

NIKOLAS

KLAUSS BROTHERS IN SAN DIEGO



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

MANDY MELANSON
& **COLLEEN KEY**

NIKOLAS

The Klauss Brothers in San Diego

COVER ILLUSTRATION

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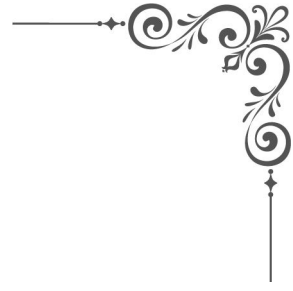
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NIKOLAS

We're still in Christmas, Florida. Apparently, there was a miscalculation on Elden's part and the show was for next Christmas. That sounds suspicious if you ask me. I need a break from my brothers, Elden and the bus. I can't remember the last time I was actually alone and now with both of my brothers in love and bringing their girlfriends around all the time... where's the bro-time? Nowhere. It's like that went all out the window. They're going to look at the holiday lights tonight, but I'm staying in.

Jericho reminded me about our gifts in his attempt to explain why he told Rosa about our secret. I get it. If I ever find someone, I'll want to tell her the truth too. But, that doesn't mean he should've told her already. They've only known each other a couple of weeks. He says when you know you know.

I'll tell you what I know...

There is zero chance that I'm going to get roped into this love for the holidays nonsense. Jericho thinks this was Mom and Dad's plan all along. To send us out to find love and save the spirit of the holiday... our family, in ourselves. I don't necessarily think he's wrong either, but if that's true and we're just out here to find the loves of our lives, why am I being left out? Not that I want to find my soul mate right now, anyway. But, it would be nice to at least be considered.

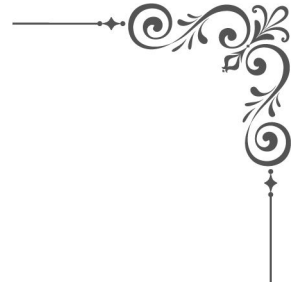
Will Christmas, Florida be the place? Is that why we're still here? I have no idea.

And, what if I don't want to? Just because my brothers happen to meet the women of their dreams on this journey doesn't mean I will. The worst part? I'm not sure if I hate it because it's forced or because I'm jealous and just want what they have. I'm confused. Annoyed. And... lonely.

I need food. There's a cute little pub just up the road. Jericho and Rosa went there the other night and that's when the magic happened. Supposedly. I'm not going there for

magic. I'm just going for a cheeseburger and sweet potato fries.

That's all.



MERRY

Jingle is centered right in the middle of Main Street, next to Mistletoe and Evergreen. It's been a staple among the people in Christmas, FL for decades. My grandparents opened it when they moved from Maine to Florida, and it's been a local favorite here ever since.

Today is like any other Monday. I opened the café portion this morning, then I took a nap after the lunch rush and now it's time to open both sides, the pub, and the café for dinner. "Morning, Merry!" Claudine singsongs as the door closes tight behind her. She's been a constant in my life, especially since my parents decided to retire about three years ago. There isn't anything worse than having the biggest holiday in our town hanging over my head when it's supposed to be the biggest time of year for Jingle and for the last three years straight, it's resulted in a deficit.

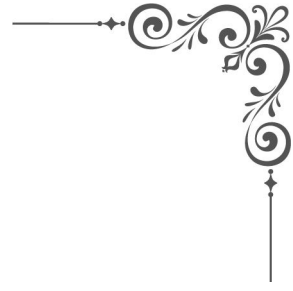
"I'm going to be in the back office," I say, grabbing my stack of books and records from the bar top.

"Don't forget to get back out here before the dinner rush starts," Claudine calls out as the espresso machine comes to life filling the pub with its fresh aroma.

"What rush?" I scoff. It's the end of the quarter and I need to get started on the accounting. Since tourism tanked after the dumpster fire that was twenty-twenty, we've struggled to make more than the bare minimum each quarter and the holiday only makes it worse because the influx of inventory hasn't been matched by an influx of customers. I worry every day that I'm letting them down and won't be able to keep this place open much longer. That's a conversation I really don't want to have with them.

She cuts her eyes at me over the top of the espresso cup she's filling, and I don't need her to say a word for me to know exactly what she's thinking.

"I won't forget, Aunt Claudine."



NIKOLAS

Jingle is busy and it looks like there's standing room only. An older woman with a kind smile walks up and cups her hands over her mouth to project her voice over the commotion of the crowd. "One?" she asks, holding up a menu.

