

A Rock Chick Christmas

By Kristen Ashley

Luke Stark was angling out of his Porsche when he got a text from his wife.

Do we have a Phillips head screwdriver?

Stark was of two minds at getting this text message.

One, he felt it was persuasive evidence that he was doing his job as a husband and father that his wife did not know if they owned a tool that probably 99.5% of every American households had.

Two, he was glad he loved her so fucking much, because Ava having him and their two daughters at Christmas to spoil did his head in every goddamned year.

And he was in no doubt this was about Christmas.

Gracie or Maisie were getting something that needed assembly, he'd put money on it.

Before he walked into Lincoln's Roadhouse, he texted back,

Yes, and whatever you're doing, don't do it. I'll do it when I get home.

This was his reply for two reasons.

One, she'd fuck it up and it'd take him twice as long to unfuck it as it would for him to do it from the beginning.

Two, it was persuasive evidence he was doing his job as a husband and a father that she didn't have to do that kind of shit.

This wasn't about "man's work." He knew everything a man could do, a woman could do.

That was just the way.

But his wife had zero interest in anything that involved a screwdriver (hence her fucking shit like that up).

Yeah, he wasn't a screwdriver kind of guy either, but he also wasn't a vacuuming kind of guy, and she did that, and he sensed when she did, it was not the highlight of her day.

So he could bust out the screwdrivers.

He was not surprised to see Lee and Hector already at the bar

What he was surprised about was that Eddie, Hank, Vance and Ren were *not* at the bar.

Their wives, collectively known as the Rock Chicks, were all gung ho holiday freaks.

In other words, take a normal gung ho holiday person, make that high octane, launch it into space, and you got a Rock Chick Holiday.

They were so damned into that shit, in truth, by Christmas, the women were halfway burned out.

It was a miracle the men survived Halloween, the first in the spate of torture.

For Stark, that required his entire collection of screwdrivers, his hammer, his drill, phone calls to all of his buds to help out and seven trips to Lowe's seeing as Ava wanted all the kids that came to their door to enter the house, walk through a "scary, but not too scary" haunted house, and hit the backyard where their folks would be waiting.

This was where she provided candy and cider for the kids, hot appetizers and alcoholic cider, beer and wine for the adults and a fire in their firepit where the kids (and adults) could make s'mores.

The Rock Chicks all pitched up at their house to help out after they took their own kids on the rounds.

The men came with them to drink Stark's beer and gird their loins for the next three and a half months.

Their neighbors came in droves.

Last year, a damn party bus stopped out front.

And his wife waved them all in.

Waved them all in.

With Stark's job, and the one he had before, he'd become well acquainted with many of the varieties of walking shitpiles that called themselves humans.

And his wife was waving every stranger who turned up through their door.

So yeah, Stark and all the men drank beer, girded their loins, patrolled the haunted maze they'd built, and they did this packing.

And every year, the haunted house had to be different, because, "we don't want people to get bored, Luke!"

He didn't give a fuck if people got bored.

No, strike that.

He was perfectly fine if people got bored.

He'd go for that.

But it was not up to him.

Thanksgiving was also a nightmare.

You could (and he did, because he liked it but also because of his job) spend the entire year keeping in optimal shape.

And then, with the Rock Chicks in charge of Thanksgiving, you could blow twelve months of that in one day.

Just weeks ago, the women got in some potato-making fight about which one of them had the best potato dish and the men had to be the judge of that shit.

There were so many goddamn casserole dishes on Daisy and Marcus's sideboard, he was still having dreams about some jackass outrunning him due to his big gut filled with starch.

And he never again in his life wanted to tell Daisy Sloan her potato dish, or anything, was not top of the heap.

The life he'd lived, the things he'd seen and done, Stark feared very little.

But he thought he was going to get his eyes clawed out by those talons she called nails.

Seriously, did she think he wasn't gonna vote for his own wife's dish?

Christ.

By Christmas the women were waxy-eyed and strung out, prone to tears and tantrums, and difficult to control.

Stark used orgasms.

Dual purpose.

They kept Ava sane.

And him.

His phone binged before he even made it to the guys, and it wasn't like Lincoln's was that big.

When are you coming home?

Not now, he replied. Then sent, *At Lincoln's*.

This, he knew, when she wanted his ass home, would not be well received.

But Jesus Christ, they were deep in month two of the torture.

He needed a beer.

He slid in beside Hector, sat his ass on a stool and jerked his chin up at the bartender.

He had a Fat Tire in front of him and his bud beside him clearly reading Stark's mood, because he was saying, "I don't wanna hear it. Whatever it is isn't as bad as what I'm facing. Sadie's changed the passwords to our online accounts, bank and credit. The first year we were together for Christmas she bought me a new truck and it's been escalating ever since."

Stark took a swallow of his beer and slid his eyes to his friend.

"But denied access to what's happening with our money is a new level," he finished.

He and Stark both worked for Lee. Lee owned the premier private investigations agency in Denver, but took cases throughout the Rocky Mountain region, so they were always busy.

