

## The Gift

One thing Rory was grateful for about grad school was the fact that she had no final exams. Instead, her department, like most in the liberal arts department, only assigned papers to be due finals week. Since she had dropped Maggie's class, she only had two papers to write, but, as per the general grad school guidelines, they were long ones: no less than fifteen pages. She didn't mind the writing so much, rather enjoyed it, in fact. And once she had all her research complete, she could write a whole paper in a weekend. But, since she had been dating Maggie, she felt as if she was somewhat behind, even though she really wasn't. She was just used to having her papers done way before the due date. Now, the week before finals and she was struggling to get them finished. Not that she regretted the time she spent with Maggie, but she also realized that next semester she really needed to structure her time better.

Maggie also had end of the semester business to attend to. She had exams to prepare for her undergrad classes, panicked students already asking for extensions on papers that weren't even due yet, grading to catch up on, and final review classes to conduct. It had been Rory's idea that since they were both going to be so busy on their separate projects that it would be best for her to sleep in her dorm, at least until she caught up, which she hoped wouldn't take longer than a week.

Her room almost felt foreign to her now. There was no comfy reading chair to get lost in, no kitchen to putter around in and make wonderful things for Maggie, and no Maggie curled up next to her in bed, stealing all the covers. For such a small person, Maggie had an amazing ability to cocoon herself up in the covers to the point Rory either had very little left or was forced to snuggle up behind her for warmth. It was an easy choice to make.

But, now that she had all the covers she wanted, it just felt wrong. She never realized such a small bed could feel so empty. Talking to Maggie on the phone and via text were always wonderful distractions, but it wasn't the same as being able to pull her to her and wrap her arms around her and fall asleep, content in the knowledge that the woman in her arms loved her like crazy.

On Wednesday, before Maggie's class started, the one Rory had dropped, Rory called Maggie's cell when she knew Maggie would be in her office.

"Hello, my love, how are you?"

"I'm dying over here."

"Oh?" Maggie was distracted as she was gathering items together for class.

"Oh? That's all you've got to say?"

Smiling, Maggie said, "Okay, why are you dying?"

Rory's voice suddenly became small. "I miss you."

That made Maggie pause. "Oh honey, well come over tonight. This is not a forced banishment, you know?"

"I know. I just thought it was for the best if we had our own space to work in for the next week or so. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You were being loving and considerate and I appreciate it and love you for it."

"So, it's okay that I come over tonight then?" Maggie paused a moment before responding and in that moment Rory knew doubt. She thought that despite what Maggie had previously said, that she was going to be told no. That given a moment to think about it, Maggie had thought that having Rory underfoot would be too much of a distraction.

What Maggie actually said was, “Rory—come home. I miss you too.”

Rory couldn't suppress her elation. “Okay. You want me to make dinner too, because if so, I'll have to do some shopping first.”

Maggie laughed. “That would be lovely. I love you, Aurora.”

“I love you too, Dr. Parks.”

Just as she was hanging up, her door came open and Rachel walked in unannounced, which wasn't unusual. “I love you too, you big douche.”

Hand to her heart, Rory said mockingly, “Aww, I love you too, ho bag.”

Closing the door behind her, Rachel came in and plopped herself across Rory's bed, making herself comfortable. “You ever wonder what a ho would put in her bag, anyway? I mean, condoms for sure.”

“And moist towelettes, I would imagine.”

“Eww.”

“You try working an overnight shift and dealing with that not so fresh feeling. You'd be dying for a moist towelette too.”

“So, where you been? I mean, I think I know, but it's a conversation starter, you see?”

“I see. Yes, you know where I've been. I'm going back tonight, actually.”

“You should start renting your room out. You're never here and your parents could make back your room and board. Ooh, I know...we could turn it into a party room and you charge a cover! We could have our own little lesbian bar right here in Cellblock C.”

“I think I just figured out what the C stands for.”

“Absofuckinglutely, it does. So, when shall we throw the first party?”

“I feel so much love coming from you right now; it brings a tear to my eye.” She wiped one eye, took her finger away and said, “Oh, no, false alarm, just an eyelash.”

Rachel sneered at her. “So it's getting real serious, then, huh?”

“Yeah. We spent Thanksgiving with my parents.”

“You used to tell me these things.”

“I'm telling you now.”

“Whatever. So how'd that go?”

Rory grinned. “They loved her. She's been adopted. Actually, I think she's now their favorite. Dad wanted to keep her.”

“I've known you how long and I've been trying for years to be adopted. Fuck you, Morgan, you can keep your perfect parents.”

“Apparently, that's what you have to do to be adopted.” Rory's grin got bigger, if that were possible.

“Gee, why didn't I think of that? Oh, wait, I did.”

“Anyway, from what I hear, you might be getting your own action. You're apparently never here either. Where have you been?”

“Who's saying I haven't been here?”

“Your favorite librarian and mine, Lori.”

“That girl will say anything to start shit. She thrives on it. Wish I had known that before I fucked her. Chicks should come with warning labels that list all their bad habits and qualities. Warning: will become obsessive and controlling at a moment's notice. Constantly needs to be told you care. Will bug the shit out of you if you don't respond to her 57, 57! messages. It would be helpful, is what I'm saying.”

“True. So why are you still friends with her, then?”

“That’s a very good question and one I don’t know the answer to. Next question.”

“So, what have you been up to, then?”

“I believe they call it homework. Ever hear of it?”

“I’m becoming reacquainted with it. So, you’re telling me that you’ve spent the last few months in your room, doing your homework, not having a social life? I have doubt, Rachel Cole, I have many doubts.”

“Fine! You got me. When I say ‘homework,’ I really mean very lucrative meth lab in my dorm. Happy now?”

“That is so unrealistic. These dorms don’t even have kitchens. You need a kitchen to make that stuff.”

“Correction, you need burners, those are easily obtainable. Acquiring all the right chemicals in the right quantities, now that’s the tricky part.”

“Fine, don’t tell me what you’re up to. See if I care. Now, I have to get. You can either go back to your ‘lab’ or take me to the store, then to Maggie’s.”

“Ooh, you mean I can be your slave for the day? Where do I sign up?”

Rory stood up. “Here, just let me bend over.” When she did so, Rachel kicked her. Rory stood back up, rubbing her left cheek. “That’s the only way you’ll ever be able to kick my ass. Come on.”

“You better feed me after all I’m doing for you.”

“We’ll see.”

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While Maggie worked at her desk, Rory was able to finish writing her papers with her laptop on Maggie’s dining room table. They were able to work in harmony, letting the other one do what she had to do. Rory appreciated having the entire table, as she had it piled with all her library books and notes, as well as a never empty mug of coffee. Sometimes she actually got up and refilled it herself, other times; Maggie would silently pick it up in passing on her way to refill her own. They would share a small touch and a smile. It was just enough to let each other know they were still there. Sometimes in the evening before it got too late, Rory would stop working to go make dinner, the simple act of cooking serving as a meditation of sorts to clear her head some and it made her feel more human. Since clearing her books and papers off the table would have been more trouble than it was worth, they ate dinner while sitting on the couch, using the coffee table. The meals Rory made were not as elaborate as her usual fare, but they were still delicious for all that.

