



DREAM

by the Fire

A FIRE AND FURY HOLIDAY NOVELLA
A VERY KINGSTON

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This book is dedicated to my husband. The man is a saint for putting up with a wife who decided to write a Christmas novella during our already busy holiday season. He deserves all the praise for putting up with my crazy ass. Merry Christmas, baby. I love you.

Dear Reader,

This Christmas novella started with a collection of scenes that were deleted from the third book in Scott and Tori's saga - Burn For You. I compiled them to give readers a warm, fuzzy story to enjoy this holiday season.

For those that haven't read Scott and Tori's journey thus far, this can be read as a standalone. I have done my very best to give you the needed info, but kept things vague enough to eliminate major plot-point spoilers from the first three books.

I hope you enjoy Scott, Tori and their gang of unruly misfits. I think these characters are pretty great.

Happy Holidays,

Avery

DREAM *by the Fire*

A FIRE AND FURY HOLIDAY NOVELLA

AVERY KINGSTON

Later on, we'll conspire,
As we dream by the fire
To face unafraid
The plans that we made...

-Richard B. Smith (Winter Wonderland)

CHAPTER

ONE

Scott opened his eyes and yawned, glancing over at his beautiful bride-to-be still sleeping soundly next to him.

As cheesy as it was, he loved watching Tori sleep. It didn't matter to him if her platinum waves were plastered to her face and drool was falling on the pillow. He loved everything about this woman. He gently brushed the strands of hair out of her face. A contented sigh slipped through her pouty lips, and she nuzzled tighter to her pillow.

To say it had been a rough month for them was an understatement. After the past several weeks of life beating them down, they were damn lucky to be here—safe, sound and tucked into their warm bed with their beautiful German Shepherd, Kahn, curled up on his mamma's feet. They'd missed Thanksgiving completely due to recent dramatic events in their lives. He was out of the country and she...well...he really didn't want to think about where she'd been. That wound was still too raw.

He rolled over and checked the time on his phone. *Jesus, 6:00 a.m.* It didn't matter how many years had passed from deployments. His internal clock would forever be set to military time. He sat up and quietly slipped on his prosthetic leg then dressed, careful not to rouse his sleeping beauty. Apparently, it was even too early for the dog who just gave him a hefty sigh and a side-eye as he snuck out of the room.

His plan was to slip out and be back home before she woke. He wanted to surprise his girl with a Christmas tree. This had always been his favorite time of year, but not so much for his fiancée. When he'd mentioned a tree at the beginning of November it didn't elicit the best response from her.

"Ugh. Are you one of those crazy people who put a tree up before Thanksgiving?" she'd said.

"What's wrong with that?" He'd chuckled. "That's how my mom always did it growing up. As soon as Halloween was over the tree went up. What was your family tradition?"

“Pray that my mom didn’t get too drunk to forget to buy my sister gifts, so she wouldn’t think Santa forgot her.”

That was about the saddest thing he’d ever heard. Christmas was a big deal in his family growing up. It always brought out the kid in him.

“What about since then?” he’d asked her.

She’d just shrugged. “Keith typically would head back to New York to be with his family, or they’d go skiing in Vermont or something. I went a few times with him.”

Keith was Tori’s best friend, and the closest thing she had to a family other than her younger sister, Jane. Scott would barely qualify Tori’s mother as family. That woman was a piece of work.

She’d continued, “Other times I’d wind up at Jane’s for the meal. I just kinda skipped around to wherever and then last year...well...” Her voice wavered.

He’d closed his eyes and swallowed hard, his heart breaking for her. Last year was her first Christmas since she’d lost her vision and she was living at the rehabilitation center for the blind.

“Last year they had a big meal at the center...” She’d blinked back the tears and lifted her chin, channeling all her inner strength as she always did. “We sang carols and did Secret Santa with each other. It was nice.” She’d shrugged and offered a thin smile, but he knew damn well she was lying through her teeth.

That was the moment he decided to make it his sole mission that this would be Tori’s best Christmas ever. After ten years of friends with benefits, they’d both come to their senses and finally settled down with each other. Their wedding was set for March eighteenth. It was time for them to start their own family and their own holiday traditions.

The first thing on that list was getting a tree in their house. Well, first coffee, then a tree. Scott went downstairs to the kitchen and rifled through the pantry, frowning when he realized they were all out. He’d just have to swing through Starbucks while he was out. He grabbed his jacket, wallet and keys, hopped in his jeep and headed to the nearest tree lot.

After strolling through the lot for about twenty minutes he finally picked out the freshest, fullest tree that he could find. He’d always had artificial trees growing up, but since Tori couldn’t visually enjoy it, he wanted the scent of the pine to permeate the house. The teen working the lot helped him tie it down on the roof of his jeep.

“Thanks for the help, kid.” Scott dug in his wallet and handed the kid a fifty. It was probably overkill, but it was the giving season.

“Thanks sir!” The kid grinned wide, showing off a mouth full of metal. Oh, how he remembered those days in high school. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas to you, too.” He waved and climbed in his jeep. On his drive home, he rolled through Starbucks and got a black coffee for him, and a pumpkin spice for Tori—he knew she loved those. He then drove the few miles back toward the house, wondering if Tori even had lights and ornaments. He never purchased any of his own because he was either back home in Austin, or overseas deployed during the holidays.

He turned down the street into their neighborhood and pulled his coffee from the cup holder, taking a sip. As he glanced back up a dog—*his* dog—came rushing out in front of his jeep. He slammed his breaks and swerved, his coffee spilling all over his lap.

“Fuck!” he screamed as the hot liquid burned through his pants “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!”

He jumped out of the jeep trying to ignore the searing pain in his lap long enough to grab his dog. He whistled, and Kahn came rushing over, merrily wagging his tail. “Get in the goddamn jeep!” he yelled, patting the dog on the backside as he hopped into the passenger seat. “How in the hell did you get out?” He looked to Kahn as if he would actually provide some sort of answer. All he got in response was a goofy dog grin as his tongue lolled out the side of his mouth, and his tail thumped against the leather seat.

He quickly pulled in the driveway and hopped out of the car, with the dog hot on his heels. He took the stairs as fast as he could, wincing and praying his cock was intact.

He yanked down his pants once he got in the bathroom and assessed the damage. Cock intact, just a couple red spots. Thankfully his jeans and underwear had provided some layer of protection. His right thigh above his knee got the worst of it, and was blistering a little, but nothing a few days wouldn’t heal. He pulled off his soiled clothes, tossed them into the laundry, then grabbed the first aid kit.

“What the hell is going on in here with all the noise?” Tori asked as she wandered into the bathroom with a serious case of bedhead. She pattered past him and sat down on the toilet, pulling her panties to her ankles. Yup, they’d reached *that* point in their relationship. Actually, they’d

reached that point years ago when she had to help him take a piss in the hospital right after he'd lost his leg. Looking back on it now, he should have asked her to marry him back then. Would have saved them both years of heartache and could have saved her from losing her vision.

Stop. Stop it now. He had to constantly control himself from sending his mind down that road. The what-if's could easily drive him to the brink of insanity.

He cleared his throat. "Kahn was running through the neighborhood. Almost hit him with my jeep," he explained as he put some ointment on his seared thigh. "I spilled coffee on my lap swerving to miss him."

Her head snapped up. "Is your cock ok?"

He chuckled as he put on a new pair of pants. "Glad to know *that* was your first question." She'd always been such a filthy, little mess—and god he loved it. "Cock survived. Kahn is also fine by the way."

She flushed and stood. "Well, obviously, because he jumped on the bed and licked my face until I was awake. That's when I heard you rumbling and cursing in here." She reached for the sink and washed her hands. "How'd he get out, anyway? Why were you out so early? And did you bring me coffee?"

"I don't know. I went to buy us a tree. And yes, I got you a Basic Bitch Pumpkin Spice Latte."

"Did the words basic bitch actually just spill out of your lips?" She covered her mouth giggling.

"Yeah, your bestie Keith must be rubbing off on me." He put his arms around her and she buried her head in his massive chest.

"Basic bitch and now bestie? You're not kidding. He's totally rubbing off on you." Her body shook with laughter in his embrace. Finally, she pulled back and patted his chest. "You ok, tough guy?"

"I've been through much worse." His leg getting blown off for one, nearly losing her to a car accident a year ago for another, and the list went on and on of all they'd endured and survived. He kissed her forehead. "I'll live."

"So, a tree, huh?" Her brow went up as she crossed her arms. "I guess we better get to decorating." A smirk tugged at her lips. "After you bring me my coffee, of course."

"You got it, baby." He pulled her by the hand, dragging her downstairs.

CHAPTER

Two

Tori sat on the sofa sipping her coffee. Kahn was curled up next to her with his head in her lap. “So what decorations did you get?” She rubbed her hands over the dog's soft fur.

“None yet.” He huffed, and she could hear the branches of the tree rustling as he fiddled with it. “I hoped that you maybe had some.” His footsteps pattered past her into the kitchen.

She shook her head. “I don’t have any.”

“I know Christmas isn’t really your thing, but you never even decorated?” The sound of snipping came from the tree and she suspected he was clipping some branches or removing the surrounding twine.

“Well, I lived with Keith until last summer.” Last year would have been her first Christmas in her own apartment—had she not lost her vision. She didn’t feel the need to remind him of that, again. The last thing she wanted to do was bum him out. Christmas—as shitty as it had always been for her—seemed to be his favorite time of year. She wasn’t about to spoil that for him.

“Then I guess we’ll have to go get some.”

She grimaced. She could hear the rain start to patter on the roof and it was about thirty degrees outside. “It’s raining, babe.”

She hated dumping chores on him. Typically, even if it took her twice the amount of time it did him, she’d take on any task at hand. But this just wasn’t rain...it was freezing rain. Ice plus blind girl typically equaled disaster.

She heard a low groan come from the back of his throat as the realization hit of what that meant. “It’s fine. I’ll go to the store. You just tell me what to get, and I’ll make it happen.” His footsteps echoed past her again and a few moments later he sunk into the sofa next to her. “Ok. Give it to me.”

—” She grinned. “We need lights, ornaments, coffee, hot cocoa, some milk

“Are we decorating the tree, or am I going grocery shopping?”

“Well...if you’re going out anyway.” She bit her bottom lip.

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. Give me the list.”



Scott stood in the long line at the store. Even though it was early in the morning, the Christmas shoppers were out in full force. He now understood why his mom did this sort of stuff early. He’d much rather be at home, snuggling with Tori on the sofa with everything done. It was almost his turn at the counter when his phone vibrated in his pocket.

Tori: You got white lights, right? I don’t want colored.

He rolled his eyes.

Scott: What’s wrong with colored lights?

What he really wanted to say was, *Why does it matter?* After all, he’d be the one looking at the tree. But that would be highly insensitive and insulting. Obviously she cared what their home still looked like. He learned that the hard way when trying to buy furniture a few months ago with her picky ass.

Tori: This is my first tree. I have a vision for how I’ve always wanted it.

What was even more annoying than the fact that he now had to get out of line, was that she didn’t seem to give a shit about his opinion on what their home looked like. *Her* first tree, not *theirs*.

Whatever, it didn’t matter. This was about making this a good Christmas for her and making her happy. He kept repeating that in his head on his march to the back of the store.

He swapped out all the colored strands for white and finally made it through the long line a second time. Just as he hopped into the jeep and started it up another text swooped in.

Tori: I'm gonna need more burlap ribbon.

Burlap? Why the fuck did she want burlap?

Two seconds later a slightly blurry photo swooped in of the said ribbon she needed.

Tori: You have to get it at the craft store.

He rubbed his face and groaned. If the superstore was that packed he shuddered to think what the craft store was going to be like two weeks prior to Christmas. *Fucking burlap.* Who in the hell puts burlap on a goddamned Christmas tree?

My hippie bride-to-be, that's who.

"This is not about you," he growled to himself, repeating his mantra in his head. He typed back:

Scott: Ok, I got ya covered.

About twenty minutes later he slid into the packed parking lot at the craft store. The rain was coming down harder, and the 4WD on the jeep helped, but the roads were quickly becoming hazardous. He pulled out his handicap parking tag and hooked it around the mirror. He loathed using the damn thing, and he hated even more the stares and comments he'd get for using it.

People tended to make knee-jerk judgments based on his looks. They see a seemingly able-bodied, tall, muscular male in his thirties, and would assume he's just a dick stealing a disabled parking spot. On a typical day the walk wouldn't bother him and he'd skip taking the spot, but today was not a typical day. His jeans were chafing the burns on his thigh, and his stump was aching so much from the cold it was causing him to limp. Adding a long walk across an icy parking lot on his prosthetic would be suicidal.

As he circled the parking lot he realized all the disabled spots were gone. A woman in a large, black, SUV was climbing out of the last one, opening her trunk. A cursory glance showed no parking permit. He

grumbled under his breath, shot her a side-eye from his window then pulled down another lane, taking a spot at the back of the lot.

As he walked by her nearing the front, a second longer look showed her pulling two small, screaming children out of the backseat, packing them into a double stroller. Shit, with the freezing rain and two small kiddos, she probably needed that space more than him. As she bent over, buckling one of the kids into the harness her purse fell off her shoulder, scattering the contents over the icy asphalt.

He went over and helped her collect her scattered belongings. She looked up at Scott, her wet bangs plastered in her face. “That’s what I get for taking this spot...” she whispered, biting her lip. “But it’s been an awful day. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome.” He offered her a thin smile, handing the woman her purse. “Merry Christmas,” was all he muttered, and he walked away.

He finally got inside, found the stupid burlap ribbon without too much trouble and got out of the store much faster than the last one. He walked past the man standing at the door ringing the bell for donations and backtracked, digging into his pocket. He stuck the remaining cash he had in his wallet into the bucket even though his Christmas spirit tank was teetering near empty.

“Merry Christmas, sir.” The elderly man grinned at him.

“Same to you.” Scott returned the warm smile and turned back toward the lot. As he stepped off the curb pain shot through his knee, causing it to buckle just as he stepped onto a slick spot. Before he knew it, his feet gave out from under him and he was sprawled out on the wet asphalt. His bag flew one direction and his leg popped off—dangling from under his jeans.

“Oh my gosh sir, are you ok?” He glanced up to see the same lady whom he’d just helped in the lot.

Yup. That was about par for the course for today. “I’m fine, thanks,” he said through gritted teeth as he rolled up his pant leg and pushed his prosthetic back on.

The elderly man who was ringing the bell ran over to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. The woman retrieved his bag as a small crowd had gathered to gawk. Typically they only got this kind of sideshow when Tori was involved, but not today. Now he was the damn center-stage act.

“Do you need help?” the man asked, offering his hand.

“That would be nice.” He lifted up his arm, swallowing every ounce of his pride as the man twice his age helped him back on his feet.

“I’m so sorry...” The woman with the two kids in the stroller bit her lip and handed him his bags. “I had no idea,” she whispered.

“It’s fine.” Scott offered her a thin smile, trying to ease her guilt.

He made a beeline to his jeep. He wanted nothing more than to just get the hell home, get out of his wet clothes, and cozy up with his girl next to the fire.



He arrived home about thirty minutes later and groaned, seeing Keith’s black Prius parked in his driveway. He loved Keith, but he was seriously not in the mood for company at the moment.

He got out of his car and limped up his steps and through his front door. Tori was sitting on the sofa with her head buried in her hands, obviously crying, and Keith had his arm around her.

“What’s wrong?” Scott asked as he tossed his keys on the table by the door.

Keith’s blue eyes met his. “The dog escaped.”

Tori lifted her tear-streaked face. “He peed on the tree,” she said between sobs. “I got mad, yelled at him, and put him out just for a minute...” Her sobs grew louder. “I wasn’t thinking, and now he’s gone...”

Scott rubbed his face. *Shit*. He hadn’t yet got a chance to check the backyard to see how Kahn had gotten out earlier. He’d locked the dog door, but didn’t remind Tori not to let him out. “He’s chipped, baby. Someone will see him and grab him. Let me change clothes and I’ll go look for him.”

Her brow furrowed. “Change clothes?”

“I’m just soaked from the rain,” he lied. He wasn’t about to tell her about the parking lot shit-show. That would only add to her guilt. “Keith, would you mind checking the backyard to see how our Houdini is getting out?” he asked as he ascended the stairs.

“Already did. The gate lock was jacked up and not latching. I grabbed some zip-ties from the garage and locked it until you can replace it.”

“Thanks, man,” Scott hollered back. At least that was one less thing he had to deal with at the moment.



“Help me with the lights on the tree, Keith,” Tori ordered as she pulled the boxes out of the bag. Scott had been gone for about twenty minutes and if she didn’t do something to occupy her mind, she’d crawl out of her skin.

