



ALL THE *Jingle* LADIES



*Rocked* BY THE  
**BAD BOY**  
JESSA JOY

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ALL THE JINGLE LADIES



# JESSA JOY





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## ROCKED BY THE BAD BOY INFO

### **Billie**

I hate Christmas for a very good reason.

My vow for the holidays is no men, no problem.

I'm making some extra holiday money dressed as an elf.

That's when I meet Raff, my gorgeous new manager.

And suddenly, all bets are off...

### **Raff**

I'm in a good place after being an out-of-control DJ for years.

Now I'm in Snowflake Falls looking after my brother's event space.

That's where I meet Billie and she entrances me.

The problem is, I have a huge secret.

But this bad boy is determined to get his Christmas angel.

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# PROLOGUE



## RAFF

THE REPETITIVE BEAT OF THIS TRASHY REMIX OF “SANTA Baby” is giving me a headache. There isn’t enough bass and the vocal line sounds tinny, like a choir of chipmunks has taken over. What should be a knowing, sexy song is just irritating. Or maybe I’m coming down?

I’m floating in a pink-lit swimming pool in a house somewhere in Malibu. My manager Dave’s friend is one of those bigshot producers, with even more money than me, and this is one of his mistress’s houses. Dave informed me of our destination with relish. “One of his mistresses, Raff. You know you’ve made it when you have more than one paid side chick. I think he has four.”

This might be Dave’s ultimate fantasy, but it’s not mine. My eyelids are heavy from the pills I’ve taken and the expensive champagne we necked when we got here is making me sleepy. I could nap.

I lean my head back on the inflatable. It’s in the shape of either a donut or a boob, I’m not sure which. I’ve been floating around in circles for a long time. The girls here circled me like sharks when I arrived, so I slipped out to the backyard and got in the pool. It’s a cool night in LA, and most people are inside.

I take another swig from the bottle in my hand, the alcohol burning my throat and numbing the pain for a moment. I know it’s not a permanent solution, but it’s the only thing that seems to help, even a little. The music is getting louder now, the cheesy lyrics filling the air around me. I should go back inside,

join the party, and pretend like everything is okay. But I can't bring myself to do it.

The stars are out in the cloudless night sky, twinkling above me. It's like they're flashing on and off in time to the music. My head is heavy, and my eyes struggle to focus. I can hear laughter and voices coming from inside the house, but they are too far away to make out. I can't seem to shake off the feeling of emptiness that has been gnawing at me for weeks. It's like a black hole that sucks in all of my happiness, leaving nothing but darkness and despair. My therapist thinks I'm having an existential crisis. Maybe I am.

The sliding door opens and someone comes outside.

"Raff...Raff. Raffy? Mate?" It's Dave. Even in an exaggerated whisper, his British accent is a dead giveaway.

"In the pool." My voice sounds weird, like it's coming from far away.

Dave walks to the edge of the pool. "Come on over here, mate. Paddle if you must."

I kick my legs and move the inflatable until I'm close to where he's standing. He crouches down so our eyes are on the same level, wobbling to remain upright on his haunches. He's wearing sunglasses, but where mine are tinted yellow, his are mirrored and I can't see his eyes. All that's reflected is me, sprawled on a tiny donut, spinning round and round in the pink pool.

"There are some VIPs inside. Are you too fucked to give them a little performance? The dude that owns this place has decks and everything, not that I think he knows how to use it." Dave puffs on his vape and a cloud of weed smoke billows across the pool.

"No, I'm not into it. I don't feel like partying, okay?" I spin around again so I'm facing away from him. In the distance, there are clouds approaching. Steady rain would suit my mood better.

"Listen, mate." Dave is pissed. He only says 'listen' when he's starting to get angry.

“I can’t hear you, Dave. I’m meditating.” The inflatable donut/boob spins faster.

“Yes, you bloody can. Stop being such a dickhead and get inside. They’re all doing coke and you’ll have a rapt audience. I’ve been bigging you up for the last fifteen minutes. It could be very lucrative if you get a film deal.” Dave reaches out and stops the inflatable spinning with his foot. He almost falls in but grabs the back of a chair in time.

“I’m not clear-headed enough to do it. Give me some time.” I stare hazily up at him.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes. Stop fucking around and get your shit together.” Dave pushes himself upright, almost falling in the pool again, and goes back inside.

I sigh. This is what my Christmas is going to be like, then. I’ve been touring for the last ten months without a break. Looking at the same drugged-up faces in different clubs all around the world. Who knew being a superstar DJ would get this...dull?

I have as much expensive booze as I can drink, all the drugs I can take and women throwing themselves at me wherever I go. And all I can think of is going back to Snowflake Falls. Spending some time with my brother Evan and his family. Staring at the huge Christmas tree in the town square bedecked with twinkle lights, drinking some hot chocolate and watching wonderful, familiar holiday movies.

Except I can’t.

I’m in no state to visit my brother. The last time I saw him, he told me in no uncertain terms I needed to kick the drugs. Sent me the name of a rehab place close to Snowflake and said I should look them up. Told me it was time to get my shit together.

That was eighteen months ago.

There’s a blast of music from inside. One of the guys has plugged in an electric guitar and is playing a truly terrible version of “Stairway to Heaven.” A bunch of them are singing

along, although the younger girls gathered around them are checking their cell phones and looking confused.

My mind's made up. That's bought me some time. The first thing I need to do is find my jacket. The second is to make an Irish exit and leave without anyone noticing. The third is to get my sorry ass into rehab.

It's not going to be pleasant and Dave will blow his top, but I've had enough. I'm tired of being out of control and on the road. I don't want to use drugs and alcohol to numb the pain of my shallow existence. Who knows if it will work? I might be back here or in another pool next Christmas.

But I need to give it a try.

# CHAPTER 1



## BILLIE

*TWO YEARS LATER*

MY SEXY ELF COSTUME IS WAY TOO TIGHT.

I'm of the opinion that the words 'sexy' and 'elf' shouldn't ever be put together, but it was either that or 'sexy reindeer.' Which, for some reason that I can't put my finger on, would be even worse.

I tug at the ribbons on the bodice of the green velvet dress I'm wearing, trying to disguise the ridiculous amount of cleavage. It's cut with a short, flared skirt and paired with striped green and white stockings, black high-heeled shoes with silver buckles and a completely ridiculous pointed hat.

I've taken on some temporary Christmas work to try to supplement my meager income as a photographer. I worked at the counter at Hewitt's Department Store last year, but this gig was better paid. So I've been an assistant at the FaLaLa event space for nearly the whole of December. As Christmas madness strikes, there's a different party here every night.

Dressing up as an elf feels like the final straw. I wish I was in front of the television, downing some spiked eggnog and watching *Scrooged*. I'm feeling very Scrooge right now. I just need the ghosts of Christmas to show up and give me a hard time to make my humiliation complete. Mom, Dad and my brothers went to visit relatives in northern Canada and they've had to cancel their flights back because of bad weather. They

don't know if they'll make it back before Christmas Day, so I'm facing the prospect of a very lonely holiday.

As I come out of the back room, trying to slink along the wall until I can lurk behind the bar, a ringing voice shatters my thoughts.

"Billie! Your costume is...tight." Darius is standing in front of me with a smile on his face.

"No shit, Sherlock." I walk behind the bar, tugging the hat down over my hair.

"Well, mine is too loose." He tugs at the belly of his Santa outfit. He's right. Darius weighs maybe a hundred-fifty pounds soaking wet and his costume is an XXXL.

"I hate these costumes, Dare. What kind of sadist would make us wear them?" I pour myself a lemonade.

"Either one of the clients or it's the new management. Some relative of the boss is filling in, now Wyatt's on vacation." Darius is already tapping away on his iPad. He's a technical genius and a sweet guy, but not entirely of this earth. Wyatt jokes that Darius could make it to Mars faster than Elon Musk, given a quarter of Elon's budget.

I like Wyatt. He's a family man who's lived here in Snowflake Falls all his life, bringing new business into the area with this space. It's created a bunch of jobs and he keeps coming up with new plans for expanding it all the time. His latest idea is an escape room, which is right up Darius' street. It's Christmas-themed and the highlight of almost all the company parties we have booked in until the New Year.

Three more days to Christmas.

I can't wait until I have some time off. I want to drown my sorrows with some eggnog and wallow for too long in a hot bath. I'm also itching to take some photos around town. Snowflake is beautiful right now, with fresh falls of snow nearly every day. I snapped the twinkle light reflecting off the windows of the Candy Cabin last night, but I want to get some daytime shots in too. My Instagram account is looking sadly bare for this time of year.

