don’t want to be connected to a book that hides the truth. If you have been doing things like...what we’ve been doing...I need to be honest about it in the book. We would need to have a serious talk before I could continue working on the project.”

I nod, although I actually don't care about the book. I just care about keeping her close enough to me that she will see that this was all a big misunderstanding.

I am finding that I would be very upset if she decided to hate me.

"You can have the other wing of the penthouse," I tell her. "It will be your own private space. You can work on your other book if you want. I might be able to help with all of this...mess...too."

She smiles wanly at me, then sobers abruptly. "Oh my gosh," she says, pursing her lips. "It's almost Christmas. You don't want to have some random person staying with you over the holidays. That would be so weird."

I shake my head. I want to tell her that I can't think of anything that I would like more, but I don't. I know that telling her that I had already been dreaming up ways to trick her into spending Christmas with me will only make her more uncomfortable at the moment.

"We already talked about this," I remind her. "Neither of us does the holiday season. It's just some days in December that you will be staying with me, that's all."

She manages a small smile for me and a little, tight nod. "Okay," she agrees, her voice very quiet. "But this is just temporary, and I reserve the right to move out without notice if you do something else I don't like."

"Pinky promise," I say to her, holding out my little finger.

She lifts a brow and stares at my hand, then rolls her eyes and completes the pinky promise oath with me.

"Now it's official," I say with a silly grin.

She's spared having to come up with a reply by the arrival of the landlord's emergency contact. She shows the man all the running water and the mess, and he vanishes for a few minutes to turn off the water.

When he comes back, he looks uncomfortable as he tells Rachel that he can't get anyone to answer the door at the apartment one floor up, which will slow down the process of dealing with the mess.

"When can you get the cleanup crew in here?" I ask, taking over the conversation because Rachel looks like she's about to dissolve into the water on the floor.

She looks exhausted and heartsick, and just plain old fed up.

"Ummm," the man hedges. "Well, it's almost Christmas so..."

"I'll get someone to come over tomorrow and get started on things," I announce, pulling out my phone and dialing the emergency cleanup group that I used when one of the floors of our office location flooded.

They don't come cheap, but I can easily afford to help Rachel out. This will be a small job for that kind of company.

"Oh, but we have our own cleanup people," the man says, squirming a little.

I wave a hand at him and take out my wallet. I get a business card out of my pocket and shove it in his general direction. "Tell your boss to call me tomorrow. We can figure it out. I can afford to pay for the repairs myself so that she doesn't have to wait until January."

He keeps trying to protest, but I ignore him as the call center at the cleanup company picks up the call. I describe what is needed and give them Rachel's address, then

promise to head over here with them the next day.

By the time I hang up, Rachel has consoled the representative of the apartment building and ushered him out into the hall.

She shuts the door behind him and turns around to look at me, her hands on her hips. “Tristan Black, I swear to God, I will never be able to repay you for all these favors at this point. What are you trying to do to me?”

“I’m being a good...friend,” I say, relieved that I didn’t slip up and use another word to refer to us. I don’t honestly even know what we are at this point, but 'friend' is not how I think of her in any case.

She harrumphs, but she accepts my help. I think she’s probably just too tired to fight me anymore.

“Did you pack up some clothes?” I ask her. “The cleanup team will pack up the rest of your stuff that didn’t get damaged by the water and move it into storage if you want.”

She reaches out and pulls a rolling suitcase over to her from the kitchen and gestures to it. “My entire life in a bag...again.” She stares down at the bag with a desolate look on her face. “It feels like I literally just got done unpacking all of this and now it all has to be packed up again.”

I feel bad for her. She looks done in, and I know for a fact that she’s not truly over all the things that happened in Alaska. And I’m sure what Denise put in her head just triggered it all again.

The least I can do is try to help her out, even if she decides that she never wants to talk to me again after she’s had a little time to get back on her feet.

“Come on,” I tell her. “Let’s get you away from the great flood and into some pajamas. We can order takeout and eat it in front of the fireplace if you want.”

Her smile is a little wobbly, but at least she doesn’t look like she’s about to burst into tears or punch me anymore. “Okay,” she says.

I collect her bag and step out into the hallway first, waiting until she’s locked the door and turned back around. I hold out my hand without thinking, inviting her to take it, then wince and awkwardly bring it back into my body and tuck it into my coat pocket. I had almost forgotten how mad she was at me about an hour ago.

As we stand in silence in the elevator, it’s hard to imagine that just twelve hours ago we were as close as any two people could be. Would she be able to forgive me? I hoped so. I was fast realizing that I couldn’t imagine a world without Rachel in it, and that scared me...a lot.

Do you love her? my brain asked as I walked her to my car and held the door for her.

I watch her slim, toned legs as she swings them into the car and feel my heart turn over in my chest. She glances over at me, a question in her glade-green eyes and I manage a slight smile to cover my spiraling thoughts.

As I walk around to put her bag in the trunk, I feel like my heart might beat out of my chest. My God , I think to myself. I do love her .

And I just scared her away with a little help from Denise. Why hadn’t I been honest with her about my feelings for her? Why hadn’t I thought to tell her about the incident with Amy at work?

There were so many things that I could have done differently, and yet, I had treated her like she was just another casual hookup of mine who just happened to be writing

my story for the world to read.

I could not have been more stupid, and now, I might lose her. I feel sick at the thought. I close the trunk lid, and pause for a moment, trying to figure out what to do next.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me, and I smile. It's almost Christmas, after all.

Maybe it's time to start believing in things like Christmas miracles.

Chapter Seventeen

Rachel

“Morning.”

Tristan is sitting at the dining table as I pass by to make myself coffee. He had sent me a text last night which I saw but didn't respond to.

Breakfast will be at eight.

I could imagine him saying that to my face with his authoritative tone, and somehow managing to make it sound sexy. I hate how much he's already worn me down.

Last night had been...comforting, actually. We had ordered takeout, he had turned on the gas fireplace, and we talked about everything and nothing.

It had been nice. Nicer than it should have been for two people who were just having an argument.

I had been more comfortable than I should have been with a man who might have been fooling around with his employees. That was, if Denise was to be believed.

Morning.

He said the word so casually, so calmly. As if last night wasn't intense with the flood. As if I didn't ignore his message.

I pour myself a cup of coffee that is mostly cream. I know I can have some caffeine, but I don't want to do anything to hurt the baby.

There are a million ways things can go wrong for me now. The scandal that would come of the world discovering that I got pregnant with Tristan's child while I was working on his book makes me want to die inside.

I would lose everything I have worked so hard to build. My credibility would be destroyed. I have worked so hard to get to this point. I can't let this pregnancy take everything from me.

And frankly, Tristan is still largely an unknown to me. I can't afford to give up everything for what is more than likely a simple little fling for him.

"Morning, Tristan." I walk past him to take a seat.

Was he waiting for me? It seems like he might have been, because he gets up and starts serving himself a plate from the small buffet that's set up on the counter.

I notice that there are three different kinds of toast, scrambled eggs, peppery-looking bacon, and a carafe of juice on the sideboard. I ponder if I can keep any of the food down as I watch him dish up his plate.

"Who does all the cooking around here?" I ask.

"Nancy," he says casually. "Although, sometimes we cook together."

"She makes you cook?" I ask, a little confused. "I can't imagine anyone making you do anything."

"Nancy is very kind," he says back. "She is willing to take the time to teach me

things. She's been helping me learn how to cook since I was little."

I smile a little and duck my head before taking a sip of my coffee. I don't want him to see me softening toward him.

"Something amusing?"

He bites into his toast and looks at me sidelong. So he noticed.

"Most wealthy people don't care about learning to do things like cook," I say with a shrug.

"I know how to do lots of practical things," he says. He gets a message on his phone and glances at it, then looks up at me. "Are you up for a little adventure today?"

"I don't know..." I hedge.

"You seem to think I'm only interested in fucking you, or that I'm only interested in you writing my book," he says abruptly, and I lean back in my chair a little.

I'm both relieved and shocked. It's nice to have this part of our...relationship...out in the open, but I don't quite know what to say to him.

"I like you, Rachel," he goes on to say. "You'll just have to accept that."

"O-okay," I say, my tone sounding like it's a question.

"So, it's settled," he says in that high-handed way he sometimes has. "We'll go do something nice later today."

I open my mouth to protest, but he sets down his fork and rises quickly. "I'm heading

over to your place to let the cleanup crew in, but I shouldn't be gone too long," he says.

"Oh, I want to go too," I argue, starting to get up.

He shakes his head and comes around the table to look down at me. "It's clear you've been working too hard. You still look exhausted," he says to me. Then he shocks me by leaning in and pressing a kiss to my cheek. "Let me do this to help out."

I open and close my mouth like a fish trying to breathe out of water, but nothing comes out. I should stop him, I should argue with him, I should say I can handle things myself.

But the truth is, I'm so tired. I am so fucking tired. I am sick of doing everything on my own, I'm sick of all kinds of problems and surprises, and I'm sick of being sick of it.

It feels like the worst kind of surrender to give in to his bossiness and to let him go take care of my flooded apartment without me, but I realize I'm going to let him.

"Thank you," I manage to say to him as he hurries from the room.

"It's no trouble!" he calls back, and then he's gone.

I stare around the fancy dining room, at a loss. What am I supposed to do with myself now?

Sighing, I get up and start putting some food on my plate. I'm not sure that I can eat any of it, but I should try.

I come back to the table and sit down, scrolling through my emails and trying to

decide which of them I have the heart to tackle right now.

I see Tristan's name in the list and my finger freezes. I stare at the email with the attached documents that he claims explain everything that Denise was talking about.

"Fuck," I mutter to myself, glaring at the email. I honestly don't really want to know anything else about the scandal at his company. I hate that Denise brought it up at all, and I hate that Tristan was so pushy about me forming an opinion about the situation as well.

I'm tired of being pushed around, of being told that I need to feel things that are convenient for other people. I know that wasn't his intention, not really, but it still sucks to be asked over and over again to be accommodating, sweet little Rachel.

But I think about what Cara said about the situation too and I shove a piece of bacon into my mouth with irritation and make myself click on the email. I force myself to eat the bacon as the email loads and the files download to my phone.

I don't feel good this morning, but at least I'm not barfing all over the place. I hope this part of the pregnancy process is short-lived. I despise throwing up.

The files finally finish downloading, and I open the first one so I can start reading.

By the time I have finished reading all of the information in the files, I have also managed to eat a full meal. I realize it's the first meal that I have been able to keep down in days and I feel oddly proud of myself.

Being pregnant is weird.

I lean back against the wooden back of the dining room chair and cradle my cup of coffee. I stare sightlessly at the full-length windows across the large space and ponder

what I just read.

The documents detailed the situation that Denise had mentioned without holding back any of the facts. Amy had been young, she had been hired to be Tristan's personal assistant, and she had made allegations against him for harassment almost right away.

The documents indicated that Denise had been instrumental in reporting the situation, and Amy seemed to have gone along with the case's progress until she was forced to make a statement about the kinds of things that Tristan had done to her.

Apparently, she had come clean and said that Denise had wanted her to report Tristan and that she hadn't felt like Tristan had done anything inappropriate.

She had also admitted that she was hoping to use the admin position to get in touch with other rich and powerful people so that she could track down a rich boyfriend.

There had been weeks of investigation done by Tristan's company and local law enforcement. In the end, the allegations had been dismissed and Amy had turned in her resignation and apparently vanished shortly thereafter.

I still needed to talk to Tristan about all of this, but it really did seem like Denise was just a troublemaker all the way around. I thought of her stiff, pretty, perfect face. She had seemed...excited...to tell me about the drama with Amy.

Now it all made sense. Well, some of it made sense. What did Denise want from Tristan that she was willing to cause all of this drama over a made-up allegation? Tristan didn't seem to be aware that Denise had it in for him, but Jay seemed to be aware that she was a problem.

I still needed to interview Jay...that was if I decided to keep working on the book. I still didn't know what I wanted to do about anything, honestly.

Part of me wanted to simply go back in time and turn down Tristan at Cara's party.

My life hadn't been easy before I met him, but at least I hadn't been secretly pregnant, worried about my future career, or concerned about how honest I should be when I wrote the book.

My phone pings and I glance down at it.

How are things?

The message is from Cara and I smile a little bit.

Okay. My apartment flooded, though .

She sends back a series of emoticons, all of which indicate shock and dismay. Then my phone rings.

"Hey," I say to my friend, leaving my coffee cup on the counter and wandering back to the room that I am staying in for now.

"Oh my God, what happened with your place?" Cara demands.

I blow out a breath. "The upstairs neighbor's place had a leak or something. There was water everywhere."

"Oh shit," Cara breathes out. "Do you need a place to stay?"

I sigh. "Actually, I'm staying with Tristan," I say ruefully.

She squeals. "Ooooh. Lots of time for bonding!"

“Well...” I say, and then I explain everything that has happened over the last twenty-four hours.

Cara is totally silent on the other end of the line, which is rare for her. Cara always has something to say.

“I just don’t know what to do now,” I admit. “I don’t want to tell him about the baby unless I’m sure that he’s actually a good guy. I just feel like he might just be using me, Cara.”

“No,” Cara says and I can just imagine her shaking her head. “I’ve known him for years and he has never been anything but kind and caring toward the women in his life. He doesn’t really do long-term relationships, but that doesn’t mean he’s been shitty to anyone that he has dated. I can’t imagine him doing any of the things that Denise wanted to indicate.”

I press my lips together. Cara is a good judge of character, and she has run in the same circles as Tristan for years.

She would have noticed if Tristan was being an obvious creep, in any case. And, if I’m being honest, I don’t think Tristan is capable of something like that.

However, I am still conflicted about writing his story and I’m still not sure I should tell him about the baby, either.

“Either way,” Cara goes on, “Tristan deserves to know about the baby. Your baby also deserves to know their father.”

I want to argue with her, but I suddenly realize that she’s right. I don’t want my child to go through the things that Danny and I went through. I want them to have a happy, healthy life.

“You’re right,” I say quietly.

“That doesn’t mean you have to do it right now,” she says to me. “But maybe soon, you know?”

“Yeah,” I agree, biting my bottom lip.

“By the way,” Cara says abruptly. “When is your first doctor’s appointment?”

I grimace. I hate the doctor and I’m not great about going to see one for any reason. I honestly hadn’t even thought about going to have an ultrasound.

“You haven’t set an appointment yet, have you?” Cara scolds.

“I’m new here,” I say defensively. “I don’t know any of the doctors in the area. I don’t even have a primary care doctor.”

“You are so lucky you have the best friend in the world,” Cara says huffily. I can hear that I’m on speakerphone now. “I’m sending you the number for my OB. Call them and get an appointment ASAP.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say with chagrin.

“Send me the date. I’ll go with you,” she adds.

“Okay,” I say, feeling less worried. “Thanks for being a great friend, Cara,” I say to her.

She chuckles. “I do my best. Think about talking to Tristan. I think you can trust him to handle this the right way.”

“Will do,” I say back, but as I hang up the phone, I know that Tristan isn’t entirely the problem.

I honestly don’t know if I can trust myself to handle this in the right way. Heck, I’m not even sure there is a right way to tackle this kind of confusing situation I find myself in.

Dress casual. See you back at home in about three hours.

I stare at the text from Tristan and release a sigh.

Whether I want to or not, I’m going to have ample opportunity to talk things over with Tristan. The universe seems hell-bent on throwing us together at every turn.

Chapter Eighteen

Tristan

I update my calendar at the office and then lean back in my chair. Last night had been...unexpected, but not unwelcome.

I had been so comfortable with Rachel's company in front of the fireplace, that I had almost slipped up and asked her to come to bed with me.

It honestly seemed like the most natural thing in the world to have her share my bed, but I knew that she was still too angry at me to entertain such a thing.

And frankly, after the whole thing with Denise, and being forced to think about the situation with Amy again, I hadn't wanted anything but a cuddle.

Amy had been looking for success in all the wrong places, using all the wrong methods, and Denise had been all too willing to cause trouble for me.

It hurt a little, to think that someone who had worked for me for so long would clearly wish me so ill. But there was no way to let her go without legal trouble after the Amy mess.