“You sure you’re up for that right now?”

“Well, I can’t go look for Kahn, so I can at least do something to get my mind off the fact my baby is wandering the streets.”

Keith chuckled. “Which baby of yours are you most worried about?”

She frowned. “Both.” She let out a heavy breath as she pulled a strand of lights out of the box. “Scott’s favorite holiday is Christmas, and I’ve done nothing but ruin it for him.” She walked over toward the wall and trailed her hand down the wall, feeling for the outlet. She plugged in the strand and placed her finger over the bulb, feeling the warmth to make sure the strand was in working order.

“Why do you say that, honey?”

“I sent him to the store with a laundry list of impossible items to get on his own, because it’s a pain in the ass for me to navigate in this weather. The dog’s gotten out twice now because I can’t see how he’s getting out of the yard. He missed Thanksgiving because of me...” Her voice broke.

Keith cleared his throat. “We’re not talking about that now, you hear? You did what you thought was right at the time, and you’re both safe and sound at home. No reason to let those monsters haunt you anymore.” Neither of them wanted to get into *that* story of the past month of their lives. “Now, Scott’s gonna find your pooch, so like you said, let’s get this tree finished as a nice surprise before he gets home. Sound good?”

She nodded. “Sounds perfect.”

The two of them worked in silence for a few moments, pulling lights out of the boxes.

“You know, this is technically my first tree,” she told Keith as she snaked the lights around the branches.

“You never had one growing up?”

“Christmas was much more of my dad’s thing.” Her dad had died when she was seven. Her mom kinda gave up after that. “I would help my mother decorate, but things were just never the same once Dad died. Then I went to college and moved in with you...” She grimaced. “You were always such a diva with your tree.”

“Says the girl who made her man go to like five stores today in freezing rain.”

She chuckled. “I think it was only two stores.” But still, he had a point. She felt so guilty that he was the one that had to go do all the shopping this close to Christmas. If she could, she would have gladly done all the shopping and saved him that headache.

Both of them working together had the lights strung and ornaments hung in no time. Along with the hot cocoa, Scott had also picked up some apple cider, and she had it boiling on the stove.

“It smells so good. Like total Christmas in here.” Tori lifted her nose and took a big whiff. “Please tell me the tree doesn’t look like a blind woman decorated it.” She chuckled.

“Well, a blind woman did decorate it.”

“You know what I mean, Keith.”

“Honey, it looks gorgeous. I promise. Totally earthy and crunchy granola, like you. Of course with all the hemp ornaments, pine cones, and burlap, it would be much more fitting if it was a marijuana plant...” He giggled as she elbowed him in the side.

“Hell, with the day we’ve had I’d light that fucker up and inhale deep.”

They both busted up laughing as the front door opened. Scott’s heavy footsteps hit her ears followed by claws skittering across the floor. “Kahn!” Tori shouted hearing the jangle of his tags. She bent down to the ground as the dog hopped in her lap, licking her cheek. “Mamma was so worried about you. I’m sorry I yelled at you, boy.” She rubbed him, happy tears trickling down her cheeks to his fur.

“A family a few blocks over found him. They were loading him in the car to take him to the vet to scan for his chip as I drove by,” Scott told her.

She heard him drop his keys to the table, followed by a flop as he fell into the sofa with a heavy breath.

She stood and walked over and sat next to him, rubbing his leg. "I'm sorry it's been such a shitty day. Would you like some hot cider?"

"I'd love some." He kissed her cheek. "Mind adding a little Jack Daniels to it for me?" He let out a wry chuckle as she walked to the kitchen.

"You got it, baby." She went to the kitchen and filled up a mug and added a little Jack as requested. When she walked back into the living room, she could hear keys jangling.

"I'm gonna head out, let you two try and salvage your day," Keith said. "Jonathan and I have a date with the Nutcracker."

"Is that the ballet, or a euphemism?" Scott giggled like a kid. "Because if it's the latter, it sounds painful."

"Well, you know I do like it rough." Keith cackled. Finally, after he caught his breath he replied, "Seriously though, would you two like to tag along? I think we can get a couple more tickets. We've got a box..."

"No!" they both shouted simultaneously.

"Fine, you uncultured swine's. Enjoy your whiskey and hemp Christmas tree."

"Thanks for coming, Keith," Tori said as she snuggled next to Scott. Kahn jumped up and curled up next to her as well. The door shut, and they both sat there for some time in silence.

"The tree looks great, baby."

"Really?" She pulled from his embrace and turned to him. "I was afraid you'd hate it. I was quite the brat today with my list of demands."

"Am I one to spare your feelings?"

"You do tend to be my biggest fan, and harshest critic." A thin smile tugged at her lips.

"It's not quite the tree I had growing up, but that's ok." He patted her on the thigh. "It's ours."

"You know, I've never fucked under a Christmas tree." She giggled and climbed on top of his lap, grazing his neck with her lips. "Ironically considering I'm such a ho, ho, ho..."

He chuckled but she could hear him wince as he tensed up under her. He gently grabbed her by the waist and pulled her off his lap. "Baby, I don't think I've ever turned you down once in the past ten years, but today my

body has been through the wringer. I literally cannot handle sex at the moment.”

She palmed his cheek, rubbing her hands over his whiskers. “Back rub instead?”

A pleased moan rumbled in his throat. “That would be the best gift ever.”

CHAPTER

three

Scott awoke that night, yawned, and rolled over, feeling for Tori. All his hand found was empty sheets. He opened his eyes and peered over at the clock. 3:40 a.m. “Tori?” he called out but was met with silence.

He huffed, flipped off the covers and grabbed his crutches to go search for her. When he got to the hallway, he could hear music and commotion coming from her studio.

What the fuck?

The door was partially open. He pushed it the rest of the way and peered inside. Guns and Roses, “Sweet Child of Mine” was playing through her speakers, and blank canvas sat on the easel in the corner. His girl was slumped down, leaning against the wall with her knees tucked to her chest, crying and mouthing the words to the song.

“Baby?” He inched closer to her. “What’s wrong?”

She turned toward him and wiped her cheeks. “He’s gone. My dad is gone,” she breathed between sobs.

Scott turned off the music, dropped his crutches to the ground and slid down the wall next to her. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead. “I know baby, I’m sorry.”

Christmas had to be drudging up a bunch of memories for her. That afternoon, after the chaos of the day, they’d shared some of their stories. Him much more than her, since she didn’t have many she wished to share. Thus the reason he wanted to make this holiday special.

She lifted her head up and shook it no. “No, he’s *gone*, Scott.” She tapped her temple and her chest began to heave as she struggled to breathe. He could feel the volcano about to burst. “I can’t pull up his face.” Her sobs grew louder.

Fuck. Blindness was such a punch in the gut at times. He closed his eyes and gripped her tighter—his heart shattering for her. He didn’t have a

clue what to say. “It will come to you, just give it time.” He had no idea if what he was saying had any truth to it.

“I’ve been sitting in here for hours trying, Scott. It’s like someone took an eraser and smudged it—he’s all blurry in my head.” She pulled back, wiped her nose and leaned her head against the wall. “I knew this would happen over time. They warned me when I was back in rehab that images in my head would fade and distort. I just didn’t expect it to happen with someone I’d loved so much.” Tears rolled down her cheeks as she sobbed harder. “Scott, I’m scared. What if I start to forget more? What if I forget you?” She reached out and caressed his cheek. Her eyes danced up and down him in desperation to try and grab onto something.

“I’ve got you.” He clutched her hands tight, kissing her knuckles, then wrapped her back up in his embrace. Her heart was pounding out of her chest and her breathing was out of control.

He had to get her to calm down. *Think, think, think.*

“Try not to think about your dad for a minute. Clear your mind and think of something easier.” He thought about it for a minute and his mind went back to their walk in the National Mall months ago, the first time they’d met up after she’d lost her vision.

This used to be my favorite place in the city. During shit days at work I would just come here and sit, look at the pool, and think for a while.

“Think about the National Mall, and the reflecting pool. You’re sitting there, on a bench, looking out at the water. Are you there?”

“Yes.” She nodded taking in a breath.

“Tell me about it.” He rubbed her arm.

“It’s fall. The leaves are changing around the Tidal Basin. The sunrise is coming beyond the horizon and giving off an orange glow, reflecting in the water—like a colorful watercolor.”

“Good.” He thought for another minute. “Ok, you get up and go to lunch. You meet Jane. You’re sitting across the table from her. What does she look like?” Scott knew from Tori’s explanation that Jane looked more like their dad than she did, and he figured as much after seeing their mother, whom she favored.

“Her hair is pulled half-way back. She never takes the time to mess with it because it’s so curly. It’s darker than mine—closer to brown, but not quite. I’d call it honey-colored. Some of the messy curls fall into her face, landing on her cheek.” Her brow furrowed, and he could see the wheels

turning in her head. “She’s got those plump, apple cheeks with the dimples that get all round when she smiles. Her smile is wide, and slightly crooked—kinda like mine. She’s animated, talks with her facial expressions when her mouth isn’t open with incessant chatter.” She made a silly face.

“Yes. You two have *very* similar expressions.” He laughed.

“Her eyes are the same color as mine, blue, but I think they’re warmer, not in color, just the way that she is.” She shrugged. “It’s more of a kindness feeling that comes through, because Jane has a sweetness I don’t quite possess.” She snorted. “Her nose is different, not big, just its own thing. Little bit larger than mine with that slight bump in the middle. Jane always hated it, said she should get a nose job.” Tori shrugged, “I always thought it made her look more interesting.”

“Yeah her nose is different. Yours looks like your moms,” he said, trying to pull her there. *So Jane’s must look like....*

“Yeah, she has Dad’s nose.”

Atta girl.

Tori stood and a look of calming recognition washed over her face. She went to the closet, reached up into the top and ran her hands across the braille labels on the boxes. “I do have one photo of my dad. I swiped it from my grandma’s nursing home when we went there to visit—right before she died...I shoved it in my backpack when my mom wasn’t looking. I always kept it hidden, and honestly, I’d forgotten I had it over the years. I need to give it to Jane...”

She eventually found the box she was searching for. She yanked it off the shelf and sat back on the floor next to him. “Will you help me find it?”

He opened up the box jammed full of old photos. “You got it.”

“It’s a high school photo. It’s not quite how I remember him—but it may help.”

He started thumbing through the box of photos. He’d never seen any of Tori that young. There were several when she was about nine with long, blond hair and chubby cheeks. “Good grief this proves how much Hannah looks like you.” He stopped and stared at one of the images, grinning at how much Jane’s daughter, Tori’s niece, looked like her.

She chuckled. “Jane always said Hannah looked more like my kid than hers.”

He continued to leaf through the photos. It was easy to see they didn’t have much growing up. The girl’s clothes had seen better days and the run-

down apartments in the background broke his heart. He saw some of Tori's high school photos and laughed at the barely there bandana shirt she was wearing. "Nice bandana shirt and flared jeans."

She grinned and shrugged. "I'll have you know they were all the rage in nineteen ninety-nine."

"Still hot—even back then." He flipped through several more of the photos and found a few of Tori in track in high school. One made him bust a gut laughing. "Ah! That goth phase you told me about! No wonder you kept this box hidden from me." He was laughing so much that tears were rolling down his face. There was his girl—black lipstick, dyed blood-red hair, and the darkest eyeliner he'd ever seen. Even her clothes were all black.

She grimaced. "I like to pretend that phase never happened."

"You should have seen me in high school," he huffed. "I didn't hit my Harris growth spurt until almost the end of my junior year. I shot up like six inches that summer and built muscle, finally. Talk about having a hard time in high school. I was in ROTC, skinny, had braces, and played in a dorky band in my garage."

She beamed. "I bet the girls eventually took notice of you senior year."

"Yeah, that was a good summer for me. I came back pretty ripped my senior year. Finally got laid." He chuckled.

They sat there quiet for a few more minutes as he flipped through a few more of the photos. "Found it, I think." He held in his hands a senior photo that was obviously taken way before the rest. "Early eighties, curly, very dark blond hair. Jane's color—honey as you called it. Thick tie, blue suit, and definitely Jane's nose."

"Yeah that's it. Square jaw?"

"Yup. Green eyes," he said looking at the aged photo. "Wide, like yours. Same shape, just a different color," Scott remarked. "Actually, you look more like him than you think you do. He was a good-looking guy."

He turned his gaze toward Tori, evaluating her expression. She didn't seem sad, and he was thankful for that. A peaceful smile rested on her face. "He had long hair, like all those big hair bands he loved. Guns and Roses... Poison...Motley Crew..." She chuckled. "Thus the reason for the music to try and jar my memory. All I could keep seeing in my head was Bon Jovi."

Scott looked at the photo. "A little longer hair and a bandana, I could almost see that a bit." He rubbed her leg. "Tell me more about him."

“Well, like I told you his name was Christopher. He was in a band on the weekends when he wasn’t working construction during the week.” She leaned her head on the wall and sighed dreamily. “He was artistic—like me. Music was his medium, but he taught me to draw. He was always a bit wild, rock-and-roll, but a good dad. He used to play that Warrant song for me, Heaven.”

“I don’t need to be the king of the world, as long as I’m the hero of this little girl, heaven isn’t too far away,” Scott belted out the lyrics to the song.

“Yes! That one.” A megawatt grin passed over her face as she clutched her chest. “God baby, you’ve got such a great voice. Promise me, if we ever have a little girl you’ll sing it to her? I’d love to carry that on and tell her about her grandfather that used to sing it to me.”

He stroked her cheek. The fact that she was talking about this was good. She was healing from her scarred past, one day at a time. “I promise,” he vowed.

“I can see him now.” She tapped her temple. “Thank you for helping me remember.” She leaned forward and kissed him sweetly.

Scott put the photos back in the box, placing the one of her dad on top, eying it one last time. He thought about his family, his mom, and dad, his siblings, and now Tori. He imagined the despair he’d feel if not only he could not see them again, but if he forgot what they looked like. He swallowed a lump in his throat. *Fuck blindness. I won’t let it erase her memories.* He would do everything in his power to never let her forget.

He’d been struggling trying to figure out what to get her for Christmas. There seemed to be nothing she wanted—they had plenty of money for anything they needed. He knew right then and there what he was going to get her for Christmas.

Tomorrow he’d make a few phone calls and put the plan in motion. “Ready to head back to bed?”

She stood and helped him stand. “Yes.”

They crawled into bed and she snuggled in next to him, her fingers trailed across his chest. “I love you, Scott. More than anything.”

CHAPTER

four

Monday rolled around, and Tori went back to work. She'd been out the past several weeks due to personal and medical issues, but she was ready to dig back into her job and hit the ground running.

After her meltdown over her father her sole mission at work was to make the museum more accessible and enjoyable to people with visual impairments.

She'd finally contacted a 3D printing company based out of New York that had been perfecting turning 2D photographs into 3D tactile art.

The CEO, Arthur told her they'd spent years on this project and were looking for more financial backing to help bring this abroad to museums and cultural institutions, "But right now we've been too under-funded to make that dream a reality," Arthur's thick, Brooklyn accent rang through the line.

"That's what I'm hoping to change," Tori explained. "With the backing of the Smithsonian Institution I'd like to rally to get you the funding that this properly deserves."

A knock came at her office door. "Excuse me a moment." She pressed the mute button.

"Victoria, can I get a word with you when you're off the phone?" It was her director, Natalie.

"Sure Nat. Let me just finish up this call and I'll be right there."

She pressed the button to un-mute the line. "Sorry about that, as you were saying?"

"We've reached out to the institution in the past after tests with blind subjects in New York went well with the trial prints, but they were not ready to back the project on a wide scale just yet."

"Well, I'd like to start by hosting a benefit locally." She went on to tell the representative that she'd been in contact with the National Federation of the Blind. "I want to schedule a trip to New York after the first of the year

and bring a rep from the NFB with me. After that we reach out to government officials. I can be quite a squeaky wheel.”

“Well, I like where you’re going with this,” Arthur replied. “I’ll have my secretary contact you and we’ll set up a time to meet.”

“Sounds great. Thanks for your time, Arthur.” Tori hung up the phone. She stood and grabbed her cane that was propped against the wall and went down the hall to Natalie’s office and knocked.

“Come on in, Victoria. Shut the door please.” Nat’s normal, chipper voice dropped an octave. Something about that tone caused a shiver to run up her spine.

“Sure.” She shut the door behind her. “What’s wrong?” she asked as she reached for the chair and sat.

Heavy breath from Nat followed by a tick in the back of her throat. This was *not* good. Tori’s heart rapped against her chest.

“Listen Victoria, there’s no easy way to say this...”

Her mouth went very dry. “Are you firing me?” she croaked.

