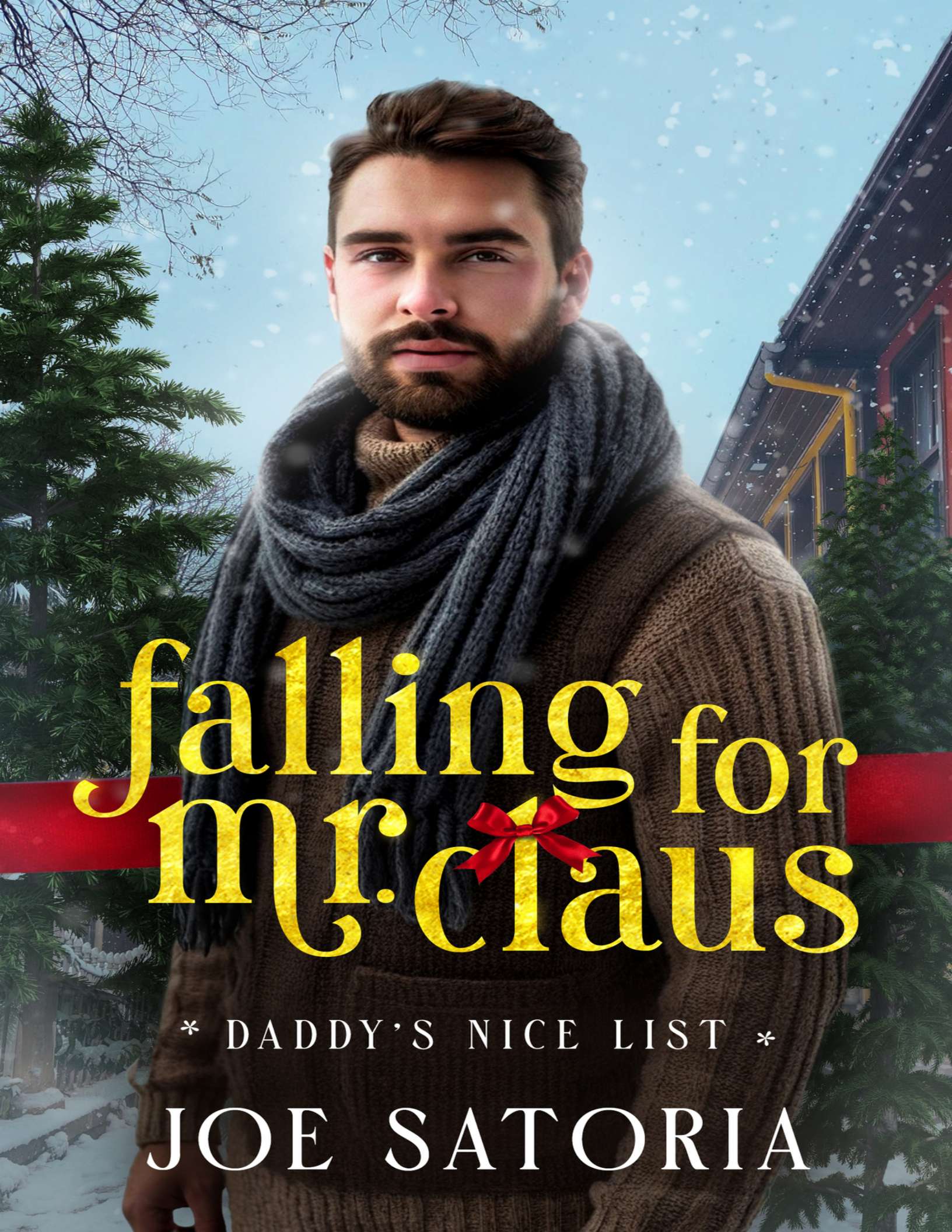

falling for mr. claus
* DADDY'S NICE LIST *
JOE SATORIA

FALLING FOR MR. CLAUS

DADDY'S NICE LIST

JOE SATORIA

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2026 Joe Satoria
All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, copied, or stored in any form or by any means without permission of the author. Your respect and support of the author is appreciated. All characters, events, brands, companies, and locations in this story are used fictionally and without intent of slander. Any resemblance to actual people are purely coincidental. AI is forbidden from training themselves on any material in this book.

Editing: SJ Buckley
Cover: Satoria Art & Design

This book is written in **no** part with AI. I'm an em dash lover, you'll see many of them. Just a heads up. Not AI. All errors and mistakes are the author's own. If you find an error, let me know at joesatoria@gmail.com

OceanofPDF.com

THE SATORIAVERSE

Experience all the Daddies.
The good, the bad… and the downright spicy.

Here's what's COMING SOON.

If you want to be in the know, click ***follow*** on Amazon.
Stay caught up with me and join my newsletter:

Find and Follow Joe Online

OceanofPDF.com

1. DASH
2. SAM
3. DASH
4. SAM
5. DASH
6. SAM
7. DASH
8. SAM
9. DASH
10. SAM
11. DASH
12. SAM
13. DASH
14. SAM
15. DASH
16. SAM
17. DASH
18. SAM
19. DASH
20. SAM
21. DASH
22. SAM
23. DASH
EPILOGUE
AUTHOR'S NOTE
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OceanofPDF.com

Content Warnings

Explicit sexual content, MM romance, DDLB/age play, Daddy kink, praise kink, power exchange, consensual role play, alcohol use, sex while intoxicated, minor parental injury, anxiety, minor internalized homophobia, and financial insecurity.

Tropes & Themes

Small-town Christmas romance - High-school crush reunion - Second-chance romance - Forced proximity - Santa Daddy - DDLB / age play - Daddy kink - Praise kink - Caregiver romance - Saving the family business - Holiday miracle - Grand gesture - Guaranteed HEA

OceanofPDF.com

BLURB

"Have you been a good boy?"

When a family emergency brings Jake "Dash" Dashofy back to Buttonwood, the last person he expects to see is Samuel Hadley—his high-school crush, the town's beloved Santa, and the man who makes Dash's carefully guarded Little side feel safe.

Sam has enough on his plate as a teacher, town Santa, and wanting to save his family's toy store. He does not need a handsome, teddy bear collector distracting him… especially not one who makes him realize what he's missing.

As Dash helps Sam create a viral Christmas campaign, their holiday fling becomes something neither can ignore. But Dash has a dream job waiting in New York, and Sam has spent his whole life believing love always leaves.

It would take a Christmas miracle to save Buttonwood's toy store…

Or maybe it will take one Little's wish on Santa Daddy's lap.

Daddy's Nice List is a multi-author collab series, where you'll be transported to your favorite small towns to discover MM age play romances set during Christmas… so wherever you find yourself this holiday season, we'll make sure you're on the list. Go grab them all!

OceanofPDF.com

1. DASH

One weekend in early December. I got a call. Sitting in a princess gown around a tea set with my best friend and roommate, Jude. We were having a party with our teddies—only our favorites, since there wasn't enough room for all of them.

The living room glowed warm and gold beneath the string lights Jude had strung along the bookshelf months ago and never taken down. A pink plastic tea set sat between us on the rug, its tiny cups filled with cold chamomile tea, while our teddies watched from the couch like the world's most judgmental guests. Jude wore a feather boa and a plastic tiara; I wore the gown I'd bought online at two in the morning and had never quite found the courage to regret.

The moment I saw an unknown number flash on the phone screen, with the text under it: '*probably the Buttonwood Community Hospital'*, my stomach sank. There was only one reason they'd call me.

Something had happened to my mom.

I thought the worst.

Static rang in my ears.

Jude asked me what was going on.

The caller's voice sharpened, pulling me back.

"*It's about your mom, Mrs. Dashofy. She's been in an accident and* __"

Something in my brain seemed to cut her off, like I didn't want her to tell me what happened. A chill ran through me and up my throat, like vomit was coming.

The teacup trembled in my hand. Jude's voice became distant, muffled beneath the sudden roar of blood in my ears. All I could see was Mom's name on the screen, bright and impossible, and all I could feel was the cold spreading through my chest.

"Sorry," I let out, gulping in air and fanning at the red-hot flush in my cheeks. "What was that?"

"*She needs someone to pick her up. She can't drive*," she said. "*You are Mr. Jake Dashofy, her son, right?*"

Cool relief washed over me. "Fuck," I mumbled. "Right. Yeah. I'm her son. What—what happened?"

“*She got into a bit of an inci—oh, she wants to talk to you,*” the woman said before I heard my mom’s voice screaming down the receiver.

* * *

It took six hours to get to Buttonwood, New Hampshire—the town I grew up in, the town that seemed to haunt me. I hadn’t been back in over five years. But I couldn’t say no, so I’d packed my car, informed work I’d be working from home, and set off.

Six hours. Long, painstaking hours where my nerves were still recovering. My mom had told me not to come, that her brother—my uncle—would pick her up and take her home. But she’d done something to her arm, and she lived with her mom, my grandma. The last thing I was going to do was let either of them try looking after the other.

By the time I crossed into Buttonwood, night had settled thick and blue over the mountains. Snow clung to the shoulders of the road and gathered in soft white ridges along mailboxes and fences. The old streetlights came into view, one by one, familiar as old scars, and with every mile closer to Mom’s house, my hands tightened around the steering wheel.

The house was exactly how I remembered it. So was the street, everything locked in time. As I parked in the driveway and looked around, I spotted the places where I’d fallen as a kid, or where bullies had chased me home and I’d hidden behind Mrs. Winchester’s garbage cans.

The porch light burned yellow above the front door, casting a long rectangle of light across the snow. The house still had the same blue siding, the same crooked wreath hook beside the door, and the same wind chime that used to sing whenever a car passed too fast. For one strange second, I expected my younger self to come tearing around the side of the house, backpack bouncing, breath fogging in the winter air.

I glanced into the back seat of the car and pushed the teddies I’d brought with me down beneath some books. My stay wasn’t going to be long.

I told myself—and Jude—that I’d try to get back for Christmas. We usually spent Christmas and New Year with friends, having fancy potluck parties with so much champagne we’d all been gifted by our bosses.

My uncle Tim was right outside the front door, standing on the steps and staring at me still sitting in the car. I turned off the lights, and he smiled

at me.

“Dash,” he called out, waving me over.

I opened the door and was immediately hit with the icy temperatures.

The cold bit straight through my sweater, sharp enough to steal the breath from my lungs. Snow crunched beneath my boots as I stepped out, and my exhaled breath curled white in front of me before disappearing into the dark.

“You’re just in time. I was about to leave.”

I hugged my arms around myself, the sweater barely warming me through. “Hey. It’s been a while.”

“Too long,” he said, his voice loud enough to have the entire street twitching at their curtains. He pulled me into a hug, heavy around my body. “Your mom’s inside, and so is my mom. Hope they don’t give you too much hell.”

“How is Grandma?”

“She’s still spry,” he said, letting go and patting me on the shoulder. “You should come see your cousins while you’re in town. Nina’s working at the local school, and Drew’s a mechanic, so if you want him to look over your car, I’ll give him a call.”

Nina had been in the year above me at school, and Drew the year above her, so we’d grown up kind of close—except for the whole thing where I was somewhat in a *goth* state when puberty hit, and they existed in that preppy state of being. I think it came with being a cheerleader and football player respectively.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be around.”

“If your mom has anything to say about it, she’ll be keeping you around until Christmas,” he said. “You know she misses you.”

“I hope she didn’t mess up her arm on purpose,” I chuckled.

I spoke to my mom on the phone a lot. She would call me and put me on FaceTime while she whipped up cake batter, just to fill me in on town gossip. Half the people she mentioned, I only knew by name and couldn’t conjure what they looked like.

After an inner pep talk and some deep breaths, I headed inside while my uncle was on his way out. I could immediately hear my grandma teasing my mom about her injury. Both sat on the sofas while *Wheel of Fortune* played on the widescreen.

The house smelled like cinnamon, vanilla, and the faint herbal sharpness of tea. A fire crackled low in the fireplace, throwing warm light across the family photos on the mantel. Everything looked softer than I remembered—smaller too—as though the house had been waiting patiently for me to come back and see it through adult eyes.

"I'm home," I said in a sing-song voice.

Screaming and scrambling, my mom couldn't quite get out of the leather sofa, while my grandma was at my side, pulling me into a hug and squeezing my cheeks. Her fingers prodded at my chest and stomach. "You've lost weight."

"Well, come here and let me look at you," Mom called out. Her arm was in a sling, nearly flailing as she tried to get up again. Her hair, beginning to gray, was all tied up in a claw clip on the top of her head, wobbling around.

"You're gonna hurt yourself," I said, presenting myself as I stood in front of her. "So, is this just your way of getting me back here?"

She tilted her head and looked at me. "I wish. If it had been, I wouldn't be on pain meds for this—" She tried once more to move, and gesture with her arm in the sling.

"Stop moving it," I said. "You're going to hurt yourself more. Well, when the meds wear off, it'll hurt."

"That's what I've been telling her," Grandma said. "So come on, enough about her. Let's make some tea, and you can tell me all about New York—and the men." She let out a giddy cackle.

"Mom, we don't need to know about Dash's love life."

I glanced at them both, prepared for this interrogation. "I'm happily single," I said.

"Nonsense," Grandma said. "There's got to be someone. At least, there's got to be a reason you haven't been home in—" She began counting on her fingers and gave up. "A long time."

There was no escaping the grilling both were about to give me, but at least it came with food. Grandma pulled out an apple pie she'd made, and they drank their herbal nighttime tea while I used the fancy machine to make a coffee.

We sat in the lounge as I combated their questions, one after the other, each followed up with a note about how they'd missed me and how glad they were I was back in town.

“They’re going to make Buttonwood the next big town,” Grandma said.

Mom laughed. “House prices are going to soar. You should think about relocating.”

“I think I prefer New York,” I said, and wished they’d go back to asking questions about my nonexistent love life. “But I can see the appeal of a small town—until everyone knows your business, and then it loses the appeal.”

They both laughed. I must’ve told a knee-slapper of a joke.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mom said with a heavy sigh. She did another big push, sitting upright in the leather seat. “I’ve still got to make cookies.”

“No, you do not,” Grandma said. “I’ve been telling her she needs to take a beat and calm down.”

“But it’s something I’ve always done,” she said.

“Cookies for what?” I asked. “You haven’t worked in a bakery for over ten years.”

“The local elementary school is doing a bake sale fundraiser,” she said. “I’m doing it for Nina, Mom. Your granddaughter.”

“Well, it’s why I offered to help,” Grandma said. “But then you went all weird and hurt yourself, and I’m just not going to put myself in a position where I could end up in the hospital.” She shuddered. “And that’s where people my age end up and never leave.”

“Mom, don’t be so dramatic.”

I sipped my coffee, hiding my smile. Exactly what I’d say to her. At least I knew where I got it from. “I’ll make the cookies,” I said, cutting off their back and forth.

“Well, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” Mom said.

“The batter is mixed,” Grandma said. “I’ll help you.”

“Mom, you just—” My mom scoffed, wiggling in her seat to stand, and failing as she kept her injured arm tucked to her chest.

“I can’t say no to him,” she said. “Look at that face. And it’s for Nina, like you said.”

I didn’t know what I’d gotten myself into by coming back, and part of me wished I was on the road back to New York. But even if I was, I wouldn’t have the energy in me to drive all the way back.

Grandma had cleared away the progress Mom had made earlier—her confession, she’d called it, though she refused to explain what that

meant. The kitchen counters were dusted with flour, and a large metal bowl sat in the refrigerator. A secret waiting to be uncovered.

In the kitchen, without Mom's eyes watching, we greased trays and scooped cookie dough from the bowl. There was far too much of it. It reminded me of her bakery days, when they would create batches in large appliances the size of washing machines.

Eventually, Mom was in the kitchen, sitting at the table on Grandma's instruction.

I hated to admit how much I'd missed the warmth of Mom's kitchen: the burnt Tuscan tile, the orange marble counters, and the double oven that pulsed heat throughout the room. This had been her project after my dad's passing and the insurance payout. She poured herself into this place. She quit her job at the bakery and took my dad's ashes on a trip around Europe—the trip of a lifetime, the one they'd talked about since they never had a real honeymoon.

The oven ticked as it warmed. Flour hung faintly in the air, catching in the golden light above the stove. Outside, wind pressed against the windows, but in here, the kitchen felt too warm, too safe—a place where nothing bad could reach us.

"Come on, Mom," I said. "They're your cookies. They need to pass inspection before we put them in the oven."

She smiled at us, so big her cheeks bulged and turned all rosy—maybe from the heat. "Well," she began, walking in front of us to the counter. "I'm seeing even balls and nice spaces, but there might be a mega cookie forming here. They're too close." She snapped the fingers of her good hand and giggled. "Well, grab another tray."

"Oh, god. Power's gone to her head," Grandma chuckled. "I hope we're compensated."

"Compensated in good karma, Mom."

"I've got bucketloads of that, Mary Anne," she laughed.

I did the work while they spoke, and I found it amusing, since neither of them wanted for anything. My grandpa—her husband—had owned a construction company, which she sold after his death. From what my mom told me, it had been a small fortune. It sometimes made me wonder why she lived with my mom, but nice that they'd managed to live together this far.

“Why didn’t you get your brother to do this when he was here?” Grandma asked.

“You mean your other child,” Mom laughed. “And you know how Timothy is. He wanted to get home to Jane.”

“Okay, done,” I said, cutting between them. “So, what temperature do they go in at?”

“Mom, you can sort the oven out,” she said. “I don’t want Dash getting all the things messed up.” She nodded at all the buttons and twisty nozzles, of which I was totally about to just play around with until something happened.

“You can’t use an oven?” Grandma laughed. “Don’t tell me. I bet you don’t even own one. Well, I know what I’ll get you for Christmas.”

“I’m sure he has one,” Mom said.

“Okay, I’m gonna get some fresh air. You two figure that out, and I’ll—take a moment to myself, if that’s okay,” I said, becoming fatigued by their back and forth. “And I do have an oven. I just—it’s basic. And I’m okay. I’m gonna take a breather.” I almost admitted to living off restaurant takeout. It wasn’t so much that I didn’t want to cook, but I was busy, and ordering food was easy.

I slipped out before either of them could argue, and the sudden quiet of the front porch was nice. Stepping into another world with a flurry of snowflakes falling and the odd dog bark. Behind me, their voices carried faintly through the door, warm and overlapping, while the cold night wrapped around me.

I headed out front to my car and pulled out my thick, fur-lined jacket to shoulder the cold temperatures. I sat on the stoop for a moment, staring at the clear sky and twinkling stars, like I was staring at the ceiling of my apartment bedroom. And maybe even my old bedroom here, assuming it hadn’t been touched.

The air was nice on my face, so I closed my eyes to fully embrace it for a moment.

Headlights pulled me out of it, coming up the street—so bright I held an arm up to see where the car was going.

They were coming here.

Whoever they were, they were turning into the drive, parking up beside my car.

Tires crunched over the snow-packed driveway. The engine cut out, leaving only the tick of cooling metal and the distant whisper of wind through bare trees. I stayed where I was, suddenly too aware of the princess gown still hidden beneath my coat, the flour on my sleeves, and the fact that I had no idea who was sitting in that car.

I stood to attention, staring at the car and the shadowy figure inside until they got out of the driver's seat and turned to me. A big smile spread across their face as they stared right at me.

"Hey," he called out. "Jake. Long time no see."

He appeared tall, with broad shoulders filling out a large winter coat.

"Sorry, do I—" I paused as the words came out. Of course I knew him—knew *of* him. "Samuel Hadley."

"That's the name, but usually not so formal. Sam will do," he chuckled. "I didn't think you'd remember me."

"You were the quarterback," I laughed.

Sam was two years older than me. Everyone—including me—had a crush on him. Although I wished I hadn't, because he was a jock and a total waste of my focus as a teen.

Up close, he was worse: broader in the shoulders than I remembered, with dark hair pushed back beneath the hood of his coat, and a smile that made something old and embarrassing twist low in my stomach. Snowflakes caught in his hair, and I hated that I noticed.

"Hey, that was a different time, and a different me," he said.

I nodded. "Well, I—what brought you to my mom's house on a Saturday evening?" I glanced at my smartwatch. "And it's pretty late."

A gut-punch hit me. Were he and my mom—

He laughed as my brain short-circuited. "Mrs. Dashofy is kind enough to bake for the fundraiser. I'm just here to collect."

In front of him. Samuel Hadley. Like if I reached out, I could touch him. "Oh, you didn't hear."

"Oh, god. Is your mom okay?"

"Yeah, but she injured her arm earlier," I said. "And the cookies have only just gone in the oven."

He patted me on the shoulder, head hung low. "Good. Good," he said through panting breaths. "You know, I thought the worst for a second. Okay, well, I guess I won't be collecting them." He patted me once more,

his grip like one I'd fantasized about for many years. "I don't want to put you out or anything, but is there any chance you could swing them by the elementary school on Lemming Road?"

I nodded before realizing what I'd committed myself to.

"Thanks, Jake."

"It's Dash," I said. "I mean, I go by Dash."

He chuckled. "Well, thank you, Dash. Maybe if you're around after the fundraiser tomorrow, we could grab a beer or something."

"Yum, beer," I said, my eyes widening. I hated beer. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"You're a star, my friend," he said, giving me one more firm shoulder pat that should've sent me to the ground like a sack of potatoes. And then he left, and I had to deal with the memories from my teen years.

I watched his taillights disappear down the street, the snow swallowing the sound of his engine until only the quiet remained. My heart was beating too fast for someone who had only been asked to deliver cookies.

Life was unfair.

How could it show me him again? And hotter?

Maybe staying in town wouldn't be so bad after all.

I *had* to tell Jude. He'd know what to do.

OceanofPDF.com

2. SAM

At six in the morning, I was up, showered, and mixing a protein shake in my shaker. I'd been a jock in high school, and some habits were hard to quit. I was thirty-two now, a long way from where I was with all that teen energy. But I made sure my muscles still popped. In the spare room, I'd set up a gym with a treadmill, weights, a rower, and a Stairmaster—those things wreaked havoc on my glutes.

All my thoughts had been on one thing: *him*.

Jake Dashofy, or Dash, as he now went by. I didn't know him in high school, or at all, really. I knew his mom—she was lovely, swinging by the school to offer help. Jake, however, was just a face in a memory I'd spent the evening recalling. All through the night, I'd been trying to figure out who he was: someone in the background of a lot of events, but also right there.

He had a bit of a beard, shorter than me, and eyes I couldn't forget.

To say I knew everyone in Buttonwood was a stretch. I knew most people, and most people knew me. That's what happened when you'd spent your entire life in a place and hit your thirties.

I left Buttonwood only once in my life, for college, and then immediately afterward, I was right back here—back to working evenings at my father's toy store and days at the elementary school with my own third-grade class. The most rewarding job I'd ever had. I'd wanted to teach, and in my mind, teaching probably meant a high school gym class, but then I went the whole way, and now I had a class of eighteen who sat, listened, and giggled behind my back when Sarah accidentally got all the glue on her desk and attached her hand to it.

After my second shower—the first one was to wake me up, the second to actually get clean—I got dressed in one of my *ugly* Christmas sweaters. I had nearly an entire closet full of the things. Most of them were gifts, but others had been ordered in the middle of the night while I laughed at them in ads on my phone screen.

The current sweater was deep red with accents of green and had white stitched writing across the chest that said, "*Sleigh my name, sleigh my name.*" It usually got a giggle out of people, and today was a big fundraiser for the school, so I tried my hardest. It was the easiest thing I could do to

bring people joy when everything else appeared to be falling apart and undoing at the seams.

Buttonwood was big on holidays. Any time the entire town could come together, any time the town could celebrate, we were throwing a feast. And that was one of the reasons I came back. I'd never found this much community anywhere else—though maybe that was because I never gave anywhere else a chance.

I arrived at the school with everyone else to get ready to set up. I waved to all the teachers and parents who'd arrived to help, then went straight to the staff lounge to take my coat off and put my things away.

The school smelled like coffee, floor polish, and faintly of pine from the decorations stacked outside the gym doors. Teachers hurried past with boxes of tinsel, folding chairs scraped across the hallway tiles, and somewhere deeper in the building, a child's laugh rang out before quickly being hushed.

Nina approached me with a huge smile. She was the first-grade teacher, a sweetheart with two large red Christmas bows clipped in her hair. "I heard you visited my cousin last night," she said.

"Oh, your—"

"Jake," she said. "Mary Anne, his mom, is my aunt. You know this."

"Right. Obviously," I chuckled, pulling at the constricting shirt collar beneath my sweatshirt. "I asked him to bring his mom's cookies over this morning."

Her eyes widened. "Really?" she asked. "I doubt he will. He's probably escaping again."

"Escaping?"

"Well, yeah. He lives in New York City. He's some big-shot marketing person there, I don't even know. I haven't spoken to him in years. Well, I have, but only through social media."

I nodded, wondering if him leaving was a good thing. "Oh, he said we'd go grab a beer."

"A beer?" she nearly choked getting the word out. "Are you sure *he* said that? I remember one year he was home, and I offered him a beer, and he pulled a huge stink face."

"People change, right?"

"Not him," she laughed. "He's always been like—*better* than everyone. Not in a bad way. He felt like he was supposed to be in a big city.

I'll be surprised if he shows. It would be nice to see him again, though."

I didn't know if she knew I'd been thinking about him. Well, how could she? But I was now thinking about him more than before. Our conversation was cut short when the principal walked in. Marcia Noonan, the sweetest woman around, carrying a huge Stanley cup of water and rattling that large ring of keys wherever she went.

"Morning," she sang out. "I've just asked Randy to pull the rest of the decorations out of storage. Would you both be dears and help dress the gymnasium with them? The tables are out. We just need those finishing touches."

"Have people been by with donations and their bakes yet?" I asked.

"A few have," she said before taking a large drink from her Stanley. "I've got Deborah from the reception desk taking those in, and her son Kyle is here helping out, which is nice. It's good to have an extra set of hands."

The gym was large and multifunctional, used as the cafeteria and stage area for plays, recitals—whatever it was, it happened in here.

Folding tables lined the polished floor in uneven rows, covered with red-and-white cloths. Paper snowflakes hung from the ceiling on fishing line, turning slowly whenever the heating system kicked on. At the far end of the gym, the stage curtains were drawn shut, hiding the faded school emblem painted behind them.

I managed to get halfway across the gym before being stopped by a volunteer parent who loved my sweater. I was distracted, searching for Jake, and I didn't know why. Maybe because he was new, back in town, and I liked new. I saw the same people all the time. He gave my eyes something new.

"Can someone get a ladder?" Rachel, the second-grade teacher, called out. "The dressing above the door is crooked, and I need to sort it out." Her eyes followed me. "Sam. Sammy."

I nodded at her. "I can get you a—"

"No, I'll have Randy do it," she chuckled. "Are you getting into the Santa suit, or are we saving that?"

"The Christmas play and Santa's workshop event are in two weeks," I said. "Right before the school breaks. And I don't want to spoil all the fun for the kids. Plus, I've still got to grow my white beard." I tugged on the small beard I'd grown at my chin, shaved down into a taper from my cheeks.

“You are so right,” she said. “I’m so excited for the kids’ performances. How’s your class doing?”

I puffed out my cheeks and laughed. “We’re doing the story of Rudolph, and they’re loving it, but getting them all to focus is going to be the biggest issue.”

“Aw,” she cooed. “We’re doing a nativity scene. They’re all so precious.”

“I’m just glad we didn’t have any parents coming in this year demanding their kid play the main part,” I said.

She snickered just as he came in, carrying three Tupperware containers, followed by his mom, whose arm was in a sling against her chest. I excused myself and made a beeline right for them.

“Mary Anne,” I said as she opened her one good arm for an embrace. “How are you doing?”

“Where can I put these?” Jake—whose name tag beneath the word *volunteer* read *Dash*—asked, glancing at me from the side of the Tupperware. “I think you might’ve made more than he needed, Mom.”

She chuckled. “Aw, Sam. I almost didn’t get these done.”

“Looks like you had help,” I said. “And I’m so grateful for it. You do an amazing job.”

“Gosh, I can’t actually take all the credit. I made the mix, but Dash and my mom did all the work.”

“Thank you.” I watched as Dash gritted his teeth into a straight smile, holding the containers. “Oh, you should’ve handed these over at reception. But I guess just put them on any table.”

Mary Anne laughed. “No, no. Dash is capable of bringing them through. When you’ve got use of *both* hands, you should use them.”

“Mom,” Dash groaned. “I told you we should’ve left them there.”

She continued to chuckle. “Oh, I’ll go find Nina. She’ll want to know how I’m doing.”

And then it was the two of us. I showed him to a table, and he carefully placed the Tupperware stack down, dusting himself off and flashing a smile.

Up close, he looked softer than he had the night before. His dark hair was slightly mussed from the cold, and there was a faint dusting of flour along the cuff of his sleeve. He kept his shoulders drawn in, like he was trying to take up less space in a room that suddenly felt too full.

“I spoke to Nina. She’s your cousin, right?”

“Right,” he said, his eyes immediately looking around.

“She said you’d probably be off again.”

He let out one loud laugh that echoed through the space. “Usually, maybe. But I’m around to take care of my mom, make sure she doesn’t get into any more accidents, and look after her arm.” He’d avoided my eye contact until I side-stepped right into it.

“So, you’re going to be volunteering?” I asked.

“Yeah. I can’t believe I’m thirty and being forced into doing what my mom tells me,” he said.

“We all do, don’t we?” I said with a smirk.

“So, what do you need help with?”

“Honestly, I’m kinda waiting to be told myself,” I confessed, watching as his eyes continued to zip everywhere but toward me. “When were you last home?”

“Years.” He tapped his fist against his thigh, then looked at me—down at me—and read my sweater, grinning. “If my mom knew people were wearing Christmas sweaters, she would’ve forced me into one.”

I raised a brow. “If I go tell her I’ve got a spare, what would happen then?”

Dash gasped, both hands flinching up in front of himself. “Please, do not do that. She’s relentless.”

“She’s lovely.” And she would talk your ear off if you allowed her to, which was exactly what she was currently doing to her niece at one of the tables being dressed with cloth and tinsel. “My folks are probably working, otherwise they’d be here too.”

“Oh, I—sorry. What do they do?”

“They own the toy store in town,” I said. “Hadley’s Toys. You might’ve driven past it on your way to your mom’s place.”

“Maybe,” he said, shrugging. “But I know the place. Not much has changed in town, has it?”

“Of course it has. You should visit a town hall meeting—so many changes,” I said with a big smile. “They’ve added an extra water fountain in the park, with one for dogs too. That was a *huge* change.”

That got a giggle out of him.

“So, what do you do?” I asked. “Nina was vague.”

“You were—talking about me?”

“You’re practically new in town,” I said. “Of course.”

A visible line of pinkish red traveled across Dash’s nose and cheeks. “I’m a—” He rubbed a hand down the back of his neck, holding it there for a moment and staring blankly ahead. “I’m a senior brand manager at Bubble Pop. You know, the soda company.”

“Oh, yeah. I love the red Bubble Pop,” I said, smacking my lips. “Strawberry, right?”

“And cherry,” he said. “Yeah. It’s the most popular. We recently broke into the energy-drinks market, and I’ve been managing the brand rollout, so expect to see some TV shows with them in it.”

“That’s fun,” I said. “But I don’t watch a lot of TV, so it might be lost on me.”

“We’ve got billboards too,” he said. “The animatronic ones, you know, where it’s like the drink is being poured.”

“You organize all that?” I asked.

He was beginning to open. “Yeah. Mostly.”

“I’m glad you’re doing what you love.”

He looked away, kicking his feet into the ground. “Not my dream job, though,” he muttered. “I turned thirty in June, and I love the position I’m in, but I’ve got feelers out for other work.”

“What like?” I asked. I found his life thrilling. The most excitement I got in a day was one of the kids in my class acting up—usually pulling faces and distracting others—like I did when I was their age. “I bet you’ve got everyone after you.”

He blushed, and closed up again when someone else appeared and prodded at him. In this instance, that person was the principal, taking a large sip from her Stanley cup and announcing herself. “Oh, hello stranger,” she said. “I can take a guess.” He was wearing a name-tag sticker, so it wasn’t too hard. “Jack.”

Not the name on the tag. He continued to blush and smile.

“Oh gosh, now I feel old. You can’t be this grown up.”

“Hi,” he said. “Mrs. Noonan.”

“Please call me Marcia, gosh, it was bad when *he* got a job, how old are you now?” she asked. “Please say in your twenties.” She put her hands together in prayer.

He snickered. “Thirty,” he said. “But only just. So, basically still in my twenties.”

Marcia pawed a hand at her chest, shaking her head. “Aw, I also heard about your poor mom. I hope she’s alright.”

“Marcia,” his mom called out, startling her.

“And there she is,” she laughed, turning. “You two need to get busy.”

“Together?” Dash asked, in a whisper. Missing the context or was he flirting? Because *together* could’ve meant something. Right?

She left, and the room filled with conversation once more. Dash’s head was down, and he’d been blushing throughout the interaction.

“You know you look like you’re in your twenties,” I said to him, seeing him embarrassed by the compliment.

“And you—” He paused, and a trembling, heavy breath came out. “You look—great.”

I laughed. “I guess we should set some of these tables,” I said. “Or I could give you the tour. Most of it is done here. I’m sure they won’t miss us for five minutes.”

He nodded. “Sure. You can show me what else has changed.” A smile cracked across his face and spread. He could’ve played Rudolph if his skin got any redder.

“To start, all-new air conditioning,” I said. “Oh, and most of the rooms have been painted since you were here. Especially my classroom. We’ve still got our Thanksgiving decorations up—from this year, not from when you were here. You know, as a kid.” Oh, god. Now I was the one feeling heat climb up my face.

I took him on the tour. His body radiated heat whenever we walked even an inch closer. This was the first time I’d ever been so intrigued by someone, and someone I’d met before—someone who, if things were different, I could’ve come out sooner to.

Obviously, I knew Dash was gay. I don’t think he’d ever hidden it.

Unlike me. I thought I hid it well. I did all the things the world thought a straight guy should do: played a major sport, had a cheerleader girlfriend, got a sports scholarship. I’d even gotten engaged until I couldn’t hide it anymore. Feelings I’d bottled, chopped up, hidden away. I’d decided it was better to be single than be seen as gay, especially in small-town Buttonwood, where gossip would whip you like the changing winds. You never knew how people would react.

Dash was probably living his dream, though. Maybe even married, with some type of gay J.Crew catalog lifestyle. A life I'd never have. A freedom I'd continue to push down, into the closet, where it would stay.

OceanofPDF.com

3. DASH

I didn’t know how to feel about Sam. He was nice—maybe too nice—but that’s what I should’ve expected from a teacher, right? Strange, like he was trying to make up for high school. He hadn’t bullied me, not to my knowledge, but he might have, and this was his way of telling me he was sorry.

And as we spoke during his tour of the school I’d attended as a child, he pulled me away into his classroom, showing off the decorations he’d put time and energy into creating. I’d been impressed with him, and I still kept searching for a reason why he was, trying to charm—or impress—me.

His classroom looked like it had been decorated by someone who genuinely loved his job. Paper reindeer with crooked antlers lined the windows. A reading corner sat beneath a canopy of felt stars, stuffed animals piled into a woven basket beside a small rug. Every surface seemed to have been considered: name tags, behavior charts, handprint turkeys, and a hand-lettered sign that read, “*Welcome to Room 12*.”

“So, it’s a class of eighteen,” he said, sitting on the edge of his desk. “And they’re just the best.”

“It looks like you have a lot of fun,” I said, my eyes still wandering around the room. “Don’t you ever want to leave Buttonwood?”

I caught him off guard, his eyes flashing wide. He laughed. “God, no. I’ve tried leaving. It’s not for me. This place is home, and you only ever get one of them. Right? Somewhere you grew up, somewhere you just feel comfortable.”

I nodded, my teeth clenched, aching my jaw. Of course, he felt comfortable. All straight people did. They had their comforts in this world because the world catered to them, and I knew I’d dealt with that in therapy—in not going so quickly to anger and annoyance. It wasn’t their fault. That’s just the way the world worked, and why we had our Pride events. We had to make some noise, throw a parade, just to tell folks we were here.

“You don’t like that answer,” Sam said into my quiet. He pressed forward from the edge of the desk, closing the gap between our bodies. His minty breath ghosted into my mouth, like I could taste the exact brand of Crest Whitening. “Maybe I should ask what makes you uncomfortable?”

One single attempt at stepping backward and I almost fell. Sam caught me, his hand around my waist, holding me in place before I could stumble into the leg of a chair. “Fuck. Sorry,” I said, straightening myself and pulling out of his grip. “I was just—”

He smirked wider, flashing his perfect smile. “You’re all good,” he said. “I’ve got fast reflexes. You ever see me play football?”

“Of course,” I grumbled, knowing just how warm and red my face had become. “You were the QB, right?”

“Right.”

“I might have caught a game or two,” I said, unable to move in case I fell, and not wanting to step forward and let him hear the way my heart and chest were practically beating too hard. “You were good.”

Sam brushed both hands down his Christmas sweater, highlighting his body beneath. At least, that’s how my eyes took it, looking him over, practically seeing the shape of his abs through the sweater.

A loud, mouthy tut came from the doorway. “There you are,” my mom said. Nina stood behind her, both of them looking at us and smiling.

