

THE FRIEDMAN CHRISTMAS ADVENT



ELLIE OWEN

The Friedman Christmas Advent



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE FRIEDMAN CHRISTMAS ADVENT Copyright ©

2024 by Ellie Owen

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

For more information, contact the author at

www.ellieowen.com

Books By Ellie Owen

Ellipsis: A Love Story

Thea Scriven, a romance author struggling to have her breakthrough might have a change of luck in love and business when she meets Adrian Friedman, a Fantasy Editor and Heir to major publishing house.

Three Weeks To Fall in Love

In the novella companion to “Ellipsis: A Love Story,” Adrian juggles work, friendship, and the blooming romance with Thea as he forges connections to help the romance writer achieve her dreams.

Curse of Death

400 years after the death of her sister, Reghen Nehtvallen seeks vengeance against the man responsible for her sister’s murder.

1

It was definitely an oversight to think traveling with a newborn would've been easy just because they didn't have to stay in long queues or squeeze to get into their seat on a plane that'd most likely have one or two sick people.

Owning a private jet made their life easier, but newborns had a way of knowing when to forcefully humble their parents.

"Can you just—" Thea stops mid-sentence, forcing air into her lungs as Adrian puts their luggage inside their car.

"What?"

"I love you more than life itself, but could you please breathe a little less loud?"

Adrian frowns at the request. He too forces air into his lungs, forcing himself to remember they lived through hell for the past eight—almost nine—hours from New York to Geneva.

The plan had been to go straight to Gstaad, but none of them could spend a second longer in that plane. They'd spend the night in one of the apartments Nathaniel owned in the city, and then, after lunch, they would make the drive to meet the rest of the Friedman family.

"Of course!" Adrian lifts another piece of luggage. "Maybe I'd breathe more softly if I could be the one holding Lala."

"What did you say?"

"That I'm all done."

Thea narrows her eyes at Adrian, knowing he was lying but having no way to know what he had muttered under his breath.

Fighting was a rare occasion for them.

So rare, Thea couldn't remember the last time they argued. Streets would sometimes make them a little snarky, but whenever one was curt with the other, it didn't take long for them to apologize and reorganize their schedules to carve more time for each other.

Even in the two months since their daughter was born, they'd been good, leaning on each other so much that not even the lack of sleep made them bicker more often, but there was something to that flight.

Maybe it was the fact they'd been a little anxious about traveling, and Alara could feel it. Or the altitude unsettled the baby, and while the private jet had a bedroom separate from the main area, they couldn't really escape her cries for nearly eight hours straight.

The only possibility left, and this was the possibility they knew they feared more than the idea of never getting eight hours of sleep ever again, was that they were getting sick of each other.

Impossible, Lala seemed to say in how she started to babble as those silvery eyes took in a world with buildings that must seem tiny when all she'd ever known was New York's skyline.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Thea whispers, lips against those round, chubby cheeks they both love to kiss. "Just wait until we get home."

Adrian clings to that word, home, as he closes the trunk of the car before opening the rear door for Thea. "Is my breathing sufficiently quiet?" He jests, watching her

settle Alara in the car seat, making sure the straps are snug but not too tight.

“Breathing, yes. But your mouth isn’t.”

As if he’d become a Parisian mime, Adrian gasps silently, stumbling backward with both hands over his heart—much to Alara’s amusement, who babbles a laugh while her mother rolls her eyes, knowing too well it made Adrian a little feral.

Better now? He mouths, hands reaching out toward Thea’s hips. There is a little smile tugging on the corner of his mouth when Thea cusps his cheeks.

“Can we just go? I’m tired; I need a bath and thirty minutes of silence.”

The only response comes in a kiss to the tip of her nose. Adrian drops his arms from around Thea to wave at Lala before closing the door.

A sense of routine settles when Adrian goes to the driver’s seat while Thea rounds the car to join Lala in the back seat. They knew it wasn’t a necessity to be with her; even their pediatrician said as much, but Thea still felt like, at three months old, Lala needed her presence.

It’s not like Adrian would judge her.

If he could, he’d also be in the back seat with Lala; she was a rather pleasant baby to look at, except for when there was poop on her neck or when she projectile vomited curdled milk.

Other than that, she was great. As long as they didn’t take her on any planes—maybe she was a girl for the people, and she’d be happier flying commercial.

A theory Adrian would have to test without Thea in case Lala hates flying commercial even more. It seemed both extremely likely and unlikely at the same time.

There was a striking similarity between Alara and Adrian, and the man had a lot of fun the first time he flew commercial—it had been with Thea to visit family in Seattle, and both airports had been so lively and were already decorated in the Christmas spirit of capitalism.

It was gloriously fun, but he supposes it could be overwhelming to a three-month-old—not to mention the amount of bacteria floating around, waiting to make their baby sick.

Between the enforced silence and the wondering thoughts of a man unable to think of anything other than his family, Adrian is surprised by how quickly the drive between the airport and Champel.

The streets would've been leafy during the summer, but they're quiet and adorned with beige buildings that would be described as *belle époque* in blogs written by anyone who'd never been to Geneva.

To Adrian, the buildings definitely had that European charm people expected, but in the height of winter, it made the neighborhood incredibly beige and brownish.

"Go take a bath before the water gets cold," Adrian declares, pressing on the parking brake button. "I got Lala, and takeout will be here when you get off."

"Before the water gets cold? Is this bathtub connected to Wi-Fi?"

"No, I just had the property manager come by to draw a bath, leave some restaurant suggestions, change the sheets, and leave some fresh—"

"When did you do all that?"

"Before we landed, I didn't want you to have to worry about things. Now go enjoy the sound of nothing. We're in the penthouse, and the code is your birthday!"

Thea squeezes Lala's cheeks, giving it a little kiss before hurrying out of the car, walking with a bounce to her step over the mere idea of having a little peace.

It was strange to think that a year ago, their flight from New York to Gstaad had been full of the events that led into one having a child, and now, the Thea who once couldn't get her hands off Adrian was the same one who savored those moments of solitude.

If Thea had begun to drift away, then Adrian would just continue swimming toward her, giving her room to breathe while anticipating her needs.

Having a child changed them both.

It morphed their sense of self, their idea of what life looked like. Every moment of every day was occupied by a tiny little human that depended on them to survive and thrive, changing the very way they looked at the future—from pure glee and eagerness to something a little more planned and cautious.