“We’re moving Alex into your position.”

“My intern, Alex?” Her brain was having a hard time processing this.

“Victoria, listen—”

“Is this about the amount of work I’ve missed?” Her ears grew warm. “I know I’ve had some medical issues, but you can’t just fire me because I have a disability. There are rules, the ADA...”

“The American’s with Disabilities Act states you have to still be able to do the job. Victoria, you have to admit, you have not been doing the job we hired you to do.”

She was rendered speechless, something that rarely happened.

“Alex has been taking on the majority of your responsibilities.” Her voice softened. “We hired you to be a curator, not an accessibility consultant. What you’re doing is honorable work, and I support it one hundred percent. It’s obvious that you’re passionate about it and I love that you’ve still found a calling artistically. But it just doesn’t fall under the lines of the job description for this particular museum. I’ve reached out to the institution to see if they have a spot better suited for you there. We are *not* firing you. All we’re asking is that maybe you take a sabbatical until—”

“Until you can figure out what to do with me.” They may have not been firing her, but it sure as hell felt that way. Tori lifted her chin and stood.

“Victoria, please don’t make this harder than it is. You have to understand you’re a blind woman working in the arts. There are places for you, it just isn’t here. I need someone with vision to curate.”

“No what you mean to say is you need someone with sight.” She stood and extended her cane, turning her back to Natalie. “Don’t mistake the two. Sight and vision are *not* the same thing. I have far more vision now than I ever did before,” she said over her shoulder. “I’ll pack up my office and go. Merry Christmas, Natalie.” She tapped her way out of the office, slamming the door behind her.



Scott’s phone vibrated on the wooden counter and Tori’s image flashed on the screen. He swiped to ignore it for the moment because he didn’t want to explain to his girl why he was in a noisy bar, in the middle of the afternoon, on a Monday. He texted her back and looked back up to the man sitting across from him in the small bar.

Scott: In an important meeting, I’ll call you back in a bit.

Tori: Don’t worry about it. Just wanted to let you know I’m heading home for the day. I’ll grab an Uber.

He frowned, unsure what that was about. She seemed excited to finally head back to work. He figured he was gonna have to drag her kicking and screaming out of the museum at five o’clock.

He looked back up at the owner of the small bar in Baltimore. “As I was saying, Christopher Johnson had a band that used to play here back in the early nineties, ninety-three specifically. I was wondering if you could get me in contact with any of the other band members.” Scott had recruited his close friend, work colleague and his go-to girl on geeky stuff, Presley, to do some digging for him.

It had taken Pres no time to dig up tax info showing checks paid to Tori’s dad at his former construction company. No reporting on the bar,

which Scott figured was a cash-only gig. Thankfully, the construction company had grown substantially over the years. If Christopher Johnson was still alive, he probably would have had a very stable job. The owner of the company had remembered Tori's father. "Such a shame, he was a helluva worker," the owner had told Scott on the phone earlier. "Funny guy, and talented too. Always kept the guys entertained by breaking into song. Even sung on the weekends in this bar, us guys would go watch his gigs..."

That tip right there had led Scott to the small bar in Baltimore where Tori's dad used to play. Now he was sitting here, talking to the owner, and hoping for a little Christmas miracle. "He was my fiancée's father," Scott continued. "He passed years ago, and I'm trying to find any videos, memorabilia..."

"Listen, man, I'm sorry." The owner frowned. "I took ownership of this place eight years ago. I was a freshman in high school in ninety-three."

"What about the former owner?"

"Passed. Sorry, man, I wish I could help you."

Well, damn. At least part one of his Christmas present was in the works thanks to a phone call to Keith, who was calling in some favors. Part two was a long shot, at best. "Thanks anyway." Scott slid some cash across the bar, covering his drink along with a generous tip, and stood.

As he walked out the man sitting two stools over tugged on his arm, stopping him. "Did I hear you correct? Did you say Christopher Johnson?" The man's words slurred through his dry, cracked lips.

Scott's eyes narrowed. "Yeah."

The man wagged a finger and staggered as he tried to stand. "I think I can help you out."

Scott snorted. "How so?" He was fairly certain this guy was a drunk only looking for a handout. Especially considering the fact he couldn't stand up straight and from the stench coming off him, Scott suspected the man hadn't bathed in days.

The man scratched his unkempt beard, coughed into his wrinkled hand, then threw some cash on the counter. His beady, brown eyes met Scott's. "Because I was his bass player in the band."



Tori went home, changed into sweatpants, then locked herself in her studio. She flipped on the stereo as loud as she could. Before long the music worked its magic and the melodies pouring through the speakers lit a fire within her soul.

Through a tear-streaked face she sang, placing layer after layer of impasto and modeling paste onto the canvas.

As the songs played, they each emitted a color of their own, depending on the melody, or the mood. She'd pick her color based on the song—using her braille labeled paint—and apply it on the canvas where her instinct told her it belonged.

The longer she painted her instinct also told her another thing. Every painful step, every windy road on her journey in life had led her to that moment in time—where for the first time she was proud of everything she was. She could now speak freely about everything. Her mother, her father... No more monsters. No more demons buried. Those were finally gone. The tears of sadness turned into ones of joy, and freedom. Suddenly, she was glad she wasn't sitting in her stuffy office. Her hands were creating again, pouring life onto canvas.

She didn't need a career to make her feel powerful; she was powerful. She had the love of a man who made her feel like she could take on the world—and she knew that together, they would.

This was exactly where she was supposed to be.



Scott would consider himself a pretty smart guy, and an excellent judge of character. Which is why it made no damn sense that he followed the drunken man—whose name he'd learned was Elliott—to his shady apartment complex around the corner. This was definitely something his reckless bride-to-be would do that would cause him to blow a gasket.

The man filled his ears with stories along the walk about how they were going to make it big someday, that was until their lead singer, Chris—Tori's dad—was killed. "We split up after that." The man unlocked his door and went inside. "You coming in?"

Scott stood at the doorway and assessed the place before entering. It was a small studio apartment—no place to have hidden rooms with freezers full of severed heads. The man was just an old drunk, and harmless—especially to a man of his size.

"So you mean to tell me you've just hung out at this bar for the past twenty-three years?" His brow raised as he walked in and shut the door.

Elliott shrugged. "Let's just call a spade a spade. I'm a drunk, washed-up, old musician who's done nothing with his life. Where else was I supposed to go?"

He scratched his temple. "I wasn't judging..."

Elliott wagged his finger in Scott's direction. "You were thinking it, don't lie." He shrugged. "I am what I am." He shuffled over to a dusty shelf and reached up, pulling a box down. He blew the dust off the lid and placed it on his worn coffee table. "Sit." Elliott nodded to the threadbare sofa as he lit up a cigarette.

Just great. He rolled his eyes. Tori was gonna rip into his ass for smelling like smoke.

Scott sat on the edge of the cushion, leaning his elbows on his knees as Elliott fished through the box, cigarette dangling from his lip. The man then pulled out a large, manila, envelope and slid it across the table. Scrawled on the yellowed paper were the words *Seldom Spiral*, which he could only assume was the band name. He emptied the contents over the wood and stared. One cassette tape labeled with the same band name and the word "demo", along with several photos that looked semi-professional—that Scott assumed were used for promotional shots. There was even a VHS tape in the mix of items. One thing stuck out to him more than anything, and that was their lead singer. He only had the one photo from last night to compare, but there was no mistaking that it was Tori's father.

God, he wished that Tori could see the photos, and watch the footage, but at least he held an actual tape of Tori's dad singing in his hands. He prayed it wasn't damaged and that he could pull something useful from them. "Can I borrow these to copy? I'll pay you and bring them back, I can give you my number." He fished for his wallet.

Elliot raised his hands and shook his head. "Take them. They're yours. Chris would've wanted his girls to have them." He scratched his wrinkled forehead with the hand holding the smoldering cigarette. "Tori and Jane, right? I remember those girls. They'd come sit in the garage and listen to us while we jammed. Last time I saw them was at Chris' funeral. I tried to contact Maureen several months later, to give them this stuff, but they'd moved with no forwarding address." He frowned. "Which one are you marrying?"

Scott grinned. "Tori."

"Ah, she was the spitfire."

"Still is." Scott's eyes widened, and he chuckled. He fished out his phone and for the next thirty minutes he showed Elliott photos of Tori, and even some of Jane and her kids, while they swapped stories.

Finally, Scott checked his watch and stood. "Listen, I gotta go." He pulled out his wallet and fished for some cash. "I'd like to give you something for your trouble." He knew that Elliott was probably gonna blow the dough on booze or something worse, but that wasn't any of Scott's business.

"No. I don't want the money." He pushed Scott's hand away. "I don't need any of this stuff. Haven't looked at it in years. Surprised I even kept it, but every time I went to toss it, I felt as if this force was stopping me." He grinned. "I guess now I know why."

"Thank you, so very much." Scott grabbed the items, shook Elliott's hand and went on his way.

CHAPTER

five

Tori finished recapping her day to Scott when he arrived home. “It’s hard enough to make a graceful exit when you’ve been let go, and even more so when you’re blind. There was no way I was gonna pack up my office and try and make my way out of there with a box. I don’t need any damn more pity than what I get on a normal day.” She took a sip of her wine then sat it on the coffee table. “Thankfully, Keith is going to bring me my things. I just had to get out of there.”

“God. Fuck them.” He wrapped his arms around her, squeezing a little too hard due to his outrage for her. “Baby, I’m so fucking sorry. I should’ve answered my phone.”

“It’s fine. You were busy.” She shook her head and chuckled as she pulled back from his embrace. “I’m not sorry. I realized something today. I’m exactly where I want to be.

“You’re taking this very well,” he huffed.

Better than him. She could practically feel the heat from the blood sizzling in his veins for her.

“I feel like walking in there and giving them a piece of my mind,” he growled.

“I don’t want to make this a big deal and spoil our holiday. The last thing I need is the big, bad, bear going in there and roaring at them.” She frowned. “I was mad at first, but once I came home and really thought about it, I’m at peace with it all. I swear to you I’m not just saying that. I think this was a blessing in disguise. I can focus on what really matters to me now. I don’t need to work for the money.” Scott made plenty to support them both, and she had her accident settlement. “It sounds like they’ll keep me on as a consultant which is really better anyway.” She shrugged. “The Hirshhorn has always been good to me and let’s face it—I’ve been a very shitty employee at times. As much as I hate to admit it, Natalie is right. I can’t curate anymore, and it was silly of me to try. Alex was taking on that

part of the job, so he deserves it. I need to be realistic about what I'm capable of."

His hand palmed her cheek. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"Eh, I'm mildly cool at best." She wiggled her shoulders and took another sip of wine. "Now, enough about me. How was your day?"

"It was fine." He stood and she could hear him dropping logs into the fireplace. A few moments later the strike of a match hit and the rushing sound of the fire roared to life. He came back over and sat next to her as soft, Christmas music began to play in the background. "Nothing too interesting." She sensed a slight pinch in his tone.

"Were you smoking today?" Her brow furrowed. He was holding back something. That, plus the fact that he reeked of cigarettes, was making her bullshit meter go off.

"No. I promise you, I was not smoking. I had a meeting in Baltimore today and the dude I was with was smoking." He leaned in and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

She believed him. She only smelled it on his clothes, nothing on his breath but the sting of his whiskey, and god, how she loved the taste of that on his lips.

"I should probably go make dinner," she moaned as he nibbled on her bottom lip. She parted her mouth wider and his tongue lapped over hers as he tugged on the back of her neck.

"Fuck dinner," he growled in her ear. His tongue played and tangled with hers for some time.

"Yes. Fuck dinner," she agreed. Dinner could wait, all she was hungry for was him. She rubbed her hands over the bulge in his pants. "You good to go today?"

"Oh, I'm good, baby." He chuckled, the vibration of his deep timbre tickled her ear.

With a swift yank on her legs, she was flat on her back, sprawled across the sofa. She clawed at her zipper and shimmied her jeans down. With a swift tug, he pulled them off the rest of the way.

His lips crushed to hers again, teeth practically crashing at the rate they were devouring each other. One by one her fingers fumbled across his buttons, ready to just rip the damn shirt off him so she could feel his skin. Finally, she reached the last one and his chest was out of the captivity of the

starch shirt. She ran her fingers over each ripple of his chest, taking in that glorious body of his.

She tugged her own shirt off over her head and discarded it to the floor. He trailed soft kisses down her belly, hooking his finger around the crotch of her panties. His warm breath tickled her thigh as he looped her leg over his shoulder, then he went in for the kill.

“Oh god, yes,” she gasped as his tongue hit. Soft moans rolled through her lips as he spun his tongue in swirls, alternating the speed. Just as she would get close to the edge, he’d back down. It went on like this for what felt like an eternity—working her into a frenzy.

Her fingers laced through his hair, tugging on his locks, pulling him farther into her. “Baby, make me come,” she begged for release. “Please, baby, make me come.”

“You got it,” he mumbled as he suckled her clit. One finger went in, then two and his rhythm increased as he steadily finger-fucked her, pressing on her g-spot. Her core tightened, and her thighs clenched, feeling her climax draw close. Finally, she fell over the edge, waves of pleasure and electricity shooting through her body. “Oh fuck yes!” she yelled.

“That’s it, scream for me, baby. I love watching you cum.”



After she was sated, he flipped his pint-sized princess over the arm of the sofa, ass up in the air. Dropping his pants to his ankles, he stood behind her, tugging on his aching cock, admiring his view.

He spread her cheeks wide.

“You gonna fuck my tight, little ass?” she asked.

His eyes rolled back in his head. That filthy mouth of hers drove him wild. “As tempting as that offer is, I’m saving that for Christmas.” He chuckled as he slid inside her soaking-wet pussy and began to thrust.

“Harder,” she moaned.

“You got it.” He grabbed her tiny waist and pulled her into him, again and again. The glow of the fire in and the twinkling lights danced off her

smooth skin, creating such a beautiful image for his eyes to feast upon. He pulled her in tighter, digging his fingers into the flesh of her ass. “God, you’re so beautiful.”

He slowed down his pace, trying to hold on to the last bit of pleasure for a little longer. She pushed her ass into him and clenched, sending him over the edge. His body shook and quivered as his orgasm ripped through him. “Oh fuck yes,” he groaned. One final jerk came and he spilled every last drop into her.

He pulled his pants up as she wandered into the bathroom to clean up. She waltzed back out, still nude, and once again he was smitten by her beauty. He loved the way she looked right after sex, with the slightly smudged makeup and wild waves falling in her face.

“Come here, pretty.” He pulled her close and they fell into the sofa. He covered their naked bodies with a soft blanket and just enjoyed the peacefulness of the moment. The glow of the fire, the soft music in the background and the twinkling lights on the tree, and her warm body snuggled in next to him.

CHAPTER

six

Tori stood next to their friend, Presley, in her studio waiting for her to respond. The fact that Pres was so quiet was unnerving. During the past week and a half of her sabbatical she'd painstakingly worked on this present for Scott, and now she feared she was going to have to come up with another option.

"Ok, say something, anything. You being quiet is making me nervous." Tori cringed. "Please don't be nice about it. I need a no bullshit answer. If it's a piece of shit, just say it's a piece of shit. I can handle it."

"It so isn't a piece of shit," Presley finally breathed.

"Honestly?" She wrung her hands in a sweat of panic.

"You made this in like a week?"

"Yup." She only worked on it when Scott was out of the house, because she wanted to surprise him. She finally got the point she felt it was complete, so she called Presley over to look.

"It's breathtaking. I'm not shitting you, Tori. I have no idea how you fucking did this," she gushed.

"I used different mediums to add texture and carve it first. I went from memory what I thought it should look like. Does it really look like a bear?"

"Yes, it sure does. I love how it isn't brown. The fact that it's full of different colors, it's just mesmerizing. You put sighted painters to shame. I'm not kidding you." Presley gave her a big hug. "Please don't take this the wrong way, I've seen the stuff you did before and it's excellent, but I honest to God think this is your best work. You put your soul into this—and it shows. Scott's gonna fucking love it."

Tori pulled back. "I'm so glad."

"It's like looking through this beautiful rain shower deep romantic reds and oranges," Presley continued to gush over the piece. "Almost like looking at it underwater, or through colored glass. How did you even know what the colors were?"

“I have all the paints labeled in braille, but I used oil paint which all has a different texture, so I could feel the difference on the canvas when mixing the colors.”

She chuckled. “That sounds messy.”

“I’ve been smuggling towels out of here into the dumpster like a madwoman. I’m worried my neighbors think I’m a crazy serial killer who dismembers bodies—walking out there with red paint all over me, carrying out trash bags.”

