Will they find love this December?

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The 12 Dates of Christmas



AN ADVENT ROMANCE

Ruby Winter



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About the Author

Ruby Winter is a pseudonym for Jen Devon, who writes sexy, sparkling romances about imperfect people finding their perfect match. A former ecology academic and university lecturer, she now works in tech and dreams of writing full-time. She's an avid naturalist, photographer, and gamer, and she lives in the midwest US with the loves of her life—one darling husband, three brilliant kids, and two hilarious rescue mutts. Her favorite holiday tune is *The Christmas Song* by Nat King Cole, and she's convinced the world would be a better place if everyone read romance books. Come say hello online at jendevon.com!

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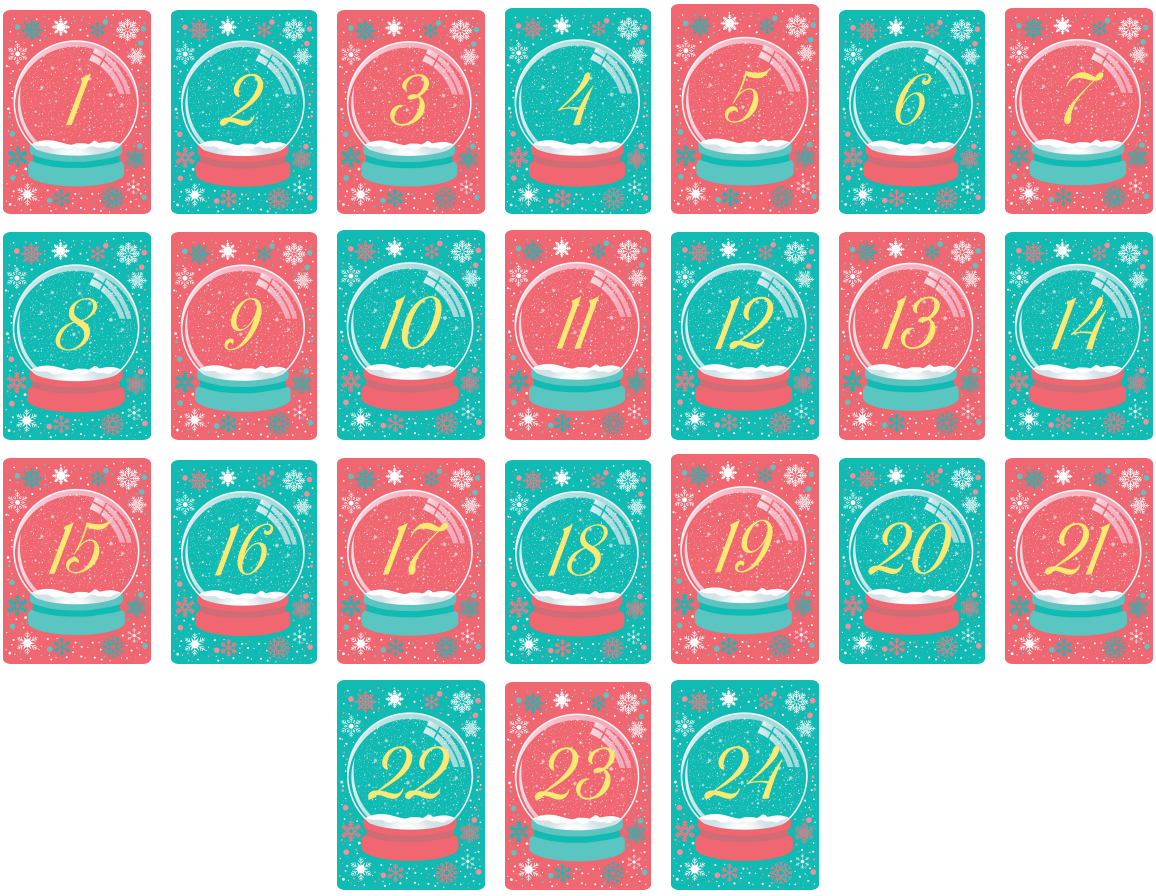
THE 12 DATES OF CHRISTMAS



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Advent Calendar

TAP FOR TEXT VERSION



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For the merrymakers and the chance-takers.

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CHAPTER ONE

Sixteen days until Christmas

Nothing puts an overworked, overachieving zillennial in the holiday spirit faster than the end of a relationship, a forced vacation, and a mulled-wine stain on her new sustainably sourced cashmere sweater.

I'm on a plane bound for London, wedged between a manspreading corporate type in a budget suit and a college-aged guy who smells like weed and pretends to read Dostoevsky. A few rows up, the seat my best friend Maddie should be in is still empty. At her insistence, I left our apartment while she was still tossing last-minute stuff into her luggage, and she hasn't responded to any texts in the past hour.

The woman behind me has jingle bells on her shoes, and the man who passed me on the way to his seat is wearing a weapons-grade amount of my ex's cologne. A preschooler with a Chucky haircut and a tenacious snot bubble in his nose peeks over the seat in front of me, staring, and the guy in Yankees paraphernalia across the aisle brought a to-go Caesar salad from one of the terminal kiosks. I hope he eats it fast, because the only thing worse than the smell of Caesar salad in a claustrophobic metal tube is the smell of *warm* Caesar salad in a claustrophobic metal tube.

I'm a good person. I generally like people. I wash my clothes before donating them to the thrift store. I leave pretty hand-painted watercolor bookmarks in the library books I return, and I never squish the jumping spiders that seem to love the windowsills in my fourth-floor walk-up. But this? I already loathe everything aviation-related as a matter of principle, so this particular flavor of humanity soup is pushing all of my worst buttons in the worst ways.

The flight must be at capacity, because an attendant who sounds like Emma Thompson announces that the front overhead lockers are full, pleading for passengers to put smaller items under their seats. Of course, nobody does.

When I take out my phone to set it to airplane mode, my heart drops into my belly.

Three missed calls and a text from Maddie.

> Evie I'm so sorry! I'm going to miss the flight, call me when you land, love you

Oh god, no.

This trip wasn't my idea. The only reason I agreed to go was to indulge Maddie's insistence that I reset after a string of bad luck. My best friend is one of those *Eat, Pray, Love* types who thrives on travel. She finds it energizing and restorative. I … do not. I like my routines, I like predictability. I also have a bit of a codependent relationship with New York City. I love that I can walk to most of the places I need to go. Queens has my back. It has everything I need, and thousands of things I don't even know that I need, and that's … comforting, I guess. My city is more reliable than any person I've had in my adult life, aside from Maddie.

I *knew* this was a bad idea. My fight-or-flight instinct kicks in and chooses flight. Just … not the kind that involves an airline.

I have to get off this plane.

Everyone is seated now. The attendant begins the standard preflight safety demonstration. My back is sweaty, and I feel every tiny, soft fiber of my cashmere sweater cling to my skin like bird's feathers stuck in honey.

I have to get off this plane.

When I fling off my seatbelt and angle my body sideways, I assume manspreader will take the hint that I want to get out. But he doesn't budge. He doesn't even look at me until I clear my throat. Twice. Eventually, he shifts his legs and I manage to get into the aisle. I'm reaching for the overhead locker to grab my carry-on when the flight attendant at the back of the plane says, "Ma'am, please sit down. We're getting ready to—"

First of all, "ma'am" is my mother. I'm only twenty-seven.

Second? I *will* get off this plane.

With an apologetic glance over my shoulder, I say, "Sorry. I need to leave."

When I turn back around to reach for my carry-on, a man stands there, blocking the aisle. He wears a calf-length overcoat of buttery-soft tweed that's tailored to the breadth of his shoulders and the long, lean line of his

body. I've lived in New York City since I was eighteen. I know luxury when I see it. His profile is beautiful—sharp jaw, a sulky bottom lip, a high-bridged nose with a gentle bump. All complemented by a swoop of tawny hair. It's like he was designed with intentional artistic symmetry instead of a random roll of the biological dice.

He opens the overhead locker adjacent to mine, and he's so tall that he has to lean backwards so it doesn't knock him on the chin. I catch the crisp bergamot scent of his cologne, and I'm temporarily mystified by how good he smells. It costs me precious seconds.

Now he's pulled two bags down and set them on the floor between us, reconfiguring the space so his own bag will fit.

Quietly, I say, "'Scuse me," but he doesn't acknowledge me.

When I move to squeeze past him, he bends to lift and swing one of the bags back into the compartment. It almost takes my head off.

"Ma'am—" the flight attendant says behind me, approaching fast.

"Excuse me," I say, a little louder this time. "I'm trying to get off."

Finally, he sees me. He tips his head sideways to remove an earbud. "Sorry, did you say something?" His voice is a mellow almost-bass baritone. Resonant and rich as butterscotch. And definitely not American.

I'm on a plane heading to London. I shouldn't be surprised this gorgeous man has an English accent, but I'm just unhinged enough right now that the complete package lights up my heart like a bonfire in a birdcage. I feel lightheaded.

"Flight attendants, arm doors and cross check," mutters the captain on the intercom.

"Ma'am, you really do have to sit down now," the attendant says behind me. She has the audacity to smile apologetically over my shoulder at the man in the aisle.

I'm not getting off this plane. I'm really going to London alone.

When I return to my seat, the manspreader refuses to stand, so I have to squeeze myself past him, temporarily straddling his thigh with my ass in his face. As I grip the top of the seat in front of me to keep from falling into his lap, my fingers lock on to something slick and cold, and I don't need to look to know that it's a little gift from the snotty kid in front of me. Dostoevsky guy has his elbow propped on our shared armrest, so I have to sit in a sustained clench that would make my old Pilates instructor proud.

Holding back tears, I watch the man in the tweed coat turn around and give me an apologetic glance. The flight attendant ushers him towards first class. Of course.

Fifteen days until Christmas

I've never been able to sleep on flights, so after a connection, baggage reclaim, and immigration at Heathrow, I think I've been awake for at least a full day. I'm desperate to put my head on a pillow.

After customs, I pick a spot against the wall to call Maddie. She forwarded the lodging confirmation email several weeks ago, but a search brings up no results. Anxiety makes my throat tighten. She put this trip together in less than five months, and I spent so much time ignoring that it was happening that I left all of the planning to her.

I'm in the middle of a jaw-breaking yawn when she answers. "Hi from the future," I mumble.

I'm surprised she's answered. I expected her to be on the next flight on her way here, or at the very least, waiting in the terminal. Instead, she's in our apartment in Queens, nestled on the sofa under a chunky knit blanket. She's got gold gel under-eye patches on, and she's wearing a sweatshirt appliquéd with a very muscular Santa Claus lifting a barbell. It reads "NORTH SWOLE." The sky in the window behind her is that saturated glacial blue of sunny winter days in New York, and it hits me with a wallop of homesickness so intense it makes me nauseous. Here, it's barely midafternoon, but the sky is already a watery grey over a weak, waning sun.

Maddie's the extrovert in our duo. *I'm* the one whose natural habitat is a comfortable couch in front of a frost-filigreed window, a mug of something fragrant and steamy in hand. I'm not really an introvert, either—Maddie calls me an "Evievert." I'm just selective about who I share my time with. I also really love staying home. Maddie will bring a bit of home with her when she gets here, though. I'm going to cling to that for now.

Maddie leans forward and squints at the screen, so close that her face goes blurry. "Oh my god, are you OK? What happened?"

"Nothing. Why?" In the tiny thumbnail in the bottom corner of my screen, the mulled-wine stain on my ivory cashmere looks alarmingly

blood-adjacent. I lay my hand over it. “Oh. This. Finance bro collision at that wine bar at the airport. Wasn’t even my wine—”

“No, honey. Your eyes.”

After takeoff, I *did* cry. Just as a little treat. Now, my mascara has fanned out under my lower lashes. I look like I’m a week into a mysterious illness. The cashmere, the heeled boots, the dark high-waisted jeans, the makeup—all of it was in anticipation of being surrounded by chic travelers in Gabriela Hearst power suits and bougie vacationers in their Burberry athleisure wear. I wanted to look like I fit in. I should’ve known I’d fumble it.

“I got, uh … sweaty on the plane.” I swipe my finger under each eye. “What happened to you?”

“The kitty sitter broke her ankle and had to bail. I am so sorry.”

It’s always been hilarious to me that Maddie refers to her hateful goblin of a cat as a *kitty*. Claudia is a creature from a Guillermo del Toro fever dream. I wouldn’t be surprised if the sitter intentionally flung themselves down a short flight of stairs to get out of watching her.

“I hope they’re OK,” I say, scrolling my email. “What’s the name of the place we’re meant to be staying? I’ll get us checked in.”

“Paperwhite Holiday Home. Doesn’t it sound *so* festive?”

Truly, at this point, I wouldn’t complain if it was called Solo Traveler Murder Cottage, as long as they let me take a quick nap before they come at me with the zip ties.

“How are you spelling it?” I spell it out for her, and she says, “Paperwhite is *one* word, not two. It’s a flower. How do you not know that, nature girl? And it’s *Home*, not House.”

“Ah. Found it.”

Maddie hesitates. “You’ll have the whole place to yourself. You’re going to love it.”

“Wait. Why did you just say ‘you’ instead of ‘we’?”

When I swipe back to the call, Maddie blinks at me over the rim of her mug. “Claudia is nineteen years old, Evie.”

Shit. I narrow my eyes at the screen. “Madison Eleanor Barden—”

“I just kinda feel like this is a sign that I shouldn’t leave her for so long—”

“Don’t you *dare* bail on me—”

“And you need this. It’s serendipity. This trip was meant for you anyway __”

“I’m canceling and coming home.”

“Paperwhite is nonrefundable.”

I close my eyes and breathe for a beat before I respond. “You didn’t mention that when I paid for my half.”

“I didn’t think it mattered. We got a big discount for booking early and going nonrefundable.”

“Fine,” I say. “It’s just money. I’ll take the loss.” That whiff of anxiety from a few moments ago becomes a full gust of panic in my lungs. My face floods with heat. I saved for five months *and* canceled my gym membership *and* reduced my takeout habit to only once a week to be able to afford this trip. Whether I stay here for the rest of the month or head home tomorrow, that money is spent. But I’m enough of a coward that I’d rather go home and be broke in my comfort zone than be broke here and enjoy what I paid for.

Maddie sits up and one of the gel packs under her eyes tumbles off. “You’re staying.”

“Did you do this on purpose?” My voice climbs an octave. “Is this some sort of elaborate Hallmarkian setup—”

“Hallmarkian?” Maddie snorts. “Really?”

“Yes. It’s like, Machiavellian, but more sinister. And I’m not a sweet and plucky heroine that people root for, Mads. I’m an unlikable protagonist. At best.” Even *I’m* annoyed by my own grumpiness these days.

“Stop talking about yourself like that. It pisses me off.”

“See? Unlikable. Even my best friend thinks I’m a pain in the ass.”

Maddie’s expression softens. “Do you really want to come home?”

I should be able to answer immediately, but I can’t. In the last six months, I’ve lost my job and my boyfriend of two years, so I was happy tagging along with Maddie to a beautiful city on a trip I didn’t have to plan. Being here solo isn’t what I signed up for, though. The last thing I want is to be alone in a place that barely gets eight hours of sunlight per day, surrounded by the manufactured merriment of the festive season. Especially since I don’t like Christmas even at the best of times. But there’s also a tiny, stubborn part of me that wants to try.

Maddie adds, “I’ll pay the fees for you to change your flight so you can come home, if you really want to, Ev.”

Claudia climbs into Maddie's lap with a creaky meow that sounds like the hinges on the gates of hell itself. She makes aggressive eye contact with me through the phone, and her tail twitches from side to side, brushing possessively across the front of Maddie's neck. Then she turns, tail lifted, so an intimate glimpse of her entire ass is the only thing visible on the screen.

"I'll stay," I say. "For now."

"Yay!" Maddie lifts Claudia away one-handed. "I've gotta go. Call when you get to Paperwhite. Love you!" The call ends.

My belly growls, and my bra straps feel like they're surgically embedded in my shoulders. A man in a sweater vest barks at his teenage kids to keep up, sideswiping my suitcase as he hustles by. It wobbles on its wheels before tipping over into the flow of travelers. Before I have a chance to leave my safe space against the wall to grab it, another man bends over to pick it up and wheels it back to me.

It's the guy in the tweed coat who blocked me from getting off the plane. Now, he wears one of those Britishy flat caps. It makes the waves of his hair wing out a bit behind his ears. In his hand, a Tiffany bag hangs alongside a briefcase of velvety brown leather.

I wonder who the jewelry is for.

He gives me a head-to-toe once-over down his very perfect patrician nose. With his hand in a fist, he pops his free arm outwards to tug his coat sleeve away from his wrist, glancing at an expensive-looking watch. He meets my eyes. "You'll want the black cabs."

This man's entire aesthetic annoys me, but I can't quite pin down why. Is it the arrogance of flagrantly carrying a Tiffany bag through the crowded airport instead of tucking it inside his coat or one of his bags? Maybe it's the pretentiousness of wearing that cap indoors, like he's an extra on *Peaky Blinders*. It could be because there isn't a single wrinkle in his posh coat or his posh slacks or his posh button-down. He looks very rested from his cushy first-class flight.

It's his fault I'm here right now. If he'd gotten out of my way on the plane, I'd be at home in Queens right now, rotting across from Maddie on the couch, my nose in a historical romance.

"How do you know where I'm going? Were you listening to my conversation?" I say.

"Love, everyone in the immediate vicinity was listening to your conversation." His mouth pulls sideways in a faint smile.

I shoot him a glare and wheel my bag away to put more space between us.

He steps towards me. “It’s just … ah, it’s obvious you’re a tourist.”

I get another hit of that luscious cologne. Now, it’s even more appealing because it’s been married with the warm natural scent of his body for hours.

“Is that right?” I lean away from the wall, to look past him at the navigational signs pointing to the different ways out of the airport.

“American?” he says.

I might hate him. He probably gets to head straight home, get into his favorite comfortable clothes—

“Even if I hadn’t heard you speak,” he continues, “it’s that contradictory blend of arrogance and confusion in your eyes that gives it away.”

He’s baiting me. I look down at my phone, willing him to disappear.

“That, and the fact that your bag is the size of a Prius.”

An awkward beat of silence passes. I glance up and blink at him with a theatrical look of surprise. “Oh, you’re still here?”

He chuckles. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, I promise. I heard Paperwhite, that’s all. It’s in Covent Garden. Piccadilly line. This time of day, though, you’ll do much better in a black cab—”

“I’m fine.”

“It’s nearly rush hour.” He nods to my bag. “Won’t make many friends with that.”

I know how mass transit works. There’s nothing London’s Tube could throw at me that I haven’t already seen a more extreme version of on the New York City subway. And if I can’t navigate the damned London Underground by myself, I’m screwed.

“I can show you the way, if you like,” he says.

“I’m *fine*.” I don’t look away from my phone. “Thank you.”

“Right. Well. See you later.”

That makes me glance up from my phone, but he’s already weaving away through the crowd. “Unlikely!” I shout after him.

He holds his hand in the air to wave, but he doesn’t turn around. Then, he’s gone. And here I am, about to spend December in London alone, feeling anything but festive.



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Return to
Advent Calendar

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CHAPTER TWO

Fourteen days until Christmas

When I wake up the next morning, it's dark, and I'm disoriented. I hear early-morning bustle outside a nearby window. But the sounds are all wrong. Instead of the hiss of my local bus's brakes or the hydraulic lift of the seafood truck at the Thai restaurant across my street, it's clattering crates and the rhythmic beep of a reversing van. There's no gentle hum of my white noise machine, and it's the first time in years that I've woken up on my own instead of to the screech of an alarm. No homey scent of burnt dust from my old radiator, no trace of Maddie's perfume drifting into my room from the hall.

Then I remember. I'm in London. My bed is more than 3,000 miles away. I roll over and bury my face in the pillow.

Paperwhite Holiday Home is allegedly a five-minute walk from the Underground station, but when I stumbled off the Tube last night, it took me a half hour of wandering before I found it. I barely noticed Covent Garden or the side street that's to be my neighborhood for the rest of the month. I didn't even turn a light on inside the flat. I locked the door behind me, stripped down to my bra and undies, and passed out on top of the duvet.

The *one* good thing about being here without Maddie is that I can sleep in as long as I want. She's a pathological morning person, and I am very much not. It never matters how late we stay out, she always wakes up bright-eyed and offensively cheerful. I, on the other hand, can't remember a time I've woken feeling fully rested. I would be one of the people who slept through an apocalyptic event and didn't realize the world had ended until days later.

Just before ten o'clock in the morning, a caffeine withdrawal headache is what ultimately drags me out of bed. Downstairs, a sliver of sunlight pierces through a gap in the curtains, and I hold up my forearm over my eyes, baring my teeth at it like a vampire. *This is the skin of an espresso addict, Bella*.

There’s a Nespresso machine in the tiny kitchenette, but I have no actual coffee pods to put into it. I don’t know where the closest convenience store is yet, but a quick glance at a map on my phone reveals coffee shops and cafés scattered around me like confetti. The closest one is called Grey Earl’s. Cute.

After a much-needed shower, I pull on a pair of my coziest wide-legged jeans and a mint-green turtleneck sweater with balloon sleeves. Fragrant sprays of rosemary, evergreen, and winter florals bound by ribbons of crimson and gold are everywhere on my short walk through Covent Garden. Small Christmas trees in the piazza drip with metallic baubles that twinkle in the morning sun.

I’m at Grey Earl’s in a matter of minutes. Under a white-and-grey striped awning, the glass storefront is foggy with condensation, and the windows are trimmed with spruce garlands and warm white fairy lights. On the recessed wooden door hangs an enormous but simple wreath made from feathery sprays of cypress and pine.

A tiny bell sings as I go inside. Scuffed floorboards squeak beneath my feet, accompanied by the clink and tinkle of teacups and coffee mugs against their saucers. To my right, tables nestle against an exposed brick wall. The counter and a small bar take up most of the left. It’s dim inside, and everything is dark wood and pewter finishes, but the effect is intimate and cozy instead of melancholy. Mismatched Tiffany lamps cast muted colors over the bar, and strands of bistro bulbs crisscross the low ceiling.

There’s a single table in the nook in the bow window at the front of the space. Lush potted plants sit on the deep ledge and more hang from macramé slings. It would be the perfect place to sit if it wasn’t already occupied by a tall man with wavy hair the glossy gold-brown of teakwood.

The guy from the airport.

Here’s the thing about attractive men: there’s a distinct difference between *handsome* and *hot*. I can’t explain it, but it’s true. This man, though? He’s *both*. He’s gorgeous in that civilized British way, but with a rugged edge. Like, by day, he’s a member of some aristocratic, rain-soaked riding club, and he drinks cognac by the fireside at night. I’m convinced his family has an estate in the Cotswolds or Surrey, and he absolutely uses words like “marvelous” and “jolly” and “fetching” in everyday conversation.

“Oh my god.” It slips out louder than I meant it to. I stop just inside the doorway.

He looks up through his lashes and does a subtle double take when he sees me. Then he sits up straighter, glancing around like he’s unsure I’m talking to him. “Jake is fine, thank you.” He takes a sip of his coffee.

Today, he wears a navy-blue lobsterman’s sweater and dark jeans, and there’s a shadow of stubble along his jaw. He’s lit up by a golden glow through the front window. Like the sun itself thinks his face deserves a spotlight. His hair is tucked behind his ears instead of the restrained style he wore on the plane. It looks soft.

“Why are you here?” I say.

“Ah … coffee?”

“Are you following me?”

“Pardon?” He lowers his mug to the table.

“Are you stalking me?”

“I was sitting here when you came in, love.” He leans back in his chair and threads his fingers together, low on his waist. “Are *you* following *me*?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course not.”

“See? It’s an absurd accusation.”

Maybe it’s jet lag, maybe I’m petty. Maybe he’s an outlet for my frustration at Maddie for ditching me. I keep going instead of walking away. “You were on my flight, and I saw you when I left the terminal.”

“I remember.” He pauses. “Perhaps we saw each other in the terminal because we were on the same flight, and perhaps we were on the same flight because we were both leaving New York to come to London? And now, it’s just a coincidence that we’ve run into each other.”

“That’s a lot of coincidences.”

“Coincidences happen.”

I cross my arms. “That’s exactly what a stalker would say.”

Briefly, his mouth twitches in an almost-smile, but he pins it down by tucking his lips between his teeth. “Wouldn’t I be a rather crap stalker if you’ve spotted me multiple times?”

“Maybe you’re a first-timer.”

He studies my face. There’s something vaguely familiar about him that’s unrelated to our previous run-in at the airport. But I can’t latch onto it. It’s like trying to catch a single grain of sand in the ocean at high tide.

Without breaking eye contact, he reaches for his coffee mug and raises it to his lips. “Maybe we shouldn’t make light of stalking.”

“Fair.”

“Agree to stop, then?”

“Fine.”

“Marvelous.”

Ha. I *knew* it.

“When you walked away last night, you said ‘See you later,’” I say. “Like you knew you’d see me again.”

A single heavy brow quirks upwards, closely followed by the other. They’re well-shaped, darker than his hair, and one arcs slightly higher than the other. It gives him an air of playful approachability. “Is that not what Americans say instead of goodbye? Even if there’s no chance of seeing the person again?”

“Sometimes,” I say. “But you’re not American.”

He chuckles. As he does, his full top lip swerves sideways a bit. It’s really charming. “What gave it away?”

“It’s that contradictory blend of arrogance and performative nonchalance, I think.”

“Fair play,” he laughs. “Did you actually come here for coffee, or did you spot me through the window and decide to badger me for existing in my own neighborhood?”

There’s a *tiny* chance that I’m the asshole in this scenario. I rub my forehead. “Sorry. I’m tired.”

“You’re quite lovely when you frown.”

I laugh. I can’t help it.

“Stop that.” He has a stern little furrow between his brows. “You’re ruining it, love.”

He has to be mocking me right now. My eyes are still puffy from sleep, I didn’t bother with makeup, and my hair hangs around my shoulders like an old fishing net. “Don’t call me *love*.”

“What shall I call you, then?” The sun through the window makes his hazel eyes seem like they’re lit from within. Desert eyes. Warm and mysterious. Easy to get lost there.

I laugh again. Loudly enough to catch a skeptical glance from the young couple sitting at the far end of the shop. “I’m not telling you my name.”

“I’m Jake.” He extends his hand towards me in greeting. “Jake Frost.”

“OK, sure.” I shake his hand. His wide palm is warm against mine. His grip is strong in a comforting way, not a power-move way. “I’m Lois. Lois Lane.”

He nods slowly. “You think I’m pulling your leg.”

“Oh, of course not. Is your brother Jack busy this time of year?”

“Ah. That’s very clever. First time I’ve heard that one.”

“Really?”

Dryly, he says, “No.”

“I’m walking away now.” I can’t help smiling as I turn away. I feel his attention on my back as I walk to the barista to order a coffee.

The wall behind the counter is covered in a mosaic of Polaroid photos. Hundreds of smiling faces. At the far end of the bar, a chessboard lies mid-game with pieces shaped like cats, but nobody’s there. Beside the cash register, there’s an old photo of a grey cat with a dangly collar tag that reads “EARL.” It sits next to a ceramic cat figurine that dispenses tiny round mints from its open mouth, like hairballs. Maddie would love it.

A tall barista with a sleeve tattoo of fern fronds and fiddleheads on fair, freckled skin approaches me. She looks like she’s about my age. Her red hair is in a tidy pixie cut, and her name tag says “QUINN.”

“You all right?” she says.

“Do you know that man over there?” I quietly ask.

She looks at me like I’ve just asked her to serve me a cup of steaming window cleaner instead of a coffee.

“Why are you chatting if you don’t know who he is?” says the other barista. Her smile pinches deep dimples into both of her amber-brown cheeks, and she has a wide diastema between her two front teeth. A floral bandana holds back a voluminous crown of black ringlets. She’s younger, maybe early twenties. Her name tag reads “CHERRY” with a little hand-drawn pair of cherries next to it, both shaped like hearts.

Fair question. “It’s just … I’ve seen him several times since I arrived. I’m here on vacation. Er, holiday.”

Quinn and Cherry glance at each other.

I clear my throat. “And I thought it was kind of a strange coincidence, that’s all.”

The baristas exchange a look that says *oh dear*, or *she can’t be serious*, or *poor thing*—I can’t tell which. I manage to swallow my automatic

defensive response and decide to go with plain candor instead. I lean over the counter and drop my voice low.

"Look. I'm meant to be here with my best friend, but she abandoned me in favor of a geriatric cat with the personality of a box of knives. The apartment she booked is non-refundable, and I'm stuck here for the rest of the month. I'm a broke journalist, so I can't just haul off to somewhere else if I am, in fact, being stalked by that man. I've been in London for less than twenty-four hours and I've already run into him multiple times, so I was really just hoping for some goddamned feminine solidarity. If you could please tell me if you know anything about him, I'd be—" I'm out of breath. It turns out, it's really hard to whisper a tirade. "Fucking chuffed."

For a few awkward beats, the baristas are silent. They blink back at me like two life-sized versions of those dolls with the winky eyelids.

Eventually, Quinn says, "I'm nonbinary."

"Huh?"

"You said *feminine* solidarity."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

The baristas glance at each other again.

Cherry nods. "Right, then," she says to Quinn.

Quinn turns their attention back to me and echoes, "Right."

"His name is Jake Frost," Cherry whispers, leaning towards me. The hesitation of moments ago is replaced by a conspiratorial glimmer in her bright eyes.

Fascinating. That *is* his real name.

Quinn leans in too, pink-cheeked and quiet. "He's here almost every day, so he must live or work nearby."

"Sometimes he brings a laptop and works for a bit."

"He always pays cash and tips a lot, like you Yanks do."

The rest comes at me in a rapid back-and-forth exchange. I'm a professional information-gatherer, but it's difficult to keep up, even for me. I learn that Jake Frost never leaves a single crumb on his table, he picks up after others who leave rubbish on theirs, and he always pushes his chair in before he leaves. Sometimes he wears a business suit, sometimes he's casual, and it was a near-religious experience for Cherry the first time she saw his ass in a pair of grey joggers. Once, when he took out his earbud to speak to Quinn, they could hear that he was listening to an audiobook narrated by Jane Goodall.

In short? If someone asked me to list the fundamental qualities I'd find appealing in a man, everything Quinn and Cherry just mentioned would be near the top of that list. Jake Frost is a walking green flag.

"That's it." Cherry raises her hands. "That's all we've got."

Quietly, I say, "Thank you."

"Do you want a coffee, then?" Quinn says. "Tea?"

I order an extra-hot cortado and ask for it to take away. Quinn obliges, but I get the stink-eye for not having a reusable cup. I'll add that to my shopping list of necessities.

Jake doesn't try to hide that he's watching me as I walk to the door. As I reach for the handle, he says, "Did you get the information you were hoping for?"

Lightly, I say, "Listening in on my conversation again?"

"No. I just assumed I was the topic, since the three of you turned in unison to look at me. Twice."

"Curious about you, that's all."

"Ah. I'm curious, too—how was your journey on the Tube?" He's baiting me.

Nightmarish, thank you for asking.

"Sit. Please," he says. "You look tired."

"That's exactly what women love to hear from strange men." I'm aiming for sarcasm, but it slips out a touch flirtatious. Logically, I should walk out of here and go unpack my bags. But I can't resist. I've been successfully baited and hooked. I sit in the chair across from him at the little table.

"Am I the strange one here?" His tone is annoyingly light, and his lip tugs sideways again.

"Not an improvement."

He laughs, and the sound does more to warm my insides than the cortado. "A few minutes ago, you said *yourself* that you were tired."

"It's different when someone says it about *themselves*. And the Tube was perfect, actually. There was ample seating, nobody smelled of body odor or bad breath, and everyone was kind and accommodating about my luggage. I experienced exactly zero elbows in my ribs, boobs, or face. Ten out of ten, would recommend."

He makes a quiet little *tsk* noise with his teeth and his tongue. His brows pull together in an expression of faux-sincere concern. "That bad, hm?"

There’s something disarming about a person who immediately matches your humor. He’s playing along, riffing with me. I don’t have many people in my life who really get me when I’m completely unfiltered. I even rein in my snark with Maddie most of the time. She’s so wide-eyed and earnest about everything, whenever I let a deadpan comment or sarcastic observation slip, she thinks there’s something wrong and it’s entirely her responsibility to make it better. And most of the things that actually bother me are completely unsolvable. So why bother her with it?

“It was rush hour, wasn’t it?” he says.

It was, but I sidestep. “You could have insisted I consider the black cabs.”

A few curls of steam rise in slow motion from his mug. “You don’t strike me as the sort to respond well to insistence.”

“You finally got something right,’ I tease. “I’m from New York City. Usually, we leave the taxis for the tourists.”

“You *are* a tourist, lo—” He catches himself before he can call me “love” again.

I’ve got to give him credit for trying. I sigh. “My name is Evie.”

He hesitates, then he smiles. It’s almost … apologetic? “I know. I saw it on your luggage tag yesterday.”

For a moment, I’m actually speechless. He makes me feel like I brought checkers to a chess match. I should want to walk away, but the only thing I find hotter than a set of wide shoulders and good hair is kind eyes and a quick wit. Jake Frost has all four.

“I live here, by the way,” he says.

“*Here* here?”

“Indeed. I have a cot in the back. I work for free coffee, and they let me have the leftover pastries at the end of the night.”

“I meant here in Covent Garden.”

“I know what you meant,” he says. “I chose to respond with a joke, you see. To lighten the mood.”

I respond with a soft grumble in the back of my throat.

“We’re practically neighbors,” he says. “Where do you think we’ll run into each other next?”

My insides feel wobbly and hot. I am *wildly* attracted to this man, but what I really want—what I *need*—out of life right now is to forget men exist at all. I didn’t come here to make a new long-distance friend, and I

didn’t come here to have a fling. I especially didn’t come here to fall in love. I came here to make damned sure I’ve fallen entirely out of it.

I stand and push my chair in. “I didn’t come here to date anyone.”

Without missing a beat, he says, “I wasn’t asking.”

Ouch. His tone is pleasantly neutral, but the words themselves land on my tender ego with the impact of an uppercut. I’m yanked back to reality like one of those fuzzy cat toys on the end of a string.

“Ah, that fabled British charm.” I head to the door. The tiny bell overhead chimes when I swing it open, letting in a gust of crisp winter air that smells like wet cobblestones, buttery popcorn, and fried cinnamon churros.

As it closes behind me, I hear him say, “See you later, Evie,” and something tells me he’s right. Considering how attracted to him I am, it could prove to be a problem.

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CHAPTER THREE

Fourteen days until Christmas

Covent Garden's open central piazza feels Italian-inspired, with shops of brick and stone, and colonnaded porticos around the perimeter. The market itself is a semi-open space covered with a soaring glass and iron roof that reminds me of a greenhouse. At the western end of the square, a fifty-foot spruce sparkles like thousands of tiny fireworks frozen mid-pop.

I spend a few hours wandering the piazza, browsing shops and kiosks and little pop-up chalets serving a range of snacks from roasted chestnuts to deep-fried Brie. A woman in a long burgundy gown sings an upbeat solo rendition of "Holly Jolly Christmas," and snow begins to fall. The flurry doesn't last long, but children run around catching the flakes in their gloved hands. I miss that kind of simple, uncomplicated joy. Their laughter makes me feel it second-hand, and it makes me smile.

I'd hoped to grab a few grocery items for the little kitchenette at the flat, but it's soon very clear to me that the Covent Garden market isn't the sort of market that sells the basics. I find a small supermarket nearby and buy a carton of milk, yogurt, butter, and a weighty block of aged Gouda that would probably last someone else several weeks. If I'm honest with myself, it will probably be gone within a few days. I also pick up a few apples, bananas, and a box of Nespresso pods. At a bakery, I grab a loaf of hearty bread and a pack of pastries called Chelsea buns that look a lot like cinnamon rolls. With a canvas bag over each shoulder as I walk back to Paperwhite, I feel an unexpected sense of contentment. It's tiny and fragile, but it's something.

Paperwhite is down a side street lined by eclectic boutiques and art galleries, with zigzags of string lights dangling between the buildings above. It's tiny inside, with watercolor paintings of paperwhites and other daffodils on the walls, and a jewel-green loveseat that evokes springtime. On the side table, there's a rectangular vase with plant bulbs nestled in

pebbles. They're just beginning to push out new shoots. Paperwhites, I assume. I wonder if they'll bloom before I leave.

Beside the paperwhites, there's a small chalkboard propped on an easel with a note from the host that reads "Welcome Madison & Evangeline!" with a bowl of chalk beside it. I erase the welcome and write a number in its place. A countdown of how many days before I go home.

The kitchenette has a leaky sink and the tiniest washing machine I've ever seen. As I put away my grocery haul, I prop my phone against a sleek electric kettle on the countertop and call Maddie. When she answers, she's in the exact spot I saw her in when we spoke yesterday. Her sweater of choice today is a mewing Santa and the words "BIG NICK ENERGY."

By way of greeting, I say, "I'm starting to feel like you're objectifying Santa Claus."

Maddie dips her chin to glance down at her chest. "He's the ideal man, Evie. Generous. Loves animals. And the *stamina* he must have? Faithful to the same woman for centuries? Come on." She looks back up. "How's the flat?"

"I don't know why they call them flats. The bedroom is up a flight of stairs that's so narrow and steep I felt like I needed a nap after bringing up my luggage. And remember how the listing said there was a second sleeping space? It's actually more of a, like … crevice? With a pull out loveseat."

"Ew. Don't say that." She shudders theatrically.

"What, pull out?"

Maddie gives me a bland glare. "Crevice. Worst word ever."

I tuck the cold stuff into the fridge. "You'd love it here. It's gorgeous. I just don't know how fun this will be on my own."

Maddie's expression softens. "You can do this, Ev."

Can I, though?

I'm not automatically confident and daring just because I live in New York City. I've cultivated an intentionally small and mostly anonymous life in a place that happens to be huge. I've lived with Maddie in the same apartment for almost four years now, and our elderly neighbor still thinks my name is Stevie. I could go to my local bodega wearing a wizard robe and a luchador mask, and nobody would glance at me sideways.

Impulsively, I say, "I met a guy." It's like I need to mention Jake Frost out loud, so he doesn't only exist inside my head.

“Shut up.” Maddie melodramatically bites a knuckle. “You *met* a guy? Like, intimately?”

“You know I don’t do hookups, babe.”

“*Yet*. The best men are like good coffee, Ev. Hot, strong, gone before nine a.m.”

I can imagine Maddie’s reaction if we’d arrived here together and she saw how little privacy there is. We’d have both been unwilling auditory participants in whatever sexual shenanigans the other got up to. These walls are *thin*, and the tiny bedroom upstairs doesn’t even have a door. There’s just a heavy damask curtain that couldn’t hide the noise of a moderate fart.

I’m done stowing the groceries, so I move to the loveseat and pull one of the pillows into my lap. “It’s weird that I can’t stop thinking about a complete stranger.”

“A *stranger*? I’m sorry, are we ten years old? Do you need an adult?”

“You’re kind of a bitch.”

Maddie grins. “How did you meet him?”

“I ran into him on the plane, then later at Heathrow, and then again at the coffee shop down the street from Paperwhite.”

“Sounds a bit stalker-adjacent.”

“*Thank* you. That’s what I said.”

“To who?”

“To him. And the people at the coffee shop. Quinn and Cherry, they’re lovely.”

“Aww, making friends already. What’s his name?”

“Jake Frost.”

“Shut *up*. Any relation to the prince of winter himself, Jack Frost?”

“Again, *thank* you. I made that same joke, but he didn’t think it was funny. I tried to look him up online. Couldn’t find anything. There’s a bunch of Jake Frosts. None are him.”

“Maybe his name is Jacob?” Maddie says.

“Tried that. It doesn’t matter, though. This man is way too hot and too well-dressed to not already have someone.” I lean forward on my elbows. “He even smells incredible. And the size of his *hands*, my god—”

“If you see him again, it’s a sign. It’s time for your mess era. This isn’t Hallmark. It’s the opening montage of a *Hoe*mark story, and you’re the star, baby.” Maddie’s smile is diabolical.

Since Calvin and I ended, Maddie's been recommending a palate cleanser of hedonistic hookups. But that's her thing, not mine. She loves people, and she loves *loving* people. She's mastered the art of what she calls "gratitude through impermanence." She's like the human manifestation of *don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened*, but make it horny.

Me? I'm at a point in my life where I'd rather set fire to everything to keep myself from getting burned. I know this is a sign of emotional immaturity. But that's another one of the beautiful things about being alone. I don't have to burden someone else with my flaws while I'm figuring out how to fix them.

"Get to know him,' Maddie says. "It would make me feel less bad for abandoning you."

"OK, so you *do* admit that you abandoned me."

"I never said I didn't. But Claudia is *family*—"

"*I'm* family. Claudia is a cryptid." I can hear the cat in Maddie's lap. It's the rumbly purr of an idling chainsaw, ready to rip, tear, and destroy. "She's a gargoyle come to life."

"Speaking of gargoyles," Maddie's tone is chipper now, like she's proud of herself for solving a big problem for me instead of creating one, "I forwarded you the info about the ghost tour tomorrow night."

"What do gargoyles have to do with ghosts?"

"They're both creepy," she says. "Don't overthink it."

Originally, Maddie wanted to do a Jack the Ripper tour to "get to know London," but I convinced her that immersing ourselves in serial-killer lore as two young women traveling alone wasn't the vibe. She probably didn't want to overload me with Christmas cheer while I was still jet-lagged, either, so she booked the ghost tour as a compromise.

Nibbling my thumbnail, I say, "I might skip it."

One of the main motivations for this trip was for me to reclaim my sense of adventure and autonomy. But this path to reclamation was supposed to be paved with fun cafés and sightseeing by day, and by night, boozy pubs and *maybe* the occasional makeout with a stranger on a dance floor. *With* Maddie as my emotional support extrovert.

And no, the irony isn't lost on me that I was perfectly content to let another person plan the rediscovery of my independence and *joie de vivre.* Nor am I ashamed to admit that I intended to lean heavily into my

codependent relationship with my best friend in order to get over my codependent relationship with my ex.

"Call the guy," Maddie says. "Ask him to go with you on the tour."

"I don't have his number."

"Don't be a quitter, Evie. A few minutes ago, you told me you keep running into him. You'll see Jake Frost again. If you can't find him, put yourself somewhere that *he* can find *you*."

* * *

Thirteen days until Christmas

The only thing I like more than coffee is coffee I didn't have to make myself. So, I ignore the pods I bought yesterday, and just before ten o'clock, I find myself heading to Grey Earl's. This time, with a book and the unrealistic hope that I'll see Jake Frost again. I'm not ready to actively look for him, but there's no harm in being somewhere he might find me, right?

I'd be lying if I said I'm not disappointed when I arrive and he's not here. Cherry and Quinn are behind the counter again, though. Even though I only met them yesterday, the familiarity is comforting. I scoot onto a barstool, order a coffee, and try to read for a while, but I can't focus. Once the shop clears out a bit, I say to Cherry and Quinn, "This is a bit awkward, but are either of you free tonight? I have a spare ticket for a ghost tour."

"A ghost tour?" Quinn's brow crinkles. "During the festive season?"

"Quinny, what do you think *A Christmas Carol* is about?" Cherry says, drying a mug with a pristine white towel. "Anyway, I've got something on tonight. As much as I would *love* to walk around in the cold and drink shitty mulled wine while some old pensioner makes up spooky stories." She hands me her phone. "Here. Put your number in. It must be scary, not knowing anyone in a completely new city. If we don't see you at least once a day, we'll call you."

I give her a theatrically skeptical look as I type in my number. "Sounds like a ploy to get me to spend money here every day. And how will this help

if I've already been kidnapped?"

Quinn shrugs. "You're in London," they say, as if it's an obvious response to the hypothetical.

"Your main risk is being metaphorically sliced to bits by our sharp wit," Cherry adds.

Behind me, the bell jingles to announce a newcomer. An icy draft sweeps in and swirls around my ankles and up the back of my neck before the door closes. I catch a hint of spiced bergamot and musk in the cold air. Adrenaline lights me up like a breath on banked embers.

Cherry grins, boosting up with her elbows on the bar. "Oi, Jake. What are you doing tonight?"

"Cherry, no," I whisper, but she must be able to tell I don't mean it. She glances at me with a knowing smile and a wink.

Jake approaches, playing along. "I don't know, Cherry. What am I doing tonight?"

I don't turn around, but I feel the warmth of his body as he sidesteps to stand between my stool and the empty one beside it. Resting a forearm on the bar, he looks down at me, and I meet his eyes. He's wearing mahogany pants and a rich toffee-colored roll-neck sweater. His mouth twitches sideways in a fleeting smile. Everything about him is charming and casual, but there's heat in the way he glances at my mouth before returning his attention back to my eyes. It makes me squirm in my seat. In a softer tone, he says, "Morning." Like it's just for me.

"Morning." I look back down at my book, but the words slide together and fade like I'm looking through a cloudy camera lens.

Cherry cups her chin in her hands, blinking up at Jake. "Be a love and keep our new American friend company on her ghost tour tonight. She's flying solo."

"Last time I flew with our American friend, she tried very hard to get away from me."