Yet, if having a baby shattered life as Adrian knew it, he also knew he couldn't even begin to imagine how becoming a mother changed Thea.

A lot of those changes were shared, but only Thea faced the pure brunt of carrying a child and the hormonal rollercoaster that came with it.

So Adrian would keep swimming toward her.

He wouldn't let her drown.

Babbling grabs his attention back toward the baby in his arm. Alara studies herself in the reflection of the mirror on the back of the elevator.

"That's a mirror," he murmurs, a smile melting over his stubbled face. "That's Lala and Daddy. God, you really look like your aunt...cuter because you're all mine."

Alara turns her head toward Adrian, mirroring his smile with a little babble, the kind that makes Adrian want to stomp his feet over how precious she looks.

“All mine.”

Spit bubbles on her mouth, eyes closing when Adrian peppers kisses over her partially bald hair—a combination that would usually have Adrian being less kissy, as spit and baldness don’t usually equate to cuteness.

The elevator stops as it reaches the penthouse, cutting their little mirror session short. Babbling fills the silence in the apartment that was both familiar and foreign.

Adrian remembers spending a week there a few years ago. The layout remained the same, but Gabriela had spent a few months renovating the four-bedroom duplex apartment that has Lac Léman framed by large windows.

“Crawling here would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Leaving his shoes by the entrance, Adrian can’t help but appreciate how the herringbone maple floors feel warm underneath his socks. “When will you start crawling?” Adrian tickles her belly, basking in her giggles. “Do you think we’d have enough time to change the floors back home? I don’t want your knees and hands to be cold, and rugs would be too harsh on you, wouldn’t they?”

Taking her babbling as agreement, Adrian makes a mental note to have workers in the penthouse on the first week of January. It also meant scheduling people to take the artwork and relics away.

“Should we spend a month or two in Brazil? I think we should; Mommy can’t write if there are people working on our home, can she?”

Nor would Adrian be comfortable with leaving Thea and Alara in the penthouse while men were there. Even if

said men had been vetted by Athena, they were men nonetheless, and the only thing more dangerous than strange men were men that weren't written by Thea.

"I think I should bathe you first, shouldn't I? Mommy will be in there for a while. I think I can give you a bath, a bottle of milk, and then order takeout before Mommy leaves her sanctuary ... She just needs to recharge a little. It's not personal; she doesn't hate us. Don't worry."

Lala is too young to worry; Adrian could do that for them both, and he would. Endlessly.

There were few things he cared about more than Thea's happiness. Maybe only one thing, and that was Alara's, but that worry was just three months old; he was more used to worrying and tending to Thea.

Alara clings to Adrian's finger as he cruises the living room, taking her down the hallway toward a guest bedroom, walking by the main bedroom where a little bassinet was waiting for Lala.

The only time she's not wrapped up in his arms is when Adrian lays her down over the mattress, being careful to not make a single sound when settling the small emergency luggage they packed in case plan B became plan A.

One could say it was impressive that they anticipated needing to spend the night in another city instead of going to Gstaad. Deep down Adrian only had his anxiety to thank for that foresight.

It was a gift that kept on giving, probably for the rest of his life, and definitely for the next eighteen years.

"Alara Florence," his tone is serious, brows furrowed close together. "This is the most crucial moment of the night; one mistake and mommy's peace will be shattered."

Adrian cringes when he unzips the suitcase and it chirps loudly enough to give him pause, listening in to the silence, fearing the sound of a deep, tired sigh.

Neurosurgeons are less stressed during the most complicated surgery of their life than Adrian feels unzipping that suitcase to take out Lala's pajamas from the luggage, stuffing the onesie inside his sweater so it wouldn't be cold against her skin after the bath.

The stress continues as he takes her out of her clothes, being gentle and precise so no whines will bubble past her tiny body.

"Tired lungs, remember? No more crying tonight."



Screaming for eight hours did seem to tire a baby out, or maybe it was jet lag that made Alara sleep for most of the night, waking up only once when Thea couldn't sleep with how full her chest felt.

That had been a first, and Adrian's heart beat hadn't gone down since. Logically, he knew it was normal—he'd read about it in the lactation book he bought—but he couldn't stop worrying it was somehow a sign they weren't feeding Lala enough.

It didn't seem like it when she'd been pooping so much they'd have to change her into clean onesies a little more often than Adrian thought possible.

Sure, every person pooped their pants once in their life, but Adrian didn't think babies would do it once a day.

"Explosive diaper again?" At the sound of footsteps getting closer to the kitchen, Adrian asks as he glances

over his shoulder to find Thea freezing on the threshold with Lala propped against her hip.

A hand flies over Lala's eyes while her mother's rake down Adrian's chest. Blood rushes to Thea's cheeks over the striking concoction of the gray sweatpants, naked chest, tousled hair, glasses, and unshaved face.

"You can't see Daddy like that."

"What? What's wrong? She's seen me today already."

A snort-like laugh bubbles in Thea's chest. It was true they'd both seen Adrian today, but they hadn't seen him cooking that day yet.

Thea had woken up to an empty bed, the smell of pancakes, and a whiny baby in her bassinet, waiting for someone to hear her delicate cries so she could have her breakfast.

"Looking like that is what got me pregnant the first time. It feels wrong for Lala to see you like that."

"Like what I look like every morning?"

Shrugging, Thea forces her eyes away from Adrian's defined back and toward the bluish veining on the marble countertop that matched the navy blue kitchen cabinets.

"What is it that line the kids are saying nowadays?"

"Do I make you horny, baby?" Thea offers, and Adrian snaps a finger, showing she'd gotten it right.

"Yes, that's the one. Do I?"

Thea tilts her head, oblivious to how Adrian loves the sight of her messy hair and the flannel pajamas tucked under fuzzy socks as she hated when the leg of her pants rides up her legs when she slept.

It was beautifully mundane.

It was so casually her that Adrian couldn't help but love the way she looked right out of bed. That was the problem: Adrian loved how Thea looked every second of every day; it didn't matter if her hair was smeared with bird shit or if it'd been styled to perfection.

"Do you?" She speaks tentatively, almost worried about what his answer will be, as they were long gone from those six weeks postpartum, and yet Adrian hadn't tried to initiate anything more than kissing and wondering hands.