Presley busted out laughing. “Scott doesn’t know? How does he not know?”

“Well, he’s at work during the day so now that I’m unemployed I’ve got nothing but time...”

“I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to...” her voice dropped an octave.

“It’s fine. It’s the truth.” She shrugged and snorted. “Anyhow. If he does know, he’s being kind and not saying anything. He stays out of here and lets me do my thing. Nothing of his is in here. I swap out the canvas for another one I’m working on,” she used her fingers as air quotes, “when he comes home and stash this one in the closet.”

“You’re a little evil genius.” She gave Tori another squeeze. “Scott’s gonna love this, it’s perfect.”

“Good. Now help me get this back in the closet before he gets home,” Tori said.

Presley helped her stash it back in the closet. “Where did he go anyway? Don’t we have a movie to catch soon?”

They’d pre-purchased their tickets to the newest *Star Wars* movie, *Rogue One*. It was better for them to get the assigned seating not only due to the crowd, but also because they had to pick a theater that had audio description.

“I have no idea,” Tori said as she shut the closet door. “He said he needed to run to the store for something and he’d be right back. We’ll leave as soon as he gets here. Keith and Jonathan are meeting us at the theater.” She went downstairs and Presley followed with Kahn on their heels, like usual. The dog had been glued to her side all day, every day. Their pooch seemed to enjoy having his mamma at home.

“I like your shirt, by the way. Nerdy as hell.” Presley chuckled.

She was wearing a baseball tee with the rebel insignia on it that said, “Join the Resistance.” At least that’s how it was described to her by the

sales associate. She bought Scott a matching one. His was black with just a red, distressed, rebel logo

“Ooh, that reminds me, I bought you something!” Tori dug under the tree and felt for the bag, double checking her braille label.

“Me?”

“Early Christmas present. You can wear it tonight if you want.” She held out the bag.

She waited with a grin on her face as the bag rustled. “Oh my...” Presley chuckled. “This is fantastic.” She cleared her throat and dropped her voice, “I find your lack of pride disturbing,” she feigned her best Darth Vader impression.

“The guy in the store said it had that phrase with the rainbow pride colors embedded into the *Star Wars* font. Please tell me I didn’t fuck it up.”

“Yup, that’s exactly what it is!”

“I bought Keith and Jonathan one too. Keith’s says, ‘Come to the gay side we have rainbows’ and Jonathan’s is light sabers that make up the pride flag. Sadly, no *Star Wars* themed disability pride shirts for Scott and I, so we get to be boring.” She rubbed her hands over her shirt.

“We should make some and market them. I mean, you’ve got time on your hands, right? I dabble in Photoshop. With your creative genius and me manning the wheel we could come up with some stuff.”

Tori squealed and clapped her hands. “Ooh! I love that idea! We could donate some of the proceeds to charity!”

“Ok Miss Moneybags.” Presley snorted. “But can we maybe start with the Presley needs a new car charity?”

“Um, yeah...sure.” Tori was a bit befuddled by her response. She knew that Scott made an ass-ton on his contracts, so she assumed Pres was just as well off. As she filed that away to ask Scott about later the door squeaked open. About two seconds later Scott started humming the *Star Wars* tune.

“You guys ready?” he asked, sounding so excited.

“Absolutely.” She grinned, loving how much of a big kid he was.



“Just use your disabled sticker,” Presley groaned from the back seat of the jeep as Scott made another loop around the packed parking lot. “Scott, we’ve circled the lot like ten times.”

Tori turned toward her. “He won’t do it. It’s like this every damn time.”

She understood his reasoning why. His fear was that someone worse off than them would come along with a wheelchair that absolutely needed the extra wide space. But the reality was they were entitled to a spot just as much as any other disabled person.

“I can just drop you two off at the front, find a spot then meet up with you.”

“Scott, you’re being ridiculous,” Presley huffed.

“Not when there is only one disabled spot left. If there were several, it would be different.”

“You’re legally entitled to that space. You’ve got one leg and Tori’s blind. Just use it.”

Tori groaned inwardly, exhausted of the two of them bickering. Those two may have not been blood related, but they sure argued like brother and sister. “Baby, at this juncture I agree with Presley.” She squeezed his thigh.

“Fine. I’ll use the damn spot.” The jeep made a sharp turn and a few seconds later came to a halt. Another few seconds and his door slammed as he got out.

God, the man could be moody and irritable at times. *And they say girls are the bitchy ones.* She grabbed the handle and climbed out of the jeep. A moment later Scott’s arm met hers. Before she could even pull her cane out of her purse, she heard murmurs coming from a group nearby.

“Hey shit-head, park in the next lot over like the rest of us!” A voice shouted as the rowdy group passed them by.

“See my point?” Scott grumbled.

A low growl hummed in Tori’s throat. *Fuck that bullshit.*

“Hey fucker,” she hollered in their general direction.

“Tori not now...” Scott warned as she reached in her purse and flipped open her cane.

She was too fired up to heed his warning and ranted on. “Before you speak, maybe you take a good look at who’s around you.” She tapped her cane into the asphalt for good measure.

“What did you say?” Footsteps came back their direction. “You’re obviously not the one driving, are your legs broke too, bitch?” the words slurred out of the mans lips.

Uh oh. She’d obviously picked a fight with a drunk person. Scott probably figured that out far before she did, thus the warning to back down.

“You’re over the line, man. Just turn around...” Scott’s voice was calm and steady, but Tori knew he was boiling from the way his arm tensed under her grasp. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“You’re picking a fight with the wrong strangers,” Presley chimed in. Tori could only imagine how intimidating the two of them looked side by side. Presley was more inked than her man, and a force to be reckoned with. The two of them had to of looked like two, tatted up, brunette beasts. Someone would have to be suicidal, *or drunk*, to try and take those two on.

A snort came from their aggressor. “Fine,” he relented. “But you may want to keep that woman of yours under control.” His footsteps faded and Tori let out the shaky breath she’d been holding in.

“You and your goddamn mouth,” Scott said as they began strolling. “You’re gonna get us killed one of these days, babe.”

“I just...” She started to protest but stopped. He had a damn good point. Her mouth did get them in a lot of trouble. The last thing she needed was for him to get into yet another fight defending her honor. “I’m sorry.” Her lip quivered. She felt awful that she almost just ruined their evening. In fact, she felt awful that she kept continually messing up this holiday season.



“Listen, I love the fight in you,” he softened his tone, seeing her wounded expression. “But when I tell you to back down, you need to trust me and back down.” He chuckled. “When it’s the right time for you to fight, you know I’ll throw you in the ring. You have a mean right hook and a vicious bite on you.” He nudged her in the side, trying to lighten the mood.

Every word out of his mouth was the truth. She had fight like no other human he’d ever met. As much trouble as she got them in at times, he loved

it about her. Most people would have crumbled after going through the things she'd been through, but not his girl.

They went to the counter, got their tickets, along with the listening headset for Tori that would give her the audio description.

When they got inside the theater Keith and Jonathan were standing in the foyer waiting on them. "Ok Mister Punctuality. How did I make it here before you?" Keith cocked his head to the side.

"We ran into some parking issues." Presley bobbed her head toward his girl. It was a running joke between them how she was constantly getting them in trouble.

Scott scratched his nose and looked down with a shrug.

Jonathan covered his mouth and stifled a laugh.

"Should have Ubered here like any sane person this time of year. You really need to learn how to live with people on the east coast." Keith smirked looking to Tori.

"You guys are terrible," Tori chimed in. "You all still don't think I can infer that you're making faces at me, but it rings through in your tone, assholes." She offered a thin smile, letting them know there were no hard feelings.

"Hey, I'm not the one that picked a fight with a drunk, college jock in the parking lot." Presley shrugged.

"Oh Vic, you always pick on douchebags twice your size." Keith slung his arm around Tori and planted a peck on her cheek. "That's why I love you so much."

She giggled. "Let's just find our seats."

They found their seats and Scott grimaced realizing the same group of college kids from the parking lot were sitting two rows behind them. Him and the boys exchanged a fevered stare, but no words were had.

"Did you guys wear your shirts?" Tori asked as she settled in with him on her left and Keith to her right.

"Sure did! Thank you for the present." Jonathan leaned across Keith and gave her arm a squeeze.

Tori grinned in satisfaction and cozied into the leather seat. It was cute, her getting excited about the movie. He loved the fact she went out and bought them all shirts.

He feared that movies were terribly boring for her, but she watched them at home without too much complaint. She didn't bat an eye when he

brought up the subject of going. “Of course I want to go!” she’d scoffed at the prospect of missing out on it. “This is a cultural phenomenon, there is no way I’m missing out on this movie.”

Scott had picked the theater with the best sound, because obviously Tori wasn’t going to get anything from the visuals. He called and made sure the theater had audio descriptive headsets as well. He read online from other visually impaired people that the theaters would sometimes say they had them, then they’d show up and it was another story. Thankfully other than the parking lot fiasco, so far, so good.

“These are comfy.” She ran her hands across the smooth, leather seat of the newly remodeled theater.

“They lean back, check it.” He reached over and pressed the button and her chair slowly reclined.

“Mmmmm, nice.” She closed her eyes, folded her hands across her torso and a calm smile fell across her face.

“Don’t you go falling asleep Vic,” Keith hissed from the other side of her and shook her leg.

“I’m not going to fall asleep.” She put on the headphones that connected to the device that would sync the audio description for her.

“No, don’t use those.” Scott pulled her hands down. “I’ve got something better for ya.” He dug into his coat pocket and pulled out his little gift for her—new earbuds. “These babies will let you control how much sound you let in, so you can still get the full effect of the surround sound in here but still listen to the audio description.” He swapped out the low-grade, theater headset for the good earbuds.

“Those are Bose. How much did those set you back?” Presley asked to his left.

“Doesn’t matter.” Scott shook his head.

“Three-hundred dollars,” Jonathan said as he Googled on his phone. Man their friends were nosy.

“For earbuds?” Tori’s jaw went slack.

It was a small price to pay if it helped her enjoy the movie more.

“Isn’t that excessive?” Keith asked.

Scott scowled back at him. “Says the man who buys five-hundred dollar jeans.”

Keith opened his mouth to protest, then shut it quickly. Yeah, the man had no room to talk.

Tori's eyes clouded with moisture as she put in the earbuds and swallowed the lump he could see forming in her throat. She reached over and patted Scott on the jaw. "Thank you." She leaned in and kissed his lips sweetly.

The lights dimmed, and the screen stretched out to widescreen in front of them. "It's starting." He nudged her in the side.

The Dolby Digital preview came on first, which made him giddy. The seats shook and vibrated with each sound that reverberated across the room. Tori let out a small gasp and he turned to look at her. A megawatt grin was plastered across her face, as her hands rubbed the seat, taking in the vibrations.

"You like?" he leaned over and whispered in her ear after the sound demo ended.

"Holy shit! This is fantastic," she said in a low hush as her eyes bulged. "I can feel everything." She groped for his hand. He laced his fingertips with hers and pulled her hand to his lips, kissing it. He lifted the armrest between the seats, pulling her in close. She leaned her head on his shoulder and nestled into him.

As the movie wore on she seemed enthralled. At one point Scott curiously grabbed one of her earbuds and listened for himself, just to see what it was like for her. "Can I try?" Tori nodded, understanding what he was doing. He leaned back and closed his eyes, listening to the smooth voice actors description as the action played out on screen.

The audio track was far more detailed than just stage direction. They did a superb job of painting with words what was happening on screen. The voice over would pop up between dialogue and concluded before essential sound effects, so she wasn't missing any of the good stuff. Scott put the bud gently back into her ear, content she was enjoying the film.

Toward the end of film he looked over and noticed her fiddling with the device.

"What's wrong," he whispered.

"I think the batteries are dead. It stopped working."

He frowned, pulling it from her grasp. Just their luck that it would happen right at a big action sequence. The light was off, so yeah, dead battery would be his best guess. "I'll go get another." He pulled out her earphones and took the crappy theater ones with him.

He walked to guest services. “This is dead. I need another.” He flopped it on the counter and told him the name of the movie and the theater number they were in. After several minutes of fumbling, the teenager employee finally handed it over.

“Sorry about that, sir.”

“No problem.” He tried to not sound irritable, but seriously, how hard was it to make sure these things were ready to go?

He marched back to the theater and sat, handing it over to Tori. “Thanks, babe.” She put the earbuds back in. Scott darted his eyes back to the screen and tried to catch up.

About thirty seconds later she tapped him on the thigh. “Somethings wrong. It’s not the right movie.”

He rubbed his face. “Ok. I’ll be back.”

She pulled him down. “Just forget it. It’s not worth it. It’s almost over anyway.”

“No. I don’t want you to miss it.”

“And I don’t want you to miss it,” she hissed.

“Shut up!” Someone behind them yelled. If Scott was a betting man, he’d put money on the fact it was probably the college douchebag. He grabbed the device from her lap and walked back up to the guest services... again.

The kid’s eyes grew wide as he walked up again. Scott dropped it on the counter with a thud. “You screwed it up. Programmed it to the wrong movie.”

“What theater number was it again?”

“We are watching *Rogue One*, in theater number ten. It’s not freaking rocket science.”

“I’m very sorry, but sir, there is no reason to yell at me.”

Yeah, he had a loud voice, but he was nowhere near yelling.

“Is there a problem?” A female came over with the title of manager on her name tag.

“My fiancée is blind. Her audio descriptive device malfunctioned. Twice.” Scott tried to keep his tone level. “We just want to finish the movie.”

“I’m so sorry, sir.” The manager grabbed the device. “What theater are they in?” She looked to the kid who looked as if he was about to soil himself.

He rolled his eyes and answered for the kid. “Ten.” Which was just about as many times as he’d told them that.

“Here you go. I’ll get you some free passes for your trouble.” She passed him the device along with the free movie vouchers.

Scott put it to his ear and listened to it the rest of the walk back. For one, to make sure it was the right movie, and two, so he could catch some of the action he was missing.

Finally he settled back in. “All fixed.” He plugged her earphones back in and handed them to her.

“I’m so sorry, babe.”

“It’s all good.” He folded his hand into hers and went back to the movie.



“Come on, Vic, say it. You know you want to.” Keith nudged her in the side as they filed out of the theater.

“No, you just want me to say it so you can make fun of me.” She clung to Scott’s arm and kept her cane tucked close as they shuffled through the crowd.

“Come on! Pretty please,” Jonathan begged.

She sighed. “Fine, you crazies.” She cleared her throat. “I am one with the force, the force is with me. I am one with the force, the force is with me.” She repeated the words of the blind monk from the movie.

Their little group erupted in laughter and applause, she even heard a few chuckles from the other movie patrons filing out with them. She grinned. “Happy now?”

“Immensely.” Keith giggled.

“I think we’ve got our slogan for a *Star Wars* disability pride shirt!” Presley added.

“We get it lady, you’re blind,” a voice came from behind them. It sounded like the same guy from the parking lot. Scott had told her he was

two rows behind them. What the fuck was this dude's problem? “Did you have to ruin the movie for everyone else?”

“Woah, man, you just can’t let up, can you?” Presley chimed in.

Scott tensed next to her. “I already warned you once. This is the last time.” The rough, commanding edge to his voice made prickles go up her arm. She did *not* want a fight. Not now. Not days before Christmas.

“What are you gonna do about it?”

They stopped dead in their tracks and he pulled Tori behind him.

This guy had to be more than just drunk to be picking a fight with Scott. A man of his size was *not* to be fucked with. This idiot had a death wish.

“Scott, let it go...” Tori begged. She regretted ever saying anything in the parking lot.

The tension was palpable. She could just imagine the two men, staring each other down in silence. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Scott took her arm and they started walking again.

“Just as I thought,” the man said and they jostled. She could only assume that he shoulder bumped Scott on purpose as he walked by.

“Oh fuck that,” Jonathan growled behind them. “I’ve got this.”

From what Tori had been described, Jonathan was not one to be fucked with either. He wasn’t as tall as Scott, but according to Keith he had, “muscles for days and a face sculpted by God and the angels.” Keith had also referred to him as a, “tall glass of Luke Cage,” knowing that Tori was a huge comic book nerd when she was a teen. So, in her mind she’d painted him as a handsome, African-American superhero.

“No Jonathan,” Scott said. “Let it go. It’s *not* worth it, man. Trust me.”



Tori climbed into bed later that night still mulling over the events of the evening.

“I really liked the fact they didn’t try to turn this movie into a romance between the two leads.” Scott was still raving about the movie. “They just told a really great story. It was dark, gritty and everything that story was

supposed to be. If you ask me, there hasn't been one this great since *Empire*."