* * *

The only events I took part in now were corporate events and product launches—nothing like this. Nothing where I was being introduced to people I’d known in another lifetime, where the kids of friends I’d gone to high school with were now walking in their parents’ wake, followed by the gab and gaggle of voices.

Being forced to volunteer wasn’t as forced as I might’ve led myself to believe. I’d wanted to see Sam again. I’d wanted to know what was going on in his life, and what had happened for him to become a teacher. And yet, I’d spent the entire time he was showing me around trying to dissect why he was being nice to me instead of asking him all the questions I had.

I was pulled into selling tickets for a raffle that was being held. It meant I walked around with my mom as the mouthpiece for selling them. She was everyone’s friend, and that meant she was stopping, talking, and telling her friends about me—the elusive son she had who never visited.

The gym had filled quickly. Folding tables sagged beneath baked goods, jars of jam, bottles of wine, hand-knitted hats, and homemade ornaments. Children darted between adults’ legs while parents called after

them, and the air smelled like cinnamon, sugar, coffee, and too many competing perfumes.

And then I came face to face with Tom and Annie. We'd been close friends in high school, and they'd gotten married and had a kid. I'd lost touch with everyone when I left for college, and then I hadn't put in any effort to stay in contact. Shame came over me when I saw them, leaving a sour taste on my tongue.

They didn't look anything like they had fifteen years ago. We'd all usually dressed in all-black clothing. Annie had dyed her hair black as a teen, covering the red hair she now wore with pride. Tom was tall, with naturally black hair, and no longer wore the guyliner Annie used to put on him every day.

"Go talk to them," my mom said. "I'll stay here and get Tonia to buy more tickets. Isn't that right? It's all for a good cause."

They'd noticed me too. They smiled and waved.

I wanted to duck and dive. I didn't know what to say.

"Hey," Tom said, wrapping an arm around Annie's shoulder. They were in matching Christmas sweaters. A theme. Everyone had them on. I'd fought my mom on it this morning because I didn't want to wear one, but now I was the sore thumb. "You're the last person I expected to see here."

"Hey, you two. I'm just here for my mom," I said.

"Gosh, we heard about your mom's fall, and I saw her, actually. You're doing so well," Annie said. "I'm not like stalking you or anything, but those views you post? Like, oh my god, we need to take a trip out to you sometime."

I nodded along. "I can't imagine you get much time off. You're a nurse, right?"

"Yes," she said, pawing at my arm with the familiarity of how we used to be. "So, everything else about your life is all secret, then? The last I heard, you got that big-shot job, and then you just never posted anything. Are you seeing anyone?"

"No, no. I'm still very much single," I said. "I'm so happy the two of you are still together. You kinda make me believe in soulmates."

Tom chuckled. "You're doing everything you said you wanted to do," he said, puffing out his cheeks. "I knew you could do it. Obviously. Look at you."

"And you took over your dad's music store, right?"

“And he also gives lessons,” Annie said. “He never did start that band, though.”

“If only either of us could sing,” I laughed, and it turned into a snort. They were comfort friends, and we were slipping right back into the world we’d lived in as teens—the world we’d created talking about the big, fancy, wonderful lives we would all lead when we were older.

“Vanessa can,” Tom said. “Our daughter. She’s around here somewhere.”

“Gosh. How old is she now?”

“Eight,” Annie said.

I gasped, my hand quick to my mouth. “What? I don’t remember you having her that—”

“We were twenty-two,” Tom said. “Annie had to take some time away from school, but I supported her through it all.” He kissed her on the forehead. “She’s being taught by Sam Hadley, the—”

“High school QB,” I finished for them. Of course. Everyone knew everyone, and nothing was secret. My stomach clenched, and a queasy simmer rose inside me. “It’s really a small world.”

“He’s great with her,” Annie said. “She’s playing Rudolph in the third-grade Christmas performance too.”

“She is?”

“We’re so proud of her,” Tom said. “You ever gonna have kids? Or __”

“Oh no. They’re not part of my life plan.”

“We need to come visit,” Annie said, reaching out and grabbing my arm. “Maybe I could come alone, and you could show me all the hot gay nightclubs.” Her grip tightened. “I would totally be your wing woman and help you find a man.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t need help,” Tom said. “Dash is probably beating off men with—”

We both burst out laughing, repeating his words in sputters of giggles. At heart, we were still those teens congregating in my bedroom, playing board games, drinking wine coolers, and watching scary movies.

“I stand by it,” Tom said, joining in on the laughter.

Seeing them again was nice, but my mom was adamant about selling those raffle tickets. She came right up to us through the laughter and

told them they had to buy some, quoting all the times she'd put up with the noise we made.

Seeing them was a bonus to being here, but it also threw the reality of what this was into sharp light: adults having to be adults, adults with kids, whose free time was dedicated to raising their children in ways they'd always said they would—and *not like my parents*.

My mom was the life of the party, even with her arm the way it was. She was animated, and I was hopelessly helpless in getting her to be anything less than she was.

I never had many friends, but Tom and Annie had kept each other. I was their third wheel anyway, so sometimes it felt like I had nobody. And again, after leaving them, I had nobody.

Leaning against the wall at the back of the gym, I watched the fundraiser carry on without me. The noise blurred together into a warm hum: laughter, children shrieking over prizes, the scrape of chairs, and the occasional crackle of the PA system. For a moment, I let myself disappear into it.

Sam joined me, copying the way I'd leaned, with one foot up on the wall and my arms crossed. I didn't comment on it, even if I wanted to. I didn't say anything, in fact. I didn't know what to say. He just stayed there, watching the people with me.

Then we both tried to speak at the same time, breaking the ice I kept rebuilding for us to break every time we interacted.

"So, you're done with your volunteer work, then?" he asked.

I turned to him, my eyes narrowed. "It's a lot," I said.

"Try dealing with a classroom," he chuckled, his eyes lighting up as our gazes locked. "I'm not being rude."

"I know you're not." I sucked in a deep breath and looked away. "Everyone knows me from some time in my life. Like, from when I was a kid, or when I was a teen, or—everyone knows me, and I don't really remember any of them. Except for, like—" I glanced back at him, batting my lashes. "Obviously, I remember you."

"I'll admit, my memory of you is hazy," he said. "And I kinda wish it wasn't. You seem really cool."

"Really cool," I laughed. "Sorry, that was rude. I just mean, I'm still processing you from when we were in high school. And there's no way you

could even have known who I was. I was two grades below you, and very much in the background then."

"You're forgetting it's a small town, and people talk," he said.

"So, tell me what they're saying about me," I said.

He shook his head. "You promised to come have a drink with me, and I wanna save some stuff for then."

"And what if I'm too busy for a drink?"

"Really? Because you're currently taking a break over here from what I think is your mom, so I'm sure you'll have free time."

He'd read my behavior, practically down to the essence of what I was doing. "Fine. But I think I owe you some truth, then."

Sam stood away from the wall. "Okay. I'm all ears."

"I don't drink beer." It had weighed on me since last night. Agreeing to beers made me think I'd actually have to drink it and pretend to like it. I'd done that too often in my life. All I needed and wanted, for now, was a cozy corner of blankets, plushies, a story read in a low, deep voice, and maybe some warm almond milk. But I wasn't going to tell him all that. He was firstly, straight, and secondly, not a Daddy.

"You know bars don't just serve beer, right?"

"I know that. Obviously."

Sam chuckled. "So, what do you say to tonight? The Button Tap?"

"The what?"

"Sports bar in town," he said.

I couldn't get out of it now. He'd given me a place, and all that was left was a time.

"Let's say eight, but call it eight thirty as a buffer."

My anxiety wouldn't let me buffer. "If you say eight, I'm there at eight." And there was my confirmation.

Now he was the one going red. "I just assumed, sorry. Everyone's usually late to a da—drinks." He nodded, catching him fumbling his words and nearly saying *date*.

I wanted to vomit, like I was a teen again—but this time, I was about to be pranked like the nerdy girl in a teen rom com where the hot popular guy asks her out.

"You're on," I said.

"Good. Because I want to get to know you."

"Well, I'm an open book," I lied.

I was far from an open book. And having said that to him, my stomach dropped, like he was going to interrogate me and maybe even ask if I'd had a crush on him. Everyone had. The guys wanted to be him, the girls wanted him—and me, of course. My book was far from open. The pages were glued shut, and the cover changed constantly. I should've wished him good luck as he walked off with that gorgeous smile.

Then Nina came over, like she'd been waiting for him to leave.

I pressed both hands to my face, trying to hide myself from her like a baby.

"Your mom's over there acting like she's working on commission with those tickets," she snickered.

"She's your aunt too," I said, hoping she didn't see how red my face was when I looked at her. But she did, tilting her head left to right and back again. "You should tell her she doesn't have to sell the whole book. I'm sure the school won't mind."

Nina shrugged, resting against the wall beside me.

"You remember Sam, right?" she said, pretending to be the reason she came over to talk.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Just wondering," she said with a hum of laughter. "He's cute, right?"

"Nina," I said in a hushed voice. "Please don't."

"You're thinking it," she said. "I saw the way you looked at him. He's cute. Obviously."

I shook my head, but Sam was right there—Christmas sweater and everything. Literally right there, several tables up, selling gingerbread cookies. There were baked goods, home goods, jams, jars, and wines everywhere.

"We're going for drinks tonight," I let out. "Does he have any friends?"

"Oh my god, everyone's his friend," she said, grabbing me by the arm to make me look at her.

"Then why is he trying so hard to spend time with me?" I asked.

Nina pressed the tip of her finger to my forehead. "Think," she said. "Come on, Dash. You'll get there." She gave me a wink.

And there it was: the crash, the culmination of thoughts, all coming together, all trying to force me into thinking about one specific thing and

outcome. But that was Samuel Hadley—the one everyone knew, the one people shouted for on the football field. The Samuel Hadley she was now telling me to clue together was someone who'd potentially been hitting on me.

That was in my head.

Unless it wasn't.

OceanofPDF.com

4. SAM

The Button Tap was the local sports bar. It's where I went most evenings after work and maybe a quick run, if I had the time. Dash had thrown everything out the window. I'd lost my schedule.

I turned up at the bar thirty minutes before I'd told him I would and settled onto one of the stools at the bar. It had a marzipan-and-cherry smell, which was either from how old the place was or some chemical paint or cleaner.

There was a room for billiards, darts, and such, but I mostly kept to myself. Well, myself and Caroline, the bartender. She was my ex-girlfriend, and we'd been crowned prom king and queen back in high school. Sweethearts who were supposed to marry, have kids, and raise a generation of football players.

"I didn't expect to see you here so early," Caroline chuckled, grabbing a glass from behind the bar and pouring me one of the local beers. "Your bake sale go well today?"

"It's the school's bake sale," I said. "And it went well."

"Danny said he saw you walking around looking like a headless chicken," she laugh-snorted.

"Where's he at, anyway?" I asked.

"In the back," she said. "Watching cartoons on the TV or playing with that damn iPad. We weren't this obsessed with technology, were we?"

I laughed. She was. We were. I think, at one point, she'd wished we'd been teen parents so we could've been on that TV show, but that was before she realized some things about me that I wasn't even comfortable enough to address head-on. "I'm not sure," I said, shrugging. "How's your day been?"

After handing me the beer, she sighed and slouched. "It's a Saturday, Sam. It's been hella busy." She stretched slightly, then pulled herself back up. "How are things with the store?"

"You know my dad. He's not going to admit anything's going wrong," I said. "He'll do practically anything but tell anyone something's wrong." I watched her eyes lit up, knowing she had gossip for me. "What?"

"Nothing."

“Caroline,” I grumbled. “Come on. If you’ve got gossip, you’ve got to tell me.”

“Not true at all,” she laughed. “Anyway, you smell nice. Trying to get laid?”

With one swipe of my head, I looked around the bar of mostly older men watching sports on one of the many screens. Then I looked back at her. “Are you for real?”

“What?” she laughed. “Some of them could be. You never know unless you ask.”

“Stop changing the subject,” I said. “What have you heard?”

“Just that it’s been a slow year,” she said. “And if you tell him, then I’ll no longer be your friend, and you can call off that Boston trip we had planned for January.”

I sighed and shook my head, accepting my fate that I wouldn’t know anything about the business. It wasn’t like I was going to take it over anyway. My sister’s husband worked there, behind the scenes, making some of the wooden toys and custom lots for schools.

“I recognize that smell, though,” she said, coming in close before someone gestured for her attention at the bar. I was saved from putting my intentions out there.

Because my intentions were to get to know Dash. They were to see what his vibe was. I knew he was gay. His mom had told me, and it was one of those things I remembered from high school. He was probably the only out gay kid back then. There were others, but they didn’t come out until leaving—really leaving—most of them going to bigger towns and cities where there was actually a gay scene.

The gay scene in Buttonwood didn’t exist. Okay, potentially there were seeds of one. There was a gay couple with a kid in the first grade, and a gay couple with a kid in the fifth grade. I’d met them once or twice at PTA meetings, but beyond that, they were married, and I was single and very unmingled.

Caroline came back over, armed with questions. She must’ve thought up more while she was away.

“You smell nice, you’re not wearing one of your goofy Christmas sweaters, and you’re wearing a T-shirt that is clearly a size too small for you,” she said, coming in close again to whisper. “I can see your nipples. They’re gonna poke my eye out, or have a staring contest with me.”

I laughed, placing both hands on my chest. “Stop looking. You’re making them feel self-conscious.” And as I removed one hand, she gave my nipple a flick.

“And I’ll do it again,” she laughed. “Now, tell me why you’re all—” She gestured with both hands at me. “Come on. I wanna know what’s going on.”

She could read me well, and she was maybe one of the first people to know I was gay, before I came out. It wasn’t because we weren’t intimate; it was because I’d lingered. I’d looked at guys that went past wanting to be like them. I wanted to be *in* them.

When she was called away once more, I leaned my head back slightly and closed my eyes. I smelled the intense cologne on my skin, doused at my neck and into the fabric of the T-shirt—which, as she’d rightly pointed out, was a size too small. A black T-shirt, the type that hid sweat marks really well, and I knew I was sweating out a bucket.

I finished the beer, and that’s when Dash arrived. I didn’t see him enter, but I watched heads turn. The bar had filled up somewhat, but I’d saved a stool for him. My denim jacket was draped across it. He walked in with his hair coiffed, his facial hair looking bouncy, dressed in a T-shirt with some comic-book figure printed on the front.

“Hey,” I said, standing to greet him, weirdly formal. I immediately shoved the stool out, trying not to take him out at the knees, though it appeared that way. “I’m glad you made it.” We shook hands, awkwardly.

“I remember coming in here only once before,” he said, sitting down and looking around. “I told my mom, and she was like, just wear normal clothes. I usually—” He shook his head.

“No, no. Tell me.”

“The bars I go to, I’m usually in a nice shirt and slacks,” he said, gesturing to his beige khakis. “These aren’t even mine. Well, they are, from like ten years ago. And they still fit.” He pulled at the fabric of the thigh. “Guess they’re stretchy.”

I couldn’t stop trying to look him in the eyes the entire time he spoke, but before we could continue, Caroline came over and smiled at us. Dash’s smile quickly vanished.

“I didn’t realize you two were—” he began before we both protested where he was going with it.

“God, no,” Caroline laughed. “We are not together. But can I get you a drink?”

“This is Mary Anne’s son,” I said. She had no clue who he was.

“Dash,” he said.

“Oh my god,” she cooed. “Your mom is an actual lifesaver. You know she helps run the summer events stuff through the school.”

“She does?”

“Yeah, she’s everywhere,” she continued, chuckling after every sentence. “I knew she had a son. Well, has, ’cause you’re right here.”

“I live in New York, but I guess the last time I was here, I didn’t see much of anyone,” he said, nodding and still glancing around. “So, you have a son—is that a—” He looked from me to her, then back again.

Then she glared at me, like she wanted me to come out all over again. I had no intention of hiding from it, but I was hoping for it organically—where I didn’t have to come out to be out.

“Since I came out, I think our ship sailed,” I said, hoping he’d get the hint.

“Of where?” he asked. “Like graduating?”

“No,” Caroline said, nudging my arm.

“As gay,” I said, and watched the color drain from his face. “It’s not a big deal. We’re just not compatible because I like—guys.”

A chortle came out of him. “I don’t—” He paused and shook his head. “Is this, like, a joke?” he asked, trying to back up off the stool. “It might’ve been funny in high school, but now, it’s kinda sad, don’t you think?”

“He needs a drink,” Caroline said. “What is it? Vodka?”

He nodded. “With soda and cranberry juice,” he blurted.

As she left, he looked at me, and I looked at him. The noises in the bar became a quiet buzz in the background. We kept eye contact for a while, slowly nodding to each other, somehow, he was understanding this wasn’t a high-school prank.

“I’ve been out for maybe ten years now,” I said. “It’s not shouting about it, because it’s nobody else’s business.”

The smile came back. “I just—” He paused and tilted his head, the smile growing. “I’ll just come out with it, because I won’t be in town long enough anyway, but I kinda had a huge crush on you in high school.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I kinda invited you for a drink because I knew you were gay.”

“And not because of my handsome looks or my ability to grow this glorious facial hair?”

I bit my lip playfully. Now he knew, and now we could flirt. “I can totally grow facial hair,” I said, rubbing at my cheek.

“It’s not fully connected,” he said. “Look, there’s no connection between the mustache and the beard.”

“Where?” I asked.

He reached out and touched my face with the graze of a knuckle. His cold hand on my warm cheek sent the type of shiver through me that I only got after beating a personal best when I was running.

Caroline came back over with both of our drinks—she knew mine by heart. “On the same tab?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ll get them,” I said.

“No, let me,” he said, pulling his wallet out. Thick with notes spilling out the sides.

“Jeez,” I grumbled. “Put that away. Why do you have so much cash on you?”

“Just-in-case money,” he said as I forced him to lower his wallet back into his pocket. “My mom called about an emergency, and I figured it was better to be safe than sorry with some extra cash.”

Caroline immediately had questions, and he answered her while I butted in with my own questions about him. I found out—not only through his full wallet, but because he said it—that he’d done well for himself. But on the other side of it, the expense of living in New York City ate up a lot of his income. I didn’t even ask how much he made. I knew it would make me wonder and want for a life I’d made peace with letting go of.

There was a time when I could’ve gone pro as a QB, but then coming out altered my fate. If I had, I’d have lived in the closet longer and longer, maybe never experiencing the tender touch of another guy until I was much, much older.

After two more drinks and a whole lot of talk, we played billiards. He won, acting like a hustler who had all this talk about not being good. We then sat together at a corner table in the back. Nobody was looking back here; everyone was watching the screens, a sport playing above the bottles

lined along the bar. I was too focused on him and the words now flowing from his lips.

We were in that tipsy state where we existed in a bubble of our own making.

“So,” I said to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. He looked at it with a big smile, then up at me. “Do you want to come over to my place and —hang?”

“It’s cold out, and my mom’s probably expecting me home,” he said, pouting at me.

I shrugged. “Okay. If you want to go home, I can call you a cab,” I said. “But also—can I kiss you?”

We stared, our eyes dancing, both of our pupils expanding.

“Serious or joke?” he asked.

“If you don’t want to kiss, then that’s okay. I just—”

Without a second thought, Dash’s lips were on mine. Our noses rubbed side by side as our facial hair connected, like Velcro, not wanting to pull away as our tongues broke free from our mouths and interlocked with each other.

Nobody watched. Nobody said a thing.

As we pulled away, Dash’s pink lips, which were glossy from my saliva, shone like there was a spotlight on them. “You live far away?” he asked.

“Close,” I said. “So, you wanna come over and hang?”

“I hope that’s not all.” He pressed a hand against my chest, and like he was counting my abs, his hand dropped slowly down. “Because this has always been a dream of mine.”

“Then let me lead the way.” I grabbed my jacket from the seat at the table and handed his to him. “I do want to hang out as well. I’ve got video games, cable, and stuff.”

He chuckled, and then I pulled him in at the waist, his warmth radiating into me. At that point, everyone stood to cheer for the goal or points scored on the screen.

“Listen, I said yes,” he said over the voices. “So take me. Take me right now.”

We held hands in that moment. I pulled one of his high, to my lips, and kissed it. “Be prepared to walk for a minute. It’s cold out.” We headed for the door, and still, I didn’t feel any gazes on us. Okay, perhaps one.

And before either of us could leave, Caroline stopped us. “You two are gonna catch your death out there,” she said. “Here. Take these.” She handed us matching beanies and scarves. “They’re from the lost and found. I think one of them is yours, Sam.”

She’d probably been watching and waiting on us the entire time, leaving us with one final message—*behave*.

And I didn’t know what she meant by it, because I was always behaved. But maybe Dash brought something out in me I didn’t know I had.

OceanofPDF.com

5. DASH

We walked for about five minutes until we reached a row of houses. We paused beneath a streetlight and kissed as the cold nipped at our noses, our lips catching at each other with each kiss, like we were doing it again and again for the first time, forgetting what a kiss felt like.

"You live down here?" I asked.

"Useful, right?" he chuckled.

"I just—" I hugged my arms around myself tightly, looking around at the row of trees, bare of leaves, some still holding on to the last of the dried-up ones on their branches. "I forget how close everything is here. And how—how close everyone is here."

As we stood still, the cold whipped around us, sending the odd leaf into a frenzy. A droplet touched my warm cheek, then another, and before either of us could say it, we were being snowed on.

"Just in time," Sam said, taking my hand. "We best get to mine before we freeze to death."

I stuck my tongue out, letting the snowflakes fall on it, then I tucked my tongue back in like a lizard, tasting the nothingness of the snowflake itself. Sam laughed, copying me regardless, then told me how much he loved doing it as a kid.

"Nothing's stopping you," I said. "I do it all the time. It's so nice to feel."

He tugged on my hand, asserting some of his power. I cooed and giggled, letting him lead me down the sidewalk to a single-story home, the typical Buttonwood look, with beige siding and pale-blue trim around the wood, and a porch with a rocking chair.

"Is this your parents' place?"

"No, this is mine," he said. "Now, come on. I want to make us a warm drink, to keep us from getting sick."

"Like hot chocolate?" I asked, overly excited. I caught myself and ducked my head slightly, hoping he wasn't about to look at me weird.

"How did you guess that?"

I shrugged. "Because it's the perfect Christmas drink," I said, and there it was: my Christmas spirit. Like all I'd needed was the kiss of a man to bring it back to me. I giggled to myself.

“I’ve got marshmallows too,” he said.

This time, I fully stopped and shook my head. The snowfall was picking up, creating a blanket of white over his lawn. “You . . .” I said, blinking at him. “In your shape, you do not eat marshmallows, and I’m surprised you’d even drink hot chocolate.”

“Only when I’m treating myself,” he said.

I giggled. “Well, I treat myself all the time.”

“So do I,” he said, reaching out once more. His porch light came on. “I’ll also get you some orange juice. We’re gonna need it to keep ourselves from being caught by whatever this cold is going to give us.”

The cold was enjoyable, maybe because of all the alcohol in my system, but in that moment, relief. Feeling a thousand tiny kisses tip-tap across my face and get caught up in my beard hair. “I’m nervous,” I confessed as his fingers interlocked with mine. “What if I don’t want to stop kissing you?”

“Who said I wanted you to stop?” His face became stern, his brow raised slightly, and my heart dropped right into my chest, like he’d read my mind about the man I dreamed of.

“What else do you want me to do—or not stop doing?” I asked as we stood beneath the porch while he unlocked the door. My voice had turned soft, panting into submission for him, submission for a dream I’d had of him many times. “I can be good.”

“Yeah,” he said as the immediate warmth inside his home hit. He turned to me, looked me up and down, and smirked. “Oh yeah? What, like a good boy?” He hummed, the heavy bass in his throat like sonar vibrating over me. “Have you been a *good boy*, then?”

After that, I didn’t get to tour his home. I got a one-way ticket to his bedroom as we made out and he led the way, kicking his door shut with one foot while his face was on mine. We managed to undress and make a mess on our way.

We were in the dark of his bedroom, his hands all over my body and my hands all over his. The only things we both still had on were our underwear. He whispered in my ear, kissed my cheek, then moved down the side of my neck until he was at my nipple.

I was somewhat hairy—a cub, in most circles—with a hairy chest and a treasure-trail path. Sam rubbed his face against it all, moaning right

against me. And then my turn, forcing him to lie on his back while I felt him, though not really against his will.

He was buff. My hands traced his washboard abs, up and down. He was hairless. I latched onto his chest, and with my tongue, I toyed with his nipple, listening to him make all types of sounds now—not just the ones he'd made when he was on me.

Then I looked up at him, or where I could slightly make him out from the sliver of light in the room. "This is—" I let out a shaky breath. "I told you, you were my crush in high school."

"Yeah," he let out softly. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No. It's—it's really good, in fact. I just want to savor the moment, and I'm trying not to come across like I do this all the time."

His hand traveled up where I assumed he could see me, from my chest all the way up to my face, where he cupped my chin and rubbed a thumb across my lower lip. He leaned up close and kissed me.

"I don't do this all the time either," he said. "But I wanna do it with you."

"Jesus. Have you always been this smooth?"

He kissed me again, this time on the tip of my nose. We laughed about it, falling beside each other in the bed and lying there.

"People think I'm smooth, but I'm actually a bit too hard around the __"

I giggled. "Hard."

"Well, that too. But people see me, then they see everything I do, and it's too much," he said.

"Like what?" I asked him, turning as he turned as well, until we were face to face on his comfy pillows. Much better than the ones my mom had put out in the guest bedroom—my old room.

"Well, I'm a teacher," he said. "I like structure, organization. I like routine, and I like things to go how they're meant to go."

"So, that's why you turned up at my mom's last night?"

He chuckled. "If I'd known you were there, I might've even used that as an excuse. But yeah. She didn't text or anything about the cookies, so I hadn't checked her off my list."

"Your list?"

"Cookie list," he said. "Not all cookies, but you know, someone has to be organized and make sure it runs smoothly."

“I do know,” I whispered. “But I’m a big believer in delegating. I like big-picture stuff. I like to daydream on the job. It’s kinda part of the job, really—creating concepts for marketing.”

He shuffled forward until my stomach was touching his. “So, what do you see, big-picture wise, for this?”

“Oh, I see a lot of fun,” I said, my hand finding his chest and his nipple, teasing it between my fingers. “And even more fun. I see—well, whoa, you won’t believe it—more fun.”

Sam made a deep moan. “That’s a lot of fun you’re talking about,” he said. “But how—” He paused, his voice breaking under the pleasure of my fingers on his chest. “How do we get all that fun?”

“Actually,” I said, pushing my lower lip out into a pout, hoping that with the way the light was, maybe he could see it. “That’s where you do your thing. Take over. Take control. Tell me what to do, and then—”

“A lot of fun,” he whispered, finishing my sentence as his hand moved to the waistband of my tight briefs—the ones with stars and *Saturday* on the front. I’d forgotten I was even wearing them.

“You can,” I said as he slipped his hand into my briefs, and I went into his boxers.

My heart raced as I touched his dick for the first time. Thick and hot to the touch, it pulsed in my hand, leaving precum by my wrist from the angle I was going in. We stared at each other, or what we could make out, and jerked each other off.

We got to the part where we were interlocked at the legs, chest to chest, tongues in mouths, and dicks touching at the tips, then we were grabbed by Sam’s two-handed grip as he jerked us together. And then I couldn’t hold it. It wasn’t so much that I wanted to come, but the dream . . . that wet dream inspired by Sam as he walked off the field, drenched from the bucket of Gatorade. That memory came to the present, to the meeting of our lips, our tips, and our locked legs, toes tensed and curled with pleasure.

He came seconds after me, like he’d waited, like he could control it. Having heard his own admission of control.

We were still tipsy drunk, so we both turned to laughter once the moment was over and our bodies were now nearly glued together.

“Was that everything you expected?” he asked.

“It was better,” I whispered, hugging my chin into my hunched shoulders. “I’m still kind of surprised it happened.”

“Why?” he asked, and I caught the light catch in a graze across his cheek, picking out the dimple in his smile.

“You’re Samuel Hadley,” I said, like some matter-of-fact knowledge everyone had.

“And you’re Jake Dashofy,” he said, not picking up on what I was saying.

“We’re completely different,” I said.

“I like different,” he said, not allowing me to fall into my usual traps —the ones where my brain would talk me out of anything someone else was putting out there, especially if it came from a hot guy. “And we’re not that different.”

“Yes we are.” My hand rested on his chest. “You have a lamp? I’ll show you how different we are.”

He scoffed. “Now I know you’re not talking about the way you look, are you?”

“No, I love the way I look, but—” I paused as he shuffled in a slight roll to turn on the lamp on the nightstand, setting our bodies ablaze with an orange glow and casting gorgeous shadows down his toned, tensed, muscular physique. “You’re clearly into different things. That’s why.”

Sam pressed a hand to my chest, pulling my hair between his fingers and squeezing slightly. “I love all of this,” he said. “For whatever else you’re thinking, let me get to know you. We might be more similar than you know.”

“We both like guys,” I said, breaking the tension I’d created.

Post-nut depression hit, the come-down, the drop. It was what I went through whenever I hooked up with someone: the realization that a quick release, a rush of dopamine, and then the discarding process would begin—the offloading out of the house or apartment, and sometimes their car.

“One of the things I teach and read books about in my classroom,” he said, slowly taking my attention away from the spiral of thoughts. “Is self-worth and self-belief. It’s so important at that age to believe and know you can do whatever you want, and nobody is better than anyone else.”

“They’re lucky,” I said. “You sound like a great teacher.”

“Just one of my many talents,” he said, tapping the tip of my nose to get my head to face him. I’d been caught with a wandering gaze, staring down his torso, slightly scared to make direct eye contact with his dick,

unsure what I'd find there—though, since I'd touched it, I had an image in mind.

"What other talents do you have?" I asked.

"I'm good with my hands," he chuckled. "And by that, I mean, let's take a shower and clean off. It's getting hard on my skin."

We were both amused by it, the way it dried on our skin like we'd just done some science experiment. And I was ready for anything he wanted to do, mostly because part of it was a dream, and the other part was fan fiction I'd written about us in high school.

Sam's house was nice, now that I got to see it all lit up after the shower. We dressed in hotel robes—he had several of them from chain hotels, all very comfy, with matching slippers. The house itself was bare, which made me question whether or not he was really gay, and I told him all about the tchotchkes I had all around my apartment in New York.

A two-bedroom one-story Cape Cod-style house, with one room set up as a gym and a wall of mirrors that had me fully recoiling when it came as a surprise. Sam stood right beside me, and we stared at each other for a moment, our bodies hugged by the soft bathrobes.

"You work out every day, then, huh?"

"Most mornings, yeah," he said. "And I run too, if the weather is nice."

"This is the most decorated room in the house, you know that?" I said.

"Well, that's because I'm always here," he said. "I've got a whole load of stuff in boxes. Didn't you see them in the living room?"

"No. What?"

We walked out, and he was right. There were three boxes hiding beneath a white sheet that made them appear like some type of cabinet. He pulled the sheet away, folding it, only to throw it across the room to the sofa.

"Maybe I'll unpack one day," he said.

"What's even in here?"

He shrugged. "Stuff from my childhood bedroom and collectibles from the store. You know, things my dad called good investment pieces. Like action figures and stuff. They should be in a storage unit, but I know I'd forget, then five years later all my shit would be on an episode of

Storage Wars, and suddenly they'd find gold, and I wouldn't be able to do anything about it."

"You've thought about this a lot?" I asked, hiding my big smile.

"Of course. I love *Storage Wars*," he said. "Oh." His eyes widened, and he snapped his fingers so cleanly it sent a shudder through me. Conditioned by the sound, so clean, I was ready to submit. "I promised you hot chocolate, with marshmallows, and I think I've got a can of whipped cream."

"Yes, please."

"Please," he giggled. "You might get lucky, and maybe I'll find sprinkles as well."

"You'll have me on my knees if you keep saying stuff like that."

Sam looked me over, biting his glossy pink lip. "I get it now," he whispered. "This has to do with being called a *good boy* earlier."

He caught on quick, and he wasn't afraid of it. I nodded, hugging my arms a touch tighter around the robe. "It's more than that, but yeah."

"Then let me say," he whispered, reaching out and pushing a hand through my still-wet hair. "How much of a good boy you've been."

I nestled my head closer, letting him give me praise and give my head a massage. I was ready to rabbit-thump my leg with excitement. He didn't have to do all that, but *my god*, it was welcome.

OceanofPDF.com

6. SAM

I'd never shared my bed with anyone else. I'd never even invited another guy I wanted to fuck into my house. And yet, I was so quick to invite Dash over, maybe fueled by the alcohol in my brain and the taste of him on my tongue. A great mix, all things considered, but I should've at least cleaned the place up first.

Dash didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, I think he liked it—and the way he was learning things about me.

We spent the night together after drinking hot chocolate with all the fixings and watching TV until we both fell asleep on the sofa. I'd carried Dash into my bed, and that's where I found the underwear he'd been wearing. They had little stars on them, maybe enough that they seemed patriotic, and the day of the week: *Saturday*. Adorable. I put together parts of who he was—from what he liked to be called, to the clothes he wore, and the way he stuck his thumb in his mouth when he cuddled me.

My alarm went off at six a.m., which was far too early. I slammed my hand down on the clock, maybe making more noise than the alarm itself. Dash woke briefly in a panic at the sound, then laid his head on my chest, and we must've dozed back off together, because when we woke again, after ten.

"Oh god," Dash let out, leaping out of bed and grabbing his khakis for his phone. "My mom's gonna be worried about where I am."

We were both still in the comfy robes, his coming loose enough to show off his morning wood.

"You told her you were going out for drinks, though, right?" I asked, standing right in front of him. "I'm sure she knows you came home with me."

"How can you be sure of that?" he asked, sucking in deep breaths, his fingers fidgeting over his phone screen as it glowed in his hands.

"Because Caroline probably told her," I said. "It's a small town, Dash. We've got each other's backs. Besides, your mom knows I'm gay, so she probably figured, when you said we were going for drinks, that—"

Dash stood incredibly still, his facial expression and the micro-muscles in it doing all the work and heavy lifting over what he was trying to tell me. "She knew?" he asked. "Then—wait—why didn't she say?"

He shrugged. “Probably assumed you knew. And yes, everyone in town knows. It’s hardly a secret. You can’t keep those things quiet in town. Someone will get it out of you, then it’s gossip before lunch.”

“So, people know we—”

“Well, we didn’t sleep together,” I said. “In the same bed, but—” My hand closed his robe as it passed his dick. “If they’re gonna talk, maybe we actually should.”

“I should go back,” he said. “My mom only has my grandma there, and I don’t need her hurting another arm—or leg.”

“Okay, well, the least you could do is let me make you breakfast,” I said.

He tilted his head and closed his eyes briefly as he smiled. “You really want me to stay,” he whispered. “And I can’t. She hasn’t even texted me, so I should get back. But I will hold you to breakfast another time.”

“Then let me drive you,” I said.

“I can let you do that,” he said, and we both leaned in and kissed.

A perfect start, but sending him home with breakfast would’ve been better. I wanted to show him I knew how to take care of a guest, even if that was only driving him home and maybe giving him a kiss. But I wanted more—at least while he was around, I wanted more.

Dash rushed to get dressed in the clothes he’d worn the night before, hiding the way he put his briefs on. I’d picked them up earlier and placed them in a neat pile. With a smile, I watched him, and dressed in gray sweatpants—it was the season for it, alongside a matching jacket, and a baggy T-shirt.

The ground outside was mostly blanketed in snow when we got outside and into my car—which was freezing inside. I immediately turned on the engine and powered up the heated seats. I took a longer route to his mom’s house as we spoke about meeting again, and I promised to upgrade breakfast to dinner. We lingered in the car for a moment, staring at each other outside his mom’s house.

“I had fun,” he said, and leaned in for a kiss.

I stroked the side of his face when my lips met his. “I think I had more fun.”

“We had an equal amount of fun, but we’ll have more,” he said. “I’ll be around for a few weeks anyway.”

“Good. Because I want to see you again.”

Before he got out, he scoffed. “I left my car in the lot outside the bar.”

“I could drive you there, or I could see you later and take you,” I said, trying to cement another time with him. Any time with him was wanted. “Or you can do your own thing, and I can stop being full-on.”

He laughed. “I’m in no rush for it, and driving in the snow is a big *no* for me, so maybe I’ll leave it there, as long as I’m not ticketed for it.”

“You’ll be fine,” I said.

We kissed one more time. The moment lingered on our lips, and I didn’t want to let go, but we were quickly forced apart when the front door opened and his grandma stood in the doorway.

* * *

I got to the family toy store after leaving Dash. It wasn’t so much that I wanted to go there, but more because I knew if I went out for a run—or back to my house—I’d just be stuck thinking about him. The first time I’d ever slept with anyone from town. All my usual escapades came from trips to bigger cities and out of state.

I parked in the nearby bay, which connected to the sports bar and most of the other in-town communal parking. I pumped myself up and then walked over.

The toy store had been in the family for generations. Some people said it was one of the founding pillars of Buttonwood, and I liked to believe it. We had an entire scrapbook dedicated to the history of the place, which meant I’d grown up hearing about it, with the goal of it one day being trusted to me.

My only problem was that I’d never have kids to pass the store down to. I’d known that from a young age and repressed it into the deep recesses of my mind during school, but there it was, standing out and waving at me like one of those inflatable waving eyesores, telling me I was ruining the premise of a family-run business.