Darius herds the company party guests into the bar area. They descend on the bar and I have to concentrate to get everyone's order's in. An older guy makes a fuss because we don't have a special brand of tonic water, but I manage to placate him.

“Good work!” A deep voice says.

I look up and my elf hat falls off my head. A tall, extremely gorgeous man is standing there smiling at me. He reaches down and retrieves the hat from the bar.

“Are you here for some niche tonic water, too?” I wink at him.

What am I doing? I've completely sworn off men and already I'm flirting with some handsome stranger. He's like a cliché, almost. Dark hair, twinkly eyes, a cute sideways grin, coupled with understated but well-cut clothes. I don't know if elves have fairy godmothers, but if we do, mine has magicked up a mighty fine specimen who ticks all my boxes.

He shakes his head. “I'll have a club soda, if you don't mind.”

I get his drink, trying not to burst out of the bodice while I reach up for the soda. His eyes are a light hazel color, hard to look away from. Broad shoulders, strong thighs. My mouth starts watering. He's just my type.

“I'll give you a tip for the escape room.” I lean over.

He smiles at me and his eyes crinkle at the corners. It's devastatingly sexy. “What's that? I'm sorry, I don't know your name.”

“It's Billie. And my tip is, don't be upset if you can't get out of there. Darius, our tech guy, keeps making them too hard. If you have an IQ of 300, then you should be fine. Otherwise...”

His grin gets wider. “I'll bear that in mind. What's it like working here?”

“Good. Today sucks, because I'm dressed like this. But usually it's more low-key. I'm not the biggest fan of

Christmas, contrary to appearances. What about you?”

“Love Christmas. The cheesier the better. Lights, food, Santa...bring it on! Snowflake Falls does it right as far as I’m concerned.”

I wipe the counter in slow strokes, trying to look down at what I’m doing rather than gawking at him. “Yep. Everyone here goes totally nuts when December starts. Well, it’s open season the day after Thanksgiving, really.”

“How come a girl who doesn’t care about Christmas is working in a Christmas-themed event space?” He sounds like he’s genuinely curious.

“A tale as old as time. I need the money.” I shrug.

“And if dressing as an elf isn’t your dream, what is?” He leans down on the counter to look at me. He’s ridiculously sexy and my heart starts to beat faster.

I need to remember my mantra. I’m supposed to hate all men. They want one thing, they lie and cheat. I’m on a total break from the male race. But my fickle body is betraying me, mirroring his posture as I angle myself so I’m facing him.

I try to stop my eyelashes fluttering as I gaze into his eyes. “Photography. I make a little money on the side with my Instagram account.”

“Oh, you’re an influencer?” He sounds impressed.

“Uh...I guess you could call it that! I’ve had free passes to a few festivals in return for taking pictures. And I’ve assisted on some fashion shoots. I’d love to do it full time, but there’s not a lot of call for festival or fashion photography in Snowflake Falls...” Argh. I’m depressing myself. Maybe it will scare off this handsome guy and my ‘no men’ vow will remain intact.

There’s a commotion as the doors to the escape room open. Darius has programmed them with some kind of timer system, so they slowly rotate outwards, releasing a cloud of dry ice. “Jingle Bell Rock” starts playing as the crowd of people outside, already tipsy on the free alcohol, start to peer inside.

“You better get inside. I’m sorry, I don’t know your name. But there’s a three-minute timeframe and then the doors close again.”

HANDSOME GUY SHAKES HIS HEAD. DARIUS WALKS UP TO US and holds out his hand. His Santa costume is so big that he has to push the sleeves up his arms to stop them from flopping down.

“You must be Raff, Wyatt’s brother?” he says.

I stop leaning on the counter and stand up straight. I’m going to kill Darius for not warning me he was expected today. And not telling me what he looked like. Now I squint at his face. He does look like a much younger, infinitely more handsome version of Wyatt, minus the huge mustache and beer gut.

“Pleased to meet you, Darius. Wyatt has told me so much about you. And Billie’s been filling me in on how this place works.” He’s still grinning. I wonder if he’s going to fire me for admitting I don’t like Christmas.

“Has the group gone into the escape room? I usually keep an eye on them to make sure everyone’s okay in there. Do you want to come see?” Darius looks ecstatic. There’s nothing he likes more than showing off his latest tech accomplishment.

“Sure, I’d love to. Pleasure speaking to you, Billie. I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other in the next few days.”

I plaster on a smile. “And you.”

As the men walk away, my smile fades. I surreptitiously unzip the side of this overly tight costume and my flesh spills out. I can finally take a deep breath.

I’ve just made a fool of myself in front of my new boss. I should be devastated. But instead I have butterflies dancing around my stomach and a weird, building excitement.

Maybe Christmas won’t be such a washout after all?

## CHAPTER 2



## RAFF

AS DARIUS EXCITEDLY WALKS ME THROUGH THE TECHNICAL details of the escape room, I have to keep myself from glancing back at Billie. I've seen a lot of pretty girls all around the world, but this particular girl is something special. Even in a skimpy elf costume, she exudes a kind of punky attitude. Almost like she's wearing it on purpose, daring you to say anything about it. And I'd have plenty to say about those eye-popping curves.

“And this, Raff, this is built on a collection of single-board computers called a Raspberry Pi...”

I try to concentrate, but Darius has taken a deep dive into the code behind the complicated locking mechanism underpinning the room. He doesn't appear to expect a response, happy to chatter on, so I sneak a glance at Billie. She's stacking glasses and our eyes meet. A zap of electricity shoots down my spine. That same zap I've spent the last two years avoiding.

In rehab, I learned I was using alcohol, drugs, and sex to avoid dealing with my feelings. My frustration at being farmed out for DJ sets, like a pampered pooch who has to perform tricks on demand. What I really wanted to do was write my own music and perform it on stage, instead of constantly playing other people's stuff.

I think Dave expected me to get out of rehab and go back to DJing, except this time with a glass of water in my hand instead of champagne. Maybe he thought I'd go back to being

his party buddy and everything would return seamlessly to the way it was before.

But I've changed. I'm a different person now. I haven't performed a DJ set since I got out of rehab. I've concentrated on making my own music, keeping a low profile and getting healthy. I substituted hours on the dance floor with chemical assistance, for training in the gym and healthy food. I cut off my signature long hair and got a tan from hours spent hiking in the hills. But LA just didn't have the same appeal anymore. I wanted to get back to my roots, so I invested in small town businesses, including my brother Wyatt's place in Snowflake Falls.

I came back last year for Christmas, staying with Wyatt and his family for a couple of days. I enjoyed it so much that when he asked if he could trade houses with me for Christmas, I jumped at the chance. I said I'd help out by managing the event space for him, so he could relax and not have to worry about work. Christmas parties and big events aren't a temptation for me anymore. I like my head to be clear, my body to feel healthy and not to bury how I feel.

Billie is the first woman I've been around who's woken something in me. She intrigues me, and that's exciting and sets off alarm bells. Am I ready for something to happen? Does she even like me? I've said maybe twenty words to her, and yet it feels like the connection is there.

Darius is still talking, gesticulating at a screen on the wall. I sneak another look at Billie, who is standing on tiptoe to put the glasses back on a high shelf. The lines of her body are so beautiful, her curves barely contained by that ridiculous costume that I can't turn my eyes away. My dick hardens, chafing against the seam of my jeans, as I imagine that skimpy dress splitting open from neck to hem, and Billie stepping out of it like Botticelli's Venus.

"So you agree, Raff? I've been so excited to try it. I'm sure Wyatt would agree if he was here..." Darius's eyes are bright.

"Sure, of course." I don't have any idea what he just said.

“Perfect. I’ll get on it. The clients are gonna love it.” He starts tapping at a keyboard.

My cell phone beeps with a series of messages.

**Dave: Mate, you can’t hide from me FOREVER. It’s fucking Xmas.**

**DAVE: A GROUP OF TECH BROS ARE GONNA PAY \$500K IF you do their Xmas party. You could live on that for what... at least three months.**

**Dave: You may think ppl have forgotten about you but your hardcore fans haven’t. In fact, your price has gone up since you’ve been away.**

**Dave: Don’t disappoint me, give me a call back.**

**Dave: Toodle pip.**

Toodle pip? What does that even mean? Dave’s still out there hawking my name around. I’m sure he’s eager for his 10 percent. I was one of his top earners and now I’m off the roster, it must leave a gap.

