



Mail Order Brides for
Christmas

Mason

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HOPE FORD

MASON

MAIL ORDER BRIDES FOR CHRISTMAS

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MIA

LAST CHRISTMAS WAS THE FIRST ONE I SPENT WITHOUT MY PARENTS, and I promised myself that by the next one I'd have someone to spend the holidays with. I've been in a mood lately, unsure of what I need to do but knowing that I need to do something. With Christmas not too far away, I've taken a look at my life and am sad to see what a lonely existence I've been living since I lost my parents. It is time to do something. Something drastic.

I can't keep doing the same thing day in and day out. Get up, go to work at my job as a cashier at the local Piggly Wiggly, come home, watch television, and go to bed just to get up and do it all again.

Sure, I probably shouldn't have had a few drinks. Especially since I was under the drinking age and had to use a fake ID to get them. And I probably shouldn't have made such a big decision for my life after having said drinks. But it's too late to back out now. I signed the paperwork. Of course, I could probably get out of it. Say I was under the influence when I signed them or something. But I don't want to. The more I've thought about it, the surer I've become. And besides, it worked for my parents. So why can't it work for me?

Of course it was a different time and circumstances then. My mom and dad were promised to each other before they even met. Their families wanted to join. My dad's family wanted to join with my mother's family's land. It was the seventies then, so things like that weren't common. The days of arranged marriages were something of the past, or at least I thought so, and so did my mom and dad. And my mom told me that she was going to refuse her parents and tell them no, that getting married was not an option, they needed to find another way. But as soon as she laid eyes on my

dad, she knew she would go through with it. My dad felt the same way. They both told me it was love at first sight. They were married almost twenty-six years, and even though it was devastating that I lost them both at the same time, in my heart I knew it was for the best. Their love was one for the ages. Neither would have wanted to be without the other. They were two halves of a whole, and from the moment they married, they never spent more than a night apart. If one had survived the car accident, it would have been too much for the other to bear.

So now here I am, alone in this world. I have the wineries all in my name, but I don't work there. I haven't been able to bring myself to go there, not since the accident. The winery was sort of like my parents' other child. They loved it, and everything they created there was amazing. They left it to me, and I know what a special gift it is, but I haven't been able to go there. I receive my monthly royalty payment automatically deposited into my account, but I don't touch it.

I look at my packed bags sitting on the floor next to my chair. There are people everywhere, arriving and departing, everyone in a hurry to get somewhere. I like to imagine what each person is doing, what their life story is. The man across the way keeps looking at me curiously, and I wonder if he's wondering the same about me. I laugh to myself. There's no way he could guess that I'm a mail-order bride on my way to meet my future husband.

In the light of day and sobered up, I am waiting for the regret to set in. I signed up online with a matrimony matching website, Mail Order Brides for Christmas. The call from Holly Huckleberry to be interviewed via Skype was definitely interesting as I learned all the ins and outs of being a mail order bride. But what sold me on the idea was talking with Joy Mistletoe. She is my husband-to-be's mother. She wanted to speak to me before I signed any papers. Joy was warm and excited. She reminded me so much of my own mother that I probably would have promised her anything she wanted. She told me that I would be a perfect fit for her son and their family.

I try to recall everything she said, and I can remember her telling me that she has six sons who own their own businesses, and they are all special guys that have found themselves in a time crunch situation. I know she mentioned the name Mason, and I try to remember exactly what the reason

was he needed to get married, but the hangover and too much alcohol has caused my brain to be frazzled.

I look at my phone again and read all the reviews for the matrimony matching website. It seems legit. Darn, I hope it is. I told my friend that I had met someone online. If I told her I was getting married to someone I hadn't even met, heck hadn't even talked to, I know she would have tried to talk me out of it. And I don't want that.

Anyone else would probably be worried right now, wondering if this is the right thing to do. But not me. When I woke up this morning, I felt refreshed and without the least amount of worry. I expected some remorse or regrets, but I feel a calm come over me about the whole thing. I feel like leaving my lonely life behind to go and begin a new one surrounded by family is fate taking a hand.

As I hear the call to board over the loudspeakers, I grab my bag and start to walk across the aisle. The man that is sitting across from me stands up and waves for me to go in front of him. I smile easily at him and show the attendant my boarding pass before walking on to the plane. As I settle into my assigned seat, I think, *This is going to be just like a fairy tale.*

Mason

I'M STARING at the paperwork in front of me, reading through it all. I shouldn't even question it. The prenuptial agreement was prepared by Mr. Davis, our family's lawyer for the last twenty years. He's trustworthy and knows his stuff. It has all the common information on it and includes the clause that we each take what was ours with us when we get divorced. I've tattooed over too many ex-lovers' names on countless clients to be naïve enough to think that anything real can come of this arranged marriage.

I still can't believe that my mother set this whole thing up. As soon as she learned about the Titan Corporation coming in to buy the town, she's been searching to find a way to stop it. We all have. But Mother took it into her own hands. She's really clever and probably one of the most headstrong women I know. She came up with this idea, contacted the mail-order bride company, and put everything into motion.

The rules for the town's ownership are clear and say I have to be married. I'm working on a clause. Something we can figure out about changing the antiquated laws of Snow Valley. Phew! It's crazy. The law states that the owners must be married. It's a crazy idea, and the rules definitely need changed. Until I can figure it out, we will stay married.

Snow Valley means so much to our community and my family, and I know there's no way I can let the Titan Corporation come in and buy it. We don't want a tourist town. We like our town the way it is. My brothers and I are prepared to buy it, but the city bylaws say that the town's owners have to be married. I think it's a bunch of hogwash, but there's no way I'm telling my mother no. I won't be the one to let my family down, not when my five brothers all agreed to do this. Plus, I'm not so worried about the idea that I would stay married if it turns out really badly. If it comes down to it, I'll figure out a loophole of selling my shares of the town or something. As long as the majority stays in the Mistletoe family, I won't need to be an owner.

Marriage really isn't for me anyway. I don't believe in happily every afters. My buddies in the service would agree with me. My best friend's wife left him while he was serving overseas. Another friend's wife divorced him because she fell in love with someone else. Another friend's wife left him because she couldn't handle him being gone all the time. Yeah, I'm not a betting man anyway, but if I was, I definitely wouldn't be betting on the success of these arranged marriages. But there's no way I could turn my mom down. Not on this. I know how much this town means to her, and there's no way I'm going to stand in the way of it being kept to its current standards. Snow Valley is a special place, and it means a lot to all of us. It's where our family is from, it's where we grew up, and it's where we plan to stay. We definitely need to preserve the town. For us and for all the townspeople.

So once the decision was made, I just had to go through with it. Honestly, I'm glad Mom had a plan for the arranged marriage. The only prospects I would have had in this town that would even consider marrying the likes of me is Jessica, one of my tattoo artists at the shop. She's nice enough, but marrying her would be a huge mistake. She's already following me around like a lost puppy; she probably would get the wrong idea and think it was a real marriage.

Nope, I don't need that drama. I need a professional. I mean, what kind of woman would be a mail order bride? She obviously knows what's up. I shake my head at the thought. My mom told me she talked to Mia, the woman I'm planning to marry, but I didn't get much more than that. Mom has romanticized all of this, thinking it's going to be six successful marriages. All I can do is promise her I'll do my best. I know it's not going to be some big love match, but we can at least attempt contentment and hopefully just a hint of happiness.

I finish signing and wait for Mr. Davis to give me a copy before giving him a thumbs-up on my way out of the office. I've already arranged for a licensed minister to officiate the marriage, paid for witnesses to be there, and by greasing a few palms even got the marriage license rushed through to be ready on time.

It's all working out. I now only have to pick up my bride-to-be, one Mia Devin, at the airport, and we'll get married right there. It will be nice and legal once we consummate the marriage. I don't want this lady getting the marriage annulled as a sham. Not sure what the lawyer would say, but I want it to be legally binding.

