A BILLIONAIRE CHRISTMAS





Get STUFFED







ELODIE HART

Get Stuffed

ELODIE HART

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Contents

A note from Elodie

Prologue - Christmas in July

1. The Naughty List
2. Driving Home for Christmas
3. Do You Hear What I Hear?
4. Good King Wenceslas
5. Sweet Baby Cheeses
6. You'd Better Watch Out
7. Bring Us Some Figgy Pudding
8. Deck the Halls
9. Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas
10. Santi, Baby
11. All I Want for Christmas is You
12. Silent Night
13. Christmas Is Coming (The Goose Is Getting Fat)
14. O Holy Night
15. While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night
16. Oh Come, All Ye Faithful
17. Joy to the World
18. Auld Lang Syne

More Christmas books!

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A note from Elodie

I'm so happy to finally bring you Santi and Sabrina's story! If you've read *The Reluctant Billionaire*, you'll have met them both, and Santi also gives Marlowe her big break in *Duplicity*.

This story takes place the same year as *The Reluctant Billionaire* and eighteen months before *Duplicity*.

While Santi is British and Sabrina is American, the spelling, punctuation and grammar are all in British English for consistency. I've made some exceptions in Sabrina's interiority and speech where to use the British version would be audibly jarring (eg. *toward* instead of *towards*).

Finally, this book contains details about GLP-1 usage and dietary protocol around it. I am not a doctor! Please do not consider any of my commentary as medical advice. I did find this Zoe podcast episode helpful in understanding the dietary issues at hand and even pilfered the excellent "Ferrari and dirt track" analogy from Dr Federica Amati.

I hope you enjoy!
Elodie x

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Prologue - Christmas in July

Six months earlier - Sabrina

When you cook for the rich and famous, there are always upsides and downsides.

The upsides? Insane kitchens. Unlimited food budgets. Travel. The occasional celebrity guest for dinner.

The downsides? I guess if I had to sum them up in a single word, I would say *neuroses*. Celebrities and billionaires are often pretty weird, overly self-absorbed, and high-maintenance as hell. Last year, I worked for someone who would only drink water at fourteen degrees Celsius and wouldn't permit dried herbs in any context.

Like I said, neuroses.

I've gotten super lucky with my current clients, the Montefiore-Charltons. Paul is just a regular, sixty-year-old British tech tycoon who would love to spend his hard-earned billions on bangers and mash and fish and chips but whose flamboyant wife Chiara has strong views about his admittedly brutal cholesterol levels and who brought me on board to whip him into shape.

By far the worst part of the job is looking into Paul's puppy-dog eyes each evening as I serve him up spiralised zucchini instead of goose-fat-roasted potatoes. But with Paul and Chiara escaping to Mustique for the winter, their daughter Lotta has hooked me up with an interview for a potential new gig. Not only is it one I seriously need to land while I work

out my visa issues, but the guy I'm meeting today is both a celebrity *and* a billionaire: a world-famous tenor who also runs the world's biggest classical music label.

Santiago Vale.

At first glance, his office is on brand: all-white. Extravagant. *Huge*. There are millions of those framed platinum disc thingies you'd expect a music mogul to have, and they're pretty much wallpapering this entire room, except for one wall that's filled with photos and posters of him and his famous family.

The only part I wasn't expecting?

Him.

Or, at least, this version of him.

Because the version of Santiago Vale I'm used to from my social media 'research', or from my mom's annual, rapt festive watching, is usually dressed all in black, or in a tuxedo, or a nice suit. He's usually all coiffed and shiny and wholesome, crooning in that voice that melts the panties off of any lady over the age of fifty.

You know. Like he's the husband or son or son-in-law or grandson they wish they could've had, but they're also crushing hard on him. Not only is he unfairly, grotesquely hot, but he has an undeniable brand of cheeky sexiness, like he'd slip a hand up your skirt if you weren't careful.

But that's not who's in front of me.

No, sir.

The version of him in front of me is wearing cobalt-blue running shorts that are so short I'm kinda expecting to spy a stray testicle or two.

If I were looking.

Which I am absolutely *not*.

He's also wearing a tight white tank that's soaked through and moulded to his admittedly perfect pecs, so see-through with sweat that I can make out his chest hair, his nipples, and a heart-rate monitor strapped to his chest.

The final flourish, as he sprints on his Peloton Tread right there in the middle of his fancy office, is a candy-pink terrycloth sweat band that holds his damp, dark hair off of his face.

I'm not gonna lie: it's a lot.

Most brutal of all, he has Kygo's version of 'Higher Love' on full-blast and he is singing his little heart out. This dude must have some serious lung capacity. He's also perfectly in tune, which figures.

I stand there, stock-still, not sure what to do or say, until he holds up a finger.

Hang on, he mouths before hitting something on the dashboard. I press my lips together and watch as his long, muscular legs slow down to a manageable stride.

‘You’re early,’ he shouts accusingly over the music as he comes to a stop.

‘I’m… on time?’

This is the problem with guys like this. It’s three-oh-freaking-one, but he’ll try to mansplain to me why I’m early.

‘Just getting a few much-needed kilometres in,’ he says, patting his perfectly flat stomach and smiling smugly, like it’s a total joke that he needs to get in shape.

Nope.

No shaping needed from where I’m standing.

He turns Kygo off and takes ahold of the treadmill’s handles, bowing his head and exhaling heavily. He’s super sweaty, but all I can smell is some expensive, opulent, oud-based scent that hopefully reflects a discreetly placed diffuser somewhere and not the smell of his actual sweat, because that would be even more unfair than his elite hotness.

‘Anyway,’ he continues, stepping off the machine and grabbing a fluffy white towel, ‘it’s good of you to come. Sabrina, correct?’

He pulls off the sweatband and buries his head in the towel before I can reply, rubbing his head with it vigorously.

‘Right,’ I tell the towel. ‘Thanks for seeing me, Mr Vale.’

He pops back up. His hair is stuck up in a million directions, but his face is, annoyingly, not remotely red, and he looks…

Hot.

He looks really freaking hot.

And not in an overheated way. In a masculine, muscular, toned-armed and athletic and capable kind of way.

‘Call me Santi,’ he says with a slick, practiced smile that I’m sure has post-menopausal women on both sides of the Atlantic swooning but has zero effect on me. ‘Sparkling water? I’m parched.’

‘Uh—sure.’ This guy’s already giving me whiplash. I follow him over to one side of the room, where he bends and opens a hidden fridge. This angle allows me to confirm both that he has a very nice butt and that his

undercarriage is still—just about—safely tucked away in its bright-blue nest.

He straightens up and hands me a small bottle of Pellegrino before belatedly deciding to shake my hand. He wipes his sweaty palm down the towel, which is now slung over one shoulder, and holds out a hand, which has me awkwardly juggling the bottle.

Again: brutal.

'How much did Lotta tell you?' he asks, turning away and throwing himself dramatically into a low chair that looks far too valuable to get covered in sweat. He gestures to a similar chair right beside it, and I sit. As I do, the skirt of my dress slides up my thighs a little, and I don't miss the appreciative once-over he gives my legs.

I'm also not unhappy about it.

'She said you were looking for a chef and wellness consultant to help your father through the holidays,' I say.

He frowns. 'By *holidays*, you mean Christmas, correct? Because over here, a holiday means buckets and spades. Sun loungers. Aperol. You get the drift.'

'Right,' I say, rolling my eyes internally.

'Good. Yes. We have a family album coming out mid-October, so this Christmas will be a fucking shitshow, and it'd be far easier all round if Pa didn't pop his clogs during the whole sorry process. Your job is to keep him alive.'

He points a finger at me.

My brows wing up.

He grins.

'Joke. Well, kind of. Basically, he's going on GLP-1s right after New Year and he's not happy about it. His doctor's made it clear that he needs to seriously prep his GI tract before he gets started on the meds. He said something about the GLPs being a Ferrari and Dad's bowels being more akin to an old dirt track that can barely handle a horse and cart, if that makes sense?'

I try not to grimace. 'Yeah, that's definitely… illuminating.'

'Right? Delightful visual. So your job is to ramp up the fibre at a manageable pace and feed him so much poo-friendly goodness that his insides will be a veritable F1 track by New Year's, not to mention the fact

that the bloke could use a good old anti-inflammatory diet at this time of year in any case.'

'Got it,' I say. 'That's something I've worked with a lot of clients on, actually. But you say he's not on board?'

'Nope. He's pissed off, and he's behaving like a giant kid. Violet has more equanimity than him—that's my ten-year-old daughter. Your job would be manage his diet as best as you possibly can, despite the fact that he's a cantankerous, stubborn old git. Really, it's to manage *him*. Think you can handle it?'

I'm not clear on what to say to that. Dominic Vale is an icon, a once-in-a-generation voice who's sung with Pavarotti and Domingo. I'm pretty sure he's not someone you *manage*. I shrug. 'I mean, I can lead the horse to water…? Or lentils?'

Another grin. 'Exactly. That's all you can do, right? How have you catered for the other clients you mentioned?'

I take a few moments to outline my usual processes, from speaking with my clients about their schedules and food preferences to working alongside their doctors and employing my Certified Nutrition Coach qualification when designing menus. He seems pleased with my response, although I think he's less impressed than relieved.

'That sounds perfect. The bar is low, believe me. My housekeeper, Sandra, has done most of the cooking up until now, but with Dad staying for a few weeks, that's not an option. She's a born feeder and a firm believer in a "robust" diet for men, so I need to keep him well clear of her Beef Wellington. But with a houseful of people, I'm sure she'll be thrilled to hand off the cooking.'

He's lost me. 'Your dad's staying with you?'

'Yeah. Hang on—this top is absolutely revolting.' With a grimace, he stands, crosses his arms, and pulls his tank off before throwing it into a far corner of the room. I watch in what I'd like to call professional horror but is definitely something else as he strides over to his desk and opens a drawer. Everything is rippling—pecs, abs, delts. His tan chest and flat stomach are covered in a damp dusting of black hair that my brain translates into some primal advertisement for his sperm count. He turns to shrug on a new, identical shirt, and his lats contract. It's absolutely fantastic.

'Sorry,' he says breezily as he collapses back into his chair. 'It was getting clammy, you know? Where were we? Oh, Dad. Yes. Right. He's

staying down at Nightingale for a few weeks over December. It makes sense on a variety of fronts, but most of all so we can all keep an eye on him.'

I'm still lost. Worse, that little *Magic Mike* show has knocked a couple of points off my IQ. 'Nightingale?' I repeat dumbly.

'It's my compound in the Cotswolds.' He makes a face like he's frustrated with himself. 'Sorry, that sounded very Dr Evil. Think a whole load of pretty stone barns with central heating and a big wall around them. Also, it's right across the road from Soho Farmhouse, so there's that. It's very pretty, I promise.'

My brain is tripping over this information, but mainly his mention of the Cotswolds, which is at the very top of my British bucket list while I'm here. Instantly, I imagine golden stone barns glowing in the winter sun, and crackling log fires, and sheep in pretty, frosted fields.

But not only that.

I can't go around gigging forever. Now that I've committed to the wellness arena, my goal is to lock down a permanent wellness consultant role at a proper institution, one that can sponsor my visa. (That's the visa that runs out in March, by the way.) The market is so saturated in London, but the Cotswolds are the obvious next spot to focus on: wealthy, health-conscious people who are surrounded by fresh produce. My hatred of networking is probably what's netted me zero luck in London, but it would be stupid not to recognise that a stint with as high-profile a family as the Vales could open up new opportunities for me. Hopefully, the quality of my work will speak for itself.

I attempt to pull my attention back to the salient points.

'So your dad is staying with you in the Cotswolds for the holidays? So I'd be cooking for both of you, which is totally fine.'

'It's a bit more than that, I'm afraid. Christ, I didn't brief Lotta very well, did I? It'll be a whole gang of us for December, I'm afraid, while we market this festive abomination of an album. Me, Dad, my mum—his ex, Dad's new wife, my daughter Violet, Violet's mum—my ex, and fuck knows who else.'

He grins and leans forward, balancing his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers. His teeth are white; his eyes are almost black. He reminds me of Tom Ellis as that smiling assassin, Lucifer—and my spidey senses tell me he's every bit as lethal.

‘Basically, you’d be cooking for the whole fucking Vale menagerie. My family and other imbeciles, to paraphrase Mr Durrell. A restorative Christmas it will *not* be. But I can promise you that what we lack in basic sanity, we more than make up for in unintentional comedy and a truly excellent wine cellar. And I’ll even throw in a few secret cheeseboards. So what do you say, Sabrina? You game?’

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CHAPTER 1

The Naughty List

SANTI

It's with no small amount of pleasure that I muse on the imminent arrival of our new chef. That hot little Californian made an impression when we met over the summer, and let's just say it wasn't her culinary expertise that hit the mark.

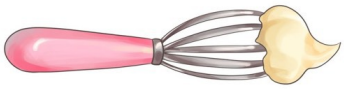
She's due to start work next Monday but has requested that she move into our Cotswolds compound this Friday so she can get herself set up. A well-prepped chef sounds like a win to me, and I like her attitude, so I've gladly agreed. I'll get someone to drive one of the Land Rovers over to her this week so she can get herself down whenever she wants. I tried to tell her that our kitchen will have everything she could possibly want, but that seemed to fall on deaf ears. Apparently, she has a tonne of her own kit that she likes to work with. Fine by me.

We've been in touch a few times via text to iron out details, and I've promised her a rundown of who's who so she has the quirks of our party straight in her head. As I prop my laptop up on my thighs in bed, I feel as though I'm preparing to write a cast list, the likes of which all my favourite Jilly Cooper books contained up front when I was a teenager reading the closest thing my mum had to porn. Those cast lists were always full of randy vicars and vile ex-wives and horny stable boys and badly behaved opera singers, and—

Christ.

All feels a bit close to home, when I think about it. My life as a Jilly Cooper novel, but without the endless, enthusiastic bonking.

Excellent.



SABRINA, I write,

Looking forward to having you with us. Violet breaks up on Friday, so she and I will also travel down to Nightingale then. We can show you the ropes over the weekend and get you settled in. As promised, here is the rundown of the dubious characters you'll be feeding this festive season:

***Dominic Vale** - my dad. Starts his GLP journey the week after New Year's, so let's get that GI tract purring, baby. He will undoubtedly be grouchy and graceless about the entire process, so discretion and distraction will be key.*

***Julia Vale** - my mum. Aside from me, she's the only one who actually cares if Dom the man and not Dom the tenor lives to a ripe old age. Clearly, they've been divorced for five years, but she lives locally (a.k.a. one field away) and is around a lot. Lovely for me and Vi, less lovely for…*

***Sloane Vale** - Dad's current wife. She was, and still is, a VP of acquisitions at Vale Music. It's the sharkiest of jobs, but for reasons unknown she still has a shitload of excess aggression that she likes to work off on all of us.*

***Vanessa Vale** - my lovely ex-wife. All I can say is that I apologise in advance. Yes, she's staying for Christmas. Yes, she claims it's for Vi's sake. Yes, that's bullshit. No, it's not healthy that we still see so much of each other. Yes, her dietary fads change on a weekly basis. Yes, you are free to ignore absolutely everything that comes out of her mouth. Ooh—and she seems to be shagging this up-and-coming French cellist that we signed—Valmont (no surname—just Valmont)—so he may be hanging around, too. Fuck knows what his dietary requirements are, and who fucking cares. (No, I'm not jealous, just allergic to my ex's brand of drama.)*

***Violet Vale** - my little angel. She's ten. She has a pretty good palate for a kid, but she's a kid, so at the end of the day, she'll want fewer chickpeas and more chips. (Chips = fries in the UK, remember?) And lastly…*

Yours truly *- I eat everything. But, unlike my father, my GI tract has the velvety smoothness of a newly tarmac'ed German autobahn, so I will be indulging in a great deal of FC (festive cheating). In other words, there will be secret cheeseboards.*

I mentioned ***Sandra****, our housekeeper, I believe? She'll be territorial on the surface and relieved as hell underneath, so don't worry about her. But if she gives you any grief, let me know. She adores me.*

There will be various other hangers-on and star-fuckers (see: Just Valmont) and business associates and entourage-y people wanting to curry favour and stroke Dad's and Ness's and Sloane's egos… so imagine the royal court of Henry VIII but with overpriced eucalyptus wreaths everywhere, and you'll get the general gist. Hampton Court fed, at its peak, two thousand people a day, but I'm hoping we can bring that number down to mid three figures at Nightingale. (Joke—please don't quit.)

Finally—in case you haven't worked it out, boundary work is not a therapeutic modality the Vales have espoused with vigour—or at all—so consider yourself forewarned and forearmed. If you have to take a wooden spoon to the lot of them, Vi and I will gladly turn a blind eye.

See you Friday

Santi

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CHAPTER 2

Driving Home for Christmas

SABRINA

If Cameron Diaz's character in *The Holiday* thought navigating the windy lanes of British villages in a MINI was terrifying, she should have tried driving a fucking army tank, A.K.A. a brand new, dent-free (for now) matte-black Defender, through the Cotswolds. It's already pitch freaking black at four thirty p.m. when I come off the motorway and wind my way down endless tiny roads with high hedges and potholes and not a single motherfucking streetlight.

I like to think of myself as serenely competent—serene competence is my entire personality, after all—but I am sweating and squeaking in terror as I creep slowly nearer to my destination, on the wrong side of the car, on the wrong side of the road. In the trunk—I mean *boot*—my equipment rattles in its plastic boxes, ratcheting the general creepiness up several degrees. The only thing that keeps me calm is listening to Santi's family's new holiday album on repeat: *The Vales. Home for Christmas*. I'll never admit it to him, but the version of 'Silent Night' he sings with his daughter is the most soothing song ever.

Eventually, the GPS in this very fancy car (licence plate: VAL3 5) tells me that I have arrived in Great Tew and am a half-mile from my destination. And then, *finally*, I'm turning off the road to face an enormous pair of wooden gates set into a stone wall. The gates have sleek chrome sconces on either side whose lights illuminate the sign *Nightingale Barn*.

Whether actual songbirds live here or just the human variety, I'm unclear. I'm as relieved as Mary and Joseph must have been when they stumbled upon their stable. I crank down the window, wincing as the freezing air invades the car, and press the button on the intercom.

Santi's voice comes through the speaker, reassuringly cheerful. 'Sabrina? Come on in!'

As I enter what Santi refers to as 'the compound' and the outdoor lighting comes on in a single gorgeous reveal, I get my first glimpse of what is hardcore Cotswolds porn.

Oh, holy shit.

I realise I've been assuming some kind of Oxfordshire manor house, or even one of those Georgian rectories my mom likes to pore over in the *Country Living* magazines I mail her, but this is way cooler: a cluster of honest-to-God barns arranged around a huge central courtyard, all different in size and shape but all built from the same stone—the kind of stone that looks grey right now but that I just know will glow on a sunny day in that beautiful, honeyed fashion that makes this part of the world so magical. The barns may all look old, but they're freaking immaculate. Someone has done a heck of a job restoring them.

I steer the Defender slowly over the cobbled stones, unsure where to park it. I'm assuming there's a side entrance for the help, and besides, I have a lot of shit to carry into the kitchen. Proximity to that section of the place will be my friend. As I grind to a halt, the front door of the biggest, baddest barn opens, and Santi comes out, trailed by a solid-looking dog and a little girl. I could really use some privacy to get this car into park without looking like a total fool, but I don't think Santi believes in privacy, because he's knocking at my window within three seconds.

Flustered, I unbuckle my seatbelt and open my door—carefully, so as not to take any pets or small children out.

'You made it!' Santi booms, stepping back and throwing his arms out with a flourish like he's on stage. I'm irritated to note off the bat that he looks hot as hell. The nearly-naked-with-pink-bandanna thing may have worked far better than it should have when I saw him last, but this soft-looking black turtleneck that moulds to his chest and shoulders is really…

Yeah.

It's great.

He’s a force of nature, and it’s not just the fame factor. I’d guess he’s famous because he’s so magnetic, and not the other way around.

‘I did,’ I say weakly. I take the hand Santi holds out—warm, strong, and totally unnecessary—and step down as gracefully as I can from this big-ass car while trying not to visibly react to the skin contact. ‘Hey there,’ I say to the kid while petting the dog, who is rubbing his super-wide and very soft head against my thigh. ‘You must be Violet. I’m Sabrina.’

‘Hi,’ she replies with a big smile. She’s a sweet little thing, with glasses and messy bangs and dark-blonde hair. ‘This is Luke.’

‘I don’t think you met Luke last time,’ Santi says, leaning in to kiss me. He kisses me on one cheek, then the other, and I focus hard on getting the double-kiss etiquette right and ignoring how great he smells. ‘We’re all so glad you’re here.’

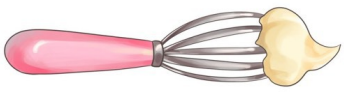
‘Happy to be here,’ I say with a tight little nod. I tend to find these moments kinda awkward: everyone is super friendly, but we need to remember that I’m staff. ‘Uh—I have a lot of stuff to take through to the kitchen. Do I need to move the car someplace closer?’

‘No need,’ Santi says airily. ‘Jed will bring it all through. Luke, knock it off.’ This is welcome, as Luke is burying his face in my crotch as if he can tell I’m just finishing up my period, which of course he can. Still, I wish he wouldn’t broadcast it to everyone.

I don’t know who Jed is, but I get antsy about anyone else touching my equipment. ‘It’s honestly fine,’ I say, squeezing past the dog and heading around to the back of the vehicle, where I manage to pop the trunk. My suitcase is in the back seat because I’ve filled the huge trunk with a stack of those big, clear plastic storage boxes containing my dearest culinary possessions.

Santi shoots me a side-eye that says, *I’m trying very hard not to judge you out loud, but you need help.* ‘I’ll grab Jed—he’s the butler. Come and meet the gang.’

With a last, frustrated glance at my stuff, I follow him, Violet, and Luke into the barn.



THIS PLACE IS INSANE: high ceilings with original beams, and enormous stone fireplaces, and tall windows that I can't wait to see out of in the morning. On top of all that, every square inch is bedecked with holiday decorations. Judging by the incredible scent of pine and eucalyptus, most of them consist of fresh greenery. There's a tree in the hallway that must be ten feet high and is beautifully decorated in white and pale gold. The vibe in here is a rich-person one-eighty from my previous employers' home. Chiara Montefiore-Charlton's aesthetic was all Versace rugs and Hermès china, whereas this, I guess, is, what *Cotswolds chic* looks like: neutral and elevated and tasteful beyond belief.

Luke, who I'm pretty sure is an American staffy, trundles on ahead, while Santi and Violet lead the way through to a vast sitting room featuring more of the same. Even with all the house porn going on, I find it irritatingly difficult to take my eyes off Santi's ass in black slacks. Clearly, his exercise regimen is still going well for him.

'She's *heeeere*,' he announces in that same booming voice. I suspect he only has one volume setting, and that's *project, project, project*. Maybe, when everyone in your family has a singer's set of lungs on them, being heard can turn competitive real quick.

There are three people sitting on the oversized twin couches that flank the crackling log fire, and I recognise two of them at once: Dominic Vale and Vanessa Vale, the dad and the ex. The third must be Mr Vale's second wife, Sloane. She *cannot* be any older than her stepson—possibly younger. With her flawless long bob and sleek all-black ensemble, she's giving Rebecca from *Landman*, which means I will almost certainly find her terrifying and crush hard on her at the same time. I have been known to watch TikToks of Rebecca's scathing legal monologues when I need to regulate my emotions, after all.

Vanessa Vale stays seated while the other two rise, a Miss Scarlet-level blonde bombshell in her red sweater dress. Something about the once-over she gives me feels like she wants to take me out in the library with the candlestick. Perhaps I've unwittingly wandered right into a cosy Cotswolds mystery… with myself as the victim. But, presumably to cover up her murderous intentions, she waggles a couple of fingers half-heartedly when Santi introduces us. 'Hi there,' she says coolly, her gaze drifting down my front as if I'm someone Santi has just dragged out of a ditch.

‘It’s good to meet you,’ I say, wondering how she keeps her red lipstick *that* perfect all day long, but she’s already turned back to her phone.

In the flesh, Dominic Vale, tenor extraordinaire, is larger than life. It’s a lazy phrase to describe the sheer impact of his physical presence. The force-of-nature genes are strong in the Vale family. My rabbit-holing tells me that Mr Vale’s father—Santi’s grandfather—emigrated from the Galicia region of Spain, which explains these men’s Mediterranean good looks.