Lee charged top dollar.

He paid exceptionally well.

But still, Hector's wife was loaded.

Hector hated getting expensive presents from his wife.

Did that stop Sadie?

Fuck no.

"Can she beat a speedboat?" Lee asked.

Yup.

The woman had bought Hector a speedboat last year.

And the year before, an Airstream because they liked to go camping.

This was after a watch that cost as much as a car.

Though, that watch was the shit.

Even Hector thought so.

And Stark had been in that speedboat multiple times.

That was the shit too.

"She's Sadie," Hector answered Lee.

Which probably meant condo in Breckenridge seeing as Hector, Sadie, their kids, all the Rock Chicks, their men and the kids old enough to do it liked to board or ski.

He couldn't deny, it'd be seriously solid, Sadie got Hector a condo for Christmas. They were up there so much during ski season, it'd be awesome to have a place to crash, and both Sadie and Hector were generous with their toys.

Case in point, his ass multiple times in that speedboat.

And he, Ava and the girls had taken the Airstream up to Yellowstone for vacation that summer.

His phone binged, and as he suspected, his last answer was not well received.

Not now doesn't work for me, she texted. This has to get done tonight.

Is this for Christmas? he returned just as he felt Hector and Lee shift, turned his head and saw Hank heading their way.

Hank was Lee's older brother. He was not employed at Nightingale Investigations. He was a cop.

But the look on his face did not say he'd had a rough day at the cop shop.

It said he was a man who foolishly agreed to get married on Christmas Eve to a gung ho holiday woman so his hell was twice as serious as the rest of theirs.

Stark was counting down the days to Valentine's.

That was a holiday he could get on board with.

Not only was he going to get laid, he could get away with buying Ava something sexy, spoiling her with something expensive, *and* Valentine's heralded the official end to holiday season.

Easter always jogged up and sputtered out. By then, even the women had had enough. Not to mention, every man (weirdly, but no one questioned it) had a skilled hand with decorating eggs. The women just got the kids Easter baskets, they hit up church, did the hunt, ate until they were sick (again)...and done.

Though, he got laid on Christmas and Christmas Eve too, guaranteed.

It might run her ragged, but his wife got off on pampering him and their family, doing it up big, and that included a pre-Christmas gift that rocked his world, and an end-of-Christmas gift that blew his mind.

And after she emerged from her food coma on Thanksgiving, when their girls were in bed, she was raring to go, to "burn off that pecan pie."

Halloween didn't suck either.

She was so tired, she couldn't muster the energy.

So he got to eat her out and take all the time he liked.

And that was a night the handcuffs came out.

Absolutely.

Ava felt it went with the theme of the holiday.

Stark didn't care what she felt, except a climax while cuffed to their bed.

"I'm ubering," Hank announced when he shifted in beside Lee. He then ordered a whiskey.

"That bad?" Lee asked.

Hank looked down at his brother on his stool. "Roxie just phoned. Herb and Trish are coming for Christmas. And she admitted she's known this now for a month, she's just been delaying in telling me, because it's Herb and Trish."

Collectively, the men sucked in breaths in brotherhood.

Herb and Trish were Roxie's folks. They were lunatics, but they were hilarious.

They were this because they were not his in-laws.

But Trish made the Rock Chicks look like amateurs when it came to getting your holiday freak on.

And Herb took over the meat portion of any meal being cooked around him. Even though Hank was the man of his house, and every man knew, you did not take over the meat portion of dinner in a man's house.

You just didn't.

It was the code.

A code that was laid down by the goddamned cavemen, for Christ's sake.

Herb hadn't been informed of the code, or more accurately, didn't give a fuck.

The Thanksgiving before their last, they were out and Herb grilled the bird. With mesquite.

It was outstanding.

Stark had a sense Hank agreed.

He still didn't like it.

Stark's phone binged again.

Yes, it's for Christmas. It still has to get done tonight.

Christmas is thirteen days away, he returned.

He barely got another sip of his beer in before she replied, *I DON'T EVEN HAVE THE CHRISTMAS CARDS IN THE MAIL!*

Stark wasn't going to touch that one.

Every year, she wanted a family Christmas portrait to put on their card.

Every year, he flatly refused to carve however long that would take out of his life to sit and smile at a motherfucking camera like a motherfucking idiot.

He had the Christmas portraits he wanted.

They lined the wall of the hall upstairs.

Every Christmas he and his woman had shared, after the presents were opened, he nabbed Ava's selfie stick, and they sat in front of the tree, cuddled together, pajamas, bedheads, big smiles, from before Gracie, every year to the last.

Pure beauty.

He did not need a backdrop, some generically decorated tree to their sides and to put on a red sweater.

No fucking way.

Baby, chill. I'll be home in an hour and I'll sort it after the girls are in bed, he replied.

“Does anyone know the purpose of Christmas cards?” he asked after he’d hit go on the text.