I can't stop the shake of my hand just thinking about it. Intimacy and I are strangers. Once I got back from the service, having received my purple heart and bronze star, I was too occupied with rehab and trying to heal. My hand instantly goes to my face and the puckered skin on the side of my cheek. Luckily the wound has healed, but it's still ugly. There's no other way to say it. I can't help but wonder if my mother informed the matchmakers or Mia about my face.

I just shake my head, trying to shove my insecurities away. This is happening, and I'm going to make the best of it.

It's a means to an end, just business.

MIA

THE MAN THAT WAS SITTING ACROSS FROM ME AT THE AIRPORT IS NOW sitting beside me on the plane, and I've learned his name is Serge. He's a handsome guy and very charming. At least he's trying to be. We talk most of the way to Snow Valley. Him about the Fortune 500 company he works for, and because I know he doesn't want to hear about my life as a cashier, I tell him about my family's winery.

As we get closer to Snow Valley, I start to look out the window.

"I'm only here for a few days, and I should be able to tie up business."

I know he's about to ask me out, so I interrupt him. "I'm moving to Snow Valley. It is now going to be my home."

"I may have a little work do while I'm here, but why don't you let me take you out to dinner?" he asks me.

If I had met Serge last week, I would have told him yes. But not today. I'm not even the least bit tempted. I'm very flattered all the same, and I smile at him with a twinkle in my eye. "I can't. I'm engaged."

He looks at my bare finger. "Why are you not wearing an engagement ring?"

I start to rub the knuckle of my ring finger. I'm still excited about this whole thing, but I'm also a little bit nervous. "Well, it's uh, been an online type relationship. I'm actually going to meet him for the first time in person at the airport."

Serge is baffled. There's no other way to explain it. He sputters and stammers. "But, what, wait!" He warns me, "This guy could be anybody. A crazy serial killer or something."

I wave my hand in front of me, laughing. Maybe I should be worried, but I'm not. I talked to the man's mother, for goodness sake, and she was—well, she was perfect. I can't explain it, but I know I trust her. "He can't be," I tell him.

"Why not?" he asks incredulously.

I just shrug my shoulders. "The matchmaker and his mother assured me that he is a good guy." I clasp my hands in my lap, feeling like that is answer enough, but for Serge it isn't.

He still looks astounded. "Mia, is this an arranged marriage?"

"Yes," I tell him as the pilot starts to make the announcements that we are about to land. Butterflies start to swarm in my tummy. Not because I'm second-guessing myself. No, I'm getting nervous because I hope Mason likes me. When this first all come about, I didn't even worry about it. But now, I can't help but wonder *What if I'm not his type? What if he likes skinny women that are quiet and reserved?* I look down at the expanse of my hips and know I'm none of those things. I'm curvy and have been known to speak my mind.

I start to fluff my hair, and I reapply the lipstick to my now faded lips. We sit in silence for a while, but I can feel Serge judging me. As soon as we land, I gather my purse and carry-on, walking off the plane.

I can tell that Serge is still taking it all in and doesn't understand what is happening, but I really don't feel like I need to share it with him, although he is a nice guy, and I do appreciate his concern. As we are walking to the baggage claim, he still seems shocked. "Are you sure about this, Mia? If you need help, I can help you."

The concern on his face is genuine. Does he think I'm being forced into this? "I want to do this. I do. Thank you for your concern, but really, I'm going to be fine."

He walks beside me all the way to the baggage area and even helps me corral one of my suitcases. Before walking off, he gives me a sweet hug. "Good luck, well, with everything." He hands me his business card. "Just in case the matchmaker is wrong, and you need help after all."

I start to hand it back, but he cups my hand, folding my fingers around the card.

"Thank you," I tell him again and put the card in my purse. As soon as he turns away, I turn back to the belt, waiting on the next and final piece of luggage.

Mason

I GOT HERE EARLY. I didn't want to worry about traffic and parking. So for the past hour I've been sitting at the baggage claim area, watching all the arrivals. I have a bouquet of red and white roses, since this is how Mia will recognize me per the matchmaker's instructions. Personally, I'm glad I didn't have to stand here with a sign and her name on it. For some reason, that seems awkward to me.

Mia is supposed to be a woman with long black hair wearing an off-the-shoulder white lacy dress and matching luggage with an image of the Eiffel tower on them.

I spot a gorgeous curvy woman with black hair and a white off-the-shoulder dress, but she's walking with some guy. I look away and start to scan the room again, but my gaze is drawn back to the woman. It can't be her. I try to keep looking, sure I'm going to spot her amongst the other arrivals, but as the last person in the crowd enters the area, I'm drawn back to the woman standing with the guy next to the luggage claim belt track.

She bends down to retrieve her luggage, and the man helps her, pulling it off the belt and setting it next to her. It's white luggage with a big image of the Eiffel tower on the side of it. It has to be her.

I approach her and am annoyed when the guy hugs Mia. I hear the pretty boy in the suit and loafers wish her luck and then give her his number. I touch the scar that runs from just under my right eye straight down for three inches before it splits like branches of a river on a fucking map.

I pick up the second piece of luggage off the belt.

"Excuse me, that's my..." Her voice trails off as she looks at me. I offer her the flowers and then brace myself for the rejection.

Is she going to deny that she's Mia? Call the whole thing off?

She takes the flowers, and her smile is beautiful, but she's a beautiful woman. Her pity smile couldn't be ugly, not on her face.

Her eyes go to my cheek briefly and then immediately back to my eyes. I can't read her thoughts; she is keeping them very guarded behind her light

blue eyes and big smile. “Nice to meet you, Mason,” she says, and her voice is smooth as honey. Soft and low and filled with melody.

Speechless, I stare at her. Is this really the woman that signed up for an arranged marriage? She’s beautiful and appears to be sweet. Are the men blind where she comes from? Why would she need an arranged marriage? I would imagine men would be falling all over themselves to get to her.

I know I should offer my hand to her, but I stop myself, feeling for sure that she doesn’t want to be mauled by me at first sight. She’s still smiling, and I appreciate the fact she’s still being polite when it’s clear my scar has startled her. I nod toward the belt. “Do you have any more luggage?”

MIA

I CAN'T STOP STARING AT MASON. HE'S A TALL, POWERFUL LOOKING man. Joy, his mom, said he was just over six feet, with a slight scar on his face, but she'd minimized both characteristics. Mason has to be at least six foot five, and while his scar isn't slight, it makes him look quite formidable. He's handsome, and just looking at him almost takes my breath away.

Why hadn't Joy mentioned how piercing his green eyes are? And wow, his hands are ginormous!

"Everything has been arranged. We'll say the vows in a room just over there. I have a prenuptial agreement stating that we take from the marriage only what we brought into it in the event of a divorce. The marriage has to be consummated and last long enough for the land purchase to go through."

I stopped listening after he mentioned the prenuptial agreement, but by the time I decided it was a reasonable request since we don't know each other yet, he was finished saying the rest of whatever he was saying.

He's gruff and says it all matter-of-factly. He's pointing to a room off to the side instead of looking at me. He's nervous... or he doesn't want to do this. Are they forcing him to marry me? As soon as the thought pops into my head, I can't get it out. I can't marry someone that is being forced to do it. Does he not want to marry me?

I follow him, wheeling my first suitcase along behind me. I'm surprised the wedding is happening so soon, but Joy did mention that Mason was in a time crunch for some reason. The room I follow him into has two people inside. It surprises me so much I nearly trip over my own feet.

"What's wrong?" Mason asks me, gripping on to my waist to steady me.

“Isn’t your family coming?” I ask. I know he has five brothers, and I have to be honest, seeing Joy right now may help me a little bit. I need to see a friendly face. I had hoped my soon-to-be husband would offer me some kind of kindness or friendliness, but he looks as if he doesn’t even want to look at me.

“My brothers are tying knots of their own, so they couldn’t be here,” he tells me by way of explanation of why none of his family is here. He hands me the contract with a pen and then leaves to go speak to the other two men in the room.

I skim the contract and sign it as I hear Mason asking where the second witness is. I can see that he’s stressed out. I want to help, but I don’t know a single soul in Montana. Then I remember Serge.