I smile and roll my eyes. "Cute."

"Isn't he?" Cherry says. "Espresso today, Jake?"

"Please," he says. He's responding to Cherry, but he's looking right at me. "I'll go along. *If* she's asking."

Quinn approaches with a blocky old Polaroid camera, pausing to meet my gaze just before raising it to press the shutter button. "Here. For the photo wall."

Something unspoken passes between us in that brief moment. Like Cherry taking my number, this is Quinn's contribution to helping me feel safer here. An acknowledgment and a record that I exist in this time and place with them. If it makes Jake feel weird to be documented like this, he doesn't show it. In fact, he leans closer so we'll both fit in the frame.

Quinn snaps the photo, Cherry hands Jake a freshly pulled espresso, and then we're left alone at the bar. Jake raises a knee to slide onto the stool beside me.

"I assumed you usually sat at the window table," I say.

"Mm. What makes you think that?"

"Because it's the best spot in the whole place."

He chuckles. "You're not wrong. But today, this is where you are."

I groan and lean back, laughing. "Does this effortless British charm usually work for you?"

Jake looks thoughtful for a moment. "To be fair, here we'd simply call it 'charm.'"

"Wow." I close my eyes and shake my head.

"But yes, I suppose it does." The warm color cast from his sweater makes his eyes look more golden than green today. "And I appreciate you calling it effortless. I'm actually trying very hard here."

"Oh my god, you're exhausting," I laugh.

"You have no idea," he drawls. Then he nods at my open book. "Not much that's better than a good book and a good cup of coffee. Are you enjoying it?"

"You could say that." I close the book and drift a finger over the cover. It's a worn-out paperback edition of my favorite book of all time, *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith. "I've probably read it a hundred times."

He sips his espresso. The tiny cup makes his hands look even more impressive. "That good, hm?"

"The best. I used to read it a few times a year, but it's been a while since I've had a chance to. I figured I'd get some free time on this trip to fit in a reread. Do you know it?"

Jake's knees are angled towards mine. If I twisted on my stool an inch or two, we'd be touching. "I'm familiar with the title. Never read it though."

"It might be a bit lost on you. It's a coming-of-age story about a seventeen-year-old girl and her dysfunctional family in a crumbling castle in the English countryside."

“Sounds bleak.”

“It’s probably more relatable for someone who was also a seventeen-year-old girl with a dysfunctional family at some point in her life.” I’m surprised at how easily this slips loose.

He knuckles his chin. “I don’t know that I’ve ever read a book more than once.”

That makes me swing around on the stool to face him, and my knee glances along his. “Are you serious?”

“Too many books out there to repeat the same one.” He traces a tiny star carved into the wood of the bar. “Do you know—if someone reads an average of ten books a year, that’s fewer than a thousand books in a lifetime?”

“How dare you,” I gasp.

Jake laughs. “It’s true. Do the maths.”

“Let me live under the delusion that I have time to read everything I’ll ever want.”

Again, he laughs. Then his expression sobers. “Why would someone reread the same book?”

“Comfort, I guess? I’m safe inside this world, because at any point in the story, I know the full scope of its past and the direction it’s going for the future. And the characters feel like real people I have a relationship with. It’s like my memory can’t tell the difference.”

“I highly recommend real relationships.” Jake sips his espresso, then he sets it down in front of him. “And new books. How do you know you’re not missing out on something incredible?”

I’m not sure if Jake’s “something incredible” means books or relationships, but a conversation about one is significantly safer than the other. So, I go with that. “I try, sometimes. But if I’m not hooked in the first ten pages or so, I put it down.”

Jake is motionless except for his thumbs rubbing slowly against each other. “I wasn’t talking about books, Evie.”

I meet his eyes and try to keep my tone light. “Relationships are a lot like books, actually. No matter how good they are, they always end.”

“Ah. I’d argue that unlike books, people can love you back.”

I swallow hard and look down at my hands in my lap. Jake must sense the vibe shift, because he picks up his espresso again and glances away. Softly, he says, “I’ve offended you. I’m sorry.”

“I just prefer to have these sorts of conversations after a few glasses of wine instead of with my morning coffee.” I tuck the book under my arm and hop down from my stool. “Bye, Jake.”

Halfway to the door, the aftertaste that *Bye, Jake* leaves in my mouth makes me stop and turn around. Beyond knowing that he lives nearby, I have no reason to believe I’ll ever run into him again after I leave this coffee shop. And I really didn’t like the way it felt when I arrived this morning expecting to see him but he wasn’t here.

“The tour leaves from the Nell of Old Drury pub at seven,” I say.

Twisting to face me, he drapes his arm over the back of his stool. “So, *are* you asking me to go with you?”

I pinch my lips together in a wry half-smile.

Jake leans forward. “To be clear—I’m all in, either way. I’m just curious if I’m responding to a question or a command.”

“It’s a question, Jake.”

“Well, then. My answer is yes, Evie. We’ll be seeing each other tonight.”

I smile, he smiles, and just like that, I’ve got a date with Jake Frost.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Thirteen days until Christmas

The Ghosts by Gaslight tour meets outside the Nell of Old Drury pub, a compact building of two-toned brick and dark wood that reminds me of an old trolley car. It's decked in a bit of greenery here, fairy lights there, and a radiant warmth that's more about vibe than temperature. Whenever anyone comes or goes through the front door, warm air gusts out into the chilly night, smelling of wood polish and nearly two centuries of spilled beer.

I glance at my phone for the fourth time in five minutes. It's nearly seven, and no Jake.

We're a small group of six—two parents and their elementary-aged son, and a young couple who can't seem to keep their hands or their mouths off each other. The tour guide is an academic-looking sort with a bald head as glossy-white as a dumpling, and a luxuriant silver mustache that quivers as he talks.

"Welcome to Covent Garden's premier paranormal tour. My name is Dr Burgess Selby, award-winning author and London's foremost authority on ghosts, spirits, manifestations, poltergeists, specters, phantoms, hauntings —"

Behind me there's a scuff of shoes on pavement. The ambient warmth of a strong body. Spicy-sweet cologne that smells like sunlit citrus. I don't need to turn around to know it's Jake.

At my ear, he murmurs, "Someone call the thesaurus police."

His breath tickles my neck, spilling goosebumps down my arms. "Thought you'd ghosted me," I whisper back.

Jake chuckles. "Nice one." He shuffles forward to stand beside me, close enough that the outer part of his arm is pressed into mine. I don't move away. Neither does he. I glance at him sideways. He's changed out of what he was wearing this morning. Now he's in a pair of dark straight-leg jeans

and a black turtleneck sweater under a high-collared caramel corduroy jacket.

Me? I'm wearing a black wool peacoat I've had since college. My houndstooth mock-neck is pretty, but it's a hand-me-down from Maddie. I think I got my jeans on clearance at Macy's. Anyone looking at us can probably clock it instantly— I'm Levi's; he's Louis Vuitton.

"Tonight," Selby continues, handing out plastic candles with screw-in nightlight bulbs at the ends, "we'll embark upon a journey through dark courtyards and gaslit lanes, where I'll show you the West End's most unsettling paranormal hotspots. Guests using mobile phones during the tour will be asked to leave without a refund …"

The bulb in my candle winks on and off every time I move. I whisper to Jake, "This isn't what I imagined when I read 'candlelight tour.'"

The little boy in front of us whacks his against the heel of his palm. "Mine's rubbish.'

"Here, lad. Take mine." Jake taps the kid on the shoulder and gives up his candle, tipping his head towards me. "I'll share hers."

Dr Selby starts to hand out paper cups to everyone, filling each with something pungently alcoholic from an ancient-looking insulated flask.

"What's this?" A sip of the wine makes me cough. It's awful. "And is this even legal?"

"Meant to be mulled wine. I think? And yes, it's legal. You're in London now, love."

Selby tells us about Nell Gwyn, lover of Charles II and the namesake of the pub. He half-heartedly points to one of the windows and says, "Look, the window there." By the time we all glance in that direction, he's turned to walk away. "You must pay closer attention if you're to see behind the veil."

The group scurries after him like children on a school field trip. "I get it now. He's trying to get us drunk so we don't realize how bad this is going to be."

At the Theatre Royal across the street, Selby tells us of its ghosts. An incontinent pantomime dame (Jake explains British pantomime to me in a whisper that gives me full-body goosebumps), a beheaded clown (because a ghost clown with an intact head isn't terrifying enough, I guess), and, apparently, a man who murdered a fellow actor during a fight over a wig.

“Hardly seems fair for the murderer to get to haunt the place instead of the victim,” Jake says, just loud enough for me to hear. I pinch my lips tight to keep from laughing.

“… and finally, we have the Man in Grey,” Selby says. “Spotted in a tricorn hat and grey cloak, he paces the Grand Circle before vanishing. During renovations in the nineteenth century, a skeleton with a knife in its ribs was found in the wall where the Man in Grey disappears. Imagine being bricked up for nearly two centuries—”

I turn my back to the group so Selby doesn’t see me giggling.

Jake still faces forward, but he cuts his eyes over at me. “Are you laughing about that poor man’s demise?”

“No, I’m so sorry—” I pull the collar of my coat over my mouth.

“What’s funny?”

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“Tell me,” Jake laughs. He nudges his hip into mine.

“You didn’t hear what he said? *Bricked up* for nearly two centuries?”

Selby boosts up on his toes to glare at us over the rest of our group. “If you insist on mucking about, I shall have to ask you to leave.”

Lips pinched tight, Jake and I cut our eyes at each other like scolded schoolkids. When the group starts moving again, I whisper to him, “Google it.” I typically wait until I’ve known someone for at least a week before I teach them new slang for erections.

Our next stop is the Covent Garden Underground station, where the ghost of a famous actor named William Terriss was regularly seen on the platforms, despite meeting his end nearly ten years before the station was built.

“… countless reports of an apparition in a three-piece suit and a formal felt hat …”

Jake tilts towards me to whisper, “Sounds like he was dying to haunt the place.”

My laugh is loud and abrupt, echoing down the tunnel. Selby pauses to make aggressive eye contact with me before he drones on, “… a strange chill that overcomes them in this very spot …”

“It’s bloody winter, mate,” Jake mutters.

I bite my lips together and close my eyes. He’s *trying* to make me laugh. It feels good. I can’t remember the last time I got to be silly with someone.

And there's something different about laughing with someone you're attracted to.

Selby's words echo off the concrete walls. "… Terriss frequented a bakery that once stood near the station …"

When I lean close to Jake, the outer curve of my breast presses against his arm. Maybe I'm doing it on purpose? "Relatable," I mutter. "If I become a ghost with unfinished business, it will be because of all the pastries I didn't get to eat."

Jake laughs through his nose.

"… but Terriss must have found what he was looking for, because his last documented appearance here in the station was in 1972."

Jake glances down at me with an eyebrow raised. "Perhaps he finally got smart and started taking a black cab."

I roll my eyes and step past him to follow the group out of the station. My knuckles brush against Jake's as I do, and it makes me wish there weren't barriers of gloves between us.

Selby makes at least three more stops with the group, but I linger so far behind with Jake, I can't hear most of it. As we walk, Jake has his hands tucked into the pockets of his coat and I've got mine crossed over my belly, but we brush and bump into each other like two ships docked in a harbor. Calvin usually walked slightly in front of me, tugging me along by the hand. Like he was a minder instead of a partner. Jake, though? He walks *with* me, and the fleeting contact feels like an invitation rather than a request or a claim. There's no reason for us to walk this close, but I feel like I'm caught in his gravity.

Jake glances down at me as we head towards our final stop. "You've got compoface."

"Huh?"

"You don't know what compoface is?" When I shake my head, he continues. "Right. Compoface happens when a newspaper runs a story about someone's grievance. Like," he waves his hands in a flourish like he's reading a headline, "*American tourist haunted by the lack of favorable refund policy finds Covent Garden ghost tour to be a grave disappointment.*"

I nod. "I see what you did there."

"And then there would be a photo of you below the headline, looking petty and cross, clutching your little battery-operated candle like a

consolation prize.”

I’ve always thought I have a pretty good poker face. It’s surprising to be read so accurately by someone I’ve spent so little time with, even though he can’t know my sour expression is about Calvin, not the tour. *Young woman spends two years in relationship with emotionally and ethically bankrupt dickhead, now investing in herself instead.*

Jake ducks his head a bit, bending at the waist to catch my eye as we walk. There’s a little wrinkle of concern between his brows. “Really, though —are you all right?”

I give him a quick smile. “Yes, yes. It’s nothing. Jet lag, I think.”

We turn onto Cecil Court, an intimate, distinctly Dickensian street with gas-powered lanterns. Overhead, faux chandeliers sparkle, suspended between the buildings. Dim golden light spills from shop windows and galleries to reflect on the damp pavement outside.

“We conclude our tour in one of the West End’s most famous passageways.” Now Selby is like a horse spotting its stable after a long ride, walking fast towards the bookshop where the tour concludes. “Dating back to the 1700s, this is now what we call Bookseller’s Row. Who knows what manner of ghosts from the last three centuries walk beside us at this very moment.”

Jake mutters, “Thought we were meant to learn about them from you, mate.”

I breathe a quiet laugh through my nose.

Inside the bookshop, it smells like aged leather and paper, and a smoky trace of incense. Herbs, resin, spice. I think if I bought a book from here, the pages inside would be permanently perfumed with it.

Jake nudges me, nodding to a display of books to the right of the door. Dr Burgess Selby’s newest release of paranormal tales sits in stacks on a table draped with black cloth. A few surprisingly realistic human skulls perch on the books. Arms crossed, Selby scowls from a framed photo in the center.

I lean closer to Jake. “Would that be compoface?”

Jake nods and whispers, “*Paranormal London author haunted by frighteningly low book sales*.”

“*London author disappointed to discover new readers to be as elusive as the ghosts on his tour*,” I whisper back.

Jake chuckles. “You’re a fast learner.”

The tour's *pièce de résistance* is a one-card-pull tarot reading. Jake and I are invited to a private room first. It's lit by two tabletop candelabras with real flame rather than batteries. I expect a campy older woman with craggy features and a mess of gray hair held in a bun by carved bone pins. When my eyes adjust to the dim light, I see a young woman sitting behind the table instead. She can't be more than twenty, but there's something about her that feels ancient. She greets us with, "Do ye invite the wisdom of the cosmos tae flow through these cards?"

"Of course." Jake sits on one of the small stools in front of the table. "Nothing like a bit of dabbling in the occult during this holy season."

"Winter's been weaving magic long before the church declared December holy, lad." She quirks a brow, but doesn't smile. "Now hold your question in your mind. And when it's clear, you may draw."

Jake doesn't hesitate at all. He flips the card on the top of the shuffled deck. Then he straightens to sit tall on the stool with knees braced wide, arms crossed over his chest. "All right, cosmos. What do you have for me?"

"The Ace of Cups," the woman says. "This is a powerful card. You have a thirsty soul, and life has just handed you a fresh, empty cup—"

"Sounds like an invitation to hit up the pub after this." Jake frowns, but his tone is light.

"You've been cracking wise all night, haven't you?" The reader pauses. "Nothing paranormal here. Simply an invitation to fill your cup, and let it overflow with something real." Then she cuts her eyes over to me. "Come. Draw." She shuffles the cards and sets the stack back on the table.

A knot of tension pulls tight under my breastbone as I sit on the stool next to Jake. The card I draw depicts a nude man and woman, and what looks like an angel above them.

"The Lovers," the reader says. "A card about choice, about union. There's something real in front of you, but you must choose to open and meet it. With your whole, imperfect self—"

"You put that card on top, didn't you? Some sleight-of-hand trick?"

"No. The cards speak for themselves. I'm simply the interpreter." She stays in character so well that I *almost* believe she's legitimate.

"Let me draw again, then." My hammering pulse makes my ears feel full of cotton.

"You won't find further clarity by shopping the deck for answers, lass." She takes the Lovers card and slips it into the deck. Then she hands the

cards to me. “Care to shuffle?”

After I shuffle, I pull the top card. The Lovers. Again.

Expecting to find an entire deck of the same, I flip the next few cards. The Empress. Two of Cups. Ace of Cups—the same card Jake pulled. I don’t know what they mean, but my mouth goes dry. Jake sits motionless and silent beside me.

“We don’t have time to talk about each of these,” the reader says, “but if you’d like to take my business card—”

There it is. The upsell. It breaks whatever spell the evening cast on me. “No thanks. I don’t believe in any of this.” I stand up and head to the door.

Jake gets to his feet and falls in at my side. He doesn’t touch me, but I feel the warmth of his hand hovering at my back.

“There’s nothing to believe or not believe.” The reader stands as we leave. “These cards simply create a shared language. Tae put your intellectual mind in conversation with your emotional soul. If this scares ye, it’s not the cards making ye feel that way.”

When Jake reaches around me to open the door, his fingertips brush my back just above the waistband of my jeans. Through the heavy fabric of my coat, it’s a barely there touch. But I feel it. “I’m not scared,” I say, though I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince.

* * *

Before we part ways for the night, we stop at the western end of the piazza in front of the enormous Christmas tree. The lights cast a reflection of fuchsia, green, and gold all around us, like an aurora borealis spilled out of the sky and splashed down onto the cobblestones.

“If it makes you feel better, the reader is in on it with Selby,” Jake says. “She tailed our group the whole time, listening in.”

I yawn so hard I feel it in my temples. “Not surprised. It’s all theater.”

Snow begins to fall. Big, plush flakes, swirling all around us. I feel like I’m inside a snow globe. I stuff my hands into my coat pockets and raise my shoulders around my neck. Silence looms for a few awkward seconds.

“I guess this is good night,” I say at the same time Jake says, “What else do you have planned while you’re here?”

We laugh and glance at the ground like we’re a couple of shy teenagers.

“No idea. I think Maddie’s plan was to live like locals for the month.”

Jake’s brows climb so high they disappear under the swoop of hair across his forehead. “You’re here the rest of the *month*?”

“Well, most of it. I fly home a few days before New Year’s.”

“Lucky you, being here for Christmas.” Jake tips his face up to the towering tree, then back to me. “London is magic during the festive season.”

My short laugh sends out a visible puff into the air. “I guess.”

His expression shifts to something impossible to read. “You guess?”

I’ve always tried to mask my way through the festive season, because when people learn you’re not a fan of Christmas, they treat you like a project or a pariah. I wonder which one Jake will pick. “I mean, it’s all a bit clichéd, isn’t it?”

“I’d argue that’s rather the point. Clichés happen because they’re things that are loved by loads of people. Traditions are clichés with heart.”

“Wow, put that one on a postcard.” I laugh and crinkle my nose, shifting from foot to foot before taking a step backwards. “Goodnight, Jake. Tonight was fun.”

“Oh my god. Wait.” Jake studies my face. I’m a half-done puzzle he intends to finish. “You don’t like Christmas.”

I pinch my lips closed and look up at the twinkling tree. Objectively, it’s stunning. But, to me, its beauty is overshadowed by the amount of resources it took to bring it here and keep it lit.

Jake blinks at me like I just crash-landed here from another planet. “I love Christmas.”

I can’t help but laugh. He’s adorable. “I’m happy for you. Truly. I promise my Scroogery isn’t contagious.”

“Fascinating. I have so many questions.”

Again, I laugh. “It’s not that deep. Materialism, hyperconsumerism, commercialism—”

Jake sucks a breath past his teeth. “Oof. So many *isms*.”

I’m suddenly hit with a jaw-cracking yawn. “Wow, so sorry.” I straighten my shoulders.

“Go,” he says. “I won’t keep you. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Jake.”

I only make it five steps before he calls out behind me. “Evie.’ He still stands in the same spot. “Let me show you Christmas in London. I don’t

want this to be the last time I see you.”

“Jake—”

“Sleep on it. You don’t have to decide now. But if you’re keen, meet me at Grey Earl’s tomorrow round ten in the morning. If not, I’ll get the hint and I’ll make myself scarce.” He gives me an unguarded smile, lays a hand over his heart, and does a little half-bow as he steps backwards. “Either way, tonight was the most fun I’ve had in a very long time.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

Twelve days until Christmas

"Evie, it's Cherry."

I mean to mutter "Hi," but it comes out as "Hnnngh."

"From the coffee shop," she adds.

It's very sweet that she thinks there might be anyone else in London named Cherry who would be calling me right now. I roll over and crack my eyelids open, but it's still dark outside. Then I drop my phone on my face. "Ow."

"You all right? Been trying to reach you for hours. There's a letter for you here at the café."

A letter?

"Like, mail?" I sit up on my elbows and squint at the digital display of the alarm clock on the bedside table. It reads 4:32. "And why are you telling me this at four thirty in the morning?"

"Because it's four thirty in the *afternoon*."

Meet me at Grey Earl's tomorrow round ten in the morning. If not, I'll get the hint and make myself scarce.

Oh, *no*.

* * *

"Jake asked for your number," Cherry says.

"He *begged*," Quinn adds. "I couldn't decide if it was sexy or pathetic."

Cherry makes a thoughtful face. "I mean … pathetic can be hot."

"Depends on the context," Quinn says. "Pathetic because of insecurity? Pass. Pathetic because of yearning? Smash."

"I didn't give it to him, by the way," Cherry says. "Your number."

I run my fingers along the envelope. The paper is faintly textured, and it feels heavy. Expensive. “When was he here?”

“Arrived around half nine,” Quinn says.

“Stayed till half twelve,” says Cherry.

“Came back just after two o’clock with that letter.”

Groaning, I lean over to press my forehead against my stacked hands on the bar.

“What’s wrong?” they both say.

“I was supposed to meet him here at ten this morning.” My voice is muffled. “I overslept.”

“You slept past four o’clock in the afternoon?” Cherry says.

“I’m jet-lagged, OK?”

“Well, no undoing that now. Open the bloody letter, Evie,” Quinn says. “I’m invested.”

I open the envelope and carefully pull out the folded paper inside. The writing is tidy, with letters of uniform size and shape. Slanted slightly to the right, and every letter T has an asymmetrical tail that suggests forward momentum. The words and sentences are near-perfectly parallel to the ones above and below them, even though there aren’t any lines on the paper itself.

God, even this man’s handwriting is attractive.

I suppose I stretched the truth a bit when I said I’d get the hint if you didn’t show at ten this morning. I hope this letter isn’t an overstep. If you’d like to give me a chance to show you London at Christmas, I’ll be at Somerset House for ice skating at six o’clock tonight. I’ll be near the central arch, waiting.

J.

* * *

It takes me around ten minutes to walk to Somerset House, but navigating through pedestrians along the Strand makes progress feel agonizingly slow. Now that I’ve decided that I want to spend time with Jake and already missed one chance, I’m anxious I’ll miss my last.

I arrive at 5:58, and despite the crowd, I see Jake as soon as I approach the three grand arches that lead into the Somerset House courtyard. He stands at the middle, backlit by kaleidoscopic lights. My pulse picks up, my hands start to feel clammy inside my gloves.

He doesn't notice me at first because he's smiling down at his phone. His cream cable-knit sweater looks heavy and expensive, and he's wearing a knitted hat, making waves of his hair swoop out behind his ears and at his nape. When I look at him, my entire nervous system feels like it lights up like a theater marquee.

God. This is going to ruin me.

My feet scuff the pavement as I approach, and he looks up from his phone. His face breaks into a relieved, almost boyish smile as I approach. "You're here."

"I'm here." I hold out my hands, palms up.

His expression shifts, eyes widening, brows pulling together. His lips tighten in playful mock concern. "How was the walk along the Strand? Did you manage to evade the Christmas spirit? Dodge any stealth mistletoe?"

Matching his energy, I frown and nod. "It was dicey at first, but I managed to avoid decking any halls or jingling any bells. The dancin' and prancin' almost got me, though."

"Whew." He nods, exhaling like he's relieved. The heat of his breath makes a little swirl in the air in front of him. "Thought I'd been ghosted, you know."

"Be serious. You've never been ghosted in your life."

"*You* ghosted me this morning." His eyes glitter as he looks down at me. As merry and bright as any of the twinkling lights along the Strand.

"I wanted to come. I remember reading that if we don't decide to rest when we need it, our bodies decide for us. I guess my body decided for me. I didn't wake up until after four."

"Always a good idea to listen to our bodies." His tone makes my face and ears flare so hot I'm surprised a halo of steam doesn't poof around me in the chilly air.

Jake's phone is still face-up in his hand. A flash of long, curly red hair moves past the screen, but I can't make out any more details. Then I hear a child blow a long, wet raspberry.

My insides clench. Does Jake have *kids*?

He blinks a few times, then he squeezes his eyes shut. “Ah, shit, sorry. I was just having a chat about Christmas plans—”

“Of course. Please.” I wave my hand and turn sideways. The very picture of nonchalance.

A second later, a tiny voice comes through the phone’s speaker. “Uncle Jake!”

Uncle. What a gorgeous word.

“Enzo, my best friendzo.” Jake’s voice lifts a little higher. Softer, too.

“She’s there,” another child says. “I heard her voice. You don’t have to be sad anymore.”

“Ah—” Jake says on a laugh.

I pin my smile between my teeth. Jake watches me with hooded eyes. His cheeks are flushed in the glow of the phone screen. From the cold, surely.

“Let us see her, then,” comes a woman’s voice.

Jake raises a brow at me in question, lifting the phone a smidge. He looks uncertain.

I peek over the screen and say, “Hello.”

The woman on the screen looks to be about my age, with coppery-red hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Two young boys peer over her shoulder. “Oh, you *are* lovely,” she says.

Jake sighs. “This is my sister Imogen and my nephews Felix and Enzo. Genny, this is Evie.”

I wave, leaning closer to Jake to whisper, “Shame on you for involving children in your charm campaign.”

“Ah, so you *do* think I’m charming,” he whispers back.

“Are you enjoying London?” Genny says.

“So far.” I glance up at Jake. “There’s a strange man who seems to turn up everywhere I go, though.”

The boys giggle. Genny plays along. “Tall? Bit posh, but still sweet?”

“Mm-hmm. Sounds like the one.”

“Very nice hair? Gets weepy about Christmas?”

“Definitely the nice hair.” Playfully, I tap my finger on my chin. “Haven’t seen any tears yet, but I’m optimistic.”

We share a laugh.

“Jake?” Genny says. As Jake peers at the screen over my shoulder, she says, “Well done.” He laughs, and some of the tension eases out of him.

“And Evie?” Genny’s smile is gentle and warm now. “Do enjoy London. You couldn’t ask for a better guide.”

* * *

Walking through the archway into Somerset House’s courtyard feels like stepping onto the set of a big-budget Christmas movie. Pale stone architecture is washed in pastel floodlights. Laughter and the sound of skates scraping ice accompany a classic version of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” There’s a refreshments lounge along the far side of the rink where people sit at tables overlooking the ice. They’ve got a front-row seat for when I inevitably bust my ass.

Once we’ve put our skates on and stepped onto the ice, it’s clear Jake is a natural. Hands in his pockets, shoulders level, back straight, it’s like he’s on a casual stroll instead of balancing his tall frame over narrow metal blades on a surface as slick as greased glass.

Me? This is, apparently, my first day with legs. I’m going to be *that* person in the background of photos and videos. They’ll zoom in on my horrified “oopsie” face and get a good chuckle at it. Maybe I’ll even become a meme in their group chats.

Jake pulls ahead as soon as we hit the ice, but he notices right away that I’m not with him. He glides back to me and stops by snapping his feet sideways to scrape a fine puff of powder from the ice. He makes it look effortless.

I glance from his feet to his face. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

He grins. “Haven’t found anything yet. But there’s plenty I haven’t tried.”

With a death grip on the wall, I tip my head back and laugh. “Wow.”

“Is that *wow, what an exceptional human specimen*, or *wow, he’s all the way up his own arse*?”

“Neither,” I laugh. “I was impressed at how you managed to be confident and modest about it at the same time.”

Other people zip around us with varying degrees of finesse. Some couples glide by in gentle conversation, like they’re on a walk in the park. One man thunders past like he’s running, ramming the blades of his skates down like ice picks. An elementary-aged girl whips by with the balletic grace and speed of a figure skater. Jake hovers nearby. He’s got his arms

poised like he's ready to reach out and grab me. "We can go slow." His gaze latches onto mine and holds. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't have to stay here in the baby lane with me. It's fine."

He tips his head to the side, curious. "I'm here to skate with you. Why would I skate off by myself?"

Goosebumps stitch up my spine and down my arms, and it has nothing to do with the cold air. I've only ever been ice skating one other time—at the Rockefeller Center with Calvin. He'd played hockey in high school, so he was great on the ice. At first, he held my hand and helped. Eventually he said he wasn't having fun, and that I'd need to figure it out on my own. Then he spent the rest of the evening lapping most of the people in the rink. A few times, he flipped around to skate backwards in front of me, but whenever I reached out for him, he'd grin like we were playing a game, and skate away.

Jake is *here*, though. *With* me.

The only time I don't have Jake's full attention on the ice is when he helps other people who have fallen. Marshals skate around in red shirts for this very purpose, but Jake beats them to it half the time. One of his rescues is a grown man who says something to him in Italian, laughing, and Jake replies. Also in fluent Italian. Because of course he does.

He skates back to me and I push away from the wall towards him with more confidence than skill. Instantly, I start to wobble, and the moment turns into slapstick. I bend at the waist to try to slow my momentum, which throws off my center of gravity. I whip upright, but it's an overcorrection. My hips lurch forward as I windmill my arms. Right now, *I'm* the cliché.

I get a glimpse of Jake closing in. The only thing that would make this worse is if I take him down with me, so I try to wave him off. My brain wants me to say, "You don't have to catch me," but what comes out of my mouth instead is a high-pitched "*Yeeeee*" wailing over the music. It echoes across the courtyard. When I wrench my body sideways in an attempt to brute-force my way back to the wall, I go down hard, wrist-first.

Jake comes to a stop with his back to the oncoming skaters, crouching like he's shielding me. Gently, he lifts my knitted beanie away from my eyes and tucks a lock of my hair back underneath. The pad of his thumb coasts across my cheekbone like he's brushing something away. He ducks his head and says, "You OK?"

“Oh, totally.” The fall knocked the wind out of me, so it comes out as a croak.

“Fascinating interpretive dance,” he says.

Despite the pain in my wrist and my hip, I can’t help laughing. “I call that one ‘The Skedaddle.’”

“You looked like a marionette whose puppeteer was being attacked by bees.”

I lean forward and laugh harder. Jake has a hand on my knee. I brace my palm against the ice to try to sit up, but the pain in my wrist makes me hiss in agony.

“Let me see.” Jake takes off his gloves and lifts my hand, gently working his fingertips under the cuff of my coat and into my glove to slide it off. He eases each of my fingers free, careful not to tug my wrist as he does. Suddenly, I have a very intrusive, very hot image of him on his knees in front of me in a dark room, languidly stripping knee-high socks down my calves—

“Looks OK.” His voice is a rasp. Like maybe his imagination and mine went to the same place.

My hand is cradled knuckles-down in both of his. He skims his thumbs over my skin, one along the heel of my palm, the other over the pad just below my own thumb. There’s nothing clinical about this. It’s an exploration, and my hand is the first part of my body he’s getting to map. All the fine little hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stand up so fast it’s almost painful.

An ice marshal skates over, and the spell is broken. “You all right there?” He’s cute, with a septum piercing and a few tiny jingle bells attached to the ends of his chin-length locs. “Never heard a person make that sound before. And I’ve seen a *lot* of tumbles.”

Jake chuckles as he stands to help me to my feet. The marshal takes point opposite him.

“Well,” I sniff. “That’s how we do it in America.”

They both lightly hold my elbows and usher me safely to the exit.

After we turn in our skates, Jake and I go to the rinkside lounge. Inside, the air shimmers with cozy heat. It doesn’t feel like we’re in a temporary pop-up—it feels like we’ve just entered a 1920s speakeasy or a modern bootleg bar. Dim lighting, crimson carpet, walls covered in black velvet. Mini curtain lights in alternating silver and gold drape along the ceiling.

The only other light comes from candles on each of the small tables and a slim Christmas tree covered in red and gold vintage bulbs.

Jake buys a hot chocolate for each of us. The paper cups overflow with big marshmallows in whipped cream and sprinkled with cocoa. A gingerbread cookie nestles between them.

"Oh, wow."

Jake carefully sets the cup in front of me. "Is that a good wow?"

"It's a wow wow, that's all." I wrap my hands around the cup to soak in a bit of extra warmth.

"The wrist OK?" Jake says.

"Well, I can lift this cup, so I should be able to lift my morning coffee. I'll survive."

He sips his hot chocolate, and it leaves a wisp of cream on his upper lip. He quickly swipes it away with the tip of his tongue. "I'm sorry you fell. I'd have chosen somewhere else if I'd known—" He cuts off. "Ah—"

I peer at him through lowered lashes. "Hmm? If you'd known what, Jake? If you'd known I'd cosplay Bambi on the ice?"

He chuckles and looks away. "I suppose I assumed everyone in New York City skates in the winter. Rockefeller Center, Wollman Rink. They're lovely."

"Do you spend a lot of time in New York?" As soon as I say it, I cringe inwardly. We haven't gone beyond surface-level conversation yet, and it feels presumptuous for me to disturb our casual equilibrium.

"Not as much as I used to."

It's a nothing answer. In a way, I'm grateful, because it means we get to continue floating comfortably at the surface. But it's also vague enough that it ignites my curiosity like a spark on tinder. I swallow it down. "Well. I don't subscribe to the festive-season clichés, remember?"

Jake rests his forearms on the table and cradles his cup in his hands. He stares down at it for a beat. "Bet I can change that."

I laugh. "Jake, if Christmas in New York City isn't enough to make me appreciate the festive season, no place will."

For a moment his attention is riveted on my mouth, then he raises his eyes to mine. With a languid smile, he says, "Care to wager? I bet I can make you fall in love with Christmas."

"Wait. Listen." I point towards the speakers playing a cover of "Snow Is Falling in Manhattan." "We're at an iconic London spot in December, and

they’re playing songs about New York. How can London be a superior festive city if it doesn’t even have its own songs? There’s ‘Bells of New York City,’ ‘First Snow on Brooklyn,’ ‘Holiday in Harlem’—”

“All right, all right,” he laughs.

“Tell me, Jake,” I tease, “how many songs about Christmas in London are there?”

His eyes are hooded, but his lips hitch sideways in an amused smile. “You’re just making me more determined.” He gets his phone out of his pocket and extends it across the table to me. “Give me your number, and we’ll start tomorrow.”

His quiet confidence is a huge turn-on. I watch him over the table with a knowing smile before taking his phone to tap in my name and number. Jake’s fingers deliberately trail over the back of my hand when I return it, and the sensation races up my arm, into my chest, throughout my belly.

“What do you get out of this?” I say.

Jake tucks his phone away. Lifts one shoulder. “The satisfaction of being right.”

I answer with a flirty shrug of my own. “Works for me.”

I can’t deny that something about this man lights me up inside. Even though I didn’t come to London to fall in love, I’m certainly willing to let Jake Frost try.

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CHAPTER SIX

Eleven days until Christmas

The next morning, I wake up to a text from a UK number.

Jake: *Keen to fall in love today?*

Evie: *You're lucky your arrogance is charming.*

Jake: *Is that a yes?*

Evie: *Absolutely.*

Jake: *Brilliant. Meet me at noon in the piazza. Bring an empty tote and an appetite. I'll handle the rest.*

* * *

Jake waits for me in front of the piazza Christmas tree. In a pair of faded jeans, pebbled leather boots, and an oatmeal cardigan over a hunter-green henley, he looks like a brand ambassador for the festive season. His entire look says: *countryside, but make it London luxury*.

A black cab gets us to Borough Market in a little under fifteen minutes.

The London sky gleams a silvery grey, casting everything in dreamy, muted softness. There's no rain, but when I breathe in, I can taste the damp on my tongue. Our first stop is a kiosk for mulled wine. Plumes of spiced steam hang heavy over cauldrons that burble like they're having a chat.

"I think I've had my fill of mulled wine, Jake. Not sure it's for me."

He pauses with his wallet in his hand. "That stuff we had on the ghost tour put you off? That was a Tesco bottom-shelf red with a dash of dried cinnamon in it." Jake breathes a little laugh through his nose. "Calling that slop mulled wine is like calling a bloody Oreo a Parisian macaron."

I reluctantly agree to try again, and he orders two for us to sip as we walk around. I'm glad I listened to him. *This* mulled wine tastes like someone distilled the festive season into drinkable form. It's plummy and luxurious, with a twist of sweet citrus. The paper cup is warm between my hands. I want to drink this every day I'm here.

We join the steady stream of people entering the market and head for the cluster of food stalls. The scents coming out of this place are unreal. The fatty richness of roasted and fried meats adds an almost tangible weight to the air. Aromatic herbs and spices marry with the fragrance of woodsmoke and charcoal. There's laughter and conversation mixed with the sound of traffic, and the percussive clang of pots and pans from the vendors.

It's mid-afternoon, so we've arrived after the lunch rush, but it's still busy enough that Jake's hand finds the small of my back when he needs to guide me through the crowd, and every time it does, my heart races.

We stroll through the central Market Hall, browsing all the stalls. The glass ceiling here is high, supported by a web of iron beams and arches. Greenery twists around columns, and pom-pom light fixtures twinkle along the exposed scaffolding overhead. A few Christmas trees are decorated with real fruits and strands of variegated ivy. Iron and glass rumble as a train passes overhead.

I'm not going to be able to spend an entire day with Jake without indulging my curiosity. I have dozens of things I'm aching to learn about him, but every question will come with an answer, and every answer will bring me a tiny bit closer to knowing him. This undefined, unfamiliar space we're in now is safe, if not a little unsatisfying.

Questions about work are *adjacent* to surface-level, right? "So, what do you do for a living that lets you take an entire day off midweek on such short notice?"

He hesitates so briefly, I think I'd have missed it if I wasn't looking right at his face. "I'm in nonprofit work. I deal with policy stuff."

Was it too much to hope for a boring, straightforward reply? If he'd told me he was a self-employed accountant or a remote software engineer, I could have simply moved on with casual small talk. Instead, his answer is just vague enough that more questions crowd into my mind, jockeying for position. *Which nonprofits? How'd you get into this work? Is it a side hustle?*

We get stuck behind a group who's stopped in the middle of the walking path to take a selfie. As if he can tell I'm dying to ask more questions, Jake adds, "I get to work by my own schedule." With a woeful lift of his brows, he says, "I'll be working well past midnight tonight because of this afternoon with you."

"Oh, no. Really?" I step sideways to get around the group.

Suddenly, Jake reaches for me, clamping his hands around my waist to pull me against him. I stumble and reach out to brace myself. My open palms land against the center of his chest. I can feel the solid planes of his pectorals arcing away from the flat of his sternum, and the thrum of his heartbeat beneath. The noise of the market fades to a dull hum in my ears.

A beat later, a man pushing an overloaded produce cart rattles past, nodding to Jake with a muttered "Cheers."

Jake doesn't let go of my waist. The way he's watching my mouth right now is downright indecent. His thumb slipped under the hem of my sweater as he tugged me against him, and now it's pressed like a brand into the curve of soft skin above my jeans. His pupils are blown wide open. A long, warm exhale through his nose stirs the wisps of hair around my face. He's got his bottom lip pinned between his teeth, and when he releases it, it's shiny and damp. He probably tastes like mulled wine—

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Jake must feel it, because he lets his hands fall away.

It's Maddie, and it's a video call. I'm reluctant to answer for several reasons—the least of which is that we're currently standing shoulder-to-shoulder in a mob of festive market-goers. But I didn't check in with Maddie at all yesterday, and I don't want her to be worried, so I answer.

"Sorry—I have to take this," I say to Jake. I step away, close enough to keep him in sight, but far enough that he can't overhear.

Maddie stands at our postage-stamp-sized countertop making a pour-over, and of course she's wearing another punny Santa sweatshirt. He's holding a riding crop, and this one reads, "FIFTY SHADES OF SLEIGH."

"Hello again from the future," I say.

"Ooh, where are you?" Maddie says.

"Borough Market. So much food, Mads. You'd eat until you barfed."

"Ugh, I hate that I'm missing it."

"Not too late to hop on a plane." As soon as the words are out, a tiny bubble of anxiety rises inside me, and it has nothing to do with Maddie not

being here. It's anxiety that she might actually change her mind and come, putting an end to whatever is happening here between Jake and me.

Which, of course, is ridiculous.

She finishes the pour-over and cups her mug with both hands. "Exploring alone?"

My eyes involuntarily cut over to where Jake stands patiently waiting. "Not exactly."

Maddie's eyes get big. She leans towards the phone, filling the entire screen with a close-up of her mouth. She whispers, "Oh my god. Is it the guy?"

"Whispering over the phone doesn't work like you think it does."

Again, I glance over at Jake. This time he notices, and he must think I want him to come over because he starts walking my way.

Breathlessly, Maddie says, "Let me talk to him."

"Don't be weird," I warn her as Jake approaches. "My friend Maddie would like to say hi," I explain, offering an apologetic shrug. He grins and holds out his hand for the phone, completely unfazed.

"Oh my," Maddie says when Jake turns the phone to face him. I can't see her, but I imagine her expression is the same one she has when she's at the pastry counter at Brooklyn Baklava, or any time Jacob Elordi is on-screen. "So you are real," she purrs.

Jake pats around on his chest a few times, then he holds out his hand, turning it over in front of his face. "Looks that way."

"Are you taking care of my Evie?" Maddie says.

"As much as she'll allow, though I'd argue she doesn't need taking care of."

"That's a five-star answer. Is she being grumpy about Christmas?"

"Still standing right here." I close my eyes and squeeze the bridge of my nose. When I look up again, he's not looking at the phone—he's looking at me, wearing a barely there smile. I swear there's a tinge of smugness in it, too. "You could say that."

"She's basically Ebenezer Scrooge without the money," Maddie continues. "Or the Grinch with a better skincare routine."

"Point of order," I say. "The Grinch and Scrooge were created by their circumstances."

"Think I can change her mind?" He's still looking at me when he answers Maddie.

“If you figure it out, please share. I can say, though, that if she starts ranting about capitalism or the inherent performativity of the holidays, get a peppermint latte in her hands right away. She’ll calm down for at least an hour. Peppermint *only*, though. Peppermint mochas are too sweet, they give her a headache.”

“All noted,” Jake says.

“Tell her to call me tonight when she gets back to Paperwhite.”

Jake nods. “Why does she not like—”

I lean over his arm to put my face in front of the screen. “We have to go. Food awaits.”

Jake starts to pass the phone back to me, but Maddie says, “Jake, wait.” When he pauses, she says, “You’re not a murderer, are you?”

He replies with one of his slanted smiles. “Only on the dance floor.”

Throughout the rest of the day, we share nearly everything without hesitation. I have my first sausage roll (life-altering), a Scotch egg (not for me), and divine Prosecco with fresh oysters eaten straight from their shells. The salt beef sandwich Jake and I share rivals the best corned beef sandwiches I’ve had in New York. I get a cup of Italian olives so vibrantly green they could be strung together to make a Christmas garland. I use a toothpick to eat them as we walk, and when I offer one to Jake, he declines, grimacing. “Mother Nature’s failed first attempts at cherries,” he says.

By the end of our Borough Market adventure, I have a bag full of treasures. Mulled wine spices in pre-made packs, a two-pound bag of black licorice, a jar of orange-ginger chutney to have with cheese. Before we head back to Covent Garden, we hop into a coffee shop near the market. After standing all day, it’s blissful to sit. With my flat white, I get a slice of banana bread topped with candied walnuts tossed in grainy salt to contrast with the sweetness.

I hold up a forkful and say, “Why do we call this bread, anyway?”

Jake turns his mug slowly in his hands. “Ah, one of the critical questions of our time.”

“It’s basically a big loaf-shaped muffin. You know?”

He makes an academic-sounding hum in the back of his throat. “Loaf-shaped equals bread, no?”

“So, we define it based on its outside appearance instead of what it’s made of?”

“Ah, so you’re a bread existentialist.” Jake rubs his chin.

“Well, a few people have told me I look like a brunette Anya Taylor-Joy, but I’m not exactly in high demand by Hollywood casting directors.”

“I see.” Jake nods slowly. “So, you’re saying banana bread is like … *I’m not actually bread, I just play one on television*? That sort of thing?”

“You get it. I guess, though, by that logic, meatloaf is bread.”

“Meat …” Jake tilts his head to the side and squints his eyes. “… loaf? The singer?”

I laugh. “No, the food. You’ve never had it?”

“I’m not ashamed to admit that I have not.”

“It’s like a mince pie, I guess, without the crust? Baked in a loaf pan with ketchup on top.”

“Sounds rubbish,” he says.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“Maybe you can make it for me on one of our dates?”

“Oof, I don’t know, Jake. I don’t usually make meatloaf for someone until I’ve met their family. And anyway, I thought the goal here was to make me fall in love with Christmas? How would meatloaf move the festive needle?”

“Hm, you’ve figured me out.” He sips his drink and watches my tongue as I catch a stray crumb on my top lip.

“I’ll play along, though. Would today be our first date, then?”

Jake leans back, crosses his arms over his chest. “I’d argue that today is our third. The ghost tour was first, ice skating was second.”

“I think we might have different ideas of what makes a date.”

“Fascinating. Tell me yours.”

