

KIMANI™ ROMANCE

USA TODAY Bestselling Author
NANA MALONE
SHERELLE GREEN

A romantic couple is depicted in a festive, holiday-themed setting. The woman, wearing a red dress and red high-heeled sandals, is lying on her side on a white surface. The man, wearing a grey suit and black dress shoes, is sitting next to her, holding a small green plant. In the background, there are champagne glasses and a Christmas tree with lights. The floor is covered with yellow star confetti. The title 'WRAPPED IN Real' is written in a large, elegant, red script font, with a red bow and ribbon graphic integrated into the word 'Real'.

WRAPPED
IN
Real

Sherelle Green

**Wrapped In Red: Mistletoe
Mantra / White Hot Holiday**

«HarperCollins»

Green S.

Wrapped In Red: Mistletoe Mantra / White Hot Holiday / S. Green —
«HarperCollins»,

'Tis the season for finding passion and rediscovering love...Mistletoe Mantra by Nana MaloneReturning to her Virginia hometown where her fiancé dumped her —years earlier on Christmas Eve—is making Nomi Adams croon the holiday blues. She needs to find the reclusive photographer who can advance her magazine career. However, Lincoln Porter's on his own rescue mission this yuletide. Because during this season of love and renewal, Faith, Virginia, looks to be a place for second chances...White Hot Holiday by Sherelle GreenA solo Caribbean vacation is college professor Sage Langley's perfect escape from Christmas and all its merriment. But she has unexpected and thrilling company at Grayson Ellington's luxurious vacation home: the sexy attorney himself! And her brother's best friend —who has desired and longed for Sage for years—has fantasies and plans for a red-hot romance to chase away her winter doldrums.

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Mistletoe Mantra

"What do you want your reward to be?" Electric sparks danced over her skin.

"A kiss," he whispered. His moss green eyes darkened to nearly black and she held her breath. His gaze dipped to her lips as he wound his hands around her waist.

Before she could even blink, he pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was firm and coaxing to begin with, but an unseen match lit her body on fire. Nomi's lips parted on a surprise gasp and Linc took advantage. His tongue dipped in and coaxed hers into a dance as it slid over.

White Hot Holiday

"Kiss me like I'm the only one that you want." She rolled her hips and did some type of two-step.

She was definitely the one he wanted, which of course was why he was here. For years, he'd been comparing his past girlfriends to Sage, which was crazy since he'd never actually dated Sage.

They weren't Romeo and Juliet, but there were definitely a few people from their families who had apparently picked up on their flirtatious ways in the past and hinted that he should stay away from Sage. Even his own sister had told him, Once a playboy, always a playboy.

NANA MALONE is a USA TODAY bestselling author. Her love of all things romance and adventure started with a tattered romantic suspense she borrowed from her cousin on a sultry summer afternoon in Ghana at a precocious thirteen. She's been in love with kick-butt heroines ever since. You'll find Nana working hard on additional books for her series. And if she's not working or hiding in the closet reading, she's acting out scenes for her husband, daughter and puppy in sunny San Diego.

SHERELLE GREEN is a Chicago native with a dynamic imagination and a passion for reading and writing. Her love for romance developed in high school after stumbling across a hot and steamy Mills & Boon novel. She instantly became an avid romance reader and decided to pursue an education in English and journalism. A true romantic, she believes in predestined romances, love at first sight and fairy-tale endings.

Wrapped in Red

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Mistletoe Mantra

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White Hot Holiday

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Nana Malone

For everyone who has never ever had the courage to say I love you.

[Dear Reader,](#)

Lincoln Porter has loved Nomi Adams since they were kids. Now that she's finally coming home again, he has a chance to do something about it. I'm so thrilled to bring you Nomi and Linc's story. Theirs is about finding your way home and finding the courage to stand up and take what you want. They're spirited and fun and Linc is romantic enough to make any girl swoon. For a few years growing up I lived in a place just like Faith, Virginia, and I was more than happy to take the trip down memory lane with these two fun characters.

Romance the Sass,

Nana

If you don't want to miss a single Nana Malone romance, make sure you join my newsletter here: eepurl.com/blicGL

Chapter 1

"What do you mean, he said no?" Naomi "Nomi" Adams stared at her assistant, Ella Thompson.

Ella shook her head. "I'm sorry. I've tried everything. His agent, Ron. His Facebook. Hell, I even hired someone and *they* can't find him. The guy is a ghost. The only thing I've been able to dig up is that he lives in some place called Faith, Virginia."

Nomi's heart stuttered. *Oh hell.*

Belinda Foster, her managing editor, sat forward. "Didn't you grow up in Faith, Virginia, Nomi?"

Nomi swallowed hard and locked her jaw. Just thinking about her hometown was enough to make her ill. "Yeah, but I haven't been back in a long time."

Belinda sat back. "What do you suggest we do? This twentieth-anniversary special edition is supposed to be epic. You turned us on to this guy and he's perfect for the theme of beauty around the world. We have to find this guy."

The whole table looked at her for guidance. Four years ago Nolan Polk had burst onto the photography scene and become a media darling with an anti-bullying campaign he'd done with *Rolling Stone* magazine. They'd done a photo call, looking for up-and-coming photographers. After that he'd been extremely prolific. Everyone had wanted him. And then two years ago, he'd mysteriously stopped producing, only donating the occasional photograph for charity. It made him a hot commodity.

Unfortunately, he was also notoriously reclusive. *Sassy* magazine had been angling to get him to do a spread since he popped onto the scene. A photo from him would be the perfect addition to their twentieth-anniversary lineup. Though, that was only *if* they could get him. And that meant finding him first.

Nomi twirled her pen and tried to steer the direction of the conversation. "We don't have much time. If his rep won't get back to us, then we either need to find another photographer or get someone down there. I might know someone who can look into it for us."

Ella shifted in her chair. "I mean, I've tried everything. I even had our people in New York go down to his agent's apartment. No luck. Maybe his representation is out of town."

Or maybe Nolan Polk didn't *want* to be found. But it wasn't in Nomi's nature to back down from a challenge. Okay, not exactly true. She'd once run away from home and hadn't looked back on what she'd left behind, ever. But she was a whole new person now. The kind of person who got things done. "I'll get someone to Faith."

Belinda shook her head. "I think for something this important, you need to go yourself. I mean, you are from there, after all."

Wait, what? No way, no how. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Belinda pursed her lips as she always did when she was about to school someone. "You're from there. You know the locals. How hard will it be to ferret out one guy? You can do that in your sleep."

Nomi's skin went cold. She could do this. *No. No you can't. You can't go home to Faith.* "Well, I mean, it's the holiday and everything so I'm thinking there is a good chance even if I can track down

where he lives, he won't be there." Not to mention that Faith was one of those towns that exploded Christmas holidays. And she, well, she hated everything about Christmas.

"Nomi, this is what we need right now. Can you commit to getting the job done?" Belinda asked.

Amber Divine leaned forward, perfectly curled red hair bouncing. "I can go if Nomi doesn't want to. I'm more than happy to be a team player."

Nomi gnashed her teeth together. She and Amber had been in the running for a senior editor position for months. If she let Amber go back to Faith and her competition got the Nolan Polk picture, there would go Nomi's promotion.

Her boss tapped her pen against her lips. "Actually, that's not a bad idea. Having more boots hit the ground will help."

