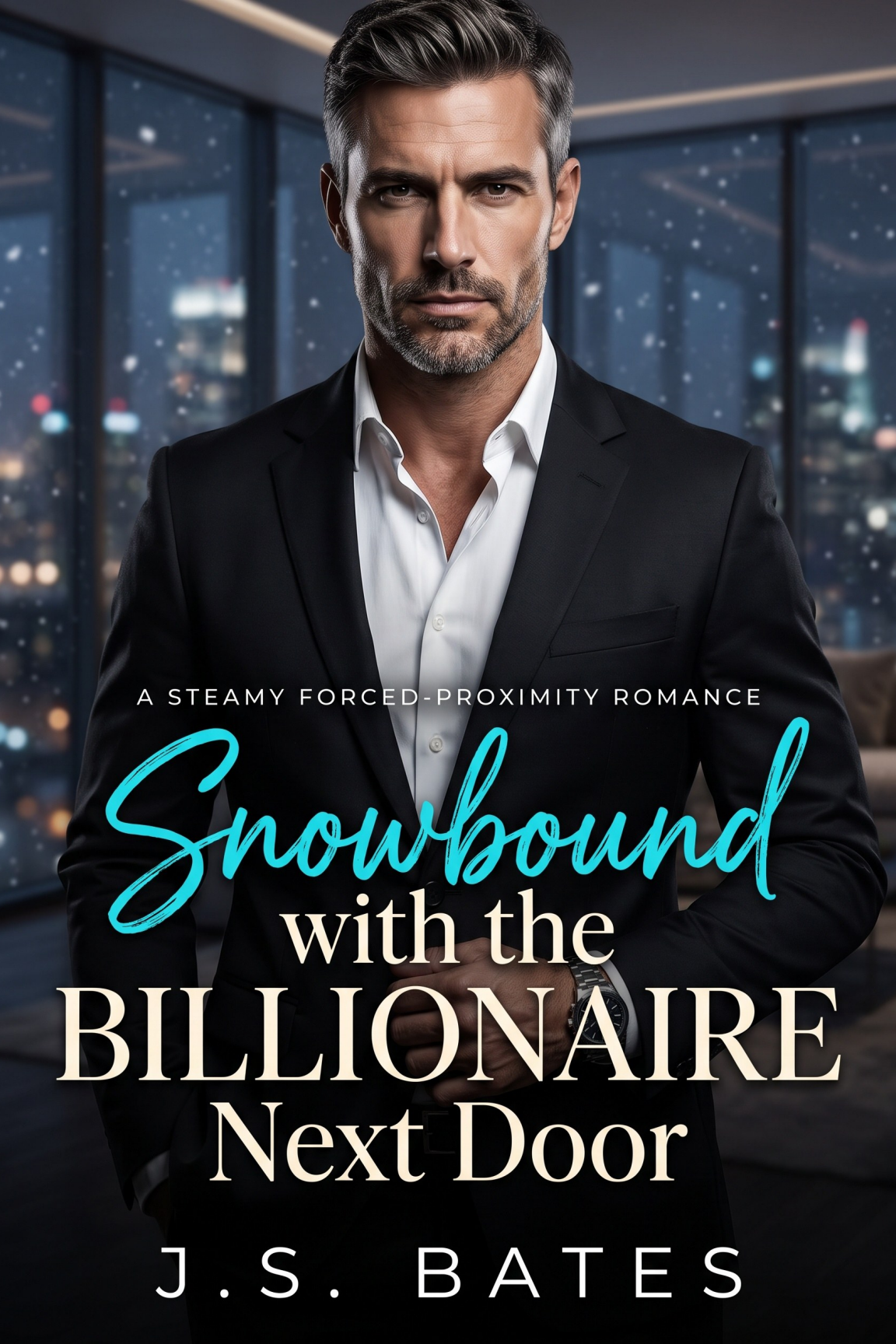


A full-page background image of a man with short, dark hair and a light beard, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred city skyline at night, seen through large windows, with lights from buildings and streetlights visible.

A STEAMY FORCED-PROXIMITY ROMANCE

Snowbound
with the
BILLIONAIRE
Next Door

J . S . B A T E S

SNOWBOUND

with the Billionaire Next Door

A Steamy Forced-Proximity Romance

J.S. BATES

DIVTER G PUBLISHING

Snowbound with the Billionaire Next Door

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CHAPTER ONE

Storm

Winter has always been my favorite season, even while growing up. There is and always was something about the zombie-white snow and the winds that leave everywhere feeling calm. The skies above are covered with thin, white clouds that cover the whole sky. I'm thirty years of age now, but the feeling is still the same.

When I was younger, I, along with a few friends, would play on a frozen pond. We didn't care about the cold but played till our breaths came out in icy pants. We would skate, slipping and sliding on the polished ice, and sustaining a few bruises on the way. Somewhere, I'm sure kids are doing exactly that sort of activity right now.

My tires crunch on ice as I drive carefully down the ill-used path that leads to where my land ends. My car heater is turned on at full blast to offset the mind-numbing cold.

Turning the final curve, I slow the car to a halt and drag my jacket tighter around my body before stepping out. I'm reminded of how cold it is as my breath puffs out in streams. My boots crush ice as I walk in my direction— an almost run-down mansion that marks the border between my land and the neighboring lands.

It's nowhere near as big as my home which sits on acres of land and is a few minutes' drive from here, but I've been trying to buy it for years as it is the closest house to mine and it wouldn't hurt to enlarge my land and avoid the pesky business of having neighbors.

"Where the hell is that cranky old man?" I mutter, running my eyes over the length and breadth of what is called "Chester Hall", an ancient piece of architecture that should have been

torn down years ago.

The cranky old man is none other than Mr. Rogers who has been adamant in his refusal to sell the house to me.

His lips curl up in distaste whenever I bring up the topic.

"No way, Byron," his eyes widen dramatically, "A building like this is not for people like you. You are not the type that appreciates the arts. If I were ever to sell this building to you, you would tear it down and replace it with soulless architecture."

Well, the old man isn't lying. My hands itch to tear down the house that is falling on its sides and although I know it will cost less to upgrade it, I would demolish every inch of it.

But, that is not for me to decide, seeing that Mr. Rogers has sold the house. When I heard it from my realtor who is his realtor's friend, I had been enraged. Now, my anger has simmered to a cool rage. I am here to see Mr. Rogers and have a look at the person Mr. Rogers has deemed fit for the difficult task of owning a multi-million property.

"Mr. Rogers?" I call, noticing that there is only one car parked in the driveway.

Mhmm, maybe the buyer is here alone.

"Is there anyone here?" I call again, as I round the bend of the house to the side where there are about three to four overgrown trees.

I try again. "Is anyone here?"

A muffled reply alerts me that there indeed is someone here and I move deeper.

The sight before me is the least I'd expected.

Tangled up in the overhanging branches of one tree is a woman who appears to have fought with the tree and lost.

She is facing away from me and the scarf has fallen off in her struggle. Her dress and hair are all tangled up in the shrubs.

I don't know if this ill-fortuned woman is a trespasser, or if she is the person to whom Mr. Rogers had sold his land, so I advance slowly, taking care to keep a respectable distance

between us in case she is harmed. If she is a trespasser who is snooping, I can reckon seeing a strange man in the situation she is in will raise her hackles.

She might attempt to run though, and that won't be a horrible option. The fact that this house is unguarded fazes me. It doesn't look good for my home to be anywhere close to a building that strangers can troop through.

I step on a fallen twig and I see her freeze, her body tightening with the realization that someone other than her is here.

"Is anyone there?" Her voice rings out, tinny with cold, shaking me out of my inner conversation.

She is twisting and attempting to turn around and although I know she's trying to catch a glimpse of me, she's only making the situation worse as the branches have dug deeper into her hair, scattering the blonde tresses and making her yelp out in pain.

"Hold on," I increase my strides and get to her in a few steps, keeping a little distance between our bodies.

She tries to twist again but stops abruptly with a yell of pain.

"What happened?" I ask, making my way to stand in front of her.

Her reply is lost to me as I meet her eyes and my breath puffs out for an entirely different reason. Shock steals my breath and results in me struggling to breathe air into my lungs.

I know I'm staring at her, but I can't stop looking into her eyes. They are the most vivid green eyes I have ever seen, and upon closer inspection, I can detect flecks of black amid the gold. It reminds me of the rolling fields I had found fascinating on my visit to Ireland, lush and exquisite. Paired with the deep auburn red of her hair and the freckles lightly scattered on her cheeks, she makes for a magnificent sight.

It takes the swelling of tears in those almond-shaped eyes to bring me back to reality and to point me to the fact that she came out here without a scarf or thick jacket.

"Does it hurt that much?" I ask, moving my hand to the branch digging into her hair.

She nods, eyes filling up with more tears when I start detaching the branch from her.

"I think I'm hurt," she whispers and I make a quick perusal of her face, my eyes settling on the side of her cheek, right next to her yet again, uncovered ear, where there's a lightly bleeding scratch. Does she want to die of cold?

"Hold still," I instruct, "I should have you free in a minute or two."

She holds deathly still and I continue untangling the branch from her hair, being as careful as possible.

The branches have done light damage to the sleeves and collar of her shirt and will need to be disposed of.

By the time I'm done, it's obvious that the main damage is the scratch and pounding headache she will suffer from.

Once she's free from the errant branch, I can't help berating her.

"I understand that there is something beautiful about this place, but I would expect anyone snooping around to be fully dressed to prevent him or her from freezing to death."

Her eyes are wide and unblinking, and the adorableness of her expression has a strange anger coursing through me.

My voice lowers to a deeper octave as it does when I'm really mad.

"You do know that you would have frozen to death if I wasn't fortunate enough to stop by, right?"

An embarrassed flush coats her features, and I'm surprised at how quickly my anger melts away.

"I know," she whispers before clearing her throat and speaking up louder.

"Thank you very much for helping me out, I'm grateful. But I'm not snooping around, I live here."

Shock and a mixture of something akin to pleasure slid down my spine.

"You're the person Mr. Rogers sold Chester Hall to?"

"Yes," she affirms, her eyes crinkling with confusion.

"Do you know Mr. Rogers?"

A humorless laughter slips past my lips. Do I know Mr. Rogers?

"Yes, princess. I know Mr. Rogers."

The endearment slipped out unbidden, and I can't think of a more appropriate name for her.

Her face is still crunched up in confusion and her lips are an unnatural shade of blue.

"Why don't you go inside where it's warm," I begin to say, stopping abruptly when I look at the building again and wonder if it is warm inside.

Chester Hall still stands with all the glory it no doubt possessed back in the day. That glory is long gone as the house is uninhabitable. The roof is barely holding on, part of the wall has collapsed, and I doubt that the building is heated.

She instinctively understands why I stopped the sentence halfway as she smiles at me encouragingly.

"I've not officially moved in yet. The house is still being worked on and the workers will be here later to continue their work. All I need to do is grab my jacket inside and head out to my car."

I nod understandingly.

"Do so fast, then. The cold is getting to you already."

She turns away from me and moves towards the entrance of the house and I follow her from a small distance. She abruptly stops and turns back with a small, embarrassed smile.

"I never did get your name. My name is Ariadne. What's yours?"

"Ariadne," I test the words on my tongue, pleased at how much it suits her.

