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*the*  
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*a 49th Floor novel*

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Real estate mogul Jack Winter has rules. Lots of rules. After all, a man doesn't build an empire without a little discipline. And on page one of the rulebook? Don't sleep with your employees. Especially when there's a multimillion dollar real estate deal at stake...

Luckily for Jack, Cassie James isn't really his employee. She's a hot bartender who just happens to be the math genius he needs, and if they share a wicked chemistry? Well, that's just a sexy little perk. So they strike a deal: Cassie helps Jack with the merger. And until the deal goes through at Christmas, they can indulge every sexy little impulse they desire.

But the more rules Jack makes, the more he seems to break...

# SAVING THE CEO

JENNY HOLIDAY

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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# Chapter One

“Ebenezer is here!”

Cassie’s head shot up from the bar, where she’d been methodically slicing lemons. “No way! It’s only Tuesday!”

Ebenezer ate dinner at Edward’s every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Not on Tuesdays. Never on Tuesdays.

“I know!” squealed Sara, one of the servers, the one who was nicest to Cassie. The wait staff knew Cassie hadn’t earned her job as the weeknight bartender—she was a friend of the owner—and some of them resented it. Unlike the rest of them, she did not engage in the bleaching and dieting and grooming required to earn tips at a high-end place like Edward’s, but the servers had to tip her out just the same. Cassie got it. In their shoes, she’d probably resent it too.

“And his table isn’t free!” Sara whispered, “Because it’s *Tuesday!*”

Cassie didn’t bother stifling a dreamy sigh as she watched Edward’s most reliable customer in discussion with Camille, the hostess—the one who was meanest to her. There was no need to hide her admiration because they all loved Ebenezer a little bit. Probably not least because he was the World’s Best Tipper. Fifty percent, every single time. Even Cassie, who as bartender was tipped out only a small percentage of what the servers took in, saw the difference on an Ebenezer night.

So, a good tipper, yes, but the girls also loved Ebenezer because he was

beautiful. A beautiful enigma. A man of habit, obviously, given his regular Wednesday through Friday appearances stretching back almost two years. But beyond that, no one knew anything about him, not really, other than that he was some sort of real estate tycoon. The servers reported that he was perfectly polite. But despite his impeccable manners, or perhaps because of them, he came across as cold. Never said anything more than was strictly required. He'd answer small-talkish sorts of questions, but in a way that made the asker feel she'd stepped out of line, never offering a real glimpse into his life. Sara had been conducting experiments on him, to see if anything she did—or didn't do—would affect the seemingly inviolable fifty percent tip. So far, no. Whether they spoke only about his order—which, unlike most regulars, was never the same—or whether she shamelessly pried and he doggedly but politely shut her down, the end result was the same. A sky-high bill, thanks in no small part to the glass of ridiculously marked-up single malt scotch he started with, and a fifty percent tip.

“He's entertaining enough on a normal night,” Cassie whispered with a grin. “On a Tuesday night when his table is taken?” She looked to the sky and made a silly “jazz hands” motion that earned her an answering grin from Sara.

But the truth was that Ebenezer wasn't inherently that entertaining. Any given night produced a customer who provided more drama—a steak sent back three times, a bottle of 1985 Cabernet Sauvignon three-quarters drunk and then sent back for being corked.

Ebenezer never generated that kind of drama. They all just made it up to fill in the blanks in his mysterious persona. His name wasn't even Ebenezer. Of *course* it wasn't Ebenezer! He had a perfectly normal name they'd gleaned from his credit card—Cassie just couldn't remember it.

Whatever it was, it was not as exciting as the story they'd made up that earned him his nickname. He always worked through dinner, spreading out



papers, tapping through documents on his iPad. That, combined with his expensive, exquisitely tailored suits, and the fact that he was always alone, inspired Cassie to name him. Last December he'd strolled in alone, with his spreadsheets and his devices, and she thought, "He's accumulating his chains." But she didn't say that. She'd just burst out the moniker *Ebenezer Scrooge*, and the rest of them, who had probably never read the book, embraced the alias. It stuck, even though Cassie protested that the actual Scrooge would never have left a fifty percent tip.

So here they were almost a year later, everything the same—nothing ever really changed at Edward's—except Mr. Scrooge had appeared *on a Tuesday*, sending them all into a tailspin.

"Oh my God! He's coming over here!" said Sara, grabbing a cloth and wiping a nonexistent spill on the bar. Cassie had to restrain herself from snatching the towel out of the server's perfectly manicured hands—she didn't like people messing with her bar.

Sara was right, though. Ebenezer was indeed on his way over, leaving an annoyed-looking Camille in his wake. God, he was beautiful, in the way a frozen waterfall was beautiful. He was all angles—choppy, dirty-blond hair slightly longer than one would have expected from a...scrooge. His face was all cheekbones and chin. Pale blue eyes (not that she'd noticed). Six-four at least. He had a rotation of suits—more than most men, she assumed, in that there were a good dozen different ones (not that she'd noticed). Today's was navy pinstriped. He was always perfectly turned out, bordering on conservative, but there was always one detail that threw off that interpretation. Today it was a lime green tie.

Without a word, without making eye contact with her or with Sara, he sat at the bar—at the far corner, tucked against a large wooden pillar. Just as he always did at his table, he spread out his papers.

"Well, damn," whispered Sara.

Cassie tried not to panic. “He’s going to want to hear the specials, isn’t he?” Crap. The sorts of people who sat at her bar weren’t usually the type to care about the specials. They were either killing time waiting for a table or they were regulars, solo diners who ordered a salad with chicken and wanted to shoot the breeze.

“Yes!” said Sara. “We have a pan-fried pickerel with capers and preserved lemon served with maple mashed potatoes and grilled asparagus. Roasted pork loin with cranberries, goat cheese, and fresh dill, served with wild rice pilaf, and the same asparagus. Pizza of the day is fig, arugula, and house-cured salumi with a drizzle of buckwheat honey.”

Though she had absorbed a negligible amount of that little speech, Cassie nodded determinedly. Fake it till you make it. That was pretty much her entire philosophy of life, whether she was facing multivariable calculus or a night among the model-waitresses at Edward’s. And hey, so far, so good.

He didn’t look up from his work until she was practically under his nose. “Single malt to start tonight, sir? We have a new bottle from—”

“Does Edward still have that 1955 Glenfarclas?” he asked, naming a rare bottle she couldn’t remember ever having touched, except maybe to dust it. She wasn’t even sure it was on the menu, so she’d have to ask Edward what to charge him. She remembered Edward bragging that there were only 109 other bottles of it in the world.

“Right away.” Ack. Surreptitiously fanning herself, she pulled a stool over to boost herself up to reach the bottle, wishing she could loosen the regulation men’s tie she wore as part of her uniform, or at least roll up the sleeves of her heavy cotton button-down shirt.

Her feet hadn’t hit the ground for a nanosecond before he spoke. “What are the specials?” Though he was looking at her, those ice blue eyes seemed almost to look *through* her, the way ghosts can walk through people in the movies.

“We have, ah, pork chops. No, pork *loin*. Pork loin with preserved lemons, and...something. Pickerel with cranberries and, um, asparagus.”

“Pork loin with preserved lemons?” He set down his pencil—he always used an old-school, non-mechanical pencil, and it was always perfectly sharp—and raised an eyebrow.

“Um...” Had she got it wrong? That must be wrong.

“I’ll have that. Pork with preserved lemon.” He picked up his pencil. “There’s a first time for everything.”

*Get a grip. You’re coming off like a total ditz.* Carefully setting a tumbler on the bar for his scotch, she asked, “Neat?” though she already knew the answer.

“Water,” he said.

“Good man.” It was out before she could think better of it. Just that most people ruined their scotch with a whack of too-cold ice, or tried to testosterone their way through by demanding it neat, which was a shame, because the best way to really *taste* scotch was to dilute it with just the right amount of water.

Ebenezer’s eyes rose from his work again, but this time, instead of looking through her, they looked right *at* her. For a very long time. They began at her hair, which she suspected was doing its usual poor job staying slicked back into the requisite bun, slid down her face which, yes, thank you, heated under his scrutiny. From there he raked his gaze to her chest, which...well, she had curves that even Edward’s gender-neutral generic wait staff uniform could not constrain. She cursed them every evening, in fact, when she struggled to button the work shirt even while its sleeves and shoulders dwarfed her. Sara and Camille and the rest of them, with their lithe frames and graceful lines, looked like an army of Kate Mosses in their always-crisp shirts. The mannish ties made them look hot, whereas the same tie just made short-waisted Cassie look...strangled.

This was all Cassie's internal monologue, though. Ebenezer didn't betray a single thought. His eyes lingered, yes, but once they fell to her waist, which was the end of the line because the bar blocked the rest of her, they came back up to her eyes with no hint of anything. No approval, no disgust. Just emptiness.

"You're a connoisseur then?" A hint of a raised eyebrow made its way onto his otherwise inscrutable face. She might have been imagining it.

She shrugged to hide her nervousness. Surely none of the others had ever had even this much of a conversation with Mr. Scrooge. "I am." She tipped the bottle to fill his glass, pausing when she'd poured the standard amount, and then poured a little more—keep the customer satisfied. After all, this one glass was probably going to cost him more than a hundred bucks, and since he was eating at the bar, she didn't have to share her fifty percent tip with anyone. "But I haven't tried this." She set the bottle down a little more vehemently than she'd intended, but he didn't flinch. "This is a little too rich for my blood." She winked—fake it till you make it. "Wait!" She suddenly remembered. "I stock distilled water for you." She squatted down to grab the jug she kept under the bar.

It was true. She did keep it here with him in mind, once she'd realized they had a regular customer who knew how to take his scotch. She shot him a grin as she stood and twisted the cap off the plastic gallon container. "Mind you, normally you're not sitting here, so you don't see me pour it from this ugly-ass jug into this"—she reached above her head for a small crystal pitcher—"fancy deal."

His hand shot out to stop her, coming to rest on her arm. Sweet Lord above, was he a shaman, conducting electricity through his fingers? Forcing herself not to jerk away as if from a hot stove, she cleared her throat. "Something wrong?"

"What is this?"

She twisted the jug toward him. “Target brand distilled water. Only the best for you.”

“You keep this in stock for me?”

“Well, you can’t drink 1955 Glenfarclas with tap water.” She shuddered—the impulse was real, but she exaggerated the effect. “Toronto water is terrible. It comes from the lake, for heaven’s sake.”

He nodded, still no discernable expression on his face.

She hesitated. “Do you want it in the pitcher?”

“That’s not necessary. You can just pour it for me.”

Great. Now she’d set herself up to pour the perfect amount of water from a gallon jug directly into a glass of scotch that cost as much as one of her textbooks—all under his signature brand of unsettling and intense scrutiny. Probably all the other staff members were watching, too. Her hands shook just thinking about it. *Once more, with feeling. Fake it till you make it, girl.*

“There you go.” She poured—pretty well, if she did say so herself—and without making eye contact with him, recapped the bottle and pivoted away. “Your dinner is coming right up.”

...

Well, hot damn. A person went to the same restaurant three nights a week for two years, and a person thought he knew everything there was to know about that restaurant. Jack knew all the Camilles and Kellies and Kristins, even if he couldn’t tell them apart, with their blond ponytails, their thin, glossy lips, and their studied casualness. Knew the cocktail list by heart. Could even guess at the specials—the chef liked to do poultry on Wednesdays and some kind of affected house-cured bullshit on Fridays that was never as good as it promised.

But then one day a person would do something so radical as come in on a Tuesday—what the hell else was a person supposed to do when one’s usual

Tuesday night dinner companion was royally fucking one over?—and suddenly here was something new.

Yes, if a person wasn't careful, before he knew it, a brunette with killer curves would be practically writhing on a stool in front of a person, reaching for a bottle of scotch that she would then proceed to mix with water from a *plastic bottle from Target*—and it would make complete sense for her to do so.

And if a person wasn't careful, the same scorching brunette would plunk a plate in front of a person and lift her chin just slightly before announcing, “Pork loin with cranberries, goat cheese, and fresh dill. I took the liberty of having the preserved lemon served on the side.”

No “I'm sorry, sir, I misspoke—we would never serve pork with lemons at a fine establishment such as this. I must have betrayed my working class ignorance there for a moment.” No, she just *brought it on the side*. Fuck. Had to admire the balls of a girl like that.

Well, metaphorical balls. Because this one, she was all girl.

Too bad, because if Carl really was screwing him the way Jack suspected, losing himself in a little female company tonight might be just what the doctor ordered.

But he had rules. And Jack hadn't gotten as far as he had without following his self-imposed rules. The relevant one here was that he was never the pursuer. Well, at least not until a woman got him into her bed. Then all bets were off. But, in general, he thought it fairer to let women come to him, given that he was never going to see any of them more than once. Pursuing a specific woman risked raising her expectations.

As he ate his pork loin—preserved lemon on the side—he gave up on the rows and rows of numbers, which were forever eluding him anyway, and contemplated the hot bartender. Why had he never noticed her before? The world was always throwing women at him—hence no need to be the

pursuer. Daughters of vendors—Jesus, wives of vendors. Flight attendants. Women hitting on him in bars. At Edward’s, and at most downtown Toronto high-end spots, they were almost all of a type, looking like they were on hiatus from the National Ballet to do their MBAs. They were all slippery shiny surface, nothing a man could hold on to, figuratively, or...well, this bartender, damn. He could just imagine pinning down those gorgeous full hips and—

“Will there be anything else tonight, sir?”

“Pardon me?” The object of his absurd little fantasy stepped into his line of vision, which put his eyeballs right in line with the second button of her white shirt—it had looked like it was about to pop off all evening.

“I’m cashing out—got to be up early tomorrow. So if you need anything else, more preserved lemon, maybe,”—one corner of her plump pink mouth turned up—“Edward will help you, okay?” She gestured to the older man at the other corner of the bar, whom he knew to be the owner.

*He was not the pursuer.* And, God, a bartender? Not exactly his type. “Thank you,” he said flatly, keeping his face neutral.

With a dip of her head, she disappeared into the kitchen. A few minutes later the door swung back open, and she stepped through transformed. A pink pea coat had been thrown over her shirt and her hair had come down. Freed from its prim bun, it fell well past her shoulders. When it was up, he’d thought of it as merely dark brown. But he saw now that it was a shiny mahogany subtly streaked with auburn and copper.

And she’d lost the tie. He shifted in his seat. The top two buttons of her shirt were undone; that heroic button had been taken off active duty, no longer straining to cover her up. He could see just the barest bit of cleavage, a mere hint of what he suspected lay beneath.

He closed his eyes for a moment, imagining the rest.

Well, if fucking Carl was going to take down Winter Enterprises, at least

Miss Lemon on the Side had given him something else to think about tonight.



## Chapter Two

When Jack arrived at the bar the next night, the bartender was deep in conversation with a...teenager? She was huddled with a girl who couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen, their attention both drawn by something on the bar.

“Ants, Cassie! Ants! Are they *trying* to alienate me?”

Cassie—that must be her name—waved a bar towel dismissively. “Ants, trains, whatever, it’s all the same. You just have to think about it the same way you always do.”

The scrape of his stool drew her attention. A flash of surprise flitted across her face, but it was quickly replaced by a grin. When she smiled she crunched up her nose, which, lightly sprinkled with freckles as it was, made for a seriously adorable picture. “Hey! You’re back!” She glanced out at the restaurant proper, toward the far corner where he usually sat.

“Yeah, it’s easier to spread out here at the bar, I found. And I’ve got a crapload of work to get done.” It was not untrue. His head swam when he thought of it. The reality, though, was that he was going to need a bar the size of his boardroom table to sort everything out. But he couldn’t do this work in the office. He huffed a disgusted laugh. Hell, he probably couldn’t do this work at all—that was the terrible irony.

She ducked for a moment, disappearing behind the bar. When she shot up, she was grinning and holding the jug of distilled water. She plunked it

down in front of him. “The scotch supplier was here today and we have a bunch of new bottles—they’re still in back. I’m gonna go grab them.” Before he could protest that anything was fine—he wasn’t feeling picky—she was off, hips swaying in her black miniskirt.

He didn’t realize how openly he was staring until he swung his attention back to the bar to find the teenager eyeing him with no less subtlety. In her jeans and too-tight T-shirt, she looked out of place in the dark bar, which was usually filled with stockbrokers and young beautiful people with money to burn.

“You Cassie’s boyfriend?”

He shot her what he hoped was a quelling look. “No.” Then he pulled up the March invoices. Jesus Christ, he was only to March. He’d hoped to have this sorted out before the Wexler deal got underway, but it didn’t look like it was going to happen. He knocked his head momentarily against his fist, as if he could knock some goddamn sense into his head.

“Problem?” The girl was still looking at him.

“You could say that.”

“Well, you’re not the only one. Listen to this. Two ants are at a common point in time. The first ant starts crawling along a straight line at the rate of one meter per minute. Three minutes later, the second ant starts crawling in a direction perpendicular to that of the first, at a rate of one point three meters per minute. How fast is the distance between them changing when the first ant has traveled seven meters?”

His blank stare must have spoken for him because she pounded the bar and said, “Exactly. There’s also the part where we’re talking about ants! *Ants!* When, I ask you, am I ever going to need to calculate the rate of change of the distance between two ants?”

“I think it’s safe to say probably never?”

“Never say never.” Cassie had snuck up on them. She was carrying too

much, hugging an armful of bottles. Carefully, slowly, she let them slide down her chest, until they thumped onto the polished cherrywood of the bar. He had a sudden vision of her doing the same thing naked. The bottles would compress her ample breasts, and as they slid down her body, those breasts would bounce back to their pertly rounded shape. Jesus. *Stop it.*

“The point is not the ants.” Cassie spoke to the girl even as she lined up the half dozen bottles and began turning them so the labels faced him. “The point is not even the ‘will I ever have to do this exact equation in real life?’ question. It’s about learning how to think mathematically. To problem solve.”

She looked at him and then back at the girl. No one spoke.

“Oh, I’m sorry! Alana, meet Mr. ah...” She bit her lip.

“Winter,” he supplied. “Jack Winter.”

“Mr. Winter”—Cassie shot him a smile—“Meet Ms. Alana Jamieson.”

“As in Edward Jamieson?” he asked, referencing the owner of the eponymous restaurant.

Alana’s version of the universal eye roll of teenagers everywhere confirmed her paternity.

Just then one of the servers came by, the one he thought of as the least annoying. “Two glasses of merlot.” Cassie nodded and pulled down two balloon glasses. “And, Cassie, nine bucks on a one hundred and seventy dollar check—what’s that?”

“Just over five percent,” said Cassie.

“Goddamn, what do these rich fuckers think? That I’m here for shits and giggles?” Then the server reached out and tousled Alana’s hair. “Sorry, sugar. Getting stiffed makes me cranky.”

Cassie gave a little cough and inclined her head ever so slightly toward Jack. The server’s eyes followed Cassie’s and landed on him. She obviously hadn’t seen him sitting in the corner, but she didn’t even bother disguising

her eye roll. What was it about him today that was inspiring feminine eye rolls? “Present company excluded, of course,” she drawled before grabbing her now-filled wine glasses and speeding off.

“Cassie!” said Alana, drawing out the final syllable. “The ants!”

“Hold on! Give me a sec to do the job I’m actually paid for, will you?” She turned to him. “You sure you don’t want to flee to your usual spot? Sitting here in the loony bin, you’re not exactly getting the fine dining experience Edward prides himself on.”

“I’m good here,” he said.

The smile she gave him did something to his throat.

“Well then.” She spread her arms with a theatrical flourish, circling them over the bottles like Vanna White. “What will it be?”

“Surprise me.”

“Really?” She clapped her hands. “Price range?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Well, if I were feeling flush, I would try this one.” She tapped a bottle of Balvenie 30.

“Have you tried it?”

“God, no. Too rich for my blood. I’m a Red Label girl—by circumstance rather than by inclination, mind you. Edward’s supplier sometimes sneaks me sips when he’s wooing Edward with a new bottle, but I haven’t had the pleasure with this one.”

He tapped the bottle. “I’ll have two glasses of this, then.”

“You want a double?”

“No, I want two glasses.”

“I’ll never understand you rich people, either.” The jibe was delivered with a smile as she pulled down a pair of tumblers.

After she’d poured two glasses, he reached for the water jug that was still sitting on the bar. “Allow me.”

“By all means.”

He eyeballed the glasses, filling each with a splash of water. Then he slid one toward Cassie.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, wow, thanks, but I really can’t.” She’d turned a little pink.

“Here’s your chance,” he said, looking around. “No one’s paying attention, and I won’t tell.”

“It’s not that.” A lock of hair had escaped her bun, and she tucked it behind her ear. “I just...I have rules.”

Her too? A woman with rules—interesting. “You have a rule against drinking the finest scotch the world has to offer?”

“No, I have a rule against drinking at work. Once you start doing that, you’re a...”

“Lush?”

“No. A lifer.”

“Excuse me?”

“A lifer. It means you’re going to be working in restaurants your whole life. Not that I have anything against that,” she said quickly, waving her hands energetically in front of her like she was fending off an attack. “But if you’re here for life, you need coping mechanisms. Again—there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s just that I don’t...”

“You don’t want that to be you.” Hmmm. The bartender had hidden depths. Ambition.

“Something like that.” She pushed the glass back toward him. “So thanks anyway. I’ll comp you this one.”

He refrained from saying that he didn’t think Edward would appreciate her comping him a forty dollar glass of scotch. “Well, it’ll be here if you change your mind.”

“You know what you want to eat?” she asked.

He looked down the bar at Alana, who was texting so fast her fingers were a blur. “Why don’t you go do a shift on ant patrol, and I’ll decide by the time you come back?”

When she returned, the bar was filling up, both with customers and with servers placing and fetching drink orders. Because Cassie was busy—and so was he, he reminded himself—he ordered quickly and tried to lose himself in his work.

She didn’t interrupt him, just slid his dinner into an empty spot among his papers and smiled in response to his thanks. She appeared a moment later with a wine bottle. “May I recommend a medium-bodied Pinot with your meal? It’s a limited edition.”

“Thank you,” he said, appreciating her ability to pour the perfect amount freestyle, just as she had yesterday with the water for his scotch. He glanced down to the other end of the bar, which Alana had long since vacated. “Ants all sorted out?”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “She’s the owner’s daughter. I help her with math sometimes.”

And then she was back to work. She looked like a dancer, executing each movement, whether it be opening a bottle of wine, wiping up a spill, or making an elaborate girlie drink with a dozen ingredients with efficiency and grace. Orders and requests came steadily at her, but she never lost track of what she was doing. It was a different view of the restaurant from here. There was a vibrancy, bordering on frenzy, at the bar that one didn’t see in the dining room. And Cassie was the eye of the storm, pivoting, pouring, smiling.

The buzz had an oddly calming effect. Or maybe that was the scotch—it really had been superb. Either way, he found himself able to tackle the rows of numbers in front of him with a focus he usually lacked. Working steadily, he made it halfway through April—he thought. Well, only eight and a half

more months to go. And, Jesus, that was just this year. When he thought of it like that, instead of breaking it down into finite tasks he needed to perform, he got that clawing panicky feeling. It started in his stomach, just like it always had. He could close his eyes and be back in third grade, clutching a piece of chalk and staring at a blackboard that might as well have been covered in Chinese for all the sense he could make of it.

“Can I bring you anything else?” Cassie’s appearance pulled him back to the present. The bar was empty. The din he’d noticed earlier had fallen off dramatically. He glanced down at his watch. Nearly eleven thirty—more time had passed than he’d realized.

“I’m not keeping you here, am I?” he asked. “But, no, because you just up and leave when you’re ready, right?” he teased, thinking of last night, when she’d left seemingly in the middle of a shift.

She looked embarrassed—she was easy to tease. “You’re referring to my untimely departure last night.” He dipped his head in acknowledgment. “I had a final exam this morning. I’d arranged with Edward to take off early last night. He’s good that way.”

*Not a lifer.* “What are you studying?”

“Math. At the University of Toronto.”

“Ah, the ants.” Damn. A mathematician. A *hot* mathematician. *Rules*, he reminded himself.

“Yeah! Well, at the rate I’m going, I feel like an ant myself.”

He raised his eyebrows, hoping to encourage her to continue.

“Let’s just say it’s taking me a long time to get through school. I can only go part time. Extremely part time. I’m practically a senior citizen compared to some of my classmates.”

She didn’t seem that old to him. Not an eighteen-year-old fresh from high school, no, but she had an air of innocence about her he suspected most university students—even those younger than she—did not.

“Well, good for you.” He eyed her as he gathered up his papers. She *did* look tired. Not that she looked bad, far from it, just that more of her hair was out of her bun than in it, and her white shirt was stained. Disheveled was the word, really. She looked like she’d worked hard tonight, like she needed a foot rub and a stiff drink. An image flashed unbidden in front of his eyes—why did this keep happening?—of her reclining on his bed, eyes closed in ecstasy, sipping a scotch while he kneaded the soles of her feet.

He pushed the untouched second glass of scotch toward her. “Change your mind?”

She snapped her eyes to his, a little shocked, as if he had suggested something far, far wickeder. As if she could read his mind. They stared at each other in silence for a few heartbeats. Then he thought of that button, that straining button, and damned if his cock didn’t start to stir. He looked into her flashing eyes—flecked with blue, green and amber, they seemed to be made up of little splinters of every color imaginable—and told himself not to be a jerk.

He dropped his gaze. It was an asshole move, but he didn’t have control over himself, that fucking button did. His eyes found it right away. It was just a plain, small, white button. Nothing special. It was the way it was pulled, so that instead of lying flat, the edge pointed toward him. She shifted a little, almost infinitesimally, and the button quivered. So did his cock. God, she was magnificent under there, wasn’t she?

The next thing he knew, a small hand inserted itself into his field of vision. Nicely shaped nails, fingers sprinkled with a few freckles. Did she have freckles everywhere?

The hand clasped around the sweating scotch glass and began lifting it.

He followed it with his eyes. She licked her lips. Slowly. Jesus. Then she tipped her head back and drank. For a moment he thought she was going to drain the whole glass in one swig. But, no, she was a lover of scotch. He



watched her neck—she took two swallows. She kept her eyes closed as she righted her head and gave a low hum of appreciation that echoed in his chest.

Plunking the glass down on the bar, she looked at him and said, “I guess rules were made to be broken.”

...

The cold night air was a relief when it hit Cassie’s overheated face. She hadn’t buttoned up her coat, and after she got out of the immediate circle of light cast by the streetlamps outside Edward’s, she turned her head to the sky, looking for stars that the city lights and tall buildings always obscured. Why did she even try? In this city, the stars could all burn out and no one would notice.

As the wind hit her neck, she took a deep breath. Holy cannoli, what a night. If this thing with Ebenezer sitting at the bar was going to *be* a thing, life was going to get a heck of a lot more interesting. And more lucrative. She patted the pocket where she’d stuffed her tips—Ebenezer’s made up two-thirds of her take for the night.

There was no denying the guy was hot. Not her usual type maybe, but really, what was her usual type? Sensitive, stylish boys whose love of \*NSYNC should have, in retrospect, been a red flag that they were complete closet cases? Jovial jocks who, though they were well meaning, probably scored higher in a hockey season than they did in IQ? Because that was the grand sum of her romantic experience. First had been Danny, the high school boyfriend, still her best friend now that he was comfortably out of the closet—but only because they both still loved \*NSYNC. And then there was Mark, the only boyfriend she’d had in the approximately eight hundred million years she’d been at university. Set up by friends, she’d gone with the flow, and before she knew it she had a hockey star

boyfriend who was...nice. She'd been surprised, then, when he dumped her, showing uncharacteristic signs of wisdom when he said they "just didn't have that spark." They'd vowed to stay friends, but without a shared devotion to a 1990s boy band to cement their relationship, they drifted apart.

But this guy. Ebenezer. Jack Winter. Mr. Richie Rich Real Estate Man. Whoever the heck he was. He was something else. He was hot, yes, in a conventional sort of way. Tall, good-looking, and all that. Smart—must be, given that he was so rich, and he always seemed to be poring over accounts. But aside from all that, there was something roiling just below the surface, barely contained. The sense that he was perpetually treading a tightrope of some sort. Like he was capable of exploding at any moment, but had simply chosen, through an act of will, not to. And, oh man, when he'd stared at her boobs so blatantly. She should have been offended, she supposed, but as he openly and unapologetically looked his fill, she'd just been turned on. Like crazy turned on.

She was still staring in vain at the sky when she heard him. "I was thinking about what you said."

She shrieked and jumped about a foot.

"Sorry," he smirked. "Did I startle you?"

Ugh. There it was again. Apparently all he had to do was speak, aim that low, knowing voice in her direction, and something spiked through her center. Something that had been conspicuously absent with Mr. Hockey and Mr. \*NSYNC.

She hoped he would interpret the time she took answering as a sign of nonchalance. Instead of, say, lust. Because there was no getting around it. She wanted him. But she didn't want him to *know* she wanted him. Her insides were turning to mush, and he probably just wanted to ask her something about Edward's scotch collection. But, fake it till you make it,

right? She sent him what she hoped was a skeptical look. “You were thinking about what I said? Remind me what I said?”

He waited a beat before he spoke, and in the pause she stared at his lips. Forget nonchalant, as he stuck his tongue out to lick his lips, there was no way not to stare.

“You said rules are meant to be broken.”

There wasn’t even time to gasp before his mouth was on hers—his mouth, tasting of scotch, and his hands. He was everywhere as he pressed her against the brick wall of the building.

He tore his mouth from hers and she did gasp then, greedily sucking in air to fill the vacuum the intense kiss had created. He pressed against the soft flesh of her belly. His desire was unmistakable. “Do you feel that?” he bit out, his voice as raspy as his face—she hadn’t really noticed his five o’clock shadow until it was being rubbed against her cheek. “Do you?”

“Yes,” she breathed. Suspended in a web of white-hot lust, she was unsure if she’d managed enough volume to make herself audible.

“This is what happens to me when I sit at your bar and watch you.”

*Holy—*

Before she could finish the thought, his mouth was back on hers, his tongue testing the seam of her lips. She opened, and he sucked on her lower lip. When he shoved his tongue into her mouth, she could have sworn she felt it between her legs too.

“I have rules, too,” he whispered, dragging his mouth down her throat until he hit the first button that was done up on her shirt. “And this”—he grabbed the button between his thumb and index finger and pulled until it simply snapped off—“is against them.” With a groan, he lowered his mouth to the exposed flesh.

And there she was, shoving her chest up shamelessly, trying to make it easier for him to access her cleavage with that wicked, wonderful tongue.

When the next button popped off and a hand pushed inside her shirt, taking the place of his mouth, she dropped her head back. It was too much work to hold it upright. And when the hand pressed aside the cup of her bra and went straight for her already taut nipple, rolling it between thumb and forefinger, she broke a rule of her own, cursing despite herself. “Oh, shit.”

He laughed, a low, self-satisfied, almost mocking laugh that made her want to punch him. But she feared doing so would make him stop, and right now the most important thing was to make sure that he never, ever stopped.

“We should stop,” he whispered, removing his hand from her shirt.

“Shit.” Once more for good measure—why the hell not? See, once she started, it was all potty mouth all the time.

He took a step back, into the streetlight, and revealed himself to be... completely unaffected. While she, panting and sweaty and breathless, felt like little pieces of her were scattered about the dirty snow at their feet...he was as cool and unruffled as ever. She *had* heard him groan at one point, hadn't she? Or—please no—maybe that had actually been her?

He narrowed his eyes at her with a look she could not decode. Voices made their way into her consciousness, and she looked around, disoriented. Had he stopped because someone was coming? Or because she was a disappointment?

“Should I apologize?” he asked, no inflection in his tone. The question was followed by the jingle of the seasonal bells Edward tied to the restaurant's door.

She shook her head no, not trusting her voice. If she spoke, she might do something as humiliating as beg him to kiss her again.

Sara and Camille—she could make out the voices now—approached, chattering and laughing. Her eyes darted around, searching for an escape, which was ridiculous because it wasn't like they were doing anything wrong. She looked down at herself. He reached out and closed her coat,

tucking one lapel over the other.

The chattering stopped as the women halted and took in the scene. “Cassie?” said Camille, with her signature upspeak. “What are you doing?”

“We were just, ah, talking about scotch,” she said. “Are you two going to the subway? I’ll walk with you.” She formed her lips into a smile. “Have a good evening, Mr. Winter.”

He did not smile back, merely said, in that completely neutral tone that gave no hint as to what was inside his mind, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Cassie.”

She didn’t know that he knew her name. The way he said it—crap. She had to get away. “Shall we?” she said to the girls, her voice just a little too chipper. They followed, having the sense to at least wait until they were out of earshot before unleashing their interrogation. When they were half a block away, Cassie risked a glance back over her shoulder.

He was gone.

## Chapter Three

Though it just about killed her, Cassie waited until ten the next morning to call Danny, who had never been a morning glory, even in the brief period when she'd been sleeping with him, and they'd both had to get up at five so he could sneak out her bedroom window and down the fire escape before school. Not that her mother ever would have noticed. Heck, her mother would have sympathized—a high school boyfriend was how she'd gotten knocked up with Cassie in the first place.

“I get it now,” she said, not bothering with a greeting when he finally answered after eight hundred million rings.

“Cassie? What time is it? Huh?”

“Sex. I get it now.”

“*What?*” Suddenly he wasn't groggy any more, and she laughed, picturing him sitting bolt upright in bed. “You had sex?”

“*No!* I made out with a guy. Outside, against a wall. Ack—it sounds so juvenile.”

“Oh my God. Who was this guy?”

“That rich guy from the restaurant.”

“You made out with Ebenezer Scrooge?”

She kind of relished being the one with news for once. Usually these calls were about Danny relating his latest exploits. “Actually it turns out his name is Jack Winter.”

“Jack Winter of Winter Enterprises?”

“Um, I guess so?”

“He’s worth, like, a billion dollars, Cass! He’s always on those annual *Canadian Business* roundups of the richest people. He’s like the thirty-fifth richest Canadian or something. But no one really knows because it’s a private company.”

Danny had majored in business, and given that he wasn’t on the eight hundred million year plan like Cassie, he had spent several years working in marketing. He knew about stuff like who was the thirty-fifth richest Canadian.

“What does Winter Enterprises do?” *Please don’t let it be something like killing puppies.*

“Real estate development. Commercial buildings at first, resort properties now mostly.”

“That’s okay, right?”

“What do you mean okay? Are you going to invest? Have his babies? Do you need a background check to make out with him?”

“No! Stop asking me questions. I just made out with him once. It’s done.”

“Yeah, but you *get sex* now. The man singlehandedly makes you quote-unquote *get sex*, and that’s it? You’re throwing him over?”

“I was exaggerating. It was just that he was...”

“What are you trying to say? That he was better than Mark? Wait.” There was a theatrical pause. Cassie knew what was coming, but she let him have his fun. “Are you trying to say he was better than *I was*?”

“I’m saying I get what all the fuss is about now.” Sex used to seem to Cassie like just another complication. Going to school, working more than full time, the odd social event—it was more than enough. Why waste time fumbling around awkwardly with strangers when she could produce reliable, efficient results with her trusty Hitachi Magic Wand?

“Welcome to the human race, my friend. I’m just a little miffed that I couldn’t have been the agent of this wonderful revelation.” Danny was forever trying to push her at guys. He’d been advocating casual sex for years, and for years Cassie had ignored him, going home alone when he caught the eye of some handsome stranger at a bar on their nights out. “What did he smell like?”

What did he *smell* like? Danny was such a weirdo. “Um, scotch?”

“Scotch isn’t a smell; it’s a taste.

“It is too a smell. He smelled peaty.”

“Like a bog?”

