



single  
all  
the  
way

Shandi Boyes

# Single All The Way!

A RAVENSHOE CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

SHANDI BOYES

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# Dedication

*For everyone who still believes in the magic of Christmas, but  
prefers to sit instead of hovering ;)*

# Want to stay in touch?

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# CHAPTER 1

# Kelsey

“Two. Cheaper for two.”

While stuffing my bag under the seat of the first airport transfer company I come across while exiting the domestic terminal, I reply, “I don’t need two seats.”

“Yes, two,” misunderstands the man with a heavy Russian accent. “Great prices. Get you to hotel quick smart.” He nudges his head to my triple-strength espresso that’s supercharging my veins with more than caffeine. “Hot chocolate still be hot at the reception desk.”

Dark locks swing against my bare shoulders when I spin to face him. Considering the month, it should be chilly. Florida just never seems to get the memo. *Or perhaps it’s the nip of bourbon you added to your coffee with your duty-free purchases when the barista wasn’t looking?*

After shrugging off the possibility that more than disappointment is heating my skin, I say, “I’m single.” When he looks at me, confused like I spoke in a foreign language, I try again. “Sin... gle.”

*Breaking it up won’t help, Kelsey.*

After holding my left hand in the air, I highlight my bare ring finger. “Single. No love. I’m going to be alone for the rest

of my life.” My last five words come out with a low, pathetic whimper. It is December, the second most romantic month of the year—unless you’re single. Then it is as painful as a table for one on Valentine’s Day.

“*Ohh...*” the stranger drags out dramatically. “Single.” His bottom lip drops into a pout before he guides me into the empty seat next to the driver. I ignore the scorching burn of the coffee and bourbon as it slides down my throat when he adds, “Keep the good seats for the couples. Better tippers when in love. Everyone happy that way.”



“One hotdog or two? We have a buy-one-get-one-half-price special for Christmas.”

“I’m single,” I reply to the hotdog vendor one block up from my apartment building, my words slurred since I discovered I’d happily face the fiery burns of hell if it fades memories I don’t want to rehash. “Uno. Solo. Without *el compañero*.” My Spanish is horrible given I haven’t visited my parents’ home country in years.

When I take in the vendor’s shadowed jaw, tight body, and inky black eyes as he prepares my dinner for one, I murmur, “And available?”

Don’t look at me like that. Every woman on this side of LA knows there’s only one way up when you’re down.

With a star-inspiring orgasm.

The vendor's smirk reveals he appreciates my underhanded compliment that I think he's hot, but he still holds up the hand I flashed an hour ago.

He's married. For a long time, by the looks of it. His ring is embedded in his finger. He couldn't remove it even if he wanted to.

Although I want to be in the 'who cares if he's taken' stage of my life, I've not yet reached that level of desperation, so I accept the loaded hotdog he's holding out for me before wishing him and his wife a happy upcoming holiday season.

The vendor flashes a second grin. "Merry Christmas to you too, ma'am."

*Ma'am?* How old does he think I am?

Don't answer that. I don't want this week to get worse.

As I trudge to my apartment building, my steps slow and sluggish, loved-up couple after loved-up couple pass me. Even a super cute old couple is holding hands on a bench. They'd have to be in their eighties, and the tips of their noses are red, but they're staring up at the stars like their tongues are going to catch the first snowflakes of winter.

That's what I want.

That's what I thought I was getting.

Then he threw it away for someone with a pathetic name like Noelle.

Who cares Christmas is only two weeks away? The other eleven months of the year, she'll look foolish pimping her Christmassy charm on unexpected naïve men who shouldn't be looking at her oversized baubles since they're already in a committed relationship.

*Ugh.* We were in Oregon for crying out loud. Sweaters should *not* have been optional.

After tugging on the hem of the micro shirt I stupidly tossed on before demanding Peter to drive me to the airport, I endeavor to pull open the door of my apartment building without letting go of my luggage.

I thought reminding Peter that Noelle isn't the only woman in Oregon with ornaments on her chest would have him regretting his decision to ditch me for his high school sweetheart, which definitely wasn't what we'd travelled to his home town for.

I'm insulted to advise his eyes never veered my way—not even while requesting I return the engagement ring he'd gifted me only three months earlier.

“Don't look at me like that, Kels. It's a family heirloom,” he said as he pulled into a free spot at the front of the departure entrance. “So it wouldn't be right for you to keep it.”

I've never been more grateful for online check-in. It meant Peter couldn't follow me past security since the only ticket in his name departing Oregon was for the honeymoon we were meant to leave for on Christmas Day.

“I used my damn miles for upgrades, too,” I grumble while wrangling with the door.

It doesn't want to budge, and I realize why when I dump my bag at my feet to force it into submission. A homeless man's sleeping bag is caught under the lip. It's as shredded as my confidence when I walked into our final meeting with the baker making our wedding cake to find my fiancé's head buried in her floured neck.

“I’m so sorry.” The man’s sleeping bag is ruined, and the shops close early on the weekend. “I have spare blankets upstairs.” Although I am beyond tipsy, my street smarts aren’t mired enough to let a stranger into my space. “Let me get them for you.”

I don’t even get into the foyer of my building when the beggar concludes that my luggage will be more valuable to his cause than any bedding I could gift him.

He races down the street with my duffle bag stuffed under his arm, his speed unchecked.

I’d be tempted to chase him if there was anything of value in my luggage. The ring Peter wants returned is in the pocket of my cut-off jeans, and my cell phone and purse are... are...

*Shit!*



“You’re welcome. Is there anything else I can assist you with this evening, Mrs. Stranger?”

“Ms.,” I correct. “It’s *Ms.* Stranger.” When I realize I’m taking my frustration out on the wrong person, I add, “And no, thank you. You’ve been a great help.”

When the virtual assistant from my bank disconnects our internet call, I scan my eyes over the list I jotted down when my sprint failed to find the perp who stole my bag. I’ve organized new credit cards, diverted my personal email to the private server of the firm I work for, and lodged an insurance claim to replace my phone and work laptop.



I've crossed every item off my list except the last one.

*Change my Facebook status to single.*

I had planned to put it off until I wrapped my head around the fact I went to Oregon to finalize preparations for my wedding, only to return home single a week later, but Peter isn't giving me a choice. He's tagged Noelle in a handful of posts over the past five days, and although their PDA is Hallmark Christmas movie cheesy, it raises many questions.

My inbox is flooded with messages from online friends.

Friends I've never met in real life.

*I'm so pathetic.*

After ensuring Jana from my online book club that I'm fine to continue buddy reading dark romances with her—how couldn't I be? Men in the below-average range like Peter usually end up dead in the romance books we read—I log into Facebook to announce the inevitable.

One click and everything changes.

The 'spend Christmas with your loved one' ads they ram down your throat at this time of year are immediately switched for online dating sites, and my inbox fills with concerns that they might not be able to return the gift they purchased for my upcoming nuptials.

"Sorry, Aunt Jac, the personalized Christmas tea towels are yours. That's karma for not sticking to the register."

As I try to clean up my home page by marking the dating site ads as 'not interested,' an email notification pops up at the top of my old laptop screen. The subject line boils my blood with rage.

*You're being unreasonable.*

The little snippet they show you to entice you to open the email does the opposite.

*We're two weeks out until our wedding, Kels. You can't expect me to buy Noelle another ring before then. Not all of us got big bonuses this year. Mine was sliced in half.*

“Because you flirted with your analysts instead of taking their advice seriously.”

In my eagerness to tell Peter he's only on the cusp of my pettiness—I still have our mutual workplace to woo to my side of our split—I accidentally click on the ‘show me more’ button of an advertisement instead of the floating email bar that disappeared a second too fast.

It flashes up a video with too much skin for a Facebook ad. They're usually as anti-nudity as Peter. I bet Zuckerberg doesn't have sex with the lights on either.

“Are you hot and horny?”

“Yes.” My body answers the voiceover's question before my head. I can't remember the last time I felt this randy and heartbroken at the same time. I think it was the night of my thirtieth birthday. Peter had pledged to ‘rock my world.’

I'd only just reached the tingle stage when he squashed me to the mattress for three jerking seconds before rolling over and falling asleep.

Considering that was the *only* birthday present he gifted me, I should have asked for a refund.

My focus returns to my laptop screen when the ad continues its extremely personal interrogation. “Have you been left unsatisfied too many times?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?”

“Then what are you waiting for? The men at Valentino’s are ready to answer your every desire.” A lady with a head full of gray hair slowly moves into the frame. She’s classically beautiful, and I wonder how much of her youth is attributed to the men she drapes herself across.

Orgasms aren’t just incredible for your pelvic floor.

They also help maintain your youth.

My mom barely looks a day over thirty. If you don’t want me to ruin the bedsheets I tried to gift the homeless man with vomit, we’ll skip the part that she’s been married to my father for over thirty years.

My parents are in Lastres, my mother’s hometown, to collect my grandparents for my Christmas Eve wedding. I’ve not yet had the heart to tell them my name is no longer on the invitations they helped me send. I don’t want to ruin their holiday. My mother hasn’t been home for almost a decade, so I’ll delay updating them until closer to their departure date.

My mother wouldn’t stay away if she thought her daughter was heartbroken and miserable. Don’t get me wrong. She wouldn’t let me mope either. She’d tell me to dust myself off and strive for better. She’s cool like that. I don’t think she’d even bat an eyelid if I paid for services to get back on the horse.

“There’s no wrong way to spend your hard-earned money. Only a million memories you might miss out on by being scroogie.”

Her logic was in response to the massive wish-list I created when I spent one too many hours scrolling BookTok, but my tipsy head doesn’t want to hear logic.

It wants me to revenge fuck Peter from my thoughts too.

With my decision made, I jot down the address from the ad still playing on my laptop screen, then race into my walk-in closet to find the sexiest LBD on the rack before common sense can make itself known.

Peter's stiff suits and horrid ties fuel my desire to forget him. His arrogance made what should have been a sexy ensemble stuffy and pompous. He never rolled up the sleeves of his button-up shirts or forwent a tie on a single occasion.

He'd wear suits to bed if given the chance.

I snort. Noelle will probably make him Christmas pajama suits. Then her little Christmas Bug will be snuggly and warm while waiting to taint her virtue after they've tied the knot.

That's the only reason Peter is rushing down the aisle. Noelle doesn't believe in trying before you buy. She'll also happily accept a dud if he makes the chapel and reception hall look like an elf blew chunks over the classic décor I had picked.

She's childish, naïve, and downright pathetic.

Anyone who believes in the magic of Christmas is.

Karma bites me for the second time tonight when my bar humbug rant is ended by me stubbing my little toe on the stupid ornaments box Peter brought up from storage last week.

Now instead of only speaking two languages, I'm fluent in multiple, but they all appear to only have cuss words in their vocabulary.

My little toe's pain is more prominent than my heartache. I'm not surprised. Things haven't been great with Peter for a while, but I wanted to believe him when he got down on bended knee and promised to do better.

I said yes because I want a love that spans decades, and the 'supposed' clock all women are meant to march to isn't ticking in my favor.

I will still achieve my happily ever after. I'm determined to have a lifelong love like my parents. It'll just have to wait until I've gotten 'my rocks off' with a man I've paid for the privilege.

## CHAPTER 2

# Zane

“**K** eep the change.”

As I stuff a handful of bills through the slot of the privacy partition separating the cab driver and me, my phone buzzes in my pocket. December should be when my industry slows, but things changed when Covid showed up.

Instead of my bookings keeping me solely stateside, personal recommendations see me jet-setting across the globe twelve months of the year.

I haven't had a day off in months, so this weeks hiatus is long overdue.

As I step onto the bustling footpath of a town I'll forever call home, even with me only visiting once a year at the most, I read the message on my phone screen.

***Emma:** He's willing to pay double for the short notice.*

Emma is my assistant. She's as cute as a bunny and has a nose to match, but couldn't be more in love with her girlfriend. They've been together for a decade, and they're one of my first success stories, which is odd to admit since I predominately work with heterosexual females.

Don't hang me out to dry just yet. I'm not a shrink, or one of those weirdos who watch couples have sex before pointing

out where they're going wrong—though I've been offered many times to do that. I'm a—

A jolly fat man in a velvety red suit cuts off my inner monologue. “Ho, ho, *ho*.”

With each ‘ho’ he thrusts his charity tin closer to my chest. He wants a donation, and since he’s covered head to toe in a body-hugging Santa suit on an unseasonably humid Florida evening, I dig my wallet out of my pocket for the second time tonight.

“Any chance of a receipt?” I ask when I fail to find a single denomination under triple digits. Donations are tax-deductible, and I need to do everything possible to bring down my IRS bill.

“No.” Stealing my ability to announce his donations would skyrocket if he popped down to Walmart for a receipt book, Santa snatches the freshly printed Benjamin Franklins from my wallet and squashes them into his locked charity box.

I’m about to berate him, but his promise puts me on the back foot. “Now your every wish will be my command.” After a saucy wink, he returns to haggling the patrons outside my sister’s restaurant. “Ho, ho, *ho*.”

My pissy attitude swings toward favorable when a flirty voice replies, “Don’t worry, Santa. I’m planning to do *exactly* that.”

A gorgeous brunette with legs that go for miles playfully tickles Santa’s beard before she skips by him minus a donation. I cut Santa some slack. The beauty’s little black dress reveals she’s carrying nothing but dick-pumping curves. There isn’t even a cell phone imprint like some women get when they use their bra as a purse. Every beautiful curve she



owns is on display for the world to see, and I'm suddenly wishing I had a beard as thick as Santa's to mop up the mess. I've got drool everywhere.

My cab can't merge with the flow of traffic until I move, but try as I may, I can't get my feet to budge. The only part of my body functioning are my eyes while I watch the striking Spaniard's weave as she darts through the crowd like a woman on a mission.

Whoever she's racing for is a lucky bastard. My cock has been trained to respond on cue, but even it went off script tonight.

The springy bounce of her steps.

Her playful tease with Santa.

The quickest connection of our eyes when she twirled around the man who robbed me of a three-hundred-dollar tax deduction.

They're not usually points that rile a response out of me, but I'd be a liar if I said my cock's head wasn't nudging at the zipper on my pants, begging for some space.

I'm hard in the middle of a bustling metropolis, even with Santa eyeballing me like he can see the imprint of my cock in my jeans.

I realize that is the case when he taps on his nose before telling me my secret is safe with him.

"There's no secret for you to share," I mumble under my breath before my body finally answers the pleas of my head and steps toward my sister's restaurant.

"Everyone has secrets," Santa replies, unwilling to back down. "Even you, Zane."

I almost fall for his trick. ‘*How do you know my name?*’ is on the tip of my tongue. But then I recall my name is on over a dozen cards in my wallet, so he would have spotted them while forcing a donation I can’t claim as a tax deduction.

“Nice try, Santa. You almost had me.”

I turn away from his grin, which is brighter than his fake white beard, when he says, “Next time, then?”

“There won’t be *a next time.*” The last half of my reply makes my throat uncomfortable since I don’t wholly express it. As I turn back to face the jolly man, my mouth falls open. Santa is gone. His red cheeks and shiny black boots are nowhere to be seen, and a guy in a red velvet coat should stand out among Floridians.

After shaking off my unease as the side effect of a long flight, I enter my sister’s restaurant while replying to Emma’s text.

*Me: Double of nothing is still nothing. I don’t work on my home turf. You know this.*

As the hostess searches for the chef, ellipsis trickles across my phone screen.

*Emma: He’s one of those deep-pocketed, most likely asshole stockbrokers. This could open up a ton of referrals. Things have been quiet of late. I’m not sure this is an opportunity you should give up.*

*Me: My calendar is full until October.*

The swiftness of her reply announces she preempted mine.

*Emma: By single desperate housewives who want to pretend they’re not paying to have their undercarriages serviced.*

*Me: Em...*

I'm interrupted by the hostess before I can complete my reply.

Well, I assume it is the hostess until my cock responds to the floral fragrance in the air long before my senses.

The brunette who mesmerized me only moments ago is standing next to me as if she's my plus one for my mother's wedding, glancing down at my phone. She is even more dazzling up close. The fairy lights throughout the restaurant bounce off her sultry locks and halo her head like she's far more innocent than her voluptuous frame suggests.

When it dawns on her that she's gained my utmost devotion, she purses her fuckable lips before asking, "You don't have an account with Trust Bank, do you?"

"I do," I answer promptly, even though I'm shocked at her weird line of questioning.

Asking someone their banking preference isn't a pickup line I've ever used before.

If she weren't standing across from me, I would have ended her attempt to sell me something by disconnecting our call.

The situation gets even weirder when she asks, "Would you be opposed to me using your account for a withdrawal?" It isn't solely her question encouraging the awkwardness. It was my cock's response to the faintest scrape of her teeth over her lower lip before she asked her question. "I'm not explaining myself very well. I—"

A man behind her cuts her off. "No beggars. It says so on the sign outside."

“Actually,” I correct, twisting to face him. “It says if you require food or water, please enter. No one is discriminated here.”

When he can’t deny my claim—because it’s true—I guide the brunette to the side of the crowd lining up to get in before gesturing for her to continue.

She waits a beat to get over the snobby patron’s assumption she’s a haggler before announcing, “My purse and phone were stolen, and since I got a little generous with my nips while organizing new cards, I forgot I had no access to funds until I traveled halfway across Ravenshoe.”

“You need money?” I query, reading between the lines.

Even with her nose screwed up like a rabbit, her face is without a single imperfection. She truly is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid my eyes on. “Yes.” She freezes my movements when I dig my wallet out of my pocket by curling her hand over mine. “Not *your* money, as such. I’ll transfer money into your account, and then you can withdraw it for me.” Her dazzling chocolate eyes scan the street outside. “I’m sure there’s an automatic teller here somewhere.”

After recalling my sister’s numerous gripes about how often her payment terminals go down and the lack of ATMs in the area, I say, “You won’t find a teller within four blocks.” When she sighs, I give a reason for an upswing in her mood. “But I don’t mind lending you money. You can pay me back tomorrow...” I stop just before I say, ‘*When you join me for dinner.*’ I don’t date. I haven’t in years, though I’m sure my clients would disagree with me. “How much do you need?”

“The ad said prices started at two-fifty.” When I grimace along with her, she adds, “But it’s okay. I’ll find another way to fund my revenge.”

Her reply piques my interest in more ways than I can comprehend, but I start at the lesser of my confusion. “Two hundred and fifty dollars?” When she nods, I cough out a wheezy laugh. “Anyone would swear you’re eating here for that.”

My joke is lost on her since she doesn’t know my sister owns the restaurant, but she still replies, “I’m not the one eating.” Her brows pull together. “I hope.” She shakes off her confusion. “I’m not exactly sure how it works. I’ve never done this before.”

She throws her hands in the air and soundlessly screams out her frustration before returning her eyes to me. “Don’t worry about it. It’s stupid. I acted in haste, and that never ends well. I just wanted to prove I’m not the problem, and even when it comes to sex, there’s no I in team.”

She snaps her mouth shut like her honesty mortifies her.

I fucking love it.

“I shouldn’t have bothered you. I hope you have a pleasant evening, and Merry Christmas.”

“I’ll lend you the money.” When I shout my words to ensure she hears them before she exits the restaurant, my reply gains her a lot of sympathetic looks I’m confident she doesn’t want. Her rapidly shrinking shoulders announce this, not to mention the dulling of the spark mesmerizing me.

With her embarrassment high, I can guide her without protest into the underbelly of the hub my sister built from the ground up.

Once we’re far from prying eyes, I say, “But it’ll have to be a check. Scrooge McDuck over there siphoned the last of

my cash.” I nudge my head to Santa, who’s once again tapping his nose. “Do you know if they accept checks?”