Ella leaned forward. "We still have a week until Christmas. I can have you guys on the first plane out in the morning and scheduled to come back before the holiday. I know how you feel about Christmas—you'll be in and out."

"I really think it would be better to hire someone. Like a professional. Amber doesn't know the area and we'd be looking for a needle in a haystack," Nomi squeaked. She hated the idea of Amber doing what she couldn't.

Belinda frowned. "Why do I get the impression you don't want to do this?"

Because I don't. "Of course I do. I'm just worried we won't find him there during the holiday."

"Then let's hope you find a lead quick, because you're both heading to Faith."

Nomi slumped in her chair. If she was going home, then she'd need some reinforcements. And she'd have to make some arrangements. Ella was good at her job, but she didn't know Faith. They embraced the Christmas holiday like no place she'd ever seen. If there wasn't snow, they brought in snow machines to make sure it was a white Christmas. Every year, without fail. Tourists started pouring into the town right after Thanksgiving and didn't let up till the New Year. It made hotels and car rentals a nightmare.

As soon as the meeting was over, she trudged to her office and made a phone call she never thought she'd be making. At the same time she started an online search for a rental car and hotel. The Resplendence Inn seemed to have rooms, so she sent the link to Ella to book.

After three rings, a harried Jilly Porter answered the phone. "This is Jilly."

Nomi exhaled slowly. There was something comforting about her best friend's voice. "Hey, girl, it's Nomi."

"Nomi! Honey, it's been two months since we talked. Why is that? I wish I could chat, but I'm getting stuff ready for a shipment."

"Oh, sorry to catch you at a bad time. Real quick though, I'm coming home. Do you think you could swing a pickup from the train station tomorrow evening?" Faith was so small it didn't even have an airport, so she'd have to fly into Dulles, then take the train from there. *Planes, trains and automobiles.*

If possible, Jilly's voice went up an octave. "Home? Why? Holy shit, for how long? Are you going to see Brad? Are you going to tell your parents you're coming? Oh my God, of course you would call with news like this when I can't properly discuss."

Nomi couldn't help but smile. Jilly owned her own art gallery, and she also did private buying for select clients. "Short answers: yes, home, for work, hopefully no more than two days, hell to the no, and haven't decided yet. Now, can you pick me up from the train station or what?"

Jilly mumbled something and Nomi could only guess she was using her mouth to hold something while she did something with her hands. "I don't think I can do tomorrow night, but you know what? Linc probably can. He's here. You work out the deets with him and I'll see you as soon as you get in."

"Jilly, wait—" Nomi sighed. Jilly was notorious for delegating tasks without asking. Especially to her twin brother, Linc.

“This is Linc.”

Nomi’s brain stuttered; the voice she remembered wasn’t the one on the line now. When had his voice gotten so deep? From the time she moved to Faith, she and Jilly had been inseparable. Which meant that everywhere they went, Linc hadn’t been far behind. He and Jilly ran in the same circles at school, but Nomi could never say she knew him that well. He’d always been so quiet. More watchful than anything. He’d never needed to be the center of attention. And he’d helped get them out of more than a few scrapes thanks to her big mouth and Jilly’s impulsive nature.

“Uh, Linc, hi. It’s Nomi. Nomi Adams, from Faith.”

There was a beat of silence. Then another beat. When he spoke again, his voice was low and raspy. “You honestly think I’d forgotten you? Without you, Jilly probably would have ended up as a rock star groupie or worse.”

He had no idea how close he was with his teasing guess. She and Jilly had once snuck out to go to a Foo Fighters concert and Jilly had been hell bent on getting backstage by any means necessary, including flashing the bouncers her boobs if she had to. Nomi had managed to talk her out of it.

“Listen, I’m sorry to impose, but Jilly volunteered you to pick me up at the train station tomorrow night. I know it’s a huge inconvenience, but I can’t seem to get a single rental car in the area.”

“Yeah, the holiday rush is in full swing.” His voice was warm and mellow, like melting chocolate. “Not to worry. It’s cool. Just text Jilly the details and I’ll be there.”

Good ol’ Linc. “Thank you. It’s much appreciated. I’ll owe you one.”

“I’ll hold you to it.” There was a beat of silence, then he said, “Last time I saw you, you said you were never coming back to Faith, Virginia.”

Yeah, she had said that. And she’d meant it. “Apparently, never say never. I need to come back for work.”

“You work for a magazine now, right?”

Nomi had no idea why, but just talking to him made her a little nervous, her skin heating. It must be the voice. It made it easy to forget she was talking to Jilly’s brother.

“Yeah. They’re sending me back to find Nolan Polk. He’s supposed to live in Faith.”

There was a long beat of silence. “What do you need him for?”

“Well, it’s our twentieth-anniversary edition and we’re looking for some of his photos for a spread.”

“I don’t get it. Wouldn’t you normally call his agent or something? I assume a guy like that has an agent.”

“Yeah, tried that. No luck. He isn’t responding to our requests. So anyway, it appears I’m headed home to try and find him.”

Linc’s voice was soft, quiet. “Well, if anyone can find him, it’s probably you. You always had a way of coming out on top.”

Nomi swallowed hard as her brain conjured up an image of her on top of Linc, back arched in bliss. What the hell was wrong with her? Just because his voice was all grown and sexy didn’t mean he’d grown with it.

“I hope you’re right, Linc. I’ve got a lot riding on this.”

[Chapter 2](#)

Nomi Adams was coming home. When Lincoln Porter hung up, he leaned his head back against the wall and shut his eyes tight. Caught somewhere between elation and dread, his brain tried to make sense of what she’d said. He’d had a thing for Nomi since she’d moved to Faith, but she’d never noticed him. She’d always treated him like a brother.

“You should look happier. *Why* don’t you look happier?”

Linc peeled an eye open to glare at his twin sister. She matched him in coloring, from her inky black hair to her jade green eyes. Her features were softer, more feminine versions of his, down to the

slight dimple in her chin. The only dissimilarity was the foot difference in height. She liked to tease that he'd stolen all her height genes. "That was low, Jilly. You should have given me some warning."

"Now, why would I want to do that? Besides, are you going to pretend that you don't *want* to see Nomi?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." He handed her back her phone. At times like this, he regretted the two of them being so close. It was impossible to hide anything from her.

"Bull. Five years is a long time to hold a torch for someone, little brother."

"Only by a minute, Jilly."

She slid him a sideways glance. "What? You thought you were slick back then? Come on, for the most part you were pretty shy, but the moment Nomi was around, you had to peek out of your little shell and hang around."

Linc pinned a narrow-eyed gaze on his sister. Lucky for him, he'd outgrown that shy awkwardness and he'd filled out. No one would call him awkward and skinny now. But five years was a long time. The last time he'd seen Nomi, she'd been running for the first train out of town after her dumb-ass boyfriend had chosen Lila Banks, or rather the Banks money and connections, over Nomi.

"Did you tell her?"

His sister's brow furrowed. "What? No! I was hoping you would get the balls and do it yourself. But I guess you never did."

The night she'd run away, Nomi had turned up at his house looking for Jilly to give her a ride. But his sister hadn't been there. Nomi had walked the two miles over from the country club in the rain after Brad had dumped her, and she had been soaked through.