“Like scotch! Peat and...lemon?” She surprised herself with that last bit. It was true, though she hadn’t been able to put her finger on the lemon part until she’d been pressed.

“So he’s like a lemon tree growing in a bog.”

She burst out laughing.

“Cassie, wait—you know how it works, right?”

“Yes, I know how it works, Danny!”

“I don’t mean how it *works* works, I mean condoms and stuff.” He paused. “And heartbreak.”

“I’m not an idiot. Use condoms. Don’t get your heart broken. That about cover it?”

“It’s just that you can be so innocent in some ways, Cass.”

“Gah! It’s not happening again anyway,” she reminded him. “At least not with him.”

“But he’s opened the floodgates, hasn’t he?”

“Mmmm.”

“Well, good. And remember, he’s not the only man in the world. He may be the only thirty-fifth-richest-person-in-Canada man in the world, but a girl can be too picky. The point is, the floodgates are *open*. Yay!”



Yes, Jack Winter had opened the floodgates. Opened them, ripped them right off the hinges, and splintered them into a million tiny pieces.

...

The next night Jack hardly spoke to Cassie. Thursday marked the beginning of the weekend in some ways, and the bar was much more crowded. He sat on the end stool as had become his new habit, tucked against the wall, but instead of a long stretch of empty stools between him and Miss Alana of the Ants, he was hemmed in by a trio of intoxicated lawyer types out for ladies' night. Try as he might to work his way through another month of invoices, he couldn't make his brain perform the necessary steps. So he gave up and turned his attention to the Wexler pitch. How he was going to get through it without Carl was another unanswered question, but at least the work was something he excelled at—figuring out how to get people to do what he wanted them to.

Something rubbed against his arm. Stifling a weary sigh, he raised his eyebrows at his neighbor, a tall blonde in a skin-tight pinstriped skirt suit who had been “accidentally” brushing against him and “accidentally” dropping things all evening. He deployed one of his signature looks. It was designed to convey a certain amount of frostiness, but not so much that could be called impolite. The problem was that Miss Droppy Pinstripes was not responding to his look.

She smiled. He did not.

“What are you drinking?”

He paused long enough that a normal person would understand he was answering reluctantly. “Scotch.”

Then, goddamn if she didn't reach over, pick up his drink, and take a sip. She scrunched her face up like she'd chugged a glass of roofing tar. “Yuck! Scotch is such a masculine drink! I just don't see the appeal!” Then she did

something he could only describe as simpler, though a minute ago he wouldn't have known what the hell the word meant. He glanced at the glass in front of her on the bar. She was drinking something pink with a whack of fruit in it.

"This isn't working on me," he said. Sometimes the direct way was the best.

"Excuse me?" Miss Droppy began blinking rapidly. Oh, shit, was she going to cry? Maybe he'd been too hasty giving up his solo table. There, no one bothered him.

Suddenly there was Cassie, inserting her barely tamed tresses between them, bringing with her a whiff of what he was coming to recognize as her signature scent—it was like vanilla mixed with some kind of spice he couldn't identify. "Gay," she stage-whispered to Miss Droppy, hitching her head in Jack's direction.

"Hey!" he protested, but Droppy's "Ohhhh!" drowned him out. She shot him a wry smile and said, "Well, that's a shame." But then, hallelujah, she turned her back.

"You're welcome," said Cassie, winking as she grabbed his empty pitcher—it being crowded, she hadn't whipped out the big ugly plastic water jug this time. She was halfway down the bar, on to the next thing, before he could really process what had happened.

The rest of the evening passed like that—Cassie dropping in briefly to anticipate a need, or merely to flash him a smile. She was in her element. She *looked* like a lifer, but not a downtrodden, resigned lifer. It was more that she was somehow the source of the place, its human battery, supplying it with the energy and life it needed to function. She was the tuning fork that kept everyone playing the same song.

She must have lent him some energy too, for he suddenly had a brainwave about how to appeal to Wexler. He would suggest they have the

meeting on the island, try to get himself invited over. Maybe the old guy just needed to see Jack's vision in context. Maybe the truth would be enough, and Carl's absence wouldn't matter.

"That bartender would be cute if she lost twenty pounds. Am I right?"

Jesus. It was one of Droppy's crew. Maybe he'd call this one Perky. She certainly was, but unlike Cassie, that much...endowment on such a skinny frame called to mind plastic surgery. And personally, nothing killed a boner faster for him.

"She has a ruuuulllly pretty face, for sure," slurred Droppy. "Plump girls always do. But I'd still way rather do Angelina Jolie."

"I'd rather do one of you guys!" exclaimed the third member of their unholy trinity. He'd call this one Dopey, because, really, didn't every group need a Dopey? "Seriously! If I had to kiss a girl—ewww!—it would be one of you guys!"

"That's so nice! Oh my gosh!"

"I would totally kiss you, too!"

All right then, that was his cue. He fished a couple of hundreds out of his wallet and left them. It's not like he was waiting for something.

Correction—it's not like he was waiting for something he couldn't just as easily wait for outside.

By the time she emerged, he was fucking freezing. Freezing and mad. At what, he wasn't sure. Though maybe the better question was what *wasn't* he mad at? Let us count the ways. To be fair, Droppy, Perky, and Dopey were really just the targets of his rage because they were convenient. The CFO whom he suspected was embezzling him to the tune of several million dollars wasn't here right now. He was probably in the office "working late." You know, demonstrating his commitment to the company.

The bells of Edward's door jingled, drawing his attention. Christ, *finally*,

someone he wasn't mad at.

It almost seemed like she was expecting him this time, because when he stepped out of the shadows just long enough to pull her back into them with him, there was no evidence of surprise. Her lips opened, but instead of rounding in shock, her jaw relaxed, letting that plump bottom lip fall open. Jesus fucking Christ, the places he could imagine that mouth. Instead of widening, her eyes glazed over with something that looked suspiciously like desire. He eyed her for a moment, trying to remember why this was a bad idea. Too late, though, because *she* kissed *him* this time. Rising onto her tiptoes, she grabbed the back of his neck, tugged his head down, and pressed her lips against his with a soft little whimper that managed to drown out any lingering peeps of better judgment.

He let her take the lead for a while, bending down to give her better access as she twined her arms around his neck. Tonight, as yesterday, she tasted like cinnamon. But there was a boldness in her kisses that hadn't been there last night. Then she went for the hollow of his neck, which, Christ, felt good enough, but it also meant her hair was right under his nose. That maddening vanilla—it must be her shampoo. Together with the cinnamon of her mouth, she was like a goddamned cake. A cake he couldn't cram into his mouth fast enough, so this was the end of her little exploration. He was in charge now.

“That’s enough,” he said, and she dropped her hands immediately, misunderstanding. She took an uncertain step back, scared off. *Shit*. “That’s not what I meant.” He was still thinking of cake. With her curtain of dark hair, her killer curves, and that spicy-vanilla assault on his senses, she might as well have been a fucking cinnamon roll. Her freckles were the sprinkles on top. “Christ. I could eat you.”

A sharp intake of breath. Her head fell forward for a moment, like it was too heavy for her to hold up. Then she righted it, looked him directly in the

eye and said, “Why don’t you then?”

That was it. A literal fire under his ass couldn’t have made him move any faster. They’d been standing in front of the restaurant—in the shadows, yes, but shadows were not enough for some things. He yanked her into the narrow alley that ran between Edward’s and the next building and fell to his knees in the crunchy snow. She gasped—she hadn’t thought he’d really do it. That would teach her to tease him. Sliding his hands up her skirt, he found the top of her tights and jerked them down.

Grabbing his forearms, she shoved him. “Whoa,” she whispered.

He held up his hands as if at gunpoint, still on his knees. Christ, standing there with her tights around her knees, she was hotter than anything he’d ever conjured in his wickedest fantasies. If she stopped him now, there was no justice in the world. But still, he was a gentleman. He might be an ass, but he was also a gentleman. “You want me to stop?”

“Yes—no.” She shook her head. “I don’t know.” Her face was blazing. She looked like a goddess.

He lowered his hands and pressed his palms against the front of her knees. Keeping a close eye on her face, slowly he began moving his hands up. Despite the December air, her skin was warm. When his hands reached the top of her panties, he stopped, still watching her. He was vibrating, humming with lust. He raised his eyebrows in a silent question. Then he licked his lips.

She nodded.

Down came the panties—a plain black cotton bikini, which, God help him, was the hottest thing he’d ever seen.

No, scratch that. The hottest thing he’d ever seen was the shock of mahogany hair between her legs. She was trimmed and neat, but not hairless like most women. He hadn’t thought he had much of an opinion on the matter, until now, when he suddenly did.

He skipped the preliminaries, anchored his hands on her thighs, and buried his face in her. Vanilla there, too—how was that possible?—mixed with a musky spice. She was already wet. He drew a finger across her folds and was rewarded with a shaky exhale. “You like that?” he whispered, following the same path with his tongue.

She didn’t answer, unless you counted the little mewling noise she made when his tongue hit her. He snuck a glance up. He wasn’t even sure she’d heard his question—her head lolling against the brick wall, her eyes closed. She was good at this, at losing herself. Her lack of self-consciousness was maybe the most erotic thing he’d ever seen. He tried again—yep, there was that insanely hot whimper again. All right, they were in an alley outside in December—now was not the time to draw things out. He didn’t want to, anyway. He just wanted to lose himself in those curls. Fuck the financials. Fuck Carl. Fuck the Wexler deal. He went straight for her clit, licking softly a few times to make sure she wasn’t going to panic. When all she did was moan and twine her fingers in his hair, he increased the pressure, alternating with sucking, trying to figure out what she liked. When she cried out and clenched her fists in his hair, he stuck with a rhythm of thrusting alternating with softer licking. It wasn’t long before her shallow breathing stopped altogether. Unable to withstand any more, he used one hand to fumble his cock out of his pants.

“Oh!” She came apart on him, and it was only two more strokes before he followed her.

They both froze for a moment, he on his knees with his dick in his hand and she splayed against the brick wall in her pink winter coat, but with her skirt hiked up and her underwear around her knees. *Jesus, what a picture they must make.* He had a belated thought that he hoped there weren’t any security cameras around. Or, hell, maybe he hoped there *were*. Probably, the resulting tape would be scorching.

When she wobbled a little and started to slide down the wall, it galvanized him. He tucked himself back into his pants and stood, hoisting her up with him.

Her cheeks were red. The uninhibited goddess had gone, and Cassie the sweet bartender was embarrassed now. She gave him a lopsided smile as she blushed. “I guess it’s your turn now,” she whispered.

Oh, the very idea of what she was suggesting—it was almost enough to get him hard again. He muttered a curse under his breath. It was one thing for him to fall to his knees in the dirty snow of a dark alley, but damned if he was going to let her do it. “Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. I took care of it.”

“Holy macaroni,” she whispered.

Holy macaroni indeed.

## Chapter Four

“Are you *sure*?”

Cassie smiled into the phone as she sat on the edge of her bed putting the final touches on her toenails—electric blue background with hot pink polka dots. She had to keep her fingernails plain to work in the restaurant, so she overcompensated with wild toes.

“Are you *sure* sure?” This was Danny’s eloquent closing argument in his campaign to try to get her to come to the farm with him for Christmas. The “farm” was the rural property Danny’s hippie mother had recently acquired, but since the land was mostly limestone, she wasn’t having a lot of luck planting. That, and the part where she didn’t know squat about agriculture. This past summer, as they stood and inspected an acre of dead corn, Cassie had to tell her that sometimes farmers have to irrigate.

“Irrigate? What are you saying, Cassie dear?”

“Irrigate. Like, water?”

“Oh, no, Mother Nature provides. That’s the beauty of farming.”

“Huh,” Cassie had said, surveying Mother Nature’s bounty, which, this season apparently fell under the heading “scorched earth.”

“You know I love you. I even love your mother. Sort of.” Danny’s mother did things like pat Cassie’s shoulder, and feed her gluten-free, vegan, stevia-sweetened cookies that tasted like bricks, but that was more than Cassie’s own mother ever did. Danny didn’t appreciate his weirdo mom enough.



“I think my mother is having a midlife crisis.”

“Hippies are allowed to have midlife crises.” She admired her toes.

“So if you love her so much, why won’t you come with me?” Then he shifted into his generic theatrical voice. “Help me Obi-Wan, you’re my only hope!”

Cassie thought back to last Christmas. “I love your mother, but I love my apartment building’s very functional boiler more.” Oh, the cold. She was nearly having PTSD-style flashbacks just thinking about it. “And then there was the part where she decided running water was a bourgeois luxury we didn’t need. Also—television. You know I don’t get to watch TV during the school year.” She wasn’t proud of it, but one of Cassie’s great joys in life was to cram entire seasons of TV into the few short weeks she had between the end of the fall semester and the beginning of spring. Once she was “only” working fifty hours a week, her life suddenly opened up, and she filled the time with great greedy feasts of *Dancing with the Stars*, *Doctor Who*, and *Glee*. She wasn’t proud of her taste, but if a girl’s only guilty pleasure was watching a bunch of middle-aged “teenagers” improbably break into Madonna songs as they went about their plucky, underdog lives, really, what was the harm?

“She’s let up on the plumbing thing,” Danny offered weakly.

“Nope!” said Cassie brightly, flipping onto her back and waving her feet in the air to speed the drying process.

“Cass,” said Danny, his tone growing uncharacteristically serious, “you can’t be alone on Christmas.”

She smiled. She was a lucky girl. “I’ll go to Edward’s.” *Maybe. Probably not.* Her boss, who was also her late father’s best friend, was always on her case to visit more, and he always tried to lure her over for holidays. Christmas at Edward’s, though, with his funny, sweet wife and their daughter Alana and her little sister Chloe—it was too big a dose of

heartbreak. But Danny didn't need to know that. Still, she was lucky. Not everyone had people fighting over them for Christmas.

"You promise you'll go to Edward's?"

"Yes!"

"Do you swear on the grave of your father?"

She jumped then, when the unnaturally loud buzzer her landlord had recently installed guillotined into her brain. Saved by the buzzer.

"I gotta go. There's someone here."

"Oh my God, maybe your mother's been sprung from rehab! Do you think *she* wants to come to the farm?"

"It's not Laura. And if she's out of rehab this soon, it's because she sprang herself, in which case I'm not talking to her."

"Maybe rehab has a punch card system going. Like at coffee shops. Each stint gets you a punch, and then when you have a whole row punched you get to go home early. I bet she *would* want to come to the farm. Isn't physical labor, like, one of the steps—"

"Gotta go! Call you later!" Cassie threw the phone on her bed and vaulted across the room to the intercom. She did kind of wonder who it was. Danny was the only person who ever came to her place. Maybe someone had sent her an early Christmas present, and it was the FedEx guy. As soon as she had the fleeting, hopeful thought, she quashed it. Hello, was she ten years old? And who would send her a present anyway? She punched the talk button. "Yes?"

"It's Jack Winter."

Ack! She wasn't wearing any pants! Lunging for a pair of jeans, she jammed her legs into them without thinking. She'd grabbed a skinny pair, so all ten wet toes came out the other end looking like she'd sent them to a Jackson Pollack appreciation class. "Awww!"

"Ahh!" There was that unholy buzzer again. "Yes?"

“Can I come up?”

“Oh! Yes, sorry! 5A.” Nice move, Rico Suave. She turned in place, trying to look at her apartment through his eyes. His eyes were probably used to a ginormous penthouse. She, on the other hand, lived in what was basically one room. The landlord had tried to sell it as an “efficiency-plus”—and it *was* large. Largish. But it was still one big room with an alcove that just fit her double bed, affording the illusion of a separate space for sleeping.

Well, it was what it was. Mr. CEO Dude would just have to deal. At least it was cute. She was rather proud of all the work she’d done to trick it out. If her version of shabby chic was a little heavy on the shabby, well, the lights were dim. She eyed the antique chandelier she’d hung just last week—and they were pretty good-looking lights, too.

By the time he rapped on her door, her vagina was panting. There was no other way to describe it. He was Pavlov; her vagina was the dog. Okay, not the best metaphor maybe, but she hadn’t even laid eyes on him yet and things were...happening.

She swung open the door. He was leaning against the jamb looking down, and he was *actually* panting. “No elevator?”

She shrugged. “The rent is cheap. The neighborhood is fun.”

He pushed off the doorframe and must have spied her feet before he lifted his eyes because he said, “Nice toes.”

“I wasn’t wearing any pants.”

He lifted an eyebrow.

Yeah, nice job—why didn’t she just say, “Woof, woof?”

“What I mean is, I was painting my toenails, and I wasn’t wearing pants. Then you buzzed. So I had to put pants on, and I ruined my toes.” *Woof woof.*

A beat of silence, then his voice like scratchy molasses. “Shoot, don’t get dressed on my account.”

Was this a booty call? A booty *visit*? Because she wasn't actually sure how she felt about that, Pavlov aside. It was one thing to do some ah, *stuff*, outside Edward's. Quite another for him to show up at her home. Yeah, this was not good. She didn't actually know anything about this guy. "How did you know where I live?"

"I got it out of that hostess at Edward's." Before she could protest, he continued. "I've come with a proposition. Can I come in?"

"Uh..." What was she supposed to say to that? It was fine in the alley, but I'm not so sure about the comfort of my own bed?

"Not that kind of proposition."

"Oh." Was that a ping of disappointment? She moved aside to let him in. Her apartment seemed to have shrunk. He filled it with his imposing golden presence. Stripping off his coat, he sat, long legs and sharp masculine angles incongruent against her turquoise art deco sofa.

"You're wearing jeans," she said, demonstrating a talent for stating the obvious as she sat on the armchair perpendicular to the sofa. It was just that he looked so different when he wasn't wearing one of his bazillionaire suits. The fitted dark jeans and gray Henley, together with the Sorel boots he'd kicked off in her entryway, made him look more like an L.L. Bean model than Canada's thirty-fifth richest person.

"Yes. Unlike you, I'm very pro-pant." He shot her a look. "Though I do make exceptions under certain circumstances."

She popped up. "Do you want a scotch? Scotch would be good, right?" A scotch approximately the size of Lake Ontario, perhaps?

"Thanks."

She could feel him checking out the place as she prepared the drinks in the small kitchen tucked into one corner of the room. Her home, she reminded herself. Her affordable, calm, hard-won home. Nothing to be ashamed of.

“Cute place. You have an eye for décor.”

A flush of pride followed, but she beat it back with self-deprecation. “It’s a bit girly, though, no?” Drinks in hand, she headed back to the sitting area.

“You *are* a girl.” He grinned and accepted the outstretched glass. “Last time I checked.”

...

Damn. Listen to him. It sounded like he was flirting. It was just too easy with her. Already blushing, she was way too teasable. Their fingers brushed as she handed him his drink, and he had a flash in his mind’s eye of her scrambling to put her pants on when he buzzed. But no, if this was going to work, they were done fooling around.

“It’s just Johnnie Walker, and Red Label at that. Sorry, no fifty-year-old Glenfarclas here.”

“A perfectly reliable brand.” He clinked his glass against hers. Time to start thinking with his brain. “So, math, huh?”

Again, she sat on the armchair, the farthest from him she could put herself in the little apartment. “Pardon me?”

“You’re majoring in math.”

“I thought you had a proposition.”

“I do, but I want to hear about the whole math thing first.”

She shrugged. “Well, yeah, math. I’ve only got a semester’s worth of credits left until I graduate, but at the rate I’m going, that will take me a year and a half.”

“You must do all right at Edward’s.” Not that it was any of his business, but hey, why let that stop him? He’d meant it when he said her apartment was cute, but it was tiny. It couldn’t cost that much.

She shifted and looked away. “Yeah, I have...other expenses.”

“Cocaine habit?” he teased.

She looked up sharply, her eyes wounded for a second before she recovered. Shit. *Did* she have a cocaine habit? Well, that was the point of this little interrogation, wasn't it? Find out if she was the man for the job. In a manner of speaking.

"I support my mother. She's very...expensive."

"Where does she live?"

"She moves around a lot." Her tone had grown clipped. Clearly mom was not a topic she wanted to discuss. Fair enough. He could relate.

"So, anyway, what I was really wondering is, why math? You're a natural? It's always been easy? Child prodigy? What?"

She tilted her head, considering. "I don't know. No, it hasn't always been easy. But at a certain point, after calculus, it kind of starts to get easier."

He couldn't contain the disbelieving guffaw.

"It does!" she insisted. "Anyway, I always liked it. A math problem is like a puzzle. It's something you can solve. It's finite, and there's a certain kind of..." She trailed off, looking at the ceiling as she searched for the right word. "Satisfaction there. You solve the problem, and then it's done."

"So what will you do when you graduate? That will be it for Edward's, I imagine? You said you weren't a lifer."

"Yeah. Though I'm lucky to have the job at Edward's."

"You're good at it—they're lucky to have you."

She rolled her eyes. "Edward was my father's best friend. He's dead—my father, I mean." She delivered the news with a detached matter-of-factness. "Edward feels responsible for me. I wouldn't take his money, but I would take his job. I never would have gotten hired at a place like that otherwise."

"Why not?"

"Let's just say I don't look the part."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ha!" She did her Vanna White thing again, this time gesturing over her

own body. “You’re nice. But high-end places like Edward’s hire beautiful girls. There’s a certain look. A type.”

He wanted to protest that she *was* beautiful, that she put all those paper dolls to shame. But that wasn’t the kind of thing he did, so instead he supplied, “Ballerinas.”

“Yes!” She looked delighted with this description. “And don’t worry, I don’t feel bad about it. Ballerinas are always hungry, I imagine, and I’d rather be happy than hungry.”

“Anyway, the plan is to quit when I’m done with school.” She was talking faster now, warming to her tale. “I’m planning to take the actuarial exam.”

“An actuary!” He was surprised, though he shouldn’t have been. It was an obvious career move for a math major. “That seems kind of...boring.”

“It will be. But as far as I can tell, it’s the way I can make the most money the fastest.”

“That’s one expensive mother.”

The ice came back into her eyes. “I have other ambitions beyond the financial sinkhole that is my mother.”

He took his cue from her tone. That would be the end of this line of questioning. All right, so she seemed perfect for the job. And more importantly, he felt like he could trust her. Jack might not be a numbers guy, but he hadn’t become a self-made multimillionaire without being able to read people. Well, most people—apparently he’d been deluding himself for decades about Carl.

“I want to hire you.”

She looked like he’d shoved a lemon in her mouth.

“I need some...math help,” he added.

“What kind of math help?”

He raked his hands through his hair as the familiar rage started to swirl in

his gut. Fucking Carl. Even promising himself that Carl was going down didn't calm the fury. Probably because he was equally angry at himself for getting played. It felt like a personal failing. It *was* a personal failing. "My CFO—my longtime CFO—is ripping me off."

Her mouth rounded in surprise.

"Yeah. That's why I came into the bar that first night I met you. He and I had a longstanding Tuesday night dinner tradition. We'd go over numbers, talk about upcoming projects. But that was before I found out he was defrauding me."

She whistled. "Hard to eat dinner with someone who's been stealing from you, I guess. How much are we talking about?"

"I don't know yet—I'm afraid it could be in the range of hundreds of thousands." Fuck, it rankled to say it out loud. "I also don't know how long it's been going on. Years, maybe."

"You don't need me. You need cops or forensic accountants or something."

He blew out a frustrated breath. "I know. And believe me, I will be nailing this guy's ass to the wall. But that's not what I need you for—that's just the context. I have a big deal in the works—a potential purchase of this company called Wexler Construction. I've been working on this for more than a year."

"Is this a hostile takeover? Like in the movies?"

Damn, she was cute, her legs tucked up under her, curled into her chair.

"No. It's a private company, so it's all about convincing Wexler—Wexler Senior, who's about to retire, to sell to me instead of handing the reins over to Wexler Junior, otherwise known as the Idiot Son."

"Why do you want this company?"

The question took him aback. It was a good question. But not the kind a business insider would ever ask. Why did anyone want any company?



“Most of the company’s assets I’ll probably sell. But Wexler owns a lot of potentially useful land, stuff he hasn’t sold or developed yet—including a private island in Lake Muskoka,” he said, speaking slowly as he thought about how to explain it. “I bought up some property on the shoreline nearby years ago. I want to open a resort, and I’ve been waiting for an island just like his to come up.”

“You can’t open your resort on the shore?”

“I could. But a private island has a certain cachet. We’ll ferry people over. It’s a big island, so there’ll be hiking, fishing, swimming, fine dining, the whole deal. But tucked away on an island, away from it all—literally.”

He was about to tell her that he was going to develop luxury condos on the shoreline, when she got a distinctly dreamy look on her face and said, “I bet you can see a lot of stars from this island.”

“Uh, yeah, I bet you can.”

“You could have stargazing parties.”

The idea of the wealthy guests he planned to woo signing up for stargazing parties was a little comical but, hey, at least she was getting into the idea. “I could. Anyway, the point is, I’ve been cultivating Wexler forever. We have a weekend of meetings coming up—I think he’s close to deciding—and I have no CFO.”

“And you want me to pose as your CFO!” She let loose a great big peal of laughter, throwing her head back and exposing her throat. For some reason the sight of her like that went straight to his dick. He crossed his legs. When she got control of herself and took in his non-answer, she jerked upright, “Holy ravioli, you *do* want me to pose as your CFO!”

“No, but I need someone to come. Someone with a head for the financials. Wexler is going to want to talk details.”

“Surely, if you’ve been working on this deal for so long, you can handle it without your in-house white collar criminal by your side?”

Jack's skin began to prickle. He downed the rest of his drink in one gulp.

"You want another?"

He nodded, then waited until her back was turned and she was pouring the drink to say, "The thing is, I *can't* handle it by myself. I have dyscalculia." She froze, immobilized with one hand holding the water bottle and the other unscrewing the lid. "It's a learning disability," he added. "Like dyslexia for numbers."

She resumed her task, and when she came back bearing his drink, she didn't look disgusted. She didn't look any different than she ever did. "I see the problem."

"So will you do it?"

"I can't just impersonate a CFO."

"First of all, it's not like it's a job that comes with a regulatory stamp—it's not like impersonating a cop. If I say you're my CFO, you're my CFO." When she started to argue, he held up his hand. "But anyway, we won't use that title. Wexler knows Carl—the betraying asshole is named Carl, by the way—so he'll expect to see him. I'll concoct an excuse for Carl and call you my senior director of finance or something. I just need someone to pinch hit on the financial side of things. But just as important, Wexler can't know there's anything untoward happening at my company or he'll never sell to me. So I can't just have no one on the finance side there, or he'll get suspicious."

"So this explains why you haven't called the cops on him yet. CFO swindling Winter Enterprises. That would be big news, right?"

That was certainly part of it—he wasn't going to do anything to jeopardize the Wexler deal, even if it meant letting Carl rip him off a little longer than was strictly necessary. "In part. But also, I've been trying to figure out exactly what he did before I call in the cavalry. I don't want a swarm of accountants and cops descending and asking me all this stuff that

I...”

“That you have trouble understanding.”

He nodded. Not sure how he was going to solve that. He probably wasn’t—more likely that he was just going to have to call the cops and admit that he had no idea what kind of damage Carl had done. But one problem at a time. First, the Wexler deal.

She looked thoughtful. “Why would I do this? It seems kind of dishonest somehow.”

“It’s not! I’m free to hire whomever I want to do whatever tasks I want them to do. I want to hire you to do this. And you would do this because I will pay you—well.”

“How much?”

“Well, I figure I’d pay a consultant, say, five hundred bucks an hour. The trip will take seventy-two hours, so that’s roughly thirty-six grand.” She choked in the middle of a sip, and he grinned. “You can either invoice based on that hourly rate, or we can agree on a flat thirty-six.”

“If I’m going to do this, I have to know what I’m talking about. I’ll want to look at your financials. I’ll want to know what you know about Wexler. I’ll need to learn everything I can about both companies to get up to speed.”

Ha! Smart girl. “Fifty grand.”

She did a poor job masking her shock. “You are going to pay me *fifty thousand dollars* to pose as your director of finance, or whatever, and try to get this guy Wexler to sell you his company? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“This is how capitalism works. I have money. I want to buy something—in this case, it’s a set of skills that I don’t possess. I pay what the seller and I agree it’s worth. It’s no different than someone buying a drink at Edward’s.” He refrained from telling her that it wasn’t a lot of money to him. “And I’ll tell you what, if we get the deal done, there will be a bonus.” She waved off the idea, which annoyed him. “This deal is worth a lot of money, Cassie.

Don't sell yourself short."

"Does your CFO know about your dyscalculia?"

He blinked, taking a moment to catch up to the unexpected question. He wasn't sure why it mattered, but given how intensely she was studying his face, she seemed to really care about the answer. "Yes," he said, swallowing the bitter saliva that flooded his mouth. "We were friends from university. I was a literature major, if you can believe it. Carl was a friend of my roommate. He was always playing the stock market, but he never did very well. I gave him some advice one day, and we figured out pretty quickly that we made a good team. I could pick the companies, and he was good with the logistics of the money. Things kind of snowballed from there. He always covered for me—or so I thought. He and my VP are the only ones at the company who know about me."

"Right." Cassie nodded, and her eyes narrowed. "And this is all happening in Muskoka. Up north. On an island."

Another abrupt change of topic that made him a beat late in answering. "Yeah. Next Thursday through Saturday—too close to Christmas?" They'd be back in Toronto just under a week before the holiday. He hoped she didn't have travel plans. Normal people spent holidays with people they loved. It was the one thing he didn't really have an argument for.

She ignored the question. "So there will be stars."

"I guess—assuming it's clear."

She stuck her hand out. "It's a deal."

## Chapter Five

Fifty thousand dollars. Holy...*shit*. Fifty grand was enough to justify a non-pasta curse. Cassie couldn't stop replaying that evening as she prepared garnishes the next night at Edward's. The trip, his bombshell revelation of dyscalculia, the fact that she was going to help him. But mostly the crazy surge of electricity between them when they shook hands on the deal. He'd been in her apartment for nearly thirty minutes before that handshake, enough time for her body to tune in to his every move. It started in earnest when she was mixing his second drink. When he'd told her about the dyscalculia, it felt like she was getting her first glimpse of something real about him—something about who he was, not just what he did or how much money he had. She'd had to stop in her tracks and take a sustaining breath, because in a split second she'd gone from wary over having a near stranger in her apartment to desperately wanting that near stranger to throw her down on the bed and have his way with her. So by the time they'd finally touched, even a simple handshake had the power to set off a five-alarm fire inside her.

A fire that had been doused when the handshake was followed by a speech about how they had to keep things professional. How he didn't screw around with employees. He didn't do relationships at all, actually, he'd said. And he was right. It wasn't a good idea to spend their working relationship sneaking off into alleys—or forests, or whatever the Muskoka

equivalent was. Still, she'd be lying if she didn't cop to a tiny bit of disappointment. He didn't screw around with employees. Yet she got the feeling that Jack Winter did whatever the heck he wanted to do.

And if he "didn't screw around with employees," it meant he was done with her. Her cheeks heated. Had he not liked what he...encountered last time? Ugh. It didn't bear thinking about because all that would happen is she would die from embarrassment. Meanwhile, there were limes to zest. And fifty thousand dollars to earn.

The ping of an incoming text drew her attention, and she leaned over to eyeball her phone.

*GETTING YOU BUSINESS CARDS. DON'T KNOW YOUR LAST NAME.*

Ha! Just went to show how foolhardy this whole venture was. She dried her hands on a towel before picking up her phone.

*JAMES.*

The return text pinged back immediately.

*YOU WANT TO BE "CASSIE?" IS IT SHORT FOR ANYTHING?*

*CASSIDY.*

*AS IN BUTCH AND THE SUNDANCE KID?*

*AS IN DAVID CASSIDY.*

*???*

She paused. Well, it's not like it was a secret. As if anything about Laura could ever be kept discreet anyway, even if she'd wanted to.

*PARTRIDGE FAMILY. THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE THE SPAWN OF A WOMAN WHO WAS A TWEEN IN THE 70s.*

*OK, CASSIDY JAMES, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF FINANCE, I'LL STOP BY THE BAR*

*TONIGHT SO WE CAN BEGIN PLOTTING.*

Well, it's not like she could tell him not to come. He was sort of her boss now, right?

*GREAT, BUT MY BEST FRIEND IS GOING TO BE HERE TOO.*

She paused, trying to think what to say about Danny. It was almost as bad as trying to explain Laura. Well, he'd find out soon enough anyway.

*BUT ONLY EARLY ON—HE'LL WANT TO GO OUT LATER.*

*HE?*

*GAY.*

Gah! She'd pressed send before she could think better of it. How stupid was she? It's not like Jack was jealous, so why was she rushing to assure him that Danny was gay?

Limes! Zesting! And if there was time before the bar got busy, she'd brought along some of her old accounting textbooks—before she'd settled on the actuary thing, she'd thought maybe accounting was the way to go, so she'd taken a few classes. To Jack it might be all numbers, but just because she was good at trigonometry didn't mean she knew the first thing about his world of corporate balance sheets and high finance.

...

It was funny to think of Cassie as a person with friends. A stupid sentiment, Jack realized, but in his encounters with her she'd seemed so...self-contained. Whether she was standing in the center of the large bar at Edward's or in the middle of her tiny apartment—or against a brick wall while he put his hands all over her—she seemed like a universe unto herself.

But of course she had friends. Normal people did. And Cassie was a nice,

normal person. She had a family, too. A dead father and a mother who was *expensive*—whatever that meant. Okay, so maybe what Cassie really had in the family category was more of a mystery.

But her friend—the one she'd dubbed her best friend—had to be the tall skinny guy openly staring at him. Dark hair, earrings in both ears, he had a vaguely Goth look. And definitely gay, he thought with a small ping of satisfaction—just like when he'd gotten her one word text.

As Jack approached, the guy nodded at the empty stool next to him. “You must be Jack.” He wasn't smiling, wasn't holding out a hand to shake—nothing. Right. Normal people told stuff to their best friends. An open-hearted girl like Cassie probably told her best friend everything.

Cassie caught sight of him and came over. “Jack! This is Danny, my—”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Danny supplied, ignoring Jack's outstretched hand.

“Pardon?” Jack shot Cassie a questioning look.

“Gotta go.” Danny hopped off his stool. He pursed his lips and looked Jack up and down before grudgingly adding, “Nice to meet you.”

“You're leaving already?” Cassie asked. Jack didn't quite like the way her face fell.

“It's almost ten. I'm meeting some people.” He leaned over the bar and planted a kiss directly on Cassie's lips before taking off.

“I thought you said he was gay.” Jack cleared his throat, trying to rid his voice of the growl that had crept in.

“He is.”

“But he said he was your ex-boyfriend.”

“He's that, too.” She quirked a little smile. “Things didn't really work out between us.”

“Why not?” He tried to keep his tone casual.

“Um, the part where he's gay?”

He barked a relieved laugh.



“Quiet! It’s embarrassing.”

“Why? This must have been a long time ago.”

“High school. But no girl wants to be the one who turns a man against heterosexuality.”

“Sweetheart, you are capable of getting a man to do many things, but I assure you, turning him gay is not one of them.”

Well, that was inappropriate. But Cassie just stared at him, mouth ajar. So he whipped out a small silver case and opened it. She picked up one of the cards inside.

“Oh, so now I’m senior *executive* director of finance?”

He shrugged. “It sounded better. Consider it a promotion.”

She leaned forward, absently running the pad of her thumb back and forth over the edge of the card. “You know, I’ve been thinking.”

Uh oh.

“I’m sure you could get someone legitimate to do this for you. Someone qualified.”

“I want you,” he said, mustering a decisive tone he hoped would shut down this line of conversation.

“There must be, like, consultants who do this sort of thing.”