He’s wrong though, most of the press have given up. I haven’t seen an article on one of the gossip papers or websites for at least a year. They got some mileage out of my sudden disappearance, and there were rumors I’d found God and joined a cult. I think my favorite one was that I’d become a yoga teacher and was teaching on a cruise ship to old hippies. A couple of old girlfriends sold their stories, and some woman I’d never seen before claimed she was engaged to me. But the bad boy thing is running out of steam with nothing to fuel it. I’m yesterday’s news now, whatever Dave reckons.

I walk back up to the bar. Billie stops what she’s doing, and a flush appears on her cheeks. So I am having an effect on her after all. That unfamiliar thrill rises in my stomach again and I have to stop myself from staring at her. Fuck, she’s so gorgeous with that long, silky dark hair accented with bright red streaks.

“All the clients in?” she asks. Her eyes are a captivating silvery-gray shade.

I nod. “Darius told me all about... something I couldn’t understand.”

She smiles. “Well, I usually just listen and zone out when he gets techy. It must be hard for Darius having a mega brain that size. So, are you a manager of reluctant elves and technical geniuses somewhere else, or what?”

I consider what I should tell her. “Do you like music?”

Billie shrugs. “Of course I like music. Don’t most people? I was sort of raised on my older brother’s record collection. He had a lot of New Wave and grunge records since he was fifteen years older than me. My listening tastes are mainly from the ‘80s and ‘90s. I’m not very up on current trends. Why do you ask?”

“I love your answer. I’m a musician. I invest in businesses but my real passion is writing and playing music. My stuff is more dance-based, but I use a lot of New Wave influences in my tracks.”

“Oh!” She looks excited. “It’s a pleasure to meet another creative...especially here in Snowflake Falls. You must play me some of your music sometime.” Her cheeks get pink again and I can’t help wondering if her nipples are the same rosy shade.

I need to stop this. I’m her boss.

“Sure,” I say. “On a quiet night, I’ll play it over the PA. Out of interest, how long do the clients normally stay in the escape room?”

“Well, that depends.” Billie takes off her elf cap, running her hand through her glossy dark hair. My dirty mind instantly imagines those glorious locks spread over a pillow, the rest of her body naked. Who is this girl? I haven’t felt like this since I was a teenager having wet dreams at night.

“On what?” I ask, trying to banish thoughts of her naked from my mind and get under control again. I don’t know if I like feeling so under another person’s spell.

“On what difficulty level Darius decided to switch on. It’s meant to take them anything from twenty minutes to an hour to solve the puzzles. The doors are meant to open automatically after 90 minutes.” Billie leans down to get some fresh glasses out of the cupboard. “I don’t know what Darius’s criteria are for setting the difficulty level. I think it depends what mood he is in on the day. I keep telling him that most people aren’t as smart as he is, but I don’t think he gets it. It’s kinda endearing, really.”

A loud, repetitive ringing sound starts up from the corner where the escape room is located. At the same time, at the entrance to the room, a huge plastic Santa’s belly starts flashing red.

Billie raises her eyebrows. “Houston, we have a problem. Someone inside the escape room has panicked and pressed the emergency alert. Either that, or they’re all just rattling every damn thing they can to see if it works. Both scenarios tend to happen a lot...”

“I better take care of this,” I say, walking back over to Darius.

Frankly, I’m glad for the distraction. Being close enough to Billie to smell her spicy, cinnamon-scented perfume was driving me crazy. I need to remember why I’m here. I’m helping my brother out for a few days, giving him a break, and taking care of this place. I’m not here to admire, salivate over and try to flirt with one of his employees.

There’s no way I want to undo all the hard work I’ve put in for the last two years by falling head over heels for a stunningly gorgeous girl.

I’ve got a job to do.

# CHAPTER 3



## BILLIE

“DO I EVEN NEED TO ASK IF YOU WANT WHIPPED CREAM AND sprinkles on that, Billie?” Zuri asks.

“Load it up! But nothing too Christmasy, remember. I’ll pass on the reindeer cookie.” I roll my eyes.

“Girl, you were the inspiration for my best-selling Goth Latte at Halloween. I’ll always remember that you’re not at your best this time of year. You’re like...sexy Scrooge.” She laughs at her own joke.

I’m standing in Gingerbread, Snowflake Falls’ best coffee place, admiring Zuri’s barista skills as she deftly adds multicolored sprinkles to my vanilla half-caff latte. There’s some kind of indecipherable, Lo-Fi version of “Jingle Bells” playing in the background. If I shut my eyes tightly to block out the rows of twinkle lights above the counter, I could almost pretend it wasn’t the holiday season.

“How’s the dating going?” Zuri hands me the cup.

The morning rush is over and most people are at work, looking after kids, or doing their Christmas shopping. It’s warm and cozy inside, the snow falling gently on the square outside. It smells like gingerbread and cinnamon in here, mixed with one of my all-time favorite smells. Coffee. Someone’s reading a newspaper in the corner, half-hidden by a Christmas tree, but apart from that, we’re alone.

“It’s not. I’ve sworn off men. All men. Had enough. It’ll be good for me.” I sigh and take a slurp of my coffee.

“Taking some time out?” She starts cleaning the huge Italian coffee machine.

“Yeah. I’m not upset, particularly. I’m just tired of players, I guess.” I yawn.

Last night I didn’t get home until midnight. The leader of the office party insisted on starting the escape room again, because someone had leant on the alarm button. And it took them the full ninety minutes to get out of there, helped along by Raff telling Darius to give them some very obvious hints over the microphone.

“I mean, after what happened last Christmas, I don’t blame you. And dating apps are like wading through tonnes of frogs to get to a prince.” She rolls her eyes.

“I’d be happy with a tadpole at this stage, Zuri. I really don’t think there are any princes left. Maybe in romance novels?”

“Could it be those dating apps? Y’know, they’re the problem, attracting the wrong kind of guys. How about meeting someone in real life?” She cleans the milk frother and then polishes the shiny metal on the top of the machine.

“Well... my new boss is gorgeous.” My voice sounds a little gooey.

Zuri’s eyes brighten. “There you go, a workplace romance! Is this the new manager? Darius was singing his praises when he came in earlier.”

I nod. “Yeah, he looks like Henry Cavill. I wouldn’t have guessed he was Wyatt’s younger brother.”

“Oh, Wyatt was quite the stud in his day, apparently. I can’t remember who told me that, but I think he used to do modeling or something.” Zuri sounds amused.

“You’re kidding? Wow. Well, his brother is just my type. Anyone’s type, really. And he seems pretty down-to-earth. Not a player-type, like—”

“Like he who should not be named.”

“Yes. Him. Ruiner of Christmas Past. King Asshole of all assholes. But I think even nice guys have the potential to be players. Given the opportunity.” I shake my head.

“Oh, Billie. He really did a number on you. There are good guys around. You can learn to trust again. I did.” She reaches out and pats my arm sympathetically.

The newspaper in the corner rustles as its owner stands up. He’s tall, dark and...

Oh, shit. It’s Raff.

I hiss at Zuri. “That’s my boss.”

“Oh no... I thought he was cute when he came in. I didn’t make the connection!” She giggles.

He comes over to the counter, his eyes twinkling. “So, you think I’m gorgeous?”

My cheeks must be flaming red. “Um...you heard everything?”

Raff smirks. “I did. Don’t worry, it won’t go on your employee record. Does Wyatt even keep employee records?”

I want the ground to swallow me up, but I try to front it out. “He doesn’t, but I’ve told him he should. He’d need a book for Darius.”

“He certainly would. Shall we walk to work together?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

Zuri leans over the counter. “By the way, as her new boss, you’ll be excited to find out that your employee took these amazing pictures on the walls. This one is my favorite.” She points over at the picture by the door, which shows Zuri in a cloud of steam from the coffee machine. She’s wearing a sequined jacket and sparkly makeup, looking like she could be dancing at a festival as well as making lattes.

Raff walks over to take a closer look. His shoulders are so broad that I have to peer round to peek at my photo. “This is incredible, Billie! You have real talent.”

I smile. “Thanks, boss. I’m still embarrassed you heard me say you were gorgeous.”

He holds the door open for me as I wave goodbye to Zuri. He leans down, closing the difference in our heights. He smells so good, an expensive scent that I can’t put my finger on. Something like musk and firewood.

“I think you’re absolutely gorgeous, too. I hope this isn’t workplace harassment.” His tone is jokey.