She gave him a thin smile. "Yeah, it was great." Too bad it was going to be forever tarnished by that stupid asshole she provoked. Add to it the fact her headset went out at the most important part of the film. Scott had gone out of his way to try and make the last few weeks special, and she'd done nothing but spoil it all.

Actually, this was nothing new. It was par for the course in their lives. He went above and beyond caring for her on a daily basis, and all she could wonder was why.

The lamp clicked off and he wrapped his strong arms around her, pulling her in close.

"Why me, Scott?" she mumbled.

"Huh?"

"Why me? She rolled over and faced him. "Why would a man like you, as good as you are, love me? How did I get so lucky?"

"Baby, I'm the lucky one." His calloused thumb ran over her cheek.

"I was just this slutty girl you met in a bar one night. Yet you kept coming back, and I know now it just wasn't for the sex."

"Well, part of it *was* for the sex. I mean, I was twenty-two and horny..." he chuckled.

She giggled and slugged him on the shoulder. "Seriously. You could've had anybody and I was just...nobody..." Her voice wavered thinking about the nude drawing she'd done of him their first night together. She'd discovered a few months back when they were unpacking that he'd kept it all these years. That spoke volumes for how much he'd always cared for her.

"You were *never* just nobody." He kissed her gently. "You saved me, baby. I was the oldest twenty-two-year-old I knew. You were so wild and free, like a breath of fresh air. You brought so much color into my boring, mundane life. You still do."

"You said the word trouble wrong." She snorted. "I mean, just look at tonight..." She tugged at her lip. "Instead of remembering the movie we're only gonna remember that stupid asshole. Hell, look at the past several weeks and months of our lives..."

He chuckled. "You're right. Twenty years from now we're all gonna be sitting around talking about the night, and laughing about the time that Tori

tried to pick a fight with a drunk, college rugby player. Nobody's gonna remember much about that asshole, or even the movie itself, but we will remember you and that crazy mouth of yours." He ran his fingers through her hair, lovingly tugging on her locks. "You're my fire, baby." His lips planted to hers. "You light up my soul."

CHAPTER

seven

Presley poked her head into Scott's office. "Dude, why are you still here? It's Christmas Eve. Go home."

"I could ask you the same thing." His forehead wrinkled.

"I had a server go down." She ran her fingers through her black, pixie cut. "I finally got it back up. Was heading out and saw your door still open."

He shut down his computer then stood. "I was backing up my backup of Tori's gift." There was no way he'd risk losing the footage and audio he'd pulled from the tapes. It was far too valuable. Also, he wanted one final watch of the footage, and he didn't dare do it at home because Tori would certainly hear it before he was ready.

With Presley's help they'd pulled the footage from the VHS tape and transferred it to digital format, then added VoiceOver description so Tori could get a play-by-play. It wasn't as great as what the pros did, but Scott was pretty proud of his description skills. He'd also put all the songs on mp3's and added them to his iTunes.

He grabbed his coat and followed Presley out.

"So what's your plans for the evening?" she asked on the ride down in the elevator.

"We're going to candlelight service. You?"

"I plan to watch *It's A Wonderful Life* on my sofa and eat cookie dough. Netflix and chill." She sighed.

He frowned. "I thought your brother was coming into town?"

"There's an ice storm hitting the midwest. Flight got cancelled due to weather." She shrugged. "He's gonna try and catch a flight tomorrow, but I'm not holding my breath. Those storms can get pretty nasty."

The door chimed at the ground level and the doors squeaked open. Their footsteps echoed through the empty garage. The place was a ghost town.

“You should come with us to service.” He hated the thought of her being alone.

She scoffed. “I haven’t been in a church since I came out at eighteen. I’m pretty sure the roof would cave in.”

“Funny, that’s what Tori said when I told her I wanted to go.” He chuckled.

When he’d mentioned the prospect of going to a service Tori about had a fit.

“You have no idea all the boring Masses I had to sit through growing up,” she’d groaned. “I do not want to put myself through that torture again.”

“What if we went somewhere more lively? You enjoyed yourself at church in Texas,” he’d said.

“I said it wasn’t nearly as bad as Mass. I never said I wanted to make church a regular thing.”

“I’m not suggesting we rent out a pew every Sunday. But I think it’s important to go on Christmas, to remember what the season is truly about.” She was quiet for a long beat and he tried to read her expression, which was nearly impossible. “Fine, we don’t have to go,” he’d said.

“This is really important to you, isn’t it?” Her expression had softened. “Alright. I’ll go.”

They came to an agreement that they’d go to Keith’s church. Scott had a very hard time imagining Keith in church, but apparently since dating Jonathan it was a regular thing for them. Like Scott, Jonathan had grown up pretty religious.

Scott stopped next to Presley’s car. “This is Keith and Jonathan’s church. If Keith’s agreed to go there, I’m sure you’d fit right in. You sure you don’t want to tag along?”

She chuckled. “Tempting, but I’m positive.” Her blue-green eyes bore into him as she unlocked her door.

“Well, at least come over for dinner. Tori’s making a big ham.”

“Dinner I can handle.” She leaned against her car door. “What do I need to bring?”

“Just bring some booze. Tori said we’re eating around seven-thirty.” He frowned. He hated eating that late. His body typically wanted food no later than six.

Presley laughed at his grimace. “I suspect that you had a late lunch?”

He frowned. “I missed lunch.” He’d been busy working on Tori’s gift.

She cringed. “Ooh. Bad call. I feel for Tori tonight. You’re gonna be a grouch.”

“That’s why she calls me her bear.” He grinned.

She laughed. “I’ll see you in a little while, Scott.” She waived and climbed into her car.



When he arrived home and tossed his keys on the entryway table, he heard two voices in the kitchen, one definitely male. He didn’t see Keith or Jonathan’s car in the driveway, or any car for that matter.

What the hell? He rounded the corner of the kitchen, and there stood his best friend, wearing a goddamned apron. His long, disheveled, blonde mane was pulled back into a knot as he bent over, pulling a pie out of the oven.

“Blaze?” Scott grinned.

“Merry Christmas motherfucker!” He sat the pie on the stove and walked over to him, extending his oven mitt covered arms.

The men embraced with a hearty pat on the back. “When did you get in?”

“Just a few hours ago.”

“I called him yesterday and suggested he fly up here to spend Christmas with us.” Tori walked toward him, extending her hand.

Scott grabbed her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you,” he whispered into her ear. He’d mentioned yesterday how he wished his folks could come out for the holidays, but with his father’s recent health issues, that wasn’t possible. Blaze wasn’t blood, but he was still family to him, so having him there was a nice addition.

“He’s been helping me cook all day!” Tori proclaimed proudly.

“I did the apple pie topping. Check it.” Blaze nodded to the stove.

Scott walked over and busted a gut laughing. “You put a dick on our pie?”

“You did what?” Her jaw dropped. “Blaze, you’re the worst!”

“Sorry, Blondie.” He laughed like a kid, pulling off the oven mitts and discarding them to the counter. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“Well, you’re just going to have to repent tonight when we head to church.” Scott grinned and gave his friend a wink.

“Fuck that shit. I regret nothing, and also, I ain’t going to no church.” He shook his head. “Hell, you need me here putting dick shapes on your pies and shit. It’s like the goddamned Brady Bunch in here. Going to church. Pfft. You fuckers have gone soft.”

“It’s a Keith and Jonathan’s church.”

“Ooh, Ginger *and* Blondie in a church?” Blazed seemed to chew on that for a moment. He’d always called Keith ‘Ginger’ due to his red hair and freckles and Tori ‘Blondie’ due to her bleached hair. “There may be an earthquake or blood raining down from heaven.” He giggled. “That makes me almost want to go. But still, nah. I don’t do church. I’ll stay here and hound sit for ya, maybe take the pooch on a walk.” He bent over and gave Kahn an affectionate scratch on the head.

“Speaking of that...” Tori grimaced and leaned against the counter. “Jane called in tears. Darren is stuck at work and she’s upset about having to take the kids to Mass by herself.”

“Wasn’t your mom planning to go with her?” Scott picked at a corner of the phallus pie crust and tossed it into his mouth.

Tori shook her head. “Mom’s got a new boyfriend. She’s going to his parish in Baltimore.” She sighed. “As much as I don’t want to, I think we should go with my sister.”

“How long does Mass last?” Keith’s church was much closer and the service was only like thirty minutes long. They had all their friends slotted to come over that night for dinner. Their schedule was tight as-is. Adding a drive to Annandale would cut things close.

“About an hour, typically.” She crossed her arms. “Blaze is here, he can watch the food for us.”

Scott turned to him. “Can you cover all this.” He motioned to the kitchen.

“I suppose.” He shrugged. “I’m no chef, but everything’s done, right Blondie?”

“Yeah, just needs warmed up.”

Scott rubbed the back of his neck. Nothing this holiday had gone according to plan, except for heaven shining down on him in nailing Tori’s

big gift. But that's what you do. You roll with the punches. "Call Jane. Tell her we'll go with her to Mass."



Scott had never been to a Catholic church. Growing up Southern Baptist was pretty simple. You walk in the noisy, bustling church, shake hands, get hugs from the old ladies, then sit down and let things roll.

When they walked in the back of the church, the first thing Jane did was dip her fingertips in the holy water then make the sign of the cross. Her children, Jacob and Hannah—who were donned in their Christmas best—did the same. He placed Tori's hand on the basin. She dipped her fingers in, made the sign of the cross herself, then he just followed suit.

Greeters further inside the door were handing out pamphlets and candles. This wasn't too much different from how he grew up. He took the brochure and two candles, one for him, and one for Tori.

Before they settled into the rock-hard pew, they each had to kneel and show respect before sitting. He groaned. Kneeling was not an easy task for him and proved just as difficult for Tori, who was already drawing stares with her cane. They finally sat and waited for the service to begin. Jacob, Tori's three-year-old nephew shimmied up onto Scott's lap and Hannah, her seven-year-old niece, squeezed in between the two of them.

"I see where I rank," Jane whispered and smirked.

Scott cracked open the program to see the order of the service, quickly realizing this was going to be his lifeline. It gave him a list of all the songs—which thankfully were all Christmas hymns he knew—and a list of all the phrases bolded that were to be spoken aloud.

The service finally began and what followed was head spinning combination of standing, sitting, kneeling, singing and repeating blessings. In between all that was a greeting where they shook hands with folks around them and said, 'Peace be with you.' It all felt quite medieval and he resisted the urge to feign a British accent every time he said it. More

flipping of the benches and kneeling followed, and it was the worst part due to his prosthetic and his aching knee. Winter was always a bitch on his leg.

The kids grew restless during the sermon. *Well kids, you aren't the only ones.* Scott blinked, trying to stay awake and stifled a yawn. He wanted to take to heart what was said, but the priest didn't have a voice that commanded attention. He checked his watch, dying inside as he thought of ham, mashed potatoes and apple pie. They'd already been there for an hour, and this was going on much longer than Tori had led him to believe.

"Jane said this priest is a fill in," she whispered to him, reading his mind. "Sorry. He's long-winded. It's just how these things are at times." She shrugged.

He tried to take his mind off the rumbling in his belly, and the fact that guests were probably arriving at his home as his ass grew numb on the wooden bench. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the priest stepped down. He glanced up to Christ hanging on the cross behind the pulpit and thanked Jesus that the service was nearly over. There was more singing, standing, sitting and kneeling, followed by The Lord's Prayer then the call for the Holy Sacrament.

Tori grabbed to his arm and followed him in the herd to the altar. "Don't take the communion," she whispered.

His head snapped in her direction. "Why not?" He was a believer and took communion all the time when he went to church.

"You're not Catholic," Jane answered for her. "And she's non-practicing." Her head bobbed to her sister. "Just cross your arms over your chest and the priest will bless you."

He tried not to roll his eyes and respect a religion not his own. "Alright, boss."

They finally got to the front of the line and Scott resisted the urge to scarf down the entire plate of wafers. He crossed his arms over his chest and the priest touched him on the forehead. "Bless you."

He nodded. "Thank you."

They sat back down, there was one more spoken word, and by the end of it all he was ready to sprint to the jeep. He played nice though, shaking hands with the priest, thanking him on the way out. They then said their goodbyes to Jane and the kids and made plans to meet up tomorrow. By the time they finally got to the vehicle it was almost eight o'clock.

“I’ve got three missed calls from Keith. I’ll call him back, you call Blaze and check on the food,” Tori ordered as she settled in and buckled her seatbelt.

Blaze didn’t pick up. The phone just rang and rang. Where the fuck was he?

He looked over to Tori who was in conversation with Keith. “What!” She smacked her forehead. “You have to be shitting me...” She swallowed hard. “Put him out back because he’s gonna puke it all up. We’ll figure something out...See you soon...” She hung up the phone and frowned.

“That didn’t sound good.”

“When Keith and Jonathan got to the house, the ham was in a pile on the floor...” She cringed. “Well, what was left of it.” Their dog had obviously eaten the entire Christmas ham.

“Where was Blaze?”

She shrugged. “No clue. It’s Blaze. We left hell in charge of ice water. Should’ve known better.” She shook her head. “We could get another ham, they’re precooked, but still, it would take far too long to warm it up...”

At this juncture he’d eat the leather off the steering wheel. “Pizza?” That was about the quickest thing he could think of.

“I’ll call in the order.” Tori went to her phone and called their go-to place. After a few minutes she turned to him, frowning. “Closed. Babe.” She made a few more calls. “They’re all closed. I fear that’s gonna be the case everywhere.”

“I’ll drop you off at home, then call around and see what’s open.” They were nearly home anyway.

He looked over at her tugging on her lip. “I’m sorry. We should have just gone to Jonathan’s church.”

“Baby, it’s not a big deal.” He tried to remain positive, for her sake. Worst-case scenario he’d wind up at the grocery store getting a bunch of frozen pizzas. That was after he found Blaze and strangled him.

“Are you kidding me? This entire Christmas has been one disaster after another. It’s like the Harris version of the Griswold family Christmas. The only thing we haven’t done is electrocuted the cat or found a squirrel in the Christmas tree.”

He chuckled. “Baby, we don’t even have a cat.”

“Only because I’m allergic, but I guarantee you it would’ve happened if we had one.”

“Blaze showing up is quite a bit like cousin Eddie.”

They both started laughing uncontrollably.

Finally, they arrived home. When they walked into their house all their guests were mulling about. Keith, Jonathan, Presley...and even Blaze had finally appeared with an uninvited female guest.

Of course. He really was gonna choke the fucker.

“Sorry about the ham, man. I was helping Mandy your neighbor here...”

“Mindy,” she corrected and shot Blaze a side-eye.

“Sorry, Mindy.” He cleared his throat. “Anyhow as I was walking Kahn, I ran into Mindy trying to fix the lights on her house.”

“A strand was out.” She puffed out her ample chest. “It was a bad bulb and he fixed it for me.” She squeezed Blazes arm, grinned and batted her lashes.

Presley rolled her eyes behind her on the sofa and Scott resisted the urge to snort.

“Typically is.” Tori’s brow went up into orbit, obviously smelling the bullshit.

Mindy just so happened to be the most eligible woman in the neighborhood. Single mom, three kids and she loved to stroll the sidewalks in her tight, yoga pants. Scott would laugh, watching as the married men nearly crashed their vehicles into trees as she jogged by, soaking up all the attention. Blaze, with no ring, would have been like bait dangling on a fishing line to her. He suspected she saw Blaze—a seemingly unattached single, attractive male—and damaged the lights on purpose to reel him in.

Joke was on her. She had no clue what she was getting into with that SOB.

“Anyhow, Mindy is all alone tonight, and nobody should be alone on Christmas, right?” Blaze grinned like a madman, chasing down his next lay. He damn well knew he had Scott between a rock and a hard place.

“Where are your kids, Mindy?” Tori asked, her mouth twitching in the corner. Scott tried not to laugh because he was ninety-five percent certain Mindy had not mentioned the kids to Blaze. If she had, well, she wouldn’t be standing in their living room.

“My ex-husband has the kids.” She pouted, doing a very great job of looking sad and disappointed. “I hope you don’t mind that Blaze invited me.”

Blaze's head snapped her direction. "You have kids? How many?"

"Three." Mindy cleared her throat and looked down, suddenly very interested in her boots.

Blaze's eyes bulged. "Three?" He obviously had not learned much about Mindy yet as Scott suspected.

"Of course you're welcome to stay, Mindy." Scott grinned at Blaze who was starting to sweat bullets. It was hilarious to watch him squirm like a man who just jumped out of a plane and realized his chute won't open. Served him right.

"I'm gonna go scrounge the kitchen for snacks for people to munch on." Jonathan stood from the sofa.

"I'll help them in the kitchen. You got the main course babe?" Tori folded her cane and placed it on the entry table.