“Fond glances, I guess? Handholding. A kiss at the end, maybe?”

“Feels a bit prescriptive, that.” Thoughtful, Jake pushes out his lip, squints his eyes. “You know, since we’re already three dates in, maybe we should just make an Advent thing of it? Twelve dates to fall in love.”

“… with Christmas,” I add.

“Of course.”

“… and London.”

“Oh, of course. We need to keep the scope realistic.”

Even though I’ve only known Jake Frost for a few days, he feels like someone I remember. When I’m with him, my body receives information from frequencies I don’t have names for. Like my heart and my subconscious recognize him as the one I’ve always wanted.

* * *

When we get back to Covent Garden, it's snowing in the piazza. I hold out my hand to let the meandering flakes land on my glove. "So strange. I heard it doesn't actually snow much in December in London, but this is the third or fourth time I've seen it. But it never lasts long."

Jake pushes his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He looks like he's been rolled in sugar. "Ah … I don't recommend catching those flakes on your tongue." He nods with his chin towards the roof of the patisserie. "It's not real snow. I think they use soap."

A closer look at the flakes on my gloves makes it obvious they aren't real snowflakes, even though they evaporate before my eyes like they're made of ice. A flash mob of people dressed as Santa Claus suddenly fills the piazza, dancing to an EDM version of "All I Want for Christmas Is You." I barely avoid an elbow to the head from a would-be influencer monologuing to his phone with the dancers in the background. "Legit chaos for sure," the guy says into a lavalier mic clipped to his collar, "but overall a festive slay that will for sure heal your inner child." He's barely older than a child himself.

Nearly everyone else around me either records the falling flakes with their phone or takes a selfie at a strategic angle. They're more concerned with capturing the moment than experiencing it. But then it occurs to me—here, being present isn't the point. This isn't snow you can catch on your tongue or feel melting against warm cheeks when you lift your face to the sky.

A piece of fake snow lands in my mouth and I awkwardly try to blow it out, but it's already melted on my tongue. The faint taste of soap lingers. "See? This is why I don't like Christmas. It's all, like, performance art."

"You enjoyed it five seconds ago," Jake says.

"Yeah? Because I thought it was real."

Jake moves closer. His hands are still in his pockets, but the gravity of his gaze pins me in place like I've sprouted a taproot.

"I'd argue—" he begins.

"You say that a lot," I laugh.

Jake pauses with an indulgent smile before starting again. "I'd argue that the beauty you found in it *is* real. Those feelings were real, regardless of

what made you feel them."

"You're insufferable." Laughing, I take a few steps backwards. "Goodnight, Jake."

He simply nods with a gentle smile on his face. Just as I turn to start my walk back to Paperwhite, he says behind me, "Evie."

When I look back, he's still in the same spot. "Hm?"

"For tomorrow, how about another date with good food?"

"You have my attention."

"But this time, more sitting?"

"Mr Frost, I might swoon." I lay my hand across my chest like I'm clutching pearls. "It's a date."

* * *

I'm exhausted and craving sleep, but I promised I'd call Maddie.

As soon as she appears on the screen, she says, "Claudia says *you're welcome*."

"Uh … what am I thanking Claudia for?"

"She's why I'm not there. If I was there, you wouldn't be starting a whirlwind holiday romance with the hottest man I've seen since Will Poulter and his perfect blond quiff made a surprise appearance as a pastry chef on *The Bear*."

"Using the word 'quiff' in normal conversation is inexcusable."

"Hm." Maddie grimaces. "Too queef-adjacent?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Strike it from the record."

"And Jake looks nothing like Will Poulter."

"His hair does. A bit."

"Also, there is no whirlwind holiday romance, Mads. This isn't reality. Men like this don't actually exist."

Some of Maddie's own cynicism comes through in her sour chuckle. "That's a *men* problem, not a reality problem."

"Why let myself be disappointed if I can avoid it though?"

"Well, that's the beautiful thing about leaving at the end of the month, yeah? Let this man crack your hips, put you through his mattress, and make

you a nice English breakfast after. Then, come home before he has a chance to disappoint you."

I make a face at Maddie through the screen, but in this moment, I can't think of a reason to not indulge in the fling she's been on about since I arrived. I genuinely *like* spending time with Jake, but surely knowing there's a built-in end date can keep my heart from throwing anchors and tying strings.

Maddie squints at me through my phone when I don't respond right away. "I'm taking that as a yes," she says. "Keep me updated, OK? I've gotta run."

Before I have a chance to set my phone down, a text arrives from Jake.

Jake: *Is it tomorrow yet?*

Evie: *No, but I know how to make it arrive faster.*

Jake: *Teach me your ways.*

Evie: *Just go to sleep. It's free time travel.*

Jake: *I'll never think of sleep the same again.*

Evie: *Like and subscribe for more life hacks.*

Jake: *Meet me at our spot near the tree in the piazza at 6 p.m. tomorrow?*

Evie: *Since when do we have an "our spot"?*

Jake: *Since now. See you tomorrow.*

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Ten days until Christmas

Tonight, Jake is taking me to two historic Covent Garden pubs. First, the Lamb and Flag, and after, The Cross Keys. Two stops hardly count as a pub crawl, but that's what we're calling it for our fourth Advent date.

I still haven't gotten over my ruined cashmere sweater, but one thing my wardrobe *is* prepared for is a night of lots of sitting and lots of eating. I wear high-waisted wide-leg jeans with plenty of give, and a slouchy indigo sweater. I pull my hair into a side braid, add a bit of mascara to the tips of my lashes and a swipe of matte berry lipstick, and I'm ready.

The Lamb and Flag is just a few minutes' walk from the piazza, nestled at the back of a narrow side street. There's a short line at the door, but Jake takes my hand and politely maneuvers us through since we have a reservation.

It's a gentle touch, fingers against fingers, palms barely touching. The skin-to-skin contact itself isn't what sets my pulse to racing, though—it's how casually and confidently he took my hand in his. Like it's a natural thing we've always done and will always do. I feel flushed, heavy-limbed, loose-jointed.

Inside, the atmosphere is dim and decidedly Victorian. We're seated in a small windowless alcove behind the bar, at one of two wooden booths adjacent to a small fireplace. We order drinks—cider for Jake, white wine for me—and fresh sourdough with Guinness butter as a starter. The first nibble actually makes me moan out loud. Jake pauses with his cider halfway to his mouth, a brow boosted high. Then he closes his eyes and drains a third of the glass in one go. It makes me feel sexy and powerful, and it sets a simmer deep in my belly.

We order our meals—a steak and ale pie for me, roasted sea bass for Jake. I assume this is the night we'll finally dive beneath the surface in our

conversation, but he opens with a relatively safe but unsatisfying topic—my job.

"I'm an investigative journalist," I say. "My undergrad was environmental science, and I went on to get a graduate degree in environmental journalism once I realized the only thing I loved more than being out in nature was writing about it and sharing it with others."

Our meals arrive, and we eat while we talk. I tell Jake about *The Juniper*, and how my boss told me that the sarcasm bleeding into my work undermined my credibility. How it was beneath me. Oscar Wilde allegedly said sarcasm was the lowest form of wit, which—fair. But once you've poured your heart and soul and intellect into a losing battle for so long, you inevitably start running on the fumes of cynicism instead of the fiery fuel of ambition and hope, you know? So, to the late Mr. Wilde and my erstwhile boss, I say: *Hand me a shovel, boys, because I'm probably going to go lower*.

Jake runs his thumb along the condensation on the outside of his glass. "I guess the fact that you're on a month-long break from work means it's not going well?"

"Well, I was fired, if that's what you mean."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. Really. I've written more in the past few months than I did for the last year at *The Juniper*, and I've sold some of it freelance. The money is terrible, but being able to write what I want, *how* I want? Priceless."

"I envy you, actually. A chance to start over is a gift, even when it doesn't seem like it at first."

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience," I say.

"Just feeling a bit stuck at the moment. Can't quite see my way out yet."

"Well, then. I highly recommend getting fired. The technique is pretty straightforward. Lean heavily into your own moral convictions, harness your anger about how broken the system is, then blatantly disregard the advice and disciplinary warnings given to you by your superiors." I take a sip of wine and make a little pop noise with my mouth after I swallow. "Done."

"I like your style," Jake says.

"Will you tell me more about what you do?"

He drags his bottom lip through his teeth, and we watch each other for a long beat.

“I’m a lawyer.” He says it like an apology. Wryly, he adds, “But I’m in recovery.”

“I thought you worked for a nonprofit?” I say.

Jake sits back. He doesn’t take his eyes off mine. “I never said I worked for a nonprofit. I said I do nonprofit work.”

“Ah. Spoken like a true lawyer.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Fair.” And then he just … shuts down.

“Where did you just go?” The Jake across the table from me right now isn’t the Jake I’ve gotten to know over the last few days. This Jake is tightly wound and withholding. I see it in the set of his jaw, the tiniest narrowing of his eyes, the way he folds and unfolds his napkin on his lap. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to get to know you, Jake.”

“Am I talking to Evie right now, or a journalist?”

I study him for a moment, nibbling the inside of my cheek. “Kind of an odd question.”

“Sorry.” Jake’s quiet chuckle is more air than sound. He passes a hand over his hair, then he clutches the back of his neck. “Ah … I do mostly community work, policy advocacy. Pollution disputes, historical preservation, that sort of thing. Some environmental work, too. I care about a lot of the same things you do. *Most* of the same things, actually. Maybe we were meant to meet.”

When the server comes by, I ask for a takeaway box for what’s left of my steak and ale pie.

“What are you doing?” Jake chuckles.

I look down at the bit of pie left on my plate. There are barely three bites left, but I’m not leaving here without it. “I don’t want to live in a world where I don’t have this to look forward to. I’m going to make this last until I leave London.”

“Just enjoy it now, Evie. You can get another one.”

“Can I, though? Maybe for the next few weeks. Then I have to go back to New York, a place tragically devoid of steak and ale pies.”

* * *

The Cross Keys is simultaneously the most British and the most Christmassy place I’ve seen since arriving in London. Its façade is eclectic

and ornate, with low arches at the entryway and a crest of two cherubs holding keys overhead. Inside, it's small, with glossy wooden walls packed tight with paintings and memorabilia. The copper pots and vintage brass instruments that hang from the ceiling reflect the light from festive bulbs, amplifying the sparkle in every direction.

We get two pints of Guinness at the bar. Jake steps away a moment before I do, and once his back is turned, the bartender says, "Ever had a proper Guinness before, love?"

I glance around to make sure he's talking to me. "I've had Guinness in the US."

"I reckon that will spoil you, then." He glances at my chest. "You won't want to go back."

I have to laugh. "I'll take my chances."

From across the room, Jake watches me with a vague smile as I approach. "Making friends?"

The place is packed. Red leather seating runs the length of the room. We manage to snag a spot in the corner, where the cushioned banquette makes an L shape around a tiny table. I slide in first, and Jake's legs are so long, his knees nestle against mine. It's the same as when he took my hand earlier this evening. Automatic. And neither of us moves away.

"So … who do you have waiting for you back in New York?" Jake says.

I raise a brow and say, "Bold of you to assume I have anyone else." I try to deliver it like a self-deprecating joke, but Jake watches me with those hooded hazel eyes. And I'm seen.

"*Had* someone else, then?" he says.

I swallow hard. It's a valid question, but looking back on my relationship with Calvin means I have to revisit the person I was when I was with him. "His name was Calvin. He was a first officer on an airline. Driven, smart, a little intense. I thought he was everything. For a long time, it was good. Or at least, I thought it was."

Jake scans my face like he's trying to figure out where my fractures are, and how they might fit back together. Finally, he says, "Was it actually good? Or just good enough?"

"It was *easy*, I think? I was happy with him for two years. *Secure* happy. Like, the *thank god I never have to brave the dating pool again* sort of happy."

It sounds so pathetic, saying these things out loud. I think most people focus on the anger or sadness that comes from being cheated on, but for me, the *shame* of it is what cuts the deepest.

"Obviously, pilots spend a lot of time away from home, and it was fine. I like my space. But after we'd been dating for a year or so, weird things started popping up. Keycards in his luggage from hotels I didn't recognize the names of. A copy of a rental car contract with a woman's name on it as an authorized driver."

As I talk, Jake makes low sounds of agreement or understanding. Or maybe it's just his way of saying: *I'm still with you*. I've been looking down at my drink, but I can tell he's watching me. I could feel his eyes on me in a pitch-black room. His presence has a weight to it.

I wave both my hands in front of me dismissively and blow out a quick breath. "Long story short—he cheated on me with women in all the cities he had regular overnights in."

"Fuck. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make light of it." Gently, he asks, "How did it end?"

I've always hated the term "dumped." Dumping a thing implies a sort of quick, careless offloading. It doesn't fully capture what it was like for me to end things with Calvin. It was slow. Almost surgical. Despite everything he'd done, I spent weeks doodling a pro–con list, and I'm ashamed to admit that my list of reasons to stay with him was almost as long as the reasons to leave. I had to methodically snip apart all the pieces of me that had tangled around his. I lost some bits of myself in the process, and I'm not sure they'll ever grow back. And do I even want them to? Maybe those bits should stay on the cutting-room floor forever.

"Unpopular opinion—I think it's actually harder to be the one who ends a relationship. Because not only do you have to deal with the heartbreak of losing it, you have to dwell on whether you made the right choice." My laugh is brittle. "*You're* the one who ended it, so it's your fault you're alone, you know?"

"Christ, Evie, it's not. It's your ex's fault for being a cheating wanker."

"Well, OK. But I *was* the one who ended it. Calvin actually wanted to stay together." My laugh is so sharp, a few men at the bar turn to glance at me. "He said things like, *But I love you—they don't mean anything to me*, and, *You know you're the one I always come home to*."

Jake's jaw muscles tic at his temples. "Sounds like a proper twat."

“It’s not entirely on him, though. Right? I’m a *journalist*, Jake. It’s literally my job to gather information and interpret meaning from it. But I was completely clueless for most of two years. I didn’t even know this person I shared my heart and my body and my life with.”

“It’s not your fault he wasn’t equipped to give you what you deserve.”

I laugh. “Who gets to decide what we *deserve*, Jake Frost, supreme authority on love and life?”

“I guess we decide that for ourselves, yeah?”

“Please.” It’s an auditory eyeroll.

“Evie.” He waits to say more until I meet his gaze. “What made you decide that you deserved less?”

I look away, suddenly fascinated with a tinsel star at the bar. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“You say interesting things I want to know more about.”

My innate skepticism and curiosity have always made me an unapologetic noticer and question-asker, even before I made it a career as a journalist. But until this moment, I never realized how little curiosity Calvin had about me. Our conversations always started with me showing interest in him—in *his* day, in *his* stresses, *his* joys. But whenever we talked about me, it was because I initiated. I’d always opened myself to Calvin like a book, but he never learned the language I’m written in.

Jake Frost is learning me. And it feels so, so good.

“I see what you’ve been doing tonight, by the way,” I tease. “You’ve been asking a bunch of questions about me instead of giving me a chance to learn more about you. It’s my turn.”

“What else do you want to know?”

“Is dating in London as awful as it seems to be in New York?”

“I wouldn’t know, really. I had a girlfriend for a few years at uni, nothing serious since then. I, ah, knew someone through work, and we were nudged together because of that, but it was obvious we made better friends. She’s American, actually. I think you’d like her.”

He asks me why dating in New York is awful, and I tell him about the Lower East Side musician from Hinge. I can’t remember if his name was Jim or Tim. What I *do* remember is the first thing Jimothy said to me when we met. “Wow, you’re exactly my type—I’ve never been into conventionally attractive women.” So, I responded, “Wow, same. I’ve never been into conventionally intelligent men.” He thought it was a compliment.

Another guy from Hinge asked me what my “goals” were before our drinks even arrived, and when I started telling him my freelancing dreams, he interrupted with, “No, I mean, goals for *this relationship*.” We’d only been chatting for three days. A chef I met on Bumble texted me after what was actually a really nice date. It started like a standard after-date check-in, but then he began asking very specific questions about what I had enjoyed the most. Later, I found out that he had a Tinder profile where most of his profile pics were screenshots of complimentary texts from dates. I knew restaurant bros were obsessed with positive reviews, but this was ridiculous.

“So,” I say, “I think it’s obvious that the proverbial dating pool in New York City is more of an abyss, and I’ve decided I’m better off not dipping a toe in at all.”

A small smile hooks Jake’s mouth sideways. “Have I mentioned I’m an excellent swimmer?”

* * *

It’s nearly midnight by the time we leave The Cross Keys. Since it’s a weeknight, we get to stroll through a calmer Covent Garden. At least, I *think* I’m calmly strolling. The Guinness nudged me over the line between gently buzzed and a wee bit impaired.

In the piazza, a lone busker sits silhouetted with an acoustic guitar. He sings a cover of “Christmas Is the Time to Say I Love You” for a couple slow-dancing in a streak of light reflected on damp cobblestones.

Jake walks me to the usual spot, where we say goodnight next to the giant Christmas tree. *Our spot*. When I walk away, I hear him say my name behind me.

“Evie.”

My imagination takes over my rational mind, and as I turn to face him, the moment unfolds like a screenplay in my head. He’ll approach and say he forgot something, then he’ll cup my face in his hands and kiss me like his life depends on it.

“Your flat,” he says instead, looking almost apologetic. “It’s that way.” He points in the opposite direction I’d been heading.

I respond with a sheepish smile. “Oops.”

He takes a few steps towards me. “Let me walk you home.”

So I do.

Outside Paperwhite, Jake stands behind me as I key in. When I turn to him to say goodnight, I sway into him like a sapling in a storm. He lets me use his body to steady myself, hands hovering at the dip of my waist. Our bellies and hips connect, and when Jake's palm settles against my lower back, it's slow, deliberate. He looks me in the eyes as he does it. The touch is light enough that I could move away if I wanted to. He breathes so deep his chest and shoulders visibly rise. The heat of his exhale floods my temples, my cheeks, my mouth.

"I got some fond glances from you tonight, Jake."

"Makes sense. I'm quite fond of you."

My heart pounds so hard my pulse bangs against the underside of my jaw. "And there was some handholding."

Jake doesn't budge when I trace the tip of my nose up the side of his neck.

"Christ, woman—that's a cold nose." His body tenses against mine. He runs his fingertips up my arms and cups his hands on my shoulders.

"Almost a proper date, wouldn't you say?" I let my nose bump against his jaw.

His big exhale clouds the cold night air. "You're a bit, ah … elevated at the moment, love."

I rest my forehead against his sternum. I'm surrounded by the heat and scent of him. Body heat and fine wool and the homey, mingled scents of the pubs. I know it doesn't make sense, but he's *familiar*. Safe. It's like my body recognizes something my logical mind isn't capable of yet. A seventh sense, and it's tuned exclusively to Jake Frost.

I raise my head to reach up and fiddle with his collar. "I bet that bartender would've kissed me goodnight."

"I think that bloke wanted a bit more than a kiss from you." Jake's throat clenches in a painful-looking swallow. "But you don't want him, Evie."

"How do you know?"

With his finger bent, he nudges my chin up so I meet his eyes. Then he straightens to his full height and takes a step back, putting his mouth well out of range of mine. But he has to grit his teeth to do it. "Because I've seen the way you look at someone you *do* want."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Nine days until Christmas

I slept in my clothes last night. A reluctant glance in the mirror reveals that I've gone full-on bog witch. I might have to cut my hair out of my braid. I yawn loudly, and as soon as my feet touch the floor, I hear a man's voice from downstairs.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

Jake.

"Yes. Good. Well." The words come out more like a croak than human speech.

"You sound like you might be lying to me, love." The bottom step squeaks. "Do you need help?"

"Respectfully, I would rather try to swim to the moon than have you see me right now."

Every step of Paperwhite's stairs is a key on a poorly tuned piano that only plays tortured creaking sounds. "Are you sure?"

I really don't want him to see me like this, but my desire to see *him* wins out. Throwing back the curtain on the landing, I call down to him. "Jake. Wait."

He's halfway up the stairs, still in the clothes he was wearing last night. He has the most charming, chaotic bedhead I've ever seen.

Quietly, I say, "Why did you stay?"

He does the thing where he tilts his head sideways as he studies my face. Actual golden retriever behavior. "I didn't want you taking a tumble down the stairs."

"How would you stop me falling down the stairs … from the bottom of the stairs?"

"Who says I slept downstairs?"

I swallow hard. I have a misty memory of trying to kiss him at the end of the night, but he backed away. I don't have any memory of him joining me

in bed.

Hand on the railing, Jake takes a step down. “Now that I know you’re alive and well, I’ll be off. I’ll be back around four o’clock. Dress warm. We’ll be on the river tonight.”

I hop down a few more steps. “Jake, wait. Did we … um—”

“You really don’t know?”

“Oh my *god*—”

“Evie. Breathe. We did not.” He chuckles. “I promise, if we did—you’d remember it.”

* * *

About an hour before Jake is due to come round, I’m folding laundry and singing an off-key version of “Last Christmas” by Wham! to myself when there’s a knock at the door. It’s him. An hour early.

“If you heard my singing—no, you didn’t.”

He gives me a mock stern look. “I heard some Christmas spirit happening in here, Evie.”

“Ha, ha.”

Tonight, Jake wears dark, loose denim and a chunky cream cable-knit crewneck sweater, perfect for a winter evening cruise on the Thames. But there’s something in his hand that doesn’t fit the vibe. It’s a big metal toolkit, and it looks brand-new.

I take a step backwards and let him in. “What’s this?”

“I’m going to fix your leaky sink.”

“How did you know it was leaky?”

He goes to the kitchenette and sets the toolbox down on the floor. Hands on his hips, he studies the sink for a moment, then he glances at me. “I spent the night here, remember? I noticed.”

He noticed. And now he’s going to do something about it. *For me.* How novel.

“I’ve tried calling the property manager about it since the day after I arrived,” I say.

Jake effortlessly lowers to a squat like his knees are hydraulic-powered. He opens the cabinet doors under the sink and shines a flashlight. “You’re

used to American plumbers and American responsiveness. Here, it might be weeks before you even get a response out of the property manager."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I say, "So you know how to fix a sink?"

Jake looks up at me and smiles. "Nope. But I watched a few YouTube videos." He stands just as smoothly as he crouched, and before I have a chance to say anything else, he's raising his arms high to lift his sweater over his head. Then he slips his phone from the back pocket of his jeans and sets it on the kitchenette countertop. Face-up. It's a tiny thing, but it's a huge green flag. Calvin had always been so secretive. I couldn't even tell you what his phone's wallpaper was.

Jake hands his sweater to me, and I take it from him without hesitation, like this is something we've done a thousand times before. "Don't want to muck it up," he says.

It's still warm from his body. The feel of it in my hands makes goosebumps rise along the back of my neck. I actually have to restrain myself from pressing it to my face and breathing him in.

"You planning to supervise?" His grin is slanted, playful.

"Do you want an audience?"

Jake lowers himself to the floor again. He doesn't answer, but he chuckles and shakes his head. I'm not sure how to interpret it.

I've only ever seen him in bulky knits and coats, so this is my first glimpse of what he's got going on underneath the heavy clothing. The undershirt he wears is a pale dove gray, and trim to his body. It's not tight, but every time he stretches forward or twists to either side, his shoulder blades ripple under the fabric. His arms are taut with lean muscle, with a few subtle veins running the length of his forearms. My catnip.

I peek around him to get a glimpse inside the toolbox. Spanners, screwdrivers, a heavy-looking claw hammer I'm almost certain has nothing to do with plumbing. Everything is brand-new, much of it still in the packaging. He bought all of it so he could do this one small thing.

For me.

* * *

So this is the Thames.

The gangway rocks gently underfoot as a boat passes by. We're greeted onboard the small private craft by a white-gloved captain. Nearby, Tower Bridge looms over the Thames, its gothic spires underlit with festive gold and green. The river wears it like a crown.

We step onto the deck and down into a wood-paneled cabin. Jake pours mugs of warm mulled wine for each of us, and he carries mine for me as we make our way up to the aft deck. It's open to the night air, with a plush settee built in below the rails. Heavy boating blankets sit folded in a tidy stack, wool on one side, polar fleece on the other. A simple evergreen wreath hangs from the back railing, and golden LED tracklights glow at our feet.

As we cast off, the surface of the Thames reflects a spill of candy-colored light from the city in the distance. Stars freckle the sky, crystalline bright in the way they only ever seem to be on clear winter nights like this.

"Before we get too far from shore, I have a confession," Jake says.

"I like confessions."

"I used to get motion sickness as a kid."

"Oh, dear."

"Haven't been on a boat in a while."

I laugh. "Why did you choose this as our date, then?"

Jake smiles. "Because there's nothing that sparkles like the Thames at night during the festive season. Worth the risk."

For a while, we sit in silence, rocking with the rhythm of the river.

"I keep a baby spoon in my kitchen back home," I say, contributing my own confession. "I use it when I eat ice cream, to make it last longer."

"Brilliant," Jake says. "I don't understand the worldwide obsession with *Star Wars*—"

"How dare you." I clutch imaginary pearls at my collarbone.

"—or *Lord of the Rings*—"

"Get out." I fling my arm straight out to point at the water.

Jake's laugh is brighter than all the lights of the city in the distance.

Once the boat picks up speed, it's colder. I gather one of the blankets over my legs, lifting the edge closest to Jake in invitation. He scoots closer, and I have to rest my thigh lengthwise against his in order for us both to be fully covered. It only takes seconds for a radiant little zone of body heat to form between us.

On the bank in the distance, tiny lights move erratically. They look like people with flashlights and headlamps.

"What's happening over there?"

"Mudlarking, most likely."

"I have no idea what that is, but it sounds like something I want to do."

"Larking about—you don't say that in the States?"

I shake my head.

"It's like … frivolous fun. A playful adventure. Mudlarking is just what it sounds like—adults mucking about in the mud on the Thames. They're looking for old artifacts that the low tide exposes. Coins, bits of old pottery, clay pipes, ink pots. My sister found a diamond ring once. Someone probably chucked it off a bridge."

"Mudlarking is the best thing I've ever heard of. It's like … thrifting, but in nature."

Jake laughs.

"I'm serious. I've never wanted to do something more in my life. Would your sister take me someday?" As soon as the words are out, my insides drop like I'm on a rollercoaster. My *somedays* in London are limited, and they certainly don't include cozying up to Jake's family.

Jake, bless him, doesn't make it awkward. If he finds what I said weird and presumptuous, he doesn't show it. "I'm sure she'd love to, but there's a licencing process. People can't just pop down to the shore and start digging."

"Do you have other siblings? Wait, wait—I know the answer already. You have a big family, and it's perfect." I do a slow, arcing flourish of my hand in front of us. "You have four siblings. No, six. Your family is basically modern-day *Bridgerton*. You're all supernaturally beautiful, and you're all intensely protective of each other even though you argue."

Jake nods appreciatively. "I have two brothers. Four sisters. Well, one is a brother-in-law, and one is a sister-in-law. All with considerably superior personal hygiene to Regency Londoners, I'm sure. Otherwise, yep. Bang on."

"You consider your siblings' spouses as your own siblings?"

Jake cocks his head to the side. "Don't you?"

"Not really. My sisters are all older. They've got families of their own in Colorado, Texas, and one in Toronto."

Calvin had a big family. When we were together, I felt like I was part of it. We'd meet with his parents for lunch a few times a month, and I built friendships with his sisters. Over the two years we were together, I even went on a handful of day trips and weekend overnights with them. I treasured those moments. It was the family I'd always wished for.

Once it ended, not a single one of them reached out to me.

I grieved that loss, too. But I eventually realized that to them, it wasn't friendship. It was orientation. They'd gotten to know me as someone who might become a permanent part of their lives. Maybe, if Calvin and I had gotten married, true friendship would've eventually evolved over time. But ultimately, they weren't interested in a meaningful relationship with me, Evie. They were interested in Evie, their potential sister-in-law.

And my own sisters' spouses? I can count on one hand the number of times I've met them.

"Jake, what would you have done if I hadn't come to Somerset House? You said in the note you left with Cherry and Quinn that you'd get the hint."

He knuckles his chin. "I guess I'd have found a different coffee shop for the month."

I look at him sideways. "Be serious."

"Scout's honor. If the vibes were off for you, would you really want to bump into me regularly after sending a clear signal—twice—that you weren't interested?"

"I guess not."

He trails the edge of his thumb along my thigh, just above my knee. "I really hoped you'd come, though." Then he meets my eyes. "And you did."

"You can't possibly be real. You're too perfect."

"No, no. I'm a terrible cook—"

"Oh god, Jake. That's not a real fault. It's like when people say their biggest fault is that they care too much, or they're a perfectionist."

"It's true, though," he says. "I'm a serious problem in the kitchen. I don't have the patience for recipes, and I don't have that creative knack for figuring out what ingredients go nicely together. One of the reasons I exercise so much is because of how much takeout I eat."

"I have another confession. I hate to exercise. I know I'll regret it someday, but working out is *so* boring."

“I’d argue that you just haven’t found a satisfying way to get your heart rate up.”

“Oh?” A flush of warmth unspools deep inside me. “Tell me more. What do you recommend?”

“Well, do you want to prioritize strength or stamina?” Jake keeps his expression neutral, but I can see the moment his pupils expand in his irises like spilled ink.

“Stamina is necessary for strength, wouldn’t you agree?” I sip my mulled wine, blinking over the rim of the mug. As I lower it, I slowly brush the inner edge of my bottom lip with the tip of my tongue. “Doesn’t matter how hard you can go if you can’t keep it up.”

Bullseye. Jake responds with a forceful little exhale through his nose. He swallows hard. His voice drops into a deep rumble register I haven’t heard until now. “I’ll think on it and come up with a personalized cardio plan for you, how does that sound? I have to warn you, though. I take a very hands-on approach to mentorship.”

Wind skips off the surface of the Thames, blowing across my neck, down my sweater. I set my mug aside, shivering hard. Jake leans away to grab the other blanket without letting our collective heat escape from the one on our laps. He lifts it by the corners to unfurl it in front of us, then he whips it over and back like a cloak, tucking it around our shoulders.

He turns to me and clasps my palms together, then he cups his own hands around them. His eyes are locked on mine when he brings them to his mouth, gently blowing through the small space between his thumbs, warming us both with his breath. He kisses the tender sensitive spot on the back of my hand between the first knuckles of my thumb and forefinger. At first, it’s a fleeting brush of his lips, but then he breathes deep, taking in the scent of my skin. I feel the subtle press of teeth—a sensual contrast to the tenderness he’s showing the rest of me. A delicious little hint of *more*.

“Better?” His body is so close, I feel the vibration of his voice in my lungs like it’s my own breath.

“Mm.” I wonder if he can hear the way my heart gallops against my ribs.

A pale white speck drifts down from the sky, slow-motion swirling, swaying. It comes to rest on Jake’s shoulder. It melts as soon as it lands, and I wonder if I imagined it. But more arrive quickly in its wake, so dense it looks like static against the black of night. The flakes are cold against my cheeks, and I can smell the mineral purity of snow.

I feel Jake's eyes on me. He uses a fingertip to lift a thin lock of hair from my lashes. As if he's read my mind, he says, "It's real," and down to the center of my bones, I know Jake Frost is going to kiss me as soon as I look away from the sky.

I'm torn between wanting it now and wanting to savor the anticipation. I'll never experience this again. It's the deep breath before a once-in-a-lifetime dive.

"Look at me." Jake's warm baritone lands in the deepest, hungriest places inside me.

I swallow hard. Lower my chin. And I face him.

He comes in easy, cuffing his hands around the sides of my neck. He nudges the pads of his thumbs against my chin to tip my head back, pausing to meet my eyes. I taste him in the air the moment before he presses his gorgeous lips to mine.

At first, it's gentle. A tentative exploration of this new Evie and Jake we've just become. His tongue lightly traces the inner seam of my top lip, and I meet him with mine.

We kiss in a shared dialect. He opens for me and I open for him, echoing the glide of his jaw and the hot, slow slip of his tongue against mine. Our mouths have an agenda of their own. One of his hands thrusts into my hair, the other glances up my leg, fingertips digging into the curve of my ass to half-lift, half-drag me into his lap. He's hard and ablaze with urgent heat against the tender underside of my thigh.

Most people realize when they're experiencing a once-in-a-lifetime event. Logically, your brain knows it's special, and temporary, and it should be savored. When I kiss Jake, I feel it. I'm also painfully aware that this isn't going to be enough. It feels like the first hit of an addiction I'm going to have to deal with for the rest of my life.

* * *

As we disembark, the captain says to us, "Congratulations, sir. Madame."

Jake nods to the man with a quiet "Thank you" as he runs his fingers through his hair. He's delightfully mussed. When I look at him in question, he says, "Ah … I might have bent the truth a bit to be able to get a booking for us at the last minute."

“Tell me.”

His laugh is a gentle, comfortable sound. “I told them I was planning to propose to you.”

God, I’m in so much trouble. It’s not *real*, obviously, but the words land with a heavy thud in my hungry little heart even as my mind registers the absurdity of it. “Clever.”

As we walk down the pier, Jake reaches for my hand. He drifts the pads of his fingers over the sensitive tips of my own before locking his palm against mine.

Later, when Jake kisses me goodnight outside Paperwhite, he says, “Five o’clock tomorrow, I’ll pick you up here. This one won’t be about Christmas, though. This one will be about us.”

I hover by the door to watch him go. He pauses just before the bend in the street, glancing back before he disappears. There’s something here between us, but whatever it is feels nervous and small. Like if I look right at it, I’ll scare it off. But it *is* real. And I have a feeling that before this month is over, it will have grown big enough to hurt when it’s time for me to go.



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CHAPTER NINE

Eight days until Christmas

This one will be about us.

That's what Jake said last night. I think "us" is one of my new favorite words. Two tiny letters with tremendous meaning. I know he's said his goal is to make me fall in love with Christmas in London. And if I'm honest with myself, he's succeeding. But the reason I'm falling in love with Christmas in London is because I'm getting to experience it with *him*.

Jake arrives at Paperwhite at five o'clock on the dot. When I swing open the door, he stands with his hands tucked into the pockets of his coat. It's one of those quintessentially British hip-length field jackets made of waxed cotton. The color is the rich, ruddy-brown of fresh tobacco, and he's paired it with a loosely draped scarf in a subtle check pattern of rust, cream, and mossy green. How many coats does one person need? And since when do I find coats *sexy*?

"I have to know." I reach out and briefly rub the end of the scarf with my fingers. "Do you have a personal stylist?"

"Good evening to you, too." Jake glances down to watch me touch the scarf, then he looks back to me, eyes glittering. "A what?"

"A stylist. Someone who buys your clothes for you. Tells you what to wear based on your features, your palette. You dress better than most men I've ever seen. And I live in the fashion capital of the world."

"No stylist. Just impeccable taste." As he says *taste*, he glances briefly at my lips. "I suppose I appreciate quality. I prefer to invest in things that last."

Jake keeps his gaze latched onto mine as he says it. There are fathoms of subtext in his expression, and in this moment, I learn something new about myself. Eye contact like this is my favorite kind of flirtation. He's not only seeing me—it's like he's welcoming me in to see *him*.

I do a double take when I see what's parked on the street behind him. Metallic navy blue, gleaming clean, its engine purring with a throaty rumble. I don't know much about cars, but I recognize a luxury ride when I see one. "What's *this*?" I say.

"It's—" Jake circles around to open the passenger-side door for me. "A car?"

"Is it yours?"

A faint smile tugs at one corner of his mouth. "Last I checked."

"Are you serious right now? I feel like I need to take off my shoes first."

He chuckles. "Would you rather take the train and a bus? Tonight's date is an hour's journey. And I've got snacks."

"You'll let me eat in this car? What if I drop a crumb?"

"Jesus Christmas, it's just a car, Evie."

My laugh echoes down the street. "It's a goddamned Aston Martin, Jake."

"Like I said. It's a car, and it's the only one I've got." He pops a kiss against my temple, then he gives my butt a pat and a squeeze. "Get in."

* * *

We've been driving about an hour when we turn off the main road down a paved lane, darkness pressing in all around us. We come to a wrought-iron gate, where Jake enters a code. It closes behind us as we pass through.

"Jake. Don't tell me this is your home."

Jake laughs softly. "Hardly."

"Whose is it, then?"

"Friend of mine, Bowen. One of my best mates from uni. I called in a favor, and the place is ours tonight."

The driveway is bordered by evergreens, so the property reveals itself in teasing glimpses through the boughs—a hint of spotlit stone here, softly glowing windows there. When we emerge from the tree-lined lane, the grounds stretch outwards and upwards as far as I can see. A pond reflects a moon so bright it might be a festive bauble in the sky. God, what in the world is a person like me doing somewhere this grand?

Inside, instead of the stately entrance hall of a residential home with rugs and furniture and a sense of embodiment, it's empty. It reminds me of a medieval antechamber or the central hall of a monastery, with a soaring

double-height ceiling and rounded alcoves on either side. There's an odor of stasis here. Mineral dustiness and the tang of some volatile oil or polish, the faint powdery scent of dried flowers. If an echo had a scent, this would be it.

I half-turn to glance over my shoulder at Jake, uncertain. He extends his hand forward again with a soft smile, silently saying, *Go, explore, I'm with you*.

Then, I see them.

In the alcoves sits a sculpture on a pedestal, each depicting the human form in marble, all illuminated with warm spotlights in a range of undertones of living skin. A figure on their knees, arm outstretched with a palm planted flat in front of them. Another glancing over a shoulder, a foot mid-step. The poses are so dynamic, the detail so realistic, it feels like they might wearily exhale and relax into a slouch once we're gone.

A sculpture of a woman stands straight, her hand subtly turned backwards with a single forefinger outstretched behind. I'm compelled to connect with her. Jake moves in beside me when I hesitate. "It's all right." He drifts his fingers along the sculpture's forearm, her wrist, the knuckles of her hand. The marble there has a faintly darker, shiny patina, as if it's been touched innumerable times. "You can touch her."

The marble is cool where my fingertip makes contact with hers. She'll endure for centuries, forever trapped in this state of longing.

It's suddenly hard for me to breathe. My body doesn't know what to do with this experience. I'm not simply *feeling* emotion. Emotion is embodying *me*. I can't dislodge the lump in my throat, and my face feels flushed and sweaty. Tears well in my eyes, streaking down my cheeks when I blink.

Jake's hand slides against mine. Our fingers engage and lock like the pieces of a puzzle. I wonder if he's feeling the same turbulence I am. He doesn't say anything. I don't need him to say anything, and he understands.

Silently, we explore together. Time seems to slow, like we're moving through warm molasses. Smaller drawing rooms off the main hall showcase other pieces, all embodying the passage of time. A half-torso turning into tattered windblown cloth, a leg from the knee down, with pointed toes turning into tangled tree roots. Two forearms with hands clasped just below the other's elbow, muscles and veins sculpted in a way that conveys a

desperate grip. There are even tiny indentations where each fingertip presses into marble skin.

Once we've explored all the exhibit rooms, Jake leads me to two tall paneled wooden doors that open on sliding tracks into pockets in the wall. "This is Bowen's atelier. It was originally an orangery."

The walls are high, and solid stone, but the ceiling is a domed network of glazed glass panels in iron frames. Motes of dust shimmer in the air like tiny snowflakes. It smells of raw clay, like soil after spring rain. Oils and wax, mineral spirits, sweet woodsmoke from a small cast-iron woodstove that someone lit before leaving the space to us. There are an astonishing number of half-done pieces along the edges of the room, imperfect and a bit haunting, but still beautiful. Sensual. Sketches are stuck to the walls, dropcloths hang from hooks.

An unfinished bust has a crooked Santa hat on its head, the only sign of levity in the entire estate. It makes me smile.

"Shall we?" Jake says.

We slip off our shoes and sit on quilts, cushions, and layered rugs on the floor. A picnic has been prepared for us—fresh bread, salty butter, olives, grapes, dates, and figs. Cold roast chicken, chocolate-dipped strawberries, actual French champagne. A plate of Brie, creamy mild Cheddar and sweet Red Leicester cheeses with chutney. English pears and English apples, and a few pomegranates pretty enough to decorate any Christmas tree.

Naturally, our conversation drifts to the more personal.

"I was my parents' last attempt for a son, so I've been a disappointment since they saw me on the ultrasound." I chuckle to myself, but Jake doesn't smile. "That sounds more dramatic than I meant it to. It's just that most of my happy memories happened at school, or camp, or whatever. With friends, rather than family. I think big families have a hard time making sure there's enough love to go around."

Gently, Jake says, "Not all big families."

"You're lucky. I'm happy for you. Truly."

"Any good memories?"

"Well, I loved being outdoors. Does that count?" I tell him about how I spent more time in nature than inside. How soft clover and moss were my sun-warmed carpet, the sky my only roof. I tell him about exploring woodland nooks and wild meadows, and the creek that ran through them both. I tell him about scooping crayfish into empty pickle jars and catching

tadpoles with my cupped hands, and how, every June, I'd stuff my face with the serviceberries that grew at the forest edge. I never feared the bees, or the spiders, or being the only tiny human amidst acres and acres of wild, rolling green.

"Sounds a lot like where I grew up." Jake's smile is whimsical. "We don't have serviceberries in the Cotswolds, though. For us, it was wild blackberries. Spent most of August with my hands stained purple. Rode my bike everywhere. That old rustbucket was my pride and joy. I spent so long in the stream every day in the summer, my fingers and toes would turn wrinkly. Not many other kids around, so my sisters and brother were my best mates. Might be why we're still so close now."

This makes me like him that much more, knowing that not only does he love his family, but that he also grew up the same sort of woodland urchin I did. I can't help but wonder about the person I'd be if I'd had the same supportive family he had.

"You all right?" Jake says, softly.

"Why me, Jake? Really. Why am I here with you?"

"I told you, you're lovely when you frown."

It's hardly a moving declaration of romcom-worthy insta-love. Not that I'm *looking* for that. But so much of what he says and does seems straight out of the pages of a romance book.

Logically, I know this is fantasy, but every day I spend with him makes me feel safer and increasingly free to indulge in it. And just maybe, reality could be like this. It *should* be like this.

"You said that to me at Earl's."

"I did. It wasn't the first time I thought it, though."

For a moment, I wait for him to give me additional context, but he doesn't. "OK?"

"The first time I saw you, you were at the gate before boarding. In New York. You were writing in a notebook."

I still don't get it. I frown.

Playfully, he points at my face and says, "There. Just like that."

Laughing, I say, "You're ridiculous."

"I swear it, Evie," he says. "Everyone else was scrolling a phone or had their face in a laptop or tablet screen, so you stood out. You were all-in on whatever you were doing. Frowning. And I thought to myself—if she's that

lovely when she scowls," his voice drops a bit softer, "her smile would probably ruin my life."

The very smile he's waxing poetic about falters before it collapses entirely. Before Jake Frost, if someone had said that to me, regardless of how gorgeous and charming they were, I'd have laughed in their face. But this isn't a man who says things he doesn't mean.

Jake knuckles his chin and looks away. "And then, when I saw you in the airport after we landed, you reminded me of someone."

"Who?"

"Myself. When I first came to London, I didn't want to be here, either."

"That's a pretty loaded statement. You can't say something like that without giving extra context."

"Ah, let's just say, you can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy."

"And now?"

His eyes meet mine and hold them. "I'm quite glad I did. Otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here with you."

"Oh god," I laugh, "don't tell me you believe in fate."

Jake chuckles. "No."

I wiggle my fingers, pantomiming falling snow. "Christmas miracles, then?"

He smirks. "Can't pass up a chance to be snarky about Christmas, can you?"

I raise and lower my shoulders in a melodramatic sigh. "I am who I am, Jake."

"Did you ever like Christmas, even as a child? Or were you born with a tiny little wisp of green Grinch hair?"

"At my aunt's," I say, right away. "We'd go to her house on Christmas Day. She had all these kitschy decorations from the eighties and nineties. Plastic ornaments, tinsel. You know those ceramic Christmas trees with the peg lights? I was obsessed with those. Everything was mismatched—a Ralph Lauren Christmas would never. In retrospect, I'm sure the whole house was a fire hazard," I chuckle. "But it was magic. For me."

"So what you're saying is—you *do* like Christmas."

"Don't push it." I laugh. "Tell me more about fate. That seems less complicated."

“Ah. Instead of fate, how about we call it: choices made in parallel? Think about it—every choice we’ve made throughout our lives has led us to this moment, sitting here in this centuries-old orangery. So, to me, it seems we’ve done life in the same direction. Your choices and my choices are compatible. Complementary.”

“That’s a very lovely concept, but I’m here because Maddie abandoned me on a vacation in a city she chose with an itinerary she planned.”

“You chose Grey Earl’s, though. I call that a course-correction.”

“Well. When I stopped by Earl’s this morning, I saw a man ordering the same banana bread I do. Does that mean he and I might have compatible destinies, too?”

“Ah, but, it takes more than a single coincidence, I’d say. At the very least, before you start making wedding plans, you’ll need to ask him where he stands on whether banana bread is actual bread, or a loaf-shaped muffin.”

Giggling, I say, “That’s very wise.”