He pressed his lips together. “Oh, and I would hire one to do what? Place the fate of my company in his hands and say, ‘I can’t do math? Please don’t take advantage of me?’”

“Not everybody’s a crook.” Then she held up a finger as if a rogue thought had just entered her mind. “But on the other hand, *I* might be a crook. How do you know I’m not?”

“I trust you.”

“Why?”

He didn’t know how to articulate the answer. He was good at reading people. It’s how he’d built the company. This thing with Carl had shaken

him to his core, but one mistake out of thousands wasn't bad. He'd brokered hundreds of deals that had made him millions because he trusted his gut. And his gut told him that Cassidy James, who helped teenagers with their math homework, was a good person.

"It doesn't make any sense," she persisted, drawing him out of his thoughts. "Why me?"

*Because I've seen what you look like when you come.* Of course, he couldn't say that, so he settled for, "Let's just say I feel pretty confident that I know you." He couldn't resist a little wink. "If you know what I mean."

She turned red to the tips of her ears. Good. End of discussion.

"Okay, then." She busied herself wiping up a nonexistent spill. "I need to do some serious prep work, not just sitting in bars talking. I need to learn everything there is to know about Winter Enterprises. When do we leave for the trip?"

"Thursday morning—a week from yesterday. Early. Back Saturday afternoon. Can you get the time off?"

"Yep. I'll need to get someone to cover Thursday and Friday, but I never take vacation, so it shouldn't be a problem. A lot of people owe me."

"What about Saturday? I can't guarantee what time we'll be back."

"I don't work weekends. Weekends are for homework, usually."

"But your semester is over? You were taking a final exam a few days ago."

"Yes, so it's perfect, really. But what about you? What about Carl? I assume he can't know about any of this."

"That's right. Carl can't know." Jack heard the menace in his tone, which was uncalled for because it's not like Cassie would ever cross paths with Carl. Still, he'd been delinquent. He should probably make her sign a nondisclosure agreement. Instead he settled for, "Sorry. It's just that *no one* can know about this. The office closes for two weeks at Christmas, so no

one at the company will know I'm on a trip. And Cassie—" He laid his hand on her forearm and had to hold himself back from tightening it like a vise— "You have to promise you'll keep everything you know—and everything you're going to learn—to yourself."

She nodded. "I promise."

It was enough for him. Maybe it shouldn't have been, but it was. He shoved back from the bar. "Meet me at the office tomorrow at two."

"Which is where?" she called after him.

He grinned. For the first time in a long time, he felt like the Wexler deal might be salvageable. "Check your business card."

## Chapter Six

Winter Enterprises was located on the forty-ninth floor of the Lakefront Centre in Toronto's high-rise studded financial district. A few floors shy of the top, but high enough that Cassie was pretty darn impressed. The security guard only glanced at her as she strode purposefully toward the bank of elevators. With any luck the outfit she'd bought this morning—fake it till you make it—would not only help convince bystanders she could do this, it would also help convince herself.

Her heart pounded as she made the long, silent ride up. This was going to make everything feel a lot more real. This was going to be Jack Winter, bazillionaire, in his natural habitat. As at ease as he'd seemed in her apartment—or with his head between her thighs, for goodness' sake—this was where he came from.

She hadn't texted him that she was on her way, but as the doors opened into a dark reception area, she wondered if maybe she should have. The elevator was well lit—a little too well lit, she thought as she stared at her reflection on the endless ride up, ruthlessly scrutinizing her face. Sometimes she thought the freckles were cute, sometimes they were way too Little Orphan Annie.

Her new three-inch black patent leather pumps—pretty hot if she did say so herself—clicked on the marble floor as she walked past an astonishing collection of what seemed to be original art. Just as she approached the

reception desk, a head popped out from behind a corner that must lead back to the offices. She grinned. Then, as she realized the head did not belong to Jack, she reared back, almost tripping in the unfamiliar heels.

“May I help you?”

Whoever this guy was, his eyes did not match the fake smile he was currently deploying.

When she heard Jack’s voice from down the hallway she was initially relieved. That is, until she realized he was on the phone, reaming out someone about something to do with the Ontario Municipal Board and zoning variances. This anger, this intensity—she suddenly understood his insistence that he was devoted to his business above everything else.

“Perhaps you’re on the wrong floor,” Mr. Fake Smile said, making her realize that she’d been standing there like an idiot, transfixed by the sound of Jack’s yelling.

“I, um—”

“Carl.” Jack’s voice—thank God, he must have heard them—from around the corner. “Carl, this is Cassidy,” he said as he emerged into the dim reception area.

Jack was wearing a brown blazer over a cream-colored sweater that was probably some kind of expensive cashmere thing, and a pair of jeans. And hoo-boy, those jeans. Though they weren’t overly tight, they fit him like a glove. Just like in her apartment the other night, there was something about seeing Mr. CEO bazillionaire in jeans that made her face heat up. She hoped he didn’t notice her blush when he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. A quick peck, the restrained gesture could have meant anything from “Hi, Mom, nice to see you,” to “Hi, hottie, we can get it on as soon as this asshole leaves.”

Jack set his hand on her lower back. “Cassidy, this is Carl Larsen, my chief financial officer.” Jack was all wound up. She could tell from his

touch. It was aggressive—not like he was pushing her toward Carl, more like he didn't realize how clenched his hand was.

Disgust bloomed in her gut as Carl looked her over, eyebrows raised slightly. Okay, that was it. Carl officially sucked. Carl was the enemy. He was messing with Jack, and in exchange, she was going to make sure that Jack got this Wexler deal done. Which meant Carl could know nothing about what she was really doing here.

So she stuck out her boobs and her hand at the same time. “I've heard soooo much about you, Carl, it's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Cassidy.” He extended his hand and she placed hers limply in his, the kind of weak girly handshake she'd always abhorred. “Cute name,” he said, shooting a look at Jack. “Working on the weekend?”

Jack's fingers pressed into Cassie's back. “Can't have my CFO being the only one burning the midnight oil. Or the Saturday oil.”

Cassie wanted to growl at Carl, but she was in character. So she giggled. Simpered. Operation Get Rid of Carl was *on*, and she was its head cheerleader. “Jack says he's going to show me the view,” she purred.

“Yes,” said Jack, picking up her cue. “The *Saturday* view. The view where it's quiet. The view where there's no one around.”

If she'd been lukewarm before about the morality of this whole charade, any qualms went out the door when she saw the big, beautiful office. Here was this place that Jack had built, and Carl was secretly and systematically chipping away at it. It wasn't right. She was going to do everything in her power to help Jack get the Wexler deal done so he could get on with firing Carl.

“Got it,” said Carl. “I'm just about finished here—Britney has a hockey game.”

“These must be the quarterfinals?” Jack asked. His hand was still at Cassie's back, and he started tapping his thumb there, too, probably an

unconscious gesture.

Carl flashed a proud smile. “My daughter,” he said to Cassie. Darn it—she didn’t need Carl humanizing himself now that she was so mad at him. “Yeah, quarterfinals,” he said to Jack. “Fingers crossed.”

“Well, best of luck,” said Jack.

Cassie aimed a zillion kilowatt fake smile at Carl and trilled, “Break a leg!” Then she turned to Jack. “You probably shouldn’t say that about sports, should you?”

He smiled and bent down to whisper in her ear, “You are magnificent.” A spike of pleasure transformed her smile into a genuine one as Carl retreated into his office.

“Let me take your coat,” said Jack.

She handed it over and tried not to fidget while his eyes slithered down her body. She was never going to be the kind of woman who could wear a suit and not feel like a kid playing dress up, so she had tried to find something that was not a suit but was still conservative enough that she looked like she might actually be the senior executive director of finance at Winter Enterprises. Well, conservative, but not *too* conservative. So she’d settled on a scarlet sheath dress. The neckline was modest, but the dress hugged her curves. She tempered the outrageous color with a fitted black blazer and matte black tights. Then there were the do-me pumps. Okay, so maybe the getup wasn’t conservative at all, aside from the fact that her boobs were not hanging out. Jack was taking his time getting his eyes back up to, well, eye level, which suggested that perhaps she had miscalculated, hadn’t struck the “I’m a serious corporate lady, but I’m not a drone” note she’d been aiming for.

The look in his eyes when they finally met hers made her stop caring.

That look made her brave. She let a slow smile blossom. “I tried to dress the part.”

“Cassie, if you came to work looking like that, no one would get a fucking thing done all day.”

A frisson of triumph spiked up her spine. Jack Winter wanted her. He wasn't even trying to hide it. When he'd made that little speech about avoiding relationships with his employees, she'd been worried she'd done something to turn him off. But she saw now that whatever else they had going on—a joint commitment to the Wexler deal, their shared distaste for Carl—it was all underlain by a river of wild attraction. Lust. However much they tiptoed around it, whatever rules they made, it would always be there, just under the surface. The idea was intoxicating, made her feel a little reckless. “What?” She played dumb. “I am showing exactly zero skin.”

He cocked his head, as if he were a judge considering an argument in court.

“If you had a dress code, I'm sure this would adhere to it,” she added. A little tipsy on this new feeling of power, she peeled off the blazer and threw it on one of the chairs in the waiting area. “Shall we go to your office?” She started sashaying in the direction from which he'd come. If she let her hips sway a little more than was strictly natural, well, what was the harm?

When she reached the main reception desk, he was suddenly very deep into her personal space. He surrounded her from behind, and she felt his erection pressing against her bottom. One hand reached around—almost as if he were hugging her—and he pressed her blazer against her stomach. “You little tart,” he rasped in her ear. “If you don't put this back on, I'm going to have to bend you over this desk right now.”

Breathing shallowly, trying not to cross the line into panting, she let the blazer fall to the floor.

Then he was gone. He'd only stepped back a few feet, but she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. The disappointment was visceral, and she shivered as his warm presence receded.



“And that is *not* happening,” he said.

She wanted to shake her fist at the sky. It wasn't like they were going to date each other. He didn't do relationships—message received. So what did it matter if they fooled around a little while they worked? As she'd told Danny, she got it now. And now that she *got* it, she wanted to *get* it. “You and your rules,” she muttered.

“The Wexler deal is too important, Cassie. I've seen deals fall apart—I've seen *companies* fall apart—when people let things get too personal.”

Well, that stung. But so be it. He wanted her, but apparently not enough to do anything about it. She shoved aside the ding to her pride and summoned another of her fake-bright smiles. “All right, let's get started. Can I get a tour first? This is a lovely space.”

“Sure.” Jack led her down one of the two corridors that split off from the reception area, turning on lights as he went. The floors were hardwood, which seemed incongruent for an office, and the walls were painted a pale sky-blue. It was all very elegant, but comfortably so.

“Huh,” she mused as he led her into a kitchen that was tricked out with stainless steel appliances and a cappuccino machine.

“What?”

“It's not very...officey.”

“Well, that's the point, I guess. We spend a lot of time here.”

“We?” she prompted. The place was smaller than she'd imagined. But then, she'd pretty much imagined the Bat Cave—cavernous, masculine, dark. Maybe he saved that aesthetic for his house. She'd seen half a dozen private offices on this side of the suite, and beyond the kitchen looked to be an open area filled with a few dozen large cubicles, but since the space was surrounded by windows on two sides, they lacked that stifling feeling that usually came with cubicles.

“Yeah, the kitchen especially is the hangout spot. There are two other

companies on this floor—a software company and an advertising agency—and everyone always seems to end up here.”

“I can see why.”

When they crossed back through reception to the other side, there were fewer, larger offices. He pointed at the first one. “My EA.”

“You have an executive assistant?” She couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice. But of course he did. He was a scion of industry. What did she think? He booked his own meetings? Made his own lunch reservations? If her surprise was unreasonable, so was the irrational stab of jealousy in her gut at the idea of some hot girl—for she would be hot—knowing the ins and outs of Jack’s life. “What’s her name?” she asked casually.

He looked like he was trying not to smile. “Seth.”

“Oh.” She sped on to the next, slightly larger office.

“Carl,” he said.

“Okay! Moving on.” She stopped at the last office before the corridor made a turn.

“This is Amy. Her title is VP, but she’s really my real estate person. She’s in Mexico right now.”

Oh, so this would be the hot girl. “Christmas getaway—nice,” Cassie said, pointedly asking no further questions about Amy.

“Nope, work. We’re working on our first project outside Canada and the US. I’m in the early stages of construction of a resort near Tulum. An eco sort of thing. Zip-lining, hiking—and of course the ocean. Hey! Why are you wrinkling your nose?”

“I’m sure it will be great. I just don’t get the idea of going on vacation in order to like, exert yourself. If I ever went on vacation, I would lie around reading trashy novels and napping all day.”

He laughed. “It’s for people who don’t work as hard as we do. Personally, I’m with you.”

It was her turn to giggle. The sight of him stretched out in a beach cabana reading a bodice ripper was too funny—he looked like he should be on the *cover* of one. “I thought the company would be bigger,” she said, running her fingers over the dark, polished wood of Amy’s door.

“We’re pretty lean, actually. We work hard. Most of my employees have been with me for a long time, and they feel some ownership, I think. They’re loyal.” She didn’t miss the flash of hurt in his eyes before he recovered. “Or so I thought. Anyway, the point is we get a lot done pretty efficiently.”

“And, wow, you get it done in style. These are some mighty fine digs,” she said, wanting to take his mind off his troubles, even if only for a moment.

“Thanks.” He pointed around the corner. “And there’s me.”

She led the way. And then she stopped in her tracks, letting loose a low whistle as the door opened onto his office.

Two of the walls were windows, and he had a breathtaking view of the towers of the financial district on one side and the blue expanse of Lake Ontario on the other.

“It is kind of nice, isn’t it?” He looked like a little kid showing her something he’d made.

Turning her attention to the office itself, she did a slow rotation, taking in the massive antique mahogany desk, a sitting area furnished with a decadent looking sofa and a pair of armchairs upholstered in a lush, vibrant orange. It looked like a masculine version of her apartment. Except for the fact that... “My whole apartment would fit in here two times over,” she declared.

“Yep,” he agreed cheerfully, but not unkindly. “*And* there’s an elevator,” he teased.

She sighed, walking toward one of the window-walls for a moment to

compose herself. It was like being Cinderella at the ball, she felt so out of her element. Except no, she told herself. All Cinderella had going for her was the prospect of hitching her wagon to some dude. Cassie, on the other hand, had been hired to do a job. A fifty thousand dollar job.

She turned. “Let’s get to work.”

...

Jack watched Cassie take in the view. She was a brilliant blot of scarlet against the gray buildings and white sky of the December afternoon. Damn. Was he a *complete* idiot? Jack had rules, yes, but he was not generally in the habit of rebuffing the advances of scorchingly hot women.

She was right, technically. There was nothing inappropriate about the dress—she was covered from neck to toe. And yet...

In fact, he thought, trying to compose himself, it looked not unlike something Amy would wear. The difference was the stylish vice-president of Winter Enterprises would have worn the dress in black or gray. Not this ridiculous blazing scarlet.

For the first time in a long time, Jack was facing a situation he honestly didn’t know how to play. Part of him—including the part of him currently straining against the fly of his jeans—wanted nothing more than to rewind, go back, and make good on his threat to bend her over the reception desk. But he’d already been intimate with her, and he tried to keep a cap on the number of encounters he had with any single woman. He was serious about not doing relationships. Dead serious. They distracted him from what was important—work. Limiting himself to one-night stands was a defense mechanism he consciously and cheerfully deployed. He had a lot to protect. Not a heart, no—at least not that kind of heart—but a man didn’t build a company from nothing into the powerhouse that was Winter Enterprises without subjecting himself to a little discipline.

So the fact that he was contemplating another round with Cassie was, frankly, a little concerning. As his eyes slid over those wicked red curves, a thought dawned. In one sense, he hadn't actually *been with* Cassie at all. He'd left their first kiss with the worst case of blue balls in the history of the universe, and at their second encounter, he'd spent himself in the snow like an untried boy.

She turned from the window with a spark in her eyes that seemed to simultaneously ignite in his chest. If he could just be inside her once—bend the rules a little—then maybe he could get this all-consuming lust under control enough to get some damned work done.

“Let's get to work,” she said.

Well, so much for that idea.

The mischief was gone from her eyes, replaced with a look of pure determination. If she had sleeves, she'd be rolling them up right now. “I want to see your books. And please tell me everything isn't password protected on Carl's computer.”

“I may be an idiot when it comes to numbers, but I'm not that stupid. Crossing to his desk, he powered up his MacBook, silently ordering himself to get it together.

“You're not an idiot,” she said.

Instead of answering, he picked up a remote control and aimed it at the built-in cabinetry. A door retracted to reveal a flat screen TV.

“Fancy!” exclaimed Cassie.

“Where do you want to start?” he asked, opening some documents on his computer. “How about the current quarter's balance sheet?” With a few keystrokes he had the document up on the screen.

“Still fancy!” Cassie laughed.

He shrugged. “It's just Bluetooth.”

She performed an exaggerated shrug in return. “I guess I'm a cheap

date.” But then she crossed her arms, narrowed her eyes, and gazed up at the screen. For a minute the only thing that moved in the room were her eyeballs. He could practically see the gears turning in her head.

“Okay. What will Wexler expect me to know? I guess maybe the best thing is to just keep going back in time, so I can get a sense of the company’s recent history?”

Silently, he projected another file onto the screen. Another jumble of numbers. He was accustomed to not “getting” numbers. When he was alone like this, or with someone he trusted—and somehow Cassie, whom he’d known for all of four days, fell into that category—they didn’t send him into a panic. He didn’t fully process what he saw, but since no one was expecting him to, it didn’t really matter.

She turned. “What is it like, seeing all this?”

Had she read his mind? “You mean with the dyscalculia?”

“Yeah. Is it like looking at another language?” Then she added, “But only answer if you want to. It’s none of my business.”

“It’s a little like another language. But it’s not that I can’t identify numbers.” He pointed to a cell on the spreadsheet. “I know a seven when I see it.” He pointed to another number, one in red. “Or a negative one hundred grand—that’s bad, right?” She whipped her eyes to his, adorably gullible. He grinned. “I *know* that’s bad—I’m just teasing. I know the numbers; I just can’t put them together very well. I can’t do anything with them.” He cocked his head. No one had ever asked him to explain before. His father had tried to beat it out of him, but never once had anyone asked what it *felt* like. “It’s kind of like this,” he said, an analogy crystallizing itself in his mind. “If I taught you to say something in Japanese, you could learn how to say it. Like, *Tamago kudasai*.”

“You do *not* speak Japanese!” she exclaimed.

“I do, a little, but that’s not the point. *Tamago kudasai*. Say it.”

“Taman...” She crunched up her nose, and he instructed himself not to lean over and lick it.

He helped her again, and she mastered the foreign phrase.

“What does it mean?”

“Eggs, please.”

She laughed in incredulous delight. “What?”

“My point is, you could learn how to say it. I could teach you the context in which you should say it. Every time a waiter came to your table at breakfast, you could say it, and the waiter would bring you eggs, the expected outcome. But that doesn’t mean you know what you’re saying. For all you know, you could be asking for watermelon. Or a telephone. You just have to trust, to go through the motions, and assume that what’s happening is what’s supposed to happen.”

“I get it. It sounds...awful.”

He shrugged. “It’s all I’ve ever known. Once it was diagnosed, I got some therapy and learned some strategies. And at least then I finally understood I wasn’t stupid.”

She blew out a dismissive breath. “You are about as far from stupid as it’s possible to get, my friend.”

*My friend.* He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. “Well, my father took a different view of the matter.”

“I’m sure he sees the light now.” She gestured to the projection.

“He’s dead. And even if he wasn’t...” Jack trailed off. There was no point trying to make her understand his father when he himself had never managed it.

“And your mother?”

“Also dead. Before my father, in fact. My parents were in their early forties when they had me—they’d been trying for more than a decade and had resigned themselves to remaining childless.”

“And then they had the miracle baby!”

The “*miracle baby*” who disappointed them every step of the way. But judging by Cassie’s moony expression, she was charmed by the fictional version of his family she’d conjured. “Anyway,” he nodded at the numbers on the screen. “The truth is, I don’t really understand what I see.”

“All the more amazing that you built such a successful company.”

“Carl deserves a lot of the credit. He’s been with me from the beginning. He was...” God, he didn’t know what made him more angry, Carl’s betrayal, or the fact that he was so gutted by it. “He always covered for me—I thought.”

She was looking at him with sympathy, but not, amazingly, pity. “Well, for what it’s worth, I thought he seemed like a complete asshole.”

He startled a little. Cassie so rarely used strong language. It was almost like hearing one’s grandmother call someone an asshole. “Strong words coming from the woman who invokes pasta instead of swearing. What’s with the pasta, anyway? I’ve been meaning to ask.”

“I used to work in an Italian restaurant.”

“No,” he said. “What’s with the granny-style cursing?”

“I don’t know.” She dropped her gaze to the floor and sighed. “Well, I do know. My mother swore a lot. It embarrassed me when I was a kid.” She shrugged. “So I never really took it up myself. That sounds stupid.”

Apparently he wasn’t the only one with family baggage. He could respect that. Time to change the subject. “Carl wants us to start a swear jar in the new year.”

“What? So he can steal some more from you? I wish he was still here, I’d plant him a facer.”

“You’d plant him a facer? What century is this?” In truth, though, it tickled him to hear her jump so indignantly to his defense, in her quaint, non-threatening way.



“Anyway, the best revenge is doing this Wexler deal without him, isn’t it? Get Wexler to sell to you, and then get rid of Carl.”

“That’s the idea.”

“Okay then, enough chat.”

Jack sat back and watched Cassie’s amazing mind click into some other mode. Sparks might as well have been raining off her head, so absorbed was she in her work. He clicked when she ordered him to, pulled up supplementary data when commanded. Although she was engrossed, she kept asking him questions. Not about numbers, but about the context.

“This number seems high,” she would say.

“Is that the May travel budget?”

“Yeah.”

“Amy had to go to Mexico a bunch of times with very little notice. We had to charter a private jet—it was killer.”

Then she would nod and sink back into her trance-like state, utterly riveted to the screen, so much so she hadn’t noticed the sun going down. She didn’t blink when he got up and switched on the lamps. She didn’t even notice when, the room having grown cold, he took off his blazer—she’d left hers in reception—and hung it over her shoulders. She held out her arms obediently when prompted, never once breaking concentration as she sat on the edge of her chair and stared at floor plans of the Mexico resort.

Just when he started to wonder if he should start feeding her bites of one of the granola bars he kept in his desk, she snapped out of it, Sleeping Beauty coming to after a long nap. She yawned and looked around as if she was seeing the room for the first time. “It’s dark.” Her brow furrowed.

“That’s enough for tonight,” he said, touching her arm, trying to draw her back to the material world. Another yawn while she nodded her agreement. Then she stretched—God help him. Before his very eyes she transformed from the avenging accountant back into the siren in the red dress. All the

blood that had been working so diligently to nourish his brain as he took her through the financials suddenly hit the road for a more southerly locale. Stretching her arms over her head caused her breasts to jut out, and suddenly he hated that dress. Somehow it managed to be wanton at the same time that it was too modest, allowing him to see only the shape of her and none of...the actual her.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, looking at her arms and realizing the blazer she wore was not her own. “This is yours!”

“Don’t,” he groaned, feeling like if he saw even an inch of her bare skin, he might combust. Too late—she stripped off the blazer and handed it to him. The contrast between the bare arms and the black-tights-clad legs did something to his already on-alert dick.

As she tossed the blazer at him, her eyes grazed over his crotch. He should have used the blazer to cover himself. Instead he let his hands fall to his sides, the better for her to see what she did to him.

“Ready to go?” she asked, smiling a little, though her tone was completely unreadable.

Okay, so it was time to be prudent. “Yeah. You must be hungry. Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she confirmed, letting herself be herded out of his office. In the reception area, he stooped to pick up her abandoned blazer and then retrieved her coat from the closet where he’d hung it, holding it out for her to slide into.

The air between them was charged, heavy with something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He pressed his hand against her lower back as they made their way out of the office. He was supposed to be prudent, he knew, but he couldn’t keep his hands off her.

Was it possible that she was walking inappropriately close to him? It wasn’t overt, like Droppy from the bar the other night—or like all of the

other women he slept with. In fact, if it wasn't all in his mind, if she was, in fact, listing slightly toward him, he didn't think it was intentional. It was as if there was an invisible current swirling around them, drawing them infinitesimally but inexorably closer, like they were a binary star system, two burning nuclei rotating around each other.

She exhaled a soft little sigh and ran her fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp. Could have been exhaustion.

Could have been desire.

He wanted it to be desire.

Rules, he reminded himself as he punched the button to call the elevator. His father had always said rules were not arbitrary but there for a reason. The older Jack got, the more he thought that might have been the one thing his father got right. Even as he chided himself, he strained to make out the sound of Cassie's tights swishing against each other as she walked. The tights that hugged her thighs. The thighs he had lost himself between a few short days ago. It seemed criminal, all of a sudden, that she would cover up those thighs, that she would conceal from him what he had so gluttonously and freely enjoyed.

"I'm hungry, too," he said, trying to revive the conversation that had been carried away on a current of static-charged air. The elevator arrived, and he held the door for her. When she stepped from the corridor to the marble floor of the elevator, her heels clicked, echoing as the blood pounded in his ears.

The back wall of the elevator was a mirror. Instead of turning and facing the front like most people did, she stepped in and stayed put, looking at her reflection in the glass. He stepped up behind her, hand still on her lower back. She hadn't done up her coat, so that damned red dress was still visible, and her gorgeous hair was messy and tangled—he'd noticed her habit of raking her hands through it when she was concentrating. She

looked like a cherry against his staid dark jeans and brown blazer. A messy, gooey chocolate covered cherry.

He found her eyes in the mirror. “You want to go somewhere or get takeout? Thai maybe? Pizza? What do you want?”

Her eyes didn't leave his as she smiled a slow, wicked Cheshire cat smile.

“I want you to fuck me.”

## Chapter Seven

The only thing that suggested to Cassie she hadn't made a huge error in judgment—*again*—was that Jack started pounding the “door close” button. Other than that, there was no indication he even heard her. He only broke with her gaze in the mirror long enough to find the button, and then his eyes were back, blank, betraying nothing.

She stared back—it was almost impossible not to drop her gaze in embarrassment, but since she'd blurted out her request so shamelessly, what could she do but hold her head high, keep meeting his eyes, and cross her fingers that his assault on the close button was a good sign?

When the endless ride down finally ended, Cassie nodded to the security guard as her heels clicked across the empty lobby. Jack did not acknowledge the man, just kept up the pressure of a hand to her lower back, picking up speed so she had to as well. Preceding her out of the building, he had a taxi hailed before she'd made it fully out of the revolving door.

There was the hand again, pressing her inside the car. He rattled off her address to the driver, his tone rough. He sounded angry. For the first time today, she was a little afraid. Not of him, but of the knowledge that she might have pushed him too far, might have jeopardized their deal. And if he was angry, didn't he have every right to be? He'd told her outright—more than once—that there could be nothing between them. She had to be either an idiot or a slut—or both—to have kept throwing herself at him anyway.

They passed the ride in silence. The hand that had been on her back had moved to her knee. Her skin tingled beneath it, despite the layer of wool between them. But to him it must have been an absent, unselfconscious gesture, for the hand lay completely still while he looked out the window at the scenery as it changed from the steel and glass of downtown to the low-rise storefronts of Queen Street, and finally, to the houses and small apartment buildings of her neighborhood. When they arrived at her building, she turned, intending to bid him good night with as much dignity as possible, but he ignored her, paying the cabbie in stony silence and getting out behind her.

“Jack,” she began, once they were standing outside her building, “I’m sorry, I—”

“Keys,” he said, holding out his hand. When she hesitated a moment, his tone became more insistent. “Give me your keys.”

No sooner had she dropped the keys into his palm than they were in the vestibule. “Up,” he said, pushing her toward the stairs. As they climbed, her breath quickened. She was used to these stairs, so it wasn’t physical exertion making her pant. By the time they hit the third floor, she could hear his breath, too, and the pressure at the small of her back increased. He had the key ready when they reached her apartment. She didn’t bother asking how he knew which was the right one. She was beginning to understand that Jack Winter was the sort of man who just knew how to do things.

By the time he clicked the deadbolt into place, they were both breathing heavily. He let his coat fall down his arms to the floor. “Take off that dress.”

At first she thought he wanted her to change into something else—he’d objected to the dress to begin with. But then he stripped off his sweater and undershirt in one fluid motion, and they joined his coat on the floor.

“Take off the dress. Now.”

The command went right to her center, triggering a rush of wetness. As

she struggled with the zipper, her face grew hot. He didn't help, just stood there watching as she shimmied out of the formfitting sheath. Thank goodness she'd worn decent underwear. It wasn't Victoria's Secret, but the black bra and panties matched, which was more than she could say most days.

"Everything off." He didn't stop watching her, but he unzipped his jeans and stooped to shuck them off, along with a pair of black boxer briefs.

And there he was. Oh God—there he was. His shoulders all lean muscle, his sculpted torso covered in a dusting of dark blond hair that trailed down over a flat, muscular stomach—and beyond. His penis stood at attention, suddenly commanding all of hers. She'd only ever seen two others before, but she felt fairly certain his was uncommonly large. Of course it was. Why would Jack Winter be anything other than hung like a porn star? Her skin prickled all over.

"Is this what you wanted?" he said, his voice sounding a little choked.

Yes. She knew then without a doubt this is what she wanted when he first kissed her outside Edward's. This is what she'd been wanting ever since, as rash and ill-advised as it was. He was clearly waiting for an answer, so she nodded, not trusting her voice.

"Then take off your fucking clothes, Cassie."

She took off the rest of her clothes.

The rush of cold air pebbled her aching nipples—or maybe it wasn't the air at all, but the heat coming from his gaze. The ache between her legs sharpened into a pain that was almost unbearable.

Then his hand was there—how could he have known? He dragged his fingers across her folds and groaned. "Oh, God, you're so wet." A finger slid in, and she threw her head back and gasped. "You're ready," he rasped. She didn't know if it was a question, but she replied with a "yes," that could have been an answer, or maybe just an exhortation.

He was gone then, and she let out an involuntary cry of frustration. But then he was back, behind her, all-encompassing, hands clamping down on her hips and propelling her forward until her hands hit the door. His chest behind her might as well have been a brick wall, firm and unyielding when it hit her back. Suddenly there was no space between them or between her and the wall. A rustling sound drew her attention and she craned her neck to see over her shoulder. He was rolling a condom onto his erection.

Then it was pressing against her lower back, in the same spot his hand had been all afternoon. “Is this what you want?” he said again, his hands reaching around to cup her aching breasts. His fingers raked over her nipples, and she moaned at the delicious torture.

“Yes,” she whispered, “yes.”

He pushed in then, and oh, the feeling of fullness was exquisite. He made a strangled noise and went still for a moment, their labored breathing the only sound. “Christ, Cassie, you’re so *tight*.” There was no mistaking the lust in his voice. He might not “do” relationships, but he wanted this, here, now. He wanted *her*. Triumph surged through her, along with desire, and she arched her hips back, encouraging him to move. His lips came to her ear. “Cut it out, or I won’t last.”

“Don’t last,” she breathed, rolling her hips again. “I’m not going to.”

It was true. She was already close. When he settled his hand over her clit, leaving the other kneading her breast, she moaned. He started pumping his hips and she turned her face, resting her cheek against the door and letting it all wash over her. It had never been like this. Danny had been tentative—for obvious reasons, she later learned. Mark had been kind of clumsy and sweet. But this. They were rattling the door, and she didn’t care. She just wanted more, harder, faster, as she careened toward the cliff.

“Is this what you wanted?” he choked out as he slammed into her again and again. She could only gasp and nod, and then all her muscles seized as



pleasure exploded inside and all around her.

“Christ,” he ground out, only a few pumps behind her.

His body, flush with hers, was the only thing keeping her upright. Her bones had turned to mush, and when he took a step back, her legs began to quiver.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, and scooped her up, startling her into laughter as he carried her across the room to the bed and dropped her onto it.

She scrambled under the covers, the cold air causing gooseflesh to rise—she was a little bit nervous now that the wave of mindless lust had receded. What did he think now that he’d seen all of her—her soft belly, her thighs, which, although they were nicely shaped, would never be called slender? She’d never wanted to be a ballerina, to use the term he’d invented, but she was aware that she deviated a bit from what most men would consider ideal. He’d gone back to his clothes. She didn’t expect him to stay the night, but was he really going to leave *now*?

“Ah,” he said, hand emerging from where it had been rifling through his jeans pocket. He’d fished out his phone. The alcove that held the bed was exactly sized to accommodate the double mattress, so getting into bed meant mounting it from the foot. He hurled himself up and executed a belly flop that made her laugh and roll out of the way.

He scrolled through his phone. “Still hungry, I presume?”

“I could eat an entire cow,” she declared. It was true. She started thinking about what she had in the house.

He put the phone to his ear. “Hi. I’d like to order a pizza for delivery.” Mmmm. Pizza sounded perfect. He rattled off her address. “Extra large. Now, might you have a pizza that comes with an entire cow?” She threw a pillow at him. “No? Really?” He put his hand over the mouthpiece and whispered, “Amateurs. What do you want?”

“Pepperoni,” she said. “And mushrooms.”

He repeated her preferences into the phone. “And extra cheese?” He raised his eyebrows at her questioningly and she nodded. “Anything else?” he whispered. “Salad?”

She shook her head.

“Good girl,” he said. “Tiramisu?”

“Yes!”

She burrowed under the covers and watched him complete the transaction. After he threw his phone aside, he turned and narrowed his eyes at her. “There’s good news and bad news.”

“Well, let’s have the bad first—isn’t that how you’re supposed to do it?”

“They’re not going to be here for an hour—Saturday night rush.”

“And the good news?”

He grinned. “They’re not going to be here for an hour.”

...

Cassie came twice more before the pizza arrived. Their initial encounter against the door had been hot—Christ, it had nearly left him with third degree burns—but his masculine pride required him to demonstrate that he wasn’t usually so...hasty.

She tucked into the pizza the same way she did everything, with total abandon. It didn’t matter if she was devouring pepperoni and mushrooms with extra cheese, diving into Winter Enterprises’ fall returns, or, God help him, driving her ass up the better to meet his thrusts—she was all there.

When they were both sprawled back against the pillows post-pizza, he said, “So, math.” There was more there, he knew it.

“Again? You say it like you don’t believe it.” She was using her index finger to scoop out the last of the whipped cream from the Styrofoam container that had held the tiramisu.

“It’s not your abilities I’m questioning. It’s your motivation.”

“Excuse me?”

She was getting indignant. It suited her—she looked good when she turned pink. But he truly wanted to know, so he clarified. “Don’t take offense. You just don’t seem boring enough to be an actuary.”

His observation caused her to let loose a giant theatrical sigh as she fell back on the disheveled bed. “I know.”

Well. He’d been prepared for a whole host of reactions, but uncomplicated agreement had not been among them.

She blew out another breath, this one with her lower lip protruding, so the exhale blew a little wind through her hair. “I told you, though, it’s about the money.”

“You don’t seem like a person who’s motivated by money.” Then he thought of the whole absurd situation they were in. “Present circumstances excluded.”

She grinned. Damn, he kept thinking he was going to offend her and she just kept agreeing with him.

“It is boring. I dread it, in fact. I could take the exam any time, but I keep putting it off.”

“So why do it?”

“I have this idea...”

“What?”

“It’s stupid.”

“I’ll bet you anything it’s not. It may be a lot of things, but if it came out of your head, stupid isn’t one of them.”

That earned him a small half smile. “I thought being an actuary would make me a lot of money in a short time.” She rolled her eyes and huffed a self-mocking sigh. “I didn’t count on meeting a titan of industry who was prepared to pay through the teeth for a little math.”