“I truly don’t know,” the brunette replies as we enter my sister’s office, which is hidden at the back of the kitchen. “I could ask.” I seem to be getting her over the fence, but she is uneasy by my generosity. “But why do you want to lend me money? You don’t know me. I could be halfway to Mexico with your money by tomorrow morning.”

I laugh. “If you have the means to pull that off, please take me with you. The chilaquiles on my last room service charge almost cost that much.”

That gets a smile out of her. It is a sexily wicked grin that summons up all sorts of naughty thoughts. “That’s what you get for taking the cheat’s way out. You don’t go to Mexico to eat in your room.”

She has a point, but things are different in my industry. The more time I spend indoors, the faster I can move onto my next client.

“How about we fill in a check and see how it goes? If it’s meant to be—”

“It’s meant to be,” she says at the same time.

Needing something to cover how hard her smile makes me, I walk around my sister’s desk before plopping my ass into her massive leather chair. Her desk is a mess, but after a quick cleanup, I find the checkbook I’m seeking and enough space to fill it in.

“You own this restaurant?” asks the brunette, her tone high in shock.

“Not exactly.” I open the checkbook at the next available check before securing a pen. “I’m a silent investor.” I wave the

pen around the mess that doesn't reflect the luxury of the menu. "This is my sister's brainchild." I'm not usually so open with women I've just met, so after a somewhat shy smile about how quickly she's unguarded me, I ask, "What's the name of the business you want this made out to?"

Now it's her turn to be shy. Her smile slips as she whispers, "Valentino's."

I reach the T before the entirety of her brief reply smacks into me. Then, just as dramatically, my pen falls onto the checkbook and my back slouches against the worn leather of my sister's chair.

"Valentino's?" I double-check, sure I've heard her wrong. There are a lot of famous Italian restaurants in Ravenshoe that sound similar to Valentino's, but none with that exact title.

"Yes," she replies, her tone lowering. "Have you heard of it before?"

"You could say that. Ah..." I cough to clear my throat from whatever the fuck is going on with it before asking, "Why do you need to attend Valentino's?" Her hue answers my question on her behalf, not to mention her earlier comment. "Revenge."

She sounds determined while saying, "There's no better way to get revenge—"

"Than to sit back and do nothing."

Her swallow is audible, but the sole sounds she makes.

Although she isn't a client of mine, I can't help but offer her some advice. "Showing him you don't give a fuck will burn him more than anything. You know that, right?"

She swivels on the spot, fanning out the short hemline of her little black dress. “Yes. But...”

I wait and wait and wait for her to finalize her reply.

It is worth every damn second.

“I’m also horny. Whiskey does that to me, and then when the advertisement for Valentino’s popped up on my laptop, I thought, what the hell, I deserve a treat. It’s been months since I’ve climaxed, and they have a climax-or-don’t-pay promise.” Her dramatic exhale ruffles the strands of hair curtaining her beautiful face. “What girl wouldn’t take them up on their offer?”

“A girl who shouldn’t need to pay to get her rocks off.”

I mean my reply as a compliment, but she’s horrified by it. “Please don’t say that.” The range of her eye roll is impressive. “The last man who said that to me left me hanging... on my birthday of all days... then he let her have her way with the elves who spewed Christmas vomit over everything.” With a groan, she slumps into the chair across from me and balances her head in her hands. “This week sucks.”

As the hope on her face fades to oblivion, I mull over my reasons for not working on my home turf. It could cause more conflict than it’s worth, and it is the one place I can be myself, but can I even call it work if I volunteer my time?

People take on pro bono cases all the time, so why can’t I?

It isn’t like I’m being put off. The woman standing across from me is beautiful. I wouldn’t hesitate to take her home if I hadn’t unearthed a conflict of interest.

This goes against every rule I have, but fuck it. It’s one night, and you only live once, so I’m running with it.



“Why pay for services when you can get them for free?”

The brunette slowly lifts her head before she angles it to the side. Unlike her sexy, fuckable body, her confused expression is adorably cute. “Free? Where? The ad said services *start* at two-fifty, and that’ll probably only get me Bucked Tooth Bobby for a quarter of an hour. Besides, no one works for free. Not even you.”

Her smile about her witty comment slips when I ask, “Are you sure about that?” When the shock in her eyes shifts to need, I adjust the span of my thighs before tilting my pelvis forward so she can’t misinterpret what I’m saying. “And can you really call a one-night-stand work?”

## CHAPTER 3

# Kelsey

**W**ith my heart thumping as fast as my clit, I stare at the stranger I approached before anyone else, confident his laidback demeanor would have him considering my offer more than the pompous men behind him.

His jeans are designer, and I'm reasonably sure his Vans are limited edition, but with his button-up shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows and covering a casual white T, he seemed more down-to-earth than every other Ravenshoe local or tourist hogging the sidewalk.

I was also curious to discover if his generosity was as all-encompassing as his sexiness. Santa walked away with a mini jackpot, but people are more willing to part with their hard-earned money when that's all that's on the table.

I didn't make it inside Valentino's foyer.

I chickened out before breaking through the entry door—a good two minutes before I remembered I had no means to fund my walk on the wild side.

But instead of going home like a loser, I took the advice of a man in a Santa suit that looked so authentic I'm confident 'made by Mrs. Claus' is stitched inside the fancy threads.

He said the ‘help’ I was seeking was inside the restaurant I was darting past. Since I couldn’t tell the man I had a crush on when I was five that a wholesome meal isn’t the warmth I’m seeking, he guided me inside the restaurant without an objection firing from my lips.

The blame for the rest of my foolish ruse falls on my shoulders.

Butterflies took flight in my stomach when I noticed how many single men were lined up to enter the restaurant known for exorbitant menu prices, but they turned into a full-blown frenzy when I spotted the man helming the queue. He was the devastatingly handsome man standing at the taxi rank who almost caused me to trip. If it weren’t for Santa’s beard, I would have fell flat on my face at the feet of the alluring stranger, whose panty-wetting features kept flashing through my head when I was willing myself to build the courage to enter Valentino’s.

He was the very image I was planning to conjure up while striving to bring myself to ecstasy with nothing but my fingers and a handy little gadget I used to store in the kitchen so Peter wouldn’t be made aware of his shortcomings.

I thought it was fate, but then I remembered that foolish notion belongs to the people who think they’re so special, they’ll take a day that’s for everyone, like Christmas Eve, and try to make it their own.

Don’t look at me like that. I was dragged to that date kicking and screaming, my fight only ending when the wedding planner advised the next date available for Peter’s family church was three years away. Peter’s family would have disowned him if he had a child out of wedlock, so I

begrudgingly accepted the date on offer since I didn't want to be fifty with a ten year old.

I swear to whatever religious entity you believe in that I tried to walk away from the handsome stranger with as much gall as I fought with not to steal Christmas Eve from families. I told my libido no, that you can't walk up to a stranger, ask if they're single, then if given an appropriate response, hit them up for casual sex.

That's unkosher and not cool.

So I tiptoed around the idea that I was considering hiring an escort to get the job done, hoping he'd take pity on me and offer his services for free.

I hit the motherload, though now I feel shitty about it.

There's no way a man as gorgeous as him is single, but he has my head in such a spin that my body has convinced my heart his relationship status doesn't matter. That two consenting adults are the only things needed for a steamy look-what-you-lost fuck.

But two wrongs won't make a right.

"I should go. It was wrong of me to approach you."

Instead of using words to end my flee this time, he beats me to the door before slowly crowding me against it. He smells as good as I imagined when eyeballing him from afar, and although he stands a foot taller than me, our bodies mold together like God himself crafted them to fit.

"The door is unlocked. You can leave at any time." He exposes the goose bumps his voice trickled across my skin when he drags my hair to one side. "But if you want to revenge fuck him out of your system, I'd rather you turn around."

After delaying his departure long enough there's no uncertainty to the murkiness of my panties, he steps back, freeing me.

My body instantly complains. It threatens irritable bowel syndrome for the rest of my life, but my heart is the first to speak.

“Are you married?”

I hear the air whizzing from his nose more than I see it. “No. Marriages should be sacramental. You shouldn't put yourself in a position to cheat, much less act on thoughts you shouldn't be having.”

His response drives me wild with desire, but I try to keep a rational head. “So... you're single?”

This time, his disbelieving chuckle is more prominent since I shakingly spin to face him. “All the way.” When my eyes shoot to his ring finger to check like I haven't done precisely that a hundred times in the past ten minutes, he pulls his phone out of his pocket before handing it to me. “There's no lock code, and I'm active on most social media sites. Scroll as long as you want.”

After being deceived in a way that will always hang a shadow over my confidence, his reply is everything I need to hear. It liberates my conscience and has me desperate to take back the piece of my womanhood Peter stole when he cheated.

So instead of scrolling the mystery stranger's phone like I did Peter's for a week before I walked in on my worst nightmare, I dump it on the desk his backside is propped on and throw myself into his arms, sealing my mouth over his lips.

Strangers or not, I want this.

I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

The moment should be awkward. It should be uncoordinated and uncomfortable.

It is far from any of those things.

His kiss is too wild for that.

Too roasting.

And his skills... *damn*. He has no trouble dueling his tongue with mine. At the same time, he toys with my nipples through the rigid material of my dress.

Desire rushes through me when he swallows the moan I can't hold back. Peter wasn't interested in my Christmas baubles. I always thought he was more of a legs man than a boobs man. I learned otherwise in the bakery earlier this week.

As if busting your fiancé cheating isn't bad enough, I was stuck in Oregon for five days with the loved-up couple, who didn't care about my feelings in the slightest. They took the itinerary I'd configured and ran with it.

They even collected the tree I'd paid for from the lot and decorated it with *my* decorations.

The stranger, whose name remains a mystery, shifts my focus far from Peter and his four-inch dick when he drops his lips from my mouth to my neck. He suckles on my skin before tracking his tongue along the veins keeping my heart rate high.

"Fuck me, you taste like"—I beg him to say sin and depravity. Heaven and hell. Sex and... sex. I don't get close to any of my guesses—"Candy canes and hot chocolate."

"That's the woman in seat 17A's fault. She'd packed a canister of mint cocoa, unaware the container would pressurize

in the cabin of the airplane. When she opened it, it squirted all over me.”

His growl makes my frustration nowhere near as bad. It sends a hot pulse darting through my veins and has me wishing my sleeveless shirt hadn't absorbed most of the mess.

He may have been interested in sampling every inch of me if I was coated head to toe in cocoa.

Instead, he backs away before dropping his eyes to the hem of my dress that's ridden up high on my thighs. “Spread your legs for me.”

“The cocoa didn't get me there.” I circle my chest. “It was more this region.”

He smiles like I'm being witty before repeating his demand. “Spread your legs for me.”

When I do as asked, the shudder wobbling my thighs is for a completely different reason than embarrassment.

He cusses for the second time before palming the rock behind his zipper. “Hmm-mmm, even sexier than my deviant head imagined.” My emotions don't know which way to swing when he says, “But I need to take my time with you. Savor you.”

His confession shocks me. Things are moving quickly, but if this were my standard Friday night ritual, he would have been finished and snoring by now, so I run with it.

My clit thumps out a mariachi beat when he returns his eyes to my face before saying, “I have a permanent reservation at a hotel a couple of miles from here.” I must express something I didn't mean to show because he's quick to try and settle my unease. “I've never taken anyone there. I don't work when I come home.” His last mumbled sentence fills my head



with many questions, but his following ensures nothing but my libido has centerstage. “But I’d like you to be the first.”

The tension eases a smidge when I jokingly ask, “How much will it cost me?”

“Not a damn thing,” he replies, grinning.

After tugging down my dress until it covers my damp panties, he curls his hand around mine before hightailing it out of the office we were about to sully.

“Zane...” A woman with inky black hair and a fond twinkle in her eye greets us when she spots our veer past a massive industrial kitchen. She’s at a cooking station housing a dozen plates with tiny portions of food that most likely cost a fortune to purchase.

“Not now, Casey,” Zane replies, alerting me to his name. “But I’ll be back in plenty of time to help you with wedding day prep.” I barely balk. It doesn’t cause the slightest ripple, but Zane must feel it. After freeing my hand from his so the sweat dripping off mine doesn’t impede his grip, he places his hand onto the curve of my back so I can’t sprint for the exit before he confesses, “*Our* mother is getting married next weekend.” He says ‘our’ in a way I can’t misunderstand. Casey is his sister. “I think it’s husband number eight.”

“Nine,” Casey corrects while cleaning a plate the server is about to take. Once it is as spotless as a snob willing to pay a hundred dollars an appetizer would expect, she lifts her eyes to me. They’re kind yet teasing. “Her constant quest for the new love feeling is why I’ve never seen my little brother with a person of the opposite sex.” She doesn’t allow me to tell her we’ve just met. After wiping her hands on her apron like she’s the one with sweaty palms, she offers one in greeting to me. “It’s lovely to meet you...”

When she leaves her greeting open, Zane watches me with as much interest as his sister.

“Kelsey,” I stammer out nervously. “Your restaurant is lovely. I’ve never eaten here, but I’ve heard the food is worth its hefty price tag.”

The wish to ram my foot in my mouth lessens when Casey laughs. “Thank you. It isn’t to everyone’s palate, but it keeps the lights on.” She’s being modest. Her tone exposes this, not to mention her flashy tennis bracelet. “Can I make you guys something? The salmon is a little—”

“No, we’re fine,” Zane interrupts. “We’ll eat at the hotel.”

When Casey screws up her face in disgust, I say with a laugh, “I tried to warn him off room service. It’s rarely appetizing.”

Hot heat tracks through me when Zane mutters under his breath, “You won’t be saying that later tonight.”

The pulse I can’t calm reminds me we’re not darting through the underbelly of one of Ravenshoe’s finest establishments for no reason.

We’re meant to be having raunchy forget-him sex.

I really need to learn how to school my expressions. A second after my thighs press together, Casey backs away with her hands in the air like I’m a ticking bomb. “Ten a.m. Monday, Zane. I can’t be expected to feed the masses and organize the place settings.”

Zane grumbles something under his breath, but I miss what he says because he continues our brisk exit.

I’ve only just returned Casey’s goodbye wave when we exit the restaurant via the service entrance and make a beeline

for the taxi rank.

“It’s Friday night, two weeks out from Christmas. We won’t get a cab for hours...” My words trail off when a taxi stops directly in front of us to let a man out. He looks oddly similar to the Santa operating the charity collection zone at the front of the restaurant. Even his suit is of the same high quality.

“If you’ve changed your mind, you can back out. I won’t hold it against you.” Zane is giving me an out, but he still slides into the back of the cab after me and announces his hotel to the driver.

“I haven’t changed my mind.” Only an idiot who drank too much eggnog would do that. “It’s just I could have sworn I’d seen that Santa before.”

“You too?” Zane murmurs, shifting my focus to him. “I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me.”

As the cab slowly merges with traffic, the Santa we’re eyeballing like freaks at a circus twists to face us. He winks like he did after shoving me into the restaurant before tapping the side of his nose.

## CHAPTER 4

# Zane

**F**or a man who's most comfortable when left alone in his own space, an odd feeling envelops me when I follow Kelsey's slow weave through the living room of my penthouse suite. I made out this room is on permanent reservation, but in reality, I own it. I don't share that information with anyone because I've never had to worry about being caught in a lie.

Since Kelsey looks two seconds away from calling me Pinocchio, I issue her a truth I don't give many. "Even with my visits home being sporadic, purchasing this room was cheaper than booking it." Her smile shines brighter than the Christmas tree staff at the hotel set up in my suite earlier this week when I say, "It also means I don't have to check the sheets each night before bed."

"I thought I was the only one who stripped the bed at each hotel I stay at." She continues to drink in a handful of family portraits on the mantel before spinning to face me. "Is it just Casey and yourself?"

I twist my lips before joining her in the den. I had gone to the bedroom to see if I had condoms in my luggage. I don't usually carry them on me when I'm home. "As direct siblings, yes." When Kelsey peers at me with her nose crinkled in confusion, I explain, "I have a handful of half brothers and

sisters and even more stepsiblings. I stopped counting at fifteen.”

“Fifteen?” If her eyes bulge any further, they’ll pop out of her head.

Grinning, I nod. “Yeah. Casey could probably give you a more accurate figure. Just maybe ask when she’s not holding a carving knife.”

Her laugh reminds me that my cock hasn’t gone down for a single minute. Our kiss that knocked me on my ass with only one swipe of her tongue has my cock forging its own agenda. It’s not a part of the team anymore. He’s gone out on his own and is fucking pissed we didn’t continue our game of tonsil hockey during both the cab and elevator ride.

It’s more than ready to make up for lost time, so you can picture its angry throb when I continue our conversation as if Kelsey is being billed by the hour. “What about you? Any siblings?”

Sighing, she shakes her head before spinning to face me. “I’m an only child.” Her huff this time around sounds more in disgust than upset. “Not from a lack of trying. My parents can’t keep their hands off each other.”

“If your mother looks anything like you, I can understand your father’s motives.” I drag my eyes down her body in a slow, predatory gawk before wetting my suddenly dry lips with my tongue.

I swear on my sister’s life, the very definition of a woman is standing before me.

A face that makes every inch of my body ache, long, sweltering legs, and curvy, fuckable hips.

“You’re good at this,” Kelsey murmurs, drawing my focus back to her face.

Suspicion highlights my tone. “Good at what?”

She joins me near the couch, pushes me back until my ass bends the springy material, then hugs my hips with her knees. “Building a woman’s confidence.”

When she tells me she’s never felt more comfortable around a stranger, I try to pull back on the reins, but before I can, she rotates her hips until her damp panties are exposed, and I can’t concentrate on anything but the thrill of the chase.

“Has anyone ever told you that?”

“It’s been mentioned a handful of times.”

My honesty can’t be helped. With all the blood rushing to the area of my body Kelsey is grinding against, I’m without a single cognitive thought.

“My mother is on her ninth husband, but she’s been in love a dozen times more than that. When she’s smitten, there’s no stopping her. But the lows were *low*. I could only get her out of bed after I built her confidence back to what it was before it was broken.”

When my honesty is awarded with a breathless moan, I cup Kelsey’s breast before rolling her peaked nipple between my index finger and thumb, then continue spilling secrets like I’m not paid to keep them. “It worked every time. In under a week, she was back whistling romantic ballads in the kitchen while teaching Casey how to cook. Casey thought I was a magician.”

“I can understand why.” She rubs herself along my shaft a handful of times before murmuring, “I can feel your magic... and it’s still in your pants.”

My breathy chuckle adds to the heat on her cheeks before my lips set her on fire. She burns up everywhere when I kiss her how I was dying to in the cab.

Once I've kissed her to the point her lungs must be screaming for air, I lower my lips to her neck before dipping them even lower.

Her head falls back, exposing more of her ravishing neck when I drag my tongue along the delicate skin covering her collarbone.

The beverage spilled on her tastes almost as delicious as the scent that wafts up when her grinds return the flare of her dress to her midsection.

Her panties are so wet they summon an image of her juices dribbling down my face as she rides it to climax.

*Fuck...* the thought alone makes my cock want to jerk through the stimulation of release even while still in my briefs.

I can't wait to taste her, to feel her climax on my lips. I want it even more than my cock wants to notch between her pillowy lips, and I can't wait a second longer.

Kelsey groans in disappointment when I lift her off me by her hips. Its rumble turns into a breathy moan when I mutter, "I want you to sit on my face."

The vein in her neck flutters out of control. "You want me to do what?"

I don't answer her question. She heard me. The increase of her seductive scent gives away her proper response.

She's merely uneasy by how horny my demand made her because she thinks it isn't cultured for women to answer the pleas of their bodies.



I'm determined to show her otherwise.

"I... I..."

I lessen her worry by leaning forward and dragging my nose over her panty-covered slit. A groan unlike anything I've heard before rumbles up my chest.