I nod and follow along behind her as she leads the way to a high-top booth in the back of the building. It suits me just fine. I'd prefer to observe the crowd than be in the middle of it tonight anyway. Just as I go to pick up the menu from the table to see what there is to eat, I notice a beautiful woman with sadness seeping from her eyes, turning them the most striking shade of green I've ever seen as she wipes a table down on the other side of the dining area. A customer approaches her with a question I can't quite make out even though I'm straining to read their lips as they talk. She forces a smile and gives a response that seems to appease them. Her mask falls as soon as they move on. I know that feeling all too well, being on the outside even when you're surrounded by people. She looks so sad, it tugs at something inside of me making me want to get up and go talk to her. I don't know what I'd say. Hopefully, something to make her feeling better.

What is going on?

It's not like me to be this invested in other people outside of my family, even if I am Santa's son. My father's legacy has only given me an up close view of how toxic and gross people can be. It's made me put up walls to protect myself instead of let people in.

But this woman...

There's something about her that makes me want to let her in and wrap her up to shield her from those people who would only hurt her or take advantage of her. Is this it? This is the start of my parents' plan kicking into action. *No way!*

I am my own person. Free to make my own choices. I have free will and I will not be set up like this.

Absolutely. Not.

She glances up and notices I'm watching her, immediately shifting her expression to a forced smile as she grabs the cleanser and heads back toward the kitchen disappearing behind the single swinging door. The second she's out of view I feel a tug in my chest pulling me toward her.

I grind my teeth as my jaw tightens. *This is not going to happen.* Just as I'm about to push myself up out of the seat and leave, a menu connects with the back of my head.

"What is wrong with you, Nik?" a very familiar and currently unwelcome voice says brining me back to reality.

"Elden," I groan, rubbing the back of my head. "What the holly are you doing?"

He snorts out a laugh and hops up into the seat across from me. "I was hungry."

Right. "Sure, you were, Elden..."

"What?" he laughs as he pops the menu open and begins scanning it. "It all looks good."

"What's the plan?" I ask, levelling with him as I lean across the table crossing my arms on top of each other. "Why are we in Christmas, Florida?"

He glances up quickly then back down at his menu. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Lies, and you know it."

"Your father sent us here for a festival and a charity event but neither of those things seem to be active," he says with a shrug. "Maybe he got bad information from an outdated search result."

I glare at him from across the table.

"Honestly," he adds. "I'm starting to wonder if he sent us to the wrong place."

Sigh. "Just tell me the truth."

"Nik, you're going to need to use more words."

"My parents. What did they put you up to?"

He shakes his head keeping his eyes on the menu. “You know everything I know.”

I lean back keeping my arms crossed and resting them over my chest. “I don’t think so.”

“We filled you boys in before we ever left home.”

“You told us the cover story, not the real story. What’s the real story?” My voice raises more than I mean for it to, just as the beautiful redhaired woman approaches our table.

“Great.” I throw my arms out to my side and let out a long exhale.

“Can I take your drink order?” she asks, cocking an eyebrow at me but turning the attention to Elden. I don’t blame her for wanting to take his first. There is no doubt that I look like a loose cannon right now. *If she only knew...* “And for you?” she asks, turning her attention to me.

“Just a coffee,” I say, noticing her name tag says *Merry*, which makes me smile. *No! Stop it.* I yell silently at myself biting the inside of my cheek.

“Can I ask you a question,” Elden interrupts as she’s walking away.

Let her walk away, Elden. This isn’t going to happen.

She nods and turns her attention back to him. “Of course.” That same fake smile she wore before when the customer asked a question returns. It makes that feeling return of wanting to make all her pain disappear. Great.

“I was just wondering about the festival...”

She swallows hard and seems to consider her response before she answers. “I’m honestly not sure,” she finally says. “The new mayor isn’t into the holiday as much as he’s into the revenue the town brings. He’s structured things around the theme park and its characters. Christmas is secondary.”

Elden nods and lets out a sigh. “That makes sense.”

“You might be able to get more information from City Hall, but honestly, I doubt it,” she says with a tilt of her head.

“Well,” Elden says, leaning back in his seat after Merry walks away, “I guess I know what I’ll be doing tomorrow. What about you?”

“No clue,” I lie, knowing exactly what I’m going to do. I’m going to find a way to talk to Merry and learn what’s hiding behind those green eyes. “Tonight, I’m eating a cheeseburger and going to bed.”

“Um...” Elden says, holding one finger up. “You’re also going to be playing Mistletoe and Evergreen with your brothers at midnight.”

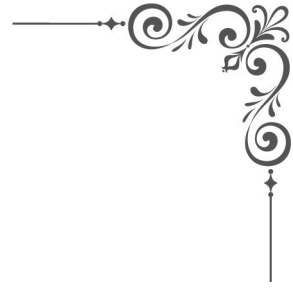
“What?” I shake my head and throw both hands in the air. “You can go shelf yourself.” I’m not playing a gig tonight. “I’m going back to the room and binge watching something until I pass out.”