When she'd asked him to swing by her house so she could grab her stuff and then take her to the train station, he hadn't tried to talk her out of it. Maybe because it hadn't hit him till they were on the platform that she was actually leaving. His stomach still knotted whenever he remembered what he'd said to her then. "You always deserved better than him."

Her smile had been sad, wistful, and she'd kissed him on the cheek. And that was it. He'd never seen her again.

Jilly snapped her fingers in front of his eyes. "Earth to Linc. Did you hear me?"

He'd been too lost in his last memory of Nomi. "No. Sorry."

His sister rolled her eyes. "Focus. She's coming back, so what are you going to do about it?"

"Pick her up from the train station."

"Please don't be obtuse. This is your chance."

"She's only staying a couple of days, Jilly."

"I know, but that in itself is huge. She hasn't been home in five years. Maybe you can convince her to stay a little longer. Have a Christmas fling."

A fling? Just the thought made his skin tight. "Not that easy, Jilly. She's coming back for Nolan Polk."

Jilly's eyes grew wide and she cursed under her breath. "What are you going to do?"

That was the question. He'd created the Nolan Polk pseudonym for his work back in college when he'd been trying to distance himself from the family name. He'd wanted people to want his work because it was good, not because his father was a senator. But one bad decision and Polk had become a prison he couldn't escape.

There was no way in hell he could help her find Nolan Polk. Problem was, when Nomi had something she wanted, she wouldn't let it go.

"I can't use the Polk name or distribute that work until the New Year. If I do, I'm in breach and it'll cost me everything."

Jilly ground her teeth. "I could kill that woman for locking you into this deal."

He wished he could wipe his whole relationship with Melanie Stanfield off the plane of existence. Just thinking about it made anger pulse in his veins. When he and Melanie had been

together, at first things were great. She had art connections thanks to her family, particularly abroad. When he'd proposed, she'd officially become his manager.

The one clause in his contract he should have paid closer attention to stated that no one else could distribute his work for profit for a term of three years. At the time, he'd been convinced of their love. *Like a chump.*

But then things had gone bad. And she'd started paying more attention to the value of his work than the value of their relationship. When they'd broken up, she'd held him by the short and curlies to his contract. He'd rather eat glass than give her a dime.

For the past two years since he'd been home, he hadn't sold or exhibited a single piece, except for charity. Suddenly the only thing he'd ever wanted had a hundred-and-ten-pound blond albatross attached to it.

But he'd made his bed, he had to lie in it. "My fault, Jilly. I trusted the wrong person. I'm not eager to do that again."

Jilly shook her head. "Nomi wouldn't hurt you, Linc. That's not her."

No, that wasn't the Nomi he remembered, but he'd been wrong about people before. "I thought the same thing about Melanie once, too."

His sister put a hand on his shoulder. "Maybe this gig could put you back on the map again. Have you shooting. This is your chance to finally leave for good. Maybe go back to Europe. See more of Africa. You always used to talk about it."

"That was a long time ago, Jilly."

She pursed her lips. "Sooner or later you won't have Dad as an excuse anymore. You'll have to face the big bad world. You were destined for great things, little brother. Time to stop hiding."

Linc ignored the numb feeling that spread from his chest. With his father's early-onset Alzheimer's diagnosis two years ago, he'd come home to help out. They both had. But for him, it had also been a way to escape all the mistakes he'd made.

Though, coming home hadn't been any easier. His father had been a man's man. Confident, a little brash, but fair and kindhearted. It had helped him get elected over and over again. It had helped people trust him. But that man was gone now. And it hurt. Some days weren't so bad. The lucid days. Which were more than the non-lucid days. But the other days, the ones where his father couldn't even recognize him, those hurt. It was the sole reason he stayed. Otherwise he'd have left, off for parts unknown by now, spreading his wings. At least that was what he liked to tell himself.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Whatever you say. What I do know is, all you have to do to get the girl of your dreams is to share a part of yourself. It's not that hard, Linc. Now's your chance to take a shot. Even if it's just for a couple of days."

"First things first. I need to keep Nomi from finding Nolan Polk. Then I'll worry about taking a shot." Too bad his brain and his heart had different priorities.

[Chapter 3](#)

It was official. Hell had frozen over. And it looked an awful lot like Faith, Virginia. Nomi strode through the train station looking around at the white canvas outside. Of course it was snowing. This was Virginia, after all, and there were only a few days left till Christmas. What had she expected? The balmy seventy-degree weather in Los Angeles looked mighty good right about now.

Get in and get out and you can go back.

She was giving herself three days to get what she needed and be back at home in the safety of her apartment before Christmas hit.

She turned on her phone and checked her messages. So far nothing from Linc. Hopefully he was already here. She was behind the curve as it was. Amber had used her miles to upgrade herself to an earlier flight and presumably had caught the afternoon train, so Nomi was playing catch up.

She took the escalator down, choosing to walk rather than ride it. All the while she scanned the luggage area for Linc. Frowning when she didn't see him, she craned her neck. *Don't be ridiculous. He might have changed in all this time.*

The last she'd seen him, his dark hair had dusted his shoulders and he'd been rail thin and barely taller than her at maybe five feet nine inches if she was being generous. She had no idea what to picture now. Maybe he'd gone extra emo like every other hipster she knew and had grown a beard or a mustache to be ironic.

As she looked around, the memories of the last time she'd been home washed over her. When she'd left here five years ago, the plan had been to never come back.

Thanks to her AP courses and the summer sessions she'd taken at the local community college, she'd finished all her high school credits just before the holiday and had planned to work from December through graduation and then head for UCLA in the fall. Brad was supposed to move out with her and had been planning on attending the University of Southern California. But that night had changed everything.

When he'd picked her up, he'd taken her to the big lake by the country club. Over the summers there were usually parties out there, bonfires on the tiny beach. It was also the standard make-out spot. But he hadn't taken her there to make out. Or, hell, propose like her idiotic seventeen-year-old self had thought.

Just thinking about what he'd said made her blood boil. "Nomi, it's been a fun two years, but we need to think about our futures. Or rather, I need to think about *my* future."

She'd been too shocked to cry in the moment. And since she hadn't said anything he'd continued.

"As great as you are, you're not the right person to take into my future. I need to be with someone who complements me. Someone who has the same vision."

What he'd meant was someone with a rich family and even richer connections. For the most part, his parents had been okay with her. His mother was more disapproving of her middle-class roots than the color of her skin. But she'd never missed an opportunity to parade rich, blonde debutants in front of Brad. The ass wipe had finally taken notice. His next words still sat with her today. "I'm seeing Lila Banks now."

She'd finally found her voice then. "Lila Banks? That wannabe socialite barely has one brain cell."

"Well, she's perfect and her family is perfect. And I also got into Georgetown. I think even you can agree that it's a better school than USC. You don't really fit into my circles. And, let's face it, not everyone would understand our relationship. You're the only one who didn't see this coming."

"H-how long?" She'd never regretted a question more.

"A few weeks. I'd have told you sooner. But your dad, he implied my history grade would be in jeopardy if I hurt you." Nomi could still visualize his strong shoulders as they shrugged. "So I waited until after the report cards had been sent."

Even now, Nomi could remember the instant nausea when he'd said that. Her parents had known. They could have insulated her or protected her and they hadn't said a word. That verbal slap had left scars.