“I can call my friend Serge. I met him on the airplane, and he might still be close,” I offer to the three men standing across the room. Anxious now, I set the flowers on the nearest table and wrap my arms around myself.

The two strangers seemed to be taking in my offer, but Mason seems angry at my words. He starts to say something but bites off his words when the second and final witness walks through the door. “Sorry I’m late.”

Mason doesn’t reply, just looks at his watch and then at me almost angrily. I begin to think that maybe he has a bad temper. I’m beginning to have second thoughts, but before I can voice them, the minister wants to begin the marriage ceremony.

I start to walk toward Mason but stop mid-stride. “Mason, can we talk for just a minute?” The way everything is being rushed, I know I have to at least have a conversation with him before I do this. I knew it was going to be rushed. I knew I was going to be married today. But I had expected at least a conversation first and not one where he’s looking at me crossly.

He leaves the other three men to talk and comes toward me, looking at me expectantly. The anger is still there, but at closer look I can’t help but wonder if I’m mistaking the anger for something else.

“What do you want to talk about?” he asks grudgingly.

I can’t help it. I laugh loudly. The other men look over at us, surprised before they go back to talking and ignoring us. “Oh, I don’t know. I thought we could at least talk a little before we did this,” I tell him, pointing toward the front of the room where we are to be married.

He shifts his weight to the other foot. “Okay.” He seems unsure. “You start.”

Never one to just hold things back, I ask him straightforward, “Do you want to marry me?”

My stomach seems to plummet when instead of answering me, he asks me the same question. “Do you want to marry me?”

I answer him honestly, “Well, I thought I did.”

I start, but I don’t get to finish. “Until what? You met pretty boy on the airplane or until you got a good look at me?” he says, pointing to the side of his face.

Then it dawns on me. He’s jealous. The man I’m to marry, the man I just met, is jealous. And how can he even think I would want Serge? My God, Mason is more man than I’ve ever known.

I decide right then that I’m going to do it. I’m going to marry Mason Mistletoe.

I don’t answer him, not ready to tell him everything and too shy to tell him just how handsome I think he is. I march to the front of the room, and when I turn back toward him, he’s just standing there, staring at me. “We going to do this, Mason? Because I’d like to be married to you,” I tell him almost shyly.

He walks toward me slowly, obviously confused. He stands facing me, and I wish we had more time. I wish we could at least get to know each other a little bit before we do the ceremony. But in my heart, I know this is what I want to do.

Mason takes my hands in his, and I gasp softly. The sensation of heat and desire that originated at his touch and then radiates throughout my body is like nothing I’ve ever felt before. As his eyes snap to mine, I know he feels it too. He tightens his grip, and I can see the vein throbbing in his forehead.

We say our vows, repeating word for word what the minister tells us to say. And when Mason puts the rings on my finger and gives me the ring I am to use for him, my hands are shaking. I’m suddenly nervous at what it’s going to be like to kiss him if just touching his hand has me tingling from head to toe.

MASON

I DISREGARD THE SURGE OF ATTRACTION THAT PULSES THROUGHOUT MY body. It's just a built-in, natural response to an attractive female, nothing more. And it's not like I can do anything about it now. I'm pretty sure I've already freaked out Mia, and I don't know why she's going through with this anyway. I know I've scared her and am causing her to have second thoughts. Man, before the war, before the scar, I was the life of the party and could make anyone feel comfortable. But not anymore. I don't want any attention on myself, but I'm finding that I want hers. I want her to look at me and never look away. I clench my jaw and remind myself again that this is just a business deal. That's all. We are getting married to save Snow Valley. Nothing more, nothing less.

So why do I feel such a strong sense of possessiveness toward her when I slip the engagement and marriage rings on her finger? Why am I seeking her eyes out, wanting to look into their depths when earlier I didn't want her to look at me at all? And why do I feel the vows I repeat to her to the very depths of my soul? Even though I tried to convince myself that we can get a divorce if this doesn't work out, I know that there's no way I would go through with it. The promises I'm making to her right now I plan to keep. At least I will as long as she lets me.

Her quivering hand as she only just manages to put my ring on reminds me that she doesn't want me. And maybe she doesn't feel the vows as strongly as I do. She's freaking out, and the way her breaths are labored I'm almost worried she's going to pass out. This is all just a business deal. That's all. A business deal. It's almost like a chant that is on repeat in my head. Call it what you want, but I'm guarding my heart because this little

petite woman with the curves and innocent face has me wanting things I shouldn't be wanting. Things I shouldn't even be thinking about. Like spending forever with her in my arms. Before I can get further into my thoughts, I drag my eyes from hers.

My military training has my senses kicking at me that someone is watching us, and I look over at the window of the door.

Pretty boy is on the other side, watching us. I should have known that he wouldn't just disappear, but I can't say that I blame him. I don't think I could walk away from her easily either. Obviously, he thought more of their meeting than she did.

My hands tighten on Mia, and she looks at me questioningly. Her shining blue eyes are clear as a cloudless summer sky. She's beautiful and breathtaking, and as of right now, she's mine. And I plan to claim her.

The possessive feeling returns, and I give in to it as the minister announces, "You may now kiss the bride."

I'd planned to give her a simple kiss, but as my lips touch hers, that plan goes out the window. I give her such a deep, searing kiss that anybody watching knows that Mia belongs to me. I kiss her longer than I should, considering the fact that we just met and also the fact that she is probably scared to death of my gruff demeanor. But I can't let her go. I wrap my arms around her, resting them on her back and tugging her close, fitting her against my hard body. The hard peaks of her nipples scrape across my chest. Her hands are at my waist, and they clench at the material of my shirt as if she's worried that I'll stop or pull away. The moan either comes from her or me or the both of us, but it doesn't stop me from sweeping my tongue in her mouth and tasting her before forcing myself to pull away before I embarrass her even further.

I stare down into her red face, and it's deeply satisfying to find her eyes still closed after I end the kiss. She reaches up and touches her lips with her fingers as if she's savoring the kiss we just shared. I completely understand, because I'm licking mine, wanting just another taste of her. She's flushed, and when she opens her eyes to look at me, I can see the desire in their depths. She wants me. There's no doubt about it. At least I know that even if she isn't attracted to me physically, she is to our chemistry.

I don't even have to look to know that pretty boy is no longer standing in the window. *That's right, Serge. She's mine.*

MIA

I ASK HIM A LOT OF QUESTIONS ONCE WE ARE IN HIS TRUCK ON THE highway heading to a cabin he rented for a few days. It isn't the honeymoon in Paris I'd imagined for myself in my youth, but sitting next to the only man who's ever stolen my breath and made my body burn hot from a single kiss makes me not even care about what kind of honeymoon I'm going to have. A cozy cabin with Mason where we can get to know each other and spend our first Christmas together... I'll take it.

Mason doesn't talk much. His answers are short, at least the ones he actually gives. He doesn't seem to want to share very much of himself. Maybe he's shy and just needs more time.

He doesn't ask me questions about myself but listens when I offer up my answers to a few of the questions I asked him. The drive seems long, and I hardly slept the last two nights I was so excited and nervous about coming and meeting and marrying a stranger. I could almost fall asleep in his truck if my nerves would let me.

The longer we go, the more insecure I feel. It's awkward now, and instead of a comfortable silence, I feel like there is a heavy weight all around us. "Mason?"

He seems to wait for me to continue, and when I don't, he asks, "Yeah?"

"I know this is weird and you can tell me no..." I start and then stall.

He doesn't respond, just looks in the rearview mirror and back at the road again. I put my hand on the console between us.

He still doesn't look at me, but the corners of his lips tilt up. "What is it? I won't tell you no. I mean, what kind of husband would I be if I told my

wife no about something on her wedding day? What is it? You don't want to go to the cabin?"

"No! I mean, yes, I want to go to the cabin. I uh, well, I'm a little nervous and I thought maybe, if you don't mind, maybe you could hold my hand if that's all right," I ask him. My voice, once strong and demanding, fades off with insecurity. I mean, he's my husband. Surely to goodness I can ask him to hold my hand. I flex my hand, palm up on the console between us.