That anxiety Adrian had been feeling slowly goes over to Thea, churning her stomach, making her bite on her bottom lip at how the knife in his hand stops mid-slice.

Dark brows knit together, forming the tiniest creases between them. Thea watches his gaze glossing over the crumbs of bread, the variety of thinly sliced cheeses, and the small jars with pesto, mustard, and mayo he'd been using to assemble sandwiches for the little road trip.

"Do I make you horny? I would hope so, but if cooking has the opposite effect, the—" Adrian stops talking when a blonde head of hair peeks through the penthouse's front door. "Oh! You're here early."

"Dad and I wanted to give you guys time to get ready in peace."

Thea glances from Adrian to Cove, and Nathaniel, walking behind the second youngest Friedman, who beelined toward Thea, holding the brightest smile over being reunited with her favorite sister-in-law and niece.

"How are my girls?" Cove smacks a kiss on Thea's cheek before stealing Lala—spoiling her niece with kisses as Nathaniel takes her place, greeting Thea with a hug.

“What are you guys doing here?” She probes gently, sustaining an unnatural smile meant to hide her confusion and bubbling anger in not being told something.

“Didn’t he tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

Nathaniel studies his son’s guilty face before Adrian averts his attention back to a juicy tomato he’d been slicing thinly simply because Thea hated when sandwiches had half of a tomato pretending to be a slice, ruining the balance of flavors.

Years of marriage and raising three children together gave Nathaniel the kind of finesse his awkward son hadn’t mustered yet.

One day Adrian would see a young man in his shoes and think to himself about how big of a moron the poor guy must be to not see the errors in his ways, but Nathaniel hoped he’d also see the way he kept trying, kept paying attention to be the man Thea needed.

“Oh, wow, Coco!” Nathaniel lays a hand on his daughter’s back, steering her. “Did you see the view from the living room? Is beautiful, isn’t it? Come, I’ll send Matthew a photo of you and Lala.”

“Dad, what are you—”

Their voices fade away, giving room for Thea’s deep breath as she waits for Adrian to explain himself and the sudden visit when they were the ones supposed to make the drive to Gstaad.

“Well?”

“I didn’t expect them to get here so soon.”

“Funny, I didn’t expect them to get here at all.”

“I was going to tell you over break—”

“Tell me what, Adrian?” Her voice quivers, making Adrian glance up with his heart hammering in his chest.

“Yesterday I called my dad to see if he could meet us here. I thought my mom would come with him instead of Cove, but I thought you could use a break? We can trade cars, and they can go to Gstaad with Lala while we drive there together.”

Weaving her fingers together over her lap, Thea nods slowly as Adrian flips the wobbly pancake onto a plate before dusting a bit of powdered sugar to go along with the sliced berries and matcha latte he had made for Thea while she’d gotten Lala ready.

“Do you think I can’t take care of my daughter?”

“What? No, that’s—why would I think that?”

“Why else would you ask them to come here? Why else would someone else need to drive her to Gstaad?”

“*Meu amor*¹, that’s not what happened. I just wanted to give you a brea—”

“I don’t need a break from our daughter.”

“You needed one yesterday.”

Thea makes that face that told Adrian he fucked up.

It was rare for her to use that face for him, and usually he’d known where and how he fucked up, but he simply frowned, tilting his head to the left as he tried to think back on his actions.

“What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing. Apparently I’m just an incompetent mother for needing a little peace after hearing my baby cry for hours.”

¹ Translation: “My love.”

“Thea, my love, the heart to my soul, that’s not what I’m saying.” Adrian’s heart beats faster and faster as tears begin to well in her eyes. “You’re the best mom. You’re the only mom I want for my children—our children. I just want you to enjoy the trip, to have a little slice of it where we don’t have to worry about Lala, to be able to listen to whatever music we want in the car, and to have you sit by my side so we can hold hands. I just wanted us to be together. I thought you’d be happy about it; if I had known, I wouldn’t have asked my dad to come.”

“If that’s the reason,” Thea pauses, sucking in a breath to keep herself from blushing. “Then I guess they can take her ... if you make more of those Japanese pancakes so we can eat together in the car.”

“I’ll make as many pancakes as you want, and if you want, I’ll give them sandwiches and tell them to leave.”

“Cove would be heartbroken if we took Lala from her.”

“We’d end up with a purple under-eyes ... Well, I would; she wouldn’t touch you.”

“Because she loves me?”

Adrian’s had moves from left to right as if Thea is partially right about her assumption. “That, and because I wouldn’t let her even if she tried.”

“You’d hit your sister for me?”

“No!” His startled voice echoes through the penthouse, making Cove and Nathaniel tense up while pretending to still be enamored by the view. “God no, I wouldn’t hit a woman. I would throw a blanket over her head and restrain her while you ran away.”

Thea laughs timidly, with a hand over her mouth. It was equal parts marvelous and confusing to Adrian—he much preferred to see her smile and the sound of her

laugh over the tears that'd been lining her eyes, yet he doesn't want Thea to forgive him, to suppress her anger.

"You make it so hard to stay angry at you."

Amusement tints her voice, tugging on all of Adrian's heartstrings. "I'm still a little hurt and angry you didn't tell me anything before going ahead with it. You're my husband, Adrian. My partner for life, not my personal assistant or Dad. We make decisions together."

"Lesson learned! I didn't want you to worry about troubling my parents. I was only thinking of making things easier for you."

"You made breakfast, and you're making sandwiches while I watch. You make my life plenty easy."

Since the day they met, Thea had a way of making Adrian feel giddy like a little puppy over the most insignificant praises—if making her life easy could even be considered a praise.

He was like a dog that just loved being helpful, being content with just having a task to complete.

"Are you blushing?"

"No!" This time, Cove and Nathaniel glance over their shoulder, shushing Lala when she begins to babble for her mom and dad.

"Oh, you're blushing."

The kitchen becomes filled with giggles as Thea saunters around the kitchen island, finger poking at Adrian's waist. He squirms away, foregoing the tomato and knife in favor of a spreader spatula.

"I'm not blushing..."

"Too bad; I feel like kissing a blushing man."

Head snapping toward her, Adrian leans down, batting his lashes as he whispers, “Can you see if I’m blushing? I feel like I’m blushing more than I’ve ever blushed.”