At night, Rory could finally sleep in peace, even if she couldn’t get enough of the covers to be completely covered. She just snuggled closer to Maggie and soaked up her warmth. Most nights, they fell asleep with Maggie’s head resting on Rory’s outstretched arm, her other arm around Maggie’s waist, their legs entwined. Their daily activities made them exhausted by the end of the day, so being more intimate was not of the utmost at the moment. It was just enough to be there. She knew that it wasn’t Maggie’s house that made it feel like home, it was Maggie. Maggie was her home. Wherever Maggie was, that’s where she needed to be.

Once Rory had finished all that she had to do, it was time to focus on the rest of the world again and that’s when she remembered there was something she had nearly forgotten to tell

Maggie. An invite had come from her mother that she had put out of her mind as she was focusing on other things. Now that she was done, and Maggie just had finals to finish grading, she felt it was a good time to bring up the topic.

Maggie was lounging on the couch with her feet up on the coffee table, a stack of student's tests next to her on the middle cushion. Rory thought she looked so cute sitting there dressed more like Rory normally did, than Maggie herself did. She was wearing an old pair of faded jeans, warm socks, and one of Rory's plain white dress shirts with the sleeves rolled up, untucked. It was too big for her when she stood up, practically went to her knees. Rory knew she liked it because it was comfy, but Rory suspected Maggie also liked it because it carried the faint hint of Rory's masculine cologne. The only thing that was still pure Maggie was the ever-present braid. Rory sat on the opposite end of the couch and just grinned at her but said nothing.

Maggie smiled back. "What's that look for?"

"Do you have any idea how fucking adorable you are right now?"

Maggie blushed. "Biased."

"Arguably. Still true."

Maggie sat the paper she was reading on top of the stack next to her and rubbed her eyes. "I don't feel adorable, I feel like I have sandpaper for eyes."

Rory moved the stack to the coffee table, then scooted closer and put her arm around Maggie's shoulders. Maggie leaned her head on Rory's shoulder. "You need a break." Maggie shifted so that she was snuggled up against Rory and Maggie put her arm across Rory, which Rory caressed. "Better?"

"Mmm, much. You're so comfortable."

Rory laughed. "Thank you, my love. How much you have left?"

"Just that stack. About twenty, I think."

"And that translates to how many more hours?"

"That depends on whether I actually read them or just scan them. Could be anywhere from two to five more hours."

"So it is true? Teachers don't always read every word?"

Maggie sighed. "I make every effort to, but sometimes even teachers don't want to do their homework. I teach three classes, remember? They're each capped at 25. That's still seventy-five papers or tests. You know how long the papers are. By the time they're done writing out the tests, they're about five pages each. Thank god for technology. Now, at least, the tests are typed up and I don't have to try to decipher five pages of hurriedly written prose."

"But you love your job, right?"

Maggie chuckled. "Yeah, I'm just tired and bitchy. It'll pass. I'm so glad you're here instead of hiding away in your dorm. I think we help each other to remember the important things, like breaks and food and sleep. Not so sure either one of us would remember to do those things for ourselves."

"Yeah. All those important things. And showering. Showering is very important."

"Yes, showering is very important. You smell really nice, by the way." Maggie buried her nose in Rory's neck and sniffed, then kissed her there, but not in such a way as to encourage anything more.

"Thank you. I think it's a mix of my cologne and garlic."

"Mmm, delicious combination. If I wasn't so worn out I would be able to appreciate it better."

"No, I'm right there with you."

“But you’re done. You can sit back and relax.”

“Or take care of you. Finally.”

“You always take good care of me, whether I need it or not.”

“That’s my job. Part of it, anyway.”

“You’re such a butch.”

Maggie couldn’t see, but Rory was beaming at her words, as she took them as a complement. “Thank you. It’s also the Morgan way. We take care of our own.”

“I know. I’m glad to be one of you now.”

“Speaking of the Morgans…”

Maggie sat up and moved back to her corner. “Oh no…should I be afraid?”

“Of course not. You have just been cordially invited to the Clan Morgans for Christmas is all. Presents will be opened, copious amounts of food will be consumed, the egg nog will be spiked, and out of tune carols will be sung. You will probably be regaled with more stories of me as a child.” Rory leaned in and gave Maggie a small sweet kiss. “And we can make furtive love in my bed again.” Rory started kissing Maggie on the neck. Maggie moved her head back to allow Rory better access, but at the same time, put her hand on Rory’s shoulder and lightly pushed her away.

“Oh, my love, not now. I wouldn’t be any use to you right now. Maybe later, okay?”

“Okay. No worries. So, what should I tell my parents? You think you’re up for another Morgan family holiday?”

“Tell them yes, that would be great. Will you be cooking with your mother?”

“Of course. You and dad can sit in the living room and watch Christmas movies all day. He likes having someone to watch them with. Last year it was Rachel. He loves her but she’s a little too talky, he said.”

“That doesn’t come as a surprise to me.” Rory started to stand up from the couch. “Wait a sec. Come here.” With a smile, Rory came back to her. Maggie brushed a curl out of Rory’s eyes and smiled. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Everything.” With a small kiss, Maggie finally let Rory go, who was nice enough to put Maggie’s stack of papers back in the spot she had vacated. “Oh look, they’re still here. Joy.”

“I could make them disappear and you could just mark down whatever grade you thought they deserved.”

“Oh, I’m sorry class, there was a horrible accident and your papers were destroyed by this freak bon fire in my backyard, so I just made up your grade based on a random guess. Merry Christmas.”

“You forgot about not letting the door hit them on the way out.”

“Now that would just be mean. They already think I’m a hard grader.”

“You know about that?”

“Uh huh. Every teacher knows what their students think of them. It’s a well-earned reputation, let me tell you.”

“Maybe dropping your class was a good idea for many reasons.”

“Chicken.”

“Maybe a little. Now, I’m going to let you get back to work, while I go over to the corner and read something just for the pure joy of it.”

“Must you be so cruel?”

“Jealous?”

“Very.”

“Well, you can watch me and dream about when it can be you.”

“Trust me love, when I get through this stack, reading will be the last thing I want to do.”

“As long as I’m the first thing.”

“Hmm, we’ll see.”

“I’ll take what I can get,” Rory said, as she settled herself in her favorite chair and winked at Maggie.

“Just stay in your corner until I call for you.” Rory gave her a surprised look at being so chastised and Maggie grinned before bending her head back to her work.

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Rory felt bad about not inviting Rachel to her parent’s house for Christmas, as she knew Rachel hated spending that much time with her family, but Rachel relieved her of any guilt by telling her that she had made other plans, but didn’t elaborate. Rory was curious but decided not to pursue it, knowing that when Rachel wanted to let her in on what she was up to, she would. She was curious and a little concerned, but figured Rachel was probably knee deep in a relationship of her own and wasn’t sure where it was going and didn’t want to shout about it yet. Rory figured she would be polite enough to give her her space, as Rachel had been nice enough to do for Rory. In the early weeks of their relationship, Rachel hadn’t bothered Rory much, as she knew Rory was engrossed in nothing but Maggie. It was something they understood about each other. They knew enough to give each other space when it was needed, secure in the knowledge that their friendship could withstand it.

They were driving up on Christmas Eve so that Rory and her mother could spend Christmas day cooking. They would arrive in time to partake of another long-held Morgan family tradition: the Christmas Eve Chinese takeout binge fest. Ann was of the firm belief that one should only have to cook once during the Christmas holiday and she had decided Christmas day was that one time. So, on the eve they did takeout and put Christmas music on the stereo. Since Rory had gone to college, they also used this time to catch up on what they had all been doing.

