



HIS CHRISTMAS

Obsession

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SADIE KING

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CURVES FOR CHRISTMAS

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His obsession took him halfway across the country...

The instant I see the photo of Cleo, my brother's assistant, I know she'll be mine, with her wine-red lipstick, curvy figure, and haunted eyes.

We live over a thousand miles apart. No problem.

I'll cross the country to be with her. Hell, I'll circle the globe if it gets me to those plump lips and soft curves.

Cleo thinks I've come to visit my brother for Christmas. She doesn't know the truth. I'm not here for my brother. I'm here for her.

Curves for Christmas is a forced-proximity, instalove steamy romance featuring an OTT, obsessed biker and the curvy woman he claims as his own.

Return to Fitzpatrick Place this Christmas where things are heating up with some brand new tenants. From Sexy Santas to Mistletoe Kisses, the Curves for Christmas Series is bringing you over 20 new stories to warm you up this holiday season!

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KRAY

The clubhouse smells like pine needles, which just about masks the usual smell of beer and mechanic's grease. Just about, but not quite.

The tree looks out of place stuffed in a corner between the pool table and the jukebox, the top of it bent over and pushed against the ceiling.

Gina's up a ladder stringing tinsel, which means there's no one to get me another beer. I slide off the barstool and around behind the bar.

I've got my hand in the beer fridge, grabbing myself a cold one, when I hear the leather stool creak behind me.

"I'll have a beer, waiter."

Irritated, I turn to find two of my bearded brothers grinning at me.

"And a jack and coke for me," chimes in Lyle.

"I'm not your bartender," I mutter while fixing their drinks. But I don't really mind. The girls always get excited about Christmas, and it's nice to watch them decorate the clubhouse. If it wasn't for the ladies, the clubhouse would stay looking miserable all year round.

"You around for Christmas this year?" Jesse asks as I slide onto my bar stool.

"Yeah, I guess." I'm always around for Christmas. My only family outside of the motorcycle club is my big brother who lives over fifteen hundred miles away.

I sip my beer as I think of my brother. It's been a while since I saw Ethan, and I wonder what the handsome fucker is up to.

Taking out my phone, I bring up his social media feeds.

As usual, my brother is living the high life with his equally as handsome husband. As Chief Marketing Officer of a leading cereal brand, Ethan's doing pretty well for himself.

There're pictures of him with his husband Craig on holiday in New York, hiking in Peru, having cocktails on a beach somewhere I've never heard of. They love traveling and are always going away somewhere.

You wouldn't peg us for brothers. While Ethan's hair is cropped short, mine's long and shaggy. He keeps his face clean shaven, but I've got a thick beard. His clothes are smart casual and fashionable. I'm always at home in black jeans and biker's cut.

We're polar opposites, but I feel a pang of regret looking at his picture. Sometimes I miss my big brother. We grew up close, especially after our parents passed away.

We were both in our early twenties when our parents were taken in a road accident. The grief changed us both, and we healed in different ways.

I found the MC, and Ethan found a love for travel. Then he met Craig, and they settled down in Bourbon, Texas. It's over fifteen hundred miles away on the bike, too far to visit regularly.

"You guys around Christmas Day?" I ask Jesse and Lyle.

"I've got a family thing," Jesse says. "But I'll stop by later."

It's the same every Christmas. The stragglers and those with nowhere to go end up at the clubhouse.

It's great fun, but sometimes I can't help wishing I had somewhere else to be, with a family of my own. I love my MC brothers, but I don't want to see their ugly mugs every day of the year.

I'm scrolling through my brother's feed when something makes my heart stop.

There's a photo of Ethan at what looks like an office party with a group of people wearing crooked smiles that are too wide. Clearly they've had too much to drink.

Wedged between my brother and a man in a suit that looks too small for him is a woman with dark shoulder length hair and a scowl on her face. She's the only one in the photo who doesn't look happy—or drunk.

The woman is beautiful. Like, take-my-breath-away beautiful. She's wearing thick black eye liner and dark red lipstick. It gives her a don't-fuck-with-me look that sets my dick stirring and my heart hammering against my rib cage.

My world shifts. The room spins.

Mine.

The word goes through my head. Whoever she is, she's mine.

I scroll frantically through Ethan's feed, looking for more signs of the woman. I pause when I find her again.

This time it's a different night. It's just the woman and Ethan in the picture, and he's got his arm around her in a protective, brotherly way.

There's a comment from Craig.

This woman deserves a medal for being assistant to my cranky husband.

She's Ethan's assistant. The woman's not tagged in the photos, so I can't find her name. But I know instantly that I have to find her.

“What do you think, Kray?”

“Hmm?” I'm pulled back to reality by Jesse looking at me expectantly. I have no idea what he's talking about, so I nod. “Yeah.”

He grins at Lyle, and they both crack up. I've got no idea why they're laughing at me, but I don't care.

They're still laughing as I walk away with my ear plastered to my phone. I have to speak with my brother and find out who that beauty is.

CLEO

I pull into parking space number twenty-two and stop well short of the charging port before I put any more dents in my banged-up blue Honda. Ethan usually parks his Tesla here, but they've left it in long-term parking at the airport so I can have a covered parking space.

My boss is the best.

Hauling my bags out of the trunk, I sling my laptop bag over my shoulder and pull up the handle for my suitcase. I'm only house sitting for a week, but I like to be comfortable. Besides, it gave Lisa more room to spread out at my place.

She contacted the charity I volunteer for needing temporary accommodation for a few days over Christmas, and I was happy to offer up my place. It made sense since I'm house sitting for Ethan.

I think about my tiny studio apartment above a laundromat as I step inside the elevator that will take me up to the penthouse apartment in Fitzpatrick Place.

As the doors start to close, a spindly arm in a leopard print sweater slides between them. The doors halt and jerkily reopen. Fitzzy fixes me with a warm smile as she steps into the elevator.

"Are you staying with us again, dear?"

She makes it sound like Fitzpatrick Place is a hotel I'm visiting and she's the welcoming committee, which isn't a bad thing. Fitzzy's as old as the building, and she's been nothing but kind whenever I come to housesit.

“Just for a week.”

Fitzzy’s eyes shoot into her hairline. “Over Christmas?”

I hear the implied question. She’s wondering why I don’t have a family to go to. But as nice as Fitzzy is, I don’t feel like explaining my situation.

“Yup.”

She gives me a wily look but doesn’t push. “Where have those boys gone away to this time?”

She’s referring to my boss, who’s pushing forty, and his older husband as if they’re wayward children and not high-powered executives.

“They’re in Barbados.”

Fitzzy sucks in her breath. “Ohhh, Barbados,” she practically squeals. “I almost got married there.”

I try to hide my surprise. But I suppose the white-haired woman with a penchant for leopard print and fluffy slippers was young once.

“He was a local diving instructor. I met him when our ship docked on his island. I was snorkeling on one of the naturalist beaches.”

My eyes almost pop out of my head as an image of Fitzzy snorkeling naked fills my brain.

“Oh, I had quite a figure back then,” she says wistfully. “Full hips, boobs for days.” She eyes me up and down. “Like you, dear. All curves and no edges.”

If anyone else but Fitzzy commented on my appearance, I’d tell them where to go. But the old lady is so endearing that I don’t mind.

“We met on a Tuesday, and he proposed on the Friday,” she says. “I was all ready to give up my job as an entertainer on a cruise ship and stay with him.”

The elevator dings, and the door opens. Fitzzy turns and starts to go out, completely forgetting she’s in the middle of a story.

“What happened?” I blurt out, stopping the elevator with my hand.

Fitzy turns around, a vacant look on her face.

“What, dear?”

“What happened to the man you almost married in Barbados?”

She looks confused, making me wonder if she’s already started drinking for the holiday, then realization creeps across her face.

“Oh, his family didn’t approve. Thought it had happened too fast, that he was only after my bazoombas.” She grabs at the air in front of her chest and mimes jiggling them up and down. Fitzy giggles, then looks wistfully into the distance, her eyes glazing over.

“So, you gave up on each other?” I’m more invested in the story than I’d like to admit, but it only confirms what I already know. Love is fickle and people always let you down. “He didn’t fight his family for you?”

Fitzy looks confused again.

“It was lovely speaking with you, dear. You enjoy that apartment while you can and call down if you need anything.”

She walks off, and I let my arm drop. The elevator door closes. I’m left alone. Fitzy’s a great neighbor, but it’s useless to try to get a story out of her.

CLEO

The smell of freshly brewed coffee fills the apartment. I breathe in deeply as I take my mug from the cafe-grade coffee machine that uses freshly ground beans. My bare feet sink into the plush carpet as I pad into the living room.

The view from the floor to ceiling windows looks out over Bourbon, with sweeping plains to the left and brown dusty hills rising in the distance. The sky hangs heavy and gray, full of the snow that the weather forecast has been promising. It hardly ever snows in Texas, so there's been a lot of talk about the gathering snow clouds.

It looks cold outside, but I'm toasty in here with the central heating warming the entire place.

I set the mug on the coffee table and open my laptop.

With Ethan away, I'm not needed in the office, and he's given me the okay to work from home for the last few days that I'm working before Christmas.

Work from his home, that is. My boss loves to travel and I've been house sitting for him ever since I took the job of executive assistant two years ago.

I was sent to his office for work experience by MUEVE, the Manifieste Una Espléndida Vida Exitosa. They're a charity that helps ex-foster kids transition into the adult world.

Ethan took a chance on me, and after the two weeks of work experience was up, he offered me a full-time position. I've been fiercely loyal to him ever since.

I log in to work and check my emails. With the boss away and half the office off for Christmas, there's not much going on.

I type a few replies to meeting requests and push the laptop aside.