Jake reclines back on one of the floor cushions across from me with his legs outstretched, one ankle over the other. His hands rest at his waist, fingers locked. His smile slowly fades, and his eyes darken. The muscles in his throat ripple in a hard swallow. “I’m glad Maddie didn’t come.” His voice is low.

“Me too.” And I mean it.

Jake unlinks his fingers to let his hands rest on the cushion beside him. “Come here.”

I swirl the last bit of champagne around in my flute, watching it sparkle in the firelight. Lightly, I say, “Why?’

“I want to kiss you.”

“We’ve both had a few glasses of champagne. Can we trust our judgment?” I set my flute aside. The tiny *tink* of glass against bare stone seems to boom in the quiet space around us.

“Evie, now that I’ve started kissing you, I’m not planning to stop.”

I slowly crawl across the floor to him, keeping my gaze locked on his. The moment I’m within reach, he pulls me into his lap, and I’m straddling him, knees clamped over his thighs. His hand makes a fist in my sweater, the other palms my nape to draw my mouth down to his.

Cradling my hands around his jaw, I let my thumbs drift along his bottom lip as he kisses me. I’m desperate for more contact. I want to feel him kiss

me with more than just my lips. I want to bank the sensation of it on my fingertips so I can touch my mouth months from now and remember it. Jake turns his head, skimming his teeth across my palm before burying his face into the soft flesh under my jaw. I churn against the bulge between his legs with a slow roll of my hips. The drag of my aching core against the urgent heat in his pants makes me whimper.

And this big, gorgeous man, with his mouth and teeth and tongue against the skin of my throat … whimpers back.

I could come like this. I'm rocketing towards an orgasm, and he's barely touched me. But then he drags his mouth away from mine, grabbing me by the hips to scoot me backwards on his thighs. "Fuck." There's a frayed edge to his voice.

Like he had to tear the word off his tongue.

"What's wrong?"

"Not a bloody thing." He's panting. "It's good. You're good. We're good." He looks me straight in the eyes as he palms his erection over the crotch of his pants, adjusting himself. He doesn't try to hide or downplay it, and it turns me on even more. "Too good."

I slide sideways onto a cushion beside him, and he stands.

I reach for him. "Come back, then—"

"Evie, the things I want to do with you … *to* you, right now—" Swiping a hand over his face, he takes a step backwards. His hand trembles as he points to the floor, like he's accusing it of a crime. "This shouldn't be on cold stone."

I almost make a quip about the cushions and blankets being more than adequate for me, but the urgent look in his eyes gives me pause. And he deserves to be able to say no, just as much as I should.

There's a sound out in the other part of the house. Jake glances at his watch. "Damn."

"Your friend?"

Jake thrusts a hand into the front of his hair and squeezes. When he lets go, the waves spring out in all directions. "He gave us until nine."

I stand and Jake pulls me against him. I tuck my hands into the back pockets of his pants. "Wouldn't he let us stay a tiny bit longer?"

The look he gives me is comical. "You haven't met Bowen."

Later, when Jake drops me off at Paperwhite, he says, "My Christmas charm campaign is back on tomorrow. But we're definitely ending the night

on something horizontal and soft.”



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CHAPTER TEN

Seven days until Christmas

It's eleven in the morning. It's only six in New York City right now, but I don't hesitate to call Maddie. The little chalkboard next to the paperwhite pot catches my eye as I wait for her to answer. It's been days since I changed the countdown number. I tip it face-down.

The first thing Maddie says is, "You look sad."

"Worse. I'm sad *and* horny."

"Sigh." Maddie says the word out loud instead of sighing. She yawns expansively. "Listen, you're there to get un-sad, not end up with another guy to be sad about later."

"Might be too late. And this was your idea, by the way."

"Ev, my idea was for you to get smashed like a pinkie toe in a room full of table legs. And see pretty Christmas sights. And then come home, unburdened."

My vagina is a one-way road to my heart. Or maybe my heart is the shortcut to my vagina. Who knows—the mapmaker is a pain in my ass. Regardless, I don't think Jake Frost is the sort of man Maddie had in mind for me when she storyboarded my cheeky, mindless fling.

Maddie rubs her eye with the heel of her hand. "Whenever you might be having an emotion, try to think about all the ways he could fail the relationship tests. Like, have you even seen his feet yet? Have you sat in close proximity while he eats soup?"

I know she's being funny, but I'm already so far gone about Jake Frost, he could slurp soup next to me, barefoot, and I'd think it was charming.

"Remember that strawberry farm we went to last spring? Imagine finishing a perfect, sun-warmed strawberry, and then you learn that for the rest of your life, you'll only be able to get those sour half-white ones from a bodega that smells like burnt coffee and cat pee."

"You need to find a different bodega, baby." Maddie stretches.

“He does the thing,” I moan. “The fingers thing.”

“I need specifics. There are so many fingers things, Ev.”

“The fingertips on the small of my back thing.”

Maddie gasps and sits up. “He doesn’t.”

“I swear.”

Calvin used to open doors for me. On the surface, that seems like the gentlemanly thing, right? But he’d stand partially inside doorways and usher me through with a hand between my shoulder blades. Not tender. Not protective. It always made me feel off-balance, rushed. It’s such a minor thing, but it’s the minor things that compound like emotional debt, isn’t it? And debts always come due, sometimes with a heap of resentment and pain as interest.

Everywhere we’ve gone together, Jake has done the fingertip thing. No pressure, no nudging. Simply five tiny points of contact between my body and his. More symbolic than anything. It says, *We’re doing this thing together. I’m here*.

I tell Maddie about Jake’s other green flags. She sighs. “Disgusting. He’s perfect.”

“Well, you’re forgetting one very important thing.”

Maddie groans and throws her duvet over her face. “I swear to god, a literal angel could fly down from heaven, and say, *Hello Evangeline, we’ve created a bespoke perfect man for you*, and you’d look at the angel and be like”—she makes her voice nasally and obnoxiously high-pitched—“define ‘perfect.’ But do go on, tell me what makes Jake Frost less than perfect after you’ve just spent five minutes telling me all the ways he is.”

“He’s in *London*.” I rub my forehead with my free hand. “Thousands of miles away from New York.”

“Evie,” Maddie says gently. “Right now, so are you.”

* * *

I pull a bra out of my luggage, and it dangles in front of me like an overcooked piece of linguine. There’s a pale orange-pink stain on one of the cups where I dripped enchilada sauce while bingeing *The White Lotus* shirtless on my couch. I didn’t pack a single undergarment that someone who gets naked with a man like Jake Frost would wear. Hell, this stuff

couldn’t even be called lingerie. It’s a packing cube full of cotton chastity belts.

It’s not even about Jake, really. I mean—I *do* want him to lose his mind when he undresses me for the first time. But all evidence points to Jake losing his mind no matter what I’ve got on under my clothes. This is more about me.

I landed in London wearing a cashmere sweater I’d bought as my first true material indulgence in years. It was meant to be a sort of psychological armor—the one meaningful thing I’d allowed myself to feel fancy about. But I didn’t even make it out of LaGuardia before the damned thing was ruined. By a clumsy man. Because of course it was.

So what was meant to be a confidence booster became a mark of shame. I had to walk through the airport looking like one of those people who get so drunk when they travel they dump their airport-bar wine on themselves.

I deserve something sexy and empowering that nobody else can ruin.

I guess I’m going shopping this morning.

* * *

One thing about Jake Frost is that he pays attention.

Tonight’s date is at Miracle at Henrietta. When we reach the top of the stairs at the pop-up bar, I clap my hands together like a kid at … well, Christmas.

It’s pure, unadulterated kitsch. Every centimeter shimmers with tinsel and tiny lights and artificial garlands. Rosy-cheeked Santas and nutcracker figurines stand like merry sentinels around the space. The bartenders wear candy-striped braces and elf hats. Eartha Kitt croons “Santa Baby,” accompanied by the clink and shake of cocktails. Tables are packed in like Tetris blocks, all loaded with people. Jake and I have to squeeze onto stools at a tiny five-person bar.

All the drinks have festive names like Scrooge on the Beach and Mrs Claus’s Naughty List. I whistle low. “Boozy. Will you refuse to kiss me tonight if our judgment is impaired?”

“What if I say yes?” Jake says.

Without a word, I hop down from the stool and pretend to head towards the exit.

Laughing, Jake snags the crook of my arm, spinning me like I'm a flamenco dancer. He pulls me between his spread knees, and I let my hands settle on his shoulders. It's exhilarating and strange, this feeling that he's mine to touch.

"I told you last night." He holds me around the waist. The way he's looking at me right now might scorch my pretty new knickers to ash. "Now that I've started, I'm not planning to stop. Unless you *want* me to stop …"

Teasing, I say, "What if I say yes?"

Jake breathes a soft laugh through his nose. "You're a right handful, you know that?"

We both order the drink called Jack Frostbite. How could we not? It's made with RumChata, peppermint schnapps, and cream, served in a marshmallow-shaped mug that's half as big as my head. It's garnished with a skewered marshmallow that's been rolled in a sweet crust of crushed candy canes.

"So, tell me." Jake nibbles at the peppermint bits. "What is it about this sort of festive fun that gets the Evie McClane stamp of approval?"

All my aunt's tacky decorations had origin stories. While the other adults would indulge in eggnog and card games after dinner, she'd treat me to those stories like her house was a museum and she was my personal guide. She made it real.

When I don't respond, Jake reaches underneath my stool, hooks his hand on the wood frame, and drags me closer to him in one smooth motion. He doesn't say anything, he simply watches my face. Waiting.

"Because there's a beating heart beneath the spectacle of it. A wise person told me once that traditions are clichés with heart."

Roy Orbison warbles "Pretty Paper." Tiny sequins of light shimmer in Jake's eyes. He tucks a knuckle along the underside of my jaw and trails his thumb along my cheekbone. Tenderly, he kisses me, his fingers easing into the wisps of hair at my temple. His tongue makes a long, lazy glide against mine.

"Steady on," the bartender teases. "We charge a corkage fee for that."

Jake and I laugh against each other's mouths. He lightly rests his forehead against mine.

"What's this, what's *this*?" says a willowy olive-skinned woman weaving her way towards us. Her glossy dark hair is twisted into two short braids that end at her shoulders. She wears a Fair Isle sweater that looks like she

knitted it herself, and velvet pants covered in stylized red roses. The pieces don't match at all, but somehow, for her, it works. "How do you have time for a night at the pub? And with this lovely gem, no less? You've been married to your briefcase for so long."

Jake straightens, grinning before he even turns around to face her. She grins back, hugging him around the neck. "Violet. It's been too long," he says.

She's still hugging Jake when she extends a hand to me in greeting. "I'm Violet, hello."

"Evie." I smile back.

Of the two men who approach along with her, the one with bronze-brown skin and a rugged jaw thumps Jake on the back with one hand, extending the other to me for a shake the moment Violet lets go. "Mohammed—Violet's husband. Friends call me Hammy." His lashes are so devastatingly long they touch the underside of his brows when his eyes crinkle with his smile. He's tidy and athletic, in a basic red sweater and jeans.

The other man has intense eyes under a sulky brow, and a shock of dark hair tied in a knot at his nape. A few locks fall around his face, too short to stay in. He wears loose charcoal-gray pants and a cream linen button-down with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, one of them hanging looser than the other, like he couldn't be bothered to check they were even.

Like Hammy, he gives Jake's shoulder a collegial thump, but he's not effusive beyond that. Jake gives him a firm, friendly handshake with a grip on his upper arm. "Appreciate the use of your humble abode yesterday evening," Jake says. He turns to me. "Evie, this is Bowen."

I feel like I'm meeting a celebrity, though the man is nothing like I'd imagined in my mind when we were at the atelier last night. The grandeur of the place conjured images of an eccentric aristocratic sort in a velvet smoking jacket. This man looks like he'd be right at home rolling contraband clove cigarettes outside an East Village speakeasy, barely able to make rent for the third month in a row.

"Did you enjoy the space?" Bowen says to me. He has one of the deepest voices I've ever heard. It seems mismatched to his lean frame.

"Stunning. My best friend Maddie is an artist, she'd …" I trail off. After his initial distracted greeting, Bowen's attention drifts away. Jake puts a hand on my knee and gives me a quick, apologetic half-smile.

There’s no room for the trio to sit, so they crowd around us at our stools. Apparently, I’m the most fascinating thing Violet and Hammy have seen in ages. Bowen stands a bit behind them, giving Mr. Darcy at the Meryton Assembly vibes.

“Jake’s mint, Evie,” Hammy says. “His only fault is that he likes Liverpool.”

Violet says, “Should we tell her he cries sometimes when he’s hungover?”

I learn a few more fun tidbits about Jake, like the time he proposed in a text that they meet at the “pube” instead of the pub, and how he says “Excuse me” to Violet and Hammy’s dog when he visits their flat and has to move past it in close spaces. Eventually, they decide to move onto a different pub where they can actually sit down, so they say their goodbyes, welcome me once again to London, and wish us a happy Christmas. I loved them all. It’s a salty-sweet glimpse of what my life would be like if I really lived here.

* * *

Jake walks me back to Paperwhite. When we arrive, he stands back from the door as I key in. Warm light from the criss-crossing string bulbs between the buildings overhead create prisms in his eyes, and his cheeks are ruddy with the chill.

He’s waiting for me to invite him inside.

Tucking my fingers into the front pockets of his jeans, I yank him closer. A barely audible grunt puffs out of him when our hips collide. His bottom lip dips down. Gentle light from the gas lamp above us catches on the glistening tip of his tongue. Whoever said the thing about British folk having a stiff upper lip definitely never saw Jake Frost’s mouth.

I tug down on his scarf and he meets me halfway. There’s no hesitation, no awkward learning curve. His lips give where mine take, and I take whatever he gives. I can’t *believe* what a good kisser this man is. He’s got a hand up the back of my coat, my sweater twisted in his fist. Winter air creeps in, magnifying the heat of his palm pressing into my spine.

“You kiss me like you’re mine,” he breathes.

I push the door open with a backward thrust of my foot. “Come inside.”

Jake nips my bottom lip between the edges of his teeth, tensing for a beat. Then he's moving, guiding me through the door, kicking it closed behind him the same way I just opened it. Shedding coats, toeing off shoes, we're at the loveseat in a few shuffling, synchronized steps. Jake kisses me open-mouthed and hungry, the force of his lips tempered by the slick, soft heat of his tongue. He growls into my mouth like a man starved.

Bang. The lamp on the side table wobbles back and forth. "Fuck." Jake's laugh is muffled against my lips.

"You OK?"

"I am. Foot isn't."

"Do you want to sto—"

"Absolutely not," he breathes.

He pulls me tight against him, bracing his forearm parallel to my spine, cradling the back of my head with his hand. He holds me so securely, it barely registers that we're falling onto the loveseat until I feel the weight of him land solidly between my thighs.

He's kissing me in cursive. His hips echo the motion of his tongue in a subtle rolling rhythm. With an explosive breath, he lifts his head and drops his forehead against my temple. "Evie. I believe …' he pants. "I believe I'm bricked up. Like a bloody mason." He's heavy and hard between my legs.

When I throw back my head to laugh, Jake buries his face in the dip between my jaw and my neck. "You googled it." I laugh until I'm wheezing.

"As soon as I got home that night."

Jake laughs with me, and I realize—this is a first.

Joy. It shimmers along the edges of the lust, brightening it into something expansive and overflowing and metamorphic. "Kiss me," I whisper.

Jake's lips slant and slide against mine. Tasting, taking. I tilt my hips upwards in silent request, and he's got my jeans button open and the zipper down before I have time to take another breath. At first, his warm palm slides across the soft plane of my lower belly, his thumb skimming back and forth just below my navel.

"So soft," he murmurs.

"Touch me. Please, please touch me."

His hand hooks like a claw around the satin front of my new pair of knickers, crushing the fabric into his fist. I have a vague awareness that I wouldn't care if he shredded them with his fingernails to get between my

legs. Then his grip loosens, and he's tugging the elastic aside so gently, it's a surprise when I feel his fingers ease inside me.

I can *hear* how wet I am as he touches me.

"Christ, Evie." His hard exhale spools down my neck in a damp plume of heat. "All this … for me?"

"You." My head lolls sideways on the cushion. I am *starved* for this. For him. "Yours."

I gasp when he spreads his fingers so that my clit slips between them. He drags upwards with just enough pressure and friction that the sensitive bundle of nerves rolls between his knuckles. I kick the side table, and again, that poor lamp rocks side to side.

Jake moves for easier access. He keeps a knee between my legs on the loveseat and plants the other on the floor, half-kneeling for leverage. He gives me a decadent, swirling pulse with the pads of his first two fingertips.

"Tell me," he rasps. "Tell me what to do."

"Faster. Just—" I suck in a shuddering breath. "A little."

Jake Frost is a very good listener.

He hits the perfect rhythm and maintains it without wavering. It's barely been three minutes, and I'm exploding into his hand, shuddering and bucking and keening—

Someone bangs on the wall from the flat next door.

Jake's eyes fly open wide, but he doesn't stop. I'm half-moaning, half-laughing through one of the most incredible, back-bending orgasms of my life.

He drops his forehead to the cushion next to my head. "You're a little firecracker, aren't you?' He's panting against my neck like he's the one who just came. He sucks a wet breath past his teeth, then he laughs.

I drift my fingers down the back of his arm. "What?"

He lifts his head, subtly jerking his chin sideways to flip his hair out of his eyes. "You made me drool like a fucking animal." He sits up.

Cupping my hand over the generous bulge in the crotch of his pants, I say, "What about you? I want to—"

"I'll take care of it later." He tucks a wild lock of loose hair behind my ear, then he lets his fingers twist and trail down my braid. "Trust me."

I pull up my jeans, not bothering with the zipper and button. "Jake. Why haven't I seen your place yet?"

The restraint in his posture convinces me he's about to say something evasive. "I guess I've liked how it feels when you see …" he swallows, "just me."

"I don't know what that means." That familiar tingle begins at the top of my spine. I brace for the letdown.

But it never comes. Jake kisses me on the forehead. "I'll show you, then. It's a date."



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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Six days until Christmas

Today, I get to see where Jake lives. Aside from our date at Borough Market during my first few days here, this will be the earliest we've started our day together. It feels important, but I'm trying to not let it. It's just another date.

On my morning walk to Grey Earl's, the clouds over Covent Garden are ominous. We're due rain later in the morning, and it feels a bit selfish, but I wish the temperature was colder so we could get a proper big snowstorm.

It didn't take long for me to fall into a new normal here, and it's strange when I arrive at Earl's and Jake isn't there. Right now, there's a serious-looking man sitting at Jake's usual table, scowling at a laptop. I have the urge to tell him he's trespassing.

I slide onto my usual stool at the bar. "Have you seen Jake today?"

"Not yet," Quinn says. "Bit weird. He's usually come round at least once by now."

"He's here multiple times by ten in the morning?"

Cherry grins. "Since you arrived, yeah. I think he doesn't want to miss a chance to coincidentally bump into you." She makes air quotes around *coincidentally*.

My phone rings with a video call from Maddie as soon as I get my coffee. We have a brief catch-up, and before I have a chance to end the call, Quinn peeks at the screen and deadpans, "We're keeping her, sorry."

"Not sorry," Cherry adds, popping in from the other side.

Maddie narrows her eyes. "I will fight for custody. I'm much scrappier than I look."

"*Orrrr* …" I say with a dramatic pause, "hear me out. We could just *all* be friends."

Maddie clasps her hands under her chin. "Aww. Baby's first international diplomacy."

Quinn and Cherry laugh. They banter back and forth with Maddie for a few minutes until a new queue of customers files in and they have to get back to work. “Cherry’s the group chat headmistress,” Quinn says. “Give us your number, and she’ll add you.”

Cherry already has her phone in her hand, and Maddie is added.

And my heart is full.

* * *

Today is my first time experiencing the full scope and scale of winter rain in London.

As Jake and I walk through Covent Garden under the cover of a shuddering umbrella, we have to evade puddles in the cobblestones that would drench my shoes otherwise. On the upside, the awful weather means fewer residents and tourists to dodge. The downside is that it’s impossible for me to see where we’re going.

It’s only been two minutes since we left Paperwhite when we duck under the pale stone portico of a dramatic Georgian building. At first, I think we’re simply taking a quick break from the rain, but Jake lowers the umbrella and shakes it out in front of him.

I glance around at the soaring pillars and wrought-iron railing. For a moment, I think he must be pranking me. “Here?”

“Here,” Jake echoes. Briefly, he smiles, but it evaporates before it can reach his eyes. His jaw is wound tight as he holds open one of the glass-fronted double doors.

We step inside to a grand foyer with a soaring ceiling and creamy marble everywhere. Our footsteps echo as we walk. Jake uses a keycard to access an elevator at the back of the space. He keeps glancing at me and looking away. There’s an agitated energy about him that I have no idea how to interpret. As the elevator slowly climbs to the fourth floor, it feels more like a countdown.

I’ve been so self-absorbed the whole time I’ve been here, it never occurred to me to speculate what Jake’s place might be like. When the lift doors open at the top of the building, I realize that whatever assumptions I might’ve had, they couldn’t have come close to the reality.

I expected a hallway, or any other sort of transition. Instead, the lift seamlessly opens into an enormous loft-like space, with double-height windows stretching up the far wall. Jake lets me step out first. After we slip off our coats and shoes, he hangs behind and gestures with his hand, inviting me to explore. I glance back at him, silent. His expression is neutral, and his stance is open, with his feet shoulder-width apart, hands captive in the pockets of his pants. I can see his pulse pounding in his neck.

Outside the windows, rain falls in heavy gray columns. The walls are gray. The floor is some kind of matte gray wood cut into a herringbone pattern. It doesn't make a sound when I move a few steps in. There's something unnatural and unnerving about it. I'm used to old, musical floors that squeak and sing and sigh underfoot. God, even the air seems gray.

This place has no beating heart.

Behind me, I hear Jake exhale a long, measured breath through his nose. Waiting.

To the left is a kitchen packed with chef-grade chrome appliances, none of them bearing a single smudge or fingerprint. The only sign of life is the soap dispenser and the tea towel hanging next to the sink. I'm definitely sliding into a full crash-out, because when I see the café-sized espresso machine built into the marble backsplash, I have to swallow an unhinged cackle. It looks like it's never been touched. A glass bistro table with two chairs sits next to the kitchen's floor-to-ceiling window. The surfaces are mirrors, reflecting the rain back at each other.

The only other furniture in this entire warehouse-sized space is, bizarrely, a king-sized bed and bedside tables against the far wall opposite the kitchen. White linens are crisply tucked and smoothed, the pillowcases are pulled into parallel points, and a royal-blue bolster pillow provides the only pop of color in the entire place. It's the most disciplined-looking bed I've ever seen.

Two frosted-glass pocket doors are closed on the back wall—a bathroom, I guess, and a bedroom? Crossing my arms over my chest, I walk to the wall of windows. The sky is bloated with purple and blue, and the historic buildings across the street look like they're painted in messy, melancholy watercolors. I don't know what's more depressing—the grim palette out there, or the sterile, soulless monochrome in here.

I can't find any words. Words are my thing. I always have the words. It makes me feel even more unnaturally out of place. Disconnected from

myself, an artist separated from her medium. So I say the first thing that comes to mind, because it's something.

"Christmas."

"Christmas?" Jake echoes, softly. He doesn't move.

"How does a person who loves the festive season as much as you do, live in a place that doesn't have a single bauble in it?"

"I try to spend as little time here as possible." The reflection in the glass makes him look like a ghost. "I suppose I don't see the point."

The absurdity of this situation hits me like one of the gusts hurling rain at the windows. I've wasted hours rationalizing that it's possible that I'm truly falling in love with this man because I've been getting realness from him. But even with all the context clues—a first-class international flight, the clothes, the Aston fucking Martin—this place doesn't fit the Jake I've been getting to know. A home like this and the person it belongs to will never be really real for someone like me. The lift might as well have transported me to an alternate universe.

"Jake, what kind of lawyer are you? I don't know a lot about law, especially British law, but this place—" I face him, arms outstretched. "This isn't the sort of place you buy on a salary doing nonprofit work. Lawyer or not."

He approaches me slowly, hanging his head with a palm cupping the back of his neck. "Ah, my family has money." He doesn't look up when he says it.

I'm vaguely aware that he didn't answer my question, but all things considered, it doesn't even matter. Any fantasy I might've entertained where Jake and I continue beyond December completely evaporates. He's beautiful, he's rich, his world is bigger than I can ever comprehend.

I guess I've liked how it feels when you see … just me.

His words from last night land like a cannonball in my gut. I *asked* him to bring me here. I hurt my own feelings, and I'm blaming him for it. My throat clenches tight. "I … um—" I turn slowly, unsteadily, like a ballerina in a broken music box. "I should go."

Silently, Jake follows me to the lift. The *lift*. In his *home*.

Tears spring up and spill down my cheeks, but I have enough pride left that I don't make a sound. And Jake has enough respect for my agency that he doesn't try to stop me when I grab my coat and step into my boots. They're soaked.

I stand there like a fool. I have no idea how to call the damned lift. There's no visible panel. I suppose it's telling that I don't feel trapped, despite the way my nervous system urges flight. Once again, my heart and my mind play tug-of-war with my body.

Behind me, Jake gently says, "What are we doing? What do you need right now?"

I have no idea what to do with this. He didn't ask something generic like *Can I do anything?* that I could easily say no to or ignore outright. It's not hollow and idle, like *I'm sorry.*

He's de-escalating.

He's present *and* he's regulated.

I've been in therapy long enough that I know what this looks like for *myself*, but I've never experienced being in healthy conflict with anyone other than Maddie. I've always thought of it as some kind of enlightened, aspirational state that I shouldn't expect other people to get to. But Jake just did.

And not only that—he got there before I did.

Jake reaches around me to press a flat button camouflaged in the frame of the lift. The door slides silently open in front of me. At my back, I feel his warmth, but I don't hear him. I think he's holding his breath.

Softly, he says, "I like you, Evie. Very much."

"I like you, too. But you don't really know me, Jake. You know vacation-me. You *like* vacation-me."

"Well, that's a treat, isn't it? Rather boring if we knew everything about each other already." I hear him shift, but there's silence again a moment later. I imagine him reaching out to touch me but resisting. "You're my advent calendar with thousands of lovely little doors."

The door to the lift scrolls shut. I still haven't moved.

Rain pummels the skylights overhead. Sniffling, I look down at my feet. "I bought these boots at Costco."

Jake clears his throat. Hesitantly, he says, "OK. I don't know what that __"

"Yes you do, Jake." Slowly, I turn to face him.

He tips my chin up with a knuckle, smoothing away tears with his thumb. He stares at me for a long time.

"Your reality and mine aren't compatible."

He chuckles. "Christ, you're litigious."

I shoot him a fragile half-smile. “Is that your professional opinion?”

Jake’s eyes go wide. His laugh is abrupt and loud, echoing off the high ceiling. “I think you missed your calling, Miss McClane. You could argue the wheels off a bloody bike.” His tone is playful, but underlying frustration gives it an edge.

“Fine, then. Tell me something real. What’s the deal with the bed out here?” I say.

“I like the view.” Jake sends a rueful glance towards the windows. Rain still falls in a solid sheet. Zero visibility. “Usually.”

My answering laugh is small, but it’s something. “I sort of figured you were loaded when you picked me up in an Aston Martin for a date at your friend’s private man-cave museum mansion, Jake. But this is unreal.”

I meant it to be tongue-in-cheek, but he actually looks embarrassed. Quietly, he says, “There’s more to me than a fancy car and who my friends are.”

Now it’s my turn to be embarrassed. “Fair.”

He stares at me for what feels like minutes. At one point, he even opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, but he closes it again before he does. Then, with a determined nod, he says, “Right. Let’s get out of here. We’re going out to do something real.”

* * *

We brave the rain again so Jake can take me to a spot he calls a “chippy.” I smell the place well before I see it. Hot oil, frying potatoes, succulent battered fish. As we get closer, I catch the tang of salt and malt vinegar, too. A long strip of illuminated signage comes into view, reflecting across the wet pavement like afternoon sunshine on a stream. Jake takes the umbrella and ushers me inside, getting drenched while he shakes off as much water as he can before following me in.

It’s not glamorous, but it’s tidy and bustling, with a brightly lit interior and tiled walls. It reminds me of a no-frills Manhattan greasy spoon. We wait twenty minutes for a table. By the time we’re seated, I’m shivering. My jeans are soaked to my knees from the slanting rain and splash-up from the pavement. Jake is even wetter than I am, but if he’s cold, he doesn’t show it.

As much as I love an icy draft beer to complement the richness of fried fish, the weather calls for hot tea instead. Chamomile for me, English Breakfast for Jake. The steam from the tea lifts and curls in the air in front of my face, and I greedily breathe it in. Thankfully, our food comes fast. For me, cod and chips—the fat kind with a crisp crust on the outside and soft potato perfection inside. For Jake, massive fried prawns, chips, a few bowls of different sauces, and something that looks like pureed baby food.

"What's the green stuff?"

Jake laughs. "Mushy peas. Try them."

"I can't think of a thing I'd rather do less."

Jake gets a bit of the pea purée on the end of his fork and extends it across the table. "Trust me."

Reluctantly, I accept the bite. And it's *delicious*.

"OK, I stand corrected. That might be the best-tasting thing with the worst name."

"Just wait until you try spotted dick."

"Spotted what, now?"

We laugh.

I learn that Jake's only real food aversion is mayonnaise, and he tells me he thinks the person who first invented it should be charged with a hate crime. He likes pineapple on pizza, but only if it's fresh, not from a can. Jake offers me a prawn, and I decline. I tell him my two main food hang-ups—eggs are almost always a no for me, and prawns are out because I hate the thought of eating a creature's entire body. He thinks this is hilarious and laughs so hard he almost chokes on the bite of prawn he has in his mouth. "See?" I say. "They'll getcha."

"But you ate oysters at Borough," he says, tapping his chest with his fist.

"Thanks for the reminder, I hate myself now," I laugh. Around a mouthful of fried potato, I say, "I'm calling this chiplarking."

"I like it." He's hoarse from coughing. "Add it to the Evie-Jake lexicon."

"Oh, we have an Evie-Jake lexicon?" I say, arching an eyebrow.

"Don't all good relationships?"

"But this isn't a relationship. It has to be … I don't know. Limerence."

"Limerence is only when it's one-sided. I don't think that's the case between us."

I laugh. "How do *you* know the definition of limerence?"

“Why would you use a word you weren’t sure I knew the definition of? Are you *gatekeeping* mental health literacy, love?” He sips his tea. “I go to therapy too, you know.”

It might be the sexiest thing he’s said to me since we met.

“Fine.” I pop a chip in my mouth and mumble, “A temporary crush.”

“Right, then. I’ll play along. Tell me, clever clogs, how does one test whether something is temporary, or lasting?” When I take a sip of tea instead of responding, he says, “I’ll wait.”

“God, you are so insufferable when you say that.”

Jake slaps two fingers against the face of his wristwatch. “*Time*, Evie. It’s time. The only way you can know if something lasts is by giving it time. Calling something temporary without giving it time is like …” He waves his hand around in front of him. “Like making a batch of banana bread batter, pouring it into the loaf tin, and then walking away from it on the worktop, saying, ‘Well, bugger it, I guess we’re not eating banana bread tonight.’”

I reach across the table with my fork to steal another bite of his mushy peas. “Nice work bringing banana bread into a completely unrelated conversation.”

“See? Evie-Jake lexicon.”

I stare down at my plate. “We don’t have *time* for time, Jake. I’m leaving in ten days.”

He sets his fork on the edge of his plate. “Sorry—are you going to the *moon*, or New York City?”

I shoot him a bored glare. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t, actually. There are these contraptions called planes—”

I chuckle. “You’re an ass.”

“—and video calls, and texts—”

“OK, OK. Stop.” I try to look stern, but my chin wobbles and tears well. “Point taken.”

“All I’m saying is—” Jake reaches across the table to take my hand, smoothing his thumb over my knuckles. “I don’t think we need to decide where this is going right now. We can simply enjoy it for what it is.”

We huddle under the umbrella on the walk back to Jake’s. He’s got an arm around me, tucked under my coat with a thumb through the belt loop of my jeans to keep me close. Through every storefront and pub door that opens and closes, warm air smelling of pine candles and gingerbread and

the smoky char of roasts and winter veggies wafts over us, mingling with the crystalline cold of the rain. An older man bumps our umbrella with his as we pass in opposite directions, saying, “Terribly sorry, loves. Happy Christmas!” The response is so different than anything I’ve ever experienced in New York, I instantly soften. This is a river of merriment and goodwill, and I’m caught in its current.

My hinges have been rusted closed for so long, they ache now that they’re trying to open. But I can’t deny it. I’m falling in love with London.

I might even be falling in love with Christmas.

And I think, most worrying of all—I think I’m falling in love with Jake Frost.



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CHAPTER TWELVE

Six days until Christmas

When we get back to Jake's building, the power has been cut by the force of the storm, so we can't take the elevator. The steps have a dim glow from emergency track lighting, but he's also got his phone out, shining the light upwards so I can see the stairs. I start to shiver. The rain has drenched me through despite the best efforts of the umbrella.

The building is only four stories high, but I'm slightly winded. I don't think Jake's heart rate has climbed a single tick. Behind me, he says conversationally, "Oh, by the way, did I ever mention? I'm a lawyer." His voice echoes in the stairwell.

I smile in the darkness and play along. "Oh, really? That's very interesting."

"I'm one of the good ones."

"Even better."

Once we're inside, his face is barely visible, but I can hear the smile in his voice when he continues. "Ah, by the way—I live in a Covent Garden penthouse. I don't spend much time there, though. Trying to sell it, actually. Would love to give you a tour someday, but it's having a bit of an electricity problem right now—"

Gently, I say, "Jake."

"Mm?"

"That was a very nice redo. Thank you."

His tone softens. "Thank you for giving me the chance to do it."

Chilly air swirls around me as he moves closer. I shiver so hard I make a weird, involuntary noise in my throat.

"Are you good?" Jake draws me in, drifting his fingers up the sides of my neck to cup my cheeks. My chattering teeth rattle my jawbone against his hands. "Goddamnit, you're frozen stiff."

"P-p-paperwhite probably has power. We can go there—"

“Does Paperwhite have a bathtub?”

“What?” I’m shaking so hard now, the muscles in my neck ache. “N-no.”

“Then I have a better idea.”

Jake retrieves a flashlight from a cabinet in his kitchen—though he calls it a torch, which I find adorable—to lead me to the bathroom. From what I can tell in the narrow beam of light, it’s ivory marble everywhere, with a freestanding pedestal tub. A separate glass shower with a curved bench along the wall stands opposite the tub, occupying at least a quarter of the room.

Like the other parts of the flat, there’s no sign that anyone lives here. But it smells like Jake here, and it’s instantly comforting and grounding.

He switches on the tub’s faucet. Steam boils into the air in a dense cloud, and he pours in a tiny splash of oil that smells like lavender and some sharper green herb.

“I’ll be right back,” he says, disappearing into the adjacent room. The bedless bedroom, I assume. He’s only gone for thirty seconds or so. He hustles back into the bathroom, dropping an armful of heavy candles on the vanity. Each one makes a loud *thunk* as it hits the marble. Jake lights them quickly, filling the room with luscious soft light. Then he disappears again.

It feels like my body has given up on trying to warm itself.

Jake is back after a few seconds, carrying a plush white towel so big it could double as a throw blanket. He hangs it over a rack built into the wall next to the tub. When he turns to me, he looks apologetic. “Towel warmer won’t work without the power on.” He makes a fist and cups his other hand around it, glancing around like a fretting innkeeper. Gesturing to the tile, he says, “Ah, the floors are heated by the boiler. You’ll feel it once you get your socks off—”

I’m frozen in place, and it’s not only because of the chill. After six years of college, then living in a Queens studio post-graduation, it’s been at least ten years since I’ve taken a bath. It’s been at least twice that long since someone ran one *for* me. “Jake—”

“Christ, I’m sorry—” He shoves his fingers through his wet hair. “You’re freezing, and I’m blathering on.” He backs towards the door. I’ve never seen him rattled like this.

My teeth chatter so hard, it’s difficult to speak. “It’s n-not that.”

“What is it?” Jake says. “I’ll close the door, you’ll have total privacy—”

Cold rain batters the bathroom's skylight so hard it sounds like we're inside a giant snare drum. The big mirror over the sink reflects the candlelight, doubling the glow through the steam-cushioned air. Flames flicker in polished chrome surfaces and the creamy shine of the floor tiles.

"It's really nice. Being taken care of," I say.

I'm sure a lot of people would think it's impossible to fall for someone in only a few days. But those people have never met a person like Jake Frost.

He steps back into the room to shut off the tub faucet. On a big exhale he goes still. Sure of himself again. "Thank you for giving me the chance to do it," he says for the second time tonight.

Scented steam clouds the air around us, fogging the skylight, glazing the chrome and glass and mirrors. Rainwater drips from the wavy tips of his hair. Each tiny *tick* hitting the tile sounds like a timer counting down. Before he turns to leave, Jake cups my face in icy hands and presses a quick kiss against my forehead. "In you get, then. I'll be right outside if you need anything."

It feels awkward to leave my clothes in a sodden pile on the floor of a luxury penthouse bathroom, but the chill in my bones overrides whatever hang-ups I have. I'm climbing into the tub less than ten seconds after Jake closes the door behind him.

It's so hot it hurts, but the sting is exquisite. A long, sharp inhale hisses past my teeth as I lower my body into the water, and I can't contain a moan when I sink fully under the surface. I swear I hear Jake blow out a harsh breath somewhere beyond the door.

The tub is big enough for me to stretch my legs fully straight. I float there for a few minutes, pondering the mundane circumstances that brought me to this truly wild moment. Then I realize—Jake is out there in the dark, just as soaked and chilled as I was. I didn't see him take a towel with him, either.

"Jake?"

He doesn't answer. Just as I open my mouth to call again, he says through the frosted glass door, "I'm here." His voice is low. Strained.

"Are you OK?"

"Capital." His flat, clipped delivery suggests otherwise.

Tentatively, I say, "Come get warm."

Again, silence. For a full minute.

"Probably not a good idea," he finally says.

"I'm getting out, then. Do you have a robe, or—"

The door clicks open. “Stay,” he says softly. He’s mostly in shadow, but the candlelight bouncing from the mirrors reflects in his eyes. He makes a very deliberate point of not looking in my direction.

“Only if you stop being a martyr and come in here to get warm, too.”

I sink deeper into the tub. Water laps against my earlobes and my chin. He takes a step in, but he keeps a hand on the doorjamb. A little thrill unspools inside me as his eyes flicker to the surface of the water before he swallows and glances at the ceiling. I don’t even know if he did it voluntarily.

“You sure?” He closes the door behind him when I nod.

He walks into the bathroom like a doomed man—slow stride, heavy-lidded eyes, tight, controlled movements. Spring-loaded. Out in the living room, he’d already stripped down to bare feet and jeans. They’re unbuttoned and unzipped, clinging to his hips for dear life. A kitchen tea towel is flipped over one of his shoulders, absurdly inadequate to dry him, but he’s obviously tried to. His hair is a wild ramble atop his head. His nipples are so hard, I know how sore they must be. Mine ache too, but for very different reasons.

Keeping his back to me, Jake slips off the rest of his clothes. Candlelight washes him in gold, accentuating the carved muscles alongside his spine and across his shoulders. His ass is almost criminal—taut and rounded, with subtle indentations below his hips. He leans into the shower to start the stream of water. But before he steps in, he glances over his shoulder towards the tub, and at me. Jaw clenched, he lingers there. Like a challenge.

He *wants* me to watch him.

Something dark and greedy stirs between my thighs. I want to be reckless. There’s always a chance reckless can be right. And if it turns out to not be—I’ll be putting 3,500 miles of ocean between us in a few weeks.

That mantra is meant to be self-soothing in my mind, but all it does is make a frantic little swirl of anxiety join the lust that’s already altering my judgment, and it’s like an accelerant on an already white-hot flame.

The shower door makes a soft *snick* as it slides closed.

I let my knees drop open beneath the water, careful not to disturb the surface. The walls of the shower are glass, but they’re entirely fogged with steam now. All I can see of Jake in the low light is the dark outline of his body. I hear a hiss of breath pass his teeth when he steps into the hot stream.

I slide my hand down my thigh to cup the blaze between my legs, dragging the pads of two fingers across my clit. Even in the bathwater, I'm shockingly wet. My fingertips slide down, up, over. There's a dull ache in my wrist from my fall at Somerset House, but I ignore it.

I am *painfully* turned on.

Pulse, pressure, rhythm.

And again.

In the shower, Jake's shoulders slump, his chin dips to his chest. I hear a softly muttered, "*Fuck*."

Again, and again, again, *again*—

Oh my god, what am I doing?

I pin both my hands between the hard surface of the bathtub and the cheeks of my ass. Sheets of water smack the floor of the shower as they slide off Jake's body, echoing loudly in the empty space. His hands are on his head, slicking suds out of his hair. He turns sideways, and I get my first glimpse of a truly impressive erection.

He knows I'm watching. He knows exactly what I see right now. And it turns him on.

"Jake," I say, softly.

"Evie," he says back. Not softly at all.

"Do you have condoms?"

The outline of his body gets darker against the glass. He swipes a rough hand through the condensation at his eye level, clearing it so he can look straight at me. "What did you just say?"

I can barely hear him over the sound of the shower. The sheen of candlelight on the surface of the water in the tub obscures my body, and I'm submerged to my chin. But the way he stares at me through the foggy glass makes it clear his imagination is filling in any missing details.

Louder, he says, "What are you doing under the water there, Evie?"

"Nothing." I raise both hands. If I wasn't so out of my mind, I'd laugh at how breathless I sound. "See?"

Another impatient swipe through the condensation on the glass. "What *were* you doing under the water there, Evie?"

"Nothing," I say again. The light bending off the candle wicks makes me dizzy.

Without warning, he cuts the shower off and throws the sliding door open. I hear him mutter, "I can't fucking do this," to himself. He steps out

onto the bare tile and turns to face me, chest heaving, gleaming wet, and furiously hard.

There's a sprawling, beautiful tattoo that starts a few inches above his left kneecap. It's Icarus falling, reaching skyward as his wings curve broken behind him. A few lost feathers extend up Jake's hip, inked into the subtle shadowed V alongside his abs. The artistry is incredible, evoking movement and vulnerability and loss. It's also an unbelievably sexy contrast to the buttoned-up man I usually see.

"Whatever you're *not* doing, you probably shouldn't stop," he says. Each word is heavy. Loaded.

I scoot my feet back. When my kneecaps peek above the surface of the water, Jake's eyes widen. When I let them spread slowly open, he squeezes his eyes shut and chokes out something I can't understand.

Every nerve ending between my thighs is a struck match. The surface of the water is impressively calm. I keep all the motion in my wrist—flex, release, flex—and with the other hand, I dig my fingernails into the back of my thigh to keep from coming completely unglued. I catch my reflection in the shining chrome faucet on the opposite end of the tub. I barely recognize myself.

Faster.

My leg slips and my heel squeaks loudly against the bottom of the tub.

Jake looks down at me with hooded eyes. He takes his shaft in hand, pumping with a slow, decadent rhythm. "Look what you've done to me, Evie."

I want to do more than look. What I really want is for him to drag me to bed and empty himself into me until dawn. "Do you have condoms?" I say again.

His laugh ends on a growl. "If I did, we wouldn't be in here fucking our own hands."

I can't decide if I'm devastated or elated. No condoms means he's had no reason to buy any. But it also means we're not sleeping together tonight.

It's eerily quiet now that the storm has slowed. The labored cadence of our breathing echoes in the steam-clouded room. A candle wick sizzles and pops.

I'm so close, swollen to the point of pain. My breath comes in short, choppy bursts. If I maintained this same pace on any typical day, I'd have ten, maybe twenty seconds until I came apart. But the pain in my wrist is

more acute now, and I can't maintain the right rhythm. I make a desperate sound and let my arm go limp.

"I can help." Jake pants in the same cadence as the pump of his wrist. "Do you need help, Evie?"

He *knows* he can give me an orgasm. Calmly confident. And that turns me on more than anything. I'm near tears when I let my hand drift away to float listlessly in the water. "I can't. I *need*—"

Jake doesn't hesitate for a second. Suddenly he's bending over, lifting me out of the tub, raining water everywhere. I lock my ankles behind his back as he digs his fingers into my waist. I feel the blunt heat of his cock bumping my ass as he carries me out of the bathroom. I'd sell my soul to be able to tip my hips backwards and sink down to the root—he's *so close*—

He's taking me to his bed.

"Jake, we're soaked—"

He lowers me to the mattress without hesitation. "It's getting fucking wet anyway," he growls, spreading me wide. He's on his knees, looming over me in the darkness. "I'm still hungry, Evie."

Oh, my god.

I have no idea if it's a statement or a question, but my answer is absolutely yes.

He cups a hand over my pubic bone, gliding the pad of his thumb over my clit before settling on his elbows between my thighs. "Fuck, I wish I could see you right now." I feel the air move with every word.

Then he's tasting me with a hot, wide-open mouth and a flattened tongue. My fingers twist in his hair. "Tell me," he murmurs, and the only thing I can say is, "*More*." And he gives it.