“Nope,” he says, matter-of-factly and I’m not sure if he’s responding to the shelf yourself comment or my binge-watching plans. “They booked last minute because one of their regular acts got sick and couldn’t show up tonight. You’re doing it.”

I click my tongue against my teeth as I glare at him. “How’d they have your number?”

“The meet and greets I did when we first arrived in town. I left the band cell phone number with all the local businesses.”

Great...



MERRY

There is something about that guy... I'm sure he was watching me earlier and then when I went to his table to take the order, his dark brooding eyes met mine more than once. My knees wobbled, but I kept my composure.

No matter how hard I try, *I can't get him out of my mind.*

"You're distracted," Claudine says, looking over my shoulder as I fumble with the garnish on this plate.

I wrinkle my nose as I study my handiwork. "Not at all."

"Uh huh," she grunts through a muffled laugh as she takes the plate away from me. "Of course, you're not." Her hands go to work arranging the garnish and correcting where I messed up the sauce on the white porcelain.

"You can uh huh all you want, but I am not distracted by that guy out there. Not at all."

She cocks an eyebrow as she glances up at me over her wire rim glasses connected to a delicate chain draping around her neck. "I didn't say you were distracted because of a guy."

Oh... "Good!" I say, snatching the plate out of her hand and putting it on the tray next to the others. "Because I'm not."

Her expression gives her away. She doesn't believe me at all. That's fine. She doesn't have to believe me. I know I'm not ready for dating or anything even remotely close to it. There's too much at stake with Jingle and I can't afford to allow myself to become distracted.

"You know," she calls out over her shoulder as she goes about working on the next plate sent up the line, "It wouldn't hurt you to get a life outside Jingle." She tries to cover her laughter but does a poor job of it.

I'm lucky to have her, but sometimes she tries to mother me a little too much. *Ugh.* I've already got a mom who worries about my work-life balance and brings it up at every family dinner night. The ticket says *L7*, so I make way to the

table and begin setting plates in front of the customers doing my best to plaster the customer service smile to my face when my best friend pops up behind me.

“What are you doing still working?” she asks with one hand on her hip.

“Hi, Stacey...” I place the final dish on the table. “If you all need anything else, just let us know,” I say, tucking the tray under my arm and ushering Stacey away from the customer’s table. “What are you doing?”

She laughs and nods toward the kitchen door where my aunt is peeking out through the tiny window at the top. “Claudine called me.” She ducks down as soon as she notices us looking in her direction, so the only evidence left of her being behind the door is a few stray bright red pieces of hair sticking up out of the velvet hair tie perched on her head.

Of course, she did. “What did she tell you?”

“She said you need to get out of the diner and relax.” Stacey wrinkles her nose and squints through one eye at me. “I don’t think she’s wrong.”

“Why do I feel like you two are conspiring against me?” I ask, letting out a sigh. She’s not wrong though. I can feel myself slowly slipping farther away from the version of myself I like most and the more I worry about saving the business the farther away I feel from myself. When I glance up, I notice the mystery guy at the table in the corner is watching me again. The intensity pouring off his eyes makes heat flood my face. I spin on my heel, placing my back to him and causing Stacey to shift so that she’s standing on the other side of me.

“What just happened?” she asks, glancing over my shoulder looking for what caused me sudden change in composure.

I swat at her arm to get her to stop looking. “Don’t stare!”

“How can I stare?” she asks with her eyebrows smooshed together. “I don’t even know what I’m looking...” her words trail off as she glances at me then back to whatever caught her

eye. “Oh,” she says with a mischievous grin on her face and a hint of laughter in her tone. “Is it mister tall, dark and brooding in the back corner?”

“Maybe,” I admit, swatting at her arm again. “Stop it!”

“What’s his name?”

I shrug and rub my hands against my cheeks. I’m certain they must be as red as the ribbon around the tree in the lobby. “No clue.”

“What? How could you not get his name?”

“I’m not interested in anything like that, right now, Stace.”

“Like what?” she scoffs, glancing back in his direction. “Hot?”

She’s not wrong. He is knee-wobble-inducingly hot. That doesn’t matter though. “I’m not in a place to be in a relationship right now. It’s just too... complicated.”

Her face morphs into a scowl as she glares at me. “You’re impossible.”

“I know,” I laugh, making my way back toward the kitchen to grab the next arm load of orders needing to go out.

She grabs my arm and forces me to turn around to look at her. “You’re coming with me to Mistletoe and Evergreen.”

“I can’t, Stace.” My arms stretch out wide to either side of me. “Look at this place. Claudine can’t handle it on her own.”

Stacey puts her hands on her hips and tilts her head to the side. “She won’t be alone. She’s got the whole team here. You need a break. Kyle told me they booked a new band for tonight and they’re supposed to be really good.”

“Have you admitted to Kyle that you like him yet, or are you still trying to convince yourself you don’t?”