My sister’s husband, Barry, was behind the counter, a huge smile spreading on his face as I walked in. “Hey,” he called out. “I didn’t know you’d be by today.”

The store was quiet. By that, I meant the only other voice I heard was my nephew, Dex, in the back room playing.

“Here to speak with my dad, actually,” I said.

“Yeah, dude, we’re sorry we couldn’t make it to the fundraiser yesterday,” Barry said. “I had to do stock intake, and your dad was on the register. But you got the donation, right?”

“Yeah, we did—for the raffle. Thanks for that,” I said, snaking my way into the back behind the counter. There was a coffee pot pulling me toward the small kitchenette. Dex was sitting at the table, playing with the train and making the sounds for it. I rubbed his head as I walked by. “You know where Grandpa Peter is?” I asked him.

Dexter jumped from his chair and hugged me around my legs tightly. “Uncle Sammy,” he said. “I don’t know. Do you want to play trains with me?”

“Of course, bud,” I said. “Give me one minute, and I’ll play trains.”

My dad was in his office. It was quiet behind the door, which was strange considering he was usually loud—the life of the party, an all-around laugh. I knocked once, heard him grumble, then opened the door and entered.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He shook his head. “The world is going to shit,” he said. “Close the door.”

The office had a nice large window, although the blinds were drawn, so only a small amount of light flooded the bottom half of the room, making my dad look like he was in some noir detective movie.

“I’ve been hearing stuff,” I said.

He sighed, gesturing to the sofa tucked into the corner of the room, where a box occupied one of the seats. “You know how it is in town,” he grumbled, shaking his head. “Once someone knows anything, they run with it.”

“So, there’s truth in it?” I asked.

He stood as I sat, letting out a grunt as he stretched. “The economy isn’t what it used to be,” he said. He’d been saying it for years now, but I hadn’t put much stock into it because of how often he said it, and I didn’t know the business like he did. “But what have you heard?”

“You’re gonna be run out of business,” I said.

He froze, turning away from me and tapping his fingers on the desk.

We stayed in silence for a moment before he looked back at me. “If the worst happens,” he whispered. “It’s putting too much on the family. And the last thing we want is to drag everyone under with us—and this place.”

There were tears in his eyes. He'd never been scared to show emotion—well, except laughter, at least. Sadness was another beast.

"There's got to be something," I said. "Get the place deemed a historical site."

He snickered. "I wish that were even possible. It's a nice thought. Wishful thinking, but the writing's on the wall, son." He grabbed the box from the sofa and thumped it down on his desk. "Barry is working here on minimum pay. I can't ask him to do that, not when he's got your sister and Dexter to support." He sat beside me in a huff.

"Rachel's not quitting her job, is she?" I asked.

"No, no. She's still at the clinic," he said. "But he's still got to be putting toward the family. And when this place goes under, he'll be out of a job, and who knows what will happen. They might even lose their home."

"Dad," I said, patting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not going to let that happen. I've got savings. I can help."

"No," he said, looking away from me, a tear about to break before he wiped it with his shirt sleeve. "You are not throwing money into this. It would only prolong the difficult decision I need to make."

"Dad," I whispered, trying my hardest not to break with him. "We can bring this back from the brink. I know we can. And why didn't you tell me sooner? You must've known for a while."

He turned to me and smiled. "I didn't want to worry you," he said. "You're working. You've got more important things to worry about than this place. Plus, I figured you knew. The large store opening up is just one more nail in the coffin of this place."

"Ridiculous," I said. "Kids come in here all the time to buy things."

"Did," he said. "They did come in here. Now they're all going elsewhere to find more variety and cheaper prices."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"There'll probably be a closing sale announced in a couple of weeks, right before Christmas, to at least recoup some losses," he said in a helpless grumble. "We're just one business going under, and I'm sure there'll be more. The bookstore, probably. Maybe even the hardware place."

I hadn't wanted to believe it—that this place could fold. But here my dad was, baring his soul while I racked my brain for ideas on how to get us out of it. The solution was to get more people to come in, but he was

right, they wanted deals and more variety, two things he couldn't compete with.

He went back to his desk and grumbled about settling debts.

Drinking the coffee, my heart raced like I'd been on the treadmill—a mix of caffeine, lack of food, and being overwhelmed by my dad's confession. I couldn't believe it. He might never have told me until they were liquidating. Even my mom hadn't told me, and she loved gossiping about everyone and anyone to me.

My mom walked in, not seeing me at first. "An overdue utility bill came through, Peter," she said, putting the paper letter on top of the box on his desk. "They're going to—" Her eyes widened, locking onto me.

"Mom," I said.

"Sam, sweetheart," she began.

"He knows, Kel," he said, standing in a huff. He couldn't move without sighing.

"Oh," she said, her brows turning up in concern. "It's unfortunate, because the kids loved the grotto you did every year."

"Wait." I almost knocked the coffee while jumping to my feet. "You're not doing the grotto this year? So, what? I'll just be doing the school grotto?" I shook my head. "People—everyone loves the grotto we put on."

"Sweetheart, there's no budget," she said. "And you're doing it for the school. I didn't think it would be a big deal."

"Not a big deal?" I choked back. "The entire school—scratch that, the whole *town* shows up for it. And I've been growing out my facial hair for the costume." I'd been dressing as Santa Claus for several years. I was around twenty-five, and not the typical Santa. It started out as sitting in for my grandpa when he couldn't sit for that long, and it was the best time I had—letting kids tell me what gifts they wanted and handing them a wrapped gift from the sack of toys and teddies. "It's practically a town tradition."

"And like I said, you're doing it at the school now anyway," Mom said, patting my shoulder.

"But it brings business," I countered.

"And we've still got to spend money," Dad then argued.

I had my own Santa costume. That's how into it I was. There was no greater joy than seeing someone smile from a gift or telling them that if they were good, they'd be rewarded. I liked rewarding. Even if some of the

kids knew it was me behind the white beard, it was fun, and I couldn't let them take it away, especially if this was the last year.

That would suck.

And now I was no longer thinking about Dash, so I guess they did a good job spiking my cortisol.

There would be a Santa's grotto here. I'd make sure of it.

I told myself I'd only drive past.

That was all.

I had a free period, a thermos of coffee, and a bad feeling heavy in my stomach. Hadley's Toys had been part of Buttonwood for longer than I'd been alive. My grandpa to this day carried boxes through its doors. My dad had grown up sweeping aisles and stocking shelves, and I'd grown up believing that one day, somehow, the place would be mine.

Watching it drown wasn't what I'd signed up for. The information hit and flooded my nervous system.

The new store sat outside town, close enough to the highway that people could stop on their way through without having to enter Buttonwood. The sign was enormous—bright blue letters on a white billboard.

TOY WORLD.

Everything about it was bigger.

The parking lot. The entrance. They even had carts, while we'd only ever had baskets.

I pulled into a space at the far end of the parking lot, by a faded holiday banner. Through the windshield, I saw families spilling out of the automatic doors with bags hanging from both hands. A boy raced ahead, holding a box over his head like a trophy.

A knot in me ached, it wanted me to hate them.

But he was just a kid. He didn't know about debt, overdue bills, or the way my dad looked.

I got out of the car, reminding myself I'd only planned on driving through.

Kicking snow and getting the slurry on my trousers was karma.

The automatic doors opened with a soft whoosh, and warm air hit me in the face. The store smelled of plastic, cardboard, and artificial sweetness—like someone was puffing vape smoke in my face. Christmas

music played overhead, cheerful and relentless, while a recorded voice welcomed shoppers to *Toy World*.

I stood inside the entrance and looked around.

It was huge.

Aisles stretched further than I could see from the door. Every shelf was full. Every end was stacked high with boxed toys, games, dolls, building sets, remote-control cars, and plush teddies in every color imaginable. There were entire displays devoted to things I'd never seen my family's store stock: the newest gaming consoles, giant playsets, branded merchandise, electronic pets, and a wall of collectible blind boxes.

My eyes landed on the teddy display.

Dash would've loved them. I shook my head. I wasn't buying anything from here.

There were marquees with people tending them, handing out sheets and greeting the kids who grabbed the boxes. A sign above it promised a limited-edition golden-ticket teddy inside select boxes.

A little girl stood in front of the display with her father, pointing excitedly.

"That one," she said. "I want that one."

Her father smiled and lifted the box from the shelf without even checking the price.

My stomach twisted.

Hadley's Toys couldn't compete.

I felt sick. I had to leave, and upon turning, I saw the sign on the door.

They were doing the very thing I looked forward to every holiday season.

MEET SANTA EVERY SATURDAY UNTIL CHRISTMAS!

My legs buckled and my hands clenched into fists.

The place offered photos, gift wrapping, and same-day pickup.

My jaw tightened.

Santa was me.

I was him.

Not because I was the best Santa in the world, and not because I could grow an okay beard or had a professional suit. But because I knew the kids. I worked with them. I knew which ones were shy. I knew which ones needed an extra minute to sit and get comfortable in a new place. I knew

which parents were trying to make Christmas special on a budget, and which kids just wanted someone to listen to their one hundred item wish list.

That mattered.

Standing here, surrounded by bright lights and stacked shelves, I wasn't so sure anymore.

Suddenly that rush, that push, that desire to make Hadley's Toys the best fizzled out.

This could ruin Christmas.

I went back to my car and sat there. My hands on the steering wheel, tightening until my knuckles turned white.

I wasn't ready to let Hadley's Toys become another empty storefront.

We had to try.

I started the engine and pulled out, back to Buttonwood.

Back to work, back to saving Christmas, and the store.

OceanofPDF.com

7. DASH

The moment I got back to my mom's house, I wanted to call Jude and tell him everything. He wouldn't believe it, or he would believe it and then ask for pictures of the guy. Both of those options were taken away from me because my mom and grandma were both sitting in the living room with smiles on their faces. The smiles of people who'd heard the juiciest gossip told. And maybe they had, I didn't know—but I did know it was about me.

I'd arrived just as the ads started playing on the TV, advertising pharmaceuticals, movies, and law firms. It reminded me how long it had been since I'd watched actual network TV. I was strictly into streaming—no ads. The only ads I watched were the ones I created, and the ones interns used as comps for ideas.

"Caroline told me everything," Mom said before chuckling.

"Come on, sit down," Grandma said, slapping the seat of the sofa, then plumping a cushion.

"I know you said you were going out for drinks with Sam," Mom said, her lips pursed into the biggest smile. "And I think it's a great thing. Sam is a wonderful guy. Honestly, I hoped the two of you would hit it off."

I sighed, putting my hands to my face and sitting beside Grandma. "Did you set this whole thing up?" The moment I met Sam outside the other night, it could've all been her doing. Their doing—the two of them.

"You think I hurt myself on purpose?" she asked.

"You don't want me to answer that right now," I said, groaning as I tipped my head back and stared at the ceiling. "I like Sam. I've *liked* Sam. But it's not really going to go anywhere. I live in New York, he's here, and the long-distance thing isn't for me."

Mom eyed me, squinting slightly. "But you hit it off?"

"Of course they did, Mary Anne," Grandma chuckled. "Look at him. He's gone red, and he was out all night."

I peeled the scarf from around my neck and folded it in my lap. "Is there coffee? And how's your arm? Do you need anything done while I'm here before I check my work computer?" It was a Sunday, but since I was in a senior position at the company, I liked to check in on anything that came through over the weekend.

“Maybe you could put a sock in her mouth. She’s talking my ear off,” Grandma laughed.

“You’re the one asking me the questions,” Mom countered. “And I get it from you. Besides, we have Dash home for Christmas, so let’s keep him feeling like this place is a home.”

I laughed in a snort. Mom got overwhelmed by Grandma—her mom—especially when it came to being told things about herself, like that she talked too much. Grandma was the same and used the card of being an old lady to get away with her sometimes childish behavior; getting back at my mom from when she was a kid.

There was a pot of coffee in the kitchen. Grandma followed me in, slapping my hand away from the pot. “It’s decaf,” she grumbled. “Your mom says I’m not allowed the caffeinated stuff anymore.”

“It’s because of your heart, Mom,” she called through from the living room. “Get back in here. Judge Judy is back on, and you’re gonna miss her verdict. I think she’s going to side with the wife.”

Grandma chuckled and cooed, grabbing the whole jar of cookies; taking cookies from a baby—me, I was *baby*. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

Alone while they were distracted, I pulled my phone out of my khaki pants pocket. It was on low battery. Jude had texted several times. Apparently, he was headed to Maine to see his family since I’d *abandoned* him, which was very dramatic. He kinda hated Christmas, which was fun at this time of year because our shared apartment was decorated, but he complained the entire time we did it.

I did something. I texted him.

My phone rang out with an image of Jude pulling a goofy face as the contact photo.

He wanted to FaceTime me. I rushed through the living room and upstairs to the room I’d been given—my former bedroom. But nothing remained of it, not even the glow-in-the-dark stars I’d once stared at while dreaming on the ceiling.

“*Jeez*,” he said as I finally answered. “*You took your sweet-ass time*.”

“I wasn’t prepared for a FaceTime,” I said, staring at myself on the phone. I combed a hand through my hair and pulled at my facial hair to stop it from looking unkempt. “Anyway, you said you were going back to Maine. Why are you—”

He laughed. “*Not today. I’m going into work tomorrow, then making sure I can head that way and work from home*.” He shrugged at me, his face flashing a smile before dropping like a mask he wore. “*So, we’re not talking about me, Dash. What did you do? Or who—who did you do?*”

I puffed up my cheeks and slowly let the air out. Glancing around the room, I reached under the pillow where I’d stored my teddy and pulled it in close to my chest. “Okay, so there’s this teacher here. He’s a family friend, and everyone loves him. Well—”

“*Oh my God. Tell me more.*”

“I will, jeez,” I snorted, lying back on the bed and holding the phone up, my arm immediately becoming tired. “Anyway, he invited me for drinks. Wait—before that, he was the quarterback on the high school football team. He had a gorgeous girlfriend, and he was crowned prom king. Two years older than me. Okay, so he was hella straight, right?”

“*You know as well as I do that bisexual people exist, Dash. You can’t just say folks are straight.*”

“He said he was straight,” I laughed. “Let me just set the scene.”

This was exactly how it had been living with him. Telling stories was fun with him, especially when we were both in Little space. And because neither of us would be spending Christmas together, that meant less time in Little space. The realization hit, and maybe in him too, as we sighed in unison.

“*What I’m gathering is that you knew this guy from when you were in high school, you had a crush on him, and now you got laid by him,*” he said. “*And that is the Christmas miracle you’re always talking about having. Right?*”

He was right. I’d talked about Christmas miracles, and I loved those movies where the boy meets girl—but in my case, in my mind of course, boy meets boy, boy falls deeply in love with the boy, and then after knowing each other for no time at all, they get married and live a picket-fence family dream. But that wasn’t this. That wasn’t the miracle happening here.

“In a way,” I grumbled. “He’s hot. Way too hot for me. His body is like—” I opened my mouth and gasped. “You know, I think he only hit on me because I appear to be the only other gay person in town. Keep in mind, there are thousands of people in town.”

“*So, what I’m gathering is, he likes you?*” Jude snickered, one side of his face twitching. “*Now, tell me what it was like. Was he dominant? Was he Daddy?”*

“Technically, we just did hand stuff,” I said. “And mouth.”

“*And is he Daddy?*”

That was the million-dollar question. Was Sam Daddy for me? He was caring, cuddly, and guiding. There were other criteria for him to meet, but he was hitting all the spots—just maybe not the spot inside me. Yet.

“*I take that as a no. Well, have fun, stay warm, don’t catch a cold, and don’t catch feelings*,” he said, raising his brows. “*Unless you want him. But what the heck would you do? Long distance?*”

The second million-dollar question. Would it even work? And why did he send me spiraling back into my teen self? Usually, when I spiraled into Little space, I’d pass the awkward teen phase of angst and go to the soft, cuddly place where I could color my anxieties away. This wasn’t going like that at all. And I was catching feelings after one single night with him. Worse yet, the entire town knew—or they might as well have, since my mom and grandma knew.

Finally, pushing the conversation toward him, we were both cuddled with our teddies as we talked through everything. I practically encouraged him to go back and visit his family, mostly so we could be on the same level of stress our families put us through. Friends who trauma together, stay together.

* * *

The bedroom was a relatively quiet place for me to work from, though I could occasionally hear Grandma shouting at the TV. I sat on the bed with my teddy squeezed between my legs, practically trapped between my thighs.

I was lucky to have the ability to work from Buttonwood, and I was still suspicious of my mom and the severity of her arm injury. Part of me wanted to go back to the comfort of my apartment in New York, to the pile of teddies Jude had no doubt jumped into and made a mess of. The only time I ever saw him smile was when he was doing that.

This place was getting all my schedules in a tizzy. There was an office Christmas party in two weeks I’d have to drop out of. I’d committed myself to spending the holiday here. I went through my calendar, noting the

big events I couldn’t attend—most of them to oversee how well the brand was doing, so easily passed on to a junior or intern.

I leaned over the side of the bed into the box I’d brought up from my car. I had other teddies in there—collectible Sublime teddies. They were adorable and put a smile on my face. The rare ones were still boxed on shelves in my bedroom.

The first Sublime teddy I’d ever unboxed was six years ago, before the craze and before scalpers started hoarding them to sell at crazy prices. The first one was worn from all the nights it spent pressed against me and sandwiched in with other teddies. It was a purple one with my star sign on its belly in gold thread. I was a Cancer, born June twenty-ninth. A summer baby, which explained why the cold made me moody.

I lay on the bed after that, staring at the ceiling, realizing just how much of this space had changed and how long I’d been away. Everything else looked the same on the outside, but on the inside, nothing was the same.

“Dash, sweetheart.” Grandma’s shaky voice called out to me. “I need your help.”

I stood and saw that the clothes I was in were still the same from the night before. Immediately feeling icky, I changed into my comfy pink Hello Kitty sweatpants, my Sunday briefs, and an oversized black T-shirt.

They were in the kitchen, arguing. It was their unique way—the way that was caring.

“You’re not touching that,” Grandma said, and I spotted my mom looking into the refrigerator.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Your mom thinks she’s Lynda Carter playing Wonder Woman in here,” Grandma cackled. “I told her we should have a nice meal, and the chicken in the fridge is about to turn, so I said it would be good to throw it in the oven.”

“I can do that,” I said. “Roast chicken dinner?” I raised my brows at them, nodding. “I can do that.” They looked at me like I was still the moody teen—the one who refused to do anything, the one who hadn’t been that way in over twelve years. Which might not have been that long for them, but it was for me. “So, you two go back in there. I’ll make dinner. And no more cookies, Grandma. You’ll spoil your appetite.”

They both glanced at each other and chuckled, like naughty schoolchildren trying to get away with a prank—except the prank was getting me to make dinner, which I didn't mind too much. I loved to cook, and by that, I meant throw things in the oven, wait for them to burn, and then they were ready.

"There are carrots and veggies too," Mom said. "If you need help peeling, I—"

"You're not doing anything," I said, shooing them both out. "Not with that arm. And you—well, you should go annoy her in there. And if I have questions, I'll ask."

There was something else going on as they glanced at each other and followed my orders. It was a strange change in power dynamics. I preferred to be catered to, but that was for an entirely different situation.

I was in a flow state when a knock came at the front door—a loud one too. It was followed by a lot of cooing and my mom welcoming them in. At that point, I was too busy following an online recipe card for honey-glazed carrots to poke my head out and look. My hands were sticky with honey; there had to have been a better way to do it.

"It's so nice to have you over, Sam," Mom said.

Sam.

Sam?

The Sam I'd spent the night with?

That Sam?

They couldn't be the same. I refused to believe it.

They were now best of friends.

Washing, rinsing, and scrubbing my hands clear of the honey, I wiped them on a tea towel and raced into the living room. But there he was. *My* Sam. Standing in front of my mom and grandma, holding out a chocolate cake inside a plastic case. The collar of his shirt appeared above his jacket, he wore slacks, and his hair was all slicked back. He glanced at me and smiled.

"Your mom invited me for dinner," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

Mom struggled in her seat with the off-balance of only using one arm. She huffed around as Sam helped her up. "I just invited him because you two have spent some time together, and you know, I think Sam is a lovely guy."

I didn’t know what to say. I’d been ambushed, and my grandma’s eyes and grin were so wide, I thought she was going to pass out waiting for me to speak.

“Great,” I grumbled. “And I look—a mess.”

I had starch and flour all over my black T-shirt—and they showed up all right. I’d been trying to make gravy, and I’d struggled. A lot.

“You need help?” he asked.

In that moment, I needed to be held, otherwise I’d collapse. I leaned against the arched doorway and pressed my lips together hard.

“Yes, go help him,” Mom snickered.

“We’re not allowed,” Grandma added.

Sam walked toward me, smiling so big.

The moment we were alone in the kitchen, I held myself up on the counter, taking a deep breath and staring at the low bubbles in the pan of gravy.

Close to him, the seductive smell on his skin was intoxicating. “Your mom said you’d invited me,” he whispered, placing the cake on the counter. “Guessing that’s not the case. Well, I brought fudge cake, if that sweetens the deal. Also, I love your Hello Kitty sweats.”

I gulped hard and nodded, warmth rising up my face even more now that he’d acknowledged them. “And they wonder why this is a rare thing,” I grumbled.

“I can leave if you want me to,” he said. “But I am great in the kitchen.” He slowly tugged at the corners of his jacket, revealing the green-and-red sweater with a reindeer’s face on the front, the nose flashing red.

“I look a mess,” I whispered. “But yes, please help.” I reached out and gave the ball on his sweater a squeeze. “You’re all dressed up.”

He laughed. “Well, under this I am. But look, this is fun.”

I squeezed it again, and he let out an *ouchie*.

“So then, Mr. Hadley, what can’t you do?” I asked.

“If I tell you that, you might not want to spend time with me.”

Narrowing my eyes, I continued to stare at him. “Tell me.”

“Okay, okay. Fine. I can’t hold down a relationship,” he said. “And I can’t stop thinking about you.”

It sent my brain into Wonderland.

Population: me and my very loud, beating heart.

He got closer, and we kissed. Then he took over, and I could finally relax.

But he was thinking of me. And I was thinking of him.

OceanofPDF.com

8. SAM

At first, when the invite for dinner came, it was a text from Dash's mom, Mary Anne. Then there was a call, where she practically begged me to come over. I thought Dash knew, but when I turned up, it was clear he had no clue—and there he was in those cute pink sweats, with no apron in sight.

I'd had a pretty shitty day after finding out the family business was going to collapse. I went for a run on the treadmill, then pumped up a sweat on the pull-up bar attached to the top of the doorframe. Things I'd usually do. But trying to think about what I could do to help my family—and what the night spent with Dash meant—was different. Was it more than a hookup? Did we even hook up if we didn't have sex?

"You know it should be illegal for you to do all this?" Dash grumbled as I coated carrots in glaze and shook the small pan of peas on the stovetop. They also had a butter glaze and black-pepper seasoning.

"Or maybe it means I've got a lot to give," I countered.

He snickered at me, his eyes glancing down my body. He shook his head, fighting off thoughts I was sure. "We're not playing that game again. You'll just make me jealous, and then I'll wonder what else I've missed by not being in town."

I laughed, the muscles in my cheeks beginning to ache around him. He made me smile so big, I didn't know the last time it had hurt this good. Perhaps last night in the bar, when we got tipsy and chatty—but those were different circumstances.

"Ooh, it smells amazing in here, boys," Evelyn, Dash's grandma, walked in, smacking her lips at us. "Are you going to change?" She tugged at Dash's black T-shirt. "We have a guest now."

His cheeks were cloudy rose quartz. "Grandma, I'll change in a minute. What did you come in for?"

She shrugged. "Your mother is annoying me." She laughed under her breath. "She won't let me put reruns of *Jerry Springer* on."

"If she doesn't, then I feel like the house might become an episode of *Jerry*," he said. "I'll tell her to let you watch your shows, and—" He glanced at me. "I'll change."

Dash left, and my smile stayed. It was unwipable. I wasn't letting it go. I wasn't letting the good feeling he filled me with leave.

I’d been in this house many times before, mostly to help Mary Anne with her baking, and sometimes when she needed help taking things from the loft space or dismantling an old table. She volunteered at the elementary school, so we saw each other often. I’d never really thought too much about her son. Sure, I’d thought about him occasionally, and she’d once asked if I remembered him from high school—and I had—but I told her I hadn’t. It was because the people I was around at the time would make fun of that group: the group with their black winged eyeliner, dyed-black hair, and somber look they carried around with them. Like goths, but probably toned down for school—there was a strict no-piercings policy in high school.

Dash came back into the kitchen looking flustered, dressed in a nice blue knit sweater—not Christmassy enough—and a pair of gray slacks, ready for work it appeared. He finished the look with a pair of slippers with teddy-bear heads on the front.

“You look good,” I said.

“Yeah, you think?” he asked, twirling for me unprompted. “My sweater isn’t as good as yours, though.”

“We can swap,” I said, wiggling my brows.

He pressed his tongue gently between his teeth and smirked at me.

The moment was cut short as a burning smell from behind touched my nose. I turned immediately, seeing the liquid in the pan of peas completely evaporated. That meant the food must be finished. Dash was at my side, looking over as I caught the green peas before they burned black.

“You want to set the table?” I asked him. “I’ll get everything else ready.”

“Oh my god, really?” he said, all giddy. “I bit off more than I could chew with this,” he whispered, not that it was a secret, anyone with two eyes could see he’d never done this before.

He was good at setting a scene, a table, and making things look nice. It was an art form in itself. His cousin at the school was the same. Her classroom looked great, especially the art displays, while mine were mostly hodgepodged together. It could’ve been a Jackson Pollock.

It had been a while since I’d made a dinner like this for people. This was what I’d usually do for myself: make a large meal, then separate it all into containers as meal prep for however many days it would last. Even now, looking at all the food being transported into bowls for the table, I

thought—*wow, I could add chicken, potatoes, peas, carrots, and even freeze the gravy into blocks*.

"Aw," Mary Anne cooed as she walked into the dining space next to the kitchen. Her arm in the sling twitched to get out, as she gestured when she spoke. Not anymore. "You've both done an excellent job."

"One more thing," Dash said, rummaging around in the kitchen junk drawer. "Got it." He pulled out a lighter and set flames to the two white candlesticks in the center of the table. "Now it's set."

It was nice. We sat beside each other, and Mary Anne and Evelyn sat beside each other across from us. Dash handed the serving over to me, which I appreciated. I liked to do it. It was maybe in my nature: to give, to handle, to control, and to comfort. And food was that comfort.

"This all smells and looks divine," Mary Anne said as I sliced through the chicken and its golden, crunchy skin. Juices came dribbling out, and all our bellies let out the same hungry grumbling.

"Who did what?" Evelyn chuckled.

"Grandma," Dash grumbled, huffing. "We both did an equal amount."

"True. Dash started it all. I was just there to help," I said, glancing at him as I placed a large chunk of chicken breast on his plate.

"Thank you."

"Oh yes, thank you, Samuel," Evelyn said.

"Thank you," Mary Anne joined. "I didn't think you'd show. I'm glad you did. Dash is secretive about things, but he knows you can't keep secrets in Buttonwood."

I hummed at that, my heart racing as the gossip was about to spin toward my family. "It was fun hanging out last night. I'm sorry I kept him overnight, but I live close, so—"

Mary Anne chuckled. "You do not have to explain yourself to me, sweetheart," she said. "I heard it snowed as well. We woke up to everything being slush." She shook her head. "I prefer it when I can see the snow, so I know what's going to be slippery or not."

"We don't want you injuring your other arm," Evelyn chuckled. "So, does this mean Dash is going to have a reason to come home more often?"

He was shrinking in his seat, but honestly, I was glad they weren't talking about the toy store or my family. I was on autopilot: smiling, dishing

out food, and just chuckling along to their back and forth about the time I'd spent with Dash the night before.

It eventually came to me once we were all tucking into our food. I saw them both glance at each other, then at me, like they were trying to figure out the best time to ask.

"So, Sam," Mary Anne began.

"Mom, leave it," Dash cut in. "Whatever it is, please don't make this awkward." I glanced at him and placed my hand on his thigh under the table. He smiled, turning his head away slightly. "I just think we should enjoy this nice meal, and maybe I'll find some wine."

"Oh, we don't have any," his mom said. "I'm not allowed to drink on these pain meds, and your grandma isn't allowed to drink, full stop."

Evelyn chuckled. "Except at Christmas, when I have a port or a sherry."

"Except for then," Mary Anne said, staring at her mom with raised brows. I was glad, once more, that they weren't going to ask me anything. The last thing I wanted my family to know me as was the leak in a sinking ship.

"Water it is," Dash said, holding his glass up to cheers before drinking.

The food was nice, but my brain wouldn't shut up about protein, macros, micros, and dissecting what value my body got from every different bite of the meal. Then Dash touched my thigh. I glanced at him, catching his smile as he nodded, like he could hear my internal monologue.

"So, we heard the news," Mary Anne said, and the rush of stress came back to me as the floodgates opened. "Hadley's Toys has been a central part of this town. It'll be sad to see you close."

"It's closing?" Dash asked. "I love that place."

"Yes. It's where I bought most of your toys for Christmas," Mary Anne said.

"That's really unfortunate," Evelyn said. "And what's your grandpa doing about it? Surely there's something he can do."

I shook my head. "I don't know much," I said. "I don't get told anything." It was a lie, but a lie that was easy to tell and digest. "I'll have to speak to them about it, but they'll figure it out."

"Aw," Mary Anne chimed in once more. "That Christmas grotto won't be happening then, will it?"

“Christmas grotto?” Dash asked.

“Yes, yes. Sam dresses up as Santa, since he’s pretty much the Santa of the town anyway,” Mary Anne chuckled. “He—well, you’re always helping out, there whenever someone needs you. Surely there’s something.”

I shrugged, the smile as she bragged about me hurting my face now. “It’s really nothing. I just like to help, especially where the town is concerned. We’re aiming for a spot in the New Hampshire Holiday Guide.”

“What’s that?” Dash asked. “Like a travel guide?”

“Exactly,” I said. “We took the number one spot a couple of years ago, but then they awarded it to some town by a lake. And I’ll admit, they had one heck of a light display. The way it reflected off the lake was what I think sealed the deal.”

“If you need help, I’m in marketing, you know,” Dash said, playing with the peas on his plate, passing them back and forth with the side of his spoon. “And I do pretty well, if I do say so. A lot of marketing is perception, image, and spectacle. Which maybe we could do for the town.”

“We?” Mary Anne gasped, nearly sucking all the air out of the room. “Well, I never thought you’d be the one to say that.”

“I mean—” Dash went red in the face, as bright as the red nose on my Christmas sweater. “It is where I grew up, right here, so yeah, *we*. And I’m here for Christmas anyway. Might as well help you guys out.” His voice was all grumbles and groans, pretending to be annoyed—but secretly, he was excited to be a part of this. I could just tell he was.

“Gosh,” Mary Anne said, her arm moving in the sling. Sucking on her teeth at the pain, she laughed. “I never thought I’d see the day, personally. So, what plans do you have, Dash?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” he laughed. “It was a suggestion. I’ll have to think about it. I’ll have to—you know, speak to people, and I’m still working a full-time job. So, let’s slow our roll. Okay?”

“It would be nice,” I said. “Maybe *we* could talk after dinner about it.” And by *we*, I had meant just me and Dash. His mom and grandma were quite the team of chatterboxes when put together—not something I could deal with if we were going to plan events for town. And maybe help for my family’s store. If he could help, I’d owe him one—or maybe we’d call it even, since I’d helped with dinner.

Dash smiled at me and nodded. He knew what I meant.

His mom and grandma continued to talk while we ate, his mom slower with only one hand in use and completely refusing help from anyone. It was a delicious meal, although I didn't eat all of it. My stomach wasn't prepared for it after the anxiety-induced nightmare that was the news my parents had told me earlier.

But of course, I'd saved room for dessert. And if Dash wanted, perhaps extra dessert—I even had whipped cream on hand.

OceanofPDF.com

9. DASH

I should've thanked my mom for inviting Sam over. I should've told her it was fine, but it caught me off guard. It was probably for the best. She knew how to keep me on my toes, and also how to keep me around.

It must've been her plan the entire time: dangle Sam in front of me and hope I'd decide to settle down in Buttonwood, so I'd be close to her. I wouldn't have been surprised if her arm wasn't even hurt—but maybe she wouldn't have gone that far. She was visibly in pain when she accidentally tried moving it.

After we ate, we washed up and had cake in the living room while Grandma took control of the TV remote and forced us to watch some of her daytime TV on one of the dedicated channels. It didn't matter what we watched, because I was sitting beside Sam, still piecing together the person he'd been in high school with the person he was now: sitting beside me, radiating heat, and making sure my mom didn't spill cake and cream from her bowl.

We'd spoken at length the night before, but even now, I didn't really know much. Maybe I shouldn't have had so much to drink, and maybe I should've gone home, but the snow was a sign. Jude would've said so too.

"This is delicious," Mom said, sucking on her spoon. "Did you buy this or make it?"

He laughed, sending a motion of tingles through me beside him. "I bought it," he said, dipping his head like he was ashamed. "It was last minute, and Mrs. Wilson at the bakery gave me a discount on it."

"Melissa?" Mom asked. "Well, she's definitely improved."

"Right, yeah. She was one of the apprentices when you had your bakery," Sam said.

Mom snickered. "The cake does taste familiar. Must've been a technique she picked up from me."

"She also makes bear claws," Grandma added. "She brings them into the community center when we have bingo night. Oh, Dash, you should come with me. It's on Wednesday, in the evening."

"Sure," I said. "Sam, are you—"

He laughed. "I'm the bingo caller," he said. "I'll be there too."

They were right: he really was doing everything for everyone in town. And once more, I wondered what he couldn't do. For starters, he probably couldn't . . . nope, I had nothing.

After eating and talking, Sam declared he had to leave. He was a teacher; he had the greatest excuse in the book. And as he stood, he looked at me with his eyebrows raised and the question on his tongue that I think we all knew was coming.

"You want to come over?" he asked.

The three of us glanced at each other, waiting on my response. I could practically hear them pushing me into his arms. He would be the first guy I'd ever brought home—except they'd invited him, not me. They'd orchestrated the entire thing.

"Are you two going to be—" I began, and before I could ask the question, they were practically throwing me out. Their gazes said a lot and did a lot of the pushing.

"What is it the kids say?" Grandma asked.

"Is it that weird thing?" Mom began. "I've seen it online. YOLO."

"Mom," I said, shrinking into myself. I couldn't believe what she was saying. It was weird coming out of her mouth, like it was the first time she'd said it, and I felt wronged by it. "It's 'you only live once.'"

"Well, you do," Sam added. "And I think I'd love to pick your brain about marketing."

"If that's all you want," I said with a big smile.

"Of course," he winked at me. "You want to pack an overnight bag? Make sure to bring those pink sweats. They were—cute."

It was a humiliation ritual, eyes on me from both sides, and then Sam in front of me, his entire body radiating, glowing under every light. "Sure," I said, clearing my throat slightly. "And I want the two of you not to argue. Please. And make sure you're both in bed at a reasonable time."

"Oh, he's bossy now," Grandma laughed, clutching the TV remote like her life depended on it.

"We will, we will," Mom said. "Now, go spend the night with Sam. Look at him, standing there looking all—" She cooed, right in front of his face, expressing that he was a literal god. I wondered just how many people had seen him without those baggy Christmas sweaters, and all he could do was smile and thank her.

I filled an overnight bag with clothes and some teddies, along with my comfy bear slippers. I knew he still had those fancy bathrobes, and I would be taking full advantage of that—maybe even permanently borrowing one.

In the car, we noticed it had begun to snow around us again. I'd be lying to myself if I didn't admit it was magical. It was, and I was doing my best not to look so excited around him.

"You know, your mom is fun," he said.

"Maybe you should date her," I snickered.

He smiled. "I'm not into women, so you'll do." And the moment we pulled up at a red light, Sam turned to me, gave me a tap on the arm, then pulled me in for a kiss.

"So, did my mom put you up to this?" I asked. "Since the two of you are so close?"

He teased teeth into his lip. I wanted to bite them too. He shook his head and put his foot down on the gas. "I'd be lying if I said she didn't talk about you—her hotshot son living in New York. I don't think she knew what you did, but she said you never asked for money, so she knew you were doing well."

I snort-laughed. "Yeah, well, I'm gonna take that as she's the one who set us up." And every time I thought it, I was like, I bet she'd never injured herself. And if she hadn't, then she was very into the bit of playing injured.

"You're adorable, you know that?" he said.

"And you're so different from the guy I saw around high school," I shot back, fake hating the word *adorable*. Of course, I didn't hate it. It just caught me off guard, much like when he called me a good boy the night before.

"Good," he said. "That guy was a jerk. He was in the closet, but Caroline says I saved her from having to date anyone else. You know, two couples in my senior class didn't turn up to graduation because they were pregnant and didn't want anyone to know. So Caroline says she's happy about that."

"Okay, so we're going there," I mumbled, nodding my head. "Did you two have—you know—sex?"

"Of course we did," he laughed. "Always protection. And I don't think either of us enjoyed it that much. It was—yeah, strange. But we didn't

do it a lot, if that's your next question. I'm probably bi, right? But ninety percent into guys, ten percent into women."