“Your mother must really be expensive.” He was baiting her now, but there was something going on, something propelling her toward a future she wasn’t excited about, and he wanted to know what it was.

“Yeah, she is. But that’s not it.” She raked her fingers through her long hair in a gesture that had become familiar. “I want to make a lot of money because I want to start a camp.”

“Camp?”

“Yeah, a math camp.” She pulled the covers up, embarrassed. “I want to start a math camp for girls. Like a normal summer camp, but with a math focus.” She pulled the covers up even higher, covering the bottom half of her face. But he could still sense the self-deprecating smile. “That sounds stupid, doesn’t it?”

He tugged the covers down so he could see all of her face and rolled onto his side, propping his head up with his hand. “No. Tell me more.”

“Well, there aren’t a lot of girls in math. I’m not sure if they’re not interested, or if they find it intimidating. But you can do a lot with math.”

“Like be an actuary?”

“Yes,” she said, a touch defensively. “Or an engineer.” Then she smiled. “Or the senior executive director of finance of a company.” She began talking faster, unable to hide her excitement. “Or an artist, or a teacher, or whatever. I don’t even think it’s about careers, so much as it’s about building girls’ confidence. I was thinking about trying to target girls who maybe wouldn’t otherwise be able to go to camp. I know I would have loved to get out of the city in the summers when I was a kid, but it wasn’t... possible.”

“Why not?” He wanted to know more about the mysterious and expensive mother.

“Teen motherhood doesn’t usually come with a huge disposable income. She was sixteen when she had me.” She huffed a bitter laugh. “If I’d had a

kid at her age, I'd have a thirteen-year-old now." He labored over the arithmetic—he'd been wondering how old she was. It took him a while to come up with twenty-nine—eight years younger than he was.

"What about your father?" Hell, if she was in a talkative mood, he was going to get as much as he could.

"He wasn't that much older than my mother. He was nineteen when I was born—but he wasn't involved."

"But you've talked about Edward being your father's best friend."

"My father and I didn't have anything to do with each other until I was in university. He made contact about five years ago to try to make amends for...walking out, I guess. He and Edward met in culinary school and bounced around the restaurant scene together over the years. Edward had some family money and a lot more ambition than my father. He built a name for himself as a front-of-the-house guy, and when it was time, leveraged the family fortune to open Edward's. He hired my father as sous chef—it was a huge opportunity for my dad, who'd historically had trouble sticking with any job for long. Are you sensing a pattern here?" She shook her head. "I shouldn't be so mean. He did the best he could."

"How did he die?"

"Car accident. Driving home after an evening shift. He was drunk."

"Jesus."

She scrambled up to sit back against the headboard and shrugged. "At least he didn't kill anyone else."

She was so matter-of-fact as she recounted the tale of abandonment, reunion, and death. It wasn't like her. She was usually much more animated. The type of water she used in her scotch garnered more emotion than this tragic tale. "Well, I think the camp idea is great. There are lots of ways you could make money, though—you don't have to be an actuary if you don't want to."

“Yeah, I was thinking. Today was kind of fun.”

“Fun?” he teased. “Thanks a lot.”

She reddened. “Not this,” she said, waving her hand vaguely between them. “Earlier. I didn’t know a business like yours could be so interesting.”

“You could do something like this after you graduate. You’d have to start at the bottom, as an analyst of some sort. You wouldn’t make as much as fast as if you took the actuarial exam, but you’d probably do much better in the long run. And if you’ll tolerate some unsolicited advice?” She nodded. “You’d be wasted as an actuary. You’re a math brainiac, yes, but you’ve also got people skills. It’s what makes you such a good bartender. You should think seriously about a career in business.” He hoped he didn’t sound too paternalistic, lecturing her about her career. It’s just that he meant it. The last place Cassie should spend the next several decades of her life was tucked away in an office crunching numbers by herself.

“It’s definitely something to think about. Gotta graduate first, though.” She yawned.

That was his cue. “I should go.” Please let this not be awkward. It always was, but maybe Cassie would be different this way, too.

She sat up straighter. “Right.” He’d gotten dressed earlier to go downstairs to meet the pizza guy, and now she was pulling a T-shirt out of a small dresser.

“Don’t get dressed on my account.”

“It’s okay, I uh…”

Usually this was the part where he made his speech about not doing relationships. He might be a coldhearted ass, but he prided himself on not being the kind of coldhearted ass who promised to call women and then didn’t. He preferred a clean break. But she’d heard a couple of variations on that speech already, so he’d forgo it.

“I usually sleep in a T-shirt anyway,” she finished, pulling on a faded

Toronto Maple Leafs shirt about four sizes too big for her—the sartorial opposite of the red dress. But with her hair all tussled and her mouth, red and swollen from their encounter, decorated with a little dab of whipped cream, the effect was the same. Damn, he had to get out of here or he would never leave.

“So, back to work tomorrow?” he asked, pulling on his coat. “Two o’clock again?”

“Sure.” She followed him to the door.

He picked up her dress, which had been left in a heap on the floor. “Don’t wear this.”

“Got it.”

He couldn’t help it. He reached out a finger and snagged the rogue whipped cream blob from the corner of her mouth. Then he held the finger out, tip poking her lips gently, seeking entry. She opened and her lips formed into an O as she sucked the cream off his finger.

He turned to go, dick rock hard.

So much for a clean break.

## Chapter Eight

When Cassie took the elevators up to the forty-ninth floor of the Lakefront Centre the next day, she was wearing jeans and a sweater. She'd gotten the message last night. No red dress. No more mind-shattering sex. Still, both jeans and sweater were tight—she was human, after all. She wanted him to want her, even if his stupid rules prevented him from doing anything about it. Normally she would have worn a tank top under the black sweater—the V-neck showed more cleavage than she was usually comfortable with. But, heck, today she was going to rock it.

He was standing in the lobby when she arrived, talking to another man. They both looked up as she approached. The sweater must have been working because the other man, who looked like a photographic negative of Jack, all dark and brooding where Jack was fair, raised his eyebrows and rounded his lips as if he were about to whistle, though no sound came out.

“Cassie.” Jack was at her side in an instant, hand on her lower back again, just like yesterday.

“Aren't you going to introduce us?” said the dark haired man.

Jack glared at the man. “No.”

He stuck his hand out anyway. “I'm Dax Harris, CEO of Cherry Beach Software Solutions.” He nodded toward the bank of elevators. “We're on the other side of this floor.”

Cassie wanted to laugh. Apparently the building was full of hot CEO



dudes. Was it, like, a requirement for tenancy?

“Dax was just going,” said Jack, actually taking her hand and physically pulling her away from Dax.

Was he *jealous*?

Oh, but she wanted him to be. As immature as it was, and even knowing there was most likely going to be nothing more between them, she savored the idea that Jack was unsettled by another man’s interest in her.

Performing a parody of a bow, Dax shot her a smile. “If you ever find yourself in need of any software solutions, you know where to find me.”

“Time to get to work,” Jack said, shooting a final glare at Dax before ushering her back to his office.

By the time they arrived, he’d dropped her hand and his face looked completely unruffled. Okay, maybe she’d imagined that whole jealousy thing. Maybe he just didn’t like that Dax guy.

This time the coffee table in the sitting area was laden with a small feast. Sandwiches, assorted salads, brownies, cookies, spritzers, and bottles of juice. “Wow,” she said.

“Didn’t want you to go hungry this time,” he said mildly, firing up his computer.

Right. Message received. We’re not going to go back to your place to get it on and eat pizza afterward. Well, who was she to turn her nose up at free fancy sandwiches?

They dove in, to the food and the financials. As before, the afternoon went quickly as Cassie lost herself in the numbers. She was building a picture of Winter Enterprises in her mind, one bit of data at a time.

“I think I’m getting it,” she declared, looking up to note that darkness had fallen. “It’s late?”

“Six-thirty.”

She nodded. “I think tomorrow I should turn my attention to Wexler. If

this is going to work, I should know everything I can about that company too.”

“Good. Let’s call it a night for now.” He walked over to a mahogany sideboard. “Let’s have a drink. You want scotch? Or something else?”

“No, I feel like a change. Surprise me.”

“Okay, hang on, I’m going to run to the kitchen for ice.”

While he was gone Cassie looked around the office some more. Same as yesterday, he hadn’t turned on any overhead lights, instead relying on floor and table lamps that dotted the space. Awash in soft, warm light, tucked away high over the snow-covered city, the huge office managed to feel cozy and comfortable. This was...nice. The winter break from school, while welcome in that it meant a respite from her usually punishing pace, did get a little solitary sometimes.

He came back with an armful of stuff and began mixing and shaking. “I make a mean crantini,” he said.

“Crantini! Isn’t that a little...”

“Froufrou?” He turned and grinned, two of the offending drinks in hand. “Not the way I make them.” He handed her one and clinked the edge of his glass against hers.

She took a sip, and as promised, the drink was neither cloying nor sweet. “Wow,” she said, lips puckering at the sour blast.

“Yeah, I use real cranberry juice, no sugar—but I can froufrou-ify on demand.”

“No, it hits the spot, thanks.” Suddenly, she was hit with a wall of exhaustion, aware of the tension that had built up in her shoulders from an afternoon of hunching and craning her neck. With a sigh, she lowered herself to the couch, kicked off her shoes, and stretched her legs out along it.

He surprised her by sitting on the couch, too, and not even on the

opposite end, but right in the middle. She pulled her legs back a little to make room for him, but he only moved closer and tugged her legs back so her feet were in his lap. He rested his hands on her shins, and she could feel the heat emanating from him even through the jeans that covered her legs.

“Tired?” he asked, wrapping his fingers around one of her ankles and drawing his thumb up the sole of her foot.

Pleasure shot through her as she let her head fall forward. “Ohhhh.”

He responded by increasing the pressure.

This was probably not a good idea.

But, on the other hand, if they were done sleeping together, what could it hurt? “Okay, you can just forget the fifty grand and pay me in foot rubs,” she said, hoping to signal that she wasn’t taking the whole thing too seriously.

Then he peeled off her sock and repeated the stroke with his thumb against her bare skin, watching her face the whole while. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Yeah?” It was hard to concentrate. There was the inherent deliciousness of the massage, yes, but the fact that it was him with her foot in his hands had her nerves humming. It was an odd combination of relaxation and alertness.

“I’m not the kind of person who plays games,” he said, sliding his thumbs to the front of her foot and stroking up the sides of her ankle. “I have these rules, see.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned them once or twice.” And she understood. She had a few of her own.

“Several apply here. I don’t do relationships. I don’t sleep with my employees.”

“Yep. Uh huh. Got it.” She really did. There was no need for him to keep reminding her of all the reasons nothing more was going to happen between

them.

“So you’ll appreciate how I’m between a rock and a hard place.” He looked down at his lap. “Literally.”

She followed his gaze. A telltale lump in his jeans gave her a little thrill.

“Because on the one hand, I have the rules.”

“And on the other?” she prompted.

“Every second that I’m in your presence I’m thinking about how badly I want to fuck you again.”

...

A slow smile blossomed on Cassie’s face. She was such an incredible mix of innocent and wicked. It drove him apeshit.

“I see your dilemma,” she said, pointing the toes of the foot he wasn’t holding so they could just reach his cock, which, as usual in her presence, was at full attention. Case in point: one minute she’d be all guileless and sweet, laughing and pasta-swearing, the next she’d be pressing purple sparkly painted toes against his poor beleaguered dick. “However, I believe there’s another interpretation. You just need to look at the situation creatively.”

He closed his eyes and clenched his fists to keep from lunging at her. “How so?”

“First, I’m not your employee. I’m more like an independent contractor.”

He smiled despite himself. “That’s true. You’re not on the payroll.”

“You said it yourself. I have skills you value. Think of me as a very expensive hairstylist. Or electrician or something.”

He couldn’t help smiling. “And second?”

“Second is don’t stop rubbing my feet.” He unclenched his fists, grabbed the foot that was pressing on his dick—somehow, removing it didn’t provide any relief—and began kneading it.

“Third...oh, that feels amazing.” She let her head loll back. She looked so fucking good when she did that, lost herself in a sensation—and she lost herself so easily. She was good at pleasure, this one, and just watching her made him hot.

“Third,” he prompted gruffly.

Lifting her head, she was suddenly all business. “Third. You don’t do relationships. But we aren’t in one.”

“So what is this then?” He nodded at the space between them, her legs draped over him.

“This,” she said emphatically, “is a no-strings-attached...” She trailed off.

“See, that’s the problem. The next word is *relationship*.”

“Entanglement,” she pronounced.

“That doesn’t sound any better,” he said, though he asked himself why he was arguing with her. If he wasn’t mistaken, here was a woman he was attracted to like no other making a case that they should keep sleeping together. Anyone with half a brain would worry about the details later.

“It does sound better,” she insisted. “Because it can be *untangled*. And it should be—when we leave for Muskoka. You were right about that. We have to be 100 percent on our games with Wexler. No distractions. So let’s get it out of our systems now. It’s Sunday now. So that’s four nights.”

“Three,” he countered. “I have a work thing on Tuesday night.” And though he’d much rather spend Tuesday night in bed with Cassie, the goddamned Winter Enterprises Christmas party wasn’t going to be much of a party without him.

“Three then.”

He could feel himself starting to weaken, but he remained silent.

“Look, Jack, I get it. You don’t have to worry about me. I’ll take my money, you take Wexler’s company, and we part ways after a job well done—no hard feelings.” He must have looked skeptical because she pulled her

feet off his lap. “Fifty grand—it’s not that I don’t appreciate it, and it will make life a lot easier in the short run. But it’s not going to change anything, not fundamentally. I’ll still have to work and inch my way through school. I don’t do relationships either, see? They never feel like they’re worth it, and I don’t have the time.”

“That’s exactly it,” he said. Maybe she *did* understand. “Relationships just get in the way of what’s important.”

“Which is what?” she asked, tilting her head in that cute way she did when she was trying to size up a situation.

“The company. I know it sounds cold, but it’s how I feel. I’ve been utterly focused on the company from day one. It’s required constant vigilance... and women, they just—” He cut himself off. There was no need to be cruel and finish the sentence with the truth, which was that women just got in the way, demanding time and affection and stuff he wasn’t prepared to provide. It was probably his father’s fault, but he wasn’t interested in psychoanalyzing himself. He was who he was.

“They just get in the way,” Cassie finished for him, suddenly looking very small curled into the corner of the sofa in the almost-dark office.

Before he could try to soften what he’d said, she continued. “Okay, so for you it’s the company, for me it’s school. I get it. We’re on the same page. This isn’t a relationship.”

“Then why bother at all?” *Because we can’t keep our goddamned hands off each other* seemed like the obvious answer, but he wanted to see what she would say.

“I’m not going to lie. I haven’t had a ton of sex in my life. It just never seemed...compelling enough to go out of my way for.” She laced and unlaced her fingers in her lap. “But now—and don’t let your ego go bananas here—I get it. With you, I suddenly get it.”

His ego went bananas. So did his dick.

Just being around her made him vibrate with lust. What the hell was he doing? And now she was suggesting that they spend three days doing just that with no strings attached. If he couldn't recognize when he'd won the fucking lottery, he didn't deserve to run the company he prized so highly.

Once he surrendered mentally, his body took over. Pushing himself up to his knees, he lunged at her, eyes on her mouth—so he didn't notice her outstretched palm until it made contact with his chest, halting his progress.

“Ah, ah, ah. We're not done negotiating.”

“Yes we are.” He closed his hand around her wrist and levered it down.

She scrambled to her feet. “Nope, there's one more condition.”

“A moment ago *you* were trying to convince *me* we should do this. And now we're talking conditions? What did I miss?”

She grinned. “I want to be in charge.”

What the hell? He cocked his head and issued a cool, “Excuse me?”

Her chin jutted out. “Exactly what I said. I want you to do what I say.” But then she lost her nerve and quickly added, “Not forever—or not for our three nights, I mean. Just right now.”

...

Cassie felt powerful. Foolish, but powerful. A pretty weird combination, but she was trying hard to hold on to the powerful part. It was just that now they had essentially decided to spend the next few days sleeping together, her mind had suddenly gone a little crazy with the possibilities. She wasn't deluding herself. Jack Winter was going to be the best sex she would have in her life—it was never going to get any better. So for the short time he was hers, she wanted him every which way. And though she'd enjoyed last night more than...well, pretty much anything ever, being in this office had planted an idea in her mind. A brazen idea. One that already had her restless and bothered. She tried to explain. “Last night you were sort of...in

charge.”

“I don’t remember you objecting.”

“Heck, no!” she exclaimed, a little louder than was probably dignified. “I just want my turn, is all. I want you to sit back and...let me have my way with you.” She grinned at the clichéd phrase, but it was the best she could do.

“And why would you think I would object?”

“Because you’re bossy.”

That earned her a wry smile. “I like to think of it more as being focused.”

“Whatever.”

He held up his hands in a caricature of surrender. “I don’t even know why we’re having this conversation. Because I’m not arguing. And yet we’re arguing. Only an idiot would take a pass on letting Cassie James have her way with him.”

“Oh.” She had girded herself to persuade him and was taken a little off guard by his easy capitulation.

“Let’s go get a cab.” He stood, his voice thick with desire.

“No!” she said, a little too loudly. “We stay here.”

He wasn’t going to like that. Even though Jack Winter was sex personified, she got the feeling he didn’t like the idea of doing it in his office. It would remind him of how much he was breaching his stand against mixing business and pleasure. Still, he didn’t say anything, just narrowed his eyebrows in a slightly annoyed way.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to the sofa.

When he didn’t move immediately, she placed her palm on his chest and gave him a gentle push. He walked backward toward the sofa until his calves brushed against it. Scowling, he sat.

She moved around the room, switching off most but not all of the lamps and enjoying him watching her. He was dying of curiosity, she could tell,



but he wasn't going to say anything. When the room was suitably dim, she took a stroll around its perimeter, letting her hand glide along the cold glass of the window walls. In truth, she was screwing up her courage.

She made one lap, his eyes burning her, though she didn't spare him a glance. Fake it till you make it. Moving to stand in front of him she said, "Take out your cock." That was the truth. That's what she wanted him to do. There was something about just asking for what you wanted, with no apology, that was intoxicating. The telltale ache took hold between her legs.

His eyebrows shot up. She'd ruffled him. Good. He hesitated a bit too long, though, so she put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows back at him. After a momentary standoff in which they stared at each other, frozen, he lifted his hips and pulled his pants and boxers down. His penis, freed from its constraints, jumped to attention.

"Now you," he said, his voice thick.

"Ah, ah." She held up a finger. "Who's in charge here?" He scowled but remained silent, so she issued her next order. "Shirt, too."

Her skin buzzed with victory and anticipation when he obeyed. Jack Winter, naked on the sofa in his office—dang. She had a fleeting notion to take out her phone and take a picture so she could remember, years from now, that this *actually happened*, but she doubted he'd let her control of the situation extend that far.

"Are you going to come over here, or am I going to have to—"

"Stop talking," she said, affecting a boldness she didn't quite feel as she moved to stand next to him.

He reached out and ran his hands over her legs. She swatted them away. "No touching, either."

He bowed his head and opened his palms in a gesture of surrender.

She swallowed hard. Okay, the way to do this was just to do it. Skip the preliminaries. They had the rest of the week for preliminaries—the thought

took the pressure off.

She fell to her knees.

“Oh my God,” he said, before her lips even made contact with him.

The taste of him was a jolt to her senses. She’d given blow jobs in the past, but they’d always felt obligatory. As she slid her lips over him, she knew he was going to be different. A low hum began in his chest, and she could feel it between her legs. He was silky and hard at the same time, salty and sweet. As she slowly took more of him in, the hum became a growl. His hands came to tangle in her hair, threading it around his fingers and resting against her scalp, which felt like it contained all the nerve endings in her body. The image they must make—it was exactly what she’d imagined, and now she’d created it. Having purposely left some of the lights on, she wondered if anyone in the neighboring buildings could see them. She’d kept it dim enough that they probably couldn’t be identified, but wanted it to be crystal clear what was going on. Though anyone watching would have seen something that looked like a woman submitting to a man, they both knew the truth. Jack Winter had given up his power for a little bit, and it was exhilarating. It was driving her wild.

She’d only made a few strokes up and down, when he gasped, “Shit, Cassie, I’m not going to last.”

She stopped then, and as the vacuum her lips had created unsealed, they made a little pop. “Maybe you need a break.” She laughed—it was an unrestrained laugh of joy.

“Maybe not,” he growled.

“But I’m the one in charge, you’ll recall,” she teased, running one finger lightly over the length of him. He grunted and threw his head back. She relented. She didn’t want him to last. She wanted to make him come as quickly as possible—she was getting off on the power trip, in truth. So she sank her mouth back over his shaft, bracing her hands against his thighs, as

she took him as deep as she could. She increased the suction and swirled her tongue over the tip of him, trying to figure out what he liked best.

“Cassie!” he barked. She might have thought him angry if she didn’t know better. His fists clenched in her hair and he pressed, warning her off. She let him guide her away, replacing her mouth with her hand as she sat back on her heels to watch the orgasm rip through him. He was magnificent, his eyes never leaving hers as a great shudder overtook him. His hips jerked as if possessed by some external force, and still he watched her. She felt the hot liquid then, and a ridiculous feeling of satisfaction mixed with accomplishment overtook her.

When it was done, he closed his eyes, just for a moment, as if turning inward to gather his strength. It had the effect of breaking the intense connection between them. When he made eye contact again, she winked, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and stood. “Now,” she teased, “was that so bad?”

“Jesus, woman, you just about killed me.” He lifted his hips and pulled his pants back up.

“Oh, sorry,” she mock pouted.

“I’m not.” He stood up and blotted the wet spot on his jeans. “And I’m going to show you just how not sorry I am.”

She raised her eyebrows, issuing a silent challenge.

He pointed to the door. “Home. Now.”

## Chapter Nine

“Race you. First one up gets to be in charge.” And then he hit the stairs—there would be none of this give-the-lady-a-head-start bullshit. No, he left the lady shrieking “No fair!” as she struggled to get her key out of the doorknob.

Everything felt so much easier now that they were out in the open about their arrangement. There was no fear she was going to jump to the wrong conclusion, which left clear sailing ahead. He picked up the pace. As hot as that little encounter in his office had been, there was no way he wasn’t going to put his hands on her this time. He couldn’t just sit back again and not touch her.

So he was going to win this goddamned race. She was gaining on him, laughing as she clattered up the stairs. He started taking them two at a time, putting a good chunk of distance between them so, by the time he rounded the landing to the fourth floor, she was more than a story behind him. “I’m kicking your ass, James!” he called down. Summoning a burst of speed for the final flight, he stumbled to a jog as he covered the last stretch of hallway to her apartment.

And came face to face with a woman sitting on the floor, her back against Cassie’s door. She lifted suspicious eyes to meet his. He stood, frozen, as the sounds of Cassie lurching up the stairs, yelling, “You had a head start!” grew louder. She burst through the door from the stairwell, then went

utterly silent.

“Mom?”

He'd known before she said it. The woman was an older, haggard twin to her daughter. Her hair was the same auburn-streaked brown, but it hung limply around her shoulders. Cassie's mother's version of the crazy-quilt hazel eyes were dull instead of vibrant, and ringed by dark circles. She would be in her mid-forties, yet she looked a good fifteen years older.

He swung his gaze to Cassie and watched her face harden. There had been shock there—he wondered how long it had been since she'd seen her mother—but it drained away and was replaced by something else. Armor.

“What are you doing here?” Cassie's tone was clipped.

The woman scrambled to her feet. “They let me out early. For Christmas.”

“Bullshit.” It was not lost on him that Cassie had skipped over the pasta swears in favor of the real thing. He took a step back to stand next to her.

“I need somewhere to stay until I can get my own place.” She held out a palm, which contained a single key. “Changed the locks on your own mother, I see.”

“They did not let you out.” Cassie spoke slowly, as if she were trying very hard not to yell. “You were supposed to be in through January. I was there for the intake, remember?” Her eyes narrowed, and he could feel the waves of tension rolling off her. He took a step sideways, putting himself a little closer to her, as if he could absorb some of that tension for her.

“If you're here, it's because they kicked you out. Or you skipped out.” Cassie turned to him then and said, “Rehab.”

Her mother's upper lip curled as she looked him up and down. “This your boyfriend?”

“No,” said Cassie.

She didn't introduce him. This was his cue. “I should probably go.”

“No!” Cassie put a hand on his forearm. Then she lowered her voice. “Please stay. She’s the one leaving.”

“I just need to crash for a couple nights, Cass. I left early because I got it together.”

“Oh, and did they give you a refund for the seven grand that January is going to cost?”

Suddenly it made sense. The expensive mother. The modest apartment. The slow pace through school. She was paying for her mother’s treatment. And from the looks of things, this wasn’t the first time.

“You told me you’d really try this time,” said Cassie, her voice breaking. Anger had given way, replaced by hurt, and she suddenly sounded like a little girl whose mother had let her down one too many times. She slumped against the wall. As heartbreak flooded into her expression, it was as if the anger that had been there a moment ago transferred to him. A spike of rage, sharp and metallic, pierced his chest. Who the hell did this woman think she was?

“I didn’t need to stay any longer. I’m clean.”

“Oh yeah?” Angry Cassie was back, and in a flash she pushed off the wall and lunged at her mother. She grabbed the older woman’s arm and forced it out of a tattered, dirty denim jacket. Turning the arm over, she exposed it to the dim light emanating from a sconce mounted to the wall.

He had to stifle a gasp. The arm was bruised and overlain with fresh lines of red.

Her mother yanked the arm back. “Excuse me for thinking I could count on my own child,” she sneered, sounding like a schoolyard bully taunting a victim.

Cassie was still standing close to her mother so Jack reached for her, tugging her back to stand by him where she had been a moment ago. He didn’t drop her hand.

“I thought you said he wasn’t your boyfriend.” There was that lip curl again. He wanted to wipe it off her face.

“He’s not. I don’t need to explain anything to you.”

The older woman shrugged. “You could never get a guy like him anyway. I always told you to play in your own league.” She flashed a leering smile at Jack. “But this one, she was always too good for everyone else. Had to go to university. Always too busy reading, even as a kid. Too good for her own mother. Too busy.”

“That’s not true.” Cassie wasn’t angry anymore, not exactly. But her voice shook. He squeezed her hand. “All I wanted was your attention. *You* were too busy for me. Too busy getting drunk with your friends. Or high. Or whatever. I’m sorry, but you can’t stay. I’m not doing it anymore.”

“So you’re going to put your own mother out on the street?”

“Yes.” Her voice was so small it was barely audible.

Cassie was about to say *I’m sorry* again, he could sense it. And he’d be damned if she apologized to this sorry-ass excuse for a mother ever again. Cassie’s mother made his own, with her benign neglect, cluelessness, and deference to his beast of a father, seem like a saint. Jack had been trying to let Cassie fight her own battle, but he couldn’t hold back anymore. He took a step forward, putting himself between the women. “I think it’s time for you to go, Mrs. James.”

After narrowing her eyes and holding his gaze for a long moment, she sneered and said, “It’s *Miss* James.” Then, like a teenager, she huffed over to her knapsack and made a show of hoisting it onto her shoulder. She didn’t spare a look for Cassie as she clomped down the hall and disappeared into the stairwell.

Cassie watched her mother retreat, her face unreadable. She was still holding her keys from when she’d been chasing him up the stairs—it seemed like a lifetime ago. Gently he pried open her fingers and unlocked

the door. She was still staring down the empty hallway. He stepped inside her apartment and said, “Come inside.”

Her eyes jerked to his, as if she’d forgotten he was there, but she obeyed, closing the door behind her and pressing her back against it. Her wide eyes darted around the apartment like she’d never seen it before. God, she looked like a caged animal. He himself was still feeling the aftereffects of the adrenaline rush that had powered him through the confrontation. He took a step toward her and she flinched. “Hey,” he said, speaking softly. “It’s okay.”

She started to shake. He saw then, suddenly, how very alone she was. Dead father—and one who hadn’t been much of a father at that, from the sound of things. A mother who was worse than useless. There was the best friend, he supposed, but where had that guy been lately? Jack was used to being alone. Preferred it, even. He was hard that way. But someone as vibrant as Cassie shouldn’t be alone all the time. It did something to a person, and he didn’t want that something happening to her.

He stretched out his arm toward her, and when she didn’t object, he took another step. He could reach her now, so he palmed her cheek. He kept his hand still—he didn’t want her to think he was coming on to her. He meant only to comfort. The touch seemed to change something in her because the hunted, defensive look slowly began to drain away as she locked eyes with him. But it was replaced by something just as bad. He watched her face crumple, and those big multi-colored eyes that he had once thought of as innocent welled up with tears. So many tears that they began spilling over in earnest—one, two, then too many to count.

“Hey,” he said again, gently pulling her off the wall and into his arms. He hugged her, though she was wooden and unyielding in his arms. But he persevered, and they stood silently. After a minute she deflated, softening as her arms snaked around his chest.



Then she began to sob, silent tears superseded by great gasping cries that echoed in his chest. He let her cry and held her tighter, a flashback overtaking him. He was thirteen, at a restaurant with his parents. His father was trying to make him calculate the tip, shoving the bill in his face, and his mother was pretending not to notice the confrontation.

The last time he'd cried.

Jesus, he'd like to get his hands on Cassie's mother. He regretted now that he'd let her walk away without at least giving her an earful. Cassie's hair fell over her face as she pressed her cheek against his chest. After a minute the weeping became less intense. Jack kicked off his boots and stooped, tapping her calf to prompt her to lift her leg. After he'd dispensed with their footwear, he led the now merely sniffing Cassie to the bed. Damn, this bed was awkward, wedged as it was into its alcove. He climbed over the foot, pulling her along with him, lying down and spooning her against his chest.

"You don't have to do this," she whispered.

"Shh. Just rest for a while."

"You should go. I'm not going to be very good company tonight so you should just—"

"You're freezing." He didn't think it was strictly true. She was still quivering, but more likely it was the aftermath of the confrontation. He worked the duvet out from under them and covered them with it. "Just lie here for a minute and close your eyes and get warm."

He expected her to argue but instead she sighed a deep, shaky exhale. So he wrapped his arms around her, notched his chin over her head, and took his own deep breath. As she softened and burrowed back against him, he could feel the tension draining from his muscles, too.

It wasn't five minutes before deep, rhythmic breathing told him she'd fallen asleep. He closed his eyes then, breathed in her spicy vanilla scent, and let himself go.

...

It wasn't like in romance novels, where you wake up and for a moment have no idea where you are. Maybe you even make out with your bedmate in some kind of mysterious half-asleep zombie state before you realize you're actually in bed with someone you shouldn't be. Nope, when Cassie woke up she remembered precisely what had happened. And, more to the point, she knew exactly whose arm was slung over her, whose solid chest her cheek rested against.

*Well, this is embarrassing.* After her big speech about how this was going to be casual, she'd put him in a situation where he—Mr. I-Don't-Do-Relationships—felt forced to stay the night. Without even opening her eyes, she could picture him, choppy hair all disheveled, a day's worth of beard growth. Because she'd never closed the curtains, the west-facing room was flooded with enough sunlight to suggest a clear and well-advanced Monday morning. She shifted a little bit, trying to ease a crick in her neck without waking him up. His arms came to life and tightened around her, immobilizing her against his chest.

"Good morning." Yikes, his voice was sexy first thing in the morning, all low and gravelly.

"Good morning," she echoed, and he loosened his hold enough for her to tilt her head up to see his face. Yep—disheveled and wickedly hot. The sun glinted off his fair whiskers, making them look almost golden.

"Woman, you need a bigger bed." Somehow, they'd drifted over to his side of the bed, and his back was pushed right up against the wall. "You're one of those migratory sleepers, aren't you?"

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, but when she tried to scooch back to her side, his arms tightened again. She'd been sort of half draped over his chest, her own chest and head cradled on his soft T-shirt, but now he hoisted her

up so she was lying fully on top of him. He didn't seem to be trying to hide his morning erection, which was apparent even through his jeans and hers. Ironic that they'd slept fully clothed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She closed her eyes, embarrassed but resigned. "Yes. I'm sorry you had to see all that."

"You've been paying for your mother's rehab, haven't you? That's where all your money goes."

There was no point in trying to hide it. It was plainly obvious from the exchange he'd witnessed. And anyway, she didn't want to hide it from him anymore. It was too much work. So she nodded. She expected him to have a lot to say, to scold her, to berate Laura as ungrateful. Instead, he merely asked, "What will happen now?"

"Same thing that always happens. I'll hear from her once or twice more in the next few days, and I'll be all tough love. Then she'll disappear for months. When she comes back, I'll have talked myself into believing her when she says she's ready to change for good."

"And then you put her in rehab again."

"Yep. Rinse and repeat." She sighed and let her forehead fall to his chest. If only she could burrow into him for a while and ignore everything—at least until Christmas was over and school started up and life became busy and routine again. It was safe and cozy nestled against his chest, and he smelled good. There was something to be said for a lemon tree growing in a bog. But he would have to get to the office. And she still had a lot of work to do to get ready for the trip.

She pressed against his chest to lever herself off him, but his arms tightened, halting her progress. "Where do you think you're going?"

She didn't know what to say. *I'm trying to extricate us from this super awkward situation? I need to remove myself from your person before I jump*

*you?*

“I believe I won the race up the stairs last night.” The sentence was delivered in a completely neutral tone, and his face did not betray any emotion. But all the same, the declaration made her catch her breath in response to the twinge between her legs.

“Don’t you have to go to work?”

One hand wormed its way under the waistband of her jeans and cupped her ass. “I’m the boss. I don’t *have* to do anything.” He rocked his hips into hers, grinding his erection against her.

She closed her eyes, allowing herself to revel for a moment in the pure, hot pleasure of her pelvis immobilized between his hips and his hands. Then they flew open at the unexpected sensation of his whiskers against her neck. He was gently kissing down her throat, and when he reached her collarbone he traced the outline of it with his tongue. A day away from his razor had left him with sharp, golden stubble that tickled and tortured and made her nipples harden.

“Waking up in bed with a woman,” he rasped against her skin, voice as rough as his face, “should involve far less clothing.” As if to illustrate his point, the hand that wasn’t on her ass snaked up her shirt and around to her back. He was searching for her bra clasp. Locating it, he expertly unfastened it, and then the hand moved around to the front and gathered a handful of breast. It was a slow assault from all directions—one hand on her ass, the other kneading a breast, while his hips continued to grind against her. “But you’re right,” he whispered. “I probably *should* go to work.” An evil grin blossomed, and he gave a low, hard thrust that nudged her a startling amount of the way toward orgasm. And they were both still fully clothed.

Which suddenly seemed like a problem. “No way,” she said, pushing herself off him, but this time only so she could slide her hands under his

shirt. When they made contact with his taut abs he hissed, as if she were burning him. “I want my money’s worth on our little arrangement,” she said. It was the simple, honest truth.

Sitting up, he shucked off his T-shirt, jeans, and boxer briefs before going to work on her clothing. Then he gently pushed her down so that she was on her back. “I won the race, remember?” Without waiting for a response, he kneeled over her.

And then his hands began to roam. Slowly, languidly, they made their way over every inch of her neck and down to her breasts. He flicked her nipples and then lowered his mouth to kiss away the tension his fingers had wrought. His hungry mouth had the opposite effect, though. As his tongue worked her nipple, she felt it in her core. A coil was twisting inside her, tighter and tighter, and the more tightly she ratcheted up, the more she needed him inside her, to ease the heavy ache that had settled between her legs.

“You like that, do you?” he whispered.