He looks taken aback for a minute, and I think he's about to tell me no. "You want me to hold your hand?"

"Forget it," I tell him and start to pull my hand away, embarrassed.

But Mason reaches out, taking my hand in his. He curls his fingers around mine and holds on to me tightly. Pure happiness surges through me, and I couldn't hide my smile if I tried. And of course, after looking straight ahead the whole way, Mason now chooses to look over at me, and I can't wipe the goofy grin off my face.

Instead of smiling back, he grunts and nods his head at me. "We're married, Mia. You don't have to ask me to hold your hand. You don't have to ask if you can touch me, or really, ask for anything. You want something from me, something I have or can give you, you take it. It's yours. I know this—the arranged marriage and well, me—isn't what you were expecting, but I'm going to do right by you. I promise. And if there's anything I can do to make you happy, well, I'm going to do it."

It's the most words he's ever said to me, and instead of grumbling and attitude, I got poetry. Stunned is the only way I know how to describe it. If I was standing up, I'd probably fall over at his words. As his hand tightens on mine, I can't help but push him a little further. "So if I wanted to kiss you, just out of the blue, you'd let me? I can kiss you anytime I want? Because I have to tell you, you don't seem too happy I'm here, so I just want to be sure that I get it all right."

He seems taken aback. He opens his mouth and then closes it again. He brings our hands up and presses his lips to the back of my knuckles. "I'm your husband, Mia. And you're my wife. I know nothing about today was normal, but what I do know is that you can kiss me anytime you want. And you're wrong, Mia."

"Wrong about what?" I ask, feeling lost as I watch his lips touch my hand.

He drops our hands to his lap, pressing my palm to his thick, corded thigh. I can feel the muscles pull and flex under my palm, and he rests his hand on top of mine. "I do want you here. With me."

My whole body shivers, and I can feel my heart start to race. He wants me here. I could keep talking, asking him questions just so I can hear his voice, but I don't. I sit next to him in the cab of his truck, listening to the soft song on the radio as he drives us to our honeymoon cabin. I'm not expecting words of love or anything like that, but for the rough start we had, it's definitely improving. I look over at Mason and watch him as he drives before smoothing out my dress.

"Your dress is pretty," Mason says even though I don't think he even looked in my direction to see me smoothing it out. Maybe because he says so very little, his compliment means more to me because I can feel my cheeks burning with my blush.

"Thank you," I tell him before looking out the window and already trying to picture what our future holds.

MASON

I PULL IN TO THE DRIVEWAY OF THE CABIN THAT IS IN THE MOUNTAINS of Snow Valley. I could have just taken her home, to my place at the edge of town, but I thought this would be better. We need time to get to know one another. My family has decided that instead of a big Christmas, we will see the family closer to the New Year to give everyone time to get settled. But I know my family, especially my mom. There's no way she could stay away, and I don't want to share Mia with anyone right now. I want to spend it with her and only her.

I help her out of the truck and carry our bags inside, setting them by the front door. "Would you like something to eat?" I ask her. "I had the fridge stocked up. I wasn't sure what you liked, but I made sure to get a variety of things."

She's gripping the edge of the counter, her knuckles white from the pressure, and I know she's nervous. "I, uh—" She puts her hand over her stomach and grimaces. "I don't think I can eat anything right now. Nerves!" she says with a laugh.

I hold my hand out to her, and she looks at it for what feels like minutes but is probably a mere few seconds. I almost pull back, rejected, but she finally reaches out, putting her hand in mine. "I'll show you around."

We walk around the cabin, and I show her the rest of the kitchen and living room. She admires the Christmas tree in the corner, and after seeing the pleasure on her face, I'm glad that the company had the cabin decorated for the holiday. I pull her toward the stairs, grabbing one of her bags on the way and then release her hand so I can follow her up the stairs for the bedrooms. Her hips sway in front of me, and the sound of her dress

swishing back and forth mesmerizes me. Her dress is fitted along her bottom and short enough I can see her curvy calves. With my mouth watering and telling myself I need to relax before I scare the daylight out of her, I take deep, muted breaths and ignore the expanding bulge in my pants.

I show her the bathroom in the hallway, a spare bedroom, and then the bedroom that I had already set my suitcase in earlier. "I'll bring your luggage up in a little while."

She looks around the room and walks toward the window, looking out at the backyard. "It's beautiful, Mason."

I walk up behind her, but instead of looking outside like I intended, I'm looking down at the top of her head. Her body is tense in front of me, and I reach out, my hand spanning her waist. She turns in my arms and looks up at me with hooded eyes. Because I can't not do it, I lean down and capture her lips with mine. She kisses me back, her hand cupping my jaw and stretching along my neck.

Our lips move against each other until instead of soft and exploring, something switches, and it becomes something more. The kiss turns frenzied and demanding, and my hands start to roam her body, across her shoulders and down her back to land on her sweet, full backside. I squeeze her, pulling her into me, and before I'm too far gone, I feel her tense in my arms, like an iron board, hard and unyielding.

She's repulsed by me.

I drop my hands instantly and step back from her. Her lips are wet, swollen, and red. Her eyes are glassy and looking back at me with desire. But even seeing all that, I know I need to walk away. I'm not going to push myself on her.

I leave without a word, tromping down the stairs and out the back door to go chop wood. I have to do something to get out my frustrations, and wielding an ax is going to do it. I remind myself for the hundredth time, *This marriage isn't real, it's just business.*

But even as I mutter it under my breath, I can't tamp down the thought that maybe we could make it real.

Mia

I STAND IN HIS BEDROOM—OUR bedroom—with my hands to my lips and watch him walk away. When he was kissing me, I was trying to pull away to tell him that I wanted to freshen up, but he was out the door before I could. My body is humming, alive with need, and I'm mentally kicking myself for not just going for it with him. It's what I wanted. And by the way he held me in his arms, I know it's what he wanted too.

I go to the window and watch as he walks out of the house and instantly grabs a piece of wood, holding an ax over his head and then bringing it down to split the wood in half.

I watch him in awe. Even from this angle, I can tell he is mad. At me or himself, I'm not sure, but I know that I could stand here and watch him all day.

Like a peeping Tom, I watch as he repeats the process over and over. When he tugs his shirt over his head and tosses it to the ground, I gasp loudly, the sound echoing in the room. His muscled chest is formed perfectly. Every muscle stretches in his arms and taut stomach as he swings the ax over and over. He's like a man on a mission, not willing to be deterred. I could stand here and watch him for hours if I didn't want to get caught. His arms, shoulders, and chest are covered in tattoos, and I wish I was closer to be able to see the designs.

My body is heated, and I start to fan my face. The sun is starting to set, and I wonder how much longer he will be out there. My body tingles, wanting him to be near again. I have to drag my eyes from him in the backyard. The next time, I'm going to be ready for him. I walk to the bathroom and start filling the large jet tub so I can shave my legs. Closing up my lease and packing in under a week left little time for me to do much else before I left for Montana.

MASON

AFTER TAKING MY AGGRESSION OUT WITH THE AX, I GO BACK INSIDE and carry Mia's remaining bags upstairs. Setting them in the corner, I hear her taking a bath. I stand outside the door for just a second, but it's enough for me to imagine the water trickling down her body, and I discover my time with the ax has been wasted. Already I can feel my body reacting to her even though I can't see her or touch her. I'd give anything to be able to walk into where she is and take her into my arms. It's like a magnetic force drawing me in. The urge is so strong I have to literally force myself to be strong and walk away.