"Your name befits you. My name is Storm, and it appears we are neighbors."

She nods. "It's nice meeting you, Storm."

A few heartbeats after that sentence, she slips into the house and closes the door behind herself.

That was unexpected, but not any less pleasant.

The entire ride back to my home, my mind is filled with thoughts of the green-eyed girl. It helps to thaw away some of the cold that had permeated my bones, leaving me with a quiet hum of apprehension.

CHAPTER TWO

Ariadne

The first time I stepped foot in North Dakota, I was seven years old. My father is big on family vacations and always made sure we traveled at least once a year. We had gone to a winter resort on one of such family vacations and I had fallen in with the state and all its quaint towns. My sister, Annalise, and my mother had felt different.

"I didn't know this much snow could fall at once," Annalise had wondered out loud, staring wide-eyed at the white road and snow-covered trees lining the road.

"How do people survive in this sort of otherworldly weather?" My mother had murmured from her place in the front seat, dragging her jacket closer to her body, as if it weren't already plastered to it. Living most of her life in one of the warmest towns in Seattle couldn't have prepared her for the cold weather.

"It's really cold, isn't it?" My father had quipped, grinning like the cat who licked the cream.

"Robert!" My mother had frowned at him, "You don't find this amusing, do you?"

But he did. My father loves the cold, as do I. Seattle is just where his business is, and where both sides of our family live.

He had smiled at me from the driver's seat and I grinned back, feeling elated at the idea of getting to play in this much snow.

It's been 18 years since I last came here, but I'm pleased to realize that I still feel the same type of giddy excitement at the age of twenty-five that I felt at the age of seven. Only this time, I'm here alone without any of my family members.

I'm not here on a family vacation. This time I'm here to start all over. It's just my rotten luck that my decision to start anew

came in the dead of winter, in a state that took me several hours to get here on a plane.

My plan was as follows; get to North Dakota by flight and lodge in a hotel while I search for a home to buy, buy the home, move in, and lick my wounds in peace while enjoying the state that had captured my heart as a child.

I hadn't counted on my plan falling apart before I even began.

First, flying from Seattle to North Dakota is one of the most uncomfortable things I've ever done. My butt hurts, my back aches, and I feel like curling up in a corner to cry.

Okay, I might have sobbed a little in the airplane's bathroom. But, I digress.

The next hurdle is getting a comfortable hotel in town during the heart of Christmas. Everywhere is filled up with guests and I had to go through a good number of hotels before finally finding one that is comfortable enough.

The biggest hurdle has to be finding a home to buy. I'll settle for rent at this point, but I want to buy a home. I know some might say that I'm acting irrationally, but me buying a home here is something I always knew I'd be doing in my lifetime. I just didn't expect it to come so soon.

There's no available home in the heart of town. The hotel manager I had told about my search for a home had reiterated what I'd seen.

"You won't find a house to buy by this time of the year. The houses you'll find will most likely be not for sale. You'll be better off staying here for the remainder of the year before commencing your search."

From all indications, the man is right. That is until a stroke of luck shines on me when I decide to leave the heart of town and head deeper into the quaint towns.

The moment I see Chester Hall, my chest tightens with want. From outside, it is a hot mess. But inside, art blooms to life and it's evident that the house has hardly been retouched since the

first time it was built.

The problem is that Chester Hall is in the "rich part of town", to put it frankly. There are a lot of mansions in this part of town, houses that look imposing and leave one feeling awestruck. The house closest to Chester Hall is the most imposing of them all. It is obvious that it is owned by an extremely wealthy person and the towering mansion is well-designed but gives off a cold feeling.

Chester Hall might be the house closest to it, but there are several acres between the houses and I will most likely need a car to go there if need be.

The seller, Mr. Rogers, is an elderly man who is the most reluctant seller I've ever seen. It took a lot of pitiable lies and half-truths to get him to sell me the house. Now, the main problem is the extreme renovation that will have to be carried out before the house is habitable. Mr. Rogers gave me a huge discount on the house, considering how much I'd have to spend to have it renovated, but the estimated price for everything will still run up to several million.

Mr. Rogers' realtor has contacted a construction company and work is due to begin any day soon. But before that happens, I want to have another look at my property. Today makes it two weeks since I arrived in North Dakota, and I can't wait to move out of the hotel room.

Chester's Hall roof is really bad, and it feels almost as cold inside as it is outside. I am wearing a fur-lined dress and the combination of it plus my heavy coat is very heavy and seems to be dragging me down. I take the coat off and place it on a clean surface before heading out the door. The snow is not too heavy, and the fact that I'm moving around keeps me warm enough. I move towards the sides of the house, intent on perusing the grounds. The snow crunches under my boots, and small wafts of smoke form as I exhale. I inhale and exhale noisily, giddy at the wafts that form in front of my face.

My giddiness is tempered by the longing that fills my chest at the knowledge that my father would love this too. I wish he was here with me.

There are about three to four overgrown trees that sprout at the sides of Chester Hall, their branches overgrown and errant as a result of years of neglect. As my mind is on my father, I don't pay as much attention to the path as I should and I end up getting ensnared in its branches.

For a short moment, I have an irrational fear that I'll end up freezing to death out here, away from friends and family. Thankfully, help comes in the form of the most breathtaking man I have ever set my eyes on. His gray eyes and pitch-black hair are set on a face that is so perfectly sculpted, it looks like a statue.

I'm appalled at the fact that I am meeting someone like this when I'm in the most embarrassing situation.

He, thankfully, handles it with grace and frees me from the infuriating branches but I'm so embarrassed at the entire situation that I retreat inside as fast as I can, but not before finding out his name and that he's my neighbor and the owner of the mansion I had described as cold.

Once inside, I put back on my coat and ruminate on the man who introduced himself as Storm. I'm shocked at how jarred I felt at the sight of him. And to think that he's my neighbor.

I shake myself out of my thoughts and head out to my car. He is gone, just as I expected, so there's no explanation for the disappointment I feel.

Looking back at the house once more, I sigh happily. I hope the workers will be able to work fast so I can move in as soon as possible.

As I drive back to the hotel, I think back on the sob story I had told Mr. Rogers which had helped me get the house. I had included something along the lines of needing a new beginning after the loss of a beloved pet and divorce. I'm not proud of the

lies I told, but I wasn't lying about the new beginning part.
I hope I can begin anew here.

CHAPTER THREE

Storm

The next morning, I am awake and dressed by the time it's 6 am. I'm out my door armed with a cup of strong, black coffee before the sky fully lightens and head out to my car which my driver has brought out to the front.

"Good morning Mr. Byron," my driver, Scott, greets me as I slide into the warm backseat of the Mercedes EQs and close the door after myself.

"Morning Scott," I take out my laptop and place it on my lap before powering it up.

The entirety of the ride is spent in silence as I begin to do some work on my laptop, taking little sips of my coffee as I go.

"We're here sir," Scott's voice breaks through the silence and I close my laptop and put it back in my briefcase before opening up the door and sliding out of the warm interior of the car into the cold North Dakota winter, making my way to the imposing building that houses my family's oil company.

Byron oil was established by my grandfather who handed it over to my father. My father, Nicholas Byron, tried his best with the company, I'll give him that. But he was never able to make it achieve its full potential. By the time I got to the age of twenty years, he had been feeling frustrated with the company's progress and had gladly given it up for me.

Having schooled at one of the most prestigious colleges, I had gotten a degree in Business and I focused on how to make the oil company compete and exceed all other companies. Yes, I aimed to have it all and to take no excuses.

Within the first three years of my being CEO of Byron oil, the company had experienced an upheaval where the income was triple what it was before. Competing oil companies were caught

off-guard by the new, ruthless CEO who worked like a horse and seemed to be tireless.

It's been ten years since I became CEO of Byron oil. In those ten years, our income is 6 times what it was ten years ago, a crazy growth that dominated business news for months. Byron Oil has also moved from the fifth biggest oil and gas company to the number one biggest oil and gas company in North Dakota.

Aside from being the CEO and president of the company, I own a 55% stake and I'm also chairman of the company's management committee and also the head of the board of directors.

It is a pretty grueling and tasking job, but it's one I do easily.

As I get to the sliding doors that lead into the foyer, it slides open, revealing the bright and spacy foyer.

"Good morning, Mr. Byron," one of the cleaners, a man in his late 50's named Alan, greets.

"Morning Alan," I nod, making my way to my office and replying to more greetings from the cleaners who are getting the company ready for the day.

As I get into the lift and press the button for my floor, I think about the fear and apprehension that is present in the eyes of a lot of the cleaners. It shows in their posture and the way they nervously refuse to meet my gaze.

No, I haven't done anything to them. Rather, I treat them with the utmost respect as I feel happy when I see people doing legal jobs to support themselves.

The only reason for their fear is hearsay. To give the company the new look and reputation that it has, I have had to be ruthless and cold in my dealings. I have gotten a reputation for being heartless and intimidating, and my reputation precedes me, hence their reaction.

The elevator comes to a halt and I step out and walk across the empty reception area into my office. It's too early for any of my workers to resume and I like coming this early to give myself

time to relax before the office fills up with guests and workers.

The cleaners assigned to my office have been in here already as the blinds have been pulled up and the large window that takes up one side of the wall and gives a nice view of the outside is polished and shining. Yes, although every piece of paper that is even remotely important is locked in safes, I have two cleaners whose personal information I know at the back of my hands. They are the only people allowed to clean my office and anything that goes missing is on them.

I drop my briefcase on my large, polished mahogany desk before hanging my coat on a coat rack and my jacket on the back of my chair.

I settle down on my seat and take out my laptop to resume what I had been doing in the car.

One hour and some minutes later, a knock sounds at the door.

"Come in," I reply, finishing up with the report I was reading.

One of my assistants, Jane, walks in with brisk steps. Jane is punctual to a fault, and a perfectionist as well. I have had her working for me for the past eight years and my two other assistants are somewhat assistants that I hired for her, to make her workload easier as she has a shit ton of work to do and it isn't exactly easy for her 53-year-old self.

"Good morning Mr. Byron," she greets, a warm smile on her signature red-painted lips.

"Morning Jane," I smile at the sight of her hand-knitted Christmas sweater. Jane knits in her spare time and she regularly exchanges gifts with her knitting club members. This fluffy, green sweater is no doubt, one such gift.

"How was your weekend?" I continue, closing my laptop and accepting the sheaf of papers she hands to me.

She grins now, "It was wonderful. Christmas does seem to bring out the cheer in everyone."

She then begins to rattle off the number of meetings and appointments I have today, typing something into her iPad.

"It's a very packed day today, sir. Your first meeting will be by 9 am."

I nod, "Alright Jane. Thank you."

She heads out and closes the door behind her.

The sight of Jane's sweater reminds me that I need to finish things up so I can give everyone their Christmas break. Hopefully, within a few days, every pending issue should be sorted out so they can go on an early Christmas break. I also give out Christmas bonuses to my workers, especially to those who have given birth or who have fathered a child during the year. Jane's married daughter had just put to birth a month ago, so Jane will have a healthy Christmas bonus, alongside the gifts I'll be giving out to everyone.

My mind goes to my new neighbor, Ariadne. Seeing the way I reacted to her yesterday, I'm not surprised to realize that I don't hate the idea of having her as my neighbor. Although, I can't help but wonder what type of job she does to be able to afford a house worth millions in the most expensive area of town.