“Oh yeah, you’re blushing a little.”



The pure bliss of holding Thea’s hand for a little over two hours, getting to hear her horrific singing voice as she sang along to the playlist they were curating for their wedding ceremony, the few kisses she’d planted on his cheek, and being fed little ripped pieces of sandwich, that bliss had carved out a smile on his face.

It surely made him look a little creepy by the way his mother and Olivie looked at him once he joined the family in his parents cabin after unpacking his and his girls’s luggage in theirs.

“Can you stop?” Olivie elbows Adrian’s ribs as if he’d been taking up too much space on the couch instead of holding Thea’s mug of hot chocolate while she feeds Lala in the rocking chair—a new addition to the cabin.

“You said if I made you an aunt, you’d be nice to me, remember? I remember it.”

“Wasn’t that Cove?”

“I’m her favorite sibling; Cove is always nice to me.”

“You aren’t your wife’s favorite Friedman sibling.”

“Neither are you.”

Olivie shrugs, the corner of her lips tugging downward as she speaks nonchalantly, “I’m not the one married to her.”

“Yeah, because she doesn’t love you.”

"I thought it was because she's straight?"

"Thea isn't the most straight woman out there. If you were nicer, you could've been the one to marry her."

"It's ok then; you're just her first husband."

"And only!"

"Yeah, because I'll be her first wife."

That pure bliss and smile become a pout as Adrian turns to his sister; studying her face carefully, he can't help but feel resentment in being the least beautiful sibling.

It wasn't fair Cove got to look like a cute fairy, while Olivie looked like Angelina Jolie in Mrs. Smith, nailing even the leather coat she'd wear whenever the family ventured out of the cabin.

It was even less fair they both got their mom's social skills. Knowing how to charm any person without even having to try while Adrian's own charm came from failing at being charming.

"You're actually hurting my feelings now."

"I'll never understand how you aren't the baby of the family when you act like one."

"Again, my feelings?"

"Again, a baby?"

"Olivie, stop being mean to your brother; he's a delicate boy," their mom chides as she walks into the living room, carrying a plate full of pigs in a blanket for them to watch the first Christmas movie of their stay in Gstaad.

Only tomorrow would they be allowed to hit the ski slopes, have lunch in the city, and go shopping in the evening—although Adrian would need to check with Thea if he could join his dad and Matthew.

"What are we watching?"

“Grinch?” Matthew suggests shyly, still feeling out of place since that’s the first year he’s joining the family Christmas getaway. “That’s my sister’s favorite.”

Sometimes, Adrian would catch himself being nice to Matthew, or worse, actually liking him until Adrian remembered his duty as an older brother and how it involved going against everything Matthew suggested.

“No, I’m thinking Elf.”

“We didn’t watch Christmas movies last year, did we?” Thea asks, letting Cove take care of burping Lala as the bestseller leaves the rocking chair in favor of the seat beside Adrian—nestled between him and Olivie.

“No.” Pretending to not notice the withering glare she receives from her brother, Olivie drapes a blanket over Thea’s legs. “We stopped watching them when Cove was thirteen, but with a baby in the family, Mom wanted to bring it back up.”

“Every time we visit them, we’ll have to watch a movie from now on until Lala is thirteen too.”

“That’s so sweet.” Thea turns to whisper to Olivie. “My parents just tell Lala she should grow up to be like my brother.”

“The nerd who builds Legos?”

“The nerd who builds Legos.”

“He’s not the problem,” Adrian chimes in, earning a withering glare from Olivie and a little nod from Thea. “Her parents are just awful.”

“Adrian!”

“It’s true! Jules is a lawyer; you’re Thea Scriven, a bestselling writer.”

“That’s only good enough for you.”

Olivie throws a pillow at Adrian, startling him enough to keep him from descending into that sweet, mellow baby talk he'd sometimes go down when it came to Thea.

It was a fact the Friedmans all loved Thea, but none of them could put up with how disgustingly sweet Adrian would get to her.

"What was that for?"

The middle child shrugs, resting her head on Thea's shoulder, leaving Cove the duty of explaining. "The movie is about to start," she speaks in that baby voice she'd only have when holding Lala.



One could expect Adrian to be a master negotiator.

It wouldn't be too far off the truth. He did learn how to negotiate from his father, and in the times he had to negotiate, Adrian wasn't the one to walk away with the weaker end of a deal.

Yet, years of negotiating became nugatory when it came to negotiating with Thea. The goal had been to have three days of their trip to go skiing with his dad and Matthew—who was comically bad at skiing.

Somehow, Adrian walked away with one day to ski while Thea would get to plan whatever she wanted for them to do.

Even worse, he'd been excited to spend a few hours skiing until he'd gotten there, and something that seemed so safe and fun just the previous winter now became this impossibly dangerous hobby that made Adrian question the love his father claimed to have for him.

Surely it proved Adrian was his least favorite child. Even though Nathaniel skied with Cove and Olivie too, taking each child to the slopes for one-on-one time.

Maybe Dad hates all of his children equally? Adrian wonders, heart hammering in his chest as she zooms past less-skilled skiers. God, I could die out here.

Life was something he loved and intended to keep.

Adrian had always been fairly attached to his life, never seeing any reason to be overly reckless with it.

Even when Adrian stumbled on an author using nonplussed and debonaire to sound well-versed in the pages of dictionaries, except they'd use the words wrong, it was easy for him to find something joyous about the mundane.

It didn't matter if the mundane was as simple as waking up after a good night of sleep, having a delicious lunch with Margo while chatting her ears off about how fast Lala is growing.

Or if it was something more valuable, like making a debut author a bestseller, or even better, being the one to make Thea laugh and seeing the way Lala would look at her mom.

Adrian was attached to life, and he wondered, as his clothes got pulled at by the wind, how he had never seen the danger in skiing.

Sure, he trusted his skills, and maybe that's why he'd never considered the sport to be particularly dangerous, but he'd been wrong.

One wrong move.

One little accident could result in Lala growing up without her dad, in Thea spending all of those memorable moments alone, and in Adrian missing out on being a

museum to their happiest moments, getting to photograph their achievements, and celebrating with them.

Relief washes over Adrian, calming down his stomach that had been waging a war against him until he could see the bottom of a ski slope—spotted by other skiers slowly making their way back to the top of the mountain.