Since I'm sweaty from chopping wood, I go to take a shower in the other bathroom in the hall. Instead of hot, I turn the knob to its coldest setting and stand under the spray, leaning back and letting the cold blast of water hit me right in the face. I don't know if I want it to be a wake-up call or for it to bring me back to my senses, but I know I need some kind of jolt. With my head held back and eyes closed, I try not to think of anything. Especially my wife that is on the other side of the wall, sitting naked in her bath, running a sponge up and down her curvy body. My eyes pop open at the image, and a groan escapes me. There's no use. Already, in one afternoon, I'm obsessed. It wasn't supposed to be like this. We got married to save Snow Valley. I had hoped for contentment or at the very least friendship. I wasn't expecting or even ready for this attraction that has taken hold of me as if it's squeezing the breath out of me. I am one hundred percent attracted to my wife. But remembering how she tensed in my arms earlier is a reminder that maybe she's not as attracted to me as I am to her.

After cleaning up, I wrap the towel around my waist. I figure she'll already be finished since she began bathing before me, but she's still in the tub. I pull on my flannel pajama bottoms I brought. To make her more comfortable, I build a fire in the fireplace and turn off the lights so she won't have to look at the scar on my face. Then I sit at the desk, turn the lamp on low, and listen to her singing to herself. I pick up my paper pad and pencil, thinking I'll draw and design a new tattoo for the shop. I'm trying to stay business-minded, after all.

I don't know how much time goes by, but as soon as Mia stops singing, it seems I come out of a trance. I got lost in the drawing as I drew Mia's face and hair without thinking about it. Disgusted with myself, I stare at the very similar replica of her and realize that I've already memorized every detail of her face. I turn off the lamp, tossing the pen and paper on the desk, and lean back in the chair in the dark corner. I'm in way too deep already.

Mia

I OPEN the bathroom door with the towel wrapped around my body. How jet-lagged am I that I forgot to bring something to change into? I'm lucky there were shampoo and soap samples for me to use. The cabin is dark except for the fire burning in the fireplace. I stand perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the house, wondering if Mason is inside or not. Besides the normal house sounds, I can't hear him. I look out the window, and the spot where he was chopping wood before now only has an ax buried into the stump. I stare at it, and for just a second I wonder if maybe he left. I can't see where he parked his truck from here, but I know that even if he did leave, he'll be back. I'm not sure exactly how I know it, but I do.

I walk over to my suitcase and let the towel that's wrapped around my body fall to the floor. I'm searching, moving things around until I feel the cool, silky material of my nightgown. I pull it out of the bag and hold it in front of me, looking for any wrinkles when I hear a grunt of a whisper behind me. "Mia."

MASON

I'M FROZEN, GRIPPING THE DESK IN THE DARK. I'M CAPTIVATED BY THE sexy-as-fuck strip show Mia has no idea she's giving me. She's so fucking beautiful. I watch her towel fall to the floor and then her searching through her bag. I get so hard it's almost painful to watch her hold up the nightgown, knowing she's about to cover her body from me.

I stand up and cross over to her, muttering her name on the way.

She turns just as I get to her, and I know she's surprised that I'm standing here. I stand over her, breathing her in, feeling every move she makes because we are so close. "We're supposed to consummate the marriage, Mia." My voice is rough and gravely, filled with emotion. "I turned down the lights... I know my scar..."

She leans her head back to look up at me. "I don't care about your scar," she says vehemently and then softens. "I mean, I care how you got it, but I don't care like you think I do. I, well, uh, I still want you."

I cup her face to keep her looking at me. "Earlier—"

"Earlier I needed to shower. That's the only reason I tensed up. I want this, I want it with you. And not because we have to or whatever. Because I want you." She blows a breath out, frustrated by the way my thoughts are going.

I barely let her get the words out before I have her up in my arms, and I lay her back on the bed. She's still gripping her nightgown in front of her, and I take it, pulling it away from her and tossing it to the end of the bed.

Standing over her, I look at every exposed part of her, taking it all in, committing it to memory. She's breathtaking.

I lean forward and rub my knuckles along her cheek before I stroke them down her neck, across her shoulder, and down to the very peak of her breast. She trembles underneath my touch. I palm her breast, caressing her as her back arches off the bed, pushing herself deeper into my hand.

“Mason...” she moans.

“Yes?” I answer, caressing both her breasts.

“Will you kiss me... there?” she asks me huskily.

I smile, not believing that this perfect woman is my wife. My answer to her is to lean forward and replace my hand with my mouth. I suckle her as I let my hand slide between her thighs, cupping her sex. With one swipe through her sex, I find her wet and ready for me.

As I kiss down her body, she mewls and makes the sexiest noises, but as soon as my lips graze her mound, she’s silent, and her body tenses up. I kiss along her opening, smoothing my tongue along her, savoring her taste.

Her hand goes to the back of my head and threads through my hair. I press my tongue to her bundle of nerves, and her body bucks against me. “Yes...” she moans.

I don’t relent. I apply pressure with my tongue and beg for her release. Soft, fast, slow, hard, I change it up until I learn how her body reacts, and I know what she likes and what she wants. When I’ve barely gotten my fill of her, she’s already mindless, pushed over the edge, coming on my tongue. I lap at her, kissing her most private area, loving her until she’s limp and delirious.

Mia

HE GAVE me the best orgasm I’ve ever had. He kisses up my body, and when he’s next to me, I kiss him softly before scooting down the bed to return the favor.

“No, honey.”

His harsh words are grunted at me, and I look at him with some sort of shock. “I want to...”

“I won’t even last. I need to be inside you. Now! All I’ve thought about since I saw you in that other man’s arms is being inside you, taking you and

making you mine, making you forget every man that's ever held you before," he pleads with me, pushing me to my back and rolling on top of me.

"Man, what man?" I ask him, not having a clue who he's talking about.

"The man from the plane."

"Se—" But I don't get his name out.

He stops me with a groan as his head falls to my chest. "I don't even want to hear you say his name."

I smile then, not believing the control that I have over this brute of a man, my husband. "Me too, Mason. I felt the same way when I saw you. I wanted you to be mine." I run my hands down his chest, between his legs, taking his girth in my hands. "I wanted you like this."

He hisses, and his hips buck into my hand as I stroke him.

There's fire in his eyes as he lowers to his knees and sits up, lining his hardness to my opening. For one brief second, I'm nervous. "Please be easy, Mason," I ask him.

His eyes look at me as if he's asking me a question, but before he even voices it, I tell him, "You're my first. I was saving myself for my husband."

Again, his head falls to my chest with a muttered "Fuck."

There's an inner debate he has with himself. He looks at me worriedly. "I don't want to hurt you."

I take a deep breath and put my trust in him. "I know you won't."

He locks eyes with me and pushes into me gently at first, and he's stretching me, filling me up. I feel full and stretched as my body accepts him. I know the instant he reaches my barrier. His fingers go to my clit again, and I'm still sensitive from my earlier orgasm, so it isn't long before I'm ready again, and he pushes through, completely filling me up and taking me.

With each thrust, he whispers against me, "Mine. Mine. Mine."

I want to reassure him and let him know that I am in fact his, but I'm half out of my mind with the way my body is responding to his. He moans against my neck, kissing me, and my senses are on overload. I can feel him everywhere, and before long, I'm coming again. My heart is racing, there's sweat on my brow, and I'm panting.

He thrusts once, twice more, and then he's grunting, filling me with his cum.

"Yes," I moan.

Completely satiated, I lie listless and limp as he falls down beside me. I don't know what you're supposed to do afterward, so I follow my gut and curl into him, kissing his chest.

With his arms circling me, he holds me so tight I can barely breathe, but I don't ask him to stop. I've never felt so safe, so cared for, or dare I say... so loved.

MASON

I FEEL LIKE I'M LOSING MY MIND.

I keep telling myself it's not real, but I've never felt anything so real as what I feel when I'm with Mia. We've been at the cabin for forty-eight hours already, and I haven't been able to keep my hands off her.

The only thing that keeps me remembering that this isn't real is thinking about that hug Mia shared at the airport with that Serge guy. Maybe she just wants to be with someone, and it doesn't matter who it is. Maybe she's lonely or maybe she believes in fairy tales and things like that. I don't know the reason, and a part of me is worried about finding out.