“Indy said it’s so you could make all your friends feel inferior with your letter that shares all the fantastic shit you did during the year, but leaves out how you had a knockdown drag-out at Disney World, your kid started throwing tantrums and was in timeout more than he was out of it, and you didn’t talk to your husband for a week because he forgot your anniversary,” Lee answered. “She also says the Rock Chicks have more reason, because they always add pictures, and it rubs in how hot the Hot Bunch are.”

Their women were known as the RCs.

They’d named the men the Hot Bunch.

It was goofy AF.

But they could have a worse tag.

Eddie sauntered up and the mood of the men deteriorated.

This was because Eddie was married to Jet, who was sweet, quiet, and got on with shit with little to no drama. She did not like attention. What she did like was her husband and their three sons.

And she liked them a lot.

On the scale of holiday crazy, Eddie was below the norm, as was Vance, who was married to Jules, who, after she went vigilante and declared war on all the drug dealers of Denver (even if

that was lunacy, she still had cause), she became one of the most level-headed women Stark had ever met (outside Jet).

The rest of them were ringing the bell at the top.

Stark had experienced the emotion of envy three times in his life.

The first two came from the fact that Ava got nine months as close as you could get to their two girls before he even met them.

And the last was Eddie and Vance during holiday season.

“Yep,” Eddie said to the bartender who was holding up a bottle of Fat Tire.

It was popped and Eddie reached between Hector and Stark to grab it.

“You fuckin’ suck,” Hector muttered.

Eddie grinned at his bottle before he took a draw.

Stark’s phone went again and he looked at it.

Fuck.

A threat.

I’m starting it.

You start, you don’t get an orgasm until the New Year. I take care of assembly of my girls’ gifts.

Right.

That should do it.

He put his phone face down on the bar.

Vance moved in next to Eddie, and there was a Coke on the bar before he stopped moving.

Stark shot him a look.

Vance returned a shit-eating grin.

In that beat, it hit Stark that, a different turn of the cards, he’d have Jules in his bed, their children together under his roof, and Ava would be somewhere else with someone else and Gracie and Maisie wouldn’t exist.

A chill snaked down his spine at this thought, his stomach tightened, and he took up his beer again to get it down so he could get home.

General conversation was breaking out, but this halted when Ren showed at their huddle.

Ren Zano. Ally’s husband, Ally being Hank and Lee’s baby sister.

He was not a cop, like Hank (and Eddie) and he didn’t work for Lee, like the rest of them.

He worked with Marcus Sloan. They'd both gone legit after being very not legit, and they both currently made buckets of money after making buckets of money doing their other ventures.

They just now paid taxes on the shit they did.

Ally was the second-best private investigator in Denver.

But she still was a holiday freak.

Zano often hung with the guys, but not as often as they hung with each other by virtue they worked together, including, on more than a rare occasion, doing that work (officially or unofficially) with Hank and Eddie.

However, Zano's face did not say he was there to wind down and shoot the shit.

And then his words confirmed that, "We got a serious problem."

In their lines of business, this could mean anything.

But what Zano actually meant was that they had a *serious problem*.

"The women know our game. They're shutting it down. We're not gonna be able to find out what they want for Christmas by getting that information from the other wives through their men," Zano finished.

Shit.

Fuck.

"Ally didn't tell me," Zano went on. "Marcus told me. Daisy told Marcus. Ally doesn't know I know."

Since the beginning, Stark had been able to get Ava exactly what she wanted every Christmas (and birthday *and* anniversary, not to mention Valentine's) because he knew what that was seeing as he got that intel from Hank, or Lee or Vance, or one of them.

Now he was gonna have to fly blind?

They all were?

"Are you shitting me?" Lee asked.

"Nope," Zano answered.

"Fuck," Hank bit off.

"Yup," Zano replied.

"Why would they do that?" Hector asked.

"I don't know," Zano said. "Why do they do the majority of the shit they do?"

Good question.

One he didn't need an answer for.

They did.

The Rock Chicks were unpredictable.

They were all full of surprises.

Even Jet and Jules.

And that was why, for every man standing there, it worked.

He and Ava bickered.

It was just them.

He got off on it.

She was quick witted and didn't take his shit. She was beautiful to look at. A great mother.

Phenomenal in bed. And she challenged him.

It was true, and it was tedious, that before Ava, a guy like him could roll over or steam through every woman he'd meet.

And he did.

Hitting Ava was liking hitting a brick wall.

It stopped him in his tracks.

He hadn't stopped and taken notice of much his entire life. He kept going. From the minute he escaped his father's abuse, he was on a tear.

A tear to get away from the shit he took from his father, who never amounted to much, because he didn't try to, and was so jealous of his son who had his entire life ahead of him, it was acid burning in his veins.

The only neutralization was to do everything in his power to make certain his son turned out to be even less.

And the only response Stark had to that was to do everything in his power to make that not so.

However he had to do that.

And so he did and his father died knowing that he did.

It didn't give him the satisfaction he'd thought it would.