"I've never," I said. "I don't think I could. Not that it's bad or anything. I think women are gorgeous—absolutely stunning—and I would marry one in a heartbeat if they needed me to. As long as I knew them and stuff."

We pulled up outside his house. "What's—" He paused, looking me over in the light from the car ceiling. "What's gotten into you about it? We talked a lot about that last night."

"Yeah, well, I FaceTimed my friend earlier, and he was saying how I could've been bi-erasing you."

"You told someone about me?" he asked, leaning in with an excited grin, the red nose of the reindeer on his sweater peeking out from his coat, ready to prod me.

"Obviously," I said. "My best friend, Jude. He should've come with me, to be honest. He's going to visit his family in Maine, I think. But I told him to come here if he wasn't feeling it. We're like each other's emotional-support blankets."

"That's sweet," he said, his hand under my chin, brushing through my facial hair, guiding my face to his, my lips to his, and the sweet kiss of them. I could've melted, even in this cold weather. I was hot and ready to evaporate under his heat. "So, tell me more about what's got you all worked up," he said in a rough whisper.

"You," I whispered back, our beards interlocking. "It's like I can't be normal around you, like you set something off in me. You—you always have. I watched you in high school. I saw most of your games, and every time you won, Caroline would run out onto the field, and you'd take her in your arms and nearly throw her into the air. I was jealous. I wanted that. And now you're right in front of me, and all those teenage dreams and feelings are coming back."

"Okay," he said and nodded. "Get out of the car, and I'll pick you up."

"Pick me up?"

"If you want me to grab you and pick you up, then I'll do it," he said with a smirk that had me feeling like Jell-O in my belly. "Let's remake the memories, the thoughts, all those things you saw and wanted. I'm kinda

known for making people's dreams come true around town, so let me do this for you."

I swatted a hand at his arm. "Are you being for real?" I asked, looking around. "But it's snowing now, heavier. What if you slip and we fall?"

"Fine," he said, leaning in quickly and pecking me on the nose with a kiss. "Then let me open your door for you, and I'll carry you inside instead."

I scoffed into a laugh, but he was being serious. And he did.

I watched Sam leave the car and become covered in snow, as he ran to his front door, opened it, then walked back to me. I pulled my bag into my lap from the back seat, and Sam carried me all the way from the passenger seat and into his house. I also got a sprinkling of snowflakes, but he was pretty sturdy on those legs.

One wish had been granted. He'd carried me and fulfilled my needs. I slept thinking about the type of carrying I'd seen him do. Effortless, controlled and caring, to hold me like that.

This had to be a dream. And if it wasn't a dream, then I was high, because while everything remained the same, my memories were now distorted with this strawberry-blush haze of—romance. And I supposed I had Sam to thank for that.

Over the threshold of his front door, he kissed me on the lips. If we were going by what I wanted: to be in high school again, to have him look at me in the stands, blow a kiss, dedicate the touchdown to me, or whatever it was he did. I'd done so well not thinking about this place, these people, or the experience I'd gone through here. My brain made it all sound so dramatic, but in reality, I'd felt out of place, and that distorted so much for me.

"For what it's worth," he whispered. "I agree. I think your mom tried setting us up." He carried me to the sofa and laid me down. "But I'm not mad about it."

"I'm not mad about it either," I mumbled back, breathless. I clenched the bag to my chest and began panting. Sam pulled my sneakers off, one by one.

"Don't you have snow boots?" he asked. "It's a good job I carried you. Your feet would have been soaked in these."

“I have—” I said, scrunching my toes inside my no-show socks, the bottoms of which had slipped halfway down my feet. “I have my office shoes. The ones I wore last night.”

“Oh, yes, you do,” he said, removing the socks as well. “And these.” He chuckled. “You’re really playing with fate. You’re gonna catch a cold, and if you catch a cold on my watch, well, I’m gonna feel downright awful about it.”

I continued wiggling my toes and watched as he grabbed them. His warm hands on my feet made them even wigglier. “Well, I’m obviously not prepared.” And I really wasn’t. I’d left in too much of a hurry to pack any Christmassy sweaters or thick, knitted socks, the ones I wore with my boots. Not snow boots. When it snowed in New York, I stayed inside, and people came to me.

Sam shuffled himself to my side of the sofa, kicking his boots off in the process. He laid his head next to me, while he sat on the floor, pressed up against the board at the bottom. “This is like that scene from *Titanic*, when Rose doesn’t let Jack on the door.”

I giggled. “You put me on here,” I said. “It’s comfy, but I know somewhere comfier.”

He hummed and tapped the tip of my nose. “Really? Because I know this place pretty well.”

“Then you’ll know about the bedroom,” I whispered. “And those fancy hotel robes.”

“Oh, you like the fancy things?”

My brows wiggled into arches. “I mean, if you’re offering. What are you—” He kissed me on the lips, hushing me.

“I think I’m pretty fancy, don’t you?”

I bit my bottom lip and nodded, and he didn’t need any other sign. I wanted him, needed him, craved every touch and taste he had to offer me. He picked me up again, this time letting my bag fall to the sofa. I didn’t care. I knew the moment I got into that bedroom, I wouldn’t be getting dressed—the opposite, in fact.

“I think I’ve figured you out,” he whispered in my ear.

“Really?”

“Of course,” he said, brushing his nose and chin along the side of my face, his mouth attempting to bite my cheek. “You’ve got a praise kink, don’t you?”

My heart throbbed in my throat. “Uh.”

“Yes,” he let out softly. “The way you got all squirmy when I said you’d done a good job, and when I called you a—”

“Don’t say it.” I was practically clenching in his strong arms.

“Good boy.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

A moan came out, and my head tipped back, letting my vocal cords blend into that harmonious sound of pleasure. Like a code word that unlocked me, a phrase that would instantly turn me on—and a Daddy saying it? Well, that was everything.

“You’ll have to tell me your limits,” he whispered. “I want to get on the same page as you. So, if you want to play, I can play.”

I nodded. “I like to play,” I whispered. “I usually go with the traffic light system?”

Daddy smirked. “That, I understand.”

Safe word was a mix of either *red* or *traffic light*, but you could also use *green* for go, or *amber* for slow.

OceanofPDF.com

10. SAM

There was a change so completely fresh and new about Dash—not the guy I'd gone to high school with, the one two years below me, but the man I was carrying into my bedroom, the man I was staring at, hoping he'd stare back. The longing in his eyes was enough for me to tense up and grit my teeth from wanting. I wanted him, all of him, everything he had to offer.

"You're cute when you do that thing with your nose," I told him, looking at him as I pulled his legs around and over the side of the bed. I tugged on his arms as his nose continued to wrinkle, forcing him to sit.

"What thing?" he asked, wiping a hand at his nose.

"When it wrinkles. When I kiss you and your nose gets those tiny wrinkles on it," I said, leaning in for another kiss. "I think it's cute."

"How cute?"

"Well, on a scale of cuteness, what do you even say? A one or a ten?" I asked him. It was the teacher in me—letting people stay curious, their brains active and playful. Dash needed that. His eyes lit up at it, like he knew a secret he was holding onto, but at any moment he might let it slip, and hopefully into my ears. "Personally, I'd put kittens at a ten."

"Okay," he giggled. "And me?"

"Below kittens. Nobody can be cuter than a kitten."

He looked away, then back at me, biting his lip. "Even if they're a really good boy?"

I sucked on my teeth playfully. "I'm afraid so."

"So I'm not cute?"

I threw myself on top of him, pushing his body back and grabbing his hands, my fingers interlocking with his. I was ready to let him know just how cute he was, and just how riled up he got me. It was a lot, all of it, pent up inside me, ready to be pulled out, aimed, and fired.

I kissed him, covered his face in kisses—his neck, both my hands up his T-shirt, feeling his gorgeous body and the hair growing in a garden-path straight line right between his pecs. I pushed until he was forced to remove it. Then I continued to kiss, to play, and flick my tongue at parts of his skin and his nipples.

Dash tried squirming and giggling, claiming he was ticklish, but he lay there and embraced those kisses right up until I was off his body, off the

bed, and removing the rest of his clothes: socks, trousers, then his briefs. They had *Sunday* written on the ass, which was upside down the first time I saw it as I pushed his legs back and his knees to his chest.

That was perhaps one of the moments it sank in, really, deeply sank within me: Dash was a complete and total submissive, to the point that there were signs of regression. And glancing at him, his big eyes waiting on my approval for the removal of those briefs, I understood.

"Sunday," I said. "Aren't you a good boy for wearing the correct day?"

He giggled and let out a whine of a moan, nearly sending me back with the way his legs bunny-kicked out from that singular, powerful phrase. So I did it again, and again, right up until we switched positions and he was on the floor while I was on the bed, being undressed.

Our eager hands grabbed at our clothes, begging to be released from the body parts they were covering. I let him play in his undressing of me, let him do whatever he wanted, like some type of reward, like a personal playground for his shaky fingers. There was something holding him back, something in him that was retelling what he'd thought about me in high school, and how life could've played out if I'd been honest with myself sooner rather than later.

"We're gonna have to speed some of these things up," I said, looking down at the vest top bunched around my chest. The rest of my clothes were hanging on for dear life at the ends of my limbs.

"But time is standing still," he said. On his knees between my legs, he kissed my inner thigh, then rubbed his face there, his soft facial hair gentle against me. "At least, it does when I'm with you."

Lifting myself to sit, I cupped both hands under his chin and cheeks and pulled him in for a kiss. "You're adorable," I said. "Now, I thought you were going to be a good boy and stop teasing me."

"Yes, sir," he said through the strain of my hands squeezing at how adorable he was—like the type of squeeze you knew didn't hurt, the kind you'd give a cat or kitten, even a puppy.

"Is that really what you want to call me?" I asked, pressing my nose to his, then up and down his face, inhaling him. "You want to call me anything else?" It seemed obvious to me, not only from the "good boy" comment, but also because of the way he'd brought a teddy in his overnight

bag—and the underwear. It was as clear as day: this man wasn't just submissive, he was also Little, in one way or another. He craved regression.

Blinking up at me, nearly choking on a breath, he said, "Daddy."

I squeezed him harder with the biggest grin on my face, my tongue between my teeth. Like an unwritten gesture, we kissed, and my tongue went into his mouth, like I wanted to taste the words—the way he'd called me Daddy, and the way he just wanted my arms around him, holding him completely.

Being a Daddy, a caregiver, a man in a position of power was second nature to me. I'd taken care of people all my life: a football team in high school, parts of the college team, and then a team of children who were wildly the most unpredictable of them all. But Dash was one person, and one person was definitely enough for me to fill my hands and mind with.

On the bed, we rolled around like rolling from side to side would somehow connect our two bodies, pulling the sheets from the mattress and letting them tangle around us to become the hydrated rice paper of a spring roll.

He giggled, our bodies tightly together, both of our hard dicks in that space, rubbing at the slightest motion. I combed a hand through his hair, pulling it back slightly. "Okay, Mr. Claus," he said. "Where's your Santa suit?"

I cooed. "Oh, you want to know how Santa feels about you?"

"Well, everyone in town has spoken about how you're practically the default town Santa, so I assumed you'd have offered to let me sit on your lap," he said, batting his lashes at me.

We rolled more, this time until we were both on our sides. "I don't think we should get that out just yet," I said. "Maybe you want to see how Daddy feels first?"

His body let out the same type of shudder it did when I called him a good boy, it was the same when referring to myself as Daddy. "Listen," he said, the heat of his body pulsating between us. "I know I've been good, but Santa hasn't told me if I'm naughty or nice."

"You know what naughty boys get, don't you?" I said, slipping my fingers down to his sides, my fingers in place, caressing slightly and watching him twitch at the touch. "Better yet, do you know what good boys get?"

His lip trembled and his head gave a slow nod. “Good boys get rewards. Bad boys get made to sit in a corner.”

I pecked him on the nose, then pushed my way out of the side of the sheet we were becoming more trapped inside whenever either of us moved. “You really want to see the Santa suit?”

He nodded and grinned so big, like he’d gotten his way—and he always would have gotten it, because I loved to show it off. It was a custom Santa suit, pretty much my favorite thing in the entire wardrobe.

“You gotta close your eyes,” I said. “No peeking.”

As I got off the bed, Dash looked through the space between his fingers at my ass, then at my dick when I turned to face him. He giggled, screwing his eyes shut and closing those finger gaps.

I opened the wardrobe. It was inside a black zip-down garment bag with dust and mite deterrents in the bottom. I put on the pants and jacket, very loose, topped off with the hat, crooked—it was in style.

“You can open your eyes now.”

He gasped, eyes wide, on the verge of bulging out of their sockets. He swished his legs around to the side of the bed, sitting up and continuing to stare at me. “You’re Santa,” he said. “Look at you.”

“I don’t have my beard, but I’m glad you think so,” I said, brushing the back of a hand against my chin, feeling the growing hair coming in. I never let it get too big, only in December. “You want to sit on my lap and tell me what you want for Christmas?”

“You,” he snickered, snorting on a laugh. “Oh god.” He pressed his lips together hard, looking away. “I sound so thirsty now. I mean—you will do, for Christmas.”

I sat on the side of the bed, and Dash’s hands were on my abs, brushing them up and down like they’d play him a tune. I was somewhat a piano in that way, except the sounds were oohs and aahs.

Dash crawled onto my lap and sat there for a moment, rubbing himself against the fluffy collar of the suit, then laying his head into my neck, nuzzling his nose against me.

“What do you want for Christmas?” I asked again.

He looked deep into my eyes, the air catching in his throat with an audible crackle. “I want—you.”

“Good,” I said with the biggest smirk. “Because that’s something I know I can give you.”

I let him take in the way I looked before carefully putting the suit back on the hangers in the garment bag. Being Santa was a privilege. Having the ability to hand out gifts was healing too, and Dash was different. His gift wasn't physical; it was *me*.

The moment the zipper sounded and the bag shut, Dash jumped on me, wrestling me as I stayed upright with him. A new type of gym exercise I could do—and it had a name. Or *he* had a name, at least.

I dropped him on the bed, the mattress topper now coming away from the sides. "Okay, okay, we've got to fix that before anything else happens," I said. "I just want to feel you—not whatever else comes between our bodies."

Dash nodded, pressing a hand to his dick as he shuffled off the bed. He was playing shy now, apparently. It was like he silently begged for me to take my two big hands and open him up.

Once the bed was made, we were back on it, fighting with the fitted sheet for time together. The foreplay fumble was probably more intimate than having sex itself: seeing each other naked like this for so long, our dicks hard, then softer, hard again, then like batons, ready to engage with each other.

We lay beside each other, his back resting against my chest, my dick prepared, lubed up, and protected, throbbing as it played and pushed against Dash's hole, readying itself to go inside him. We cuddled, and in those cuddles, we fucked. Slow to start, my hand on his dick, his hand on mine, like he was telling me just how fast—or slow—he wanted me to go. And I went at the pace he set: light thrusts until I was deep inside him, his moans coming out between deep breaths.

In that moment of our bodies being connected, mine inside his, there was bliss, like a bright, warm light slowly tickling over my body, sending goose pimples through me. It kept me twitch-pumping myself into him.

Dash continued to tug and pull on my hands, but it wasn't possible for me to wrap my arms any harder around him. We cuddle-fucked in that position for a while, slow and steady, then fast, each of us tempting the other to come. I didn't. He didn't.

"Get on top," I said.

He turned and looked back at me with a sweaty forehead and a smirk. "You can handle me on top?"

"I can handle you whichever way," I said.

“I suppose it is a form of sitting on Santa’s lap.” He bit his lip, and I pressed a hand to his cheek and pulled it from between his teeth.

“I want to be the one biting and sucking on you,” I told him, going in and taking a playful bite of his lip the way he had. “Now, on Santa’s lap, and bounce.”

The way I appeared to people, being the dominant one—or the one people looked at to be the dominant one—was sometimes thrilling, but I’d never really thought of myself as someone who was dominant. But now, I knew I was dominant, and I liked it: to take what I wanted from him and give him everything I had in return.

When he was on top, I saw Dash in his full glory, in the fullness of the light coming from the low orange lamps. His body was different. I had to investigate it further with my fingers, and my mouth. Dash wasn’t trying to cover himself at all. It was a surprise; men of his stockier size usually wanted to keep their T-shirts on or not do anything where I could see their bodies in motion.

Dash was in pure motion, up and down, side to side, like he was using my dick as a joystick, spelling out his name, all while jerking himself with one hand and grabbing at my abs with the other. Each time he tensed my core, he let out an excited moan, squeezing me more, leaving small red marks from his fingernails.

“I’m gonna come,” he whispered, his lower lip trembling.

“Come for me, baby,” I said, then hit him with a surefire shot. “Like a good boy.”

Then there it was, his release, all the way across my torso, up into the small dip of skin at the bottom of my neck. His orgasm led to mine in quick succession. I’d been holding it; a light squeeze of his ass acted as a stopper. I didn’t like putting my balls in an elastic like others did. I filled the condom inside him, and neither of us moved. We stared at each other, then he pointed at my face and the come he’d gotten on it. Every motion, movement, and exhale, I could feel through my dick.

“That was—” He paused, lifting himself off me with the biggest grin.

“Good?” I asked, one hand going to grab my dick and remove the condom. “It was good for me.”

“Better than I thought it would be,” he said. “You got something on your face.” He wiped away the cum from my chin. “Oopsie.”

“You’re cute,” I said, taking his hand and kissing the back of it.

“It’s good branding,” he chuckled.

“Oh, really? And what’s my branding?”

He hummed, biting his lip in that same way, tilting his head. “That you’re hot,” he snickered. “And that everyone wants to fuck you.”

“Whoa, I didn’t know all that,” I said as he squinted to stare at me now.

“Yeah, right. You’re obviously hot. So hot, in fact, you could power a very, very hot shower.”

“Mm-hm. I think I’m picking up what you’re putting down.”

He giggled, jumping off the bed with a couple of booty bounces. He strutted off into the en suite, his ass jiggling on the way there. And all I could do was stare—as soon as my body got around to pushing itself together, I’d chase in there right after him.

OceanofPDF.com

11. DASH

Everything about this place was different from how I remembered it being, and maybe some of that was because every time I'd been here, I would leave feeling worse off. But right now, waking up in Sam's bed, meant all my Christmas wishes had come true. In fact, they might have. There were countless times I'd dreamed, prayed, and written letters asking for times like this in Buttonwood.

He woke me to the smell of sausages in a pan, then to the delicious smell of toasted bagels—sausage, egg, and cheese bagels for both of us. He'd even made an entire pot of black coffee, and my soul was complete. I needed the sweet bitterness of black coffee.

The table was set for just the two of us. It was a dream, but often dreams were ideas that hadn't happened yet—or so I told the marketing assistants who worked beneath me.

Sitting in our comfy robes, I stared at him. He spoke about how I'd slept, and I yawned about his comfy bed. I had my teddy bear on my lap too, snuggled up against my stomach, just like he had been all night. I could sleep without my teddies, but I hated it.

"We didn't talk about the real reason you said you were coming over last night," Sam said, pouring a glass of orange juice into a cup. I watched his every motion, pouring both our drinks—coffee, orange juice, and water—trying to make sure my every need was met.

"Right," I mustered, trying to cover for the fact that I'd been smiling too much and not really paying attention. "I think I'll go to your parents' toy store later and see if there's anything I think they could do."

Sam nodded. "Should I come with you?"

"You're going to be teaching your class," I said.

He chuckled. "Fine. But they don't know I'm even trying to save the place," he said.

"So, what they need is viral video." I grabbed the sliced breakfast bagel, my mouth watering. "And then, after we make them go viral with it, we drill it into the internet, get it on social media, and get people to come to the store. And if they miss out, they're going to look like fools, or something—" I shrugged, unable to contain myself as I chowed down on a

whole chunk of the bagel, my eyes rolling back slightly from just how delicious it all was.

Sam's low hum sounded across the table. "I can't believe you're making me jealous of a bagel right now."

His words went right over me as I devoured the food at such a pace that my ears were turned off. And as I ate, ideas percolated in my mind. I'd done a lot of marketing plans and strategies for companies over the years. My dream job was at one of the teddy companies. I'd missed out on that job to a close friend, though. My current job was a paycheck and a way to get free sodas.

"Your parents are really going to sell?" I asked.

He shrugged, now eating and smiling—the shoe on the other foot. He swallowed, large bites and gulps. "I think maybe it's going into foreclosure. It's hard to know. They don't tell me anything, but they're set and certain they're going to be closed down by the end of the year."

I sighed, planting my fist on the table harder than anticipated. "It's not fair. That place is a local gem. A hidden gem, maybe. Are they keeping up to date with all the trends?"

"I have zero idea," he said, brow furrowing. "You think they're no longer hip?"

"Not for kids," I scoffed. "They're probably not interested in the same stuff they see in there."

"It'll kill my folks for the place to go under like that," he continued. "So, if you can use that brain, I'll make sure to put you on my nice list." He winked at me, and it gave me butterflies. The man had fucked me, and yet I was still getting butterflies like I was a nervous teen getting ready for the first time I ever kissed another guy.

"I get that," I said. "I won't even let them know I'm there to report back to you."

"Maybe you're right, then," he said. "You can go in and have a look, but they're kinda set in their ways, so I don't even know if they'll listen to me—or you."

"All you can do is try," I said, feeling the pep in my voice as it came out and being shocked by it. "This breakfast is amazing, by the way." I went in for a second bite, my eyes rolling back cartoonishly, in the same way they'd rolled back for him the night before.

I didn’t want to leave his place. It was strange because I hadn’t wanted to come back to Buttonwood, and I definitely hadn’t wanted to bump into Sam. I wondered what other things I hadn’t wanted to do, and a thought tickled me into smiling right in front of him without prompt: quitting my job, and finding something I didn’t have to tell myself had the amazing perk of free soda.

“You’re cute when you do that,” he said, and I could feel a heat warm across my skin, like he was the sun and I was getting far too close to being happy and comfortable. I was falling right into the holiday trap, the one where everything seems to be going fine during the holiday season.

“You’re cute too,” I mumbled back, tongue-tied and shy. That wasn’t me. If anything, I was the one with the remarks—often snide—and the side-eye.

“So, is it too presumptuous if I ask what you’re doing tonight for dinner?”

“I’ve still got to look after my mom,” I told him. “My grandma can cook and stuff, but I just don’t want her getting hurt by however my mom’s arranged the stacking of those pans in the cupboard.” I wanted to invite him over, to say he was free to join, but I was getting ahead of myself. So I finished my breakfast bagel, and he finished his, as we shared smiles back and forth, neither of us breaking the moment, like we were racing. We both had jobs to get to—mine less pressing. I didn’t have a gaggle of small children calling out my name for attention, unlike him.

* * *

It was a nonstop interrogation once I got home. Sam drove me to my car, and I drove back to my mom’s place. They’d started on their second coffee of the morning. I had to nearly yank the mugs right out of their hands. They knew they couldn’t drink all that coffee. Decaf was fine, but with some of the medications I’d seen rattling around in the medicine cupboard, they should’ve been on water and orange juice—like what Sam prepared for me.

“He’s a gorgeous man,” Grandma said in a coo, shaking her shoulders in a shimmy. “You’ve hit the jackpot with that one, Dash.”

Mom chuckled from her armchair, her arm still in the sling with all the tight bandaging around it. “And I’ll ask again: should I get a fancy hat for the wedding?”

“It’s just a getting-to-know-you thing,” I told them both, heading through to the kitchen. “Have you both eaten?”

“No, your mom’s starving me,” Grandma laughed, and the sound of her hand slapping at her knee told me it was probably one of her favorite lies to tell. “Are you making something? I could go for food—maybe boil some eggs.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Mom called back. “Just tell us if the two of you are happy and what you’ve got planned to do.”

I paused, my tongue running across the backs of my teeth as I looked around the kitchen. The first thing I noticed was that they’d definitely had breakfast. The second was a container on the counter with extra dessert from the night before, sitting out with a note: “*Dash’s Boyfriend.*”

We weren’t boyfriends. Sure, we were hooking up—or had hooked up, singular, unless the first time we only did hand stuff counted. It probably did. We hadn’t labeled it. There was nothing to label. We were two guys in the same town who knew of each other and were gay. It was cliché to date the only other gay guy in town, right?

“You still want me to boil some eggs?” I called out, pouring myself a coffee. “And I’m hiding the coffee, so you’ll have to switch to decaf. I won’t be able to watch over you two when I’m upstairs in meetings.” The bag of coffee was placed on top of the cupboards, where even my fingers couldn’t reach, and neither of them would think to look.

“Okay, sweetheart,” Mom replied.

“I suppose we could do soft-boiled eggs for lunch instead,” Grandma added. “But that doesn’t mean we’re letting you go without knowing how the two of you are spending tonight.”

Again, another question about my evening plans. With my full cup and a big smile, I walked out to them. “He works, I work. We’re not really planning too far ahead like that,” I said, scooping up the strap of my overnight bag.

“Ooh, your bag is looking light,” Mom said with a big grin. “Did you leave something at his?”

I forced the biggest smile as my heart raced, because of course, the thing I’d forgotten was my teddy. My big teddy. He was in the pile with the bathrobe after I’d taken it off and had a pretend mournful goodbye with it,

knowing I'd probably end up back in it tonight. "Nope, it's all here," I said. "And no fighting, you two."

"I would never," Grandma said. "But you know I sometimes get loud watching my shows."

Mom stared at me, shaking her head. "You're leaving me with her?"

"Yes," I said. "Now behave, or no ice cream later, and I'll leave you both at home when I go into town later."

It was the same tactic Mom used on me when I was growing up, and it was effective. But now I'd basically invited them to the toy store with me later, which might actually be great cover for my investigation. So, props to me for that—maybe.

* * *

Work was mostly people asking how I was and what my Christmas plans were. There were the occasional questions about work, but everyone knew I was working from home—and not home in New York.

I gave everyone the same story, and they didn't ask much more after knowing my mom was injured. In fact, it was a pass to get away with dipping from online video meetings. I didn't take it, but they said often that if I was needed, I could leave.

Since my position was somewhat senior, I assumed most of them just wanted a reason to mess around and get silly with it being the holiday season and all. I could relate, because I was once that person. Now, I was serious about the world of carbonated hydration—lame, I know.

Working from my old room—now the guest room—meant there was a lot of familiarity to the place, and yet nothing of me here. I kept some of the smaller teddies I'd left behind, now in my lap, squished between my thighs.

Midway through work, Jude called, moaning about how he was regretting his decision to go up to Maine, then even floated the idea of spending it with my family. I shut it down, telling him if I had to be with family, then he had to be with his. At least then we could bond over our shared holiday trauma when we were back home in New York.

"*Tell me about the hot, handsome man you're seeing, then,*" he said down the phone, the main reason for his call. "*Please. Just give me something. Is he a total Daddy, or like a partial one?*"

“He’s—” I paused, smiling to myself, my grin wider and wider. “He’s Santa.”

Jude laughed so loud, I could hear him put the phone down just to laugh—probably maniacally. “*He’s Santa?*”

“Yes, Santa,” I said. “And I’m not saying, like, he’s magical, but he’s—” Now even I was laughing at it. “He dresses as Santa for all the kids in town, and they don’t know it’s him, but he’s like their town Santa. And he’s sweet, like—not the guy I remember from high school.”

Jude groaned down the phone, his mouth sounds loud over the receiver, turning to static. “*So, he peaked in high school, or is this someone who broke the small-town curse?*”

“Not everyone in a small town is a peaked-in-high-school type of person,” I said, lying in bed and pulling the Sublime plush teddy to my chest—not really enough plush or stuffing for me to feel the weight on my chest, though. “And he’s far from peaked. I think he might be peaking now, though, after meeting me.” I giggled, kicking my feet and almost my laptop off the bed.

“*I’ve got to meet him*,” he said.

“In your dreams—wait, no. Not in your dreams at all. Don’t dream about my man.”

“*He’s your man*?” Jude laughed louder as my face went red, right as a cold shiver ran over me. “*Tell me more about him*.”

“I’m going now, Jude. Love ya,” I said, cutting the call to lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling: blank, boring beige, the color of torture since it didn’t have any of the glow-in-the-dark stars attached to it. And maybe, if I squinted just enough, I’d see the residue they left, the mark not even a lick of paint could remove.

I got through the morning, and when I reached the living room, my mom and grandma were both dressed in their thick winter coats, ready for the afternoon out in town that I’d promised them—and now I had to follow through on it.

“Come on,” Mom said, the unused arm of her coat flopping around as she moved. “You said lunch.”

“I said lunch,” I mumbled at them.

“And we can take my car,” she said.

Grandma nodded and laughed, pushing up the curls in her gray hair. “Your car is looking run-down.”

“I barely use it,” I admitted. “So yeah, we can take your car, but don’t disrespect my baby. She got me all the way here, didn’t she?”

“I’m just saying, it probably doesn’t even have snow tires, sweetheart,” Mom said. “Your grandma is saying it’s a death trap.”

“No, I’m—oh,” Grandma snickered. “That’s exactly what I was saying.”

And now they were ganging up on me. That was just *perfect*.

I grabbed my winter coat with the fur lining. This might take all afternoon. I stared at them, both looking at me like I was taking them on a day trip somewhere nice. We were only going into town, and mostly going to the toy store.

“So, where do you guys want to go first?” I asked.

“Oh, we’ll just come with you,” Mom said. “Then I can tell all my friends in town that you’re back for Christmas and they’ll believe me. Not that it’s a competition, but you’ve done very well for yourself.”

And so began the pageantry of this town: being paraded by my mom, with my grandma in tow, as they showed me off to their friends. We went to the café, then the bakery, no hope of shaking either of them off, before settling on the toy store. Before we even walked inside—all three of us, no straggler left behind—I’d inhaled Sam’s cologne. My pupils dilated. A coconut, vanilla, and something spicy in the air. Like a tropical mixed drink with rum. It took my breath away.

Sam was inside, or he’d just left, either way, it now made this a family affair.

OceanofPDF.com

12. SAM

I'd been waiting at the toy store for ten minutes, wondering if Dash would even arrive. It was silly of me to have done this, to come in here and try to make it a coincidence when it was planned, just bump into him and make the whole thing look less suspicious. But my folks were suspicious that I'd come here on my lunch.

Standing in the entryway between the store floor and the walkway to the office and break room, I was keeping one eye on the door and another on my mom as she spoke to my dad further down the hallway, shaking her head at him, then at me.

My gut felt it first: sharp, like I wanted to recoil and vomit. This place had been in the family for too long, and there had to be something we could do. I'd have gone into my savings for this place, but that wasn't an option. They'd declared it a sinking ship, and I'd been forced off into a lifeboat, watching them go down.

"You've got a class of small children waiting on you to get back to," Mom said, brushing a hand on my arm and smiling at me. "You don't have to worry yourself with these things, sweetheart."

"But I'm sure there's something we can do," I told her.

Dad went back into his office before I could say anything, slamming his door shut. I glanced back at Mom. She brushed her hand along my arm once more, pulling my attention again. "Unless you want to hear Barry talking about this mess."

I looked through to the storefront, where Barry was at the cash register, sitting on a stool and staring at his phone. I knew that look: the look of someone searching for work.

"I'm just saying, I want to foot the bill for the grotto this year," I told her. "The kids love it, it's good for business, and it's basically a staple in this town. Everyone loves it."

Mom pulled me in and squeezed me in a big bear hug. "It's because everyone loves you, sweetheart." Her words became strained, holding back from shedding a tear in front of me. "Ugh. Your sweater is far too scratchy." She chuckled, wiping her face before looking at me. "How many of these do you even have?"

“The limit does not exist,” I said with a big grin, knowing full well she had no clue it was a quote from *Mean Girls*. The sweater was a green, chunky knit covered in white snowflakes, with the phrase “*It’s Snow Joke*” stitched across the chest in script.

“Please don’t stress or waste your time, Sammy,” she said, patting my arm once more. “Your sister and your dad’s sister will be here soon anyway.” She rolled her eyes. “They keep pitching their own ideas. Joanne more than anyone.”

Joanne was my aunt, my dad’s sister. She used to work here before she sold her half to him, and now I wondered how she felt, knowing she wasn’t tied to it—to all the bills piling up. But she was still a Hadley, and we had each other’s backs.

Then every thought I was going through left my mind, and I was staring at the door. The bell above it rang, and in walked Dash with his mom and grandma, both of them still the same as always: their back and forth, their squabbling. It brought life into the store—the very empty store on a Monday afternoon.

He spotted me right away, because he knew to look.

My mom and brother-in-law looked busy before my mom spotted his mom and grandma, and they immediately went to each other. Dash walked around the store from one side, and I walked from the other, like two magnets meeting in the middle.

“Surprised to see you here,” I whispered as he brushed a finger across the metal shelf, inspecting it for dust.

“So, nobody comes in?” he whispered back. “And I thought you’d said you weren’t going to come in. You said you were going to be working.”

“No, I said I wanted to come with you, but you said you didn’t want them to talk,” I said, staring back at his pouting face. “It kinda worked out, though. My mom’s not over here interrogating you.”

He glanced over at them, rolling his eyes. “They’re gonna find out,” he said.

“It’s not a secret,” I said, raising a hand and tempting the air between our bodies to pull us together. I brushed softly against his cheek. “Are you treating it as a secret?”

Dash reached up and touched my hand, forcing it to stay against his cheek. “Well, I don’t like secrets, unless they’re from my mom, but she

hunts them out," he said. "So no, I'm not. But there are things I keep to myself, and—stuff. You know, like what I like when I'm *with* someone."

"The Daddy thing?" I asked in a barely audible whisper. "Because I agree, nobody needs to know the ins and outs of—" And there it was, on the tip of my tongue, threatening to call this a relationship. "What we've got going on right now."

He nodded. "Good. Then let me look at the store, and I'll see what I can—" He paused now, groaning. "They're running low on stock, for starters. And I don't see any Sublime teddies. Those sell like gangbusters."

"Gangbusters," I snickered back.

He rolled his eyes. "People use it at work. But where's the USP here?"

"The US—who?"

"Unique selling point. You know what I mean, right?"

I did, but it had been a while since I'd heard that acronym. "Well, there's the grotto they do, but—" I was baring my soul. Of course, he knew I played Santa, and he knew I was good at it. "They're talking about not doing it this year."

"Ridiculous," he snapped, and the gossiping parents overheard and glanced in our direction. "You've got to."

"It's happening. Trust me," I told him. "So, what plans are you thinking?"

"I've been in here for a hot minute. Let me walk around, but immediately, the lack of any hot-ticket items is something people are going to notice, and they're not going to come in," he said. "And then there's the reason to bring people in. The grotto is a great starting point, and *you* are also a great starting point."

That inflated my ego a touch, and I couldn't contain my smile. "And what about me is great?"

He looked me up and down. "Like you don't know," he said. "You've got that *look*. Everyone fancies you, and I mean, you can't be too surprised by it."

I winked at him. "Fine, I get told that, so I'll take it. And I'll leave you to walk around and, in secret, just see if there's anything you can tell me to tell them."

He winked at me, then wrinkled his nose as he let out a snort of laughter. "Also, I left something at yours, and—"

“On purpose?” I asked. “Because you know, I was totally planning on inviting you back.”

Dash screwed his lips together in the most adorable way, forcing his facial hair to look as one one big chunk of hair on his face and hiding his lips.

I let him do his thing, taking the brunt of the operation, which was talking to my mom, his mom, and his grandma—all three of them talking, and none of them about to run out of words, but worse they might run out of oxygen in the room.

Dash’s mom was bragging about him, and my mom was bragging about me. Then, as I tuned in, they were just a bunch of sounds, all cooing like they were trying to insinuate that something romantic was happening between us—which was partially true.

“You didn’t tell me you were dating,” my mom said.

“I assumed Caroline told you, didn’t she?”

She shrugged. “Well, not dating. Just that you were—oh god, I don’t want to get into that. It’s not my place.”

“They are just the cutest,” his mom said, looking around, trying to catch her son somewhere in the store. “He’s probably looking for a toy or something. He’s a bit of a collector.”

“He really doesn’t have to come and shop here because he’s heard about our troubles,” my mom immediately countered. I’d never seen her defeated in this way before. Sure, sometimes when she was actually defeated, but she perked right back up with a positive mindset. “We don’t have much in.”

The town heard, and I was the last to know. I’d been busy—too busy to notice—and maybe that’s why I was trying hard now. Guilt, shame, whatever it was, I still had the Hadley last name, and I wasn’t going to let it be attached to people thinking of this place as a graveyard, and not even one people went to when mourning.

When I came across Dash again, he was on the phone with someone, smiling so big it made me smile in return just looking at him. Then my sister arrived, laughing with Aunt Joanne, linked at the arms, walking in step with each other.

“Sammy,” Joanne said, so loud she woke the store from its slumber. “I didn’t know school broke this soon.” Her clothes were vibrant and

layered with flowy, draped pieces, but without a coat. She must've been cold, but she seemed so warm.

"I've got about fifteen minutes to get back," I said, embracing her with a hug. She looked at the sweater and chuckled. "You're still a hoot. Your sister and I were just talking about going on a shopping trip. I bet they'd have plenty more sweaters like that."

"Auntie," Rachel grumbled, tugging her arm. "Not in here. Everyone's on edge. We don't want to talk shopping sprees."