I had tried not to think about Denise's innate dislike of me ever since the whole Amy debacle, but having Rachel accuse me of things I never did just brought everything up all over again.

Does Rachel really think I am a bad guy? That I would come on to my employees, or ask them for favors?

I grimace as I realize that her relationship with me isn't very professional. To be fair to me though, we both had wanted that first night together and neither of us could have known we would end up being so...compatible.

Not that I regret it, but I can see why she might assume I would try to sleep with all of my female employees.

I lean my head back against my chair and close my eyes. We had been up late and I was more tired than I wanted to admit.

I am getting old enough that being short on sleep is sometimes a big distraction. It makes me a little sad to think that I might one day not have the energy to run this company without help.

I have always been a go-getter, always burning the midnight oil, always working too hard.

That's probably why you're always alone, too, I think bitterly to myself.

I have met precious few women over the years who were willing to try and find time to date someone who was as busy as me. Not that I could really blame them, but I loved my job. It is a huge part of me.

I have always hoped that someone someday would understand that and love me in spite of my passion for my work.

Rachel is passionate about what she does, I know that much. It's actually been nice to spend time talking with someone else who really loves the work that they do.

It's one of the things that I had been attracted to first if I was being honest. I love her drive and her willingness to work as hard as she needs to work to meet her own goals.

I allow myself to slip into a little half-doze, my mind combing through memories of my evening eating in front of the fire with Rachel last night.

She had put on some cute little sweats and an oversized T-shirt, but that had not stopped me from being able to see the delicious shape of her breasts under the shirt as she plopped down on the sofa and grabbed her takeout box.

She had wadded her hair up into a messy bun, but it looked beautiful anyway, catching the light from the fire with a warm glow. Her cheeks had still been a little pink from her bath, and she hadn't had any makeup on.

She had still been the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and my heart had squeezed in my chest at the same time as my cock twitched in my joggers at the sight of her.

She looked like she belonged on the sofa near me. She looked at home there. Our conversation had flowed readily from topic to topic, and I had loved finally getting to talk with her about the things that she liked.

I hadn't really realized how little I knew about her.

She had been giggling and telling me a story about this time when she snuck a boy into her bedroom by having him climb the gutter and slip in through her window. She had said that he had fallen off the roof and broken his wrist and she had been forced to call his parents to let them know.

I had watched her laughing and blushing. And I had thought about what I would have done to her if she had helped me climb in through her window. I imagined it as I

stared at her sitting a respectable distance away on my white sofa.

I had imagined reaching out and pulling the hair tie out of her hair so that the blonde shining mass fell in silky waves around her shoulders.

I would have brought her close to me, kissed her, and slipped my hand under that big T-shirt to squeeze the fullness of her breast.

She would have made that soft little surrendering sound that she always made when I touched her breasts, and I would have switched to squeezing harder, pinching her nipple while I used my tongue in her mouth to show her what I wanted to do with my dick.

I had imagined tugging her into my lap and helping her to get rid of her sweats. I would have tugged down the waistband of my joggers and plunged into her welcoming heat without warning, just to hear her cry out with pleasure.

I had imagined her breasts bouncing with each of my thrusts, her head tilted back as her hair shimmered and moved along with her. I could even feel the silky tendrils sliding over my wrists and fingers, as I helped her to move faster, driving us both toward our release.

She would have started arching her back, sweeping in closer to me, taking me deeper as she made the delicious sounds that let me know she was close. I already knew her body so well that it was easy to find the perfect angle to help her come with shattering relief.

I could imagine her practically sobbing my name as she clutched my shoulders and flew apart, her pussy clenching my dick as she shuddered and gasped. I would have thrust into her a few more times and then allowed myself to let go as well, breathing her name as her pussy fluttered around me, milking my cock, wringing the pleasure

from me.

We would have stayed like that afterward, breathing as one, her hair tumbled all around us, the scent of sex in the air, the fire crackling in the background.

“Umm...hey there.”

I snap awake, completely confused about where I am or what is going on. I almost expect to be at home or to find that Rachel is here, but then I remember that I am at the office. I must have dozed off. I blink rapidly and realize that it was Jay who spoke to me.

I also realize that I have a raging hard-on, and I quickly yank my chair in closer to my desk to try and hide it. The way that Jay is looking at me from the doorway makes me think that maybe I didn't do such a good job of hiding it, though.

“You've been working too hard lately,” Jay says to me, coming to sit in the chair in front of my desk.

I sigh. “I always work too hard. It's who I am.”

“Are you sure that there isn't something else that's causing you to fall asleep at work?”

I look over at Jay, noting the speculative glint in his eye. He knows me well. He knows I never fall asleep at work. He probably also knows that I'm never this distracted heading into the Christmas season.

We always have things to take care of, like marketing for the holidays, seasonal gifts for vendors and business partners, and a variety of other year-end tasks.

I war with myself. Should I be honest, or should I deflect? I wish I knew how Rachel actually feels about all of this. Wet dreams aside, she's starting to become a big part of my life, and I'm finding that it's hard to imagine her moving out once the book is complete or her apartment is inhabitable, whichever comes first.

"It's Rachel," I say finally, scrubbing a hand down my face. "I don't know what to do about her."

"As far as the book goes?" Jay asks. "Or is there something else going on?"

My mouth pulls into a little smirk. "The second thing," I admit.

Jay whistles a little and leans back. "I could tell that you guys were having fun, but is this a...serious thing to you now?"

I nod. "Yeah," I say, surprised to hear myself saying the word. "Yeah, I really think it is."

"No wonder she was so upset about the nonsense that Denise told her," Jay says thoughtfully.

"I would have told her about all of that if I thought it was relevant, you know?" I grit my teeth together with frustration. "You don't think I treat the women who work here poorly, do you?" I look at my hands.

I'm scared of the truth, but what if I have been a total dick all these years, and no one has been brave enough to tell me?

Jay chuckles. "Look, you enjoy female company, and you are a great listener, but treating the women who work here the wrong way is not something I would accuse you of. I have always hoped that you might settle down with someone, if only so that

you don't make such a pathetic third wheel when Janet and I take you with us on trips."

I flip him off with a smile, before crossing my arms over my chest. "I just...I feel like there's something else going on with Rachel all of a sudden. She was always really clear about wanting to just have fun and that she didn't want anything serious, but then all of that stuff happened with Denise and she got so...worried."

"I imagine she's trying to decide what to do about the book," Jay says astutely. "She can't write your biography if everyone knows you two are sleeping together. It would discredit her and her work."

My mouth forms an "O" as I soak that in. Oh, I had been so stupid! No wonder she had been so scared of sleeping with me more than once.

I still didn't know if it fully explained the undercurrent of fear that I felt in her whenever we were alone together, but it did make things a bit clearer overall.

"Maybe she doesn't even need to write that book, now," Jay goes on. "After all, if you guys care about one another, then the book shouldn't stand in your way."

I nod, but I realize that this isn't a decision that I can make for Rachel. If I back out of the contract, she will be hurt, and she will lose a lot of money, both for the completion of the project and for the sales profits once the book has been published.

I also know that she won't want to give up on the book because that's not who she is.

"It's up to her," I tell Jay. "I won't take the book away from her."

Jay blows out a breath. "Well, try not to get caught in any kind of compromising position with her until the book is out. Not sure you two are capable of being that

circumspect, but you should try.” He winks at me.

“That obvious?” I ask, feeling a little heat creep into my cheeks in spite of my desire to remain cool as a cucumber.

“More than obvious...blatant,” Jay says back. He grins at me. “It’s nice to see you in love. It’s a good look on you.”

I think about my own realization that I loved Rachel and how crazy and impossible it had seemed that I might feel that way.

However, now that Jay has said my love for Rachel was obvious, it feels less like a figment of my imagination and more like a real thing.

“Is this how you felt when you decided to marry Janet?” I ask with a little smile.

Jay shrugs. “How should I know? She proposed to me.”

I laugh out loud at that. I had known that, but it had never occurred to me just how much my friend allowed his wife to call the shots in their shared life until now.

I wondered if I could manage to allow someone else to make such big decisions for the both of us.

Could I relinquish that much control? It seemed like something that would be nearly impossible to do, but maybe it was why Jay was so happily married.

“Commitment,” Jay says to me, leaning forward to pat me on the shoulder before rising to his feet. “You should try it sometime.”

I nod in silence. I know he’s right. I try to imagine Rachel proposing to me, but it just

feels like something that would never happen to me.

Although, knowing Rachel it's not impossible.

"What did you want to ask me?" I say to Jay as my friend walks toward the door to my office.

He turns back and waves a hand. "I just popped in to wake you up before someone came in here and saw you napping and having an...exciting dream."

I can feel the rush of heat reach all the way to the roots of my hair as I look at my friend.

"You'd better head back to your place. I saw you wanted to be out of here by two-thirty," Jay reminds me.

I glance at my watch and curse, bolting to my feet. "Thanks. See you next week."

"Consider taking the holidays off!" Jay calls after me, but I don't reply as I jog down the hall toward the elevator.

Chapter Nineteen

Rachel

I tap my foot. He had told me to be ready on time, and I was. I adjust the soft, fuzzy sweater I had chosen from my suitcase and glance at my phone for the millionth time.

I instinctively run my fingers over my dainty star bracelet, it's practically a comfort charm.

It's not like him to be late. Now I am starting to worry rather than feel annoyed. The feel of my bracelet under my fingers soothes my nerves.

Just as I lift my phone to give him a call, the elevator pings, and moments later, Tristan walks into the apartment.

I give him a grim look, tapping my watch and lifting a brow at him.

He looks embarrassed and nods. "I know, I know...I.... fell asleep at work."

"You what?" I ask with a giggle.

He looks like he might be blushing. "Guess I've been working too hard."

"I thought something happened to you," I tell him with a little pique.

"You were worried about me?" he asks, stepping closer to me. I can't help but take in

a deep breath of his spicy cologne.

I bite the inside of my cheek, resisting the urge to stand up and kiss him. I'm supposed to be mad at him, and I am certainly worried about his intentions, but my body doesn't seem to care.

"Something like that," I admit, then stand up briskly. "You have a surprise planned for me?"

His smile curves his lips for a moment, then he offers me his hand. I reluctantly take it, wanting to ignore the zing of awareness that snakes up my arm at his touch, but being unable to.

Damn the man for being so handsome.

"I figure we both need to learn to like the holidays," he says to me, leading me into the elevator.

I look at him sidelong. "What kind of smarmy Christmas nonsense do you have in mind?" I ask him.

He chuckles. "The most smarmy, wonderful, Christmasy time ever," he assures me, and I groan a little. He nudges me with his elbow. "Come on, Rachel. Be a sport. Let's give Christmas a whirl."

"Fine," I say, drawing the word out to be many syllables. "But only because I can interview you while we spend time together."

He wings a brow at me but doesn't comment. He does, however, slip his hand down my forearm, grab my wrist, and tuck my hand into the crook of his elbow.

I start to tug it free, but then the elevator dings as we land in the lobby and Tristan sails forward with me in tow.

I manage to wave at the front desk person before we step outside into the chilly drizzle that is as much a part of Seattle as Pike Place Market and the Space Needle.

“The parking garage is over...” I start to say, but then the words die on my lips as I take in the stretch limo that is parked outside the building. A man dressed like Santa climbs out of the car and comes to open the door for us, and I giggle as I slide inside.

It’s pleasantly warm inside the limo, and I take off my coat as I lean back against the soft seat. Tristan climbs in behind me and sits across from me. I ignore the small pang of sadness I feel that he didn’t choose to sit alongside me.

I know that it’s no good for us to be that close. We will only end up giving in to the attraction that neither of us seems to be able to fight.

“So,” I say as the limo starts to drive. “Where are you taking me? Are you kidnapping me?”

He laughs and shakes his head, opening the minibar and checking the contents. “This would be one hell of a way to kidnap someone. It’s hardly like we are traveling incognito in the limo.”

He rummages a little and pulls out a bottle of champagne. He holds it up questioningly, but I just shake my head, suddenly scared he will see right through me and know that I’m pregnant.

“Umm...no thanks,” I say a little too quickly, my cheeks hot.

Tristan gives me an odd look but moves past my strange, strident reaction. “That’s

totally fine. There are other things in here like soda and some sparkling water. Oh, there's also some hot chocolate ice cream!"

"Oh, give me one of those," I say eagerly.

He pulls out a cup with plastic wrap over it and hands it to me. He also gives me a spoon. I lean back against the seat and close my eyes in bliss as I enjoy the first bite.

"This is to die for," I say with my mouth full. The baby seems to like my choice of food as well because I feel immediately better as I start eating the dessert.

"I asked them to surprise me with some holiday snacks and treats when they stocked the car," Tristan says happily, sounding like a kid. He pulls some candy canes out of a little compartment next to him and happily unwraps one to enjoy.

"So, honestly... where are we going?" I ask again as I enjoy the delicious treat in the cup.

He winks at me. "Let me surprise you," he says.

I mock-frown at him for a moment, but then I fall silent, just being happy to exist in this moment in this fancy car, with this delicious food.

We drive for about forty-five minutes before the car comes to a stop. During that time, Tristan and I talk about his childhood, his friends, college, and anything else that I can think of that might be related to the book.

I hope I'm actually absorbing the information that I need to know in order to get the book done. I'm so distracted by the wetness in my panties each time he grins at me that I'm not sure.

“I think we are both going to love this,” Tristan says to me as he offers me a hand out of the car.

I button my coat and then slide over to the door. I take his hand and allow him to pull me outside.

The first thing I notice is smells that I associate with the country. I look around and a grin spreads out over my features as I take in the beautiful old barn that is decorated with Christmas lights, the tall candy canes at the entry gate, and the beauty of the rural area we have come to.

“This place is beautiful,” I breathe, turning around happily.

“I thought it would be fun to pick out our own tree,” Tristan tells me. “Come on. Let’s go look at what they have.”

“A Christmas tree?” I say uncertainly. “But your place is already decorated for Christmas.”

He waves a hand at that. “Nancy did her best, but I can’t remember the last time I’ve had a Christmas tree. I just woke up this morning and realized that we needed to get one.”

“But trees make a mess, and they need watered, and...” I start to say as I balk.

“Why don’t you leave all of that up to me?” Tristan says to me with that charming smile of his that could charm the birds out of the sky. “You deserve to have a nice Christmas. You just moved here, your apartment flooded, you’ve been feeling sick, and I’ve been monopolizing your time. The least I can do is make sure that you have a proper, family Christmas.”

Family. I think about the word. I barely know what it means. I really didn't have parents growing up, and without my close friends and my aunt, I wouldn't have had any idea what it felt like to give and receive love.

I look at the man standing across from me, holding out his hand to me. His eyes glow with excitement, and he has thought up this amazing afternoon and evening for us, just to cheer me up.

Would it be so bad to just give in and have some fun? Would it be so wrong to enjoy myself for just a little while, without worrying about what might happen if Tristan gets tired of me, or if we find that we don't have enough in common with one another to stay together?

I allow myself to smile finally, stepping forward and taking his hand. "I have no idea how this is done," I say to him ruefully.

"I have a little bit of a clue," he assures me. "We still observed Christmas traditions in my family, even if things were...strained each year at the holidays. I at least know what we have to start with. The decorating the tree part, that's on you."

"Me?" I say loudly, tugging at his hand so that he will look at me. "I have no idea how to do that," I tell him.

He shrugs. "We'll figure it out together, how about that?"

I roll my eyes and follow him as we walk out into the rows of green, spiky trees that smell amazing. We debate about size for a while, make some very obvious, immature jokes about the size of other things, and then finally settle on a tree that we like.

"Should we flock it?" Tristan asks me, tilting his head to the side as he ponders.

I shake my head. “Nah,” I say. “I like things that aren’t in disguise. I’m bad at secrets and I don’t think a Christmas tree should have any secrets either.”

He looks at me for a moment and then bursts into laughter. “If I hadn’t known that you were a writer for a living, I would have wondered how on earth you thought up something like that.”

I smile a bit in reply, feeling strangely pleased with his enjoyment of my odd train of thought. “My mom always said I was so odd that I would never find a boyfriend,” I hear myself admitting. I clap a hand over my mouth after the words come out. “Why did I just say that?”