"Yeah. I'll head out and get what we need." Scott turned to walk to the door.

"I'll roll with you. My treat," Blaze said looking for an escape. "It's the least that I can do to repay you for the mess I made."

Mindy looked wounded. "I'll just um, help Tori in the kitchen."



"You gotta get me out of this man," Blaze said as they rolled down the road in his jeep. "How was I supposed to know that yoga-pant hottie has three fucking kids? I mean you've seen her. Nothing about that smokin body says she's a mom of three."

"Are you kidding me?" Scott roared in laughter. "Watching you squirm like a worm on a hook has been the fucking highlight of my day. I'm gonna sit back tonight, pop some popcorn and watch this unfold."

"I don't fuck around with single mom's. Too messy." He cringed. "They're too emotional. I mean, we both know I'm a damn son of a bitch, but I sure as shit don't want to be the asshole that makes them hope they found their next baby daddy—only to crush their dreams." He ran his fingers through his long, disheveled mane.

Scott shot him a side-eye. “I’m pretty sure that’s *not* what women think when they look at you.” Nothing about his best friend said he was marriage material. “Make yourself useful and find me a pizza place that’s open.”

After some internet searching and driving, they found a pizza shop about fifteen minutes away. They weren’t known for the best pizza, but that was the only place open. Whatever. He didn’t give a shit that he was buying cardboard pizza. They at least had ready-made ones that he could walk right out with. At this point he’d even eat the box it came in.

He walked up to the counter, still in his fancy, dress clothes and long, wool trench-coat. The kid manning the register looked him up and down as if he didn’t belong in there buying five dollar pizzas.

“I need five large pizzas. Give me a sausage, a pepperoni, two supreme, and—”

“We don’t have any supreme ready to go,” the kid stopped him. “We have one of those in the oven now, and I can throw some more in for you.” He turned over his shoulder and hollered back to the other employees to throw another in.

“Just give me five pizzas then,” he answered gruffly, causing the kids eyes to widen. He knew the kid was just doing his job, but he was starving and had a house full of hungry guests. “Whatever you’ve got ready.” He fished out his wallet.

“We have two pepperoni ready.” The kid nodded to the warmer that did, in fact, only have two boxes in there.

“I need five pizzas.”

The kid swallowed hard. “Ok, we’ll get them ready. So I’ve got you down for two supreme...” he punched in the cash register.

“Just give me five pizzas. I just need them fast.”

“Um, ok, sir.” The kid scratched his brow as if he couldn’t get the concept that Scott wanted the first five pizzas that came out of the oven. He called a manager over and they mumbled under their breath as the kid fumbled with the register.

“You’re gonna light this place on fire, aren’t ya?” Blaze snickered from behind him. Finally between the two of them they figured out the register, Scott paid for his order, and moved to the side.

About ten minutes passed. A few more customers came in and ordered specialty pizzas, and they were moved to the side like he was. The small

pizza shop was quickly getting packed.

The door chimed with yet another customer. The man waltzed up to the counter and the clerk handed him the two pepperoni pizzas that were ready—that Scott assumed would go to him when three others came out of the oven, since he was there first.

“You have to be kidding me,” Scott grumbled under his breath and clenched his jaw.

More giggles came from Blaze, who looked extremely giddy watching Scott grow more irritated by the minute. “You look like you’re gonna blow a gasket. Is that smoke coming out of your ears?”

The clock ticked on. Three pizzas came out of the oven and the employees boxed them up. *Only two more to go.* Then he could get out of there, get home, and strip off his uncomfortable suit and tie that was choking him.

Another chime of the door, followed by another customer. “I need two sausage pizzas,” the woman said.

The kid handed the woman two of the three boxes that had just come out of the oven. Scott’s eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath, clenching his jaw.

Blaze was giggling like a kid, clutching his belly next to him. “Someone’s gonna die,” he chimed in a silly sing-song tone.

Blaze was right. He’d tried to keep his temper under control, but he was tired, starving and the employee giving his pizza away was the final straw.

He marched over to the counter. “Any reason that you just gave those to another customer? I just watched two other customers walk out of here with five pizzas.”

The kid blinked like a deer in the headlights. “We’re waiting on the supreme pizzas.”

Ah, the supreme pizzas. The bane of his existence currently. He seriously regretted uttering those words. “I said I’ll take five pizzas. *Any* five pizzas.”

“But you said you wanted five supremes...”

No that wasn't at all what he'd said. “I just want five pizza's!” his voice raised to a chilling level, causing the other patrons to turn his direction.

The kids face paled. “But I charged you for the more expensive ones.” He looked over his shoulder. “I’ll need to have the manager void the order so I can refund you...”

Scott rubbed his brow and let out a heavy breath. “I don’t care what you charged me for. You don’t need to void the order.” He’d pay twenty dollars a pizza at this point. All he wanted was to get home. “I just want five pizzas. I don’t care what they’ve got on them. So the next five pizzas that come out of the oven, go to me. Got it?” He looked the kid straight in the eye, unsure how to make this any clearer. “Five pizzas. That’s all I want.”

The kid nodded slowly and swallowed the lump in his throat. “Yes, sir.”

Scott walked back over to Blaze, who was standing in the corner, laughing so much that tears were rolling down his cheeks. “Having fun?” he asked.

“I think this is fucking hilarious. You walk in here, dressed like a mafia hit-man, looking all menacing. I think that poor kid is scared you’re gonna pull a gun out of that trench coat.”

Finally, about fifteen minutes later Scott and Blaze walked out of the shop with five pizzas in hand and they climbed in his jeep.

“You’re an asshole.” Blaze laughed. “That poor kid is probably gonna quit his job now because of you.”

“How am I the asshole? I mean, I don’t think I could have been any clearer.” Scott shook his head as he pulled out into the traffic. “Not like I shouldn’t have expected it. It’s like we’ve been hexed this Christmas. Everything that could go wrong, has. Tori even got let go from her job.”

“What?” His jaw dropped, his laughter instantly fading. His normal jovial expression hardened. “What asshole fires a blind woman before Christmas?”

“She wasn’t technically fired. They asked her to take a sabbatical until they could figure out where to put her.” Scott went into the long explanation of everything that went down, including all the other mishaps of the last few weeks. “Every one of her Christmases have sucked. I was trying to make this one special, and well...I’ve failed. She’s taken every blow personally, as if it’s her fault.” He turned down the street into their neighborhood.

Blaze snorted and shook his head. “You’re such a perfectionist. Always have been.”

“I *will* salvage what’s left of this holiday for her. Failure is *not* an option.” He pulled into his driveway and killed the engine.

“You still saying that motto?” Blaze chuckled as he got out of the car and opened up the back seat. “Dude, if we’ve learned anything through our time together, it’s that things will not always go according to plan.” He grabbed the pizzas and walked toward the house.

Scott followed him in, stripping off his tie the minute he walked in the door.

“Got the pizza pies!” Blaze held them up over his head and feigned the worst Italian accent Scott had ever heard.

They all cheered then went into the kitchen. They plated up their shitty pizza and settled around the table.

Blaze started laughing. “Oh boy do I have a story for you. So we walk in there, Harris in his long, wool, trench coat looking like a goddamned mafia hit man...” he started telling a much taller tale than how it actually went down. “So then, when they give his pizzas to another customer his eyes went black. Harris marched to the counter, pounding his fists into it. That’s when the kid started crying.”

Scott swallowed his bite of pizza. “That is *not* how it went down. I did *not* make the kid cry.”

“Shhhh,” Blaze motioned for him to shut up. “Let me finish.”

Scott glanced around the table to all their guests, laughing, completely captivated with the story. Whatever. He rolled his eyes. Let them have their fun. It was Christmas. He was in his warm home, his belly and heart were full, surrounded by those he loved.

CHAPTER

eight

Scott's eyes flew open early Christmas morning, excited for the day ahead. It didn't matter that he was in his thirties, he still felt like a giddy little kid.

He leaned over and slipped on his prosthetic, followed by a pair of sweatpants, then headed out the bedroom door. Once Kahn realized he was going downstairs he jumped down off the bed following him out.

A quick glance in the guest room showed the bed empty. After several glasses of whiskey, Blaze walked Mindy home and he'd yet to show back up. Whatever. He loved his best friend, but he was happy to have the morning alone with Tori.

He descended the stairs, went into the kitchen, and unlatched the lock on the dog door. Khan barreled out the door, then brewed the coffee. The dog came barreling back in right as he was putting the cinnamon rolls in the oven that had risen overnight. They were his grandmother's recipe, and a tradition in his family every Christmas morning. He wanted Tori to wake up to the wonderful scent of them wafting through the house.

Scott didn't expect Tori to wake too early, they were up late last night with all their friends, drinking, laughing and having a great time in spite of the shit-show the evening had started out to be.

Scott went into the living room, started a fire, turned on the Christmas tree lights and waited.

"Fuckin burlap" he huffed to himself, eyeing the tree. Even though it wasn't as festive as he'd like, he had to admit the twinkling white lights, burlap ribbon and the pine cones emitted a warm, earthy feel.

He went back into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down in the living room, turning on the TV as Khan curled up next to his feet and they waited. About fifteen minutes later, Tori came wandering sleepily into the living room.

“Something smells heavenly.” She sucked in a deep breath and grinned wide.

He stood and walked toward her. “That would be Grandma Harris’ cinnamon rolls baking.” He wrapped his arms around his girl and gave her a kiss. “Merry Christmas, beautiful.”

“Merry Christmas to you.” She kissed him again and rubbed his cheek. “For the first time in almost forever, it actually feels like a real Christmas.”

She walked over toward the tree, reaching out for it, running her fingers over the ribbon. “Did you turn on the tree lights?”

“Sure did.”

“Good.” She sat down on the rug, curling her feet up under her as Khan came over and hopped in her lap. “Oomph. Lord boy, you just think you’re a lap dog, don’t ya?” She giggled pushing him off her lap. “Merry Christmas, you sweet boy.” She kissed the fur on his head and gave him a good scratch and some love. Khan turned his face to her and licked her cheek. “Gross. Doggy kisses.” She giggled again. “So nasty.” But she still let him lick her anyway.

“I’m gonna go pull out the cinnamon rolls. I’ll be right back.”

After he pulled them out of the oven he walked back in the room and paused at the entry for a moment, taking in how happy Tori looked and how beautiful she was. The glow of the fire and the twinkling lights dancing off her skin took his breath away, making his heart skip a beat. Khan was rolled over on his back as she scratched his belly and wrestled with him. Her oversized sweatshirt hung off one shoulder, her soft, blonde waves falling in her gorgeous face.

This was their first Christmas together of a lifetime of many, and Scott wanted to remember every detail. Suddenly the drama of the last few weeks and months seemed insignificant. Everything in that moment was perfect. Life was incredibly good.



Scott finished packing up the jeep with the presents for Jane and the kids then walked back inside to fetch Tori. The two of them had exchanged stockings and a few presents that morning but he wanted to save his big gift to Tori for the evening. He knew she was gonna love the gift, but he also knew it could be emotional for her, so he figured it was best to let that one wait. He felt like an ass for waiting to give it to her, especially after she'd given him the best gift he'd ever received.

He had a suspicion that she'd been working on something secretly, because Tori typically showed him all her work. She'd tried her best to hide it, but every day when he came home from work he noticed there were spots of paint she missed scrubbing on her nails and skin. He never mentioned a word to her that he suspected what she was up to. He thought it was endearing and adorable how she'd tried to keep it a secret.

And boy was he glad she did. When he saw the painting of the large, roaring bear full of color he was moved to tears. It was absolutely her best work yet, and the fact she'd done it in complete darkness by touch only was unfathomable. He may be biased, but he truly believed she was the most talented person he knew. He was so fucking proud of her.

"You ready?" he hollered for her.

"Coming!" she shouted as she descended the stairs. "Any word from Blaze yet?"

"Nothing." He'd texted Blaze a few times and told him they were heading to Tori's sisters for an early dinner. He hadn't heard back so he assumed that his best friend was still getting his dick wet.

She frowned as she pulled on her jacket. "Should we walk over to Mindy's and check on him?"

"Nah. He got himself into this mess, he's gonna have to get himself out. The girl weighs maybe one-ten soaking wet. Doubtful she'd murder him."

They walked out the front door and as they grew closer to the jeep Tori stopped. "Do you hear that?" She tilted her ear in the direction of Mindy's house.

He didn't hear anything, but his ears were shit compared to hers. Years of firing military weapons—plus his explosion he'd been in—had taken its toll on his eardrums. She was much more tuned into noise than he was.

He glanced down the street.

“Get out you sick, son of a bitch!” Mindy screamed from her porch. Blaze stood in the yard, in only his boxers, as she threw his clothes onto the lawn.

“It seems that we’ve heard this before. It’s like déjà vu.” Tori leaned against the jeep and smirked as Scott watched the sideshow unfold.

He could only laugh. The first time Tori met Blaze he was found in very similar circumstances. He tended to piss off his female companions. He half suspected it was on purpose so they’d never call again. His best friend was indeed a son of a bitch, and a sneaky motherfucker.

He watched as Blaze collected his clothing off the lawn and Mindy retreated into her house, slamming the door. His idiot best friend then waltzed up their driveway, whistling and grinning like a madman. “Ninety percent of the time, it works every time.”

“And what’s that?” his bride-to-be asked.

“Asking if I can call her mommy and suck on her tit.” He shrugged as he put on his jeans and sweatshirt.

Tori sputter-coughed and bent over clutching her belly in a fit of laughter.

“You’re sick, man,” Scott mumbled.

Finally his girl caught her breath. “You going with us to my sisters house?”

“God, you guys are seriously too domesticated now.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I may have to move in and set you all straight.”

“Are you going or not?” Scott leaned on the open door.

“Nah. I’m going to the range with Pres. We’re gonna go fire off that new SIG you got her.”

Scott had gifted Presley a SIG Sauer P320 striker-fired pistol. She’d flipped her shit when she opened it the night before. He loved Jane and her kids, but he was slightly jealous of how his buddies were gonna spend their afternoon. “Alright then. Have fun.”

They got in the car and took off.

“You’re jealous.” Tori crossed her arms and smirked. “I can hear the disappointment ringing through your tone.”

“What?” He feigned shock.

“I know you’d much rather be shooting with your friends right now. Thanks for doing this family thing with me.”

“Baby, your family is my family now.” Every word of that was true. “I love those kids. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” He squeezed her thigh. “No worries, I’ll still get some shooting in this afternoon.”

Her head snapped his direction. “What do you mean by that?”

“You’ll see.” He chuckled and turned the radio up, blasting the Christmas music.

They rode mostly in silence, just enjoying the tunes on the drive out to Annandale. Tori seemed on edge. He wasn’t sure if that was because she feared what he had up his sleeve, or if it was due to the fact her mother would be there.

To say that her and her mom had a turbulent history was an understatement. Things had been getting better, but there was a lot of damage between the two of them to be undone. He just hoped things went smooth that evening. He debated bringing the present along for Jane to enjoy as well, but with Maureen there, he wasn’t sure that was the best option. He’d let Tori share that with them another time if she felt it was appropriate. He couldn’t wait to get home and give it to her.

He pulled into the driveway and helped Tori out of the car. They walked up the steps and knocked.

The door flung open and Tori’s niece Hannah stood in the entry. “The bear!” she exclaimed and squealed along with Jacob, her three-year-old brother at her side. Little arms flew around their legs as they ambushed Scott and Tori. Lady, their Cocker Spaniel started yapping like usual and joined in on the ambush.

Scott scooped up Hannah in one arm and Jacob in the other and let out a big growl, causing them to giggle and squeal even more. He walked a few feet into the entryway and put them back on the ground, pulling Tori in and shutting the door behind them.

Hannah bounced into the living room and plopped down in front of the tree playing with some toys and Jacob followed suit. After a cursory glance around he saw that Jane and Darren were nowhere in sight. *Odd*. They typically came to greet them when they arrived.

“Jane?” Tori called out as he took her cane and helped her with her coat.

“Mommy and Daddy are upstairs in the bedroom,” Hannah said, not glancing up from her Barbies. “They locked the door and said they were busy wrapping presents.”

Scott smirked and stifled a laugh as he hung up their coats on the rack, then handed Tori back her cane.

“Did they?” A wide grin crept across his girls face, knowing damn well what Jane and Darren were probably up to.

Scott knew things had been tense between Darren and Jane. They needed this minute. He’d taken Darren to lunch a few times in the city to try and get to know him a bit better and had some heart to heart talks with him. He was actually a really great guy, trying to do the right thing for his family.

Darren’s job was extremely demanding, and his hours were long, which caused tension at home. Jane accused him of working longer hours to avoid his responsibility with a wife and kids, which wasn’t the case. He was just exhausted and overworked and even considering another field, but money was tight.