“Hey!” she says, holding both hands out in front of her. “Tonight is not about me or my love life.”

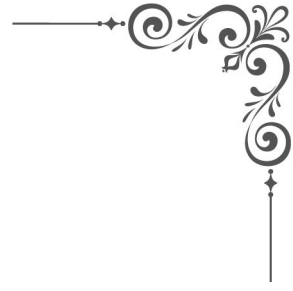
“I forgot,” I scoff. “It’s about my total lack of a life.”

“Exactly,” she laughs.

Sigh. “I don’t know...”

“Go,” Claudine says, coming through the kitchen door with her own armload of orders perched atop one of our trays. “I’ve got this. Go have fun! I won’t take no for an answer,” she adds as she passes by us on her way to the next table.

“Fine,” I concede. “Let me go clean up and I’ll meet you outside.” I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this.



NIKOLAS

Jericho is tuning his guitar when Elden walks into the backroom of Mistletoe and Evergreen. The owner, Kyle, said we could hide out back here until it was time to go on, since they don't have an actual backstage area. It suits us fine. We just need room enough to tune our equipment and shake off the pre-show nerves. We don't need much. I'm still irritated I have to be here, though. I made sure to let Elden know about it too, even if it didn't change anything. "Did you see this place?" Elden screeches as he bounces into the room.

"Nope," I deadpan, warming up with my sticks slapping against the arm of the sofa that looks like it's seen better days. "We've been back here hiding out."

He rolls his eyes and shows us a picture of the crowd he took on his phone.

"That's a lot of people for a local gig," I admit, scratching my head. "What gives?"

He stuffs the phone back in his pocket. "No clue."

"What's wrong with you?" Jaxon asks, nudging me in the arm making me lose the beat I was holding.

"Other than the fact I didn't know we were going on until about an hour and a half ago?" I shrug. "Nothing."

"You'll be fine," Elden groans. "The binge-watching festival can begin tomorrow."

"Speaking of the festival," Jaxon interrupts. "Did you find anything out about it?"

Elden shakes his head. "Not yet, but apparently the mayor is one of those faces out there, so we need to make sure we're on our game tonight. Okay, boys?"

We all nod in unison and groan loud enough it echoes in the small room.

"I'm going to go warm them up. Be out there in five minutes." He ducks out through the door and heads in the

direction of the stage.

I nudge Jaxon in the arm. “Do you think he’s acting strange?”

“More than usual?” he asks with a laugh.

“Yeah.” I nod, glancing between my brothers. “Something doesn’t feel right. He seems more... nervous, lately.”

Jaxon scoffs and pats me on the back before heading toward the door. “Don’t worry, so much. If this tour taught me anything it’s to just go with the flow and you might be surprised what you find.”

“That’s what worries me,” I admit.

Jericho laughs and follows Jaxon, shaking his head the whole way. They can laugh and make fun of me all they want, but I’m not interested in being someone’s puppet. Not even for our parents. “Hey,” he says, turning as he reaches the doorway. “If they wanted us here, it was for a good reason.”

I sigh and nod in agreement. Our parents would only send us here if they believed it was for our best interests. “Maybe it’s to restore the town to its former glory.”

He shrugs with a smug grin on his face like he knows something I don’t. “Could be,” he says before disappearing on the other side of the wall.

I suck in a deep breath and try to shove all the racing thoughts out of my mind. It doesn’t matter why we’re here. We’re here. And, we have a show to do. That’s all that matters right now, I remind myself as I follow my brothers through the door and take my position behind the drum kit. From the drum throne I can see the entire audience stretched out in front of us. It’s definitely a surprising turn out for a small venue, but not the largest we’ve ever played for. That helps to relax the nerves, a little, until I see her face. She’s perched on a barstool and is looking right at me with a confused expression on her face. That’s better than the sadness she was wearing earlier, but still not what I’m going for. I smile and wave at her from behind the drums, causing her cheeks to turn so red I can see it from here. It makes me want to laugh but I bite my tongue and

count down for my brothers. As Jericho and Jaxon launch into the song, I hold the beat steady, but I can't take my eyes off her. She's leaning over to the woman sitting next to her and whispering in her ear. What I wouldn't give to know what she's saying, especially since I think it's about me because her friend keeps glancing over her shoulder at me.

I'm going to talk to her after the set is over...

The set isn't very long, but the last song has an epic guitar solo in it and Jericho played the holly out of it. As he lets the final note ring out the crowd erupts into cheers and whistles. Most of them are even standing. I would probably try to convince my brothers to do an encore set, but I've got other things on my mind right now.

I jump off the stage and weave through the crowd of warm bodies, making my way to where she's sitting. Her friend saw me and nudged her in the arm, but she's still trying to pretend she doesn't notice me. I slide into the seat next to her and lean against one elbow on the bar top. "Hi there," I say, hating myself for not planning this out before I sat down.