While the wellness consultant in me can see clear signs of inflammation at a glance, the fangirl in me can appreciate that Mr Vale has aged *well*.

He gives me a smile that looks genuinely ominous. Maybe he’ll beat Vanessa to it. The wrench in the kitchen? ‘Sabrina. Come to starve us all for Christmas?’

Beside him, Presumably Sloane raises an elegant eyebrow. It looks to me like she’s already over this, and I recall Santi telling me that it’s his mom who is the driving force behind this unwelcome intervention.

‘That is absolutely not my intention, sir,’ I tell him as he engulfs my hand in both of his, like a very hostile politician. ‘I’m looking forward to working with you.’

One thing I’ve noticed during my time over here is that the British really don’t like the word *sir*. They barely use it. In the case of an actual music legend, it seems fitting, but Mr Vale harrumphs grumpily. ‘None of that *sir* nonsense—call me Dominic. While you’re staying with us, you’re part of the family.’

The strangled note in his voice tells me that he absolutely does not believe that. This should be an interesting experiment, though. I haven’t lived in as a chef for years—not since I was working in villas, back when I was training. Santi has told me I’ll be taking my meals with the family, which is kind, but I’d put the chances of my feeling like one of the Vales while I’m here at slim to none.

‘And this is my wife, Sloane,’ Mr Vale—Dominic—says, his face softening a little as he places a hand on the back of the woman next to him.

Sloane’s handshake is businesslike. ‘Welcome. We’re glad to have you.’

That makes one of you, Sloane. She’s less overtly hostile than her husband, less effusive than Santi, and less rude than Vanessa. She really is stunning—sleek, dark hair and perfect makeup and cute, black-rimmed eyeglasses. I’m already fascinated by them as a couple, especially since she’s gotta be thirty years younger than her husband.

Go, Dominic.

And go, Sloane, I guess.

Violet crawls onto the couch, next to her mom. Luke puts his giant head on Vanessa's lap, and she pushes him away, her red lips twisting in distaste. 'Don't crease my dress, darling,' she says to her daughter, who's trying to snuggle closer.

Um—it's a *sweater* dress. I'm pretty sure those don't crease.

'Let me show you where you'll be staying,' Santi says. 'Then we can all have a nice cuppa and a chat. It's almost five, which means *cuppa* is code for *cocktail*.'

I feel antsy already. Really, I just want to go check out the kitchen and see what I'll be working with. I want to get my stuff brought in from the car safely and put away in a manner that makes sense for my workflow. I want to get my bearings. I do not want to indulge in what is basically daytime drinking with these people.

But I am not in charge here, sadly, and I recognise that it's important to pay lip service to establishing some kind of relationship with these people. I just hope Santi will shelve his relentless charm long enough to let me do my job in the coming weeks instead of trying to sabotage me with 'fun' at every stage.

Vanessa looks over at me disinterestedly. 'I have some calls to make. But I'll send you my dietary requirements by email before Monday. I have to be very careful with how my food is prepared.'

Of course she does.

'Plenty of time for all that,' Santi tells her, his tone clipped. 'Now, let's get you to your room, young lady.'

A sideways glance shows me something flashing in those dark eyes of his—something that makes me catch my breath. I stand totally still for a moment as something electric crackles between us.

It's a throwaway comment, obviously. He's literally showing me to where I'll be staying. But there was something… *stern* in his voice just now that makes my stomach flip. Something that warns me just how quickly his easy joviality could switch to a kind of alpha intensity if he were ordering a woman to bed.

Oh my dear Lord.

It's the eyes, probably. His eyes are almost black, which means that he could be reading a train timetable, and it would still look like an eye-fuck.

With a colour like that, they can’t not smoulder. It’s not a thing. It’s just the way he is.

I look away quickly. Accidental eye-fucking with my boss will get me precisely nowhere this holiday season.

And I’d do well to remember that.

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CHAPTER 3

Do You Hear What I Hear?

SABRINA

I slept surprisingly well last night. My room is beautiful and, more importantly, is removed from the family's quarters. It's situated in the barn adjacent to the main barn, above, appropriately enough, the 'wellness centre' and reached directly by a sleek glass walkway.

Apparently, this building used to be an old dairy, but it now houses a slate indoor pool, sauna, steam room, and gym, with a couple of bedrooms above. It affords me privacy and peace and avoids us all being on top of each other, which was one of my main concerns. And, let's face it, it's also sick. The way Santi has remodelled this place is insane. No wonder his ex wants to hang around for Christmas.

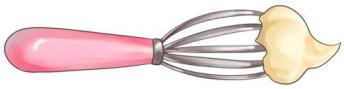
Do not get me started on the kitchen. It juts out from the end of the main barn nearest to my accommodation and features a vaulted ceiling traversed by dark-wood beams. But most of it is white: a soft, rustic white, not a harsh London white. White ceilings and walls, white Shaker-style cupboards, and a white-fronted walk-in pantry. The touches of colour come mainly from the plants and the forest-green AGA that throws out wonderful warmth while being totally inexplicable to me as a cooking appliance.

Happily, there's also a huge eight-burner Wolf range, with a duplicate in the utility room next door, and a Sub-Zero fridge, the industrial sleekness of these units somehow working with the softer country vibes. It's a show kitchen and a chef's kitchen. It's the kind of room you'd produce a TV

show from while also being set up to cater for a hundred-people-strong cocktail party easily.

Let’s just say that this kitchen is everything I need it to be. She will be my sanctuary for the next four weeks. She and I will operate together in perfect harmony—in a symphony of efficiency and aesthetics, to use a Vale-friendly musical analogy.

We will be perfectly happy as long as everyone stays the hell out of my space.



TODAY IS FOOD-SHOPPING DAY.

Tomorrow is prep day.

When I spent summers cheffing in upscale holiday villas in SoCal, the secrets of cooking for large groups of people, day in, day out, were drummed into me.

One. Do your prep.

Two. Use a formula.

Formulas are everything. They keep *you* oriented and organised while keeping the dining feeling fresh. Obviously, the formula will vary by season, but it retains its moving parts.

So, for breakfast at Nightingale Barn, I will offer the following each day: An egg dish, a type of bread, a seasonal fruit option, and a second protein—Greek yoghurt or chia seed pudding, or perhaps porridge, with the oats swapped out for ancient grains and seeds.

Then for lunch there will be a different soup daily, a protein option, a winter salad, bread (same kind as at breakfast), and a wild card, which can be anything from a flan to a cold cuts platter.

Dinner at this time of year will probably be a hearty one-pot dish or a whole fish, heavy on taste and nutrition, with a carb option and two or more additional vegetables.

See? It’s about keeping yourself sane while finding the balance for your clients between novelty and familiarity—and nutrition, of course.

Later today, I’ll put the finishing touches to tomorrow morning’s Waitrose delivery. The larder is well stocked, but it makes my chef’s heart

sad that most of its contents are bought in: fancy pasta, tinned tomatoes, all types of flour. If I worked here year round, with access to the fantastic little kitchen garden just outside the window, you can bet I'd have spent the whole of fall pickling and fermenting and preserving like crazy. As it is, nothing has been preserved, which is a tragedy. The garden still has a tonne of excellent brassicas and root vegetables, but I'll have to use the former sparingly with Dominic so we don't overtax his GI tract.

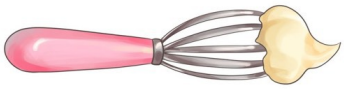
No matter. What we don't have, I can buy. And that's why Santi and Violet are taking me to Daylesford this morning. You'd better believe I have a list, but I can't help but be excited. I regularly shopped for Paul and Chiara at Daylesford's Notting Hill store, but there's nothing like visiting the OG farm, the heart of the Bamford family's operations. Watching Daylesford's reels is almost as emotionally regulating as watching Rebecca eviscerate unsuspecting men on *Landman*, and my expectations are high.

Don't even get me started on how much I would love to build my career someplace like this.

I just wish Santi would let me make the trip on my own, but he's insisted. Reading between the lines, I think it's a way for him to get Violet out of the house. At least I can use the drive to probe her on her eating preferences. While I have no intention of feeding her French fries every evening, I want to make sure she enjoys what I cook.

Which brings me to my twin—and possibly contradictory—goals for the next four weeks: Prime Dominic's gut as effectively as possible for these meds, and create food so delicious that there isn't a whiff of privation. Sure, I'll have to ramp down his fat intake in the final week—digesting excess fat may trigger nausea once he's on the meds—but we can do that slowly. For now, it's about getting him on board.

One thing's for sure, though. These guys won't be getting any more main meals like the fish pie Sandra served us up last night: one hundred percent delicious and at least fifty percent heavy cream.



AT VIOLET'S INSISTENCE, we spend most of the half-hour drive listening to the Vales' new album. The cover, which she shows me on Spotify and

which I've already seen *everywhere* over the past two months, features Dominic, Vanessa, Santi, and Violet, all dressed in winter white and standing in front of the fireplace in their main living room back at Nightingale. The décor is gold and white and about a hundred times more full-on than how the house is actually decorated right now.

It really is a family affair, what with Vanessa still being so closely involved in their brand (and physically impossible to get rid of).

'No Luke?' I ask, kind of as a joke, but Santi makes an exasperated huff beside me.

'Dad vetoed it. Said he wasn't pretty enough. He wanted to hire a bloody *golden cocker spaniel*. Can you believe it?'

I swallow a smile, because I totally can, actually. 'That's awful,' I say. 'Luke is beautiful.' What I don't say is that Luke is quickly becoming my favourite member of the Vale family.

I also don't mention that I listened to the album the whole way up here in the car yesterday. It is genuinely great—commercial, but great—and I can't imagine how big of a goldmine it's proving. It's even doing great in the US. The Vales are a global brand for sure.

We go quiet when my favourite number comes on: 'Silent Night'. It's a beautiful, pared-back arrangement with Santi and Violet singing in harmony. No one else. It gives me the best kind of holiday feels. This, for me, is how I want to be at Christmas: small and quiet, everything barren and blanketed in snow, a chance to go inward.

No risk of that around these guys, but I can't help but be in awe that little Violet, there in the back seat with her glasses and her bangs, can sing like *that*. The genes are strong in this family.

I sneak a glance at Santi. He's so cheery most of the time—a total golden retriever—and I can handle it. Irritating, yes, but tolerable. But I can already tell that it's when he goes quiet that he's at his most dangerous—for me, at least. He's watching the road, but those dark, impenetrable eyes are soft and, I think, a little wet. What a beautiful thing to do: to create a piece of music like this with your own child and preserve it forever, delighting and transporting millions of people.

'We had so much fun that day, didn't we, love?' he asks Violet with a glance in the rearview mirror. 'I loved singing that with you.' His voice sounds a little scratchy.

'You guys are so talented,' I tell them both. 'It's beautiful.'

‘We went for ice cream after,’ Violet tells me, leaning forward. I twist around so I can smile at her. ‘We couldn’t go before, because dairy coats your throat. So we went after, and I got two scoops.’

‘Quite right,’ Santi says. ‘Two scoops for my little soprano.’ He turns to me, those black eyes glittering. ‘If we’re going to exploit our kids for commercial gain beyond all decency, we have to treat ’em right, you know?’

I can’t tell if he’s joking.

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CHAPTER 4

Good King Wenceslas

SABRINA

Daylesford has the effect of making us all feel like kids in a candy shop. From the moment we get out of the car, I'm dying. I want to photograph absolutely everything for my Instagram. It's instantly clear that this is less a 'farm shop' than a wellness Disneyland, an extended cluster of old buildings in the palest Cotswolds stone, with light green-grey doors and shutters and sleek glass extensions. My desire to work someplace like this—someplace beautiful and inspiring, where you are preaching wellness to the choir and not to grumpy older men—only intensifies.

'Food shop first,' Santi tells Violet. 'Hot chocolate second.'

She pouts but follows us across the parking lot. She seems like a great kid, which is impressive, when you consider her family's fame level as well as some of her role models.

It's a perfect English December day, cold and crisp and clear, the sun low in the sky and the scent of firewood filling the air. Santi is wearing an olive-green cashmere turtleneck that, again, moulds perfectly to his pecs, with a worn-in waxed Barbour thrown over it—navy and giving *The Gentlemen*. Not helpful. He's even wearing a flat cap. To say he looks dashing is a laughable understatement. He looks like an eye-watering, full-wattage celebrity doing leisure time, which is exactly what he is.

'I hope you read the email I sent you,' he says to me. 'Because there's a cheese room here, and I wasn't kidding about the secret cheeseboards.'

‘Cheeseboards are never a joking matter,’ I deadpan, and I’m rewarded with a pleased smirk. *Nope. Nope. Look away, Sabrina. Resist the man porn and focus on the food porn.*

Thankfully, distraction is easy here. In the porch area of the grocery store is the most beautiful display of seasonal fruits and vegetables, arranged in wheelbarrows and wooden crates: rosy apples, and frilly cavalo Nero, and purple-edged cabbages. It’s stunning. I take out my phone and snap a couple of pics for my socials.

‘Let me take one of you,’ Santi says, and I flush.

‘Oh, God, no. Not necessary.’ I’ve made an effort this morning—it’s not time for chef’s whites just yet, and I knew Daylesford was upscale. I’m wearing jeans, brown leather boots, and a pale pink sweater that I treated myself to before I left London. Still, I absolutely do not need Santiago Vale assessing me, even through a camera lens. I couldn’t take it.

‘Nonsense! You need to work that personal brand, Sabrina. Exploit the hell out of yourself. You’ll learn from the best this Christmas, I promise.’

‘You’re a chef,’ Violet says. ‘You should take lots of pictures of yourself with nice food.’

‘See?’ Santi arches a strong black brow. ‘Listen to the expert.’

I shoot Violet a smile. ‘Okay.’ Reluctantly, I hand Santi my phone and go to stand in front of the display. He holds up the phone and presumably begins to snap, but God, he takes his sweet time. I hold an awkward smile and attempt to keep my posture relaxed. It’s all well and good for these guys, who have done numerous professional shoots, but I generally hate having my photo taken.

It feels like an age before he puts the phone down and hands it to me.

I wonder what he saw.

I wonder what he thought.

I risk a glance at him. *Shoot.* Bad idea. *Abort! Abort!* He’s looking at me with something seriously heated in his eyes, and, as I take my phone from him, my fingers brush his. Time expands, and another endless moment stretches out—but this time, I don’t want it to end.

‘Beautiful,’ he says softly, and he shoves his hands in his pockets.

It’s good for me that the inside of the store is even better than the outside, because I seriously need to refocus here. The cheese room is right inside the glass doors, and we agree to leave it for last: my version of Violet’s hot chocolate incentive. I am in sensory heaven between the

abundance of Christmas decorations (rustic and heavy on the fresh greenery), the jewel-coloured foods, and the unmatched scent of excellent quality aged beef wafting over from the butcher's counters.

'You're the boss,' Santi says cheerily. 'Vi and I are here to help and carry. Right, Vi?'

I doubt that's remotely true, but it's a sweet sentiment. I'm glad I did a full inventory back at the house, and I'm glad I know exactly what I want to achieve here, because a place this decadent is unhelpfully overstimulating. A girl could wander off to that candle room over there and not surface for hours.

'Meat first,' I say firmly. I was thrilled to discover, in a chest freezer in the utility room off the kitchen, copious amounts of venison. That will be a huge win for me on the taste and nutrition fronts. But, given we're in game season, I'd like to pick up some more options here. Once I find my feet in the next couple of days, I'll organise for online deliveries of fish and meat to keep things simple and optimise my time. My daily schedule will definitely *not* allow for meandering trips through Daylesford.

'Sure,' Santi says, 'but you should definitely check out the ravioli, too. And their beetroot hummus is to die for. And—ooh, Vi, they have banana bread.'

I pause and assess the situation. I am not a mother, but this feels like going grocery shopping with a distractible toddler: i.e. not efficient. 'Tell you what,' I say, looking around. 'I am happy to cook everything from scratch. But I know the quality here is excellent, so if there are things you enjoy, like that hummus, by all means, go crazy. How about you grab the items you want, and I'll focus on the basics?'

'Sounds good to me,' he says with a grin at his daughter.

All righty, then.

Having shaken off my dead weight, I move more quickly, picking up a couple of whole chickens, a few pounds of wings with which to make quick stock, some in-season partridges, and a split trotter to add gelatine to my proposed venison casserole. I don't buy many vegetables except for celeriac, which our kitchen garden seems to be lacking, but I do grab a few jars of colourful kitchen-garden ferment. *Take note, Vale family.*

When I finish up and look around for Santi and Violet, I find her standing by as Santi smiles for someone's phone camera, his arm around some middle-aged lady who looks like she might orgasm right there on the

shop floor. You can sense his star quality a mile off. The guy is *dazzling*. For a moment, I stand and watch as if I'm any other passerby enjoying a celebrity sighting.

Which I am, of course. Better not forget that I'm staff, and temporary staff at that.

The cheese room at Daylesford is the stuff of dreams. Not only is the selection incredible, but the little notes dotted around the tiny glass chamber make me realise how many of these cheeses come from rare breeds cultivated on the farm. There's award-winning cheddar, and mountains of Mont d'Or, and a Bington Blue that would be amazing crumbled into some bitter chicory salad, and an organic Penyston Brie. My mouth waters as I place various wrapped cheeses into my fancy basket as tenderly as if I were laying babies in their cribs.

All the while, though, I'm conscious of being in such close proximity to Santi. Violet has stayed outside, claiming with horror that the room is 'stinky', so it's just me and him in a tiny space, three sides of which are covered in cheese.

'Try the lavender-encrusted goat's cheese,' he says behind me. 'It should be illegal.' I turn around and he's holding up a piece of crumbly cheese on a tiny wooden fork, his other hand cupped like a safety net below.

I pause for a moment before parting my lips. I find myself hyperaware of ensuring I open just enough, but not too much. He brings the fork to my mouth, and I close around it, the musky flavour of the cheese and the smoky, floral hint of lavender hitting me at once.

God, that's delicious.

I make a tiny noise of approval at the back of my throat, my lips still wrapped around the fork, and his entire body stiffens. Slowly, he pulls the fork out, and I instinctively lick my lips to catch a stray crumb. His eyes are locked on my mouth, my darting tongue, as if steel girders are holding them in place. Instantly, my heart rate ratchets up. I can hear my pulse in my ears. I don't know why all of it—his feeding me, the slow slide of the fork as he withdrew it, his watching intently as I swallow—feels filthy and sacred all at once.

I just know I have to get out of here.

'It's delicious,' I say, turning toward the door. 'We should get some.'

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CHAPTER 5

Sweet Baby Cheeses

SANTI

A couple of hours after dinner, during which I held off admirably on going for seconds of Sandra's excellent shepherd's pie, Luke and I wander into the kitchen for our secret convention with Sabrina. I've just texted her the *all-clear* signal. Violet and Vanessa are in the snug, doing my ex's favourite thing—watching her own favourite hits on YouTube—while Dad and Sloane have wandered over to Soho Farmhouse to network at the bar. Aside from the humming of the dishwashers, it's quiet in here. Sabrina is already here, pulling a well-oiled olive wood board from under the island. Seems she already knows her way around my kitchen.

'Why the hell does it smell so dangerously good?' I wonder aloud.

'I took the liberty of baking the Mont d'Or,' she says. 'I put it in the AGA about twenty minutes ago. It should be almost ready.'

'You little beauty,' I murmur. Fuck me, baked Vacherin sounds good.

'Figured I'd find a use for the AGA.' She gives me a tight little smile before glancing nervously at it. I suspect there aren't many AGAs where she comes from, but I love that she's already experimenting.

'There's no better use,' I tell her.

I lean against the work surface as she grabs the rest of this morning's bounty from a shelf above the sink and places them on the work surface. There's an air of austerity, of simplicity, about her: her clothes, her movements, her beauty. No adornments. God knows she doesn't need them.

Her long blonde hair is pulled back into a severe ponytail; her skin is probably paler than it would be if she was still in California, but a sprinkling of faint freckles is visible under her light makeup; her sweater is of the black and crew-necked and sensible variety; her black jeans are fitted but, alas, not fitted enough to show off more of her legs—even if they leave a man in no doubt as to the pert curves of her arse. She's low on artifice, and high on natural beauty, and… *something*. There's something about her that draws me in. It drew me in when I interviewed her, and today in that tiny cheese room at Daylesford, and the draw is strong enough that I slid a fucking tasting fork between her lips earlier, for fuck's sake, and—

Desperately, I gesture at the cheeses. 'I thought I put those in the fridge,' I say for want of anything more intelligent.

'I took them out before dinner.' She places the Brie reverently on the board before cocking her head and rotating it about thirty degrees. 'Eating it cold would be a crime.'

She really does plan everything, doesn't she? Something tells me that our new wellness consultant is what might charitably be called 'detail-oriented' and uncharitably 'anal as fuck', but it's quickly becoming clear that her obsession with perfection will work out very well for me.

'What can I do?'

'Nothing,' she says.

'Just bung everything onto a platter and we can bring it through like that.' I'm already growing impatient to get my hands on this stuff.

'Not happening.' She swerves around Luke, who is already invested in this clandestine mission, so she can remove the rest of the pristinely folded waxed paper from the cheeses. 'Cheeses this good deserve more than that.'

Spoken like a true chef. 'Got it. I'll sort the wine out, then.'

'I wasn't planning on drinking tonight,' she says stiffly. 'I have a lot of prep to do tomorrow. I mean, I can do maybe a half glass.'

'Understood.' I produce my trump card from the wine fridge and stand it on the worktop, next to where she's assembling the cheese platter. 'Sounds very sensible, actually.'

She freezes and stares at the bottle of Sauternes. 'You can't open that!'

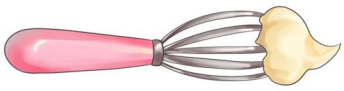
'I beg to differ.'

'Château d'Yquem isn't the kind of thing you open for a random Saturday night cheese fest.'

I unfold the corkscrew and take my time running the foil cutter around the edge of the bottle. ‘On the contrary. This is *exactly* the kind of thing you open it for.’ She probably thinks I’m showing off. That or being gallingly flippant with a six-hundred-pound bottle of wine. After all, 2001 is a perfect-scoring vintage for this stuff. But she’d be wrong. If she’s passionate about her food, I’m passionate about my wine. I can’t think of a better opportunity to crack this open than a secret cheese fest with a stunningly beautiful woman. But I don’t say that, of course. Instead, I parrot her words. ‘Cheeses this good deserve it.’ She narrows her eyes at me, clearly unable to work out if I’m taking the piss. I get that a lot. ‘I’m serious. It’s nearly Christmas. We have some world-class cheese here. And you’re going to be working your ass off from Monday—or tomorrow, it sounds like. Let’s live a little.’

‘Okay, then,’ she says faintly, turning back to her project. As I open the wine, she plates up the cheese with terrifying efficiency. Out come little ramekins into which she spoons some Daylesford pickle. A block of quince is added and rotated. Sprigs of rosemary are applied to the Brie. A variety of crackers is fanned out. And, finally, the Mont d’Or is rescued from the AGA, bubbling gently, and placed in the middle: the perfect centrepiece.

‘The only flaw in our plan,’ I grumble as Luke attempts unsuccessfully to put his entire head on the countertop, ‘is that that’s the least secret smell I’ve ever smelt. It’ll drag fucking everyone out of the woodwork.’ Dad might actually weep when he comes home. ‘Which means we’d better get stuck in, and fast.’



WE TAKE our secret stash down the glass corridor and through to the wellness centre, right below Sabrina’s sleeping quarters. It has less of a cosy atmosphere than the drawing room but more private, and while there’s no crackling log fire, the entire space is underfloor heated. I hit a couple of buttons on the lighting controls, illuminating both the slate pool inside and the gardens outside. If it’s going to be pitch black sixteen hours a day for the next month or two, we may as well enjoy my fancy garden lighting system.

There are two comfortable armchairs and a small table at one end of the pool, and I lead Sabrina here.

‘The vibe we were going for when we decorated was *rustic spa*,’ I tell her as I give Luke his first and last slice of cheddar and point him to the rattan dog bed behind my chair. ‘How you think we did?’

‘It’s fantastic,’ she says, ‘but—do you mean you and Vanessa?’

‘I actually meant me and my design team.’

She frowns. ‘I’m just trying to do the math. You didn’t live here with her?’