She smells fucking delicious.

When I tell her that, the shake hampering her thighs doubles, but her soar in confidence is the most apparent change.

"Scoot back. If you want me to use your face as a chair, you need to bring your chest down a smidge."

Only seconds ago, I hated my designer couch. Its rolled top offers little back support. It was purchased solely for its high-end look rather than comfort ratibility. However, when Kelsey uses its bench-like top to balance her knees on a second after shimmying out of her panties and dragging down the top of her dress, I pledge never to own another couch.

"Sit on me," I moan in a purr when she sinks down only far enough for the tip of my nose to breach the entrance of her delectable-looking pussy. "Suffocate me with that pussy I wanna own. Ride my face like you know I could never be so lucky."

I don't know if her knees fall out from beneath her or if the desperateness in my voice has her eager to fulfill my every fantasy. Whatever it is, within a second, her pussy swamps my mouth, and her hips rock in rhythm to the pulse of the vein feeding my cock.

"*Ohh...*" That's all I get. Not an entire word but a moan that explains everything.

The tension.

The eagerness.

*The heat.*

This right here is what dreams are made from.

With my hands on the generous swells of Kelsey's ass, guiding the sways of her hips, she fucks my tongue, mouth, and nose until the buzz can't be held off for a moment longer.

"I'm going to come."

I dig my fingers deeper into the bouncing globes of her ass before ensuring my tongue finds her clit with each grind she does.

Then she lets go. She freefalls into orgasmic bliss while whispering a name I can't quite work out since she clamped her thighs around my head to steady her shakes.

"No. God, no," Kelsey murmurs, shuffling back when I flutter my tongue over her deliciously firm clit. "You can't do that so soon after making me—"

I lick her again, causing a brutal shudder.

"Zane..."

Fuck me. That couldn't sound hotter.

When my name in a lusty tone is the extent of her protest, I help myself to a second serving of dessert. I eat her until the wetness slicking from the tip of my nose to my chin is close to dripping down my cheeks.

Her juices would have puddled around my ears minutes ago if I weren't so eager to lap them up.

When Kelsey's rocks hasten, announcing I'm getting close to tipping the axis of her world for the second time, I place all

my focus on her clit. I lick it, bite at it, and suck it between my lips.

“Zane...”

The way she says my name drives me wild.

I want to sink into her—to fuck her how I’m certain she’s never been fucked.

I want all her future orgasms and then some.

Desperate to control some of the insanity firing through me, I flick my tongue over her swollen clit like a maniac. I take all the control until there’s no doubt whose name she’s screaming, then I aim to give her what she hoped to achieve when she kissed me in my sister’s office.

I endeavor to fuck the need for revenge right out of her.

Things move so fast, my pants are huddled to my knees, and my cock is sheathed with a condom by the time I pull a deliriously limp Kelsey from my face to my lap.

She’s drunk now instead of on the verge of tipsy. Alcohol isn’t responsible for her floppy state, though. It is back-to-back orgasms and the possibility of more.

Her body is humming. Every part I touch vibrates in response to the spark it causes, and the fiery embers almost turn catastrophic when I stuff my cock inside her.

We moan in sync when the eagerness of my thrust has her ass slapping my thighs and the head of my cock hitting her cervix.

My moan is more pleasurable than Kelsey’s.

After circling her hips to loosen herself up for me, she uses the rolltop feature of my couch as a tether to control the

movement of her hips. She rises and falls on my dick a handful of times, each descent a smidge faster than the one before.

Within no time, she adopts a rhythm she finds pleasurable.

It's somewhere between making love and fucking like a wild animal.

This is usually when I'd take over, where I'd lead the procession to the ultimate thrill.

I can't do that this time around.

I'm too busy admiring the view. The princely swell of Kelsey's breasts as she arches her back so her clit gets as much attention from my pelvis as her pussy is my cock. The rosy hue that lightens the coloring of her nipples the more she moans. The wetness that gets more pungent the more damp it becomes.

This girl is a dream.

*A dream you'll only experience once if you don't man up and get the job done.*

In a flurry, I lift her off me, fold her over the couch, and slam into her with one brutal pump.

Kelsey screams before she convulses around me.

The tightness of her pussy as she rides the wave of ecstasy is almost my undoing. It takes everything I have to simmer my urge to come. But I do it. I achieve the impossible. I fuck her until her words are incomprehensible, and the roots of her hair are as damp as the slit between her legs.

Then I move our exchange to the bedroom, bathroom, and the kitchen.

I show Kelsey the time of her life, so the last thing I expect to wake up to the following morning is an empty apartment and a note next to an unlocked iPhone.

## CHAPTER 5

# Kelsey

“I’ll approve the ride as soon as I get inside. I promise.”

The Uber driver isn’t happy with my request, but he can do little about it. I booked my ride with the app on Zane’s phone. I’d already overstayed my welcome when I reached a stage of unconsciousness in his bed before groggily requesting he spoon me, so I refused to steal his phone to prevent a driver thinking I was trying to dupe him out of a fare.

The Uber driver’s eyes connect with mine in the rearview mirror. “I’ll wait here.”

“It’s thirteen dollars...” I stop myself. It isn’t my right to judge others on what they can or cannot afford to let go of. “Okay. I’ll be just a minute.”

I wait for him to nod before slipping out the back of his SUV and racing up the stairs of my apartment building. It’s no easy feat with how deliriously sore my muscles are. I lost count of how many times I climaxed last night. I’m confident it was close to double digits.

Zane was... I can’t find the words to describe how magical last night was.

It went above and beyond my greatest expectations, but I refuse to be one of those women who try to make out a one-

night-stand is more than it is. If we all did that, we'd ruin the handbook for relationships and breakups. With how misguided some men are these days, no one wants that.

My pace slows when I reach the floor my apartment is on. A notice is pinned to my front door. I have little experience with them, but if the bold letters at the top are anything to go by, it is an eviction notice.

"You slimy snail," I snarl out while ripping the notice off the glossy wood.

Yes, Peter is the official owner of this apartment, but he promised I'd never be homeless if I gave up the rent-controlled apartment I'd been leasing since college.

It was the only affordable one-bedder left in Ravenshoe after Bronte's Peak surged house prices to unreachable levels.

And let's not forget who paid the mortgage on this apartment over the past two years. I've put more time and money into this apartment than Peter ever has, so it is my house as much as it is his.

With my anger high, it takes the Uber driver honking three times before I remember he's waiting for his payment to clear before leaving.

After dumping my house keys and eviction notice on the kitchen counter, I race into my bedroom to fire up my old laptop.

I close a dozen 'Back to the drawing board?' and 'What am I meant to do with a twelve-piece dinner set?' messages before logging into my Uber account on Safari and approving my latest ride.

Its announcement that I was online only a minute ago exposes how close I came to having my walk of shame busted



by Zane. I had intended to log out of the app after booking my ride, but the creep of Zane’s hand as he searched for me under the sheet revealed how close he was to waking up.

I didn’t have time to do anything—not even brush the knots out of my hair Zane’s fingers caused when he brought me to climax over and over again.

I’m grateful for the cool December breeze when I open my apartment window to signal to my driver that his fare has been paid. My skin is still on fire.

My courtesy isn’t needed. The driver is halfway down the street already. He’s idling at the stop sign a charity Santa is working like this side of Ravenshoe is as pricy as the other half.

A Santa who oddly resembles the Santa from last night.

“They must get their suits from the same spot,” I rationalize with myself before dumping my laptop onto my bed and trudging to the bathroom.

I don’t want to wash off the scent of Zane’s skin from mine, but if I don’t do something to loosen my muscles, I’ll never find the strength to box up Peter’s things and ship them to Oregon.

He’s not coming back here. I forbid it. But I’m not going anywhere either. Ravenshoe is my hometown, and I refuse to let him trample my mark here for a second longer.



“Is that the last box?”

I stray my eyes to the desk drawer I hid Peter's family heirloom in for the quickest second before returning them to the courier company worker picking up his belongings. "Uh-huh. That's everything."

Missing the deceit in my tone, he replies, "Great. If you could sign here." He waits for me to sign the first slip before placing a secondary document on top of it. "And here, then we will get these to the other side of the country before your plane lands."

"Oh... I'm not moving."

When he peers past my shoulder, I follow the direction of his gaze. Bar some basic bits of furniture that could only fill a dorm room, my apartment is almost empty.

I roll my shoulders before shrugging them. "A change is as good as a holiday."

"That it is." When the courier wets his lips as his eyes rake my body, a spark of interest darts through his hooded gaze. "Did you want to go out for some eggnog sometime?"

"Ohh... umm... I'm taken." I have no idea where those last two words came from. They didn't even ruminate in my head before my mouth spoke them.

"You are?" the courier asks, his lower lip drooped.

"Yeah. Sorry."

*You're a lying poo-poo face.*

Only two days ago, the courier's dark features, light eyes, and bad boy persona would have ticked every one of my boxes. Now, they're barely creating a hum.

Zane ruined me.

He completely and utterly destroyed me.

I'd be upset if my foolish heart wasn't still believing there's a possibility of round two.

It's late Sunday afternoon, and Zane has not realized my details are accessible in his Uber app.

That can only mean one thing.

He doesn't want to find me.

"All right." The driver hands me a business card. "If you change your mind, my cell phone number is on there."

I accept the card he's holding out while saying, "Thanks."

It feels good to walk him to the door with enough confidence to convince myself I could go it alone if needed. I haven't felt like this for a long time.

Every year that ticked closer to my thirties convinced me more and more that I had to settle. That *anything* was better than nothing.

I don't feel that way anymore.

I spoke to a separation attorney yesterday. She's confident I have a solid case to demand the right to buy Peter out of his mortgage, and even though I'm meant to be on vacation, my request to return to work was approved in writing earlier today.

Life is good.

Until it isn't.



“What do you mean I’m fired? I am the best analyst this company has. I’ve brought you in millions of dollars.”

“And lost us millions too.” I shoot my eyes to Rochelle, the supervisor of my division. She looks down her nose at me as she says, “TreadWall—”

“Was Peter’s decision. I advised him against purchasing additional stock. The CEO was on the verge of a meltdown. He wanted blood. I wrote that in my report.”

“In a report that was never logged with the department before you left for vacation.” Mr. Black, the money behind this operation, stands from his chair to join Rochelle and me on the other side of his big, overcompensating desk. “Everyone got sloppy, and millions were shaved off my company’s assets the past weekend alone.”

“Peter—”

“Has agreed to a voluntary redundancy from the Ravenshoe division. His partnership will be paid out by Christmas Eve, and he’ll helm the less profitable Oregon chapter for the foreseeable future.”

Mr. Black makes it seem as if Peter’s share of the partnership is a pittance. Paying out the one point five million dollar stake I helped Peter achieve in his company may be small for him, but it will give Peter the capital he needs to start the firm I’ve been endeavoring to get off the ground the past two years.

We won't mention the two point eight million he's requesting for me to buy out his share of our apartment. He's trying to put potential future value on the valuation the real estate broker quoted earlier this morning.

When it dawns on me that my fate has been decided, I ask, "And me? What do I get?"

It won't be a share of Peter's cut because, as far as Rochelle and Mr. Black are concerned, we're not a couple. Peter wanted to keep our relationship strictly business during office hours.

Now I know why.

Rochelle's voice doesn't house an ounce of remorse. "Your unused vacation days will be included in your final pay."

That's it?

That's all I get for seven years and one hundred and thirty-eight million dollars in profit?

"Okay." I have a million more words in my head but no way of expressing them without screaming like a lunatic. I need to keep my cool if I want to secure another job in the financial sector. "I'll pack my things now."

"Things?" Rochelle asks, conscious everything in and on my desk belongs to Black Industries.

*Almost everything*, I mentally correct.

"I have a photograph of my parents on my desk." I smile when I remember how long ago the polaroid image was taken. It was the year my parents met, and snapped during the annual Christmas tree lighting in my mother's hometown.

The thousands of lights illuminating the Christmas tree bounce off my mother's dark locks, but they have nothing on

the sparkle of love in her eyes.

My parents aren't ashamed to admit it was love at first sight. They have no reason to be ashamed. They've been inseparable since they first met.

"Right," Rochelle replies, fighting not to snicker. "The housemaid and the janitor, right?"

I could ignore her snide tone any other day, but not today. "Yes. Two *employed* people who've been happily married for over thirty years."

I could mention that they were one of Ravenshoe's lucky investors who believed in the young entrepreneur that put this town on the map, but since my parents' happiness will swipe Rochelle's smile from her face quicker than the knowledge they own several investment properties now in the millions, I keep tightlipped—mostly.

"What's your relationship status again?"

Her wrinkled face, that looks like she sucked a lemon, tells me everything I need to know.

She's been single longer than I've worked here.

"Don't get up," I murmur when they don't attempt to make our split amicable. "I'll show myself out."

My shell is unbreakable... Until Rochelle proves the Grinch isn't a fictional villain.

## CHAPTER 6

# Zane

““T hey’re both white. I can’t see any difference.”

“This one is Chantilly Lace and the other is Tibetan Jasmine. There’s a noticeable difference.” When I arch my brow at my mother, she bonks my nose with a selection she could have made a month ago if she hadn’t decided to get engaged and married in under three weeks.

This wedding will set her new husband’s bank balance back a pretty penny.

Lucky he’s wealthy as fuck.

Needing to end our meeting before they convince me there’s a difference between two identical napkins, I reply, “Chantilly Lace. It goes well with the frilly lacy thingamabob you’re putting in the middle of the table.”

“The table runners?” the wedding organizer assistant asks as she bats her lashes at me.

“Yeah. Them.” She’s the type I’d usually go for. Busty, blonde, and with a streak of wildness in her eyes, but today, I’m not interested.

I haven’t been able to get a certain spicy little Spaniard out of my head. She’s been on my mind since I woke up to an empty bed two days ago and hasn’t left it for a second.



Not even this morning in the shower when the overly floral body wash reminded me of her perfume.

I showered only minutes after having room service bring a mug of cocoa to my room with a double serving of candy cane stirrers.

Hand stimulation was the only way I could leave my suite without a raging hard-on.

Did you know there are several spelling variations of the name Kelsey? No? I didn't either... Until I began searching for a needle in a haystack. There are twenty-four Kelseys in Ravenshoe West alone, and I have no clue if the Kelsey I'm seeking lives here or if she's one of the millions of tourists who visit each year.

"You think the Chantilly?" asks my mother, drawing me from my thoughts. "I was leaning toward Jasmine."

"Then go Jasmine." It takes everything I have not to shout, "*It's the same damn color,*" but I hold back the urge—just.

"Hmm... maybe you're right."

My phone buzzes as my mother places two identical napkins against the bright red plate she chose because she's getting married a week before Christmas.

Grateful for an out, I shake my phone to announce I'll be outside taking a call before I sprint for the exit.

"Bet you're regretting not working now?" Emma riles me a second after I squash my phone to my ear. "What white is she picking this year?" She laughs when I growl. "Weddings —"

"Are the bane of my existence."

“Continue to exist *because* of you,” Emma corrects. “And don’t be too hard on your mom. If it weren’t for her, you could have been a sleazy lawyer. Or worse...” She pauses to build the suspense. “A stockbroker.”

As I twist to face a stockbroker firm half a block up from the wedding planners’ office, I say, “Eh. I’ve heard the pay packet is good.”

“But the hours are long and lonely.” She sighs heavily before saying, “Anyway, I wasn’t calling solely to give you an early pass from the torture I’m sure you’re facing.” She waits for the silent praise she’s confident I’m issuing her. “I was wondering if you had a chance to review the proposal I forwarded you this morning?”

Even though she can’t see me, I shake my head. “I was a little short on time this morning.” *Masturbating*. “Can it wait until after the wedding? Casey is about to have a coronary. The guest list blew out from fifty to two hundred overnight.”

“How does that even happen?” She stops, places the blame solely on Casey’s shoulders since news leaked about who was catering the wedding, then says, “It could wait until after the wedding...”

I wait, certain there’s more.

I love being proven right.

“But then I’d have to reschedule your flight to...” Papers rustling sound down the line. “Avila.”

Since Emma seems to have an issue with her hearing, I speak slowly. “I... don’t... work... on... home... turf.”

“Za—”

“Goodbye, Emma.”

After waiting for a grumbled farewell, I disconnect our call, slide my phone into my pocket, then endeavor to build up the courage to return to the room that has me convinced it has to be five o'clock somewhere.

It takes longer than I care to admit to commence returning to the building I fled like a groom with cold feet. But before I get halfway down the footpath, I'm stopped by an unlikely source.

“Ho. Ho. *Ho.*”

With a playful twinkle in his eyes, a Santa who should be sweating on a warm December day like today thrusts his charity bucket my way.

Although my family is generous with donations, even more so at this time of the year since we relied on them so much during my childhood, the last charity Santa cleaned me out. I've not had time to replenish the cash I usually keep on hand in case of emergencies or payment terminal malfunctions.

I only have a few quarters in the coin section of my wallet, which I deposit into his bucket before attempting to step past him.

This time, I don't get in a single step.

Santa gets up in my face again, his demand for more as apparent as his familiar facial features.

“Aren't you the Santa from Friday—”

Before all my accusation leaves my mouth, the frustrated groan of a woman in need trickles into my ears. “They're *my* clients! They would have never transferred their accounts to Black Industries if I hadn't coerced them to the dark side.”

A security guard gives a curvy brunette with her back to me a miffed look while a second officer deposits her onto the footpath. Once they have her outside of Black Industries' walls, the first officer hands her a photo frame from the file box he's clutching.

As the two officers return to the security office in the foyer of a massive steel and glass structure, the brunette tosses out a range of obscenities. Some are in English, but most are in a language I don't understand.

"Ungrateful, scum-sucking leeches," she murmurs after her screams diminish the last of her energy.

When she spins around, my cock recognizes her long before my head.

"Kelsey?" My shock is understandable. Her glossy dark locks are pinned back in a low, modest ponytail, and her curves are covered with a skirt and a buttoned-up-to-the-neck blouse my grandma would wear.

She's still gorgeous, but more professionally refined than the little sex pot who rocked my world two nights ago.

She's excited, then panicked. "Zane."

I'm unsure if my unexpected presence is responsible for the whitening of her cheeks or if she is horrified she cussed in front of Santa like a rapper laying down new tracks.

Even full-grown women don't want to land on Santa's naughty list.

He's usually most girls' first legitimate crush.

I realize I'm the cause of Kelsey's embarrassment when she offers me a pathetic wave before she bolts down the footpath.

Desperate not to lose her in a sea of millions again, I take off after her, my steps unhindered by Santa since he's no longer on the footpath demanding more cash.

“Hey. Whoa. Slow down,” I beg when it takes me jogging to keep up with her. “Can we at least swap deets before you disappear on me again? I can't keep turning up in random Kelseys' inboxes. I'll most likely get arrested since I can only describe you as having legs that go for miles and breasts that taste like mint and chocolate.”

When she stops walking, my reply having the effect I'm aiming for, the confident won't-stop-until-I-get-what-I-want woman I wrangled with only nights ago is nowhere to be seen. She looks upset, and it instantly switches my mood from personal to professional.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

Her eyes become wet before she admits, “They fired me.” She slings her eyes to the building she was forcibly removed from. “They fired me and gave him a massive payout like every million he earned them wasn't a trade *I* recommended. I did all the work!”

The shock in my tone can't be missed. “You're a stockbroker?”

“Yes.” She groans before correcting, “No, not exactly. I'm an analyst for a stockbroking firm. *He's* the broker.” Her shoulders slump as it takes everything she has not to cry. “Now I'll never be able to buy him out. No one will lend me money if I don't have a job.”

“I would.” The offer leaves my mouth before I can stop it.

I'm glad when my pledge burns off the droplets brimming her eyes. She's still upset but far from bursting into tears. “I

need more than two hundred and fifty dollars this time.”