I love staying at Ethan and Craig's place. It's so much more comfortable than my tiny studio apartment, but there's another reason I love coming here.

Dropping to the floor, I crawl over to the oak bookcase.

My fingers run over the spines on the bottom shelf until I come to my favorite album.

I pull out the well-worn photo album and thumb through the pages.

Ethan's smiling face when he was a boy stares out at me. He's with his younger brother, both of them on bikes, while a woman crouches next to them, a proud motherly smile on her face.

The next photo shows the whole family. The two boys with Mom and Dad. Dad holds the younger brother in his arms, tiny hands clasped around his solid neck.

A pang of envy runs through me as I look through the family photo album. I never had a family like this. There are no photos of me as a child and certainly no loving parents helping me ride a bike or playing with me at the park.

There's a small pang of envy, but mostly I find the photos comforting.

Ethan's a good man. I'm glad he had a happy childhood. The photos give me hope. Maybe someday I can have a family like his.

I flick through the pages as the boys get older, the younger brother with dark hair and a constant scowl on his face that contrasts with Ethan's good-natured smile.

There's something about the younger brother that I find intriguing. As he gets older, he seems more remote, and I wonder what's going on behind his dark eyes.

The photos get less frequent as the boys get older. There're some holiday snaps at a beach when they're teenagers and neither seem happy to be photographed.

By this time, the brother is looking positively hot, especially in an Iron Maiden t-shirt with tight black jeans and scruffy hair. I stare into his dark eyes, wondering what's going on in his head, wondering what kind of a man he grew into, this troubled-looking kid.

On the next page, he's straddling a small motorbike. He must be barely eighteen and just learning to ride. He's smiling in this one, like the bike is the thing that lights him up.

A few pages later and the photos stop abruptly, the album half-finished.

Ethan told me what happened to his parents—the accident that took both their lives.

The boys were in their early twenties by then, but it's still a tragedy to lose both parents. From what Ethan's told me, I know he set off travelling while his brother stayed behind on the Sunset Coast.

The rest of the pages in the album are empty, and I slide it back in its place on the shelf, wondering if I'll ever know what happened to Ethan's dark-eyed brother. I've thought about asking Ethan, but I've never worked up the courage.

The next album is of Ethan and his travels through North America and across the border into South America. I flick through these quickly, not so interested in the places he's been.

It's when Ethan meets Craig that I slow down again.

They're both so young and carefree here, lounging about on white sandy beaches, checking out the markets of Buenos Aries, and hiking in the Andes. The next pages are of them settling in Bourbon where Craig grew up. Then there're their holidays that get more elaborate every year.

Florida, Alaska, and the European tour.

I like looking at Ethan and Craig together. Their travels over the last ten years take up two more albums. They're

always happy, with their arms around each other or with groups of other travelers.

As they get older, the places they stay get nicer. Cheap hostels are replaced with hotels and then five-star experiences. But the love they have always shines through in the photos.

I wonder if I'll ever meet anyone who looks at me like that.

Probably not.

This kind of family, this kind of love, isn't for someone like me. My own mother didn't even want me, so why would someone else?

It's while I'm thumbing through the final album that there's a knock at the door.

I snap the album closed and slide it back to its place before going to the door.

It's probably a delivery. Ethan's always ordering stuff online, and Fitzzy must have let them up the elevator.

But when I open the door, it's not a delivery driver. It's a bearded man in biking leathers wearing an Underground Crows Motorcycle Club jacket.

The man looks surprised to see me but not as surprised as I am to see him. I don't recognize the patch on his jacket, but anyone in an MC has got to be bad ass.

I start to shut the door, but then I properly look at his face.

His dark eyes narrow at me, and there's a half-scowl on his lips. I'd recognize that brooding look anywhere.

Ethan's brother eyes me suspiciously.

"Is Ethan about?"

"No," I say slowly. If it was any stranger at the door, I would leave it at that, but it's Ethan's brother. Surely he knows Ethan's away.

"He's in Barbados."

The brother's eyes widen, making me wonder if they still talk to each other.

"Barbados," he says, surprised. "Is he back for Christmas?"

"No."

"Damn. I just rode over fifteen hundred miles to spend Christmas with my big brother."

"I guess you should've called first." I fold my arms across my chest because I've just noticed the tote bag he's got slung over his shoulder and I don't like where this is going.

The brother's eyes rake down my chest and hips, lazily going over my body and making me shift uncomfortably as heat pools in my belly.

I'm not used to being looked at like that. I spend a lot of time hoping people don't notice me, dying my hair black and putting on dark makeup, making myself unapproachable. But I didn't think I'd be seeing anyone today. My face is bare, and I'm wearing sweatpants. It's uncomfortable without my armor on.

"Soo, Ethan's not here, and I've got work to do..."

I start to close the door, and the brother wedges a black booted foot into the doorframe.

"Not so fast. Who are you and why are you in my brother's apartment?"

He eyes me suspiciously, but I give zero fucks. He can go call Ethan if he wants. Although maybe as the brother of my boss he deserves an explanation.

"I'm house sitting."

The brother nods slowly like he's not sure he believes me. I fix him with my best go-fuck-yourself stare, but the son of a bitch doesn't even flinch.

Instead, he holds out a hand that's red raw from cold with what looks like mechanic grease under the fingernails. I guess he's still into bikes.

“I’m Kray.”

I eye the hand but don’t offer him mine.

“I don’t bite,” he says, a smile pulling at his lips.

“But I might,” I retort.

He chuckles and his face breaks into a genuine smile. Damn, he’s hot. Which brings my defenses down a little.

“I’m Cleo.”

I shake his hand in what I hope is a formal way. His palms are callused, the rough edges nicking my soft skin and causing tendrils of heat to zing up my arm. I pull away quickly and look down, hoping he didn’t notice.

“So, Cleo, you gonna invite me in, or am I gonna stand out here in the cold all day?”

I should close the door and send him on his way, but there’s a vicious wind blowing, and those clouds look like they’re going to dump snow any minute. Besides, he’s my boss’s brother. It’s not going to look good if I close the door on him.

“Fine.” I open the door wide. “But hurry up. You’re letting the cold air in.”

KRAY

She's got a lot of sass for someone who's five foot nothing. In all the pictures I saw of Cleo, she had a thick layer of makeup on.

I like her style, the darkness and tough look she's going for. But seeing Cleo makeup free in sweatpants and an old hoodie—she's fucking beautiful. The sweatpants hang off her hips, showing me the outline of her curves, and my mouth waters as I follow her to the living room.

The place looks as plush as I remember, all soft carpet and tasteful furniture. It's been a few years since I've been up to see Ethan and the man likes to live well.

I dump my bag next to a two-seater couch, and Cleo eyes it suspiciously.

“What's that for?”

“I'm staying a few days.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “No, you're not.”

Her hands go to her hips and she looks indignant, which makes her look adorable, although I get the feeling she'd hate me if I tried to tell her that. Instead, I shrug casually.

“I can't go back. There's a storm brewing. Not good riding conditions.”

I pull off my road boots and sink my feet into the plush carpet. The softness feels good after the chill of the road.

“And my bike needs some work.” Which isn’t true, but I have no qualms about telling a little white lie if it buys me time with Cleo.

“You can go find a hotel then,” she splutters. “I’m staying here. Ethan asked me to house sit. He never mentioned you were turning up.”

I lie back on the couch and put my feet up on the edge.

“You don’t need to house sit. I’m here now.”

If looks could kill, she’d pierce me right through the heart. I lace my hands across the back of my head and lean back.

“I’m not leaving,” she says.

Which is exactly what I thought would happen. I counted on Cleo being stubborn when I made the crazy-ass journey here.

“I guess we’re both staying then.”

Her jaw clenches. “There’s only one bedroom.”

I look around the spacious living room. I’m spread out on the two-seater, but there’s a bigger couch adjacent.

“I’ll sleep out here.”

She taps her foot irritably and looks out the window. I’m amused by the reaction, but I don’t want her to hate me.

I sit up and open my hands magnanimously.

“Look. I know this isn’t what you were expecting. It’s not what I was expecting either.” Which is bullshit. I knew exactly what I was walking into, but Cleo doesn’t need to know that.

“I came to surprise my brother, and I didn’t know he wasn’t going to be around. I’ll stay a few days until the roads and my bike are safe, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

Cleo eyes me suspiciously, as she should. I know how I must look with my riding leathers and my patch. But the MC strip on my jacket doesn’t seem to worry her.

“You’re not going to throw me out in the cold over Christmas, are you?”

I give her my most genuine smile, but she only narrows her eyes further. It makes me chuckle. She's a suspicious one all right.

"I can't go back to my place. A friend needed a place to stay for a few days and I can't kick her out."

She chews her lower lip, thinking it over. She's got no place to go but here.

"I guess we're roommates for a few days then," I say, grinning.

"Fine," she finally says. "But just so you know, I sleep with a knife under my pillow. If you try anything, I'll cut your balls off."

My balls tighten just thinking about it. I believe she'd do it too. I hold my hands up in a placating way.

"I'd like to keep my balls, thank you."

"Then stay the fuck away from me and you'll be fine."

She snatches a laptop off the table and marches into the bedroom. The door slams shut behind her, and I let out a breath.

"That didn't go so bad," I mutter to myself.

CLEO

Someone's in my shower. Not that it's technically my shower, but as it's the shower in the ensuite attached to the bedroom I'm staying in, that makes it mine.

I pull the duvet off my head and sit up, suddenly wide awake. Over the noise of running water is a baritone voice singing. Kray's actually fucking singing in my shower.

The door to the bathroom is closed, luckily, but the door to the living room is wide open, which means Kray must have strolled on in here while I was asleep to get to the shower.