Bless her. Doing the maths on the Vale family would fry anyone’s brain. ‘I bought it when we were married, but she was never really that invested in it. She wanted to be in London most of the time. Lucky for her, I suppose, because I bought it with my trust fund. So she was never going to get half of it.’ I almost laugh at the horror on Sabrina’s face. ‘Relax. No one got screwed. She’s an indecently wealthy woman in her own right. I didn’t take a penny of her royalties—except for the share Vale Music takes, obviously.’

‘It sounds very civilised,’ she says suspiciously.

I cock my head and shoot her a grin as I pour us both what I would consider a thimbleful of sticky. ‘Exactly.’

You’d almost think we’d kept things clean in the likelihood of a mutual exit, wouldn’t you? The subconscious is an amazing thing.

‘And you don’t mind your ex being here? Over Christmas?’ I get the sense she’s feeling her way through the conversation, unwilling to offend her new boss. Little does she know how hard I am to offend.

I sigh as I spoon melted Mont d’Or onto a rosemary and sea salt cracker. ‘Ness is a bit like a mouse infestation—annoying but ultimately harmless. And I say that with the greatest of affection for the woman who brought my only child into the world, naturally.’ Sabrina attempts to suppress a smile as she cuts a perfect slice of cheddar and spears it with the cheese knife. ‘I’m willing to put up with it for Vi’s sake. Being the kid of divorced parents is particularly miserable at Christmas, I’d imagine.’

She lays the cheddar carefully on her plate. ‘It is.’

Aha. ‘You’d know?’

‘Far too well.’

‘I’m sorry. That’s shitty for you. So, yeah, if Ness still wants to hang around and see our daughter, who am I to stop her? It’s not about me.’ The irony is that this visit is shaping up to be a longer stretch of time at

Nightingale than my ex-wife ever managed when she was actually married to me.

‘That’s nice of you.’ She gives a small nod. ‘Sounds like you’re a good dad.’

It also sounds like this conversation is in danger of getting too heavy, too quickly, so I raise my glass. ‘Here’s to my staggeringly good parenting skills and to you not getting so sick of our collective fuckwittery that you quit before the end of next week.’

‘To nobody getting themselves bumped off in the kitchen with the rolling pin,’ she deadpans, which makes me laugh. It’s probably not a bad thing to wish for, not when she’s working for us lot. She holds up her glass, and we drink in unison. I watch her face carefully, and… there. There it is. *That’s* what I was hoping for when I opened this thing: a flicker of almost orgasmic pleasure across the finely wrought features of Little Miss Dutiful that I hope opens the doors of whatever permission she needs to give herself to have a little fun. Sure, she’s here to work, and work she will. But I’m damned if she won’t sample the good stuff and taste the best cheeses and join me in a spot of festive cheating from time to time. Because if you can’t have a little fun along the way, what the hell is the point of it all?

‘Holy crap,’ she says faintly, lowering her glass and staring at its golden contents as if she’s just drunk from the cup of life itself. ‘That is so good.’

‘Dangerously so,’ I say. ‘And lethally so if you follow it with a good hunk of that Bington Blue.’

For a few moments, we content ourselves with assembling our goodies on the side plates I brought through and commenting on their deliciousness. My selection is haphazard; Sabrina’s is painstaking. Beside us, the pool glows atmospherically. The serenity of this room is a far cry from the rest of the house, especially when my family is in situ. It’s the perfect place to wind down before bed, if you ignore the fact that I’m planning to eat far more cheese than my body will be able to metabolise when I turn in.

While we nibble, I turn over in my mind the various directions in which we could take this conversation.

‘So,’ I say finally, ‘why come to England? And don’t give me whatever bollocks you fed me in the interview about personal growth, or whatever it was.’

She makes a face that suggests she takes issue with my calling her interview content *bollocks*. ‘Travel is good for a chef. New cultures, new

produce. It's inspiring.'

'So you chose an English-speaking city of nine million people. Niche.' I pop a cube of cheddar in my mouth.

A beat passes in which we're seemingly deadlocked. She caves first.

'I came here with someone. It didn't work out.' Her tone is clipped. She does *not* like divulging personal information, this one.

'I'm sorry to hear that.' I press on, because, as I told her in my email, we Vales have no boundaries. 'A personal partner? Professional?'

'Yes and yes.'

'Brutal. Sorry to hear that. A guy? A girl?'

If looks could kill, I'd be approaching the pearly gates right now. 'A guy. A British guy.'

I wince. 'Ouch. Yeah, never trust a British guy. Especially a posh one. We're the worst. Total lack of follow-through under all that Hugh Grant charm, you know?'

'I do now.'

Okay, it's probably time to start backpedalling. 'That's good, though. And, you know, you stayed, which shows backbone. Fuck him and fuck his nanny for not beating more character into him as a boy, right?'

Her jaw drops open. *'Beating?'*

Jesus Christ. 'It's a turn of phrase, sweetheart. British humour. Anyway, so now you're single and, uh, unencumbered, and, it seems, incredibly talented.' I shoot her a smile. I'm fawning—I'm aware. But Sabrina is not a little scary. 'So what's the endgame for you? How long are you hoping to grace these shores?'

'That depends,' she says, looking down.

'On…?'

'The opportunities.'

'Ah. You want to keep doing this?'

She looks up. 'Actually, I'd like to work in-house somewhere as a wellness consultant. Like… a members' club, maybe?'

A light bulb goes off. How deliriously happy Sabrina was earlier at Daylesford. What an excellent ambassador she'd be at a place like that… or Soho Farmhouse. Of course that's what she should be doing instead of trying to sort out grumpy old fuckers like Dad against their will.

'Daylesford,' I say. 'Or across the road, even.'

‘Yeah.’ Her face takes on a defensive expression, as if she thinks I’ll mock her or find her lacking.

‘I can see you at a place like that,’ I say. ‘Well then, we’d better find you the perfect job while you’re here, hadn’t we?’

The lights from the pool ripple across her beautiful features as she gives me a little nod. She’s mesmerising. I take a sip of my wine and decide that I’d rather not examine my reasons for wanting to keep her close. Instead, I hand her a spoon for the Mont d’Or. ‘No point in fannying around with crackers when we can go straight in. Come on.’

We lean forwards across the small table, heads almost touching as we attempt to eat the cheese off the spoons before it dribbles all over the table. Sabrina catches a string of it with the pad of her thumb and sucks it into her mouth, and our eyes meet. *This is so much better than the little wooden fork.* Hastily, she removes it and wipes it on her napkin.

‘This might be a good time to confess that I listened to your holiday album the whole way up in the car.’ She scoops more cheese up and twists her spoon like a honey dipper as I watch, rapt.

‘What I’m hearing is that you’re a bit of a fangirl,’ I muse. ‘Could get awkward.’

‘It’s called research,’ she retorts, flushing.

‘Of course it is. So, what did you think?’

‘Well, clearly it’s very… commercial.’

‘Ouch.’

She laughs, showing her perfect American teeth. ‘I’m pretty sure every single thing you guys do has a commercial bent. There’s nothing accidental about your success.’

‘Harsh but fair. Exhibit A: Dad’s refusal to include Luke on the cover.’ At the sound of his name, Luke lets out a funny little groan behind me, and I reach back and pat his head. ‘You’re all right, mate. Back to sleep.’

‘So, the song I replayed the most was “Silent Night”. It’s beautiful, but I have to ask—was including Violet really a commercial decision? You kind of suggested it was in the car.’

I sit up straighter as I feed her the patter we agreed on with our PR. My daughter’s involvement is something I’ve had reason to get defensive about in the past. ‘Vi’s a great little singer. She was on board the whole way through the process. Recording with her was a wonderful experience.’

‘I’m not—I didn’t mean to imply…’ She trails off, and I sigh.

‘Strictly between you and me, a lot of it was her mum. I wasn’t convinced, but Ness thought it would present more of a “united front” if Vi was on the album, too.’

The smallest, most imperceptible raise of her eyebrows. I can only imagine what kind of opinion someone as self-contained and stoical as Sabrina is forming of my ex-wife.

‘To be honest, though,’ I continue, ‘that was my favourite number to record by a mile. The rest of it was—whatever. Same old, same old. Everyone’s heard the Vales warbling about Christmas ad nauseam. But being in the booth with my little girl was… pretty special.’ I smile to myself as I recall that feeling: Violet and I inside that booth, singing to each other, exchanging little grins.

It was fucking magic.

‘I’m glad,’ Sabrina says softly, and it looks like she really is. I’m not sure why I’m relieved that I told her that. Maybe it’s because she’s so serious—I don’t want her thinking I’m just some shallow, exploitative jackass. She has one foot up on the chair, and she’s pulled her long golden ponytail over one shoulder. Clearly, I have a thing for blondes, but she couldn’t be more different from my ex.

She brings her other leg up and positions herself lotus-style. It makes me want to drag her over here and onto my lap. ‘It’s none of my business, anyway. But I’m sure Violet appreciated having you guys back together—for the recording, I mean.’ She shrugs and looks down at her wineglass. ‘It must have been bittersweet for you and Vanessa.’

That’s a theory I have to disabuse her of right away. ‘The only bittersweet thing about it was having to be in close proximity with the woman eight hours a day, I promise you that.’

‘Well, for her, then.’ She looks straight at me, and it’s the cheese room all over again. ‘She must have been sad to have to part ways at the end of each day. You guys have recorded, like, a million albums together.’

She’s not wrong on that last part. Ness and I were the Fred and Ginger of accessible classical music, and we went multi-platinum, several times over, doing it. The rest of it is nonsense, yet I can’t help but hope that Sabrina’s projecting, somehow. Is my beautiful little chef really sitting there and suggesting that I’m a hard man to walk away from?

I bloody well hope so.

‘I promise you, you don’t need to worry about my ex-wife’s feelings,’ I tell her, fixing on my trademark showbiz grin. ‘This is the perfect situation for her. She gets to exploit my voice, and my profile, and our admittedly electric professional partnership, and bugger off afterwards. That was all she ever wanted from me, anyway. So it’s all good.’

She stares at me, her pale blue eyes huge, those lights still rippling across her face and casting her as some kind of delectable water nymph. Christ, she’s gorgeous. I wonder what it would take to make her relax. I wonder—

‘I’m sorry.’ She says it simply, which makes it worse, somehow.

‘Don’t be.’ I need to move. I need to get the hell out of this room and away from her hotness and her pity and my own vulnerability. If I stay, either she’ll see right through me or I’ll jump her, and neither of those are appropriate scenarios for a poor girl who’s barely been in situ for twenty-four hours.

I jump up from my seat, and she looks up at me, surprised.

‘I’d better go and rescue my daughter from the Vanessa Vale YouTube channel,’ I say briskly, picking up the platter. ‘I’ll put this stuff away. Help yourself to more wine.’ I hesitate. ‘And thanks for your company. You’re a delightful festive cheating companion.’

With that, I take myself off to the kitchen and leave her to what’s left of her evening.

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CHAPTER 6

You'd Better Watch Out

SABRINA

Sunday, or prep day, begins early, with a small Sauternes-based headache and an email from Vanessa, which is just what I need after my confusing evening with her ex-husband—and my boss. Last night was fun, and intimate, and unhelpful. This is a guy with so much magnetism that he can make every person in a ninety-thousand-strong stadium feel like they're the only person in the room.

So actually getting yourself into a situation where you *are* the only person in the room with him is bad, bad, bad. Especially when you're both bent over a Mont d'Or like you're Lady and the Tramp or trading confidences that neither of you probably meant to share.

Thank God for Vanessa and her self-obsession, that's all I can say. I've read the email twice, and I'm still in a state of disbelief at her demands. If she were my client, then fine, but she's a guest in her ex's house—a low-key unwelcome one, if I inferred correctly—yet she seems intent on monopolising my time and efforts.

The email is entitled *Vanessa Vale—Nutritional Protocol (PLEASE READ IN FULL)*

Sabrina, it reads.

How lovely to have a trained professional with us at such a critical time for my vocal and overall health. I'm sure you realise that, as a professional

soprano, my body is my instrument and I can therefore entertain no compromises when it comes to my physical and mental wellbeing.

If you have any questions about the below stipulations, I can refer you to my nutritionist.

1. I only consume alkaline mineral water.

2. No tap water is to be used in the washing of my food - mineral water only.

3. Honey - manuka only, UMF of 20+. I refuse to inflict anything less than that on my vocal cords.

4. No nightshades or oxalates.

5. I am extremely intolerant of lecithin. Extremely.

6. If you insist on preparing alliums in the kitchen then I must insist that you use a separate chopping board. They bloat me terribly.

7. No processed foods. Zero. (I will make an exception for organic dark chocolate—minimum 80% cocoa.)

And so the email continues, on and on. I stand by the kitchen sink in my running gear, stretching my legs and sipping a glass of electrolytes as I read. My initial reaction is to stress out. After all, Dominic is my primary client here, and now is not the time to be excluding additional items. If I'm gonna keep him on board, I'm gonna need all the garlic and potatoes and tomatoes I can get to make his meals flavoursome, so it will be a *lot* of extra work to accommodate Vanessa's demands.

But, after about thirty seconds, I recall Santi's words about his ex-wife in his introductory email. Something like *you are free to ignore absolutely everything that comes out of her mouth*. And about thirty seconds after that I recall seeing Vanessa hoovering up an enormous glass of sauvignon blanc and a bowl of cheese-and-onion chips yesterday evening.

I wonder if she knows that sauv blanc has a pH of close to three? All the alkaline mineral water in the world won't help her if she's drinking highly acidic wine. And don't get me started on potato chips. Either she's messing with me, or she's decided to exploit my presence for maximum gain.

In the end, I reply as ambiguously as I can while staying polite. Santi has hired me for a very precise mandate, and that's to get his Dad primed for what's likely to be a rough few months for him. From what he said last night, he's tolerating Vanessa's presence at best.

Speak of the devil.

He saunters into the kitchen, also in running gear, and gives me a lazily appreciative once-over that makes me feel as though he's contemplating stripping me naked and bending me over the butcher's block work surface. His running gear is a far more wintry and socially acceptable version of what he was wearing (or not wearing) for my job interview: all an-black ensemble of a slim-fitting hoodie, shorts, and leggings (no stray testicle risks today), topped off with a beanie that showcases the severe beauty of his bone structure. It all absolutely fucking works.

Damn his broad shoulders and long limbs.

He looks like an extremely hot cat burglar.

'Off to rob a bank?' I enquire to hide my hormonal upheaval. From sharing cheese and vulnerabilities in the dark to being faced with his full athletic hotness in the (almost) daylight, the relentless proximity to this dude is something I absolutely have not factored in enough energy for.

He grins at me. 'I usually commit my crimes by night. I'm running a bit late this morning—unlike other people. Clearly, you don't have a cheese hangover.'

He's referring, I guess, to the activity level in the kitchen. I wanted to get the longer-lead-time tasks done as early as possible, so I already have two huge trays of chicken wings roasting in the oven on their trivets of carrot, celery, and onion—oh no! An allium! I've also had the dried chickpeas I found in the pantry soaking since last night, because I want them to sprout over the next couple of days, and I'm defrosting the venison for tomorrow's dinner. My precious baby—my jar of sourdough starter, brought from London—is standing happily a few feet from the AGA next to a kefir culture, and there's a pile of pears on the work surface that I'll poach later.

I've actually enjoyed prepping everything in the cosy kitchen this morning while the house was quiet and the sky was still dark outside. It's kinda meditative.

'My head is a little fuzzy,' I say, 'but I'm a morning person. I was actually gonna go for a run soon, so if you could maybe share a route with me, that would be super helpful.'

He grins as if I'm endlessly amusing. 'I'm going running. You're going running. Let's go crazy and run together.'

I stare at him. This is a bad idea on many levels. I like to run in silence. I don't need a distraction in the form of my hot boss. And I'm sure Santi

doesn’t want to go running with the help.

‘Honestly,’ I say. ‘Is there, like, a route you could share on Strava, or…’

‘Sabrina. Get your arse outside, now. The sun’s rising, and it’s way more fun if I show you the route.’

Fun. We’re back to that. Running isn’t about fun. It’s about doing something good for my mind and body. It’s about efficiency. It’s about me-time.

But he’s still smiling at me, and if I say no, it’ll feel like kicking a puppy.

‘Okay. If you’re sure. Is Luke not coming?’

He snorts. ‘He wouldn’t last five minutes. Besides, he’s still fast asleep. Let’s go.’

And so we run.

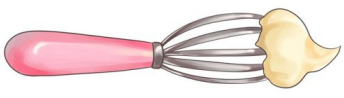
We run down quiet roads and across pretty, frost-dusted fields, past old churches and still-silent houses. We run as the sun rises majestically in a clear winter sky, stretching its fingers lazily across hills and hollows. While Santi has the advantage of being insanely long-limbed, I can just about keep up with him. We’re well matched, if I’m honest.

And, while he drops the occasional piece of commentary about our surroundings, or about the history of the neighbourhood, he’s less chatty than I feared. It’s honestly not awful having an indecently hot and highly competent running partner, and I can admit to myself that jogging with a local is far more efficient than if I’d tried to find a route myself.

It was a good option for my first run here, but I’m gonna make sure I don’t make a habit of it.

‘We should make that a habit,’ Santi says with a wink as he takes his leave to go shower.

Oh, dear Lord. That is the absolute last thing I need. He and his hot-felon look and overfamiliarity can well and truly get stuffed.



A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, Vanessa comes to find me in the kitchen, Violet trailing behind her. Vanessa is wearing a floaty maxi dress in a neutral tone with a beautiful, long, white waterfall cardigan over it. She looks like an ad

for a cashmere company and is perfectly made up, her scarlet lips as flawless as always. Violet, on the other hand, has on a scarlet sweater with a festive pattern across the front and green-and-navy argyle-print leggings. Her eyeglasses today are the same red as her sweater, with tiny white paw prints at the outer corners. She's adorable.

'Was everything clear in my email?' her mom asks in a tone that makes it clear there's only one acceptable answer.

'Perfectly, thank you,' I say. Clearly, she doesn't check her email replies.

'Whatcha doing?' Violet asks me, resting her forearms on the work surface and her chin on her forearms.

'A bunch of things. I'm making stock that I can use as a base for soups and casseroles, and I'm poaching pears, and I'm waiting for these chickpeas to sprout.' I point at the enormous bowl of soaking legumes in front of us. 'The more I prep today, the tastier everything will be tomorrow.'

Vanessa peers at the bowl in distrust. 'I hope that's not tap water.'

'It's cooled boiled water,' I lie easily. Usually, I pride myself on my integrity as a chef, but I can't seem to find any fucks to give with this woman. Isn't the water in this part of the country supposed to be of excellent quality? Besides, these chickpeas will be slow-cooked for hours tomorrow in the venison casserole. Whatever water they were soaked in will be a distant memory.

And besides *that*, I don't believe for a single second that Vanessa is consistent in this diet. She and her 'nutritional protocol' can get stuffed, for all I care.

'And you understand what I mean when I say I can't have lecithin? If you're planning on serving me chickpeas, all those skins will have to come off manually. Each and every one.'

I swear to God, she's doing this to assert some kind of power over me. I'm gonna charge Santi overtime if his ex keeps this up like this. 'I'm happy to serve you something else if it's a problem,' I say. 'I have a tonne of delicious mung beans.'

As I expected, her facial expression goes straight to *Are you fucking kidding me*. 'The chickpeas will be fine if the skins are off. They're an important source of protein for me.'

'Sure,' I say. Mung beans can be a tough sell for anyone, although the daal I have planned for curry night on Thursday should change her mind.

Inwardly, I sigh as I calculate how much extra time it will take me to remove the skins of what must be four pounds of chickpeas. *Forever:* that's the answer, even if I place them between two tea towels and rub them.

'I'm going to leave Violet with you for a bit,' she pronounces, kissing her daughter perfunctorily on the top of her head. 'I'm off to the Farmhouse for a hyperbaric oxygen session.'

I glance from her to Violet, who's smiling at me expectantly. 'Right—that's—of course. That's totally fine.'

And it is fine, obviously, only it would be nice if she asked me instead of assuming that I'm fine with adding childcare to my duties. Especially on a Sunday. Especially when my employment doesn't actually start until tomorrow. But there's no way I'm gonna make Violet feel the slightest bit uncomfortable. Not for a second. It's not her fault her mom is an asshole without a working understanding of boundaries, just like it wasn't my fault that I sometimes slipped through the cracks after my parents divorced.

As Vanessa wafts off without a backward glance, I give Violet a genuine smile. 'Do you like to cook?'

'I like to bake,' she says, clambering up onto one of the barstools.

'That's awesome. Baking is harder than cooking—there's way less scope to mess up.'

'True,' she muses, pushing her glasses up her nose. 'Dad tried to bake a birthday sponge for Mum once and it didn't rise, like, not even a little bit, and she called it her "birthday biscuit".' There are a lot of words I could use to describe her mom right now, and none of them are suitable for her daughter's ears. 'But you can use a lot more sugar in baking than you can in cooking,' she continues. 'And chocolate. So that makes the stress worthwhile.'

'I get that,' I say instead of using the B-word about her mom. 'Speaking of which, would you like a festive hot chocolate?'

She sits up straight. 'Why is it festive?'

'Because I simmer the oat milk with spices that make it taste super Christmassy, like cloves and cinnamon and nutmeg, and I also add vanilla. It's delicious.' I don't add that, for the shavings, I use chocolate at the darker end of the spectrum, even if it doesn't quite meet her mother's eighty-percent-cocoa-solids criterion. I'll add a little extra honey in so it's nice and sweet for her. I'm not that much of a Grinch.

'Thank you. I would love that so much.'

She has beautiful manners, and she sounds like Hermione Grainger. How her narcissistic mother has not fucked this kid up more, I have no clue.

‘Excellent.’ I pull a copper milk pan off one of the overhead hooks. ‘But I have a rule in my kitchen, and I hope you’re okay with it.’

‘What’s that?’

‘If you hang out in here while I’m working, you have to do some chores, too.’

She cocks her head and considers. ‘That sounds fair, especially if you’re making me hot chocolate.’

‘Excellent. Being fair is important to me. How do you feel about shelling chickpeas?’

She eyes the bowl as warily as her mom did, if for very different reasons. Smart kid. ‘I’m not sure yet.’

‘Full disclosure, it’s kinda boring. But it’s not hard. Even if you just do a few, you’ll still be helping me.’

‘And Mum,’ she points out.

‘And your mom.’

Carefully, she takes her eyeglasses off and places them off to the side.

‘They’re cute,’ I tell her. ‘Do you have a lot of pairs?’

‘No, the frames are magnetic. See?’ She reaches back over and unclips the red frame from the base.

‘Oh my God, that’s so neat!’

‘Yeah, and Dad gets me a new pair every birthday. I even have flamingo-pink ones.’

‘I would love to see those.’ I set a large bowl of water in front of her as well as a smaller, empty one and move the bowl of chickpeas over, too. I hope she didn’t just see me filling it from the faucet. ‘Now, these skins would be looser if it were tomorrow and they were cooked. But you should be able to manage. You just have to kinda pinch them, and they slide right off, like this.’ I flick the first one into the smaller bowl. ‘Skins go here. The chickpeas go back into the fresh water. Got it?’

She sticks her hand straight into the water and plucks one out. ‘Ooh, this is actually quite satisfying.’

‘It can be. But you won’t be saying that after number three hundred,’ I warn her as I open the spice drawer.

‘I don’t know,’ she says. ‘I can be kind of obsessive about stuff like this. Mum says it’s unhealthy and weird. But even when I want to walk away, I

can’t, you know? It’s like I get addicted.’

‘I know one hundred percent what you mean,’ I promise. ‘It can be a great quality. You’re detail-oriented, and that’s my entire personality. It’s honestly what I’ve built my entire business on. Obsessing about stuff means you care.’

‘Sloane says the *exact* same,’ she says, and I smile to myself, even as I tamp down my latest feelings of rage toward Vanessa. Fuck’s sake.

‘Honestly,’ I tell her, ‘if you develop an addiction to shelling chickpeas, that’ll be a really big positive for me this holiday season.’

I don’t miss her pleased grin before I turn to the fridge to grab the oat milk. Santi seems like a good dad, but divorces are never easy on kids, and the vibe in this place is more than a little dysfunctional. No wonder poor Violet seeks comfort from purpose and rigour and details, just like I did. It’s not rocket science.

Right now, she’s shaping up to be the only member of the Vale family I *don’t* want to get stuffed.

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CHAPTER 7

Bring Us Some Figgy Pudding

SANTI

Our first breakfast from Sabrina is a major win. When she asked me if she should expect everyone to drift down for the first meal of the day on their own timeline, I told her absolutely not.