Tristan looks at me sympathetically. “Your mom sounds selfish and shallow,” he says to me. He reaches out and tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. “You are wonderful just as you are. I love your clever brain.”

I gulp and just stare into his eyes, trying to find the annoyance that had sustained me for the past few days. As far as I reached, trying to find it, it was gone.

I decide to just let this moment happen, to stop fighting it. I turn my head and press a kiss to his fingers. He reaches out and tugs me closer, and I tip my head back to allow him access to my lips.

The kiss is different than the others that we have shared. It’s not hurried, intense, combative. This kiss is sweet, soft, and gentle. I can feel my toes curling in my sturdy boots.

“Do you want to get takeout and decorate the tree when we get back?” Tristan asks me, his voice husky.

I nod. “That sounds heavenly.”

“Let me go find someone to get the tree onto the car,” Tristan says.

“The limo?” I say, shocked that the company would allow such a thing.

“They brought a tarp and tie-downs!” he calls over his shoulder to me as he goes hunting for someone to wrap up the tree.

“Wonder if he even has any ornaments,” I say to myself, wrapping my arms around myself to keep out the chill.

I’m not sure if it’s the pregnancy hormones or just the wetness of the Seattle area, but I have been cold all the time lately.

“Yes, this one,” Tristan says as he joins me, gesturing to the tree we had picked out.

He talks with the tree farm owner for a little bit and then guides me ahead of him toward the car. “We can enjoy the warmth of the car while they get the tree ready to go,” he tells me.

We slide back onto the soft bench seats of the limo, and Tristan takes off his gloves and shakes some moisture off of them.

“It’s chilly today,” he says.

“It’s chilly every day here,” I say dryly.

“Come here,” Tristan invites, opening his arms and gesturing to the space next to him.

I again shove away the practical part of my brain that wants me to avoid being close to Tristan, and slither across the seat to tuck myself under his bicep.

The warmth radiating off his body is very welcome, and I nestle into his side.

“Are you having fun?” Tristan asks me.

Sleep is weighing on me, but I manage to mumble back, “I’m having a blast. There was hot chocolate ice cream.”

Then I slip into sleep.

Chapter Twenty

Tristan

She's been snoring softly for a while now. It should be annoying, but it's cute.

I look down at her pretty face nestled against my jacket and I feel a pang of protective love that I hadn't known I was capable of.

I don't know what comes next. I've never really done something like this. Do I ask her to date me? Do I ask her to move in? Do I just allow her to stay until she decides that she wants to propose to me instead?

I look out the window as we start entering the city again, pondering what comes next. I decide that I just can't know right now what we even are to one another.

However, what I do know is that we have a beautiful Christmas tree on the top of the car, Nancy is making a special dinner for us, and I bought an entire set of Balsam Hill ornaments a few years ago, which have never once been used.

And I have a beautiful companion to help me enjoy the evening. Whether she will still be living with me when Christmas rolls around remains to be seen, but for now, I'm just happy that she's here.

"Are we home?" she asks, sitting up blearily and looking around.

Home . Does she think of my place as home already? I wish that I didn't like the

thought of that so much.

“Almost,” I say to her, pressing a kiss to the tip of her nose.

She giggles and shakes her head at me, then pouts up at me. “No fair sneaking up on me when I’m still half asleep.”

“You snore,” I tell her. “It’s adorable,” I add when she starts to argue with me that she doesn’t.

“I never used to,” she says a bit grumpily. “It’s probably something else that’s changed now that I’m...” She stops herself abruptly and looks at me with wide eyes.

I feel worried for a moment. What had she been about to say? I open my mouth to ask her why she didn’t finish her sentence when the limo pulls to a stop.

“We’ve arrived,” the limo driver tells us over the intercom. “Would you like help with the tree?”

“If you can just help me get it into the elevator, that’s good enough,” I say back.

“Won’t the lobby get needles all over the place?” Rachel asks.

“You need to stop worrying about all of this so much,” I tell her, helping her slide toward the door.

“Says the man with more money than God,” Rachel says back to me, but her tone makes it clear she’s joking.

I admit to myself that she has a point, however. There are certain things that are easier once you have enough money to make things happen.

I hadn't missed out on much as a child, but I hadn't enjoyed truly luxurious living until I got my company established.

The thing was, while the money was really nice, and I got to enjoy a lot of hobbies I had never been able to enjoy as a kid, it was also lonely being rich.

I was never sure if people were interested in knowing me for me or my money. Most people weren't willing to treat me like everyone else, either.

That shit gets really old.

But it also gets really lonely. I hadn't realized how lonely until Rachel had de facto moved in. In just a short amount of time, she had made my life more meaningful, made me look forward to coming home from the office, made me want to do spontaneous things like this.

It felt like truly living and I realized that I hadn't been really making the most of life for years now.

"Sometimes that money comes in handy," I tell her as we get into the elevator with the tree. She's trapped at one end, while I am at the other, both of us being poked by needles and chuckling.

I manage to get my key card out of my pocket so that we can travel to the top floor, and then we spill out into my place in a flurry of pine needles.

"Oh my," Nancy says as she walks toward the elevator. She smiles fondly at me as she watches me dust loose needles off my coat. "That's a big tree."

"We have the room for it," I say with a smile, manhandling the tree over to the living room and leaning it against the wall by the fireplace. "Do you know where those

ornaments are at, Nance?"

She purses her lips for a moment, then holds up a finger. "Yes. I'll be right back."

She vanishes for a few minutes and then she rolls in a multi-tiered storage container that is protected by a cloth cover.

"Oh my gosh!" Rachel squeals, hopping over to the storage cart and clapping her hands. "When I was a kid I wanted to get a set of these ornaments!"

It feels good to be able to offer her something that she feels this excited about. "They're really pretty. You can check them out."

I watch Rachel unzip the cover over the ornaments and start pulling out unique ornaments with care, smiling as she catalogs the set. She also pulls out a box of tinsel. No Christmas would be complete without it.

"Dinner is almost ready, sir," Nancy says to me as she passes by on her way to the kitchen.

"Let me just get this bad boy into a tree stand, and then we can eat!" I announce, going down the hall to look for the toolbox which has a little saw in it, and to find the tree stand I bought yesterday.

Twenty minutes and some cursing later, the tree is perched in the tree stand, mostly straight upright, and looking ready for decoration.

"Let's eat, then we can tackle the fun stuff," I tell Rachel, putting a hand on the small of her back to bring her to the dining room table.

We sit down at the table, and Nancy pours me some red wine. Rachel waves her off

with a smile. I could have sworn that I had seen her drinking when we first were getting to know one another, but perhaps not. I decide to ask about that at another time and tuck into my food.

“I can’t remember the last time I had schnitzel,” Rachel says, taking a big bite of her dinner.

“I hoped you would like it,” I say to her. “It’s one of my favorites. You haven’t been eating much, so I wanted to make sure that we had planned a dinner you could enjoy.”

She gives me that same slightly startled, almost guilty look again, but then she looks down at her plate and focuses on inhaling her dinner.

I suppose that whatever is making her look at me like that will come out eventually. I don’t want to ruin our fun by worrying about what it means.

“Do you two want treats while you decorate the tree?” Nancy asks as she clears up dinner.

“Please!” Rachel exclaims happily. “I cannot wait to get my hands on those ornaments!”

We drift into the living room, and I turn on the fireplace. I also find some Christmas music on Spotify and connect my phone to the home speakers.

“Do you even know the words to these songs?” Rachel asks as she takes the cover off the ornaments and stands there plotting her next move.

“Yes,” I say, singing along to “Jingle Bell Rock”, and swinging her around in a circle. She squeaks but then allows me to dance her around the room. The tinsel she

had been holding wafts through the room.

She's breathless by the time I stop whirling her all over the place and she shakes her head. "You made me dizzy!" she says accusingly.

"Good. Then both of us can be off-balance for once," I say to her, lifting her chin with my finger. I don't hesitate and bring my lips down on hers.

She doesn't resist at all and melts into my kiss with a little moan. It's all I can do to stop myself from tumbling her onto the sofa and fucking her right now.

I force myself to go slowly, teasing her tongue with mine, running my hands down her body to cup her round ass and squeeze.

"Tristan," she mumbles against my mouth, "you make it so hard for me to say no to you."

"Then don't," I whisper back, kissing her more deeply.

A small noise from the doorway makes us break apart sheepishly. I look over Rachel's head at Nancy and give her a wink. She smiles back and drops off the tray of cookies and hot chocolate that she made.

"Do you need anything else before I go to bed?" she asks me.

I shake my head. "No. Thanks for cooking a special dinner for us, Nance."

"Yes, thank you," Rachel adds, her voice sounding breathless.

She gives us a little wave and heads down the hall toward her room that is partitioned from the rest of the house to give her some privacy.

“Poor Nancy,” Rachel says ruefully. Her cheeks are very pink.

“Poor Nancy, nothing,” I argue, giving her a quick kiss, before stepping away and starting to take ornaments out of the storage container.

We dance around the tree for an hour, decorating, talking, and having a generally festive time. My place has never felt like a real home to me until this moment.

I step back and look at the Christmas tree and grin. It looks beautiful.

I’m sure that I could have gotten immaculate results if I had hired a decorator to take care of this, but I don’t care. I love that Rachel and I did the work ourselves.

“I never asked about my apartment,” she says, breaking into my thoughts. She takes a sip of her hot chocolate and whipped cream lingers on her top lip.

I step closer and wipe it off, sucking my thumb into my mouth afterward. She goes red and ducks her head.

“The damage is pretty bad,” I tell her with a little frown. “The leak is extensive and the apartment above yours is involved. I don’t think it will be taken care of until the end of January, honestly.”

“Shit,” she says, and I chuckle. “Sorry,” she adds with a little half-smile. “It’s just that I can’t break my lease...I just got moved in and it’s for a year. And I can’t afford a hotel for so many weeks either. It just figures. I have had such bad luck lately.”

I shake my head and step in closer. I take her hot chocolate out of her hands and put it on the coffee table. “I’ll be Home for Christmas” is playing on my phone as I push her hair out of her face, pulling a stray piece of tinsel from her blonde locks and swaying us back and forth gently.

“I’d say you have good luck. After all, we met, which means that you have a place to stay, and you get to live by Cara, which I know that you love. Also, we have had some incredible times together already. We decorated a Christmas tree together, for goodness' sake.”

She laughs softly and puts her hands on my shoulders as we rock back and forth. “You’re not wrong,” she says. “I guess I just...don’t trust easily these days.”

“Fair enough,” I say. I pull us backward until my knees run into the couch, and then I sit down, bringing her with me. She spills into my lap with a little squeak, her blonde locks flying all around us.

It’s just like in my wet dream this morning at the office. She looks good enough to eat as she straddles me, her cheeks pink, and her bright green eyes open to me for once.

“Tristan,” she says to me as I rock my hips up so that she can feel my hardness pressing into her. “What are we doing?”

“Right now?” I say, running my hands up her sides to palm her breasts. She makes the sound I knew she would and leans into my palms by instinct. “Right now, I’m trying to make love to you.”

She sighs with pleasure as I squeeze her breasts a little while rocking my hips against hers.

“No, I mean, in general,” she says breathlessly, her head tilting back.

“Do we need to put a title on things?” I ask seriously. “Would that make you happy? Would you feel safe with me then?”

“I don’t know,” she says softly, closing her eyes and grinding against me.

I want to press her for more, I want to know why she's always holding back like this, but my cock is dying to get inside of her, and she's making the most incredible noises as she bobs up and down above me.

I help her chuck her sweater on the floor, and I quickly release her breasts from her bra. Another piece of tinsel falls free as her breasts bounce loose. Her tits seem slightly heavier than usual, and they are clearly very sensitive right now if her little mewling cries are any indicator as I fondle them.

She starts tugging at my shirt, and we both unbutton it, laughing as our fingers tangle together and make a mess of the process. Her jeans are tugged off next, and I stand to finish disrobing.

We stand for a moment looking at each other in the firelight, naked, my desire for her evident from every angle. I back up and sit down again and gesture for her to come over to me.

"I have dreamed about this," I say to her as I tug her into my lap. Her hair feels like silk as it falls over my wrists where they are gripping her waist.

"Oh, really?" she says slyly. She rocks back a little, dragging her wet pussy over the head of my cock.

I groan and lift toward her instinctively, but she lifts away teasingly so that I can't sink inside of her.

"Yes, but in my dream, you weren't being so mean to me," I gasp out, my cock flexing with want.

She holds herself up on her palms, pressing up higher so that I can't get inside of her.

“You must have been dreaming about someone else, then,” she quips, wiggling her hips and making her breasts bounce.

“I would never do that,” I say to her, and I mean it. “I only want you. Desperately.”

She looks like she wants to say so much, but she doesn’t say a word. She just starts to slowly lower herself down until the head of my cock is poised at her lips, nudging toward her heat.

“I want you so much each day that I can’t think straight,” she whispers to me as she sinks down a tiny bit.

I try to lift my hips, but she stops me with a hand pressed to my chest. She is so wet that she’s dripping onto my thighs. I think I might die if I don’t get to sink inside of her.

“I want to believe that this is real, that you actually care about me,” she continues, sinking another inch, taking me deeper.

“I want to think that this Christmas will be special,” she finally finishes as she slides all the way to the root of my cock.

She makes a sweet little sound of pleasure, closing her eyes and rocking a little as she enjoys being filled up to the brim.

“Fucking you is heavenly,” I say to her as I start to move within her. Her breasts bounce with each thrust, and her head lolls back as she gasps with ecstasy.

“But I enjoy your company. I like talking to you. I like learning about you,” I say to her. I’ve learned by now, that as an author, Rachel experiences so much of her life through the exchange of words.

I want her to feel everything, to know how I feel as we share this moment because I know it will make it that much more intimate for her.

I start moving faster, and she clings to me, her nails biting into my flesh. Her pussy is so tight that I'm afraid I might be hurting her, but then she grabs my face and kisses me intensely, moaning loudly into my mouth as she rides me.

Suddenly, she jerks back away from me. I feel bereft as I look at her standing before me with a tiny smile nestled in the corner of her lips.

"I've always wanted to do this," she says to me, before she backs up toward me, looking behind her to stabilize herself by touching my thigh. It quivers where her fingers are pressed into it, just like my cock that is so close to release.

I help her to straddle me again, grinning as I realize that she intends to lean back against my chest as I fuck her. I grip her breasts as she leans back and reaches down to grab my cock at the root. She guides me inside of her, and we both cry out at the friction, which is intense and incredible at this angle.

"Oh, God, Tristan!" she cries out as she rocks her hips.

Her butt is pressed into my hips, and I lean her back even further to get more access to her body. As we press closer together, my cock sliding snugly in and out of her, I reach forward and run my fingers over her clit.

"Tristan!" She cries again and flies apart with a rush of heat that I feel all the way to my core. I work her clit through the orgasm, loving her shrieking release ringing in my ears.

When I can tell that she's spent, I pump once more and come with a shout, pumping into her with painful intensity, feeling like I'm being torn apart and reassembled over

and over as the orgasm goes on.

“Now that,” she says in between huffing little breaths, “was a Christmas miracle.”

We both laugh a little in between rough breaths, struggling to come down from our high.

“Should we take a shower?” I ask her, stroking my hand idly down her belly.

“Yes,” she says as she lifts off of me and slithers to the floor. “But only if you agree to fuck me again.”

“I would be honored,” I tell her, looking at her beautiful body highlighted by the flickering light from the fire.

We both have tinsel stuck to our asses which is a perfect addition to the holiday mood.

“Hurry up,” she says, then dashes from the room toward my bedroom.

Laughing, I jolt to my feet, slip on my boxers, nearly fall, and then race after her into the bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rachel

“I’m coming to get you in an hour,” Cara says to me over the phone.

I hear her chastising someone about the right order to put silverware out for place settings and smile. She must be planning some kind of event somewhere.

It’s sweet of her to take time out of her day to keep me company while I go to my first doctor’s appointment.