She found his shaft with her hand and stroked it, coaxing a ragged groan from him even as he continued to work her nipple with his tongue and teeth. Shamelessly, she thrust her hips up as she tried to guide his cock toward her, a clear invitation. He moved her hand off, and she let loose an involuntary cry of frustration.

“Not yet,” he whispered, letting his hand drift down and tangle in her curls. Just when she thought she couldn’t take any more—when she would come from the feel of his mouth on her breast alone, he moved his lips to her other nipple. But the relief was only momentary. As he took the second nipple into his mouth, he parted her folds and dragged a finger from her clit to her opening. “Oh my God, you’re so wet,” he choked out, sounding half strangled.

“There are condoms in the bedside drawer,” she said, hoping to urge him

onward.

“Patience,” he said, having gained control of his voice.

“No,” she said, though she knew it was pointless to argue—he won the race, and he wasn’t going to give up control.

And so on and on it went. He would take her to the brink and retreat just long enough for her head to clear so that she was able to fully grasp how totally and completely frustrated he was making her with the ceaseless torture. He’d allow her to touch him, but only a little. Then he’d groan and push her hands and mouth away and renew his measured assault. He wasn’t kidding about the “in charge” business. He wasn’t being stereotypically dominant, though. In fact, it was all very disciplined and controlled and slow—unlike their past couplings. But he was definitely playing her like a violin.

Then, finally—*finally*—after it seemed hours had passed, he had two fingers inside her, stroking her. She lifted her head up from the pillow, enough to make eye contact. He nodded a little, as if acknowledging a message she wasn’t consciously sending, and pressed his thumb down on her clit. The cry that ripped from her throat sounded otherworldly to her own ears, like it was coming from someone—or something—else.

The aftershocks were still quaking through her when she became dimly aware of him rolling on a condom, and then he was pushing inside her with a guttural cry of his own. She surged up to meet him, closing her eyes tightly and wishing she never had to leave this nest, this cocoon where nothing else mattered.

...

It was a long time before Jack came back down to earth. He’d intended to give her what she needed—a slow, attentive fuck to take her mind off her mother. A caring fuck, even, if he were that kind of person. He’d wanted to

show her that she was worth paying attention to. Because whatever happened at the end of this incredible friends-with-benefits thing, she was a good person. She deserved to be happy and well-treated.

The ironic part was that he'd planned the whole thing out, insisted that he was in charge. And he had been. He'd purposefully resisted when she'd urged him to hurry, drawn it out, a slow, deliberate torture. And yet...he had a nagging sense that a person who was so calculating—a person *in charge*—should not be left feeling this positively gutted with pleasure.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Good idea.” If he had any hope of getting out of here without jumping her again, it was probably smart for her to use that mouth for something banal. Like talking.

Shooting him a bewildered look, she scrambled to a sitting position and put her T-shirt back on. It didn't help. She still looked like she'd been fucked within an inch of her life.

“How did you discover Carl was stealing from the company?”

Well, that was unexpected. But still, a nice chat about Winter Enterprises' problems could be just the distraction the doctor ordered. “I was working through a stack of mail late one night a couple weeks ago. Seth was on vacation, so we'd had a temp in. An invoice addressed to Carl mistakenly made its way into my pile, and I opened it before I noticed it wasn't meant for me. It was an invoice for lumber.”

“Is that suspicious?”

“Not inherently. But I know the names of all our suppliers. *All*. Like, down to where we get our toilet paper. And I didn't recognize this one.”

“Uh oh.”

“Yeah. It was called A-plus Construction, which is not a name I know.”

“And I would guess, being a developer, you know the construction industry pretty well. Plus, that's, like, a name you would make up if you

were inventing a fake construction company.”

“Exactly. And the address was a P.O. box, and there was no phone number.”

She groaned. “And nothing on Google, I assume?”

“Nope.”

“And the company turns out be registered to Carl?”

He nodded, glad she hadn’t asked how he’d figured that out, because he’d called in a few favors.

“Funny,” she said, scooting off the bed and heading for the kitchenette. “It all came to light because of a misdirected invoice. Because of a temp who screwed up.”

“Yes, and I’m aware of how stupid I am.”

“Not stupid. You trusted him.”

“I should have known better.” It was hard to say aloud. “There should be more than one person’s eyeballs on incoming invoices. Anyway, lesson learned. Of course, that set me off looking at everything. If there’s one fake supplier, why not more?” He paused. He still hated talking about it. She’d been nothing but kind, but his disability was a shortcoming. A serious one. “Everything takes me ten times as long as it should because I’m always second-guessing myself. Part of me still wants to think he’s doing some kind of creative accounting that I don’t understand, something that benefits us. Something he hasn’t bothered to tell me about.”

She shook her head from her vantage point by the sink. “Sorry, but I don’t think so.”

He sighed. As much as it sucked, it was kind of a relief to have someone else confirm his worst suspicions.

“Coffee?” she asked. “I’m making some.”

“No thanks. I should get to work.”

She turned, coffee pot in hand. “Would it be okay if I looked around for



you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m pretty familiar with your company now. What if I poked around a little more, dug deeper, checked on the invoicing for the past couple years? Then when you call the police—”

“I won’t be a total ignorant idiot,” he interrupted.

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.” She turned back to her coffee making. “Anyway, don’t worry if you’d rather not. I just thought—” She cut herself off with a slight headshake.

“You thought what?” Her head kept shaking. He had to get her talking again or the flapping of that evil dark mane would prevent him from leaving. “Tell me.”

“You helped me last night.” She flashed him a sheepish smile. “And this morning. So I thought maybe I could help you, too.”

The idea that she simply wanted to help him damn near took the wind out of him. He couldn’t speak right away. When he did, his voice was embarrassingly raspy. “That would be great. I’d appreciate having at least a big-picture handle on what has been happening before I call the cops, knowing if there are any more suspicious suppliers. I was going to worry about that after the Wexler deal, but if you have time...I’ll pay you, of course.”

“I don’t want you to pay me. Can I just do you a favor?” She tilted her head, as if she were looking at a puzzle she couldn’t quite make sense of. “Is that against the rules? Having friends?”

Friends. His cock jumped. As if in protest? “Not against the rules,” he said. “Just not a lot of precedent. That Dax guy you met the other day is as close as I get, and he’s pretty much an asshole.”

She smiled then—a real one. “Well, we’ll muddle through.” When she turned back to pour cream in her coffee, she was all business. “Send me

whatever information you think might be good for me to look at—don't be picky, just send everything. I'll start this afternoon. I'm at the bar tonight, but I'll get back on it tomorrow.”

## Chapter Ten

The rest of the suppliers looked legitimate to Cassie, but she did find a few cash withdrawals against the corporate credit card that seemed suspicious. Historically, the company had paid its invoices by check and charged expenses out in the world with corporate credit cards—but those expenses tended to be meals, plane tickets, that kind of thing. Why would someone withdraw two grand in cash, given the sky-high rates cards charged for cash advances? And the bigger question was, where was that cash going? Cassie worked all afternoon on the files Jack had couriered over on a memory stick, quitting only when it was time to head to Edward's.

Setting up the bar was surreal. After the insane weekend she'd had, Edward's felt like a fragment of the distant past, a place she'd been once when she was a different person entirely. Hopefully the evening would go fast, and she'd be able to call Jack tomorrow with a progress report. She wanted to get her hands on receipts to reconcile against the company's credit card statements.

Her phone buzzed a few hours later, when the bar was in full swing.

*COME OVER WHEN YOU'RE OFF.*

A frisson of excitement drew goose pimples on her skin, even in the hot bar. After parting this morning—her cheeks heated at the memory—she had assumed they would talk tomorrow, since he never said anything to the

contrary. Maybe he wanted to talk about whether she'd found anything. Glancing around, she huddled to type her response. Even though no one here knew anything about Winter Enterprises and its cheat of a CFO, she wanted to make sure her texts were not seen.

*I DON'T FIND ANY OTHER QUESTIONABLE SUPPLIERS, BUT THERE ARE SOME CASH WITHDRAWALS I WANT TO ASK YOU ABOUT.*

*I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE WITHDRAWALS. COME OVER. TAKE A CAB.*

She'd be lying if she didn't admit his response was just a tiny bit gratifying. Though she hadn't wanted to presume they would get it on every night, she was all too aware that their "to hell with the rules" time was slipping away. She paused. Did "no relationships" mean no flirting? Oh, screw it. If you couldn't flirt with your friend-with-benefits-for-three-nights, what was the world coming to?

*IS THIS A BOOTY CALL?*

Ah! She almost dropped the phone, flustered by her own boldness. The reply came almost immediately, and it made her gasp.

*18 LINDEN STREET*

She'd been assuming he was texting from the office. The idea of going to his home seemed strangely intimate. And hugely exciting.

*I GET OFF IN AN HOUR.*

*I'LL TRY MY BEST.*

She was unable to hide her stupid grin at the innuendo, clicked off the phone, and proceeded to start counting the seconds until it was time to go.

When the taxi pulled onto Jack's street a little over an hour later, Cassie was practically thrumming with tension—mixed up with a heck of a lot of

curiosity. Jack lived in Corktown, a neighborhood tucked in between the high-rises of the city's financial district and more solidly residential swaths to the east. Home to some of the oldest row houses in the city, the neighborhood was slowly gentrifying. Somehow, she'd pictured Jack in a penthouse condo. But then, he had the killer view at the office, so maybe he had the whole luxury-nest-in-the-sky thing covered there. Alternatively, she would have expected he'd live in one of the city's swanky mansion-filled neighborhoods, at an address with status. The houses in his neighborhood were lovely in their own way, old bay-and-gable Victorians, but they perched on tiny postage stamp yards, and were in varying states of repair.

Unlike many of its neighbors, the narrow semi-detached house where they rolled to a stop was immaculately restored from its clean red brick to its bright white-painted trim, visible even in the dim glow of the streetlights. She didn't even have a moment to marshal her courage before Jack, wearing a parka, came jogging down the walkway and opened her door. Handing the driver some cash, he waved off her attempt to pay. Figuring it was useless to argue, she made her way up the path and onto the porch. He must have been waiting for her outside, because she spied a tumbler of scotch and a lit cigar.

"You smoke?" she said as he mounted the steps behind her. "Gross." She smiled inwardly. One benefit of this whole "rules" situation was that she didn't have to worry about what she said. If you weren't doing that "getting to know you" thing with the hope a relationship might result, you didn't have to worry about making a good impression.

So she followed that with, "I would never have expected you to live here."

Stubbing out the cigar, he said, "I don't really smoke. Maybe once every couple of months when the mood strikes." He opened the front door and gestured for her to precede him inside. "And as for the house whose honor

you've just insulted, I love this place.”

“I can see why,” she said, registering, as she took in the amazing interior, that this was the first time she'd ever heard him express an unreservedly positive opinion about something. “It's beautiful.” And it was. The place must have been gutted back to the studs and rebuilt—it looked like a spread in *Architectural Digest*. They'd stepped into a living room with a huge roaring fire at the far end. The wall that adjoined the attached house was exposed brick and sported an enormous black and white photograph of the Toronto skyline in a rainstorm. The house was narrow but deep, and at the back of the main floor she could see across a gleaming marble island into a small, but no doubt, luxuriously appointed kitchen. “It's just that I was expecting more...”

“Rosedale?” he supplied, naming the city's wealthiest neighborhood.

“Yes. Or some kind of luxury condo.”

“I wanted to be able to walk to work. It's less than twenty minutes from here.”

“And Edward's is about halfway in between.”

“Exactly, which is why I got into the habit of coming for dinner on my way home. Except, of course, for Tuesdays, when I used to have dinner with my betrayer. You know, the Judas Iscariot of the real estate world.” He made a self-deprecating face and took her coat, and she couldn't help but admire his ass as he turned to hang it. “Anyway, those mansions in Rosedale are too big for one person.” She couldn't disagree, but still, this beautiful but cozy place made her wonder if the impression she'd formed of him wasn't entirely correct. She'd been surprised by how non-sterile his office had been, too. “Not to worry, though,” he said, taking her hand and drawing her farther inside. “I have this place tricked out.”

She followed him to the kitchen and took a seat at the island as he indicated.

“You hungry?”

“I ate at the restaurant,” she said, taking in the smooth dark wooden floor-to-ceiling cabinets lining two walls, concealing, she assumed, dishes, food, even appliances, for none were visible.

“Scotch?”

“Had one of those before I left Edward’s, too.” She grinned. She’d needed the liquid courage to get into the cab.

“Want another?”

“No, thank you.” She hoped she wouldn’t have to explain why she rarely had more than one drink at a time—he’d seen her mother, after all.

Standing on the other side of the island, he turned and lowered his elbows to the counter, propping his chin in his hands and gazing at her with those ice blue eyes. He was wearing a long sleeve navy V-neck T-shirt, and she could see a few golden hairs peeking out of the neckline. Suddenly she wanted nothing more than to lick them. But probably she was here to discuss the finances. Not to lick his chest. Or at least not until after they’d discussed the finances.

“Heard from your mother?”

“Huh?” That was the last thing she’d expected him to say.

“You said the usual pattern is that you hear from her a few times after she reappears until she really goes.”

“Yes. I mean, no. That’s right, but I haven’t heard from her. Haven’t been home, though, since I left for work mid-afternoon. For all I know she’s sitting outside my door right now.”

He nodded. “I think you should stay here tonight. Just don’t be home when she comes.”

She was touched he would offer, but it felt weird. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy who looked after people like this. There was probably a rule about it. “That’s nice of you, but I can’t avoid my apartment forever. Or my

mother.” She summoned a wry smile. “Alas.”

“It’s not nice of me.” His eyes narrowed. “I’m not a nice person.”

“Um, okay.” Those eyes—they were wicked blue sapphires.

“I’ve broken the rules for you, Cassie.”

She raised her eyebrows. She’d broken a few for him, too, but refrained from saying so. “Which rule would that be? You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“No relationships.”

“I told you we’re not having a relationship. We’re having an—”

“Entanglement.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Whatever you call it, we *are* having a kind of relationship. One that has an expiration date. Thursday morning, to be precise.”

None of this was news, so Cassie just kept her eyebrows raised.

“Today is Monday,” he said.

“You have a talent for stating the obvious.”

He acted as if he hadn’t heard her. “Tomorrow is the company Christmas party, which is a drag, but my presence is required. The next night is Wednesday. That leaves two more nights.”

“Until we’re off to Muskoka,” Cassie said, leaving the rest unspoken. *And then it’s over.*

“That leaves two nights,” he said, still acting like she wasn’t part of the conversation, “for sex.”

She recoiled a little. He was only saying what she’d been thinking, but it was a little offensive to hear it stated so plainly and mercenarily.

“Two nights of the most mind-blowing sex imaginable.”

Well, okay, maybe not so terribly offensive. She bit her lip and ducked her head, no longer able to withstand the icy-blue heat of his gaze.

“And you have a tiny bed and a crazy mother.” He tipped her chin up. She wanted to grab the finger that was currently burning her chin and stuff



it in her mouth. No, strike that—she wanted to vault over the island and jump him.

Forcing her to look at him, he didn't change his expression. It was still that neutral blue ocean. "I rest my case."

She swallowed. "I suppose you have a big bed."

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "I have an extremely big bed."

She feigned a casual shrug. "Well, if you're going to break a rule, you might as well be as efficient as possible and break it thoroughly."

"Thoroughly and often."

"Where is your bedroom?" He started to get up, but she held up a hand. "Don't show me, tell me."

"Third floor."

He stood on the kitchen side of the island, so she was closer to the stairs. She leaned back slowly as if considering, lazily stretching her arms.

Then she turned and bolted for the stairs, shouting, "First one to the top gets to be in charge!"

...

The nice thing about "losing" to Cassie, thought Jack, while he still had the ability to string together a coherent thought, was that it always managed to work in his favor. The two times she'd won control in this silly but crazily erotic game they played, he'd ended up with her lips wrapped around his cock. She seemed to like winning on principle more than she cared about how things played out afterward.

Knowing he was going to lose their little race, he'd given her a few minutes' head start, and damned if he hadn't come upstairs to find her naked inside his shower.

"I love this shower," she said, somehow managing to make herself understood with his cock in her mouth.

He wasn't in the mood for talking, so he just let his head fall back against the glass and lost himself in the sensation of her lips gliding up and down his shaft as her hands played with his balls.

"It's so big," she said a few seconds later.

She stopped moving then, though she still held him in her mouth, and there was a delay while they both processed the double entendre, which he was pretty sure had been unintentional.

"I was *totally* talking about you!" she squealed as he pulled her up to standing.

"You little minx," he growled, falling to his knees in front of her. "I'm going to *make* you stop talking."

"Though this *is* a big shower," she said, laughing. "It's *almost* as big as \_\_\_"

He licked her like an ice cream cone, which had the desired effect of halting her speech. He was a little sorry the shower diluted her musky sweet taste. Swirling his tongue around her clit, he stroked her impossibly soft folds with his fingers, eventually letting one of them slide inside her.

She stayed quiet for a while then. Well, that wasn't exactly accurate—she stopped using words at that point. And he didn't count it against her when she started gasping his name. No, he loved hearing his name on her lips. Every "Jack," she breathed seemed to ratchet up the tension in him another notch. He was restless and hot, and not from the shower. Consumed by her but distracted by her at the same time.

Enough. He'd been intending to make her come in the shower, but he couldn't stand it anymore. "I have to be inside you," he said, turning off the twin shower heads as he stood. When she opened her mouth, he placed his hand over it—not hard, but enough to convey that he wanted her to remain silent.

Throwing a bath sheet over her shoulders, he used it to pull her to him—

so they were both wrapped in the white cotton—and nipped the side of her neck, which was reddened from the heat of the shower. She grabbed his ass and he kissed her, hoping she could taste on his lips how delicious she was.

“I thought you were going to—”

“Shut *up*,” he said, kissing her again but propelling her so she walked backward into the bedroom, both of them still wrapped in the bath sheet. He reached for a condom as he tipped her back on the bed, displaying the whole mass of her pink, damp skin. Kneeling over her, he picked up where he’d left off in the shower, licking her clit as he unwrapped and rolled on the condom. When she raised her knees to her chest, he kneeled, hooking her legs over his shoulders, and slid inside her.

Maybe it was the residual heat of the shower, but she was a furnace. “Oh, God,” he choked out, fearing that once he began to move, it would all be over. But he couldn’t *not* move. Something inside him took over, forcing his hips to move faster and faster as he slammed into her, losing himself in the unbelievably hot sight of her moaning and shaking her head from side to side, dark damp hair whipping through the air.

She screamed then, and the wave of sensation he’d thought was going to crush him became almost unendurable when she began clenching around him. Then she went silent, her head stilled, and she focused the shattered gemstones of her eyes on his. It was as if there was a silent command in them, and his body responded, sending sharp surges of pleasure through him that went on and on.

“That wasn’t fair,” she whispered when he was finally done coming. “I was supposed to be in charge.”

He was glad she was competitive, he thought a few minutes later, when they were sprawled out across his king-size bed, staring up at the sky visible through his skylight. He’d never had a lover *per se*, meaning a woman he’d slept with repeatedly. He’d always wanted to avoid that kind

of...entanglement, to use her word. But he did pride himself on being skilled in the bedroom, on making sure his one-night stands left their one-nights with smiles on their faces. But this playful tussle for control with Cassie helped their...thing feel like a game. And it was important to remember that that's what it was—a little exercise in breaking rules. A temporary suspension of what experience had taught him was the optimal way to structure everything. She was skeptical of his rules, he knew, but without them he never would have had the discipline to build Winter Enterprises. Without them he'd probably still be trying to please his father.

She sighed. A sweet, satiated sigh that stroked his masculine ego. He loved the way she looked after he fucked her senseless. She flushed so easily, and her hair looked like she'd been in a monsoon. Damn, she'd been right about one thing. If the rules were going to be broken, they might as well blow them to smithereens in the time they had available. His dick stirred. Jesus, with her he was like a teenager.

She turned to him, catching her bottom lip with her top teeth. She looked like she wanted to eat him. Damn, he was lucky, if only for two more nights. “Do you have a printer?”

“Huh?” She might as well have thrown a bucket of cold water over him. He shook his head. It was hard keeping up with her sometimes.

“A printer.” She scrambled to sit up, and he struggled to wrest his eyes from her spectacular breasts and pay attention. “Those files you sent me—it would be easier if I could print them, spread them out, and look at them all side by side. Mine at home is out of toner.”

He tried to hide the fact that it took him a second to catch up to the radically new topic. Leaning over, he scooped up an iPad from the floor next to the bed. “You can print from this if you want. But you sure you want to do this now?”

“I'm too wired to sleep.”

“I can think of other things we could do to pass the time.”

She shook her head. “I’m like a dog with a bone with this.” She grabbed the iPad. “Carl is going *down*.”

He hopped out of bed, went to his dresser, and tossed her a T-shirt. “At least put this on.”

She rolled her eyes. At least he hadn’t said what he was really thinking, which was *for God’s sake, cover yourself, woman*. He left her pulling the shirt over her head and ran downstairs to retrieve her papers from the printer and to throw together some snacks. She might have eaten at Edward’s, but that was hours ago, and surely someone so dedicated to vanquishing his enemies deserved snacks.

Back upstairs, he hopped into bed with a book, leaving her alone for the next hour, aside from feeding her the odd almond. But when three o’clock rolled around, he set his book aside and rolled into her line of vision.

“Time for bed.”

“Oh!” Genuinely startled, she looked at the bedside clock. “Sorry! I got carried away.” She slung her legs over the edge of the bed.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

She paused, looking like a teenager caught pilfering her parents’ liquor cabinet. “Um? Home?”

“I thought we talked about this.”

“I thought we talked about having sex. Not, like, sleeping in each other’s arms.” She made a funny face, as if she’d tasted something sour.

“Who said anything about sleeping in each other’s arms?” He grabbed one of the arms in question, and tugged. “I’m just talking about sleeping. You’re a superstar, I get it, but surely you need at least a few hours rest.”

Her expression turned serious. “I’m just trying to follow the rules. You don’t seem like the kind of guy who...”

“What?” Suddenly, he really wanted to know how she’d meant to finish

that sentence.

“Like the kind of guy who does sleepovers. Crazy junkie mothers notwithstanding.” She pulled back against his grip, but he didn’t release her.

He sighed. He hated it when she made him confront the contradictions in his psyche. He hated it when she *caused* contradictions in his psyche. “It’s true that I’m a private person.”

She snorted then, a full-on, completely unladylike snort. All the same, it made him want to pin her down and shove his tongue into her mouth. “He said to the person lounging in his bed, wearing his shirt, up to her eyeballs in his company’s financials,” she drawled.

“Touché.” It was all he could say. Unless he wanted to admit she was the first woman he’d ever let into his bed, much less allowed to spend the night. “Will you just shut up and come to bed?”

She gave up resisting, and he settled her under the covers. Turning out the light, he reached for a remote control on the bedside table and aimed it at the skylight. A shade began to retract.

“Can we leave it open?” she asked.

He lifted his thumb from the button.

“I know it’s stupid,” she said from underneath the duvet. “We’re in the middle of the city, and it’s overcast. But I love this skylight. I like the idea that the stars are just up there, even if you can’t see them.”

He hit another button, reversing the shade’s progress to expose the full expanse of glass. He couldn’t give her anything close to what she deserved. In fact, he could only give her one more night after this. So he could at least let her sleep under the invisible stars.

## Chapter Eleven

Cassie awoke warm and cozy under Jack's duvet. When she opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the white winter sky through the skylight. It looked like snow. She stretched. "Mmmmm." She sounded like a cat. She *felt* like a cat. Scooching over—Jack's bed was enormous—she wondered what they would do this morning. The slideshow of possibilities that flipped through her head brought a grin to her face. Who knew last night's epic marathon could leave her still wanting more? She fanned her arms out under the mound of covers, intending to wake him, but her fingers glided over nothing but cold sheets.

She was alone in the bed. Well, that was...surprisingly disappointing. But it was a work day. Popping her head out of the cocoon of down, she made out of the sound of the shower.

"Hey," she called as she walked through the open bathroom door. He stepped out of the shower stall with a towel wrapped around his waist. "Oh, hi!" she said again, startled and unaccountably embarrassed, given all that had transpired the last couple of nights. It was just that he looked like some kind of Nordic sea god, all chiseled angles and wet blond hair slicked down his head. She could still hardly believe she was sleeping with someone like him.

"Hey," he said, stepping around her to get to the sink. He didn't look at her as he said, "Sorry to wake you. Last day of work today—the office

always closes after the Christmas party until after New Year's, so I've got tons to do."

"Right, of course." She spun around and headed back out to the bedroom in search of clothes, swallowing the little lump of worry that had lodged in her throat.

"Shower, though, hang out as long as you like," he called after her, his voice flat, like he was reciting lines in a play.

"That's okay," she said, locating and pulling on her jeans. What had she expected? To wake up in his arms to the swell of violins? To find him looking at her with stars in his eyes? No, she wasn't that stupid. But maybe she'd expected the generous lover who'd plied her with snacks and insisted she stay the night to be a little...warmer the morning after.

"Seriously," he said, emerging from the bathroom, attention on his phone as he texted furiously. "Take your time." He disappeared into the walk-in closet. "I've got a shitload of work to do today."

Right. Okay. She might not have tons of dating experience, but she knew a blow off when she saw one. And she wasn't about to cool her heels after he bolted. She was starting to feel dirty—and not in a good way. "I've got stuff to do, too," she said, hoping her voice sounded normal. "So thanks, but I've got to go back to my place."

He emerged from the closet dressed for the office. The slim-fitting gray wool suit fit him like a glove, and the hot pink plaid tie made her smile in spite of herself. Again, it seemed like he was avoiding her eyes as he adjusted his cuff links. "Okay, tell you what. I'll leave a key on the counter downstairs. Lock up when you leave and then shove it back through the mail slot."

He wasn't even going to wait for her to get dressed? What the hell? "Okay," she managed, shooting him a fake smile—but he'd already turned away and was rifling through his briefcase. Apparently he wasn't even



going to look at her once this morning. How could everything have changed like this? Last night they had mind-blowing sex and slept in each other's arms, and now they were strangers? Or maybe this was just normal for him. Maybe she was the one overreacting. It's not like he owed her anything. She headed for the bathroom, calling, "Have a great day!" over her shoulder. No need for him to know that he'd upset her. After all, it wasn't like they were having a relationship.

...

It wasn't until three o'clock, when she was rummaging through her purse looking for her work ID, that Cassie realized she still had Jack's key.

*Crap.* She'd hidden in his bathroom until she heard him leave. He'd been talking on the phone—to someone he was less angry at than last time she'd overheard his end of a business call. But she had heard him say, "That is not acceptable," in a voice that would have made her wilt like a daisy in the desert. His voice had grown quieter as he moved farther away from her in the house, and then she'd heard the front door close behind him.

Once he was gone, she'd waited five minutes to be safe, then hightailed it out of his house, wanting nothing more than to get to her own little apartment and try to shower away what had clearly been a huge mistake. She'd thought she could do this fuck-buddy-number-cruncher thing, but obviously she'd been wrong. It wasn't like she expected they'd ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after, but she had learned one thing about herself. She needed a fuck buddy to actually be a buddy. To be friendly. The confusing thing was that he *had* been that—to her if not to the rest of the world. Up until this morning, they'd enjoyed fun, flirtatious banter—in addition to the scorching sex.

But obviously she'd misunderstood. Done something wrong. Including inadvertently keeping his key.

Which he couldn't know about. She couldn't risk him thinking she'd held on to it in some kind of desperate, clinging move. If he thought she was trying to manipulate her way into a relationship, well, she'd have no dignity left. So she'd just have to swing by his house on the way to Edward's—he would still be at work. His precious key would be there when he got home, and he would be none the wiser.

An hour later she hopped off the King streetcar at the top of his street. What a ridiculous day. Thanks to her own stupidity, she was right back where she started. And what had she done in between? More homework in service of Winter Enterprises. She was pretty sure she'd gone back far enough that she could say with confidence there were no dummy suppliers other than A-plus Construction. And she'd flagged all the fishy cash withdrawals against the company's credit card. She'd been able to reconcile only a small number of them against expense claims, and from what she could tell there was about a hundred grand in cash unaccounted for—in addition to just under four hundred grand that A-plus had invoiced. She was going to recommend that Jack call in a forensic accounting firm to check her work. It's possible there were other things going on that she hadn't even thought of. She was good with numbers, yes, but she didn't have a criminal mind.

She sighed in frustration as she approached his house. Not only had she spent the whole day thinking about Jack and his problems, she was still at it. She'd done what he was paying her to do, and she was ready for the Wexler trip, so she needed to just turn her brain off until they left. Turning up the path to his house, she resolved to drop the key and be done. She'd wasted enough mental energy on Jack Winter and his...

Barely legal jailbait?

“Hi! Are you a friend of Jack's?”

A tall blonde was draping pine garlands along Jack's porch railing and

looking, with her rosy cheeks and her pink fur-lined parka, like the spawn of L.L. Bean and Victoria's Secret. The girl didn't even look like she was twenty. Even as tears—stupid, juvenile tears—prickled in Cassie's eyes, her brain kicked into high gear. This was none of her business. She had no claim on him, so what—or who—he did in his spare time was none of her concern. He didn't do relationships. He'd told her that explicitly from the beginning. What he *hadn't* said was what he really meant. He didn't do relationships with girls like *her*.

Pink Parka Girl laughed as she tried to disentangle herself from a garland.

Cassie struggled for words. She could hardly explain that she was here to return Jack's house key. "Ah, actually, I think I have the wrong house."

"This stupid thing looks awful!" said the girl, finally extricating her glove from the pine bough and trotting down the steps to stand beside Cassie. "Jack is going to hate this! He has his house professionally decorated, and then I come and add this crap."

She had to get out of here. Cassie took a step, backing away like she was trying to ease her way out of the path of an animal poised to attack. Her heart was pounding accordingly, too. The key would have to wait until she could—

"Cassie?"

Jack. Stepping onto the porch. Holding a mug of coffee, as if it was totally normal for his stunning blonde hopefully eighteen-plus girlfriend to meet his plump, nearly thirty math nerd temporary-friend-with-benefits accounting helper in his front yard.

"Cassie?" the girl squealed. "As in Cassidy? The Cassidy my dad told me about?" She didn't wait for an answer. "OMG! Cassie, I'm Britney. My dad works with Jack. He's my godfather. Jack, I mean, not my dad. Because that would be stupid."

Another peal of laughter, laughter that suddenly seemed obviously of the

teenage variety. The girl with the hockey game Jack had asked Carl about. Jack's *goddaughter*. Relief flooded Cassie. But only because it was good that Jack wasn't secretly the poster boy for statutory rape. Not because it mattered to Cassie whether Jack was seeing someone else.

"Cassie," said Jack, from his perch above them. "This is Britney Larsen, my CFO Carl's daughter. You remember Carl?"

She could only nod mutely.

"Britney and I have a little tradition where we make a gingerbread house for the company party."

"Oh, Cassie! You're going to stay, right? Jack said you had to work, but *please* won't you come tonight?"

"Um. I do have to work." Cassie eyed Jack. "I just came because I forgot to...leave this." She couldn't make herself utter the words "your key" in front of Britney. She might as well paint a scarlet A on her forehead. She stepped onto the first step and opened her palm in Jack's direction.

He looked at the proffered key, face blank. "You can at least stay and help us with the gingerbread house."

"And the decorations!" said Britney. "Because I'm so bad at it!" She gestured in the direction of the admittedly uneven garlands.

"The party is here?" Cassie asked, hearing the bewilderment in her tone. She'd imagined the Winter Enterprises Christmas party at some swank restaurant. They hosted lots of those sorts of things in the private dining room at Edward's.

"Yep!" said Britney. "Jack always puts on a huge spread!"

"Well, I don't do it," said Jack. "It's catered. I just show up. And make a gingerbread house."

Britney waved dismissively. "He just pretends to be a humbug," she stage-whispered to Cassie. "But really, he's like the best boss ever."

Cassie looked back and forth between the man and the girl, unable to find

anything to hold on to that would help her make sense of this odd situation. “That’s, uh, great. But speaking of bosses, I’ve got my own, and I’ve got to go.”

“You start at six, don’t you?” asked Jack.

Leave it to him to stand in the way of her escape. Which was extra annoying because eight hours ago, it seemed he couldn’t get away from her fast enough.

When she didn’t answer immediately, he locked his eyes on hers like blue lasers and said, “I want you to stay.”

...

It was the truth. He wanted her to stay. The sudden appearance of Cassie on his doorstep might as well have been divinely orchestrated. He’d spent the entire day feeling like a complete jerk because of how he’d acted this morning. They might not be having a *relationship*-relationship, but he treated his cleaning lady better than he’d treated Cassie. And his cleaning lady had never blown him until he nearly blacked out and then thrown herself into ferreting out fraud in his company. It was just that his rules were there for a reason. Women were a distraction—they got in the way of work. He hadn’t built Winter Enterprises from nothing into a multimillion-dollar company by being distracted. Though they had clearly negotiated the parameters of their short-lived, rule-bending entanglement, in the clear light of day, last night seemed...wildly dangerous. Still, she hadn’t done anything wrong, and he had pulled the rug out from under her.

“Britney, I need to speak to Cassie for a minute. Can you finish this garland while we go inside and check on the gingerbread?”

His goddaughter’s eyes narrowed. “Whatever you’ve done, Jack, you should just apologize so Cassie will come to the party.”

He winked at Britney. Whatever Carl’s faults, he had raised a pretty damn

amazing daughter. “That’s the idea, Brit.”

She tilted her head and regarded the garlands. “I think this is going to take quite a while. These are awful. I’m going to have to totally start over.”

Cassie was still looking adorably like a deer in headlights, so he bounded down the steps and took her arm, pulling her up after him. Once inside, he took her winter clothes and steered her toward the kitchen island where sheets of gingerbread were cooling. “I’m sorry.”

“Excuse me?” She blinked.

“I acted like an ass this morning.”

She blinked, still looking dazed. “You kind of did.”

“Yeah, well, I told you I didn’t do relationships.”

“And I told you this isn’t a relationship!” Her voice rose almost comically.

“I know, I know. We set out the parameters at the beginning, and there was no reason for me to brush you off like that. I just kind of…” *I don’t bring women here, much less wake up with them in my arms. So I panicked and acted like a dick.* Except that sounded ridiculous to actually say.

“You kind of freaked out.”

Wincing, he nodded. That was it exactly. “I know it sounds stupid, but I can’t afford to get distracted.”

“Dude, you should have just let me go home when I tried to.”

She was right. Except he hadn’t wanted her to go home right then. And in truth, that’s what worried him. It wasn’t that he was breaking the rules—it was that he was getting a little too comfy with them broken. Still, it wasn’t her fault. And they only had a little time left together. It wasn’t like Winter Enterprises was going to crumble around his ears if he let himself be distracted by her for a couple more days. “Look, come to the party. Call in sick to work—I bet you’ve never done that.”

“I can’t,” she said automatically.

Before he could argue, there was a clattering noise from the entryway, followed by the sound of Britney coughing theatrically.

“We’re in here, Brit,” he called.

“I just need to get my hat,” she called. “It’s freezing, and my ears are turning into icicles.”

“It’s okay. Come in and help me convince Cassie to call in sick to work. She’s too conscientious.”

“Oh, *please* come to the party, Cassie!” Britney came forward clutching her hands to her chest as if she were having a heart attack. Good. Let Cassie resist Hurricane Britney.

Five minutes later a deal had been struck. Cassie would start her shift at the restaurant but would try to find someone to sub for her so she could come to the party later.

“I’ll have to run home after I get off, though, and change.”