Outside the wall of windows, pinpoints of light begin to flicker on throughout Covent Garden. I can see our reflection in the glass as he feasts on me like a man starved. His hips move in silhouette, thrusting in a subtle echo of the movement of his lips and his tongue. Like he's imagining fucking me with more than his mouth.

That does it. An orgasm rages through me without warning. Relentless, pounding. My back bends, my knees fall inward, sealing my hands against his temples. Jake doesn't stop, his lips and the broad pulse of his sucking tongue sending me all the way into oblivion.

My legs collapse flat against the mattress. Jake's palms skid up the tops of my thighs as he kisses his way up the soft dip of my hip, my navel, my

belly. Then he rolls sideways, landing with a grunt beside me on the mattress.

I'm up in a flash, quicker and more confident than I actually feel. Straddling one of his legs, I bend over him, planting my palms on the thrust of his hipbones, running my thumbs along the plane of his lower belly. My nipple skims the head of his shaft, coming away with a slick pearl of moisture. I reach up to gather it between my fingers, and Jake groans like he's dying when I put them in my mouth to taste it.

"You don't have to—" he rasps, levering onto his elbows. The muscles in his belly flex in sharp relief.

"Oh, I do, Jake." I finally take him in hand, swirling my thumb over the soaked tip. He bucks against me as I spread the wetness in a sleek, slow pump, then another. "*I'm* taking care of this tonight."

I take him into my mouth. His arms fall loose at his sides, and he twists both fists into the fabric of the duvet, ripping it loose from where it had been so tidily tucked in around the bed. I maintain my languid, tugging rhythm with my hand, letting the pulsing suction of my mouth and the wet slip of my tongue do their sacred, sensual work.

It doesn't take long. Jake's heels press into the bed, and the muscles in his belly and thighs begin to quake in rhythmic unison. He releases the duvet to fist his hands in my hair instead. He lifts his head to watch as I finish him off. The moment our eyes meet, he sucks in a sharp, shuddering breath, groaning with teeth clenched tight. I expect him to fall back and look away, but he doesn't. He keeps his gaze locked on mine, and makes a soft, ruined noise as he comes.

I collapse sideways, and he drags me upwards to nestle between the curve of his chest and his arm. With his free hand, he swoops the duvet over us. The kiss he presses to my temple is tender, a stark contrast to what just happened between us, but somehow the perfect coda.

I'm not naïve. I know where this thing between us is heading. The only surprise is how *fast* I'm letting myself fall. It's like gravity, and now that I've started spiraling, I can't stop.



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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Five days until Christmas

The next morning, I wake up to a text from Jake. This one has more specific instructions than any of our dates so far, but they're so contradictory, I have no idea what to make of them.

> *Be ready at four. Wear a long coat. No jeans. Expect to get wet.*

Expect to get *wet*?

I roll over onto my back and stare at the ceiling. We've already had a date on the Thames, so that can't be it. Obviously, we're not swimming anywhere in December. Unless there's an indoor pool he's planning to take me to? But then, why would it matter whether I wore jeans?

The only thing I packed for this trip that isn't jeans and would also be suitable for an evening out is a burgundy maxi dress with a scoop neck and long fitted sleeves. It's not fancy by chic London standards, but my only other options are joggers that were meant for Maddie's eyes only. I guess I'm wearing a dress tonight.

When the text notification pinged, I'd been in the middle of a dream that Jake gave me a gorgeous traditional advent calendar, only instead of gifts behind the doors, each one was full of condoms. They came shooting out at me like those prank cans full of spring-loaded snakes.

And I'm definitely not seeing Jake again without them.

* * *

The crackling cold air in Covent Garden smells of hot cinnamon and espresso. When I pop in to Grey Earl's for a coffee and chocolate croissant,

Jake is there. He's in black thermal leggings under a pair of loose olive-green shorts, and a lightweight hooded fleece in the same color. Obviously, he's been for a morning run. We're not supposed to see each other until this evening, and even though I'm not surprised to see him, my blood pressure climbs and I get a tingle along the back of my neck. It's a delicious little thrill to run into him here in public. Like this is my real neighborhood, and I'm a real local, and he's the guy I'm dating.

He raises his mug and nods, and I smile back. As I head to the bar, he watches me with smoldery warmth in his eyes.

"Morning, love," Cherry says.

Quinn has already begun my pour-over. They look up, wink, and murmur "Ev," by way of greeting.

"Croissant or banana bread this morning?" says Cherry.

"Chocolate croissant, please. To take away. I'm going shopping."

"Ooh. Where you going?"

I clasp my hands behind my back and rock on my heels. Playfully, I say, "That's for me to know."

"Ooooh," Cherry says again, this time drawn out a bit longer. "Right then, keep your secrets." She passes me a paper bag with my pastry inside.

Cutting their eyes to where Jake sits at the window, Quinn hands over my coffee and says in a low, conspiratorial tone, "I don't know if you realize this, but that man by the window hasn't taken his eyes off you since you walked in."

"Mm. Interesting. Should I say hello?" I whisper.

"To your future husband? Of course," Quinn whispers back. "And when you marry this man, we'll be at the top of the guest list, right?"

I laugh and say, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," but it sets off a wistful little ache behind my breastbone.

I stop at Jake's table on my way out. A knitted cap and a pair of gloves sit folded neatly on the table next to a near-empty coffee cup and the leftovers of a two-inch-high slice of chocolate cake layered with pistachio cream. This contradiction delights me—he cares for his body, and he indulges it at the same time.

"Chocolate cake for breakfast? Are you a hedonist, Mr. Frost?"

A single eyebrow bumps upwards as he glances lazily at his wristwatch. "It's past noon, Miss McClane. It's not breakfast for those of us who don't have the body clock of a koala." Then he picks up his fork to take a bite of

the cake. He licks a bit of chocolate from the edge of his upper lip. It's just cake, for goodness' sake, but I know too much about what that tongue is capable of. "To answer your question, though—" He meets my eyes. "I suppose I am."

"Flirt." I roll my eyes and laugh, but the smolder low in my belly flares to life. I shake my head and walk to the door, and I've got my hand on the knob when Jake says, "Hey." I stop and turn to face him, and he says with one of his quiet smiles, "See you later."

* * *

The London Eye is the third-highest structure in London. I've seen it in the distance a lot over the last few days, and it was easy to think of it as a glorified Ferris wheel. But now that we're directly below it, its scale is staggering. Lights surge and shift, racing along all its structural surfaces. Blue and white, green and red. The pods are enormous, at least twenty feet long. I still have no idea how "prepare to get wet" fits into this date, but I trust Jake implicitly.

When we arrive, there's a long line of riders waiting, but we skip it by taking a different path up to the platform. Jake leans in and quietly says something to the attendant, who then smiles and says, "Right, sir."

The pods are clear capsules, with at least ten people boarding each at once. I'm not sure if it's a trick of the light, but when our turn comes to step up to the platform, the pod coming towards us looks different. When it lowers to let us board, nobody else gets out. When I finally see inside, I forget to breathe.

This one is special.

Instead of the plain bench and minimalist lighting I noticed in the other pods, this one glows warm with frosted lanterns that mimic flickering flames. Young potted trees fill the space with the sharp, earthy fragrance of evergreens. Strands of micro lights weave between the branches, nearly invisible. The center bench is covered by oversized cushions in cream knits and cocoa-colored fleece. Plush woolen rugs cover the floor, and a few throws in warm grays and sandy browns sit rolled in a basket.

A moment ago, I was in London. Now, I'm inside a snowy, remote Scandinavian cabin.

Jake takes my coat and shrugs out of his own, draping them over the cushioned bench.

At the front of the pod, there's a cushy chair made for two. It's covered in ivory velvet, and there's an oversized blanket of sumptuous faux fur across the top. Jake takes my hand to lead me to it once we're securely locked in to begin our slow ascent. He has something in his other hand that I can't quite see. Whatever it is, he tucks it under his thigh when he gets comfortable in the chair.

"I don't understand," I say. "This morning, your text said to expect to get wet—"

"Trust me." He leans forward, does a half-hearted tug on the hem of my dress, and sits back again.

"Will we be able to see as well if we're sitting?"

"We have thirty minutes in here. I promise you'll have time to see everything you want." Jake pats the small space next to him on the seat. "Come here."

I gather the skirt of my dress and ease down next to him. The seat feels like a memory-foam cloud. The moment my butt makes contact with the seat, Jake hooks his arm under my knees and pulls me into his lap.

"What are you—"

"Save all your questions for the end, love." He reaches behind me to pull the blanket over us. "I'm going to get you high."

"Jake, please tell me you didn't bring drugs onto this very busy tourist attraction."

Softly, he laughs. Then his eyes darken. "There's another kind of high I can give you."

He glides his hands along the sides of my neck, his fingers dipping into the wisps of hair at my nape. He bumps the tip of his nose feather-light along my temple, then along my cheekbone. With his teeth, he traces the lobe of my ear. He spreads his knees a bit so I nestle even lower into his lap. Beneath the blanket, I feel his hand settle high on my thigh. He's got something hard in his palm. A moment later, it begins to vibrate.

"How high do you think I can take you before you fall?" he murmurs.

"Oh my god. Are you serious?" The words come out in an airy rush.

He kisses his way to my mouth. "Very."

"There are cameras in here," I whisper.

“They’re behind us. All they see is a man and a woman enjoying the lights of London from their cozy little nest in the sky.”

“But they can *hear*—”

“Then you’d better be very, very quiet.” He says the words into my mouth, and I *feel* each one as much as I hear them. He uses his tongue and teeth to nip my bottom lip between his. He’s fully erect under the zipper of his pants. With the weight of my ass against him, I wonder if it hurts. I wonder if he likes it.

“What if we get caught?”

Jake leans back to meet my eyes, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. “Is it a no, Evie?”

A full-body tremor goes through me. “It’s not.”

“Then open your legs for me.”

I spread my knees.

“Now,” Jake says, “sit on my hand,” and I do.

The vibrator is cradled in his palm. It’s still on a low setting. I expect him to somehow subtly move his hand under my dress, but he doesn’t. He’s holding the toy against me through the fabric of my dress and panties.

“Open.” His voice is muffled against my shoulder. “More.”

There. Now I understand the no jeans request. I begin to move beneath the blanket—slow, fluid rocking nobody would notice even if they looked right at us. The purr of the vibrator isn’t enough for me to get off, but it’s making blood rush to all the critical places. Quickly.

He winds my braid around his fist. “I’ve fantasized about this plait since the first time I saw you. So pretty. So … orderly. I’ve been dying to fuck it up.” He eases off the elastic at the bottom, then he works his fingers between the thick strands to part them.

“Kiss me, Jake.”

Jake presses his mouth to the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. His voice drops a husky octave. “I *am* kissing you.”

I breathe out a barely there whimper as he boosts the vibrator up a level. “Kiss my *mouth*.”

Jake coasts his bottom lip whisper-soft along mine, but when I try to deepen the kiss, he leans away and makes a tiny *tsk* sound with his tongue. The vibrator switches off.

“You monster,” I breathe, grinding down on his leg to maintain the pressure. The fingers of his free hand dig in where my thigh meets my hip,

keeping me locked down against his lap so I can't move. His grip is coarse, rough, opposite the tender restraint he's showing with the rest of his body. He might even leave a bruise. I *want* him to leave a bruise so I can see it on my body tomorrow and have proof that this really happened. Otherwise, I fear I might not believe it.

Jake's expression is infuriatingly placid when he clicks the vibrator back on. This time, he indulges me with a higher setting. But every time I begin to move, he turns it off.

"What are you doing?" I whisper. I've got a white-knuckle grip on restraint, but it's bucking like a thoroughbred to rip loose.

"I'm going to edge you until you cry, darling."

He keeps me right at the top without letting me fall. "*Please*, Jake." My lips are pinned between my teeth. I'm panting through my nose like an animal, pinning the vibrator between my clit and the muscle of his thigh for extra friction. Tension and pressure are twin flames racing up a dynamite fuse.

"Jake …" My legs begin to shudder, my ass clenches. Goosebumps erupt across my breasts, my back, my thighs. Tears squeeze free from the corners of my eyes. "I'm … *mmmf*—"

With his free hand, Jake reaches up to clutch his long fingers around my jaw, twisting my head sideways to cover my mouth with his. My insides turn molten and impossibly heavy the moment he finally lets me have what I need.

"I'm going to—"

"I know," he murmurs against my lips. Then he revs the vibe to the highest setting.

I come so hard, my vision goes black around the edges, and I have to squeeze every muscle in my core to keep the orgasm from whipping me backward. Jake tightens his arm around me and keeps his mouth locked to mine to swallow my sobbing moan.

I slump into him when he turns the vibe off. His pulse jerks visibly in his neck. He looks like *he's* the one who just came.

Later, as we approach the end of the ride, Jake helps me into my coat. There's a wet spot on his leg where I was sitting, so he folds his own coat over his forearm to let it hang. I'm sure I have a matching spot on the back of my dress. *Wear a long coat. No jeans. Expect to get wet.*

When we leave the pod, a few of the attendants congratulate us. I glance at Jake and say, playfully, “You told them you were going to propose, didn’t you?”

He gives me a sheepish smile.

Laughing, I catch a glimpse of myself in a reflection as we leave the boarding area. I hope nobody remembers what I looked like when I arrived. Now, my hair is wild, my cheeks are flushed, my lips swollen and rubbed red. I look a mess.

I look like I just had an orgasm four hundred feet in the air over London.

* * *

We walk along the Southbank of the Thames to get back to Covent Garden. It’s busy, but more intimate and cozy than Borough. There are stalls nestled inside their own wooden Alpine-style chalets draped in bulbs. The fairy lights have a fuzzy halo around them, softened by the cinnamon-spiced mist in the night air.

The scentscape of London has been one of my favorite things about the city, and the Southbank is no exception. It’s clove and citrus and buttery vanilla from a creperie. Herbs and garlic and the hot, salty fat of sausages and smashburgers. It’s the brackish water and cold mud of the Thames, the fleeting perfumes of passersby, the smoke and spice of a woodfire.

God, I love it here.

I buy beeswax candles and marmalade, and a few hand-knitted scarves. Despite not having a Christmas tree of my own back home, I buy a gorgeous enamel and bronze ornament of the London Eye. I have no idea how I’m going to fit everything in my luggage, but for tonight, I want to pretend I’m a local, and I’m taking these things back to my cozy Covent Garden flat.

We pass Burgess Selby and one of his tour groups. One of the people in the back dumps their mulled wine onto the pavement. Another fiddles with the bulb on their plastic candle as it winks on and off.

“This is my turf, Ainsworth,” Selby shouts to a group approaching from the opposite direction. We never heard a scrap of this sort of enthusiasm during our tour.

“Jog on, you fuckin’ melt,” yells another older fellow—Ainsworth, apparently—wearing a Santa hat and carrying what looks like a wizard’s staff. “You can’t claim The Queen’s Walk.”

Jake and I glance at each other, wide-eyed. The corners of his mouth dip down in a playful, puckish frown.

“Did you warn them you can’t get through a tour without stopping for the bog?”

“At least I’m not a pavement pisser, Ainsworth.”

Jake and I share another look. “Maddie may have booked you onto the wrong tour.”

We laugh, and I tuck my arm through his as we walk. Trailing behind Selby’s group, I catch a glimpse of a young woman in a Supreme hoodie and a pair of baggy jeans. She looks at me and makes a heart shape with her hands, and winks. It’s the tarot girl, minus her mystical vintage get-up. Jake was right when he said he’d seen her skulking about during our tour. I shake my head and smile back.

I’m probably being too sentimental, but there’s something grounding about seeing people I recognize. And obviously, she recognized me too.

We linger, listening to carolers sing a haunting rendition of “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” Jake buys some small presents for his nephews, along with a few baubles for his sisters. I pick up two enamel pins—an espresso bean with kissy lips and a rainbow mohawk for Quinn, and a floral mug with “Pour Kindness” in script for Cherry. Jake buys me a tiny silver black-cab charm on a silver chain. As he hooks the clasp at the back of my neck, he says, “So you never forget the time I was right.”

I turn to face him. His arms settle around my waist. “Would black cabs be the first historical reference in the Evie-Jake lexicon?” I say.

“I believe they might be.”

As we head back to Covent Garden over the bridge, I start to giggle.

“What’s funny?” Jake asks.

“Oh, Jake.” I press my lips between my teeth and look at him apologetically. “I thought the London Eye was going to be boring tonight. Ferris wheel, but make it a slow thirty-minute ride? Come on.”

“Are you saying you found it more, ah, *stimulating* than you’d originally assumed?”

I laugh. “What do *you* think?”

We walk the rest of the way with our hands threaded together, gloves off so we can feel the warmth of each other's skin.

* * *

We stumble off the elevator into his flat, shedding shoes and scarves and coats. We're down to our underwear, backing towards the bed, when I mutter against his mouth, "Wait. My coat … over there. Inside pocket."

Jake gives me a curious look, but he obliges. He crouches, sits back on his heels, and reaches into the pocket of my coat. He pulls out the three-pack of condoms I've brought, holding it in front of him like he's not sure what to make of it. Slowly, he stands, looking confused. "Oh."

I wrap my arms around my middle, suddenly chilled. What is *happening* right now?

He strides past me, over to one of the bedside tables. He still has his back to me when he says, "I think there's been a misunderstanding, Evie."

If the earth cracked open under my feet to swallow me whole, I'd eagerly grab a shovel to help it take me.

Jake turns, and he's got something in his hand. It's an entire box of condoms.

He gives it a playful shake, but the look in his eyes is pure, dark determination.

"We'll be needing more than three."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Five days to Christmas

Jake is back to me in a few determined strides. He bends at the knees and grips my ass in both his hands, hauling me into the air. My legs twine around his waist, my elbows land on his shoulders. My fingers twist into his hair, maneuvering his head like a puppet, tilting, tasting. He's kissing me so hard, so deep, my jaw pops, and I can barely breathe.

"I don't usually do this—" I say into his mouth.

He pulls back. His shallow exhales are hot across my collarbones. "You're doing this."

I cup both hands around his face, dragging my thumbs over his bottom lip. His eyes are hooded as he lets his jaw go slack. "God, I am, aren't I?"

"Do you *want* to do this?"

I want to devour and be devoured. Squeezing my thighs around his waist, I grind against his belly. My panties are soaked again—he has to feel my wet heat against his bare skin. A beacon calling him home. His fingertips dig in, socketing my body against his. My mouth crashes down on his again in answer. Jake grunts and staggers backwards, stumbling over our discarded clothes and shoes. Steady again, he adjusts my body so I'm supported beneath by a forearm. With his other hand, he lets his palm skid up my sweaty spine before delving his fist into the back of my hair.

In an explosive breath, he tears his lips away from mine, angling his chin up and away so he can speak. "Tell me what you want."

I bury my face under the angle of his jaw, sucking, biting. The pulse in his neck rampages against my lips, and the scent of him makes me delirious. Scoring my teeth along his earlobe, I say, "You."

The word is barely out of my mouth before he has me on the bed, covering me with his body. He settles heavy between my thighs. The exquisite length of him is pinned against my clit with only two thin layers

of cotton between us. I want to yank the crotch of my panties aside and beg him to bury himself inside me.

In the next moment, he raises over me, lifting himself away to kneel between my legs. He's so desperately hard, the tip of his cock rises above the waistband of his black boxer briefs. I swallow down a howl of frustration, but then he's hunched over me, running his beautiful hands across my breasts, over my ribs, my waist. He hooks a single finger in the elastic of my pink satin panties, meeting my eyes with a playful boost of one brow. I arch my back off the mattress and let my knees fall open.

Instead of taking them off, he lets the waistband snap back into place.

"*Jake*."

He smirks, bending to cover my nipple with his mouth. As soon as I sink my hands into his hair, he moves down, coasting kisses along the arch of my ribs and the subtle swell of my lower belly. He skims his hands over my knees and up my outer thighs before gripping my hips.

"I haven't stopped thinking about the way you taste," he murmurs, tugging the top edge of my panties down, kissing my hipbone with teeth and tongue.

Then he's rolling the satin down my legs. Once they're off, he cups the cheeks of my ass in his hands to lift me to his wide-open mouth and his gloriously strong tongue. I'm so turned on, the pleasure of it is almost too much. I push away with my heels against the mattress, but Jake adjusts his hold on me, bringing one hand up to pin me down. It's barely thirty seconds before I'm rising off the bed in a soul-shattering orgasm. I lever up onto my elbows to watch him drive me over the edge, my chest heaving, my thighs shuddering, Jake's big shoulders moving rhythmically with the unwavering pace of his mouth.

I'm limp against the headboard. Jake gets his briefs off and pulls me down the mattress by my ankles so I'm flat again. "You drive me mad, Evie." He shudders as he rolls on a condom with a single slick stroke. Tipping his head back, he pauses for a beat, gripping his shaft at the base. Firm enough that the veins in his hand bulge around his knuckles. "I've been fucking hard since I made you come in your pretty little knickers earlier tonight."

When he looks down at me again, his expression is pure, sensual determination. Hands clamped on my hips, thighs braced wide, he's there. Blunt and broad, blazing with heat, poised to bury himself inside me. I

clamp my teeth on my bottom lip, welcoming him with a sinuous upward roll of my hips. He sinks down to the root without taking his eyes off mine, and we both close our eyes and breathe. The aftershocks of my orgasm still ripple through my core.

"Christ," Jake rasps. "You're still coming."

I can't control the way my thighs tremble, so I lock my ankles around his ass to anchor myself to him. He pulses inside me, but the rest of him is as still as a stone. When I open my eyes, his head is thrown back, teeth bared at the ceiling. A vessel throbs alongside the straining cords in his neck.

"I can't believe this is happening." He lets out a shaky breath as he finally looks down at me. "I've wanted you since the moment I saw you."

"I'm here." I shift beneath him. "Please, Jake."

He holds himself over me, body trembling with restraint. Then he withdraws, inch by torturous inch, before easing back into me with brutal tenderness. I surge upwards to meet him, drenched and impossibly inflamed.

"Slow down, love." Jake is so hoarse, I barely recognize his voice. The muscles in his entire upper body tense against mine. His thighs go rigid, and he pushes onto his elbows to meet my gaze. "We're just getting started."

Arching my back, I roll my hips to draw him deeper.

"Fuck," Jake exhales on a low, whimpering groan. It's a sermon, and I'm desperate to worship.

I don't think I've ever been this turned on. He's already close to losing it, and we've barely begun. This big, beautiful man is barely clinging to self-control because of me. *Me.*

I'm dying to watch him unravel completely. "Do you really want to slow down?"

Eyes squeezed shut, he grinds his teeth, making the muscles at his jaw go taut. "Yes," he says. In the next breath, he growls, "*No*," dropping his forehead to the pillow next to my head. He gives me three solid, unrestrained thrusts, bouncing us hard against the mattress. Then he stops again. It's like he's allowed himself one urgent, hungry indulgence before locking back in on discipline.

He's edging himself. It's one of the hottest things I've ever witnessed.

"I don't want this to be over yet," he rasps.

"We can just do this again." I nip his earlobe. "And again." I dig the tips of my fingers into the cords of muscle along his spine. I want to be selfish. I

want to be railed into a different universe and worry later how I might get back to Earth. “And again.”

When I clench around him, tight and greedy, he gasps and presses his open mouth to my temple. “Fucking *hell*, Evie.”

However badly he wants to prolong this, his body can’t help but answer mine. He begins to move again. Long, sensual strokes, like he’s savoring each one. I’ve never felt this bare, this alive. This vulnerable and this *powerful* at the same time.

“I need more, Jake. Please. Just—”

Jake drops his forehead to mine in assent. His exhale blazes across the side of my face, and he spreads his knees wider, bracing for leverage. He slips an arm under my back, clutching me against his chest like I’m the only thing keeping him from spinning into orbit.

He’s panting with an open mouth now, crashing into me like a tide hitting its shore. I slide my hands to the taut cheeks of his ass, feeling each pump of muscle, the force and ricochet of his thrusts. He presses his lips to the curve of bone just behind my ear, his every gratified moan resonating into my body. I feel teeth graze my jaw, his lips and tongue and explosive breath hot on my neck.

Jake raises his head to watch me. Lips swollen, face flushed, his gaze glassy and frantic. Wavy locks of hair fall into his eyes and dance along his forehead, jerking in the same cadence as his hips between my thighs. Over and over, I churn against him, riding him from beneath. I’ve lost all language except for whimpering vowels and stuttering breath.

“I can’t—” Jake grinds out. “Can’t stop—”

Friction is a struck match on a short fuse, and we’re the dynamite.

Jake covers my mouth with his and says against my lips, “Come with me.”

He’s not saying *come* with me.

He’s saying come *with* me.

Again, Jake lowers his full weight against my body, clasping me to him with shuddering arms. Our bellies are slick with sweat, heaving together with every desperate gasp for air. His feet slip against the sheets, his arms buckle, his mouth trembles against mine.

Moans hitch in my throat. The eager ache between my thighs builds and builds to the point of agony, too huge and too heavy to contain. Tears squeeze free from the outer corners of my eyes, painting my face with salt.

Jake is feral. Demanding, pounding, his hips possessed by an erratic rhythm as he starts to come. Now, his angsty little whimpers and breathy grunts are no more—now, he's loud as he unravels inside me.

My second orgasm erupts a second later, wet and white-hot, roaring out of the deepest, hungriest places inside me. Wave after shuddering wave of pleasure breaks against me until my legs slip loose, collapsing boneless on the bed as we plummet together over the edge.

* * *

After.

My head rests on Jake's outflung arm. His thigh lies heavy on top of mine, but it doesn't make me feel trapped. It makes me feel anchored. I'm not sure how long we lie there. But we don't move until our breathing slows.

Jake slides his arm out from under me to prop up on his elbow. He trails a fingertip across my neck, down to my collarbone. "I've marked you. I'm sorry."

I smile, running a finger of my own along the love bite I left on his bicep. "Looks like I did the same. I'm sorry."

Jake drops a tender kiss against my tangled hair. Then he gets up and walks completely nude to the kitchen. I watch him go, taking in the firm planes of his shoulders and his back. Even his legs are beautiful. He grabs two champagne flutes in one hand, filling them with water so cold it frosts the outside of the glass. He hands one to me and sets the other on the bedside table. "Be right back," he says.

From the bathroom, I hear running water. Jake is back after a moment wearing a towel around his waist. He carries a damp washcloth and another one of his enormous plush towels. He climbs onto the bed again, inching towards me on his knees. Then he looks me in the eyes and crooks a finger in a "come here" gesture. I set my water aside and sit forward, and he bundles me into the big towel. It's lusciously warm from the heated rack in the bathroom.

Jake sits beside me, tracing the warm washcloth along my neck, my collarbones. He gently pushes me back against the pillows again, and he somehow manages to make the ritual sensual, letting the cloth drift between

my breasts, down the center of my belly, across my hipbones. It's chilled from the air by the time he tenderly uses it on my inner thighs, making me shudder. Jake chuckles. "Sorry."

"Don't be." My voice is shaky. This feels distinctly more intimate than the sex we just had, and I'm having a hard time making sense of it. I do know, though—this thing with Jake has gone way beyond attraction for me. This is *attachment*.

I am falling in love with this man.

When he finishes, he pulls me upright between his legs to begin working on my braid. "This OK?" he says, easing the strands apart. My head lolls to the side. It feels better than OK. It's hypnotic.

Jake manages my tangles faster than I've ever been able to myself. Once my hair is loose, he draws me against his chest and we lie back, watching lights from the city flicker and shift on the wall across from the window. It's so quiet, I can hear Jake's heartbeat against my ear. I've never felt so held, and it goes far deeper than his arms around me.

We're quiet for a long time. Jake makes tiny, languid swirls against my shoulder with the tips of his fingers. After a while, he says, "When's your birthday?"

I chuckle and prop my chin on my hand against his chest. "Why? Are you going to consult the zodiac?"

He looks down at me through lowered lashes. "What if I say yes?"

"You don't strike me as the type."

"I'm not, really. One of my sisters is into it. I think I picked some up secondhand from her."

"One mudlark, one astrologer? Your family sounds lovely."

"They are, truly. You didn't answer my question, though."

My smile fades. "Would you believe it if I said Christmas Day?"

Jake sits up. "Actually, yes. I would. It would explain a lot."

"About why I don't like Christmas, you mean?" I turn to face him. "That's a common misconception. Not all Christmas babies hate Christmas because they have to share their birthday."

"Are you saying your Scroogery has nothing to do with it?"

"Well, maybe, when I was little. As I got older, though? I don't mind so much. Having my birthday and Christmas on the same day means there's just one day for my family to disappoint me instead of two separate ones."

"Jesus, Evie." Jake pulls me close, and we rock for a while.

“So when’s *your* birthday?” I ask.

“I’m a summer baby, actually. July first.”

I nod like I understand the significance of being born on 1 July, but I break down in giggles. “I’m sorry, I know absolutely nothing about astrology.”

Jake laughs with me. “I think Capricorn and Cancer are quite compatible signs.” After a beat, he says, “Maybe we can ask my sister.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” I nod. “Right after your other sister takes me mudlarking.”

Jake is quiet for a while. What he says next knocks the wind right out of me. “Spend Christmas in the Cotswolds with me and my family. I’m due to be there on the twenty-third. That’s in three days.”

When I first arrived in London and learned Maddie wouldn’t be coming, my biggest concern was how I could possibly fill an entire month alone in a city I knew nothing about. Christmas itself seemed an eternity away. As I’ve spent more time with Jake and Christmas has crept closer, I’ve assumed he’d either leave to spend the holiday with family, or he’d spend it here in London with me. He’s mentioned how close he is to his family, so the latter seemed much less likely.

I never imagined a third possibility, where I might go *with* him.

Every time I try to pull back on the reins of whatever is happening here, Jake says or does something that makes me want to gallop towards it that much faster. Being with him like this feels a bit more right every day, but I have to remind myself that feelings don’t manifest reality. The more meaningful our connection becomes, the harder it is to ignore the actual reality that I’m leaving in nine days. Jake going to spend Christmas outside London could be a tidy, natural conclusion to whatever we’ve started here—he’d have his family close, and I could walk away from this on a high, taking home a beautiful mosaic of memories of a man who never let me down. Permanently perfect.

I’m a coward, I guess? Am I so afraid of losing this, I’m not even going to try having it?

“I need a beat, Jake. Can I have a day to think about it?”

He raises my hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to the center of my palm. “Of course. You know how to find me. I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

* * *

Four days to Christmas

I spend the next day alone, wandering a few of the places Jake has taken me. I get a sausage roll in Borough Market, and I pick up a copy of Burgess Selby's new release at the bookstore on Cecil Court. They're selling tarot decks by the till, so I pick up one of those, too, even though I have no idea how to do a reading. I spend an hour or so at Grey Earl's to give Cherry and Quinn the enamel pins I bought for them at Southbank Market, and they immediately pin them to their aprons above their nametags. I linger for a while, sitting at Jake's table in the window, reading *I Capture the Castle*.

I'm painfully aware of the fact that I'm the one who asked him for this space today, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't hope to see him come through the door every time I heard the tiny bell ring.

Quinn approaches me at the table at the end of their shift. They take the seat across from me. "What is it, love?"

"Jake asked me to come spend Christmas with him and his family in the Cotswolds."

Quinn leans back in the chair. "That monster."

"Ha, ha," I say. "This is going to ruin me when I have to leave."

"Listen. Because it might hurt in the future is a poor excuse to not do a thing. There's always going to be something that hurts you. Might as well go for the happiness while it's there for the taking." Quinn squeezes my hand across the table. "My partner is French, did you know that? We throw a little festive do for expats, so they don't have to be alone on Christmas Day. You're welcome to come if you decide not to go with Jake, OK?"

Sudden tears burn my eyes. "OK."

Cherry comes over, dragging a chair from another table. "I was listening, because of course I was." She takes my other hand. "What I always say is—go with your gut. But if you don't like what your gut is telling you, nothing wrong with getting a second opinion from your heart."

I've got seven full days left in my trip. I don't want to spend another moment apart from Jake.



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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Three days to Christmas

The morning after my self-imposed solo day, I wake up on my own before nine o'clock. By five minutes past nine, I've sent Jake a text to ask when I can see him, but by ten, he hasn't responded. When I stop in at Grey Earl's, he's not there either. Quinn and Cherry tell me he hasn't been in today, and when I grab a takeaway coffee instead of lingering at the bar for a chat, I get matching looks of concern.

"Evie, is everything OK?" Cherry calls as I head to the door.

Pausing with my hand on the jamb, I turn with a tentative smile. "Not yet. But it will be."

I stop at the piazza Christmas tree in our spot. As soon as I get there, I feel absurd. Jake Frost doesn't just hang out in the Covent Garden piazza in the cold, hoping to catch a glimpse of me. I replay that last bit of our conversation two days ago, trying to figure out if there was any way he might have thought I was breaking things off rather than asking for a short breather. A wave of anxiety ripples through my belly. It's similar to what I felt my first few days in London when I thought I'd missed my chance to meet him that night at Somerset House. But now, it's magnified. Now, I know exactly what I'll be missing if I never see him again.

* * *

There's one more place I can check.

The Evie who arrived in London would have never done this. That Evie would've accepted defeat easily, chalking it up to a misunderstanding or miscommunication, or *I guess he's really not that into me*. But that's not me anymore.

I've made it as far as the lobby of Jake's building. But the private elevator to the penthouse only opens with a keycard, so I can't just pop up there and knock on the door. There's a console on the wall with a doorbell and a call system, though. I press the call button and a little LED lights up green. I'm live, I guess?

"Um. Hi. It's me. So … you told me I'd know where to find you, but I haven't been able to yet. Are you there?"

No answer.

"I wonder if this thing is recording? Like one of those old answering machines?"

I feel ridiculous. I'm standing here talking to a wall. Still no reply from Jake when I check my phone again.

"I guess I just want you to know that I want to spend Christmas with you. Meet your family. All of it. If—" I have to swallow hard to clear the lump in my throat. "If you, um, still want me to."

"I very much do," says a soft, deep voice behind me.

It's Jake. He starts towards me with purpose, his long legs closing the distance between us in the time it takes me to suck in a bracing breath.

"You're here," he says.

"I'm here."

He's very festive today in a burgundy turtleneck sweater and cream corduroy pants. Both his hands are full of shopping bags, but the moment he stops in front of me, he drops them at our feet to cradle my face in his palms. Then he's kissing me, his warm breath gusting across my cheek, his tongue moving against mine in languid greeting. I twist my fists in the front of his sweater and make a low sound of pleasure in my throat. He doesn't pause the kiss as he reaches behind me to press his keycard against the sensor to call the elevator.

When it arrives, he picks up the bags, this time all in one hand. The moment he's upright again, his mouth is back on mine. He wraps his free arm low around my back, waltzing me into the elevator, mirroring my backward steps with his forward ones.

God, I've missed this man terribly, and we were only apart for a day. It's going to wreck me when I have to leave for good. For the next seven days, I'm going to cling to every bit of happiness while it's here for the taking.

He drags his teeth along my bottom lip like he's reluctant to stop kissing me long enough to speak. "Were you waiting long? I figured you'd sleep

until at least noon."

"I had a very good reason to get up early," I say against his mouth. "But if you keep this up, I'm going to have to insist we go back to bed once those elevator doors open."

He does.

And we do.

* * *

Sun streams in through the big windows and skylights, flooding the place with sweet light the color of lemonade. I've got a leg thrown over Jake's belly, and he's got a loose grip on my naked hip. With my fingertips, I make tiny little swirls in the feather-soft hair across his chest. "Are we calling today a date? You promised me twelve dates to fall in love."

"With Christmas." Jake raises a finger. "And London."

"Of course. We need to keep the scope realistic."

"What number would today be, then? Nine?"

"Hmm, by my calculations, it's ten, if we count the ghost tour."

"I thought you were skeptical about whether that counted as a date?" Jake teases. "There was nary a single fond glance that night. No handholding. Certainly no kiss."

"Good point." I make a theatrically thoughtful face, scrunching my brow, pinching my lips tight. "But, in retrospect, I *wanted* to do all those things. Surely that counts for something?"

"Right. Date number ten, then. Let's consult the advent calendar to see what's on for today." He grabs his phone from the bedside table and taps around on the screen. "Huh."

I sit up straighter. "What is it?"

His hair falls into his eyes when he looks up. He swings it off his forehead with a quick jerk of his chin. "It says: 'mutual wank in the bath.'"

"It does not." I snatch the phone out of his hand. The only thing on the screen is his wallpaper. I hand the phone back and shove him gently in the arm. "Menace."

Laughing, he taps a finger to his temple. "My brain is our date advent calendar, love. Let's call today's date: 'Evie's choice.'"

“Oh my, I’m positively mad with power.” I rub my hands together. “How will I choose?”

“What’s the first thing that comes to mind?”

“Let’s stay in,” I say. “We can call it ‘Evie and Jake’s Date of Domestic Bliss.’ Let’s pretend, just once, this is real life.”

The playfulness drains out of Jake as quick as if I’d pulled a plug. “This *is* real life, Evie.”

I lay my hand on his arm. “And you know what I mean.”

We’re quiet for a while. He covers my hand with his, then he flips it to thread his fingers between mine. Grazing his thumb across my knuckles, he says, “We can’t stay in all day. My fridge and pantry are empty. And we leave for the Cotswolds tomorrow, you know.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And if this were real life, you’d probably spend the night.” He meets my eyes. “For practical reasons. Early start, and all that.”

I blink up at him. “Oh, of course.”

“So I suppose the first order of business is to pop round to your flat to collect your things.”

* * *

When we finally get out of bed later that afternoon, Jake drives us to Paperwhite and I throw together an overnight bag to last through the end of the week. Afterwards, we head to a supermarket to stock up for our date of domestic bliss.

“Have you noticed yet how most of what we do together revolves around food?” I say to Jake as I push a trolley along the produce aisle.

Jake puts a head of broccoli in. “Foundational to any good relationship, really.”

He says it so casually. *Relationship*. He’s not even looking at me as he says it—he’s got his bottom lip thoughtfully pushed out as he peruses the selection of fresh garlic bulbs. Even more remarkable is that I don’t get that nagging sensation of static in my brain as he says it. This *is* a relationship now, regardless of what happens to it at the end of the month.

“This is one of Maddie’s relationship tests. Shopping for groceries without a list.”

Jake gives me one of his lopsided smiles. “Are we passing the test?”

“I’m not sure what the passing criteria are, actually. I suppose we’re winning if we’re not sniping at each other.”

“Tell me more.” He puts a few lemons in the trolley.

“Well, at the very least, she says a new couple should build IKEA furniture together at least once. If they really want to test compatibility, maybe they do without the instructions.”

“Diabolical.”

“Also—a cross-country road trip with no GPS, so they have to use paper maps.”

“Sounds dystopian,” he says.

“Camping trip, but it’s raining, and they arrive late. So they have to set up their tent in the dark.”

“Nightmarish.”

“And for me personally—I’d need to spend at least an hour or two in a bookstore with a prospective partner. If they rush me, I’m out.”

“I’d spend all day there with you just to be able to watch you do that little lip-nibble thing you do when you’re concentrating.”

“What lip-nibble thing?” I laugh.

“The one where you pull your top lip in, and I can see your bottom teeth. It’s adorable.”

“I didn’t even realize I did that.”

“Well,” Jake drops a kiss on the top of my head, “I reckon I spend a lot more time looking at you than you do.”

At the edge of the produce section, a few poinsettias and sad-looking potted fir trees in festive wicker baskets sit lined up on the floor. Impulsively, I bend to lift one of the firs into the cart while Jake has his back turned to peruse the tomatoes. It bangs against the bottom of the metal basket when I set down the heavy pot, and a few dry needles drop to the floor.

Jake glances over his shoulder—first at me, then at the conifer in our trolley. He turns in slow motion, his brow creased, eyes narrowed. Then he comes close and says in a hushed tone, “Who are you, and what have you done with my Evie?”

I pop up on my toes to drop a kiss on his cheek. “Happy Christmas, Jake.”

* * *

That evening, Jake and I make dinner together. We're both admittedly terrible in the kitchen, but we've each got a single dish we're able to prepare from memory with moderate success. I make meatloaf with a side of lemon-garlic broccoli, and when it comes out of the oven I'm a bit embarrassed at how unappetizing it looks compared to Jake's dish. He calls his "Marry Me" Chicken. It has a sundried tomato cream sauce, allegedly so delicious it inspires marriage proposals. He got the recipe from his sister Cait, whose wife actually *did* propose to her when she tasted it. They'd apparently been heading down the road to matrimony already, and that meal accelerated the process.

Jake carries both our plates to the bed. We've covered it with an old duvet and laid a few hefty law school textbooks around to set our food and drinks on. "Shall we watch a Christmas film with our picnic?"

"But you don't have a television."

"I didn't say television. I said 'film.'" Jake settles in beside me with his own plate, then he aims a remote at the wall opposite the bed. There's a faint mechanical whirring noise, and a white screen begins to descend from a slot near the crown molding. At the same time, a projector emerges from the ceiling at the center of the room.

"Of course you have a theatre setup in your ceiling," I laugh.

We watch *While You Were Sleeping* and *Die Hard* after a long conversation about why each counts as a classic Christmas film. At first, Jake isn't sold on *Die Hard*, and he accuses me of bias because I share a last name with the fictional protagonist. Eventually, he comes around, and we even decide that *Die Hard* qualifies as a romance movie too, since the entire reason John McClane does what he does is to save his wife. *And* it ends in a happily ever after.

It's well past dark by the time we finish the movies. Lounging back on the bed while Jake washes up in the kitchen, I say, "I never want to live anywhere again where my bed isn't five steps away from my kitchen. Or a film projector."

"I don't think this is a very conventional design choice, love." He turns from the sink, watching me with intense eyes and a gentle smile.

"What?" I say.

Turning back to the dishes, he says, “Just noticed how it doesn’t echo as much in this place when you’re here.”

Warmth floods through me, but I play it casual. “You should invest in a few rugs.”

When he finishes drying the last dish, he comes back to bed. “Has today been real enough for you?”

I trace a finger along the map of veins on his hand. “Jake, you live in a several-million-pound penthouse with a film projector in the ceiling and a bed in the living room.”

“And?”

“This is *your* real.” I meet his gaze, tucking my hands into my lap. “But it’s still been one of the loveliest days of my life.”

Jake withdraws. It’s barely noticeable, but I see it. His chin dips, his eyes cast downwards, he cracks the knuckles of his left hand. And he nods almost imperceptibly, like he’s affirming something inside his own mind. His voice is quiet when he says, “I believe this is what you Americans call ‘moving the goalposts.’”

Gently, I say, “What is the goal, Jake?”

“Maybe … I don’t know.” He hesitates. “Maybe I just want to find a way for your definition of real to align with mine.”

That warmth blossoms inside me again, sunshine through a cold window in winter. But I don’t know how to respond. Realities are realities, aren’t they? How can one be changed to mesh with another?

Hours later, in the dark, Jake’s bare belly slowly rises and falls against my back. There’s something so intimate in feeling someone else breathe. His heartbeat has become my favorite lullaby. As I start to drift off, I hear him whisper, “I never saw you coming. But god, I hope I never have to watch you go.”

* * *

Two days to Christmas

The morning we're due to leave for the Cotswolds, Jake isn't here when I open my eyes. There's a note on the bedside table that reads, *Gone to Earl's. Text me when you get up*, in his immaculate print.

I hop to my feet and scurry to the bathroom to pee and brush my teeth first. Once I'm back in bed, I lie back and text that I'm awake.

I hear the elevator within ten minutes of sending the text. Jake is already smiling as the doors slide open. Today, he sports a five o'clock shadow, and his hair is loose around his ears. He's shed his typical old-money countryside aesthetic for whiskered raw denim and a faded Oxford University crew with a frayed neckline. There's a new sort of lightness about him. His posture is looser, the tiny muscles at the corners of his eyes and around his mouth seem softer. I think he's excited to see his family.

There's a cardboard box with the Grey Earl's logo on it and a takeout coffee cup in his hand. I still haven't gotten around to buying a reusable travel mug, and the thought makes me irrationally sad. At this point, it's so late in the trip, I might as well not bother.

"Good morning," Jake says.

"What's this?" I scoot to the edge of the bed and sit with my legs crossed under me. "I didn't know you offered a breakfast service."

He chuckles and passes me the cup. I cradle it against my chest with both hands, hunching over it like a goblin.

"You have a five-thousand-dollar espresso machine built into your kitchen worktop," I say.

"Ah, that. That monstrosity was here when I bought the place. How do you know it cost five thousand dollars?"

"I looked it up on the internet. I was curious."

"Of course you were." The mattress dips a bit with Jake's weight as he sits beside me, and I tip towards him.

"So, you never use it?"

"It scares the hell out of me. Have you seen the way they shoot steam? Why do you think I'm at Earl's every morning?"

This is one of those seemingly inconsequential choices we've made in parallel. If Jake had his morning coffee here, or if I'd bothered to use the

Nespresso pods I bought when I arrived, our second chance encounter after baggage claim at Heathrow would probably have been the last time we ever saw each other.

My first sip of coffee is sublime. “What’s in the box?”

He gives me one of his tilted smiles. “Didn’t know what you preferred, so I grabbed one of everything I’ve seen you order. Cherry and Quinn helped fill in the rest.”