Today is Christmas, and I'm lying on the couch recovering from the big breakfast that we had. Mia loved the presents I got her, a soft blanket, a robe with *Mrs. Mistletoe* printed on the back, and the diamond earrings. Of all her presents, I think she loved the robe the most. Instead of putting it on, I've caught her staring at her name since she received it.

She gave me a beard kit, pajama bottoms, and homemade coupons offering back rubs, showers together, and alone time. She took back the shaving kit and the pajamas as soon as I opened them because she decided she likes my beard and doesn't want me sleeping in pants. Luckily, she let me keep the coupons, and I know I'll be redeeming those very soon.

"Mason, did you do this?" she asks me, walking into the living room.

She's holding up the picture I drew of her, but I'm not looking at it. I'm looking at her. She's in awe of the portrait, and the way she's looking at me cuts through my walls of defense like a tongue through whipped cream. I sit up, pulling her into my arms until she lands on my lap, and I cradle her there. "Yes. That first night when you were in the bath."

She shakes her head, confused. “How? I mean, we’d just met, how did you do such a portrait without even looking at me?”

I should be embarrassed. I should just blow it off, but I can’t. “From the first moment I saw you, before I was even sure you were the one I was going to marry, I had committed everything about you to memory. You’re beautiful, Mia.”

“Oh, Mason.” She puts her hand on my chest as her face flushes a pretty pink.

I cup her jaw. “Tell me something about you. Something I don’t know.”

She looks up at the ceiling and back at me. “Uh, I own a winery.”

“What?” I ask her, surprised. “You own a winery?”

“Well, yes. When my parents passed, it was left to me, but I haven’t been there since their death. I haven’t been able to bring myself to go there.” A sadness overcomes her face, and I rub my thumb across her cheek as if I could smooth out her worry lines. “I have people in place to run it, but maybe one day you would want to go there with me?” she asks me hopefully.

“Sure, absolutely.” I think about the fact that she has an income, she’s beautiful and smart, she’s everything. Why did she agree to this marriage? I can’t figure it out. “Why did you agree to an arranged marriage, Mia?” I ask her, thinking her answer will be what keeps me from tipping over the edge.

She starts to talk about her parents. And instead of the sadness when she brought them up before, her face is filled with hope. Her hand goes to my face, tracing the scar on my cheek, and then she leans in and kisses the puckered skin there softly before pulling back. “My parents had an arranged marriage. Neither one of them wanted to go through with it, but as soon as they saw each other, they agreed to it.” She shrugs her shoulders. “It was love at first sight. It was fate. I know that’s what it was. And I don’t know, but when I talked to your mom, I couldn’t not do it. It weighed on me so heavily, I knew I was going to do it.” She takes a deep breath and pulls back her shoulders, looking me straight in the eye as if daring me to disagree with her. “I believe it’s fate that brought us together.”

I brush the hair off her face and don’t even try to look away from her. It hits me hard how fucking fearless this little half pint of a woman is. She believes in fairy tales, happy endings, and true love. Looking at her, I know she deserves to receive nothing less.

We stare at each other so long I can see every emotion filter across her face. I wrap my hand around the base of her neck. "I'm all in, my fearless Mia."

I seal my lips to hers, wanting her to know exactly what I'm feeling. I'm never going to get enough of her, but there's an edge that I feel. With my life, the things I've seen, I can't help but wonder if this is too good to be true. Can it really last? I know how I feel, but what about her? She's young and has so much to offer. How can she settle with a broken hero that doesn't believe in fairy tales anymore?

Mia

IT'S a few days after Christmas, and we're finally home. I'm glad that Mason and I had the last few days to get to know one another, but it's nice being able to get things set up in our home. He has a beautiful little cabin and told me I could decorate it however I want. He's next door at his tattoo shop, and I'm moving about the house, putting all my things away. He's gone above and beyond to make me feel welcome, and I know it's crazy, but I miss him. He's only next door, and he told me I could come over there and hang out at any time, but I don't want him to think I'm clingy or anything.

But by the evening, I'm going crazy. I've never been this way before, and it's hard to navigate what's the right way and wrong way to handle things. It's after dinner, so it wouldn't be completely absurd for me to take him a sandwich. Wouldn't most wives do that for their husbands? I know my mom did for my dad all the time.

I make him a sandwich and put chips and fruit with it. I grab the bag and take a deep breath before stepping out onto the porch. The tattoo shop has two cars in the parking lot, so chances are he's busy. I'll just deliver the food, get to see him even if it's only for a few minutes, and then come back home.

I walk through the front door of the tattoo shop, and the bell jingles announcing my arrival. A woman raises her head and looks at me. She

doesn't smile or seem remotely friendly as she looks me up and down. "So you're her, huh?"

There's blatant hostility in her voice, but I do my best to ignore it. "I'm sorry. We haven't met, have we? I'm Mia... Mason's wife."

She curses. It's muttered under her breath, but I can hear it all the same. "I'm Jessica, but you probably already know that. I'm sure Mason told you all about me." She shakes her head. "So he went through with it, did he?"

I put one hand to my chest. Mason has never mentioned the name Jessica, but I don't want to make her feel bad for it. But the way she's talking, I'm wondering why Mason hadn't mentioned her. I'm not used to dealing with people that obviously don't like me, and I don't know how to take her. Plus, she works with Mason. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean."

She shrugs. "I mean, it's crazy that he was forced to marry you... all so him and his brothers could save Snow Valley. Are we back in the old days or what? I mean, it's crazy, right? But at least he said there's an out. You two won't be stuck together forever."

I start to panic. Is that what he's telling people? That once he figures out a way to save Snow Valley, he's going to divorce me? My breath comes quickly and shallow. My hand that's not holding the bag clenches in a fist at my side. I feel flushed, nauseous, and on edge. When Jessica realizes that her words have bothered me, her smile gets even bigger. With a trembling hand, I hold up the bag of food. "I brought Mason dinner."

She walks across the room. She's slender with short hair and she has a hip look about her in her holey jeans and tight T-shirt. She looks to be my exact opposite. She grabs the bag from my hand. "Thanks. I'll make sure he gets it. He's in the middle of a tattoo, and he hates being disturbed."

I nod and turn to leave. I don't tell her bye or nice to meet her because I don't want to lie to her.

I hightail it back over to the safety of our house. As soon as I walk in the door, I fall back against it and let the tears fall. I had so many hopes for this marriage before I even met Mason. After meeting him, it was like all my dreams were coming true. How could I have been so wrong?

MASON

I ONLY WORKED AROUND FIVE HOURS. I WENT IN LATER IN THE afternoon and worked into the evening, but I swear it felt like the longest shift of my life. All I could think about was Mia. I wondered what she was doing and if she was okay. I almost called her a few times to see if she wanted to come and sit for awhile, but I figured she probably needed a little space. We'd been with each other for more than a few days.

I walk through the front door of the house, and the lights are already out. I walk up the stairs and into the bedroom, letting out a breath when I see her lying on the bed. I had panicked for just a minute, wondering if she'd left or something.

I sit down on the chair facing the bed and start pulling my shoes off. I can't take my eyes off her, and I watch her body move with each breath she takes. I know she's awake, but she's acting like she's not.

"Mia," I say softly into the dark room that is only lit by the moonlight peeking in through the window.

She doesn't open her eyes. "Yes?"

"Are you awake?" I ask her dumbly.

"Yes. I'm awake," she says. Her voice is thick, and something sounds off.

"Why didn't you wait for me when you brought food? I would have liked to show you around."

She doesn't answer me, but she does sniff. I move the angle from where I'm sitting, and I take in her puffy lips and the wet spot on the pillow she's lying on. I crouch down on the floor next to her. "Mia, honey, look at me."

She opens her eyes but doesn't say a word. She's been crying. There's so much pain in her face, I can feel my heart cracking. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She sits up and moves backwards on the bed. She's putting distance between us, and I don't like it. I rise from the floor and sit on the bed, my hip next to her legs. She's watching me but not saying anything. That's not Mia. Not the Mia I know, anyway. I put my hand on her leg and ignore the way it tenses under my palm. "What's going on?"