"Hello," she says, clearly uncomfortable and probably wondering what the weird new guy in town wants.

"Um..." I stammer. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I... uh..." She glances back at her friend who holds up both hands and spins the barstool around, standing to leave.

"I was just on my way home." She grabs her coat from a hook underneath the bar top. "Call me later," she adds, leaning in to give Merry a quick hug then heading toward the door.

Merry looks at me with wide eyes. "I don't think I need another drink," she says, taking another sip from the one she's holding.

I nod. "How about a coffee, instead?"

"I could use one of those," she admits, placing the small glass back on the bar top. "I'm Merry," she says, holding one hand out.

"I know," I say, immediately kicking myself. "I mean..."

“Jingle?”

Phew. “Yeah. The name tag.”

She laughs and the sound makes my heart soar. *Is this that feeling Jericho and Jaxon have been talking about?*

“Two coffees,” I say, motioning to get the attention of the person running the bar.

“Nik!” Elden’s voice comes from behind me, and I can feel my eye begin to twitch as my jaw locks into place. “There you are. Who’s your friend?” he asks, shoving himself between us. “I’m Elden, the band’s manager.”

“I’m Merry,” she says with an awkward laugh that sends a blush across her cheeks. She’s beautiful anyway, but when her cheeks blush, she’s breathtaking.

Elden smiles and turns to face me, blocking my view of Merry and making me want to deck him. “I talked to the mayor. He was thrilled with your performance and wants to see us at city hall tomorrow morning.”

“About the festival?” I ask, trying to see Merry by straining to peek over the top of Elden’s head. The last thing I want is for her to dip out while he’s got me sidelined.

He nods. “Yep.”

“The festival?” she asks, causing Elden to shift his attention back to her.

“That’s right,” he says. “We’re hoping to convince him to reinstitute it this year with these guys,” he flicks his thumb over his shoulder pointing at me, “headlining it.”

Her eyebrows crash together, but there’s a glimmer in her eyes that looks a lot like hope. “The festival hasn’t been in the city budget for years.”

“We’re hoping to change that and show Mister Mayor-pants that Christmas is worth betting on, so he’ll stop funneling all the city money into the theme park. They’ve got their own funds.”

“That’s... that would be a Christmas miracle,” she says with a heavy sigh.

“What would the festival mean if it was reinstated?” Elden asks the same question I’m wondering.

“It would mean everything,” she says as the bartender slides a steaming cup of fresh coffee across the bar top to her.

“Just the way you like it, Merry,” he says. I mentally swat away the jealous feelings that bubble up inside of me when he knows her coffee order. This is a small town where everyone knows each other. That doesn’t mean I have to turn into a raging jealous weirdo. *Easier said than done...*

“It was great for the town, especially all the local businesses,” she continues. “Since he stopped funding it and tourism died off, a lot of us have been struggling.”

I glance at Elden to confirm he’s thinking what I’m thinking and the look on his face tells me that he is. This is why my parents sent us here. The town needs us.

“If the festival was brought back, it might be our saving grace.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, leaning in to hear her better over the buzz of chatter in the room.

She gives a half-hearted smile and hangs her head. “Jingle is on its last leg. I know a few other business owners in town who are in the same boat. The revenue from the festival and the people it drew was enough to carry us for an entire year, but without it... it’s just impossible to do anything more than barely break even.”

“What about the theme park events? Don’t they bring in tourists?”

She nods and bites her bottom lip as she seems to consider her answer. “They do, but most of them stay on campus. We don’t really see much benefit from it being here. They’re doing a huge event right now and yeah... we’ve seen a slight uptick in customers over the last few days, but it won’t be enough to save Jingle unless a miracle happens.”

“And the festival is that miracle?” I ask already sure of what we need to do.

She nods and takes another sip of her coffee.

“Then we have to convince him to restore the festival,” I say, turning to Elden who gives me a nod.

That’s our mission here in Christmas, Florida.

BREAKFAST AT THE BED and breakfast this morning was rushed, since I told Elden I wanted to go with him when he met with the mayor. There's something about this guy, I already don't like him but I want to be there so I can help. My gift as one of Santa's sons is being able to sense other people's emotions. With Merry, I can feel her sadness, but I also feel her hope and desire for something different. Let's see what this mayor guy is working with. If I can help her save her business, then I'm going to do whatever it takes.

"Are you even listening to me?" Elden interrupts my thoughts with an elbow to the kidney.

"Dude!" I grumble, grabbing my side and hunching over. "What?"

"I said," he sighs, glaring at me, "this is the place."

"This?" I scoff, scanning the skysrise building we're standing in front of. It looks like it belongs in Manhattan, not this little town. "It's gross."

Elden sneers and cringes. "Let's see if we can convince him to care more about the people in this town than the bottom line."