A peek into the box reveals all of my favorites, each of them individually nestled in a piece of parchment paper folded into an origami-like cup. A chocolate croissant, a pear and pistachio Danish, a few Earl Grey madeleines. Banana bread, of course. I’ve been at Earl’s often enough that I’ve watched Quinn and Cherry make these takeaway assortment boxes for others, but I’ve never seen it done with quite so much care as this.

“They say hi, by the way.” Jake traces a fingertip along my bare knee. “They’re quite fond of you.”

“They’re darlings.” I reach back to grab my phone from the side table, firing off a quick thank-you in my group chat with Cherry and Quinn. I get a response back immediately in the form of a selfie, both of them blowing a kiss at the camera. “Did I tell you Maddie got to meet them on a video call? Afterwards, she told me it was the first time she regretted not coming.”

Jake nudges my chin up with a bent knuckle. “I rather like having you all to myself.”

I set my coffee and pastries aside and lift a leg over his lap to straddle him. Pushing him back against the mattress, I pin him down and murmur against his lips, “I rather like being had.”

We get on the road an hour later than we’d originally planned.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two days to Christmas

We're calling today our road-trip date.

I do a double take when I get to the car. "We're taking a passenger with us, hm?"

The little potted fir tree we bought at the supermarket sits on the back seat of Jake's very expensive vehicle. He didn't bother to put a blanket or a towel under it, and there's already a faint dusting of soil and dried needles on the leather.

It's strapped in with a seatbelt.

Jake loads my bag into the trunk and opens my door to tuck me in. "Such remarkable journalistic observation skills," he teases, popping a kiss on my forehead. "We won't be coming back to London until after Christmas. I was thinking Mum could plant it in the garden, come spring."

This man. The greenest of green flags.

"That sounds perfect." I have to swallow hard past the lump in my throat. I love the idea of the tree I found, virtually abandoned in a pot in the supermarket, getting to live out its days in the Cotswolds. It's like I'll be leaving a living piece of myself behind. Maybe Jake will think of me every time he sees it.

We buckle in. Jake switches on a jazzy Christmas playlist, and he puts a warm, reassuring hand over mine. And then, we're off.

Once we're out of the city, there's beauty in the bareness. A sepia-toned winter world rolls by my window like an old movie reel. Frost gathers in foothills and in the furrows of stubbled fields. Bare beech trees seem inked by a fine brush and an unsteady hand. We pass small streams and tiny bridges, quaint stone churches, and sheep grazing gently sloped fields.

"I feel sad for them," I say.

"The sheep? Why? They've got their own wool coats."

My laugh is half-groan. "All right, *Dad*."

“I’ll have you know, that was an *uncle* joke, not a dad joke. Far superior comedy.”

Jake grins out the front window without looking over at me, so I get to indulge in some lovely prolonged staring at his profile. I love the way his cheek creases around his lips when he smiles—it’s bigger than a dimple, more of a frame for his gorgeous mouth. I love the sharp angle of his jaw, and how it contrasts with the velvety softness of his earlobe, and I love his nose, proud and shaped like it was etched from marble with a precise, loving hand.

“You love being an uncle, hm?”

“God, yeah. Nothing like it.” He glances away from the road for a beat, smiling again. “Enzo—my sister Genny’s middle son—he thinks I’m the funniest bloke on the planet. Exceptionally good taste.

“Remind me, how old is Enzo?” I tease.

“Ah … four.” Jake drops his tone, serious. “He’s a very discerning four, mind you.”

I laugh.

“She’s got two other boys. The oldest is Felix, he’s a serious little lad, doesn’t find me nearly as funny as Enzo. Alfie doesn’t either. Yet.”

“Why not?”

“Well, he’s an infant. Tough crowd, you know.”

Laughing, I say, “You want kids of your own someday?” There’s no subtext in the question—I’m simply, genuinely wondering. But when the words hang in the air between us, I worry what it sounds like to Jake. Does it actually seem like idle curiosity, or an invitation?

Again, he flicks his eyes away from the road to glance over at me. “Well, dad-ing and uncle-ing are different, aren’t they? But yes. I think I do. Someday.” He keeps his eyes straight ahead. After a beat, he says, “You?” in a tone I’m certain he thinks is casual, but it’s not. Not at all. Maybe he’s wondering the same thing I just did.

“I do. Maybe?” I tuck my feet under me in the seat. “Yeah. I do. It’s hard to imagine *when*, though. I can’t picture the space and time for kiddos in my life right now. And I’d have no idea how to be a mom.”

Jake chuckles. “Nobody becomes a first-time parent knowing how to be a parent. It’s an on-the-job-training sort of deal.”

“Speaking of kids,” I say, “maybe you should give me the Frost family tree prep course.”

Jake laughs. “We’ve only got an hour left in the drive.”

“The short version, then?”

“Right. Mum’s called Helena, she was a cellist in the Royal Opera House orchestra for thirty years. Retired now. And she’s not a Frost anymore. She’s a Winston now. My stepdad’s name was George—Canadian fellow. They were married when I was in Year 11. Couldn’t have asked for better. He passed away a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” I lay my hand on his forearm.

“Me too.” Jake glances away from the road for a second to smile. “My nan will be there—Mum’s mum. She’s called Gladys, but I think she’d be tickled if you called her Nan. My sister Genny will be the redhead you met on the phone at Somerset House, her husband’s called Ewan.”

Somerset House. God, it feels like that was a different lifetime. I was certainly a different Evie.

“Miles is my brother—brawny chap with a thoughtful look about him and a tendency to say what’s on his mind. I’ve told you about Cait and Maeve—they’ve got two baby girls, Hazel and Terra. And my little sister is Indi. She’ll be the one swearing like a docker.”

For a while, after the family-tree debriefing, the only sound is the gentle drone of the tires on the road. As we get closer to the Cotswolds, it begins to snow. I sit up straighter in my seat, practically pressing my nose to the window. “Oh my goodness. I’m in love.”

Beside me, Jake quietly says, “So am I.”

Swells of farmland are bordered by distant blue-gray forest. The English countryside reminds me of the valleys and gentle uplands at the margins of the Adirondack foothills of New York where I grew up, but softer around the edges. More intimate. I have an overwhelming sense of home, but I have a feeling it has to do with the man sitting beside me more than the landscape outside.

The lanes become more narrow and winding, and we pass stacked stone walls and ancient-looking homes covered in evergreen ivy. Once we’re through a village square, we’ve just returned to fields and farmland when Jake slows the car. He turns down a private pebbled driveway bordered by dormant linden trees. They must smell incredible when they flower in the spring. Jake parks next to a few other vehicles—a Volkswagen hatchback, two SUVs and a vintage pickup truck.

The house is built from stone the color of fresh honey, embroidered with jasmine. Its steep roof is covered in a powdery crumble of snow that glitters in the sun. The front door is sandy-brown wood, decorated with a wreath of feathery fir boughs, berries, and twigs of papery birch and curly hazel. A wisp of woodsmoke meanders from the chimney.

When I step out of the car, I don't move out from behind the open door. Instead, I cling to it, and I feel Jake watching me over the hood. "Wow, Jake, this is—"

"It's been drab all day," calls a woman emerging from the house with her arms spread. "You brought the sun with you."

To my surprise, she approaches me first, extending her hands to clasp mine. She stands back to take me in, her brown eyes bright as topaz in the sun. "I'm Helena." Her voice is warm. "Hello, Evie. Welcome to Marleigh."

She has one of those faces it's impossible to assign an age to—she could be forty-five or sixty-five, or any of the numbers in between. Jake was obviously cast from her palette, the same fair skin with warm undertones, the same toffee-brown hair. Hers is shot with silver and trimmed into a chic pixie cut, but I can tell where Jake gets his thick waves.

Jake watches as she pulls me in to press her cheeks to mine. She smells like ginger and rose, and the subtle spice of a hearth fire. I have the absolutely unhinged urge to hold tight when she gently lets me go.

She rounds the car to Jake, reaching up to cup his face in her hands. "Welcome home, love."

I follow Helena into the house, and Jake follows behind me. The floors creak and crackle underfoot. Somewhere deeper in the house, Dean Martin sings his jazzy rendition of "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm." The air is rustic and cozy inside, like sun-warmed wood and amber florals, and a century's worth of luscious, hearty meals made with loving hands and no shortage of tradition. A wooden bowl of orange-spiced pomanders sits on a narrow table in the hall, each wrapped in a narrow red ribbon, scented with sweet clove and cinnamon.

There's a boot room to the right of the entry hall, with kids' and adults' shoes haphazardly piled on the floor. A few pairs made it into baskets and under benches, but excitement at arrival clearly won out over tidiness. Amidst the dignified beauty of the place, there's something charming and grounding about the mess.

Down the main hall and to the left is a dining room. Exposed beams overhead, wood-plank floors worn to a satiny patina. Tall, multi-paned windows line the far wall, and a sofa sits in front of them, piled with throw pillows embroidered with holly and ivy. There's a recessed stone fireplace, its mantel studded with pillar candles amidst a garland of cedar and bay. Above it, an antique mirror bounces buttery sunlight back into the room. Chairs at the huge table in the center of the space are all mismatched in size and shape, covered in burgundy bouclé, oatmeal linen, a plummy velvet, and wools in a spectrum of greens.

In the middle of the table, a vase of paperwhites is in full bloom. They bend towards the sun beaming through the side window. Their scent is syrupy and botanical, almost narcotic in its intensity. I wonder if I'll still be in London when the buds on my paperwhites open. The sense of my time here ticking down feels like a knot under my lungs.

Jake says, "Where's Nan?" as we follow Helena to the kitchen.

"Arriving with Cait and Maeve tomorrow," Helena says. "She's been staying with them to help with the babies since I've had so much to do here."

Jake and I linger outside the kitchen for a moment. I hang behind him a bit, peeking around his arm. Genny's ginger curls are in a messy bun, and she stands at a butcher's-block island in the middle of the kitchen. Her wire-rimmed glasses have slipped down the bridge of her nose, and I get that paradoxical mom vibe from her—serenity and presence, but if someone were to suggest she go take a nap, she'd bolt for a dark bedroom before they finished the sentence. At the other end of the worktop, a man holds a bundle against the center of his chest. It's a sleeping baby so tiny he's able to hold him securely with one hand, while dumping a measuring cup of what looks like dried fruit into a bowl with the other. He must be Ewan.

Between them, two young boys stand on stools. With bare hands, the little ones rub cubes of butter into flour and sugar on the worktop. The smaller one looks to be about four, and he's locked in, concentrating so hard his little bottom lip quivers. The older boy—eight, maybe?—is more chaotic, his own kneading punctuated by impulsive swipes and the occasional chop with the side of his hand.

"Don't let the demons win, love." Genny pats the older boy on the head and casts a rueful smile at the man holding the baby.

“Well, this looks promising,” Jake finally says. “Haven’t ever had a mince pie made by such ace pastry chefs.”

Everyone looks up from the worktop, smiling. Jake nods, warmth settling into his expression. “Genny. Ewan.” The younger boy jumps off the stool so explosively that it tips and bangs to the floor behind him. The baby startles, and the older boy says, “Hey, Unc,” in a serious tone that suggests, *Nice to see you, but I’m doing something important here.*

The little one collides with Jake’s legs, and Jake lifts him with a theatrical groan. “Enzo, my best friendzo.” Enzo’s shirt rains little beaded bits of butter and sugar.

“Uncle Jake!” the boy chirps back, grinning. He pats messy, chubby hands on Jake’s cheeks, leaving behind a powdery mess.

“All right, Zozo, we’re not making an Uncle Jake pie today.”

A kid-shaped impression of loose flour is left on Jake’s jeans too, but if he notices, he doesn’t seem to mind. “Y’all right?”

“Fucking *mint*,” Enzo says.

“Enzo Edward Underwood!”

Two hairless cats in Fair Isle sweaters trot into the kitchen. One is a satiny fawn color with luminescent lemon-shaped eyes, the other piebald with vivid blue eyes. They disappear towards a different wing of the house, and a moment later, a woman screams, “Mother! Your domesticated scrotum just had a go at my fucking ankles again!”

Dryly, Ewan says to Genny, “Still wondering where he gets that mouth, love?”

“Christ on a bike,” Genny whispers. She squeezes her temples, leaving behind a sprinkle of flour.

Jake pats his nephew on the chest. “Mate, you’re doing your mum’s head in with the naughty language.” He turns his back to the other adults, like he’s conspiring with the little boy. Dropping his voice to a stage whisper, he says, “Let’s choose a different word to use instead. It’ll be only ours. When we say it, we’ll be the only ones who know what it really means.”

Enzo’s eyes widen, his cheeks flushing with mischief. His voice drops to a whisper too. “What word?”

Jake puts Enzo down and whispers back, “Think on it, and we’ll chat later, OK?” Then he comes back to stand next to me. “Everyone, this is Evie. Evie, this is my sister Imogen—”

“She can call me Genny,” she says, smiling. “We’re old friends, remember?”

“—my brother-in-law Ewan, and their boys Enzo and Felix. The little bundle there is baby Alfie.”

I wave and say hello.

“Look what the Aston Martin dragged in,” drawls a big man leaning against the arched opening between the kitchen and sitting room. He’s as tall as Jake, but he’s rugged. Broader in the shoulders and thicker in the chest. His hair is a rich, auburn brown, a shaggy swoop across his forehead and longish around his ears. Despite the dark hair, his eyes are pale gray-green, and his complexion is fair. Even though sunshine seems to be a rarity this time of year, there’s a faint sunburn across his high cheekbones, and a scatter of freckles across the bridge of a nose that’s definitely been broken a time or two.

The two men hug, thumping each other between the shoulder blades. It’s a proper embrace, not one of those half-assed bro hugs that so many men seem to do. “Evie, this is my brother Miles,” Jake says.

Miles raises a hand and says, “Pleasure, Evie.” There’s a gentle melancholy about him. I think if Jake is the human embodiment of a golden retriever, his brother is a chocolate Newfoundland.

A woman bursts into the kitchen. Her hair is the same glossy auburn as Miles’s, cut in a shaggy French bob. She looks to be a few years younger than me, and infinitely more chic in a fitted black boatneck tee and fashionably oversized denim. Her fair pink complexion has rosettes of deeper color in rounded cheeks, and she’s wearing the vibrant shade of red lip color I fantasize about being able to pull off.

“I’m being hunted. That vile hairless cu—uh,” she flicks her attention to the boys and pivots on her choice of words, “—cat drew blood this time.”

Jake leans close and says, “This little foul-mouth is Rosalind.”

“I vaccinated Mum’s cats myself, sis,” says Miles. “If you get rabies, it’s from one of those sketchy blokes you date.”

“Bugger off.” She playfully bares her teeth, then she lifts onto her toes to give Jake a hug around his neck. “I’m surprised Daddy dearest let his golden boy come mingle with the mortals this Christmas.”

Jake frowns and musses her hair. “Love, there’s a time and a place, and you’ve managed to land on neither.”

Rosalind pirouettes over to Ewan's bowl of chopped fruit and sticks her fingers in, snagging a piece to pop in her mouth.

"Oi! We have to let that macerate," Ewan says.

One of Rosalind's perfect brows pops upwards. "Isn't that something you should be doing alone?"

Beside me, Jake mutters, "Not necessarily," and I hide a choked laugh behind my hand.

Rosalind is still chewing brandied fruit when she comes over to give me a hug. Her perfume is spicy and warm. "Wait about forty years before you start calling me Rosalind. Call me Indi for now."

"I'm—" The word turns into an explosive grunt as Indi squeezes me hard. "Evie."

"Oh, love." She takes a step back and squeezes my upper arms. "I already know."

The Sphynx cats trot back into the kitchen. When Indi sees them, she twists around to stand behind me. "Away, beasts."

Jake lifts the fawn cat into his arms. It headbutts his chin, purring in a low, loud rumble. "This is Enoki," he says, then he nods to the piebald weaving between my ankles and cooing like a pigeon. I'm reluctantly charmed. "Indi's nemesis there is Chanterelle, but everyone calls her Elle for short." He glances at his sister and says, "Some people say cats can sense evil, you know."

"She's going to sense my boot in her arse if she puts her teeth on me again," Indi says.

Miles grabs a chopped walnut from the worktop to toss in his mouth. "You know I can't stand for violence against animals, sweetheart."

Jake leans towards me again. "Miles is a vet."

"Ah," I say.

"I might have a muzzle out in the truck—" Miles says.

"Brilliant," Indi says. "Thank you."

"I didn't mean for the cat," he laughs.

Indi lunges for him, giving chase as he feints out of the kitchen.

Helena claps her hands together, turning to Jake and me. "Well, then. Shall we move you two in?"



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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Two days to Christmas

Now that we've said our hellos, Jake and I go back to his car to grab our bags. Helena comes with us.

"Evie, we've prepared the cottage for you. Plenty of firewood."

Her phrasing is peculiar—she makes it sound like Jake won't be staying with me. I instinctively glance at Jake for clarification. Right now, though, he's looking at his mom.

His head is subtly tilted, curious. Her eyebrows lightly lift in response. Jake answers with a slight pinch-lipped smile and a mirrored raise of his own brows, then Helena breathes a silent laugh through her nose. Her expression softens.

They've just had an entire conversation with no spoken words, and it happened faster than I can blink twice.

What would it be like, to be that known by someone? That *seen*? What would it feel like, to understand and be understood simply through microexpressions and shared history?

Jake finally meets my eyes, and his expression stays neutral, but one of his brows bumps up in tandem with a faint slant of his lips. *Shall I tell her …?* the look says. I feel like I can actually hear his voice saying it in my head. The expression I send back hopefully says, *Don't you dare leave me alone.* I think he gets it, because he answers with a smoldery warmth in his eyes before turning his attention back to his mom.

"I'll be staying in the cottage too, Mum," Jake says.

Oh. He got it. So *that's* what it feels like.

"Marvelous." Helena's eyes sparkle, and she subtly bounces on her toes. "Extra pillows and blankets will be in the wardrobe."

* * *

The cottage is down a fieldstone path behind the house. We round a tall hedge, and the late-afternoon sun catches on the glass panes of a tiny greenhouse. It looks like it started as an old shed, and gradually the walls and roof were replaced by a patchwork of antique windows secured together like puzzle pieces. The door at the gable end is stained-glass.

A dense cottage garden surrounds it, and even though everything is brown and brittle now, it's still beautiful in its austerity. I can imagine how breathtaking it must be in the summer, with bees and butterflies coasting between foxglove and geranium, echinacea and sage.

It's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. "Can I see inside? I *beg*, Jake."

Jake moves in beside me. "You like it? Miles and I built it for Mum ages ago."

The hinges on the door squeal in harmony. I leave my overnight bag on the stepping stone outside. Jake comes in after me, closing the door behind him to keep in the meager amount of warmth from the sun trapped under the glass.

After almost a decade of living in the city, the scent in this space is almost like therapy. That cool mineral quality of clean, living dirt, and the slight funk of fertilizer. I swear I can still smell the heat of summer sun baked into the wood and the soil.

There's a small crystal chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling. It's vintage, the bulbs long gone and the crystals turned yellow with age, so it acts as an oversized suncatcher now. Against the far wall, an old church pew is painted the chalky blue-green of a duck egg. A raincoat drapes over the back, and a pair of boots sits propped against a leg. Along a side table, there are grow boxes with winter greens—spinach, rocket, and lettuces of at least three varieties. On the other side, terracotta pots and ceramic vases are all marked with handwritten chalkboard signs that hang from little metal stakes pushed into the soil. Rosemary, Spanish mint. Olive, dahlias, cannas and callas. A dozen more.

What would it be like to putter around out here with Jake's mom? I'd give anything to see this place in the warmer months. Central Park is gorgeous year-round, but I can't imagine there's anything that compares to having a space like this all to myself.

Jake trails his knuckles along the small of my back. It's a gentle touch, and it's not asking for my attention or a touch in return. He's simply

existing in the moment with me.

I turn to face him, sliding my arms into the open front of his coat and around his waist. “What was that about in there, with your mom?”

“You mean about the cottage?” Jake reaches up, gently twining loose locks of my hair around his fingers. “I mentioned the possibility of bringing a guest along for Christmas. I wasn’t specific about the, ah, nature of our association.”

“The nature of our association?” I laugh. “OK, Counsel.”

“Technically, I’m a solicitor.” He smiles, but it lacks his usual warmth. It’s like that every time anything remotely law-related comes up. “Barristers are the ones called Counsel.”

“Well,” I pull him closer, “to me, you’re just Jake.”

“That’s a good thing, I suppose. Anyway, I think Mum wanted you to have the option of staying alone if it would’ve been more comfortable for you.”

It’s touching, being cared for by someone I’d never met.

I slip my hands from under his coat to reach up and draw him down for a kiss. Jake doesn’t hesitate to bend to meet me. He’s got a hand in my hair, the other hooked onto a belt loop of my jeans with his thumb. The flashpoint between us falls lower and lower every time we’ve kissed over the past few days—lust ignites the moment my tongue makes a slow glide against his. I hear it in the sharp draw of breath through his nose, the urgent press of his hips into my belly. He walks me backwards until I’m pinned between his body and one of the high tables. A wind chime of tiny bells rattles against the glass. A few of the pots wobble.

“Whoops,” Jake mutters.

Goosebumps scatter up my spine when he nips my earlobe with the edges of his teeth. “Someone will see us.”

“Good,” he growls. “I’d argue—”

“Of course you would.”

“—that it’s a good thing for them to see this. That way, there’s no question who you are to me.”

Hell. If they’re able to figure it out, maybe they can clue me in. “Who am I to you, Jake?”

He looks surprised, like it should be entirely self-evident what the answer is. “You’re Evie.” The way he says it is quick and clear. He coasts the pad of his thumb between my brows to smooth away the frown, then he lets my

messy braid slip between his first and second fingers. Softer, he says, "You're mine."

Well, then.

I guess I am.

* * *

The cottage is a miniature version of the main house. The same straw-colored masonry, the same dormant jasmine vining along the front façade. Inside, there's a fireplace along the wall to the left, and a tiny galley kitchen to the right. Everything is sparkling clean, but there's an undertone of homey mustiness from the old timber and stone. I love it.

The bed is up a small set of steps, on a galleried landing rather than an enclosed bedroom. The ceiling is pitched along one side, low enough that I can't stand fully upright. I lean over the railing. "I can't sleep in these conditions, Jake."

He looks up, concerned. "Something wrong?"

"It's much too far from the kitchen."

"Sounds like I've got some remodeling to do, then."

Jake gets behind the small sofa and drags it away from the hearth, pushing it instead against the wall near the door. On the other side of the room, he scoots a small bookshelf and a side table closer to the kitchen.

I watch from halfway down the stairs. "Are we going to dance? Or tussle?"

He laughs, whisking a stand lamp to the opposite corner near the hearth. "Is that what you want to call it?" He pulls plaid blankets from a wardrobe with squeaky hinges, whipping them outward to unfurl flat over the thick woolen rug in front of the cold hearth. Then he climbs past me on the stairs, taking two at a time. Laughing, I say, "What in the world are you doing?"

Jake grunts. I hear the billowy rustle of the duvet and the other bed linens from the loft. Then I see the edge of the mattress scooting out over the railing. It slowly edges farther over the rail until it falls, thudding neatly on the landing pad he made with the plaid blankets. A sweet-scented cloud of cedar and thyme plumes into the air. A ball of linens comes down next, followed by the duvet.

Jake grips the loft railing and leans over to grin at me. "Better, love?"

* * *

One day until Christmas – Christmas Eve

“How could you, Jake? Letting this poor girl spend a December in England without a proper pair of wellies.” Helena stands over me at a bench in the cloakroom as I pull on a spare pair of her boots. They’re a bit big, but she’s so sweet and earnest about it, I can’t refuse.

We spent the first part of the day prepping food for Christmas lunch, chatting all the while. I learn that Indi is the mudlark (and yes, she would take me along, if I wanted to go), Genny and Ewan were best friends since primary school and married when they were twenty-one, Miles is a rural veterinarian, and Caitriona (arriving tomorrow with her wife Maeve) is a pediatric surgeon. She’s the sister who’s into astrology. Now, tonight, Helena is keeping the little ones so we can go to a pub in the village called The Drowsy Cow.

“Are you sure you should go?” Helena twists her hands together, glancing between everyone as we shrug into coats and scarves. “Trevor Pritchard was just saying earlier today, we’re due a big Christmas Eve storm.”

On his way out the door, Miles says, “That old bastard is just trying to get sweet people like you into his hardware store to buy overpriced generators, Mum.”

Slow-motion snowflakes meander above us on our nighttime hike to the pub. There’s a velvety softness to the darkness here. Jake holds my hand, and we walk in step with each other.

The first glimpse I get of the village is the mercurial shimmer of fairy lights on snow. The cottages and shops seem to huddle together against the chill, windows aglow with flickering amber light. The air is rich with hot sugar and sweet cigars and the hearty burn of hearth fires. An eclectic group of carolers sing “Silent Night” on the village green. It’s all a perfect sensory backdrop for sweater weather. I’ll compare every Christmas Eve to tonight for the rest of my life.

The Drowsy Cow is the archetypal English pub from my imagination. Magical, with a gritty earthiness about it. There’s a bit of mud and melted

snow on the scuffed hardwood floors, a few patrons with dogs curled up at their feet. Creaking chairs and lively, lilting conversation. A fire, filling the air with the resiny scent of woodsmoke.

Each beam along the ceiling drips with a canopy of cut winter foliage. Sprigs of spruce, downy-soft branches from fir, and the waxy leaves of fragrant juniper. Even the baubles are arcadian—simple shapes covered with dried moss, a ball of pinecones, braids of English ivy. Globe bulbs in bright white and soft amber thread throughout the greenery like silver and gold stars in a winter wood.

We approach the bar. There are rows of old mugs hanging there for decoration, and Jake has to duck his head a bit. The man pulling pints is very Santa-coded, with a bright white beard, pink cheeks and a red nose. Jake raises the hinged service hatch at the end of the counter to go behind the bar. The bearded bartender doesn't look up from the taps. "Looking for a job, lad?"

Jake thumps the older man on the back, smiling. "I'm considering it."

The bartender passes four frosty mugs of beer to the people waiting. He turns to Jake, yanking him into a hearty hug. "Good to see you, kid."

I love seeing how Jake is loved here.

"Evie, this is Hutch." Jake grins. "He was my school's headteacher. I called him Mr Hutchinson back then, though."

"Pleased to meet you, Hutch," I say.

"Retired now. Living the dream. My wife Bonnie and I bought The Cow few years back. Best choice I ever made, 'side from marrying her."

"I'm already counting down the days," Jake says.

"To marriage, or retirement?"

"Yes," Jake chuckles.

Hutch's laugh booms, but his smile falls quickly, and his eyes soften. "All will be well, lad." Something quiet passes between the two men. I can't decode it, and I don't have time to linger on it, because Jake claps his hands together, winks, and says, "Right. We need drinks, big man. That Old Hooky isn't going to pour itself."

* * *

“So is this a new tradition now, bringing Americans with you for Christmas?” Miles says to Jake.

Jake has his pint glass halfway to his mouth, frozen mid-air. Ewan clears his throat and takes a long drink of his ale, and Jake’s sisters share a matching raised-eyebrow glance. Miles glances individually at everyone. “What? We’d know more about him if he came round more than two or three times a year.”

I remember Jake mentioning another American woman during one of our early dates, but the way he described her didn’t make her stand out in my mind. There was certainly no suggestion that they’d been serious enough for him to bring her home with him for Christmas.

Genny breaks the awkward silence. “Let’s play Make Me Laugh. This is the first time in a while we’ve had enough of us home for a proper game. Last year it was just Ewan and Indi and me mugging at each other over our sad pints. We went home after one round and snoozed through three hours of *Rosemary & Thyme* with Mum.”

I’m the only newcomer, so they give me a rundown of the rules. “To start, everyone at the table contributes a pound to the pot,” Jake says. “We determine turn order by drawing straws.”

“First person is the Joker. Their goal is to make at least one person laugh,” Indi says. “They can target someone specifically, or say something to the whole group.”

“No touching or tickling,” says Jake. “Otherwise, anything goes.”

Ewan adds, “Whoever smiles, snickers, or laughs, they’re out.”

“Then the next round starts with a new Joker,” Miles says. “Everyone left in the game puts in two pounds this time. And it escalates from there, though this bunch of numpties rarely makes it past four or five rounds.”

The game starts pretty tame. We make a full circle around the table with everyone getting a turn. It’s in the second go that people start dropping.

“Hey, Gen,” Ewan says. “What do you call a fish with no eyes?” He hasn’t even delivered the punchline yet, and Genny’s bottom lip quivers. “Fsssh.”

Genny cracks. “Not fair, picking on your own wife.”

“Sorry, love, you’re the easiest target.”

Jake addresses the whole table next. “Someone asked me once what my favorite dinosaur was. I told them I don’t know, I’ve never met one.” All it earns him is a few groans.

Indi seems to have it in for Miles. “The last time Miles had a piece of ass was when his finger broke through the toilet roll.” This one makes Ewan choke on his beer. Miles simply holds her eye contact and sucks his teeth.

On my turn, I say, “What’s the difference between a dog and a complex sentence? One has clawses at the end of its pawses, and the other has pauses at the end of its clauses.” It bombs completely, winning me a few grimaces and a sympathetic pout from Jake.

Miles leans back in his chair for his turn. He taps the shoulder of a serious-looking middle-aged man at the table behind us. “Hey, mate. Did you hear that they said you were an owl?”

When the man says, “Who?” Miles turns back to us with a truly diabolical smile on his face. I have to roll my lips between my teeth to stay in the game.

Jake’s turn. “What did the zero say to the eight?” Bless his heart, he pauses theatrically. “Nice belt.”

More rolled eyes.

Indi’s turn again. She aims for Miles. “You know, Miles, believe it or not, I actually love cats. It’s just—I can’t ever manage to eat a whole one myself.”

Miles breaks. Swiping beer from his chin with the back of his hand, he says, “Oh my god, what is wrong with you?”

Jake swivels around to Indi and says, “Absolutely brisket.”

She cracks, and everyone else laughs, too. “Well, fuck.”

I look around the table. “I need context for that one.”

Genny grins and says, “Every time she tries to say *absolutely brilliant* in our family group chat, that’s what her phone corrects it to.”

Indi shrugs and shakes her head. “I don’t even try anymore.”

It’s only me and Jake left. We volley back and forth a few rounds, stone-faced. Conversationally, I say, “Do you think people named Cornelius have the nickname ‘Corn’?”

Jake indulges me with an answer, stone-faced. “Well, here in the UK, we usually say sweetcorn.”

I give him a puzzled look. “How do you know, though?”

Jake frowns. “I don’t follow.”

“How do you know he’s sweet? Maybe he’s a real bastard?”

I think I’ve finally got him. His self-control is impressive—muscles tic in his jaw, a vein pops out on his forehead, his nostrils flare. All these

microexpressions appear and disappear so fast I'd miss them if I blinked. Then he crumbles.

Everyone else laughs, too, and I fall a little bit more in love.

* * *

I have a new understanding of Jake now that I've met his family. And at the same time, I have more questions. What led him down such a different path from his siblings? How did he end up in London, all alone in that big, empty flat?

A three-piece band arrives midway through the night. Their setlist is a combination of classic pub tunes and lively Christmas carols. Dancing shakes the entire place. Before long, Jake's siblings leave us alone at the table to join the ceilidh. The moment we're alone, he turns to me, taking my hand in his.

"What Miles said, earlier." Quietly, he says, "Her name is Juno. The one I told you about. I brought her here for Christmas last year so she wasn't alone over the holidays, but I swear to you, Evie, we really are just friends."

So this is what it's like, being met with openness and honesty in the face of a potential misunderstanding. I didn't even have to be the one who brought it up. "I believe you."

Jake's shoulders relax, and he holds my hand a bit tighter. "Actually, I had a suspicion that Miles carried a bit of a torch for her. After his little swipe at me, I'm certain of it."

"Do you think they'd notice if we left a bit early?"

"What are you suggesting, Miss McClane?"

"Let's get out of here."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

One day to Christmas, Christmas Eve

We make it back to the cottage just before the storm arrives. Jake springs into action the moment the door is locked behind us. He kicks off his boots, but he doesn't bother to remove his coat—he heads straight to the hearth to stoke sleepy embers back into a proper fire. As I take off my boots, I shiver like a pounded piano chord. My teeth clack together so hard I'm afraid I might bite my tongue.

He must be having trouble, because he makes an impatient sound and sits back on his heels, yanking his arms out of his coat to fling it across the room. When he bends back over the hearth, he doesn't look at me, but he says, "You all right, love?"

"Mm-hmm," I manage.

"We'll get you warm soon."

I shrug out of my coat and lay it on the sofa Jake moved next to the door. Silently, I lift my sweater over my head. Static electricity makes strands from my braid cling to my face and neck. The chilly air makes my upper body erupt in goosebumps so aggressive my skin feels a size too small.

I watch the way Jake moves. He's determined. Purposeful. The strong arcs of his shoulder blades rise and shift beneath his sweater, and the warm light of the embers in the hearth glaze his hair with crimson. Suddenly, the orange glow becomes a bright, golden flame, casting Jake in silhouette. I feel the heat almost instantly.

My nipples are so hard they ache against the fabric of my bra. I reach around to unclasp it and ease my arms out of the straps. At the same time, Jake stands and turns to face me. For a few moments, he simply stares.

He doesn't take his eyes off mine as he pulls his sweater over his head, letting it fall to the nest we made in front of the fire. I let my fingers hover over the button of my jeans, and Jake does the same with his own,

mirroring me. Nudging the button loose, I tilt my head subtly to the side. He thumbs open his own button and licks his lips.

Behind him, icy wind wails down the chimney. For a moment, the flames in the hearth go dark before roaring back to life.

I'm not cold anymore.

When I draw down my zipper bit by bit, Jake does, too. With a playful lift of my brows, I stop midway. So does he. He takes a determined step closer to me, but I hold up a hand. He freezes.

As a reward, I unzip fully and shimmy out of my jeans. Jake does, too, but he flings his aside with more force than I did. Our socks come next, one by one in unison, until all that's left is our underwear. For me, cream lace hipsters; for him, navy-blue boxer briefs. I tuck the tips of my thumbs in the waistband near each of my hips, edging the panties down centimeter by centimeter.

Jake's patience has run out, though. When he drags the waistband of his briefs off his hips, his erection tips forward and sways in front of him, rebounding upwards to curve towards his navel.

My *god*.

He's already as hard as I am wet, and we haven't even touched each other yet. My mouth floods like I'm a woman starved.

The instant I let the cream lace flutter down my legs and kick the knickers aside, Jake is on me, pulling me to him. Down to our little nest in front of the fire. Lust is a struck match between us, but he still has the presence of mind to cradle his hand around the back of my head as he lowers me to the pillows.

He kisses his way down my body, but instead of settling between my legs, he turns to lie sideways beside me. Gently, he lifts my leg closest to him so my thigh rests over his shoulder. His arm loops around to rest on my belly, positioning his hand so his long, beautiful fingers can open me to him.

Gasping, I say, "What are you—"

"Save your questions for the end," he murmurs. It's the soft heat of his lips there first. Then I feel him spread his mouth wide, using pressure and friction and suction to reveal the most sensitive part of me. His tongue makes a slow slide against my entire clit, moving side to side rather than up and down. Slow, broad strokes at first. I'm being *savored*.

My leg starts to slip and shudder over his shoulder. Jake reaches up to steady me with a hand shackled around my thigh. Once I'm braced against him, he seals his mouth against my clit. Now it's rhythmic, rippling waves, escalating in intensity with every swirl of his tongue.

I see actual stars when I come, writhing beneath him as he clings to me like a life raft on a chaotic sea. I slap one hand over my mouth, the other across my eyes, jerking against him in the most exquisite orgasm of my life. I don't recognize the noises I'm making, but I'm too delirious with sensation to care.

I'm left throbbing and breathless by the end. Jake sits up, looks me in the eyes, and wipes my wetness from his chin with a lazy stroke of his thumb.

And then he licks it off.

He leans close. "Do you know what you taste like, Evie?" He kneels beside me, coasting the tip of his nose along my cheekbone. Then he hovers his lips just centimeters from mine. "You're a rare vintage, darling."

I can smell the salt and musk of my arousal on his mouth. It mingles with the deliciously familiar flavor of his breath, the heady essence of his skin, and the barely there trace of his cologne. Surging upwards, I fist a hand in his hair and collide my lips into his, tasting him, tasting *me*. It's a furious, filthy kiss. Teeth meeting teeth. Unrelenting strokes of tongue against tongue. Jake makes an agonized noise deep in his throat when I break away. I push him back against the mattress, straddling his thighs.

Skimming both hands down his torso, I say, "What was it you said to me that night on the London Eye?" He shudders when I graze my fingertips along the ridges of his hipbones and the firm hollows beneath. "'I'm going to edge you until you cry,' was it?"

He swears under his breath and chokes out, "Fair play."

I let my jaw drop all the way open and drag the full wet-hot length of my tongue up the underside of his shaft, curling a palm over the top for more friction. He bucks his hips and throbs in my hand when I coast the pad of my thumb over the velvety bundle of nerves beneath the head. When I take him fully into my mouth, Jake's thighs shudder, and he groans like he's possessed. He grabs a handful of sheets and twists it around his fist.

"Ah, *fuck*." His sharp inhale hisses past clenched teeth. Head thrown back, his throat spasms in a painful-looking swallow.

Flat on his back like this, he doesn't have much leverage. Still, I can feel how the cheeks of his ass contract and release beneath him in a rhythm that

echoes every sucking pulse of my tongue.

Then I stop.

"Bloody Christ, woman." When he tries to sit up, I push him back down. He throws his arm over his eyes as he hits the pillow. "I think—" his voice cracks, "I'm dying tonight."

I still have him in my mouth when I laugh softly, letting the mellow hum vibrate around the tip. "I'm sure I'll be able to bring you back."

I take him deeper, matching the strokes of my hand to the cadence of every sleek pull of my mouth. My heart hammers so hard I can feel my pulse between my legs. God, he's extraordinary from this angle. Abs quaking and tensing, chest slick with sweat and heaving with every labored breath. Nipples in tight peaks, and an angry flush across his collarbones.

A low rumble begins in Jake's chest.

Again, I stop.

"*I can't*," he growls, launching upright quicker than I can react to. In the next beat, he's got his hands under my arms, hauling me sideways, then onto my back. He's got me half-pinned with his upper body across my chest and a strong thigh over one of mine. Firelight pours over him, highlighting the thrust of his collarbones and the smooth, broad caps of his shoulders.

"Not fair." My breath hitches. "You didn't cry."

Jake's low laugh is dark. "Trust me, love. I'm fucking *wailing* on the inside."

With his free hand, he pushes my other thigh wide, then he cups the soaked center of me with a trembling grip. I jerk my hips upwards, and he dips two fingers inside me before targeting my clit with relentless friction. Slipping, pulsing, tugging. I'm still primed from the orgasm he gave me with his mouth, so it's barely a minute before I'm ready to pop again. Pressure pools between my legs, filling me to bursting. It plumes into my belly and races down my thighs. It's the insistent heat of Jake's cock pressed against my hip that finally sends me over the edge.

My thighs collapse shut, trapping Jake's hand between my legs as I begin to rock and thrust against him. I'm out of my mind, yanking Jake down by the back of his neck, sobbing and moaning into his mouth from the pleasure of it.

When I go limp, Jake makes a sound of satisfaction deep in his throat. He sits up on his heels and thrusts into a condom. "More?" he says.

"More. Everything," I say.

Jake knocks my thighs open with his spread knees. Anticipation pounds through my body like a second pulse in my veins. Wind rails against the windows, shivering the panes of glass in their frames. It's like a living thing, urging us to match its raw, elemental power.

"Please, Jake. *Pl—*"

He drives inside me with a single sleek, determined thrust, and I'm ready for him, angling upwards, feet dug into the mattress. My legs fall open wide, boneless. He plants his elbows alongside my shoulders and bears down for leverage, his fingers tangled in my hair. We breathe what the other exhales, taking each other in on a molecular level. He's primal. Painting my skin with his sweat. He's got his bottom lip sucked between his teeth in a grimace of pleasure-pain and barely restrained hunger. But I've never felt so safe. So worshipped.

Crashing into each other, we're as unbound and wild as the storm outside, and nearly as drenched. Finally, Jake kisses me, mumbling urgent words against my mouth that I taste more than I understand. He spreads his knees even wider for extra leverage, doubling down on the pace of his thrusts. He surges into me so hard, he pushes us up the mattress, closer to the fire. The heat of it blasts our sweat-slick skin. Jake's hair falls fully into his eyes, and locks of mine stick to my forehead, my neck. It's like I'm clinging to Icarus himself, and I'd gladly fly into the sun with this man if it means I get to fall with him.

Jake bucks over me, erratic now. With a shuddering groan, he goes boneless for a moment, then he locks himself to me with trembling arms. His entire body jerks as he empties himself into me, his ragged cries filling the room. I've never heard him come so loudly, so frantic. *Oh god*, the sounds this man makes as we unravel, peeling everything back until the only thing that remains is our urgent, infinite need for each other. Every cell in my body vibrates, faster, faster, as he urges me to meet him in the place he's just gone. It's a soaking storm of our own making, and I'm desperate to let it take me.

Come *with* me.

And I do.

* * *

Later, after we've cleaned up and put fresh linen on the makeshift bed, we laze in front of the fire.

"This is beautiful." I trace a fingertip along the Icarus tattoo that covers most of his thigh. "But doesn't he die in his story?"

He makes a rumbly, thoughtful noise. "Don't we all? Eventually?" Jake stacks his hands behind his head.

"Obviously. But isn't Icarus's death his own fault? It's a cautionary tale about hubris, right?"

"Mm. I see it differently." He doesn't elaborate.

His reluctance to talk about this in detail makes me tread carefully. Softly, I say, "Will you tell me more?"

Jake takes a big breath that expands his cheeks. He blows it out and sits up, facing me on the bed. I sit up, too, crossing my legs under me.

"Icarus wouldn't have died if he hadn't been caught up in his father's ambitions," he says.

I've come to recognize this tension in his posture, and the tiny lines around his eyes. There's some kind of internal struggle happening here. Quietly, I sit and wait.

"Icarus was innocent," Jake finally says. "Young. His father's choices are what landed him in prison. Then when they broke free, his father may have been the one to give him wings, but Icarus himself decided what he'd do with them. On his own terms."

"You didn't—" I look down at my hands. "Ah … go to prison, did you?"

Jake surprises me by laughing hard. As it fades, he looks at me, genuinely puzzled. "Wait—really? No, love, I haven't been in prison." Some of the mirth fades fast, and his expression falters. "My father is just a nasty piece of work."

Gently, I say, "I'm sorry, Jake." I want to say more. I want to ask more. But as close as we've grown, we're still not at a point where I feel like I can delve into his personal life for more than he's willing to offer. I'm surprised I had the guts to prompt him for more a moment ago. I'm even more surprised that he gave it to me.

He takes a big breath and blinks a few times. It's a reset. "Right. Well." He leans towards me to press a kiss to my temple. "Enough of that."

In the next breath, Jake rolls me sideways and pins me underneath him. He's levered up with his hands pressed into the mattress next to my

shoulders, eyes locked in on mine. His hips rock to nudge my thighs apart. His hair hangs around his face as he looks down at me.

We're in pajamas now—him in a pair of festive cotton boxers printed with red and green "HO HO HO" all over, me in snug boyshort panties and one of Jake's soft white V-neck tees. I feel him get hard the moment he settles between my legs.

"Well, well, well." I lock my ankles around his back. "Someone's awake again."

His low laugh rumbles through me. "That chap has always had a hard time settling down in the evenings." His tone is playful, but I watch in divine fascination as his pupils burst wide-open with desire. He bears down against the knot of nerves beneath the thin fabric of my panties. I know he's doing this to distract me away from going too deep into the Icarus story. And it's working.

The moment is ruined when my stomach growls. Loudly.

Jake's eyes widen. He raises to his knees and scoots backwards, then he bends to press his ear to my belly like he's speaking into a vintage telephone. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

I throw my head back against my pillow and laugh, threading my fingers through his hair.

When my stomach growls again, he whips upright and looks at me in mock horror.

"Jesus Christ. I need to get some food in you before that thing breaks loose and terrorizes the countryside." He hops up from our nest to pad over to the kitchen. His erection hangs heavy in the "HO HO HO" boxers, swaying a bit as he walks. It's absurd and unbearably sexy at the same time.

I wrap a quilt around me and join him in the tiny kitchen. Jake hesitates before he opens the refrigerator. "I've just realized—I have no idea if there's any food here."

My stomach rumbles again. This time, it's so long and loud, it sounds like the words of some cryptic, undiscovered language.

Jake stands motionless, glancing down to my belly and back to my eyes. "Am I in danger?"

"Only if you ask nicely." Swooping the quilt outwards like wings, I lunge forward to wrap my arms around him.

Jake laughs and lifts me off my feet to plunk me down in one of the chairs at the table near the window. "Moment of truth." He glances back at

me. “Let’s hope there’s something in here.”

