

ROYALS OF FORSYTH



DUKES

# SAINT NICK



ANGEL LAWSON  
SAMANTHA RUE

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ROYALS OF FORSYTH U SHORT STORY

ANGEL LAWSON

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*OceanofPDF.com*

## CONTENTS

Foreword

Chapter 1

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## FOREWORD

Happy Holidays Friends!

We wanted to write a little something for you all after having such an amazing year. You guys showed up for Lords in a way we didn't even know was possible. The edits, the tweets, the TikTok videos, the Bookstagram posts... it's all love and we love it & you!

We decided to give you a taste of what's to come. Pretty Nick...he's definitely not the St. Nick you want coming down your chimney on a cold winter's night... or is he?

This is a pre-Dukes story, fit into Lords of Mercy timeline. All warnings apply although it is a Christmas story. It's not the most evil thing we've ever written, but then again, we may not be the best judge on what's naughty or nice.

Angel & Sam

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LAVINIA

Living in a shitty, run-down, '60s era motel has its little quirks. The walls are as thin as a paper bag. The bed is basically five handfuls of fiberglass padding stuffed into a torture device of uneven springs. The air conditioner only works for the first ten minutes after turning it on, and then it takes three hours for it to generate anything approaching non-tropical air. Now that it's cold, the heat is even less predictable.

The worst part is the shower, though.

There's one miniscule window on weekdays, between three and four in the morning, where the possibility of getting water just north of lukewarm is very nearly guaranteed. I stopped adhering to anything resembling a traditional circadian rhythm the second I was shoved into this dump, so I make it a point to be awake at this time every night. It's the quietest time of day here, all the whores having gotten their payment and either fucked off to their hidey holes or nested down into the rooms. The fights taper off around two, and the junkies are all passed out by now.

It's with this rare feeling of calm that I step into the shower.

I make a note of my shower gel running low as I bang the lid-side against my palm a few times. Back at home, I'd listen to music in the



shower. Something fast and hard and worth dancing to. This time of year, I'd pull out the fun, festive stuff. Old school carols and obscure singles. They took my phone, and my playlists, when they tossed me in here. I don't even bother humming. I just run the sudsy washcloth over my hips—bony, I've lost too much weight in this hellhole—and go through the motions of washing the stench of this place from my skin.

There's zero fucking joy here. I do what I can, but it's mostly due to boredom that I tore half the pages from the bible in the bedside drawer and, with some creative folding and tenacious fingernails, ripped them into various symmetrical snowflake shapes. I've already read the thing from front back three times, anyway. I spent most of my day stringing the snowflakes across the room. My little indulgence in the holiday spirit.

It's Christmas Eve, after all.

I wash my hair mechanically, the shitty two-in-one shampoo-conditioner combo making it stringy and dry like straw. I guess I used to think my Christmases were shitty. The only gifts my father ever graced me with were statements showing the shiny new total of my trust fund. But that was never a gift. It was half bribe, half threat, and complete manipulation. He always did enjoy having it to hold over me, even though I couldn't possibly care less.

Of course, those were the days of high-end conditioners, shower dancing, and basic fucking freedom, so what the hell did I know?

The water starts turning cold halfway through rinsing my hair, which I'm willing to accept as a Christmas present from the universe. Usually, the hot water runs out before I can even finish lathering.

I step out with a shiver, briskly running the threadbare, motel-branded towel over my arms and chest. I give my hair a tight wring and wind the towel around my body, sprinting my way toward the blankets on the bed.

Two feet off the tile, I skid to a stop.

Pretty Nick is perched on the foot of the bed, elbows resting on his knees, gloved hands deftly unloading a clip from a black pistol.

My blood turns to ice, and it's only half because of the chill against my damp skin.

There's a long, dark spatter of blood across his white t-shirt.

He doesn't look up at me, even though I see his blue eyes give my feet a brief glance. Instead, he tucks the clip into his pocket and empties the chamber, catching the casing in his palm.

I take a step back. "What are you doing here?" The question comes out both hard and soft—indignant and apprehensive. I haven't seen him in five days, and the last visit had been hurried and curt. A plastic grocery store bag with tampons, crappy microwave meals, and a Kit-Kat bar thrown carelessly into my lap before he swept back through the door, locking it behind him.