“Doesn’t count if it’s not in the workplace.” A warm thrill runs through my core. He thinks I’m gorgeous? I try to talk myself out of feeling so delighted by it, but my no man mantra appears to be malfunctioning.

Raff’s staring at me. He must have asked me something.

“I’m sorry, I missed that?” I trudge through the snow, thankful for the grippy soles on my neon pink snow boots.

“What’s your account? For your photography? I have a secret Instagram account. I’d love to follow you.”

“A secret one? How many do you have?” I tease.

He looks away and runs his hand over his hair. “Two. But one’s—”

“Your favorite? I know what you mean. I have a few accounts that all do different things. One is for stalking other photographers. One is just for my photography and promoting it. And one is friends, family and silly stuff.” I get my cell out and show him my photography profile.

Raff takes out his cell, which is an iPhone model that I didn’t even realize was released yet, and taps my profile name in. “You should really do this as a career, you know.”

“I’m trying! After I went to college, I did a bunch of internships, but I didn’t have the funds to support myself in the city long term. And the festival stuff I’ve done hasn’t worked out yet. But I keep applying and I’m working on a bunch of projects.” I steal a glance at Raff, and he’s looking directly at me, his head to one side. A thrill runs from the tip of my head right down to my toes.

“I hope you don’t mind me mentioning it, but I couldn’t help but overhear—”

“Me admiring you. Yes, I know.” I stare at the ground.

“No, when you talked about last Christmas. The King of Assholes?” His voice is amused.

“That’s a story for a different time. Actually, it’s not a story anyone should hear if they don’t want to either laugh hysterically or think I’m the biggest Christmas loser in Snowflake Falls. I’ve had both reactions.” I look up as Darius wrenches open the door of FaLaLa.

“Guys! Wait until you see what I’ve done for tonight!” Darius’s voice has risen an octave with excitement.

I groan. “It’s not a drone, is it, Dare? Or a fleet of drones?”

He shakes his head. “No, we decided that wouldn’t be practical, right? No, I spent last night writing a script that fully automates the entry and exit process. I’m going to test it out tonight.”

“You know we have a big party from Actual Accounting coming in? This might not be the best time to experiment...”

“What do you think, Raff?” Darius asks as we walk into the building. I need to remember to turn the Christmas lights on outside before it gets dark.

“I say go for it. They’re accountants. If something happens, it’ll be the most exciting thing that’s happened to them all year.” Raff holds the inside door open for me again.

I get the feeling he’s not taking this seriously. Wyatt’s a laid-back boss, but even he would think twice about giving Darius full approval to test out his code on some unsuspecting clients. Should I say something? Warn Raff again that Darius tends to go a little rogue, left to his own devices?

I glance up at him again and admire his sculpted jawline, high cheekbones and the curve of his lips. Even in a big coat with a hood, he manages to look put together. By contrast, I’m wearing a neon pink and black parka to match my boots, and you could probably spot my outfit from space.

I'm going to keep quiet. I've said enough today already.

# CHAPTER 4



## RAFF

“I KNOW YOU. I CAN’T PUT MY FINGER ON HOW I KNOW YOU, Mr. Handsome, but I do.” One of the women from tonight’s office party is very drunk. She’s holding onto my arm and swaying slightly. She’s exactly the right age to have watched one of my sets on YouTube, or maybe she’s been at a festival where I’ve played and danced the night away. I thought the baseball cap, short hair and casual clothes would make me invisible. I should have been more careful.

The last thing I want is the press getting wind of where I am and doing some kind of exposé. I wince as I imagine the headlines: *Burnt Out Bad Boy Superstar DJ Found In Snowflake Falls!* They’d be delighted. I’m sure they’d dig up someone from my past to make some kind of unsavory comment about what I did one Christmas past.

I smile vaguely at the woman. “I get that a lot. Would you like some more Prosecco? Or a glass of water?”

“Okay.” She’s distracted by a guy dressed as a reindeer trying to do a complicated breakdancing move on the dancefloor.

I walk over to the bar. Billie’s swapped last night’s elf costume for leather pants and a Nirvana t-shirt, topped with the branded Santa hat that Wyatt makes his employees wear during the holidays.

I put my hands on the bar. “Lady over there needs a glass of water. She’s quite a bit more than tipsy. I’ll take it over.”

“Coming right up. They’re all so rowdy tonight! Who’d have expected a bunch of accountants to party like this?” She pours a big glass of water and adds some ice.

I take the glass and turn around as the drunk woman comes swaying up.

“DJ Extra! OMG!” Her eyes are round and excited.

“I’m not the DJ. We have a mix of Christmas tunes playing, but I could look for something more exciting for you.” I hand her the water, hoping to distract her.

“We saw you at Coachella. You were really, really, really amazing...” Her voice slurs. I take a glance at Billie, who’s rolling her eyes and smirking.

“Really?” I wink at Billie. My hope is she thinks this woman is talking crap. In the back of my mind, I wonder what my game plan is here. At some stage, I should probably say something to Billie. But what if she hates what I have to tell her? It sounded like she’s had her fill of bad boys from her conversation with the barista. I don’t want her to get the wrong impression.

Hell, the first google result for my name is a photo of Dave and I standing up on a Ferris wheel, clutching bottles of tequila. We nearly got arrested for that.

“You gotta dance with me, okay? Wait until I tell my friends.” She tries to drag me onto the dance floor. I let her, glad she hasn’t asked for a selfie yet.

Billie laughs and shakes her head as the woman begins twerking to “All the Single Ladies,” barely staying upright. I hold on to her arm so she doesn’t fall over. She’s going to have one hell of a hangover in the morning. Through all the flailing arms on the dance floor, I spot a guy in a tired-looking suit leaning over the bar. He’s trying to flick the end of Billie’s Santa hat. She bats his hand out of the way, but he’s persistent.

What the fuck does he think he’s doing?

I lead the drunk woman over to a seat at the side of the dance floor. I think she’s forgotten who I am. When I turn back to the bar, the guy’s still bothering Billie and I stalk over

to him. He's a couple of inches shorter than me and maybe fifteen years older, out of shape and seedy-looking.

"Give me a kiss, Santa Baby. It's part of the package." His voice is raised.

"May I help you?" I put on my most officious-sounding voice.

"No." He doesn't look around.

"You're bothering one of my employees." I wedge myself in between him and the bar. I'm right up in his personal space and I couldn't care less. He's not getting a single inch closer to Billie, and if he tries, I will flatten him. I glare into his beady, red-rimmed eyes.

He steps back. This loser's all bark and no bite. "Wait, hey. Look, I didn't mean anything. She's just..."

"Don't blame it on her. Take responsibility for your own behavior. Now, are you going to treat her and everyone else here with respect? And leave a glowing five-star review? Or..." I'm still glaring at him.

He holds up his hands. "No harm, no foul. Sorry, ma'am. Okay, buddy?" He starts backing away. This guy's a pushover.

I turn back to Billie. "You okay?"

"Thanks, boss. I had it under control, although I wanted to tip some of that peppermint schnapps over his head. I'll be happy when these guys are safely locked up."

"Hey, there's an idea. Give me a second." I find Darius, who's typing something on a keypad.

"Let's move the escape room entry forward by an hour," I say.

"How come?" His eyebrows shoot up.

"They're too drunk. Nobody's going to notice, and we're going to have to deal with people puking and fighting if we leave it much longer. Can you do it?"

"Roger that, captain. Do you want to push the button or shall I? It's for the dry ice, really. My script runs by itself to

open the doors and do everything inside.” He points at a red button marked ‘do not touch’ on his console.

“You do it. I’ll stand well back.” I take a step backwards.

Darius nods and presses the button. “Step Into Christmas” blares out of the speakers, while the escape room doors dramatically swing open and clouds of dry ice engulf the dance floor. He leans into the microphone.

“Time to enter the Christmas Escape Extravaganza, folks. I hope you have your wits about you! I hope you aren’t Claustrophobic, ho-ho-ho...”

The group chatters excitedly as they enter the room and the doors close.

“Okay, time for me to get into the viewing room. Want to come?” he asks.

“No, I’ve had enough of this group for one night. It’s in your capable hands.” I pat him on the shoulder.

“Okay. See you on the other side.” Darius closes the door of the viewing room. I wouldn’t want to watch a group of drunk accountants stumble around, but I guess he has to, for health and safety reasons.

There’s only one place I want to be right now, and that’s as close as possible to Billie. I walk back up to the bar and she sets down two glasses.