Brad had been with her as a note of rebellion, but now that real life was starting, he wanted his perfect blonde girlfriend and perfect life, and Nomi didn't fit.

She'd walked away from him, leaving him at the top of the hill. Tears streaming down her face, she'd walked across the golf course and through the trails to Jilly's house. Somewhere along the way it had started to rain, the frozen splashes stinging her face as she walked.

Jilly hadn't been there. But Linc had. He'd opened the door and dragged her inside by the fire and wrapped a blanket around her. After a change of clothes, a go-around with Jilly's blow-dryer and some hot cocoa, she had felt better.

He hadn't asked her a thing, merely been there. Linc hadn't batted an eyelash when she had asked for a ride home so she could pack. His only objection when she had asked for a ride to the train station was that she should wait for Jilly to come back before she left. But her friend was at Villanova visiting the college, and Nomi wanted out so bad she couldn't wait.

She would never forget his last words to her. "You always deserved better than him."

Then he'd given her a hug and his phone number and told her to call him if she ever needed anything. And that was that. Before that, they'd only been peripheral friends. She'd always seen him just as Jilly's brother. But she'd always liked him. Unlike most of the other kids at her school, he'd talked to her when Brad wasn't around. Nothing heavy, but he always went out of his way to make her feel comfortable. She'd always assumed it was because her mom worked for his father, but given that he was braving the cold to come pick her up now, maybe he was just a nice guy.

When she didn't see him, she shuffled to the baggage claim wishing she'd worn her Uggs instead of her Cole Haan stiletto boots. She'd opted to check her bag instead of lugging it from car to car. Her train from Dulles had carried the usual commuter crowd, so the claims area was practically empty even though there were plenty of people waiting for their passengers.

For the most part, no one paid her any attention, but after several minutes the hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention. Nervously, she whipped around, expecting to see someone behind her. There was no one there. But at the far corner of the arrivals area, a man stared at her. He was tall, maybe around six feet or so. And he had one of those thin, rangy builds that screamed soccer player or some sort of athlete. His dark hair curled over his forehead and framed one hell of a face. *Holy hell.* There were men that hot in Faith? Maybe she'd been missing out.

Nervously she turned back and dragged her roll along off the luggage carousel.

Her neck still prickled with awareness. Oh jeez, was he staring? She hazarded another glance over her shoulder. This time when their eyes met, the corner of his lips tipped up in a hint of a smile and her insides flipped.

No. No. No. She was not getting distracted by some hottie. She had a job to do. Tall-dark-and-rip-your-clothes-off over there was a dime a dozen in Los Angeles. Granted, the ones in LA were also pompous ass hats for the most part.

She turned back around to keep from staring some more, pulled up Linc's contact info on her phone and sent a quick text. Hey, are you still okay to pick me up?

His reply came quickly. Yeah. I'm already here.

Her brows snapped down. Had she missed him? The station was slowly thinning out. Despite her brain's commands to not look at the guy in the corner, she couldn't help a furtive glance. He smiled at her then and something pulled low in her belly, making her ache.

Oh hell. She'd never been the one-night-stand type, but for that smile, she'd give it some serious considerations. *Focus, Nomi.* She turned her attention back to her phone. Where are you? What are you wearing?

The suggestive nature of the text didn't hit her until she'd already hit send. Aww hell. She'd been home all of five minutes and she was already a hot mess.

He was slower to respond now. Dark jeans. Dark jacket. And I'm waving.

This time she looked up and her jaw went slack. Tall-dark-and-turns-good-girls-bad was waving.

Pushing off the wall, he sauntered over with one of those panty-dropping smiles. As he got closer, Nomi's heart hammered faster and faster; she was certain she'd have a heart attack.

He paused just in front of her. "I guess you didn't recognize me."

Still slack jawed, she stared up at him and catalogued his face. His jade green eyes were dark and reminded her of the forest after a heavy rainfall. The cleft in the chin that had only been hinted at when they were kids was more defined. His angled jaw and chiseled cheekbones, combined with full sensual lips, meant Lincoln Porter had turned into a full-blown hottie.

Speak. Close your mouth, swallow and then find some intelligent words. The brain's commands were sound, but all she managed was, "Linc?"

He chuckled. "Yeah." He ran a hand over his hair. "It's me. I guess I look a little different."

"Understatement of the year."

The smile was back. "How about we get out of here and get you settled?"

[Chapter 4](#)

Nomi hadn't recognized him. What the hell was he supposed to make of that? Okay, fair enough—the summer before college he'd added three inches to his frame and packed on some muscle finally when he'd started doing parkour. His mother always said he'd grow into his looks. But he never expected Nomi to walk right by him.

More dangerously, he wanted to know what she thought. He'd seen her appraising gaze as it slid over him, but from a distance it was hard to tell.

She swallowed hard. "Sorry. You just look so..." Her voice trailed, but even in the bad lighting of the station, he could see her pupils dilate. With her lips parted ever so slightly, he wanted to take her photograph.

Yeah, not gonna happen. The moment she found out he was Nolan Polk, she'd take what she needed and bolt. And he didn't want to go through that again. "It's good to see you, Nomi. You look good."

She wore her hair in slim braids that hung down her back. Her smile, now, that was the same. Her lips naturally curved upward, making her look as if she was always on the verge of laughter or mischief. She hadn't changed at all. Still slim, but her curves had filled in, making him itch to touch. Her cinnamon skin gleamed. And her wide, dark, almond-shaped eyes missed nothing.

She was still beautiful. And likely still hung up on Brad Lennox, so get your mind right, Linc.

He cleared his throat. "C'mon, let's go get you settled." She'd only packed a carry on so it was easy enough to take that from her and pull it along.

"Must we?" she mumbled under her breath.

Linc chuckled. Her acerbic wit was still intact. "I see you're no more fond of this place than when you left it."

Nomi shrugged. "I always knew you were astute."

Oh yeah, she hadn't changed. Problem was, he hadn't changed either, so she still had the power to make him a little nervous. "So if you hate it so much, then what are you doing back here? At Christmastime no less. Surely someone else could have come. I seem to recall you saying you'd rather have your fingernails torn out."

"Hey, the night is still young." With a small laugh she added, "Hopefully, I'll be in and out. If my career trajectory didn't depend on it, I wouldn't be here encroaching on your Christmas holiday."

Once at his BMW, he unlocked and opened the passenger door for her, then deposited her bag in the trunk before sliding behind the wheel.

"You're not encroaching, Nomi. I'm happy to help. And since you won't be able to rent a car anywhere in a thirty-mile radius, I can take you anywhere you need to go." This situation wasn't ideal. The last thing he wanted her to do was find out he was Nolan Polk, at least until he was sure he could trust her. This way he could find out what she was really after.

She turned in her seat to study him. As her gaze slid over his face, he bit back the sudden compulsion to kiss her. She always had that unnerving way of looking at someone directly, clear to the soul.

"You seriously don't need to do that. I can manage."

"Independent to the bone. But be reasonable. You'll need help. I'm offering."

"I—" Nomi shook her head. "Honestly, I don't even know what I'm looking for. You'd be signing up for what amounts to a wild-goose chase."

There was no way he was letting her roam around asking questions. Not so much that he feared she'd actually find anything, but more that he wanted to keep her close. Maybe Jilly was right, and she was the same old Nomi, and he could trust her. But then maybe she cared more about her bottom line than anything else. The only way to know was to keep her close.