“I could be open to a little more,” I reply before spinning her in the direction of the closest watering hole. We could both use a drink, and it’s finally ticked past noon. “How much are we talking?”

A brick lodges in my throat when she replies, “How do you feel about a three-million-dollar loan?”

She’s joking; her tone exposes this, not to mention the ease of her question, so I play along. “You’d want to cook damn good chilaquiles for that much coin.”



After straying my eyes to the third-floor apartment on my left, I sling them back to Kelsey, who is well past tipsy. We may have gotten a little eager during happy hour. It becomes more appropriate when you learn the theme of every cocktail was Christmas-based. My favorite was the candy cane cocktail. It was chocolatey, minty, and far better served when sampled out of Kelsey’s mouth instead of a glass.

“Are you sure this is your apartment? It looks empty.”

“That’s me.” *Hiccup*. “Emp...ty... So maybe we should get another cocktail?” When she slides out of the taxi at the end of her long slur, I toss a handful of the notes I recently replenished to the driver’s half of the cab, then help Kelsey to her feet.

The top two buttons of her stiff blouse were undone before she finished her first cocktail. Her skirt was hiked up her

thighs somewhere between beverage three and four. I'm not exactly sure when she let her hair down. I am not even sure if her fingers unraveled the elastic or mine. We'd shared a handful of flirty kisses by then, but I have to put a stop to the antics now.

We're alone, and as much as I've enjoyed her company the past eight hours, the kisses we shared were before her body clicked on to the fact our Christmassy drinks were laced with alcohol.

With every mile we traveled, the drunker she became.

She's well past tipsy now, so I can't touch her.

Not sexually, anyway.

"Can you walk, or do you want me to carry you?"

Kelsey's eyes adopt the same puppy dog look they held when she realized her firing may not be so bad. She's been wanting to go out on her own for some time, but her douchebag ex always talked her out of it before she gave it any true thought. "You'll carry me?"

"If you can't walk, yes." I'd carry her even if she could walk, I'm just not known for showing my cards so early—if at all. "But you'll need to return your skirt's hem to its original position. We don't want you flashing your panties to..." When I scan her street, the only person I spot is a charity Santa near the stop sign at the T-intersection. "Santa?"

My reply sounds like a question since the Santa ringing a golden bell resembles the other two Santas I've stumbled onto so far this week.

I've heard everyone has a doppelganger, but this is starting to get creepy.

Kelsey gulps and unrolls her skirt like Casey did every afternoon in high school before she walked through the door of our childhood home. “I don’t want to be on Santa’s naughty list.”

“It’s too late for that,” I reply with a chuckle before pulling her into my arms like a groom would a bride on their wedding night.

“Too many cocktails?”

I twist my lips so they’re not tempted to kiss her pout from her mouth. “That... and even more f-bombs.”

Her eyes pop open. “I didn’t cuss in front of Santa.”

She’s clearly forgotten that she taught me cuss words in Spanish while waiting for our taxi to arrive. *Joder* was the easiest for me to learn, and Kelsey used it multiple times while berating the security officers keeping company records property of the person who pays their wages.

“Santa travels across the globe in one night, so I’m reasonably sure he’d know Spanish.”

I grin like an idiot when she whispers, “Shit.”

“That’s strike number three. There’s no hope for you now.”

I realize her soul is still a little fragile when she whines about my reply instead of taking it as I had intended—playfully.

A reason for the darkness of her apartment comes to light when Kelsey slips the key into the lock and pushes open the door. The power has been disconnected.

“You rodent!”



Despite how stumbling her steps were only minutes ago, Kelsey races through the room without a single fault in her stride. I don't know what she's seeking, but it must be more important than the rest of her stuff that was stolen. Her apartment is almost empty.

"Oh, thank god." She hugs something close to her chest as if it is valuable before tossing it back into a drawer near the kitchen and slamming the drawer shut. My jaw spasms when she reveals how badly her ex is working her over. "Peter must have disconnected the power from Oregon when he organized my eviction notice. I'll get candles."

"There's no need," I reply while pulling my phone out of my pocket. "After several homeless people died in a winter blast in 2010, laws were introduced that stopped electricity providers from disconnecting service to a habitual premises." I scroll to the Safari app and then ask Kelsey who her provider is.

"Energ—"

She's interrupted by the hum of the refrigerator kicking back on.

Her eyes are back on me. They're still glossy but now more in awe than sheened with the effects of alcohol. "After your stamina Friday night, I never thought I'd be commending you on the speed of your performance."

Her reply strokes my ego, but I play it cool. "As much as I want to take credit, that wasn't me." I spin my phone screen to show I hadn't gotten further than opening the Safari app. "They must have realized..."

My words trail off when a familiar jingle rattles through Kelsey's apartment. "Ho, ho, *ho*. Merry Christmas."

Kelsey's eyes bulge before she races for the far wall of the apartment. She leans out the window facing the street just in time for Santa to hit her with a frisky wink before he disappears around the corner.

When she cranks her neck back to me, her expression shocked, I say, "Maybe you're not on his naughty list after all."

## CHAPTER 7

# Kelsey

**W**ith my bladder on the verge of busting, I toss off the bedding wrapped around me like a cocoon and slowly shuffle to the bathroom. I should feel like shit. I'm not a cocktail drinker in general, let alone a daytime drunk, but I feel decent.

My teeth need a scrub, and my underarms need to be groomed with more than a razor, but I'm presentable, nonetheless.

The positive outcome after a night of drinking is more thanks to Zane than me. He forced me to drink a gallon of water before tucking me in like I wasn't throwing out a million sexual insinuations.

My ego should be as beaten as my temples, but his promise to be less ignorant once I'm not drunk saved it from being pulverized.

He was a total gentleman, and the remembrance has me doubling the length of my strides when I recall him telling me he'll sleep on the couch to make sure I didn't try to get back on Santa's naughty list without him.



My shower routine is quick, but like my hangover, decent. Since I am unemployed, I leave my hair out to dry after washing off the smoky plume of the bar we spent a fortune in last night and keep my makeup palette neutral.

I said I'm feeling decent, not spectacular.

However, the odds of wonderful drastically improve when I exit my bedroom. Zane is awake—with how bright the sun is, I understand. He's in the kitchen, making breakfast.

“Morning.”

He grins at the croakiness of my greeting before setting down a mug of coffee on the island separating us. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Umm...” It isn't too early to have this conversation. I'm simply struggling to think straight since he's wearing nothing but the jeans he wore last night.

He's barefooted, and the top button of his jeans is undone. I don't know about you, but that is as much a turn-on for me as a man rolling up the sleeves of his pricy dress shirt, so I won't mention his six pack abs and mouth watering V-muscle. I don't want you to get jealous.

Zane places two sunny-side-up eggs onto buttered toast before locking his eyes with mine. “Any preferences?”

*One serving of you, please!* “Ah... over easy will be great. Thanks.”

Did I wake up in an alternative universe? This can't be reality. Peter never once made me breakfast. He wasn't even considerate enough to make sure he left enough coffee in the pot for me if his shift started earlier than mine.

"Why are you doing this, Zane?" Don't misconstrue my question. I love that he's here, but we only met days ago, so it isn't his responsibility to clean up the mess I made before we met. Also, no one wants to be the rebound guy. Unless you're my father, the odds rarely swing in their favor.

Zane flips my eggs in a way that would make Casey proud before he answers, "You asked me to stay."

"I also asked you to screw me senseless, and that didn't happen."

When his eyes shoot to the living room window that faces the street, I release a girlie giggle. He did the same thing multiple times last night. His gawk always followed a familiar Christmassy chant.

I can admit it was odd that Santa's greetings only seemed to occur while I was trying to lure Zane into a trap by pretending I wasn't drunk, but I brushed it off as a coincidence.

Zane didn't seem convinced by my verdict. After a second bellowing chant, he yanked my hand out of my panties, dragged up the blanket from the foot of my bed, and tucked me in like my father did every Christmas eve since I was three—in a straitjacket design I couldn't escape from until the morning.

"You know he's not watching you twenty-four-seven, right? He has millions of children to check off his list each year."

He swirls the frypan to loosen up the eggs before sliding them onto two slices of toast. “I might have believed you if that fu...” He freezes before picking a better word. “... that *Santa* hadn’t been following me all over Ravenshoe.”

I laugh so hard I snort. “He’s not the same Santa. They’re charity Santas who get their suits at the same store.” When not even my hungover head can take my tone any other way, I murmur, “Right?”

Zane shrugs. “I thought so too, then—”

“You had too many candy cane cocktails and turned into an elf?”

He takes my comment as intended. After tossing back his head and laughing, he wiggles his slightly pointed ears. “I’ve got the ears for it.” Once he garnishes my eggs with fresh dill, he places my plate in front of me. “Eat up. We’ve got a ton of work to do.”

I stab my fork into the feast he prepared while replying, “Since you seemed to have missed the memo, I guess I better spell it out. I got fired yesterday, so I have endless dreary, boring, non-joyful hours at my disposal.”

You’d swear my voice wasn’t whiny when Zane says, “Even more reason for us to spruce up the place.”

After swallowing a mouthful of buttery, eggy goodness, I say, “You want to go furniture shopping? My budget could be stretched for a handful of necessities, but it seems odd to do on a third date.”

Zane doesn’t balk at the dreaded D word. “We’re not going furniture shopping. Your couch is a bitch to sleep on, and you only have enough place settings for two, but you’ve got enough to get by.” He kicks a box at his side, which I hadn’t

noticed until now. “Can’t say the same for this. There are barely enough decorations inside to cover a tree, let alone an entire apartment.” Oblivious to my shock, he ensures he’s not speaking with a full mouth before asking, “Talking about trees, when is yours being delivered?”

“It’s not. I... ah...” How do you explain that your ex-fiancé collected your tree and decorated it with your ornaments with his new fiancée in front of you because you were snowed in at the venue meant to host your Christmas Eve wedding?

There isn’t a way to explain that without sounding like a loser, so I give him a half-truth.

“I wasn’t meant to be home for Christmas, so I didn’t order a tree.”

“Oh...” The dip in his tone makes sense when he asks, “I didn’t realize I wasn’t the only one leaving before festivities truly begin.” He sounds as devastated as I feel when he asks, “When do you leave?”

“I’m not. Plans changed.” Hating that I’m letting a man like Peter make me forget I have an Adonis sitting across from me shirtless, I say, “So I guess I no longer have an excuse not to get a tree. We can pick one up today, if you want?”

I overemphasized ‘we’ on purpose to scare him.

Zane once again acts blasé. “Sounds good. Let me clear my schedule.”

The rejection attempting to burn its way up my esophagus returns to my stomach when he collects his cell phone from the kitchen counter and dials what I assume is a regularly dialed number.

“Casey...”





“Just a little more. You’re almost there.” When pine thistles scrape my doorframe, I act ignorant. “It’s almost there. You’re nearly fully through.”

In homage to myself, I picked the tree with the biggest curves. Its top half fitted through the opening of my apartment without incident, but its curvy backside is proving difficult. Zane is pushing while I’m tugging, and we’ve been going at it for nearly twenty minutes, but Zane has not once lost his cool as Peter would have nineteen minutes ago.

If I was still with Peter, I wouldn’t have gotten the tree out of the lot. He hates vacuuming, and even with me promising to vacuum every day of December, he forever opted for a fake tree.

That ghastly sham was what filled most of the box Zane highlighted earlier today.

When the tree doesn’t appear to be moving, I ask Zane, “Can you push a little harder?”

“If I go any harder, I could break some of her branches,” he replies, his voice projected over the tree that stands two feet taller than him. “But if you’re okay with that, I’ll give it a go.”

I don’t want to hurt the tree, but wouldn’t it be worse if we left her out in the cold instead of showing her that it’s okay to incur damage if you’re still striving to live your best life?

“Push her. She’d want that. She would rather have a handful of flaws than a fake, loveless relationship unworthy of

her beauty.”

“All right.” Zane peers at me through her thick branches before flashing me with the grin he hit me with when the cab refusing our ride for fear the tree would scratch the paintwork moved out of the way enough for us to see the horse and carriage parked across the road. “Stand back. I don’t want you being knocked down with her.”

I almost say, “Too late,” but the worry in his eyes that I could get hurt stops me.

He truly seems oblivious to my flaws.

*If only he was as blasé to Santa’s attention.*

The carriage ride was everything a romantic love-struck idiot could wish for. The horse was large and white, the carriage was covered with tiny, flickering fairy lights, and the hot chocolate and blanket the driver supplied were as warm as the heat that trekked through me when Zane placed his hand high on my bare thigh partway home.

I had never been so shocked, panicked, and horny in all my life.

I didn’t think anything could come between my rampant need for Zane to move his finger an inch higher and his demand for me to remain quiet, then a familiar Christmas greeting filled the air, and a jolly man in a big red suit appeared out of nowhere on the sidewalk next to the carriage.

I would have worn hot chocolate for the second time in a week if Zane hadn’t guzzled it down at the start of our romantic gallop through the main streets of Ravenshoe.

I’m returned to the land of the living when Zane checks that I’m out of the firing zone. “Ready?”

I inch back a little more before replying, “Ready.”

Zane doesn’t push the tree into my apartment. He crash-tackles it inside, his maneuver as effective as our revenge fuck.

I once thought revenge fucking was made up by people wanting to excuse the swiftness of their ability to move on, but I know it’s more than that now. It’s about acceptance more than anything and that it’s okay to admit when something isn’t working.

I would have preferred if Peter had done that in a better way than me walking in on him kissing Noelle’s neck while ringing her Christmas bell with his thumb, but he got the message across better than the multiple times I tried to walk on both our relationship and my job position the past two years.

“Grab the stand,” Zane requests, returning my focus to him.

“The stand...?” I breathe out slowly while peering at him in unease. “Would that be the stand we should have purchased with the tree?”



“It works.”

“It does,” I agree with Zane, smiling.

Since I haven’t had a real Christmas tree since leaving home, I didn’t have a stand to keep her hydrated until the New Year, so Zane improvised with a steel bucket and some bolts from the maintenance closet of my building.

It was a fix-it job most couples would fail even after years of wedded bliss, but Zane and I cruised through it without a single hiccup. We talked, flirted, and sung along to the corny Christmas carols thumping out of my neighbor's apartment like this has been our tradition for years.

Today has been so different to my last three Christmases. I'm almost grateful I arrived twenty minutes early for my appointment with Noelle. Peter's betrayal will always sting, but shouldn't the guilt of that weigh solely on his shoulders? I didn't do anything wrong, so why should I be shamed by his actions?

I shouldn't, so I won't.

"Are you happy where she's sitting?" Zane asks as he steps back from the tree. "My mother spends more time aligning her tree than she does picking out her next husband."

Zane has joked about his mother's constant quest for new love multiple times over the past few hours. I don't think he realizes how often he brings it up, but it is clear it bothers him.

"The position is fine, but do you think we should spin her to face the other way?" I step toward the tree that is so curvy and beautiful she's hogging the entire main window of the living room. "She has a massive scrape down her trunk from her dramatic entrance and is missing a limb."

"I think she looks good as is. Naturally perfect and free of any encumbrances." I realize Zane is talking about me and not the tree when he whispers, "You'd have no clue she drank all the other elves under the table last night."

When I toss a reel of switched on Christmas lights at his chortling face, he uses the long strip to lasso me toward him.

The crash of our bodies leaves me as breathless as his handsome face the first time I saw him.

“Mmm...” He breathes heavily against my lips like he did before he monopolized the hot chocolate we shared on the way back from the Christmas tree lot. He mumbled something about tasting my toothpaste on the lip of the lid before he polished off the last three-quarters of our shared beverage. “I’ll never again smell hot chocolate and mint and not get hard.”

“Then why are you all the way over there?” I tug him closer like there’s more than an inch of air between us. “Come closer. Smell more.”

His laugh rumbles through us both since we’re standing so close before he takes me up on my offer by dragging his nose across my lips.

When his impressively large appendage forces a gap back between us, excitement burns through me. My chocolatey breath made him hard, but instead of answering the silent pleas of his body like he teased during the carriage ride, he returns to the chivalrous stance he commenced last night.

“Why won’t you kiss me?” I ask, my voice almost a whine.

I’ve been dying for his lips on mine all day, but even with his flirty nature keeping me in a constant state of arousal, he’s yet to answer the numerous hints I’ve been tossing his way since breakfast.

Zane’s eyes bounce between mine as he replies, “Because I need to be sure.”

“Sure of...?”

A touch of shyness in his hooded gaze sends me wild with desire. A man who looks like him should never feel shy. He’s

perfect. Beautiful. Everything Peter will never be. “I needed to be sure...” I could crush his baubles for the delay, and the odds double when he finalizes his reply. “That the big man in the red suit isn’t watching. I might get performance anxiety.”

He stops laughing when I push him onto the couch and straddle his lap. “Don’t steal all of Santa’s joy.” After swiping my tongue across his delicious mouth, I murmur, “He only gets to come once a year, so the least you can do is let him watch the other three hundred and sixty-four days.”

## CHAPTER 8

# Zane

**F**uck me.

This is better than heaven.

Kelsey's curves, which are highlighted by the lights the tree is meant to be holding, and her flushed cheeks and wide eyes are the best presents I could have ever asked for, not to mention that the night is young and free of any cock-shrinking jingles.

Kelsey's shirt and bra were disposed of almost thirty minutes ago—tit-fucking requires a bare chest—but her skirt and panties have yet to be removed.

My cock bobs like I didn't find release with Kelsey's mouth only minutes ago as I make fast work of the flimsy material covering her lacy panties. I take my time with the scrap of fabric hiding the ultimate gift, though.

After toying with the bow at the top, I slowly drag the back of my hand down the delicate lines of her pussy. My pulse thuds wildly in my ears when she arches her back and moans from my meekest touch, but this time, I don't have to stop since we're not playing out my wildest Christmas fantasy in public.



I didn't want to place her on Santa's naughty list in the horse-drawn carriage. I just have a hard time keeping my hands to myself when Kelsey is nearby. I can't get enough. Even when she's telling me something as dull as all the different varieties of Christmas trees available at this time of the year, I can't help but be in awe of her.

She truly fascinates me, and I'd be a liar if I said the admittance of that doesn't scare the shit out of me. I've never been like this with anyone else. Watching my mother fall in and out of love made me a cynic about anything remotely romantic, but I feel different with Kelsey.

I want to see her eyes gloss over with excitement and catch the sneaky glances she tosses me when she thinks I'm not looking.

I also want to be the reason she learns that she deserves better—but will she then realize she deserves better than me too?

Kelsey's husky murmur of my name tells me everything I need to know. Whether I'm in her life for one night or a hundred, I shouldn't waste a single second wondering about the 'what ifs.'

After the quickest backhanded slap on Kelsey's clit, the heat on her neck is as bright as the flashing bulbs keeping her tethered to the ground.

Her flushed appearance makes me want to lose control and rush something too perfect to flaw, but her confidence and down-to-earth nature remind me that people's deficits are rarely their bad points. It is usually the acknowledgment of their imperfections that makes them flawless.

“Do you have any idea how hard it was to walk away from you last night?” I ask while sliding my finger over the needy rise of her clit. “It was torture. Pure hell. I almost caved.”

Kelsey lifts her hips from the ground, seeking firmer contact, while replying, “You did?”

“Uh-huh.” I roll her clit through her panties while confessing, “I got as far as your bedroom door.” Her excitement dampens the scant piece of material now clinging to her pussy. “Then Santa bellowed, and I veered for the bathroom instead.” Before she can laugh about my newfound fear, I ask, “Could you taste your body wash on my cock? Taste how badly I wanted to replace my hand with yours?”

She moans like I did when she licked up the droplet of precum on the tip of my cock. I was tit fucking the best pair of breasts I’ve ever seen and having the crown licked clean after every pump.