As they were heading out of the house to leave, Maggie said, “Rory, give me your hand.”

Looking confused, Rory held out her hand. “Okay.”

Maggie placed her car keys in Rory’s outstretched hand and closed Rory’s fingers over them. “This is your first present.”

“You’re giving me your car?”

Maggie laughed. “No, I’m letting you drive. I think it’s time I napped on the way.”

“Oh. Okay. Can I plug my music into your stereo then? I have a great playlist for this occasion.”

“If you know how to do that, sure.” Rory gave her look. “Of course, you young people know all about this technology stuff, while we older folks are still lamenting the demise of the Walkman.”

“I’m sorry, the what?” Rory gave her a teasing grin.

“Oh hush. Your little plastic piece of crap is no match for the battery eating machine my generation had strapped to our waist, pulling on our pants.” They settled themselves in the car and Rory reached around in the backseat to find her backpack, rummaged around in it until she

came up with the cord that would connect her iPod to Maggie's car stereo, then preceded to plug it in and get the music set to play.

"My 'little plastic piece of crap' can hold thousands of songs and requires no batteries and weighs next to nothing. Your dinosaur can't compete with that."

"As you say."

"Yes, as I say. Now, sit back, relax, take a nap, while I adjust the seat. Seems like an elf has been driving this car."

Maggie snickered. "Meanwhile, my side is just perfect—for laying out flat." She adjusted her seat as well to a position better suited to her height and then buckled her seatbelt.

"This is weird. I got so used to that side of the car."

"And sleeping. You got so used to sleeping. I hope you can stay awake."

"That's why I have loud music on this playlist."

"Great, neither one of us will be sleeping."

"You don't want to sleep; you'll miss my witty repartee."

"I might risk it." Maggie looked at her out of the corner of her eyes.

"Fine, I'll sing instead." Rory turned on her music to a song Maggie had never heard before and started to sing as she drove and tapped out the beat on the steering wheel.

Maggie could surmise that the title was "Black Sheep" and was amused at the line about having a string of jealous lovers, as Rory had had no other lovers. When the song was over she said, "I love it when you sing to me."

Blushing, Rory asked, "Really?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I? You have a beautiful voice. When you sing to me I am always torn as to whether I want to curl up into you or rip your clothes off."

"I'm sure that is dependent upon my song choice."

"Hmm, arguably. Sing to me again."

Smiling, Rory obliged with the next song that played: "Fast Car," by Tracy Chapman.

When the song was over, Maggie put her hand on Rory's knee and said, "Oh baby, you are someone and I wish we could sit with your arm around me."

"Damn bucket seats."

"Horrible invention."

"The worst." They shared a smile. "Hey, Maggie Parks?"

"Yes, Rory Morgan?"

"Why don't you pick the next song?"

"Okay." Though Maggie didn't have an iPod of her own, she had played with Rory's before, so she knew how to navigate on it. She scrolled through the playlist until she found a song. "Here, I think this is fitting for you, my young hellion." The song that played was "Cherry Bomb," the original by the Runaways. Rory laughed out loud when it began to play. She dutifully sang along, much to Maggie's delight.

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As predicted, the Morgans did indeed dine on Chinese takeout and told stories about the last few months, something they really hadn't taken the time to do over thanksgiving. After a

few hours of animated stories, the Morgans announced they were going to midnight mass. Rory and Maggie declined to go. Much to Rory's surprise, Ann did not make an issue of it.

Rory looked at Maggie and asked, "Ready to go upstairs, then?"

"Not yet, there's something I want to talk to your parents about before they leave." John and Ann exchanged a curious look.

"Oh, okay. Should I be worried?"

Maggie put her hand on Rory's chest and said, "No, my love, but I would really appreciate it if you waited upstairs for me."

"Yeah, that does nothing to curb my sudden anxiety."

"Relax. Maybe I want to talk to them about your presents, hmm?"

"Did you get her a lump of coal too? Oh, I hope not. Perhaps we should have consulted."

Maggie smiled. "No, John, I did not. But I do want to discuss what I did get her."

"I am most curious, my dear. But I will give you the time you ask for and go upstairs and get the room ready for you."

"Thank you." Rory kissed her on the cheek, then stood up and went up the stairs, true to her word.

Once Maggie heard Rory's door open and close, she looked at John and Ann and took a deep breath. What she was going to ask them was huge and she hoped it wasn't too soon.

Ann put her hand on her husband's arm. "John, brace yourself, I think you might have to give your daughter away."

John eyed Maggie shrewdly. "Is that what I'm about to do?"

"Well, not quite." She proceeded to tell them what she had in mind and, much to her relief, she saw them smile and nod.

"I think that would be fine. Rory's an adult, much to her mother's and my disbelief. She can make her own decisions. If she wants to do this, I think we will be fine with it."

"You don't think it's too soon?"

"Maybe a little, but what would be the point of waiting? I think she knows what she wants and what she wants is you, Maggie. I trust you will take good care of her."

"Oh, I will Ann, I definitely will." Unable to contain her happiness at their acceptance, she went to them and hugged them both. "Thank you so much. You have a wonderful daughter and I love her very much. I hope you know that."

"Yes, we do. You know, you didn't have to ask our permission but it shows good character that you did. I'm proud to call you my second daughter."

"Aww, thank you, John."

"When are you going to give her this gift?"

"Tomorrow, during the gift exchange."

"I'm sure that it will overshadow everything else you've gotten her."

"I hope so, Ann."

"That's another thing; I think you can call us what Rory calls us if you're comfortable with it."

Feeling devilish, Maggie declared, "Oh, I couldn't call you that, that's disrespectful. Oh, you meant 'mom and dad.'"

"Woman, you have the devil in you."

"Funny, your daughter told me the same thing once."

"She should know. I used to say the same thing to her when she was a young hoyden."



“Well, thank you for your support. I better get up there before she gets too nervous about what’s happening down here and starts to worry.” Maggie made to leave.

“Starts to worry? I’m sure she’s well past that.”

“You’re probably right. Good night.” Maggie hurried upstairs, not waiting for a reply. When she got to Rory’s room, she found her lounging against her pillows, with her legs out in front of her, typing a message on her phone, her boots on the floor next to the bed. She didn’t look anxious but Maggie knew her well enough by now to know that she was about to crawl out of her skin with fear that something was wrong. She silently walked over to the bed, gently took the phone out of her hands and set it on the night stand, then put a soft kiss on Rory’s lips. She could feel the tension in Rory when she touched her but Rory kissed her back and smiled. “It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere and neither are you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Maggie sat down on the edge of the bed and put one arm on the other side of Rory’s legs. “I really did want to talk to them about gifts. And that’s all you’re going to get from me. You’ll just have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Woman, you had me worried.” She tried to grin but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I know and I’m sorry. But you should know by now that you have nothing to worry about. What do I have to do to convince you of that, hmm?”

“Just keep choosing me.” Rory reached up and put her hand behind Maggie’s head and brought her down to her for a kiss. When she pulled away, she said, “I am convinced. A little reminder never hurts anyone, however.”