“You’re the one who’s always late,” I tease her. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

She snorts inelegantly into the phone. “Pish posh. I’m still your best friend even if I can’t tell time. See you soon.”

I smile after we hang up, and then slump down into my seat a little as I stare at the computer screen.

I’ve written about half of Tristan’s book already, which is wild, considering how much time I’ve spent dealing with a flooded apartment, shocking news from Tristan’s coworkers, and worries over finances. Not to mention all the lost hours that were spent ralphing in the morning.

I make a face. At least the morning sickness seems to be over with already. I am eternally grateful. However, I can already feel my breasts getting bigger and I

couldn't fit into one of my favorite skirts the other day. I'm going to struggle to hide this pregnancy before long.

I had hoped maybe I wouldn't show early, but that doesn't seem likely.

"You can't write a chapter about this," I mutter to myself, putting my hands on the keys again thoughtfully.

"About what?"

I glance over my shoulder and slam the laptop shut, turning to look at Tristan. "No peeking!" I chide him.

He looks fully unrepentant, leaning down to kiss me with lingering thoroughness. We've enjoyed a week of domestic bliss that doesn't even seem real to me.

I don't know when I've ever had this much sex, and yet I never stop being hungry for Tristan.

"How's the book coming along?" he asks me.

I nod. "Well. No snooping, though."

He holds up his hands placatingly. "Truce, truce. I was just coming to tell you I would see you later." He starts to leave to go to work, then turns back, snapping his fingers. "Oh, by the way, do you want to have Danny over here for Christmas Eve and Christmas morning?"

I feel a swoop of emotion race through me. I can't even remember Danny and I ever having a proper Christmas. We always had to wait until we went to see my aunt in the summer to get to open Christmas gifts with her.

“I would love that!” I exclaim, clasping my hands together with excitement.

“Excellent,” he says to me. “I’ll plan everything out, then. See you after work.”

“See you later,” I tell him, feeling a twinge of guilt about him still being in the dark about the baby. I don’t know why the words keep sticking in my throat, but they just do.

I watch him leave the room, then glance at my watch. I have about twenty minutes to get dressed, so I’d better start working on being ready to go out in public.

By the time I ride the elevator down to meet Cara, I’m getting nervous. What if there is something wrong with the baby? What if the doctor tells me that I need to make some kind of drastic diet change or start taking all kinds of supplements or something?

I’m not ignorant about how this process works, but since I have so little family, I’ve actually never known anyone throughout a pregnancy. The girls that I’ve worked with or been casual friends with over the years didn’t stick around long enough after they got pregnant for me to experience the work of growing a human vicariously.

When I lived in Alaska, it was just Danny, myself, and my boyfriend...and the fake nurse. I sigh and shake my head. I can’t start being paranoid now or I’ll talk myself out of going to the appointment altogether.

“See, I wasn’t very late at all,” Cara says pridefully to me as I climb into her car. She drives a bit aggressively out of the parking garage and whips around the corner.

“Woah, slow down!” I exclaim, holding my queasy stomach. “You have to do pregnancy-approved driving or I’m going to throw up all over your car.”

She looks apologetic as she slows down. Her fancy Cadillac can go quite fast and she loves to enjoy it, however, I am in no condition to humor her today.

“Sorry,” she says, navigating a turn more carefully. “How are you feeling?”

I shrug. “Mostly okay now, thank goodness. I hated the morning sickness part of things.”

“Have you told Tristan?” she asks next.

I sigh and look out the window at the tall apartment buildings and businesses whizzing by out the window. “No.”

“Rachel!” Cara exclaims. “You’re just being chicken now.”

“Hey!” I retort, looking at her with indignation. “How many times have you had to tell the man that you are casually banging that you’re pregnant?”

She laughs at my outraged expression and waves her hand. “Sorry, sorry. I get your point, but I also don’t think that’s an accurate description of your relationship at this point.”

I shake my head. “We haven’t set any boundaries or given this thing a name.”

“So?” Cara shoots back. “You’re still living with him and you’re still fucking him, right?”

I glare at her.

“You’re having his baby,” she goes on. “You aren’t a fling. If you were a fling, he would have made it clear by now, and I doubt that he has. You guys got a Christmas

tree together for fuck's sake."

I smile a little. "Okay, I guess you're kind of right. That doesn't mean that this thing will last beyond me needing to be around him to write the book."

"Are you still going to go through with the book?" Cara asks. "Does your publisher know that you guys are...a thing?"

I shake my head hard, my hair flying. "No, and I'm not going to tell them. I can already tell the book is going to be really good. I don't need to tell anyone about Tristan's and my...friends with benefits arrangement."

"More like author with benefits," Cara scoffs as she turns into the parking lot of the clinic.

We wander together into the clinic and I get handed the new patient packet of documents to fill out. I start working on them as we wait for my name to be called.

"Nervous?" Cara asks me quietly as we sit side by side on the uncomfortable clinic chairs.

"Duh," I say ungraciously, and she laughs.

"Rachel Smith?" a nurse calls, poking her head out of a door into the hall with the exam rooms.

I rise with Cara and we walk together into the back where I am weighed and then taken to room five. The nurse asks me some preliminary questions, then glances at Cara.

"Should I put you down as her significant other or spouse?" she asks Cara.

Cara blinks, and I say hastily, “Oh no, she’s my friend. She’s just here to support me. She could be my emergency contact, though.”

The nurse doesn’t seem flustered in the slightest and just collects Cara’s information before leaving us to wait for the OBGYN.

Once the nurse slips out of the room, Cara winks at me. “I guess we make a cute couple.”

I roll my eyes and press a hand to my belly. I swear I can feel junior swimming around inside of me the past twenty-four hours. Maybe I can, I guess. I also don’t know when that starts to be a possibility.

There’s a knock at the door, and the doctor pokes her head into the room. “Rachel Smith?” she asks.

I nod. “Hi.”

“Nice to meet you,” she says. She sits down across from me at the little desk by the door and starts asking me things like how far along I think I am and if there are twins in the family.

I feel a little sad when I can’t really answer most of the family medical history questions. I simply don’t know enough about the people in my family on either side to be sure about any of that.

“Let’s get you up here and take a look,” the doctor says briskly once she has collected all the information she needs. “The goo will be a little cold, sorry,” she says regretfully as she squeezes the cold ultrasound jelly onto my stomach. “The warmer broke this morning.”

“My excellent luck continues,” I say glumly, but then Cara takes my hand and squeezes it.

“Chin up,” she says, and I return her smile. When we were teens, this used to be Cara’s mantra for everything.

When she needed to convince herself to go to work at the mall rather than hanging out with her friends, she’d tell herself, “chin up”. When she was sick and didn’t want to go to cheerleading practice, she would tell herself, “chin up” and head out the door.

Over time, it had become our little secret codeword for moral support. I used it when I was alone as well sometimes, but we always said it to each other when the going got tough.

“Okay, everything looks great,” the doctor says after poking around a little bit. “So I guess some of your good luck is still with us.” She gives me a big, sweet smile, and I feel better. She seems nice and I think I can trust her.

“Want the images emailed to you?” the doctor asks as she clicks around, making notations and indicating measurements on the images she collected.

“Sure,” I say. “I put my email on the documents I filled out.”

“Will you have a spouse or partner that we need to include in information about your care here?” she asks next.

I swallow hard, suddenly emotional. Cara notices my silence and squeezes my hand.

“Umm,” I say, my voice sounding tight. “I actually haven’t told the father yet, but I guess...if I can make myself do it...I bet he’d be happy to be included.”

The doctor doesn't even glance over at me, she just nods as she keeps tapping away at her computer. "Sounds great," she says agreeably. "I've sent those images so that you can brag to everyone."

"When do I get to know the sex?" I ask, suddenly realizing that this is one more thing I don't know about the pregnancy timeline ahead of me.

"Based in your potential conception date, by your next appointment we might be able to tell you," the doctor says back. She gives me another smile. "Any other questions for me?"

I shake my head. "No, I think that's it. Thanks."

The doctor leaves the room and I finish wiping the ultrasound gel off my stomach before pulling my shirt down.

"I'm honestly glad I have someplace to stay right now that has a fireplace," I say to my friend as I shrug my jacket back on. "I don't know how you guys stand living here. It's so freaking damp all the time. I never feel like I can get warm."

I finally realize that Cara has been silent for quite a while. I glance over at her and notice that she looks slightly pale.

"What's wrong?" I ask, feeling a dagger of panic shoot through me.

"Uh," Cara says, stumbling over her words. "Gosh, there's just no nice way to tell you this."

She passes me her phone and I gasp.

Isaac had sent her link after link of gossip articles about me and Tristan, showing us

kissing, holding hands, standing outside by the limo with the Christmas tree. The headlines blare things like: FAMOUS PLAYBOY TECH MOGUL SEDUCES HIS BIOGRAPHER and RACHEL SMITH GETS THE REAL INSIDE SCOOP ON MILLIONAIRE TRISTAN BLACK.

“Oh no,” I breathe, my head spinning.

“You can say that again,” Cara whispers back. She takes her phone back and frowns as she taps out a message to her brother. She’s quiet for a moment, thumbing through the articles, and then he replies. She rubs her forehead.

“These are all over Facebook, X, and even Instagram,” she grumbles. “What the fuck? There has to be someone who has it in for you guys. This is so malicious.”

I feel lightheaded. Everything feels wrong, off-kilter, broken. I need to call my publishing house and my agent, but I feel frozen, suspended between knowing this bad thing has happened and the reality of everything that I am going to lose.

“They’ll get rid of me,” I say, my voice cracking.

“Who?” Cara asks in a distracted way, still looking at her phone.

“Price and Jackson,” I reply tonelessly, naming my publisher. “They won’t be able to withstand the scandal of this.”

“Oh, I don’t think it will be that bad,” Cara says with false cheer. “After all, things will blow over as soon as the next scandal comes up.”

“It’s the holidays,” I say with despair lacing every note. “Everyone will have weeks with nothing else to do but make fun of me and drag my name through the mud.”

Cara chews on her lower lip silently. She knows I'm right.

I drop my head into my hands and groan. "Merry fucking Christmas," I say.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tristan

My phone rings, and I glance at it before I silence it.

I'm in the middle of an important meeting with the marketing team who are going to handle the rollout of our latest app right before Christmas. I don't have time to entertain Jay at the moment.

But then it rings again. And again.

Cursing, I step out of the conference room quickly to grab the next call.

"What?" I ask in a loud whisper as I stand in the hallway. "I'm in a meeting with the marketing company."

"Have you looked at social media today at all?" Jay asks me, his voice grim.

"No," I say with confusion. "Why?"

"Just do it," he says and hangs up.

I stare at my phone in confusion, then open a couple of apps as Jay had suggested. I suck in a breath in dismay as I see Rachel and I splashed all over the tabloid news, kissing, holding the Christmas tree, and walking hand in hand.

“Dammit,” I mutter. This is going to be a huge problem for her. She had already said she didn’t want anyone to know about us because she might lose her ongoing relationship with her publisher and her agent.

I hadn’t really believed that there would be any trouble since we don’t go out in public together that often.

In my mind, we had conducted the whole of our little situationship behind closed doors, but I see now that we weren’t quite as careful as I had thought.

I run a hand over the back of my neck, trying to think about what to do. I don’t want her to have to scrap the book, or worse, move away because she can’t afford to be here.

What can I do to help stop this scandal in its tracks before her reputation is ruined?

“Everything okay?” Ali asks, poking her head out into the hallway.

I shake myself a little and manage to nod. “Just something personal that came up. Say, can you handle the rest of the meeting for me?” I ask her. “I really should go take care of this.”

She nods and shoos me away. “Sure, no worries at all. Let us know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks,” I tell her, hurrying off toward my office with my mind spinning. I need to think of a plan to help Rachel out, but I’m not even sure where to start.

Who on earth leaked all those pictures to the media? I can’t think of anyone in our inner circle who would do something like that, and they are the only people who knew that Rachel and I were sleeping together.

First things first, time to spin up the PR team. I actually don't care about yet another scandal rag or two worrying over my personal life, but I know that this will be devastating for Rachel if we don't nip it in the bud.

I realize as I'm calling, that it's just a few days until Christmas. That might make the process of halting the scandal a little tougher.

"Hello? Jerry?" I say as I hear the voice of my lead PR manager come over the phone. "Yeah, that's what I'm calling about," I reply when he asks about the scandal news. "She's...gosh, it's so complicated, honestly, but she's writing my biography. Yeah, I know that's not very professional of us. That being said, we need to try and stop this before her career is destroyed. Suggestions?"

I sit down at my desk as Jerry and his team spitball with me for about twenty minutes. We come up with a plan to try and pay off a few of the smaller mags that just need the cash and a proactive plan to flood the media with other nonsense so that our story gets buried.

Jerry is also going to reach out to the two biggest magazines and see if he can pay to have the story killed. I know it will be expensive, but it's worth it if I can do anything to keep her from suffering.

Once I'm done on the phone with the PR team, I try calling Rachel. The call goes to voicemail, but I leave a message asking her to call me back. I call Jay next, detailing the plan to squash the story and asking him to think of anything legal that we might need to explore as far as resolving the problem. Jay says he'll chat with the legal team to help me out and then gets off the phone.

Alone with my thoughts and no real way to be helpful, I run a hand through my hair. I keep thinking that if I could just figure out who leaked the photos, I could help clear some of this up.

I decide to try calling Cara. She might have some ideas about what to do in this situation.

Cara picks up after the second ring. “Hey,” she says, her voice tight. She must already have seen the articles.

“Ideas?” I say without preamble. Why waste time if we all know why Rachel needs our help?

“Rachel’s publisher already released her from her contract,” Cara says sadly. “Her agent agreed to keep her on but was not pleased with her. She’s devastated.”

“Is she with you?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Cara says. “She didn’t want to be alone.”

“I can come pick her up,” I say, already rising to my feet to leave work. “I have the PR team working on this and I will talk to legal about it tomorrow.”

Cara is silent for a spell, and I stop in the doorway to my office.

“Cara?”

“She...um...she doesn’t want you to come get her,” Cara says quietly. Her tone is almost apologetic. “She says she just needs some time to...process...and figure out what’s next.”

“But I can help her out with this,” I insist, wondering why my heart feels like it’s going to beat out of my chest. “I’ve been through this kind of thing before and my team can...”

“Tristan,” Cara says, her voice very quiet, patient. “Just give her a day or two to figure out how she feels. She’s lost everything in a matter of a couple of hours.”

She hasn’t lost everything! I want to yell into the phone. She has me? Aren’t I enough?

I suddenly think of my father and his sneering critiques of my efforts to be good at sports, to be good at school, to please him. I always felt small, unloved, unseen when he treated me like that. The feeling of being rejected by Rachel when I’m only trying to help is the same, only much worse.

“I understand,” I say woodenly, even though I don’t. I don’t understand at all.

“Cara,” I say, then pause. I forge ahead anyhow after a moment. “Is there some kind of secret that you two are keeping from me? I just keep feeling like I’m missing...something.”

“Look,” Cara says, that patient note still in her voice. “She has to tell you in her own time. I can’t interfere. I’m sorry.”

I want to scream, kick over my chair, rage at the world, but I know it won’t do any good. Finally, I look out the window at the rain pattering down, and I say, “It’s almost Christmas. We had plans.”

Cara sighs heavily. “I know. I’m sorry, Tristan,” she says before she hangs up.

I stare at the cell phone in my hand, wishing that there was something I could do to reach her. Why is she shutting me out? Why won’t she talk to me?

I stumble across the room and sit down heavily in my chair. I rest my forehead on my hand and stare sightlessly across the room. Clearly, I’m no good at relationships. I’m

apparently not even good a situationships.

It's like every time we get close to one another, something that neither of us can control happens, and she pulls away.

There must be something that I'm missing, some crucial piece of information that would explain her reticence. I just can't think of anything that would cause her to run so hot and cold like this all the time.

"Burning the midnight oil?"

I look up and see Ali hovering in the doorway to my office.

I sigh and realize that I've been sitting at my desk mulling things over for about an hour. I straighten up and wince at the kink in my neck.

"Not really," I say to Ali with a sad smile. Clearly she hasn't seen any social media recently. "Just have a situation going on that's hard to deal with."