"Doubtful," I scoff as we enter the lobby. It's just as cold and uninviting as the exterior. There's nothing personal in here.

A man with a receiver wrapped around his ear, greets us from behind the desk positioned directly in the center of the room. "May I help you?"

Elden steps up to the desk. "We're here to see Mayor Brink. We have an appointment."

"Ah, yes," he says, scanning the log on his computer screen. "I'll let him know you're here. Take the elevator to the top floor. They'll direct you from there."

The top floor? “Is this guy serious?” I ask, leaning over to whisper in Elden’s ear as he reaches out and presses the button on the wall.

“Apparently.”

The elevator ride up to the top floor is just as uncomfortable as the lobby. Stale music playing through the speakers. Cold and impersonal design. *Ugh*. The doors slide open revealing another lobby. This one more elaborate but just as sterile as the first. “You must be with the Klauss brothers,” a woman says, as she pops up out of nowhere. She startles me and I jump back bumping into the elevator door. “Right this way,” she says, motioning for us to follow her.

I can already tell this guy is a bigger jerk than I thought and I’m not holding my breath that this meeting is going to resolve anything. He’s clearly only focused on the power and the money the town can make him. “He’ll be right in,” she says, directing us to take a seat in one of the empty conference rooms at the end of the hallway. Elden takes the seat closest to the head of the table where I assume Mayor Jerkface will be sitting and I take the seat next to Elden.

We no sooner sit down, and the door flies open thumping into the wall. Startling. Again. “Welcome friends!” he says, holding his arms out as he takes the seat that I assumed he would. He extends his hand. Elden shakes it and I hesitate but eventually do. I pretend not to notice how the pause made him flinch. I bet he’s not used to that. “Can I offer you a coffee?”

We both shake our heads.

“It’s from a gourmet shop in New York.”

“You have several local coffee shops you could’ve sourced that from, don’t you?” I ask, unable to help myself.

“It’s a special blend,” he responds flatly.

“No, thank you,” Elden says, getting right to business. He swipes at his phone and pulls up the pitch he put together. “We’d like to discuss the possibility of bringing the festival back to Christmas.”

The mayor leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “I remember. We spoke briefly about it, last night.”

Elden nods. “I know you had some hesitation around the theme park.”

Mayor Jerkwad nods. “We can’t be seen as competing with them for tourism or it will lead to a very unfortunate set of circumstances.”

Ah ha. He is trading the city for the theme park. Merry’s suspicions were right. I definitely don’t like this guy. Elden goes into his pitch about how the festival will bring in revenue and it would be a major disaster to his community if they don’t have one this year and I zone out. My only focus is on how Brink’s emotions shift as Elden speaks. The only thing this guy cares about is keeping the theme park happy.

“I just don’t know—” he starts but I cut him off.

“What if we can organize the festival as a collaboration between the city of Christmas and the theme park?”

“How?”

I shrug and strain to wear my best poker face. “I understand you want the theme park to come here to spend their big money on joint investments with you, but that doesn’t really help the town, does it?”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Oh, I think you do.” The people in this town are working class and can’t

help his political ventures, but the theme park... they could. “If the theme park was interested, would you let the city reinstate the annual festival?”

“The Klauss Brothers will work for free,” Elden adds, which I don’t recall agreeing to, but in this case I’m sure my brothers will agree.

“What makes you think the park will agree?” Mayor Brink asks, leaning back in his chair.

“Just a hunch,” I say with a shrug. “We have a few connections there as well,” I add, glancing at Elden who knows exactly what I’m talking about. He doesn’t react but I’m certain he’s going to punch me when we leave.

“Okay,” Brink agrees. “If you can convince the park to go along with it and be a sponsor then the festival can resume.” He pushes himself away from the table and stands to leave. “I’ll need to know within twenty-four hours if I’m going to do anything about it *this* year,” he adds, then disappears through the doorway.

“Sounds like we’ve got work to do,” Elden says, turning to me with pursed lips.

“We better get to it then,” I say, hopping up from my seat and making my way to the door. Elden follows along behind me as I make my way to the elevators. I can’t get out of this building fast enough. The plan is going to work. I can feel it and I want to tell Merry about it.

As soon as the elevator doors shut, Elden reaches up and smacks me on the back of my head. “Why would you say we have connections at the park?”

“Because we do,” I screech, rubbing the back of my head.

“No,” he says as he moves to stand in front of me, grabbing my shirt collar pulling me down to eye level with him, “we fudging don’t.”

“I swat his hand away from my collar and stand upright. “You have to call her, Elden.”

He clicks his tongue against his teeth and storms out of the elevator as soon as it comes to a stop and the doors slide open. I fight back the chuckle that’s threatening to come out until he’s safely through the doors then my cackle fills the sterile lobby, echoing off the walls.