'They're all my guests in my house,' I said, 'and I'm laying on a world-class chef. The least they can do is show enough respect to get their arses out of bed at a timely hour. If they can't be at the table by nine, it's a pot of yoghurt or a piece of fruit. You snooze, you lose, in this house. I won't have you taking endless egg orders all morning when you've got Dad's shit to be getting on with.'

You'd better believe I extended the same message to my rabble of family members—and a rabble it is. Just Valmont rocked up yesterday, reeking of what must be Calvin's lesser-known Self Obsession fragrance, and went for drinks with Ness, Dad, and Sloane at Soho Farmhouse last night. He's dragged his skinny arse down to break his fast in style with the rest of them. While I couldn't give a shit whom my ex shags, it is particularly galling to think that she's getting laid and I'm not. That said, Just Valmont is clearly doing the Lord's work. Ness is always decidedly more Zen on the mornings after he's bonked her, so the least I can do is shout the man some eggs and coffee.

To add kindling to the fire, Mum has shown up for breakfast too, with a view to sitting down with Dad and his doctor at ten o'clock before putting

Sabrina through her paces. On that, at least, I've lost no sleep. It'll take Mum no more than five minutes to ascertain that our new chef is fucking gold dust.

Said chef is looking even perkier than usual this morning, and it's giving me the horn. She's in dazzling chef's whites, apron strings wrapped tightly around her middle and tied with a neat bow. It's hardly bondage gear, but it feels kinky to me. (Everything feels kinky to me at the moment. I seriously need to get laid.) Her ponytail is sleek and golden and would look un-fucking-believable wrapped around my fist. The vibe I'm getting as I help her and Sandra bring the various platters through from the kitchen to the dining area of our huge lounge is a very particular frequency that's nowhere near stressed but is definitely 'on'. She gets her kicks from this, I reckon. She's in her element, choreographing what looks like an epic feast without getting a hair out of place.

When I had a quick chat with her last night to make sure she felt comfortable with everything that lay ahead, she said to me in that intense way she has, 'My number one objective tomorrow isn't your dad's GI tract. It's his *head*. I want every dish to feel so indulgent to him that he doesn't feel even a whiff of scarcity or exclusion, even though there won't be a single ingredient he shouldn't have.'

It's absolutely the right strategy with a mulish old git like my father, and, from the looks of the epic breakfast she's served up, my little perfectionist has nailed it.

Sabrina takes her seat at the table while Sandra heads off to refill the kettle, having served up the first round of teas and coffees. Every seat has a bum on it, the greedy bastards.

'Sabrina,' I say, loudly enough that the others stop talking.

She looks up at me with wide eyes. 'Yes?'

'Would you lead us in saying grace, please?'

There's a split second where she believes me. I watch as that beautiful face fills with horror before Dad roars with laughter.

'He's messing with you, Sabrina.'

Her relief is palpable, her jaw dropping. 'Oh my God.'

'Well, that's one way to kick it off,' I deadpan. 'No, I was just going to say thank you for what looks like an amazing breakfast. Do you want to quickly talk us through the options?'

‘Of course.’ She pushes back her chair and stands, spine perfectly straight, hands clasped in front of her: the quintessential chef. ‘For the egg dish, we have shakshouka. Vanessa, I’m afraid it contains nightshades, so I’ve taken the liberty of boiling you two five-minute eggs.’

Mum and I exchange an amused glance across the table. Ness would fucking love that shakshouka, gorgeously rich-looking and sprinkled with creamy feta and fresh herbs. My guess is she’s fed Sabrina some bullshit about whatever fad diet she’s on currently and our girl has decided to have a bit of fun with it. I swallow a smirk and decide afresh not to get on Sabrina’s wrong side.

‘We have grilled sourdough wedges to accompany the eggs, avocado smashed with cumin and olive oil, Greek yoghurt or kefir with vanilla-poached pears, and gravadlax for another protein option, as well as a variety of preserves and ferments from Daylesford,’ she continues, before giving a little nod. ‘I hope you enjoy.’

As she takes her seat, I glance at Dad. I’d put his expression at ‘not horrified’, which feels like a win for Sabrina.

‘No egg-white omelettes, then?’ he mutters.

‘Not today,’ she bats back with a professional smile. Good girl.

‘It looks bloody amazing,’ I tell her. ‘Dig in, everyone.’

What follows is a feeding frenzy. Breakfast has been mainly self-serve since the family descended on Nightingale, with Sandra deigning to provide pots of tea and not much else. No one is stupid enough to leave this feast intact—except, possibly, for Vi, who’s studying it with suspicion. Watching Ness forlornly crack her boiled egg with her spoon while, next to her, Just Valmont digs into his shakshouka with a lot of gusto and nowhere near enough diplomacy—*amateur*—is a memory I’ll cherish on my deathbed.

‘Not bad at all,’ Dad says, pointing at the delicious plateful with his fork.

‘Without wanting to totally ruin the experience,’ Sabrina says, ‘it’s all pretty healthy, too. Just, you know, so you can sit back and enjoy it.’

‘I’ll pretend you didn’t say that,’ Dad says, and everyone laughs.

‘Just so you know for next time, Sabrina,’ Ness pipes up, a martyred expression on her face, ‘I prefer five-and-a-half-minute eggs. These are a tad underdone.’

From where I’m sitting, they look cooked to perfection.

‘Not a problem,’ Sabrina says. I wonder if you have to take a module in diplomacy at culinary school. I bet she passed with distinction, if so. I’m torn between wanting to defend her against a comment I’m positive Ness lobbed out there to make a point and calling the mother of my child out in front of others, which isn’t a good look.

‘If people have preferences, they can text them to Sabrina,’ I suggest as a middle ground. ‘That should remove any guesswork. Now, Vi, what do you fancy?’

‘What’s the brown stuff on the avocado?’ my daughter says, squinting at it.

‘It’s just a sprinkling of cumin for flavour,’ Sabrina tells her. ‘It’s not spicy.’

‘Okay,’ Vi says happily and, reaching forward, drags the bowl of avocado towards her before heaping a few spoonfuls onto her plate. Another happy convert to our new chef’s skills.

‘Is breakfast always this early here?’ Just Valmont asks with a yawn, stretching his arm out across the back of Ness’s chair. Lazy bastard.

‘My thoughts precisely,’ my ex says snippily.

‘It is when Sabrina is catering for’—I do a quick count around the table —‘up to *eight* people at each meal, three meals a day, and putting on a spread like this each time. It’ll be relentless, and that means we need to give her enough time between each meal and not make too many outlandish demands.’ I deserve a gold star for not giving my ex some serious side-eye when I say that. ‘This isn’t a hotel.’

My mum smiles, and I recall how often that phrase fell from her lips when I was an entitled teen and she was a full-time homemaker. ‘Quite right,’ she says, studiously avoiding Ness, whom she has little time for.

‘I didn’t mean to put her out,’ Ness protests, and my *passive aggression* radar beeps. ‘When I told her I couldn’t tolerate nightshades, I rather thought she could work around it, not single me out…’ She trails off as I lose my battle with side-eye.

‘*She* is not the cat’s mother,’ I say, clenching my fist under the table and sounding exactly like *my* mother, ‘and, like I said, *Sabrina* is cooking for a large group of people. Dad’s her number one priority, and the rest of us need to fall into line, even Vi. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?’ I ask, tousling my daughter’s hair. ‘There’ll be lots of variety at every meal,’ I add more lightly. ‘And—this goes for everyone—if you don’t like what’s being

served up, you can grab a bowl of cereal from the kitchen or bugger off to Soho Farmhouse.'

What I *don't* do is yield to the impulse to add that Ness's absolute favourite thing in the world is being singled out. I have no doubt that Sabrina's decision to kick her tenure off with shakshouka was a passive-aggressive ace *par excellence*. My beloved ex-wife may have met her match. I'd put good money on Sabrina taking zero shit from her—or anyone.

'If it helps, we could make a group chat,' Sabrina says. 'I can text everyone the menu I've set out for the week, and I can also share each day's menu that morning. I'll finalise it after our meeting with Dominic's doctor.'

'Oh, dear God,' Dad groans. 'What a load of bullshit.'

'Dad…' I say warningly.

'I won't be here tomorrow or Wednesday, Sabrina,' Sloane says. 'I'm heading down to London for a night. I can't make the doctor's meeting, either. I have a Zoom in thirty.'

'It's a good job I'm here, then,' Mum says stiffly, and they glare at each other. There's no love lost between them for a multitude of reasons, but on the topic of Dad's health I'm basically Switzerland. I'm grateful that Mum still holds enough sway with him to get him over the line on the GLPs, but I also kind of get why Sloane is staying at arm's length. Dad is almost twice her age. I've—unfortunately—seen enough private moments between them to know that their chemistry is real, but I can see why limiting her exposure to conversations about her husband's shitting schedule might actually be a good thing for their marriage.

'Anything fun planned?' I ask her.

'A *Vogue* party tomorrow night, and I'm meeting a Hungarian pianist I want to sign. Sony is sniffing around him, but they can back the hell off.'

'What *Vogue* party?' Ness and Just Valmont say at, I swear, exactly the same time, and I groan audibly. How the fuck are these people my family?

I swear, Vi and Sabrina are the most mature people at this table.

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CHAPTER 8

Deck the Halls

SABRINA

Considering I'm cooking all day long for a houseful of people who are not what I would call low-maintenance, and considering I'm invited to share mealtimes with these people, some of whom are major celebrities, you could be forgiven for thinking that mealtimes are the highlights of my day.

You would be wrong.

Mealtimes are at best chaotic and at worst something resembling a soap opera. It's only when I'm alone in the kitchen that I can really focus. I even have to ask Santi to have a polite word with Sandra, who is what is known as a 'talker', and ask her to focus on the rest of the house during my food-prep periods—which is most of the time. I feel bad, but I can't focus when she's chattering on about the weather forecast or the neighbour's dog.

When Sandra is off vacuuming or making beds, and everyone else is off doing their thing, then this beautiful kitchen and I can return to our blissful honeymoon period. When Santi has no houseguests, this place must be total heaven. My prep, my formula, and my rigour all serve me well. I get up at what feels like the blackest part of the night, I prep the majority of breakfast, and I go for a run with Santi—brief at my end, because I'm short on time. He usually does another lap of our usual route afterward.

I hate to admit it, but our runs have quickly become a highlight of my routine. They set me up for the day, even when it's dark and wet and shitty,

and it’s mainly because of Santi’s company. He’s almost always upbeat, but—and this is the real problem—not irritatingly so. He’s funny *and* fun, and I find myself looking forward to being the recipient of his brand of bitchy witticisms about his family members.

From breakfast, I segue into lunch prep or take short trips for groceries. The afternoons are spent prepping for dinner, cataloguing ingredients needed for the following days, and setting up online grocery deliveries. It’s rigorous and tiring, but with every day that passes, I grow more secure in my routine. Santi, Violet, and Sloane are the primary visitors to the kitchen—a couple of times, Sloane and I have grabbed a brisk late-morning espresso together in the kitchen before she continues with her aggressive job. I admire both her efficiency and her lack of need for pointless small talk. The others steer clear, as if this is Downton Abbey and I’m below stairs, but honestly, that suits me. The last thing I need is Vanessa coming in and finding me scrubbing vegetables under the faucet. And the benefit of the long hours on my feet means that there is no time or energy for sexy, secret cheese feasts with my hot boss.

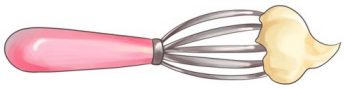
There are hiccups, obviously. Thursday curry night is less of a hit with Dominic than I’ve been hoping. He’s pissed that the main chicken dish is a rogan josh and not a makhani—i.e. not seventy-five percent cream and butter—and, when he tastes my black lentil daal, he loudly asks if I’m trying to kill him more quickly. Later that evening, I walk into the utility room to find him face-first, Luke-style, in the remains of Santi’s contraband cheeseboard, the tableau eerily illuminated by the light of the open fridge.

‘I suppose you’re going to snitch to my son,’ he blusters as he wipes some crumbs of Bington Blue off his mouth.

‘Absolutely not, sir,’ I tell him. ‘This is your home, and I’m not your keeper. Besides, I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

He makes a kind of old-posh-guy harumphing sound, but it seems to me that my response earns me a very small brownie point.

Really, everything is going as well as can be expected—until the Saturday night drinks party arrives and, with it, a fleet of external caterers, blowing out of the water not just my routine… but my carefully erected boundaries.



WITH WHAT I'VE started to think of as 'my' kitchen out of commission from Saturday lunchtime onward, Santi sweeps all of us across the road to Soho Farmhouse for lunch. The members' club is as pretentious and delightful as I expected: a *Truman Show*-esque assortment of old barns with a charming courtyard and a pretty boating lake. Genetically blessed people in oatmeal-coloured cashmere drink Bloody Marys or cycle around on the farm's mint-green bicycles, and I double down on my intent to find a way to speak to someone here next week about any possible hiring opportunities they may have. Like Daylesford, this place is the perfect target client base for me.

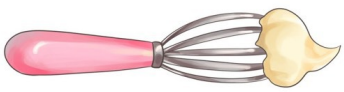
After a hearty lunch in the cavernous but weirdly cosy main barn—Dominic steadfastly refuses to make eye contact with me as he devours a beef-and-Guinness pie—we traipse back to Nightingale to find it in the process of being transformed. The kitchen is full of chefs prepping, and the huge drawing room is being rearranged, with couches moved back and cocktail tables brought in.

'What can I do?' I ask Santi, who laughs and, putting his hands firmly on my shoulders, rotates me until I'm facing the glass corridor that leads to my sleeping quarters.

'Take the fucking afternoon off, you little nutter.' He squeezes my shoulders. 'Go for a swim. Get in the sauna. Watch a movie. Do whatever mysterious shit women do to prepare for parties. Get some rest, because tonight you'll be networking like a Vale.'

'Ugh.' I accidentally say that out loud, which makes him laugh again. He's insisted I join the party tonight as a guest, telling me that he has a tonne of potential networking opportunities for me. I should be grateful for his kindness, and I totally am, but I hate this kind of thing: schmoozing with people I don't know while making sure I don't drink too much and that I represent my clients appropriately.

I just can't wait until it's all over and I have the kitchen to myself again.



I SPEND way too long getting ready so I can put off actually joining the party. When I finally venture through to the main barn, it's in full, noisy swing. A jazz band is playing a jaunty version of 'Deck the Halls' down one end of the space, while glamorous guests relieve the circulating servers of champagne with gusto. I wish Lotta Montefiore-Charlton was here, but she texted me during the week to tell me she wouldn't make it. I guess she's far too busy snuggling by the fire with her hot billionaire boyfriend, Aide, to make the journey, and who can blame her?

As it is, I'm in some kind of odd limbo: not a guest, exactly, but not staff, either. Just dressed up and what feels like half naked in my LBD and heels, business cards tucked into my sparkly little clutch and feeling awkward as hell. I step into the kitchen because I can't resist and find it a hive of activity, with servers loading up fresh trays of champagne while chefs arrange canapés on platters. I personally think the Brie to cranberry ratio is a little off on the croustades they've been handing around, but otherwise they seem like a good catering outfit.

My fingers *literally* itch to set down my glass, tie on my apron, and get involved, but I force my feet to turn around and totter back toward the party. They already ache. I can pull a sixteen-hour shift in my sneakers, no problem, but a few minutes in four-inch heels is already too much. Dominic and Sloane are holding court in the middle of the room. She's lost the eyeglasses, put her hair up, and is wearing a long gold column dress. She looks freaking *fantastic*, and clearly her husband thinks so too, given the way his hand is splayed over her ass. Here, laughing in the centre of a group of guests, they are every bit the music industry power couple.

Meanwhile, Vanessa is a blonde bombshell in a totally backless emerald-green dress as she works the room, air-kissing everyone. It's made of satin, and it hugs every single curve in a way that makes me feel pretty crappy about my B-cups and reminds me miserably that Santi must have loved *some* things about his ex-wife. Valmont is here too, the perfect lapdog, following Vanessa around and looking like a French cologne commercial in a very undone white button-down and *exceedingly* tight jeans.

I'll stay for half an hour, I decide: just until I've seen the Vales do their musical number and caught Santi's eye and established my alibi. Then I'll execute a flawless Irish goodbye and escape to my room and the heaven that is my noise-cancelling AirPods. There's no way I'm gonna network

tonight. What would I do—march up to randoms and foist my business card upon them?

It's only a moment after I've made this decision that Sloane, who must have extricated herself from her husband's hangers-on, materialises beside me. Based on our brief coffee breaks and Violet's endorsements, I like Sloane a lot. She's no-nonsense and far more level-headed than someone in her position might be.

'Right,' she says, tugging on my elbow. 'Time to network.'

'That feels icky,' I protest, but she shakes her head.

'We need to work on your networking skills. Come on. It's not like every fucking guest isn't here to endlessly promote their own agenda.'

I hesitate. I know I need to nail down a job—and a visa—but there's a time and a place. 'I don't know.'

'You're going to meet three people and give out three cards, and then I'll let you go. You look hot as fuck. You think any of the guys here would find it a hardship to talk to you? It's time to abuse your pretty privilege.'

As my jaw drops open, Sloane leads me around the room like I'm a pony on a rein. It takes me precisely thirty seconds to understand that this woman is a shark. She introduces me briskly to three people—she wasn't kidding. One guy is senior in HR at Vale Music in London. Sloane informs him that having an in-house wellness consultant would be a major perk to attract new talent. Another is high up at Maison Estelle, the insanely fancy members' club with London and Oxfordshire outposts.

But the third person is a huge icon of mine: Aida Russell, a fellow American whom the British have adopted as a national treasure over her years as an award-winning BBC broadcast journalist. She's here with her very handsome (younger) husband, Callum, whom I and the rest of the UK happen to know she met when she did a documentary on rediscovering her sex drive after her divorce. Callum runs a sex club and, um, 'held her hand' during the process.

He can't seem to leave her alone, so our conversation is brief. Even so, this woman's energy is electrifying.

'The more perimenopausal I get, the more I realise how much this shit matters,' she says, 'especially on all the bullshit weight gains we have to deal with. Half the women I know are on Mounjaro, but very few of them are holding on to their muscle or bone density successfully. It's like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Someone like you, offering

proper support, could make all the difference. Surely, *surely*, there has to be a third option for mature women besides *fat* or *frail*? Honestly, I'm getting so overly fixated on this that I may end up pitching a documentary about it.'

'Fixated is a polite understatement,' Callum says, shooting her a look that leaves me feeling very much like a third wheel.

I leave the conversations three business cards lighter and reeling with gratitude. Maybe I could put Sloane on commission to originate all my business? No wonder Vale Music pays her the big bucks. And even if the networking comes to nothing, Aida's words ring in my ears. GLPs aren't just a silver bullet for moving the scales. For a lot of perimenopausal or menopausal women, they're the bridge needed to turn their body composition around.

Maybe there's something there. Maybe Dominic Vale isn't the only one who could benefit from support and guidance and whatever foodie inspiration is needed to get a person through a treatment like this without their losing the will to live.

'I have to go and pretend to care about how many mini cheese soufflés my husband is putting away,' Sloane says, putting a perfectly manicured hand on my arm and interrupting my reverie. 'Thoughts on the soufflés, by the way?'

I hesitate, then think better of it. This woman favours honesty above all else. 'A little too much thyme for me, but otherwise good.'

She nods. 'Precisely. Now, if you want to slink off, then I'll tell no one, but my so-called stepson is coming this way, and he looks like he wants to eat you for supper.'

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CHAPTER 9

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

SABRINA

Before I have a chance to stammer out a reply, she's vanished into the throng. I glance to my left, and there's Santi, a head taller than most of the guests, his gaze burning with a heat that, yes, does make me feel like a cheese soufflé—if it were perfectly seasoned, that is. It's only as he edges past the people nearest to me that I see he has Violet by the hand. While she looks adorable in a maroon minidress with black tights and Doc Martens, it's her dad I can't take my eyes off.

Black velvet smoking jacket? *Check.*

Black dress shirt, top few buttons open? *Check.*

Black dress pants that look like the devil's tailor himself sewed them? *Check.*

Dark hair styled and raked back off his face, leaving me totally at the mercy of his black eyes and indecent cheekbones?

Check, check, fucking *check.*

It's so unfair that he's so freaking hot, though, frankly, the fact that he's holding his daughter's hand is the sprig of holly on the yule log.

'Sabrina,' he rasps, his eyes most definitely meandering over my boobs in this admittedly low-cut dress. 'You look…'

I don't know how I look, because he doesn't seem able to finish the sentence.

‘You too,’ I say with a stupid little nod. Honestly, I can’t find the words to describe how he looks, either. Instead, I turn to Violet. ‘Violet! You look so cute!’

‘Ew.’ She turns up her sweet little nose.

‘*Cute* means *good-looking* to Americans,’ her dad tells her. ‘If they think something’s actually cute, they say *adorable*. Right, Sabrina?’

‘Right!’ I say, thankful that he’s taken the lead with the conversation. ‘I meant that you look fantastic.’

She looks down at her feet, still unconvinced. ‘The shoes don’t look too emo?’

‘No! Not at all. They give it just the right amount of edge. Are you guys having fun?’ I ask a little breathlessly, having made the mistake of looking straight at the delicious sliver of manly, hairy chest Santi’s shirt shows off.

‘We are,’ Santi says in a tone I take to mean *Not really*, ‘but I have to go full *Sound of Music* with the clan in a sec. There’s no such thing as a free canapé for our poor guests.’

The Vale family number this evening has been much discussed. I know that Violet has point-blank refused to get involved, which means ‘Silent Night’ is off the table, and that Santi, Vanessa, and Dominic have opted to sing ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas’ from the album we’ve all gathered here to celebrate. I guess I should just be thankful that we will all be spared Santi and his ex crooning ‘Baby It’s Cold Outside’ to each other.

‘Do you want to hang out with me while they perform?’ I ask Violet, pouncing on the opportunity to snag a buddy for five minutes.

Her face lights up. ‘Can I? Weird people keep talking to me like they know me, but I don’t know them. And they keep wanting to hug me.’

I grimace. ‘That sounds horrible. Stick with me.’

‘Thanks,’ Santi says, looking genuinely relieved. ‘That would be great. You can keep her safe from the fanboys and girls.’

With a final, lingering—and honestly filthy—once-over aimed mostly at my mouth, he heads off to set up for his performance. These guys sing all the time around the house—*Nightingale* is definitely the right name for this place—but I can’t help but be excited that I’ll get to see Santi perform live. I have goosebumps just thinking about it.

Next to me, Violet erupts in sudden peals of laughter. I look down in alarm to find a dark-haired guy looming over her and tickling her. When he straightens up and fixes me with a blinding grin, I can see that he is

ridiculously hot. What the hell is in the water here? His eyes are bright blue, his skin tan and glowing with health. He's freaking huge, and he's wearing the hell out of a very nice suit.

'And who's this?' he asks Violet, pausing his tickling for a moment.

'That's Sabrina,' she gasps, wriggling in delight in his arms.

'Ahh. So *this* is Sabrina. I've heard a lot about you from Santi.' He sticks a huge hand out. 'I'm Brendan—Vi's godfather and spiritual guide.'

'I'm sure you are,' I say as we shake. *Spiritual*, my ass. But—Santi's been talking about me?

He picks Violet up easily and holds her in one arm as she loops her arms around his neck and grins goofily at him. She certainly seems fond of him.

'Did you bring me some presents?' she demands.

'I did. They're under the tree, but you know you have to wait till Christmas morning to open them.' She pouts, and he sighs. 'The Vale gene isn't known for its self-control,' he tells me. 'I could give you a Christmas present, too, Sabrina, if you like.' With that, he gives me a suggestive wink, and my face heats immediately. This guy is shameless. He's propositioning me after thirty seconds, and in front of a *kid*?

'Hard pass, but thanks,' I say, and he chuckles.

'This one's a tough customer, Vi. What have they done with my mate Luke?'

'He's gone to Sandra's house for a sleepover,' she says sadly. 'Grandpa said he would scare the guests.'

He gasps dramatically. 'That's plain rude. He would have been the belle of the ball. Glad I didn't bring Mark, then. He would have been sorely disappointed.'

'Brendan's dog, Mark, is Luke's brother,' Violet tells me. 'They look sooo alike. They both have the same black patch over their eye.'

'That's adorable,' I say. 'Are you guys big fans of the Gospels, then?'

