
THE SWEET TALKER

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The Sweet Talker

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Six days until Christmas Eve:

“Why do I feel like I just drove straight onto the set of a Hallmark movie?” I ask my buddy Declan as I look through my dirty windshield and take in the decked-out shops lining Main Street. Thank God I don’t have epilepsy. All the flashing lights in the store windows, not to mention the sparkling spruce wreaths hanging from every lamppost, are liable to trigger a damn seizure.

I slow my sports car on the slushy streets of Holiday Peak, Massachusetts, the sugary sweet town Declan calls home. Talk about a community taking Christmas to the extreme, and no, I’m not secretly enjoying the festive energy bubbling up around me. Not much, anyway.

“Watch a lot of Hallmark movies, do you?” Declan asks, busting my balls, and why wouldn’t he? Do you know any guys

that blurt shit out about Hallmark movies, like they're totally into them? Didn't think so.

I glance at my buddy as he stares out the window, nostalgia all over his face. Declan and I became close when I joined the Seattle Shooters defensive line up a couple of years ago. He took me under his wing, and we've been tight ever since. While he knows a lot about me, more than most, he doesn't need to know I'm a sucker for a good Christmas movie, which undoubtedly stems from far too many craptastic Christmases over the years.

He tears his gaze from the festive streets, and his brow arches in challenge as he waits for me to answer. "So that's a yes? You watch a lot of Hallmark movies?"

"Sometimes I'm too lazy to stretch for the remote," I say, rubbing my eyes. The drive from my place in Boston to Declan's hometown isn't a long one. I'm just tired from kicking ass during our winning game against Detroit two nights ago and I'm damn well looking forward to this break.

"Which means you were already watching the Women's Network, correct?" He grins. "Look I don't care, just stop denying it."

I shake my head. Leave it to Declan to call me on my shit. Every. Single. Time. I lift my chin. "You don't know my life," I shoot back. I hide a grin and add, "Sometimes those movies are on the Lifetime channel, you know." We both laugh at that. Yeah, I get it. Hours spent watching chick flicks hardly fits my image, and it's best that information doesn't leave this car. While I might be known as the Sweet Talker—and I'm not being cocky when I say this, but I'm pretty good at scoring with the ladies—on the ice, I'm a pit bull with one job: keep the opponents from scoring. But enough of that. I

need a change of subject before Declan makes me cash in my man card.

“Do I really have to bring a date to Christmas Eve dinner?” I ask with a groan as I sink deeper into the driver’s seat. To be honest, I’m a little played out, and agreed to join Declan for Christmas because he grew up in a sleepy town with a nearby ski hill, and I need downtime. That, and my father, an NHL hall of famer, couldn’t care less about seeing his kid over the holidays. He’s too busy with wife number five, or maybe it’s six, and don’t even get me started on my biological mother. But sometimes I think I worked so hard at hockey just to get his attention, his approval. You’d think he’d be proud of his son following in his footsteps. I guess he’s too self-centered and interested in his own pleasures to care.

Declan shrugs. “Up to you, but like I said, no one sits alone at Mom’s table. If the chair next to you is empty, she’ll fill it with my cousin Eugenie, and that woman...” He gives a low slow whistle. “Let’s just say she’s a huge Brody Tucker fan, and I’m pretty sure she wants you to be her baby daddy.”

I laugh out loud, holding one hand up. “I draw the line there, bro.”

“I know you do, so you better put a plan together and find someone to fill that chair, before Mom does and you find out you’re Houdini Eugenie’s baby daddy before you even realize you’ve been unzipped.”

“Note to self, steer clear of Houdini Eugenie.” Snow starts falling again, and I turn on my wipers, spreading a streak of dirty slush across my window. Way to mess up my visibility. I scrunch to look through a clean streak. “Where am I going to find a date this late, anyway?”

“You have six days.”

I consider that for a moment. “I guess that’s plenty of time to sweet talk a girl into a fancy dinner at your parents’ place.” Declan snorts, shaking his head. “What?” I ask.

“Maybe the women in Holiday Peak won’t fall for your charm.” He taps his head. “They’re kind of smart like that around these parts.”

I tap the steering wheel and grin. “Guess I won’t know if I don’t try.”

“Just don’t try it with Nikki,” he says, a warning in his voice. “I don’t want her getting mixed up with the likes of you.”

“You’re the one they call Heartbreaker, not me, and it’s not like you have any claim on her. All you do is hang out when you’re home and then return to the team in a shit mood. If you like her, do something about it.”