She clenches her eyes shut. She starts talking, soft and low. "I think we made a mistake, Mason. I think this happened too fast."

There's a sudden heaviness on my chest. A part of me knew this was too good to be true. After only a few days, she's ready to divorce me. My head starts to pound, and my heart starts to ache. "What do you mean we made a mistake?"

She finally opens her eyes. Her voice is saying one thing, but her eyes are telling me something else. She looks like she's going to be physically ill. "I thought about it, and maybe it would be better if I go back home."

"This is your home." I enunciate each word. It's the truth. This is her home now. Without her in it, it's nothing but a house.

She shakes her head. "It's fine. I'll be okay. And we can stay married... I know how important Snow Valley is to you."

She's moved her knee from under my hand, and I clench the covers. "Stay married..." I mumble, shock hitting me right in the face. She's leaving me. How in the world did I screw this up already?

She scoots across the bed to the other side and gets up. She's in her nightgown, and it's long, white, and flowy. It shouldn't be sexual, the cotton material, the way it covers all her body parts, but still, it's probably one of the sexiest nightgowns I've ever seen. All because it's on Mia.

She turns away from me, her hands on the dresser. "Well, I mean we can stay married if you want to... If you found a way to save Snow Valley without it... then you can divorce me."

She chokes up on the word *divorce*, and that's the only saving grace I have to hold on to. She doesn't act like she wants to leave me. She acts like this is hurting her... so why is she even doing it?

I stand up and walk around the bed. Her body freezes under my touch, but I put my arms around her, locking my hands around her middle and pulling her against me. She keeps her back straight, and I wait for her to

pull away, but I already know I'm not going to let her. If she wants to end this marriage, I'm going to hold her while she tries to convince me she's better off without me.

"What made you change your mind? What did I do?" I ask softly against her ear.

I raise my eyes and look at the mirror on the dresser in front of us. She's staring at our reflection. "You didn't do anything."

She's lying. I can see it in her face. "Bullshit, honey. Tell me what I did. I can't fix it if you don't tell me."

Her body starts to melt into mine, and she leans her head back against my chest. She has her eyes closed again. "When I married you, I thought it would be forever. At least I wanted it to be."

My arms tighten around her. Can't she see I want the same thing? "Me too. That's what I want too."

Her eyes clench. "No, Mason. Please don't lie to me. I can handle anything—well, almost anything—but don't lie to me. I can't handle that."

"Look at me," I tell her.

She shakes her head, and I turn her in my arms. She still has her eyes closed as if looking at me is going to be painful or something. "Look at me," I tell her again.

She opens her eyes, and when she does, a lone tear falls down her cheek. "Fuck," I mutter. I wipe it away with the pad of my finger and then pick her up in my arms. I carry her back across the room and sit in the chair with her in my lap. "Tell me what's going on."

She leans against my chest. "I'm leaving, Mason. It will be easier now than later. It's killing me, but if I wait, I won't survive it."

Her hand curls into my shirt, her palm over my heart. "But I don't understand. Why are you leaving at all?"

I want to understand, I need to know what's going through her mind, but at the same time, I know I'll never let her go.

"Jessica told me what you said."

"What did I say?" I ask her, wracking my brain, trying to remember anything that I've said to Jessica that would upset Mia. I can't think of anything. I don't really talk to Jessica a lot.

"You said—" She stops and takes a deep breath. "You said that there was an out... that we wouldn't be stuck together forever, and I've thought

about it all afternoon, Mason. It will probably be better if I leave now rather than later.”

I put my finger at her chin and bring her face up to mine. “You’re not leaving me, Mia. I won’t let you.”

She wraps her hand around mine. “But it’s for the best in the long run.”

I wrap my hand around her chin. I hate to hear her talk this way. “No, it’s not. I told that to Jessica when I first heard about my mother’s idea of the arranged marriage. That was before my mother talked to you and before I even met you.”

She blinks and opens her mouth to say something, but I put my finger over her lips to stop her. “And now, well now that I have you, that you’re my wife, you’re Mrs. Mason Mistletoe, there’s no way I’d ever let you go. Before I met you, I never believed in forever. I didn’t think I would ever find love like my parents have. But now, fuck, now, Mia, I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

Her eyes widen. “So you don’t plan to divorce me once everything is handled with Snow Valley?”

I shake my head sternly. “Nothing matters to me but you, Mia. You’re my life now. Any and everything I do is for you.”

She’s watching me closely, searching my face, and I know she needs to hear the words almost as much as I need to say them. “No, Mia. I’m not divorcing you. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I love you. I know you could do better than me. I know you’re young, beautiful, smart and have your own money. You don’t need me. But I promise you that there is no one that will ever love you more than I do.”

She shakes her head. “But you’re wrong, Mason.”

I look at her questioningly. She holds on to the front of my shirt and pulls me closer so our lips are almost touching. “I do need you. I felt like I couldn’t breathe just thinking about leaving you. I need you, Mason.”

I smile, ready to seal it with a kiss, but she continues. “And more than that, I love you. I knew when I first saw you and the possessive way you looked at me that I loved you. More than anything in this world, I want to be yours.”

I kiss her then. Fiercely, without holding back. She turns in my lap, straddling me. I pull back just enough to pull her nightgown off. “That’s good, honey. Because you’re mine. You’ll always be mine.”

She raises her arms, and I pull the gown over her head. She leans in, pressing her breast against my chest. “I like the sound of that.”

I spend the whole night—the rest of eternity—showing her that I mean it. She’s mine... and I’m hers.

Mia

LATER IN THE NIGHT, I’m nestled in Mason’s arms, and I feel so close to him.

I could stay right here, just like this—just the two of us—and know I’ll never want another thing.

Cuddled against him, tracing patterns on his chest, I ask him, “Do you think your family is going to like me?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” he starts.

I gasp and look up into his face, and he’s smiling wickedly at me. “Oh, you,” I say, playfully slapping him on the chest.

Finally he says, “They’ll love you. Not as much as I do, but yeah.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, planting a big kiss on his lips. “I love you, too. Now feed me, Mr. Mistletoe, and then take me back to bed.”

He stands up and holds his hand out. “As you wish, wife.” We go down to the kitchen where we eat, but we don’t make it back to the bedroom before he shows me again just how much he needs me.

EPILOGUE

MIA

One Year Later

“I CAN’T BELIEVE IT’S BEEN THIS LONG SINCE I’VE BEEN HERE. DO YOU think my parents would be upset with me?” I ask Mason.

He’s holding my hand outside of my parents’ winery and tugs me to a stop. My heart rate speeds up just looking at him. We’ve been married a year, and it was the best thing I’ve ever done in my life. Mason has proven over and over that it was definitely fate that brought us together. There is no doubt in my mind that we are soul mates and were made for each other. I know it, and I’m pretty sure he believes it too.

He’s just staring at me with so much love on his face that I know my plans for today are going to be perfect.

He brings my hand up and kisses my knuckles. “Your mom and dad would understand you needed time. We’re here now. And I can’t wait for you to show me everything.”

I look out on the vineyard, and even though the vines are bare right now, I can remember how beautiful this place is in the summer. Luckily, my plan has been in play for a while now, and I was able to have it completed with the sweetest grapes of the season.

Ava, the manager that has been overseeing the winery, walks up to me, and after a few pleasantries, she places a box in my hands. “Here it is. The new wine you approved,” she tells me with her eyebrows wagging.

I snap my eyes to Mason, but luckily, he didn’t notice. Fortunately, my husband only has eyes for me. I turn back to Ava and tell her, “Thank you,”

but she's already almost to the door she just came in. With a quick wave, she walks out, leaving us alone together.

"This is for you," I tell him, handing him the box.

Surprised, his eyes flick to mine. "For me?"

Nodding, I gesture for him to open it. I had a big speech, but I knew I wouldn't be able to do it without tears pouring from my eyes, I've been so emotional lately, so I had them attach a letter to the box.

He opens the envelope and reads the letter.