"Look, I get it. You like to do everything on your own. But help from a local can't be a bad thing."

"I don't want to keep you from anything. I'd feel terrible. And it's the holiday. I'm sure you have family obligations. A girlfriend. Somebody is going to need you. I got this."

His breathing slowed. Did she just ask if he had a girlfriend? "Right now *you* need me. Family is fine and no girlfriend. Why can't you just accept help?"

She ducked her head. "I guess I've never been very good at it. I'd rather count on myself."

Only with a Herculean effort did he manage to keep his gaze from flickering to her chest. "Can't have that, now, can we? Besides, my mother and Jilly would have my hide if I didn't help you. You're practically family." *Shit, way to put it out there.*

She blinked, then again. "Uh, whatever the reason, I appreciate it. And any return favor, just name it."

"Am I taking you to your parents' house?"

She shook her head vehemently. "God, no. I haven't seen either of them in a year, and birthday conversations were awkward enough without me being under their roof. Besides, I'm not staying for the holidays, so there's really no point of letting them know I'm here."

"So where to, if not your parents'?"

"Resplendence Inn," she said absently.

She was staying there? That was the most expensive hotel in town. Vacationing celebrities looking for a Norman Rockwell Christmas had put Faith on the map. The town had become a booming tourist destination, and with that had come development. Resplendence was one of the newer boutique hotels. "Nice place."

She shrugged. "The magazine booked it."

"So what exactly do you want Nolan Polk for?"

Her morose mood lifted the second she started talking about her job. "*Sassy* magazine is having their twentieth-anniversary issue and we're doing a women in beauty spread. But not like the usual bullshit stuff that the other magazines do featuring photoshopped celebrities who don't even look like that. Or just the western aesthetic. We wanted to capture real women around the world. This Polk guy, you should see his work. He does the most moving and intimate candid portraits. I think you'd like his stuff. You used to be into photography, if I remember correctly?"

Used to. "Yeah. I dabbled."

She narrowed her gaze. "You more than dabbled, from what I remember. Didn't you win a competition or two? I always thought you'd leave here and travel the world with your pictures."

And he had. Or at least that was before he'd had his heart ripped out and come home to lick his wounds. "Well, funny thing is, there is no place like home." The last thing he wanted was for her to dig further about him, so he changed the subject. "So what's going on? You lost your artist?"

"I didn't lose him, exactly. He just doesn't want to be found. Little does he know I don't give up on anything. Ever. And I need to find him before Amber does. If she finds him first and convinces him to give her a photo, then she gets my promotion."

"Who's Amber?"

"My nemesis who works at the magazine. She's in town looking for Nolan, too, and she's had a head start."

Damn, there was someone else looking for him? How was he supposed to keep two of them at bay? "So, what? You plan on finding him and convincing him to be part of this spread?"

“Short answer, yes. But more than that, I feel like I get him. I wish I could explain, but his photos, they do something to me. They make me feel something. I want him to know I understand him and that *Sassy* isn’t going to exploit his work. I’m hoping that appeals to him. My job depends on it.”

“You do have this way of manifesting what you want. I mean, look at you. You always talked about working for a fancy magazine. And now you are.”

Her gaze narrowed. “You remember that?”

“Just because you barely noticed me doesn’t mean I didn’t notice you.” He pulled into the hotel’s parking lot in front of the valet stand. Not giving her a chance to respond, he was out of the car quickly, pulling her luggage out of the trunk and beating the valet to her door to open it. He needed to stop blurting things out around her.

She accepted his proffered hand. “Thanks, Linc. I have it from here.”

Yeah, he should probably just head home, but he wasn’t ready to say good-night yet. “If it’s just the same, I’ll make sure you’re settled in. Jilly would have my head if I didn’t.”

She silently studied him for a minute, then her gaze shifted to his mouth. Linc’s heart tripped into full gallop. With their breath lingering between them in puffs of visible air, his blood hummed just under his skin. But then her gaze shifted away and the moment was gone.

He led her inside to the lobby and she shifted from foot to foot in her boots. “I don’t even have the words to thank you.”

“It was just a pickup from the train station. No big deal.”

She winced. “Well, and helping me find Nolan Polk. I owe you.”

Cocking his head, he said, “Let me just add that to your tab.”

At check-in, she gave her name and the desk agent searched for her name. He took that time to drink in his fill of Nomi. Sure, he’d be seeing her a lot over the next couple of days, but he wanted the unfiltered Nomi, who didn’t have her walls up.

“I’m sorry, Miss Adams, but your reservation was cancelled.”

Nomi’s head snapped up and she glared at the registration attendant. “Please check again. It was booked by *Sassy* magazine.”

“I have, ma’am, and we have one reservation under that booking. A Miss Amber Divine. Your reservation was cancelled. This evening around four.”

Nomi shook her head. “That’s insane. I was on a flight at that time. Fine. Whatever, just rebook me.” She clamped her hands together on the counter; she was the picture of calm, but he could sense the heat coming off her body.

“I’m sorry, we gave the reservation away.”

“Excuse me—”

Linc placed a hand at the small of her back and her jaw snapped shut. Glancing at the attendant’s name, he smiled, calling up whatever Porter charm he’d been blessed with. “Karen. I hope you realize the error you’ve made. Miss Adams is a guest of my family. Senator Porter would be disappointed if you couldn’t resolve this problem. There must be something you can do.”

Karen blinked rapidly. “Of—of course, Mr. Porter.” But after another check through the VIP rooms, nothing was available.

Nomi hung her head. “I’ll need to get a hold of Amber and room with her.”

“No. You won’t. I have another idea. Come with me,” Linc said.

“Where are we going?”

“Trust me. I know of somewhere better than the Resplendence Inn.”

“And you think they’ll have rooms days before Christmas?”

“I can guarantee it.”

Thirty minutes later, she was standing in the middle of one of the guesthouses on his family’s property. “Linc, I don’t even know what to say. You’re really going above and beyond with this whole white-knight thing.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. The smile she gave him was reminiscent of seventeen-year-old Nomi. There was no way he'd crack that shell if she left in a couple of days. He wanted to spend some time with her. "I know you said you'd owe me."

"Anything. If I have the power to give it to you, it's yours."

Oh boy. His brain conjured up images of her twined around his body naked in front of a fire, and he had to shake his head to get rid of the imagery that would likely drive him insane for weeks. "Go with me to Brad Lennox's wedding on New Year's Eve."

Her beautiful mouth fell open. "No way in hell."

He'd anticipated that response from her. "How about you sleep on it?"

"My answer's not going to change. Pick something else. *Anything* else."

He considered it. Hell, the way she parted her lips, he considered asking for a kiss instead. But the wedding bought him some time with her. "Tell you what, we'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Why are you being so stubborn?"

Because I want you. "Because you never come home, and I need a date."

She pursed her lips. "I'll still say no tomorrow."

Linc merely shrugged. "I'll take my chances."

Chapter 5

The next morning, Nomi tossed and turned in bed. Sexy Linc was *not* part of the bargain. Yes, he could help her, and yes, she needed him, but he was not supposed to look like he did. Nor was he supposed to ask her out to the one event she certainly couldn't go to.