It just put that part of his life to an end.

And that worked for Stark.

Whatever it said about him, his tear through life included tearing through women.

He didn't think about it.

He didn't think about much but becoming the man he needed to be, living his life the way he wanted, doing the things he worked his ass off to become skilled at doing, making damned good money doing it, and above all, not turning out like his dad.

Then came Ava, who wasn't playing hard to get, she just was.

She'd loved him since they were kids and lived across the street from each other.

But she'd been burned bad—from a dad who took off without a word and never returned, to some seriously shitty boyfriends who fucked her over in extreme ways—she wasn't going there.

He had to win her.

And it was the goddamned, motherfucking truth she was the first thing he'd encountered in his life that was worth the effort of winning.

He went all out.

And now she wore his ring and gave him baby girls.

So Stark made sure every important date in their calendar year, she unwrapped something that was meaningful to her.

But if he did not get that from Lee (through Indy) or Hector (through Sadie) or one of them, he was fucked.

Hank stated Stark's opinion.

"This doesn't make any goddamned sense."

"To them it does," Zano replied.

"If they want something, why the hell would they cut off our path to the info to get it for them?" Lee asked.

"Apparently, according to Marcus, they want us to pay more attention to them," Zano shared.

"I do not go shopping with my wife, so how the fuck would I know what piece she wants from Night Rider?" Lee demanded.

Zano shrugged but answered, "You could ask the people at Night Rider. Ally's there as often as Indy is, mostly *with* Indy. And I swear to fuck, she gets Christmas cards from them."

"Lee, since you guys were kids, you always rocked your presents for Indy," Hank pointed out.

"Yeah, because I asked Ally what she wanted," Lee returned.

Hank grimaced.

Stark downed the rest of his beer, tagged his phone, turned it over, saw he did not have a return text, which could be good, but with this latest information, it could be bad, and then he slid off his stool and said, “I’m outta here.”

“Not letting grass grow?” Vance asked.

Stark stopped and looked at him. “Not letting my wife do something this stupid. I’m a man who likes to be challenged. I am not a man who likes to be tested.”

Vance just tipped his chin.

Eddie grunted, “I hear that.”

Yeah, even Eddie, with Holiday Chill Jet, got his intel from the men about what Jet wanted.

Stark passed a glance through them all as his way to say “later” and headed out to his Porsche.



“Daddaaaaaaay!”

Gracie, his oldest, raced up to him the minute he walked in the back door.

She was in his arms the next second, swung onto his back the second after that.

Part one of the routine every night he came home.

Then came part two.

“Dadeeeeeee!”

Maisie was next, but as her usual, she didn’t want a ride up top.

She sat on his foot, wrapped her arms and legs around his calf and knee and grinned up at him, her mother’s eyes in her beautiful face shining.

This meant Stark walked into his house like a peg-legged pirate.

He didn’t give a fuck.

“Good day?” he asked Gracie what he asked every night he got home.

“Good day!” she shouted, like she did every night he got home.

“Good day, Maze?” he asked his baby.

“Good day, Dadeeeeee!” she shouted.

Serious as shit, he was going to be one of those fathers who would work to make it so his daughters called him daddy until he died. He didn’t care if they were sixty by that time.

Only better sound was Ava whispering, “Love you,” in his ear before she fell asleep.

And he was going to work to get that every night until he died too.

They both got his dark hair, and Grace got his blue eyes.

And thank fuck, Maisie got her mom's light brown ones.

In truth, he wouldn't change a thing about either of his girls. They were gorgeous. They had their mom's attitude and both their parents' grit.

But that didn't mean there weren't times he wished that his physical traits weren't dominant because he would want one of them to look just like the girl who he'd watched grow up across the street.

The girl, who, outside his mom, had been the only truly decent, good, worthwhile thing in the life he'd lived under his father's roof.

He grinned at both his girls while moving from the mud room into the family room which took him to the kitchen where his wife was, unsurprisingly, entertaining.

The Rock Chicks were social.

But this was different.

This was Shirleen and her crew.

It wasn't blood.

But it still was family.

It could be argued all the Rock Chicks were family, and it would be Stark arguing that.

The bond Shirleen had with Ava, and his babies, was just that much more.

Shirleen, Lee's office manager, had claimed Ava during the time Stark and his woman were getting together.

And then Shirleen had claimed their daughters.

In other words, Shirleen was at their house and she was there often.

Shirleen had her ass to a seat at his bar.

Moses, Shirleen's husband, was at his stove.

Roam and Sniff, Shirleen's kids (who had been street kids, then her foster kids, now they were just her boys—although Roam was also Lee's since he worked with them, and Sniff was home for the holidays, because the rest of the time, he was Uncle Sam's), were also at his bar, stuffing their faces with a nut-crusted cheeseball and crackers.

Ava was dumping tater tots into the air fryer.

Stark looked from his wife, who did not look at him, to Shirleen, who gave him big eyes, to Moses, who caught his gaze and shook his head.