The ensuite is the only bathroom in the apartment, and now a big, bearded biker is washing himself in there.

An image of Kray covered in soapy suds fills my brain, and a sudden heat courses through my body. There's a tug in my core, and I squeeze my thighs together.

It's infuriating how goddamn gorgeous Ethan's brother is. It made it extremely difficult to throw him out yesterday.

After he turned up unexpectedly on the doorstep, I spent the rest of the day squirrelled away in the bedroom.

I thought about emailing Ethan, but I hate to bother him on holiday unless it's urgent. When he's here, he gives the company a hundred percent, so I like to leave him to get a proper break while he's away.

Besides, there's not a lot he could do from Barbados. And it sounds petty, complaining that his brother has turned up. He

might suggest I'm not needed to house sit, but I can't go back to my apartment yet. I can't throw Lisa out.

Also, I don't want to cause bad feelings between the brothers if Kray isn't supposed to be here. With their parents gone, they only have each other. Well, I guess Ethan has Craig and Kray has his MC. But blood must count for something.

The shower stops, and I hear the screen door open, then close. Kray hums to himself as he dries himself off. I'm about to get up and throw some clothes on before he comes into the room when the bathroom door opens.

Kray is wrapped in nothing but a fluffy bath towel that hangs off his hips. Droplets of water slide down his muscular chest and bead in the dark line of hair at the base of his stomach.

Dark tattoos snake over his thick arms, making me want to trace my fingers over the patterns and explore his ink.

My core tightens and there's a rush of dampness between my legs. My mouth must be hanging open, but I can't look away.

"Morning," he says cheerily. "Did I wake you?"

I drag my eyes away from the bulge that's visible under the fluffy towel and up to his eyes. They've got a dangerous sparkle to them, and I get the feeling that if I peeled back my duvet and invited him in, he wouldn't say no.

"No." I lie because I don't want him to think he has any effect on me, even though my core is inflamed and my nipples are hard.

"Thought I'd grab a shower first thing, then get out of your way."

He reaches a hand up and tussles his wet hair, sending droplets of water into the air.

"Ah-hum."

I clamp my jaw shut and manage to drag my eyes away from his body. Pretending to be disinterested, I pick up my phone and pretend to check my emails because if I look at

Kray for too long, I don't trust myself not to lick the water off his hard chest.

Kray saunters through my room and into the living room, still humming. He doesn't close the door behind him, and I have to employ all my self-restraint not to crawl over the bed to get an eyeful of him getting dressed.

Alongside the heat that's spreading through my body, I also feel irritated. How dare he come in here and strut about like he owns the place? Walking around in just a towel and showing off his goods...

While I'm annoyed, I'm also glad for the show.

Damn, this guy's got me all flustered.

Striding to the door, I slam it shut, cutting him off mid-hum.

I lean my back on the door, breathing heavily. My body is inflamed, and I slide my hand over my aching breasts, trailing my fingertips over my hard nipples, imagining what it would feel like to have Kray's hands running over my body.

My eyes flutter closed as my hand snakes lower, slipping between my legs to feel the damp patch of my panties.

My core sparks to life under my touch, but my hands are too soft. I want Kray's callused hands on me, the rough ridges scraping against my skin.

There's a knock at the door behind me and my eyes fly open, my hand coming up from between my legs.

"What is it?" I call out sharply.

"I need to brush my teeth."

Fuck. I rest my head against the wall and take a deep breath before opening the door, hoping Kray doesn't notice my pointy nipples and inflamed pussy.

This is going to be a hard couple of days.

It's a few hours later and my work for the day is done. I spent most of the day in the bedroom working on my laptop while propped up by pillows in the bed. It didn't take me long to do all my tasks for the day, so I pulled out my reading app and downloaded a dirty, sweet, short romance—my favorite genre.

It's done nothing to ease the pressure that's been building in my pussy ever since Kray turned up on the doorstep.

I only came out to get lunch and he wasn't there, which is fine by me.

Now as I come out of the bedroom, Kray's on the couch with his feet up and a book in his hand. I try not to act surprised to see him reading, but I do note it's a thriller. No dirty romances for him.

The gray clouds hang thick and low, but they still haven't broken.

I took my time getting ready to go out, and I tell myself it's because I always like to put my persona on, but I'm pleased to see the way Kray's eyes rake over me, taking in my black skirt and figure-hugging sweater.

“Where you off to?” he asks as his eyes rest on my breasts.

“None of your business.”

I grab my car keys from the kitchen counter and head for the door.

“You're right. It's none of my business, but I wondered if you want to have dinner with me later, since we're in the same house.”

I narrow my eyes at him, not sure if he's asking me out of politeness alone.

“Here, I mean,” he says. “It's too cold to go out.”

He says it pointedly, and he's right. I want nothing more than to stay here where it's warm and cozy. But there are people relying on me.

“I'm going to the MUEVE office.”

He cocks his head, waiting for me to explain what the hell that is. I think about walking out without an explanation. I usually don't tell people I do volunteer work. It leads to questions I don't want to answer. But Kray's looking at me with those warm brown eyes of his that make me want to crawl inside him and curl up.

"It's a charity for people who grew up in foster care, to transition them back into the community."

He looks genuinely surprised. "You volunteer there?"

I nod. "We're organizing a Christmas lunch for local foster kids and their caretakers. I'm helping organize it."

I wait for the questions. Why that charity? Did I grow up in foster care?

But they don't come. Instead, Kray looks impressed, and the smirk he's had on his face the entire time he's been here is gone for once.

"That's great work you're doing," he says softly. "Do you need some extra help?"

"No," I say firmly. The last thing I need is Kray hanging about and distracting me when there's still so much to do.

"Okay." He holds his hands up. "But I'll have dinner ready for you when you get home."

He says it firmly like there's no argument.

I know it will be an intense few hours with no time to grab anything to eat, and the thought of coming home to a cooked meal is tempting.

"Fine." I snatch my keys up before I remember my manners. "Thank you."

He smiles, but I head out the door before he can say anything else.

If Kray wants to cook me a meal, I won't say no, but that doesn't mean I'm going to sleep with him.

KRAY

*A*s soon as Cleo's out the door, I head to the kitchen. I love to cook, and my mother's Italian meatball recipe is my favorite. I went to the supermarket earlier to pick up the ingredients, banking on Cleo agreeing to eat with me.

I get to work on the sauce. It takes a few hours to really marinate to get the flavors, so I leave it bubbling on the stove top while I pull out the other things I picked up from the shops.

It was the only Christmas tree I could find this close to Christmas. It's a small artificial one, but this apartment's bare. I love my brother's low-key ascetic taste, but sometimes you want a bit of color, a bit of festiveness. And I get the feeling Cleo could do with some festivity in her life.

Cleo's got this tough-girl persona, but I wonder what it's hiding. I want to spoil Cleo with good homemade food, wrap her in my arms, and tell her that whatever it is, she's got me now. But I get the feeling she'd run a mile if I told her how I feel, that she's mine and I'll always look after her.

I need to take it slow. I need to build up her trust, and we need to get to know each other. I have to let her realize we're meant to be together the way I know it in my heart.

It's a few hours later when I hear the door open. I can feel the cold air from here as it blasts into the apartment. Then I hear Cleo's intake of breath as she sees the decorations. I smile to myself. It's exactly the reaction I wanted.

I strung a row of fairy lights from the front entrance all the way into the living room. She comes around the corner and drops her purse by the couch.

“What’s all this?” she asks, taking in the tree with ornaments and lights.

“Thought I’d make the place more Christmassy since we’ll be spending Christmas here.”

She eyes me suspiciously, but there’s a sparkle in her eyes and I can tell she’s pleased.

“I thought you were driving back soon?”

I shrug. “The bike needs some repairs and that snowstorm...” We both look out the window because the clouds keep getting lower and darker but never seem to burst. Not that we can see them now. It’s after dark and all we see are the lights of the town and the decorations from the square twinkling in the darkness.

“Do you drink red or white wine?”

I move into the kitchen and grab two wine glasses from the cupboard. She leans her elbows on the kitchen counter and watches me.

“Red.”

“Red it is.” I pour two glasses, and she sips hers tentatively. Her dark red lipstick comes off on the glass, leaving a lip-shaped smudge.

My gaze lingers on the imprint of her lips, making my cock twitch. I can imagine Cleo on her knees with those red lips wrapped around my cock.

Fuck. I need to clear my head, or I’ll blow my chance with her.

Cleo leans over the pot, her eyes half closed, inhaling the scent of the sauce. Her top falls open, exposing tightly pressed cleavage—two soft, enticing pillows.

“You made this yourself?” Cleo asks, unaware of the devious thoughts running through my mind.

“Ah-ha.” My words come out strangled, and I have to walk away to compose myself and adjust the hard-on in my jeans.

“It smells good.”

Which is about the nicest thing Cleo’s said to me since I arrived.

“My mum’s old recipe,” I manage to say, trying to pull myself together. I take two deep bowls out of the cupboard and set them on the counter. “I’m lucky she taught it to me before the accident”

Cleo doesn’t look surprised, and I gather she knows my family history.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” she says softly.

I have a pang of regret for a moment, as I always do at this time of year, even though it’s been almost fifteen years since they passed. It stays with you, that kind of loss.

“Thank you.”

I want to ask where her family is, but I can already guess if she’s volunteering for a foster charity.

“Do you always spend Christmas by yourself?”

She takes a large swallow of wine. “Yup. I haven’t got any family.”

“I’m sorry.”

Cleo looks away, and for just a moment, her guard comes down. I get a glimpse of the vulnerable girl behind the hard exterior. I reach out, wanting to give her comfort, and my hand closes over hers.