And she certainly was not supposed to respond to him like that. Just thinking about his intense, focused green eyes on her made her feel flushed.

Over the past five years she'd dated some, but nothing serious. After all, her last serious relationship had sent her fleeing her home under the cover of darkness, so she was more than a little gun shy. And the guys she had dated were nice enough, some with great potential, but she had yet to meet a guy who gave her that same kind of exhilarating rush that her job did. So she just didn't bother.

The knock on her door came at eight sharp and she was a little surprised to find Linc on the other side. They weren't supposed to meet until eight thirty. "Oh, good morning. I'm almost ready. I just need to finish my makeup."

"Sorry I'm early, but I figured maybe we could get breakfast before we head over to Jilly's gallery. Besides, she'll kill me if I don't bring her a pastry from Claire's bakery."

Nomi smiled. "I see Jilly still has her sweet tooth. How is she doing anyway?" Nomi shoved aside the twinge of guilt. She didn't want to ask secondhand, but Jilly would pretend she was okay for Nomi's sake. Her fiancé had called off their wedding in New York just six months ago and Jilly'd had a rough time.

"You know Jilly. She's tough."

"She also puts on a brave face even when she shouldn't."

He gave her that almost smile of his again. The man was dangerous to her equilibrium. "Like someone else I know."

She raised her brow. "You're her twin, so if anyone would know, I suppose it would be you."

"She's still hurt and reeling. But she's good. She's back at work and business is booming. Jilly will bounce back. She always does."

She put down her powder brush. "I was sad to hear about your father. How's he doing?"

Linc shrugged "Fine, I guess. It's hard to see him slipping, you know. Most days he's lucid and he wants to work. But there are days now where he's not even sure where he is and who people are. It's killing Mom."

"Can't be easy on you, either."

Again he avoided talking about his father, this time by changing the subject. "After the gallery, do you know where you might want to try next?"

Guilt pricked at her. He had enough things to worry about without shuttling her around town. “What about work?”

“I work at the winery for Mom. I’m the operations director.”

“I’m sure she needs you.”

He rolled his eyes. “Everything is shut down until after the holiday. I’m all yours.”

The way he said that sent a tingle through her body, awakening nerve endings she hadn’t thought about in a very long time.

“I feel bad. I’m sure there are things you’d rather be doing than spending every waking minute with me.”

His gaze skimmed over her body. “Not really. How about this? I’ll feed you, take you to see Jilly and we’ll see where things are. It probably won’t be easy to find this guy, especially if he doesn’t want to be found and it’s tourist season.”

She nodded. “Yeah, okay. I just wanted to get this done as quickly as possible so I can get out before the holiday.”

He cocked his head. “Not a fan at all of Christmas?”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been soured on the whole holiday season.”

“That’s a shame. No eggnog, no caroling, no presents?”

Nomi laughed. “Hold up now. I still like presents. I’m not an idiot.”

He nodded, his eyes narrowing imperceptibly. “Lennox really did a number on you.”

No. She was not discussing Brad Lennox. “He’s not even on my radar. I’m here to work and get out of Faith as fast as my stilettos can carry me. And I’m sorry, Linc, but you’ll have to think of another way to have me pay you back. I slept on it, and I still can’t go to his wedding with you.”

His lips tipped up at the corners. “We’ll talk about it later. Right now, your taxi service awaits.”

She had a sinking suspicion he wasn’t going to let it go. But she was hungry and needed fuel for that kind of fight.

For breakfast he took her somewhere she’d never been, just on the outskirts. Even though it was still somewhat early, the place was full of tourists, but at least there wasn’t a line out the door. If this were LA, there would be at least an hour wait.

While they waited for their food, she studied him. “You know, I realize I don’t know you that well. Even back then, I didn’t really *know* you. All I know is you run an excellent taxi service and you were sweet enough to offer a girl a lifeline when she needed one.”

His laugh transformed his face, making him appear more open and, if possible, more handsome. The sound rolled over her, making her warm from the inside out despite the chill outside. “I’m an open book. Ask me anything you want to know.”

She widened her eyes. “Anything? You realize that as a journalist, my whole job is to ferret out the story I’m looking for. This is a dangerous proposition for you.”

“I think I can take it.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you. No evading, Porter. You have to answer honestly.”

He shifted in his seat a little, but his gaze never wavered from hers. “Do your worst. Just remember, turnabout is fair play.”

She weighed her options. She had no life to speak of besides the magazine, so he could ask her whatever he wanted. “Fine.”

He leaned back to make room for the waitress bringing them their coffee. “Shoot.”

She opened her mouth, but decided to take a sip of coffee first. Sighing in contented bliss, she put her cup back down. When she looked at him again, he was staring at her, his green eyes now hot and dark.

“What?”

“That look on your face. It’s sexy.”

She blushed, but would put down money saying he couldn't see it. "I see you're starting with the flattery."

"Or truth." He shrugged.

Nomi laughed. This felt like...flirting. *Or maybe you're woefully out of practice.* "You were super smart. I figured you'd go off to law school or something, like the rest of the prep school set, or bum around Europe. What are you doing back in Faith?"

He opened his mouth, then a light flush stained his cheeks, but he answered her. "I did all that. Transferred every AP credit I could and busted my ass to graduate from Carnegie Mellon in three years. Travelled some, came home. Not much to the story."

"Now, why don't I believe you?"

Her flashed her another grin. "I did graduate from CMU. Have the diploma to prove it."

"You know what I mean." She changed tactics. "You could do anything. Go anywhere, be with anyone. Why here?"

"Dad got sick, and the way I figure it, there's plenty of time for me to go do other things. Mom has needed more help at the winery."

"Are you happy?"

A shadow drifted across his face, but then his good-natured smile was back in place. "Right in this moment, yeah. Good food in the company of a beautiful woman."

Her heart rate picked up in response. *Easy does it. We're here to work. Not flirt.* For the rest of breakfast, she kept things on safer topics—catching up on some of the people she'd known, local gossip, her job and their favorite places to travel.

He relaxed her and made it easy to forget where she was, but a flash of red hair outside the window was all the reminder she needed. *Amber.* She was going somewhere in a hurry, and Nomi didn't have time to sit here on a leisurely breakfast date. "I see my competition is already up and at 'em. Do you think we can head to Jilly's now?"

He made a poor attempt at hiding his smile. "Sure, let me get the check."

"Oh, I can't let you do that. You're doing me the favor, remember?"

"I insist. I'll add it to your tab. Why don't you get the car warmed up."

While he flagged down the waitress, she headed out to start the car. She climbed into the passenger seat of the SUV and leaned over to stick the key in the ignition. Maybe if she'd been more alert, better mentally prepared, or hadn't wasted part of the morning pretending she was on a bed-and-breakfast date, she would have noticed the woman coming out of the post office four doors down.

With her smooth chocolate skin and high cheekbones, she was the picture of Nomi in another twenty years. Nomi froze, not sure what to do. She hadn't called her parents and hadn't planned to. But still, she couldn't ignore the twinge of pain in her heart at seeing her mother again.

Adrenaline spiking through her blood, Nomi knew she had to make a decision. If she didn't move, then her mother would see her.