Scott gave him the best advice his father ever gave him. *If you’re gonna fight, fight naked. Fights won’t last near as long.*

It seemed that Darren had followed his advice.

“Fine.” Tori sighed, as she made her way into the living room. Her cane hit about three objects right at the entry.

Scott placed his hand across her chest. “You have a mine field of wrapping paper and scattered toys. Grab my arm, I’ll lead you.” He weaved her through the mess and helped her to the sofa.

“Thanks for the eyes.” She smiled as she sat.

“I got your back, babe.” He patted her on the leg. “Ok kiddos, lets move the toys over to one side of the room and show me what you got from Santa,” Scott said, not wanting to spoil their fun, but he needed the floor cleared for Tori. “Jacob bring all your stuff here.” He motioned near the tree to the left. “And Hannah, let’s put your stuff here.” He picked up a barbie doll and tossed it toward the tree. In turn Lady thought he was trying to play fetch and went and grabbed it between her teeth.

“No! Bad doggie!” Hannah screeched so loud it made his ears ring. Were girls always so squeaky?

“I got it.” Scott grabbed the barbie from the clutches of the dogs’ mouth.

He collected all the torn wrapping paper as Jane finally walked into the room. When he glanced up he noted her hair, wild on a normal day, was even more of a disheveled, curly mess.

“God guys, I’m so sorry! The morning just got away from us. I meant to have this cleaned up before you got here,” Jane said, yanking her hair into a ponytail. Darren came down the stairs behind her, a bit sweaty, wiping his brow.

“It’s all good.” Scott tilted his head down to hide the growing smirk on his face.

“Merry Christmas guys!” Darren said, breathless.

“Merry Christmas,” Tori said, stretching her arms out on the back of sofa.

“Scott, you don’t need to do that,” Darren said, seeing him cleaning up the mess.

“It’s no problem.”

“I’ll get you a trash bag,” he offered, disappearing down the hall to the kitchen.

“Kids, take your stuff upstairs.” Jane walked into the living room and started picking things up. “I’m really sorry, I know better than to leave the floor cluttered with you coming over, sis.”

“Jane. Stop fussing.” Tori grimaced. “It’s ok. It’s Christmas. Chill out.”

Darren came back with the trash bag and within a few moments the three of them had the floor completely cleared. After all was said and done, Scott looked up at Jane, noticing her sweater was inside out. He couldn’t help it, he busted out laughing.

“What!” Jane snapped at him.

He tilted his head down, scratching his brow. “Your sweater is inside out.”

Jane looked down and turned as red in the face as the sweater she was wearing. “Well crap,” she mumbled.

Scott and Tori both erupted in laughter.

“Guess we know what you got for Christmas.” Tori giggled. “Told the kids you were wrapping packages. More like *unwrapping* packages.”

Darren turned a bit red, laughing as he tied up the trash bag.

“Lord have mercy, Tori.” Jane rolled her eyes.

Scott went outside to retrieve the presents from the car while Darren took out the trash.

“So I have to thank you for your advice,” he said to Scott.

“And what’s that?” he asked as they neared the doorway.

“Came home last night in trouble for missing Mass. She woke up pretty pissed this morning, didn’t say much while we unwrapped gifts. Afterward we went upstairs and she lit into me. I just started undressing her.” He shrugged. “Fighting naked. Worked like a charm.” He patted Scott on the back. “I owe you one.”

“You can pay me with a beer.” He grinned as Darren opened the door since his arms were full of presents.

He went in and plopped the presents in front of the tree.

“Can we open them now?” Hannah jumped up and down as Jacob ran over and started shaking the packages.

“Not just yet. We’re gonna wait till Grandma gets here,” Jane said grabbing the gift from Jacob and placing it back in front of the tree.

“Grandma is always late.” Hannah frowned and rolled her big, blue eyes.

“Oh poor kids. We don’t know how long it will be before she gets here. At least let them open one,” Tori piped up.

More whines and pleases came out of the kids, who looked like they were going to burst with excitement.

Jane sighed. “Fine. One, but that’s it until Grandma gets here.”

“They can open mine.” Scott chuckled mischievously, grabbing two gifts from under the tree and tossing them to the kids. “Jane and Darren there’s one for you too.” He slid the packages over to them.

He sprawled himself across the floor leaning on his elbow as the kids ripped into the packages.

“Wow!” Jacob exclaimed as he opened up the package. “Gun!”

“It’s a Nerf gun!” Hannah exclaimed reading the package. “It’s purple and pink and has wings on it!”

“That it is,” Jane said through gritted teeth, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Don’t worry, Jane. I got one for you too so you don’t feel left out.” He slid the box over to her, smirked and gave her a wink.

Ok, he knew Jane wouldn’t be thrilled, but she looked as if she was almost boiling. He knew she didn’t like shooting real guns, but he figured Nerf ones were of no harm.

“Alright kids let’s open these up.” He pulled a pocket knife out of his jeans and opened up the box and the packaging.

CHAPTER

nine

“Tori can I have a word with you in the kitchen please?” Jane walked over and pulled her sister off the sofa, dragging her into the kitchen.

“What?” Tori snapped.

“You know I have a strict no gun rule in my house. I can’t believe that you would let him get those for the kids.”

“He didn’t tell me about the gifts...” Jane watched as Tori pulled on her lip. “He wanted to be in charge of the kids’ presents, and him being a big kid himself...well...I figured he’d do good.”

Jane rolled her eyes. This was so typical of Scott. She may have only known the man a few months, but he loved to get under her skin. She was teetering somewhere between completely pissed off and partially endeared that he was treating her like an older brother who was a big bully.

“Now I have to be the bad guy and take away their Christmas presents.”

Tori frowned and groaned. “Or you could let them play with them.” She shrugged “Jane, they’re fucking Nerf guns, with little teeny felt darts.”

Jane rolled her eyes and gave Tori the death glare, realizing that no longer worked with her sister. “Language!” She peered around the corner to make sure her kids didn’t hear her drop the f-bomb. “He’s asked me a hundred times to go shooting with him and every time I’ve turned him down. God, I can’t believe he’d do this,” she said as Darren walked into the kitchen. “Right, Darren?”

He’d back her up on this, he was her husband after all.

“Jane, I’m with Tori on this one. The kids aren’t going to get gun-crazed if they play with a few Nerf guns. They don’t even look real. Stop being ridiculous,” he said.

Her cheeks grew hot and she narrowed her eyes at her husband. It was gonna take a lot more than sex to make up for this.

“See my point?” Tori waved her arm. “Even Darren agrees with me, and he *never* agrees with me.” She chuckled.

“If anything having someone like Scott around to teach us all a few things about gun safety would be a good idea. He’s even offered to take us shooting and teach us how to properly use one, wouldn’t that be fun?” Her husband seemed so excited about that prospect.

Of course Scott did.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jane snarled, looking at Darren. “What makes you think I’d agree to that if I don’t even want my kids to have toy guns?”

“Ya know Jane, I’ve backed down to you and let you have your way on a lot of things that I don’t agree with one hundred percent, but good grief, it’s Christmas. Let the kids have a little fun.”

“We had them as kids,” Tori pointed out. Her jaw dropped open as if something had just dawned on her and her eyes filled with moisture. “In fact,” she sucked in a deep breath trying to keep her cool, “I’m pretty sure that is the whole reason behind the gift.” She swallowed a lump in her throat, collecting herself. “A couple weeks ago him and I were talking about best Christmas memories. I told him about the last Christmas we had with Dad. You were probably too little to remember. Dad bought us both Nerf guns and we had this huge war in the house.”

A light bulb went off in her head and a fuzzy memory came to mind of her and Tori, pelting each other with darts. Jane’s heart squeezed. There was a man there, but he was blurred and no matter how hard Jane tried, she couldn’t bring him to mind.

“This is what Scott does, sis.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “He wants to give us our childhood back.” She quickly wiped the stray tear. “He’s just a big kid—with an even bigger heart.”

She fought the urge to break out into sobs at Scott’s kindness. There was zero chance she’d ever take those stupid guns away now. “Fine. They can play with them.” Jane choked back her emotion and walked back into the living room. When she got there she saw Scott ducked behind the chair popping out every few minutes shooting darts at the kids. Hannah and Jacob ran circles around the living room squealing—trying to get him.

They didn’t care about their stupid Kindle Fire’s they’d gotten, or the hundreds of dollars worth of toys up in their rooms. Those stupid, ten-dollar Nerf guns were giving her kids the most joy she’d seen all dang day.

She crossed her arms, leaning against the wall, watching it all transpire. She'd hand it to Scott, he was good with those kids, and they loved him. She laughed as he poked his head up from behind the chair and hit her square in the forehead with a dart with a mischievous grin.

"Oh you just did *not* do that." She scowled, narrowing her eyes at him.

He laughed and shot her again, hitting her in the shoulder. "Come on, pull out the stick out of your butt and have some fun."

Damn him for being so likable.

Hannah tugged on her shirt. "Here Mommy...we opened yours." She lifted up the Nerf gun to her mom. "Get the bear." A megawatt grin passed over her daughter's face.

"Yeah, Jane. Get the bear." Scott grinned and shot her again in the forehead.

"Oh, it's bear season now." Jane snatched the Nerf gun from Hannah and charged toward Scott, causing the kids to squeal in delight.

In her peripheral she caught her husband and sister mulling into the dining room, watching it all transpire.

"What the heck is happening?" Tori shouted over the commotion.

"Better stay back, babe, your sister is about to get it!" Scott shouted from behind the chair.

Jane huddled the kids up and whispered to them a plan as Scott continued to unload darts on them. Within a few moments the kids followed her orders, collecting all the darts into a pile.

Scott clicked his gun, "Argh! Out of ammo!" he shouted.

Jane waited until he came around the chair with his hands held up growling. "Now!" she shouted as her and the kids unloaded on him. As each dart hit his body, he overplayed it by jolting each shoulder backwards. He then clutched his chest and dropped to the ground. "You got me. I'm hit." He coughed and sputtered, took a deep breath and closed his eyes laying still.

Jane couldn't help it, she was rolling in a fit of laughter. "Told you it was bear season!"

The kids ran over and jumped on his chest, beating their hands on it.

"Wake up bear!" Jacob yelled in his face slapping his cheeks.

After about thirty seconds, Scott grinned and popped open his eyes and let out a huge roar. He then wrestled the kids to the ground, tickling them as

they giggled uncontrollably. Jane could only grin watching him. He was gonna make a great dad someday.

Just then the front door squeaked open. She glanced up, seeing her mother, Maureen, walking in with an older man about her age. Mom had told her she'd be bringing her newest boyfriend, Terry, so it didn't surprise her that they had a guest. The two of them stood in the entry for a brief moment, watching Scott on the floor wrestling with the kids.

"Well this looks fun," Mom said, looking down at Scott, brushing her hair off her brow as she smiled.

The action stopped, and Scott looked up. "Merry Christmas, Maureen."

"Terry, this is Scott, my future son-in-law." She placed her hand on Terry's shoulder. "And that's Jane, and Darren and Tori." Mom pointed to the others in the room.

"Nice to meet you Terry," Scott stood and gave him a hearty handshake.

"You as well Scott, and all of you." Terry nodded to the rest of the group.

At first glance, Terry seemed nice. He had a pleasant, crooked smile that was framed in a grey mustache. She always tried to give everyone the benefit of the doubt at first, but her mom had not always picked the best companions. There was a warmth to him that filled Jane with a little hope.

"He's not Scott he's the bear!" Hannah said wrinkling her nose and making a little growl. Her sister's man gave her daughter a grin, ruffling her hair.

"You must be Hannah." Terry looked down at her, placing his hands in his pockets.

"I'm Hannah and I'm seven." She said holding up seven fingers. "That's my brother Jacob, he's three." She pointed to her brother over by the tree who was now engrossed with his fire truck. "And Mommy is going to have another baby soon, so I'll have another brother or sister!"

Everyone gasped, and all eyes turned to Jane.

Well, there goes that.

"Hannah!" Jane scolded her. "It was supposed to be a secret." She didn't plan to tell anyone, yet. "Guess that cats out of the bag." She shrugged.

Her mom walked over to her and gave her a hug. “Congratulations!” Mom patted her stomach. “How far along?”

“Ten weeks,” she replied as Darren snaked his arm around her.

“Congratulations to you both,” Terry said, nodding at Darren.

Jane peered over her shoulder at her sister who was leaning against the archway of the dining room, trying to gauge her reaction. They all knew it was questionable if she’d ever conceive.

“Congratulations Jane. That’s so exciting!” Tori grinned. “Now get over here and give me a hug.” Her smile widened as she opened her arms.

She embraced her. “You ok?” she whispered in her sisters’ ear.

Her and Scott weren’t even married yet. They had plenty of time to keep trying.

“Of course. I get to be an aunt again.” Tori kissed her on the cheek and patted her back with her free hand.

She pulled back and looked at her sister trying to figure out if she was lying. Tori was hard enough to read before she went blind, and nearly impossible now.

Just then Tori’s smile twitched in the corner.

And there it was. That damn fake grin of hers. Jane knew that all too well.

“Presents!” Jacob shouted, breaking Jane from her gaze. Her son ran over to the entry looking at the packages her mother had placed on the floor in the foyer, grunting as he tried to grab the biggest box.

“We better open those soon before these kids lose it.” Darren chuckled.



Tori took the dish as her mother handed it to her and dried it with a towel, carefully placing it in the pile she was making next to the sink.

“Did you get the wedding invitation?” Tori asked.

She tried to make small talk the best she could with her mother, but she despised being in a room alone with her. At eighteen she got away from her and never looked back.

“Yes, we did. Very pretty, *very you*,” her mother said, as if she actually had a clue who she was.

“I noticed you two aren’t getting married in the Catholic church?” She hated that edge in her mom’s tone.

And here we go.

“Mom, Scott isn’t Catholic, and I haven’t practiced in years. We just want a small, intimate wedding with our close friends and family. Nothing fancy.” She placed the next dish in the pile and it clanked a little too loud.

“But what if you have kids? Won’t they be baptized Catholic?” Her mother seemed appalled at that thought.

“*If* we have kids,” her jaw tightened, “they’ll be whatever him and I see fit.”

“Well, I guess with your medical issues, it would be best to have a small, simple event.” Her mom sighed and shook her head.

She wished she could be anywhere else other than that room at the moment. Her mom still couldn’t utter the words blind. It was always like it was poison dripping from her lips. “Terry seems nice,” she said, trying to redirect the conversation.

“He’s really a nice man. Handsome too, for an older guy. Not that you care about that anymore...”

I’m going to kill her. I’m literally going to reach over and choke the life out of her.

“We met at a group meeting. He’s recovering as well,” her mother continued.

“How’s that going?” she asked. *Be cordial* she reminded herself. Her mother sounded better than she had in years, so maybe this time the sobriety would stick.

Her mom sighed. “Going good. Almost had a setback a few months back when dealing with some stuff from the past, got to step four and things got rough. I checked myself inpatient for a while to clear my head.”

Tori stopped drying the dish and stood still. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black,” Mom huffed.

Tori raised her brow, she had a point. *Learned it from the best.* She’d always been so closed off herself, but Scott had changed that about her. She was finally learning to trust again.

“Because I’ve put you all through too much. You and Jane have enough going on. I had to work through this on my own.” Another big sigh

followed.

“What’s step four?” she asked, reaching in the sink for the next dish and continued drying.

“Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself...”

“Oh.” She swallowed the lump in her throat as her hands shook. “What step are you on now?”

“Making amends to everyone we’ve wronged.”

Tori’s shoulders tensed up and her lips tightened. Not once had her mom ever said she was sorry for all she’d done to her.

“Tori.” Her mom’s hand landed on her shoulder. “I’m sorry doesn’t even begin to scratch the surface of what I put you through growing up. You raised Jane, not me. I was too far gone after your dad died.”

They were quiet for a few moments. She really didn’t know what to say.

Mom handed her the last dish. “This is the last one, dear.” A sniffle came from her mom as she choked back tears. “It’s my fault. Every last bit of it. If I hadn’t been drinking...”

The dish slipped from Tori’s grasp and dropped on the floor, shattering. She braced herself on the counter and bent her head down. All this needed said, she was just shocked that it came now, on Christmas

Footsteps came quickly into the room, the right heavier than the left. Tori always knew it was her man. He could never sneak up on her.

“You ok, babe?” he asked.

She wiped the tears burning her cheeks and turned to him. “I dropped a plate. I’m fine.”

As he came closer, the sound of glass crunched under his boots. “Let me help...”

“Give us a minute, will you?” her mother asked. “I’ll handle the mess, Scott.”