“No you don’t!” said Britney at the same time that Jack said, “Wear the red dress.” He didn’t care if he was being overly prescriptive. They only had two days until Wexler. Two days till it all ended. Suddenly it seemed criminal that he wouldn’t get to see the red dress again in the interim.

“What red dress?” said Britney, looking between the two of them. When she got no answer, she grinned and said, “I vote for the red dress, too.”

## Chapter Twelve

The next time Cassie arrived at Jack's, she did so by cab. It was dark—she'd been able to beg off Edward's early, but since she'd had to go home and change, it was still ten o'clock—and she was wearing the killer pumps. She'd undergone an internal debate, but the “why the heck not” side had won out and she'd abandoned her winter boots and called a taxi, texting Jack that she was on her way. After all, her time with Jack was almost up, so why not squeeze all the fun (okay, all the sex, too) out of it while she could? As long as he didn't get weird again. The minute that happened, she would bail.

The lights blazed inside, and Britney had salvaged the outdoor decorations and added strands of twinkling lights. Though she'd been nervous, Cassie felt lighter just looking at the festive, welcoming house. As she stepped out of the cab, the front door opened, and Jack bounded down the steps dressed in a button-down shirt and the jeans—she'd begun to think of them as “the sex jeans,” because he just oozed sex appeal when he wore them. She rolled her eyes at the Pavlovian response those jeans elicited as she watched him pay the cabbie. Her nipples tingled and moisture gathered between her legs. Gah. Did he have to wear them so often? Wasn't he rich enough to afford a more expansive wardrobe?

Judging by the way he raked his eyes down her legs and paused at her feet, she'd made the right choice of footwear. Then his fingers closed



around the collar of her coat and pulled it back, just enough to expose a little of the red fabric of the dress.

He patted her ass. “Good girl.”

She followed him up the stairs, but put her hand on his arm to stop him before they went in. “So Carl is going to be in there?”

“He is.”

“It’s going to be weird seeing him, knowing what I know. I kind of want to punch him.”

“Try to resist the impulse. I do every day.”

“There’s also the part where he thinks I’m the floozy piece you picked up. Remember, from the office?”

“Oh, I remember.”

“You were whispering about bending me over the reception desk, and I was playing the ditz. He’s also going to think I only own one dress.”

“There’s a kitchen island here, but we’ll save that part for after everyone’s gone.”

“What?” It took Cassie a moment to get his meaning, then she felt her cheeks heat, even in the cold.

“I don’t give a fuck about what Carl thinks,” said Jack, wagging his eyebrows at her. “But anyway, he obviously told Britney about you, so it can’t be that bad.”

“Yeah, what about Britney?” She swatted his arm. “You neglected to mention the part where you’re *godfather* to the criminal’s kid.”

He blew out a breath. “Yeah, and she’s a pretty awesome kid.”

“And you take down her father, and it ruins her life.” Cassie shook her head in sympathy. What a mess.

“Hey!” The kid in question stuck her head out of the door. “Are you guys *ever* coming inside? My mom says we have to go soon.”

Jack gestured for Cassie to precede him, and she was launched into a

magazine spread. How had he managed to so utterly transform the space in a few short hours? Candles blazed from every flat surface, stylish people stood around in clumps laughing and juggling champagne flutes. There was even a small Christmas tree in the living room, limbs heavy with silver and white ornaments.

“Ha!” said Britney triumphantly, pointing to the space above Cassie’s head where she stood in the middle of the entryway. “Works every time!”

Cassie tipped her head up. Mistletoe. “Ah! You got me!” She offered her cheek to the girl.

“No way! Jack’s gotta do it.”

“Oh, no,” said Cassie, suddenly feeling cornered as the chatter in the room died and everyone turned to look at her. “I have a feeling you’re the one who hung this, Britney, so pony up.” She pointed to her cheek.

But the girl had danced away. She twirled in a circle in the festive room. “Jack has a *girlfriend*! It’s a Christmas miracle!”

Cassie started to protest that she wasn’t Jack’s girlfriend when the lemony musk of her not-boyfriend assaulted her senses. He stood behind her, sliding her coat off her shoulders at the same time he reached around and placed his lips on her jawline. He’d probably been aiming for her cheek, but she’d jumped a little, and he ended up where her jaw met her throat. His breath was warm, and his lips pressed against her skin felt like a brand. He left them there for a long moment, enough for her to register that everyone else was probably cataloguing the kiss as more than strictly polite.

When he finally pulled away, her legs felt wobbly. But Britney swooped in. “Everyone, this is Cassie. I met her earlier today.” She tugged Cassie’s arm and took her around, introducing her to Jack’s employees. She met the VP Amy, who turned out to be a stunning, leggy woman much younger than Cassie had expected. She was probably not even thirty, and a sharp stab of jealousy pierced Cassie’s belly when she thought of Amy’s office nestled

next to Jack's, the two of them collaborating on plans and projects. She couldn't dwell on her irrational reaction, though, because there were others to meet. Seth the executive assistant was studying ancient philosophy part time. Dax Harris, the software guy, greeted her warmly. And then there was Amy's boyfriend, a tall good-looking doctor whom Cassie greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm. She met Marcus Roseman, the CEO of the third company on the forty-ninth floor, and a handful of his employees. Finally, a group of analysts from Jack's company and programmers from Dax's recognized her from Edward's and drew her into their heated debate about what was going to happen in the upcoming *Doctor Who* Christmas special.

Everyone was different, yet they all seemed to come together into a cohesive, collegial whole. Even spouses and kids—in addition to Britney, there were a couple of middle schoolers and a baby asleep in his mother's arms—seemed to integrate into the group like they'd always been there. It felt almost like she was at the Christmas party of a family business.

Even Carl was nothing less than totally friendly and charming. He and his wife Diana pulled Cassie into conversation after issuing an instruction to Britney to begin gathering her things so they could leave.

"It will take her an hour, so I'm having another drink," said Diana, pouring herself a glass of wine as they stood at the kitchen island. "How long have you known Jack?" she asked, reaching over to refill Cassie's glass, too.

"Um," Cassie hedged, not sure what role she was supposed to be playing. Jack seemed content to let everyone believe they were dating. She supposed it would be easy enough for him to invent a breakup later. "Not too long, actually."

"Well, when Jack knows what he wants, he knows," said Diana.

"What do you do, Cassie?" asked Carl, and she couldn't help but silently thank him for putting an end to his wife's line of questioning.

“I’m a student,” she said. “And a bartender, too. Though I should probably switch the order of that answer because I only go to school part time.”

“What are you studying, and where?” asked Carl.

“Math at the University of Toronto,” Cassie answered, seeing no reason to lie.

Carl nodded, and asked her a series of questions about school. He seemed intensely and genuinely interested in the details of campus life, dormitories, meal plans.

“Well, I’ve never lived on campus, so I’m not sure,” she said in response to a question about whether dorms at the local university were competitively priced compared to other schools.

“Carl, leave her alone,” said Diana. “He’s freaking about Britney’s college,” she said to Cassie. Then she turned back to Carl. “And you wonder why we’ve never met a girlfriend of Jack’s. I always thought it’s because he’s married to the company, but maybe he just hides them because he knows you turn into the Inquisition?”

Cassie wondered if she should protest that she wasn’t actually Jack’s girlfriend. It was one thing to let people believe it. But not correcting the record when someone said it to her face—was that any different than lying?

Her internal moral debate was interrupted when Jack swooped in holding a large framed photograph. “Look at this. Britney just gave it to me.” It was a black and white image of one of Toronto’s iconic streetcars. Britney had managed to make the everyday infrastructure of the city look both familiar and strange, as the photo was taken from a low angle and through rain. It was both gritty and beautiful. Cassie recognized the shot as being by the same photographer whose work lined Jack’s entryway.

Britney bopped up behind Jack, beaming at the overheard praise. “I want to be a photographer,” she explained to Cassie.

“Looks like you already are one,” Cassie said. “This is beautiful.”

“I can make you a print, too, if you like.”

Cassie looked at Jack. His face was unreadable. “How did you get the shot from so low?” she asked Britney, turning to evasive techniques rather than responding to the offer. She didn’t want Jack to think she was overstepping, trying to worm her way into his real life.

...

Everybody loved Cassie. Of course everybody loved Cassie. Cassie was a nice person. Smart, charming, beautiful—the whole package.

Cassie was also distracting as hell. He’d practically ordered her to wear the red dress, so he could hardly complain, but goddamn. Unlike last time, she’d made no attempt to tone down the dress. Gone were the blazer and the thick black tights. Her arms were gloriously bare and she wore black stockings with seams down the back that made his dick twitch every time he caught a glimpse of them. A shiny curtain of hair hung down her back, and she’d forgone her usual light hand with makeup in favor of dark, smoky, heavily lined eyes and crimson lips the same shade as her dress.

As she floated through the party, he was perpetually aware of her, a scarlet presence that practically oozed sex. And he wasn’t the only one who noticed. Dax, who usually spent all his time with the Winter Enterprises crew arguing with Amy—the two fought like cats and dogs for some reason he couldn’t figure out—chatted with Cassie more than Jack would have liked. The analysts were all over her, too. And then when it turned out she had an opinion on the upcoming episode of *Doctor Who*? Forget it, she might as well have been a snake charmer. He’d caught the eye of one of the guys and shot him a look that made him physically take a step back from Cassie. Of course, Jack had no right to be possessive about her, but no one else knew that. Hell, they thought she was his girlfriend, and macking on

the boss's girlfriend was not cool.

Though he always knew where she was and what she was doing, he'd hardly spoken to her all evening. She seemed to be doing fine on her own, and honestly, he didn't trust himself in close proximity. This was the company party, and the boss couldn't disappear upstairs with the party's most noticeable guest for an hour without raising eyebrows. Still, he looked at his watch every few minutes, growing increasingly agitated with the never-ending party. By the time Carl and Britney and Diana started making moves toward departing, his skin was prickling. When Amy announced her intention to leave, too, he practically threw her coat at her.

His vice-president caught the coat and inclined her head slightly toward Cassie, who was on the other side of the room. "This is a very interesting development."

"There is no development."

"Oh, so maybe we should just stay a little longer then?" She teasingly handed her coat back to him. "Hang on, honey," she called after her boyfriend Mason, who was already pulling on his boots in the entryway.

Jack's answer was to lift her coat, holding up the sleeves for her to slip into.

"So chivalrous."

"You know me."

She kissed him on the cheek, and maybe it was the holiday, or maybe it was three glasses of Pinot, but he suddenly felt a rush of gratitude for the loyal lieutenant who knew him better than he might want to be known.

"She's amazing," Amy whispered.

Damn. If Amy was invested, he was in trouble. He should have listened to Cassie when she tried to worm her way out of the party. In a few short hours, she'd managed to charm everyone, which meant they were all going to be disappointed when they came back to work in January to the news of

their breakup.

This is what he got from thinking he could pretend to be a normal person.

This is what relationships did. They messed up everything around you, causing you to lose sight of what was important.

But before he could follow that line of thought any further, the she-devil in the red dress appeared at his side. She seemed to think she was joining the exodus train.

“Stay,” he whisper-commanded, pointing back toward the kitchen. Because the damage was done, and hell if he wasn’t going to make the most of it. And also because if he didn’t touch her soon he would detonate. She opened her mouth like she was about to say something. But then she closed it and followed his silent instruction, retreating to the kitchen. He had to stop himself from fist-pumping in victory.

A few minutes later, he’d bundled Dax and the analysts out the door. He breathed a sigh of relief, feeling as if a literal weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He usually enjoyed the Christmas party despite his protestations to the contrary. But all the gingerbread in the world couldn’t make him stop wishing for a speedy end to this year’s.

“Hey,” came a low, throaty voice. She strolled toward him, and if there was anything hotter than those fuck-me shoes of hers, it was Cassie walking across his living room in her stocking feet. She had a hole in the big toe on one side of her stockings, and an emerald-green-painted toe stuck out. He wanted to bite it.

“Hey,” she said again as she took a step closer than could be considered strictly friendly. “You’re standing under the mistletoe.” He looked up reflexively, though of course he shouldn’t have been surprised to see the damn plant he’d hung there himself under Britney’s instructions.

“Yeah?” he countered. “What are you going to do about it?”

But she was already there, her lips on his before the final syllable was

out. It was like she was pouring water on flames and simultaneously dousing them with oil, so complete were the contradictory sensations of relief and agitation. They kissed and kissed, tongues engaged in a battle for control as surely as all their races up stairs had been. He slid into her mouth only to find her pushing back, breaking her way into his. Each suck, every nip, was met in kind, and it ratcheted his desire up and up and up until he thought they might both catch fire.

He put hands all over the red dress, shaping her curves beneath it, sliding it up her thighs and letting his hands brush her bare hips. Breaking the seal of their lips, he looked down. “Christ,” he bit out. Her hips were bare because she was wearing old-fashioned thigh-high stockings, lace-topped and held up by garters. She was also not wearing any panties, her dark curls practically begging for his mouth. “Are you *trying* to kill me?”

“Visible panty line,” she said, a hitch in her breath as his hands slid down her creamy thighs. “The mark of a bumpkin. To be avoided at all costs. So say the ballerina girls at Edward’s.”

“Finally, something to credit the ballerina girls with,” he rasped, moving his lips against her neck as he spoke.

She was standing on her tiptoes, angling her hips toward him. He grabbed a thigh, hitching her leg up over his hip, but the height differential between them was still too great. He had to have her. Now. So he hoisted her up. She emitted a little squeal of surprise. Backing her against the wall in the entryway, he was finally able to grind his erection against her, and she moaned at the contact, rocking her hips against his. That little tilt of her hips was enough to push him almost to the edge. Pulling his mouth from her warm skin, he lifted her off the wall, still holding her flush against him.

“What are you *doing*?” she breathed.

“Taking you upstairs.”

“No.”



He stopped in his tracks. Christ, if she put the brakes on now, there wasn't a shower in the universe cold enough to set him to rights.

"You promised me the kitchen island."

"Fuck," he groaned as lust shot through him, nearly liquefying his legs at the image she'd conjured.

"That's the idea." She pressed her palms against his chest and he loosened his hold. His eyes practically rolled back in his head as she shimmied down his body. No sooner had her feet hit the floor than she was gone.

Left alone in the entryway, he almost didn't know what to do. Well, he *knew* what to do—he wasn't a complete idiot—but something made him pause. The idea of Cassie, laying herself out for him in the kitchen. But also the idea of what would happen afterward—a bath, maybe a movie. She might even tell him what the hell to do about Carl. The fire inside him had mellowed, replaced by a strange liquid warmth pooling in his lungs. But it wasn't suffocating him—it was like he was a fish and he could breathe the warm, golden water.

It was like he was happy.

## Chapter Thirteen

What was it about Jack that turned her into such a...slut? Normally, she hated that word, but something about him made her want to do the hottest, most forbidden things she could imagine. With him she felt wanton—slutty in a good way. Liberated.

Lying belly down on the marble island with her legs hanging over the edge, she'd just gotten to the point where a niggle of doubt was starting to worm its way into her bravado. Maybe she *did* seem like a slut. He'd waited out there just long enough to make her wonder if she'd misread the signs yet again. She'd laid herself bare—literally—and she wasn't sure she could take another dose of his indifference. But when he finally came into the kitchen, she heard him breathing heavily. Then he went completely silent for a few beats before breath returned, shallow and uneven. The pulse of desire between her legs became an insistent drum beat.

“Tomorrow is Wednesday,” he said.

What? That was the last thing she expected him to say. She started to push herself up.

“Don't move.” A hand settled on her back, and she stilled. “Tomorrow is Wednesday. I assume you have to work at the bar.”

She nodded, trying to twist her head around to see him. She couldn't read his tone without seeing his face. He sounded almost angry.

“And we leave early Thursday,” he went on. “And then it's done.”

She nodded again. He must need reassuring once more that she wasn't going to try to cling to him beyond the confines of their agreement.

“Between now and then, with the exception of your shift at the bar, you will be here.”

She tried to say something about having to go to her place at some point to pack, but he wasn't listening. He just talked right over her.

“Right now, I'm going to fuck you senseless. Then, between now and Thursday morning, I'm going to make you come so many times that you'll be begging me to stop.”

She hadn't finished a sharp, involuntary inhale of surprise—and desire—before he was on her. The crinkling of a condom wrapper, and then he was pushing his way inside her. There was no foreplay, and she didn't want any—she was already wetter than she could ever remember being. Just his warm hands anchoring her hips as he entered her. Once he was buried to the hilt, he paused. She loved the feeling of being filled by him and released a shaky sigh. His hands travelled up from her hips, over where her dress was bunched up around her waist, and along her arms until his hands covered her own. He guided them up, over her head, and wrapped her fingers around the lip of the counter on the other side of the island.

“Hold on,” he whispered. And then his hands were back splaying her thighs and he was pounding into her, the only sounds in the room the slap of his balls against her ass, his labored breathing, and the gasping she couldn't seem to control as heat coiled in her belly. He was pounding into her so hard she was inching forward on the island. She never wanted it to stop, but all too soon, he groaned, and time seemed to stand still for a moment as he froze, buried in her. Then his hips bucked wildly for a moment, and he collapsed on her.

“Cassie,” he whispered, making her name sound like a prayer. “Cassie.”

...

Ten. He was counting, and by the time she left for the bar the next afternoon he was up to ten. He was beginning to see the utility in retaining a lover for more than a day or two. He'd always prided himself on making sure his partners left his bed satisfied. But they always left. This arrangement with Cassie, once he got over his initial fear that she wasn't going to know when to say good-bye, was proving very interesting. When the same woman stuck around for a few—or ten—orgasms, you could start to figure out exactly where her edge was. There was something to be said for taking a wild, running leap over the edge. Nothing wrong with that, in fact. But once you knew exactly where the edge was, like within millimeters, you could keep her teetering there almost indefinitely. A little practice yielded the secrets. She liked her nipples, the left in particular, flicked with his tongue. Her ankles were sensitive.

But it wasn't altruism. He loved watching her come, yes, but he was a selfish bastard. Even more than that, he loved feeling her tightening around his cock, her face screwed up in pleasure. He loved hearing her sob his name, gasp for more. He loved having the power to make her lose her beautiful mind.

Ten. Double digits had been the goal, and when he got her home after her shift tonight, he was aiming for a baker's dozen, at least.

Or maybe he wouldn't wait until she got home. He pushed through the door of Edward's, thinking maybe they would revisit their spot in the alley. He glanced at his watch. Three hours till she was done.

She must get a break, though, right?

The bar was moderately crowded, and she didn't see him initially because she was engrossed in a conversation with a customer whose wine glass she was refilling. He could tell she sensed the arrival of a new customer,

though. Her face didn't change, and she smiled and nodded at the sixty-something woman she was serving, but she listed almost imperceptibly in his direction. The palms of his hands began to itch.

Backing away from her customer, she set down the wine bottle and turned, still half the bar-length away. It took a moment for her to register it was him, and when she did her smile turned from generic to...something else. Enormous. She lit up like the Christmas tree in his living room. As she came closer, he could see she was turning pink. Good. He couldn't make her come here, but he was stupidly glad to see that he could still affect her.

"Couldn't stay away?" she teased, drawing closer.

"I don't know what I did with my Christmas vacations in previous years, when I wasn't fucking you."

She turned even pinker as she glanced around, eyes wide. "Keep your voice down!"

"It's true. I always tell everyone not to work. I close the office. I perform all the actions that a good boss does. But really, I spend the whole holiday working. I'm very bah-humbug."

She set an empty glass down in front of him. "You know, we used to have a nickname for you here. All those years you came in and sat in the dining room?"

"Yeah?" He raised an eyebrow, not sure he wanted to hear this.

"We called you Ebenezer. As in Scrooge."

Well, he'd walked right into that one.

She kept talking, preventing him from having to respond. "It was mean. And you were never cheap like Scrooge. It was more that you were kind of aloof. And you worked all the time."

"Busy forging my chains?" he asked, trying for a teasing note, but in truth, not unmoved by the barb.

"Um, something like that." She turned for a moment and then reappeared

with a bottle of scotch. “But now we know better!”

Did they, though? Britney called him a humbug, but he’d always thought she was teasing. He had freaking mistletoe in his house, for God’s sake.

He nodded his assent when she showed him the label of the scotch she’d picked out. Another customer arrived, and soon he was settled in watching the dance Cassie performed behind the bar. It was as compelling as ever, but now that he knew her, it was like foreplay. The dance was graceful and efficient because she was these things herself. She did everything with just the right number of steps—neither too few nor too many. Whether she was combing through his finances or making a drink, there was an economy about her that he admired. Which was why it was so fun to torture her in the bedroom with delayed gratification.

“What time are you off?” he asked when she circled back to him. “Do you get a break?”

“Why?” She was suspicious. Smart girl.

He shrugged. “I was just thinking about how long it’s been since we visited our favorite alley.”

The smile she’d been wearing slid away and she bit her lip. “I get off at ten, actually.”

Earlier than usual. His dick stirred. The ghosts of Christmas present were smiling on old Scrooge, it seemed.

She rested her forearms on the bar and leaned toward him, looking very serious. “I was thinking, though.”

“Yeah?” He had a feeling he wasn’t going to like what came next.

“I think I should just go home to my place.”

“Your bed is too damn small.” He didn’t give a crap about the bed, but he really, really didn’t want her to run into her mother again. She’d told him a little more about her childhood last night, and it was clear that her mother was nothing but a drain on Cassie—not just on her money, but, more

threateningly, on her vitality.

“I think I should go home to my place alone.”

“Oh.” He reared back a little as if she had slapped him. He hadn’t seen that coming. Nice. He was getting dumped from their non-relationship entanglement or whatever the hell it was.

“It’s just that I have to pack, and then I think I should be getting back into homework mode, go over the numbers again. This Wexler thing is a big deal for you.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.” But she did. She had to remind him.

“I also just think...” She twisted her bar towel like she was wringing out a wet cloth.

“What?” His voice sounded clipped, sharp. Scroogey?

“If tomorrow is good-bye—well, not good-bye, but you know, if it’s the end of...” She waved her hand back and forth between them and scrunched up her nose as she searched for words.

“It’s better to pull the Band-Aid off now,” he supplied, striving for an even tone. There was no reason to be angry, after all. She was right. What had he thought? That they could fuck all night and then just roll into the car tomorrow and switch on their corporate identities?

Just that he hadn’t expected this. Not yet.

There hadn’t been a chance to say...thanks. He rolled his eyes, disgusted at himself. Thanks. As in “wham, bam, thank you, ma’am?”

Jesus, this was the problem with relationships. You knew exactly the route to orgasm, yes, but you also ended up getting blindsided.

Or you would, if this had been a real relationship.

“You’re right,” he said, belatedly realizing the conversational ball was in his court. “I should go over some stuff, too.” He drained his scotch and pulled out his wallet. “I’ll pick you up at six tomorrow morning, okay?”

She nodded, waving off his attempt to leave cash on the bar. He threw

down a fifty anyway.

“Good-bye,” she said.

That was it—good-bye. He hadn’t had a chance to say good-bye.

...

When Cassie arrived back at her place, there were a couple of people she would not have been surprised to see sitting outside her building. Her mother topped the list. Danny, maybe, since she’d texted him on her way home and reminded him she was leaving in the morning. Jack even. Not that she wanted that. Well, technically, *of course* she wanted that. Every cell in her body wanted that. The idea of spending the night without him made her jittery, in fact. But her higher self knew that finding Jack outside her place was not a smart thing to want. Still, when she rounded the corner of her block and saw a figure hunched over, sitting on her snowy stoop, Cassie was prepared for Jack.

She was not prepared for Carl.

“Cassie.” He stood up as she approached. “I’m sorry to ambush you like this at home.”

“How did you even—”

“But I had to talk to you without Jack around. I spoke to him earlier and when he mentioned you weren’t with him tonight, I had to come find you.”

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Carl was a crook, yes, but she didn’t *think* he was an ax murderer. Still, she was not about to invite him upstairs. “What is it?”

He’d been looking at her, but then his face started to crumple and he covered it with both palms.

“What is it?” she said again, her voice softer this time. “There’s a coffee shop on the corner.”

The idea of a destination seemed to cheer him. He nodded and they set



out. “I have to tell Jack something. Something awful. But I thought if I started with you maybe you could...smooth the way.”

Was he going to *confess*? Cassie stayed silent, having learned in her years as a bartender that when people wanted to get something off their chests, it was usually best to get out of their way. Cassie watched Carl while the barista made their drinks. She assumed since he and Jack had gone to university together, they were roughly the same age. But Carl looked a decade older. Deep creases ran along the sides of his mouth, and his complexion was ashen. He drummed his fingers on the bar. Once seated at a small table in the back, he fidgeted and avoided looking her in the eye. Still, it wasn't her job to make life easier for him. Things might be weird with her and Jack, but that didn't mean she wasn't firmly on Jack's side.

After a full minute of increasingly uncomfortable silence, Carl finally managed to look at her. “I have a gambling problem. I've gambled away Britney's college fund.”

“Excuse me?” This was the polite version of what Cassie was thinking.

“She wants to go to art school, study photography. You've seen her stuff—she's good. Could you imagine what she could do with some formal training?”

Cassie had to agree there. “Carl, I'm not sure why you're telling me this.”

“It gets worse,” he went on, ignoring her objection. “I...I stole from the company, to try to win back what I lost. I told myself I was only borrowing the money, that I'd win it back and more. But...”

“You lost it all.” Cassie recognized some of the same rationalizations from her years of back and forth with her mother. She'd come to learn that people like Carl and her mother actually believed their own lies, at least initially.

He slumped in his seat, looking nothing less than stricken. “I know it doesn't make sense.” He shook his head in disgust. “It sounds ridiculous

when I describe it.”

Opposing emotions warred inside her. She wanted to berate him for stealing from the man who’d made him—gave him a job that allowed him to live in luxury, mentored his daughter. And he’d done it by taking advantage of Jack’s one weakness. But he looked so pathetic, so miserable, that a tiny part of her felt bad for him.

“How much did you steal?”

He winced at the word *steal*, but if he thought she was going to sugarcoat things, he was mistaken. Of course she knew the ballpark answer, having reverse engineered his crimes, but she wanted to see if he was still in denial.

“A lot. More than I can repay. I can only hope that Jack doesn’t decide to press charges, which would be more than I deserve.”

“You have to tell him.”

“I know. I will. I plan to. I’ve already asked Seth to book a formal meeting with him for the first day back. January second, I come clean.”

Cassie started to say he should tell Jack sooner—now. He deserved the truth. She began formulating an “If you don’t tell him, I will” threat.

“I don’t want to ruin his Christmas holiday,” said Carl.

That stopped her in her tracks. He had a point. Not about the holiday so much as about the Wexler trip, which of course Carl knew nothing about. Jack didn’t need any complications that would jeopardize the deal. And though it was good that Carl was planning to come clean, dealing with the outcome of the confession would be a huge upheaval. It was better for the deal for Jack to stay angry and honed. So she would hold her tongue. For now.

“All right, but if you don’t tell him when the office reopens, I promise you, I will.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“You still haven’t told me why you’re telling me this.” It was bugging

her. She hadn't done anything except be his involuntary confessor, and now she was saddled with this knowledge she didn't want. "You just met me."

Carl buried his face in his hands, and when he spoke his voice was muffled. "I don't know. It's just that Jack has never had a girlfriend who stuck before." Cassie winced at the word *girlfriend*. "I thought it would be good if you knew ahead of time, so you could...help him when he finds out. It's a big betrayal." Then he looked up. "That's not true. Well, it is, but it's not the whole truth. I think the real reason I'm telling you is because you're in college. God, the idea of you having to work so much to pay for school." He raked his hands through his hair and looked at the ceiling, as if seeking divine guidance. "That's what I've condemned Britney to."

A sharp burst of anger animated Cassie's limbs, and she had to bite her tongue to keep from saying something she would regret. Who did this jerk think he was? She settled for saying, "My life isn't so bad, you know." He was pulling some kind of psychological BS on her here. Like he thought if he confessed to Cassie the College Student, she could somehow absolve him for screwing his own daughter's future. Meanwhile, Cassie Jack's Girlfriend was supposed to smooth the way for Carl to confess his crime. Nope, all Cassie was going to do was keep his stupid secret long enough for Jack to do a major deal behind his back.

Carl looked down at his drink, some kind of awful Christmas-themed thing topped with a dollop of whipped cream dusted with red and green sprinkles. "It being Christmas and all that, I just wanted to be honest with *someone*."

A pit opened in Cassie's stomach. If he only knew. How ironic that there were two people sitting at this table, and only one of them was being honest—the compulsive gambler-slash-crook. Which left her—the liar.

## Chapter Fourteen

By the time Jack picked up Cassie the next morning, he was in the zone. She'd been right—they needed the time apart to clear their heads. Two days from now, Wexler Construction would be his. He didn't care what he had to do, he was going to win the company—and the island. He was now fully focused on Wexler. There wasn't room for anything else.

Correction—maybe there was a little room. “Hi!” Cassie called as she burst through the door of her building. She had on big Sorel boots and a bright green parka with a fur-lined hood. How could she be so bundled up and still be so hot? Anyway, nothing to do about it. It was perfectly normal to admire an attractive woman like Cassie. It would be weird if he *didn't* notice her. The trick was to appreciate her from afar, like he would any other beautiful woman.

The trick was not to think about getting into her pants.

“Brr!” The temperature had plummeted overnight, and she did a little half-wiggle, half-hop as a gust of frigid wind hit them.

Yeah. So much for not thinking about getting into her pants.

“The car's all warmed up,” he said, taking her suitcase and popping the trunk.

“Nice wheels!” she said as she settled into the front seat. “Ooh! And seat warmers!” Another little wiggle as she ground her ass into the heated leather.

God almighty, this was going to be a long trip.

“This is totally the kind of car you would drive,” she said.

“What do you mean?” He glanced at her as he started the engine. She was stroking the leather seat.

“Aston Martin! Who drives an Aston Martin? But it’s perfect—fast, refined, but not too showy. Very you.”

He couldn’t help but smile. He’d been worried this was going to be awkward, an extension of the weirdness that accompanied last night’s parting, but it seemed they were going to glide into being friends with no trouble at all. As long as he kept his hands to himself. “What kind of car are you, then?”

“Ha! I’m a city bus! I wonder what that means?”

“Not literally how you get around, but what kind of car would you be?” he asked.

“Oh, man, I don’t know. I’d like to be something classic but not boring.”

“I got it. You’re a VW Bug. One of the old ones. Timeless, but fun and quirky.”

“Yes! A Slug Bug! But in a crazy color!”

“But of course,” he agreed. “Lime green or something.”

“I always wanted a Bug!” She clapped her hands with delight. “Okay. Trees.”

He shot her a skeptical glance as he navigated onto the highway. “And after we decide what kind of trees we are, will we hold hands and sing Kumbaya?”

“You would be a birch tree,” she said decisively. “Tall, straight, strong, yet, with the white bark, apart from all the other trees.”

The back of his throat tightened at the truth of the image she conjured. “Okay, uh, you would be...” He ran through his admittedly limited mental catalog of trees. “I think you’d have to be some kind of coniferous tree.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “You’re just saying that because it’s Christmas, and they’re top of mind.”

“I am not. It fits. Resolutely green year-round, no matter the weather. Striking. You’d be one of those tall pine trees in the forest, with the long needles. The kind that has a long trunk before the branches with needles start. I’m sure they have a proper name I don’t know.”

And so it went. They laughed and assigned each other animals, colors, and cities. It occurred to Jack, as the kilometers slipped by, that this wasn’t the best way to keep a professional distance between them. This wasn’t something he would have done with Carl or Amy, for instance. But it did make for an amusing trip. And keeping his mind occupied with something other than what was under Cassie’s parka could only be good.

Their game was derailed when Cassie’s phone rang. “Sorry, I have to take this.” He waved away her apology, thinking about where they might stop for a meal. They were approaching Gravenhurst, which would be the last town before they reached the island.

Whoever was on the line had obviously launched into a flurry of talking because Cassie kept saying “yeah” and trying to interrupt. When she was finally able to get a full sentence in, she said, “I told you. Lake Muskoka.” Some more silence from her was followed by, “An island. I don’t *know* which one. Danny! I’ll be fine!”

“I’m not sure if there’s cell service there,” he offered, realizing that wouldn’t go any way toward placating her obviously agitated best friend.

“He doesn’t know if there’s cell service,” she parroted. Silence. “He is *not* an ax murderer.” More silence. “Because I just know!”

Jack chuckled. He liked that she had a friend who looked after her like this. After this trip, when they were done...well, it was good to know she had Danny.

She held the phone away from her ear in parody as Danny talked on.

“Put him on speaker.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Just do it,” he said.

She obeyed and he said, “Danny, hi. This is Jack. The not-ax-murderer.”

“Isn’t that what they all say?” came the droll reply.

“Listen, I’ll give you my phone number. Then when I murder Cassie, you can at least give that to the cops.” He was joking, but Danny was right. He should have a way to contact Jack—and vice versa—in case something happened. Danny was pretty much Cassie’s next of kin from what Jack could tell. Especially given that her actual next of kin was so completely useless. He rattled off his digits. “And do me a favor. Send me a text, and then I’ll have your number, too. I promise to call if anything happens.”

Danny gave him a hard time for another minute, issuing a couple of melodramatic threats that made Cassie roll her eyes and Jack struggle to hold in laughter.

“It’s so pretty here,” said Cassie after they’d hung up, watching the snowcapped trees pass as they zoomed along the nearly empty highway. “You kind of forget how pretty snow can be. You get so used to the ugly gray urban variety.”

“Do you ski? No time on this trip, but we’re not too far beyond Blue Mountain.” Then he realized it sounded like he was suggesting they ski together. “You should come back sometime,” he added lamely.

She shook her head and laughed, and he breathed a quiet sigh of relief that she hadn’t misinterpreted what he’d said. “To ski you have to get out of the city.”

“And you don’t do that much, I take it?”

“Nope.”

She worked too hard. People said that about him, but at least his work necessarily sent him to other locations, forced a change of scenery on him

every now and then. “When was the last time you got away?”

“Never.”

“You mean like literally never?” Was that even possible?

“Yup.”

“You’ve *never* been out of Toronto.”

“Well, I did go to Niagara Falls on a class trip when I was twelve. And I’ve been to Danny’s mom’s farm, which is an hour north of Peterborough,” she said, naming a town a couple hours east of Toronto. She crinkled her nose. “I’m not planning to repeat that mistake, though.”

He was shocked. Though why should he be? She didn’t have any money, thanks to her mother. Between school and Edward’s, she worked nearly constantly. How was she supposed to get away? Too bad he hadn’t known—they could have tacked on a couple non-business days to this trip. His mind began cataloguing all Winter Enterprises’ properties, trying to figure out which she would like best.

No. He checked himself—he was doing it again. There was no “after this trip.” What came next was that they shook hands and parted ways, he having gained a company and an island, her fifty grand richer. Maybe, though, he would send her and Danny on a trip to one of his sites. It could be the bonus he’d promised if the deal went through.

He slowed as they pulled into Gravenhurst. “I thought we’d have a meal here—late breakfast, early lunch, whatever you want to call it. It’s about another hour to the spot where we set out for the island.”

Cassie smiled. “Great. I’m starving.”

The image of Cassie devouring pizza on her bed flashed through his mind. She ate, like everything else she did, with gusto and delight.

He shifted in his seat. God *damn*, it was going to be a long trip—and it had barely even started.



...

Everything was so pretty. Gravenhurst seemed to Cassie like a pretend town. Something out of a Lifetime Television movie, all quaint and decorated for Christmas. They'd had amazing homemade pancakes at a diner, served by a sweet older woman who called them both "hon." The snow squeaked under her feet, white and pristine. She was glad she'd sprung for a serious pair of boots. She'd figured with fifty grand coming her way, she could afford to outfit herself sensibly for the trip.