Ali looks regretful and she nods. "Well, maybe you should call Rachel. She seems like she's a really good listener."

I almost burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of her advice. But of course, Ali and everyone who works here think that Rachel is just working on my biography.

Before today, they wouldn't have had any idea that there was anything between us. If they hadn't opened social media for a few hours, they wouldn't have even seen the news articles about us.

However, I know that Ali means well, so I just nod at her. "That's a great idea, thanks Ali."

“Sure thing,” she says back with a chipper smile. “Well, I’m off until the New Year. See you after the holidays!”

I wave at her and then watch her walk away down the hallway, her stilettos clicking on the marble floor. I think about the beautiful Christmas tree standing in my living room next to the fireplace. I think about coming home alone, eating dinner alone at the dining table, and then going to bed alone.

All of that sounds terrible. I grab my phone and call Jay. Maybe he and Janet won’t mind having me over for dinner or something.

“Hey buddy,” I say when Jay picks up the call. “What are you up to tonight?”

“We’re headed over to Janet’s extended family’s place to do early Christmas Eve since we can’t all fit into one house these days,” he says ruefully, and I chuckle a little.

Jay’s wife’s family is positively enormous. She has more cousins and second cousins and nieces and nephews than anyone else I’ve ever known.

“Never mind then,” I say, happy for Jay despite the aching void in my heart.

“What’s up?” Jay asks.

“Really, it’s nothing,” I tell him. “It can wait.”

“If you don’t have anyone to spend the holidays with, you know you’re always welcome to spend them with us,” Jay says to me. “You know I offer every year and you turn me down, but I just thought I would try again.”

I smile a little. “I appreciate that, Jay,” I tell him. “I just...I was hoping to avoid

being alone tonight what with Rachel and the whole...thing. But it's okay, truly."

"Invitation still stands," Jay says. "Think on it."

"I will," I reply before ending the call.

Grumbling a little to myself, I leave my office and wander down to the parking garage. I get in my sports car and start driving home to the apartment, my mind still preoccupied with the scandal, another Christmas spent alone, and a future that suddenly seemed very...lonely.

When I step out of the elevator, Nancy comes to meet me. She looks so empathetic that I can tell she has seen the news.

"Drink?" she asks me, her tone kind.

"Sure," I say with a shrug.

"I made dinner," Nancy says, gesturing for me to sit at the table.

I oblige her even though I can't imagine eating. I feel numb, empty, bereft of purpose.

"Here," she says, placing a delicious-looking plate of food in front of me and then handing me a glass of milky-white liquid with some kind of garnish on the top.

I eyeball it skeptically and she smiles at me. "Eggnog," she supplies, before bustling off to the kitchen again.

I manage a small laugh and take a sip of the eggnog. It's not bad. Maybe I should have been more willing to enjoy it in the past when it was offered to me.

I eat more of the food Nancy placed in front of me than I had expected.

I take another glass of eggnog and wander into the living room to stare at the tree standing proud and festive by the fireplace.

I think of Rachel and I spinning around dancing to Christmas carols, and then I think of her leaning back against me, riding my cock, screaming as she came. Everything in this room feels sad to me now. I expect it will always feel that way if this is the end.

I wander listlessly away from the fireplace, tired of being plagued by the memories of time spent with Rachel there. My feet take me to her room. Maybe she wants all of her clothing packed up and sent over to Cara's place. I guess I had better ask that question in the morning. Thankfully, they are much the same size, so she can borrow from Cara for now.

I drift into the bathroom and decide I should check to make sure that she didn't leave anything essential in there. I haven't seen her taking any kind of daily medication or anything, but honestly, we don't know one another that well yet. It's something I could have missed.

I tug open the drawers, finding them all to be empty, which is what I had expected. I'm about to leave when I realize that the center drawer in front of the vanity mirror is poking out a little. It's the kind of space where you could fit a small pill bottle, so I open it.

There are a couple of makeup products tucked into the drawer, but I hear something else rattling at the back of the drawer as I pull it open. Frowning a little, I reach back farther and curl my fingers around three plastic objects.

I freeze when I bring them out and can see them better. I flip them all over and stare at the positive symbols on all of them.

“Oh my God,” I say out loud, feeling dazed. “She’s pregnant?” How long had she known? Was I the father? Do I want to be the father?

I stumble back and sit down unceremoniously on the tile surrounding the soaking tub, my mind awirl.

Pregnant.

Why hadn’t she told me? Did she really not trust me enough to let me know that she was having a baby?

I think of the way I was raised and I feel a little overwhelmed. Maybe I’m not cut out to be a father, and that’s why she hadn’t told me. But no, that’s not fair. I haven’t even had the chance to fuck things up yet.

I cradle my head in my hands as I try and process what I have just discovered.

She had said that she was coming down with something a few weeks ago, but that wasn’t the issue at all. She had probably known about this for more than a month now, and yet I was still in the dark.

Did Cara know? I felt a sharp sting of annoyance toward our mutual friend. This was something that I should have been told.

There was no way that I was going to let any child of mine be raised without a father.

I realize that even a few years ago, I would not have been ready to be a father. Heck, I still didn’t know that I am fit to be a father, but I am more than ready to try.

Rachel was younger than me, so she couldn’t totally appreciate the loneliness of being unable to share your achievements with people that you love.

Jay and Janet have always been like family, but they can't take the place of my own child, or the woman that I love.

Woman that I love. The phrase keeps playing over and over in my mind.

I love her. I want us to do this together. Now all I have to do is convince her that she wants me too.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rachel

I roll over and pull the covers over my head.

I'm wallowing, and I know it, but I don't care. I push my greasy hair away from my face and snuggle down further into the blanket nest that I've made in the spare bed at Cara's house.

Without a publishing house and with an agent who has told me to lie low and "stop fucking up", I have had little to do except sleep, be sad, and then sleep again.

I press a hand to my belly. This isn't how I want my child to live their life. I want their life to be full of purpose, joy, and comfort.

I think of all the mornings that I woke up as a young girl, knowing that my mom wasn't home and that I needed to get up and prepare breakfast for me and for Danny, and get us ready to go to school. I sometimes felt like I had already raised a child because frankly, I had.

However, deep down I knew that raising my own baby without the complications of a dysfunctional family would be so different than how I remembered things for me and Danny when we were kids.

I had to admit that I had learned a lot about kids when I was taking care of Danny as well, and I felt equipped to the task of taking care of a small human, even though I

hadn't had family members with little kids or anything like that.

However, I was a little sad that this baby might not really know what a stable family life was like either. This was not the situation I had expected to find myself in when I discovered that I was pregnant. I had expected to be married, to have a house, to be able to afford daycare.

It felt like setting my child up for a fall from the start and I regretted my lack of common sense from time to time.

I think about Tristan for the umpteenth time. I have been stewing about our relationship ever since I got to Cara's. I love him, but I don't even know if that is enough anymore.

The fact remains that, since I met Tristan, I have been accused of being a whore by Denise, and now by the media. I have also lost the contract with my publishing house that I worked so hard to get, and I might have to find another agent as well.

I'm pregnant, alone, and have no money to pay my bills.

Things are not looking up.

And the hell of it all is that none of it is his fault.

The fact remains that I have worked with other famous people who welcomed me into their homes to interview them and learn about them before I wrote their stories. I had not slept with any of them. I hadn't even been tempted to do so.

Tristan has been like some kind of Achilles' heel for me. I find it almost impossible to tell him no. He always manages to convince me that my carefully thought-out plans are not as fun as the ones that he has come up with.

It doesn't help that his ideas really are more fun than mine in most cases. Tristan is funny and he brings me out of my shell. He has allowed me to find out that I really like being in control in my life as well as in the bedroom and that I have been surrendering too much of myself to everyone around me for years.

I miss him terribly, but I also don't want his plans for me to cloud my judgment. Cara said that his PR team is working on squashing the stories, and I'm grateful for that much, at least.

I really don't enjoy seeing some of our most intimate, honest moments being paraded around social media like a joke.

How on earth had those images been captured anyway? Who had told the scandal rag press to start paying attention to us? It didn't make sense. We hadn't been that public with our connection, and we had both assumed that if the press saw us together, they would know it was just due to the book.

I had figured that I had about two more months before I would start showing and have to come clean to my agent and my publisher. By then, I had been hoping that the book would be poised to be prepped for print, and they would both have simply tutted at me and moved on.

However, as with my luck in all areas of life, I did not have good luck in this case.

I think about the upcoming bill for Danny's care and feel sick. He has a small fund from our grandfather that we use to pay for his basic care, but it's never enough to cover all of the bills.

"Maybe I need to find a different job," I say out loud, my voice muffled by the blankets. If I got something soon, I would be able to get maternity leave with pay probably.

But what kind of job could I get on such short notice during the holidays? Maybe I could find some kind of seasonal work at a clothing store or something.

I used to work at a Starbucks during college, but there's no way they are hiring right around Christmas when things are crazy busy. Plus, no one would want to take the time to train someone new during the holiday rush.

I flop over onto my side and look at my social media for a few moments before everyone's Christmas cheer depresses me and I close the app.

I decide to call my brother to ask him what he wants to do for Christmas. It seems only fair to ask him since we will be on our own again now.

"Hey, sis," he says to me as he picks up the call.

"Hey," I say back. "What are you up to?"

"Drawing," he says back.

Danny's phone skills are often like this. He is just going to answer questions without expanding his ideas, but that's okay. I don't honestly feel up for any kind of conversation that is more advanced than that.

"What do you want to do for Christmas this year?" I ask.

Danny is silent for a moment, then he says, "We already have plans. We're going to Tristan's house."

I bite my lip. How to break the news to Danny that we aren't going to be spending Christmas with Tristan? Frankly, I don't think we are going to be spending any significant amount of time around Tristan ever again.

“Um,” I say, thinking about my words carefully. “I’m not sure that Tristan can host us now. Will you be upset?”

“He said you might say that,” Danny says matter-of-factly into the phone.

I draw back and pull the phone away from my ear, staring at it like it might be able to give me answers. “He told you what?” I ask, forgetting how Danny communicates.

“I just said that Tristan said...”

“I’m sorry, I heard you,” I cut him off. “Did Tristan call you?”

“Yep,” Danny says. “He called me this morning. He said he would still come and get me for Christmas Eve if I wanted. I can stay with him with a care provider until Christmas morning. He said you might not be there.”

I want to be angry, but instead, I’m sort of hurt. I know that I haven’t answered any of his calls or texts over the past couple of days, but I had good reason to want to hide out.

I wasn’t even that annoyed when he sent me his most recent text, which just said, “Fine. Don’t act like an adult.”

But going behind my back to ask Danny what he wanted to do for Christmas and making plans with him feels like a step too far.

“Thanks for telling me that, Danny,” I tell my brother. “I will support whatever decision you make.”

“Thanks,” he says back. “I’m going to see Tristan. You should come.”

I want to cry and laugh at the same time.

“Look, let me call you back later,” I tell my brother. “I need to go talk to Tristan.”

“Okay,” Danny says, then, “Be nice to him, okay? He likes you.”

This gives me pause and I stare at the phone screen which just shows Danny’s name and number at the moment.

“Sis?” Danny asks when I’ve been quiet for too long.

“I’m here,” I say quickly. “Sorry, you just...surprised me is all.”

“Why?” Danny asks.

I thought about brushing this part of the conversation off but then changed my mind.

“I didn’t think Tristan cared about me that much at all, honestly.”

I think that Tristan likes my company, and he likes spoiling me. He also likes fucking me...a lot. But none of that means he actually cares about me .

However, I haven’t seen any indication that I am anymore or less special than anyone else in his life. Tristan is a lone wolf, and he seems to like it that way. It also doesn’t give me confidence knowing that he hasn’t ever had one serious relationship as an adult.

“Oh, he thinks you are the best,” Danny says, sounding happy to impart useful information. “He told me so when we talked. He said that he loved you and that he hoped that you would let him someday. I told him I wasn’t sure what he meant and he just laughed and said that was okay.”

He said he loves me ? I feel like someone has hit me over the head with a piano.

He wouldn't tell Danny something like that if he didn't mean it. He might be many things, but Tristan definitely isn't the kind to manipulate someone like my brother to get into my good graces.

"Thanks for telling me that," I say to Danny. "I need to go now. Talk soon."

"Bye, sis," he says before we hang up.

I lay in my nest of blankets and try to figure out if what my brother had said was right or not. Danny doesn't lie. He simply isn't capable. Tristan had to have told him that. Which means that it's the truth.

I look at my phone. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I can spend it wallowing in bed, greasy and pathetic, or I can put on my big girl panties and figure this mess out.

With that decided, I swing my legs out of bed and hustle to the shower. I look at myself in the mirror and make a face. I look awful.

Time to wash this mokey, greasy version of Rachel Smith down the drain for good.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tristan

I've arranged for the limo to pick up Danny at his care home tomorrow in the late afternoon.

Nancy agreed to prepare a bunch of the food ahead of time and to leave instructions for how to cook the turkey before she took off to see her kids for the Christmas weekend.

I had called Danny and made sure that he still wanted to come. He sounded upbeat about being able to spend the holidays with someone else besides his caregivers and the other people who live at his center, so I took heart in that. At least I would be able to share the holiday plans I had made with someone.

I feel a pang about Rachel missing out on all the fun, but part of me does understand.

I hadn't offered her much to cling to when it came to the personal side of our connection. I know I'm not that great at this part of relationships. I never have been.

And because I'm not that great at the process of truly connecting with someone and making them want to spend time with me, I'm not that great at figuring out what to do when things go south.

It has always just seemed easier to let the person go.

I always figured there were lots of fish in the sea, and they would find someone that was a better match and I would just carry on being alone.

I kind of like being by myself, and overall, being a loner has worked well for me for most of my life.

However, with Rachel, it's different. The last thing on earth that I want is for her to find someone else to spend the holidays with. I don't want to spend even a single day without her. It makes me livid to think about someone else dating her, marrying her, supporting her career.

I close the door to my closet with more force than necessary and sigh, running a hand through my hair. I really need to think of a way to make all of this better, or I'm going to go crazy.

I don't want to examine too closely the reason that I invited Danny over for Christmas despite his sister's refusal to talk to me.

It's like I'm hoping that she will get annoyed and come over too. But it's also a sad commentary on how empty my life is that I don't have anyone else to spend the holidays with.

I decide to bake some cookies to make myself feel better and I meander into the kitchen to start working on that project.

As I create the batter and drop chocolate chips into it, I ponder the idea that I'm going to be a father. I don't know for sure that the baby is mine, but it seems really unlikely that it would be anyone else's.

Rachel and I have been thick as thieves due to her work on the book if nothing else. I don't know when she would have had time to fool around with someone else.

Neither of us had the best childhood. I presume that part of the reason that she hasn't told me about the baby is because she's been spiraling about her own parenting skills and warring with herself about ending up in a long-term relationship that she never really wanted to be in.

But does she want to be with someone else? It's hard for me to imagine that there is anyone else on earth who could give her the kind of mind-blowing sex we have enjoyed. And I have to assume that she is at least feeling a fraction of the connection that I have been enjoying from the moment I met her.

Being around her just feels good. It feels right. She seemed to feel the same way up until everything with the scandal. How can I convince her to come back around?

I suddenly hear the buzzer that indicates that someone is in the lobby wanting to come up. Frowning, I cross the kitchen to press the button to talk with the lobby speaker.

"Hello?"

"It's me," she says, and my heart grows light in my chest. "Let me come up. We need to talk."

I almost forget to buzz her in because my hands are shaking. I try to get control over myself. What is wrong with me?

Is she finally going to tell me about the baby? Does she want me to know that she's moving away? There are so many things that occur to me, and all of the thoughts are jumbling up in my brain as I try to prepare myself to see her again.

It's only been a few days. I really shouldn't be this excited and nervous to see her. I feel like a kid with his first crush.

“Come on up,” I say, buzzing her through. I stare at the intercom for a moment, trying to figure out how to feel. What do I say to her? Do I apologize yet again? Do I invite her over for Christmas Eve? What do I do?