“Oh God.” Doubling over, Adrian tosses his goggles and helmet onto the snow before pulling the balaclava off his head, needing the wintry winds to smother the heat in his cheeks. “I’m never doing that again. Am I dying?”

Adrian knew better than to strip himself of his gear entirely; he knew it wouldn’t take long until he’d want to put the balaclava back on.

A hand clasps his shoulder, sending a chill down his spine as Adrian wonders if Lady Death herself came to collect his soul.

Maybe he’d fallen somewhere along the slope, broke his neck, and all of this is a figment of his—

“Are you ok, son?” Nathaniel’s voice pierces through the spiraling.

“Have you been trying to kill me all along?”

“A bit late to abort you, don’t you think?”

“It’s never too late to abort me.”

Nathaniel crooks his head, seeming strangely like a mosquito rubbing its legs like a villain when he still has his goggles on.

For a moment, they fade from the world, or rather, they become one with it. Blending into the snow and muffled howling of the wind, into the tourists from all over the world, some who routinely visit Gstaad and some who saved up for years to be able to take that vacation.

Adrian is certain his father is pondering why he was trying to kill his son when, in reality, Nathaniel is preoccupied with watching Matthew moving down the slope at such a speed the boy might as well be moving in reverse.

“He’s awful, isn’t he?”

“I’m awful?”

“Matthew. Matthew is awful. At skiing, before you think I mean something else. Are you ok?”

“Other than thinking you want me to die, I’m great.”

Sucking in a deep breath, Nathaniel pulls his goggles up, meeting Adrian’s gaze and holding it for several enervating moments before asking, “How long?”

“What are we talking about?”

“How long since you had sex?”

Suddenly, Adrian lost fifteen years of his life.

Reverting to when he was a hormonal teenager who’d been caught discovering the world of websites with plenty of X in their names.

Last time his father asked Adrian about his sex life, they were driving back from the supermarket because his mother had wanted to make an apple pie and had forgotten to buy the apples.

“Do—do you plan to ask Matthew the same thing?”

“No. I plan on reminding him that if my daughter’s blood tests ever come back positive for an STD, he’ll answer for it however Athena sees fit.”

“Why can’t I get the same speech?” Adrian mutters, dragging his ski against the snow.

“You wouldn’t cheat on Thea, would you?”

“Never!”

“Well, how long?”

Unsure of why his father is curious, Adrian searches within himself for the will to answer that question in hopes there is some wisdom to be found in the end of it.



There were only two things better than seeing her book on the bestseller list or reading a reader raving about how much they loved her book and characters.

The first, and second on the rank, were the small yet constant reminders of how deeply she was loved by Adrian in how she'd always wake up to a blanket covering her body, or how her water bottle was always, magically full, how he'd bring home her favorite snacks but also new treats for her to try.

It was a constant reminder that Adrian saw her in the smallest and most mundane things while also carving space to bring her those gestures that took a little more planning—like the way he proposed to her twice, asking her to marry him on the day they finalized their prenop or their official first date that had looked like a small-scale wedding for an Italian family from New Jersey.

However, the second, and first on the rank, was glancing down to find Lala sleeping against her chest, being safe and utterly content in the baby carrier despite the soft murmuring in downtown Gstaad.

“Look!” Cove pivots, holding a beige, long-sleeved cashmere onesie. “It’s part of a set. It comes with matching socks and a bonnet.”

It was adorable.

Not thirteen hundred euros. adorable, but adorable.

“She’ll outgrow that one in a month.”

“So?”

It was still a little foreign for Thea to be able to afford shopping in the store they were perusing that afternoon. It was even more foreign that Thea could afford them even if Adrian didn’t have a cent to his name.

She’d made enough money from her books that if Cove didn’t insist on buying the onesie set along with the five-hundred-euro set of pastel cashmere socks that comes with one for every day of the week.

“So, you can buy something for yourself instead.”

“I’m getting a jacket!”

“A matching jacket with Lala,” Thea points out, lips brushing against Lala’s cashmere beanie—a gift from Cove, one that came before they even left the cabin to explore the town. “She has more clothes than she can wear before outgrowing them all.”

“It’s why you’ll have another baby later.”

Laughing softly, Thea drifts away from Cove to complain under her breath as her free hand brushes against soft, marvelous jackets. “Your brother needs to touch me for us to have another baby, doesn’t he, Lala?”

It was a particular and rather unique kind of torture to have Adrian as a husband. He’d always let Thea sleep in a little longer unless she was cuddling him; then he’d stay in bed with her for as long as Alara allowed them to.

But it was both heaven and hell how often she’d wake up to an empty bed, drifting through the penthouse with the certainty she’d somehow end up finding him.

Sometimes, she wound up in their private gym with Adrian doing Pilates to Baby Shark while Lala did tummy time or snoozed after being fed from the stash of breast milk Thea had been working on keeping supplied.

More commonly, she'd find them in the kitchen with Adrian wearing Lala while he prepared breakfast.

There was no aphrodisiac quite as strong and quick to work as finding him shirtless, their child secured in his strong arms, glasses propped on the tip of his nose, and the final and most lethal weapon was the way Adrian dared to smile when he saw Thea in the threshold.

The hellish part came in how uninterested he seemed to take their rare make-outs further. There were times when Lala was the culprit, waking up from her nap earlier than Thea anticipated.

But there'd been times when Adrian didn't seem to care to do more. Maybe he'd been traumatized from the time he fondled her breast and got his hand wet with milk.

"It's awful," Thea complains under her breath.

Taking her boiling frustration out on a knit bomber jacket that shouldn't cost eleven thousand five hundred euros, especially when it looks like something she could buy from a gas station—albeit, it would likely be polyester.

"It's not that bad, is it?" Thea jolts, glancing up to find Gabriela by her side. "A bit bland, and the color wouldn't compliment you, but it's not awful, is it?"

"I wasn't—no, it's not that bad."

"And things between you and my son? Are they awful or not that bad?"

Thea laughs as she pats Lala's back, more to soothe herself than to soothe her baby. It was a little enervating

how Gabriela seemed to be able to read her mind when it came to her son.

It was a kind of motherly instinct Thea wasn't sure if she envied or if she hoped she would never develop.