Even the air seemed different. Colder, yes, but also fresher. Jack had rented a Jeep Grand Cherokee in town, having arranged to leave his own car at the rental office. She'd teased him at the time that he was not a "Jeep" person, but she was glad now he'd made the switch. The Aston Martin would never have made it through the icy, rutted lanes that Jack was expertly navigating. And, in truth, she was enjoying the ride. The bumping and vrooming of the engine felt kind of like a carnival ride.

She had to remind herself, as they turned from a small road onto an even smaller one, that she was on a business trip. It was tempting to get sucked into the fantasy that this was her life—that she had a rich, handsome, Jeep-driving boyfriend who could make her feel all squishy just by looking at her with his signature brand of intensity.

Dang. She needed to get this whole insane attraction thing under control. That was exactly what she'd intended when she suggested they part ways last night. Some physical distance to presage the emotional distance that had to come between them on this trip.

But clearly she'd been an idiot to think anything would work. The only way to get Jack Winter out of her system was to get him out of her life. And that wasn't happening for a few days yet, so she just had to grin and bear it—"it" being the maddening and constant state of low-grade arousal his

presence triggered.

She sighed and looked out the window. The trees grew thicker and the road narrower. Just when it seemed there was no way they could continue to press onward, Jack turned off the road next to a little clearing that had been shoveled out. The big expanse of treeless snow beyond must be the frozen lake.

He shut off the ignition. “This is the end of the line.”

It occurred to Cassie that she hadn’t bothered to think through the part where their destination was an island, and it was the middle of winter. “We walk from here?” she asked.

“Nope. Snow’s too deep. We snowmobile.” He gestured to his side of the Jeep, and when she leaned across him to look, sure enough, there was a snowmobile parked next to them. It was much bigger than she’d always imagined one would be, with its two seats and side compartments that looked like larger versions of panniers on a bicycle.

He hopped out of the car and came around to her side. “I’ll take you over first, then I’ll come back for our bags.”

She pulled out her phone. “Hang on just a sec. I have to text Danny that you didn’t murder me.”

“How do you know I’m not going to drive you into the woods and murder you there?” He flashed her a grin. “That would be a lot more sensible than murdering you in the rental car.”

“Good point.” She clicked off the phone and climbed out. Jack emerged from digging around in the back of the Jeep and handed her a helmet.

“Right.” She reached for the helmet even as her mind flipped through all the reasons this wasn’t a good idea—death chief among them. “So you own the land we’re on?” she said, glancing around as if she could find something to discuss that would stall their departure.

“Yep.” He nodded at their immediate surroundings. “I own this.” Then he

pointed out toward the island. “But I want that.” He slung a leg over the machine, looking for all the world like James Dean from *Rebel Without a Cause, the Winter Edition* rather than a titan of industry.

She cleared her throat. “All right then.” Fifty thousand dollars. That was her mantra.

“Wrap your arms all the way around and clasp your hands together,” he instructed when her first lame attempt to hold on to him and still maintain a decent amount of distance between them did not meet with his approval. He revved the engine, and she instinctively tightened her grip.

*Fifty thousand dollars.*

She couldn’t help shrieking as he hit the gas and they started off across the snowy expanse.

*Fifty thousand dollars.*

After half a minute they’d reached a steady pace and he was no longer accelerating. Her heart slowed enough to allow her to take in her surroundings. The sky was almost painfully blue, even through her helmet’s tinted visor. The cold air was sharp, a cauterizing knife that felt like it cut out all the useless emotions she was battling, leaving her lean and honed and...alive.

It was a little bit scary and a lot exhilarating. Kind of like everything with Jack.

When they arrived on the island, Cassie was ready to play her role. The ride over had turned out to be the perfect demarcation line between her personal self and her business self. Between the bartender and the senior executive director of finance. Between Jack’s lover and his employee.

After some kind of person—she wanted to say servant, but did people still have those?—opened the door and settled them into a stunning great room with a giant, two-story fireplace, the Wexlers appeared.

David Wexler, nicknamed Wexler Senior by Jack, did not look at all like

the shark Cassie expected. “Head of an empire” was the last thing that came to mind when the lean, flannel-shirt-wearing man arrived. He looked like a kindly grandpa. A clean-shaven, skinny Santa. Wexler Junior—aka Brian—was probably in his mid-thirties, but he dressed as if he were a decade and a half younger. His crew cut and slightly saggy jeans made him look like an overgrown skater boy forced inside because of the snow.

“Jack!” said the older man. “Glad to have you on the island.”

“Glad to be here, sir. Your house is beautiful.” It was odd to see Jack the cutthroat CEO act deferential. “May I introduce Cassie James, my senior exec director of finance? Cassie, this is David Wexler.”

Cassie smiled and shook hands, and everyone was friendly as can be, but Senior eventually asked the question she’d been waiting for. “Where’s Carl?”

Jack didn’t miss a beat. “Carl is in Mexico. He sends his regrets. Cassie is up to speed on the file, though.”

Just then a woman who looked to be older than Junior but younger than Senior glided in. She wore drapery cream clothing Cassie associated with rich women.

“Ah,” said Senior. “This is my friend Tania.”

Jack had given Cassie the lowdown on the Wexlers, including the fact that Senior had been widowed five years ago and was currently seeing an art dealer-slash-society lady.

Wexler Senior turned to his son. “Brian, you know Jack. This is his finance person, Cassie James.”

Junior did not speak, just raised his eyebrows and looked Cassie fully up and down. A little shocked, she looked around to see if anyone else had noticed, but the others were moving farther into the great room to a sitting area on one end. “Well,” he drawled, “this meeting just got a little more interesting, didn’t it?”

If he meant what she thought he meant? Gross. She offered him a vague smile and followed the others farther into the room. Jack had coached Cassie to expect the trip to start out social. Wexler was old money and hospitality was bred in him. He would also want to show off the “cottage.” Cassie had to bite her lip to keep from scoffing every time she heard the place referred to as a cottage. It *was* made of logs, she supposed, so there was that. But she’d never seen a log cabin like it. Warm, exposed wood on every surface inside—well, every surface that wasn’t covered with enormous paintings and fine Persian rugs. And centered in front of the window at the rear of the great room was a spectacular Christmas tree at least twenty feet high.

Coffee was rung for; a tour was given. Cassie let her guard down a little as her nerves settled. Wexler Senior was formal but cordial. Tania may have been a trophy girlfriend, but she was funny and friendly. The only wild card was Brian, aka Junior. He didn’t talk much, but he stared openly at Cassie in a way that made her want to squirm and do up the top button of her blouse. Still, she’d been led to expect he was a loser. And if he was always like this, there did seem to be an opening for Jack to convince Senior to sell to him rather than hand the company over to his son.

“Why don’t you young people go snowshoeing?” said Wexler Senior. “Then you can wash up and rest, and we can talk some shop after dinner. Brian, you can show them the north face of the island, hear some of Jack’s ideas. He’s only ever looked at a map of the island. It will be good for him to see it in person.”

Junior rolled his eyes behind his father’s back, which Cassie thought inordinately rude, but he rose and gestured for Cassie and Jack to follow him. They suited up, and once outside, he led them to another pair of snowmobiles, sighing a little as he loaded the snowshoes onto the back of one of them.

“Not a fan of winter?” Cassie asked, wanting to fill the silence.

“Snowboarding, yes, or skiing,” he said. “But clomping around a deserted island on snowshoes? No thanks.” Brian really did sound like a disgruntled teenager, forced to endure the agony of a family vacation. “You know how to snowmobile?” Junior asked, eyeing her up and down again, though this time she was dressed in snow pants and a parka, so there wasn’t much to see.

“No. I can ride with Jack, though,” she said.

“No, you’re with me. Mine’s the two-seater.”

Cassie could see in Jack’s face that he was going to object—his own two-seater was parked on the other side of the house—so she shook her head slightly at him and said to Junior, “Great.”

He insisted she take the front seat, and once they started, she realized her error. Brian was effectively wrapped around her, his front against her back, his arms around her body.

“How does it feel to have a 130 horsepower engine between your legs, Cassie?”

Gah. She pretended not to hear him over the motor. She might have to negotiate hazard pay with Jack, in compensation for being sexually harassed by this ingrate. Now, more than ever, she wanted Jack to walk away with this deal done.

The afternoon was salvaged, though, because the island really was stunning. It possessed a stark winter beauty, bare trees outlined against blue sky, the low sun bathing everything in yellow light.

“I bet the stars are amazing out here,” she said as they trudged along, still trying, perhaps futilely, to engage Junior in civilized conversation.

He only shrugged. She listened as Jack laid out his vision for an eco-lodge, luxurious yet respecting the natural setting of the site. He described architect-designed cabins situated so they blended into the landscape,

hiking trails that preserved the old-growth woods, a natural beach stocked with canoes since no motorized vehicles would be allowed on the island.

She snuck a glance at him as he talked. His eyes were bright, his cheeks pink from the cold. Her heart squeezed. He was almost unbearably handsome in his winter gear, all bundled up yet still radiating heat.

Then she looked at Junior. His eyes were glazed over. He must have felt her attention, though, because he snapped to and did a weird smile-leer thing at her.

Okay. Jack was getting this island. End of story.

...

Jack knocked on Cassie's door a bit before the five o'clock cocktails they'd been instructed to attend. She was housed on the top floor of the building, and he was a floor below on the second. He couldn't have asked for better arrangements. He needed as much separation as possible between them. Because the sight of her clomping around with her dark hair spilling out of her green parka hood, all color and curves against the white snowy backdrop—well, let's just say it was a good thing it had been cold out there today. The last thing he needed was for this fragile deal to go south because he was caught creeping into his senior executive director of finance's room at night. She already faced an uphill battle convincing Senior that she was credible. Being the boss's piece wasn't going to help.

Oh, and there was also the part where they were done. Relationship, entanglement, whatever—over.

“Hi!” she said, stepping back to let him in. “Is this okay?” She twirled, showing off a long-sleeved black silk blouse, a dark purple pencil skirt, and low black heels.

“Perfect,” he said, and meant it. She managed to look polished but not overly formal. He might have added that perhaps the skirt hugged her ass

and hips a trifle too tightly, but he checked himself. Just because he had a dirty mind where she was concerned didn't mean there was anything wrong with the skirt.

"So Junior is a bit of a piece of work, hey?"

He laughed. "Yeah, he's pretty much the textbook entitled, spoiled, rich kid who never grew up."

"Because he never had to work a day in his life," she said, her top lip curling up on one side. Coming from Cassie, that was probably the worst insult possible. "But I like Senior. And Tania."

"About Junior," said Jack, who had just come from a one-on-one with Senior.

"Yeah?" She turned to the full length mirror opposite the bed and whipped out a tube of lipstick.

"David just told me he won't sell if Brian is opposed."

"What?" She stopped, one lip scarlet-ified, the other her natural Cassie pink. The juxtaposition was oddly erotic. He took a step toward the door.

"He might not sell anyway, but if Brian objects, he definitely won't."

"Well, that's it, then, isn't it?" she asked. "Brian will object, won't he?"

"I don't think it's that simple. You hit on it yourself—he may like the *idea* of helming a big company, but he might be self-aware enough to realize that he doesn't actually want to work."

"Hmmm." She went back to her lips. "A *self-aware* lazy good-for-nothing!"

"A buyout might suit him fine—take the money and run. We'll have to feel him out." He ran his fingers through his hair and sat on Cassie's bed. "I'm no closer with Senior, though. I can't figure him out. He seems open to my ideas, but I think he *wants* Brian to want the company. Yet he must realize that putting his son at the helm of the family company will mean its ultimate demise."



She turned, perfect geisha-girl red lips smiling at him. “Families are complicated.”

He sighed. “That’s why it’s so much easier not to have one.”

## Chapter Fifteen

After a dinner of the most amazing duck confit Cassie had ever had—okay, the only duck confit Cassie had ever had—everyone retired to a small den-like room to start talking business.

“I’m just going to level with you, Jack,” said David. “I’m not sure you’re the right man for Wexler Construction. The eco-resort—I get it, I guess. But aren’t you trying to transition into being more of a Caribbean sun-and-surf type developer?”

“There’s a lot more continuity between the two types of projects than you might think,” said Cassie, before she could think better of it. Darn. She really should stick to the financials and let Jack do the rest of the talking. But now everyone, Jack included, was looking at her. “The Mexican property is also going to be an eco-resort,” she offered. “And though it’s bigger than this place would be, the basic principles are down-scalable.”

“Are they, though?” said Senior. “To be honest, I was always skeptical of your decision to move into Mexico. You’re a small player on the international scene. Hasn’t that project leveraged you way too much to take on something like this?”

“Actually, no,” said Jack. “Cassie can show you the projections for that project. It’s true we’ve directed a lot of resources into it, but we’re well positioned to work on a project here, too.”

“I’d like to see those numbers,” said David.

This was her cue. Cassie's stomach fluttered. "I'll just run to my room and get my computer," she said. She hadn't been sure if she should bring it with her, or if they were going to cling to the fiction that this was a social visit. But clearly Senior had shifted gears, and now he was all business.

"I'll come with you," he said. "Then we can swing by my office and you can show me there. I have some notes I want to get." He stood and looked back at Jack. "Jack, you want to come, or are you still leaving the down and dirty finances to your lieutenants?"

"Lieutenants," said Jack, smiling and lifting his glass. "Especially when the alternative is port that's this good."

Tania smiled. "And Jack promised me a game of chess, so I'm keeping him."

And so Cassie found herself in David Wexler's office, situated at the back of the house and featuring a wall of windows. "Oh!" she exclaimed when she stepped into the still-dark office. "Can you wait to turn on the light for just a moment?" She moved to the window. The house was situated in a small clearing, and if you looked up from this vantage point, the sky twinkled with stars.

"Amateur astronomer?" Wexler asked. "You start to take it for granted, but it's gorgeous, isn't it?"

"I can't imagine taking this for granted," said Cassie. When he didn't answer, she realized she'd been unwise to speak so honestly. He probably thought she was scolding him somehow. "I just mean..."

"Don't get to see the stars often in the city, I suppose?" he asked, his voice kind.

"Yes, and I never get out of the city, so even though I'd like to be an amateur astronomer, my subscription to *Astronomy* magazine is about as far as I ever get." She chuckled. "When I was a kid, I thought I *would* be an astronomer."

“Yeah, a lot of kids get that idea, at summer camp or at the cottage—somewhere they really start to see the night sky and think about what’s out there.”

“Oh, no,” said Cassie quickly, “I didn’t...” Ahh, what was she saying? Well, what the heck? Why not throw some truth into the mix of lies she was weaving here? “I grew up poor. So no summer camp. No stars.”

“I see,” said Wexler. He looked like he was going to say something more, but then he blinked and said, “Well, let’s run through your numbers, and then we can slip out and take a walk while we talk further. You only get a limited view from this window.”

...

An hour later Cassie was toasty warm and happy. Everyone had said good night and gone their own ways, and she, ensconced by the fire in the great room, had intended to spend an hour before bed brushing up on some details for tomorrow. Instead, though, she just stared into the fire and let the heat melt her tension away. This was a good place. It was silly, because she’d only been here a day, but she felt a sort of affinity for the island. Jack could really do something here.

Never in her life had she seen stars like tonight. When Wexler had taken her outside, it seemed the entire Milky Way was lit up like a swatch of white silk, stars so thick you couldn’t differentiate one from another. And even better, she felt confident she’d done the best she could making Jack’s case. Wexler had proven a receptive audience. He must have sensed that she appreciated the place because as they walked, they talked about the island as much as about its possible sale. Whereas before she’d felt embarrassed about telling him she’d grown up poor, she was reassured now that he wasn’t holding it against her. In fact, he seemed impressed with her story of putting herself through school as a bartender. He was easy to talk to. Like

she imagined an interested father might be—someone who managed to ask the right questions and be a good listener. The only thing that put a damper on the walk was the niggling guilt she felt over the fact that she was a fraud. She told herself she wasn't deceiving him. She knew her stuff. She could tell him what he needed to know and make a case for Jack. None of that was a lie. Not precisely.

“Burning the midnight oil?”

For a moment her heart leapt, thinking it was Jack. And really, if she were being honest with herself, didn't she *hope* it was Jack? Isn't that why she was here to begin with, stationed in this public area of the house, in the hopes he'd find her?

“How about some company?” said the voice from the shadows.

Her mind was a little slow to catch up, but when it did, it registered the presence of Brian, who, now that she had gotten to know his father a little, seemed even more unworthy as heir to the Wexler fortune.

He surprised her by sitting right next to her on the sofa, rather than on one of the adjacent armchairs. “You want a drink?”

“Ah, no, no thank you. I was just thinking about getting to bed.”

“A girl who cuts to the chase—I like that.” She couldn't see his face very well in the dim light of the flames, but she could *feel* the leer. She was mustering her response, when he said, “I can cut to the chase, too.” He leaned in, and she caught a whiff of beer on his breath. Funny how Jack's sometimes-scotch-tinged mouth could be so irresistible, and this guy's was just...repulsive. Her heart started beating harder than was called for. She reminded herself that she was in a house full of people and that nothing could happen against her will. She had only to scream, if it came to it, and they would come running.

“I'm going to tell you the truth,” he whispered, hot breath on her ear. “For some reason I can't fathom, I find you insanely hot.”

“Cassie?” came a deep voice from the darkness that surrounded the fire.  
*Thank God.*

“Yes!” She stood. “I’m here!”

He came into the circle of light cast by the fire, and he was not pleased. Junior probably wasn’t sensitive enough to notice, but even in the shadowy flickering, she could see his clenched fists.

“We were going to go over those numbers.” On the surface his voice was flat, devoid of emotion, but she recognized in it a streak of barely restrained rage.

“Yes—the numbers.” She turned to Junior. “Brian, I’m sorry, it’s been lovely chatting, but work beckons.”

...

“What the hell, Cassie?” Jack asked after Brian was out of earshot.

He felt bad almost immediately. It wasn’t her he was angry with—she had looked so small there on the couch, leaning away from Brian—and he should have tempered his tone.

“Don’t say that like I did anything! I was just sitting here and Mr. Rico Suave suddenly arrived and...ugh.” She shuddered.

That told him all he needed to know. Which was that he should have punched Brian Wexler’s lights out when he had the chance. Stupid, but for a split second, when he’d seen them so close together on the sofa, he wondered if there was something there. An instant attraction. It would have been hard to believe, but having had some recent firsthand experience with instant attraction, it was not completely outside the realm of possibility.

He raked his hands through his hair and sat next to her. “I’m sorry. You didn’t sign up for this.”

“It’s okay. He’s gross, but I’m a big girl.” She grinned. “And, hey, it’s good to be liked. Although he did say he *couldn’t fathom*—she made air

quotes with her fingers—why he was attracted to me. That was kind of rude!”

He didn't reward her with the smile she was probably looking for.

“I think Senior likes me, too,” she said, turning serious.

“He does. I just left him, and he's been singing your praises.” It was true. He was beginning to think that instead of being a pinch hitter, Cassie was going to be his surprise closer. “He likes you personally, but he also says you have a way of cutting through the bullshit when it comes to the numbers.” It was too dark to be sure, but he thought she might have blushed. He bounced his shoulder against hers.

“So both Wexlers like me. This is good.”

He cracked his knuckles. How should he put this? “I'll have a word with Junior tomorrow.”

“Jack! No! I'm a grown-up. I can take care of myself. Besides, think about it rationally for a minute. He likes me. This is good for the deal.”

“I'm not sure *like* is the right word.”

“Whatever. We need him on our side, right? Senior won't sell if Junior opposes. Junior...*whatevers* me. I can help make him see the genius of your plan.”

Yeah, that was not happening. He and Cassie may be done, but he'd be damned if he was going to let that overgrown entitled frat boy near her. “No way.”

“Oh, come on. We'll play him a little. It's no less than he deserves. If Carl uncovered a way to manipulate a major player in a deal to your advantage, you wouldn't hesitate.”

He couldn't lie to her, so he just looked away.

“Ha!” she said, as if triumphing, but he couldn't imagine what sort of victory she was claiming. But then she must have realized he remained unamused, because she turned defiant. “It's not like you can tell me what to

do, anyway. You're not *actually* my...boss."

For a minute he thought she'd been going to finish that sentence with another word altogether.

He sighed. "All right. But be careful." It was all he could say. He'd heard what she'd left unsaid, and she was right. He had no claim on her.



## Chapter Sixteen

The next day was the usual mix of socializing and business. Cassie found it exhausting, but she could tell Jack thrived in these deal-making situations, in environments when there was a lot at stake. For her part, she could never tell which persona she was supposed to switch on at any given time. Were they going to talk fourth-quarter projections, or were they going to go for a swim in the indoor pool?

She was constantly on guard, and not only because she felt like a fish out of water both as Winter Enterprise's finance person and as a houseguest of the extremely rich. There was also the matter of Brian Wexler. If he wasn't so gross, he would be sort of fascinating. She'd run a little experiment on him, spending the first hour of the morning subtly encouraging him and the second being borderline rude. Amazingly, his behavior did not change at all. He seemed cheerfully oblivious to anything she said or did to encourage or discourage him. It had probably never occurred to him that someone like her wouldn't automatically jump at the chance to be with a rich guy like him—rejection just wasn't in his vocabulary. He probably thought she was the type who was impressed by money.

Okay, she was a little impressed—not by him, but by the whole situation. Nine days ago, she'd been a bartender-slash-student, saving her tips and crossing her fingers that Laura's latest rehab stint would take. Same old, same old. Now she was literally sipping Veuve Clicquot and eating

bonbons, doing her part to help broker a multimillion-dollar acquisition.

There was also the part where she spent last week getting it on at the forty-ninth floor of the Lakefront Centre, and having, like, fifteen orgasms a day. That seemed as unreal as her immersion in this whole other world. She wasn't accustomed to being the sort of woman men found irresistible. But Jack had seemed to.

*Had* seemed to—past tense. They'd agreed to end things at the onset of this trip. She knew that, but she hadn't been prepared for how easily he had just shut off whatever it was that had been between them. Because, honestly, it had been twenty-four hours now—twenty-four hours of being in the same house and pretending they were nothing to each other but cordial colleagues. While she was constantly aware of his presence, her heart speeding up when he entered a room, he hardly seemed to notice hers. She'd gone into this with her eyes open, knowing Jack's "rules" meant there was an expiration date for them.

But apparently she'd underestimated how much it was going to break her heart.

...

When Cassie didn't answer his knock, Jack hesitated for only a minute before entering. He needed to talk to her before dinner.

"Cassie?" he whispered, "Can I come in?" He hoped she wasn't napping. They'd spent the morning tromping around the island with Wexler Senior, and then Wexler and Cassie had huddled with some spreadsheets. Damn, she'd been magnificent. When he'd hatched this whole plan, he'd known she was smart. He'd hoped it would be enough for her to pass, to provide the minimum amount of support he needed in Carl's absence. Instead, she was turning out to have quite a knack for this. Amy couldn't have done a better job explaining the Mexico project—and she'd been there in person.

Cassie could shift between numbers and big-picture vision stuff effortlessly. Plus she had a kind of infectious enthusiasm for the idea of a resort here. It was hard not to get swept up in the excitement when she described bird-watching expeditions and stargazing parties. He might even have to implement the damn stargazing idea if the deal went through, though he still seriously doubted the ladies-who-lunch of Toronto would care that there was an “amazing” meteor shower early every August. But maybe their kids would.

After a busy morning, Wexler suggested everyone retire for a couple of hours before dinner. Jack had given Cassie half an hour to herself, but now he needed her. He’d caught Junior putting the moves on her a couple times, and he wanted to tell her to call off whatever little manipulation scheme she was running. It wasn’t sitting right with him. And besides, he didn’t think they needed it. Wexler Senior was coming around—he could feel it.

“Cassie?” He stuck his head in a little farther. If she was napping, she’d just have to wake up. This was work, not a vacation.

No answer. Her bed was made, and in fact, there didn’t seem to be anyone in the room at all.

His stomach dropped. Could she be somewhere with Junior?

Stepping fully into the room, he closed the door behind him. “Cassie?” he called, at full volume this time. “You in here?”

“Jack?” came the reply. It sounded like she was far away. “I’m outside.”

He moved toward the door to the balcony, which had been left slightly ajar. “What the hell are you doing outside? It’s freezing, and...”

Oh. Oh no. He remembered Tania instructing the housekeeper to give Cassie “the nice room.” Apparently “the nice room” came with a hot tub.

There was a hot tub on her balcony, and she was inside it. Presumably naked.

Fuck.

“Jack? What are you doing here?”

He couldn't see much of her because of the steam billowing off the surface of the water, so her voice sounded odd, disembodied. Then one arm snaked out and felt around the edge of the tub. He spied a towel just out of her grasp. The gentlemanly thing would be to hand it to her.

He did nothing. Just stood there while his skin heated, even in the sub-zero air. He caught sight of a shoulder as she leaned a little over the edge, still in search of the towel. Water poured off reddened flesh, and his dick, which had already been making itself known, went rock hard.

He took a step forward. He could reach the towel now. His hands closed over the fluffy white terrycloth.

He moved it out of her reach.

“Go inside, and I'll be in in a sec,” she said. He thought she must be facing away from him given the way her voice was muffled.

“Okay,” he said through the wall of steam. He was lying. His body had taken over, and it was battling with his better self. His better self was losing, because he clicked the door shut audibly behind him, making it sound like he'd gone back inside. But he hadn't. He just kept standing there, a fool staring at a cloud of steam, about to make a huge mistake.

He had to bite the insides of his cheeks to keep from groaning when she stood up. She *had* been facing away from him. As she stood and the steam parted, it was her back his eyes rested on. She lifted her hair over her head to wring water from it, exposing an elegant neck. Sexy shoulder blades—who knew shoulder blades could be sexy?—and then her waist narrowed before she widened out at the hips.

And her ass. Oh, her ass. Pink from the hot water, and so pert. Generous. Ideal in proportion to the rest of her. His fingers started flexing of their own accord. Christ, those ass checks were so grabbable, each a perfect, overflowing handful.

Then she turned.

“Shit,” he groaned, at exactly the same time she gasped. Her eyes widened and one hand flew to her mouth. Yes, surprise. He was supposed to be inside, not out here ogling her, but he didn’t care anymore. It mattered only that the shock painting her features give way to something else. He didn’t want surprise.

He wanted...yes, there it was. Desire. She caught her lower lip with her top teeth and let out a little sigh. He let his eyes slide down her front, lingering on her criminally gorgeous breasts, her rounded hips, the dark V of curls where her thighs met. Every inch of her shimmered as the afternoon light hit her wet skin.

They stood there for a moment, staring at each other, suspended like ice statues in the arctic air. He wasn’t sure who made the first move, just that suddenly they were launching themselves at each other, and he was dragging her out of the tub and back into her room.

“You’ll get wet,” she said, even as she wrapped her legs around his waist, soaking his jeans with the rivers of water running off her body.

He didn’t bother answering in words, just crashed his mouth down on hers and let himself gather those handfuls of ass. The groan that ripped from his throat sounded totally alien to him, calling to mind torture as much as pleasure. It triggered an answering moan from Cassie, who threw her head back in clear invitation.

He licked his way down her neck, more quickly than he perhaps should. He couldn’t resist the siren call of those pink, now rock-hard nipples. When he took one in his mouth, she cried out and pushed him toward the bed, shoving him down and climbing on top of him. He struggled to keep her breast in his mouth the whole time and, once they were horizontal, both breasts dangling above him, he used his hands to knead them, too.

When she responded by snatching them away, he growled. But she’d

pulled back just enough to undo his fly. He lifted his hips off the bed, and she slid his pants and underwear off in one swoop. Then—oh, God—she straddled him.

“I don’t have any condoms,” she whispered. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck fuck. He didn’t either. Not even back in his room. Because she was right. This was not supposed to happen. He let out a howl of frustration as she rubbed herself over the tip of his cock. She was impossibly wet already.

“Have you been tested for everything?” she whispered. “Are you clean?”

“Yes, but—”

“I am, too.” She plunged down on him.

“Oh, fuck!” he shouted, his head nearly exploding as she took him in, nothing between them but flesh on fire.

“My period is due any day,” she whispered.

She must be implying that she wasn’t fertile at the moment. Even so, this was a mistake. For so many reasons. He tried to say they should stop, to push her off. What came out, though, was “I’ll pull out.”

She nodded and pushed herself up onto her knees and then plunged back down.

Oh my God. Jack had always been a religious user of condoms. Aside from a few fumbling attempts with high school girlfriends who’d been on the pill, there was always—*always*—a layer of latex between him and anyone else in his bed. He would call it a rule, but it was so much common sense it didn’t even rate rule status. He couldn’t afford any mistakes. So he made sure he never made any.

But Jesus fucking Christ, how was he ever going to go back? Cassie rode him, and at the bottom of every stroke she ground into him, tipping forward and circling her hips a little so her clit ground against him.

He reached up and pulled her head down for a kiss, needing to slow the pace so things didn't end just as they were beginning. From this angle, she couldn't lever her hips up as effectively. He'd been aiming for a little mercy, but when she opened her mouth over his, it was just as bad as when she was riding him. Tangling his fingers in her damp hair, he plunged his tongue into her mouth, wanting to gobble up her cinnamon lips. He couldn't get enough. There would never be enough.

He pushed her away, and she whimpered in protest. He had to get on top so he *could* pull out when the time came.

"Come back," she breathed. He flipped her and paused for a moment to control his audible panting.

She must have thought he was reconsidering, because her brow furrowed and she said, "Please."

"Say my name," he whispered. Suddenly he needed to hear it on her lips, like he had the last time they were together at his house. If this was the last time, he needed to memorize what it sounded like when she breathed his name, voice shaky with desire.

She didn't hesitate. "Jack," she said. "Jack, please."

It almost undid him. He thrust into her, and she threw her head back and bit her lip. It wasn't going to be long, the feeling of her heat directly on his skin nearly blistering him. He pressed a thumb down on her clit, not wanting to get too far ahead of her.

"Oh my God!" she gasped, and he needn't have worried about pacing, because suddenly she was contracting around him, shuddering all around his cock, her whole body quaking in his arms.

"Unnnh," he groaned, using all his willpower to press himself back up onto his elbows.

"Don't pull out," she whispered. "You don't have to."

It was like there was an unbreakable magnetic force keeping their hips

together. Moving an inch out of her felt like moving lead. But he had to, before he got utterly lost in the waves of pleasure tearing through him.

“Jesus,” he bit out. It was going to be too late. He heaved, rearing back and spilling on her belly—mostly.

*Shit.*

...

Cassie couldn't bring herself to regret it. How could you regret the best sex of your life? She *did* regret that they had only been sprawled out on the bed, silent and breathing heavily, for two minutes before there was a rap on the door, effectively dashing her hopes that there would be a round two in the hot tub. Maybe real regrets would come later, but right now she wanted to throttle whoever was at the door.

Another rap, more insistent this time. She let loose a giggle when Jack responded by diving off the far side of the bed and hiding behind it. Throwing a bed sheet around herself, she opened the door an inch and peeked out so that only her eyes were visible.

“Yes?” *Crapola*. It was Junior.

She bit back a nervous giggle. It was just that the contrast was kind of amusing. On the other side of the door was a lazy, entitled man-boy who assumed people were going to give him what he wanted as he rotted away, oblivious, in a fantasyland. On the other side of the bed was a capital-*M Man* who knew what he wanted and worked hard to get it. And who had a knack for making fantasy into reality.

“I need to speak to you,” said Junior. “I want to show you something.”

Her smile disappeared. The contrast was amusing, yes. But the proximity between the two men, and the frightening possibility that discovering Jack here might jeopardize the deal, sobered her instantly.

“Sure. Can you just give me a couple minutes? I'm just getting out of the



uh...shower.”

“Need some help getting dressed?” He pretended to push the door open, and she panicked for a moment, thinking the gesture in earnest. Pushing back against the door, she said, “I need a moment, Brian!” She heard the urgency in her tone, and she also heard Jack stirring behind the bed. So she tempered her voice and mustered her friendliest, “Great, thanks! How about I meet you in the great room in ten?”

“Dress for outside,” he said as she shut the door in his face.

“Like hell you’re meeting him,” said Jack, standing up behind the bed, stark naked.

She dragged her eyes away from his magnificent chest. “Don’t worry. Let me just see what he wants. I can feel him out regarding the sale.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No! He likes me. It’s better for me to go alone.”

“I thought we agreed that he *whatevers* you,” Jack snarled.

Cassie just rolled her eyes and started getting dressed.

Fifteen minutes later she and Brian were hiking away from the house, down the main road, the only one that was plowed this time of year. Uncharacteristically silent, he trudged ahead of her, the crunch of the icy snow beneath their boots the only sound. After they’d gone maybe half a mile, he stopped abruptly and turned toward the woods that abutted the road. “We turn here.”

Cassie shivered, and it wasn’t from the cold. Maybe Jack had been right. “Where are we going?” she asked, though she knew that if he was planning something sinister, he probably wasn’t going to furnish her with the details ahead of time.

“I want to show you my tree house.”

Huh? Was that a euphemism for something?

“My father had it built in a giant tree just a little way in. When I was

seven.”

Curiosity got the better of her. “Okay, lead the way.”

Five minutes later she stood at the base of a huge oak tree, looking up at an amazingly elaborate two-story structure perched fifteen feet up in its branches.

“It’s easier to climb if you take your gloves off,” Brian called down. When she hesitated, he said, “Don’t worry, this thing is rock solid. My father hired an architect and an engineering firm.”

She almost laughed at that. Okay, well, what the heck?

Gingerly, she made her way up, grabbing one wooden crossbar after another as she scaled the trunk.

“Wow,” she exclaimed once inside. She’d emerged into a room that was bigger than it seemed from the outside. The floor was covered with snow, but the wooden walls were smooth and polished. There were some old folding chairs, a small table, and some empty beer cans in one corner. And, startlingly, some remnants of the boy Brian had been endured. A half-finished model airplane that had seen better days lay in a corner and a fishing rod rested against the wall.

Well, if she thought finding herself in Muskoka this week was unexpected, obviously she’d never given any consideration to the idea of finding herself *in a tree house* in Muskoka.

“There’s a sleeping platform up there.” Brian pointed over his shoulder, wagging his eyebrows only slightly—almost self-mockingly.

“This place is amazing,” she said. “You must have loved it here as a kid.”

“It was all right.” He shrugged. “I’m really more of a city person.” He looked like he wanted to say more, so she practiced her bartender silent treatment. “Actually, I pretty much hated this island,” he added.

Hope sparked in her chest. Hated it enough to let his father sell it?

“I was an only child. At least in the city I had friends. Stuff to do. Here I

had this.”

She wanted to snort her disbelief, her outrage at what he had taken for granted. What wouldn't she have given to have had access to this place? To beaches and trails and snowmobiles and forests? And stars.

“I want you to tell me how much money Jack Winter will give us for the company.”

She blinked rapidly, her initial surprise followed by annoyance that he'd used the word “us,” when Wexler Construction was clearly the product of hard work by Wexler Senior alone.

“No one seems to want to name a figure, and I'd like to know how much.”

There was a figure being bandied about, a ballpark. But if neither Wexler nor Jack had told Junior, maybe they didn't want him to know.

“I'm not an idiot, you know,” he said. “I know my father wants me to take over the company. And I know that I'd be a disaster at it.”

“You'd have a lot to learn, but you could do it.” Yeah, nice—try to talk the guy into blocking the sale. Still, a sliver of sympathy for him worked itself under her skin. Looking at Brian Wexler and his life crystallized the adage that money can't buy happiness.