"It's no way to live," she said. "Plus, Dex needs to know what a shopping spree feels like—a kid in a candy store."

"Or a toy store," I said.

"I'll go speak to Peter," she huffed. "And I heard about them axing the grotto. I'm going to have strong words."

Rachel shrugged and looked at me before our aunt stormed off on a beeline toward the back of the store. Rachel waited until we were alone and I was staring at a shelf of toys that had collected dust. "Dad didn't want me to tell her," she said. "But she's right about not walking around them on eggshells. They haven't been financially good for years, and nobody has wanted to tell you."

"They know I can help," I said.

"You've helped," she said, brows up, eyes wide, the eyeliner making them pop as she stared into my soul. "And you're a teacher. What exactly do you think they could say to take you away from that?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Even if—" I paused and continued to shake my head, glancing at Dash down an aisle, still touching the shelves for dust while on the phone.

"Finish your sentence."

"I just feel like I'm living for vacations to bigger cities," I said in a whisper, unable to look at her. "It's like the only time I'm around people who are like me."

"Sam," she said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Buttonwood is full of people like you."

"They're all married," I let out. "My options are finding a guy in the closet, and I have no *gaydar*. Or finding someone here for a few weeks." And now I couldn't find Dash when I looked for him.

"There's got to be a planet retrograding for you to be feeling all of this," she said, tilting her head and patting me once on the shoulder—more

of a dusting, an offer of something sympathetic. “You’ll find the one when you’re not looking for them.”

“Well, like I said, there’s nowhere to look in town,” I said with a shrug.

Rachel walked off, and I turned, nearly smacking my head right into Dash’s. He laughed it off, then out of nowhere, he leaned in and we kissed. We shimmied off behind an aisle of toys.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“That was from me to you,” he said, still smiling so big, his teeth shining like pearls. “I think I might have sorted out something.”

“Oh.” My heart pulsed in my neck. “I haven’t even told my folks yet that you were going to help. They’re gonna refuse it. What is it?”

“So, I have a friend. He works in digital media, and I’m very jealous of him,” Dash started, flailing his arms around so dramatically. I was obsessed with him; he was adorable. “Anyway, he now works for Sublime teddies—the collectibles. They’re this huge hit, and one of the things they do during Christmas to drive sales is these golden-ticket blind boxes. You get the whole *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* experience, except the owner isn’t going to give you the factory once the tour is over, and there’s no falling into a lake of chocolate, or Oompa Loompas for that matter.”

Both hands on his arms, I asked, “Are you saying you’ve got a golden ticket coming here?”

“No—well, I don’t know. It’s very possible. But since Eric owed me one, he’s going to put this store on their delivery list. So, you’ll be getting a shipment, and . . . well, I guess the actual logistics of it have to be sorted with your folks, because I don’t know how toystore sales work.”

“Ah. What’s the cost?”

“Okay, yes, I know this. It’s going to be on a sort of consignment deal, because I told him you were going under and all, so he mentioned some smaller toy stores have this deal,” he said. “But it will have to be done through your folks. Eric is lead design in digital media, but he’s got the pull for this. Perks of working for a teddy company.”

I held Dash for a moment, squishing him and giving his cheeks a kiss. “This—oh god, this could really work,” I said, and before letting go, he pulled me in. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “The teddies alone aren’t viral enough, so I had this idea. Well, okay, I’m riffing off an idea from a couple of Christmases

ago, where we had a guy in a Santa suit pose with our sodas. Obviously, cola is still very much associated with Christmas, but—you." He placed a hand on my chest, his fingers zigzagging through the knit, playing over the bumps of the snowflakes. "You give good Santa, so I've seen. And if your folks don't do social media, well, you could be the face—oh, and the body." He pulled away, giggling. "That's my idea. You in a Santa suit, asking people if they've been naughty or nice, and they can find out by coming to the Santa's grotto here—whenever that is." He shrugged, letting out another accomplished giggle.

"Damn," I mumbled. "You thought of all that."

"Well, I've been in marketing for a while, so some things are mashed together to form new franken-ideas, and it's kinda hard to tell if they'll work. But those Sublime teddies, depending on how many they get in, will have people—everyone, not just kids—going feral. Trust me."

Our bodies snapped together again in a hug, and I squeezed and inhaled him like he was going to vanish. "Let's tell my folks together," he said. "Although, they're gonna have seen this."

"It's not like we're together. We're just—feeling out the holiday with each other."

"Feeling out the holiday with each other," I repeated.

I liked the way he'd worded it, although I sensed apprehension, like he didn't want to be the first one to name what this was—and neither did I, in case I overstepped. And I very much wanted to overstep. I'd known gay people who got into relationships after a night together, and now they were living in Seattle, or somewhere.

Both our families had seen us as we appeared from behind the shelves, which were mostly see-through anyway, since stock was low. Then they looked back at each other, my mom's brow going up. It was mom talk, and that must've been a code.

With hands held, we had a plan, and a shot at saving this place—my family's legacy.

OceanofPDF.com

13. DASH

Sam made it feel like “Everywhere” by Fleetwood Mac was playing on repeat in the back of my mind whenever I was around him. The soft melody, the way it made me want to frolic through tall grass—or something equally insane for me to do. I wasn’t that type of person. I was teddy bears and a quiet corner with a cocoa. Sam was single-handedly turning me into someone who could tolerate Buttonwood.

After we told his folks the plan, they were apprehensive, but apparently, they’d been trying to get a contract with the Sublime teddies for a while. They’d been trying to get contracts with many major suppliers, it seemed, judging by the lack of stock around. I thought his dad was going to squash me with a hug when he got the news that they wanted to ship product—and his mom did too, which was nice.

They thanked me, but I’d barely done anything, and they knew it wasn’t going to be an easy stretch. They’d have to pull out all the stops. I didn’t ask questions, but from how Sam had put it, the place was going under in debt, and I really didn’t want to see this place fall down. Sam left in a hurry to get back to school before I could even tell them they needed to keep his grotto going—and in that, I’d found myself a second job.

I took the rest of the day off work, no questions asked. People just assumed it was in relation to my mom. I spent most of that time with Sam’s sister, Rachel, and their aunt, Joanne, with all her questions about the fancy phones and everything. She still owned one of those blocks with buttons and barely any backlighting for the screen.

We sat in the back of the store in the small kitchenette. The group of our moms and my grandma had gone to the café, which gave me some peace from listening to them argue. Rachel had a phone out on the counter, and Joanne placed hers beside it, snickering at the comparison.

“I only call people,” she said. “None of that texting business. It’s not for me. It’s not in my star chart, sweetheart.”

Rachel was actually in charge of trying to market the place, so she knew about what to do, but with no USP—which she understood—she’d had a hard time doing anything but complaining to her aunt about it. We set up some social media accounts they didn’t yet have. They only had a Facebook page and a claimed address on search engines, but no content.

“The world is content now,” I said. “Which means getting people to look at what you’re doing and getting them interested in it.”

“And those teddies, collectibles, things—they’ll do that, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, mostly. But I was also thinking of using Sam.”

She snorted. “Does he know that?” she asked. “Although, I suppose he’d do it if you asked. He’s happier around you, well, all things considered.”

“He already knows,” I said. “I’m thinking, showcase the grotto, but with a shirtless Santa. Because you’ve got to think about it—who buys presents for their kids?”

“Moms,” she immediately said. “But I’m not taking videos of my brother shirtless.”

“Technically, he’ll be in his Santa suit.” I nearly bit my tongue, recalling the way he’d looked in it the night before. “And I think it would go viral. At least, it has the potential to go viral.”

Joanne laughed, circling us. “Does he know he’s viral?” she asked. “I’d assume he’s been to the pharmacist.”

“No, wrong viral,” Rachel said. “He means the way a movie goes viral, and everyone sees it.”

“Anyway. He would have his face obscured, for his job safety,” I said. “Or the Santa beard and such will be enough, but we’ll have to see what he thinks. I mean, he’s always running without his shirt, so it’s not like people won’t see his abs and know who they belong to.”

“Oh, yes,” she laughed.

“I’ve kinda got more ideas,” I whispered, smiling at the thought of Sam in that suit, maybe even writing his list or unboxing a Sublime teddy and then giving it to me—off-camera, of course. I was a behind-the-scenes hand, not for on screen. “But we’ve got time to think. The teddies themselves are a trend, and posting them will be good for business. We just need to make it look less like a ghost town out there.”

Joanne grumbled, both hands landing on my shoulders. “When I was running the shop floor, I’d get it all dressed in tinsel and string lights, and we’d have fake snow.”

And just like that, there was a plan. It was nice to plan something I felt passionate about. Planning the resurrection of a toy store hadn’t been on my wishlist, but now that I was doing it, I was very proud of myself. All we

had to do now was execute the plan and make sure we got a viral clip with Sam—the former, and still very much current, heartthrob of Buttonwood.

* * *

We got home just after four. My mom and grandma had eaten, which saved me work. They had so many questions, it was once more taking me back to when I was a kid and would go on and on about anything and everything—all the questions—and now, that's what they were doing. It wasn't fair. I didn't want to be in charge, or much of an adult, doing it all day.

I just wanted to lounge around now and think about how much more comfortable my bed was back in New York. There was nothing like the way your own bed felt, with all the comfort items. I supposed Sam's bed was a nice alternative, and this bed would do. I wondered if it had become stiff because nobody slept on it, although it was fine when I was working from it, forcing me to stop slouching.

The living room would do. In a onesie, I sat beside Grandma, and we watched *Wheel of Fortune*. It was the type of show that had all of us guessing at the words and answers to questions. It was yet another show they argued over, but this time, I'd been involved. It was fun—not fun when you got an answer wrong, but I wasn't on the show, so public humiliation was still firmly at zero.

An ad break came on, and my mom shuffled around in the armchair with a big grin on her face, the type of grin I knew meant she had questions.

"You know his family has had that store for years," Mom said. "Almost a landmark in town."

"True," Grandma added. "I hope whatever plans you were making save it."

"I hope so too."

"And Sam," Mom said. This was the question, right there, burning to come out. "He's so nice."

"Yeah, he's nice, and a lot of fun."

Grandma gave my arm a tap, pulling me to look at her now. "So, does that mean you're going to come back and live here?"

"Here?" I nearly choked. "Uh, no. It's not in my plans, and it's only been two days." I presented my fingers. "Or three. I don't know. I'm not going to make life-changing decisions based on a few days."

"He's a nice guy," Mom said. "And I want you to be happy."

I remembered those words. She'd said them to me when I came out—although I feared I'd been out before announcing it. The *I want you to be happy* speech, and my dad's hug, calling me champ and telling me he didn't know much about gay stuff, but love is love. I think he'd been coached by my mom at that point. He was always supportive, though.

Sam texted me just as the show came back on, and all eyes were back on the screen.

Thank you for everything you did today. Rachel was telling me you had ideas of me being shirtless and going viral. I don't know much about that, but if you think it's a good idea, then I'm down. Maybe we could talk about it tonight over dinner. Not like last night, but really talk about it. And since I've got your teddy hostage, I think you better do as I say.

He wrote it all in a block of text, followed up with a picture of my teddy in his bed.

Correction. As Daddy says. He quickly followed up with.

I stared at the screen. My heart raced. This was everything I'd wanted: someone to play with me like this, to want me, and not want everyone else as well. And if I could whip something up for these two, then I'd be free to spend time with Sam—and do some hostage negotiation.

They barely noticed me as I smiled at my phone.

I, of course, agreed to have dinner with him—and negotiate the peaceful release of my teddy by whatever means necessary.

My mom and grandma both claimed to still be full from lunch, saying Sam's mom had forced them to eat far more pastries than they knew they should. I knew that was a lie. My mom liked to sample bites, especially pastries, and since she'd been a baker for so many years, she used it as an excuse.

"If you've got to be somewhere, you should go," she said.

"Is it to your boyfriend's house?" Grandma asked.

The playful type of teasing made the inside of my onesie even warmer, and I tried to duck and hide my head inside it. That teasing was something I would've loved to have had as a teen, but hated too. In my heart, I wouldn't have known whether they meant it in a supportive way, like I did now. Sam wasn't my boyfriend. We were just dating.

"I can't leave you two without making sure you've had dinner," I said, looking at them both. "Is this what you had to go through raising me?"

Mom laughed. “Oh, much worse,” she said before flinching at the sudden movement of her arm. “I had your father to deal with as well.”

“Go on,” Grandma said, just far enough away that I knew she wouldn’t be able to prod me. “We know how to soft-boil an egg, and if all else fails, we’ve got a whole drawer filled with takeout menus in the kitchen.”

I rolled my eyes, although neither of them caught it. They were just like me now. It was clear we were related. The nervous bubbles in my belly were surfacing, and as I looked at them both, and they looked at me long enough for them to miss one of the questions asked on the TV, I knew I was going to Sam’s place—even if it was just for my teddy. But mostly because he had a comfy bed and two very nice pillows on his chest.

Upstairs, I repacked the overnight bag with fresh clothes and the correctly dated underwear for the morning. I called Jude, and he was just as giddy as me. We always were when it came to guys, to discovering someone who might fit into the jigsaw puzzle of our lives. It was nice to have his input, even if it was the same as mine. It was another voice.

“*I need to see a picture of him*,” he demanded.

“No. Maybe,” I grumbled, staring into the bag and wondering what else to put in there. “Listen, he’s a great guy, and if it’s serious, you can see him. But it’s not yet, so I’m not going to jinx it.”

“*That’s true. If you like him, let’s not jinx it*.”

We believed that showing someone the guy you were seeing before it was official was a jinx, and it really was, because it meant someone else had an image of them in their mind, and they knew exactly what was going to be lost if it didn’t work out. A Daddy was at stake, but without putting all the pressure on someone taking up that title, he was just a guy. A handsome, strong, and charming guy who got me right out of my pants.

“*I might come through on my way to Maine*,” he said.

“You absolutely should,” I said. “You could stay over, and we could just relax. I order a tea party, stat.”

He laughed. “*Should I bring more of your stuff?*”

“Nah, I’ve still got a suitcase in the trunk with clothes. I think I’m actively avoiding unpacking.”

“*You’re there for like four more weeks, Dash. Unpack, and go spend time with the guy you’re seeing.*”

It filled me with butterfly tingles to hear that. I then told him about the call I'd made earlier to Eric and how I'd been a savior to a toy store in town. I didn't give him the full scoop; it was tedious, and Sam had messaged me again, asking what foods I liked.

On the drive over to his place, I listened to Ty Hartwell—pop-country sort of music, soft and melodic, the type of music that put me at ease. And I needed all the ease I could get to play it cool in front of Sam and remind myself he looked the same but was different from the guy I'd pined over in high school.

I parked behind his car in the driveway and stayed there for a moment, looking into the living room as the orange lamplight glowed in the corner. He must've heard the car, because he opened the front door wearing a blue sweater with a gingerbread man on it that said, "*You can't catch me.*" It was so silly. I loved it.

"Come on," he called to me. "I've got a surprise for you."

And now I wanted to lock myself in. A surprise. I loved knowing what a surprise was before it happened—taking away the essence of a surprise. I grabbed my bag from the passenger seat and readied myself for his surprise, and to stare at his gorgeous, smiling face all night long.

It was the dream.

OceanofPDF.com

14. SAM

I'd explored a lot of the community since coming out and trying to discover where I fit in. I'd explored it all, maybe—okay, perhaps not all of it. I never went too hardcore in some of the clubs with the dark rooms, or big-city saunas with their zoning either.

But I had experimented with being in control, dominant, though I wasn't strict. I could never give the harsh, punishing type of dominance many wanted. My form of domination was rewarding, and I knew from there where I fit. Somehow, through it, I'd shaped parts of my life, knowing how to play with a person's behavior based on what they might get out of it.

Dash was someone I knew what to do with—finally. After thinking about it, I knew just what he wanted. And as he got out of his car, dressed in his adorable onesie with boots a size too big for his feet, stomping through the leftover snow slurry in the driveway, I knew he wanted rewards, nice things, and the comfort and aftercare only a Dom—or Daddy—could give.

I was that Daddy, and more so, I was Santa, the ultimate Daddy, giving out gifts—although maybe not the absentee part of it all, since he only came around once a year.

"What's the surprise?" he immediately asked, shaking his head and staring at me. "You gotta tell me."

"Relax," I said, taking his duffel bag as he walked inside. "You're going to love it. And I've also put the teddy up for ransom." I winked at him.

He planted a hand firmly on my chest and pouted, trying once more. If anything, it was a nice massage-type feel on my chest—definitely something I'd been lacking. Then he hugged me as we walked inside, waddling side to side as he kept hold of me.

"You don't want to know what the ransom amount is?"

He stared up at me and continued to pout, rubbing his bearded chin all over my chest. "If it's not one big hug and a kiss, then it's too much."

Clicking my tongue, I hummed dramatically over the idea. "Well, I'll call it two kisses, and you can have him back. But only because—"

Dash immediately pulled away. "I would've gone to three kisses," he snickered.

“Wait,” I said, and with my foot, I pushed the front door until it clicked into place. “You can’t go in there yet. That’s where your surprise is.”

“I don’t like surprises,” he mumbled, all adorable like.

Something had clicked between us behaviorally, like we’d both come to the conclusion of our roles. And since we had a limited amount of time together, it was probably for the best.

In the lounge area, I’d prepared a small platter of food on a blanket. It was mostly things I’d had to search online about. I’d been to many kids’ parties for my nephew, and since I worked in an elementary school, I had a very clued-in inkling of what I could give Dash. So, on the blanket, there were mini hot dogs in brioche buns, tiny cupcakes, small pastries, sliced red apples, a bowl of popcorn chicken, and a cheese board to finish it off.

Dash was shocked, standing in front of it as he let out the gentlest of whimpers. He pulled me into a hug, and I hugged him back just as hard.

“I love an indoor picnic,” he said.

“Good,” I said, looking at him.

We kissed, and I counted it as one. He was quick to kiss me again, paying off the teddy bear’s ransom. The teddy was still in bed, tucked up in the creases of the duvet. Before we could picnic, Dash revealed more smaller teddies from his bag, clueing me in on what the Sublime teddies looked like. His were small, but he said they made much bigger ones.

I put a YouTube video on the TV and through the surround-sound system, playing orchestral music with the sounds of the outdoors—like summer infiltrating winter with its playful plucks of cello strings and birds cawing sweetly.

“Nobody has ever made me a picnic like this before,” he said, getting ketchup all over his mouth from the hot dogs. “Maybe they have, but not someone like you.”

“You can say it.” I nodded, cleaning his lips with a napkin. “It’s why I did it—as well as a thank-you for helping out my folks. My dad called to thank me too, which I didn’t take, so I’ve passed it to you. The thanks, that is. Apparently, they’ve got a great deal on those teddies. All on consignment. Paying a fee only on what they sell.”

He couldn’t stop smiling, getting more ketchup on his mouth, and as I went to wipe it again, he took my hand. “What can I say again?”

“Well, if you’re a good boy, you’ll know exactly what to say.”

“So, you’re into it, then?”

I nodded. “If it means I get to have fun with it, and with you, then I’m into it.”

“Okay, Daddy.” Dash blushed beet red. He turned his head slightly, shying away, pressing a hand to his cheek. I wanted to feel it.

“This isn’t everything I’ve got prepared,” I said, taking his chin in my hand and turning him to face me, my fingers digging gently into his facial hair, massaging him. “I also wanted to show you some of the old collectible toys I’ve got. I say collectible, but I mean, I collected them in my bedroom as a kid, and I’ve always had a problem throwing things away.”

“Teddies?” he asked, keeping eye contact with me and lolling his head only slightly. “Do you have teddies?”

I nodded. “I think so. I’ll get them out of the attic, and we can see.”

“Yay,” he said. “You know, I was nervous when you said there was a surprise. It’s not that I don’t like getting things, because I do—I love getting things. It’s more being overwhelmed and not being prepared for it.”

“Okay,” I said. “Noted. Next time, I’ll say it’s something you can eat, or something you can cuddle.”

Dash giggled. “You know, you fit nicely into both of those categories.”

I winked, and for a moment, I thought we might jump on each other and make a mess of all the food on the blanket. We didn’t, but the thought was there, like a twinkle in his eye. I caught it, and I wasn’t going to let go.

We ate most of the food, and Dash gave his teddies some as well. Those pieces were then fed to me, so they were gone. It was the first type of meal I was just eating without thinking about macros and protein goals. It was chaos, in the best way possible, and I liked that Dash was bringing it out of me.

We eventually settled into a cuddle on the sofa with white wine on the small end table at the side. Dash referred to it as his adult apple juice—despite it being made from grapes.

“So, those ideas,” I said, stroking a hand through his hair and pushing back the hood of the onesie.

“I thought you spoke to your sister,” he said, glancing up at me.

“Well, she gave me the CliffsNotes version of it,” I told him. “But she didn’t sound as passionate as you do when you describe things. Like

how you wanted me without a shirt in the Santa suit, or how you're going to use my body for views."

He giggled, shuffling his body on me. His hands were on my stomach. I wasn't tensing for abs, and I'd eaten quite a bit, so there was some give, and he quite enjoyed playing with it, jiggling my belly. "You're basically the entire strategy," he said, shuffling until he was on top of me, legs around my waist. "So, there are key areas to marketing, like who your audience is. And since it's Christmas, that audience is parents—moms mostly, traditionally doing the shopping. And you are eye candy. You are the USP. Well, the Sublime teddies are, but you are the town Santa, and people are gonna want to see it."

I nodded along to everything he said with the biggest smile on my face. "I can work with that," I said. "And you're not worried some guy is going to come into the store and ask me to be his Daddy, are you?"

He snorted. "Assuming they mean it like I mean it, then no, because look at me." He giggled himself right to my chest, placing his chest there in an attempt to motorboat me over the sweater. "This thing between us is a lot of fun, and obviously, if some guy hit on you, then maybe I'd feel a type of way. But you actually hit on me, so it means more."

I pushed a hand under his chin, trying to get him to look at me. "You're cute," I said. "And everyone in town basically knows about us now."

"Already?" he groaned, becoming muffled against my chest.

"It's a small town, and we were practically glued to each other earlier," I said, my fingers now trailing up the side of his face until they were in his soft hair. "But we're more glued to each other now."

"I like being glued to you," he mumbled. "It's a choice." He buried his head in my chest once again, blowing a raspberry against my sweater. "Take this off."

"I guess you wanna see what you're working with," I said. "You had your preview last night, of me shirtless in that Santa suit."

He giggled, pushing his hands up from beneath my sweater, forcing it up to my chest to reveal the white T-shirt beneath. "It's going to work," he said. "I can't keep my hands off you. I don't think the internet will either."

"I'm just glad the grotto stays," I told him, letting him push his head up beneath the sweater and pull it down over his head, stretching it to capacity. "You good in there?"

“Smells like you,” he said, and once more, his head was nestled against my chest. I tensed it, making sure there was something of a cushion for him. “And yes, the internet will love you. Maybe you’ll have offers lining up outside the door for you to play their Santa.”

“I’m only Santa here,” I said, pulling the sweater back, peek-a-booing him. “One town, one Santa, and one—elf. Is that what you are? Helping me.”

He giggled. “I’ll be your elf.”

“Good boy.”

His body let out a ticklish jolt against mine. “Do I get an outfit?”

“Are you serious?” I asked, trying to look him in the eye. “Because I do actually need an elf. Caroline usually does it, but she’s grabbed more shifts at the sports bar and doesn’t have the time.”

Dash’s face turned serious for a moment. “Wait. Are you—yeah, I’ll be an elf for you. As long as I’m on your nice list.”

“I can’t imagine you being naughty,” I said, tapping his nose with a finger. “Maybe I can, actually.”

He snickered. “I’m always a good boy for Santa, because Santa gives me presents and throws me tea parties. You know, if I’d known it was going to be a tea party, I—” He froze, looking off into the distance.

“Go on.”

“So, my friend and I do these tea parties, and we dress up as princesses, and we just have fun. But I didn’t bring the princess dress with me, so we can’t do that.”

I let out a frustrated groan, reaching out and giving his ass a squeeze. “I bet you look cute in a princess dress.”

“It’s not totally my thing, but it’s fun, and life is—or should be—all about having fun, right?”

“Right.”

“But I do love to dress up,” he said with the biggest smile. “So, where’s the elf costume?”

The elf costume was not with me, and I doubted he would fit into the one Caroline had, since it was a skirt with stockings and some corset thing. But there was another elf costume somewhere, probably at the toy store in a closet or a box.

After we had our cuddle moment on the sofa, I was tasked with the promise of getting my box from the attic space. There were plenty of boxes

up there, and Dash didn’t want to go up with me. I didn’t blame him; the light had blown at some point.

In the process of taking boxes out of the attic, we uncovered the Christmas decorations. I didn’t usually decorate until two weeks before the day—that’s when most of the town came out of the Thanksgiving hole they’d buried themselves in with leftover turkey.

“Do you have a tree?” Dash asked, rummaging through the box on the floor with his legs wrapped around it. “In my apartment, we have string lights up all year. In the kitchen archway, there are these rainbow ones that twinkle, and I could stare at them all day.”

Pulling the third box out, I placed it beside him. “Those might be the color-changing ones. I know I’ve got some. And this is the box.” I hadn’t labeled them, which was my own mistake. There were at least five more boxes upstairs, but this one had a teddy in it. “Ta-da!” I pulled the teddy out.

Dash gasped. “That’s so cute.”

“I don’t remember his name, but I used to snuggle this guy every night,” I said, something I might’ve found too soul baring to say at one point in my life. “Oh. He’s called Hubert.”

“Hubert,” he said, all dramatic with a point. “Can I hold him?”

I handed him over and revealed the other teddies inside the box, alongside my action figures, toy cars, and an old edition of Monopoly. This had been put in here to keep the family from arguing. I immediately set that back in the box.

“He’s so old and soft,” Dash said, gently rubbing his fingers across its button eyes.

“I almost thought an elf costume could’ve been hiding in here,” I said. “And I’d probably best leave the rest of the boxes upstairs.”

“What else is in them?”

“High school stuff,” I said with a shrug. “Just things I’ve kept in case I want to remember something.”

He smirked. “Like your letterman jacket?”

“No,” I said, watching his smirk vanish. “I keep that in the closet.” And he smiled, much bigger. “It’s a special thing. Can’t have it up there, potentially being eaten by moths and whatnots.” Dash didn’t say a word; he just stared, waiting for me to ask him—because I knew what he wanted. I think it’s what we both wanted. “Do you want to wear it?” I asked.

“Because traditionally, a guy on the team might have his partner wear his, and—”

“Yes, yes.” He stood so quickly, he kicked the heavy box of decorations. “I wanna wear it. Please.”

“Okay, wait there, then, and close your eyes,” I said. “And keep them closed.”

I grabbed the jacket from a garment bag, feeling the fabric again after so many years. It was still like it had been. I walked around Dash, hearing his heavy breathing and the loud gulp as I draped it across his shoulders. The yellow-and-red team-color stripes ran down the arms, with white and black bands.

“Keep them closed,” I whispered right by his ear, and with a hand on his arm, I led him through the minefield of boxes that had exploded across the lounge floor.

Standing in front of the bedroom mirror, I thought he might cry. He opened his eyes; they were pink now, and he choked on a slight breath. I placed an arm around his shoulder, looking at us in that mirror as he also held onto Hubert. My brain wanted to label us a couple, but it could only be temporary, unless Dash decided to leave his glamorous job and live in Buttonwood again.

I shed a tear, wiping it before he saw. “Dust,” I said, puffing out a breath. “Maybe I need to clean this place better.”

“If I wasn’t wearing a onesie, we’d look totally cute,” he said. “I mean, we do, but if I were in regular clothes, I might even think we were in high school, going steady. Or whatever people said then.”

I kissed him on the cheek. “We don’t have then, but we do have now. So let’s make it count.”

OceanofPDF.com

15. DASH

I'd officially given in to the town, to the temptations of it, to the spirit of the season. I'd given in more than I wanted to admit. Sam was perfect. He was everything I'd imagined he would be, but better—and on my team, instead of what I'd thought was just a hopeless want. But that was back when I was a teen, and like everything when I was a teen, it meant nothing but stress.

Sam took that stress away with a hug, with his hands trailing down my exposed back in his bed. Lying on my belly in his bed, completely naked, he went all the way down from my shoulders until he reached my ass, palming it with both hands and giving it a shake that shook my entire body.

"I like this," he said before tickling a cheek with his facial hair and then giving me a bite. "I like this one a lot."

"You gotta even it out," I told him, turning slightly to see him hunched over me like he was getting ready to pounce. "With a bite." I giggled.

"A bite," he said, snapping his teeth and laughing. "Tell me if it's too hard."

It tickled. I liked it. I liked anything he was doing to my body. In fact, as long as he was touching my body, then I was very much okay with it. I wiggled my ass in the direction of his face, and he gave it an equal bite, leaving a patch of saliva where his tongue had licked me.

Sam then spread my legs, turning me into a triangle where he was only interested in getting to the pointed end. "Good boy," he said, and I nearly snapped my thighs around him in excitement. But he was strong, and he had a firm grip on my thighs, pushing, spreading, stretching. It was a nice burn, and I couldn't really fight back against it.

"What's my reward?" I asked, looking over my shoulder, a quick glance before burying my head in the pillow and giggling.

Sam swiped his hand under me, pulling my dick down so it faced in his direction. "I'm your reward," he said, and something—maybe his mouth or tongue—touched the tip of my dick. I ground my hips into his comfy bed, giggling into the pillow harder now. "Keep doing that," he said. "And maybe I'll let you sit on my lap."

"Yeah," my muffled voice groaned out to him. "You'll let me."

His tongue was suddenly in use, tracing my hard dick all the way up until it reached my ass. He spread my cheeks, squeezing them as he pulled, making the perfect space for his face to go. My ass, his face, it was practically written in the stars: the stars of my dreams, the ones I'd looked up at most nights as a teen when he was on my mind. And he was on my mind all the time now, and I was seeing stars from how tightly I screwed my eyes shut.

Then he was eating my ass, devouring it. I moaned out everything I could from my lungs into that pillow, and on each inhale, I took in the way it smelled just like him: the sweet musk of his body, like a prize I'd won, like a teddy bear I'd collected from a carnival. All that excitement inside me came out in heavy moans, and he continued, his tongue like a rocket, spreading me open and wide.

"Jesus," I let out, looking back at him.

"No Jesus," he said, lifting his head from my ass. "Call me Daddy."

And I practically slammed my ass right back into his face, making sure those words that came from his lips were also working my ass and taint. It sent a fizzle right through me. For a second, I thought I was about to come hands-free. I didn't, but the fizzling feeling stayed, like my body now carried its own electrical force.

"I thought I was gonna come," I said, gasping at him.

"Not yet, you're not," he said, swiping a hand back through his hair, all the sweat pulling it back like it did when he was on the football team and would take off his helmet and swipe his hair back. My body tensed and shook for a second, letting out a second gasp he could savor every moment of. "On your back."

I followed his orders as he got off the bed and opened the nightstand drawer for lube and condoms. I watched his every move and motion as he stood there in front of me, completely naked, my eyes not knowing where to look or what to stare at. His body was—and always had been—sculpted from marble. The muscle, the abs, the V-shaped cum gutters on display, like they were taking me on a trip down the skin-brick road to see the wizard who would tell me I wasn't in New York anymore.

"I can't get you out of my mind," he said. "And maybe it's because your people always talked about you."

I snickered. "Thanks for not mentioning my mom there. But I—"

“Okay, okay, so she always talks about you, and part of me wonders if she did this whole thing just for us to meet,” he whispered, climbing onto the bed with his knees, his dick chubbed into the curve toward his thigh.

“Can we not talk about that while you’re—like that?”

He laughed. “I’m sorry, but you are so incredible to look at. Every part,” he said, stroking his hand down my side over all my glorious little bumps, only slightly tickling. “I want to touch every part of you.”

I took his cock in my hand, jerking it slightly. He gestured with the lube, but I shook my head. Moving around the bed until I was face to face with it, still on my side. I wanted a taste—another taste, a taste to remember, where my tongue could rub against the underside of his dick, gently, softly, releasing precum into my mouth.

Sam climbed over me, forcing me onto my back, and sucked my dick. His hips moved in a swift, ocean-like motion as he fucked my face with his dick, and I didn’t have to do any of the work—just enjoy how deep he went.

He exercised all his strength against me, muscles popping out of his arms like he was trying to show off. But he didn’t need to show off for me anymore. I was in. I was here, waiting for him to show me what I’d been missing since he dropped me off at my car that morning.

After softly kissing me, he pulled away, condom on his dick, lubed all the way down his shaft. He spread my legs from where I lay, tapping his dick against mine. If he wanted a sword fight, then I’d lose on purpose—anything to be pinned down by him. I was never sporty or involved in whatever they did in sports, huddled and smashing their bodies against each other. Harder, harder, he pushed his dick inside me. No resistance, the lube just welcomed him in, and as my head pressed back, I forgot I was at the opposite side of the bed with no pillow to catch me.

“Is that good for you?” he asked, and without prompting, he pushed a pillow under my head. “Not too quick. I want to make it special for you.”

Both hands out, I hooked them around him and pulled him into my chest, where our faces met and our tongues wrestled. My legs wrapped around his lower back, and I pressed and pressed, guiding him into rhythm—or he was letting me.

A minute later, we rolled over for me to really ride him.

“Is that what you want, Daddy?” I asked, moving up and down, making little motions with my hips as I rode him.

“Keep doing that, like a good boy,” he said. “And I’ll make sure you get a nice reward.”

“How about a nice load?” I said, really going in with the movements, feeling his hands on my hips, up my body, then down, right where it mattered, on my dick. One hand was under my balls, his other hand still slick with lube, massaged the head of my dick. Little precum drops came up. He was slow with it, taking his thumb to his mouth and licking it clean.

“You’re delicious,” he said. “How can you be so goddamn delicious?” His voice became gravelly and strong, taking back the control he’d handed over. This time, he swept me up, his dick still in me like a tether. He carried me with a huff and placed me against the bedroom wall, where he fucked me and the entire house shook.

I was used to being quiet, controlled, and muffling my moans at home. Sam wanted them, like he wanted to run a hole right through the wall, right through me. He was balls deep—there couldn’t have been much more dick for him to put inside. Each thrust was like he was trying to merge with me, and I leaned into it, kissing his neck, leaving small love bites like tiny stars on his skin.

He carried me from the wall to the sofa in the living room where we’d been fumbling around together. He sat on the edge of the sofa while I was firmly planted on his dick, swaying my hips and thrusting as he leaned back slightly and stared at my body, smiling, reaching out, touching all the way down the creases and folds in my skin until he got to my dick and started to jerk me off.

“All over me,” he said. “I want it.”

I didn’t have to do much. I was on the edge of releasing, and with his permission, it freed me from the effort of holding it, saving it, staving off the orgasm like I needed to savor the moment, the memory. Everything about this was being recorded in my mind.

Throbbing ropes of come hit his torso, thick as they slipped down his chest and rested in his tensed abdominals I’d stared at it so intensely. I shook slightly; the moment had made me tense up and jerk.

“Good boy,” he said, and my dick continued to throb. He wrapped an arm around my back, lifting and carrying me, flexing how strong he was. I couldn’t melt in his arms anymore, like I had a second load in the barrel waiting to coat his abs pressed firmly against my belly.

“I don’t think I’ve come like that in ages,” I whispered—not even when we jerked together, not even the night before when we first experienced each other’s bodies.

He took me to the bathroom and into the shower, his back against the tile, cooing at the cold. “You said you wanted to taste it,” he said, both hands slipping down to my ass, spreading them wider to the point it hurt. His dick pulsed in rhythm with the throb in my dick. “Can I—”

“Come on my face,” I said, tensing my hole for him. “Like icing on a sugar cookie.”

“Mm-hm. I think you’re spicier than a sugar cookie,” he said, lifting me off his dick.

The moment I had full mobility of my legs, they felt weird. I leapt back into his arms for his body heat and control over me. “Whatever I am,” I said, pulling at the condom, tight against his hard dick. “I want to be yours.”

Kneeling on the tile, I opened my mouth as he jerked his dick, my tongue out like it was ready to collect fresh snowflakes as they fell from the sky. The only difference was that Sam was my sky, and the snowflakes he was creating had more taste to them.

“Come on me, Daddy,” I said, pouting, my tongue dripping saliva down my chin.

Sam pushed my head back, slapping the tip of his dick on my tongue. He pulled it away, then down my throat before he continued to jerk it, so quick I thought he might yank it off. And then he came. The first spurt hit the glass partition of the shower, then he directed it, pumping across my cheek and mouth. I placed my lips around it, taking in the last drops on my tongue and down my throat, while Sam leaned back against the tile, gasping and telling me not to stop.

Milked for all he had in him, he then dropped to his knees right beside me and kissed me, his tongue slipping between my lips, his hands on my head, massaging his fingers through my hair.

“Perfect,” he whispered. “You’re just perfect.” He nuzzled his nose against mine. “Now, I’m gonna clean up all nice and get us ready for bed. Did you bring your toothbrush?”

I nodded, unable to wipe the aching smile from my lips. “It’s in my bag.”

“Gold star for you,” he said, kissing my forehead.

Taking his hand before he could move, I stared at him. “We don’t joke about gold stars,” I said. “Do you have any with holographic foil on them?”