"They're great," Thea is truthful, thinking only of how Adrian had been as a father and partner rather than how she'd been feeling a little unwanted. "He's an incredible father. On more nights than not, while I breastfeed Lala, he fills my water bottle and brings me snacks, and he's always the one to burp her."

There hasn't been a night when Thea was awake alone with Lala—even before Thea had given birth, whenever she woke up in the middle of the night to pee, Adrian would get up to help her out of bed.

It almost makes Thea feel embarrassed, making her feel as if she had to lie about how present of a father and partner he was whenever she'd talk to Marine or the friends she made through the classes they'd taken.

While those new mothers complained about their boyfriends or husbands not being much help, Thea could only listen, hiding how grateful she was for the man she'd chosen as her partner.

"Just as I knew he would be." Pride coats Gabriela's words along with the accent Thea found so endearing. "But I asked how things are between you and my son, not between the three of you. You see, my son is a bit like a light switch."

"A light switch?"

"If you turn it on, it won't turn itself off, and if it's off, it won't turn itself on. He doesn't understand hints very well. You know that, don't you?"

Thea knew his brain worked differently. One word or a moment of imagined discomfort would have Adrian reeling back with a bit of a panicky look on his face as he wondered if he had crossed a boundary or pressured Thea into more than she'd want from their kissing.

Yet, Adrian never needed permission to show his love.

He never waited for Thea to grow discontent; never needed her to ask for flowers for Adrian to buy them for her; never needed Thea to ask for something sweet for him to bring her some baked good from a new bakery—taking different routes home from work just to stumble upon hidden gems.

Adrian loved her in a way Thea had never needed to ask for reassurance, knowing he'd think of her over the smallest hint of beauty.

"When I was still pregnant, there was a day when he came home from work with the sweetest gift," Thea begins telling Gabriela a story. "Adrian found a dandelion in the cracks of a sidewalk, so he brought it home, cupping a hand over the seeds to keep the wind from blowing them."

Thea knew he walked slowly. It took him longer to get home that day, but seeing the proud and sheepish smile on his face as he presented Thea her gift has made her worrying worth it in the end.

"What did you ask for?"

"I told him I asked Lala to be healthy. Truthfully, and maybe that makes me a terrible mother, I wished he'd never stop loving me... and to feel worthy of that love because your son is the first person to love me for me."

"You already are." Gabriela offers Thea the kind of smile her son often held when speaking about his family.

“Now, should we leave Cove and Olivie here while we go shop for some candy?”

“Why do we need candy?”

“I planned a Christmas event full of activities we have never done before. Tomorrow we’re building gingerbread houses.”

“You never build a gingerbread house?”

Gabriela shakes her head, shoulders lifting in an elegant movement as if the expression on Thea’s face wasn’t worthy of confusion.

“They aren’t a thing in Brazil, but since you joined our family, I want to include your traditions. Don’t think we’ll start to celebrate 4th of July or Thanksgiving. Your family will have you and Alara for those ... holidays?”

“Yes, holidays. What candy are we getting?”

“You’re the American; you tell me.”

That was a dangerous thing to tell a woman who’d grown up with gingerbread house competitions. Well, who grew up with a mother who’d taken those competitions very seriously, doing several trial runs before settling on a design that for the past five consecutive years made the woman the neighborhood winner?

Christmas was a very serious ordeal in the suburbs Thea grew up in. It made for a stark contrast to how quiet and cozy Gabriela celebrated.

Everything from decorating the cabin's Christmas tree to the dinner they’d have at midnight on the twenty-fifth of December was a family activity rather than a war zone.



Adrian Friedman had never been happier to participate in his mother's shenanigans than in that moment. Crafting his and Thea's gingerbread house held much less potential to turn into a deadly experience than skiing could've ever.

Although the glint in Thea's eyes did make him think there was still a bit of a harm potential. At least to him if their gingerbread house didn't turn out how she wants.

"Should we make a competition out of it?" Thea asks, laying out the baked pieces she'd been so careful in measuring early in the day.

It had given Adrian a new item to add to the reasons he loved Thea. Marveling at how precise she had been in designing the house, wanting their gingerbread to resemble the dollhouse that had been hers once upon a time before her grandma gifted it to them when Lala was born.

"Isn't this supposed to be a fun activity?" Olivie chimes in, holding Lala when she refused to participate in the activity their mom planned.

Sometimes Adrian wondered if Olivie was allergic to fun, but now he's convinced it was an excuse to be the one to hold Lala for most of the day when everyone else would be focused on baking.

"Competitions can be fun, can't they?"

"Just for fun?" Gabriela lifts the piping bag, studying her progress in decorating the roof she'd been working on while his father used a heat gun to melt hard candy over the windows they cut into the baked cookie.

"I know what the prize should be!" Cove chimes in, grinning to herself as she places a jellybean over the icing

dollop her boyfriend placed where the lines making up the roof lattice pattern met.

“Let me guess.” Adrian places two fingers against the center of his forehead, pretending to ponder on it. “Winner gets to babysit our child?”

“Mind reader! Well...” Cove tilts her head. “Almost. I was thinking of a sleepover. If she woke up hungry, the winner will go to your cabin.”

“Agreed,” Thea says, much to Adrian’s surprise.

Alara had been sleeping through most of the night, but she had never slept away from them.

Her bassinet was always right beside their bed, being within reach if she needed them—or if they needed to put a finger under her nose to make sure she was breathing.

It was true Adrian was usually the one who felt the need to check on her breathing, but that’s something he was working on in therapy.

“I’ll be the judge, and...” Olivie claims the title for herself, putting a dramatic pause to hold their attention. “Referee. To make sure there will be no stealing each other’s design, Mom and Dad will stay where they are.”

The kitchen in the main cabin was tucked in a corner, with an island between the cabinetry that had the oven and the side that had the fridge.

“Cove and Matthew, go to the oven side. Thea and *quello stronzo di mio fratello*², can take the fridge side.”

quello stronzo di mio fratello can take the fridge side.”

Thea arches a brow at Adrian, holding a silent question on the meaning of what Olivie said in reference to him. Yet, her only response comes in a scrunched face that told Thea

² Translation: “That asshole brother of mine.”

whatever Olivie said wasn't worth being explained as he moves their little bowls filled with candy, icing, and the baking sheets with the unassembled winning gingerbread.