“Every day, if that’s what it takes. Now scooch over, I want to lay here and put my arms around you.” Smiling, Rory obliged. She moved over and Maggie sat beside her and Rory scooted down so she was in Maggie’s arms. “I love you too much to go anywhere.” Maggie held her tighter and they stayed that way for so long, they eventually fell sleep, not waking up for several hours, when they woke up enough to undress enough to the point of comfortableness, then get under the covers. It was Maggie’s turn to hold Rory until she fell asleep, hoping the girl could feel how her heart beat only for her.

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On Christmas morning, with a quick kiss to Maggie, who barely registered the contact, Rory bounded out of bed to go help her mother in the kitchen. There was no elaborate Christmas breakfast, but there was a fresh pot of coffee and John, for his part, had gotten up early, as he did every year, and brought home doughnuts from their favorite bakery. Rory would grab one and set it aside next to her favorite coffee mug, a big brown one that had been her grandmother’s, as she and her mother were getting dishes together that needed to cook the longest and go into the oven.

Maggie awoke a bit later, smiling at all the delicious smells in the house, anticipating the meal she was sure would be wonderful. Of course, it brought to mind holidays in her parent’s home, but she wasn’t as sad about that fact as she had been over thanksgiving. Now that she had been accepted by the Morgans, she didn’t feel the loss as much. They were so generous with their love and acceptance, that, though she still missed her father and regretted how things were with her mother, she was happy to have stumbled upon this new family.

Unlike Rory, Maggie didn't bound out of bed, but instead, set up gradually, stretched, then reached for her glasses on the nightstand. She had taken to wearing just a tee shirt, usually one of Rory's, and underwear to bed, which is what she wore now. She had to walk over to her suitcase and retrieve a pair of baggy blue and green checked flannel pajama pants. Not a gift from Rory but when she had found them forgotten in a drawer at home they made her smile remembering what Rory had said about the family colors, so she had packed them. She put them on now, along with a pair of Rory's big, warm socks. Once properly attired, she picked up the one gift she had brought for Rory. There were actually two gifts in the box, but the other one, the one she had talked to Mr. and Mrs. Morgan about the night before, would come as a surprise, as it was kind of hidden inside the bigger gift. She had put a lot of hope in them approving her scheme, since she had already wrapped the second gift in the box before talking to them, but she had felt strongly they would approve, and if they hadn't she would have thought of some other way to explain it. Thankfully she didn't have to.

Once downstairs, she put her gift under the tree, then surreptitiously went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Rory's back was to the door and she was peeling potatoes at the counter, while Ann was prepping the turkey. Ann noticed her first and smiled. "Good morning, sleepy head. You didn't come in to help, I hope. I mean, as our guest, you don't have to lift a finger."

Maggie laughed good-naturedly. Rory had turned around and smiled at her. "Hey, you're up."

"Yes, and I feel so lazy. Looks like everyone else has gotten up and done something useful while I've been lounging in bed." She walked over to the coffee pot which was near Rory and without a word, Rory handed her a cup from the cup tree near her. Maggie gave her a smile.

"Nonsense. We each have our part to play. Your part is to go in and keep John company while he stuffs his face with doughnuts. And try to keep him from eating more than three, that's his limit and he damn well knows it!"

Maggie laughed. "Yes ma'am, I'll keep an eye on him. Let me just get out of your hair." On the way out, Rory stopped what she was doing so she could give Maggie a quick kiss before she left the room.

"We'll be out as soon as we can. Just let me and mom get some things started in here." Rory leaned in for another kiss. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas. Now, get back to work." She lightly swatted Rory on the behind, more playful than flirtatious, and it made Ann laugh.

"I'm glad to know someone keeps her in line when I'm not around."

"Actually, she's pretty well-behaved. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to do what I normally do at home, and go put my feet up while she does the whole food making thing." Maggie left the kitchen and headed to the living room, coffee cup in hand, where she found John sitting on the couch with the TV tuned to *It's a Wonderful Life*, a jelly doughnut in hand. He smiled when he saw her come in. She sat down on the opposite end of the couch from him.

John noticed she was only carrying coffee. "You don't eat doughnuts?"

"Not very often. In fact, I never used to eat breakfast at all but someone insisted on feeding me all the time." Maggie smiled.

"Nasty habit, that eating three meals a day thing."

"Umm, quite."

"Our womenfolk don't seem to understand that we don't have time for these things. But, I suppose, we should appreciate the fact they're trying to keep us alive."

"Indeed. So, when does the gift exchange happen?"

“In a few minutes.” John eyed her knowingly. “Don’t be nervous. I’m sure she’ll say yes.”

“I hope so. I love her so much, John.”

“I know you do hon.”

“So, what is your role, if they’re doing the cooking?”

“I have the most important role of all—dad! In this role, I get to make bad jokes, eat all the cookies, carve the turkey, and keep the remote control from going missing. It’s a pretty sweet gig.”

“Those are important jobs.”

“Yes. But before you think I can’t pull my own weight, you should know that I will be cleaning the kitchen afterwards. Since I can’t be of any help otherwise, it’s the least I can do.”

“I feel the same way at home. I think I will join you, that way you will no longer have to suffer alone.”

“I’m so glad Rory brought a woman home, instead of a silly girl. You appreciate the value of work.”

“You and I both know she can’t tolerate silly girls.”

“Like Rachel. Nice girl and they have fun together but damn, she’s exhausting. I can only imagine she would have gotten on Rory’s nerves if they had dated.”

Maggie laughed. “She definitely has a lot of energy and enthusiasm.”

“That’s for sure and a very diplomatic thing to say.”

At that moment, Rory and her mother came out of the kitchen. Ann sat on the couch between her husband and Maggie and Rory took a position on the floor next to the gifts.

“Honey, there is a whole sofa over there. I could even move if you like.”

“No, that’s her usual spot. Has been since she was a kid.”

“Closer to the presents, duh!”

“Don’t worry, we put her to work. She doesn’t just get to sit there and look pretty. Remember the rules?” John asked.

With a great show of exaggerated patience, she said, “Yes dad; guests first, then mom, then you, then me. I’ve only done this how many times?”

“Are you sassing me child?” John turned to his wife. “I think your daughter is sassing me.”

“My daughter wouldn’t do that, but yours might.”

Maggie smiled into her cup, enjoying herself. She caught Rory’s eye and winked. Rory blushed a little and it warmed Maggie’s heart to know she could do that without even really trying.

“Okay, enough of the parental mumbo jumbo, let’s get this show on the road.” Rory piled up gifts in front of each family member, starting with Maggie, but the unwrapping only started once all the gifts were distributed. Maggie was delighted by the tome of Tennessee Williams’ works that the elder Morgans had gotten her, and was near tears at the rare vinyl Louis Armstrong record Rory got her.

Rory just smiled. “We can dance to that later.” Maggie practically knocked her backwards with the force of her hug, as Rory hadn’t expected it.

When John unwrapped his gift from Maggie he couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s Wilma! Maggie, this is perfect. Now my set is complete, thank you.” John carefully put the glass back in its box and eyed his only child. “You touch this glass and you’re out of the will.”

“What is it with you and those glasses, anyway?”

“It’s nostalgia from a simpler time. Plus, they’re whimsical. And I’m nothing, if not whimsical.”

“Your father’s having a second childhood dear, be respectful.”

“Sorry dad didn’t realize you had reached the midlife crisis years. My apologies.”

“Thank you. Aren’t you going to open your gifts?”