No wonder I’m struggling to keep a rational head.

I’m the luckiest prick around.

I can’t let Kelsey know that, though. Not if I want to continue sampling the magic. “That’s twice you’ve forced me to take care of business myself.” I swivel her clit faster. Bring her to the very edge. Then I stop. “Twice you’ve had me moaning your name while you’re not even in the room.”

“You said no,” she says with a husky pant. “Not me.”

“Not the first time, I didn’t.” Her eyes roll backward when I slip her panties to the side and slowly insert a finger inside her. “You ran while I was asleep.”

“Because...”

Not wanting to hear her excuse, I work her harder. Faster. I tease her with my fingers and thumb until my mouth can't hold back the urge to taste her for a second longer.

“Oh, God.” She thrashes against the restraints keeping her hands bound behind her back when I cover her pussy with my mouth, then twirl my tongue around her clit.

Even with me arching over her, Kelsey fucks my face like she did three nights ago. She drags her pussy from the tip of my nose to my chin until the sensation rising within her encourages stars to form in front of her eyes.

“Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.” She gets louder with each scream before giving up the one I'm dying to hear. “I'm going to come.”

As she rides the wild crazy rollercoaster, I work my finger in and out of her while dedicating a heap of attention to her clit. She moans, rocks, and grunts, as determined to experience every satisfying dip and rise as me.

She unleashes the most glorious moan I've ever heard when my eagerness to please her sees me fighting to stretch her number of orgasms from one to two.

I lick her faster and more greedily until she stops the movements of my head by clamping her thighs around my ears and screaming my name in an ear-piercing roar.

Kelsey sings my name on repeat, her shudders not lessening even after she comes down from the high of ecstasy. They tremor through her floppy limbs as she watches me sheath my cock with a condom and continue as I loosen the flashing lights enough that I can hook her legs around my waist, and her nails can guide the pace of our exchange.

If her nails dig in, I'm being too rough.

If they claw at me in desperation, the pace is perfect.

If they don't do a damn thing, I should close up shop immediately.

We moan as one when I enter Kelsey one painstaking inch at a time. She's wet, drenched front to back, but I'm the thickest I've ever been, so I need to take it slow so I don't hurt her.

It feels so good being buried deep inside her that I don't immediately withdraw when my cock's head knocks at the opening of her cervix. I flex my dick instead, adding a tremor to her moans.

"Please," she begs, her erotic voice tightening my balls. "I want you to fuck me, Zane."

Not one to deny, I pull out before thrusting forward at an almost cruel pace.

Kelsey doesn't mind. She mewls through the pain of my slam before encouraging me to repeat the move that has her juices dribbling over my balls.

We fuck in fevered unison for several long minutes, the pace only slowing when one of the bulbs surrenders to the heat blistering between us.

Its pop encourages several more.

Within seconds, the only glow in the living room is Kelsey's glorious breasts as they bounce in rhythm to my pumps in and out of her.

Lust spirals through me as the urge to come turns potent.

Not yet.

I can't let go yet.

She needs to come first.

After a quick adjustment of Kelsey's hips, I find a rhythm that has her nails unsure of which direction to take. One set digs into my hip as she holds on for the ride while the other drags up and down my back to playfully scratch the sweaty skin.

"*Ohh...*" Her moan is throatier than the earlier ones. Desperate and needy. It tells me everything I need to know.

She's close.

Her hips lift from the ground the more she chants. She meets me thrust for thrust, writhing and bucking as her moans turn feral.

"Fuck, Kelsey," I say with a moan when I realize she isn't the one being fucked.

She's taking me.

Riding me.

She's put me under a spell, and I can't get enough.

This is everything. Not could be. Not possibly. This *is* everything.

I drive into her harder. Deeper. I fuck her with everything I have until her song hits the high note, and her left hand finally joins her right hand in marking my back with her touch.

"Zane..."

Her pussy sucking at me is intense. It hugs me and begs me to let go of the restraints until I join her on the thrilling ride that announces I'm not helming our exchange. I'm the passenger tagging along for the ride as Kelsey regains her life.

## CHAPTER 9

# Kelsey

**D**on't ask me what day of the week it is or how many orgasms I've experienced in the past however many days. They're both questions I wouldn't be able to answer. I've lost track of everything—including my anger.

It couldn't be more apparent when my first thought isn't to run when I see Peter coming from the other end of the street.

Zane and I got dressed for the first time in days so we can light the Christmas tree in a way she deserves. It was an errand meant to take ten minutes but has been dragged out to forty since Zane wanted to ensure the next set of lights we 'test' before placing them on the tree are shock resistant.

He still doesn't realize my shudders that night had nothing to do with the bulbs blowing.

The blame for their fritz solely belongs on Zane's shoulders.

With my past about to collide with my present, I try to lessen the brutality of the impact. My father put on a brave front when I was told how my parents met, but even a pair of eyes as loved-up as his couldn't hide his sadness when it was revealed how close he came to not meeting my mother at all.

They'd met by chance, but my father is adamant more than luck was on his side that day.

In his twenties, he was as paranoid about a stalking Santa as Zane is now.

I twist to face Zane, who is being admired by teenage girls far too young to place him on their Christmas wish list. "We forgot to grab candy canes for the tree. I think I saw some in the decoration section."

"I'll grab them," Zane offers before asking, "Mint or candy apple flavored?" He doesn't wait for me to answer him. "Mint. *Always* mint."

He presses his lips to the edge of my mouth, then darts back into the department store brimming with last-minute Christmas shoppers. He disappears amongst the crowd just as Peter notices me standing on the sidewalk.

"Hey." While bridging the gap between us, he takes his time scanning my face and body. He forever saw me in corporate wear, so my Christmas sweater and yoga pants would seem odd to him. "You look different." When my scoff comes out louder than intended, he nervously shuffles from foot to foot. "Good different. It's giving me naughty elf vibes."

"Thanks. Ah..." Never one for small talk, I blurt out, "What are you doing here?" Even confident I never want to witness his heavy make-out sessions again, I peer past his shoulder, seeking the person who almost had me wanting to hate Christmas. "Is Noelle with you?"

"No." I loathe the joyful tap dance my insides do from the disappointment in his tone. Even more so when he adds, "She's back home, finalizing preparations for our..." His throat works hard to swallow. "... you know."



“Oh, I do. But why aren’t you there?”

My brows furrow when he nudges his head to the jewelry store we’re standing next to. They’re not known for high-end designs and reputability. The owner’s reputation is so shady he should shack up with Rochelle in her Grinchy cave.

Peter acts like he isn’t mere days away from a massive payday. “Their synthetic diamonds are the best in the country. I couldn’t pass them up.” I stop glaring at him as if I despise him when he says, “Noelle doesn’t care you won’t cough up the goods. She’d happily wear a diamond-less ring, but Ma is pretty upset. That ring has been in her family for decades.”

“Then you should have been more cautious about who you offered it to.”

He scoffs at me like I don’t have the right to be upset as well. “Come on, Kels. Not all the blame belongs on my shoulders. You could have said no.”

“You promised to try harder!”

He scrubs at the back of his neck when my shouted words gain the attention of people wanting to keep the vibe Christmassy. “Then I realized it shouldn’t have been that hard. Loving someone shouldn’t be a fucking chore you have to force yourself to do day in and day out.”

*Ouch.* Knowing he saw me as a chore hurts.

It hurts more than walking in on him fingering the baker on the same bench our wedding cake was to be made on, and it hurts too much for me to hold my tongue anymore.

I did that for a week. I refuse to do it for a second longer.

“You’re right. Love shouldn’t be hard. But that doesn’t give you the right to cheat. You should have left first. You

should have told me it wasn't working." I thrust my hand like Noelle is standing at our right. "You should have let her pick her own damn tree instead of stealing mine."

"Is that what this is about? Is that why you're holding my mother's ring hostage? Because you're angry we picked up your tree?!" His words get louder with each one he shouts. "You weren't going to pick it up, Kels. You were too busy moping in your room."

"Because my fiancé cheated on me with the baker hired to make our wedding cake!"

I whack into him with a bag full of Christmas lights until I'm exhausted, then I dart in the opposite direction of where he came from.

Just as I whizz past the department store, Zane exits it. "They only had one box of mint, so I got—" He stops talking when he notices how red my cheeks are. "Kelsey..." He slings his eyes in the direction Peter is still standing before following me into the cab I slip into even with the queue being two blocks long.

The taxi driver waits for a charity Santa to remind the crowd that Christmas is also the time for forgiveness before seeking an opening in traffic. "The best gift you can give anyone this Christmas is forgiveness." Santa locks his eyes with Zane during the last part of his reply. "Forgiveness costs nothing, but the rewards could be endless."

With Zane as shocked by Santa's sudden arrival as I was Peter's, we're almost halfway home before he asks, "Do you want to talk about what happened back there?"

Mindful he means Peter and not Santa, I shake my head. "No."

“Kels—” I shut him up in the only way I know will weaken the burn circling my heart. I hug his hips with my knees, and then I kiss him.

He accepts the strokes of my tongue and the needy nips of my lips, but he doesn't kiss me back. He doesn't weave his fingers through my hair or meet my rocks. He stays motionless. Still. He forces all the weight back onto me.

“Kiss me.”

I hear his headshake more than I see it. Then rejection smashes into me hard and fast when he adds a single word to his reply. “No.”

When I attempt to dismount him, too devastated to remain straddling the lap of another man who no longer wants me, Zane grips my wrists and pulls me back onto him. “If you want to kiss me until you can't taste the garbage his mouth spilled, kiss me. If you want to revenge fuck him out of your mind with my body, fuck me. Use me to erase the pain, Kelsey. But don't ask me to stoop to his level again. Not now. Not after I've realized how much I could have fucked this up the night we met.”

It dawns on me that he's still clueless I came onto him when he says, “I should have never taken advantage of you when you were vulnerable about something a douche with a bad combover did.” He tilts his head to align our eyes. “But if *you* need me, use me however *you* see fit. Just keep Peter out of it because he doesn't deserve to be a part of this any more than he deserved to be a part of you...”

I break as the last word leaves his lips.

## CHAPTER 10

# Kelsey

**H**ave you ever met a giddy crier? You know, those people who get so embarrassed they got upset they spend the rest of the day in a fit of giggles?

I'm one of those people.

During the short drive from Ravenshoe downtown to my apartment building, I cried enough tears to soak two circular imprints in Zane's casual white shirt. I wasn't upset about the end of my engagement. I'd overcome that neurosis during the week I was snowed in with the overly affectionate yet still PG rated couple.

I was devastated that a man I'd only met days ago was the first to validate my feelings.

When did society stop rallying around the single lady when she gets dumped weeks before her wedding? Have we become so accustomed to separations that we're immune to them?

I'd be devastated if my parents filed for a divorce, but it seems as if I would be the only one not flooding their inbox to ask what will happen to the toaster they were gifted thirty years ago.

So I cried about the loss of human decency, and it was hideous. But instead of running for the non-existent hills of Florida when we arrived at our destination, Zane carried me up the stairs like he did the afternoon we sampled too many cocktails and then ran me a bath.

I was already swooning that he knew not to rinse my hair with the bath water when he washed it, so you can imagine how bad the sways became when he asked me if I wanted to skip dinner and move straight onto dessert.

Regretfully, he meant literal dessert—as in chocolate ice cream and marshmallows with crushed candy canes sprinkled on top.

An excessive amount of sugar is partly to blame for my giggles over the past six hours, but I know most of it stems from embarrassment. I've never cried in front of a man before. Not even my father. He would have killed whoever made me cry, so I reserved the details of my heartache for girls' days with my mother.

We talked and ate chocolate while I whined about how every boy on the planet sucked. Even though she's loved my father for decades, my mother let me rant because she knew the right way for me to handle the pain was to find my own way through it.

Zane did the same.

He offered me a shoulder to cry on and an ear to bash, but he never once forced me to share my feelings or explain the nonsense Peter never wanted to hear. He supported me until I found my way out of the dark, and I'll be forever in his debt for that.

“I’m glad you stopped me today,” I say to Zane, drawing his focus away from the black-and-white Christmas movie we’re watching. “I wasn’t considering how you felt in that situation. I was only worried about me and what I was feeling.”

“That’s okay. It’s a natural response.”

“It’s not okay. It’s selfish and entitled, but I will learn from it and do better.” Needing to slacken the unease, I say, “Kind of like you need to learn not to hoard all the crushed candy canes.”

Zane’s mouth drops. “We had an equal amount of—”

“Chocolate ice cream and marshmallows, but your share of the crushed candy canes was far bigger than mine.”

He drags me to his side of the couch by hooking my ankle and pulling me across the rigid material. “It was not. I measured each serve.”

“Your sister is a world-renowned chef, so if you’re trying to tell me you don’t know the difference between a tablespoon and a teaspoon, you’re a big fat liar.”

My giggles about the onslaught of his hands on my ribs switch to a moan when his tug sees me straddling his lap like I did hours ago in the taxi. He’s hard like he is whenever he mixes chocolate with mint flavors and doesn’t look at me with the same worry-filled eyes he hit me with in the cab.

“Nuh-uh,” he grunts out when I lunge for him.

He isn’t rejecting me. He’s taking charge because he knows how wild it makes me.

To be craved so much they want to control every inch of you, including your cognitive thoughts, is my biggest turn-on

to date.

“It’s time to combine my three favorite flavors.” With Zane’s hands gripping my ass, he stands us from the couch, then heads for the kitchen.

Excitement bubbles in my veins when he plops me onto the counter before moving for the freezer. It is almost on par with my shock when his phone screen lights up with a message from his bank announcing he’s the recipient of an impressive five-digit transfer.

“Who is it?” Zane asks as he rummages through the freezer like whatever he’s seeking is at the back.

“Not really a ‘who’ more an ‘it.’” I show him his phone screen when his head pops out of the freezer. We’ve done similar the past few days. His lack of secrecy has made it so much easier to trust him. “It’s a notification from your bank.”

His dark brows furrow when his eyes drink in the fifty-thousand dollar payment, but he shrugs it off as if it is a regular occurrence before he returns to hunting in the freezer.

I wonder about the opportunity I missed when he offered to lend me money, but a loan is the last thing on my mind when Zane pulls a tub of chocolate ice cream and a baggie of tiny white shards out of the freezer.

“Ha! I knew you had a secret stash somewhere.”



The back of my head whacks into the tiles when Zane curls my leg around his shoulder before dragging his nose down the



seam of my pussy.

We're meant to be cleaning up the mess our second helping of dessert made, but the instant Zane sniffed out a morsel of crushed candy cane on my collarbone, his desire to drive me to the brink again overwhelmed him.

His growl sends me wild when it rumbles through my clit. "I lied when I said chocolate, mint, and you are my three favorite flavors."

Cupping my ass, he teasingly slides his tongue up the lines of my pussy before he spears it inside me. He eats me until my legs are close to buckling before he inches back and peers up at me through the sheet of water falling between us.

"You're my favorite flavor. The other two don't come close to how good you taste."

He worships my pussy until my knees are so dangerously close to giving in, I balance on his face more than ride it.

Zane doesn't seem to mind. The more I ride his face, the faster he fucks me with his mouth. He drives my needs higher and higher and higher until they have no choice but to splinter.

I fracture under the attack of his pleasure, quivering, shuddering, and moaning his name. However, Zane's onslaught doesn't slow. He bites me, licks me, and pays a heap of attention to my clit with his tongue and lips.

"Ohh..." I scream, thrust, then beg him not to stop. "I'm going to come again. I'm... I'm... I'm..."

The world shatters around me as my knees buckle, but I don't land on the floor with a thud. Zane keeps me upright with a sturdy grip on my ass, his movements so stable, I only begin coming down from euphoria when he gives me another reason to strive for the high notes.

After banding my legs around his waist, he notches the head of his fat cock at the opening of my pussy.

“Please. More. Again.” They’re the only words I can get out through the lust clutching my throat. I’ve never been so greedy. So gluttonous. One more will never be enough when it comes to Zane.

And it appears I’m not the only one having those thoughts.

Zane’s cock is sheathed with a condom. That proves he preempted how our first joint shower would go, and that he is trapped under the same spell as me.

It won’t stop him from seeking consent, though. After creeping one of his hands up my sweaty back, he weaves it through my drenched locks before tugging my head back so our eyes align.

The need in his hooded gaze nearly topples me into orgasmic bliss for the third time since we entered the shower twenty minutes ago. Being desired so discernably is an addiction I’ll never overcome—even more so if the admiration comes from Zane.

“Ready?”

His cock flexes when I graze my teeth over my lip before jerking up my chin. “Always”

My nails dig into Zane’s shoulders when he smiles a wolfish grin before his hips shift upward, and he enters me with one quick thrust. I can still feel where he’d been earlier, know every part of my body he touched, but my pussy still clamps around him in protest of the sudden intrusion.

“Fuck,” growls Zane. “You get tighter with every orgasm.”

I love how full he makes me feel, how stretched and invaded, but I still need a minute to accommodate his girthy length, so Zane doesn't move a smidge until the pain on my face switches to pleasure.

Then the thrusts come hard and fast.

He fucks me with every muscle he owns until the bathroom is filled with as many moans as steamy dribblets of condensation.

The fast, steady friction of our bodies drives me insane. I need to come so bad. I want it more than I need my next breath.

I tighten around him, my desire piquing when he responds to my tease with a growl. "You make me so fucking hard." He encourages me to balance my back on the slippery tiles before wedging a hand between us. "It's never been like this with anyone."

I assume he means the control he exudes every time he takes me to the brink of ecstasy, but I learn otherwise when his eyes drop to the area where our bodies are intimately joined.

"He seems to have his own agenda when it comes to you. I don't get a fucking say." He adds a swivel to the end of his thrusts, ensuring he hits the sweet spot inside me with each pump before pressing his thumb to my clit. "Can't say I blame him. You feel amazing."

Heat blooms across my skin when he rubs my clit with the same expert precision of his pumps. He toys with it until the sweat misting my face is no longer compliments to the piping hot water coming out of the shower.

"Zane..." My moan is a warning—a caveat. I'm about to unravel, and I want him to come with me this time.

After balancing a hand on his shoulder and flattening my back to the tiles to stabilize my wobbles, I meet his thrusts pump for pump. I fuck him as he's fucking me, and I love every single minute of our manic, animalistic fuck.

“Jesus... Christ...”

He pumps harder. Faster. He makes me lose my mind.

Then, just as a climax scorches through me, his cock swells, and the most tormented, feral groan I've ever heard rips from his lips.

We watch each other fall apart. Our eye contact is absolute. Our mutual desire is unmissable.

It should be uncomfortable or, at the very least, embarrassing.

It is neither of those things.

Being vulnerable isn't a farce. It is beautifully haunting and has my heart in such a state it takes everything I have not to burst into tears for the second time today.

My emotions are all over the place.

And regretfully, I'm not the only one noticing.

“Hey.” After cupping my cheek, Zane drags his thumb under my eye, wiping away a tear I hadn't realized had fallen.

Not wanting him to think he's done something wrong, I try to brush off my surging emotions as hormones. “I must be close to that time of the—”

My words trap in my throat when Zane kisses the trail the sneaky tear caused before he once again notches his cock's head at the opening of my pussy—his *throbbing* cock's head.

“How are you hard again already?” I ask in disbelief.

He pushes in the first inch painfully slow. “I told you he has a mind of his own when it comes to you.” Then another inch. “Can’t say I blame him.” I swivel my hips to accommodate the next two inches since he’s getting harder with each word he speaks. “You’re so fucking beautiful. Everything about you is perfect.”

“Zane...” I murmur in a moan as he continues to enter me slowly.

“Feel how crazy you make me.” We moan in sync when he’s so profoundly seated that the crown of his cock knocks at my uterus. “How unhinged.”