“I think we’ve earned ourselves a drink, boss. What are you having?” She gestures for me to sit down on the bar seat.

“Anything non-alcoholic. I don’t drink.” There, I’ve said it. I’m part way to telling her the whole truth about who I am.

“I’m not a big drinker either. But I’m having some of this cream liquor we can’t sell. Tonight’s been pretty intense.” She pours our drinks and comes around to sit next to me at the front of the bar.

“Santa Baby” starts playing through the speakers, booming around the empty room, and I laugh.

I clink my glass against hers. “Cheers, as the British say.”

She looks curiously at me. “How come you’re laughing? Is it this song, or just the weirdness of finding yourself in Snowflake Falls running a Christmas event space?”

“Both, I guess. The last time I heard this song I wasn’t in the best place. My life has changed a lot since then. It’s better. I’m healthier and happier.” I’m trying not to inch closer to her, to take great lungfuls of her amazing scent and then say something stupid.

“You got sober? Must be hard working in the music industry with everyone partying the whole time. Oh - you were going to play me some of your stuff. You can stream it through the Wi-Fi here.” Billie looks expectantly at me.

I take out my cell and select the track I’ve been working on. “This one has some New Wave influences. But it’s got a dance track underneath...”

The music comes pouring out of the speakers. To my surprise, it sounds so much better in this big space. I’ve been listening to it at home, with my headphones on, concentrating on the details. Billie’s foot starts tapping, and she gives me a huge smile.

“This is good, Raff. Wow...” She sets her drink down, grabs my hand and takes me to the center of the empty dance floor. The lights flash as we dance and I can’t resist wrapping my arms around her waist. She still has that glorious big smile on her face, gazing up at me as we move to the beat.

Our bodies get closer as the rhythm intensifies until we’re touching. Her curves pressed against the hard lines of my body send sparks up and down my spine. I gaze down at her beautiful face and she stands on tiptoes, surprising me with a soft kiss. I hold her tightly to me, meeting her kiss with mine and deepening it, exploring her mouth with my tongue, my dick hard as a rock. She gasps a little, our mouths moving together, both of us locked together.

The piercing wail of an alarm makes us spring apart.

“What’s that? The escape room?” I ask.

Billie shakes her head. “That’s the fire alarm.”

A door swings open above us. It's the drunk woman from earlier, the one who recognized me.

“Sorry! I was having a cigarette and I think I opened the wrong door? Can you turn it off? The noise is giving me a headache...”

I walk off to deal with it, my senses buzzing.

I'm not sure what I'm doing with Billie, but I don't think I can stop now.

And I really don't want to.

# CHAPTER 5



## BILLIE

THE EVENT WE'RE MEANT TO BE HAVING TONIGHT HAS BEEN called off. A whole bunch of people in the company who booked it got sick from eating at a seafood restaurant. However, for some kind of complicated holiday insurance reason, we need to stay open. So, I'm sitting at the bar, trying not to think too much about the kiss with Raff last night.

But that's impossible. The memory of his lips on mine, his hard body pressing against me and his fingers running through my hair pushes all my other thoughts away. Kissing your boss should be the one thing any decent employee knows that's off limits. But I don't want to be working behind the bar at FaLaLa forever. In fact, if I'm here tending bar next Christmas, I'll be sobbing into my peppermint schnapps.

Raff looked so handsome last night. That drunk woman thought he was her Prince Charming. She seemed convinced that he was some kind of famous DJ! After we'd fixed the fire alarm, she asked me to take a photo of her with him. I could see Raff was about to refuse, but then everyone in the escape room came out thinking there was a fire and I think she forgot.

I get out my cell phone, trying to remember the name she called Raff last night. Was it DJ Exodus? I try typing in some random words. There are plenty of DJs around with outlandish names, but none of them looks like Raff. I'm not sure why I'm doing this, anyway. She was drunk enough to mistake him for Tom Cruise. But there's a tiny doubt at the back of my head. Imagine kissing a guy like that and he turns out to be a superstar DJ? And a liar, for that matter.

Without the music on, it's kind of eerie in here. It's such a big space that there are lots of shadowy corners. I'm not easily spooked, but I'm pretty sure that there's a rustling sound coming from the general direction of the escape room. Should I go and investigate it? I try to talk myself out of doing anything. Surely I can leave it until morning? I try to think logically. There has to be a very simple explanation.

I set my phone down on the bar and walk over to the escape room to check out the noise. The iPad that Darius uses is right there outside, resting on a table. Wyatt insisted that Darius build in a very simple interface so that all the staff could open the room while he wasn't there. I pick up the iPad and press open. A cloud of dry ice engulfs me and I start coughing, setting the iPad down on the table and rubbing my eyes. I don't know how to turn it off.

I take a deep breath and feel my way to the door. There's definitely a noise coming from inside. Has someone left the fan on? I grope around for the lights and turn them on.

That's it, the fan is still on. I switch it off and sit down for a second, marveling once again at the decor. It's a Christmas wonderland, made to look like Santa's workshop with twinkle lights and grinning reindeer.

There's a big green velvet sofa in here. I'm the only one at work, so no one's going to mind if I stretch out and close my eyes for a second. I grab a clean sheet from the small cupboard where we keep supplies and lay it over the sofa.

What a strange holiday period this has been. No Mom and Dad, no family stuff, working all the time and then Raff. Meeting him has definitely been the highlight.

My eyelids are heavy and I close them for a few seconds.

It's dark when I wake up. I feel around for the lights and turn them on.

Crap. The door is shut. I look around for the iPad and have the sudden dawning realization that I left it on the table outside. My damn phone is on the bar. Why is the door closed?

Did Darius build something into the program to automatically close it?

Banging on the door, I try to open it, but it's locked shut. I should have paid more attention to Darius when he was talking about his mad scientist plan for the puzzles in this room. It's something to do with reindeer and a formula, but I kind of zoned out when Darius got super technical explaining it to me.

There's a hissing noise as the dry ice starts up again. The door swings open. Raff is standing there, backlit by the purple and green lights.

I start laughing. "You really don't know how glad I am to see you."

"What are you doing here? Is this how you get your kicks?" He flashes me his cute sideways grin, then comes to sit down next to me on the sofa.

"Yeah, I like locking myself into Christmas escape rooms on my own. What are you doing here?" Up close, he's even more gorgeous than I remembered in dark blue jeans and a gray sweatshirt.

"I wanted to see you. That kiss has been on my mind since last night." He reaches for my hand.

"Mine too. Although getting out of this Christmas prison has sort of occupied my thoughts a little more in the last ten minutes."

"Billie, what happened last Christmas? If you want to tell me, that is..." His voice is gentle.

I sigh. "I'd been seeing a guy for months who I liked. He was visiting Snowflake Falls on a regular basis to work here. I had a job over at Hewitt's, this department store over in Larsley, which is a few towns over. Same sort of thing, Christmas work to earn extra money. They had me dressed up in a snowman costume, handing out leaflets for their Christmas food shop."

Raff smiles encouragingly. "I bet you looked adorable dressed as a snowman."

I shake my head. “I looked like a total dork. The costume was huge, and I kept bumping into things. So, it’s the day before Christmas Eve, and I’m in the middle of the store when I spot my apparent boyfriend, hand in hand with a pretty blonde woman. He keeps kissing her and it’s obvious they’re together. She has a big ol’ sparkly ring on her finger. I see red, forgetting I’m in the snowman costume, and start shouting at him, running over. Except I bump into the store’s huge Christmas tree and take it down with me.”

His eyes are wide. “Oh no.”

I nod. “Oh yes. I had a mild concussion from the angel at the top of the tree falling on my head. I blacked out. Spent the rest of the holidays spaced out on the sofa. And the asshole-with-a-secret-fiancée blocked me. It’s sort of funny, actually, but it didn’t feel like that at the time.”

“So no wonder you hate Christmas...” He trails his finger up my arm and it feels like a slow wave of warmth travels up my body and then radiates down to my core.

“I didn’t hate it before. And I’m sure I’ll learn to love it again. Maybe working in a Christmas-themed event space wasn’t the smartest idea, but I needed the cash. You still haven’t told me much about your day job. How do you make it work as a musician? Do you have another job?”

He opens his mouth as the dry ice suddenly engulfs us with a whooshing noise. The purple and green lights flash on and off, then the door slams shut. I stare at Raff in surprise.

He smiles, his face calm. “Don’t worry, I have my cell. I’ll call Darius, and he can release us.”