Now, his eyes are fixed to the wall as he tucks the gun into a black backpack at his feet. The shitty TV in the corner that only gets two channels has been playing Carol of the Bells on a loop since midnight, which isn't the worst Christmas song by any metric, but still is like having an ice pick stabbed into my temple.

"Boss man sent me here," is his low, bland reply. "Need a place to lie low until morning."

I tighten the grip on my towel, heartbeat ratcheting up. "Why?" When he just looks up at me, face emotionless, I swallow. "Did you kill someone?"

He answers without reservation. "Yes."

My mouth scrunches into a tight purse as I process this, glancing at his hands as he slowly shucks his gloves. I think I mean to ask him why, but what comes out is, "Did they deserve it?"

Something about the question makes a coldness settle over his features, and when his blue eyes meet mine, they're sharp enough to pierce. "What

the fuck do you know about what's deserved or not?" He pushes to his feet, and it doesn't matter that I lift my chin defiantly.

I still stumble back two steps at his approach.

"Maybe he did, maybe he didn't," he says, voice hard as he bears down on me. "Doesn't matter to me. I take care of me and mine, and if that means burying a bullet into some junkie's skull, then that's what I do."

"Merry Christmas, right?"

He grins, and without warning, his hand shoots out to grab my towel, yanking it.

I struggle against his grip, yanking it back with a panicked motion. "You can't touch me," I insist, voice pitched high and alarmed. "I belong to Daniel and the Kings!"

His jaw goes tight, eyes narrowing. "They never said I couldn't look." He gives the towel an aggressive tug that sends me stumbling toward him. The thought of crashing into his chest, against that still-wet blood, is the only reason I let it go. I stiffen at the air against my bare skin. He easily rips the towel from my hands, dropping it to the floor before his cold gaze descends upon my naked body.

I rigidly cross my arms over my chest. Not that it's hiding much. There's a camera in the corner, but he doesn't even spare it a glance. He just maps my body with his eyes, resting a wide palm on the wall over my shoulder like he's getting real comfortable about it.

His tongue peeks out to wet his lower lip. "Such a waste," he mutters, gaze zeroing in on the swell of my tits. "Keeping you all hidden away like this. Tucked away like a doll in a case." His other hand reaches out, but I don't flinch as it pauses, hovering a hairsbreadth from the skin of my hip. His eyes flick up to mine, so full of intensity that it sends a shiver up my spine. "If you were mine, I'd be raw dogging your pussy every night."

I clench my teeth as his hand moves, an invisible caress up my ribs. "Thank the fuck I'm not yours," I remind him. "I'd have to slit my wrists."



So quiet that I'm not even sure he intends for me to hear, Nick mutters, "You could be."

Well, that's a terrifying thought.

The harsh, grating sound of his phone shatters the silence. I jump at the intrusion, erasing the distance between my side and his calloused fingertips.

"That's Daddy Payne calling," Nick says, eyes dropping to where his fingers rest on my skin. "He's watching on the camera. You should know that about him, little bird." His face remains impassive, unreadable. "He's been watching you nonstop these days. He barely even goes home anymore. What do you think that means?"

My throat jumps with a swallow. "Probably that he's a sick fuck."

Nick's silent laugh collides with my chin in a warm puff of beer-scented breath. "You have no idea." He tilts his head and watches me, inspecting me even as his phone continues its loud, jarring chime. "The things he wants people to do to you? It'd make you want to turn those bed sheets into a noose."

But as he reads me, I struggle to read him. That's the thing about Nick. He's got two settings—unbearably cocky and unreadable mask—and sometimes one stands in for the other. It doesn't really matter. I never forget what he is. The Kings are only as strong as their foot soldiers. The people they pay to take out the trash and beat loyalty into others. Nick Bruin is a trigger finger with the barest glimmer of sapience.

So when the phone stops ringing, the last thing I'm expecting him to do is turn his back to the camera and say, "We can run. I've got a car outside." His gaze moves back and forth between mine. The lock of hair falling in his eyes makes him look, for a moment, haggard and harried. "Fuck Daniel. Fuck the Kings. You don't want to belong to them."

Setting my jaw, I ask, "You think I want to belong to you?"