I settle for crossing the room to stand by the elevator doors. I lean against the wall and wait, my heart racing.

When the elevator slides open, we just stare at one another for a beat, neither of us sure what to say.

“I’m sorry,” we both say at the same time.

I feel a grin break out across my face and watch as she slowly smiles back.

She wanders into the room, stopping a few paces away from me, her hands in the pockets of her trench coat. Now that I know what I’m looking for, I can see the healthy glow of her pregnancy shining forth.

She looks beautiful, even if a little sad and worried.

“I’m so sorry about the...scandal,” I say and I mean it.

She nods. “I’m sorry for shutting you out. I guess you’ve probably heard that I lost my publisher over this?” She wanders over to the Christmas tree and touches the spiky branch closest to her, a wistful smile on her face.

I sigh. “Yeah, Cara told me. I think they are being short-sighted. It’s not like you have a habit of sleeping with your clients.”

She chuckles a little, the sound so soft I wonder if I actually heard it.

“I knew we shouldn’t be doing this,” she says with a little shake of her head. “But I was selfish and let it happen anyway. Now I am paying the price.”

My chest aches at her words. Paying the price . I hate that she thinks of us that way, that we are a mistake that she has made. I want to make her feel differently, but I know that’s not really up to me.

I watch her tugging at the bristly needles of the Christmas tree, trying to figure out what to say. Finally, I turn and walk to my room. I see her turn to look after me, and I can imagine her furrowed brow.

I come back with my arms crossed behind my back, and then I bring out the hand that is holding the three pregnancy tests. Her face falls, and she looks up at me with worry in her emerald eyes.

“When were you going to tell me?” I ask her. My tone doesn’t indicate my feelings, and frankly, I still don’t quite know how I feel about the pregnancy.

I haven’t had time to process it like you’re supposed to. Having to find out by accident, when I was all alone, had gotten in the way of that.

“Oh, fuck,” she breathes. “I forgot I shoved those into the drawer in the bathroom here. I...took more tests after the first ones, just to be sure.”

She looks down at her feet, scraping her toe under the edge of the throw rug in front of the fireplace.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask her, wishing I didn’t sound so hurt.

She meets my gaze again, her expression pleading. “I was just...shocked, you know? And then the whole thing with Denise happened, and my apartment flooded, and we

had that fight, and..." Her voice trails off. "There just didn't ever seem to be the right time," she finishes a bit lamely.

I nod, leaning over to set the pregnancy tests on the coffee table. "I'm not mad," I say to her, even though I am hurt. I meet her gaze and give her a partial smile.

"But are you...do you...I mean...do you want to help with...the baby?" she stammers out, flushing.

I grin at her. "Of course," I say. There's so much more that I want to tell her, but I feel like this is enough for the moment.

A slow smile spreads over her face, and she hurries over to me to throw herself into my hug. I rock her back and forth and kiss the top of her head. It feels good to be holding her against me.

"I was just afraid that you'd be angry, or that you'd just want me to go away," she says, tilting her head back to look at me.

I shake my head and look at her beautiful green eyes. "Don't be stupid," I say teasingly to her.

She shoves at my chest a little with mock annoyance. "Hey! That's not nice!" she protests.

"I know," I say, leaning down to kiss her. She stops struggling and leans into me. "I just like making you squeal."

She giggles as I tickle her sides, squirming in my arms. I hold her more tightly and deepen the kiss, and she responds in kind, opening her lips and letting my tongue touch hers.

I hear rain hitting the windows behind us as I bend her back a little so that I can trail kisses down the column of her throat. She gasps and presses her hips into mine for stability. My cock jerks toward her desperately and I growl a little against her skin, my lips pressed into the hollow of her throat.

“I swear, every single time I kiss you, it’s like the first time,” I tell her, slipping my hands under her sweater to knead her breasts.

“Gentle,” she whispers to me, and my fingers go still. “They’re really sensitive all the time now.”

“Baby stuff?” I inquire, pressing more gently. I’m rewarded with a little sigh and she relaxes against me again.

“Baby stuff,” she agrees languidly, her eyes closed.

“Did you already go to the doctor?” I ask her.

She nods. “Everything is good so far. Cara went with me.”

I feel a jolt of frustration that I wasn’t included, but the logical part of me understands.

“Can I go to the next appointment?”

“I guess so,” she says.

I pull back to look down at her, trying to see if she’s serious.

She opens her eyes and winks at me, then squeezes my forearms comfortingly. “It’s not that exciting at first,” she reassures me. “They just make sure there’s

something...anything...in there.”

“That’s not how people describe it,” I insist a little touchily.

She makes a soothing noise. “I have ultrasound pictures I can show you. That’s all you really go to that appointment for.”

“Rachel,” I say to her, my breath blowing over her ear. I feel her shudder against me. “The thing is...I’d really, really like to fuck you.”

She leans away from me for a moment and then steps back. I feel cold as she opens up some space between us, but then she stretches out her hands in invitation and grins at me.

“Tristan, the thing is...I’d really, really like you to do that.”

I take her hands and let her lead me toward my room, my heart thundering in my chest like it’s the first time I’ve gotten to sleep with her, and emotions coursing through me with wild abandon.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rachel

There's something different about fucking Tristan guilt-free.

I loved the naughtiness of doing it when it was forbidden. But now that we have come clean about so many things with one another and there's no need to keep our attraction a secret, it's like a whole new world of sexy opportunity has opened for us.

I didn't waste any time stepping out of my clothing when we got to Tristan's bedroom. He had paused for just a moment to turn on the fireplace to banish the chill in the room before he had done the same.

We stand facing one another, naked, waiting for the other one to make a move. I know Tristan. I know that he likes me to take charge, so I decide to do so.

I move closer to him, taking my time, admiring his thick cock, which is already as hard as iron. I trail my finger down his side and then flatten my palm and run it along his lower abdomen and his back, dragging it behind me as I circle him.

"Fuck, you're so hot," I say to him honestly. I have never seen a more attractive man.

Sometimes I wonder how it's possible that he can look like this at his age when most people alive will never aspire to his level of sexiness.

"You're just saying that because you want my dick," he rumbles.

“Well, yes,” I agree, coming back around to face him.

I stretch up on my tiptoes and press a soft kiss to each corner of his mouth. “But I also know art when I see it,” I tell him. “And your body can’t be described as anything else.”

“You’re just taking pity on this old man,” he insists and I roll my eyes.

“Now you’re just insulting me,” I assert, running my hand along the length of his cock and giving it a little tug. He sucks in a breath and his eyes flash a darker gold.

I stand still for a moment, my fingers still cradling him, sticky with precum.

He stares at me with naked want, still restraining himself. I turn around and walk sexily toward the huge bed in the middle of the room. I look back over my shoulder.

“Want an early Christmas gift?” I ask him coyly. I watch with approval as his cock twitches.

“You know I like presents,” he replies.

I nod, drawing to a halt next to the bed. I hold my arms wide, and say, “Do with me whatever you want. Merry Christmas.”

He just looks at me for a long moment, then his smile grows wide. He’s across the room in moments, flipping me around and bending me forward.

I catch myself with my palms before I fall face-first onto the bed, moaning as he slaps my ass hard.

He kicks my feet apart, and leans over me, trailing kisses down the bumps of my

spine. I can feel my pussy throbbing for him. The ache at my core is so painful that I think I might pass out.

“You are the perfect Christmas gift,” he says to me, just before he lifts my hips and plunges into me.

I cry out as he stretches me, pressing back into him to take him more deeply. He’s so big that the first thrust is always almost painful, but I have found that this is one of my favorite parts of fucking him.

I love the sense that he is claiming me, marking me, changing me.

He starts moving within me, his thrusts sharp, powerful, overwhelming. I hear someone keening loudly, and realize in an abstract way, that it’s me making the harsh sounds of pleasure that are reverberating around the room.

I wrap my fingers into the sheets, holding on for dear life, straining to push back into him, to take him even deeper. My sensitive breasts ache as they swing with my movements, the sensation only adding to the pleasure of being taken this way.

I love this new feature of our connection—being used, plundered, enjoyed. It makes me feel powerful that I can reduce him to this kind of wild need. That he wants me so much that the polished, perfect veneer slips away to reveal this man who is desperate for release.

“Tristan, I’m so close!” I shout, pressing wildly against him. The tidal wave of orgasm is hovering in my nerve endings, and I’m already shivering with it, seconds from letting go.

Suddenly, he stops moving and slips out of me. I don’t have time to protest before he tumbles us onto the bed. He crawls up the mattress to position himself over me, his

golden-brown eyes glowing in the late afternoon light.

He looks down at me for a moment, his eyes hungry, but his body still. I can hear our mutual ragged breathing filling the space and my body tingles with desire, each cell alive with want.

I wriggle closer but don't break eye contact, mesmerized by the emotions chasing one another in his expression, hungry for the connection between us that seems strongest when he's buried inside me.

I feel the tip of him nudging against my folds and I arch toward him hungrily. "Please," I beg, writhing under him. "Tristan, please."

He starts to press slowly home, and I moan as he fills me up again. I can feel the orgasm flooding back, tingling through my nerve endings, ready to crash over me.

"Wait for me," he tells me, his voice rough as he starts to move back and forth. "Let me catch up, baby."

I try to clamp down on the rush of pleasure that's threatening to wash over me, gasping with each slow and tender thrust.

I feel like I'm going to die if I don't let the orgasm have its way with me, but there is something deliciously dangerous about holding it back, making it wait for him.

"Tristan," I warn him. "Tristan, I'm going to come."

"Come for me," he tells me, his voice sounding desperate, just before he starts shaking and snapping with his own release.

I let go with a sharp cry, feeling my pussy gripping his cock, feeling the warm flood

of him within me as I press up to meet him. My back arches with the force of my release, and I grab his shoulders to help me balance, feeling like I will be swept away if I don't have something to cling to.

"I love you, Rachel!" he gasps in my ear. "I love you so much."

I hear the words, but at first, the reality of what he has confessed doesn't sink in. My orgasm ebbs down to a more gentle level, and I open my eyes to look up at him. He's still holding himself above me, his arms trembling a little with the effort, his eyes searching mine.

I meet his gaze for a moment, and then I grin at him. "Took you long enough to admit it," I say teasingly, pressing up toward him for a kiss. He returns it, his lips gentle on mine, before he rolls to the side, taking me with him.

His hand comes down to rest on my belly which is just starting to show the barest hint of a curve. He strokes gently back and forth, his gaze trained on his hand.

"You don't have to say you love me back," he says to me, something hurting and small in his voice. "I would understand if you aren't... there yet. Sorry to...sort of sneak up on you. The words just came out in the moment. But I mean them with all my heart."

I look at his long fingers tracing paths on my skin and I feel a little smile tugging at the corners of my lips. My heart is sore for both of us, for our lack of love growing up, for having to figure out how to care for people without a roadmap of how the process works. We could have saved ourselves a lot of stress if we had known how to handle everything between us.

"Tristan," I say gently. When he doesn't respond, I reach out and put my hand on his. "Tristan, look at me."

He slowly turns so that he can meet my gaze. I hate how worried he looks. He is so worthy of love. He should never have to question if he deserves my affection.

“Tristan Black,” I tell him, a smile working its way into my words. “I have loved you since the moment that you took me back here and let me force you to beg.”

His grin is abrupt, and wide, and his eyes are bright. “Truly?” he asks me, his tone still cautious, as if he doesn’t dare hope that I am telling the truth.

“Truly,” I say to him with a nod. “I want us to raise this baby together. The rest of the details, I don’t know...we can figure those out later. Just know that I love you.”

“You really are the best Christmas present ever,” he shouts, rolling on top of me and pressing silly, sloppy kisses all over my cheeks, my lips, my neck, and my breasts.

I giggle, struggling in his grip, feeling him get hard all over again. I feel lighter than a feather, truly happy for the first time in weeks.

Suddenly, his phone rings.

We both ignore it for a few cycles, but then it starts all over again.

Sighing, he tumbles off me, being careful of his cock, which is standing proud again, eager for more action.

I admire the majesty of it as he stands by the bed, talking to whoever is on the other end of the call. I start getting wet all over again at the idea of him being inside me.

“Hello?” he says into the phone. “Yeah. Did you manage to convince them to accept a payment to stop the story? Good deal. Oh...okay,” he says, his brows drawing down.

I ponder lazily whether the other men I had been with were just too small to really satisfy me, or if there's something specifically special about Tristan's cock and my body.

I have never experienced anything even approaching the kind of pleasure that he gives me so effortlessly. I remembered Cara talking about a college hookup that had been so good that she had ignored all the other red flags just to be able to experience the kind of sex that I was enjoying with Tristan.

I didn't understand it back then, but now, I did. Boy, did I ever.

I watch him in confusion as his expression gets even more annoyed-looking. He looks over at me, his eyes wide.

I sit up a little, tugging the sheet up over me. I hope that everything is okay. But his face looks like everything is not okay at all.

"Yeah. No, that's really helpful. I'll take care of it. Thanks."

He hangs up the phone and puts it back on the bedside table, then looks over at me. He looks a little shell-shocked.

"What is it?" I ask him, worried.

He shakes his head a little, and then looks at me with a rueful expression on his face.

"That was my PR folks. They got the two big tabloids to kill the story about us."

"That's great news!" I say, even though it won't make my publisher take me back. It at least means that we don't have to stare at garbage about us all over social media for a while.

I am so tired of seeing the headlines blaring that I'm a terrible and untrustworthy person who had the nerve to sleep with someone she was writing a book about. Of all the problems in the world, it seems like my personal life really shouldn't be at the top of the pile of things to obsess over on social media.

"That part totally is good news," he agrees. "They found something out when they paid the requested amount to kill the story, however. They found out who tipped off the press that we were fooling around."

My brows draw down a little. "Oh?"

He nods and drives a hand through his hair. "It was Denise. She called them and told them to start following me and she told them what you looked like and who you were. She tipped them off."

"Bitch," I murmured, surprised at the venom in my voice. I didn't usually hate anybody, but boy, did Denise deserve my dislike.

"Agreed," Tristan says, shaking his head again. "Damn. She's worked for me for so long. I know she's not easy to deal with and stuff, but she took her work seriously. I thought we were over all of the nonsense after the Amy thing went down."

I reach out and rub my hand down his back soothingly. "Sometimes people suck," I say, the words inelegant, but appropriate.

He snorts at that and turns to look at me. "Yeah. I guess that's just how it goes sometimes. I'll wait to fire her until after the Christmas break."

I make a face. "I'd fire her today, but I get that you have to get HR involved and stuff. Do you have enough other concrete problems to cite to let her go?"

“Mountains,” he says back. “I was too patient with her. She’s just...been with the company since the early days. Damn,” he says again.

“It’s okay to trust people and make mistakes,” I reassure him, squeezing his thigh comfortingly.

He meets my gaze with another one of those heart-stopping grins that he’s so good at.

“At least I usually trust the right people,” he says, pressing me back against the sheets and separating my legs. “After all, I let you have your way with me, and look how well that turned out?”

I giggle as I watch him kiss his way down my abdomen, then gasp as he blows a warm breath over my pussy.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I moan, as he drags his tongue along my slit.

“Merry early Christmas,” Tristan growls against my aching pussy.

“Merry early Christmas,” I breathe back, before giving in to the pleasure that is threatening to sweep me away again.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rachel

I sink lower into the bathtub, enjoying the warmth and the lovely smell of the bath salts that I poured into the tub before I climbed in.

I stayed at Tristan's again last night and he had insisted that he would go get my things from Cara's place while I relaxed. I didn't take much over there, but the gesture was sweet.

I woke up feeling a little under the weather, so any help is welcome. Nancy had been thoughtful enough to leave some of her recommended morning sickness tea blend with a note explaining how to prepare it just so.

I assumed she was aware of my pregnancy for the same reason that Tristan was. I should have just told them both about the pregnancy sooner. Then we would all have been spared this little dance of make-believe.

"Hey, you, I'm going to head out to Cara's now. I'll be back soon with your bag. Here is a cup of Nancy's tea," Tristan says as he sets the tea on the bathroom counter.

"Thank you, Tristan," I call as he blows me a kiss and closes the door behind him.