His slow, steady pace drives me as wild as when he screwed me into oblivion.

“I’ve never been so hard.”

His hot breath gusts over my lips as his cock flexes inside me.

It is taking everything he has not to let go, and he’s only doing something as simple as looking at me while his cock is buried deep inside me. He doesn’t thrust his hips or toy with my clit that’s thudding like it hasn’t been stimulated multiple times today.

He makes love to me with his eyes until he coaxes every emotion I own to the surface.

Then he forces them to spill over with long, breathless orgasms, hushed praises, and the realization as to where my upset stems.

He’s due to fly out in less than forty-eight hours, and the remembrance of that is more devastating than being replaced only three weeks out from my wedding.

## CHAPTER 11

# Zane

“**A**ll of them?”

I twist away from the chocolate ice cream stained bedding Kelsey is sleeping on before replying to Emma’s question with a hum. “Uh-huh.”

“That’s a lot of funds to process almost a week out from Christmas, Zane.” Her yawn alerts us to the early hour of our call. I could have waited, but I’m not known for patience. How I forced Kelsey’s deepest, darkest secrets out of her last night verifies this. “Your clients are required to pay your fee upfront to secure your services. It isn’t a down payment—”

“I know how my business operates, Emma,” I interrupt, my tone firm. “I’m just not feeling it right now.”

“Then maybe block out the rest of December and reevaluate after that?” She mistakes my silence as me mulling over her suggestion instead of ensuring Kelsey remains asleep after her hand’s creep across the mattress fails to find me. “You might feel different once the festive season dies down.”

“My decision has nothing to do with Christmas.” I hold my tongue before I say, *‘and everything to do with the woman who was so raw and open with me last night, I fell in love in under a second.’* “And things were never meant to expand this much.

I made my fee exorbitantly high so I only needed to take on one client a year. Then greed took over.”

Since she can't deny my claims—because they're true—Emma remains quiet.

“This won't affect your position. I'll—”

“I'm not worried about my position, Zane. I'm just shocked. I thought your heart was too icy even for a Florida summer to thaw.”

I laugh. “I once thought the same, then Kelsey showed up out of nowhere, teasing Santa, and everything changed.”

I realize I said my comment out loud when Emma murmurs, “Kelsey?”

There's no leveraging my smile. “Yeah. She's...” My throat works through a stern swallow when I spot a pair of chocolate brown eyes peering at me. “... awake, so we'll finalize this conversation later.”

“Zane—”

“Goodbye, Emma.” I disconnect our call before tossing my cell phone onto the bedside table next to Kelsey's recently delivered iPhone. “Did I wake you?”

Kelsey shakes her head before she switches it to a nod. “I was cold.” My laugh rumbles louder than charity Santa's call from the corner of Kelsey's street when she murmurs, “That's what I get from sleeping on ice cream smeared sheets.”

“It could have been worse.” A scent I'll never get enough of fills my nostrils when I yank the bag of crushed candy canes I stored in the freezer last night from under the bedding. “This was digging into my back most of the night.”



I realize I'm not the only one becoming addicted to the shards of white crystal when Kelsey's eyes bulge before she dives for the baggie of minty goodness I'm about to consume.

## CHAPTER 12

# Kelsey

I'm loading sheets into the washing machine when Zane's voice projects through the wall separating the bathroom from the laundry. "What do you mean the wedding is off?"

He sounds more upset than Peter's family did when he announced the same thing. The only one who looked remotely teary-eyed was Peter's mother. Valeria always treated me as if I was family. She's kind and thoughtful, even going as far as to offer for us to wed at her family's estate so my parents wouldn't be financially decimated by a wedding that's bill crept into six figures since Peter has so many extended family members.

"Ma, listen to me... That's normal... Ma..."

Zane shifts his eyes to me when he spots me entering the living room, smiles to assure me he's fine, and then returns to trying to calm down his mother, who sounds in full-blown meltdown mode.

"Cold feet aren't reserved solely for your first wedding. They can occur at any time." I slap my hand over my mouth to hide my smile when it becomes evident his mother didn't hear the humor in his reply. "I'm not ashamed of you, Ma. I'd never \_\_\_"

He cusses before pulling his phone from his ear and selecting a recently called contact.

His call goes unanswered three times before he gives up.

After tossing his cell phone onto the kitchen counter, he scrubs his hand down his face. “I can’t say I’m shocked. This happens a lot. It’s just usually *after* they’ve tied the knot.” His hand falls from his face before his eyes align with mine. “This is the first time she’s cried, though.”

“Your mother has never cried before?”

I’m taken aback when he answers, “Not once. She has a heart of stone. That’s who Emma, my assistant, says I inherited mine from.”

“She said you have a heart of ice.” My eyes bulge when I realize my big mouth exposed that I’m a snoop.

Zane stares at me with his mouth gaped and his eyes wide. “You faked being asleep?”

“No.” My lie holds out for two seconds when I recall why he left my bed so early in the morning. He was extending his time in Ravenshoe, and I was so delighted he wanted to spend Christmas with me, I wanted to show him my thanks with my body. I couldn’t do that if he remained on the phone. “I faked searching for you.” When he continues to stare, I stomp my foot down like I’m years younger than I am. “What? I was horny, and you were wearing jeans without briefs. My reasoning would hold up in any court.”

Laughing, he bands his arms around my back and pulls me close. I’m in the giddy high of Christmas, and another emotion I’m certain it is too soon to announce, and I would love nothing more than to act on the tingles racing through my veins, but I can’t.

I can't sob about the loss of human decency and stomp on it only a day later.

After sampling Zane's lips for a measly thirty seconds, I give him his marching orders.

I shouldn't love the devastation in his tone when he asks, "You're kicking me out?" But I do.

"No," I reply, walking to the door to open it for him. "I'm suggesting you go check on your mother."

"She'll be fine. She does this all the time. I'm sure everything will go ahead as planned. If I can't convince her to not cancel the wedding, Casey will be able to."

"She's your mother, Zane, and how you treat your mother shows what a true man you are."

Even when he's groaning about how fast she falls in love, it is obvious he loves his mother. He wouldn't want her to be upset, even if the reason for her heartache belonged on her shoulders.

"Besides, my coochie is tired. It needs a break."

I'm lying, but only to ease his guilt. He won't say it, but I'm reasonably sure he doesn't want to leave me alone because he's not convinced I'm fully healed from my confrontation with Peter and my subsequent meltdowns.

He's wrong, but if I don't get a second to think, I'll never work out how he's caused a more significant impact on my life in a week than Peter did in three years, so I must march him out the door.

"Are you sure? You can come with me. Ma would love another opinion on what white napkin she should pick."

I push him out the door before another stupid thought can form in his head. “The only time I’ll ever pick linen again is when I’m too lazy to iron.”

Those words did not leave my mouth. Surely. I’ve dreamed about a big Spanish wedding since I was a little girl. Now I’m acting as if marriage is the last thing on my mind.

My mother always said contentment in my personal life would bring me more happiness than anything else.

I didn’t believe her until now.

Zane doesn’t balk about either commitment or noncommitment rants. “All right. We’ll cool things off for a bit. How long do you need for your *coochie* to recover?”

I smile at his uncomfortable stumble of ‘coochie’ before suggesting, “Overnight?”

He looks upset. My libido is downright pissed.

But I try to calm the waters by accepting one of the multiple insinuations he tossed out the past few days. “You can pick me up around two. That’ll give us plenty of time to get to the church before your mother.”

Zane couldn’t sound more shocked. “You want to come to my mother’s wedding?”

Smiling, I nod. “Uh-huh.”

His bewilderment increases. “The elves have most likely vomited on *everything*. There’s probably spew stretched from the church to the reception hall.”

Mistaking his warning as rejection, I say, “If you don’t want me to come, I don’t have to come. I just thought you might like the support.”

“I want you to come. I need all the help I can get.” He steps closer to me before admitting the actual cause of his fret. “I just don’t want you to believe I inherited an icy heart from my mother.”

His expression exposes that divorce affects children even when they’re adults. “Your parents—”

“Are not like yours, Kelsey. Yours have their shit together. Mine...” He scrubs at the back of his neck while softly sighing. “They’re a fucking disaster.”

“Then I guess I shouldn’t tell you that the first time my mother walked down the aisle, she wasn’t standing across from my father.” With Zane shocked into silence, I can continue my story without interruption. “They were initially not meant to be, but fate...” A chuckle breaks up my reply. “And if you believe my father... Santa... was responsible for their union.”

“Santa?” Zane asks, his tone high.

Even confident he will never look at me in the same way again, I nod. “He was even their witness.” When it dawns on me that I sound like one of those weirdo Christmas freaks like Noelle, I shove Zane out of my apartment before muttering, “So if I haven’t scared you off, and you still want me to be your plus-one, I’ll see you tomorrow at two.”

I miss his presence the instant I close the door in his face, but I keep my hopelessness hidden by not responding to his offer until he gallops down the stairs of my building. “You know where to find me if you need me before then.”

Only once the steel door at the front of my building slams shut do I dance like no one is watching. I bump and grind across the polished floorboards in the living room, the

sauciness of my moves tripling when Zane's voice breaks over the 'ho, ho, *ho*' booming through my open living room window.

“And if you don't know the way, just keep an ear out for Santa. I'm sure he'll point you in the right direction.”



## CHAPTER 13

# Kelsey

I try to utilize the first solid alone time I've had in three years well. I respond to a handful of messages I received that veered away from their disappointment to my heartache, cancel the gift register before more family members get stung purchasing Noelle's expensive additions, and then I draft the speech I plan to give my parents one week from today. It's the day they are due to fly to Oregon and includes details about their new itinerary.

I've achieved a lot, but I'd be a liar if I said I'm not bored out of my mind and wishing I hadn't told Zane he broke my coochie.

If he didn't need to be with his family, I would have been halfway to his hotel by now.

Luckily, my morals still linger even when I want to be a harlot.

Confident I'll die of boredom if I live this life every day, I open the finance section of a local online newspaper. I sent some feelers to possible clients earlier this week, but I've yet to hear anything back. It is understandable when you remember Christmas is only eight days away.

I haven't bought a single gift yet, and I've been unemployed for days, so imagine the to-do list of people who

work sixty-plus hours a week.

My eyes bulge when I realize the seriousness of that last thought.

I haven't bought a single gift, and Christmas is only eight days away.

*Shit!*



My parents are easy. I could give them socks, and they'd be as happy as pigs in mud, but I've been scrolling online stores for over an hour and haven't found a single suitable present for Zane.

What do you buy a man you know intimately but have only recently become associated with?

I can't get him nothing, that's just scroogie, but I don't want to go overboard either. I did that for Peter every single celebration, and all I ever got were broken promises.

To keep with the theme of our... *whatever the hell this is*... I need to make sure Zane's gift is funny but functional. Reasonably priced but shows I put some effort into picking it out.

It also needs to be...

My thought process trails off when a faint "Ho, ho, *ho*" trickles through my open bedroom window.

"Yes!" I shout to myself when I come up with the perfect gift. "Then he can eat as many candy canes and drink as much

hot chocolate as his heart desires.” No one bats an eyelid when Santa downs a million calories in one night. He has an entire year to burn off the kilojoules, so we let him prepare for hibernation with a heap of naughty foods.

It takes an hour to find a replica of the suit from the Santa Zane swears is stalking him. It’s from a specialist dressmaker in Canada, but by selecting express shipping, it should be here in time for Christmas. I just need to input my credit card details.

I practically skip into the kitchen to fetch my purse from the drawer. I’m so excited that the glitzy sparkle of my engagement ring compliments to the overhead lighting above my kitchen cabinets doesn’t hurt as much as it once did.

It helps that I’m learning what my parents have been endeavoring to teach me since the day I was born.

Sentimental value far exceeds dollar value.

Only last week, my apartment was filled with designer furniture and pricy antiques, but I wasn’t game to sit on a single armchair while wearing a skirt with a zipper in the back because I was afraid of the damage it could cause.

This morning, I stomped across the floorboards with no concern that trinkets on the shelves could topple over.

Zane was down to a final tablespoon of crushed candy canes, and I was determined to sample it off his body as he had mine.

I won the battle. I can’t say the same for the vase I picked up at a thrift shop years ago. It wobbled to the ground when Zane’s hand shot out to secure a hold of anything he could when I took him to the very back of my throat.

Its cracks are blatantly obvious. However, I will never accept Zane's offer to replace it.

It's perfect the way it is.

Damaged but more beautiful than ever since it survived the trauma.

As my eyes shift from the vase Zane glued together at six in the morning to the ring I once thought was priceless, I realize it doesn't add an ounce of value to my life—neither sentimental nor monetary.

It is as worthless as the man who once made me believe I wasn't enough.

The heaviness on my shoulders clears when I remove Peter's number from my block list before sending him a quick message.

*Me: You have until midday tomorrow to pick up the ring. I'll be busy until Christmas Eve after that.*

Zane asked Emma to block out his planner indefinitely, but I don't want to get ahead of myself. Some of his decision could center around wanting to spend time with his family at Christmas.

As my message is marked as read, I receive a notification. It isn't from Peter. It is a text announcing I missed a call from a local number while searching for a Christmas present for Zane.

I flick away Peter's reply before calling my voicemail to listen to the message.

I can barely hear the number the caller requests I call back on. My heart is thudding too fast in excitement about the first half of her message.

“Ms. Stranger, it’s Maryann from Marigold Investment Brokers. To say I was pleased to hear about your recent dismissal from Black Industries is an understatement. We’ve been trying to poach you to our firm for years...”



“Seattle? You want to offer me a partnership at your Seattle firm?”

“Yes,” Maryann replies, her tone not as low as mine, her personality still chipper. “Is that a concern?”

“No. Ah...” I run my sweaty palm down the skirt I put on to represent the business take-no-shit-from-anyone woman I portrayed while pretending I wasn’t engaged to my boss.

My ruse is as faultless now as it was when I accepted Peter’s marriage proposal, but I feel more fake than the thistle-free tree in the corner of Maryann’s office.

This isn’t me.

The woman sitting across from Maryann is the shell of the woman I am meant to be.

So, as much as I am grateful for the opportunity being bestowed upon me, I can’t accept it.

Magic won’t occur if I don’t strive to unearth it.

“I appreciate you bringing me in so close to Christmas, and I am incredibly grateful that you believe in me, but Ravenshoe is my home, so I am only seeking a position that will both

keep me here and working toward my goal of establishing my own investment company.”

Maryann is shocked by my denial but hides it with a smile. Her surprise is understandable. The salary on offer is staggering. I’ve never seen so many zeros, but my parents gave up far more than financial security for love, and it worked out perfectly for them, so I’m willing to risk the same.

“Then I guess that concludes our interview.”

I nod, agreeing with Maryann. “I guess it does.”

I shake her hand before twisting to face the man watching our exchange from the corner of the room. After farewelling him with a chin dip, I exit an office double the size of any one Peter will ever have with my head held high.

The interview didn’t go as planned, but it proves what I’ve always known. I’m a damn good analyst, and when given the chance, will be an even better stockbroker.

As I exit Marigold’s head office, a familiar jingle makes me smile. “Ho, ho, *ho*. Merry Christmas.”

While approaching the Santa seeking donations for a local children’s homeless shelter, I pull a few notes out of a recently acquired purse.

He accepts my contribution with a grateful head bob before complimenting my outfit.

“This is my business attire. It isn’t as comfortable as yours, but beggars can’t be choosers.” When his rosy cheeks assure me he’s sweltering under layers of velvet, I say, “I saw a handful of alternative suits on a website earlier today. You could probably find something a little less weighted for the warmer climates. Cotton would—”

“Cotton?” He’s so good at his job that he sounds truly horrified while saying, “Mrs. Claus would have a coronary if I asked her to make my suits from cotton.”

“That’s because she knows the real Santa’s suits are made from velvet,” announces a toothless child at our right. “Hey, Santa?”

“That’s right.” When he bobs down to her level to tell her how his suit came about, I smile at the mother snapping a picture of her daughter with Santa before continuing down the path.

I only get a handful of steps before I’m stopped by someone calling my name.

It isn’t Maryann as I hoped, offering to invest in my startup company. It is Santa, who looks flustered from jogging the short distance I placed between us. “I missed Zane this morning when he left your apartment, so perhaps you could give him this for me. I’m running out of time for all my special projects this week.”

After a playful tap of his nose, he places a handwritten receipt in my hand before returning to his station. It is from Saint Nicholas to Zane for three hundred dollars and seventy-five cents.

Too curious for my own good, I ask, “Why does Zane need a receipt?” I’m silenced for the second time by an empty footpath. “Santa?” I call out while twirling in a circle. “Where did you go?”

“To the North Pole, silly,” shouts the little girl, who should be wishing for her two front teeth for Christmas.

When I crank my neck her way, eager to double her belief that Santa exists, I’m the one left reeling in Christmas spirit



instead.

I knew I recognized this region of Ravenshoe, but I couldn't pinpoint why until now.

Zane's hotel is half a block up. I'm only feet away from him and too giddy with Christmas magic to ponder how unkosher it is to drop in on someone unannounced.

It's almost Christmas.

People don't mind if you visit unexpectedly.

Especially when you're still wearing the racy red number the host picked out when you sent him a not suitable for work image to make sure you didn't leave his thoughts for even a second during the absence you're responsible for.

## CHAPTER 14

# Zane

“**W**hat do you keep looking at?”

I slant my phone so the glare of the undercabinet lights in my kitchen blocks the pictures Kelsey sent me over an hour ago. They're X-rated and have me so eager to ditch my mother and sister for the umpteenth time this week that I used every skill I own to pull my mother off the ledge in an hour instead of a week.

I'm emotionally drained and could do with a twelve-hour nap, but Kelsey's teasing snaps have ensured sleep is the last thing on my mind.

Thank fuck Maryann agreed to interview Kelsey instead of Harrold Marigold. He's rumored to have broken a handful of his employee's hearts. I know for a fact he has. More than one of them have been clients of mine.

After a second look at the images causing my skyrocketing temperature, I store my phone in my pocket like the lingerie picks haven't made *everything* a tight squeeze, then spin to face my sister. “Just a proposal Emma sent through. Nothing interesting”

“You are such a liar.” Casey throws a balled dishtowel at my head before balancing her elbows on the island she just scrubbed clean.

Our mother's wedding is in this hotel, so Casey has access to a massive kitchen downstairs, but she's reserved my kitchen for the baker to finalize the finicky toppers of the two-tiered cake.

"It's Kelsey, isn't it?" I don't get a word out. "Don't try to deny it. I can see it all over your face. It hasn't gleamed this brightly since Christmas Eve twenty years ago."

That was the year before she told me Santa isn't real.

I refused to speak to her for a month after she ruined my childhood.

I'm on the cusp of spilling every sordid detail of my feelings for Kelsey, but before I can, Casey continues spilling secrets. "Santa is telling everyone he's responsible for your pairing."

"What?" I only speak one word, but it is barely audible through my shocked chuckle.

Casey nods. "Charity Santa... the one who's been following you all over town."

I knew I wasn't going crazy.

"He's taking full credit for your relationship with Kelsey. He even said he—"

She's interrupted by the trill of the hotel's landline.

I point at her in warning that our conversation isn't over before I answer the call. "Hello?"

"Mr. Kringle—"

"Please call me Zane," I beg. "Especially at this time of year."

The receptionist at the hotel giggles before addressing me as requested. “Zane, the baker you’re expecting has arrived.”

“Great. Send her up, please.”

When she hums in approval of my request, I disconnect our call as the buzzer at my suite rings.

*Damn, that was quick.*

My strides to the door double when I recall Kelsey’s interview should have ended by now. Maryann was beside herself when I let drop that I was looking at investing with a new stockbroking firm when I called to cancel Harrold’s yearly reservation with my company.