Having seen how Christmas mattered to the Scriven family—and the photo album with the gingerbread house Thea and Jules built as recently as three years ago—Adrian knew they'd win, even if the idea of taking care of their own daughter didn't seem like much of a prize.

"What do I do?" Adrian asks, wrapping his arms around her waist, burying his face against the crook of her neck. "Boss me around, Thea Tea."

"You can stay right where you are."

"Cuddling you?"

"Yes ... Actually, can you tie my hair?"

"Bun or ponytail?"

As if it requires physical effort, Adrian unravels his arms from around her waist, taking a step back while fidgeting with the hair tie that had a perpetual place in his wrists, always readily available for when Thea needed one.

With a baby who gave new meaning to death grip, it came in handy often.

"Bun."

"Aye aye, captain." Adrian marvels at how her shoulders rise in a silent laugh, refusing to let him fully bask in being able to make her laugh.

That had always been his favorite thing to do.

It was as if the imprint of her joy gave him some sort of superpower, as if it extended his life by hundreds of thousands of years that he'd get to spend by her side.

Thea lolls her head back when his long fingers brush against the nape of her neck, sending a chill down her spine and spreading goosebumps over her skin.

“Sorry,” he whispers, his voice in a soft drone that makes her stomach flutter. “Tight or loose?”

“Whatever you want.”

It would be a lie to claim Adrian only began to learn how to tie long hair or do braids once they learned they would have a daughter.

In reality, he started blow-drying Thea’s hair whenever she postponed showering in favor of writing, only to find herself with wet hair and too tired to dry her hair.

Then, Adrian figured that if he was going to dry her hair, he might as well style it, and slowly, he found himself learning how to do a simple braid, putting her hair in a ponytail, and trying to survive the way Thea would bat her lashes at him while he tried to focus on the task at hand.

“Good?”

“Perfect,” Thea says after wiggling her head, checking if her hair is securely twisted on top of her head. Then, like magic, his arms find their place back around her waist as he watched Thea work.

Piece by piece, the gingerbread house gains form.

The windows and door are drawn in thick, uneven dots before Thea glues the four pieces in a generous layer of icing.

One might even consider it to be too generous of a layer when it looks like it’s spilling out from within. Yet, most of the icing goes on the roof, dripping down in an unpleasant form that even Lala would be able to achieve.

“Are you sure—”

“Trust me and tell me what Olivie said to insult you.”

“How do you know she insulted me?”

“She had that glint of mischief ... and because I told her that she can only insult you in front of Lala if it's not in Portuguese or English.”

“I don't know if I should feel giddy you don't want her to insult me in a language Lala is guaranteed to speak, or if I should be heartbroken you're still letting her insult me.”

“Giddy, definitely giddy.” Thea picks up a few green and orange Skittles, using them to fill in the door. “I'm a younger sister; I know insulting her brother is a form of love language.”

“Love language *o perché è una stronza?*³”

“Uhm,” she drones, smiling at how Adrian drags his scratchy chin over the nape of her neck. “*Stronzo* and *stronza* is the offensive word here?”

“*Esattamente.*”⁴

“Stop talking Italian, Adrian Friedman. That's a dangerous thing to my heart.”

“*E perché? Sei una ragazza molto intelligente...molto bella e solo mia, non è vero?*”⁵

“Adrian...”

³ Translation: “Love language or because she's an asshole?”

⁴ Translation: “Exactly.”

⁵ Translation: “And why is that? You're a very intelligent girl...very beautiful and only mine, isn't it true?”

“Te voglio bene, Thea ... Io ti desidero più di quanto abbia desiderato nessun altro.”⁶

“Ok! We’re done!” Thea announces, slipping away from Adrian’s embrace with heat kissing her cheeks.

His eyes track the column of her throat rising as Thea swallows hard, fingers gripping the edge of the marble countertop in a way that tells Adrian she’s not yet ready for more than flirting.

It didn’t matter.

Adrian could wait until she’s ready to have him worship her once more.

“Are you sure we’re done?” Adrian leans in to whisper to her, eyeing the way their rivals seemed to be much more careful in their placements and icing usage.

“Yes. It’s perfect.”

“Perfect, like you.”

That was a lie, one of the few lies Adrian would ever tell Thea, as she was actually perfect, and their gingerbread house was more abstract than perfect.

But if she loved it and felt proud of it, then so did he.



Well, it seems Olivie’s love for Thea didn’t translate into loving their monstrous gingerbread house, and no amount of protesting from Adrian changed the result.

In the end, they were placed last.

It shouldn’t have been surprising that Cove and Matthew won the little competition. The boy has a young

⁶ Translation: “I love you Thea ... I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone else.”

sister who'd force him to join in the task of decorating her gingerbread house.

"A master," Adrian mutters, kicking up snow as he repeats what Thea exclaimed when seeing Matthew's creation. "If he's a master, then what am I? A masterpiece?"

Huffing like a tired dog, a cloud of air billows in front of his mouth. Adrian couldn't help but think he could've done better than Matthew if he didn't find so much more pleasure in watching Thea have fun.

If he had known she would give such high praise to the winner, then he would've shown her how crafty he could be. It wouldn't even matter that Adrian had never done anything other than eat gingerbread cookies; for Thea, he would become an architect within hours to swoon her off her feet.

"That boy better not break mine and Cove's heart by having Thea fall in love with him...God, what if he's already working on making Lala love him too?"

Adrian stops walking, planting both feet on the snow-covered ground as he turns his gaze heavenward. He doesn't know why, but a part of him is waiting for a voice to echo down to him, whispering that if Matthew dared to even think of running away with Thea, then some greater force would lash him with a thousand thunders.

Instead, the wild howls in his ears, reminding Adrian of why he insisted on being the one to drop off Lala's diaper bag and frozen bags of breastmilk in case there was too much snow for Cove and Matthew to go find them.

Kicking up more snow with each step, Adrian hurries toward their cabin, looking so much like a penguin in all the layers he'd been wearing.

It doesn't take long for him to be able to see inside their cabin, where flames dance within the fireplace, but the living room is empty.

"Thea?" Adrian calls out, his voice drowned by the gust of wind breaking into the cabin when he pulls the door open. "Are you in the bedroom?"

Surely she isn't running away with Matthew, Adrian broods, shedding the boots, scarf, and beanie. His heart nearly stops when soft footsteps echo from the hallway.