It felt good to have the pregnancy out in the open. I hadn't truly appreciated just how tiring it would be to grow a baby in my body.

I pride myself on being independent, but I was finding that it was becoming increasingly difficult to have the energy needed to tackle everything I had to do in a day.

I pondered what was going to happen with my career. My credibility was a mess now, and I didn't think anyone would want to buy the biography I had started for Tristan. Not unless they were just looking for a tell-all-style book.

I sigh and close my eyes. It's Christmas Eve day. I'm not going to let the logistics of my failing career ruin the holidays. I had promised Tristan I would try and enjoy the holidays this year, and that is just what I'm going to do.

Tristan had said that my brother would arrive in two hours. He told me he had sent a limo to get him. I could just imagine how excited Danny would be to see the limo show up.

I smile as I think about how kind Tristan has been with Danny, and how thoughtful he is to have included him in our Christmas plans.

I could clearly see the difference between my ex and Tristan's attention to Danny. My ex had always worked hard to keep him out of sight under the guise of "taking care of him" while Tristan wanted Danny to be a part of our world.

How had I ever assumed that Tristan was a superficial asshole? Even though Denise had tried to paint him in that light, I should have known better.

My phone alarm goes off, indicating that I need to get up and start getting dressed. I reluctantly rise from the warm water and pull the drain. I watch the water swirl away as I reach for the soft plush robe that Tristan had draped near the tub.

I shrug into it and stand before the mirror, turning this way and that, examining the

changes to my body.

I knew that some women claimed that you could tell if it was a boy or a girl just by where your pregnancy bump showed up. Mine seemed to be lower than I had expected. I wondered what that meant.

I decide to stop staring at myself and start putting on my makeup and drying my hair. It feels nice not to have work responsibilities looming over me for the first time in more years than I can remember.

My phone rings as I'm just finishing with my hair, and I answer it.

"Hey, babe," Tristan says, already getting really comfortable with the endearment. "Can you make sure that the turkey isn't like, on fire, or something?"

I laugh and pad out of the bathroom and into the kitchen. The smell of the turkey is heavenly and I breathe in with appreciation. I bend down to see if the bird looks okay, and then turn away from the oven.

"Looks good to me," I say. "It smells amazing."

"Perfect," he says to me.

I frown for a moment, hearing noise in the background. "Where are you?" I ask.

"Oh, just walking down the street to where I parked. Cara's parking garage was almost full and I didn't want to scratch the car."

I shake my head a little at that and put him on speakerphone so I can finish applying my makeup.

“If you are anywhere near as careful with the baby as you are with that car, our child will live in bubble wrap,” I tease.

“Whatever,” he says back. “You should be grateful that I’m capable of attention to detail. Okay, getting in the car. See you shortly. Be sure you are dressed and ready on time!”

“Yes, boss,” I say to him, rolling my eyes. I’m not sure why he’s so hell-bent on me being ready for our little dinner at such a specific time, but he has always been kind of a control freak.

It doesn’t shock me that he might view his surprise Christmas dinner like a work project he’s trying to streamline.

I finish getting my makeup on, then realize that I don’t have anything to wear because the clothes I want are in the bag he’s fetching. I reach for my phone and text him.

Um, I don’t have anything to wear.

His reply is almost instant.

Sorry! Forgot tell you. That’s part of the surprise I had planned before you avoided me for a couple of days. Check the closet in your room.

Curiosity piqued, I make my way down the hall to the other end of the apartment. I push open the barn-style door and gasp when I see the pretty red dress hanging inside. It’s wrapped in plastic, but I can already tell it has an empire waist and is covered with small sparkling beads and a tasteful amount of lace.

It feels like the perfect, posh Christmas dress, but it’s way too much to wear around the house. I close my eyes for a moment when I notice the designer’s tag. I don’t

even want to know what Tristan spent on this thing.

I almost feel guilty about contemplating wearing it. I stand there, my lip caught between my teeth, pondering what to do.

Don't talk yourself out of wearing it. I bought it for you to enjoy.

I laugh at the text as it flashes across the screen of my smartwatch.

You read my mind.

I send the text before taking the dress out of the closet and walking back to Tristan's room. I shimmy into it and then twirl around slowly, admiring myself.

He even bought me some practical red heels to wear with it. I put them on, seeing Cara's taste in the purchase.

They were both probably complicit in this little display of affection, despite the fact that I had been moping around Cara's place trying to hide from life.

I wondered at their confidence in me. What if Tristan had sent her out to help him find these clothes and I had refused to shake myself out of my misery in time for the holidays?

"Life," I say to myself as I look at the back of the dress again. "What is it even?"

Pretty great right now , I hear my inner monologue say, and I realize with some surprise, that it really is pretty great right now. I clasp my little star bracelet and rub it around my wrist. It looks perfect with the dress.

There are still things I will need to figure out after the holidays, like my flooded

apartment, the job that I no longer have, and what to do about Danny's bills. But for the first time, I am going to enjoy a few days of peace and holiday cheer before I have to stress about anything.

I walk into the kitchen again to check on the turkey, then start bringing out all the sides to heat them up. Tristan had shared his location with me on his phone, and I can tell that he's not that far away from the apartment.

I'm positively starving, so I'd like to get right to eating once he's back.

I carefully bring some mashed potatoes out of the microwave as I hear the elevator ding, announcing that Tristan has arrived.

"Is Danny here yet?" I call from the kitchen, moving the gravy into the microwave next.

There's no reply, and I wait until I press the start button to turn toward the living room area. "Tristan?" I call out.

I'm still greeted with silence. Where has that man gone off to ? I wonder as I walk toward the Christmas tree and the fireplace. I'd be worried, except I know that no one can get into the apartment without a key card or without being buzzed up.

"Tristan?" I call again.

"Surprise!" a chorus of voices call out, and I press my hand over my heart as it starts racing from the shock.

Tristan, Cara, Isaac, and Danny are all standing by the elevator, beaming at me.

"What are you two doing here?" I ask Cara and Isaac as they rush over to give me

exuberant hugs. “I thought you were going to see your folks this year!”

“Tricked you!” Cara exclaims, kissing my cheek. I can tell that she left a big lipstick print on it, but I don’t care.

“We’ve all been planning this for weeks,” Danny says proudly, clearly happy to be in on the secret. He hugs me and then looks over admiringly at Tristan. “Tristan wanted us to have a real Christmas.”

“Oh, well, this is just...it’s...amazing!” I finally manage to squeak out. I hear the microwave ding and rush into the kitchen to pull out the gravy.

“Everything smells amazing,” Isaac says approvingly, wandering after me and closing the microwave door.

“I’m so hungry I could eat a horse!” I announce, slipping the oven mitts off my hands and looking around at the spread of food that Nancy had prepared for us.

“Well, horse probably tastes pretty gross,” Isaac says with a little curl of his lip. “So, let’s not.”

I laugh. “Can you imagine?” I titter, shaking my head.

“Rachel,” Tristan calls from the other room. “Can you come here for a moment?”

“Sure, just a sec,” I say distractedly, looking at the timer for the turkey. It looks like it just needs a few more minutes, so I turn away and start walking toward the living room.

I stumble to a halt with a gasp, my hands flying up to cover my mouth.

Tristan is kneeling in front of the tree, holding out a small, square box. His smile is as bright as the twinkling lights on the tree behind him.

“Tristan,” I whisper, “what are you doing?”

“I have a very important question to ask you,” he says to me, opening the lid of the box and taking out the ring that is inside. “Rachel Smith, I know things haven’t always been smooth between us, and we’ve struggled to get our feet on the ground, but I love spending time with you. I even love arguing with you. You’ve made me believe in love. Will you marry me?”

For a moment, I just stand still, frozen, unable to process thoughts or react. My hands are still clutched together in front of my lips and I just stare at Tristan as if I have never seen him before.

Of all the things that I thought we might do today, this was not one of them.

“Rachel?” Cara says, starting to step toward me like she thinks I might faint or something.

Her words jolt me into action, and I sweep across the floor in a clatter of heels to throw myself into Tristan’s arms.

I rain kisses onto his lips, his cheeks, his nose, laughing and chanting, “Yes, yes, yes!” over and over.

Tristan manages to press me away from him and slip the ring onto my finger. I look down at it, tears spilling down my cheeks as it glints in the light from the fireplace and the lights on the tree.

“Do you like it?” he asks me.

I nod, unable to speak around the lump in my throat.

“It’s perfect,” I whisper, with a watery smile.

“No, you’re perfect,” he says back, kissing me.

Cara, Isaac, and Danny start clapping as we share our first kiss as an engaged couple, and Tristan twirls me around in dizzying circles until I plead with him to stop.

“Oh my gosh!” Isaac exclaims. “Please, please, please let me marry you guys! I got ordained last year just in case someone I know wanted to have a truly fabulous wedding.”

“I’m sure that we can work something out,” I say over my shoulder when I come up for air.

“Yes!” Isaac exclaims. “Between Cara planning your wedding and me officiating it, you are going to have the most memorable wedding of the season!”

Tristan looks down at me with a rueful expression on his face.

I shrug at him. “He’s not wrong,” I say.

Tristan smiles. “We can just turn them loose and enjoy the months up until the wedding. Seems like a good deal for everyone involved.”

I nod. “What are best friends for anyhow?”

“Best Christmas ever?” he asks me.

“Best Christmas ever,” I say back.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tristan

I wake up earlier than usual and slip out of bed. I glance back to make sure that Rachel is still sleeping and smile a little as I hear her gentle snores.

I turn on the lights on the Christmas tree and the fireplace, enjoying the beauty of the scene as I take my first few sips of coffee. My heart feels warm, and I feel...content in a way that I haven't in years and years.

I walk down the hallway toward my office and glance at the time on my phone. I figure it's safe to call Jay because he has kids and I am sure they have been awake for hours now.

I know kids always wake up extra early on Christmas morning.

"What's up, buddy?" Jay says as he answers the call. He sounds tired, and I can hear kids screeching in the background.

"Having a good Christmas?" I ask my friend.

"Of course," he says happily. "The kids love it so much. Hard to have a bad day when they are this excited."

I think about the tiny human that is growing in Rachel's womb and grin. It won't be that long until we get to share the holidays with our own child. I can't wait to make

their holiday celebrations special in all the ways that mine never were.

“Did you have a nice Christmas?” Jay asks me. I hear him debating something with one of his kids about no cake until after breakfast before I reply.

“Rachel and I got engaged,” I say proudly.

“No shit! That’s great!” he exclaims before apologizing to Janet as she chides him about his language in front of the kids.

“Congratulations!” she yells from across the room, and I smile at the phone.

“Tell her thanks,” I say to Jay, who relays my words.

“So, why are you calling me so early on Christmas morning?” Jay asks me.

“I had this crazy idea yesterday,” I tell my friend. “I know it’s really short notice, and it’s the holidays and I shouldn’t be bothering you, but I wanted to surprise Rachel with a really amazing gift. We didn’t go crazy shopping for one another since we didn’t even know if we were going to be together or not, you know? But I want this Christmas to be unforgettable.”

“Okay,” Jay says. “That’s all great. What do you need me for?”

I chuckle. “Sorry. I’m rambling. I have this idea. Let me bounce it off of you and you can tell me if it’s nuts or not before I say something to Rachel today.”

I outline my idea and Jay listens to me quietly, only being interrupted occasionally by his kids wanting something from him.

When I get done talking about the plan I have, I ask, “What do you think?”

“It’s actually a really great idea,” Jay says, and I nearly sag with relief. “I have the contacts to help you out with it if that’s what you want to do.”

“I was hoping that you would be willing to help me with the heavy lifting,” I admit a bit sheepishly. “Just not something that I know that much about.”

“We obviously won’t get a lot of movement on it over the holidays, but once everyone’s back at work, we can hit the ground running,” Jay tells me. “No, I know, sorry. Okay, Janet says she will refuse to feed me breakfast if I don’t get off the phone,” he says ruefully. “It’s a great idea. We’ll talk more soon?”

“Sure thing,” I tell him. “Thanks, Jay. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you too,” he says and then hangs up.

I shove my phone into the pocket of my sweats and then make my way into the kitchen. I start making coffee and then remember that Nancy had made coffee cake for us for Christmas morning.

I pull the coffee cake out and pop it into the oven to heat up a little bit. Hopefully, the waft of tantalizing food will pull Rachel out of bed.

I would feel bad waking her up since I know she’s been exhausted lately what with the baby and all.

I am positively buzzing with excitement about my idea. I can’t wait to share it with Rachel.

“Is that cinnamon and sugar something?”

Rachel’s bleary voice reaches me from the hallway, and I laugh a little bit as she

wanders in sleepily, tying her robe around her waist. Her hair is up in one of her signature blonde sloppy buns, and I can see that she's pulled on some kind of cartoon-patterned socks.

"Coffee cake," I confirm. "Nancy's special recipe." I look at my cup of coffee, then lift a brow at her. "Coffee?"

"I can have a tiny bit," she says. "I don't want to push it, but gosh it sucks being sleepy all the time."

"Yeah, I would probably be useless without my two cups each morning. Motherhood is hard," I say as I pour her a partial mug and then pass it to her.

"You are preaching to the choir," she says with a laugh, pulling open the fridge door and taking out the almond milk. She pours a liberal amount into her cup, and then yawns hugely.

"You sure you don't need some more sleep?" I ask her, my brows raised a little.

She snorts. "I need more sleep, but your child is already flippy flopping all over inside of me. There's no way to sleep through those kind of antics. I presume the baby is going to be one of those dreadful morning people."

She sounds positively annoyed, and I can't help but laugh out loud. "Can I feel the baby move yet?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I don't think so. It's more of an...internal kind of thing for me still...like a flutter, you know?"

I don't know, but I nod anyhow. Motherhood is wild.

There's a ton I don't know about what we are about to experience. I just didn't have enough close family growing up to have been around anyone who was pregnant. I realize with a jolt that Rachel is probably in the same boat.

"When is your next doctor's appointment?" I ask.

Rachel takes a sip of her coffee and closes her eyes, thinking. "I think in like two weeks? I can check my phone. I think we can find out the sex at that one...that is, if you want to."

I ponder that and then shrug. "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

She tilts her head to the side, "I think I want to know so that I can get the perfect clothing and nursery gear. If you choose not to find out, you'll end up buying all that yellow and green and neutral stuff and it's just way less fun." She wrinkles her nose at the thought.

"Fair enough," I say to her as she scrolls through her emails on her phone searching for the most recent update from her doctor.

"Oh, here it is, I missed this email somehow." She opens the email and stares at her phone. Her face seems to lose all color momentarily.

"What?" I ask, frantically.

"Oh, it's nothing, just an annoying email from my agent," she stammers.

It's obvious she's not giving me the whole truth, but I don't want to cause a scene Christmas morning, and I have a feeling her brother will be waking up any minute.

I push my worry down for a later moment.

“How long does your brother usually sleep?” I inquire, deciding to let the doctor's appointment issue go until later.

She glances around, looking relieved at the change in subject. “Oh, he’s not up yet. Usually, he’s up at the break of dawn.” She looks worried and starts to get up off the stool she is sitting on by the kitchen bar when Danny’s large frame comes walking into the kitchen.

His sandy-blond hair is mussed, and he has his sweatshirt on backward which makes me want to chuckle, but I don’t.

“Breakfast?” he asks, sniffing the air.

“In just a couple of minutes,” I say to him with a reassuring smile.

“Okay,” he says. He turns and sits down at the dining table, waiting quietly for his food.

I find it sweet that he is so accommodating. He understands and needs a schedule, Rachel said. She had told me once that he was always happiest if he knew precisely what to expect from people and places.

I wonder if he slept in so late because he feels safe here. I hope that’s why.

“Okay,” I announce when the oven timer goes off. “Bon Appetit!”

“That’s French,” Danny observes from his place at the table.

“You’re correct,” I say, “and it’s all the French that I know.”

Rachel surprises me by rattling off a few sentences in French in Danny’s direction.

He replies in kind, and I gawp at them.

“You guys speak French?” I ask, a bit stunned.