Maybe she is from a very rich family, or she works in a lucrative sector. It has to be something really good to be able to cough up enough money for buying and renovating that rundown building. Her being in that house by this time of the year is not something that sits right with me. I don't know what sort of magic the workers will perform to have the house ready for her in this cold weather.

The telephone shrills beside my laptop and I pick up the receiver and place it to my ear.

"Your 9 am appointment has arrived," Jane announces and it's hard to miss the low background noises.

"Please let them in," I reply, straightening up in my seat before dropping the receiver.

As I mentally prepare for the people about to walk into my office any moment from now, my mind drifts, once again, to Ariadne.

I find her intriguing and there's a part of me that wants to know her more, maybe as friends. But just for now, I definitely can't stay friends with her for long. I want more, I've wanted more from the minute I saw her yesterday. It doesn't have to be anything too serious, as I am unlucky in relationships and always seem to find myself with greedy, money-hungry women who are only concerned with how much I give them and trying different tactics to get my last name.

This, combined with how distant and strained my relationship with my family is, makes me hesitate in relationships with friends and potential lovers who most often complain about how much I draw myself away from them.

I don't want this to be the case in whatever may be budding with my new neighbor, be it a friendship or a potential relationship.

The door opens and I stand with a cool smile to welcome my guests.

"Hello gentlemen, I'm glad you could make it."

CHAPTER FOUR

Ariadne

"Do you need help carrying that box, ma'am?"

I turn to the person, a young-looking construction worker, and smile gratefully. The box he's referring to is the small box I have nestled against my chest which contains some cutleries and a few plates which I had grabbed in the departmental store some days ago.

"No, thank you," I reply, "It is almost lightweight,".

He smiles and tips his head in acknowledgment before moving down the stairs.

With a shit-eating grin on my face, I push open the remodeled front door and make my way into my warm house.

It's moving-in day and it's sooner than I had expected. As expected, the house will take several weeks or even months to work on, so the manager had come up with the genius idea of working on a small section of the house that consisted of a large room, sitting room, kitchen, and lounge. The house had several more rooms and lounges, but one of each in the same area had been picked and worked on.

A little more than a week later, the roof on that section, along with all the other work, has been completed and a cleaning company had been in here earlier to clean everything up. I'm moving my few things in, and I am practically salivating at the idea that I'll be able to bathe and cook something in my house.

The stovetop has been fixed and I have gotten a mattress, fresh produce for cooking, and some other essentials. I'll be buying things little by little until I can send home for my things.

"This is the last of the things Miss Ariadne," another worker announces, dropping a huge brown box on my new granite countertop. The men have been extremely helpful, offering and

even insisting on helping me to carry in my boxes and mattress. A couple of them even set up the mattress.

"Thank you so much, Sean," I greet profusely. "Please you all should have something to drink before you go."

"Oh no," he replies, "you don't have to give us anything as payment. We just wanted to help."

I scoff, ruffling through one of the boxes on the countertop. I bring it out with a satisfied sound before turning to the man.

"I'm doing this not as payment, but because it's really cold and you guys could use some sips of whiskey to warm you up."

I had gotten a couple of bottles of wine and other drinks because I knew it would come in handy sometime. I know that it's not a cheap drink, but these men have been working overtime to get this house ready for me and although I'm paying quite well, a little drink doesn't hurt.

Once everyone has had a drink, they pack their gloves and other work equipment before heading out the door.

Shouts of "Good day Miss Ariadne, take care of yourself" fills the air and I wave them bye before locking the door behind the last of them.

The last gust of wind from outside hits me as I close the door and my chest echoes emptily. I miss being at home. I miss my father, mother, and sister, and I miss our warm and fun-filled Christmases. With each step I take, the memories from home return, particularly, my mother's flair for dramatics.

This is the only explanation for the reason why she convinced my simple father to agree to give my sister and me such dramatic names.

My full name is Ariadne Cressida Arabella Sam. Yes, I have four names with each name sounding more complex than the last, ending in a dramatic down swoop as I have the simplest surname.

My long name does come in handy, for example in situations where I want to write a book, but don't want everyone I run into

to be able to recognize me immediately.

I've always been big on reading, preferring it to most things in life. I can't count the number of birthdays and sleepovers I have stayed back from only because I was unable to put down a new book I had started reading.

When I decide to give writing a shot, I use Cressida Sam as my writing name. A part of me thinks that I am dramatic, after all, who is to say that my book will sell well?

As God would have it, my fantasy book, *Of Swords and Skulls*, did better than sell well. It became a fucking bestseller and one of the most popular fantasy books of all time. There is even talk of making a movie with the book.

I'm elated at the fact that I used Cressida Sam, not Ariadne Sam, as it has afforded me a lot of privacy.

A year before I published my book, I had met and started to date Matthew who worked in a furniture-producing company. Matthew is a fair-headed man with blue eyes and our relationship was slow, taking months before we officially began dating. I love him, and he has been a major support system for me during the entire writing period. He proposed to me a few months ago and our wedding is in a few days.

"Honey," my mother calls, "have you spoken to Matthew yet?"

She is standing on the stairway, looking stressed with the marriage preparations.

"No mum," I look up from where I am looking through flashcards holding my wedding vows which I am trying to memorize.

"That's strange," mum adds before turning on her heels and heading back up the staircase.

I can't help but concur with her. Matthew has been acting strange for the past few weeks and although I choose to believe that it's wedding stress, there's a feeling of premonition.

Asides from family and my books, I place a high value on my dignity and I've never had sex. I love Matthew, and I've loved

him for years, but I don't want to have sex with him yet.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not doing it for religious reasons. I'm just really intentional about finally having sex when I decide to, and there's never been a fleeting moment where I have wanted to sleep with Matthew. Our wedding night will be our first time and I can admit that knowing that we've never had sex makes me feel unsure about his love for me. I find myself wondering if he truly loves me with all his heart, or is there a tiny bit of resentment hidden somewhere.

The night before the wedding, I still haven't heard from Matthew and I'm getting worried.

"Ari!" My sister, Annalise screams from downstairs and I rush downstairs as fast as I can.

"What's happened?" I ask, terrified.

She holds up a piece of paper, mum, and dad looking at her from their seated positions.

"There's a letter for you here. It's from Matthew."

Dear Ariadne,

I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore. It was fun when nobody knew you. Now, the pressure of being the almost-husband of a renowned writer is not something I want to handle.

Please forgive me, I'll see you soon.

Love Matthew.

Seeing my devastated reaction, my father snatches the letter from my hand to read it for himself.

I have never felt this level of pain and humiliation in my life, and everything else that happens afterward is a blur.

The only time I finally gain control of my senses, it's to pack a light suitcase and hightail it out of home with promises of calls and keeping in touch with everyone.

Everyone is sad, but I don't allow myself to think of it, I need to nurse my heartbreak and get away from the humiliation that is sure to come in the form of questions from friends and acquaintances.

As I slowly drift out of my reminiscing, I think about how much I wish I were home for Christmas. But that can't happen, not now.

My entire family knows where I am at the moment, and it's from them that I hear Matthew has returned and is snooping around, trying to get in touch with me. I have begged my family to never tell him where I am or give him my new number, and I know they'll do so.

Sighing heavily, I begin to offload the various boxes, setting everything on the countertop before putting them away.

Another quick perusal of the living quarters fills me with excitement. I want to be happy here without thinking of past experiences. At the thought of being happy here, my thoughts move to Storm, the mysterious and insanely attractive man who had helped me here some days ago.

I haven't seen him since then because I am hardly steady here. Now that I live here, anticipation curls low in my stomach.

I can't help but wonder if he will be the one to help my heart heal from my past heartbreak.

I want to embrace a new beginning here, one free from wicked ex-fiances. The thought that I'll hopefully be able to achieve it fills me with a sense of hope and possibility.

CHAPTER FIVE

Storm

I'm sequestered in my home office which has everything one would find in a real office, the reddish-brown mahogany desk taking up a large portion of the room. The desk is cluttered with papers of work I brought home from the office.

I'm not heartless enough to tell my employees to take work home on a holiday, but the work also isn't going to do itself.

Just when I'm back into the groove of work, my phone lights up, indicating my mother's incoming call.

"Heavens," I mutter. I hesitate to pick up the call, mentally bracing myself before picking up.

Once the phone is placed to my ear, my mum's voice rings shrill and clear.

"Storm, I'm surprised you're picking up your call today."

I'm tempted to point out that I've only ever missed her call once, and that I called back immediately. But if there's one thing I learned from experience, it's that doing so would invite a whole lot of talking.

"Good afternoon ma. How is the holiday?"

"Afternoon Storm," she continues, " my holiday is going horribly because my son has refused to come to visit me and I feel like one who has no child."

"Here we go again," I mutter.

"There's no need to give me lip, Storm," she continues, displeasure evident in her tone.

My parents live less than an hour away from me, but I feel a twinge of guilt at the fact that I haven't visited for way too long. Part of the reason is that I've been preoccupied with work, but the main reason is the incessant nagging from my parents about my single status.

They have had my marriage planned out to the T even before I got to twenty-five. Sucks that I have no desire to wait at the pulpit for any woman anytime soon.

However, the guilt is the reason I find myself getting in my car and driving out to my childhood home.

Exactly forty-five minutes later, I'm pulling up at the driveway and heading down to the house. It's unlocked, and I let myself in.

"Storm," mum's voice rings out from deep inside the house, "Is that you?"

"Yes mum," I shrug off my coat and place it on the fancy coat hanger my mother had gotten several years ago when she decided that regular coat hangers are too basic for her home.

She comes out of the kitchen area, dressed to kill in a floor-length blue gown with elegantly arranged hair and a face full of makeup.

My mum dresses like every day is a party, and she's wiping her hands dry on a towel, looking very much like someone who had been busy in the kitchen. But that's not the case. My mum doesn't cook, and we have several cooks in the kitchen. I'm sure she only went there to oversee the cooking.

"How are you, sweetheart?" she effuses, coming up to me for a peck.

I lean down to receive her peck before trailing behind her as we head to the first living room which is directly after the foyer.

"I've been good, mother."

Immediately we step into the living room, I see my father sprawled on the couch, a newspaper in his hands.

"Hello father," I greet coolly and he looks up at me before replying just as coolly.

"Hi, son, welcome home."

My mum fusses around me, requesting drinks from one of the several housekeepers they have around, and asking if I'm hungry.

Just when I think that maybe this visit won't be as horrible as I had been dreading, I'm reminded that I should never jump to conclusions. "I had thought you'd come over with a woman in your arms."

My face hardens but my mum doesn't care, leaning into my seat with a carefully blank face.

"What gave you the impression that I'd be doing that?" I bite out.

My father jumps in. "Maybe it's because you're thirty years of age already, and the Byron line needs an heir."

I turn to him to see that he has dropped his newspaper and is now glaring at me.

"If you're finding it difficult to find a woman that befits you, maybe you should have agreed to be with Belinda," he continues.

My temper flares at the mention of Belinda's name.

Mum's eyes shine with determination as she takes over with the grueling. I have been finessed into coming here.

"Belinda's family have been close friends with us for years, which means that she is the type of girl that befits your class. She is of good stock, ladylike and classy."