“Baby, I’m a teacher. I have every sticker you could ever imagine,” he said, winking at me. “You’ll get another star after you let me clean you up. And you can clean me, if you want.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice to touch you,” I said. “And you don’t even have to give me a star for it. I’d do that for free.”

He stood, making a kissy face at me. “But now I know you run on gold stars, I’ll use it.” He winked at me again, and I was in heaven. My heart couldn’t pound any harder, and if it did, I’d be in the back of an ambulance needing CPR.

Sam was really going to do this for me: be Daddy and play, explore something, even if it was only for a limited amount of time. I supposed I was going to do it too, to find something fun while I was in town. But the way this was going, I was only going to hurt my own feelings.

OceanofPDF.com

16. SAM

Life had a strange way of throwing people into your life and then making every waking thought be consumed by ideas of what life might've been like if you'd met them earlier. What would have happened if his mom had forced him up here for the winter holidays and we'd met? Although, I doubted it would ever have happened, given that he avoided this place like the plague.

I'd worn my way into Dash—from the way he'd looked like he didn't want to be here in Buttonwood to now being a part of the town in the way the town made everyone become a part of it. I supposed he'd never left, not really. When you were from here, we all wanted to help each other out, and he had, especially my parents, and now me, helping me get the grotto back at the store.

We both woke early the following morning, and after a large pot of coffee, a whole plate of scrambled eggs, and a couple of not-wanting-to-leave kisses, we had to part. Although I'd offered him the place to stay and work if he needed to, he insisted on being back home for his mom and grandma.

His cousin, Nina, was in my ear as soon as I arrived at school. She pulled at my arm, swinging it around hers and forcing me with her to my empty classroom.

"Spill," she said.

With my leather laptop bag in one hand, thermos of coffee in the other, and my jacket over my arm, I heaved them both onto the desk and sighed. "They're letting me have the grotto back at the store," I said, playing coy.

She scoffed, sitting in my chair and spinning. "No, not that. You know exactly what I'm asking you about, Samuel."

"Samuel," I snorted. "Come on, I'm not someone to kiss and tell."

"So, if you're kissing, then you're together," she said, stopping her spin abruptly with a hand whack against the desk. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

I looked her up and down. "That's not what I'm worried about. People seem to be talking a lot about it anyway."

“Just a little.” She demonstrated with her fingers. “But come on, are you two together? And will I be required to attend any double dates?”

“Do you want to double date?” I asked.

Nina squealed, smacking her feet on the ground. “I would be honored to double date.”

“Then I think Rebecca and her husband would be a great fit.” I winked at her. “Also, did I smell fresh pastries when I came in? I didn’t go on a run, so I’m not sure if I’m allowed to reward myself, but—” I smirked to myself, knowing last night had been a workout, so I did, in fact, deserve a pastry.

“You know what I meant,” she said.

She followed me into the staff lounge, where other teachers were eyeing and smiling at me more than usual, it seemed. I tried to brush it off, but Nina was right there, giggling to herself like she couldn’t keep anything to herself. Usually, I liked a bit of gossip, but not when that gossip was about me.

On a large table against the wall, right by a nearly half-empty pot of coffee, was a plate of pastries. I eyed them up, then eyed the large school-year calendar with all its dates and events.

“Are you ready for the Christmas grotto next weekend?” Marcia, the principal, asked as she walked in, smiling at me just like everyone else.

“Of course. I’m already ready,” I said with a wink.

“And do we have any volunteers to help with that?” she asked, announcing it to the lounge. All eyes averted from our gazes now. It wasn’t really too much of a surprise that they turned away. It was a weekend, and we were getting closer to Christmas.

“It’s—” I said, biting my tongue to keep from mentioning him, but I wanted to. “I think I have someone who could help. And someone to be Santa’s elf.”

Nina snickered, tugging my arm as I reached for a pastry. “It’s Dash, right?” she asked, and now everyone wanted to know.

“Oh, well, then, if we’ve got someone. But Sam, make sure he’s got a clean record,” Marcia said.

“He’s my cousin,” Nina said. “You know, Dash. Also called Jake.”

She laughed, raising a hand to her head. “Oh gosh, Dash Dashofy. I haven’t had my coffee yet. But it is policy for anyone working near the

children to have a clean record, so if you could . . .” She took one of the pastries and skirted out, the clack of her heels following her.

I took a bear claw, my mouth salivating over it.

“The beard is coming in nicely this year,” she said. “Although maybe Dash’s beard is bigger. You could be his elf.”

To that, I laughed. “I’m Santa. Now, if you’ve got any more questions, put them down in writing so I can ignore them.” I bit a chunk out of the pastry, still warm.

Nina swatted my arm and laughed. “We’re nearly family now,” she said. “So I guess I’ll help with the grotto next weekend if you need an extra set of hands.” She wiggled them at me.

In my classroom, I sat and stared out at all the empty seats. I knew once my class was here, I’d be occupied with all their questions—thankfully, all of them about colors, shapes, and animals, things I could answer and look into for them. Like the biggest drama of the day could be about what a panda ate, and reassuring Jerome that they weren’t going to eat him.

I wanted to text Dash, just to ask if he had a background check, and to say I’d volunteered him to work next weekend with me at the school. I’d assumed he wouldn’t mind, considering he was here and we’d be spending time together. Plus, he had agreed to be my elf, after all, and that was a big undertaking. He’d be repaid for all the work—with whatever our bodies decided was adequate payment.

* * *

That afternoon, after teaching, I ran and I ran until my calves burned. It was a routine I’d missed a day or two of. Running was something I did to clear my mind and also occupy it with a single thought, usually about where I was running and how long I’d been doing it for. But Dash was also there, and I was *dashing* all the way around town.

It was an hour of running before I reached home, and rain came down in sheets, thicker than usual, mixed with snow, turning into slurry on the ground. I laughed, standing in the doorway as I panted for breath. The neighbors across the road were staring at me as they got out of their cars, and their kids raced inside with their school bags over their heads. They had two teens. Most everyone in town had kids, and sometimes I felt left out. I

didn’t know if I wanted kids. The truth was, even after all the time spent in my head, I didn’t know what I wanted.

I pulled my phone from the strap on my arm and closed the front door. Dash had texted. I’d kinda felt it buzz on my arm earlier, but I’d been in focus mode. We’d been texting each other throughout the day. He had a recent background check, since I hadn’t realized he worked with kids in some marketing-strategy focus-group thing.

My mom wants you to come over for dinner tonight. Dash sent.

I also want you to come over for dinner, but just the two of us. I think she wants another show of muscle like you demonstrated the other night cutting into that chicken.

That put a huge smile on my face, because of course I wanted to go. It wasn’t like my folks were inviting me for dinner. They’d updated me on their issues and were still in chaos mode, spiraling about the store potentially closing. They’d been given Marketing 101 from Dash, and without him there to hold their hands through the videos my sister was taking, they’d gone back into spiral mode. I wasn’t letting Dash know that. I wasn’t going to ask him for more favors; he had enough work.

I called him as I stripped out of my sweaty, wet clothes, throwing them into the laundry basket in the bathroom.

“I’m sure you’ll get sick of me soon,” I said.

“*That’s how you say hello?*” he asked. “*And here I was, wondering if you had any flaws.*”

I laughed. “It wasn’t intentional. Hello. Hi. How are you?”

He giggled softly down the phone, probably away from his mom, trying not to be heard. It felt sneaky and naughty, since I was naked, staring at myself in the glass on one side and the mirror in front of me.

“So, if I come over, what’s for dinner?” I asked.

“*Mm, I don’t think we thought that far*,” he said.

“We? So, it’s a joint task force to get me over?” I asked. “Nina continued to ask me all sorts of questions. Has she got to you too?”

His giggle this time was contained with a hand to his mouth. “*She came over, and she’s still downstairs*,” he said. “*I didn’t say anything, but my mom did. And then she said I should be Santa because my beard is bigger.*”

My voice turned low and gravelly. “If you want to talk bigger and thicker, I’m pretty sure I’ve got you beat,” I whispered.

“*We’re not talking beards anymore, are we?*”

“You tell me. What are we talking about?”

His gulp was audible. “*Are you coming over for dinner? And are you taking me home with you tonight?*”

I glanced through to the bedroom, the bed a mess from where we’d been rolling around in it together, neither of us wanting to get up out of it. “I think you might have left some things here. You’ll need to come collect them, and maybe the rain is too thick, too heavy, too much for you to handle, so you’ll have to stay the night.”

He whimpered. “*We’re not talking rain, are we?*”

“We’ll have to find out,” I said, my hand on my dick, one clench, just a single squeeze—a single throb in return, my eyes closed. “What time do you want me?”

“*Now*,” he said in a snap.

I didn’t know what to say to that, I just let out a heavy breath. I wished he was here right now to welcome me in after my run, to see me all worked up with nowhere to put all that extra energy. Like a sprint to the finish line, I was ready to come—and he wasn’t here for it, but he was trying his hardest to tempt it out of me over the phone.

“*But for dinner, let’s say seven. Is that okay?*”

I breathed deeply through my nose. He didn’t know what he did to me—or he did, and enjoyed it, like a tease. “I’ll be there, and you, get your ass ready to come home with me.”

“*Yes, Daddy.*”

“Good boy.”

He let out a throaty grumble before a voice in the distance called out to him, and he had to go. Just as well, my dick had become hard, and I refused its invitation to play. I’d reserved that right for Dash. Claiming him as my good boy, my body was now his playground, and I had to honor that.

* * *

Dinner was bolognese, which was messy—and no *Lady and the Tramp* moment, despite his mom asking for it. I still questioned whether or not she’d done this to set us up, which she laughed off, and so did we, because if she had, then maybe we should be thanking her. It was, however, just for Christmas, but everyone deserved joy and happiness over the holidays, even temporarily.

We got back to my house just after ten. Dash brought a cross-shoulder messenger bag and his duffel bag, nearly bursting at the seams. He emptied it out on the bed: teddies and clothes, onesies—a lot of them. His other bag had his work laptop, because tomorrow he was taking me up on the offer to work from my place.

We stripped, and after being stuffed with food, we got into comfy clothes. Dash even offered me a onesie, but I ran hot; a onesie would be a sauna. I wore shorts and a T-shirt while he got comfy in a navy-blue dotted onesie.

I hugged him tight, arms around him like I wished to fuse him in place. I sniffed at his hair, then kissed his temple. “I wanted to do this to you all evening,” I said.

Dash laid his head on my chest. “You’re making things hard,” he whispered.

“Are we talking feelings, or—”

Moving his head, he stared up at me. “You know what I mean.”

I nodded. “It’s a new thing. We don’t have to make any decisions. Even if everyone else is pushing us to label this, and—” I shook my head, not wanting to even finish my thought. “We’re good being us for now.”

“And what we are is—” He snickered, pushing his head against my chest. “Santa and elf.”

“We still need to sort you out an elf costume,” I said. “There’s a great place in town. They sell all types of costumes, or rentals. Maybe we could go tomorrow—together?”

“Buying or renting,” he whispered. “The difference between me staying or going.”

“Or we don’t have to decide right away, and that’s still okay.” I kissed his head again. “Want some cocoa? I’ve been craving something sweet.” The topic changed, and I waited on his response to know if it had been successful.

He giggled. “If you want sweet, we can play.”

“Oh, I’ll make sure to eat you later,” I told him, chomping at the space near his ear, sending his head deeper, like he was trying to go down on me.

“You have sprinkles and marshmallows still?”

“And more gold stars.”

He shot back up.

The gold stars didn’t have a home to go to yet, but I had an idea as to where he wanted them. He was looking at the ceiling, like they were already there. It would require a ladder to reach, but it was on my mind now, and I’d make sure to do it before he asked, as a surprise—or just preempting his wants.

In the living room, we cuddled up with our feet sharing the ottoman. A movie played on the TV that we weren’t watching, and hot cocoa went cold on the end tables. Our bodies entangled with each other, kissing and groping at each other, occasionally taking a break because his mom had really gone all out stuffing us with spaghetti. So, we caught clips of the movie here and there and sips of our cocoa at different stages: hot, warm, cold, and practically an iced drink.

Dash eventually fell asleep in my arms, and I carried him to bed, laying him among the sea of teddies he’d thrown everywhere. I joined him, covering him in the teddies from my side of the bed, not wanting to squish any of them. He then cuddled up to me in bed, like he’d pretended to be asleep just to be carried, and I had to give him credit for that. It was adorable.

He was adorably perfect, and I didn’t want to sleep just so I could be in awe of him.

OceanofPDF.com

17. DASH

For as long as I could remember, relationships fell apart around me because I couldn't compromise on a part of the relationship I thought was a deal breaker: play. Being in adult mode all the time was a serious place to be, where you had to think about money, rent, utilities, and adding to that, performance reviews.

I could never be with someone who, after a long day of being an adult, didn't want to decompress by pretending, by roleplaying, by doing something that allowed us to be truly free. At least, to cosplay freedom. And I hated to admit it, but there was something about Sam that made me feel all the ways I'd ever wanted to feel. Adding in the fact that he was a high-school crush, and now he was the literal town Santa Claus with a family who owned a toy store—the signs were there, and I was a big fan of signs.

Sam woke before me, and I woke to the smell of brewing coffee and something being cooked in a skillet. I inhaled deeply, punching my arms out in the duvet, my hand hitting the wall and absolutely terrifying me.

Rolling around in the teddies, I realized the space Sam should've been—five minutes ago—wasn't even warm anymore. I stumbled out of bed in a onesie up to my waist, the arms wrapped around me and my bare torso on show, immediately cold as I left the bed.

"Morning, sleepy," Sam said, standing in a pair of tight Lycra shorts with his hair back and wrapped in a bandana. "Just waking up?" He flipped bacon in the sizzling pan. "Or did I wake you when I left for my run?"

So, it was sweat all over him. I stared, trying not to look like a feral animal as I licked my lips at him. "Just woke up. What time is it?" I walked toward him, and he gestured for me to sit at the table.

"I've got about thirty minutes before I need to leave for work," he said. "But you're working from here today, right?"

I nodded, staring at him as I took my seat. "Yeah." The word drifted from my lips. "And then I'll go see my mom at lunch." More than anything, they'd wanted me out of their hair. Again, it made me think this was their plan the entire time, and if so, well, I wasn't going to be mad about it.

Sam pulled a pancake stack from the oven and placed it in the middle of the table. "They're made with banana, oats, and the usual." He

pressed a hand against my shoulder. “I don’t want to get all my sweat on you.”

My brow turned into an immediate furrow. “Um, yes. Get it all over me.”

“As you wish,” he said, pressing his head to mine and kissing my cheek. “I’ve got coffee, and there’s juice in the fridge if you want that too.”

“Apple?”

“Orange.”

My eyes pinched together as I stared. “But apple is so much nicer.”

“Then maybe we should buy an orchard,” he said, shrugging his ass off in those tight pants. I hadn’t even been able to properly ogle his bulge. My mind was far too preoccupied with him saying *we* should buy an orchard, and also the breakfast.

It was a nice breakfast setup, and I couldn’t believe just how lucky I was. It was probably something I would’ve taken a picture of and shown Jude, but I didn’t want to be on my phone for even a single second and waste it not looking at Sam’s gorgeous body or the way he could wolf down a short stack of pancakes like that.

“Any ground rules you want me to follow while I’m here today?” I asked, pouring syrup over the last quarter of pancake left on my plate.

“Other than making sure you get a lot of work done, I’m not sure,” he said.

“What if I—” I paused, suppressing a smile on my lips.

“Go on,” he said, countering my fork with his fork as I reached for my mouth with it. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“What if I wanted to go through your underwear drawer?”

He winked at me. “That’s approved,” he said, pulling his fork away from mine. “As long as you’re wearing the correct underwear of the day.”

Still shirtless at the table in my onesie, I currently had no underwear on. “Well, what if I’m not wearing any?”

“Then I’d say getting dressed is a rule, for being at work,” he said. “Although, if I’m being honest with you right now, I wish we didn’t have to work and we could stay in all morning. That would be fun, right?”

I played footsie with him under the table. “Don’t tease me like that,” I said. “Yeah, it would be nice. Obviously, it would be nice, but you’ve got a super-important job, and I’ve got to figure out market placement for some soda.”

He laughed. “You make it sound like you hate the stuff.”

My eyes rolled. “Not hate. And they’ve been good to me, letting me work from home, letting me have free soda—the sugar-free ones. I was drinking way too many of them at one point.”

“See, that’s cute,” he said. “I get free stuff too. Sometimes they draw pictures of me, and then they’ll have me hang them up on the wall.”

I looked around; his walls were pretty bare. “Uh—”

“At school,” he said.

“Then maybe I should draw you some for here,” I said, feeling the excitement in my belly.

“You and me?” Sam’s foot control was much greater than mine, which made sense considering how many yards he used to run as a QB, and now before I even woke up. He pushed it up between my legs, but before he could get any further, the alarm on his watch beeped. “Balls. Okay, you eat, and don’t drink all the coffee. I need to fill my thermos.” He skittered out of the chair, and I almost toppled out of my chair staring at his body in all its glory.

Once Sam was off to work, I went back to the bedroom and lay in bed, rolling around in it like an animal, trying to get as much of him on me as possible. I also had the benefit of not needing to open my work laptop for another hour.

I proceeded to text Jude, who insisted on a video call, so I threw on a T-shirt and gave him a guided tour of the house. It was such a nice house that we both oohed and aahed over everything I pointed out, and then I sat on the sofa where a balled-up blanket from the night before was left.

“He said maybe we should buy an orchard,” I told him. “Obviously, the context was—”

“*In how much apple juice you consumed?*” Jude knew me too well. “*I could figure that much out. I live with you. I hope that’s still true. Live, not lived.*”

“Relax, I’m not moving in,” I said, despite feeling incredibly comfortable in his space and around his things. There were still boxes he’d brought out from the attic, pushed to the side wall near the thermostat. I got up to show him Sam’s trophies and high-school pictures. “You’re not going to believe he was a QB unless I show you proof that he was.”

Jude laughed. “*I’m actually jealous of you*,” he said. “*And I will be making a pit stop on my way to make sure you’re not just squatting in some*

poor man's house."

"I don't know what it is about him, but he's making me like this place again," I said, throwing myself down on the sofa, the phone flying around until it slipped down the side of the couch. "Oh god. Hold on. I'm coming."

All I could hear was Jude pretending to be stuck, like I'd trapped him. I couldn't leave New York because it would mean leaving my best friend, princess nights, lots of wine and cheese, and swiping freely on each other's dating apps.

"Once you meet Sam, you'll understand why all of this has me the way I am," I said once the phone was back in my hand.

"*He's got you dickmatized to the nth degree*," Jude said. "*Anyway, I best go. I need to buy milk—which is usually your job.*"

"I bought it before I left," I laughed.

"*I know. I'm just mad I forgot*," he laughed back at me.

And we were codependent on each other. I didn't know where that sat in all the rules, but it had to go somewhere high on the list of reasons. But the reasons to want to stay and explore this with Sam was its competing list, and on it was Daddy, Santa outfit, and correctly predicted: that dick.

I got dressed in a blue checkered shirt, not done up completely and definitely not ironed. I kept the onesie on at the bottom around my waist, with the correct day-of-the-week underwear on. It made me smile to know they would probably be checked later on, as I was gunning for another gold star in my good-boy book.

Work was more of the same: answering emails, tuning into video-call meetings where I nodded, smiled, and took notes on marketing pitches to take to my superior, who then allocated the funds if they were okayed.

All I could really focus on was Sam, and then how I'd thought about going to check on my mom at lunch—which was impossible, given Sam had driven me here. A blessing in disguise, but it didn't stop me from worrying about them.

My lunch was then consumed while wandering around the house, then staring out the window at the snow while chowing on a pastrami sandwich and a sleeve of cookies. I refused the OJ in the fridge, staring at the perfect spot where apple juice would go if he'd had it, like I was manifesting—because I was big on that.

I'd managed to clean, and used that as even more reason to look around. For a second, after looking inside the gym room, thoughts of potentially picking up a weight or trying to run on the machine whirred through me, like that had ever been part of what made me.

Clearly, I'd become bored with looking over content for work and waiting on Daddy Sam to come through the door and sweep me off my feet. I knew he could—he'd carried me to bed the night before, and more than that, he'd fucked me against a few walls. Maybe it was a good thing they didn't have pictures on them, otherwise they could've dropped.

I had cartoons on the TV and a blanket over me, with my laptop near idle, when Sam came through the front door, the fresh snowy air billowing in behind him. I threw my laptop on the ottoman and jumped up, racing to the front door around the wall to see him shivering, pulling at his thick coat and scarf.

"Missed me?" he asked, yanking the thick beanie from his head, making a mess of his hair.

"Nope," I snickered. "Just wanted to know who was coming in."

He opened his arms to me. "Then you won't want this hug I'm about to give you."

I pouted, blinking at him. "Gimme, gimme."

We were entangled in that embrace for minutes. He gave all the cool, outside snow air, and I gave him the warmth he was about to kiss right out of me, it seemed. "I've missed you," he whispered in my ear. "I've also missed the memo that said you were cleaning the entire place. You've been a really good boy, then. I'll have to calculate the stars on this one." He winked at me like he knew it sent something through my heart—a tingle.

I held his hand, walking through the house to show it off. "I had some time to kill," I said. "And I forgot I didn't have my car with me."

"I kinda remembered when I was at school," he said. "But you should've called me. I could've picked you up on my lunch and—oh, actually, I couldn't, because I was doing reading club in the lunch break. It was snowing a bit too hard, so they weren't letting the kids outside for recess and lunch."

"It's all good. I kinda liked being here alone and looking at things," I said. "Is it a new house, or—"

"Listen, I know it's not really decorated. Caroline says the same thing. This place needs something on the shelves and walls. And—"

I giggled at an earlier thought. “Maybe not all the walls.” Sam caught on quickly. Our minds were on the same track, it seemed.

“Well, not until you give me those drawings you promised at breakfast,” he said, pulling me toward the sofa and holding me as we both fell into place among the blankets. He kissed my cheek and all the way down my neck. “But I—” He paused and looked at me. “I remember saying we’d go get you an elf costume.”

“Aw, but I wanted to see where this was going.” I pushed my lip out into a pout. “Pwease.”

“But then we’d have to get dressed again,” he said, wiggling his brows. “And you still need to get dressed if we’re going out.”

I stood in a huff, leaving him on the sofa. “Aren’t you going to ask about my underwear?” I turned slightly to look over my shoulder.

“No,” he said. “Because you’re going to take that onesie off and show me.”

The sides of my palms pressed at the edges of the onesie, resting at my waist. I pushed, just hard enough for the onesie to fall to my thighs, and then, with a shimmy, all the way down. I hoped he got a good long look at my ass and the letters right across it—even if they were slightly consumed by my ass itself.

“One more star for you,” he said. “And a second one if you can finish getting dressed. Otherwise, I don’t know if I’ll be able to control myself with that thick ass just out like that.”

Placing my hands beneath my cheeks, I jiggled, making it bounce. “I hope we can find an elf outfit that I can fit all this ass into.” It was a real thought, a real question, and after saying it, I was even more weighed down by what this town was doing to me, making me want to stay.

The costume store was a small outlet, a corner storefront, like someone had tacked it onto the pizza place next door. We’d agreed that after here, we’d head to visit my mom, whose only reply to my texts had been that they were fine and I should just enjoy Sam’s company.

We had to walk to the store from the parking lot across the road because curbside parking wasn’t allowed. It meant wading through the slush that had settled instead of the gorgeous and picturesque snow that should’ve been laid.

Inside, we were greeted by an older woman, an eccentric type, like Sam’s aunt—I’d thought it was her.

“Mrs. Daniels,” Sam greeted her with a big hug.

“Come in, come in,” she said. “And close the door. We’ll all catch a cold.”

“I’m looking for an elf costume for my friend,” Sam said, hesitating over what to call me.

She chuckled. “I know exactly who you are. You’re Mrs. Dashofy’s son. Dash, is it?”

Of course. Everyone talked. Everyone knew. Everyone was also going to hear about this, and about me getting an elf costume to become Santa’s elf. I blushed, or the limited space was beginning to heat up around us.

“Mrs. Daniels is a former costume designer for Broadway,” Sam said. “Dash lives in New York now.”

She laughed. “It’s an excellent space to spread one’s wings. Alas, I spread mine, and then, like a homing pigeon, I was off on a goose chase around the world, then home, and it’s where I’ve been ever since. Costume, tailoring, anything really. I’ve got it for you.”

Sam placed his arm around me, pulling me in tight. “See, I knew this was going to be a great call. I still have the Santa costume you made for me. But now I’m—we’re looking for an elf, something to match, something for Dash.”

I sucked in a deep breath, looking at her and around us: the photos on the wall, the long stretch of room all the way in the back, and the second floor with a wheeled ladder, like this place was a library for clothes.

“Custom?” she asked.

“Depends on the budget,” Sam got out before I could speak. “But yeah, we’ve got time, and I think you deserve it.” He kissed my cheek. “You earned enough stars to redeem one.”

I went from annoyed to wanting to drop to my knees for him—in public. It was one of the only ways I knew how to give thanks, but I was learning I could just be there for him. And that’s what the costume was for: to be an elf, his elf for Christmas, and make dreams come true.

My dreams.

OceanofPDF.com

18. SAM

Mrs. Daniels's place was really the only place in town people went to for anything custom, and for most of their tailoring. There was a dry cleaner that did alterations and tailoring, but nobody came close to Mrs. Daniels for her flair and fashions. Even my aunt was a regular. I think she exclusively wore pieces blessed by the store.

We weren't in there long before she uncovered a cute green Christmas elf costume from her closet, wrapped inside a clear garment bag. Pins stuck out of it with labels; it was from an old stage show she'd once been costume designer for and no longer needed, so she offered it to us at a discount without the cost of alterations—which she then said would be on the house because she knew it was for the grotto and her grandkids loved it at Christmas.

All throughout it, Dash had been gobsmacked, like he hadn't expected it to happen, to find it so quickly, then for her to throw on all the discounting she had. Part of me, the selfish part of me, wondered if that meant he was going to come around to the idea of potentially staying in Buttonwood for longer. It was selfish because I knew this place wasn't really where he'd pictured spending his life, and neither had I—not as a kid, not as a teen. But then I got older and realized small-town living wasn't all the awful things I'd led myself to believe.

In the back of the store, behind a curtain, Dash changed into the costume for Mrs. Daniels to alter for him. "You know, my mom's gonna ask me more now if I plan to stay," he said, unprompted.

From outside in the small showing area, I glanced at Mrs. Daniels, who raised her brows. We all knew Dash's mom; she was one of the most active people in town. Without saying a single word, I knew she was ready to start a phone tree of gossip.

"Just for Christmas, I hope," I called out to him.

"Obviously. I'm not going to leave my mom like she is," he called back.

"Oh, I heard about the fall," Mrs. Daniels said with a sigh. She'd gathered loose measuring tape, bits of string, and a red pillow crammed with pins. "When you get to a certain age, sometimes things just stop

functioning," she continued. "I was laughing the other day and almost peed myself." She snickered. "Oops, best not start that again."

Dash chuckled from behind the curtain before opening it.

He looked adorable. It fit quite well: the shirt, the waistcoat, even the trousers were green, in different shades.

"I think it could double as a St. Patrick's Day outfit," he said, turning to look at himself in the mirror. "But I like it."

"And the bow tie," she said, waving her hand at the small seat in the room behind him. "The red bow tie really brings it all together, and the hat. You've got to wear that, or it's just not Christmassy enough."

I snapped mental pictures of him in that moment, smiling and nodding. He might've needed to smile himself, but it was perfect, and I just wanted him to know it was perfect. He continued to examine himself in the mirror, trying his best to hide the smile, right before Mrs. Daniels was there prodding at the clothes with needles and getting him instead.

It was safe to say we were in good hands as she made all the notes quickly before letting him take the outfit off. She muttered to herself about embellishments and things that had gone missing from it over the years.

We left it with her. I paid up, and we had a near footrace to the car as thick, heavy blobs of snow came down from the sky.

Inside the car, it was freezing. We stayed there for a moment, rubbing our hands together and pumping hot air inside.

"I should've got those heated seats," I chuckled, grabbing his hands and rubbing mine around them.

"My car has them," he said, his teeth chattering. "Also, I think she prodded me so much I might've lost a pint of blood or something."

"Aw," I said, leaning in and giving his cold face a kiss. "Well, I guess you'll need a nice big treat later."

Dash pouted and nodded. "Please. Pretty pwease."

I kissed him again, long and hard. My lips forcing warmth into his skin.

Before I could give him any reward, we had to visit his mom and make sure she was okay with him not being around, even though she was the reason he was here. We got to his mom's house and parked outside. Now warmed up, we stared at each other and held hands for a moment.

"If she mentions buying a hat, let's run," he said.

“Oh, her wedding hat,” I snickered. “Nina asked me the same thing.”

It made sense. I’d complained about being single for so long to all the people around me, everyone knew the moment I found someone, they were going to ask when the wedding was and if they could be part of the celebrations.

His mom and grandma were in the living room, a quiz show on the TV that was quickly paused upon our entry. His grandma leapt. I’d never seen someone her age move, at a speed I was worried about. She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me down to sit on the sofa beside her.

“You’re going to look handsome in a tux,” she said, pawing at my sleeve to get me out of my coat.

“Mom,” Mary Anne said, wide-eyed and glaring. “Leave the poor boy alone.” She tutted, looking at Dash holding a hand to his mouth and giggling. “And I told you we were doing fine. We made eggs for breakfast, and we had Tim bring us over lunch.”

“Mom,” he groaned. “I told you, if you needed anything, just call me. So, what are you having for dinner? And don’t say Tim is bringing it.”

She laughed. “No, no, Drew is coming over,” she said. “He’s going to make burgers. Isn’t that right, Mom?” While Evelyn was still pulling me out of my coat.

“Yes, yes, Drew is coming over,” she said. “But I don’t think he’ll mind making extra for you two.”

And that’s how we were roped into staying for dinner, which I didn’t mind. Dash had some annoyance over it—not the dinner part, but having his cousin come over when he could’ve been here to do the same thing. He expressed it in quiet frustration as we stood in the corner of the kitchen, making coffee.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen Drew,” I said.

“Ugh, right,” he rolled his eyes, throwing his body at mine and holding it there, turning him into putty. “You were both on the football team.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, he was on defense. Although I don’t really remember much of the team. I kinda pushed that all away when I came out. I figured it was a way to separate myself from it.”

“Because you were straight,” he said. “Or bi.”

“Always gay,” I said. “Sometimes I’m like, yeah, I was bi, but then I remembered the absolute fear I used to have being intimate because I just —” I shook my head. “Caroline . . . I obviously loved her—love her, she’s my best friend—but I think she knew before me that I was gay.”

Dash continued to stroke my chest over the punny Christmas sweater. “Do you wonder what it would’ve been like if you came out back then?”

“A disaster, maybe,” I said, shrugging. “You know how everyone was back then. I was strong, right, but mentally, I might’ve crumbled.”

He leaned in and kissed me. “I’m lucky you didn’t then, because we could’ve become enemies. I had this—” He laughed, shaking his head and turning red. “It’s so weird to think about then, because nothing I did made sense, but I kinda had this complex where I was like, I’m the only gay guy, and there was this other gay kid in my year who I was annoyed at. So weird. Anyway, he’s living it up in Texas as a drag queen now.”

I stroked a hand across his warm cheek. “Kinda like how Caroline and Nina say I complain about being the only gay guy in town, when I know there are more, but everyone is coupled up, so I feel right in my complaint.”

We kissed again, this time as a loud noise came from the living room. Drew arrived, and Evelyn was trying just as hard to get him to sit beside her on the sofa and talk as she had been with me. Instead, they walked into the kitchen with Mary Anne in tow, sucking on her teeth as her arm in the sling swung slightly.

They saw us cuddled in the corner, like startled rabbits. We didn’t move. It was surprisingly welcoming, and I wrapped another arm around Dash.

“We’re staying for dinner,” I said, seeing Drew smile as he thunked down a bag of meat on the counter.

“Yo, bro,” he said, raising a hand for me to greet him in one of the most bro-ish actions I’d done in a while, forcing Dash to leave my side while it happened. “I barely see you anymore.” He turned the cap around backward on his head. “Is that your car out there? When’s the last time you booked it in at the garage?”

“Oh, Drew’s a mechanic,” Mary Anne said.

“Yeah, I know,” Dash said.

“Cuz,” he said, trying the same hand-grabbing action on him and failing. It looked more like a handshake than anything—awkward. “It’s been years. When my dad said you were back, I thought something was seriously wrong, but now I see the two of you are just—together, right?”

It stunned us all. Dash looked at me to answer, and I couldn’t. But if it *was* the reason he was here, then I wasn’t going to complain, like an angel sent to me from above—from fate, from his mom.

Drew was a chatterbox; the guy talked nonstop while he made the burgers, talking me through his rub technique, which Dash chuckled at every time he mentioned it. He also complained about not getting to sit down all day, and then wouldn’t join Evelyn on the sofa. It was nice, overall. It wasn’t like I needed to do a whole meet-the-family thing, since Buttonwood was small and we all knew each other.

I understood why Dash wasn’t able to work here, mostly because of how much his mom and grandma talked—which seemed to run in the family. Although his mom had apple juice in the fridge, which he pointed to and nodded at, eventually becoming part of the booty we brought back to my place with us. We must’ve been there for hours, talking over each other at the dinner table, recalling high-school memories, and discussing what was going to happen to all the other sliders we weren’t able to eat.

And once the evening was over, we went back to my place and sat in blissful quiet on the sofa, stripped down to our underwear and wrapped in large blankets.

No loud TV show playing, no voices, just our bodies, and the language they communicated in as they stuck together, as they warmed, and as our chests and hearts had their own rhythm they followed. It was nice for about thirty minutes, and then Dash looked into my eyes, getting my attention.

“Tonight was fun,” I said to him.

“I got apple juice,” he chuckled.

“Yes, you did,” I said, taking his hand and kissing it. “You want a glass now?”

“Nope. I just want to lie here and listen to your heart,” he said.

“Do you have anything you need to do for work tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Probably, but nope.” He stared at me. “Do you?”

“My lesson plans are all done,” I told him. “I just have to show up, make sure they’re all behaving, and have them all comment on my facial hair.”

Dash tugged at it lightly. “It’s growing nicely, Mr. Claus.”

“Thank you, Mr. Little Elf.”

He giggled, pulling the blanket up over his head and continuing to giggle right against my chest. He wiggled around on top of me like a worm. It was adorable. I placed my hands over him, trying to contain his wiggles.

This was an insight into the life I’d wanted: spending evenings with family, spending nights with the one I had feelings for, and then spending days becoming days older, until those days turned to months, turned to years, and then a lifetime of memories and happiness together.

“So, we’ve got to set the grotto up this weekend, if you want to help,” I said to him, cuddling my hands over his, one under the blanket and one over.

He peered out at me and nodded. “I think I’m already roped into it.”

“Right, because of the marketing stuff,” I said. “Are you really sure it’ll work?”

“I know what people want,” he said, trying to wink at me, his eyes doing a wave, one eye blinking and the other following in quick succession.

“And the people want to see me without my top on,” I teased as he squeezed my bare chest. “In the Santa suit, obviously.”

“Obviously,” he chimed back. “But we’ve got to wait on the shipment of Sublime teddies first. They’re the second—or maybe first and ultimate—USP of the store.”

“Oh, so they’re not coming because I’m shirtless?”

He giggled. “That’s just to get them excited about Christmas,” he said. “The toys are what they’re buying, and you’ll be wearing a shirt when you’re actually Santa.”

“Unless we do a—”

“A what?” he asked, lifting his head up at me.

“Santa After Dark,” I said. “Like, when I get to let people sit on my lap without me wearing a shirt. Maybe with a Santa mask on. I am a teacher after all.”

Dash hunkered his fingers into my chest, nearly pulling out hair. “I’m mad I didn’t think of that,” he said. “Although, then you’d really be slutting yourself out, and I think I prefer it when you’re all mine anyway.”

“It was as far as I’d go,” I laughed. “People see me shirtless all the time. Now at least they’ll have it to look at—all day,” I laughed.

“A bit full of yourself,” he giggled, then pushed out a pout. “But what if a cute elf asks you to keep it on in the bedroom?”

I played with my lip, sinking my teeth into it. He knew just how to play and tease me. “Let’s talk about that once we’ve made this place its own grotto.”

“We can decorate now,” he said, lifting himself and then lying back down on me. “Second thoughts: I still want to sleep after that dinner.”

“We can decorate this week then, maybe once Mrs. Daniels is done with your elf costume, so you can break it in,” I said. “And because I really want to get some pictures of you—if that’s okay.”

Dash’s head on my chest moved with a nod, and I could hear his heart beating faster against my belly. “As long as I get photos of you.”

“All the photos.”

Because photos might be the only thing that remained afterward. I hoped not, because this was special to me, but it was entirely possible they’d be the only reminders of what we had in this moment. Even if we didn’t give it a label, we were Santa and elf, Daddy and Little. We were discovering each other, and that would always exist and live within me.

OceanofPDF.com

19. DASH

We fell into a pattern, a habit, and I was falling for him—although I may already have fallen. As my mind tried to pinpoint the exact time of the fall, I took it all the way back to my teens, and maybe it happened then, but none of my dreams could've come close to the reality. I was with Samuel Hadley, and he was perfect.