Which is the wrong move. Cleo’s expression closes up, and she pulls her hand away, clasping it around the wine glass as she takes another sip.

“I don’t need your sympathy. It is what it is.”

That statement saddens me even more. I know what it’s like to lose a parent, but at least they were around for my childhood.

Even though Cleo hasn't told me, I can guess what her situation is. However, it's clear she doesn't want to talk about it. If I push her too much, she'll close up completely.

It's a big step forward that she's agreed to have dinner with me. I can't fuck this up.

"I hope you're hungry because there's a lot of food."

She looks grateful that I've changed the topic to a lighter one, and I take the plates to the table and dish out the food.

My brother has a grand dining table that sits eight. I guess it's for all the diner parties they throw, but it feels too big for just the two of us.

I set the plates with mine at one end and Cleo next to me. I've lit the candles on the table, and with the lights off and just candles and fairy lights on, the only thing missing is music.

I flick my phone on and Iron Maiden comes blaring through the speakers.

Cleo almost chokes on her forkful of food.

"Sorry," I say, quickly turning it down. "I like listening to music when I cook."

She arches her eyebrow. "Which album?"

"*Powerslave*, of course."

She nods appreciatively, and we share a knowing look from one fan to another. "One of the best albums of all time in my opinion."

My girl likes Iron Maiden, even though she probably wasn't even born when *Powerslave* came out. I think I just fell in love a little bit more.

We talk about music, keeping the conversation safe. Another glass of wine later and she asks me about Ethan as a kid.

I tell her stories about what it was like growing up along the Sunset Coast.

She laughs when I tell her about the time we got caught stealing parsley from a neighbor's yard.

“Parsley? Why the hell parsley?”

“Mom was cooking but she'd used up all the parsley from our garden. I said we'd go get her some from the shop, but Ethan convinced me to pocket the money and pick some from the neighbors.”

“Ethan was the instigator?” Cleo sounds surprised, and I pretend to look offended. “What? You think just because I wear a cut that I'm the thief?”

She laughs, and goddamn, it's the sweetest sound I ever heard.

“No, it's just that he seems so strait laced.”

It's my turn to chuckle. “He'd have you believe that, but when we were growing up, he was always the one getting me into trouble.”

I tell her a few more stories, and another hour later the wine is gone and the candles have burned down.

Cleo checks her phone, and her eyes go wide.

“It's nearly midnight.”

She looks alarmed. I can't help but laugh.

“What happens at midnight? Do you turn into a pumpkin?”

She shakes her head, looking half exasperated and half amused.

“Some of us have to work in the morning.”

I shrug. “Take the day off. Your boss won't know.”

She stands up from the table and takes the dishes to the kitchen. “It's tempting, but you know my boss. He can be a real asshole.”

We both laugh because if there's one thing Ethan isn't, it's an asshole.

I follow Cleo to the kitchen with the empty wineglasses in my hand. She's slow putting the plates in the sink. The wine

must be getting to her head.

When she turns around, we're so close I can smell her musky perfume.

Her eyes look up to mine. Damn. She's a foot shorter than me, and the way she's looking up with her dark-rimmed eyes makes my chest swell with a need for her.

Her eyes widen at finding me so close, but she doesn't back away. Her breath hitches and her lips part.

I could kiss her now, smudge what remains of her lipstick right off those plump lips. Her hand closes around my forearm, and I groan at her touch.

Her pupils dilate, and I see my desire reflected in her eyes. This is the moment. This is what I came here for, to kiss Cleo, to claim her and make her mine.

Her lips part, and I smell the sweet wine on her breath. She's had too much to drink. This isn't how I want to claim her.

I want her to be fully aware of what she's doing. I want her to choose me because that's what she wants, not because she's feeling tipsy and I just happen to be here.

With all the restraint I can muster, I take Cleo by both arms and kiss the top of her head.

"Good night, Cleo."

She gazes at me and blinks slowly. There's disappointment, but something else also flickers across her face. Respect.

I get the feeling I just passed a test, maybe one she didn't even know she was giving.

"Goodnight, Kray," she mumbles.

Then she's out of my arms and heading to her room.

I watch her go, wondering if I'll get another chance, hoping like hell that the next time I have Cleo in my arms she'll be stone-cold sober and wanting me as much as I want her.

CLEO

My head feels fuzzy and my tongue dry. I lick my lips, but there's no moisture in my mouth. Slowly, I swing my legs over the bed and stumble to the bathroom.

My eyeliner is smudged because I forgot to take it off before bed, and my hair is sticking out at funny angles.

It's not my best look.

Cupping water in my hand, I take a few greedy gulps and immediately feel better as I hydrate. I'm not a fan of hangovers, but I don't regret drinking wine with Kray last night.

He's a nice guy underneath the heavy ink and intimidating biker jacket. The conversation flowed easily, and the night went by so quickly I didn't realize it had gotten so late.

Luckily, I don't need to be in the office today.

After a long shower I'm feeling better and venture out to the living area.

"Morning." Kray's smile lights up the room and makes me remember that I almost kissed him last night.

Almost but not quite.

"Stupid girl," I mutter to myself.

Kray gives me a sympathetic look and runs me a glass of water. He must think I'm telling myself I'm stupid for being hungover. I'm not going to correct him.

I take the water and slink back to my room, not ready to face him.

It was stupid, throwing myself at a man because he showed a little bit of kindness. But it still stings that Kray rejected me.

Or maybe he was being a gentleman. I snort at the thought, almost spilling my water. Not likely. There are no gentlemen left in this world that I've ever come across.

I spend most of the day in my room working and avoiding Kray. But in the afternoon, I get ready to leave the house. I take my time with my makeup, telling myself it's what I usually do. But somewhere inside me, I hope Kray notices my figure-hugging tights and how good my lips look in this wine-colored shade.

He's not in the apartment when I come out of the room, and I feel a pang of disappointment. I find him working on his bike in the parking lot and chatting amiably to Fitzzy. She gives me a pointed look when she sees me come out of the elevator and floats off in her zebra print shawl that looks far too cold for this weather.

My heartbeat goes up a notch as I watch Kray's grease-stained hands tighten something up on the bike.

I know nothing about bikes, but I can tell this beast is his pride and joy.

"Fixed enough to take you home yet?" I ask pointedly, even though I'm not sure I want Kray to leave now.

"You trying to get rid of me?"

His eyes sparkle and I look away. I'm not sure I am anymore. Kray is good company. I like having him around.

"I'm going into town," I tell him. I can tell he's dying to ask me where I'm going, but I decide to keep that to myself. It's nice watching him wrestle with himself not to ask. "You got a key?"

He holds up his key chain. "Ethan gave me a spare."

I head over to my car, and Kray calls after me. “Be careful. That snow cloud is about to break.”

It’s been about to break for the last two days, so I’m not too worried. Although it’s nice that he’s concerned.

As I pull out of the parking lot, Kray leans on his bike and watches me. I peek at him through the rearview mirror as I drive away, hoping like hell I get another opportunity to kiss him.

KRAY

As soon as Cleo drives around the corner, I get on my bike and follow.

She's hidden herself away all day and my need to be close to her is overwhelming.

Cleo fills my thoughts, her image swirling around in my brain and driving me to distraction. I had to get out of the apartment and to the only thing that will soothe me—my bike.

If Cleo doesn't want to spend time with me, fine. But that doesn't mean I won't spend time with her. Besides, I'm curious to see where she's going and if she's meeting anyone.

My fingers grip the handlebars hard at the thought. If she's meeting another man, I'll lose it. But somehow, I don't think she is.

I slow down as I turn into the main street of town. A guy my size always gets attention, and I slipped off my MC jacket so I would blend in more.

Luckily, the streets are too busy with Christmas shoppers and revelers for anyone to notice me.

I spot Cleo's car parked up farther and pull into a place half a block away.

I scan the street but there's no sign of Cleo. There's an uneasiness in my gut. I don't like her being out with so many people around. Anything could happen to my girl.

There's a bar near where I park the bike, and a rowdy group of people are singing along to Christmas carols. I push

open the door and scan the dark room. There are a few men at the bar nursing beers and a large group that has taken over the karaoke machine. It looks like an office party that started way too early if everyone's already drunk in the afternoon.

Thankfully, Cleo isn't in there.

I pass a pet shop, which I doubt she's gone into, and the next store is a cafe. I peer in the window, squinting to see around the frosted decorations on the glass and the Santa display.

My heart leaps into my throat when I see a man slide an arm around a woman with short dark hair, but the height is all wrong. The woman turns to speak to the man, and it's not Cleo.

Relief floods me, but so does a new sense of urgency to find her.

A few doors up from the cafe is a bakery. The door opens and Cleo comes out. I duck behind a blow-up Santa display in front of a toy shop.

Cleo's carrying a paper bag full of something from the bakery. There're too many to have on her own, so she must be taking them to someone. If it's a man, I'll shove the donuts or whatever the fuck she's bringing him down his throat.

With jealous rage searing through me, I stalk down the street, nearly bumping into a kid carrying a giant stuffed reindeer.

"Sorry," I mutter.

I unclench my fists and take a deep breath. I'm this jealous over the thought of Cleo meeting another man and I'm not even sure that's what she's doing. I'm really losing it. The guys at the clubhouse would give me shit for sure.

Cleo continues up the road, and I follow from a safe distance, my feelings in check.

Usually, I'd stand out in a town this size, but with all the Christmas shoppers, no one notices a big, bearded man in

biking leathers. Cleo turns down a street and goes into a building a few doors down.

It's a plain-looking concrete building with a wooden plaque out front and a few business names on it.