Fortunately, there’s plenty. Helena stocked the refrigerator and cupboards, but most of it is breakfast food. Jake attempts to make something for us. He scorches the toast and burns the eggs when he tries to do both at once. Together, we manage to make a nice breakfast for dinner, and as is our habit, we curl up in our fireside nest to enjoy it.

“Do you think we’ll ever sleep in an actual bedroom together?” Jake says. “Or eat at an actual table?”

“Well,” I say around a mouthful of toast, “we’ve got about five days to find out.” I meant it to be funny, but the bread is suddenly dry in my mouth, and I struggle to swallow.

“Only five?” Jake doesn’t look up from his plate. He pushes eggs around for a moment before laying his fork down. Then he meets my eyes. “I guess we’d better make the most of them, then.”

* * *

Jake falls asleep an hour or so before I do. I lie beside him, his thigh stacked over mine, the gentle sound of his breathing a counterpoint to my own heartbeat. I watch the dim embers of the fire shimmer and shift on the ceiling of the cottage, and I listen to the lonesome howl of the wind in the eaves. Outside the window, bare branches rattle like bones.

I’ve never felt anything like this. This soul-deep peace born from safety and stillness. Maybe the reason this is so perfect is *because* it’s not meant to last. Often the most ephemeral things are the most beautiful, aren’t they? Could a single snowflake possibly be more lovely if it lingered longer?

“I think I’m in love with you.” I whisper the words directly over Jake’s heart. I’m not ready for him to hear them, but maybe this way, he’ll feel them.



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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Christmas Day

The morning is as bright as a Dreamsicle against my closed eyes. Jake stretches, murmuring something incomprehensible against my temple. Then he's up from the bed, taking all the warmth of the room with him. I nestle deeper in the quilts and try to cling to sleep.

Jake tiptoes around the cottage. Water trickles from the bathroom faucet as he brushes his teeth. There's a rustle of a bag, a crinkle of paper. He puts the kettle on, and I hear the dainty *tink* of empty teacups snugged into saucers. Then he comes back, crouching in front of the hearth, nurturing last night's embers into the crackle of a merry fire. He lets out a barely audible grunt as he gets to his feet, and I hear a tiny creak in his knees. It makes my heart ache a little.

I open my eyes to watch him return to the kitchen. Lacy swirls of frost on the windows melt like tears down sun-warmed glass. Beautiful. Temporary.

I'm a year older today. And a day closer to leaving Jake.

I'm not sure which one is more depressing.

Sitting up in bed, I stretch my arms overhead and softly say, "Merry Christmas, Jake," because I know how much he loves this day.

He pours the tea and joins me in front of the fire. I criss-cross my legs in front of me and bundle the quilts around my waist and my lap, then I gratefully take the tea and breathe in the spiced steam. Even with a swirl of milk, it smells delightfully strong, scented with cinnamon, cloves and creamy citrus.

Jake has something small tucked behind him. He reaches over to nudge a lock of hair behind my ear, letting a knuckle trail down my cheek before he withdraws his hand. But he doesn't wish me Happy Christmas back. Softly, he says instead, "Happy birthday, Evie."

My insides warm, my throat tightens. Jake's eyes are gem-bright as he watches my face. They remind me of an Adirondack lake in winter—clear,

honey-colored water, tinted green by ancient pines and balsam reflected from shore. Sometimes shot with gold when sunshine glazes the surface. I'll never be able to visit one of those lakes again without remembering this moment.

Jake hands me a flat rectangular box wrapped in ivory damask paper and a cream velvet ribbon. I set my tea aside on the hearthstone so I can hold the bundle against my chest with both hands. I give him a playful, stern look. "I thought we agreed, no gifts."

"This isn't—"

"I'm kidding, Jake," I laugh. "I got you something, too."

"Love, this isn't a Christmas gift," he says gently. "It's a birthday gift."

That lump in my throat is back, this time spreading deep into my chest. I want to savor this moment, slowly lifting the folded edges of the beautiful paper until it falls open on its own.

It's a hardback book. A very old one. Bound in faded blue cloth, with a castle vignette on the front. There's some discoloration on the edges, and light fraying at the corners.

It's a first edition of *I Capture the Castle*. "Jake," I whisper.

"I know you've read it many times. There's some new material in this one."

As I open the cover, an envelope slips into my lap. I open it slowly. It's a handwritten letter by Dodie Smith, the author, to one of her friends. All about how the book came to be.

It's extraordinary.

"Jake, this is—"

"Do you like it?" He sets his own tea aside.

"It's the most wonderful gift anyone has ever given me. Thank you." I lean over and kiss him, long and slow.

Smiling, he mumbles against my lips. "What's this about a gift for me, then?"

I grimace. Compared to his exquisitely unexpected present, my gift for him is ridiculous.

Jake looks at me sideways. "Are you OK?"

With my thumbnail between my teeth, I get up from the bed to get his present from my bag. His eyes light up as I hand it down to him. A blush floods my cheeks as I settle back into the quilts. He opens the small box and takes out the mug inside, holding it up to the light like it's the Holy Grail.

Painted on the side is a cartoon alligator wearing an elaborate white barrister's wig, and the words "SEE YOU LATER, LITIGATOR."

Jake's laugh is loud and delighted. I've never been so embarrassed in my life.

I cover my face. "You're not a barrister. You don't even drink coffee at home—"

Jake sets the mug aside so he can lift my hands away. He nudges my chin up to look me in the eyes, and says, "I love it, Evie. Truly."

* * *

When we arrive at the house, classic Christmas carols stream from the vintage record player in the hall. The air is toasty, a tapestry of rich roasting foods, fresh coffee, and mingled traces of perfume. Everyone greets us at the door, something bubbly in pretty antique flutes in hand. They look like mimosas to me, but I get a very quick education—here, they call them Buck's fizz. And they're *way* generous on the champagne.

"Happy Christmas!" Indi says.

"Nice of you to join us," says Genny, while Ewan gives us a warm smile.

"We shoveled the path hours ago," Miles says. "We were starting to think you'd driven off in the night."

We've just entered the kitchen on the way to the living room when there's another commotion at the front door. We all flow back into the front hall like a merry swarm of bees to greet the newcomers.

"We're here!" A woman with pink cheeks and a chic shag of thick ginger hair stomps snow from her boots. "But only just." She's breathless, somehow managing to carry a bundle of presents, a rolling luggage and a red-cheeked, annoyed-looking baby.

Behind her, another woman says, "If it ever snows like this again at Christmas, we're staying in London. Sorry, darlings." She's nearly as tall as Jake, with the same dark hair and fair complexion as Miles. She must be Cait, and the other woman must be Maeve. She's similarly loaded down, also carrying a baby, a bulging diaper bag and another bundle of presents.

"You act like we just endured an Antarctic expedition," scoffs a third woman. She's also tall, and her eyes sparkle with mischief. "I've had mammograms more stressful than that drive." This must be Gladys.

The moment after Cait and Maeve drop their bags and pass presents to Helena, they hand the babies to Jake, one by one, muttering, “Happy Christmas, love,” barely glancing at him.

Jake follows. “Which is which?”

Genny gasps. Indi tosses a walnut at his back. And Helena says, “Honestly, Jake.”

“What? The last time I saw them, they were all pink and wrinkly. Now they’re all pink and … less wrinkly.”

“Hazel is the wee one. She’s three months. Watch your hair. She’ll yank your eyebrows straight through your skull.”

“Terra is the one who looks like she’d like to headbutt you in the nose,” Maeve says.

The bigger baby looks at Jake with an indignant scowl, staring him down with the most impressive poker face I’ve ever seen. “Why are your children so *angry*, Cait?” Indi says.

Cait chuckles. “She’s a very tough customer, Jake—”

Jake makes a silly face, and little Terra’s face lights up. She coos at him like a little bird.

“Well, then. I stand corrected.”

Over his shoulder, Jake flashes me a diamond smile, and I save a snapshot of the moment in my memory.

* * *

Wine has been poured, side dishes are bubbly from the oven, and a turkey with crackling golden skin sits at the center of the dining-room table. Helena stands with hands clasped to her chest. “What a perfect, perfect day. Welcome home, my loves.” She turns to me. “And a very special welcome to you, Evie. We are so very happy you’re here.” She raises her brows and tips her head down. “A little bird told me that today is not *just* Christmas.”

Under the table, Jake lays a warm hand on my thigh. Everyone around the table smiles, warmly murmuring “Happy birthday.” Despite wanting to crawl under the tablecloth, I meet their smiles with one of my own. I look to Jake last, pressing my lips between my teeth to keep from coming entirely unglued. “Thank you,” I mouth to him. Louder, I repeat it for everyone else. “Thank you so much.”

“Shall we toast?” Helena lifts her wine and holds her head high. “To properly celebrated birthdays. To Christmas. To family.” Glasses joyfully clink as everyone echoes, “*To family*.”

Each table setting has a small tube-shaped gift placed above the plate. They’re the length of a soda can, but a bit narrower, with ribbons cinched at each end to create frills of festive wrapping paper. Before reaching for the food, everyone picks up the little bundle in front of them, grinning and chattering. The excitement is palpable, but I have no idea why. Jake leans towards me and says, “Christmas crackers,” but it just makes me more confused.

I mirror what the others do, crossing my arms in front of me to make a human chain, each of us linked by our hands on opposite ends of a wrapped cracker. “Pull, on the count of three,” Jake tells me, as Helena counts down, “Three, two, one—”

I startle at the first pop, and it’s followed by lively little cracks around the table. Trinkets tumble out of the torn-open tubes. A miniature screwdriver in mine, a plastic jumping frog in Jake’s, bottle openers, whistles and keyrings in others. There are also tiny scrolls with truly awful jokes written on them (mine reads, “*What do you call a flatulent Santa’s helper? A smelf*”), and a colorful piece of folded paper I’m not sure what to do with. Jake is unfolding his, so I watch to catch on. It’s a paper crown. He sets it on his head and grins, nodding to mine in my hands. “Go on, then.” Around the table, everyone else is arranging their own on their heads.

Mine rains glitter as I open it. Once it’s fully unfurled, my breath catches. It’s a crown, too, but bigger than the others. The paper itself is covered in cartoon dinosaurs and balloons, with “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” printed all over. Someone wrote “B-DAY GIRL” in glue and covered it in glitter. I glance up and around the table. All the other crowns are made from the same paper. And everyone is wearing one.

“Felix was our most recent birthday before yours, Evie,” Genny laughs. “We only had the dino wrapping paper.”

Just like that, I’ve been folded into this family’s traditions. This is so much more than a simple paper crown. I did nothing to *earn* this. I didn’t have to chase it or ask for it. I didn’t hope for it and have to brace for the inevitable disappointment. I’m being celebrated, fully *seen* by each person at this table, even though they barely know me beyond a bit of small talk and whatever Jake has told them.

Jake.

Tears well in my eyes. They're seeing me through *his* lens, not the one I see *myself* through. What would it feel like to see myself as he does? God, the time I spend here is a cruel paradox. Every moment I'm with Jake, I fall deeper into the possibility of *us*. But every moment also brings me closer to the day I have to leave him.

I've got four more days to savor this while it lasts. To bank it deep in my bones so it stays with me forever, no matter what happens once our time runs out.

I finally lift my paper crown onto my head, and everyone cheers.

* * *

Along with the turkey, we have roasted carrots, parsnips, and Brussels sprouts with pancetta. Curls of steam rise from a dish of creamy bread sauce. The potatoes have craggy, beautifully crisp salt-dusted edges outside and lusciously fluffy insides. Roasties have ruined me for all other potatoes in perpetuity. Conversation flows freely. We wear the paper crowns and take turns reading the jokes from the Christmas crackers. Jake keeps his free hand on my thigh throughout the meal, and Nat King Cole, Andy Williams, and Ella Fitzgerald croon Christmas tunes from the record player in the hall.

Later, the Christmas pudding is doused in brandy and set alight, filling the air with boozy, smoky sweetness. At the same time, I'm presented with a vanilla cupcake with a single lit candle shaped like a triceratops. Miles jokes about keeping the fire and rescue service on retainer if we insist on setting anything else on fire. And there's laughter. The plentiful kind, loud and loose.

I'm endlessly grateful when they don't insist on singing the "Happy Birthday" song, but there *are* calls for me to make a wish before I blow out the dinosaur candle. I glance at Jake, and his eyes are luminous when he smiles over at me.

I haven't had a lot of practice making birthday wishes, but I'm sure this will be the easiest one I'll ever make.

* * *

After lunch, we open gifts in the living room. I'm in a cozy chair, and Jake is on the floor in front of me, leaning back with an arm crooked over my lap. Enoki is curled in the empty space between my thigh and the chair's arm, while Elle is nestled above my head in the cushioned top of the chair. I have the urge to take a selfie to send to Maddie and ask her to show Claudia.

Helena casually asks if anyone has wished their father a happy Christmas, which earns groans from the siblings. I don't miss how they all glance at Jake.

"I'm sure Jakey will handle that one for us," Indi says. "Taking one for the team."

Jake tenses. I'd be lying if I said it didn't churn up even more questions about his father. It's equally curious to me how quickly everyone moves on from it. Like they're accustomed to putting him out of their minds with absolutely no hesitation. It's not the same for Jake, though. I lay a hand on his shoulder, letting my fingertips coast along his neck above his sweater. As soon as I make contact, I feel his body relax against my legs.

The kids all score piles of gifts. I learn that the Tiffany bag I saw Jake holding at the airport the day we met contained gifts for the women in his life. For Genny, an emerald pendant on a short chain with a sturdy lobster clasp. Leather card wallets in cream and Tiffany blue for Cait and Maeve. Indi gets a bold chain bracelet that makes her squeal and hop out of her chair. Helena and Gladys each get floral silk scarves, which they immediately conspire to share.

Genny has knitted hats for everyone, but they're all too small or way too big. The pink one she gifts to Indi unintentionally looks like the business end of a penis, and Indi says it's her favorite gift this year.

And then, there's me. Felix and Enzo each bring me a wrapped gift. All eyes are on me once again, but the attention makes me feel warm and held instead of scrutinized. The smaller box is wrapped in Christmas paper, and inside is a delicate necklace from the boutique in the village. There are two charms on it—a quill, and a linden leaf. Jake helps me fasten it around my neck, and it hangs beautifully next to the black cab charm he bought me on the Southbank.

The bigger box is wrapped in the dinosaur birthday paper. It's a brand-new pair of my very own wellies. Knee-high and navy blue, with a vibrant print of wild flowers in pink, red, and cream. Everyone laughs when I

nudge Jake out of the way to pull them on. “Thank you,” I say, glancing around the room. “Truly.”

* * *

After gifts, the kids go down for naps, and Ewan brings mince pies, warm from the oven, for us to snack on while we play games. They’re served with clotted cream, and I take a heaping dollop and eat it like custard. We play Who Am I?, a game where the name of a person or object is written on a sticky note, then stuck to our foreheads so everyone can see, but we can’t. Then we take turns asking yes or no questions until we figure out what—or who—we are.

Early rounds are easy, but it goes fully off the rails on Gladys’s turn.

“Am I famous?” says Gladys.

Helena makes a thoughtful face. “Rather infamous, I’d say.”

“Am I a person?” Gladys continues.

“No,” says Indi.

“An object, then?”

“Yes,” says Ewan.

“Large?”

Cait chuckles. “In reputation only.”

“Right. So, I’m small.” Gladys glances thoughtfully at the ceiling, thinking. “Am I valuable, then?”

Across the table, Genny and Maeve hoot with laughter.

“Bloody priceless,” Jake says.

Gladys looks genuinely confused now. “Am I food?”

“Oh my god.” Miles props an elbow on the table, cradling his forehead in his hand.

“Maybe if you’re Enoki,” Jake deadpans.

Suddenly, Gladys gasps. “Am I that ridiculous poo-shaped rubber from the Christmas crackers?”

Everyone roars with laughter. I’m caught up in the merriment too, but I have no idea what is happening here. Jake leans in close. His face is red. “Over here, rubbers are pencil erasers.”

“Ahh.”

“You wee menaces kept hiding it all over the house,” Helena says.

Jake uses his thumb to wipe away a tear, turning to me again. “Whoever found it would hide it in a new spot for someone else to find.”

“We never figured out who put it on top of the turkey at Christmas lunch,” says Genny.

Ewan clears his throat.

Genny playfully knocks him on the arm. “You didn’t.”

“God, I would’ve loved to have grown up in this family,” I say.

“Grown up?” Indi laughs. “This was just three years ago!”

* * *

It’s late when Jake and I walk back to the cottage. I’m wearing my new wellies, carrying a plate of mince pies. It begins to snow again, but this time, it’s a gentle flurry. The flakes are the size of postage stamps, slowly easing down from a black, crystalline-cold sky.

For the first time ever, it feels like a privilege to share my birthday with Christmas.

“Jake.” I stop on the stone path, and he turns to face me. We’re faintly spotlit by the lantern in front of the tiny greenhouse. Patiently, he watches. Waits. “I … I just—” There are so many things I want to say, but the weight of it all is bigger than words.

Thank you. I’m in love with you. Ask me to stay. Please.

“I—”

I can’t.

Jake closes the distance between us, cradling my face in his gloved hands. He bends low to touch the tip of his nose to mine. Then he whispers, simply, “I know.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

One day after Christmas

The morning of Boxing Day, I wake up before Jake does. My body must know that my time here is ticking down fast, and it doesn't want to waste it in sleep. It's another way I've started to become unrecognizable to myself.

He's on his belly with his face turned towards me, hands stacked under his pillow. One leg is straight, the other bent at the knee with his hip rotated outwards. Like he's in freefall. The thin sheet that covered him in the night is pooled at his waist, clinging to the taut curves of his ass. He's a study in textural contrasts. His lips are pushed into a gentle pout, and his thick hair is a soft wave across his forehead. But his cheekbones and jaw are almost geometric in their angles.

He rolls over onto his back, and rumbles, "Morning," without opening his eyes.

"Morning," I say back.

He arches his back to stretch, making a throaty growling sound that ends on an explosive sigh. Then he yawns, squeezing his eyes shut. I love vulnerable morning-Jake. His softness is an invitation for me to meet him with my own. A vulnerability, that's what our collective noun would be. A parade of elephants. A flamboyance of flamingoes. A vulnerability of us.

He cracks an eyelid. "How can I surprise you with breakfast in bed if you're awake before me? Who are you, and what have you done with my Evie?"

* * *

There's a brisk tap at the bathroom door, even though it's half open. Through the steam-fogged shower glass a moment later, I see Jake pop his head in. "Can I come in?"

“Yes,” I laugh. “There’s no part of me left that you haven’t already seen.”

I’ve just closed my eyes and lathered cleanser onto my face when he says, “You all right?” Warm water streams down my forehead, over my cheeks. I hear a brief shuffling sound. A beat later, I feel Jake step into the shower behind me. His big hands settle on my shoulders.

When my face is fully rinsed, I turn to face him, slinging my arms loose around his waist. “Why do you ask?”

“I heard one of your epic sighs from the kitchen. The sighs you do when your mind is racing about something.” He cups his hands on either side of my head, smoothing my wet hair back from my forehead, coasting his thumbs across my cheekbones and over my brows.

“Ah. That was the sigh of a woman who finally believes she could fall in love.” I stare at the notch between Jake’s collarbones. His pulse is visible, steady, and strong. He swallows hard and slow, and I watch his Adam’s apple plunge and rebound beneath glistening wet skin.

“With Christmas,” he adds, almost too quietly to hear over the fall of water around us.

“Of course,” I murmur, pressing my forehead to his sternum. “Obviously.”

He tilts my head up to press his mouth to mine in a lush, lingering kiss. Sensual instead of sexual. Steam billows around us in the small space. Jake slowly guides my head back so the water cascades over my hair. He bends to trail his lips along the exposed column of my throat, murmuring, “Let me take care of you.”

He shampoos my hair, untangling the strands with far greater tenderness than I ever afford myself. Working firm fingertips into my scalp, he finds all the tiny places my tension hides—the base of my skull, the narrow threads of muscle behind my ears that ache from clenching my teeth in my sleep. He lathers my body with swirls of a washcloth loaded with soap scented like peppermint cream. His movements are tender, deliberate. Intended to calm as much as to clean. He cups warm water between my thighs, soothing the lovely ache left by a week of exuberant sex.

How wonderfully odd and unexpected that I arrived at this moment with him. A month ago, we didn’t know the other existed. I’m sure there’s still yogurt in my fridge in Queens that’s older than my relationship with him. But still, here we are.

I've spent enough time in therapy to logically understand the concept of a mindset shift. But I've always been able to intellectualize my skepticism to a point that it's made any sort of change feel dangerously naïve. *Safety* was the missing ingredient. Now, I can play with mindset shifts like I'm a DJ and my brain is a console of sliders and knobs. No matter what I choose, the outcome will still be music.

This entire trip, I've clung to the version of myself that resists attachment, thinking it will protect me from the pain and exhaustion of an inevitable rupture. But after yesterday, I realize I'm *already* attached. I have been for a while. And I'm exhausted by pretending I'm not.

It's time to learn how to rest.

* * *

We get to the house so late for Boxing Day lunch, everyone is leaving the table by the time we arrive. Jake manages to snag a turkey sandwich as Miles pulls him away to split firewood. Helena and Gladys have already left for the village to sledge with the boys, and Maeve disappears around a corner with both baby girls asleep on her shoulders.

I go with Genny, Cait, and Indi to the living room, where a hearth fire fills the air with sweet warmth. Ewan comes in, dipping down to give Genny a tender kiss before heading to the boot room to bundle up. A moment after I snuggle into a cozy chair, Jake comes into the room, silently. In three purposeful strides, he's got a hand hooked around the back of my head, and with one hand planted on the armrest, he kisses me. Thoroughly. Then, he doesn't say a word as he sweeps out of the room again.

Gently, Genny says, "The way he looks at you, it's like he's been searching for a key he lost ages ago, and he finally found it. Every time, Evie."

Indi leans back on her hands. "What she's trying to say is—he's obsessed with you."

"God, I know." The words trip past my teeth before I can bite them back. I can't *believe* I just said that out loud to Jake's sisters.

Cait makes a cartoonishly lascivious face at Indi. "Oh, she *knows*."

"Ugh," Genny groans. "Cease and desist, tarts. I was trying to have a sweet moment with our Evie."

I'm definitely sweating now. "I just meant … he's, ah, a very clear communicator."

Indi cackles and drums her feet against the rug.

Not helping. I'm definitely making it worse.

"Right." Genny slaps her hands down on her thighs and starts to get up. "Ta-ta, then. I'm late for my flight to the far side of the moon."

"Sit down, spoilsport. As if you've never had sex. You've got three kids," Indi teases.

I can't imagine this kind of connection with my own sisters. Being alone with these women makes me feel like I'm fully immersed in this world, independent of Jake. In this small way, they're becoming *my* people as well.

"I think I'm in love with him."

The words drop like a stone between us. Genny freezes, bent at the waist, mid-sit. She extends her arms out in front of her, palms down, as if she's just stuck the landing of a gymnastics routine. Then she slowly lowers herself back down in the chair. Indi keeps her back straight as she sits up from her lounging posture like she's a vampire in a vintage horror film rising out of a crypt. Cait rubs her hands together, grinning like a goblin. "*Now* we're getting somewhere," she says.

I love their silliness. What a privilege, to be a part of this candid little sanctuary. Unfortunately, now I have no idea where to go with this conversation. "I know it's impossible."

Cait softly clucks her tongue. "Is it, though? I think most things people call impossible are just the hard things they don't want to try for."

"Ouch," I laugh.

"Honestly, I've never understood that phrase, anyway. *Falling* in love," Genny says. "There's no process, Evie. One moment, you aren't in love, and then suddenly you are. There's no checklist or invisible finish line you have to cross before you can say you're in love. If you feel like you're in love, you're in love."

* * *

I get a text from Maddie wishing me a belated happy birthday and a merry Christmas. She sends me a grinning selfie, and when she asks for one from me in return, I don't hesitate to ask Genny, Cait, and Indi to join in. They

crowd around, pressing their faces into the frame with me as the centerpiece.

Later, once the conversation shifts away from Jake and me, I excuse myself from the living room to rein in my thoughts. I wander down a hall I haven't been in yet, and even though I'm exploring alone in a home that isn't mine, I don't feel like an intruder. Except for the nursery where Maeve naps with the babies, all the bedroom doors are open, giving me a glimpse inside.

The rooms look like teenage time capsules. Soft pastel carpets, floral bedspreads, and fairy lights draped over vanity mirrors with snapshots of smiling, youthful faces tucked into the edges. Crystal suncatchers in the windows, pennant garlands crisscrossing the ceilings. Posters on the walls of horses and *Doctor Who*, reproductions of Monet and Degas, pop icons like Kylie Minogue and Dido and a bunch of others I don't recognize.

In the hall, the walls are packed with framed photos ranging from candid snapshots to formal portraits. Young Jake on a beach somewhere, his hair soaked and sandy, watching something intently just off-camera. A primary school portrait of him in a tiny suit jacket, a crooked tie, and a valiant attempt at looking serious. Another of all four siblings in festive pajamas on Christmas Day, surrounded by a sea of torn wrapping paper. Jake and Miles as teenagers, standing on the middle rung of a horse paddock's gate, squinting into the sun.

I see this boy in the Jake I know now. The same set of his shoulders, the paradoxical warmth and reserve of his expressions. The occasional wide-open laugh. The photos are a vivid reminder of the nature of time. Of what fate really means. If any of the moments captured here had happened differently, our paths would have never crossed.

Choices made in parallel.

There's a family portrait where Jake looks to be around ten or eleven. They're on the terrace of a home even more stately than Marleigh. The Frost siblings stand like stairsteps in front of a vibrantly gorgeous Helena in an emerald-green ankle-length coat. The man who stands beside her holds baby Indi in one arm, and his other hand rests on Jake's shoulder.

There's a smiley sticker over the man's face. This must be the senior Frost, then. In this photo, Jake is the only person not smiling. His father is the one little advent door he won't let me peek behind. I have the unhinged urge to peel the sticker back with my fingernail, but I move on.

The room at the end of the hall is larger than the other bedrooms. A shared room. One side has a green plaid quilt on the bed, and bookshelves loaded with fantasy novels and nature field guides. On the walls, beautifully illustrated human and animal anatomy posters, a chart of the Milky Way. All three of the *Lord of the Rings* movie posters—bonus points for those.

The other side has to be Jake's. It's almost as shockingly sparse as his penthouse flat in London. The quilt is heather grey, and the wall is decorated only with a grid of amateur photography in individual frames. A mounted shelf above the headboard is lined with small trophies, and there's a small bookcase filled with comic books still in their protective plastic sleeves. Obviously, it's been more than a decade since he actually lived here, but it's missing the inhabited vibe his siblings' spaces seem to give off.

"I'm glad you're here," Jake says behind me, and my whole body lights up. It's the first time we've been alone together since we left the cottage this morning. "There's someone I want you to meet." He steps past me into the room, crosses to his bed and hands me the small plushie from his pillow. "This is Meatpie."

It's squat and stocky. A bear, I think? Its fur is entirely gone in some places, obviously from being well-loved by a child. I finally meet Jake's eyes.

He sits on the bed, patting the space next to him for me to sit. "He's the only toy from my childhood I still have. Cait hid it in her things when our father binned all of my other stuff. He said something about how young men rely on dignity, not teddies. I was thirteen, I think?"

The immediate sting of tears floods my eyes. My heart breaks for the little Jake I saw in the photos. But it's not only that. This eruption of emotion is about the man Jake is *now*.

A man who could be mine for the taking.

The tears overflow when I blink, plopping onto Meatpie's belly.

Handing the plushie back to Jake, I sniff hard and tilt my head back to contain the tears, but all it does is make them race down my cheekbones and into my ears. "I'm so sorry, I don't know why—" I swipe the heels of my palms across my cheeks.

He chuckles and rubs one of the bear's worn ears between his thumb and forefinger. "It's all right. This isn't the first time he's been in the splash zone, love."

* * *

Later, Jake and I take a Boxing Day walk in the woods, and I get to give my new wellies their first taste of clean Cotswolds mud. The chill snaps against my face and neck, but the sun is so bright I imagine I can smell it. Crisp, bright, and pure.

Jake's hair is winter wheat in the sunshine. He's rugged today, dressed in flannel, jeans, boots. Before we're off, I zip his coat up to his chin and tug his hat down to fully cover his ears. His nose is red and his voice is raspy from the cold, and he smells like weathered wool and that unique alchemy of cold air on warm skin after hours outdoors.

Being here makes me realize how nature-starved I am. New York City has green space, and Central Park is more wild than most people outside the city realize. There's also a surprising amount of gorgeous nature within day-trip driving distance from New York, but I never seem to find the time to go. And even if I did, it's not the same as this.

"I really love your family, Jake. I've never met people like them."

A brisk wind makes the tree branches shed snow like glitter.

"Well, you've never met anyone like me, either." A playful brow quirks upwards, his voice low. "Makes sense I'd come from this sort of stock, yeah?"

"One year, when I was still in college, Maddie and I went home for Christmas with one of her friends. They were a super-close family, too, but it was chaotic and overwhelming for me. It seemed exhausting. After that, I really thought my family's disconnectedness was preferable."

"Are you saying you can see yourself spending more time with my family?"

I'm sprouting tiny roots, like I'm a windblown seed that's finally landed where I'm meant to stay. I could spend my life in a place like this. I don't answer with words, but I clutch his hand tighter. "Why do you live all alone in London when you have such an incredible family here in the country?"

Jake's tilted smile is fleeting. "*Technically*, Cait and Maeve are in London too—"

I fix him with a mock-stern look. "Jake."

His soft chuckle is more rueful than amused. For a moment, he presses his lips together, and his jaw flexes like he's sorting around for the right

words. When he finally responds, his voice cracks a bit. It's one more thing that breaks my heart and stitches it back up in the same breath. "When we get back to London, I'll show you."

* * *

Two days after Christmas

We say our goodbyes to Jake's family mid-morning on the day after Boxing Day. There are no tears, only hearty hugs and see-you-laters. They know I'm leaving early next week, but it's like they know I'll be back someday.

I'm utterly in love with his family, despite every warning that pings like sonar inside my heart. Getting close to a family means there's more people to lose. If feeling like this was a choice, why would I choose it again? When I know how it aches to lose it?

The scenery from my car window during the trip back to London is the same as it was when we came, simply in reverse. But now I see it as a woman leaving a place that feels like a home, rather than someone journeying to meet strangers. Jake is quiet on the drive back, but it's a warm, expansive silence, not a distant one. It's like he knows I need time to sit with what I've just experienced.

I've finally accepted where this is going. Love doesn't have to feel like a test I might fail. We can figure this out. Together.

We've reached the outskirts of London when Jake says, "We've had eleven dates, you know. I promised you twelve. Are you up for a bit of shopping and dinner?"

And just like that, we're back to where we began, dating in London. And this, too, feels a lot like coming home.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Two days after Christmas

From the outside, Liberty looks less like a department store and more like an old Tudor house, as if it had been plucked from the past and dropped into the middle of London. Inside, the central atrium is multiple stories of open space with a glass ceiling, all dark timber framing and carved scrollwork along the open galleries at the sides. Steeped in expensive perfumes and fresh fabrics and polished wood, I breathe in a world that feels both luxurious and alien to me.

"Ah, Mr. Frost, it's been a while!"

A woman approaches with a wide smile on her face. She looks to be in her middle fifties, wearing a fitted midi dress in a stunning pigmented floral print. Her hair is swept back into a neat bun; she's dripping in class. The only hint she's an employee is the name badge on her lapel that reads "Lorraine."

Jake bends to kiss the woman on each cheek. "Lorraine, a pleasure as always."

"And this must be Evie." Lorraine extends her hands to me, and I take them, even though I'm not sure if I'm supposed to.

"Nice to meet you, Lorraine."

She twinkles at me. "Oh, you're lovely. I'm going to enjoy this. I'm your personal shopper for the afternoon. Please, follow me."

As she leads us through the store, I whisper to Jake, "I thought you said you don't have a personal stylist."

He slides an arm around my waist. "I don't. But I do have four sisters, a mother, and a grandmother. Lorraine has helped me find the perfect gift on more than one occasion."

"But how did you arrange this on such short notice?"

Jake answers with a wry, playful smile. "I think, as far as they're concerned, I also spend the perfect amount of money."

On the second floor, Lorraine directs us to a private fitting suite. Inside, the lighting is soft and warm. Champagne awaits on a glass table. Full-length mirrors surround us, and an oversized lounge chair sits opposite them. A rail loaded with dresses stands near the wall. Four different cream sweaters sit on a side table, neatly folded. They look so soft in this light, they seem to have a misty haze around them. I let my fingertips trail across each one. Cashmere.

Lorraine quietly backs out of the room. Jake casually follows her to lock the door once she's gone. Behind me, he says, "I wasn't sure which one you'd prefer."

I turn to face him. "I was wearing a stained cream cashmere sweater on the flight here."

Jake crosses his arms and leans a hip against one of the oversized chairs. "I know."

I shake my head. "But that's the only time you'd have seen it."

"I memorized everything about you the first moment I saw you, Evie."

Pressing my knuckles to my lips, I cross the room to where the dresses wait. Heavy gold sequins, shimmering green velvet, a sparkly champagne minidress I'd never have been bold enough to select for myself. Richly hued florals like Lorraine's. At least a dozen more.

One of the maxi dresses gives distinct wedding-dress vibes. Ivory velvet with a cowl neck and spaghetti straps. A split in the fabric hits mid-thigh, giving it extra movement. I'm feeling cheeky, so I decide to start with it. It fits like a fantasy.

"How did she know my size?" I turn to face Jake.

"I've had my hands all over you for most of December, my love. I'm good at estimating."

Teasing, I say, "I thought I told you not to call me 'love'—"

"Is that what I said?" His mouth is curved up in a tiny smile, but his eyes are heated. "Turn around."

I turn to face my reflection again, watching him prowl towards me in the glass. He stops behind me and slowly winds a thick lock of my hair around his palm. His touch is feather light. Leaning over my shoulder, he meets my eyes in the mirror. "May I?"

Whatever he's asking for, my answer is a very breathy "Yes."

The fist in my hair pulls taut, and an involuntary moan slips off my tongue. Jake tips my head back to expose my throat. Pleasure-pain in my

scalp spools down my neck and gathers heavy in my breasts.

"Jake." The tension between my legs is hot and swift. "What—"

Without hesitation or sound, his broad palm flattens above my pubic bone to jerk my body fully against his. Inch by inch, he walks his fingers down my thigh, bunching the fabric into his hand until the triangle of my panties is exposed in the mirror. Black. Lace. Low-cut. A provocative contrast to the plush ivory of the dress.

I arch my back, silently begging him to touch me. He breathes out through clenched teeth, the heat of it stitching goosebumps down my arms, raising my nipples to aching attention.

He's hunched over me, urgently hard against the split of my ass. Strands of my hair cling to his mouth. He slides his hand under the lace, entering me with two firm, flattened fingers. He's not easing me into this at all, but I'm already slick for him. He pounds out the same unyielding pace on my clit that I've seen him use on himself. Perfect, relentless, tugging friction.

"Don't come, darling." Jake doesn't slow the pace of his strokes, even as he's telling me not to pop off. "This isn't our dress, and you're a messy little love, aren't you?"

I'm so wet I can feel it on my thighs. My bare toes dig into the plush carpet, my hips jerk against him. A stitch busts in the crotch of my panties.

"Please," I gasp. Knees trembling, I plant my feet wider so I don't collapse. Eyes squeezed shut, bottom lip bitten to the point of pain, I let my head fall back against him.

He's locked against me, his chin digging into my shoulder, his free arm surging upwards to take my breast fully in hand. "Are you asking me to stop?"

"No." I gulp air like I'm drowning.

"Then tell me—" He squeezes his eyes shut and shudders against me. His rhythm falters for a beat, and he makes a strangled little noise in his throat. "God *damn* it," he breathes. "Tell me what you want."

"Let me—"

Before the words are out, he doubles his pace and I chase the friction like it's the only thing keeping me alive. I vaguely wonder if there are cameras in here, and I almost laugh, because not only is it a bit late to worry about that—the thought of it just turns me on even *more*. An orgasm throbs to ravenous life between my legs, exploding me wide open. I slip down Jake's

chest, grinding and bucking against his hand as pleasure rips me into orbit. He yanks me back up with a rolling, satisfied growl.

Three minutes. That's all it took.

The skirt of the dress slithers down my legs as Jake lets it unspool from his fingers. He sidesteps to stand next to me in front of the mirror, chest heaving, cheeks red with a raging flush.

"Look what you made me do, Evie."

Next to the prominent imprint of his erection, a wet spot slowly spreads across his crotch.

I laugh, panting. "Good thing you wore your long coat."

* * *

Jake makes all the arrangements for delivery of the dresses, so when a dozen white boxes arrive at his flat later that afternoon, I'm stunned. He bought every frock I showed even the tiniest interest in. I feel like a Regency romance heroine being visited by the modiste's staff.

"Jake, I will literally *never* have anywhere to wear these the rest of my life."

He responds with one of his lazy, tilted smiles. "We'll see."

* * *

Since my bag is already here from our Christmas trip, I dress for our dinner date at Jake's place. I choose the champagne sequined mini with long fitted sleeves and a scoop neck. It makes my collarbones and legs look incredible. These heels will make me nearly as tall as Jake, and I don't bother with jewelry. The low chignon I attempt for my hair comes out much better than I'd expected. A smoky eye, a nude lip and a dewy shimmer on my cheekbones, and I'm done.

When I emerge, Jake doesn't say a word, but his body goes tense. His brows boost high on his forehead. He takes me in completely, then lets out a breath and mouths, *Wow*.

And *him*. My god.

He's in a midnight-blue dinner jacket that's fitted to his waist, satin peak lapels accentuating his wide shoulders. Flat-fronted black pants taper to a

clean stop over glossy cap-toe Oxfords, and he's got the waves of his hair tidy and sideswept away from his face.

Mine.

* * *

Our black cab pulls up to the Shard. Jake steps out first, extending his hand to steady me when I crane my neck to look up. The building just keeps going, a beam of neon light soaring into the night sky. It gives me a bit of vertigo, but it fades when Jake's hand squeezes mine.

A host greets us in a gleaming lobby, and after a short exchange with Jake, directs us to the elevator. We're whisked into the air so quickly the rising floor numbers on the LED screen change faster than I can blink, and my ears pop. I'm disoriented for a moment when the doors open. The space before us is dark, lit only by low lamps and chandeliers, and candles on tables. It's striking, but to me, it's obvious what the real feature here is. It's London itself.

The walls of the space are floor-to-ceiling glass, revealing a glittering city beyond. The lights seem so tiny, so far away, that I feel like I'm on the precipice of space, and a single step forward will launch me into a sparkling abyss.

Then I feel Jake's hand on my back, and I'm tethered. Safe.

There's a low hum of conversation and occasional laughter. There's not much privacy to be had, and I think our table next to the window is as secluded as it possibly gets here. Beneath the table, Jake extends his foot towards me, as if he knows how unsteady I'm feeling. I let my own foot nestle next to his.

He's going to ask me to stay. That's what tonight is for. It has to be.

Obviously, I don't have my journal with me here, so I can't ground myself in a pro–con list in a literal way like I might otherwise. Instead, a list begins populating my head, and it's the first time I've had a pro list—staying here, with Jake—that's significantly longer than the con list. It writes itself in invisible ink, occupying every space inside my mind. Like graffiti.

I am in love with this man.

And I think he's in love with me.

I wonder what we might do for New Year's Eve—

"Are you OK?" Jake says. The low light seems to brighten his eyes instead of darkening them. They look like sea glass.

"Oh, yes." I smooth my hands over my bare knees. "I'm just … really happy."

Jake's smile is soft. "Me too."

I have an absurd image of us slipping off our shoes, tossing quilts and cushions into this little space, and enjoying our meal in an Evie-Jake nest with our beloved city glittering below us like the world's grandest festive light display. The other diners would stare and whisper behind their hands—half because they can't possibly understand, the other half because they do, and they wish they were us.

Our conversation flows like the Thames—god, I'm really becoming insufferable about London—but one thing notably absent is talk of convincing me to love Christmas, or debating realness, or any of my other hang-ups that threaded through so many of our previous dates.

"I have things I want to tell you tonight," he says. "They, ah, have to be in a certain order."

Tell me you love me, Jake.

For the first time all evening, I'm genuinely nervous, and it has nothing to do with the dizzying altitude. It's because Jake suddenly looks more on-edge than I've ever seen him.

"When we were at Marleigh yesterday, and you asked me about why I lived so differently from the rest of my family—I promised you more about that. But before I say anything else, I want you to know that I've spent a very long time feeling stuck." He takes my hand, cradling it in both of his in the center of the table. "I'm finally starting to see a way forward, now."

From the corner of my eye, a dark reflection in the polished floor stretches towards us, but it doesn't move with the same controlled bustle as the servers.

The next few moments are something out of a movie. A ruthlessly handsome man approaches. He's got gunmetal-gray hair and the same lithe, long lines as Jake. I don't need Jake to tell me this man is his father. There's a woman with him, but she stays back a bit, her expression impossible to read. She's stunning in a black velvet dress. Nearly as tall as Jake's father, her dark brown eyes make a striking contrast to her alabaster skin and silvery blonde hair.

With a placid, barely there smile, Jake's father says, "Happy Christmas. *Son*."

Jake seems to have been replaced by a flat, faded newsprint version of himself. And he's never held my hand this tightly before. "Lovely to see you. *Dad*." His voice is calm, but the way he says "Dad" is a weapon.

There's no reaction from his father at first. Then he smiles and chuckles softly, as though he suddenly remembered his programming to pantomime humanity. "I wasn't sure if you were still in London. How long has it been —twelve months? Fifteen? Imagine my surprise, seeing you here at the same place and same time as my informal little summit with Ms. Wilding-Wood. She's been managing a great deal of the mess you left."

The blonde woman finally approaches. She sighs. "Jameson, you're being theatrical." She is absolutely not intimidated by Jake's father. I'm reluctantly impressed, but I'm not sure if this means she's an ally, or an enemy even more ruthless than the elder Frost.

"Go on, Jake," his father says. "Would you like to introduce your dinner companion to your fiancée?"

Fiancée.

The word is a domino with a bomb attached. Jameson watches it collide with Jake before it tips to me. I've been relatively impressed with my ability to keep my composure so far this evening, but this cuts me off at the knees.

"Enough," Jake growls.

The woman extends a hand to me and says, "Juno Wilding-Wood." She shifts her eyes to Jake's father, then back to me. "I'm a *friend* of Jake's."

Jake's grip tightens for a beat as I slide my hand from his to shake Juno's. God, I hope she can't feel how I'm sweating.

Before I can speak, Jameson Frost does. "Evangeline McClane, from Queens," he says. "Formerly of *The Juniper*. Fascinating conflict of interest for you, Miss McClane, I'm sure."

Questions swarm at me like a kicked beehive, but I dig deep for serenity. I'm literally shaking in my champagne sequins, but I've still got a power move of my own in my arsenal. I don't look away from Juno as I shake her hand. "I'm Evie," I say, simply. Then I turn my attention to Jake's father. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure we've met?"

Jameson Frost sniffs. "So my son hasn't told you about me, then." He talks with his teeth showing, like he's utterly incapable of hiding his

contempt. “I suppose that also means he hasn’t told you what sort of people we are.”

“Don’t,” Jake warns. He’s wound so tight, I haven’t seen him blink since his father approached. He might as well be a Renaissance sculpture.

Maintaining the elder Frost’s gaze, I raise my chin and slowly blink at him. Then I smile without letting it reach my eyes. “He has not.”

Internally, I’m clinging to serenity by my metaphorical fingernails, but I manage to keep a stony exterior. Despite this man’s obvious cruelty, he’s beautiful, and his resemblance to Jake is so uncanny it makes my insides ache. This is a glimpse of how Jake might look in thirty years. A Jake I’ll never get to know.

Juno clears her throat and steps subtly between Jameson Frost and me. “How do you find London, Miss McClane?”

“Ah—” I quietly clear my throat. “Unexpected.”

“Where are you staying?” she asks, like we’ve just met at a fun, frivolous cocktail party and we’re on the way to becoming fast friends.

I play along, because it’s the only thing I’ve got. I’m not sure if it was her intention, but this tiny moment of bland social nicety is a lifeline. “Covent Garden, a little flat called Paperwhite Holiday Home.” I try to smile, but I can barely move my mouth. “It’s neither flat, nor a home.”

Juno laughs, softly. “It’s taken me years to remember to say jumper instead of sweater, and biscuit instead of cookie.”

In the windows around us, I see reflections of people at adjacent tables. Watching us. Pretending they’re not.

“Right.” Jake scoots his chair back with a loud scrape. “We’re done here.” His nostrils flare in a big inhale, muscles in his jaw bulge and strain so hard I’m worried he might crack a molar. He sets his napkin down with meticulous restraint, then he extends a hand to me. “Evie.”

“Jake—” Juno says.

Jake turns and cuts her off, lightly touching her elbow at the same time he threads his fingers between mine with the opposite hand. “Would you like to come with us?”

Juno swallows, cuts her eyes briefly to me, then she dampens her lips. “I’m fine. You know I am.” A blink later, her serene mask is back in place.

