

New Year's Eve
*Starting Again,
With Him*

Genny

Mostly, I stayed out of the way.

He obviously had his thing.

And he was really into it.

Really.

Decades ago, when he was mine the last time, if you told me that Duncan “Bowie” Holloway would be all about tiny LED string light placement among pinecones and selecting linens that went with his party’s color scheme, I would have giggled myself silly.

But this was the same man.

And he was different.

He was a man I knew to my soul.

And a man I was loving every second of getting to know.

But in that time without me, he’d reached for his dream, worked for it, earned it, and now, like he had in years past, he thanked those who helped him achieve it and worked to keep it alive.

He told me he gave good bonuses to the staff in his many River Rain Outdoor stores across the country.

But those employees that lived close were all coming to his house for his annual New Year’s Eve bash.

Tons of food. Tons of booze.

And then there was the chance to meet me.

Imogen Swan.

Hollywood Darling.

Also now Duncan’s fiancée whose entire past heartbreak with the man she loved and lost (twice) had recently been exposed to the world and picked over by gossips and tabloids. People I didn’t even remember from our old hometown coming forward to tell their stories about Bowie and me. The star-crossed lovers who finally, after years and life and betrayals and broken hearts and failed marriages, found their love aligned.

I would be on for him tonight, my man, the CEO of River Rain.

I'd be learning all new things about the man I'd known since he was a boy of ten years old.

He'd be sharing more of his life with me.

And I couldn't wait.

But for now, I left him to whatever discussion he was having with the bartenders, regardless of how attractive I thought he was when he was being the guy in charge.

He was tall. Built. He commanded attention just with his presence. That had always been the way.

He was also an attentive listener (again, he'd always been like that).

You felt heard by Duncan...because you were.

And he was very smart (he'd always been that too).

Now, there was more.

Maturity.

Confidence.

Accomplishment.

That meant Bowie could murmur, "Hmm..." after something was said, and based on the inflection in that sound, a trajectory could change.

Though it would happen without anyone feeling hurt, or foolish, or ignored.

I'd noticed that Duncan just had a way with taking things in, making quick decisions and communicating those in gentle ways where people went forth and did his bidding because they believed it was the right course to take.

So yes.

Watching Duncan being the guy in charge was immensely appealing.

But I had to get ready. For this party, as ever, I'd be Imogen Swan, award-winning actress, but also a much bigger role.

Genny, the boss's fiancée.

I was really looking forward to it.

I had a dress as selected by my daughter, Chloe, who knew better than anyone how to dress me.

But I was doing my own hair and makeup.

The dress was a lot. It was what they'd expect from Imogen Swan.

And that was good.

Though, for my face, they needed to meet...

Me.

It was some time later when Bowie came into the bedroom, calling, "Chloe showed. The gang's all here. And in about half an hour, Judge will be here too."

I felt my lips quirk at the mention of Judge, an employee of Duncan's, a man I had not met, a man my daughter had met, at Duncan's store, and they'd had a massive row.

The two of them didn't know each other, and they'd had a huge public fight.

That was very much my Chloe.

A lot of drama.

More importantly, she never let anyone get away with anything.

Duncan was worried about this. He and Chloe had bonded. He adored her. He wanted her—and all our kids, my other two, Matt and Sasha, and his two, Sully and Gage—to have a good time that night.

I knew Chloe a lot better, however.

For one, she was a big girl. She could look out for herself. And she'd been like that since she was about five.

And there were other things I knew about my daughter when it came to Judge Oakley, and I hadn't even met the man.

I heard Duncan calling this information while I was sitting at my vanity in the master bathroom.

It was something that wasn't there the first time I walked into this room.

However, after I'd been in LA a few days to do some business, I'd come back to see that unused corner of Duncan's massive bathroom had new lighting, a new mirror, granite countertop, seven drawers and a vanity bench covered in cowhide.

He'd built this house after he'd divorced his first wife. No woman had ever lived there, and no woman was in his life when he'd designed the house.

Thus, no vanity in his huge bathroom.

When I left, he hadn't shared he was going to build that for me. Not to mention, I'd dealt with contractors before, so it was a minor miracle he'd pulled it off in that short a period of time.

But there it was, my space to do my girlie thing in his huge mountain house (though, do that girlie thing on a cowhide bench).

I loved it.

What I loved oh so much more, it was Duncan's indication that his space was my space. I wasn't just welcome there.

I belonged.

A permanent fixture.

That was the Duncan I used to know.

But now, he was that man with the means to do those kinds of things.

In other words, to be the man he needed to be, for himself.

And for me.

"I don't know if this'll be a disappointment, or a relief, but tonight, Chloe is going to be in her soon-to-be Duncan Holloway's stepdaughter mode," I called in return. "So for once, she'll put the drama way."

I was adding finishing-touch shimmer on my cheekbones, which didn't take a lot of concentration, or time. But when I'd accomplished it, Duncan hadn't replied. So I wondered if he'd been called away and I'd been talking to nobody.

I turned on my chair for reasons unknown, since I didn't have a view to the bedroom from my vanity, and I wasn't ready to get up, because I still needed to do my mascara.

But I froze when I saw Duncan leaning against the double-wide opening to the bathroom, eyes on me.

And he had the most perfect look on his handsome face, it stole my breath.

Therefore, when I said, "Hi," it came out husky.

"There's never been an instant of your life when you weren't beautiful," he declared.

These words didn't help with my breathing.

"Even when you were a little girl," he continued, "I didn't know what to do with how I felt when I looked at you."

"Bowie," I whispered.

"But honest as fuck, baby, you sitting right there, in my house...*our* house, looking like that, you've never been so beautiful."