The door closes behind her, and I step forward to read the plaque. There are a few businesses in the building, but the one I recognize is:

Manifieste Una Espléndida Vida Exitosa

It's MUEVE, the charity that Cleo told me about.

The charity for helping young foster adults get back into society. The place where Cleo volunteers.

My heart melts, and I fall in love a little bit more. It's two days to Christmas, and instead of drinking and partying and overspending, my girl is spending all her spare time helping others. And she's bought them baked goods.

My girl is a fucking saint.

CLEO

When I get home from MUEVE, Kray's still working on his bike. He's got grease all over his hands, and he wipes them on a dirty rag and stands up when he sees me.

"Is it fixed yet?"

He gives me a lopsided grin that makes my panties melt. "Hop on and we'll see."

I bark out a laugh until I realize he's serious.

"You want me to get on the back of that thing?"

Kray shrugs. "Sure."

A nervous thrill goes through me. I've never been on a motorcycle before, and the possibility thrills me. But it's cold and about to snow, and he's been fiddling with it all day.

He senses my hesitation and pulls a helmet out of his saddle bag.

"Put this on."

He holds it out to me, and I take the helmet and turn it over in my hands.

"Is the bike really fixed?"

"Yes," he reassures me. "It's not going to fall apart. I've just been doing an oil change."

Kray swings his leg over the bike and pats the back seat.

"Come on, Cleo. I'll drive safe, I promise."

Slipping the helmet onto my head, I slide onto the back of the bike.

There's nowhere to sit but straight up against Kray. Even through his leathers I can feel the warmth radiating from him.

I breathe in deep, taking in the scent of leather and grease. I long to rest my head against his solid back, but he'd probably think I was being clingy.

Kray guns the engine, and the bike vibrates beneath me. A tremor goes through my body, adding to the heady sensations of being this close to Kray.

"Hold onto me," he calls over the roar of the engine, and I thread my hands around his waist.

As we ride out of the parking lot, Fitzzy is standing by the trash, bag in hand. She gives us a wave, a wide grin on her face.

It must match my own.

The bike feels amazing. Wind whips my hair and makes my eyes water. The ground zooms past as I cling onto Kray. It feels like we're flying, and I feel safe with him in control.

It's exhilarating, and I'm not sure if it's because of the bike or because of the man I've got my arms around.

We drive out of town and head along the plains to the Black Top Ranges. After about twenty minutes, we start heading upwards into the hills. Kray turns down a dirt track and then comes to a stop at a small parking lot.

I've explored some of the trails around the ranges, but this isn't a place I know.

I slide off the bike and unhook my helmet.

The cold air hits me like tiny pricks of ice against my face. It's colder up here than in the valley, and I wrap my arms around myself. The icy wind heightens my senses even more, making me feel lightheaded. I pull my gloves off, blowing on my hands to get them warm.

"You ever been up here?" Kray asks.

I shake my head. “Not to this part.”

He smiles. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

He takes my hand. It feels so natural, his hand clasped in mine.

We walk along a small trail, which widens to a lookout. My breath catches in my throat. The plains are laid out below us, lines of lights crisscrossing the darkness where the roads are. In the distance is Bourbon, the Christmas lights of the main street sparkling like beacons of hope.

I can see the twinkle of lights coming from houses and Christmas lights lining the streets.

“It’s beautiful.”

Kray leads me over to a flat boulder, and we climb up and take a seat. I dig my hands into my pockets to keep the biting cold away from them.

“Don’t you have gloves?” he asks.

“I left them with the bike.” Which I know was stupid, but I don’t regret it now as Kray takes my hands in his again.

He tucks my icy fingers between his warm palms. The warmth immediately flows into them, but he doesn’t let my hands go.

“Why did you join an MC?” I’ve been dying to ask him, but I didn’t want him to think I gave a fuck. But since I tried to kiss him last night and I’ve got my hands tucked in his, I think he knows I’m interested. “You don’t seem like someone who belongs in a motorcycle club.”

Kray chuckles softly. “We’re not all outlaws, you know.”

“Aren’t you?”

He raises his eyebrows at me. “It’s not all like what you see on the TV. There are loads of clubs where we just want to ride.”

I’m skeptical. “And yours is like that?”

He regards me carefully, and I get the feeling he's sizing me up, wondering how much to tell me.

"The Underground Crows are mostly legit, but there's a few business opportunities that are a gray area."

It's a lot to confess to someone he barely knows, and I feel the weight of his trust in me. But I'm not here to judge. I'm just curious.

"Why did you join?"

He looks out at the view, taking a moment to answer.

"After my parents died, Ethan packed a bag and went off traveling. He was the only family I had left. I was into bikes, so I knew some of the guys in the club. I did some work at their bike garage, and they took me on as an apprentice. It wasn't hard from there to become a prospect. I guess I was looking for a new family, and the club provided that."

"So, they're like family to you?"

I can't keep the wistful note from my voice. I've never had a family and this guy's got two.

"Yeah." He turns toward me. "They are. My brothers are my family. They'll always have my back."

I wonder what that would be like. I've never had anyone to have my back.

"That must be nice."

"Some families you're born with, and some you choose."

His hand runs over my chin when he says it, and my heart skips a beat. I want him to choose me. I want to be part of something more than myself.

"I've never had either."

I don't usually talk about my past, but with Kray I feel like I can open up. I find myself telling him about my alcoholic mom, about being passed around from foster home to foster home.

Kray listens attentively. There's no pity in his eyes, no judgement. He just lets me talk.

"I never had a family. I've never belonged anywhere."

Kray's hand brushes my cheek, and he cups my chin. Pinpricks of heat emanate from his touch, making me shiver—in a good way.

"You belong here, Cleo." He takes my hand and presses it to his heart. "You belong with me."

My breath catches at his words, and my heart thumps in my chest. No one's ever given me a place to belong. But he can't know how serious those words are to me.

It's the kind of thing guys say to girls all the time. I doubt he means it the way I need him to mean it.

But for a few moments, it's nice to pretend.

Kray's face is so close to mine I can smell grease and soap. I can see the different shades of darkness in his eyes, the golden flecks around the iris and the deep chocolate of the outside.

Then he's kissing me, his firm lips making my cold lips sing. Warm energy flows through me, and for a moment, I believe Kray's right. I do belong. Right here, in this moment.

Kray's hand slides around my head, tangling in my hair and deepening the kiss.

Our tongues collide, and I slide closer to him on the boulder. I want to be close to him. I want this. My body wants this.

A cold, icy spike hits my face. Then another.

I pull away quickly as thick snowflakes hit my cheeks.

"It's snowing."

I tilt my head to the sky, to the gray cloud that has finally opened. Snowflakes float down around us.

I've never seen it snow in Texas before.

My smile widens as Kray takes my hand. We sit in silence, watching the thick flakes fall over Bourbon. Until it gets too cold and not even the heat of Kray's body pressed next to me can stop the shivering.

We climb on the bike and ride home as the snow comes in flurries around us. This time I rest my head against Kray's back, not caring what he thinks of me. I'm hungry for his warmth as we ride home.

KRAY

*I*t's five on Christmas morning, and I'm warming my hands in front of the industrial oven that's currently cooking breakfast for a hundred kids.

I haven't been up this early on Christmas Day since I was a kid checking if Santa Claus had come to the house.

Christmas music plays in the kitchen as a team of volunteers butters bread and prepares scrambled eggs for the kids who will be arriving in a few hours.

Cleo has an apron tied over her trademark all-black outfit, no colors even for Christmas, and a wide smile on her face as she peels potatoes. She's leading the kitchen team of volunteers who are mostly ex-foster kids like her.

Some children will be here for breakfast while we're expecting about two hundred for lunch, plus their foster families if they want to join us.

There are games planned and singing, and some poor schmuck is dressing up as Santa Claus.

I'm whistling to myself as I butter toast, and when I reach for a new bag of bread, my eye catches Cleo's. She gives me a smile that warms my chest and makes my heart feel like it's floating.

She's happy here, doing good and making a difference to people's lives.

My girl's an angel, and that makes me love her even more. Because yeah, I do love Cleo.

I've loved her since the moment I saw her photo, and that love has grown stronger every day I've spent with her.

When this is over, I'm going to tell her how I feel and ask her to come back to the Coast with me. If she wants a family, I'll give her one. There'll always be a place for Cleo with me.

It's a few hours later and my hands are sore from buttering toast. Not that I'd ever admit that to anyone.

"The first kids are here!"

A young woman runs in excitedly, wearing reindeer antlers and a red nose, and she's got a string of tinsel stuck to her foot.

While we've been working in the kitchen, another group of volunteers has been decorating the hall.

I grab a tray of toast while Cleo takes a plate of bacon, and we head out into the hall.

A boy who looks to be about seven years old comes in the door. His eyes widen as he takes in the big Christmas tree in the corner and the lights that are strung round the room. In the center of the hall are tables where we lay down the plates of food.

The boy is joined by two girls who are slightly younger. One of them carries a raggedy soft toy in her hands, the gray bunny pulled tightly to her chest.

"Hey." Cleo crouches next to the girl. "Do you want some Christmas breakfast?"

The girl eyes Cleo warily, and it breaks my heart to see such suspicion on the face of a young girl. I can't comprehend what some of these kids have been through.

But Cleo can. She's been through it too.

With compassion, she takes the girl by the hand and leads her over to the table. I don't hear what Cleo says to her, but within a few minutes, the girl smiles at Cleo and a few moments later they're laughing together.

I turn my attention away. I can't do anything about the past and what these kids have been through, but I can make sure today is one experience they'll remember for all the right reasons.

I find the little boy flicking ornaments on the Christmas tree and crouch next to him.

“Hey.”