For several loud, pulsing heartbeats, she stayed like that, but then her brain kicked in. Just as her mother was about to look up from her bag, Nomi ducked. She'd call home. Just not right now. *Later.* Maybe tonight. Maybe tomorrow. Definitely before she left...*maybe.*

The driver's door swung open and Linc laughed. "What are you doing?"

Sheepish, she sat up. "I, uh, thought I lost an earring."

His brows rose. "Did you find it?"

"Yep." She pointed at her ear. "Put it right back." She could tell that he didn't believe her, but she did not want to get into some long conversation about why she was hiding from her mother.

By the time they reached Jilly's gallery, she felt more at ease. Linc's sister had always been exuberant. It was no wonder she'd been a part of the pep squad at school. "Nomi! It's so good to see you." She bounded up to her and enveloped her into a warm hug.

Nomi squeezed back and let herself settle into the feeling of being home. She'd missed Jilly. Her bestie had been out to LA frequently to see her, or they'd met in places like New York, DC or San Francisco.

"Oh my God, Nomi, you have to tell me everything. Start talking. I'm so sorry I couldn't be there yesterday, but Linc came to the rescue, right? He wasn't late, was he?"

"No, Linc was perfect." Damn, why did her voice sound so husky? She cleared her throat. "I didn't recognize him at first."

"He's changed a lot, huh? Sometimes I can't even believe it. You would think he'd have a girlfriend, but for some strange reason he doesn't. If you ask me, he's carrying a torch for someone."

Linc's brows rose, then he coughed. "Enough, Jilly."

Nomi resisted the urge to shiver while she glanced between brother and sister, trying to figure out what the sudden note of tension was about. "Jilly, we have so much to catch up on."

Her friend squeezed her hand. "We will find a way to make time before you go, okay? In the meantime, I know you didn't come all this way for a snow fix. What do you need?"

"Even if it's at midnight. We'll figure it out. So, your gallery has showed some work of one of my favorite photographers."

Jilly nodded, understanding. "Nolan Polk."

"Is there anything you can tell me about him? What he looks like? Any places he might frequent? Even better, where he lives? It's important I get a hold of him."

Jilly bit her lip. "Have you tried his agent? She might know how to reach him best."

Nomi rolled her shoulders. "Yes, repeatedly. I've tried everything. I keep getting the 'Mr. Polk doesn't take unsolicited requests' message. I'm sort of desperate. We're looking to put his photographs in our twentieth-anniversary issue featuring beauty around the world. I think some of the portraits he's done around the world would be ideal."

"Well, he is extremely talented. No doubt about that. But unfortunately, I can't tell you much about him."

There was something about the way Jilly slid her gaze away when she said that. "Look, I get it. You're protecting your relationship with him. But anything you can tell me would be helpful. What does he like, where might I look next? I'm sort of running out of time."

Jilly slid a glance toward her brother and sighed. "Okay, fine. First place you might look is Faith Woods. He used to do a lot of photos out in the woods. Rumor is he has a cabin there. Then tomorrow night, there's an auction at the country club. Every year for the past three years, he's donated a piece. I doubt he'll be there, but it's worth a shot."

The country club? One of the last places she wanted to go. But if it meant a chance at Nolan Polk, then she'd better pull out her little black dress. But first, she and Linc were going to the woods.

[Chapter 6](#)

This was insane and Linc knew it. But, as he was quickly learning, there was no deterring Nomi from something she wanted to do. She was too damn stubborn.

"You know, you didn't have to drive me."

He slid her a glance. "Yes, I did." It was the only way to keep her out of trouble. "The roads are a mess out here from the last snow, and you don't actually have a car, so what were you going to do, walk?"

"If it meant getting here ahead of Amber, then yes."

"What is the competition thing with that girl anyway?"

Nomi sighed and wiped away the fog on the passenger side window. "She's hated me since I started at *Sassy*."

He would never understand the dynamics between women. "Girl jealousy bullshit?"

She shrugged. "Something like that. I know I can come off a little strong, but she hated me on sight."

“You? Come on strong?” he teased. That earned him a shove in the shoulder.

“I know I’m driven and that puts people off.”

“I dunno. I think it’s sexy. You know what you want and nothing stands in your way.” It also scared the shit out of him, because if anyone could find Nolan Polk, it was *her*. Hell, they were *here*, at *his* cabin.

So stupid. He couldn’t risk her knowing who he was just yet. His contract with Melanie was up in a little over a week. He had that long to determine if Nomi could be trusted. If she hung around that long.

He couldn’t wait to live his life again without Melanie clouding every decision he made. That was if he even felt like picking up a camera. It had been months. Though, sitting here with Nomi, with the sunlight streaking in, highlighting the reddish tones in some of her braids, he itched to capture it.

Her laugh was low and throaty. “You would be the only man on the face of the earth that finds my relentlessness sexy. Sometimes I feel like I repel guys. It’s okay, though. I’m about to be the youngest senior editor in the history of the magazine if I can pull this off.”

His gut clenched. The way she said it—as if it was the thing that would make her whole life—a part of him wanted to give it to her. “I think you’re wrong, but it’s a moot point. Anyway, we’re here.”

She sighed. “It’s kind of peaceful.”

“Don’t tell me the city slicker girl is missing her small hometown.”

“Don’t get it twisted, I *love* the city. The hustle and bustle. Los Angeles has a way different energy than Virginia does. But I do like my quiet moments. It must be easy to be creative out here with all the solitude. Nothing to do but listen to your imagination.”

It was peaceful. That was why he liked it. He could get away from the noise and just be himself. Granted, he hadn’t been here in a while. No need.

Nomi opened her door and a gust of icy wind blew in, chilling him to the bone. Right about now, LA didn’t sound so bad. He’d never been. An added bonus—Nomi lived there. *Sap*.

He followed her up the front stairs of the cabin, her tight ass sashaying in front of him in her leggings. She’d tossed the impractical boots she’d worn yesterday, and opted for flat ones with sheep’s wool lining.

Nomi knocked on the door and waited as patiently as she could. After only a brusque knock, she was peering into the windows.

He ignored the twinge of guilt. He knew no one was coming. “Looks like no one is home.”

She tsked at him. “Linc, you give up way too easily. Where is your determination?” She hopped down the stairs and started around the back.

“Where are you going? You need to be careful.” He could only imagine how pissed she’d be if she slipped on some ice and twisted an ankle.

“I’m fine. I’m not some west coast rube who’s never seen snow or ice before.”

“Still, it’s a long time since you’ve been here, Nomi.”

She shrugged. “Last I checked the stuff doesn’t change. Cold, slippery, wet.”

“Suit yourself.” He couldn’t help the smile as she had to check her balance more than once.

At the back of the house, she looked inside the windows again, then frowned. “I don’t see anything.”

“Nomi, the guy’s not home.”

“Yeah, but maybe he’s fallen down and can’t get up and he needs our help. Listen.” He stilled and she added. “You can almost hear him calling out.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Surprisingly not the first time I’ve been told that.” She scooted around him. “Come on, I need a better view of the whole place.”

Linc stared at her. “You can’t break in.” Not to his place she couldn’t. “Nomi!”

Her laugh rang from around the corner. “Relax, I’m not breaking in. Think of me as more of a Peeping Tom.”

He joined her at the side of the house and cursed. She was trying to climb a stack of slippery logs to look inside. Linc stepped up behind her and dragged in a breath of chilly air. *I’m just giving her a lift. No need to get all excited. It’s only for a second.* The problem was getting his hands on her was all he could think about.