He laughs, showing very white teeth. 'Fuck no. Only my poor brother—he's a priest, if you can believe it. We're just fans of non-ironically using human names for dogs. Oh, Jesus, Vi, your mother's about to start singing. God help us all. Do you have any ear plugs I can borrow, love?'

She giggles, and I press my lips together to hide my smile. He's kind of hilarious—and not Team Vanessa, I assume. He hikes Violet up higher in his arms as Santi taps the mic, and I crane my head for a better view. No way am I missing this opportunity to ogle my boss freely.

‘Welcome, everyone, and merry Christmas,’ he says, flanked by Vanessa and Dominic, with Sloane off to the side. ‘Thanks to everyone who’s trekked up from London to the arse end of nowhere to come and celebrate this album with us. Dad reckons you’re all here for the singing and not the free-flowing Krug. Isn’t he adorable?’

Everyone laughs, and I tamp down the urge to shiver. Everyday Santi is hot, but Santiago Vale, world-famous tenor and music industry mogul, is scorching. I’d like to be that mic right now: his long fingers wrapped around me and his mouth teasing me. But it’s stupid to even think like that. It’s not like his appeal is a mystery. Every woman between the ages of twenty and ninety wants to jump his bones. What’s not to love? More important than that, and something I would do very well to remember: *he makes every one of those women feel like he wants to jump their bones, too.* That, right there, is what makes his appeal so potent.

And so lethal.

He carries on with the patter for a few more moments. He’s so freaking suave. I could watch him all night. Then he slides an easy arm around Vanessa’s bare shoulder, and she smiles like the cat who’s gotten the cream. I stiffen and immediately sense Brendan’s eyes on me.

‘As you know, there’s no such thing as a free drinks party,’ Santi says from across the room. ‘But it’s only one song, I promise. You’ve got this. We can do hard things, remember?’

More laughter.

‘Here,’ Brendan says. ‘Move in closer, and you’ll be able to see better.’ He puts a large hand lightly on my bare shoulder, and I begrudgingly allow him to move me in front of him because he’s right—I have a clearer view of Santi here. The familiar opening chords of ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas’ kick in and, around us, heads start bobbing in appreciation.

Santi clocks his daughter in her lofty position in Brendan’s arms, grins, and raises his mic to her. Then his gaze finds me, and the grin drops instantly, his face going dark. It’s not until Dominic and Vanessa start to sing that he seems to snap out of it, switching Santi the Crooner on for all the room to enjoy. His voice is as rich and mellow and delicious as a vat of melted organic chocolate, and I could drown in it just as easily. I close my eyes for a second to shut out any visual stimulation as I let the perfect harmony of these three obscenely talented people wash over me.

A moment later, Brendan's mouth is against my ear. 'You know,' he says over the music, 'I'd hate you to get the wrong idea about Santi and be disappointed. You seem like a lovely girl, and I've seen it happen before.'

I go immediately stiff, my stomach dropping like a stone. Oh my God, this is mortifying. My attraction to Santi must be written all over my face, and his buddy here can see it a mile off. I bet he's seen a million women throw themselves at his friend, mistaking his effortless charm for genuine interest.

'I don't know what you mean,' I say through clenched teeth, looking straight ahead. Through the crowd, Santi's eyes find mine again, and I catch a flash of grim displeasure on his gorgeous face before he flips back into character.

'Well,' Brendan says, 'he seems like this slick superstar up there, doesn't he? Rakish and so fucking smooth. You think he'd be a total Casanova, wouldn't you? But really, he's very boring.'

Hang on a sec. What does he—

'He's a great dad, for starters,' he continues, 'which has to be a real turn-off. I mean, when has reliability been sexy? Let's see—he calls when he says he will; he even remembers *birthdays*, which is frankly embarrassing. He's hopelessly reliable. I'd just hate to see you go for the big, bad superstar, only to find out that he's a thoroughly decent guy. It'd be spectacularly anticlimactic, I should think.'

A warm, molten glow is flooding my body. I find myself smiling straight at Santi, whose face softens when he finds me in the crowd again. There's something dissonant about standing here, watching one of the most beloved classical superstars in the world singing right in front of me, his voice rich as molasses, as his friend pitches his best attributes in my ear.

'I guess it would,' I murmur.

'He's very disappointing like that,' Brendan says, 'and I'd just hate you to get his hopes up, because he slips your name into every conversation he can. He's such a loser. Whereas if you went out with me, I can promise zero disappointment. I'm exactly as filthy and flaky as I come across. I'd give you the best night of your life, and you'd never hear from me again. I'm a far safer proposition.'

'Uh-huh,' I say. 'Good to know.'

I can't stop smiling.

Santi has talked to his buddy about me.

I might actually mean something to him.

‘Look at him, eye-fucking you across the room when he’s supposed to be playing to the crowd,’ Brendan says, his lips still against my ear. ‘Disgraceful. But can he actually come up with the goods? That’s my question. And he’s probably a cuddler afterwards. That’s a huge red flag, if you ask me.’

I think my face might actually split in two.

‘Red flags are always a good idea,’ I tell Brendan, who sighs and straightens up beside me. When I glance up at him, he shakes his head mournfully.

‘I did my best. Some people have no sense of self-preservation.’

Perhaps not, but taking the leap to find out if Santi really is the great guy Brendan thinks he is, the great guy *I* think he is, feels like a leap worth taking.

The song comes to an end. Three or four minutes of performance, and the atmosphere is electric. Every person in this room has felt the spine-tingling magic that the Vale family can create with the force of their voices. ‘Encore!’ several people shout, and Vanessa smiles coquettishly and raises her mic again, but Santi shakes his head no and makes his way grimly through the throng.

It looks as though he’s coming straight toward me.

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CHAPTER 10

Santi, Baby

SANTI

Fucking Brendan was standing there in my home, drinking my champagne and hitting on *my* chef the whole way through my number.

I'm going to fucking strangle him.

I push through the crowd of well-wishers. A tight smile is about all I can manage as people stop me so they can lick my arse. I have to get Bren away from Sabrina. He knows how I feel about her, for God's sake. And he made a fucking beeline for her anyway. The guy is shameless—but he's effective. No woman can withstand the charms of Brendan Sullivan, and that's *before* they find out how much he's worth. That slimy smile has probably already got her pregnant.

Vi shouts at me from Bren's arms. 'Daddy! You were amazing!' I reach up and cup her face so I can give her a smacker.

'Thanks, my love. Bren.' I release her and give my disloyal shit of a buddy a bro hug. 'You don't waste time, do you?' I mutter in his ear as I do.

'Nope.' He pulls back, wearing a smug grin that makes me want to punch him. 'You snooze, you lose.'

I have not been *snoozing* on Sabrina. I have been trying to keep a respectful, professional distance. What kind of sleazebag would I be if I was all over my beautiful employee like a rash, making her feel uncomfortable while she's stuck here with us?

Still, that doesn't mean she's fair game. Doesn't mean that Bren, who's probably never gone more than a week of his adult life without sex, gets to try his moves on, either. I saw him while I was up there trying to focus on singing: tugging her close to him and whispering God knows what kind of bullshit in her ear. I saw that full-wattage smile he coaxed out of her almost immediately—a smile that's all too rare in my experience but perfectly exquisite when she bestows it upon you. A smile she usually only lets me have at the end of our run, when she's high on endorphins.

I have no intention of letting Sullivan give her any of his STD-ridden endorphins. If I can't have her, neither can he. If I have to protect her from myself, then it's my duty to protect her from him, too. Especially—*especially*—given how fucking tempting she looks tonight. She's done a full one-eighty. Gone are the buttoned-up chef's whites and the flat shoes and the neat ponytail. Instead, she's rocking a low-cut, slinky little black dress with tiny straps that hits halfway down her very toned thighs, high heels, and a hairstyle that has her long blonde locks flowing over her shoulders in loose waves.

I get the sense sometimes that she's restraining her beauty, concealing it, as if it's unseemly and unprofessional. This evening, she's unleashed it in all its wild magic, and I know one thing to be true:

I have to get her the fuck away from Bren, and *now*. If my vestiges of self-control are hanging by a thread, then his will already have given up the fight in the face of Sabrina's glory.

'Go say hi to Dad, would you?' I ask him through gritted teeth. 'I'm sure he'd love to see you. Sabrina, come with me. I need to speak to you.'

Not waiting for an answer from either of them, I grab her by the hand and lead her forcefully through the rest of the guests. 'Kitchen emergency!' I bellow at one of the board members of the Royal Albert Hall as I tug Sabrina through to the kitchen. Instantly, I realise my mistake. The room is heaving with chefs and servers alike. I spin neatly on my heel and pull her through to the walk-in pantry before flicking on the light switch and slamming the door behind me.

'What the hell is wrong with you?' she demands, her chest rising and falling unhelpfully in that indecent little dress. There's a faint flush on her cheeks, too. I know well that this woman has excellent levels of cardio fitness, but the idea that my dickhead mate could have got her worked up

like this makes me want to put my fist through one of those five-kilo bags of flour behind her.

‘Listen,’ I say, pointing my finger at her for good measure, ‘you cannot hook up with Brendan. You’re my employee while you’re here, and I won’t allow it.’

Her eyebrows shoot up. She has sleek black wings of eyeliner at the corners of her eyes and a soft pink on her lips that makes me think kissing them would be like kissing a bed of crushed rose petals.

‘I *beg* your pardon?’

‘I saw him,’ I say desperately. ‘When I was singing. He was all over you, and you were smiling. But, honestly, he’s a total slag. He has a different woman in his bed every night. Believe me, you don’t want to be his latest conquest.’

She narrows her eyes. ‘I don’t?’

‘No, because you’re— Look at you. You’re so fucking beautiful, and— on your worst day, you’re too good for him.’

She takes a tiny step towards me. My heart is pounding, and it’s not from singing that fucking song. Her skin looks so soft. I want nothing more than to run my hands down her bare arms before pulling her against me. Soft against hard. I can’t take my eyes off her.

When she speaks, her voice trembles. ‘Why do you care?’

‘Because I— You’re my employee. You’re in my home and you’re my responsibility, and I’m not about to let you get seduced by my so-called mate just because he can’t keep it in his pants for a single night.’

‘Well, he said he’d show me a good time,’ she retorts shakily, and I scoff. He’s un-fucking-believable.

‘I bet he fucking did.’

‘He said you were boring.’

The edges of my vision begin to blur. Of all the bloody acts of disloyalty, this one has to take the cake. He *knows* I’ve been pining after Sabrina. ‘He’s lying. I’m not.’

‘Boring, and reliable, and a really great dad, and a good guy.’

‘He’s such a— *What?*’

‘It was a great pitch. A little backhanded, but great. He really sold you to me.’ She licks her lips and stares into my eyes as I attempt to recalibrate what’s happening.

‘But I’m not boring,’ I repeat dumbly. She’s standing so close to me, and this confined space smells of roses, just like her, and there’s so much skin, and her fucking tits are *right* there, and the blood flow to my head is quickly diverting itself to my dick. But if I’m correct, *Bren was putting in a good word for me?* That devious little motherfucker.

‘God, I hope I’m not misreading this,’ she mutters to herself before I can react, hanging her head for a moment. When she looks up, her blue eyes are growing hooded. She places a hand on my chest, over my shirt, her warmth radiating through me. ‘I don’t think you’re boring. But you should prove it to me. You know, if you feel you need to.’

I begin to shake with the effort of not touching her back. ‘Are you saying what I think you’re saying, sweetheart?’

Something that looks to me a lot like desire flashes over her lovely face. ‘Yes, please.’

That.

Yes, please.

It’s all I need to flick the switch between that semblance of civilisation I’ve been holding the fuck on to and the primal, terrifying hunger I have for her.

‘Be careful what you wish for, you lovely, *sweet* little thing,’ I grit out before gripping the back of her neck and hauling her against me. A second later, my mouth crashes over hers. I groan something barely human as I get my first taste of her. It’s less a tentative first kiss than a fucking onslaught, driven by the frenzy of need I have for her. She opens for me almost immediately, her hands clawing at my hair and grabbing my neck, fingers scraping against my beard.

That this woman in my arms, taking everything I’m giving her and claiming me for herself is *Sabrina*, my stoical little perfectionist, is breaking my brain. She feels like heaven in my grasp. I find the arse that taunts me, *haunts* me, on every single run and squeeze hard. ‘This *fucking* arse,’ I groan into her mouth, and she laughs. Insolent little thing. But then she’s pushing a hand under my smoking jacket and copping a feel of my arse and saying, ‘Right back atcha,’ and I forget about everything in the world except getting as much of her beautiful body in my hands as I physically can. I kiss her hard, my teeth gripping her tongue lightly as she twists her head, our lips sliding plushly against each other, losing ourselves in the heady worlds of each other’s mouths. Fuck, we should have been

doing this since the very first day. I should have dragged her straight out of my car and up to my bedroom.

Just as I'm thinking I should pull away so I can taste her neck, the door starts to open, and Sabrina pulls away from me with a panicked gasp.

'Keep *out*,' I shout, slamming it closed as someone on the other side squeaks 'Sorry!' 'Fuck. Hang on,' I add.

I cast around and land on a stack of crates full of Ness's infernal alkaline mineral water. I grab a pack of twelve and shove it against the door. Then another. Then another. When I turn back to my beautiful conquest, she's staring at me as if she wants me to throw her over my shoulder right here and now. I slide off my jacket and throw it off to the side somewhere before tugging her to me again.

'Now, where were we?'

She answers that question with a punishing kiss, dragging her hands all over my shoulders, my biceps, my chest. 'God, you're so fucking hot,' she moans between kisses, sliding a little hand under my shirt. 'I can't bear it.'

'Well, you'll have to, because I'm nowhere near finished with you.' My hand is back on her arse, and I can feel enough to know that she's wearing a thong. I will absolutely *not* survive this, despite my brave words just now. My dick is almost completely hard, and I grind it against her while clamping her to me. My gentlemanly protestations about her virtue were in vain; she'll know that now.

But she's not leaving here until she learns firsthand just now *not* boring I can be.

Just like I won't be leaving here until I've worked out what to do with my monstrous erection.

She rubs herself against me as our tongues dance and entangle and explore. I'm in real danger of coming in my lovely Tom Ford trousers, so I grip her by the forearms and hold her away from me. 'Stop that right now and give me a feel of these lovely tits.' I palm them both, and *Jesus Christ*. Her nipples are needy little bullets, even through the dress and her bra. I flick my thumbs over them, and her legs almost buckle. Quickly, she grabs my arms to hold herself up.

'Like that, do you?' I say as I explore them. 'Fuck, I want to see them. I want to suck them.'

'Shit,' she whispers to herself, swaying a little. 'Oh my God.' Her eyes are so glassy now, her parted lips swollen from my kisses.

‘You okay?’ I ask, working her nipples harder.

‘Yeah, God, I just—I wanna...’

She drifts off, but I see what feels like my life’s purpose flash before my eyes at her state of extreme arousal.

I need to make her come.

I *need* to.

I’ve never needed anything so much in my entire life.

Releasing her tits, I turn her so she’s facing a shelf of canned goods and step up behind her.

‘Here’s what’s going to happen, sweetheart,’ I say into her ear as I run my hands down her rib cage, pausing at the delectable dip of her waist before curving over her lovely, pert bottom. ‘If you want my help to come, then you’ll hold onto the shelf, and spread those legs for me, and give me a feel. What do you think?’ For good measure, I press my boner against her lower back.

‘I can’t believe I’m even considering doing this,’ she mutters, and I grin evilly behind her. Unravelling my little chef is excellent fun, even considering the agony in my dick. Horny, conflicted Sabrina is even more entrancing than plain horny Sabrina.

‘That’s not what I would call enthusiastic consent.’ I reach beneath the hem of her dress and brush my knuckles over her inner thighs, and she practically shoots through the ceiling.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, fine. But I think we should be quick.’ She hangs her head, having opened the window a crack, and I waste no time in clambering through.

‘You’re going to need to work on your begging,’ I tell her, ‘but don’t worry. I reckon I can make you come in thirty seconds flat. Legs further apart like a good girl.’

To her credit, she obeys. I splay one hand over her taut stomach as I hitch that hem higher and trail my fingers over her soft skin until I hit the very edge of her thong. Both her skin and the fabric are hot and damp, and I swear, sunspots dance before my eyes.

‘That’s very good,’ I croon. ‘See what nice things happen when you’re a good girl for me?’ To underline my point, I slip a couple of fingers under the soaking thong and find nothing but flesh so slick and hot that I bury my face in her neck in anguish. It would be so, so easy to unzip myself and slide right in like this, but that’s not on the cards right now. The privilege of

being allowed to touch her like this, to make her come, is astonishing all on its own. Shoving the thong aside, I slide my fingers through her wetness until I find her clit, impossibly slick and swollen. She bucks against me with a little whimper, and I clamp my hand even more tightly down over her stomach, holding her steady.

'You feel like heaven.' I drag my mouth and nose down her neck. 'Heaven. And you're fucking *drenched*. Let's see how nice and wet you are inside.' I give her clit a leisurely stroke and walk my fingers back until I find her entrance. She gasps and widens her stance as I slide two inside. *Christ*. Just as I suspected, she is tight as sin and wet as fuck. 'How the hell is a man supposed to survive this?' I ask her as I push them in as far as I can. At this rate, she'll have to hold *me* up.

'Oh my God,' she chants. 'Oh my God.' She shoves her little ass back against my poor dick as I fuck her calmly, rhythmically, her arousal coating my fingers, the filthy sounds we're making echoing around this small space. As I do, her whimpers grow louder. She moves one hand along the shelf towards her and leans her forehead on it.

I can tell she's close, so close she's lost to every last thing except how I'm making her feel, so I pull out of her and find her clit again, rubbing it as hard as her slickness will allow as I slide my other hand upwards until I'm tugging down one side of her dress and rummaging under her bra for the beautiful, peaked nipple beneath it. At my first touch, we both make a noise of disbelief. I could happily spend the entire weekend in this room with her and never come up for air.

'Show me how you feel when you come,' I say against her neck. 'Show me how you sound. Show me the things you don't let anyone else see.'

I keep on rubbing her clit, pinching her nipple. She's breathing hard now, white-knuckling the shelf as if she's hoping it will save her, which it absolutely won't, rutting against me just as I'm rutting against her, except that I'd bet she has no clue she's doing it. The inadequate skirt of her dress is against my waist, the pale globes of her arse so tantalising that it takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to bend her over and finish her off properly. I keep a steady stream of depraved words of encouragement flowing. It seems my little ice princess rather enjoys a spot of dirty talk.

And it all yields the most wonderful reward; it really does. Long before I'm ready for this to be over, she's bucking and shuddering and crying out.

Muffling her shrieks, she presses her mouth to that hand gripping the shelf and comes, like the very good girl she is, all over my blessed fingers.

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CHAPTER 11

All I Want for Christmas is You

SABRINA

Today is supposed to be my day off, but there's no way in hell I'm hanging around like 'one of the family' after what happened with Santi last night. No, sir. I intend to spend as much time as I physically can in the kitchen before driving myself off to Daylesford, where I will spend my feelings and eat my feelings. All of which means that, instead of a self-serve breakfast for whomever wanders down (if, indeed, any of them surface at all), I will prepare an array of dishes from which people can help themselves.

After all, everyone who wasn't sex-drunk but was *actually* drunk will require some serious sustenance this morning.

And also after all, I've been awake since long before dawn, staring at the ceiling.

As I cut up fresh fruit with more attention to detail than is strictly necessary, I continue to be assaulted by a highlights reel of the best, steamiest, most decadent moments with Santi in the pantry—that pantry *right there*. Oh my dear God, someone even tried to walk in on us before he barricaded us in with crates of Vanessa's alkaline water.

His face when he was warning me off Brendan. Oh my God. His eyes. So dark and ravenous and filled with foreboding. I shut my own eyes for a moment and allow myself to luxuriate in the memory. And when he reached

for me and kissed me, he was a man unleashed. How is a girl supposed to withstand *that*?

Not that that's any excuse for what happened next. It's not. There *is* no excuse. The truth is that I allowed my boss to finger-fuck me up against a shelf of canned plum tomatoes and kidney beans. I spread my legs quicker than you could say *slutty little slut* and took every single thing he gave me. I have no idea where that behaviour came from, no idea at all. But oh my *God*, the things he said to me. The filthy, fantastic things he whispered in my ear as those long, clever fingers brought me to an earth-shattering climax. They were the best things I've ever heard.

I can confirm two things:

One, Brendan was downright wrong. There is *nothing* boring about Mr Santiago Vale.

And two, it is a crying shame that I'm hellbent on behaving myself from now on, because the size of that monster in his pants was un-freaking-believable.

But I am. Hellbent, I mean. I'm here for two more weeks, then Santi and I will part ways. I have one objective, and one only: to find a permanent in-house position with a company that's prepared to sponsor my visa. Otherwise I go home with my tail between my legs. So scratching any more of each other's itches is unprofessional and downright unwise. We're sharing a house with his entire freaking family, for God's sake! With his daughter. Last night was reckless in the extreme and not to be repeated.

But shit, the memories of his sucking his fingers into his mouth after I'd come all over them, and then kissing me again, slow and decadent, and then laughingly releasing me from the pantry before apologising in advance that he was about to defile one of the clean aprons I kept stacked in there by jerking off in it before he could follow me out… They're all *seriously* good memories. I really, really wish I had stayed to watch him get himself off.

I bet it was borderline violent.

I bet he lasted about ten seconds.

But I didn't. Nor did I hang around the party like he asked me to. Instead, I crept off to my room like the giant chicken I am and spent most of the night reliving and obsessing and freaking the fuck out.

There's a commotion in the living room, and, before I can steel myself, Santi bursts through the door—with Brendan by his side. I didn't realise he had slept over. They're both in running gear. Santi looks hot as actual fuck,

if a little peaky, and I clench my internal muscles involuntarily. I still feel as if I got wrecked in the best way down there.

His eyes go *straight* to me and don't leave.

'Morning. You're not supposed to be working today.'

'It's okay,' I say, standing up taller. 'I couldn't sleep, so I figured I'd get some food going for whoever wanted it.'

'Epic,' Brendan says. 'I could murder some bacon.'

'No bacon in this household,' I tell him with a professional smile. That's definitely not a Dominic-friendly food group. 'But I can certainly whip you up some eggs.'

'No—stop it, Bren,' Santi says. 'She's not your servant.' He comes closer and rests his hands on the island as I try very hard not to look at his fingers. 'I didn't see you later on last night. Did you slip off early?'

'I— Yeah. I was super tired. But thank you for a lovely party. Did you have a good time?'

'I had a *great* time,' he says, those black eyes boring into me, and I swear I turn the colour of a beet.

'That's great,' I babble. 'It seemed like a wonderful group of people.'

'It really wasn't,' he says, 'but Bren and I found a corner and hit the whisky, hence the need to go clear out the cobwebs. We can wait if you want to join us?'

I shake my head so violently it might snap off. 'I'm all good, thanks. I'm gonna have a rest day.' I can't honestly think of anything worse than a cosy run with Santi and his buddy, especially because, judging from the way Brendan is smirking at me, he knows damn well something went down after his little pitch.

Santi frowns. 'If you're sure. Did you—did you drink much last night?'

I know exactly what he's asking. 'Just a glass or two.'

'Right. Yeah, me too—until later, that is.'

We stare at each other for a moment. I swear, the air in here feels electric. I want to close the distance, and kiss him, and scratch his beard, and press my body against his. Judging by the way he's looking at me, he's thinking the same thing.

'Anyway,' he says, 'don't go to too much trouble. It won't kill them to make their own toast for once. Oh, and the caterers should be here shortly to grab the poseur tables. I can wake Dad to let them in, if you want?'

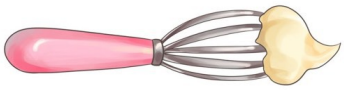
'I'm good,' I insist again. 'I'll let them in. I'm not going anywhere.'

‘Okay, then.’ He looks almost bereft. He drums his fingers on the marble, and I quickly look away. ‘Thanks, for… everything. And seriously, take it easy today. See you later.’

He slaps Brendan on the shoulder, and they head out together. I straighten my apron and pick up my knife. This is good. This is what I want —to be someone he and his family can rely on to be helpful and professional and available.

Just not—

Just not *that* available.



SANTI CORNERS me again around five o’clock. I’ve mainly spent the afternoon drinking organic chai tea from Daylesford and gorging on the stollen I picked up there, my ‘wellness consultant’ hat firmly off.