Right.

Ava was pissed.

“Yo,” he greeted generally. And after he got varieties of that back, he called, “Babe.”

She slammed the air fryer shut in a way there was a good possibility he was hitting Williams-Sonoma the next day to replace it and turned her glare at him.

He really wanted not to laugh.

And he conquered that feat.

But he felt half his mouth go up in a smile.

Her eyes blazed.

Damn, she was cute when she was pissed.

Then she got a load of him with their girls attached to him and her glare faltered.

On the whole, she did not hide she liked the way he looked.

But Stark loved her even more that it was impossible for her to hide that feeling significantly increased when she saw him with their babies.

“Babe,” he said softly.

She locked down on the pissed.

“I am utterly certain you feel like you’ve expressed volumes by saying that same word twice, but I can assure you, as I have assured you often during our years together, you haven’t.”

Sniff made a weird noise that Luke had heard often enough from the kid (or yeah, shit, now he had to call him a man because he just was), Stark knew it was a swallowed guffaw.

“Maybe we should talk,” he suggested.

“We have company for dinner,” she pointed out the obvious.

“Unka Moses brought over his baked beans!” Maisie squealed, unlatching from her father, taking her feet and rushing Moses, and Luke almost winced, because his daughter almost ran right into the man’s crotch.

Fortunately, Moses had his own kids, now grown girls, and therefore he had quick reflexes. His hip caught the impact then his hand fell to her head before he grinned down at her.

Good man, Moses. Relatively new to the crew.

Fit right in.

And Stark's girls, all of them, adored him.

"Uncle Moses, along with Sniff and Roam, took care of our other business too," Ava declared.

Stark went completely still.

Except to turn his head and look at his wife.

"Oh Lord," Shirleen muttered. "Grab the cheeseball, Roam. Sniff, get Gracie. We're movin' to the living room. Let's go."

Moses swept up Maisie as he moved to do what his wife did not verbally tell him to do.

Sniff started to ask, "Why are we—?"

"Dude," Roam said low. "Just grab Gracie."

Stark let Sniff take his older girl, but he turned his head and gave her a kiss on the cheek before he did.

When they were alone, Ava launched in.

"Luke, you weren't home and—"

Stark cut her off. "Was it a present for one of my girls?"

"It was a present for one of *our* girls."

"And you let Moses and the boys put it together?"

Ava, unusually belatedly, read his mood.

Her tone was much different when she said, "Honey, I needed that off my to-do list."

"You allowed someone, not their father, to put together a present for one of my daughters."

Ava did not repeat she did this.

Stark didn't need it.

"Do not...ever...fucking do that again, Ava," he growled.

She opened her mouth.

Stark didn't wait to hear what she had to say.

He turned on his boot and walked right back out to his Porsche.



It was late when Stark returned to his home.

He checked in on his daughters asleep in their beds before he moved to the master.

The double doors to that room were closed, but there was a light coming out from under them. Ava was waiting up for him.

Stark pushed in and saw his wife in their big bed, on top of the covers with a book, as he closed the door behind him.

“Luke,” she said, setting aside her book.

He ignored her and moved to the bathroom.

He was still pissed.

Driving around didn’t make him less pissed.

Hanging in the control room at the offices, sitting with Jack and keeping his eyes on the monitors didn’t make him less pissed.

Honest to God, since after Ava went through all she went through (and all she put *him* through) when they’d been reunited and fallen in love, he had not been this goddamned, motherfucking pissed.

And he’d learned, from the way his father was, and the fact his father gave him many things he never wanted, including his temper, when he got this pissed, he took it somewhere else.

What he did not do, would not ever do, was take it out on the people he loved.

Yeah.

His father taught him how shit that felt, and he did it repeatedly.

Stark was in his sleep shorts, bent over the basin, one hand braced to the counter, brushing his teeth, when she appeared at his side, leaning a hip into the counter.

“Honey—”

He pulled the toothbrush out, spit and turned only his head to her.

“This conversation is not gonna go well for you, so my advice, don’t start it.”

He then went back to brushing.

His wife, as usual, did not heed his advice.

“Okay, I see why you’re angry—”

He pulled the brush out and contradicted, “I’m not angry. I’m pissed.”

“Okay, I see why you’re pissed, but—”

“Ava, what did I tell you?”

“Stop interrupting me, Luke,” she snapped.

Yeah, his woman didn’t take any of his shit.

Even when he wanted her to.

He rinsed his brush, put it away, rinsed his mouth, spit, wiped down and threw the towel on the counter.

Only then did he turn to her and cross his arms on his chest before also leaning into the basin.

Her eyes dropped to his bare chest.

His wife dug his chest.

He was in no mood for Ava to share she loved his body.

He knew that already, the frequent reminders never sucked, but now was not the time.

“You don’t do all the stuff at Christmas I do,” she began. “The cards and all the shopping and the wrapping and the cookie baking. I mean, you buy my present, but you get help even doing *that*.”

There it was.