“It’s not like that.” He exhales, averting my gaze, but not before I catch the frown on his forehead. I’m not exactly sure what the deal is with him and Nikki. I guess I’ll never know because he shuts down whenever her name comes up.

“Who should I ask, then?” I scan the sidewalk, looking for possible candidates. A pretty brunette walks by and I perk up, until I notice the little boy by her side. Nope. Not her. Moving along. It’s not that I have anything against kids. Simply put, relationships never work out for me, and no way do I want to drag a kid into my world only to screw him up when I eventually screw up. I don’t want to be the cause of anyone’s therapy. He’s better off never having known me on a personal level.

Declan pulls his phone from his pocket and sends a text. He seems a bit distracted when he says, “Are you suggesting I pick someone for you?”

“This is your town, isn’t it? You know the women better than I do, and maybe Nikki has a friend. Just point the way.” I offer him my best smile. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re saying whoever I pick, you can charm to the table?”

“Is that a challenge?”

He stares at his phone for a second, shoves it into his pocket and looks at me. “Maybe.”

I toss him a cocky grin. Being a star in the NHL comes with its perks—Declan knows that firsthand. You know what being a star in the NHL doesn’t come with? Long term relationships. At least not for me. Lots of my buddies have fallen in love and are now married with kids. But the only thing I know about love is how to mess it up, which is why I no longer try.

“Try me, bro. Pick a girl and I’ll get her to the table.” I flick on the windshield washer, but no fluid comes out. “I can’t see a thing.”

“Wait, pull over.”

“What?”

“Right here,” he practically shouts. “Stop the car.”

I jerk the car to the right, and my suspension squeals as my front right tire plunges into a slush covered pothole near the curb. The god-awful screeching sound is followed by a gasp so loud it drowns out the song on the radio. My heart jumps into my throat. “What the hell?”

“Oh, shit.” Declan jerks his thumb to the right. “You just soaked someone.”

Worry races through me as I kill the ignition and jump from the car. Circling the front, my eyes go wide when my gaze lands on a girl around my age—late twenties. It’s a bit hard to tell exactly how old she is as she stands there gasping for air, cold, wet slushy snow dripping from her—compliments of my erratic driving.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurt out, thankful that I hadn’t done more damage, like actually hit her. “Declan, grab me something.” As Declan goes to the trunk, I take in the woman trying to catch her breath as she swipes wet, dirty snow from her face. I scan the length of her. Christ, I don’t think there’s an inch of her that I missed. “I’m so sorry,” I say again. “Let me help you.”

“No thanks. I think you’ve done enough already,” she shoots back, a cold shiver wracking her body. Okay, she’s upset because I soaked her. I can understand that, and maybe she was headed somewhere important, and needed to be, well... dry. Despite her protest, I take my coat off and hold it out to her as Declan comes back with one of our team towels. He spreads it open, and she takes the towel and wipes her face. “Thank you,” she says quietly to Declan.

“Here, take my coat,” I say.

She hands the towel back to Declan, shaking her head at me. “I’m fine.”

Clearly, she’s not fine, but I’m not about to call her on that as she averts my gaze and scans the snowbank. “Let me make it up to you.” I reach for my wallet. “I’ll pay for the dry cleaning.”

She holds her hand out, palm facing me. “I don’t want your money.”

“Please, let me do something to make this up to you. Dinner? New clothes?” She toys with the zipper on her winter jacket. “Axe throwing?” I glance up and down the streets. Maybe they don’t have that here.

Her head lifts and she glares at me like I might have just escaped an institution. Maybe under the circumstances, with her soaked and freezing, I can understand how axe throwing was a little bit out there.

“Keep the money.” She wrings out her ponytail, and that’s when I notice the pretty green flecks in her dark brown eyes. “Maybe you could use it for driving lessons.”

I bite back a wince as Declan stifles a chuckle. She looks down again, searches the snowbank. A thunderous noise rumbles down the street and I jump back, pulling my new friend—or rather enemy—with me, before the snowplow soaks us both. The plow drops its blade at the front of my car and scrapes up the snow.

“Great,” she says under her breath, and I examine the layer of packed snow with her, even though I have no idea what it is I’m looking for.

“Did you lose something?”

She briefly closes her eyes, like she’s trying to convince herself murder is wrong, and then says, “No, I just like to search snowbanks for fun. It’s a pastime here in Holiday Peak, something you out of towners wouldn’t know anything about.”

“How do you know I’m from out of town?”