‘Can we go through the menus for Christmas Eve?’ he asks in a tone that indicates he’s not expecting a no. ‘Let’s go through to the pool.’

I follow him through, iPad in hand, and sit stiffly in one of the armchairs where we shared our fun, sexy cheese evening.

He flops down beside me and sighs, raking his hand through his hair— hair that, I now know, is every bit as thick and silky as it looks. ‘I don’t care about the menus. I just—I wanted to see if you’re all right after… last night.’

The courteous, next-day check-in. Because of course that’s the type of thing a nice guy like Santi would do, *and* because of course he’s wondering if I’m okay after I had a full-on lobotomy and showed him a totally different Sabrina from the one he hired. So I give him a firm, competent smile to let him off the hook. ‘I’m totally fine, thanks.’

Another sigh that makes me look down at my hands in my lap. ‘Sabrina. I— Look. Let me say, if I may, that we are on’—he glances at his watch —‘the twenty-first of December, and, aside from recording “Silent Night” with Vi, that little interlude with you in the pantry was the loveliest thing that’s happened to me all fucking year—*including* the secret cheese fest.’ My face heats, but so does my heart. That’s such a sweet thing to say. A generous thing. ‘You don’t need to say anything, but I wanted to say it. It’s

unfair to ask you how you're feeling without laying my cards on the table. But do you think you could look at me, at least?'

I swallow and look over at him. His face is so gorgeous and so kind, but the expression on it also looks hungry. I owe him something, I guess, even if this situation is awkward as hell, so I force myself to speak. 'I appreciate you saying that. And I had a good time—obviously—but I feel like it was really unprofessional of me to… Anyway, I just— I've been feeling bad about it, so I think we should put it behind us so I can continue to give your family my best efforts, and—'

'Stop.' He pushes suddenly to his feet and extends his hand. 'Come here. Just for a second. I won't bite—even though I really want to.'

Flustered, I stand and hesitantly allow him to take my hand. As his warm, strong fingers close over my skin, I realise belatedly that this is a very bad idea.

'I have one question,' he says, 'and then I swear I'll leave you in peace.'

'What's that?'

'Did you—*do* you regret it?'

We stare at each other. Jesus H Christ, being this close to him again is *not* wise. I trot out the party line. 'I regret my lapse in judgment. It wasn't professional.'

'Sabrina.' A brush of his thumb over my knuckles that I swear echoes where he shoved his fingers last night. 'As a woman who was with a man: Do. You. Regret. It.'

His head is bent, our faces inches away as I crane my neck to look up at him. Even his Adam's apple is sexy as he swallows. And I can't look at him and lie. I just can't. Nor can I tell him it was the best thing that's happened to me all year, because I'm still too chicken. He's still too… *much*. Too hot. Too famous. Too wealthy. Too freaking perfect.

So I tell him the truth, with a little smile to show him he can trust it. 'No.'

He grins that megawatt, megastar grin, and my leggings and panties practically melt right off. 'Good. That wasn't so hard, was it?'

I roll my eyes. 'I guess not.'

'Excellent. So…'

I need to nip whatever this is in the bud *right* now. 'So nothing. You're my boss.'

'For another two whole weeks. However shall we handle the conflict?'

‘It’s not a good idea.’

‘Everything about us is a great idea.’ He slides a hand around my waist and suddenly I’m in his arms, as if we’re going to break out into a waltz or something.

‘I signed a contract,’ I say desperately. ‘I distinctly remember a clause about maintaining a professional demeanour.’

He dips his head to my ear so that his scent invades my senses and whispers, ‘Maybe we should add in a Santi clause.’

I burst out laughing. ‘Oh no. You did *not* just say that.’

‘I think it’s rather clever.’ He straightens up, his dark eyes sparkling with mischief.

‘It’s a dad joke. I don’t date guys who make dad jokes.’

‘I didn’t hear any complaints last night,’ he says, his face going all serious and intense, and I swear I nearly come right here and now.

‘That’s—uh…’

‘You’re beautiful when you’re flustered. You’re beautiful all the time.’

I don’t know what to say to that except for *So are you*, so I wisely stay silent. Instead, I allow myself to reach up and scratch his beard gently.

‘I have no intention of making you uncomfortable,’ he says gently. ‘You’re in my home, you’re working for me. But I’ve been attracted to you since the moment you walked into my office in that little blue dress this summer, and there are a *lot* more ways I’d like to show you just how attracted to you I am.’ His fingers flex on my lower back, and I want to melt into the floor at how good it feels. ‘So, if you decide you feel the same, sweetheart, then you know where to find me.’

With that, he presses a kiss to the crown of my head and takes his leave, a decisive figure cutting through a corridor made of glass, surrounded by darkness.

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CHAPTER 12

Silent Night

SABRINA

I've spent the past two nights lying awake for hours while expending all my energy on not sending my boss some version of a *U up?* text and the past two days ignoring his puppy-dog eyes.

Both are equally painful.

My sexual frustration—and, apparently, Santi's—aside, though, things are going well. Over the past couple of weeks, I've been gradually, carefully, upping Dominic's fibre intake, mainly through leaving skins on his fruit and vegetables and cooking with legumes (though the latter is still a bone of contention for him). Through the diplomatic grapevines of his doctor and Julia, I hear that his bowel movements are improving, too. His GI tract may not be an F1 track just yet, but it sounds like it's no longer a dirt track, either.

On top of that is a tonne of holiday baking with Violet, which is a lot of fun, and the fact that tomorrow is Christmas Eve. With that comes a feast that the Vales still celebrate by way of their Galician heritage: *Cena de Nochebuena*, or Christmas Eve dinner. Honestly, this event is a gift to me in that it's given me something to focus on other than my love life. I've rabbit-holed over the many mouth-watering culinary traditions that this feast brings as well as the lore surrounding Santiago de Compostela—literally Jesus' disciple, Saint James, or *Sanctus Iacobus* in Latin. (Told you I was desperate for distraction.)

I've served the family up a relatively low-key lunch of chicken soup and roast vegetable salad as I grapple with the details for tomorrow. This morning, a delivery of seafood arrived from northern Spain. There's so much of it that the utility room fridge is chock full of it: Styrofoam boxes filled with delicacies from *percebes*—goose barnacles, if you will—and octopus to scallops, cod, and *centollo*, or spider crab. It's a feast, for sure, but given how seriously Dominic takes this occasion and given that I've never even heard of goose barnacles before this week, I'm more than a little nervous. Not to mention, Santi tells me he'll be on hand to help me with the seafood prep tomorrow, which makes me a whole other kind of nervous.

For a variety of reasons, I've left the family to eat lunch together while I hide out in the kitchen, eating my chicken soup at the island and watching TikTok videos of the specialist (and probably insane) fishermen who rope down the cliffs on the Costa da Morte—the Coast of motherfucking *Death*—to gather these bad boys. Apparently, people die doing this every year. As far as I can tell, they're straightforward to cook. A few minutes in heavily salted boiling water should do the trick. But a glance at the commercial invoice that came with the delivery told me that these barnacles cost Santi something like three hundred dollars a *kilo*, so the stakes not to fuck them up are sky-high.

I'm watching a hot guy on TikTok get ejaculated on in the face while trying to twist the barnacle meat out of its leathery-looking sleeve when Vanessa comes storming—no other word for it—into the kitchen. She's in a Skims-style getup, all expensive neutrals, her golden hair piled onto her head. Her arm is outstretched, index finger leading the way.

'What the fuck is this?' she demands, stopping just short of my stool and thrusting her finger in my face so aggressively that I recoil.

I squint at the translucent thing on her fingertip. 'That looks like a chickpea skin.'

'And what did I tell you about chickpea skins?'

I laugh a little. I can't help it; it's out before I can stop it. But seriously, this is freaking *ridiculous*. 'Vanessa, come on.'

Her jaw drops as if she can't believe I haven't thrown myself at her feet in apology. 'You know I'm intolerant.'

'Intolerant, yes,' I say carefully, 'and I take that seriously. But not allergic. With allergens, I operate on a strict exclusionary basis, but with

intolerances, I can only do the best I can—especially since you told me you didn't want legumes excluded.'

'I told you I wanted them peeled. Every. Single. One.' She flicks the skin onto the island, where it lands silently. I stare at it. I cannot believe there are fully grown adults who think it's okay to behave like this.

'I took that on board,' I say as evenly as I can, 'but my methods aren't a hundred percent perfect. They can't be, when I'm cooking for multiple people every day, and—'

'Have you *any* idea how much these fuckers bloat me?' she hisses. 'They make me look six months pregnant!'

'I sympathise,' I say, 'and honestly, I did my best. If they really don't agree with you, then we can find other sources of plant protein for you.'

She slams her hand down on the island with a loud *thwack*. 'This body shape only works with a flat stomach, do you understand that? My boobs are big and my arse is enormous. If I'm bloated, I look like a fucking sack of potatoes. I need a waistline to pull off the bombshell thing, and here you are, sabotaging me with your careless mistakes.'

I rear back again. *That's* the source of her food restrictions: her body image? 'Vanessa,' I say, 'are you kidding me right now? Your body is literally insane!' It's true. This woman puts the *bomb* into *bombshell*. She's freaking *gorgeous*.

'I'll look like a badly stuffed sausage by the time Valmont shows up later,' she grumbles, not seeming to have heard my reassurance.

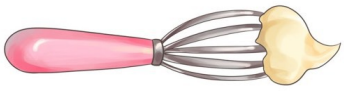
'No you won't. Don't be ridiculous! You couldn't look bad if you tried. I'd kill for your cup size.' Also true. Try getting to grips with your B-cups when you know the guy who was fondling them in the pantry the other night used to have Vanessa Vale's boobs to play with. It's miserable.

She glares at me. 'He's young and hot and famous. You have no idea how exhausting it is keeping up with his standards. And I'm not asking for your opinion. I'm asking you to *do your fucking job*.' With that, she turns and flounces back out in a cloud of indignation and expensive perfume.

My hand is trembling a little when I pick up my soup spoon. That woman's energy is *off*. Jeez. I'm not sure if it was the unfairness of her taking me to task when she's not my employer or her genuinely problematic self-image issues, but either way, it's shaken me up. I should have told her to get stuffed. How many freaking chickpeas have I manually skinned this

past couple of weeks? Hundreds upon hundreds, that's how many. And this is the thanks I get.

She can choke on the darned things, for all I care.



I'M happy to stay confined to the kitchen today. Vanessa's mood gets markedly worse when Valmont apparently calls to say he's decided at the last minute to go home to France for the holidays, although at least it means she'll be alone with her bloating. I hope her perception of how hard it is to keep him interested is solely in her head, but even if it is, it almost makes me feel sorry for her.

Almost.

I spend the afternoon making dinner and pulling out the beautiful Spanish linen that's embroidered with scallops—the OG Santiago's symbol, apparently—and which will be used at tomorrow evening's feast. After dinner, as Vanessa screams at some other unfortunate soul in the recesses of the house, I bake a *tarta de Santiago*, an almond cake that will serve as one of tomorrow night's desserts. It smells insane.

Santi has told me that we will use a stencil to adorn it with the shape of St James's cross in powdered sugar, and I'd like to know whether this is something I'll need to download off the internet and cut out or whether the family has a random cross-shaped stencil in some drawer somewhere. It's ten o'clock, and I have no idea whether he's gone to bed, but I figure I'll see if I can find him in one of the reception rooms. If he's gone upstairs, then no way in hell am I going anywhere near him.

I venture into the main living room. Dominic is asleep on the couch in front of the log fire, with Sloane curled into him, holding a Kindle. She looks so cosy, but she looks up and smiles when she sees me.

'Hey,' I whisper. 'Do you know if there's a stencil anywhere to make a cross on top of the almond tart tomorrow?'

She makes a comedic face. 'I have no fucking clue. I'm sure *Julia* has a ring binder full of them, but he didn't marry me for my housewifely skills.'

I grin. 'Yeah. No worries.'

'Ask Santi. He'll know.'

‘Do you know if he’s still awake?’

She sighs. ‘Ness went off on one at poor little Vi about the state of her bedroom, so he took her—Vi—off to the den. They’re probably watching movies. Go and see.’

‘Okay. Thanks.’

I haven’t spent much time in the rest of the first floor of the barn—or ground floor, as they call it over here. Santi’s study is down here and some other, smaller rooms. But as I walk down the corridor, the faint strains of singing hit me.

It’s Santi.

And he’s singing ‘Silent Night’.

I creep the rest of the way and stand just outside the open door to the den, not wanting to interrupt. Instead, I lean against the wall to the side of the doorjamb and let my eyelids drift closed. Even with no accompaniment, Santi’s voice is heavenly. Like, he *literally* sounds like an angel. He’s singing it softly, like a lullaby, but his voice is still so rich and silky. I guess he must be singing to Violet, and, pissed though I am at the idea that her freaking mom upset her, I can’t help but envy her a little right now.

I’ll just wait for the song to finish, and then I’ll peek around the door.

But, as soon as it finishes, Santi starts the song again. I can’t resist. I move off the wall and peer around the door… and there they are, Violet laid out across the couch, fast asleep, her head on a cushion in his lap and his hand stroking her hair as he sings. He’s staring down at her like he can’t believe she’s real, and I stand for a second, transfixed and guilty and conflicted. It’s such a beautiful, quiet, private moment between a dad and his daughter, and I shouldn’t be here.

He looks up and sees me, and I freeze. *Don’t stop*, I mouth, waving my hand in front of me and taking a step backward, but he lifts his free hand and beckons me over, halting the song at the end of its next line. I go, obviously, because he’s the Pied Piper, and I’m powerless to resist.

‘I’m going to put her to bed,’ he whispers, looking around like he’s not sure where to start with the process of getting her off the couch.

‘Do you need a hand?’

‘Please. Not sure my abs are up to the job.’

I snicker quietly, because that’s patently untrue. Still, I crouch with the intention of sliding one hand under her head and one under her knees so I can take a little of her weight as Santi gets them both up. But I pause when I

realise how dangerously close our faces are. His eyes flutter closed for a second, his unfairly long, dark lashes fanning over his cheeks. He's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen—*especially* like this.

'Sweetheart,' he whispers, extricating a hand so he can drag his thumb along my jaw. Instantly, I break out in goosebumps. It's his touch and his endearment, but it's also the look in his eyes: a pained, desperate look.

'Hi,' I whisper back, drinking him in.

When he slides his hand around the back of my neck and draws my mouth gently to his, I don't fight it. I don't do anything except close my eyes and drown in the sweet, perfect touch of his mouth on mine. It's a chaste kiss, especially by pantry standards, but it feels more real than anything I've ever felt.

He sighs and kisses me again. 'I have to get her to bed. I'll let her sleep with me tonight. She was pretty upset.'

'It's okay,' I say. I pull away regretfully. I really hope he can see that in my eyes. With my help, he gets himself to standing, his little girl still fast asleep in his arms, her peaceful expression belying the tear stains on her cheeks. He's such a good man, and I'm so fucking glad for Violet that she has one emotionally stable parent and one wonderful role model.

'Rain check,' he whispers, his dark eyes roving over my face. 'But I can't wait very long.'

My face heats. 'Ugh. Me neither.'

That gets me a sexy grin. 'Tomorrow night? I think we should give each other a Christmas present.'

I clap a hand over my mouth to stop myself from laughing out loud. Brendan said something similar, I recall, but it sounds so much better when Santi says it. 'I'm ready for the Santi clause,' I say when I've recovered.

His grin grows wider and dirtier. 'That's my girl. It'll be worth the wait—you mark my words.'

'I can't wait,' I tell him.

He gives me a nod of approval and makes his way out of the room. Right before the door, he turns and mouths, *Tomorrow night.*

It sounds like the best kind of threat.

It's only when he's taken Violet upstairs that I realise I never asked him about the stencil.

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CHAPTER 13

Christmas Is Coming (The Goose Is Getting Fat)

SABRINA

From: aida.russell-sinclair@untetheredproductions.co.uk

To: sabrina.roberts.wellness@mac.com

24th December, 08.16am

Hey Sabrina,

Happy holidays! It was so lovely to meet you on Saturday, and now I can't stop thinking about our quick chat.

I hope this isn't too forward, but when we get back to the office in Jan I'm going to greenlight a documentary series on perimenopause, related metabolic challenges, and GLP use. I've been itching to do it for so long and meeting you tipped me over the edge. If you're interested, I'd love to get you in for a proper conversation then. What do you think?

Over the past couple of years, we've built out a content offering beyond just television media. We have a podcast and a tonne of free and paid online content. Women need a programme for this stuff. They need a protocol. We have online companies handing out GLPs with little to no support.

I did a little digging on Sunday (occupational hazard). I checked in with Dom and got a quick intro to Paul Montefiore-Charlton. Both spoke very

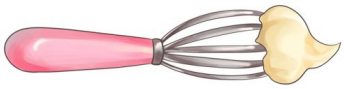
highly of you. I think, with the right team of physicians around you, you could be the perfect person to help us build this architecture out, but I should stress that it, while it's my documentary, this would be your method and your name and your IP. And when it grows legs—because it will—then let's talk equity, because I'd want in.

LMK! Meanwhile, I hope Santi gives you some time away from the stove to enjoy the holidays.

Warmly

Aida x

PS: I have no idea of your visa situation, but a skilled-worker visa is absolutely something we can sponsor for you on an ongoing basis, so thought I'd mention that up front.



SANTI

After two straight weeks of us all being lazy buggers, Sabrina now has a kitchen filled with three generations of Vales. Dad, Violet, and I have all been in situ since this morning. *Cena de Nochebuena* is Dad's jam in particular. His family emigrated from Vigo before he was born, and he and his brothers used to help their mum in the kitchen every year. When *I* was a boy, Christmas Eve was the one day of the year when Mum surrendered the kitchen to Dad, even if she used to complain that the chaos we created wreaked havoc with her attempts to prep for Christmas Day. I in turn roped Violet in as soon as she was big enough to stand on a step stool.

I wasn't sure how it would be today with Dad wanting to run the show and a professional chef in the mix, but it turns out Sabrina's good at keeping him on the straight and narrow without letting him feel like she's cramping his style. It helps that she has an entire Christmas Day lunch to prep for tomorrow.

By midday, the hefty spider crab is cooling on its back to preserve the juices and the salt cod has had its last water change. Violet's stencilled the cross on the *tarta de Santiago* thanks to an old stencil Dad procured from a

ring binder in his study. By the time we finish lunch, both of them have grown sufficiently bored to wander off, leaving me and Sabrina alone at the island, picking the crab. She's put the family album on, very possibly as a way to take the piss, and the kitchen smells like a million Christmases past. If it were up to me, we'd be drinking our way through a nice bottle of white as we labour, but the Grinch here is hellbent on both of us maintaining professional sobriety.

'I knew you were the golden boy, but I don't think I realised just how much of a golden boy you were until I clicked that the whole of Christmas Eve is in celebration of you, basically,' she says, her eyes on her work.

'Basically,' I agree cheerfully. 'And I'll have you know that not only am I named after St James the *Great*, and not the other one, but that James and his brother John were known as the Sons of Thunder. Put that in your pipe and smoke it.'

'That explains a *lot* when it comes to the singing,' she retorts. I pick up a piece of crab meat and pretend to lob it at her, and she starts squealing. 'No, please! I already stink of crab as it is.'

'I won't care if you smell like a fucking fishmonger later.'

At my reference to *later*, her expression instantly turns flustered. 'Yeah, well, I will.'

'Will you join us for pre-dinner drinks?' I ask more softly.

She lets out a huge sigh. 'Unlikely. I'm going to be compiling the *bacalao* right before we sit down, and I still have a tonne of prep to do for tomorrow, too.'

Back when I hired Sabrina, we agreed that she'd work Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. After all, she wasn't going home for Christmas. And nothing requires professional help like tonight's and tomorrow's meals. But now that I've got closer to her, it feels wrong to have her stuck in here like a member of staff when I'd far rather have her company by the fire.

'Well then,' I say firmly, 'we'd better crack on with as much stuff as we can. I'll peel every last fucking potato if it buys me more time with you later.'

'Promises, promises,' she says, but she's smiling at me. She's always beautiful, but she's glowing today, galvanised by the kind of hard work that would break most other people, I imagine.

I get off my stool and walk around the island so I can give her shoulders a good squeeze. God, she's tense—but she smells amazing. Her fish wife

fears are unfounded. ‘Christmas is coming, the chef is getting stressed,’ I whisper dirtily in her ear as she sips Evian from a straw—Evian is as rock ’n’ roll as it gets for Sabrina, it seems. ‘Santi has a plan, and it involves her… *breasts*.’

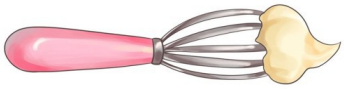
She nearly chokes on her glass of water. ‘Oh my God,’ she splutters.

‘It’s called foreplay, sweetheart.’

‘I hate to tell you, but it’s really not.’

‘Tonight,’ I whisper, kissing the soft skin of her neck right below her earlobe. ‘My game will be so much better tonight.’

‘Tonight,’ she whispers back. ‘I can’t wait.’



By nine o’clock, the food is ready, poor little Vi is on her last legs, and dinner is served. The huge table is adorned with scallop-embroidered linen, while tea lights sit in scrubbed scallop shells from previous years, punctuating the dim light like the *campus stellae*—the field of stars from the Compostela legend. The shells themselves, with their pretty grooves converging at a single point, represent the pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago converging from every direction.

My family is all together—divorces be damned—and the woman I can’t stop thinking about clearly has better time-management skills than she’s let on, because she looks absolutely breathtaking. She’s wearing the same little black dress she wore last Saturday—I don’t think she gave her Christmas wardrobe as much thought as she’s given our Christmas menus—but I’m not complaining because she looks fucking magnificent.

‘Do you know why we eat seafood on Christmas Eve, Sabrina?’ Dad asks as he shakes out his napkin.

‘I don’t,’ she confesses.

‘You want to tell her, Santiago?’ Dad asks. He only ever calls me by my full name on Christmas Eve, the weirdo. I assume it’ll just confirm what Sabrina already said about my being the golden boy, but hey ho. I pick up my wineglass and settle back in my chair for story time.

‘Ironically, it’s supposed to be a night of fasting.’

Sabrina lets out an elegant little snort, which is entirely fair. ‘I assume you mean *feasting*.’

‘Yeah, that kind of got lost in translation,’ I say.

‘Anything the Vales can turn into excess, they will. I’m sure you’ve learnt that already,’ Mum says. ‘I wouldn’t miss this dinner for the world.’ The second half of her sentence goes unsaid: *No matter how much I want to throttle my ex-husband most of the time.*

‘The idea is that we’re still in Advent, so we shouldn’t eat any meat until after Midnight Mass,’ I continue. ‘So instead, just as the humble fishermen of Galicia have done for centuries, we eat simple seafood—though, obviously, we’ve taken that to extremes.’

‘Like the grossly overpriced barnacles that people probably perished to get,’ Sloane points out, her expression telling us exactly what she thinks of that.

‘Exactly like that, thanks, Sloane!’ I say cheerfully. ‘It’s all about the symbolism, eh?’

‘Why you pay that much money for food that’s so stupendously inflammatory, I’ll never know,’ Ness, who is still in a strop over Just Valmont’s no-show, says.

‘It’s Christmas, Ness,’ I say. ‘No one gives a flying fuck about inflammation tonight.’

‘Hear, hear,’ Dad says, raising his glass of the Albariño he brought up from the wine cellar this morning and awarding himself a generous slug.

‘Tell Sabrina about O Apalpador,’ Vi pipes up, no doubt momentarily revived by her father’s narrative mastery.

‘In Galician folklore, O Apalpador is a feeder,’ I say. ‘He’s a giant charcoal burner who comes down from the mountains on Christmas Eve and feels children’s bellies to check if they’ve eaten well.’

Sabrina’s jaw drops open. ‘In the US, we have laws against that kind of thing.’

‘Right?’ Sloane says. ‘*Thank you.* It’s so creepy.’

‘Oh, it’s all very wholesome,’ I say. ‘And if you have a nice, round belly he leaves you chestnuts.’

‘That is *not* my idea of a reward,’ my daughter says, ‘so he leaves me Lindt Santas instead.’

‘That sounds a lot better, to be fair,’ Sabrina says.

‘We come from a long line of feeders,’ Dad tells her. ‘So you see, when you try to—’

I butt right in. ‘This is Dad’s way of telling you that, this year, you’ve been our O Apalpador. Isn’t it, Dad?’ A younger, hotter version, but still.