She admitted she had been trying to poach Kelsey from Black Industries for years, and wondered if she could be persuaded to return to a corporate role for a senior position with Marigold’s.

I warned her that she’s probably too late, Kelsey’s determination is unyielding when it comes to her goals, but that there was only one way for her to find out. She had to call Kelsey and ask.

Kelsey seemed excited to have been offered an interview, so I’m interested to learn if she accepted their proposal or if she’s going to continue forging ahead with plans that have been at a stalemate the past two years.

I’ll call her for an update as soon as I’ve let Noelle in.

When I open my front door, the person on the other side isn’t who I’m anticipating. I only glanced his way for two seconds yesterday afternoon, but not even the hideous cut of his tailored suit can conceal his identity.

*Why the fuck is Kelsey's ex standing outside my apartment?*

“Peter...” I have to force his name out of my mouth, not to mention the rest of my greeting. “What are you doing here?”

I'm given an answer by Casey, who has just picked up my phone, instead of the douche across from me. “It's Emma. She said it's urgent. Something about the refund you processed this morning.” Casey stops halfway into the entryway when she notices Peter. Her brows furrow as she mumbles to herself, “I thought Mom hired Noelle to make her cake?”

“She did.” I offer an introduction I'm confident Peter doesn't deserve. “Casey, this is Peter, Kelsey's ex. Peter, this is Casey, my sister.”

“*Ohh... shoot,*” Casey whispers heavily before diverting her focus to my cell phone squashed to her ear. “He's going to have to call you back.” As she returns to the kitchen, I hear her say, “He's talking to Kelsey's ex. Kelsey... the woman he's...”

I wait for her words to fade to silence before focusing on Peter. He looks angry. Good. His devastation might be the only way I'll keep my fists balled at my side. I've witnessed a ton of sly tactics when a relationship ends, but Peter's antics are by far the worst.

A reason for the downfall in his mood is unearthed when he says, “Ex? You introduced me as Kelsey's ex?”

“Yeah. That's how it generally works when you cheat. They become your ex, and you become theirs.”

“I didn't cheat.” He has absolutely no class when he spits out, “Fingering someone isn't cheating.”

“Uh, yeah, it is. But I don't have time to discuss the semantics of cheating with you. I have a wedding to prepare

for...” I stop just before I say, *‘And lingerie to peel off a woman way out of your league.’*

I usually handle the exes of my clients with more professionalism. I guess it’s understandable that I’m mixing things up this time since Kelsey isn’t my client.

“If you want to talk to someone about it, I have a ton of shrinks on standby. I’ll have my assistant forward you their details.”

“Along with the fifty K you owe me since I’ve changed my mind?”

I chuckle in disbelief. “I owe you fifty K?” When possessiveness flares in his eyes as he nods, I spit out, “If that’s all you think she’s worth, you are way off the fucking mark.”

The fees from the clients Emma cancelled this morning so I can delay my departure of Ravenshoe for a few more weeks were four times that amount, and it still isn’t close to Kelsey’s worth.

She’s priceless.

I’m about to slam the door in Peter’s face when a third person joins our conversation. “Peter?” Stepsister number two skips down the hallway, her excitement increasing with each step she takes. “I thought you said you couldn’t come.”

Noelle curls the hand not lugging a two-tiered cake and sugar decorations around Peter’s waist and snuggles into his chest.

I step back, shocked when I notice the loved-up expression on her face.

“What the... You’re... He’s...”

My bewilderment grows when the last person I want to witness their lovey-dovey exchange freezes halfway down the hallway.

Kelsey's wide eyes bounce between Noelle, Peter, and me for several heart-clutching seconds before she murmurs, "I shouldn't have come."

When she spins on her heels and races for the elevator still idling at my floor, I shout, "Kelsey!"

I race after her, but since I have to barge past Noelle without ruining my mother's wedding cake, Kelsey makes it inside the elevator before me. I only just reach it as the doors snap shut.

When my stab of the call button fails to keep the cart on my level, I throw open the emergency exit stairwell and race down the stairs at a million miles an hour.

What Kelsey thinks she saw isn't close to what is happening, but I understand the hurt she's facing. My father endures the same pain every time he attends one of my mother's weddings so he can support Casey and me.

I told him not to come anymore, that he doesn't need to torture himself like that, but he shows up to every ceremony without fault because sheltering our pain is more important than sheltering his own.

When I break into the foyer of my hotel, I'm sweating and woozy but determined. This isn't how things are meant to go down, especially since Kelsey has nothing to do with my company.

"Kelsey?" I scan the people milling on the footpath outside the hotel.



Ravenshoe streets are always packed, so I struggle to spot Kelsey in the crowd, even with her having curves and a gorgeous face that stand out.

When “Ho, ho, *ho*. Merry Christmas” sounds from the west, I push off my feet and race in that direction. Santa won’t let me down. He can’t claim a victory if he’s yet to help me win it.

I suck in a relieved breath when I spot Kelsey preparing to cross the intersection on the corner of Westin and Trace. Charity Santa is standing at her right.

I catch up to her just as the pedestrian light switches to walk. Not wanting her to get trampled by last-minute Christmas shoppers, I pull her under the awning of my hotel before steadying her swaying movements by gently gripping the tops of her arms.

She sucks in a shaky breath before endeavoring to ease her shock. “Peter... Noelle... Why, Zane? Why were *they* at your apartment?” Her low tone exposes her surprise, not to mention that she’s seeking answers from the wrong person.

I know why Noelle is here. She’s been my stepsister for over half my life. But I don’t understand why Peter showed up out of nowhere. I’m as clueless as Kelsey as to his motives.

When Kelsey continues seeking answers from my eyes, I say, “I don’t know. But if you stay... if you *trust* me, I will find out.”

I’m confident I would have gotten her over the fence if Peter hadn’t followed us out. “He does this for a living, Kels. Men hire him to help their exes move on because a woman who thinks she has the world at her feet can’t be fucked taking

her ex to the cleaners for his scheming ways. She rarely goes for her share once Zane plants himself in her life.”

I’d deck him for his lies if I believed I could leave Kelsey’s side and not witness her collapse. Instead, I use words. “That’s not true. That isn’t how it works.” I return my eyes to Kelsey. “I help women learn who they are and regain their independence.”

“For a fifty-thousand-dollar fee.”

I’m about to tell Peter to shut the fuck up, but before I can, Kelsey murmurs, “Fifty thousand?”

Peter nods. “I thought it was worth it when you called to say I could have my mother’s ring back. It’s valued in the millions. But then I realized how much I miss you. How much I miss *us*.”

“Peter—”

He disrespects Noelle in a way he will never disrespect Kelsey again by shoving his hand into her face before stepping closer to Kelsey and me. “I made a mistake, Kels. I was scared, and I got cold feet. But the worst thing I ever did was hire him to build your confidence to the point that you believe you no longer need me in your life.”

I’m glad Kelsey’s trust in him is so low that she doesn’t seek the truth from him, but I really wish she wouldn’t look at me how she is. “He hired you to help me move on?”

She knows the words Peter is speaking are fraudulent, but she still needs me to spell it out for her. “No.”

“He’s lying. I transferred his requested fee into his bank account Wednesday night at—”

“5:57 p.m.,” Kelsey answers, her confidence disintegrating before my eyes.

Peter acts oblivious, though. “Yep. See.” He twists his phone screen to show her the wire transfer he made to my company, Single All The Way, the afternoon he confronted Kelsey outside the department store.

I can’t tell if Kelsey is confused or steaming mad when she questions in a hushed tone, “Did you sleep with me because you were paid to?”

My denial is too swift to be cordial. “No. I’ve *never* slept with a client. I was their friend and confidant. They became better women because of me.”

My I’m-so-great rant is silenced by Kelsey swinging her handbag at me. “Better because they wouldn’t fight for a share of what’s rightfully theirs?!” She hits me another two times before she spits out in disgust, “So much for offering your services for free.”

For how hard she’s shaking, her push shouldn’t wind me when it sends me crashing into the outside wall of my hotel, but it does. And her steps to force distance between us are unhindered and robust.

“Kelsey...”

My endeavor to catch her again is thwarted when my arm is suddenly grabbed by a leather-covered hand.

When I shove back the person stealing my ultimate Christmas wish, I’m glared at from all sides. I didn’t push Peter out of a situation he no longer belongs in. I shoved the Santa who’s been stalking me all over Ravenshoe.

“Santa,” I murmur when he sways like a leaf on a hot summer’s day.

“Ho. Ho... *ho.*”

When he collapses at my feet while clutching his heart, I shout, “Call 9-1-1.”

## CHAPTER 15

# Zane

When the click of designer heels sounds through my ears, I raise my eyes from the phone screen, which displays all the messages I've sent to Kelsey over the past three hours that have gone unread, and drift them to the noise.

Dr. Jae, the head surgeon at Ravenshoe Private, hands her clipboard to a nurse at the nurses' station before joining me in the waiting room of the ICU. She looks as drained as I feel, but I doubt her exhaustion is because a charity Santa wouldn't let go of her hand while he was loaded into the back of an ambulance and driven to the hospital in peak hour traffic.

It took Jae prying my hand from Santa's before I could begin explaining to Kelsey that things weren't as they seemed.

I have proof I never accepted Peter's request to hire me. It just took him exposing the proprietary limited name he used while I was performing CPR on Santa to realize who I refunded this morning on Emma's behalf.

Peter was the client who wouldn't quit harassing Emma this week—the douche who wanted me to break the rules for him. But I was clueless because every inquiry he made was under a company name, and he paid under the same guise.

Between reviving Santa and waiting on news of his prognosis, I haven't had time to work out all the details, but I

am assuming when Peter saw me with Kelsey, he believed I had accepted his proposal, so he forwarded the fifty thousand fee to show good faith.

When Jae's exhaustive sigh tickles my cheek, I ask, "How is he?"

"He's doing okay." Her giggle is unexpected. She was always the strait-laced one at our study sessions at university. "His recovery is occurring remarkably fast. It's almost a miracle." Her eyes pop. "A Christmas miracle."

Confident there's no such thing after the day I've had, I ask, "Are his family on their way?"

I feel like a dick seeking a way to skip out on my obligations, but the quicker I get Santa's collapse off my conscience, the faster I can return to Kelsey's apartment to grovel.

"Excluding 'made by Mrs. Claus' stitched on the inside of his suit, he has no other form of ID. We don't know who to call." She rolls her eyes. "But I'm sure once word gets out that we have a sick Santa in our ward, a news crew will soon show up. It isn't the best way to get a formal identification, but it is better than having him spend Christmas here alone." I stop nodding in agreement when she nudges her head to the double doors she recently walked through. "You can go sit with him if you want. I'm sure he'd appreciate the company."

"Is that allowed? I'm not exactly family."

"Are you sure about that? You seem to have forgotten that I know your last name." She barges my shoulder like I don't hear every joke on the planet about my surname a million times each December before she gestures for me to follow her. "I'll never do my rounds if he's left alone. It doesn't feel right

so close to Christmas, so you'd be doing me a favor if you'd sit with him."

When she walks me into a curtained-off room, my heart sinks. Santa looks tiny out of his suit and strapped to a bed by monitors.

I wait for the ICU nurse to leave before asking, "What's his diagnosis?" I had planned to be a heart surgeon in college, but my roommate's gratitude for assuring his girlfriend her chances of a happily ever after significantly improved when she walked in on him with her best friend altered my plans.

I still work on hearts, just not with a scalpel.

"The original diagnosis was a heart attack, but we think there's something wrong with the ECG machine. It's been on the fritz since he was admitted."

When Jae switches on the electrocardiography to record the electronic signals of Santa's heart, my shocked eyes rocket to her.

His heart is beating out the tune of jingle bells.

"You're an ass," I mutter under my breath when Jae bursts out laughing before exposing she'd placed one of the pads on her iPhone speaker.

"Don't be mad. It's Christmas." After dragging over a chair to the side of Santa's bed, she tells me she will be back in an hour to check on him. "If you need anything before then, hit the buzzer on your right."

I wait for her footsteps to stop sounding in my ear before taking a seat.

Just as fast, one of Santa's eyes pops open. He drags it to the left before pulling it to the right.



Only once he's confident the coast is clear does he speak. "Is she gone?"

Although shocked by his quick recovery—he was flatlining only hours ago—I nod. "She said she'll be back in an hour."

"She said that five minutes ago, and I was barely alone for a second." He yanks off the blanket covering his legs, displaying he's placed back on the boots the first responder officer removed at the scene of his collapse. "I almost got caught."

"Should you be doing that?" I ask when he commences ripping off the pads of the heart monitor. "You collapsed. Your heart—"

"Is perfectly fine," he interrupts as he removes the final pad.

As he enters the cubicle next to us to gather his Santa jacket, he asks, "How's yours? Looks like it took a bit of a beating earlier as well. Understandable with your whole, *they're better women because of me* speech."

"It's good. It's fine." *Its crumpled remains aren't up for discussion with a man I don't know.*

I grow panicked I said my inner monologue out loud when Santa breathes heavily out of his nose. "I thought you were ready, but I may have jumped the gun a little early."

"For?" I ask, confused.

My bewilderment augments when he replies without pause for thought. "For the wish you made when you were ten."

That was the year Casey told me Santa didn't exist. I was super pissed, not solely because she had stolen the magic of

Christmas from me, but because it meant it was less likely my wish would come true.

I wished not to become my mother. I wanted one true love, not a dozen, because I didn't want anyone to hurt me how my mother hurt my father when he came to collect us that Christmas Eve to learn she was engaged for the fourth time since their divorce.

Only when I got older did I understand the gap between my mother's third and fourth marriage. She'd given my father a sliver of hope that we could be a family again before she bumped into my little league baseball coach three weeks before Christmas.

Santa squeezes my shoulder, pulling me from my thoughts. "Maybe next year?"

I nod before realizing I don't know what I'm agreeing to. "Next year for what?"

As he breaks through the curtains of the cubicle meant to keep him alive, he shouts, "To try to re-grant your Christmas wish!"

I lose the chance to tell him I don't have to wait another year—Kelsey is the best gift I've ever received—when my charge through the curtains has me stumbling onto a handful of nurses staring at me as if I am talking to myself.

They're acting like a patient didn't just dart past them, and the concern on their faces triples when I ask, "Did anyone see which way Santa went?"

## CHAPTER 16

# Zane

**C**asey sighs when I rip at my bow tie with the tenacity of a shark. I'm moody, tired, and wearing a stupid-ass groomsman suit for the ninth time in my life.

After ensuring the nurses from the ICU that I didn't need a psych evaluation, I raced to Kelsey's apartment, determined to prove Santa wrong that I wasn't ready to have my Christmas wish granted.

I'd already met the girl of my dreams, so I only needed to tell Kelsey the truth.

All I found at Kelsey's building was an empty apartment and a receipt for my donation to the charity Santa the night I returned home.

I've tried Kelsey's cell a hundred times, and when my desperation reached fever pitch, I went to her old place of employment to see if she'd given them a forwarding address.

I even asked Noelle, who was acting far too heartbroken over a man like Peter, if she knew where Kelsey would go.

Every direction I took was a dead end.

I've never had a case backfire so severely before.

I startle when I realize the inaccuracy of my last thought. Kelsey isn't a client of mine. She isn't a case number. She's

just clueless because Santa fucked everything up when he stalled proceedings by faking a heart attack.

“Fucking Santa.”

“Don’t blame him,” Casey snaps out, over my shit. I’ve been a grouch all day. “I’d make you wait a whole lot longer than a year if I had discovered you were profiting off women’s heartache.” My family were clueless about what I did for a living until Casey followed Peter and Noelle’s storm out of my suite. “You used vulnerabilities exposed by their exes to weasel your way into their lives for profit. Then you made them our mother.”

I *pfft* her. “I did no such thing. I built them up before making them realize they deserve better.”

She holds her hands out as if to say, “*Exactly,*” before she thrusts them at the aisle our mother is due to walk down in under an hour. “You built her up so much, Zane, she never comes back down. She goes through husbands like underwear because you’ve made her believe she can do no wrong. How has that helped her?” Before I can speak, she mutters, “And if you’re helping them be ‘*better women,*’ why do their exes pick up the tab?”

Since I can’t find an appropriate response, I murmur, “I help them move on.”

“No, you help them turn a blind eye to the scheming pieces of shit they’d already moved on from before you became a part of their lives.” I’ve never seen her so worked up when she gets up in my face and says, “If she wants a billionaire’s house after she’s given him an heir and a spare, she deserves the billionaire’s house. If she wants to keep the Rolls Royce he gifted her on her birthday, she deserves to keep it.”

She hits me where she knows it will hurt. “If she wants to make him fret for a week about a family heirloom he offered when he asked her to be his wife, she gets to make him fret! It is the least he should suffer for making her sit across from them necking like teens for an entire week three weeks out from their wedding!”

Her snarl is vicious. “It isn’t up to you to inflate her ego to such an unmanageable level that she walks over *everyone* she’s meant to love.” Her voice cracks when she murmurs, “She’s *our* mother, Zane, so I will always love her, but has she ever put us first? Has she ever wondered how it feels for us to have these men introduced into our lives over and over again?” She angrily wipes at a tear streaming down her face. “Has she ever wondered how this affects us? How it affected you?”

“No, she hasn’t,” I admit, the fight no longer in me. The wind was released from my sails when she compared the women I thought I was helping to our mother.

Casey doesn’t hesitate to continue cutting me down. “Then don’t blame Santa for your fucked up notions of what women want. Make the real culprit pay.”

When she darts past our mother coming to check we’ve set the aisle up exactly how she wants, my father signals that he will take care of Casey while I deal with the actual perpetrator of her upset.

Her angst started with my stupid belief that women require my friendship to know they can let go of their heartache and survive, but it ended with our mother’s inability to do precisely that.

“Sweetheart, what happened?” My mother fixes the collar of my suit, ensuring it sits right before locking her eyes with

mine. “You know you need to be cautious with Casey. She’s not as confident as us. She’s not as strong.”

“Ma, stop. Casey isn’t your competition. She’s your daughter.” With one truth comes many. “And I’m your son. *Your son*. I’m not the person you’re supposed to rely on to fix your broken heart all the time. That’s your partner’s job, the man you’re meant to lean on in return for your affection. When something breaks, you’re supposed to give *him* a chance to fix it.” When she looks like she can’t believe the words I’m speaking, I hit her with gospel honesty. “I thought I was helping you and making you a better person.” I shake my head. “I made everything worse.”

“What are you talking about, sweetheart? You’re perfect.”

“No.” I pull her hands down and hold them at her sides. “Because if I were, I would have done this years ago.”

I smile at her to ensure she knows I will always love her before I join my father and sister at the back of the church and then lead our walk outside.

## CHAPTER 17



# Zane

*Seven Days Later...*

“**Y**ou know I’m not twelve, right?” Casey asks between licks of her ice cream. “I would have gotten over my heartache of being ditched on Christmas Eve without ice cream.”

“Ice cream is the perfect opener for a conversation you don’t realize you need to have until...” I stop talking when it dawns on me that I’m using the lessons I learned from our mother on another unsuspecting victim. “It’s a nice night for a stroll, so I thought, what the hell, I deserve a treat.” I smile when I recall Kelsey saying something similar the night we met. It’s the first genuine smile I’ve given this week.

“It is.” Casey tilts in like the air is chilly. “I love this time of year. The twinkling lights and endless Santas on every corner. The excuse to gorge on calories isn’t bad either.” She peers up at me with her glistening eyes on full display. “Do you think she’ll keep her promise this time around?”

When she nudges her head half a block up, a heaviness I haven’t been able to shift for the past week no matter how hard I try to fix my wrongs intensifies.

“Probably not,” I answer, knowing a leopard can’t change its spots in a week even when striving like fuck to do exactly that. “But I hope he’s smart enough not to get hurt this time.”