She kept at him.

“I’ve got a list a mile long, and if it gives me peace of mind to mark something off, and you can at least help me to do that, you should.”

“None of that shit, outside my girls, *all* of them,” he emphasized, “having a special day, means anything to me. I’ve told you this. You wanna do cards, fuck the environment, send cards no one gives a shit about.”

Her face screwed up.

He ignored it and kept at *her*.

“You wanna bake cookies. That’s your choice. You know what the girls’ teachers want?”

He asked that question but didn’t give her a chance to answer.

He kept going.

“Gift certificates to get coffee at Fortnum’s or to King Soopers so they can catch a break because their salaries suck balls. They get a bunch of shit from parents they probably gotta pretend they like and let it hang around for long enough it isn’t rude to re-gift it. You can pick those gift certificates up at the grocery store. And if you want, I’m all in. When I’m at the goddamned store, I’ll get them. What you do not have to do is fret and wander the mall trying to find the perfect thing because it’s just a thing. Seriously, Ava, there’s traction in the thought that counts.”

“People like presents, Luke,” she retorted.

“Babe, *you* make the decision to knock yourself out every year on all this shit. I drew the line years ago with you wanting the outside of our house to look like everyone else’s when that shit doesn’t mean *dick* except you give too much of a shit what the neighbors think. I told you then, I want my wife and daughters to enjoy the day. I don’t give a shit that people think I’m less of a man because I didn’t spend five hours the day after Thanksgiving stapling lights to my roof. If I did not ask my daughters if they had a good day every night when they come racing at me, that’d make me less of a man. My house not having Christmas lights does not. You knowing all of this, how are we still having this conversation?”

“Because you should care that it matters what *I*,” she leaned toward him with her hand at her chest, “think.”

Shit, he was going from pissed to something that might mean he’d have to take another drive. Or put on workout clothes and take a late-night run.

“I do care what you think,” he said softly, but it wasn’t a gentle soft, it was a dangerous one. “Have you considered you should care the same about what’s in my head?”

Her head jerked like he’d struck her.

He did not like that.

Fuck.

He got off on bickering with his wife.

He detested fighting with her.

“Babe, we are not your mom and dad,” he continued. “You do not have to fake it with the world to prove to them I love you, you love me, we love our daughters. Unless I’m seriously missing something in that, and if I am, I wanna talk about *that*. *That* is important. Not fucking Christmas.”

“It isn’t about my mom and dad,” she denied.

“It is,” he disagreed.

“Luke Stark, you think you do, but trust me, you don’t know everything.”

“Ava Stark, I know this.”

“Okay, here you go. It isn’t about my mom and dad. It’s about *your* mom and dad.”

He shut his mouth and concentrated on keeping his focus on her while the blood roared in his ears.

“Your mom...” she trailed off and looked away.

“I am not my father,” he growled.

Her head snapped back to face him.

“Of course not,” she whispered.

“He didn’t do dick at Christmas because he was a dick. I don’t do it because I don’t buy into it because I don’t think it means anything and I don’t like how you tie yourself in knots when it doesn’t fucking *mean anything*.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Best be tellin’ me what you meant, babe,” he warned.

“She tied herself in knots to give *you* a good Christmas. Your mom did.”

“And you’re trying to do that for me?”

Ava shrugged. “Maybe a little bit. Maybe mostly I’m trying to give you what you didn’t have because your dad was the way your dad was and I want you, and our family, to have it all.”

“And, Ava babe, I’m telling you, I *already have it all*.” He uncrossed his arm and swept it up between them, indicating her. “You’re standing right there, aren’t you?”

He watched her face freeze in a look of wonder.

He kept talking.

“Our girls are down the hall, healthy and full of your air fryer tater tots and Moses’s baked beans and the cookies Shirleen pretends she doesn’t know that we know she sneaks them, aren’t they?”

“Luke,” she whispered.

“I will spend hours putting together a dollhouse or a scooter or whatever the fuck for our girls. I will get that done in time for you to slap a bow on it. And *I*,” he pounded his chest, “will make sure it gets done. For you. For our babies. *You*,” he stabbed his finger at her, “do not ask someone else to touch that. That...is...*mine*.”

“Okay,” she said quickly, the look she got on her face when she’d seen him earlier with the girls coming out full force.

“And I’ll run the goddamn cards to the post office. I’ll run to Target at ten at night on Christmas Eve to buy more paper because you’re running out. I am not checked out, Ava. I’m just not as checked in as you are, and if that’s your choice to do it all, own it. But do not drag me with you because it’s not mine. And do not drag me with you because you think I’m missing

something and you're hell-bent to give it to me. I'm not. I come home to my wife and girls every night. You're with me, I got all I need until I die."

Her gorgeous face was soft and she was listing toward him, but he held up a hand.

"One other thing I need for Christmas is to get you what you want. You and the women better rethink your gambit of testing your men. It is not a cheat to ask Eddie or Hank to find out from Jet or Roxie what you want. It's using the resources at hand to give my woman what she wants."