I shake my head. “Darius has the night off. And that means he’ll be playing role-playing games online and won’t look at his phone all night. Did you bring the iPad in?”

“Yes, it’s right here.” He holds it up and presses the green ‘exit’ button. Nothing happens. He hands it to me and I try. It still doesn’t work. Raff tries calling Darius’s number and sends him a few texts, just in case. I have the bright idea of sending

Darius an email, just in case he has some kind of alert set up to notify him while he's plugged into his game.

"Shall we try to work our way out of this room?" Raff asks.

I shake my head. "We had a group of astrophysics students in here a couple of days ago. They couldn't do it. Unless you know about complex numbers and Finnish holiday customs."

He laughs. "Remind me to tell Darius to simplify this whole place. I think he's gone hog wild now Wyatt's not here."

"You don't seem that worried about being trapped in here." I wrap my fingers around his.

"I'm happy, Billie. There's no one I'd rather be trapped with." Raff reaches his fingers out to gently caress my cheek. It's like a bolt of electricity running down my spine. I swear that even my nipples stand to attention. My heart starts to thud in my ears as he leans forward and kisses me.

He pulls me onto his lap and I wrap my legs around his waist as he kisses me deeper, claiming every inch of my mouth, his body leaning into mine. I can feel his hard cock beneath me and I grind down onto him as he groans, wetness pooling between my legs. His hands run from my back around to cup my breasts and it's my turn to gasp as he lifts up my t-shirt. He stops kissing my lips to devote his attention to each breast, pulling down the cups of my black lace bra to run his tongue over my peaked nipples. I arch my back as he takes each nipple into his mouth, licking and sucking as I moan louder.

I want his mouth on me, on every part of me. I wriggle out of my jeans, pulling down my soaked panties. Raff's eyes are glazed with desire as he looks at me.

"You are perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect." His voice is low as he takes off his t-shirt. His firm, chiseled abs and broad chest are coated in a healthy tan. He's definitely not from Snowflake Falls.

I laugh. "You must know you're hot stuff yourself? You have to get women throwing themselves at you..."

He smiles a little mysteriously. “Not for a long time. I’ve been abstaining for the last couple of years. Had a bunch of tests, so I’m clean.”

“I did too. I mean, had a bunch of tests after I found out about my cheating ex. There’s been nobody since then, but I’m still on the pill.”

“I want to taste you,” he growls.

I grab his arms and push him back onto the sofa. His hands reach for my waist as I position myself above his face.

“You’re so wet, it’s so sexy...” His tongue circles my clit as I lower myself down, holding onto the back of the sofa with both hands. I gasp in pleasure as the pressure of his tongue gets harder and faster, grinding myself down on his mouth.

“You taste so good,” he says, his words nearly pushing me over the edge. He parts my pussy lips as he inserts first one and then another finger, never stopping his insistent licking.

“Raff, I’m going to come...” My voice is breathy.

“Come for me, beautiful. All over my face, so I can taste you.”

A warm wave explodes inside me as I come hard, almost screaming with pure pleasure. I can’t move as I grip on hard to the edge of the sofa, my breathing ragged.

I lift myself up, my thighs shaking. “I need you inside me now.”

He smiles and flips me onto my back, looking down at me as his fingers trail across my peaked nipples. He takes off his jeans and his huge cock is ready and waiting, pre-cum leaking from the tip. I spread my legs as wide as I can as he takes himself in one hand, lining his cock up with my entrance.

Slowly, he enters me. Inch by inch, he fills me until I think I might split apart. I’ve never felt like this before, totally full. He starts to swivel his hips and I moan, the sensation intensely pleasurable. His thrusts become deeper and I close my eyes, gripping at the sheet beneath me. I’m panting as he pumps above me, that wonderful wave starting again. It runs through

every part of me as I come hard, pulsing over and over again around his cock. He pumps even harder and faster, shouting my name as he comes, filling me up with his seed.

We rest together, our breathing slowing down. Those were, without doubt, the best couple of orgasms in my life. Then reality hits me.

What have I done? I've just slept with my boss! What if Darius finds us like this?

I grab my clothes and start frantically putting them on.

“Are you okay?” He's sprawled out, gloriously naked.

“I'm more than okay. But I'm worried Darius might respond to our messages and come down here. What if he goes into the viewing room? Get dressed, Raff!”

# CHAPTER 6



## RAFF

BILLIE'S FALLEN ASLEEP. SHE LOOKS ALMOST ETHEREAL WITH her red-streaked dark hair spread out around her. The twinkle lights and nodding reindeer in the room give the whole scene a dreamlike quality. She had a moment of panic after we'd had sex, insisting we both put our clothes on just in case Darius turned up unexpectedly. I think she was worried she'd just crossed all the lines by sleeping with her boss in the workplace.

But after an hour, she started to relax. I told her some corny jokes, trying to work up to telling her what I do for a living. Billie matched my pathetic attempt at humor with some of her own, which made me double up with laughter. If I wasn't already convinced that I'd found my perfect woman, her dad jokes took it to the next level. Her head rested in my lap, her beautiful body stretched out as I stroked her hair. She kept yawning and then dozed off.

I'm sitting here, staring at her, trying to find the right words to say I've been lying to her.

Well, keeping the truth from her. Because I'm terrified she'll read all my bad press, watch a couple of videos and then tell me to get lost. And I can't lose her. I haven't felt like this before, this mad mix of vulnerable and excited at the same time. It's like she could effortlessly lift me to the highest highs and then crush me if she wanted to.

How can I convince her that I'm not the same person I used to be? Will she even believe me? I can't lose her, now that I know how infinitely precious she is.

Despite what Billie said about it being impossible to solve the escape room puzzle, I pick up the laminated card that sits on the table. And then I put it down again. It might as well be written in Finnish, for all I can decipher it. This place doesn't get a lot of repeat business and some of the reviews are scathing. Wyatt's been too soft, and he's going to need to have a stern word with Darius.

I lean over carefully so I don't disturb Billie's sleep, picking up the iPad, which controls the door. Five years ago, I played a gig in Rome where the decks had a really complicated setup, designed by a technical whiz kid a little like Darius. He told me that he always put in a frustration option, where you could press all the buttons at once and it would activate or disable the system. Something to do with the Millennium Falcon, although I wasn't sure if I understood him properly.

It's worth a try. I hold down the exit and entry buttons, plus some others that I have no idea what they do. Dry ice starts spurting from the exit, and to my surprise, it swings open.

I gently stroke Billie's hair and lean down to whisper in her ear.

"Wake up, beautiful. The door's open. I think we need to take our chance to get out of Santa's prison as quickly as possible..." I stroke her hair.

Her eyes open slowly and she sits up. "Raff! You superstar! How did you do it?"

"I knew the Finnish for Santa." I wink. "Not really. I pressed all the buttons at once."

She laughs and grabs my hand. "C'mon, let's get out of here. Before that temperamental door decides it wants to close again."

Once we're outside, we both lean against the wall and start laughing again. It's been such a wonderful and ridiculous night, exploring each other's bodies with all the Santa paraphernalia in the background. Billie stretches and then

heads for the bathroom. I leave another message on Darius's cellphone, telling him we won't be having any more clients in the room until he's sorted out the operating system.

There's a clinking noise from behind the bar. We aren't alone? I walk over and Dave stands up, weaving slightly.

"Mate! I tracked you down! I knew you were here, but I couldn't find you." He smells like peppermint schnapps. His clothes are disheveled, like he's slept in them and his remaining hair is all messed up. He's grinning at me like he's won first prize. Seeing his face again, with all the memories of how self-destructive I used to be on the road, makes my heart sink.

Shit. Billie's still in the bathroom, but I don't want her to meet Dave. I need to tell her in a gentle way, not like this.

"How the hell did you find me?" I sit on the stool in front of the bar.

"Private investigator. Spent quite a bit on that, but he was good. You weren't answering your calls. How was I meant to get in contact? Look, I can get us both on a jet to Dubai in three hours. Five hundred thousand, mate. You could buy about twenty houses in this weird little Christmas town, if that's what you're into..." He pours himself some more alcohol, unsteady on his feet.

"Can we take this outside?" I whisper.

"Why? You want to fight about it?" Dave shakes his head. "I thought sobriety would make you all peace-loving and all of that. But yeah, we can have a punch up if it makes you feel better. Then we need to get to this gig. I'll see if I can get those topless stewardesses on the plane. That will soften the blow since you're not drinking."