“Nah. Old dog, new tricks.” He picked up a stick and started drawing a swirl pattern in the snow on the floor. They were silent a moment, and then he looked up at her. “How much?”

She hesitated only a moment. “Seventy-eight million.”

He nodded.

“I'm being honest when I say I think it's a fair price,” said Cassie.

“It's a lot of money.”

Cassie was a little surprised to hear that coming from him. What was a lot of money to these people? What was pocket change? It was hard to tell. “You could do a lot of things with that much money,” she said lamely. She

meant that he could found a company he *was* interested in, could help people. But he was probably thinking more about trips and cars and other luxuries.

“I want you to ask me nicely. That’s all I want. Someone to ask me nicely.”

“Excuse me?”

He looked up at her, and if she’d seen any vulnerability in his eyes before, it was gone. “I want you to ask me nicely not to block the sale.”

Cassie wasn’t sure if she should follow her natural instinct, which was to throw up on his shoes, or do what he asked. Being bossed around by such an immature creep made her stomach churn. But if “asking nicely” was all it took to facilitate the deal, what did it really matter?

She schooled her face into what she hoped was a neutral expression. “Will you please not block the sale of your father’s company to Winter Enterprises?”

“Ask me again, but say my name.”

Gross. This was worse, in a way, than all his lurching come-ons. He was lording his power over her, probably because he knew he couldn’t have her. It was humiliating. She was tempted to just turn and climb down the tree, but, then, she was in a tree! It was all so absurd anyway, and there was a lot at stake. For Jack, but also for her. She wanted this deal to go through as much as he did, and not just because of the money. Even though she could never publicly take credit, it would be something to hold on to, in her heart, once Jack was gone.

“Brian, will you please not block the sale of your father’s company to Winter Enterprises?” she said, speaking slowly and clearly, ignoring the adrenaline rush that accompanied the task.

More silence as the scratch of his stick on the snow resumed. After a full minute he said, once again, “I’m really more of a city person.” Turning

serious, his face changed for an instant so he looked nothing like the usual freewheeling skater-dude she'd come to know. Her heart sped up. If he was saying what she thought he was saying, they'd won.

But then he grinned at her, and the frat boy was back. "You sure you don't want a tour of the sleeping platform?"

"No thanks," she said softly, once again feeling inexplicably sorry for him.

He just nodded. "That Jack is a lucky bastard."

She didn't bother correcting him.

## Chapter Seventeen

“I think Junior is going to agree,” Cassie whispered in Jack’s ear as she came into the great room for cocktails. Relief washed over him. Not at what she said, but at her presence. He’d spent the balance of the afternoon after she departed wracked with worry. He’d invented a million reasons to be roaming the halls of the house, hoping to see or hear her, to find evidence that she’d returned from her time with Brian unscathed. But since he could hardly set up camp outside her bedroom, she must have slipped in without him noticing.

The thought of Brian Wexler with Cassie, even just walking with her, made him crazy. It made him want to get this deal done not just because he wanted to buy Wexler’s company, but because he didn’t want Brian to have it. He was fully aware that this made him no better than a kid who doesn’t want a toy for himself but also won’t share it, but he didn’t give a fuck. Cassie was too good to spend another minute in that jackass’s presence.

“What do you mean?” he asked, forcing his mind back to what she’d actually said.

“Junior may not be as bad as he seems,” she whispered, but was interrupted by the arrival of both Wexlers and Tania.

“I have a crazy idea!” boomed David.

“You’re going to love it!” said Tania.

“We have a room on the lower level that faces the back,” said David. “A

kind of family room we sometimes use for garden parties in the summer because the back wall is all windows. There's a big grill outside. Let's have a winter picnic. We'll grill steaks. We can eat inside and watch the stars come out."

"Or we can be hardy," said Tania, "and bundle up and go outside for a stargazing party. I understand Cassie can show us a few constellations. And I make a wicked Irish coffee."

"What about the projections you wanted to go through?" Jack asked David. They'd been led to expect a working dinner.

"This sounds like more fun," said Senior, waving a hand dismissively. "What do you say?"

Jack looked at Cassie. She was beaming, lit up like a big copper sun. "All right," he agreed.

As they tromped outside in boots, parkas, and hats, he wondered if it could really be this easy. Every time he tried to turn the conversation back to business, Wexler deflected him. "If I have any questions about that, I'll call you after New Year's," he'd say. Or, "Why spoil a gorgeous clear night like this with business?"

What the hell had shifted Wexler's mood so dramatically? He had an unsettling feeling it had something to do with what had happened between Cassie and Junior. Junior himself gave no clues. He'd eaten dinner with them but had been uncharacteristically subdued. Then he'd begged off, but not before saying a polite good night to everyone. It didn't escape Jack's notice that his eyes lingered on Cassie for a long time as she graced him with a wide, genuine smile.

Cassie. While he and Tania sat on lawn chairs near the house sipping booze-laced coffee, Cassie and David stood twenty feet away, heads tilted back to look at what was, he had to admit, a pretty spectacular night sky.

He marveled anew at how Cassie managed to look so beautiful when

nearly every inch of her skin was covered by wool and Gore-Tex. Even from this distance, even in the dark, she radiated a kind of energy. There was a luminescence about her that was like a drug. He pushed to his feet. Why resist? Maybe he could drive off Senior and find out what the hell was going on.

They were talking in low tones when he approached.

“Stargazing parties,” said Senior. “You’ll have to make him do them. In fact, I’ll make it a clause in the contract.”

Holy crap. Wexler was going to sell. She’d done it. He didn’t know how, but somehow Cassidy James, bartender-slash-math student, had brokered Winter Enterprises’ biggest deal of the year.

She turned to him then, and she smiled. Just a smile. But it made his chest tighten and his heart thump, because he thought it might be a different smile than the ones she gave everyone else. It seemed like a private smile. One that hinted at possibilities he hadn’t considered. It provided new information, variables that hadn’t ever factored into his planning.

It was a smile that promised love.

He decided right then and there, standing in the snow with Cassie James smiling at him. He’d always avoided women because he thought they distracted him from what was important. But this one, she was going to distract him no matter what, whether she was in his bed or someone else’s. Even if he never saw her again, he’d never be able to get her out of his mind. And the thought of never seeing her again, the image of her in someone else’s bed? He answered that question with another. There would be no Winter Enterprises to protect if he became completely unhinged, would there?

So screw the rules. He was going to take Cassie James back to her room and fuck her all night long. Then they were going back to the city and he was going to take her on a proper date.



Jack's little revelation scared him. But not enough to make him back down. Cassie deserved to be wooed. And the thought of anyone else doing that made his stomach churn. Still, there was no need to call attention to themselves here, so when she started yawning and announced her intention to call it a night, he said good night calmly and pleasantly, just like David and Tania did, and watched her walk away, pretending that his insides weren't churning like an overflowing river.

He'd give her maybe a half-hour head start. And then she was his.

The longest thirty minutes of his life, it turned out. Wexler had had a few drinks, and was getting nostalgic about the early years of his career. Jack tried not to keep peeking at his watch. It didn't do any good anyway. The damn minute hand might as well have been broken for all the progress he saw.

Thirty minutes was kind of arbitrary anyway. There was nothing wrong with giving her a seventeen minute head start. Surely that was enough to dispel any potential suspicions.

No answer to his knock again this time. Maybe she was back in the hot tub. "Cassie?" he whispered, slipping into the room.

He could hear the shower running in the bathroom. Hey, that worked, too. As he crossed the room, her phone, which she'd left on the bed, buzzed. He couldn't help but glance down at it. A picture of Danny flashed on the screen. Had she forgotten to text him the latest update of her continued survival? It was actually kind of cute how Danny looked out for her. He was probably going to have to woo Danny a little bit, too, when they got back to Toronto.

He picked up the phone, intending to carry it into the bathroom to her. The phone beeped and he glanced down at an incoming text.

*GAH. GLAD IT'S OVER, TOO. COME HOME ASAP.*

Danny again, who must have texted when she didn't pick up the voice call.

He could see the end of Cassie's last text to Danny.

*...IT WAS AWFUL.*

He shouldn't. He knew that.

But he did it anyway. He scrolled back.

*HE MADE ME SAY PLEASE. HE MADE ME SAY HIS NAME. IT WAS AWFUL. I FELT LIKE A TOTAL WHORE.*

*WHAT?? THESE RICH MOFOS, THEY HAVE NO IDEA, DO THEY?*

*WELL, I'M DONE. DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND ANYMORE. CAN'T WAIT TO GET OUT OF HERE...IT WAS AWFUL.*

Air. Jack had no air. Couldn't get enough into his lungs, and as metallic saliva flooded his mouth, he thought for one irrational moment that he might actually be drowning.

Then the sound of the shower stopped. The absence of noise spurred him to action. He threw the phone back on the bed and made for the door. He had to get out. He had to find something to hold on to.

He had to get back to the rules.

...

The next morning Cassie woke up confused. As the bright sun sliced in through the curtains she'd forgotten to close, she looked around the room.

She was looking for Jack, which was totally stupid. In all honesty, she had to admit that she'd fallen asleep waiting for him. She had no idea what was going on between them, but she'd felt fairly confident, given the epically spectacular sex they'd had earlier in the day, that he'd be back for more.

At the very least, she thought he would have wanted to talk about the deal. It seemed pretty clear from Wexler Senior's behavior at dinner that he was going to sell.

But no Jack. She even got up and peeked out the glass door, hoping against hope that he'd snuck in without her waking up last night and was now ensconced in the hot tub. But that was irrational.

Stupid.

She didn't really begin to worry in earnest, though, until she made her way downstairs and found David and Tania eating breakfast and reading newspapers in the enormous sun-filled breakfast "nook."

"Ah," said Tania. "My dear, you've been abandoned!"

Cassie felt her brow furrow as she tried to make sense of the disjuncture between what this woman was saying and the cheery tone she was using to say it.

Tania must have seen her confusion, because she laughed and handed Cassie a piece of paper. "Jack left a note. He had to leave in the middle of the night—some kind of emergency."

Cassie scanned the familiar angular handwriting. Had to go. Didn't want to wake them up. Could someone take Cassie to Gravenhurst where there would be a car and driver waiting for her at noon? Terribly sorry. Emergency. Happy holidays.

She knew then. Even though her mind could have kicked into gear, spitting out entirely reasonable explanations—even though part of her *wanted* it to—she knew. He'd gotten what he wanted, and now he was gone.

It wasn't like he hadn't warned her.

Stupid.

And heartbreaking.

## Chapter Eighteen

“God *damn* it!” Jack pounded his fist on his desk as he rifled through his mail. There was a familiar envelope, marked “no longer at this address.” Cassie’s check, which he’d tried to mail to Edward’s when his initial attempt to mail it to her home address was refused delivery. It turned out this mumbo-jumbo psychobabble thing called “closure” was real, and it was impossible to achieve when the girl who had played him so expertly refused to accept his motherfucking check. It was the last bit of housekeeping related to Cassie James, and he wanted it off his mental list. She’d rendered *exactly* the service he’d hired her for—Wexler was going to sell—and he’d be damned if he wasn’t going to pay her the agreed-upon sum.

“Everything okay in here?” Carl popped his head into Jack’s office. Since the offices were closed for the holiday break, they were the only two working. Well, “working” might be a stretch. Jack was obsessing over his bank balance, which was too high by fifty grand, and Carl was packing up his office.

“Fine,” said Jack tersely.

“Hey, at least you’re not headed to three months of rehab.”

“It’s not rehab.”

Carl shrugged. “Gambling addiction residential treatment program. A rose by any other name...”

Jack sighed. When he’d returned to the office after the Muskoka trip, this

year had already earned the distinction of being the worst of his life, despite the Wexler deal. At least it was almost over. Just a week and a bit till January 1. But when a weird email from an anonymous Gmail account saying only, “Ask Carl about college tuition,” arrived a couple days later, it got a little bit worse. After he confronted Carl with the cryptic message and endured the abject and tearful confession that followed, he punched a hole in the drywall next to his desk.

And then he fired Carl.

He wasn't without sympathy. His old friend was clearly desperate, and within the confines of his addiction—and Jack thought it was exactly that—what he had done made a warped sort of sense. And of course Jack had a huge soft spot for Britney. He'd pay for her college himself, but no need to tell Carl that. Better to let the guy's rock bottom really feel like rock bottom. Jack told Carl that if he sought professional help, he wouldn't press charges.

And so here they were. A brokenhearted idiot who got burned breaking the rules and couldn't seem to stop punching inanimate objects, and a pathetic white collar criminal off to spend Christmas in rehab.

“Did you tell Britney and Diana?” That had been another of Jack's conditions. He actually suspected Diana had sent the mysterious email, but on the off chance she hadn't, he didn't want Carl claiming he had to miss Christmas because of a business trip Jack was making him go on.

“Yes.” Carl literally hung his head.

Jack couldn't hide his anger, couldn't stifle a sneer. And why should he? Carl had pledged to pay back the money somehow. If Jack wasn't going to press charges, he could get another job when he was out of treatment, Carl said, and pay Jack back in installments.

Jack didn't care about the money. It was the betrayal. God, the betrayal.

'Tis the fucking season.

...

“Sweetie, you have to stop crying sometime.”

Cassie nodded at Danny, but she kept crying. She wanted to stop, but it just wasn't possible.

Danny tilted his head, opened his mouth, then closed it again. She would've laughed if she could stop crying long enough. Danny, struck dumb—now there was one for the history books. Poor guy. He'd cleaned her apartment. She looked around, able to appreciate, even through this relentless gutting despair, how the sun shone in through the immaculate windows. He'd made her all her favorite comfort foods, stuffing her full of macaroni and cheese casserole and chocolate chip cookies. He'd bought her a bunch of crazy new nail polish.

“Sorry,” she said, tears still flowing. She went entire stretches—like, hours—without crying, but then she'd see a Christmas wreath and it would remind her of Jack's Christmas party, which would remind her of the amazing sex they had after his Christmas party. Or, against her better judgment, she'd unfold the note the driver he'd dispatched to meet her in Muskoka had silently handed her. One sentence, in his distinctive handwriting. “On the off chance that you are pregnant, please be in touch with me.”

She'd been so stupid to think she could escape from this unscathed. She'd been talking tough about this not having been a relationship, but she'd been deceiving herself. It takes two people to have a relationship, but it doesn't take two people to fall in love.

Yes, despite her best intentions to the contrary, she'd fallen in love with him. And love in a situation like that was bound to lead to heartbreak. But it would have been worth it, despite the heartbreak, because the time she'd spent with him had been life changing. He'd made her feel so attractive—

and smart, and capable. He'd made her feel invincible. You don't just walk away from that without consequences.

So if she'd expected heartbreak, why couldn't she stop crying? She could only figure it was that she hadn't expected Jack to be so...mean. Which was stupid because he'd been *exactly* that the morning after she'd first slept over at his house. Shame flooded her stomach when she thought about that morning, him unable to meet her eyes as he rushed out of the house. Had she learned nothing?

Still, she'd thought they were over that. Yes, part of her hoped then that they'd end up extending their...entanglement. But at the very least, she thought they would share a triumphant ride home, shake hands, and part as friends. What a fool she had been to think she was special. She was no different than anyone else. It really was all about the company for him.

"If you don't stop crying, I'm forcing you to come to the farm for Christmas," said Danny, hands on hips, trying to look stern.

She sniffed. "I'll go to Edward's house," she lied.

"After you quit with no notice? Isn't he mad at you?"

"He'll get over it." And it didn't matter, because she wasn't going anywhere for Christmas. She was going to stay home and cry and eat leftover mac and cheese and stale cookies.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, and I'm swinging by on my way out of town. If it looks like you've been crying, I'm knocking you out caveman style and throwing you in the trunk. Be ready for your inspection."

Cassie smiled through her tears. "Yes, sir."

## Chapter Nineteen

Jack woke up Christmas Eve morning with an idea. Last night he'd contemplated walking into Edward's with a briefcase of cash—that's how much he wanted this done. But if Cassie was "not at that address," did that mean she wasn't working there anymore?

He'd gone over and over in his mind all the possible reasons Cassie might have for not accepting his money. Some kind of late-breaking remorse? Perhaps she had a shred of decency in her that made her realize she couldn't take his money after she'd deceived him so badly. The frustrating part was that he'd proposed the business deal independent of everything else—Christ, he'd even suggested that they *not* fuck around. She wouldn't have *had* to pretend anything. He wondered if maybe it was about Junior, as unlikely as that seemed. But despite how angry he was at her, he couldn't believe she was the kind of person who would settle for someone like Junior no matter how much money he had.

But it would explain why suddenly she didn't care about fifty thousand dollars.

Anyway, it didn't matter. All he wanted was to pay his debt and be free to stop thinking about it all. And the solution had been right under his nose the whole time. He had Danny's number in his phone. Whatever twisted reasons Cassie had for refusing the money, he was pretty sure Danny wouldn't share them.



He rolled over and grabbed his phone from the bedside table.

*IT'S JACK WINTER. I OWE CASSIE SOME MONEY, AND I'D LIKE TO PAY HER, BUT I'M HAVING TROUBLE GETTING AHOLD OF HER. CAN YOU HELP?*

He was on his way to the shower when the buzz of an incoming text summoned him back.

*YOU ASSHOLE, YOU OWE CASSIE A LOT MORE THAN MONEY. YOU'RE LUCKY SHE WON'T TELL ME WHERE YOU LIVE.*

Jack sighed.

*LOOK, I JUST WANT HER TO GET WHAT SHE'S OWED.*

*A NICE CHECK TO GO WITH HER BROKEN HEART? SORRY, CAN'T HELP YOU. I'M TOO BUSY PICKING UP THE PIECES OF THE AFOREMENTIONED HEART. ASS. HOLE.*

What the hell was he talking about? Had Junior thrown her over already?

???

*MOTHERFUCKING ENTITLED RICH ASS. DON'T PRETEND YOU DON'T KNOW. STOP TEXTING ME.*

*I REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT. I KNOW CASSIE DOESN'T WANT TO SEE ME, BUT I CAN'T JUST NOT PAY HER FOR A BUSINESS SERVICE SHE PROVIDED. HOW ABOUT I MAKE THE CHECK OUT TO YOU, AND YOU BUY HER SOMETHING WITH IT?*

Silence. Damn. So much for his obvious solution.

He was so on edge, he jumped when the phone rang in his hand.

Jack picked up, and before he could get a greeting out, Danny said, "Wait. What?"

"Will you just give me your address so I can send you a check? She's refusing delivery at her apartment, and I'm getting 'no longer at this

address' when I try the restaurant.”

“She quit.”

Jack thought his head might explode. “It shouldn’t be this hard to give someone fifty thousand dollars.”

“What did you mean when you said you knew Cassie didn’t want to see you?” asked Danny.

“Exactly what I said.”

“So is that why she’s been crying her eyes out over you for the past three days?” Danny shouted. “Because she *doesn’t* want to see you?”

Jack’s stomach dropped, and it was his turn to say, “Wait, what?”

“You broke her heart, man,” said Danny, his tone less menacing. “You have to know that. You left after the deal was done, without a word. In the middle of the *night*.”

Hope. A little tiny mote of hope. It felt like a spark. Not even a spark, just the sound of a match striking. “You have it backward,” he said slowly, finding it hard to make his clumsy mouth form the right sounds to propel the conversation forward. “Cassie broke *my* heart.” *Please, please let it be true.*

“Why the hell would you say that?”

“Because I saw her text messages to you. About making her say please and all that. She was tired of pretending. She wanted to get out.”

There was a long silence. Then, “Oh. My. God.”

Then a weird jaggedy inhale that seemed to be coming from his own throat.

“She was talking about *Wexler*,” said Danny. “The young one—the gross one. They had a meeting and he, like, made her ask him nicely not to block the sale. Apparently he was a complete jerk, and she hated doing it. She was glad *that* was over.”

It was Jack’s turn to talk, he knew, but he had started shaking, and he

didn't trust his voice.

"But *you*?" Danny went on. "She hoped you would sneak into her room that night. She was *waiting* for you. You, who kept telling her you didn't do relationships. You and your fucking precious *rules*. She fell in love with you, asshole."

...

Cassie stood slumped against the cold red brick building, silently cursing Danny for insisting they meet at this random corner at the south end of the university, rather than, say, a bar where she could drink approximately a liter of scotch.

But thinking about bars made her feel worse, and not just for the obvious reason. In the midst of everything that had happened, she missed Edward's, the clatter and bustle, the steady, predictable anchor it provided. But, no. She straightened her spine, lifted her chin, and gazed at the sparse parade of pedestrians on campus on Christmas Eve afternoon, dark blots bundled up against the snow, which was beginning to fall in earnest. Quitting Edward's had been the right thing to do. She'd always told herself she wasn't a lifer as a bartender, so, she'd asked herself before handing in her resignation last week, what was she waiting for? What had been keeping her there? In the midst of all her crying, she'd been ruthlessly interrogating herself about every aspect of her life, and the honest answer was fear.

If she wasn't a lifer, she had to stop wasting her life, assuming that it would *really* start at some fictional future date. She had to give Jack some credit for the revelation. If nothing else, her time with him had made clear what she wanted out of life—a quick end to her degree and a career in business. He'd shown her a wider world she hadn't known existed and had somehow managed to give her the confidence to stand up to her mother. Laura had shown up two nights ago, on schedule, insisting she was ready to

go back to rehab. Cassie had been tempted to reenroll her in the pricey program she'd abandoned mere weeks ago, but instead did some research and helped her mother apply for a government-subsidized program. Then she gave her two hundred dollars and told her not to come back until she'd been clean for six months.

But she did feel bad about quitting so abruptly on Edward. She'd decided to go back to school full time for one final semester and finish all her outstanding credits. She'd live on student loans and credit cards. She now had confidence that she'd be able to get a good job after graduation, so she'd be able to pay back her debt quickly. Still, there was no reason she couldn't have given Edward two weeks' notice. It was one thing to make major life decisions, another to be a jerk about it. But in her irrational, wild grief, she'd wanted to make a clean break from everything, to leave her old identity behind and catapult herself into a new, better future. After Christmas, she'd seek Edward out and try to explain to him. Maybe they'd even talk about Cassie's dad a little.

She glanced at her phone. Two o'clock. Danny was pushing it if he was going to get to the farm before dark. She typed a text.

*WILL YOU HURRY UP ALREADY SO I CAN PASS INSPECTION, AND YOU CAN LEAVE? I HAVEN'T CRIED ALL DAY.*

It was true, mostly. She'd spent the morning culling her closet. She wanted to get rid of everything she didn't need, like a snake shedding its old skin.

"I'm not sure I believe you."

She didn't bother trying to look away as he approached. Even through the snowstorm, Danny would see everything. She lifted her chin. "Well, I haven't cried since ten this morning. Is that good enough for you? And *why* are we meeting here?"

He didn't answer, just wrapped an arm around her shoulder and opened the door they were standing next to, giving her a little shove that discharged her into an unremarkable, institutional hallway. She turned, just in time to hear him shout through the closing door, "Text me if you need me! You know I only need the slightest excuse to abandon the farm!"

What the heck? She looked around, trying to get her bearings. She had probably passed this building a thousand times, but since she'd never had a class in it, she'd never taken note of it.

The door clicked open behind her, and she shrieked a little. But it was just Danny. "Go down the stairs right in front of you! I forgot that part!"

Okaaaay. Well, what the heck else was she going to do? She made her way down the dim stairwell and stopped at the bottom in front of a classroom door not unlike the dozens of doors she'd walked through for her own classes. What was going on?

*Oh.* She couldn't prevent a gasp. "Planetarium," she said, reading aloud the word on the sign outside the door.

Then, again, because she couldn't quite believe it. How had she not known about this place? "Planetarium." The word felt simultaneously familiar and strange in her mouth.

Her reflex was to tell herself to fake it till she made it, but for once she thought she might be facing a situation in which faking simply would not work. So she just took a deep breath and pushed open the door, stepping into a giant, dim classroom. Inside was a big puffy black dome made of some kind of inflatable material. It looked like a bouncy castle you'd see kids jumping on at a fair.

It had a door. A door she was obviously meant to walk through.

So she conjured Brave Cassie, the one who'd quit in order to start living her life in the here and now, and walked through it.

She stepped into the night sky.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. It was so beautiful, yet so impossible. Her legs started to shake, like they didn’t know whether to buckle or to bolt.

“Cassie.”

Without even taking her eyes from the stars, she knew it was him. Of course she did. She’d known from the moment she saw the sign on the door that he was behind this, hadn’t she? It was what she wanted and what she dreaded, at the same time.

She dragged her eyes from the pinpricks of light on the ceiling. There wasn’t enough light to really see his face, but he held up a palm, his hand a pale presence in the dark. And the smell of him—the lemon tree in the bog—was an assault in the enclosed space. How had she ever thought she could get over this man?

“I have two things to say.” His gravelly voice unsettled her, scraping over exposed nerves. “Let me say them, and then you can leave if you want.” He didn’t wait for her acquiescence, just started talking, both of them standing under the strange little black dome. “One. I read your text messages to Danny about Brian Wexler. I thought they were about me.”

Her hand flew to her mouth as she struggled to remember what exactly she’d said about Brian. He made her feel like a whore; she couldn’t wait to stop pretending. Oh, my God, she’d referenced him making her say his name. The enormity of the misunderstanding hit her, a knockout punch of regret. And something else—hope. She bit the insides of her cheeks and looked up at the stars, which had grown fuzzy. “And the second thing?” she whispered.

He didn’t hesitate. “The second thing is, I love you. I don’t know how to be without you.”

She wailed then, and she could only hope he recognized it as a wail of joy. She started to crumple, but he caught her and hugged her so tight she thought her ribs might snap.

“I love you, too,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“*I’m* sorry,” he said, pulling back enough to frame her face with his hands.

They were close enough that she could see he hadn’t shaved in days. His eyes were filmed with liquid, but he was smiling a small, lopsided smile.

“I didn’t think Toronto had a planetarium,” she croaked, which was a ridiculous thing to say, but there it was. She remembered the big McLaughlin Planetarium from her childhood. It had closed to make way for condos, and even as a girl, she had lamented its loss.

“Just this little one, right here under your nose all this time.” He tapped her nose, as if to illustrate his point. “They use this for educational purposes, which is why it’s a weird inflatable thing inside a classroom—it’s portable. They only do public shows once a month.”

She cleared her throat, trying for levity. “And why do I suspect tonight is not one of the public shows?”

He answered with a question of his own. “Do you have Christmas Eve plans?”

“No. Do you?”

He grinned. “I do now.”

She looked up at the projected sky, the impossibly gorgeous sky she always knew was just above the clouds and the city lights. The sky she had not seen like this until she’d visited the island with him. “What about the rules?” she asked.

Nothing about his stance changed. He kept standing there a foot away from her in the dark. She felt his face change more than she saw it, felt his eyes slide down her body, just like they had that first night at the bar. “Fuck the rules.”

All right then. She closed her eyes. It was almost too much. To go from dejection and heartbreak to wild, almost-painful joy in the space of a few

minutes...well, she needed a moment.

He didn't give her one. "This is the night sky as it would be tonight. After this, there's a show we can play. It's about the formation of stars."

She tried to talk, to express incredulity, but he kept talking over her.

"I want to kiss you. Hell, I want to...do things to you. But there's some stuff I have to tell you first." He gestured to the other side of a small projector set up in the center of the space, which was the source of the stars on the ceiling. She followed him around to a blanket that was set up on the floor. A picnic basket sat next to a bottle of scotch.

"Oh my God," she said.

Tugging her to the floor to sit beside him, he opened the basket and handed her a Chinese takeout container. "First, about the Wexler deal."

Yes! Even amidst her grief this past week, she'd been dying to know for sure that Wexler had sold. Jack handed her a fork. She stabbed a bit of the food—he seemed to want her to eat, though dinner was the last thing on her mind. She brought the fork to her mouth. It looked like shredded chicken breast in some kind of sauce. She ventured a taste. "Oh! This is...awful!" He handed her a thick napkin, almost as if he knew her reflex would be to spit out the food, which she did not waste any time doing. "What is that?"

"Pork with preserved lemons."

She laughed then. A real, unbridled, full belly laugh. It felt so good after her week of tears. Strange, but good. "So?" she asked when she'd composed herself. "Did he sell?"

Jack lay on his back, hands clasped at the back of his head as if he were reclined in a meadow somewhere in the country, taking in the night sky. "He did, but had one condition. Insisted it be written into the documentation."

"What was it?"

"I get Wexler Construction and the island, but two weeks a year the resort



is reserved for math camp.”

“What?” she shrieked, throwing herself down next to him and swatting his shoulder. “Shut up!”

“I told him fine, but I had no idea who was going to run the thing.” He shot her a wry smile. “It sure as hell isn’t going to be me.”

“Shut *up!*” She didn’t seem to be capable of saying anything else.

“I did promise you a bonus if the deal went through. What do you say? Camp Cassie? It has a certain ring to it, no?”

Her throat felt like it was closing, so she took a moment to arrange herself next to him, lying on her back the same way he was. Looking up, she could easily spot the Big and Little Dipper, Orion, Draco—all the constellations she knew from books. When she’d gotten control of her voice, she said, “What happened with Carl?”

Jack turned over so he was lying on his side. “I showed him the email—the email I suspect *you* sent—and he admitted everything. I’m not going to press charges in exchange for him going into treatment.”

“Did you fire him?”

“Yeah. I might hire him back, though. We’ll see.”

“So Carl and my mother are both in rehab for Christmas,” Cassie said. “Kind of ironic, huh?”

He reared back a little, almost involuntarily, it seemed. “Your mom showed up again?” His tone had turned cold.

“Don’t worry, I’m not paying for it this time. I finally see that there’s no point in continuing to pay for these gold-plated programs if she’s going to keep skipping out.” She shrugged. “Who knows, maybe the seventh time’s the charm.”

“For her sake, I hope so.”

God. How did he do that? All he’d done was touch her arm and breathe near her ear, and everything inside her came alive. The urge to burrow into

his arms was almost overwhelming. But how often did a girl get a private planetarium show? She snuggled into the crook of his arm and whispered, “So let’s see this show of yours.”

“Oh,” Jack mock-groaned. “I knew it. You’re going to want to pay attention, aren’t you?”

“I’m not even going to ask how you did this.”

He grinned as he got up and went to the projector. “I know people.”

“Of course you do.” She smiled as he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and surreptitiously studied it as if he were cheating on an exam.

Once the show got going, he moved back to stretch out next to her. After a minute or so, he began inching closer.

“No way!” said Cassie, scooting away from him. “I want to see the show.”

Jack made a strangled, vaguely frustrated noise, but planted a quick kiss on her neck and rolled over onto his back so that he wasn’t touching her at all.

They spent the next twenty minutes marveling over the universe as it unfolded before them. Well, Cassie did. Jack watched her more than he watched the show. She could feel his attention as surely as if he’d been shining a spotlight on her, but she kept her eyes trained upward, watching gasses condense and explode, throwing out new elements into the heavens, the elements that would, over billions of years, go on to make everything in the universe.

Cassie felt a little like she had a universe inside her heart, like big glowing suns were coming to life in gorgeous violent explosions as everything expanded outward, creating space where there had been none before.

She hadn’t realized she’d been crying until the narrator finished. “And so,” boomed the disembodied voice, “when people say we are made of

stardust, it is literally true.”

It was dark then. Just dark. She swiped at her eyes but didn't have a moment to regain her equilibrium before Jack took her in his arms, his mouth crashing down on hers. It was so familiar. It was so new. It was everything at the same time. But what hadn't changed was the undercurrent of heat that was always there between them. Snaking her arms around him, she kissed him in the secret planetarium, where, in contradiction to the laws of the possible, the stars shone just for them.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he whispered, “We're made of the same stuff, Cassie.”

“Yes,” she said, pressing her mouth against his again, imbuing the kiss with everything she had, with all the stardust in the universe.

# Epilogue

*A TUESDAY NIGHT IN MAY.*

When Jack came into Edward's that night, he was grinning. He couldn't help it. He was just so damned proud.

"Jack!"

He wiped the smile off his face as Camille, the hostess, approached. A man did have limits.

"I read about you in that *Forbes* "Ones to Watch" thing!"

"Mmmm," he murmured, scanning the bar as he left the Queen of the Ballerina Girls still talking.

There was everyone—Danny, Amy and her boyfriend Mason, Dax and some of the guys from his company, a few of the women from Marcus's advertising firm. Cassie had grown close with lots of the folks from the forty-ninth floor. Of course she had—everyone loved her. She was fucking irresistible.

There was everyone. But where was the guest of honor?

Just then, a familiar brunette head popped up from behind the bar at the far end, away from the others. Her eyes lit up when she saw him approach.

He ignored the greetings being lobbed at him from everyone else and made his way to her. "What are you doing back there?" Though Cassie had made up with Edward, she had decisively quit and had been working tirelessly all semester to finish school.

“Just getting some props out to help Alana,” she said, plunking down a bunch of shot glasses on the bar and then coming around to sit by the girl. “We’re working on ants again.” She already had a ruler on the bar, and she started measuring out the distance between one shot glass and another.

“Oh no you don’t,” he said, reaching between her and Alana to close the textbook sitting on the bar. “This is your party.”

“Thank you!” said Alana with her signature drama. “I’ve been trying to get her to quit for half an hour!”

He winked at Alana. “I just saw Carl. Britney said to tell you she’s on her way.” Tenderhearted Cassie, in the months that Carl had been in treatment for his gambling addiction, had made friends with Britney, and had, in turn, introduced her to Alana.

“How did it go with Carl?” Cassie whispered as she gathered her things in preparation for moving down the bar.

“I offered him a less senior position, but he said no.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“He said he thought it was better for him to start over somewhere else. Prove himself.”

“It’s hard to argue with that.”

He nodded. It had been a relief, really. He couldn’t just throw Carl out on the street, but it would have been hard to fully trust him again. This way, they could stay friends and keep the business out of it. “Anyway, enough. We’re celebrating the graduate.”

“Oh!” She hopped up and down and grinned. “There’s something else to celebrate—I got a job!” She lifted her chin and struck a fake-haughty pose. “You are looking at the newest junior analyst at TD Waterhouse. They’re expanding their retail operations in the US, and I’ll be helping assess markets.”

Well, hot damn. Step one on the Cassie James world domination tour. He

tried to scowl, but a smile won out. “I still wish you’d come work for me.”

“Working for your bazillionaire boyfriend’s company is gross. Favoritism.”

“I’m not a bazillionaire. But I *do* favor you. You got me there.”

She leaned over to hug him. He was like a trained puppy. That vanilla scent called him to attention. In more ways than one. She lifted her eyebrows and looked pointedly at his crotch.

They were interrupted by the clinking of cutlery against glass. Edward beckoned them over and handed each of them a scotch. “To Cassie James, B.A.,” he said, beaming.

“Hold on now,” said Cassie. “I don’t have the grades back from my finals yet, so technically—”

Jack kissed her. It was sometimes the only way to shut her up. That was his excuse anyway. She made a little squeak of surprise and then sighed and opened her mouth.

“Get a room!” shouted Danny.

She pulled away, flushed, and lifted her glass, but not before standing on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear. “This isn’t over.”

He kissed her once more for good measure. “It’s sure as hell not.”



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## About the Author

[Jenny Holiday](#) started writing at age nine when her fourth grade teacher gave her a notebook and told her to start writing stories. That first batch featured mass murderers on the loose, alien invasions, and hauntings. From then on, she was always writing, often in her diary, where she liked to decorate declarations of existential angst with nail polish teardrops. Later, she channelled her penchant for scribbling into a more useful format, picking up a PhD in geography and then working in PR. Eventually, she figured out that happy endings were more fun than alien invasions. You can follow her on twitter at [@jennyholi](#) or visit her on the web at [jennyholiday.com](#).

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