She arches a brow glancing at my sports car, which isn’t ideal for this mountainous town. *Alrighty then*. People on the street slow as they see us, a few pointing at Declan and me with

recognition. “Can I drop you somewhere?” I gesture toward my car.

“No.”

“Maybe you could call someone to pick you up. Do you have a boyfriend or husband I could call?”

I’m not hitting on her—I don’t think. It’s just that she looks a bit traumatized, and might need someone other than me coming to her rescue.

“No.”

I really don’t know why my chest loosened at that answer. We’re different people from different worlds, and yeah, I can’t forget her instant dislike of me, and maybe even my car.

“You should probably get inside before you freeze to death,” I suggest.

Her head lifts. Speaking of death... As her murderous eyes turn on me, I’m pretty sure she’s thinking about ways to bury me in the slushy snow, or maybe she’s reconsidering the axe throwing, with me as her target. “You think?” she shoots back.

Clearly, we’re off to a good start.

“I’m sorry. Look. Can we start again?”

“You can keep the towel,” Declan says, holding it out for her. She looks at the Seattle Shooters emblem, and her eyes lift. She smiles for the first time, and my heart stills a little in my chest. Jesus, she’s gorgeous—when she’s not contemplating killing me, that is. “Declan Bradbury. I’ve heard a lot about you. You’re famous in this town, and it’s nice to meet you in person.”

“Nice to meet you too, and you are...?”

“Freezing to death. Thanks to your friend.” She searches the snow again, and her teeth clatter a little louder.

I step closer, crowd her, wanting to offer her my warmth but afraid of getting a knee to the nuts. As I crowd her, I breathe in her delicious scent. Cookies and cream and...chocolate. Not just any chocolate. No, she smells like the expensive kind my third stepmother used to put out at Christmas—before she disappeared from my life, taking a little bit of my heart with her.

“I can help you find whatever it is you’re looking for,” I offer.

She stares at the plow as it takes a turn, and for a second I think she might cry. But the anger is back in her eyes when she turns to me. “I don’t...need your help...you’ve...” Choppy words through clattering teeth fall off as a shop door opens behind her, a little bell ringing to alert the staff to a customer.

“Done enough, I know.” Feeling like total crap, I adjust my ballcap as she turns, disappearing into the shop. The delectable scent of warm gooey chocolate fills the street, as the door falls shut behind her.

I stand there for a moment, a little confused at her sudden departure. Then again, it’s possible she was on the brink of hypothermia. I put my jacket back on, reading the sign above the door: The Chocolate Lab. I guess she must work there.

“You been here five whole minutes, and look at you, making friends,” Declan says.

I turn to my buddy, and shrug. “Who the hell was that, anyway?”

He looks past my shoulders up and down the street. "I don't know."

"Don't you know everyone in this town?"

"She must be new around here. That shop wasn't here last time I was home."

His mouth turns up at the corner, presenting me with those double dimples that drive women wild. "Axe throwing?"

"Cut me some slack, I panicked, and what the hell is the matter with you? Why are you smiling like the village idiot?"

"Because I pick her." He points to the chocolate shop. "She's the girl you have to charm to the dinner table."

I scoff. "Oh, hell no. She's a man-hater."

"I don't know if I'd say that. I thought she was rather sweet." My jaw drops and he continues with, "She knew who I was and smiled at me."

"Then you date her."

He shoves his hands into his pockets, and rolls one shoulder. "No, I think I'll leave that to you."

I cover my crotch. "I'm kind of fond of these guys, Declan, and wouldn't mind them intact when I leave here after Christmas."

He laughs. "Then I guess you have your work cut out for you."

"My work cut out for me? No, my friend, getting her to the table isn't going to take work, it's going to take a Christmas miracle."

“Are you saying you can’t do it? That the infamous Sweet Talker can’t sweet talk his way into any woman’s life?” He turns and heads down the street, stopping outside a coffee shop.

I make a move to go when my foot knocks something loose in the snow. I glanced down and spot something shiny lodged between the bank and a lamppost. I snatch the object up, and the second I realize what I’m holding, a wide smile crosses my face.

“Not saying that at all,” I shoot back.

He pulls open the coffee shop door, pausing to look back at me. “Then it’s on?”

I grin, as I shove my ticket to winning this challenge into my pocket. “It’s already done.”

I step into the warmth of my shop, the delicious scent of chocolate doing little to soothe the deep-seated pain that lives inside of me as my assistant Kayley takes one look at me and gasps.