“Why not?” I’d expect the cockiness here, but that’s not what I see. I get the hot edge of his anger instead, the flare of his nose, the tick of his jaw. “I’d treat you good.”

“Says the murderer who wants to fuck me raw.” I scoff, pulling my hip away from his touch. But it’d be a lie to say I don’t think about it, and I can tell from the spark in his eyes that he realizes I’m turning it over.

I’d throw on my clothes and leave everything else behind. We’d fly down the stairs and jump into his car. He’d load his gun, peel out with his foot on the gas, and race us down the Avenue toward whatever new, fickle freedom awaits. I’d have to let him fuck me, but he’s one person. I could get away from him. He has to sleep. Nick wouldn’t be able to watch me all the time. Plus, a little sex for my freedom? Doesn’t sound too bad. Fuck it, maybe Nick’s a decent guy. He hurts people, but he’s never hurt me. Even now, standing in front of him naked and defenseless, knowing that he wants it, he wouldn’t make a move. If he wants me, he can be manipulated.

I exhale, all the hope bleeding from my lungs. Running isn’t an option. Not yet. I still have things to do in Forsyth. Scores to settle. “We wouldn’t get past county lines before they found us, and you know it.”

“We would,” he says, all looming and dark-eyed. “All it’d take is a little information.” Leaning closer, the tattoo on his temple fills my vision when he whispers, “Just tell me where Leticia is.”

I freeze, lungs aching with an aborted breath. “What?”

But it’s drowned out by his phone going off again, the shrill tone mingling with the Christmas music from the TV.

“It’s all he wants,” Nick says, voice urgent. “If we give him Leticia—fuck, even if it’s just her body—we can—” he jumps back when he spots my knee coming toward his groin. He wrestles me into the wall, his unyielding body pinning me against it. “Ah, little bird. I know you like shit rough, but no hurting the goods.” His breath is warm on my ear. “One day, that pussy is going to be mine.”

His body is taut with hard muscles. I have no problem fighting back, but I'm well aware of how dangerous he is. There's a line and I can't cross it. Not until I'm ready. Standing here naked and cold isn't ready.

"Are you done?" he asks.

I look away, jaw locking. "Yeah." I'm more pissed at myself than him, anyway. Nick belongs to the Kings almost as much as I do. Fucking stupid to think he gives a damn about taking me away. He just wants some juicy intel to take back to his bosses.

"Good." He holds onto me one last moment, then releases me. "No need for a Christmas massacre." Taking his phone from his pocket, he slides his thumb across the screen, answering, "Hey boss." He idly tosses me my towel as his gaze flicks to the camera. "Yeah, we're playing nice. Just a little tussle. No big." He listens and watches me rewrap the towel around my body, an involuntary shiver making my shoulders tremble. Suddenly, his eyebrow raises, a small, dark grin twisting his mouth. "Well, I appreciate that. Thank you. And Merry Christmas to you, too. Give Posey my best."

Whatever Daniel says to him, he doesn't share. He just sets his phone on top of the television and begins pulling off his blood-stained shirt. It's hard not to look at him, his warm skin covered in ink and hard muscles. He looks even more dangerous like this. Raw strength. I realize exactly how stupid it's been for me to fight him. He could take me out easily if he wanted to, like squashing a bug.

If Daniel would let him.

He raises his chin, dark eyes staring down his nose at me. "Like what you see, little bird?"

"No." I drag my eyes away, but not before I notice the cut on his side. The gash is edged in angry, singed skin. Not all of the blood is from the victim. I nod to the obvious bullet graze. "He got you before you killed him."

He touches it gently, shrugging. "It's nothing. Just a scratch."

I snort. “Just a scratch? A couple inches to the left and that bullet would have torn your gut up. You got lucky.” He doesn’t look surprised that I recognize the wound. I’ve seen the injured soldiers come through my father’s door, most late at night, all needing the type of care that would provoke too many questions from an actual hospital. Leticia and I learned to administer first-aid from an early age, which was handy for me whenever my father got a little too punchy. Sighing in resignation, I say, “I’d at least clean it with soap and water,” and start looking for a shirt in the pile of clothes on the chair.

“Would you now?” His eyes narrow at the T-shirt in my hand. “Did someone tell you to get dressed?”