"And she looks strong enough to bear you many children," father adds.

"What the actual fuck is going on here?" I rage. "Are you describing a woman or a horse? What do you mean by good stock and that she looks strong enough to bear many children?"

They are silent, staring at me with equal levels of cool anger.

Belinda Scott is a scheming, cunning liar of a woman and our parents have been trying to push us together for years. Daughter of a business mogul, her pride is choking, and I'd made the grand mistake of sleeping with her once.

It might have been an event that occurred more than a year ago, but it worked to cement Belinda's mind that we truly would be a powerful couple.

I don't think so.

I rise slowly from my seat, "If this is how tonight is going to be, I'll be on my way out."

The sound of the front door opening halts every movement and we all look in the direction of the entrance to the living room.

If I were calmer, I would have noted how my parents' expression has shifted from anger to expectation. It would have better prepared me for the person that walked in.

"Belinda, you're here," my mum exclaims, walking towards the girl with outstretched arms.

Belinda is a tall woman and she has to bend to meet my mum's hug.

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Byron," she drawls, eyes fixed on me and not the people she's greeting.

She is also dressed in formal wear, but her gown is more risque, featuring a very low neckline and an upper thigh-high slit on her right leg.

"We've been waiting for you, dear," my father adds, still sprawled in his seat.

"You invited her here," I say, not like a question but more like an announcement.

"You two need to spend time together," mum replies.

I don't say a word; not when I walk out of the room, unhang my coat or make my way out of the house amid their shouts.

I cruise down the road, carefully controlling my rage to prevent overspeeding on this dangerous road.

Unconsciously, I take the road that passes by Ariadne's house, and at the sight of her heading into her home with what appears to be a bag of groceries in her arms.

I can't help but feel drawn to her and I decide to stop my car.

She doesn't notice me as she's trying to wedge open the door with her shoulder without dropping her bag of groceries.

"Hi princess," I greet, announcing my presence. She whirls around quickly and her features light up when she sees me.

"Oh, hi Storm," she says raggedly, clearly out of breath.

I walk close to her, "let me help you with this. It seems I'm always meeting you in moments you need help"

I shove the door open and she walks in with a sigh of relief.

"Yep," she replies, giving me an amused smile, "I'm a real damsel in distress."

"Please come in," she invites, looking at me over her grocery bag.

Not waiting to be invited twice, I walk in and trail behind her, content to stare at her ass which seats so comfortably in her jeans

She seems like a refreshing change from the materialistic and condescending women I'm used to and it feels like a breath of fresh air.

CHAPTER SIX

Ariadne

I thought that I'd be uncomfortable to be in such close quarters with Storm. It's refreshing to realize that there's no awkward air between us.

I walk in front of him, hyper-aware of how I look. The knowledge that he has unfettered access to stare at me from behind me doesn't help.

"Don't you need help with that bag?" He asks his voice echoing around the empty foyer. "It seems kind of heavy."

I shake my head before realizing that he can't see me.

"No, thank you. It's not as heavy as it looks."

We make our way across the living room and head over to the kitchen where I deposit the grocery bag on the counter.

I look over to see that he had stopped at the entrance to the kitchen, his eyes running over the interior of the kitchen. My kitchen is by no means small, but his towering frame makes it look congested. He doesn't look too happy though, but I don't think it's the kitchen that's making him this unhappy.

He didn't look happy when he approached me outside, although he had a forced smile on his lips.

"What do you want to drink?" I ask, feeling out of breath. The bag was heavier than I want to admit.

He smiles, "You do seem awfully out of breath for someone that carried a not-too-heavy bag."

Is he reading my mind?

I attempt a joke, although it seems flat to my ears. "Did you say you want some tea? Two cups of tea coming right up."

He chuckles, settling down on one of the few kitchen chairs lined around the counter.

"Alright, princess. I'll take a cup of tea."

Hmm, he found the joke funny. A sense of fulfillment fills me up at the fact that I made this man that seems to take up a room laugh.

I busy myself with making us tea, taking my box of tea down from the top shelf, and putting some water in the kettle.

I try to focus on what I'm doing but his gaze is searing into my back. It's like a hot, branded iron, pressing heavily into my back and demanding my attention.

Once the tea is ready, I hand him his cup and settle in the chair next to him to nurse my cup.

We drink our tea in silence, but not an uncomfortable one. It feels like we're just content to be here and there's no pressure to fill the silence with unnecessary talk.

But there's something wrong with him. He was angry when he came here, but it seems like the anger has simmered and has only gotten more potent. He's practically fuming now.

"What's wrong, Storm? What made you so angry?"

He takes one more sip of his drink, delaying his response.

There's a nagging feeling inside me that he is angry because of this house.

I managed to talk to Mr. Rogers and we had an in-depth conversation about the house.

"Chester Hall," he said, "has been in my family for generations. We have always been an influential family, and when other influential families moved here and began building houses, my great-grandfather did so as well."

There was a look of intense pride on his weathered face as he spoke of his ancestors.

"It has been in the family since then, but it appears that I'm the last of the line. I don't have a child, and I am far gone in age."

His expression had changed to a crestfallen look and I immediately felt bad for the poor man.

"I am selling the house to someone that will appreciate it. Many people have asked for the house, but I don't like any of

them, most especially Storm Byron."

My heart skipped a beat when he mentioned Storm's name.

"Storm Byron?" I ask innocently.

"He's your closest neighbor. I'm sure you'll meet him soon."

I'd already met him, and it was embarrassing.

Mr. Rogers continues, "Boy has more money than Croesus and doesn't know what to do with it. He has offered a price that is two times what Chester Hall is worth but I don't want someone that will destroy the house once the papers are signed."

From that conversation, I know that Storm has always had an eye out for the house. That may be the reason he's so angry.

I decided to bite the bullet and just ask him.

"Are you mad because I got the house you want?"

Shock flashes across his features for a minute but is quickly gone and replaced by amusement. I don't know what he finds funny, but I'm glad I can cool down some of his anger.

"Oh no, princess," he begins, "I'm not angry because you got Chester Hall. I know old man Rogers was more than happy to tell you about how I've been asking for this house for months and I know he was even happier to tell you about how he rejected my proposal time and time again."

An embarrassed flush sweeps up my cheeks because, yes, Mr. Rogers had had a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes when he told me of how he rejected Storm's proposal.

"There's no need to feel embarrassed," one hand reaches out to lightly palm my cheek, causing a thread of awareness to run down my spine.

He takes back his hand before continuing.

"Of a truth, I wanted this house. But not because I had any kind of attachment to it. I only wanted it because I didn't want to deal with neighbors."

His eyes soften as he smiles at me. "I'm happy I didn't succeed. You make for a very beautiful neighbor."

A laugh bubbles up in my throat.

The hard look returns to his eyes. "I'm angry because I'm not comfortable with this house you're living in. It needs extensive work done before it can survive the winter and you have already moved in."

"But they worked on the part that I'm living in," I retort.

"I can see that," he says. "But the house is not yet habitable. Why don't you wait till the holiday ends and the workers can carry out more work before you move in?"

His now empty tea cup is on the countertop and I drain the last of mine before dropping it on the counter as well.

"I can't stay in a hotel anymore, Storm," I argue. "I will be okay here. Everything is working; heat, water, light. I'll be okay."

"Are you sure the roof is strong enough to withstand the snow?" He presses.

I roll my eyes. "I'll be fine, Storm. Now stop worrying."

His lips stretch into an amused smile. "Alright princess, I believe you."

He stands and I look at him, surprised at the disappointment I feel at the thought that he's about to leave.

But he doesn't leave, rather, he takes the dirty cups and drops them in the sink.

"Do you have a dishwasher?" He turns to ask.

I shake my head no. "I couldn't find it in the town's electronic shop. I'll be heading into the heart of town tomorrow to search for it."

"Don't worry," he replies, coming back to stand in front of me. "I'll have one sent to you tomorrow."

I laugh, about to ask him what he means by that when one of his hands comes to tuck an errant piece of hair behind my ear.

"You look so beautiful when you laugh. I want you to do that more."

My tongue is stuck in my throat and every nerve in my body is concentrated on where his palm is touching.

His fingers move from my cheeks, moving to my nose to trace the freckles that are littered on my nose and under my eyes.

"Your freckles look so good on you."

That embarrassed flush comes back. "I was bullied in middle school because of it."

His lips thin, those wonderful green eyes growing dark with anger.

"Those kids were fools. Everything about you looks exquisite."

My chest warms with pleasure, although a niggling thought forms that maybe he says this to other women.

That thought flies out when his fingers trace my lips, and my eyes fly to his in shock.

He lowers his head, his soft lips meeting mine in a gentle kiss that makes my breath whoosh out of me.

One hand trails to my nape and he uses it to hold my head still.

Our lips move against each other, the kiss sweet and drugging. I feel drunk on feelings as he sucks on my lower lip and scrapes it with his teeth before soothing it with his tongue.

I let out a moan that sounds foreign to my ears, my fingers digging into the front of his shirt.

When he pulls away, it takes a while for my senses to return, and he's still running his fingers through the hair at the back of my neck.

I didn't know it was possible for kissing to feel this intensely good. A flutter of excitement swirls in my stomach at the possibility of something more with this man.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Storm

Justin and I have been friends right from middle school, and although our parents were both rich -it was a snotty middle school, so go figure- our friendship was unexpected.

Justin had been a skinny kid, with his red hair, tiny arms, and little self-confidence, he was like honey for all the ants that called themselves bullies.

I had been on my way to class when I saw one of the bullies harassing him and calling him names while throwing books at him. Without a second thought, I flung myself at him, starting a fight. I was a tall kid and already knew how to throw a punch from classes my father had paid for, so when the fight ended, the bully had more bruises than I did.

Since then, we stuck together. He is no longer the skinny kid that wilted in the face of public stares.

Now, he owns a billion dollars advertising company that he had built from scratch.

The aforementioned Justin is now laughing at me over the phone.

"Don't tell me you're working on Christmas?"

I keep mute, typing something into my laptop.

"I'll take your silence as yes," he concludes, eliciting a chuckle from me.

"Someone has to do some work, Justin," I interject, "and it definitely won't be my employees that are already on vacation."

Justin is very big on Christmas, although I can't say the same for myself.

"Alright, I'll leave you to your work," he replies.

"Thank God," I murmur loud enough for his hearing.

He just laughs, "Not so fast. I'm calling to invite you to my annual Christmas party on the twenty-ninth of the month."

He also has a tradition of hosting a Christmas party every year without missing. I've never missed one as well.

"I'll be there," I reply. After a few more minutes of talking, the call ends and I'm left to live my lie.

Truth is, I haven't been getting any work done, not for lack of trying.

It is 10 am, and for the past hour, I have been staring at one page on my laptop, unable to focus for more than two minutes without my thoughts shifting to the woman who is living in Chester Hall.

Yesterday was incredible and the thought of that kiss is imprinted in my mind. I was incredibly strung up but I just figured that having a good night's rest would take some of the edge away.

I thought wrong. I woke up with a hard-on and my mind replaying the kiss and the warmth that emanated from her body as we were pressed together.

Damn! I need to stop acting like a high school boy because the last time I was this strung up about a girl, I had been in high school and about to have my first girlfriend.