Rachel smiles at me and then glances at Danny. “Growing up, French was one of my favorite subjects in school. I loved to practice it. And Danny was my primary practice buddy. There were times when, just for fun, I wouldn’t let us speak English at home. Danny hated it. But now we both still retain some of the language, so, I’d say that’s a win.”

“That’s amazing,” I say, realizing just how much I still don’t know about my fiancée. I am more than ready to find out all of her secrets, though.

My heart feels full as I realize that we will have a whole lifetime to learn about one another now.

We tuck into breakfast, and I watch Danny and Rachel as they move through the world with their own unique symbiosis. It’s fascinating and I’m learning a lot about Danny from watching him with his sister.

I break the mutual, peaceful silence, by asking, “Danny, would you like to set up that spare bedroom as your own room for when you visit?”

Danny’s head shoots up and he looks at me for a moment like he’s assessing me. I can see him pondering what to say or how to feel about the question. He looks at his sister, who just smiles at him and waits for his reply.

“Yes,” he says in that slightly stilted way that I am learning indicates that he is struggling with a wealth of emotions. I have heard that tone in his voice when he talks about Rachel sometimes.

“How exciting!” Rachel says, reaching over to press Danny’s hand. She glances at me and there are tears in her eyes.

I don’t know the whole story about what happened with her ex, but I think he must have made Rachel feel like Danny needed to be hidden away, excluded. I want exactly the opposite thing.

We finish eating, and I insist that they let me clear away the dishes. Danny looks around at the tree and the fireplace and says, “This is nice.”

It’s a simple compliment, but it warms me to the core. And I couldn’t agree more. It is nice.

“I want to read my book some more,” Danny says, looking at his sister.

“Sure. It’s Christmas. We just get to enjoy being peaceful together,” she says to him.

Danny drifts away down the hall to get his Kindle, or maybe an actual book, I don’t know which. Left alone in the kitchen, Rachel and I look at one another across the space between the kitchen and the dining room.

The distance between us is charged with unspoken words, emotions, and pure, unfiltered happiness.

I almost don’t want to ruin the harmony of the moment by telling her about my surprise, but then again, what better time to reveal something she will probably be excited about?

“I’m sorry we don’t have gifts to exchange,” Rachel says a little sadly.

I shake my head. “I’m not. The only gift we really need is each other. Plus, the baby

is a really amazing Christmas present. Anything else would be a comedown.”

She blushes and looks at her hand with my ring on it. “Plus, the engagement,” she says quietly. “That’s also a Christmas present to the both of us.”

“Agreed,” I say, stepping around the kitchen island to sit next to her at the dining room table. “I um, I have another surprise, however.”

Her brows draw down a little and she blinks at me. “Tell me you didn’t buy me a new car or something crazy like that.”

I burst into laughter at that, thinking of the ridiculous and over-the-top holiday ads that depict husbands getting their wives sports cars or a Mercedes with a huge, silly bow on them.

“No, no,” I say between laughs, “I wouldn’t do something like that, I swear...unless you want a new car?”

She shakes her head firmly. “My practical little Camry is good enough for me.”

“Okay, well that’s settled,” I say with a last little chuckle. I pull my phone from my pocket and swipe the screen to unlock it. I thumb into my documents, and then pass the phone to her.

She starts skimming the information in the file I opened, her expression growing more and more serious as she reads. Finally, she sets the phone down on the table and blinks at me.

“I don’t understand,” she admits, leaning back in her chair.

I reach for my phone and pull it over to me. I look at her, frowning slightly in

confusion across from me. She's making me nervous that this won't actually be a good surprise.

I clear my throat. "I was thinking about your situation with your publisher and your agent being all forbidding and grumpy with you. I know that you are in a place where it will be tough to continue writing as you have been, and that's all my fault. I feel terrible about that and I've been trying to think of a solution."

I pause, scrolling to the middle of the document and then saying, "I wanted to make things right and I also thought you might enjoy a change of pace. I talked with Jay this morning and we cobbled together a little business plan to make it possible for you to have your own publishing house. You'd be able to decide what kinds of works you wanted to focus on, develop new talent, and bring forth creative items into the world that you feel deserve a chance to be discovered."

She's still just blinking at me, looking like she doesn't understand.

I frown a little and pocket my phone. I lean forward and take her hands in mine. "Nothing has been done yet, so if you hate the idea, we can scrap..."

I don't get to finish my sentence because she squeals and throws herself into my arms. She rains kisses onto my cheeks as she says, "I love it! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

I laugh and hold her close as she shares her excitement with me, the fireplace glowing in the background, and the lights from the Christmas tree casting a soft light over both of us.

"Tristan," she says softly, reaching for my hand. "I actually have a surprise for you too."

“You’re not about to give me a sports car with a big bow on it, are you?” I joke.

She laughs, shaking her head. “No, it’s bigger,” she pauses, her hand drifting to her belly. “The thing is...there are two babies in here. I’m having twins.”

“What?! Twins?” I say as my heart races out of my chest.

“Yep! I just saw the news when I found the next doctor's appointment date. I cannot believe I missed that email. But the doctor left a note saying when she went over my ultrasound again with a resident that they spotted a second baby hiding behind the first.”

My jaw is on the floor as Rachel talks. “I just needed a second to process that news, sorry I didn’t tell you right away,” she adds.

“No, don’t worry,” I say. Happiness is spreading through me like a sunrise. “Twins, wow! That is the best Christmas gift I’ve ever been given in my whole life.”

“Me too,” she says through happy tears. I pull her into my arms as we both soak in this life-changing news.

I can’t remember a time when I have been happier.

“Merry Christmas,” I say to the woman that I love. “The thing is ...I could not love you more.”

“Love you so much,” she says back, kissing me. “Merry Christmas.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm

Rachel

Three Years Later

“Emmy, get down from there right now!” I call to my daughter who is trying to climb the bookshelf behind my desk to reach for something.

Luckily the shelf is screwed to the wall for safety. Tristan hired professional baby proofers to come into every space the kids may ever set foot in.

It’s a good thing too, because it turns out we are raising monkeys.

“I want my book!” she sasses me back, slipping and then hopping up on the lower shelf again, reaching as far as she can with her chubby little arms.

I roll my eyes and apologize to the author I’m in a Zoom call with, then rise from my desk and get down the children’s picture book that my toddler wants.

“Can you please be patient for just a little longer, Em?” I ask, tapping my foot and looking down at the charming little cherub grinning up at me.

She has my coloring, but her father’s golden-brown eyes and she’s every bit as high energy as he is.

I don’t usually bring the twins to work because they are terrors right now, but today their daycare was closed for the holidays and I needed to come into the office and attend to some meetings and other business.

“Thanks for my book, Mommy,” Emmy says, toddling off with the book clutched to her chest. She plops down by the small, fake Christmas tree in the corner of my office, happily flipping through her book and mumbling to herself as she pretends to read.

Her brother, Easton, is engrossed in a train set he built on the floor.

“Sorry about that,” I say to the author who is waiting patiently on the other end of the Zoom call. “Now, what were we talking about? Oh, release dates.”

I lose myself in the fun of planning out a new author’s rise to success, feeling completely and entirely at home. I hadn’t fully appreciated just how much Tristan’s idea about starting a publishing company would suit my temperament until we actually got the company up and running.

Smith & Black has become a huge success with a reputation for taking on promising new authors and being willing to work with a wide array of genres.

While biographies were always my first love as a writer, I had published some titles in other genres when I was a younger writer. It felt nice to come back to my roots.

“I was hoping to copy the release plan that you used for Finding Love in Unlikely Places ,” the woman on my computer screen says. “I just felt like it exploded onto the scene and everyone fell in love with it immediately. Maybe it was because it was the holidays when it came out.”

I hadn’t been able to publish Tristan’s biography, but I had instead taken the writing that I had done about him and included it in the book about love and life that I had been writing when I met Tristan.

The book had become a mutual love story and biography that had immediately rocketed to the top of the bestseller list.

It had been number one for weeks the year I released it, published by Smith & Black of course. It had been the flagship of our company, and it had ensured the success of the publishing house.

“Let me chat with my agent about a couple of details from that campaign,” I tell the author on the call. “I need to remember how we timed some of the release parties and so forth.”

It honestly felt like decades ago, but it had only been two years. Maybe that was my current pregnancy talking, though.

I pressed a hand to my growing belly. Being pregnant with twins again was exhausting, but I was excited anyway. Even if I did sometimes fall asleep while we were watching Yellowstone .

Tristan and I both nearly fainted when the doctor gave us the news of our second set of twins. What are the chances? Apparently not that low.

I finish discussing some more details with my new client, then end the call. I check the time and sigh. Tristan was supposed to have been here about ten minutes ago.

I lean forward and push the intercom button for the reception desk. Our offices have grown enough that we actually have multiple floors in the building, and the reception desk is farther away than I want to waddle right now.

“Jesse,” I say when I hear the receptionist’s voice on the other end of the line, “have you seen my husband somewhere?”

I can hear the smile in his voice as he replies. “He’s just stepping off the elevator. I’ll send him up.”

“Thanks,” I say in reply, then I notice a notification that Ali has sent me an email.

I open the email and reply to her questions, smiling at the thought of the new press releases that we are planning. Ali had been so excited about the possibility of what Smith & Black could be, that she had asked if she could come work for me.

I never stop teasing Tristan about stealing his best marketing team member for my company.

“Daddy!” I hear Emmy and Easton shriek in unison, just as I realize that Tristan has stepped through the door to my office.

He catches their tiny bodies as they hurl themselves at him full force. He swings them around and they giggle and squeal.

I lean back in my chair and watch them, feeling a little amazed that this is my life now. After all of the stress and chaos of the years that led up to meeting Tristan, and then the stress of the way that our relationship began, I hadn’t truly believed that I could ever be this happy.

“Are you bothering Mommy relentlessly?” Tristan asks our twins as he jostles them a little in his arms.

Emmy draws her little brows down and chews over this new word. “Relentlessly,” she mimics. She tilts her head to the side. “What does that mean, Daddy?”

Tristan smiles at her and pushes her messy curls back off her forehead. “It means that you are bothering mommy all the time without taking a break.”

She grins. “Oh, then yes,” she says with a giggle.

We all laugh at that, and then Tristan puts the twins down. They zoom around my office making silly animal noises and just generally showing off.

“I live in terror at the thought of four of them acting like this,” Tristan says to me, leaning over my desk to kiss me.

“No more than me,” I say back with a lifted brow. Easton stumbles over his own feet and tumbles to the floor, but he pops back up with a laugh and starts racing around again.

“Maybe they can start school sports early,” Tristan says with a chuckle.

“Can you take them home for me?” I ask my husband. “I have to take one more call this afternoon and they’re about done with being here.”

“Sure,” he says easily. He looks over at me with one brow lifted. “Don’t forget that we need to finish packing tonight for Montana.”

I look at my work calendar and realize that he’s right. We are supposed to leave for Montana tomorrow.

We always head out to the ranch for the holidays and then spend some time there over the summer as well.

It makes an ideal place to have guests. Jay, Janet, and their kids visit often. Danny loves it at the ranch as well. In fact, I think it’s become his new favorite place. Cara and Isaac have even been out to visit.

I pull at the thin star on the little bracelet Cara gave me years ago. It has always meant a lot to me, but now it means so much more. She knew everything would be okay. Even when I didn’t. She was right. She is a good friend.

“Don’t tell me...” Tristan says with a shake of his head. “You scheduled meetings tomorrow?”

I bite my lower lip and nod apologetically. “But I can push them out a day. I can take care of this stuff over Zoom at the ranch.”

Tristan rolls his eyes fondly. “You work too hard,” he tells me.

I scoff. “So do you!”

“Touché,” he agrees and we share a smile that’s filled with mutual understanding. We had promised one another before we actually got married, that we wouldn’t step on one another’s toes when it came to business or career considerations.

Tristan had confessed to me that none of his other relationships had worked because the women he was with hadn’t understood his passion for his job.

I realized that I had also run into the same troubles over the years. It had been easy to agree to do things the non-traditional way in order for both of us to feel fulfilled.

It was also why I hadn’t taken his name when we got married. I wanted to preserve my professional identity, and it just hadn’t felt...right to take someone else’s name.

Sometimes we got questions about this from the media or from people at professional gatherings, but I would always just point to people like Kim Kardashian. She didn’t change her name, why should I?

Tristan had once joked that I should change my name to just a single word like Prince or Cher.

“Come on, darlings,” Tristan says to the kids, scooping them up again. They both nestle sleepily against his shoulders, already worn out from their antics. “Let’s go home for a nap. When mommy comes back we can finish packing to go to Montana.”

“I miss Dot,” Emmy says, her voice thick with sleep. Dot is her little spotted pony

who lives at the ranch. She was already passionate about all of the animals on the property, and I could foresee something like horseback riding lessons in our future, even when we weren't in Montana.

"Of course, you can see Dot," Tristan murmurs back to the dozing child in his arms. "She's been asking about you."

"Really?" Emmy asks, her voice dreamy.

"I knew Dot could talk," Easton chimes in.

I wink at Tristan and wave at him, watching as he shuts the door to my office. Taking my world with him.

I check my watch. I have a few more minutes before my last call of the day and I have some notes to go over.

"Thank you for always making sure we get out here," I say to Tristan a few days later.

We both draw our horses to a halt and look out over the spread of beautiful acreage that surrounds the large home below us. Easton is nestled safely in front of Tristans' body.

It had snowed the night before, and the scene before us is like a winter wonderland.

I love spending Christmas at the ranch. It just feels much more like the holidays when there's snow on the ground.

The wind tugs at my hair, and strands of it whip across my cheeks.

I lean forward and pat the neck of my reliable mount. I wouldn't dream of riding any horse other than Patch while I'm this pregnant.

Frankly, this might be my last ride before our second set of twins arrive. I'm already getting uncomfortable due to the size of my belly.

"There's nowhere else on earth like this," Tristan agrees, tipping his hat back a little and looking out across the snow-covered land.

"Danny, I want to go up to Mommy and Daddy!" I hear Emmy say.

I look over my shoulder and smile at the sight of my brother riding his horse and leading Dot and Emmy. The little pony's short little legs churn as she keeps up with Danny's bigger, dark bay quarter horse.

Danny had taken to riding like a duck to water, and he had confessed that he wanted to start a riding program for special needs kids.

Tristan had been working on this plan with him for a couple of months, and it sounded like Danny wanted to be a counselor.

It thrilled me to see Danny coming out of his shell and being more excited about engaging with the world. He had sometimes struggled with depression, but he seemed much more hopeful and happier now that Tristan was in our lives.

"Mommy, Dot is so fast!" Emmy shouted to me as Danny drew his horse to a halt by mine.

"I see that, baby," I tell my daughter. "Don't bounce on her back, remember?"

"Sorry, Mommy," Emmy says regretfully, leaning over to give her pony an apologetic pat on the neck.

“Shall we head back?” Tristan says to us. He glances meaningfully at my very pregnant belly and the hand that I have pressed to my lower back.

“Yes! I’m freezing,” Easton whines.

“And I think Mommy and two certain kids need an afternoon nap,” Tristan adds.

“Naps are stupid,” Emmy says a little mulishly.

“What did I say about using that word?” Tristan says sternly to our daughter.

She looks down apologetically. “Sorry, Daddy.”

“I forgive you. Now come on. Time to head back.”

“Thank you,” I say to my husband as we guide our horses back to the fence line.

I reach out and grab for his fingers, lifting our clasped hands a little so that we don’t get jostled apart by the rocking and rolling motion of our mounts as we ride.

“For what?” he asks, his eyes on Emmy who is talking Danny’s ear off about something to do with the dogs who herd the cows.

“For making my life so wonderful,” I say honestly. “I never thought I would ever be this happy.”

Tristan turns to me with a grin. “It wasn’t me,” he teases. “It was a Christmas miracle.”

I roll my eyes, but then I smile at him. “Either way, I’m grateful, and I love you.”

“I love you too,” he says back, leaning over to kiss me awkwardly for a moment

before his horse trips and we are pulled apart abruptly.

I look at my little family and feel like my heart might burst from happiness.

I could never have written a more perfect story than ours and I'm so grateful that we have found our happy ending.

The end.

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