He takes a cautious step back, which makes me glad I swapped my MC cut for a bright-green Christmas jumper with a snowman on it that I found in Ethan's drawer.

“You want to play with the trains?”

The boy looks hesitant, and I point over to a corner where there are a bunch of toys, including a wooden train set.

The boy runs over, and I join him. Soon we've built a track and we're racing each other around. He cracks up laughing every time we crash into each other.

It doesn't take long for the place to fill up, and I'm called back to the kitchen.

There are organized games for the kids while we get lunch ready. It's a proper Christmas roast with all the trimmings.

When we serve lunch, the volunteers join the kids at the table.

I reach across Cleo to pull my Christmas cracker with her. She's got a green paper hat on that's fallen lopsided, and my chest swells at the sight of her.

I catch her eye and she smiles. Then the little girl tugs on Cleo's sleeve and takes her attention away.

As I take a bite of my Christmas dinner, I can't help thinking this is the best Christmas I've ever had.

After dinner, Santa visits and each kid gets a present. The hall is filled with laughter and shrieks of delight.

It's late afternoon before the last of the kids are gone and we're finally done with the cleanup. Some of the volunteers

are going for a Christmas drink, but Cleo looks tired. She smiles gratefully when I suggest we go straight home.

For the entire drive back to Fitzpatrick Place, Cleo is pressed against my back. The warmth from her body warms me up on the inside.

When we get back to the apartment, she slides off my bike. I take her hand as we walk upstairs.

“You were amazing today,” I tell her.

Cleo shrugs as if it’s no big deal.

“It’s a way to give back. We’re shown all these images and movies about Christmas being about family. The perfect family sitting around at home, Dad carving the turkey, and Mom making dinner. I used to dread Christmas. It reminded me of all the things I didn’t have. At least with a foster kid’s Christmas party, for one day you felt like you belonged, like someone did care. And if I can help other kids feel like that, then that’s the perfect Christmas for me.”

By this time, we’re upstairs. The fairy lights strung around the apartment building flicker, making her features glow softly.

“You’re the most kindhearted person I know.”

Cleo snorts. “Please. I’m a cold-hearted bitch. Ask anyone in the office. That’s why Ethan likes me as his assistant. I’m not afraid to tell people to fuck off.”

She sticks her chin out defiantly, and yeah, there’s no question Cleo can be tough when she wants, but she’s also kind and thoughtful and soft on the inside.

Cleo unlocks the door, and we go into the apartment. I flick the fairy lights on, making the room twinkle.

Cleo slides her shoes off and dumps her purse on the table. She’s tired after the long day, but I’m not missing another chance with her.

I take Cleo’s hand, making her pause as I pull her toward me.

“You are an amazing woman. What you did today, what it means to those kids...” I trail off, not sure how to go on. “You’re amazing.”

She’s looking at me as if she’s unsure that I mean it. And she’s so fucking beautiful that I can’t get my words out. I can’t tell her all the things I wanted to say today. Instead, I pull her toward me and press my lips to hers.

She gives way to me immediately. This time, we haven’t had anything to drink, and she isn’t high on the thrill of a ride. This time, as Cleo kisses me back, I know that this is exactly what she wants.

CLEO

*K*ray's lips on mine are warm and insistent. The kiss sends tingles down my spine and heat coursing between my legs. My hand wraps around his head, tangling in his hair to bring him closer to me. I need to anchor myself.

Spending the day hanging out with foster kids has been amazing, but it's also brought up feelings for me—the shame of abandonment, the emptiness that comes with knowing that no one wants you.

I've lived with these feelings for so long that they've become a part of me. Now I cling to Kray, needing to feel the intimacy, needing to know that someone wants me, even if it's for only one night.

I press my body brazenly against his and love the power I feel when his hardness rubs against me.

I swivel my hips, and he groans, a deep rumble that I feel low in my belly. My hips rock against him, wanting to make him lose control. And I feel the moment he does.

Kray backs me against the wall, his pelvis grinding into me as he bites my bottom lip.

“Fuck, Cleo...” he moans. “I want you so bad.”

The words are like a drug to me. I want to be wanted by this man. His hands run over my hips, grabbing my ass as he pushes against me.

I hook my fingers under my top and pull it over my head, wanting him to see all of me.

Kray takes a step back, letting his eyes rove over my breasts. I know how good I look with my heavy breasts pressed into the black lacey bra. Sure, I've got stomach rolls, but I don't give a shit. If Kray doesn't like it, he can fuck off.

But he does like it. By the way his hungry gaze runs up my stomach and over my breasts, I can tell he likes what he sees very much.

I trail my hand over my breast casually, flicking my nipple through my bra.

“Do you want to fuck me?”

Kray's eyes go wide at my dirty talk, but he shakes his head slowly.

“No, Cleo. I want to make love to you. Slowly.”

My hand drops to my side. I don't know what he means. Making love and fucking are the same thing in my book.

But I'll go along with it if it will keep his hands on me. Because his hands on me make my skin heat and my mind clear.

I push my hips against him, feeling my mound rub against his hardness.

“I'm not going to take you against the wall.” Kray takes my hand and leads me to the bedroom. “Our first time should be in a bed, Cleo.”

Kray's sweet, talking about our first time as if he's not going to get on his bike and roar off tomorrow. And the way he's looking at me makes my heart skip.

It's disconcerting. I've never felt that with a man before. It makes me feel vulnerable, and I don't like vulnerable.

As soon as we're in the bedroom, I pull at Kray's jeans. My feelings are churning inside my chest, and I need the feel of him to still this raging emotion that's happening inside of me.

I tug at his fly. Kray stops my hand.

“Slow down, Cleo.”

He pushes me gently back onto the bed and lies next to me, planting soft kisses on my neck.

I shiver at the sensation, his warm breath making my panties dampen. I slide my hand under my skirt, looking for relief, but Kray stops me.

“I’m going to take care of your pussy, but I need you to slow down and trust me.”

His eyes are pooled with desire and steadiness. I take deep breaths. He keeps telling me to slow down, but it’s hard. I’ve never been with anyone that wants to take it slow before, that wants to enjoy my body the way Kray seems to.

His fingers trail up my thighs, lightly brushing the skin until he gets to my panties. Then he’s pulling them down, and I feel cool air on my pussy.

Kray shuffles down the bed, and I know where he’s going. He plants a kiss on my thigh. He’s so close to my most intimate center that the anxiousness inside me explodes.

I can’t have him go there. It’s too vulnerable, too much.

I sit up on the bed, and before he can protest, I’ve climbed onto his lap.

“You keep telling me to slow down, but I want you too much.”

I straddle Kray in nothing but my bra. His eyes roam over my body as I wiggle my hips, pressing my sticky sex on top of his hard bulge.

“Fuck, Cleo...”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do, Kray,” I say unhooking my bra.

He groans as my breasts swing free. I take one of his hands and place it on my tit, and the other I put on my ass.

He’s trying to turn this into an intimate experience, but I can’t deal with that. I don’t do intimacy. I don’t know how. But I do know how to fuck.

Sliding his underwear off his hips, I lay his thick length along my pussy entrance as I grind into him.

I see the moment Kray gives in to me, the moment his resistance breaks.

It feels like a victory as I take his cock in my hand and slide the tip into my opening. His eyes widen as I slide down his shaft. It's a victory, but it feels like a hollow one.

Right now, I don't care.

Kray fills me up, and the sensation chases away the demons in my heart. The turmoil, the emotion of the day disappears as I ride his cock, as I let him lose himself in my pussy.

I don't ask him to use a condom because I want to feel the rawness of his cock, the realness of him inside me.

As his control loosens, he grabs my tits, sucking a nipple into his mouth. His teeth graze my nipple, and I cry out, the shock making my insides grip his cock.

“Fuck.”

The feelings shooting through my body are overwhelming me, giving me a few moments of peace where there's nothing in the world but the heat coming from his cock and raging through my body.

My nipple pops out of his mouth, and I take the opportunity to lean back. Thrusting my tits out as I ride him hard, letting him see my body, watching his face as he gets close to losing control.

I feel powerful. I feel in control. I feel nothing.

When Kray's about to lose it, I lean forward and ride him hard as my clit rubs against his pubic bone.

My orgasm screams out of me, and I clutch his shoulder as I come. A moment later, Kray thrashes against me, and I feel hot come shoot into me.

I crash forward, panting hard, hiding my face in his shoulder as waves of pleasure sweep through me.

I roll off him, and Kray gets me a tissue to clean up. I face the wall, pretending to be exhausted, and he wraps his arms around me, planting soft kisses on my neck.

It feels good. It feels safe, but I know it's not.

Kray is only here for a visit. He thinks he feels something for me, but I know it won't last. I'm a distraction, an unexpected gift for a few days over Christmas.

He'll go back home in a few days. He'll leave me like everyone else does.

Sex with Kray was amazing, but it was just sex. That's what I tell myself as his solid arms pull me toward him, wrapping me in a tight hug.

I drift off to sleep, for one night feeling wanted in his arms.

KRAY

*M*y arm reaches for Cleo and comes down on an empty pillow. Groggy from sleep, I open my eyes. The other side of the bed is empty. The sheets are pulled up just below the pillow and smoothed down, nicely made.

I sit up quickly, listening for sounds in the apartment. But there's nothing but silence.

"Cleo?"

Not bothering to dress, I get out of bed and stalk through to the living room.

It's empty.

There's no smell of brewing coffee and no sounds of Cleo humming to herself like she does in the mornings. I search the kitchen and entryway, then double back to the bathroom.

But the place is empty.

My gut clenches, an ominous feeling sitting heavy in my stomach.