“Sorry, I was enjoying watching everyone else.” The first gift she unwrapped was from her parents; she was purposely saving Maggie’s gift for last. Her parents gave her books, which were always a sure bet, as well as a new laptop. Even though she’d had her current laptop since coming to college and it still worked, she didn’t technically need a new one, but it was kind of heavy and the battery no longer held more than an hour’s worth of charge. She hadn’t wanted to ask for one; however, since she could still do what she needed with it, she just had to always sit next to an outlet. She greatly appreciated the gift, however.

Then came the large, flat box Maggie had placed under the tree that morning. Maggie watched in eager anticipation as Rory undid the blue ribbon and carefully pulled back the tape from the silver paper. When Rory pulled the lid off the box she sat in stunned silence for a moment. Then, “Oh my god.” She held the item aloft to reveal a vintage leather biker’s jacket, replete with all the zippers. Immediately, she put it to her nose to smell the leather then she hugged it to her chest like a teddy bear and looked at Maggie with such delight.

“You like it?” Rory said nothing, just shook her head yes. “Well, try it on.”

“Okay.” Excitedly, Rory stood up and reverently slipped the jacket on, making sure to flip her hair out so that it cascaded down her back over the collar. She loved the sound the leather made as she moved. “It’s perfect. Thank you so much.”

Maggie stood up and Rory walked toward her to give her a brief hug and a kiss. Maggie straightened the collar then took a step back, both Rory’s hands in her own. The grin on Rory’s face was so worth it. “I think it was made for you. You look so good in this. Now, you can be a proper butch.” Maggie had to restrain herself from showing Rory just how much she loved seeing her in that jacket. She had a feeling Rory knew how much she was restraining herself, however, as she gave her a wink.

“Thank you, Dr. Parks.” Maggie laughed, remembering what Rory had said before in the theatre that saying her name formally meant she was saying I love you in public.

“You’re welcome, Aurora Morgan.”

John turned to his wife. “These young people are too formal these days, I don’t understand it.”

Ann just smiled. “Hush, John.”

Ignoring her parents, Rory said to Maggie, “I can’t wait to wear this with my boots. How did you know I’ve always wanted one of these?”

Maggie shrugged. “I paid attention.” She didn’t see John smile at her words. “By the way, there’s one more thing. Check your right front pocket.” Maggie took a step back so Rory could do so.

With a confused look on her face, Rory put her hand in the pocket indicated and came out with a small box. Her eyes widened. “Is this what I think it is?”

Maggie smiled. “Probably not. Open it and see.”

With suddenly shaking fingers, Rory unwrapped the small gift and was stunned when she saw what was inside. “You’re giving me a key to your house?”

“No. I’m giving you a key to *our* house. I want you to live with me.” Maggie was suddenly nervous; as she watched several emotions play out on Rory’s face at once.

“You want me to live with you? Are you sure?”

Unable to stop herself, Maggie put her arms around Rory’s waist and smiled. “I’ve never been surer of anything before. We can do this when we go back, if you like.”

Still not joining Maggie in celebration yet, Rory said, “But, I mean, are you sure you want to do this? Bringing a student into your home? What about your job?”

“If I was still worried about that you wouldn’t be at my house as much as you already are. I really don’t care what my nosy coworkers, or even my dean, think. You and I are doing nothing wrong. I love you and I hate having to send you back to your dorm. Is this something you would want?”

Rory let a smile creep up and finally she put her arms around Maggie, clutching the key tightly in her right hand. “Yeah, this is something I would want.” Rory hugged her furiously, burying her face in Maggie’s neck. She whispered, “I love you so much.” A moment later, she pulled away with a smile and said, “So this is what you wanted to talk to them about?”

Maggie and the Morgans laughed. “I told you it was nothing to worry about.”

“I guess this means you’re going to need help moving?”

“Yeah, Dad, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I would, actually. I have something planned that day.”

“We haven’t settled on a day yet.”

“Doesn’t matter, still busy. I’m a busy man, you know? I have some important lawyering to do, I’m sure.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I won’t.”

Relieved at Rory’s acceptance, Maggie could finally relax into the camaraderie that was time with the Morgans. She loved them all so much and they all filled her heart and made up for the empty spaces left by the absence of her own parents.

...

Once the gift exchange was over, Maggie pulled Rory aside before she disappeared into the kitchen again. “You look really sexy.”

Rory grinned at the praise and pulled Maggie to her for a long kiss that made Maggie go weak in the knees. When she pulled away, she said, “Thank you, my love. So do you.”

“You’ve seen me dressed this way before.”

“Yeah, but you always look adorable in my clothes. They swim on you but you make them sexy as hell.”

It was Maggie’s turn to blush. “Well, thank you. They make me feel close to you.”

“Aren’t I close enough as it is?”

“Not always. But you will be now.”

“Yeah. You sure you want this brat under foot 24/7?”

“As I said, I’ve never been more sure.”

“Hmm. Well, there are some things you need to know, then.”

“Such as?”

“Like, sometimes, when I’m busy doing homework, I can block the world out, not really hearing much, just into my own little world.”

“I know that, dear.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Anything else I should know?”

“Well, let’s see. I don’t always put my dirty clothes in the basket, sometimes my aim is off and they end up sitting on the floor next to the basket until laundry day.”

“Yep, know that too. What else ya got?”

“Gosh, you’re making this hard.” Maggie snickered into Rory’s chest. “Oh, I know, some weekends I might go the entire weekend without showering, if it’s a weekend I don’t really go anywhere because I’m busy doing school work the entire time.”

By now Maggie was laughing. “Baby, you’re not telling me anything I don’t already know. Are you nervous; is that what this is about? Because you should know, I’m not.”

“I guess I am a little, but not because of us, because of me.” Rory looked down at the floor but she was still in Maggie’s arms and Maggie forced her to look at her by lifting her chin.

“Oh honey, why?”

“I’ve never done this before. What if I can’t adult? I feel like such a kid sometimes. I just don’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

Maggie thought her heart would break. “Oh honey, please don’t. What, you think because I’m older I always know what I’m doing? No one knows how to ‘adult’ but we do it anyway, we have no choice. And I have never been disappointed in you. I just hope you’re not disappointed in me.” That got Rory’s attention. She looked up into Maggie’s eyes, confused.

“Why would I be disappointed in you? You’re perfect.”

“See, that’s the thing, I’m not. I don’t want you to be disappointed the first time you realize I’m just as human as you are. I make mistakes. Don’t put me on a pedestal because I will fall off.”

“I suppose I know that. And, I’m not saying I don’t think you have flaws, just that, just that your flaws are only part of you but they don’t define you. I don’t care about them. I mean, I acknowledge them, but dismiss them as irrelevant. When I say perfect, I mean everything good about you fits into the open spaces of me, like a puzzle piece. It’s not about the rough edges; it’s about the picture we make when we come together. I don’t know. I don’t think I’m making sense.” Rory sighed and kissed Maggie on the forehead.

Wiping her cheeks, Maggie laughed a little. “Dammit, you’re too good at that.”

“At what?”

“At making me cry. For good reasons, my love, for good reasons.”

“I’m sorry for making you cry. I just love you and want you to never regret this.”

“Aurora Dawn, I have not regretted one single moment I’ve spent with you over these past few months, only the moments I haven’t. Now, give me one more hug and kiss and go help your mother. And I love you too.”