Dad has the good grace to laugh and acquiesce. He raises his rapidly emptying glass again. ‘Sabrina, Sabrina. With a few notable low points’—he pauses dramatically, presumably so we can all remember the black lentil daal she tried to make him eat—‘you have fed us admirably. You have been patient and hardworking, and you have shown relentless grace in the face of my… not-so-relentless grace.’ Everyone laughs, and Mum shakes her head fondly. ‘This feast looks incredible,’ he continues. ‘We all know I just did the fun parts. You have well and truly excelled yourself. We’re very lucky to have someone with your immense talent look after us this evening, and Santiago is right. Let’s raise a glass to our very own O Apalpador, Sabrina.’

Fuck me, when Dad wants to pull out all the stops, he does. I’m so fucking relieved that he took my hint and ran with it, and I’m delighted that he’s given Sabrina this public validation. After all, she has worked her pert little arse off for the lot of us these past couple of weeks. Still, even I couldn’t have predicted quite how open-hearted his toast would be.

Maybe he’s just in a good mood because he’s finally shitting on a daily basis. Must be life-changing for him.

‘To Sabrina!’ everyone says, charging their glasses. (I may actually shout it.)

Sabrina’s beautiful face is filled with emotion. She wasn’t expecting that either, it seems. ‘Thank you so much, Dominic,’ she says. ‘And thank you all for welcoming me so warmly. It’s meant the world to me.’ Her gaze flickers to me as she says it, and our eyes lock for a second. She has no fucking clue just how warm a welcome I’ll give her later this evening.

‘Let’s eat,’ Dad says.

And we do.

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CHAPTER 14

O Holy Night

SANTI

The food is sublime. Delicious. Off the charts. Insert your hyperbole at will. My little chef has fucking nailed it. Where Dad's prep ended and hers picked up, it's hard to tell. The salt cod with cauliflower melts in your mouth. The crab meat is light and fresh. And the *percebes* taste like eating the Atlantic—as well they fucking should, for the price I paid.

Everyone gets fully stuck into the seafood, except for Ness, who's still harping on about inflammation and her dislike of eating 'bottom feeders'. She lowers herself to have a bit of the cod but mainly sticks to some chickpea stew that she bade poor Sabrina rustle up for her. I swear, Sabrina deserves a sainthood for the way she's managed my ex-wife while she's been here, and I bet I don't know the half of it.

Luke has fallen asleep under the table, having given up hope of our exhibiting any festive spirit towards him and his belly. We're still valiantly putting away food for which we no longer have the stomach capacity when Vi asks in that very particular whiny voice kids adopt when they are about to lose the last remnants of both their personality and their will to live, 'When can we do the *queimada*?'

'We're supposed to do it *after* dinner, darling,' Ness reminds her, to which Vi pushes her plate away and lets her head drop dramatically to the table with a bang.

‘But you’re all taking so *looong*, and I’m so *tiiiired*. Mum, you’re eating so *slooowly*.’

‘Masticating thoroughly is very important for one’s wellbeing,’ Ness says primly. I bend my head and bury my face in my napkin, because I cannot keep a straight face if she insists on saying things like that. I’m only human. On my right, Sloane sniggers like a fourteen-year-old boy.

A moment later, I surface for air and decide to relent. After all, Ness *is* eating like she’s lost her dentures, and Vi is so excited for the arrival of Father Christmas, in whom she eighty percent still believes, that she’s desperate to go to bed. I know how she feels. When I was a boy, I fucking hated having to wait for the grown-ups to finish their interminable feasting before we got to the *queimada*, which is by far the most fun part of the evening if you’re a kid.

‘Let’s go get it,’ I tell her, pushing back my chair. It’s a good excuse to step away from the remaining food. ‘We can light it while we’re still eating.’ (That’s my polite way of saying *while your mother is still eating*.)

She immediately sits bolt upright and pushes back her hair, and Dad chuckles. ‘She is risen. It’s a Christmas miracle!’

‘It’s called *not being bored to death* anymore, Grandpa,’ she shouts back towards the table as she follows me into the kitchen.

‘Okay,’ I tell her. ‘You take the glass, I’ll take the pot.’

We bring our spoils back to the table. *Queimada* is a Galician tradition performed on multiple pagan feast days, some of which can double as Christian feast days. It’s a highly alcoholic, highly flammable punch consisting of orujo, a grape spirit, along with sugar, lemon peel, and coffee beans. It’ll put hairs on your chest, but the purpose of setting it alight is to ward off evil spirits, and witches, and that sort of stuff. I set the clay pot and matching ladle that we own solely for this purpose in the middle of the table before taking the glass from Vi.

‘Violet,’ I intone as sombrely and dramatically as I can, which is quite a lot, ‘please extinguish the lights.’

She giggles, tiredness and boredom forgotten, and runs to the doorway, where she flicks the light switches. Immediately, the room goes dark except for the glow from the fire at the other end of the room and from the tea lights in their scallops. I won’t lie; I love a bit of drama, even when I’m not on stage, and I relish this role. It’s decidedly more fun in the depth of winter than at midsummer. Dad used to scare the living daylights out of us when

he performed this ritual, and it is my wholehearted desire to do the same to Vi.

In the flickering candlelight, Sabrina looks transfixed. I filled her in on the *queimada* lore when I was prepping it earlier. Mum's got a nostalgic look on her face, and Sloane holds Dad's hand on top of the table as he watches me. Only Ness is uninterested as she continues to 'masticate' her dull chickpea stew to nursing-home levels of puree.

'Are we ready?' I ask everyone, but mainly Vi, as I hold up a long, lit match.

'Yes!' she shouts.

'Most excellent.' I hand it to her before removing the ladle from the pot and pouring the contents of the glass into it: a sugar and orujo mixture. That done, I retrieve the match and use it to light the ladle. Instantly, the alcohol ignites in blue flames. I plunge the ladle into the pot, the spectacular flames multiply, everyone *oohs*, and I launch into the *conxuro*, which is a famous incantation that doubles as a hedge. The crux of it: *I don't believe in witches, but they exist*. See what I mean? A bit of a hedge, really, if a highly atmospheric one.

As I hit my stride, reciting the *conxuro*—which is the only thing I can actually say in Gallego—with full tenor-level drama, I look around the table at the blue-lit faces. Sabrina's is rapt. I wish I could give her a wink, but it would ruin the spooky vibe I'm going for. Violet is grinning maniacally, Dad's nodding his approval, and Ness is—

Wait.

Ness looks as if she's having some sort of fit. She's rocking and jerking and clutching her throat—and she's completely silent. No one at this table is more likely to try to upstage me at any given moment than Ness is—not even Dad—but this is something else entirely.

Because Ness is never silent.

Fuck.

She's—choking.

'Shit,' I say, breaking character immediately. 'Ness? You okay?'

Her eyes are bulging out of their sockets. She waves a free hand around frantically, and, even in the eerie blue glare, I can see that she's not okay.

'She's choking!' I shout, heading around the long table towards her at a sprint. 'Fuck! Someone get the lights!'

‘Oh my dear God,’ Mum says in the periphery. ‘Goodness! Vanessa, are you okay?’

‘Mummy!’ Vi cries in a squeaky panic that has my heart lurching painfully. ‘Mummy! What’s wrong?’

I reach Ness and attempt to slap her on the back as someone—Sloane—bolts over to the doorway. The lights come on all at once. My ex is still flailing, and she’s still completely silent. For someone who spent far too much of his marriage wishing his wife would just be quiet for five minutes, I find myself desperate to hear her say anything at all. I slap her again. Nothing.

‘Shit,’ I say. ‘Come on, darling.’ I’ve always thought that people make horrible retching, gargling noises when they choke, but this total silence is far, far worse.

Then someone’s pulling on my elbow, trying to tug me back. ‘It has to be way harder than that,’ Sabrina says in a voice so calm that it feels we must be in parallel universes right now. ‘Let me try. Get her standing up.’

I haul Ness to her feet by her armpits and step back. She grabs at the table with one hand as I hear Sloane in the distance saying, ‘Ambulance please.’

Luke materialises from under the table and starts to bark: the sharp, loud barks of a dog that knows something is very wrong.

Sabrina raises her hand and fucking *whacks* Vanessa between her shoulder blades.

‘Good God,’ Mum cries, ‘you’ll break her ribs!’

‘If I have to, I have to,’ Sabrina says in the same calm voice. ‘Vanessa, I’m gonna try again. I need to employ a lot of force to dislodge this, okay?’

By some miracle, she actually sounds as if she knows what she’s doing. I take a step back to give her more space and pull Vi, who’s crying, ‘Mummy! Mummy!’ over and over, up into my arms. I feel as if I’m stuck in a nightmare, watching, completely paralysed and totally fucking useless, as the mother of my child chokes.

Once again, Sabrina wallops Ness, who drives forward, but seemingly to no avail.

She does it a third time.

Nada.

‘Protocol is five, but given her silence, I’m moving to Heimlich,’ Sabrina says, probably hoping for some kind of approval from us but

sounding like she's an emergency services official. I'm vaguely aware of Sloane reciting our postcode over the phone.

'Do it,' I say desperately. 'Do whatever you need to.' I wrangle Ness's chair out of the way as Sabrina steps right up behind her and plants one foot between Ness's feet. She bars one arm across Ness's collarbone and wraps the other somewhere around her front like some kind of awkward embrace. Then she's thrusting as if she's trying to lift Ness off her feet with just her fist, the movements even more brutal than her blows were a moment ago. It's a savage, full-body effort.

She does it once, and we all brace collectively as Vi buries her head in my neck and howls.

Twice.

Three times, and—

Oh my God, fucking hell—there's a sudden, hoarse gasp that sounds like a death rattle in a horror movie, *but it's come from Ness.* Then she's coughing and gasping and retching right before she bursts into tears of terror and fury.

'Oh, Jesus,' I say, clutching Vi more tightly as I babble with a relief more potent than anything I've felt since my daughter was laid in my arms for the first time, 'Mummy's okay. Mummy's okay. She's fine, my love. She's going to be okay.' I'm telling myself as much as her, because, for a minute there, I thought Vi's mother was going to die right in front of her little girl's eyes.

Ness is bent over almost double, but Sabrina hasn't let her go. 'Chair,' she barks.

'Here, let me,' Mum says, materialising beside me and taking Vi from my arms. Quickly, I set the chair back in its place and help Sabrina lower Ness back into it. I crouch by Ness's side and haul her against me as she weeps and splutters and coughs out her shock and terror.

'Do we still need the ambulance?' Sloane asks, approaching with the phone. 'Yes, whatever was obstructing the airway has now been cleared. Yes, she's conscious.'

'Definitely,' Sabrina interjects as I gape at her. She rests a reassuring hand on Ness's shaking shoulder. 'She needs to get fully checked out. Abdominal thrusts can cause internal injuries, and she was without air for a couple of minutes.'

As I hug Ness, who clings to me like a very distressed, very scared child, I gaze up adoringly at Sabrina. I thought she was competent in the kitchen, but holy fuck. In a roomful of woefully useless adults, she just single-handedly saved Ness's life. *Thank you,* I mouth, and she gives me a terse nod, as if she doesn't trust herself to speak. She's beginning to tremble. I'm not surprised, but by God, she held it together in admirable style just now.

'Well, would you look at that,' Dad says in a shaky voice, rising stiffly from the table and holding something tiny up between his thumb and forefinger.

'What?' I ask, squinting at the object as I rub Ness's back. It's too small to see properly.

'This little blighter flew out of your mouth when Sabrina performed that jolly clever manoeuvre,' Dad says. 'It's a bloody chickpea.'

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CHAPTER 15

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night

SABRINA

Santi is shaking.

I am shaking.

Everyone is shaking.

But Vanessa is alive, and that's all that matters.

Apparently, I cursed the poor woman yesterday in my head, and, apparently, I've saved her.

Everything is okay.

Vanessa is still coughing and heaving in a way that tells me she's about to throw up. It's to be expected after the trauma I just put her diaphragm through. There's a heavy silver wine bucket on the table. Acting on instinct, I pull it toward myself, skewing the tablecloth, and grab the three bottles out of it. With them gone, it's only a third full of water and ice. But right now, it's the best we've got.

'Santi,' I say urgently. 'Help me.'

He looks up and clocks the bucket, releasing Vanessa so he can take it off me. Almost as soon as he positions it under her face, his arms wrapped around it, she starts to empty her stomach. I go behind her and rub her back gently.

'That's it,' I tell her. 'It's good that you're getting it all out.' Next to me, Violet starts to cry in her grandma's arms. 'It's okay, sweetie,' I say. 'This is

going to help your mom feel better. Her body had a big shock—it can't handle food right now.'

'Oh, for God's sake,' Sloane explodes over the harsh, hacking noises of Vanessa's vomiting, 'they're saying now that she's out of immediate danger, they can't send an ambulance for over an hour.'

'One of us can take her to A&E,' Dominic says.

'Everyone's been drinking,' Santi says, which is a relief. I didn't want to have to be the one to point that out.

'Call Jed, then,' Sloane says. 'Thanks for nothing,' she says crossly to the emergency services operator, and hangs up.

'I need to go to hospital,' Vanessa moans into the bucket. The poor thing must feel absolutely wretched.

Jed, Santi's part-time butler-slash-driver-slash-caretaker, lives about a mile away. He's a capable guy and a recovering alcoholic whose sobriety this evening is almost guaranteed—and greatly welcome. He's at the barn within five minutes, by which time Vanessa has finished vomiting and is cuddling a still very upset Violet in her lap while Santi has disposed of the (presumably chickpea-heavy) contents of her stomach and is standing next to me, hands on his hips as he worriedly observes his ex.

'Would you like me to come with you, Vanessa?' Sloane, who seems to have been roused from her usual thinly veiled hostility to her star soprano and former step-daughter-in-law by Vanessa's unpleasantly close brush with death, says.

Vanessa finds the energy to give her a contemptuous side-eye. Impressive. 'Of course not. Santi will come with me.'

Santi's instant reaction is to glance at me. While the crisis has pushed all promises of 'later' out of my head, they come flooding back now.

'I can, of course, but I wonder if I should stay with Vi,' he says. 'She's pretty upset.' It's a fair point, but the excuse sounds hollow, even to me. I busy myself with briskly stacking the plates. I think it's safe to say everyone is done with their food.

'So you would let the mother of your child go to hospital on her own on Christmas Eve?' Vanessa rasps with difficulty.

'I literally just said I'd go with you,' Sloane says, but Vanessa ignores her, her hand flying to her throat.

'Oh my God, my cords. You have to come with me. We need to get them checked for damage.'

I can totally get how scared she must be on multiple levels. If I were her, I'd want Santi with me, too. He's kind, and caring, and competent, and therefore presumably excellent emergency room material. But I can't help but feel a sinking in my stomach. Of course Vanessa had to sabotage my evening with him.

Instantly, I feel like a horrible person. She nearly freaking died. What the hell is wrong with me?

'You're right, of course,' Santi says in a voice so breezy it sounds like his commitment was never in doubt. 'I'll come with you, and we'll get you properly checked out.'

'I'll stay and put Violet to bed,' Julia says.

'But I want to stay up and wait for Mummy,' Violet protests.

'Then we can watch Christmas movies in the den and have a nice cuddle,' Julia tells her. 'Go on, go. We'll see you later.'

I urge myself to pull myself the fuck together and put my professional hat back on. Our lovely evening threatened to turn into a nightmare for a few moments. Everyone is in shock. I'm the only person who's not family, and I'd do well to give them all the support I'm capable of right now. I'll have this place spick and span by the time they get back, I decide. I continue to walk around the table, stacking plates as I go.

'I hope it all goes well,' I say politely.

Vanessa's coat, a huge black faux-fur number, is procured. Santi throws a navy scarf around his neck and looks instantly, impossibly hotter.

'Sabrina,' he says urgently, and I turn. He strides toward me and pulls me into a hug in front of everyone. 'You saved her life,' he says into my ear, his voice thick with emotion. 'I can't thank you enough.'

As Julia sits with Violet in the den and Dominic takes himself off to bed, Sloane and I tackle the cleanup. I'm pleased, but not that surprised, to discover that Sloane is every bit as efficient as I am when it comes to clearing up. I suspect we both find the work a comfort after the scare Vanessa gave us all. I scrape and rinse the plates, and she stacks the dishwasher. We then do the same with the serving dishes and pans in the second dishwasher. Leftovers are put into Tupperwares and set in the fridge, while I place a glass dome over the untouched *tarta de Santiago* to keep it fresh. All in, it takes about an hour.

This family is so absorbing, even when people aren't trying to ravage me in the kitchen or threatening to die at dinner, that I've barely had a

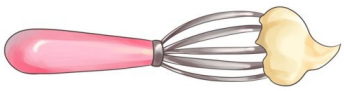
second to think about Aida's lovely email this morning—although, whenever I remember it, I feel warm with the sense of possibility. It's so strange to think that I may already have another role on the horizon, that Sloane may have scored with one of her three shots on goal at the party, and that something huge and exciting and empowering may await me. No more divas screaming at me over errant chickpea skins, but a business and a vision and a sense of building something bigger than myself.

After Sloane has taken herself off to bed, I find Violet fast asleep in the den on her grandma's shoulder.

'My taxi should be here in a few minutes,' Julia whispers worriedly. 'Do you think I should cancel it? I don't know how long they'll be. Do you think I should get her up to bed before I go?'

She looks drained and exhausted, even if her pearls are pristine and her dark-grey hair is still up in its elegant chignon. What must it feel like to come to her son's house and see her ex-husband with a woman half his age? Weird at best, I guess. Humiliating at worst. I like her a lot. She's a trooper, and I have a lot of respect for troopers.

'No, you should head home,' I say. 'It's late. I'll stay here and keep Violet company. I think she'll want to see her mom when they get back.' *But not as much as I want to see her dad.*



I MUST HAVE NODDED OFF, too, because one minute, I'm half-watching the OG *Miracle on 34th Street* with Violet's head resting heavily on my shoulder and Luke's on my lap, and the next, I'm startling awake to find Santi and Vanessa standing over us.

'Hey,' I say, flustered as Luke climbs off me and drops heavily to the ground. My leg is numb from the weight of his head. 'Are you— Is everything okay?'

'It's all good,' Santi says. 'She's going to be fine.'

Vanessa rolls her eyes. 'Hardly.' Her voice is still hoarse. 'Two hours in A&E with every drunk dickhead in the place asking us for selfies, and, when we finally got seen, they couldn't actually tell me if my vocal cords were damaged. What a waste of fucking time.'

‘Funnily enough, there aren’t many laryngologists on night shift on Christmas Eve,’ Santi says in the upbeat tone of a nursery school teacher who’s already had this conversation a million times. The man’s relentless cheer is staggering. ‘But the rest of you is in good health, which is far more important.’

‘They told me to eat soft food and take paracetamol,’ Vanessa scoffs.

Oh dear. I guess that felt pretty anticlimactic to her after the fear and the drama and the long wait, even if it sounds encouraging.

‘And get some rest,’ Santi reminds her, putting his arm around her. ‘Come on. Let’s get you to bed. I’ll carry Vi up.’

There goes my night of passion. It’s stupid to feel bummed or jealous, but tonight has been a pretty clear reminder that, whatever paperwork has been issued, these three are still very much a family.

‘Put her in my bed,’ Vanessa says. ‘I could do with some company tonight.’

I can’t help but smile. I’m sure Violet will be so happy to wake up on Christmas morning with her mom.

‘Will do,’ Santi says. ‘I’ll put her stocking in your room, too.’

Of course. She’ll wake up with her mom *and* a tonne of presents.

He bends over and picks Violet up, his arm brushing mine as he does. A secret smile, just for me, and then he’s straightening up. I get stiffly off the couch, shaking out the pins and needles in my leg.

‘Well… goodnight, then. Merry Christmas.’

It’s a shock when Vanessa launches herself forward and wraps me up in a tight hug. ‘I don’t know how to thank you,’ she says, sounding as though she means every word.

I pat her awkwardly on the back. ‘No thanks necessary. I’m just glad I could help.’

‘You did a lot more than help,’ Santi says as Vanessa releases me. ‘Merry Christmas, Sabrina. Get some sleep.’

I guess I will. Alone.

With a last peek into the kitchen to make sure everything is in good enough shape for tomorrow’s festivities, I take my weary ass off to bed. My room is cosy, but it feels cold and lonely, the bed looking huge and empty and Santi-free. I wander around the room, texting my mom, who messaged while I was asleep to see how the big feast went off. If only she knew.

All went great! I write. I absolutely do not have the energy to fill her in on the truth right now. Instead, I head through to my ensuite and force myself through my nighttime routine: brush, floss, cleanse, serum, gua sha, moisturiser, and the cute Chelsea Peers holiday PJs my mom sent me as part of a festive care package. I feel slightly better when that's done.

I'm sitting heavily on the side of the bed and doom-scrolling through my IG feed—which, admittedly, features mainly holiday baking—when there's a sharp knock on the door. Instantly, my heart rate kicks into gear. I jump off the bed and call, 'Come in!'

The door opens, and there, in a formfitting grey t-shirt, penguin-print pyjama bottoms, and a red-and-white Santa hat, is none other than my boss. He looks me up and down, closes the door behind him, and saunters toward me, a sinful grin on his face.

'You didn't think I'd forget about giving you your Christmas present, did you?' he asks.

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CHAPTER 16

Oh Come, All Ye Faithful

SABRINA

I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe he's here, *in my room*, after everything that's gone down tonight: after nearly watching Vanessa die, after hours in the emergency room with her. And, sure, he looks exhausted, but he also looks gorgeous and mischievous and hopeful as he approaches.

'I'm getting a Christmas present?' I ask, trying not to sound too uncool.

He stops in front of me and cradles my jaw in his hands. The mere sensation of it has me shivering. 'Fuck yeah, you are. As many as you can handle. You're the woman of the hour, after all.'

'I am?'

'You are, though the thing you need to know with me is that it's not the Nice List you want to be on. It's definitely the Naughty List.' He dips his face to mine and kisses me. His lips are warm, his kisses hungry, and he tastes of toothpaste. I open for him, and his tongue plunges into my mouth, finding mine and fighting for dominance. As soon as I yield for him, he makes a pleased, low humming sound that has the space between my legs throbbing.

With one hand, he grabs my ponytail and wraps it around his fist while, with the other, he caresses my back. My ass. He uses his grip on my hair to tug my face to the side so he can kiss along my jaw and down my neck. I shiver again. I want his mouth *everywhere*. I want his hands on me all night

long. I want him inside me yesterday. My hands go on a little journey, too. I cop a feel of his broad shoulders and delight in the muscles of his back flexing under my touch. He's the first guy with a Santa hat I've ever kissed, but there's no doubt *Santi* is an upgrade on a regular Santa.

A moment later, his mouth is against my ear. 'Go on, admit it.'

'What?' I ask. Probably something like *Admit how much you want this* or *how hot I am* or *how much I turn you on*. All true and, I guess, admissible. But he surprises me.

'You thought about leaving Ness to choke. Just for a moment.'

I bark out a shocked laugh and pull away as much as his hand in my hair will allow. 'No! Of course not!'

He raises his eyebrows and waits.

'Okay, well, full disclosure—she ripped me a new one yesterday because she found a rogue chickpea skin, and I distinctly thought, *I wish she would just choke on one*. So I figured that, if I'd accidentally hexed her, I should probably save her, too.'

'Well, thank you for saving the life of my daughter's mother, and remind me not to get on your bad side.'

'You're welcome. At least I got to do something useful with that annual first-aid training. And she's not so bad.' I shrug. I figure I can afford to be charitable—after all, I'm about to get a Santi-shaped Christmas present in all its glory. And I kind of mean it, I guess. I think back to the insecurities driving yesterday's neuroses and her hug tonight. Her request that Violet sleep with her. She's not *totally* awful. Just a little… fucked up. And aren't we all?

'You can't be a witch *and* a saint, you know,' Santi says, looking at me in probably the best way anyone's ever looked at me.

'I'm pretty sure women can be whatever they want to be,' I retort, 'despite how centuries of men have tried to label them.'

He sighs dramatically. 'That's it. I'm taking you to bed. You're fucking incredible. Nice jammies, by the way.'

'Right back atcha.'

He wraps his arms tightly around me and we kiss again, ravenous for each other. I claw at his hair as he sticks his hand down my pyjama bottoms and cups my bare ass.

'No panties,' he says against my mouth. 'I approve.'

'No bra, either.'

‘Fuck me. Let’s get these off.’ He releases me and starts to unbutton my shirt.