"Dave, no. I'm not doing that kind of thing anymore. I told you, I'll pick and choose which events I do when I'm ready to do them. I'm working on my own music now."

He shakes his head. "You play other people's music. Not your own. No money in it. Every DJ thinks he's a creative now. Just show up and play the damn songs. We were making

a million a month during summer, three years ago. Everyone knew who you were. How can you walk away from that?"

"Walk away from what? You're a millionaire?" Billie asks from behind me.

Fuck.

"Sweetheart, he's a multi-millionaire. I guess this naughty boy was going incognito in this tiny town. This is the famous DJ Extra." Dave tries to clap me on the back, but I shift away from him.

"DJ Extra? That rings a bell. Something to do with a rollercoaster and a topless..." Billie's voice trails off.

"Oh, there are plenty of videos of that particular debacle online. I made sure it went everywhere." Dave chortles.

I turn around. "I'm not the same person, Billie. You know I'm sober now."

She shakes her head. "Why didn't you tell me? I'm done here."

I reach out my hand, but she walks straight past me, eyes flashing, and slams the exit door.

"Don't worry, mate. Come to Dubai and pretty girls like that will be ten a penny. You'll forget about her once you're on the jet." Dave tries to pat me again.

I've had enough.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Dave. Consider our arrangement terminated. I have a two-year agreement clause on the management contract. It's expired. Find yourself another party buddy, or even better, get your ass into rehab. I can't do this. I'm a musician. If I DJ again, it's going to be a whole different sort of gig." I stand up to walk after Billie.

Dave sags against the bar. "You're turning down a lot of money. Are you sure? Without me, the big dollars are going to disappear pretty damn quickly, mate."

"I'm not the same person I was. And I like being the way I am now. My head's clearer and I can see how I want the future

to pan out. And that's with Billie, if you haven't ruined my chance with her forever." I grimace.

"That punky, dark-haired chick? She's The One? Ol' playboy Extra found the love of his life in Snowflake Falls?" Dave's eyebrows shoot up.

"Yes. And if I read any stories about it, I will let the gossip sites and journalists know about what you got up to on the South American tour. With some very choice documentary evidence."

Dave visibly pales. "You wouldn't."

"I would. Let's make this a clean break. You go your way and I'll go mine." I walk towards the door and then turn around.

Dave's slumped against the bar. I'm going to have to help him out if I want to turn off the lights and lock this place up.

"C'mon, I'll put you in a taxi to the airport. Onwards and upwards, isn't that what you always say?" I walk back over to him.

He's asleep, passed out on the bar. I'm going to have to try to deal with this as quickly as possible so I can explain to Billie.

That is, if she'll let me talk to her again. The idea of never seeing or speaking to her sends a cold chill down my spine.

I need to make this right. I lean down to Dave, putting my arm under his to heft him upwards. His skin is clammy, and he makes a groaning noise, his eyes rolling backwards. I don't like this. Dave's never ill, despite his hardcore lifestyle. I walk him over to one of the couches. His breathing isn't normal.

I think I need to call an ambulance.

# CHAPTER 7



## BILLIE

CHRISTMAS EVE. ANOTHER TERRIBLE CHRISTMAS IN A ROW. My luck is unbelievable.

I haven't seen Raff since the events of last night. Not that I want to. I've turned my phone off, bolted the door of my tiny studio apartment, and settled down to wallow in my misery. I wasn't due into work today, so I've wallowed in alternately crying and confirming my worst suspicions by searching for Raff online.

There's so much on here about DJ Extra. If I thought my ex-boyfriend was a player, then Raff is him times a thousand, on a celebrity scale and documented by the press. Drink, drugs and parties galore. Rumors of celebrity engagements, one-night stands and vacation trysts with some of the most beautiful women in the world.

I'm such an idiot for even thinking he really liked me. I'm surprised he even bothered to try to apologize as I was walking out the door. He got what he wanted in the escape room and he could have just fired me afterwards, I guess. Maybe he thinks of himself as a nice guy. For some reason, that makes it even worse.

I walk to the refrigerator, open the door, and stare inside. Mom had arranged a big food delivery to her house, but now they're definitely stranded in Canada, so she re-routed it to mine. So I have a turkey the size of a beach ball, a bucket of cranberries and a ridiculous quantity of vegetables to get through. Plus ice cream, pumpkin puree, champagne, orange juice, and a metric ton of holiday food crowding the shelves.

How am I meant to eat all this? I get the ice cream out of the freezer and go to sit on the sofa. On television, every channel seems to be showing either a cheesy Hallmark Christmas romance movie or a cheesy Christmas family movie. All the happy families and lovestruck families make tears spring to my red-rimmed eyes.

I switch it off and go to look out the window. The snow is falling outside, making the roads look picture-perfect. Inside, my love life is an even bigger mess than usual. Somewhere far away, carol singers are coming to the end of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” Mom plays that on the piano every year. Except this one, when their house will be cold, dark, and empty.

I sit down on the sofa and open up my laptop. I might as well edit some of the photographs I’ve taken this month. I’ve been neglecting my Instagram account. I’m in the middle of changing the exposure levels on a picture I took of the outside of Gingerbread when a new email alert flashes up.

It’s Darius.

**IMPORTANT! BILLIE, I’VE LOCKED MYSELF IN THE ESCAPE room. This is not a drill. Please come and release me ASAP! You aren’t answering your phone.**

I GROAN. THIS IS THE LAST THING I NEED RIGHT NOW. I’M tempted to pretend I haven’t seen the email, but then Darius will be locked in there for Christmas Eve and possibly Christmas too. I’m a Grinch, but I’m not that mean.

I wash my face and pull on some clean jeans. The only thing I can find to wear that doesn’t need to be washed is the silly Christmas sweater my brother bought me a few years ago. It has a dinosaur covered in twinkle lights and says “Tree Rex” on it. It’s going to have to do. Maybe it will cheer Darius up. I wonder how long he’s been trapped in there?

When I get to work, I let myself in. The internal lights are on and the control iPad is on the table outside. I bang on the door of the escape room, but there’s no answer. I pick up the

iPad and press the exit button. The dry ice starts up and the door opens.

Raff steps out of the escape room wearing a Santa hat.

I take a big step back.

“Where the heck is Darius?” I ask. Seeing him again, looking so handsome, is a big shock to the system. My body responds instantly to his presence, but my brain is screaming at me to stay away from this bad boy.

“I know you hate me right now, Billie, but please, just give me a couple of minutes.” He walks towards me. How can I believe a word he says?

I shake my head. “What have you done with Darius?”

“Darius was in on this. I’m sorry. I explained to him that I’m head over heels in love with you and we concocted a plan.” He’s still walking towards me and I hold up my hand, palm out.

“Stop right there, Buster. Or, should I say, DJ Extra? You won’t believe some of the stuff that people say about you online.” I raise my voice.

His eyes are fixed on mine. “I’m sorry you had to see that. And I made a huge mistake not letting you know about my past when I met you. I wanted you to judge me for who I am now, not who I was then. I promise, I’m a different person.”

“How do I know that? You could be just like my ex, a lying, cheating toad. And your timing... I can’t believe I’m having another shitty Christmas. Except this time, I don’t even have my family around to get me through it...” I stop, because I’m close to tears again.

Raff takes a step forward. “Billie, you’re everything I’ve ever dreamed about. I used to blot out my feelings with drugs and booze, and not care what happened. Because of my career, there’s evidence of that online. I’m not proud of it, or how I acted. But a future with you is my dream. Please, give me this chance and I won’t let you down.”

“Empty words.” How can I trust him? “Why didn’t you come and tell me this last night? I spent the evening looking at your exploits and bawling.”

“Dave passed out, had trouble breathing. Something to do with his heart’s rhythm. He’s in the hospital. I had to call his brother. I’ll visit him in a few days. Hopefully, this is a wake-up call for him.” He shakes his head.

“Oh.” He did the right thing. And from what I’ve seen of him, he’s acted thoughtfully every time something’s gone wrong. But what do I know? My judgment is probably off.

“I know I can’t prove it to you, but I’m never going to go back to the way I was. I want to make you happy, and if you give me a chance, I’ll spend my life doing it. Let me start by making your Christmas as special as I can.” He takes another step forward and puts his hands over mine.

The feeling of his warm hands is so reassuring that something cracks inside me. Maybe I’m making a terrible decision, but I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

He wraps his arms around me and I bury my head in his broad chest. He smells so good, like home mixed with his own particular woody scent. It makes my stomach leap.