Rory obliged with a hug that lasted for quite a while, as she didn’t want to let go. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Oh hush, you do too. Now go on. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good. See you later.” With one final quick kiss, Rory disappeared back into the kitchen and Maggie wiped her eyes. She knew this was going to be an adventure, but she felt she was up for it. Ever since that conversation with Charles, she had thought of little else but a future with Rory. She knew she wanted her in her life, of that there was no question. But she

didn't want to be forced into making a decision she didn't feel either of them were ready for simply to save face. So their relationship went against the norm? So what? It was a good, healthy, loving relationship and that's all that should matter.

That being said, she suddenly wanted to share this news with someone. Bill and Dix came to mind first, as she knew they would be supportive. They liked Rory and they wanted to see her happy. But, it wasn't their approval she wanted. She wanted her mother to know Rory was in her life and she wanted to be a family again. When it was just her it didn't seem as important, but this was the girl, no, this was the woman who she was going to spend the rest of her life with, it was something she felt in her bones, and she wanted her mother to know. She needed her to know. Before she lost her nerve, Maggie ran upstairs to Rory's room, closed the door behind her, and retrieved her phone from the nightstand and called her mother's number.

"Hello?"

"Hello mother, it's me."

"Oh, Margaret, there you are. I called your house several times, but got no answer. Thought maybe you were at church or something." That was another thing Elizabeth Parks refused to accept: that her daughter had left the church when she was in her twenties, due, mainly to its anti-woman stance, and of course, the gay thing. But as with so many aspects of her daughter's life she didn't approve of or didn't understand, she pretended it wasn't true.

"No mother, I'm not at home. I'm staying with my girlfriend's parents for the holiday."

"I see. I got the sweater, thank you. It'll come in handy. Did you get my gift?"

"Yes mother, I did, thank you. It was very lovely." Her mother had sent her an expensive designer handbag that she would never use. It was more her mother's style and not something Maggie had ever had a desire to own. Maggie wasn't sure if her mother just didn't know her well enough to know that about her or if she was purposefully trying to turn her into her clone and was constantly disappointed when her daughter proved to be something apart from herself. Usually, when she received unwanted gifts, especially expensive ones, she returned them and bought something she liked, or re-gifted them to someone who would appreciate them. This year, torn between giving the bag to Rachel or Ann, she had chosen Rachel, as she didn't want to appear as if she was just trying to get on Ann's good side by giving her expensive gifts. She knew Rachel would appreciate it and she had. First time Maggie had ever seen the girl speechless.

"Well, when I saw it, I just thought of you, as you are always so stylish."

"Thank you, mother." On a whim, Maggie asked, "Mother, would you mind a visit after Christmas? There's someone I would like you to meet. She's very important to me. I want you to know her."

"When, dear? I was thinking of doing some traveling. Now that I'm all alone and have nothing but time, was thinking about seeing the world some."

"That sounds wonderful, mother. Was thinking maybe next week before I have to go back to work. Would that be alright?"

"I don't think so dear, I think I will be on a cruise ship to the Bahamas then. I really have a full, exciting adventure planned. Maybe another time."

"But mom, I won't have more time until summer. I really want you to meet her, her name is Rory and, and she's wonderful."

"Dear, why do you do this? Insist I meet these women who are only transitory? When you have finally stopped all this foolishness and are ready to settle down like a grown up and get

married, then I will meet that man, until then, I just don't see why I should be subjected to your flights of fancy. It's just a waste of time."

"Mother, this is not some flight of fancy or a waste of time. I'm gay; there will never be a man in my life. Why do you refuse to understand this? I just wanted to call and tell you about this wonderful person in my life, to share her with you, thinking you would care what's going on in my life, but I see I was wrong about that. Mother, I'm never going to be who you want me to be. So stop it, just stop it!" Angrily, Maggie ended the call and threw her phone across the bed, then buried her face in her hands and cried. What had she been thinking? She had let the good feelings generated by Rory's love and the prospects for the future overwhelm her into thinking that her mother would want to share in her joy, but all she cared about was that Maggie wasn't living up to what she wanted. She missed her father more than ever, as she knew he would have wanted to know all about Rory. He would have shared his love of music with her and played his records for her. Her age may have concerned him. Her having initially been Maggie's student may have disappointed him, but he would have accepted her as a permanent fixture in Maggie's life and treated her as such. "He would have loved me for me," she thought, as she tried but failed to stop the tears that fell.

More than anything, she wanted Rory, but that would mean walking through the house, letting the Morgans see the state she was in and feeling their concern for her wash over her. It would have made her feel loved, but also, exposed. She just couldn't bare it, not yet. So, she lay back on Rory's pillows and curled into a ball and cried herself out. She kept telling herself that she should have known better, she should have known better.

By the time the tears had settled into just wetness on her cheeks, the door opened and Rory walked in with a smile on her face at first. "There you are." When she saw the state Maggie was in, she went to her side and sat down next to her on the bed and bent down to kiss her on the cheek. "Baby, what's wrong? What happened?"

Maggie sniffed and wiped the last of her tears off her cheeks and sat up and put her arms around Rory's neck. Rory held her close. "I called my mother."

"Oh honey." Maggie relaxed into the strength that Rory offered and let herself be comforted. "It's okay. You're with your real family, people who really love you." Rory kissed Maggie on top of her head and smoothed her hair back, as it was all flyaway after her sojourn on the bed.

Maggie pulled back a little but didn't leave Rory's embrace. "I know. And there's nowhere else I want to be. I just wanted her to know you. I love you and wanted to share that with her. I thought...I thought...I thought it would be different this time, I don't know why."

"Well, maybe I don't want to know her, did you ever think of that?"

"What?"

"Well, think about it. Why would I want to know someone who does this to you? Someone who puts you through hell like this? Doesn't think about your feelings? If I met her I might cuss her out, mother or no mother. I don't give a shit whether she likes me or not, but you're her own daughter, not someone to pass judgement on or exclude simply because you're not who she thinks you should be. I'm not the one who has you on a pedestal, she is. I see and love you for who you are because when you are who you want to be, that's who I love. She can go to hell and kiss my ass on the way by. We don't need her approval. I don't want her approval. It doesn't affect us."

This time, when Maggie shook, it was with laughter and there were more tears but they were different than before. "Oh honey, thank you. You said exactly what I needed to hear. I



shouldn't have to be reminded of that, but I'm glad you're here to do so. Thank you for loving me enough to cuss out my mother," she said with a chuckle.

"Anytime. I'll cut a ho for making you cry, I don't care who she is. No body hurts my Maggie and lives to tell about it." Rory said it all with a straight face and it made Maggie laugh out loud.

"Oh my god. A ho, really? Did you just call my mother a ho?"

"Okay, maybe that was a bit harsh."

"Just a bit."

"Maybe tight assed, high society, Bostonian matron bitch would be better?" Rory cocked an eyebrow as if she was asking Maggie's opinion.

"Well, it would certainly be more descriptive, if a bit long-winded."

"Okay, I'll just shorten it to bitch then." Maggie laughed again and Rory kissed her on the lips very softly and hugged her again. With her arms around her, she said, "You don't need anyone's approval for existing or for loving."

Maggie clung to her. "I know." She sniffed again. "Okay, I suppose I should pull myself together so that I can get back to enjoying this holiday. Let's put this behind us. I'm anxious to taste that food, it smells delicious."