“Are you okay?” Wiping her hands on a cloth, she comes out from behind the counter to get a better look at me. Stupid tears prick my eyes, and I try to fight them back as I hold my hand up to wave her off, like what just happened out on the street was nothing more than an unfortunate incident. But it wasn’t an unfortunate incident. Not to me. No, to me I’d just lost a huge part of my soul in that snowbank, and nothing or no one can bring it back now.

“It was an accident,” I say, working to push down my anguish and hating myself for the way I treated a complete stranger. Mr. Pothole, or whatever his name was, never meant any harm, and he definitely didn’t drive into that puddle on purpose. I hold one finger up in front of Kayley’s worried face. “Pothole, one.” My thumb and index form a circle.

“Josie, zero.” I struggle to project my best happy voice despite the storm going on inside me.

Another customer enters the store as she shoos me away. “Go get changed, I’ve got this.”

With little choice in the matter, I nod, walking to the back of the chocolate shop, thankful that my apartment is above it and I don’t need to go outside again. I was on my way to Coffee Klatch to grab a couple of lattes for Kayley and me—Christmas time is crazy busy at the shop, giving us little time for breaks—when I accidentally dropped my phone into a snowbank.

I was seconds from fishing it from the slush when I was assaulted by a cold puddle. Some might say after that incident, the rest of the day could only go uphill, right? Heck, right up until that moment, I tried to be one of those positive people—despite the pain I’d been through over the last year. But this time, I couldn’t summon any glass-half-full attitude. Watching that plow drop its blade, and undoubtedly scoop up my phone and carry it away, sliced my already wounded heart in two. I’m surprised I didn’t bleed out on the ground. I know, I know, you’re probably thinking, it’s just a phone, it’s replaceable. You’d be right. The one thing that’s not replaceable, however, is the voice message my late husband sent me last year before he passed away.

I haven’t been able to bring myself to listen to it, and that’s why I packed up my store in Boston, moving to Holiday Peak. A fresh start. A fresh town. A fresh—or rather not so fresh—puddle of dirty slush in the face, and everywhere else.

“I’ll be right back,” I say to Kayley, pretending to brush remnants of snow from my face. It’s a week from Christmas, the holiday spirit is high here in Holiday Peak, and tears are

the last thing anyone needs to see. I'm not a girl to bring anyone down. Before I can make it to the back room, the bell over the door jingles and I spin, half expecting to see Mr. Pothole. My gut clenches as the town's sheriff, Patrick McCullum walks in. His eyes go wide at my disarrayed state.

"Josie, what happened?"

"Fight with a pothole, the pothole won," I explain. Maybe if he sees me like this, he'll stop asking me out. He's a nice man, as sweet as can be, but I'm just not attracted to him. Not that I'd go out with him even if I did like him. That would dishonor my late husband's memory. Since it's not in my nature to hurt anyone, a couple of months back, I told a little-white lie, just to preserve his feelings. I point to the back steps. "I'm just going to go get changed."

"Yes, go. Wouldn't want your boyfriend showing up for the holidays seeing you like this. He'd think we weren't taking good care of you in this town." The fine lines below his eyes crinkle, a light dusting of snow in his salt and pepper hair. As I take in his smile, there is a part of me that suspects he doesn't believe I have a boyfriend in Boston. He'd be right. Who knows, as a sheriff, maybe he even did a bit of digging.

"He would never think that. He knows how much I love Holiday Peak."

His brows raise. "He is coming for the holidays, right? I'm looking forward to meeting him."

"Yeah, uh sure, that's the plan. I'd better go get changed."

As I head up the steps, I berate myself for lying. Nothing good can come from it, and now I'm caught in a web of deceit, with Patrick expecting my boyfriend to visit over Christmas. As I scold myself for that fib, my thoughts switch

to my behavior on the street. I was upset and angry, not so much at being soaked, but at the loss of my phone. I never should have taken my troubles out on Mr. Pothole. He offered to make things right, pay for dry cleaning, buy me dinner, and weirdly, take me axe throwing. Strange, but nice, and there was something about his eyes—a kindness in them that really caught me off guard—that drew me in. That could also be why I lashed out. Everything about him triggered a reaction in me—desire. Guilt quickly followed.