I decide to take the long way to Jingle and circle the block since Elden is obviously mad and went the other way. I’ll just avoid him until after he’s talked to his ex-girlfriend and the arrangements are made. As I’m scanning the shops lining the

sidewalk, I spot Noel coming out of a local toy store with bags lined up on her arms and dangling from both hands.

“What are you doing?” I ask, reaching out to grab an armload of the bags from her.

She doesn’t hesitate to let me take part of the load and looks relieved that I did. “I’m just trying to do what I can to help out the small businesses here. Jaxon filled me in last night,” she adds. “How’d the meeting with the mayor go?”

I shrug. “Elden’s not happy, but other than that I think it went pretty well.”

“Why is he upset?”

“His ex-girlfriend left the workshop and went to the park as a holiday events coordinator. He has to go talk to her.”

“Oh!” she says, laughing. “Maybe you guys aren’t the only ones finding love on this tour.”

“Did you just say ‘you guys’? As in me... too?”

She doesn’t answer and just purses her lips together.

“Is it that obvious already?”

“Be honest,” she says, looking at me. “When was the last time you wanted to be part of the planning and strategizing?”

“Um...”

“Never?”

I nod, tugging at the back of my neck with one hand.

“So, yeah. It’s obvious.”

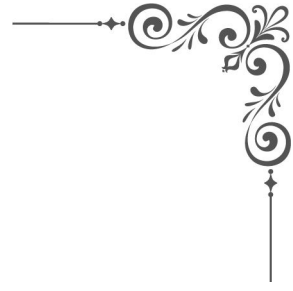
Great. I let out a long sigh and search for a way to change the subject.

“What are these for?” I ask.

“I was going to take them to the shelter I saw on the way into town. I

normally take them to the one back home, but since I’m not there... I thought, maybe they could use some extra holiday cheer here this year.”

“I’ll come with,” I say, tugging the bags back on my arm as they attempt to slide off. I could use some time to figure out what I’m going to say to Merry when I see her again, anyway.



MERRY

I'm cashing out the lunch drawer at the bar when I see Nikolas through the window by the door. My stomach does a little flip when I see him. It's slowed down enough in here. *I could go say hi.*

Just as I'm about to tell Claudine that I'm taking my break, I see a gorgeous woman pass in front of the same window. She takes a few double steps to catch up with him and has as many bags on her arms as he does. The way they're laughing and talking back and forth feels like they must be very close.

That changes things. I grab a rag from underneath the bar and start cleaning up from the lunch crowd.

"Honey," Claudine's voice says from over my shoulder, "you're going to rub the finish right off that wood table. Give me the rag." She holds her hand out waiting for me to drop the cleaning cloth in it. Instead, I clench my jaw tight and move to the next table as the phone rings behind the bar. Luckily, Claudine goes to answer it instead of following me around trying to take my emotional support cleaning supplies from me. She picks up on the third ring. "Jingle. How can we make your Christmas merry?" Her face brightens as she listens to the person on the other side of the phone and punches an order into the computer. "We'll have it there right away."

"What was that?" I ask, unable to control my curiosity as I continue to attack tables in the dining area. "That was the local children's shelter and they've received a very generous donation of gifts and cash from an anonymous donor. One of the stipulations was that they order lunch for the entire center from us."

"What?"

"I know," Claudine says, cocking an eyebrow.

"Don't look at me with that eyebrow," I scowl, going back to the tables.

“I’m just saying,” she laughs, leaning against the bar top. “Maybe you shouldn’t jump to conclusions until you talk to him.”

Ha! “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” she scoffs. “How about the model he was just walking up the street with? Or... you don’t know anything about that either?”

“Nope.”

“Good. Doesn’t matter anyway, right?”

I can’t help myself and my eyes shoot up instantly to glare at her. She catches it and laughs from behind the bar. “Thought you weren’t interested.”

“I’m not.”

“Merry,” she says, her tone softening. “You don’t know anything until you ask. Until then, all you have is fear.”

“Maybe I don’t want to know.”

“You want to know,” she says, putting one arm around me. “And you should know.”

“What if I don’t like the answer?”

“Then it’s better to find out now than later, but something tells me you’re going to be surprised with what he has to tell you.”

“How can you be so confident?”

“Because I see what an amazing woman you’ve grown into, and I know any person who doesn’t see that is a fool. I don’t think he’s a fool.” She plants a kiss on my forehead and snatches the rag out of my hand before I can refuse. “Go get ready. You’re taking the order to the community center for us.”

“Why me?”

“Trust me,” she says, disappearing into the kitchen.