Dear Mason,

I love you, I think you know that. I am so thankful that fate (and your mom) brought us together. You and your family have helped me heal and have made me feel a part of your family. You make me happy every day. I've enjoyed the last year together, and I know we will have many years to come. Because you gave me something special, I knew I wanted to give you something that you would cherish too. I hope you like your present.

I love you! Mia

As soon as he's done reading, his eyes take me in, and even though I didn't read it, I can recite it word for word. I'm filled with emotion as a tear rolls down my cheek. He takes his thumb and brushes it away before latching his lips to mine. He deepens the kiss, but I force myself to pull away. "Open the gift."

He opens the box and takes out the bottle of wine. I stand next to him and look at it with the logo and the words *Fate of the Mistletoe* written in big bold letters. It's the exact design that Mason had drawn and given me. "This is why you wanted me to draw the mistletoe?"

I nod, loving the design he made. I had told him it was a logo for a tattoo I was thinking about getting. He had no idea that I was having a wine made especially for him.

"This is amazing, honey," he tells me, pulling me in for another kiss, but I stop him with a hand to his chest.

"There's more."

"More?" he asks. I take the bottle from his hands so he can search in the box.

He pulls out another envelope and opens it. There's a black and white photo. It's almost impossible to guess what you're looking at until you see the small typed font, "Baby Mistletoe."

"A baby?"

“Yes!” I whisper to him.

“You’re pregnant?” he asks.

I laugh then, realizing that I really did take him by surprise. “Yes. I’m pregnant. I’m about eight weeks along, so around summertime you’ll have a son... or a daughter.”

He just stares at me with shock on his face. I put my hands at his waist. “Mason, are you okay?”

Finally, he smiles at me, wrapping his arms around me and kissing the top of my head. “I’ve never been better.”

EPILOGUE 2

MASON

Four Years Later

“WHAT IS HAPPENING, MASON? WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?” MIA ASKS me.

She’s looking around at the decorated room. I have to admit that my brothers and their wives outdid themselves on this one. The place is perfect, and I know Mia loves it. There’s Christmas lights, decorated trees, flowers, and of course mistletoe everywhere. She looks at the rows of chairs lined up behind us. When she turns around, I’m on one knee in front of her.

The confusion on her face would be comical if I wasn’t nervous right now. I’ve spent the last five years loving Mia. She’s my soul mate, which is crazy because I never believed in things like that until I met her. But yeah, she’s definitely my other half. All my pain that I kept hidden, my years in the military and the scars on my body and in the inside, she’s made me feel whole again. The day we married, right after we met, I made vows to her, and those vows are still just as important today. She’s never talked about regretting how we met, or the wedding that I put together at the damn airport. But I regret not giving her what she deserves. On bended knee in front of her, I open the small box in my hand and hold it up to her. “Mia, I love you more than anything. You’ve made me the happiest man on earth, and I want to know if you’ll marry me... again?”

I’ve surprised her. It was hard putting all this together without her finding out. She’s staring at me, her mouth hanging open. “Yes,” she says. And before I can get up, she falls to her knees in front of me with tears rolling down her face.

I close the jewelry box and cup her face in my hands. “What is it? What’s wrong, Mia? I thought you’d be happy.”

She sniffs. “I am happy.”

“Look at me,” I tell her. She opens her eyes and stares back at me.

“I’m happy, Mason. I’m sorry that I’m reacting this way. I’m so emotional, I’m a mess lately.” She finally smiles and wipes her tears. “I thought you were unhappy... I thought you were leaving me.”

For just a fraction of a second, my heart stops beating. How could she think that? Mia and our son, Mason Jr, are my life. I pick her up and take her over to one of the chairs. I can see my brother peeking at us through one of the cracked open doors. He obviously can tell something’s not right, because he holds the rest of the family back from coming in.

I hold her in my lap, my arms around her. “Explain yourself. How could you think that?”

“You’ve been distant the last few months,” she explains, blinking her wet eyelashes.

“I’ve been planning this, and I’ve been so afraid you’d find out about it. I really wanted to surprise you.”

She puts her head on my shoulder. “Oh, Mason. I don’t need any lavish gifts or big surprises. I just need you.”

“Mia, honey. You make me happy. I’d never leave you. I can barely breathe when we’re apart. You are such a big part of me, you’re my life... and honey, if you don’t know that by now, I’ve fucked up big time... I’m so sorry.”

“No!” she says, lifting her head and searching my eyes. “No! It’s not you, it’s me... I told you I’ve been emotional—well, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Oh God! My first thought is there’s something wrong with her. My hands go to her waist possessively. “What is it? Tell me.”

Her hands go to my chest, and even through the leftover tears, she tries to smile. “I’m pregnant. We’re going to have another baby.”

My heart is racing with excitement. We’ve talked about having another child, but we said we’d just wait for it to happen. “You’re pregnant? We’re having a baby?”

She nods, and I pull her in against my chest. “Fuck!” I mutter. Emotion is hitting me hard. I rest my chin on her head. “I wanted to surprise you, and instead you surprised me... gave me the best gift of all.”

She pulls back then. “Oh yeah, my surprise... I’ll take my ring now.”

I pull it out and help her put it on. “That’s not it, you know.”

She’s admiring the ring. “What’s not it? This is more than enough, Mason.”

I shake my head. This woman deserves the world. “No, honey, it’s not. Today, you’re getting the wedding that you deserve.”

She gasps and looks around the room again. “Wait! What? Are we...”

I nod, unable to keep it quiet another minute. “Yeah, honey. We’re renewing our vows to each other. All my brothers and their wives have helped to plan this day.” I lift my arm and look at my watch. “You have exactly two hours to get ready.”

She pulls from my lap. “Two hours?” She runs her hands down her shirt and leggings. “Mason Mistletoe, I cannot get married looking like this.”

I grab her hand and stroke my thumb across her smooth skin. “You’re perfect just the way you are, but I knew you’d feel that way.” I look over at the door where I know our family is at and holler loudly, “Okay, guys, you can come out now.”

As soon as I say it, the door opens, and my brothers, their wives, and our mom and dad all tumble into the room. Mia and I are passed around and offered congratulations. She’s laughing with the girls when I catch up with her. I gesture to the women that married my brothers. We were all put into this situation to save Snow Valley, but it turned out perfectly. We’ve all found our soul mates. “They have your dress, flowers, and everything else you need. I’ll see you back here in two hours.”

She nods happily. She gets one step from me before I pull her in for a kiss. Even now, knowing I’ll see her in just a few short hours, I’m going to miss her. Our lips mesh in perfect union, and just when I try to deepen the kiss, my brother pats me on the back. “Two hours,” he reminds us.

I reluctantly pull away. I look into her eyes, not caring who can see us or hear what I’m about to say. My possession of Mia is uncontrollable. “You’re mine, Mia. For now and always.”

She nods. “And you’re mine.”

“Damn straight,” I mutter.

I let her go then and don’t take my eyes off her until she’s out of the room. For the next hour and a half, I pace the halls. It’s killing me to know that she’s here and I can’t touch her.

When the time comes, I'm standing at the altar. Our son is standing next to me as my best man. All five of my brothers are the groomsmen, and their wives, having just come down the aisle as bridesmaids, are now standing on the other side. Everyone in Snow Valley turned up for this event, and the place is packed. The bridal march begins, and Mia is on the arm of my father as he walks her down the aisle. She's the most breathtaking woman I've ever seen, and I don't even wipe at the tear that falls down my cheek. She took a chance by coming to Snow Valley and being a mail order bride. And somehow I'm the luckiest man in the world that she's mine.

My dad barely has time to kiss her cheek and put her hand in mine before I'm on her. I know the kiss is supposed to be at the end, but I can't wait another minute. I tune out the hoots and hollers and laughing around us. I try to show her in one kiss what she means to me. She pulls away and pats my cheek. "I love you too," she leans in and whispers. "Now come on, husband. Let's get this going so we can get back home."

And right there, in front of our family and friends, we become Mr. and Mrs. Mistletoe... again.

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