"Thea Te—"

"Oh! You're back!" She exclaims over Adrian, smiling at how his head whips toward the sound of her voice, quickly shimmying out of his jacket. "Why does it look like you saw a ghost? Or, like you were being hunted by one?"

Adrian proffers his hands toward Thea, pretending to be unwounded when she doesn't take them, keeping her arms behind herself.

"I thought you were running off with Matthew."

"Why?"

"You called him a master!" He walks toward her, studying the curve of her smile—it held some kind of malice to it.

"Goodness, you discovered our plan? We've always wanted to be gingerbread house engineers; together we'll conquer the—"

"You did call him a master."

Thea takes a step away from Adrian when he gets close enough for his fingers to brush against her waist. "And that means I'm in love with him?"

"Your mom cares a lot about Christmas."

"Again, and that means I'm in love with him?"

“She’d be happy to have him building gingerbread houses with her... I can’t build them with her; she doesn’t even like me.”

“You don’t like her either, and I said, ‘I’m a master,’ not that Matthew was a master.”

Dark brows knit close together, forming a deep crease between them—the kind Thea only saw when Adrian was focused on deciphering a truly awful book that’s been praised by readers.

“You’re a master, but,” Adrian pauses, running a hand through his hair that had been flattened by the beanie. “Well, you were a master. I’m not sure your vision was very good today, but next year I trust we’ll win.”

“No. Today went according to plan.”

The glint in her eyes tells Adrian she truly believed that to be the case, even if the idea of Cove babysitting—albeit under his parents distant supervision—wasn’t exactly Adrian’s idea of victory.

“You don’t believe I was a master, do you?”

“Well, the walls didn’t seem very sturdy, but I’m—”

“Will you crouch down for me?” Thea speaks over him, lips caught by her teeth as she sways on the balls of her feet. “More,” she demands when Adrian only bends a little bit.

Adrian raises his brows, head tilting slightly as he waits. Yet, Thea doesn’t move for several moments, simply sustaining his gaze while a smile melts over her lips.

It was the kind of sight that made him a little breathless, like watching dusk turn into dawn and all of the beautiful hues the sky gains in that metamorphosis.

“What is—” The words slip off into silence when she lifts an arm, holding a mistletoe above their heads. “Oh, a mistletoe!”

“Merry Christmas, my dear husband.”

Warmth rises to his cheeks with the faint promise that one day, he wouldn’t get flustered over the simple yet fantastic fact he was Thea’s husband.

“Can I kiss you?”

“That’s usually what happens under a mistletoe.”

“Uhm,” he drones, lips brushing over hers, shuddering over the chill traveling down his spine when Thea wraps her arms around his neck. “If we kiss under a mistletoe, I wonder what happens if we made a bed out of it.”

Thea laughs against his mouth, lids fluttering close with the little seed it plants in her mind. “Is that something you still want?”

“Yes...isn’t it what you want? Is it because I don’t have a soft belly?”

“What?”

Sweeping Thea off the floor, Adrian holds her against his body, trying not to blush further when Thea wraps her legs around his waist, clinging to him as Adrian takes careful yet decisive steps toward their bedroom.

“I’ve been reading about it, you know? I didn’t know women preferred dad bods, and I know mine isn’t soft and hairy, but I’m working on really enjoying beer... There isn’t much I can do about becoming hairy, though.”

A rich, joyous belly laugh echoes against the wooden walls, filling Adrian with warmth and confusion as he lays Thea down in their bed.

“Wait, is that why you’ve been avoiding me?” Adrian nods sheepishly. “We haven’t had sex because you think I’m not attracted to you?”

“That’s what you said before.”

“No, when I was pregnant I said I wasn’t—” The words hang unspoken as Thea remembers the last time Adrian had tried to initiate sex and how her hands had gestured between them as she explained she wasn’t attracted to the idea of having sex while heavily pregnant.

Somehow, Adrian took it to mean she wasn’t attracted to him, and not to the belly between them that made even kissing more complicated than it should be.

“God, we’re so stupid.”

“Do explain,” Adrian pleads softly, fingers raking over her thighs. “Because I’m still conflicted between stopping Pilates and the need to be strong enough to be able to carry Lala as she grows up.”

“Months ago, when I turned down sex, it wasn’t because you weren’t attractive, but because being heavily pregnant made the idea of sex almost laborious.”

“Oh!”

“Yeah, oh... So, just so we’re clear, you haven’t initiated sex since because of that? And not because of my body? I thought seeing me pregnant made you see me as a mom and not as a wife.”

Adrian lets his hands dip under the hem of her sweater, caressing the warm skin as his digits trace the contour of her waist.

“Are you kidding me, Thea Scriven-Friedman? Seeing you pregnant...seeing you now, right this second, is maddening to me. Becoming a mother made you infinitely more beautiful, partially because you seem happier—”

"I am... happier, I mean."

"Good. Happiness looks good on you."

"You know what doesn't look good on you?" Thea asks in a low, husky voice, rolling in bed to pull her sweater over her head, enjoying the deep breath Adrian takes upon seeing the green lingerie she wears. "Being overly zealous about me and my opinion. Talk to me, Adrian; don't let assumptions drift us apart, and I'll do the same. Deal?"

"Deal. Does that mean—"

"Now, what was it that you said before? *ti desidero...*"

"*Ti desidero più di quanto abbia desiderato nessun altro.*"

"I still have no idea what that means, so please, kiss me silly and realize how truly masterful I was today. Thanks to me, we won't have to think of being quiet."

"How did I get so lucky with you?"

"The same way I got lucky with you."

Adrian sits up in bed, fingers finding home in Thea's hair as he pulls her into a kiss, welcoming the way her hands quiver slightly when tugging on his sweater.

"I promise you, Thea Scriven, Santa came with you in his mind."

"And now so will you," she teases, laughing against that innocent kiss.

It was silly, really, how they both worried for months about not being enough for each other when they were two halves of a soul sharing different bodies.

They were born to share a life together, to find beauty in every dark corner of each other's mind, and to be drawn to every imperfection.

Ellie Owen

At times, Adrian forgets there is no reason for anxiety, for worrying Thea wouldn't love him when they were the wings to an airplane, the s'more to a bonfire, the clouds to a morning sky.

One didn't make sense without the other, having a way of finding their way back to balance.