Tori could just imagine that intense, protective look that Scott would get boring into her mother’s skull.

“Tori?” he asked, wanting *her* assurance that she was fine.

“I’ll be there in a minute.” She waved him off.

“If you say so.” He reluctantly left them alone, going back in the living room. She could hear her mom rifle for the dustpan, followed by the shards of glass being swept up.

What does she expect from me?

She listened as her mom dropped the pieces of the broken dish into the trash can. "I'm not asking for your forgiveness. I'm just trying to make things right going forward," her mom said. "In whatever way I can."

"Mom I..." Tori trailed off. She really had no words. She couldn't make sense of anything she was feeling. She didn't know if she was sad, angry or relieved that those words were finally being said.

She took a deep breath, collecting her thoughts. "I don't know if I'll ever completely forgive you," she said firmly. "I had nobody in my corner. *Ever*. A lot of damage has been done, and one apology in the kitchen will never repair what is broken between us...but it's a start."

"I understand that. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to be a part of your life." She rubbed Tori on the back.

"I'm willing to try." She nodded, wiped her hands off with a dish towel, and grabbed her cane that was propped up against the counter, then walked out into the living room.



Scott was tuning his guitar as Tori came back into the room. He wondered what her mother said or did this time to upset her. He stood, shifting his guitar to his left hand, then grabbed her arm, pulling her in close to him.

"You good?" he whispered to her as they sat.

"Mmmhmmm." Tori nodded, and her lips grew tight.

He suspected that was a damn, dirty lie. After the intense conversation he'd just witnessed in the kitchen with her mom and the bomb Jane just dropped on them about being pregnant, he was worried about her. They just couldn't catch a break this holiday season.

"Oh, what's this? A concert?" Maureen asked as she sat next to Terry on the sofa.

"This is all on her." Scott pointed to Tori, who seemed to brighten up at the prospect of him playing.

In them talking about family traditions on Christmas he mentioned how his family would gather around the tree and his dad would play on

Christmas eve. As cheesy as it was, his girl seemed really excited at that prospect and convinced him to bring his guitar over. *The kids will love it*, Tori had said—using them as leverage.

Well, even if the kids didn't love it, she would. That's all that mattered. He was just happy to see that grin back on her face.

The kids crossed their legs and sat in front of him. Jacob reached his teeny hand up, plucking at the strings. Jane sat on top of Darren's lap in the corner chair.

"Who wants first request?" Scott scanned the room.

Hannah stood up, jumping. "Me! Me! Me!" She raised her hand.

"Alright." He nodded at her. "What song do you want?"

"Let it Go, from *Frozen*!"

"What *Christmas* song do you want." He narrowed his eyes. "The bear does *not* do Disney songs."

"Frosty!" Jacob yelled.

"Yes. Frosty." Hannah nodded, her blond curls bouncing with her head.

"Alright. I'll play, but Aunt Tori sings it." He smirked.

Tori's jaw dropped. "I do *not* sing."

That was a big, fat lie. She had an amazing voice. "You do now." He laughed and started strumming the tune.

"Oh please, you have a lovely voice," Maureen said.

Tori's brow raised, seemingly surprised that her mother was giving her a compliment.

"Kids are waiting..." He continued to strum. "Can't let them down," he whispered in her ear mischievously.

Tori inhaled and started singing the words, reluctantly. He loved hearing her. She had this cute, raspy singing voice that had a sexy, earthy tone to it. Around the second verse she got hung up on the words, so he helped her out a bit. Jacob clapped his hands and Hannah sang along with them, dancing around the living room.

His eyes gleamed as he watched his girl. She was radiant, and happy. His heart squeezed, feeling the same. This was the Christmas he wanted for her.

He took a few more requests from around the room. The kids wanted "Jingle Bell Rock". Terry surprised them a bit when he took the guitar and

did a few songs himself. Scott was quite impressed; the old man could actually play quite well. Maureen requested “What Child is This”.

The evening wore on and Scott could see the kids winding down with the music slowing. He checked his watch and it was nearly eight, so he knew bedtime would be coming soon for them.

“One more. This one is one my dad used to sing to me on Christmas Eve. It’s a bit country, an old Glen Campbell song my folks used to listen to, but I’m from Texas after all...”

He started singing the lyrics, “*Little toy trains, little toy tracks, little toy drums comin’ from his sack...*” It was a sweet Christmas lullaby for the kids. He’d always loved this one as a kid. It reminded him of home, and his dad. He’d made a mental note to FaceTime his folks when he got home.

He watched as the kid’s eyes grew droopy. Jacob snuggled up next to his mom, laying his head on her lap as he finished the last few lines.

“That was so lovely,” Jane said, rubbing her hand through her sleeping child’s hair. “You’re not so much of a bear after all.” She winked and smiled warmly. “More like a teddy bear.”

Darren glanced to his sleeping kids. “Guess we better carry these kids up to bed.” Hannah’s eyelids were heavy and Jacob was out. He leaned over, grabbing Hannah off Tori’s lap and carried her up the stairs.

Jane moved Jacob and stood. “Sit down, preggos,” Scott said, motioning for her to sit. “I’ll take him.” He bent over, scooped up sleeping Jacob, and carried him up the stairs.

CHAPTER

Ten

Scott walked out onto their back deck where Tori sat outside, alone under the cold, starry night.

“You’re gonna freeze out here,” he said, sitting on the swing. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling a blanket on top of them.

“Says the man who’s wearing a t-shirt in forty-degree weather.” She rubbed her hand on his bare arm. Khan ran out into the yard, traipsing through all the wet leaves.

“Did you FaceTime your parents?”

“Yup. They’re doing good. Said to tell you merry Christmas.”

“Sorry, I should have poked my head in to say hello...I just...” her voice wavered as she rested her head on his shoulder.

“You doing alright?” He squeezed her leg.

“Just needed some air, and came out to enjoy the gift from Blaze,” Tori said taking a hit off a joint.

“Yeah.” He huffed and scowled. “I’m gonna have to thank him for that one.” He’d texted them and said he was crashing with Presley tonight. The dude was a freaking nomad.

She held the joint out to him. “Want some?”

“You’re kidding me, right? Why do you still even ask?” He snorted.

“You did it in Amsterdam with me,” she reminded him. Years ago, after Scott lost his leg she’d swept him off to Amsterdam for the wildest week of his life. He still couldn’t believe half the shit they did there.

“What happened in Amsterdam, stays in Amsterdam.” He laughed. That was positively the most wild and reckless week of his entire life. “I was a very different man back then.”

“Come on, it’s Christmas. Let’s start a new tradition. Every Christmas you smoke just one with me. Be a little bad, get on Santa’s naughty list.” She smirked playfully. “Be a rebel Scott Harris, for me.” She taunted him,

holding it out with a pout. “It will turn me on. Pretty please.” She flashed a wicked grin and waved the joint. “Come on....”

He sighed and took it from her hand. She had more control and influence over him than he liked, but he couldn’t resist that devilish grin of hers. His whole motto this Christmas was to make her happy. So, fuck it. “You’re a pusher, you know that?” He took a big inhale, coughing it back out. “Shit, that’s terrible.”

“Better than cigarettes.” Her brow raised, knowing he damn well still snuck them now and again on a stressful day.

“Seriously though, you ok?” He took another drag and handed it back to her. He still hadn’t given her the big gift. He wanted to, but there was never a time of day where it felt right yet. At the rate things were going it was about to be a New Year’s gift.

“I’m good...” She took a big puff and blew out a few rings of smoke. Their pooch huffed and sneezed, which made them chuckle.

“You know what I mean, Jane, your mom...everything...” Tori had filled him in on the car ride home about her conversation with her mom.

“You’re killing my buzz.” She sighed, passing it back to him. “I’m happy for Jane. Really, I am. I mean she’s Catholic and all, and they don’t believe in birth control, so I expect she’ll end up with a dozen kids.” She chuckled. “I wish you and her would stop tiptoeing around my feelings.”

“We just know that this is a soft subject for you.” He took another hit and stared up at the sky, feeling a little dizzy.

“Why should it be? I mean it’s only been five months of continual fucking and I’m still not pregnant.” She frowned. “That biological clock is just ticking away.”

“We aren’t even married yet, Tori. We’re just barely starting our life together. We have plenty of time,” Scott said, taking another puff. “I’m not pressuring you for anything.”

“You aren’t.” She sighed, taking a hit. “But it’s so glaringly apparent every time you’re around Jane’s kids that you’re meant to be a dad. I want to give that to you more than anything, and I want it too.” She sucked in another hit. “Listening to you tonight sing to those kids...God...ovaries exploding. I could have a dozen of your babies.”

He chuckled. “A dozen, really?”

“You know what I mean, goof.” She nudged him in the side.

“I know you do, but sometimes life doesn’t give you exactly what you want.” Hell, the last several weeks of their lives had proved that more than anything. “We may have to go about it in another way.”

“Meaning adopt,” she said flatly.

“There are so many kids that we could give a good home to.”

“I know that, but selfishly, one day, I still want one that’s part me and you. Even if I can’t see them, I’ll know them. I want a little boy with your dark hair and my blue eyes. He’ll have your sense of adventure, strength and character. Or a little girl with blonde, wavy hair and your big brown eyes. She’ll be sassy and fierce like me and love the outdoors like her daddy bear.”

“They’ll be like that no matter what—whether they have our DNA or not. They’ll be raised by us. They’ll inherit our traits, and love what we love. That is until they’re horrible teenagers that dye their hair weird colors and hate everything about us as they fight for their own identity.”

“Ooh, I forgot they turn into awful teenagers.” She laughed. “Forget kids, let’s just have dogs.” She scratched Khan on the head as Scott finished off the last bit of the joint.

He let out a silly giggle. His body felt heavy, but his head was floating. “I’m really fucking high, damn you.”

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“It’s...interesting...” He felt slightly relaxed, but uneasy at the same time that he wasn’t in complete control of his body. Rather than get paranoid he was trying to enjoy it.

She snuggled in closer to him, getting warm under the fluffy, soft blanket.

“I hung up your painting,” he said after a few minutes of silence.

“Where?” Tori asked.

“In my office. It looks incredible.” He kissed her on the forehead. “It’s amazing. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“Really? You like it?” Tori smiled, pleased. “You would tell me the truth, right?”

“Have we met?” Scott snorted. “Wanna know something else?”

“What’s that?”

He rested his lips on her temple and lowered his voice. It was now or never. “I have another present for you. It’s a big one.”

“Oh, do you now?” She reached under the blanket and stroked his cock under his pants.

His head tilted back to the night sky as he roared in laughter. He loved how her filthy, little mind worked. Of course that is what she’d immediately think. And as much as he wanted that, he wanted to give her this gift more. “No, this is an actual present, but we’ve got to go inside for it.” He stood and swayed. “That’s if I can walk...” He giggled like a kid. Lord, maybe now wasn’t the right time, but he’d already opened his mouth.

He pulled her off the swing and dragged her into the house, through the kitchen and led her to the sofa.

“Sit,” he ordered. “I’ll be right back.” He went down the hallway into his office.



She sat there and waited as his footsteps echoed down the hall. She couldn’t begin to imagine what he had up his sleeve. He’d already given her several gifts that morning and what she assumed was her big gift—a three-dimensional printer for her studio.

A few moments later his footsteps came back into the room. “So, I called Keith and he recruited some help from the man you’d been talking to in New York that owns the 3D printing company...”

“Arthur?” she cocked her head to the side.

“Yes, Arthur.” The sofa cushion sunk as he sat next to her. Something hit her lap, it was long and straight. Her best guess is that it was a canvas.

“Is this a 3D painting?” Her heart raced in her chest, wondering...was it a Dali? A Monet? Or maybe a Van Gogh? He knew those were some of her favorites, but the possibilities were endless.

“This...” he took her hand and placed it on the canvas, “...is not just any piece of art.”

Her fingertips trailed over the raised ridges. It was a face, that was certain. She could make out the angled lines of the jaw, and the softer edges of lips, the waves of the hair, a curve of a nose. It almost felt like...*Jane?*

Scott's weight shifted slightly next to her, and suddenly, the sound of guitar music hit her ears followed by a voice she hadn't heard in over two decades. But it was a voice she'd know anywhere.

My dad.

She dizzyed, pulling her hand to her mouth as a gasp escaped her lips. Tears of pure joy flowed down her cheeks. She tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come, and even if they could they'd be inadequate to describe the emotion swelling in her chest.

How did he ever do this? She knew that her man would move mountains for her, but this was literally forming ashes into diamonds. To hear her father's voice again was a priceless treasure.

She leaned back into the sofa, clutching the canvas to her chest, grinning and crying as she let the sweet melody wash over her. The song ended, and Scott's strong arms wrapped around her as he kissed the top of her head.

"Thank you," she managed to mumble as she sat the canvas down. She turned back to him and buried herself into his massive chest. "Thank you," she repeated again and again.

"Anything for you, baby." He squeezed her tight. "There's a whole lot more of them. I got his whole demo tape from a former band member."

She pulled back, wiping her nose. "Really?"

"That's not all I got." He relayed the story of how he'd gone to the bar in Baltimore and ran into Elliott. "I've got several photographs that Presley scanned in and you can print on your 3D printer. There was even a VHS tape in the mix—full of footage. Even some of you and Jane, sitting in the garage listening to them as they practiced. I transferred it to digital and added my own VoiceOver adaptation for you."

"Jane's gonna get to see him. I can't wait to show her." She grinned so wide she feared her jaw would break. "That's...that's..." she was speechless.

"A Christmas miracle?" He chuckled.

"Yes, it's a Christmas miracle." She palmed his cheek and planted a tender kiss on his lips.

"I'm so glad you love it, baby." His smooth voice washed over her as his lips grazed hers.

"I love it, but I love you more." She trailed soft kisses along his neck, the scruff of his beard tickling her cheek. "This has been the best Christmas

I've ever had," she whispered into his ear. "But I know one last thing that would make it even better." She nibbled on his ear.

A low grumble came from his throat as she ran her hands over his groin. "You got it, baby."

He scooped her up from the sofa and laid her down on a soft blanket on the floor. The crackling from the logs on the fire popped next to her, the warmth hitting her skin.

"Merry Christmas, baby." His calloused hand grazed her cheek.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered as his lips planted to hers in a tender kiss.

THE END

Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading my words and giving me a chance to entertain you. To my loyal readers, thanks for understanding why I needed to put Blaze on the shelf for a few weeks and share this part of Scott and Tori's story. "Fighting The Blaze" will be coming next. Hell or high water, you're getting Blaze's book.

To my new readers, I hope you enjoyed Scott and Tori and their entire gang of unruly misfits. I think that they're a pretty kickass couple. They've had a long, arduous journey to get to this point, and I hope that you go back to where it all began in [Chasing Fire](#) and read about those two college kids who met in a dive bar one night.

To stay up to date on my most recent releases and events I'd love to have you join my Facebook reader group: [Avery's Angels](#)! Why? Because even good girls need to be bad sometimes. Come join in on the naughtiness.

Please leave a review on Amazon and Goodreads and to tell others what you thought about the book. Reviews are the number one thing that readers can do to help out an indie author. I mean, really... I can NOT express enough the importance of reviews. Also, every time you read a book and don't leave a review, a unicorn dies.

Ok, I'm lying, but you get my gist.

Also I love to hear personally from my readers. Honestly, I get a little giddy. Feel free to drop me a line at:

averyjkingston@gmail.com.

Also I LOVE to be social. Come stalk me!

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#)

XOXOXOXO,



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all I want to thank my husband. Without him, Scott and Tori would have never come to life. In an effort to remain connected during his military leave, he sent me a story about an amputee veteran meeting a blind woman in a bar. Little did he know that this would ignite an entire series of books. (A decision I'm certain he regrets to this day).

Thank you, baby, for being my biggest fan (and harshest critic). I love you with every fiber of my being. Thank you for helping me breathe life into these amazing characters. Thank you most of all for believing in me, encouraging me and not flipping your shit when I told you three weeks before Christmas that I wanted to publish a novella. You are and always will be the "real Scott Harris." Sorry that I steal so many of your words and give them to him. You're the wind in my sails and support me and all my crazy.

To my editor, Phoenix, from [Writer's Rebirth](#). I cannot thank you enough. You ROCK. I'm becoming a better writer because of you.

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To all the book bloggers that have given me love I can't thank you enough for helping me promote all my stories.

Finally to my readers, my fans. Avery's Angels. I can NOT thank you enough for your support. Thanks for pimping my books and giving me words of encouragement. I'm truly humbled at your love and support of my work. I've grown to know and love so many of you over this past year and consider you all friends. Thank you SO much. You readers keep me going.

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