I'd worked from his place, and he now kept apple juice in the fridge, so many cartons, I wondered if he bought the orchard he'd teased about. There was something about the way he'd accommodated me, and my accommodations for him were cleaning and being a good boy. But I'd also begun slowly organizing things to fill his shelves and walls: hand-drawn pictures, like I'd do for the marketing storyboarding department. They were quick and mostly motion gestures with wrist flicks, but they were now stuck to the walls with white tacks.

There was a running tally of stars I'd earned. He didn't tell me how many stars, but I knew it had to be within the thousands by now. On Friday, the school closed for a snow day, which meant one day early to get the grotto ready at the toy store, and a second one for the school—but that was a fixed thing they kept in storage: large poster boards with tinsel and fake snow they refreshed each year, or so Sam told me.

I didn't have a snow day, but that didn't really stop us from enjoying the day together, decorating the house with all the Christmassy items he had. Boxes filled with gauche and ugly tinsel and baubles. He loved it, so we did it: tinsel over door frames, around the side of the dining table, around the TV unit, coffee table, and then enough for the small tree he had. A plastic one.

"We can get a real one, bigger, if you want," I said, tilting my head and looking at the small tree on the ground.

A real one meant it was real, like this was real, and not something I was playing at. I wanted real. "Do you think we've still got time for a real tree?"

"Time," Sam laughed, wrestling me and picking me up. I wrapped my legs around him. "We don't need time. We just need my dad's contacts and to figure out who he uses."

"And if they don't—"

He pretended to drop me. “We’re not thinking negative,” he said. “We’re thinking—” He looked around. The mismatched tinsel colors were completely wild compared to how I decorated with Jude in our apartment. “Fun,” he finished. “We’re thinking fun. Look at this place. Look at all the fun. And thinking negative removes stars, actually.”

“Aw, no. I want stars,” I said, pouting at him. “What can I do for one?”

“Gimme a kiss.”

I smooched his face, all over his face, until we toppled over onto the sofa, kissing each other, and then eventually looked up at the ceiling.

“This place needs more decorations,” I said. “Like those things you hang from the ceiling. They’re like a concertina; they go flat, and then they come apart, and it’s this large, intricate design.”

He kissed me and pulled away. “We’ve only made it through a few boxes. There’s more. I’ve got those. But I thought you’d think they were tacky.”

I giggled. “I—I kinda do, but I think they’d go really well here.”

“Hey, are you calling me—” he began before I yanked on his arm to get his attention and keep him from finishing that thought. It wasn’t so much that I thought he was tacky, but he was definitely not used to designing or color matching, and that was completely okay, because he was hot, so he didn’t need to know all the things—especially when he had me around to do it for him.

We got the concertina decorations, more mixed colors that had no story to them at all: yellow and green, red and blue, silver and gold. One side going down was one color, and looking from the other side, they were the other color. They were a choice, but one I thought worked well given the look of the place.

I’d turned Sam’s house from a place barely decorated into a place I might call the police about if he’d brought me here that first night we’d spent together—not for any reason other than how ugly it seemed. Ugly, again in a nice sense.

“This place looks like something hellish blew up,” Sam said, self-aware of the place. I loved that about him. “The decor for the grotto is at least all the same two colors.”

He witnessed me sighing and laughed.

“Blue and white,” he said. “Okay. So, looks like we can go collect your elf costume, and . . .” He winked at me, so effortlessly cool and hot, sending a signal right to my butt that made me twitch.

“You go grab it,” I said. “I’ll clean up here and get the bedroom ready.”

“The bedroom?”

I placed my hands on his shoulders, ready to slow dance with him. “For pictures, and it’s the only place not touched by all the tinsel.” And for good reason. I couldn’t sleep with it all in there—not unless it came in the form of stars on the ceiling.

“Okay, photo shoot,” he said. “But I get to take them of you first.” He reached around, squeezing my ass. “Just because I know how excited you get seeing me in my Santa suit.” He kissed my forehead, and I was chubbed at the idea of him being Santa, snapping photos of me.

“Fine, but I get a preview of what we’re going to shoot tomorrow for the social media account,” I said. His sister had been slowly growing the one for the store, and it had been very slow until they announced they were getting a shipment of Sublime teddies, thankfully on the Monday before the big Santa event on the weekend.

I waited for Daddy Sam to get back and become Santa Sam, to become the version of him that so many loved, and I was about to really get to know and explore—something I didn’t want to wonder if I was the first to do, because it was the first time we were doing it together.

Preparing myself, the bed, and bringing in some silver tinsel—after an internal back and forth—to add some Christmas flair to the bedroom, I was ready for him. His Santa suit was inside the bag across the end of the bed, just waiting.

He brought in the cold air and snow with him, slamming the door and letting out a slight holler as he searched for me. “Jeez, no wonder it’s a snow day. I almost lost the road when I was driving,” he said as he walked into the bedroom and saw me lying across the bed in my onesie, the bag over his arm with my costume inside. “But now I’m back, I’m absolutely ready to play.”

I was a ball of nerves, but I got dressed in the outfit, feeling all the ways Mrs. Daniels had tailored it for me: the trousers, the thick red-and-white striped socks up to the knee where they pushed the pant leg. The waistcoat now came with red frill embellishments, and the hat came with a

bell and more of the same red trim. It was surprisingly comfortable, more than I remembered.

“Can I see you yet?” he called out from the bedroom.

“One second,” I said, staring at my ass in the bathroom mirror. It was thicker than I remembered. “Are you getting dressed?”

“Baby,” he called out softly, and I melted, my hands curling into fists like I was grabbing something to hold myself upright. “I got naked the moment you went in there. Mine is easily done.”

“You know you’ve gotta put it on, right?”

“It’s on,” he said.

I opened the door. He was lying on the bed like I had been, across it with an elbow propping him upright. His body was on show beneath the opening of the Santa jacket. He stared at me, gazing up and down, licking his lips.

“That’s what’s going to make the toy store go viral,” I said.

“Really?” he asked, tugging at his facial hair. “You think I still need a beard to go over it?”

“A beard?” I giggled. “I thought Caroline was busy.”

He snorted. “We’ve already discovered I don’t need that type of beard anymore.” He puckered his lips, kissing out at the air. “And even if she wasn’t busy, I think I might always have needed you to be my elf. And what do elves do best?”

“Serve Santa?”

“That’s right,” he said, sliding until he was upright. “And I think I need a warm body all over mine. As you can tell, I’m pretty cold.” He pushed his hand at the jacket, stroking past a nipple. “And hard.”

I crawled onto the bed, slow, testing the tug of the fabric. “And what would Mr. Claus want from me?” I asked, pushing my lip out into a pout. “I’m just an elf. I’m at your service. Whatever you need, I’ll do it for you.”

“Are you a good elf?” he asked.

“The best.”

My head at his chest, I looked up at him, and he cradled a hand under my chin. “Good, because only the best little elves get to know what I’ve got,” he whispered, leaning in close until our lips met. “Now, tell Santa what it is you want for Christmas.”

From the way he sat on the bed, I was able to sit on his lap.

He wrapped his arm around me, and we swayed.

“For Christmas, I want lots of kisses, lots of cuddles, and I want to experience a lifetime of fun,” I told him. It wasn’t far from what I actually wanted. I should’ve added him into the mix of that, but maybe he was getting the hint. Maybe he was going to put me on the nice list and give me everything I wanted this Christmas.

He continued to sway with me in his arms, his lips against my neck, his beard softly scratching at me that tickled at my core. “I’ll see what Santa can do for you,” he said. “But only if you continue to be Daddy’s good little elf.”

“And protect you from all those other elves that might try to steal you away.”

He gasped, his soft chuckle right there against the skin of my neck. “You can protect me as well,” he said. “And I’ll protect you.” His hand slid up the front of the waistcoat, beginning to unbutton it. “I’ll make sure nobody steals my favorite elf away.”

A moan came out of me, alongside a knee-buckling groan, and I snapped my legs together. I was hard, and he was soon about to discover it. His hand, like he knew, slid all the way down to my crotch, feeling around, and he grabbed it.

“I didn’t know you were hiding a candy cane,” he said, and it throbbed in his hand.

“I think that’s my line, Daddy Claus.” I turned my head slightly so he could see me pouting.

He kissed me, then licked the side of my face. “Mm, delicious.”

Nothing could stop us, and all talk about getting photos of each other went out the window—like our clothes, carefully thrown across the room, except he kept the red fur-lined Santa jacket on.

It was a sex dream come true: to ride Santa Claus on a bumpy sleigh ride, surrounded by all the teddies as our reindeer, cheering us on from the sidelines. It was all too good to be true, all too good to be happening to me right now, but I stopped myself from questioning it and started to live in the moment, forcing myself to experience the gifts his hands had to give my body: the reward of his lips as they pecked softly down from my neck all the way to my chest, where he sucked my nipples. His hand on my dick, feeling each throb coincide with his tongue pressing the hardness of my nipples.

We avoided making a mess of our costumes, but something in us both solidified after that moment, like a satisfaction we'd both wanted to explore, and we reaped the rewards on each other's skin. My small love-bite kisses on his neck became more and more defined, losing their diamond-star-like quality.

I was really falling for him.

And as we lay together in the bed, we stared at the ceiling.

"We need stars up there," I said. I was temporarily moving in, and leaving my mark. "Glow-in-the-dark, preferably." I looked to him, and he was staring back with the biggest smile. He took the Santa hat with the large white fluffy ball on the end and put it on my head.

"You are a star," he said. "Can I put you up there?"

He was nearly completely naked except for the red Santa jacket. I stared all the way down his body, and then to mine. I was naked, and my belly rose and fell with each heavy breath it took as my body processed all the action and all the feelings swimming around in me—not his feelings, he still wore a condom, but he was inside me mentally.

"You can put me wherever you want," I whispered, snuffling against his chest. "I'm glad you got a snow day."

He kissed me on the back of my hand. "I'm hoping it doesn't continue, or a snowplow comes through, because those roads are hell."

With a warm, comfortable sigh against his chest, I looked up at him. "We should check on my mom," I said. "The last thing I want is for her power to go out or not have food in, or worse, tell the family I was in town and not helping."

Sam kept my hand in his, using it to brush and rub against his face. "Then we'll go check on her," he said. "But we might have to shower and get dressed in our regular clothes first."

I could accept that, since I'd be seeing a lot of him dressed as Santa soon enough. "Maybe keep the hat," I said.

"Mm-hm. Well, I do have other Santa hats I can wear, not part of the official costume."

He brought out something so giggly in me that I turned around on his body, ready to go for another round. "Official costume," I said. "Words like that might make me think you're the real Santa."

He winked. "I'll never tell. But if I am, that makes you a real elf."

One more drop, one more fall, one more swim in his emerald eyes.

Sam held me in the palm of his hand, and I felt special.

OceanofPDF.com

20. SAM

Grottos were an immersive Santa experience. A corner of the toy store was decorated in snow and tinsel, making it look like we were in the North Pole. It was interactive too, given I was Santa, and I had been for many years. I'd become known for my Santa, and also for my body, since in the summer I ran around shirtless most of the time. I knew people saw, and I kind of liked the attention—I'd have lied if I said I didn't.

We visited Dash's mom, decorating with her and Evelyn, pulling out all the ornaments from Dash's childhood: things he'd made in school, things I was getting my kids in school to make for their parents too. Card-stock snowflakes, snowmen, all types of things you could thread a ribbon through and slip onto the branch of a tree. They had a fake tree, one they'd had for many years, from Dash's own cooing and awing at the memories. It was after that we made our way to the toy store for some early work on the grotto.

The entire family was there, setting it up. Nobody had called me about it, but for once, everyone was smiling and happy. My mom, upon seeing Dash, even invited him over for dinner, and he accepted.

Even Dex was helping out, building the grotto, saying that we needed to do it for Santa. He still believed, and that brought me joy, because he didn't know it would be me sitting in the gold-painted armchair next weekend.

We were only there for an hour before my mom called it a day, and the dinner she'd invited us both to was that night, but I could tell Dash needed some alone time before that happened.

* * *

By the time we got back to my place, Dash looked like his brain had become a browser with too many tabs open. He dropped onto the sofa with a dramatic huff, clutching one of his teddies to his chest.

"Rough day, sweetheart?" I asked from the kitchen.

"Everybody was talking," he said, with the solemnity of someone reporting a natural disaster. "And making plans."

“They were,” I agreed, walking over with a glass of apple juice. “Do you want quiet time, or do you want to play?”

He considered it very seriously. “Both.”

“Both is allowed.”

I sat beside him and brushed his hair back from his forehead. “Do you want a tea party?”

His eyes lit up. “With the good cups?”

“With the good cups.”

“And the tiny sandwiches?”

“If you help me make them.”

He gasped. “I can help?”

“You can be my very important tea-party assistant.”

The smile that broke across his face was worth every extra dish we were about to create.

We made little cucumber-and-cream-cheese sandwiches, cut into triangles because, according to Dash, triangles were fancier. He arranged them on the good plate with intense concentration, placing one of his smaller teddies at each setting.

“This one is Lady Marshmallow,” he told me, setting a white teddy beside his cup. “She’s very fancy.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Marshmallow,” I said solemnly, shaking one of its paws.

Dash giggled so hard he nearly knocked over his apple juice.

“Careful, baby.”

“Sorry, Daddy.”

“No sorry needed. Just careful.”

We sat on the living-room floor with a blanket spread beneath us, our tea party arranged between us. Dash made me a paper crown from construction paper, glittery letters across the front reading *SANTA DADDY*.

“Does it suit me?” I asked.

He studied me with great seriousness. “Very much.”

“Then I shall accept my royal duty.”

He lifted his little cup, and I lifted mine.

“To Lady Marshmallow,” Dash declared.

“To Lady Marshmallow,” I echoed.

For now, it was only apple juice in a plastic teacup, tiny sandwiches, and Dash looking at me like I was the most important person in his world.

I wanted to protect that look. I wanted to protect him from the overstimulation that was my family.

When he started to yawn, I gathered him into my lap.

“Sleepy little elf?” I whispered.

“Just resting my eyes,” he mumbled.

“Of course you are.”

He groaned and yawned. “We’ve still got your mom’s dinner to go to.”

“We can skip it,” I said, stroking his face.

Suddenly, he opened his eyes wide. “No, no. She was so excited to have me over, and I can cope with it all. I promise.”

“Whatever you wanna do, Daddy’s got you.”

* * *

Dinner at my parents’ house were loud. Even louder than dinner at Dash’s.

The kind that came from everyone talking at once—my mom asking questions before anyone could answer, Dad telling a story nobody asked for, Rachel adding commentary from across the table, and Aunt Joanne insisting she had a better idea about everything before anyone else finished speaking.

Dash sat beside me, his knee against mine beneath the table, shaking slightly.

He shifted closer when Dad started talking about the toy store again.

“And the Sublime shipment was a godsend,” Dad said, lifting his glass. “But we can’t forget that this whole thing started because Dash walked in and saw what we couldn’t.”

My mom beamed at Dash like he had personally delivered Christmas—I suppose he’d helped, he was a good elf like that.

“You have a good eye,” she said. “And you’re so generous with your time. Honestly, Dash, you should think about staying. You could help us expand. You could run the social media side properly. You could—”

“Mom,” I said, feeling my face heat. “Why are you talking about expansion, you just need to stay afloat first. And—”

“What?” she asked, playing innocent. “I’m only saying he’s good at it.”

“He is,” Dad agreed. “And clearly he cares about this place.”

Rachel nodded. “He’s done more in a few weeks than some people do in years.”

Aunt Joanne pointed her fork at Dash. “You should move back. Buttonwood needs young people with ideas. And you and Sammy are cute together. It would be *perfect*.”

Dash went still beside me.

I knew that look. Not the shy, soft look he got when he was Little. Not the nervous look he got when too many people were talking at once.

This was different.

This was the look of someone trying to decide whether he was allowed to say no.

I reached beneath the table and found his hand. His fingers curled into his palm.

“You don’t have to answer,” I murmured, low enough that only he could hear.

Dash accepted my hand and squeezed once, before he let go.

He set down his fork.

“Actually,” he said, his voice quiet at first. “I do want to say something.”

The table quieted.

Dash’s cheeks went pink. He looked at my mom, then my dad, then Rachel and Aunt Joanne.

“I love helping,” he said. “I really do. And I am glad I could help with the store. I’m glad the teddies came, and the videos worked, and glad people are coming back to Buttonwood.”

My dad nodded, pleased.

“But . . .” Dash continued. “I don’t want everyone to forget that Sam has been doing this his whole life.”

The words hung there.

I blinked.

Dash turned toward me, his knee pressing firmly against mine—no more shaking.

“Sam has been showing up for you forever,” he said. “He teaches little kids. He volunteers at every event. He plays Santa even when he’s tired, even when nobody thanks him, even when his own family is struggling and nobody thought to tell him.”

My throat tightened.

Dash’s voice grew steadier.

“He was the one who said the grotto had to happen. He was the one who kept showing up when everyone else was pretending nothing was wrong.”

My mom’s smile faded into something softer.

“So yes, I helped,” he said. “But Sam was here. Sam has always been here. And if anyone gets to decide what happens next, it should be him too.”

For a second, nobody spoke.

Then Dad cleared his throat. “You’re right,” he said quietly. “Sam has always shown up.”

Mom reached across the table and covered my hand with hers. “Sweetheart, we know that. We just get excited when someone new sees what we see in you.”

If it hadn’t been obvious, it was now. Dash had been overwhelmed. Thrown from our afternoon of *bliss* visiting his mom, putting up her tree, then to the toy store, where there were far too many cooks in the kitchen. Now my parents’ home, where the only cook in the kitchen was my grandpa Benjamen, and he was singing Dash’s praises too.

The table became quiet after telling everyone to appreciate me. There had been a time when it was all about people singing my praises, and I wondered if my sister felt the same. If she had, then I was sorry. It hurt, but when he spoke up, something deep in me stirred, warmed, and I’d wanted to whisk him away.

“Are you okay?” I whispered to Dash at my side.

His eyes were wide, like he couldn’t say anything else now. In the seat by my dad at the head of the table and was pulled back into conversation. Catching a snippet of it, they were talking about commission and favorable rates.

“If you don’t stay and work for us, they should at least hire you,” my dad said to him.

Dash took my hand under the table, his warm palm in mine. My family could do that: all the voices, all the people. Oftentimes it was quiet, given how nobody had wanted to bring up the store going under around me. They were open with it now, so it was business as usual in how we were again.

After dinner, my mom promised dessert, but I'd promised Dash we'd get out of there, and we did, leaving before they could dish anything up for us. Dash was the only dessert I needed, and the only person I needed to be there for right now. He'd been there for me, and I knew that had taken up the rest of his energy. Putting him first felt good.

He didn't complain, though, in the car or when we got back to my place. He was just drained by all the interactions, drained to the point that he went right to the bedroom, pulled a onesie out of his duffel bag, then sat himself down on the sofa, sinking into the blankets.

"Apple juice?" I called out.

He turned his head so quick, smiling at me. "Pwease."

I poured him a glass from the carton in the fridge, as cold to the touch as it was outside. I handed it to him and watched as he sipped and smacked his lips. "Anything else you want me to do?"

He let out a long, groaning pause. "Make this place look less like a Christmas store exploded in it."

"No can do," I said. "You're the one who did it. But I can give you a gold star for helping my folks today and dealing with dinner."

He smiled. "Thank you, Daddy."

"How about I clean the bedroom? You watch a show, relax, do Little things. You want your teddies? Maybe something to draw with?"

He nodded at all of it. Thankfully, I had the crayons, the paper. I even had a caddy of glitter. It was a perk of buying your own school supplies, I suppose, or the pain of it. And while Dash was occupied with that, I got started on cleaning the bedroom: new bedding, putting in a load of washing with the clothes he'd been in—a show of how often we'd been staying together.

I'd heard of gay couples moving in after a first date, but never assumed it would happen to me. Not like Dash had moved in, but more that he was here, and he'd made himself at home while in town. Either way, it was finally a phenomenon I was getting behind.

He was still so preoccupied drawing and keeping his teddies in headlocks that I had time to finally put some stars on the ceiling for him. He didn't even notice me grab the step stool from my home gym—the one I used to help me with elevated lunges and such. A roll of glittery gold stars went on the ceiling. I didn't keep count; I just dotted them around.

The stars were there for him, and I wasn't going to mention it.

He was nearly asleep by the time I was finished, his hand sliding across the paper, scribbling thin strokes with the pencil across it. He yawned, startled awake when he noticed me watching him.

“Carry me to bed,” he said, and I raised a brow at him. “Pwease.”

“All you need is to be a good boy and ask,” I said. “You’re still on Santa’s nice list.”

He giggled, packing away the crayons. “And Santa is on my nice list.”

I yawned, and he yawned. I might not have had it in the tank to carry him, but I did, pulling it out of my reserves. Dash took the opportunity to feel my arms and how muscular they were. “Not the only big muscle I’ve got,” I told him. “But we’re gonna have to brush those teeth before bed.”

“And you’re saying that to me now, when I’m so freaking tired,” he groaned, bashing his head gently against my shoulder, trying to hide his face from me. “Did you put the other teddies back on the bed?”

I had, but in the dark of the room, they were invisible—tiny bumps under the duvet that would come to haunt my back if one of them made it under me while I was asleep.

After brushing our teeth, I carried Dash and placed him on the bed. He didn’t notice the stars, preoccupied while I undressed, a show for him. Then I did the rounds, making sure the lights were off and doors were locked, all in my briefs, then coming back in to strip naked.

In bed, he grabbed me and turned over, pulling me to cuddle him from behind, the smaller teddies were a barrier keeping me from getting at him.

“The teddies say access is denied,” he giggled, and turning again, he paused and stared, his jaw slack, gobsmacked by what he was seeing. He let out a whine. “Stars.”

I kissed him on the cheek, shoveling the teddies out of the way and placing them on top of him. “Only just noticed?”

“When did you—” He pouted. “I love it.” Then he sighed, and I knew that sigh—not particularly his sigh, but it was the sigh that I’d done something that had him questioning things, and that wasn’t my intention, even if it was my intention to have him stay in Buttonwood with me.

“I didn’t know where to put all the good-boy gold stars you’d earned, so I figured they could go somewhere you’d see them,” I told him.

“I guess that means I’ll have to stay here every night, then.”

“And I don’t think I’d mind that at all.” I kissed his cheek, rubbing the kiss in place and watching him fuss in a giggle from my beard.

“You might have to get more ceiling, because I think this will be full of them soon.”

And that was the dream, the goal, the everything: to have the ceiling full of gold stars he’d earned, to have those moments together where I could keep telling him in whispers how he’d earned another gold star.

I fell asleep, maybe even before him, my thoughts about those stars, about being in space, watching as surreal glittering stars rained down around me in the darkness of the abyss that was space—and my mind. I’d told myself my mind was strong: work the body, work the mind, and they’ll come together. But Dash crumbled all my defenses, and I didn’t want the feeling to pass.

He woke me the following morning, shaking me. “You kept moving around,” he said, laying his head on my chest, my heart thumping out of it. “You’re a heavy sleeper. I didn’t know that.”

It was the first time he’d woken before me.

We cuddled for a moment like that, at least until my heart was beating normally.

Dash placed a hand to my forehead. “You’re not getting sick, are you?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m the picture of health.”

He gasped. “You’re jinxing it,” he said, his eyes glancing in either direction. “You can’t say stuff like that.”

I pulled him into a hug, his body over mine as I kissed at his cheeks. “I can do anything,” I told him.

“Good, because I’ve been texting your sister, and you’re wanted at the store soon,” he said. “Maybe do some—what are those ab things people do?”

“Right,” I chuckled. “Slutting-out Santa day. With a big Santa beard to keep my face obscured.”

He snorted a laugh. “As long as I can put the baby oil on you.”

“Wait—what?”

Dash was off me, running around in his cute onesie.

“You know you’ll probably have to be in the elf costume as well,” I called out to him. “Santa can’t operate without his elf.” I watched the doorway, and he peeked inside the bedroom slightly. “His favorite elf.”

* * *

I'd roped him into it, not letting him get away without being in production of the videos. We got to the store after breakfast, where Dash told me he didn't want to be in front of the camera and how he played a role behind it.

I broke that with a single phrase. "I want pictures of us together," I said, and he looked at me like I'd proposed to him. It was strange to have all these feelings all at once, all this care for someone who'd been a stranger Mary Anne would talk about whenever we were together.

"Fine," he said. "But I reserve the right not to post anything where I'm not looking my best."

I pursed my lips and kissed out to him across the table. "You look perfect in anything," I said, sealing the deal, and with that, he leaned over, just enough until our lips connected in a real kiss. The toast crumbs on his lips weren't the tastiest of options, but nice.

Rachel and Joanne were there, preparing the grotto, using a fan to disperse the fake snow. It looked pretty real, if I hadn't just walked in from outside, where the snow was piling. And we arrived dressed to impress: my grand Santa suit all red, and Dash in his green outfit with the little hat.

"You two are cute as a button," my aunt Joanne said, reaching out and pinching Dash's cheek. "You should have blush: noses, cheeks, and—" She sucked on her teeth, looking me over. "I thought you were doing those things. Rachel, what did you call them?"

"Thirst traps," she said, approaching us. She clapped, all giddy. "I'm so glad Dex is at home with Barry right now, or he'd go wild."

Swinging the bag around my arm, I said, "I've got my beard in here. This isn't long enough yet."

Dash chuckled, reaching out and tugging on it. "I told him to just throw baby powder in it, and it would turn white."

"Or—" Rachel walked away. "The fake snow in a can. Is it skin safe?" She went right for a can of it by the window she'd been spraying and decorating. "I don't think it is. We could try, though."

"Absolutely not," I said. "I'll just wear this, and I've still got to oil myself up for the thirst traps."

Dash pointed a finger high. "My idea," he said. "I'll be doing the oiling."

My aunt and sister laughed, neither of them volunteering.

It was surprisingly a lot of fun and reminded me of my days in college on the football team there, during press days when they came in and took your photo in all different ways to make it look like a spectacle. Some people used fire, while I flexed my muscles here and there—looking sweaty, and not oiled up like I was right now. But back then, I was DL, and those pictures were great on those apps.

After a moment of my sister and aunt giving direction, Dash took over, and I saw the side of him he used for work. He had an eye for what worked, what wasn't working, and most of all, what would make us go viral.

I don't think my sister stopped recording for even a second—probably enough footage to cut together several feature films of me and Dash as he rubbed oil on me then proceeded to throw fake snow on me.

The first video was posted that afternoon.

No bites. Barely broke two hundred views.

The second video did better.

Dash was annoyed because, from the looks of it, it hadn't worked.

And then the third video: the one where Dash fell on me after rubbing all over my chest.

That one went viral. Elf falling into Santa after rubbing oil over his chest. Millions of views. Dash was glad his face hadn't been fully in the video, and I was just glad the phones hadn't stopped ringing for the store, people trying to book a private session sitting on Santa's lap.

And after several days of several videos—of me, of promoting the event or bragging about having those teddies everyone was looking for—it sent the account to over twenty thousand followers. The videos garnered hundreds of thousands of views after that.

On the Monday when those teddies arrived, they sold out on the same day.

My dad cried—although he wouldn't confess to it. I heard him from outside his office.

My mom told me to make it official with Dash, and I could've cried.

Was this the joy other people felt when they were seen to be a couple?

If so, I didn't want to stop surfing that high. Dash would leave, but New York wasn't that far—six hours? I could do that for these feelings. I

could do anything for how I felt right now, like I could explode into a million gold stickers, ready to cover and coat Dash's body.

Sitting together, cuddled up, watching TV, squeezing him in my arms.

"My friend is almost here," Dash said, squealing.

I was nervous for that, and now it was happening. He'd met Caroline; she approved of him. Would his friend approve of me? And would it even matter?

OceanofPDF.com

21. DASH

Jude was here!

He hated Christmas, and I loved that about him because he could bring me back down to earth, and I would find my feet again. He always did. It was Friday, after seven in the evening, when he was asking me for directions to Sam's house.

Sam looked shocked, even though I'd been telling him all week he'd meet my friend. He wasn't staying here; he'd be staying with my mom and grandma. They'd met before, so I wasn't just throwing him to the wolves. I think they might have liked him more than they liked me.

"He's heading to Maine, right?" Sam said.

"Yeah, tomorrow."

"Just cautious because of the storm coming in," he said.

I groaned, leaning back on him. "Wouldn't be the worst thing if he gets stuck here," I said. "Then he could see you and me at the school grotto tomorrow evening."

Sam had fully booked me out as his elf. We had the afternoon at the toy store, then the evening at the school. I didn't mind too much because we'd gone viral—okay, a lot. Thankfully, most people hadn't seen my face, so I could've been absolutely any elf, and Sam would be completely dressed this time, although the people from the internet would've seen his body-ody-ody, and it made me claws-in on him, even if we hadn't defined this thing we had going on.

It had been too long since I last saw Jude—well, not counting FaceTime calls.

The moment he pulled up into Sam's snowy driveway, I practically raced to him and gave him a hug, getting the feet of my onesie drenched in snow water. He was a skinnier guy, so I could really squeeze him when I went in for it.

He laughed and joked, pretending he was being choked by me.

Sam was in the doorway, smiling at us. He waved us in, and I barely gave him time to lock his car before yanking him inside.

Jude had seen the inside of Sam's house, and every room in here. But things were different from pictures to in person, like Jude finally meeting Sam. He gasped, then looked back at me, slapping a hand to my

chest. “You are a dirty little—” He scoffed again, laughing. “This man—that man.” He gestured to him. “I’m sorry, that man is fine.” His voice turned low.

I pulled the beanie on his head down over his face. “Oh my god, you’re embarrassing me.”

Sam was chuckling, still hollering to call us inside because of the snow and cold.

It was so nice to have him here, and to get a whole bunch of clothes from him. I hadn’t thought I’d have time to regress and play, so I hadn’t brought many outfits to wear. There was the princess outfit. I missed that one, mostly because of the tea-party privileges it provided.

Jude walked around the house like he knew it, which surprised Sam. We stood together, mostly because Daddy Sam whispered in my ear.

“Well, does he approve of me?”

It was a question I knew he was going to ask eventually, because it’s what everyone wanted to know: if their friends approved of the people they were dating. Because we were dating, and that was what we’d call it for now.

“Of course he does,” I said, looking up at him. He kissed my cheek.

Jude squealed again. “*Adorable*,” he said. “Also—” He paused to clap. “I’m going to miss you when I’m in Maine. It’s going to be a ghost town up there.”

I snort-laughed. “I thought you said it was a Christmas town.”

There he went, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, because everyone who stays is obsessed with Christmas. They decorate the town square, they hold festivals with a live band, and then people are—” He stared at us, smiling big. “I know you’re big on Christmas, so I guess I’ll stop there.”

“Oh no, continue,” Sam said. “I don’t mind. I love playing Santa. It’s great for the kids, and great for Dash.”

I giggled right out of nowhere, like he’d jabbed me with a finger of electricity. I giggled hard.

“He’s a softie,” Jude said.

“And you’re closed off,” I cut back. “But together, we’re best friends.”

Sam hugged an arm around me. It was endearing. “You two are quite a pair. Do you run stuff in New York, then?”

Jude scoffed. “Far too busy.”

“So busy,” I said. “Even though—” I sighed, a relaxed sigh that made me hate to think of where my mind was going about work. “I’m just glad I got to work from home. Otherwise, I might’ve been stuck in New York.” I looked to Sam. He winked at me.

Jude’s stay wasn’t long. He knew about the oncoming storm, and because of that, he wanted to head to my mom’s place for a night of rest—which I’d warned him might not happen once my mom and grandma got their hands on him. He was skinny to the point I knew my grandma would want to stuff his face with whatever cake they’d had sent over by Nina, Drew, or their dad, my uncle Tim.

He left me with a bag of clothes, and I put on a show for Daddy Sam.

The princess costume wasn’t custom, but it fit like a glove, and it had a blue, poofy skirt that I could spin around in, and it picked up like I was about to take flight. Alongside more onesies, there were teddies, and Sublime teddies. I hadn’t even managed to score one of them from the shelves of the toy store. They had daily deliveries at this point, selling out in a blink of an eye, even without Sam there as Santa.

“You are just the cutest patootie I’ve ever seen,” Daddy said, pulling me into his arms, trying his best to find my ass through all the ruffled fabric. He held me, he kissed me, and he pulled me into the bedroom, where we were met with all the teddy-bear lumps in the bed, ready to be the flies on the wall to what was about to happen. “I think I—” He paused, my legs around his waist. He leaned back and lay on the bed, a hand washing down over his face.

“What?” I asked, pulling his hand free. He was red. “What were you gonna say?”

“You could use a tiara,” he said.

“No, I—” The heat now rose up in my face, right from my throat all the way up, like I was about to cry. “I think you were gonna say something else.” It came out in a whisper this time, my knees twitching around his thighs, my dick chubbing freely—no underwear.

He leaned in close, bridging the space between our bodies. “If I said what I was thinking, you might end up out there running away in the snow.”

I shook my head. “Just try it.”

“I really like you, Dash,” he whispered, kissing me. “And I really like spending time with you.”

“I really like you too.”

Our faces and bodies were warm, all that heat, like we were suns ready to come together and explode. I wondered if that meant we’d end up blowing a hole in the surface of the earth. It was possible.

Sam squeezed my ass, startling me in that moment and I bounced.

I didn’t know how he could feel that for me when he hadn’t been the one pining over me for years. Unless he had been—in the years he’d known my mom, the years she’d probably spent talking about me to anyone who’d listen, and Sam was kind enough to listen to anyone.

There wasn’t time to process it.

We were about to be busy. Two days: Saturday and Sunday. Dressed as Santa and elf, giving gifts to children in the school, and gifts to them again in the toy store. The toy store, I assumed, was for profit given where it was placed, and it was also going to be a testament to my marketing prowess as to how many people showed up for sexy Santa—with his shirt on this time.

Saturday morning blurred into a busy afternoon of meeting all the kids at the elementary school, handing them one of the wrapped small toys from the sack: donated toys, usually fidget toys, because everyone in the school was obsessed with trading them, and everyone seemed to want this thing called a glitter squish, a blob toy with a glitter cover and this satisfyingly squishy center.

It was hard to even remember this place as the cafeteria I’d been in when I came by for the bake sale. There were large snowmen formed from large polystyrene balls, prodded and poked with accessories. Fake snow covered the floor, forcing a walkway everyone had to follow in order to get to Santa. Large candy canes, the paper coming away from the cardboard—probably another year they’d been used, probably in need of an upgrade.

We were halfway through the kids when the late afternoon arrived, and I spotted my mom, grandma, and Jude all in the entryway of the cafeteria, looking in, taking photos, and smiling at me—at us. It was a quick moment. Jude hadn’t left that morning; he’d wanted to see sexy Santa for himself. Mom and Grandma came along for the ride, it seemed, and would need a ride home. So they stayed, loitering in the back as others joined: my cousin Nina, Sam’s sister Rachel.

It was extra pressure because, to me, this was playing pretend to be Santa’s submissive elf: fetch toys, take pictures of Santa, the kid, and their

mom—mostly the mom, except for the gay dads who were both there.

Every smile was met with a nag, the question of wanting and wonder: wanting to know if this is how my life could have been this entire time, and wondering what would've happened if I'd stayed in Buttonwood and never ventured to New York, which helped me spread my wings and soar.

There was another good thing about being the elf: people were seeing us together. And it solidified something in me, something I'd been wrestling with myself: the idea that we could be a couple. The idea that we could make it work if this were to become long distance. We'd barely been together, but it was a case of when the heart wanted something, it had to route itself in whichever was easiest.

It could.

The evening at the toy store was more of the same: more family, more kids, more parents asking Santa questions—asking if he was single and whether or not he was taking applications. Some were from out of town, a couple from out of state. People were flocking to Hadley's Toys, buying up the shelves, and paying a teary-eyed cashier: Sam's dad.

Barry was restocking shelves with as much as he could and making the most of the hungry customers. It was a genius idea, really: take kids to a toy store to meet Santa, and given they had to wait, they also had to shop.

There was a part of me wanting to know how much this place had made, but that wasn't my place to ask or know. As long as they weren't going under, then I was happy. Rachel and Joanne were filming content, only using Rachel's son, Dex, in any of the footage, broadcasting their message about meeting Santa. They went viral too. The audience was there now, even without Sam being shirtless—which had spawned parodies of Santas in all different shapes and sizes thirst-trapping on the social media timelines.

It was fun. I was having fun.

And everyone saw it. Sam saw it the most, being that I was right beside him. This was play we were engaged in, even if he didn't know it.

The Sunday was different: all day at the toy store, every shelf was full, and a large shipment of Sublime teddies. I was shocked—but they were selling faster than they had a chance to put them out on the floor.

I'd watched so many people—kids and adults alike—opening the toys: the kids ripping right through, while the adults filmed content and

saved the boxes, maybe for resale, each one looking for something inside, a collectible, the rare one.

Sublime had many lines of these teddies: the love collection, a Pride one, the Halloween one, Christmas—any event had them. And they had a standard one, their first release that got the world in a tizzy with how adorable they were. I was still jealous of Eric for getting that job before me.