I try to tell myself she's gone out for milk or something, even though she drinks her coffee black. Then I notice her bag's gone. And I know she's gone too.

"Fuck."

Somehow, while I was sleeping, Cleo packed up her belongings and left.

I go through the apartment again, just in case I missed something. That's when I see the note stuck to the coffee

machine, where she knew I'd see it.

Thanks for a fun night.

My apartment's free again and I didn't want to wake you.

Have a safe ride back.

Cleo x

“Fuck.”

I crumple the note into a ball in my fist.

Thanks for a fun night.

Is that all this was to her? A bit of fun?

I think back to the sex last night, how I tried to take it slow. I wanted to savor the moment of our first time together. But Cleo was hell-bent on riding me hard.

My cock thickens at the memory. I guess I didn't resist too much. But maybe that's all she wanted from me.

A bubble of anger rises up inside me, and I launch the note at the floor to ceiling windows. It bounces off the glass and rolls onto the floor and under the couch.

“Fuck.”

I better pick it up or my brother will find it and wonder what the fuck we were up to in his bed. I get down on my knees and retrieve the note.

I open it again, needing to see the words from her.

How could I have been so wrong about our connection? I thought she felt it too. I thought we shared something special.

Then it hits me.

Have a safe ride back.

Cleo thinks I'm leaving.

She thinks I'm heading back to the Sunset Coast. But the truth is, I'm not going anywhere unless it's with Cleo.

I never told her how I feel. I didn't want to overwhelm her, and now I've done the opposite.

She thinks I'm going to abandon her.

With my heart in my throat, I race to the bedroom and pull my clothes on.

I've got to find Cleo and let her know how I feel.

CLEO

“Just keep breathing,” I mutter to myself. It’s what I used to say when things were bad with Mom. “Just keep breathing and everything will work itself out.”

It’s the only way to hold back the emotions that threaten to burst out of my chest as I step out of the elevator and into the underground parking lot.

My suitcase trails behind me and my laptop bag’s slung over my shoulder. I’m glad I kept everything together. It made it easy to pack up this morning while Kray was asleep.

The thought of Kray sends a slice of pain to my heart, and I take a deep breath. I knew when I woke up this morning next to him, my heart light and content, that I had to leave.

I had to leave before he does.

I’ve let Kray get too close in the last few days. He makes me feel things I’m not ready to feel, especially for a man who’s going to get on a bike a ride away as soon as the snow clears.

“Merry Christmas, dear.”

I’m startled out of my thoughts by Fitzy.

She’s taking a load of clothes to the basement laundry, wrapped up from the cold in a leopard print robe.

“Merry Christmas,” I mumble.

I don’t correct her that it’s Boxing Day and Christmas is technically over.

“He came away with me anyway,” Fitzzy says.

She pauses with the laundry basket resting on the door frame, looking wistful. I glance around, wondering if she’s in the middle of a conversation with someone else. But no, it’s just the two of us in the parking lot.

“Um, who?”

She squints at me as if I’m the one that’s gone mad. “My first husband.”

Oh, I get it. She must be talking about the man she mentioned the other day.

“I thought you didn’t get married?”

“We didn’t get married in Barbados,” she corrects. “He came with me back here to Bourbon for the wedding.”

“What about his family?”

“Oh, they accepted me in the end. They just didn’t believe we could fall in love after only knowing each other for four days.”

She smiles wistfully. “But when you know, you know.”

I try not to think of Kray and his laughing eyes and kind smile, or the way my heart skips whenever I catch him looking at me.

“He got a job as a lifeguard on the cruise ship, and we had a wonderful time traveling the world,” Fitzzy continues. “Until a freak diving accident took his life in Thasos, one of the Greek Islands.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be, dear. We had three wonderful years together. I’m glad I took that chance on him, or I would have missed out.”

She looks at me sharply, all wistfulness gone. “Make sure you don’t miss out, dear.”

Then she disappears into the laundry room, the door banging shut behind her.

I stare at the closed door for a moment thinking about Fitzzy's words. She can't be talking about me and Kray, can she?

She doesn't know our situation. She doesn't know that he's leaving town the first chance he gets.

I pull my suitcase toward me and head to my car.

What might have worked for Fitzzy a hundred years ago doesn't apply to my situation. There's no changing the fact that Kray's life—his family—is somewhere else.

It's a few hours later and I'm slumped on the couch in my apartment. Lisa left a box of chocolates to say thanks for the temporary accommodation, and I've got a pile of crumpled chocolate wrappers next to me.

I pop another chocolate in my mouth just as there's a knock at the door.

Biting into the caramel center, I get up off the couch. It's probably one of my neighbors wishing me a happy Christmas. I don't feel much like chatting, but I can't ignore the fact that I'm home with my car parked out front.

I open the door, and my heart stops for a beat when I see Kray. His hair is messy and windswept, and there's an anxious look in his eyes. I long to run my hands through his thick hair and lean into his solid, comforting chest. But I can't show weakness now. It will only get me hurt.

"What are you doing here?"

I fold my arms across my chest. If he's come to say goodbye, he can do it on the doorstep. I don't want a drawn-out farewell.

"Can I come in?"

I don't want to prolong the goodbye, but it's freezing on the doorstep. Begrudgingly, I open the door wider, letting him in.

"What do you want, Kray?"

If he's offended by my coolness, he doesn't show it, which just goes to show how right I am. He doesn't give a shit about me.

"Have you come to say goodbye?"

His brow furrows and he shakes his head. "No. I'm not leaving you, Cleo."

The words spark something warm inside me, and a bead of hope unfurls in my stomach.

I crush it down before it gets me hurt.

"You've got to go back sometime, Kray. There's no point in being dishonest about it. I fucked you last night knowing that you'll be leaving. You don't have to feel like a bad guy. It's okay."

He winces at my crass language, and I get a little bit of satisfaction from his reaction.

"No. You don't understand, Cleo." He's talking to me slowly as if I'm dumb. "I'm never leaving you. I'm staying here with you, or you're coming with me to the Coast. Whichever one you want."

My mouth drops open and I stare at him. He's so confident. He sounds so certain. I want what he says to be true, but I can't be sure he means it.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..." Kray takes my hands in his as he takes a step closer his intense eyes searching mine. "I love you, Cleo. I've loved you since I saw your photo on Ethan's social media feed."

"What are you talking about?"

"I didn't come here to visit Ethan. I came here for you."

The words don't make sense. Kray turned up to visit Ethan. He drove all that way to see his brother. He didn't drive all that way to see me, did he?

Kray runs a hand through my hair. "Cleo, the moment I saw your photo, I knew you were the woman for me. I called

Ethan to ask who you were, and he told me you were house sitting for him over Christmas.”

I stare at him, my mouth agape. What he’s saying doesn’t make sense. “You mean, you turning up wasn’t an accident?”

“Nope. I knew you were here, and I knew Ethan wasn’t. I came for you, Cleo. I came to meet you, to see if my instincts about you were right. To see if you were the woman for me.”

I think about looking through the family photo album, about my own feelings about the boy with the dark eyes and long hair. If I’m honest with myself, whenever I looked at those photos, I wondered about the man he would become. I longed to meet him. I never thought I ever would.

Kray takes a step closer until we’re inches apart.

“And what did you find?” I ask breathlessly.

“I was right. You are the only woman for me. I want to be with you, Cleo. I hope you’ll come back with me, but wherever you want to be, I’ll be by your side.”

His words speak to something deep inside me, the longing I’ve had ever since I can remember to be a part of something.

“And to show you how serious I am, to show you that I’ll never leave you...”

Kray sinks to one knee and pulls a small box out of his pocket.

“What are you doing?” I think I know damn well what he’s doing, but I can’t quite believe it.

“Cleo, will you marry me? Will you become part of my family and build our own family together?”

I think about the losses in my life, about how everyone close to me eventually leaves. I think about the last few days and how happy I’ve been with Kray but how much of a risk it is to give my heart to him.

Then I think about Fitzzy, about her advice not to miss out on love, and I know without a doubt that this is something I don’t want to miss out on.

“Yes.” The words slip out easily because I know it’s the right thing. “Yes, Kray. I’ll marry you!”

He scoops me into his arms, planting kisses on my lips, my cheeks, my face.

“Where did you get the ring on short notice?”

“I bought it on the ride up here. My feelings about you were so strong, Cleo. I was sure my instincts were right. I just knew that by the end of my stay you’d be mine.”

CLEO

*K*ray's mouth trails down my neck, igniting my skin and making my entire body tremble. He pushes me up against the bed, and this time I let him kiss me slowly, enjoying every touch of his lips, every caress of his fingers.

He cups my cheek in his palm. The gesture is so gentle it makes me feel vulnerable, and my stomach clenches with tension.

Kray's dark eyes find mine, and they're reassuring, his gaze steady.

"I love you, Cleo. I'll always be here for you."

I take a deep breath and let the tension release. I let myself give in to his slow kisses and all the feelings they stir up inside me.

I kiss Kray back, my body going limp against his, letting the emotions roll over me. This is what it feels like to belong. This is what being wanted truly feels like.

Kray takes his time peeling off my layers of clothing. The single heater in my studio is never enough to warm the entire room, but our heated bodies slice through the cool air.

I peel Kray's jacket off, then slide my hands under his black t-shirt, feeling his muscular body, my fingers catching in his chest hair.

He moves his hand over mine and places it over his heart. The steady beat is reassuring, strong.

Kray doesn't say anything, but the slow kiss he gives me conveys more meaning than any words could. I feel safe with Kray. I feel like this is where I'm supposed to be, right here with him.

My chest opens and my heart lifts. A sense of belonging comes over me, like I'm with exactly who I'm meant to be with.