Since he was with Declan, the town's hockey hero, I can only assume he plays for the Seattle Shooters too. From his physique, his body all strength and power—not that I was really looking, it's just a hard thing *not* to notice when a guy is *that* built—I can only assume he's a defenseman. I'll have to get a hold of Declan's mother, find out who the guy was and send him a box of chocolates as an apology. That almost makes me laugh. I'm soaked because of him and I'm the one apologizing? But seriously, I should have handled the situation better. He's not the reason my phone is gone. Why the heck didn't I listen to the message? I had a whole year. But I already know the answer to that. I couldn't bear to hear Jon's dying words. Maybe in some way that kept him with me, gave me some twisted sort of hope that he wasn't really gone. Unfortunately, that thinking is unhealthy and damaging, and keeps me stuck in the past, yet there is nothing I can, or want, to do about it. Moving onward and forward would be a dishonor to Jon and our marriage.

I hurry up the last steps and push open my apartment door. I'm instantly greeted with a bark and a wagging tail. Miss Mabel, named after Mabel, a lovely lady at Coffee Klatch who took me under her wing when I moved here, is quite happy at the unexpected sight of me. Mabel was the one who suggested a puppy, a chocolate lab, like the name of my shop.

It's like she could see the loss deep inside me, the need for something to love. Mabel had lost her own husband years ago, and if there was one person who knew what I was going through, it was her.

I drop to my knees as Miss Mabel licks at my jacket. "That's yucky, Miss Mabel." I give her a kiss, and stand to check her water bowl, which is almost full. "Would you like to get out for a quick walk before I have to go back to work?" Her tail wags faster and I hurry out of my damp jeans and coat. At least my sweater survived. I tug on yoga pants, a heavy vest, and a different pair of boots as I hang my clothes to dry.

I snatch her leash. "Come on, girl."

Outside she drags me down the sidewalk, wanting to sniff everything. I really need to find the time to get obedience classes. Everyone wants to stop to see the fifty-pound puppy, and she soaks up the attention. As we get closer to Coffee Klatch, she begins to sniff harder, and like a dog on a mission, she makes a beeline for the shop, knowing Mabel will always have a treat for her.

The door opens, and a man steps out, his back to us. Miss Mabel breaks free from me, and I call out to her, but it's too late. The guy turns, something in his hands, and Miss Mabel jumps up on him, knocking him to the wet sidewalk. Mortified, I run and the second I see exactly who she knocked over, the world closes in on me. I've been a good person. I pay my taxes on time. Donate to charities and help my neighbors. Why does life keep throwing me curveballs that knock me on my ass? Or in this case, Mr. Pothole on his ass.

"I'm so sorry," I say and try to drag my big pup off, but the guy is holding her favorite bear claw and she's drooling all over it as he tries to hold it out of her reach.

“Fine, take it,” he says and feeds his pastry to her, but at least he’s smiling. Correction. He was smiling, until his gaze finds me.

Mabel, my friend, comes rushing outside. Something I don’t recognize moves over her face as she takes in the way I can’t seem to keep my focus off Mr. Pothole. Wiping her hands on her apron, she says, “Josie Moser, meet Brody Tucker.”

“We already met,” we both say at the exact same time, and Mabel’s grin grows wider. Miss Mabel gobbles the bear claw, and proceeds to lick Brody’s hand, and my insides tighten as Brody’s gorgeous blue eyes lock on mine. My God, his gaze hits like a warm caress, touching me in all my girly parts—parts that have been dormant for a long time now.

It’s wrong to feel this way.

I grab Miss Mabel’s leash and tug her off. She turns, sees her namesake and once again goes crazy, jumping up for more goodies. “You’ve had enough treats,” I scold. I turn back to Brody. “I’m so sorry. I’ll replace your bear claw, and your clothes. I can wash them or dry clean or whatever.”

He sits up, and puts his arms on his knees, like he’s in no hurry to move. “That was some great payback.”

“It wasn’t payback,” I explain quickly. I’m not the kind of girl who believes in revenge, and I don’t want him, or anyone to think I am. “It was an accident. I promise.”

I hold my hand out to help him up, but he refuses it and really, can I blame him? I brace myself, waiting for him to be as ungracious to me as I was to him.

“I got it,” he says, pushing to his feet. “You’ve—”

“Done enough, I know.” I swallow down the guilt pushing into my throat as my cheeks heat, undoubtedly turning a bright shade of pink. Seriously though, I deserve everything he’s dishing out.

He stands in front of me, and I have to lift my head to see his face. I’m average height, but Mr. Pothole—Brody—is tall. Wide too. Solid. Yeah, I guess if I tried to tug him to his feet, he’d only end up pulling me down on top of his yummy body.

Yummy body?