CHEERFUL, BUT UNFAMILIAR, holiday music is playing as I enter the community center where they asked for the food to be delivered. The music teacher isn't usually here today, so I can't help but wonder what's going on. I make my way into the main room, still carrying the food transport bags. A group of children are laughing and singing while sitting around Nikolas who is sitting on a stool with a bucket in front of him playing an impromptu drum solo. The same beautiful woman is sitting next to him, singing. Her voice is just as beautiful as her face... and her body. I hate the feeling of jealousy rising up inside of me, so I turn away.

Who is she? Didn't he try to pursue her hours ago and now he's with someone else? Who does that? *Ugh! Typical.* I should've expected it.

I do my best not to interrupt the festive little sing-along and make my way to the tables set up along each side of the massive room and get to work setting up the catering order. As I'm putting the first platter in place, the music stops, and I hear footsteps approaching from behind me. I refuse to turn and look, knowing what I'll find.

"Hi," Nikolas says, reaching to grab a tray out of the bag. "Can I help you set this up?"

"I got it."

"Oh," he glances back and forth between me and the woman on the other side of the room nervously. "What should I do with this?"

"Sit it over there," I say, nodding toward the other end of the table as far away from me as possible as long as I'm still in this room.

"Sure," he says, placing it exactly where I told him to. He makes his way back and stops short in front of me. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yep," I say, growing more irritated by the second.

“Okay... I just...” he stammers.

“I’m really okay. You should get back to your girlfriend. It looks like she’s waiting on you.” I bite my tongue as soon as the words leave my mouth. This isn’t how I want to react, but I’m emotional and drained and have zero filter left.

“My what?” he squeaks. “Her?” he asks, pointing to the woman across the room.

“Yeah...”

He laughs and I can actually see the relief washing over his expression, which only confuses me more.

“What’s so funny?”

“That’s my sister-in-law,” he says, still laughing.

She’s walked up beside him now and reaches out to shake my hand. “Not until after the new year,” she corrects him. “I’m Noel.”

“I’m Merry,” I say, reaching back to shake her hand. “I’m sorry. I—”

He holds up both hands. “Don’t worry about it. I get it.”

“Honestly, I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions,” I admit.

“It’s okay. You don’t know me, yet...”

“Yet?”

He nods with a smirk creeping across his face. “I’d like to change that if you’ll let me.”

“What do you have in mind?” I ask, suddenly feeling a hundred pounds lighter.

Just when he opens his mouth to respond, his manager runs into the room as excited as the kids still gathered in a circle on the floor. They’re whispering and chattering amongst themselves while pointing at us, but their excitement is still in the air. “The mayor called!” he says, waving his phone in the air as he runs up to Nikolas.

“The mayor?” I ask, glancing between the two of them.

Nikolas smiles and turns back to his manager. “What’d he say, Elden?”

“He’s going to approve the festival for a last-minute event this year. We just have to find a director,” he says, looking straight at Noel.

She groans and sucks in a deep breath. “Okay,” she eventually says. “But need help from a local,” she adds, looking at me.

“The mayor suggested we ask the daughter of the former mayor who is now in retirement. I hear her name is Merry and she owns Jingle,” Elden says. Now he’s looking at me too.

Nikolas is smiling from ear to ear. “I can help with his one, Noel. If Merry will let me, of course.”

“You’re going to help direct the event?”

He nods. “There’s nothing I would like to do more.”

“I don’t understand...” I shake my head to clear the fog that feels like a blizzard forming in my mind. “I feel like I missed a few steps here.”

“We went talk to Mayor Brink this morning. He had a few... stipulations,” Nikolas chuckles, glancing at Elden who is wearing a frown now. “But, he agreed to let us hold the festival.”

“And the best part,” Elden adds, shaking the frown off his face, “is that we’ve got the park’s support, so they’re going to be sending waves of people into town for the festival through their shuttles.”

“You’re kidding,” I gasp, covering my mouth and fighting against the stinging in the corners of my eyes. “Do you know what that’ll mean for the town? For the businesses here? For Jingle?”

Nikolas reaches out and grabs my hand, pulling me slightly closer to him.

“You said it was important to you.”

I nod.

“I can’t explain it,” he says, brushing a stray hair away from my face and

tucking it behind my ear, but *you’re* important to me.

“Thank you,” I say, trying desperately to find more words to express my gratitude but unable to even form a coherent thought right now.

“I’d like you to go with me, Merry,” he says with a grin that lights my heart on fire. “If you want to.”

“You want me to be your date the night of the festival?” I ask, wiping a stray tear from my cheek with one hand.

He nods with a twinkle in his eye that sucks the breath right out of my lungs. “And every other night too.”

I can feel the heat rushing to my cheeks. “Let’s just start with one date and go from there.”

“Works for me,” he says, lifting my chin with one finger and bringing his lips to mine. When he kisses me, the entire world stops, and the only thing left in this room are me and him. *I could get used to this...*



Until next time...

Catch up with the Klauss Brothers

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