Jake and Juno hold each other’s gaze for a long moment. Then Jake nods, takes my hand, and I have to jog to keep up as we head to the exit.

“I expect you in the office by the new year. That’s not a request,” the elder Frost calls behind us.

Jake freezes. He turns and says, simply, “No.”

Every eye in the room is on us now.

“I made you everything you are, Jameson,” his father says when we turn again to leave.

“Maybe,” Jake adjusts his grip on my hand, “that’s why I’m trying so hard to become someone else.”

* * *

I’ve spent the month wondering if this could possibly be real, and now I have my answer. This thing I started with Jake Frost is—*was*—as real as it gets. If it wasn’t, it wouldn’t hurt this bad knowing I’m about to lose it.



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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Two days after Christmas

The elevator feels even faster on the way down. I'm grateful, but it also makes me feel like my heart and lungs were left suspended in the air at the thirty-first level. I can't breathe when we spill out onto the street in front of the Shard.

My composure is snow in the rain, cold and fragile and melting rapidly away. I'm desperate to put distance between Jake and me, but hustling in high heels on a busy London street in the dark is a guaranteed rolled ankle. I make a break to the left because it seems less crowded than my other options. Behind me, Jake says, "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," I shout over my shoulder. "Away."

"Evie, you have to let me explain," Jake calls after me. "This is exactly what I brought you here to talk about tonight."

I skid to a stop. Other pedestrians flow past me like I'm a stone in a stream. "You planned this?"

"Christ, no. I meant … to tell you everything. Tonight was the first time I've seen my father in person for more than a year."

"Why *here*, Jake?"

"It wasn't—" Jake's gaze slides away and he exhales, hard. "It wasn't the only thing I planned to tell you tonight."

I have things I want to tell you tonight. They, ah, have to be in a certain order.

God, I want to scream at the sky.

"I wanted to make sure it was clear how important this was to me," he says. "How important you are."

"Your dad called you Jameson. Is Jake even your real name?"

"I'm named after him. Jameson Kiernan. Everyone called me JK when I was little. Then that turned into Jakey. Eventually became Jake."

“What’s the name of your firm, Jake?” I already know the answer, but I want to hear him say it.

“Frost, Acton, and Isaacs.”

My heart collapses into my belly. I might throw up. Frost, Acton, and Isaacs is one of the most notoriously ruthless firms undermining environmental progress in the last thirty years.

“Choices made in parallel, Jake? Your firm actively promotes using corporate courts against governments trying to take climate action. For profit. It’s literally not possible for our professional lives to be more different.”

“It’s not my firm,” Jake says. “Why is it easier for you to believe that’s the real me, rather than the man you’ve known this month?”

“I have no idea who you are. How you could … participate in what that firm does. Was the nonprofit a lie?”

“No.”

“Then what, Jake? Make it make sense.”

His jaw flexes like he’s trying to chew his words into something more palatable. “He played you, like he plays everyone and everything else. There’s no winning with him, Evie.”

“How do you know?” I fire back. “Have you even tried?”

Jake clenches and unclenches his hands. “I’ve spent the last three years trying to get out.”

“You try until you succeed. That’s how it works.”

“Ah. Is that how it works? Is that why you’re running like a frightened mouse?”

“This isn’t my fight.”

“So your spine is situational, is it?”

“Yes.” I raise my chin, defiant now. “I’m not equipped to go head-to-head with a man like your father.”

“Neither was I, Evie.” It’s the first time Jake has ever raised his voice when he’s spoken to me. There’s more than frustration in it. It’s pain. He closes his eyes, resetting. Steadier, he says, “From the time I was old enough to understand it, my father always made it clear what my place was. Eldest son. The legacy. I was *assigned* it, Evie. And after Mum divorced him, I accepted it, because it meant I could take care of her and my siblings. School, debt, all the problems they never realized they never had. Including

him. My siblings have never had to deal with him the way I have. *Because* I have."

I back towards a wall, out of the way of the people around us. Jake follows. He catches me by the arm when my heel gets stuck in a crack in the sidewalk, and I stumble. He pulls me gently to him, and I let him take me. Like the night I fell on the ice at Somerset House, he angles his body to shield me from the flow of pedestrians.

"I told you the truth about Juno." Jake mirrors my steps, keeping me close. "She isn't my fiancée. We were never together."

"I believe you."

"And about my father?" When I nod, he says, "So you're not angry?"

"I'm not angry, Jake. I'm sad." I curve my hands around his lapels. "But not for the reasons you think."

"Tell me, then."

"This is all too big for me. The scale of your life—" A tear slips loose, glittering for a moment on the sequins of my sleeve before soaking in. "Juno is like … a symbol. People like her belong in your world. Not me."

Night wind comes in from the north, scattering the waves of his hair. God, this would be so much easier if he were a little less beautiful. I hook both my hands around the back of his neck to pull him down for a kiss. His mouth trembles against mine. "I fell in love with you, Jake. I tried not to. But you had to make it so damned impossible."

He inhales, sharp and ragged. "I love you too, Evie. Thank god—"

I drop my grip on his coat. "No." I pull away. "Let me go."

Confusion clouds his face. "I thought you weren't angry." He stiffens, but he lets me go.

"I'm not. I wish I was. It would make this easier."

"Wait." He looks at me like I'm holding a stick of dynamite in one hand and a lit match in the other. "Make *what* easier?"

"I've just been borrowing this life. Borrowing London." I take a step back. I'm afraid if he touches me again, I'll scatter like a windblown dandelion. "Borrowing you."

There's a black cab nearby on the street now. Empty.

I truly do understand why he didn't tell me about this sooner. If anything, though, it makes it that much worse. All it does is prove I was wrong to stop protecting myself. God, I'm right back to who I was when I arrived here, aren't I? Absorbing the fallout of someone else's mistakes, questioning the

validity of my anger, my hurt. I wish I could summon the sort of sharp, righteous anger that would slice a clean break between us.

But instead, the ache in my heart is magnified by my concern for *his*, tethering me tight to the very source of my pain.

"I have to go." I turn and weave through other pedestrians before I lose my nerve.

"Your bag," he calls after me. "It's still at my place."

I don't turn around. My hand closes on the cab's door handle.

"All your dresses—"

Swinging the door open, I turn and give him a sad smile. "There's nowhere in my real life I could wear those dresses, Jake."

"Where to, please?" the driver says.

"Damnit, this *is* real life."

"It was." My throat is clogged with tears now. "But I'm leaving it in London."

The driver says, loudly, "You getting in then, love?"

"Please don't get in that cab, Evie." Jake's voice breaks as he shouts after me. "I'm not asking. I'm begging."

The muscles in my calves clench, my toes curl in the stilettos. My body balks at what my mind is commanding it to do. I've become two Evies again. One urges flight, the other urges fight. I've been here before, split down the middle by a man I love. Flight is supposed to be the easier option, but it's not. Not in moments like this.

Still, I fly.

* * *

I've never been to Earl's this late, so I shouldn't be surprised to see someone behind the counter I don't recognize. I'm *more* than surprised. I'm completely shattered. There are even two people sitting at Jake's table—a young couple with the audacity to look deeply in love.

The unfamiliar faces bring into sharp focus just how alone I actually am here in London. The feeling of home that I've had has been an illusion. Once I get on the plane home tomorrow, London, Covent Garden, Cherry, Quinn … and Jake, will all move on like I was never here in the first place. Quinn and Cherry will make friends with a new traveler, someone else will

sleep in my bed at Paperwhite, and Jake Frost will eventually meet someone new and better suited for him than I ever was. Someone who was always meant to stay.

The barista frowns at me. “You all right?” he says.

God, I must look completely unhinged. My smoky eye has inevitably run down my cheeks, and I can feel the ratty nest of my collapsing chignon bobbing against the back of my neck every time I move. “Ah … sorry, I was just looking for Cherry and Quinn.”

I sit at one of the tables along the wall to text them. I use the group chat that Maddie isn’t in with us. I don’t want to worry her.

Cherry shows up first. She whistles low as she approaches. “Now that’s a fit, love.” She slides into the chair across from me and says to the person behind the bar, “It’s fine, Julian. I’ll close up.”

“Right, boss,” says the strange-to-me barista.

I watch him go, then turn back to Cherry. “You’re the boss?”

“I am. Why do you think I’m here all the bloody time?” Cherry laughs. “Youngest business owner in Covent Garden,” she says proudly. With a soft, cheeky grin, she adds, “At least for now. I seem to be getting older every year. It’s so unfair.”

Quinn arrives shortly after Cherry does. I’ve never seen either of them out of their plain tees and Grey Earl’s aprons. Quinn wears a puffer over a hoodie with a screenprint that’s age-softened to a blur of color. Their jeans are cuffed just high enough to show off chunky wool socks and leather lace-up boots. Cherry’s in a charcoal wool peacoat over a clay-colored turtleneck tucked into wide-legged jeans. Again, I’m overwhelmed by the sense that I’m just a visitor here. I’d give anything to have just a few more days to spend with them outside this coffee shop.

Quinn drags over a chair from an adjacent table and sits on it backwards. “Y’all right?” they say.

“I’m so sorry. But I need a favor.”

I tell them everything. And of course, they agree to go to Jake’s to retrieve my bag for me. Before I leave, Quinn takes down the Polaroid they took before Jake and I went on the ghost tour. “You should have this.”

Jake and I didn’t take any photos together aside from this one. Not a single selfie. At first, it felt too awkward for me to ask him for one. Then we spent December together, fully present, living moments instead of performing them to capture in pixels and print.

Now that it’s over, I wish I had more than this single grainy Polaroid. But it’s fitting, really. There’s something about Polaroids that evokes the past, and that’s always been where Jake and I were headed.

* * *

Three days after Christmas

The morning of my last full day in London, I wake up crumpled like a rag doll on my loveseat at Paperwhite. Still in my champagne dress. I couldn’t bear to take it off last night because it was the last thing Jake touched.

I can’t pack yet since my bag is still at Jake’s, so I take a shower and stay in it until the water runs cold. The only clean clothes I have here are the ancient “SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL LIBRARY” sweatshirt and bleach-stained black sweatpants I brought to sleep in. For obvious reasons, they never went to Jake’s.

There’s a knock at the door. I expect Quinn or Cherry with my bag, but it’s neither of them.

It’s Juno Wilding-Wood.

She looks as sleek and cool as an icicle. White sweater, snug cream jeans, silvery hair pulled into a mirror-smooth bun at her nape.

I blink at her. “Did Jake send you?”

“God, no. He’d be furious if he knew I was here. May I come in?”

I invite her in, and she perches on the edge of the loveseat. I finally open the box of Nespresso pods I bought at the beginning of the month, brewing a cup for each of us, even though I’m a little embarrassed by it. She murmurs a “Thank you” when I hand a cup to her.

Before she says anything else, she shows me a text exchange between her and Jake. It’s dated one week after I arrived in London.

Jake: *I’ve met someone, can we talk?*

My laugh is sour. “All this time, I couldn’t stop thinking about how it was impossible someone like him wasn’t already committed to someone

else. And all this time, he was."

"Jake and I weren't engaged. But we were meant to get married. Someday."

"Not to argue semantics, Juno, but that's the definition of a fiancée."

She laughs softly and looks down at her left hand. Ringless, with a flawless soap nails manicure. "The Jake Frost I first met was always going to be married to his job. And I have no interest in giving up even a whisper of agency under the guise of 'settling down.' Our fathers have been courting each other for a merger for several years now, and Jake and I became friends. They've always thought we were more than that, and we let them believe it. We probably would have gotten married, eventually. Call it, ah … a dynastic marriage."

I wait for her to say more. When she doesn't, I raise my brows and say, "OK?"

Juno studies me. "Marriage has been about social and economic reasons for far longer than it's been about love. Marrying Jake would give me freedom, resources, security."

"You can just say it's about money and power."

Juno doesn't hesitate. "It's about money and power. I like money and power. I'm not ashamed of liking money and power." She narrows her eyes. "How much do you actually know about Jake's situation with the firm?"

I've picked the cuticle on my thumb until it bleeds. I stick it in my mouth and mumble around it, "Very little."

Juno nods subtly. "If Jake resigns on his own, his partnership agreement would make all his pro bono work in violation of the terms of his noncompete. He'd have to stop for eighteen months. And some of the nonprofits he's been helping don't have that kind of time, Evie. Not to mention the huge personal financial cost of walking away. So he's been trying to get Jameson to fire him. If Jake is fired, he walks free."

"That's … actually very clever."

"Isn't it?" Juno smiles, but her expression quickly turns serious again. "You should know that Jameson closely controls what new partners see. There's no moral ambiguity to the cases he exposes them to, and whenever anyone brings up concerns, he calls them the 'subtleties of the game,' positions them as learning experiences. His inner circle handles the worst ones. In the beginning, I don't think there was any way Jake could've

known the full scope of what happens in that firm. And by the time he did, he was snared."

She notices when I glance at the text again. "Even though we're not really together, there are many people who *think* we are. Optics. He wanted to make sure I was OK with whatever might happen between you two."

My laugh is weak. "There's no way he knew he was in love with me that early."

"Probably not. But he could tell that he was going to be."

The words hit me like shrapnel. Tears well in my eyes, but they don't spill. God, I've cried more in the last few days than I cried my entire childhood. "Why are you telling me this?"

Juno sips her espresso. "I saw the way he looked at you last night." She says it plainly, like no further explanation is necessary. Like the implication is obvious.

"Why were you there with his father?"

"I've been Jameson's favorite little project for a while. I met him first as sort of an envoy for merger discussions. I assume he thinks of me as who he'd hoped Jake would turn out to be. He thinks I share his worldview. I haven't bothered to correct him."

Juno Wilding-Wood is ruthless. And a little terrifying.

I like her.

"Evie, I truly don't know how Jameson knew Jake would be at The Shard, but I have no doubt his little ambush was premeditated. The man's connections are astonishing. And he used me as a prop." She primly sets her espresso cup aside. "I don't like being used as a prop."

"What was it like having dinner with a real-life Bond villain?" When I smile, the curves of my cheeks finally tip tears loose.

Juno laughs and walks to the door. "I like you. I think we would've been friends in a different lifetime."

I sniff hard and wipe my eyes with the heels of my palms. "Me, too."

Just before she leaves, Juno says, "You can't outrun feelings, Evie. They're way faster than you. And they can cross oceans."

* * *

Cherry and Quinn drop off my bag later in the afternoon. They didn't even have to go to Jake's place to get it—he brought it to Grey Earl's shortly after they opened this morning. They bring me a coffee and a box of my favorite pastries, too. I'm fully committed to eating every single one before I leave for the airport tomorrow morning.

Before they leave, Cherry hands me something from her coat pocket. It chimes as it lands in my hand. It's the little jingle bell from over the door at Grey Earl's.

My eyes well with hot tears. "Oh."

"Now don't get all misty on us," Cherry says. "I've got another. This one is permanently retired now."

"Hang it on your door at home," says Quinn. "It'll tell you when someone lovely is about to come into your life."

"I'm going to miss you two. Terribly," I say.

"We'd better take a photo, then, eh?" says Quinn. They press their cheek to mine, and Cherry comes in from the other side, and we snap a picture with my phone.

"It never has to be goodbye, love." Cherry squeezes my shoulder. "Let's call it—'until later.'"

* * *

I didn't *really* cry until I tried to pack my bag to go home.

Now, I'm hemorrhaging tears.

I've been here so long, there are touches of me and Jake everywhere. A bunch of bananas has turned black on the counter, but even if I were home in Queens, I'd never make the time to bake them into bread. The small piece of meat pie from the Lamb and Flag is in the fridge, hard as a stone at this point. I wish I'd just enjoyed it while I'd had the chance. I slice cheese into chunks and use them to scoop chutney, and I eat licorice until my tongue goes numb.

I've acquired more things than could possibly fit in my luggage, and I briefly consider buying another bag to take everything home.

But I don't. I have to leave it all in London.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Four days after Christmas

The morning of my flight home, the paperwhites are in bloom.

I know it before I even open my eyes. Their fragrance floats up the stairs, so potent I can almost imagine a visible wisp of scent, like in a cartoon.

When I finally get out of bed and go downstairs, I take each step slowly, savoring the musical creak of each one. The tiny easel on the side table sits empty, and the chalkboard still lies face-down where I put it earlier in the month. I stand it back up. What would I do with my time if I still had this many days left?

I did build a little life here, even though it was brief. Even though it's ending. We live so many different lives within a single lifetime, don't we?

In the watery morning light, the clustered blooms of the paperwhites seem to glow ghostly white. In a glass vessel, in just an inch of pebbles and water, they bloom months before they're meant to. Nourished by cold light through a windowpane instead of the drenching shine of a springtime sun. And they're still beautifully, perfectly complete. They're still paperwhites. And when all that's left are the bulbs sleeping beneath the soil—they'll *still* be paperwhites.

That's their true beauty. Their resilience, their potential. They remain exactly what they are, regardless of where they're planted, and even when the timing is wrong. And they'll bloom again.

The last thing I do before I leave for the airport is top off the water in the vase. It makes me feel like I'm leaving a home behind, and in a very real way, I guess I am.

* * *

I’m sitting in the terminal when my phone rings, and I’m convinced its Jake.

But it’s not. Of course it isn’t. Jake Frost—walking green flag, boundary-respecting consent king—does as he’s asked. And I’d asked him to let me go.

It’s Maddie. “Ready to come home?” she says as soon as I answer.

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“Claudia has been sleeping in your room. I think she misses you.”

“Well, I guess even cats don’t know what they’ve got ’til it’s gone.” My voice cracks on *gone*, and I have to swallow hard past the lump in my throat.

“Oh, Evie.” Maddie hesitates. “What happened?”

“Never made it to the mess phase. Took a calculated risk. I’d forgotten how shitty I was at math.”

“You fell in love with him, didn’t you.” It’s not a question.

I can’t answer. There are too many people around, and if I try to talk about it more right now, I’ll unravel completely.

“Oh, honey.” Maddie does the thing where she puts her face so close to the camera that she turns into a blurry, peachy blob. It’s her instinctive way of trying to get closer to me from 3,000 miles across the ocean. “Come home. We’ll figure it out.”

* * *

I see Maddie before she sees me in the arrival hall. She holds a handmade sign that reads “WELCOME BACK TO THE PAST, EVIE,” riffing on my stupid joke about London being five hours ahead of New York. In her other hand is a sack from my favorite bagel joint in Queens.

When she finally spots me, she bounces in place, and I can’t suppress my tired smile. She drops the sign and crashes into me, wrapping both her arms around my head in a suffocating hug.

And I’m home.

* * *

Maddie gives me a bit of time alone after we get to our apartment. It's dark in my room, and I'm cycling through the stages of grief like a roulette wheel. When I finally unzip my bag, most of my clothes smell like Paperwhite. Some of them smell like Jake, but at this point I'm too numb and too tired to cry. I leave the luggage open on the floor. I can't deal with it right now.

I guess I'm a masochist, because I pull out my laptop and search for Jameson Kiernan Frost, Jr., desperate to see his face in something other than the grainy Polaroid Quinn took.

One of the first results is a press conference photo from a story *The Juniper* did about Frost, Acton, and Isaacs. That tiny flicker of recognition I had one of the first times I saw Jake was because of this photo. When I'd been preparing to apply for a staff-writer position at *The Juniper*, I'd devoured as much of their content as I could get my eyes on. Even then, Jake stood out to me in the photo. So achingly beautiful, so young. And so deeply, unmistakably miserable.

Based on what I know now, this article and this photo would have happened around the time Jake started trying to separate himself from his father's firm. I touch a fingertip next to his face on the screen.

I think I made a mistake.

I was so intent on finding a reason to distrust, a reason to leave, that I clung to the first difficult thing that happened between us. Right after I'd resolved to stop treating love like a test that could be failed, we were tested, and I struck through what we had with metaphorical red ink. But ultimately, would it have even mattered? We were a perforation on a journal page. Designed to eventually come apart.

Maddie knocks on my door, peeking around the edge. "You OK?"

I answer with a deadpan "Never better."

Maddie sits next to me on the bed, and I set my laptop aside. "What are you doing here, honey?"

"Um. Do you not remember picking me up at the airport earlier today?"

"That's not what I mean. You fell in love with a beautiful man in beautiful London. And now you're here in Queens."

I lean back and cross my legs under me. "I'm sorry, what was it you said to me at the beginning of the trip? Have all the sex, then fly home?"

Maddie gives me a long look. "This is what you do, Evie. You walk away from things when they get tough."

Tough is when your favorite taco joint goes out of business, or your favorite book series gets canceled before the author has a chance to finish. Or your new vibrator meets its maker three days after arriving in the mail. *Tough* implies that it's hard, but doable. Survivable.

Walking away from Jake Frost wasn't tough. And neither was deciding to stay. They were both impossible. I just had to choose the slightly less-impossible impossible.

"You're kind of a bitch," I say.

"I love you, too. But listen. If you had a choice between living here and living a charmed life where you're beloved and bounced against a mattress by Jake Frost every night, I would hope you would choose the latter."

"Are you trying to get rid of me? You can just say you don't want to live with me anymore."

"Well … There are these things called *planes*—"

Jake said something similar once. That's what breaks me. It feels like my lungs have ballooned into my throat, closing my airway. Tears soak the collar of my shirt. Maddie gathers me into her arms on the bed, and I spend hours unloading to her about London. About Christmas. About Jake.

After I've gone quiet for a while, she says, "I need to tell you something. And I want you to know, it's OK for you to be pissed off."

I push upright and tuck my hair back out of my eyes. "Oh no, Mads. What did you do?"

She pulls at a thread on the sleeve of her hoodie, takes a deep breath. "I never intended to go to London, Ev. I always planned for it to just be you."

I'm not sure what to do with this information. I'm self-aware enough to know that I'd have reacted much differently a month ago, though. Harnessing calm, I exhale a long breath through my nose. Waiting.

"I never even had a plane ticket for myself," she adds. "I bought two ghost tour tickets as a diversion." Maddie has been my best friend for a decade now, and I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen her cry. Now, her chin trembles as she looks up at me, and tiny lights from the buildings across the street from our flat—our *apartment*—glisten in the tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry. If I'd had any idea you'd meet someone like Jake, and fall in love, and be so torn up—"

I throw my arms around her. She hugs me back, and we cry into each other's hair.

"I love you, Ev."

“I love you too, Mads. It’s OK.”

* * *

New Year’s Eve

When I wake up on December 31st, it’s dark, and I’m disoriented. I hear early-morning bustle outside a nearby window. But the sounds are all wrong. Instead of the sound of clattering crates or the rhythmic beep of a reversing van, it’s the hiss of my local bus’s brakes and the hydraulic lift of the seafood truck that supplies the Thai restaurant across the street. I hear the gentle hum of my white-noise machine, and smell the homey scent of burnt dust in my radiator, and a trace of Maddie’s perfume drifting into my room from the hall. Claudia is asleep at my feet, softly snoring.

Then I remember. I’m in Queens. London is more than 3,000 miles away.

Just as I’m about to crawl to the kitchen for coffee, my phone rings. It’s a UK number, but not Jake’s. When I answer, there are four faces crowded into the screen. It’s Genny, Cait, Maeve, and Indi. They’re at Marleigh.

“Hiiii,” Cait says.

My heart climbs into my throat. “Morning,” I croak.

“It’s still bloody dark there, Gen,” Indi scolds. “I told you we’d wake her up.”

Genny and Indi shove each other like they’re teenagers instead of grown women.

“We heard you’d gone home,” says Maeve.

Quietly, I ask, “Is he there?” My insides feel like they’ve fallen through the mattress.

“He’s not, love,” Genny says. “He said he couldn’t make it back here for New Year’s.”

We chat a bit longer, but after a while, I’ve yawned so many times, they shoo me back to bed. As I fall back to sleep, I swear I can feel gentle fingertips against my back, and warm breath in my hair.

* * *

To say that I'm not in a festive party mood is a gross understatement, but Maddie is absolutely adamant that I come with her to the rooftop New Year's Eve party being thrown tonight by some of her artsy friends. I've hung out with them before, and I like them. But they all seem so much more chic and interesting than me, I always feel like a bit of a dud when I'm around them. And those were times when I *wasn't* jet-lagged and heartbroken.

"I can't, Mads. Someone will make small talk with me about how my Christmas was, and I'll end up sobbing into my drink."

"Then we'll get you something that tastes great with a bit of extra salt." Maddie tugs on my arms. "Tequila shots.' She grunts. "Margs." She braces her foot against the bed frame, still pulling. "Palomas."

I will my body to sink into the mattress. "I can't just pretend I'm OK. I'm a terrible actor."

"Honey, we're in New York. Every party in the city is going to be loaded with terrible actors." Maddie climbs onto my bed, squeezing herself between me and the wall. She draws up her knees so she can press her feet flat against my back, pushing against the wall for leverage.

To my great dismay, she actually manages to start shoving me towards the edge of the bed. I go boneless and flop onto my belly, groaning into the comforter. But Maddie doesn't relent. "I'm not letting you make this be the last thing that defines your year and the first thing that defines the next." She digs her toes into my ribs. "Arise, you beautiful slob."

* * *

While I brush my teeth for the first time today (it's six o'clock in the evening, I'm not proud), Maddie starts the shower so the water can heat up. I look like a ghoul in my reflection in the mirror, and I'm thankful for the condensation that begins to creep in from the corners of the glass to obscure my view. Maddie slips out as I undress and step into the stream of hot water.

On the other side of the shower curtain, I hear the bathroom door creak open again, followed by the sound of small things being placed on the side of the sink. A moment later, the melodramatic opening saxophone riff of "Careless Whisper" wails from a tiny Bluetooth speaker. It's so unexpected,

I can’t help the unhinged laugh that breaks loose. I pull back the shower curtain for a peek. Maddie’s also left me her beloved plastic Dollywood tumbler full of ice water, and a lit aromatherapy candle.

Afterwards, she trims off the new half-inch of hair that grew in London, plus another two inches for good measure, because I can’t bear the thought of braiding it. Now, I can’t, even if I wanted to. She does my makeup, and it’s bold and lovely and nothing like I’d do for myself. And importantly—cry-proof.

She bundles me into a Kelly-green satin slipdress from her closet, assuring me there will be patio heaters on the rooftop. I’ve never seen her wear this dress before, and it somehow fits me perfectly even though I’ve got a few inches on her in every dimension.

This is the post-breakup movie montage of my life. I never had one after Calvin, because Maddie didn’t push for it. I think she knew he didn’t rate the emotional acknowledgment that’s inherent to the process. But Jake, though? It’s like she knows I don’t need his erasure. I just need a reset.

* * *

The party is fine. Everyone is impossibly cool, in vintage velvet blazers and mod jumpsuits, patterned tights and thigh-high boots. There’s a guy everyone calls “Fancy Mayor” wearing a faux-fur top hat. He’s hit on me three times. I spend most of the night feeling like I’ve arrived in the middle of conversations, even in ones I was present for when they began. I’ve gotten so good at standing at the periphery while trying *not* to look like I’m standing at the periphery, I’m considering adding “human shrubbery” to my résumé once I start my job hunt.

I wonder what Jake is doing right at this moment. The distance between us feels cosmically vast now. He’s several hours into an entirely different year than the one I’m still in.

It’s ten minutes to twelve, and I haven’t seen Maddie for the past half an hour. Not that I’m surprised, really. I’d just hoped that since she brought me with her tonight, she’d at least be with me for the countdown to the new year. I’m not upset, though. I’m just numb.

Then she’s there, weaving towards me through the crowd of sparkling people settling in for their midnight moment. She’s got a freshly fizzing

glass of sparkling wine in one hand and an … *envelope?* in the other. She presses her cheek to mine and says, “Read it somewhere quiet,” then she disappears before I have the chance to ask for more context.

Quiet isn’t really an option here, but I manage to find a spot near the rooftop’s edge that’s not packed with people. When I open the envelope and pull out the note inside, I feel like every muscle in my body has slipped loose from its proper place. I have to lean against the railing.

If you’re keen to give us a new start, I’ll be in New York in the New Year. I miss you.

J.

Oh my god.

I tuck the paper under my arm and yank my phone out so quickly I almost bobble it to the ground. My thumbs shake so hard, I mistype my passcode four times, and I’m horrified that I might lock myself out. It’s 11:57.

Pausing to breathe, I realize what this note means. It’s handwritten. And Maddie just gave it to me, in person. The only way she could possibly have had it in this very moment is if Jake gave it to *her* in person.

He’s here.

He has to be.

My phone buzzes with an incoming text notification.

Some love stories don’t end, they just switch time zones.

It’s 11:58. I’m whirling like a pinwheel in a hurricane. The note falls from under my arm and the wind catches it, lifting it high into the air before sending it over the edge of the building. Somewhere in the city, a single premature firework explodes in the sky.

It’s 11:59 when I see him. In a small nook in the corner of the rooftop, half-enclosed with evergreens still covered in Christmas sparkle. Still managing to find the most festive spot possible.

My Jake.

He’s wearing that long travel coat he was wearing the first moment I saw him. He has his luggage with him, too. He must have come straight from the airport.

All around us, the crowd erupts in unison. "*Ten!*"

I step towards him and immediately wobble in my heels. Bending without taking my eyes from his, I slip them off and leave them behind to race to him. The deck is cold underfoot.

"*Nine!*"

Stopping just out of his reach, I whisper, "You're here."

"*Eight!*"

Jake takes a halting step towards me. "I'm here."

"*Seven!*"

A tear breaks loose and coasts down his cheek. For once, I'm not the one crying.

"*Six!*"

I reach out with a trembling hand, drifting my fingers down the center of his chest, testing if he's real. I can feel his heart hammering beneath.

"*Five!*" The volume escalates now. The air vibrates with it.

When I close my fist around the soft blue wool of his sweater, he whispers, "Thank god," then he's pulling me into him, burying his face in my hair.

"*Four!*"

I push away, cupping his face in mine. "You can't be here."

"*Three!*"

"Getting some mixed signals from you now, my love," Jake chuckles.

"*Two!*"

"We were leaving it"— my voice breaks—"in London."

"*One!*"

"You might have left it in London." His chin trembles. "I brought it to New York."

Jake's mouth meets mine the moment the sky explodes in shimmering light above us. Around us. Inside us. The noise of it booms through my body, magnifying the racing beat of my heart.

He came for me. He's *here*.

And now, I really am home.

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Return to
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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Epilogue

Twenty-four days to Christmas

I love winter mornings in the Cotswolds.

Jake and I arrived in London yesterday and headed here straight away despite the jet lag. I have to admit, though— flying first-class makes it much easier to sleep on a plane.

I awakened just after dawn in the cottage. Last night's embers in the hearth were a low, shimmering crimson, and a gentle wind blew the first icy breath of the day through the eaves. I left Jake asleep, bundled under quilts, splayed like a starfish on his belly.

Have you ever heard silence? You'd know it if you have.

When I walked in these woods for the first time with Jake last December, I mistook quiet for emptiness. But this quiet is *full*. Expansive. It creates space in my mind. And as someone approaching their thirties who's only just discovered comfort within their own internal monologue, that space is a gift.

A thin filigree of ice covers the surface of the cold mud, and it crackles underfoot with every step. My flowered wellies are faded now, weathered by rain and snow and salt from big-city pavements and the pathways of New York City parks. I like to imagine that they realize I've returned them to their natural habitat here in this forest. And I've brought myself along, too.

Jake knew, when he brought me here last year. He barely knew *me* then, really, but he *saw* me. He saw my need for stillness inside my own mind. I love New York City, but it never stops demanding something of me. Here, the only demand the land makes of me is that I rest.

Since Jake came to me last New Year's, we've been living in New York. It was a definitive answer to the tenacious cynical part of me that still wondered if what we had was real, rather than some kind of festive, cinnamon-scented magic manufactured by Christmas in London. I'm not ready to retire my inner skeptic quite yet—it's what makes me a good journalist. But now, it's forever silenced when it comes to Jake and me. This love is absolutely real, and it's the same, regardless of time zone.

He still texts me hints about where he's planning to take me when we go out.

Jake got to meet Maddie, and she took full credit for our relationship. I let her have the win, because—fair. Not only was she the reason I met him in the first place, she's the one who engineered our reunion last New Year's Eve. He also got to meet Claudia, and the hateful little gremlin adored him. Of course she did.

I've done a lot of writing over the past year. Mostly about the environmental plight of the Cotswolds as a consequence of increasing over-tourism. I sold a few pieces, but it hasn't yet been the freelancing windfall I fantasized about when *The Juniper* let me go. But I'll get there.

Together, Jake and I founded a nonprofit to preserve and restore natural green spaces in cities. The process took the better part of a year, and we plan to expand with a sister organization in London once we get our footing. Jake still does the pro bono work he'd been doing while trying to break away from his father, too.

Juno helped us with some pro bono work of her own, taking a meticulous look at Jake's fifty-page partnership agreement with Frost, Acton, and Isaacs. She agreed that there was no deemed withdrawal clause—no specification that Jake was required to come to work in person to remain employed by the firm. It meant that they couldn't claim he'd resigned by not showing up to work. For a firm that makes much of its fortune on legal loopholes, it was an embarrassing oversight on the part of his father's own in-house team. It meant that Jake could continue to maintain the benefits of employment without having to do anything his father wanted. It took six more months for Jameson to officially fire him.

I round a bend in the trail to reach a clearing that overlooks all of Marleigh. The narrow road embroiders gently sloping pastures like a ribbon. In the center sits the farmhouse where Jake spent most of his

childhood, its roof scattered with frost, caramel-colored stone glowing like a topaz in the mist.

Behind it, nestled in a thicket of hazel and dormant wildflowers, sits the cottage. The little fir we bought last year at the supermarket is planted outside, decorated with oversized vintage bulbs that wink and shimmer at me, despite the distance and the weak morning light.

There's a thin curl of smoke rising from the chimney now.

He's awake.

I make my way back down the trail. Quickly, this time.

It feels like I'm going home to him, even though Jake has never made me feel like it was a foregone conclusion that we'd build our life together in England. That he gave my beloved Queens a fair shot is yet another reason I adore him. When I boarded the plane to Heathrow last Christmas, I truly couldn't have imagined a world where I'd live anywhere outside New York.

At the time, I also couldn't have imagined a world where a man like Jake Frost existed.

And now, I can't imagine a world without him.

* * *

The warmth of Jake's fire meets me the moment I open the door to the cottage. He's shirtless at the worktop in the little kitchen, putting the finishing swirl of steaming water on a pour-over that fills the entire space with the nutty scent of fresh coffee. Festive green and black plaid lounge pants sit slung low on his narrow hips, giving me an indulgent view of the subtle dimples just north of his waistband. His hair is a chaotic tumble of soft waves that bob gently over his brow as he turns to face me.

"Good morning, my little wood sprite." The words are slow, still rough with sleep.

He's switched on our Christmas decorations in anticipation of my return. Glowy, muted fairy lights twisted with a garland along the small staircase's baluster and banister, chunky candles stacked along the mantel. Even a kitschy ceramic Christmas tree with multicolored lights, just like the one my aunt used to have. He found it in an antique shop in Brooklyn in the middle of July. We brought it here in its own suitcase, padded with bubble wrap like it was a priceless anthropological artifact.

The moment I shrug out of my coat and unloop my scarf, he bends to press his mouth to my neck, just below my ear. He smells like toothpaste and balsam-scented soap, and the sweet, earthy scent that comes from a night spent next to a hickory-burning hearth.

“I don’t love waking up without you here,” he murmurs against my skin. He traces my jaw with whispered kisses, then lets his mouth hover above my lips. “But I do love it when you come home to me.”

Now, there’s a real bed set up in front of the hearth. We don’t bother pretending anymore that we need sofas and coffee tables and entertainment consoles. We read, we write, we talk.

We love.

Jake drops to a crouch in front of me, gently lifting my leg with a hand behind my knee. He slides my wellies off, one at a time, and I’ve got my arms raised straight overhead by the time he stands again

He lifts me into his arms to carry me to the bed. Over his shoulder, I see the two mugs of coffee he’s prepared for us sitting on the worktop, with lonesome little wisps of steam rising slowly into the air.

Some things are more important.

Jake lays me on the mattress like I’m precious and rare rather than sturdy bone and flesh that’s as greedy for him as he is for me. He locks his fingers between mine, sweeping our arms up in an overhead arc. Then he links my palms together, pressing gently down on my wrists to tell me to stay put. He works his way down my body, tracing my outline with his hands, skimming his mouth down my middle. And then, he does the same on the way back up.

We take each other’s mouths in a leisurely, searching kiss, tasting tongues and sharing breath. Exploring, even though we’ve mapped the terrain of each other’s bodies hundreds of times over. There are ways Jake knows my landscape even more intimately than I do. And I, his.

I shift sideways beneath him, signaling movement. He responds on instinct rather than obedience, rolling me over him like we’ve choreographed it in body language. He’s hard and straining up towards me when I straddle his hips, taking his exquisite length inside me with a sinuous swirl of my hips. Heads thrown back—mine to the ceiling, his to the pillow—we exhale together, savoring this first moment of union like it truly is the first time. In this light, his eyes are kaleidoscopic old copper, bright brown, and amber etched with green.

This will never not be sacred.

We make love. Decadent. More than simple sensation. We're celebrating each other. My body beckons the man beneath me, this human I love with cosmic magnitude. I ride him like a gentle wave, slowly flexing and flowing around him. Amber light from the fire spills over my convexities and concavities, and Jake traces all of me with reverent hands and hungry eyes. I feel powerful in my complexity. I feel beautiful. I am beautiful.

We move together like a single fluid organism, sinuous and slow, giving and taking in equal measure. There's no room for silence here. I moan and sigh on every exhale, and we go for so long, I lose my voice. But I'm already saying everything to him I could ever want him to know, without the need for a single spoken word. I'm inviting him to meet me in the place where only I can take him, and only he can take me. Jake's hands are hot at my waist, his fingers locked into the ripple and bend of muscles alongside my spine.

Inevitable tension builds in the deepest, hungriest part of me, shimmering outwards. Jake moves a hand to my heart now, his long fingers spread between my breasts. I stack my palms over his, and I begin to rock faster. Jake's back bends like a bow, his hands slide down to grip my thighs. My invitation becomes a demand for him to meet me at the top.

When he does, we fall together.

* * *

It's December first. The main reason we've arrived this week is to help Helena decorate for the festive season. Jake has been worried about his mom for a while, being alone with such a big property to manage in the countryside. Miles is close by, but he's already overcommitted and overworked, relentlessly busy with his veterinary practice. I know Helena well enough by now to know that she'd never ask him for help, anyway. I'm sure she tells him she's "quite well, thank you," whenever he offers, too.

We arrived mid-afternoon yesterday. I vaguely noticed there weren't any cars parked in front of the house, but I was too tired for it to spark my typical eager curiosity. When Jake and I walk to the house late this morning, Helena's car still isn't here. Jake sees the confusion in my

expression and says, “She’s with Nan in London today,” and it puts my mind at ease.

Jake puts the kettle on, and we open the curtains all over the house to let in the silvery winter sunshine. He gets a fire going in the living room where we’ll make our base of operations, and I put classic Christmas records on the player in the hall.

We chatter at each other in that easy way we have now, unhurried and unworried about what we’ll say, how we’ll say it, or whether we need to say anything at all.

Jake lifts the lid of a cardboard box printed all over with Christmas trees. The scents of clove and cinnamon, wrapping paper, and the faint whiff of musty attic mildew cling to the treasures inside. “There will be a note in one of these boxes,” he says. “We always pack everything away on January second—it’s a family tradition. Last bit of fun of the festive season. Whoever finds the previous year’s note gets to write and hide the one the following year. Then Mum keeps them in her scrapbook.”

“That’s so lovely. Who wrote last year’s?”

“Mum herself, I think.” He gives me a playful, sensual grin. “Can’t be sure, though. I was … ah, *elsewhere* on January second.”

We spent those first three days of the new year in my little bed in Queens.

A sprig of dried and crumbly mistletoe comes out of one of the boxes. I imagine all the kisses that have been exchanged beneath it. Kisses upon tiny baby noses and children’s cheeks. Lovers, friends, even strangers.

We make a good team, distributing treasured decorations to each of the rooms they’ll live in for the duration of the month. In a big red box with frayed corners, I find a scrapbook that Helena has kept for more than thirty years. There’s a square of every bit of wrapping paper the family has ever used on Christmas Day, the oldest ones faded and yellowed. On last year’s page, there’s a clipping from the birthday wrapping paper covered in dinosaurs that they used to wrap gifts for me. I trace a hand over it through the clear protective sheet.

There’s also a summary of all the practical details of each Christmas—the menu, who was there, and the guests they brought. It makes tears well in my eyes when I see my name on the entry from last year. *Evie McClane here from America. Birthday girl! Already hoping we see her next year.*

The lesson is this: everything about the festive season is meant to be savored. Nothing is inconsequential.

Needless to say, I’m beyond thrilled to have an excuse to start a new sort of journal of my own.

At the bottom of this box, I find the hidden note. As I unfold it, I recognize Helena’s lush, flowy script right away.

He loves her, even if neither of them knows it yet.

* * *

Later that night in the cottage, we’re wrapped in luscious white robes sharing mulled wine when Jake pulls out a small gift-wrapped box from the cabinet under his bedside table. It’s flat and rectangular. Small. He gives it to me without a word. Just a gentle, hopeful smile on his beautiful face.

I set my wine aside and slowly peel away the paper, then I hold the box in both hands to lift off the lid.

My heart pounds so fiercely, I think I can taste it on my tongue.

It’s a key.

“Jake … wh—”

“It’s too much for Mum, now. She’s moving to live with Nan, and she wanted to give us first crack at the place if we—”

“Marleigh?”

“It’s a lot of work, and we haven’t talked about—”

“Yes.” I swing a leg over his lap, raining kisses on his face, his hair. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Jake laughs. His voice is muffled against my mouth. “All right, love. Save some of those yeses. I have something else to give you.” He anchors himself to me with one hand around my waist, leaning away again to grab another box.

This one isn’t wrapped.

It’s a flat box made of solid wood, with twelve tiny doors closed by even tinier gold swing latches. There are twenty-four.

An advent calendar, of sorts. But there’s something different about it. There aren’t any Christmas motifs to be found. It’s painted in lovely pastels —peachy orange, periwinkle, minty green.

Softly, Jake says, “It’s an Evie Advent. One door for every day leading up to your birthday.”

I’m overcome. I lay it aside and let my forehead drop to his shoulder. “God, I love you.”

How is this my life?

I feel Jake’s hand move under my leg. He tips sideways a bit so he can reach into the pocket of his robe. “One more thing, my love,” he murmurs against my temple.

When I raise my head from his shoulder, Jake holds a ring between his thumb and forefinger. Dainty. Dazzling, like he’s scooped a star right out of the clearest, most crystalline winter sky.

“Marry me, Evie.”

I can’t speak yet, so I let my kiss be my answer. But the joy overflows, and then I’m laughing against his mouth, and he’s laughing into mine. “A thousand times, yes. Yes, yes, yes.” And because I’m incapable of not making it awkward, I add, “Thank you.”

He laughs again and slips the ring onto my finger. And it fits, perfectly.

Of course it does.

“I wanted to wait until it snowed, but I think Mother Nature used all of it up last year,” he says, rubbing his thumb across my knuckles. “I’ve been waiting three bloody weeks to do this. I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“I think there’s a compoface story here.” I drop my voice into a plummy newsreader accent. “*He couldn’t put a ring on it: London man blames climate change for delayed marriage proposal*.”

Jake presses his face into the shallow dip beneath my jaw, his laugh dissolving into a playful growl.

Squirming and giggling, I say, “You should have just told Mother Nature you were planning to propose. That earned you quite a lot of special treatment last Christmas.”

“To be fair, all those times last year when I told people I was going to propose—”

“You were very naughty.”

“I’d like it to go on record that I didn’t specify *when* I was going to propose to you.”

“You are such a lawyer.” I laugh. I can’t stop looking at the sparkle on my finger. “How does a winter wedding sound?”

“Only if you mean *this* winter. I’m not waiting an entire year to marry you.”

Fiddling with the open collar of his robe, I say, “Hm. Bit quick, don’t you think?”

“Yesterday wouldn’t be quick enough. Since we haven’t cracked time travel yet, I’d be willing to settle for sometime this month.”

“I *do* already have that white dress you bought me at Liberty last year.”

Jake tucks a knuckle under my chin, nudging my face up to meet his eyes. “My love, I’m not going to make you wear an old dress on your wedding day.”

“Jake,” I laugh, “I’ve only worn one of those dresses. Ever. It’s new enough. And is it too clichéd to be married at Christmas?”

“Possibly. But it’s a cliché with heart,” he says.

“Ooh, a deep cut from the Evie-Jake lexicon. Nicely played.”

“I’d argue—”

“OK, now you’re just showing off.”

Jake laughs, twining the end of my braid around his ring finger. My hair has grown out since Maddie cut it last year. “I’d argue that now we’re going to be spending the rest of our lives together, we might need to upgrade to, ah … what’s the word? A compendium, perhaps. A chronicle?”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to fill an entire library someday,” I say.

“So, Christmas wedding, future Mrs. Frost?”

Cradling my hands around his beloved face, I lean in and whisper against his lips, “It’s a date.”

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