Good God, who am I? I don’t know, but I’m just glad he refused my hand. Falling on him would be horrible, make a rough day even worse, and I am not going to spend one second imagining what it would be like to be on top of him, or underneath him. Nope, not going to spend a millisecond picturing his arms wrapped around me, those big hands on my back, fingers splayed wide, heating me from the inside out as he explores my body. I gulp.

Get it together, girl!

“What I was going to say is, you’ve been *through* enough already. You know, with me soaking you, earlier.”

“It was an accident,” I say.

He glances at Miss Mabel. “I won’t hold it against her.”

“No, I mean—”

Before I can get the words out, apologize again and let him know I realize he didn’t soak me on purpose, Declan steps outside. His gaze bobs between the two of us and he backs up an inch, like he just stumbled upon a street fight or something.

“Uh oh.” Sweet Miss Mabel jumps up when she sees he’s holding a box full of treats. “Whoa.”

I grab Mabel at the same time Brody does, and our hands touch, not unexpectedly. But you know what *is* unexpected? The zap of heat that travels through my arm and settles between my legs. I quickly pull my hand back.

“Let me help,” Brody says. “She’s still a pup and doesn’t know her own strength.”

He gets hold of Miss Mabel’s collar, and kneels on the ground. Since he’s already wet, he doesn’t need to worry about dampening his knees.

“Hey girl,” he says in a low voice that Miss Mabel instantly responds to. “Aren’t you pretty.” He runs his hand along her head and when he reaches her hindquarters, he gives a push. “Sit, girl.” She instantly sits and he smiles up at me. “She’s a good girl. She’s just excited, and in need of direction.”

“What are you, the dog whisperer?” I ask, and even though I’m being very serious, everyone bursts out laughing. Another wave of heat moves into my face, and I’m about to backtrack when Brody turns serious.

“You could say that.” He pets Mabel and she sits like a good girl, leaning into him. “I love all animals.”

“Miss Mabel seems to love you, too.” Mabel says as she glances at me, a new kind of twinkle in her eyes. Good Lord, if she’s trying her hand at matchmaking, she can forget it. I am not interested in a relationship with anyone, especially a hockey player who’s probably only in town for the holidays. I don’t care how good looking he is, or how broad his shoulders are. A guy like him probably knows he’s God’s gift to women,

and no doubt wears it as a badge. I'm just going to do myself a favor and steer clear. "Doesn't she, Josie?"

"What's that?" I ask. Shoot, I'd lost myself in his broad shoulders for a moment...err...I mean I lost my train of thought for a second.

Mabel's grin widens. Dammit, busted. "Miss Mabel seems to love Brody, don't you think?"

Okay, Mabel. Your matchmaking is getting a little blunt here. I adjust my purse on my shoulder and send subliminal messages for her to cut it out. But she continues to smile at me, waiting for an answer. "Uh, yeah sure."

"Hey, she knows a good thing when she sees it," Brody teases, standing, his big body towering over mine.

"Well, she kind of loves everyone, and you were holding her favorite treat."

Declan snorts. "Of course, it was the bear claw," he says, and grins at me. "Did you know Brody had no friends growing up? His parents used to tie a pork chop around his neck just to get the neighborhood dogs to play with him."

"Asshole," Brody says, grinning, grabbing Declan, putting him into a choke hold. I laugh at their antics, tension ebbing from my body as the two play-fight like brothers, and when Mabel grins at me, I straighten my shoulders and pull myself together.

"If you'll excuse me. I'll see about replacing your bear claw. Come on, girl." I take hold of Miss Mabel's leash and tug, but she seems reluctant to leave her new friends.

“Hey,” Brody says, letting Declan go. “I’ll be in town for the holidays. If you want, I can give Miss Mabel some puppy behavior lessons.”

I turn back to him, nibbling my lip. While that does sound good, and I just haven’t had a moment to work with her, I can’t just hand my pup over to a stranger.

“I...I...well...”

Miss Mabel leans against Brody, in a disgusting display of loyalty, as she wiggles in contentment. I meet her pleading eyes, and suspect she’s siding with Mabel, and trying to set me up. Traitors!

Brody’s gorgeous blue eyes lock on mine. “I’d love to work with her.”

“I can pay you.”

“Sure, we can figure out payment later.”

He winks at me, and my pulse jumps. Why do I get the feeling that he’s not looking for a monetary exchange? My deceitful body takes that moment to heat up, liking the idea. My God, I’m surrounded by traitors! My own body included.