"There isn't much thought put into that, honey," she said quietly. "I mean, we, all of us, wrack our brains for things to buy you guys every year."

"You wanna know why it's so hard to figure out what to get your men?"

She nodded.

"Ava babe, it's because *we already have what we want.*"

She stood solid.

"Is this getting through?" he asked.

"I'm totally gonna jump you right now," she said by way of answer.

Yeah.

It was getting through.

Still.

"Babe—"

He got nothing more out.

His wife jumped him.

Right, he was a guy, and a knockout gorgeous woman jumping him would get his attention.

But he was Luke, and she was Ava, so his wife jumping him, it was all over.

They could finish their conversation later.

For now, he let her kiss him until she sucked his tongue into her mouth.

Then he started kissing her.

He then picked her up.

She wrapped her legs around his hips.

He walked them to their bed and only disengaged their mouths when he was at the side of it.

He did this to throw her on it.

She bounced.

He watched, her hair, her face, her tits before his eyes went lower and saw her little white, lace-edged panties above the hem of her nightie that had flown up.

“Panties off,” he grunted.

His wife had that snatch of white off so fast, he felt one side of his lips hitch up.

“Luke, you’re too far away.”

He studied her, all that blonde hair, those eyes, that lush body.

“Ava baby, you are honest to Christ the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

She whimpered and started to make a move to launch herself at him again.

He moved faster, catching her ankles, pulling them apart, and putting a knee to the bed.

She settled.

He slid his lips from the inside of her knee to her pussy.

She unsettled.

He grinned again against her wet and then got serious.

In the end (of that part), he rolled and pulled her onto his face.

She rode his mouth until she came then she slid down, took him inside and rode his cock, not until he came.

He rolled her to her back and moved inside her with her hair all over their bed and her eyes still misted from coming and from fucking him and from loving him.

Oh yeah.

His wife was a goddamn knockout.

“Never doubt it,” he whispered.

“What?” she whispered back.

He glided in to the root, watched her eyes go hooded, got off on it, and replied, “I got everything I need, baby.”

She slid her hand over his hair, over the beard at his cheek, gave it a tug, and he took her mouth.

Then he took her there again before he joined her.

He did not shift his weight from her when he was done.

He liked her pinned under him and they both liked that he stayed inside until the natural functions of his body meant he could not.

But he kept some of his weight in his forearms even as he tangled his fingers in her hair.

“How about I give you three hints, easy ones, even though you’re an investigator so you’d figure out the hard ones, but so it’s not a test, just some fun, as to three things I want. You can pick, and I’ll be surprised on Christmas,” she suggested.

“Will there be one thing in those three you want more than the others?” he asked.

“Luke, I’ll like anything you get me.”

“Will there be one thing in those three you want more than the others?” he repeated.

She took his face in both her hands. “Luke, *I will like anything you get me.* I get your point. But the flipside of that is, you cannot fail because if you took the time to find something for me that you think I’d like, I’ll like it.”

He was dubious about this assertion.

“God,” she whispered, studying him closely, “it means a lot to you to get me what I want.”

“Well, yeah,” he affirmed the obvious.

She lifted her head and his fingers sifted through her hair when she did, double goodness after she planted a kiss on his lips.

When she set her head back to their bed, she said, “I’ll make sure one of the Hot Bunch knows my deepest Christmas desire.”

He grinned at her.

Her eyes dropped to watch as she slid her thumb along his lips.

His cock was losing her, so he bent and she only slid her thumb away when his lips hit hers.

He kissed her wet then he pulled them both out of bed.

They cleaned up, returned to bed and hit the sack, Stark on his back, Ava curled tight to his side.

“I fucked up with Moses and the guys,” she whispered in his ear. “I never should have done that, honey.”

He used his arm around her to give her a squeeze, sharing he was over it and it was okay.

“Are you worried about the environment?” she asked.

“Babe, we got two girls who might not have anything worthwhile to inherit if we don’t pull our fingers out.”

“Lucas Stark, environmentalist,” she teased.

“Luke Stark, father,” he did not tease.

She pressed closer and let that do the talking.

Then she said, "It'd be boss, not having to do cards anymore."

He let that lie.

Her decision.

But yeah, it would be boss for more than one reason.

He knew she was ready to call it when she whispered, "Love you," in his ear.

"Love you too, baby," he murmured back.

Ava fell asleep before he did.

She always fell asleep before he did.

This was because he made that so.

He might have had a physically impactful day and he'd be worn out.

He still fought sleep until he knew she found it.

This so he could lay there, feel her close, listen to her breathe, know his daughters were tucked safe, and have a few beats of quiet where he could sense his home and understand it was all right for him to lay down the vigil and get some rest.

He did all that.

And then he closed his eyes and got some rest.



Christmas morning, Gracie and Maisie were wrestling him on the floor by the tree among a mess of spent Christmas wrap, ribbons, bows and opened presents.

And Stark was letting them win.