I whip around to glare at him. “It’s fucking freezing in here.”

Holding my gaze, he flicks the button on his jeans and instantly drops them.

He’s not wearing underwear.

And his dick is hard.

I hide my apprehension by arching an unimpressed eyebrow at it. “Like I said. It’s cold. I won’t hold it against you.”

“You can join me in the shower,” he replies, spreading his arms, perfectly comfortable showing off his body. “We can warm each other up.”

I pointedly ignore the innuendo. “Trust me, nothing about a shower in this place is going to be warm.”

I’m half hoping it puts him off the idea, but instead, he bends to pull something familiar from his backpack. Zip-ties.

Groaning, I gesture to the strips of plastic. “Seriously? I’m already locked in here!” It’s no surprise when he catches my wrist, easily manhandling me to bind my hands behind my back—not that I bother fighting. Nick’s been assigned to me for a reason. He’s pretty, but he isn’t dumb.

I don’t expect him to drag me into the bathroom with him, though.

He notices how rigid I've gone. We're both naked. His dick is standing at attention. The camera doesn't see in here. Nick lets out a low laugh. "Relax. Can't have you roaming about unchecked when my gun's so close, can I?"

Fair point.

He turns on the shower, using his hand to test the temperature. I can tell from his subtle flinch that it's just as cold as I knew it'd be, but he doesn't seem to care. He grabs his phone and flips through the screen, making my shoulders curl protectively inward. I wouldn't put it past him to record me in this humiliating position.

Instead, a blast of music comes from the speakers.

Christmas music.

"You've got the right idea," he says, stepping beneath the weak spray of water. "Me and you are living the South Side life, little bird. The Lords aren't even throwing a party this year. Too paranoid. Shitty music and depressing bible snowflakes is all we get." Beneath the derision and pointed attempt to make us seem on the same level, I think I detect a trace of wistful melancholy. Briefly, I wonder what his family is doing this time of year. I doubt post-murder motel hide-outs are a Bruin tradition.

Leaving the curtain open, he ducks under the showerhead and lets the water lazily roll down his body, taking the blood and grime with it. Nick showers like I always imagined a typical guy might. Quick, efficient, unconcerned about being watched. Picking up the shower gel, he mutters a soft curse when he realizes it's empty.

"Oh yeah, by the way," I say, shivering on the toilet seat, "I need new soap."

He tears off the cap and runs the water inside, shaking it. When he turns it upside down it gushes out, watered-down but still soapy. "Guess rich girls like you never had to economize."

I want to tell him that he knows precious fuck-all about what growing up in my house was like, but I swallow it back. Nick doesn't need to know more about me than he already does. He lathers up his body, taking care to clean the fresh wound, and then dips his hand between his legs to idly stroke his cock as the water washes the suds away.

"You want to know what Daniel said on the phone?" He turns off the water with a sharp squeak, shoulder muscles flexing.

I avert my eyes, trying not to look at his growing erection. He's obviously impervious to the cold. "Not really."

"He said I've been a valuable member of the team this year. Helped him out of multiple jams. Called me reliable." Laughing quietly, he adds, "More reliable than his son, seeing that Killer's too occupied being all pussy whipped over his Lady to be a proper bullet gopher."

I shift uncomfortably on the toilet seat, eying the door. "Good for you."

"And for my hard work, I've earned a Christmas bonus."

"Oh, let me guess. A new gun? Another kidnapping victim? Maybe a few hookers from his brothel?" I roll my eyes.

He steps out of the shower, hand still gliding up and down his cock. "He told me I could do whatever I wanted to you. Well, so long as I keep my hands to myself." For emphasis, he toys with the tip of his cock, jerking his chin at me in an authoritative nod. "Show me your tits."

With my arms pinned behind me, I'd managed to keep the towel secure under my armpits. If Nick has learned anything about me by now, it's that I'm not doing his shit-work for him. He steps toward me, hand still running along this length, and easily snatches the towel off. Frigid air hits my already shivering body, but the heat in his eyes as he inspects me is almost enough to burn. He rakes his bottom lip through his teeth, nodding approvingly. "Don't even need to touch you to get nipples hard."