And it's not like I have very important work to do. I'm just tidying up things and it's not the sort of activity I need to get my mind off Ariadne and to stop my mind from wondering about how far her blush spreads.

When she blushed yesterday, the blush swept down her neck. It makes me wonder if it spreads down to her breasts.

I wish the company hadn't closed for Christmas so I would have something really important to do.

Alright, let me stretch my legs a bit. I walk out of the office and head down a flight of stairs to the kitchen downstairs.

From the large windows, I can see that the snow has gotten heavier. This year's winter is incredibly heavy. The amount of

snow we have now is what usually falls when the winter is at its peak. It's not even peaking, yet the snow looks to be about 7 inches thick.

As I head to the kitchen, I pass by the living room but the voice coming from the television stops me in my tracks.

I quickly move to the living room and the headline causes panic to shoot through me.

BREAKING NEWS: BLIZZARD WARNING

The National weather service is putting out a blizzard warning. The blizzard is expected to begin anytime this evening and the weather will noticeably get worse as the day progresses.

The predictions are as follows; The winds will be around 35mph. The visibility will be near zero. And the temperature will lower to -12°C or 10°F.

The news presenter looks worried and it's understandable. The last time this area had suffered from a blizzard was a year before I moved here, so it's 6 years ago and people still talk about it.

It took some lives and the effects of the blizzard never faded.

My thoughts quickly drift to Ariadne and her safety in that house. She had been very convinced of her safety, and I guess she was right.

If she closes her door and stays huddled up indoors, she will be safe from the cold.

Because of my worry, I decide to call her and check in on her first.

The first call goes unanswered, and the same thing with the second call. I decide against a third call, choosing to wait till later.

The news of the impending blizzard has jarred me out of distracting thoughts and I think I'll finally be able to focus on work. Grabbing a bottle of whiskey from the wine bar along with a glass, I head back upstairs.

It's not difficult to lose myself in work this time around. I work till the sky darkens, only stopping to eat something, and I only stop working when I feel a change in the weather.

My office window gives me a clear view of the road, and the sight before my eyes has a thread of panic flaring up.

The snowfall is heavier than ever, way more than it was in the morning. The snow on the ground is almost 10 inches thick. The wind is picking up as well, swaying the branches of the trees lining the streets and the sky is darker than the normal 6 pm sky should be. If I were to guess the time by the sky, I'd guess that the time is no less than 8 pm.

I guess we are having a blizzard then.

My home is secure enough to withstand any weather, but I know someone whose home isn't.

Ariadne hasn't called back and it's safe to say that my worry is skyrocketing. I dial her number again, but she still doesn't pick up. I try two more times, but all the call rings until it goes straight to voicemail.

The wind picks up, whipping the trees violently and breaking off branches.

I can't sit here when I'm not sure how Ariadne is doing. And I have little hope in her home's ability to withstand the weather and keep her safe.

Several thoughts run through my mind but I concentrate on doing them one after the other.

I head upstairs to my room and change into outside clothes before coming back down and slipping on a very thick winter coat.

I head down to my garage through a side door in the kitchen and choose one of my heavier cars that can drive through snow.

I drive down to the garage door and open my window to press the console on the side of the garage door. The doors open and I wind up my window before driving out. The doors close behind me and I drive off.

It takes longer than normal to get there as the thickening snow is piling up more.

Once I'm there, I slow the car to a halt and without giving myself time to dread the outside cold, I open the front door and step outside.

The biting snow and furious whip of the wind across my face are startling and I have to pull my coat further down my face.

Taking big strides, I move across the snow and head to her front door. A few, sharp knocks later, I realize that the house is eerily quiet. I push open the door and walk inside the house.

A blast of cold hits me and there's the loud whirring sound of the wind. Horror spreads in my chest as I realize that it's as cold inside as it is outside, plus the loud noise of the wind which points to the fact that the roof has collapsed.

I run past the foyer and shock stops me when I see that, indeed, the roof has collapsed.

More horrifying than that is the sight of Ariadne lying on the ground, shivering uncontrollably. I run towards her and kneel beside her to carry her. Her lips and cheeks are blue already, and she's mind-numbingly cold.

"Storm," she breathes out shakily, her eyes closed and her body wracked with shivers.

I need to act fast.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ariadne

I would love to believe that I am an optimist and generally a 'glass half full kind of person'. However, it's not easy to keep being optimistic in the face of different challenges.

I'm taking a risk of being called a pessimist by saying that I've had the worst luck this year.

Sure, there have been moments of sunshine, like when I moved in earlier than expected. But now, my optimistic side is dying a slow death because now the new roof is leaky, in the coolest part of winter.

I look up at my beautiful patterned roof, now offset by brown stains which are evidence of water leaking into it. The water stain is restricted to the middle of the sitting room, the other parts looking as normal as possible.

I call Sean to tell him, and after apologies and promises to come work on it, he directs me on what to do.

Following his instruction, I move some couches and rugs that are under the leaky part, stressing and straining to move the heavy weights up and moving.

By the time I'm done, I'm sweating like a furnace although I'm grateful for the work as I feel warmer.

The snow is getting increasingly heavier, falling in heavy sheets and blanketing the entire earth in white. The combination of my physical exertion and the lulling cold of the snow has me feeling drowsy.

Two slices of toast and a hot cup of tea later, I'm stumbling upstairs and crawling into my bed. Once the heavy blankets have covered my ears, I'm out like a light.

I wake up to a cold breeze filtering in through the partially left-open door and my senses kick in immediately. I scramble

out of the bed and run down the stairs. The closer I get to the sitting room, the colder the air gets and my stomach twists in fear.

Once I get off the stairs, I scamper to the sitting room's entrance and a shocked gasp leaves my lips as I stare at the horrifying sight of a caved-in portion of the kitchen roof.

My right palm flies to cover my mouth and stifle the pained cry that is wringing out of my chest. I pull my sleeping coat tighter around myself as I walk deeper into the freezing room, pained to see the leaky pieces of roof lying on the floor.

A bigger portion of the roof collapses, making a sound so loud my heart skips several steps. A rush of adrenaline runs through me and I jump out of the way, but not fast enough to escape getting scratched. The pile of wood and plaster is high, blocking my path and trapping me in a corner of the sitting room. Attempting to scale through it would mean me sustaining serious injuries.

I run to my telephone which is in my corner of the room, intent on getting to Storm. I may have just gotten to know the man, but I know that he would not hesitate to help me. My heart is pounding with a mixture of pain and fear as I look at the sitting room that is almost completely open and quickly filling up with snow.

Fuck!!!

The phone lines are dead, and for the life of me, I can't remember where I dropped my mobile phone.

Why is this happening?

* * *

There's a faint whirring sound, but I won't hold my breath by thinking that help has come. I've been imagining the sound of cars for what seems like twenty minutes. I can only pray that this time around, it's help.

I'm freezing to death. My fingers and feet feel frozen, and there's no difference between my house and the outside as snow

is coating every surface of my body and the sitting room.

"Ariadne!!!"

I jerk awake at the sound of my name being called and my chest thumps when I realize that the voice belongs to Storm.

Please come inside, please come inside.

I'm too cold to say more than a whisper and I don't think I could shout even if I tried.

Like an answered prayer, Storm's powerful frame barges inside and when he sees the state of the room and sees me, he freezes in horror. But just for a second, because he's soon springing into action. I wish I could help him, but I can barely keep my eyes open.

I hear him push away couches and piles of the fallen roof, my eyes closed in relief. I think he's talking, but I can't pick out any word.

Before I know it, he's carrying me, taking me far, far away from the disaster site, before laying me on warm, leather seats.

His car.

The careful jolting of the car is jarring and helps to keep me awake all through the ride, till he stops.

I open my eyes slightly to see that he's now carrying me inside his house, his steps fast and panicked.

The warmth of a fire is the first thing that kicks me out of my slumber. The heat feels painful against my too-cold skin, and I groan in pain.

Warm hands run over my body, rubbing my hands and feet, and having little success.

"Fuck it," he mutters frustratedly.

His hands leave me and I hear the rustling of clothes before the hand returns to me and begins to strip me naked.

I try to protest, but it comes out as the most pathetic whisper in the history of whispers.

Once I'm down to my panties alone, he drags me to a burningly hot and firm surface.

The warmth is incredible, and not as painful as the warmth from the fire, and I melt into it, cuddling and digging deeper into such incredible warmth.

It feels like forever, but I gradually warm up. It takes time for me to become aware of my environment, and heat envelops me when I realize that I'm naked sans pants, and curled up to an almost nude Storm, my breasts pressed against his chest.

"Storm," I whisper, lifting my head to his.

"Shhh," he replies, bending his head to lay a painfully sweet kiss on my lips.

"I–," I attempt to say but he shakes his head.

"Don't worry, we'll get dressed as soon as you're warmed enough."

It's my turn to shake my head. "No, that's not what I want."

His eyes squint in confusion, while a wary look settles in his eyes.

Rising to my knee, I move towards him, slowly plastering my lips to his.

I don't know what's come over me, but I want this man with a surety that I've never felt before.

He pulls away, "Are you sure you're doing this out of a clear mind?"

"Yes," I smile, "I know exactly what I'm doing."

We don't say a word for a long time, our breaths mingling as we let our hands and lips do the talking.

His hands caress my head before gently tangling in the roots, angling my head in one direction as he takes the lead.

He stands suddenly, taking me with him. My legs automatically wrap around his narrow waist.

He doesn't stop kissing me for a second, not as we go up the stairs, nor as we head into a room.

Only when he sets me gently on the bed do I open my eyes. My heart kicks at the sight of him at the doorway, looking at me with emotions so varying that I can't pick one out.

"Take that pant off for me, princess," he growls, voice roughened with desire.

I do so, gaining more courage as his eyes darken with need.

I take it off and then look at him for further direction.

"Spread those sweet legs for me."

Heat gathers at my core at the rough sound of his voice barking out such a shocking command.

With pinkened cheeks, I do so, my breath going out of me at the harsh sound he makes.

He prowls towards me and lowers himself between my spread legs. Before I can say a word, he lowers his head and feasts on me.

My cries can probably be heard outside the house, and he doesn't stop till he wrings out a second orgasm from me.

As he climbs up my body, he kisses me and I moan at the erotic taste of myself on his lips.

He picks a condom from the bedside drawer and slips it on, kissing me as he preps himself at my entrance.

He doesn't waste time, entering me in one long thrust, and freezing like a deer caught in hind lights when I scream.

The pain is jarring and I take in greedy gulps of air to cool myself down. The pain soon subsides, and I am left with a needy ache in the place he's stretching.

I move my hips frustratedly. "Storm, I'm okay now. Please do something, I need you."

With a ragged breath, he begins to move, leaning down to whisper in my ear.

"You were a virgin? I'm so sorry I didn't take it easier with you."

I don't reply, focused on the building orgasm that is threatening to overpower me.

"Fuck, princess. This is insane. You're insanely wonderful," he groans as he slams into me, over and over again.

When the orgasm swallows me whole, he's right there with
me, holding me tight and telling me how wonderful I am.
Hands down, the best first time a girl can have.

CHAPTER NINE

Storm

I can't sleep well this night, my mind preoccupied with thoughts of the way Ariadne had given herself completely to me. I can't lie, the fact that she was a virgin until a few hours ago is shocking.