We celebrated after the store closed. His grandpa, Benjamen, brought out an expensive bottle of scotch and poured it into cheap red Solo cups for each of us still there: his parents, aunt, and brother-in-law. His sister had left with her son, Dexter. It meant Sam could remove the Santa face—the beard and all the white paint we'd pressed against his facial hair.

"This place—" his father began, teary-eyed. He sniffled. "This place has never had so many people through its doors. We've cleared out most of the storage we have, and the teddies. Thank you to Sam for being Santa again this year. Thank you to Dash. I don't think I can thank you enough. You really pulled through for this community, for this family, and I—"

"Aw, Peter," his mom said.

I held it together, sucking in a deep breath and not crying like I knew I would. "And I'd do it again in a heartbeat." Sam hugged an arm around me, pulling me in close, then kissing me on the forehead.

"When Sammy came out years ago, I could never have predicted that he'd find someone like you, that he'd find someone who would one day end up saving us," his father continued, raising his Solo cup. "To having a great Christmas, and finishing the year with success."

I could raise my cup to that. There was still another weekend until Christmas, and another two days of being an elf, but if they'd made a lot of money to pay their debts, then the next week would put them in profit. As someone from marketing, I was desperate to see those figures, to know the margins—but I stopped myself, even in the moment of celebration where moods were high, and the magnetic pull to Daddy Sam's arms was the strongest.

OceanofPDF.com

22. SAM

My world was complete with him in it. He was right by my side, smiling, staring, existing in our bubble where I could've sworn I'd read his mind on occasion, like spending all the time together had created that connection.

The thing was, I'd never invited a guy to stay over in my bed. I'd never even had one of them temporarily live with me either. Dash was beginning to be a lot of my firsts, and the first person I was falling like a misstep on a curb—falling. That's what it was like. Your stomach went for a second before catching yourself, and I'd yet to catch myself.

We spent the Monday morning cuddled up together until my alarm went off for work. I usually had an alarm for getting up and going on a run, but now it was just for waking. I didn't know what I wanted from him, because anything my mind threw out, my body, in a knee-jerk reaction, rescinded. I wanted him, pure and simple. I wanted him.

Breakfast was toaster strudel and coffee. Dash also had an apple juice on the table.

"I think you should be legally allowed to take a day off after that weekend," he said.

"Nah, it was fun," I said.

He yawned, and after a second of seeing it, I caught his yawn. He giggle-snorted.

"My mom was sending pictures of us last night," he said. "I was too tired to show you." He placed a hand over his mouth as he yawned again. "I'll show you now." He looked around, leaving the table for his phone.

"You should get a million stars for helping me," I called out to him. "And next weekend too."

He laughed, then a scream came.

I raced to him in the bedroom. He sat on the bed, teddies covering him. He stared at his phone.

"What is it?" I asked, tilting my head and stepping closer.

"An email," he whispered, shaking his head. He gave a passing glance at me as I got closer, and I saw his eyes gloss over with tears. "It's __"

"Everything okay, baby?" I dipped low, trying to make eye contact.

He shook his head. “I’ve—” He looked at me. “I’ve got to go back to New York.”

“What?”

“Um—” He looked at me, gulping and sucking back. “So, my friend Eric, the one who helped get your dad that contract, well, he told me about an opening a few weeks ago. I—I submitted my resume and was salty because they never got back to me. But—but now—oh my god. I think they’re offering me a job. A senior marketing position. But I—”

“You’ve got to go back for it,” I mustered.

He nodded, tears in his eyes. “It’s—it’s probably just a formal interview, but—”

I sat on the bed beside him, cuddling and stroking his back. “You’ve got to do it,” I said, stroking his back against the shiver that rattled him. “Will you be back?”

“Of course, my stuff is here.” He wiped his face and sniffled. “Oh god. I’m being so emotional right now. Will you check in on my mom from time to time?”

“Of course,” I said, nuzzling my head to his and kissing him. He hadn’t answered my question; it must’ve been difficult. I didn’t want to ask it again. “I’ll drive you over on my way to work so you can take your car.”

Dash smiled, turning into my body, and kissed me. “Thank you.”

I wanted to ask him when he’d be back again.

But if he ignored it, I’d have felt low, and even destroyed.

He packed some things: only a couple of his teddies, some of his clothes from the drawer I’d given him. He had to come back for the rest of it. He had to come back. I still needed my elf this weekend.

We were quiet on the drive to his mom’s house. He didn’t go in, just kissed me, and then took his car to drive back to New York. Not a word about his return, not a word about being my elf. He’d dropped everything. He’d dropped me, and for the first time in a while, I had a pit in my stomach, the same pit that happened when we’d lost a game. It was awful, like pure acid burning through skin—it ravaged me into a husk.

There was nothing I could do or say to him about the entire situation. He had dreams, and they were right in front of him. Getting that job was a dream to him. I realized my dream couldn’t hinge on someone, especially not the idea of finding someone who fit me—my soul. I worked the entire day like I was a ghost just walking through spaces. On the

outside, I was switched on, and I doubt anyone noticed anything was different, except for the remnants of the white in my beard we'd been unable to clean off.

I went straight to the sports bar after work.

Caroline was behind the bar, busy; the bar itself was swamped. The Christmas spirit was taking over people. The town lights were on, the tree—a large thing near a parking lot where festive food carts pulled up to sell their overpriced hot dogs and bags of nuts. Nothing caught my interest now.

In the corner booth I'd sat with Dash that night, I drank alone, a beer, and then another, until Caroline came over on her break, throwing herself into the seat beside me. She clung to my arm, all smiles.

"Okay, that's not what I was expecting," she said, pulling my arm and jolting me. "What's eating you up?"

"Dash," I said, so plainly. "He's—"

"Oh god," she said, sighing. "You've broken things off already? We just saw you at the school, the way he looked at you, the way he was a better elf than I'd ever been."

I sucked in deep and let it out softly. "He's gone back," I said. "He's got a job interview, and so he's left."

"Shut up." She rocked my arm again. "How has he gone?"

"Because the job is something he's always wanted, and I was never going to stand in the way of it."

"Shut up," she said, this time with more force behind it. "You are not the Sam I remember. The Sam who knew what he wanted, the Sam who would punch and whatever you did on the football field."

I laughed. "No punching, but we would pound them—" I laughed harder this time, tears coming out.

Caroline caught them, wiping them with her hand. "You should go to him," she said.

"I can't. You know I can't just leave. The kids—"

"Danny said you're not even doing anything at school," she said. "Just movies and stuff. It's the holidays; they're about to break for Christmas anyway. I'm sure someone can cover for you."

I continued to shake my head, but I'd thought about it. "He also asked me to check in on his mom."

"And I can do that. I love Mrs. Dashofy," she said. "So, what's actually stopping you now?"

“I’ve had like three beers,” I said, sniffing back a light snicker. “I’m not driving drunk.”

“That’s fair, and I wouldn’t let you, but tomorrow,” she said. “You should go to him. You should tell him how he’s made you feel, and then, maybe decide where it goes from there.”

Caroline had the answers, it seemed, and I loved that about her, even if sometimes those things she said gave me the worst internal pain. I didn’t want to think about exploding my feelings all over him, but at the same time, I didn’t want him to think I’d stopped thinking about him. I hadn’t texted him all day, or called, or done anything but glance at the photos we’d taken of each other. And that was just making the knot in my stomach worse.

“I think it’s important you tell him how you feel,” she continued.

I nodded. “But do you think he’ll even want to do long distance?” The words came out of me like the worst phrase that had ever been in my mouth. “And how would it even work?” I looked at her like she had all the answers, because she usually did have all the answers.

“First, you need to know if he’s on the same page, then you’ll figure it out,” she said. “You’ll always find a way to figure it out. I believe in you, Sammy.”

Sinking into the booth, I closed my eyes briefly, practicing my breathing.

“Go on,” she said. “I’ll call you a cab. You go home, sleep this off, and tomorrow, call in sick—or something.”

“Calling in sick,” I grumbled. “I don’t think I could lie like that.”

“You lied for years,” she said, tugging my arm and chuckling. “I’m sure you can manage something. Now, get your booty up. You’re going to New York tomorrow, and you’re going to get your man.”

It was inspiring, and I was no longer sinking into a spiral. But I didn’t want to lie to the school. I couldn’t lie; I was in my honesty era, and I guessed that honesty meant also being honest to Dash as well.

“I don’t even know where he lives,” I said.

“Mrs. Dashofy will tell you, I’m sure. Stop making excuses. You’re going.”

* * *

I didn’t know what I was doing. I was taken over by Caroline’s push, and before I knew it, I was driving to New York, driving with a handwritten address of a place I’d never been before, of showing up with just the clothes on my back. But at least I hadn’t called in sick. I’d explained the situation to Marcia, the headteacher, and she seconded Caroline’s push—talking about *love*, and my heart was in my throat the entire time she agreed to cover the class for me. For *love* and big gestures.

In that time, I could think—or so I thought. I was far too focused on the road and not speeding. There were strong flurries of snow drifting in as I drove, each one making me question what I was doing. For all I knew, he was going to come back; he’d left his things behind. But I’d grown close to him, and suddenly being torn from his side had sent the fight-or-flight in me feral.

I’d only ever spent a weekend in the summer in New York, usually with Caroline, usually drunk, and so my knowledge of the space was nonexistent.

Six hours it took.

Six hours of thinking.

Six hours of wondering.

Had I made the right call in driving all the way out here? Like I hadn’t wanted to let go of him, like I needed him around me because, for the first time in a while, I wasn’t punishing my body over with extreme run times and workouts. I was settling into the time and space we’d been spending together.

I found his apartment building, still telling myself it was the right decision to come all the way here. I’d parked and paid the meter. He was in 6B. The entry door was locked. A panel of buttons for apartments lined the brick at the side. And just as I was about to press the call button for his place, someone opened the door, leaving the building. I thanked them as I entered, hugging the coat around myself tighter. It was colder inside than it was out in the icy winds and slush-lined sidewalks.

I took the elevator to the sixth floor. Dash’s apartment was 6B, and I couldn’t tell where to go. There were zero directions, so I wandered up and down the hallway before finding it. Of course it was his apartment; his signature smell hovered right by the door, which was decorated in Thanksgiving turkeys made from hand painting, like the types I’d make with my class. I stared at the door for a long while, my heart beating out of

my chest, aching in my ears, my palms sweating, itching, readying themselves to curl and knock on the door.

"You can do it," I told myself.

I knocked. No answer.

Again. There was nothing.

He could've been out; he could've been anywhere. Or maybe he just hated his neighbors so much he refused to answer even after a third knock. It could've made some sense, considering he hadn't wanted to be in Buttonwood, and even with me, when I first saw him.

As I resigned myself to leaning against the wall across from the door, knowing if he looked, he'd see me through the peephole, I got a text from him.

It looks like they're going to make me an official offer on the job. He sent.

I stared at the text, a light chuckle in the back of my throat. I'd been here, thinking he was screening me, but he was busy.

That's great! I messaged back.

So, I'm going to be coming back tonight. I'll call you once I'm back at my place.

Suddenly, I felt foolish. So stuck in one way of thinking that all other logic decided to refuse entry into my mind.

The elevator dinged, and there he was, standing, staring at his phone as he walked. Dots appeared on my phone as he was crafting something else to say—maybe because of my silence, maybe something to tell me we'd have to make the next week special because he was going to be too busy to even think about a relationship after coming back.

I should've gone for a run this morning. I should've cleared my mind. Spiraling thoughts were a toxin, and Dash brought all mine out of me.

He looked up and saw me. He ran and jumped right into my arms, tears in his eyes as we stared at each other, embraced, our quivering lips eventually met, and I pinned him against his apartment door, my breath too shallow to make sounds. I didn't know what I would say to him, except I'd been worried about letting a good thing go.

And that's exactly what I said.

Dash blinked back tears and sniffled. "I was worried you'd never drive to see me if we dated, but you're here, and—you knew I was going to

come back, right?”

I kissed him again. “Your track record isn’t that great,” I said. “So, you can’t really blame me for not wanting to wait to find out.”

“We should go inside,” he said, and I let him down before anyone could’ve seen our bodies in a game of Twister together, with our thick coats like a blur filter of whose arm belonged to who. “Because—”

“I really like you, and I want this to happen.”

“I want this to happen,” he repeated. “So, that means we’re dating, and if that’s the case, you should know, this place is a bit of a mess.”

I snickered. The way he’d cleaned my house, I didn’t know how much of that to take as truth, but he was right. The moment he opened the door, I could see there were teddies everywhere, and each one had its own space. The apartment itself was all garish bright colors, like stepping into another teacher’s classroom who made sure to use the brightest color poster cards for the room display and decor.

“Ta-da,” he said, and the magic trick was to have me stunned.

It worked, like a look into Dash’s mind.

I wanted to see more.

OceanofPDF.com

23. DASH

I'd left Buttonwood in a hurry. I wanted to prepare for the interview and have a night in my own bed. But all night, Sam had been on my mind, and my bed felt lonely, not only because I didn't have as many teddies in it, but also because I didn't have his warm body lying beside me.

We hadn't really texted much that night or the following day, just to say I was nervous about the interview and ask how my mom was doing. I never thought he'd have made the drive all the way down to me. In my fantasies, sure, but not for real. Never in this lifetime did I think I'd get home and see Samuel Hadley standing outside my front door, shoulders down, with a look of defeat on his face until I leapt into his arms and saw him find that smile again.

I barely had time to show him around the apartment before taking him to bed. The apartment was cold, and the only way I knew to heat the place up was through sheer force of will, and that meant our bodies coming together—again and again. He took a tour while carrying me, like he did, pulling my weight against his body, pushing me against walls, and finding new ways to try and get his dick to reach my guts.

We lay in my bed, naked, staring at each other. Our hands acted like they had that first time we'd been together—slightly drunk, not knowing where they went, or how to even function—like we were both virgins again.

"I'm sorry for coming all the way out," Sam whispered as his finger drew circles on my chest. "Not *sorry* sorry, but for thinking you were never coming back. Which isn't really a sorry, but I'm not trying to infiltrate your life."

"And I already told you, I was always coming back," I said. "Not only because of my teddies, but because I made a promise to someone."

His eyes widened. "You did?"

"Yeah, to this guy. He um—" I watched his face as it turned through all expressions and twitches. "He wears all red, and he's someone I want to make happy."

"Santa," he whispered. "Because you're right, you made a promise to him, and he'd be sad if his elf didn't report for duty."

I pawed a hand at his chest. "Anyway, you were supposed to be at work."

He shrugged. “I couldn’t think of anything else I needed to do but see you today,” he said. “So, I had someone cover for me. But I—”

“You shouldn’t have put me before your job,” I said.

“It’s really okay,” he said. “Plus, I forgot, but I also have another reason for coming.”

“Oh?”

Sam got out of bed, his naked body on full display as he went looking for his coat. It meshed with the mess around the place. He came back with his coat and pulled something from the pocket: balled-up fabric. “I didn’t want you to come here and not have the right day of the week on,” he said, holding them up to me.

“You are—” I sucked in deep. “Damn it.”

“But again, you probably have more of these.”

“I do,” I giggled. “Thank you, though, because now I don’t have to go looking for a pair to wear on the drive back.”

He threw himself back on the bed, arms across my body. “I also decided, maybe right before I saw you, that maybe we could do long distance, if this is something you want to continue.”

“Yes,” I said, watching his arm on my chest rise with my deep breath. “I’d like that.” He squeezed his arm around me, pulling me in closer.

Then we lay there, looking at my ceiling and all the stars, now a sickly green color in the daylight.

“Can I give you stars?” I asked him. “For being a good Daddy?”

He hummed, the sound of it going through my body like my bones were hollow and played like instruments. “I take my stars in kisses,” he said. “Each kiss is a star for me.”

“I like that,” I said. “I like you. A lot.” It was as close to love as either of us were getting to say right now. The L-word was on the tips of our tongues, neither of us wanting to throw it out first because it hadn’t even been that long. Neither of us wanted to admit to falling fast, or falling first, but we’d both fallen, and that was all that mattered.

“Also, you don’t know how long parking is outside?”

I laughed hard. “I knew I saw your car. It depends how much you paid.”

“Five bucks, maybe.”

“Then three hours, maybe.”

He stroked a hand across my chest, dipping below the duvet. “Then I guess we’ve got time,” he said, kissing the exposed skin above my belly button.

I giggled at the tickle in my belly, my hand twitching to grab his head and push it against my skin to make more tickles from his soft, scratchy beard. And all I could do was think: think about how this was the most any man had done for me, think about how he’d missed me so much in the space of a day that he needed to find me—even with the excuse of bringing me underwear.

It was special, the type of special I’d heard only comes around once in a lifetime, the type of special I’d been told to grab with both hands and never let go. I didn’t want to let go of Sam, of the job offer, or of New York.

Once we were able to stop and look at each other again without the urge to jump and try pulling clothes off each other’s bodies, I took him on a proper tour of the apartment, sans Jude’s room. This place was magic for me: all so much color, painted it ourselves, and we’d made it so that once all the lights were out and the string lights were on, the space looked like a museum or gallery, but without the extortionate prices on anything.

Sam saw even more of my teddies, and more of the boxes we had filled with princess dresses and onesies, playtime activities, things we did to feel fun and silly, to let our inner child free and scream into the void of adulthood. And after all that, he pulled me into a hug and kissed my neck, and then my cheek, working his way to my ear.

“I want to be with you,” he whispered. “I want you.”

I leaned away to look him in the eye. “I want you too. I think—well, you know I’ve had a crush on you.”

“You might’ve had a crush first, but my crush is harder.” He bit his lip.

I slowly shook my head. “We should leave, even though I’d absolutely go for a third round—on the sofa.” I placed a hand on his chest. “But you know as well as I do that we’ve got to be back in Buttonwood tonight.”

He pursed his lips, and I went in for a kiss. He wrapped his arms around me, and we spun for a moment. I saw stars in his eyes, and that was all I needed to know how real this all was. The most real of anything that had happened today—even beating my dream job offer.

“So, are you okay doing long distance?” I asked after the spinning stopped.

“I am if you are,” he said. “But I am, regardless of whether you are. I’m okay with it.”

“Okay,” I said, kissing him again and sniffling

I didn’t realize I was crying until Sam wiped a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Talk to me, baby.”

I tried. I really did. But the words got tangled somewhere between my chest and my throat. The interview, the job offer, leaving Buttonwood, Sam showing up at my door, long distance, New York, Mom, Jude, everything—all too much.

My lower lip wobbled. “Too much.”

Sam’s face softened. “Okay. We don’t have to talk about any of it right now.”

He pulled me into his arms, and I went easily, curling against his chest like I belonged there. His heartbeat thumped steadily beneath my ear, warm and familiar. My fingers found the front of his shirt and held on.

“Do you want to be Little for a while?” he asked quietly. “You don’t have to. We can just cuddle. But if you want your teddies, your onesie, or something soft, Daddy can help.”

I nodded against his chest before I could think better of it. “Please.”

“Okay, sweetheart. Color?”

“Green,” I whispered.

“Good boy. Thank you for telling me.”

The praise settled something in me. Warm, safe, and simple. I let out a breath and tucked my face further into him.

Daddy moved to stand and I huffed.

“I’m here. I’m getting your teddies.”

He opened the closet where Jude and I kept the softer things: my favorite onesie, a stack of blankets, and the teddies I hadn’t packed for Buttonwood. He brought back my purple Sublime teddy first, the one with the gold star on its belly, then added two more to the bed.

“There,” he said, sitting beside me. “Your whole committee is here.”

I hugged the purple teddy to my chest and looked up at him. “They missed me.”

Sam smiled. “Did they? And what about me?”

“They said you’re nice.” I shrugged. “You need to meet them.”

“Nice to meet *you*.”

I giggled, small and sleepy, and Sam’s expression went soft in that way that made my tummy flutter.

“Do you want cocoa?” he asked. “Or apple juice?”

“Apple juice.”

“Apple juice it is. And we can watch something silly. No grown-up decisions. Just you, me, and your teddies.”

“No grown-up stuff,” I agreed.

“No grown-up stuff,” he promised.

He returned with a sippy cup of apple juice, and I took it with both hands. He didn’t tease me or make me feel silly for needing it. He just sat beside me while I drank, rubbing slow circles between my shoulder blades.

“You did a lot today,” he murmured. “You were very brave.”

My eyes filled again, but this time it felt gentler. “I was?”

“Very.” He kissed my temple. “And you don’t have to be brave anymore tonight. Daddy’s got you.”

I curled into his side, teddy tucked beneath my chin, and let the world shrink down to the warmth of his arms, the sweetness of apple juice, and the quiet safety of being little.

After a while, though, I had to be big, and adult, and make those decisions.

The apartment had gone quiet again, except for the soft hum of the radiator and the distant rush of traffic below. Sam sat beside me on the bed, our shoulders touching, both of us still wrapped up in everything that had happened: the job offer, the drive, the reunion, and the words we’d finally said out loud.

I stared at the green stars on my ceiling. “This is all happening really fast, isn’t it?”

Sam turned toward me. “Yeah. It is.”

The honesty of it made my chest tighten, but not in a bad way. “We’ve known each other for what, not even two weeks?”

“Technically, we’ve known each other much longer,” Sam snickered. “Your mom always talks about you.”

“And we know each other’s families,” I said. “Oh, and we’ve survived a toy-store crisis, you’ve gone viral, and then decided we’re boyfriends.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds like a movie on fast-forward,” Sam said, a small smile tugging at his mouth.

“It feels like one.” I pulled my knees up, hugging them to my chest. “And I’m scared that when Christmas is over, we’ll wake up and realize we only fell for the version of us that existed in this moment, like we’re in a snow globe.”

Sam was quiet for a moment. Then he reached over and took my hand.

“That’s fair,” he said. “And I don’t want to pretend it isn’t fast. I don’t want to act like two weeks is the same as two years, or that we know everything about each other yet.”

I looked at him. “But?”

“But I know how I feel when you’re here,” he said. “I know I missed you after one day, which is embarrassing. I know I drove six hours because the thought of letting you go without telling you how I felt was—was worse than anything else. I mean, I even had Marcia telling me to come here, and she was covering for me.”

My eyes softened before I could stop them. “You really drove all that way because you were scared I wouldn’t come back?”

“I drove all that way because I didn’t want to wonder,” he said. “I didn’t want to spend the next week pretending I was okay with maybe losing something before I’d even given it a chance.”

I leaned into him, resting my head against his shoulder. “I was coming back.”

“I know that.” He kissed my hair. “But I’m glad I came. Not because I think we need to rush into forever, but because I wanted you to know this matters to me.”

“It matters to me too,” I whispered.

Sam shifted so we were facing each other. “So, here’s what I think. We don’t have to decide tonight whether this lasts forever. We don’t have to promise to move in together, get married, or have a house full of teddies by spring.”

I snorted through a smile. “That’s disappointing. I had plans for the teddy room a.k.a. your gym, so say sayonara to the treadmill.”

“We can revisit the teddy room after we’ve survived long distance,” he said, making me laugh hard.

“Okay,” I said. “So, what do we decide?”

“We take it one step at a time,” he said. “We date. We talk. We visit each other. We don’t make promises we can’t keep because everything feels magical right now.”

I nodded slowly. “And if it starts to feel like too much?”

“Then we say so,” he answered. “No pretending. No disappearing because we’re scared. If one of us needs space, we say it. If one of us wants more, we say that too.”

“That sounds very adult,” I murmured.

“I know. Terrifying.”

I giggled and tucked myself against his side. “I like the idea of taking it slow, even if everything else has been fast.”

“Me too.” He wrapped an arm around me. “We can let this be new without making it smaller than it is. We can let it be serious without turning it into a test we have to pass.”

I was quiet for a moment, thinking. “I don’t want to give up New York.”

“I don’t want you to,” Sam said at once. “You’ve worked hard for this life. You deserve the job, the friends, the apartment, all of it.”

“And I don’t want to give up you.”

His expression softened. “Then we figure out how both things can exist. Maybe it’s weekends. Maybe it’s video calls and bad jokes and me sending you pictures of the latest school-project disasters. Maybe it’s you coming home for holidays and me visiting New York when I can.”

“You’d come to New York?” I asked.

“For you? Yeah.” He kissed my temple. “I’d come for you.”

My eyes filled, and I blinked quickly, laughing at myself. “You can’t just say things like that after I’ve cried twice today.”

“Sorry,” he said, though he clearly wasn’t.

I took a breath. “Okay. One step at a time. We date. We talk. We visit. And we don’t treat every hard day like proof this can’t work.”

“Exactly.” He laced our fingers together. “And if we get to a point where it isn’t working, we’ll be honest about that too. But I’m not planning on letting go easily.”

“Good,” I said, squeezing his hand. “Because I’m not either.”

We stayed there for a while, wrapped in each other and the uncertain, glowing possibility of what came next. Nothing had been solved.

New York was still six hours away. Christmas was still coming. Our families would still have opinions, and long distance would still be difficult.

But for the first time, it didn't feel like we were rushing toward an ending.

We were choosing a beginning: one honest conversation, one visit, and one day at a time.

* * *

Sam drove his car with me and more of my things to take back to his place. Strange to leave my car behind and make me rely on him, but it meant he'd promised to drive me back after Christmas and even stay with me during the tail end of winter break.

I couldn't believe he'd driven all the way here. I replayed it over in my mind, desperate for a moment alone where I could call Jude and tell him what happened. He would've thought I was making the whole thing up, and then make another case for why we should have one of those doorbell camera things.

We had similar taste in music, and played one of my favorites: Ty Hartwell. I'd seen him in concert once and cried. The voice of an actual angel. I had a massive crush on him—and that was definitely a phase I hadn't grown out of.

We'd stopped at a gas station on the way, loaded ourselves up on energy drinks, and then stopped off at two more gas stations to pee because that was what happened when you'd only consumed energy drinks and beef jerky sticks.

After ten, and both of us were exhausted, wanting nothing more than to climb into bed on top of each other, and that was exactly what we did. Not a single light was turned on as we zombie-walked from the front door to the bedroom, stripping ourselves naked, not even tempted by it. Sam even slept on the teddies.

It surprised me to see him awake early, a pep in his step, his running shorts on, soaked in sweat. Looking through groggy eyes, I could see he was panting, and from the way he was tiptoeing to the bathroom, he was trying not to wake me.

"Meugh." I didn't know what came out of me.

"Hey, baby," he whispered, and cue melting. I pulled the duvet over my face, an excited recoil at being called baby. I loved it, and after the

drive, I'd forgotten how intense we'd been making love, and plans for the future. "Not regretting anything, are you?" His voice was closer, and so was his smell—the mix of body odor and whatever scent was in Electric Pure Sport—a citrus fruit.

"How did you wake up before me?" I groaned, pulling my head out again.

Sam tugged it down further. "I had to run. My brain needed to calm itself," he said. "I meant every word I said yesterday about doing this, and I'm even more sure of it now. Even if I have to run all the way, we'll make it."

I giggled. "It's a nice gesture, but you should just drive, or take the train, but there's like a million connections." My eyes rolled, the sensation like a chill as I shuddered.

"How about we don't think about that, and instead, we start the day with fun?" He continued to pull the duvet down, slowly, like he was teasing himself with every inch of flesh he managed to see.

"I've got so much to do today," I said, reaching down to grab at my dick, chubbed with morning wood. "Which will be so much easier to do after a shower with you." I snorted. "That rhymes."

He took my hand away and kissed it. "Then let me show you the way."

We were officially dating, officially a couple, and soon that news would be spreading across town. If not from my cousin, it would be from my mom. Maybe it had been broadcast, or maybe the news was waiting on us to make our first public outing as a couple. They definitely weren't going to get that here, in the bedroom, or the shower, or walking around one of the small teddies scattered around the living room.

That day, I handed my notice in to my job and signed the acceptance of a job offer from the Sublime teddy company. I was set to start the first week of January, a nice clean start. The soda company accepted my resignation, working a two-week period to hand off everything to another colleague in New York. I knew they didn't mind me working remote—but they liked having someone around. The Sublime job could be done completely remote, which would help being long distance.

If this was relationship bliss, then I wanted more of it, maybe with the mix of Christmas, but not necessarily reliant on it. I liked gifts, of

course, but more than anything, I liked the freedom to play, and Sam was full of it, wanting to engage in every facet of play.

Time in this relationship bubble whirred around us.

We were found cuddled beside each other like penguins, watching the Christmas tree lights go on, then wandering around buying warm nuts and hot chocolate from nearby food vendors.

Our families were around us.

My mom's arm was still in a sling, but she was getting better and continued to refute the claim she'd fallen for the purpose of having me here to be set up with Sam. She walked around in her puffy coat, like it would expand if she fell again, one arm of the coat tucked into the pocket while her other was flailing around with her expressive talking.

Grandma was also nearly drowned out by her winter coat too, but that didn't stop her from being the loudest person. Her voice traveled. A town crier, ringing a bell, ready to spread gossip. She announced to everyone in town how proud of me she was.

Sam stared at me, a loving hole boring into the side of my face. "We're all proud of him," he said.

"And he has a new fancy job," she said.

"Not until the new year," I said. "I'm about to get a load of free teddies too, so—" I blinked at Sam, my words in my throat, unable to come out.

"I'll make room for them," Sam said, and slipped his warm gloved hand into mine.

Everyone in town knew. Gossip traveled far and fast; people congratulated us like something big had happened, but all we'd done was become boyfriends. I supposed maybe they assumed we'd proposed, and the idea of it made me blush.

We all got a photo in front of the large town tree in all its colorful glory. Both of our families together. Not everyone looked as the photo was taken, but that didn't matter, because we had a photo now, and in Sam's words, it would look perfect on our fridge.

I was now part of an "us" and "our," part of a "we" I'd never felt before. One that wasn't just friends, but was with someone I'd asked Santa for at Christmas. One Samuel Hadley, wrapped under the tree. I was surely on the nice list, and here he was, my reward for all those years—or maybe I

was his reward that came back to town, perfectly timed, perfectly ready for a relationship.

I was his elf.

He was my Santa Daddy.

We were made for each other.

And together we could do anything.

Even fall fast, and fall harder, fall head over snow boots in love.

Ready for our forever of teddies and tea parties.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

DASH

I didn’t want to spend a day away from Sam.

When Christmas morning arrived, he gave me a key to his place and a blind-box Sublime teddy—he’d said it was from the first shipment his dad got, before I got the job. It was a nice gift, because I’d always accept a blind-box teddy. The key, however, was new. I cried when he said it was for me to come and go whenever I wanted.

I gave him a picture I’d drawn and colored of the two of us, for the fridge, to complement the photos of our families together in front of the tree. We hadn’t planned on giving each other anything, mostly because we’d agreed we were each other’s gifts.

The day had me planning on staying with him here, but I loved New York. It was a hub where anything could happen. I was needed there, and we had to go long distance, which we’d agreed on: a plan of visiting each other on alternating weekends.

Six months passed, and it was safe to say long distance didn’t work out for us.

It was sad. The choice of stepping away from an *us* or from what I’d wanted, and I’d had it—but now had to let go.

Except New York would be there, so I moved back to Buttonwood. That way, we could give it a shot: a shot at happiness that started in my belly and spread, the feeling that chased me back into Sam’s arms.

And work was all from home. So, the dream continued. As did the supply of new Sublime teddies before they hit the market.

Summers in Buttonwood were filled with nostalgia, the type that haunted me with memories of things I used to do with my friends. We were weird friends, going into the woods, celebrating the solstice, and drinking wine coolers while spinning and dancing.

Today marked three months since I’d decided to come back and live here with him—to make use of that key he’d given me properly. Although working from home meant I wasn’t really coming and going. I’d been expanding and exploring my role, which meant visiting smaller toy stores like Sam’s family’s and helping them with a hookup to Sublime, single-handedly tearing the grip big toy stores had over people.

Sam cooked breakfast, all giddy. He made so many pancakes he could've fed a small army. And then, as I wandered into the kitchen in my onesie, hugging a teddy, I saw three place settings. Rubbing my eyes, I let out a sound—nonsense.

"We've got a surprise coming," he said, standing there all attractive with no top on, only a pair of slutty gray sweatpants that showed his impressive bulge.

"It's not my birthday until next week," I said, shrinking my chin down into my chest. "So it's a person."

"Come on, no guessing," he said, winking at me. "I know it's what you want."

I looked him over, trying not to be thirsty—but licking my lips all the same. "I want a lot of things."

"Well, this one is—"

A knock came at the door. Several. Pounding.

I knew exactly who it was.

I woke to those knocks on my bedroom door for years.

Jude. I nearly screamed, scrambling to the door.

Sam beat me to it, holding a finger up to me. "Patience," he said. "You've gotta wait for this."

Pouting. "Pwease."

"I'm surprised you haven't figured it out."

As he opened the door, a small, fluffy ball of energy raced inside, yapping. I dropped to my knees, letting the Pomeranian dog jump into my lap. Looking up, Jude was there at the door, juggling a large bag in his arms.

"Just in time," Jude laughed.

"I've just finished making breakfast," Sam said.

"Put a top on," I said, hugging the dog, his paws up on me, licking at my face. "Aw, what's your name?"

As Jude walked in, I noticed he was carrying dog supplies.

"Wait—" I said, holding the dog out in front of me. "Is this—"

"Surprise," Jude and Sam said together.

"Aw, I love—him—her," I said, pretending to sob. "Are you being serious?"

They were. It was an early present.

Jude found a man, and that man found him, and together they'd found and rescued dogs. It was a whole thing that happened in Maine while I was cuddled up with Sam as he gave me shiny gold stars for being a good boy.

"Where's your boyfriend?" I asked. "Isn't he helping?"

"He's in Maine," Jude said. "But you'll meet him soon, Sam. Then we can double date."

I was too preoccupied with the dog. It was named Pudding because, when they found him, he was licking a vanilla pudding cup, and his coat was a yellow-cream color like pudding.

He was the perfect addition to the family.

Now all we needed was some art of him on the fridge and to pick up all the teddies from out of his reach before he tore through them all. Despite being told he wouldn't do that, he immediately went for the teddy I was holding—maybe because he knew I was his new Daddy, and he didn't like the cuddle competition. Probably the same thing I'd do if Sam had a teddy he wanted to cuddle instead of me.

"He's really good," Jude said. "And he loves to play. I figured he was perfect for my best friend."

Pudding decided, very firmly, that the teddy in my arms belonged to him.

"No," I told him, holding it above my head. "This is mine."

The little Pomeranian jumped and yapped, his fluffy tail going so fast it was practically a blur.

Sam laughed from the kitchen. "I think you've met your match."

"He's a teddy thief," I accused.

"He's a puppy," Jude said from the sofa. "Everything is either a toy, food, or a personal enemy."

Pudding made another leap, and I squealed, clutching the teddy to my chest. "Daddy, save me!"

Sam came over immediately, scooping Pudding up before he could launch himself at me again. "Okay, little man. No teddy theft on your first day here, you'll get a reputation."

Pudding licked Daddy Sam's chin, entirely unrepentant.

"He likes you," I said, pouting.

"He has excellent taste."

I crawled onto the sofa beside Jude, pulling a blanket over my legs. “Can we have a welcome-home tea party for Pudding?”

Jude cooed. “For the dog or for me being your best friend?”

“Yes. He needs to feel welcome.”

Sam crouched in front of us, like he was hiding from Pudding. “What do we need for the party?”

I thought hard. “A bowl. And a blanket. And maybe a teddy that isn’t mine.”

“That last part seems wise,” Sam said.

We made a nest on the floor with an old blanket, a water bowl, and one of the sturdier teddies from the box Jude brought. Pudding sniffed everything, sneezed at the teddy, then curled up directly in the middle of the nest, settling into his new life.

“He likes it,” I whispered.

“He loves it,” Sam corrected, sitting behind me and pulling me back against his chest.

I leaned into him, watching Pudding’s tiny nose twitch as he fell asleep.

“He’s really ours?” I asked.

“He’s ours,” Sam said.

Jude smiled from the sofa. “And he has two overprotective dads. He’s going to be spoiled rotten.”

“Good,” I said. “He deserves it.”

Sam kissed the top of my head. “So do you.”

My cheeks warmed, and I buried my face against his chest. “Daddy.”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I’m happy.”

His arms tightened around me, gentle and sure. “I’m happy too.”

Pudding snored softly in his little nest, and for once, I didn’t feel like I needed to wish for anything else. I had everything I could ever want, and then some.

OceanofPDF.com

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Hello reader!

Thank you for taking a trip with me to Buttonwood, I hope you’ve had as much as I have. There’s still plenty more small-town Christmas adventures to be had if you go through the rest of the series.

There’s also a second special story in there… Jude’s story! Who’s captured his heart? Where did he get that dog from? And can he be transformed from the Christmas grump? We’ll find out together…

Again, you rock for reading all the way to the end, and I’ll let you in on a secret. I’ve sprinkled some easter eggs in here for another character in an upcoming book… Jude, of course, but there’s another hiding in here.

Follow me to stay updated and don’t forget to rate and review! It really helps!

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heya! I’m Joe Satoria, I write sweet and spicy MM romances. I mostly write Daddies and D/s dynamics in my pairings... some soft and sweet, other dark and dangerous.

As a queer person using he/they pronouns, I am an own voices author, which means you’re reading through the eyes of lived experience... only the gay relationships part, definitely not the dangerous Daddies... oops!

Here’s what’s COMING SOON.

Stay caught up with my and join my newsletter:

Find and Follow Joe Online

OceanofPDF.com