Trying to hide my rising alarm, I bite out, "Because it's cold, you fucking idiot. It has nothing to do with you. You're disgusting."



He shrugs, not denying it. The glint in his eye makes my pulse quicken. Nick has been circling me for months, but until tonight, I've held my own. The verbal jabs and occasional scuffle have been the closest things I've had to stimulation since my father handed me over. Now, seeing his thick, stiff cock in my periphery, I feel a dormant wrongness waking inside of me. I won't deny he's good looking. Nick has the body of a god, the face of a devil, and all the raw power to back it up. But everything about him repulses me—especially his devotion to a King. Daniel Payne, to be specific.

His lips part on a slow exhale, head tilting. "I'd love to tell Santa you've been a good girl this year, but we both know that's not true. You had to have done something naughty for your daddy to sell you off to a man like Daniel." The muscle in his forearm tenses, rippling as he strokes up and down his shaft. "But I'm not a monster. I've got a little something for you. Call it a gift."

I keep my mouth shut, sensing that he'd probably just get off on me sniping back. The inner mantra I've got going about him not being able to touch me doesn't make this any less of a violation. Studying under Daniel has probably already taught Nick something invaluable.

Sometimes the worst way of touching someone has nothing to do with physical contact.

He shuffles closer and I strain back, turning my head as he puts his cock in my face. He spits a soft curse. "You're so pretty when you're pissed like this. Your body gets so tight. I bet your pussy does, too. I bet if I were inside you right now, your cunt would be strangling me." He pleasures himself to his own words in long, deliberate motions. He's not in a hurry, enjoying torturing me as long as he can. I try to focus on another time, another place—on what I'll do when I finally get out of here.

I try to imagine getting away.

His loud, ragged breaths drag me from my fantasies, which is the only reason I look up to see his jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck strained. A

sensation ripples through me, strange and obtrusive. My skin is no longer cold, but warming with every pass he makes on his cock. I don't want him. I don't. I don't. He is a monster.

But fuck, I've been here a long time.

The motel walls are flimsy. I spend basically half of my time listening to other people fucking. Sometimes it's hard and fast, and sometimes it goes on for hours, moaning and thumping and grunting. I usually lay in my bed and alternate between imagining what they look like and doing my damndest not to even think about it.

I blame that for the way my body responds to the sight of him, coiled tight as he towers over me, fist gripping his thick shaft. Suddenly, he's fucking gorgeous like this, a perverse study in eroticism, his blue eyes holding my body captive. Heat builds between my legs, liquid fire descending down my spine. But he's too involved with himself to notice, eyes growing hooded and heavy. Cheeks going red, his lower belly caves, dipping in and out with his shallow breathing. It's strangely mesmerizing to watch a man pleasure himself. To see him so disarmed. To witness the crack in his armor as. To hear his grunt and the small dolent sound that's hidden within it. To see his fist tighten around his dick. I'm no expert, but I know the signs of a man about to orgasm.

I also know where he intends to put it.

His eyes slit open, and his tongue swipes out, wetting his bottom lip. "Open your mouth," he commands, voice full of gravel.

I lurch backward, banging into the toilet. "You're not putting that thing in my mouth!"

He just moves closer, tip of his cock a hairsbreadth from my closed lips. "Never said I was," he answers, stiffening. His hand tightens on his cock, but even though I squirm back, it's no use. There's nowhere to go. The room is hot now, sweat beading up on the back of my neck as I watch him seize, abdomen caving. It's impossible to even hear myself think over the

sound of Christmas music and his choppy breaths. None of it is as loud as the sound of the groan ripping through him. His hand thrusts out and slams over my head, palm flat against the bathroom wall. The other grabs my chin and works my jaw until it's open, which is against the rules. We both know it.

But the second I part my lips to say so, it happens.

His face collapses in an agonized expression as the first hot ribbon of cum lands on my lips, my tongue. I gasp and try to clamp my mouth shut, but that's almost worse, taking it inside me, tasting it, feeling it against the roof of my mouth. Instead, I turn my cheek, holding my jaw open like I've tasted something horrible. But Nick doggedly chases me, shooting another thick spurt onto the flat of my tongue.

"Ack!" is all I manage to say before he's rubbing it in, sliding the tip of his cock against my lower lip.