She's so gorgeous it had been difficult to stay away from her. I don't understand why no other man in her life had seen it. Or was it her decision? Well, I'll never know till she tells me.

She is cuddled up to me, fast asleep, her breath coming out softly. I can't sleep though, so I busy myself with staring at her and running my hand soothingly over her back. Her skin is so smooth it feels sinful. I would be quite content to stay here for longer, but sleep creeps up on me and I fall asleep with her body tucked into mine.

The blizzard starts in the middle of the night. I jerk awake, confused at first. It takes some seconds to realize that what woke me up is the sound of the wind.

My window blinds have all been pulled shut, so I slowly detangle myself from Ariadne's sleeping frame. It takes some time, but I succeed in leaving the bed without waking her up.

I pull on some fur-lined slides before padding to the windows. I slide open one, and my heart drops at the sight in front of me.

I can't see anything, it's pitch black outside, the street lights completely engulfed by the howling winds. I walk back to the bed and pick up my phone from the bedside table. Turning it on, I see that this is a few minutes after midnight. I look at the sleeping woman on the bed and my chest lightens.

At least, she is here and safe with me.

* * *

"Can you try to get across to Sean?" I ask the woman who is staring worriedly out the window, her forehead creasing in worry.

She turns to me, wringing her hands together. I'm tempted to go to her and smooth those lines from her face, but I stay where I am; seated on the couch and enjoying the way she looks with my too-big sweater on her.

"I already tried," she walks towards me, "but the storm has knocked the phone lines out."

She stops in front of where I'm seated, so I stretch one hand out to her. She takes ahold of it without hesitation, and I pull her down to sit on my thighs.

She holds herself stiffly, her back as straight as a ramrod. My hand goes around her waist, and I pull her closer to me. She has no choice but to lean on me and soon relaxes, her back slouching to meet my chest.

"It'll be okay," I reassure her, kissing the side of her head.

She exhales softly. "I just fixed up my place, now everything is ruined. And who knows how long this is going to last."

According to the morning news, the winds have increased to a staggering 40mph, the visibility is near zero and the temperature is dropping to -14°C. This blizzard is severe and might last for several days. I'm just thankful for one thing.

"The important thing is that you're out of there and in here where it's safe."

She half-turns to me and levels me with a smile.

"All thanks to you. Thank you so much for all you did yesterday."

I'm about to wave her off when she places a small kiss on my lips. Just when my shock wears off, she pulls away with a shy smile.

I pull myself together, there's no need to scare her with my need. She has no idea that I needed her again immediately after having her last night. I need to take it easy, for now.

"You're welcome," I smile wickedly, "now you have no choice but to stay with me for as long as the storm lasts."

Her answering laughter is like music to my ears.

"What do you mean you have four names?" I ask incredulously.

Ariadne who is curled up on the couch next to me chuckles.

"My mother is a drama queen. She was determined to give her children dramatic names. So my full name is Ariadne Cressida Arabella," she pauses. "Wait, my last name is the opposite of the others. It's just Sam."

I laugh then, "Well, it's a good thing she can't change your father's last name."

She nods, "I agree. I honestly believe the fact that she doesn't have a son is for the best. Poor boy would probably be named Atticus or Bartholomew."

Her family sounds very interesting, and they seem to be very close. I can't help comparing it with my family dynamic.

It's late evening, and we've had so much fun all day. I cooked breakfast for us, and the way she praised me made me determined to always cook for her.

"So you're a big-time writer?" I ask, awed at what she had just told me.

"Kinda," she replies quietly, her cheeks taking on a pink tint.

"How did you come about such skills?"

"It just stemmed from my love for reading. I am a voracious reader, and I guess, I just decided to try my hands at writing. My family was supportive and they were prepared to stick by me, no matter the outcome."

I'm impressed by this woman. "Come here," I beckon to her. She stands and walks a short distance to me. With a slight pull, she is seated on my legs and I pull her closer to me so I can have easy access to her lips.

"I'm proud of how much you've achieved in life," I whisper in between kisses.

"You've achieved more," she protests, her hands clutching to my sweater.

"Mine pales in comparison to yours."

She laughs loudly but stops with a gasp as one hand had snaked under her sweater to fondle one bare breast.

"Everything pales in comparison to you," I whisper gruffly before returning my lips to hers.

Feeling frustrated with the barrier the clothes provide, I sit back and lower my hands to the hem of her sweater. In one clean swoop, it's off her head and those sweet breasts are bare to my touch and eyes.

My head lowers and I take one nipple into my mouth, one hand massaging the breast as I lick, suck, and gently bite the engorged dusky pink flesh. She is writhing on me, her hand buried in my hair while the other hand digs into my sweater.

I move to the other breast and lave the same attention on it, one hand slipping past the waistband of my sweatpant that is too big on her.

My fingers part the soft curls that hide what I seek, and when I finally touch warm, wet skin, a moan slips out of both of us and a gush of wetness soaks my fingers.

"I'm sorry," she whispers and my shocked gaze shoots up to meet her.

"Are you sorry for wanting me?" I whisper fiercely, not moving my fingers from where it cups her.

"No," she shakes her head, "it's just that the wetness—"

"Is a sign of how much you want me," I interrupt. She's twisting on my thighs, trying to get my fingers to move.

"Never feel sorry for that," I conclude hoarsely as I part her lips with my index finger.

"Do you want this?" I whisper, my finger sliding up and down the length of her sex, gathering moisture and spreading it as I go.

"Yes," she moans, her eyes closed.

"Tell me what you want," I press, increasing my pressure and dipping a finger into her.

"I don't know," she cries, eyes opening to stare into mine.

With her eyes on me, I slide my finger forward till it reaches the bundle of nerves gathering at her clit and I flick it. She moans loudly, her green eyes darkening with need.

"Tell me," I repeat, one finger rubbing her clit while another slides along her slit.

"I want you in me please," she cries, "I want to orgasm."

In a split second, I pull our remaining clothes off and settle her over my thighs as I pull out a condom from my pocket and slide it on.

"Sit on me princess, I can't take my eyes off you."

She shakes her head, "I don't know what to do."

I guide her to sit, groaning at the feel of her wet heat enveloping me. When I've guided her down to the base, I put my hands on her hips and lift her to move gently up and down. When she has gotten the hang of it, I let go of her and sit back to watch.

It's a glorious sight, her hair and breasts bouncing, and her mouth slightly open.

I press a finger on her clit and begin to rub it in time with her bounce. She must feel the beginning of an orgasm because her movement because erratic and wild, her breasts bouncing freely. I palm one breast, squeezing the nipple and feeling enthralled by the sight of my princess seeking her pleasure from my body.

It doesn't take long for her to shatter on me, squeezing the life out of my cock. I can't hold back anymore, I orgasm alongside her, our moans mixing.

CHAPTER TEN

Ariadne

I haven't been in a whole lot of relationships. The first person I called a boyfriend was George and we were in our freshman year of high school. He was a lanky boy with more limb than trunk and an obsession for rocks. I found him cool, and we became an item sometime during the middle of freshman year. Our relationship had been one of holding hands in the middle of the hallway and seating together for lunch with friends.

I'll admit that we were together for longer than I had expected, almost four months. Alas, our childish love had crumbled because I hadn't let George get past first base and he was mad that I wouldn't "give it up" as sex was codenamed.

My next relationship was with Matthew and it was my longest. I met Matthew in my second year of college. He was one of the hottest guys on campus, and a lot of girls dreamed of being with him. Sadly, I joined them and crushed on Matthew for months. We became friends in my final year of college and didn't officially begin dating till I was finishing up college.

Yes, I finished college at 22 because I had taken a gap year to pursue a one-year intense writing course.

It's well-known how my relationship turned out, but there seemed to have been a pattern. The men I have dated were not very compassionate or caring. Matthew found romantic acts cringy and was always thinking about himself. Thinking back now, I'm grateful that the wedding didn't go through. I'm also grateful that I didn't cave into sleeping with him. Knowing Matthew, he would have been after his sexual gratification.

Storm is the polar opposite of the two men. It sometimes seems like he doesn't worry about his gratification but focuses on giving me as many orgasms as humanly possible.

"Penny for your thought," his voice breaks into my thoughts.

He's making a midday snack for us and I'm seated at the counter, watching him, as he has forbidden me from cooking anything.

My lips stretch into a smile, "I'm just thinking that you have a great ass."

I've become very comfortable with him and my sassy side is coming out.

He grins, the white of his teeth startling against his day-old scruff.

"Nothing's more remarkable than your ass," he quips before turning back to his food.

A pleased warmth spreads in my chest at his easy compliment.

But it seems too easy. I'm not a fool, the knowledge that Storm is the head of a multi- billion oil company in addition to how he looks only means that there are legions of women around him.

I don't know if he's the type to take advantage of their desperation, and I don't know if anything we share is real.

My eyes slide to the window and the outside sight is depressing. The blizzard is increasing in strength, and the time may only be 2 pm but I can't see more than a few feet from the window and the sight is towering piles of snow.

"I don't think this blizzard is dying down today or anytime soon," he drops two plates on the counter, sliding one to me. Two cups of steaming hot chocolate are placed on the counter as well.

"Sure looks like it." I take a bite of my food before jumping out of my chair. "I'm worried about Chester Hall, it might need to be torn down and rebuilt after this."

His eyes follow me as I go to one of the cupboards and take out a pack of marshmallows and return to the table. I open up the pack and drop some marshmallows into our cups. He smiles at my actions before taking a sip of his hot chocolate with

marshmallows.

I drop the pack on the table and sit to resume my meal.

After taking a sip, the mirth clears from his eyes.

"I don't think it'll be that bad. The worst that can happen will be to change the paneling and the entire roof as well as fix some floors."

I mull over that, debating the pros and cons of worrying further.

"Oh well," I exclaim, "I guess you're right."

"I'm always right," he deadpans.

I lift a finger to poke his nose, "No, you're not."

He grabs my finger and puts it into his mouth, sucking it.

Moisture gathers between my thighs and I have to clench my legs together to reduce the ache I'm feeling there.

He never misses anything as his eyes notice my clenched thighs.

"Hmm," he lets go of my finger, his suddenly dark green eyes boring into mine, "I'm suddenly in the mood for something sweeter than chocolate."

A shocked gasp leaves my lips as he stands from his seat, releases my grip on my cup, and pushes all the food away.

Bending down, he carries me to a farther side of the counter and sits me down on it before slowly dragging my sweatpants down.

"Hey," I exclaim, "I was about to eat that food."

His lips stretch into a grin so wide, it looks like a Cheshire cat.

"Well, I'm starving. But it's not for food."

Any further thought is wiped from my head as he bends and fuses his mouth to that area between my thighs that is aching.

* * *

It's been two days since I came to Storm's home and we've spent the entirety of the two days practically glued to each other. I'm loving every moment of it, but my conscience is repeatedly being pricked by the fact that I am keeping a very huge part of

my life from him.

He has no idea that I have ever been engaged, or that I jilted my ex-fiance on our wedding day. It's not like we're dating or anything, but I would like to hope that we might do just that. Just the thought of Storm with any woman has my chest hurting and my eyes blurring with tears.

Yup, I'm falling for this man already, and I don't even know what we are.