"And it is. You must be starving, you didn't eat breakfast."

"Well, that's because my personal chef has been too busy to make me eat."

"I'm so sorry I have been remiss in my duties. Come downstairs and maybe I can sneak you something from the kitchen. It's going to be a couple more hours before food's ready."

Maggie stood up from the bed but kept ahold of Rory's hand. "Should I change? I mean, I am the only one still in my pajamas?"

"You can do whatever makes you comfortable."

"Whatever makes me comfortable, you say?" Maggie gave her a flirtatious look and Rory let go of Maggie's hand and backed towards the door.

"Oh no, not now, I have to get back downstairs. My mother will send a search party looking for me if I'm not back soon. I can't be distracted like this." Rory looked left and right as if she was looking for an escape route or someone to help her. In truth, she loved it that she and Maggie could play this way.

"Fine, go my dear. I will find you later, when you least expect it." Maggie grinned. Just as Rory was leaving she called out to her. "Aurora?"

Rory poked her head back in with a small smile. "Yes, Maggie?"

"Thank you." For an answer, Rory gave her her best smile then blew her a kiss before she shut the door behind her. Once Rory was gone, Maggie sighed and hugged her arms to herself. "So this is what unconditional love feels like?" she thought to herself, as she went to her suitcase to find more suitable clothes to change into.

...

Later that night, after a delicious meal had been had, then cleaned up by Maggie and John, and the family had contentedly sat around watching Christmas movies they'd all seen several times over and enjoyed the cookies Rory had made, it was finally time to call it a night. Maggie hadn't known a Christmas that happy since her father had been alive. She had found

herself smiling at the oddest moments throughout the evening. The banter in the house never wavered but it was always full of love and was never hurtful. The elder Morgans showed just as much affection to each other as she and Rory did and it was a wonderful thing to see. They were obviously still in love and Maggie could easily see how their daughter could be so full of love herself, as they gave freely of it themselves. Everything just felt so natural, even more so than it had at Thanksgiving. She felt a permanent part of the family, something she had never felt with Maxine's family, as they were just as dysfunctional as hers but in a different way. There never had been family get-togethers during the holidays, as they all barely spoke to each other, so she had never had the chance to get to know them or become one of them.

Now, climbing the stairs to Rory's childhood bedroom felt like the most natural thing in the world and something she had done for years. They had barely closed the door behind them, when Maggie surprised Rory by throwing her arms around her neck and giving her a big, passionate kiss. Rory quickly recovered enough to put her arms around her and return the kiss. When Maggie came up for air, they didn't break the embrace. "What was that for, my love?"

"Since when do I need a reason to show you how much I love you?"

"Never. But it surprised me is all."

"I like surprising you. Keeps you on your toes."

"I don't even know if that's possible in my boots. Plus, I'm not exactly graceful."

Maggie snickered at the image of Rory standing on her tip toes in her boots. "And it's not like you need to be any taller."

"True. And by the way, you don't need to kiss me for me to know you love me. I can see that when you look at me. I see that the way you give me little touches. I see that when you wear my clothes. I see that when you're always here for me."

Maggie caressed Rory's face. "I'm glad. I'm glad you can tell."

"Matter of fact, I think I knew you loved me before you did."

"Really? Why do you say that?"

"I can't tell you that, my little secret."

"I see. Fine, keep your secret. Then I will keep my last gift to you a secret." Grinning, Maggie let go of Rory, turned her back and began to pull her shirt off over her head pointedly ignoring Rory.

"You have a last gift for me?"

"Mhmm. But, maybe not, maybe I'll just give it to you another time. Or not at all." Maggie threw over her shoulder with a shrug.

Rory growled. "Woman, you're going to be the death of me." Maggie said nothing, just laughed evilly. Humorously incensed, Rory quickly grabbed Maggie around the waist as she was bending over their suitcase and pulled her down to the floor in a spectacular rolling tackle that would have impressed on any field of play. Maggie shrieked, in both surprise and delight. Rory wrestled around until she was sitting astride a giggling Maggie, holding her hands above her head and declaring, "Woman, you have brought this on yourself!" Rory commenced to tickling and Maggie could barely breathe. Rory had never attacked her like this before, so she had no idea just how ticklish Maggie was.

"Okay, okay, stop, can't breathe."

Rory immediately stopped and rolled off of her and pulled Maggie to her in a more comfortable embrace. "You okay?"

Catching her breath, she said, "Yes."

“Good. Now, you going to tell me what you have for me or do I have to do that again, only this time strip you naked in the process?”

“Aurora Morgan, you will behave in your parents’ house!”

Rory snickered. “Yeah, like I did last time.”

Maggie lightly smacked her chest. “No more of that, I’m trying to be a good girl here.”

With a growl to her voice, she said, “You’re always a good girl.” Then she made to nibble on Maggie’s ear but Maggie held her off.

“Do you want your last gift or not?”

“Okay. I’ll be good.”

“I doubt that.”

“Hey, I am perfectly capable!”

“Uh huh.”

“See, I won’t even touch you.” Rory removed her arm from around Maggie’s waist and rested it on her own leg.

“Now, I didn’t say you have to go that far.” Maggie reached for Rory’s arm and put it back on her waist. “Okay, now then, for your final present...your final present isn’t exactly something I can give you.”

“Oh?”

“No. It’s someplace I want to take you.”

“You have my attention.”

“Good. How would you like to spend New Year’s Eve in Chicago and watch fireworks off Navy Pier?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No my love, I’m not. Would you like that?”

“Gee, let me think here: spend a romantic New Year’s Eve in my favorite city with the woman I love? No, that doesn’t sound awesome at all!” Rory gave Maggie a hard kiss on the lips and Maggie couldn’t stop laughing at Rory’s enthusiasm.

“I’m glad it appeals to you. Thought we’d spend a couple days here then drive into the city. I had no idea it was your favorite place.”

“Oh, since I was a kid. I don’t care how many times I’ve been, it will never get old. And to be able to share that with you. Oh honey, this is perfect. Then, afterwards we can go home and really start our lives together.”

“Yes, yes we can.”

...

Their hotel was right in the heart of downtown, just a few minutes’ walk from all the main attractions. Rory had only stayed at hotels with her parents before, as she had never had reason to by herself and obviously never with a girlfriend. They were on the top floor and had a great view of the city. She threw her bags on the floor by the bed, and then lay back, propping herself up on her elbows, making sure to keep her wet snow-covered boots on the floor.

“I think I could get use to this.”

Maggie laughed as she sat her bag down more gently than Rory had, then went to the bed and stood in front of Rory's legs. Rory set up and put her arms around Maggie's waist. "So, what do you want to do first?"

"This." Maggie put her arms around Rory's neck and kissed her slowly and tenderly. Rory responded by pulling her closer. Just as she felt Rory start to pull her back towards the bed, she gently put her hands on Rory's shoulders and pulled back. "Not now, my love. I just meant I wanted to kiss you for a bit before we go find food. There will be plenty of time for that later, I promise."

With exaggerated impatience, Rory sighed and let go. "Fine. If that's what you'd rather do."

"For now, love, only for now." Maggie lightly caressed Rory's cheek, then kissed her on the forehead before backing away, lest they start again.