In the middle of this, Ava showed carrying two coffee cups she'd gone to the kitchen to refill.

She had on a gray nightshirt that went to her knees and had on it the body of an elf that started at the neckline and said under it ELFIE SELFIE.

That nightshirt was goofy AF.

The girls loved it.

Stark did too.

She had that look on her face that shared how much she loved how much he loved their girls.

Then she set the coffee mugs down and pounced.

"Mommmaaaaaay!" Gracie squealed in joy, and they all went on attack.

With Ava in play, Stark had to put more effort into it.

And obviously, so he could communicate to the females under his roof that he could protect them, he made it so the girls felt like they were winning, but he pinned his wife.

His babies, sharp as tacks, read his game, the tables turned and the girls ganged up on their mother.

“Luke!” she snapped when he was covering her and Maisie was holding down one of her arms over her head and Gracie was lying along Stark’s leg, which put her on top of her mother’s leg.

“What?” he asked, grinning down at her.

“You let the girls win,” she stated.

He faked a severe expression. “I do not. My babies got chops.”

“We got chops!” Maisie yelled.

Stark had no idea why both of them needed to yell everything all the time.

He just knew when they stopped, he’d wish they didn’t.

So he didn’t tell them to do it now.

He just tipped his head back and smiled at his girl.

Maisie giggled as she smiled back at her daddy.

He had to pay attention when his wife attempted to buck him off.

She failed in doing this and collapsed under him, crying, “I give! You win!”

“We win! We win!” Gracie yelled, jumping up and then jumping around.

Maisie joined her sister.

Stark kissed the frown from his woman’s face.

Then he pulled them up off the floor and asked the room at large, “Who wants more hot chocolate?”

“Me!” Maisie shouted.

“Me!” Gracie yelled.

He swooped Maisie up and got another squeal as he did and a further one when he tossed her over his back and started walking to the kitchen with her dangling upside down from his shoulder.

“You’re my helper,” he decreed.

“Okay, Daddy,” she agreed excitedly, wrapping her little arms around him as far as they would go, which was not very far.

They were into anything, his girls. Helping with hot chocolate. Helping him wash his Porsche. Racing to the car when he told them he needed assistants at the grocery store.

All three Stark women.

Perfection personified.

His coffee was probably cold when they got back to the family room with two mugs of cocoa topped high with marshmallows.

Gracie was lying on her belly on the floor, sticking stickers in a book.

Ava was curled in what she called their “cuddle chair,” which was a comical name for a loveseat, fingers wrapped around her coffee mug, eyes on the fire Stark built while she was making coffee before they dug into presents.

Her face was relaxed and content, and Bing Crosby and David Bowie singing her favorite Christmas song was drifting through the room.

He set Gracie’s cocoa on the floor by her book, she muttered, “Thanks, Daddy,” then stuck out her tongue as she smooshed another sticker into her new book (a present from Shirleen).

Fuck, he loved that kid.

He then went and claimed his wife, not his coffee.

She had the diamonds in her ears.

Two carats each side.

What she wanted (though she hadn’t asked for those carats, just diamond studs, but that was what she got).

He figured she actually wanted diamonds.

But he knew she also wanted to start collecting things they could leave their daughters that had meaning, memory and worth that would remind their girls how much their parents loved each other after their parents were gone.

He knew this because she whispered that in his ear after she lost her mind when she opened them and threw herself at him (that last part, he reckoned, was about four carats).

She’d get her reward for that later, that night, after the girls were in bed.

From her, he got a letter stating she'd made a donation in his name to the Denver Rescue Mission, and her donation was such, three hundred people who would otherwise go without a meal that holiday season, were going to be able to eat.

His best present that year was wrestling on the floor with all his girls.

But the one Ava gave him was second-best.

She was finally with the program.

He stretched his legs out on the ottoman and Ava curled closer to him, fingers hooked in her mug which she rested on his stomach, her head on his shoulder.

"Not your dad," she said so quietly, he almost didn't make out the words.

But he got them.

"Babe," he murmured.

She said (repeatedly) she couldn't read the varied meanings he laid out behind that word, but he knew she read precisely how much what she said meant by the look he caught on her face when she tipped her head back and he dipped his chin down.

"Merry Christmas, Luke," she whispered.

"Merry Christmas, Ava baby," he whispered back.

She touched her lips to his.

When she settled back in, Stark grabbed the remote and went back to Crosby and Bowie so Ava could hear her favorite song again.

Then Stark settled in.

And they watched their girls play nestled in bright spent wrapping paper and glittering ribbon, next to a sparkling tree as they listened to a pretty, hopeful song about Peace on Earth.

Even after the song, and getting through one by the Carpenters, another from Whitney Houston, Stark sat content, tangled with his woman in their cuddle chair with their daughters close.

And then with a kiss, he disengaged from his wife.

To go get the selfie stick.

 ***The End*** 

Very Happy Holiday Wishes from All the Rock Chicks and the Hot Bunch!

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