"Your family must be very worried about you with the whole blizzard thing and them not being able to get ahold of you," he comments, sipping his brandy while we lounge in the living room.

It's around 8 in the evening and we finished dinner a while ago and decided to just sit around and watch the fire.

I'm regretting that decision already because this turn of conversation is not something I'm ready to talk about yet.

"Yeah," I laugh awkwardly, "they should be. But they don't know about the blizzard."

His head swivels to mine and the confusion written plain as day on his face has my insides twisting in anxiety. I know he's gonna ask more questions, and no one can fault him for that.

"They don't know you moved here?" He asks, and I know he has a feeling that I'm hiding something from him.

I decide to keep to the truth as much as possible.

"They don't know where I am but they know that I'm safe. I was planning to tell them when I get settled."

My family knows that I am in North Dakota, but they don't know where exactly I stay in the state of North Dakota.

He doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't push. My heart is still beating abnormally fast and my palms are sweaty.

"Here I was, thinking that I'm the only one out of two of us with family issues," he replies, taking another sip of his drink.

"You don't speak to your family?" I ask while feeling like the biggest hypocrite for investigating a person's family when I don't

want mine to be investigated. But I can't help it, I want to know as much about this man as possible.

"Oh no, we do speak," he replies, "it's just that our conversations nowadays end in arguments."

"But you speak to each other?" I press, silencing my guilt.

"Yes, we do. I visit once in a blue moon even though they don't live too far away from here. I'm just thankful that the blizzard hasn't extended to their side."

"I'm sure they are worried."

"Oh they are," he laughs. "My father had sent me a 'stay safe and don't go out' text when news of the blizzard broke out."

"That brings me to it," he turns narrowed eyes to me. "Didn't you hear the warnings about the blizzard in the news?"

My cheeks warm as I avoid his piercing gaze. "No, I guess I didn't watch the news, and neither did I pay attention to any news coverage."

"You know you could have died, right?" He deadpans and my cheeks get warmer.

"I know," I look up at him and something on my face must work at melting his anger because he smiles.

"At least it gave me another chance to act like the hero to a damsel in distress." I laugh loudly, relieved to note that the ache in my chest has relaxed. I make a resolution that I will tell him tomorrow.

Tomorrow rolls around and I push telling him the truth forward by a day, but it is a great mistake.

"The blizzard ended last night," he announces as soon as I wake up, "and one of the construction workers drove up to say that they are here already."

When he drives me to my house, sure enough, men are inspecting the damage to the building.

As Sean walks towards us in the car, my heart squeezes with the realization that I never got to tell him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Storm

According to the news channels, the blizzard resulted in a lot of loss of properties and damage to homes and establishments, but there is no loss of life recorded.

It calls for celebration and a lot of people in town are doing just that. I would join in on the celebration, but I have a lot of things to do.

Firstly, the company has to be assessed for any damage and several trees on my property have been uprooted and have to be cleared and replanted. I have to pay to have the snow shoveled and I also want to pay for Ariadne just so she can have one less thing to worry about. The shoveling work has already started and the roads are clear enough to comfortably drive a car through.

I do all this while still supervising the construction work going on in Chester Hall, just to assure myself that they do the best work this time around.

I'll also be paying for every work in that house, although Ariadne has zero idea of that. I have a feeling she will argue about this, hence my decision to not tell her till the work is done.

I am working on the list of things I've typed up to be donated to families who were affected by the blizzard. Almost every home has something the blizzard fixed that needs to be fixed, and I'll be donating money and food, anonymously of course.

My mind drifts to Ariadne and my fear that the end of the blizzard signifies the end of the best three days of my life.

Life with just Ariadne and nobody else had felt like a warm cocoon, a safe bubble, that I'd hoped would last just a little bit longer.

We have not even defined what we are, but I know what I want us to be. Ariadne is mine, and I know it. I just didn't fancy the idea of asking her to be mine casually. She deserves the red flowers, date, wine, and a complete princess treatment.

I call her princess because the first day I saw her, she looked like one of those princesses I had seen Jane buying for her new granddaughter; all smooth skin, bright eyes, and fancy air. I wouldn't have been surprised to see her dressed in a big, colorful gown like those princesses had worn in the book.

I'm just waiting for the construction work to be done so she'll have less on her plate. And it needs to be soon because the house already feels empty and too big without her laughter echoing off the walls of whatever room she's in. I miss her like crazy, and although she's still acting the same way with me, I'm scared that won't be the case for much longer.

Alright, time to round up this list so I can head over to Chester Hall.

It takes less than 30 minutes to finish up with all the details on the list and then I'm on my way out.

Once I pull up to my destination, the first person I catch sight of is my princess who is conversing with a worker young enough to be her age. My hand tightens on the steering wheel as I take note of the longing and admiration in the young man's gaze as he looks at her. She is conversing freely with him, not at all aware that the young man is listening with only one ear.

As I look at her open, kind face, I'm once again convinced that she is hiding something very important from me. She has the most sincere face I've seen on a woman, a face that is ridiculously easy for me to read.

However, when any topic concerning her family or anything she left back home comes up, her expression turns guarded and it doesn't lessen until the topic is dropped and a new conversation starts.

I don't even want to imagine what the secret is but the fact that it's something big enough to scare her into hiding it, terrifies me. I have my problems too, mainly the fact that I'm known for having commitment issues. No one can point to anyone that I've openly dated, and that gives me a playboy reputation. I've also never promised any woman marriage, but it seems I'm in the news every other month for breaking off an engagement with women I've barely said three words to. The entertainment world is wild, I won't lie.

"Storm!," Ariadne exclaims when she looks over to see my car hovering around her driveway. I finally park my car and walk to meet her.

"Hey princess," I open my arms for a hug and she walks in without any reservation. This gladdens me more than I can ever admit.

"I thought you'd be too busy to come by today," she lifts her head to look at me and I lower my head and catch her lips in a short but no less sweet kiss.

When we pull apart, she sighs and lays her head on my chest and I look over her head at the worker who is still standing there. Once our eyes meet, he scurries away.

Smart man, this woman is mine.

"I was just caught up with completing the list," I reply, breaking the hug to pull one hand to mine and clasp it in mine.

Her eyes lit up at my sentence, the same way they had lit up when I told her about the list last night. She still spends nights at my place as I have adamantly refused to allow her to move back to Chester Hall till I'm assured that the house will not fall around her again.

"Are you almost done with it?"

"I finished up with it a few minutes ago."

"So we are going shopping soon, right?" She asks, excitement making her bounce in her steps.

"Yes," I smile, "we are going shopping soon, probably tomorrow if we finish here early."

To outsiders, we act like a couple already. I can barely wait to do what I have planned.

We head inside, hands still clasped together as I look over the work that has been done and exchange greetings with the team.

"The new paneling is turning out great, isn't it?" She asks, her eyes trained on the newly installed paneling that is looking good.

"Yes, it looks great. I like the color you chose."

She turns to look at me with warm eyes, "Thank you".

We have barely made it past the foyer and into the living room when we hear the sound of cars pulling up into the driveway along with a cacophony of voices too low to pick out any particular voice.

"Were you expecting guests?" I ask, turning back around and slowly walking to the door.

"No," she shakes her head, wisps of dark auburn hair that have escaped her hat framing her face.

The noise gets louder the closer we get to the door, and since I don't know those people outside, I let go of her hand and move outside first.

The sight outside is confusing. There are four people in total; a large, stocky man who is attempting to quell an argument between a black-haired young woman and an older woman who I am shocked to see looks so much like Ariadne.

The fourth man sticks out like a sore thumb with his bright blond hair and tall, lanky frame. He stands apart from the other three, looking on in silence.

A gasp from behind me startles the crowd of four and they eventually move their eyes to us.

"Ariadne," they all cry, moving in to hug her, but the sore thumb man still hangs back, seemingly unsure of his standing.

They move past me and go to hug Ariadne who is standing behind me.

The women hug her first, the older woman checking her over for what I don't know, and the younger one just holding on to her. They move apart after a short while and the big scoops up Ariadne like a doll and hugs her to his chest.

"My girl," he says gruffly, "you're okay."

Ariadne moves back from him and moves away, staring at me with something akin to horror and fear in her eyes.

The entire group notices that I'm standing here and they all turn to look at me.

"Ariadne," the younger woman calls, "is this your friend?"

Ariadne doesn't respond, still looking shell-shocked so the man takes it upon himself to do the introductions.

"Hey mister," he stretches his hand and I meet it for a shake, "I'm Robert, Ariadne's father."

He points to the women, "This is her mother, Grace, and her younger sister, Annalise."

I'm about to turn to Ariadne and ask why she's acting this way over her family's visit. That's when I notice the sore thumb man coming closer.

The words he speaks work at freezing my already thawing heart.

"I'm Matthew, Ariadne's fiance."

In shock, I turn to Ariadne to find her eyes already swimming with tears.

Tell me he's lying, I beg in my head as I look into her eyes. When I see the guilt that is written all over her features, my chest hurts.

"So this was your secret?" I ask before walking away towards my car. I drive away without looking back.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ariadne

How did they find me?

And why did they bring Matthew?

A truckload of questions are running through my head and making my thought process sluggish. It feels like my whole world is collapsing around me and I'm helpless to do anything but watch numbly.

From the second I set eyes on my family and Matthew huddled around the car where my mum and sister are arguing their heads off as they often do, I freeze, literally.

Dread slithers down my spine because I know that I have kept Storm in the dark about everything. Oh, why didn't I tell him about this when I had the chance?

When my family introduces themselves, Storm's face is still open and amused. He must not realize why I'm acting like this when it's just my family.

It's not until Matthew opens his damn mouth that I see my Storm's face twist in confusion.

Matthew called himself my fiance, I don't know why he would say that but I know that I've never hated the term more than I do at this moment.

"So this was your secret?" Storm says lowly and my heart twists at the pain in his voice. His gray eyes are dark and cold, with no emotion whatsoever reflected in them and the cold in his gaze causes a chill to run through me.

I don't say a word, only staring stupidly at him, wishing that all the words that are stuck in my throat will somehow be reflected in my gaze.

When he storms off, I watch helplessly, panic clawing a hole in my stomach. I won't stop watching till his car disappears out

of my sight.

"Hey muffin," my father's hand squeezes my shoulder, "what's going on?"

It seems the sound of his voice and the familiar feel of his hands shake me awake, and I awake with a rage so potent that not even his childhood nickname for me can placate me.

I turn around and burn a hole into my father.

"What's going on? No dad, I should be asking you what's going on. Why are you all here? How did you find me? And what in the world made you think I'll want to see Matthew?"

"Calm down, sweetie," my mother cajoles and I turn to her.

"No mum, don't tell me to calm down. I want answers, now!"

"Ariadne!" Annalise yells, "don't talk to mum in such a way."

My parents look hurt and seeing their expressions coupled with my raging feelings, I fight the burn of tears that have gathered in my eyes.

"Oh, my baby," mum coos, "I believe our coming here has caused a big problem."

Realization dawns on dad because guilt reflects in his gaze as well. "Was that young man a good friend of yours?"

A tear slips down my cheeks and I furiously wipe it away. "He's more than a friend to me, at least I want him to be. But I don't know if that's still possible."

"You didn't tell him why you came here?" Annalise asks and another tear slips down.