They spent the next couple of days leading up to New Year's Eve exploring the city together. They went to very few touristy places, as Rory preferred all the little bookstores that were packed floor to ceiling with books, her favorite places being those that seemed to have no rhyme or reason to how the books were arranged. The masking tape labels attached to some of the shelves were either faded and worn, covered up with books, or completely ignored. They were even able to catch some theatre. But they ignored the main theatre district of State Street, and chose instead one of the well-known gay theatre's in town and watched a play by an unknown playwright.

They also made it to the 103<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Willis Tower, and Rory made sure to kiss her there, while standing inside one of the glass boxes hanging off the side of the building that overlooked Wacker Drive and the river. Rory wasn't sure what was more exhilarating: where they were and how frightening it was, or the touch of Maggie's soft lips on her own. If truth be known, Rory had felt free to kiss Maggie anywhere in Chicago, as she knew there were no prying eyes from campus anywhere near them. And Chicago and its people seemed oblivious to them, as they were just yet another pair of lovers walking down its streets, hand in hand or arm in arm, delighting in showing each other special places and special finds.

On New Year's Eve, Maggie thought there should be a small change in their plans. "Honey, how would you feel about watching the fireworks from a different location? I was just thinking about how packed the pier is going to be. If you still want to go, I'm fine with that, I just thought you might want to avoid the crowd." They were having dinner at some hole in the wall restaurant they had just stumbled upon. The food was wonderful, which was no surprise, as Maggie had found that the best food in Chicago usually came from the little places that most people wouldn't look twice at.

"You make a great point. I've never been one for wall to wall people. Besides, I think I see the little spark of deviousness in your eyes, so, I am putty in your hands. Do with me as you will." Rory grinned at her across the table.

"Hmm...now you make me want to think of other possibilities."

"Well, there are other ways to bring the New Year in with a bang."

"Yes, well, don't distract me. I was thinking we could watch the fireworks from a different, but just as special, location. Just make sure you dress warm."

"Now I'm intrigued. As I said—putty."

“Okay then. After we finish here, we’ll go back to the hotel and put more layers on. And before you say anything, that’s *all* we’re going to do.” Rory said nothing, only chuckled at how well Maggie knew her.

Once fortified with another couple of layers each, they ventured back out with Maggie leading the way down Michigan Avenue. All Rory knew was that they were going south, towards the river. When they passed the river she wondered if they were going to Millennium Park. They continued past the park, however, but, despite her piqued curiosity, Rory didn’t ask any questions. She was content to just walk the moonlit Mile while holding Maggie’s gloved hand in her own. She enjoyed looking at all the old buildings along the way, she always had. The buildings told the story of the city, each one unique to its time and the older ones seemed to never change as the years passed. Some people thought Paris was the most romantic city in the world, but for Rory, it had always been Chicago.

While they made their way down One Mag Mile, one of the many nicknames for Michigan Avenue, Rory couldn’t help but marvel at the last few months. Three months ago while mooning in class over her favorite teacher; she never would have dreamed that they would now be walking as lovers in one of her favorite places. She surely didn’t take it for granted that she had the privilege of Maggie’s love. That’s why she was content to walk beside her and let herself be led wherever it was that Maggie wanted to take her. As long as she was by Maggie’s side, she really didn’t care where they went.

They walked past the vigilant lions in front of The Art Institute, who were dressed for the season with large wreaths around their necks, each bearing a big red bow. They looked quite festive and Rory felt sorry for them. Here, they spent the rest of the year trying to look like the protectors of art and knowledge that lay beyond, and yet, every Christmas season they had to be adorned with these infernal wreaths, making them look as playful as kittens. Once past the museum, Maggie steered Rory left onto Jackson Street. She thought she knew where they were going now and once they turned onto S. Columbus Drive she was sure of it: they were headed for Buckingham Fountain.

“Ah ha! I know your plan now. You’re taking me to the fountain.”

“Yep. Have you ever watched the fireworks from there?”

“Woman, I have not. As a matter of fact, I have never been in Chicago for New Year’s before. So wherever we watch them will be a new experience for me.”

“Ah, good. I like that we can share this.”

“Me too.” As they entered the courtyard area surrounding the fountain, they saw a few other people but probably no more than thirty, milling around. Most of them were standing over fire barrels that the parks district had set up to help guard against the cold, as well as to provide additional lighting. But, even with the few festive lights that were put up especially for the season, it was not so well lit that seeing the fireworks off the lake to the east would be difficult. On the southeast corner of the fountain, the parks district had set up a medical tent that with the use of generators was kept warm so that if participants were feeling too cold they could go in and take a break to warm up. They also provided free cocoa, which Rory noticed many people were using just to keep their hands warm.

It was only ten minutes to midnight when they arrived, so they ignored the cocoa and the fire barrels and found a place that was all theirs on the east side of the fountain, directly facing the lake. Despite all her layers and the walk, however, Maggie was freezing. Noticing this, Rory came up behind her and wrapped her arms around her and held her close. Maggie leaned back against her and sighed. “Any better?”

“Mmm, much. And thank you for being so tall, you make an excellent wind break, my love.”

“It’s what I’m here for.”

“And this is why, when you’re my height, you date someone your height.”

“So, your choice of me is completely utilitarian then?”

“Mostly, yes. Young, tall, sexy women have many uses.”

“And don’t forget the reaching things on high shelves bit. That’s really high on the list of things tall people can do for short people. It’s on page one of the manual.”

“Is it? I haven’t seen this manual.”

“You wouldn’t, they only give it to tall people.”

“I see.”

All of a sudden, from speakers Rory and Maggie hadn’t noticed when they first arrived, came a voice counting. “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five,” Rory tightened her grip around Maggie and Maggie hugged Rory back and leaned in to her, “four, three, two one...Happy New Year!” As soon as the voice proclaimed the New Year, the fireworks exploded in a cascade of color over Lake Michigan. Rory and Maggie missed the first set of fireworks, as they were busy kissing in the New Year, but they quickly turned around to watch the show and listen to the music that came over the speakers that was perfectly synchronized with the display. They watched, mesmerized, along with the others who had braved the cold to watch the show from the historic fountain. No matter how many times Rory had seen fireworks in her lifetime, nothing compared to seeing the explosive palette that lit up the Chicago sky that night. Not normally a religious person, she couldn’t help but feel blessed to be where she was at that moment. There was just something about fireworks that made one feel proud and insignificant and awestruck, all at the same time. She wasn’t sure why that was. Before the display ended, she bent down, pulled back the hood of Maggie’s jacket so that she could whisper in her ear.

“I love you, Maggie Parks.”

Maggie turned around in her arms and took her gloves off so that she could feel Rory’s face without the interference of the leather barrier. “I love you too, Aurora Morgan. Thank you for loving me.”

“It has been my pleasure. You want to hear my New Year’s resolution?”

“Yes.” Maggie smiled up at her, still caressing her cheek.

“I vow to love you more and more every day and to make sure you know it.”

Maggie chuckled. “That shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Exactly. I wanted to make one I knew I could keep. What about yours?”

“Mine? I vow to never take this love for granted and appreciate it and maintain it.”

“Yours was so much better than mine.”

“No, just the same thing, said differently.” As the fireworks display built to its crescendo behind them, Maggie and Rory held each other and kissed in the moonlight. When the show was over, the accompanying applause and whistles could have just as easily been for them and it made them both laugh.

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