Casey, our father, and I had just climbed into a taxi at the front of the church my mother was due to wed in when she raced out its double doors and begged to come with us.

Casey and I weren't given the chance to speak. Our father cranked open his door and pulled my mother onto his lap before we could respond.

She's used his lap as a seat several times since then.

I tried to talk to my father about his inability to let go. Then I realized it wasn't my right to insert myself into anyone's relationship, so I shut my mouth, soundlessly wished him well, and continued to work on bettering myself instead.

It's only been a week, but I've made some drastic changes. I refunded the money I had received for my 'friendships' with the women I had duped. I also set up a foundation with my share of the profits from Casey's many restaurants and sound investment decisions I've made over the past decade to ensure even people not married know what they're entitled to in the event of separation.

I even penned apologies for my wayward thoughts to every Kelsey from LA to Florida.

I've had a handful of replies, but not from the Kelsey I'm seeking.

I don't want her to forgive me. I just want her to know that I never meant any harm. I honestly thought I was helping women move on as I had my mother, but my week with Kelsey proved my clients would have done it on their own even if I hadn't forged a way into their lives.

Kelsey initiated every step necessary to move on from her ex. I was merely a witness to her strength and determination.

Half a block later, Casey balks. When I glance down at her, unappreciative of the ribbing her sudden stop caused, she stares at me as if I have rocks in my head.

“What?” I ask, shocked by the surprise on her face.

“Did you not hear that?”

She doesn’t breathe while waiting for the noise I’m fighting like hell to ignore to occur again.

Fortunately for her, Santa is quick, or she may have passed out. “Ho, ho, *ho*. Merry Christmas.”

Casey’s eyes bulge as she grabs my arm. “It’s him. It’s charity Santa from the restaurant. I’d recognize his deep rumble anywhere.”

“It’s not him.” I try not to sound disappointed. I miserably fail.

When charity Santa’s voice rings through Ravenshoe’s main street again, Casey stomps her foot down like she’s years younger than she is before saying, “I swear to God, if you don’t pull your finger out of your butt, I’ll... I’ll...” An evil expression crosses her face when the perfect threat smacks into her. “I’ll tell everyone you cried when I told you Santa wasn’t real.”

I stare at her like she’s a monster. That’s *our* secret. We’re not meant to share *our* secrets. If we were, I would have told Kelsey how Casey peed in the sandpit like a cat throughout kindergarten while sharing details about the tears I shed when my big sis broke my Christmas spirit.

I was willing to face a lifetime of embarrassment just to ensure Kelsey knew the handful of tears she released about the end of her engagement were perfectly acceptable.

When I realize the threat on Casey's face is authentic, I say, "You wouldn't dare."

"Wanna bet?" She grabs the first couple she finds and shouts in their faces, "My brother cried when I told him Santa isn't real. He was ten and still believed a fat man in a red suit came down the chimney every Christmas Eve!"

When she shares the same story with another three couples, I clamp my hand over her mouth before dragging her into the alley. Our parents are oblivious to our imminent tiff since they only seem to have eyes for each other.

"You're damn insane. You know that, right?" I don't wait for her to answer me. "You're telling people I believed in Santa when I was a child because I won't listen to your stupid notion that the charity Santa from your restaurant is the real Santa."

"He knew about your wish, Zane. You never told anyone about that, not even me until *after* he disclosed it, so how did he know?"

"I don't know! He just did." I take a moment to calm down before confessing, "He also said I wasn't ready and that I'd have to wait another year before trying again."

Mindful of the cause of the dip in my tone, Casey drops her angsty expression while stepping closer. "Maybe he changed his mind?"

"He didn't change his mind. I haven't improved enough yet not to fuck it up. No one improves in a week."

"Kelsey did."

Just hearing her name hurts.

I didn't realize how quickly she had snowed me under until the avalanche overwhelmed me.

Casey hits the nail on the head over and over again. "She found you that night, and wowed you so quickly, you broke every rule you made to protect yourself in under a minute. She saw the positive in being let go so she could pursue her dreams of her own company, and she didn't let that ass steal the magic of Christmas when he stole *her* damn tree and decorated it with *her* decorations. *She* did all that, Zane. You were merely there for—"

"The ride," we say at the same time.

Casey nods. "So although he may have believed you weren't ready, maybe he's realized you're not the only person he should be visiting. Maybe he's learned with you that it takes two people to make a relationship work, not one." Tears wet her eyes when she says, "You didn't want to help Kelsey overcome her heartache, Zane. You wanted her to help you get over yours." When I can't deny her claim—because it's true—she smiles faintly. "She can't do that if you stop believing. It is the magic of Christmas bringing you together."

My heart thuds in my ears when a familiar jingle quickly follows her statement. "Ho, ho, *ho*. Merry Christmas."

Santa's chant this time around is fainter than the first. It sounds distant, like it is about to fade into oblivion.

Even Casey reaches the same conclusion as me. "Go. I'll fetch our parents and catch up."

"Are you sure?" My heart has already left the alleyway, but my feet won't budge without some reassurance that I'm not about to make a fool out of myself.

Who over the age of ten still believes in Santa?

“Just go already!” Casey demands, pushing me out of the alley.

As she races for our parents, screaming that Kelsey is back, I sprint in the direction the Christmas chant came from.

I run and run and run until Santa’s greeting pierces my ears for the fifth time tonight.

At the top of the grueling St. Thomas hill, I spin in a circle, seeking a feisty Spaniard amongst the tourists that flood this region of Ravenshoe every day of the year.

“Where is she?” I beg when I drink in hundreds of faces but fail to find a familiar one. “I promise I won’t fuck this up. I’ll make things right. I just need you to believe in me like I believe in you. I need you to give me a chance.”

My head cranks to the left when a distinct “Ho, ho, *ho*” fills my ears.

The Santa I’m seeking doesn’t present in person. He’s on a computer monitor in the office of a local travel agency. His red velvet threads have been switched for a Hawaiian print shirt, but he isn’t promoting a Hawaiian getaway. The ad is for a small coastal community on the Austrian Coast.

For a village called Lastres.

## CHAPTER 18

# Kelsey

“**B**oils. Menstruation cups. Anal fissures.” I speak clearly and precisely into my phone speaker so there’s no chance the social media ad gods will miss my suggestions. “I’ll even take dating sites if that’s all you’re willing to offer.”

I startle when my father enters the living room of my childhood home. I had no intention of running home when my confusion was piqued at a never-before-reached level, but somehow, the email I wrote to my parents about the dissolution of my engagement ended up in the outbox of my email provider instead of the draft folder.

My parents were halfway home before I stumbled on the free-for-all at Zane’s apartment. Since my apartment held more memories from my week with Zane than it did my almost three years with Peter, I accepted my mother’s offer to bunk in my childhood room until I figured out my next move.

“Did you just google anal fissures?” my father asks with a raised brow.

“No. But that’s not a bad idea. Thanks.”

My father is lost as to why I’m praising him, but my mother has a better understanding. She knows me better than anyone and has been my rock the past week.



No. I haven't moped in my pajamas for a week. I gave the real estate agent the go-ahead to clear out my apartment, put it on the market, filed for an LLC, and commenced trading under my name for the first time.

I also cried while eating chocolate ice cream sprinkled with candy cane dust, but we will save that confession for a day that is mine to tarnish.

Today is Christmas Eve, and I refuse to let anything dampen the magic.

"Let her be," my mother whispers before pulling my father down to sit next to her so they can share a fresh batch of hot chocolate.

It should hurt to see how in love they are. I was slightly bitter about it when I trudged past their room for the first time and saw the raunchy Mrs. Claus outfit my father had laid out for my mother, but then I realized they didn't get where they are without the ups and downs every relationship faces.

My grandfather hated my father on sight. He did everything in his power to keep them apart.

But at the end of the day, love won, and I was born nine months later.

We won't mention that my birthday is September twenty-fourth, or you'll do the math I wish I never calculated.

Once my mother has my father's focus solely on her, she gives me a nod of approval to continue altering the trajectory of my universe.

During a moment of weakness my first night home, I googled Single All The Way. Ever since, my Facebook page has been filled with advertisements for Zane's business. I wasn't interested in the who, what, when, or how of Single All

The Way when my curiosity got the better of me. I merely wanted to settle some theories that arose within me once things settled down.

Predominantly, why did Peter pay Zane days after we met for the first time, and how could he have known Santa would push me in Zane's direction?

I had this crazy theory in my head about Peter paying the whole of Ravenshoe off to secure the return of his family's heirloom, but the more I thought about it, the more I disbelieved my theory.

I sought Zane out.

I came onto him with the guise I was going to hire an escort for the night.

And then there was the return of the funds that had been illegally removed from a trading account I started two years ago when I commenced discussions with Peter about leaving Blacks and opening my own investment corporation.

Peter is so cheap he sold securities from my online trading account to pay Zane's fee.

Mercifully, the money was refunded while I prepared for my interview with Marigold's—hours before I arrived at Zane's apartment.

Although I appreciate the return of the funds Peter could end up spending years behind bars for—I wasn't the first 'client' he had embezzled money from—I'm still confused.

Why did Zane refund Peter if he believed his ruse was successful? Peter collected the engagement ring before my interview. He got his supposed money's worth and then some if his valuation of his mother's ring is accurate, so his entitlement to a refund makes no sense.

My confusion is why I've spent the past week with my head in future trades and investments.

And perhaps my anger.

It seems so odd that Zane founded a company that's so disrespectful to women. He loves his sister and would do anything for his mother, so how did his notion of respect become so skewed?

After shrugging off my confusion for the umpteenth time this week, I log into the Facebook app to send Christmas messages to my online family and friends.

I'm halfway through my slim list when an advertisement hogs my phone screen.

"For crying out loud."

When I spin my phone to show my mother the advertisement that's just popped up, my father exposes he has his ear to the floor more than I realize. "Can't you say you're not interested, then the bots will stop showing you Zane's ads?"

I swear I'm smarter than my broken-hearted head makes out.

As I'm about to click the not interested button, my half-blind cat jumps onto my lap and bumps my hand, sending my clicking finger half an inch lower.

*I'll never be saved now.*

My inward whine ends when I notice Zane's website displays a banner announcing it is closed. It has a number to contact if you wish to claim reimbursement for any losses incurred by his company, then a link to a charity that will assist you with your claim.

Too curious for my own good, I click on the link.

My mouth gapes only a minute later. The charity won't solely assist women in suing Single All The Way for any wrongdoings they believe they may have faced. It will also help women in situations similar to mine—the women who think they have to leave a relationship with nothing because they're not married.

“Kelsey...” my mother murmurs when my throat works hard to swallow. I assume she's worried I'm storming down a path that will only cause me more pain, but I am proven wrong when she says, “*Dios mío*. Look at the time.” She pushes my father off her before snatching her car keys off the kitchen counter and tossing them into my chest. “You should have left half an hour ago. The traffic will be bumper-to-bumper all the way to the airport.”

I gulp when I notice the time. My grandparents are due to land in forty minutes.

“Flying fruit bats,” I gabber out before cussing the day my parents learned of candy cane cocktails. They were meant to collect my grandparents from the airport since we cashed their travel credits for flights to Ravenshoe instead of Oregon, but they got a little festive early, so I offered to pick them up on their behalf.

Now I'll most likely get a speeding ticket from Santa instead of the million-dollar startup capital I'm seeking from investors for my first solid trade.



Santa should thank his lucky stars the streets of Ravenshoe don't get icy at this time of the year. When he steps out in front of me outside Ravenshoe Airport, I narrowly avoid hitting him by the tip of his red nose.

Our near collision blows off his hat and veers me into the departure lane of the airport instead of arrivals, but Christmas is spared from imminent disaster, nonetheless.

"Excuse me," I shout through the passenger window of my mother's car when I spot Santa's hat on the hood of her Mazda. "You forgot your hat."

When I fail to get Santa's attention, I park in the next available spot and slip out of the driver's seat.

"You can't leave your car, ma'am. This is a no-stopping zone," an officer warns when I try to catch up to Santa before he darts through the departure doors.

"It's his hat," I reply, showing the officer the impeccably crafted hat with 'made by Mrs. Claus' stitched on the inside. "Santa forgot his hat."

"It's Christmas Eve," mumbles a little boy who'd only be five or six. "You can't let him leave without his hat, or he won't be able to communicate with the elves when he's in his sleigh."

"Oh no," joins another child with cheeks as rosy as the first. "Christmas will be ruined. You have to give him back his hat. Please, kind lady."

When I look at the officer for advice, he succumbs to the children's pleading eyes even faster than me. After nudging his head to the departure lounge, he says, "Make it quick."

Nodding, I sprint in the direction Santa went. He should be easy to spot in the crowd. He should be the only one minus the

hat that makes his suit authentic, but the arrivals lounge replicates a Where's Wally Santa edition. They're everywhere.

My head cranks to the right when a familiar "Ho, ho, *ho*" bellows over the crowd's chatter.

It is too authentic to belong to a wannabee Santa and lubricated enough to announce nothing but warm milky goodness is lining his throat.

When I stop near the customer inquiries station to prick my ears like my father did thirty-one years ago in another country far from here, I overhear the pleas of a desperate man. "I can't wait until tomorrow. I have to go to Lastres tonight. Tomorrow will be too late."

"I'm sorry, Sir. The last flight to Lastres left this morning." The clicks of a keyboard are the only noises heard since I'm too shocked by the coincidence not to eavesdrop. "If you're willing to take a connecting flight, I could get you on a plane that leaves in an hour—"

"I'll take anything as long as it arrives in Lastres by Christmas Day."

"I'm sorry, the connecting flight isn't until tomorrow afternoon. You'll spend Christmas in Doha Airport."

The same children from earlier take up this traveler's campaign as well. "You're not listening to what he's saying. By then, it'll be too late. He'll no longer hear Santa's calls."

The airline assistant peers down her nose at them. "Santa doesn't exist—"

"Don't you dare," says a voice so clear his identity can no longer be hidden.

"Zane?"

Santa's hat slips from my grip when the man begging for a flight to my mother's hometown spins to face me. He was supposed to depart this airport a week ago. He's meant to be on the other side of the world, so why is he still here, seeking a ticket to my mother's country?

I give Zane's belief that Santa is stalking him more thought when the children at his side snatch up Santa's hat from in front of me before they race to a hatless Santa's at the entrance to the departure gates.

After securing his hat back on his head, Santa's eyes twinkle with mischief as he bounces them between Zane and me. He watches us until I'm on the verge of booking a psych evaluation before he taps his nose and then disappears into a sea of charity Santas.

"I... Is he...No..." I shut my mouth before I say something that will see me irreparably branded as brainless as a little old lady adds to my assumption.

"I think it's a sign, dear." She nudges her head to the mistletoe I swear wasn't above my head only a second ago before giving me a gentle shove toward Zane. "A girl who refuses to be kissed under the mistletoe will still be single next Christmas."

"That's okay. I'm fine with that. There's nothing wrong with being single."

"There isn't," agrees the man I'd rather oppose my theory than harmonize it. Zane waits for our eyes to lock and hold before he adds, "But how will I ever learn that lifelong love exists if I don't get the chance to unwrap the best present Santa has ever brought me?" He already has my heart over the line, but he secures my head too when he adds to the saying my father used on my mother on this day thirty-one years ago.

“December is a month full of blessings, but if my life is blessed with a woman like you, Kelsey, it’ll feel like Christmas every day of the year.”



# Epilogue

*Almost a year later...*

**A**s my phone unexpectedly buzzes, I startle to within an inch of my life. It isn't the 'ho, ho, ho' ringtone I set since it is only two weeks from Christmas causing my new coronary. It is Zane's deliriously handsome face popping up on a monitor in front of me.

He's being interviewed about his new book adeptly titled *Single All The Way*, and the charity organization now funded solely by its sales.

His hair is longer than when we first met, but his outfit of choice remains the same. Dark jeans, a white undershirt, and his Christmas red button-up dress shirt with its sleeves rolled to the elbows.

The first handful of questions Zane faces are the standard questions any author is asked during a book tour, but they delve a little deeper into the nitty gritty when a familiar voice whispers, "Tell her it was Santa who led you to your ultimate calling. I'm sure she'll believe you."

Zane's cheeks glow before he follows Casey's instruction to the T. "It was Santa who led me to my ultimate calling."

“Santa... right?” stammers out the blonde interviewing him. “And how did that happen?”

I can’t hold back the giggle that erupts from my throat when Zane answers, “He was kind of stalking me, so I returned the favor and ended up at the airport, seeking a ticket to a foreign country.”

The interviewer’s next question exposes she’s done her research. “Was that where you ran into Kelsey again?”

Zane nods before he licks his suddenly dry lips.

His mouth dries for an entirely different reason than the steamy kiss we shared in front of thousands of Christmas travelers when she asks, “She was one of your previous... *clients*, right?”

Zane hears her final word in the same manner as me. She’s referring to him as if he was an escort. “No. Kelsey was *never* a client of mine,” he replies, his tone stern like when he testified for the prosecution indicting Peter for multiple counts of embezzlement.

Peter didn’t attend Zane’s apartment solely because he wanted me back. The realization that I had removed his stockbroker access to my online trading account had him sweating.

It is illegal to sell securities without a client’s permission. Even the shadiest stockbrokers could face legal ramifications for it, so Peter figured demanding a refund would be the quickest and most suitable option out of the pickle he’d found himself in.

He was clueless that Zane had reversed the transfer hours earlier since he refused to ‘work’ on his home turf.

I tune back in when Zane's voice switches from angry to remorseful. "And can I please say on record again that I not once slept with a client. I never offered them anything more than my friendship."

The interview veers away from a book that has helped millions of women globally when the blonde snaps out, "Friendship you offered in exchange for money?"

Zane's exhale sinks his chest. "Yes. But—"

"Do you not think that sounds a little ostentatious?"

"Stupid is a better word," Zane fires back. "But that is why I started the Single All The Way foundation and wrote a step-by-step guide on overcoming the fear of financial isolation and women's rights when a relationship is dissolved outside the clauses of marriage."

"So you're trying to help women?"

Zane nods. "Yes—"

"After hurting so many?"

Nothing but sincerity is on Zane's face as he says, "My intention was never to hurt anybody."

When he peers at me over the production set equipment, I smile to assure him he has nothing to prove to me.

While endeavoring to get my LLC off the ground, I met with a handful of his ex-clients. Although they were as shocked as me to discover the commencement of Zane's friendship wasn't a coincidence, not a single one had a bad word to say about him.

They're too strong for pettiness, too powerful to let another man slow them down. They took the knocks life handed them and used them to better themselves.

As much as Zane hates to admit this, he was merely their wingman, tagging along for the ride.

I tune back into the interview at the right moment. “Don’t you think it’s a little too late to apologize?”

“It’s never too late,” Zane immediately replies. “If you want to go back to the start and make a brand new ending, no one can stop you.” I laugh when he says, “If you want to follow Santa’s chant across three continents, no one can stop you.” I melt into a gooey puddle when he locks his eyes with mine and murmurs, “And if you want to tell the love of your life that she is the greatest gift you could have ever asked for, no one can stop you.”

Against the advice of the producer and the interviewer, he slips off his chair and slowly heads my way. “And if you want to fall to your knees and beg her to believe in the miracle of Christmas one more time, no one can stop you.” My heart thuds louder than the boisterous claps of the live audience when Zane bends down on one knee and produces a ring box from his jeans pocket. “Because only you can decide where your story starts, and mine started with you, Kelsey.” Two fat salty blobs form in my eyes when he opens the ring box to display a beautiful diamond ring. “So, will you do me the honor of continuing to be my greatest blessing?”

When a familiar jingle rings through the air, I impatiently wait for a break between the “ho’s” and “Merry Christmas” before answering with a highly exuberant “Yes!”



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