"That's my sweet little bird," he rasps, voice harsh and low. His forehead creases and he exhales, pumping out the last of his cum. It lands on my chest. "Fuck, I knew you'd look so good covered in my cum."

A million 'fuck you's' burn on my tongue, but I'm too busy lurching to the side and spitting his release onto the grimy tile floor to voice them.

Luckily, he lets me.

I can practically hear him rolling his eyes as I retch into the little waste bin beside the toilet.

"Bit dramatic," he mutters, pushing off the wall and wiping off his cock. I barely notice him leaving the bathroom, vision distorted by the tears that spring to my eyes from the gagging, but I don't miss that he returns with a knife. Gasping, I straighten my shoulders, heart pounding, but when he grabs me, it's just to wedge the knife between the zip tie and my wrist. With one clean jerk of his wrist, he frees me.

"Clean up," he says, grabbing his phone and walking out of the room again. I don't move, still shocked. I hear the zipper on his backpack and the

sound of him rummaging inside. A moment later, he peeks his head in. “I’m getting some snacks. Want anything?”

Do I want anything?

A vision of me taking the knife and slicing off his balls comes to mind.

I shake my head infinitesimally, unsure of my ability to speak.

He shrugs and steps back out. The click and lock of the motel room door echoes back to me a moment later.

I exhale, deep and shuddering, and drag the back of my hand across my mouth, sliding against the cooled cum. Like a sick, cosmic joke, the heat between my legs still radiates, clit throbbing with the hope of a release it hasn’t gotten. It doesn’t care that Nick is vile. It doesn’t give a shit that rubbing Nick’s sticky release between my fingers is disgusting. It couldn’t give less of a damn that doing anything about it would be beyond shameful.

My eyes dart to the bathroom door, but it’s silent, other than the TV.

I don’t let myself think too much as I slip my fingers between my legs and spread the cum over my clit. A white hot current surges along my nerves, and it’s easy then. I deserve it; I tell myself. It’s Christmas. I have nothing, no one. I can give myself this. Use him the way he used me.

I scoop more of the cum off my body and use it for lube, coating my fingertips and getting my clit good and sloppy. It’s fucking obnoxious how much better this is than using my own spit or the dregs of the shower gel. I close my eyes and the first image that pops up is Nick in the shower, body on full display. I shake that off, but am struck by the sight of him jerking off in front of me. It shouldn’t have been hot—it wasn’t—but fucking hell. He’s all man, with the muscles and the ink and those eyes.

Warmth spreads from my core throughout my limbs, my breath coming in short, choppy bursts. I work fast, knowing that even if he has to fight with the ancient vending machine, he won’t take long. I flick and rub the

nub between my legs, stopping short of fingering myself. I draw the line at his semen being inside of me.

A girl's gotta have some standards.

From the other room, the sound of Christmas bells ringing carries into the bathroom. I find a rhythm, something to focus on, ding, dong, ding, dong, driving the pulsing beat between my legs. Inside, something catches, then shatters, the orgasm cresting over me like a tidal wave of sharp embers. I press my fingertips against my cilt, riding out the swooping fall of it. My breath is ragged, hands shaky, but as much as I'd like to bask in the glow of a hasty orgasm in a shitty motel, I don't push it, grabbing my damp towel off the sink. Still feeling the lingering effects, I wipe myself off. Face, body, between my legs. After hastily brushing my teeth, I hustle to the other room, grab panties and a T-shirt, and dive for the bed.

I'm still breathing hard when he opens the door.

He steps in, clutching a mountain of snacks, bicep holding them against his chest. He pauses halfway in and breathes deep, then looks over at me on the bed. I've got the phone book open—only reading material left after the bible thing—eyes half-focused on the page.

He sniffs the air and tosses the food on the foot of the bed, the packages landing flat. There's no spring in the mattress. He eyes me suspiciously, like he knows what I've done—like he can smell it in the air—but I quickly avert my gaze.

I pick through the snacks and laugh darkly to myself. A break from the nightly monotony of the motel, a nerve-shattering orgasm, and junk food. "This probably isn't even the worst Christmas Eve dinner I've had." I say it more to myself than him, but he grabs the hard chair from the corner and drags it over, grabbing three bags off the bed and tearing into them.