"No, I didn't. I swear I was about to, but I just kept on procrastinating."

All through our conversation, we pay no attention to Matthew and the fact that he's standing there fans my anger.

"Why are you all here, mum?"

"We heard of the blizzard and I'll admit I've never felt more fear than I've felt in those three days the blizzard locked this place down."

My mum's face is open and sincere, and I know she has no reason to lie. Which means that they did hear of the blizzard.

I ask the question that is on the tip of my tongue.

"But how did you know I was affected by the blizzard? Last I recall, no one knows the town I have chosen to live in, only the state."

My father cuts in, "Immediately I heard of an impending blizzard in North Dakota, I'm sorry muffin but I had to find out where you were. Please don't be angry, no parent would be able to rest when there's a risk of their baby being caught in a blizzard."

"People die in blizzards, Ariadne," Annalise adds, worry marring her face. "When your phone was no longer going through, I threw up in worry."

"None of us could sleep well for the three days the blizzard held, we had to come down as soon as we could, just to assure ourselves that you're alive and well."

My mum's hand comes up to caress my cheeks and truthfully, there are dark circles under all their eyes.

"We thought it could be like one of those vacations," dad adds, smiling fondly at me. "I seem to remember you being enamored with North Dakota when we traveled here."

If they thought it could be a vacation, then why is Matthew here?

"Why him then?" I turn to Matthew who has walked closer to our group. The construction men working outside are all pretending to ignore our conversation but I know their ears are wide open.

"Oh, I'll tell you why he's here," Annalise volunteers with anger in her tone. "He has been sniffing around the house like a dog for days, trying to get ahold of your location or number. When we were leaving for the airport, he followed us and booked an emergency flight."

"So he followed you guys here without your knowledge," my eyes bore holes into Matthew's guilty gaze.

"I'm not proud of that but I was too busy being worried to notice him." My father adds. "We found out when we saw him at the hotel we were staying at. He also booked a car and followed us here."

"Listen, Ariadne," Matthew begins, "I still love you and I'm very sorry for breaking off our engagement. It's just that I was feeling out of sorts with how popular you had gotten and I didn't know how to react."

I snap, "Listen here, Mathew. You are a pathetic excuse for a human being and I'm ashamed of the fact that you ever made me regret what I've accomplished. Some people are proud of my accomplishments, and people are thrilled at how big my book has gotten. You are not my fiancé, and you should have never been in the first place. I ignored all the walking red flags and gave you privileges I should never have. Get out of here and go back to where ever you came from, and don't bother showing your face again."

He is frozen in his spot and I turn to my family, "I need to go."

That's all the warning I give before walking to my car and driving off as fast as I can to Storm's home.

There's an unknown car parked in his driveway but I take no notice of it and stop my car before getting out and running to the front door. It's open, and with a pounding heart, I walk inside and walk hurriedly to the kitchen where I have a feeling he will be.

My heart falls to my stomach and I feel vomit climbing up my throat at the sight of Storm kissing a mystery woman.

He is leaning on the counter and the woman's long, lithe body is plastered to his, her silky long black hair falling perfectly down her back.

I stand still for barely two seconds before running out with a horrified gasp.

"Ariadne, wait!!" He calls but I don't stop running, tears flying from my eyes and sobs breaking free from my mouth.

So it's over, he didn't even bother to wait for long, immediately finding another woman to frolic with. I feel so stupid for thinking that I mean as much to him as he means to me.

A hand grabs my hand and halts my movement, turning me around to see Storm's panicked face.

"Ariadne, don't run off. We need to talk."

I drag my hand free from his, "Talk about what? Talk about you being plastered to a strange woman bare minutes after we had a problem?"

"It's not what you think," he runs a hand roughly through his hair. "The woman you just saw is Belinda, my parents have been pushing her on me for years and she has been a willing pawn in their games. I have no relationship with her".

"Why is she here then?" Try as much as I can, I can't stop the hope from blooming in my heart.

He sighs tiredly, "She is using the excuse of checking in on me to see how I am after the blizzard, to try her luck again. It's just sad that you came in the second she plastered her lips on mine as I was escorting her out. If you had stayed for one more second you would have seen me push her away."

I believe him, I completely believe him.

"What about you? Haven't you been engaged the entire time you've been here?" He retorts, anger twisting his features.

We both turn our heads as the front door slams close. It's the woman, walking furiously down the stairs and throwing us a furious gaze before getting in her car and driving off in a huff.

"You have every right to be angry," I begin, holding his gaze and feeling my chest twist at the hurt deeply embedded in his gaze. "But I want you to know that my engagement was broke before I even got on the flight to North Dakota."

I tell him, without leaving anything out, and watch the hurt gradually leech out of his face.

"Why did you react the way you did if there is nothing between you two?"

Tears gather in my eyes and too tired to fight them off, I let them fall. "Because I didn't tell you beforehand, and I was scared that I'd lose you."

He walks closer to me, and one hand goes to caress my cheeks, wiping away the tears.

I lean my head into his palm, closing my eyes to savor the feeling.

"You could never lose me. I love you too much to let you go."

My eyes pop open and my heart's rate increases.

"You love me?" I ask incredulously.

"Yes, I've loved you since the moment I saw you caught in the branches of the trees bordering your house. I was prepared to fight that man if he attempted to take you away from here."

With a sob, I press myself against his chest, his hands coming up to hold me tight.

"I love you, my princess."

"I love you so much," I cry. "I was so afraid I'd lose you before I get to tell you how much I love you."

"I'm here," he kisses my head and I can feel the tension leach from his frame. "And I'm not going anywhere."

He lifts my head to meet his gaze. "And you aren't going anywhere, too."

He lowers his head and caresses my lips with his. This kiss is like the signature on an official document. It is sealing, and I pour out all my love into the kiss, hoping he can feel it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Storm

THREE MONTHS LATER

Spring is here and the ice is melting although it's taking too long for me. It seems like we're caught in a limbo between the cold of winter and the new sun of March spring.

Ariadne slips into the car and I close the door behind her. "I never thought I'd miss the sun."

"And this is a pathetic excuse for a sun," I reply, sliding into my seat and closing my door.

We slide our seat belts into place and I move the car.

"At least it's giving off some heat," she lifts her head, basking in the sunlight coming in through the windshield.

My chest feels light with joy as I take in her upturned face. She's so beautiful and I'm glad as hell that she's my woman.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She asks with a smile.

The hand closest to her carries her hand from her lap. I carry it to my lips and press a kiss on it.

"I'm just thinking of how beautiful you look."

Her cheeks turn pink-tinted and I smile at how easy it is to make her blush.

In the three months following the entire drama that happened with Ariadne's ex-fiance and Belinda, we have grown inexplicably closer.

I had been prepared to pummel into the foolish ex-fiance, but before we could go back to her place, he had scampered away.

Her family had been invited to my place and they had stayed there for dinner before heading back to their hotel. The next morning though, her father had come back to supervise the building work because according to him, "his muffin shouldn't stress herself with things like that."

It didn't take him long to realize that his muffin wasn't, in fact, concerning herself with things like that. I was in charge of everything and he realized that on the first day. It had pleased him, and he'd told me so.

He still came to the building site every day and we just hung out together, chugging drinks.

Her mum and sister came over every day as well and they went shopping a lot. To fill up the house, they said, but there were a lot of dresses and shoes in their purchases. Her father and I just laughed.

They stayed for a week, and we got to know each other well. She has a wonderful family and it encouraged me to get closer to my own family. Sadly, my mum and dad were still fixated on my getting married. However, when I took Ariadne home for dinner two weeks after her parents left, everything fell into place.

My mum adores her and loves hanging out with her and my dad loves buying her silly things like clothes and shoes. He even got her a car last month. I was surprised by how quickly they forgot about Belinda, but my mum waved my concerns away.

"Belinda always had a greedy stare in her eyes. But Ariadne, Ariadne is different. She is prettier, hardworking, and she is rich enough to fit in well with our friends."

Her reasons for liking Ariadne didn't sit well with me, and they still don't. But I wasn't about to cause another fight. Besides, I'm just happy that she is fitting in well enough with everybody.

Dozens of articles have been written about us and news of our relationship has covered many newspapers, but I'm surprised to see that no one has been able to uncover the fact that she is one of the biggest fantasy writers.

"What do you want to eat for dinner?" I ask as we approach my place. Chester Hall is fully fixed and functioning, but she spends most of her time here in my place. The remaining time is spent in her place.

She turns to level me with puppy dog eyes. "Allow me to cook something today, please?"

I chuckle, driving into the driveway and parking the car before taking off my seatbelt and then hers.

"Come here," I put my hands on her waist and legs and guide her to straddle me in my seat.

I lower my head to the crook of her neck and drop an open-mouthed kiss. "Haven't I told you that princesses don't do strenuous work? Besides, you have some writing work to do."

She is in the middle of finishing another potential bestseller and it's been taking a lot of her time. I'm just happy to watch her brain work.

She bends her neck, giving me more access. "Just for today. I've been taking online lessons and I want to also cook something for you."

I lift my head to look at her, taking in the sincerity in her gaze. I have noticed that she has been on YouTube a lot, watching videos she doesn't want me to see. The knowledge that she has been doing all this just to cook for me pleases me to no extent.

"Alright princess, just for today," I acquiesce.

No matter how the meal goes, I won't have the heart to say anything bad about it.

* * *

"Come on princess," I coax, "I've got you."

"Storm," she hesitates before taking another step, "I don't see why I have to be blindfolded."

I laugh, my laughter loud in the space. I told Ariadne that I have a surprise for her and that she needs to be blindfolded for the surprise.

Unsurprisingly, she is not too enamored with the blindfold.

"Just for a little longer and then we'll be there."

"Storm, I hope this isn't another car." We both laugh at that as a second car was delivered last week as a gift for her publishing her second book. Yes, it's been out for a few weeks and it's

already an international bestseller.

"Don't worry," I reply dryly, "my parents have taken on the responsibility of buying you cars for the faintest excuses."

She giggles, her face set in pleasant lines. She and my parents have gotten close and we're even arranging a get-together of sorts for both our families to get to know each other very well.

"Alright, we're here," I announce and turn to her back to take off the blindfold.

It takes a second for her eyes to focus and by the time she notices it, I'm standing beside her.

She gasps, her hand flying to cover her mouth.

"Storm," she whispers as she stares at the sight in front of her.

I rented a private beach and set up a table with two seats. The table is loaded with food and red and white balloons are artfully arranged all around the beach.

What is making her gasp though, is the sign displayed on balloons beside our table.

"Will you marry me?" is illustrated on the balloons and the next time her eyes move away from the setup, it's to see me kneeling on one knee in the sand, a ring in my hand.

"Ariadne Cressida Arabella Sam, the love of my life. Please do me the honor of marrying me and making me your husband?"

"Yes, yes, yes," she screams, throwing herself on me and almost taking me to the ground. Laughing, I slide the ring on her finger before standing up to kiss her.

I can't wait to make her mine in every sense of the word. If it was up to me, we would marry tomorrow. But I know our mothers will have my head if suggest that.

I may give them a month or two, surely that will be enough for every preparation, right?

For now, I'm just going to enjoy standing here in the arms of my soon-to-be wife.

Thank you for reading.

If Storm and Ariadne kept you up past midnight, there's more where they came from.

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