‘Just pull it over my head,’ I urge him impatiently, holding my arms up to facilitate. I need Santiago Vale’s lovely, talented mouth on at least one nipple, and I need it now.

But he just laughs. ‘Such an impatient little minx, aren’t you? Patience, sweetheart. I’m a thespian. I’m all about the big reveal.’

It turns out that his way works, because when he’s taken care of the buttons, he pushes the open shirt slowly off my shoulders, and the expression on his face when he seeks my naked breasts can only be described as rapturous. If this were a movie, his face would be actually aglow as if the gates of heaven had opened and poured forth radiant light.

His eyes flick up to my face, and they are black and dangerous and fucking electrifying. I can’t see where his pupils end. ‘You *are* perfect,’ he says. ‘It’s official.’ He closes both his big palms over my breasts, his skin brushing my sensitised nipples, and I shudder out a sigh of pleasure. But then he’s letting go so he can shove my pyjama bottoms down in one clean movement, and suddenly I’m naked in front of him.

We stare at each other.

His dark, filthy gaze travels down my body.

His nostrils flare.

His fingers flex.

Then, quick as a flash, he reaches for the back of his neck and pulls his shirt off over his head, Santa hat coming off too, before shoving his own pyjama bottoms down. As he straightens up, his eyes meet mine like a challenge.

Oh boy.

I take him in like the slutty little ho ho ho that I am and instantly see that my hot take from the pantry last week was correct.

That right there is a *hell* of a challenge.

His body is perfect, obviously—tan and lithe, with black hair dusted over his chest and tapering downward over his flat stomach—but let’s get straight to the main event.

Because his dick is *huge*. Long and thick and perfect, standing proudly to attention, and why not? It *should* be proud. It should be in a museum, come to think of it. Santi should have it cast in bronze and placed in the centre of the fountain in the garden.

I’m actually drooling. My mouth is filling with saliva. I need a taste. I take a step forward, and my knees automatically begin to bend as if I want him to knight me with his majestic man-sword. But then he’s clamping his hands around my biceps.

‘Oh no you don’t. Don’t you dare. Christmas present, remember?’

‘That’s not my present?’ I mutter like a total dummy—although, to be fair, I think I’ve been dicknotised.

He chuckles darkly. ‘It will be soon. *Very* soon, in fact, unless my self-control is significantly better than I think it is. But first, get yourself on that *fucking* bed.’

I bite my lip. Jesus H Christ, if he’s going to boss me around like he did in the pantry, I’ll be coming like a champ before he’s even laid a finger on me. I go and lay down on my bed, tugging my hair loose and throwing my ponytail holder off to the side. My heart is thumping, and my skin is covered in goosebumps, and I feel achy all over, but especially around my breast and pussy areas. I have never, ever felt such a state of breathless anticipation as I do now. I watch as a gloriously naked Santi climbs onto the bed, his eyes roving everywhere. Luxuriously, I raise my knees, the soles of my feet sliding over the comforter. He taps one knee imperiously, and I spread my legs so he can kneel between them.

He plants a hand on either side of my head and ranges over me, big and brooding and so, so beautiful. He’s a—heavily armed—beast, and I’m his spoils of war, and I cannot freaking wait for him to plunder me. He braces on one arm and traces a fingertip lazily over my skin, teasing my nipples before trailing it down over my stomach.

‘Christmas was a shitshow,’ he murmurs,

‘And Sabrina bore the brunt.

‘So now I’m going to sort her out

‘By feasting on her cunt.’

Despite my advanced—and painful—state of arousal, I shout out a laugh. ‘Oh my God. Please tell me you don’t spontaneously rhyme when you’re turned on.’

‘Not that talented, sadly.’ He drags that infernal finger lower and lower, until it’s brushing over my clit. I almost die from the pleasure of it. ‘I dreamt it up in a plastic chair in A&E.’

‘Really?’ I manage, trembling with the effort not to shove my pussy against his hand and start rutting like one of the sheep in the field down the

road. He was thinking about me, even when he was at the hospital with his *ex-wife*?

‘Really.’ His voice goes serious. ‘It was *all* I could fucking think about. It’s the only thing that got me through it all—coming back here and pretending to give you your reward while really giving myself a reward for surviving the most painful Christmas Eve in the history of the world.’

‘Oh, really?’ I ask. ‘It’s like that, is it?’

He sits up and, slowly, carefully, parts my flesh with two fingers while he stares at my pussy with a level of intensity I don’t even know what to do with. I can actually feel myself pulsing under his watchful gaze. I bet he could make me come with his eyeballs.

‘It’s like that.’ His voice is just as intense as his eyes. ‘It’s going to be a merry fucking Christmas to both of us, let me tell you.’

With that, he leans forward a little and bends to suck one of my nipples into his mouth as his finger teases my clit with strokes that are far too light. Still, his pulls reverberate through my breast, and I’m powerless to do anything except clutch at his hair, his shoulders, his arms.

‘You are such a good girl,’ he groans, popping off my breast and sliding down my body, peppering my skin with kisses as he goes. ‘You work that tight little arse off, and you look after everyone, I bet you’re so fucking hard on yourself. I bet you never give yourself an inch.’

I squirm, because he’s not wrong, and he knows me far better than I’d like. The only option here is an awkward joke. ‘Is this where you tell me just how many inches you’re going to give me?’

‘Nine,’ he bats back, so deadpan that I can’t help but laugh. ‘But actually, no. This is where I tell you your only choice here is to lie back and take, take, take for once in your conscientious, good-girl life. Got it?’

He dives between my legs and tacks on to the end of that ominous command the most decadent lick my poor, neglected pussy has ever experienced.

‘Got it,’ I say as my ass rises off the bed. He pushes me back down with a large hand splayed over my stomach.

And then he goes to town on me.

I am lying on a big, soft bed as Santiago Vale licks and sucks and finger-fucks. (Oh shit, he has me rhyming now, too.) His dark head bobs between my legs as he targets my clit with lethal skill and astonishing precision. I won’t last a minute like this. He has one of the most incredible

voices on the planet, but it turns out he's even deadlier when he's totally silent, when his magical tongue is circling my swollen clit, and flicking it, and laving it. The two fingers he's jammed inside me maintain a rhythm that would be punishing if I weren't so wet, but is still brutal in the best possible way.

'You're a very talented chef, sweetheart,' he mutters against my pubic bone, 'but even your best efforts have nothing on how you taste down here.' *Lick.* 'Your cunt is the ultimate delicacy, and to think you've been keeping it all wrapped up under chef's whites and aprons and God knows what else. It's fucking *criminal*.'

I gasp at the outrageous filth of his words and throw an arm over my face. It feels like a white flag.

I surrender.

I have no defence against this man, and his looks, and his words, and his tongue. My entire body is on fire. My pussy is actually molten.

As he presses said tongue to my clit again and abrades it like he might die if he doesn't make me come, I soar. My orgasm crashes through me, sending me catapulting through time and space, shattering my consciousness and obliterating everything that isn't pure, searing pleasure, so bright and vivid and beautiful that I can't help but cry out. As Santi licks me through it, he grunts, long and low and tortured, as if my climax is branding him. Agonising him.

It might just be the sexiest sound I've ever heard him make.

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CHAPTER 17

Joy to the World

SANTI

Pyjama bottoms with pockets are truly a thing of wonderful practicality. After a few tender kisses to Sabrina's pussy and a few words of praise that tell her exactly how pleased I am with her performance just now, I scoot off the bed and admire her from a distance as I tug a strip of condoms from said pocket. It would have felt distinctly unclassy to enter her room waving them like a starting flag, you know?

I stagger back to the bed, destabilised as I am by the sheer amount of blood in my cock and the sheer lack of it left in my brain. But who can blame me? Spread out before me is a woman so spectacularly beautiful that my entire system is a slave to one need: to get the fuck inside her. I'm reeling from her scent, her taste.

She scrambles to her knees, looking as drunk as I feel, golden hair everywhere, and holds out her hand for a condom. 'I'll do it.'

I can't help but smirk as I tear one off. My little control freak probably doesn't trust me—or any man—to put a condom on correctly, which is hilarious and adorable and also hot. I imagine Sabrina's attention to detail will serve me well in bed.

And I'm correct. The mere sight of her rolling it painstakingly over my length, the tip of her little pink tongue peeking out as she focuses, nearly has me exploding in her hand. I'm a sad fuck, but it's been a while, and having her touch me, even like this, is almost too much.

‘It’s a tight fit,’ she says, rolling it up the final half an inch.

‘That’s what she said.’

She levels me with a look.

‘Come here.’ I pull her down onto the bed with me and wrap a leg around her, my dick jerking against her stomach. She reaches between us and wraps her fingers around me. She tried something similar in the pantry, through my trousers, but this is a million times better—so much better, in fact, that I start to shake. ‘I want to fuck you more than I’ve ever wanted anything,’ I tell her before stealing a kiss.

Our tongues entangle, her fingers sliding over my cock, and I can take it no more. I give her a little slap on her lovely arse before rolling us over so she’s lying on top of me. ‘Get on my fucking cock right this instant.’

To my delight, she pushes herself upright, and then she’s straddling me. Jesus, she’s a goddess: her tits small and high and perfect, her skin so pale and creamy. Best of all, though, is the expression on her face. Usually, she looks focused or weirdly serene or blankly professional. Right now, she looks like she’s just had a hell of an orgasm and is very, very enthusiastic about the prospect of a second one. I didn’t get to enjoy that expression properly in the pantry last week, but tonight I have the best seat in the house.

I watch in awed delight as she grips my dick again and raises herself up enough to notch it at her entrance. Tight though the fit will undoubtedly be, she’s like Niagara Falls down there. I’d put money on her being able to take me. Even through the condom, the sensation of her plushness taking me in, bit by bit, is too good to be true. We grin at each other in anguished disbelief, and I shake my head at her.

‘Little beauty. Fuck, that’s…’

She blows out a breath. ‘Yeah.’

‘Spread your legs wider,’ I order her. ‘You can do it.’ I recall how much she seemed to like it when I bossed her about last time (not hard to do; it’s been the subject of almost all my waking thoughts since then). Sure enough, she complies, her eyes fluttering shut for a moment as if the sensation is too much to handle.

I can relate.

‘Take your hand away. I want to watch you feed yourself my cock, and it’s getting in the way.’ She does, running her fingers over the soft skin of her thighs as she impales herself lower onto me.

‘You look like you’re watching porn,’ she grits out.

‘I absolutely am.’

I bottom out, and she gasps as she rocks a little against me. *Fuck.*

‘It’s been a while,’ I warn her through clenched teeth.

She looks almost shy. ‘For me, too.’

‘*Good.* Move for me, sweetheart.’

Like the good girl she can’t help but be, she obeys, moving experimentally up and down my cock a couple of times. *Fuck*, but we fit perfectly. I knew we would, but this is crazy. There isn’t a millimetre of space. I reach back and wedge a pillow under my head for a better view and grip her hips. She leans forward, planting one hand by my ear and one on my chest, her hair creating a golden curtain around us.

‘I can’t handle how beautiful you are,’ she says, and my heart contracts.

‘Me neither, sweetheart. You’re incandescent.’

‘You could have anyone. Look at you.’

Now, I can’t have that. I can’t have that at all. ‘Sabrina, sweetheart, have you looked in a mirror recently? You’re all I want. You’re all I can think about—to an embarrassing extent, actually.’

She goes still, and my dick jerks impatiently inside her. ‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously.’ I reach up and tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. Instantly, it comes loose again. Who cares. I’ll move onto her breasts instead. I caress one, stroking the silken underside before rolling her perfect pink nipple between my fingers. ‘I’ve wanted this since July,’ I remind her. ‘I told you that the other night.’

‘Me too,’ she confesses. ‘Against my better judgment.’

I laugh at that. ‘Your lack of self-control is my new favourite thing about you.’ She moves, and I groan. ‘Apart from *that*, obviously. Come here.’

She lowers herself fully forward, and I kiss her to show her how serious I am about this, about her, our hands roving everywhere. Slowly, lazily, she begins to move on top of me, learning how we fit together, figuring out a rhythm. I humour her until my need gets unbearable, but she seems to reach the same conclusion, sitting upright and reaching a hand back to rest on my thigh.

The arch of her body as she begins to ride me properly is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. No, actually, the fact that my very own beautiful, good-girl chef is riding me for the purpose of her own satisfaction—*that’s*

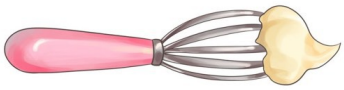
the sexiest thing I've ever seen. All I can do is hang on for dear life and enjoy every moment.

As she moves on me, my skin pricks with sweat. The room fills with the sounds of sex: skin slapping and noises of agonising pleasure from both of us. When I can't bear it anymore, I rear up on one hand so I can wrap the other up in her silken hair and kiss the hell out of her. I need her to feel me filling her up at both ends; *I* need to feel it, too. As best I can, I shunt my hips upwards every time she bottoms out, fucking her with little finesse and a whole lot of thuggish desperation. In response, she claws at my hair and my back, kissing me furiously and milking me harder, grinding her pussy against me on each thrust, her nipples rubbing against my pecs. It's astonishing and gratifying in equal measure that a woman so self-contained at all times is doing me the service of letting loose like *this*.

My consciousness takes on a dreamlike quality: this bed; the otherworldly experience of being surrounded by Sabrina; the almost unbearable fire in my dick; the heat it's created throughout my body. I can barely take it anymore, so when the moans she's making into my mouth grow louder, more pitiful, I find her hip and use my hand to shunt her even more savagely against me.

Within moments, she's bucking and jerking, crying out against my lips as she falls apart, her inner walls spasming around my dick and her breath warm on my face. The gossamer-thin thread of my self-control snaps in an instant, and I brace harder on my supporting arm as I fuck her as hard as I can through her orgasm. I go impossibly rigid, white-hot pleasure racing up my dick, and let loose inside her, coming and coming and coming, my entire body shaking at the violence of my climax. *Thank fuck, thank fuck, thank fuck.* Thank fuck she likes me; thank fuck she let me inside her body; thank fuck this is how karma rewards me for that hospital run tonight.

As I come down from my impossible high, I smooth her hair back off her face and kiss her. She cups my jaw and tells me with her kisses that she feels exactly the same.



‘GOD, THIS IS GOOD,’ she mumbles about twenty minutes later, her mouth full of food. I crept down to the kitchen after we recovered to procure two enormous slices of *tarta de Santiago*, which I put into a big bowl and drowned in pouring cream. Now I’m sitting up in her bed as she lounges between my legs, her head against my chest. I’m in my PJ bottoms, and she’s wearing her pyjama top, and we are, I have to say, cute as fuck.

‘It would have been a travesty if we hadn’t got stuck into it,’ I agree, loading up my spoon and holding it to her mouth. I wonder when was the last time anyone fed her—or took care of her at all. She closes her lips over it and moans contentedly as I slide the spoon out. If she keeps doing that, I’m going in for seconds—and I don’t mean of cake.

‘I just banged you,’ she begins when she’s finished her mouthful, ‘so does that make me a *tarta de Santiago*, too? Like, Santiago’s tart?’

‘It absolutely does. Look at you and your clever, punny slut-shaming. Clearly, I didn’t scramble enough of your brain cells.’

‘Well, I’m pretty sure your dick hit my skull, so I have no idea why,’ she says, stretching her long, bare legs out in front of her. Her toenails are painted a shiny scarlet.

‘Can I ask you an inappropriate question?’ I ask, hating myself already but feeling unaccountably needy.

‘I have no idea why you’d start asking permission now.’

‘Fair,’ I say. ‘When you said that it had been a while for you… was that the guy you mentioned during our cheese fest? The British guy?’

‘Yeah,’ she says shortly. ‘Great subject matter, though. Just what I feel like discussing.’

‘Sorry.’ I kiss the side of her head.

‘Don’t be. You’re better than him in every single way.’

‘By *every single way*, you’re essentially referring to my dick size and bedroom abilities, correct?’

She laughs and turns her head towards my chest, and I boop her on the nose. She is so fucking radiant.

‘Sure,’ she says, which absolutely does not feel like a categoric affirmation.

‘I’m sorry he was a dick to you. His loss is my gain.’

‘Thank you.’ She nuzzles her cheek against my chest. ‘You’re so sweet.’

‘Sweet and accurate. But you’re so talented. You don’t need him—or anyone,’ I remind her.

‘Actually, I had some news today,’ she says, sitting up and shifting around so she can see me.

‘Yeah? Job news?’ I feel suddenly and unaccountably nervous.

‘Kinda. It might come to nothing, but… well, Sloane introduced me to Aida Russell at the party? And we had a super-quick chat, but she emailed me this morning.’ She hesitates. ‘Apparently, she’s been thinking about doing a documentary on GLPs in perimenopausal women for a while, and our conversation persuaded her to take the leap. She’s gonna greenlight it, and she wants to talk to me about coming on board as an advisor and setting up a kind of protocol that can be shared widely. It would be an ongoing thing, and, well, she seems to think it could have legs for me beyond the show. She said if I ever wanted to make a real go of it, she’d back me.’

I can’t help the size of the grin I give her. Unselfishly, all my instincts tell me this project is fucking perfect for Sabrina, and selfishly, I’ve been worried about what her next steps would be. I know she’d never talk to me about it, but I’m well aware that the Montefiore-Charltons are sponsoring her visa currently—a visa that runs out in spring. An expiration date like that is *not* reassuring.

‘I’m not surprised,’ I say. ‘Of course she wants to snap you up. She’s a businessperson. She knows a winner when she sees one. You’re so backable it’s revolting.’

‘Aww.’ She wraps an arm loosely around my neck. ‘You really think so?’

‘I know so. And Aida’s the real deal, too. Nothing like that dodgy ex of yours.’

Her face grows serious. ‘That was my first thought. He really did a number on me, but Aida’s language was very… careful. She made it clear that I would own the protocol, and they’d just feature it. So that sounds okay, I guess?’

I hate that this prick shafted her and then made her doubt herself. Her judgment.

‘It sounds more than okay,’ I say. ‘And you’re clearly a very capable businessperson, too, but you’ve got me in your corner now. And the rest of the Vales. You’re now un-shaftable. Anyone tries anything funny, then…’ I trail off menacingly.

‘You’d punch them?’

‘Of course not. I’d set Sloane on them.’

She’s laughing as she kisses me. She tastes of cream and sugar and happiness. And on that note…

I pull away and clear my throat. ‘This isn’t something casual for me, you know,’ I tell her.

Her blue eyes go wide as she studies my face carefully. ‘For real?’

‘For real. Whatever you might think of me, I don’t fuck around.’

‘I believe you,’ she says. ‘Brendan, remember?’

I roll my eyes. Shifty fucker. ‘Ah, yes. I’m dependable but boring.’

She trails her fingers down my chest. ‘Nothing about you is boring.’

‘Good. Well, I was wondering, once you’d had some time to think about everything and, of course, I don’t want to steamroll you, but’—I clear my throat—‘I can’t tell you what it meant to me tonight to come home, stupidly tired, and find you asleep with my daughter. It was… pretty special. I’d like to tell Vi that I’m serious about you and that I want to date you.’

Her smile is everything to me. ‘You do?’ she whispers.

‘I do. I actually want you to be my girlfriend, but I’m painfully aware that I’m being Luke levels of needy right now.’

‘Also very manipulative, altering my brain chemistry with orgasms and skin-on-skin and sugar before you ask,’ she says, but the way she’s looking at me tells me I don’t have much to worry about.

‘Did it work? Will you be my girlfriend?’

She kisses me, long and slow, her tongue sliding against mine. I inhale her and marvel at how such a shitshow of a day could end with my feeling like all is good with the world. Tomorrow, we will celebrate the Lord’s birth with my crazy, colourful family, but tonight, as the fields freeze and the darkness envelops us all like a blanket, it’s just me and Sabrina.

She pulls away a millimetre. ‘I’d love to,’ she says. ‘Especially if it gets me off chickpea duty.’

I laugh and wrap my arms more tightly around her. ‘I have a hunch Ness won’t be in the mood for chickpeas for quite some time. Do you think you can manage another spoonful of cake, you little tart?’

She sighs contentedly and rests her head against my chest. ‘Honestly, between your dick and that cake, I’m totally stuffed.’

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CHAPTER 18

Auld Lang Syne

SABRINA

A week, and everything has changed.

This time last week, I was the chef. I cooked for this group of people around this large table—and I guess I saved one of their lives, too, while I was at it.

Tonight, I'm here as Santi's girlfriend. He's outright refused to let me cook, instead calling in a favour and having Soho Farmhouse deliver an incredible spread. In fact, the lot of them were due to be at some fabulous party tonight, hosted by a film director who has a Georgian manor house locally, but they unanimously bailed on that and decided to stay home. It seems Vanessa's choking scare has ignited a real sense of family among the Vales.

Santi took Violet aside on Christmas Day and asked for her permission to date me. She gave it, sweet little thing that she is. Apparently, she's a fan because I 'make the best hot chocolate'. So he told the rest of the family that evening as we lounged around the fire playing Jenga and charades. Dominic and Sloane seemed genuinely tickled by our news.

'Took you long enough,' Sloane said, although I'd argue that two weeks is pretty freaking quick.

Vanessa's reaction was lukewarm at best, but I suspect it would have been positively frigid had I not arguably saved her life the night before. Anyway, Valmont showed up three days later, seemingly genuinely

enamoured of her, at which point she promptly lost interest in holding any resentment toward my putting moves on her ex-husband (even if he mainly put them on me).

We've all eaten too much. I have to admit, it's pretty sweet being in guest mode and even sweeter being in girlfriend mode, with Santi's arm draped ever the back of my chair all through dinner as I enjoy delicious food that I haven't slaved over.

As midnight approaches, we retire to the fireplace. Santi fusses over the bottles of champagne stacked in the huge ice bucket (fully disinfected after last week, I should add), and Violet fetches the big bowl of chilled grapes that she and I frosted earlier with sugar and lemon juice. It's our little twist on the Spanish tradition of eating twelve grapes at midnight—one on each chime to ensure prosperity and good fortune for the next twelve months. Afterward, we will apparently have a singsong (my plan is to stay totally silent and enjoy a concert people usually pay through the nose for.)

As Violet sets the bowl of grapes down on the huge coffee table, Santi eyes it warily.

'For God's sake, no one let Ness get anywhere near those bloody grapes. I could do without tonight ending at A&E.'

Everyone laughs except Vanessa, who rolls her eyes. 'Charming. Good to know who your friends are.' Her voice has fully recovered, and a quick trip to London after Christmas reassured her that her vocal cords are totally fine.

Violet kneels by the grapes, cutting off twelve for each of us and placing each bunch in a small silver bowl. She hands them out while Santi fills everyone's champagne flutes in readiness for a toast.

As the clock strikes midnight, we all—including Vanessa, who has promised to put her infamous mastication skills to good use—eat our twelve grapes. They're sweet and tart and delicious. There is much hugging and kissing. I pick Violet up, and twirl her around, and squeeze her tight.

Finally, the man of my dreams saunters toward me, on his handsome face an expression that I've gotten used to over the past week: a kind of mix of wanting to appear cocky but looking far too smitten to fully pull it off. It's a dangerous expression. An intoxicating one. And I respond, obviously, by swooning so hard that I may melt into a puddle at his feet.

'Happy New Year, sweetheart,' he says, looping a strong arm around my waist and tugging me hard against him.

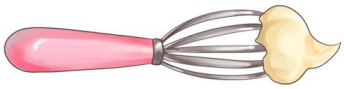
‘Happy New Year,’ I echo, staring up at him. He smiles as if he likes what he sees and, dipping his head, kisses me. It’s soft and low-key family-friendly, but it’s also full of promises. Promises for tonight and beyond.

‘Glad you ate your grapes,’ he murmurs, his voice husky. ‘Prosperity and good fortune, and all that.’

I had a next-level inspiring, invigorating call with Aida this week (she couldn’t wait until January, in the end). The paperwork for my visa sponsorship through her production company, Untethered, will begin next week. And, right now, I’m in the arms of the most inspiring, invigorating man I’ve ever met, and he’s looking at me as if he wants to make every one of my dreams come true.

It seems to me that nothing *but* prosperity and good fortune lie ahead.

I don’t need grapes for that.



If you’d like to visit Santi and Sabrina, and Brendan and Marlowe, six Christmases on, then download this **bonus epilogue!**

And if you’d like to read the other shorts in the **Billionaire Christmas** series, then please check out the series here:

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