I look up. “I’ll give you this Christmas. No promises, no disappointments. Let’s just spend Christmas together and get to know each other properly. You answer all my questions honestly and we’ll go from there.”

He smiles. “Sounds good. Can I start by kissing you?”

I don’t say anything but stand up on tiptoe and press my lips against his. Christmas with the bad boy?

It could be worse.

# EPILOGUE



## RAFF

### SIX MONTHS LATER

I'M BACKSTAGE.

There's a repetitive thudding that shakes the little dressing room, which is crammed with flowers and candy from well-wishers. I'm sure people have sent bottles of booze too, but those have been tactfully removed. The sun is setting and I'm the last act on the bill, which I'm grateful for as it's been over one hundred degrees all day.

All the performers are separated from the festival goers in tents set up backstage. They each have fans and a big sofa, along with a bar area, table and chairs and a closet. The organizer of the festival has checked in on me a few times, since I'm top of the bill, but he's mostly been dealing with a band who all arrived barely coherent on magic mushrooms. He's been singing my praises for how low-maintenance I am, but he wouldn't have said that a couple of years ago. I wince, remembering all the needless drama that used to follow me around.

They're in the tent a few rows down from me and one of them has been giggling for what seems like three hours straight. I've had to put my headphones on to block it out, because I want to get in the zone for my performance. Two and a half years ago, I'd be straight in there and joining them, my set suffering as a result.

My cell beeps with a message.

**Dave: Good luck, mate. Break a leg. Actually, don't break a leg. I almost did that yesterday trying to do a yoga position. Still on the mineral water, you'll be glad to know.**

I send him a thumbs up emoji. It turns out that Dave's heart arrhythmia was the wake-up call he needed to go sober. He's been at a detox place for months, extolling the virtues of green smoothies and has started writing his autobiography. He says he's going to get out of the music business and into property instead, but I'll believe that when I see it.

I'm my own manager now. It's a hell of a lot more work, but I like choosing my own schedule and giving all those party gigs a miss. I don't miss being pimped out to groups of coked-up producers or bored celebrities. Looking back, I could probably have turned up and played the same track on repeat over and over again, and nobody would have noticed. I probably did just that a few times, when I was drugged out of my brain.

Tonight's an extra special night, for a number of reasons.

First, because it's a charity event to help raise money for people fighting addiction. A friend of mine from rehab set it up and a lot of Hollywood bigwigs have donated huge sums of money for VIP passes to the festival. The lineup is full of famous names and there's a lot of hype since it's my first big gig since I got clean.

No pressure.

Second, and most importantly, it's because Billie's flown out here to the desert. Not just to hear me play, because she's got her own job documenting the festival. She's been doing Instagram Live, which I've shamelessly snooped on, sending her emojis and PMing her to tell her how sexy she is.

I ended up renting a place in Snowflake Falls and writing more music. I'm releasing an album later in the year, with a tour booked to promote it, touring the US and Europe, then South America. Except this tour is going to be different to any

I've done in the past, because Billie will be right there by my side for the whole thing.

One of the assistants pokes her head through the tent flaps. She's wearing a purple wig, a hat covered in sequins and a huge furry coat that gets stuck on the heavy canvas material of the tent. She picks it off, sighs, and then smiles at me.

"You've got fifteen minutes, okay, Raff?" She gives me the thumbs up sign and disappears.

My heart starts to pound, almost in time with the music. Where's Billie? I'm not going onstage until she's back. If the organizer thought I was low-maintenance, he's not going to be prepared for me delaying my set until my girlfriend gets back. I need her here. She's more than my girlfriend, she's my lucky charm. The person I can't wait to see if I've been out all day. The one I want to make smile, first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

A memory stands out, replaying in my head like a movie, but with the colors and sound intensified. We're dancing in my house in Snowflake Falls in time to a track I've written, where the beat gets faster and faster, building to a crescendo. Her hair is whirling around her head and she's totally abandoned herself to the music. My arms are around her. Then the next moment we're tearing each other's clothes off. We didn't make it to the bedroom as I sucked those luscious tits and then thrust into her, bending her over the sofa until we both came in a glorious rush.

That's better than any drink or drugs. Sex with the woman you're totally crazy about.

I check my cell. Ten minutes to go.

I text her.

**Raff: Hey babe, are you close? I'm on in ten.**

She texts back almost instantly.

**Billie: Two minutes away. I have news!**

I smile and put my cell down, checking my reflection in the mirror. A local designer in Snowflake Falls has made my

stage outfit, which is designed to reflect the lights and has a soft silver sheen.

I turn around as Billie enters and hold out my arms.

“I missed you!” I squeeze her tight, kissing those soft lips and pressing her body into mine. As always, just having her near me and I’m hard, ready to go.

“Can we risk it? Do you think the organizer would be standing there tapping his watch and waiting for us to finish?”

She laughs. “We’re out of time, Raff. But we can celebrate afterwards...”

I reluctantly pull away. “So, what’s the good news?”

“The news site I’m reporting for wants me to cover your tour. They’ve been impressed with my live blogs and my photographs. So they’re giving me my own section. I can’t believe it’s happening!” Her voice squeaks at the end.

“That’s wonderful news! You’re so talented, Billie. You deserve this and—”

The organizer sticks his head through the tent flaps. “Hope I’m not disturbing anything, folks, but we need to get you prepped and ready. As you know, it’s a trek to get to the stage so we can’t be laid-back about timings.”

Billie nods. “He’s ready, aren’t you, Raff?”

“I’m ready.” I take Billie’s hand in mine, and we follow the organizer out of the tent. There’s a low hum as we get closer to the stage and the previous DJ finishes his set. The announcer comes on, his words muffled as he starts to warm-up the crowd for my arrival.

Once I’m at the entry point, Billie kisses me so she can go and watch from the side of the stage.

“Good luck. I love you,” she whispers.

I’m on my own as the announcer leads a countdown, then shouts out my name and the crowd roars back in approval. My warm-up music comes on as I dash onto the stage, feeling the energy of the crowd like a blast of wind. I start with one of my

new tracks, which has samples of waves crashing on the shore mixed with a hypnotic beat.

As the music picks up, a shiver runs through my body. It's not just the cool breeze that's blowing through the desert, but the energy of the crowd and the music that's making me feel alive. I've been waiting for this moment for months, and now that it's finally here, I'm not going to waste a single second.

Billie's standing in the middle of the crowd at the side of the stage, seemingly lost in another world. Her hands rise and fall to the beat of the music, her hair swaying behind her like a cape. As she dances, her body is illuminated by the last remnants of sunlight reflecting off the mirrored art installation at the front of the stage.

People move around her, their footsteps barely audible beneath the heavy bass. Suddenly, a spark lights up the darkening sky as fireworks burst in vibrant colors above. She smiles in delight as others whistle and shout around her and the main theme kicks in. I could watch her dance all night long.

For such a long time, I was running from myself. I had no idea who I wanted to be, so I played the bad boy and nearly destroyed myself in the process.

But now I'm with the woman of my dreams, creating new music and doing what I love best.

I've found my rhythm.

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Want to read a sexy bonus epilogue? Click on the link below to find out what happened next to Billie and Raff...

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/ozlc0hbvda>

**THANK YOU FOR READING. WE'D LOVE TO HEAR WHAT YOU thought in a review! [Rocked by the Bad Boy.](#)**

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**Falling in love with your best friend is something that only happens in movies, not in midlife...**

### **Mary Ellen**

For eighteen years, Antonio and I have been the best of friends.

We've shared everything: inside jokes, secrets, Cubs tickets, even an address.

Everyone thinks that we're secretly in love with each other, but that's ridiculous.

I mean sure, Antonio is charming and hot, and we almost kissed that one time, but I'd never do anything to risk our friendship.

**Until Antonio pulls a stunt right out of a rom-com...**

### **Antonio**

When my grandmother was on her death bed, I told a little white lie.

I wanted my nonna to die happy, so I told her I was engaged to my beautiful best friend.

But Nonna unexpectedly recovered, and now she's coming from Italy to spend Christmas in Chicago with me and my fiancée.

She's on a mission to get us to set a date for the wedding.

Now I need to convince Mary Ellen to move into my apartment, sleep in my bed, and pretend to be my fiancée.

**I have an ulterior motive though: I want to finally break out of the friend zone and convince my best friend that we have a shot at something better- love.**

If you enjoy safe reads with instalove perfection, strong men, spicy scenes, and a solid happily ever after with no cheating or cliffhangers, then this series fits your wish list.

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