Nomi looked over her shoulder. “What’s the matter? I swear, I only want to have a quick look around. See if there’s any indication he’s been here or if this is even his cabin.”

Linc knew she wouldn’t find anything. He’d paid Hanna, the owner of Faith Woods Cabins, for a cellar to be added. Hell, he’d even brought in the crew and paid for all the work as a donation so he’d have somewhere to store all his equipment and files. “Fine, let’s get this over with.”

It wasn’t the safest move in the world to touch her since it was all he’d been thinking about since he’d picked her up from the train station. He might not be able to stop.

Nomi planted her hands on the sill and he hoisted her up easily. She might have been tall, but she didn’t weigh much. And, added bonus, she smelled heavenly. Like chocolate and something else. Something spicier. He gritted his teeth. All he had to do was not breathe in. “Do you see anything?”

“No,” Nomi panted. “Freaking nothing. For a photographer, there isn’t a single camera lying around, or even a photo. No photography books, no nothing.”

“Maybe we have the wrong cabin. Or maybe he was never a guest here at all.” He hated the disappointment he heard in her voice. A snake of guilt slithered over his skin.

“I’m starting to think I’m on a wild-goose chase.” She sighed. “Okay, coming down.”

It would have been an easy task to bring her down slowly. *Should* have been. It would have been no big deal. *Should* have been no big deal. It should have been simple. *Should* have been. But she let go of the windowsill and her shift in weight unsettled them.

Next thing he knew they were falling backward and Nomi gave a little squeak of surprise. Linc wrapped his arms around her and cradled her inward to protect her body as he landed on his back on the snow-packed grass. His teeth clinked together as he took the brunt of their fall.

“Oh my God, Linc. Are you okay?”

He did a quick mental check as his teeth rattled and a jolt of adrenaline spiked his blood. His back had a residual ache he’d likely feel for days. But for the most part, he could feel all his fingers and toes. He was fine. Except...Nomi was now plastered against his body. Her ass nestled right in his lap. He wasn’t sure if he was in heaven or hell—either way, his body loved it.

Chapter 7

Nomi wanted to melt into the molten heat surrounding her body. Relax into it and nestle there forever. Except she couldn’t. Linc was the source of the heat, and right now, she was on his lap.

He sat up abruptly, bringing her with him, and she gasped. Through his jeans and her leggings, she could feel the insistent pulse of an erection. A very large erection. *Shit.*

Behind her, a wall of muscle braced her upright. In her attempt to scramble up, all she managed to do was rub against him, making her pulse quicken and her breath hitch as heat pooled between her thighs.

Linc planted both hands on her hips, his voice low and gravely as he squeezed gently. “Stop moving, Nomi.” He sounded like warm whiskey on a cold night. She stilled.

“W-what?” She could barely force the two brain cells she had left to cooperate enough for speech.

“It’ll be easier if you let me pick you up.”

Right. “Oh.”

Gently, he lifted her and set her next to him on the grass.

Despite the cold of the grass and the whipping air, Nomi flushed. Not only did Lincoln Porter have the devil’s tempting smile but apparently, he had the power to turn her bones to liquid too.

Just having him hold her on his lap was enough to make her brain conjure all sorts of interesting scenarios about him naked. Nomi cleared her throat in an attempt to dissipate the imagery. What was she supposed to say? “I couldn’t help noticing you were working with some serious equipment. Can I help you with that?” *No*.

She wasn’t here looking for a fling. She was here for work. And Linc was doing her a favor. He didn’t want her, current erection notwithstanding. She had pretty much given the poor man a lap dance.

Lucky for her, he took all the fumbling words out of her mouth and stood smoothly before extending a gloved hand to her. Swallowing hard, she placed her hand into his. When he spoke, his voice was low. “Tell me, Nomi, are you done with your adventures in B and E now?” He pulled her to her feet easily.

“Yeah. It’s clear he’s not here. If he ever was to begin with.”

He watched her with those intense eyes of his and she shifted on her feet under the weight of his scrutiny. “You giving up on me?”

She lifted her chin. “Nope. There’s still the auction tomorrow night.”

His smile was fleeting. “There’s the Nomi we all know and love. Come on, let’s head into town.”

The drive back to town carried an undercurrent of tension. None from Linc’s side apparently, as he chatted with her about happenings in town.

But *she* felt the tension. Every time he touched her. Every time he slanted a grin at her. It was damned inconvenient.

After three more hours searching through the town and a false trail with his post office box, followed by coming up empty-handed with Jilly’s contact at the bank, she was losing hope. Her feet hurt. Her back hurt. And to make matters worse, she was still hyper aware of Linc.

He pulled into the guesthouse entrance and she was surprised to find a car in the driveway. One she recognized. Her mother’s.

She came out the back entrance before Linc had a chance to even park. Whistling low, he said, “You want me to stay with you?”

Nomi shook her head. She couldn’t hide forever. Eventually she’d have to deal with her parents and now seemed as good a time as any. “No, I got it.”

They both climbed out of his car and he headed straight for his room and she for her mother. Her mother’s no-nonsense stride hadn’t changed in the five years Nomi had been gone.

“Nomi Adams, do you want to explain to me how you come to town and you don’t even tell your parents?”

She sighed. “I’m sorry. This was supposed to be a really quick trip.”

“Nomi,” her mother admonished.

Nomi clenched her jaw. She hated that tone. Hated how it made her feel like a misbehaving teenager. Never mind that she’d called her mother weeks ago and had yet to get a call back. But she hadn’t come to fight, and no doubt Linc and his mother in the main house could hear them. “I’m sorry. I came for work. I should have come by the house. I didn’t think it through.”

“That’s an understatement. Is that why you were hiding from me in the parking lot this morning?”

Damn, she’d seen her. “I wasn’t hiding, exactly.” She sighed and opted for a little honesty. “I panicked. If I’d had my way I wouldn’t have even come back to Faith. And seeing you was sort of a shock to my system.”

Her mother added more quietly, “When do you leave?”

“I’m not sure actually. I still haven’t finished what I came to do.”

“Why would you come stay with the Porters when you could have come home?”

What? And have them on her case all the time about how she never came home and how they couldn’t possibly make it out to California for some reason or another? Her mother had spent her

career following Senator Porter around, but now she claimed she didn't like to travel. They'd only been to see her twice. "It's a long story. The hotel was overbooked and Linc helped me out."

"You could have come home." Her mother softened her voice. "Since you're here and the holiday is only a few days away, you should come to dinner, see your father. Christmas Day?"

"I..." The last thing she wanted to do was go home. But she didn't want to do the same thing she accused them of. "If I'm still here, I'll come."

Her mother squared her shoulders. "I know it hasn't been easy. But we haven't seen you in a year and you haven't been home in ages. It will be good for all of us, don't you think?"

What she thought was that it might be torture. But there was no way out. Apparently, coming back to Faith also meant going home.

Chapter 8

The following night at the auction, after a fruitless day of searching, Nomi was tense. After last night's showdown with her mother, it was bound to happen. But when she located the Polk piece for auction, all the tension rolled out of her body. Normally, she was down for a fancy party. The auction was just part of the itinerary for this event. But tonight, even the nicest champagne wasn't making her any happier.

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