He shoves a crumbling cupcake into his mouth and asks, "What, no sixteen-foot tree in the Count's mansion?"

I settle on Chex Mix—the closest thing to holiday fare—and pick through the pieces in search of pretzels. “Not that I have to explain myself to you, but just because something looks pretty, doesn’t mean it’s not rotten inside.” I give his face a pointed look.

A group of crumbs cascades from his lips when he says, “Nah, I’m a fucking saint.” The fact that he’s put his soiled shirt back on underscores the irony. Blood still spattered to the front and staining the side.

My eyes narrow. “Don’t you have somewhere better to hide out than here? I know you have a family—a real family who presumably doesn’t want to see you killed.” Not that I’d know what that’s like.

A shadow falls over his eyes as he ducks his head, picking at the cake. He’s a Bruin. Everyone in the Royal world knows his history. I also know it’s a sore spot that he left to join up with Daniel Payne—a betrayal to his family—and the curve of his shoulders look all at once dejected and defensive. If he wants to pick at wounds, he’s chosen the wrong girl to do it with. I come bearing salt.

He tosses the cupcake wrapper toward the trashcan and it bounces off the edge, just like my comment bounces off his skin. “I’m right where I want to be, little bird. Sometimes a family is what you make of it. The people who are there when you need them—not just the blood that runs through your veins.”

It’s ominous, but the weird thing is that I know what he means. Family is tricky—especially families like ours. The TV jolts across the room and Carol of the Bells mercifully stops. Different but familiar music comes through the speakers, along with bold cartoon lines on the screen.

“Yes!” Nick says, hopping from the chair to the bed, knocking the snacks around. “Charlie Brown Christmas. Score.” I flinch, jerking aside so as to avoid touching him. But even as I give him a long, incredulous glare, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a candy bar. My favorite candy bar. Wordlessly, eyes still fixed to the screen, he offers it to me.



I flick my eyes from the candy to the TV, back to the man lying next to me. He's all relaxed, a soft heaviness to his eyes that could be owed to Charlie Brown or the afterglow of an orgasm. But either way, it's like he didn't kill a man tonight. As if he didn't force me to eat his cum. As if he's not my jailor, holding me here against my will.

No, he acts like it's the most normal moment in the world, and although I never, ever, let my guard down, I do allow myself to snatch the candy from his hand.

Buzzz!

I startle at the sound, and Nick's loose shoulders stiffen. He picks up the phone, blue eyes jumping up to the camera in the corner before answering.

"Yes, sir?"

The sound of Daniel Payne's voice barks through the line, "I said a Christmas bonus, not a Christmas vacation!"

Nick slides off the bed, dragging the yellowing bedspread with him. "I know. Just lying low like you told me to."

Daniel isn't as audible once Nick moves away, but I can still make out, "Get your ass downstairs in three minutes. Someone will pick you up."

"Yes, sir."

Nick hangs up, but he doesn't speak as he grabs his things, pushing his feet back into his boots and shrugging on his jacket. I watch from the bed as he methodically checks his gun, sliding the clip back in. His eyes flick back and forth between his things and the screen, a subtle thread of a weariness flickering in his features before it hardens back into the sharp lines of a soldier. I'm struck by a moment of weakness. I'll come to feel embarrassed about later.

I think I might feel bad for him.

It isn't until he's at the door that he finally looks at me again. When he does, it's just to tip his chin in a nod, eyes snapping to the camera once

before he says, “Merry Christmas, little bird.”

And then he’s gone, melting away into the frigid chill and oppressive darkness, the door closing behind him. My makeshift paper snowflakes rattle in the breeze before stilling. On the screen, Lucy is hounding Shroeder to play a Christmas song.

“Jingle Bells! You know, Santa Claus and ho-ho-ho. And mistletoe. And presents to pretty girls.”

I turn the candy bar over in my hands and resolve not to eat it until morning. After all, this is South Side and I’m a prisoner. Maybe tattoos, gun-shot wounds, and shameful orgasms are as close as it gets to being visited by Saint Nick in this place.



Happy Holidays! Thank you for all the continued support! Don’t forget to order your copy of Dukes of Ruin, book 4 in the Royals of Forsyth U series on Amazon!

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