“Although I don’t have my mascara on yet, I’d still appreciate it if you didn’t make me cry,” I tried to joke.

He didn’t laugh.

“I got a second chance with you. And now I’ve got a third. Which means I’m the luckiest man on this goddamn planet.”

My heart contracted so powerfully at his words, I closed my eyes and tilted my head away.

“For obvious reasons, I’m not getting near you right now,” Duncan went on.

I opened my eyes and looked at him.

“And I don’t wanna get in the shower and steam it up and ruin anything,” he kept going. “So just let me know when you’re out and I’ll get on with getting ready.”

He made to move to leave, but I called his name.

He turned back.

“I love you,” I said.

It wasn’t fierce.

It wasn’t steely.

It was quiet.

It was honest.

It was his.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Luckiest man on the planet.”

He then disappeared from the doorway.

And I had time to get my emotions under control before I stroked on my mascara.

But as I got them under control, I did it sitting on a cowhide bench in a colossal bathroom in a massive mountain home built by the man I loved, staring at the doorway his long body was no longer lounging in.

Being quiet.

Being happy.

Being his.

* * * * *

“I should have cancelled this year,” Duncan muttered five hours later.

Surprised, I looked up at him, because I thought the party was going great.

It'd been lovely meeting his staff, who were wonderful.

Not to mention, getting to know his best buddy, Harvey, and Harvey's wife, Beth even better and spending time with my kids as well as my good friends who all serendipitously lived in Prescott, Heddy, Trisha and Scott.

The food was fantastic. The libations plentiful.

I myself had a nice level of tipsy happening.

And it appeared everyone was having a good time.

So I didn't know why he'd say that.

Therefore, I asked, "What? Why?"

"You're on. In your home, you have to be on. We're seeing in the first new year that we've had together in over two decades. It should have just been us. Or the family. It's too much for you. It's constant. You have to be on when you go to the grocery store, for fuck's sake. You shouldn't have to be that way when you're home. You shouldn't have to be that way during a holiday."

"Bowie—" I tried.

But failed.

"The good news is, after the clock strikes midnight, normally, the longest folks stay is another half hour, forty-five minutes. The younger kids have places to be that are more fun. The older ones just wanna be in bed. So this is almost done for you."

I turned fully into him and put my hand on his chest.

"I'm fine," I assured. "You do this every year. It's a tradition. And I'm having fun."

"That dress and you in it will live in my brain until the day I die, but I still should have given it a break this year. Us a break. But you, especially, with the new TV show starting up, and—"

I slid my hand up to right under his throat, pressed in, and just in case that wasn't enough, I pressed my body to his.

This worked.

I got his attention.

Now, that had never changed, not since the first time we were together as teenagers.

Duncan was very tuned to my physical proximity.

As I was his.

These thoughts nearly made me smile but I managed to hold it back before I said, “Stop worrying about me. I’m not telling tales. *I’m fine.*”

“Babe—”

He was going to say something else, berating himself for not protecting me (that was the old Duncan...and the new one), when his eyes went over my shoulder, and they narrowed.

When they did that, I looked over my shoulder too.

At what I saw through the windows, outside in the cold on the back deck, I pressed my lips together to stop myself from laughing.

The night had come complete with two silent, completely unconvincing performances.

One given by my daughter, who tried to pretend she wasn’t very aware Judge Oakley was at the party.

Oh...

And might I add, that would be a very, very tall, very well-dressed, very well-mannered, very, very good-looking Judge Oakley.

The other performance was given by Judge Oakley himself, who tried to pretend he didn’t know every move Chloe made at that party.

Although I suspected this attraction and uber-awareness of each other was the reason for their “fight,” after that night, it was now confirmed.

“That doesn’t look good,” Duncan grumbled, and my gaze went up to him again.

Eyes still narrow, brows drawn, unhappy, protective-instinct-in-overdrive papa bear was now standing in front of me.

Much more attractive than take-charge guy, and that was saying something.

I turned back to the goings-on on the deck and saw what no protective-instinct-in-overdrive papa bear ever saw.

And thus, I slid right back into assurance mode.

“It’s fine,” I told my fiancé.

“Judge looks pissed.”

He did indeed.

But Duncan was missing something.

“It’s fine,” I repeated.

“And Coco looks unhappy.”

My eldest, known to those who loved her as Coco, looked a lot of things, and yes, unhappy was one of them.

But it was the least important.

Ten!

“Darling, it’s fine,” I said again.

Nine!

“Maybe I need to go out there and make sure,” he suggested.

Papa bear.

So, *completely* attractive.

Seven!

“Bowie.”

He didn’t tear his eyes away from my daughter and the very tall, very good-looking man who ran Duncan’s community program, Kids and Trails at River Rain.

Six!

God.

I loved how deeply he loved.

Me.

And what was mine.

Five!

I pressed into him again. “Bowie.”

And again, it worked, his eyes came down to me.

I looked into his.

Yes.

I loved how deeply he loved.

Four!

“There is one person on this planet who I know without any doubt can take care of herself.”

Two!

“And that’s my daughter,” I finished.

Happy New Year!

His eyes flicked over my shoulder again.

And he grunted, “Uh...yeah.”

I, too, looked over my shoulder.
And smiled.
Yes.
I was so very right about my beautiful Chloe.
My smile didn't last long.
My fiancé.
The man I'd met when I was eight.
Fell in love with along the way.
Lost.
And found.
And lost again.
Only to be found.
That man was turning me into his arms.
His head was descending.
His lips found mine.
And we were only seconds into it.
But I already knew it was a very happy new year.

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