We stay like that for a long moment, with the steady beat of his heart drumming under my fingers reverberating through my body and settling my soul.

Something shifts in that moment. My world changes, and I know without a doubt that I belong with this man, that I'm his and he is mine for the rest of our lives.

When Kray next presses his lips to mine, it's with an understanding between us. Our bodies know it, our spirits know it, and our souls know it.

Hooking my thumbs under his t-shirt, I pull it over his head, wanting—needing to be close to him.

Our bodies press together, my breasts pushing against his chest and my nipples scrapping against his thick hair, sending heat through my body and making my core ache for him.

My need becomes more intense, and I lift my hips, letting my thigh graze over his and opening myself to him.

Kray must sense this new urgency because he pushes me onto the bed, his hands pulling at my leggings and stripping my final garments off me.

I'm exposed to him, vulnerable, but I feel safe as his gaze runs over me.

Kray's hands rest on my thighs as he sinks to the floor in front of me, nestling between my legs. He's right in front of my most intimate place, and a furl of anxiousness pierces my stomach.

“What are you doing?”

He plants a lazy kiss on my thigh before answering.

“I think you can probably figure that out.”

His mouth moves up my thigh, and I know exactly where he’s going.

I tense up as his hot breath moves closer to my center.

I’ve never let anyone in like this before. I’ve never let anyone really see me, and I’ve certainly never let anyone do anything so intimate as what he’s about to do with his mouth.

“Relax,” Kray says, his hot breath skimming my pussy. “Relax and enjoy it, Cleo.”

His tongue flicks out and licks my swollen lips.

I gasp at the sensation. He does it again, and it’s like an electric shock coursing through my body.

I’m sitting up on my elbows, staring at Kray nestled between my legs. I want to relax. I want to open myself to him. It feels like the final barrier, the most vulnerable and exposed I can be.

“Lie back and relax,” Kray growls.

It’s an order. Part of me wants to protest because giving in makes me feel vulnerable, and vulnerable is scary.

Then he licks me again, and I know I’m safe with his man. He makes me feel safe and oh so good.

As his hot breath tickles my most intimate space, I finally surrender. Lying back on the bed and letting my thighs fall open, I expose myself to Kray, trusting him completely because I know my heart is safe with him.

KRAY

I feel the moment Cleo surrenders, the moment she opens herself up to me, trusting me completely.

It stirs something inside me, a fierce protectiveness. Cleo's entrusting her heart to me, and I make a silent vow to always look after her, to do right by her, and to never leave her side.

And right now, that means giving her the best orgasm of her life.

I take my time planting soft kisses on her swollen lips and gently licking around her opening. Once I feel she's completely relaxed, that she's completely given up control, I slide a finger into her pussy.

She writhes on the bed, her hands grabbing the bedsheets, little moans escaping her lips. The sounds ping straight to my hard cock, almost making me lose control.

"Kray," she moans, and it's the sweetest sound I ever fucking heard.

She's pleading for release, but I take my time, licking her slowly until her hips buck and she grabs my head, pulling my mouth onto her pussy.

I keep my movements slow and deliberate while she screams for release. Then it hits her. Cleo's body goes rigid, and she screams my name as the climax roars through her.

Her sweet juices coat my tongue as her body writhes, and I suck her into me, wanting to taste every part of her.

I wait until her body stills before pressing my tongue to her sensitive nub again.

“Kray...” she moans, and I know she’s got another orgasm trembling below the surface. With some gentle rocking, I pull it out of her.

This time her legs go rigid as the pleasure sweeps through her. God, I could spend all day between Cleo’s legs. But I want to seal our promise to each other. I want to claim her. Slowly this time, so she feels every part of me.

I climb up the bed from between her legs. Cleo’s wearing a dreamy look, and I’ve never seen her features look so soft.

I kiss her mouth, and she seems surprised at the taste of herself.

“I’ve never done that before,” she confesses shyly. I didn’t think my girl could be shy about anything.

“Get used to it.” Because I’m not joking, I could do that all day.

But right now, I’m hard as stone and I want to be inside my girl.

Cleo must sense my need because she sits up and takes my cock in her hand. Her touch is electric. My eyes roll into the back of my head, and I almost cum in her hands.

But that’s not how I want to do this.

She moves to climb on top of me, and I push her gently back on the bed.

“My turn to be on top.”

She hesitates before lying back. It’s a vulnerable position, and my girl doesn’t like to be vulnerable, which is exactly why I want to make love to her like this, to let her know that she’s safe with me.

“I’m going to make love to you slowly, Cleo.”

My hand slides up her thigh to the warm sticky center. I graze my tip over her swollen entrance, and she moans, a small noise that has my cock zinging with energy.

It takes all my restraint to keep it slow, but I want to show her how much she means to me.

I plant kisses on her neck, her throat, her breasts, letting our connection build until we both need more of each other.

When the need becomes too much, I slide into her slowly, an inch at a time, giving her time to adjust to me and feel every part of me. I love the way her pussy tugs at my cock. She's tight and sticky and like a sweet piece of heaven on the end of my cock.

I push in all the way, and Cleo's head falls back, her eyes closing.

"Open your eyes." Her eyelids flutter open, and her gaze finds mine. "I want to see you."

We keep looking at each other as I slide in and out of her. The intense look stirs up emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. I can't believe I'm inside this amazing woman, that she said yes to spending her life with me, that we're sharing this journey together.

I see all the vulnerability in her eyes, but I also see her strength, that she's working through it, that she's banishing the darkness.

I pick up the pace, our movements getting faster and faster. Cleo's eyes widen and her mouth pops open as she cries my name. Her face contorts and then she's coming, her cries echoing around the room and her pussy convulsing around my cock.

I let myself go, shooting my seed into her, giving her my life force. Everything I have I'll give to this woman.

We keep our eyes on each other, the shared gaze making it more intense.

"I love you, Cleo."

The words spill out as our bodies are still trembling.

"I love you too, Kray."

Afterwards, we lie together, our arms wrapped around each other. We talk into the night, making plans for our future, for the family we'll start together.

I traveled fifteen hundred miles to claim my woman, and it was worth every mile.

EPILOGUE

CLEO

Six years later...

*A*pple sauce bubbles in a large pot, adding a sharp aroma to the smell of roasting pork and potatoes.

The door bursts open and Lyle comes through carrying a large roasting tray. When I first arrived at the Underground Crows clubhouse, I found the big men with the patched jackets intimidating, but now I know they're all softies at heart.

"You better take this pork off me, or there's not going to be any left for the dinner."

He gives me a kiss on the cheek and sets the pork where I indicate on the kitchen counter.

"You need a hand with anything?" Lyle asks.

"If you could keep the kids out of the kitchen, that would be a big help."

I've got anywhere between sixty to a hundred kids showing up for Christmas dinner, and the last thing I need is my own kids getting in the way.

"I'll see what I can do."

Lyle snags a piece of pork and stuffs it in his mouth.

"Hey!" I swat his hand away, and he gives me a cheeky grin as he exits the kitchen.

When I turned up on the back of Kray's bike six years ago, the club really took me in. Not just me, but my ideas of starting a charity for foster kids too.

With club funding, I got the center up and running. We provide temporary beds for kids needing emergency accommodation. We feed them, look after them, and make the transition as easy as possible before they go into foster care.

And every year we throw a big Christmas day party for any kids or families that want to come along.

The kitchen door bursts open, and Charlie runs through, tears streaming down his face. Lyle's nowhere to be seen, and I guess the job of keeping my kids out was too difficult.

"Nina stole my train," Charlie wails.

I bend down so I'm level with the four-year-old as he swipes at his tears. "She stole your train, did she?"

"Yeah." He nods solemnly. "I said she could play with it, but she's not giving it back."

Nina comes into the kitchen rolling her eyes. "You can have your dumb train back," she says dramatically, handing it over to Charlie. "I was putting a battery in it for you."

Charlie's tear-stained face instantly turns into a wide grin, and I give Nina a thankful smile. At nine, she's the oldest of my daughters.

Nina came to us as a foster child four years ago, and we both fell in love with her. The adoption went through last year.

Of our four children, only Charlie is ours biologically, and we're not planning to have any more of our own. We figured there are enough children in the world looking for families, and we can give them a place to belong.

We've officially adopted three children, and there's always at least a couple of foster kids staying with us too.

It's busy and chaotic, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"There you are." Kray comes into the kitchen and scoops a child up under each arm. They both squeal. Even at nine, Nina isn't too young to enjoy being carried around by her dad.

"Santa's arriving soon."

They both wriggle to get free, and as soon as he sets them down, they run out of the kitchen.

Kray plants a kiss on my sweaty brow and slides an arm around me.

“You smell like apple sauce.” He nuzzles my neck, and there’s a familiar tingle through my body.

His lips find mine, and we share a deep kiss.

“When all this is over, I’m taking you upstairs.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

We break away from the kiss, and I stir the apple sauce.

“Have you heard from Ethan?”

Kray’s brother is flying down to see us with his family.

A few years ago, Ethan and Craig adopted two little boys who are full of energy and love causing chaos. It means they travel less, but their latest photo album is filling up with family memories instead.

We take turns visiting every year.

“They’ll be here in a few hours.”

Kray’s arm slides around me, and as I stir the sauce, I think about our family. Our brood of happy children, the extended family of Ethan and Craig, and the bigger family of the MC.

I wanted to belong and now I do.

Not only do I belong, but I’ve also got a huge extended family—people to care for me and people to care for. I couldn’t be happier.

* * *

Return to Fitzpatrick Place this Christmas where things are heating up with some brand new tenants. From Sexy Santas to Mistletoe Kisses, the Curves for Christmas Series is bringing you over 20 new stories to warm you up this holiday season!

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